

Interpreting Old Testament Narratives

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This study is for the most part taken from Chapter 5, "Old Testament Narratives-- Their Proper Use in *How to Read the Bible for all its worth* by Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart.

Biblical Narratives:

1. "Narratives" is the most predominant type of literature in the Bible.
2. Over 40 % of Old Testament are narratives.
3. The following Old Testament Books are largely or entirely composed of narratives.
Genesis, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings, 1 and 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Daniel, Jonah, and Haggai.
4. The following books have a substantial amount of narratives.
Exodus, Numbers, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Isaiah, and Job.

Definition:

Narratives are those portions of the "divine story" that have a story form.

1. Not isolated stories, but part of a divine "story".
Old Testament narratives are not just stories about people who lived in Old Testament times. They are first and foremost stories about what God did to and through those people .
2. Not fictional but a "story that is utterly true, crucially important and often complex."
3. Story form: Plot, characters, events, developments, climaxes, etc.
4. Not human narratives but divine narratives.
"God is the hero of the story if it is in the Bible...God is the supreme "protagonist" or leading decisive character in all narratives.
5. Not allegories or stories filled with hidden meaning.
Limited in their focus according to their revelatory purpose in redemptive history.
"We have to learn to be satisfied with that limited understanding, and restrain our curiosity at many points, or else we will end up trying to read between the lines so much that we end up reading into the stories things that are not there, making allegories of what are in fact historical accounts."
6. Narratives represent an "implicit" kind of teaching rather than a "direct" kind of teaching.
"Implicit" does not mean hidden, but indirectly illustrating what perhaps another portion of scripture will teach directly.
Example: David and Bathsheba (2 Sam.11), nothing like "In committing adultery and murder, David did wrong". It is illustrated.
7. Each narrative is part of a larger revelation.
May not even have a "moral" of its own.
Therefore, Can't be interpreted in isolation.

Three levels of Narratives Corresponding to Three steps in Interpretation.

Three Levels:

1. Top level: The whole redemptive plan of God.
Redemptive history as it progressively unfolds and is fulfilled in Christ and the New Covenant.
2. Middle level: Immediate redemptive context.
I.e. Adamic, Noachian, Patriarchal, Mosaic, Judges, Theocratic, Prophetic, "latter days" church.
3. Bottom level: Individual plot, characters (etc.) of particular story.

Three Steps: (Bottom Up)

1. Analyze the specifics of the particular story.
Some Good questions to ask:
Who are the characters?
What is the plot?
Where is the climax?
Who's perspective is the story given?
Where does it take place?
Repeated phrases or ideas?
When did it take place?
Etc.
2. Understand story as it pertains to immediate redemptive Context.
Good questions to ask:
Under what covenant administration does the narrative take place?
What are the stipulations and promises in the immediate covenant context?
Example, if under the Mosaic covenant, would want to know the teachings of Deuteronomy to determine how the immediate narrative is related to the first level covenant context.
What is the author's intent for the book as a whole?
Note preface to book, Conclusion to book, key themes or repeated results, etc.
Example: Judges, to reveal a sinful pattern that would prepare and argue for a new redemptive administration under Kings.
3. Understand story in light of the New Covenant.
Good Questions to ask:
What relation does the immediate redemptive covenant have with the New Covenant of Christ?

Some Warnings and Tips:

1. In the final analysis, God is the hero of all biblical narratives. Story ought to draw attention to God's sovereign guidance and manipulation of events for His redemptive purposes.

Ex. Joseph narrative (Gen.37, 39-50) God was with Joseph for his redemptive purposes. (Note: Jacob- favoritism, Potiphar or wife- Unfair and unethical, Joseph-- overconfident self-centered young man.)..

2. Narratives record what happened-- not necessarily what should have happened or what ought to happen in every time and every place. (Not always a good example)

3. All narratives are selective and incomplete. What does appear is everything the author thought was needed to get the purpose of it's being told.

4. Most often error: To find what is not there.

"they confuse inspiration and illumination to the devaluation of Scripture and the inflation of modern insights." Edmund P. Clowney

a. Allegorizing: Looking for "hidden meanings"

b. Decontextualizing: Ignoring full historical and literary contexts.

c. Selectivity: Picking words and phrases to concentrate on ignoring others or the overall sweep of the passage.

d. Subjectivization: Treating text as if it had you in mind. Remember, While we can learn something about God and his purposes from narratives, be careful to read our lives into it. We will miss the whole point.

e. False Combination: Combining elements from here and there in passage and making a point out of the combination even though the elements themselves are un-related.

Ex. Psm. 23, David saying he will "dwell in God's house forever and that God has prepared him a table in the presence of his enemies therefore the enemies must be in God's house.

Be Patient in Interpretation and get help from good commentaries!