

**Preaching from Old Testament Narratives:  
A Circular Letter Addressed to Those who Preach  
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**The Introduction to Preaching Old Testament Narratives**

It is hard to overstate the importance of preaching from the Old Testament. The Church of Jesus Christ has witnessed the abuse or misuse of the Old Testament in its teaching and preaching at the foundation of almost every heresy from the ancient Marcionites who dismissed the God of the Hebrew Bible because He was deemed to be irreconcilable with the Christ of the New Testament, to the rise of medieval high-church sacerdotalism which justified the reinstatement of Old Testament priestly and sacrificial shadows and types into the church's worship of Jesus Christ according to a fourfold or sevenfold sense, undermining the sufficiency of His high priestly ministry and the Church's worship as a celebration of sinners justified by faith alone through Christ alone to the glory of God alone. And yet, while *sola scriptura*, as recovered by the reformers of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, rejected the hermeneutics of the late middle-ages, the misuse and abuse of the Old Testament did not end there. The rise of nineteenth and twentieth century liberalism with its source critical disintegration of a professedly uninspired text into multiple mutually contradictory fragments occupies one side of the theological spectrum today. While on the opposite side of the road remains the rampant evangelical love affair with Dispensationalism which theologically demands the Old Testament be left behind, unless it gives the church mere moral lessons or it can serve an eschatological agenda for a post-rapture premillennial reconstituted national Israel, in which case it is professed to hold the key to prophetic revelation. Add to this the infectious embracing of postmodern literary textual deconstruction with its reader-response theories and what is offered on any given Sunday morning in "Christian America" must appear more like the tower of Babel than the faith once for all delivered to the saints.

Apart from these obvious challenges, being self-consciously evangelical and reformed has not insulated the church from those who either through ignorance or instability twist the Old Testament to their own ends (2 Pet. 3:16). One need only think of instances such as that practiced by the 18<sup>th</sup> century Calvinistic Baptist John Leland as a potent example of the misuse of the Old Testament, in this case a polemic against the Congregational standing order.

On turning to it [his text] in the Bible, he found it to read thus—"And Balaam saddled his ass,"—and, as he announced it, he said that if he had searched the Bible through, he could not have found a text more appropriate. "It brings to our view," said he, "three things, a *prophet*, an *ass*, and a *saddle*. Balaam, the prophet, who loved the wages of unrighteousness,— and he well represents the class who oppress their fellow-men (otherwise the Congregationalists); the ass, a patient bearer of grievous burdens, represents those who are oppressed by them; and the

saddle is the unrighteous exaction that is made of these down-trodden denominations;" and the result was that he preached a sermon that even those who liked the doctrine the least, were obliged to acknowledge, furnished evidence of his remarkable promptness, shrewdness, and pungency. (B. T. Welch, in Sprague, *Annals of the American Baptist Pulpit*, p. 185)

However vindicated the Baptists may have felt that day, they certainly did not come away better instructed in righteousness, nor better equipped to understand and apply the Balaam narrative to the purposes for which the inspired Author gave it to them.

By simply turning on the radio today one is bombarded with the misuse of the Old Testament in preaching. From archeological narratives excavated for display in museums of 'bed-time-story' tales of derring-do (thrilling tales of yesteryear ~Dare to be a Daniel), to church building programs fostered by an energetic appropriation of Nehemiah. After all, wasn't his an exemplar of one of the most successful building projects in Israel's history? Add to this the exhaustive capacity of some to spend innumerable sermons unfolding the types of Christ found in every detail of the Book of Exodus and we must concur that something is amiss. In the end we are forced to concur with the words of Andrew Fuller, "It is an easy thing for a man of a luxuriant imagination, unencumbered by judgment, to make any thing he pleases of the Old Testament Scriptures." Have we not been bombarded by attempts to stir up the courage of a people that seemed unclear on how to claim their personal promised land by simply praying the prayer of Jabez. Or how many times has Joshua been enlisted to stir up our courage to remain unhindered by the reality that there are giants in the land; fear not, face your giants and like Joshua of old you shall conquer whatever gigantic obstacles are in your way. Or how about the radio preacher recently heard preaching from the Book of Ruth vociferously declaring the problems Naomi faced when she and her husband did the unthinkable thing; they left Bethlehem and sojourned in Moab. How dangerous it is to leave the Promised Land! Clearly we have far too many examples of how not to preach the Old Testament. All of these, like Leland above, furnish more evidence of imaginative misuse of the Old Testament than faithful expositions of its inspired contents. In many respects, the complaint of Spurgeon is perennial, "How dreadfully the word of God has been mauled and mangled by a certain brand of preachers who have laid texts on the rack to make them reveal what they never would have otherwise spoken." (Spurgeon *On Spiritualizing, Lectures To My Students.*)

In light of these things, is it any mystery why the mist that engulfs the pulpit when the Old Testament is opened should bleed over into un-navigable fog for the people in the pew? The text that is often tortured in the pulpit is left unknown and seemingly irrelevant to the people to whom it is preached.

We have a sacred calling and obligation, not only to preach the word in season and out of season (2 Tim. 4:2), but to preach the whole counsel God (Acts 20:26); this includes the Old Testament as well as the New Testament (2 Tim. 3:16-17). And in doing so we must not be guilty of wrongly handling the Word of truth (2 Tim. 2:15). There is not room in a circular letter to present a full explanation of the task and method of preaching Old Testament texts. The best we can do is to present some suggestions that current methods and present day abuses seem to call for. Further, to cover all the various types of literature found in the Old Testament is too large a task and so we shall concentrate

particularly on the task of preaching Old Testament narratives which is the genre that occupies the largest amount of space in the sacred text.

### **The Warrant for Preaching Old Testament Narratives**

There are several reasons for choosing narratives as the basis for this letter. Both Steven (Acts 7:2 ff.) and Paul (Acts 13:16 ff.) preached from Old Testament narratives. Christ challenged his critics (Matt. 12:3) as well as comforted his disciples (Matt. 6:28-29) from them. Old Testament narratives are found in the New Testament, not just providing color to the preaching but providing exegetical detail upon which theological implications necessarily followed (cf. 2<sup>nd</sup> LCF 1.6). Jesus affirmed the resurrection was necessarily contained in the narrative recounting the burning bush (cf. Ex. 3:6 w. Mk. 12:26 f.; Lk. 20:37). Paul likewise affirmed the Christological focus in the Abrahamic Covenant by reference to the details of Hebrew grammar encountered in the narratives of Genesis (Gal. 3:16). In addition the New Testament finds in Old Testament narrative didactic amplifications (Romans 4:1f. "What has Abraham found"), legal precedent (Mark 2:25 "Did ye never read what David did...?"), and preemptive counsel (Luke 17:32 "Remember Lot's wife."). Clearly the New Testament amply warrants the liberal yet careful preaching of Old Testament narratives.

### **The Warnings When Preaching Old Testament Narratives**

But there are careful warnings that need to be heeded in preaching these texts as well. We must avoid the tendency to moralize narrative texts, squeezing proof and precedent from innuendo. Is this not what one paedobaptist author does when he finds justification for sprinkling as a mode of baptism in the mist showering the Israelites as they passed through the Red Sea (*What About Baptism*, Robert Rayburn)? If we would find such doctrinal justification from imaginative innuendo unacceptable in our opponents should we not be as careful to avoid the same folly in our own preaching?

We also need to take care to avoid universalizing narratives, distinguishing what happened from what ought to happen and from what ought always to happen. Narratives rarely, if ever, carry the universal weight of moral obligation that some would freely assign to them. As Dale Ralph Davies notes, "we may need to distinguish between what the Bible *says* and what the Bible *supports*." (*The Word Became Flesh: How to Preach from Old Testament Narrative Texts*, p. 72, italics are his.) If Abraham's method for finding a bride was not paradigmatic in the Old Testament, should we not avoid universalizing it in this way as a means of finding spouses for our children? Luther would have avoided the sanction of polygamy in the marriage of Philip of Hesse had he been more cautious here. Texts used in this way eventually rob the Christian of their Christ bought liberty in some areas and plunge the church into neonomian self-righteousness in others.

Additionally we must avoid spiritualizing texts with free-ranging typology. As Calvin noted, commenting on Genesis 21, in the hands of some, "Histories [are] indiscriminately tortured to an allegorical sense, as Origin does; who by hunting everywhere for allegories, corrupts the whole Scripture; and others, too eagerly emulating his example, have extracted smoke out of light. And not only has the simplicity of Scripture been vitiated, but the faith has been almost subverted, and the door opened to many foolish dotings." Certainly one would hope that as Confessional Reformed Baptists, the

2<sup>nd</sup> London Confessional affirmation that “the true and full sense of any Scripture..is not manifold, but one...” should stand as a safeguard to such allegorical preaching of the Old Testament text (2<sup>nd</sup> London Confession, 1. 9).

Finally, we must avoid the seeming necessity of finding Christ so prevalent in every text that everything is reduced to a “gospel according to....” As E. J. Young wisely cautioned, "The desire to find Christ in the Old Testament, commendable as it is in itself, may lead to a neglecting or slighting of the individual text."

### **The Task of Preaching Old Testament Narratives: General Considerations**

It is appropriate at the outset to consider what tools ought we to cultivate in our quest to preach Old Testament narratives in a manner that is faithful to the text and fruitful for our people? There are some general considerations that apply to any text and some specific suggestions regarding Old Testament narratives that we would like to offer. Probably the most important need is that we be preachers who model common sense; this is the modern way of recognizing that the man of God must be a man who is sober-minded and self controlled (1 Tim. 3:2) in the pulpit as well as out of the pulpit; with the text as well as with people. It is at times nonsensical how uncommon common sense really is, but it is a trait we should cultivate in our studies and in the pulpit.

Additionally, we need to mortify our imaginations. The desire to read excessively between the lines must be resisted lest we be men guilty of preaching fables (myths, fictitious fabrications) rather than the truth. We are not called to tantalize our hearers (2 Tim 4:3-4) but to honor the one who called us to this sacred task. May that reminder limit our imaginative exposition so that the original audience would not find our sermons fanciful or nonsensical. And while we would not repeat the excesses somewhat prevalent in what has come to be known as the redemptive-historical approach, we must also ensure that we not preach Old Testament narratives in such a way that a Rabbi would find the sermon quite satisfying. Thus while we may not find the immediate presence of Christ in every Old Testament passage, we must ensure the text is always preached in light of the New Testament. As Sidney Greidanus has aptly stated, “It should be clear by now that our concern is not to preach Christ to the exclusion of the ‘whole counsel of God’ but rather to view the whole counsel of God, with all its teachings, laws, prophecies, and visions, in the light of Jesus Christ.” (Preaching Christ from the Old Testament, pp. 227-228). We must always approach the Old Testament through the pathway lighted for us in the New Testament (1 Pet. 1:10-12). To fail to do so has led many to hermeneutical confusion and theological muddle-headedness.

Another important tool in the preacher’s arsenal is sanctified experience. It is the text, as Paul reminds Timothy (2 Tim. 3:16-17), which trains us to be preachers and as trained preachers it is the text we preach to our people. When we can see our own struggles with holiness and faithfulness expressed in the narratives of the saints of the Old Testament then we can apply those same texts profitably to our people. They were given for our example (1 Cor. 10:1 ff.). How else would we understand the entire eleventh chapter of the Book of Hebrews? Calvin, commenting on Romans 4:23, a passage illustrating the Apostle Paul’s didactic use of an Old Testament narrative, summarized well the task before us;

If we would make a right and proper use of the sacred histories, we must remember that we ought to use them in such a way as to draw from them the fruit of sound doctrine. They instruct us how to form our life, how to strengthen our faith, and how we are to arouse the fear of the Lord. The example of the saints will be of assistance in the ordering of our lives, if we learn from them sobriety, chastity, love, patience, moderation, contempt of the world, and other virtues. The help of God, which was always available to them, will contribute to the confirmation of our faith, and His protection, and the fatherly care which He exercised over them, will afford us consolation in time of adversity. The judgments of God, and His punishments inflicted on the wicked, will also be of assistance to us, provided they inspire in us the fear which fills our hearts with reverence and devotion.

### **The Task of Preaching Old Testament Narratives: Specific Considerations**

Turning from these more general considerations we believe it would be valuable to consider some more specific factors when preaching Old Testament narrative passages. Some of these factors will guide us in our preparation for preaching Old Testament narratives and are relative to our study and some will evidence themselves in the substance of the Old Testament narratives as they are preached, and will be evident from the pulpit.

#### **1. Historical Setting**

We must jettison the reader-response theories so common in our day, even when they have been draped with sanctified language. While it is true that every text was inspired by God *for* our individual and corporate use and edification, it is not true that every text was inspired by the Holy Spirit and given directly *to* me. In this light we must consider not only the Spirit inspired text, but the historic situation the Holy Spirit used to give us the inspired mind of God. We cannot simply ask, What does the text mean to me? Instead we must ask what its author meant when he wrote it within the sovereignly ordained historic situation in which he wrote. Paul reminds us of this principle in 1 Corinthians 10 where he writes of the events in the wilderness as things that took place to them but “for us, that we might not desire evil as they did.” (v. 6) The pronouns here are instructive.

Examples of this abound. If we fail to consider that the Book of Genesis was not written simply to give an account of past primeval and patriarchal history, but to give context to the first generation of Israelites leaving Egypt, we will likely miss important clues to interpreting Genesis and its present application to the people of God. Man, created as the image of God has both practical as well as theological implications. It would be important for a people leaving slavery in Egypt to know that each and every man, woman, and child was an image bearer of their Creator instead of chattel in the hands of an oppressive Egyptian ruler. There was value in knowing that it was God who had brought them to Egypt in the first place so as to make them a nation and now it is God who is calling them out. And did they not need to know that God gave the land of Canaan to Abraham’s descendents four hundred years earlier so as to give context to where they were headed and why? The historical setting forces us to ask and answer an important set of questions not immediately apparent on the surface of the text alone.

The same could be said for Joshua. It was not given to the generation entering the land but to the generation that followed in order that they might know how it was that they were to go about completing what God had begun under that great leader. In it they would learn the task before them was ultimately not simply conquest, God had covenanted to do that, but faithfulness to their covenant God and to see the comforts and encouragements and pathway laid by Joshua in the previous generation. The importance of Judges comes to light when we see that Israel exhibited in a spiritual downward spiral without a king. Chronicles gives great hope at the close of the Babylonian captivity as the genealogies at the beginning reflect that neither the priesthood nor the Davidic lines were lost. The anticipated restoration of Jerusalem that closes the book reiterated the same hope. Great David's greater Son was yet future and in the midst of the discouragements and turmoil of captive life, hope was not lost. Historical context gives us insight into the application of the passage we preach. If we assess author and audience, answering the question what was the author's intent in giving this text to this people in this situation, we can then apply it by extension to our own day, making appropriate adjustments in the application but not being fanciful in our interpretation. Thus the right question is not, What does this mean to me? But rather how did it apply to them and by extension, how does it apply to us?

## **2. Narrative Context**

Another helpful factor in preaching Old Testament narratives is the context of the narrative we are preaching, forcing us to ask a new set of questions. Why did the author, under the influence of the Holy Spirit, choose these particular narratives to weave together into the overall text? And how does this particular text fit into the larger context of what precedes and what follows.

A rich example of this follows from the Book of 1 Samuel. How many times have we heard sermons on 1 Samuel 16:7? But the LORD said to Samuel, "Do not look at his appearance or at the height of his stature, because I have refused him. For *the Lord does not see* as man sees; for man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart." Clearly this is an important text and worthy of our homiletical attention. But if we do not see this in the larger context we shall miss important pointers as we apply this to the people of God today. The first pointer is found in a previous reference that anticipates the text under consideration. In 1 Samuel 13:14 we are told that Saul had lost all hope of a dynasty because his heart was not faithful to the Lord, he had disobeyed the direct command of God (there is an important allusion here to Deut. 30:6, but we will address allusions below). Faithfulness is objectified as obedience to the revealed will of God. And while it is true that faithfulness brings blessing, we must understand that Saul's failure was not simply functional but a lack of a heart after God. 1 Samuel leaves us anticipating a king change based upon a heart difference. The larger context then reminds of what God is seeking in His new king, the contrast is between David and Saul.

But the immediate context of 1 Samuel 16:7 sets up another consideration; Samuel's assessment of David's oldest brother Eliab. This brother appears in only two chapters in 1 Samuel, this one and the one that follows. Thus 1 Samuel 17 beckons us to consider how David and Eliab compare. What happens when one whose outward appearance and stature which command our attention is confronted with one whose stature is even more commanding (the same word used of Eliab in 16:7 is

used of Goliath in 17:4)? Eliab's heart cowers with Saul and the rest of the Israelites. But the problem is not outward, or at least we should have learned that in ch. 16. The next time we run into the word heart it comes from the mouth of Eliab in 17:28 in his spoken disdain of David. "Now Eliab his oldest brother heard when he spoke to the men; and Eliab's anger was aroused against David, and he said, "Why did you come down here? And with whom have you left those few sheep in the wilderness? I know your pride and the insolence of your heart, for you have come down to see the battle."

Eliab's problem is informed by 16:7, it is not enough that his horizontal view is skewed, he disdains David. His vertical view is corrupt as well because we have already been told that only God can see the heart of David and God's assessment is the polar opposite of Eliab's. Thus the larger context of 1 Samuel 16:7 does not leave us to imaging applications for our people. A heart for God is found in faithfulness to His revealed Word and in fearlessness before those who would defy the armies of the living God (17:36).

This is just one example that could be multiplied many times over. Ultimately contexts force us to ask questions; Why has the author, under the influence of the Holy Spirit, told me this? The answer is usually found in the immediate or larger context and often adds rewarding content and application to our sermons.

### **3. Allusions and Anticipations**

Another feature of Old Testament narratives that can be richly rewarding is looking for allusions within the text to historically prior texts, or for anticipations of texts yet to come. Many times pointers are imbedded in the language and study bears more fruit than imagination. Two examples of this are evident in the opening verse of the Book of Ruth, one more obvious and the other more subtle.

The more obvious example of allusion is that Ruth is set by the author in the context of the Book of Judges. The entire book reminds us that while Israel is spiraling downward spiritually "because there was no king in the land" (Judges 17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25), God was providentially providing for Israel's spiritual need, a king who would be realized, not in Saul but in David (Ruth 4:22), the king after God's own heart. In what looks like human chaos and spiritual degradation, the God of Israel neither slumbers nor sleeps.

The more subtle example of allusion is found in the reference to Elimelek's "sojourn in the land of Moab" with his wife Naomi and their two sons. (Ruth 1:1) Now some imaginative preacher may assume the problem encountered by Naomi is directly related to their leaving the Promised Land and so leaving the umbrella of God's protection (as in the case noted above). But a more careful attention to the details of the text would reveal that the first occurrence of someone in Scripture leaving the Promised Land to sojourn in a foreign country due to famine is found in Gen.12:1 where Abraham himself leaves on a sojourn to Egypt due to a famine in the land. In no case are we to assume that these two occurrences are to be treated differently. In fact, being a sojourner places one in a special class, for even the entire nation of Israel sojourned in Egypt in part due to a famine in the land of Canaan. In this case, giving attention to the details alluding to prior texts will fence in our imaginations and keep us from making a text say what it was never intended to convey.

Again, examples could be multiplied, are not allusions to Sodom and Gomorrah to be found in the brutal rape of the Levite's concubine in Judge 19, and the anticipation of the removal of Eli's lineage from the office of high priest, prophesied in 1 Samuel but not realized until the reign of Solomon in 1 Kings. Attention to these details will make the Old Testament come alive to our people as we preach the living Word of God to souls hungry for the milk of the Word rather than the straw of our imaginations..

#### **4. Characterization**

The place of characters in Old Testament narratives is of critical importance in preaching; not just the presence of particular individuals but their presentation as well. At times we are given details that are pivotally important in the outcome of the narrative and so should have primacy in our preaching. Often an obscure detail proves a critical link in the narrative. Why are we told that Ehud was a "left-handed man"? (Judge 3:15), except to provide detail that will become important later in the story; we learn of this man what we know of few men in the entirety of inspired revelation. And why are we informed that Eglon was not just fat, but "a very fat man" (lit. a man of abundant fat)? The text is setting up the characters in preparation for the culmination of the story. In fact, much of the detail in this short narrative is provided to show the buffoonery of the Moabites and the ease with which the Lord is able to free His people from bondage when they repent. Can anyone imagine a security detail so inept that they do not consider the possibility of a left-handed assailant. Or servants so over the top incompetent that they think their king is on the toilet when he is bleeding to death on the floor, an eighteen inch dagger having disappeared into the folds of his abundant fat. Details add color and context to the characters in the narrative waiting to be brought to the surface in our preaching of these texts. Ultimately these characters highlight the sovereignty of God over the affairs of his children showing that the most powerful of men are no obstacle to God's blessing or chastening His people; while those who oppose the Lord are often shown in almost comical ways that they are played by God for the fools they are.

Another example of characterization occurs in the Books of Samuel. In fact, these two Books (actually one book in the Hebrew canon) are a masterful compilation of three sets of characters that are intentionally contrasted with each other. The narrative centers first on two women, Peninnah and Hannah, then moves to focus on two priests, Eli and Samuel, and finally considers in greater detail two kings, Saul and David. Additionally, when characters are compared and contrasted within the text, as these three pairs are, there are often divinely ordained reversals and some very rich irony (regarding irony, consider Haman and Mordicai as another example. Could greater irony be found than that one should hang on the gallows he built for another?). We already considered the comparison of Saul and David to some degree, kings whose stature was as physically disparate as their hearts were spiritually disparate. The barren Hannah, saddened by her physical inability to participate in a motherly way in the messianic hope of Israel, is faced daily with her counterpart Peninnah, whose major delight in motherhood appears to be as a foil for despising Hannah. And yet by the end of the narrative Hannah has become fruitful and in the process has been the first person in recorded revelation to utter the Hebrew word Messiah in reference to the coming king (1 Sam. 2:10), ultimately looking to the coming of David and yet, likely beyond him to the very coming of Christ. The contrasts between Eli and Samuel are stark as well as Eli has become fat through the wickedness of his sons, giving honor to them over the



Lord. Samuel on the other hand, having sons who like Eli's were wicked, is not found to be an accomplice in their sins. More could be said here but space precludes further unfolding, but the point is clear that at times we are expected not only to pay attention to characters but also to the ways they compare and contrast with other characters within the narrative.

## **5. Word Plays.**

Another feature of Biblical narrative is the presence of word plays. These are clearly less common and unquestionably more subtle (in fact they are not apparent in the translation and must be examined in the original language). A careful consideration of the Hebrew word for "house" in 1 Samuel 7 will reveal it is used of a palace, a temple and a lineage, all of which are interwoven to enrich the presentation of the Davidic Covenant. David, living in a house (palace) desires to build a house (temple) for God. Yet God refuses to let him do so. Now, while it is true that 1 Chronicles adds some detail to this overall narrative, including David's participation as a warrior, it does not enter this narrative and may be best left to the exposition of the text of 1 Chronicles. Essentially, what God concedes to David is that the house that God intends to dwell in will follow after David. God must first build David a house (a lineage) before that house of David becomes the house of God as it reaches its fullness in the person of Jesus Christ where both David's desire for God and God's blessing David converge (cf. John 2:13 ff. where the house/temple of God ultimately points to the temple of Christ's body).

Word plays can be found in the Eli narrative where the word in Hebrew for fat and honor are the same word (1 Sam. 2 and 4). Ultimately Eli had become fat (Heb. kabod, weighty) by honoring his sons more than he honored God (Heb. kabod, honor). To fail to see the word play in the text is to fail to catch the irony of Eli's life and death, as he was both old and heavy (Heb. kabod). It is also to fail to see the principle of sowing and reaping in the life of Eli; if the glory of the Israel had departed, Ichabod, it had first departed from the heart of this fat high priest.

A final example of word play that we will highlight from the Books of Samuel is found in the narrative of Saul's failure to eliminate Amalek (1 Sam 15). From the beginning of the command to "listen" (Heb. shama) to the voice of the Lord in verse 1 to Samuel's ironic question, "What then *is* this bleating of the sheep in my ears, and the lowing of the oxen which I hear (Heb. shama)?" (v. 14) the narrative revolves around this Hebrew word. If Saul had heard the voice of the Lord then Samuel would not have heard the bleating of the sheep. The text not only teaches us why Saul was rejected as king, after all how could God's king be a man who would not listen to God, but it teaches us the most important feature of a Godly king is his faithfulness to the voice of the King of kings and Lord of lords (it is of great value to see that the entire Saul narrative is anticipated in Deut. 17:14 ff., note esp. the reference to the "nations" in 1 Sam 8:5 and 20).

## **6. Narrative Shifts in Time and Space**

The text often focuses our attention through the masterful use of time and space. In order to set up the narrative time often moves very fast and space is displayed as expansive. However, if we focus on these narrative settings rather than seeing them as simply setting up the narrative so as to teach us the important parts of the historical situation, we shall miss the focus of the passage. A good

example of this is found in the previously referenced radio preacher's criticism of Elimelek and Naomi leaving Bethlehem and sojourning to Moab during a famine in the time of the Judges. The amount of time it takes to travel from Bethlehem to Moab and the amount of distance covered are summarily addressed in one verse. Clearly the author is not attempting to draw our expository attention to these details other than to provide the background to the didactic portion of the narrative which comes later in the chapter. Unfortunately, this particular preacher took this material as the sum and substance of what God wanted his people to learn – don't leave the Promised Land or you will come under God's judgment. However, when we encounter the dialogues between Naomi and her two gentile daughters-in-law we slow to real time, the conversations take as long to read as they took to transpire in their original historical setting. By this use of time and space the author has encouraged us to focus on the statements made and particularly on the proclamation of Ruth. But Ruth said: "Entreat me not to leave you, *Or to turn back from following after you; For wherever you go, I will go; And wherever you lodge, I will lodge; Your people shall be my people, And your God, my God. Where you die, I will die, And there will I be buried. The LORD do so to me, and more also, If anything but death parts you and me.*" (Ruth 1:16-17). This gentile great-grandmother of David teaches us how faith in the living God defines our allegiances and constrains life's options. It would be challenging to find a richer example of seeking first the kingdom of God, nor a more obvious example of God working even the tragedies of life to the ends of His great redemptive plan. God wasn't just preserving the lineage of Israel's future king, but the lineage of Israel's future Savior.

## 7. Structure

A final suggestion is to give consideration to the structure of a narrative to point us toward the overall didactic intent of the narrative. While we are used to stories climaxing near the end the ancient text is bound by no such convention. In fact, many Old Testament narratives use a chiasmic structure and climax in the middle. These structural elements can span several chapters encompassing several narrative blocks and are also prevalent within individual narrative blocks. Examples abound.

Gordon Wenham points out that the Genesis flood narrative (Gen. 6:9-9:19) exemplifies such a structure and climaxes at the center with the declaration in Genesis 8:1, "Then God remembered Noah, and every living thing, and all the animals that *were* with him in the ark. And God made a wind to pass over the earth, and the waters subsided." (For the full structural analysis see Wenham's commentary on Genesis in the Word Biblical Commentary series). The structure points us to consider carefully this verse, which reflects the first occurrence of the Hebrew word for "remember." Remembering (pun intended) to consider allusions and anticipations mentioned above we find this word used again in Gen. 9:15 and further in Exodus 2:24 as containing referents to God as a covenantally faithful God. In fact, its usage in the covenant language within Genesis provided the context for Israel seeing the Exodus as the continuation of God's covenant faithfulness. Ultimately, we revel in a God who remembers our sins no more (Jer. 31:34), but remembers His covenant with us. That Wenham has captured an important element of the structure of this larger narrative is underscored by the way numbered days are balanced around this text as well (cf. 7, 7, 40, 150, 150, 40, 7, 7; 8:1 occurs between the two references to 150 days).

Smaller narrative blocks reveal rich literary structures that provide pointers to which we should give attention in our preaching as well. Probably one of the more common examples is in the structure of the six days of creation which reveal a rich balance of between the first three days where God creates and demarcates the heavens, earth, and sea, and the last three days of creation where he populates those same realms with animal life finally culminating in the creation of man on day six. While this in no way denigrates the historic reality of the six days of creation, it literarily enriches the text and can inform our preaching of it as well. It is clear that careful attention to structure provides clues to the proper interpretation of the text and also points to the edifying exposition of the text.

### **Application of Old Testament Narratives**

A final word should be offered regarding the application of Old Testament narratives. Richard Pratt (*He Gave Us Stories*) points us in the right direction when he directs us to consider that we have the same God, we live in the same world, and we bear the same nature. This is not to diminish the shifts we encounter due to cultural (Jew v. Gentile), epochal (NT v. OT), and personal differences, but to acknowledge that in spite of these differences there is much in common. Our applications are possible because of the points in common and they will vary as the differences are accounted for. Probably the best example to look to in this way is provided by the Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 10. He uses the exodus narratives as the foundation for NT application. In addition, he notes that there is a commonality between us and them (they were “our fathers”) that gives opportunity for moral imperatives; “do not be...as some of them were...” In other words, our application of the text should derive from the text itself. We must first assess how the original author intended the original audience to apply this text and then, making appropriate adjustments, apply it in similar ways. Paul was not concerned that the Corinthian Christians would make a golden calf and offer sacrifices to it. But he was quite clear that we today can suffer from the same types of sinful behavior without repeating the identical sin. We are prone to idolatry as were some of them, we must struggle against sexual immorality or be like some of them, we are capable of grumbling against God and His chosen leaders as were some of them, and we can just as easily put Christ to the test, as did some of them. Paul makes the appropriate shifts but at the same time insists that these texts were given to us for this very purpose. While we must make careful allowances for the fact that Paul was speaking by inspiration, if our application is not anchored to the text our exposition of the text will be rendered superfluous.

The wisdom encapsulated in the oft quoted adage of Augustine; “The New Testament is in the Old concealed, and the Old Testament is in the New revealed.” applies here. Because we are people who bear the same nature, live in the same world, and have the same God, we can apply the analogy of faith with profit to Old Testament texts. The Three Uses of Law were as present in the Old Testament as the New, therefore we can see where the Law would reveal to depraved sinners the need of a Savior who was to come and we are thus enabled to point sinners to the Savior whom they, in the age before Christ, could only know by shadows and types. We can see where Old Testament saints, “under grace,” struggled with remaining indwelling sin and found refuge in the promises of the Coming One who would, as Hebrews informs us, establish the better covenant, and thus we can find an even greater comfort and refuge to those of us who in the New Covenant have the substance where they had only shadows. We have many rich examples of God’s faithfulness to His covenanted promise (Gen. 3:15) and

how He patiently bore with the infirmities of fallible Patriarchs and sinful Israel to bring forth the promise of Messiah; from this we can preach the benevolent Providence and Sovereignty of God overruling sinful men to bring His Son into the world, to keep His Word to believers, and to glorify His great name – even that name that is above every other name. We must not preach the Old Testament as if the entire revelation of Christ was unfolded in the Old Testament, but we can certainly make the epochal shifts to which these texts point and apply the Scriptures beneficially in a New Testament context.

The sacred text is not only profitable for instruction, but correction and reproof (2 Tim. 3:16). May God enable us to preach it with clarity and sobriety and to apply it with wisdom. Only then can we expect to avoid becoming mere “peddlers of God’s word,” and instead be made to be “sufficient ministers of the new covenant.” (2 Cor. 2:17 ff.)