

# How to Read the Bible

## LESSON FIVE

### for All Its Worth

### Old Testament Narratives: Their Proper Use

#### About Narratives

Just as studying epistles covered most of the New Testament, the study of the narrative type will allow us to cover most of the Old Testament. These are some of the easier books to understand if you apply the appropriate rules we will discuss in this lesson. Let's start with the basic question, what is a narrative?

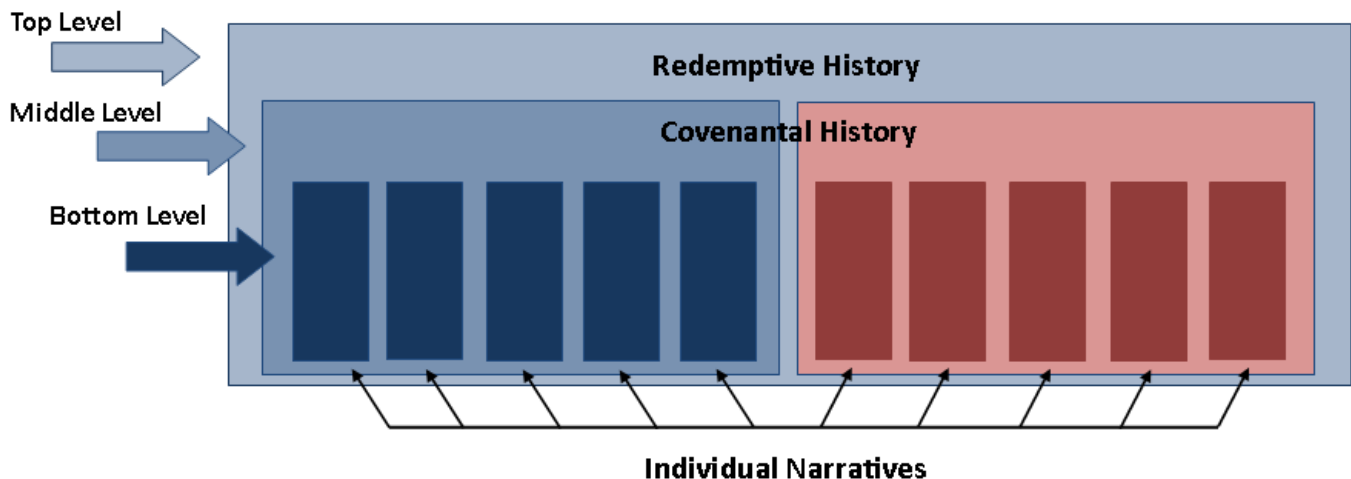
Biblical Narrative – the recounting of a historical event that illustrates God's intervention with man

As we said, much of the Old Testament contains historical narratives. Circle the books (red) that are almost completely narrative. Put a box (green) around books that contain a significant amount of narrative.

Genesis	1&2 Kings	Song of Solomon	Obadiah
Exodus	1&2 Chronicles	Isaiah	Jonah
Leviticus	Ezra	Jeremiah	Micah
Numbers	Nehemiah	Lamentations	Nahum
Deuteronomy	Esther	Ezekiel	Habakkuk
Joshua	Job	Daniel	Zephaniah
Judges	Psalms	Hosea	Haggai
Ruth	Proverbs	Joel	Zechariah
1&2 Samuel	Ecclesiastes	Amos	Malachi

#### The Three Levels of Biblical Narratives

There are three levels in which the biblical narratives communicate. Consider the diagram below and define each of the three levels and answer the questions.



# How to Read the Bible for All its Worth

## Lesson Five – Old Testament Narratives: Their Proper Use

Top Level (Redemptive History) – The overall scheme of man’s redemption from the fall to glory

Middle Level (Covenantal History) – The history of the nation of Israel from Abraham to dispersion

Bottom Level (Individual Narratives) – The individual narratives that describe specific events.

Why are there two boxes for covenantal history?

There are two major covenants in the Bible: the Old Covenant (Old Testament) and the New Covenant (New Testament). Recognizing and understanding these covenants give us perspective on the events that take place within them.

### **Each narrative is best understood when it is understood in the context of Redemptive History and its Covenantal History!**

Each narrative typically contains characters, a plot, and plot resolution. Among the characters, there is usually a protagonist (the main character), the antagonist (the person bringing the conflict or tension), and the agonists (other characters involved in the story). Identify the protagonist, antagonist, and agonists in the following scenarios:

Top Level: Redemptive History

- Protagonist – God
- Antagonist – Satan
- Agonists – The saved, the lost, angels, demons

Middle Level: The Old Covenant

- Protagonist – God, Abraham, Moses, Israel
- Antagonist – Satan, Opposing tribes and nations
- Agonists – Many individuals and nations that round out these events

Bottom Level: 1 Samuel 17:31-54

- Protagonist - David
- Antagonist - Goliath
- Agonists – Saul, Israel’s army, Philistine army

The primary purpose of a narrative is to record what happened. There may be secondary uses of the text, but we should not be so quick to jump to them that we fail to grasp the primary point. In fact, a failure to understand the primary point renders you helpless to understand a secondary application (if any) of the text. We must be VERY careful in interpreting these as to not take liberties or go to excesses that run counter to God’s intended use of the text. We do see in the New Testament however, that there can be secondary purposes for narratives. Narratives can be:

1. **Types** and **Shadows**: Galatians 4:21-26 and Colossians 2:16-17
2. **Illustrations** of the outcome of good or bad moral behavior: 2 Samuel 11:1-12:23

# How to Read the Bible for All its Worth

## Lesson Five – Old Testament Narratives: Their Proper Use

### The Form of Old Testament Narratives

#### The Narrator

The Narrator is usually unseen in the text; you may or may not know who it is. That is part of the point though. They are presenting God's perspective on the text, not necessarily their own. They don't tell you everything they know or everything you would like to know, only what you need to know so that you can be drawn in and see the point yourself. The text below provides us a brief narrative on the reign of Jotham from the perspective of the narrator in 2 Kings.

**2 Kings 15:32–38** - "In the second year of Pekah the son of Remaliah king of Israel, Jotham the son of Uzziah king of Judah became king. He was twenty-five years old when he became king, and he reigned sixteen years in Jerusalem; and his mother's name was Jerusha the daughter of Zadok. He did what was right in the sight of the LORD; he did according to all that his father Uzziah had done. Only the high places were not taken away; the people still sacrificed and burned incense on the high places. He built the upper gate of the house of the LORD. Now the rest of the acts of Jotham and all that he did, are they not written in the Book of the Chronicles of the Kings of Judah? In those days the LORD began to send Rezin king of Aram and Pekah the son of Remaliah against Judah. And Jotham slept with his fathers, and he was buried with his fathers in the city of David his father; and Ahaz his son became king in his place." (NASB95)

What are the important things for us to learn about Jotham's reign? Is it God's perspective?

He began reigning at 25 and reigned for 16 years. He was generally a godly king, but did not remove the high places and continued allowing the people to make offerings in places other than Jerusalem. His most notable and enduring accomplishment was building the upper gate of the temple complex. His son's name was Ahaz. This appears to be God's summary perspective on Jotham's reign. It is a spiritual perspective.

What do we learn about the narrator from this passage?

We don't learn anything about the narrator at all. We hear their voice, but they are invisible to the reader.

#### The Scene(s)

Most of the time, Hebrew narratives go from scene to scene, rather than following a specific character. Together, each scene makes up a single narrative.

#### The Characters

Although narratives may be organized around scenes, the characters are central to the point. We are not often given information about how they look (unless it is important for us to know), but rather about their occupation, character, and family lineage (usually what tribe they are from). We often get to know our characters by how they compare or contrast to other characters and by what they say or do.

Read Esther 2:5-3:11. How do we learn about the character of Mordecai and Haman?

We see Mordecai remaining concerned over Esther, continuing to counsel and encourage her. He also was faithful to the king, discovering a plot against him and revealing it so that the king would not be overthrown. Finally, Mordecai was devout, unwilling to bow before Haman. Haman however was very insecure and shown to be evil by seeking to kill the Jews because of Mordecai's lack of honor.

#### Dialogue

It is important to pay attention to the dialogue (conversation) between characters because the message of the narrative is often contained in their speech. There are a few patterns throughout biblical narratives that can especially help us grasp the point:

# How to Read the Bible for All its Worth

## Lesson Five – Old Testament Narratives: Their Proper Use

- Pay attention to the first point of dialogue in a story
- Look for contrasting dialogue to see a point made
- Watch for repetition or summaries

Read Chapter One of Ruth. What do we learn about the character of Ruth and the point of this story from Ruth's first few statements in this chapter?

This story is going to be about deep friendship and commitment. It is going to show the fruit of being faithful to loving others, even to the point of suffering loss our selves. Ruth is emphatic and repetitious about her commitment to stay with Naomi. Naomi's contrasting dialogue (verses 11-15) brings out the best in Ruth, as is seen by her response in verses 16-17.

### Plot

The plot of the story is usually revealed when conflict arises. Some plots are relatively short and simple (like Ehud the Judge of Israel in Judges 3:15-30) while others can have more complexity and span multiple chapters and entire books (like the book of Ruth or Esther). For the most part, Hebrew narratives move along quickly. When they slow down, it is usually because they are trying to draw your attention to something.

### Structural Forms

Hebrew narratives can also contain unique structural forms, similar to poetry, intended to help the audience understand and remember the main points. A lot of this probably has to do with the fact that the original audience of the narratives were hearers and not readers. The structural patterns are adapted to engage a listener to the text. The key structures seem to largely revolve around repetition and include:

- repeating key words;
- resuming the narrative after a detour by repeating a previously mentioned point; and
- the use of stereotypical patterns (like the continual ups and downs of the Book of Judges);
- chiasm, a form of parallelism in which a narrative (be in very short or long) begins and ends in the same way; and
- foreshadowing, where something previously mentioned in brought up again later in more depth.

As an example of repetition, read Chapter One of Judges. What phrase is repeated frequently? What is the point of the repetition at the beginning of Judges? See Deuteronomy 6:16-19.

The phrase, "did not drive out..." is repeated frequently. The point is that the Israelites did not obey God in all things. They compromised and this would set them up for lots of problems in the Book of Judges.

### The Hero of Every Story

In EVERY biblical narrative, God is the ultimate hero. While He may intervene personally (as at Mount Sinai) or through another character (like Samson), He wants the reader to know that He is the One resolving conflict and bringing good from evil. We need to make sure we really see this point in every narrative or we have missed the point.

Esther is the only book of the Bible without God's name. Yet we see God's fingerprints all over that book. Read Esther 4:14 and explain how this passage assumes the presence of God without mentioning His name.

The passage assumes that God's providence was at work in the situation and that He would hold true to His covenant with the nation. Mordecai wondered whether Esther was part of God's providence.

# How to Read the Bible for All its Worth

## Lesson Five – Old Testament Narratives: Their Proper Use

### Reading Between the Lines

Hebrew narratives may include implicit messages, that is, things the writer assumes people will know about the story or will pick up from the story without being explicitly told. Recognizing implicit messages is a way of “reading between the lines”. We must be careful however, that we do not read a message into the text that is not there. The authors of our text make a good point.

“If you are not able confidently to express to others something taught implicitly so that they, too, can understand it and get the point, you probably are misreading the text.”<sup>1</sup>

For an example of an implicit message, read Judges 6:25-7:14. In this passage we learn about two of God’s missions for Gideon, a judge God raised up in Israel. We learn something about Gideon’s character in Judges 6:27 and 7:10-11. Now go back and read about Gideon’s fleece in Judges 6:36-40. We aren’t told explicitly what is behind Gideon’s test. What is the implicit message?

Gideon seemed to be afraid. He had a fear of men in Chapter Six and continued to be afraid of going forward with the battle in Chapter Seven. I believe it is reasonable to assume that Gideon kept putting out the fleece because he was afraid of what might happen if he was wrong. Ultimately, his desire to obey conquered his fear. God was very patient in this process.

### Common Mistakes Made when Interpreting Narratives

If we were to consider how the Hebrew narratives are read and interpreted, we would find many common mistakes that are made by well-intentioned people.

1. Allegorizing – The historical narratives of the Bible actually occurred. They are not fiction created to teach us a deeper meaning. While they may illustrate truths taught elsewhere, they are primarily historical accounts that show us the progress of God’s greater narrative of redemption.
2. Playing Loose with Context: This may be the most common error and there are several ways in which this can occur.
  - a. Decontextualizing/Selectivity – Taken small portions of the narrative out of its context to make up new meanings that don’t fit with the whole, or choosing specific parts to focus on while ignoring others.
  - b. Misappropriation – to misuse a text for a purpose that is outside of its context.
  - c. False Appropriation – to read into the text something from our culture that would have been completely foreign to the culture at that time.
  - d. False Combination – Pulling facts together from different portions of the Bible that do not necessarily fit together and then combining them to make a point.
  - e. Redefinition – When people don’t like what the passage clearly states, they try to redefine it to mean something else.

---

<sup>1</sup> How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth, Fourth Edition, Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart, p107

# How to Read the Bible for All its Worth

## Lesson Five – Old Testament Narratives: Their Proper Use

3. **Moralizing** – Some people try to find a moral behind every story, even when there isn't one. Some narratives only function to educate us about what was happening in God's redemptive plan.
4. **Personalizing** – This person pretends that every part of Scripture in some way applies to them right now rather than looking at the passage in context.

Let's take a moment to try and recognize these mistakes. Below are some examples of common errors. Try to match the error with its description above.

Type of Mistake	Description
Moralizing	"In Genesis 14:13-16 we learn from Abraham that sometimes you need to take the law into your own hands and bring justice to those who mess with your family."
Allegorizing	"Adam and Eve were not necessarily real people, but are intended to represent humans evolving to a point where they became conscious of good and evil and God became involved in history."
Misappropriation	"We learn from Gideon that sometimes it is OK to test God by putting out a fleece."
False Combination	"Because Judges 1:8 says that the Israelites captured the City of Jerusalem, the narrative of 2 Samuel 5:6-7 describing David's capture of the Jerusalem must mean that they lost the city at some point and recaptured it."
False Appropriation	"The men of Bible times were much more effeminate because they wore robes instead of pants."
Personalizing	"I read that Abraham's servant prayed that God would give him a sign of which woman He chose as a wife for Isaac by having her draw water for his camels (Genesis 24). Therefore I am going to pray that the Lord show me who I should marry by having them perform some task that I think of."
Redefinition	"2 Chronicles 7:14-15 tells us that if God's people humble themselves and pray and seek His face that He will forgive their sin and heal their land. If Christians do this, God will heal America."
Decontextualizing or Selectivity	"1 Samuel 28:8-14 teaches us that mediums can communicate with the dead and allow us to speak with those who have already died."

**Just because a narrative's teaching is not clearly stated, it doesn't mean that it is a secret. Make sure you pay close attention to what a narrative tells you (not what it doesn't) and prayerfully discern the implied message.**