

Fiction and Truth in the Old Testament Wisdom Literature

— Daniel J. Estes —

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Since the mid-twentieth century biblical scholars have increasingly accepted that the texts of the Bible must be interpreted in terms of their literary genres.¹ Many fine books, ranging from Fee and Stuart’s general primer, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, to Sternberg’s specialized tome, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative*,² have informed and assisted students and scholars of the Bible in reading according to generic distinctives. Numerous articles and monographs have explicated how biblical narrative, poetry, psalms, wisdom, law, prophecy, apocalyptic, and epistles should be interpreted. These analyses of specific genres are important, because as Coats states, the goal of genre studies is “to identify a class of literature that will facilitate a functional definition of any given piece that may belong to the class.”³ One genre, however, that is notable by the relatively scant attention it has received from biblical scholars is fiction or imaginative literature. Aside from some references in discussions of biblical parables,⁴ the fictional literature of the Bible, and in particular the OT, has not often been examined.

It must be acknowledged at the outset that the very notion of fiction is ambiguous. Fiction often refers to what is false, as when one observes that truth is stranger than fiction. Using this sense of the term, many critics draw a clear line between fact and fiction in the Bible. For example, Lemche argues that the Bible makes use of fiction that consciously distorts the most elementary historical facts.⁵ From

¹ Leland Ryken, “The Bible and Literature: A Brief History,” in *A Complete Literary Guide to the Bible* (ed. Leland Ryken and Tremper Longman; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), 57–65.

² Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* (3rd ed.; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003); Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative* (Indiana Literary Biblical Series; Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1985).

³ George W. Coats, “Genres: Why Should They Be Important for Exegesis?” in *Saga, Legend, Tale, Novella, Fable: Narrative Forms in Old Testament Literature* (ed. George W. Coats; JSOTSup 35; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1985), 8.

⁴ The recent thorough study of the parables by Klyne Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 1–42, presents an excellent introduction to the background of the parables of Jesus, and he touches on the strategies of biblical fictional literature.

⁵ Niels Peter Lemche, “New Perspectives on the History of Israel,” in *Perspectives on the Study of the Old Testament and Early Judaism* (ed. Florentino Garcia Martinez and Ed Noort; VTSup 73; Leiden: Brill, 1998), 44.

a confessedly evangelical position, Blomberg holds to the same firm antithesis between fact and fiction when he contends that in the Bible “a historical narrative recounts that which actually happened; it is the opposite of fiction.”⁶ Similarly, assessing scholarship on the Gospels, Chilton concludes, “The distinction between fact and fiction lies at the heart of the controversy between those who regard the Gospels as historical and those who regard them as mythical.”⁷ However, Chance’s analysis of the Gospels against their background in Hellenistic biography blurs the lines between fact and fiction when he states, “The study of ancient biography makes clear that Christians were not alone in their refusal to “draw the line” between fact and fiction in their narrative presentations of their hero. They would have been alone had they not employed fiction in their narratives about their hero, for fiction was a fact of ancient biography, be it Christian or non-Christian.”⁸ In this respect, according to Alexander the early Christian writers were simply following the accepted narrative conventions of their day.⁹

That notion of fiction corresponds with one of the definitions in the Oxford English Dictionary: “That which is imaginatively invented; feigned existence, event, or state of things; invention as opposed to fact.” In this sense, fiction is what is erroneous but presented as though it were factual. This contrasts with the historical-critical sense of truth, that is, genuine, real existence. Fiction, then, in this sense does not correspond to the external world that it purports to describe because the story cannot be corroborated by comparing external data.

There is, however, another longstanding and well-attested sense of fiction, for the Oxford English Dictionary also defines the term as “the species of literature which is concerned with the narration of imaginary events and the portraiture of imaginary characters.” As early as in the writings of Hesiod, the muses in *Theogony* 26–28 describe their sayings in the following terms: “Field-dwelling shepherd, evil disgraces, mere bellies, we know how to say many falsehoods that are like the truth, and we know, when we wish, how to voice what is true.” Although scholars interpret these lines differently, as Bowie analyzes this statement he argues that the muses here are not speaking of false stories that are told in order to mislead, or stories mistakenly thought by their tellers to be true, but rather “to a category of poetry that is truly ‘fictional,’ in the sense that the poet is neither lying nor relating erroneously held views, but is . . . telling a story that he had made up to be like reality without claiming that it *is* reality.”¹⁰

Hedrick summarizes the division of narrative by Sextus Empiricus into categories of history, legend, and fiction. According to Sextus Empiricus, “history is the recording of things that are true and, hence, actually happened. Legend is the narration of events that have never happened and, hence, are false. Fiction is the narrating of things that are not real but are similar to real events in their narration.”¹¹ Abrams states that most current literary critics, building on the sixteenth-century proposal by Sir Philip

Cf. the discussion by Mark Zvi Brettler, “The New Biblical Historiography,” in *Israel’s Past in Present Research* (ed. V. Philips Long; Sources for Biblical and Theological Study 7; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1999), 47–48.

⁶ Craig L. Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels* (2nd ed.; Downers Grove: IVP, 2007), 19n12.

⁷ Bruce Chilton, *Beginning New Testament Study* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 22.

⁸ J. Bradley Chance, “Fiction in Ancient Biography: An Approach to a Sensitive Issue in Gospel Interpretation,” *PRS* 18 (1991): 141–42.

⁹ Loveday Alexander, “Fact, Fiction and the Genre of Acts,” *NTS* 44 (1998): 386–87.

¹⁰ E. L. Bowie, “Lies, Fiction and Slander in Early Greek Poetry,” in *Lies and Fiction in the Ancient World* (ed. Christopher Gill and T. P. Wiseman; Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993), 20–21.

¹¹ Charles W. Hedrick, “Realism in Western Narrative and the Gospel of Mark: A Prolegomenon,” *JBL* 126 (2007): 349.

Sidney, “hold that fictive sentences are meaningful according to the rules of ordinary, nonfictional discourse, but that, in accordance with conventions implicitly shared by the author and reader of a work of fiction, they are not put forward as assertions of fact, and therefore are not subject to the criterion of truth or falsity that applies to sentences of nonfictional discourse.”¹² Truth in the genre of fictional literature, then, is not what is empirically verifiable, but it is what is considered true within a particular conceptual system, whether rooted in an ideological worldview, or, as in the case of Lewis’s Narnia or Tolkien’s Middle Earth, created out of the cloth of the author’s imagination. The truth claims of fiction, then, are of a different kind from those made in realistic narrative. In the case of biblical fiction, truth is an aspect of reality that lies within the boundaries of divine omniscience and that at times must be accepted by faith apart from empirical corroboration.

Fiction, then, has two distinct senses that one must be careful not to conflate or confuse. On the one hand, for the historical scholar fiction refers to what is erroneous when measured by empirically verifiable data. On the other hand, for the literary scholar fiction is used to speak of the genre of imaginative literature that consciously communicates principles that the author considers true within a conceptual framework. As Sternberg trenchantly declares, “What opposes fiction to historiography is not the writer’s breach or avoidance but his independence of factuality.”¹³

In this essay, fiction is viewed in its literary sense as a subset of narrative in which the imaginative stories in the Bible have been composed in order to communicate aspects of spiritual or ethical truth. Just as factual, historical narrative is frequently employed in the Bible to teach what God wishes to reveal to humans, so the genre of fictional narrative is used for the same purpose.¹⁴ By drawing on both biblical scholarship and literary studies of narrative, this essay endeavors to do five things: (1) demonstrate the existence of the genre of fictional or imaginative literature in the Bible, particularly the OT; (2) investigate the literary strategies employed in fictional narratives; (3) briefly analyze a fictional wisdom story in the light of the strategies distinctive to fiction writing; (4) discuss how the wisdom books of Ecclesiastes and Job may plausibly be read as imaginative literature; and (5) draw some conclusions and implications for ministry and further research.

1. Examples of Biblical Fiction

The Bible is full of stories that range from realistic non-fictional accounts to narratives that embody the author’s invention. Ryken notes,

The stories in the Bible exist on a spectrum. At one end is the brief fragment in which we are told only the facts about what happened. Here the historical or documentary impulse governs. At the other end are stories in which the writer images the events in sufficient detail that we can recreate the experience in our imagination. The farther a

¹² M. H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (7th ed.; Boston: Heinle and Heinle, 1999), 95; cf. Peter Lamarque, *Fictional Points of View* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), 25.

¹³ Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, 26.

¹⁴ Gene Edward Veith, *Reading between the Lines: A Christian Guide to Literature* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1990), 118–19, notes well: “Some works of literature are in a realistic mode—although the reader should be alert to the mind of the writer behind the shaping. Some works of literature are in a fantasy mode—although the reader should be alert to the reality that can be disclosed in the play of the writer’s imagination. Realism and fantasy represent distinct literary approaches, both of which are congenial to Christianity.”

biblical narrative moves toward the second end, the more accurately we can call it a literary narrative.¹⁵

When the term fiction is used in the literary sense of language that emanates from the imagination rather than being a realistic description of external data, then numerous examples of literary fiction in the Bible can be adduced. In a very broad sense, every metaphor is technically a literary fiction because it declares what is not literally true. For example, in Ps 23:1 Yahweh is the psalmist's shepherd only in a non-literal sense, and in Ps 91:1 the psalmist abides in a non-literal shadow of Shaddai. Bar-Efrat states that in a metaphor "the word is used in a non-literal sense, there being similarity but no direct continuity between its literal and non-literal meanings, and the things which the word indicates in its literal and non-literal meanings belong to completely different and separate spheres."¹⁶

More directly to the point, fictional writing is also evident in a handful of fables in the OT. Fables present a moral or principle by ascribing human features to animals or plants,¹⁷ and in so doing "draw some comparison between one kind of reality and another."¹⁸ The fables by Jotham in Judg 9:8–15 and by Jehoash in 2 Kgs 14:8–10 (par. 2 Chr 25:17–19) are clear examples of non-literal language being used in fables to communicate the speakers' points.

Apocalyptic literature in both the OT and NT is replete with non-literal descriptions. Much of the content of Ezekiel, Daniel 7–12, Zechariah, and Revelation 4–22 is presented in a visionary mode, in which collages of fantastic pictures impressionistically evoke an emotional response in the reader. The portrayals of beasts and battles are not intended to be taken primarily as realistic descriptions to inform the mind; rather they are imaginative creations designed to touch the heart of the reader by employing a fictional strategy.

Biblical fiction is also represented by parables. According to the Gospels, Jesus frequently taught by parables, "brief fictions realistically portraying aspects of first-century Palestinian life,"¹⁹ both to make spiritual truths about the kingdom of God understandable to those predisposed to believe him and to obscure the same truths from those who were not inclined to accept him (Mark 4:10–12).²⁰ It is likely that the parables included in the extant text of the NT constitute only a selection of the stories that Jesus invented and told in his earthly teaching ministry.

Although parables are less frequent in the OT than in the Gospel accounts, there are several clear examples of this kind of imaginative story.²¹ Simon points to five similarly crafted stories that he calls

¹⁵ Leland Ryken, *Words of Delight: A Literary Introduction to the Bible* (2nd ed.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), 45.

¹⁶ Shimon Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible* (Bible and Literature Series 17; JSOTSup 70; Sheffield: Almond, 1989), 209.

¹⁷ Kevin J. Cathcart, "The Trees, the Beasts and the Birds: Fables, Parables and Allegories in the Old Testament," in *Wisdom in Ancient Israel* (ed. John Day et al; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 214.

¹⁸ Ann M. Vater Solomon, "Fable," in *Saga, Legend, Tale, Novella, Fable: Narrative Forms in Old Testament Literature* (ed. George W. Coats; JSOTSup 35; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1985), 118.

¹⁹ Charles W. Hedrick, *Parables as Poetic Fictions* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 3.

²⁰ Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral* (2nd ed.; Downers Grove: IVP, 2006), 294–96.

²¹ Cf. the surveys by John Drury, *The Parables in the Gospels: History and Allegory* (New York: Crossroad, 1985), 7–20, and Craig A. Evans, "Parables in Early Judaism," in *The Challenge of Jesus' Parables* (ed. Richard N. Longenecker; McMaster New Testament Studies; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 54–62, as well as the comprehensive study by Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*.

juridical parables because they judge the hearer.²² The most prominent of these parables is the story of the poor man's ewe, a fiction told by Nathan in 2 Sam 12:1–4 in his successful attempt to provoke David to acknowledge his sin with Bathsheba. By using realistic language that conceals the fact that the story is indeed a parable, Nathan imaginatively draws David into the conflict and without a word invites the king to give a legal judgment on the case. Nathan's tactic in telling this fictional parable works brilliantly, as David becomes so emotionally involved in the story that he indicts himself of his own guilt. Fokkelman concludes his excellent analysis of the scene with this assessment:

As a message to David, the parable is true, fictional, and fictitious. The king has positively perceived the report's fictional character, i.e. its literary and sometimes even poetic make-up, but has not been misled by this knowing that a prophet in action is a poet in action. Its fictitious aspect, on the contrary, remains completely hidden to him, and this is how the truth can penetrate him deeply and engage him. While David imagines the story to have really occurred, the truth is already working on him. From Nathan's point of view, fiction, made functional and attractive by literary devices, is the ideal vehicle for the truth and, as theologians say, for revelation.²³

In contrast to Aristotle's preference for historically factual parables (*Rhetoric* 2.20), the OT parables are typically imaginative fictions that in many ways parallel the parables used by Socrates in the dialogues of Plato.²⁴

This essay focuses on one wisdom story, which in many ways shares the features and strategies of the juridical parables. Von Rad identifies two wisdom stories in Prov 24:30–34 and in Ps 37:25, 35–36, as well as another two non-biblical examples in Sir 33:16–17 and 51:13–16. He comments,

Here we definitely have, rather, a traditional stylistic form in which the teacher could . . . clothe his instruction, and which also allowed of being extended into larger units. Our modern interest in the biographies of the biblical authors should not, therefore, be misled, for here we are scarcely dealing with genuine experiences; at any rate they appear in a highly conventionalized form.²⁵

The wisdom stories cited by von Rad, as well as the stories in Ecc 4:13–16 and 9:13–18, and the story in Prov 7:6–23, which will be examined in this study, are marked by the author's first-person account. By this means, the author lends an air of vivid realism to his narrative as though it were a scene that he has personally witnessed. Significant details in the texts, however, including direct quotations and rhythmic language, strongly suggest that the stories in fact emerge from the author's imagination rather than from his empirical observation. As such, they are fictions composed in order to teach principles of wisdom.

²² Uriel Simon, "The Poor Man's Ewe-Lamb: An Example of a Juridical Parable," *Bib* 48 (1967): 207–42.

²³ Jan P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel* (Studia Semitica Neerlandica 20; Assen: Gorcum, 1981), 81; cf. Michael S. Moore, "'Wise Women' or Wisdom Woman? A Biblical Study of Women's Roles," *Restoration Quarterly* 35 (1993): 153.

²⁴ Drury, *The Parables in the Gospels*, 8.

²⁵ Gerhard von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel* (1970; trans. James D. Martin; London: SCM, 1972), 38.

2. Strategies of Fictional Narratives

Before we examine Prov 7:26–33 as an exemplar of biblical fiction, it is beneficial to consider how such fictional narratives operate and what strategies characterize this genre. As one considers strategies of fictional narratives, two questions emerge.

2.1. How Does Imaginative Literature Teach Truth through Fiction?

In fiction writing, the author uses and adapts familiar literary conventions. For example, the standard fairy tale begins with “Once upon a time” and ends with “and they lived happily ever after,” and the reader is not surprised to find talking animals, wicked stepmothers, and benevolent fairies. To read fiction accurately “requires some detailed awareness of the grid of conventions upon which, and against which, the individual work operates.”²⁶ When one turns to the fictions in the Bible, however, it is not always easy to discern the literary conventions that would have been shared by the original author and readers two thousand or more years ago.

All narratives draw from a wide range of possible authorial points of view, but fiction in particular extends what the author is able to know up to the point of total omniscience. Because the author of fiction is able to know well beyond what would be directly observable, imaginative stories can reveal even the internal thoughts and motives of the characters. As Booth observes, “One of the most obviously artificial devices of the storyteller is the trick of going beneath the surface of the action to obtain a reliable view of a character’s mind and heart. Whatever our ideas may be about the natural way to tell a story, artifice is unmistakably present whenever the author tells us what no one in so-called real life could possibly know.”²⁷

As a subset of narrative, fiction is also marked by its rich characterization. The development of characters can be achieved by both explicit and implicit means. Although it uses some description, fiction typically reveals character by deeds. Bar-Efrat explains the significance of this narrative strategy: “Since one’s inner nature is embodied in external behavior a narrator can present the characters in action rather than spelling out their traits. In biblical narrative deeds do in fact serve as the foremost means of characterization, and we know biblical characters primarily through the way they act in varying situations.”²⁸

One of the most prominent means by which imaginative literature teaches truth is by simplifying issues as it removes ambiguity. Life as it is actually experienced is complex, but in a fictional world issues can be distilled into clear polarities or meaningful patterns.²⁹ This is particularly the case when the characters are required to make a decision, and the alternatives are presented as a stark choice between

²⁶ Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), 47.

²⁷ Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (2nd ed.; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 3; cf. John W. Sider, *Interpreting the Parables: A Hermeneutical Guide to Their Meaning* (Studies in Contemporary Interpretation; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 161.

²⁸ Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible*, 77.

²⁹ David M. Gunn and Danna Nolan Fewell, *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 103.

antithetical moral visions.³⁰ By this means, concrete situations are used in order to communicate abstract concepts, and the particulars in the story are constructed in order to teach universal principles.

2.2. Why Is Fiction Employed Rather Than a Factual Record?

Another way to ask this second question is “What advantages does fiction provide over non-fiction?” Aristotle addresses this issue in *On Poetics* 9:

The distinction between historian and poet is not in the one writing prose and the other verse . . . ; it consists really in this, that the one describes the thing that has been, and the other a kind of thing that might be. Hence poetry is something more philosophic and of graver import than history, since its statements are of the nature rather of universals, whereas those of history are singulars.

Because fiction writers are not constrained by the actual events of history, they are able to structure perception in ways that communicate their messages with optimal force. This structuring of perceptions usually moves in the direction of simplifying the issues that in real life are rather complex, so that the reader can view them more clearly. Instead of relying on detailed argumentation to make a point, the author draws simplified pictures of life that help the reader to see in a fresh way. Because of its ability to structure perception, fiction has the advantage of being able to present truth with a high degree of clarity. By this means, it can “encapsulate . . . the fundamental values that undergird the more complex decisions one must make in real life.”³¹ Furthermore, fictional portrayals lend themselves to unusual vividness that highlights the issues in view.

The purpose of the fictional presentation is to elicit the active participation of the reader by constructing a story that is familiar, even though of imaginative origin.³² The simplicity and brevity of fictional stories, moreover, actually lends a measure of ambiguity to them, and that very ambiguous character of fiction requires focused meditation by the reader. Rather than merely stating a principle that can be received passively, the fiction writer compels the reader to think through the issues that have been raised in the story, thus making the reader actively involved in the process of discovering truth.³³ By means of fiction the author also draws the reader into a profound emotional involvement with the story. As a result of this connection with the characters and plot of the narrative, “we feel what they feel, rejoice in their gladness, grieve at their sorrow and participate in their fate and experiences.”³⁴ This intense identification with the fictional text leads naturally into the reader’s acceptance of the explicit or implicit injunction of the author.³⁵ Hence, fiction can have powerful persuasive force because rather

³⁰ Cf. Carol A. Newsom, *The Book of Job: A Contest of Moral Imaginations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 50.

³¹ Newsom, *The Book of Job*, 46.

³² Veith, *Reading between the Lines*, 120.

³³ Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 12.

³⁴ Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible*, 47.

³⁵ Susan Rubin Suleiman, *Authoritarian Fictions: The Ideological Novel as a Literary Genre* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 32–33; Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, 429–30; Dale Patrick and Allen Scult, *Rhetoric and Biblical Interpretation* (Bible and Literature Series 26; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1990), 49.

than providing mere cognitive instruction, it presents an attractive and compelling vision that awakens the reader's moral imagination.³⁶

In addition, at a very basic level, fictional stories are pleasurable, and that feature stimulates people to read them when they might be less eager to begin a non-fictional text. Speaking of biblical narratives in general, Ryken roots their enduring appeal in their ability to address fundamental human impulses:

These stories are both factually realistic and romantically marvelous. They bring together two impulses that the human race is trying to join—reason and imagination, fact and mystery. The stories of the Bible nourish our need for both down-to-earth reality and the more-than-earthly. They appeal both to that part of us that is firmly planted on the earth and to that part of us that soars to the heavens.³⁷

3. Analysis of Proverbs 7:6–23

How does the wisdom story in Prov 7:6–23 teach truth through the genre of fiction? This story demonstrates a wide range of fictional features as the teacher exhorts the son, or pupil, to a life of wisdom. The image of the strange woman parallels and parodies the language of Woman Wisdom in chapter 8, before the two women are set side by side in their contrasting appeals to the youth in chapter 9. This contrast reflects the antithetical categories that dominate traditional wisdom. It is also significant that the seductress misappropriates the language of wisdom, as she leads the youth astray with persuasive words (*leqah*) in 7:21, in contrast to the positive references to *leqah* in 1:5; 4:2; 9:9; 16:21, 23. In 7:12 she is described as lurking at every corner, the same term (*'ārab*) that is used in 1:11 to refer to the appeal to the youth by violent young men who plan to rob the innocent. Both are bad companions who use appealing talk to bring others to moral destruction. The strange woman also appropriates erotic language that is used in the Song of Songs for the nurture of intimacy within a God-honoring relationship.³⁸

In addition to exploiting several familiar literary conventions, this fictional story also extends the authorial point of view. Within the framework of the teacher's interpretive commentary in 7:1–5 and 24–27, the author probes beyond what would have been recognizable by a distant observer. He is able to discern the woman's deceitful motives (7:10) and her predatory pattern (7:11–12) that contradict the words with which she propositions the youth in 7:15. Davis suggests that the term *nēsūrat* used to describe her heart in 7:10 is best rendered “guarded, closed, blockaded,” as also in 2:8, 11, so “behind her passionate words and gestures lies a blockaded heart, and so there is no possibility of genuine relationship.”³⁹ The author is also able to quote her words to the youth, which one must suspect would have been spoken surreptitiously rather than within earshot of others.

³⁶ Vigen Guroian, *Tending the Heart of Virtue* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 20.

³⁷ Ryken, *Words of Delight*, 39.

³⁸ For specific parallels, see Scott C. Jones, “Wisdom’s Pedagogy: A Comparison of Proverbs VII and 4Q184,” *VT* 53 (2003): 70–71. Examples include “myrrh” (Song 4:6; 5:5), “aloes” (4:14), “cinnamon” (4:14), “love-making” (5:18), and seeking in the street and in the squares (5:6–7). The same point is expounded well by Daniel Grossberg, “Two Kinds of Sexual Relationship in the Hebrew Bible,” *Hebrew Studies* 35 (1994): 8–9.

³⁹ Ellen F. Davis, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs* (Westminster Bible Companion; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000), 60.

In characterizing the seductress, the teacher uses both explicit and implicit means to describe what she is like. In the interpretive introduction, she is called an adulteress and a wayward wife (7:5). In contrast to 5:15–20, she is functioning outside the bounds of marriage, and thus she is a *zārâ*. In her dress she appears as though she were a prostitute (7:10), even though in fact she is a married woman (7:5, 19–20). The author’s description of her defiant promiscuity (7:11–12) is borne out by the fact that she is active and calculating in accosting the passive and clueless young man (7:13).⁴⁰ In contrast to the language of mutuality that predominates in the Song of Songs,⁴¹ she does all the talking in leading him to his destruction (7:14–23). Making effective use of her social position and splendid possessions, she seduces him to join her in an immoral tryst. To complicate matters, according to Lev 7:19–21 the meat of the votive offering could not be eaten in a state of ritual uncleanness, so when the woman’s telling the youth that she has fellowship offerings at home is juxtaposed with her sexual proposition, she is also proposing an action that violates the stipulations of the Mosaic law.

By detailing such an unambiguous solicitation to sin, the author clarifies the issue and its consequences. In his concluding hortatory words, the teacher indicates that what he has described is the pattern by which many people have been brought to disaster (7:26–27). This story, then, is not just a specific incident in history, but it is intended as an example story that applies well beyond the case of a particular individual.

Why does Prov 7 employ fiction rather than a factual record? By inventing a realistic but imaginative scene, the author is able to structure and focus perceptions. Embedded within a specific interpretative framework (7:1–5, 24–27), the fictional wisdom story finds additional significant linkages to the larger structure of the book of Proverbs. The strange woman is the antithesis to the wife with whom the young man should be exhilarated (5:15–20), to the worthy woman of 31:10–31,⁴² and to Woman Wisdom herself (chs. 8–9). Moreover, by constructing the story with its specific details, the author is able to present an unusually tempting set of conditions, for the fulfilled vow provides a rare opportunity for a sumptuous meal, the inventory of her luxurious possessions presents the lure of the exotic,⁴³ and her husband’s absence diminishes the possibility of detection.⁴⁴ Both in the persona of the seductress and in the strategy of the author, “every element is calculated for maximum impact.”⁴⁵

Through fiction the author is also able to use description rather than explanation to make his important point with compelling force. The passage begins with a distant shot of a young man mindlessly wending his way through the city in the direction of the house of the seductress. The focus then settles on the woman, who comes out in the dress of a prostitute as she aggressively accosts him. To this visual picture, sound is added as the woman flatters, allures, tempts, and entices the youth to make his fateful decision to follow her. At that point, the observant author steps in to interpret the calamity that the reader has imaginatively witnessed.

⁴⁰ Mieke Heijerman, “Who Would Blame Her? The ‘Strange Woman’ of Proverbs 7,” in *Reflections on Theology and Gender* (ed. Fokkeliën van Dijk-Hemmes and Athalya Brenner; Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1994), 23.

⁴¹ Richard Clifford, *Proverbs* (OTL; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1999), 87.

⁴² Cf. the numerous verbal parallels cited in Jones, “Wisdom’s Pedagogy,” 74, including the only two OT uses of the Hebrew term *marbaddim* in Prov 7:16 and 31:22.

⁴³ R. N. Whybray, *Proverbs* (NCBC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 115.

⁴⁴ Kathleen Farmer, *Who Knows What Is Good?* (International Theological Commentary; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 49.

⁴⁵ Davis, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs*, 60–61.

The language that the author places in the mouth of the strange woman is calculated to elicit the reader's active participation. In aggressively initiating the seduction and alleging that she was waiting just for him (7:15), she plays on the male fantasy of being irresistibly desired by a sensuous woman.⁴⁶ Furthermore, the seductress appeals to all of the senses to create an allurements that is overwhelming even to the reader of the text. By placing these words in her mouth, the author causes the reader to feel the powerful force of her siren call.

The imaginative story in 7:6–23 demonstrates the strategic advantages that fiction provides over non-fiction. The graphic depiction of the woman's invitation to sexual delights sparks immediate interest as it draws the reader imaginatively into her erotic seduction.⁴⁷ By using a compelling personification of folly that preys upon the sexual vulnerability of young men, the author imaginatively leads the readers to totter at the edge of disaster, so that they will acknowledge their need to heed the warnings of wisdom.

By constructing a cautionary tale of the destruction of a youth who lacks maturity and wisdom, the author describes and then unmasks the powerful seduction not just by an immoral woman, but by folly itself. This fictional story, then, is intended to equip the youth to anticipate the various temptations that folly presents, to see through its blandishments, and to respond wisely to it to avoid potential disaster. The sage

relies on his descriptive powers and his ability to reconstruct imaginatively the woman's stratagems and seductive conversation, so that the warning is conveyed not by schematized instruction, but by introducing the young man into the ways of the world and bringing him to the woman's house, in order to show him that it is a death trap and that only a fool will satisfy his desire at such a price.⁴⁸

4. Ecclesiastes and Job as Imaginative Literature

This article interprets the wisdom story in Prov 7:6–23 as a fiction that the wisdom teacher specially composed to communicate to young men in a particularly potent way the dangers inherent in the powerful allurements of folly. Making extensive use of the language, conventions, and strategies of imaginative literature, the author endeavors to awaken the moral imagination of those who otherwise would be prone to succumb to the lure of folly rather than adhering to the way of wisdom.

Although this study has focused on one wisdom story, its conclusions may well have broader implications for other OT wisdom texts. On a larger scale, it could be that the autobiographical discourse in Ecclesiastes signals the use of an accepted fictional convention; in other words, the book is an exemplary tale writ large.⁴⁹ This would be compatible with Longman's identification of the genre

⁴⁶ Grossberg, "Two Kinds of Sexual Relationships in the Hebrew Bible," 12, notes well: "Here the woman is the sole initiator of the action and the prime actor. The young man is largely passive and acted upon, whereas she speaks smoothly, comes toward him, is boisterous, is rebellious; she lurks, she grabs, she kisses, she acts defiantly, she finds him, she decks her couch, she sprinkles her bed, invites him to drink deeply of love and to revel in love, she sways him, she leads him astray, and she strikes many dead. In contrast to these nineteen far-reaching actions, all performed by the woman, the wisdom writer makes the young man the subject of a mere four verbs . . ."

⁴⁷ Michael V. Fox, *Proverbs 1–9* (AB 18A; New York: Doubleday, 2000), 252.

⁴⁸ William McKane, *Proverbs* (OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970), 332.

⁴⁹ Leo G. Perdue, *Proverbs* (Interpretation; Louisville: John Knox, 2000), 135.

of Ecclesiastes as framed wisdom autobiography, although it would not necessitate his specific literary connection with fictional Akkadian autobiographical texts.⁵⁰

A difficult interpretive question for the book of Job is the relationship of the narrative to factual history.⁵¹ Does this book record the literal account of a calamity that overwhelmed Job at a specific time and place, along with the transcripts of the actual words spoken by Job and his friends as they endeavored to come to terms with this tragedy? Or is the book a *māšāl* that “illumines some enduring condition or recurring experience/situation by way of analogy”?⁵² The historicity of the book of Job must not be rejected on *a priori* grounds. The biblical allusions to Job in Ezek 14:14, 20 and James 5:11 do not state that he was a fictional character, but rather they refer to him just as an historical figure would be indicated. The question of the historical factualness of the book of Job, then, has to be decided by a careful consideration of the textual data in the book.

The opening paragraph of Job uses a literary pattern that finds close parallels both in historical narrative (1 Sam 1:1) and in imaginative parable (2 Sam 12:1). What is intriguing is that the author sets the book outside of Israel in the land of Uz, and he introduces Job as a man who is not in the covenant family. The introduction proceeds to describe Job’s family and possessions in ideal terms. Job himself is portrayed as the epitome of righteousness (1:1), an assessment that is twice endorsed by Yahweh (1:8; 2:3). Although the evidence is not definitive, the details of the initial verses of the book hint that the opinions of the Babylonian Talmud tractate Baba Batra 15a and of Maimonides (*Guide for the Perplexed* III:22) that Job is a parable could well be indicative of the genre of the book.

Additional internal evidence comes from the poetic dialogues that constitute the major section of the book of Job. The artistic qualities of these poems appear to be explained better by conscious craftsmanship rather than by artful spontaneity, which leads Archer to conclude that “the main body of the text reads like a poetic and highly artistic composition, employing language which would not normally be used by persons speaking extemporaneously in a real life situation.”⁵³ The intricate design discernable in the dialogues suggests that the book is not a transcript of actual, unprepared conversations between Job and his friends. The book of Job, rather, may well be explained better as a divinely-inspired work of imaginative literature, in which the author explores the lofty theme of the problem of evil by setting forth an ideal case study and then by constructing a series of speeches that represent the best efforts by humans to resolve the issue. By this means, the book of Job is able to transcend the necessary limitations inherent in any actual human example in order to focus on the theological issue in its most comprehensive dimensions.

5. Conclusions and Implications

This article demonstrates that the wisdom story in Prov 7:6–23 is best viewed as a fictional narrative that exploits to great effect the conventions of imaginative literature in order to persuade the reader in an unusually vivid way. In addition, it suggests that the wisdom books of Ecclesiastes and Job may

⁵⁰ Tremper Longman, *Fictional Akkadian Autobiography* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1991), 41–43; *ibid.*, *The Book of Ecclesiastes* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 17–20.

⁵¹ The following three paragraphs are adapted from the discussion of the literature of the book of Job in Daniel J. Estes, *Handbook on the Wisdom Books and Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 16–17.

⁵² John H. Stek, “Job: An Introduction,” *CTJ* 32 (1997): 444.

⁵³ Gleason L. Archer, *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction* (3rd ed.; Chicago: Moody, 1994), 509.

well be read best as examples of biblical fiction crafted to teach theological truths that could not be expressed as well if the authors had been limited by the constraints of actual historical experiences.

The relationship between literature and truth is an ancient and complex question, for as Lamarque observes, “just how literature intersects with truth, what relevance truth has to literary value, whether literature is essentially to be conceived as a vehicle for truth, even what ‘truth’ might mean when applied to works of fiction: these questions go to the very heart of literary studies.”⁵⁴ When addressing the subject of fiction and truth in the Bible, many scholars allege that the historical narratives of the Bible are full of falsehoods. In light of this denial of the veracity of the biblical texts, it is understandable that evangelicals who hold to the truthfulness of the Bible could be prone to consider the idea of biblical fiction an oxymoron. This essay, however, demonstrates that the term “fiction” can refer not only to what is false, but also in a literary sense to the genre of imaginative literature. This mode of fictional writing has a long history from ancient times to the present day, and its distinctives and strategies have been analyzed and expounded by literary scholars. When clear biblical examples of the use of the genre of fictional literature are adduced, as for example in the parables of Jesus and in wisdom stories such as Prov 7:6–23, then the existence of imaginative literature in the Bible must be acknowledged.

Because of the ambiguity presented by the two senses of fiction and the confusion that can easily enter into the discussion, biblical scholars and expositors must define precisely what they mean when they speak of fiction and truth in the Bible. To read historical narratives as though they were falsehoods is to fictionalize the text. On the other hand, to insist that texts composed in the genre of fiction (i.e., imaginative literature) must be read as records of literal fact is to literalize them. Both of these approaches fail to read the Bible accurately because they do not treat it according to the distinctives of its literary genres. Instead, historical narratives should be read as reliable records of what actually happened in time and space, but biblical fictions must be read as the imaginative texts that they are.

How, then, should pastors, students, and scholars approach the fictional stories of the OT wisdom literature? How should they read, study, and teach to derive the most benefit from them?

First, stories are composed to be heard as complete narratives, not to be dissected as though they were logical arguments. When a biblical story is taught or preached, it is important to tell it as a story and let its literary power work on the audience. Just as Nathan’s parable brought obstinate David to his knees in repentance, so the stories of the Bible can have the same life-transforming effect today. This inherent power is diluted when the story is treated as though it were some other kind of literature.

Second, because familiarity can breed contempt, or at least inattentiveness, it can be helpful to retell a story like Job in a fresh way. Just as Shakespeare’s plays are often updated and set in more recent periods, so recasting Job in twenty-first-century terms can produce a new appreciation of its enduring message. To do this, a preacher or teacher must ask, “If the author of Job were telling his story today, how would he communicate the same points?” This strategy can be effective in building an applicational bridge from the ancient text to the contemporary context.

Third, the OT wisdom stories assume the worldview of biblical wisdom, so they must be understood within that conceptual framework. Before studying or teaching either the short fictional stories in Proverbs and Ecclesiastes or a longer narrative like Job, it is important to get a firm grasp of the themes of wisdom.⁵⁵ That background will provide a much more profound understanding of the wisdom story. In order to understand fictional literature, we must enter into the imaginative world that the author

⁵⁴ Lamarque, *Fictional Points of View*, 92.

has constructed. To comprehend and appreciate what C. S. Lewis says in the *Chronicles of Narnia*, we first have to step through the wardrobe and assume a different kind of world. Similarly, to grasp the OT wisdom stories, we have to enter into the conceptual world of wisdom and understand it on its own terms.

Fourth, much scholarly work on biblical fiction remains to be done. Biblical narrative in general, and biblical fiction in particular, has not often enough drawn on the insights of literary scholars. It is true that biblical specialists have appropriated insights from some literary scholars with an interest in the Bible, especially Robert Alter, Meir Sternberg, Leland Ryken, Adele Berlin, Northrop Frye, and Frank Kermode. A few biblical scholars such as Jan Fokkelman and Wilfred Watson have crossed over to the discipline of literary analysis and by this means have developed excellent insights on the biblical texts. Much more must be done, however, in integrating the skills and insights of biblical and literary specialists. Only when that is done can we clearly hear the wisdom stories as the imaginative literary texts they are and thus be able to feel the full force of their messages to us.

⁵⁵ A brief summary of the worldview of biblical wisdom is found in Daniel J. Estes, "Wisdom and Biblical Theology," in *Dictionary of the Old Testament Wisdom, Poetry and Writings* (ed. Tremper Longman and Peter Enns; Downers Grove: IVP, 2008), 853–58.