

Original Paper

The Art of Narrative Structure and Design—A Comparative Study of Two Biblical Stories

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Abstract

The Hebrew Bible (James, 2011), as a collection of ancient books of history, prophecies, poems and wisdom literatures, contains some of the most intriguing stories and profound wisdom from the ancient world. While majority of these ideas and sapiential teachings have already deeply integrated into our modern cultures, there are yet some that we still struggle in understanding and accepting, such include the origin of sin and evil in the story of Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden and the story of Job with his undeserved sufferings.

In this study, we are going to conduct a comparative study of the two biblical stories mentioned based on resources in and out of the Bible. We hope that our study will be able to cast some new lights over these long-discussed topics and to help our readers in their own reading experience.

Keywords

The Hebrew Bible, God, Satan, Adam, Eve, Paradise Lost, Job, John Milton, theodicy, comparative study

1. Introduction

According to the Hebrew Bible, the world creation process ends with the climactic moment of God making Eve the first woman as Adam's sole and equal companion. The author of Genesis told us this beautiful story in two different versions with certain altering of details possibly to help us better understand the wonder of creation and a God who is behind it all.

But the happy scene didn't last long. With a slight taste of sadness and mockery, a serpent was abruptly introduced into the garden by the author and ruined God's most proud and precious creation by seducing them into defying his will. In a brief moment, the master desire was destroyed, the intimacy between man and God lost, and a trusting relationship severed.

According to the Bible, a selfish decision from the first human couple has not only destroyed the eternal trust between human and God, but also introduced death and sin to the world, and gave reasons to the existence of remaining parts of the Bible and human history. But this seemingly straightforward narrative story which tells the colossal loss of human in less than a thousand words miss some crucial details under strict scrutiny. i.e. Why the serpent was created and allowed to be in the garden? Why did the serpent want to trick Eve and destroy the happiness of human? Why Adam and Eve were not allowed to taste the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil when given permission to eat every other kinds of fruits? Did God foreknew all that would happen in the garden? Did God allow it to happen even though he knew the weakness of human? Why God didn't give Adam and Eve the wisdom of knowing good and evil to begin with to avoid this whole terrible scene? The list goes on...

Honestly we don't have any definitive answers to these hard questions. The lack of details and logical soundness together makes the Garden of Eden story one of the most mysterious and popular chapters in both religious and secular studies and debates, especially under the influence of the Renaissance and Reformation movements in Europe. This story has also been reiterated in various ways and forms of art by some of the most brilliant minds at that time. Among them, we have chosen John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (Benjamin, 2017; Schwartz, 2014; Nasrullah, 2020), a poetic rewriting of the book of Genesis published in 1667, as our candidate.

Looking at Milton's *Paradise Lost* from the surface layer to its core, we will see the overall structure of the story, followed by the narrative storyline, and then details of the main characters.

On its outmost layer, Milton has architected a world structure of hell, heaven and paradise, designating realms for Satan, God, and human respectively. This three-part world structure can be seen as Milton's direct reflection and illustration on the biblical worldview. But we have to keep in mind that these parts do not exist as a rigid and arbitrary division. Each of them contains a unique narrative and didactic dimension in the poem's overall message that closely attached to the underneath layers.

On the middle layer, the storyline of the narrative, we see more of Milton's genuine ideas and designs of the narrative. He provides us much more details than the simple sketch we learned at Genesis 3. With their help we could see a more logical development of the narrative that explains to us the serpent's appearance in the garden, both Eve's and Adam's decisions of eating the forbidden, and also the origin of sin and death. In the same process, we would also see the narrator stand out for himself to play both the commentator to the story and educator to his readers from time to time.

If the middle layer shows the mastery talent of Milton as a good storyteller, the core layer of his design—the characters, is undoubtedly the icing on the cake that wins him the well deserved title as a master poet among the best in history. With Milton's vivid strokes of the main characters in the narrative story, especially Satan the antagonist and Eve—two richest characters in the entire poem, we very often find ourselves losing control of our sensible judgment and sharing sympathies while been asked to sit at the judges' seats.

In fact, Milton's audacious portrayal of Satan the antagonist with a heroic charisma in the beginning part of the poem is so eccentric and unorthodox that it has disturbed many of his religious readers and literary critics after the book's first publishing. This has also won Milton himself a big notoriety among his contemporaries. The famous Romantic poet Blake once said that John Milton was in the "Devil's party without knowing it" (William, n.d.). Although general attitudes among literary commentators became more tolerant in the 20th century (Lewis, 1961), their opinions were still divided until Stanley E. Fish's work published in late 1967 that sealed the case. According to Fish, the real purpose of Milton's writing of the poem (with his controversial portrayal of Satan) was not to stimulate sympathy for the fallen archangel but to facilitate his readers to sense and experience the shame and enormity of the tragedy of losing paradise on a personal level.

In all, the poem's overarching structure of heaven, hell and paradise, filtering through the competing voices and points of views from Satan, God, Adam and Eve, and even the narrator himself, together with the enticing narrative make *Paradise Lost* one of the most enjoyable books to read.

The second candidate chosen for our study is the book of Job (Scott, 2020; Mark, 2013). Job is considered as one of the oldest books in the entire Hebrew Bible. It tells about a righteous man named Job who experiences undeserved loss and sufferings that are allowed by God and yet trusts in God and defends him to the end.

Stylistically speaking, Job uses a standard stage drama layout to organize its content. It combines a prologue, multiple plots in the middle taking turns by different characters, and an epilogue in the end. Yet beneath this seemingly simple and straightforward framework it conceals a profound idea, which is one of the main reasons for this book to be considered the most sapiential piece of literature in the entire Hebrew Bible and among all the ancient civilizations.

The first thing we need to know is that this book didn't come from vacuum but was cultivated under a heavy influence of popular cultures in ancient near east, where there were some well-known literary motifs and genres flowing around. The most relevant two here are the "plaint of the sufferer" and the doctrine of "divine providence of retribution and reward" (Roberts, 2002).

Traditionally in ancient near eastern literature, suffering of the innocent was a popular literary convention available in many neighboring cultures, such as the Mesopotamian poem *ludlul bel nemeqi* (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ludlul_bēl_nēmeqi), the Sumerian epic poem *Gilgamesh* (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gilgamesh>) and some others less famous ones. These poems share the ideas of a sufferer going through challenges and recalling the former goodness of God, praising God's supreme power and wisdom, and claiming his innocence and his faith in God's provision. But in Job, these familiar ideas are given some new looks.

In traditional "plaint of the sufferer" works, afflictions come from the sufferer's enemies. But in Job, God himself plays the ultimate persecutor, who wore the sufferer out and led him to his challenges to God;

In traditional “plaint of the sufferer” texts, the subject sufferers are debased to highlight their utter dependence on God’s mercy that is either anticipated or experienced. But in Job, we see his accumulated sufferings serve as an excuse for him to challenge God’s moral order. The author did this through a personal experience instead of some popular and well-established theology;

In traditional “plaint of the sufferer” texts, there are also friends of the sufferers who serve a distinct purpose—to provoke disputation for the sufferers. But Job’s three friends serve a quite different role, which is to provide Job a great opportunity to relieve his feelings and claim his innocence;

The last point worth mentioning is that the author of Job didn’t provide the final solution same as other sapiential works—the sufferer’s eventual release through a divine oracle that reaffirms the popular doctrine of divine justice. Instead, Job’s author introduced God into the final scene to present himself in front of Job and readers of the book.

Based on these unique features of the book of Job, we could confidently argue that the author of Job borrowed a familiar idea available in his culture, and artistically and creatively transformed it into his own original work.

The second thing we need to notice about the book of Job is its linguistic richness. The book is mostly written in poem except the prologue and epilogue serving as the narrative parts of the story. The author used forensic terminology and imageries heavily in his rendering of the “heavenly court” and God as the “public prosecutor”, Job’s challenges to his friends and God in the dialogues, and God’s counter-challenges to Job before the epilogue. Underneath these familiar terms and concepts, we are witnessing a trial neither for Job nor for God, but for the accepted conventions of theodicy represented by Job’s friends.

The middle section (the Dialogue) of the book contains three cycles of debates between Job and his friends, discourses made by Job himself on sapiential wisdom, his apologia, his plaint of innocence and his oath of purgation (chapter 28-31), an addendum attributed to Elihu the outsider, and God’s declaration in the end. It builds on top of the following two logical fallacies:

1. In the divine economy, sin occasions sufferings, which equals to that all sufferings are occasioned by sin;
2. In accordance to the doctrine of divine justice, all blessings are directly from God, which means that God is immediately responsible for all sufferings.

We can see very clearly that Job’s friends have based their arguments entirely on the 1st fallacy when they accused Job of his sinful behaviors that triggered his sufferings. Similarly, Job has made a same mistake by believing the 2nd fallacy in his challenges to God for unmerited sufferings.

By putting his readers in the audience seat to watch the drama unfolding by itself with the vantage point of a panoramic view, the author cleverly showed us a brand new type of theodicy developed gradually through Job’s unique personal experience that is no where else to be found in the entire Bible. Job’s case is powerful indeed, not because it is new in its idea or its aesthetic language, but the challenges it posts to the status-quo in the popular theory of theodicy.

God's presence in chapters 38-41 is the climactic moment of the entire poem. Here we are invited to hear from the defendant's side of the story, except the long-expected and waited defendant is nobody else but God himself while we are given the privilege to be the jury. To our surprise, God doesn't answer any of Job's challenges directly, but counter-challenges Job with a series of questions (chapter 38—37 questions, chapter 39—17 questions, chapter 40—6 questions, chapter 41—11 questions). Here are some repeated structures used by God:

Who is this ...?

Where were you when ...?

Who has ...?

Have you ...?

Do you know/realize ...?

Can you ...?

In these questions, God uses natural things and phenomenon as the main body. And to our surprise, our eloquent Job suddenly becomes silent after getting what he's wished for through the drama—to see God face to face and challenge his justice. During his encounter with God, our plaintiff speaks twice [Job 40:4-5, Job 42:1-6], not to defend himself any further but to confess his sin and ignorance and plead God for forgiveness.

So here we've seen the author flipped the court situation completely. The accuser asks for mercy and forgiveness while the accused release challenges that humble the accuser (and the audience as well). Should we, the functioning jury, be perplexed, or even startled by these questions? We should and we must! Because that's exactly what the author wanted from us. As we analyzed before, the trial is never about Job or God, but the established theories of divine justice that is limited or even flawed some time in its claimed accuracy and applicability.

Till now, we could possibly sense the existence of a three-tiered wisdom structure (illustrated in Figure 1) serving as the intellectual backbone and the third dimension of the story that combines seamlessly to the other two dimensions—the chronological narrative storyline evolved gradually in the book and the transition of focus on stage by voices from different characters in the drama.

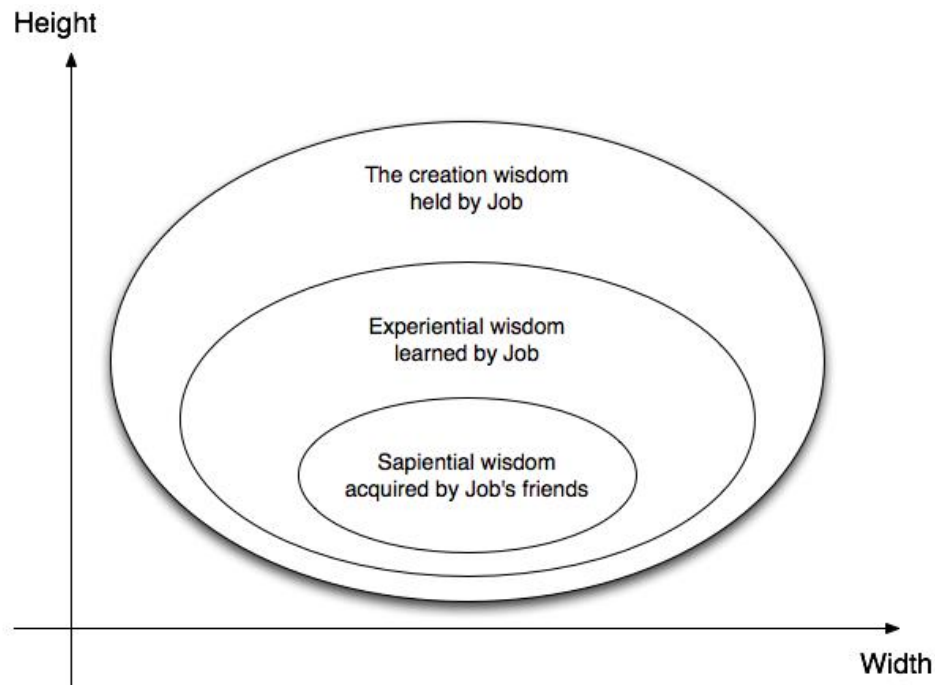


Figure 1. Three Levels of Wisdom in Job

2. Comparison of Structure and Design

We will now take a closer look at these two stories' structures and design and compare them in four different areas—change of focus, plots arrangement, voices of the narrator and the story ending.

a. change of focus

In both books the authors used change of focus deliberately to emphasize the theme of their stories, yet there are some differences.

In Job, the focus change is done quite straightforwardly. We begin the story with Job, his family, possession and state of prosperity. Then we are introduced to God, Satan in his heavenly court. Then we have Job suffered for his righteousness and his long discussion with his friends and claims of innocence. After their heated debate, we see Elihu the outsider and God himself on stage consecutively to lead the case to its conclusion.

This feels very much like watching a multi-staged drama or play in a theatre. When the focus being shifted, he person who spoke before goes silent or even off stage until he is given the focus again. There's no prompted interruptions during speeches, everyone waits for his turn to speak and finishes in a very ordered way, no matter how passionate or over-heated the speaker becomes. In other words, the focus line in singular, one-threaded, one person at a time, despite the fact that Job remains the center of the story. This is illustrated in Figure 2.

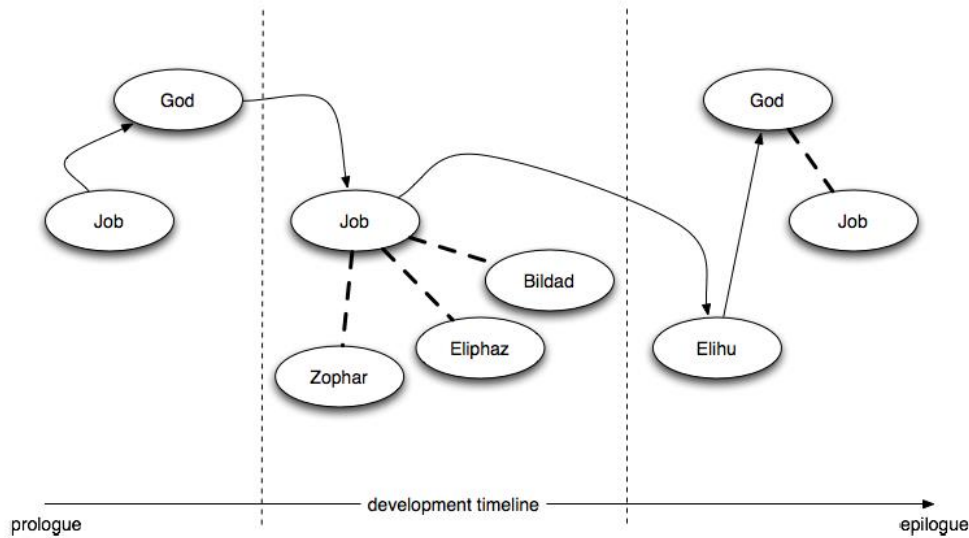


Figure 2. Focus Pattern of Job

In Paradise Lost, Milton used a multi-stranded focus line needling through the entire story due to his special design of the world structure. These three different strands exist simultaneously but different priorities are given according to the setting of plots. A simple illustration is given in Figure 3.

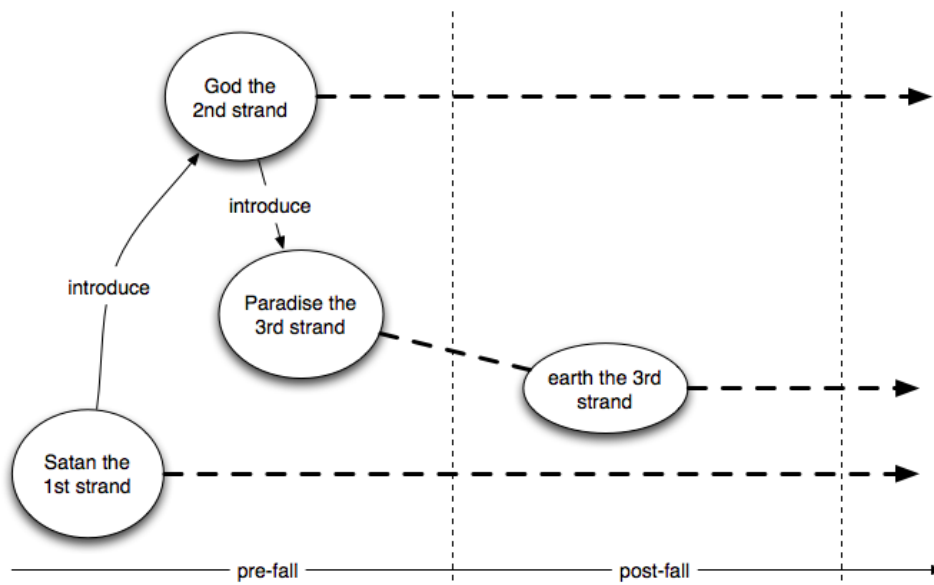


Figure 3. Focus Pattern of Paradise Lost

The first strand revealed to us is on Satan and his rebel followers introduced in Book I. As the story goes, we are taken by Satan to travel to the heavenly realm (Book III) and introduced to the second strand focuses on God and the angelic beings. It didn't last long until Satan takes us again to the Paradise and avails us the third and final strand which is on the first human couple (Book V). It may

sound like a single thread working in different stages, but the truth is that the second strand of focus (on God and angels) always exists in the background as the backdrop of the whole play and never goes away while the first and third strand in the foreground fighting over priority and attention from the audience.

Another thing worth pointing out here is that as the story develops, we find a significant swap of priorities of the first and third strands. The heroic Satan degrades gradually from a mighty and charismatic leader of an army to an ugly toad in the garden and eventually to a muted crawling beast forever punished by the divine order as Adam and Eve, despite their disobedience to God by eating the forbidden fruit, stand up to face the challenge of new type of life and death as a united couple and support each other through their shared love and loyalty.

b. plots arrangement

In figure 3 we notice that Satan's strand is the first one been introduced in the story despite the fact that it will eventually be suppressed and dimmed out as the story develops. But why the author chose to do this instead of starting the story with the second or third strand? In this section we are going to find some rationales behind it by looking at plots arrangement.

We will start with Job first. The book of Job is direct in this aspect. The author adopted a conventional approach for his plots arrangement—the popular chronological sequence in narrative story telling. All plots are told in the same sequence as they happened, from the beginning to the end. This approach is a safe and well-tested option for both the writer and the readers. But Job's author chose this for more than safety reasons.

First, for a personal experience for its readers. By using this approach, the author made the whole story a lot more like a standard court hearing, where everything happens in its natural order and the audience can make their judgments while watching it develops in front of their own eyes. The whole experience is made very real and direct, with a gripping effect provided by the changing of voices on stage.

Second, for the author's own unique purpose. As we've mentioned in the previous section, the author wrote this book to challenge the status-quo in his time and mainstream culture. He achieved this by borrowing well-known ideas and literary motifs as a cover-up to lure his readers in and create a sense of familiarity as a start, then with a dramatically different story under the cover the author delivers his revolutionary new ideas of theodicy as a real surprise and challenge to all his readers.

In *Paradise Lost*, the author used a different approach in plots arrangement. The book opens with Satan discussing with his rebel followers about a plan of revenge in the hellish court. His charming eloquence and charismatic leadership catches our eyes and even mesmerizes us. Then with our tainted vision and skewed opinions Satan takes us on a journey of breaking out of hell to reach heaven and eventually paradise to execute his plan. During our journey of traveling through heaven, details of Satan's former life as an archangel and his rebellious act in heaven are revealed to us by the guardian angel Raphael (Book V), also given is the account of creation of Adam and his beloved wife Eve after our safe arrival in Paradise.

The author adopted this nonlinear and unchronological approach in his storytelling mainly for the following two reasons.

First, for the readability and design of the story. We've already known that the book of Paradise Lost is a retelling of the familiar story given in Genesis 3. Although the story has raised questions concerning the serpent's appearance in the garden and his seduction to Eve, no voices were ever given to the creature to answer these questions for himself in the original text. It is based on this thread of thinking that the author opened his book with Satan's scheme of revenge that would eventually lead him to his eternal destruction and degradation into an ugly crawling beast forever condemned.

As Satan's plan of revenge being executed step by step in a world structure carefully crafted, he has to go through heaven in order to reach his execution ground—Paradise and to meet his bait—human. It is this travel route that makes it necessary for us to meet faithful and loyal members of the heavenly court and to learn about Satan's former glory and details of the dreadful heavenly war from these angelic beings (Book V). All these words and conversations add an extra degree of sadness and woe to Satan's acts of rebellion and prepare us emotionally for the coming of human's rebellion. After his unpleasant encounter with angels Satan finally reaches Paradise and sees Adam for the first time. Then the focus is smoothly shifted to Adam who recalls his memory of the creation process for our benefit.

Everything interconnects so seamlessly to foster a gripping and immersive reading experience. For a long book like Paradise Lost, it's almost impossible for the author to use a natural sequence to tell events and plots, especially when he has a multi-dimensional story like this in mind. Instead he has to adopt some unconventional approaches.

Second, for the author's educational purposes. Different from the book of Job, Paradise Lost serves as a didactic and educational material. The author made this point very clear in his opening verses of the poem.

*In the beginning how the heavens and earth
Rose out of Chaos: or, if Sion hill
Delight thee more, and Siloa's brook that flowed
Fast by the oracle of God, I thence
Invoke thy aid to my adventurous song,
That with no middle flight intends to soar
Above th' Aonian mount, while it pursues
Things unattempted yet in prose or rhyme.
And chiefly thou, O Spirit, that dost prefer
Before all temples th' upright heart and pure,
Instruct me, for thou know'st; thou from the first
Wast present, and, with mighty wings outspread,
Dove-like sat'st brooding on the vast Abyss,
And mad'st it pregnant: what in me is dark*

*Illumine, what is low raise and support;
That, to the height of this great argument,
I may assert Eternal Providence,
And justify the ways of God to men. [Book I, 9-26]*

Opposite to the purpose of ‘challenging-the-status-quo’ held by Job, Milton made it very clear that his sole reason of writing this epic poem is to educate his readers about God’s justice and his divine economy.

Based on this point, we could say that what happened to Satan before his presence in the miserable pit isn’t that important for us to know (especially when the author wished to suppress Satan’s past glory as an archangel) in comparison to his continued will of rebellion against God through schemes of revenge. It’s also through Satan’s path of continued self-destruction that Milton has the chance to teach his readers not only the justice of God but also the nobility of love, obedience and loyalty to God and to each other.

c. voices of the narrator

In both Job and Paradise Lost we find voices of the narrators. Although in different ways of articulation, they both serve legitimate purposes.

In Job, it feels mostly like that the characters are acting on their own and the narrator is just standing by in charge of the spotlight. But after a careful reading and study of the text, we reach a different conclusion. The narrator hides himself behind the acting figures on stage and uses their voices to express his own opinions implicitly.

In this approach, the narrator has to familiarize himself to all the different voices he borrows in order to give a genuine experience to his audience. This includes the voice of Job, Job’s friends, Elihu the outsider, God, and even Satan and Job’s wife. This operation requires the narrator both a profound knowledge of different schools of beliefs and theological teachings and amazing mastery on playing different characters in correct presence of their identities and roles in the story. On top of delivering what we’ve described professionally without leaving any clumsy marks for us to criticize, the narrator also very subtly left his preferences to the audience to dig out, even though the digging process is a bit brain consuming.

This is because in the case of Job, the narrator doesn’t have to make decisions for his audience on how to look at the story since it’s a well-known topic in their culture. All the readers are invited to a thought-provoking and immersive experience of a man’s journey of life. Even though he has strong desires to challenge the status-quo, the clever narrator knows very well that forcing his revolutionary and even heretical ideas on his audience is much less powerful and productive than just letting the story unfold itself and penetrate through the guarding views held by its well-informed audience.

In comparison, the narrator in Paradise Lost is much less subtle in his way of expression. Right from the beginning we can feel his presence loud and clear, and it sticks around through the entire poem. The narrator did this for two reasons.

First, because he really wants us to hear his own opinions on major events and scenes of the story as the defender of God's divine justice (Book I, 9-16). That's why we hear him applauding for God's supreme power and his creation, warnings us about the approaching doom of humanity, sharing with us his disappointments over the fall and its sad consequences, and inviting us to join him in his exaltations over God's merciful plan of salvation to the fallen humanity.

Second, the narrator wants to educate his readers. The audience of this story is different from that of the book of Job. The book is not written for a group of well-informed people who enjoy similar values and beliefs in a shared culture. It's created to face a heterogeneous group that may hold different views and opinions on the issue of God's divine justice. This very purpose serves as the the dominant voice used by the narrator in his communication with his audience. He did this more than simply borrowing a well-known story from Genesis 3. Instead, the narrator built an entire world system on top of the whole Bible narrative that encompasses the birth, death and redemption of human race from Genesis to Revelation.

d. the story ending

Both stories finish on happy notes in the sense of uplifting faith and encouraging loyalty in God, but there are some different nuances.

In Job, the author concluded the story with a short narrative ending that echoes in parallel to the opening of the book as illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1. Elements in Parallel in Job's Opening and Ending (KJV)

Prologue	Epilogue
Seven sons and three daughters.	Seven sons and three daughters. ... After this lived Job an hundred and forty years, and saw his sons, his sons' sons, even four generations.
Seven thousand sheep, three thousand camels, and five hundred yoke of oxen, and five hundred she asses, and a very great household.	Fourteen thousand sheep, six thousand camels, and a thousand yoke of oxen, and a thousand she asses.

The author used these elements in contrast to give a feeling of mending and restoration to Job after his challenging experience with God and his friends, which also provide us as readers a sense of relief and joy beside a sense of real completion.

Comparatively, in the ending of Paradise Lost, Milton invited us to join the fallen couple in their newly-gained sense of reassurance and encouragement in embarking upon their new journey of life in a fallen world. Here are the finishing verses of the poem.

*They looking back, all th' Eastern side beheld
Of Paradise, so late thir happie seat,*

*Wav'd over by that flaming Brand, the Gate
With dreadful Faces throng'd and fierie Armes:
Som natural tears they drop'd, but wipe'd them soon;
The World was all before them, where to choose
Thir place of rest, and Providence thir guide:
They hand in hand with wandring steps and slow,
Through Eden too thir solitarie way.
Som natural tears they drop'd, but wipe'd them soon. [Book X]*

Although we know it's the end of a tragic event of breaching divine laws and loss of citizenship in Paradise, this ending also gives us a sense of bitter sweet when the couple face a broken world in front of then together with love, loyalty and solidarity to each other. Even though the life waiting for them ahead is filled with loss and pain, and sorrow and death, they know eventually salvation would come to human again and everything will be made new and right. In this sense, this book never ends, but opens another unwritten chapter for us to complete with our own journey of life.

3. Conclusion and Future Works

In this study, we've briefly analyzed and compared the narrative structures and literary designs of two important books—the book of Job in the Hebrew Bible and John Milton's *Paradise Lost*.

As one of the oldest books in the Hebrew Bible, Job contains profound wisdom in its revolutionary idea of divine justice and theodicy. The author borrowed a popular literary idea available in his culture and redefined it with his master design of plots, poetic language and skillful portrayal of characters to implicitly challenge the well-accepted theory of theology and divine justice.

As one of the most famous and influential English poets in history, John Milton took us on a grand journey in his poetic rewriting of Genesis 3 to travel through the entire biblical world of its past, present and future and equipped us with his powerful imagination to personally experience the tragic loss of Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden and their noble act of love and loyalty for each other in facing the unknown world of trials and persecutions till the arrival of the promised salvation.

Through the work of comparison between these two literary masterpieces, we've given the privilege to work together with these brilliant minds on some of the most difficult and challenging human endeavors of understanding the world we live in and ourselves as well. And we've also familiarized ourselves with some great techniques of literary creation, especially on narrative structure and design.

Yet there are much more to be done in the future in order to make this research more beneficial to both our readers and fellow researchers. These include other wisdom literatures available in the Hebrew Bible such as Psalms and Proverbs, other near eastern literatures that were only briefly mentioned in this work [13, 14] but with an undeniable influence on the accomplishment of Hebrew literature, and some other extra-biblical materials and extensional resources such as John Milton's *Paradise Regained* and *Samson Agonistes*, etc. These materials will be included in our future studies.

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