SOME OBSERVATIONS ON THE ANALYSIS OF
STRUCTURE IN BIBLICAL NARRATIVE

by

S. BAR-EFRAT

Jerusalem

In recent years an increasing number of studies has been published
devoted to the investigation of the literary features of biblical nar-
ratives 1). Whereas in the past biblical scholars paid attention pri-
marily to genetic questions, with a view to restoring the “original”,
“authentic” form of the narratives by peeling off additions and dispos-
ing of alterations, lately there has been evidence of a growing tendency
to deal with the biblical narrative in its present shape. Needless to
say, this new literary approach is not to be confused with the form-
critical method, which occupies itself mainly with questions of genre,
formulas and other more or less fixed forms, and with their Sitz im
Leben 2). The present literary method is concerned mainly with the

1) Among the early advocates and practitioners of this line of investigation the
following deserve to be mentioned above all: M. Buber, “Leitwortstil in der
Erzählung des Pentateuchs”, M. Buber and F. Rosenzweig, Die Schrift und ihre
Verdeutschung (Berlin, 1936), pp. 211-38; E. Auerbach, Mimesis: Dargestellte Wirk-
llichkeit in der abendländischen Literatur (Bern, 1946), chap. I: Die Narbe des Odys-
seus, pp. 7-30; J. M. Muller, “A study in Hebrew rhetoric: repetition and style”,
Supp. to VT 1 (1953), pp. 97-111; E. Galbiati, La struttura letteraria dell’Esodo
(Alba, 1956); L. Alonso-Schökel, “Erzählkunst im Buche der Richter”, Bib. 42
Bibel”, VT 13 (1963), pp. 456-75, and “Weiteres über die Bauformen des Er-
zählens in der Bibel”, Bib. 46 (1965), pp. 181-206. Some of the more recent con-
tributions are: L. Krinetzki, “Ein Beitrag zur Stilanalyse der Goliathperikope
(1 Sam 17, 1-18, 5)”, Bib. 54 (1973), pp. 187-236; J. L. Crenshaw, “The Samson
Saga: Filial devotion or erotic attachment?”, ZAW 86 (1974), pp. 470-504; M.
Fishbane, “Composition and structure in the Jacob Cycle”, JJS 27 (1975),
pp. 15-38; J. P. Fokkelman, Narrative Art in Genesis: Specimens of Structural and
Stylistic Analysis (Assen-Amsterdam, 1975); R. Alter, “A literary approach to the
Bible, Commentary 60 (1975), pp. 70-7, and “Biblical narrative”, Commentary 61
(1976), pp. 61-7; J. Magonet, Form and meaning: Studies in literary techniques in the
Book of Jonah (Bonn-Frankfurt, 1976); J. T. Walsh, “Genesis 2:4b-3:24: A syn-
chronic approach”, JBL 96 (1977), pp. 161-77; J. Licht, Storytelling in the Bible
(Jerusalem, 1978). See also the publications in Semeia and the survey by J. D.
Crossan, “Waking the Bible (Biblical hermeneutic and literary imagination)
Int. 32 (1978), pp. 269-85.

2) Both methods are represented in the work of Gunkel; his successors, how-
ever, have applied themselves almost exclusively to form-criticism.
individual narratives. Its aim is to bring to light their artistic and rhetorical characteristics, their inner organization, their stylistic and structural features. This preoccupation with the literary rather than with the historical aspects of the biblical narrative—or to put it differently, with its synchronic rather than with its diachronic facets—is no doubt influenced by similar trends in other realms of scholarly endeavour. Structuralism has secured a position of considerable importance in the sciences as well as in the humanities, and conspicuously so in anthropology, in linguistics and in literary criticism 3). Structuralism is itself only one manifestation of the current attempt to look at things as they are, to investigate the arrangement of the constituent parts rather than to inquire how they originated and how they developed 4).

It appears, however, that there is some lack of clarity with regard to the method of analysing structure. When examining specimens of structural analysis of biblical narratives one sometimes senses a lack of awareness of the exact nature of the structural elements employed. In a certain number of cases the analysis evinces an indiscriminate use of heterogeneous elements, which is of course detrimental to the quality of the structural analysis and may even impair its validity. Therefore it might be useful to clarify the subject to some extent by surveying the chief varieties and constituents of narrative structure and illustrating them by reference to biblical narratives.

Structure can be defined as the network of relations among the parts of an object or a unit. This definition at once raises the question what is to be considered a unit in the area of biblical narrative. Should biblical scholars focus their attention on the smallest literary units or should the literary work as a whole be the object of investigation? The correct reply to this question seems to be that the limits of the literary unit cannot be fixed a priori, but that they are dynamic and vary according to the kind of questions the literary critic desires to pose 5), provided of course that the delimiting of the unit has its justification in the text.

4) Already in 1925 J. L. Palache expressed the opinion with regard to the biblical narrative that its being rather than its becoming should be studied. See his Het karakter van het Oud-Testamentische verhaal (Amsterdam, 1925), pp. 7-8.