

## Biblical Narrative

“The Bible contains more of the type of literature called “narrative” than it does of any other literary type.”

“Over 40 percent of the Old Testament is narrative.”

[Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 78]

### Description

“Narratives are stories.” [p. 78]

“All narratives have a plot and characters.” [p. 79]

### Levels

- TOP whole universal plan of God worked out through his creation (*heilsgeschichte*)
- MIDDLE center on Israel
- BOTTOM individual narratives that make up the other two levels

“Every individual Old Testament narrative (bottom level) is at least a part of the greater narrative of Israel’s history in the world (the middle level), which in turn is a part of the ultimate narrative of God’s creation and his redemption of it (the top level). This ultimate narrative goes beyond the Old Testament through the New Testament.” [p. 80]

| Example: I Samuel 17 |

- TOP God rescues his people, defeats their enemies.
- MIDDLE After the death of Goliath, Israel prevailed, defeating the Philistines, their archenemy.  
Goliath and the Philistines had threatened Israel’s national security and Saul’s kingship.
- BOTTOM David defeated the Philistine giant Goliath.

### Characteristics

#1 God is the “protagonist” (i.e., main character).

“Old Testament narratives are not just stories about people who lived in Old Testament times. They are first and foremost stories about what *God* did to and through those people.” [p. 81]

#2 Old Testament narratives are not allegories or stories filled with hidden meanings.

#3 Old Testament narratives are selective.

“Narratives do not answer all our questions about a given issue. They are limited in their focus, and give us only one part of the overall picture of what God is doing in history. We have to learn to be satisfied with that limited understanding, and restrain our curiosity at many points, or else we will end up trying to read between the lines so much that we end up reading *into* stories things that are not there, making allegories of what are in fact historical accounts.” [p. 81]

“*All* narratives are selective and incomplete. Not all the relevant details are always given.” [p. 84]

“Narratives are not written to answer all our theological questions. They have particular, specific limited purposes and deal with certain issues, leaving others to be dealt with elsewhere, in other ways.” [p. 84]

#### #4 Old Testament narratives teach indirectly.

“Old Testament narratives do not always teach *directly*. They emphasize God’s nature and revelation in special ways that legal or doctrinal portions of the Bible never can, by allowing us vicariously to live through events and experiences rather than simply learning *about* the issues involved in those events and experiences.” [p. 82]

“Narratives thus give you a kind of ‘hands on’ knowledge of God’s work in his world, and though this knowledge is secondary rather than primary, it is nevertheless a real knowledge that can help shape your behavior.” [p. 82]

“They often *illustrate* what is taught directly and categorically elsewhere. This represents an *implicit* kind of teaching, which in cooperation with the corresponding *explicit* teachings of Scripture, is highly effective in generating the sort of learning experience that the Holy Spirit can use positively.” [p. 82]

“Narratives record what happened--not necessarily what should have happened or what ought to happen every time. Therefore, not every narrative has an individual identifiable moral of the story.” [p. 84]

“What people do in narratives is not necessarily a good example for us.” [p. 84]

“Most of the characters in Old Testament narratives are far from perfect and their actions are, too.” [p. 84]

“We are not always told at the end of a narrative whether what happened was good or bad.” [p. 84]

“Narrative may teach either explicitly (by clearly stating something) or implicitly (by clearly implying something without actually stating it).” [p. 84]