

**Xenos Christian Fellowship**  
**Christian Ministry Unit 2**  
**Week 8-Old Testament Narrative**

Editors' note:

- *Italics (lower case or ALL CAPS) show what students should write in their student outline.*
- **Bold (including bold italics and bold ALL CAPS) shows what appears in the student outline.**
- Regular text is used for lecture notes; ALL CAPS are used for emphasis.

Starting this week, we will begin learning how to interpret and apply the different genres of Old Testament literature. This will complement what you've already learned in Introduction to the Bible.

The **Old Testament Genres** are:

- **Narrative: Genesis–Esther** (this lecture).
- **Law: Exodus–Deuteronomy** (covered in Introduction to the Bible).
- **Poetry & Wisdom: Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs** (next week).
- **Prophecy: Isaiah–Malachi** (covered in Introduction to the Bible).
- **Apocalyptic: Ezekiel, Daniel, parts of Zechariah** (1 week on Daniel in Christian Ministry 1).

Each genre requires a different approach to interpretation in order to gain an accurate understanding of the message (e.g. compare with different approaches you take to reading a rental contract, a love letter, and a detective novel). No matter what part of the Bible you are reading, it's important to stay curious, ask good questions and think hard about what the text is saying.

If you review what you've learned in *Intro to the Bible* and work hard at learning the features of each genre covered in this course, you'll have a solid foundation for reading the entire Bible, and you'll be able to enjoy what Paul calls the "full counsel of God." This ability to read all of the Bible and truly grasp its message is well worth the effort and something that few North American Christians take the time to pursue.

### **Introduction to Old Testament narratives<sup>1</sup>**

**A narrative is a true story.** We prefer the term "narrative" because "story" often has a fictional connotation. Unlike many bedtime stories, biblical narratives are true – they relate events that actually occurred.

---

<sup>1</sup> This section borrows many insights from Fee and Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* (Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1993) pp. 78-93.

**Narrative is the most common type of literature in the Bible.** 40% of the Old Testament is written this way. The New Testament also contains large amounts of narrative, especially in the Gospels and Acts.

**Biblical narratives are *Theological Narratives*.**

- **Theological-** Their purpose is to convey information about God and his relationship to humanity and the spiritual realm.
- **Historically selective-** Since their primary purpose is theological, biblical narratives are not historically exhaustive. Biblical history is accurate, but it is not meant to answer all the questions of a historian.

**(1 Corinthians 10:11) Now these things happened to them as an example, and they were written for our instruction...**

As we read these stories, we are supposed to watch and learn. We may be inspired by the faith of the characters described or sobered by their mistakes and the ensuing consequences.

## **Interpreting Old Testament narrative**

### **A. Look for three basic parts: plot, characters, and plot resolution.**

Narratives have a PLOT that usually involves some kind of conflict or tension surrounding one or more CHARACTERS that works toward a RESOLUTION.

Let's take **the overall story of the Bible** as an example.

#### **Plot:**

The basic plot of the biblical story is that the Creator God has created humans to bear his image, rule with him, and enjoy close fellowship with him. But an enemy of God found a way to drive a wedge between God and the humans he created.

#### **Characters:**

**“Who are the main characters?” “What are they like?” “How do they interact with each other?”**

**“protagonist”** – the primary person in the story – *God*.

**“antagonist(s)”** – the person who brings about the conflict or tension – *Satan*.

**“agonist(s)”** – other characters in the story who get involved in the struggle – *humans*.

#### **Resolution:**

The plot resolution is the long story of “*redemption*,” how God rescues his people from the enemy’s clutches, restores them back to his image, and finally restores them in a “new heaven and new earth.”

**Discussion: Let’s identify these three components in the Joseph narrative...**

**Plot:**

How about the Joseph Narrative? What is the tension that drives the main part of the story? Who is the tension between?

**Characters:**

Note to instructor: Point out that God is involved in every page of the story, but ask students to think in terms of human characters when they try to identify the protagonist, antagonist(s), and agonist(s).

Ask students to share what they learned about various characters from their homework assignment.

Who is the protagonist? Joseph Who are the antagonists? Joseph’s brothers. Who are the agonists? Potiphar, the jailer, the cupbearer, the baker, Pharaoh, etc.

**Resolution:**

How is the tension between the characters resolved?

**B. Investigate Historical Features**

The Grammatico-Historical method requires that we learn what we can about the language, history, and culture of the period in which the events in our narrative occur. This information will shed light on the meaning of the text.

What issues do I need to investigate to understand what this meant to the original audience?

What needs investigation in the Joseph account?

Slavery, life in Egypt, famine, life in the Pharaoh’s court.

Use Bible Dictionaries, Web resources (Biblos.com, Wikipedia), commentaries.

**C. Understand the passage in context of the “big picture” rooted in the Covenants**

Often times Old Testament narratives unfold in relationship to the Covenants. A **covenant** is *an agreement between two parties*, and in the Old Testament God initiated covenants between Himself and humanity. The Old Testament narratives

frequently revolve around three significant covenants.

### 1. Abrahamic Covenant:

The Abrahamic Covenant is a central concern in the Old Testament (especially Genesis 12 through the end of Joshua) and in the Bible as a whole. See **Genesis 12:1-3**.

In this covenant, God promised that:

- Abraham would become the father of a great *NATION*.
- He would give Abraham's descendants *LAND* to live in.
- He would *BLESS THE WORLD* through one of Abraham's descendants.

Key stages in Israel's development as a nation are tied back to this covenant (see Exodus 2:23-25 and Joshua 24:1-15), and tension in biblical narratives often involves events or characters that threaten its fulfillment.

e.g. Barren wives in Genesis who are unable to produce offspring.

e.g. Jacob's family becoming enslaved in Egypt, away from the Promised Land.

e.g. Israel's being unwilling to cross into the Promised Land and wandering in the wilderness.

In each case, God provides a way to keep advancing his plan and honoring his promises.

### 2. Mosaic Covenant (the Law)

When Moses led Israel into the wilderness, he met God on Mount Sinai. There, God gave him a series of laws for his people to obey.

**Exodus 19:5,6** “Now then, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be My own possession among all the peoples, for all the earth is Mine; 6 and you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.’ These are the words that you shall speak to the sons of Israel.” (See also Joshua 24:15,16)

These Laws are contained in Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy.

Notice that **unlike God's promises to Abraham, which was unconditional, God's covenant with Moses spelled out responsibilities for God and for his people.**

**God's responsibility:** *To offer Israel protection, to bless them, and to keep them in the land.*

**Israel's responsibility:** *To obey God's laws.*

**The connection between Israel's failure to keep the Mosaic Covenant and God's judgment on them is a prominent theme in the prophets.**

**Example: Jeremiah 22:8,9** "Many nations will pass by this city; and they will say to one another, 'Why has the Lord done thus to this great city?'<sup>9</sup> "Then they will answer, 'Because they forsook the covenant of the Lord their God and bowed down to other gods and served them.' "

### **3. Davidic Covenant:**

See **2 Samuel 7:12-16\*\*** *God promised David that he would establish one of his descendants on the throne of Israel to rule as an eternal king forever over the entire world. This future ruler is called the "Messiah" in the Old and New Testaments..*

*Like the Abrahamic Covenant, God's covenant with David is a sweeping theme that spans both testaments. This covenant is especially prominent in 2 Samuel – Esther.*

**Discussion:** Ask students to pose these questions regarding the Joseph narrative: How do the events in this story pose a threat to the fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham?

How do the events in this story advance the fulfillment of this promise?

- **GOD works through the treachery of Joseph's brothers to preserve his people from famine (45:5,7,8).**
- **GOD tells Jacob (a.k.a. "Israel") through these events he will honor his promise to make his descendants a great nation (46:3).**
- **GOD has worked to save his people in order to honor his promise to Abraham (50:19,20,24,25).**

### **D. What is the main point of the narrative?**

To accurately interpret the narrative, we must settle on the author's main point. These **three clues** can help you uncover the author's main message:

#### **1. *God speaking*** either directly or through someone in the narrative:

When God speaks, he often provides commentary on the people and events described in the narrative. Near the beginning of the Exodus narrative, God explains what he plans to accomplish in the events that follow (see Exodus 6:6-8).

In **Genesis 50:19,20,24** Joseph explains God's purpose behind the events in his family. Despite the treachery of Joseph's brothers and a famine which threatened the very existence of Abraham's descendants, God was using all

of these circumstances to advance his plan and honor his promise to Abraham.

## 2. *Repetition of ideas, phrases, and words:*

**Ideas – Restatements of the Abrahamic covenant (Genesis 15:6; 17:6-8, 22:17,18; 26:3,4; 28:13,14; etc.)**

**Phrases – “In those days Israel had no king” & “everyone did as they saw fit” (Judges 17:6, 18:1, 19:1, 21:25).**

**Words – “It was good” in the creation narrative. Contrast with “it was not good” in Genesis 2:18.**

## 3. *The plot:*

The plot often draws attention to the main point. As the plot thickens, it heightens the reader’s awareness of the point being made.

The central message of the Joseph narrative comes from the entire collection of stories and the way they are related to each other. Did you notice how the separate events in Joseph’s life build to a climax when Joseph reveals his true identity in chapter 45?

**(Genesis 45:4) “I am your brother Joseph, the one you sold into Egypt!”**

During this pivotal point of the story, Joseph plainly states the key lesson the narrative is designed to convey:

**(Genesis 45:5,7, 8) “And now don’t be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you... (7) God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance. (8) So then, it was not you who sent me here, but God. He made me father to Pharaoh, lord of his entire household and ruler of all Egypt.”**

**REMEMBER:** As an interpreter and teacher, your first and foremost task is to identify and relate the main point of the narrative. This won’t always be easy to do. In some cases, the significance of the story is not clearly stated. Your teaching may elaborate on several spiritual truths illustrated in the story, but your primary focus should be on the main point of the narrative.

**E. Don’t read hidden meanings into the text unless an inspired New Testament author indicates they are there**

Saint Ambrose (339-397 AD, Bishop of Milan) saw many parallels between the life of Joseph and the life of Christ. The table below is just a sample of some of the connections Ambrose drew between Joseph and Jesus:<sup>2</sup>

<b>Comparisons between Joseph &amp; Jesus</b>	
<b>Joseph</b>	<b>Jesus</b>
Sent by Jacob to find his brothers and inquire after the welfare of the flock.	Sent by God to inquire after the lost sheep of the house of Israel.
Sold for a number of pieces of silver.	Betrayed for by Judas for a number of pieces of silver.
Stripped of his garment and cast into a dark, dry pit as if dead.	Stripped of his clothing, crucified and subjected to the wrath of God and death.
Foresaw famine in Egypt and provided food for the people.	Takes pity on the spiritual hunger of the world by opening the granaries of divine mysteries that nourish mankind.

As interesting as these similarities are, the New Testament authors do not make these connections. Therefore we should avoid this approach to interpretation. **Looking for deeper meaning when we're reading Old Testament narrative can shift our attention away from what the author is trying to communicate.**

**OT events or symbols interpreted in the New Testament:**

- **John 3:14,15** “As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up; <sup>15</sup> so that whoever believes will in Him have eternal life.”
- **Hebrews 11:17-19** By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was offering up his only begotten son; <sup>18</sup> it was he to whom it was said, “In Isaac your descendants shall be called.” <sup>19</sup> He considered that God is able to raise people even from the dead, from which he also received him back as a type.

**Isaac is a type of Jesus.**

**Application of Old Testament Narrative**

**What did it mean to the original audience and what action did it call forth from them?**

- For the Joseph narrative: See **Gen. 50:20-21**

---

<sup>2</sup> *Saint Ambrose: Seven Exegetical Works* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America, 1972), pp. 187-240.

**How does the main point relate to us? What does God call us to do?**

- Consider trials in your life and how you might apply Gen. 50:20-21.

**Be aware of the following issues when you apply Old Testament Narrative:**

**1. Don't blindly imitate practices recorded in a narrative.**

Narratives record what happened—not necessarily what *should* have happened or what *ought* to happen every time.

**Examples:**

- Polygamy in many OT instances
- Abraham lied to the Egyptians to avoid a confrontation
- Gideon tested the Lord to gain reassurance of His will (Judg 6)  
*Simply because the bible describes a practice does not mean God prescribes that practice.*

**2. Don't apply something to yourself or your situation that has specific application to Israel.**

**Example: In 2 Chronicles 7:14, the Lord appears to Solomon and says:**

(2 Chronicles 7:14) “...if my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land.”

(Stephen Green) “In Britain, (2 Chron 7:14) means that recompense must be made for the shedding of innocent blood; ... that sodomy will be banned; that marriage will again be for life; that the courts will dispense justice; that the Sabbath will be kept; that government will be honest and limited to what God commands. In short, God will heal the land when He sees the fruits of national repentance.”<sup>3</sup>

**Memory Verses**

**2 Sam. 7:11-16\*\* – The Davidic Covenant. God promises that one of David's descendants will sit on his throne and rule forever.**

**Assignment**

**Complete the *Psalms and Proverbs Assignment*.**

---

<sup>3</sup> Stephen Green, *Christian Voice*, June 2003.