

Contrasting Historical-Critical and Literary Approaches to Biblical Interpretation: The Case of Exodus 1-2

In this essay, I contrast what I call the Historical-Critical approach, the predominant methodology in academic bible scholarship as practiced in the university world for the past two centuries, with a Literary approach that has grown in popularity, both inside and outside academia, in the past half century. Setting these two approaches to biblical interpretation side by side enhances our understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of each approach.

As a test case, we will examine both methodologies at work regarding the first two chapters of Exodus. I argue that some textual problems that the Historical-Critical approach seeks to resolve are resolved more plausibly by the literary method, and also that literary categories such as intertextuality and *leitwort* (key word) illuminate the text in a way that the Historical-Critical method cannot.

Describing these two approaches obviously involves a significant degree of generalization, and some scholars utilize both methods; reality does not always split neatly into binary divisions. Yair Zakovich¹

1. Yair Zakovich, *Hayyei Shimshon: Nittuah Sifrutit Bikkorti* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1982).

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and Yaira Amit² are examples of scholars who combine these methodologies. At the same time, other prominent scholars remain fully entrenched in the Historical-Critical approach. James Kugel, for example, has long portrayed the Literary approach in a negative light.³ There is value in comparing the methods in their pure forms, a project that is facilitated by examining older scholarly works, those preceding the literary movement.

I also note that this essay obviously can only analyze a small sample size. In the future, however, I hope to increase the sample and illustrate a similar pattern over a much larger canvas of biblical material.

General Contrasts

Critical biblical scholarship in the university setting emphasizes questions of composition and history. With regard to the Pentateuch, scholars developed various theories as to the different strands woven together into the final product. Although there is much disagreement within this field about the correct historical reconstruction, the most famous theory—the Documentary Hypothesis of Graf and Wellhausen—remains a good starting point. According to this theory, writers referred to as J, E, P, and D were the main contributors to the final product. Scholars rely upon the biblical usage of different names for God, other linguistic variants, and doublets (parallel stories with differences, such as multiple wife/sister stories about Abraham and Sarah) to identify the various authors.

Historical-Critical Bible scholars like to situate the Pentateuch within the context of other cultures in the ancient Near East. They compare biblical covenants to ancient Hittite suzerain treaties, the flood story to the Gilgamesh epic, biblical law to the Code of Hammurabi, and so on. While these scholars do occasionally take note of salient differences between the Bible and these Near Eastern texts, the scholarly thrust stresses the similarities.

2. Yaira Amit, “*Izzuv u-Mashma’ut be-Sippur Kerem Navot ha-Yizraeli (Melakhim I 21)*,” *Beit Mikra* 60:1 (5775): 19-36.

3. James Kugel, “On the Bible and Literary Criticism,” *Prooftexts* 1:3 (1981): 217-36. See also the subsequent exchange between Kugel and Adele Berlin, “On the Bible as Literature,” *Prooftexts* 2:3 (1982): 323-32, and his online essay, “Appendix 1: Apologetics and ‘Biblical Criticism Lite,’” 1-23, available at <http://www.jameskugel.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/Apologics-and-Biblical-Criticism-Lite.pdf>.

While traditional Western religions view the Bible as a source of religious guidance, moral instruction, and psychological insight, such themes find muted expression in Historical-Critical biblical scholarship. Instead, stories are viewed as etiological tales, stories intending to explain how places were named or how different languages developed, or as power plays in which representatives of the Northern or Southern kingdom or Aaronoid and non-Aaronoid priests portray their side in the best possible light.⁴

In the early part of the twentieth century, Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig pointed the way towards another approach. Although they accepted many of the findings of critical scholarship, they tended to read the text we have as a unity that holds together well. In Rosenzweig's famous phrase, R stands not for Redactor, but for Rabbenu.⁵ Secondly, they saw great moral pathos and keen insight in the biblical world. Finally, they noted how the Bible uses sophisticated literary techniques to great effect. For example, Buber emphasized the *leitwort*, a word repeated multiple times that adds resonance to a story.⁶ Thus, for instance, repetition of the word "brother" in the Cain and Abel story (Gen. 4) underscores that the first murder is a fratricide. Sensitive to the use of word play, Buber and Rosenzweig attempted to maintain the word play of the Hebrew original even in their German translation.

The past fifty years have witnessed great flowering of this literary approach, with the two most significant contributions being Robert Alter's *The Art of Biblical Narrative*⁷ and Meir Sternberg's *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative*.⁸ Many other scholars—such as Adele Berlin,⁹ Michael

4. A good contemporary example is James Kugel, *How to Read the Bible: A Guide to Scripture Then and Now* (New York: Free Press, 2007). In each chapter, he contrasts the biblical account per se with the readings of ancient interpreters. In Kugel's presentation, the Bible never has any moral grandeur or psychological insight until the ancient interpreters have their way with it. See my critique of this volume in BDD 29 (2014): 7-13.

5. Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig, *Scripture and Translation*, trans. Lawrence Rosenwald with Everett Fox (Bloomington, IN: University of Indiana, 1994), 23.

6. *Ibid.* 114-28, 143-50.

7. Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (2nd ed., New York: Basic Books, 2011).

8. Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington, IN: University of Indiana Press, 1987).

9. Adele Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative* (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1983).

Fishbane,¹⁰ J. P. Fokkelman,¹¹ Yonatan Grossman¹² and Meir Weiss¹³—have penned important works of literary biblical interpretation. In addition to *leitwort*, they analyze intertextuality, clever word choice, irony, variation in repetition, type scenes, point of view, and many other literary techniques. Their readings discern great ethical and religious meaning in the Pentateuch.

It is interesting to note that both Alter and Sternberg are professors of comparative literature who came to Bible later in their careers. This reflects the fact that it sometimes takes an outsider's perspective to get beyond methodologies standard in a field. That being said, Berlin, Fokkelman, and Fishbane are all professors of Bible and Jewish studies, so insiders also helped generate this revolution.

The Literary approach has made enough inroads that students now frequently encounter such ideas in university Bible courses. At the same time, the Historical-Critical approach remains alive and well.

We have noted three salient distinctions between the two approaches: Historical-Critical Bible professors divide the text into various authors, whereas the Literary approach reads the text as a unified whole. Classical biblical scholarship dedicates much time to comparative study with other cultures, whereas the Literary school emphasizes the artistry of the biblical writing in and of itself. The former approach tends to identify little wisdom and insight in the Pentateuch, while the latter locates a great deal.

It should be clear that preferring one approach does not mandate viewing the other as worthless. If study of ancient ziggurats helps us understand the Tower of Babel story or if expertise in Akkadian illuminates the meaning of an obscure biblical term, those are positive developments. Nonetheless, we will take note of three shortcomings of Historical-Critical scholarship. First, there are methodological flaws in the approach per se. Second, the exclusive focus on issues of history and composition blinds these scholars to alternative and preferable solutions to textual problems. Finally, practitioners from this school are often indifferent to literary techniques that provide meaning and depth.

10. Michael Fishbane, *Text and Texture: Close Readings of Biblical Texts* (New York: Schocken 1979).

11. J. P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis* (Assun: Von Gorcum, 1979).

12. Yonatan Grossman, *Galuy u-Mazpun: Al Kammah mi-Darkei ha-Izzuv shel Sippur ha-Mikra'i* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2015).

13. Meir Weiss, *The Bible From Within: The Method of Total Interpretation* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1984).

With this background in mind, we will examine how each school reads the first two chapters of Exodus, chapters that describe the enslavement of the Israelites in Egypt, the birth and hiding of Moses, and three episodes from Moses' youth.

Exodus 1

Our presentation of the Historical-Critical approach relies primarily on the work of Brevard Childs,¹⁴ Samuel Lowenstamm,¹⁵ Martin Noth,¹⁶ and John van Seters.¹⁷ Although, as noted above, some contemporary scholars combine the methods or appreciate both, these scholars did their primary work before the growth of the Literary approach. They therefore bring the Historical-Critical approach into relief in its pure form, and thus facilitate contrasting the methods.

For the most part, the works of these scholars share the characteristics enumerated above, but Childs, with his "canonical approach," is quite interested in both theological meaning and the current form of the masoretic text. In his commentary on Exodus, Childs first engages in source criticism and then addresses the text in its final, canonical form.

We will first present some of the verses that will occupy our attention:

8 Now there arose a new king over Egypt, who knew not Joseph. 9 And he said unto his people: "Behold, the people of the children of Israel are too many and too mighty for us. 10 Come, let us deal wisely with them, lest they multiply and it come to pass that when there befall us any war, they also join themselves unto our enemies, and fight against us, and get them up out of the land." 11 Therefore, they did set over them taskmasters to afflict them with their burdens. And they built for Pharaoh store-cities, Pitom and Raamses. 12 But the more they afflicted them, the more they multiplied and the more they spread abroad. And they were afraid because of the children of Israel. 13 And the Egyptians made the children of Israel to serve with rigor. 14 And they made their lives bitter with hard service, in mortar and in brick, and in all

14. Brevard S. Childs, *Exodus: A Commentary* (London: S.C.M. Press, 1974).

15. Samuel Lowenstamm, "The Story of Moses' Birth," in Lowenstamm, *From Babylon to Canaan: Studies in the Bible and its Oriental Background*, ed. Yitzhak Avishur and Joshua Blau (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1992), 201-21.

16. Martin Noth, *Exodus: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962).

17. John Van Seters, *The Life of Moses: The Yahawist as Historian in Exodus-Numbers* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994).

manner of service in the field; in all their service, wherein they made them serve with rigor. 15 And the king of Egypt spoke to the Hebrew midwives, of whom the name of the one was Shifrah and the name of the other Puah. 16 And he said: "When you do the office of a midwife to the Hebrew women, you shall look upon the birth-stool: if it be a son, then you shall kill him, but if it be a daughter, then she shall live." 17 But the midwives feared God, and did not as the king of Egypt commanded them, but saved the male children alive. 18 And the king of Egypt called for the midwives, and said unto them: "Why have you done this thing and have saved the male children alive?" 19 And the midwives said unto Pharaoh: "Because the Hebrew women are not as the Egyptian women; for they are lively, and are delivered ere the midwife come unto them." 20 And God dealt well with the midwives; and the people multiplied, and waxed very mighty. 21 And it came to pass, because the midwives feared God, that He made them houses. 22 And Pharaoh charged all his people, saying: "Every son that is born you shall cast into the river, and every daughter you shall save alive."¹⁸

Before proceeding, it is important to note that the first two chapters of Exodus read smoothly as is. Furthermore, the classic supports for multiple authorship, such as variant names of God and striking doublets, are absent in these chapters. This is admirably admitted by Childs, who confirms "a unified quality to the narrative in its present form" and adds that "the usual criteria of the divine name or duplicated story occur too infrequently to aid."¹⁹

Nonetheless, many academic scholars see multiple strands in the first chapter. Consensus attributes vv. 13-14 to P, but debate ensues about the surrounding verses. Hugo Gressmann argued that the "wise dealings" of v. 10 refer to the subtle plan of having the midwives kill the babies (v. 15) while pretending that the babies were stillborn. Thus, he viewed vv. 11-12 as a separate unit and v. 10 as continuing in v. 15.²⁰ The problem with this view is that "the more they multiplied" of v. 12 refers back to Pharaoh's fear of "lest they multiply" in v. 10. Apparently, then, the passage of vv. 8-12 is a unified whole.

Martin Noth divides between vv. 8-12 and vv. 15-21, attributing the former to J and the latter to E. To bolster his position, he notes that

18. The biblical translations in this essay are taken from the JPS 1917 translation, with some minor modifications.

19. Childs, *Exodus*, 7.

20. Gressman is cited by Lowenstamm, "The Story of Moses' Birth," 201.

v. 11 uses the term “Pharaoh,” whereas vv. 15-21 refer to “the king of Egypt.” Yet matters are not so simple, since v. 19 includes a reference to “Pharaoh” as well. Noth suggests that this term may be a later addition, a suggestion that exhibits one of the oft-noted flaws of Historical-Critical biblical scholarship—its use of what philosophers of science call ad hoc hypotheses.²¹ It is far too easy to dismiss contrary evidence as a later interpolation. Scientific research becomes far less convincing when we can effortlessly dispense with experiments that counter our thesis.

Most scholars view v. 22 as an independent tradition, noting that Jewish males do not seem to be in any danger in chapter 5 and that the rest of Tanakh stresses the servitude in Egypt without mentioning the decree to annihilate the males (with the exception of Ps. 105:25). We will later explore alternative explanations of this phenomenon.

Intertextuality

We will now turn to literary readings of the first chapter, relying upon an insightful essay by James Ackerman.²² Ackerman argues that the beginning of Exodus harks back to the beginning of Genesis. The terms for Israelite multiplication in Ex. 1:7 (*paru . . . va-yirbu*) match the command to be fruitful and multiply in the creation story (Gen. 1:28).²³ Furthermore, the image of a mother “seeing” that her baby is “good” (Ex. 2:2) parallels the multiple times God sees and declares His creations to be good in the first chapter of Genesis. Intertextuality conveys how the formation of the nation of Israel is a new beginning, almost a second creation.

Ackerman²⁴ and Judy Klitsner²⁵ also note parallels to the Tower of Babel episode. Both stories use the phrases “*havah*” (behold) and “*pen*” (lest). Both involve major building projects using “mortar” and “brick.” Finally, no names appear in either story. The absence of names is even more pronounced in the second chapter of Exodus, in which the parents of Moses are described as being a man and women from the tribe of Levi. Klitsner suggests that the absence of names reflects

21. Noth, *Exodus*, 23.

22. James Ackerman, “The Literary Context of the Moses Birth Story,” in *Literary Interpretations of Biblical Narratives*, ed. Kenneth R. Gros Louis, James Ackerman, and Thayer S. Warshaw (Nashville: Abingdon, 1974), 74-119.

23. *Ibid.* 74-77.

24. *Ibid.* 81.

25. Judy Klitsner, *Subversive Sequels in the Bible: How Biblical Stories Mine and Undermine Each Other* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2009), 48-61.

the depersonalization involved in totalitarian society and its projects. Slaves and menial workers lose their individual identities; individuals do not matter as long as the collective achieves its goals.

Leitwort

The key word in vv. 13-14 is clearly AVD, with the word appearing four times in v. 14 and once in v. 13. This repetition leaves the note of servitude ringing in our ears. The Egyptian taskmasters go to great lengths to enslave the Hebrews and make their lives miserable.

Irony

Irony plays a strong role in this chapter. Not only are Pharaoh's decrees ineffectual, they bring about the very things he fears. Pharaoh hopes that servitude will decrease the Jewish birth rate, but it actually increases after the enslavement. He tries to kill the males, but the midwives defy his tyrannical orders. Indeed, his attempt to kill the males eventually leads to his downfall, as Moses grows up in the palace and becomes the beneficiary of an upbringing that leaves him more equipped to lead a revolt. Finally, Pharaoh does not perceive the girls as a threat, yet females are his undoing throughout the first two chapters. His commands are successfully countered by two midwives, his own daughter, and Moses' mother and sister.

Ongoing Themes

This last idea highlights an advantage of the literary approach. Traditional rabbinic medieval commentaries for the most part made their invaluable contributions via painstaking verse by verse analysis. While Nahmanides and Don Isaac Abravanel did analyze larger sections, most of the rabbinic commentators did not. In contrast, the literary interpreters employ a wide lens, enabling them to see larger pictures. In our context, the themes of heroic women and the irony of Pharaonic futility run through the narrative. The coherence of running themes provides further reason to read the chapter as a unified whole.

Bible scholars consider a practical question in addressing this story: How could two midwives service the entire Jewish population? Answers provided by medieval commentaries prove helpful. Ibn Ezra and others

suggest that these women were, as it were, the heads of the obstetrics department in Egypt, presiding over all the other midwives.²⁶ One difficulty with his explanation is that the Bible does not refer to these women as “*sarei ha-meyalledot*.” Abravanel explains that Shifrah and Puah are not the names of individual women, but rather the names of two distinct nursing positions—one aiding the mother and the other helping with the baby. Thus, Pharaoh actually addressed many women.²⁷ R. Ovadiah Seforno adds what I consider to be the most profound interpretation. He writes that Pharaoh did a trial run with two women, and their resistance led him to abandon that particular plan.²⁸ Accordingly, this anecdote illustrates the influence a few individuals can have in defying tyranny. As noted, the defiance theme fits with the actions of Pharaoh’s daughter in the subsequent chapter.

The Literary approach might deny the cogency of the question altogether. According to this approach, the Bible is more interested in conveying ideas and ideals with great artistry and less interested in painting a precise historical picture. From this perspective, the literary benefits of a personal conversation between Pharaoh and a small number of midwives trump historical concerns about the precise number of midwives.²⁹ From that vantage point, Exodus conveys the heroic resistance of two women, without addressing pragmatic questions about how many midwives were actually commanded in the historical Egypt.

The defiance theme may also help us understand why the killing of the male babies does not receive extensive reporting in the Bible. Note that Pharaoh does not begin with a genocidal command to his entire nation. As Nahmanides observes, tyrants cannot simply command whatever they want; they rely upon propaganda and subtlety to convince their countrymen to go along with their sinister plans.³⁰ Pharaoh was concerned that the Hebrews, or even the Egyptians themselves, would forcefully resist such a murderous edict. Indeed, the heroic actions of two midwives and of his own daughter indicate that his fears were well-founded. Perhaps Pharaoh’s directive to his nation to toss babies into the Nile met with enough resistance that the plan was soon cancelled. If so, this theme is understandably muted in subsequent accounts.

26. Ibn Ezra, Ex. 1:15.

27. Don Isaac Abravanel, commentary on Exodus, p. 7 in the Jerusalem 5744 edition.

28. R. Ovadiah Seforno, Ex. 1:15.

29. I am indebted to Prof. Yonatan Grossman and Zecharya Blau for this last point.

30. Nahmanides, Ex. 1:10.

We now turn to the second chapter.

Exodus 2

1 And there went a man of the house of Levi and took to wife a daughter of Levi. 2 And the woman conceived and bore a son; and when she saw him that he was a goodly child, she hid him three months. 3 And when she could no longer hide him, she took for him an ark of bulrushes and daubed it with slime and with pitch; and she put the child therein and laid it among the reeds by the river's brink. 4 And his sister stood afar off, to know what would be done to him. 5 And the daughter of Pharaoh came down to bathe in the river; and her maidens walked along by the riverside; and she saw the ark among the reeds and sent her handmaid to fetch it. 6 And she opened it and saw it, even the child; and behold, a boy that wept. And she had compassion on him, and said: "This is one of the Hebrews' children." 7 Then said his sister to Pharaoh's daughter: "Shall I go and call thee a nurse of the Hebrew women, that she may nurse the child for you?" 8 And Pharaoh's daughter said to her: "Go." And the maiden went and called the child's mother. 9 And Pharaoh's daughter said to her: "Take this child away and nurse it for me, and I will give you your wages." And the woman took the child and nursed it. 10 And the child grew, and she brought him unto Pharaoh's daughter, and he became her son. And she called his name "Mosheh" and said: "Because I drew him [meshitihu] out of the water." 11 And it came to pass in those days, when Moses was grown up, that he went out unto his brethren and looked on their burdens; and he saw an Egyptian smiting a Hebrew, one of his brethren. 12 And he looked this way and that way, and when he saw that there was no man, he smote the Egyptian and hid him in the sand. 13 And he went out the second day, and behold, two men of the Hebrews were striving together; and he said to him that did the wrong: "Why do you strike your fellow?" 14 And he said: "Who made you a ruler and a judge over us? Do you think to kill me, as you did kill the Egyptian?" And Moses feared and said: "Surely the thing is known." 15 Now when Pharaoh heard this thing, he sought to slay Moses. But Moses fled from the face of Pharaoh and dwelt in the land of Midian; and he sat down by a well. 16 Now the priest of Midian had seven daughters; and they came and drew water and filled the troughs to water their father's flock. 17 And the shepherds came and drove them away; but

Moses stood up and helped them and watered their flock. 18 And when they came to Re'uel their father, he said: "How is it that you are come so soon today?" 19 And they said: "An Egyptian man delivered us out of the hand of the shepherds, and moreover he drew water for us and watered the flock." 20 And he said to his daughters: "And where is he? Why is it that you have left the man? Call him, that he may eat bread." 21 And Moses was content to dwell with the man; and he gave Moses Zipporah his daughter. 22 And she bore a son, and he called his name Gershom; for he said, "I have been a stranger in a strange land."

Most Bible scholars agree that this chapter is a unified whole. They attempt to augment understanding of this chapter by turning to other ancient literature about misplaced babies. The theme of a baby brought up by a family other than his biological parents who subsequently goes on to great things appears in the stories of Oedipus, Romulus, Sargon, and Cyrus. But in all of those tales, a child of royal lineage is brought up by commoners, the very opposite of the Moses story. This point bothered historian Eduard Mayer so much that he asserted that in the original account, Pharaoh's daughter was the biological mother.³¹ A different approach could highlight how the world of the Bible does not idolize royalty; the biblical perspective deems it more honorable to come from a simple Levite couple.

Parallels to the Sargon legend lead Lowenstamm to conclude that the original account involved an illegitimate birth, which induced Moses' mother to hide the baby. He cites further support from the total absence of the father after the birth. Lowenstamm writes that the parental lack of concern "would be intelligible only in the case of a man who has begotten an illegitimate child."³² In response to the problem of discrepancies between the Sargon story and the biblical episode, Lowenstamm states that "the remaining discrepancy between the two narratives disappears once it is recognized that the biblical form of the story betrays its origin in the legend describing the exposure of an illegitimate child."³³ To some degree, this strategy again enables scholars to ignore contrary evidence. If the current form of a narrative does not fit a theory, they can always claim that the original form did so. A methodological desire to read biblical stories in the light of ancient Near

31. Mayer is cited by Lowenstamm, "The Story of Moses' Birth," 201.

32. *Ibid.* 204.

33. *Ibid.* 204-5.

Eastern parallels sometimes leads scholars astray. Instead, we should investigate if Lowenstamm's approach is truly the only way to restore intelligibility to this tale.

Abravanel offers three alternative explanations for the father's absence. The father may have already perished or was simply away. We can further the second option by suggesting that he was conscripted for work; after all, we are talking about slaves. More intriguingly, Abravanel proposes that the father may have despaired, leaving the mother as the only parent with the wherewithal to attempt a desperate measure to save her son.³⁴ This would cohere with the running theme of heroic women in the opening two chapters of Exodus. When males lost hope and courage, their female counterparts remained stalwart as they pursued any small strand of possibility.

From this point on, I will not compare treatments of specific textual problems by the Historical and Literary methods. Instead, I will illustrate how, independent of any specific difficulties, certain literary techniques greatly enhance our understanding of the Exodus narrative. A purely Historical approach would not draw on those techniques, and is to that extent poorer.

Type Scenes

Literary readers find significant technique and meaning in the second chapter of Exodus. Robert Alter has developed the idea of a type scene, in which the text uses a common trope but introduces variants into that trope.³⁵ This technique simultaneously generates a sense of continuity—Isaac emulates the endeavors of Abraham—while also allowing for differences relevant to the individual characters.

Thus, for example, biblical heroes—including Jacob and Rachel, Moses and Zipporah, and Abraham's servant and Rebecca—all meet spouses at a well. It is quite noticeable that in the Rebecca example, she meets a representative at the well, and not the groom himself. For Alter, this highlights the more passive element of Isaac's personality. Unlike his son Jacob, Isaac does not find a wife on his own.³⁶ Alternatively, David Sykes explains that Isaac was the only one of the patriarchs commanded not to leave the Land of Israel (see Gen. 26:2-3).³⁷

34. Abravanel, commentary to Exodus, p. 12.

35. Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 55-79.

36. *Ibid.* 64.

37. David K. Sykes, *Patterns in Genesis and Beyond* (New York: Patterns Publications, 2014), 141-42.

In the Moses marriage episode, Moses does the work himself, but the other side seems represented more by a father than a daughter. No dialogue ensues between Moses and Zipporah; only Re'uel insists on inviting Moses home. This variation sets the tone for Moses' ongoing relationship with his father-in-law. Indeed, in the Bible, Moses interacts with his father-in-law (Ex. 18; Num. 10) more than with his wife.

None of these suggestions is available in the Historical-Critical method, nor are those that follow.

Purposeful Ambiguity or Double Entendres

Some biblical texts may consciously lend themselves to two different meanings, as in the case of Jonah's prophetic cry: "In another forty days, Ninveh will be overturned" (Jonah 3:4). Although the simplest reading foresees a calamity for Ninveh, another reading interprets the verse as referring to the locals turning over a new leaf and improving their behavior. Perhaps the prophet intends both meanings, since either eventuality could turn out to be the case. The same technique applies to Abraham's statement before the *akedah*: "God will provide for us the lamb for a burnt offering, my son" (Gen. 22:8). On a basic level, Abraham informs his son that they will find an animal to offer. Yet the juxtaposition of "burnt offering" and "my son" reminds the knowing reader of another, far more frightening option.

The account in Exodus 2 utilizes a similar technique. As Yael Ziegler has shown, this chapter highlights a tension in Moses' identity. The daughter of Pharaoh apparently names Moses, but the etymology of his name is given in Hebrew, not Egyptian, although there is a simple Egyptian etymology for his name; the Egyptian root MSY means "child of," as in the name Ramesses (child of Ra). Moses grows up an Egyptian palace, but his Jewish mother nurses him. He stands up for his fellow Jews, but having fled to Midian, he is identified by Re'uel's daughters as an "Egyptian man." Finally, v. 11 refers to Moses "going out to his brethren." Almost all commentators understand the verse as referring to his Jewish brethren, but Ibn Ezra suggests that Moses went out to his Egyptian brethren. Perhaps the twin possible readings emphasize the ambiguities of Moses' identity and the choice of ultimate allegiance that he will soon have to make. Again, the Historical-Critical method does not mine any of the interpretive options I have mentioned.

Development

The Bible frequently presents multiple consecutive stories conveying the development of a character or theme. In our context, Moses stands up for justice on three occasions. He kills an Egyptian taskmaster who was striking a Jew. He then tries to prevent two Jews from fighting. Finally, he defends the daughters of Re'uel from the aggression of local shepherds.

In an incisive essay, Aḥad Ha-Am illustrates two patterns of development between the stories.³⁸ On one level, we have an ever expanding circle of Mosaic involvement: The first case provides the strongest motivation; a clear bad guy strikes at his brother. The second case is less obvious, since two Jews are fighting and his allegiance lies with neither one. In the final episode, Moses provides succor to total strangers from a different ethnic group. After Moses develops into a universal crusader for justice, God appears to him in the burning bush.

Aḥad Ha-Am adds a second profound point:

But this time [after intervening in the argument between two Israelites], he discovers that it is no easy matter to fight the battle of justice, that the world is stronger than himself, and that he who stands against the world does so at his peril. Yet this experience does not make him prudent or cautious. His zeal for justice drives him from his country, and as soon as he reaches another haunt of men, while he is still sitting by the well outside the city, before he has time to find a friend and shelter, he hears once more the cry of outraged justice and runs immediately to its aid.³⁹

A young idealist begins his career with great optimism about his ability to perfect the world. Quick success in his first attempt seems to confirm his rosy initial outlook, before the harsh limitations and conundrums of reality immediately appear. Not only are Moses' brothers not grateful for his heroism, their response indicates that his life is endangered. Duly chastened, he flees to Midian, where we imagine he will strenuously avoid involvement in any further crusades. Yet he enters the fray at the first sign of injustice. Such an undaunted and idealistic individual merits leading God's people out of bondage.

38. Aḥad Ha-Am, "Moses," in *Selected Essays*, trans. Leon Simon (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2011), 292-315.

39. *Ibid.* 300-301.

Patterns of Three

In his doctoral thesis, Yair Zakovitch writes that the number three is the most significant biblical number and that it is often used to establish a pattern.⁴⁰ Although his doctorate focuses on instances in which a pattern of three gives way to a very different fourth, the three pattern per se remains part of the biblical world. The early chapters of Exodus repeatedly exhibit this pattern. Pharaoh tries three times to curtail Jewish population growth (servitude, the midwives, and a directive to the whole nation), Moses has three stories of protesting injustice, God gives Moses three signs (ch. 4), and the plagues clearly break up into three units of three.⁴¹ This recurring pattern supports a unified reading of the first several chapters of Exodus, although it is certainly not absolute proof.

Leitwort

The root RAH, to see, appears seven times in the second chapter, many of them connoting a look that inspires mercy. Moses is seen by others three times; he then looks out three times at others when he decides to help his Jewish brethren. Finally, God sees the plight of *Benei Yisrael* (Ex. 2:25). The human mercy manifest in sight motivates Divine action and leads directly to the revelation at the burning bush.⁴²

Intertextuality

The word *teivah* (ark) appears only twice in scripture—in the flood story and in our narrative. In both instances, the ark provides salvation from threatening waters. We have already noted how the first chapter of Exodus resonates with imagery from the creation story. Now we see that the second chapter hearkens back to the flood story, in which Noah and his family represent a new beginning after a failed generation. Here too, the Jewish people begin anew after baby Moses emerges from the ark.⁴³

40. Yair Zakovitch, *Ha-Degem ha-Sifrutit: Sheloshah-Arba ba-Mikra* (PhD thesis, Hebrew University, 1977).

41. Convincing evidence for dividing the plagues into units of three appears in Nahum M. Sarna, *Exploring Exodus: The Origins of Biblical Israel* (New York: Schocken, 1996), 76-77.

42. I am indebted to Prof. Yonatan Grossman for this point as well. Yael Ziegler noted the possible relevance of *Shemot Rabbah* 1:27.

43. Ackerman, "The Literary Context," 91.

Irony

Carol Meyers, professor of religion at Duke University, notes that Pharaoh wants to kill the Jewish boys by throwing them in the Nile, but Moses' mother ultimately saves him by placing him in that same body of water. Thus, the river of death turns into waters of salvation.⁴⁴ In general, Meyers' commentary reflects the inroads that the Literary approach has made in university Bible courses.

Inclusio

The biblical text sometimes demarcates a unit through a parallel between the opening and closing verses. Abraham's career begins with God's command of "*lekh lekha*" (Gen. 12:1), commanding him to leave his birthplace, and comes to a crescendo with another "*lekh lekha*" (ibid. 22:2), sending him to the *akedah*. Meyers writes that the second chapter of Exodus utilizes a similar technique. The story begins with marriage and the birth of a boy (Moses) and concludes with marriage and the birth of a boy (Gershon).⁴⁵

Narrative Pace

The Bible often skips over long periods of time. We know nothing about Moses' time in Midian before he returns to Egypt at the age of eighty; the account in Numbers of wandering in the desert jumps from the second year after the exodus to the fortieth year. On the other hand, sometimes the narrative slows the pace to create a more intensive focus. In our context, the narrative attributes seven different verbs to the daughter of Pharaoh, considerably slowing the pace. This shift in pace creates drama and highlights her heroic decision.⁴⁶

Conclusion

The critical point about intertextuality, *leitwort*, type scenes, and other literary techniques is simply that if we utilize the Historical-Critical

44. Carol Meyers, *Exodus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 42.

45. Ibid. 46.

46. See Joshua Berman, *Created Equal: How the Bible Broke with Ancient Political Thought* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 149-56.

method exclusively, we deprive ourselves of the deep readings afforded by studying these techniques. It is possible, though I do not profess to know, that the increase in the ranks of scholars who combine a Historical-Critical approach with a Literary one owes to recognition of this truth.

The Historical-Critical reading of the first two chapters of Exodus breaks the story apart into purported original strands and views the biblical account as of a piece with other ancient texts about hidden babies. In its pure form, it locates no profundity in the account and fails to identify literary artistry. The aspiring Bible student will not discover discussion of any of the literary techniques outlined in this essay by reading Noth, Lowenstamm, Van Seters, or Childs.⁴⁷ In contrast, the Literary approach notes a host of artistic techniques conveying depth and adding wisdom. I think it clear which reading is more interesting, insightful, and inspiring. It is this essay's contention that the literary reading is both more convincing and much richer.

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47. William H. C. Propp's Anchor Bible volume on Exodus (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999) does a far better job of combing standard academic scholarship with literary sensitivity, but his expressed aims downplay the literary element:

My basic approach to the Bible is anthropological. My goal is to understand, as best we can, Israelite social institutions and perceptions of reality. This orientation will be most apparent in my use of the methods of folktale analysis and in my interpretation of *Pesah-Massot* as a rite of purification and riddance. . . . I am also interested in how aspects of the Bible and Israelite culture relate to the ancient Near Eastern milieu(s) from and against which they arose. And I am very interested in words: their contextual meanings, their semiconscious resonances and their ultimate etymologies. Lastly, I am interested in history. What reality underlies the accounts? How, when, where and why did Israel emerge as a nation? (p. 39)

Other than one sentence about words, Propp focuses on anthropology, folklore analysis, the ancient Near East, and history.