

## Section 8: PRINCIPLES FOR INTERPRETING NARRATIVE

“The morning newspaper contains a diversity of forms of writing, from news reporting to commentary, from classifieds to comic strips. These different forms are almost unnoticed by most readers, who unconsciously adjust their expectations when reading the different content, ways of expression, and purpose of what is written” (Sandy and Giese).

Waymeyer: “The interpreter must recognize that Scripture also contains a diversity of forms of writing—commonly known as *literary genres*—and that each of them requires that he adjust his expectations and approach to interpretation. These adjustments are often slight, but they are always essential.”

These special rules of interpretation fall into the category of what is known as “special hermeneutics.” The following six sections will address special hermeneutics by setting forth specific principles for interpreting the biblical genres of narrative, proverbs, psalms, parables, prophecy, and epistles. As the interpreter consults these additional guidelines, it is essential that he view them as a supplement to the principles of general hermeneutics he is already using.

### I. Introduction to Biblical Narrative

- A. Waymeyer: “Biblical narrative refers to those portions of Scripture which provide an account of historical events. Narrative is the most common genre in the entire Bible, constituting more than 40 percent of the Old Testament (Gen; Exod. 1-19; 32-34; Num. 10-17; 22-24; 36-39; Deut. 1-5; 8; 9-10; Josh—Esther; Isaiah 6; 36-39; Jer. 1; 26-28; 36-43; 51-52; Ezek. 1-3; 33; Dan 1-8; Hosea 1; 3; Amos 7:10-17; Jonah) and nearly 60 percent of the New Testament (Matt, Mark, Luke, John, Acts). For this reason, it is absolutely imperative that the interpreter have a clear understanding of how to determine the divinely intended meaning of biblical narrative.”
  
- B. Walt Kaiser: “[A]ll too frequently narrative portions of Scripture are the victims of abuse. In the rush to make legitimate applications and personal utilization of these texts, preachers, teachers, and general readers of the Bible hastily assume the *meaning* of a passage has been understood (or worse still, that determining the meaning of the story is a waste of time) and move on to make an appropriate *application* of the narrative.... There is simply no substitute for taking the time to determine the *meaning* of the narrative.”

The purpose of this section is to set forth some of the primary guidelines for determining this meaning.

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<sup>1</sup> Notes compiled from The Master’s Seminary and Matt Waymeyer Hermeneutics course, *Grasping God’s Word* (Duvall and Hays), and *Basic Bible Interpretation* (Roy Zuck).

Walt Kaiser: “Though narrative is common in our experience, the stories in the Bible are sometimes misunderstood. Rarely does the author of a text state what the point of the story is; that is left to interpretation. With so much of the Bible written in narrative form, correct interpretation of narrative must be the concern of all who are serious students of Scripture.”

## **II. Guidelines for Interpreting Biblical Narrative**

Although distinctions can be made between various types of narratives in Scripture (e.g., OT narrative, the Gospels, and the book of Acts), the following principles are broad enough for interpreting narratives throughout the Bible.

### **A. Recognize the Theo-centric focus of biblical narratives.**

Waymeyer: “Biblical narratives are not just stories about people who lived during biblical times—they are first and foremost stories about *God* and what He did to, for, within, and through those people. In contrast to human narratives, the Bible is composed especially of divine narratives in which God alone is the hero of the story (Fee and Stuart). For this reason, the interpreter must be prepared to recognize God as the primary focus of narratives in Scripture.”

Fee and Stuart: “Their purpose is to show God at work in His creation and among His people. The narratives glorify Him, help us to understand and appreciate Him, and give us a picture of His providence and protection.”

Scott Duvall and Daniel Hays: “Throughout most of [biblical narrative], God is a central character. God is not aloof...speaking only in shadows through the narrator. He is a major player in the story.... If we miss God in the story, then we have missed the story.”

### **B. Recognize the difference between description and prescription.**

Waymeyer: “The common temptation when reading narratives is to assume that the biblical account is setting forth how the people of God ought to live. In contrast, biblical narratives simply record what happened, not necessarily what *should* have happened or what should happen *today*. For example, sometimes Scripture records how God’s people acted wickedly as a warning to people today (e.g., see 1 Cor 10:1-11), and other times it records events that were unique to that period of redemptive history (e.g., the miraculous gifts of the early church). In light of this, the interpreter must always recognize the difference between description (what happened) and prescription (what *ought* to happen).”

### **C. Interpret the narrative in light of its broader literary/theological context.**

Waymeyer: “As with all genres of Scripture, it is important for the interpreter of biblical narrative to locate the passage he is studying within its larger literary and theological context. For example, the writers of the historical accounts in 1 and 2

Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings, and 1 and 2 Chronicles build their narratives upon the content of the Pentateuch, Joshua, and Judges.”

Stein: Thus, “they accept as normative what has happened and is taught in these books, and they expect their readers to be acquainted with them and also to accept them as such. In a similar way the New Testament writers build on the teachings of the Old Testament (Matt 1:1; Mark 1:2-3; Rom 1:2; 4:1-3; 9:1-5; Heb 1:1-2; James 1:1).”

**D. Interpret the narrative in light of the overall purpose of the book in which it occurs.**

Once the interpreter understands the purpose of the book, then the question can be asked, “How does this narrative passage contribute to and align with that purpose?”

**FOR EXAMPLE:** What is the main point of Acts 2:1-47?

First, ask, “What is the purpose of Acts?” Acts records how Christ’s promise to build the church unfolded through the Holy Spirit’s power working in individuals saved by the Person and work of Christ.

How does it serve the overall purpose of Acts? Acts 2 fits perfectly into the purpose. Luke records the extraordinary event of the birth of the church through the New Covenant arrival of the Holy Spirit. Israel is judged through their hardness of heart towards Christ. God performs an incredible language miracle to illustrate that Christ will fulfill the promise to Abraham; bringing blessings through Israel to all nations.

**E. Carefully analyze the various literary features of the narrative.**

Waymeyer: “In seeking to discern the divinely intended meaning of a biblical narrative, there is simply no substitute for reading the narrative over and over again. As the interpreter reads the account repeatedly, he must do so purposefully, being careful to observe and analyze several literary features which are common to all biblical narratives.”

**1. The Perspective of the Narrator**

Stein: “Because the biblical narrator is the spokesman of God, he is not necessarily limited by space and time. For this reason, he is able to assume a literary omnipresence (Gen 3:1-24; Job 1:6-12; 2:1-6; Mark 6:48) and omniscience (Gen 6:6, 8; 29:20; 38:15; 2 Sam 11:27; Luke 2:29, 38; John 2:23; 4:1; Acts 24:26).”

- Is the biblical narrator writing in first person or third person?

- Is he an active participant in the events he is describing? Or is he viewing them from the outside as a detached observer?
- Is he an omniscient observer, able to see many things at once? Is he able to read people's minds? Or is he a limited observer, describing events as they might be seen by anyone else who was there? Or is he somewhere in between, less than omniscient and yet seemingly able to discern some things another observer would not see?
- Does he side with the actions, deeds, or words of one or more of the characters that he describes?
- Does he interrupt his story with information that comes from a later point in time?

## 2. **The Setting of the Narrative**

The setting of a narrative refers to the time and location in which the narrative takes place (e.g., Ruth 1:1), which can be geographical, historical, or even temporal.

Grant Osborne: The three Passovers recorded in the Gospel of John (2:23; 6:4; 11:15) “form a temporal framework for the entire ministry of Jesus.” It is essential for the reader to identify this setting as the background for the narrative he is seeking to interpret.

## 3. **The Characters of the Narrative**

Characters are central to almost every story. For this reason, the interpreter will need to pay close attention to how the narrator introduces and describes each of the characters.

- How are the characters described?
- What do they say and do?
- What role do they play in the course of the narrative?
- Do they change at all in the course of the narrative? If so, what is the nature of the change? Is it viewed positively or negatively?

## 4. **The Details of the Narrative**

One notable feature of biblical narrative is the relative lack of detail and description provided in the accounts themselves. This relative lack of

description makes it all the more essential for the interpreter to take note of descriptive details when they are provided. For example, when the narrator makes a note of Esau's hairiness (Gen 25:25), Rachel's beauty (Gen 29:17), King Eglon's obesity (Judg 3:17), or Saul's height and handsomeness (1 Sam 9:2), the interpreter should expect that these descriptions "will probably figure prominently in the plot, theme, or consequences soon to be told" (Kaiser).

## 5. The Dialogue of the Narrative

The dialogue between characters can play such a central role in a given passage that it often drives the flow of the narrative itself. In this way, dialogue not only adds color and vividness to the story, but oftentimes it becomes the primary feature of the plot. For this reason, as he moves toward outlining the narrative, the interpreter should begin by observing who is speaking to whom throughout the entire passage.

Other times the interpreter can use the flow of dialogue in a given narrative to construct a brief outline of the entire passage. For example, the dialogue between Jesus and the rich young ruler in Mark 10:17-22 could be outlined like this:

- The Request of the Ruler (10:17)
- The Response of the Savior (10:18-19)
- The Revelation of Pride (10:20)
- The Requirement of Repentance (10:21)
- The Refusal of Salvation (10:22)

Still other times, making key observations about the dialogue of a given narrative can help the interpreter determine the main point of the passage. For example, consider the following dialogue in 1 Samuel 17:

- **Saul:** "You are not able to go against this Philistine to fight with him" (17:33).
- **David:** "The Lord who delivered me from the paw of the lion and from the paw of the bear, He will deliver me from the hand of this Philistine" (17:37).
- **Goliath:** "Come to me, and I will give your flesh to the birds of the sky and the beasts of the field" (17:44).
- **David:** "You come to me with a sword, a spear, and a javelin, but I come to you in the name of the Lord of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel" (17:45).

- As Joel James observes: “Without the dialogues between David, Saul, and Goliath, 1 Samuel 17 would be only an entertaining account of David’s improbable victory over the Philistine giant. With the dialogues, it is a theological treatise on God’s power.”

## 6. The Scene of the Narrative

Kaiser: “In the scene, the action of the story is broken up into separate sequences, each scene representing something that took place at a particular time and place. With the scenes, the emphasis is put on the deeds done and the words spoken. Thus the scenes function much like the frames in a movie that make up the total film. Each one contributes to the whole, but each may be analyzed in and of itself in order to discover how the parts contribute to the whole.”

To do so, the interpreter may find it helpful to map out the transitions from one scene to another much in the same way as he did earlier with the dialogue between characters.

In doing so, the interpreter should recognize that the narrator may actually point his camera in several different directions even when he remains in the same general vicinity, providing “mini-scenes” within a scene. For example, even though John 19:17-30 is all part of the same scene—having occurred in the same general time and place—the interpreter can follow the camera angle of the apostle John as it points in different directions and captures different aspects of what took place:

- Jesus is crucified by the Roman soldiers (17-18)
- Pilate interacts with the Jews about his inscription (19-22)
- The soldiers divide the garments of Jesus (23-25a)
- Jesus speaks to John and His mother Mary (25b-27)
- Jesus drinks the wine and calls out His final words (28-30)

These events all happened in the same basic vicinity—some of them perhaps even occurring at the same time—but following the mini-scenes within this scene helps the interpreter follow the overall flow of the passage and moves him one step closer to his final goal.

## 7. The Plot of the Narrative

“Plot” refers to the organizing structure that ties the individual scenes of the narrative together into a larger, coherent story.

Duvall and Hays: “The sequence of events, along with the rise and fall of dramatic action, outlines the structure of the plot and moves the story forward.”

Biblical narratives “usually follow a pattern in which a problem occurs near the beginning of the narrative, with increasing complications that reach a climax. And then the narrative moves toward a solution to the problem and concludes with the problem solved. As the problem develops, suspense usually intensifies and issues and relationships become more complicated until they reach a dramatic climax” (Zuck).

As Michael H. Burer observes, the key to understanding the plot is to determine the nature of the conflict, how it gets resolved, and the role that the characters play in the process: “This will be determined through the interaction of two main elements in the story, the characters and the events....The responsibility of the reader is to put the characters and events together in such a way that a coherent plot is understood, one which explains the events of the story and provides an appropriate framework for understanding.”

The initial purpose of constructing this framework is to trace the unity and movement of the action as it progresses through the narrative. “First this is done at the macro level, noting the development of the work as a whole. Then we analyze the micro structure of individual pericopes, or stories. Each story is broken up into...its individual elements or actions. These are charted to determine how the characters interact and how the conflict ebbs and flows within both the single story and the larger narrative of which it is a part” (Osborne).

Jeffrey D. Arthurs proposes a paradigm which captures well the development of the plot in many biblical narratives:

- Background
- Conflict
- Rising Action
- Climax
- Resolution

**EXAMPLE:** Paul Lamey shows how the account of the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15 reflects this basic plot structure:

1. Background (15:1)
2. Conflict (15:2-5)
3. Rising Action (15:6-12)
4. Climax (15:13-21)
5. Resolution (15:22-35)

- For other examples, see pages 417-18 of Daniel Block's "Tell Me the Old, Old Story."

The ultimate goal in tracing the development of the plot is to begin to zero in on the theological purpose of the narrative as a whole. This is the final and most critical step in the process of interpreting biblical narrative.

**F. Seek to determine the theological purpose of the biblical narrative.**

Waymeyer: "The purpose of biblical narrative is not simply to tell the reader what took place in the past but rather to use the telling of a story to communicate theological truth. Put another way, the ultimate purpose of biblical narrative is not historical but *theological*. This is not to deny the historical accuracy of Scripture but rather to say that the *meaning* of biblical narrative is not found not simply in what *happened*, but rather in an accurate *interpretation* of what happened. For this reason, the pinnacle of the process of interpreting biblical narrative is to determine the theological purpose of the passage."

In order to do so, the interpreter must give special attention to four (sometimes overlapping) features of biblical narrative: (1) the selection of material, (2) the use of repetition, (3) the use of editorial comments, and (4) the use of summary statements.

**1. The Selection of Material**

Waymeyer: "The author of a given biblical narrative had to make choices regarding which details to include in his composition and which to leave out. Furthermore, he also had to choose which details to explain more fully and which to do so in summary fashion. The end product of these decisions is the narrative itself, and the specific material the narrator chose to tell the story is therefore the primary indicator of his theological purpose in the narrative as a whole."

Waymeyer: "The interpreter must look at the narrator's selection of material as his primary guide in discerning the theological purpose of the writer. After all, the selection of material is the only sure guide to understanding what the biblical narrator wanted to emphasize in his narrative."

Fee and Stuart: "All narratives are selective and incomplete. Not all the relevant details are always given (cf. John 21:25). What does appear in the narrative is everything that the inspired author thought important for us to know."



For example, both Matthew and John were disciples of Christ, eyewitnesses of His earthly ministry, and first-hand hearers His teaching. In addition, both of them were given the Holy Spirit to help them remember everything Jesus had said (John 14:26). For this reason, both Matthew and John possessed the same basic “material” to choose from in constructing their Gospels. But the apostle Matthew referred to the “kingdom” 54 times in his gospel whereas the apostle John referred to it only five times in his. This tells the reader that Matthew obviously wanted to emphasize the kingdom to a degree that John apparently did not. The job of the interpreter is not only to take note of this kind of selection of material, but also to determine what it reveals about the theological purpose of the narrator.

## 2. The Use of Repetition

Waymeyer: “Repetition of key words, phrases, and concepts in a biblical narrative is often a clear and obvious indication of an important point of emphasis in the passage. These patterns of repetition can be found in the book as a whole or in a section within a given book.”

### For Example:

- **The Repeated References to “the Kingdom” in Matthew (54x)**
- **The Repeated References to “No King” and “everyone [doing] what is right in their own eyes” in Judges**  
“In those days Israel had no king” (Judges 17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25)
- **The Repeated References to the Holy Spirit in Luke 1-4**  
(1:15; 1:35; 1:41-45; 3:22; 4:1; 4:14; 4:18)
- **The Repeated References in Nehemiah to:**
  - the theme of God’s help (2:8; 2:18; 2:20; 4:20; 6:16)
  - Nehemiah’s prayers for God’s help (1:11; 2:4; 4:4, 9; 6:9, 14)
- **The Repeated Emphasis on Fulfillment in John 18-19**
  - John 18:9: “that the word might be *fulfilled*”
  - John 18:32: “that the word of Jesus might be *fulfilled*”
  - John 19:24: “this was to *fulfill* the Scripture”
  - John 19:28: “to *fulfill* the Scripture”
  - John 19:36: “that the Scripture might be *fulfilled*”
- **The Repeated Emphasis on Fulfillment of God’s Word in 1/2 Kings**
  - 1 Kings 2:27: “to fulfill the word of the Lord”
  - 1 Kings 12:15: “that He might establish His word”

- 1 Kings 15:29: “according to the word of the Lord”
  - 1 Kings 16:12: “according to the word of the Lord”
  - 1 Kings 16:34: “according to the word of the Lord”
  - 2 Kings 1:17: “according to the word of the Lord”
  - 2 Kings 23:16: “according to the word of the Lord”
  - 2 Kings 24:2: “according to the word of the Lord”
- **The Repeated Pattern of Judgment/Deliverance in Judges:**
    - Israel does “evil in eyes of Lord” (2:11-12; 3:7, 12; 4:1; 6:1; 10:6; 13:1)
    - The Lord hands them over to enemies (2:14; 3:8, 12; 4:2; 6:1; 10:7; 13:1)
    - Israel cries out to the Lord in repentance (3:9, 14; 4:3; 6:6-7; 10:10, 12)
    - The Lord delivers them (2:16, 18; 3:9, 15; 6:9; 10:12)

**THE POINT:** Sin leads to judgment, but repentance leads to salvation!

- **Two Repeated Themes in the Book of Acts**
  - **The Faithful Proclamation of the Gospel**
    - 4:31: “they...began to speak the word of God with boldness”
    - 4:33: “the apostles were giving witness to the resurrection”
    - 5:42: “the kept right on teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ”
    - 6:7: “the word of God kept on spreading”
    - 8:4: “those who had been scattered went about preaching the word”
    - 11:19: “speaking the word”
    - 11:20: “preaching the Lord Jesus”
    - 12:24: “the word of the Lord continued to grow and be multiplied”
    - 19:20: “the word of the Lord was growing mightily and prevailing”
    - 28:31: “preaching the kingdom of God”
    - 28:31: “teaching concerning the Lord Jesus Christ”
  - **The Numerical Growth of the Church**
    - 2:47: “the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved”
    - 4:4: “many of those who had heard the message believed; and the number of the men came to be about five thousand”
    - 5:14: “all the more believers in the Lord, multitudes of men and women, were constantly added to their number”
    - 6:1: “the disciples were increasing in number”
    - 6:7: “the number of the disciples continued to increase greatly”

- 6:7b: “a great many of priests were becoming obedient to the faith”
- 9:31: “So the church...continued to increase”
- 9:42: “many believed in the Lord”
- 11:19-21: “a large number...believed and turned to the Lord”
- 16:5: “So the churches...were increasing in number daily”

**THE POINT:** This clear pattern suggests “that Luke wrote the book of Acts to show that the early church was faithful to obey Christ’s commission to preach the gospel and that God was faithful to bless their efforts with many conversions. Luke’s theological message? Whatever internal problems or external pressures threatened its progress, the church preached and the church grew” (Joel James).

### 3. The Use of Editorial Comments

Waymeyer: “Regardless of the identity of the narrator, a biblical view of inspiration requires that the human writer’s perspective be understood as the perspective of God Himself.”

#### ▪ Hidden Thoughts, Desires, and Motives

- Mark 6:20: “For Herod was afraid of John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and he kept him safe.”
- Mark 9:32: “But they did not understand this statement, and they were afraid to ask Him.”
- Mark 11:18: “The chief priests and the scribes heard this, and began seeking how to destroy Him; for they were afraid of Him, for the whole crowd was astonished at His teaching.”
- Mark 12:12: “And they were seeking to seize Him, and yet they feared the people, for they understood that He spoke the parable against them And so they left Him and went away.”
- John 2:24-25: “But Jesus, on His part, was not entrusting Himself to them, for He knew all men, and because He did not need anyone to testify concerning man, for He Himself knew what was in man.”
- John 6:15: “So Jesus, perceiving that they were intending to come and take Him by force to make Him king, withdrew again to the mountain by Himself alone.”
- John 6:64: “For Jesus knew from the beginning who they were who did not believe, and who it was that would betray Him.”

- John 9:22: “His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews; for the Jews had already agreed that if anyone confessed Him to be Christ, he was to be put out of the synagogue.”
- Acts 24:26: “At the same time too, he was hoping that money would be given him by Paul; therefore he also used to send for him quite often and converse with him.”
- **Moral Descriptions of People or Events**
  - Job 1:1: “There was a man in the land of Uz whose name was Job; and that man was blameless, upright, fearing God and turning away from evil.”
  - Luke 1:6: “They were both righteous in the sight of God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and requirements of the Lord.”
  - Luke 23:50-51: “And a man named Joseph, who was a member of the Council, a good and righteous man (he had not consented to their plan and action), a man from Arimathea, a city of the Jews, who was waiting for the kingdom of God.”
  - Judges 2:11: “Then the sons of Israel did evil in the sight of the LORD and served the Baals.”
  - 1 Kings 14:8-9: “and [I] tore the kingdom away from the house of David and gave it to you—yet you have not been like My servant David, who kept My commandments and who followed Me with all his heart, to do only that which was right in My sight; you also have done more evil than all who were before you, and have gone and made for yourself other gods and molten images to provoke Me to anger, and have cast Me behind your back.”
  - 2 Kings 10:31: “But Jehu was not careful to walk in the law of the LORD, the God of Israel, with all his heart; he did not depart from the sins of Jeroboam, which he made Israel sin.”
  - 2 Chronicles 12:14: “He did evil because he did not set his heart to seek the LORD.”
  - 2 Chronicles 26:4-5: “He did right in the sight of the LORD according to all that his father Amaziah had done. He continued to seek God in the days of Zechariah, who had understanding through the vision of God; and as long as he sought the LORD, God prospered him.”

- 2 Chronicles 33:2: “He did evil in the sight of the LORD according to the abominations of the nations whom the LORD dispossessed before the sons of Israel.”

**KEY:** Daniel Block: “Biblical narrators were concerned not only to describe historical events, but also to interpret them. Indeed, it is in the author’s interpretation that we find the permanent message.” Therefore, when the narrator provides his own interpretation or editorial comment on a given aspect of the narrative, the interpreter needs to determine how this sheds light on the theological purpose of the narrative as a whole.

#### 4. The Use of Summary Statements

Sometimes the entire point of a given narrative is summarized by the narrator or character in the narrative in a single statement (or series of statements) at the conclusion of the passage. The interpreter must determine this, however, not simply by locating what appears to be a summary statement, but by identifying it as such in conjunction with a careful study of the entire passage.

#### **EXAMPLE:**

- **The Main Point of John 2:1-11**
  - John 2:11: “This beginning of signs Jesus did in Cana of Galilee, and manifested His glory, and His disciples believed in Him.”
- **The Main Point of John 4:1-42**
  - John 4:42: “And they were saying to the woman, “It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves and know that this One is indeed the Savior of the world.”
- **The Main Point of John 9:1-41:**
  - John 9:39: “For judgment I came into this world, so that those who do not see may see, and that those who see may become blind.”
  - John 9:41: “Jesus said to them, ‘If you were blind, you would have no sin; but since you say, “We see,” your sin remains.’”

- **The Main Point of Genesis 37-50**
  - Gen 45:5: “God sent me before you to preserve life.”
  - Gen 45:7: “God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant in the earth, and to keep you alive by a great deliverance.”
  - Gen 45:8: “It was not you who sent me here, but God; and He has made me a father to Pharaoh and lord of all his household and ruler over all the land of Egypt.”
  - Gen 50:20: “As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result, to preserve many people alive.”

#### **KEY THEOLOGICAL QUESTIONS:**

Daniel Block: Interpreting a narrative theologically involves “identifying the timeless doctrinal and ethical truths the author is seeking to communicate.” In order to determine the narrator’s theological purpose, it can be helpful for the interpreter to complete his analysis of the passage by asking the following questions:

- What does this narrative reveal about the character of God?
- What does this narrative teach about the human condition?
- What does this narrative say about how God relates to mankind?
- What does this narrative contribute to God’s plan of redemption?
- What does this narrative reveal about God’s eternal purposes?
- What does this narrative reveal about living to the glory of God?

#### **IV. Common Pitfalls in Interpreting Biblical Narrative**

##### **A. Resist the temptation to interpret narratives allegorically.**

Waymeyer: “An objective reading of Scripture reveals that biblical narratives are presented as an accurate historical account of what really happened (e.g., Luke 1:1-4; 3:1-2). For this reason, to interpret them allegorically is to depart from their divinely intended meaning and to substitute instead a completely subjective and arbitrary interpretation which undermines the authority of God’s Word. The interpreter, then, must resist the temptation to interpret biblical narrative allegorically.”

**B. Resist the temptation to interpret narratives atomistically.**

Fee and Stuart: Every individual narrative or episode within a narrative does not necessarily have a point all its own: “Narratives cannot be interpreted atomistically, as if every statement, every event, every description could, independently of the others, have a special message for the reader. In fact, even in fairly lengthy narratives all the component parts of the narrative...work together to impress upon the reader a single major point. There is an overall drift or movement to a narrative, a kind of superstructure that makes the point, usually a single point...”

**C. Resist the temptation to interpret narratives applicationaly.**

Waymeyer: “Some interpreters are so eager to embrace the practical value of God’s Word that they bypass interpretation altogether and move right to application. This can be especially true with biblical narrative where interpretation can be so difficult.”

Fee and Stuart: “Too impatient to find God’s will from the Bible as a whole, people make mistakes—they allow themselves to misinterpret individual parts of Scripture.”

Fee and Stuart: “The Bible is a great resource. It contains all that a Christian really needs in terms of guidance from God for living. But it does not *always* contain answers as specific and personal as some would wish, and it does not contain all its information in every chapter of every book!”

**D. Resist the temptation to see a given biblical narrative as being exhaustive.**

Waymeyer: “There are two related dangers in seeing a given biblical narrative as exhaustive. First, the interpreter may believe that the narrative consists of an exhaustive account of the event that it describes, but this is rarely the case. The account of any given biblical narrative is always accurate and trustworthy—and it is perfectly sufficient to communicate the intent of the author—but it does not record every thought, word, deed, and event that occurred at that particular time and place.

Second, the interpreter may believe that the narrative is exhaustive in its treatment of the theological topic it addresses.”

**Section 9: PRINCIPLES FOR INTERPRETING PROVERBS**

**I. Introduction to Proverbs**

MacArthur: “Proverbs are simple, moral statements (or illustrations) that highlight and teach fundamental realities about life.”

## II. Guidelines for Interpreting Proverbs

### A. Interpret individual passages in light of the overall theme of Proverbs.

The overall theme of the book of Proverbs is found in Proverbs 1:7a: “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge” (also see 9:10). This motto serves as the compass that provides orientation to the entire book, for Proverbs is designed to teach believers how to fear God in every area of life. For this reason, each of the individual verses and passages in Proverbs should be understood not as a call to behavior modification, but rather as a call to this kind of devotion to Yahweh.

### B. Recognize the two basic literary forms in Proverbs.

#### 1. The Admonition

The admonition consists of either a positive command or a negative prohibition in the imperative mood: “Give instruction to a wise man, and he will be wiser still” (9:9a). The imperative in the admonition is often followed by a motivation clause introduced by the conjunction “for” (or sometimes “and” as in 9:9a above). This clause conveys the practical consequences of the mandated action, and the proverb as a whole is designed to convince the hearer of obeying the command or prohibition.

Grant Osborne: “At times the motivation clause may not be stated (20:18) or may be implicit (24:17-18; 25:21-22), but at all times commands are meant to stimulate response and obedience.”

**EXAMPLE:** “Do not speak in the hearing of a fool, for he will despise the wisdom of your words” (23:9).

- **Command:** “Do not speak in the hearing of a fool”
- **Motivation:** “for he will despise the wisdom of your words”

#### 2. The Wisdom Saying

Waymeyer: “A wisdom saying is an observation based on experience which is expressed by a verb in the indicative mood. The unstated exhortation of such sayings is that the reader is to follow the path of wisdom rather than the path of foolishness, each of which can be recognized by the stated results of taking a given course of action.”

**EXAMPLE:** “A gentle answer turns away wrath,  
but a harsh word stirs up anger” (15:1)



- Is there an actual command in this verse?
- If not, is there an unstated exhortation?
- If so, what is it? How do you know this?

**C. Recognize the significance of poetic parallelism in Proverbs.**

The dominant characteristic of poetry in the Old Testament is Hebrew parallelism in which one line corresponds with the other. There are four main types of poetic parallelism used in the book of Proverbs—*synonymous parallelism*, *antithetical parallelism*, *emblematic parallelism*, and *synthetic parallelism*.

**1. Synonymous Parallelism**

Waymeyer: “In synonymous parallelism, the second line of the pair repeats the idea of the first line without making any significant addition or subtraction.” This often includes the use of a strict grammatical parallel between the two lines:

- 1:20:      Wisdom      shouts      in the street  
              She            lifts her voice      in the square.
- 17:4:      An evildoer    listens to      wicked lips  
              A liar            pays attention to      a destructive tongue.

Osborne: “The interpreter in some instances should not read too much into the semantic variation between the two lines, for that could be intended more as a stylistic change for effect.” In other words, the student of Proverbs should guard against the common error of seeing anything more than a subtle difference in meaning between two words being used as synonyms. In addition, when the interpreter encounters synonymous parallelism and comes to an obscure Hebrew word whose definition is unclear, comparing it to its synonymous counterpart will usually shed light on its meaning.

**2. Antithetic Parallelism**

In antithetic parallelism—the most common form in Proverbs—the second line is set in contrast to the idea of the first line, and usually by means of the adversative conjunction “but.”

- 10:1:      A wise son            makes a father glad  
                                  but  
              A foolish son        is a grief to his mother.



the proverb by wrestling with the question: *How am I to live in light of this truth?* To fail to take this extra step is to miss the point of the verse.

**D. Beware of assuming that proverbs are unconditional promises.**

Fee and Stuart: “Proverbs are not to be understood as unconditional promises but rather as practical principles to follow as one seeks to fear God and live wisely. In other words, they are poetic guidelines for behavior, not legal guarantees from God, for proverbs state what *generally* takes place in certain circumstances, not what always takes place in those circumstances.”

For example, consider Proverbs 10:4: “Poor is he who works with a negligent hand, but the hand of the diligent makes rich.” Is this true in every case? No, for some wealthy people are lazy and some poor people are diligent. Or Proverbs 15:1: “A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.” Is this the way that an angry person will respond every single time? Of course not. As Parsons writes, “A gentle answer may turn away wrath, but at times such an answer may have no positive effect on stubborn individuals.”

So rather than unconditional promises from God, proverbs often consist of generalizations of what is *likely* to happen if a certain course of action is taken. In this way, they are intended to exhort people to walk the path of wisdom, not offer iron-clad assurances that A will always produce B. At the same time, some proverbs are unconditionally true, usually those connected to an attribute or action of God (e.g., 11:1; 12:22; 15:3; 15:8; 16:2, 4, 33; 17:3; 22:2) (Parsons).

**E. Beware of assuming that any one proverb is an exhaustive statement about the subject it discusses.**

Ted Hildebrandt: “The truth of an individual proverb is limited to the specific slice of reality that it portrays.”

No proverb is a complete statement of truth, and no proverb is exhaustive in its coverage of a particular subject (Fee and Stuart). The interpreter of a given proverb will need to keep in mind that other proverbs and other portions of Scripture may fill in certain aspects of living wisely in the circumstances addressed by the proverb under consideration.

For example, Proverbs 16:9 (“The mind of man plans his way, but the Lord directs his steps”) should give one confidence in the sovereignty of God, but in light of Proverbs 15:22 (“Without consultation, plans are frustrated, but with many counselors they succeed”), it should not be understood as eliminating the need for careful planning. Fee and Stuart: “Each inspired proverb must be balanced with others and understood in comparison with the rest of Scripture.”