

Old Testament Narrative Overview

Summarize the historical situation of the book, its main themes and its place in the Old Testament story

Narrative books of the Old Testament are composed of smaller narratives united around a controlling theme or themes. The clearer these themes are understood, the more able interpreters will be to grasp narrative flow and place individual narratives in their proper interpretative framework. The controlling theme, usually stated but sometimes implied, is an “umbrella” under which all of the narratives of the book fit together.

Controlling theme as a *theological marker* (promise, covenant, blessing), repeated or alluded to throughout the narrative.

Example: Genesis 12—36: God’s faithfulness to His promise to Abraham

12:1—3 Promise of blessing to Abraham, a nation, all humanity while Abram is still in Ur.

12:7 Reaffirming the land blessing as Abraham travels to Canaan.

13:14—17 After Abraham redeems Lot from Sodom

15:4—7 Clarification: From your own body will the promised son come.

15:13—21 Promise becomes a unilateral Covenant—notice land dimensions

16:10 Ishmael is blessed as a son of Abraham

17:2—8 Abram becomes Abraham; circumcision is the sign of covenant.

17:16 Sarah is to be blessed

17:19—21 Isaac to be born; God will establish His covenant with Isaac.

18:18,19 Purpose of the promise: legacy of justice and righteousness.

21:12 Isaac is the son of covenant, not Ishmael.

22:17,18 Reaffirming the covenant after Abraham’s obedience at Mt. Moriah.

24:7 Covenant in context of Rebekah and Isaac’s marriage.

26:24 Reassurance to Isaac under threat.

32:9,12 Jacob's prayer for safety as the son of covenant

35:11,12 God blesses Jacob (deceiver) now called Israel (strives with God).

Note the broader blessings, including land, to Ishmael (21:13,18), Moabites (19:37,38), Ammonites (19:37,38), Midianites (25:2), Edomites (36:1,8)

Note that the promise/covenant directs the flow of the narrative of each generation of Abraham, showing God's *grace* and *faithfulness*.

Example: 2 Samuel 7/1 Chron. 17

The Davidic Covenant as a blessing to David, formation of a dynasty from him, and the promise of an eternal kingdom

- Controlling theme as *summary statement*: Judges 2:6—23
 - The judges era was a dismal failure, illustrated by the “cycle of apostasy,” pointing to the need for monarchy (17:6;18:1;19:1;21:25)
- Controlling theme as theological *link*: 1 Kings 11:9—13 or Exodus 2:23—25
 - Failure of the kings in the Davidic line would result in judgment on the nation, but God will remain faithful to his promise to David. Consequently the prophet-author of Kings (see 2 Chron. 32:32) assesses kings in terms of their obedience/disobedience to God.
- Controlling theme as a *repeated phrase*: 2 Kings 3:3; 10:29; 13:2; 13:11; 14:24; 15:9,18,28; 17:21.
 - Each king is evaluated by the standard of apostasy: “The sin of Jeroboam, son of Nebat.” Little more needs to be said about whether a king was faithful to the Lord or not. The reader can easily grasp the historical implications for Israel based on this assessment.

Summarize historical situation of the book

- What time does the book cover? (see chart) E.g.: Genesis includes prehistory (1—11); patriarchal period (12—50)
- Describe the general *circumstances* facing God's people?

Summarize the main characters and their relationship to the main theme(s)

Abraham (12—23); Isaac (24—26); Jacob (27—36); Joseph and his brothers (37—50)

Structure (skeleton) of the individual narrative

Structure concerns how the pieces of a narrative relate to each other. By closely noting the flow of the story and the connection of each scene within the narrative, interpreters are able to understand its purpose (main point) and how the main point is illustrated, supported, or applied by the dialogue and flow of action. Structure is the *form* or shape of the text while content relates to the *substance* of the ideas contained within it.

Identify and chart each scene in the narrative. Substantial portions of books may constitute a narrative, a complete story (E.g.: Exodus 1—19; Genesis 37—50). Narratives may also be defined in narrower terms—the life of a patriarch, the reign of a king, and so forth. *A more or less complete story defines a narrative: generally with a beginning, a sequence of events or dialogue, and a conclusion.* Chart each scene in the story.

Setting

Context

Briefly summarize *preceding* and *subsequent* narratives.

Identify

Who? Describe each person in the scene, noting characteristics the narrator identifies—where they are from, friend or foe, etc. The more we know about the characters of the narrative, the more vivid will be the dramatic effect of the story. Characters offer cautionary or positive examples to the reader who is invited to identify with them.

Where? Location can play an important role in understanding the poignancy of a text or its meaning. Why are the characters where they are?

When? Identify when the narrative takes place. What could be generally said about these times that would aid understanding why this particular story matters? For example, narratives from 1 and 2 Kings relate to the reign of the kings of Israel and Judah. These are distressing times and times of blessing, often depending on the spiritual condition of the king. What God is accomplishing through the narrative relates directly to this historical circumstance.

Note: changes in setting signal shifts in scene.

Purpose clues: what is the main point of the story?

Repetitions

- Formulas:
 - “Evil/good in the sight of the Lord (2 Kings)
 - “Is it because there is no God in Israel...” (2 Kings 1:3,6,16)
 - “God said...It was so... It was good” (Genesis 1)
- Words:
 - “give” in Joshua 1
- Events:
 - Joshua and Moses (Joshua 1—5)
 - Elijah and Elisha (1 Kings 17 and 2 Kings 4)

Summary or introduction statements

Genesis 1:1 “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.” (see Gen. 1:1—2:3)

Exodus 7:2—5 serves as an outline of the plagues narrative:

- vs. 2 “let Israel go”
- vs. 3 “pharaoh’s hard heart”
- vs. 3, 4 God will “multiply signs and wonders”
- vs. 5 “*So that* the Egyptians will know that that Yahweh is the Lord...”

7:2—5 structure in each of the plague scenes:

Plague	“Let people go”	Pharaoh’s heart	“wonder”	“I am Yahweh”
Staff to serpent		7:13	7:10—12	
Nile to blood	7:16	7:14, 22	7:19—21	7:17
Frogs	8:1	8:15	8:5--7	8:10
Insects	8:20	8:19, 32	8:16—18, 24	8:19, 22
Cattle	9:1	9:7	9:6	9:4
Boils	9:13	9:12	9:10	9:14, 17
Hail	9:35	9:34	9:22—26	9:29
Locusts	10:4	10:1, 20	10:12—15	10:2, 3
Darkness	10:24—26	10:27	10:22, 23	<i>why the silence?</i>
Passover	11:8; 12:31	11:10	11:9; 12:29, 30	11:7; 12:12

Divine voice

When God breaks into the narrative, it is usually a vital purpose statement.

1 Samuel 13:13,14; 15:22,23 Samuel's rebuke of Saul

Marker/link

Note the many repetitions of the Abrahamic Promise in the narratives of Genesis.

Context

1 Samuel 1:1—2:11 the Hannah narrative is significant because it introduces the reader to Samuel, the transitional figure and amplified by the barren woman bearing the hero theme. Such a long introduction shows the importance of the person being introduced.

Decisive or symbolic actions

Samson's dramatic destruction of the Canaanite temple (Judges 14—16).

Isaiah's shame (Isaiah 20:1—4).

Jeremiah's lump of clay (Jer. 18:1—12).

(note: Gospel narratives provide many examples of "parabolic action").

Irony

Judah: the deceiver is deceived (Genesis 37) setting up the Joseph narrative.

(note: Gospel narratives focus substantially on irony).

Dramatic moment of realization

Joseph's surprising announcement (Genesis 45:7,8).

1 Kings 17:1 Now Elijah the Tishbite, who was of the settlers of Gilead, said to Ahab, "As the Lord, the God of Israel lives, before whom I stand, surely there shall be neither dew nor rain these years except by my word." **2** The word of the Lord came to him, saying, **3** "Go away from here and turn eastward, and hide yourself by the brook Cherih, which is east of the Jordan. **4** "It shall be that you will drink of the brook, and I have commanded the ravens to provide for you there." **5** So he went and did according to the word of the Lord, for he went and lived by the brook Cherith, which is east of the Jordan. **6** The ravens brought

him bread and meat in the morning and bread and meat in the evening, and he would drink from the brook. 7 It happened after a while that the brook dried up, because there was no rain in the land.

8 Then the word of the Lord came to him, saying, 9 “Arise, go to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and stay there; behold, I have commanded a widow there to provide for you.” 10 So he arose and went to Zarephath, and when he came to the gate of the city, behold, a widow was there gathering sticks; and he called to her and said, “Please get me a little water in a jar, that I may drink.” 11 As she was going to get it, he called to her and said, “Please bring me a piece of bread in your hand.” 12 But she said, “As the Lord your God lives, I have no bread, only a handful of flour in the bowl and a little oil in the jar; and behold, I am gathering a few sticks that I may go in and prepare for me and my son, that we may eat it and die.” 13 Then Elijah said to her, “Do not fear; go, do as you have said, but make me a little bread cake from it first and bring it out to me, and afterward you may make one for yourself and for your son. 14 “For thus says the Lord God of Israel, ‘The bowl of flour shall not be exhausted, nor shall the jar of oil be empty, until the day that the Lord sends rain on the face of the earth.’” 15 So she went and did according to the word of Elijah, and she and he and her household ate for many days. 16 The bowl of flour was not exhausted nor did the jar of oil become empty, according to the word of the Lord, which He spoke through Elijah.

17 Now it came about after these things that the son of the woman, the mistress of the house, became sick; and his sickness was so severe that there was no breath left in him. 18 So she said to Elijah, “What do I have to do with you, O man of God? You have come to me to bring my iniquity to remembrance and to put my son to death!” 19 He said to her, “Give me your son.” Then he took him from her bosom and carried him up to the upper room where he was living, and laid him on his own bed. 20 He called to the Lord and said, “O Lord my God, have You also brought calamity to the widow with whom I am staying, by causing her son to die?” 21 Then he stretched himself upon the child three times, and called to the Lord and said, “O Lord my God, I pray You, let this child’s life return to him.” 22 The Lord heard the voice of Elijah, and the life of the child returned to him and he revived. 23 Elijah took the child and brought him down from the upper room into the house and gave him to his mother; and Elijah said, “See, your son is alive.” 24 Then the woman said to Elijah, “Now I know that you are a man of God and that the word of the Lord in your mouth is truth.”

Plot and dialogue

Narration: Story teller’s relationship to the story.

“Point of view”

Space and tempo of the scene provide a sense of symmetry to the narrative. It draws the reader’s attention to what is important. Note for instance in the creation narrative of Genesis 1 that the creative days leading to the creation of man move very quickly, but then the pace slows as the uniqueness of man is carefully described: the crown of creation. So interpreters need to pay close attention to what is being emphasized through narrative slowing and events or dialogue expanding.

Editorial insertions:

Introduction (Genesis 1:1)

Conclusion or summary (Genesis 2:3)

Clarification/evaluations/explanations (Genesis 6:6; 1 Sam. 21:6; Ex. 1:8)

Action and Dialogue

How does the plot move forward? Usually the narrative begins with a *circumstance* (perhaps a problem) that unfolds through a sequence of scenes, bringing the story to *aclimax or crisis*, and then *resolution*.

Genesis 6—9 Flood narrative

Genesis 22 Abraham’s sacrifice of Isaac

Genesis 32, 33 Jacob and Esau

Note the plot movement from scene to scene. This linear progression in the narrative reflects the Old Testament’s unique linear view of history. See for instance the critical contrast with the Hindu epic, *Bhagavad-Gita* II:26—III:5, where Krishna “comforts” Arjuna by reminding him of life’s unavoidable fate—it’s resignation, not resolution.

Note how the narrator’s description of events and dialogue shape the *character’s development*. Describe what we’re told of the inner life, motivations, relative virtue, spiritual sensitivity, and relationship of the characters to the main point of the narrative. Is the reader to be drawn to or repulsed by the characters? How have the key characters been changed through the narrative? (see Gen. 32,33).

Jonah

Scene #1: 1:1,2

setting	plot and dialogue	purpose clues
<p><i>Context:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Jonah is a complete narrative. <p><i>Identify:</i></p> <p>who—</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Jonah, son of Amittai • a prophet commissioned to denounce Nineveh <p>where—</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • north of Jappa • Nineveh the great city <p>when—</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2 Kings 14:25 • ~780 BC 	<p><i>Narration:</i></p> <p>“point of view”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nineveh is a great city, but wicked 	

Scene #2: 1:3—16

setting	plot and dialogue	purpose clues
<p>who—</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Jonah • the Lord • pagan sailors <p>where—</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tarshish to board a ship • see map <p>when—</p>	<p>“point of view”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “But” (1:3) • “fleeing from the presence of the Lord” (1:3, 10) • downward direction (1:3, 5) <p><i>Action:</i></p> <p>Jonah moves directly away from his</p>	<p>Narrators point of view makes it clear that Jonah’s actions are totally wrong—something the narrative is illustrating:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fleeing God’s presence • No concern for the sailors, even willing to be drowned before praying to

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> immediately after being commissioned by the Lord 	<p>calling, into self-imposed isolation in the bottom of the ship</p> <p>Sailors become frightened, cast lots, find Jonah, confront Jonah, throw Jonah overboard; the storm ends; offer sacrifices to Jonah’s God</p> <p><i>Dialogue:</i></p> <p><i>How can you sleep?—You must pray to your god, maybe he’ll hear us.</i></p> <p>I am a Hebrew, I fear the Lord of heaven who made the sea and dry land</p> <p><i>How could you do this!</i></p> <p>You must toss me into the sea</p>	<p>God to intercede for them & sleeping through their crisis</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Knowing that your god is the god of heaven, sea, and dry land, “How could you do this?” is biting commentary Sailors, offering sacrifice is interesting
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Scene #3: 3: 1:17—2:9

setting	plot and dialogue	purpose clues
<p>who—</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Jonah the Lord the fish <p>where—</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> In the belly of the fish, in the bottom of the sea 	<p>“point of view”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Jonah’s descent is complete (1:17;2:6) a poetic prayer reflects a change in perspective <p><i>Action:</i></p>	<p>Jonah appears to have a genuine faith in God’s goodness and salvation, but it’s personal. How ironic that this great salvation is just for Jonah—no mention of the commission to Nineveh</p>

<p>when—</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 3 days and nights (1:17) 	<p>God appoints a fish to save Jonah—but he will fall to the depths for a while first</p> <p>Jonah finally prays—for himself</p> <p><i>Dialogue:</i></p> <p>Jonah’s prayer:</p> <p><i>A plea:</i> “I called out of my distress”</p> <p><i>A result:</i> “You brought up my life from the pit”</p> <p><i>A response:</i> thanksgiving to God, whom Jonah remembered</p> <p><i>Conclusion:</i> Salvation is from the Lord</p>	
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Scene #4: 2:10—3:9

setting	plot and dialogue	purpose clues
<p>who—</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Jonah • the Lord • People of Nineveh • King of Nineveh <p>where—</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nineveh <p>when—</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • after the incident with the fish 	<p>“point of view”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a bit of ironic contrast between Jonah’s proclamation of judgment, without a call to repent, and the repentance of Nineveh <p><i>Action:</i></p> <p>Jonah heeds God’s second “word” and goes to Nineveh</p>	<p>Are we to recognize anything in the comparison between Jonah’s prayer and the King’s edict and prayer?</p>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Jonah’s second commission to Nineveh 	<p>Jonah preaches while walking the wall of the city</p> <p>the people and the king believe and repent, calling out to the Lord for mercy</p> <p><i>Dialogue:</i></p> <p>Interestingly, there is no dialogue, only Jonah preaching and the people responding.</p> <p>Nineveh is to be overthrown in forty days</p> <p><i>King’s decree:</i> No eating or drinking; each are to repent of their wickedness</p> <p><i>King’s plea:</i> “Who knows, God may turn and relent and withdraw his anger and we may not perish”</p>	
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Scene #5: 3:10—4:11

setting	plot and dialogue	purpose clues
who— <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Jonah God where— <ul style="list-style-type: none"> East of the city when—	“point of view” <p>this is where the real climax and resolution of the story is—what it’s all been leading up to</p> <p><i>Action:</i></p> <p>God relents for Nineveh</p>	<p>God’s closing statement sums up the whole narrative: Jonah cares more for a plant than a lost nation</p>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • After the people repented 	<p>Jonah is angry with God, wishing to die</p> <p>Jonah builds a shelter from the sun at a place where he can see the city—will it be destroyed?</p> <p>God provides, then destroys Jonah’s source of shade</p> <p>God rebukes Jonah</p> <p><i>Dialogue:</i></p> <p>I fled to Tarshish knowing you are “slow to anger, abundant in loving kindness, relenting concerning calamity”</p> <p>Now take my life</p> <p>God confronts, “Do you have reason to be angry?”—first about the city, then the plant</p> <p>Jonah twice says he is angry even to death</p> <p>God concludes: You had compassion on the plant that came and went, but not for the great city of 120,000 lost people</p>	
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- state the *main point* and how the narrative supports, illustrates, or applies it

***Rebuke:* Jonah, representing Israel, has no concern for God’s plan for the nations and is less spiritually responsive than the gentiles to whom they are called**

1. **Rejecting God’s commission to the nations by fleeing**
2. **No concern for the sailors in the storm**
3. **Disputing with God over the fate of Nineveh**
4. **Repulsive display of self-pity revealing Jonah’s heart**

Assignment: Exodus 3:1—22. Break the narrative into scenes; follow all of the “structure” steps on the worksheet.