

Biblical Narratives Observing This Literary Genre

Narratives are often portrayed as “stories;” which may convey a sense of fiction. As a distinction, the narratives in the Bible are honest and truthful historical reports by men who could be seen as “journalists.” With over 40% of the Old Testament written as a narrative, this literary style is the most common type of literature in the Bible.

Because biblical history and theology are intertwined, narratives do not simply inform; they should elicit a response.

Narratives force us to know ancient history. Because they are referenced by other books of the Bible, there are certain narratives you should know well for both their historical and theological significance. Much of Christianity’s principles are derived from historical narratives; however, historical narratives are also where many controversies lie.

The writers of the Bible were chosen for their faith and obedience to God (i.e. Isa 6:8), which implied their fidelity to the truth in journalism. Each author had personal reasons for writing in the manner he did including the use of literary devices such as metaphors, chiasms, etc. Thus, careful observation of the details matter to the reader.

These impeccable reporters documented among other things:

- The presence / absence of God, His Son, and His Spirit
- The biography / genealogy of the leaders of God’s people
- God’s laws governing God’s people
- World events that affected God’s people
- Supernatural events and the fulfillment of prophecies that validated God’s Son Jesus Christ

As divinely inspired journalists (2 Tim 3:16), the writers of the Bible wrote:

1. As personal eyewitnesses.

This is the disciple who is testifying to these things and wrote these things, and we know that his testimony is true. And there are also many other things which Jesus did, which if they were written in detail, I suppose that even the world itself would not contain the books that would be written. (John 21:24-25)

2. As reporters who carefully used secondary sources as a basis to write their own observations.

a) The source may be divine

Then the Lord said to Moses, “Write down these words, for in accordance with these words I have made a covenant with you and with Israel.” So he was there with the Lord forty days and forty nights; he did not eat bread or drink water. And he wrote on the tablets the words of the covenant, the Ten Commandments. (Ex 34:27-28)

Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, so that we may know the things freely given to us by God, which things we also speak, not in words taught by human wisdom, but in those taught by the Spirit, combining spiritual thoughts with spiritual words. (1 Cor 2:12-13)

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b) The source may be a reliable and trustworthy person whose reporting may be checked.

In the first year of Darius the son of Ahasuerus, of Median descent, who was made king over the kingdom of the Chaldeans— in the first year of his reign, I, Daniel, observed in the books the number of the years which was revealed as the word of the Lord to Jeremiah the prophet for the completion of the desolations of Jerusalem, namely, seventy years. (Dan 9:1-2)

Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile an account of the things accomplished among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, it seemed fitting for me as well, having investigated everything carefully from the beginning, to write it out for you in consecutive order, most excellent Theophilus; so that you may know the exact truth about the things you have been taught. (Luke 1:1-4)

God's written word of retelling past historical events serves to guide and give meaning to people of the present. It would be meaningless if the narratives were not true. The narratives are constructed in a manner that is viewed through three hierarchal conceptual frameworks:

1. The Immediate Historical Plot

The character of the person or peoples of a nation involved in the plot serve as examples of good or evil. Their choices and resulting consequences impact our understanding of situational ethics or illustrate a moral lesson.

2. The State of Man Under the Old and New Covenant

Under the Old Covenant, the person or people of the narrative were usually portrayed with their attitude towards the Law in view. Did one have a genuine faith in God that engendered an obedient commitment to the Mosaic Covenant? Under the New Covenant, the person or people were being introduced to the death and atonement of Jesus Christ, and the implications of faith, being conferred with the Holy Spirit and Christian ethics.

3. The Glory of God – how He plans to redeem His good Creation

God's Lovingkindness – His fidelity to His unilateral and unconditional covenant

How He provides His New Covenant

How He fulfills His promises to Abraham and its culmination as the Kingdom of God

The Hermeneutics of Biblical Narratives

1. Narratives should be read literally as the author intended. When Jesus taught, He placed an emphasis on seeing and hearing. Truth corresponded to reality.

But Thomas, one of the twelve, called Didymus, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples were saying to him, "We have seen the Lord!" But he said to them, "Unless I see in His hands the imprint of the nails, and put my finger into the place of the nails, and put my hand into His side, I will not believe." After eight days His disciples were again inside, and Thomas with them. Jesus came, the doors having been shut, and stood in their midst and said, "Peace be with you." Then He said to Thomas, "Reach here with your finger, and see My hands; and reach here your hand and put it into My side; and do not be unbelieving, but believing." (John 20:24-27)

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While some narratives may not correspond to our current understanding of science, objectivity demands a literal reading and cannot rule out the possibility of the supernatural.

Example: When the account of the Flood is examined, the dimensions of the ark are realistic. In comparison, other ancient mythological accounts of a great flood (Altra-hasis Epic, Epic of Gilgamesh) do not have realistic and survivable boats.

Caution: Read literally, biblical narratives may not be in chronological order, and anachronisms may exist. With careful study, most of these confusing incidents can be worked out and explained. Details really do matter.

2. Look for patterns and see if there is a lesson to be learned.

Example: Judges is not simply a cycle in history of apostasy, covenant chastisement, repentance and deliverance. What pattern do you notice of moral character of the judges themselves?

Example: Note the sequence of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness. What do you notice in Satan's seductions? How does this compare to the temptation of Adam and Eve?

3. Narratives may include other literary styles and devices and introducing figures of speech, which may require the appropriate hermeneutics.

Therefore I speak to them in parables; because while seeing they do not see, and while hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. In their case the prophecy of Isaiah is being fulfilled, which says,

'You will keep on hearing, but will not understand;
You will keep on seeing, but will not perceive;
For the heart of this people has become dull,
With their ears they scarcely hear,
And they have closed their eyes,
Otherwise they would see with their eyes,
Hear with their ears,
And understand with their heart and return,
And I would heal them.'

But blessed are your eyes, because they see; and your ears, because they hear. (Matt 13:13-16)

And whoever receives one such child in My name receives Me; but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to stumble, it would be better for him to have a heavy millstone hung around his neck, and to be drowned in the depth of the sea. (Matt 18:5-6)

4. Narratives may include observations of things and events that the author has never seen before as he attempts to describe from his perspective. In this instance, figures of speech do not serve as a poetic device.

Example: The Book of Revelation is seldom seen as a narrative; however, the apostle John states repeatedly that he is recording what he is seeing (Rev 4:6; 5:1-2, 6, 11; 6:1-2, 5, 8-9, 12; 7:1-2, 9; 8:2, 13; 9:1, 17; 10:1; 13:1-3, 11; 14:1, 6, 14; 15:1-2, 5; 17:6; 18:1; 19:11, 17, 19; 20:1, 4, 11-12; 21:1-2, 22) and hearing (Rev 6:3, 5-7; 7:4; 8:13; 9:13, 16; 10:4, 8; 14:2, 13; 16:1, 13; 18:4; 19:1; 21:3)!!

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The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave Him to show to His bond-servants, the things which must soon take place; and He sent and communicated it by His angel to His bond-servant John, who testified to the word of God and to the testimony of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw. (Rev 1:1-2)

I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like the sound of a trumpet, saying, "Write in a book what you see, and send it to the seven churches: to Ephesus and to Smyrna and to Pergamum and to Thyatira and to Sardis and to Philadelphia and to Laodicea." (Rev 1:10-11)

When I saw Him, I fell at His feet like a dead man. And He placed His right hand on me, saying, "Do not be afraid; I am the first and the last, and the living One; and I was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of death and of Hades. Therefore write the things which you have seen, and the things which are, and the things which will take place after these things. (Rev 1:17-19)

After these things I looked, and behold, a door standing open in heaven, and the first voice which I had heard, like the sound of a trumpet speaking with me, said, "Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after these things." (Rev 4:1)

I, John, am the one who heard and saw these things. (Rev 22:8a)

5. Ask these types of questions:

- a) What is the main plot and who are the characters involved? Were the characters similar or a contrast? Did the moral qualities of the character change over time? Was there anything being repeated? What was the outcome of the plot? Did it illustrate any type of ethics? Was this a good example or one that should not be followed?
- b) What do you observe in the context of the Mosaic Law? What do you observe in the context of the New Covenant?
- c) What do you observe in the context of the Abrahamic Covenant? What do you observe in the context of the ultimate fulfillment of the Abrahamic Covenant and its culmination as the Kingdom of God?

As the primary means of documenting God's active involvement with His Creation, narratives are an essential literary style in the Bible. Take the time to carefully study this literature literally, and as you observe within the three contextual frameworks, the elegant beauty of God's logic and plan emerges. There is no other narrative like the Bible!!!