

## Narratives: How to listen to a story...

The Scriptures have a lot of narrative material, over 40%. These stories have thrilled most of us since childhood. God's story is "*magnificent, grander than the grandest epic, richer in plot and more significant in its characters and descriptions than any humanly composed story ever could be.*" (Fee & Stuart)

There is an art to listening to these stories - recognizing their structure as stories, and the subtle clues within them, or, sometimes reading between the lines - in order to grasp their meanings for us. They are not just moral tales, or entertainments - they are perhaps the best revelation of God and His character as He both speaks and acts in human history.

### The questions of authorship and composition:

The authors are largely unknown, and their intentions and audience must largely be deduced from the narratives. They clearly collected, copied and used both oral and written sources and sometimes quoted from each other. Their audiences may have been in different circumstances than the subjects of the Narratives.

The **time spans of the events recounted** are often different from the rather broad **time spans of the composition of the narrative** (its boundaries being: the absence of significant events being mentioned, anachronistic statements, and other authorial comments [which set the latest possible date]; as well as external references to the document, the latest events mentioned in it, or its ideological viewpoint [which sets its earliest possible date]).

Some examples: Moses wrote Genesis over 300 years after the days of the Patriarchs and Joseph to explain the Exodus to the people; Judges was written when there was a king as justification for needing one, Kings was written after the fall of the monarchy in Jerusalem, probably early in the captivity; and Chronicles even later in the days of Nehemiah and the rebuilding of the city.

They contain a narrative history of real people and actual events, a history that can be confirmed with the archaeologist's trowel, and by the ancient documents of other cultures. But the intention was not just to record history. But rather to tell His Story! The authors were highly selective in the episodes they used and in the details they included, carefully editing and selecting that which suited to theirs (and the Holy Spirit's) purposes. Clues to deducing these are found in the characters, scenes, literary structures and other techniques they used to disclose their viewpoint.

### The Building blocks of Narrative Literature:

#### Characters

God is the hero of Biblical narrative and its most important character, though sometimes he disappears into the background, yet He is always present.

The *human* characters are many, and they are presented honestly, noting their virtues and weaknesses. The authors exercised much selectivity in choosing what to tell us about them, sometimes, they are presented as fully three dimensional people, and sometimes, as flat (plain and colorless, exhibiting just one character trait) - or merely functionary characters in the story. Judgments are often given concerning their actions and hearts - the clues to their character are in: descriptions of appearance (which are rare, so usually significant), their social status, overt actions, dialogue and speech; as well as other descriptive comments, as well as any reactions of the author, or subsequent blessing or judgment by God. Scripture is not neutral concerning its characters, and often expresses value judgments concerning them.

Within the stories, the **characters** take on particular roles in their relationships to each other:

**Protagonist:** The main character of the story (whether good or bad) and his supporters.

**Antagonist:** The character (again whether good or bad) who is arrayed against the protagonist - representing the opposite side of the dramatic tension.

**Foil:** a character that serves as a contrast to the main character.

**Ambivalent** characters are those who either support neither side, or shift from one to the other.

**Dialogue** has an important role in narrative stories. It frequently reveals character as *“the transactions between characters unfold through the words they exchange, with only the most minimal intervention of the narrator.”* (Alter) The point at which it is introduced, or narration is resumed is often significant in the story. Sometimes a summarizing speech is introduced at a critical juncture to speed up the flow of the narrative, avoid repetition or give perspective.

**Scenes** - A scene presents what took place at one particular moment and place. They are basic building blocks. A Story is a sequence of scenes. The listener needs learn to define them - and note where the scene has changed when there is a significant shift in Time (such as a gap (“and it came to pass”), a shift to a previous time (“meanwhile”), or a flashback “Now it had happened that...”), or Pacing: when the “action” speeds up or slows down; or the “focus” of the writer draws in closer on the details, or out to a broader perspective, a shift of place (or of a place’s environment - such as shifts from day night), or a change of characters is made.

Within scenes, **Imagery** is often significant: all senses should be engaged and taking note of : sights, sounds, touch, smell, and taste. Stories are as much pictures as they are words. All these contribute to our experience of the story.

**Plots:** Dramatic flow is also an essential part of story. Even the simplest story will have a plot To be sure, **Reports** (Statements of facts) are found in narrative and sometimes conflicts are presented as **unresolved tension**, but most have the elements of **conflict and resolution**. Biblical stories have a **beginning, middle and end**, there is frequently a **climax, or turning point** in the middle and they usually have carefully structured **symmetry** and **balance** in the presentation of these.

**Episodes** are the simplest unit of narrative material displaying a significant level of independence from the larger context, i.e., a series of scenes grouped in phases and steps that together make up a complete “story” by itself. The **Steps** are made up of **scenes** and **phases** (which are groups of scenes unified by their characters, or setting, or theme). They are the parts of the plot and usually take one of these structural forms:

Two Steps [problem | resolution],

Three Steps [problem / turning point \ resolution],

Four Steps [problem / rising actions | falling actions \ resolution]

Five Steps [problem / rising actions / turning point \ falling actions \ resolution]

Within the episode, there will be symmetry and balance - problems have corresponding solutions, and similarly **rising actions** (where tension increases) corresponds to **falling actions** (where tension decreases.) The **Turning point or climax** is also important.

As I became more sensitive to storytelling, I became increasingly aware of the importance of recognizing the elements of character, scene and plot in understanding a story. In learning a story for telling, one analyzes it looking for and diagramming these elements. They give us significant clues concerning the meanings God has for us in the narratives.

## Narratives, Sub-plots & The big picture:

Narratives also have **larger structures** where they may show similar arrangements of episodes - sometimes arranging episodes chronologically; presenting them as simultaneous events or gathering episodes topically into clusters, or by paralleling episodes.

A number of **Rhetorical devices** are used on both the verbal and larger levels:

**Repetition** is a favorite Hebrew literary form, whether of words and phrases, or of actions, images, motifs, themes or ideas. Use of repetition is frequently significant and offers clues to understanding meaning. **Resumptive Repetition** is when a writer returns to a point in a story after narrating a related incident.

**Inclusion** uses repetition to mark off the beginning and ending of a section, framing or bracketing of the episode what it contains.

**Chiasm**, a Semitic poetic form, is sometimes used in prose arrangements as well, juxtaposing reversing, or contrasting words, dialogues, episodes, scenes and events. Walter Kaiser calls it “*one of the major artistic conventions for narratives in the Bible. . . a key for detecting an author’s aims for the main event or principle idea typically occurs in the apex - that is the middle of the story.*” At sometime in the narrative, the author will bring to a climax the series of episodes in the various scenes, supplying the whole **Point of View** for the story, the perspective from which the whole story is told.

We can talk of **a story existing in three levels** - individually as an account of its characters; as a part of its intermediate context (within the history of ISREAL); and ultimately in God’s working out of his divine decrees.

**Cautions:** Beware of allegorizing or moralizing narratives. They are not intended to illustrate principles. Do not assume from them that God expects us to behave in the same ways, or that we will have the same experiences. “*Narratives are precious to us because they so vividly demonstrate God’s involvement in the world and illustrate his principles and calling. They thus teach us a lot - but what they directly teach us does not systematically include personal ethics. For that area of life, we must turn elsewhere in the Scriptures, to the various places where personal ethics are actually taught categorically and explicitly.*” (Fee & Stuart)

### Ten Principles to avoid errors in interpreting narratives:

1. An Old Testament narrative usually does not directly teach a doctrine.
2. An Old Testament narrative usually illustrates a doctrine or doctrines taught propositionally elsewhere
3. Narratives record what happened - not necessarily what should have happened or what ought to happen every time.  
Therefore, not every narrative has an individual identifiable moral of the story.
4. What people do in narratives is not necessarily a good example for us. Frequently it is just the opposite.
5. Most of the characters in Old Testament narratives are far from perfect and their actions are too.
6. We are not always told at the end of a narrative whether what happened was good or bad. We are expected to be able to judge that on the basis of what God has taught us directly and categorically elsewhere in Scripture.
7. All narratives are selective and incomplete. Not all the relevant details are always given. What does appear in the narrative is everything the inspired author thought important for us to know.
8. Narratives are not written to answer all our theological questions. They have particular, specific limited purposes and deal with certain issues, leaving others to be dealt with elsewhere in other ways.
9. Narratives may teach either explicitly (by clearly stating something) or implicitly (by clearly implying something without actually stating it.)
10. in the final analysis, God is the hero of all biblical narratives.

- From How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth by Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart

Quotes are from: The Art of Biblical Narration, by Robert Alter (1981); He Gave Us Stories, By Richard L. Pratt, Jr (1990); An Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics by Walter Kaiser and Moises Silva (1994) and How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth by Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart (1993).