



# PREACHING NARRATIVE

## 1 PRELIMINARIES<sup>1</sup>

What follows are two presentations of human nature. The first comes from a church constitution. The second comes from Genesis 6:1-8.

*All people, men and women, are created in God's image and are called to love God with all their beings. However, since the fall, all people are guilty of rebellion against God and human nature is thoroughly corrupted by sin. This makes everyone subject to God's righteous anger and condemnation. [Curtin Community Church constitution]*

<sup>1</sup>*When men began to increase in number on the earth and daughters were born to them, <sup>2</sup>the sons of God saw that the daughters of men were beautiful, and they married any of them they chose. <sup>3</sup>Then the LORD said, 'My Spirit will not contend with man forever, for he is mortal; his days will be a hundred and twenty years.'*

<sup>4</sup>*The Nephilim were on the earth in those days—and also afterward—when the sons of God went to the daughters of men and had children by them. They were the heroes of old, men of renown.*

<sup>5</sup>*The LORD saw how great man's wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time. <sup>6</sup>The LORD was grieved that he had made man on the earth, and his heart was filled with pain. <sup>7</sup>So the LORD said, "I will wipe mankind, whom I have created, from the face of the earth—men and animals, and creatures that move along the ground, and birds of the air—for I am grieved that I have made them." <sup>8</sup>But Noah found favor in the eyes of the LORD. [Genesis 6:1-8, NIV]*

Both these quotations are designed to convey information about God's desires for human beings and the reality of human nature. However, the mechanism used by each is very different. The first uses technical language and clear statements and attempts to be somewhat comprehensive in scope. The second uses story.

While many modern pastors and teachers find themselves more at home with the former presentation, the growing volume of fiction in our Christian bookshops tells us that most modern Christians find themselves at home with the latter.

Storytelling is as old as language. Humans have always told stories and they have used these stories for endless purposes—to teach, to communicate, to console, to amuse, to distract, to escape, to bear witness, and a variety of other purposes. Believers in God are similar and it would not be an exaggeration to say that the core of Jewish and Christian existence gravitates around the telling and retelling stories about God and his people.

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<sup>1</sup> The following notes are taken from seminars presented by Andrew Reid at preaching schools in Melbourne and Adelaide in 2004.

In this lecture I want to talk about narrative and preaching from narrative. Most of what I have to say will gravitate around Old Testament narrative. However, the principles I speak about will often apply equally well to New Testament narrative. There are four things to say before we look at the topic in a bit more depth:

- This lecture is only a very slim introduction to the topic and the bibliography at the end suggests some books that are helpful on the topic.
- Although I focus in on ‘preaching’, the principles that are enunciated here apply to all ministries of the word (e.g. one-to-one, small groups, etc.).
- I want to affirm what Fokkelman says about the reading of the Bible and particularly the reading of narrative. If it is true about reading the Bible, then I suspect that it is even more true of preaching on narrative. He says  
*‘The most widely read book in the world is not necessarily the best-read book.’*<sup>2</sup>
- My hope for this session today is to excite you, prepare you, and fuel you to preach on Old Testament narrative.

I think that preaching on narrative literature is the most exciting exercise a Christian preacher can have and I want you to be able to share in this experience with me.

## 2 AN INTRODUCTION TO NARRATIVE

### 2.1 WHY?

#### WHY DO WE NEED TO THINK ABOUT NARRATIVE?

Narrative is the dominant literary genre in the Bible. One third of the Bible is narrative and nearly half of the Old Testament is narrative. These narratives contain some of the most endearing and memorable episodes in the Bible. But they also contain some of its most terrifying and alarming episodes.

#### WHY DON'T WE PREACH ON NARRATIVE?

- Because we don't know what to do with it.
- Because we fear it.
- Because preachers are almost incurably logical people and therefore prefer the logical structure of the epistles, etc.
- Because it has been so badly abused. At one end of the spectrum, preachers have used narrative to support the most fanciful ideas. At the other end, they have taken the heart and the drama out of it by turning it into a series of facts like the Epistles.

#### WHY SHOULD WE PREACH ON (OT) NARRATIVE?

Biblical reasons:

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<sup>2</sup> Fokkelman, J., *Reading Biblical Narrative: An Introductory Guide*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999, translated by Ineke Smit, p. 8.



- Because people such as Jesus and Paul urge us to (e.g. 1 Corinthians 10:1-13; 2 Timothy 3:14-17).
- Because it is Scripture and part of the whole counsel of God.

Other reasons:

- Because post-modern people identify with stories.
- Because we can engage people in a way that is not always possible with more didactic material (e.g. emotions).
- Because we need to teach our people how to access this literature and to enjoy and understand it.

## 2.2 WHAT?

### WHAT IS NARRATIVE?

A story, told by a storyteller, with a specific goal in mind.

### WHAT DOES IT DO?

#### **It teaches.**

In the past people spoke of narrative as descriptive but not prescriptive. There is an element of truth in this—narrative describes what happened but doesn't necessarily prescribe what we should do. Hence, a description of Abraham lying about his wife to Pharaoh in Genesis 12 is not a prescription that we should lie about something and a description of the Gideon seeking guidance by laying out a fleece is not a prescription that we should seek guidance by such means.

However, it is clear that narrative is designed to teach. It is designed to teach us the history of God's dealings with his people, to teach theology, and to teach ethics. The thing about narratives is that it just doesn't do these things in the same manner that other literature does. For example, it doesn't teach theology the way that the book of Romans does and it doesn't teach ethics in the way that the ten commandments might (although it should be noted that the teaching of the ten commandments is set in a narrative context and can only really make sense within that framework).

Another example of the way narrative teaches is the way that it causes us to sense that God is behind all events, even when he is not mentioned. As we read the text we sense his presence and his evaluation of deeds and words as well as his pursuit of his purpose.

#### **It invites and engages.**

Narrative is an invitation. As soon as a narrator moves beyond mere description and begins to tell us how and why something happened, he issues us with an invitation to enter the experience and share it.

The power of narrative is its uncanny ability to involve us in the action. It takes us out of our own time and place and puts us in another. It engages us not only intellectually but also psychologically, temporally, and emotionally. It calls upon us to be there where the action is, to hear the voices, to take part in the action, to get involved in the plot, and to assess the characters.

**It persuades.**

Examples of the use of narrative within the Bible itself indicate that narrative is intended to persuade, to influence people to accept a particular view, and to deeply impact upon the hearer/reader. Some examples include

- Nathan's parable in 2 Samuel 12,
- Joab's use of story with the wise woman of Tekoa in 2 Samuel 13-14,
- Judah's telling of the family story in Genesis 44-45.

Biblical narrative rarely, if ever, sets out to present a neutral succession of words and events. It clearly seeks to involve readers and listeners and to persuade them. Often this persuasion has a strong ethical focus, such as to urge them to cling to the covenant and obey God's laws.

Gordon Wenham notes:<sup>3</sup>

*...Old Testament narrative books do have a didactic purpose, that is, they are trying to instil both theological truths and ethical ideals into their readers.*

He argues that a close examination of Genesis and Judges demonstrates that

*...the Bible storytellers are not advocating a minimalist conformity to the demands of the law in their storytelling, rather that they have an ideal of godly behaviour that they hoped their heroes and heroines would typify.<sup>4</sup>*

**WHAT ARE THE DIFFICULTIES?****Description or...?**

We often can't tell whether the author is simply describing something or whether he wants to convey something in terms of theology or ethics. For example, when the writer of Genesis describes how Abraham and Lot divide the land between them in Genesis 13, is he simply telling us what happened or is he telling us with some purpose in mind. And if he has a purpose in mind, what is it?

**Getting too absorbed in the story**

One danger is that we get so involved in the story that we forget that these things were written for us. That is, we neglect that God is speaking to us through this story.

**Spiritualising or moralising**

Often, our problem is that we seek moral or spiritual lessons in a story that are simply not there. We cut the narrative off from God's redemptive purposes.

**Lack of resolution**

Narratives sometimes leave us wondering. We might not know who the guilty or commended character is. We might not be given understanding or explanation of an event but simply be told that it happened.

<sup>3</sup> Gordon J. Wenham, *Story As Torah: Reading Old Testament Narratives Ethically*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003, p. 3.

<sup>4</sup> Wenham, p 3.



## 2.3 How?

### HOW DO WE DEAL WITH IT?

Well, the first thing to say is the most obvious – we should READ them. That is, we should sit down and simply read them through and catch the drama and power of the story. One of the effects of reading is a feeling of growing understanding as patterns become apparent and new information is added to throw light on what has happened already.

Whatever else we do with narrative, we must not neglect the fact that we are dealing with narrative and that narrative is an invitation to enter another world and to share an experience with the characters of the story.

Second, we should avoid the postmodern approach that stresses that the reader is king and that the reader creates the meaning of the text. A text is a message from an author to a set of readers. This author expected that the message would be correctly understood by his hearers and the hearers expected that they would be able to understand the intended message of the author.

As we noted above, this does not mean that the reader is passive in the exercise of reading. Narrative is designed to involve the reader and draw him or her into the interpretative process.

Out of this observation we have our first goal in approaching narrative: We are seeking to grasp what the original author intended to say to the original hearers. This means that we should approach the text with all the usual tools of grammatico-historical method.

Third, we should look for the special things that characterise narrative literature.

Jan Fokkelman proposes ten useful questions for reading narrative literature:<sup>5</sup>

1. Who is the *hero*? What is your reason for thinking this?
2. What does the *quest* consist of? What is the hero after? What is his object of value? Does he attain his goal, and if not, why not?
3. Who are the *helpers* and *opponents*? Besides characters, factors, situations or personality traits also qualify. Are any *attributes* (objects) present? What do they contribute? Do they have some symbolic added value.
4. Can you feel the *narrator's* presence anywhere in the text? This will apply especially in the case of information, comments, explanations or value judgments on his part. Can you point to these instances of the writer speaking? Where is the writer less obviously present (for instance in his deliberate arrangement of the material)? Does he usually make his own statements at strategic points in the text?
5. Does the narrator keep to the *chronology* of events and processes themselves? If not, where does he deviate, and why do you think he does that? Try to get an idea of the discourse time/narrated time ratio.
6. Where are the gaps where *narrated time* has been skipped, and are there cases of acceleration, retardation, retrospect and anticipation? Assuming that the writer inserted them at the right points: why are they where they are? What is their relation with the context?
7. Is there a clear *plot*, or is the unit you are reading more or less without a plot of its own, because it forms part of a greater whole? What, then, is the macro-plot there?
8. Where are the *speeches*? Are there many of them? Have speeches been left out where you would expect them? What factors influence the character who is speaking, what self-interest, background, desires, and expectations? What about *congruence*: Do the characters' words match

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<sup>5</sup> J. P. Fokkelman. *Reading Biblical Narrative: An Introductory Guide*. Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1999, translated by Ineke Smit, pages 207-209.

their actions? If not, how come? Does the text contain indications of the *writer* supporting or approving his character?

9. Is there any particular choice of words that strikes you? Any other characteristics of *style or structure*? Take them seriously, and keep pondering them, guided, for instance, by such questions as ‘What does this contribute to plot or characterisation?’
10. *Boundaries*: What devices are used to demarcate a unit? (Consider the data regarding time, space, beginning and end of the action, entrances or exits of the characters.) Can you make a *division* of the text (divide it into smaller units)? By what signals are you guided? Try and find other signals or markers, which may possibly lead to a different structuration. To what extent does the division clarify your view of themes or ‘content’?

Fourth, I think we need to understand what we are looking at in its larger context, that is, we should see how the narratives fit within

- the book in which it appears;
- the section of the Testament in which it appears (e.g. Pentateuch);
- the Testament in which it appears; and
- the total Biblical revelation that culminates in Jesus Christ.

The best way to approach this is probably to be aware of patterns as we read. Does what happens here have links with what happens elsewhere? Do subsequent events, comments, words, and deeds throw light on what happens in this narrative?

## 2.4 GOALS IN PREACHING NARRATIVE

As well as all the usual goals in preaching, there are some additional ones to bear in mind in preaching on narrative. These are

- To help the congregation enter the drama of the story; and
- To avoid sterilising the story!

## 2.5 METHODS

One of the trendy topics among preachers overseas in the last 20 years has been the topic of genre and preaching. There are a few things to say about this.

First, there are some good books in this area. They include Sidney Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and Ancient Text*, and books by Wardlaw and Nash.

Second, whatever else we do, we have to remember that our congregations learn interpretation from us. Therefore, if we interpret apocalyptic as history or narrative as Epistle, they will do the same. Therefore, we need to model good hermeneutics and good handling of genre in our preaching.

Third, there has been a trend to say that our preaching ought to reflect or mirror the genre we are preaching from. In other words, if we are dealing with a narrative passage, we should preach using narrative form or at least preach in such a way that is sympathetic with the genre of the passage.

Personally, I am not convinced by this even though I am convinced of the thesis that underlies this desire. That thesis appears to be that most of our preaching is discursive or didactic in style and is significantly influenced by Greek oratory styles and the end result is that our sermons are somewhat formulaic and this formula almost has some sort of imprimatur attached to it.



So, how do we approach the issue? My suggestion is that we begin to experiment with different forms in our preaching. These forms might include such things as

- Narrative
- Parable
- Diagrams
- Other rhetorical devices other than the illustration

I would also like to see us experiment with using emotion a bit more. Evangelical preaching in particular appears to have become rather passionless in some circles. This is a relatively new thing (e.g. Whitefield used to be in tears for a significant time in a significant number of his sermons).

Rather than preaching ‘with the grain’ as some modern exponents advocate, I’m suggesting that in our sermons we preach in such a way as to elicit the same emotional response as the original passage might have elicited. In other words, perhaps we should preach in such a way as to draw out similar responses. Hence, if the response was primarily cognitive, perhaps we should preach in such a way as to draw this out. If the response was primarily emotional, perhaps we should preach in such a way as to allow this.

Having said this, it should be noted that there are dangers with experimentation.

For example, I think that the narrative sermon can only be used occasionally. It is not ideally suited to our congregational structure whereas it may have been suited to itinerant preaching.

There are two great Biblical examples of narrative preaching.

- Nathan’s parable
- Parable of the vineyard (Matthew 21:33-46)

### 3 SOME RECOMMENDED READING

Alter, Robert. *The Art of Biblical Narrative*. New York: Basic, 1981.

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Bonchek, Avigdor. *Studying the Torah: A Guide to In-Depth Interpretation*. Northvale: Aronson, 1996.

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Kaiser, Walter C. *Preaching and Teaching From the Old Testament: A Guide for the Church*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003.

Pratt, Richard L. *He Gave Us Stories*. Brentwood: Wlegmuth & Hyatt, 1990.

Ryken, Leland and Longman, Tremper. *A Complete Literary Guide to the Bible*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993.

- Satterthwaite, Philip E. 'Narrative Criticism: The Theological Implications of Narrative Techniques'. In *A Guide to Old Testament Theology and Exegesis: The Introductory Articles from the New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*. Edited by W. VanGemeren. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990, pp. 122-30.
- Ska, Jean -Louis. *'Our Fathers Have Told Us': Introduction to the Analysis of Hebrew Narratives*. Editrice Pontificio Istituto Biblico: Rome, 1990.
- Sternberg, Meir. *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading*, Indiana Literary Biblical Series. Bloomington: Indiana University, 1985.
- Wenham, Gordon J. *Story As Torah: Reading Old Testament Narratives Ethically*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003.