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This book makes an important contribution to our understanding of the Book of Genesis. Professor White shows that the traditions embodied in the narrative are essentially linguistic; and by using narratological theory he shows how each stage in the growth of the Biblical tradition is in fact an interpretation of some body of prior tradition. By relating his presentation to a general narrative typology, White hopes to demonstrate how Biblical narrative relates to the broader tradition of narrative writing in the west, and in so doing he provides a useful introduction to the work of modern narrative theorists. For this reason, his book should be of interest to literary theorists as well as to theologians, since it treats Biblical tradition as a complex literary process which projects possibilities already embedded in that tradition to successive participants in the flow of history and culture.

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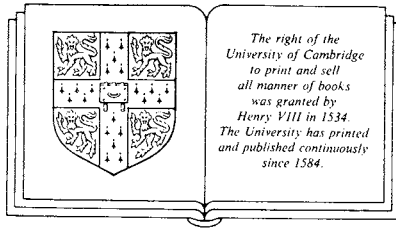
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NARRATION AND DISCOURSE IN THE BOOK OF GENESIS

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For my mother
Marjorie White Hancock
and in memory of my father
Otis Clayton White
(1909–1971)

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Preface

Roland Barthes once wrote that the poetic Word is something which is produced and consumed with a kind of “sacred relish.”¹ Certainly no less should be said of the writers and readers of the book of Genesis. It will be the underlying thesis of this work that a narrator’s response to or experience of language – his or her stance toward the Word – is crucial for how s/he narrates. From this basic relation to language arises the narrator’s manner of representing the narrative world and the direct discourse of the characters, as well as the way character is formed through description, analysis, action and speech. Ultimately from this system of interpretive tensions and dramatic events will erupt the unique experiences of defamiliarization which renew the reader’s perceptions of self and the world, and perhaps satisfy what Barthes also refers to as the “Hunger of the Word.”²

This thesis will be developed in the first part of this book where I attempt to create a functional narrative theory in the form of a typology of narrative functions and modes which delineate the various ways in which a narrator may relate the framing narration to the direct discourse of the characters. Within this broad context the types of discourse which characterize some of the major narratives of the book of Genesis can be determined. It may also then begin to be possible to see more exactly how narrative writing in Genesis both resembles and differs from other types of narrative literature.

This typology has grown out of my engagement with speech-act theory, but I have sought to provide an intersubjective grounding for illocutionary force chiefly in the semiotic philosophy of Edmund Ortigues. For the linguistic and literary development of the typology I have utilized primarily the work of Eugenio Coseriu, Emile Benveniste, Julia Kristeva, Lubomír Doležal and Michael Bakhtin, though I have worked it out in dialogue with some of the various theories of point of view produced by contemporary literary critics such as Franz Stanzel, Dorrit Cohn and Gérard Genette.

The second and third parts of the book then show how the overarching narrative structure of Genesis and the style of a number of separate sub-narratives relate to this typology, and how the reader is affected by the defamiliarization experience produced by the unique configuration of third-person narration and direct discourse in each narrative. The wide variety of

writing styles that have come to light in this analysis lends support to the basic contention of historical criticism that the book of Genesis was written over a long period of time by a number of different authors. But within this variety, a common system of constraints upon the representation of characters and the narrative world is seen to be operating – perhaps due to a continuous tradition of narrative writing among several schools in Ancient Israel – which provides a degree of stylistic continuity and structural coherence amidst the change. Those whose interests are more exegetical and interpretive than theoretical, might begin with part II or part III which are reasonably understandable on their own, and return to part I to gain a deeper understanding of the basis of the method of analysis being used.

As a person originally trained in the disciplines of Biblical historical research I am keenly aware of the difficulty of bringing theoretical constructs developed by semioticians, linguists and literary critics to bear upon the materials of the Hebrew Bible. On the one hand, those who specialize in theory will undoubtedly be dissatisfied with the rather eclectic efforts of a newcomer to this field, and, on the other, my empirically oriented colleagues in Biblical studies will be wary of such an extensive reliance upon theory. My earlier work with form criticism, however, led me to the conclusion that narratological conceptions have always constituted significant but usually unexamined presuppositions of the historical research on Biblical narratives. It thus has not seemed possible to me to find a way into the unique subtleties of Biblical narrative writing without engaging some of the underlying theoretical issues. I view the results of this work as more supplementary than contradictory to much historical criticism, however.

With regard to the more recent literary approaches to Biblical narrative such as that especially of Robert Alter³ and Meir Sternberg,⁴ who have worked with some of the Genesis narratives, I can only say here that I am highly appreciative of their illuminating ground-breaking work, but I have had somewhat different methodological aims and interests. Alter's forthright location of Biblical narration within the field of narrative fiction, and his subtle, insightful and persuasive exposition of the stylistic art of Biblical narrators served to break the spell of historicism in which Biblical studies have been enthralled. In contrast to Alter, however, I have felt the need to place the study of Biblical narrative within a broad context of narratological theory which can account for the striking reticence on the part of the Genesis narrators to use descriptive language with regard to character and setting. And while generally supporting Sternberg's functional approach to narrative discourse, I have not sought to create a special poetics for the corpus of Hebrew Biblical narratives based on the ideology of divine and narratorial omniscience. Rather than emphasizing the universal compositional importance of the unlimited knowledge of the Biblical narrator, I have sought to describe the modes of the

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narrator's relation to the divine Word, and the constraints this imposes upon his expression of knowledge and his use of language. Thus in focusing in detail upon the narratives of the book of Genesis alone, I have found the stance of the narrator to change in the course of the book, and the ideology also to vary. My interpretations of specific narratives are often close to those of Gabriel Josipovici whose recent book reached me only after my work was completed, but I am inclined to see the literary influence of the Bible more at the "micro" level of the individual narrative than at the "macro" level of the Christian Bible as a whole.⁵

Many friends and colleagues, both in the United States and in Europe, have given me valuable assistance and criticism over the rather lengthy period of time taken for the research and writing of this book. The Rutgers University Faculty Academic Study Program has provided funds for both research travel in France and Germany, and indispensable periods of freedom from teaching responsibilities. I am especially indebted to Erhardt Guttgemanns, Coral Lansbury, Joseph and Anne-Marie Plagemann, Jean Sabattier, Lilo Schneider and Trudi Tate who have, in different ways, given me vital assistance in my research and manuscript preparation. Further, I will always be grateful to Martin J. Buss, Stuart Charmé, Robert Detweiler, George L. Dillon, David Jobling, Julia Kristeva, Louis Marin, Angel Medina and Roland Sublon who took time from their own heavy schedules to read and respond generously to portions of this book in first draft form. The book is stronger because of their criticisms, and would doubtless be stronger had I been able to incorporate their suggestions more adequately. They are, of course, in no way responsible for the errors and weaknesses that remain.

Thanks are also due to Scholars Press for permission to adapt materials for this new context which were first published in *Semeia* 18 and 31.

Finally, a word of tribute is due to my wife, Ann Shepard White, and my daughters, Lisa and Jessica, who have had to endure hearing of this book entirely too long, and have sustained my equilibrium through it all by keeping me joyfully aware that life is always much more significant than the books we write about it.