Chapter 1

Introduction: The Story of Plot and the Book of Genesis

The grand assertion of this present study is that a nuanced understanding of Aristotle's theory of plot-structure, as modified by Paul Ricœur, will provide us with a reading strategy by which we can follow a movement from complication to dénouement in the book of Genesis.1

The great philosopher Aristotle suggested that every well-formed plot has a beginning, middle, and end (Poetics, 1450b26–34).2 He also described the two movements of plot: the complication stretches from the beginning to just before the point of change and the dénouement from the change to the end (1455b24). In Aristotle's scheme, the movement through plot from complication to dénouement is the organizing principle of narrative. If that is the case, then it might be interesting to emplot the history of plot.

The Story of Plot

Once upon a time, civilizations passed on tales and histories in which plot was ubiquitous as the organizing principle of their stories. Then one day along came Plato who, in his attempt at designing a just society, banished the poet (and plot) from his ideal republic, denigrating the poet's mimetic art because in his view, as Belfiore explains, “an imitation is ‘third from the truth,’ a copy that has an inferior relationship to a model or an original, and to imitate is to engage in an activity that is derivative, second-rate, peripheral to the important business of life.”3

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1 I use "plot" and "plot-structure" interchangeably. "Plot" allows the prose to flow a little better but the occasional use of "plot-structure" reminds us that we are drawing from Aristotle's use of muthos in his Poetics and that we are referring to “the formal organization which is purposefully produced and fashioned to coherence by the poet.” Stephen Halliwell, Aristotle's Poetics (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 24.
As our story progresses, it takes two valiant heroes to restore plot to her once glorious status. First comes Aristotle who sneaks her back into the republic by shifting the object of Plato’s mimesis from character to action.\(^4\) Tragedy is no longer ethically based, as Plato asserted, but it deals with universals that have value for gaining knowledge and teaching ethics. While Aristotle partly restores plot, he continues to distinguish it from history since plot deals with universals and not the particulars of history. As our story moves toward resolution, plot has gained access to the outer courts, even as it faces a two thousand year battle before it will finally cross Lessing’s ugly ditch and gain admittance to the inner sanctuary.\(^5\)

The warriors fighting to keep plot at bay, the Annales School and the neo-positivists, were at their peak of strength in the twentieth century. At the same time narrativists such as White, Gallie, Mink and many others, proved valiant allies of plot. In the end it was Ricœur who played the second hero and dealt the decisive blow. In *The Rule of Metaphor* and *Time and Narrative*, Ricœur set out a scheme whereby he takes Aristotle’s model of plot applied to tragedy and epic and applies it to “every composition we call a narrative.”\(^6\) He effectively argues that the historian uses the process of emplotment to relate historical events in a single action. The climactic battle takes place when Ricœur takes on the Annales School champion Braudel and demonstrates that even with a conscious attempt at eschewing plot, Braudel himself unavoidably organizes his historical account in *The Mediterranean* according to plot’s organizing principle of movement from complication to dénouement. With the defeat of

\(^4\) Elizabeth S. Belfiore, “ΤΙΕΠΙΠΕΤΕΙΑ as Discontinuous Action: Aristotle ‘Poetics’ 11. 1452a22–29,” *Classical Philology* 83.3 (1988): 85. Belfiore argues that this is the key that endows tragedy with the ability to teach universal laws. A well-formed plot, according to Aristotle must have a beginning, middle and end with movement from complication to dénouement. This movement must be according to what is inevitable or probable and it is this law of the inevitable and probable that gives plot its ability to teach universal laws. It contributes, therefore, to knowledge and ethics. Vanhoozer explains it in a slightly different way, saying that in “Plato, *mimesis* (imitation) had a more metaphysical sense whereby things imitate Ideas as works of art imitate things. In Aristotle’s *Poetics*, however, what gets imitated is a matter not of being but of *doing*: action.” Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Remythologizing Theology: Divine Action, Passion, and Authorship*, CSCD 18 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 6.
