



# How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth

Chapter 5

The Old Testament Narratives:  
Their Proper Use

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# The Need for Guidance

On why we should be concerned about Old Testament narrative



# The Need for Guidance

- ▶ The Old Testament (henceforth, OT) comprises over  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the Bible. Over 40% of the OT is narrative.
- ▶ Some Christians have had an unhealthy relationship with the OT in general and OT narrative in particular.
- ▶ Examples:
  - ▶ “Polygamy is present in the OT therefore it is good to practice.”
  - ▶ “God commands Moses and Joshua to drive out and kill foreigners and so should I.”
  - ▶ “Elijah’s battle with the priests of Baal on Mt. Carmel is about Jesus triumph over evil spirits” (96).\*

\*Unless otherwise noted, pareneticals refer to *How to Read the Bible*.



# Two Equal and Opposite Errors

On two erroneous approaches to the Old Testament narratives



# Two Equal and Opposite Attitudes Toward the OT

1. Error of Dismissal: "We are part of the New Covenant in Christ. The old has passed away and the new is here. Therefore, we are to only read the New Testament."
  1. The OT is *our* spiritual history. Ethnic Israel is not the genuine recipients of the promises of Abraham but those who trust in the promises of God to Abraham (Gal. 3:6-9).
2. Error of Personalization: "The Old Testament contains messages, even secret messages to me. The OT is to be read as a direct prescription for my daily life."
  1. The OT was written to a specific people in a specific time. Before we can ever ask what it means *for us*, we must first know *what it meant*. Only then can we see what God is now communicating to our present time.



## ROUND TABLE DISCUSSION

- ▶ Tell your name and why you live in Houston.
- ▶ Do you find yourself with any fears or aversions to reading the OT?
- ▶ Do you find yourself or others falling into one of the errors mentioned?
  - ▶ Error of Dismissal
  - ▶ Error of Personalization

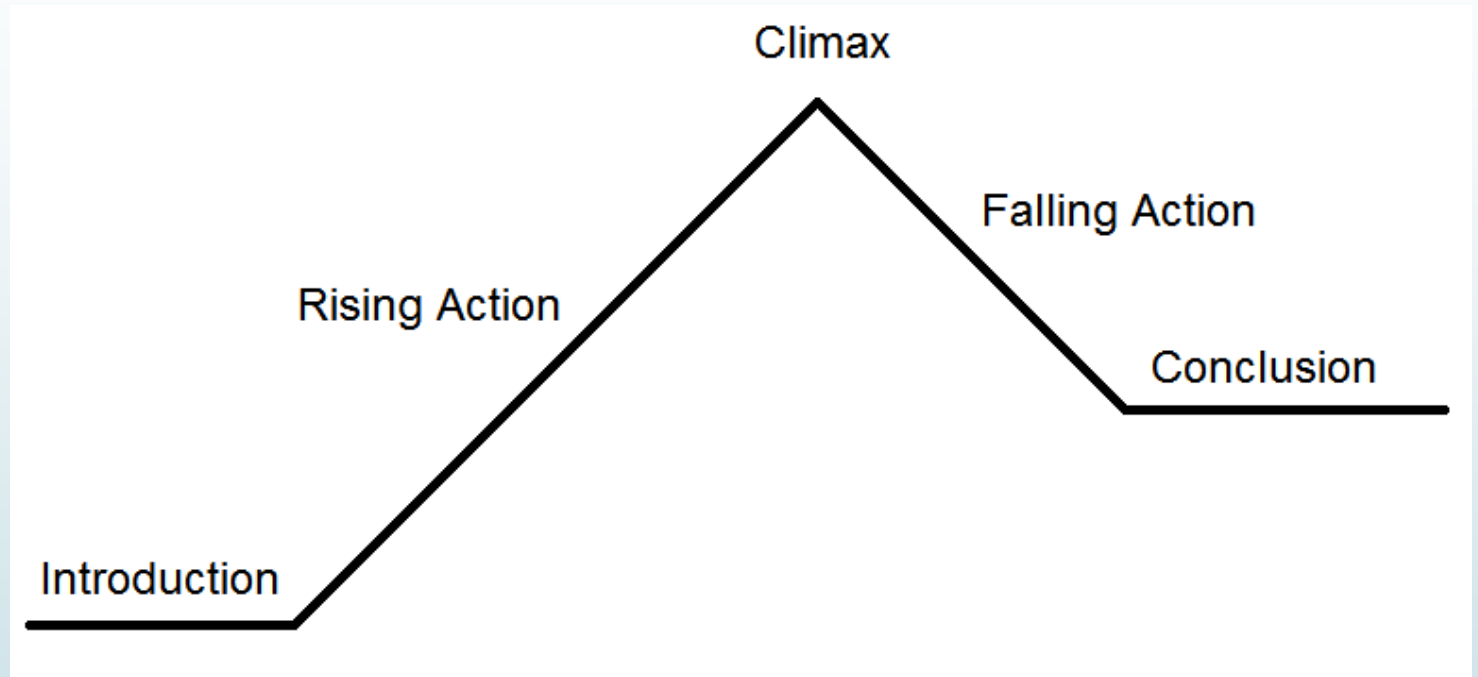
# What Plots and Narratives are

On what constitutes a plot and how  
to understand narratives



# The Plot Mountain

- All narratives have the elements of stories that we are familiar with.
- There are protagonists and antagonists.





Meta-what?

# Meta, Communal, and Individual Narratives

Metanarrative:  
Creation>Fall>Redemption>Renewal

Abrahamic lineage

Communal

Exodus from Egypt

Narrative

Israel in Babylon

Abraham  
and Sarah

Individual

Moses

Narrative

Daniel

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# What Narratives are Not

## 1. Allegories

1. Allegory is present within the Bible. However, its use is limited and we cannot use this method of interpretation to decipher OT narratives for it completely dismisses what the narrative would have meant to the original hearers.

## 2. Moral lessons

1. God's moral law is present in the Bible. However, simply because the Bible describes something does not mean it prescribes it for moral practice.

## Narratives as Spoken and Heard, Not Read Privately

- ▶ We can hardly appreciate this now in our abundantly text and visual based culture.
- ▶ The original audience were *hearers* not *readers*. This is why there is much repetition and why the narratives can be quite difficult to read.



"Moses Speaks To The People"  
By James Tissot (1836–1902)



# Characteristics of Hebrew Narrative

Aspects to look out for when reading Old Testament narratives

## Characteristics of Hebrew Narrative: The Narrator

- ▶ The narrator is functionally all-knowing
- ▶ The narrator does not disclose all that he knows (he lets us figure it out and allows the story to unfold on its own).
- ▶ The narrator is responsible for the point of view of the story.

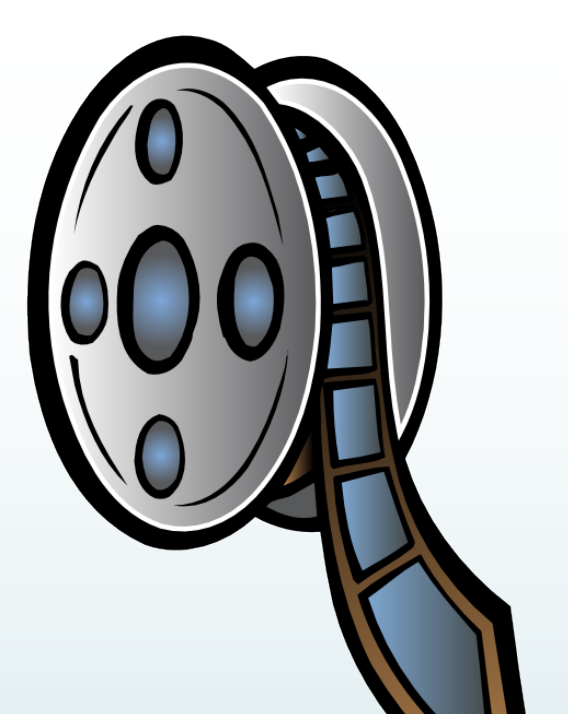


## Characteristics of Hebrew Narrative: The Narrator

- ▶ Test Case: Joseph
- ▶ The story is from the point of view of Joseph, as it states at the end of Gen. "you intended to harm me, but God intended it for good..."



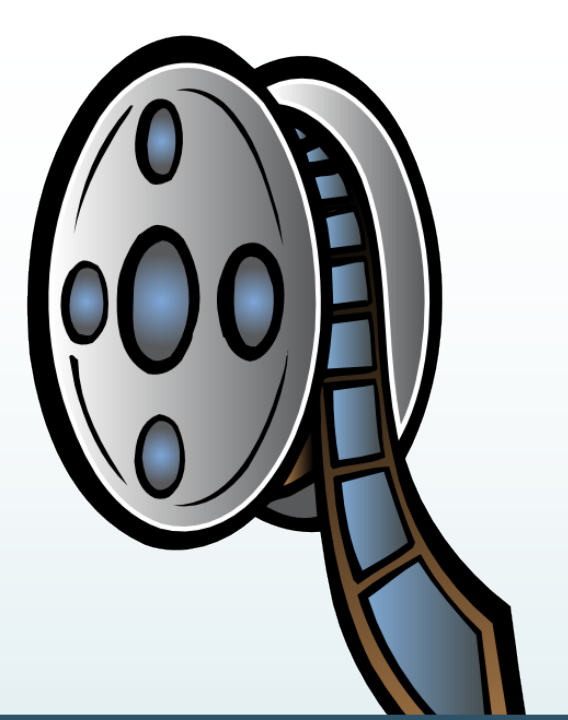




## Characteristics of Hebrew Narrative: Scenes

- ▶ The predominant kind of narration is scenic. The narrator seldom “enters into” the story. Rather, he arranges various scenes into a unified whole.





## Characteristics of Hebrew Narrative: Scenes

- ▶ Test Case: Joseph
  - ▶ We are presented with favored Joseph in his arrogance “tattle-telling” on his brothers.
  - ▶ Joseph reinforces this arrogance by describing dreams that he will rule over his older brothers and father.
  - ▶ Joseph is sold into slavery by his brothers.
- ▶ The point is, the narrative goes from scene to scene to tell a story. Joseph’s narrative is so organized as to communicate that the events are divinely ordained.





# Characteristics of Hebrew Narrative: Characters

- ▶ Characters are the main component of the Hebrew narrative scenes.
- ▶ The narrative progresses through the character's words and actions, not the narrator's comments on the characters.



## Characteristics of Hebrew Narrative: Characters

- ▶ Test Case: Joseph
- ▶ At the beginning of the narrative, Joseph is a brat and arrogant. By the end of the story, he has developed to a mature and faithful servant of Yahweh. This is especially illustrated by his confrontation with Potiphar's wife.

## Characteristics of Hebrew Narrative: Dialogue

- ▶ The first point of dialogue sets the tone for the rest of the narrative.
- ▶ The narrator will emphasize crucial parts of the story with a character repeating the narrative in a speech.
- ▶ Test Case: Joseph. The speeches of the brothers and Judah illustrate this point (Gen. 42:30-34; 44:18-34).





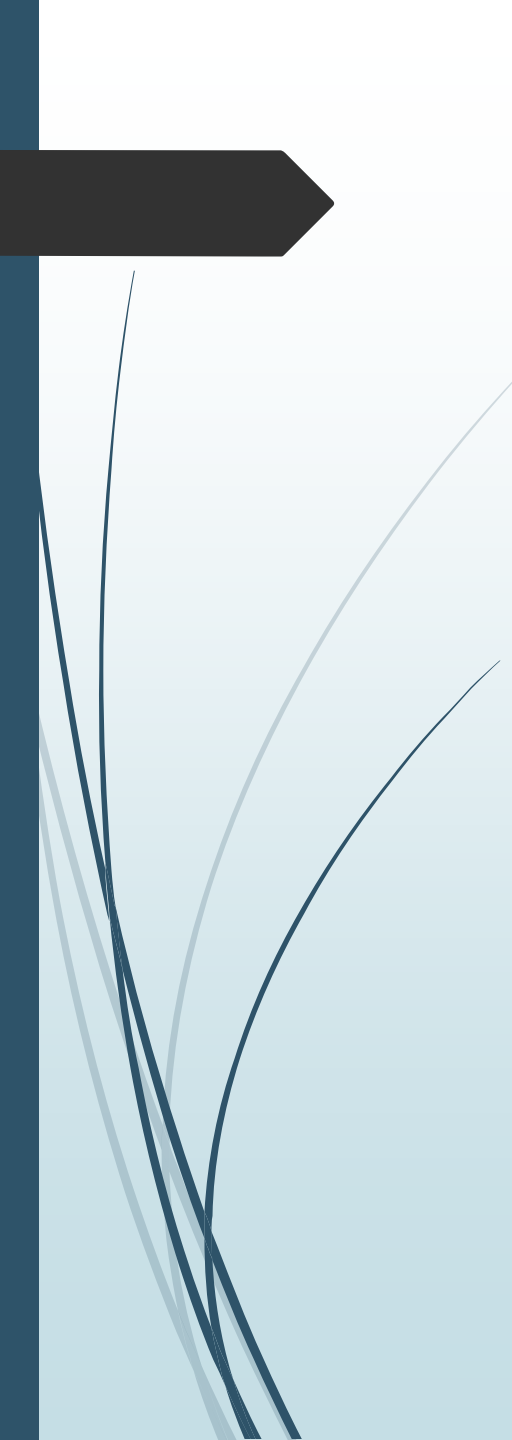
# Principles for Digesting the Narratives

Action plan for beginning your engagement with Old Testament narratives

## Principles for Engagement: Initially Hearing and not Analyzing

- You must allow yourself to sit with the story before you begin to analyze it and decipher it.
- A good rule of thumb is to read the narrative through completely twice before you begin digging for meaning.





# Principles for Reading: Discover the Presuppositions of the Narrator

- ▶ The narrator assumes that you share his presuppositions since the original hearers would have. You will likely have to do some textual analysis and commentary investigation.
- ▶ The most often appealed to presuppositions within the Hebrew Narratives deal with the following:
  - ▶ The covenant with Abraham
  - ▶ The Law of Moses
  - ▶ The Exodus from Egypt

# Principles for Reading: Find Implicit Meanings

- ▶ Because the narrator assumes you share his presuppositions, he does not spell out all the implications from the scenes he presents. So we have to do a little work here.
- ▶ Test Case: Ruth
  - ▶ In the book of Ruth, the reader assumes that we will be familiar with the Levitical law when he describes the righteousness of Boaz and the trust that Ruth has in Yahweh.
  - ▶ Also, if we look closely at the genealogies within Ruth, we discover that she is in the lineage of King David and by implication, Jesus of Nazereth. This suggests that the story is *not only* about Ruth but also about the metanarrative of redemption.





# Principles for Reading: Implicit ≠ Secret

- Simply because there are implicit points in the narrative does not mean those points are *secret* or *hidden*. There must be a connection between exegesis and application. Otherwise, we can make the text say whatever we wish.

The image shows a screenshot of a Hebrew Bible software interface. At the top, there is a toolbar with various icons and labels: Show nikud, Modify nikud, Zoom-in, Zoom-out, Previous code, Next code, Additional code, Identify word, Proximity rank, Unmark all, Save screen, Print screen, and Skip 1372. Below the toolbar, the text 'codes: SEPT' is visible. The main area displays a grid of Hebrew text with several words highlighted in colored boxes. The highlighted words include: ARRIVAL, COMET, ALIGNMENT, SALVATION, LION, FAITH, TISHRI, SABBATH, ARISE, TRULY, GLORY, RAPTURE, SABBATH, TISHRI, BRIDE, SEATED, 2009, YEAR, SEATED, REMINANT, CHRIST, GLORY, LIGHTNING, and DISPENSATION. The background text is in Hebrew, and the highlighted words are in English. The interface also shows a search bar at the top right with the text 'From: Jeremia To: Jeremia' and a dropdown menu with the text 'אגרת'.



A dark blue arrow points right from the left edge of the slide. Below it, several thin, curved lines in shades of blue and grey sweep across the left side of the slide.

# Homework

- ▶ Read Ruth aloud to yourself or to someone else and attempt to apply these principles we've discussed today.