CHAPTER FOUR

CONFIGURATION: MEDIATING THE NARRATIVE WORLD

The configuration stage (mimesis) focuses on what literary criticism traditionally understands as the plot. For Ricoeur, however, the plot is not a static set of internal structural relations, but a dynamic process of mediation operating at different levels: between the lived experience behind the text (pregfiguration) and the lived experience in front of the text (refiguration), between individual incidents and the whole story, between discordant and diverse particulars and the concordant whole, and between time as a chronological sequence of events and time as a configured reality.¹

In this chapter, I explore these different mediations. I first look into how the different incidents in Exod 4:18–26, particularly the episode in 4:24–26, fit into the broader narrative unit of Exod 2:23–4:31. I then identify the discordant elements of the narrative, including its temporal discontinuities. These discordant elements include ethical expectations produced by the different actions in the text in the world of the reader and the world of the text. I then show how the configuration of the narrative achieves a synthesis of these heterogeneous factors, without completely overcoming the discordance. Lastly, I look at how the configurations of the narrative world open up different possibilities for Moses, the main character in the story, and for the self in response to the narrative world.

It must be kept in mind that the reader is the operator that sets these different mediations in motion. Thus, the work of configuration is not just a function of the text, but of the reader as well. I, as the real reader of the text, set the plot in motion. Indeed, the plot of the narrative brings about a “synthesis of the heterogeneous” and a “concordance out of discordance”; nevertheless, this process becomes operative only in the act of reading. The reading proposed below, therefore, comes as a result of the confluence between the action of the plot that “grasps together” diverse particulars into a concordant whole and a reflective

¹ See pp. 23–24.
act on my part as I read the narrative, work out its coherence, recognize its narrative schema, and reveal its capacity to be followed.

**Exodus 4:18–26 within the Broader Narrative Unit**

Because the plot mediates between individual episodes and the story as a whole, an incident can no longer be considered an isolated occurrence, but must be seen in terms of its contribution to the progress of the whole narrative. The incidents in Exod 4:18–26 play the role of facilitating the transformation of Moses into a messenger who would effectively communicate Yahweh’s message to Israel and to Pharaoh.

*The Thrust of the Narrative Unit*

The main movement of the second narrative unit in Exodus 1:1–14:31 (Exod 2:23–4:31) focuses on how God has seen the oppressive plight of the Israelites, and how God is doing something about their situation by sending a messenger who will communicate to the people God’s concern and intention to deliver them. This key theme is brought to the fore in the introduction (2:23–25), is reiterated in the middle section of the unit (3:7–10), and is recapitulated in the conclusion (4:31). The thrust of the unit then is the relationship of the people and God, in which God acknowledges the cry of the Israelites, and the Israelites acknowledge that God has heard them. This relationship between God and the Israelites is mediated by the figure of Moses.

*Setting the Stage: God Hears the Cry of Israel (2:23–25)*

The death of the old king (2:23) who was instrumental to the oppression of the Israelites (as told in Exodus 1) could have presumably introduced a new set of affairs that could have led to the alleviation of the suffering of the Israelites. Just as a change of policy was effected when “a new king arose over Egypt who did not acknowledge Joseph” (1:8), hope for a reversal of policy was ripe with the death of this king. However,

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2 See pp. 93–96.


4 The phrase יִרְוַעַל here does not mean that the new king had no knowledge of Joseph, but that he did not value or honor what Joseph had done for Egypt. J. P. Hyatt, *Exodus* (NCB; London: Oliphants, 1971), 58.