

# NARRATIVE STRUCTURE: AN OVERVIEW

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Reading narrative is not like reading poetry or discourse. This should, of course, come as no surprise. Narrative is an account of events or people. It is a story. And there are specific ingredients: characters, setting, point of view, plot, style, and tone (as well as others). It may follow a linear or chronological path (as you might expect from a piece of logical discourse), or it might not. How we find the structure of a narrative—the emphasis in what the author is trying to communicate—depends on our ability to grasp how narrative works. Remember:

*Every text has a structure.  
This structure will reveal an emphasis.  
The emphasis must shape your message.*

This emphasis, the themes present in the story, the development of the characters, and other such important aspects of narrative will help us to see the author's point.

This brief overview is meant to introduce you to how narrative works in general. The elements and organization is not particularly innovative. You will find these kinds of terms and ideas in a standard guide to reading literature.<sup>1</sup> But—and this is important—we have worked hard here to show how these standards elements might look in the Gospels and Acts. As such, we have tried to use biblical examples in some places and we have purposefully de-emphasized or omitted aspects of narrative literature which are irrelevant in the Bible (but, perhaps, relevant in modern narrative).<sup>2</sup>

As such, we have focused on just a few important ideas that are unique to New Testament narrative. So, while repetition of words, phrases, and ideas are important in every genre, we think it important to have a handle on **characters, background and setting, and plot**.

Additionally, we want to begin with a few words of caution about the Gospels and Acts. The Gospels and Acts are not 100 percent narrative. In fact, the Gospels and Acts comprise probably

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<sup>1</sup> Surprisingly, we have not found a single guide to the elements of narrative written for adults that has seemed either succinct or clear enough to recommend. Instead, we recommend you look at elementary school textbooks on reading comprehension for definitions and additional background on the narrative concepts we discuss in this chapter. For an advanced treatment of the elements of narrative, see H. Porter Abbott, *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative* (Cambridge Introductions to Literature; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008). For a useful treatment of narrative criticism in biblical scholarship, see Mark Allan Powell, *What Is Narrative Criticism?* (Guides to Biblical Scholarship; Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1990). There are also some very useful tips in the relevant chapters of Leland Ryken, *How to Read the Bible as Literature* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984). A more recent work, since the first few distributions of this document, but incredibly similar and helpful is Jonathan Pennington, *Reading the Gospels Wisely* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012).

<sup>2</sup> It should be noted that the kind of narrative analysis this essay is suggesting can be considered, in part, anachronistic. While certain aspects of narrative are universally true throughout history and cultures, much of the terminology and some of the specific structures addressed here derive from modern literary criticism. That these concepts existed in the ancient texts (e.g. discussions of *characterismus* in the *progymnasmata*, reflections on the plot of Greek dramas in Aristotle and Plato, matters of style) should not imply that that the authors were consciously using these concepts as they composed the Gospels and Acts. Nevertheless, it is useful to have the terminology and the concepts offered by literary criticism as we look at these ancient texts. Remember, our goal is not to argue for the plausibility of the author's plot or the historicity of this kind of analysis, but to identify the emphasis of the structure of the text as given to us by the author.

the most complex genre in the Bible because they make use of narrative, poetry (including songs), discourse (both extended speeches/sermons like you would expect in Greco-Roman literature, and sayings like you might expect in Old Testament wisdom literature). They even include various categories within of those text types, such as historical and apocalyptic passages. As such—and this is important—you must know which text type governs the passage you are studying. Your first question must always be: is this narrative, poetry, or discourse?

Also, be careful to not look for simplistic answers. The strategies for finding structure and emphasis described in this chapter are meant to be attempted and evaluated critically. They are meant to be used together. That is, the emphasis will not always be a matter of how the protagonist changes or the climax of the plot. In fact, those two elements may suggest different emphases. Your job, as a careful reader and one who is looking for the main idea to teach, is to hold all of these things together and see what emphasis emerges. We will return to this caution at the end of the chapter as it will, undoubtedly, make more sense after you have been through the weeds of finding structure in narrative.

Finally, be encouraged. While this genre is not an easy one, nevertheless, you can make a lot of progress in understanding how it all works by considering its parts. Or, to put it simply, it is worth the hard work.

## CHARACTERS

In the biblical narrative, characters are usually people. They generally have qualities that are revealed through the character's appearance, actions, and speech, as well as comments of other characters and of the author. The sum of these qualities is generally referred to as "character."

One way we might distinguish characters from each other is in terms of function:

- The **protagonist** is the central character (person or personified object) in the plot. Broadly speaking, this is usually Jesus in the Gospels (though sometimes, it might be Peter or one of the other disciples). In Acts, it varies a little more. Through chapter 12, it is frequently Peter. After chapter 12, it is frequently Paul. Interestingly, it could be argued that "the gospel" is, in fact, the main character of Acts. It is the gospel that spreads and grows through the whole of the book.
- The **antagonist** is the character in conflict with the protagonist. An antagonist might be a broader concept (e.g. a society, a government, sin, God's sovereignty) in addition to another person. It can also be the protagonist, if he or she has an internal conflict. See the notes on plot below for more information.
- A **foil** is a character whose traits or actions are in contrast to those of another character. Therefore, the foil generally functions to emphasize aspects of the character. The foil is usually a minor character. In the Gospels, the disciples are frequently foils to Jesus (as protagonist). Other minor characters can serve as a foil for other more significant characters who are not the protagonist (e.g. the blind man is a foil for Peter with respect to two-fold understanding in Mark 8). Use of a foil is meant to inspire the reader to compare and contrast. The side-by-side placement of a foil and character by the author is called **juxtaposition**.

Beyond function, the character of characters may also develop in longer narratives. For the purpose of interpreting, one of the most important choices you will need to make is that of the primary or main character. Your understanding of plot may depend on this choice.

## BACKGROUND AND SETTING

**Background and setting** frequently consists of merely the place, time period, and circumstances in which a story takes place. For the New Testament, these aspects of setting will be fairly obvious from the text. You may want to consult a book on background or a commentary on your text to learn more.<sup>3</sup> Sometimes, particular aspects of the setting will be important. Consider geography, political and governmental situations, religious situations, and the like. Details in the setting may or may not be important for the plot (that is, individual details of the setting may be treated differently):

- An **integral setting detail** includes elements necessary for the plot. The political setting of the interplay between religious and civic authorities in the trial scenes just prior to Jesus' death and resurrection is critical to how those trials unfold.
- Many **background setting details** are comparatively unimportant for the plot. Instead, they may simply consist of details you might otherwise expect from journalistic or historical narrative writings.

Aspects of setting can show the development of character, movement in plot, and affect the tone of a story, as well as even function symbolically.

## PLOT

**Plot** is simply the sequence of events in the story. It is also called the storyline. It generally will revolve around the conflict, climax, and resolution as the primary elements. Aristotle, in thinking about drama, said that "plot is the first thing you want to find and it will have a beginning, middle, and end."<sup>4</sup> To that, we add the establishment of the setting (see above) and the new setting established by the plot. As such, most plots have five common elements:

- First, a story commonly begins with **setting** (or sometimes called the exposition or presenting situation). This is a period at the beginning of the story in which the author establishes characters, location, time, and the situation from which action will emerge.
- Second, there will generally be some kind of complication or **conflict**. Conflict is usually the struggle between the protagonist and the antagonist. This may be a simple problem which the protagonist must solve, an obstacle the protagonist must overcome, an antagonist who threatens some aspect of the protagonist. It may even be as simple as confusion or a character missing a critical piece of information. The conflict will create a kind of dramatic tension in the mind of the reader and a sense of movement toward some unknown outcome. This tension may grow with the unfolding of the story and additional complications. This development of the conflict is sometimes called *rising action*. There are several questions you might ask to help identify the conflict. What is the conflict here? What is providing the dramatic tension? What seems like a problem that must be fixed?

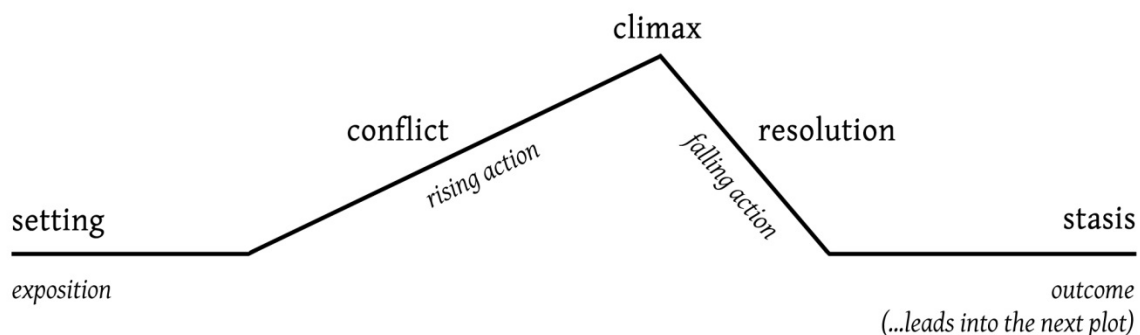
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<sup>3</sup> For background to the New Testament, there are several good resources books. Here are just a few standards to get you started: Hans Josef-Klauck, *The Religious Context of Early Christianity: A Guide to Graeco-Roman Religions* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003); Richard Bauckham, *The Jewish World Around the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008); C.K. Barrett, *The New Testament Background: Writings from Ancient Greece and the Roman Empire That Illuminate Christian Origins* (New York: HarperCollins, 1956); Bruce M. Metzger, *The New Testament: Its Background, Growth, and Content* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1965).

<sup>4</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics*, 50b21-34

- Third, the **climax** is the turning point of the conflict. It is the peak of the action. The tension will have grown so much that the reader can no longer bear it and a resolution must be reached. Frequently, the climax will include a sense of ‘reversal’.<sup>5</sup> Again, there are some helpful diagnostic questions. What is the turning point? Where does it change?
- Fourth, the climax will produce the **resolution**. Once the climax has been reached, the situation or conditions or some aspect of a character will have changed, producing a sense that the story is now complete. The resolution is the inevitable outworking once the climax has been reached. The author will typically describe the adjustment to the new situation. This description of adjustment is sometimes called *falling action* or *denouement*.
- Finally, the ending of the story will establish a **new setting** or new *stasis* or *outcome* (in light of the conflict and resolution). It is the ‘new normal’ situation of the characters. The reader will feel that the future of the characters or setting is now predictable. Often, this outcome will serve as the foreground or exposition of the next conflict. That is, it forms the new setting.

## Plot Arc



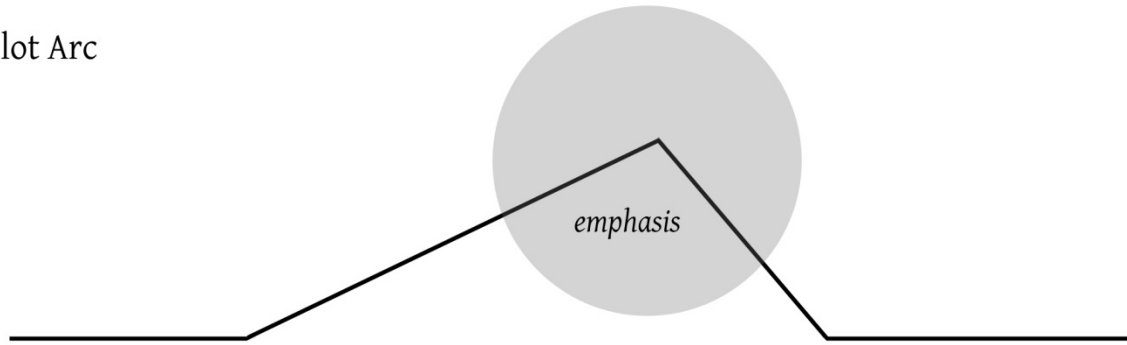
Now that we have looked at this enormous—and enormously helpful—tool, we need to understand some limits of putting it to use. Or rather, I would urge you to understand these guidelines in getting to work on plot:

1. This plot tool is to be used by you. It is your servant as an exegete. You do not serve the tool. What I mean by this is that your job is to make use of the tool in finding the emphasis of your passage and teaching it in a way that is consistent with the shape of the passage. You should not feel like you need to conform (or mangle) your passage into a specific shape just because you want to show this tool. That is a dangerous first step toward eisegesis.
2. The emphasis of the passage is not always equal to the climax. In fact, most of the time, the emphasis of the passage will be found in some combination of the conflict, climax, and resolution. It is important to remember this is a tool that helps you find the structural features of a narrative in order to better understand it. The emphasis will more likely be the product of synthesizing your understanding of the passage.

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<sup>5</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics*, 48a-52b

## Plot Arc



3. Picking differently sized passages will necessarily influence how you understand the plot. Plots are not simple discrete units that all line up in a neat row to form a book of the Bible. They overlap. There are macro-plots and micro-plots. How you choose the length of your passage will be a factor in how you understand plot. Or, in the alternative, how you understand plot may affect how you choose the size of your teaching passage.
4. Similarly, focusing on particular characters may shift your understanding of plot. How one enters the story (e.g. whether you as a reader identify with the crowds or the disciples or the opponents or Jesus himself) will affect what conflict you see and how that character faces the conflict. Because plots come in all shapes and sizes and frequently overlap two or three at a time, you will have to make a choice as to which character's perspective you will use in finding the plot. Obviously, we would want you to make smart choices. Let the particular strength of the conflict, the particular height of the climax, your best understanding of the literary and historical contexts, and your best understanding of the author's overall purpose in writing the book guide your decisions. Or rather, avoid the mistake of a certain pastor who, after realizing he'd preached the Christmas story from every possible angle, decided to preach from the perspective of a donkey in the stable near the manger. It may have been good literary technique and it may have been clever, but it was not good exposition.

Building from that first procedural note, it is good to be aware of the numerous variations on parts of the plot that are available. Conflict, for example, may be treated in several ways:

- **Internal conflict** (man vs. self) occurs when the protagonist struggles within himself. The protagonist may be pulled by two conflicting ideas, emotions, or courses of action. This kind of conflict is most commonly applied to dynamic protagonists. Moments in the Gospels where Jesus seems to wrestle with the horrible reality of his mission to die might be good examples of internal conflict.
- **Interpersonal conflict** (man vs. man) occurs when the protagonist is in conflict with another person (generally, the antagonist).
- **Societal conflict** (man vs. mankind) occurs when the protagonist is in conflict with the structure, values, or ambitions of his society. In Acts, for example, large groups of people produce the conflict for the apostles.

- **Natural conflict** (man vs. nature) occurs when the protagonist is in conflict with some element of fallen creation (e.g. death, disease, demon possession).

Any one story may include multiple and different types of conflict. And it may be difficult to distinguish between the types. Also, a new setting or outcome may be either open or closed:

- In a **closed ending**, the point of the conflict and resolution is generally articulated. The new stasis will be satisfying to the reader and there will be a sense of completion to the story arc. This is the most typical type of ending in biblical narratives.
- In an **open ending**, the readers are invited to draw their own conclusions about the conflict and resolution and even what is to happen next. The shorter end of the Gospel of Mark (Mark 16:1-8) is a kind of open ending.
- Additionally, sometimes a plot will terminate prematurely. This is generally referred to as a **cliffhanger**. Its purpose is to keep the reader reading.

Other times, the author may include a repetition of certain elements of the plot. A new character may enter the scene and, as such, certain points (e.g. the climax and resolution) may get repeated for the purpose of exposing the new character to these elements. This feature is sometimes used to emphasize certain points. Additionally, there are several ways to treat the sequencing in a story:

- The most common type of sequence in biblical narratives is **chronological**. The events are simply told in the order they happen. Because much of the Bible is also presented as historical narrative, this sort of sequencing should be obvious.
- A **flashback** or **flash forward** occurs when the author narrates events that took place prior to or after the current time of the story. This kind of sequencing is very rare in the Bible. Functionally, sometimes a biblical author or even a character in the story might recount certain details of past events that are critical to the story in order shed light on the present events (e.g. Mark 8:19ff).
- **Intercalation** is the insertion of one plot or sub-plot into the middle of another plot. That is, sometimes, one story can seem to be completely encapsulated inside of another story. Other times, the relaying of two different plots can alternate. Use of intercalation can be a strategy for building suspense or showing a particular emphasis or contrast (see *juxtaposition* above). The Gospel of Mark makes frequent use of this technique (which, in the context of the Gospel of Mark, is often called *sandwiching*). For example, the story of the suffering woman in Mark 5:25-34 comes completely in the middle of the story of Jairus' daughter in Mark 5:21-24, 35-43.
- A **time lapse** is when the story omits an atypical period of time compared to the rest of the narrative. In the gospels, it is fairly common for the story to proceed a few days, weeks, or months at a time. However, the jump from the birth to the ministry of Jesus (around 25-30 years) may be considered a time lapse.

Finally, some other features of plot include:

- **Suspense** is a state of tension or uncertainty. This is frequently used rhetorically to drive the plot forward and is most common in the “conflict” and “climax” elements.

- **Foreshadowing** is the introduction of details or characters that are shown to be significant later in the story. Foreshadowing prepares the reader to make sense of some aspect of the story and is often subtle and when introduced.
- **Inevitability** is the sense that the resolution must necessarily follow from the conflict and climax. Foreshadowing contributes to this sense of inescapability.
- **Surprise** is the opposite of inevitability. Sometimes a character will do something or say something inconsistent with how the character has developed so far or outside of the expected (and even foreshadowed) plot arc. When Jesus forgives the sins of the paralytic rather than healing him in Mark 2:1-12, the reader should be surprised. Surprise is often an important clue in determining the plot.

It may also be useful to consider different types of plots that are found in the Bible. These plots often overlap. For example, each of the Gospels has an overall plot (Jesus' path toward death and resurrection). But, each pericope often also has an individual plot. It may be useful to think in terms of "plot" and "subplots" when studying large portions of biblical narrative.

## MARK 5

With notes on character and setting and the basic structure of plot in place, and keeping in mind the many variations, it will be helpful to look at an example. Take a look at Mark 5:1-20:

- We begin with *setting*, which might give the place, time, season, and introduction of characters. Jesus and his disciples have gone across the sea to the country of the Gerasenes, where they meet a man by the tombs (vv. 1-2a).
- But this man had a problem, which brings us to the *conflict*, the part of the story that provides dramatic tension and a sense that something needs to be resolved. The man is possessed by a demon (vv. 2b-5).
- The *climax* of the story—what Aristotle calls the reversal—follows. It is the turning point from which a resolution must necessarily follow. The climax here occurs when the man encounters Jesus. He goes up to Jesus, calls him the Son of God, and pushes the story beyond the point of return. Either Jesus must prevail and banish the demons, or the demons will prevail and defeat Jesus (vv. 6-8).
- This leads to a *resolution*: Jesus wins. He sends the demons into the pigs and the pigs off a cliff and into the sea (vv. 9-13).
- It's a definitive resolution that brings us to the end, to a *new setting* from which the next plot arc will emerge. Stories just don't end with the resolution. We typically see the aftermath, the follow-up conversations, the return to a kind of normal, but forever changed by the plot. Here, the local farmers want Jesus to leave, and Jesus tells the man who was possessed to go spread the word (vv. 14-20).

By looking at this kind of plot arc, we see a few things. First, remember that the emphasis is usually located in the middle, probably in some combination of the *climax* and parts of the *conflict* and *resolution*. You may have marked your verses a little differently than I have, but the important thing is that we are asking the right questions: What is the conflict here? What is providing the dramatic tension? What is the turning point? Where does it change? How is the tension resolved? And if we answer these questions, we will have a pretty good sense of emphasis. In Mark 5:1-20, I think the emphasis emerges at the encounter with Jesus. This is the moment that changes the demon-possessed man's life forever. This is moment when

something important is revealed about Jesus. In fact, just noticing how the demons address Jesus as the “Son of the Most High God” connects it to a major theme of Mark’s Gospel: the identity of Jesus. Remember: in narratives, the emphasis is almost always found in the climax (including some bits of the conflict and resolution).

Now, let’s broaden this analysis out to the whole of Mark 5 and think about *characters* as well. If we keep reading, we see two more healing stories. In fact, they are interwoven (this is a strategy that authors sometimes use to build suspense in a story—it is called intercalation). We have a woman with a particular disease (5:25-34), and we have a child who dies (5:21-24, 35-43). The plot arcs are remarkably similar to the first part of the chapter: there is an encounter with Jesus in which he heals or resurrects the individual.

So when we look at chapter 5 as a whole, we find three nearly identical plots. We have three people: a man, a woman, and a child. We have three problems: demons, disease, and death. And we have one solution: Jesus Christ. By asking questions of plot and character, we see that the whole structure is emphasizing the identity of Jesus.

Interestingly, this structure and emphasis is affirmed by the preceding context. At the end of Mark 4 Jesus calms a storm, provoking his disciples to ask, “Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?” Yes, Jesus is the one who has sovereignty over nature, but Mark goes on to answer the question more fully in chapter 5. Jesus is the Son of the Most High God! He is the one who has come for every man, woman, and child! And he is the one who will deliver us from the power of demons, diseases, and—after anticipating it with the tombs in verses 1-20 and building the suspense in verses 21-40—even death! Jesus is the one we must fear and follow. Like the man possessed by demons, we should feel compelled to tell the whole world about Jesus.

## CONCLUSION

So, you have made it to the end of our suggestions for finding structure in the Gospels and Acts. Hopefully, you will be a little more ready to tackle those wonderful stories of Jesus and his followers in the first decades of our Christian history.

We said we would return to this important caution: do not look for simplistic answers. Narrative is actually fairly simple. You probably grew up reading stories, having them read to you, watching them unfold in movies and on television. Probably more than any other kind of literature found in the Bible, you will have instincts about how narratives work. These strategies for finding structure in narrative are meant to help you, to give you the language to describe what is going on and, when it all comes together, begin to identify the emphasis. These strategies are meant to be used together. Once again, the emphasis will not always be a matter of how the protagonist grows or when the protagonist and antagonist conflict or even the climax of the plot. Each strategy may point you to a different emphasis. As we said above, your job is to hold all of these things together and see what emphasis emerges. And maybe one emphasis does not emerge as dominant. Perhaps, two or three emphases emerge. You will still have your other tools—context, melodic line, connections to the death and resurrection of Jesus—to consider. You also have the freedom to change the parameters of your text, perhaps lengthen it or shorten it to give you a clearer approach to the structure. In any case, we think you will find doing this work to identify the narrative structure to be both useful in your Word work and immensely satisfying.