



Elements of Biblical Narrative

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*A Brief Introduction with an Analysis of the Red Sea
Story*

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HOSTED BY PALNI PRESS
INDIANAPOLIS, IN



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Acknowledgments

This brief introduction to biblical narrative grew out of my course on the Pentateuch and the Historical Books of the Bible. Students' questions and their consternation have forced me to reconsider how to explain the craft and power of biblical narrative. To be a teacher, you must also be a student, and my students have helped me become a better student.

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Tammy Schuetter designed the cover using a detail of Pietro Santi Bartoli's etching, "Moses Parting the Red Sea," from the Met Collection API. Her strong design speaks for itself.

Fr. Eugene Hensell, OSB and Dr. Katherine Hayes read an earlier draft and made valuable recommendations for which I am grateful. I also want to thank Dr. Dan Kolb, Director of the Archabbey Library, for his support of this project. Amanda Hurford, the PALNI Scholarly Communications Director, has provided timely help and guidance for this publication. I commend the vision of PALNI and its desire to put resources in the easy reach of students and others.

Finally, I want to thank Father Archabbot Kurt and the monks of Saint Meinrad and also the administration and faculty of Saint Meinrad Seminary and School of Theology for creating the space, time, and support for projects like this.

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Introduction to the Elements of Biblical Narrative

A Brief Introduction to Narrative with an Analysis of the Red Sea Story

The Bible tells the history of Israel in stories, and this essay seeks to introduce students and other interested readers to the basics of narrative craft for the Bible.

Though some see stories as escape or entertainment, narratives serve as powerful instruments of communication. By capturing our imaginations and confronting us with core values, stories explore our deepest desires and fear. They show how others have dealt with life and people and God. Even a very short story can challenge our understanding of how the world works as it offers us new possibilities. Stories do all this and more, often without our realizing it.

Growing up with stories, we all know something about how to engage them. Still, just as native speakers do well to study their own language, so we also benefit by examining narratives more closely to understand their craft and power. This essay offers students an overview of the narrative elements needed for that exploration.

Over the last fifty years and more, scholars have focused on these narrative elements and the complex ways that they engage an audience. H. Porter Abbott's introduction surveys this accomplishment for literature in general.^[1] In *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, Robert Alter laid a foundation for this approach to the Bible, but he was not alone, nor has his way been the only one, as Stephen Moore has shown.^[2]

This essay surveys the narrative elements to help readers use these

insights for the analysis of biblical stories. A literary analysis should help a reader become more alive to the power of the story. This examination is not an exercise for its own sake. By understanding how a story works, we should be able to enter more fully into its world and feel its impact more acutely. Here we can distinguish between standing inside a story to experience it and standing outside a story so that we can examine it. This essay is mainly about standing outside the story and analyzing its elements. After that, we should be able to step back inside the story and experience it more intensely. Our analysis should make us more aware of its affirmations and challenges. The analysis should also help us connect the story to other stories, whether in books or in our lives.

While scholars have produced a number of fine introductions, they typically gather examples from throughout the Bible.^[3] This range of references can challenge those just beginning. This essay takes its examples almost entirely from the Red Sea Story told in Exodus 13:17-31. Arguably, it is one of or even the most important story in the Hebrew Bible. Therefore, it is worth our careful attention.

Footnotes

^[1] H. Porter Abbott, *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

^[2] Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1981, revised 2011). Stephen D. Moore, “Biblical Narrative Analysis from the New Criticism to the New Narratology,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Biblical Narrative*. Edited by Danna Nolan Fewell (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2016) 27-50.

^[3] Cf. among others: Yairah Amit, *Reading Biblical Narratives: Literary Criticism and the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2001); Shimon Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible*. (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997); Jean Louis Ska, “*Our Fathers*

Have Told Us": Introduction to the Analysis of Hebrew Narratives, Subsidia Biblica, 13 (Rome: Editrice Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 2000); Jerome T. Walsh, *Old Testament Narrative: A Guide to Interpretation* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press).

The Red Sea Story in Exod 13:17-14:31 (New Revised Standard Version)

13:17 When Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them by way of the land of the Philistines, although that was nearer; for God thought, "If the people face war, they may change their minds and return to Egypt." 18 So God led the people by the roundabout way of the wilderness toward the Red Sea. The Israelites went up out of the land of Egypt prepared for battle.

¹⁹ And Moses took with him the bones of Joseph who had required a solemn oath of the Israelites, saying, "God will surely take notice of you, and then you must carry my bones with you from here."

²⁰ They set out from Succoth, and camped at Etham, on the edge of the wilderness. ²¹ The LORD went in front of them in a pillar of cloud by day, to lead them along the way, and in a pillar of fire by night, to give them light, so that they might travel by day and by night. ²² Neither the pillar of cloud by day nor the pillar of fire by night left its place in front of the people.

14:1 Then the LORD said to Moses: ² Tell the Israelites to turn back and camp in front of Pi-hahiroth, between Migdol and the sea, in front of Baal-zephon; you shall camp opposite it, by the sea. ³ Pharaoh will say of the Israelites, 'They are wandering aimlessly in the land; the wilderness has closed in on them.' ⁴ I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and he will pursue them, so that I will gain glory for myself over Pharaoh and all his army; and the Egyptians shall know that I am the LORD. And they did so.

⁵ When the king of Egypt was told that the people had fled, the minds of Pharaoh and his officials were changed toward the people,

and they said, “What have we done, letting Israel leave our service?”

⁶ So he had his chariot made ready, and took his army with him;

⁷ he took six hundred picked chariots and all the other chariots of Egypt with officers over all of them. ⁸ The LORD hardened the heart of

Pharaoh king of Egypt and he pursued the Israelites, who were going out boldly. ⁹ The Egyptians pursued them, all Pharaoh's horses and chariots, his chariot drivers and his army; they overtook them camped by the sea, by Pi-hahiroth, in front of Baal-zephon.

¹⁰ As Pharaoh drew near, the Israelites looked back, and there were the Egyptians advancing on them. In great fear the Israelites cried out to the LORD. ¹¹ They said to Moses, “Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us, bringing us out of Egypt? ¹² Is this not the very thing we told you in Egypt, ‘Let us alone and let us serve the Egyptians’? For it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness.”

¹³ But Moses said to the people, “Do not be afraid, stand firm, and see the deliverance that the LORD will accomplish for you today; for the Egyptians whom you see today you shall never see again. ¹⁴ The LORD will fight for you, and you have only to keep still.”

¹⁵ Then the LORD said to Moses, “Why do you cry out to me? Tell the Israelites to go forward. ¹⁶ But you lift up your staff, and stretch out your hand over the sea and divide it, that the Israelites may go into the sea on dry ground. ¹⁷ Then I will harden the hearts of the Egyptians so that they will go in after them; and so I will gain glory for myself over Pharaoh and all his army, his chariots, and his chariot drivers. ¹⁸ And the Egyptians shall know that I am the LORD, when I have gained glory for myself over Pharaoh, his chariots, and his chariot drivers.”

¹⁹ The angel of God who was going before the Israelite army moved and went behind them; and the pillar of cloud moved from in front of them and took its place behind them. ²⁰ It came between the army of Egypt and the army of Israel. And so the cloud was there with the

darkness, and it lit up the night; one did not come near the other all night.

²¹ Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea. The LORD drove the sea back by a strong east wind all night, and turned the sea into dry land; and the waters were divided. ²² The Israelites went into the sea on dry ground, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left.

²³ The Egyptians pursued, and went into the sea after them, all of Pharaoh's horses, chariots, and chariot drivers.

²⁴ At the morning watch the LORD in the pillar of fire and cloud looked down upon the Egyptian army, and threw the Egyptian army into panic. ²⁵ He clogged their chariot wheels so that they turned with difficulty. The Egyptians said, "Let us flee from the Israelites, for the LORD is fighting for them against Egypt."

²⁶ Then the LORD said to Moses, "Stretch out your hand over the sea, so that the water may come back upon the Egyptians, upon their chariots and chariot drivers."

²⁷ So Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and at dawn the sea returned to its normal depth. As the Egyptians fled before it, the LORD tossed the Egyptians into the sea. ²⁸ The waters returned and covered the chariots and the chariot drivers, the entire army of Pharaoh that had followed them into the sea; not one of them remained.

²⁹ But the Israelites walked on dry ground through the sea, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left.

³⁰ Thus the LORD saved Israel that day from the Egyptians; and Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore. ³¹ Israel saw the great work that the LORD did against the Egyptians. So the people feared the LORD and believed in the LORD and in his servant Moses.

§I. Narrative: Some Basic Ideas

I.I. A Definition of Narrative or Story

For this essay, a narrative or story is a sequence of events moving from tension to a resolution, told by a storyteller.^[1] Unlike drama, where the characters present their story directly, or a lyric, which is not a story, narrative has both a story and a storyteller who mediates the story.^[2] It contrasts with the report, which merely retells what has happened without any particular concern for tension or resolution. Between the tension and resolution, the storyteller or narrator develops the story by raising the tension while developing the means of resolution through smaller tensions and resolutions. As Aristotle said in his *Poetics* (I.7), narratives have a beginning (tension), middle (development), and end (resolution). The analysis of a story often begins with identifying the overriding tension and its resolution and then the smaller tensions and resolutions.

For stories retold many times, we can distinguish between the storyline and a specific telling of the story. Many people can give the basic storyline of the Red Sea Story. The tension begins with Pharaoh deciding to pursue the fleeing Israelites, and it resolves with Israel's escape and the Egyptians drowning in the Red Sea. Exod 13:17–14:31 fills out this storyline most fully, but it is also retold briefly in Josh 2:10; 4:23; 24:6, in Psalms 77, 106, 114, and 136, and elsewhere. The victory hymn in Exod 15:2-18 presumes a knowledge of the storyline as it celebrates the victory. Although each telling recounts the same storyline, each is different, and each invites us to assess and appreciate its differences.

Finally, some texts contain an implied narrative. Though the text does not lay out the story in order and may not tell everything, it presumes a story that the audience must figure out from what is told. For example, the voices in the lament psalms tell of illness, false accusations, the attacks of enemies, and more which are the tensions of the implied story. They then call on God to come and save them (resolution). Some are hopeful; others are not. The audience must piece together the implied story from what these voices tell us.

1.2. The Boundaries of Stories

The Red Sea Story in Exod 13:17–14:31 is part of a larger story and raises the question of boundaries. For a modern novel, the story begins on the first page and ends on the last. The Bible is more complicated. The Red Sea Story resolves a story that begins with Pharaoh's persecution in Exodus 1. Even so, what takes place at the Red Sea has its own tension and resolution and forms a coherent unity that we can examine on its own. Still, we cannot completely isolate it from the larger story.

1.3. The Relation of Narrative to the World: Realistic and Thematic Narrative

Broadly speaking, art reflects the world in two primary ways. One presents the world realistically and seeks to portray a convincing picture that is true-to-life. The other presents the world as general types with its plots and characters reflecting large ideas.^[3]

The first reflects the approach of Aristotle, who wanted to know things as they are. He believed that art should imitate reality.

Realistic stories then seek to reproduce the world in its specificity and complexity, in its contradictions and ambiguities. These stories are well-suited to explore the complex psychological motivations of characters found in Greek tragedy and modern novels. By carefully considering the specific and realistic, Aristotle expected to arrive at universal truths.

The second depends heavily upon tradition and artistic convention to create its vision of the world. Its characters are stereotypes representing ideas, and its plots play out in predictable ways, with good overcoming evil, truth triumphing over untruth, and beauty outshining the ugly. These narratives almost necessarily end with the required happy ending as they project an ideal understanding of the world. As such, they reflect Plato's vision that this world only reflects the real world of forms and ideas. James Phelan uses the word "thematic" for this approach because it emphasizes the 'theme' or 'idea' that these characters and plots represent.[\[4\]](#)

Both the realistic and thematic approaches look for and expect that stories will project a coherent world grounded in coherent ideas. Recent scholarship, often categorized as deconstruction or post-modernism, points out, often insistently, that narratives do not fit entirely together, that the reader constructs the perceived wholes. These constructions, therefore, can be deconstructed to challenge and upend their apparent coherence. While people of faith react strongly to the broad skepticism and relativism of this approach, narratives worth their salt are complex and do not provide simplistic answers. These recent critics have a valid insight, and biblical texts, when read carefully with an open mind, often challenge readers to a larger understanding of this world and of their God. In this way, the Bible preserves the mystery of God that transcends our predictable expectations.

While pure examples of both realistic and thematic narrative are possible, the two mainly serve as poles on a continuum, with some

stories adhering more closely to the traditional and conventional while others favor the realistic.

1.4. History and Story

History wants to tell what has actually happened. Readers should be able to verify its claims against the facts, although this is often difficult to do for biblical stories. Even so, the historian and the audience are seldom interested only in the facts; they want to know how and why it happened. Therefore, historians create narratives with tensions and resolutions to address these larger questions.

Though history belongs to realism, it can end up telling a traditional story that projects traditional themes. A historical account can also be difficult to distinguish from a realistic story. Both seek to be believable. Still, history should be verifiable, while realism does not have that burden.[\[5\]](#)

The question of historicity is not irrelevant because the Bible asserts that God has acted in historical time for actual people. Although the historicity of these events is often difficult, even impossible to assess, both Jews and Christians down to the present have affirmed the truth of Exodus as a present historical reality for themselves. At least in that sense, the Exodus has for them a historical reality.

1.5. Realistic and Thematic Dimensions in the Red Sea Story

The Red Sea Story is mainly thematic. It tells the universal story of escape from the forces of enslavement, oppression, and destruction. At the same time, it presents its story as real events in real-time and space. The very specific places in 14:2, repeated in 14:9, add to

the sense of realism even though geographers are unsure of the exact locations. As Dozeman notes, the location in the land of Egypt makes the “destruction of the Egyptian army the last event in the land of Egypt.”^[6] Though specific, the place also has a thematic dimension: The Lord is defeating Egypt within the boundary of its own land.

Exod 13:19 tells us that Moses brought Joseph’s bones because of the oath their ancestor had made them swear. Though this detail may seem incidental, Robert Scholes counsels readers to “note carefully characters or events which seem to make no contribution to the plot or movement” because they “often...have a special thematic importance.”^[7] So we can ask whether this detail is realistic or thematic. If just realistic, it simply reports what happened. However, the return of Joseph’s bones is connected to the promise of the land to Abraham. Without any explanation, this detail evokes one of the great themes of the Pentateuch, and Joshua will realize this promise by leading Israel across the Jordan into the Promised Land.^[8] The thematic dimensions of elements often depend on the reader’s ability to recognize the possible link.

Some readers take stories only at their face value; others see great significance in most everything. Biblical texts, handed on and retold, often carry a significance that extends beyond its historical moment. As a result, this story remains paradigmatic for everyone who has found themselves in some “land” of bondage or oppression.

1.6 Footnotes for Section 1

^[1] Abbott, *Introduction*, 12–14; Moore, “Biblical Narrative Analysis,” 27.

^[2] Robert Scholes, James Phelan, Robert Kellogg, *The Nature of Narrative* (Oxford UK: Oxford University Press, 2006) 4; Bar-Efrat,

Narrative Art, 13-14; Gérard Genette, "The Architext." in *Modern Genre Theory*, edited by David Duff (Harlow, UK: Longman, 2000) 210-218.

[3] Scholes, *Nature of Narrative*, 84.

[4] Scholes, *Nature of Narrative*, 314; James Phelan, *Reading People, Reading Plots: Character Progression, and the Interpretation of Narrative* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1989) 3, 61-62; 78-79.

[5] Abbott, "11. Narrative Truth" in *Introduction*, 151-166.

[6] Thomas Dozeman, *Commentary on Exodus* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2009) 184.

[7] Robert Scholes, *Elements of Fiction* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1968) 17.

[8] Joshua 3; Dozeman, *Exodus*, 309.

§2. Author, Narrator, and Worldview

2.1. Author, Narrator, and Worldview

Sometimes you hear “narrator” and “author” used interchangeably, but there is a difference. The author is, of course, the one who creates the story and so creates the narrator who tells the story. The narrator plays a crucial role in mediating the story. As Bar Efrat says, “we see and hear only through the narrator’s eyes and ears.”^[1] That persona may closely reflect the author, but it need not be so.

The author also creates the story’s worldview, that is, an understanding of how the world works in this story. The narrator may describe this worldview, but often the audience must reconstruct it from the pieces of the story. In that sense, the worldview is implied, and different readers may reconstruct the worldview in somewhat different ways.

For biblical stories, this worldview could also be called the story’s theology—that is, its understanding(s) of God and humanity and their relationship to each other and to creation. While some see the Bible as just one homogenous theology, a closer look reveals that this book contains many theologies—many understandings of God and humanity. Repeating vocabulary, motifs and characters indicate that some stories share a common theology or worldview. Other stories combine tellings reflecting different theologies into a single story. Much modern scholarship has focused on the dominant theologies of the Bible.

What I am calling the “worldview,” others refer to as the “implied author,” which Abbot defines as “that sensibility (that combination

of feeling, intelligence, knowledge, and opinion) that ‘accounts for the narrative.’^[2] Though widely used, the term “implied author” has also been the source of some debate, and some find this metaphor hard to grasp.^[3] While “worldview” may not capture every dimension of “implied author,” this term names this important feature more literally.

In any case, the reader must reconstruct the implied worldview from what the story presents. Readers usually begin by accepting the story’s worldview without much thought. However, there can be a difference between the story’s worldview and our own. Stories distant from us in time and culture, as is the Bible, can present a challenge because we are unfamiliar with their ways. More critically, we may even find that we have a fundamental problem with a story’s plain meaning. Biblical stories take place in a world that accepts slavery—an institution that we necessarily reject.

In some stories, the author, narrator, and worldview go together seamlessly, as in Genesis 1. There, both the narrator and worldview reflect the theology of the Priestly School, which authored the chapter. The Red Sea Story, on the other hand, is more complicated. It brings together at least two narrative strands representing two different worldviews or theologies. A final editor, often called in biblical studies the redactor, took what came from the tradition and gave the text its final form. Much of modern biblical studies has focused on how various traditions came together to form the final text. While this assessment is surely true, I am interested in the unity of the final text forged by the final redactor. In §2.3, I shall argue that the joining of different traditions gives the text a tensile complexity.

2.2. First and Third Person Narrators

The narrator may be a character in the story—often called a first-

person narrator because they tell the story in the first person from their perspective. Storytellers inside the story can only tell what they know, and that depends on whether they are telling the story as the action unfolds or later as they reflect on what has happened. Nehemiah tells the story of rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem that bears his name. The prophet Ezekiel recounts the major events in his book. The first-person narrator creates a sense of immediacy and intimacy that we typically experience when anyone tells us their own story.

Most biblical stories have a third-person narrator who tells the story from the outside. These narrators typically know and can tell us everything, although they usually do not. They can tell us what each character thinks or feels, what is going on here and then there. As a result, these narrators are omniscient, and one could add omnipresent. For example, we hear in Exod 13:17 (quoted from the NRSV and throughout this essay unless noted):

When Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them by way of the land of the Philistines, although that was nearer; for God thought, “If the people face war, they may change their minds and return to Egypt. (13:17)

The narrator does not offer this as the informed opinion of a historian or as a historical fact based on written documents. The narrator tells what God did and what God “thought.” We might ask who knows what God thinks. According to the story here, this narrator does.

Our narrator also tells us what God said to Moses (14:1-4, 15-18, 26), what Pharaoh and his officials said (14:5), and then what Israel and Moses said to each other (14:10-14). The confidence of the narrator’s voice invites us to trust and understand the story from this perspective. Not being a character in the story, the third-person narrator can disappear as we focus on the story. Still, the narrator shapes and focuses the story and projects its worldview and

theology. The importance of this voice deserves close attention even though disembodied and disappearing.

2.3. More Than One Author and Narrator

Biblical narrative has another complicating factor. We expect a modern novel or short story to have only one narrator who tells a consistent story. Biblical narratives developed over a long period. Though Moses is honored as the “author” of the Pentateuch, a hard look at these first five books does not reveal a single understanding of God or a consistent story.

For instance, we read in 14:21-22:

21 Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea.
21b The LORD drove the sea back by a strong east wind all night,
and turned the sea into dry land;
and the waters were divided.
22 The Israelites went into the sea on dry ground,
the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left.

Close readers see the same event described here in two different ways. Exod 14:21b gives a more realistic explanation: The Lord drives back the sea with an east wind turning the sea into dry land. Exod 14:21c-22 gives a more miraculous understanding: The sea divides to form a wall to the right and left. This story gives us at least two versions of the same event, and scholars over the last three hundred years have invested much energy in discovering and understanding these different stands and their theologies. Thomas Dozeman argues that the Priestly tradition is responsible for Exod 14:1-4,8-10; 15-18, 21-23, 26-29, and he attributes to the “Non-P” tradition Exod 13:17-20; 14:5-7, 11-14, 19-20, 24-25, 30-31. By pulling the text apart,

Dozeman and many others hope to discover the sources behind the present text.[4] These insights reveal the links of this text to other biblical texts shaped by the same vocabulary and ideas. While important, this concern lies beyond the scope of this essay.

Brevard Childs, in his famous commentary on Exodus (1974), argued that that “the final literary production” has “an integrity of its own” and that scholars must deal with this integrity as it stands in the canon.[5] Similarly, Jean Louis Ska seeks the perspective of the final redactor who gave the text its definitive form to uncover “the principles that give coherence to the whole of the text.”[6] Some would play down the differences, but as Alter points out, they are sometimes glaring. Rather than conclude that the final redactor was oblivious, Alter would search for the contribution each made to the whole.[7]

I want to take a somewhat different approach and argue that the differences belong to the fabric of this multi-perspectival text. The Bible does not give us a consistent, homogenous text. Though some may see that as a deficit, I want to argue that this complexity plays a pivotal role in protecting the possibilities and mystery of the text.

For comparison, let me use Paul Cézanne’s painting, “The Basket of Apples” (1893). The Art Institute of Chicago owns the painting, which is easily found online with extensive commentary. The painting shows apples on a table with a cloth, a plate of cookies, and a bottle of wine. If you follow the lines of the tabletop from side to side, they change beneath the cloth and do not match up with the lines on the other side. The painting shows the cookies from the side, except for the top two cookies; the viewer sees them from above. The bottle of wine stands at an angle. Some of the fruit seems to lie on different planes. Unlike the Renaissance perspective, Cézanne does not present “The Basket of Apples” from a single point of view. His vantage point moves in space as a person might on entering a room and encountering a table with apples from different angles. Cézanne has put them all together and challenges us to create a

unified view from his pieces. Finally, Cézanne's painting does not exist to show us exactly what was on the table; rather, it points to itself as the thing we must confront as the experience of this reality.

Biblical narratives often possess a similar juxtaposition of perspectives. Because these stories were composed and adjusted by different authors, told and retold by various narrators, they offer us different vantage points. Rather than throwing out the “inconsistencies,” the final redactor, often with great skill, worked them into a unified but not a homogenous narrative. Because things do not quite fit, whether subtly or strikingly, these narratives refuse to allow the audience to adopt a single viewpoint. In this way, the narrative preserves a sense that all cannot be explained, that something mysterious is at work. The differences in the narrative militate against any absolute sense of closure.

Finally, like Cézanne's painting, the Red Sea Story does not exist to report what happened but rather to offer us an experience of the event that only it can offer. Like Cézanne's painting, the story points to itself and offers itself as our experience of the event.[\[8\]](#)

2.4. Narrative Lens or Focalization

The narrator often provides the primary narrative lens whereby we view the action. Though the narrator may give the impression of having an objective vantage point, this impression, as noted above, deserves careful consideration because the narrator's telling shapes the story and its worldview.

Narrators can keep the story at a distance by summarizing and telling everything themselves. Narrators can also allow us to come close to the action by their careful descriptions. More importantly, they can let the characters speak for themselves and so allow us to assess motives and causes for ourselves. This narrative lens,

sometimes called focalization, can change rather quickly and often. A narrator may move closer and then farther away depending on the importance of the action and dialogue. Less important events are quickly summarized, while the more critical events benefit from time and closeness.

In Exod 14:1-4, the narrator lets us hear what God says, then in 14:5-7 what the Egyptians conclude in their own words, and finally, in 14:10-14, we hear how Israel reproaches Moses from bringing them into this desert. In each section, the narrator allows us to hear what these characters think by giving us direct speech. In this way, the narrator allows us to experience the complex web of voices in dialogue with each other.

2.5. Reliability

Readers sometimes have good reason to question the reliability of modern narrators whose values run contrary to the story's worldview.^[9]

In the Bible, third-person narrators are entirely reliable. They may not tell us everything, but, as Alter says, “we are never in serious doubt that the biblical narrator knows all there is to know about the motives and feelings, the moral nature and spiritual condition of his characters.”^[10] That does not mean that we must always agree with the narrator or the worldview, but only that the narrator is an honest broker. If the narrator tells us that something happened or someone said something, we must accept that as a given in the story.

Also, the Lord is a reliable source though the narrator provides our only access.^[11] In Exod 14:3, the Lord predicts that Pharaoh will say: “They are wandering aimlessly in the land; the wilderness has closed

in on them.’ There is no reason to doubt the truth of this statement within the story because the Lord has said it.

2.6. Footnotes for Section 2

[1] Bar Efrat, *Narrative Art*, 13.

[2] Abbott, *Introduction*, 84.

[3] Wayne Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1961): 71-76; Tom Kindt and Hans-Harald Müller.2006. *The Implied Author: Concept and Controversy*. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter.

[4] Thomas Dozeman, *The Pentateuch: Introducing the Torah* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2017) 319. Also Dozeman, *Exodus*, 300-318. For other analyses, see the following: William H.C. Propp, *Exodus 1-18: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, The Anchor Bible (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1998) 476-484; Vervenne, Marc. “The Sea Narrative Revisited,” *Biblica* 75 (1994) 80-98, esp. 80-85; Jan Christian Gertz, “The Miracle at the Sea: Remarks on the Recent Discussion about Origin and Composition of the Exodus Narrative.” *The Book of Exodus: Composition, Reception, and Interpretation*, edited by Thomas Dozeman, et al. Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2014) 91-120.

[5] Brevard Childs, *The Book of Exodus: A Critical, Theological Commentary* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1974) 224.

[6] Jean Louis Ska, *Le Passage de la Mer: Étude de la construction, du style et de la symbolique d’ Ex 14,1-31*. *Analecta Biblica*, 109 (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1986) 20-21.

[7] Alter, *Art of Biblical Narrative*, 165-166.

[8] Gadamer, “The Relevance of the Beautiful.” in *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*, translated by Nicholas Walker, edited by Robert Bernasconi. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1985) 1-52, esp., 34-35.

[9] Booth, *Rhetoric of Fiction*, 158-159; Chatman, *Story and Discourse*, 149.

[10] Alter, *Art of Biblical Narrative*, 197.

[11] Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art*, 19.

§3. Narrative Time and Narrative Space

3.1. Narrative Time

Clock time is continuous and even; it moves relentlessly in one direction. Unlike clock time, narrative time refers to the time it takes to tell the story. The narrator can slow down the unfolding of events by describing things in great detail or reporting all the dialogue. The narrator can also cover days and years quickly by summarizing or omitting events.^[1] The story can also move back and forth from present to past or future by flashbacks or flashforwards. The sequence of events plays a central role in the presentation and experience of the story, and we shall consider it again when we look at the plot.

The time of the story's actions seldom matches the time of the telling. The Red Sea Story begins on one day and ends at dawn on the next, but it does not take twenty-four hours to tell. Its text of thirty-seven verses is comparatively short. Even so, the story devotes seventeen verses to the resolution (14:15-31). As a rule, the more narrative time the narrator devotes to an element, the more important it is, and the more it demands our attention.

The Red Sea Story is arguably one of the great works of world literature, but it uses only about 435 words. While earlier scholars, influenced by Romanticism, saw this brevity as a lack of narrative skill, today, there is a much greater appreciation of the mastery reflected in these narratives—its spareness being a hallmark of its mastery. The repetition winnowed these stories and left what mattered. Any analysis of these stories must recognize that every word counts and deserves sustained attention.

3.1.1. The Time of the Story, its Composition, and its Reading

Some stories clearly belong to a specific historical moment. Others belong to imaginative time (fairy tales). Still, others present themselves as real but taking place beyond human, historical time. Though some stories from the ancient Near East present themselves as actually happening in this beyond time, the Bible presents its stories taking place in human, historical time.

The events of the Red Sea Story would date to around 1300 BC, although there is little in this story or the wider book to date the event more precisely. Pharaoh, for instance, has no name. The writing down of the story in its final form, however, belongs to the time of the Persian Empire (539-330 BC)—a difference of nine hundred years or so. The final redactor preserves the story not as some distant historical event but as a paradigmatic event for Judeans in Persia looking to return from their own Egypt. We, of course, are reading the story from our own timeframe, more than two and three thousand years later. To make sense of it, we must discover some relationship that can link our time to that of the final redactor and the time of the story's events. We must also be careful to respect the timeframe of each moment.

3.2. Narrative Space

Just as narrative creates its own sense of time, so it also creates the space for the story—its narrative world. This space may refer to a realistic place, but it typically has a thematic dimension. Jurij Lotman has championed an understanding of narrative space as a reflection of the primary themes of the story. According to Lotman, narrative is born when a character crosses the boundary between these symbolically charged spaces.[\[2\]](#)

Egypt was and is a country in the northeast corner of Africa. Our story is not particularly interested in the reality of ancient Egypt. Rather, Egypt represents the land of slavery and oppression, as the Book of Exodus itself calls it: “the house of slavery.”^[3] This narrative space is mainly thematic rather than realistic. Its Egypt is no longer a place of refuge as was Joseph’s Egypt in Genesis, for “now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph” (1:8). This land has become a place of threat. Space then can be both realistic (geographical) and thematic (connected to ideas). This understanding neither affirms nor denies the historicity of the story. Instead, it insists on a thematic understanding of the space.

The larger story spans three main spaces. From Egypt, “the house of slavery,” the story moves to the wilderness, the place both of trial and temptation and of theophany before coming to the Promised Land, the goal of the journey. In each case, the opening between these spaces becomes a miraculous event through water: first at the Red Sea and then at the Jordan. The thematic content of this geography is clear. Still, as Thomas Dozeman has observed, modern scholarship has tended to regard thematic geography as pre-critical and has focused on accurate geography. “The result is a one-sided approach to biblical geography in contemporary study, which lacks a critical exploration of the ideological role of setting in creating a cultural and religious landscape in the writing of biblical history.”^[4]

As with time, we can inquire about the relationship of “Egypt” to the Persian Empire, where the narrative receives its final form in the Torah. We can also consider our spatial relationship to this narrative space. The geographical differences may be sharp, but this must not obscure the thematic similarity.

3.3. Footnotes for Section 3

^[1] Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*,

translated by Jane E. Lewin (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1980) 33-34.

[2] Jurij Lotman, *The Structure of the Artistic Text*, translated by Ronald Vroon (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1977) 217-218, 238; Marie-Laure Ryan, "Space," in *The Living Handbook of Narratology* (www.lhn.uni-hamburg.de, 2012, 2014) 3.1.

[3] Exod 13:3, 14; 20:2.

[4] Thomas Dozeman, "Biblical Geography and Critical Spatial Studies" in *Constructions of Space I: Theory, Geography and Narrative*, edited by Jon L. Berquist and Claudia V. Camp (New York, NY: T & T Clark, 2007) 87-108, esp. 103.

§4. Characters and Other Entities

A character counts as anyone or anything in a story that can speak and act. Mainly they are people, sometimes divine, and in certain stories, animals, or even things that usually cannot speak or act. We make sense out of characters basically in the same way that we make sense of people in our daily lives. Meeting someone for the first time, we form some general ideas about them based on our past experiences of other people (thematic types). If we get to know them better, see what they say and do, then we develop a more realistic understanding of their complexity and possibilities. With stories, we can reread the text; we can look for connections that we may have missed and perhaps reshape our insight.

4.1. Flat and Round Characters

In *Aspects of the Novel*, E.M. Forster famously divides all characters into flat and round. These categories prove to be more ends of a continuum than two separate groups, and they fit into the distinction between the realistic and the thematic discussed above.

As Forster says,

Flat characters ... are sometimes called types, and sometimes caricatures. In their purest form, they are constructed around a single idea or quality: when there is more than one factor in them, we get the beginning of the curve towards the round.[\[1\]](#)

The flattest characters then are generalizations—that is, stereotypes representing, as Forster says, “a single idea or quality.”

There are many stereotypes. Some arise from a common human experience, and others depend upon a familiarity with the conventions of cultures and societies—the Old Testament prophet being an example.^[2]

As Forster notes, flat characters have a “great advantage” because “they are easily recognized whenever they come in—recognized by the reader’s emotional eye, not by the visual eye.” When an old woman or man appears in a story, tradition tells us to expect that wisdom has arrived on the scene. When an enemy king arrives, we know he is a bad guy. Audiences can process this without even bringing it to a conscious level, and we remember these characters easily. Storytellers create more complicated characters by combining traditional types and so move toward a rounder, more realistic character.^[3]

Round characters are more complicated and singular, just like real human beings. They are capable of believing one thing and doing another. They can change for the better or worse. As Forster says:

The test of a round character is whether it is capable of surprising in a convincing way. If it never surprises, it is flat. If it does not convince, it is a flat pretending to be round.^[4]

Round characters then are realistic, or to use Aristotle’s word, they are mimetic—they imitate reality and give us the sense of a real, individual person. As such, it is hard to tell whether they are historical or fictional.

Biblical narrative is mostly spare and minimal. Robert Alter uses the word “reticence” and asks particularly how the Bible is able to create characters that “evoke such a sense of depth and complexity” in such few words.^[5] In his famous book *Mimesis*, Erich Auerbach argues that biblical narrative leaves much in the “background.”

Unlike Homer, who tells everything and puts everything in the “foreground,” the Bible’s narrators leave much to our imagination.[\[6\]](#) Some criticize Auerbach’s generalization as too broad; still, his insight touches much in biblical narrative.

4.2. Other Entities

In addition to those who speak and act, other things, sometimes called entities or existents, play important roles in stories.[\[7\]](#)

The “Red Sea” appears twelve times in this story. The sea or some form of chaotic waters appears as the antagonist in several mythic battle narratives of the ancient Near East. The Canaanite deity Baal fights Yamm, the sea god, and wins kingship. In the Babylonian *Enūma Elish*, Marduk, the deity of Babylon, fights Tiamat, the ocean depths, and becomes the king of the divine pantheon.[\[8\]](#) Some biblical texts also refer to the killing of a sea monster.[\[9\]](#) Here, however, the Red Sea is not the mythic enemy representing chaos but rather the Lord’s instrument for destroying the forces of slavery and oppression. This story transforms a traditional image or motif. It shows that the Lord is in charge of the destructive waters and can use them as it seems good.[\[10\]](#)

4.3. Characters in the Red Sea Story

The characters here are mainly flat, with the Lord as an exception.

Egypt and the Egyptians, named 28 times, represent the land of slavery and oppression. Its power appears as its “army” (four times), “chariots” (nine times), and “horsemen” (six times). The Egyptian forces serve as the traditional enemy army ready to destroy “our” side. The unnamed Pharaoh, appearing eleven times, reigns as the

king of the land of slavery and oppression. With his officials, he changes his mind one last time in 14:5: “What have we done, letting Israel leave our service?” This change of mind does not make him a realistic character but completes the pattern of Exodus 7-11. Each time Moses asks Pharaoh to let Israel go, he refuses, and Moses invokes a plague that forces Pharaoh to relent. Moses then calls off the plague, but Pharaoh reneges. With the tenth plague, Pharaoh has let Israel leave, but now he reneges once again and pursues them. He is playing his traditional role.

Robert Scholes counsels readers to “note the things working against the movement of the story.”^[11] Clearly, Pharaoh’s stubbornness serves as a major obstacle to the resolution of this story, and it carries the theme of his refusal to acknowledge YHWH as God. With the main tension in place, the story turns to “our” reaction of fear.

The Israelites, named 19 times, are basically flat. In 14:10, the narrator tells us that they were “greatly frightened,” which is the traditional motif for “our” side at the appearance of the enemy.^[12] Here, however, the Israelites attack their leader with questions that are not informational but rhetorical and sarcastic. As Martin Buber observes, their speech to Moses “brings out the antithesis of Egypt and the desert.” The speech’s seven elements end five times with “Egypt” and twice with “wilderness.”^[13]

Was it because there were no graves in Egypt
that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness?
What have you done to us, bringing us out of Egypt?
Is this not the very thing we told you in Egypt,
‘Let us alone and let us serve the Egyptians’?
For it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians
than to die in the wilderness (14:11-12).

Israel identifies servitude in Egypt with life and the desert with death. They fail to see the opposition between slavery in Egypt and

the life-giving service to the Lord. They prefer the known to the unknown, servitude to freedom, death to life.^[14]

While stereotypical, the speech still captures a realistic, psychological dimension. People trapped by oppression—whether addictions or destructive relationships—can find it difficult to imagine that the unknown world of freedom will be better than the known world of enslavement.

Moses' reply seems to offer them an unbelievable solution.

Do not be afraid, stand firm, and see the deliverance that the Lord will accomplish for you today; for the Egyptians whom you see today you shall never see again. 14 The Lord will fight for you, and you have only to keep still (14:13-14).

Moses articulates the central theme of this narrative: The Lord alone will be the hero of this battle, and Israel needs “only to keep still.” As such, Moses stands in contrast to the people he leads. Through the remainder of the story, he simply obeys God's command to stretch out his hand, and so, as a flat character, he shows himself God's faithful servant.

In the larger story, Moses becomes a complex character created by the juxtaposition of different scenes. If a faithful servant here, he is unwilling to accept God's commission in Exodus 3-4. During the debacle with the golden calf, he plays the mediator between God and the people, and he must mollify the Lord who tempts him with the promise of Abraham (Exod 32:7-14). As a result, he is granted a vision on the mountain (Exod 33:18-22). However, in Num 20:11-12, caught between the people and the Lord, he strikes the rock twice, and for that lack of faith, God does not allow him to enter into the Promised Land. All these pieces and more, like a Cézanne painting, show us the many sides of Moses that reveal his complexity as a round character.

This juxtaposition of different views of the same person serves as

the primary strategy for creating round characters in the Bible. The Books of Samuel give us two main portraits of David. The four gospels give us more than four perspectives on Jesus, which continually demand that we revise our understanding of his person. The whole Bible gives us many visions of God and so preserves the mystery of God.

Here the Lord presents the most challenging character. He plays the traditional role of king and hero in this battle story but with some noteworthy differences. When the enemy attacks in the royal battle narratives, the king is typically somewhere else and must make his way to the place of battle. Here the Lord orchestrates the battle. In 13:17, the narrator shows how God takes charge of Israel's route and in 14:2 has them turn back and camp between "Migdol and the sea." In 14:3, the omniscient Lord reports that Pharaoh believes them "wandering about aimlessly." Then in 14:4, we hear:

I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and he will pursue them so that
I will gain glory for myself over Pharaoh and all his army; and
the Egyptians shall know that I am the Lord. And they did so.

The Lord's hardening of Pharaoh's heart repeats in 14:8 and 17 and causes the king to pursue Israel. The repetition provides emphasis, but what does it mean that God is causing Pharaoh to do this? The motif does not fit with standard ideas of God, and this has been the source of much consternation. While modern scholarship has tried to limit its function or read it away, Claire Matthew McGinnis has shown that the "problem" has pushed Jewish and Christian theologians to find inventive solutions, and she concludes "that the most fruitful theological approach to this narrative may be not to try to resolve its tensions fully."[\[15\]](#)

Add to this the Lord's opening question to Moses: "Why do you cry out to me?" Moses has said nothing, so why does God attack him. Childs, following traditional midrash and also St. Augustine, asks whether Moses had "prayed to God privately" and notes it as a

problem.^[16] Many commentators tend to blame Moses, but I find that solution unsatisfactory.^[17] Though this may well indicate the juxtaposition of two traditions,^[18] as it stands, God accuses Moses without provocation. It reflects poorly on the Lord and makes the deity sound a little touchy or even petulant. Our piety tends to blunt such assessment, but the Lord in this story is full of passion.

Our examination shows the Lord as a more complicated character than the others, but we need to look at the plot before completing our assessment of the hero.

4.4. Footnotes to Section 4

[1] E.M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* (New York, NY: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1927) 102-103.

[2] Abbott, *Introduction*, 142-144; Chatman, *Story and Discourse*, 123, 132.

[3] Forster, *Aspects of the Novel*, 103-104; Abbott, *Introduction*, 142-143.

[4] Forster, *Aspects of the Novel*, 117.

[5] Alter, *Art of Biblical Narrative*, 143.

[6] Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press) 3-23.

[7] Abbott, *Introduction*, 19, 232.

[8] Propp, *Exodus*, 554-561; Dozeman, *Exodus*, 307-308.

[9] Ps 89:9-10; Isa 50:9-10.

[10] Thomas Dozeman, *The Pentateuch: Introducing the Torah* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2017) 317-318.

[11] Scholes, *Elements of Fiction*, 16.

[12] Harry Hagan, *Mighty in Battle: A Literary Study of Battle Narrative in the Ancient Near East and in the Bible* (Palni, 2021) §2.5.2; 3.5.3. Also, "Basic Plots in the Bible: A Literary Approach to Genre," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 49 (2019) 198-213, esp. 206-207.

[13] Martin Buber, *Moses* (Oxford, UK: East and West Library, 1946). 86; Ska, *Le Passage*, 64.

[14] Ska, *Le Passage*, 64-66, 68; “The Crossing of the Sea,” *Landas* 17 (2003) 36-50, esp. 40.

[15] Claire Matthews McGinnis, “The Hardening of Pharaoh’s Heart in Christian and Jewish Interpretation,” *Journal of Theological Interpretation*, 6 (2012) 43-64, esp. 61.

[16] Childs, *Exodus*, 226.

[17] Propp, *Exodus*, 497.

[18] Propp: *Exodus*, 479.

§5. Plot

5.1. Tension, Resolution, and Retardation

Traditionally, we think of the plot as what happens, its storyline. However, we cannot separate these events from the characters or from the narrative time and space. Likewise, it is not just the individual events that prove important, but how the narrator selects, arranges, connects, and recounts them.

As defined above, the plot moves from tension to resolution, but a story that resolves too quickly holds little interest. The storyteller delays the resolution by heightening the tension in various ways: initial failures, unexpected problems, the difficulty of finding a hero. All these and more help to retard the resolution and magnify the problem. Typically, smaller tensions arise and must be dealt with before the resolution of the main tension.

Retarding the action also creates suspense. Often suspense and surprise play an important role in a story's impact. While biblical narratives have a first time for each reader, they are continually told and retold, and so we typically know what is going to happen. Their power then must lie not so much in what will happen but in how and why the tensions resolve and in the questions or insights that the story raises.

In analyzing a text, it is helpful to divide the story into its basic moments and chart the unfolding action. These divisions are open to some interpretation, and different concerns will lead to different divisions. The basic criteria include the change of time or location and the entrance or exit of speaking characters. The divisions should be useful rather than correct.

Amit stresses the importance of recognizing the moment of change

when the tension begins to unravel.^[1] In this story, the Lord's command for Moses to stretch out his hand in 14:16, but he does not do it until 14:21, and with that, the tension begins to unravel even though the end of this story has never been in doubt.

5.2. Repetition: Key Word, Motif, and Theme

Robert Alter identifies repetition as a particular hallmark of biblical narrative, particularly verbatim repetitions. Others interested in the development of these texts have seen repetition as a sign that different traditions have been combined. While this is possible, Canaanite stories of Baal use much repetition, and critics like Alter have stressed the literary function of these repetitions rather than their being signs of difference.^[2]

As is true for all literature, anything that repeats deserves special attention because narrators use repetition to create emphasis, design, and time. The insistence of repeating words and phrases provides a major clue to what the narrator wants the audience to focus on. Repetition also creates rhythm and design. It often appears in groups of three or three plus one. Finally, repetition gives the audience time; without it, the action would move too quickly to grasp intellectually, emotionally, and imaginatively.

Repeating words or phrases are identified as “keywords.” Recurring images are called “motifs.” Typically motifs reflect recurring ideas, called “themes.”

The keyword “pursue” appears in 14:4, 8, 9, 23 and defines Pharaoh's misguided quest.

The column of cloud and fire serves as a motif manifesting God's protective power and mystery.^[3]

The motif of the “hand” plays an important role here. In Exod 14:16,

21, 26, 27, Moses' "stretching out his hand" serves as a concrete expression for the divine power working through him. The Hebrew word for "hand" also appears in 14:8, "with a high hand" translated as "boldly," and in 14:30 where it is omitted, and in 14:31 as "word" in "the great work of the Lord." The English may not reveal every instance. The New American Bible Revised Edition, for instance, often translates the Hebrew word for "hand" as "power." While there are resources to help those with little or no Hebrew discover these hidden words, readers do not need to discover everything to appreciate the power of these stories.

The search for keywords and recurring motifs is often the easiest way to begin an analysis of a story.

5.3. Sequence and Arrangement

Typically the storyteller recounts the action sequentially—that is, in the order in which the action unfolds in time. This orderly progression creates a sense of cause and effect even though the narrator may not literally state that A causes B. The coherence of the order normalizes the events and gives them a powerful claim as a reliable account without any other corroboration. This reliability may be a claim to historicity or just a claim to truth.[\[4\]](#)

Sometimes the narrator introduces a flashback to provide needed information from the past. At other times, a flashforward links the present to a future event. In biblical narrative, prophecies can serve this function. Here the Lord predicts in 14:3 that Pharaoh will pursue and in 14:4 says: "I will receive glory through Pharaoh and all his army." This story has no suspense; its resolution is clear from the beginning.

As Chatman notes, "each arrangement produces a different plot, and a great many plots can be made from the same story."[\[5\]](#)

5.4. Duration or Narrative Time

As discussed above, the more narrative time an element receives, the larger its importance. Since biblical stories put great value on economy, we should pay careful attention to longer scenes. In this story, the resolution with Israel's escape and the Egyptians' destruction takes up almost half of the narrative time. The narrator makes the resolution absolutely clear and gives us time to grasp its significance.

5.5. Frequency

Frequency is Gérard Genette's name for the repetition of events. An event may be told once, or a number of times; likewise, something that happened many times may be told just once.^[6] Of particular interest for the Bible is the idea of a single event told a number of times. As noted above in section 2.3, the Bible tells the Red Sea Story a number of times from somewhat different points of view. Even in Exod 13:17–14:31, the story is told or summarized from several viewpoints, and this layering adds complexity to our understanding. While those interested in the composition of the final story may separate these into different strands, the final text uses the frequency to create a complexity that preserves the mystery, particularly the mystery of God.

5.6. Gaps

The narrator does not tell everything. If the story is a journey, the narrator presumes that the audience is familiar with journeys from their own experience. Therefore, there is no need to fill in the gaps. With the Bible, there is also a gap between their experience and

ours. Their idea of a journey and ours may be so different that we need information to appreciate what they mean by “journey” or “house” or “ruler.”

The filling in of other gaps involves the reader in the interpretation of the narrative.^[7] In this, the reader must find a middle way between underreading and overreading, between too little imagination and too much. Overreading finds connections not grounded in the text, and underreading fails to see the clues the text provides. At times, our understanding of a story turns on how we fill in a crucial gap. Round characters typically come with gaps. The narrator provides clues about their motives or feelings but does not state them completely. The audience is left to fill in the gaps from what has been said.^[8] Just above in 4.3, I have done this by arguing that Pharaoh’s decision to pursue Israel is a sign of his stubbornness and refusal to acknowledge the Lord as God. The narrator does not say this exactly, but I have argued that the text invites this understanding.

5.7. Basic Plots

Stories told and retold from one generation to the next carry the core values and identity of a community. These traditional stories offer people a paradigm for dealing with possibilities and failures that come with being alive. Christopher Booker has argued that seven basic plots reflect the basic tensions of life.^[9]

- Overcoming the monster or the battle narrative:
An enemy’s physical threat brings forth a hero who triumphs. The victory represents the larger triumph of a society’s values and culture over the forces of chaos.
- Rags to riches:
A hero begins in poverty and weakness but comes to possess great wealth and power. It explores the themes of

independence and power.

- Journey quest:
A hero goes in search of someone or something and does not relent until it is found. This plot examines what is worth desiring and its cost.
- Journey of voyage and return:
The hero leaves home and moves out into a different and unknown world before returning home. Maturation and transformation are often major themes.
- Comedy:
The characters begin in confusion and separation but come to a clearer identity that brings union, which often means marriage.
- Tragedy:
The main character seems to prosper, but because of sin or flaw or fate, the events turn, and the resolution brings destruction.
- Rebirth:
Someone in a death-like situation is reborn. These stories celebrate the power of life over death.

Booker also names three recurring subplots:

- Call and commission:
Someone commissions another to carry out a task, or someone asks for and receives a commission or permission. This subplot typically touches on themes of duty and service.
- Test:
Someone must overcome an external obstacle before proceeding to deal with the larger tension. The hero's success reveals their worthiness.
- Temptation:
A person beset by temptations of appetite (food, sex, pleasure, wealth) or animus (anger, pride, envy, ambition) must gain or show the self-mastery of a worthy hero.

While one basic plot typically dominates a narrative, stories combine them in various ways to tell their particular story. The audience's ability to connect individual stories to these basic plots serves two functions. First, it allows them to follow a story more easily because they know what to expect. Second, they can identify not only what is similar but, more importantly, what is different and specific in each story. I offer a fuller examination of this topic in my article "Basic Plots in the Bible."

5.8. Closure and Interpretation

Audiences expect the narrator to resolve tensions so that everything comes together. This means not just the plot but also the questions about how the world works or does not work. When all is resolved, then there is closure.[\[10\]](#)

The last fifty years or more have emphasized the reader's role in forging a story's meaning. The questions and understandings of readers shape their ability to find relationships within and to the text. These presuppositions tend to lead readers to conclusions that they expect. Still, narratives continually raise questions or blatantly challenge our presuppositions. Voices, like those of the deconstructionists or the post-moderns, point out that a resolution often leaves behind elements that do not fit or that even undermine the "obvious" coherence of the text. For some critics, this overturning of coherence stands as the main purpose of narrative, and they seem to leave little or nothing standing.[\[11\]](#)

On the other hand, those who come to these texts with a belief system and belong to a community of believers can find both affirmation and challenge. Their beliefs will provide limits to their interpretation, and the community will provide a context and a guide for generating meaning. Even so, they must guard against finding only what they want to find. As the deconstructionist and

post-modern interpreters insist, these texts rightfully challenge our narrow expectations.

5.9. Footnotes for Section 5

- [1] Amit, *Reading Biblical Narrative*, 47.
- [2] Alter, *Art of Biblical Narrative*, 111-117.
- [3] Exod 13:21,22; 14:19, 20, 24; cf. Propp, *Exodus*, 549-550.
- [4] Abbott, *Introduction*, 46-52.
- [5] Chatman, *Story and Discourse*, 43.
- [6] Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, 113-116.
- [7] Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1985) 186.
- [8] Abbott, *Introduction*, 86-95.
- [9] Christopher Booker. *The Seven Basic Plots: Why We Tell Stories* (London, UK: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2004) 21-213.
- [10] Abbott, *Introduction*, 47-50.
- [11] Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2008) 190-208.

§6. The Plot of the Red Sea Story

The plot begins with Israel fleeing from Egypt. This event resolves the earlier tension in which Moses begs Pharaoh to let the people go. After renegeing on his promise nine times, Pharaoh has finally allowed Israel to depart. The new tension begins with Pharaoh again changing his mind and deciding to pursue the escaping Israelites, as the Lord has predicted.

This story reflects the basic plot of the battle narrative, Booker's "overcoming the monster." Here, an enemy rises up to threaten "our" lives, values, and ways of life. Typically "our" side reacts with fear. As the threat and the fear continue to rise, the means for resolution are put into place; typically, a weak leader calls and commissions a hero to fight the enemy. The hero, perhaps mustering an army, then defeats the enemy. After taking plunder, "our" side recognizes the hero with a gift, a feast, a hymn. In a variation on this, found throughout the ancient Near East, the king is already the designated hero but is somehow distant from the initial threat. These royal narratives emphasize the close relationship between the king and the deity, who also takes part in the fight and receives recognition as the battle hero.^[1]

The Red Sea Story depends on this tradition but reshapes it to tell its own story. Like the royal narrative, the Lord takes the role of the hero from the outset, but he is not distant from the action. Instead, God directs and predicts the action as it unfolds. Unlike the royal narratives of the ancient Near East, where the deity and the human king triumph together, the Lord alone triumphs over the enemy as in the heroic narrative. In other biblical battle narratives, human beings take some role in the action, but here Israel does nothing but stand and watch. Moses, their leader, contributes to the victory only

by raising his hand and staff. The story makes it absolutely clear that the Lord alone is the hero of this battle narrative.

Below I have divided the story into its basic moments.

6.1. Description of the Hero

- 13:17-20. Israel with Joseph's bones makes an escape toward the Red Sea by a route chosen by God, and they encamp at Etham.
- 13:21-22. The Lord goes before them as a column of cloud and fire to protect them.
- 14:1-4. The Lord's Speech: The Lord has Israel encamp at the Red Sea to get glory over the hard-hearted Pharaoh.

Battle narratives often have a description of the hero. Here the description here shows the Lord in command of everything. He manages the escape of Israel by directing them toward the Red Sea and away from the shortest route (13:17-18). The explanation of the pillar of cloud and fire provides a concrete image of God's presence and protection while giving the sense of the passing of time (13:21-22).

In 14:1-4, the Lord speaks directly to Moses but does not call and commission him as the hero. Rather Moses takes the role of the Israelite leader and the divine intermediary. The Lord commands that Israel encamp at the Red Sea and then predicts that Pharaoh, his heart hardened by God, will take back his consent and pursue the Israelites. We might prefer that Pharaoh come to this decision by himself, but the text again insists on the Lord's involvement in everything. The speech also makes the divine purpose explicit. The Lord wants "glory," that is, recognition by the Egyptians "that I am the LORD" (14:4b). The recognition of the hero, a typical reward,

brings honor and often kingship. Here the Lord wants this recognition from the enemy. In the Book of Exodus, “glory” plays a larger role as the primary manifestation of God for the Priestly tradition, and the book reaches its climax with God’s glory filling the tabernacle in the final chapter (Exod 40:34).^[2]

6.2. Tension: Threat and Reaction of Fear

- 14:5-8. Tension: Pharaoh and his army have a change of heart and pursue Israel.
- 14:10-14. Israel reacts with fear and accuses Moses of treachery, but he reassures them that the Lord will act alone as their hero.

The narrator now shifts to the king of Egypt. Hearing a report of Israel’s flight, Pharaoh and his servants have “a change of heart” even before the Lord acts to harden his heart in 14:8.^[3] This “change of heart” completes the pattern after each plague, and this, the tenth time, shows that Pharaoh cannot be trusted to keep his word. The narrator then provides three extended and repetitive descriptions of Egypt’s vast army and horsemen with their horses and chariots (14:6, 7, 9). With this, the fundamental tension of the story becomes absolutely clear, and the keyword “pursue” focuses the Egyptian threat (14:4,8,9, 29). This section comes to an end with a touch of dramatic irony—that is, the narrator and the audience know something that the characters do not. As the Egyptians reach the Red Sea, the narrator tells us that Israel had gone out “boldly” (literally: “with a high hand”), thinking they were home free, but clearly, the situation has changed.

The reaction of fear begins with Israel lifting up their eyes and seeing the Egyptians: “In great fear, the Israelites cried out to the Lord” (14:10). As discussed above, their speech betrays the Israelites’

ungrateful lack of faith and trust both in Moses and in their God. This reaction becomes a recurring motif, characterized by George Coats as the “murmuring motif,” and it appears both in Exodus and Numbers with regard to water, food, and a foolish nostalgia for Egypt as here. Coats characterizes it as more than a “disgruntled complaint” but as “rebellion.”^[4] As such, the reaction becomes another tension in the text.

Ska points out how Moses’ reply mirrors the Israelite’s response. Though the Israelites are “greatly frightened,” Moses tells them, “Do not fear!”— a typical encouragement motif.^[5] Though they have just “seen” Egypt’s military might, Moses tells them to stand and “see” the “salvation/victory” that the Lord will accomplish for them “today,” and he assures them that they will never “see” these Egyptians again.^[6] There follows what is arguably the most important line in the story:

“The Lord will fight for you, and you have only to keep still.”
(14:14).

The Lord and the Lord alone is the hero here. Unlike every other battle narrative in the Old Testament where human beings play some role, here Israel needs to do nothing but stand and watch. Israel’s reaction is not recorded, and we are left to imagine what it might have been.

6.3 Resolution 1: Israel Escapes

- 14:15-18. The Lord’s Speech: The hero commands Moses to stretch out his hand so that he can get glory over Pharaoh and his army.
- 14:19-20. The column of cloud and fire moves between the Egyptians and Israel.

- 14:21-22. Moses finally fulfills God's command and stretches out his hand, turning the sea into dry land, and Israel passes through "on dry ground, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left."

The narrator shifts the focus to the Lord and Moses, with the Lord asking, "Why do you cry out to me?" As noted above, the accusation comes out of nowhere. Then the Lord has Moses tell the Israelites to set out and commands him:

But you, lift up your staff, and stretch out your hand over the sea and divide it, that the Israelites may go into the sea on dry ground (14:16).

With this, the resolution begins, but the narrator is careful to retard the ending over the next fifteen verses so that the audience can absorb just what happens and exactly who makes it happen.

Following the command to Moses, the Lord affirms a second time that he will harden Pharaoh's heart to take glory so that "the Egyptians shall know that I am the Lord" (14:18).

The narrator then tells us the angel of God moved and went behind the Israelites, and the pillar of cloud did the same so that it comes between two forces. The narrator then explains that the pillar lit up the night and kept the two from coming close to each other "all night" (14:19-20). This extended description again demonstrates that the Lord has everything in hand even as the scene creates a sense of passing time and retards the resolution.

Moses then fulfills the Lord's command with the presiding motif of this section: "Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea" (14:21).

The narrator then shows us two pictures of the escape: one realistic and the other miraculous. The first shows the Lord driving back the sea with a strong east wind to yield dry land. In the other,

the sea splits miraculously into walls of water through which Israel passes. Though these two images belong to different traditions, the narrator insists that we hold the realistic and miraculous together. This story affirms that God works in historical time, and the realism underscores this. Still, the event shows the *magnalia Dei*—the great wonders of God with the walls of water to the right and the left conjuring up a sense of wonder. Indeed, the elemental dimensions of the story—sea, dry land, the pillar of cloud and fire—give it a primordial and transcendent dimension. However, this story is not an ancient Near Eastern myth beyond this world. Instead, Egypt and Israel are human actors within human space and time. However, the Lord plays the major role in their world and shows the story to be more than a piece of human history. As Ska says, “the story contains an experience that wants to be paradigmatic and a source for continual renewal for those who relive it in the liturgy.”^[7] Its telling and retelling give power to this story for those who accept its pledge.^[8]

6.4. Resolution 2: The Destruction of Pharaoh and the Egyptians

- 14:23. Egypt pursues Israel into the midst of the sea.
- 14:24-25a. The Lord throws Egypt into a panic.
- 14:25b. Recognition by the Egyptians: “The LORD is fighting for them against Egypt.”
- 14:26-27a. At the Lord’s command, Moses stretches out his hand, and the sea flows back.
- 14:27b-28. The Lord tosses the Egyptians into the sea, and all are lost.

With the Israelites safely through on dry ground, their plight is resolved. The narrator now turns to the Egyptians and begins with the word “pursue.” The addition of the word “all” underlines the completeness of destruction that will come:

The Egyptians pursued, and went into the sea after them, all of Pharaoh's horses, chariots, and chariot drivers. (14:23).

The narrator is in no rush to end this. We hear of the morning watch and the Lord looking down on the Egyptian army from the pillar of fire and cloud. From there, almost casually, it seems, the Lord first throws “the Egyptian army into panic” and clogs their chariot wheels so that they turn only with difficulty (14:24b-25a). With that, the narrator takes us close and lets us hear exactly what the Egyptians say:

“Let us flee from the Israelites, for the Lord is fighting for them against Egypt” (14:25b).

Here we have the recognition by Egypt that the Lord had predicted in 14:4 and 17-18.

The narrator continues to retard the action. Next, we hear the Lord speak to Moses: “Stretch out your hand over the sea that the water may flow back.” Again the narrator repeats all the elements: “upon the Egyptians, upon their chariots and chariot drivers.” And then we hear:

So Moses stretched out his hand over the sea,
and at dawn the sea returned to its normal depth. (14:27a).

The reference to “dawn” asks us to understand more than a realistic reference to the time of day. The next sentence shifts our perspective and emphasizes once again the Lord's control:

As the Egyptians fled before it,
the Lord tossed the Egyptians into the sea (14:27b).

Exod 14:28 resolves the tension and leaves no doubt about its totality:

The waters returned and covered the chariots and the
chariot drivers,
the entire army of Pharaoh that had followed them into the
sea;
not one of them remained (14:28).

The motif of the enemy's total destruction is a traditional motif in battle narratives and supports the theme of complete victory over the forces of chaos.[\[9\]](#)

6.5. Recognition of the Hero

- 14:29. Repetition of Israel's journey through the Sea.
- 14:30. Statement: The Lord saved Israel, who sees the Egyptians dead on the shore.
- 14:31. Israel's recognition of the Lord as hero and of Moses, his servant.

Exod 14:29 repeats Israel's miraculous escape to emphasize the contrast with Egypt's destruction. Again it describes their journey "on dry land through the midst of the sea, with the water as a wall to their right and to their left." The miracle cannot be denied.

The motifs of seeing and fear from 14:10 and 13 reappear transformed for the recognition of the hero. Earlier, the Israelites, on seeing the Egyptians, greatly feared, though Moses commanded them, "Do not fear!" He called on them to stand their ground "and see the deliverance that the Lord will accomplish for you today," adding: "For these Egyptians whom you see today, you will never

see again.” The events have realized these predictions, and the final verses summarize this.

Thus the Lord saved Israel that day from the Egyptians;
and Israel **saw** the Egyptians dead on the seashore.
Israel **saw** the great work that the Lord did against the
Egyptians.
So the people **feared** the Lord
and believed in the Lord and in his servant Moses. (14:30-31)

No longer cowering, Israel stands in awe of its hero. To that is added the word “believe,” which in Hebrew carries the sense of “trust in” and “rely on.” The power of Egypt has given way to the great work of God. The fear of the Egyptians gives way to the fear of the Lord.^[10] Israel’s unbelief and the desire to return to Egypt also gives way in the final resolution:

“They believed in the LORD and in Moses his servant”
(14:31b).

For the moment, all is good.

6.6. Footnotes for Section 6

^[1] Hagan, “Basic Plots,” 206-208; *Mighty in Battle*, §2.5.4; 3.5.4.

^[2] Ska, *Le Passage*, 106.

^[3] Terrence Fretheim, *Exodus* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1991) 155.

^[4] George W. Coats, *Rebellion in the Wilderness: The Murmuring Motif in the Wilderness Tradition of the Old Testament* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1968) 249.

^[5] Hagan, *Mighty in Battle*, §2.4.3.

^[6] Ska, *Le Passage*, 71-74.

^[7] Ska, *Le Passage*, 112.

[8] Hans Georg Gadamer, “On the Contribution of Poetry to the Search for Truth,” in *The Relevance of the Beautiful and Other Essays*, translated by Nicholas Walker, edited by Robert Bernasconi (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1985) 105-115, esp. 109-110.

[9] Judg 3:29; 4:16; 16:30; Hagan, *Mighty in Battle*, §2.5.2; 3.6.3; 4.3.

[10] Ska, “The Crossing of the Sea,” 37; *le Passage*, 117-118; Dozeman, *Exodus*, 318.

§7. Conclusion

The basic elements of narrative come together in the Red Sea Story. The third-person narrator can tell us what God thinks, how the Egyptians change their minds, and how the Israelites attack Moses for bringing them out of Egypt. The story uses the basic plot of the battle narrative with changes to tell its own particular story with both realistic and thematic dimensions. Though created with quick strokes, its characters are vivid and memorable, and the story leaves no doubt about the Lord as the hero. Israel had “only to keep still.” The victory hymn in Exod 15:1-18 repeats in non-narrative sequence various moments of the battle, and then Miriam, with tambourine, leads the dance and celebrates the victory:

Sing to the LORD, for he is gloriously triumphant;
horse and chariot he has cast into the sea. . (Exod 15:20)

Our understanding of a story often depends on how we see ourselves in the story. The final redactor shaped this story for the Judeans living in the post-exilic period, and so the story suggests that the hearers identify with Israel, who moves from fear of Egypt to fear of the Lord. For the moment, all is resolved, but as readers of the Bible know, Miriam barely finishes the victory hymn before the murmuring motif returns (15:24). The events of the Red Sea are not enough to ensure that their faith endures.

Still, there are other possibilities. We could identify with Moses caught between God and the people. Or we could identify with the oppressive Egyptians. That would be uncomfortable and perhaps unthinkable, but still, it might fit. We could even identify with the Lord as the hero.

The story's meaning depends upon our ability to find some relationship of likeness or some new possibility. What the story meant for its original audience will not be the same as what it came

to mean for others or what it means for us. Stories do not provide answers to our questions but rather open a dialogue that brings us to a deeper understanding of what we hold or, perhaps, takes us to a new place.

Glossary

author: the person who created the text. In biblical literature, this can be complicated because some stories existed in an oral form before being written down and even then went through several editions before ending up in their present form. §2.1, §2.3, §2.5

basic plots: the storylines that capture basic human events and so appear throughout history and cultures although they may well have a specific historical and cultural form. Christopher Booker gives the following as the basic plots: overcoming the monster (battle), rags to riches, journey quest, the journey of voyage and return, comedy, tragedy, and rebirth. He adds three subplots: call and commission, trials, and temptations. §5.7

boundaries of the story: the beginning and end of the story. While a novel begins on the first page and ends on the last, biblical narratives are often part of a chain of stories, and sometimes in analyzing a story, one must make a prudent decision about its beginning and end. §1.2

closure: the sense of an ending that comes with the resolution of the overriding tension and the basic questions raised by the story. In general, audiences dislike the lack of closure. §5.8

development: the middle of the story where the tension heightens the means of resolution fall into place. §1.1

distance: the audience's sense of being far from or close to the story. The narrator can keep the story far from the audience by mediating everything or bring it close by letting the characters speak for themselves and by providing more detail. §2.4

drama: a story presented directly by the characters, as distinct from a narrative mediated by the narrator. §1.1

duration: another term for narrative time that refers to the amount of the narrative devoted to the telling of an event. §5.4

entities: those things in the story, in addition to the characters, that serve some function in the story. §4.2

flashback: a narrative scene out of sequence that takes the audience back to an earlier event needed to understand the present action. §3.1, §5.3

flashforward: a scene out of sequence that takes the audience forward in time to reveal what will happen. In the Bible, prophecy has this function and helps the audience see the consequences of the present action. §3.1, §5.3

flat characters: stereotypes that represent an idea or trait. §4.1

focalization: see **narrative lens**. §2.4

frequency: the number of times an event is told. §5.5

gaps: the things that the narrator does not tell us but that we want or need to know about the story. Some gaps are inconsequential, but the way in which we fill in other gaps can have important consequences for the interpretation. §5.6

history: what actually happened and should be verifiable; for biblical events, often there is little data beyond what is contained in the Bible. §1.4

implied author: Wayne Booth's term for the idea of the author constructed by the audience to account for the narrative. This essay uses the term "worldview" instead. §2.1

implied narrative: a text that presumes some tension and a projected resolution, but the audience must reconstruct the story from what is told. §1.1

keyword: a repeating word or phrase that signals critical themes in the story. §5.2

lyric: not a story, but the direct presentation of reaction or idea by a single voice. §1.1

motif: a recurring image that signals critical themes in the story. §5.2

narrative, also referred to as story: a sequence of events moving from tension to a resolution, told by a narrator/storyteller. §1.1

narrative discourse: the way that a narrator tells a story in a particular instance as distinct from the storyline. The narrative discourse of Exod 13:17–14:31 captures one telling of these events in the Bible.

narrative lens: also called focalization: the frame through which we see and experience the story. Usually, the narrator serves as our narrative lens, but sometimes, a character may serve as the lens.

§2.4

narrative space: the geography of the story which carries thematic dimensions. §3.2

narrative time: the amount of time given to telling the parts of the story. The more narrative time an event receives, the more important it is. §3.1, 5.4

narrator, first-person: a narrator who tells the story from “my” point of view, often as a character in the story. §2.2

narrator, third-person: a narrator outside the story, typically possessing an omniscient understanding of the characters and events. This narrator typically gives the impression of impartiality and objectivity but plays a crucial role in shaping the story, its worldview, and the narrative lens. §2.2

narrator, also called the storyteller: the voice that tells the story. §2.1

overreading and underreading: overreading finds connections that go beyond what the text signifies, while underreading fails to recognize clues in the text. §5.6

plot: the way that the actions unfold in the story. §5.1

realistic narrative: a narrative that presents a world true to our experience with its round characters and complexity. §1.5

redactor: the person(s) who serves as the final editor and gives a biblical text its final form. The redactor may take a creative hand and reshape the material from the tradition to reflect a new worldview/theology. §2.1, §2.3

reliability: the trustworthiness of the narrator. Biblical narrators are reliable in the sense that they believe what they tell to be true. §2.5

repetition: a basic strategy used to create emphasis, time to react, and design. Repetition is a sign of what the text deems important and demands the audience’s attention. §5.2

report: a retelling of what has happened without any particular

concern for tension or resolution (though some today would consider this as part of narrative). §1.1

resolution: whatever brings a tension to an end. Stories typically have a major resolution that brings the whole to an end, but along the way, smaller tensions demand their own resolution so that the story can move ahead. §1.1

retardation: events that introduce new tensions that impede the final resolution. §5.1

round characters: E.M. Forster's term for a realistic character who possesses the complication and surprise of real human beings.

sequence of events: the chronological unfolding of the events of the story which may or may not be the way in which the narrator tells the story. §4.1

story: used here as another word for narrative. §1.1

storyline: the skeletal events that a story fills out. §1.1

tension: a problem that the characters must resolve for the story to move forward and come to closure. A story typically has a major tension whose resolution brings the whole to an end. Between them, small tensions arise and demand resolution for the story to move forward. §1.1, §5.1

thematic narrative: a narrative that projects and reinforces a plot with flat characters representing traditional themes (ideas); all the pieces are grounded in convention and artistic tradition. §1.5, §4.1

theme: an idea that a story carries and develops. §5.2, also §1.5, §3.2, §4.1

time of the story: the time when the story takes place, in contrast to the time of its composition, the time of its reading, and also to narrative time. §3.1.1

worldview: the story's understanding of how its world works. This world view is largely, and the audience must construct this understanding from what the narrator presents. Others call this understanding "the implied author." For biblical stories, their worldview could also be called their theology—that is, their understanding(s) of God and humanity with their relationship to each other and creation. §2.1

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