This is an exact reprint of the first edition of this book (1989, 1992) without any essential change. Only the front and back covers are different. The volume, of course, is still a valid instrument for all those who endeavor to learn the basics of narrative art in the Bible. When the book was first published there had been a flurry of similar studies. Let us recall here the names of Weiss, Alonso Schökel, Fokkelman, Culley, Jobling, Licht, Alter, Sternberg, Eslinger, Berlin, and so on. Some of the titles appear in the (short) bibliography that concludes Bar-Efrat’s work (283–85). Unfortunately, other, more recent works are not mentioned. It would have been advisable to try to fill out this short bibliography. One should mention at least a few titles of recent manuals, most of them provided with updated bibliographies: Y. Amit, Reading Biblical Narratives: Literary Criticism and the Hebrew Bible (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001); J. P. Fokkelman, Reading Biblical Narrative: An Introductory Guide (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1999); D. Marguerat and Y. Bourquin, How to Read Bible Stories: An Introduction to Narrative Criticism (London: SCM, 1999); J. T. Walsh, Style and Structure in Biblical Hebrew Narrative (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2001); D. F. Tolmie, Narratology and Biblical Narratives: A Practical Guide (Atlanta: International Scholars Publications, 1998). Much has been published in English, but several studies have appeared also in French on this topic under the direction of D. Marguerat, such as La Bible en récits:
The method itself is not completely new, and H. Gunkel, in the introduction to his well-known commentary on the book of Genesis, had anticipated most of what more recent commentators expound in their studies. One of the main questions raised by this kind of study is the relationship between this type of synchronic approach, very much influenced by the New Criticism advocated by I. A. Richards and his disciples, and other, more traditional, diachronic approaches. On this topic, much has been said and discussed, although in the majority of cases scholars simply affirm their own convictions and dismiss other positions without further argumentation. Dialogue between methods would be more fruitful, it seems to me, as the late L. Alonso Schökel once recommended in his presidential address to the IOSOT Congress at Salamanca in 1983, published in Congress Volume: Salamanca, 1983 (ed. J. Emerton; VTSup 36; Leiden: Brill, 1985), 3–13 under the title “Of Models and Methods,” if we want to make any progress in biblical research. On the same topic, see also C. de Moor, ed., Synchronic or Diachronic? A Debate on Method in Old Testament Exegesis (OTS 35; Leiden, Brill, 1995) and W. Dietrich, ed., David und Saul im Widerstreit: Diachronie und Synchronie im Wettstreit: Beiträge zur Auslegung des ersten Samuelbches (OBO 206; Fribourg: Academic Press; Göttingen: Vandehoeck & Ruprecht, 2004).

The plan of the book is simple and reflects its richness: preface and introduction (7–11); “The Narrator” (13–45); “The Characters” (47–92); “The Plot” (93–140); “Time and Space” (141–96); “Style” (197–237); and “The Narrative of Amnon and Tamar” (239–82). The volume is provided with a short bibliography, an index of biblical references, and an index of subjects.

The different categories are illustrated with many examples, and some readers might feel somewhat giddy after flipping through the Hebrew Bible. But the examples are well chosen, and there is much wisdom in their choice. The style is consistently pleasant, and the arguments are convincing, one must say, and this is one of the major qualities of this excellent booklet. Bar-Efrat has purposely excluded the Joseph story and the book of Ruth from these examples. This might be regrettable, but the author wanted his readers to examine for themselves these splendid samples of biblical narrative art with the help of his methodological tools.

Of course, questions can be raised about some points. About the plan of the book, for instance, some could object that plot (action) is the major element of biblical narratives in general. Characters, for instance, are most of the time subordinated to the plot, not vice versa. The study of the plot itself might have benefited from using the two Aristotelian
categories of *peripeteia* (reversal of fortune) and *anagnorisis* (change of knowledge). Actually, the chapter on plot—and the other chapters as well, to a certain extent—insist more on stylistic than on structural or compositional aspects. This is by and large one of the main features of the New Criticism.

There are a few cases of imprecision. For instance, the three “unities” (time, place, action [15]) do not go back to Aristotle himself, although he anticipated them; the theory was formulated for the first time during the Renaissance. Aristotle insisted only on the unity of action (*Poetics* vii–viii).

More important, Bar-Efrat seems to deny that time cannot be reversed in biblical narratives (173). In other words, a narrative cannot go backward in time, except in the case of “flash-backs.” There are, however, several examples of such a procedure in the Bible that I proposed to call “tiling-technique” (see J. L. Ska, *Our Fathers Have Told Us* [Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1990], 10–11). For instance, in 2 Sam 1:1–12, 13–16 an Amalekite comes and tells David about the deaths of Saul and Jonathan. David and all his men mourn the king and his son until evening (1:12). In the following narrative section, David orders the execution of the Amalekite because the latter said he killed Saul, the Lord’s anointed (1:13–16). In a third section we have David’s lament over Saul and Jonathan (1:17–27). It is clear that David did not wait until evening to order the Amalekite to be killed and that he did not begin to sing his dirge only after the Amalekite’s execution in 1:15–16 (cf. 1:12). The chronological order should be the following: announcement of the deaths of Saul and Jonathan (1:1–11), short trial and execution of the Amalekite (1:13–16), rites of mourning accompanied by David’s lament (1:12 and 17–27). This order was disrupted to show that David did not rejoice at all at the death of his rival (1:11). His first reaction was to order everyone to mourn the king until evening. This means, however, that in 1:13–16 the reader must “go back” to an earlier moment of the day to attend the execution of the Amalekite.

On the problem of the double *wayyo’mer* (43–45), there is now a complete study by S. A. Meier, *Speaking of Speaking: Marking Direct Discourse in the Hebrew Bible* (VTSup 46; Leiden: Brill, 1992).

This introduction to narrative art in the Hebrew Bible speaks of only one narrator, as is customary in many other studies of the same type. This is acceptable, I think, as long as one is analyzing short and unified narratives. But is it legitimate to apply the concept of only one narrator to longer, more complex, and composite narratives? A case in point is offered by 1 Sam 8–12. In these chapters some narratives express strong reservations about the monarchy, especially 8:1–22 and 12:1–25. Other chapters are much more positive with respect to the same institution, as for instance 9:1–10:16 and 11:1–15. Must
we say that in all these narratives the reader hears the unique “voice” of one narrator expressing conflicting views on the same topic? Or must we suppose the existence of a “concert of voices” (and thus the presence of different narrators) because the compilers of these chapters were trying to keep a debate going between at least two factions? The answer to this question is surely not obvious, but we can hardly avoid a problem that is inherent in the composite nature of many biblical texts.

One of the main problems of this kind of study, however, is the possible conflict with diachronic methods. Most of the examples proposed by Bar-Efrat come from unified narratives and do not contain many critical problems. The study of 1 Sam 17, the story of David and Goliath, could be a little more difficult, however. Is the (longer) MT to be preferred to the shorter version of the LXX (120)? Bar-Efrat offers an ingenious explanation of the present text, but there are several contradictions in the MT that are not so easily explained by a synchronic reading. Why is David introduced a second time after 1 Sam 16? It seems more reasonable to admit that the LXX has a better text in particular because this would be the only case in which the Greek translators would have skipped very long sections to obtain a text smoother than the Hebrew original. This means, however, that the present Hebrew text is not exactly the result of an artistic composition but rather the conflation of a first version and some sections of a more recent one that is absent from the LXX (Codex B): 17:12–31, 38b, 41, 48b, 50, 55–58, 18:1-6a. In the second version, David is unknown to Saul (see especially 17:55–58). The arrangement of the two versions surely obeys certain criteria. Can we say, however, that these criteria are those of biblical narrative art only? It remains difficult to explain, from a strictly narrative point of view, why Saul asks about David’s identity in 17:55 if the same Saul had already conversed with David in 17:32 and offered him his armor (17:38–39). Here as in other instances a classical diachronic explanation seems more reasonable and more economic to me. Occam’s razor would surely come down in favor of the latter explanation.

In other cases, the same text can be explained in different ways. For instance, in 1 Kgs 21:27 Ahab repents after Elijah’s condemnation of Naboth’s murder, and, according to Bar-Efrat, God himself confirms Ahab’s genuine humility (91). But the text could also be trying to justify the fact that Omri’s dynasty did not disappear immediately after Ahab’s death.

Admittedly, Bar-Efrat did not intend to face this kind of problem, and his book should be used as a refreshing way of reading some of the best pages of the Hebrew Bible. His exegesis of 1 Kgs 1 (Adonijah and Solomon) and 2 Sam 17:7–13 (Hushai’s discourse), among other texts, is a delight for everyone who has a certain feeling for the literary qualities of biblical narratives. Even a fierce defender of diachronic methods such as the late François Langlamet recognized this a long time ago in a review of this book that
contains a lot of critical and intelligent comments, for instance about the indexes, comments that could have been taken into account in the present reprint (see RB 98 [1991]: 303–7). All in all, this excellent handbook should be recommended to everyone who is interested in biblical narrative art, although it would be desirable to supplement the reading with some more recent publications in the same field.