

The Nature of Narrative Literature

“The single most common type of literature in the Bible is narrative. In fact, over 40 percent of the Old Testament is narrative” (*Fee & Stuart*).

Narrative is also a large portion of the New Testament (the Gospels and Acts.)

As a Christian, the narratives, or stories, in the Old and New Testaments are:

- Our spiritual _____
- Our historical _____

But we have to be careful not to read narratives as narratives and not confuse the genre, else we completely misunderstand the point of the stories.

What’s the point?

Narratives are stories – retellings of historical events that are intended to give meaning and direction to a given people in the present.

Narratives in the Bible were written by people who were inspired by the Holy Spirit to tell us the story of God and His people in history.

There are three parts of every narrative:

1. Characters
 - The *protagonist* (the primary person in the story, not necessarily the good guy)
 - The *antagonist/s* (the person who brings conflict or tension)
 - And sometimes the *agonist/s* (other characters who get involved)
2. Plot – “refers to the sequence of events inside a story which affect other events through the principle of cause and effect.” (*Wikipedia*)
3. Plot resolution – the way that the plot is resolved.

Most narratives presuppose some kind of conflict or tension that needs to be resolved.

In order to understand the narrative story of the Bible we have to have all the information provided in each story.

“When reading narratives, it is important to understand every scene in the context of its larger plot line. You can make the same story have a totally different message if you ignore where it occurs in the plot. This happens all the time when people read the Bible” (*BP*).



Example: the story of Gideon (Jud 6-7).

Gideon is called to be a mighty warrior for God, but he doubts his calling.

He asks for a sign: a wool fleece on the ground would be wet, while the ground around is dry.



(Bible Project)

Is that really the lesson here? No. It misses the point completely because it doesn't consider the whole story:

- The Israelites live in fear of the Midianites (v1-11)
- God calls Gideon (v12)
- Gideon is hesitant and asks for a sign "so I can know it's really you talking to me" (v17)
- God provides a sign (lit an altar on a rock, v20-22)
- God then asks for Gideon to tear down an altar to false gods and Gideon does so at night because he is afraid of people seeing him do it (v27)
- Gideon asks for another sign (the fleece above, v36-37)
- Gideon asks for another sign (the opposite fleece sign, v38-39)

The plot conflict is not about Gideon discerning the will of God. The real conflict is whether or not Gideon will ever _____ God.

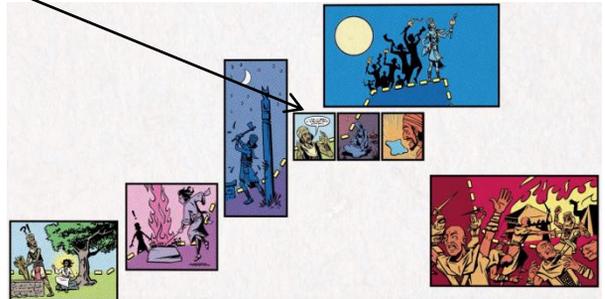
In Judges 7, the narrator continues the plot towards resolution:

- Gideon gathers a huge army of 32k (7:1)
- God tells Gideon to send those who fear away, leaving 10k (v2)
- God removes more at the water based on how they drink (v4) and this leaves only 300 men (v7)
- Then God tells Gideon to arm his soldiers with trumpets and torches and make noises (v16)

- The Midianites and other armies get scared at the noise and start fighting each other, while Gideon and his men are safe up in the hills (v19-25)

Gideon tested God, then God tested Gideon back and showed him that trusting God was the right answer all along.

This story is about "God's commitment to use weak people with deep flaws to do more than they could have imagined" (BP).



(Bible Project)

This is the real story of Gideon and the message the author was trying to get across. But that's not the only zooming out we need to do here, because Gideon is just one of the many stories that make up the book of Judges:



(Bible Project)

Each of the stories has its own internal narrative and then all together the collection of stories has a unifying narrative about the time when Israel had no king.

And if you zoom out more, you'll find that there are hundreds of stories throughout the whole Bible, with characters, plots and resolutions that all fit together with one overarching story:

THE STORY OF SCRIPTURE

and adjust our approach. We can't read narratives the same way we read epistles, psalms, prophecy or apocalypses. Here are some quick pointers.

Consider the human *Narrator*:

- We should remember that there is a narrator and that person(s) make a difference to the story. They may choose to include only details that are important to their story, rather than explaining everything to the reader. They may take for granted that their intended reader would understand certain aspects of the story so they don't have to explain it. Details may be left out if the narrator didn't believe them to be necessary to the story – either they expected everyone to know (like the David story) or the details weren't considered important to the point of the story.
- The point of view of the narrator matters, like, that Luke was written to Greeks while Matthew was written to Hellenized (Greek influenced) Jews, explaining some of the different choices made for their stories. It also matters that the Old Testament was written to ancient Hebrews, leaving modern Americans confused as to the details and meaning of some passages (that weren't confusing to the original readers.)

Pay attention to the *Scenes*:

- The predominant mode of telling stories in Hebrew is via scene, where we move forward by changes in scenes that make up the whole of the story.
- Consider Joseph (Gen 37):
 - Scene 1: Joseph tells on brothers, who don't like him because of it (v1-4)
 - Scene 2: Joseph has two dreams (v5-11) and then searches for his brothers who don't like him quite a bit by now (v12-17)
 - Scene 3: The brothers plot to kill Joseph (v19-20)
 - Scene 4: Reuben saves Joseph (v21-22)
 - Scene 5: They sell Joseph to slavers (v26-28)
 - Scene 6: Reuben and Jacob are super sad (v29-35)
- All of the scenes moved the story along so that Joseph ends up in Egypt working for Potiphar (v36), which was the goal of the narrator.

Recognize *Character* details:

- The point of Biblical narratives isn't always to provide a full historical history of the people, but the story of God interacting with the people. We see this all the time with genealogies, which don't have all the actual parents and kids in pretty much every case. Genealogies skip to important characters that the narrator highlights to tell the story to the people they are writing for.
- Also, how we act in normal life may not be important enough to write down in a story (ahem, pooping.) So when a character has some description of their physical body, or normal acts (like Saul's peeing in 1 Sam 24) it matters to the story. So we have to pay attention to key insights that aren't normally spelled out and ask why. (Same goes for time of day, titles of characters, rulers named, cities, peoples, jobs - they all matter because the narrator told us they do. Our job is to figure out why the narrator told us.)

Watch the *Words* they say:

- Narrators may not write down everything that every character says, so words they use matter and were chosen specifically for the story. If a character says a lot or a little, whatever they say, it was included on purpose.

Listen to the story:

- Most Hebrew literature was originally oral and created to hear rather than read, so pay attention to features like repetition, inclusion (where the story has a start and ending that mirror each other), and foreshadowing.

God is the _____ character:

- God is the protagonist, the main character, the victor and the supreme hero.
- God is also, in an important way, the narrator of the story since He inspired and directed the story. He is telling us about Himself.
- If that isn't clear in the story, zoom out to ensure you aren't missing the point.

It's not about _____:

- You inherited these stories, but they aren't to you or about you. Don't try to make them be.