

How to Interpret Old Testament Narrative Literature: A Start

Limits of the Text

Narrative literature is one big story comprised of a series of smaller stories. A narrative book is taught by successively teaching through each of the smaller stories. Where are the limits of the text, the beginning and ending of the smaller stories?

Plot

Often **plot** can be used to find the limits of the text. The plot of a story generally has four components:

1. The **background** sets the stage.
2. The **crisis** is the problem that needs to be resolved, the source of the tension.
3. The **resolution** is how the crisis is solved.
4. The **conclusion** is what results from the resolution of the crisis.

Where these components can be identified, a text has been identified. Sometimes there are smaller elements that aren't necessarily part of one story or the next; these can be bridges, paragraphs that lead from one text to the next.

Towards Authorial Intent

New Testament epistles are the low-hanging fruit of the Bible; truth is set out simply and plainly, ready to be understood and believed. Narratives, including Old Testament (OT) narratives, teach the same truths, but they package truth in a different form, the form of a story. Interpreting OT narratives begins at the same place as interpreting epistles: What was the author's intent? A given author was writing to a given audience for an intended purpose. For every story in a narrative book, the interpreter must attempt to understand what the author intended, as an individual story, as a piece of the larger story of the whole book, and as a contribution to the meta-narrative of the entire Bible.

So how can the author's intention be discerned? Several literary devices can be helpful:¹

- Stories have a **plot**, as described above. The main idea of the story can be found in how the crisis is resolved.

¹ Taken from *A Jumpstart Guide To Preaching Narrative* by Dr. Heisler.

- Stories have **pace**. Stories occur over time; some parts of the story go by fast while others parts slow down. The main idea of the story can be found wherever the author slows the story down.
- Stories have **dialogue**, where the characters speak to one another and/or with God. The main idea of the story can be found in the dialogue of one of the main characters, especially when they are speaking with God.
- Stories have **character development**. The main idea of the story can be found in the growth and change that occurs in the life of the main character. There are four ways to assess the development of a character.² First, judge a character by what he says and does, especially if speech and act contradict each other. Second, examine what other characters say about a character or how others react to him. Third, note what the book's author narrates about a character. Fourth, read what other biblical writers say about a character.
- Stories have a **hero**. In the Old Testament, God is the hero of every story. The main idea can be found where a character recognizes God is the hero or allows God to use them to help accomplish his purposes.

External Context

Stories have external context, which is how a story fits with the preceding and following stories.

Three Levels of History

Old Testament narratives are history, and this history can be examined at three different levels:³

- The first level is **personal history**. At this level, the story is examined in terms of the main characters and their actions.
- The second level is **national history**. At this level, the story is examined in terms of the actions of God on behalf of the nation of Israel. The emphasis shifts from the obedience (or lack of obedience) of the characters to the covenantal faithfulness (or judgment) of God.
- The third level is **redemptive history**. At this level, the story is examined in terms of the meta-narrative of the Bible; the entire canon, Old and New Testaments, are considered. The truth of the story is now applicable to people in all places and time. This level is where a legitimate connection can be made to Jesus and the gospel.

Jesus and the Gospel

Every text in the Bible has some relationship to the gospel of Jesus. The gospel isn't an extra feature added on to the message of the Bible; it *is* the message of the Bible. Jesus, on

² House, 65.

³ Taken from *Preaching Narrative from the Old Testament* by Dr. Heisler.

the road to Emmaus, began with Moses and all the prophets and explained to his disciples the things concerning Himself in *all* the Scriptures (Lk 24:27); he claimed that everything in the Old Testament pointed to him. The Baptist Faith and Message 2000 affirms this truth when it says, "All Scripture is a testimony to Christ, who is Himself the focus of divine revelation."⁴

Here are some possible ways to relate an Old Testament to Jesus and the gospel:⁵

1. The story may contain a **type** of Jesus and the gospel. A type is something in the Old Testament that foreshadows something in the New Testament. How do you know if something is a type? Let the New Testament be your guide. If a New Testament writer describes how something foreshadows Christ, then you have a type. Paul said that Adam was a type of Christ; the first Adam brought condemnation to all, but the second Adam brought justification to all who believe (Ro 5:14-19; 1 Co 15:20-24, 45). The bronze serpent, which was lifted up on a standard for the people to see and be saved from snakes (Num 21:4-9), was a type of Jesus, who was lifted up on a cross for all people to see and be saved from sin (Jn 3:14-15).
2. The story may contain an implicit **prediction** of Jesus and the gospel even though it doesn't explicitly mention him. The protoevangelium in Ge 3:15 predicted the gospel when it foretold that Satan would bruise Eve's descendent on the heel and would in turn be bruised in the head. The blood of the Passover lamb in Ex 12:21-22 predicted the gospel by requiring the shedding of the blood of a perfect lamb.
3. The story may contain a **preparation** for the gospel by helping people to see that the only way to meet God's standards is through Jesus and the gospel. Any text that reveals God's perfect standard and man's inability to meet this standard prepares for the gospel. The primary example of this in the Old Testament is the Ten Commandments and the Mosaic Law.
4. The story may contain a **reflection** of mankind's need for redemption through Jesus and the gospel. This is the most common way to relate Old Testament narratives to the gospel, and it is found by asking two related questions:
 - a. What does this text teach us about ourselves? What need or deficiency in our lives does it expose?
 - b. What does this text teach us about God? How does it reveal God's grace to meet our need?

The story of Abraham and Hagar (Gen 16 & 17) reveals the character of man (even when we know God's promises, we tend to do things our own way) and the character of God (even when we sin, God is gracious and will keep his covenant). The story of David and Goliath (1 Sa 17) reveals the character of man (we tend to be more concerned about ourselves than about God's name) and the character of God (he alone wins battles, and he alone provides salvation).

⁴ <http://www.sbc.net/bfm/bfm2000.asp>.

⁵ Bryan Chapell's *Christ-Centered Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon*, 280-288.

Outline

There are different ways to outline a narrative passage.⁶ First, the outline can be based upon the plot. Second, the outline can be based upon the different scenes of the story, where there is a change in character or a change in location.

Outlines intersect with the three levels of history. If an outline is based upon personal history, it will be a historical outline that conveys the actions of the main characters. If an outline is based upon national history, the focus shifts from the characters to God, but it is still remains a historical outline. If an outline is based upon redemptive history, it will be an application-centered outline that calls the church to trust and obey God.

Central Truth of the Story

The central truth of the text (CTT) is a clear and comprehensive one-sentence statement that summarizes the dominant theme of the story as scoped by the theme limiter. It is written in the past tense, includes historical elements associated with the text, and is anchored to authorial intent.⁷

The CTT takes the following form:

(Author) + “wrote” + (text) + “in order to” + (verb) + (audience) + (dominant theme and theme limiter)⁸

When writing a CTT, make sure it is not vague. It should be unique to the story; that is, it should not be re-usable with any other story in the Bible.⁹ Make sure it covers the entire story, not just part of it.

Mistakes to Avoid

There are three inappropriate (albeit common) ways to interpret Old Testament texts. They are inappropriate because they remove the text from its historical and grammatical context in order to interpret it.

Spiritualizing is converting the text into a spiritual analogy. It takes the main point of the story and makes it analogous to some point in the lives of the hearers.¹⁰ As God helped David to slay the giant, so he will help you slay the giants in your life. As God helped Nehemiah rebuild the walls of Jerusalem, so he will help you rebuild the walls of your life. Spiritualizing is inappropriate because it ignores the original intentions of the author, leaping from the “then” of the story to the “now” of the hearer without considering the truth that the author intended to teach.

⁶ Taken from *A Jumpstart Guide To Preaching Narrative* by Dr. Heisler.

⁷ Adapted from Dr. Heisler’s preaching notes.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ One might make an exception for parallel passages.

¹⁰ Spiritualizing does not mean that we attempt to interpret the Bible without the help of the Holy Spirit. His ministry of illumination is critical to right interpretation.

Allegorizing is looking beyond the immediate meaning of the text to find a deeper, hidden, more spiritual meaning. It ignores the obvious, literal meaning of the text and claims to find another meaning behind it; the historical features in the story are supposedly clues that point to hidden, spiritual meanings. The love and wisdom of the Lord (represented by David) destroys false teaching (represented by Goliath) in order to protect true teaching (the armies of Israel).¹¹ Allegorizing is inappropriate because it is completely subjective. Since it removes the story from its context, there is no objective standard by which to determine if an interpretation of a story is correct. Because it is so individualized, interpretations vary widely among interpreters. In short, an allegorical interpreter sets himself up as the final authority over Scripture itself.¹²

Moralizing is drawing simple morals from a story. The general idea is that a Bible character has displayed a great virtue so you should have the same virtue, or a Bible character performed some great activity so you should do the same activity. It emphasizes “virtues and vices, do’s and don’ts” without “properly grounding these ethical demands in the Scriptures.”¹³ David was courageous when he faced Goliath, so you should be courageous, too. When Nathan confronted David he used a very clever parable; so when you confront people, you should devise a clever parable, too. Moralizing is inappropriate for two reasons. First, it ignores the intentions of the author. Moral lessons of this sort are rarely (if ever) the intention of the author, so they are rarely the main point of the story. Is David and Goliath in the Bible in order to teach you to be courageous, or is it there to teach you that God is still living, the battle belongs to him, and he does not deliver by sword or spear (1 Sa 17:26, 46-47)? Is Nathan’s parable of the lamb in the Bible to teach you effective confrontation strategies, or is it there to teach you that God hates sin and won’t let you remain in it (2 Sa 11:27)? Second, a lesson that merely advocates good virtues and moral behavior is **sub-Christian**; it reduces the Bible to the same value as Aesop’s fables (“and the moral of the story is...”). Moralizing subverts the very message of the gospel because it ignores the sinfulness of man and the grace of God.

¹¹ http://www.swedenborg.org/messenger/2007_01/story1.html

¹² What about Ga 4:21-31? Didn’t Paul say that Sarah and Hagar were an allegory? Paul did not allegorize this text in sense discussed in this paper, nor in the sense that well-known allegorical interpreters such as Philo or Origin interpreted Scripture, nor in the sense the word is typically used today. This is why many newer translations avoid this misleading word and translate using other words, such as symbolic (NKJV), illustrations (HCSB), and figuratively (NIV).

¹³ Sydney Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text*, 163-164.