The Interaction of General Knowledge and Canon in Appreciating Biblical Narratives, Illustrated with Luke 5:12-16

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Abstract

Knowledge of storied human experience informs all listening to narratives. So also it informs listening to the story of the healing of the leper in Luke 5:12-16. In addition, the literary context of a book and of the canon as a whole invite us to see any particular biblical narrative in the light of its divine author, the redemptive concerns of the book, and the redemptive story of the whole of the Bible. Third, the Bible's teaching about human nature and history informs our analysis of what it means to read any narrative whatsoever. In particular, stories of achievement, deliverance, and tragedy in human culture display the character of human beings as created in the image of God, fallen in Adam, and needing redemption in Christ. One can study such commonalities both in plot structure and in character roles, as illustrated in structuralist narrative theory. The Logos is reflected in human narrative even when narrative is not directly tied to the canon of Scripture. So general theory of narrative needs reformation in the light of biblical teaching. Luke 5:12-16 thus has implications for the nature of stories in general.

What happens when we interpret a story in the Bible, such as the story of the healing of the leper in Luke 5:12-16? We focus on the story and the details of its contents. But this focus has a larger background. We probably know already about other stories of healing in the Gospels and in Acts. We also perform our reading against the background of knowing something about stories in general.

Let us reflect explicitly about the relation of one story, Luke 5:12-16, to other stories. Luke 5:12-16 can serve as an example of what we do or ought to do in interpreting any story in the Bible.[1]

The influence of context

1 Parts of this paper are to appear in Vern S. Poythress, *God's Speech and Ours: A God-Centered Approach to Language* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway).

The general principle with which we are concerned is the principle of context. Contexts influence interpretation. And contexts are of many kinds. Luke 5:12-16 has a narrower literary context consisting in the narratives that come before and after Luke 5:12-16: the catch of fish in Luke 5:1-11; the more general summary of Jesus' early ministry in Luke 4:42-44; the healing of Simon's mother-in-law in Luke 4:38-39; the healing of the paralytic in Luke 5:17-26; and so on. These stories compose part of the Lukan narrative of the early period of Jesus' public ministry. They fit into a still larger circle of Jesus' entire public ministry, and that circle fits in turn into the larger circle of Jesus' entire life as narrated by Luke. We can also consider Luke within the context of Luke-Acts and within the larger NT canon, consisting of all four Gospels and the other NT writings. We can consider the thematic context consisting of all the instances of healing in the NT. We also have the cultural context of the Roman Empire and of Palestine within the Empire, and the historical context of political, social, religious, and economic developments over the time periods before and after the events took place.

At a very general level, explicit studies in cognitive psychology, cognitive linguistics, and the sociology of knowledge[2] confirm what thoughtful observers have known intuitively for a long time, namely that our interpretation of a particular experience is shaped by context, including the context of previous knowledge. We might add that interpretation can be shaped by *future* knowledge as well. New experiences can be instrumental in causing us to reinterpret previous experience. Moreover, the broader assumptions coming from culture and from worldviews influence how we interpret any particular item of information or experience.

History or sociology as ultimate frameworks

So what assumptions come into play when we read Luke 5:12-16 or another story in the Gospels? Some people find an anchor for their interpretive practice primarily within a broad historical framework. Their thinking about history offers an implicit or explicit worldview. Any story, such as the healing of the leper, gets evaluated within this historical framework. We ask about whether the events happened, what led to telling of the story, who told it, and so on But what is our view of history? Is it the working out of God's plan, or it is a merely immanent process, thrown up by a combination of chance and mechanical causation and human will? The plurality of worldviews makes us aware that there is no one "obvious" standpoint that claims everyone's allegiance.

Other people take their standpoint within sociology and anthropology when they analyze the past. The healing of the leper might be analyzed in terms of the social position of lepers within Palestinian culture, and the social meaning of the healing and the reintegration of the healed leper into society. But which kind of sociology and

2 See, for example, Greg L. Robinson-Riegler and Bridget Robinson-Riegler, *Cognitive Psychology: Applying the Science of the Mind* (2d ed.; Boston: Pearson/Allyn and Bacon, 2008); William Croft and D. Alan Cruse, *Cognitive Linguistics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckman, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966); Nico Stehr and Volker Meja, *Society and Knowledge: Contemporary Perspectives in the Sociology of Knowledge and Science* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 2005).

anthropology do we adopt, and what worldview assumptions do they bring with them? The frameworks of assumptions in sociological theory, or the framework of assumptions about history, are both contexts that come to bear on interpreting the meaning of the story. But they do not furnish neutral or indisputable assumptions.

Still other people take their stand within literary theory and the tradition of literary interpretation. But which literary theory? Which tradition of interpretation?

The role of the canon

The complete canon of Scripture offers us a special context that needs attention. People who take their stand within general history might be uneasy about the canon, except to the degree that they are able to treat canon as merely an immanent historical and social product of ecclesiastical decision-making. For these people, Luke 5:12-16 ought only to be considered in the context of ancient history in general, and ancient literature in general. The isolation of a particular group of writings into a "canon" is a datum of ancient history, but otherwise is ultimately arbitrary and irrelevant.

But I believe that the books of the canon were breathed out by God (2 Tim. 3:16). They were therefore the word of God even before the time when the church recognized them. They belong together as books with a common divine author and a common absolute authority. We can still pay attention to the contexts of other ancient writings. These too are under God's providential superintendence. But only the canonical writings have their distinct authority.

So it is right that we treat Luke 5:12-16 in the context of the canon, and that we give distinct reflection to that context.

And then Luke 5:12-16 fits into the working out of the redemptive plan of God. Luke 5:12-16 is a story of deliverance, in this case deliverance from the disease of leprosy.[3] As a story of healing, it resonates with all the other stories of healing, particularly in the Gospels. More broadly, it has an affinity with stories of deliverance of other kinds throughout the canon. God gives us one central story of redemption, in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. He also gives us many mini-stories of mini-redemptions, which are types or shadows of the one central story.

The mini-stories and the central story are organically related. How can God be merciful to sinners? Ultimately, only through Christ. Christ was merciful to the leper, even though he did not merit mercy. Any instance of deliverance, whether in the exodus, or in the wars with Sihon and Og, or at Jericho, or in David and Goliath, or in Hezekiah's Jerusalem, is an instance of undeserved mercy. Undeserved mercy comes for the sake of Christ. Christ is the "one mediator" (1 Tim. 2:5). Temporary mediatorial figures, like Noah, Moses, David, and Hezekiah, obtain God's mercy only because they are founded on Christ's ultimate mediation. The affinity between the stories is not something invented by literary cleverness, but is inherit in the unity of God's plan and the constancy of God's character, as a God of holiness, mercy, and justice (Exod 34:6-7).

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3 I use the term "leprosy" and "leper" within the biblical context. Comparison of Lev. 13-14 with modern medical knowledge of Hansen's disease (modern "leprosy") shows that biblical "leprosy" covered a variety of skin diseases, and does not have a close relation to Hansen's disease.

Interpretation against the background of general knowledge

The special role of canon does not eliminate a role for general knowledge. Our general knoweldge ultimately derives from God's general revelation and is under his providential superintendence. We are creatures, made in the image of God. And as creatures God intended that we should hear his special word in Scripture in the context of general knowledge.[4] We grew up, we learned language, and we heard stories. Mostly without thinking about it, we developed skill in understanding and interpreting stories. Every story that we have heard has had a role to play. When we read the story of the leper in Luke 5:12-16, we read it using the skills that we developed from many extrabiblical stories.

Stories of deliverance include not only the special redemptive deliverances recorded in the Bible, but everyday stories. Knights rescue damsels in distress. The hero slays the dragon. People get healed, either through medicine or by God's healing even without medicine. People's spiritual ills are comforted by God's word. Lost hikers are rescued. Or, to a more mundane example, leaky faucets are repaired. Any human triumph over opposition can be viewed as a kind of mini-deliverance.

It is easy in our secular environment to adopt the framework of the secular historian, and to pull the biblical stories of redemption down to the level of all the other stories, whether true or imaginary. We read the stories in the Bible within a framework formed by the general stories that developed our story-reading skills. According to this view, it is all a product of socialization. This kind of historical framework tells us--because it already assumes--that all deliverances take place by merely immanent causation, and that the common pattern of redemptive meaning is only an incidental by-product of causal processes from which God is absent. If the mention of God happens to be imported into a story, it is merely an extra "ideological" addition to a situation from which God is essentially absent.

The key role of biblical redemption

But interpretation of this kind has plausibility only because it has injected at the beginning the assumptions of fallen human thinking with which it ends. We can turn the whole picture topsy-turvy. We do not have to deny the reality of general revelation or the reality of the influence of general stories on our interpretive skills. We simply see all such stories as fitting, according to God's wisdom, into his plan for our lives. The general stories have an affinity to biblical stories because every story everywhere is a variation on God's big story of redemption. People cannot escape God even when they rebel against him. Because they cannot avoid knowing God (Rom. 1:18-25), they know that all is not well. And if all is not well, they long for a remedy. That is, they long for redemption. But because of the perversity of the fallen human heart, the longing can take strange, perverted forms; the stories of redemption include counterfeit stories of counterfeit

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4 Cornelius Van Til makes the point with vigor and with detail in *An Introduction to Systematic Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1974).

redemptions. Such are the mythologies of non-Christian cultures.

The result is that interpretation of the healing of the leper is a spiral. We use our general knowledge of stories to interpret this one story. But this one story offers us, from God's mouth, a gospel announcement, the announcement of a small deliverance foreshadowing the great deliverance of the cross. When we hear the message of the cross, and hear with faith, we are transformed, And then we begin to understand the stories of mini-redemption differently. We are enabled to see in the healing of the leper a type of the healing in the cross. Jesus touches the leper, and thereby identifies with the uncleanness, which symbolizes the uncleanness of sin. Jesus' identification with uncleanness foreshadows and anticipates his identification with our sin in his sin-bearing on the cross. And the healing of the leper anticipates the healing of the resurrection, which promises ultimately the resurrection of our bodies and the final deliverance from every kind of bodily dysfunction.

So, once we understanding the deliverance and healing on the cross, we see the healing of leper in the light of the Jesus' work on the cross. And then it is a further step to see the multitude of other mini-stories of redemption in the Bible in the same light. And then we see extrabiblical stories in the same light. Extrabiblical stories do not have divine authority. They can offer distorted redemptions or counterfeit redemptions. But even in such cases they are dependent in a sense for their meaning of the one true redemption.

So our interpretation of Luke 5:12-16 has the potential to affect our interpretation of every other story. The one central story of redemption results in reinterpretation of all the other stories. Redemption is comprehensive. And if it is comprehensive, it includes redemption of our minds. And so it includes redemption of what we think about stories.

Structure on God's redemption

We can become more explicit about the way in which stories in general show analogies to the central story of redemption.

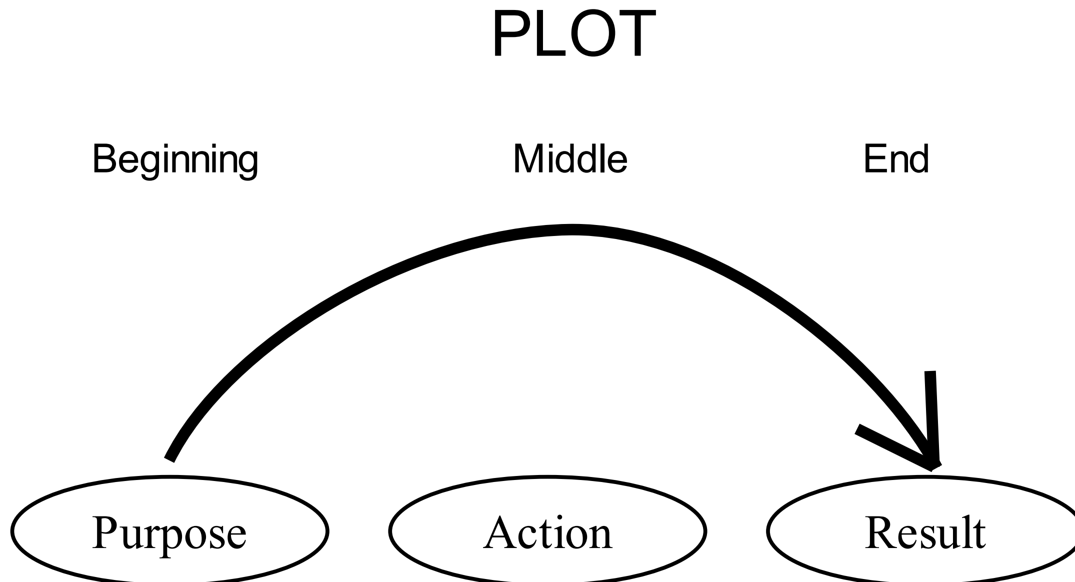
The final context for human action is God's action. God has a "story," namely world history. God has purposes from the beginning, and these are executed in time. At the center of world history God has the climactic history of redemption brought about in the life of Christ. Because human beings are made in the image of God, they have purposes, and they endeavor to bring about those purposes in time. So human stories are naturally analogous to God's world history. Human stories represent within language the nature of human action.

Plot

God's story has a beginning, a middle, and an end. In the beginning God created the world. Shortly after the beginning of the human race, the Fall disrupted the original harmony. God then acts in the middle of history to redeem human beings. The end comes with the consummation, the new heaven and the new earth (Rev. 21:1).

God's actions exceed what human beings can do. And yet there are still

similarities. We may re-label God's history as a story consisting in commission, work, and reward. Using this more general labeling, we can see similarities with human action. Human beings imitate God's purposes on smaller scales. Purposeful human action has an action "plan" of sorts; it has purposes. It also involves a concrete action, and its result.

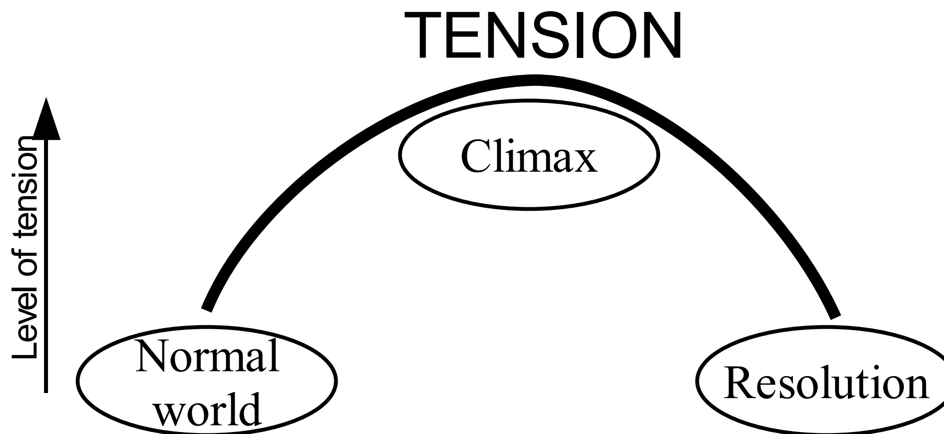


This pattern occurs both in real human actions in history and in fictional stories.

Story plots, as accounts of human action, therefore often show similar features. Stories may begin with a normal situation. But a problem or a disruption soon surfaces. Let me illustrate with a generic form of a fairy tale.

"Once upon a time, there was a good and faithful king who had a lovely daughter, the princess. But one day the princess was kidnapped by a dragon." The kidnapping represents a disruption of the normal situation. The disruption already suggests a task to undertake to remedy the disruption. The remedy will be a small-scale analog of redemption. The princess must be rescued. That is the action plan; that is the purpose.

The introduction of tension and the resolution of tension lead to the possibility of drawing a "plot" of the tension at each point in the narrative. The tension goes up when difficulties increase; the tension goes down when the difficulties are resolved. The resulting plot has the shape consisting of a hump in the middle and valleys at the two ends. It is what has been called the "bell curve" for plotting tension in a narrative. The tension is introduced, rises to a climax, and then falls during the resolution and the period of reward (or failure, in a tragic plot).



John Beekman,[5] building on the observations of many literary analysts, and based on experience with multiple languages, has produced a set of labels for the various main elements in a narrative episode, which are tied into the rise and fall of tension. They are listed below.

Pieces of a narrative episode

SETTING. Setting is composed of statements about static facts, location, time, circumstances, or movement in location. Usually such information comes at the very beginning of a new episode.

PRELIMINARY INCIDENTS. Preliminary Incidents are events (not descriptions of static states of affairs) relevant to what follows, but before the problem or tension has been introduced into the episode.

OCCASIONING INCIDENT. The Occasioning Incident is the event which introduces notable conflict or tension. In the nature of the case, there is seldom more than one such incident.

COMPLICATION. Complication is an event increasing tension, making a solution (apparently) more difficult. There can be more than one paragraph devoted to complications of various kinds. (Unlike the Occasioning Incident, Complication can and often does occur more than once in a single episode.)

CLIMAX. Climax is the incident of maximum conflict or tension. It is where, in a melodrama, we would expect the music to play the loudest.

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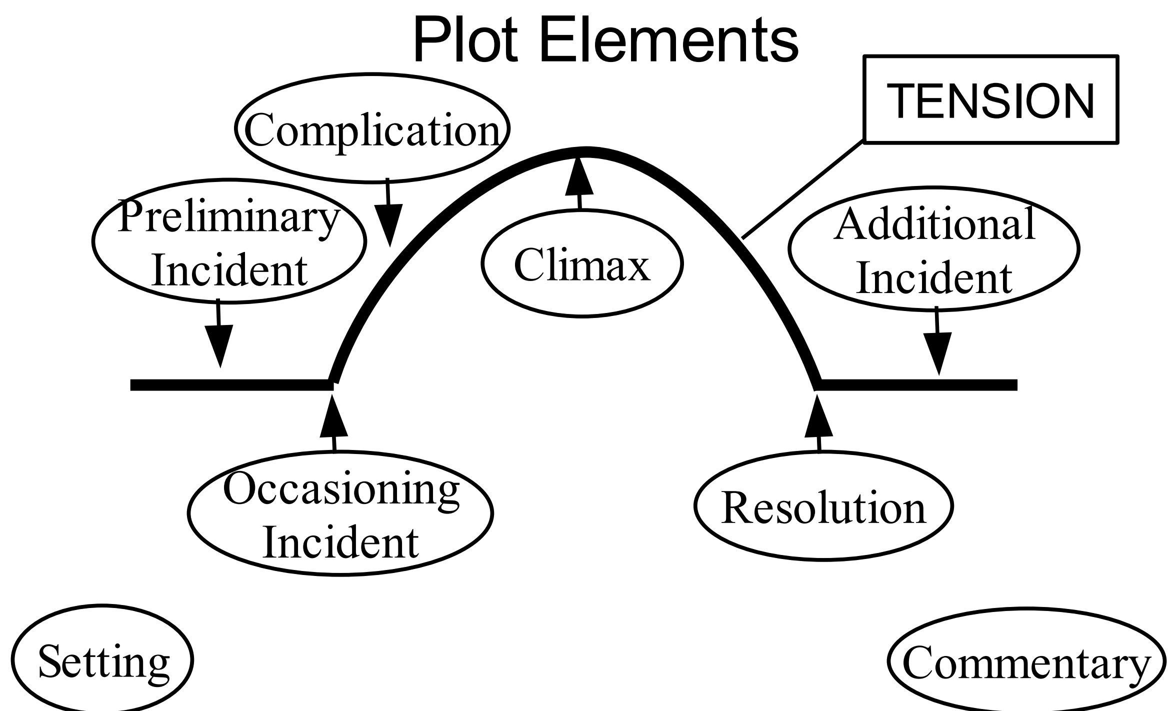
5 John Beekman, "Toward an Understanding of Narrative Structure," Dallas, TX: Summer Institute of Linguistics, 1978), 7-8. In what follows, I have introduced additional clarifications.

RESOLUTION. Resolution is the event or events which solve the problem, release the tension, and unravel the tangles—or at least they contribute toward the solution.

ADDITIONAL INCIDENTS. An Additional Incident is a further event that is a consequence of the climax or resolution, but is not a significant part of the climax or resolution itself.

COMMENTARY. A Commentary contains the narrator's comments on, evaluation of, or moral for the story. Unlike Additional Incidents, it does not contain events continuing the straight line of the narrative.



All of these except the first and the last, "Setting" and "Commentary," represent an elaboration of the basic structure of human action consisting of three steps: (1) formulation of purpose; (2) action; and (3) the result. The Setting and the Commentary are additional explanatory remarks that the narrator uses to situate the episode for the benefit of the reader's understanding and appropriation.[6]

Roles

6 Commentary can also occur as an introduction to the story itself; it may supply reasons why the story is interesting.

Examples of phases in plot

The plot can be elaborated by the introduction of participants who execute particular phases in the plot. The king offers a reward for the rescue of the princess. This step is the beginning of the commissioning. The hero steps forward, and may be formally commissioned to execute the plan.

The hero then goes out, in the "work" phase of the plot. He may meet with various obstacles. There may be subplots in which he confronts obstacles along the way and overcomes them. The road is long. Finally, he confronts the dragon, the villain. The dragon, it may be noted, is the small-scale stand-in for the opponent of God's plan, namely Satan (Rev. 12:9). Are we right in thinking so? Remember that man, made in the image of God, inevitably imitates God's action. So, yes, it makes sense that stories about human action should show analogies to the big story, the macrostory, concerning God's action.

But let us continue with our small, made-up story of the hero and the dragon. The hero defeats the dragon. That is the end of the "work" phase.

The hero then returns with the princess. The king rewards the hero by offering the princess in marriage. This is the blessing phase, or reward, and is an offer of communion with the source of blessing, the king, and subordinately with the princess. The princess, let it be noted, is the small-scale stand-in for the church, the bride of Christ, who is one part of the reward for Christ's accomplishment of his work. The macrocosmic hero is Christ, for which the fairy-tale hero is a small-scale stand-in.

Actor categories

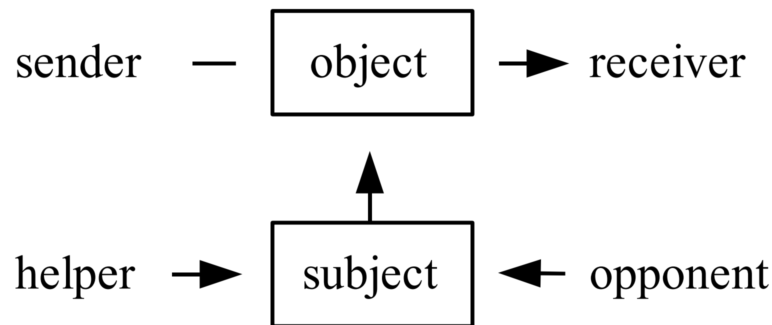
In this stereotyped story there are certain important character roles. The hero, the villain, the sought-for person or object (in this case, the princess), the commissioner (the king), and the reward-giver (the king again). In this case the commissioner, the king, is the same person as the rewarder. And so it is with the macrocosmic story, with God the Father as commissioner and rewarder. But the roles are distinguishable, and so in some human stories the roles may be occupied by distinct human beings. There may also be stories where there is confusion. The person who appears to be the hero, or sometimes the person who is the hero's helper, turns traitor, and must be replaced by another (in the story of the gospel, Judas is a traitor; and in a certain respect Adam became a traitor). There may also be subplots. In one subplot, a person who seems at first to be an opponent, or minor villain, turns out to be a helper.

There is a history to twentieth-century analysis of such stories. In 1928 Vladimir Propp published *Morphology of the Folktale* in Russian. It was translated into English in 1958, and a second edition dated 1968.[7] On the basis of analysis of a corpus of about 100 Russian folktales, Propp found a regular structure both in the plot and in the roles of characters. Propp found eight roles, namely the "villain," the "donor" (who gives the hero a helpful object), the "helper" (who helps the hero on his quest), the "princess"

7 Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*, 2d ed. (Austin/London: University of Texas Press, 1968).

(more generally, the sought-for person), "her father" (more generally, rewarder, punisher, tester), the "dispatcher" (who sends the hero on his quest), the "hero," and the "false hero."[8] In his analysis Propp did not find a consistent distinction between the functions of the princess and her father. If those two roles are wrapped up together, there are only seven distinct roles.[9]

Vladimir Propp only applied his analysis to one corpus of Russian folktales; he never claimed that it could be generalized. But Algirdas J. Greimas in 1966 undertook to generalize the approach so that it would apply to narratives from many sources.[10] Greimas compared Propp's work with an analysis of dramatistic roles by Étienne Souriau.[11] In synthesizing both of them, Greimas recognized complexities, but settled on a set of six roles that he claimed could usefully categorize "mythological manifestations only."[12] The roles, which he termed "actantial categories," are "sender," "object," "receiver," "helper," "subject," and "opponent." He summed up the relationship between the six roles in the following diagram:[13]



The "subject" is a generalization based on Vladimir Propp's "hero." The "opponent" covers both Propp's "villain" and Propp's "false hero." The "object" corresponds to Propp's princess or sought-for person. The "receiver" is Propp's "hero" in his role of receiving the princess as bride. The "sender" includes Propp's "dispatcher" and the princess's father in his role of giving the princess.

Greimas's approach differs from Propp. Propp attempted to develop "insider" categories that would match the perceptions of tellers and hearers of the specific body of Russian folklore. Greimas, on the other hand, was obviously striving for a general set of categories that would work cross-culturally; he necessarily offered an "outsider's" set of categories, that is, classifier's categories that would work across multiple cultures.[14] More

8 Ibid., 79-80.
9 Ibid., 79.
10 Algirdas J. Greimas, *Structural Semantics: An Attempt at a Method* (Lincoln, NB: University of Nebraska Press, 1984); translated from *Sémantique structurale: recherche de méthode* (Paris: Larousse, 1966).
11 Étienne Souriau, *Les deux cent milles situations dramatiques* (Paris: Flammarion, 1950).
12 Greimas, *Structural Semantics*, 207.
13 Ibid. It is not clear why the line connecting "sender" to "object" is not an arrow.
14 In technical terms, Propp offered "emic" categories; Greimas offered "etic" categories. See Pike,

than one set of categories might prove to have some use. Why then this specific set? Greimas's own explanations in his book do not go very far. He has obviously melded together a set of seven (or eight) roles from Propp, and six roles from Souriau, but other roles can be imagined.[15]

Actor categories in the light of God's work

We can find some clearer motivation for Greimas's selection by returning to the nature of man as prophet, king, and priest. Human action includes verbal action and thinking action (prophet), action in power (king), and action in sanction (blessing and reward, curse and punishment; corresponding to priest). In many stories, the beginning presents a challenge. In the middle, the challenge is worked through in a test. And in the end there is a recompense (reward or punishment). These three phases correspond to some extent to the three "offices," prophet, king, and priest.[16] The prophet's role in speaking corresponds to the challenge. The king's role in exercising power corresponds to the test. And the priest's role in blessing corresponds to the recompense.

In talking this way, I am using the terms "prophet," "king," and "priest" is a very general way. The terms are describing activities in which ordinary human beings engage, because human beings are made in the image of God. But the use of the terms in the Bible is much narrower and more special. In the Bible "prophet," "king," and "priest" designate special offices that God appointed for redemptive purposes, and imply special authority that goes with the office. It is important to appreciate their unique role. At the same time, it is possible to see analogies between the special offices and human actions in general.

The same goes when we compare the historical accounts in the Bible with stories outside the Bible. The events reported in the Bible really happened. And the reports in the Bible have a special role, because God instructs us concerning events related to his redemptive plan. These events have key, unrepeatable roles in God's purpose for the world. But because these events are key events brought about by God, they are likely to be imitated by human beings in many other circumstances, because human beings are made in the image of God. So the uniqueness of what is recorded in the Bible is not in tension with the generalities that we can explore about stories all over the world.

So let us return to consider Greimas's set of categories. The bottom row of Greimas's list of "actantial categories," namely "helper," "subject," and "opponent," focuses on power relations. The helper brings in his power to help the subject, while the subject uses his power to fight against the opponent. The top row in Greimas's list focuses on reward or recompense relations. The sender gives the object to the receiver, as a benefit, as a reward. But Greimas includes Propp's role of "dispatcher" under the category of "sender," and "dispatcher" concerns a role with more prophetic associations, namely verbal commissioning. Finally, the relation between subject and object is a

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Language, 37-72.

15 For further discussion of various "structural" approaches to narrative, see Robert Detweiler, *Story, Sign, and Self: Phenomenology and Structuralism as Literary-Critical Methods* (Philadelphia: Fortress; Missoula, MT: Scholars; 1978), 103-164.

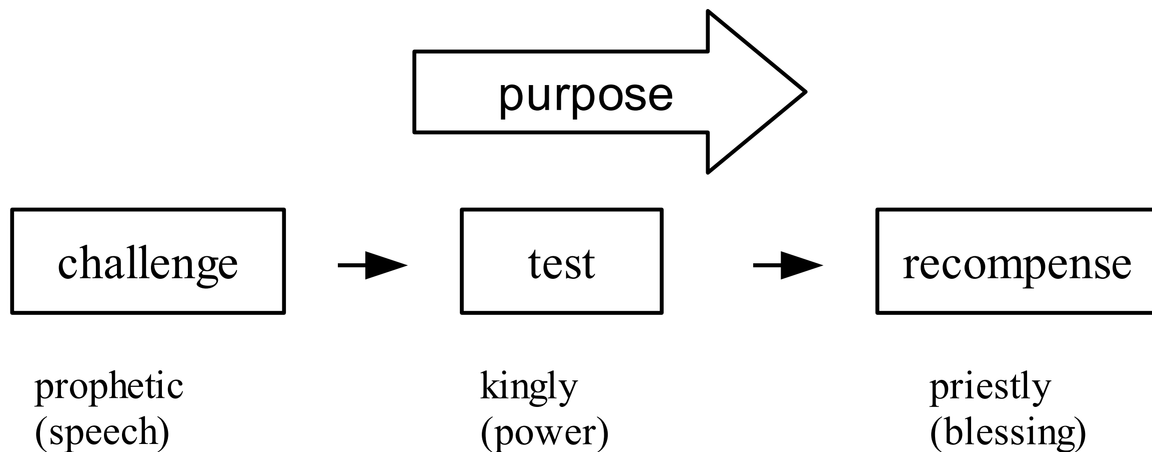
16 See Chapter 13.

relationship of desire that gives rise to the main human intention and to a human project. That intention is what makes the whole narrative go forward.[17] It is actually closely related to the sphere of thought and plan, which has verbal and therefore "prophetic" associations.

We can perhaps attempt to separate out a little more clearly various strands in the total plot. First, a simple plot, uncomplicated by subplots, will generally have a movement from purpose to action to result. The purpose is the purpose of a "subject" to obtain a result, that is, an "object." The subject may be a group of people as well as an individual; and the object may be either a nonpersonal reward such as a royal treasure, or a person such as the princess. The relation between purpose and result structures the whole episode lying in between the endpoints.

Second, a plot may have phases that include planning, work, and reward. To rephrase it, the phases are the challenge, in the "prophetic" sphere, the test, in the sphere of kingly power, and the recompense, in the priestly sphere. Within each of these phases we may anticipate interactions between characters, and in these interactions the characters will characteristically play certain roles. If we look carefully at these activities, we can make further distinctions beyond what Propp or Greimas have done.

Action Imitating God



Let us start with the phase of the challenge. Here we may anticipate interactions involving primarily verbal communication. Propp supplies the label "dispatcher" for the person who issues the challenge. But there must also be someone who is "dispatched," who receives the challenge. Typically in Propp's stories the person dispatched is the hero. But we can see that there can be variations. To remind ourselves that we are generalizing beyond what Propp did, we may introduce some new labels, namely "challenger" (for Propp's "dispatcher") and "challengee." A typical interaction may involve any or all of

17 God the Father's love, and Christ's love for the church, are the final motivation for God's history of redemption.

the moves in a three-move sequence: (1) a situation or a formulation of desire impacts a challenger; (2) the challenger issues a mandate to a challengee; (3) the challengee accepts or refuses the challenger.

In the phase of the test, we may anticipate interactions involving primarily power relations. One person sets up a test, and another is being tested. In Propp's stories, the person who initiates the test may be an opponent, namely the villain, or may be an aid, namely a donor (the donor gives a gift after the testee proves his worthiness). The person being tested is typically the hero. Once again we can generalize, and speak about a "tester" (the person or the thing that is the problem) and a "testee." We can again anticipate a three-move sequence: (1) the tester confronts the testee; (2) the testee struggles against the tester or the situation formed by the tester; (3) the tester acknowledges victory or defeat, success or failure, on the part of the testee.

In the phase of the recompense, we may anticipate interactions involving primarily evaluation and the conveying of consequences. There will be two parties in the interaction, namely a "recompenser" and a "recompensee." The "recompenser" is a generalization from the role of the father in Propp's analysis. We have a possible three-move sequence: (1) the recompensee is evaluated by the recompenser; (2) the recompenser issues a recompense; (3) the recompensee accepts or repudiates the recompense.

Obviously we have anticipated the possibility of different roles than those that Propp or Souriau or Greimas have listed. That is all right, because our categories are general categories, "outsider" categories; they are not intended to match perfectly with any one culture or any one set of stories. They serve well if they clarify the characteristic kinds of action. These kinds of actions are what they are because human beings are what they are. Human beings have characteristic purposes and characteristic desires and characteristic powers. And human beings are what they are because they are made in the image of God. God is the archetypal speaker, and therefore challenger; he is the archetypal controller, and therefore tester; he is the archetypal source of blessing, and therefore recompenser. Human action imitates divine action, even when it is twisted by the Fall.

In many stories there are complexities. The categories that we have mentioned so far do not eliminate the complexities, but rather offer only a very general overview. Within a particular story, two or more different characters may play the same role at different points in the story. At an early point, the donor becomes a recompenser when he gives to the hero, that is, to the recompensee, a magical object that will help him find his way or fight the dragon. At a later point, the king is the recompenser when he gives his daughter in marriage. It should also be clear that the same character can play two distinct roles at two different points in the story: the king can be challenger when he tells the hero to go and rescue his daughter. He can be recompenser when he gives his daughter in marriage. And finally, a single character can play a combination role. The villain as tester may confront the hero as testee, and in the confrontation verbally *challenge* the hero to combat, thereby becoming a challenger.

We can see also the potential for embedding small narratives within larger ones. The confrontation between the villain and the hero can be an extended confrontation,

which becomes a small story of its own. It may show the whole story pattern of commission, work, and reward. Each of the Gospels has smaller historical accounts within it: accounts of Jesus' healings, his casting out demons, and his feeding the 5000. Each particular incident of healing has its own small "plot." At the same time, each incident fits into the larger account of the whole Gospel.

We can make further distinctions if we like. If a challenger intends morally to aid the challengee, we may call him a *dispatcher* (Propp's term). If he intends morally to hinder the challengee, we may call him a *tempter* or *deceiver*. Satan appears in the role of tempter when Satan tempts Jesus in the wilderness (Matt. 4:1-11). But Satan and Satan's agents also appear in the role of tester, as when Pharaoh pursues the Israelites at the Red Sea. A challenger may use mediating objects or persons in his relation to the challengee. The mediating object can be either a guarantee or a threat. Satan says, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me" (Matt. 4:9).

Testers may also be morally for or against the testee. The tester who is on the side of the testee is typically a donor, who intends to bless the testee at the end of the test. The opposite of this is the villain, who intends to destroy the testee. Villains may enlist mediating objects or persons, who will be *opponents*. The barrel thrown at the testee, or the lighted stick of dynamite, or the villain's sidekick, is an opponent. Donors may enlist *helpers*, either tools or persons (for example, the person who becomes sidekick to the hero). In the Old Testament God acted as a donor by providing helpers, often human heroes like David, when Israel was in distress.

Recompensers may recompense in two directions, reward or punishment. The recompense itself is a mediating object or person. (The princess given in marriage is the reward from the king, who is the rewarder.)

Using the categories

Any particular story has details that will not be captured by these very general categories. A story may have subplots, or distinct episodes, which show some of the features in miniature. A story may have an inconclusive ending, or no ending at all (see Luke 13:6-9).

The categories serve their purpose if they alert us to some commonalities that belong to many stories, commonalities both in plot and in the functions of the characters. I have chosen the categories in a way that also helps to underline the relation of human action to divine action.[18] We can also see the relation between character roles and the role of Christ in the central acts of redemption.

Christ is commissioned by the Father. He accomplishes redemption by undergoing testing in his life and his death. He is rewarded in the resurrection. This pattern of redemption is then applied to each person who trusts in Christ. The pattern is repeated as a mini-redemption in the story of an individual life.

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18 For further indication as to how these roles fit into a larger linguistic framework, see Poythress, "Framework for Discourse Analysis," and Poythress, "Hierarchy in Discourse Analysis."