The rhetorical power of literary conventions: Artistic means of persuasion in Biblical discourse

Azila Talit Reisenberger
Department of Hebrew and Jewish Studies
University of Cape Town
CAPE TOWN

Abstract

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This article traces the impact of reality on the development of communication skills, and the manner in which these skills are in turn refined and by repetition develop into literary conventions. Furthermore, the influence which literary convention then exerts on social attitudes and on the development of new literary conventions are traced. This article is a literary study, though all examples are from or related to the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament).

1. Introduction

The act of communication involves the sender and the receiver of a specific message. Both sender and receiver are important and active constituents of the act of communication, whether the latter is a verbal (oral or written) or a physical (non-verbal) act.

All acts of communication require a system of reference shared by the communicator and the communicatee. In a verbal act of communication it is natural to assume that the two communicating parties speak and/or understand the same language, i.e. that they share common linguistic references.

This is equally important in acts of non-verbal communication, though the importance of a non-verbal common reference system to effective communication has often been underestimated.

These cultural reference systems are determined by reality: *vocabulary* develops in accordance to need, and *concepts* develop with repetition of the same experiences. In other words, people who live in a land where it snows develop a great number of terms to describe snowflakes and different ways of snowing. Similarly, the concept of "fishing", together with the development of its skills and

tradition, evolved in societies who live near bodies of water. It would be safe to assume that neither terminology relating to snow nor fishing skills would be formed and developed in societies who live in deserts.

Indeed studies show that the development of all Semitic languages from the Proto-Semitic is a good example of this phenomenon (Blau, 1980).

2. Words as cultural signposts

The need for the reader to know the language in which an author tells a story requires no illustration.

Yet the need of the reader to share or at least to be aware of the cultural references of the author is often underestimated. Barthes' concept of "the death of the author" is a good illustration of the trend towards dismissing or diminishing the author's importance.

If literature is, however, accepted as an act of communication which involves both story-teller and audience, the cultural references of both parties have to be taken into consideration. (In the term *story-teller* I include both writer and orator, as well as their respective media, the written and the oral text.)

Let us take for example the word "God" and the literature which dealt with divine powers in ancient times.

When ancient Mesopotamian story-tellers told stories about their gods, these gods were described in a manner that was entirely different from the one used for the ancient Egyptian gods, and also from the description of the Israelites' God. Reality shaped the way in which people conceptualized their gods. Thus, even if the same vocabulary was used, the meanings and qualities which the word "God" held for the different tellers, as understood by their respective audiences, were different.

Nature in Mesopotamia was unpredictable: the rivers often flooded the valley and unexpectedly wiped out various cities. The Mesopotamians consequently envisaged their gods as erratic beings. Natural phenomena in Egypt, by contrast, were more predictable, and people there developed a sense of security and trust in life which manifested itself in the way they described their gods (Pritchards, 1969:3-49). Historical events that seemed fair caused the ancient Israelites to look towards their God as a supreme power of justice. The biblical narrative of the Deluge, which is almost identical to the Mesopotamian version in its description of the ark, the animals and the length of the flood, as well as in many other details, differs sharply in its description of the deities and their qualities. This difference in attitude towards the gods reflects the world view of these two societies; thus the Israelites record that:

> Noah was a just, perfect man in his generation ... And the earth was corrupt before God; and the earth was filled with violence. And God looked upon the earth, and behold, it was corrupt, for all flesh had corrupted his way upon the earth. And God said unto Noah, 'The end of all flesh is come before me; for the earth is filled with violence through them, and I will destroy them with the earth ...' (Genesis 6:9b, 11-13).

The emphasis here lies on the element of justice: things are not done at whim, not even at God's whim. Moreover, once judgment is passed, God does not intervene, and is mostly removed from the situation.

The same basic story was known and reiterated among the civilizations dwelling in Mesopotamia. From Sumeria we have a tablet which presents the reason for the flood as lying with the gods:

> By our ... a flood [will sweep] over the cult centres,
> To destroy the seed of mankind ...,
> [This i]s the decision, the word of the assembly [of the gods]
> (Pritchards, 1969:44) (lines 155-58).

A more detailed account is preserved in the Akkadian myth of Gilgamesh. This story, which is part of the narrative which traces Gilgamesh's quest for immortality, is represented in four separate versions. Two of these, the Hittite and the Hurrian, exist only in fragments. Substantial portions of the narrative are to be found in the Assyrian version as well as in the old Babylonian version in which we are told:

> Utnapishtim said to him, to Gilgamesh:
> I will reveal to thee, Gilgamesh, a hidden matter
> And a secret of the gods will I tell thee:
> Shurippak – a city which thou knowest,
> [and] which on the Euphrates' [banks] is situate –
> That city was ancient, (as were) the gods within it,
> When their heart led the great gods to produce the flood.
>
> [There] were Anu, their father,
> Valiant Enlil, their counsellor,
> Ninurta, their assistant,
> Ennuge, their irrigator.
> Ninugiku-Ea was also present with them ...
> (Tablet XI, lines 8-19)
>
> ... With the first glow of dawn,
> A black cloud rose up from the horizon.
> Inside Adad thunders,
> While Shullat and Hanish go in front,
> Moving as heralds over hills and plain.

Erragal tears out the posts;
Forth comes Ninutra and causes the dikes to follow

...

The gods were frightened by the deluge,
And shrinking back, they ascended to heaven of Anu.
The gods cowered like dogs
Crouched against the outer wall.
Ishtar cried out like a woman in travail ...
(Tablet XI, lines 96-102, 113-117; see Pritchards, 1969:89-97).

Although these civilizations conceived of and depicted their deities differently, they used the same nominative term: "God".

Thus it can be seen that when readers want to understand what a writer meant when he or she wrote a certain text, they must seek to familiarize themselves with the writer's cultural frame of reference. When readers have no knowledge of such a frame, they create a new story.

In order to reach out and communicate clearly, the author should thus hold linguistic and cultural systems of reference in common with his or her audience.

The well-known Israeli author Amalia Kahana-Karmon refuses to allow any of her books to be translated from Hebrew into other languages, because she claims that only Hebrew-speaking readers, and preferably those resident in Israel, can understand her writings correctly. She argues strongly against the reader's right to create his or her own text from her work, claiming that such a right defies the notion of *bona fide* communication on her side while in the process of writing. She maintains that if the story is presented in another language, which is loaded with other cultural references, then it is no longer her book.

Accepting the natural development and the fundamental importance of the verbal and non-verbal aspects of communication as a basic axiom, this article deals with a more refined component of communication, which is developed through repetition and which makes its appearance in literary texts – the *literary convention*.

From a communication angle, literary conventions should be placed between the verbal and non-verbal signs, that is, between words and their cultural milieu.

3. Literary convention

Literary conventions evolve from life experiences which are forged into a literary form and which then infiltrate the verbal communication system to an extent where they become more powerful than the original individual words or story (Reisenberger, 1989:21-24).

These conventions have greater rhetorical power than specific words. Thus they become a very influential means of persuasion, which through repetition becomes part of the accepted system of reference. Later literary works draw upon them and reiterate them.

Sixty years ago Walter Arend noted in his study of Homer's epics (Alter, 1981:51) that the poet includes certain fixed situations in his narrative. These situations appear according to a set order of motifs. For example, the sections dealing with the arrival, the message, the voyage, the assembly, the oracle and so on. Each consists of a given situation followed by a chain of similar events occurring in a similar sequence. Arend named this pattern the "Type-Scene".

The Greek Type-Scenes are easy to detect because of two specific literary characteristics which are typical of the Homeric epos:

* The abundance of descriptive detail, down to minute details of clothing and actions.

* The identifiable, somewhat mundane or trivial subjects shared by the teller and his audience.

The Greek audience were familiar with the settings, the formalities and ceremonies which appear in Homer's narratives. They were accustomed to certain traditions and expected to find them in the stories they read. Homer, because he was a member of the society for which he wrote and probably enjoyed the same traditions, complied with the expectations of his audience by recording their habits in his stories.

For Walter Arend, who was an outsider to the Homeric system of cultural reference, the Type-Scenes on the other hand became components of ancient narrative, to be examined and analysed by academic research.

The recognition of Type-Scenes in the Bible was slightly hampered by the fact that the Bible is only a small remnant of a vast literary corpus, that it is sparse in detail and that it is a collection of non-homogeneous multifarious books which differ sharply in content and style and were put under one cover for the sole reason that they share a religious message.

Furthermore, the fact that for centuries the Bible has been viewed as the manifestation of divine revelation has hindered literary analysis *per se*.

The scarcity of details also explains why we find literary conventions in the Bible rather than the longer, more detailed Type-Scenes which appear in the Homeric epics.

Initially, when stories were found in the Bible that were similar to one another, scholars attributed this repetition either to a duplication of sources (i.e. the Documentary Hypothesis),[1] to the "Primitive" character of the text,[2] to a kind of literary "stuttering" on the author's part, or to a recurrent stammer in the process of transmission, whether written or oral[3].

Nowadays it is recognized that modest "Type-Scenes", i.e. literary conventions, do appear in the Bible. Robert Alter maintains that every literary convention comprises a hidden contract between the story-teller and his or her audience, and that the way in which this contract is carried out or manipulated therefore constitutes an important part of the audience's reading pleasure (Alter, 1981:47-62).

Alter uses as example the modern convention of Western films. He claims that audiences in the next century, who will not share the cultural references of our contemporary audiences (who have seen many Westerns), may try to understand each of these movies by itself and thus miss the pleasure which the original audience drew from aspects of convention in the film specifically. This pleasure arises at times from the fulfilment of expectations, and at times from unexpected twists in the narrative and visual flow. Various levels of comedy, ranging from straight forward fun to more serious satire, can be raised by deviating from the expected format, and the inclusion or omission of certain sections from the expected sequence can be as effective as explicit details.[4]

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1 In essence the Documentary Hypothesis views the Bible not as a unitary literary creation but rather as a collection of different documents. Therefore, when different narratives include similar events which follow a similar sequence, they were accepted as parts of different documents which had not been edited properly.

For the best introduction to the Documentary Hypothesis see Wellhausen (1883). For an opposing view see Cassuto (1961).

2 See the previously quoted and other Mesopotamian texts (Pritchards, 1969).

3 Culley (1976) in his survey of oral story-telling in the West Indies and Africa, maintains that every time a story is told some changes occur either in the plot or in the characters, at times to the extent of protagonists themselves being replaced. He proposes that Biblical stories follow the same developmental pattern.

4 Much has been written about the usage and problematic nature of repetition. I have found Barthes' and Kierkegaard's opinions on the matter illuminating. For an especially thought-provoking account see Said (1984:111-125).

4. Literary conventions as cultural signposts

The literary convention follows a sequence of clearly recognizable events. This sequence is determined by the life experience of the audience, and in turn determines the audience's expectations of the story. The expectations of the audience, rather than the imagination of the writer, generally dictate the outcome of the story (Reisenberger, 1989:22-4).

In order to illustrate the impact of reality and cultural reference systems on the formation of biblical convention, as well as the ways in which existing conventions played a role in stating their antitheses as new conventions, one such convention will be analysed: *The birth of a hero to a barren woman.*

Furthermore, as the convention of the barren woman who gave birth to a hero became rooted in folk literature and the years of waiting and yearning for a child became glorified, an anti-convention developed: *The insignificant person who was born to a woman who conceived easily.*

Procreation, although of utmost importance to the survival of the clan, was attained with much pain, as is already indicated by the early words of the Lord to Eve: "I will greatly multiply the suffering of thy conception" (Genesis 3:16). Considering this, it is of no wonder that ancient culture glorified conception and childbirth.

Emanuel Ben Gurion writes that "... mythology and ancient religious legends do not stop at glorifying national heroes' lives, but instead go on to add wondrous details to their childhood and even elaborate miracles which preceded their conception and birth" (Ben Gurion, 1949:54). (My translation – ATR.)

4.1 The birth of a hero to a barren woman

This convention is based on the importance of procreation to the survival of the clan. Great pressure was placed upon women to grant their husbands an heir. Conception was seen as the main purpose of women's existence (Patai, 1959).

Unfortunately poor hygienic conditions and lack of medical assistance often resulted in infertility. Despite popular belief, biblical women had few children (Otwell, 1977). As conception was considered the most important event in a woman's life, pregnancy bestowed great importance upon the future mother and upon every new-born to be. The longer the period of waiting for conception, the more intense the resultant yearning, and in turn, the greater the expectations from the newborn became. This was the reality for the biblical audience, which then dictated the conventions utilized by the author.

Sarah, Rabekah, Rachel, Samson's mother, Samuel's mother, as well as the Shunammite are all described as barren women who waited long and prayed for a child[5]. We are told that after God's intervention they all gave birth to children who became leaders of the nation. The reader's expectations of these children to become national heroes is so great that even when the Bible for instance tells nothing about what befell the son of the Shunammite, commentators have felt obliged to complete the story.[6] For example, both the Talmud and other rabbinical sources claim that the Shunammite was the sister-in-law of Iddo the prophet and that her long-awaited son is the prophet Habakkuk.[7]

The readership's expectation that the son would grow up to be a national leader not only influenced the Rabbis in the creation of a prestigious family tree, but also clouded their historical judgement (biblical chronology renders their suggestion impossible by more than a hundred years).

4.2 The insignificant person born to a woman who conceived easily

The fact that there existed such great expectations of a child whose conception was delayed gave rise to a related anti-convention. If a child was easily conceived, there was no time to build a sense of yearning for him, and no time to weave dreams about his great future, something which in turn diminished expectations of him.

This new convention is an antithesis to the convention of the birth of a national hero to a barren mother, and it is basically the reverse of the original convention (Reisenberger, 1989:75-81).

In the Bible every barren woman who struggles to conceive and who when succeeding gives birth to a national hero has a counterpart: a woman who conceives easily. The counterpart is, as is to be expected, usually of lesser importance, and in addition her children (who have been conceived easily) grow up to be of little significance.

These counterparts are very conveniently juxtaposed with the barren women: Hagar and Keturah are the secondary wives of Abraham and are literary counterparts of Sarah, Abraham's beloved wife. Similarly, Bilhah and Zilpah,

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5 Details of these stories can be found in the Bible in the following passages: Genesis 11:30; 16:1; 25:21; 29:31; 30:1-2; Judges 13:2-3; 1 Samuel 1:1, 5; 2 Kings 4:14, 16.

6 *Berachot* 10, 2; *Jerusalem Yebamot* 15, 2; *Pirkey d rabbi Eliezer* 13; *Yalkut Shimoni* vol. 2, 228.

7 "*Midrash Hagadol*", Genesis 23:1. See also Hasida (1988:398).

Jacob's concubines given to him by his wives solely for procreation purposes, are the counterparts of Rachel, Jacob's most beloved wife. Esau's wives Adah, Aholibamah and Bahsemath are placed as literary counterparts of Jacob's wives, and Peninnah, the fertile wife of Elkanah – Samuel's father, is the counterpart of Hannah – Samuel's mother.[8]

After Sarah, the beloved barren wife of Abraham, has given birth to Isaac he becomes a father of the future Israelite nation. Hagar, one of the other two wives, on the other hand conceives quickly. Her son Ishmael is sent away and although he receives a blessing to become a father of a nation, God still emphasizes that "... in Isaac shall [Abraham's] seed be called" (Genesis 21:12b).

Without going into detailed case studies of the lives of these babies (as these are to be found in the Bible, in the chapters mentioned above), it is important to note that the biblical accounts mention the ease with which they were conceived, and that even when mentioned by name, they are not counted amongst the nation's leaders.

In the same way that reality dictated the audience expectations and gave rise to literary conventions, these conventions became imbued so strongly in the minds of readers that it dictated their expectations of national heroes. When in some biblical accounts there is no mention of a "period of waiting before conception", possibly resulting in an impression that pregnancy occurred with ease, some Rabbis took it upon themselves to create legends of difficult conception so as to avoid an impression of worthlessness in particular heroes (Hasida, 1988:172).

These Rabbis complied with reader's expectations by saying that both Joshua and David's mothers had difficulty in conceiving and delivering their sons. These fantastic gynaecological details have no basis in Biblical records; they were consciously constructed, lest a semblance of worthlessness should tarnish the glory of Moses' successor Joshua or that of the mighty king David[9]. The need for such a claim to exist attests to the influence of audience expectations on the literary discourse employed.

5. To summarize

Life experience is crystallized within literary discourse, which by means of repetition turns into literary convention.

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8 Genesis 16:4, 25:1, 30:4-5, 9-10, 36:2-6; I Samuel 1:2, 6.

9 *Zohar* 8, side 1,7; as well as in "*Yalkut Hamakiri*", for Psalms 118:28.

By being inculcated into the specific culture, these conventions become part of a system of cultural reference.

As a result of consolidation into such a system, literary conventions have tremendous persuasive power. This power is strong enough to exceed verbal communication, entering into a non-verbal realm which determines the words used.

Life experiences dictate the audience's expectations which in turn dictate to the writer the direction which the literary discourse must take.

On the other hand, the writer exercises some control over the literary discourse by manipulating conventions for aesthetic purposes or for conveying his or her message.

However, since literary conventions develop from a particular cultural background, they are particularly effective for readers who subscribe to the same system of cultural reference as does the author.

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