

HOW TO STUDY OLD TESTAMENT NARRATIVE

What is narrative?

narrative {noun}: a story that is told or written

Basics

- Narrative is the most common type of literature in the Bible. Over 40% of the Old Testament is narrative.
- All narratives have a setting, plot, and characters.
- The Bible's historical narrative is not fiction or myth or legend.

Why did the Holy Spirit choose to write so much of Scripture in narrative when there are more direct ways for God to teach us (i.e., didactic literature)?

The Holy Spirit knows what He is doing! Narrative emphasizes God's nature and revelation in special ways that legal or doctrinal portions of the Bible cannot. They give us a kind of "hands on" knowledge of God's work in His world, vividly demonstrating and illustrating it, allowing us to "live through" events and experiences rather than simply learning about them.

What sorts of interpretive principles do we need to know when studying Old Testament narrative?

1. Interpret the Old Testament in light of the New Testament. (John 5:37-39, 45-46, Luke 24:44-47)
2. Old Testament narrative is history. Read it as such! They aren't myths or stories with hidden meanings.
3. Narratives may teach either explicitly or implicitly.
4. Distinguish between the prescriptive & the descriptive.

Things you'll run into in Old Testament narrative:

- Miracles—Real supernatural events
- Places—Real places that all the readers would have known
- People—Real people with real descendants
- Wars—Real violence
- Gnarly things—Real descriptions of things that are hard to understand or swallow.
- Appearances of Christ—Called "Christophany" by theologians. Also types and shadows of Christ.

Common interpretive mistakes:

1. Allegorizing—going beyond the clear meaning of the text.
2. Decontextualizing—ignoring the full historical and literary contexts and concentrating on small units only.
3. Selectivity—picking and choosing specific words and phrases to emphasize, ignoring the overall sweep of the passage.

What causes these errors?

1. Desperation—"I need information that will help me and apply to my situation."
2. Impatience—"I want God's answer in this book from this chapter now."
3. Wrong expectations—"Everything in the Bible should apply directly as instruction for my own individual life."