

Beginnings: A Walk Through Genesis

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Additional Course Material Available at <http://gd25.us/zDRQ5d>

Genesis and Historical Narrative

Definition

“A narrative is a selective record of a series of events that uses shared conventions to convey the author’s communicative intention in an engaging manner.”¹

“Historical narratives recount factual events in story format.”²

The biblical genre of historical narrative is much like the factual reporting we might read in our newspapers or a history book. However, there certainly are some differences.

1. Biblical narratives will often be peppered with subgenres, such as genealogies, songs, proverbs, prophecies, or covenants.
2. Biblical narratives generally are not concerned with some of the same details that modern readers might wish addressed (for example, strict chronological identification or sequencing, biographical details from the entire span of a person’s life, etc.).
3. Biblical narratives, while accurate, never claim to be objective. The biblical authors have a purpose in writing—to convince the readers of God’s revelatory message and the necessity of responding to God in repentance, faith, and obedience.

¹ Peter T. Vogt, *Interpreting the Pentateuch* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2009), 48.

² Robert L. Plummer, *40 Questions About Interpreting the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2010), 191.

“While the biblical narrative records many facts (the locations where the Israelites wandered in the wilderness or the names of Jesus’ disciples, for example), the purpose of the narrative is to bring the reader to submit to God in Christ.”³

Guidelines for Interpreting Historical Narratives⁴

Historical narratives also present some unique interpretive challenges. The biblical writer’s purposes are usually undercurrents of the text rather than floating unmistakably on the surface. Because of this, unskilled interpreters are prone to missteps, leading both themselves and their listeners astray from the real meaning of the text. For example, many details in stories are not presented as normative. That is, the author is not intending to present all persons or actions as moral lessons. For example, it has been said that you should put your new born baby in a crib (as opposed to your own bed) because Mary put Jesus in the manger (Luke 2:7). The key interpretive question of course is: why does Luke tell us that Jesus was placed in a manger? Was it to teach us how to put our children to bed, or was it to emphasize the Savior’s humble origins?

It is important to understand that interpretation of narratives should not simply be a reiteration of the facts in the narrative. Facts are included, grouped, and commented on by the writer for the purpose of convincing the reader of some truth.

Context

While context is important for all interpretation, it is especially important for the more indirect genre of historical narrative. The author of the biblical book did, in fact, intend his audience to read the whole account, so each minor section needs to read in light of the whole and vice versa. In

³ Plummer, 192.

⁴ This section is taken from Plummer, 192-95.

Mark 1:1, Mark tells us that the purpose of his account is to relate the good news about Messiah Jesus, the Son of God. All the material that follows should be read in light of Mark's opening statement.

Editorial Comments

Sometimes the author will give explicit editorial comments as to the meaning or importance of an event. This is especially helpful to the reader and should not be overlooked. In Mark 7:19 for example, Mark notes that Jesus' comments about food and purity should be understood as declaring "all foods clean."

In Genesis, in the account of creation, there is an editorial comment that is used over and over again (repetition). "And God saw that it was good." This adds meaning and importance to the story.

Thematic Statements

Sometimes an author will begin his work or a section of his work with a thematic statement that helps us to understand the remainder of the work. For example, in Acts 1:8: "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." As we see, the remainder of the book of Acts traces the Holy Spirit propelling the church outward in witness to the gospel of Christ in ever-widening geographic venues (e.g., Acts 2:14-42; 8:1-25, 26-40; 10:1-48; 11:19-21; 13:1-3; 28:28-31).

Repetition

Biblical authors did not have the luxury of bold script or impressive graphics. When they wanted to emphasize something they often used repetition. As is clear from Mark's frequent summary statements on the matter, he wanted to emphasize the massive crowds that were drawn to Jesus, as well as their utter amazement as his teaching and miracles (e.g., Mark 1:27-28, 45; 2:12; 3:7-12; 4:1)

Trustworthy Characters

Whether directly or indirectly, the author clues the reader as to which characters are to be believed or imitated. So for example, when the angel from God speaks to a character, there is no doubt that the angel is conveying trustworthy information (e.g. Matt 1:20-25).

Life Study Assignment

1. Read in *How to Read Genesis* pages 13-25.
2. Read in your Bibles Gen 1 & 2 continuing to draw out observations, specifically, now applied to what we have learned about narrative. Find where you see areas of editorial comments, repetition, specific omission, etc.

Next week we will turn to the authorship of Genesis.