CHAPTER 5

The Old Testament Narratives: Their Proper Use

The single most common type of literature in the Bible is narrative. In fact, over 40 percent of the Old Testament is narrative — and the Old Testament itself constitutes three-quarters of the bulk of the Bible. The following Old Testament books are largely or entirely composed of narrative material: Genesis, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings, 1 and 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Daniel, Jonah, and Haggai. Moreover, Exodus, Numbers, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Isaiah, and Job also contain substantial narrative portions. Although a goodly portion of the New Testament is also narrative (the Gospels, Acts), our interest in this chapter is specifically with Hebrew narrative — the special way that the Old Testament people were inspired of the Holy Spirit to tell their story.

Our concern in this chapter is to guide you toward a good understanding of how Hebrew narrative "works," so that you may read your Bibles more knowledgeably and with greater

appreciation for God's story. Unfortunately, failure to understand both the reason for and the character of Hebrew narrative has caused many Christians in the past to read the Old Testament story poorly. If you are a Christian, the Old Testament is *your* spiritual history. The promises and calling of God to Israel are *your* historical promises and calling. Yet, in our experience, people force incorrect interpretations and applications on narrative portions of the Bible as much as or more than they do on any other parts. Their intended value and meaning are replaced with ideas read into rather than out of the text. So we will pay extra attention in this chapter to describing the literary nature of narratives in general, as well as pointing out the most dangerous pitfalls to avoid as you read.

THE NATURE OF NARRATIVES

What Narratives Are

Narratives are stories — purposeful stories retelling the *historical events* of the past that are intended to give meaning and direction for a given people *in the present*. This has always been so for all peoples in all cultures; and in this regard the biblical narratives are no different from other such stories. Nonetheless, there is a crucial difference between the biblical narratives and all others because, inspired by the Holy Spirit as they are, the story they tell is not so much our story as it is God's story — and it becomes ours as he "writes" us into it. The biblical narratives thus tell the ultimate story — a story

that, even though often complex, is altogether true and crucially important. Indeed, it is a magnificent story, grander than the greatest epic, richer in plot and more significant in its characters and descriptions than any humanly composed story could ever be. But to appreciate this story you will need to know some basic things about narratives — what they are, and how they work.

At their basic level Bible narratives tell us about things that happened in the past. All narratives have three basic parts: characters, plot, and plot resolution. That is, most narratives presuppose some kind of conflict or tension that needs resolving. In traditional literary terms, the characters are the "protagonist" (the primary person in the story), the "antagonist" (the person who brings about the conflict or tension), and (sometimes) the "agonist(s)" (the other major characters in the story who get involved in the struggle).

In the biblical story God is the protagonist, Satan (or opposing people/powers) are the antagonists, and God's people are the agonists. The basic "plot" of the biblical story is that the creator God has created a people for his name — in his own "image" — who as his image bearers were to be his stewards over the earth that he created for their benefit. But an enemy entered the picture who persuaded the people to bear *his* "image" instead, and thus to become God's enemies. The plot resolution is the long story of "redemption," how God rescues his people from the enemy's clutches, restores them back into his image, and (finally) will restore them "in a new heaven and new earth."

Three Levels of Narrative

It should help you as you read and study Old Testament

narratives to realize that the story is being told, in effect, on three levels. The top ("third") level is the one we have just described. Often called the "metanarrative," this level has to do with the whole universal plan of God worked out through his creation, and focusing primarily on God's chosen people. Key aspects of the plot at this top level are the initial creation itself, the fall of humanity, the power and ubiquity of sin, the need for redemption, and Christ's incarnation and sacrifice. Sometimes this top level is also referred to as the "story of redemption" or "redemptive history" (see *How to 2,* pp. 14 – 20).

The second level is the story of God's redeeming a people for his name. These people are constituted twice — by a former covenant and a "new" covenant (see ch. 9 below). Our interest in this chapter is with the story of the first covenant, the story of the people of Israel: the call of Abraham; the establishment of an Abrahamic lineage through the patriarchs; the enslaving of the Israelites in Egypt; God's delivering them from bondage; God's making covenant with them at Sinai, followed by the conquest of the promised land of Canaan; the Israelites' frequent sins and increasing disloyalty; God's patient protection of and pleading with them; the ultimate destruction of northern Israel and then of Judah; and the restoration of the holy people after the exile (see further, *How to 2,* pp. 21 – 23).

Finally, there is the "first" level. Here are found all the hundreds of individual narratives that make up the other two levels. This includes both compound narratives — for example, the Genesis narrative(s) of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, or Joseph, as a whole — and the smaller units that make up the larger narrative. Our interest in this chapter is primarily in helping you read and understand these first-level narratives. But it is especially important that you always be asking yourself how

these first-level narratives fit into the second and third levels of the biblical story.

An awareness of this "hierarchy of narrative" should help you in your understanding and application of Old Testament narratives. Thus, when Jesus taught that the Scriptures "testify about me" (John 5:39), he was speaking of the ultimate, top level of the narrative, in which his atonement was the central act, and the subjection of all creation to him is the climax of its plot. He obviously was *not* speaking about every short individual passage of the Old Testament. True, the individual passages, including narratives, that are messianic or otherwise identified in the New Testament as typological of Christ (cf. 1 Cor 10:4) are an important part of the Old Testament; but these constitute only a small portion of its total revelation. What Jesus was saying was that the Scriptures in their entirety bear witness to him and focus toward his loving lordship.

What Narratives Are Not

Because the Old Testament narratives have frequently been used in some unfortunate ways in the church, we need here to remind you how the Old Testament narratives are *not* to be understood.

1. Old Testament narratives are *not allegories or stories filled with hidden meanings*. While there may be aspects of narratives that are not easy to understand, you should always assume that they had meaning for their original hearers. But whatever else, they are not allegories. The account of Moses going up and down Mount Sinai in Exodus 19 – 34 is not an allegory of the descent and ascent of the soul to God. Elijah's battle with the priests of Baal on Mount Carmel (1 Kings 18) is not an allegory of Jesus' triumph over evil spirits in the New

Testament. The story of Abraham's securing a bride for Isaac (Gen 24) is not an allegory about Christ (Isaac) securing a bride (the church/Rebekah) through the Holy Spirit (the servant).

2. Individual Old Testament narratives are *not intended to teach moral lessons*. The purpose of the various individual narratives is to tell what God did in the history of Israel, not to offer moral examples of right or wrong behavior. Very often you will hear people say, "What we can learn from this story is that we are not to do [or say] . . ." But unless the biblical narrator makes that point, on what grounds do we make it? We may rightly recognize from the story of Jacob and Esau the negative results of parental favoritism. But this is not the reason for the presence of this narrative in Genesis. Rather, it serves to tell us how Abraham's family line was carried on through Jacob and not Esau; it is one more illustration of God's not doing it "right," according to prevailing cultural norms, in not choosing the firstborn to carry on the family line. While the narrative may incidentally illustrate the outcome of parental rivalry, this has little to do with the intent of the narrative as such.

3. However, even though the Old Testament narratives do not necessarily teach moral values directly, they often illustrate what is taught explicitly and categorically elsewhere. This represents an *implicit* kind of teaching by illustrating the corresponding *explicit* teachings of Scripture. For example, in the narrative of David's adultery with Bathsheba (2 Sam 11), you will not find any such statement as, "In committing adultery David did wrong." You are expected to know that adultery is wrong because this is taught explicitly already in the Ten Commandments (Exod 20:14), which David would have known very well. The narrative illustrates the harmful consequences of his adultery to the personal life of King David

and to his ability to rule. The narrative does not systematically teach about adultery and could not be used as the sole basis for such teaching. But as one illustration of the effects of adultery in a particular case, it conveys a powerful message that can imprint itself on the mind of the careful reader in a way that direct, categorical teaching may not.

THE CHARACTERISTICS OF HEBREW NARRATIVE

Hebrew narratives have some distinctive features that, if looked for and recognized, can greatly enhance one's ability to hear the story from the perspective of the divinely inspired narrator. We will illustrate these characteristics by using the story of Joseph, as skillfully narrated by Moses (Gen 37 – 50). This, in fact, except for the insertions of the story of Judah and Tamar (ch. 38), of the genealogy (46:8 – 27), and of Jacob's blessing his sons (49:1 – 28), is the longest single-focused narrative in the Bible. And in its present form in Genesis, the "inserted" items are especially significant to the entire narrative. For an excellent commentary on Genesis that takes all of these narrative features as an essential part of "commenting" on the text, we highly recommend Bruce K. Waltke's *Genesis: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001).

The Narrator

We begin by paying attention to the one party who is not

mentioned directly in the unfolding of the narrative: the narrator himself. For you to understand how narrative works, you need to be aware of two important things about the narrator's role in the unfolding of the story.

First, since he is the one who chooses what to include in the story, he is comparatively "omniscient"; that is, he is everywhere and knows everything about the story he tells. But he never shares all he knows, nor does he usually comment, explain, or evaluate during the unfolding of the narrative itself. His role is to tell the story in such a way that you are drawn into the narrative so that you will see things for yourself.

Second, the narrator is responsible for the "point of view" of the story, that is, the perspective from which the story is told. In the end, of course, he thus presents the divine point of view. Sometimes God's point of view is disclosed directly, as in the repeated "the LORD was with Joseph" (Gen 39:2, 3, 21, 23); note how this fourfold repetition happens early on in the narrative when Joseph is first in Egypt. Very often the point of view comes by way of one of the characters. So note how at the end of the narrative (50:20) it is Joseph who tells the reader the divine perspective for the whole narrative: "You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives"!

As you read the various narratives, be constantly on the lookout for how the inspired narrator discloses the point of view from which you are to understand the story.

The Scene(s)

Rather than build the story around the "character" of any of the characters, the predominant mode of narration in Hebrew narrative is "scenic." The action is moved along by a series of

scenes that together make up the whole. This has been likened to the way a movie or a television drama tells a story through a succession of scenes. Each scene has its own integrity, yet it is the progressive combination of scenes that makes up the story as a whole.

Note, for example, how this happens in the opening episode narrated in Genesis 37. In the opening scene Joseph squeals on his brothers (v. 2), after which you are informed of the basic reason his brothers hate him: parental favoritism — again (vv. 3 – 4)! The scene quickly shifts to two scenes in which Joseph recounts two dreams (vv. 5 – 11), which sets you up for the next scene (vv. 12 – 17) where Joseph searches for his brothers but does not find them. This scene serves as a kind of pause in the story to make sure you understand that the "timing" of the crucial scene — the arrival of Joseph, the plot to kill, and the arrival of the Midianites — is divinely ordained. The next three scenes (the plot to kill and the intercession by Reuben, the role of Judah in "rescuing" Joseph by selling him, the grief of Reuben and Jacob) are interwoven with consummate skill; but the point comes in the last verse, where Joseph ends up in Egypt as the servant of a well-placed Egyptian official (v. 36).

It is the "scenes," separately and together, that make the narrative work. Another feature of the scenic nature of the narrative is that in most scenes only two or three characters (or groups) are in place. More than that would intrude on the main plot of the story.

The Characters

In the scenic nature of Hebrew narrative, the characters are the absolutely central element. But you will also note that

"characterization" has very little to do with physical appearance — so much so, that if such a thing ever does appear (e.g., Ehud's being "left-handed," Judg 3:15), you need always to ask why. Hebrew narrative is simply not interested in creating a "visual image" of the characters. More important are matters of status (wise, wealthy, etc.) or profession ("captain of the guard," Gen 37:36; "wife," "cupbearer," "baker" chs. 39 – 40) or tribal designation ("Midianites," 37:36).

Two features of characterization stand out: (1) Characters often appear either in contrast or in parallel. When they are contrasted, which is most often, they must be understood in relationship to each other. In our narrative the contrast between Joseph and his brothers that begins in chapter 37 lies at the heart of the unfolding subsequent narrative in chapters 42 – 45 (especially the "changes" that have taken place in both Joseph and Judah) and a bit later (50:15 – 21). Characters in parallel usually happen at the second level of narrative; for example, John the Baptist is a "reenactment" of Elijah, and Mary's story (Luke 1 – 2) is a clear echo of the story of Hannah (1 Sam 1 – 2).

(2) The predominant mode of characterization occurs in the characters' words and actions, not in the narrator's own descriptions. In our narrative this happens especially with the main character, Joseph, and with the most significant secondary character, Judah. In particular, how Joseph's moral character develops from negative to positive is a main theme. At the beginning, Joseph, as part of a notably dysfunctional family, is depicted as "spoiled brat, talebearer, braggart" (Waltke, p. 498). His moral character comes alive in the incident with Potiphar's wife, made explicit by the dialogue (see below), and his faithfulness to sexual morality lands him in prison (ch.

39). But the crucial matter is the loving but firm way he handles his brothers in chapters 42 – 45; he weeps for them but will not reveal himself to them until they are tested and proved to be changed themselves.

Likewise, the narrator shows special interest in Judah. Judah is the one who argues for selling rather than killing Joseph (37:26 – 27); yet his own moral life is highly questionable (ch. 38 — a story that is also told in part because Judah will assume the "rights of the firstborn" through whom Israel's eventual king will come [49:10], and because his offspring continue the motif of the choice of the younger son [38:27 – 30]). But the narrator's primary interest in Judah is in his radical change of character that emerges a bit later in the story (42 – 45).

Dialogue

Dialogue is a crucial feature of Hebrew narrative, and one of the chief methods of characterization. Indeed, a significantly large part of all narratives is carried on by the "rhythm" between narrative and dialogue. There are three things to look for here:

First, *the first point of dialogue is often a significant clue both to the story plot and to the character of the speaker.* Look, for example, how this happens in the brief scenes at the beginning of the story of Joseph (Gen 37:5 – 11). Joseph's narration of his dreams reflects straightforward arrogance (vv. 6 – 7); his brothers' (and father's) response both sets the plot itself in motion ("Will you actually rule us?") and is expressly brought to conclusion by way of narrative at the end (50:18). But in contrast to his brothers' hatred, his father "kept the matter in mind" (37:11, a narrative clue for the reader to do the

same).

Second, *contrastive dialogue often functions as a way of characterization as well*. Note the length of Joseph's reply (39:8 – 9) to the very brief invitation of Potiphar's wife (v. 7). You will see a different kind of contrastive dialogue with the final speeches of Judah and Joseph (44:18 – 34 and 45:4 – 13), by which the first plot resolution is achieved.

Third, *very often the narrator will emphasize the crucial parts of the narrative by having one of the characters repeat or summarize the narrative in a speech*. This happens particularly in the speeches of the brothers (42:30 – 34) and of Judah (44:18 – 34). So don't yield to the temptation to speed read through these repetitions; they often tell you very important things about the point of view of the narrative.

Plot

A narrative cannot function without a plot and plot resolution. This means, of course, that the narrative must have a beginning, middle, and end, which together focus on a buildup of dramatic tension that is eventually released. Usually the plot is thrust forward by some form of conflict, which generates interest in the resolution. Plots can be either simple (as the inserted story of Judah and Tamar in Gen 38) or complex, as is the whole of the Joseph narrative, where several subplots vie for attention during the unfolding of the major plot: how the conflict between Joseph and his brothers brought Israel to Egypt — which in turn prepares the way for the next major part of the story of Israel (the exodus from Egypt).

You will find that the plot in Hebrew narrative moves at a much faster pace than most modern narration — even that of the "short story" genre. So as you look for the major plot and

its resolution in any narrative, be alert to the various devices the narrator uses to slow the pace of his story. This usually happens by dialogue, the sudden elaboration of detail, or by other forms of repetition. Very often a slowed pace is a signal pointing to the narrator's focus or point of view, so again, don't yield to the temptation to skim read.

Features of Structure

In ways that most of us in modern settings can hardly appreciate, Hebrew narrative uses a whole series of structural features to catch the hearer's attention and keep him or her fastened on the narrative. The reason for these features is something that often escapes us and thus causes us to overlook them, namely, that these narratives, even when written down, were designed primarily for *hearers, not readers.* In a time when our senses are bombarded by dozens of images in a brief thirty-second television commercial, taking the time to "hear" a text read is virtually a lost art. Yet, these texts were composed altogether with the hearer in view and thus contain structural features designed to make the narrative memorable. We have already noted some of these. Here we isolate them and add others so you will be constantly on the lookout for them.

Repetition. Repetition, which pervades Hebrew narrative, can take several forms. We point out only a few. The first, and probably most important, is repetition of *key words.* For example, can you notice the emphasis on "brother" in chapter 37, a word that occurs fifteen times in the narrative? Note also how the conflict dimension of the plot is carried forward by the repetition of "hated" (37:4, 5, 8; cf. "jealous" in 37:11).

Repetition also happens as a form of *resuming* the narrative

after an interruption or detour; note, for example, how the concluding moment when Joseph is sold by his brothers (37:36) is repeated at the resumption of the Joseph narrative (39:1). At other times repetition takes the form of *stereotyped patterns*, as in the cycles of the judges or the introductions and conclusions to the stories of each of Israel's kings.

Inclusion. "Inclusion" is a technical term for the form of repetition where a narrative is begun and brought to conclusion on the same note or in the same way. We have already noted this in the theme of Joseph's brothers' bowing to him (37:6 – 8 and 50:18). A frequent, and special, form of inclusion is known as *chiasm,* in which whole books or smaller narratives are structured in some form of an A B C B A pattern. In *How to 2* (pp. 55 – 62), we point out how the entire book of Deuteronomy is structured in this way. Another way this happens is called *foreshadowing*, where something that is briefly noted in an early part of a narrative is picked up in detail later on (e.g., the births of Perez and Zerah in 38:27 – 30 anticipate their appearance in the genealogy in 46:12, and especially the role of Perez as the "firstborn" later in the Old Testament story).

Besides the features of biblical narrative we have included here, you will find still other, sometimes more complex, rhetorical features noted in the better commentaries. For some of these, see Waltke's *Genesis* (pp. 31 – 43). But these are enough to give you plenty to think about as you read any Hebrew narrative, be it short or long.

A Final Word

As our own form of inclusion, we conclude this section by reminding you that the one crucial item to keep in mind as you

read any Hebrew narrative is the presence of God in the narrative. In any biblical narrative, God is the *ultimate* character, the supreme hero of the story. Sometimes this is indicated in bold terms: "The LORD was with Joseph" (39:2; etc.); "interpretations [of dreams] belong to God" (40:8; etc.); "God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance" (45:7); "God intended it for good" (50:20). Thus the whole story climaxes with Joseph's prophecy, "God will surely come to your aid and take you up out of this land" (50:24, note the repetition in verse 25, which then foreshadows Exod 13:19 and Josh 24:32!).

To miss this dimension of the narrative is to miss the perspective of the narrative altogether; and precisely because of these explicit statements about God's presence in the narrative, one should constantly be aware of God's presence in more implicit ways (e.g., the source of Joseph's dreams in ch. 37; the timing in the narrative that brought Joseph, his brothers, and the Midianites together in 37:25 – 28; etc.).

ON READING "BETWEEN THE LINES"

We turn to the book of Ruth for another narrative to illustrate further how much one can learn from what is *implicit* in narrative — parts the narrator has embedded in the story that you might miss on a first, or otherwise casual, reading of the book. The Ruth narrative is a good candidate for this task since it is brief and self-contained; and an initial careful reading of the text will point out its essential features with regard to its being a marvelous expression of Hebrew narrative. Whatever else, the book of Ruth is not a "love story"; rather it is the

story of God's "kindness" (1:8 — first point of dialogue; 2:20; 3:10) being played out in the lives of three people who are the central characters in the plot; and it is filled with several subplots as well (e.g., the foreigner who showed kindness assumes a place in the royal lineage of King David).

To remind you again: Implicit teaching is that which is clearly present in the story but not stated in so many words. At issue here is the fact that the narrator and his implied hearers/readers share the same presuppositions, and therefore he does not make explicit many things he assumes they will know simply by the way he tells the story. Rather than looking for hidden meanings, you must try to discover these shared assumptions that make the story work easily for them but that can otherwise leave us on the outside of the narrative. What you want to find is what is thus *implied* in the story, that which can't be read right off the page. Being able to distinguish what is explicitly taught can be fairly easy. Being able to distinguish what is implicitly taught can be more difficult. It requires skill, hard work, caution, and a prayerful respect for the Holy Spirit's care in inspiring the text. After all, you want to read things *out of* the narrative rather than *into* it.

Ruth's story may be summarized as follows. The widow Ruth, a Moabite, emigrates from Moab to Bethlehem with her Israelite mother-in-law, Naomi, who is also a widow (Ruth 1). Ruth gleans leftover grain in the field of Boaz, who befriends her, having heard of her faith and her kindness to Naomi, who is a relative of his (Ruth 2). At Naomi's suggestion, Ruth lets Boaz know that she hopes he would be willing to marry her (Ruth 3). Boaz undertakes the legal procedures necessary to marry Ruth and to protect the family property rights of her late husband, Mahlon. The birth of Ruth and Boaz's first son,

Obed, is a great consolation to Naomi. Eventually, Obed's grandson turned out to be King David (Ruth 4).

If you are not familiar with the Ruth narrative, we suggest that you read the book through at least twice. Then go back and take particular note of the following *implicit* points that the narrative makes.

1. The narrative tells us that *Ruth converted* to faith in the Lord, the God of Israel. It does this by reporting Ruth's words to Naomi, "Your people will be my people and your God my God" (1:16) rather than by telling us "Ruth was converted." We are expected to be able to recognize this by the content of this first piece of dialogue spoken by Ruth (verse 10 is spoken by both daughters-in-law). Moreover, the genuineness of her conversion is implicitly confirmed by her next words: "May the LORD deal with me, be it ever so severely, if . . ." (1:17), an oath taken in the name of Israel's God. You can be sure that the original hearers/readers well understood this.

2. The narrative tells us implicitly that *Boaz was a righteous Israelite* who kept the Mosaic law, though many other Israelites did not. Look carefully at four specific moments in the narrative (2:3 – 13, 22; 3:10 – 12; and 4:9 – 10). Again, by means of dialogue, the narrator makes clear to his readers that Boaz is faithful to the Lord because he keeps the law. As with Boaz, they would know the law of gleaning set forth in Leviticus (19:9 – 10). In this case one might note that Ruth fits both categories of this law — she is poor *and* a foreigner, not to mention a widow. Original readers would know, too, the law of redemption decreed later in Leviticus (25:23 – 24). Also implied is the fact that not all Israelites were so loyal to the law — indeed it was dangerous to glean in the fields of people who did not obey the law's gleaning obligations (2:22). Again, we

get a lot of important information *implicitly* from the narrative, which is not *explicitly* given.

3. The narrative tells us implicitly that *a foreign woman belongs to the ancestry of King David* — and by extension, therefore, to Jesus Christ. Look at how this unfolds at the conclusion of the narrative (4:17 – 21). The brief genealogy with which it begins (v. 17) and the fuller genealogy that follows (vv. 18 – 21) both end with the name David. This David is obviously the focus — the endpoint — of this portion of the narrative. We know from several other genealogical lists in the Bible that this David is King David, the founder of Israel as a nation on the larger political scene, and thus the first great Israelite king. We also know from the New Testament genealogies that Jesus, humanly speaking, was descended from David. Ruth, then, was David's great-grandmother and an ancestor of Jesus! This is an important part of the teaching of the entire narrative. It is a story not just about Ruth and Boaz in terms of their faithfulness to Yahweh but also in terms of their place in Israel's history. They had no way of knowing it, but these were people whom God would use in the ancestry of David and "David's son" Jesus.

4. The narrative tells us implicitly that *Bethlehem was an exceptional town* during the period of the judges by reason of the faithfulness of its citizenry. To spot this implicit thrust in the narrative is not easy or automatic. It requires a careful reading of the whole narrative, with special attention to the words and actions of all the participants in the story. It also requires knowledge of what things were generally like in other parts of Israel in those days in contrast to what they were like specifically in Bethlehem. The latter knowledge depends on a familiarity with the main events and themes of the book of

Judges, since Ruth is directly related to that time period by the narrator (1:1).

If you have had the opportunity to read Judges carefully (see *How to 2,* pp. 70 – 77), you will have noticed that the judges' period (about 1240 – 1030 BC) was generally marked by such practices as widespread idolatry, syncretism (mixing features of pagan religions with those of Israel's true faith), social injustice, social turmoil, intertribal rivalries, sexual immorality, and other indications of unfaithfulness to Yahweh. Indeed, the picture presented to us in the book of Judges is hardly a happy one, though there are individual cases where God in his mercy benefits Israel, or tribes within Israel, in spite of the general pattern of rebellion against him.

What in the book of Ruth tells us that Bethlehem is an exception to this general picture of unfaithfulness? Practically everything except for one sentence in the narrative (2:22), and even that one gives the reader a hint as to the troublesome nature of the time. What is implied is that not all Bethlehemites were practicing the gleaning laws as they should. Otherwise, the picture is remarkably consistent. The words of the characters themselves show just how consciously the people of this town manifest their allegiance to the Lord.

Remember that all the characters mentioned in the narrative, except for Ruth and her sister-in-law Orpah, are citizens of Bethlehem. Consider Naomi: whether in times of great bitterness (1:8 – 9, 13, 20 – 21) or in times of happiness (1:6; 2:19 – 20), she recognizes and submits to the Lord's will. Moreover, Boaz consistently shows himself by his words to be a worshiper and follower of Yahweh (2:11 – 12; 3:10, 13), and his actions throughout confirm his words.

Even the way people greet one another shows a high degree of conscious allegiance to their God (2:4). Likewise, the elders of the town in their blessings on the marriage and its offspring (4:11 – 12) and the women of the town in their blessing on Naomi (4:14) show their faith. Their acceptance of the converted Moabite, Ruth, is further implicit testimony to their faith.

The point is that one cannot read the narrative carefully (and in comparison with Judges) and not see again and again how exceptional Bethlehem was! Nowhere does the narrative actually say, "Bethlehem was a town remarkable for its piety in those days." But this is exactly what the narrative does tell us — in ways just as forceful and convincing as the outright words could ever be.

These examples, we hope, will demonstrate that careful attention to details and to the overall movement of a narrative and its context are necessary if its full meaning is to be obtained. What is implicit can be every bit as significant as what is explicit.

Warning! Implicit does not mean secret! You will get into all sorts of trouble if you try to find meanings in the text that you think God has "hidden" in the narrative. This is not at all what is meant by implicit. "Implicit" means that a dimension of the message is capable of being understood from what is said, though it is not stated in so many words. Your task is not to ferret out things that cannot be understood by everyone. Your task, rather, is to take note of all that the narrative actually tells you — directly and indirectly but *never* mystically or privately. If you are not able confidently to express to others something taught implicitly so that they, too, can understand it and get the point, you probably are misreading the text. What the Holy

Spirit has inspired is of benefit for all believers. Discern and relay what the story recognizably has in it; do not make up a new story (2 Pet 2:3)!

SOME FINAL CAUTIONS

It is our conviction that the primary reason Christians have often read the Old Testament narratives so poorly, finding things that are not really there, is the one we mentioned at the outset of this book: the tendency to "flatten" everything because they assume that everything God has said in his Word is thereby a direct word to them. Thus they wrongly expect that everything in the Bible applies directly as instruction for their own individual lives. The Bible, of course, *is* a great resource. It contains all that a believer really needs in terms of guidance from God for living. And we have assumed throughout that the Old Testament narratives are indeed a rich source for our hearing from God. But this does not mean that each individual narrative is somehow to be understood as a direct word from God for each of us separately or as teaching us moral lessons by examples.

So that you might avoid this tendency, we list here several of the most common errors of interpretation that individuals commit when reading the biblical narratives, although many of these errors are not limited to narratives.

Allegorizing. Instead of concentrating on the clear meaning of the narrative, some relegate the text to merely reflecting another meaning beyond the text. There are allegorical portions of Scripture (e.g., Ezek 23 and parts of

Revelation), but no historical narrative is ever intended at the same time to be an allegory.

Decontextualizing. Ignoring the full historical and literary contexts, and often the individual narrative, some people concentrate on small units only and thus miss interpretational clues. If you take things out of context enough, you can make almost any part of Scripture say anything you want it to. But at that moment you are no longer *reading* the Bible, you are abusing it.

Selectivity. This is similar to decontextualizing. It involves picking and choosing specific words and phrases to concentrate on while ignoring the others and ignoring the overall sweep of the narrative being studied. Instead of listening to the whole to see how God was working in Israel's history, it ignores some of the parts and the whole entirely.

Moralizing. This is the assumption that principles for living can be derived from all passages. The moralizing reader, in effect, asks the question, what is the moral of this story? at the end of every individual narrative. An example would be: what can we learn about handling adversity from how the Israelites endured their years as slaves in Egypt? The fallacy of this approach is that it ignores the fact that the narratives were written to show the progress of God's history of redemption, not to illustrate principles. They are historical narratives, not illustrative narratives.

Personalizing. Also known as individualizing, this refers to reading Scripture in the way suggested above, supposing that any or all parts apply to you or your group in a way that they do not apply to everyone else. This is, in fact, a self-centered reading of the Bible. Examples of personalizing would be, "The

story of Balaam's talking donkey reminds me that I talk too much." Or, "The story of the building of the temple is God's way of telling us that we have to construct a new church building."

Misappropriation. This is closely related to personalizing. It is to appropriate a narrative for purposes that are quite foreign to its reason for being there. This is what is happening when, on the basis of the Gideon narrative (Judg 6:36 – 40), people "fleece" God as a way of finding God's will! This, of course, is both misappropriation and decontextualizing, since the narrator is pointing out that God saved Israel through Gideon despite his lack of trust in God's word. It is yet another account of God's mercy, not a method of finding God's will!

False appropriation. This is another form of decontextualizing. It is to read into a biblical narrative suggestions or ideas that come from contemporary culture that are simultaneously foreign to the narrator's purpose and contradictory to his point of view. A prime example is to find the "hint" of a homosexual relationship between David and Jonathan in the language, "[Jonathan] loved him as he loved himself" (1 Sam. 20:17), followed by, "they kissed each other" (v. 41) — which of course in that culture was not on the lips! But such a "hint" not only is not in the text, it stands completely outside the narrator's point of view: Their "love" is covenantal and is likened to God's love (vv. 14 and 42); moreover the author is narrating the story of Israel's greatest king, and he presupposes Israel's law, which forbids such behavior.

False combination. This approach combines elements from here and there in a passage and makes a point out of their combination, even though the elements themselves are not

directly connected in the passage itself. An example of this all-too-common interpretational error is the conclusion that the account of David's capturing Jerusalem (2 Sam 5:6 – 7) must have been a *recapturing* of that city, since Judges 1:8, an earlier part of the same grand narrative that runs all the way from Joshua through 2 Kings, says that the Israelites had already captured it. What you need to know (i.e., what the narrator and his original audience knew) is that there were two Jerusalems — a "greater" Jerusalem and, within it, the walled city of Jerusalem (also known as Zion). The account in Judges refers to the capture of the former; David captured the latter, finally completing the conquest hundreds of years after it started and then faltered, finally fulfilling promises going all the way back to Abraham (Gen 15:18 – 21).

Redefinition. When the plain meaning of the text leaves people cold, producing no immediate spiritual delight, or says something other than what they wish it said, they are often tempted to redefine it to mean something else. An example is the use often made of God's promise to Solomon as it is narrated in Chronicles (2 Chron 7:14 – 15). The context of this narrative clearly relates the promise to "this place" (the temple in Jerusalem) and "their land" (Israel, the land of Solomon and the Israelites). Understandably many modern Christians yearn for it to be true of *their* land wherever they live in the modern world — and so they tend to ignore the fact that God's promise that he will "hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land" was about the only earthly land God's people could ever claim as "theirs," the Old Testament land of Israel. In the new covenant, God's people have no earthly country that is "their land" — despite the tendency of some American Christians to think otherwise about the world. The country all

believers now most truly belong to is a heavenly one (Heb 11:16).

Perhaps the single most useful bit of caution we can give you about reading and learning from narratives is this: Do not be a monkey-see-monkey-do reader of the Bible. No Bible narrative was written specifically about *you*. The Joseph narrative is about Joseph, and specifically about how God carried out the divine purposes through him — it is not a narrative directly about us. The Ruth narrative glorifies God's protection of and benefit for Ruth and the Bethlehemites — not us. We can always learn a great deal from these narratives, and from all the Bible's narratives, but you can never assume that God expects you to do exactly the same thing that Bible characters did or to have the same things happen to you that happened to them. For further discussion on this point, see chapter 6.

Bible characters are sometimes good and sometimes evil, sometimes wise and sometimes foolish. They are sometimes punished and sometimes shown mercy, sometimes well-off and sometimes miserable. Our task is to learn God's word from the narratives about them, not to try to do everything that was done in the Bible. Just because someone in a Bible story did something, it does not mean a modern reader has either permission or obligation to do it too.

What we can and should do is obey what God in Scripture actually commands Christian believers to do. Narratives are precious to us because they so vividly *demonstrate* God's involvement in the world and *illustrate* his principles and calling. They thus teach us a lot — but what they directly teach us does not systematically include personal ethics. For this area of life, we must turn elsewhere in the Scriptures — to

the various places where personal ethics are actually taught categorically and explicitly. The richness and variety of the Scriptures must be understood as our ally — a welcome resource, and never a complicated burden.

PRINCIPLES FOR INTERPRETING NARRATIVES

We conclude this chapter by isolating ten summarizing principles for interpreting Old Testament narratives that should also help a reader avoid certain pitfalls as one reads.

1. An Old Testament narrative usually does not directly teach a doctrine.
2. An Old Testament narrative usually illustrates a doctrine or doctrines taught propositionally elsewhere.
3. Narratives record what happened — not necessarily what should have happened or what ought to happen every time. Therefore, not every narrative has an individual identifiable moral application.
4. What people do in narratives is not necessarily a good example for us. Frequently, it is just the opposite.
5. Many (if not most) of the characters in Old Testament narratives are far from perfect — as are their actions as well.
6. We are not always told at the end of a narrative whether what happened was good or bad. We are expected to be able to judge this on the basis of what God has taught us directly and categorically elsewhere in Scripture.
7. 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.

8. Narratives are not written to answer all our theological questions. They have particular, specific, limited purposes and deal with certain issues, leaving others to be dealt with elsewhere in other ways.
9. Narratives may teach either explicitly (by clearly stating something) or implicitly (by clearly implying something without actually stating it).
10. In the final analysis, God is the hero of all biblical narratives.