

Lesson Five: The Old Testament Narratives: Their Proper Use

- I. Introduction:
 - A. Narrative is the most common type of biblical literature.
 1. 40% of the Old Testament is narrative.
 2. The Gospels and Acts are largely narrative.
 - B. We need to know how these narratives are to be read and how they communicate God's will.
- II. The Nature of Narratives
 - A. What they are.
 1. Narratives are stories.
 2. They are "*historical events* ... intended to give meaning and direction for a given people *in the present*" (Fee, p. 90).
 3. The common elements to all narratives:
 - a. "It is certainly true that there is little difference (at the genre level) between historical narrative and fiction, since both utilize the same methods to tell the story: **plot, characters, dialogue and dramatic tension**" (Osborne, p. 200).
 - b. "All narratives have three basic parts: **characters, plot, and plot resolution**" (Fee, p. 90).
 - B. Three Levels of Biblical Narrative:
 1. Top level (*metanarrative*) – The Big Picture – The Complete Scheme of Redemption.
 2. Midlevel – Covenantal Narratives
 - a. The "stories" (*historical accounts*) that make up the Patriarchal Period.
 - 1) The Patriarchal narratives reveal information about the time prior to the nation of Israel under the Law of Moses (Gen. 1-Ex. 19).
 - 2) However, these are given in the context of Hebrew Law for the historical background of the Israelites.
 - b. The historical accounts that make up the Mosaic Period.
 - c. The historical accounts that make up the Christian Period (primarily the Gospels and Acts).
 3. Bottom level – the individual accounts in their immediate setting.
 - C. What they are **not**.
 1. They **are not** allegories or "stories filled with hidden meaning" (Fee, p. 92).
 2. They **are not** moral lessons.
 3. They **are not** doctrinal teachings.
- III. The Characteristics of Hebrew Narrative
 - A. "Hebrew narratives have some distinctive features that, if looked for and recognized, can greatly enhance your ability to hear the story from the perspective of the divinely inspired narrator" (Fee, p. 93).
 - B. What to look for in Old Testament narratives.
 1. The Narrator
 - a. The narrator is not typically referred to directly in the story.
 - b. The narrator is the one relating the story to the audience.

- c. The narrator provides the point of view from which the narrative is seen.
 - d. While reading biblical narrative it is important to pay attention to the inspired narrator's point of view as it is how the account is to be understood.
2. The Scenes
 - a. Hebrew narrative is composed of scenes.
 - b. The connected scenes present the story much the way a movie does.
 - c. The "story" of a movie isn't realized by watching "clips" or "trailers," but when all the scenes are taken together for the complete story.
 3. The Characters
 - a. The scenes of the narrative revolve around the characters.
 - b. The characters are either parallel or contrasting to each other.
 - 1) The characters at the bottom level narrative are often shown in contrast (i.e. Joseph contrasted to his brothers).
 - 2) Where there are paralleled it is typically at the mid-level (i.e. John the Baptist to Elijah).
 - c. The characters are developed in their own words and action rather than the narrator's description of them.
 4. The Dialogue
 - a. This is a central element of Hebrew narrative as a means of character development.
 - b. "Three things to look for" (Fee, p. 96).
 - 1) "First, the first point of dialogue is often a significant clue both to the story plot and to the character of the speaker" (cf. Gen. 37:5-11; 50:18).
 - 2) "Second, contrastive dialogue often functions as a way of characterization as well" (cf. Gen. 39:7-9).
 - 3) "Third, very often the narrator will emphasize the crucial parts of the narrative by having one of the characters repeat or summarize the narrative in a speech" (cf. Gen. 42:30-34; 44:18-34).
 5. The Plot
 - a. A narrative revolves around a central plot and bring it to a plot resolution.
 - b. A plot can be very simple (cf. 1 Sam. 1:1-2:11).
 - c. There are complex plots with many connected sub-plots (Gen. 37-50).
- C. The implicit teaching of narratives.
1. Much of the teaching value of biblical narrative is implicit in nature, not explicit.
 2. "Implicit teaching is that which is clearly present in the story but not stated in so many words" (Fee, p. 99).
 - a. Implicit teaching is "**clearly present**"!
 - b. When dealing *implicit teaching* it is important to remember the principle of **necessary inference**.
 - c. The value of the implicit teaching of the narratives is especially evident in the great "Character Study" sermons we preach from these narratives.

- d. In such lessons we must take great care to only teach what is clearly present in the narratives presentation of such characters.
 - 3. “Warning! Implicit does not mean secret! You will get into all sorts of trouble if you try to find meanings in the text that you think God has ‘hidden’ in the narrative” (Fee, p. 102).
- IV. Things to avoid when studying biblical narratives.
 - A. Allegorizing
 - B. Decontextualizing
 - C. Isolating
 - D. Personalizing
- V. Principles for interpreting narratives (Fee, p. 106).
 - A. Fee and Stuart give “ten summarizing principles for interpreting Old Testament narratives.”
 - B. These ten principles are:
 - 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.
 - 4. What people do in narratives is not necessarily a good example for us.
 - 5. Most of the characters in Old Testament narratives are far from perfect – as are their actions.
 - 6. We are not always told at the end of a narrative whether what happened was good or bad.
 - 7. All narratives are selective and incomplete (cf. Jn. 21:25).
 - 8. Narratives are not written to answer all our theological questions.
 - 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.