

**Sandra L. Glahn**



# **A Woman's Place Is in the Story**



**Seeing Women  
in the Biblical  
Narrative**



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# 1

## Building Blocks of Narrative

### Key Elements in a Story

MY INTEREST IN STORY revealed itself at age ten as I sat in front of a Corona typewriter.<sup>1</sup> The machine in my memory is sturdy and brown and rests on a bedside table overlooking Ninth Street South in Arlington, Virginia. Sitting inside on a sunny day, I had set out to write a play. The two-story house across from ours had a grand old porch that could serve as a perfect stage, so the neighborhood children had urged me to create something we could all perform.

I slid my paper into the machine and began pecking away, crafting lines we could pronounce to each other in unusually proper English:

**BETSY:** Fine! Let us go.

**TIMMY:** Shall we shop in the store, then?

**MOTHER:** (Gesturing to a table) Put that box over there, for it is heavy.

**PAMELA:** (Holding up a palm) Stop! You will hurt yourself.

It took only about fifteen minutes for reality to hit: Plays are not a collection of random quotes. They're entire stories communicated through words. I groaned. I could write individual lines to deliver. What I could not do—at least not yet—was create a whole narrative.

Obvious, right? A story is much more complex than a string of good lines. In her work on narrative theology, New Testament scholar Jeannine Brown writes, “By reducing a Gospel to its smallest passages (called pericopes) we might attempt to derive a lesson from each story or teaching of

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<sup>1</sup>Portions of this chapter appeared as Sandra Glahn, “The Bible as Story: What the Literary Elements Reveal,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* (July–September 2021): 272–89. Used by permission.



Jesus. But to grasp the whole of a Gospel, we are pressed beyond simple lessons and moral proverbs. We will need to grapple with the inherent narrativity of a Gospel if we are going to understand its theology.”<sup>2</sup> Indeed. And perhaps listeners perceive the Scriptures as proverbs or quotes because those of us who devote ourselves to teaching the world’s bestselling book often read it with a view to delivering a message.

On my first night of a novels class in my doctoral program, the professor told us, “I don’t care if you give me gay, lesbian, hardcore porn—just don’t give me anything *Christian*.”

I struggled to veil my shock. Wasn’t that a violation of my free speech? The option of hiring an attorney came to mind. But when I repeated this professor’s words to a colleague, he wisely counseled in a different direction: “Study him. Find out what would make him disrespect Christians. And determine to be the best, most teachable writing student he has ever had.”

Fast-forward one semester. I received a lot of great coaching from this professor, an award-winning novelist who reviewed fiction for *Publishers Weekly*. And I met with him to talk about finishing the work I’d started in his class—a work in which I had not yet included any mention of faith or Christianity.<sup>3</sup> And then it happened. Seeing I was older than most of his students, he assumed I already had a career and asked my vocation.

I probably swallowed first. “I teach at a theological seminary,” I said.

His eyes grew wide. Obviously, he was thinking of his comment from the first night of class. I didn’t have to bring it up. After backpedaling furiously, he sighed, and his explanation went something like this: “Some of my Christian writing students have been so concerned with preaching a sermon through story that they’ve failed to tell a *good* story. In fact, they’ve focused on messaging at the expense of story. They’ve cared too little about mastering plot and character and setting, seeking only to deliver their sermon wrapped in thin story elements. They don’t believe me when I say the message will reveal itself naturally through the other vehicles done well.”

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<sup>2</sup>Jeannine K. Brown, *The Gospels as Stories: A Narrative Approach to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John* (Baker Academic, 2020), 148.

<sup>3</sup>Later published as Sandra Glahn, *Informed Consent: A Novel* (David C. Cook, 2007).

That professor went on to be my primary reader and a fierce advocate. How wise my colleague's advice had been! And that (now late) professor's words are worth heeding. True, John Bunyan proved himself an enduring enough author by preaching through his way through *The Pilgrim's Progress*. At one time second only to the Bible in popularity, *The Pilgrim's Progress* has been translated into more than two hundred languages and has never gone out of print since its release in 1678.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, when Jesus told the truth, he usually told it so "slant" that after some of his narratives, the disciples followed him to ask, "Why do you speak to the people in parables?" (Mt 13:10) and "What does this parable mean?" (see Lk 8:9).<sup>5</sup> In his encounter with a Syrophenician woman, Jesus initially rebuffed her and then likened her to a dog. But rather than take offense, she sparred with him, and he conceded (Mk 7:24-30).

If the text itself does not state overtly what its message means, how are we to arrive at meaning? How do we equip ourselves to read narratives? Many experts have written excellent technical books that answer that question. This is not a work about all the fine points of literary theory. It's more general, more basic. We'll focus on the building blocks of story to frame our analysis. In the chapters to follow, we will draw on these foundational elements to look at some women in the Bible and how they function in the texts where they appear.

## THE BIBLE AND THE ART OF STORYTELLING

The biblical writers, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, used the same foundational elements as do all tellers of tales: narrative voice, character, plot, and setting. Seeing how the biblical authors have drawn on these storytelling tools can enhance our understanding of how the stories

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<sup>4</sup>Paul Bauer, "The Pilgrim's Progress," Britannica.com, [www.britannica.com/biography/John-Bunyan/Literary-activity](http://www.britannica.com/biography/John-Bunyan/Literary-activity).

<sup>5</sup>Emily Dickinson: "Tell all the truth, but tell it slant," in *The Poems of Emily Dickinson: Reading Edition* (Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1998), [www.poetryfoundation.org/poems-and-poets/poems/detail/56824](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems-and-poets/poems/detail/56824). "Tell all the truth but tell it slant. . . . The Truth must dazzle gradually / Or every man be blind."

in Scripture work, what they reveal about the divine author behind them, and how they help us interpret the texts with women in them.

Here's what I am not suggesting: that the tools we use to look at women in the biblical text somehow differ from those we use to consider texts with men in them or even the text as a whole. Rather, I am suggesting that considering the text through the grid of basic story elements will lead us to more faithful analysis and thus help us overcome some of the problems described above.

## THE ELEMENTS OF STORY

We will begin with only the simplest of definitions, because these elements are generally familiar to us:

**Story:** A specific sequence of events. The “what” of the events.

**Narrative:** That which is told. The “how” of events.

**Plot:** A sequence of events; the organization of the events, and how individual elements are interconnected.

**Characters:** The animated beings involved. These are usually people, but they can be animals, aliens, or even talking vegetables. Characters play major or minor roles.

**Setting:** The world of the story; the time, place, and environment. Setting includes the historical, cultural, and even psychological and emotional context that influences characters and plot.<sup>6</sup>

If we tell a story such as “Boy gets girls, boy loses girl, boy gets girl back again,” we have the classic narrative arc of a romantic journey. The characters are the boy and girl; and we know what happens to them in a three-part plot. Without boy and girl, though, we have no story. We have only plot: gets, loses, gets back. Similarly, without plot we simply have a boy and a girl. Plot and character work together like blades on scissors. Without both, we simply have one blade, and nothing cuts. Yet when

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<sup>6</sup>Adapted from Tanvi, “5 Key Elements of a Short Story: Essential Tips for Writers,” Paper True, 2025, [www.papertrue.com/blog/5-key-elements-of-successful-short-stories](http://www.papertrue.com/blog/5-key-elements-of-successful-short-stories).

paired, they work inseparably. The same is true of other elements. Without characters in a setting, we have landscape. The wind might blow, but we have no story. As in most stories, in the examples we will consider from Scripture that include women in the text we will see the interplay of several elements of story.

With this in mind, let's take a closer look at those elements.<sup>7</sup>

## NARRATIVE VOICE

The story has a narrator. And that narrator has a voice. The narrative voice includes the person, tone, and perspective the narrator chooses for communicating with the reader.<sup>8</sup> Part of this voice is the narrator's point of view. But there's also a point of view character, "the one through whose eyes the scene is viewed."<sup>9</sup> Some options include the first person, "I" (as seen in Neh 1; some of Acts); the second person, "you" (as in Ps 23:5-6); and the third person, "he, she" (as in Ps 24:1-4; some of Acts).

Within the third-person perspective, options include the omniscient point of view, in which the narrator knows all (Gen 1); the objective point of view, in which the narrator knows only what is observed through the senses rather than by mind reading (Ruth 2); and limited point of view, in which the narrator reads the mind of only a singular character, or one character at a time (Ruth 3:8-9).<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>For a much deeper look and the elements of story, consult these resources: Robert Alter's *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (Basic Books, 2011); *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (Basic Books, 2011); and *The Literary Guide to the Bible* (Belknap, 1990); Meir Sternberg's *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Indiana University Press, 1987); David M. Gunn and Danna Nolan Fewell's *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible* (Oxford University Press, 1993) and *Gender, Power, and Promise: The Subject of the Bible's First Story* (Abingdon, 1992); Danna Nolan Fewell's *The Oxford Handbook of Biblical Narrative* (Oxford University Press, 2016). Also, I recommend Brown's previously mentioned work, *Gospels as Stories*.

<sup>8</sup>Mike Cadden, citing Charlotte Otten and Gary Schmidt, "Voice," in *Keywords for Children's Literature*, ed. Phillip Nel and Lissa Paul (NYU Press, 2011), 225.

<sup>9</sup>Gary Yamasaki, "Point of View in a Gospel Story: What Difference Does It Make? Luke 19:1-10 as a Test Case," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 125, no. 1 (2006): 105. In the story of Jesus' interaction with Zacchaeus, Luke does something unique in scenes with Jesus in that Luke never makes Jesus the carrier of point of view. Instead, Luke crafts the scene to maintain Zacchaeus as the point-of-view character for all but a moment. As a result, because Jesus addresses his concluding promise of salvation directly to Zacchaeus, readers experience his words as if addressed directly to them.

<sup>10</sup>George Hartley, "Point of View and Narrative Voice," Ohio University Department of English.

In *The Wizard of Oz*, the narrator has a positive point of view about Glinda, the good witch. But *Wicked* retells the same story from a new point of view, one that sees the so-called wicked witch of the West, Elphaba, as the good one. By shifting point of view, the writer changes the entire plot and its interpretation.

In Genesis, the human narrator typically uses an omniscient point of view. The book begins with, “In the beginning, God” (Heb. *Elohim*, Gen 1:1). Only from an all-knowing perspective could a human author possibly report what God did before humans witnessed Elohim’s actions. One chapter later, another example of omniscient perspective appears: “So the LORD God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping,” God took one of the *adam*’s ribs “and then closed up the place with flesh” (Gen 2:21).<sup>11</sup> If the *adam* was asleep and God was the only other being present, the storyteller has only one way to describe what God was doing: to use the omniscient point of view.

Yet later in the Genesis story, when we come to Jacob’s pulled tendon, the narrator shifts point of view by introducing a “man” into the scene: “So Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him till daybreak” (Gen 32:24). Had the narrator stayed within the omniscient point of view, he would have had to reveal the full identity of the mysterious being from an omniscient perspective—spoiling the intrigue. By choosing to limit the story to Jacob’s perspective, the narrator invites readers to discover along with Jacob the identity of this being.

Doubtless for ease of reading, most English translations insert the word *man* throughout the scene (four times in Gen 32:25-28). Yet such repetition takes away from some of the narrator’s expert storytelling. The Hebrew word for “man” occurs only once. And the underlying Hebrew text uses ambiguity to reinforce the mystery about his identity. The writer goes out of his way to avoid saying “the man.” Jacob thinks his opponent is a mere human, and the reader sees the encounter with this being through Jacob’s point of view. But the repeated literary gymnastics used

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<sup>11</sup>I’m keeping the article with “the *adam*” rather than rendering it as a name, as the writer does.

to avoid describing the being as the “man” add to the suspense by hinting that this being might have more to his identity than meets the eye. Is it an angel? Is it *God*?

In this wrestling pericope, the reader knows Jacob initially thinks his partner is a human. But when the opponent injures Jacob’s hip, Jacob insists that his wrestling partner grant him a blessing. When the blessing is offered, the being pronounces a change in Jacob’s name. Readers wonder, “Who has the authority to do that?” Jacob, recognizing the supernatural power of this opponent, has an aha moment and declares, “I saw God face to face, and yet my life was spared” (Gen 32:30). Is Jacob right? Has he really seen God? The narrator of Genesis leaves readers to wonder, returning to the omniscient perspective when explaining why the Israelites didn’t eat “the tendon attached to the socket of the hip” (Gen 32:32). Due to the incorporation of the narrator’s point of view into the story, the revelation of the divine presence in the Jacob narrative dazzles gradually.<sup>12</sup>

In Song of Songs, a point-of-view shift from omniscient to limited enhances the poetry as the point-of-view character changes between the beloved and her lover. The book opens in the point of view of the female as she expresses her longing for her man with “Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth” (Song 1:2). Interestingly, in this book women’s voices comprise more than 60 percent of the text. Mention of the female protagonist, her mother, Solomon’s mother, and the daughters of Jerusalem make this book unique. Both in its abundance of female characters and in that the topic of human sexual expression is seen so much from females’ perspectives, the book stands alone in ancient Near Eastern poetry.<sup>13</sup> Song of Songs covertly corrects the idea that sex is primarily a male pleasure.

Russian playwright and short-story writer Anton Chekov, in a letter to his brother, wrote, “Avoid depicting the hero’s state of mind; you ought to

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<sup>12</sup>For an excellent in-depth look at this story, see Steve Foster, *Heelcatcher: The Story of Jacob Revisited for Those Who Are Anxious, Tired, and Struggling to Make Life Work* (n.p., 2019).

<sup>13</sup>I use “ancient Near East” as a label for the cultures of western Asia and the eastern Mediterranean, without intending a Eurocentric perspective.

try to make it clear from the hero's action."<sup>14</sup> This advice applies to villains as well. And it is exactly the approach often taken in the Old Testament. It's certainly that taken by the narrator of David's interaction with Bathsheba (2 Sam 11–12). The absence of assessment is intentional. The gap is there on purpose. But that does not mean the narrator is ambiguous in assessing David, nor that readers should be. The writer intends for readers to see the entire story only from David's point of view—his sighting of the woman, his sending of soldiers, his taking her, his having her husband killed, his less-than-subtle cover-up. Efforts to add Bathsheba's point of view miss the point, not because she is not important but because she *is*. The unequal distribution of authority, the power differential, is supposed to make readers shudder as we identify, to our horror, with the one who has gone from being a humble shepherd boy to a king abusing power.

## SETTING

A great narrative needs a terrific setting. Tatooine, home to Luke Skywalker and Obi-Wan Kenobi, is a beige, once-lush desert planet in the Star Wars franchise. Oz turns from black and white to color, but Dorothy's home has an even stronger pull than color because of the love that resides there. The four Pevensie children would have had no story without Narnia. And imagine Frodo, Samwise, or Éowyn having any sort of story without all the locations on Tolkien's maps.

While setting includes geographical space, it also includes time and background in the broadest sense, including sociological and theological characteristics of the world of the work.<sup>15</sup> Rich, poor. Faithful, apostate. Lush, barren. Ancient, future.

A narrative may take place primarily in one general location, such as the Passion of Christ in Jerusalem; or a story may include multiple locations, as in the desert wanderings of Exodus or the apostle Paul's missionary journeys.

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<sup>14</sup>Anton Chekov, "Letter to Alexandr Chekov," May 10, 1886, as cited in Brown, *Gospels as Stories*, 63.

<sup>15</sup>James Phelan et al., "Narrative Worlds: Space, Setting, Perspective," in *Narrative Theory: Core Concepts and Critical Debates*, ed. David Herman et al. (Ohio State University Press, 2012), 85.

In the world of literature, the typical Jane Austen novel features a few families living in British country mansions, at least one of which is inhabited by a strong female lead. A setting might shift from reality to fantasy—such as in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, which begins on the real outskirts of London but soon relocates to fantasyland Narnia, where animals talk. A setting may take place in time, or even a brilliant mix of times. Consider how *The Empire Strikes Back* is set in a galaxy far, far away “a long time ago” but features futuristic technologies such as light sabers.<sup>16</sup>

Sometimes a place, such as America’s Old West, so influences the narrative that the land itself becomes a character. Such is also the case with ancient Israel, Jordan, and Egypt, where God has revealed himself by making repeat appearances in the same places. We’ll see this happening in the story of the midwives in Egypt in chapter four. But by way of illustration here, consider Bethany beyond the Jordan. While many religions build altars to their gods on high places (e.g., Num 33:52; Lev 26:30; Is 16:12; 2 Kings 16:4), Yahweh has bent down to the Dead Sea and its environs over and over in the unfolding of redemption history. Following their desert wanderings, the children of Israel are ready to take Jericho, so they camp close to where the Jordan River flows into the Dead Sea. Joshua records, “Early in the morning Joshua and all the Israelites set out from Shittim and went to the Jordan, where they camped before crossing over” (Josh 3:1), about seven miles east of Jericho, the first city conquered. Tradition also places the locust-eating prophet Elijah at this location (2 Kings 2:5-11). And in the New Testament, the locust-eating John the Baptist preaches in this same wilderness, at Bethany beyond the Jordan. It’s the same place where the apostle John says John the Baptist baptized Jesus (Jn 1:28).

When I visited this site on a press junket in 2008, Armenian Christian engineer Rustom Mkhjian, who later became acting director general of the Baptism Site of Jesus Christ, met with a group of us journalists. He said his research revealed that in the centuries following the resurrection,

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<sup>16</sup>Yes, no worries, Star Wars fans. I do know I flipped the order.

many early Christian pilgrims visited this place on their way to nearby Mount Nebo (Deut 34:1; Num 27:12-14), the precipice on which Moses stood looking into the Promised Land. A spiritual connection to this place has continued for millennia, he told us. Mkhjian asked, “Why was Jesus baptized at the lowest point on earth?” With a raised eyebrow, he offered a hint. “Maybe the same reason he was born in a cave?”<sup>17</sup> This low place reveals something of the high God and how the Almighty has repeatedly—from the conquest of Jericho to the ministries of Elijah and of John the Baptist to the baptism of Jesus—condescended to bend low.

In the same way that the choice of narrative voice can communicate more than actual words, setting can communicate more than where a narrator situates a story in time or place. Peter denies the Lord three times by a charcoal fire (Jn 18:18). Later, Jesus uses a specific setting to provide Peter with a do-over intended to restore him. Three times Jesus gives Peter the opportunity to declare his love. And he does so by a charcoal fire (Jn 21:9). Through use of this concrete detail, readers see what a grace-based ministry looks like.

In her chapter in *Vindicating the Vixens*, Eva Bleeker retells Rahab's story.<sup>18</sup> Bleeker begins by pointing to a detail in the story's setting—the spies starting out from Shittim (rhymes with “a scheme”)—that the human author uses to frame the narrative. “Then Joshua son of Nun secretly sent two spies from Shittim. ‘Go, look over the land,’ he said, ‘especially Jericho.’ So they went and entered the house of a prostitute named Rahab and stayed there” (Josh 2:1).

Today most of us read this text without knowing the significance of the town. But members of the story's original listeners, upon hearing Shittim, would have squirmed. An equivalent might be to say that some leaders discreetly left the massage room on Jeffrey Epstein's island. While staying in Shittim prior to Joshua's sending of the spies, Israelite men indulged

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<sup>17</sup>Sandra Glahn, “Israel: Encounter God as Storyteller II,” *Kindred Spirit*, February 1, 2010, <https://voice.dts.edu/article/israel-encounter-god-as-storyteller-ii-sandra-l-glahn/>.

<sup>18</sup>Eva Bleeker, “Rahab: What We Talk About When We Talk About Rahab,” in *Vindicating the Vixens: Revisiting Sexualized, Vilified, and Marginalized Women of the Bible*, ed. Sandra Glahn (Kregel Academic, 2017).

“in sexual immorality with Moabite women” (Num 25:1). And God nearly wiped out these men for their apostasy.

The first detail in the Rahab narrative is Shittim, where sexual immorality happened. And the next thing readers know, the spies have arrived at the house of a professional sex worker. To make matters worse, the narrative contains multiple references with double entendre, such as the word *lodged*, which can have two meanings, like how one might use *sleeping* to refer both to sleeping with a teddy bear and sleeping with the boss.<sup>19</sup>

Yet unlike in the disastrous Shittim narrative, Rahab—the outsider in Israel’s settlement narrative—serves as a righteous foil to Israel’s spies. Consequently, she is the object of God’s mercy. Bleeker suggests that Rahab’s story shifts the narrative from one of ethnic cleansing to one of rescue for the person who believes. This approach eliminates the good guys/bad guys dichotomy by raising eyebrows over the actions of those who *should* fear Yahweh as compared with the one who *does*. Bleeker concludes, “This concept—that God is for God—confounds the insider/outsider themes as understood by the Israelites, and it makes room for Rahab within the community of faith.”<sup>20</sup> The narrator of Rahab’s story sets up a major contrast by starting with a context that would have made readers gasp—simply by using setting.

We will explore further the use of setting to communicate in the narratives about Jezebel in chapter eight and the Samaritan woman in chapter nine.

## PLOT

If setting tells where and when something happens, plot tells what and how. It’s the main story line or outline of events.<sup>21</sup> While Aristotle in *Poetics* argues that the most important element in a story is the plot—or the

<sup>19</sup>Frank Anthony Spina, *The Faith of the Outsider: Exclusion and Inclusion in the Biblical Story* (Eerdmans, 2005), 52-63, as cited in Bleeker, “Rahab,” 52.

<sup>20</sup>Bleeker, “Rahab,” 55, drawing on the work of Danna Nolan Fewell, *The Women’s Bible Commentary* (Westminster John Knox, 1992), 72.

<sup>21</sup>Kieran Egan, “What Is a Plot?,” *Literary History* 9, no. 3 (1978): 455.

structure of events—some say character matters more.<sup>22</sup> After all, plot generally requires a character or characters for something to happen to. But both character and plot are necessary for a story to work.<sup>23</sup> Plot includes how the writer arranges and connects events in a story, as well as what these events reveal.

C. S. Lewis said the Scriptures tell “a very long story, with a complicated plot.”<sup>24</sup> Indeed, the plot of the Bible provides the narrative of God, humanity, and their conflict-filled relationship, which ends with renewal. Its conflicts move the plot forward while revealing core values and beliefs of the narrative as it names the overall motivation or goal and the forces that help or hinder that goal.

The options for parties in a plot's conflict are vast. Tornadoes, storms, hurricanes, and other forces of nature can up the tension. Or the events can happen between living creatures. Consider some examples in Scripture: between God and angels or demons, such as in the fall in the Garden of Eden and in the prologue to Job (Gen 3; Job 1); between angelic beings, such as between Michael the archangel and Satan (Jude 9); and between humans and supernatural beings, such as in the appearance of Gabriel to Mary (Lk 1).

Conflict also happens between humans. Their battles may be good versus evil, as with Abel and Cain (Gen 4) or Hannah and Peninnah (1 Sam 1:6); evil versus evil, as with the Arameans and King Ahab (1 Kings 22); or even between the righteous—such as the tension between Paul and Barnabas (Acts 15:39) or Euodia and Syntyche (Phil 4:2). Conflict also happens between groups of humans, such as Israel and the Philistines (1 Sam 17:1-58.); the Pharisees, Sadducees, and Jesus (see Mt 22); or the world's armies in the final battle (Rev 16:14).

Aristotle also famously said that the whole is that which has a beginning, middle, and end.<sup>25</sup> Many have summarized such a beginning-middle-end

<sup>22</sup>Aristotle, *Poetics* 6.20; Dorothy Allison, “Reviewed Work: *An Atomic Romance* by Bobbie Ann Mason,” *The Women's Review of Books* 23, no. 1 (2006): 6.

<sup>23</sup>Julian Murphet, “Character and Event,” *SubStance* 36, no. 2 (2007): 106.

<sup>24</sup>C. S. Lewis, *Miracles: A Preliminary Study* (HarperCollins, 2001), 158.

<sup>25</sup>Aristotle, *Poetics* 7.25.

storytelling structure as “act 1, act 2, act 3.”<sup>26</sup> Using Aristotle’s structure, one might summarize the Bible as creation, fall, restoration. Yet when we shoehorn the story of Scripture into such a three-part summary, we must do so with an awareness of the structure’s weakness. Such an approach makes the second plot point in Scripture begin in the third chapter of the book (Gen 3) and makes restoration happen in the final two chapters (Rev 20–21). That leaves 1,187 chapters in the rebellion section. Also, such an approach fails to account for the fact that most of Scripture is devoted to the story of God’s people—from the promise of hope after the fall, to the call of Abraham, to Messiah, to the crucifixion and resurrection, to the church, through the apocalypse before we get to restoration. Certainly, one can see a beginning, middle, and end in the Bible’s grand narrative, but we must use such a summary with awareness that the elements do not fall into sections of approximately equal length. Yet despite the weaknesses in summarizing, the Bible has a story line, and even the exercise of seeking to summarize it can help bring clarity about its message.

Something else to bear in mind, though: Aristotle’s three-point linear narrative differs from how many people groups tell stories.<sup>27</sup> He was writing in fourth-century BC Greece, while the stories recorded in the Old Testament were crafted orally many centuries earlier in the Levant. If one considers the structure of Genesis, for example, the story does not divide easily into a three-part narrative. After the creation, the fall of humanity, the promise of Messiah, the murder of Abel, the great flood, the tower of Babel, the call of Abraham, and tracing the messianic promise

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<sup>26</sup>A marketing expert referencing Aristotle and the classic boy-meets-girl example wrote, “While linear storytelling is not going away entirely anytime soon, it is no longer the single solution and, put plainly, it is not enough anymore.” He cites Instagram stories, data visualizations, scrolling through hashtags on Twitter, and phone games as examples. Ethan McCarty, “The End of Linear Storytelling: The #Thumbstopping Story of Our Digital Future or Trading Catharsis for Engagement,” Institute for Public Relations website, July 1, 2019, <https://instituteforpr.org/the-end-of-linear-storytelling-the-thumbstopping-story-of-our-digital-future-or-trading-catharsis-for-engagement>.

<sup>27</sup>Some storytellers today note, “No one experiences life as a written, linear, expository narrative; why should we be confined to presenting it as such?” Ruth M. Van Dyke and Reinhard Bernbeck, “Alternative Narratives and the Ethics of Representation: An Introduction,” in *Subjects and Narratives in Archaeology*, ed. Ruth M. Van Dyke and Reinhard Bernbeck (University of Chicago Press, 2015), 1-26.

through his and Sarah's progeny, the story pauses at Judah and takes an excursion to Egypt. There it follows the events in the life of Joseph. The narrator focuses on Joseph's story for fourteen chapters (Gen 37–50). It's easy to lose sight of how the storyteller is tracing the sovereign protection of the messianic line because the mere length of Joseph's narrative takes up more space than all the vignettes devoted to Judah combined. Yet Judah is the one through whom God's promises to rescue humanity see their fulfillment. Judah's is the line God is preserving.

Also, sometimes in Scripture a narrative appears in chiastic structure. Chiasm (or chiasmus) is a literary device that involves the repetition of ideas in inverted order:

A  
 B  
 C  
 B'  
 A'

A chiasm follows the above structure, repeating phrases or even over the course of multiple chapters. Here's an example of a sentence that follows a chiastic structure:

You can take the boy  
 out of  
 the country, but the country  
 out of  
 the boy you can't take.

Sometimes entire books follow a chiastic structure. An example of a biblical story with a chiastic structure is the narrative in which two and a half tribes of Israel have returned to their own land and built an altar like the one in the tabernacle (Josh 22:9-34). When the rest of the tribes learn of this development, they misinterpret the actions of their relatives and

prepare to wage war. They send a delegation to ask why their kin have turned from their God. The reply reveals that this group has been misunderstood—that the two and a half tribes have remained faithful by building a memorial as a sign of their unity with their relatives.<sup>28</sup> The entire pericope follows a structure that emphasizes the judicial dialogue:

A: Transjordan tribes depart and build an altar (Josh 22:9-10)

B: Other tribes grow angry and prepare for war (Josh 22:11-12)

C: Phinehas and leaders confront Transjordan tribes (Josh 22:13-15)

D: Accusations of rebellion and treachery made (Josh 22:16-20)

E: Transjordan tribes explain their reasons (Josh 22:21-29)

D': Accusation of rebellion is refuted (Josh 22:26-29)

C': Phinehas and leaders are satisfied (Josh 22:30-31)

B': Other tribes are appeased (Josh 22:32-33)

A': The altar serves as a witness (Josh 22:34)

The pivot point (E) serves as the point of emphasis: the explanation by the Transjordan tribes about their good purpose in erecting the altar (Josh 22:21-29). Framed by the accusations of rebellion and their refutation, the explanation reveals the heart of the conflict and its resolution.

While Aristotle's is the most followed plot structure in the West, it is not always ideal for assessing Scripture. In the past century, the literature of James Joyce, jazz music, and interactive games, as well as social media such as Facebook story options, have made nonlinear plots more familiar to Western users.<sup>29</sup>

Having noted the possibility of different plot structures, it is also worth pointing out that knowing when a plot is *not* present is as important as knowing when one is. Those looking for a beginning-middle-end

<sup>28</sup>Galy Dinnur, "The Design of the Dialogue in the Story of the Altar of the Two-and-a-Half Tribes (Joshua 22:9-34)," *Beit Mikra* 53, no. 2 (2008): 89-122.

<sup>29</sup>Celia Pearce, "The Ins and Outs of Non-Linear Storytelling," *Computer Graphics* 28, no. 2 (1994): 100.

structure to Song of Solomon, for example, have seen in this book a linear chronology of dating/courtship, wedding day, postmarriage.<sup>30</sup> Yet dating was not part of an unmarried couple's life in Solomon's world, and dating is still not part of courtship rituals in much of the world. To see Song of Solomon as a poetic chiasm is to see it less as a Western story and more in line with the poetry of the ancient Near East.<sup>31</sup>

Another element of plot is the strategic placement of a story. An example from the New Testament is the story of the woman with the issue of blood. The main character in this pericope has endured menstrual bleeding for twelve years.<sup>32</sup> The storyteller sandwiches her story around one about Jairus's dying twelve-year-old daughter (Mt 9:20-22; Mk 5:24-34; Lk 8:42-48). The detail of twelve years must be important to the narrator. Both are female; both are considered unclean (one related to bleeding, one related to death); both are restored by the sense of touch; both are called "daughter"; and both show Jesus has supernatural power. The embedding of the one story (bleeding "daughter") within the other (death of a daughter) serves a literary function in the plot, designed to reveal who Jesus is.

Sometimes in the Scriptures, older stories frame new ones. The New Testament story of Jesus raising the son of the widow of Nain (Lk 7:11-17) parallels an Old Testament story featuring Elijah and the widow of Zarephath. The Old Testament Babylon, carrying Israel off into exile, reappears as Babylon the Great, who meets a fitting end in the Apocalypse.

## CHARACTERIZATION

If plot tells the what and how of a story, characterization reveals the who. Creating believable, compelling characters with whom readers identify is

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<sup>30</sup>One example is Tommy Nelson's study *Song of Solomon Classic Study Guide: A Study on Love, Marriage, Sex, and Romance* (Hudson, 2008), which addresses "the art of attraction, dating, courtship, intimacy, conflict, romance, and commitment." For a more thorough treatment of chiasm vs. narrative in Song of Solomon, see Sandra Glahn, *Solomon Latte* (AMG, 2006).

<sup>31</sup>John H. Stek, "The Stylistics of Hebrew Poetry," *Calvin Theological Journal* 9, no. 1 (1974): 24.

<sup>32</sup>Not "hemorrhaging" for twelve years (as in NASB, NABRE, RSV, NRSV, NET). Such a word choice demonstrates the need for diverse eyes on the text, including both women and medical doctors.

yet another of the storyteller's devices. The toolbox for doing so includes both explicit attributions of characteristics and implicit attributes from which readers can make deductions.<sup>33</sup> Audiences have long criticized Christian publishing houses for offering books populated by plastic, one-dimensional characters.<sup>34</sup> But that dynamic has changed much due to publishers' growing insistence on works with complex characters.<sup>35</sup> The biblical storytellers, however, never required such a course correction. Their characters have been marked by flaws from the beginning, starting with Adam and Eve.

Stephen King, in his memoir *On Writing*, describes how he creates complex evil characters. Using the example of Annie Wilkes, a nurse who holds a victim hostage in *Misery*, King writes, "If I am able, even briefly, to give you a Wilkes'-eye-view of the world—if I can make you understand her madness—then perhaps I can make her someone you sympathize with or even identify with."<sup>36</sup> The result? Wilkes becomes even more frightening to readers as they find parts of themselves in her.

To put the concept of such identification in theological terms, the villain becomes more chilling when the reader sees in the villain a glimpse of the image of God while identifying with the character's depravity. Doing so makes the character in question more like the reader than other. And having identified with something in the character, the reader is more drawn in, even if horrified.

Conversely, King advises using imperfections to make good characters believable. And reflecting on how the Bible presents its characters, we see that the narrators have made many characters believable by presenting them as complex, warts and all. Peter is spirited but impulsive—as Malchus, whose ear Peter cut off, could testify (Mt 26:51). Thomas doubts (Jn 20:27). Moses lashes out in anger (Num 20:11). King David sends

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<sup>33</sup>Koen De Temmerman, "Hermeneutical Tool for the Analysis of Characterization in Narrative Literature," *Rhetorica: A Journal of the History of Rhetoric* 28, no. 1 (2010): 28.

<sup>34</sup>Gene Veith Jr., *Reading Between the Lines: A Christian Guide to Literature* (Crossway, 2013), 74.

<sup>35</sup>Monique El-Faizy, *God and Country: How Evangelicals Have Become America's New Mainstream* (Bloomsbury, 2008), 21.

<sup>36</sup>Stephen King, *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft* (Pocket Books, 2000), 191.

officials and takes Bathsheba. Then he has one of his valiant warriors killed to keep himself from being exposed (2 Sam 11). In fact, after reviewing the list of people mentioned in Hebrews 11, often described as “the faith chapter,” we might conclude that, with few exceptions, Hebrews 11 could just as easily be labeled “the foul-up chapter.” Rahab appears—with the writer reminding readers she was “the prostitute Rahab” (Heb 11:31). In fact, instead of choosing the most honorable women from Judges, such as Deborah, Samson’s mother, or Jephthah’s daughter, all of whom the text portrays positively, the writer names less stellar characters: “Barak, Samson and Jephthah” (Heb 11:32).

In this Hall of Fame, one finds former murderers, liars, and a professional sex worker. Visibly missing are Daniel, Mary of Bethany, and Mary and Joseph—some of the rare essential characters presented without major flaws. It’s almost as if the writer purposely includes characters with known weaknesses who please God by faith. This focus should give every reader hope. L’Engle observed that God continually chooses the most unqualified. She reasons, “If we are qualified, we tend to think that we have done the job ourselves. If we are forced to accept our evident lack of qualifications, then there’s no danger that we will confuse God’s work with our own, or God’s glory with our own.”<sup>37</sup>

Considering how Jesus is presented in the New Testament, even the perfect man is unpredictable—and thus more compelling. Cracking a whip and overturning tables in a temple seems a flawed way to win friends and influence people (Mt 21:12-17). Readers also find Jesus praying in the Garden of Gethsemane that, if possible, God might let the cup of suffering pass (Mt 26:39). Of this event King writes, “Sometimes the good guy tries to turn away from the right thing . . . as Jesus Christ himself did, if you think about that prayer (‘take this cup from my lips’) in the Garden of Gethsemane.”<sup>38</sup> One might add that the ideal man also gave biting rebukes with accusations such as, “On the outside you got cleaned up, but inside you stink like a coffin” (paraphrase of Mt 23:27).

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<sup>37</sup>Madeleine L’Engle, *Walking on Water: Reflections on Faith and Art* (WaterBrook, 2001), 70.

<sup>38</sup>King, *On Writing*, 195.

In previous decades when fiction writers gave faith-filled characters fewer, if any, flaws, the Christians in such stories were among the most boring, least believable characters. That made them the ones with whom readers least identified. Yet the biblical authors took a different approach. They show the brokenness—like how God chose Peter, a disciple who denied Jesus three times (Lk 22:59-62).

Characters may include protagonists and antagonists, heroes and anti-heroes. But the protagonist in the Bible's overarching story is God, even if God remains at times unnamed or even silent.<sup>39</sup>

***Naming and not naming in the Bible.*** Because the Lord of visible mortals is himself invisible, his character is revealed through actions. In Esther, for example, we never read God's name, but we can trace the Sovereign's hand in events. Just as naming is part of the narrator's craft, so is leaving out names. In the literary world, *Invisible Man* and *The Road* come to mind as having protagonists who are never named. In leaving out names, perhaps Ralph Ellison and Cormac McCarthy were making a point about social invisibility or emphasizing universal themes, such as the human struggle for survival. We see namelessness used to both purposes in the Bible.

Of course, the absence of a character name may simply indicate a person is only a member of the supporting cast. "Hesitate to name minor characters." I heard this advice on multiple occasions in the decade of my life when I was writing medical suspense novels. And the recommendation served me well. Leave out the name of a plane's pilot unless readers will need to remember that person. Someone who greets the protagonist in an elevator or merely passes by her at a pool—if that character will serve no other purpose in the narrative, novelists do well to describe them according to their vocation or role rather than by name. If a waiter introduces herself as Nikki but only brings a bowl of ravioli on page 104 and never appears again, we can keep her name out.

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<sup>39</sup>Marina Warner, "The Divine Protagonist," *The Washington Post*, April 30, 1995; Roland Mushat Fryep, ed., *The Reader's Bible, a Narrative: Selections from the King James Version* (Princeton University Press, 1977), xviii.

In using this tool of the craft, the narrator helps readers know which characters should receive their attention. That is, unless the author wants a minor character to serve as a red herring. Otherwise, naming a minor character requires readers to hold on to too much meaningless information.

In the Bible, as a rabbi explains, keeping names out is partly a literary tool and partly “because of the Bible’s compact and terse style.” That terseness, he says, “can alert us to the importance of a character by the very fact that the Bible bothers to give us his or her name.”<sup>40</sup>

Yet this is not to say that when a minor character *is* named it calls for a *Prayer of Jabez*-sized press campaign.<sup>41</sup> An author might have other reasons to identify a minor character by name. One reason is that the minor character is related to a main character, particularly a parent, or—to be more exact—a father. We learn that Manoah is the father of Samson (Judg 13:2), and Joash is the father of Gideon (Judg 6:11).<sup>42</sup> These are biblical conventions. Hannah is named alongside her husband, Elkanah (1 Sam 1:1). Thus, we should take notice when the narrator veers from the norm. We will see this when we meet Moses’ family in chapter four.

Sometimes keeping characters nameless is the narrator’s way to avoid honoring them in a context in which names matter. In the book of Ruth, the only unnamed action character is the *ploni almoni*, the John Doe, who walks away from the opportunity to serve as a kinsman-redeemer for the widows Ruth and Naomi (Ruth 4:1). The narrator’s decision to refer to him with a singsong version of “Mr. So-and-so” is both intentional and negative, keeping his name out of the narrative to avoid honoring for posterity a man who acted only in self-interest. The one man in the story too concerned about keeping his good name to act in compassion is the only one whose name gets forgotten. Meanwhile, the women in the story and the man with whom they partner to do good all receive honor for

<sup>40</sup>Francis Nataf, “Shemot’s Missing Names,” *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 45, no. 3 (2017): 193, <https://jbnqnew.jewishbible.org/jbnq-past-issues/2017/453/shemots-missing-names>.

<sup>41</sup>*The Prayer of Jabez*, released in 2000 by Bruce Wilkinson with Multnomah Books, popularized the short prayer found in the NKJV rendering of 1 Chron 4:10, “Oh, that you would bless me and enlarge my territory! Let your hand be with me, and keep me from harm so that I will be free from pain.” The book sold more than nine million copies.

<sup>42</sup>Nataf, “Shemot’s Missing Names,” 193.

their selflessness. We still know the names Ruth, Naomi, and Boaz. And at the end of the book, we read the names of their descendants to the tenth generation.

The cultural context for Bible stories is patriarchal. So as compared with narratives crafted today, we should expect to find fewer women in the text. Yet we should not assume from the relatively rare mention of women in some texts that God condones contexts, systems, dynamics, and/or cultural practices in which the characters' experiences occur. As Jewish scholar Tikva Frymer-Kensky puts it, "Biblical Israel did not invent patriarchy. It was not even the most intense or thorough patriarchy in the ancient world. . . . Readers can accept the Bible's moral stature without conforming to the patriarchal social structure within it. At the same time, there is no ignoring the fact that even though the Bible did not create patriarchy, it also did not eliminate it." Nevertheless, "the Bible also does not defend the status quo, for the idea of social revolution is integral to biblical thought."<sup>43</sup>

Some writers take a more critical approach. As Israeli Jewish scholar Esther Fuchs writes, "By presenting women as either mother- or wife-figures, as sisters and as daughters, they [the biblical narrators] contain women within familial boundaries."<sup>44</sup> And some readers do think women in the text are nameless as a result of a narrator's sexism. It is true that people and social structures with power do tend to mute certain groups, even if unintentionally.<sup>45</sup> And the choice to omit names can sometimes be a way to erase people—as the Mr. So-and-so from Ruth demonstrates (Ruth 4:1). We begin, therefore, by acknowledging that names are important. And so are voices. Nevertheless, their absence does not necessarily stem from a narrator's prejudice or blindness. Reading with such an assumption can cause readers to miss important literary details that

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<sup>43</sup>Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible* (Schocken Books, 2002), xiv-xv.

<sup>44</sup>Esther Fuchs, "A Jewish Feminist Reading of Exodus 1–2," in *Jews, Christians, and the Theology of the Hebrew Scriptures*, ed. Alice Ogden Bellis and Joel S. Kaminsky (Society of Biblical Literature, 2000), 317.

<sup>45</sup>British cultural anthropologist Edwin Ardener coined the phrase "muted group theory" to provide a label for this phenomenon, initially exploring the concept in the 1970s.

sometimes even *challenge* sexism. Indeed, at times the story crafter is using the very namelessness of a character to critique a social context.

All of this to say that a not-to-be-missed detail is how the narrator uses names.

***Namelessness as indictment.*** An example of namelessness as indictment occurs in the closing chapters of Judges (Judg 19–21). The narrator omits the name of the concubine whom the men of Gibeah gang-rape. The writer keeps her nameless and voiceless as part of underscoring how far the nation has fallen.

We trace this fall from the first chapter of Judges, where we see Caleb's daughter, Achsah, dismounting her donkey. She approaches her father, and (in words that foreshadow Jesus in Cana asking literally, "What to me to you, woman?" [Jn 2:4]) Achsah hears her father's question, "What can I do for you?" (Judg 1:14). She asks for land with water on it. So her father gives her an inheritance of prime real estate (Judg 1:15). In a world in which the father arranges marriages, he also pairs her with his best warrior and land with springs (Judg 1:12). Continuing along in the same book, readers encounter positive portrayals of Deborah the prophet-judge and Jael the head spiker (Judg 4–5).

Yet by the time readers reach the last chapters, the nation has spiraled so deeply into depravity that a nameless concubine gets raped, murdered, and dismembered, and her body parts distributed throughout the land. Mass slayings of countrymen and kidnappings of women follow. And the perpetrators here are not some false god-worshipping Canaanites; they're members of the tribe of Benjamin! No longer is the enemy the oppressor. God's own people terrorize each other, leading to civil war.

The decline in the treatment of women provides an index of social pathology. The nation has reached rock bottom, revealed most glaringly in how they treat those with the least social power. That a woman they victimize leaves no recorded speech and remains nameless makes the narrator's point. The men treat her as nothing—to their shame. And the narrative closes with the refrain repeated throughout: "In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as they saw fit" (Judg 21:25). Sometimes

the absence of names makes a point more sharply than their presence would. Sometimes the silence is the indictment.

***Namelessness to preserve honor.*** A narrator might keep a name out of a story for the opposite reason, though—to preserve honor. Mark the Gospel writer uses the literary device of leaving good women unnamed to avoid their guilt-by-association with men he has portrayed negatively. Carey observes how Mark depicts Jesus’ twelve disciples negatively as “leav[ing] behind them a string of empty promises.” Meanwhile, Mark shows anonymous speechless women as those “whose actions demonstrate faithful discipleship worthy of emulation and remembrance—such as we have seen in the anointing woman at Bethany and the women near the cross and the tomb.”<sup>46</sup> The anonymity of these women showing faith and extravagant love models how the ideal disciple should live.

Luke does something similar in his description of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus (Lk 24:13-35). Many have suggested, probably correctly, that the unnamed person walking with Clopas is his wife. John places her in Jerusalem at the time of the Passover, from which Clopas is said to be returning (Jn 19:25).<sup>47</sup> It only makes sense the couple would make the fifteen-mile round trip to and from Passover together. So why not name her?

Keeping her anonymous fits with Luke’s storytelling plan. Clopas and his travel partner “are not joyful but are disappointed and confused, not knowing what to make of the women’s testimony or the reality of the empty tomb.” Luke has been showing how the male disciples “do not ‘see’ Jesus for who he is even when he is in their presence, while the women believe, go and tell before having seen the risen Jesus at all.”<sup>48</sup> Thus, to name a female in a context where Jesus is rebuking these two people for being “foolish and slow of heart to believe” (Lk 24:25) would undermine

<sup>46</sup>Holly J. Carey, *Women Who Do: Female Disciples in the Gospels* (Eerdmans, 2023), 71.

<sup>47</sup>Victoria Emily Jones, “The Unnamed Emmaus Disciple: Mary, Wife of Cleopas?,” *Art and Theology* (blog), April 28, 2017, <https://artandtheology.org/2017/04/28/the-unnamed-emmaus-disciple-mary-wife-of-cleopas>. Jones cites N. T. Wright, James Montgomery Boice, Jim Cole-Rous, and Wayne Grudem as people who hold this view.

<sup>48</sup>Carey, *Women Who Do*, 127.

what Luke has been emphasizing in his storytelling. He has been casting women in a positive light as he highlights the faith of those lacking social power. To name Clopas's wife here would undermine his own argument.

Similarly, Matthew provides the genealogy of Jesus from Abraham to David, including select women in an otherwise all-male cast. Yet when referring to the mother of Solomon, rather than listing her by her name, Bathsheba, Matthew refers to her only as the one who “had been Uriah's wife” (Mt 1:6). It might seem he is dishonoring Bathsheba, but Matthew is preserving her from dishonor as he reminds readers of David's evil.

The author of *Mothers on the Margin?* explains. In her book on the significance of women in Matthew's genealogy, E. Anne Clements notes that Matthew includes Bathsheba by drawing on the narrative in which David takes Bathsheba (2 Sam 11–12) rather than the story in which Bathsheba secures the crown for Solomon (1 Kings 1–2). And just as 2 Samuel records David's abuse of power, so Matthew reminds the reader of Solomon's history: namely, that his mother was violated; his father, David, murdered her first husband; and his older brother died. Matthew lays out Jesus' genealogy as three epochs of fourteen generations, with “the wife of Uriah” beginning the second epoch. Doing so places her chronologically at the point at which the kingdom starts to falter. Matthew's reference to Bathsheba as “the wife of Uriah” draws attention to the consequences for David and others who exploited people and misused positions of power.<sup>49</sup>

Sometimes we have negatively interpreted a narrator's choice to avoid naming women in contexts where women do serve as key actors. We might assume some narrators refrain from naming key females because of a patriarchal mindset, but it's worth digging more deeply to see whether the absence of names might be a literary convention.

## CONCLUSION

In addition to being Holy Scripture, the Bible is an enduring work of world literature. And through better understanding the literary tools its writers

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<sup>49</sup>E. Anne Clements devotes an entire chapter to “the wife of Uriah” in *Mothers on the Margin?* (Woodland, 2014).

used to craft it, readers can more accurately trace lines in a forensic sketch that show the Creator. The immortal, invisible, only wise God is revealed through the vehicles of narrative voice, setting, plot, and characterization—all of which, rather than falling into disparate categories, intertwine. A character's actions form a plot. A setting such as the Promised Land may function as a character. Or we might need to know the setting before we can talk about the characters in their contexts. But through considering both what the story is and the elements used to craft it, readers of the biblical text can gain a greater understanding of its Creator and his grand plan for his male and female image bearers. In the process, we can spot women we have missed, clear up misunderstandings, reinterpret those wrongly vilified, place women back in the stories where they appear, and ultimately recover a clearer picture of the God behind the scenes.



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