

## How To Study The Bible (#14)

### *The Bible As Historical Narrative*

This material was outlined and adapted from *How To Read The Bible For All Its Worth* (Edition 3rd) by Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart; “Chapter Five - The Old Testament Narratives: Their Proper Use” [4th edition to be published June 24, 2014]

1. The most common type of literature in the Bible is narrative. Forty percent of the Old Testament is narrative and three fourths of the Bible is Old Testament.
2. This present chapter focuses on how Hebrew narrative works.
3. *The Nature of Narratives - What Narratives Are*
  - a. Narratives are stories that retell historical events of the past that are intended to give meaning and direction for a given people in the present.
  - b. In this regard, biblical narratives are parallel to non-biblical narratives. They are different, of course in that they are divinely inspired and tell God’s story.
  - c. Bible narratives tell us about things that happened in the past, and have three basic parts: characters, plot, and plot resolution.
  - d. Most narratives assume some sort of conflict or tension that needs resolving.
  - e. The characters are: the protagonist (the lead character in the story), the antagonist (the person who brings the conflict), the agonists (other major characters involved in attention)
  - f. The ultimate biblical protagonist is God, Satan, or his minions, are the antagonists, and God’s people are the agonists
  - g. The basic plot centers on how God’s people created in his image serve him on this earth
  - h. Satan attempts to thwart God’s purpose, thus creating tension
  - i. Plot resolution, biblically speaking, centers on redemption

### 4. *The Nature of Narratives - Three Levels of Narrative*

- a. The top, or third, level is the one that focuses on God’s redemption. It is sometimes referred to as the super story, or the meta-narrative. It addresses everything that goes on in the entirety of God’s plan to redeem mankind.
- b. The second level focuses on how God redeems (i.e., works out his redemption for) his people through the ages. The second level includes all of the principles of covenant, law, etc. The authors stress God’s plan as it is enacted through promise and fulfillment. I often emphasize this level as the realm of providence.
- c. The first, or bottom, level is where we find all of the hundreds of individual narratives that make up the other two levels. I often refer to this as the street-level, referring to those events that occur right in front of us every day.

### 5. *The Nature of Narratives - What Narratives Are Not*

- a. “Old Testament narratives are not allegories or stories filled with hidden meanings.” (92)
- b. “Individual Old Testament narratives are not intended to teach moral lessons.” (92) (I would modify this to say, “some” narratives, and/or note that they are not all “primarily intended” to teach moral lessons.) When moral lessons are often found, the primary objective is recognizing what God has done to and through Israel.
- c. Though Old Testament narratives might not teach directly, we can find those teachings explicitly elsewhere.

### 6. *The Characteristics of Hebrew Narrative*

- a. The Narrator
  - i. The narrator chooses what to say in the story
  - ii. This makes him comparatively omniscient - he knows what’s going on at all times and all places
  - iii. His role is to tell the story in such a way that you are drawn into the narrative
  - iv. The narrator is responsible for the point of view of the story

- b. The Scene(s)
    - i. The predominant mode of narration in Hebrew narrative is scenic.
    - ii. The action is moved along by a series of scenes that make up the whole, and might be likened to a contemporary movie/television drama.
  - c. The Characters
    - i. In the scenic nature of Hebrew narrative characters are central
    - ii. The presentation of character has very little to do with physical appearance, but rather are matters of status or profession, or tribal designation.
    - iii. Two features of characterization stand out:
      - 1. characters are often presented in contrast or in parallel
      - 2. The usual mode of characterization occurs in the character's own words and actions, not in the narrator's
  - d. Dialogue
    - i. The first point of dialogue is often a significant clue to both the story plot and character of the speaker
    - ii. Contrastive dialogue often functions as a way of characterization
    - iii. The narrator often emphasizes crucial parts of the narrative by having one of the characters repeat or summarize the narrative in a speech
  - e. Plot
    - i. Narratives need a plot and the plot resolution, thus necessitating the narrative have a beginning middle and end
    - ii. Together these focus on a build up of dramatic tension/conflict that needs resolved, thus generating interest in the resolution
  - f. Features of Structure
    - i. Hebrew narratives used various structural features to catch the hearer's attention. Note that term hearer. Though written down, narratives were designed primarily for hearers, not readers. Several different styles of structure were employed in order to keep hearers readily engaged.
      - ii. Some of those structural features all are:
        - 1. Repetition—keyword repetition, resumption of the narrative after interruption, stereo typical patterns (cycles in Judges and in Kings)
        - 2. Inclusion—a unique form of repetition were in narrative is started and ended on the same note or in the same lie, a special form of inclusion known as chiasm involves a more elaborate structure, starting and ending the same, but in between it could be something like this A - B - C - C - B - A
        - 3. Foreshadowing—something briefly noted in an early part of the narrative is picked up in detail later on
        - 4. Cf. Exegetical commentaries for additional features of structure
7. *A Final Word*: Remember that as you read Hebrew narrative God is the ultimate character, the hero of the story.
8. *Reading Between The Lines*
- a. Using the book of Ruth as an example, we can learn much from what is implicit in a narrative, things that the narrator has put in the story that you might initially miss on first reading of the book.
  - b. Though it appears that the book of Ruth is a love story between Ruth and Boaz, we must remember that it is ultimately a story of God's love for us, God's kindness.
  - c. We do not want to look for hidden meanings, but we do want to find out every meaning implicit in the story.
  - d. Note the following implicit story lines:
    - i. Ruth's conversion to Judaism is subtle; see 1:16
    - ii. Boaz, a righteous Israelite, his faithful specifically because he keeps the law. The law of gleaning in Leviticus was applied scrupulously in this setting.
    - iii. The narrative informs us that a non-Jewish woman became a part of the ancestry of King David, that's informing us of God's love for all mankind.

iv. The narrative tells us implicitly that Bethlehem was unique town during the period of judges because of the faithfulness of its citizenry.

9. *Some Final Cautions* - Be sure to avoid the following:

- a. Allegorizing: while there are clear allegorical parts of Scripture, we must remember that no historical narrative is at the same time an allegory [cf. Gal 4 re Hagar/Sara - jla]
- b. Decontextualizing: don't ignore the complete historical illiterate context, as well as the individual narrative.
- c. Selectivity: don't pick and choose specific words and phrases to concentrate on while ignoring others in the overall sweep of the narrative. Listen to the entirety of the narrative.
- d. Moralizing: don't assume that principles for living, moral principles, are derived from every passage. This approach ignores the fact that narratives were written to show the progress of God's history of redemption, not to illustrate principles. (The authors' consistent emphasis on this point avoids a key question: is it not possible that God could reveal moral principles at the same time that he revealed his overarching plan to redeem man. Surely they must consider that the principles of Mosaic law, enacted in a uniquely historical setting, carries with it specific principles and practices of behavior. Their approach needs to be tempered in this regard.)
- e. Personalizing: assuming that everything you read apply specifically to you or someone close to you: becomes a very self-centered reading of the Bible
- f. Misappropriation: similar to personalizing, this error centers on the use of a text in an inappropriate way: it is to appropriate the text for purposes that are foreign to the narrative itself
- g. False appropriation: another form of decontextualizing; to read into a biblical narrative ideas that come from contemporary culture, ideas that are foreign to the narrative's purpose and point of view

h. False Combination: draws from other/multiple places and passages to establish a combination that is not directly connected in the immediate passage itself

i. Redefinition: redefining some passage to mean something other than what is/was intended in the text

j. simply remember that no viable narrative was written specifically about you, or to you, immediately; while it applies, it is only after conducting proper exegesis that proper hermeneutics can determine so

k. note the general principles on page 106 for interpreting narratives.

#### *Principles For Interpreting Narratives*

1. OT narrative usually does not teach doctrine directly. [see my caveats elsewhere - jla]
2. OT narrative usually illustrates doctrine taught propositionally elsewhere.
3. Narratives record what happened, not what ought to happen ... Not every narrative has clear moral application.
4. Actions in narratives are not necessarily good examples to follow .... They may be just the opposite. [cf. 1 Cor 10 in this regard - jla]
5. OT characters and their actions are often far from perfect.
6. OT narratives do not always end telling us what is good or bad - we are left to form that judgement from other teaching.
7. All narratives are selective and incomplete ... We have, however, what was intended.
8. Narratives do not necessarily address our theological questions. They have specific purposes/issues.
9. Narratives may teach implicitly or explicitly.
10. God is always the hero of biblical narratives.