

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

**Old Testament Genres**

- Narrative: Genesis–Esther.
- Law: Exodus–Deuteronomy
- Poetry & Wisdom: Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs
- Prophecy: Isaiah–Malachi.
- Apocalyptic: Ezekiel, Daniel, parts of Zechariah.

**Introduction to Old Testament Narrative<sup>1</sup>**

A narrative is \_\_\_\_\_.

Narrative is the most common type of literature in the Bible.

Biblical narratives focus on God’s unfolding plan to redeem mankind.

Reading narratives requires patience and hard work.

Reading narrative is worth it!

**The nature of Old Testament narrative**

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

The overall story of the Bible:

Plot:

Characters:

“protagonist”

“antagonist”

“agonist(s)”

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

Resolution:

The Joseph narrative:

Plot:

Characters:

“protagonist”

“antagonist”

“agonist(s)”

Resolution:

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**

Covenant:

A. Abrahamic Covenant (Genesis 12:1-3)

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B. Davidic Covenant (2 Samuel 7:12-16)

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C. Mosaic Covenant (Exodus 19:3-8)

God’s responsibility:

Israel’s responsibility:

Good questions to ask: “How does this narrative related to 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.”

- 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**

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 Abrahamic and Davidic covenants?” “Is this story related to the ones before and after it?” “If so, how?”

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

#### **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.

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

Look for...

A. \_\_\_\_\_ either directly or through someone in the narrative:

**Genesis 50:19,20,24**

B. \_\_\_\_\_ 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 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 interpreter and a teacher, your first and foremost task is to identify and relate the explicit 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...

Narratives teach spiritual truths in two ways.

A. Explicitly—

**Genesis 15:6**

B. Implicitly—

Examples from the Joseph narrative:

Judah's confession to Joseph:

Joseph’s endurance:

Joseph’s humility:

Joseph's willingness to forgive:

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:**

**1. Don't lose the big picture.**

Smaller stories within the Joseph narrative:

- 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)

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 resentfulness 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.”<sup>2</sup>

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

<b>Comparisons between Joseph &amp; Jesus<sup>3</sup></b>	
<b>Joseph</b>	<b>Jesus</b>
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 pieces of silver.	Betrayed by Judas for 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. But none of that could destroy his divinity or his immortal life
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.

**3. Don’t overlook God’s role in the story.**

**(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.”

**4. Don’t blindly imitate practices recorded in a narrative.**

**Judges 6:14**

<sup>2</sup> *Favor, the Path to Prosperity* by Tom Brown. <http://www.tbm.org/favor.htm>

<sup>3</sup> *Saint Ambrose: Seven Exegetical Works* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America, 1972), pp. 187-240.

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

**(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."<sup>4</sup>

**Memory Verses**

**2 Samuel 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*.

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<sup>4</sup> Stephen Green, *Christian Voice*, June 2003.