

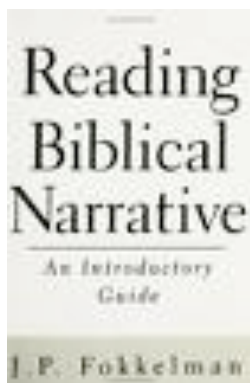
Literary Competence



Hebrew Exegetical Methods

Ten Productive Questions

J. P. Fokkeman, in *Reading Biblical Narrative: An Introductory Guide* (pp. 206-209) identifies ten groups of questions useful while reading narrative texts. According to Fokkeman, "reading properly is always active puzzle solving: comparing elements, checking on a character's history, sometimes consulting an atlas or a Bible handbook. Asking questions is more important than committing ourselves to answers."



1. Who is the hero? What is your reason for thinking this (remember the criteria of presence, initiative, and the executor of the quest)?
2. What does the quest consist of? What is the hero after, *i.e.* what is the object of value? Does he attain his goal, and if not, why not?
3. Who are the helpers and opponents? Besides characters, factors, situations, or personality traits also qualify. Are any *attributes* (objects) present? What do they contribute? Do they have a symbolic added value?
4. Can you feel the *narrator's* presence anywhere in the text? This will apply especially in the case of

information, comments, explanations, or value judgments on his part. Can you point to these instances of the writer speaking? Where is the writer less obviously present (for instance in his deliberate arrangement or composition of the material)? Does he usually make his own statements at strategic points in the text?

5. Does the narrator keep to the *chronology* of the events and processes themselves? If not, where does he deviate, and why do you think he does that? Try and get an idea of the discourse time/narrated time ratio.
6. Where are the gaps where the *narrated time* has been skipped and are there cases of acceleration, retardation, retrospect and anticipation? Assuming that the writer inserted them at the right points: why are they where they are? What is their relation with the context?
7. Is there a clear *plot*, or is the unit you are reading more or less without plot of its own, because it forms part of a greater whole? What, then, is the macro-plot there?

8. Where are the speeches? Are there many of them? Have speeches been left out where you would expect them?

What factors influence the character who is speaking, what self-interest, background, desires, expectations?

Congruence: do the characters' words match their actions? If not, how come?

9. Is there any particular choice of words that strikes you?

Any other considerations of *style* or *structure*? Take them seriously, and keep pondering them, guided, for instance, by such questions as "what does this contribute to plot or characterization?"

10. *Boundaries:* what devices are used to demarcate a unit?

(Consider the data regarding time, space, beginning and end of action, entrances or exits of characters.)

Can you make a *division* of the text (divide it into smaller units)?

By what signals are you guided? Try and find other signals or markers, which may possibly lead to a different structuration. To what extent does the division clarify your view of themes or "content"?

Summary . . .

You are asking these questions as part of your quest to develop literary competence.

"To be literarily competent does not mean knowing the literature exhaustively, but being aware of the major conventions, or literary devices, genres, and so forth." Longman, *Literary Approaches and Interpretation*, p. 124.

"Students of the OT may learn much Hebrew and yet seriously misunderstand the biblical texts if they do not learn as much as possible about the idioms, the literary conventions, the rhetorical devices, and so on at work in the foreign literature that is in the Bible." V. Philips Long, "Reading the OT as Literature," p. 91.

In other words, our pursuit is authorial intent.

A Basic Plan For Reading the Bible a Literature



"Reading the Old Testament as Literature" by V. Philips Long in *Interpreting the Old Testament*, edited by Craig Broyles.

Genre and Setting. Genre has to do with what a text is.

Certain genres operate generally within certain settings. . . The literary setting considers context

in which the passage is located as well as the historical timeframe of the events narrated.

Topic and Theme. Topic is what a text is about. Theme is what a text asserts or implies about the topic.

The topic can sometimes be expressed in one word, whereas theme generally requires a verb as well as a noun.

Structure and Unity. The central questions in this part of the process are whether the text hangs together (*unity*) and how (*structure*).

Texture and Artistry. The central point is that while the three categories above concern the text as a whole, the exploration of *texture* and *artistry* focus on the details of the text.

Structure can be compared to the framing timbers that hold up a wall; *texture* is the plaster; and *artistry* is the paint or wallpaper.

Texture includes words, images, metaphors, similes, apostrophes, personifications, hyperboles, and other figures of speech.

Artistry focuses on what gives color to the poem or narrative. What is it that makes the poem beautiful or powerful? What is it that makes the narrative compelling or convincing?