

HOW TO READ OLD TESTAMENT NARRATIVE

About two-fifths of the Old Testament is composed of a Biblical literary genre called *narrative*. These narratives recount historical events in a story format. They tell the story of God's people, from the foundation of the world to the arrival of the promised Messiah. Even though this story takes place before the first advent (or arrival) of Jesus, they have so much to teach us as New Testament followers of Christ. How we read, comprehend, interpret, and apply them matters.

Here are some important truths to remember as you read and study Old Testament narrative:

1. These stories are a part of one true and unified larger story.

More than a list of rules and principles for life, the Bible is a story. More specifically, it is the story of God which begins with the creation of a garden, reaches its peak with the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, and culminates in the creation, not of a garden, but of a garden city.¹ The Old Testament, specifically, is a story meant to point forward and anticipate the coming of Christ. In Luke 24:27, Jesus tells us that all of the Old Testament points to Him.² He's the promised Satan crusher³, from the line of Abraham⁴, and heir to the throne of David⁵.

Look for this truth when you read the Old Testament. It may be fun to imagine ourselves as David fighting the "goliaths" of our lives or Moses boldly standing up to the "pharaohs" all around us, but in reality, we're more like the Israelites too afraid to act. It's not about us. It's about God. David and the other great people of the Old Testament were not great enough to save us, but they point toward the coming of the One who would, Jesus Christ.

2. These stories are written in a specific context.

The books of the Old Testament were written to a specific people (the nation of Israel) at a specific time (2000 to 400 BC) in history. We may be able to learn more about God through the stories we read, but be careful about ignoring what the stories meant to the first readers. These stories were not written in a vacuum, they were written largely to an ancient Jewish background. This means every story and every detail was included for a purpose. In order to get the most out of your Bible reading in Old Testament narratives, make sure you understand this purpose. You can do this with something like a study Bible or a helpful commentary.⁶

3. These stories are inspired by the Holy Spirit.

2 Timothy 3:16-17 tells us, "All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work."

¹ For more on the whole narrative of Scripture, check out *From Eden to the New Jerusalem* by T. Desmond Alexander.

² Luke 17:26-33 esv.

³ Gen 3:15 & 1 Jn 3:8 esv.

⁴ Gen 12:7 & Gal 3:16 esv.

⁵ 2 Sam 7:12-16 & Matt 22:44 esv.

⁶ For a comprehensive study Bible, we recommend *The ESV Study Bible*. For a commentary on Ruth, we recommend *Faithful God* by Sinclair Ferguson.

This includes the Old Testament narratives. While it might be easier for you to learn from and apply a book like 1 John or Galatians, there is value in books like Ruth and 2 Samuel as well. These stories are just as inspired by the Holy Spirit, and are worthy of our attention like the rest of Scripture. They are still the inerrant (without-error), authoritative, preserved, true, and sufficient words of God to His people.

An easy way to let these stories speak into your life, is by asking the question → What is the larger doctrine about God and His people I can learn from positive and negative examples in this story?

4. These stories are full of examples of the good, the bad, and the ugly.

These stories are full of men and women we should learn from - some in the positive and some in the negative. For example, Joseph⁷ is a great example of how to live a godly life. He ran from temptation, forgave those who wronged him, and remained faithful to God despite being sold into slavery by his brothers and wrongfully imprisoned. Samson⁸, on the other hand, is a great example of how not to live. He married a Philistine woman that turned him away from God, repeatedly broke his vows to God, and caused others to break God's law.

These are just two of the many Old Testament narrative examples of how to live and how not to live. Seek to model your life after those whom God praised and learn to look forward to the one who both the good examples and bad examples point forward to - the promised Messiah, King Jesus.

- For more on reading Old Testament Narrative, check out *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* by Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart.

⁷ Gen 37-50ff esv.

⁸ Judg 13-16ff esv.