

SECTION 17

Old Testament Narrative and Poetry

WHAT TO LOOK FOR WHEN READING A PARAGRAPH

1. Look for that which is *General* and that which is *Specific*.
2. Look for the author's use of *Questions* and *Answers*.
3. Examine the flow of *Dialogue* and ask the appropriate questions of the *Dialogue*.
4. Observe the use of *Emotional* terms.
5. What is the *Tone* of the passage?

CLUES FOR INTERPRETING NARRATIVE

CONTEXT

Any individual narrative should be interpreted in light of the whole account, i.e., Mark 5:1-20 should be interpreted in light of Mark 1:1-16:8.

AUTHORIAL/EDITORIAL/NARRATOR COMMENTS

The author or narrator gives clues to his reader of how to interpret a text.

Examples:

- (1) Mark 5:1-20 should be interpreted by such editorial comments as: Mark 1:1, 34; 3:11-12.
- (2) 1 Kings 15:5-6; 22:43; 2 Kings 14:3-4; 2 Chronicles 33:2-8
- (3) 1 Kings 12:15, 15:29; 16:12, 34; 2 Kings 1:17; 23:16; 24:2

THEMATIC STATEMENTS

The author or narrator sometimes provides a thematic statement which reveals the theme of his work: Cf. Acts. 1:8 with 6:7; 9:31; 12:24; 16:5; 19:20; 28:31. (How do Peter and Paul fit into this?)

REPETITION

Cf. Judges 3:7-9; 17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25

Interpreting Old Testament Narratives¹

1. Follow many of the same principles used in the interpretation of New Testament narratives.
2. Examine each section to see what it is teaching and then ask why the author has strung together the stories in the larger context.
3. Ask what the passage is teaching about God. He is the central figure in Old Testament narratives as Jesus is the central figure in the Gospels.
4. Look for story shifts (breaks and pivots) in the narrative.
5. Observe the literary device of interchange, which involves contrasting or comparing two stories at the same time.
6. Note that theology is (normally) taught implicitly rather than explicitly in Old Testament (as well as in the NT) narratives.
7. One significant difference between Old Testament narratives and narratives in the Gospels is the Old Testament narratives are usually much longer (i.e. Joseph, Abraham, David)

¹ This material comes from Fee and Stuart

Common Errors in the Interpretation of Old Testament Narratives

1. Beware of allegorizing Old Testament narratives. Focus on the clear meaning of the text.

2. Beware of reading things into narratives that are not really there. Why do people sometimes read things into narratives that are not really there?

- Desperate people are truly hurting and in need of help are looking for anything that might address their situation.
- Sometimes sincere believers are impatient and want an immediate answer from God rather than waiting patiently and praying for God's guidance.
- We sometimes wrongly believe that everything in the Bible applies *directly* to us.
- Sincere believers can be prone to decontextualizing a passage.

Poetic Literature

The Difference Between Prose and Poetry

Judges 4 (prose) and 5 (poetry)

Exodus 14 (prose) and 15 (poetry)

Poetic License

THE FORM OF HEBREW POETRY

1. Metrical Patterns
2. Parallelism
 - a. Synonymous Parallelism
 - b. Synthetic Parallelism
 - c. Antithetical Parallelism
 - d. Non-Parallelism
3. Poetic Language and Imagery
 - (a) Paronomasia
 - (b) Alliteration
 - (c) Acrostics
 - (d) Assonance
 - (e) Figurative Language

HERMENEUTICAL PRINCIPLES

1. Note the strophic (stanza) patterns of the poem or hymn.
2. Group parallel lines.
3. Study the metaphorical language.

INTERPRETING POETRY

- What is the difference between commissive and referential language?
- Over one-third of the Bible is comprised of Poetry.
- Psalms, Job, Proverbs, Song of Songs, and Lamentations – almost all of these books are poetry.
- Prophetic books embody poetry as a major literary feature.
- Poetry can also be found in many Old testament narratives (Judges 4-5; Exodus 14-15)
- The teaching of Jesus in the Gospels contains a significant amount of poetic/commissive language.

Elements of Hebrew Poetry

1. Terseness

2. A high degree of structure – Parallelism

- Synonymous
- Developmental/Step/Climatic
- Antithetical/Contrastive
- Chiastic

3. Figurative Language

- Simile
- Metaphor
- Indirect analogy
- Hyperbole
- Personification/Anthropomorphism/
Zoomorphism

DIFFERENT KINDS OF PSALMS

Psalms of Zion	48, 84
Royal Psalms	2, 8, 72, 110
Hymns to God	19, 24
Wisdom Psalms	1, 127-128
Penitential Psalms	6, 32
Imprecatory Psalms	58, 137
Praise Psalms	106, 111-113
Lament Psalms	13, 142

Songs in the Bible

Introductory Information:

Different Kinds of Songs in the Bible:

Much of the following outline is directly dependent on Grant Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral*. Not all quoted material appears in quotations.

(1) War Songs

- (a) Exodus 17:16
- (b) Judges 7:18, 20
- (c) Numbers 10:35-36
- (d) Exodus 15:1-18 [victory song of Moses – among best known]
- (e) Judges 5 [victory song of Deborah – among best known]
- (f) Numbers 21:27-30 [victory song over Moabites]
- (g) 1 Samuel 18:7; 21:11; 29:5 ["Saul has slain his thousands, David his tens of thousands"]

Osborne: "[Most of these songs] dwell rapturously upon the hand of God stretched out against the enemies of Israel. The glory belongs to Yahweh, who shares the spoils and the honor with his people."

(2) Love Songs

- (a) Song of Solomon, 5 different interpretations
 1. Judaism and the early church – allegory of the mystical love of God for his people or Christ for the church.
 2. Some modern scholars – a postexilic midrash on divine love (similar to #1)
 3. A drama of a maiden and her lover
 4. Most modern critics – see no structural development – it is a collection of secular love songs, perhaps modeled on praise hymns
 5. The book uses love imagery for purposes of cultic ritual and was used in the festivals of Israel.(I favor option #3) – literal maiden and lover. Solomon and lover. image of rustic shepherd and king relate to David and by extension to Solomon as well.

(3) The Psalms

Overview of psalms. Largest “book” of Bible. 5 different books.

Psalms 1-41, ends in verse 13 with doxology

Psalms 42-72, ends with benediction in verses 18-19

Psalms 73-89, ends with benediction in verse 52

Psalms 90-106, verse 48 benediction

Psalms 107-150, ends with 150th Psalm

There are titles affixed to some of psalms

73 explicitly by David

12 by Asaph

11 by the sons of Korah

2 by Solomon

Lament Psalms.

- (a) The most common type of psalm.
- (b) Songs that agonize over a particular situation and petition God for help
- (c) Individual laments (Pss 3; 5-7; 13; 17; 22; 25-28; 31; 38-40; 42-43; 51; 54-57; 69-71; 120; 139; 142)
- (d) Corporate laments (Pss 9; 12; 44; 58; 60; 74; 79-80; 94; 137)
- (e) Two by David outside the Psalms – 2 Samuel 1:17-27 for Saul and Jonathan; 2 Sam 3:33-34 for Abner.
- (f) Seven Common themes in the structure of a lament noted by Hayes (Stein text lists 5, extra two have a *)

1. **Address to God** – Ps 22:1 “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?” often with a confession of faith, Ps 71:1, “In you, O Yahweh, I have taken refuge; may I never be put to shame.
2. **Description of Distress**, often highly figurative (57:4, I am in the midst of lions ... whose teeth are spears and arrows”, at times presented as concern regarding himself (69:2, “I sink in the miry depths” or even as a complaint against God (44:9, “yet you have rejected and humiliated us”)
3. **Plea for Redemption**, both for deliverance (3:7a, “Arise, O LORD! Deliver me, O my God!”) and the defeat of his enemies (3:7b, “For you have struck all my enemies on the jaw; you have broken the teeth of the wicked”)

4. **Statement of Confidence or Trust in Yahweh** (12:7, “O Yahweh, you will preserve us; you will protect us from this generation forever”)
5. ***Confession of Sin** (25:11b, Pardon my guilt, for it is great”) or affirmation of innocence (17:3-5, “you have tested me and found nothing . . . I have avoided the paths of the violent . . . my feet have not slipped”)
6. **A Vow or Pledge** to do certain things if God grants the request (56:12, “I must present vows to you, O God; I will render thank offerings to you”, often involving a reminder to God of his covenant commitments (74:18, “Remember this, O Lord”)
7. ***Conclusion**, which may be in the form of praise (57:11, “Be exalted, O God, above the heavens; let your glory be over all the earth”) or restatement of the request (80:19, “Restore us, O Lord God Almighty; make your face shine upon us, that we may be saved”)

Few psalms contain ALL these elements. Nevertheless, these do constitute the basic lament.

Osborne: “The value of such psalms for every believer is obvious. Whether one is ill (Ps. 6; 13; 31; 38; 39; 88; 102), beset by enemies (3; 9; 10; 13; 35; 52-57; 62; 69; 86; 109; 120; 139) or aware of sin (25; 38; 39; 41; 51), the lament psalms offer not only encouragement but models for prayer. Many have claimed that one should pray them directly; I agree but prefer to meditate, contextualize and then pray these psalms as they reflect upon my situation.”

Hymns or Praise Songs. Directly celebrate the joy of worshipping YHWH.

1. Calling upon YHWH (Ps 139:1, “O Lord, you have searched me and you know me.”)
2. A call to worship (111:1, “I will extol the Lord with all my heart”)
3. A motivation clause praising YHWH and giving the reasons for worship, often centering upon God’s attributes and deeds (111:2, “Glorious and majestic are his deeds”)
4. A conclusion repeating the call to praise, often including a series of blessings (111:10, “to him belongs eternal praise”)

Fee and Stuart note 3 specific kinds of hymns:

1. Yahweh is praised as Creator (Ps. 8; 19; 104; 148)
2. Yahweh is praised as protector and benefactor of Israel (66; 100; 111; 114; 149)
3. Yahweh is praised as Lord of history (33; 103; 113; 117; 145-47)

Other hymns:

- (1) Some go into detail regarding God as in control of history by recapitulating the great salvation events in the life of Israel (78; 105-6; 135-36).
- (2) The Hallel psalms (113-18) formed a special part of the Passover celebration and were also a regular part of the synagogue service.

Thanksgiving Hymns – Thanking God for answers to specific prayers. If the lament is the “before” of spiritual trust songs, the thanksgiving hymn is the “after” – like 2 bookends. Like the lament, we have individual thanksgiving hymns (18; 30; 32; 34; 40; 66; 92; 103; 116; 118; 138) and corporate (65; 67; 75; 107; 124; 136). Another example – after Jonah’s deliverance (Jonah 2:2-9).

1. In addition to thanking God for his deliverance, such psalms regularly pledge future fidelity and worship to God (18:49, “Therefore I will praise you among the nations, O Yahweh”) and specifically give the glory to Yahweh for the defeat of the psalmist’s enemies (18:39, “You gave me strength for battle; you subdued my adversaries”) or his recovery from illness (30:3, “O Lord, you raised my soul from Sheol; you rescued me from those who descend to the grave). 6 structural elements to a Thanksgiving song.
 - a. Invitation to give thanks or to praise YHWH , Ps 30:1, 4
 - b. Account of trouble and salvation, Ps 18:3-19
 - c. Praises of Yahweh, acknowledging his saving work, Ps 18:46-48
 - d. Offertory formula at the presentation of sacrifice (Ps 118:21)
 - e. Blessings over participants in the ceremony (Ps 22:26)
 - f. Exhortation (Ps 32:8-9)

Songs of Celebration and Affirmation – several types of hymns that celebrate God’s covenant relationship with the king and the nation.

1. **Royal Psalms.** The coronation psalms (2; 72; 101; 110) and enthronement psalms (24; 29; 47; 93; 95-99) were written to depict the implications of the accession to the throne, with its ritual crowning, swearing in before Yahweh, anointing with oil and receiving the homage of the people. The enthronement psalms may have gone beyond the single coronation to encompass an annual ceremony celebrating the kingship.

2. **Songs of Zion** – praises God for his gift of Jerusalem, the Holy City.

Wisdom and Didactic Psalms (1; 36; 37; 49; 73; 119; 127; 128; 133) parallel Proverbs in the celebration of wisdom as God's great gift to his people and its connection to the inscripturated Word and Torah.

Imprecatory Psalms (12; 35; 52; 57-59; 60; 69; 70; 83; 109; 137; 140) lament psalms where the writer's anger and desire for vindication are especially prominent.

Penitential Psalms – Psalms of repentance where the psalmist comes to God in repentance of his sin. Pss 6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130

Label the Psalm:

1 –

13 –

21 –

48 –

51 –

95-

137 -

Suggestions for interpreting the Psalms:

1. Note the sub-genre of the psalm, consider the original setting (as best as one can determine).
2. Be aware of figurative language (poetry)
3. Be aware the psalm may give general guidance or only part of the story (proverbs)