

Biblical Studies, Lesson 8: Old Testament Narratives

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Dann Farrelly teaches students how to view stories from the Old Testament and activates them to interpret and apply the principles found within God's Word.

Old Testament Narratives

Beautiful and Complex

- Embrace the joyful complexity and artistry of the Old Testament stories.
- Old Testament narratives are not simple, fabricated stories to illustrate a moral, but are complex and beautiful, full of details and the Holy Spirit.

Reveal God

- These narratives of God's involvement with His covenant people and human history reveal God's heart, His ways, His mystery, His fierceness and holiness.
- God is not a nicer and more powerful version of us. He is altogether another Being.
- God speaks for Himself about Himself.

Our Stories

- As those who have been grafted in as wild olive branches into the Israel of God (Romans 11, Galatians 6), these narratives are also our stories.
- These stories were specifically selected and edited for theological reasons not only for the Jewish community, but also for the church community.

Finding Jesus In the Old Testament

- Scholars span this wide spectrum of being comfortable with finding Jesus in the Old Testament stories and those who are not comfortable with finding Jesus in the Old Testament stories.
- Consider each story in light of the author's intent, and God's intent as best as you can for as long as you can, before you bring in the bigger picture of salvation in Jesus to bear upon it.

Strengths of the Narrative Style

- God likes to reveal Himself through stories. Narratives are interesting. They pull us into the story.
- They depict parts of life to which we easily relate. We ask ourselves what we would have done in that situation. Stories portray the complexities and confusing parts of life.
- They are usually easily remembered.
- God can include Himself as one of the characters in the story.
- Be aware of the larger themes. Do not make God fit into our 21st century box.

- Read carefully and look for clues from the text.
- God is the Hero of every story.
- Pay attention to the voice of the narrator.
- Characters are complex.

A Narrative's Components and Interpretation Principles

Plot — What and How

- Put the plot in the larger context of the character's journey with God, and the story will read very differently.
- Because we are influenced by the post-modern era and are motivated more by emotions rather than ideas, we project into the story and focus on what it would be like to emotionally experience those events, at the risk of excluding the main point of the story.
- The larger plot puts the various episodes together.

Setting — Where and When

- The Book of Ruth gives eight to ten clues of how exceptional Bethlehem is.
- Read other books and commentaries to give insight to the setting such as: *How To Read The Bible for All It's Worth*¹ and *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament*²

Characters — Who

- Characters move the story along.
- Notice what information the narrator does or does not give about the characters.

Viewpoint of the Narrator

- Notice if the narrator is against what is happening in the story, or has taken a neutral stance.
- Sometimes a neutral stance is frustrating for the reader, because we want the narrator to tell us how to view the event.
- The narrator may assume those familiar with the Torah understand what is right or wrong, or the narrator leaves it to the reader to do his own study and research to find the answer.
- Sometimes the narrator will give an implied message.

The Big Picture

- We must see each mini-story in light of the big picture. This provides a better perspective.
- Do not miss the bigger context of the story by allowing our emotions to too quickly enter into the reading of the story.

Comparison/Contrast (Not included in lecture)

- This literary technique is a major device used in Old Testament narratives to develop plot and to move the story forward.
- Recognizing comparison and contrast is critical to our understanding of narratives.

- Notice these comparisons and contrasts between David and Saul as developed over many chapters in 1 Samuel. David is everything that Saul is not. Understanding these comparisons and contrasts helps us understand these narratives.

Irony (Not included in the lecture)

- Irony is the literary term used to describe situations where the literal or surface meaning of an event or episode is quite different and sometimes opposite of the narrator's real intended meaning.
- Irony presents the narrative's meaning with more force.
- Irony allows the narrator to surprise the reader, often with humor in the subtle meanings.
- In irony, actions and events may have multiple implications.
- Irony enhances narratives, making them fascinating to study and enjoyable to read.

Principles for Interpreting Old Testament Narratives

- An Old Testament narrative usually does not directly teach a doctrine, but illustrates a doctrine or doctrines proposed elsewhere.
- Narratives record what happened, not necessarily what should have happened or what ought to happen every time. Therefore, there is not always an individual identifiable moral application.
- What people do in the narratives is not necessarily a good example for us.
- Do not just imitate exactly what is seen. Learn about God and His ways from narratives, not simply imitating what is read.
- All narratives are selective and incomplete. All the details we want are not given.
- Narratives are not written to answer all our theological questions.
- Narratives may teach either "explicitly" by clearly stating something, or "implicitly," teaching it without actually stating it.
- In the final analysis, God is the Hero of all Biblical narratives.
- Like interpreting the Gospels, note how the narrative is connected to the larger stories of Israel's history and salvation history.

Profound Points of Story, Verse by Verse

Observations About Genesis 22:1–19

- Verse 1: The time is later. The narrator knows this is a test from God. Does Abraham know it is a test?
- Abraham answers the traditionally accepted way, "Here I am," just as Eli taught Samuel (1 Samuel 3).
- Verse 2: There is no argument from Abraham about God's instructions.

- God understands the depth of the relationship between Abraham and Isaac.
- Verse 3: Abraham does not fight with God, but sets out early the next morning in quick obedience to God's will. They brought wood with them for the sacrifice.
- Verse 6: The son carried the wood. This reminds us of Jesus as the Sacrifice carrying His cross.
- Verse 2: God told Abraham to sacrifice his son, but would He give Abraham more information later about where.
- Verse 4: Abraham saw the place for the sacrifice, rather than hearing God tell him specifically the place.
- Verse 5: Abraham says, "We will worship and then we will come back to you."
- We should ask ourselves if Abraham was trying to stall, lie to control his son, lie to the servants, or were these declarations of faith. Worship is equated with sacrifice.
- Verses 7 and 8: Isaac asks a key question, "Where is the lamb for the burnt offering?" Abraham answers, "God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son."
- We wonder what was going through both Isaac and Abraham's minds, and the inspiration behind Abraham's answer.
- Verse 9: Isaac is bound. We wonder why he is bound. Is Isaac fighting his father? What is his response?
- Verses 10 and 11: Abraham reaches for the knife, but the Angel of the Lord called to him to stop him. Abraham answered again, "Here I am."
- Verse 12: The Angel of the Lord said now He knew Abraham feared God, because he had not withheld his only son.
- The Angel of the Lord said, "Now I know." We wonder if God did not know before this.
- Verse 13: The ram is caught by the horns in the thicket.
- Verses 15 through 18: God swears by Himself. God reiterates the covenant He made with Abraham.
- Verse 14: The narrator adds a note: "And to this day it is said, 'On the mountain of the Lord it will be provided.'"
- Verse 18: "All nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me."
- We would rather have the promise of blessing based on God alone, but here we see the weight of the condition of blessing in the covenant going forth and being released: our obedience.

Overview of Genesis 22's Components

Plot

- The plot begins with conflict: how Abraham responds to God's seemingly outrageous request.
- Tension rises as Isaac realizes there is no lamb for the sacrifice.
- Abraham maintains faith, but faith in what?
- Abraham takes the knife to sacrifice his son.
- When we review this story against other Scripture and in light of the bigger picture, we see more.
- Abraham experienced God's faithfulness.
- Abraham walked with God. In light of this, Abraham had faith in God's goodness to do right by him and Isaac.
- As with this story, look at Bible stories in the larger context.

Setting

- It occurred sometime later than the previous story.
- Abraham is directed to the region of Moriah and the mountain of the Lord.
- Abraham's journey begins and ends in Beersheba.
- At the time of the sacrifice, Abraham and Isaac are alone until the Angel of the Lord cries out from heaven.
- There are stones for the altar, but no wood, so they bring wood.
- There are thickets (where the ram is caught), so the setting is rather desolate on the mountain.

Characters

- God (appearing as the Angel of the Lord)
- Abraham and Isaac
- Two servants (with marginal roles)
- Absent lamb, then ram caught in the thicket
- Both Abraham and Isaac seem serene, even in this horrific scenario.
- God receives new information: "Now I know...." (verse 12).

Viewpoint of the Narrator

- God is testing Abraham.
- The narrator adds the note: "And to this day it is said, 'On the mountain of the LORD it will be provided'" (verse 14).

Comparisons and Contrast

- When we compare Isaac to the ram, we prophetically see Jesus in the future.

- Abraham is also compared to Father God.

Irony

- Isaac, the one who potentially is going to be the sacrifice, sees that the fire and wood are there, but there is no sacrificial lamb.
- Humanity gets to keep their sons, but the Heavenly Father's Son still must be sacrificed.
- The grace of God comes to man, but 2,000 years later there would be no one to stop the sacrificing of God's Son.

Summary of Story In Paragraph Form

- God decided to test Abraham's faith with the unimaginable task of sacrificing his son. Abraham responded immediately and took wood, fire, a knife, and the child of promise, his son, Isaac. This time, Abraham did not do a dance. He did not have a different idea. He obeyed quickly. As he was about to kill his son, God stopped him and provided a substitute ram. Abraham sacrificed the ram and named the place, "The Lord will provide," or, "Jehovah Jireh." God was pleased with Abraham's faith and reiterated the covenant promises of blessing upon his descendants. God also declared the occupation of enemy cities by Abraham's descendants and that the blessings given to all the nations of the earth would be because Abraham obeyed God.
- Abraham made powerful faith statements in his town: we will worship, we will return, the Lord will provide an offering, and a sacrifice for us.

1. Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981).

2. John H. Walton, Victor H. Matthews and Mark W. Chavalas, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2000).

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Reference Materials:

Duvall, J. Scott and Hayes, J. Daniel. *Grasping God's Word*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001.

Fee, Gordon D. and Stuart, Douglas. *How To Read The Bible For All Its Worth*.

Grand Rapids: Zondervan 1993.