

Part 3 Biblical Storytelling

Boomershine

The Episode

The basic hypothesis is that Biblical stories are composed of a series of small units, which can be called episodes. The episode is composed of two, three, and, occasionally, four sentences. The sentences can be of virtually any length from one word to more than forty. The episodes of a particular story often tend to have the same number of sentences. But many stories are composed of a combination of two and three sentence episodes. In this case, the two sentence episodes tend to occur at the beginning and end of the story.

The episode usually has a clearly marked beginning and ending. Characteristic features of episode beginnings are: a description of time or place, a new character, an expanded description of a person or event, and verbal parallelism with the beginning or ending of other episodes in the story. Episodes often end with sentences that are either very short or very long in comparison with other sentences in the story. As with episode beginnings, so also episode endings are often marked by parallelism with other episode beginnings and endings.

The content of an episode is a unified part of a larger event or speech. The episodes of speeches tend to treat a particular theme or topic while the episodes of stories describe an aspect or moment of the event. The episode is, therefore, a chunk of the story which can be remembered as a single piece. A Biblical story is built by connecting a series of episodes which function as modules or building blocks. The individual stories are then tied together to form longer stories such as the stories of Abraham, the exodus, the reign of Saul, and the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Thus, the episodes of Biblical stories can function as the episodic mnemonic structure for the storage and retrieval of the stories from long-term memory.

The Verbal Thread

The episodes are tied together by verbal connections which link the episodes to one another. A verbal thread is a repetition or variation of two or more words. It is then a repetition of sounds which are either identical or similar. A verbal thread is often the verbal component of parallelism between sentences in an episode or a story. Verbal threads have several patterns or functions which can be more specifically identified.

Quotations - One type of verbal thread is a quotation of either an earlier statement in the narrative or some phrase from earlier in the tradition. Stories in the Gospels, for example, frequently quote phrases from the Old Testament, which was their Scripture.

Phrases - The most frequent verbal thread is the repetition of two or more key words from an earlier statement in the story. This kind of verbal thread generally

provides the connections between the major motifs of the longer stories in the tradition. Thus, the motifs of the hardening of Pharaoh's heart, the murmuring of the people of Israel, and the announcement and fulfillment of the passion prophecies are structural elements in the Biblical narratives in which they occur.

Key Words - Occasionally, a key word can function as a verbal thread by establishing a connection with an earlier element in the story. In the Gospel narratives, for example, the name, Christ, links the story with the traditions of the anointed ones of Israel such as David and Saul and with the major events of the narrative itself (Peter's confession, the trial before the Sanhedrin, etc.).

Structural Verbal Threads - In some instances, the verbal threads in a later story are connected with phrases drawn from the beginning to the end of an earlier story. Such a series of verbal threads weaves a structural link between the two stories. Thus, Mark's story of the preparations for Passover (14:12-16) has structural connections with the preparations for the triumphal entry (11:1-6) and with the preparations for the first Passover (Ex. 12:21-28). Also the story of Elisha raising the son of the Shunnamite woman (2 Kings 4:8-37) has extensive structural connections with the story of Elijah and the widow of Zarephath (I Kings 17:8-24).

Thus, the identification of the episodes and verbal threads of a Biblical story can make it easier to store and retrieve the story from long-term memory. How then does one identify these structures in a Biblical narrative? When available, a story which has been analyzed and printed in episodic units is the easiest way. And, as noted above, an initial analysis of some Biblical narratives is outlined in Appendix I. However, this work has only begun and will not be completed for some time. With many Biblical stories, therefore, it will be necessary to do the analysis yourself. And, while there are complexities which cannot be easily resolved in many stories, the basic characteristics are relatively simple and can be recognized easily.

We will analyze a section of the Yahwist's creation story (Gen. 3:1-13) and of Mark's passion narrative (Mark 14:66-72) using the RSV translation. I would recommend that you do your own hypothetical analysis before reading the analysis here. If you do, I would suggest the following process: 1) read the story aloud and underline any verbal threads or repeated elements in the story; 2) mark characteristic episode beginnings and endings such as descriptions of time and place, a new theme or character; 3) make a decision about the episodes of the story and mark them. If you do not, please look at a typical Biblical text while reading the analysis. A text of each story arranged in episodes and with the verbal threads underlined and connected will follow a brief summary of the major episodic and semantic connections.

The Genesis story has several clear marks of episode beginnings. The serpent is introduced as a new character (3:1) and the Lord God is reintroduced into the story after the eating of the fruit (3:8). The description of the woman's examination of the fruit describes a new time in the story (3:6) as does the introduction of the Lord God walking "in the cool of the day." (3:8) The beginnings of

the conversation episodes are clearly indicated by the parallelism in each conversation. The first is begun by the serpent and the second by the Lord God. Thus, the episode beginnings, other than those which introduce the new characters, are the statements of the serpent and the Lord God (3:4; 11; 13).

The verbal threads tie the episodes together. Only a few of the many can be pointed out. The first episode is tied together by the phrase "you shall not eat of...tree...of the garden"(3:1-3). The first episode is connected to the second by the antithetical parallelism: "lest you die/you will not die." The endings of the second and third episodes are also in antithetical parallelism: "...your eyes will be opened and you will be like God, knowing good and evil"(3:5)/"the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked" (3:7). The endings of the last episodes are connected by the same words, "I ate"(3:12-13).

Thus, the story written in episodes would be as follows:

Now the serpent was more subtle than any other wild creature that the Lord God had made.

He said to the woman, "Did God say, 'You shall not eat of any tree of the garden?'"

And the woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees of the garden; but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.

But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not die.

For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."

So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, and he ate.

Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves aprons.

And they heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden.

But the Lord God called the man, and said to him, "Where are you?"

And he said, "I heard the sound of thee in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself."

He said, "Who told you that you were naked?"

Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?"

The man said, "The woman whom thou gavest to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate."

Then the Lord God said to the woman, "What is this that you have done?" The woman said, "The serpent beguiled me, and I ate." (Gen 3:1-13)

The story of Peter's denial has similar marks of episode beginnings and endings. The descriptions of time and place occur in the naming of the courtyard (14:66), the gateway (14:68b), "after a little while" (14:70b) and the crowing of the cock "immediately" (14:72). The new characters who are introduced are the maid (14:66), the bystanders (14:69, 70b), and the cock (14:72). As can be seen, there are conflicting marks of episode beginnings in the second episode, with both a new place and a new character, "the bystanders," begin described. But, in the context of the synonymous parallelism between the endings of the first two episodes, "he denied it" (14:68, 70), the second episode clearly begins with Peter going out into the gateway. The other verbal threads are also easily identified: the maid and "one of them" (14:69,70). Furthermore, the last episode has a major verbal thread which connects the end of this story with Jesus' prophecy of Peter's denial earlier in the story: "Truly, I say to you, this very night, before the cock crows twice, you will deny me three times" (14:30) •

Thus, the story of Peter's denial in episodes:

And as Peter was below in the courtyard, one of the maids of the high priest came; and seeing Peter warming himself, she looked at him, and said, "You also were with the Nazarene, Jesus."

But he denied it, saying, "I neither know nor understand what you mean."

And he went out into the gateway.

And the maid saw him, and began again to say to the bystanders, "This man is one of them."

But again he denied it.

And after a little while again the bystanders said to peter, "Certainly you are one of them; for you are a Galilean."

But he began to invoke a curse on himself and to swear, "I do not know this man of whom you speak."

And immediately the cock crowed a second time.

And Peter remembered how Jesus had said to him, "Before the cock crows twice, you will deny me three times."

And he broke down and wept. (Mark 14:66-72)

The content of the episodes follows the basic sequence of events: the three denials and Peter's response. In the Genesis story, the same is true. The episodes describe the serpent's question, the serpent's challenge, the eating of the fruit, the Lord God's arrival, and his questioning of the man and the woman. The structure of the episodes, therefore, can be retrieved by remembering the sequence of events. And the verbal threads provide a series of semantic associations that reinforce and enrich the connections between the episodes.

Of course, the episodes of most Biblical stories are more difficult to identify than these. And disagreements about the episodes of specific stories will undoubtedly continue and even increase. But, regardless of whether the analysis is right or wrong at some particular point, doing the division into episodes and identifying the verbal threads will make it easier to learn the stories.

The basic steps in memorizing a Biblical story are implicit in this analysis of the correlation between the structure of memory and the structure of Biblical stories.

1) Hear the story. This can be done either by reading it aloud, repeating it back to someone else, or making a tape recording. It is imperative that the sensory register for sound in the brain be activated.

2) Listen for, identify, and master the structure of the story. There are various ways of doing this: making an outline, writing out the text in episodes, repeating the story in word groups, sentences, and episodes. It is essential to avoid trying to memorize the story as a series of individual words and to concentrate instead on the structural elements of the story which provide the framework for storage and retrieval from long term memory. Once the structure is in mind, the particular words of the story can be chunked in relation to the structure. This is reinforced by rehearsal. The story needs to be repeated several times, perhaps taking it up a sentence, an episode, or several parallel episodes at a time.

3) Tell the story. As soon as possible, the story should be told to someone else. Even if it does not go well and parts of the story are forgotten, the telling reinforces the memory and builds a new set of associations from the response of the listener. It is often helpful to invite someone who is hearing a Biblical story told for the first time to refresh your memory.

This outline reflects one of the oldest and most widely known educational processes in the history of education. It has been known for thousands of years that the best way to learn to recite something from memory is to hear it, to study it, to

learn it by intelligent repetition, and then to tell it. Thus, until this century, the meetings of a school class were called "recitations."

A basic question in relation to the memorization of Biblical stories is the question of accuracy. To what degree is it important to learn the story word-for-word? Or is it all right to learn the general structure of the story and then improvise it anew each time it is told? In general, the manner in which a Biblical story is told depends on the setting. If the story is a Scripture lesson in public worship, it is important that the story be told virtually word for word. But, if the story is being told in the context of a sermon, a lecture, or an informal gathering, then improvisation is often fully appropriate. However, the process of improvisation in storytelling is like improvisation in jazz. It is only possible to improvise well after mastering the song. Improvising requires prior mastery. The same is true of Biblical storytelling. In the absence of thorough mastery, the story will be poorly told and central elements will be forgotten.

But, in the present age of multiple translations, it is no longer essential that the words of the stories be a verbatim repetition of a text. If one were perhaps going to recite the Greek or the Hebrew text, a verbatim retelling might be an appropriate goal. For most purposes, a telling of Biblical stories that makes a serious attempt to be faithful to the story itself is fully appropriate. A general guideline for the initial stages of learning a story is to aim for 75% to 85% verbal accuracy, without either omitting or adding anything of major importance. After careful memorization, however, it is my opinion that improvisation and adaptation of the story to each new telling is part of the life of storytelling.

Memorizing stories is an unfamiliar process for us. And most people initially resist or are, at least, anxious about trying. But people have remarkable capabilities to remember the stories when they learn them in a manner that corresponds to the way human memories work. Most people are amazed at both how easy it is to memorize the stories and at how well they remember them. And, once the story is thoroughly internalized, it is a permanent, long-term source for the life of the spirit and for sharing with others.

Exploring a Biblical Story as a Story

The process of bringing a Biblical story to life as a story involves the transformation of the marks on the page into a story that is told. In this sense, storytelling is a resurrection of the Biblical narratives from the captivity of writing to a new life as a living story. A natural step in this process is to study the story in its original context to discover its meaning then.

Theoretically, all the resources of historical critical study of the Scriptures are a resource for this exploration. Dictionaries, commentaries and monographs provide basic information about the background of the stories, the history of the period and of the traditions themselves, and the guiding concepts of the communities and individuals who created and edited the stories. Lexicons and concordances make it

possible to clarify the meaning of the words of the stories. All of this information helps to bring the story to life. The more that is known about the world of the story, the more it will grow in meaning.

However, while these tools can be helpful, the methods of historical criticism that have been used in the past are also problematic for an exploration of the Biblical stories as stories. As Hans Frei has made clear, the focus on "meaning as reference" has resulted in the loss of the meaning of the stories as stories. Thus, the focus on the recovery of the theological ideas implicit in the story makes the story itself into an illustration of ideas. The story becomes a rhetorical vehicle or means by which the ideas are transmitted or concretized. And, if the only alternative to a theological interpretation of the narrative is a historical reading, the meaningfulness of the stories as stories is dependent on their historical reliability. In this sense, fundamentalists and modernists are dealing in different ways with the results of a common presupposition.

The problem for Biblical storytellers is to find a new way of utilizing the basic tools of Biblical exegesis for the study of the stories as stories. At this point in history, there are relatively few helps available. There is a great deal of analysis of the theological and historical meaning of the narratives, but very little analysis of the narrative meaning. And the resources that are available treat the narratives as literature rather than as stories to be told. The recovery of Biblical storytelling depends, therefore, on becoming aware of the characteristics of the stories as oral narratives that can be known through the study of the existing manuscripts. The purpose of this next section is to outline some of the characteristics of the stories as stories.

The Biblical Stories as Stories

First, the basic characteristics of a story need to be described. A story is sounds. Sounds have volume, tempo, pitch, and beginnings and endings. Thus, the study of the story as a story aims at a clearer understanding of the character of the story's sounds. For example, a primary consideration in a story is the relationship between sound and silence. Listening for the pauses that mark the literary units of the story is, as we have seen above, an essential step in learning a story.

Furthermore, a story has characters and a plot or sequence of events. In a story, relationships are established with the characters of the story. In general, sympathetic relationships are established with the heroes and heroines of the story and a high degree of identification is created. The relationships with the enemies in the story are hostile and distant; alienation characterizes the relationships to these characters. The plot creates expectations and hopes about the events that are imminent. Good plots are characterized, therefore, by a tantalizing web of possibilities and by surprising twists and turns in the course of events.

A story is told by a storyteller. The storyteller, then and now, has attitudes toward the characters and events of the story. Those attitudes reflect the storyteller's

ethical norms which, in turn, form the basis for the judgments that are made during the course of the story. A storyteller also has a distinctive style. And, regardless of whether or not the story was composed by the storyteller, the storyteller's style shapes the character of the story when it is told.

A story is told by a storyteller to an audience. In telling the story, the storyteller makes a series of appeals to the listeners. These include such appeals as: to stay awake, to make appropriate judgments about the characters and events of the story, to identify and sympathize with the main character and to be hostile towards the enemies, and to enter into the mysteries and riddles of the story. The audience is always free to accept or reject these invitations of the storyteller. And, at the most basic level, that is the freedom to get up and leave or to stay and listen.

While these aspects of the story are only implicit in the manuscripts and cannot always be discovered in detail, there are many aspects of the Biblical stories as stories that can be recognized and described. A major part of the task is to begin to sensitize our ears to listen. Thus, I greatly enjoy pre-concert lectures or demonstrations, such as Leonard Bernstein used to do on television. He would describe and play some of the major themes of, for example, Bach's St. Matthew Passion and point out the shape of their development in the course of the piece. With this prelude freshly in mind, I could then hear things I would never have perceived before and understand the music at a deeper level. Similarly, our task is to identify the characteristics of the recordings of Biblical storytelling events that are before our eyes and ears when we read Biblical narrative manuscripts.

Volume and Tone

One of the ironies of listening to the recital of Biblical narrative in pulpit reading is the degree to which readers will frequently ignore the explicit instructions in the story about how it is to be told. For example, in the story of Jesus' crucifixion, Mark reports that Jesus "cried with a loud voice, 'Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?' "(15:34). This is the storytelling equivalent of a "ff" (very loud) sign in a musical score. But I have rarely heard the story read with any marked increase in volume for Jesus' words. This instruction is widely used in Biblical narrative to indicate the volume of the statement which follows (Jotham's parable, Judges 9:7; the medium at Endor, I Samuel 29:12; II Samuel 18:28; Daniel 6:20; Mark 1:27; 5:7; 15:34; Luke 1:42; 4:33; 8:28; 23:46; John 11:43; Acts 7:60; 14:10; 16:28; 26:24). These instructions are explicit evidence of the wide range of volume that was used in the telling of Biblical stories. But there are other indications of volume that are implicit. Thus, in the story of David's cutting off Saul's robe in the cave (I Samuel 24), there is a conversation between David and his men inside the cave, which must be told in an extremely quiet, whispering tone in order to convey the atmosphere in the cave. This is followed by David and Saul calling to each other apparently from some distance. These speeches need to be told in a loud voice to concretize the character of their communication. And the contrast between the intense quiet of the conversation in the cave and the equally intense volume of the shouted conversation outside is part of the story's power. Thus, not only are there explicit instructions about the volume of

the story at some points, but there are also implicit indications at many other places in the Biblical narratives.

In addition to volume, there are also explicit indications of tone: anger, grief, trembling, love. After the cleansing of the leper, for example, Mark reports that Jesus "sternly charged him" (Mk. 5:6-7); this is only one of hundreds of instances in which the attitude or tone of a direct address is explicitly described. And, once again, there are even more instances in which the tone is implied, but not directly stated. These indications of the volume and tone of the stories are like the stage directions in a play or the volume markings in a musical score. They are markings which help to direct the telling of the story.

Tempo

Biblical narratives are generally read as if there were no variations in the tempo or speed of the words. But one of the functions of the episode and of variations in sentence length is to vary the tempo. The principle is relatively simple. A sentence is marked by the pause to take a breath. In some long sentences, it may be necessary to take a breath at a half way point as well. ~Jt, in sound, the beginning and ending of a sentence are marked by the pauses to breathe. If there are two or three words in a sentence, that sentence will naturally be said more slowly than a sentence in which there are thirty or forty words. While it may not be possible to say the whole sentence in one breath, the effect of a long sentence is to speed up the tempo in which the words are read. The singing of canticles is an example of this practice. If only one or two syllables are sung on a note, they are sung deliberately. But, if fifteen or twenty syllables are to be sung on a note, the speed increases.

The same is true of the episodes and sentences of Biblical stories. Episodes and sentences that are short tend to be slow, while episodes and sentences that are long are faster. And this variation in tempo supports the meaning of the story. That is, there is a correlation between the speed of the elements of the story and their over-all effect. The parable of the prodigal son is a clear example of this. The following is part of the parable arranged in episodes:

And he arose and came to his father.

But while he was yet at a distance, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him.

And the son said to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son."

But the father said to his servants, "Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet; and bring the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and make merry.

For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found." And they began to make merry.

Now his elder son was in the field.

And as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing.

And he called one of the servants and asked what this meant.

And he said to him, "Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has received him safe and sound."

But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him.

But he answered his father, "Lo, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command; yet you never gave me a kid, that I might make merry with my friends.

But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your living with harlots, you killed for him the fatted calf!"

And he said to him, "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours.

It was fitting to make merry and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found. (Luke 15:20-32)

As the episodic analysis makes clear, there is a direct correlation between the length of the episodes/sentences and the atmosphere. Thus, the two longest sentences/episodes are the verbal explosions of, first, the father's joy and second, the elder son's anger. The length of the sentences/episodes suggests that Jesus told them quite rapidly in order to convey the intensity of their speeches. The final sentence of the celebration episode, however, is climactically short and, therefore, slower: "And they began to make merry." As a result, there is a major pause before the introduction of the elder brother.

In the elder brother half of the parable, the episodes are shorter (two sentences rather than three) as are also the sentences. Thus, there is a marked contrast between the father's announcement of the celebration and the elder son's coming in from the field and hearing the feast in progress. The slower tempo makes it possible to build the suspense about what will happen next. The shortest episode in the parable describes the elder brother's anger and the entreaty of the father. Both are full of emotional conflict. The slow pace of the episode makes it possible to fully register the emotional dynamics of this confrontation. The verbal thread which connects the ending of both halves of the parable (dead/alive; lost/found) also poses

the major issue of the parable: how will those who identify with the elder son respond?

There is no substitute for reading the parable aloud in order to experience the impact of the changes in tempo in conveying the dynamics of the parable. But the function of the episodes and sentence length in relation to tempo can be seen as well as heard. In this parable, the tempo changes are rather abrupt. But, in other stories, the length of the episodes/sentences can create a gradual change in tempo. The ending of Mark is a good example.

In the RSV, Mark 16:8 is punctuated as only one sentence. But an episodic analysis of the resurrection narrative in Mark suggests that it should be punctuated as four sentences in two episodes:⁶

And they went out and fled from the tomb.
For trembling and astonishment had come upon them.

And they said nothing to anyone.
For they were afraid.

These episodes are markedly shorter than those which precede them. And, as can be seen as well as heard, they get shorter and shorter. In the original Greek, the degree of this shortening is even more striking. The final sentences have six, six, four, and, finally, two words. This indicates that Mark built to a climax by progressively slowing down and emphasizing each word more and more emphatically as he came to the provocative end of his story.

Thus, by observing the relative length of the sentences and of the episodes, one can identify some aspects of the tempo of Biblical stories.

Pauses

The ending of Mark, like the ending of Jonah, is a classic instance of the so-called "pregnant pause." This phrase describes that moment of silence which is full of ambiguity and life. The creation of these moments of silence in which the implications of the story resonate through time is a characteristic feature of Biblical narrative. Eric Auerbach, in his comparison of Biblical narrative style with the Homeric narrative style, argues that thoughts and feelings in the Homeric style are completed expressed. But, in Biblical narrative, thoughts and feelings are generally unexpressed and are rather "suggested by the silence and the fragmentary speeches."⁷ As Auerbach has recognized, the suggestiveness of silence in Biblical narrative is at the heart of its distinctive style. Auerbach discusses two stories, the binding of Isaac and Peter's denial, as his examples and they will serve well for a discussion of the pause in Biblical storytelling.

The central section of the binding of Isaac, analyzed in episodes, is as follows:

Then Abraham said to his young men, "Stay here with the ass; I and the lad will go yonder and worship, and come again to you."

And Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering, and laid it on Isaac, his son; and he took in his hand the fire and the knife; so they went both of them together.

And Isaac said to his father Abraham, "My father!" And he said, "Here am I, my son." He said, "Behold, the fire and the wood; but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?"

Abraham said, "God will provide himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son;" so they went both of them together.

When they came to the place of which God had told him, Abraham built an altar there, and laid the wood in order, and bound Isaac, his son, and laid him on the altar, upon the wood.

Then Abraham put forth his hand, and took the knife to slay his son.

But the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven, and said, "Abraham, Abraham!" And he said, "Here am I."

He said, Do not lay your hand on the lad or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me." (Gen. 22:5-12)

As can be seen, the pauses at the end of the first two episodes come after the poignant refrain, "so they went both of them together" which concludes the episodes. The thoughts and feelings of both Abraham and Isaac are only suggested in the silence that follows this verbal picture of father and son, each of whom deeply loves the other, going up the mountain to the sacrifice.

But the most graphic and dramatic pause is after the shortest phrase in the narrative. In Hebrew, there is a half pause midway through each sentence. If the pause were indicated with a comma in English, the sentence would be: "Then Abraham put forth his hand and took the knife, to slay his son." In Hebrew, this second half of the sentence, "to slay his son" is only two words; furthermore, the whole sentence is the shortest in the narrative. The shortening builds the climax. The pause between the episodes is, therefore, the moment of ultimate suspense as the knife is poised to kill Isaac, Abraham's only son. The thoughts and feelings are never expressed but, by being unexpressed, are all the more present. The function of the pauses, Therefore, is to provide time for the emotion of the moment to be felt by the audience and shared with the storyteller.

In Peter's denial, a similar function of the pauses between the episodes can be heard (see above for the story in episodes). In this case, the first two episodes end with the key phrase, "he denied it." (Mark 14:68, 70) The pause marks the number of denials so that the audience can count them in the interim. The third episode does not repeat this phrase but instead ends with Peter's vehement statement, "I do not know this man of whom you speak." In this climactic third pause, the prophecy is fulfilled. The silence between the episodes anticipates the crowing of the cock for the second time. The final episode of the story ends with an extremely short sentence, in Greek only three words; if connected with hyphens in English: "And breaking-down, he-wept." Peter's feelings are not described, but are only suggested by his action. It is in the silence of the pause which ends this story that the unexpressed thoughts and feelings suggested by these climactic words can be felt and known. The pause marks the end of the story in time. And, in the silence, Peter's past and the listener's future converge in the only time that ever is in story: now.

Ambiguity

Dealing with ambiguity is one of the problems created by the pauses of Biblical narratives. And learning to allow or even to heighten ambiguity is one of the most difficult tasks for a modern Biblical storyteller. Many Biblical stories, including most of the truly great ones, end with ambiguity. But we have tended, as modern interpreters of the Bible, to focus on those elements of the Bible as a whole and of the individual stories that are clear. We are trained to look for the relatively unambiguous instances of historical evidence or theological doctrine in the various stages of the history of the Biblical tradition. Only such instances will count as evidence for the reconstruction of a historical sequence of events or a trend of theological thought. A clear and relatively unambiguous meaning is best for evidence in almost any theological or historical argument. Anything else is of minimal value.

However, many of the Biblical stories, including many of the parables of Jesus, may have as their goal a profound and multi-faceted ambiguity. In such a story, the meaning is left unresolved precisely because it may require the listener to enter into the story and choose a meaning. Often, in Biblical interpretation, we try to make the story clear and unambiguous. As a result, there is an almost irresistible temptation for storytellers to clarify things that are ambiguous in Biblical narratives rather than to respect and honor the enormous fertility of the narratives. Somehow, the image of a Biblical narrative as a mother-to-be, nine and a half months pregnant, is uniquely appropriate. And I have witnessed, though not experienced other than with books, that such ambiguities are uncomfortable.

The time when this temptation to end the discomfort of ambiguity is greatest is at the end of a story. The temptation is to add one more comment to tell the people what it means. This temptation is related to the tradition of "the moral" for which the opening line is: "The moral of the story is..." But, rather than a moral, it may be a truth. This is the danger of the way in which the stories have been interpreted in preaching. The stories are read and their meaning then described in the sermon.

But, in fact, the effect of this discomfort with ambiguity is to reduce the meaning of the stories to whatever element of their meaning may be selected by the storyteller. Generally, the meaning will then become whatever is most compatible with the doctrinal orientation, whether conservative or liberal, of the storyteller.

Examples of this acid test for a prospective Biblical storyteller are legion. Any Biblical story is a candidate for being reduced to a moral or theological point. But the toughest tests are those narratives that are truly ambiguous. For example, the second story of Jesus walking on the water in Mark ends with two narrative comments explaining why the disciples were amazed: "For they did not understand about the loaves but their hearts were hardened" (Mark 6:52). Later, in the Gospel, Jesus again questions the disciples about the loaves:

Why do you discuss the fact that you have no bread?
Do you not yet perceive or understand?
Having eyes do you not see, and having ears do you not hear?

And do you not remember?
When I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you take up?"
They said to him, "Twelve."

"And the seven for the four thousand, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you take up?"
And they said to him, "Seven."
And he said to them, "Do you not yet understand?" (Mark 8:17-21)

Neither the disciples in the story nor Mark's audience could have fully understood. Indeed, even a partial answer to the questions that are posed here is reserved until the Last Supper (see Mark 14:22-25). Only there does Jesus state that the bread is his body. The significance of the seven and the twelve baskets, however, remains ambiguous and is never clarified in the narrative.

And, even as the ambiguity about the bread is cleared up, new elements of ambiguity are introduced. For example, why does Jesus take a vow not to drink wine until the Kingdom comes? Who are "the many" for whom his blood is poured out? And, if the Gospel ends at 16:8, profound ambiguities are introduced at the end of the Gospel: did the women tell the story? Why were they afraid? Mark is not the only narrative of the New Testament to end with ambiguity. The same is true at the end of Acts. Paul is in Rome and the possibility of his imminent execution is implied, but the story ends on this note:

And he lived there two whole years at his own expense, and welcomed all who came to him, preaching the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ quite openly and unhindered. (Acts 28:30)

What happened to Paul after the two years? The details of his martyrdom remain shrouded in mystery.

Thus, a modern Biblical storyteller needs the strength to resist the temptation to jump in and clarify the ambiguity. People expect and even want this, especially from a minister or a teacher. The implicit question is: "O.K., that's a nice story. But what does it mean?" It takes a great deal of confidence in the power of the stories themselves to come to the end of a parable or a narrative and to allow the ambiguity to be. However, if one recognizes that this combination of clarity and mystery is the goal of the story, it can be honored and even celebrated. To delight in the riddle of God's government over all creation, to invite others to revel in the enriched mystery of God's gracefulness, to enjoy exploring the ambiguities on the playground of God's time and space - this is to become a Biblical storyteller.

Narrative Comments

One of the primary means by which a storyteller establishes community with the audience is by addressing them directly and giving them inside information. The most direct way of doing this is a narrative comment. A narrative comment occurs when the narrator interrupts his description of the story's action and makes a comment. In effect, the narrator says, "Hold it! Let me tell you something that will help you understand what is happening." As a result, narrative comments draw the audience and the narrator closer together. Like the commentary segments on network news programs by David Brinkley or Bill Moyers, these comments are an opportunity to stand back and comment on the current events of the story.

Narrative comments in Biblical narratives are relatively brief in comparison to the modern novel, in which narrative commentary can extend for pages. The briefest form is a parenthetical comment or appositive, marked by commas, such as: "he saw Simon and Andrew, the brother of Simon..." (Mark 1:16), or "Joseph of Arimathea, a respected member of the council who was also himself looking for the kingdom of God..." (15:43). These brief comments provide supplementary data about the persons and places of the stories.

Another type of narrative comment is what might be called background. This form of narrative commentary often occurs at the beginning of a sentence or as a separate episode prior to a major narrative action. Descriptions of time and place are often in this form. Thus, in the midst of the story of Jonathan's single-handed attack on the Philistines, the narrator interrupts the story to give geographical background information:

In the pass, by which Jonathan sought to go over to the philistine garrison, there was a rocky crag on the one side and a rocky crag on the other side; the name of the one was Bozez, and the name of the other Seneh.

The one crag rose on the north in front of Michmash, and the other on the south in front of Geba. (I Samuel 14:4-5)

The degree of detail reported here provides an opportunity for the narrator to draw a verbal picture for his listeners and to make clear the heroic scale of Jonathan's exploit. To use another contemporary analogy, this is the type of commentary that tour guides provide for tourists. And the bond that is established between the narrator and the listeners is like that which is formed between a group of travelers and a good guide.

A similar form of narrative comment is translations. The evangelists often translate Aramaic or Hebrew terms into Greek for example, "he said to her, 'Talitha cumi, , which means, "Little girl, I say to say, arise" (Mark 5:41); "Jesus cried with a loud voice, 'Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?' that is, 'My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?'"(Matt. 27:46) Just as a translator is a welcome friend when one does not know the language being spoken, so also are Mark and Matthew helpful to their audiences when they translate foreign words.

A frequent form of narrative commentary in the Gospels is an explanation of something surprising or puzzling in the story. Thus, Luke explains why Jairus, an elder in the synagogue, fell at Jesus' feet and begged him to come to his house: "For he had an only daughter, about twelve years of age, and she was dying"(Luke 8:42). Later, in his version of the same tradition, Mark explains why the woman with a flow of blood touched Jesus' garment: "For she said, 'If I touch even his garments, I shall be made well'"(Mark 5:28). From these comments, a storyteller now can identify the elements of the story which the ancient audiences found surprising and in need of explanation. Also, to recognize narrative comments and to use them as opportunities to establish close communication with the audience is a key to the art of the Biblical storyteller.

In addition to recognizing the narrative comments that are present in the narratives themselves, Biblical storytellers now can also use narrative comments to provide needed information for contemporary audiences. I remember telling the story of the Gerasene demoniac, in which the legion of demons enters a herd of swine (Mark 5:1-20), to a local church in Ohio in which there were a lot of farmers. As I was describing the herd of swine feeding on the hillside, it occurred to me that it might be difficult for some of those farmers to rejoice at the report of two thousand hogs plunging headlong into the sea and being drowned. For that reason, I explained to them that pigs were unclean animals for the Jews and that the swine in this story were like rats or "the big bad wolf." With this background, I was then able to tell the story with appropriate enthusiasm. Commentary such as this can easily become oppressive and overwhelm the story itself. But such comments are often both necessary and helpful. When appropriately done, narrative comments are an opportunity for building a close relationship with the listeners.

Norms of Judgment

As I experienced with the congregation of farmers, a primary factor in the relationship between the storyteller and the audience is a series of implicit negotiations about norms. This is complicated by the fact that, in telling an ancient story, we, as contemporary storytellers, are in effect identifying with ancient storytellers and making their norms our own. Thus, in telling Mark's story to this congregation, I was in danger of uncritically identifying with Mark's norms that pigs are unclean animals at whose death we can rejoice. If I had, it would have created distance between me as the storyteller and my audience since they in no way shared Mark's evaluation of swine and the desirability of their mass destruction. In telling Biblical stories, therefore, it is essential to be aware of the norms of judgment that are operative in the story itself and in the relationship between oneself as the storyteller and the listeners. Negotiating those norms in a variety of ways is