

Reading the Bible

Advance in Faith Unit 107



Lesson 5 - Reading Hebrew Narratives

1/ The Authority of Narrative

“Somehow, the authority which God has invested in this book is an authority that is wielded and exercised *through* the people of God telling and retelling *their* story as the story of the world, telling the covenant story as the true story of creation.”¹

a/ The Fifth Act

Wright suggests that the way to have Scripture, particularly story, take a place of authority in our lives is to pretend we are performing the fifth act, not yet written, of a play. The first 4 acts are written but the play did not end and the fifth act was left unfinished.

Wright would list the first 4 acts as follows:

- Creation
- The Fall
- The story of Israel
- Jesus’ story
- The Church (unfinished)

Our role is to perform the fifth act: but how? In order to do this performance all of the actors would need to immerse themselves in the first 4 written acts, in the culture and language of the playwright and his times.

By understanding the culture and language of the Biblical stories we are then able to act out the fifth act with a measure of authenticity towards the first 4 acts, which is our way of showing that the first 4 acts are to be taken as authoritative in our lives.

¹ N. T. Wright, How can the Bible be Authoritative? *Vox Evangelica*, 1991, Vol. 21, 7–32
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3/ Hebrew Storytelling Conventions²

(Much of the following material is taken from Fee and Stuart's book "How to read the Bible for all it's worth".)

a/ *Levels of Narrative*

Biblical stories need to be seen and understood on three different levels:

1. Meta-narrative – God redeeming the whole creation
2. God redeeming his people
3. Individual stories

b/ *What narratives are not.*

1/ *Biblical narratives are not allegories or stories filled with hidden meanings. Remember Scripture was written for us not to us.*

2/ *Individual Biblical narratives are not intended to teach moral lessons.*

The purpose of the various individual narratives is to tell what God did in history, not to offer moral examples of right or wrong behaviour.

What should we learn from the story of Jacob and Esau?

Lot's willingness to sacrifice his daughters, is this an example of what to do/not to do? (Genesis 19:6)

What of Gideon's story? (Judges 6)

3/ *The Biblical narratives do not necessarily teach directly.*

They often illustrate what is taught explicitly and categorically elsewhere. E.G. David's adultery with Bathsheba (2 Sam. 11) we do not find a statement saying David committed adultery, but the story shows the drastic consequences of wrong behaviour.

² G D Fee and D Stuart, *How to read the Bible for all its worth* (Zondervan Grand Rapids 1981) p.89-103

c/ The Characteristics of Hebrew Narrative

Hebrew stories, like all stories within an ancient culture, were firstly told and then written within a framework of storytelling rules or conventions. These conventions are often quite different from one culture to another and even from one time period to another time period within the same culture.

In order to correctly understand the story we need to have an understanding of the conventions that support and give structure to the story.

1/ The Role of the Narrator

The narrator is ‘omniscient’ in regards to the story. This means that he will tell the story within in his own experience and so make choices as to what is in the story. His version of the story is not necessarily the whole story.

2/ A Scenic Presentation

The story is generally built around different scenes, not as we might around different characters. There are usually only 3 or 4 characters within the story at any one time. Compare this with say a Tom Clancy novel or with Lord of the Rings.

Because of this it is the scenes that are used to give focus to the ideas and characters. This means that a Hebrew story is quite loose when it comes to the sequence of events.

Ben Witherington makes the following point:

“If you don’t read the NT with a certain degree of literary sensitivity you are bound to make wrong assumptions and ask wrong questions.

Modern culture and cultural assumptions are in many cases so different from ancient assumptions. For example, in our day and age we expect precision when it comes to things like timing or dating, or reporting somebody’s words. Ancient people had far less

exacting standards when it came to things like telling time or telling a story in precise chronological order.”³

3/ Lack of Character Description

The Hebrew narrative is not interested in creating a visual appearance of the characters, so if this happens it is important. More important are matters of status or profession or tribal designation.

Characters often appear in either contrast or in parallel. E.g. David v's Saul or David and Jonathon.

The predominant mode of characterisation occurs in the character's words and actions, not in the narrative's descriptions. David's character is not described but seen through his words and actions.

4/ Dialogue

Dialogue is a crucial feature and one of the chief methods of characterisation. Three important ideas;

- The first point of the dialogue is often a significant clue both to the story plot and the character of the speaker. 1 Sam 17:25, 26 Compare to 1 Sam 9:7, 21
- Contrastive dialogue often functions as a way of characterisation as well.
- Very often the narrator will emphasise the crucial parts of the narrative by having one of the characters repeat or summarise the narrative in a speech. e.g. the often repeated story of the exodus

5/ Plot

³ B Witherington, *The Living word of God*. (Baylor University Press, Texas, 2007) p53

The plot in Hebrew narrative moves at a much faster pace than most modern narrative. The narrator may use dialogue, the sudden elaboration of detail or other forms of repetition to slow the plot down. Very often a slower pace is a signal pointing to the narrator's focus or point of view. The gospel stories rush over much of Jesus' life but then spend a significant amount of time on the Passion Week and the crucifixion.

6/ An Oral Presentation

The narratives were developed within an oral society and so were designed primarily for hearers not for readers. In order to make the story memorable certain techniques were used;

- Repetition – especially of key words, 1 Sam. 17:25-29
What will be done for the man who kills Goliath?
- Resuming – the taking of detours and then the resumption of the main story 1 Sam 25:23-31 Abigail's speech to David expresses the central theme for this part of the narrative, David's lack of bloody response to Saul's seeking his life.
- Inclusion – where the narrative is begun and brought to a conclusion in the same way or manner - a Chiasmus. Isa. 43
- What we now read as a written story usually began life as a number of oral stories. When they were gathered together and written down they often overlap in their story line.

7/ The Ultimate Character

In any Hebrew narrative God is the ultimate character, the supreme hero of the story. 1 Sam 17:37 the Lord will deliver. **This almost becomes the theme of David's story!!!!** Think about the importance of this in terms of David being a messianic figure.

4/ Conclusion

“We must let scripture be itself, and that is a hard task. Scripture contains many things that I don’t know, and that you don’t know; many things we are waiting to discover; passages which are lying dormant waiting for us to dig them out. Awaken them. We must then make sure that the church, armed in this way, is challenging the world’s view of authority. So that, we must determine—corporately as well as individually—to become in a true sense, people of the book. Not people of the book in the Islamic sense, where this book just drops down and crushes people and you say it’s the will of Allah, and I don’t understand it, and I can’t do anything about it. But, people of the book in the Christian sense; people who are being remade, judged and remoulded by the Spirit through scripture.”⁴

Group Questions:

Read some of the story of Ruth and identify and discuss any of the story telling conventions we have discussed.

Take Home Exercise:

Read the story of Esther. As you read write down any of the story telling conventions we have discussed that appear in this story.

For next week we will deal with some of the tricky and often confusing parts of scripture. If you have any part that you would like me to cover please email me on graham.irvine@riverviewchurch.com.au

Memory Work:

Matthew 5:17 “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them.¹⁸ For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished.

⁴ N. T. Wright, How can the Bible be Authoritative? *Vox Evangelica*, 1991, Vol. 21, 7–32
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