How to Understand and Apply the Bible

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Tools (part 2): Background resources - literary and historical

Study Bible

Commentaries

Pastoral

Exegetical

Expositional

Interpreting Old Testament Historical Narrative

- 1. The narrative portions of the OT cover roughly 40% and, viewed as a whole, reveal the unfolding of God's plan for his people across history.
- 2. Narrative has three levels that we need to regard in different ways when we think about what the text means.
 - a) The top level is the big picture of God's plan in salvation history. God is the hero of the Old Testament.
 - b) The middle level is God's plan for his people (Israel) in their historical context: how they respond to God in covenant relationship and how he responds to their faithfulness/disobedience.
 - c) The bottom and most basic level is to see the story as the unfolding of God's plan for specific individuals.
- 3. The OT narrative is intended for us (Romans 15:4)—but secondarily. Therefore, we take steps to interpret it that include starting from the original context and cautiously moving to our culture and our individual lives.

Interpretational principle:

The text cannot mean something to us that it never could have meant to the original readers.

Things to look for as we read historical narrative:

- Parts of the story that directly relate to commands in the law
- Statements by the narrator (or by God himself) that reflect God's point-of-view
- The first point of dialogue in a scene
- Repetition

Sample passage to look at:

2 Samuel 11:

¹ In the spring, at the time when kings go off to war, David sent Joab out with the king's men and the whole Israelite army. They destroyed the Ammonites and besieged Rabbah. But David remained in Jerusalem.

² One evening David got up from his bed and walked around on the roof of the palace. From the roof he saw a woman bathing. The woman was very beautiful, ³ and David sent someone to find out about her. The man said, "She is Bathsheba, the daughter of Eliam and the wife of Uriah the Hittite." ⁴ Then David sent messengers to get her. She came to him, and he slept with her. (Now she was purifying herself from her monthly uncleanness.) Then she went back home. ⁵ The woman conceived and sent word to David, saying, "I am pregnant."

2 Samuel 12:

⁵ David burned with anger against the man and said to Nathan, "As surely as the Lord lives, the man who did this must die! ⁶ He must pay for that lamb four times over, because he did such a thing and had no pity."

⁷Then Nathan said to David, "You are the man! This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: 'I anointed you king over Israel, and I delivered you from the hand of Saul. ⁸ I gave your master's house to you, and your master's wives into your arms. I gave you all Israel and Judah. And if all this had been too little, I would have given you even more. ⁹ Why did you **despise the word of the Lord** by doing what is evil in his eyes? You struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword and took his wife to be your own. You killed him with the sword of the Ammonites. ¹⁰ Now, therefore, the sword will never depart from your house, because **you despised me** and took the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your own.'"

Historical Narrative: Interpretation to application, step by step

Old Covenant View the action through the lens of the law

Principles: What do we learn about God? What do we learn about his expectations for his people, Israel?



Narrative

- How does this story fit into the big picture of God's plan in salvation history?
- How does this story fit into God's plan for the nation of Israel in this historical setting?
- What does the story reveal about God's plan for the individuals involved?
- Consider how the law provides a moral backdrop to the story
- Look for clues to God's point-of-view
- Take note of the first point of dialogue in a scene
- Note any repetition in the story

• Specific story

Historical Narrative: Interpretation to application, step by step

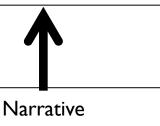
Old Covenant View the action through the lens of the law

- changed but it has reached a new phase. The goal isn't the preservation of a nation but the spread of the gospel (Matt 28:18-20) and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2).
- How do the principles derived from the narrative fit a people of God drawn from all nations and guided by the Holy Spirit?

New Covenant

View principles through the lens of the cross of Jesus Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit

Principles: What do we learn about God? What do we learn about his expectations for his people, Israel?



What does God want us to know about him? What does God want us to know about his expectations for the church?



Specific application

Historical Narrative:

Interpretation to application, step by step

Old Covenant

Harsh condemnation for adultery

Lev 20:10

New Covenant

No condemnation but don't grieve the Spirit

Rom 8:1-2; Eph 4:30

Principle: If God's people break his laws by sinning against one another, it is the same as despising the Lord who gave them.



Narrative

2 Sam 11-12

Principle: If we love Jesus we should do what he says (John 14:15, 21). Love is the fulfillment of the law (Rom 13:8).



Application: If I love God, I should honor my spouse even when he/she really bugs me.