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David M. Howard, series editor

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An Exegetical Handbook

Robert B. Chisholm Jr.

David M. Howard Jr.
SERIES EDITOR

Kregel
Academic & Professional

Interpreting the Historical Books: An Exegetical Handbook

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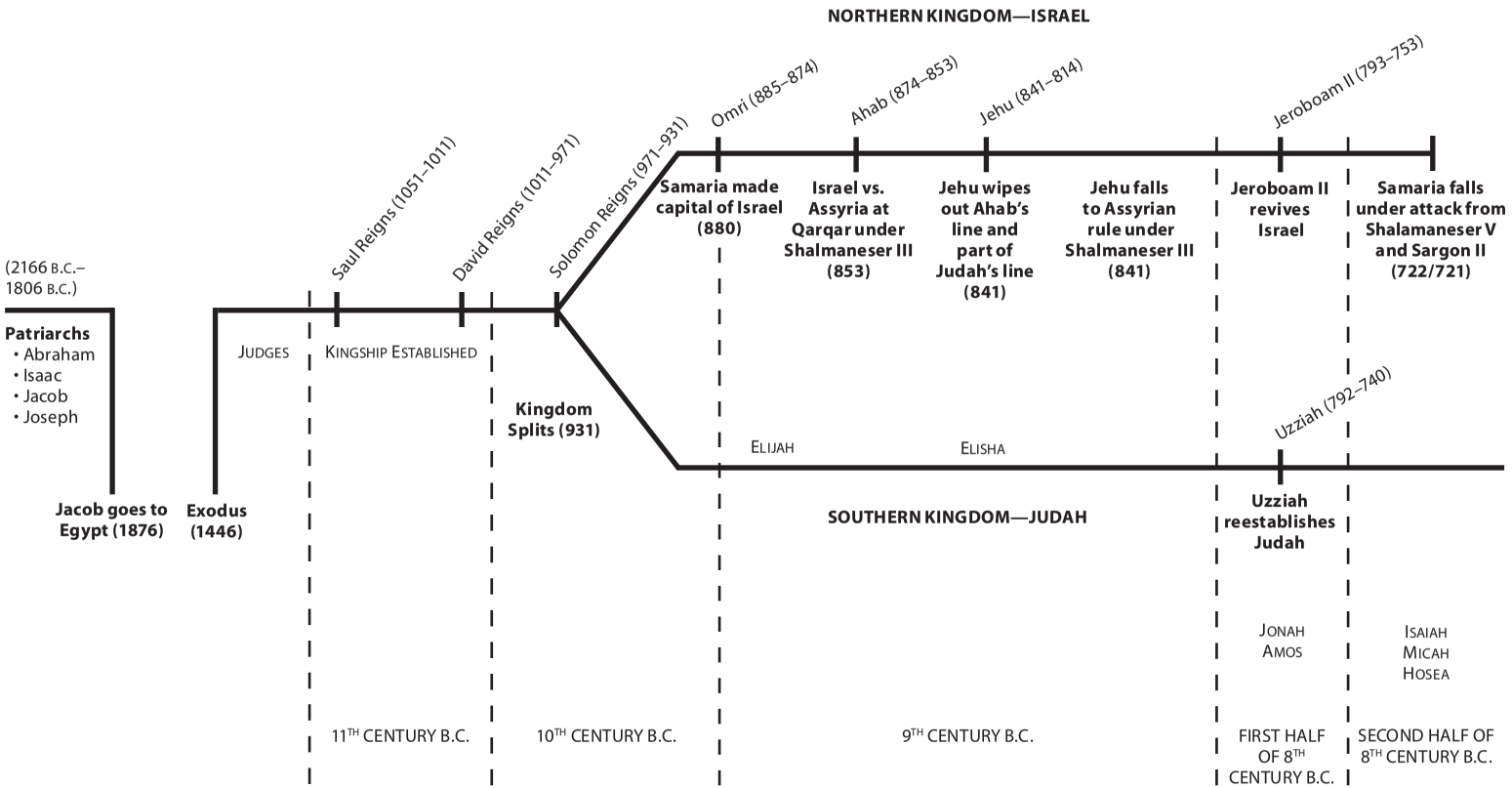
To my brother,
Douglas Chisholm,
with whom I have had many spirited
and stimulating discussions
about biblical and
theological issues.


NORTHERN KINGDOM—ISRAEL
(2166 B.C.–
1806 B.C.)
Patriarchs
• Abraham
• Isaac
• Jacob
• Joseph
Jacob goes to Egypt (1876)
Exodus (1446)
JUDGES
Saul Reigns (1051–1011)
David Reigns (1011–971)
Solomon Reigns (971–931)
KINGSHIP ESTABLISHED
Kingdom Splits (931)
Omri (885–874)
Ahab (874–853)
Jehu (841–814)
Jeroboam II (793–753)
Samaria made capital of Israel (880)
Israel vs. Assyria at Qarqar under Shalmaneser III (853)
Jehu wipes out Ahab's line and part of Judah's line (841)
Jehu falls to Assyrian rule under Shalmaneser III (841)
Jeroboam II revives Israel
Samaria falls under attack from Shalamaneser V and Sargon II (722/721)
ELIJAH
ELISHA
Uzziah (792–740)
SOUTHERN KINGDOM—JUDAH
Uzziah reestablishes Judah
JONAH
AMOS
ISAIAH
MICAH
HOSEA
11TH CENTURY B.C.
10TH CENTURY B.C.
9TH CENTURY B.C.
FIRST HALF OF 8TH CENTURY B.C.
SECOND HALF OF 8TH CENTURY B.C.

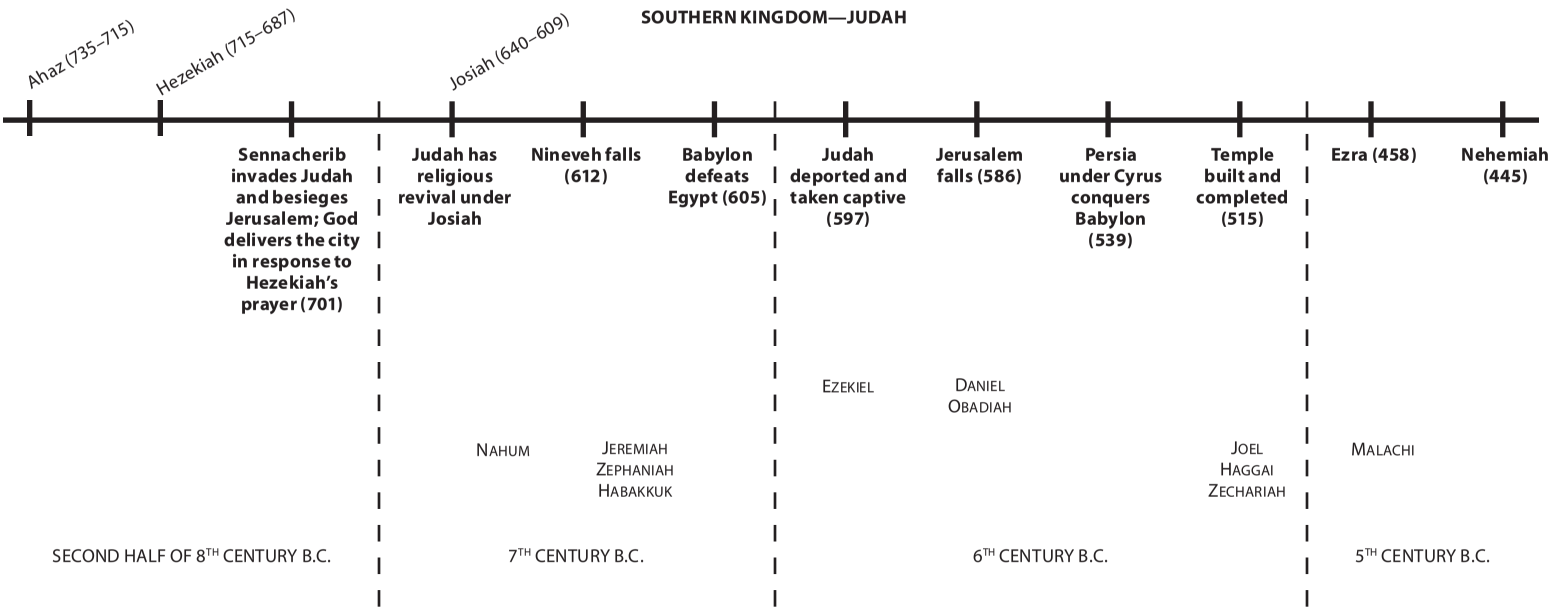


Chart creator and designer: Rev. Errol G. Coner; revised by Robert B. Chisholm Jr.

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SERIES PREFACE

AN APPRECIATION FOR THE RICH diversity of literary genres in Scripture is one of the positive features of evangelical scholarship in recent decades. No longer are the same principles or methods of interpretation applied across the board to every text without regard for differences in genre. Such an approach can lead to confusion, misunderstanding, and even wrong interpretations or applications. Careful attention to differences in genre is a critical component of a correct understanding of God's Word.

The Handbooks for Old Testament Exegesis series (HOTE) offers students basic skills for exegeting and proclaiming the different genres of the Old Testament. Because there is no one-size-fits-all approach to interpreting Scripture, this series features six volumes covering the major genres in the Old Testament: narrative, law, poetry, wisdom, prophecy, and apocalyptic. The volumes are written by seasoned scholar-teachers who possess extensive knowledge of their disciplines, lucid writing abilities, and the conviction that the church and the world today desperately need to hear the message of the Old Testament. These handbooks are designed to serve a twofold purpose: to present the reader with a better understanding of the different Old Testament genres (principles) and provide strategies for preaching and teaching these genres (methods).

These volumes are primarily intended to serve as textbooks for graduate-level exegesis courses that assume a basic knowledge of Hebrew. There is no substitute for encountering God's Word in its original languages, even as we acknowledge the limitations of language in plumbing the depths of who God is. However, the series is also accessible to those without a working knowledge of Hebrew, in that an English translation is always given whenever Hebrew is used. Thus, seminary-trained pastors for whom Hebrew is a distant memory, upper-level college students, and even well-motivated laypeople should all find this series useful.

Each volume is built around the same six-chapter structure as follows:

1. The Nature of the Genres
2. The Big Picture: Major Themes
3. Preparing for Interpretation
4. Interpreting the Text
5. Proclaiming the Text
6. Putting It All Together

Authors are given freedom in how they title these six chapters and in how best to approach the material in each. But the familiar pattern in every volume will serve students well, allowing them to move easily from one volume to another to locate specific information. The first chapter in each handbook introduces the genre(s) covered in the volume. The second chapter covers major themes in the individual books and canonical sections under consideration. The third chapter includes such diverse matters as historical and cultural backgrounds, critical questions, textual matters, and a brief annotated bibliography of helpful works. The fourth chapter sets forth guidelines for interpreting texts of the genre(s) under consideration. The fifth chapter details strategies for proclaiming such texts. The final chapter gives one or two hands-on examples of how to move through different stages of the interpretive process, in order to demonstrate how the principles discussed previously work out in practice. Each volume also includes a glossary of specialized terms.

The Scriptures themselves remind us in many ways about the importance of proper interpretation of God's words. Paul encouraged Timothy to "do your best to present yourself to God as one approved by him, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly explaining the word of truth" (2 Tim. 2:15 NRSV). In an earlier day, Ezra the scribe, along with the Levites, taught God's Word to the postexilic community: "So they read from the book, from the law of God, with interpretation. They gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading" (Neh. 8:8 NRSV). It is my prayer, and that of the authors and publisher, that these handbooks will help a new generation of God's people to do the same.

Soli Deo Gloria.

—DAVID M. HOWARD JR.
Series Editor

PREFACE

WHEN PEOPLE HEAR THE WORD "history," they usually think of dates, names, places, and events. History writing is not usually a popular genre of literature, for people typically think of it as a dry record of bare facts about what happened in the past. For this reason some might shy away from reading the historical books of the Old Testament. However, a closer look at the literature reveals that it contains many exciting and fascinating stories, and most people, especially in our contemporary postmodern context, love a good story. Because of this literary dimension, the historical books read more like a historical novel complete with plot structure and character development. God himself even appears as a character in the unfolding drama. When one considers that these stories are true, they take on special relevance. In fact, of all the stories that have been written in human history, the biblical stories are the most relevant, for they alone are inspired Scripture. To be sure, some of those seemingly dry facts that we normally associate with history—lists, genealogies, and dates—are present, but even these details take on significance when we see them as contributing to the larger story in which they are embedded. These larger stories are sometimes called narratives. To get the most out of reading the Old Testament historical books, one needs to know something about how the narrative genre "works." To that end, chapter 1 seeks to answer

the question, "What Is Narrative Literature?" The chapter concludes with a list of interpretive principles that one should keep in mind as one reads narrative literature, whether it be in the historical books or elsewhere in the Old Testament.

The historical books of the Old Testament include Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1–2 Samuel, 1–2 Kings, 1–2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther. Following the arrangement of the ancient Greek version of the Old Testament (the Septuagint), these twelve books are grouped together in the English Bible and follow a rough chronological sequence. They tell the story of Israel from the conquest of Canaan in Joshua's day to the return from the Exile centuries later, though there is some overlap between Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles. The Hebrew Bible, which consists of the Law, Prophets, and Writings, arranges the books differently. Joshua, Judges, 1–2 Samuel, and 1–2 Kings appear in the Prophets. Collectively they are known as the Former Prophets.[1] The remaining six historical books appear in the Writings. Within this third section of the Hebrew canon, Ruth and Esther are two of the five Megilloth, or Scrolls (the others are Song of Songs, Ecclesiastes, and Lamentations), while Ezra–Nehemiah and 1–2 Chronicles are at the tail end of the Hebrew Bible.[2]

Technical words are defined in the glossary at the back of the book and are identified in the text by boldface print as they appear in new sections.

1. Within the second part of the Hebrew Bible, the Latter Prophets include Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the Twelve (i.e., the so-called Minor Prophets).
2. For a concise discussion of the canonization of the Old Testament see Paul D. Wegner, *The Journey from Texts to Translations: The Origin and Development of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 101–18. For a more thorough analysis of the subject, consult Roger Beckwith, *The Old Testament Canon of the New Testament Church and Its Background in Early Judaism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985).

ABBREVIATIONS

AB	Anchor Bible
ANEP	Pritchard, James, ed. *The Ancient Near East in Pictures Relating to the Old Testament.* Princeton, 1954.
ANET	Pritchard, James, ed. *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament.* 3d ed. Princeton, 1969.
AUSS	*Andrews University Seminary Studies*
BDB	Brown, F., S. R. Driver, and C. A. Briggs. *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament.* Oxford, 1907.
BHS	*Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*
BSac	*Bibliotheca sacra*
CBQ	*Catholic Biblical Quarterly*
COS	Hallo, W. W., ed. *The Context of Scripture.* Leiden, 2003.
DSS	Dead Sea Scrolls
HALOT	Koehler, L., W. Baumgartner, and J. J. Stamm. *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament.* Translated and edited under the supervision of M. E. J. Richardson. Study Edition. 2 vols. Leiden, 2001. (The publisher has also made available an electronic version, as well as a more expensive five-volume print edition, which is identical in content to the Study Edition but has larger print.)

IBHS	Waltke, Bruce K., and M. O'Connor. *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax*. Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 1990.
JANESCU	*Journal of the Ancient Near Eastern Society of Columbia University*
JAOS	*Journal of the American Oriental Society*
JBL	*Journal of Biblical Literature*
JNSL	*Journal of Northwest Semitic Languages*
JSOTSup	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament: Supplement Series
LXX	Septuagint
NAC	New American Commentary
NET	New English Translation
NICOT	New International Commentary on the Old Testament
NIV	New International Version
NIVAC	NIV Application Commentary
OTL	Old Testament Library
PRU	*Le palais royal d'Ugarit*
SBLDS	Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series
SJOT	*Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament*
VT	*Vetus Testamentum*
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
WTJ	*Westminster Theological Journal*

1

WHAT IS NARRATIVE LITERATURE?

THE HISTORICAL BOOKS ARE OFTEN classified as narrative literature because they give an account of Israel's history in story-like fashion. Old Testament narrative, as it appears in the historical books, encompasses several literary types, including stories, reports, genealogies, and lists. Stories have a **plot structure** and usually exhibit character development. They vary in length. The story of Ehud, for example, covers a mere nineteen verses (Judg. 3:12–30), while the story of David occupies half of 1 Samuel and all of 2 Samuel. A report lacks plot structure and character development; it typically provides a brief summary of an event or a king's reign. Reports are interspersed throughout 2 Kings (e.g., 2 Kings 15). Genealogies consist of tribal and subtribal family trees (e.g., 1 Chron. 1–9). Various types of lists appear, including, among others, defeated kings (Josh. 12:7–24), boundaries and cities (interspersed throughout Josh. 13–21), warriors (2 Sam. 23:8–39), and returning exiles (Ezra 2). Other literary genres are embedded within narrative literature, including victory songs (e.g., Judg. 5) and prayers (e.g., 1 Sam. 2:1–10). The interpreter's task is to explain the story line of the literature and to show how the variety of material contributes to the whole.

THE LITERARY DIMENSION IN NARRATIVE

Evangelicals affirm that Old Testament narratives, including the stories, are historically accurate, yet they also recognize that narratives, especially the stories, have a literary dimension. Old Testament narratives do not simply inform the reader what happened. The literature has an aesthetic, literary dimension that contributes to its overall theological purpose. In other words, Old Testament narratives tell Israel's story in an engaging, dramatic fashion that highlights God's relationship with his people. By the time the story is finished, it has painted a picture of God that contributes to the Bible's overall divine portrait. The story's literary dimension is often the means whereby the raw facts of history are given a theological dimension.

Basic Elements of a Story

The stories of the Old Testament, like all stories, have three basic elements: setting (where and when the story takes place), characterization (how the participants in the story are presented and developed), and plot (how the story line unfolds and engages our minds and hearts).[1]

Setting

Setting has physical, temporal, and cultural dimensions.[2] A story's physical setting can be geographical and/or topographical. For example, Samson's confrontation with the lion takes place near the vineyards of Timnah (Judg. 14:5), while Elijah's confrontation with Ahaziah's military captains occurs at an unidentified hill (2 Kings 1:9). Usually references to physical setting simply help the audience visualize the scene; the elements of the physical setting are the props on the stage, as it were. But physical setting can occasionally have a more significant function. As a Nazirite, Samson is prohibited from drinking the fruit of the vine (Num. 6:34; cf. Judg. 13:4). When Samson approaches the vineyards of Timnah, the story takes on an ominous mood and we realize that threats

1. See Leland Ryken, *How to Read the Bible as Literature* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 35.
2. Ibid.

to Samson's Nazirite status are present in his environment. The same is true later in the story when Samson falls in love with a woman who lives in the Valley of Sorek (literally, "grape valley").[3] Her home territory has an ominous name and she proves to be Samson's downfall by successfully tempting him to compromise his Nazirite status in exchange for her charms. In 2 Kings 1 Elijah is sitting on a hill when the captains approach him and demand that he come down. The attitude of the first two captains shows that they regard the prophet as subject to the king's orders, but Elijah, as the Lord's prophet, actually has authority over the king and his messengers, as symbolized by his physical position above them.

The temporal setting of a story can be significant. For example, the book of Ruth opens with the words, "During the time of the judges." This simple temporal clause informs the reader when the story occurred, but it takes on greater significance as the story unfolds. The time of the judges was a period of moral chaos when people followed their own moral code, not God's (Judg. 17:6; 21:25). But the story of Ruth shines brightly against this dark background as it depicts characters that demonstrate the virtues of compassion and loyal love, qualities that were for the most part absent in the period of the judges.

An awareness of a story's cultural background is especially important to interpretation. For example, one cannot appreciate fully the significance of Elijah's actions in 1 Kings 17 without some understanding of West Semitic mythology. Elijah's journey to Phoenicia takes place during the reign of Ahab, who married a Phoenician wife and made Baal worship a state religion in Israel (1 Kings 16:30–34). Baal was the Canaanite storm god, responsible for making the crops grow. How appropriate and ironic that the Lord brings a drought upon the land as a punishment for Ahab's apostasy (1 Kings 17:1)!

According to West Semitic myth, the arrival of a drought signaled that Baal had been defeated, at least temporarily, by his archenemy Mot, the god of death and the underworld. During times of drought, Baal was a captive of Mot and unable to carry out his responsibilities as king, which included caring for the needy and ensuring fertility.

Against this background Elijah's actions in 1 Kings 17 take on great significance. Through Ahab, the god Baal, as it were, invades Israelite

3. See *HALOT,* 1362; and Stanislav Segert, "Paronomasia in the Samson Narrative in Judges xiii–xvi," *VT* 34 (1984): 458.

territory. But now, while Baal is incapacitated and unable to reward his worshipers for their loyalty, the Lord's prophet invades Baal's home turf. Through his prophet Elijah, the Lord cares for a needy widow by miraculously supplying the staples of life (flour and oil). While Baal languishes in the underworld as death's prisoner, the Lord demonstrates his power over death by resuscitating the widow's son. The events recorded in 1 Kings 17 set the stage for the conflict between Elijah and Baal's prophets at Carmel (1 Kings 18). Baal's prophets cut and slash themselves in an effort to resurrect their god from the underworld. West Semitic myth indicates that this self-mutilation was a mourning rite designed to facilitate Baal's return. But the Lord reveals that he is sovereign over the elements of the storm as he consumes the sacrifice with lightning and then sends a torrential downpour.

An awareness of West Semitic myth also helps one better understand the significance of Gideon's tests with the fleece (Judg. 6:36–40). At the Lord's command, Gideon destroys his father's Baal altar. When the townspeople threaten to kill Gideon, his father challenges Baal to defend his own honor. He gives Gideon a new name, Jerubbaal, meaning or at least suggesting by **soundplay**, "Let Baal fight." Gideon's choice of signs is not arbitrary or random. The tests are designed to demonstrate the Lord's control of the dew. According to West Semitic myth, Baal controlled the rain and the dew. In one legend Baal's weakness results in the disappearance of rain and dew.[4] One of Baal's daughters is even named "Dew" ("Tallaya").[5] Gideon had destroyed Baal's altar, depriving him of sacrifices. His new name, Jerubbaal, made him a target for one of Baal's lightning bolts. By seeing a demonstration of God's sovereignty over the dew, an area supposedly under the control of Baal, Gideon can be assured that he is insulated from Baal's vengeance.[6]

Characterization

Characters are one of the necessary ingredients of any story. Without them, all we have is an empty stage or a still life devoid of plot. Since

4. For the text see J. C. L. Gibson, *Canaanite Myths and Legends,* 2d ed. (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1978), 115.
5. See ibid., 46, 48.
6. See Fred E. Woods, *Water and Storm Polemics Against Baalism in the Deuteronomic History* (New York: Peter Lang, 1994), 68–69.

characters play such an essential role, it is vital to analyze how an author depicts them and how characters function. One must seek to answer the following questions: How does the author present the character? How, if at all, does the character develop in the course of the story? In what way(s), if any, is the character an example to follow or avoid? What does the character's experience teach us about how God relates to people?

One must pay special attention to how a narrator evaluates each character, including any comments about a character's inner thoughts or motivation. For example, the various characters in Judges 17–21 can be evaluated in a negative manner in light of the summary statement that appears near the beginning and at the end of the section (cf. 17:6; 21:25). The main participants in the stories illustrate the observation that "each man did what he considered to be right," regardless of what God's law demanded. We are even given insight into Micah's greedy motive for hiring the wandering Levite (Judg. 17:13).

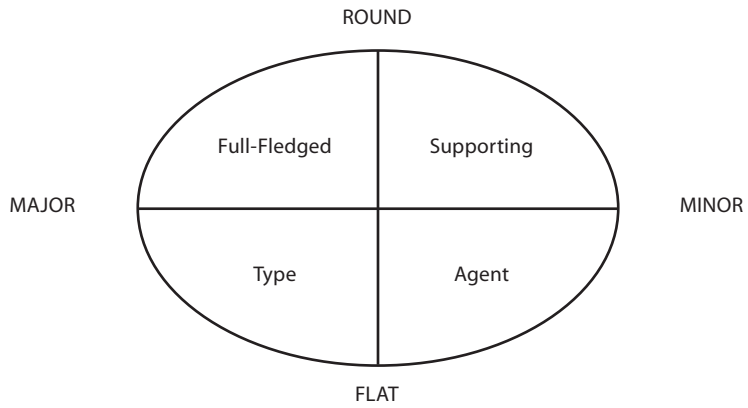
Unfortunately, narrators usually offer few, if any, direct **evaluative** comments of this type. They prefer simply to describe a character's appearance and actions, leaving it to the reader to form an evaluation based on the overall presentation of the character throughout the story. This makes the interpretive task challenging and somewhat subjective. For example, the first half of the story of David seeks to convince the reader that David is indeed God's chosen king, in contrast to Saul, whom the Lord rejected. Generally speaking, the narrator presents David in a positive light, at least in comparison to Saul, but this does not mean that everything David does must be given a positive spin. David's story ends up a tragedy in many respects as his family and kingdom disintegrate around him. As the story unfolds, several disturbing facts foreshadow David's moral fall. For example, despite his successes, which were the result of God's protective presence and blessing (2 Sam. 5:10, 12), David has a harem, in violation of the Deuteronomic law (Deut. 17:17; 2 Sam. 3:2–5; 5:13–16). While these wives, who seem to be "local girls," do not turn his heart to other gods (the primary concern of Deut. 17:17), his expanding harem does suggest that David has a fascination with the royal trappings of his society. His action sets a bad precedent that eventually causes conflict within his royal court and leads to Solomon's blatant disobedience of God's law (cf. 1 Kings 11). David also fails to discipline his sons Amnon (2 Sam. 13:21 [LXX,

DSS; cf. NRSV, ESV text notes]) and Adonijah (1 Kings 1:6). He proves to be a very human, complicated character. He displays great faith, but also the worst of human flaws.

There are various ways one may evaluate characters. They may be categorized by their role in the story. Major characters are those upon whom the narrator focuses his attention, while minor characters usually fulfill a single function. A story can have more than one major character, but there is usually only one central character, or **protagonist**. Central characters can be presented positively or negatively. Some are heroes (e.g., Ehud); others are failures (e.g., Saul). Many are a very human-looking mixture that falls between these two poles (e.g., David). Since Israel's story is, for the most part, one of human failure, characters often have a tragic dimension (e.g., Jephthah, Samson, Saul, David).

Characters may also be categorized according to the extent of their development. They can be round or flat. Round characters look very human and display a wide range of emotions and character traits. Their weaknesses and failures, as well as their strengths and successes, are recorded (e.g., Abraham, Jacob, Gideon, Samson, Samuel, Saul, David, Elijah). Flat characters are one-dimensional, usually displaying only a limited number of character traits (e.g., Ehud, Abimelech the son of Gideon, Boaz).

When evaluating characters, one should consider both of these categories. To visualize this we can make extent of character development a vertical axis with "round" at the top pole and "flat" at the bottom. We can then make character role an intersecting horizontal axis with "major" at the left end and "minor" at the right end.



Characters who appear in the upper left quadrant created by the intersecting axes are major and round. Such characters may be labeled full-fledged. Most of the major characters in the longer stories of the Bible are full-fledged (e.g., Saul and David).

Characters in the upper right quadrant are round, but minor. We may call them supporting actors or actresses. There are relatively few characters of this type in the Old Testament. Jonathan is a prime example (1 Sam. 13–14; 18–20; 23; 31). His character is developed to some degree, though not to the extent of Saul or David. As a minor character, he serves primarily as a **foil** to Saul. Where Saul falters, Jonathan demonstrates faith and courage. Whereas Saul falsely accuses David and seeks to kill him, Jonathan recognizes David as God's chosen king and swears allegiance to him. He is also a tragic example of how Saul's failure negatively impacts so many of those who are close to him.

Characters in the lower left quadrant are major, but flat. We may label them types. Types usually provide an example of one character trait that is to be emulated or shunned. For example, Ehud is a type of the courageous leader whose faith becomes a channel through which God delivers his people from oppression (Judg. 3:12–30). Apart from Ehud's faith, which is revealed in bold and decisive action in a single episode of his life, we know almost nothing else about the man.

Finally characters in the lower right quadrant are minor and flat; they usually function as mere **agents** in the story. They have a limited role to fulfill and normally are not intended as models for behavior. Occasionally an agent serves as a foil for a major character. For example, Orpah is a foil for Ruth (Ruth 1:4–19). When Naomi urges the girls to return to Moab, Orpah does what one expects—she says good-bye and goes home. But Ruth's love for Naomi causes her to stay with her mother-in-law, even when such devotion seems illogical and downright foolish. Orpah is not a bad person; on the contrary she is a good daughter-in-law who had treated Naomi well. She deserves and receives Naomi's blessing (Ruth 1:8). But Ruth is beyond good—her love for Naomi transcends the norm. So the comparison between the two girls is not expressed in terms of bad versus good, but good versus great. The narrator's purpose in mentioning and describing Orpah is to highlight Ruth.

One of the striking features of biblical stories is that God often appears as a character. The interpreter is in an awkward position, for it may seem

sacrilegious to view God as a character in a story and to analyze him like one would the hero of a novel. However, we must resist the urge to shy away from such analysis. After all, by entering into human history and inscripturating stories in which he plays a prominent role, God invites us to learn something about himself from these literary presentations of his self-revelation in space and time. In analyzing how God is characterized, we must remember that these stories reflect God's self-revelation in a form that is culturally **contextualized** and conditioned. When we open Scripture, we discover that the very first book contains stories, not a systematic theology. These stories are not so much concerned with making philosophical pronouncements about the divine character as they are with revealing a personal, dynamic God who longs to relate to his people and move them toward the goal he has for them.

If one looks only for **ontological** truth about God in biblical narrative, one is likely to become frustrated with the diversity that is evident in the characterization of God. But if one approaches the text as it is and seeks to discover what it says about how God relates to human beings, one will come away invigorated and encouraged by the portrait of an omnipotent, sovereign creator who enters into his world in an intimate, personal manner. In Genesis he pays Abraham a personal visit (Gen. 18) and even stoops to wrestle with one particularly recalcitrant character (Gen. 32:22–32)!

We also detect God working behind the scene, through and in spite of human actions and choices, as he providentially transforms the sinful, mean-spirited actions of a hate-filled band of brothers into the redemption of a family, in fulfillment of his promise to an obedient servant who once passed a difficult test of faith (Gen. 37–50; cf. Gen. 22).[7] In the end these elements complement one another—the poles of **transcendence** and **immanence**, as well as the intermediate dimension of **providence**, reflect God's relationship to his world.

Plot

The third basic element in a story is its plot, or sequence of events. At the heart of a plot is a conflict that involves the central character. Such

7. For a study of the characterization of God in Genesis see W. Lee Humphreys, *The Character of God in the Book of Genesis: A Narrative Appraisal* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001).

conflicts usually involve a test or challenge. The conflict can be external to the protagonist, pitting him against an **antagonist**. Examples would be David's battle with Goliath (1 Sam. 17), Saul's ongoing attempt to kill David (1 Sam. 18–27), or Elijah's confrontation with Baal's prophets and their sponsor, the evil queen Jezebel (1 Kings 18). Conflicts can also be internal to the protagonist, as in the story of Elijah (1 Kings 19). These external and internal dimensions can both be present in a story. For example, within the framework of Elijah's external conflict with Jezebel, a deeper, more profound conflict takes place within the prophet's soul. Despite his success on Mount Carmel, he wavers in the face of Jezebel's threat against his life and flees to distant Mount Sinai, all but abandoning his prophetic call. The Lord confronts him there, tries to encourage him, and gives him a renewed commission. The Lord commands him to anoint, in order, Hazael (as the new king of Syria), Jehu (as the new king of Israel), and Elisha (as his prophetic successor) (vv. 15–18). But Elijah loses the internal struggle. He goes directly to Elisha and anoints him (v. 19), as if to say to God, "I quit—let Elisha take over." Eventually Elisha, not Elijah, announces Hazael's rise to the throne of Syria (2 Kings 8:13) and anoints Jehu as king over Israel (2 Kings 9:6).

As an interpreter seeks to appreciate how a story's plot contributes to the significance of the story, it is helpful to have some categories with which to work. The final goal of exegesis is not to label a story's plot type or fit the story into a taxonomy of forms, but thinking about the plot type and structure of a story can help one get a handle on the story's dramatic features and its function within its larger narrative context.

Biblical stories display a variety of plot types. On one side of the spectrum we find tragedies, punitive stories, and negative example stories. In a tragedy the protagonist, who has the potential or at least the opportunity to succeed and achieve greatness, fails and falls, often because of a very human, but fatal flaw. Biblical examples abound—Samson, Saul, and David being some of the better-known tragic figures.

Punitive stories highlight the theme of God's justice. An evildoer violates God's moral standards and then reaps the consequences of his behavior, often by a combination of direct divine intervention and providential manipulation of events, as in the case of the murderous tyrant Abimelech and the Shechemites (Judg. 9). Abimelech murders

his half-brothers and becomes ruler of Shechem. In response to Jotham's curse, the Lord sends a spirit to stir up hostility between Abimelech and the Shechemites. Through a series of reports delivered in a timely manner, Abimelech attacks and destroys Shechem, but is then killed by a woman armed with a millstone.

Negative example stories present a character in a negative light as an example to avoid. The story of Jephthah, while it has a tragic dimension, is best viewed as a negative example story (Judg. 10–12). Jephthah has a just cause and is energized for battle by God's Spirit, but his faith wavers and he bargains with God, promising a human sacrifice in exchange for a victory over the Ammonites. Having painted himself into a corner, he is forced to offer his daughter as a burnt offering to fulfill a vow that arose out of fear and reflected the influence of paganism upon his thinking. His weak faith and lack of foresight make him the antithesis of what Israel needs in a leader.

One can distinguish these plot types by the emotional response they produce in the reader. Tragedies bring tears of sorrow to our eyes, punitive stories bring a sense of satisfaction when the evildoer gets what he or she deserves, and negative example stories make us frown and shake our heads in disapproval at the disturbing behavior of the central character.

On the positive side of the spectrum, one finds comic plots, reward stories, and admiration stories. In a comic plot the protagonist faces challenges and obstacles but overcomes them through faith and divine intervention. For example, the book of Ruth is a comic plot type. The story's central character, Naomi, is reduced to poverty by the death of her husband and two sons. She returns home a bitter woman who feels that God is her enemy. But as the Lord providentially intervenes in her circumstances through the devotion of her daughter-in-law Ruth and the kindness of her relative Boaz, her attitude is transformed. In the story's final **scene** her friends, who heard her spew out her bitter resentment upon her arrival in Bethlehem, remind her that the Lord has blessed her with a grandchild who will protect her in her old age.

Reward stories, like punitive stories, illustrate God's justice. But in reward stories God rewards a character for being faithful and obedient. The story of the Shunammite woman (2 Kings 4:8–17) is a good example. She makes it a practice to provide for Elisha's comfort when he

passes through Shunem. As a reward for her kindness, Elisha, apparently in his capacity as a prophet, announces she will finally have a son.

Admiration stories, in contrast to negative example stories, present a character in a positive light as an example to follow. The story of Esther illustrates this plot type. Esther finds herself in a strategic, though precarious, position in the king's harem. When Mordecai challenges her to step forward and intercede on behalf of her people, she answers the call and risks her life to save her people.

These positive plot types can also be distinguished by the emotional response they produce in the reader. Comic plots bring tears of joy to our eyes, reward stories prompt a hearty cheer when the faithful character gets what he or she deserves, and admiration stories make us smile and nod our heads in approval at the commendable behavior of the central character.

Plot types are often combined in a single story. While one plot type may be dominant or primary, other elements are sometimes present. For example, 1 Samuel 25 is essentially an admiration story. David is tempted to seek vengeance against Nabal, a fool who shows no respect for the future king of Israel. But David listens to the voice of wisdom embodied in Abigail, refrains from violence, and allows the Lord to punish Nabal. At the same time, the antagonist Nabal is a negative example of one who opposes God's chosen king; his death also gives the story a punitive element. The story of Esther is an admiration story, but it also has elements of a punitive plot type in that the antagonist, Haman, is justly punished for his sin and ends up hanging from the gallows he erected for Mordecai. When one focuses on Naomi, the central character in the book of Ruth, the story is a comic plot, but in Ruth's shining example one also detects the elements of both reward and admiration stories.

Plot structure can vary, depending on the story's length, complexity, and plot type(s). The structure of negative example and admiration stories can be quite simple. Following some reference to the story's setting, the protagonist typically faces a challenge or test that he or she fails (e.g., the story of Cain in Gen. 4:1–16) or passes (e.g., the story of Abraham's offering of his son Isaac in Gen. 22:1–19). Elements of the punitive or reward stories sometimes appear as the story concludes.

Tragic and comic plots are usually more complex. Once the setting

has been established a conflict arises, creating a complication in the plot that begs to be resolved. As the story unfolds, this tension is eventually resolved one way or the other, but usually not without plot twists and additional tension. For example, the reward story in 2 Kings 4:8–17 is immediately followed by a comic plot in which the Shunammite woman faces a terrible challenge to her faith. While working in the field (v. 18 = setting), her son suddenly complains of a severe headache (v. 19 = complication). The tension mounts as the boy dies on his mother's lap (v. 20). This unexpected twist in the overall plot of the chapter threatens to undermine the preceding reward story. The tension continues as the woman lays her son on the prophet's bed and travels to Mount Carmel (vv. 21–26). One gets the impression she is quite stoical about what has happened, but one suspects that this cannot possibly be the case. Her true feelings explode from within her when she meets Elisha and suggests that he may have played a cruel trick on her (vv. 27–28). Yet one detects her faith in her posture (v. 27, she grabs hold of Elisha's feet) and her words (v. 30, she insists on staying with Elisha). The tension is relieved to some degree when Elisha instructs Gehazi to run ahead and try to revive the boy (vv. 29–30), but it reaches an unbearable level when he returns and reports that the child did not respond (v. 31). The plot reaches its peak in verse 34 as the prophet stretches out on the boy and the boy's skin grows warm. As the boy begins breathing again, the reader breathes a sigh of relief, for the plot's complication has been resolved and its tension diffused. As the woman takes the boy in her arms, the reader is convinced of the integrity of the Lord's prophet and of the One who sent him.

Structural Features

Discourse Structure

In addition to **plot structure**, Old Testament stories also exhibit **discourse structure**.[8] Examining and outlining the discourse structure helps one see the basic contours of the story at the surface level

8. For studies of Hebrew narratival structure see Roy L. Heller, *Narrative Structure and Discourse Constellations: An Analysis of Clause Function in Biblical Hebrew,* Harvard Semitic Studies 55 (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2004); Robert D. Bergen, ed., *Biblical Hebrew and Discourse Linguistics* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1994); and David Allan Dawson, *Text-Linguistics and Biblical Hebrew,* JSOTSup 177 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1994).

and contributes to analysis of **dramatic structure** and other literary features (see below). A story's discourse structure is comprised of three main elements: the main line of the narrative, offline constructions, and quotations.

The main line is essentially the story line—the sequence of actions that forms the backbone of the story. Stories can begin in a variety of ways, but the story line proper is typically initiated and then carried along by clauses introduced by *wayyiqtol* (or past tense) verbal forms (often called *waw* consecutive with the imperfect). Most *wayyiqtol* clauses are sequential or consequential, but they can also have a variety of less common functions.[9] The following list, though not exhaustive, identifies the primary functions of *wayyiqtol* clauses:

1. Initiatory: The *wayyiqtol* clause sets the story proper in motion.
2. Sequential: The clause describes an action that follows the preceding action.
3. Consequential: The clause describes an action that follows the preceding action both logically and temporally.
4. Introductory: Often a *wayyiqtol* clause (especially one consisting of וַיְהִי, lit. "and it was," and a temporal word or phrase) introduces an **episode** or **scene** by providing background for the story to follow.
5. Flashback: Sometimes the narrator interrupts the sequence of events and uses a *wayyiqtol* clause to refer to a prior action that now becomes relevant. The flashback can initiate an episode or scene, refer back to an action that preceded the episode or scene chronologically, or, more often than not, recall an event that occurred within the time frame of the story being related.
6. Focusing: A *wayyiqtol* clause often has a focusing or specifying function. It can focus on a particular individual involved in the event just described, give a more detailed account of the event or

9. For more detailed analysis of the use of *wayyiqtol* forms in narrative discourse with illustrations of proposed categories, see Robert B. Chisholm Jr., *From Exegesis to Exposition: A Practical Guide to Using Biblical Hebrew* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 119–23; Bill T. Arnold and John H. Choi, *A Guide to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 84–87; Christo H. J. van der Merwe, Jackie A. Naudé, and Jan H. Kroeze, *A Biblical Hebrew Reference Grammar* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1999), 165–68; and Bruce K. Waltke and M. O'Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 547–54.

an aspect of the event, or provide a specific example of a preceding statement.

7. Resumptive: A *wayyiqtol* clause can serve a resumptive function. When used in this manner it follows a supplementary, focusing, or flashback statement; such examples can be labeled resumptive-(con)sequential. On a few occasions the resumptive *wayyiqtol* repeats a statement made prior to the embedded comment or scene that interrupted the narrative; these clauses can be labeled resumptive-reiterative.
8. Complementary: A *wayyiqtol* clause sometimes complements the preceding statement by giving the other side of the same coin or by describing an action that naturally or typically accompanies what precedes.
9. Summarizing or concluding: A *wayyiqtol* clause occasionally makes a summarizing statement, often in relation to the preceding narrative, and/or can be used to conclude a narrative or scene, sometimes with a formulaic comment.

Offline clauses deviate from the *wayyiqtol* pattern. Most often the conjunction is immediately followed by a non-verb, usually the subject of the clause (sometimes called a disjunctive clause). The predicate then follows, whether stated (typically a perfect verbal form or a participle) or implied (in equative sentences where a subject is connected to its predicate by an implied "to be" verb; e.g., וְהָאִשָּׁה טוֹבַת מַרְאֶה מְאֹד, "the woman [was] very beautiful," 2 Sam. 11:2). Offline constructions often are descriptive and do not further the action of the story. In such cases they tend to provide background or supplemental information. Sometimes, however, they do contribute to the story line by describing a contrastive or oppositional action. In other cases they shift the dramatic focus from one character or participant to another. The following list, though not exhaustive, identifies the primary functions of offline clauses:

1. Introductory or backgrounding: Offline clauses sometimes formally mark the beginning of a new scene or episode; in this case they typically provide background information for the story that follows.

2. Supplemental: Offline clauses very frequently give supplemental (or parenthetical) information that is embedded within a story.
3. Circumstantial: Offline clauses sometimes describe the circumstances attending to an action, such as time or manner.
4. Contrastive: Sometimes an offline clause describes an action that contrasts with what precedes or qualifies it in some way.
5. Dramatic: An offline clause, especially when introduced by וְהִנֵּה, "and look!" can have a dramatic function, inviting the audience to enter into the story as a participant or eyewitness. This device can also signal a shift in focus from one character or participant to another, sometimes involving a flashback.
6. Concluding: Offline clauses can be used to signal **closure** formally for an episode or scene.

Quotations (including dialogues), the third main element in a story's discourse structure, are very common in Old Testament narrative. Quoted speech displays various **discourse types** and functions (see discussion below). The syntactical structure of quotations can vary, depending on the discourse type.

Since a picture is often better than a thousand words, we offer a sample outline of the discourse structure of a passage (Judg. 4). *Wayyiqtol* clauses that form the main line of the story are translated in regular font, while offline constructions are in bold. Quotations are italicized. Our proposed classification of each *wayyiqtol* and offline clause appears in the third column of the chart. Comments on the discourse structure are included after each paragraph. The translation is a slight adaptation of the author's translation prepared for the NET Bible.

Judges 4 has three main literary units—a prologue (vv. 1–3), the story proper (vv. 4–22), and an epilogue (vv. 23–24).

1–3	Prologue	Type of Clause
1a	The Israelites again did evil in the LORD's sight	initiatory and sequential
1b	**after Ehud's death.**	circumstantial
2a	The LORD turned them over to King Jabin of Canaan, who ruled in Hazor.	consequential
2b	**The general of his army was Sisera;**	supplemental
2c	**who lived in Harosheth Haggoyim.**	supplemental
3	The Israelites cried out for help to the LORD, for Sisera had nine hundred chariots with iron-rimmed wheels and he cruelly oppressed the Israelites for twenty years.[10]	resumptive-consequential

Comments on the Prologue

1. This next major episode in Judges begins with the formulaic report, "The Israelites again did evil in the LORD's sight" (see 3:7, 12). The *wayyiqtol* form initiates the action, but it is also sequential in relation to the preceding literary unit (3:12–31). It introduces a historical account that postdates the story of Ehud recorded in the previous chapter.
2. The offline clause in verse 1b is circumstantial/temporal, informing us that the rebellion described earlier in the verse took place after Ehud's death.
3. The supplemental offline clause in verse 2b introduces us to Sisera, who plays an important role in the following story. The accompanying offline clause in verse 2c provides further information about this character's place of residence.

10. The final clause of verse 3 begins with a disjunctive structure (*waw* + subject + verb), but it seems to be an extension of the preceding causal clause (cf. Gen. 2:5).

4–22	**Story Proper**	**Type of Clause**
4	**Now Deborah, a prophetess, wife of Lappidoth, was leading Israel at that time.**	introductory-backgrounding
5a	**She would sit under the Date Palm Tree of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the Ephraimite hill country.**	introductory-backgrounding/specifying
5b	The Israelites would come up to her to have their disputes settled.	complementary
6a	Deborah sent messengers	initiatory
6b	and summoned Barak son of Abinoam from Kedesh in Naphtali.	sequential
6c	She said to him:	sequential or specifying
6d	*"Is it not true that the LORD God of Israel is commanding you? 'Go, march to Mount Tabor! Take with you ten thousand men from Naphtali and Zebulun!*	
7	*I will bring Sisera, the general of Jabin's army, to you at the Kishon River, along with his chariots and huge army. I will hand him over to you.'"*	
8a	Barak said to her:	sequential
8b	*"If you go with me, I will go. But if you do not go with me, I will not go."*	
9a	She said:	sequential
9b	*"I will indeed go with you. But you will not gain fame on the expedition you are taking, for the LORD will turn Sisera over to a woman."*	
9c	Deborah got up	sequential
9d	and went with Barak to Kedesh.	sequential
10a	Barak summoned men from Naphtali and Zebulun to Kedesh.	sequential
10b	Ten thousand men followed him.	sequential
10c	Deborah went up with him as well.	reiterative

11a	**(Now Heber the Kenite had moved away from the Kenites, the descendants of Hobab, Moses' father-in-law.**	supplemental
11b	He settled near the tree in Zaanannim near Kedesh.)	resumptive-sequential
12a	When Sisera heard that Barak son of Abinoam had gone up to Mount Tabor,	resumptive-sequential
13a	he ordered all his chariotry—nine hundred chariots with iron-rimmed wheels—and all the troops he had with him to go from Harosheth Haggoyim to the River Kishon.	consequential
14a	Deborah said to Barak:	sequential
14b	*"Spring into action, for this is the day the LORD is handing Sisera over to you! Has the LORD not taken the lead?"*	
14c	Barak quickly went down from Mount Tabor	consequential
14d	**with ten thousand men following him.**	circumstantial
15a	The LORD routed Sisera, all his chariotry, and all his army before Barak with the edge of the sword.	sequential
15b	Sisera jumped out of his chariot	sequential
15c	and ran away on foot.	sequential
16a	**Now Barak chased the chariots and the army all the way to Harosheth Haggoyim.**	dramatic shift in focus
16b	Sisera's whole army died by the edge of the sword;	sequential
16c	**not even one survived.**	complementary-reiterative/ emphatic
17a	**Now Sisera ran away on foot to the tent of Jael, wife of Heber the Kenite, for King Jabin of Hazor and the family of Heber the Kenite had made a peace treaty.**	dramatic shift in focus
18a	Jael came out to welcome Sisera.	sequential
18b	She said to him:	sequential
18c	*"Stop and rest, my lord! Stop and rest with me! Don't be afraid!"*	

18d	So Sisera stopped to rest in her tent	consequential
18e	and she put a blanket over him.	sequential
19a	He said to her:	sequential
19b	*"Give me a little water to drink, for I am thirsty."*	
19c	She opened a goatskin container of milk	sequential
19d	and gave him some milk to drink.	sequential
19e	Then she covered him up again.	sequential
20a	He said to her:	sequential
20b	*"Stand watch at the entrance to the tent. If anyone comes along and asks you, 'Is there a man here?' say, 'No.'"*	
21a	Then Jael wife of Heber took a tent peg in one hand	sequential
21b	and a hammer in the other.	complementary
21c	She crept up on him,	sequential
21d	and drove the tent peg through his temple	sequential
21e	and it went into the ground	sequential
21f	**while he was asleep**—	circumstantial
21g	for he was exhausted—	supplemental/explanatory
21h	and he died.	resumptive-consequential
22a	**Now Barak was chasing Sisera.**	dramatic shift in focus
22b	Jael went out to welcome him.	sequential
22c	She said to him:	sequential
22d	*"Come here and I will show you the man you are searching for."*	
22f	He went with her into the tent	consequential
22g	**and there he saw Sisera sprawled out dead**	dramatic shift in focus
22h	**with the tent peg in his temple.**	circumstantial