

Narrative as Philosophy: Methodological Issues in Abstracting from Hebrew Scripture

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In the second half or so of the twentieth century, the dominance of modes of communication characterized primarily by “abstract propositions arrived at through rational argument”¹ in what were considered to be paradigmatic works of Christian systematic theology came under fire on several fronts. Attempts to assert (or reassert) the value of narrative for Christian theology gained support across a broad swath of theological orientations, and in some cases – like that of the Narrative Theology movement associated in various forms with Niebuhr, Frei, Lindbeck, and Crites² - proponents of the rediscovery of narrative for theological methodology went so far as to argue that its employment is strictly *indispensable* for theology. Nevertheless, clearly, theology conducted primarily in terms of “propositional discourse” remains the norm.

In contemporary analytic philosophy, too, the idea of philosophy’s incorporating (let alone consisting of) narrative at a deeper or more fundamental level than that of illustration or example – say, the occasional adventure story about a runaway trolley or sci-fi thriller about brains-in-vats and philosophical zombies – remains relatively exotic. But here, as in theology, the possibilities for a more substantial relationship between philosophy and narrative have not gone entirely unexplored. Among very recent works, for instance, Eleonore Stump’s *Wandering in Darkness*³ - along with earlier publications in which she explored related ideas⁴ - makes a particularly exemplary foray into this territory in connection with narrative in Hebrew Scripture, with implications for both philosophy and theology. And, now, Yoram Hazony’s *Philosophy of Hebrew Scripture* adds a new and important layer to the literature on the subject. This contribution, too, has significant implications for both philosophy and theology.

So, it is on this issue – the expression of philosophical ideas of a general nature through scriptural narrative – that I will be focusing in this brief response. I will proceed, to begin with, in terms of the following (rough and simplified) way of cutting up the categories into which contemporary debate about the relation of narrative to philosophy can be helpfully organized⁵:

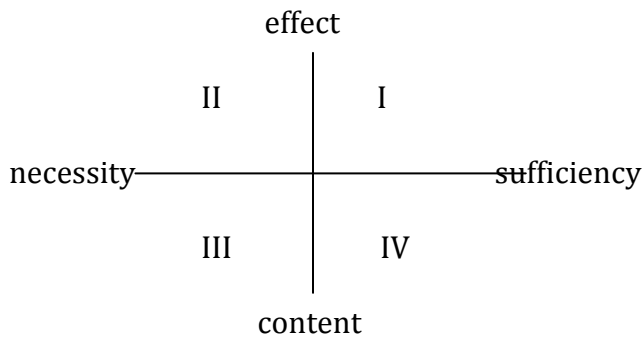
¹ Tracy 1994, 306

² Niebuhr 1941, Frei 1974, Lindbeck 1984, Crites 1971.

³ Eleonore Stump, *Wandering in Darkness: Narrative and the Problem of Suffering* (New York: Oxford UP, 2010).

⁴ Stump 2001, Stump 2009.

⁵ The two distinctions reflected here are essentially in line with those drawn by Paul Griffiths in (Griffiths 2001).



I: Effects narrative is capable/incapable of bring about in individual readers or communities.

II: Effects narrative alone, among forms of written communication, is capable of bring about in individual readers or communities.

III: Content narrative alone, among forms of written communication, is capable of expressing.

IV. Content narrative is capable/incapable of expressing.

In addition to this matter of narrative's resources for expressing philosophical positions, considering Hazony's proposal relative to IV, under which rubric I take the primary contribution of *Philosophy of Hebrew Scripture* on the subject to fall, raises a further theological question: the *status* theologians or philosophers whose commitments include some sort of special status for Scripture should ascribe to such philosophical positions if they are, indeed, so expressed. I will conclude by suggesting that acceptance of even a relatively minimal form of Hazony's proposal, though not incompatible with certain nuanced understandings of Scripture as in some sense divinely inspired or even reliable regarding distinctively religious matters ("matters of faith"), may constitute compelling reason for one to reject such doctrines as inerrancy and infallibility - and, more broadly, to reject any understanding of Scripture incompatible with the epistemic possibility of its turning out to be mistaken in its teachings.

A. Scriptural Narrative as Philosophy

Before diving into consideration of *Philosophy of Hebrew Scripture's* contribution to IV, it will be helpful briefly to locate that contribution in relation to the other three categories, since Hazony's argument also has implications at least for I and perhaps also for II.

III: Things Only Narrative Can Say

In contrast to I and II, although Hazony does not deny that III is populated, I take it to be no part of his proposal or its implications that there are kinds of

conceptual content that are by nature impossible to express in forms of written communication other than narrative (most saliently including systematic, propositional discourse). So, we can pass over this category relatively quickly.

What *would* fall into III? An especially good candidate – and one singularly relevant in this context – might be Eleonore Stump’s notion of Franciscan knowledge of persons, explicated, among other places, in *Wandering in Darkness*. Stump argues that there exists a kind of knowledge of persons that is non-propositional, not knowledge *that* P, which we usually acquire through interaction with another person. She takes this kind of knowledge to be at least partially transmissible or reproducible via narrative (and, it should be noted, some poems that likewise “portray for us the interactions of persons”⁶), but incapable even of approximation in terms of the non-narrative discourse characteristic of most philosophical work. That is, “while we cannot express the distinctive knowledge of such an experience as a matter of knowing *that*, we can do something to re-present the experience itself in such a way that . . . knowledge garnered from the experience is also available to [others who were not part of it]. This is generally what we do when we tell a story.”⁷ It is open to some question whether Stump’s argument is best interpreted as establishing that narrative is uniquely capable of performing this function or merely uniquely efficacious in doing so.⁸ For our purposes here, it is enough to note that the former interpretation would place this view firmly within category III: second person knowledge would constitute a kind of cognitive content that narrative (or something like it – i.e., certain poems) is necessary, among forms of written communication, to express.

Again, Hazony’s proposal does not seem to me to entail, in any of its parts, this especially strong claim. So, let us move on.

I-II: Things Narrative – and Only Narrative? – Can Do

Differentiating I and II from III is, by my lights, an important step in analyzing debates regarding constituents of the cognitive significance of narrative texts that are unique or arguably unique to the narrative form. Few philosophers or theologians working today (indeed, none of whom I am aware) wish to deny that narrative is uniquely efficacious in some respects – that the form has its “peculiar genius,” as Paul Griffiths puts it in this context.⁹ Narrative is almost certainly better equipped to evoke some emotional responses and prompt individuals to some kinds of action than are non-narrative forms. And most are willing to affirm even that there may be certain effects narrative alone (as over against propositional discourse, in particular) is capable of bringing about in individuals or communities. Because some of the latter do have genuinely *cognitive* significance, failing to differentiate adequately between content and effect can make them appear to

⁶Stump, *Wandering in Darkness*, 80.

⁷Stump, *Wandering in Darkness*, 78.

⁸Note 84 (*Wandering in Darkness*, 518) seems to support the former, whereas note 6 (“The Problem of Evil,” 254) appears to leave open the possibility of the latter.

⁹Griffiths, “Limits of Narrative Theology,” 225.

qualify as counterexamples to claims that are more properly understood as denials that anything actually falls into category III.

For instance, narrative is sometimes taken to have unique capacities for cognitive transformation in seeing-*as*, as over against seeing-*that*. Relatively uncontroversially, one could come to see *that* God exercises providence with respect to the world by means of a non-narrative discourse asserting and explaining this notion. But insofar as seeing-*as* is a genuinely distinct category (for which claim I make no argument here), perhaps narrative is uniquely positioned to bring about what Kevin Vanhoozer describes as “a process of formation, a training in seeing as,”¹⁰ whereby we come to see the world *as* the arena with respect to which God exercises God’s providence. Indeed, Loughlin interprets Frei as affirming that the narrative of Scripture goes beyond even inculcation of discretely identifiable elements of a worldview, like seeing the world as the arena of God’s providence, to providing an overarching storyline into which “all other stories must be inscribed” such that “we no longer view the world as we once did; we view it from the point of view of a character in the Bible’s story.”¹¹ Wolterstorff challenges the strong claim that “living within a text” should include actually understanding oneself as a character in Scripture’s narrative, but affirms (and presents several options concerning the precise sense of) the notion that individuals should see themselves as living within the world-story presented by Scripture.¹² Similarly, it is a nearly ubiquitous point in discussions of the unique value of narrative for theology that shared narratives have a unique capacity to form the basis for community identity by providing a *shared* pattern for self-ordering in relation to a worldview or world-story.¹³ In my view, such accounts are typically best understood as portraying narrative as constitutive of community by virtue of its forming in multiple individuals a qualitatively similar cognitive skill for seeing-*as* (of the sort discussed above) with reference to the world and themselves.

What distinguishes such forms of cognitive transformation from examples of categories III and IV is that they pertain to effects brought about by a text in a reader or community of readers. Although such effects may be identified as constitutive of the meaning or content of a text on, say, “radical” reader-response theory, on a view in which the meaning of a text is fixed by authorial intent (which Hazony seems to affirm¹⁴), such transformation is not part of the content or meaning of the text, even if it is among the intended perlocutionary effects of Scripture’s authors.

¹⁰ Vanhoozer 2005, 284.

¹¹ Loughlin 1996, 37.

¹² Wolterstorff 2001. Significantly, Wolterstorff grants that one can “live within” other types of texts in the relevant sense as well – not just narrative – though narrative remains particularly significant for his purposes in the essay.

¹³E.g., Hauerwas’s argument for implied moral commitment to formation in accordance with a particular narrative as a constitutive element in the identity of a community or society, or Frei’s understanding that ordering of a community’s self-understanding according to a distinctive narrative framework (in the case of the church, the narrative projected by Scripture) is directly and internally definitive for community identity (Hauerwas 1981). Frei’s (1990, 149-62).

¹⁴ Hazony 2012, 48, 55.

Consider, in this light, the following conclusion for which *Philosophy of Hebrew Scripture* argues:

[The authors of the Hebrew Bible] reject and defy catechism, presenting us instead with Scripture so variegated and vast that they leave us no alternative, if we are to take them seriously, but to engage in a lifelong search to understand what is in them and what they require of us. Moreover, the purpose of the quest initiated and described in the Hebrew Scripture is precisely . . . a knowledge of that which gives life and the good to individuals and nations. . . . [T]hey hoped to point the way to that which is reasonable – to that which human reason, when at its best will know to be right.¹⁵

Scripture, Hazony argues, presents its teaching “by way of a family or school of viewpoints, each of which approaches truth from a different place,”¹⁶ and the very diversity, depth, and nuance of the views it expresses has the capacity to prompt – indeed, is intended to prompt – a response of what amounts to ongoing philosophical inquiry on the part of the reader. Although this is plausibly construed as a form of cognitive transformation, in light of what has been said so far it is, I think, clearly best subsumed under the rubric of category I or II (depending upon whether Hazony takes it that non-narrative texts are capable of bringing about precisely the same sort of effect). This is, then, a substantial implication Hazony’s proposal bears for the understanding of what narratives qualitatively similar to those found in the Hebrew Scripture are capable of *doing*.

IV: Things Narrative Can Say

But Scripture’s ability to do this, to bring about this effect, is dependent upon – indeed, a direct result of – another sort of capacity. It seems to me that the primary contribution of *Philosophy of Hebrew Scripture*’s argument regarding the relation between narrative and philosophy pertains to this second sort of capacity, which, again, falls into category IV. Scripture is able, on the present proposal, to bring about the effect Hazony describes in readers precisely because it is able to “advance theories or arguments of a general nature,”¹⁷ to express “abstract conceptual schemes such as those familiar from philosophy.”¹⁸ Now, it is not especially difficult to see how this could happen in certain sorts of narrative, like a simple fable or an imagined philosophical discussion merely placed within a narrative frame (e.g., Plato’s *Euthyphro*, to cite one example among very many). But it is less clear how it could happen in a narrative like those we find in Hebrew Scripture. Hazony argues compellingly that techniques such as establishing type contrasts involving characters which are then recapitulated at different points in the story, repeating events at different points in the story, and repeating recognizable phrases or word-

¹⁵Hazony 2012, 239.

¹⁶Hazony 2012, 227.

¹⁷Hazony, *Philosophy of Hebrew Scripture*, 66.

¹⁸Hazony, *Philosophy of Hebrew Scripture*, 68.

combinations allow the author of a narrative text to generate, from concrete, particular features of the story, abstract concepts whose employment in the narrative consequently becomes suitable for expressing points of a general nature. And when we examine what is in fact expressed through such techniques in Hebrew Scripture, Hazony argues that we find not merely that the authors of Scripture have communicated abstract ideas, but that central to what they intended to communicate are abstract ideas about ethics, political philosophy, epistemology, metaphysics, etc. Philosophical ideas.

The notion that it is possible to construct narrative texts – even subtle and complex ones like those in Hebrew Scripture – in such a way that more general concepts may be abstracted from them is likely to strike many of us who work in or are acquainted with the methodology of systematic theology as familiar. We routinely incorporate theological data we believe to have been appropriately abstracted from the narratives of Scripture via exegesis and biblical theologies, interpreted according to our hermeneutical principles, into our systematic work.

One of the differences between the theological concepts theologians sometimes take to be so established and the philosophical concepts Hazony takes to be central to the content of the text, however, points to an additional methodological question that arises when Scripture is instead understood as, at least in part, a work of reason or philosophy in Hazony's sense. Those inclined to view Scripture as a "special" source of data for theology by virtue of its being, in some sense, divine self-revelation (more on this in a few moments) do not always look for justification for ascribing positive status to those data primarily in the quality of reasoning or argumentation of Scripture's authors as expressed in the text itself; their logically antecedent arguments for viewing Scripture as a special source of data for theology often play that role, at least once we have followed the status ascription a few steps back from interaction with the text. Our interaction with philosophical views, though, is usually not like this. When we tell our Introduction to Philosophy students about Plato's Forms, they expect us (at least they do in our dreams!) to draw an imperfect triangle on the board and tell them something about *why* Plato thought one should accept that the Forms exist. So, if we acknowledge that scriptural narratives can and do express philosophical positions, a natural next question (likewise falling into IV) is what tools might be available for expressing in narrative, not merely theories of a general nature, but similarly general arguments for those theories.

Certain kinds of narrative are capable of supporting articulation of straightforward philosophical arguments on pretty much any topic – I am thinking here, again, of arguments simply placed in the mouths of characters within a narrative frame. Clearly, portions of the narratives in Hebrew Scripture are plausibly understood in this way, but to the majority of scriptural narrative this method of argument expression is equally clearly inapplicable. At the other end of the spectrum, some kinds of narrative appear obviously to be capable of supporting only certain sorts of argument for certain sorts of content. In some recent scholarship on the *Astavakra Gita*, for instance, it has been suggested that the narrative in this ancient Indian text functions as a philosophical argument "not through overt syllogism or validity claim redemption, but through textual

indeterminacy between the audience's disposition and the foregrounded theme of non-individuation in the text. This tension . . . results in consistency building by the audience, which enables the transcendence of these two viewpoints (reader and text)."¹⁹ By way of adoption of reader-response theory, the experience of such transcendence is taken to *be* the content served by the text's argument. Naturally, only this specific sort of argument is susceptible to expression by this means.

In *Philosophy of Hebrew Scripture's* chapters on the ethics and political philosophy found in the History of Israel in particular, Hazony illustrates compellingly a broad approach to arguing for a philosophical view via narrative that falls somewhere between these extremes: a narrative of the sort that characterizes much of this portion of Hebrew Scripture could argue for a philosophical thesis by providing reason to think that thesis would be likely to work out well in the life of the individual, family, society, state, etc. if accepted – which, in turn, may constitute some reason (perhaps by virtue of abductive inference) to think the thesis true. The author could, for instance, structure his or her account of a historical event, or multiple historical events with salient similarities, in such a way that it appears plausible that failure to enact a certain principle was causally related to powerfully negative outcomes. Alternatively, she or he could depict characters with a similar trait experiencing good outcomes in similar situations, illustrating that it makes sense to think exemplification of that trait might be causally related to such outcomes. The possibilities are many and diverse. They are not, however, limitless, as in the case of propositional discourse in a narrative frame; this method of narrative argument, considered by itself, seems more or less limited to those theories of a general nature susceptible to being supported by likelihood of positive outcome. Moreover, this characteristic of this way of arguing seems likely to generalize to others that fall within the same category.

So, in terms of *Philosophy of Hebrew Scripture's* implications for the relation between narrative and philosophy, perhaps an interesting further question – beyond that of the sufficiency of narratives like those in Hebrew Scripture to communicate general, abstract views – is how broad a range of arguments for such views narrative is sufficient to express, and by means of what tools it might do so. In light of the centrality of argument to the nature of philosophy, at least as we are most familiar with it, the degree to which scriptural narratives may or may not be limited in this respect is a significant issue for category IV.

B. Scriptural Philosophy and the Theology of Scripture

As I noted at the beginning of the previous section, though, those inclined to identify Scripture as a special source of theological data by virtue of its being, in some sense, divine self-revelation often do not take the feature of philosophical views that makes argument so central to philosophy – closely linked as it is to their “unbolstered” status as products of “reason” – to apply to Scripture's theological

¹⁹ Stroud 2004, 43.

claims. Consider, as an especially strong example of this perspective, a doctrine of inerrancy according to which the scriptural *autographa* contained no errors whatsoever, neither regarding theological/religious matters nor regarding points of history, science, etc. which form even incidental constituents of the content of the text. The doctrine may be stated this way, letting “AI-content” be shorthand for content as fixed primarily by authorial intent:

E (Inerrancy): For any proposition p , if p is part of the AI-content of Scripture, then p is true.

A closely related doctrine, often called infallibility, affirms in its strongest form that properly interpreted Scripture is a reliable guide – that is, is such that it will not mislead us – on all matters it addresses, not just matters of faith. Let us state it like this, for now, with *being reliable with respect to x* understood, albeit loosely, in the way just suggested:

F (Infallibility): For any x and any p , if p is part of the AI-content of Scripture and x is a matter addressed by p , then p is reliable with respect to x .

In the remainder of this paper, I will suggest that acceptance of even a relatively minimal version of Hazony’s proposal constitutes some reason for one to reject both of these doctrines as stated, and – more broadly – constitutes some reason to reject any understanding of the nature of Scripture incompatible with its teachings turning out to be false or unreliable/misleading.

Consider Jane, who subscribes to E and/or F. In addition to subscribing to E and/or F, Jane is a philosopher who espouses a correspondence theory of truth and takes truth and falsity to be properties of sentences. She reads *Philosophy of Hebrew Scripture* and is convinced that Scripture conveys views of the sort Hazony argues, and upon seeking to understand Scripture in this light becomes convinced that one of these views is the dramatically different account of truth and falsity *Philosophy of Hebrew Scripture* argues Scripture reflects (which, because its falsity is entailed by her current view, she currently takes to be false). Now, if she had come across this account of truth and falsity in any other work of philosophy than Scripture, she would consider the arguments in favor of the new account, and if they failed to persuade her that it is at least as likely correct as her current correspondence view, she would maintain her current view and judge the new account likely incorrect. Since she is committed to E, however, her predicament is evident (letting N be the new account): She is committed on the basis of philosophical considerations to $\sim N$, but from E and the claim that N is part of the AI-content of Scripture, N is derivable. At this point, if she continues to accept Hazony’s main proposal that Scripture makes the relevant kind philosophical claims, she has three relevant options. She could attempt to reinterpret the scriptural data such that the AI-content of Scripture regarding truth and falsity, if any, is not incompatible with her current position after all (e.g., argue that Scripture actually endorses a correspondence theory like hers); she could reject her current position on a theological basis, namely E, and accept N

despite her judgment that philosophical considerations render it implausible; or she could reject E. A parallel issue arises for F in precisely the same manner.

A proponent of E and/or F might be inclined to say Jane should take the first option if it is hermeneutically permissible, but otherwise take the second. This approach, however, seems itself to run afoul of part of Hazony's main proposal: the character of the philosophical views under consideration as fundamentally *reason*-based. Now, it is worth pausing here for a moment to note that this understanding of the nature of the relevant scriptural content is not incompatible with certain nuanced understandings of Scripture as divine revelation, or even of the doctrine of the inspiration of Scripture. This is because such nuanced understandings need not be incompatible with the claim that the theories of a general nature expressed in Hebrew Scripture are the fruit of "unassisted human reason." For instance (to cite just one example among several of how this might go), one could endorse a Molinist sort of account of inspiration in which God knows in God's *scientia media* the circumstances under which the authors of Scripture would freely and independently produce documents containing the content God wishes, and so God actualizes a possible world including those circumstances.²⁰ One could perhaps say something quite similar employing other views of foreknowledge.

By contrast, an approach that prescribes Jane's second option above *does* seem likely to prove incompatible with *Philosophy of Hebrew Scripture's* account of the relevant scriptural content as fundamentally reason-based; indeed, Hazony develops the idea of Scripture as a work of reason in emphatic contrast to the notion that Scripture should be understood to require sacrificing the deliverances of one's reason on behalf of principles of faith.²¹ So, again, accepting Hazony's proposal seems plausibly to provide some reason for rejecting E and F. Moreover, though E and F are rather specific, narrowly-defined interpretations of inerrancy and infallibility, the same issue arises, and on the same basis, for other views according to which the teachings of Scripture cannot turn out to be false or potentially misleading. Given any such view in combination with the claim that Scripture's AI-content prominently includes philosophical positions, it seems that one's thinking about these philosophical positions inevitably becomes, not merely influenced, but *constrained* by Scripture's endorsing them; this is a far cry from Hazony's picture of the nature of Scripture.

As I have suggested that Hazony's proposal may be compatible with some nuanced versions of doctrines like the inspiration of Scripture, however, I suggest also that it may be compatible with more moderate forms of the doctrine of infallibility than the one specified above. Consider, for instance, the following common variation:

MF (Moderate Infallibility): For any x and any p, if p is part of the AI-content of Scripture and x is a *religious* matter addressed by p, then p is reliable with respect to x.

²⁰E.g., William Lane Craig's proposal in (Craig 1999, 45-82).

²¹Hazony 2012, 235, 239.

Given MF and neither E nor F, one could perhaps consistently affirm that what Scripture says about God, God's relationship to humanity, etc., is comprehensively reliable, while also accepting that Hebrew Scripture expresses "views of a general nature" rightly classified as matters of reason in a sense that clashes with E and F. This strategy would amount to positing that, in addition to its philosophical content, Scripture also conveys distinctively religious content rightly characterized in a manner compatible with ascribing to it infallibility-caliber authority within its appropriately restricted domain.

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