

**Xenos Christian Fellowship
Christian Ministry Unit 2
Old Testament Narrative**

Editors' note:

- *Italics (lower case or ALL CAPS) show what students should write in their student outline.*
- **Bold (including bold italics and bold ALL CAPS) shows what appears in the student outline.**
- Regular text is used for lecture notes; ALL CAPS are used for emphasis.

Starting this week, we will begin learning how to interpret and apply the different genres of Old Testament literature. This will complement what you've already learned in Introduction to the Bible.

The **Old Testament Genres** are:

- **Narrative: Genesis–Esther** (this lecture).
- **Law: Exodus–Deuteronomy** (covered in Introduction to the Bible).
- **Poetry & Wisdom: Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs** (next week).
- **Prophecy: Isaiah–Malachi** (covered in Introduction to the Bible).
- **Apocalyptic: Ezekiel, Daniel, parts of Zechariah** (1 week on Daniel in Christian Ministry 1).

Each genre requires a different approach to interpretation in order to gain an accurate understanding of the message (e.g. compare with different approaches you take to reading a rental contract, a love letter, and a detective novel). No matter what part of the Bible you are reading, it's important to stay curious, ask good questions and think hard about what the text is saying.

If you review what you've learned in *Intro to the Bible* and work hard at learning the features of each genre covered in this course, you'll have a solid foundation for reading the entire Bible, and you'll be able to enjoy what Paul calls the "full counsel of God." This ability to read all of the Bible and truly grasp its message is well worth the effort and something that few North American Christians take the time to pursue.

Introduction to Old Testament narratives¹

A narrative is a story. We prefer the term "narrative" because "story" often has a fictional connotation. Unlike many bedtime stories, biblical narratives are true – they relate events that actually occurred.

¹ This section borrows many insights from Fee and Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* (Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1993) pp. 78-93.

Narrative is the most common type of literature in the Bible. 40% of the Old Testament is written this way. The New Testament also contains large amounts of narrative, especially in the Gospels and Acts.

Biblical narratives focus on God's unfolding plan to redeem mankind. God has many stories to tell, but in the Bible, he has selected those stories that reveal how he is at work in history to advance his plan through specific people and events. These narratives provide insight into who God is, what he values, and what he is trying to accomplish.

Reading narratives requires patience and hard work. Because Old Testament narratives are often fairly long, impatience and a failure to invest the time to read large sections will hinder our ability to enjoy this part of God's word. Beware of failing to read enough to get a sense of the story as a whole. It would be a mistake to expect Old Testament narratives to deliver as much direct instruction per page as the Epistles. Narratives have much to teach us, but they require patience and careful reading.

Reading narrative is worth it! The story of Joseph and other biblical narratives are powerful! These are some of the richest passages in scripture. God is eager to communicate important truths to us through this part of his Word. Instructors: Stop here to get students to talk about their reading, which included the Joseph narrative, and what they've gotten out of it so far.

The nature of Old Testament narrative

Because narratives are such a rich source of information, the key to understanding them is reading them again and again. The points below provide different lenses through which we take in each story. On a practical level, you'll find it much more stimulating and interesting to reread narratives if you're looking for new information each time.

1. Stories with three basic parts: plot, characters, and plot resolution.

Narratives have a PLOT that usually involves some kind of conflict or tension surrounding one or more CHARACTERS that works toward a RESOLUTION.

Let's take **the overall story of the Bible** as an example.

Plot:

The basic plot of the biblical story is that the Creator God has created humans to bear his image, rule with him, and enjoy close fellowship with him. But an enemy of God found a way to drive a wedge between God and the humans he created.

Characters:

“protagonist” – the primary person in the story – *God*.

“antagonist(s)” – the person who brings about the conflict or tension – *Satan*.

“agonist(s)” – other characters in the story who get involved in the struggle – *humans*.

Resolution:

The plot resolution is the long story of “*redemption*,” how God rescues his people from the enemy’s clutches, restores them back to his image, and finally restores them in a “new heaven and new earth.”

Discussion: Let’s identify these three components in **the Joseph narrative**...

Plot:

How about the Joseph Narrative? What is the tension that drives the main part of the story? Who is the tension between?

Characters:

Note to instructor: Point out that God is involved in every page of the story, but ask students to think in terms of human characters when they try to identify the protagonist, antagonist(s), and agonist(s).

Ask students to share what they learned about various characters from their homework assignment.

Who is the protagonist? Joseph Who are the antagonists? Joseph’s brothers. Who are the agonists? Potiphar, the jailer, the cupbearer, the baker, Pharaoh, etc.

Resolution:

How is the tension between the characters resolved?

Good questions to ask: “Who are the main characters?” “What are they like?” “How do they interact with each other?” “Is there tension between them?” “How is the tension resolved?”

2. Stories that revolve around covenants

A **covenant** is an agreement between two parties, like a rental contract

between a landlord and a lessee or a marriage between and husband and a wife. There are three important covenants that Old Testament narratives often refer to.

A. Abrahamic Covenant:

The Abrahamic Covenant is a central concern in the Old Testament (especially Genesis 12 through the end of Joshua) and in the Bible as a whole. See **Genesis 12:1-3**.

In this covenant, God promised that:

- Abraham would become the father of a great *NATION*.
- He would give Abraham's descendants *LAND* to live in.
- He would *BLESS THE WORLD* through one of Abraham's descendants.

Key stages in Israel's development as a nation are tied back to this covenant (see Exodus 2:23-25 and Joshua 24:1-15), and tension in biblical narratives often involves events or characters that threaten its fulfillment.

e.g. Barren wives in Genesis who are unable to produce offspring.

e.g. Jacob's family becoming enslaved in Egypt, away from the Promised Land.

e.g. Israel's being unwilling to cross into the Promised Land and wandering in the wilderness.

In each case, God provides a way to keep advancing his plan and honoring his promises.

B. Davidic Covenant:

- *God promised David that he would establish one of his descendants on the throne of Israel to rule as an eternal king forever over the entire world.* This future ruler is called the "Messiah" in the Old and New Testaments. See **2 Samuel 7:12-16**.

Like the Abrahamic Covenant, God's covenant with David is a sweeping theme that spans both testaments. This covenant is especially prominent in Judges – Nehemiah.

Sometimes you will see a reference to this covenant when you are reading a narrative (e.g. 2 Chronicles 21:5-7).

C. Mosaic Covenant (the Law)

When Moses led Israel into the wilderness, he met God on Mount Sinai. There, God gave him a series of laws for his people to obey.

Exodus 19:3“Moses went up to God, and the Lord called to him from the mountain, saying, “Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob and tell the sons of Israel: 4 ‘You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings, and brought you to Myself. 5 ‘Now then, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be My own possession among all the peoples, for all the earth is Mine; 6 and you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.’ These are the words that you shall speak to the sons of Israel.” 7 So Moses came and called the elders of the people, and set before them all these words which the Lord had commanded him. 8 All the people answered together and said, “All that the Lord has spoken we will do!” And Moses brought back the words of the people to the Lord.” (See also Joshua 24:15,16)

These Laws are contained in Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy.

Notice that unlike God’s promises to Abraham and David, which were unconditional, God’s covenant with Moses spelled out responsibilities for God and for his people.

God’s responsibility: *To offer Israel protection, to bless them, and to keep them in the land.*

Israel’s responsibility: *To obey God’s laws.*

As you read Old Testament narratives, you will sometimes (not always) find references or allusions to these covenants.

Good questions to ask: “Does this narrative relate to one or more of the covenants?” “Are there events in this story that pose an obstacle to these covenants being fulfilled?” “Are there events in this story that advance the fulfillment of these covenants?”

Discussion: Ask students to pose these questions regarding the Joseph narrative: How do the events in this story pose a threat to the fulfillment of God’s promise to Abraham? How do the events in this story advance the fulfillment of this promise?

- **GOD works through the treachery of Joseph’s brothers to preserve his people from famine (45:5,7,8).**
- **GOD tells Jacob (a.k.a. “Israel”) through these events he will honor his promise to make his descendants a great nation (46:3).**

- **GOD has worked to save his people in order to honor his promise to Abraham (50:19,20,24,25).**

3. Selective stories

All narratives are selective and incomplete (Jn. 21:25). The author only includes what he wants his readers to focus on.

Example: Even though Azariah (a.k.a. “Uzziah”) reigned 52 years, the author of 2 Kings only uses 7 verses to summarize his reign (see 2 Kings 15:1-7). By contrast, this same author uses 11 chapters to describe the reign of King Solomon.

Stories about the kings of Israel and Judah in first and second Kings focus on each king’s adherence to the Law, the Mosaic Covenant. Other details of their reign (e.g. building programs, military achievements, social reforms) are often left out.

Good questions to ask: “Why did the author slow down to describe events in the life of a particular person in detail?” “How is his or her life connected to the main themes in the book or to the covenants?” “Is this story related to the ones before and after it?” “If so, how?”

Discussion: In Genesis 38, the story of Joseph pauses and the author’s focus shifts to Judah, one of Jacob’s 12 sons. Here’s a short summary of what happened:

Judah marries a Canaanite woman referred to as “Shua’s daughter.” Together they have three children: Er, Onan, and Shelah. God puts to death Er and Onan because of their wickedness and sin. Then Judah’s wife dies. In the aftermath, Judah promises to give his son Shelah as a husband to Tamar, Er’s widowed wife. When Shelah comes of age, Judah fails to follow through on his promise. Concerned about her future, Tamar dresses like a prostitute and sleeps with Judah. When word gets out that Tamar is pregnant, Judah accuses Tamar of “playing the harlot” and demands to have her killed. But Tamar is able to show that Judah is the father!! Caught in his own hypocrisy, Judah admits “she is more righteous than I.”

WHY IS THIS STORY HERE? HOW DOES IT RELATE TO THE JOSEPH NARRATIVE? It’s a vivid depiction of the sorry spiritual state of Judah, which helps you understand the treachery of him and his brothers in chapter 37.

HOW DO JUDAH’S ACTIONS POSE A THREAT TO THE ABRAHAMIC COVENANT? What if Jacob’s family become assimilated into the surrounding nations by intermarriage? What impact would that have

on God's plan to establish a nation through Abraham's descendants?

4. Stories written to a particular audience within a particular historical-cultural context.

Like all literature, Old Testament narratives were written to a particular audience within a particular historical-cultural context. The Grammatico-Historical method requires that we learn what we can about the language, history, and culture of the period in which the events in our narrative occur. This information will shed light on the meaning of the text. The best way to do this is by consulting a good commentary.

Example:

(Genesis 49:11,12) "He ties his foal to the vine, and his donkey's colt to the choice vine; he washes his garments in wine, and his robes in the blood of grapes. His eyes are dull from wine, and his teeth white from milk.

Why the emphasis on vines, grapes, wine, and milk? These are all pictures of prosperity.²

Good questions to ask: "How are the practices, customs, or images mentioned in this passage different than those of our day? What did they mean back then?"

5. Stories with a main point

Sometimes the main point of a narrative is clearly stated (like we saw in the Joseph story), but often it is not. Either way, these tips can help you uncover the author's main message. **Look for...**

A. God speaking either directly or through someone in the narrative:

When God speaks, he often provides commentary on the people and events described in the narrative. Near the beginning of the Exodus narrative, God explains what he plans to accomplish in the events that follow (see Exodus 6:6-8).

In **Genesis 50:19,20,24** Joseph explains God's purpose behind the events in his family. Despite the treachery of Joseph's brothers and a famine which threatened the very existence of Abraham's descendants, God was using all of these circumstances to advance

² "Tethering an ass to a vine (which the ass would readily consume) would be like lighting a cigarette with a dollar bill. Laundering one's clothing with wine might also point to opulence." Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18-50* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1995), p. 662.

his plan and honor his promise to Abraham.

B. Repetition of ideas, phrases, and words:

Ideas – Restatements of the Abrahamic covenant (Genesis 15:6; 17:6-8, 22:17,18; 26:3,4; 28:13,14; etc.)

Phrases – “In those days Israel had no king” & “everyone did as they saw fit” (Judges 17:6, 18:1, 19:1, 21:25).

Words – “It was good” in the creation narrative. Contrast with “it was not good” in Genesis 2:18.

C. Summary statements:

Let’s skip details on this for now. When we study the book of Acts in a few weeks, we will see several examples of how summary statements reveal the main focus of a narrative.

D. The plot itself:

The plot often draws attention to the main point. As the plot thickens, it heightens the reader’s awareness of the point being made.

The central message of the Joseph narrative comes from the entire collection of stories and the way they are related to each other. Did you notice how the separate events in Joseph’s life build to a climax when Joseph reveals his true identity in chapter 45?

(Genesis 45:4) “I am your brother Joseph, the one you sold into Egypt!”

During this pivotal point of the story, Joseph plainly states the key lesson the narrative is designed to convey:

(Genesis 45:5,7, 8) “And now don’t be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you... (7) God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance. (8) So then, it was not you who sent me here, but God. He made me father to Pharaoh, lord of his entire household and ruler of all Egypt.”

REMEMBER: As an interpreter and teacher, your first and foremost task is to identify and relate the main point of the narrative. This won’t always be easy to

do. In some cases, the significance of the story is not clearly stated. Your teaching may elaborate on several spiritual truths illustrated in the story, but your primary focus should be on the main point of the narrative.

6. Stories that teach spiritual truths.

(1 Corinthians 10:11) Now these things happened to them as an example, and they were written for our instruction...

As we read these stories, we are supposed to watch and learn. We may be inspired by the faith of the characters described or sobered by their mistakes and the ensuing consequences.

Narratives teach spiritual truths in two ways:

A. Explicitly—*by clearly stating a spiritual truth.*

Genesis 15:6

Just remember, explicitly taught spiritual truths may or may not be the main point of the narrative. From this verse we see that Abraham was justified by faith, but the main purpose of the narrative is to show God's commitment to honor his promise to Abraham.

B. Implicitly—*by describing what happens.*

Sometimes a narrative describes what someone does, but no commentary is given stating whether the actions taken by key characters in the story are good or bad. If that's the case, we can still learn from what has happened by studying the events in light of what God has directly taught in other parts of scripture.

Examples from the Joseph narrative:

Judah's confession to Joseph: Judah acknowledges his guilt without any excuses (44:16). He admits he deserves judgment, and he asks for mercy. This is the response Jesus says God is waiting to hear from us (Luke 15:18,19). This is what the Bible calls *repentance*.

Joseph's endurance: After being carted off to Egypt (38:28), falsely accused by Potiphar's wife (39:17-20), and forgotten by the cupbearer (40:23), *Joseph could have easily given in to despair and focused on being a victim. Instead, Joseph recognized God's involvement in his life (45:7,8).* He chose to recall and believe God's promises and believe that God was

bigger than the circumstances and people in his life. No human can derail what God wants to accomplish through someone who is cooperating with him (Rom. 8:28,31-37).

Joseph's humility: Instead of taking credit for everything to get ahead, *Joseph gave credit to God at every crucial point* (39:2,3; 40:8; 41:16,52). The importance of doing this is clearly taught in 1 Cor. 4:7 & 1 Pet. 2:9.

Joseph's willingness to forgive: Joseph fought with bitter memories of what his brothers did to him (41:51), and had many opportunities to take retribution. But *he chose instead to forgive his brothers* (45:14-15). This is a great picture of God's forgiveness (Luke 15) and an example of how we should forgive others (Eph. 4:32).

Good questions to ask: "What did these people do that I should avoid?" "What were the consequences of the mistakes they made?" "What did they do that is worthy of imitation?" "What was the positive outcome of their good decisions?" "What does this story teach me about who God is and how he operates?"

Mistakes to avoid when interpreting narrative:

1. Don't lose the big picture.

Biblical narratives are often a collection of **smaller narratives**. The **Joseph narrative**, for example, is itself a collection of many smaller stories...

- **Joseph's dreams (37:2-11)**
- **The treachery of Joseph's brothers (37:12-36)**
- **Judah and Tamar (38:1-30)**
- **Joseph in Potiphar's house (39:1-23)**
- **Joseph in jail (40:1-23)**
- **Joseph interprets Pharaoh's dreams (41:1-36)**
- **Joseph rises to power and prepares Egypt for the coming famine (41:37-57)**
- **Joseph's brothers go to Egypt (42:1-28)**
- **Joseph's brothers go home to get Benjamin (42:29-38)**
- **Joseph's brothers return to Egypt (43:1-34)**
- **Joseph places a silver cup in Benjamin's baggage (44:1-34)**
- **Joseph reveals his identity to his brothers (45:1-28)**
- **Jacob's journey to Egypt (46:1-7)**
- **The names of those who went to Egypt (46:8-27)**
- **Settling in Goshen (46:28-47:12)**

- **Joseph's Rule in Egypt (47:13-27)**
- **Jacob's final blessings (47:28-49:33)**
- **Jacob's death and burial (50:1-14)**

Don't make the mistake of trying to interpret these smaller stories in isolation, as if each one has a meaning of its own, independent from the others. This would be similar to taking a verse out of context. Even in a longer narrative, all the component parts of the narrative work together to impress a few key ideas on the reader.

Discussion: The quote below is one Bible teacher's take on the favor shown to Joseph by Potiphar, the Jailor, and Pharaoh himself. **How does this interpretation miss the overall point of the Joseph narrative?**

(Tom Brown) "You might ask, 'Why did Joseph have so much favor with people?' Listen carefully: The reason Joseph had favor with people was because of his magnanimous spirit. We don't often hear the word magnanimous but it means a big heart, generous in forgiving an insult or injury, free from petty resentment or vindictiveness. You see favor does not flow from heaven to others so that they look upon you with kindness. No, favor flows from your spirit to others. If your spirit is wrong and polluted then favor can't flow from you to others. Favor is not based on luck, but on a big heart."³

It would be misguided see the stories about Potiphar, the Jailor, and Pharaoh as models for how to curry the favor of people around us. When we read the entire narrative, we can clearly see that this is not the author's focus at all. Check out Genesis 39:3 ("the Lord gave him success"), 39:21 ("the Lord... granted Joseph favor"), and 41:39 ("God has revealed the meaning of the dreams to you") – even Pharaoh recognized God was with him!

2. Don't read hidden meanings into the text unless an inspired New Testament author indicates they are there.

Saint Ambrose (339-397 AD, Bishop of Milan) saw many parallels between the life of Joseph and the life of Christ. The table below is just a sample of some of the connections Ambrose drew between Joseph and Jesus:⁴

³ *Favor, the Path to Prosperity* by Tom Brown, <http://www.tbm.org/favor.htm>.

⁴ *Saint Ambrose: Seven Exegetical Works* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America, 1972), pp. 187-240.

Comparisons between Joseph & Jesus	
Joseph	Jesus
Sent by Jacob to find his brothers and inquire after the welfare of the flock.	Sent by God to inquire after the lost sheep of the house of Israel.
Sold for a number of pieces of silver.	Betrayed for by Judas for a number of pieces of silver.
Stripped of his garment and cast into a dark, dry pit as if dead.	Stripped of his clothing, crucified and subjected to the wrath of God and death.
Foresaw famine in Egypt and provided food for the people.	Takes pity on the spiritual hunger of the world by opening the granaries of divine mysteries that nourish mankind.

Unless a New Testament author makes connections like this, we should avoid doing so. Looking for deeper meaning when we're reading Old Testament narrative can shift our attention away from what the author is trying to communicate.

That said, you will come across many symbols and stories that point to Christ in the Old Testament. In Genesis 22, for example, God tells Abraham to sacrifice his only son Isaac. But God intervenes and Abraham receives Isaac back alive. Many interpreters see parallels between this episode and God's willingness to sacrifice his only son Jesus. It is correct in this case to make a connection between Isaac and Jesus because we are explicitly told in Hebrews that Isaac is a type of Christ. See Hebrews 11:17-19.

3. Don't overlook God's role in the story

The Joseph narrative shows that God, not Joseph, is the hero. The human characters in Old and New Testament stories are flawed in many ways. It isn't their heroism, but rather God's faithfulness, that continues to advance his plan.

(Deuteronomy 9:6) "Understand, then, that it is not because of your righteousness that the LORD your God is giving you this good land to possess, for you are a stiff-necked people."

Joseph readily admits, "...am I in the place of God? You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives." – Genesis 15:19b,20

4. Don't blindly imitate practices recorded in a narrative.

Narratives record what happened—not necessarily what *should* have happened

or what ought to happen every time.

Example: Some Christians use “fleeing” to determine God’s will when faced with a difficult decision (e.g. “Lord, if you want me to take the job, make my phone ring in the next five minutes). Christians point to the example of Gideon in Judges to support this practice. But God never commends fleeing as a way to discern his will. Before Gideon put out his fleece, God had already clearly told Gideon what he wanted him to do (**Judges 6:14**). God mercifully went along with Gideon’s request to strengthen his resolve, not to express his will. The main point of the narrative emphasizes that God’s strength and faithfulness saved Israel (7:2), not Gideon’s.

5. Don’t apply something to yourself or your situation that has specific application to Israel.

Example: In 2 Chronicles 7:14, the Lord appears to Solomon and says:

(2 Chronicles 7:14) “...if my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land.”

(Stephen Green) “In Britain, (1 Chron 7:14) means that recompense must be made for the shedding of innocent blood; ... that sodomy will be banned; that marriage will again be for life; that the courts will dispense justice; that the Sabbath will be kept; that government will be honest and limited to what God commands. In short, God will heal the land when He sees the fruits of national repentance.”⁵

Discussion: Ask students to interact with this interpretation. What hermeneutical rules covered last week are being violated?

Memory Verses

2 Sam. 7:11-16 – The Davidic Covenant. God promises that one of David’s descendants will sit on his throne and rule forever.**

Assignment

Complete the *Psalms and Proverbs Assignment*.

⁵ Stephen Green, *Christian Voice*, June 2003.