

Interpreting a Biblical Passage

Genre – Narrative

Big Picture Questions

- **Selection (Why?)** – of all the possible events to relate from a character’s *whole life*, the biblical narrator selected this story. *Why?*
- **Characters (Who?)** – most scenes involve two primary characters, a **protagonist** and an **antagonist**. Not simply “good” and “bad” guys, note *status* and *power relationships*. Secondary/supporting characters may include **crowds** or **God** (often an assumed character, manifesting through providential acts). The **biblical narrator** sometimes interjects an opinion/interpretation.

Biblical narrators often use **speech** to reveal the point(s) of their narrative and, crucially, the **character** of the speaker. Who speaks, *how* do they say what they say, and *with whom* does the audience identify?

Crucially, biblical “heroes” usually appear flawed. Characters are not meant simply to be **imitated**, but often **illustrate** a moral point made explicit in the context. Frequently, however, moral knowledge is *assumed*, so the reader is expected to “know better” than the character.

- **Setting (Where?)** – particularly in the ancient world, geography matters. What is assumed about character conflict or social/cultural conditions by *where* a story takes place?
- **Plot (What?)** – narrative typically has a *beginning*, *middle*, and *end*, often revolving around resolving a conflict. What is the *story*, and how do the *setting* and *characters* contribute to it?
- **Arrangement (When?)** – unlike modern narrators, ancient narrators are far less concerned about arranging stories sequentially or chronologically. Instead, they often use stories to *illustrate* or *reinforce* moral or theological points made in the surrounding context. Looking at *when* a narrative occurs in its larger context, what does the author intend to teach?

Rhetorical Devices

- **Exaggeration/hyperbole** (“if your right eye causes you to stumble, pluck it out!”) – overstatement to make a point; rarely to be taken literally
- **Inclusio** (or “bracketing”) – repeating a phrase or key word(s) at the beginning and end of a section to express a point of that section (e.g., Matt 5.3, 10, “theirs is the kingdom of heaven”). The section can sometimes be large, even an entire book (e.g., Psalm 118.1, 29; Rev 1.8, 22.13, “Alpha and Omega”).
- **Irony** (e.g., the “good” Samaritan) – emphasizes a point by the unexpected turn of events
- **Repetition** (words/ideas) (“after Jesus taught/said these things...”, emphasizes Jesus as teacher in MT)
- **Metaphor** (“you are the salt of the earth) and simile (“you are like whitewashed tombs”) – makes a point by comparison; not meant to be pressed for detail (e.g., don’t look for all the properties of salt, *etc.*)
- **Rhetorical questions** (“by worrying can you add a single hour to your life?”) – identify the point by turning the question into a statement (“worrying won’t help you live longer, so don’t worry!”).
- **Parallelism** (**synonymous** – saying the same thing *twice*; **contrastive** – the second line makes the point by contrasting with the first; **developmental** – the second line repeats part of the first, then makes the point by adding to it).
- **Parables** (stories Jesus uses to teach about God’s Kingdom) – what lesson is directed to each of the main characters in the story, and what lesson is directed to the audience at the time? Like **metaphor**, avoid pressing for details or looking for fanciful meaning in the elements of the story.

Comparison (Repeated Material)

Occasionally, biblical authors give *their take* on earlier biblical accounts. Notably, **Chronicles** draws on **Samuel-Kings**, and **Matthew** and **Luke** use **Mark**. In cases of repeated material, **compare** how the later account may *change* a story to make *distinct* and sometimes *different* points for a new situation.

Applying Biblical Narratives to Our Lives

1. What in the story is *prescriptive* and what is meant to be *descriptive*?
 - Are the heroes *positive* or *negative* examples, or maybe *not examples at all*?
 - Does the wider context reveal a clear moral or theological point?
2. What is *time-bound* and *culture-specific*, and what is *timeless* and *universal*?
 - Is a story *meant* to be applied today, or do we *distort* it by ignoring its *original* function? Is our situation *sufficiently similar* to the biblical situation we should expect God to act in the same way? Much of biblical narrative reveals how God honoured his *specific* promises to a *specific* people and aren't meant to be *generalized*. (Life's problems are not "giants" to be slain or "storms" to be calmed!)
 - Is our takeaway more about God's *character* and *eternal plan*?
3. How does a *specific* biblical story (OT or NT) inform us how to live as part of the *grand story* of God's Kingdom Come that Jesus proclaimed and that the Church is meant to model?

Practice

1. 1 Kings 17 – Introducing Elijah
 - a. Read through the story of Elijah
 - b. How many distinct **scenes** can you identify?
 - Hint: *geography matters!*
 - c. What **distinctive** point or points does each scene make *individually*?
 - d. What **overarching** point does the author make by collecting these scenes *together*?
 - Hint:
 - *repetition matters!*
 - *Dialogue matters!*
 - *Where repetition/dialogue occurs in the scene matters!*
 - e. What is the **key application** we might take back to *our* context today?
2. Acts 8.26-40 – Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch
 - a. Read through the story of Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch
 - b. Who are the main **characters** involved?
 - Hint:
 - *there are more than two!*
 - *race, occupation, and status matter!*
 - *where we're first introduced to the main character matters!* (You'll have to look further back – and he's mentioned just in passing!)
 - c. Where does the scene take place?
 - Hint: *geography matters* – and *more than one place is mentioned!*
 - d. How does this scene relate to what's come before and what comes after?
 - Hint:
 - *what the main character's been up to matters!*
 - *what happened before the main character is introduced and what happens after the main character exits matters!*
 - e. How does this scene relate to Luke's **overarching** message?
 - Hint: *remember Acts 1.8 and Jesus' mission in Luke 4.14-27.*
 - f. What's the **key application** we might take back to *our* context today?
3. Comparisons
 - a. David's census – 2 Samuel 24 // 1 Chronicles 21
 - b. The greatest commandment – Matthew 22.34-40 // Mark 12.28-34 // Luke 10.25-28