

## **EXAMINING THE NARRATIVE STRUCTURE AND FUNCTION OF THE STORY OF TOBIAS AND SARAH: A LABOVIAN APPROACH**

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### **Abstract**

The narrative study of religious texts provides important insights into how linguistic structures shape theological and spiritual meaning in a story. This study aims to identify the narrative components in Chapters 7–11 based on the Labov Natural Narrative Model and interpret how each component functions in building the overall meaning of the story. This study uses a qualitative narrative analysis method by mapping the narrative structure into six Labov components and analyzing the functional relationships between the components through in-depth textual reading. The results show that the six components of Labov are present in a complete and organized manner in Chapters 7–11, with complicating action and resolution as the center of tension and narrative resolution, while evaluation serves as a theological core that affirms faith and dependence on God. This study concludes that narrative structure not only builds storylines, but also works as a theological device that conveys spiritual messages through patterns of conflict, prayer, and recovery. These findings make a methodological contribution by demonstrating the effectiveness of the linguistic-narrative approach in the study of Deuterocanonical texts and opening up opportunities for further research comparing narrative structures to other books in the biblical tradition.

**Keywords**— book of Tobit, deuteronomy, faith, Labov, narrative linguistics, narrative structure, Tobias and Sarah

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### **Introduction**

In the era of the development of modern language studies, a linguistic approach to religious texts is increasingly important for understanding how language shapes human experiences of faith and moral values. Fairuz (2025) affirms that language serves as the primary medium and tool to convey ideas to readers. Similarly, language serves as a medium to narrate spiritual experiences and convey theological messages (Nadeem, 2022; Scott, 2020). A similar phenomenon occurs in the context of cultural religiosity, as explained by Sulastr<sup>2</sup> and Alleynisa (2024), the transformation of religious functions in society does not reduce its spiritual value but serves to maintain and communicate the meaning of faith in the midst of social change. Language transforms experience into stories for generational contemplation and transmission. Therefore, the analysis of religious texts focuses on the structure and function of language as well as theological content. (Stein, 2019).

In this context, the Book of Tobit, as one of the Deuterocanonical texts, is an interesting example for the study of narrative linguistics. This book tells the story of Tobit, a good Israelite who had to go through much pain, blindness, and exile. The dramatic climax of the story occurs in the episode of Tobias and Sarah's marriage, where God's entry and the intercession of the angel Raphael bring restoration, healing, and new hope (Craghan & Kodell, 1990; Njiolah, 2006; Wet et al., 2020). This narrative functions not only as a moral story but also as a form of proclamation of faith manifested through the distinctive structure of language and organization of the story.

The development of narrative linguistic studies allows for the scientific reading of religious



texts by paying attention to how the structure of language constructs the meaning of faith. One of the key approaches in narrative linguistics is the Labov Natural Narrative Model (Gordon, 2013; Labov & Waletzky, 1967). This model describes six narrative components: abstract, orientation, complex actions, evaluation, resolution, and coda, which represent the way in which human experience is structured in meaningful linguistic forms (B'aanoon et al., 2023; Nadeem, 2022).

In addition to formal structure, narrative meanings in texts are formed through the organization of events that are linguistically manifested. In this case, the narrative theories of William Labov and Joshua Waletzky (1967) explain how human experience is represented through a systematic and meaningful structure of language. This model views narrative as a linguistic form that organizes events into six main components: abstract, orientation, complex actions, evaluation, resolution, and coda. These six elements show how language organizes the sequence of events and emphasizes the communicative function of each part in building the overall meaning of the story. This approach allows analysis to be carried out at two levels: the macro level, which outlines the overall narrative structure, and the micro level, which highlights the evaluative function as a central moral and theological message conveyance. Some previous research, such as that conducted by Nadeem (2022), B'aanoon and Jasim (2023), and Zai et al. (2024), also proves the effectiveness of the Labov model in uncovering the narrative structure and function of religious texts.

Moreover, readings of the Book of Tobit focus more on theological and historical aspects (Nickelsburg, 2005), while its linguistic dimension has not been widely studied. In fact, narrative structure has an important role to play in shaping the reader's experience of faith. Labov's theory systematically maps the structure of the story, identifying the communicative function of each part of the story (Riessman, 2008). The application of cohesion theory helps uncover how language integration strengthens the relationship between form and meaning (Johnstone, 2016).

The study centers on the narrative of Tobias and Sarah's marriage (Tobit 7-8), describing the interplay between faith, prayer, and God's inclusion. This episode was chosen because it contains complete narrative elements, namely introductions, conflicts, and resolutions that carry spiritual meaning. Labov's narrative model provides a clear framework for mapping the structure of the story and interpreting the function of each of its components in constructing narrative meaning. This approach helps to examine how the text of the Book of Tobit arranges events, conflicts, and responses of faith in a coherent and meaningful flow for its readers.

In connection with to the background of the research, the following research questions are as follows: (1) How are the components of the Labov Natural Narrative Model manifested in the narrative of Tobia and Sarah? (2) How does each narrative component function in constructing meaning throughout the story?

Based on these research questions, this study aims to achieve several objectives, namely: (1) to identify and describe the structural components of the narrative according to the Labov framework, and (2) to interpret the functional contribution of each component to the construction of meaning in the text.

In addition, the background of this research underscores the relevance of narrative linguistics to study religious texts, especially those that integrate moral, spiritual, and theological dimensions. By applying the Labov model to the story of Tobias and Sarah's marriage, this study not only seeks to enrich the linguistic study of the sacred texts but also to illuminate the narrative mechanisms through which the Book of Tobias conveys its theological message. This approach highlights the importance of narrative structure as a linguistic and theological medium, forming a solid basis for the following analysis.

## Literature Review

### Natural Narrative Models

Labov's Natural Narrative Model (LNNM), first introduced by Labov and Waletzky (1967) and later perfected by Labov (1972), is one of the most influential frameworks in the study of modern narrative linguistics. This model departs from the assumption that narrative is a form of language that humans use to reconstruct past experiences in a sequential and meaningful manner. According to Labov, narrative structure not only conveys events, but organizes human experience

through language so as to shape social, moral, and emotional meaning.

The LNNM identifies six main components that build a narrative structure: abstract, orientation, complex actions, evaluation, resolution, and coda. The abstract provides a brief summary of the content of the story, orientation introducing the characters, setting, and initial situation. Complex action is the core of a story that contains a series of events or conflicts that move the narrative. Evaluation serves to convey the important values, attitudes, judgments, or intentions of the story, explaining why the narrative is worth telling. The resolution features the resolution of the conflict, while the coda closes the story and reconnects it to the current situation.

Labov emphasizes two main dimensions in narrative analysis: the structural dimension, which highlights the temporal regularity between clauses, and the functional dimension, which analyzes how narratives convey social and emotional meaning. One of Labov's most important contributions is the affirmation that evaluation is central to the narrative; This section expresses the moral values, beliefs, or theological foundations that the speaker wants to affirm. Thus, LNNM not only provides a structural framework, but also offers tools to understand the communicative function of a story.

### **Narrative Linguistics**

The field of narrative linguistics encompasses a wide range of linguistic approaches that study the structure, function, and use of language in narratives. However, in the context of this study, the discussion of narrative linguistics is focused specifically on the placement of Labov's thought in the discipline. The aim is not to elaborate on the entire development of this field, but rather to explain how the Labov model has made a significant contribution to modern narrative analysis.

In the linguistic tradition, narrative is understood as a discourse that follows a temporal pattern and contains a specific social function. Labov became one of the important figures because he succeeded in showing that language in narrative has a structural pattern that can be systematically analyzed through clause units. This approach differs from literary narratives that emphasize more plot, characters, or themes; Labov's version of narrative linguistics focuses on the relationship between clause structure, temporal order, and communicative function.

This framework is particularly relevant for the analysis of religious texts that, although theological, are nevertheless constructed through language that is subject to the rules of narrative structure. Therefore, placing Labov's theory in the context of narrative linguistics helps to strengthen the argument that the text of the Book of Tobit can be analyzed using a purely linguistic approach, without neglecting its moral and spiritual content. Labov's approach has also been used in various studies of religious narratives, showing that language structure and evaluative functions can reveal the ways in which religious texts convey theological messages to readers.

### **Narrative Structure and Function of a Story**

In this study, the discussion of narrative structure and function is not directed at general narrative theory, but specifically refers to the concept developed by Labov in LNNM. According to Labov, narrative structure is constructed through a temporally interconnected sequence of clauses and forms a story scheme that can be understood as a representation of experience. Each component of the narrative structure has a complementary function, forming a complete discourse.

Intricate action is the part that moves the story through events that follow a strict temporal sequence. Labov calls this clause a narrative clause—a clause that cannot be moved without changing the temporal meaning of the narrative. Meanwhile, evaluation serves to mark the dimension of assessment or meaning that the speaker wants to emphasize. Evaluative clauses often do not follow a temporal sequence and can appear in the form of comments, explanations, emotional reinforcement, or expressions of trust. This is why narrative structure and function should always be understood as two inseparable sides.

The application of Labov's concept to the text of the Book of Tobit allows us to see how narrative structure and evaluative function work simultaneously in constructing a theological message. For example, the threat of Asmodeus and the risk of Sarah's husband's death complicate the act of creating tension, while Tobias and Sarah's prayer on the wedding night serves as an evaluation that affirms the value of faith, God's protection, and deliverance. Resolution arises when the threat is overcome through divine action, while the coda brings the reader back to the peaceful situation after the rescue.

Therefore, narrative structure is not just a series of events, but a linguistic instrument used to convey moral, spiritual, and theological meaning. It functions not only as a narrator, but as a tool to reinforce the religious identity, values of belief, and theological understanding contained in the text of the Book of Tobit. This approach allows for a deeper and more directed narrative analysis according to Labov's linguistic framework.

A number of cutting-edge studies have shown the direct application of the Labov Natural Narrative Model in analyzing narrative structure and function in different types of texts. Nureldeen et al., (2024) Applying the six components of Labov's narrative to the narrative of Arabic speakers' personal experiences and finding that evaluation is the element that determines the importance of a story, suggests that the evaluative function is central to the formation of narrative meaning. Study by Kushartanti et al., (2024) about written narratives, Indonesian children also use the Labov model to assess the completeness of the narrative structure, as well as to affirm the close relationship between the Labov component and the cohesion apparatus in building the clarity of the storyline. Meanwhile, Brookes et al., (2022) uses Labov's model in the analysis of healthcare patient feedback and shows that narrative evaluation is often the primary location for the expression of values, attitudes, and emotional experiences, thus supporting Labov's theoretical position on the role of evaluation as the core of the story. In the context of religion, the study of B'aanoon and Jasim (2023) applied the Labov model to the story of Joseph and Potiphar's wife in the Qur'an, and found that the narrative structure of the Qur'an was very consistent with the Labov pattern, especially in the use of evaluation to express moral values and divine intervention. The four studies confirm that Labov's narrative model is relevant for analyzing personal texts, education, public service, and religion. However, nowadays, there has been no systematic research applying Labov's approach to the story of Tobias and Sarah's marriage (Tobiah 7-11), although this narrative is a complete unit of story and is full of theological evaluation through prayer, divine participation, and relational restoration. This gap is what this research seeks to fill through linguistic-narrative analysis to uncover how structure and evaluation work in an integrated manner in constructing theological meaning in the text.

## Research Methods

### Types of Research

The study used a descriptive-qualitative research design, following Creswell's (2014) The view that qualitative inquiry is appropriate for exploring the meaning, interpretation, and depth of social-spiritual experiences expressed in language. This design is suitable for narrative linguistic analysis because it allows researchers to interpret how structural and evaluative elements in a text construct meaning. The narrative analysis approach is based on Riessman (2008) theoretical perspective, which emphasizes the interconnectedness between narrative structure and meaning-making.

### Research Instruments

The main instrument in this study is the researcher himself, who acts as a human instrument that interprets, classifies, and analyzes linguistic data. In line with qualitative linguistic research practices, the researcher performs several analytical functions, including identifying narrative clauses in the text, encoding each narrative segment based on the six components of the Labov Natural Narrative Model, and interpreting the evaluative elements in relation to their theological significance. To support the analysis process, a specially designed coding sheet based on Labov's narrative components is used: abstract, orientation, complicating action, evaluation, resolution, and coda which serve as a systematic guide in classifying story units. In addition, document analysis guidelines tailored to the study of Deuterocanonical biblical texts are applied to ensure consistent, thorough, and methodological engagement with the narrative data analyzed.

### Data Collection Procedure

Data were collected through documentary research by examining the narrative units of Tobit 7–11 of the New Translation of the Indonesian Deuterocanonical Bible (LAI). The selection of the text uses intended sampling, as the story of Tobias and Sarah's marriage contains a complete narrative structure and significant evaluative/theological material. The data collection steps include: (1) reading Tobit 7–11 to identify the narrative sequence, (2) segmentation of the text into clauses and episodes, following Labov's narrative clause concept, (3) extraction of linguistic forms (verbs, narrative markers,

references, cohesive ties), (4) initial coding of narrative components (A–O–CA–E–R–C) using a coding sheet. The coding process is carried out after text segmentation, namely by labeling each clause and narrative unit according to the six components of the Labov Natural Narrative Model: abstract, orientation, complicating action, evaluation, resolution, and coda. This coding functions to organize the data into stable structural categories so that narrative development patterns can be analyzed systematically. The results of this coding then became the basis for the preparation of Table 1, Table 2, and Table 3 in the results section, which map the structure, relationships between components, and narrative functions in Tobit 7–11.

### Data Analysis Procedure

The data analysis in this study was carried out through two complementary stages. The first stage, macro analysis, focuses on structural mapping by identifying and classifying each narrative clause according to the six components of the Labov Natural Narrative Model: abstract, orientation, complicating action, evaluation, resolution, and coda, so that the plot pattern and organization of the story can be comprehensively understood. The second stage, microanalysis, examines the evaluative dimension of narrative which is seen as the core of meaning according to Labov (1972). At this stage, the researcher identifies evaluative elements such as prayer, confession, and emotional responses that reflect the theological and moral values of the characters. The analysis process includes re-reading and verification of the coding results to ensure consistency, interpretation of evaluative elements according to the theological theme of the narrative, as well as cross-examination of findings with the framework of Labov and Waletzky (1967) as a form of conceptual validation.

## Results and Discussion

### Result

This section presents the main findings of the narrative analysis of Tobit 7–11 based on Labov's six-component framework. Analysis is carried out by identifying the narrative structure that forms the storyline, the relationships between the components that drive the narrative, and the socio-religious functions contained in each section. The findings are presented systematically through three tables: the mapping of the narrative components, the relationships between the components in the formation of meaning, and the thematic function of each component. The presentation of these results provides an empirical basis for further discussion of how narrative structures work in constructing theological and moral messages in texts.

**Table 1. Labov's Narrative Components in Tobit 7–11**

Component	Verse	Summary
<b>Abstract</b>	7:1–4	When Tobias and Raphael came to Ekbatana, they greeted Raguel; and when he saw Tobias, he was amazed... and his wife Edna and daughter Sarah also welcomed them.
<b>Orientation</b>	7:5–13	Raguel asked, 'Where are you from, brothers?' ... and when he learned of their lineage, he blessed them and spoke of his kinship with Tobit
<b>Actions that make it difficult</b>	8:1–3	After the wedding, Tobias and Sarah are taken to the bridal room; and the devil remembered Tobias and came, but Raphael drove him away.
<b>Evaluation</b>	8:4–8	Tobias said, 'Sister, let us get up and pray'... and together they prayed that God would show mercy and protect their marriage.
<b>Resolution</b>	8:9–14	Raguel blessed the Lord for saving the couple, instructed the servants to prepare for the wedding celebration, and rejoiced that

		the Lord had shown mercy to the two only children.
<b>Coda</b>	10:1– 11:15	Tobias returns home with Sarah; Anna ran to him, hugged him, and Tobit's vision was restored, so he said, 'Now I can see you, my son.'

Table 1 presents a mapping of the six narrative components according to Labov as they appear in Tobit 7–11. Each component is identified based on the verse range and the summary of events that represent it. These results show that the narrative of Tobit 7–11 fulfills the entire structure of Labov's narrative in its entirety, from the introduction, to the emergence of conflicts, to the conclusion and conclusion. This mapping is the basis for understanding how texts construct plots and meanings in a systematic way.

**Table 2. The Relationship Between Narrative Components in the Formation of Plot and Meaning**

<b>Connected Components</b>	<b>Forms of Linkage</b>	<b>The Meaning of the Resulting Narrative</b>
Orientation → Complicating Action	The social and spiritual background of the characters gives rise to moral and faith conflicts.	Describes the test of man's faithfulness to God.
Complicating Action → Evaluation	Conflicts are responded to with prayer and religious reflection.	Affirming the importance of faith and prayer in the face of suffering.
Evaluation → Resolution	Religious values culminate in miraculous solutions.	Illustrates the divine reward for faithfulness.
Resolution → Coda	Success ends with gratitude.	Returning the reader to moral and spiritual balance.

Table 2 illustrates the logical and functional relationships between narrative components in shaping the storyline. Each relationship from orientation to complicating action to resolution to coda shows how narrative movement produces a certain meaning, especially related to the themes of faith tests, rescue actions, and restoration. These findings confirm that each component does not stand alone, but is interrelated in building a complete narrative development.

**Table 3. Narrative Function and Socio-Religious Meaning of Each Component**

<b>Component</b>	<b>Narrative Function</b>	<b>Socio-Religious Meaning</b>
Abstract	Presents a summary of key events.	Draw the reader's attention to the theme of faith.
Orientation	Establish the social and spiritual background of the character.	Describing the lives of the obedient and suffering people.
Complicating Action	Present conflicts and tests.	It symbolizes the struggle against evil and temptation.
Evaluation	Conveying reflections and prayers of figures.	Demonstrate confidence in God's power.
Resolution	Resolving conflicts through divine intervention.	It represents the victory of faith over suffering.
Coda	Closing the story with	Teach the values of loyalty, gratitude, and hope.

	gratitude.	
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Table 3 describes the narrative function of each component and the socio-religious meanings associated with it. Each piece of structure from abstract to coda has a specific thematic contribution, including strengthening beliefs, depictions of moral struggles, affirmations of the power of prayer, and expressions of gratitude. These results show that the narrative structure not only serves to shape the storyline, but also articulates the religious values that are at the heart of Tobit's story.

## Discussion

### Realization of Labov Components in Narrative Structure

The findings in Table 1 show that all six major components of Labov are present in full in Tobit 7–11. The presence of this complete structure shows that the narrative is arranged with a linear and coherent plot, starting from the opening to the closing.

Analytically, the dominance of the verse range in complicating action (8:1–3) and resolution (8:9–14) in Table 1 indicates that the narrative's center of gravity lies in its tension and resolution. This suggests that the narrative of the Book of Tobit deliberately emphasizes the intensity of spiritual conflict and divine restoration as the two main axes of the story. Meanwhile, evaluation, which only appears in the range of verses 8:4–8 but plays a key role, confirms that the theological value and moral significance of the narrative are not determined by the length of the segments, but by their functional weight.

This result is consistent with Labov's (1972) opinion that the core of the narrative lies not in the longest part, but in the part that gives the "reason for the story," i.e. evaluation. In Tobit's narrative, this evaluative part is formed through the prayers of Tobias and Sarah, thus creating a theological center that binds the entire plot.

### Narrative Function and Meaning Formation

The function of each narrative component is more evident through the pattern of relationships between components shown in Table 2. The movement from orientation to complicating action shows that conflict does not arise suddenly, but is prepared through the social-spiritual background of the Raguel family. Thus, the narrative establishes a moral basis for the emergence of Sarah's suffering as a context of conflict.

The transition from complicating action to evaluation in Table 2 shows that prayer is a narrative response that the text chooses to interpret suffering. This shows that the Labov structure functions not only as a linguistic pattern, but as a framework for regulating the dynamics of faith. The prayers of Tobias and Sarah are not merely poetic elements, but interpretive centers that interpret the entire conflict within a religious frame.

The relationship of evaluation to resolution also shown in Table 2 shows a theological narrative logic: salvation arises as a consequence of faith. This is further reinforced by Table 3, which emphasizes that the function of narrative evaluation is to express confidence in God's power. Thus, analytically it can be concluded that the narrative structure not only arranges a series of events, but at the same time directs the reader to interpret events through the lens of faith.

Compared to previous research, the results of this study show alignment and expansion. Nureldeen et al. (2024) emphasize that evaluation is the center of interpretation in oral narratives. The findings in Table 1 and Table 3 corroborate this, as Tobit's narrative places prayer as an evaluative marker that contains important theological value.

Brookes et al. (2022) found that evaluation is the point of conveying emotional and moral values in patient narratives. This is in line with the role of Tobias and Sarah's prayers as expressions of emotion and faith in the evaluative part of Tobit's narrative.

Research by B'aanoon and Jasim (2023) reveals that the narratives of the Qur'an follow the Labov pattern and place moral values on the evaluative side. The findings in Table 2 and Table 3 show a similar pattern in Tobit's 7–11, showing structural consistency across religious traditions. Thus, this study expands the understanding that Labov's narrative patterns can be used as a universal

analytical tool in religious texts.

The researchers' interpretation of the results presented in the three tables suggests that the narrative structure of Tobit 7–11 does not work mechanically, but has a significant spiritual function. The dominance of complicating action and resolution (Table 1) suggests that this story is literally constructed to show the dynamics between threat and rescue. Meanwhile, the unique position of evaluation (Table 3) shows that narrative meaning is directed towards the affirmation of faith and prayer as the core of religious experience.

Objectively, this confirms that the Labov Model is effective in uncovering layers of theological meaning in Deuterocanonical texts. The narrative of Tobit 7–11 shows that narrative structure can serve as a theological tool that conveys teachings about God's inclusion, restoration, and faithfulness. Thus, this research contributes to the development of narrative analysis methodologies in the study of religious texts.

## Conclusion

The results of the study show that the narrative of Tobit 7–11 presents the six components of the Labov Natural Narrative Model in a complete and functional manner, where complicating action and resolution form the center of tension and resolution, while evaluation becomes the core of theological meaning through the prayers of Tobias and Sarah. These findings indicate that the narrative structure of the Book of Tobit not only constitutes a storyline, but also conveys the value of faith, dependence on God, and relational restoration, thus demonstrating the relevance of the linguistic-narrative approach in the study of religious texts. However, this research is limited by a single focus on one narrative unit and one model of analysis, so it has not accommodated other perspectives such as structural narrative, critical discourse analysis, or intertextual approaches. Therefore, future research may expand the study by comparing the narrative structure of other chapters in the Book of Tobit, testing the conformity of the Labov model with other Deuterocanonical texts, or integrating theological and linguistic approaches to enrich understanding of narrative dynamics in biblical literature.

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