

STORY TELLING IN THE BIBLE

by

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The story of the Floating Axehead (2 Kings 6:1-7) is short and plain enough to serve as a convenient subject for the demonstration of a few basic features of Old Testament narrative:

*"And the sons of the prophets said to Elisha: Please, here this place, where we dwell with you, is too strait for us. Let us please go to the Jordan and take from there every man a beam, and we shall make us there a place to dwell in. And he said: Go. And one of them said: Please be so kind and come with your servants. And he said: I shall come. So he went with them. And they arrived at the Jordan and cut trees.*

*And it happened that, as one was felling a beam, the iron fell into the water. And he cried out and said: Alas, master! And it is borrowed! And the man of God said: Where did it fall? And he showed him the place, and he cut down a stick, and cast it there, and the iron floated up. And he said: Take it up; so he put out his hand and took it" (2 Kings 6:1-7).*

From the historical point of view, this story is just another proof of Elisha's miraculous powers, a relatively unimportant item in a series. It can be classified as a legend dealing with the extraordinary personality of prophets; it is also a minor legend, anecdotal in scope. On the other hand, it is obviously well told, vivid and entertaining. Thus we find its historical aspect poor, but its story-telling aspect important enough for our analysis.

Though part of a series, the story is virtually independent of its context; all that one needs to know in order to comprehend it, is that Elisha was a prophet. Its effect is brought about as a result of various story-telling skills. One such skill is mimesis. The respectfully long speeches by the disciples, the master's curt answers, the clear (though brief and indirect) presentation of material circumstances, and a poor man's consternation at the loss of a borrowed tool (because it must be replaced) are casual strokes which combine to show life in the little community thus creating an illusion of everyday reality. Another element which contributes to the effectiveness of the story is the anecdotal arrangement of its parts. The reader's curiosity is first aroused by a comparatively long presentation of the circumstances, then quickly satisfied by a mild surprise. It is, however, the structure itself, carefully wrought from basic details, which contributes most to the success of the story.

In the first place we note that the beginning and ending are properly marked and worked out. At the beginning we have a static situation: the community is living at some unnamed place, which is cramped, so they start talking about it. The end, in a truly typical anecdote, is the surprising point, i. e. the miracle of the axhead floating up. The story would thus end abruptly, at its highest point. The narrator, however adds another sentence in order to close his tale properly. He tells the reader that the man who had lost the axe took it up. The reader, of course, can guess such an obvious detail, but the author prefers to tell it. The removal of all possible doubt has the effect of re-establishing calm: thus creating a static situation once again.

Between the two points of calm, tensions are revealed and action is developed, in two stages. The first (verses 1 - 4) stage at the unnamed place where the community lived, explains how it came about that the company went on a tree-cutting expedition. The second stage (verses 5 - 7), at the Jordan, develops the decisive part of the action, and leads quickly to the one event, the miracle itself, which the story is all about. Here we have a tense situation, or a crisis, at the loss of the axehead and its resolution at the recovery. A minor, less obvious tension provides the mainspring for the action in the exposition. It is the question whether Elisha will or will not accompany his disciples, which has to be resolved in order for the action to continue. This minor problem is entirely superfluous as relevant information, its function being purely structural: it enables the narrator to build up his tale.

Both parts of the story of the Floating Axehead invite the reader to witness, in his imagination, conversations and events as directly as possible. The story-teller puts as much as he can into dialogue, and describes the action in direct terms; no reflections or explanations of his intrude between the reader and the things done and said. He 'shows' these things rather than 'tells' us about them. This is less unusual in the second part of the story, which deals with a vivid self-explanatory happening, highly suitable for this type of presentation. The exposition, however could be easily and more simply told in another manner. Rewritten, with due regard for the possibilities and established usage of ancient Hebrew syntax, it might sound like this:

The sons of the prophets lived all at one place, and the place was too strait for them. So they went to the Jordan to cut trees, to build themselves a place to live in. And Elisha, he also went with them, because they had asked him to come.

When told in this manner, without the dialogue and the artificial tension, the passage loses some effect, but gains in brevity and clarity. It is thus demonstrably the author's artistic preference, not the subject matter, which made him tell his story as he did.

The two features just demonstrated, viz., the building and resolution of tensions, and the 'showing' of dialogue and direct action, are the main characteristics of narrative scenes. When strictly defined as a piece of narrative technique, the story under discussion is typically scenic. It is made up of two scenes; a preparatory scene, serving as an exposition, and a culminating scene, which gives the relevant information. All other features demonstrated above are subsidiary or accidental in relation to this basic characteristic of the piece.

Moreover, the story of the Floating Axehead is typical of Old Testament stories in general. Though, as a rule, somewhat longer than the example given, they are all short, especially when compared with narratives in other literature. Most of them can be read by themselves, with very little background information remembered from the context. In other words: long and complex chains of events are presented in loose sequences of independent stories, rather than in long closely-knit narratives, consisted of interconnected episodes. Each story consists of a single main event. The beginnings, as a rule, state a calm initial situation: Abraham sitting in his tent (Genesis 18:1), or said to have reached a ripe old age, as he sends his slave to fetch a wife for Isaac (Genesis 24:1). Jacob, we are told, left Beer-Sheba and went to Haran (Genesis 28:10). Actually he was fleeing, but this is another story; the first words of the account of his journey are kept as calm and smooth as possible. The variation of this type of beginning and the exceptions to it, will become apparent shortly.

The endings are almost always 'closed', re-establishing calm and leaving nothing for the reader's imagination. Examples of less common, 'open', endings are Genesis 34:31 and Jonah 4:11. Both are rhetorical questions challenging the reader to supply an answer, which then closes the story with a definitive, though slightly evasive, flourish. Both usual and unusual, beginnings and endings mark the stories clearly off; they are the formal signs of their relative independence.

Long and slightly elaborate expositions are another typical feature of Old Testament narratives. In them the initial calm situation is gradually changed, so that it becomes the background of a conflict, or of some other violent disturbance of the smooth flow of events. The disturbance is presented in the main part of the story, and then leads to the central event, which comes, as a rule, close to the end. The conflict is then resolved, calm is re-established, and this is accomplished quickly and smoothly leading to the definitive resting-point of the (usually closed) ending. All this is, of course, a broad generalization on the usage of Old Testament narratives. It does not fit well in all details, but it does show the aesthetic norm of a well-balanced story, as aspired by the narrators. One feature, however, is practically always present; it is the marked tendency to make scenes from all even slightly suitable material.

Narrative scenes are a widespread literary phenomenon. They should not be regarded as poor cousins or bastard brothers of the scenes written for the theatre ('dramatic' scenes), but the resemblance is close enough to supply us with a practical rule. It is this: Try in your imagination, to put a given piece of narrative writing on the stage. If you have enough dialogue and 'business' to do so, without too many and too drastic changes, it is a narrative scene. In the case of the Floating Axehead you will have one actor speaking the 'lines' of Elisha, another acting as the spokesman for the disciples, and a third actor for the part of the man who lost his axehead. All will speak the exact words of the text. A small group of dumb actors will represent the company of the disciples. Some words of the text will have to be transposed and a few props might be useful to indicate the change of scene, the trees and the river, and an axe might also be necessary. It does not make great theatre, but it can be done easily enough; and it will be perfectly intelligible to an audience not acquainted with the story. This mental exercise shows that the story is truly made up from scenes. The exercise can be repeated with equal success with a great many bits and pieces of Old Testament narrative prose.

The practical rule just demonstrated does not provide a proper theoretical understanding of the phenomenon. One way to achieve this is to realize that all narratives can be classified into four modes of narration: straight narrative, scenic narrative, description, and comment. In straight narrative the author simply reports a series of events, telling his audience that this and this and this happened. His endeavour will be to spin out an even yarn of a tale, to make the action flow smoothly from event to event. Too much emphasis on details or conflicts, and direct speech, spoil this smoothness, and are generally avoided. In scenic narrative, by contrast, the action is broken up into a sequence of scenes. Each scene presents the happenings of a particular place and time, concentrating the attention of the audience to the deeds done and the words spoken. Conflicts, direct statements of single acts, and direct speech are pre-eminent. The narrative moves by jumping from one scene to another; in order to avoid confusion there are unimportant bits of straight narrative linking the scenes or introducing them, where necessary. In the descriptions the story-teller stops the flow of events, taking his time to tell the audience how persons, places and objects looked, sounded or smelled. A proper tale which is all description is unthinkable; but a story-teller can achieve much in the way of creating an atmosphere, and similar effects, by leaning heavily on the descriptive mode. By comment I understand various remarks, which explain the situations, praise or blame the characters, point out the moral, and generally help the story along. Moralizing and philosophical digressions, either by the author or by one of the characters, are also comment.

It is evident that the four modes of narrative are always used in combination. And yet, in any given story, there will be found one dominant mode, determining the general character of the whole.

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