

Notes on Narrative and Discourse

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INTRODUCTION

The genres of the Hebrew Bible include narrative, poetry, and law, each with distinct conventions. My concern here is narrative. How does narrative work? What do the discourses embedded within narrative do? Working with the biblical Hebrew verbal system provides a way to understand the functions of narrative and discourse. The questions are not about what verb forms mean, but what they do in narrative context.

The purpose of introducing discourse analysis of biblical Hebrew narration is to prepare the student for assignments, with the larger aim of exegetical proficiency. The goal is not all of the subtleties of “textlinguistics” or “narrative syntax” but the next step after the basic prose “sentence grammar” of first year biblical Hebrew. These notes introduce the general categories of *narrative structure* and *discourse constellations*, making connections between verb forms and narrative function, along with a couple of other related matters. After introducing a basic discourse approach, these notes will provide specific guidelines for putting together class assignments. The student should keep in mind that there are many other matters which bear on narrative interpretation. This is simply a way to begin understanding Hebrew grammar within a storied framework.

NARRATIVE STRUCTURE

What motivates biblical Hebrew writers to choose one or another verb form, especially relative to those that seem to have the same tense/aspect as another form? (see van Wolde) Verb forms work in certain ways in certain narrative contexts. Verb forms can be ranked in story (see Longacre 1989, chap 3).¹ That is, different discourse types have different constellations of verb forms (see Longacre 1989, 59-60; Heller, 22-24). While different verb forms can appear within constellations, constellations have dominant verb forms that establish the mainline (see Longacre 1983, 14). The function of a verbal form is not a general phenomenon, but a function of the discourse constellation in which it used. The function of the same verb form may differ substantially within two discourse constellations (see Longacre 1992, 178). The point at hand is a contextually based functional grammar of story.

The mainline or backbone of narration is marked out by wci forms. The narrative function of wci form is so dominant that it can be called “the narrative tense” (see GKC, § 111). The storyline moves forward, sequentially or consequentially, by wci verbs.

Narration has mainline and offline clauses—foreground and background (see Niccacci 1994a, b).² Mainline clauses have wci forms as the main verb. These clauses constitute the main storyline. Offline clauses are all the other kinds of clauses, those which provide background, of various sorts, to the storyline.

Mainline clauses feature wci forms which, in the main, provide conjunctive function, whether temporal or logical (see GKC §111i; Lambdin, § 132; Heller, 430). The story’s mainline

¹ Longacre’s work is not without its problems (see van der Merwe, 142-45; Miller 1996, 7-8). Longacre’s description of several kinds of discourses (see below) have become somewhat standard, and serve as the basis for Heller’s and Chisholm’s approaches to direct speeches. My summary here is indebted to each of these.

² Endo does not find foregrounding-backgrounding to be determinative for the choice of verb forms, but a byproduct of the sequentiality and non-sequentiality (see esp. 324; *contra* Niccacci, Longacre, *et al*).

moves forward primarily by sequential or consequential wci forms (Longacre and Hwang, 345). Several less common functions can be discerned, like flashback, focusing, resumptive, complementary, and summarizing (see Chisholm 2006a, 37-38; Chisholm 2006b, 263-64). The subcategorizing of wci clause functions is beyond my present purpose. The normal word order of the storyline is verb-subject-object (VSO), or V-(S)-O when the subject is implied in the verb (see Bandstra).

Offline clauses are those which feature non-wci forms and such, and which are not governed by wci verbs. Offline clause types include pf, wcp, participle, verbless, הִיָּה denoting existence, and וַיְהִי as temporal introduction (see Heller, 52-54). Independent wci clauses may also function as offline clauses when they are not part of the wci chain (see Heller, 431). Noun-pf clauses (NV), for example, supply background to the wci story chain. Moreover, pf clauses may be marked with negation (לֹא) relative (אֲשֶׁר), or causal (כִּי) markers indicating the relative function of the respective clauses (see Langacre and Hwang, 337, 339, 347). The functions of the offline clauses in narration are to divide the narrative into smaller units (paragraphs) and provide commentary. The commentary function includes inner-paragraph and extra-paragraph commentary which, respectively, provide more direct and less direct background to the narration (see Heller, 54-62). For my present purposes it is enough to think of offline non-wci clauses as providing comment on the storyline (see Heller, 57, n. 25 for critique). Thus, offline clauses comment, broadly speaking, on the main storyline. Disjunctive or non-sequential or offline clauses provide background which can be contrastive, circumstantial, explanatory or parenthetical, initial or terminal, and dramatic introduced by וַהֲגִיָּה (see Lambdin, § 132; Chisholm 2006a, 38-39; also see Chisholm 2006b, 263-64; Chisholm 1998, 120-23). The subcategorization of offline clauses is also beyond my present purpose.

What is mainline in one type of discourse is offline in another. Wci verbs are the backbone of narration and VSO is the normal word order. In other kinds of discourse alternate word orders and verb forms provide the mainline. In these other kinds of discourse VSO and wci forms may be used as offline commentary (see Longacre 1983, 17). Discourses embedded within narration are of several types, or better have different constellations.

DISCOURSE CONSTELLATIONS

Direct discourses are embedded within stories (on direct and indirect discourse see below; my concern in this section is only with direct discourse). Direct discourses are not all of one sort, but are comprised of different types. Each type has its own discourse constellation which, in turn, have different a verb form which provides the mainline and other verbal forms are offline (see Heller, 25-26). I will work with five types of direct discourse and their respective verbal constellations (based on Heller, 23-27, 456-81; Longacre 1989, chap 3; Longacre 1992; Chisholm 2006a, 58-60).

Before describing five discourse constellations there a couple of general matters. First, whereas mainline narrative structure usually follows VSO, discourses often exhibit different word order, like SVO or OVS (see Bandstra, 116; Buth). Second, direct speeches can be

embedded within direct speeches. Multiple layers of discourse may seem complicated but these conventional dynamics just need patience since we all talk this way every day. Third, different direct speech types may work side by side within the same reported speech. Fourth, these discourse types should be thought of in broad terms. The point is not to figure out the correct labels, but to raise the reader's consciousness to facilitate interpretation.

Narrative Discourse is one in which a character relates a story. The verbal constellation of narrative discourse is centered on the wci form. It functions just like the larger narrative in which the speech is reported. Other discourses, of other any type, may be presented within a narrative discourse. The story within the story does not necessarily accord, as the character may, and often does, envision things differently from the storymakers.

Expository Discourse is one in which the speaker explains or describes facts or actions, explains how to do something, or argues a case. The participle and verbless clauses are the mainline of the expository discourse constellation. Expository discourses also feature הִיָּה and incomplete clauses to a lesser extent. The expository discourse may use rhetorical or leading questions (compare to Interrogative Discourse below).

Predictive Discourse is one in which a character plans, proposes, or describes what will or would or could occur—future tense. The impf provides the mainline of the predictive discourse verbal constellation. While impf is the primary form, impf clauses may also contain other verb forms. The secondary verb form of the predictive discourse constellation is wcp. The normal word order of the predictive constellation is VSO.

Hortatory Discourse is one in which a character urges or commands the listener or some other referent to perform or refrain from an attitude or action. Imperatives, cohortatives, jussives, and, to a lesser extent, attendant forms (לֹא־ with impf and wcp with אָנִי־), make up the mainline of hortatory discourses. The relatively frequent use of impf forms which perform volitional function in hortatory speeches shows that verbal function is tied more to context than form (see Heller, 67, n. 41). The leading characteristic of hortatory speech is volition. Rhetorical questions can be used with a hortatory function.

Hortatory discourse has some overlap but is distinct from predictive discourse. Predictive discourse describes what will or could take place and hortatory what must or should happen. Hortatory discourse may be used with expository—hortatory discourse tells what to do and expository discourse explains how to do it.

Interrogative Discourse is one in which a character poses a question or seeks to obtain a verbal response from a listener. Interrogative discourse constellations, unlike the other types of discourse, are not oriented toward a particular verb form, but are signaled by interrogative particles (הֲ) and adverbs (מִי, מָה, and so on) (see Heller, 66, n. 39). While interrogative particles and adverbs mark the discourse type as such, the tense of interrogatives is determined by the governing verb or clause type (see Heller, 478). Rhetorical and leading questions do not fit here since they are not real questions but serve functions in expository or hortatory discourse.

DIRECT AND INDIRECT SPEECH

Direct speech is a quotation which “recreates, in a sense the original discourse context” (Miller 1995, 157). The reported direct speech is syntactically independent of the narrative frame. The independence is reflected in the pronominal reference of the reported direct speech. The reported speech references the speaker in first person and the addressee(s) in second person, not in third person as in the narrative frame. There are three cases in which direct speech uses third person reference to the speaker or addressee(s): deferential language, oath formula, and sarcasm or reproach (see Miller 1995, 156-58). Direct speech is introduced by the quotative frame made up of one or more speaking verbs (אמר, and so on). The quotative frame precedes the quotation of direct speech in narration (see Miller 1996, 21; poetry is another story).

Internal speech is not usually distinguished from external speech; both may be introduced by אמר (Miller 1995, 160-61). Sometimes internal speech is marked by אמר בלבו *he said in his heart* or אמר אל לבו *he said to his heart*. There are several other indicators of internal speech: no addressee; speech within a speech which may cite past words giving reasons; introductory particles like כִּי, הִנֵּה, כִּן, or אֲשֶׁר; and context (see Carasik, 100; also see 93-104).

הִנֵּה may mark indirect thought. הִנֵּה is a point of view term which may introduce items known to the narrator but not the character. הִנֵּה is most often used with verbs of seeing, and not with verbs of saying. Presentatives like הִנֵּה occur in direct more often than indirect speech because they present the speaker’s point of view to the addressee, though it can signify a merger in the reported speaker and narrator’s viewpoints (see Miller 1996, 85-90, 114-15; also see van Wolde, 46-47).

Indirect speech reflects the same perspective in the quotation, with respect to pronominal reference, as the narrative framework. The time and place of the speech act also accord with the narrative perspective. Indirect speech is marked by (see Miller 1995, 161-65; also see Miller 1996, 93-141):

- a framing verb of speech and כִּי *that* plus an independent clause,
- ל *to* plus an infinitive clause or noun phrase,
- אֵת *definite direct object marker* plus a noun phrase,
- אֵת אֲשֶׁר *definite direct object marker and relative pronoun* plus a dependent clause,
- or as an independent clause with no explicit subordination to the quotative frame.

Note indirect speech in Gen 29:12, framing verb נגד and two כִּי clauses (see Miller 1996, 99).

וַיֹּגֵד יַעֲקֹב לְרַחֵל כִּי אָחִי אֲבִיהָ הוּא וְכִי בֶן־רֵבְקָה הוּא

Jacob told Rachel that he was her father’s relative and that he was Rebekah’s son.

If this verse presented direct speech it would say something like: “I am your father’s ‘brother.’ I am your aunt Rebekah’s son.” Thus, the referents of pronouns supplement literary indicators like כִּי. Indirect speech reflects the narrator’s paraphrase or summary of what characters say.

LAYOUT GUIDELINES FOR LEARNING

Hebrew text and English translation layout formats are mirror image, right to left and vice versa. In English translation students should parse verbs in parentheses. An interpretative summary should follow the layout.

The point is not to learn to do layouts. This model to layout and graphically depict “functional grammar” is a learning step. Once the student is aware of functional structuring in narrative is best not to overstress it, as though writing prose is confined to strict mechanical structures. Simply put, grammatical structure has great variety, and, in any case, detecting it is only, at best, an intermediate point of interpretation. At the same time, sensitivity to narrative syntax and discourse verbal constellations can greatly benefit interpretation of narrative contexts which have a healthy quantity of embedded speech of characters.

ENGLISH

Mainline wci clauses flush left

Indirect speech in mainline indented ½ inch from left margin

Offline clauses indent 1 inch

Indirect speech in offline indent 1.5 inches

(**Label** of discourse type centered in parenthesis over direct speech)

Direct speech centered

HEBREW

Mainline wci clauses flush right

Indirect speech in mainline indent ½ inch from right margin

Offline clauses indent 1 inch from right

Indirect speech in offline indent 1.5 inches from right

(**Label** of discourse constellation type centered in parenthesis of direct speech)

Direct speech centered

EXAMPLE ENGLISH LAYOUT (JONAH 1)

¹ (וַיְהִי) Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Amittai, (לְאִמְתַּי) saying,

(Hortatory)

² Rise up (קוּם Q impv), go (הֵלֵךְ Q impv) to Nineveh, the great city,

and cry (קְרֵא Q impv) against it;

(Expository)

(כִּי) for their wickedness has come up (עָלָה Q pf) before me.

³ But Jonah rose up (קוּם Q wci) to flee (בָּרַח Q infc)

[to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD,

and went down (יָרַד Q wci) to Joppa;

and he found (מצא Q wci) a ship going (בוא Q ptc) (to) Tarshish:
so he gave (נתן Q wci) the fare,
and went down (ירד Q wci) into it, to go (בוא Q infc) with them
[to Tarshish from the presence of the LORD.

⁴ But the LORD sent (טול Hif pf) a great wind to the sea,
(ויהי) and there was a mighty storm on the sea,

so that the ship was thought (חשב Piel pf) to be broken (שבֵר Nif infc)

⁵ Then the sailors were afraid (ירא Q wci),
so they cried (זעק Q wci) every one unto his god,
and they threw (טול Hif wci) the supplies that were
[in the ship into the sea, to lighten it (קלל Hif infc) of them.

But Jonah had gone down (ירד Q pf) into the inner part of the ship;
and he laid (שכב Q wci),
and was fast asleep (רדם Nif wci)

⁶ So the captain of the ship came near (קרב Q wci) to him,
(ויאמר) and said to him,

(Interrogative)

“What are you doing, sleeper (רדם Nif ptc)?

(Hortatory)

Get up (קום Q.impv), call (קרא Q impv) upon your god,

(Predictive)

maybe God will consider (עשת Hit impf) us,

so that we do not die (אבד Q impf).”

⁷ (ויאמרו) And each one said to his fellow,

(Hortatory)

“Come (הלך Q impv),

(Predictive)

and let us cast (נפל Hif coh) lots

that we may know (ידע Q coh) on whose account this evil has come on us.”

So they cast (נפל Hif wci) lots,
and the lot fell (נפל Q wci) on Jonah.

⁸ (ויאמרו) Then said they to him,

(Hortatory)

“Please tell (נגד Hif impv) us on whose account this evil is upon us;

(Interrogative)

What is your job? Where are you from (בוא Q impf)?

What is your country? And of what people are you?”

⁹ (ויאמר) And he said to them,

(Expository)

“I am an Hebrew; and I fear (ירא Q ptc) the LORD,
the God of heaven,
who has made (עשה Q pf) the sea and the dry land.”

¹⁰ Then the sailors were terrified (ירא Q wci),
(ויאמרו) and they said to him,

(Interrogative)

“What did you do (עשה Q pf)?,”

for the sailors knew (ידע Q pf) that he was fleeing (ברח Q ptc) from the presence
of the LORD, because he had told (נגד Hif pf) them.³

¹¹ (ויאמרו) Then said they to him,

(Interrogative)

“What should we do (עשה Q impf) with you,
so that the sea may be calm (שתק Q impf) for us?,”
for the sea was raging (הלך Q ptc), and storming (סער Q ptc).

¹² (ויאמר) And he said unto them,

(Hortatory)

“Pick me up (נשא Q impv, -1cs), and throw me (טול Hif impv) into the sea;

(Predictive)

and then the sea should be calm (שתק Q impf) for you;

(Expository)

(כי) for I know (ידע Q ptc) that on my account
this great storm has come on you.”

¹³ But the sailors rowed anyway (חתרו Q wci)

[to return (שוב Hif infc) to dry land;

but they could not (יכל Q pf) because the sea was raging (הלך Q ptc), and
storming (סער Q ptc) against them.

¹⁴ Thus they called out (קרא Q wci) to the LORD,

(ויאמרו Q wci) and said,

(Predictive)

“Please O LORD do not let us be lost (אבד Q coh) for this man’s life,
and do not put (נתן Q impf) on us innocent blood,

(Expository)

(כי) for you, O LORD, will do (עשה Q pf) as you please (חפץ Q pf).”

³ This background clause contains indirect speech, as the content of the sailors thoughts. It would be acceptable to layout as indirect speech in the background “that he was fleeing from the presence of the LORD because he had told them.” Indirect speech normally begins with the verb of saying followed by כי (or some other marker as noted above) whereas here the verb of saying is in the כי clause.

¹⁵ And they lifted (נשא Q wci) Jonah
and threw him (טול Hif wci) into the sea,
and the sea stopped (עמד Q wci) its raging.

¹⁶ Then the men feared (ירא Q wci) the LORD with a great fear,
and they sacrificed (זבח Q wci) a sacrifice to the LORD,
and they vowed (נדר Q wci) vows.

Summary

The action or storyline of Jonah chap 1 is both pushed forward and explained by many of the direct speeches. The word from Jonah's God initiates the prophet's travels. The speeches of the ship's captain and Jonah layout the significance of the storyline.

God operates in the background or offline. It is the prophet's speeches which is the vehicle for the sailors to understand the meaning of the storm. Moreover, the sailors reason out the purpose of the storm based on a speech act of Jonah not in the narration (the quasi-indirect speech of 1:10). Both of these factors, God's actions in the background and Jonah's disobedient motives, look forward to the last chapter of the book. In Jonah chap 4 God's actions are on the mainline, and Jonah explains further his motives for disobeying.

The speech of Jonah in 1:12 of his responsibility bringing judgment upon the sailors contrasts the sailors seeking to save Jonah against God's judgment. The sailors' efforts for Jonah in spite of his disregard, even sleeping, model the sort of vision Jonah is supposed to have for the people of Nineveh.

One of the significant changes in Jonah chap 1 is the transformation of the sailors' regard for Jonah's God. The sailors paid no mind to Jonah's God when they helped the prophet run away (1:10). Then, they feared the wrath of Jonah's God when they learned who he is (1:9, 10), but yet they strove to overcome his fierce wrath against the prophet. After the sailors appeased the wrath of Jonah's God by throwing the prophet to his death (or so they thought), they feared him anew and offered him sacrifices and vows.

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also see http://scriptureworkshop.com/bibliography/biblio_bh.pdf

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