

Interpreting Historical Narrative and Proverbs¹

Lesson Outline

Historical Narrative

Purpose

- Lead the reader to submit to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior
- Narratives record many facts (e.g. locations, names), but they are not simply history books or entertainment.
- Scripture—including historical narratives—is intended to give people wisdom so that they come to a saving knowledge of Christ (cf. 2 Tim. 3:15)
- Historical narratives are effective because they are memorable and evoke strong emotion. This often makes narrative very persuasive.
- Many people—especially skeptical listeners—often have an easier time listening to the indirect nature of narrative versus a speech.
- People are often more willing to hearing a story that illustrates God's grace than an abstract discussion.²

Clues for Interpreting Narrative

- Context: any individual narrative should be interpreted in light of the whole account
- Thematic statements: the author or narrator sometimes provides a thematic statement that reveals the theme of the work
 - Luke 1:1-4 “Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us, it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, *that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught.*”
 - “When Luke’s Gospel and the book of Acts are read in the light of this preface, it appears that Luke is writing to provide reassurance to believers about the nature of the events surrounding Jesus’ life, death, resurrection, the spread of the message about Jesus, and the nature of God’s people following Jesus’ ascension. He is providing assurance that these events really are the work of God, that God really has been accomplishing his purposes, that Jesus really is who he said he was, and that believers in Jesus really are the true people of God. All of this is especially important in the light of the rejection and persecution faced by these believers, not the least of which came from those who also claimed to belong to the heritage of God’s people and who read the same Bible.”³

¹ Much of the following outline is directly dependent on the teaching that I received from Robert Plummer during his hermeneutics class at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, KY. Not all quoted material appears in quotations.

² Robert L. Plummer, *40 Questions about Interpreting the Bible*, 40 Questions Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2010), 192.

³ Alan J. Thompson, *The Acts of the Risen Lord Jesus: Luke’s Account of God’s Unfolding Plan*, New Studies in Biblical Theology 27 (Nottingham, England: Downers Grove, IL: Apollos; InterVarsity Press, 2011), 19–20.

- John 20:30-31 – Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.
- Repetition: E.g. Judges 3:7-9; 17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25
- Authorial/editorial/narrator comments: the author or narrator gives clues to his reader of how to interpret a text
 - Mark 5:1-20 “I, Mark, have told you this story about the healing of this demon-possessed man because...”
 - Mark 5:1-20 should be interpreted by such editorial comments as Mark 1:1, 34; 3:11-12
 - 1:1 The opening verse of the Gospel introduces Jesus as “Jesus Christ, the Son of God.”
 - In 1:34, Mark adds the comment that “he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him.” This indicates that one must pay careful attention to what the demons say about Jesus. They are, in Mark's Gospel, “reliable spokesmen” whose testimony is to be believed (Cf. 3:11-12).
 - Immediate context of miracle stories show Jesus' power, which show who he is. 4:35-5:43
 - In 4:53-5:43 Mark gives a series of miracle stories in which he shows Jesus' power: over nature (4:35-41); the demonic (5:1-20); disease (5:25-34); and even death (5:21-24, 35-43). All these serve to show who Jesus is (cf. 4:41).
 - Within the story itself we find: a demoniac confession in 5:7 – “Jesus, Son of the Most High God” (note the direct discourse: like parables, direct discourse is important); a detailed description of the strength of the demon in 5:3-5 (note that the stronger the demon the stronger must be the one who overcomes him; cf. also the great number of swine which are destroyed); that Jesus' exorcism results in awe and wonder (5:15 and 20).
 - “I, Mark, have told you this story about the healing of this demon-possessed man because...**I want you to know that Jesus of Nazareth is the Son of God who possessed power over the demons and Satan, himself.**”
- Location of the passage within the overall book. Why did the author place the passage here?
 - E.g. Markan sandwiches. The middle passage gives the theological purpose.

Mark 5:21-43

- A. Jairus begs Jesus to save his daughter (5:21-24)
- B. Woman with a discharge of blood for 12 years (5:25-34)
- A. Jesus raises the girl from the dead (she was 12 years old) (5:35-43)

Mark 11:12-21

- A. Jesus curses the fig tree (11:12-14)
- B. Jesus cleanses the temple (11:15-19)
- A. The fig tree withers away (11:20-21)

- Other Markan sandwiches:

- 3:20-3:35
- 4:1-20
- 6:7-30
- 14:1-11
- 14:17-31
- 14:53-72
- 15:40-16:8

Prescriptive vs. Descriptive⁴

- Luke 2:7: And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.
 - Is the point of this verse to instruct parents to put their babies in cribs? (Prescriptive)
 - Or, is it emphasizing (through description) our Savior's humble beginnings?
- Luke 11:7 describes children sleeping in their father's bed with him.
 - Even this is not prescriptive. It is a simply a detail in the parable.

Proverbial Literature

Proverb: a subset of wisdom literature; a brief piece of advice, observation, admonition, or prohibition. Proverbs are not *universal* truths. They are statements that are *generally* true when they are applied at the right time and under the correct circumstances. They do not guarantee results, but they offer the best path to a desired conclusion.⁵

- Biblical proverbs call us to action: to respond to God in faith and obedience.⁶
- Proverbs 3:9-10 – vats/barns are full. General rule: Yes, when people gave generously, they were blessed, but there are exceptions. Some generous Christians have died of hunger/poverty.
- Proverbs 10:3-4 – It is possible to have a lazy person who is rich. But as a general rule, people who are lazy are poor. People who are diligent have things.
- Proverbs 13:21 – General rule: Sinners experience misfortune, and righteous have prosperity.
- Proverbs 15:1 – possible a gentle answer will stir up anger but is generally true
- Proverbs 22:16 – general rule: people who oppress the poor will be punished
- Matthew 26:52 – generally, people who live violently, die violently.
- Luke 16:10 – faithful in little, faithful in much. Dishonest in little, dishonest in much
- 1 Corinthians 15:33 – epistolatory proverb: Bad company corrupts good character. Exception: Jesus hung out with sinners but maintained his righteousness. But as a general rule, Christians who spend consistent time with people of bad character will be negatively influenced.

⁴ I owe this example to Plummer, *40 Questions about Interpreting the Bible*, 193.

⁵ Tremper Longman and Mark L. Strauss, *The Baker Compact Dictionary of Biblical Studies* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2018), 160.

⁶ Plummer, *40 Questions about Interpreting the Bible*, 238.

Proverbs that appear to conflict one another⁷

- Proverbs 26:4 and 26:5 – Should we answer a fool⁸ or not?
 - Circumstantial nature of proverbs affirms the truth of both. Depending on how the fool responds to a rebuke, one of these proverbs will apply.

Proverbs that have NO exception⁹

- These are essentially promises.
- Proverbs that discuss the nature of God.
- Proverbs 11:1 – Since God is righteous, he never condones cheating in business.
- Proverbs 6:16-19 – God always finds these things detestable.

Proverbs that suggest God's intervention beyond our life on earth¹⁰

- 10:2, 11:4, 11:7, 12:28, 15:24

The Problem of Job

Universalizing general truth

- Job 4:7-9 – Since you are perishing, you are not innocent.
- Job 5:15 – God saves the needy.
- Job 8:3-7 – Your circumstances are due to sin.

The problem of Job's comforters

- They misunderstand proverb as promise instead of general truth.
- They were wrong in their assessment of Job. They thought that Job was being punished for sinfulness.
- Proverbs are not promises. They are general truths.

Ecclesiastes and Song of Solomon/Song of Songs

- One must read all of Ecclesiastes to understand the meaning of the book. It concludes with a call for the reader to fear God and keep his commandments because will bring every deed into judgment—good or evil (Eccl. 12:13-14).
- Song of Solomon/Song of Songs is wisdom literature and poetic song. It is “a divinely inspired stamp of approval on the emotional physical joys shared within marriage.”¹¹

Job, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Solomon help prevent us from misinterpreting the biblical proverbs.

⁷ This example is from Plummer, 237.

⁸ A fool is an unbeliever who ignores God and follows self.

⁹ Plummer, 238.

¹⁰ Plummer, 239.

¹¹ Plummer, 240.

References

Longman, Tremper, and Mark L. Strauss. *The Baker Compact Dictionary of Biblical Studies*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2018.

Plummer, Robert L. *40 Questions about Interpreting the Bible*. 40 Questions Series. Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2010.

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