

who has been warned by Solomon to keep quiet, is stupid enough to ask Bathsheba (Solomon's mother, of all people) to request her hand for him from the king. Solomon (loving brother and king) is quick to interpret this as proof that Adonijah still has not given up his claims to the throne, and has him killed. Beauty is here, again, clearly a factor in a plot.

Values, finally, are so important that I have set aside a complete section for them in Chapter 8.

5

Action, plot, quest, and hero

When we read a novel or watch a movie, we often let ourselves be guided primarily by the action. This word usually has a broad spectrum of meaning, and justifiably so. It is a productive concept for narrative art in the Bible as well, but it is necessary as well as illuminating to distinguish between "the action" and the *sub-actions*. These often occur in sequences, populating sentence after sentence, and are indicated by the predicate (verb).

An example will clarify this. The action (in its broad sense) of "Joseph in Dothan" is, in a nutshell, as follows: Joseph is sent out by his father to go and see how his brothers are doing; they conspire to kill him and throw him in a pit; after some deliberation, they sell him as a slave, so that Joseph ends up in Egypt. This can be put in even fewer words: Joseph has to go and see his brothers, but when he finds them he is humiliated and sold to Egypt. The concept of "action" goes hand in hand with the notion of grasping the story at a glance or making a summary.

The sub-actions, on the other hand, are as it were the infantry; they are responsible for the details—but these details are of course the actual business. An example of such a sequence follows here. I have chosen the moment after the brothers have made their plan and Reuben has come out against bloodshed, Gen. 37:23-24. I am largely following the JPS translation, but I will show the structure of this bit of narrator's text typographically by printing each clause on a separate line:

When Joseph came up to his brothers,
they stripped Joseph of his tunic, the ornamented tunic that he was
wearing,
and took him
and cast him into a pit.
The pit was empty; there was no water in it.

We have here a simple sequence of four sub-actions: the first is still intransitive ("to come," a verb of motion), but after that the game is up for Joseph and he becomes the direct object—in both senses—of his brothers' scheming. They get three sub-actions with a transitive verb as predicate, but that does not make this simple sequence a pedestrian set of lines. In the second line there is an apposition that, merely by being there, stops the narrative pace for a moment and reminds us of how the elderly Jacob had dressed his favorite son in an elegant, multi-colored garment (with all its connotations of princely garb); it is this sort of preferential treatment that has made the brothers see red. In a minute, with some relish they will dip this smart coat in blood, and send it back to their father. Finally, there is the fifth line, which contains description instead of action. At the moment Joseph lands at the bottom of the pit, the narrative tempo practically grinds to a halt: a short break enables us to consider Joseph's new position, and to realize how completely overwhelmed he must be feeling by the course events have taken.

Many biblical stories consist of a well-planned combination or alternation of report and speech: there are some sequences of sub-actions presented by the narrator, which alternate with sequences of clauses containing direct speech, i.e. character text. A clear idea of this sort of combination contributes much to a good understanding of the text as a whole, and of the various themes. This is why I would recommend readers who would like to dig a bit deeper to type out the entire story, line by line, indenting all direct speech by one or two spaces. Character text is, after all, embedded, and in this way, you can see immediately how the text is divided into the two types of language. Moreover, in this typed or printed text it is now possible to draw as many connecting lines as you want, to color in key words and other forms of repetition with a felt-tip pen or crayon, etc. This sort of kindergarten work often leads to new insights.

Actions

I return to the concept of "action." This is very broad, as it includes highly divergent elements:

a. The first component is "actions" in the strict sense: the deeds the characters perform, which can be either intransitive, as for instance movements (Joseph came up), or transitive, in which case they touch on somebody else (his brothers cast him into the pit).

b. Characters lead just the sort of life people in extratextual reality, like us, do. They endure more than they actively achieve, and more often than not this "enduring" equals "suffering." The Latin word *passio* means both, experiencing and suffering; it is opposed to *actio*, which could serve as the label for component a. In short: the action of a story mainly consists of action and passion; in our language the latter aspect is more often expressed in the *passive* form than it is in the Bible. It is more lively and forceful to say "they cast him into the pit" than "he was cast into a pit." It also has more character: unlike passive forms, active forms do not hide where the responsibility lies, which is often important to the narrator and his scale of values.

c. Acting in the strict sense, enduring, and suffering are economically supported by descriptive and explanatory sentences, in which the narrator offers some background, sketches a situation, or reveals motives or purposes. They are likely to occur more frequently at the opening; thus, Genesis 37 already offers so much background in verses 1-4 that Joseph's treatment at the hands of his brothers in Dothan is no surprise any more. The hero is introduced in v. 2: we are told Joseph's age and the fact that he helps his brothers when they are tending their flocks. The end of v. 2 not only nominates Joseph as the hero, but also as the villain: he discredits his brothers towards Jacob. We are certainly justified in expecting their father to buy this, because v. 3 now reports: "Israel (Jacob's new name, which marks him out as a patriarch) loved Joseph best of all his sons, for he was the child of his old age." This is background plus motivation. The final straw for the brothers, however, is the following: "he had made him an ornamented tunic." This line still belongs to the preliminary stage: it is a short flashback that epitomizes the father-son relationship, but at the same time efficiently introduces an attribute that (a) is roughly handled by the furious brothers, both in v. 23 and in vv. 31-32, and (b) ends up,

covered in blood, in the hands of Jacob, who then draws the wrong conclusion and plunges into mourning. In an opening chapter that is loaded with tensions, this attribute brings together motives of love and hate at one and the same point, which is always attractive to a narrator. And then, the fact that an entire family is torn apart by emotions is reminiscent of Genesis 27.

d. Finally, the broad concept of "action" also includes processes. The Levite of Judges 19 wants to go home after a long stay and will not listen to his host, who says: "The day is waning toward evening; do stop for the night." He leaves in the afternoon and before long gets himself into trouble: "They were close to Jebus, and the day was very far spent." And when he has decided where he wants to seek shelter (in vv. 11-13), it says: "The sun set when they were near Gibeah." The natural process reported here is part of a system of exact coordinates of time and space; it has far-reaching consequences, which I shall examine in the next chapter.

Selection

For each sub-action that has found its way into the text ten or more have been left out. The series that we see is a radical selection, and when we understand what it is that governs the writer's choice, we will have found the main point of access into his linguistic work of art. Our understanding will increase considerably if we are able to retrieve the writer's criteria for rejection (omission from the text) and selection (inclusion in the text). Every word that the writer allows to participate has a relation to his vision and themes. At the same time, his task was to allot each detail its correct position along the linear axis. We find ourselves confronted here with *the plot*.

The plot is the main organizing principle of a story. It provides a beginning, a middle and an end to the course of action. This seems overly simple, but it is in fact extremely productive: it is the brilliant opening statement by the father of literary theory, Aristotle, in his *Poetics*. Admittedly, he was referring to the structure of tragedy, but his observations about coherence apply to all story-telling. The plot provides the head and tail we need

to hold on to, and thus determines the boundaries of the story as a meaningful whole. These boundaries then, in their own way, draw the horizon of our correct understanding of the story: within it, the reader is looking for the connections between everything and everything else.

Beginning, middle, and end: here we have three stations or benchmarks. However, what is a plot exactly? One of the most illuminating answers is to picture the plot as a course that is run. Thus, we can describe the course of the action, that is the course of events in a story, as a *trajectory*. The full-grown story begins by establishing a problem or deficit; next, it can present an exposition before the action gets urgent; obstacles and conflicts may occur that attempt to frustrate the *dénouement*, and finally there is the winding up, which brings the solution of the problem or the cancellation of the deficit.

Beginning, middle, and end, however, are more than linear entities. Their value or meaning is not purely quantitative; they are no mere instantaneous photographs along the axis of objectively proceeding time. They have been carefully attuned to each other, which is not surprising as they themselves are deliberate products of selection. Inspired and guided by a specific vision, the writer "sees" what would be a meaningful whole within the material he is working on, and how to delineate this whole. The trajectory he creates occupies a certain amount of narrated time, for instance the time taken up by a journey (think of Joseph's being sent to Dothan, or the Levite who goes to collect his wife in Judah). Such a stretch of time, however, only becomes functional and meaningful if it can be demarcated and fleshed out through the prism of a specific thematic field. Of course, the plot basically follows the chronological order of the narrated events themselves, but it is not *only* defined by a time interval of a certain length, and not even *primarily*. Trajectory and plot are in the first place determined by a vision. Before I go any further I will illustrate this with an example. The narrator may decide to relate a thousand and one things about the day Joseph comes to his brothers, by means of as many sub-actions; but what would be the point? If he likes, he can fill an entire page with a description of the landscape, brother A's mood and brother B's

clothes, but he leaves that out. Nor does he tell us that Reuben cut his nails yesterday and that his big toe hurts because he stepped on a thorn. Why not? Because it is pointless. Why is it pointless? Because it is not *relevant*.

All right, but what—you may well ask—is relevant? It is the writer's vision or agenda that determines what is relevant. He wants to relate how the subject of the search—Joseph had been sent out to find his brothers—becomes its object, and how he is humiliated and eliminated, permanently, as it seems. To this end, he arranges some dozens of sub-actions, makes deliberate choices as to who (only Reuben and Judah) is allowed to say what, and at which moment exactly. The rest is silence: no descriptions of the weather, what the shepherds look like, or the other myriads of details. His criterion for selection is the plot. The plot is an organization of the action in such a way as to result in an *ingenious combination of the "horizontal" and the "vertical" arrangement*. The horizontal organization is the seamless succession of clauses along the linear axis of time, a succession that pretends to cover the chronology of the narrated events. The vertical organization results from the writer's vision, who is on a plane above his subject matter and only includes (along the same linear axis!) what contributes to his thematics and to the ideological unity of the story. The biblical narrator only uses details if they are functional to his plot.

Quest and hero

The concept of "trajectory" becomes more concrete and vivid when we illustrate it by means of two other fundamental entities, *quest* and *hero*. The trajectory in an independent story is often a search or "quest" undertaken by the hero in order to solve or cancel the problem or deficit presented at the outset. The hero is the subject of the quest, and he proceeds along the axis of his pursuit: he is on his way to the object of value that he wants to acquire or achieve.

This valuable object is not always physical, and the search operation is not always literal. In Genesis 27 the valuable object is the paternal blessing, i.e. a unique and special speech act of great power, through which Isaac marks the son who receives it

as the leader of the new generation. The story is a game in which the blessing is the prize. In 1 Samuel 17, a text about a war that threatens Israel's survival, the valuable object is also obvious: disabling the armored giant. Whoever conquers the protagonist wins the war.

Joseph in Dothan

In Genesis 37 neither quest nor hero is simple. The literary unit "Joseph in Dothan" starts with vv. 12–18. Joseph is the hero, and it is he who executes the quest. The problem is that of the father who sends Joseph out: his sons are far away, and he wants to know how they are doing. The quest started in this way is that of Joseph; as the searching agent he is the hero. Soon, however, there is an end to his position as the subject and acting character. From v. 18 onwards, our attention is directed towards the brothers. This move of the camera is an ominous one, as it is motivated by a radical reversal: now it is the brothers who are hatching a plan and proceed to action. They usurp the plot and give it the color and significance of a veritable conspiracy. They, too, have a quest: we'll teach our little brother a lesson, let's just kill him, shall we? During the exposition, Reuben, as a speaking subject, proposes a change of plan, and shortly afterwards the plot takes a decisive turn as Judah's proposal is put into effect. Thus, Joseph has changed from subject into object, and it is no coincidence that we do not hear another word from his mouth. The literal search on Joseph's part—who actually gets lost for a moment, in vv. 15–17—is eclipsed by the figurative one manned by the brothers. Joseph's quest fails, since Jacob, who sent him, does not receive a report from Joseph about them. Theirs, however, succeeds, and does result in a report. It is the message about Joseph, which needs no words: it is the sight of the bloody coat that makes the old man think Joseph has been killed.

Why does Reuben appear twice, and what is the significance of the fact that he finds the pit empty? There is also a striking repetition: the terrible message "a savage beast devoured him" not only occurs in v. 20, but is repeated *verbatim* in the middle

of v. 33. What is the point of that? Everything falls into place when we discover the structure of vv. 18-33:

A	18-20	conspiracy by the brothers: kill Joseph! "A savage beast devoured him!"
B	21-22	speeches by Reuben: no, throw him into the pit
C	23-24	brothers cast Joseph into the pit
D	25	a caravan passes by
X	26-27	proposal by Judah: sell Joseph
D'	28	Joseph sold to caravan
C'	29	Reuben finds the pit empty, rends his clothes
B'	30	and mourns; speech to his brothers
A'	31-33	they deceive Jacob with the coat, Jacob concludes: Joseph must be dead. "A savage beast devoured him!"

There is not only linear progress, but also circular coherence, which has been made possible by the narrator's grip on his material. He was able to develop this grip through his vision: I will start with the brothers' conspiracy against Joseph, and I will conclude with the mini-conspiracy they plan against Jacob by deliberately deceiving him with the coat. I can emphasize that by putting the fatal clause about the savage beast first on their lips, and then have the same words spoken by their father.

The reader notes that the sentence about the animal in v. 20 only has the status of an intention, that Joseph and Jacob are in the dark as to this (they do not hear it) and that the narrator takes us into his confidence, so that we have the same level of knowledge as the brothers. The plot does not run as expected, since it is first twisted by Reuben, and next by Judah; at the conclusion, however, there is the surprise that, upon seeing the bloody coat, the father chooses the very words which, unknown to him (unlike us and the brothers), constitute the lie that the brothers planned to spread, of course in order to effectively hide their own responsibility. Since Jacob is not contradicted after v. 33, his conclusion "Joseph devoured" remains, and the old man is steeped into unstemmable mourning which is to last many years. Through our prior knowledge, we know who is responsible for this cruelty. Meanwhile, Joseph in his turn does not know what is happening at home: he has long since been transported south as a slave.

The repetition of the utterance "A savage beast devoured him!" is spectacular, as the clause both is and is not the same. Whereas the choice of words and their meaning remain unchanged, the sense and the value of the utterance have been changed and expanded in an intriguing way: the context has been drastically altered; it is a different character speaking the clause, and the truth/untruth ratio has been shifted. Its positioning in v. 20 and v. 33 is one of the supports of the ring structure and, through being part of A and A', marks the boundaries and thus the conclusion of the section devoted to the conspiracy, vv. 18-33.

The concentric structure also shows how Reuben, Jacob's firstborn who feels responsible towards the father (end of v. 22!), is useful at first but eventually sidelined; we see him empty-handed next to what was his idea: the empty pit. Thus, his contribution in vv. 21-22 is reduced to the level of a nice leg-up for Judah and his crucial idea. Yet, the writer does pay him a compliment: by having him mourn and especially by introducing his clothes, too, as an attribute—Reuben rends them as a sign of mourning—he places him next to the grieving Jacob, who does the same after v. 33. Elements B and C (speech and action) are mirrored in the winding-up, where C' and B' offer action and speech.

The ring structure takes us to the center, the central member X that has no counterpart and conveys the unique message about Judah's prominence. It is Judah who gets to speak the most words, and it is his proposal that is executed. He easily eclipses the firstborn, which is no more of a coincidence than the writer's drastic decision to introduce a digression in Genesis 38, an excursus with, as its subject, Judah again.

This extra attention for Judah, during which a kid again becomes part of a mix-up (38:17 and 20), clothes serve as disguise, and the *dénouement* consists of a recognition that causes a great shock (vv. 24-26), sets him up for his major role as the brothers' spokesman in Genesis 44, and prepares us for Judah's crucial speech (44:18-34) at the Egyptian court. The point of this ardent and desperate plea is that he, Judah, should be allowed to take the place of Benjamin who is in danger of being taken hostage by the viceroy (the as yet unrecognized Joseph). His

speech is by far the longest in Genesis 37–50, moves Joseph to tears, and has the result that the viceroy sheds his “disguise” and makes himself known to the perplexed brothers: “I am Joseph!” Chapters 37, 38 and 42–45 employ the attribute of clothing and various forms of disguise, i.e. not-being-recognized; all the time recognitions take place, which makes these stories fit perfectly into a tightly constructed cycle.

In search of the hero

I will now go round the practice area in order to show how much clarity and force is added to the stories by a correct application of the concepts of hero and quest. There are various texts where pinpointing the hero is not that simple, but where every time it is the very exercise of weighing the pros and cons with a fine sense of proportion that, paradoxically, will help us best to determine what are the exact requirements a character has to meet in order to qualify as hero. Just for the record, I would simply note here that a character (M/F) can be the hero in a narratological sense, but a villain in a moral sense. A solid and law-abiding citizen offers less scope to the narrator than a crook or a loser. Thus Jacob, being a practiced deceiver, is a perfect candidate for both labels. And what should we think of the Levite in Judges 19? As far as ethics and sensibility go, he is hardly distinguishable from the riffraff of Gibeah...

As narrative art is very flexible, there are few rigid laws governing it. As far as the hero is concerned, we will come a long way by checking if three conditions are met: Is the hero the subject of a quest? Is he/she mostly or permanently present in the text? Finally, does the hero or heroine show initiative?

(A) Rebekah and Jacob deceive Isaac and Esau

For one paragraph in Genesis 27–28:9 we think that Isaac and Esau are in line for the position of hero, because, as the father sends and the son goes out, they have a quest in common that should result in the ceremony of the blessing for the firstborn. The second paragraph, however, contains a surprise: Rebekah has eavesdropped on the two and makes her own plan, to the

benefit of her personal favorite Jacob. So a second line is drawn: that of the counter-quest. These two characters see that it is now a race against time: who will be the first to get to Isaac with a lovely dish of meat? Interestingly enough, their counter-quest aims at exactly the same object of value as that of Isaac and Esau: the paternal blessing.

Who, then, is the hero of Genesis 27? The pair Rebekah–Jacob, since they win the race and Jacob, disguised, indeed receives the blessing? (Just a stray moralizing thought: are we as readers not rewarding crime too easily?) This would be correct if all we had was vv. 1 through 30a (the moment when Jacob leaves, satisfied). These, however, constitute only half of the long episode. After the middle, a real problem arises in the shape of a furious Esau who plans to take revenge on his twin brother. Rebekah sees this and acts shrewdly. She makes a virtue of necessity by getting Isaac to do the dirty work. She asks him to send Jacob away in order that he can find a kinswoman to marry in Haran. And so it happens; Esau, who had already got himself sidelined in a religious sense by an exogamous marriage (26:34; check what his parents think of this in v. 35!) can only conclude that for the second time he has lost crucial ground, 28:6–8.

Isaac and Esau have become the tools for the cunning plans made by Rebekah and Jacob. For one moment, the initiative was with the father, but it is negated and eclipsed by Rebekah's. Moreover, in the second half the mother takes an original initiative that is realized. Again I ask: are Rebekah and Jacob, who win two races, not the hero as a couple? This brings me to Jacob's part, which is less than admirable. In the first half, he is only carrying out his mother's scheme; he can still maintain he is only finishing a difficult job. In the second half, however, he is no more than the character who is sent, according to the mother's plan and the word of the manipulated father, and he flees the danger. At the level of the chapter as a whole, that leaves Rebekah victorious, the real heroine. This is mainly due to the factor of initiative; as regards the moral dimension, we are left with a gnawing question: are Rebekah's actions not justified because in this way she helps to fulfill the prenatal oracle? This word of God in 25:23 was the exact power center of the opening story, and had this sting in its tail: “The older shall

serve the younger!" I leave it to the reader to answer this question; it is a variation on the well-known problem whether the end justifies the means, or any means.

I have challenged Jacob's status as a hero for the single story. At the next two levels up, however, Jacob again claims the position of hero, because the act of the play that includes Gen. 25:19-34 (two short stories: oracle and birth of the twins, the birthright sold for a dish of lentil stew) and Genesis 27-28 (the long story of the deceit, plus the short story of the dream and revelation at Bethel) mainly focuses on him, and does form part of the cycle (Genesis 25-35) that is wholly devoted to him. Seen in this light, Genesis 27 is only a station in the macro-plot of the entire Jacob cycle. In the next chapter, we will see that Genesis 27 has a remarkable structure that also affects the question about the hero.

(B) *Deborah and Barak defeat Sisera*

The problem at the beginning of *Judges* 4 is quickly discovered: oppression by the Canaanites, which triggers the quest for the liberation of Israel. This combination of war and liberation is a feature of many stories in *Judges*, *Samuel* and *Kings*, for instance in *Judges* 6-8 (Gideon), 10-12 (Iephthah), 1 *Samuel* 4, 8, 13-14 and 17 (each chapter contains battles against the Philistines) and the wars against the Aramean kings in 1 *Kings* 20, 22 and 2 *Kings* 3, 6-7.

Here in *Judges* 4 it is not long before a formidable candidate for the position of heroine enters the stage: Deborah, the only woman judge in the Bible and the only one who is a prophet. In vv. 6-7 she pronounces the trajectory and the aim of the quest in the presence of Barak, and wants to send him out as a general. In this way, she invites Barak to become the subject of the quest and offers him the chance to gain the glory of victory. From a military point of view, however, this man is no hero:

But Barak said to her: "If you will go with me, I will go, but if you will not, I will not go."

This does not sound too good; he seems so faint-hearted that Deborah almost has to hold his hand. For Deborah, this puts a totally different perspective on things:

"Very well, I will go with you," she answered.

"However, there will be no glory for you in the course you are taking, for then Yahweh will deliver Sisera into the hands of a woman!"

Thus a short but revealing conversation in vv. 8-9. The reader, who does not yet know how the war is going to end, is convinced at this stage that the woman who will apprehend Sisera must be Deborah herself, as there is no other candidate. With her speech about the glory falling to a woman, she would thus forcefully stress her own position as subject of the quest and as a heroine.

Things, however, will turn out very differently, and we will find that we have been cunningly wrong-footed here by the narrator. As the positions of the two armies are still being discussed (vv. 10-13), v. 11 presents a piece of intelligence that at first we do not know what to do with: about one Heber who is an ally of Sisera and his king. The positioning of this verse has a subversive function which for the moment remains hidden, as it prepares us for the appearance of Heber's wife Jael. After v. 16 the section about the large collectives is finished. While the Canaanites are being scattered in defeat, Sisera leaves his chariot and flees ignominiously. The camera follows him—note how v. 17 takes up where v. 15b left off—and we enter the second half of the story. The aftermath of the battle has been exclusively reserved for individuals. Sisera seeks shelter with Jael, who receives him cordially. The visit ends rather gruesomely: she drives a pin into his head while he is sleeping. The narrator has not prepared us for this; on the contrary, the information he gives in v. 17 makes us exactly as unsuspecting as Sisera about the allies Heber and Jael—we share his perspective. For us, the surprise is complete, but Sisera cannot feel it any more. In v. 20 he had unwittingly authorized his destruction, by prompting Jael to turn away any pursuers with the words "Nobody is here." He has become the nobody from his own speech.

Only afterwards do we realize that Jael must have decided to defect, for reasons the writer does not disclose. Israel admires her change of allegiance, and honors her by an expressive hymn in 5:24-27. The final scene is given to Barak, vv. 22-23. All that is left for him is to note that his opponent has already been destroyed, by ... a woman. With him, the reader now also notices that Deborah's prediction in v. 9 has acquired a different content: the woman at whose hand Sisera was to fall turns out to be Jael instead of Deborah. Judges 4 is an ingenious construction about two men from opposing camps, who both cut a foolish figure with two strong women. The position of heroine falls to Deborah and Jael. They complement each other, as Deborah figures only in the first half, Jael only in the second. Hidden in the background there is another hero, who made Deborah clairvoyant: she has divine foreknowledge when she foretells the glory of a woman (= Jael). It is this hero, too, who instantly decides the battle in v. 15a: "And Yahweh threw Sisera and all his chariots and army into a panic before the onslaught of Barak." This is the only instance of the writer bringing Yahweh on stage. In the end, all the inspiration and courage shown by Deborah is due to him.

(C) *The outrage in Gibeah*

From the point of view of plot analysis, *Judges 19* is extremely interesting, as it is a case of a quest that fails. The problem at the outset is at the same time the gap that needs to be filled: the Levite's concubine has deserted him. His quest, which consists in getting her back and requires a journey there and back, seems to be successful. He is allowed to take her home, but on the return journey she dies, after a night of terror in Gibeah. The Levite comes home with her body, 19:28-29, and the quest has failed. This is not, however, the end of the story: the Levite cuts her body in twelve pieces, which he sends to the twelve tribes, and reaps bewilderment all around; in v. 30 we hear the country's reaction. In this way, he lifts the case on to a higher plane, that of national justice and national well-being.

The Levite did traverse a circle by retrieving the woman, but at the moment his quest got stuck, he defined a new and much

larger problem, and he defined it before the nation. The gang rape is a blatant violation of the law, and if the whole of Israel does not redress this with a fitting punishment, the crime may taint the entire nation and bring down the wrath of the deity. The assembly of the tribes at the beginning of ch. 20 marks the start of a new quest. The tribes form a coalition and ask the tribe of Benjamin, of which Gibeah forms part, to hand over the group of rapists. When the Benjaminites refuse, the coalition decides that the tribe as a whole should pay the price. An absurd civil war breaks out, in which at first Benjamin wins a battle twice (20:17-26) but is eventually defeated. At the moment that the coalition is about to attain its goal, the annihilation of the tribe of Benjamin, they recoil, frightened by their own vindictiveness, so that it suddenly becomes necessary to stage a veritable abduction of virgin women in order to resuscitate the remnants of Benjamin.

However ill-considered and chaotic the moral and religious actions of the tribes in Judges 20-21, in a strictly narratological sense they are the hero of the new quest, which is only ended in 21:6-7. This shows that a hero can also be a collective personage. In the final section, a new quest comes up for a moment, as the coalition wants to give Benjamin another chance. What is at stake this time is life, the exact opposite of the coalition's first goal: the annihilation of Benjamin. As to ch. 19, we may note in retrospect that the incident in Gibeah functions as the fuse in the powder keg of chs. 20-21.

(D) *Saul anointed king on the road*

The long story of 1 Sam. 9:1-10:16 is a showpiece with many different characters, and a rewarding subject for plot analysis. There are no fewer than three quests. The opening is simple: the farmer Kish sends his son Saul to look for some asses that have gone astray. This is a literal search, Quest One (hereafter: Q₁), of which Saul is the hero. I now jump to 9:15ff. where we meet the seer/prophet Samuel in his own setting, and learn that God is preparing him for the arrival of Saul. Samuel is awaiting him, and knows he has to anoint the Benjaminite king. This

makes him the subject of Quest Three (= the prophet looking for the candidate for the throne), hereafter Q_3 .

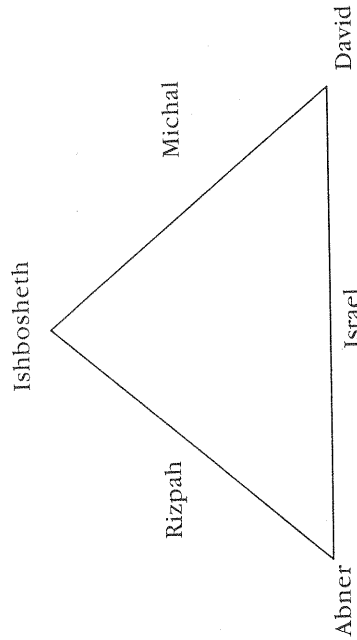
When we take another close look at the nature of Q_1 and Q_3 , and compare the two, we notice that actually there is no logical and necessary connection between a farmer's looking for his animals, and a prophet's waiting for the right candidate for anointment. The former seems a trivial, private matter hardly worth recording, while the latter is important material for real historiography. The narrator links Q_1 and Q_3 in a masterly way through Q_2 . I will now take a closer look at the text segment in question, vv. 6-14, and state the writer's technical problem: how can I bring a random farmer and the spiritual leader of the nation together on one plane? He does this by introducing indispensable informers who in their spontaneity do not realize how vital their contribution is to the installation of the first king. They are one boy (Saul's servant), and a group of girls who have come down from the town to draw water. These characters are also anonymous.

The first quest has failed. Saul and his servant have searched the hill country for days, to no avail. So, in 9:5 Saul is about to give up, but his servant has an idea: why not go to the town up there, and ask the man of God for advice? Saul refuses, but the servant is remarkably persistent and manages to persuade Saul. This is the origin of Quest Two: they try to approach the seer," who so far has also remained anonymous. Q_2 , then, is to find the seer. As soon as this aim has been stated, the girls appear, descending the hill that Saul is climbing. Their relatively long speech (vv. 12-13) contains a lot of information that will later turn out to be relevant, as they mention a sacrificial meal at the cultic high-place, with Samuel as the indispensable officiating priest. At this moment, only (the character) God and the narrator know that Saul is to be the guest of honor at this cultic meeting on the hilltop. The girls press him to hurry, and Saul indeed runs into the prophet just when he is leaving the gate, v. 14. At that moment, Q_2 has succeeded and is eliminated, but at the same time Q_1 and Q_3 become alive and operational: the farmer can now ask for clairvoyant information about his

asses (which he soon gets: v. 20), while the prophet can take care of his guest and initiate him into his unexpected destiny. Suddenly, Q_1 and Q_3 are merged; a brilliant reversal, as subject and object of Quest One exactly coincide with object and subject of Quest Three. Saul finds the prophet at the same moment as the prophet finds Saul. In the next chapter I will show that in the end Saul is the hero of the long story as a whole, as he not only occupies two quests as subject and may also be considered the valuable object of Q_3 , but is also the only character to be present in all scenes.

(E) Abner leaves Ishbosheth for David

Second Sam. 3:6-21 takes us to the tiny state that is the sole remnant of Saul's kingdom. His weak son Ishbosheth rules in the Trans-Jordanian region, but the strong man of the regime is Abner, the general. When his king rebukes him about a woman, he has had enough, and decides to deliver the Northern Kingdom—ten tribes, in theory—to the king of Judah, David. The argument in vv. 7-11 constitutes the exposition, and is about Saul's concubine Rizpah; this puts her in a triangle together with Ishbosheth and Abner. After this, the plot starts, which largely coincides with Abner's quest: how do I deliver the tribes to David? Although Abner is the hero, he is also the asking party. David is much more powerful: he stays where he is and moreover makes a heavy demand that the Saulite state has to meet. Again, this concerns a woman; it is Saul's daughter, to whom David was married for a short time but who was taken from him. To David, she is a pawn on the chessboard of national politics: if he can have her back, Abner will have proved his loyalty, and at the same time the possession of the princess will raise the legitimacy of his (David's) kingship over the whole of Israel. Without her, he will be no more than an upstart in the eyes of many. Michal has been made a symbol of the transfer of the tribes, and there is no noticeable personal feeling for her in David. She is handed over to him after having been cruelly torn from her husband Paltiel in vv. 15-16. A diagrammatic representation of how the women are being juggled about would look as follows:



The potentates are in the corners; the objects of exchange (two women and a nation) are between them along the sides and are subject to shifts. Ishbosheth ends up as the big loser; yesterday the concubine Rizpah was taken from him, today he has to give up his sister, tomorrow he will have lost his country and his position. Abner is the great initiator: he initiates the first and third shifts, and monitors the second one, the delivery of Michal as demanded by David. It is David who gains the most here: he gets the princess back, which at the same time symbolizes how he now becomes the guardian of the entire nation. This story lends a unique shape to the intimate connections between sex, power, and politics.

(F) *Two factions at war over David's throne*

First Kings 1 is another long story, which becomes complex on account of the large number of characters who, divided into two groups, are active in two places simultaneously. The problem is that David is very old, and has not settled the succession. This spurs prince Adonijah, whose ambition and vanity are strongly reminiscent of the rebel Absalom, into action. For the moment, he is the hero, and his quest—to seize power—seems to be advancing according to plan, as, surrounded by his associates, he gives a banquet that is to seal his coup. The Solomon party raises the alarm, led by Nathan the prophet and David's most influential wife, Bathsheba, Solomon's mother. They are the

heroes of the counter-quest, and manage to persuade David to make a pronouncement that at a stroke radically turns the tables.

Again, there is a race against time, as in *Genesis 27*. Adonijah's party is celebrating just a few hundred yards from the palace, near the spring of Rogel. Therefore David, together with the rival faction, organizes a coronation of Solomon at the spring of Gihon, just below the palace. Thus Solomon beats his brother to the crown, who is suddenly in danger of being found guilty of high treason. Solomon falls far short of qualifying as the hero, as everything is done for him and he is always the object—even the grammatical object—of discussion, transport, etc. The hero is his faction, which raises the alarm and gets busy; he himself shows no initiative at all. The beautiful structure of this varied episode, with its pivot (v. 30) of David's authoritative decision that changes everything, is discussed in the next chapter.

(G) *True and false prophets*

First Kings 13 opens with an exposition in which God, through a prophet who has come from Judah, opposes the altar of King Jeroboam. With the support of the prophet Ahijah, Jeroboam had separated the North from the House of David, but is now operating an illegal cult in Bethel. During the exposition (12:33–13:10), the anonymous man of God from Judah is the subject of the quest, which consists of putting a curse on the cult (through a prediction, and carrying out a destructive sign), and in this he is successful. All this, however, is only a prelude.

The story proper is in vv. 11–32 and quickly presents us with a nasty problem. An old prophet in Bethel invites the Judean to his home for a meal, and states that God himself instructed him to do this. The Judean, who just before resolutely dismissed a similar attempt at reconciliation by the king, now rises to the bait, which will cost him his life. Thus, a counter-quest has started that reeks of temptation. Apparently, the prophet from Bethel is prepared to go to great lengths to get the man of God into his house. What is he after? I would guess it is prestige, and it is at the same time an attempt to placate the Judean after all,

on behalf of Jeroboam's regime. For the entire section of vv. 11-32 the prophet from Bethel is the hero of this second quest.

To our minds, the two men do not meet their deserved fates. The man who did good work against the detested altar, and who brushed off the king by pointing to his own instructions (go straight home after business), pays with his life for letting himself be taken in by the colleague from Bethel. The deceiver who lied (thus v. 18) about God's word, becomes, to our surprise, a vehicle for God's word in vv. 20-22 and pronounces an oracle of doom against his guest. An hour later, the Judean is killed as he continues his journey home, but his remains find a place in the grave owned by his host, with the result that 200 years later this grave is spared during the religious purge under King Josiah—thus 2 Kgs 23:16-18.

We can get a clearer understanding of the fate of these two prophets, one from the south, the other from just across the border, when we acknowledge that there is a hidden but razor-sharp competition here about true and false prophecy. Who is right? And first of all: how was the Judean man of God to know that the man who invited him was lying about God? Did he have a realistic option of refusing him, as he had done the king? He should probably have kept strictly to his own task, which undisputedly had come from God, and realized that this command certainly would not be cancelled or contradicted by God himself. In short, he should have been utterly obedient. Now that he has caved in to the prospect of a convivial drinking session (remember the Levite of Judges 19?), another hero appears in the arena where true and false prophecy are at loggerheads. This is the Word of God, which employs various spokesmen, but which always reaches its destination, even though this has to be accomplished through the mouth of a prophet who has just lied to a colleague.

(H) *Elisha after Elijah's ascension to heaven*

Our first thought in 2 Kings 2 is that of course Elijah must be the hero—isn't he awarded the unique honor of being taken up to heaven? No, this consideration is based solely on content, and is refuted by the opening clause. The curious thing about 1a is that in the first phrase the ascension figures as something

already known—these first words are no more than an indication of time. The first main clause refers to the journey undertaken by Elijah and his pupil, and the temporal clause treats the ascension as something which is nothing new to those concerned (Elijah and Elisha, and the throng of prophets following them): "When Yahweh was about to take Elijah up to heaven in a whirlwind, Elijah and Elisha had set out from Gilgal." We cannot help noticing how well-informed all these prophets are, when in v. 3 the narrator lets us in on an exchange where the prophets ask Elisha: "Do you know that Yahweh will take away your master from over you today?" Elisha answers that he knows it, too.

The two holy men travel a route to the east that is shown to us on the map: Gilgal—back to Bethel—Jericho—Jordan. Elijah had wanted to travel alone, but he does not get the chance. Three times the narrator has Elisha use strong language: this is the oath in vv. 2/4/6 by which he swears to his master that he will not leave him. Apparently, he is determined not to; why? The truth comes out after Elijah, in a final display of divine power, has divided the river with his mantle (v. 9): Elisha wants to receive a double portion of Elijah's spirit, i.e. his divine inspiration. This request reveals that Elisha (no relation!) assumes the role of Elijah's son, and wants to inherit a firstborn's portion: under the law of succession, the eldest son receives a double share. No wonder Elisha should cry out at the *moment suprême*: "Oh father, father! Israel's chariots and horsemen!"

It is now clear who is the hero, and of which quest: 2 Kings 2 is already a story about Elisha, because he, the disciple, now wants to become the master, at the exact moment when his master disappears. And so it happens. He witnesses a miracle in v. 11, as a chariot of fire and horses of fire take Elijah away from him, up to heaven. Now that he sees it with his own eyes, he knows that he is, in fact, the successor accepted by God, as Elijah had determined earlier (v. 10). Elijah's departure is the axis of the story, around which are placed Elisha's seeing and not-seeing-any-more (vv. 11-12). The next ring consists of vv. 8 and 14: Elisha takes up Elijah's mantle, and divides the waters of the Jordan just as his master had done on the way up, so that to the throng of prophets following events from a distance

(another ring, vv. 7 and 15) it is now also quite clear who is their new leader. The conclusion of the unit confirms this, when Elisha is confronted with some skeptics who still find it necessary to go and look for Elijah's body in the rough Trans-Jordanian terrain. As it is their problem, Elisha sensibly leaves them to it and manifests himself as spiritual leader; the narrator grants him the last word in this final paragraph, with its comical mini-quest (vv. 15-18).

(I) A mother fights for her child

I conclude with 2 Kgs 4:8-37, where Elisha twice performs a miracle, and where again we are tempted to think that the great prophet is the hero. Again, however, this consideration, based on content, is wrong. A first signal that we are on the wrong trajectory already occurs in the exposition, when the woman from Shunem makes it clear that she does not need any favors from the prophet (jumping ahead for a moment: be sure to link v. 16 with her bitter reproach in v. 28!).

The exposition covers vv. 8-17 and already brings on all the actors. The quest is the woman's, as her goal is to have a guest-room permanently available for the man of God in her house, and she has the initiative. The prophet wants to do her a favor in return, but prefers to speak with her through his servant Gehazi (see especially vv. 12, 14-15 and later on v. 36)—a slightly disagreeable form of indirect contact. Moreover, being a child of his time the prophet suffers from the traditional notion that every woman considers motherhood *the* fulfillment of her life, and without paying attention to the fact that she is not very interested, he announces that she will have a child. So it happens, and in certain respects this outcome resembles a counter-quest in which the prophet forces his plans through. The circumstance of her husband's being old (and who knows—she herself could be 50 already) is an allusion to Abraham and Sarah who had a child when this had long been impossible from a biological point of view (Genesis 17-21).

The story's central part covers vv. 18-37. The child dies, and the father appears indolent (if not sluggish, v. 23). The desperate mother has to cope on her own, but she fights like a lioness. All

action is initiated by her. She knows that the only remaining chance to get her child back is Elisha's power to work miracles, and she sets off in a hurry. She finds him on Mount Carmel and will not let go, in much the same way as Elisha behaved towards Elijah in ch. 2. She, too, swears: "As Yahweh lives and as you live, I will not leave you." This is a poignant detail: to have a *dead* child but to swear on the *lives* of the two male authorities, with the implicit message that the prophet should not attempt now to wriggle out of it. First Elisha tries a solution through his servant, but of course Gehazi is just as good at doing miracles as you or I (vv. 29 and 31), so that the great prophet will really have to make an effort himself. With his body he works a kind of healing that succeeds just when all hope seems lost.

The woman is the real hero. Twice the initiative rests with her, she is continually present in the text, and she devises the preliminary quest (and is rewarded with young life). Some 15 years later she is forced with her back to the wall, but immediately takes action and resolutely and alertly completes the trajectory of the second quest, truly a life-and-death struggle. She shows the prophet his responsibilities in v. 21, when she carries the dead child to the guest-room and puts it on Elisha's bed. And through her oath, she makes sure that he is going to try himself. It would be a gross error to view 2 Kings 4 as a naive or primitive story about wonder-working; on the contrary, the good listener discerns subtle criticism of the man of God. She is a woman of character.

Assistance and opposition

I will conclude this chapter with a brief discussion of *helpers and opponents*. Now that we have learned to discern the axis of pursuit, we are able to position the remaining characters correctly in relation to the quest. They are on the action axis, and are usually few. They are seldom neutral; in fact, the question whether they further or obstruct the action is often enlightening. If we see Rebekah as the heroine of Genesis 27, it is clear that Jacob is her helper. In his case, this function with respect to plot or quest coincides with his position as beneficiary. In the first half, his brother and father are unwitting opponents—of

course only in relation to the plot. The father is partly a helper, in so far as he wastes his blessing on the disguised son. In the second half, Esau is clearly an opponent, and Isaac is transformed into a helper through Rebekah's wiles. In 1 Samuel 9–10 the prophet Samuel obviously functions as helper, in relation to the journey that turns an unsuspecting farmer into a surprised, but secretly initiated candidate for the throne. I trust readers will find it easy to develop this distinction for themselves.

The narrator may, however, decide not to use a simple black-and-white contrast but may opt for ambiguity, two examples of which I mention here. The man of God from Judah and the old prophet from Bethel, the duo from 1 Kings 13, are in the interesting gray area. In relation to the straightforward quest of the Word of God that creates and changes reality, they both have merits as well as demerits. A more intriguing use of ambiguity occurs in 1 Samuel 17 as regards Saul. On his way to the arena where he is going to slay Goliath, David has a conversation with Saul. In vv. 31–40, the king offers him his armor to wear in the fight. Saul must be a helper—or is he?

No, he is not, for in the first place the king already proves obstructive by not admitting David to the arena, v. 33, even though motivated by the best of intentions. When next David argues that as an experienced shepherd he knows what to do, Saul gives in and offers him his sword and armor. David puts it on, but it does not fit him. Not surprising, we conclude, on the basis of our superior knowledge. What no one in either of the army camps knows except David—and “above” the story the reader knows, too, thanks to the narrator—is that the shepherd boy from Bethlehem has been selected by God to be the new king, and that his rise is closely interwoven with the fall of the rejected Saul (both story lines: 1 Samuel 16). Hence, it is highly symbolic that Saul's attributes sit awkwardly on David, and that afterwards Jonathan's tunic does fit him like a glove. From the start, the offer of the king's armor was doomed to failure, and the entire incident is an obstacle on the shepherd's route to the Philistine champion. It is also a good example of the irrelevance of good intentions. The conclusion is that Saul's contribution in vv. 31–40 makes him a helper as well as an opponent.

6

Time and space, entrances and exits

The power of a correct structuration

When we succeed in making a correct division of the text into its various parts, everything comes together. Two useful avenues of approach are the entrances and exits of characters on stage, and the way in which the writer employs his system of time and space coordinates.

Characters come and go

When we check Genesis 27 (story A: Rebekah and Jacob deceive Isaac and Esau) for entrances and exits, we notice a remarkable alternation that shows how meticulously this act has been put together. There are six scenes with two figures each, and these are always one parent plus one son:

- | | | | |
|---|------------------------------|----|---------------------------------|
| A | Isaac and Esau (vv. 1–5) | A' | Isaac and Esau (vv. 31–40) |
| B | Rebekah and Jacob (vv. 6–17) | B' | Rebekah and Jacob (vv. 42–45) |
| C | Isaac and Jacob (vv. 18–30) | C' | Isaac and Jacob (v. 46; 28:1–5) |

This distribution of characters seems to be a decision about form. Shouldn't a correct exegesis be concerned with content? So far, I have studiously avoided the terms “form” and “content,” and will wholeheartedly continue to do so. As it is, this duo is not very useful. The impression they give of a neat dichotomy is misleading. A literary approach can only flourish if we realize that all form affects content, and that all the content you may imagine for any story of quality can only be seen and discussed if it has taken some form or other. Form and content are so inextricably linked that they are difficult concepts to handle. Take, for instance, the tight design we notice in Genesis 27.