

# The New Testament and narratology

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## **Opsomming**

Na 'n inleiding waarin die konteks geskets word waarbinne narratiewe analise van die Nuwe Testament verstaan moet word, asook die noodsaaklikheid van so 'n benadering, word daar in twee afdelings aandag gegee aan die implikasies daarvan vir die interpretasie van sekere geskrifte in die Nuwe Testament. In die eerste deel word die tema van die artikel in die lig van 'n literêr-historiese aanpak behandel. Daar word aangetoon hoe daar in die Nuwe-Testamentiese Wetenskap veel meer aandag aan die wording van geskrifte as aan die geskrifte self gegee word. Die tweede hoofdeel van die artikel word gewy aan 'n bespreking van die implikasies van narratologie vir die Evangelies, Handeling van die Apostels en die Openbaring van Johannes.

## **Summary**

The article deals with narratology and the New Testament. A few introductory remarks explain the context of interpretation and the need for a narratological approach to certain New Testament writings. In two major sections the theme is developed from a literary-historical perspective and applied to certain New Testament writings. It is argued that too much emphasis has been placed on the origin of New Testament documents and that a narratological approach of some of them is of particular importance. The gospels, Acts of the Apostles and the Revelation of John are discussed as narratives in the second part of the article.

The right to tell one's own story is a weapon of the marginalized in the struggle against identity in a world of uniformity (Fackre, 1983: 347).

What role does narratology have to play in the interpretation of the New Testament? A prominent one, I would argue. Was Jesus not a storyteller, and were the early Christians not committed to promote their beliefs by telling all sorts of stories? Are there not many narrative texts in the New Testament? And is narratology not the study of narrative? Let me begin my discussion of the topic with a few general remarks about New Testament studies and literary theory.

New Testament scholars are by definition literary as well as historical critics. Their field of study includes ancient documents and the world out of which these documents arose. In view of this, it could be expected that New Testament scholars would form part of the scientific circle of literary and historical critics. Furthermore, it could be expected that scholars with a mutual interest, for example literary critics who are all interested in 'texts', would in some way or another influence one another with regard to their reflection and their practice. This is obviously a positive and perhaps even an idealist view of a scientific circle. Theory is not always in accordance with practice and this, in addition to other reasons, will explain why some literary critics, including New Testament critics, are presently reflecting on the possibilities of narratology and reception theory while others are involved in the

study of deconstruction, and yet others are totally unaware of theories of literature on which they base their interpretation of texts.

In this regard the history of New Testament research reveals an interesting insight into the history and *Wirkungsgeschichte* of the science of literature. Wittingly and unwittingly New Testament scholars have been influenced by current ideas in literary circles. It is not difficult to show how the interest of New Testament scholars, moving from *author* to *text* to *reader*, has directly been influenced by exactly the same theories of literature which influenced literary critics in other fields of literary study. Positivism, Structuralism, Phenomenology, Marxism, Feminism, Reception Aesthetics and other perspectives formed and form the basis of the symbolic universes of scholars of the New Testament in the same way as those of their colleagues in other literary disciplines. The only reason why I mention this all too obvious fact, is because it is not always taken into account by practitioners of New Testament criticism and also not by those literary critics who are unaware of the work which is being done by New Testament scholars. It is often the case that scholars are unaware of the philosophical basis of their respective disciplines or of the reasons why they practice their discipline in a particular way. This holds true for many biblical scholars also in connection with those theories which influence their approach to ancient texts.

These few preliminary remarks set the parameters of my understanding of the theme of my article. I am aware of the fact that my view of what the New Testament is, what the science of literature is, what interpretation is and so on, determine my understanding of the topic. In view of this and other limitations such as the fact that it is not common practice in our country that New Testament and other literary critics share and exchange ideas, in other words that one cannot necessarily suppose mutual knowledge about the subject matter, I will attempt to deal with this topic in the first place as a New Testament critic who also realises that his task is a literary one. In addition to the introduction the article comprises two sections. Firstly I shall develop the theme from a literary-historical perspective by taking into account aspects of the history of New Testament research, and in the second section aspects of the New Testament as part of the narrative legacy of ancient times will be treated with a view to the implications of insights of narratology for the study of New Testament texts.

For many the New Testament is a book, a holy document written shortly after the founding of the church in the first century of the Christian era. This is partly due to the way in which the New Testament is presented to the modern reader, a single book comprising a number of documents divided into chapters and verses, or as the second section of a book, the Bible. It would be agreed that the understanding and interpretation of any form of communication, including a written document, is to a great extent determined by the way in which it is presented. While gestures, tone of voice and other factors, in addition to the way in which the material as such is organised, play a role in communicating a message, cover, title, subtitle and many other aspects of presentation, among other things, determine the way in which a written

document is read and understood. Perhaps this is the one, most important fact to remember when the New Testament is approached from a literary perspective. The New Testament is a collection of ancient writings written by different authors from different perspectives for different reasons and probably for different purposes. It is not one book, it is a collection of books. The titles, presentations of modern editions and versions of New Testament writings, divisions into chapters, paragraphs and verses are all but original. These aspects reveal the purpose for which these documents came to be used, namely as lectionary units and preaching material of a religious community.

However, although all these reading indicators may be necessary and helpful, they certainly distract the attention of readers from the character and purpose of these writings. Before they became the canonised documents of a new religion, that is a sect of Judaism, they existed individually as texts written for specific purposes by people who were members of a minority group, in many ways a marginalised group, who had to promote their own convictions and beliefs. In short, early Christians produced writings to further their convictions, and current presentations of these documents in modern versions with titles, divisions of chapters, verses and so on are fictions, however well-intended and helpful they might be for the use of the New Testament in the church. But what are these writings? From a literary-historical point of view, depending of course on what is meant by the term, this is an intriguing question, which, for the purpose of the discussion of the topic, needs to be illuminated.

The history of research in connection with early Christian documents is revealing. Perhaps the most influential period in the scientific research of these texts is the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Since the Reformation the so-called grammatical-historical, or literal meaning of Scripture had been promoted in contrast to the deeper and spiritual meaning of earlier ages. It was, however, in the previous century, and especially in the early part of the twentieth century that biblical writings came to be viewed in terms of current convictions about literature. Under the influence of a variety of historicist and positivistic assumptions, biblical writings came to be studied in view of their origin and evolution and as part of the current convictions of their time of origin. The history of literature, especially the history of early Christian literature, became the history of the growth and evolution of early Christian writings, that is the study of the sources upon which the final texts were presumably based. In accordance with current scholarship, it was asserted that early Christian writings were of secondary value, *Urliteratur*, in fact that they were not literary at all (cf Overbeck, 1954). In his epoch-making essay on the place of the gospels in the history of literature, K L Schmidt (1923), for instance, maintained that the gospels were cult legends, *Kleinliteratur*, and comparable to folk stories, not to the so-called *Hochliteratur* of Greek and Hellenistic authors. Under the influence of these and other views on the origin of cultic texts, the gospels and other New Testament writings came to be regarded as second-rate productions of cultic communities – the end products of a process of transmission of oral traditions which were collected and writtern down. A very sophisticated methodology, called *Formgeschichte*

(form criticism), was developed to study the history of the origin and growth of the oral (and written) sources which lay behind the written texts. On the assumption that it was possible to study the origin and growth of inscripturated texts in their original oral forms, the history of early Christian literature became the hypothetical literary-historical study of forms behind the written texts (cf Bultmann, 1970 & Dibelius, 1971). The written texts were broken down into smaller units (*Gattungen*) such as parables, controversy stories, miracle stories, and so on, separated from the contexts within which they were transmitted in written form and studied like archaeological artefacts by tracing their development through the presumed layers of transmission which are hidden behind the written text. In terms of biblical criticism, study of the literary history of biblical writings became the study of the growth and origin of texts.

This is not the place to evaluate the so-called historico-critical reconstruction of early Christian writings. I simply wish to highlight the very influential hypothesis that early Christian writings like the gospels, were the products of cultic communities and not of individual authors, and that the study of the history of these texts should be a study of their growth and origin, rather than of their resemblance to other texts. Although much attention was paid to the study of form, the main emphasis was on the history and transmission of smaller literary units, that is on forms within a form, and not on the textual characteristics of the forms such as gospels, acts or apocalypses into which these smaller units were embedded. In view of this the so-called literary character of the New Testament was denied and it was concluded that Christian literature started to be written in the second century when authors adopted Greco-Roman standards (cf Norden, 1958:451 ff.; Overbeck, 1954). With the emphasis mainly on the so-called non-literary character of New Testament writings, it is clear why and how it happened that early Christian writings such as the gospels came to be regarded as *sui generis*. What happened was that scholars first of all based their views about the form or genre of the writings of the New Testament on the aforementioned presumed literary history of these texts and furthermore valued the form of these writings in the light of so-called criteria of literary characteristics of contemporary and earlier Greco-Roman writings. The problem of genre is, however, much more complicated, as we all know. A few remarks in this connection will help to explain the importance of the narrative paradigm in any discussion of the literary history of these writings.

There seems to be little agreement between literary theorists about the nature and characteristics of genre (cf Hempfer, 1973). Generally speaking, genre refers to a group of literary texts which are related to one another by shared resemblances. That explains why genre is very often described by comparison of generic features of types and subtypes, for example drama, epic, lyric, novel, biography, sonnet and so on. It is, however, also possible to describe 'genre' in terms of text types, that is, in accordance with the organisation of the material in a given text, for example narrative, argument, exposition, description and listing. The latter approach to the problem of classifica-

tion of text types seems to be useful, since it is possible to apply significant textual criteria to describe a particular text.

If one considers the writings of the New Testament from the perspective of text type, that is in view of the way in which the material is organised in a particular discourse, the matter becomes interesting, and the history of early Christian literature a totally different case. Irrespective of the subclasses into which the different New Testament writings can be divided, it seems to be clear that there are mainly two types of texts presented in the New Testament and that they are of a narrative and non-narrative character. The material in the letters of the New Testament is organised in the form of argumentation or exposition while the gospels, *Acts of the apostles* and the so-called *Revelation of John* are narratives.

The following New Testament writings can be regarded as narratives: *The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, Acts of the apostles, and Revelation of John*. Roughly speaking, there seems to be enough reason to subdivide these texts into three subclasses, although it should be remembered that these subdivisions do not imply that the texts are not narratives. Gospels form a separate subclass. In addition, the *Acts of the apostles* and the *Revelation of John* can be classified separately. In spite of the objections raised by proponents of the evolutionary view of early Christian literature mentioned above, there seems to be no serious reason why cognisance should not be taken of the *textual* resemblances between these texts and other Greco-Roman and Semitic texts of a narrative nature. The writings of the New Testament fit well into a very long tradition of Greek and Semitic narrative literature, even though they cannot be compared on literary artistic levels.

Although it would be impossible to maintain that the gospels were written under the influence or even on the model of ancient biographies like the lives of philosophers or emperors of Greek and Roman authors (cf. Vorster, 1984), the biographical aspects of these narratives should nevertheless be considered (cf. Dihle, 1983). Luke-Acts, that is the *Gospel of Luke* and the *Acts of the apostles* as a cycle, has on the other hand, on the ground of narrative criteria successfully been compared with ancient novels written during the first three centuries after Christ. These include *The acts of Thomas, The Alexander romance, Chaereas and Callirhoe, Clitophon and Leucippe, Daphnis and Chloe, The Ephesian story, Theagenes and Chariclea, Joseph and Asenath, The life of Aesop, The golden ass, The pseudo-Clementines* and the *Satyricon* (cf. Praeder, 1981). There are, however, those who regard the *Acts of the apostles* as Hellenistic history (cf. Plümacher, 1972) which, of course, is also a form of narrative. Texts written from an apocalyptic perspective can also be classified as a subclass of narrative. These texts became popular during the period between the Old and New Testaments. Because they are concerned with supernatural realities, symbolic language and concealing codes play a prominent part. The content of these texts is determined by the idea that this world is passing away and that a new world is coming. The past and present are read through the lens of a coming future, which is revealed by means of visions, dreams and messages transmitted from the supernatural realm (cf. Vorster, 1985).

These few remarks illustrate how deeply embedded a major part of the texts of the New Testament is in the narrative tradition of ancient Greek and Semitic literature. Let us now, in view of some insights of narratology, turn to a few implications of the fact that the gospels, the *Acts of the apostles* and the *Revelation of John* are narratives.

There can be little doubt that Jesus was a storyteller and that early Christians transmitted and established their newly found convictions by retelling the story and stories of Jesus. This was a very powerful, but also natural way of promoting the ideas of a new religion. The gospels contain a great variety of short narratives ranging from parables, controversy stories, and legends, to miracle and biographical stories, while the *Acts of the apostles* relate the narratives in the lives of the apostles in their attempt to propagate their beliefs from Jerusalem to Rome. The *Revelation of John* on the other hand, presents us with the creative imagination of an early Christian who tried to persuade his readers to persist under difficult circumstances by telling them about things revealed to him from an apocalyptic perspective.

From a narratological point of view, these stories offer a variety of insights into the art of storytelling in ancient times. The narrative paradigm furthermore presents the reader of New Testament narrative texts with challenging problems and possibilities in the interpretation of these narrative texts.

Since the days of Aristotle (cf. his *Poetics*) it has been realised that both the *narrative message* (narrative world of events, existents, sequence, structure, time and space) and *narrative means* (narrator, point of view, style, language, commentary and so on) are the building blocks of any story (cf. Chatman, 1978, also Genette, 1980). It has been argued that the essence of narrative art lies in '... the relationship between the teller and the tale, and the other relationship between the teller and the audience' (Scholes & Kellogg, 1966:240).

In spite of the fact that the authors of gospels have in view of the results of gospel criticism been regarded as collectors and redactors of tradition, it has been realised during the last decade that they have in a very significant way contributed to the presentation and structuring of their material (Vorster, 1980). It has in fact become clear that gospels are narratives, that the material they contain is presented through narrative means and also that their messages are narrative messages (cf eg. Culpepper, 1983; Edwards, 1985; Kingsbury, 1986; Malbon, 1983; Rhoads & Michie, 1982 and Tannehill, 1977). While these texts have been the object of historical reconstruction for many years and in many ways have been regarded as windows through which the real world behind the texts can be seen, the narrative paradigm has brought new challenges for those who have come to realise that, despite the fact-likeness character (cf Wright, 1984:396) of early Christian narratives like the gospels and *Acts of the apostles*, they still remain man-made representations of narrative worlds and works (cf Petersen, 1984). Let us consider a few matters in this regard.

With the exception of the *Revelation of John* all other narrative texts in the New Testament are presented by third person narrators from an omniscient

narrative point of view. In the Gospel of Mark, for example, the narrator knows everything that needs to be known about the characters and events in his story, even the thoughts, feelings and emotions of the characters (cf Vorster, 1980: 58 ff). He knows that Jesus silenced demons because they knew him (1:334); that the disciples thought he was a ghost and were afraid because they did not understand (6:49–52); that the Pharisees thought to test Jesus (8:11); that Peter did not know what to say (9:6); that Jesus knew about the conversation of his disciples (9:33–35) and so on. He even knows what happened to Jesus in Gethsemane although, according to his story, there was no witness to hear what was happening. He reports what Jesus prayed (14:35) when Jesus was alone, simply because he knows everything. He knows the minds of his characters (Mk. 3:6) but withholds the information from Jesus. He knows their emotions (1:27,41; 4:41; 14:4.11,19) what they see and hear (14:67; 15:35) and even what they think (2:6,8). For the sake of the reader the narrator comments on the thoughts (cf 2:6, 8) and actions of characters (1:22b; 2:18; 3:6; 5:30). He explains strange terminology (eg. Aramaic in 5:41) and narrates the actions of the characters in an evaluative manner and in this way affords the norms of judgement for his reader.

The same holds true of the narrators of the other gospels and the *Acts of the apostles* who are also third person narrators who relate their stories from an omniscient point of view. In the case of the *Revelation of John* it is different. In accordance with other apocalyptic texts, and the content of the message, the story of John is told from a first person perspective. Because of the type of information with which the reader is presented, that is imaginative presentations of otherworldly realms and events, this observation is not without significance. In contrast to the gospels and acts the author of the *Revelation of John* is supposedly telling his readers about the world and time to come and accordingly, because the otherworldly is unknown to mankind, he makes use of a first person narrator to whom the mysteries have been revealed. In accordance with conventions of his time he uses symbolic language and concealing codes.

Another aspect which is of paramount importance for the interpretation of New Testament narratives, is the phenomenon of storyworld. It is not so much the fact that the events and existents of these stories are foreign to a modern reader, as the idea that these worlds are narrated worlds that often cause problems. Indeed, the worldview or symbolic universes of these texts are very unfamiliar to people who live in a modern society. That one can, however, attempt to understand. In addition to knowledge of Greek, social and cultural conditions and customs of those times and information about the geography and history of the peoples involved, one needs to understand that these texts are narratives and that the world they present is a narrative construction. This is a very important discovery for historically-minded people who tend to focus on the fact-likeness of much of the information in these texts. Is Peter of the Gospel of Matthew not the Peter who lived in Galilee during the life of Jesus, and are the cities and towns not the ones we know from history and archaeology? Yes indeed, but one also has to say no immediately. They are the characters and existents in the storyworld of the

New Testament narratives. For literary critics it might be obvious that the worlds of stories are narrated worlds and not descriptions of how things 'really were and how they really happened'. For many New Testament critics on the other hand, this is a frightening idea on many scores, despite the fact that it is common knowledge that the gospels and acts are not so-called historical accounts. Some would accept the narrativity of certain characters and events, of certain stories, for example the parables, but it would be difficult to convince them of the narrative implications of the gospels and acts as such. This is so in spite of their rejection of the nineteenth century idea that Mark wrote a history of the life of Jesus. Let us develop the problem a little further.

What if one were to argue that the gospels and acts are historical narratives, as some do? From a narrative point of view this is a very interesting problem. I have elsewhere argued (Vorster, 1984: 115 ff.) that even in the writing of history there is no one-to-one correspondence between object and description because neither linguistic signs nor historiography functions in that way. In short, historical description is nothing more than narrative, that is remaking of reality. It is in this remaking of reality that the challenge of the narrative paradigm lies for readers of the New Testament and especially for critics who make the narrative character of the writings under discussion seriously. Are these narratives thus fiction? Obviously they are, but this is a unfruitful way to look at these writings because of the superficial way in which fiction is very often handled. Fiction is used here in the sense of man-made, that is remaking of reality. In the same way as it is impossible to repeat any historical fact, it is impossible to narrate 'facts' without remaking them. And in this way New Testament narratives are undoubtedly fictions which invite the reader to enter into their storyworlds.

Because of the importance of the historical basis of Christian faith, among other things, a lot of effort has been put into the discovery of the original form of the utterances and narratives of Jesus. A case in point is the historical-critical research of the parables during this century (cf. Jeremias, 1970).

Parables are metaphorical narratives, short stories of which Jesus apparently told quite a number in his attempt to resocialise his hearers in terms of their religious thinking. If one compares the different versions of the same parable in the different gospels, it becomes clear that these stories had undergone various changes according to the context of communication (cf. Mk. 4 against Mt. 13). Closer investigation also reveals that the authors of the different gospels used these parables, which are mostly selfcontaining stories, in contexts which often not only vary in the different gospels (cf. Mt. 13:31-32; Mk. 4:30-32 and Lk. 13:18-19), but also used them in contexts which they apparently created for the purpose of conveying a particular meaning by imposing the context onto the parable. This is clearly the case with the parable of the Good Samaritan which Luke used to answer the question of who is one's neighbour (cf. Lk. 10:29, 30-35 and 36-37):

'And who is my neighbour?' Jesus replied, 'A man was on his way from Jerusalem down to Jericho when he fell in with robbers, who stripped him, beat him,



and went off leaving him half dead. It so happened that a priest was going down by the same road; but when he saw him, he went past on the other side. So too a Levite came to the place, and when he saw him went past on the other side. But a Samaritan who was making the journey came upon him, and when he saw him was moved to pity. He went up and bandaged his wounds, bathing them with oil and wine. Then he lifted him on to his own beast, brought him to an inn, and looked after him there. Next day he produced two silver pieces and gave them to the innkeeper, and said, 'Look after him; and if you spend any more, I will repay you on my way back'. Which of these three do you think was neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?' He answered, 'The one who showed him kindness.' Jesus said, 'Go and do as he did' (NEB)

Luke inserted the story of the Samaritan into this particular context to illustrate the point of neighbourliness in a divided society. Obviously this story can be used on its own, that is without the context into which Luke put it, and within other contexts to convey other messages such as fellowship and sympathy. From a narrative point of view two very important questions arise. The first is related to the fact that it was fashionable in New Testament studies to reconstruct the 'original' form and meaning of the parables in the mouth of Jesus (cf. Jeremias, 1970). The second has to do with the retelling of stories. Is it possible to tell the same story twice?

Unless we assume that Jesus told parables for the sake of parables, that is for the purpose of religious entertainment and not to make a point or to convey a particular message, it seems to be futile to search for the original form and meaning of these metaphorical stories (cf. Frye, 1979). Even if it were possible to reconstruct the original form, it is in no way possible to recover the contexts of communication in the life of the earthly Jesus (cf. Vorster, 1985).

The second question is perhaps even more interesting. Since much of the debate about the gospels concern the relationship between them and how the agreements and disagreements can be explained, this is not an unimportant matter. In fact, it is a very fundamental question. Literary scholars do not seem to agree about the possibility of telling the same story twice (Polanyi, 1981). One thing, however, is clear. As soon as the 'same' story is told in another context of communication the narrative message is viable to change. This is not only true of parables, but also of other narratives (cf. Fowler, 1982), even for the story of Jesus as we can gather from the four narratives, that is the four gospels, we have in the New Testament.

In conclusion it seems to me that not only is it possible for New Testament scholars to learn a lot from insights of narratology offered by modern theorists, it is also possible to gain insights into the nature of New Testament narratives. There is undoubtedly a need to rethink the history of early Christian literature from a perspective where much less emphasis is put on the growth and the origin of texts and more on the written texts and the way in which the material they contain is organised. Despite the important contributions of scholars who studied the New Testament documents with a view to

their preliterate stages, one has to remember that it was the written documents which became the literary legacy of early Christianity and not their origins. Once it is realised that narrative is one of the few ways in which material can be organised into a discourse, both the literary history of some of the documents and their narrative nature become important, more important even than the so-called literary or non-literary character of New Testament writings. With regard to the interpretation of the New Testament, the narrative nature of the gospels, acts and the apocalypse has far-reaching implications. For people who are historically-minded and who care for so-called 'facts', the discovery of the narrative nature of New Testament writings often poses major problems. On the other hand, when it is accepted that much of the material is narrated, it is also possible to view the documents from a totally different perspective and to discover the possibilities of narration. As a form of text production, early Christian narratives furthermore provide the student of ancient texts with invaluable insights into the creative imagination of ancient men who were committed to the story of Jesus. Narrative research conducted during the last decade has fruitfully contributed towards a better understanding of these texts (cf. Hahn, 1985).

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