

## **The Day the Sun Stood Still: Joshua 10, Narrative Structuralism, and Worldview Analysis**

I intend in this paper to discuss and apply to Joshua 10, particularly verses 6-15, a hermeneutical model that makes use of methods from more philosophically-oriented approaches. This model will make use of narrative structuralism in the service of worldview analysis. This hermeneutical model is not intended to replace grammatical-historical exegesis, but to augment it. Accordingly it may be used profitably *along with* more traditional types of exegesis in the preparation of sermons. I hope to show that it yields additional insights into, and a fuller explanation of, the passage, and thus will prove useful in the preparation of sermons—particularly sermons from narrative sections of Scripture. (It may also prove useful as a model for the delivery of narrative sermons!)

### **Theory**

#### The Story Is the Thing

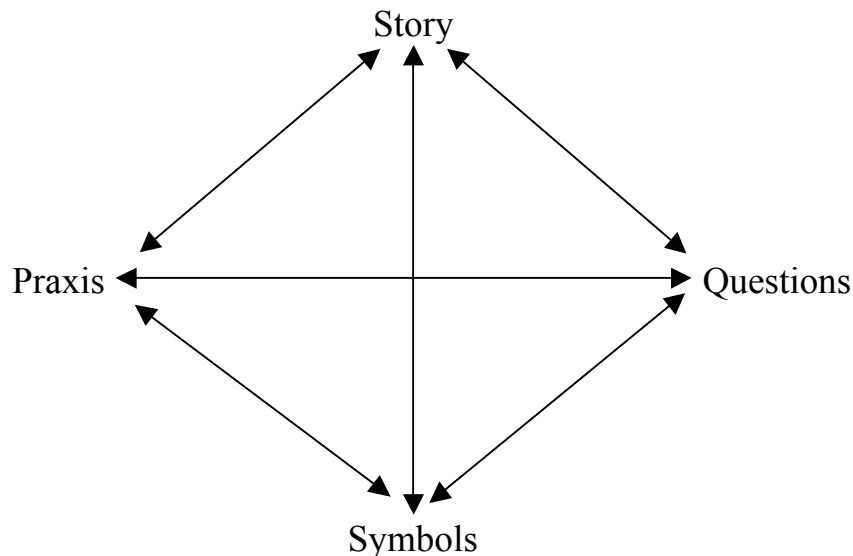
My proposed hermeneutical model is one of worldview analysis along the lines of that proposed by N. T. Wright, which is an embellishment of the work done by J. Richard Middleton and Brian J. Walsh.<sup>1</sup> This model differs from some other models of worldview analysis that focus on the philosophical components of a worldview.<sup>2</sup> Examples of the philosophical categories upon which such models focus include metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, history, anthropology, etc. While such categories are rightfully considered in examining a worldview, the advantage of the model I will use in this paper is that it focuses upon the *narrative structure* of worldviews. To that end, we need now to discuss briefly the nature of worldviews *qua* worldviews.

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<sup>1</sup>N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, vol. 1, *Christian Origins and the Question of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 122-26; J. Richard Middleton and Brian J. Walsh, *Truth Is Stranger Than It Used to Be: Biblical Faith in a Postmodern Age* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1995).

<sup>2</sup>Examples of the philosophical categories upon which such models focus include metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, history, anthropology, etc. While such categories are rightfully considered in examining a worldview, the advantage of the model I will use in this paper is that it focuses upon the narrative structure of worldview.

*Worldviews are by nature pre-cognitive.*<sup>3</sup> They are not reasoned *to*, but reasoned *from*. Worldviews address deep issues of human life; they are the lenses through which an individual or a society interprets reality and daily life. Worldviews typically do four things: (1) Provide *stories* through which those maintaining that worldview view reality. (2) Answer *ultimate questions* about human existence that every person asks: “Who am I? Where am I? What’s wrong? What’s the solution?”<sup>4</sup> (3) Express the story in *symbols*. (4) Mandate a characteristic *praxis*—a way of being in this world. In each of these worldview indicators one may glimpse the worldview in its entirety. Each of these worldview indicators relates to and impacts, and is related to and impacted by, all of the others. This interaction is illustrated below:<sup>5</sup>



The most important indicator of all is that of *story*. The four ultimate questions are simply drawing out the dimensions of the story. Consider:

1. Who am I? Characterization
2. Where am I? Setting
3. What’s wrong? Plot Conflict

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<sup>3</sup>One may see this by noting that the *Anschuaang* of *Weltanschuaang* (worldview) is often translated “intuition.”

<sup>4</sup>Wright added a fifth question, “What time is it?” to this model in *Jesus and the Victory of God*, vol. 2, *Christian Origins and the Question of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 467-72. It is interesting to note that the four original questions are quite similar to the questions that Vatican II suggested were common to all humans. See *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, ed. Austin Flannery (Dublin: Dominican Publications, 1975), 738.

<sup>5</sup>Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, 124.

#### 4. What's the solution? Plot Resolution<sup>6</sup>

The symbols capture in a glance, the most significant points of the story. Consider for a moment the two most important symbols of Christianity: the Lord's Supper and Baptism. The Lord's Supper pictures the substitutionary, atoning death of the Lord.

This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of Me. . .  
This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this as often as you  
drink it in remembrance of Me (1 Cor. 11:24-25).

Baptism pictures his resurrection, which ensures the resurrection of the believer (Romans 8:10; 10:9-10; 1 Cor. 15:19-49).<sup>7</sup>

Every worldview story demands a unique praxis, a way of being in the world. Praxis is a way of making the Christian story one's own. (Note that the story that is *practiced*, not simply the story that is *professed*, is the story that is operative in the life of an individual.)<sup>8</sup> One thus sees the influence of story in each of the worldview indicators.

Stories are thus crucial in preaching because not only are they capable of communicating one's worldview—they also can subvert opposing worldviews. This is seen in the preaching of Jesus. Over and over Jesus reverses the expectations of his hearers. Consider the parable of the *Good Samaritan* (an oxymoron to first-century Jewish ears if ever there was one!). The hero is the last person Jesus' audience expected. Likewise Jesus' parable of the prodigal son could not but stun the Pharisees who were listening. Through the vehicle of story he tells those who complained that he received sinners and ate with them that the Father eagerly desired to receive the immoral in the most lavish of ways, too! The son who left home and *cleaned the pigsty* was accepted back, and *given his own banquet*, while the son who stayed home and obeyed was left outside the banquet. They could not fail to recognize which son in the story referred to them.

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<sup>6</sup>I'm pretty certain that this is not original to me but I can't remember how I learned this.

<sup>7</sup>I do not wish to suggest that this is all that is pictured in either Baptism or the Lord's Supper. The important thing to note is that both ordinances "picture" the heart of the Christian Gospel.

<sup>8</sup>Some from all different worldviews live according to a different praxis. For instance, most postmodernists still want to employ a banker or accountant that believes that the signifiers he works are referential in nature. Disagreement between what one confesses and what one practices constitutes a performative contradiction; the proposition affirmed is contradicted by the action performed.

All this demonstrates that worldviews are often in conflict with one another. They often tell competing stories that cannot be resolved. One or the other must win out—they cannot both be maintained.<sup>9</sup> *Every worldview calls for allegiance.*<sup>10</sup>

Finally worldviews are by nature theological. Any statement about ultimate reality is theological in some sense. Even the atheist’s assertion that there is no God is a theological statement of great significance. Likewise the agnostic’s assertion either that one cannot know if there is a God, or that at least he personally is unsure on the matter, is also a profoundly theological statement. Worldviews simply are theological. They cannot be otherwise.

Our task as preachers of God’s word is to proclaim the biblical worldview story in all its fullness as clearly and distinctively as possible. To do this we *must first hear the biblical story* as it truly is. Often we preachers fail to be properly shocked by Scripture because we are so familiar with it that we fail to pay attention to its nuances. One useful tool in learning to hear the biblical worldview story again is narrative structuralism.

### How Stories Work

A variation of A. J. Greimas’s narrative analysis, or as it is often called, actant analysis, is useful as an aid in understanding how stories works. Greimas drew upon Vladimir Propp’s analysis of the formal grammar or “morphology” of Russian folk stories,<sup>11</sup> Claude Levi Strauss’s mythological

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<sup>9</sup>In other words they are contrary. One sometimes hears that competing worldviews are contradictory; such is not necessarily the case. Contradictories involve two truth claims where one position (worldview) must be true and the other false: such as atheism vs: theism. Contraries involve two truth claims which cannot both be true, but both may be false: such as Buddhism vs: Christianity.

<sup>10</sup>Even pluralism, which claims not to be a worldview, but nevertheless is itself a worldview, demands that others accept it. Those who refuse to embrace it are accused of being hegemonic, patriarchal, antiquated, or simplistic. Ted Peters observantly touches on this point:

“How do we get out of this confusion? We need to clear the smoke and fully accept the reality of pluralism. This means we must recognize Hick’s proposal for what it is, namely, one confessional position within the plurality of positions regarding the nature of revelation and salvation. It is not a precondition that all must accept in order for dialogue to take place. . . . The acceptance of pluralism means, among other things, that if a given religious tradition teaches double or multiple ultimate destinies, then it should be permitted to express that position without an attack on its integrity at the outset. This should include all major religions, Christianity included. There is no reason to discriminate against Christianity just because it may teach double destiny. Many other religions do too.”

<sup>11</sup>Propp analyzed Russian folk stories according to their *function*, and concluded that certain functions within Russian folk stories are invariant elements in the tale. See Vladimir I. Propp, *Morphology*

analysis,<sup>12</sup> and Ferdinand de Saussure's distinction between *langue* and *parole*.<sup>13</sup> Like Propp's morphology Saussure's *langue* focused not on the *content* of texts, but on the *function* of texts. Greimas maintains that there are six basic actors or characters in any story, the sender, the receiver, the object, the agent, the opponent, and the helper. Actant analysis in its simplest form has three phases: (1) the *initial* sequence, where the goal is stated; (2) the *topical* sequence, where plot tension is achieved as the goal is initially thwarted, but ultimately made possible; and (3) the *final* sequence, where the original goal is achieved.<sup>14</sup>

- a. initial sequence: The Agent is given some Object by the Sender to deliver to the Receiver, but is prevented by the Opponent from doing so;
- b. topical sequence: The Agent in the initial sequence becomes the Receiver in the topical sequence, a new Agent or Helper is introduced;
- c. final sequence: The Agent is thus able to deliver the Object to the Receiver after all.<sup>15</sup>

Actant theorists chart out how the characters interact with each other at the individual levels or within each sequence.<sup>16</sup> I have charted out below how the theory works abstractly and also in practice, using the simple story of Little Red Riding Hood, as presented by Wright.<sup>17</sup>

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*of the Folktale*, ed. Svatava Pirkova-Jakobson, trans. Laurence Scott (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1968).

<sup>12</sup>Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Myth and Meaning* (New York: Schocken, 1979); idem, *Tristes Tropiques*, trans. John and Doreen Weightman (New York: Penguin, 1992); idem, *Structural Anthropology*, trans. Claire Jacobson and Brooke Grundfest Schoepf (New York: Basic, 1963).

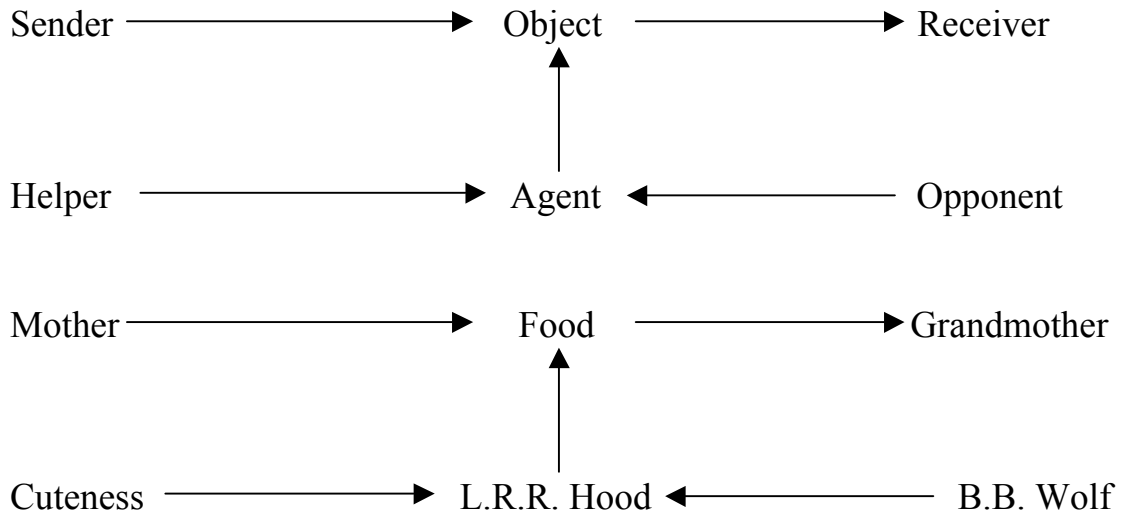
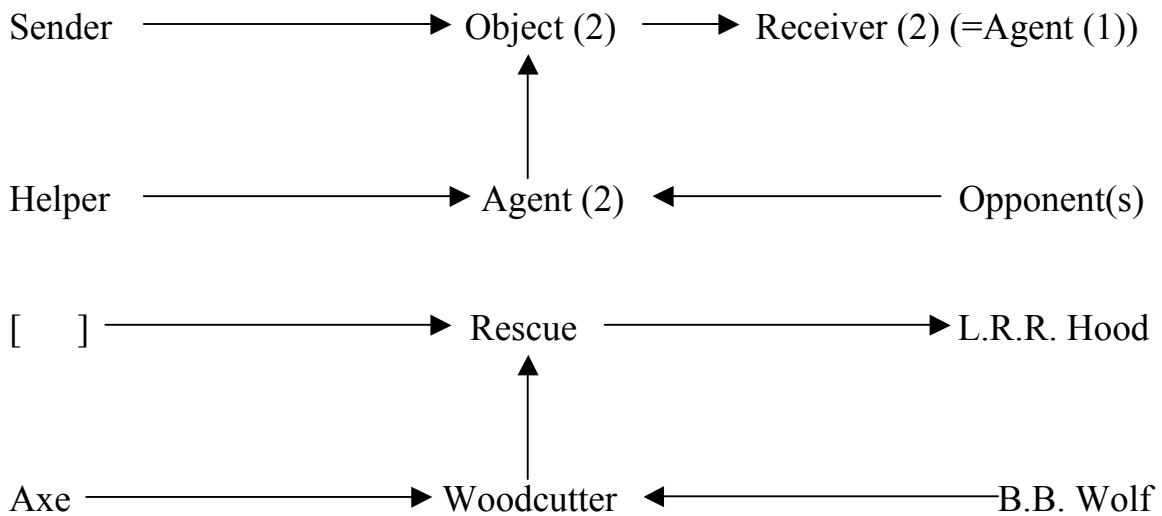
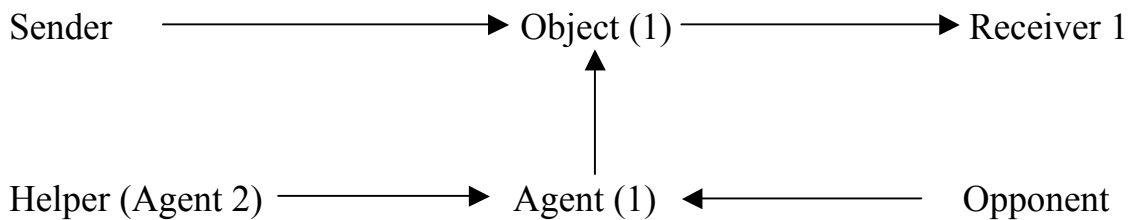
<sup>13</sup>Saussure distinguished between concrete acts of speech (*parole*) and language-systems (*langue*). Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, ed. Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye, trans. Wade Baskin (New York: Philosophical Library, 1950).

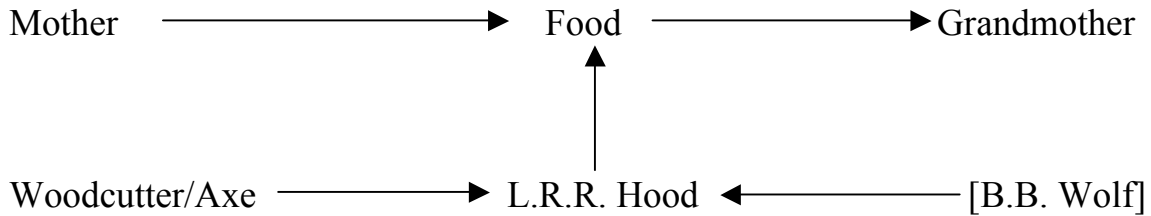
<sup>14</sup>In practice there are often multiple levels within a sequence.

<sup>15</sup>Cf. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, 71.

<sup>16</sup>Greimas is not content simply to address how stories work in a linear fashion, somewhat similarly to Propp. He also seeks to understand texts at a deeper, more elementary, level, in a manner somewhat akin to that of Lévi-Strauss. He thus assigns three levels to a text: the surface level, the superficial level, and the elementary level. The surface level is the level at which individuals routinely read stories. The superficial level is the level at which actant analysis takes place. The elementary level is the level where deep structures are analyzed. See A. J. Greimas, *Structural Semantics: An Attempt at a Method*, trans. Daniele McDowell, Ronald Schleifer, and Alan Veile (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1983), 20. Few evangelical biblical scholars have endeavored to use Greimas's work at the elementary level, in part due to his cryptic language, the problematic psychological basis of this part of his project, and probably primarily for evangelicals, the dehistoricizing nature of this sort of analysis. And I am not recommending this part of Greimas's model, either.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, 71-72.

**A. Initial Sequence.****B. Topical Sequence:****C. Final Sequence**



## Application

### Worldviews and Joshua's Long Day

The book of Joshua is all about a clash of worldviews. It is not merely a matter of geography, of Israel possessing the land, it is also about whose God is the greatest. Yahweh has told his people that he will give them the land. If he does not keep his word, then he is not a God worthy of their devotion. On the other hand, the Canaanites have gods as well, and their gods also have certain obligations. The scene is set for a worldview clash of the first order. In this section I shall propose an interpretation of the passage that addresses both the overall worldview theme of the book of Joshua—Israel's God demonstrating his supremacy and faithfulness by delivering the (promised) land to his people—as well as the immediate issue at hand in chapter 10 (Joshua's leadership).

Clearly a battle of deities is in order when Israel enters Canaan. The land isn't big enough for two worldviews. The differences between the God of Israel and the gods of the Amorites are evident. Israel has only one God. The Amorites have a number of deities. Israel's God rules over the entire universe. The gods of Canaan are local gods, ruling separately over certain areas of life. In other words, they are limited in power (one god over the moon, another over the storms, the crops, and so on). Israel's worldview story pictures her God as consistent in holiness, concerned for his people, and faithful to keep his Covenant. The Amorites, on the other hand, have a number of contrary stories that picture their gods as arbitrary, selfish, sensual, often battling against one another, and above all not to be trusted. Most significantly for the purpose of this paper, the most prominent Canaanite god is Baal, the storm God, who has a consort, 'Anath.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>18</sup> 'Anath is alternately pictured as the sister and consort of Baal. She is a lustful huntress who desires either blood or sex, or both. She repeatedly sides with Baal against his enemies, divine and human,

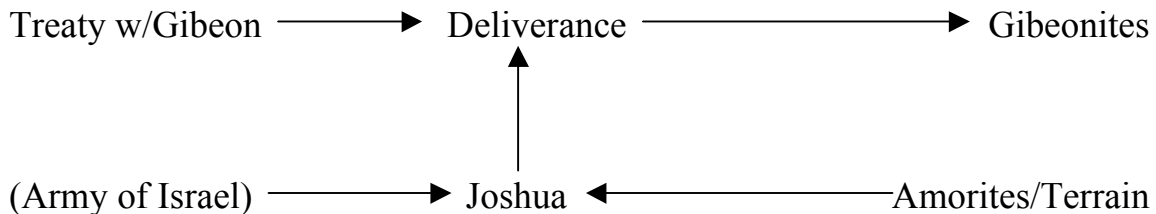
From a worldview perspective it is not inconsequential that the God of Israel works miraculously to ensure victory for his people over the people of Baal *through a storm*. The message is clear: “Our God is so mighty that he can order your god to do his work for him and to destroy you.” In the inherent battle of the gods (worldviews), Yahweh has no equal.

On another level, the level of the story within the story, an immediate issue that Israel faces at the moment is the leadership of Joshua. Israel is fighting on behalf of the pagan Gibeonites because Joshua naively entered into a treaty with the Gibeonites *without seeking the counsel of the Lord* (9:14). Joshua’s credentials as a leader are clearly at stake. Therefore, it is imperative that he not compound one bad decision with another by not only leading the Israelites into battle on behalf of a treacherous people, but into one in which they suffer significant casualties. But not only are Joshua’s qualifications called into question—Yahweh’s are also suspect—after all, the Lord chose Joshua (1:1-9). Ultimately the buck stops with the God who chose Joshua.

### The Narrative Structure of Joshua 10

Actant analysis of Joshua 10 designates the actors in the first sequence in this way. The *Sender* is the treaty Israel made with the Gibeonites. The *Receiver* is the Gibeonites. The *Object* is Deliverance. The *Agent* is Joshua. The *Opponents* are the Amorites. (The geographical conditions and temporal restraints also are opponents in that they serve as obstacles to the success of the mission.) The *Helper* is the army of Israel. We will now apply this method to Joshua 10.

#### A. Initial Sequence (10:6)

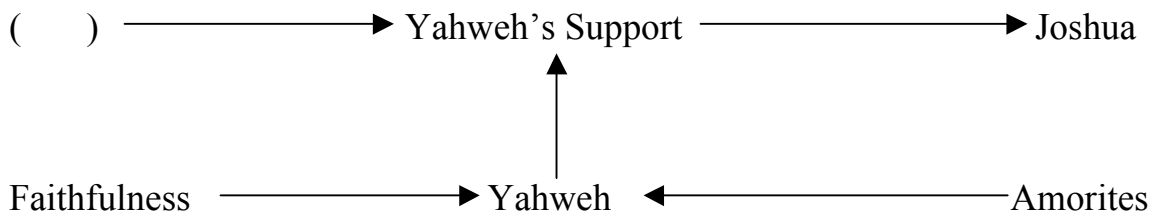



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including her father, ‘El, as well as opposing Yam-Nahar, and Mot, the god of death. She destroys entire towns and gleefully wades through the blood. She is not one you would take home to mother.

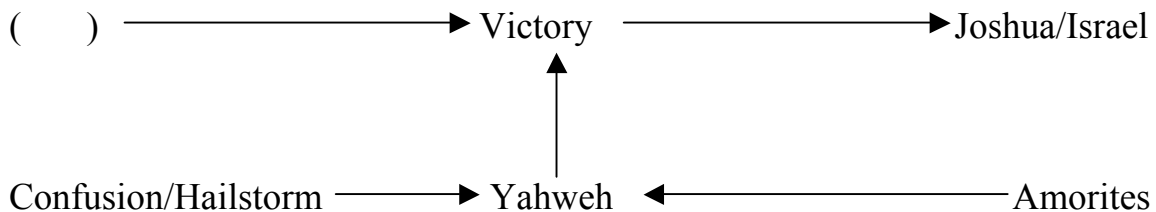
Joshua is bound (by the treaty he made with the Gibeonites in chapter 9) to respond to their call for aid. But to respond to the Gibeonites he will have to act quickly and travel all night through some rugged terrain. This is quite a difficult task, as well as one that will not be popular with the people given the circumstances behind Israel becoming allied with the Gibeonites.

### B. Topical Sequence (10: 8-9)



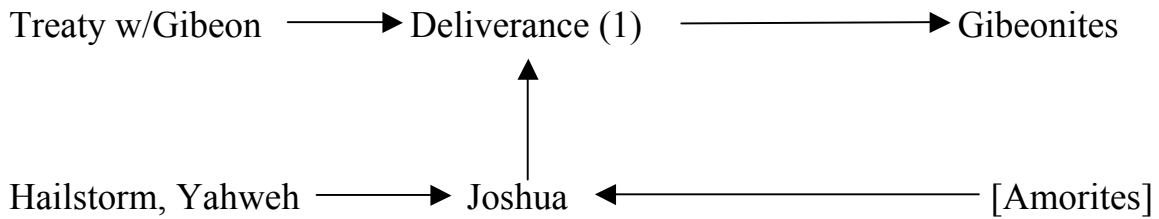
In this sequence the Lord becomes an agent. He assures Joshua that He will give him an overwhelming victory (10:8). Secure in the knowledge that whatever the circumstances Yahweh will give him the victory, Joshua marches his men all night in order to attack the enemy as soon as possible (10:9).

### B<sup>1</sup>. Topical Sequence 2 (10:10-11)



B<sup>1</sup> is a second topical sequence. Yahweh is true to his word. When Joshua's army arrives on the scene, the Lord acts (fights for) on Joshua and Israel's behalf and an overwhelming victory is won.

### C. Final Sequence (10:10-14)



The Gibeonites are delivered. Not only are the Israelites victorious, Joshua has led them with integrity—to say nothing of the Lord’s faithfulness and wisdom being demonstrated anew. They return to camp satisfied, and probably greatly relieved. Moreover, this story reinforces a crucial part of Israel’s worldview by answering the four worldview questions:

1. Who are we? We are God’s chosen people.
2. Where are we? We are in the land He has promised us.
3. What’s wrong? Our enemies also lay claim to this land.
4. What’s the solution? Our God is mightier than their gods—and he will fight for us (he had it under control all along).

#### What Does All This Have to Do with Preaching?

This passage has often been the focus of controversy in the continuing battle between naturalists and theists. It is also a point of some disagreement between evangelicals—what exactly are we to understand happened here? Some say a literal stopping of the sun and the moon, i.e., that the earth stopped rotating.<sup>19</sup> Others, including some who affirm the reality of biblical miracles, say that what is in view here is an astronomical/astrological omen, one that so frightened or discouraged the Amorites that they were easily defeated.<sup>20</sup> Still others say that we have misunderstood the language here

<sup>19</sup>This is the traditional position for both Jewish and Christian scholars. Those who have affirmed it include Augustine, Jerome, Luther, Calvin. For full documentation see, J. H. Walton, “Joshua 10:12-15 and Mesopotamian Celestial Omen Texts,” in *Faith, Tradition, and History: Old Testament Historiography in its Near Eastern Context*, ed. A. R. Millard, J. K. Hoffmeier, D. W. Baker (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1994), 181-82, 190.

<sup>20</sup>J. S. Halliday, Jr., “The Day(s) the Moon Stood Still,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* (1968): 166-78; K. L. Younger, Jr., “Early Israel in Recent Biblical Scholarship,” in *The Face of Old Testament Studies: A Survey of Contemporary Approaches*, ed. B. T. Arnold and D. W. Baker (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 215; and Walton, “Joshua 10:12-15 and Mesopotamian Celestial Omen Texts.”

and that what Joshua asked for is *less* light, not *more*.<sup>21</sup> Even others have held that the language here should be understood figuratively, and that verses 12-13 were never meant as literal.<sup>22</sup> It is not entirely clear what took place. What is clear is that God fought for Israel in a dramatic way, hence, the statement that there was “no day like that before or after it, when the Lord listened to the voice of a man; for the Lord fought for Israel” (14).

Although I believe in miracles—I am no naturalist!—I am quite certain of one thing concerning this passage: This story is not recorded for us in sacred Scripture simply to tell us that the God who created everything out of nothing can control significant portions of what he has made. Such is made abundantly clear over and over again in Genesis and Exodus. Therefore overly-long and detailed discussions on what the sun and moon language in Joshua 10 actually means miss the major point of the passage—the Lord fought for Joshua and Israel and defeated his enemies! While we should attempt to understand all that we can of the biblical text, the primary task of evangelical hermeneutics and proclamation is ascertaining and making known the major point of the text, i.e., the author’s intention. Worldview and actant analysis focus our attention on the meat, not the side dishes, of biblical passages.

### *Caveat Emptor*

These methods are not without inherent risks. (1) There is the danger of reducing historical persons into literary plot moves. While it is important to take note of how texts function, it is a serious mistake to reduce the biblical text to mere function. (2) One must also take care to be aware of one’s own motives. Structuralist methods have historically been plagued by hidden agendas such as Freudianism and/or Marxism.<sup>23</sup> We must do all we

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<sup>21</sup>E. W. Maunder, “A Misinterpreted Miracle,” *The Expositor* 10 (1910): 359-72; idem, “Beth-Horn, The Battle of,” *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* 1:469-71; Walter Kaiser, *More Hard Sayings of the Old Testament* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1992), 123-26.

<sup>22</sup>Richard D. Nelson, *Joshua: A Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 144-45; R. deVaux, *The Early History of Israel* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978), 634-35; John Sailhamer, *NIV Compact Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan), 191; David M. Howard, Jr., *Joshua: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1998), 244-50.

<sup>23</sup>For more on Lévi-Strauss’s indebtedness to Freud’s thought, see Thomas Shalvey, *Claude Lévi-Strauss: Social Psychology and the Collective Unconscious* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1979), 7-51. On Marx’s impact on Lévi-Strauss, see Mark Kline Taylor, *Beyond Explanation: Religious Dimensions in Cultural Anthropology* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1986), 182-84.

can to ensure that we don't allow these methods to become agenda-driven. (3) Such methods are meant to augment, not replace, traditional grammatical-historical methods of interpretation. We must not fall into the fallacy of the false dichotomy. (4) No method solves all hermeneutical difficulties, though some are generally better than others. One must not make the mistake of believing that there is "out there" a perfect method for reading the Bible, historically or otherwise. John Barton comments on the effect of such a belief upon biblical interpretation:

[M]uch harm has been done in biblical studies by insisting that there is, somewhere, a "correct" method which, if only we could find it, would unlock the mysteries of the text. From the quest for this method flow many evils: for example, the tendency of each newly-discovered method to excommunicate its predecessors . . . and the tendency to denigrate the "ordinary" reader as "non-critical."<sup>24</sup>

There is no one method that will always work in all situations. *Ultimately the sensitivity and skill of the interpreter is still the most crucial component in biblical interpretation.*

## Conclusion

Nevertheless, generally speaking, the more tools one knows how to use effectively, the better exegete one will be. Therefore I am led to conclude that proper application of narrative structuralism in the service of worldview analysis will serve the preacher well in the exegesis period of sermon preparation. An additional benefit to the preacher is the fact that an understanding of how stories and worldviews function aids one in the construction and delivery of the message. For these reasons I encourage preachers to give some attention to these methods in preparing sermons. Those who take the time, without neglecting historical-grammatical methods of interpretation, and seek the guidance of God's Spirit, will be richly rewarded.

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<sup>24</sup>John Barton, *Reading the Old Testament: Method in Biblical Study*, rev. ed. (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1996), 5.