

Ritual Endings in Short Narratives in Genesis

1. In the short narratives in Genesis – I am looking at approximately 40 of them – there are many ritualized processes in which the characters participate. Is it significant, from a narrative standpoint, that most of these rituals occur at the ends of their stories? And, that there are so many of them – eighteen of the forty short narratives have a ritual in the closing, or end-section, of their story.

Some examples are:

- Noah builds an altar, *mizbeah* and makes a sacrifice and the Lord responds at the end of the J-source Flood narrative, Gen 8:20-22.
- Abraham builds an altar twice at the end of the first narrative in Genesis 12, and again in Genesis 13; Jacob builds altars at the ends of narratives in Gen 33 and 35.
- Jacob erects or raises pillars, *maṣṣebot*, at the ends of narratives in Gen 28, 31, and in two narratives in Gen 35.
- Abraham prepares animals in Gen 15 as part of the covenant with God
- Abraham enacts circumcisions at the end of Gen 17.
- Isaac blesses Jacob in Gen 27.
- in Genesis 31, there are two separate rituals in the end-section: the enactment of a treaty between Jacob and Laban; and then Jacob's sacrifice on the Height.

How do these ritual actions relate to the author's intention¹ as he ended his narrative?

In 1968, Barbara Herrnstein Smith had noted that in poems, the end is accompanied by finality, stability and integrity.² Part of a study by Adele Berlin in 1983 indicated that the

¹ Robert Alter, in *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 10, speaks of the "intentionality" of the biblical author regarding analogies and other aspects of literary art.

² Smith, *Poetic Closure, A Study of How Poems End*, viii.

ends of narratives have the function to “cut off the flow of the narrative.”³ Since Smith’s study, and Frank Kermode’s at approximately the same time,⁴ much academic work has focused on endings in various types of literature, including novels, short stories, classical drama; less so for the ends of biblical narratives.

With the observation, however, that a large percentage of short narratives have a ritual action in their endings, I will be asking the questions, How do these rituals contribute to the cutting off of the flow of the narrative, and, How do the rituals contribute to the ending finality (though not necessarily complete finality), to the stability (that is, stable but not frozen), and, to the integrity (meaning that there is consistency and honesty about the characters and situation as presented at the end, compared with what was presented earlier).

I will also explain how I use the terms ‘ritual’ and ‘end-section’ of a narrative.

2. These rituals are different from the prescriptive or descriptive priestly rituals elsewhere in the Tanakh, yet they are rituals, “a way of acting,” or “ritualizations,” as Catherine Bell explains. That is because they have these distinguishing characteristics:

a. First, an individual, or individuals, separates himself from mundane, normal everyday activity to do something ‘special.’

- In the J-source portion of the Flood, the narrator describes how Noah was caring for his charges – pragmatically sending out doves to ascertain whether the land was dry, in Gen 8:8-12. Then in the next, and final, J-source verses, Noah changes his focus from his normal activities to focus on the divine. He builds an altar to the Lord and offers burnt offerings upon it.

³ Berlin, *Poetics and the Interpretation of Biblical Narrative*, 107.

⁴ Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending*, 1967.

b. In addition to the separation from one's daily tasks, a characteristic of many ritual acts is that they create a qualitative distinction between what is "sacred" and what is "profane." The circumcision that Abraham performs upon himself and his household in Gen 17 is performed in the context of the covenant with God. Its enactment transforms each of the participants physically and also existentially. That can be contrasted with the circumcision in Gen 34, where there is no ritual component when the people of Shechem are circumcised.

c. Another characteristic of these rituals is that they are culturally appropriate and meaningful in their society, and the characters use 'the correct' strategy to set off the special activity from other activities.

- Based on the J-source flood story, and other J-source stories in Genesis we can presume that making an offering was an appropriate way to propitiate the Lord. The narrative of Cain and Abel indicates that the strategy is appropriate, but one is not assured of the response.

- A meal is just a meal, but culturally prescribed rituals that surround a meal make it special, as the treaty meals in Gen 26 and 31 demonstrate.

d. When God is invoked for his power as a witness and enforcer of interpersonal or political treaties, it demonstrates another characteristic of these rituals. We see this when Abraham and Abimelekh make a treaty, Gen 21:32, and later when Jacob and Laban, do the same, 31:44-53. Their rituals ascribe distinctions to realities which they believe transcends their human powers.

e. Sometimes spoken language is part of a ritualization. Words may be related by the narrator, as in Gen 12:8 where we are told only that Abraham 'invoked the Lord by name'; in Gen 28, the words of Jacob's vow are related. The words become powerful because they are in the context of a ritual.

f. Another aspect of a ritual is that when a character enacts it, it confers power and distinction *upon* that person.

- In Gen 13, after Lot and Abraham separate, only Abraham builds an altar to the Lord.

g. Some other types of rituals relate less to the sacred or divine, but instead bring ritualized activities to transitional stages in human life, stages deemed to be fraught with danger, as van Gennep demonstrated.⁵ The stages are birth, puberty, marriage, death. Two of the rituals in the Genesis narratives fit into this grouping: they are the burial of Sarah in Gen 23, and the marriage of Isaac and Rebekah in Gen 24.

3. The rituals I have been referring to all occur in the end-section of their narratives. I would like to use Gen 12:1-9, to demonstrate what the end-section of a narrative is.

a. If we look at the beginning of Gen 12, when God first speaks to Abraham, he is living in Haran, presumably settled with his family, perhaps living a sedentary or a nomadic life or a combination of the two. Then the action begins. God directs him to leave, upsetting the equilibrium of his life. Abraham leaves, arrives in Canaan and begins to move in the land. At this point, the discourse has accomplished its goal: Abraham is living in Canaan. Indeed, the Lord's appearance to him in v.7, and the promise, "I will assign this land to your offspring," indicates that Abraham has successfully achieved what God requested. For the character Abraham the destabilizing event has been alleviated, and, his life has been transformed. He is in Canaan and that land has been promised to his descendants; there is a new equilibrium to his life. This way of looking a narrative demonstrates how the actions of a plot move from a relatively stable but not static, equilibrium, to activity, and then back to equilibrium, as Todorov had demonstrated.⁶

⁵ Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*.

⁶ Tsvetan Todorov, "Structural Analysis of Narrative," in *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*, Vol 3, No 1 (Autumn, 1969), 70-76; JSTOR. Todorov used the term equilibrium to indicate the "existence of a stable but not static relation between the members of a society" as part of his definition of a narrative, (75).

b. As we saw, the plot had a destabilizing action, then an alleviation of that destabilizing action. By being aware of these points in a narrative, one can see more clearly when the key transformation, in situation or character, has occurred in a narrative. The system I am using as a guide was developed by Emma Kafalenos, who built on the work of Vladimir Propp and Tzvetan Todorov.⁷ By looking at the narrative in this way, we saw that Abraham's arrival in Canaan and the promise of inheritance fulfilled the essential purpose of the narrative. He has achieved what God directed him to do; his life has been transformed. [See Addendum]

c. The transformation could be the end of the story, but the author has added more information. So the transformation just marks the beginning of the end. In verses 7 and 8, Abraham's ritual actions are described as he continues his travels. In verse 9 the narrator describes him moving towards a distant location, in stages toward the Negev. The movement away from the location of the narrative's action and the iterative behavior of Abraham are typical ending markers of narratives. The end-section, then, is the transformation plus information the writer/editor includes that follows the transformation. No further destabilizing events occur in the narrative.

4. Some aspects of the rituals in Gen 12 contribute to finality, stability, and integrity.

a. The references to specific locations of the altars, one in Shechem and the other in Bethel contributes partial completion to a goal expressed in God's first words in verse 1. God said he would "show" Abraham the land, and Abraham now *sees* two specific locations in it. Building an altar meant he would have had to stop in each place long enough to 'see' it. These locations also connect to the future promises and mark places in the land that will be given to Abraham's descendants,

⁷ Kafalenos, *Narrative Causalities*.

as God promised in verse 7. Since two specific places are mentioned, not just one, it doubly marks the achievement of (beginning to) see the land.

b. The rituals also provide integrity to the narrative because they demonstrate the character of the individual Abraham that God has chosen. Abraham is loyal but does not just follow orders; he builds these altars without prompting. With the first altar, the process appears to be his response to God's appearance. In the second he initiates the action and invokes the Lord. The rituals clarify the Lord's choice of Abraham; they demonstrate Abraham's loyalty, his initiative, and his ongoing relationship with the Lord.

c. The altars are also a physical manifestation of the relationship between Abraham and God. They concretize it. Abraham builds the altars, the reader is made aware of each location by name. In the context of the narrative, those altars could then be seen by others because they were presumably left in place since Abraham built new ones at each location. They can become markers for future travelers.

d. Building altars also creates a pause in the forward action of the narrative, that of seeing the land. Shechem and Bethel are stopping places. Each time Abraham builds an altar he has to dis-engage himself from the business of moving about in Canaan and halt his normal daily activities. By stopping the action the rituals provide a logical place to finish writing about Abraham's arrival in Canaan.

5. In the J-source portion of the Flood story, the key transformation in that narrative occurs within the context of the ritual that is described in the last three verses of that source, Gen 8:20-22. The flood is over; Noah builds an altar and offers burnt offerings to the Lord.

a. The transformation occurs within the context of the ritualized action

- The destabilizing action is the Lord's decision to destroy mankind, based upon his evaluation of the mind of man, Gen 6:5-7. The flood ensues.

- The alleviation of this destabilizing action occurs during the ritual; the Lord decides never again to destroy mankind and also to accept the nature of man.

- A new equilibrium has been established.

b. The ritual brings about stability and a sense of calmness for the future.

c. A sense of finality, regarding the Lord's decision, is emphasized by various literary elements, including a poetic repetition of the new equilibrium, and words and merisms that indicate absolute-ness.

d. Finally, there is integrity at the end. God, the controlling and moral force in the world, remains cognizant of man's nature, but accepts that nature as he reassures that he will not destroy again..

6. As a comparison, in the Cain and Abel story, Genesis 4:3-4, the offerings are brought at the beginning of the narrative. There, the ritualization is part of the process that leads to the destabilizing action. The ritual there does not cut off the story nor contribute to its finality, stability or integrity.

7. In summary, the examples of Gen 8 and Gen 12 suggest that when rituals are written into the end-sections of their narratives they contribute to the process of ending the narrative. This occurs both because of the nature of a ritual act, and also because of specific elements within the ritual. The nature of a ritual is such that when the character enacts a ritual he stops all other activity. This halts the narrative's forward action; once the ritual is over that becomes a logical place to end the narrative.

In addition, a ritual that is proven and accepted in a society suggests a way to achieve an outcome for the character, and for the writer, that cannot be achieved by other means. A ritualized action provides stability, and confidence that the outcome will likely be successful.

In specific narratives the rituals relate directly to expressed narrative goals, and to unexpressed understandings. Abraham demonstrates that he is seeing the land. His building of altars concretizes the relationship between himself and God. After the flood, although the world will be populated by descendants of the righteous Noah, (v 7:1), even if those descendants act ‘with evil devisings,’ the promise to mankind is stable and remains in place.

Addendum:

Gen 12:1-9, using the Kafalenos system as guide and grid:

EQUILIBRIUM: ABRAM IS LIVING SETTLED IN HARAN

DESTABILIZING EVENT: THE LORD TELLS ABRAM TO LEAVE FOR A NEW LAND

- 1, The Lord said to Abram, “Go forth from your native land and from your father’s house to the land that I will show you.
- 2, I will make of you a great nation,/ And I will bless you;
I will make your name great,/ And you shall be a blessing.
- 3, I will bless those who bless you/And curse him that curses you;
And all the families of the earth/ Shall bless themselves by you.”
- 4, Abram went forth as the Lord had commanded him, and Lot went with him.
Abram was seventy-five years old when he left Haran. 5, Abram took is wife Sarai and his brother’s son Lot, and all the wealth that they had acquired in Haran;

ABRAM’S INITIAL ACTION TO ALLEVIATE THE DESTABILIZING EVENT:

and they set out for the land of Canaan.

ALLEVIATING ACTION BY ABRAM: ABRAM ARRIVES IN CANAAN AND TRAVELS IT.

When they arrived in the land of Canaan, 6, Abram passed through the land as far as the site of Shechem, at the terebinth of Moreh. The Canaanites were then in the land.

SUCCESS OF THE ALLEVIATING ACTION

7, The Lord appeared to Abram and said, ‘I will assign this land to your offspring.’

NEW EQUILIBRIUM: ABRAHAM IS IN THE NEW LAND, AND HIS OFFSPRING WILL INHERIT IT.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

And he built an altar there (*wayyiben šam mizbeah*) to the Lord who had appeared to him.” 8, From there he moved on to the hill country east of Bethel and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai to the east; and he built there an altar (*wayyiben šam mizbeah*), to the Lord and invoked the Lord by name.
9, Then Abram journeyed by stages toward the Negev.

