

## Lesson 4

# Doing a Story Analysis

*Maurice W. Lusk, III*

The lessons on this link are designed to demonstrate the method of analyzing a biblical text as a story. Stories have specific characteristics called literary features. These are the players, stage setting, script, action, and themes making up the story. Identifying each of these features in a story allows the reader to break it down into its particulars, look at each part individually, and then put it back together again to see how these parts contribute to an understanding of the whole. This approach to the study of a biblical book is most easily done with the Gospels, Acts, and many of the Old Testament books with a story or narrative format.

The Gospels and Acts are narrative in style and lend themselves easily to the story analysis approach. In each book one can go from scene to scene (or story to story) in studying the book as a whole. The letters of the New Testament may also be studied using story analysis. Each letter has its story: there is a setting (i.e., the background of the letter), there are players (the writer, the recipients, and often a third party who is an antagonist), there's a script consisting of monologue with an implied dialogue between the writer and the original recipient(s) of the letter. There is often action associated with the letter, what has happened that occasioned this letter? The most essential literary feature is that of the themes or motifs found within the letter that gives the reader insight into the issues of the letter as well as providing the reader with some of the richest word studies of the Bible.

Story analysis has many names: compositional criticism, dramatic analysis, and rhetorical analysis just to mention a few. These are studies found in the Department of Literature of the universities under the heading of "Literary Criticism." This is a

method of studying a written composition or doing a literary critique of any literary piece. It may be applied to any written document having a narrative format or the characteristics of a story.

One of the most useful of these disciplines for the study of a Gospel is that of dramatic analysis. The term "drama" is taken from the Greek work *drama* meaning, "deed, act, acting, an action represented on the stage, a drama." In literature the term drama is defined as a composition in prose portraying life or people (players, characters, actors) by means of dialogue and actions. Essentially, we are talking about "a story."

People usually understand things better through stories. Cultural anthropologists call the human being "the storytelling animal" because of the long trail of stories he has amassed during the human journey from primitive to the modern era. Man is truly a storytelling being, he has a great love of stories, and a master of the art whether a storyteller himself or a lover of stories and the story craft. Stories are, and always have been, one of our cultures most popular means of communicating data or information, from the evening news to a full-length feature film for our entertainment. Most data or information is easily communicated through stories and can be best remembered through stories. Significance for our purposes is the fact that the most treasured collection of data or information for the past 3,000 years has been communicated through the centuries in the literary form of stories. That literature is the Bible, called the Hebrew Scriptures or *Tanakah* in Judaism and in Christianity, "the Bible," consisting of the Old and the New Testaments. These are the stories with which we are concerned in our study of story analysis.

## The Literary Features

Every story has a number of essential characteristics called literary features. By identifying these literary features one can better appreciate of how each literary feature functions within the story and what significance it plays in the telling and interpretation of the story. These literary features are taken from the discipline of dramatic

analysis; they are as follows:

**1. The Players, Characters, or Actors:** There are usually a protagonist, an antagonist, and supporting characters within a specific scene, in literature called "a pericope," from a Greek word meaning, "to cut around;" it is a block of writing that stands by itself as a scene in a play. Of the players one asks "who" is this person or persons in this scene. Who is saying or doing what? Why are these players on stage? What is going on between the different players? These questions will give the reader a good understanding of the identity and role of the players in the scene.

**2. Stage setting:** This involves the setting of the action. Here one asks the questions when and where, (questions of time and place) with reference to the action of the narrative. By determining the stage setting one breaks the larger composition apart into units or parts; i.e., the smaller stories within the larger stories. A collection of scenes make up an act (i.e., scenes having a unifying characteristic), and the acts make up the total story or drama.

**3. Action:** This is what is going on in the scene, the behavior of the players on stage. Whether physical activity or a conversation between the players, the behavior of the players is called "the action." An interpretation of the action can tell the reader about the players, whether they are protagonist, antagonist, or a supporting player.

**4. Script:** The script is made up of monologue, dialogue, and narrative (i.e. the editorial comments of the one telling the story). A speech or address within a scene is a monologue, a conversation between one or more players is a dialogue, the comments made by a third person not on stage is narrative, usually an editorial comment, as is easy to identify in the Gospel of John.

**5. Themes:** Here one is concerned with identifying themes that are essential to the development of the scene. A theme may be identified by a single word, a phrase, or an idea or concept expressed with a larger group of words. One of the most enjoyable parts of story analysis is the word studies which results from the search for

an understanding of a biblical term used to identify a theme; e.g., a title given to Jesus which gives the reader an idea of who Jesus was believed to be. Another is the kingdom of God, a reoccurring theme in the sayings and stories of Jesus. There is the nature of God as expressed in the attributes used to identify him: the Lord God, the Most High, the Holy One, or the Father. The concepts of grace and new creation in the letters of Paul are critical themes in Pauline theology. These only touch the surface of a sea of thematic studies which surface in doing story analysis.

### Interpretation and Application

Another part of story analysis, though not a literary feature, is the role of "**interpretation.**" Here the task is that of identifying the significance of each literary feature to one's understanding of the scene or pericope. This is done by the use of questions. The art of questioning the text is critical to digging out the wealth of ore hidden within the story. What is the message of this story? What was the meaning of the stage setting of this scene? Who were these players and why were they on stage? What was the significance of the dialogue in this scene? What was a certain player saying and why was he say it? Why were the players of this scene doing what they were doing? What is the meaning of the terms or expressions used by this player? Why did he use that term and not another term? What repeated words or phrases are in the text that may help the reader discover the reoccurring themes of the text?

Interpretation is then followed by the final step of "**application.**" In this step the reader enters into the story and becomes a part of it and allows the lesson of the story or the interpretation of the scene to be personally addressed to him or to her. This inevitably happens when one hears or reads a story or attends a stage play or theatrical production. We walk from the theater thinking about what this story says to us and how it affects us. We finish reading a story then lay the book down and begin to process it as to what it has to say to us, or how this story applies to our story.

As well as being a literary composition, drama is also a

performing art, something that is played out - actors acting upon a stage, whether a theatrical stage or the stage of daily life. Essentially, drama is something that is experienced, not only by the actors, but also by all who are drawn into the drama, whether by being on stage or through being drawn into what is happening on stage. We've all experienced this at the theater. We identify with the characters and become completely absorbed into the story; i.e., we become part of the drama.

We are all players of a drama that goes on every day of our lives. Drama, whether literary or performed, is a reflection of life or the experiences of daily existence. Good drama portrays life at its best and life at its worst. It portrays the joys and heartbreaks, the triumphs and the tragedies, the comedy and the crisis, the pleasure and the pain, the celebration and the despair that constitutes human existence as we know it.

## Conclusion

The story of Jesus found in the Gospels does just this. We see people experiencing a living drama - a story about the coming of a special someone into their world and their reactions to that someone. Each of the Gospels is a composition made up of different scenes of this historical drama or "God story" - the divine visitation of God to us in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. Each scene is presented in story format consisting of stage setting, players, dialogue, monologue, or editorial comment, and action. Within each story one can find many intriguing themes that give the story its meaning and interpretation.

In this discipline called "story analysis," one is simply approaching a biblical composition (Gospels or Acts) as a drama or story by looking at the whole composition as a drama or stage play. The study should consist of an analysis of the scenes portrayed in each chapter, pulling from those scenes the players, the stage setting, the dialogue, the action, and the essential themes giving meaning and interpretation to the scene. In this way this ancient biblical document will come to life as a living drama. Some of the players of this drama

are like us, thisworldly and often too worldly, especially in the presence of those who are otherworldly. Some are good and some are evil, some believers and some unbelievers. The critical thing to see in all of this is that for us to be a part of this ancient story, we must enter into the scenes making up the story by means of a recreation of that which originally gave the story its life; i.e., the players, the stage setting, dialogue, action, and the themes which give all of this meaning.

The ultimate objective in all of this is to catch a glimpse of Jesus, or better, to catch sight of God in the life of Jesus. These compositions are Godstories, the stories of Jesus. We must see these compositions as the story of Jesus (the Gospels) or the story of the earliest followers of Jesus (Acts of Apostles), a community of believers who, as major players in this story, came to believe things that changed or transformed their lives. To see what they saw, and hear what they heard is the objective of the art of story analysis. One overwhelming benefit of learning the art of story analysis is in what it can contribute to one's appreciation for the storycraft, the love and wonder of stories and the art of storytelling. This is all the more important in that the story we have is the most wonderful and powerful story ever told, *and we are the storytellers.*

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