

“Ben Walton has written an excellent guide for *Preaching Old Testament Narratives*. Well versed in biblical hermeneutics and homiletics, he offers an insightful, practical, step-by-step method, illustrated with many examples, for preaching Old Testament narratives relevantly. I highly recommend this book to those who wish to preach Old Testament narratives with divine authority.”

**Sidney Greidanus, Professor of Preaching Emeritus,
Calvin Theological Seminary**

“Pastors around the globe desiring to preach all of God’s word faithfully will find Benjamin Walton’s book *Preaching Old Testament Narratives* to be extremely helpful. Walton guides the preacher throughout the entire process of studying and proclaiming the Old Testament narratives. This book is quite readable and yet very thorough, addressing all of the important issues that preachers encounter in proclaiming the Old Testament stories. This is an outstanding work, a valuable tool that seasoned pastors and beginning pastors alike will want to read, study, and employ in their preaching.”

J. Daniel Hays, Professor of Biblical Studies, Ouachita Baptist University

“Read this book before you preach from any biblical narrative and it will skillfully steer you away from some common mistakes and toward very constructive alternatives. More than that, its short chapters and accessible style will help you improve, among other things, introductions, conclusions, and how you preach Christ. Take up and read!”

**Greg R. Scharf, Chair of Pastoral Theology and Professor of Homiletics,
Trinity Evangelical Divinity School**

“The narratives of the Old Testament present a technical challenge for the preacher. But in the end, they are still just stories that compel attention even as they offer truth. Ben Walton helps us navigate these technical aspects without losing the heart of these stories. This book draws from deep reserves of homiletic wisdom. If we listen to this wisdom, we just might help our people deeper into the heart of God.”

**Kenton C. Anderson, Professor of Homiletics, ACTS Seminaries of
Trinity Western University, President, Northwest Baptist Seminary**

“Most Christians know only a limited number of the Old Testament’s narratives, largely because so few pastors have the confidence to preach them. Ben Walton helpfully addresses this problem, showing how these narratives continue to be relevant for Christians today and how they can be preached authentically. Preachers will find clear guidance, both in the processes of interpreting these narratives and also in the steps to developing interesting sermons on them.”

**David G. Firth, Old Testament Tutor, Head of Research,
St. John School of Mission (Nottingham, UK)**

“Ben Walton has given us a gift in this wonderful summary of a sound hermeneutical approach to the Scriptures. Paul admonished us to ‘rightly divide the word of truth,’ and with this tool in hand any student of the Bible, if they have the discipline, will be able to be ‘a workman who need not be ashamed.’”

Darryl DelHousaye, President, Phoenix Seminary

“A welcome, thorough guide for pastors brave enough to preach on Old Testament narratives—and to further sharpen their skills. A full menu of practical help and examples awaits them in this book.”

**Robert L. Hubbard Jr., Professor of Biblical Literature Emeritus,
North Park Theological Seminary**

“The narratives of the Old Testament may be at once the easiest and the most demanding passages in the Bible for preachers—easiest, because they are vivid accounts filled with arresting details that easily hold an audience’s interest; demanding, because it’s difficult to preach them well, in the sense of getting their theological substance right and communicating their relevance effectively. This is where Ben Walton’s *Preaching Old Testament Narratives* can help. Preachers who are intent on doing justice to the stories of the Old Testament will profit greatly from Walton’s counsel on how to navigate the exegetical and homiletical challenges these marvelous passages pose.”

Duane Litfin, President Emeritus, Wheaton College

“As children many of us were raised on wonderful stories from the Old Testament, but it is rare indeed to hear faithful and relevant exposition of those narratives in today’s pulpits. Benjamin Walton’s volume, *Preaching Old Testament Narratives*, offers the sort of clear guidance necessary for all who are serious about discovering and delivering the message of the Old Testament to the church in our age. Walton’s work guides the preacher through a series of practical steps and clear illustrations designed to result in messages that are rooted deeply in stories of old while turning toward the Christ who makes all things new. I recommend it highly.”

Jason Hiles, Dean, College of Theology, Grand Canyon University

“Preaching from Old Testament narrative texts can be tricky for beginning preachers and seasoned expositors alike. For many listeners today, Old Testament stories may sound archaic at best, and irrelevant at worst. In this very practical and helpful resource, Ben Walton moves adeptly from hermeneutics to homiletics and offers preachers a blueprint for how to faithfully communicate God’s redemptive story from Old Testament narrative passages. Read it and you will acquire concrete tips for making this important genre of Scripture come alive and find new pathways for application in your listeners’ lives.”

**Matthew D. Kim, Assistant Professor of Preaching and Ministry,
Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary**

“Springing from the homiletical and theological world of Haddon Robinson and Donald Sunukjian, this book on preaching Old Testament narrative makes its own, fresh contribution. Ben Walton writes with precision and clarity, and his thoughtful method will go a long way toward encouraging more fine sermons on the rich narrative literature of the Old Testament.”

**Thomas G. Long, Bandy Professor of Preaching Emeritus,
Candler School of Theology, Emory University**

“In his encounter with an Ethiopian court official who was reading a passage from the scroll of Isaiah, Philip began at that passage and proclaimed Jesus to the official (Acts 8: 26–35). All who teach and proclaim the gospel should be able to do the same with Old Testament narratives. Ben Walton’s book will help that to happen. *Preaching Old Testament Narratives* is unique in approach and practical in design. Examined and tested by groups of pastors prior to publication, the book gives understandable guidance on narrative interpretation and helpful steps on sermon development from text selection to formulation of the take-home truth. Organized in two main parts, Discover the Message and Deliver the Message, *Preaching Old Testament Narratives* is not just a quality textbook for personal study or for a course of study; it is a complete course in a textbook, and I highly recommend it as a vital resource for those who preach and teach Old Testament narratives.”

**Jerry N. Barlow, Professor of Preaching and Pastoral Work,
New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary**

“Ben Walton honors the Old Testament’s narratives by resisting the reductionist tendency to strip them down to bottom-line principles that will rarely do justice to the divinely inspired text. *Preaching Old Testament Narratives* is a wise, well-conceived book that is very accessible and overflows with practical instruction. Those who take to heart and practice the rubrics and advice provided here will preach the narratives with fresh Spirit-infused, Christ-centered power.”

**R. Kent Hughes, Visiting Professor of Practical Theology,
Westminster Theological Seminary**

“I’ve always believed that God’s Word is the greatest storybook of all time. While a comprehensive guide to theology and doctrine, its stories highlight the reality of God’s work in human lives in colorful and dramatic ways. But preaching the narratives can often be challenging. *Preaching Old Testament Narratives* by Ben Walton will be a great guide to anyone who wants the stories of the Old Testament to come to life in their preaching without wavering from the true meaning of the text or over-spiritualizing the narrative. All of us who love telling the stories of Scripture will be grateful for Walton’s contribution.”

Joe Stowell, President, Cornerstone University

“For a while now I have been looking for an up-to-date book that would enable my homiletics students to grapple with and grasp how to preach from the Old Testament. Here is the answer to my prayers. Since narratives make up so much of the Old Testament, this book will certainly be a great resource. Any homiletics student—and indeed any preacher—who makes his way through this book will find his preaching true to Scripture and powerfully applied to his hearers.”

**Conrad Mbewe, Chancellor, African Christian University,
Principal, Lusaka Ministerial College**

“Pastors who have been trained to preach based on Pauline texts are often challenged when facing the task of preaching those fascinating stories found in the Old Testament. So pastors will welcome Ben Walton’s new book *Preaching Old Testament Narratives* as a helpful source of exegetical and homiletical insights. Walton walks us through the process, from selecting and analyzing a narrative text to shaping and then delivering such a message. The book is packed with valuable preaching ideas and tools. This volume will be a welcome addition to many a preacher’s bookshelf.”

**Michael Duduit,
Dean, College of Christian Studies and Clamp Divinity School,
Anderson University**

“Everybody loves a story! Perhaps that’s why God put so many of them in the Bible, especially in the Old Testament. Of course, these stories took place long, long ago in places far, far away. So how do we discover their message and their relevance for modern readers? How do those of us who preach and teach communicate effectively the relevance of these ancient stories to a modern audience? If, like me, you’re still thinking through answers to these questions, you need to read Benjamin Walton’s *Preaching Old Testament Narratives*. In this readable, insightful book Walton provides a clear, practical, and well-illustrated guide to discovering the message of the stories and to delivering that message in an accurate, relevant, clear, and inspiring manner. He shows the reader how to select a complete unit of thought, identify its theological and historical contexts, discern its plot, determine its original theological message, and craft its take-home truth. From there he shows how to construct a sermon that will not only inform listeners, but convince them to ‘buy’ and live out the take-home truth of the passage. As I read through the book, I found myself thinking: *Yes, that makes sense! What a good idea! Why haven’t I been doing this?* This will really enhance my preaching!”

**Robert B. Chisholm, Jr.,
Chair and Senior Professor of Old Testament Studies,
Dallas Theological Seminary**

“In *Preaching Old Testament Narratives*, Ben Walton provides a clear, helpful, and thoughtful approach to preaching from this important genre. The book is well designed, enabling the experienced or novice preacher a clear path toward biblical preaching.”

Scott M. Gibson,
Haddon W. Robinson Professor of Preaching and Ministry,
Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary

“The biblical text—specifically, the theology of the text—is what preachers are called to proclaim. Nailing down the theological message of Old Testament narratives is notoriously difficult. Walton has written an excellent how-to guide for preachers. Like the sermons he espouses, Walton’s book is accurate, relevant, clear, and inspiring. It will instruct rookie preachers, challenge veteran preachers, and inspire all preachers to work hard at their craft. Practical and profound, Walton’s book is a worthy addition to every preacher’s library.”

Brandon Cash, Director, Preaching and Pastoral Ministry Program,
Talbot School of Theology, Biola University

“Everyone loves a story. The power of the narrative has not disappeared. We are still captivated by a good story well told. And the Old Testament is a treasure trove of stories. Yet, the Old Testament narrative presents exegetical and homiletical challenges that any serious student of the Word will have to wrestle with. And the tension often lies between being faithful to the ancient text and making the sermon relevant. There are preachers who focus on the meaning of the biblical text, but sometimes at the expense of making the text meaningful to listeners. How can we remain faithful to the preaching of the Word without failing to engage our listeners today?

“To answer this dilemma, Dr. Ben Walton proposes that we consider three aspects of communication—words, genre, and message—as possible ways forward. Pastors, seminary students, and all who communicate God’s Word should consider Dr. Walton’s suggestions on how to preach with biblical integrity and homiletical clarity.”

Desmond Soh, Assistant Professor of Homiletics
and Intercultural Studies, Singapore Bible College

“Walton’s careful analysis of a specific narrative is a helpful model that exemplifies the interpretation of narrative texts for preaching. His writing is lucid and dynamic, and his presence is felt at your side, a friendly guide helping you along as you make your way through the narrative of 2 Samuel 11–12. In his writing he has modeled the ‘four pillars of excellent preaching’ that he propounds: accuracy, clarity, relevance, and inspiring quality.”

Abraham Kuruvilla, Research Professor of Pastoral Ministries,
Dallas Theological Seminary

PREACHING
Old Testament
NARRATIVES

BENJAMIN H. WALTON



Kregel
Ministry

Preaching Old Testament Narratives

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Donald Sunukjian and Jeffrey Arthurs

Molders of preachers, least of all me

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FOREWORD

Jeffrey Arthurs

Haddon Robinson was fond of saying that for the pastor, “Sundays roll around with amazing regularity—every three or four days!” Similarly, I heard Timothy Keller say in a panel discussion that the task of preparing sermons is “relentless.” What preachers need is a doable method for preparing sermons that is both exegetically sound and rhetorically savvy. That’s what Benjamin Walton has provided. This book is a template, well-illustrated, for how to manage the relentless task of feeding your flock from the pulpit.

Part of the reason the task is daunting is because preachers stand between two worlds; we exegete both the text and the audience. In the case of Benjamin Walton’s focus, that text will be an Old Testament narrative, and it’s no easy task to uncover the theology of a story. That is because stories “show” more than they “tell.” Biblical narrators are theologians, yes, but they are also artists who use deft brushstrokes to depict the excellences of God, the folly of humans, the glory of redemption, and the sobering warning of judgment. So I say again that preachers need a do-able, realistic method for discovering the theologian-artist’s intention. We are interpreters of Scripture.

And preachers are also persuaders. This moves us into the realm of rhetoric as we contextualize the ancient narratives for the twenty-first century mission field. As communicators we apply the truth, speak for the ear, address objections, and deliver in a way that embodies the message rather than contradicting it. Is such a method available? Read on.

Preachers do one more thing as well. They not only interpret and communicate Scripture. They also watch souls. Preaching

cannot be divorced from shepherding. Perhaps it is more accurate to say that soul-watching is not a third component of pulpit ministry; rather that it is the sum total of that ministry. Our roles as interpreters and communicators serve this overarching role. You will see that emphasis in Dr. Walton's book. It is a gift to busy pastors who stand between two worlds every three or four days.

PREFACE

When I put together a few notes about OT narratives fifteen years ago for a class at church, I could never have imagined it would become the book you hold in your hands today. It was hard enough back then to imagine writing a ten-page paper! A book it has become, and hopefully it's one that will serve you well.

My goal was to create a resource that you'll want to turn to when you preach OT narratives. My heart is for practitioners—those who stand before God's Word and God's people, and who are called to be faithful to both. Multiple times over the last few years, as the book developed, its contents were read and tested anonymously by groups of pastors. Their feedback encouraged and challenged me to meet them where they (and you) are at.

The book is unique in that it fleshes out in one volume both the interpretive and practical skills necessary to preach OT narratives with excellence. These skills have proven to be learnable among a cross-section of pastors. I pray they enrich your study of Scripture, deepen your faith in God, and enhance your service to others. We preachers desire to preach God's Word faithfully and powerfully. It's my hope that after closely following the book's approach, you'll have an intuitive sense that you have done just that.

Chapters 4–10 are a conscious attempt to apply, in my own way, Donald Sunukjian's homiletic to the preaching of OT narratives. Don is a homiletical genius and the author of *Invitation to Biblical Preaching*. A seminary provost once told me that experienced pastors appreciate Don's teaching so much that he

consistently receives the highest marks from them when he comes to town to teach doctoral-level courses.

Many thanks are in order. Thanks first to my wife, Sara, and my boys Colin, Lucas, and Landon. I delight in you. Thanks also to longtime friends Jim Sides, Scott Elliott, and Tom Wise. Who would have known?

I would like to offer special thanks to Dennis Hillman, Shawn Vander Lugt, Laura Bartlett, and the rest of the team at Kregel. Thanks for seeing value in the book and for shepherding it along the path to publication.

I remain in awe of God for blessing me with an eclectic mix of professors who were ideally suited to develop this future homiletician: Jerry Camery-Hoggatt, Ben Shin, Peter Anders, Alan Hultberg, Tim Ralston, Randy Pelton, Jeff Arthurs, and Don Sunukjian.

The book is dedicated to Don Sunukjian of Talbot School of Theology, Biola University, and to Jeff Arthurs of Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary. A finer combination of homileticians who can find? Don taught me to preach and allowed me to lecture and mentor his students. Jeff was my doctoral mentor. His investment of time enabled me to polish my preaching skills in ways that only regular feedback from an experienced pro could.

INTRODUCTION

Three pastors. Different backgrounds. The same struggle.

Pastor John

John has led First Church for five years. A graduate of National Seminary, he maintains some facility in the biblical languages. When he preaches, he makes use of interlinears, lexicons, and the best commentaries. He's most comfortable in the NT letters, but occasionally preaches OT narratives.

He's currently preaching through 2 Samuel. He's begun, however, to question how well he's doing. "Am I going too fast or too slow?" His goal is to preach one complete unit of thought (CUT) at a time, but he has difficulty figuring out where they begin and end. The commentaries are of little help because they break up passages in all sorts of ways, and use terms like "literary unit" to describe everything from blocks of dialogue to ten or more chapters.

He's also questioning his application. He understands that it isn't something preachers make up. It derives from the message of the text. He tends to use the old "When you are in a situation similar to the one in the biblical story, God will respond to you pretty much the same way he responded to them" approach, but he's beginning to doubt its validity.

John's got the details down. What he needs is a resource that helps him put the pieces together, so that he can maximize his preaching potential from OT narratives.

Pastor Shawn

Shawn has led Second Church for ten years. A former student of Regional Seminary, he spent a decade in ministry before becoming a senior pastor. He gave up trying to use scholarly commentaries years ago: “It’s difficult to get much out of them. They’re full of minutiae, addressing concerns few of us care about.” What he finds most useful are the commentaries of Big Preacher.

Shawn would differ with anyone who questions the quality of his preaching—so would his congregation. He’s no topical preacher. “We preach verse-by-verse here.” He’s currently preaching through 2 Samuel, one chapter per week. He rarely questions the accuracy of his applications, and while he doesn’t think of it this way, he “applies” the Bible by reading a few verses, sharing what comes to mind, reading a few more verses, and sharing more personal reflections.

Shawn wants to preach OT narratives with biblical authority, but needs a resource that helps him bridge the gap between scholarly commentaries and the sermon, so that he can maximize his preaching potential from OT narratives.

Pastor Ron

Ron has led Third Church for fifteen years. He never went to seminary but has taken a few Bible classes. Currently, he’s too busy with a thriving ministry to pursue a seminary education. Besides, what if seminary killed his ministry? It killed the ministry of Associate Pastor’s son. “He gave up a great future here because seminary made him think that my preaching and evangelism are unbiblical.”

Ron usually covers a variety of passages in his sermons. With OT narratives, however, he finds it better to stick with one passage. He sees important lessons in them: how to have hope and courage; how to be great husbands and wives; and how to pray, listen to God’s voice, and discern his will. This week, he’ll preach on how to avoid marital infidelity from 2 Samuel 11. He sees the value of commentaries for lecture preachers, and never questions the accuracy of his applications because he finds that most passages are pretty clear. When he needs it, he finds Favorite Author to be helpful.

Ron values accuracy in preaching, but needs a resource—one that minimizes academic lingo, so that he can maximize his preaching potential from OT narratives.

Despite their differences, John, Shawn, and Ron have the same struggle: to preach OT narratives with excellence. This book is designed to help preachers like them.

ABBREVIATIONS

OT Old Testament
NT New Testament

CUT Complete Unit of Thought
EI Exegetical Idea
OTM Original-Theological Message
PPA Picture-Painting Application
THT Take-Home Truth

v(v). Verse(s) in the chapter under discussion

ISBE International Standard Bible Encyclopedia

PART I:
DISCOVER THE MESSAGE

CHAPTER I

OT NARRATIVES, HERMENEUTICS, AND BIBLICAL AUTHORITY

Accuracy in preaching is vital in today's world. In the 800s, it mattered less if preachers thought the Bible taught the earth was the center of the universe. Everyone believed that. In the 1400s, it mattered less if preachers taught a flat earth. People believed the clergy more than university professors.

Today, when we misinterpret Scripture or assert knowledge of God or his will that the Bible doesn't teach, repercussions can be serious. A few years ago, I had a chance at a college graduation party to witness to a young man who had left the faith years earlier. He was a strip-club bouncer. Knowing that I was a pastor, he asked me a number of Bible questions. My answers shocked him because I was able to show him that the Bible didn't teach much of the well-intentioned legalism he grew up with. No fancy interpretations were necessary. No in-depth analysis was needed—only the most well-accepted, but neglected, principles of biblical interpretation.

What Does It Mean to Preach with Biblical Authority?

Preaching with biblical authority means that our sermons accurately proclaim and apply the message of their biblical preaching texts. It

has little to do with whether the sermon is verse-by-verse, topical, or otherwise. It's often called "expository preaching" or "biblical preaching." The benefit of preaching with biblical authority is significant: It renders our message God's message.

Preaching with biblical authority is rooted in the historic Christian belief that God is so different than us that the only reliable way to have knowledge of God or his will is through Scripture. Applied to the sermon, it's the idea that unless the messages we preach and the applications we give derive from the message of our preaching texts, there is a good chance we've misrepresented God.

Preaching with biblical authority has one fundamental problem: It requires preachers. That's you and me. Keith Mathison once observed that no one "asserts that a Bible can enter a pulpit and preach itself. No one asserts that a Bible can read itself. Scripture cannot be interpreted or preached apart from the involvement of some human agency."¹ Since preaching with biblical authority is an action more than a belief, it requires more than a theoretical commitment. It must be put into practice. Despite his profound admiration for us preachers, Haddon Robinson admits that preaching with biblical authority "has suffered severely in the pulpits of those claiming to be its friends."²

To preach with biblical authority, we must use sound hermeneutics. *Hermeneutics is the thoughtful process of discovering what a biblical text was designed to teach those it was originally written to, so that we can faithfully apply it to our lives today.* It recognizes that careful thought is necessary to interpret and apply the Bible. Hermeneutics is necessary to overcome the temptation to too hastily equate our thoughts with God's thoughts. When we preach without giving much thought to hermeneutics, we relegate the Bible to the status of a tool—a tool for us preachers to carry out our agendas, which always seems noble to us.

1. Mathison, *The Shape of Sola Scriptura*, 259.

2. Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, 4.

Hermeneutics 101: How Words and Genre Work Together to Communicate Messages

Sound hermeneutics requires an understanding of how communication works. The Bible, after all, is God's authoritative communication to us. We need to consider three aspects of communication: words, genre, and message. "Words" refers to what we say; "genre" to the way we say it; and "message" to the reason for saying it.³ When we decide to communicate, we first determine the point we want to make (message); then the way we want to say it (genre); and then finally, we express ourselves in words.

Of these three, genre is the most neglected by preachers. Genre is an essential clue to understanding the message of biblical texts because it clues us in to the reading strategy—i.e., the hermeneutical principles—that the biblical author expects us to use. We practice genre analysis every day. We've all mastered the reading strategies of dozens of genres, including tax bills, political cartoons, parodies, fairy tales, editorials, and street signs. We don't think we're engaging in genre analysis because these genres are common in our culture.

Words alone cannot communicate a message. Genre is necessary to make sense of words. Take the phrase "I am bad." We're familiar with the wording, but what is the message? If intended ironically, it is, "I think I'm cool." If it's a mocking insult, the message is, "The person I'm speaking about thinks he's cool, but he's not." If it's a heartfelt confession, the message is, "I believe that I am a bad person."

In some genres, the words are similar to the message. In others, they are quite different. Let's say we want others to believe that our kids are great. If we want to be crystal clear but dry, we could use a declarative sentence. If we want to "wow" our listeners, we could use an anecdote. If we want to rouse the emotions, we could write a poem. Notice that even when the message is the same, the genre we couch it in affects our word choice:

3. Klein, Blomberg, and Hubbard, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, 9, 169.

Genre: Declarative sentence
 Words: My kids are great.
 Message: Believe my kids are great.

Genre: Anecdote
 Words: I woke up, got coffee, heard laughs outside, and saw my kids washing my car.
 Message: Believe my kids are great.

Genre: Poem
 Words: Roses are red, violets are blue, my kids' hearts are true.
 Message: Believe my kids are great.

The same dynamics are present in biblical communication. In some genres, the words are similar to the message; in others, they are very different.

Genre: Direct command (Eph. 5:18a)
 Words: Do not get drunk on wine, which is debauchery.
 Message: Do not get drunk on alcoholic beverages, which is a public act of wild living.

Genre: Parable (Matt. 13:44)
 Words: The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When found, the finder hides it, sells everything, and buys the field.
 Message: Join the kingdom of heaven; it's more valuable than anything else.

Genre: Lament (Ps. 10)
 Words: God, why do you hide? The wicked are prospering. God, fix the problem. God is great.
 Message: When feeling like God is hiding in the midst of an unjust trial, God's people *can* (express their

feelings to God) call on God to fix the problem; and, when they do, do it while maintaining full confidence that God is great.

- Genre: OT narrative (Gen. 11:1–9)
- Words: After the flood, people don't disperse, endangering and defying God's redemptive plans, so God disperses them.
- Message: It is futile to defy God's redemptive plans, because God's redemptive plans will prevail.

To give an example from recent history: A few years ago, *The Da Vinci Code* caused quite a stir because many read it more like a work of history than like the novel it is. This was largely a result of the author employing a literary device in its opening pages to heighten interest in the story. The gullible public, unfamiliar with fiction's tools of the trade and unversed in historical Jesus studies, misread the book in droves and made its author a very rich man. If misreading genre clues in secular literature can have deleterious effects, how much more when biblical literature is preached?

Hermeneutics 201: Comparing OT Narratives and NT Epistles

We call the message of a biblical text its theology. This is because the message is from God, and it makes demands on our lives. It includes both the primary and ancillary theological principles that God inspired a text to communicate. A text's message/theology represents the future-oriented direction of the text. In other words, its goal is to get us to conform our lives to it going forward.

Old Testament narratives differ from NT epistles in three key ways. The first is that OT narratives are a form of indirect communication. New Testament epistles are a form of direct communication. The messages of NT epistolary texts are clearer, more straightforward. They often use reason and logic to make their

points. Old Testament narratives, however, seek to persuade by enrapturing us in their stories, thereby causing us to lower our defenses, so that their messages can land easily and affectively on our hearts.

The second key difference between OT narratives and NT epistles is that the complete units of thought (CUTs) of OT narratives tend to be one to two chapters in length. The size of NT epistolary CUTs tend to be one to two paragraphs. Identifying CUTs is crucial because they provide the smallest unit of textual context that *must* be considered when interpreting anything within their boundaries.

The third key difference is that *unlike NT epistles, OT narratives do a lot of describing and not a lot of prescribing*. That is, they say a lot about what happened and only a little about what should have happened or must happen in the future. Compare 2 Samuel 11:1 with Colossians 2:6–7:

2 Samuel 11:1 (OT Narrative)	Colossians 2:6–7 (NT Epistle)
In the spring of the year, the time when kings go out to battle, David sent Joab, and his servants with him, and all Israel. And they ravaged the Ammonites and besieged Rabbah. But David remained at Jerusalem.	Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.

It's at this point that an important hermeneutical principle comes into play: "*Unless Scripture explicitly tells us we must do something, what is only narrated or described does not function in a normative (i.e., obligatory) way—unless it can be demonstrated on other grounds that the author intended it to function in this way.*"⁴ In other words, it

4. Fee and Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 124. See also Klein, Blomberg, and Hubbard, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, 424.

is illegitimate—going beyond the bounds of biblical authority—to turn the individual actions or behaviors that a text describes into principles or commands to be obeyed, unless we can make a really good case for it. Ignoring this hermeneutical principle is called *atomistic* interpretation

You might be wondering, “How can I know when a described behavior is prescribed?” The answer is: through a careful examination of a combination of factors (1) in a CUT or (2) its book that work together to prescribe the behavior being described. For example, in terms of factors in a CUT, most of 2 Samuel 11 describes David’s murderous activities. At the end of the chapter we read, “But the thing that David had done displeased the LORD” (11:27). From this combination of factors, it is accurate to conclude that “murder is wrong, even for the king.”⁵

When we take these three key differences between OT narratives and NT epistles together, an important point emerges: *OT narratives convey a small number of theological principles*. The number of theological principles in one or two chapters of OT narrative pale in comparison to one or two chapters of NT epistle. Plus, as we just saw in the 2 Samuel 11–12 example, it usually takes at least half of a narrative CUT for even ancillary theological principles to be taught.

For preaching, this means that OT narratives contain very few legitimate application principles. What is application? *Application is an actionable principle, instruction, or exemplification that derives from the theology (message) of a biblical text*. Application is not a universally true or even biblically true idea that comes to our minds when we read or preach a text. Application is not a principle that we “see” illustrated in a text. It is a requirement of God that is prescribed by the passage at hand, or a way to carry out such a requirement. Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart express it well:

5. For discovering how (and how difficult it is) to discern exceptions through a combination of factors in a biblical book, see Wenham, *Story as Torah: Reading Old Testament Narrative Ethically*.

Perhaps the single most useful bit of caution we can give you about reading and learning from narratives is this: Do not be a monkey-see-monkey-do reader [or preacher] of the Bible. . . . An Old Testament narrative usually *illustrates* a doctrine [or behavior] *taught* propositionally *elsewhere*. . . . Narratives record what happened—not necessarily what should have happened. . . . Therefore, not every narrative has an individual identifiable moral application [i.e., a specific behavior that it is advocating or warning against]. . . . We are not always told at the end of a narrative whether what happened was good or bad. We are expected to be able to [not apply, but] judge this on the basis of what God has *taught* us directly and categorically *elsewhere* in Scripture.⁶

Objection One: Apostolic and Early Church Hermeneutics

I commonly hear two objections when I share that the theology of an OT narrative contains only a small number of application principles. The first cites the hermeneutics of the apostles or early church, suggesting that they had an alternative method of applying OT narratives that we can use today.

Two things can be said in reply. The first, which relates to apostolic hermeneutics, is that if you are willing to dedicate three to five years of your life to sort out and learn the actual hermeneutical methods of the apostles—as opposed to some hack pseudo-version of it—go for it. Don't be surprised, however, when you discover that much of what they did pertained not to discerning life application principles from every nook and cranny of an OT narrative, but to pointing to Christ from the OT.

The second, which relates to the early church's hermeneutics, is that while the early church didn't always recover the message of an OT narrative, it doesn't mean that it wasn't their goal to do so. That many tried and failed doesn't mean that we should fail intentionally. Further, in many ways correct hermeneutics involves what

6. Fee and Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 110–11 (emphasis added).

the early church called the “four senses” of Scripture. This way of thinking about the hermeneutical process was dropped not because it was altogether invalid, but because its consistent misapplication yielded highly improbable results.

Objection Two: 1 Corinthians 10:1–22

The second objection that I commonly hear is, “Doesn’t the apostle Paul teach in 1 Corinthians 10:1–22, especially 10:6, that we can moralize—i.e., *atomistically* turn the individual actions of OT narrative characters into ‘do or do not do as the biblical character did’ principles or commands?” The answer is “no.”

There are three ways we can know this. The first way is by carefully reading 1 Corinthians 10:6. Paul—who, in the surrounding context of 10:1–11:1, is warning the Corinthians to avoid idolatry—refers to certain OT narratives that teach the futility of idolatry (i.e., trusting in anything other than God for a sense of national, family, personal, or economic security). As part of that argument, he says in 1 Corinthians 10:6:

“Now these things took place as examples

[*tupos*: “*model, pattern*. . . . —b. as guidance for a style of life. . . . 1 Cor 10:6. . . . —c. of someth. serving as a model for understanding someth. else, usually rendered ‘type’. . . . 1 Cor 10:6⁷]

for us, [so] that we might not desire evil [e.g., idolatry] as they did.”

In other words, 1 Corinthians 10:6 teaches that certain OT narratives record Israel’s idolatry, so that future generations of people

7. Danker, *The Concise Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, 358. This is a quasi-abridgement and lexical enhancement of Bauer, Danker, et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*.

would not follow the overall “model” or “pattern” of idolatry in those narratives. They were written so that we would not be a “type” or “contemporary version” of people who in some sense align ourselves with God, but are in fact idolaters. What Paul is *not* saying is that OT narratives were written so that we would *atomistically* make application out of the individual actions of a character.

So then, while it would be legitimate to say, at some point in the sermon, something general like, “Let’s be faithful (or not stumble) like Israel in this passage,” it would be illegitimate to *atomistically* turn the specific actions of OT narrative characters into principles or commands to emulate or avoid.

The second way that we can know 1 Corinthians 10:1–22 doesn’t teach us to moralize is by looking at the applications that Paul makes. They are: Do not participate in idolatry, particularly of a sexual variety (vv. 7–8); do not put God/Christ to the test (v. 9); do not grumble against God’s authority as expressed through the words of his divinely appointed Old Covenant prophets and New Covenant apostles (v. 10); humble yourselves before God (v. 12); believe that God is faithful, enabling victory over temptation (v. 13); flee idolatry (v. 14); people cannot genuinely worship God while still participating in idolatrous practices (v. 21); it is a bad idea to arouse God’s jealousy through participation in idolatrous practices because God is stronger than us (v. 22).⁸ As we’ll see, Paul is not moralizing because he is not atomistically making application out of an action.

For example, Paul’s application in 1 Corinthians 10:10 is, “Do not grumble against God’s authority.” This application derives from either Numbers 14 or 16, it’s unclear which. Nonetheless, in both of these chapters, does Israel grumble against God’s authority? Yes. Is the application in 1 Corinthians 10:10 that we should not do that same action? Yes. Did Paul moralize? No.

Here’s why: As we discussed earlier and illustrated with an example from 2 Samuel 11–12, OT narratives occasionally teach that

8. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 486–524.

an action by a character is good or bad. This occurs when a combination of factors in a CUT or its book work together to make that point. In Numbers 14, vv. 19–20 comment on Israel’s grumbling in vv. 1–3 and indicate that it was sinful. In Numbers 16, vv. 42–47 contain God’s immediate reaction to Israel’s grumbling in v. 41, indicating that it too was sinful. Thus Paul’s application is legitimate, because a combination of factors working together in the CUT makes that point.

Third, we can know that Paul’s applications in 1 Corinthians 10:1–22 are not the result of moralizing because they apply the primary—“trust God alone”—theological principle of their CUTs. The next chapter discusses how to discern that. Before we move on, however, let’s reflect on the words of Peter Vogt:

Understanding the author’s purposes in writing a narrative helps us avoid a common error in the interpretation of narratives. Many times we approach narratives and look for a readily applicable “moral” that is relevant to our lives. But sound interpretation of the text means seeking to understand the author’s intention, not simply looking for something readily applicable. [S]ound interpretation means being content with (or, at least, accepting) the [text on its terms].⁹

Original-Theological Message and Take-Home Truth

In our discussion so far, we’ve defined the “message” of a biblical text and equated it with its “theology.” We’ve discussed how the message/theology of a passage often contains primary and ancillary theological principles, although OT narratives contain few ancillary theological principles. At this point, I want to introduce and define two terms, Original-Theological Message (OTM) and Take-Home Truth (THT):

9. Vogt, *Interpreting the Pentateuch*, 51.

OTM: The primary theological principle that a biblical text was designed to communicate to its original audience.

THT: A timeless or contemporary expression of the OTM.¹⁰

The THT is the message of the sermon. It takes the time-specific language of the OTM and replaces it with timeless or contemporary equivalents.¹¹ Therefore, we have to determine the OTM before we determine the THT. As we'll discuss in chapter 2, moving from the time-specific language of the OTM to the timeless or contemporary language of the THT requires the building of legitimate hermeneutical bridges. For 2 Samuel 11–12, the OTM and THT are:

OTM: The LORD will use repentant kings of Israel to fulfill the Davidic Covenant, but despising the LORD's word brings discipline.

THT: God will use us to fulfill his plan of salvation, but sin brings discipline.

Since OT narratives teach few theological principles and usually only one unifies a passage, the THT is generally going to be the only principle we will spend time applying. That said, when we cover 2 Samuel 11:27 in a sermon from 2 Samuel 11–12, we may want to say something like, “You see, murder is wrong. For you. Me. And the king.” To spend much more time on it, however, would disrupt the coherence, clarity, and flow of the sermon.

Since an entire CUT is necessary to communicate a THT, we will generally need to wait until after the narrative has been covered before making application. *Nevertheless, the entire sermon should be relevant in the sense that we should relate the text to real life throughout*

10. The term comes from Sunukjian, *Invitation to Biblical Preaching*, 65–84.

11. Some modifications to this method would be necessary for preaching from the OT Law, but that's a discussion for another book!

the sermon. For example, when covering 2 Samuel 11:1–2, we might say something like:

The story opens with two pictures: One of David, the other of Israel's army. Like a vacationing CEO who demands his employees double-down on their hours, we find David taking a siesta, his entire army out in battle. Read with me verses 1–2.

Nevertheless, we would go beyond the bounds of biblical authority to *atomistically* apply this detail by saying something like, “When we're lazy, we risk falling into sin.” While we may “see” this principle illustrated, the passage doesn't teach it. Furthermore, like so many principles we “see” illustrated in the Bible, careful study reveals the need for corrective lenses. In this case, David's decision to stay home, like the CEO's to vacation, wasn't sinful.¹²

The Benefits of OTMs and THTs

There are two powerful benefits of OTMs and THTs. First, they anchor the sermon to the primary message God wanted to get across with that biblical text. It stands to reason that the primary message God inspired a passage to teach should generally be our primary message. We could call OTMs and THTs our “authority maximizers.”

Second, OTMs and THTs promote sermon coherence and unity by enabling us to check everything we want to say by them. Unless there is a really good reason, if something we want to say does not help our listeners understand, buy, or apply the THT, it should be taken out of the sermon. Thus, we could also call OTMs and THTs our “effectiveness maximizers.”

I've had some protest: “I'm not into that ‘big idea’ stuff.” Fair enough, but as kids are told, “You can choose your behavior, but you can't control the consequences.” We can choose to ignore the proven principles of oral clarity—and if we have a charismatic

12. Firth, *1 & 2 Samuel*, 417.

sense about us, attendance numbers may increase—but listeners are not going to be able to follow or internalize our sermons, not even with bulletin notes!

Mistakes in the Application of OT Narratives

Since knowing what *not* to do can clarify what to do, this section discusses a few common ways that preachers *mis*apply OT narratives. To avoid redundancy, I will discuss them without rehashing previously discussed arguments against them.

Springboarding

Springboarding occurs when we use the biblical text as “a peg on which to hang a string of [our own] ideas.”¹³ It’s a venerable method that’s been around for years. Back in the 1940s, Paul Warren noted that too often preachers “use” the biblical text “simply as a rallying point for [their] own ideas.”¹⁴ Many springboarders are heralded as biblical preachers because their frequent—even verse-by-verse—references to the biblical text give the impression that they’re faithfully proclaiming and applying the text.

Biblical Model Approach

The Biblical Model Approach is a form of moralizing that turns OT narratives into “how-to” lists of principles, which they inevitably don’t teach. This method might turn the story of Gideon and his fleece in Judges 6:36–40 into a misleading sermon on how to discern God’s will. Likewise, it might turn the story of David and Goliath in 1 Samuel 17 into a message—that the Bible nowhere teaches—on overcoming adversity “God’s way.”

Illustrated Principles Approach

The Illustrated Principles Approach is a form of moralizing that “applies” the principles that preachers “see” illustrated in a biblical

13. Stibbs, *Expounding God’s Word*, 67.

14. Warren, “By What Authority? Pitfalls in Pulpit Interpretation,” 208.

narrative. This approach might turn David's decision to stay home from battle in 2 Samuel 11:1 into an anti-laziness principle. Likewise, it might turn David's decision to look at Bathsheba bathing in 2 Samuel 11:2–5 into a warning about the need to flee temptation.

Universalizing the Plot Line Approach

In seminary, students are taught the skill of creating exegetical (big) ideas: long, complex sentences that summarize the details of their texts. It's a worthwhile skill to learn. There is a qualitative difference, however, between the exegetical ideas of most NT epistolary texts and OT narratives. For example, the exegetical ideas of most NT epistolary texts are prescriptive statements of their theology. The exegetical ideas of OT narratives, however, are *descriptive* statements of their plot line.

Without taking this difference into account, the Universalizing the Plot Line Approach confuses an OT narrative's descriptive plot line (exegetical idea) with its message/theology. Typically, this results in a "When you are in a situation similar to the one in the biblical story, God will respond to you pretty much the same way he responded to them" hermeneutic.

Most of what's wrong with this approach has already been discussed. Here, however, I want to address the idea that when we are in a situation "similar" to that in a narrative, we will get "similar" results. Here is an exegetical idea (EI) and THT from a careful practitioner of this approach:

EI: When David failed to walk with God, he put his life, family, and career in jeopardy.

THT: When believers fail to walk with God, they put their lives, families, and careers in jeopardy.¹⁵

15. See Mathewson, *The Art of Preaching Old Testament Narrative*, 106. Mathewson's "theological [big] idea" is functionally similar to the THT.

Notice the specificity of results: “they put their lives, families, and careers in jeopardy.” It’s too specific. It asserts more than 2 Samuel 11–12 teaches. In the next chapter, we’ll discuss how to determine the OTM and THT of OT narratives, and why “discipline” should be in those for 2 Samuel 11–12.

A study of the book of Judges demonstrates why we need to avoid such specificity. Seven times in Judges, Israel committed the same sin: doing “what was evil in the sight of the LORD” (2:11; 3:7; 3:12; 4:1; 6:1; 10:6; 13:1). God’s responses—the results—included discipline each time, but the specifics of the discipline were unpredictably different. Commenting on this variety in Judges, Robert Chisholm writes:

Though God is unchanging in his very essence, this does not mean that he always relates to people in the same way. . . . If we learn anything from the stories of the Old Testament, it is that God cannot be placed in a box where his response can be predicted. On the contrary, he is free to act as he pleases, even though his actions may seem contradictory or inconsistent from our limited perspective.¹⁶

I know that you want to preach with biblical authority. If you see room for improvement in your preaching, take heart. I know how vulnerable it makes us feel to recognize imperfections of such a personal nature. I know how scary it is to mess with the preaching methods that have gotten us where we are today. I get it. You have no reason to be disappointed or ashamed. God has worked through you and will continue to. It took courage to get you “here.” Use that same courage to take you “there.”

16. Chisholm, *Interpreting the Historical Books*, 191.