

MEETING JESUS IN OLD TESTAMENT NARRATIVES

The aim of this session is to understand the impact different literary contexts (i.e. genre) have on biblical interpretation and to identify and apply the key principles for interpreting Old Testament narratives.

Recommended Reading

Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart. How to read the Bible for all its worth. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993) pp. 13-27, 78-93.

A. THE IMPORTANCE OF LITERARY CONTEXTS

The Bible is both a human and divine book. It is ultimately a message from God to human beings. But the Bible did not drop down directly from heaven, nor did God dictate his message verbatim to his human messengers. Rather God revealed his message to us through his chosen human authors in human language e.g. Hebrew and Greek, in a specific culture and time.

Just as the eternal Word of God came bodily into the world in the person of Jesus Christ, so the written Word of God assumed a culturally specific form in the Bible. This means to better understand the Bible, we need to become acquainted with the language, culture and literary conventions of the day.

The English speaking world is blessed with a number of excellent translations. (See Fee and Stuart's discussion, pp.28-44.) Our focus in the next three modules will be on understanding the literary forms found in the Bible. This is important because the Bible, although a single book about the one story of salvation/restoration, is also at the same time a library of books.

Just as libraries or book stores often arrange their books according to literary types e.g. biography, history, travel, poetry, science-fiction, philosophy, etc. so too the Bible is made up of a number of different literary types e.g. narratives, law, prophecy, poetry, wisdom, apocalyptic etc.

The biblical authors followed normal human conventions when they wrote their texts. This means the literary context that they chose contains important signals that tell the readers what to make of the text in front of them.

In sum, literary context is important because sentences only make sense if both author and reader agree about what it is being communicated. Each literary style or genre comes with its own set of rules.

For example, we don't read love letters or newspapers or novels or menus or car-repair manuals in the same way. We instinctively know this and we bring with us a different set of expectations to the text as readers. To read them all in the same way would run the risk of misunderstanding the text.

Or take another example. Knowing the rules of language is like knowing the rules of a game. In the game of rugby, a player can pick up a ball with his hands. In the game of football, they can't. So unless we understand how a particular game is played, a spectator might find it all very confusing. So it is with the rules of language.

B. CHARACTERISTICS OF OLD TESTAMENT NARRATIVES

Nearly half of the Old Testament is made up of narratives or stories. A narrative is a story with a plot, setting and characters. Biblical narratives aren't myths like the Hindu sacred text, *Bhagavad-Gita*, but are rooted in historical events.

Yet biblical narratives are more than just history. The biblical authors didn't intend to give us a random collection of facts, names or dates. Rather, the authors use history to teach us something about God.

The purpose of stories is show how God works among his people and in the world. The biblical authors inspired by the Holy Spirit use stories to teach us theology.

This approach has both advantages and disadvantages. On the plus side, stories are interesting. They are easy to remember. They are easy to relate to and can show the complexities of life. On the minus side, the meaning of stories can be ambiguous if they are not clearly stated. One can read too much into or too little from a biblical story.

Two things we need to watch when reading narratives. First, we need to remember ***Old Testament stories don't always teach us directly.***

Old Testament stories usually illustrate a theological principle. How they work is to draw us into the story. Narratives give us a 'hands-on' experience of God. They were not set up to answer our all our theological questions about a particular topic. To check whether our interpretation is correct we need to support it with a theological principle taught more directly elsewhere.

Second, ***Old Testament stories often record what happened rather than what ought to happen.***

So unlike Aesop's Fables, they don't always contain an identifiable moral to the story. For example, although Rahab is the hero (with a small 'h') in Joshua 2, the moral of that story is not that prostitution or lying is right. Rather the main point is on her faith, which led to her deliverance from God's judgment.

C. FEATURES OF OLD TESTAMENT NARRATIVES

There are four important elements to any narrative: (1) plot, (2) setting, (3) character, and (4) narrator's point of view.

For every story we need to ask five standard questions: Who? What? When? Where? How? These questions help sharpen our observations about the text. We will look at each in turn in relation to the four elements.

PLOT

The plot is the organizing structure of the narrative. It is the thing that ties the component parts of the story together. Plot deals with the questions of the *What?* and the *How?*

Often like the Abraham narrative in Genesis 12-25, Old Testament narratives are long and within the larger plot are a number of sub-plots e.g. he receives a promise from God, he goes to Egypt, he rescues Lot, he sends Hagar away, he sacrifices Isaac, he buries Sarah etc. Yet all of these sub-plots are part of the larger story about God's promise to Abraham and how God fulfils that promise.

Most plots have three basic components: (1) exposition, (2) conflict, and (3) resolution. The exposition is how the story starts off. It provides the basic setting and sets off the main series of events e.g. God calls Abraham to establish a new covenant with him in Genesis 12:1.

This is followed by conflict. Often there is some incompleteness, disorder or shortcoming within the story that intensifies the action. For example, in Genesis 12, Abraham after receiving a promise that he will be a father to a great nation (12:2) surrenders his wife to Pharaoh. This conflict leads to a resolution in Gen. 12:17-20.

On another level, this is part of a larger story about how God can and will fulfil his covenant promises to Abraham despite the many obstacles.

So as we read the narratives, we need to identify the main plot. What is this story about? How does this individual story fit in with the larger story of the book and with the overarching story of the Old Testament? Identify the main conflict. Trace how the tension develops and how the conflict is resolved.

SETTING

The setting is the backdrop of the story. The Old Testament narratives don't happen in an imaginary setting. They are rooted in a particular place and time e.g. Pharaoh's court in Egypt, in the desert of Sinai, etc. This is important as it affects how we understand the story.

This deals with the questions of the *When?* and the *Where?*

Changes of setting, like the changes of name for individual characters, can be significant. For example, look at Ruth 1:1.

In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land, and a man from Bethlehem in Judah, together with his wife and two sons, went to live for a while in the country of Moab.

We're told two important things in the very first verse. First, Naomi's family left Israel to live in Moab. This should make us sit up and pay attention. Why?

Israel was the special place that God had promised his people. Does this migration mean they lacked trust in God? Isn't it ironic that there was famine in Bethlehem i.e. 'house of bread'? Was this a sign of God's displeasure or judgment on his own people?

Second, the story is set in a particular time i.e. 'when the judges ruled.' This ties the story of Ruth to the book of Judges that precedes it. If we were to skim through the book of Judges, we will quickly discover that this was a chaotic time. Lawlessness and violence were common. So was disobedience. Even the judges, the supposed heroes, were somehow flawed. 'In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit' (Judges 21:25).

All this serves to underscore the dangers the widows face and highlights how unusual it was to find an honest and pious Israelite in the form of Boaz. Later Ruth gave birth to Obed, grandfather to David. The problem articulated in Judges 21:25 found a resolution in Ruth 4:22. So the setting connects us to a larger story of the Old Testament.

CHARACTERS

Characters answers the *Who?* question in a narrative. They move the plot forward. Biblical characters are not one-dimensional e.g. good guys versus bad guys. They are complex and true to life.

One common error made in interpreting Old Testament narratives is that we assume that everyone in the story is a hero and model for us to copy e.g. 'be like Moses,' 'be like Boaz' and so on. Yet this is simply not true.

Most of the main characters have a mixture of good and bad traits. This includes people like Abraham, Gideon, Samson, David, and Solomon.

Abraham lied about his wife twice (cf. Gen. 12:11-20, 20:2). Gideon didn't fully trust God and led the nation into idolatry. Samson, for all his physical strength, was undisciplined, lacked respect for God and squandered his potential for foreign women. David slept with his subordinate's wife and engineered his death. On the other hand, supposedly negative characters like Ruth, a Moabite widow and Rahab, a prostitute, made God-honouring choices.

So it is vital not to put the biblical characters on a pedestal. Don't read their life-stories in isolated units. Don't define them in simplistic ways. Follow their individual stories to the end. Learn from both the good and the bad. Remember, they are not super-saints that never do any wrong but are flawed human beings just like us!

This leads us to a very important feature of Old Testament narratives. The hero of the story is not Gideon, Samson or Solomon. The hero of the Old Testament narrative is God!

God is the hero even when he is not explicitly mentioned. He is always at work. Sometimes he works in spectacular ways e.g. Exodus, other times he works quietly behind the scenes e.g. Ruth and Esther.

God is a major player in every story. The biblical narratives are primarily about God and not about us. So the first question we ought to ask is not so much, 'what is God saying to me?' but 'what does this passage teach me about God?'

The whole Old Testament (and the New) is a story about God and how he restores a world that has gone astray into a right relationship with him. God often intervenes and speaks directly to his people. One of the strengths of narratives is that through such stories we are able to see God at work through many different situations, dealing with various human-related problems.

Don't lose sight of the big question, i.e. 'what does this passage teach me about God?' when you ask the smaller question, i.e. 'what does this text reveal about Gideon?'

Treat God as the main character in every narrative. Analyze his actions. Listen to his dialogues. Find out the reasons for his actions. God is always the hero of the story. Find out from the text what he is trying to tell us about himself in the Old Testament narratives.

NARRATOR'S POINT OF VIEW

The narrators of the stories are often unknown in the Old Testament. But this doesn't mean they are completely invisible. They often express their views within the text to give meaning to the stories they tell.

This can take the form of summary statements. For example, two statements are often repeated in the book of Judges:

The Israelites did evil in the eyes of the LORD ... (Judges 2:11, 3:7, 3:12, 4:1, 6:1, 10:6, 13:1)

In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit. (Judges 17:6, 18:1, 19:1, 21:25)

Other times, the narrator might interpret an event for us after telling us the story, e.g. 'all this took place because the Israelites had sinned against the LORD their God, who had brought them out of Egypt' (2 Kings 17:7).

Another way the narrator conveys his point of view is through the way he tells the story. The narrator might not explicitly state what he thinks but he drops us big hints about what he actually thinks about a situation.

Take for example, the story of how an Israelite mob threatened to molest a Levite priest in Judges 19. The mob says, 'Bring out the man who came to your house so that we can have sex with him' (Judges 19:22). Does this sound familiar?

This story is similar to one in Genesis 19. (Those who have Bibles with cross-references can spot this quickly.) Back in Genesis 19 we find the Sodomites doing the very same thing.

So although the narrator in Judges 19 doesn't state his disapproval explicitly, the way he tells the story lets the reader know where he stands. He lets the readers draw their own conclusions.

D. HOW TO INTERPRET OLD TESTAMENT NARRATIVES

With these elements in mind, how then should we go about interpreting Old Testament narratives?

First, read the narratives carefully: pay attention to the plot (or sub-plots), setting, character and narrator's point of view.

If possible, read through the entire book. If not, refer to a good Bible dictionary or introduction. Ask what is the immediate context of this story? Then ask how does this character or event fit within the larger story of the Bible?

Next, we need to identify the similarities and differences between our situation and that of the biblical audience. Although we are not under the Mosaic Law or called to expel a people from their land, our human natures remain the same and the God they experienced is 'the same yesterday, today and forever.'

The third step is to establish the theological principle found in the text. Since OT stories might not teach a principle explicitly, we need to confirm our interpretation with other clear passages in Scripture.

Be careful not to read too much into the individual stories. Don't allegorize i.e. try to find a hidden meaning in every detail. Teaching a principle indirectly through a

story does not mean its true meaning is a secret that can only be discovered by supernatural or mystical means e.g. dreams or visions.

A better way is to read it as a whole in context. The Holy Spirit inspired the biblical authors to write for the benefit of all believers.

To apply the theological principle correctly we need to identify the parallels between our situation and the original audience. Stories are a powerful medium to illustrate who God is and demonstrate how God deals with his world. They mirror the complexities of life in a world that largely ignores God. They entertain us, challenge us and rebuke us. They draw us in on an emotional as well as intellectual level.

Finally, the Old Testament stories are important because they are our spiritual history as well.

EXERCISE

- 1. Read 1 Kings 3:3; 4:20-21, 29-34 and 5:1-6. What is your overall impression of Solomon based on these texts? Is it largely positive or negative? Who is he? When did he rule? How does he fit into the larger story of the Old Testament?**

This exercise serves to illustrate how Old Testament stories work. Solomon is often thought to be a 'hero' figure in the Bible along with Abraham, Moses and David. So he is often seen in a positive light. He was a man who loved God (3:3a), had great wealth (4:20-21) and wisdom (4:29-34) and he built the first temple for the Lord (5:5).

He ruled after the time of David, his father, so the kingdom of Israel had not yet split into two. In the context of the covenant story, kings are now God's covenant mediators so their obedience and disobedience is important to the life of the nation. Moreover, Solomon was heir to the promise God gave to David (2 Samuel 7) about a great chosen king that will usher in God's rule. So is he this king?

But on closer reading, the biblical author hints that everything is not picture perfect here. Although he loved the Lord (3:3), he also 'offered sacrifices and burned incense on the high places.' These were pagan shrines! Interestingly, the author chose not to dwell on this here. Yet this is against God's commands. And it is all the more significant since Solomon is both a covenant mediator and heir to the Davidic promise.

- 2. Now read 1 Kings 6:1, 38; and 7:1. What do you think are the significance of the lengths of time it took to build the temple and the palace? What is your initial impression of Solomon here?**

The author continues to hint that something is amiss here. Solomon takes 7 years to build God's temple but 13 years (nearly twice as long) to build his own palace! (In verse 8b, the author tells us Solomon built another house like his for Pharaoh's daughter.)

So the biblical author continues to subtly build up a picture of a man who although outwardly loved God, his heart might be completely devoted to the Lord. One scholar described Solomon's actions as the 'piety of worldly success.' Again, the author makes little comment here on this fact.

3. Now read Deuteronomy 17:14-17. Compare this with 1 Kings 10:26-29? What does this tell us about what the biblical author thinks of Solomon? How does this help us better understand the Solomon narratives?

To our modern ears, where shows like *Who Wants to be a Millionaire* and *The Apprentice* are popular, 1 Kings 10:26-29 sounds like good things. Like some pop-stars today, Solomon is smart, rich, have lots of beautiful female companions and spiritual at the same time, what more would you want?

But a closer reading, the author tells us otherwise. By what standards should Israelite kings be measured? Should they be compared to cultural or biblical norms? When 1 Kings 10 is compared with Deuteronomy 17, Solomon comes out poorly.

Notice the three things that were prohibited in Deuteronomy 17 i.e. many horses, many wives and lots of silver and gold? These were exactly the same three things that the biblical author chose to emphasize in 1 Kings.

Was this a coincidence? Not likely. He even puts in little clues to jog our memory. Look at the last part of 1 Kings 11:3. The text says, 'and his wives led him astray.' This echoes Deuteronomy 17:17.

So is Solomon meant to be a positive example here as it is commonly assumed? The narrator makes it clear after eleven chapters (11:6-8).

As Solomon grew old, his wives turned his heart after other gods, and his heart was not fully devoted to the LORD his God, as the heart of David his father had been ... So Solomon did evil in the eyes of the LORD; he did not follow the LORD completely, as David his father had done.

The phrase 'did evil in the eyes of the LORD' casts Solomon in an unflattering light. A careful reader would have picked up the narrator's hints of disapproval earlier. This exercise shows the need to read the OT narratives carefully and pay attention to the details. (The biblical author never came right out to say what he thought about Solomon until 11:6-8.)

In the larger context of the OT story, Solomon is clearly not the Davidic king that God had promised his people. But God's sovereign purposes cannot be thwarted. It also shows God's grace to Solomon. God withheld judgment on the nation because of David. The kingdom was only divided after Solomon's reign.

On an individual level, Solomon serves to highlight the danger of a divided heart. A man cannot serve two masters. He started well but over time, through the influence of his many foreign wives (another prohibition ignored), his devotion to God was led astray.