

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 a library of books by a large number of human authors over a long period of time, although God is the ultimate author.
- The biblical authors followed normal human conventions when they wrote their respective texts.
- To better understand any particular text, we need to understand the 'rules of language.'

B. CHARACTERISTICS OF OLD TESTAMENT NARRATIVES

- The purpose of stories is to reveal God and his character by showing how God works among his people and in the world.
- The advantages of using stories include: stories are interesting, easy to remember, easy to relate to and can show the complexities of life.
- The disadvantages of using stories include: the meaning of stories can be ambiguous if they are not clearly stated so one can read too much into or too little from a biblical story.

Two important things to remember when we read narratives:

- Old Testament stories don't always teach us directly.
- Old Testament stories often record what happened rather than what ought to happen.

C. FEATURES OF OLD TESTAMENT NARRATIVES

- **Plot:** Organizing structure of the story typically with three basic components – exposition, conflict, and resolution. Example of Genesis 12.
- **Setting:** Backdrop to the story. Example of Ruth 1:1.
- **Characters:** Produce the actions in the story. (One common error made in interpreting Old Testament stories is that we assume that everyone in the story is a hero and model for us to copy. God is the hero of all the stories, even when he is not explicitly mentioned e.g. Ruth and Esther)
- **Narrator's point of view:** Give meaning to the stories they tell. Example of Judges 19.

D. HOW TO INTERPRET OLD TESTAMENT NARRATIVES

- 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?
- Identify the similarities and differences between our situation and that of the biblical audience.
- 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.
- 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 mirror the complexities of life.

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?
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?
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?