

Notes on Narrative (Cyprus Training 1, session 7)

Why is it important to develop skill in understanding and applying narrative? Because almost half of Scripture is narrative: Genesis, most of Exodus, Numbers, almost all of Joshua to Esther, Jonah, half of Daniel, a large part of the four Gospels and Acts...!

What is narrative?

We could say "story", but for many people 'story' means fiction, whereas almost all Bible narrative is historical (except e.g. parables) We could say "history", but this might obscure the fact that Bible history is artistically crafted and contains a teaching purpose.

What makes a story? **Setting, Characters, Plot...**

- initial situation ~ often a problem / task for main character
- development and twists: progress / setbacks, helpers / opponents
- resolution (unless it's a tragedy)

There is also the **authors viewpoint / intent**. "Why are you telling this story in this way?" (Often this is subtle, in contrast to e.g. the epistles: if Paul says 'Love one another' his intent is obvious!)

Often we have stories within stories. The whole Bible is a single narrative, containing great sagas (Abraham, Jacob, Joseph, Saul/David; the life of Christ; Acts, etc), each with sub-stories.

It is interesting to ask, **Why is Narrative Primary** in Scripture? Scripture doesn't tell us, so the following suggestions are tentative:

- The great message of Scripture, and the gospel, is not *firstly* what we should believe or should do, but what God has done
- Narrative is most natural and basic to us (both in our everyday life, and we use meta-narratives to make sense of our world)
- Narrative reflects the complexities of life, we relate to it
- "Don't tell me, show me" (an invitation to identify)

It is also often interesting and memorable, with an emotional element.

Consider now our approach to a particular narrative, our 'text'. Ask:

Why has this been written? (How do I pick up the author's intent?)

Don't just ask about what the text says, but ask what point the author is making (THRUST), and what the author is seeking to do (PURPOSE). Here are some suggestions to help you identify this (remember, these are tools not rules)...

① The importance of the narrator's comment

Sometimes obvious, 2Kings 17v7ff
Sometimes subtle, Judges 21v25

② REPETITION

Judges 21v25... also in 17v6, 18v1, 19v1!

Clearly the author is making a point about the people's need for a king Is it significant that the author has illustrated the dire state of Israel using two stories that both originate in Bethlehem (3x in 17v7-9, twice in 19v1-2)? Might Bethlehem also hold the answer, 1Sam.16?

Also look out for repeated themes, e.g.

- the *assessments* of the various kings in Kings / Chronicles.
- *success* in Judges 8-12: Gideon = spoiled by the taste of success, Abimelech = ruthless in the pursuit of success, Jephthah = blinded by the hope of success...
- *helplessness* in Mark 4v35-5v43, see 4v38, 5v4, 5v26, 5v38.

③ Climax / punch-line

Judges 21v25 again! (a convergence of indicators => significant) It is quite frequent in the synoptic gospels (i.e. Matt, Mark and Luke), to have episodes leading to an announcement, e.g. Mark 4v35-41 (there are about a dozen in Mark), Luke 19v10 is a brilliant twist – Who is seeking who?!

④ CONTRASTS

Within a story, or between consecutive or interwoven stories, e.g. Saul/David. Compare 1Samuel 9v2 with 16v6f+11: Failing to find lost donkeys contrasted with successfully keeping and protecting sheep. Samuel and Eli in 1Samuel 1-7
John 18v12-27: the coward and the courageous one.
Joshua 2+7: Rahab (Canaanite saved) vs. Achan (Israelite judged), helps to address the oft-raised question of 'genocide'
John 3+4: Nicodemus and the woman at the well.

⑤ Dialogue, including Q & A

Often speech within a narrative carries key elements, and indicates the author's focus.

1Sam.17v26 => first mention of God in the chapter. Then also v47
What is first thing Jesus says in John's gospel? "What are you seeking?" An invitation. And the last thing? "You follow me"

There are also some famous examples of **Question and Answer** dialogue in Scripture: John 3, John 4, John 13v6-10, Numbers 22 (Balaam and his donkey!), Job 38-42, Habakkuk 1-2.

Always ask: Who is involved; who is looking on; what is the tone...?
Mark 2v1-3v6: The five episodes turn on five questions (four levelled against Jesus, & one of his own). We have the very same structure at the end of Jesus ministry, in the temple courts, 11v27-12v40.
Romans 6v1-4: what sorts of questions do we have here?

⑥ Subtleties: ALLUSIONS, Irony, Choice of material

The Narrator almost never makes a moral judgment on what he describes, but we are expected to do so.

Sometimes that is obvious: e.g. Judges 19 => New Sodom!

But we may need to do some detective work and listen carefully to pick up echoes: e.g. Solomon's horses from Egypt, 1Kings 10v28, cf. Deut.17v16f (his riches were God given... but not all was well)

Look out for irony (an unexpected reversal, or contrast) and humour: e.g. 1Samuel 5f, the Ark in Philistia: The Israelite army may need God, but he doesn't need them, but can certainly look after himself!

Also ask, "What's in & what's out?" Some narrative covers hundreds of years very quickly, then slows right down. Always ask 'Why?'

If a story is included in several places (mainly Kings/Chronicles, and Matt/Mark/Luke) then be aware of the other account(s), but focus on the details in your text, rather than hurrying to include elements from the parallel accounts. What are the particular things in *this* text?

How do I apply it? (How does narrative evoke response?)

Recall the dual purpose of Scripture: to make us wise for Salvation through faith in Jesus Christ, and to equip us for every good work. But we need 'controls', to be able to provide *reasons* for our interpretations and our 'Salvation/Godliness' applications. We believe that all Scripture is useful and must be applied, but we may struggle, particularly with OT narrative, or detailed lists.

① Beware the temptation to spiritualise / allegorise

This is a *temptation* (unless the literature is allegory). Allegory robs us of what God is actually saying.

The 'spiritual meaning' is the meaning the Spirit intended (unless we want to be more spiritual than the Spirit!), as communicated by the literature as literature.

We must avoid "Using creative imagination to find deep theological connections to the New Testament without even asking what the symbol might have meant to the Biblical audience"

- Genesis 2v18-25: A bride for Christ from his wounded side, his burial?! Actually, practical truth as to the marriage relationship.
- Half buried tabernacle tent pegs: Christ's death & resurrection?!
- The colours of the Tabernacle. Blue = deity, Red = blood...?! actually royal colours: heaven's king dwelling amongst his people!

How are we to avoid fanciful interpretations / applications?
 The author's intent (indicated by the thrust of the text) is the starting point for meaning and application. Starting with a meaning that would make no sense to the original hearers is usually a bad idea!

② The Lord is the central character

God is the central character in all OT narrative (If God seems to be absent from the narrative, then that itself is very significant).

Thus we learn about the God *with whom we too directly interact* (an awesome thought!)

We learn that we can trust him (promise and fulfilment is a key characteristic of Scripture.)

We see clearly that we must avoid his displeasure.

The Gospels focus on **Jesus and his saving work**:

- ① encouraging us to place our trust in Him, and
- ② calling us to follow him (and teaching us what that involves)

Narratives tend to *illustrate* truths taught elsewhere.

Even something incidental to a narrative may illustrate truth (e.g. Jacob's two wives shows the stress of going against God's pattern)

If it is historical narrative, pause to consider, "this actually happened" before hurrying too quickly to spiritualise!

E.g. Mark 4, Jesus stilling the storm (awe... not just 'my storms')
 Exodus 14, not just a 'type' of Salvation, but evoking worship, 15v11.

③ Ask: Who am I? (but beware the 'Moses-is-me' syndrome)

One powerful characteristic of narrative is that it gives us people with whom to identify, examples to follow or to avoid.

"All characterization in a narrative is an invitation to identify with the character"

This is an approach which the Bible itself encourages – James 5v10, 1Corinthians 10v6, Philippians (Jesus, Paul, Timothy and Epaphroditus, 2v5, 3v17, 4v9...)

But all this needs to be used with care (it is easily abused, or used as a lazy alternative to thinking hard). We always need to ask:

Are the actions presented as normative / prescriptive?

Not everything done by believers is good (the Bible gives us real, complex characters; that is part of its genius)

Not every good thing done is to be imitated.

Do not assume that our situation is the same: e.g. John 14v26: not our words as authoritative, but we can trust the apostles words!

Ask: Does the text give any clues that this person is to be taken as an example (to be followed or avoided). If not, is there a general reason to do so? (e.g. 1John 2v6, 2Thessalonians 3v9)

Is there a genuine correspondence between their situation and ours?
 The closer the parallels, the easier it is to apply directly & confidently.

The Moses-is-me syndrome

"The Moses-is-me syndrome... reflects my propensity for identifying myself as the hero or central character in every story; everything has to be ultimately about me and my life"

e.g. David & Goliath: all about my battles, my faith, overcoming my enemies?

No! None of us is the David who defeats God's enemies and rules over God's people, or the Moses mediator who leads his people out of slavery, or the Elisha with the power to heal lepers and raise the dead... someone else is a much better fit!

Is the behaviour described culturally specific, and if so, what is the equivalent expression in my/our own culture?

Some examples to ponder...

Exodus 1 = The church oppressed by an ungodly world?

Daniel 6 = Obey God rather than men? Certainly!

1Samuel 3 = Expect to hear God audibly. Nope

2Samuel 11 = Commit adultery?!

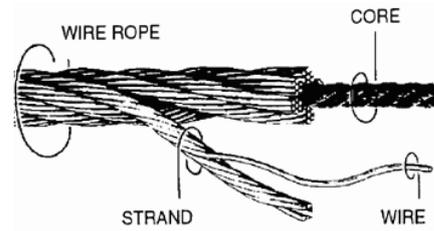
Judges 6 (Gideon) = 'Lay a fleece' to get guidance? But Gideon wasn't trying to find out what God wanted him to do - he knew that

already. Rather, he wanted reassurance as to God's supernatural intervention, and he knew that what he was doing was hardly commendable (v39). But God is patient with weak faith (a good, 'God-centred' lesson!)

Acts 4v32-37 = Should we sell everything? (but note the contrast between generous Barnabas and Ananias & Sapphira)

Acts 8v14-17 = Unique moment: the gospel to Samaritans...

④ Follow the streams to the sea (Themes => Christ & the Gospel)



Like a steel cable, **bundles of themes** in Scripture wind around the **central core**, the *main plotline* of God's salvation through Jesus Christ crucified and risen.

Here are some common themes in Scripture:

- The promise to Abraham... leading to all nations blessed in Jesus
- God's sovereign choice of the most unlikely people...
- God's righteous servants, opposed but ultimately vindicated (Joseph, Moses, David...)
- Deliverance from oppression and slavery, Egypt & Exile.
- Appeasement through judgment (blood sacrifices, Achan!)
- A leader for God's people. The many bad rulers show the need for a true king after God's heart... which finds fulfilment in Jesus
- The enemies of God's people... sin, death, evil powers, the World against God
- God dwelling in the midst of his people, in a restored world

E.g. Solomon's riches and fame => The wealth of nations brought into Messiah's Kingdom: Isaiah 66, Matthew 2v11, Revelation 21-22...

This approach can help people to see the interconnectedness of Scripture, and the way in which Christ is the great focus.

It should not be overdone however, since it tends to shift the focus away from the text itself, onto the fulfilment.

Some sub-categories: OT Lists, Parables

① Lists (e.g. genealogy, census, geography, construction lists etc.)

Lists tend to remind us of the historical nature of Scripture

Go for the main point, rather than squeezing the details.

- Genesis 5 => "and he died" like a tolling bell. God's threats (2v17) are not idle, Romans 6v23a. (The larger context, chs.3-11, is all about God judging sin)
- Exodus 25-31 => a tent dwelling => the wonder of 'God with us!'
- Nehemiah 3 => all working together
- Genealogies have various functions, but they often remind us of God's interest in individuals, & concern for the least of his people.

② Parables (i.e. short, fictional narrative)

E.g. 1Sam.12v1-7! The punch-line may be a stealth bomber, getting under the defences. No need to press the details

- look for the central point or points, don't 'allegorise' (i.e. find a distinct 'meaning' for every detail)
- Are there unusual elements in the story that would stand out for the original listener?
- what is the audience / background / intended effect?