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Preaching the David Story
David G. Firth 1-10

Preaching Old Testament Narratives
Grenville F. R. Kent 11-24

The Immutable Mutability of YHWH
David T. Lamb 25-38

Preaching Deuteronomy as Christian Scripture
Joshua N. Moon 39-51

Augustine's Wise Preaching of the Psalms
Benjamin T. Quinn 53-70

Book Reviews 71-106

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Contents

ARTICLES

Preaching the David Story 1
David G. Firth

Preaching Old Testament Narratives 11
Grenville J. R. Kent

The Immutable Mutability of YHWH 25
David T. Lamb

Preaching Deuteronomy as Christian Scripture 39
Joshua N. Moon

Augustine's Wise Preaching of the Psalms 53
Benjamin T. Quinn

BOOK REVIEWS

James K. A. Smith. *Letters to a Young Calvinist: An Invitation to the Reformed Tradition* 71
Reviewed by Heath Thomas

William A. Dembski and Michael R. Licona (eds). *Evidence for God: 50 Arguments for Faith from the Bible, History, Philosophy, and Science* 73
Reviewed by Kent Dunnington

Richard Bauckham. *The Jewish World around the New Testament* 74
Reviewed by Andreas J. Köstenberger

Mark Senter III. *When God Shows Up: A History of Protestant Youth Ministry in America* 75
Reviewed by R. Allen Jackson

David Naugle. *Reordered Love, Reordered Lives: Learning the Deep Meaning of Happiness* 77
Reviewed by Jeremy Evans

Richard S. Briggs. *The Virtuous Reader: Old Testament Narrative and Interpretive Virtue* 79
Reviewed by Michael Travers

Paul Copan and William Lane Craig. *Contending with Christianity's Critics: Answering New Atheists and Other Objectors* 80
Reviewed by Allen Gehring

Michael Bergmann, Michael J. Murray, and Michael C. Rea (eds.) *Divine Evil? The Moral Character of the God of Abraham* 82
Reviewed by Paul Copan

Gene C. Fant Jr. *God as Author: A Biblical Approach to Narrative* 83
Reviewed by Michael Travers

Timothy G. Gombis. *Paul: A Guide for the Perplexed* 85
Reviewed by Jason Hood

Christopher R. Seitz. *The Goodly Fellowship of the Prophets: The Achievement of Association in Canon Formation* 86
Reviewed by Joshua E. Williams

Lynn H. Cohick. *Women in the World of the Earliest Christians: Illuminating Ancient Ways of Life* 88
Reviewed by Timothy Gombis

Todd L. Miles. *A God of Many Understandings? The Gospel and a Theology of Religions* 90
Reviewed by James R. L. Noland

Paul Helm, Bruce A. Ware, Roger E. Olson, and John Sanders. *Perspectives on the Doctrine of God: Four Views* 91
Reviewed by Marc Pugliese

Joel N. Lohr. *Chosen and Unchosen: Conceptions of Election in the Pentateuch and Jewish-Christian Interpretation* 93
Reviewed by Brian Howell

James G. Crossley, *The New Testament and Jewish Law: A Guide for the Perplexed* 95
Reviewed by Robin Parry

J. Gordon McConville and Stephen N. Williams. *Joshua*. The Two Horizons Old Testament Commentary 96
Reviewed by Heath Thomas

Steve Moyise. *Paul and Scripture: Studying the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* 98
Reviewed by Timothy Gombis

Gregory J. Lockwood. *1 Corinthians*. Concordia Popular Commentary 100
Reviewed by Edward D. Gravely

Gary Smith. *Isaiah 1–39*. The New American Commentary 101
Reviewed by Chad Steiner

Torsten Uhlig. *The Theme of Hardening in the Book of Isaiah: An Analysis of Communicative Action* 103
Reviewed by David Firth

Mark J. Boda. *A Severe Mercy: Sin and Its Remedy in the Old Testament* 104
Reviewed by Brian Howell

STR 2/1 (Summer 2011) 11-24

Preaching Old Testament Narratives

Grenville J. R. Kent
Wesley Institute, Sydney, Australia

> "I believe cinema is now the most powerful secular religion, and people gather in cinemas to experience things collectively, as they once did in church. Cinema storytellers have become the new priests. They're doing a lot of the work of religious institutions, which have so concretized the metaphors in their stories, taken so much of the poetry, mystery and mysticism out of religious belief, that people look for other places to question their spirituality. I don't think we fully understand yet the need of people to gather together to listen to a story, and the power of that act."
>
> -George Miller (*Happy Feet*, *Babe*, *Mad Max*)[1]

Preachers and teachers soon notice that stories draw an audience in. Compared to a list of propositional points in a lecture, stories (or good ones at least) are more concrete and emotionally accessible, almost experiential: a listener can feel like they have learned a lesson from life in the company of others. A story well told feels like a dialogue, an invitation to try it on for size and make it your own. When life feels random and unresolved, a story can help people who have "lost the plot," giving a sense that our present experience is part of an ongoing story of cause and effect that is progressing somewhere. Bible stories in particular constantly assure us that God can play a part in the real world, and may yet be an influential character in our personal stories. For postmodern hearers who are suspicious of metanarratives, a story acts like just a humble little truth, yet can smuggle in profound meaning.[2] Stories have always been superb vehicles for religious experience: Jesus said nothing without one (Mk 4:34).[3]

1. George Miller, interviewed by Janet Hawley, "The Hero's Journey: The Epic Progress of Filmmaker George Miller," *Sydney Morning Herald Good Weekend,* October 14 1995, 54–55, 57–58, 60 (60).

2. On this see Fred B. Craddock, "Story, Narrative and Metanarrative," in Mike Graves and David J. Schlafer (eds.), *What's the Shape of Narrative Preaching?* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2008), 87–98.

3. Craddock, "Story, Narrative and Metanarrative," in Graves and Schlafer, *Narrative Preaching,* 87–98:88, observes that "anyone who has listened to Jesus' stories, the parables, knows

Yet Old Testament narratives have often been under-utilized in Christian preaching and teaching. Biblical narrative itself has been considered light and simple, better left to children while sophisticated minds analyze epistles or prophecy. Then again, some Bible stories explicitly portray such violent or sexual themes that some have practically excluded them from the canon of preaching, finding them sub-Christian or just too hard to explain. Yet perhaps they are designed to cut through apathy and provoke passionate moral questioning at an adult level.[4] Some may have considered OT stories part of the old covenant, forgetting that Jesus and the apostles used them as Scripture.[5] Further, some scholarly approaches have theorized about various sources behind the OT narratives, and have attempted to break texts into various voices and authors. Interesting though this speculation may be to some, it does not consider that at least the final form was intended by somebody and works effectively as a unified work of literature. The 20th century also saw debates over historicity. Buttrick caricatures the problem: "Liberals distilled eternal truths from the biblical record while tossing out those embarrassing narratives that stretched credulity. And conservatives were busy trying to defend the facticity of the Bible's literal story in our more modern world; they too lost track of narrative meanings."[6] It is important to support the Bible's historical claims with research, but an argument defending the accuracy of a narrative account, however valuable, is not the same as telling it in a way that engages and informs a listener.

So when many people want a story that transports them, they pick up a novel or attend a cinema. I have not heard liberals complain about miraculous special effects or the incredible plot moves of Hollywood's magical realism, or conservatives worry about the historicity of the plot – most people simply relate to the narrative and absorb its themes. I find George Miller's comment (above) irritating, hopefully in the sense that a grain of sand irritates an oyster and produces a pearl. I think Miller has sensed something very important. Do churches offer rich, multi-layered, subtly told narratives as well as good films do? If not, why not? Some will plead lower budgets, but I do not mean expensive special effects, I mean quality of narrative, and we have in Scripture some of the best literature ever written. Have you ever heard a brilliantly nuanced and characterized OT narrative flattened into one dimension and rendered in cardboard by a preacher trying to prove one moral? (I confess I have probably done this.) How then can preachers help our listeners experience the artistry and persuasive power of Bible stories?

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that a story may be more than an ingredient of the sermon: it may be the message itself. As such, the story has the density, complexity, and realism of life."

4. Cf. Elizabeth Achtemeier, *Preaching Hard Texts of the Old Testament* (Peabody: Hendricksons, 1998). Robin Parry, *Old Testament Story and Christian Ethics: The Rape of Dinah as a Case Study* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2004).

5. To name but a few, Jesus reasons from Adam and Eve narrative (Matt 19:4–6), Peter from the Noah narrative (1 Pet 3:17), and Paul from the Exodus narratives (1 Cor 10:1–12).

6. David Buttrick, "Story and Symbol, the Stuff of Preaching," in Graves and Schlafer (eds), *Narrative Preaching,* 99–113:102.

From around 1980, scholarly interest in the literary study of the Bible has resulted in many more insights into reading and understanding it, and of all the genres, narrative has received most attention.[7] This has also influenced the preaching of narrative[8] and caused a sea change: previously, most seminaries taught propositional preaching as almost the only method. I recently unearthed my notes from a preaching class 25 years ago, and found the classical approach: preaching is for the mind, so sermons should make three points, clearly drawn from the text(s) and logically connected into an argument, and then give a brief illustration or poem to touch the emotions as well. Stories are small illuminating windows but the walls of the house are propositional points linked into a case for some belief. This theory comes from Greek rhetoric. It works well in preaching passages from the prophets or epistles who argue in this style, and yet a large part of the Bible is narrative. Narratives have their own shapes, which may or may not really fit a three-point sermon outline. Further, stories often make their points inductively, while classical sermon outlines are deductive. Craddock has challenged preachers by asking why we would stick to the style of a Greek debater rather than using the many literary forms of the Bible.[9] If preachers let the type of Biblical literature shape our sermonic form as well as our content, we would not fall into doing what we find easy and audiences find predictable, but would offer fresh variety in both content

7. See Jean Louis Ska, *"Our Fathers Have Told Us": Introduction to the Analysis of Hebrew Narratives* (Roma: Editrice Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 2002). Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981). Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Rading* (Bloomington: Indiana UniversityPress, 1987). Yairah Amit, *Reading Biblical Narratives: Literary Criticism and the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001). Shimon Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible* (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1989). Tremper Longman III, *Literary Approaches to Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987). Leland Ryken, *How to Read the Bible as Literature* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987). Gordon J. Wenham, *Story as Torah: Reading Old Testament Narrative Ethically* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic Press, 2000). David M. Gunn and Danna Nolan Fewell, *Narrative Art in the Hebrew Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993). Michael Goldberg, *Theology and Narrative: A Critical Introduction* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2001).

8. One excellent example is Stephen D. Matthewson, *The Art of Preaching Old Testament Narrative* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002. See also Walter C. Kaiser, "Preaching and Teaching Narrative Texts of the Old Testament," in *Preaching and Teaching from the Old Testament: A Guide for the Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 63–82. Elizabeth Achtemeier, "Preaching from the Narratives," in *Preaching from the Old Testament* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1989), 61–91. Sidney Griedanus, *Preaching Christ From The Old Testament: A Contemporary Hermeneutical Method* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999). Eugene L. Lowry, *The Homiletical Plot: Expanded Edition: The Sermon as Narrative Art Form* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001). Mark Ellingsen, *The Integrity of Biblical Narrative: Story in Theology and Proclamation* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1990). John C. Holbert, *Preaching Old Testament: Proclamation and Narrative in the Hebrew Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991). Roger Standing, *Finding the Plot: Preaching in Narrative Style* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2004). Austin B. Tucker, *The Preacher As Storyteller: The Power of Narrative in the Pulpit* (Nashville: B&H Publishing, 2008). Dale Ralph Davis, *The Word Became Fresh: How To Preach from Old Testament Narrative Texts* (Fearn, Ross-shire:Mentor, 2006).

9. Fred B. Craddock, *As One Without Authority* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2001), 113.

and style. What if we shaped our sermon around the story's own structure and theme(s), rather than forcing it to fit our argument? What if we copied its style – tragic or comic, hard-hitting or gentle? That would really be Biblical preaching. It would be wholistic preaching, reaching hearts and minds.

How then can a preacher exegete an OT narrative[10] and then render it for a contemporary audience? We will discuss strategies in reading and preaching 1 Samuel 25.

1. Choose your passage

In personal devotions, I am drawn to the story of David wanting to kill Nabal (1 Sam 25). I admire Abigail's gentle strength and conflict management skills, persuading David to leave vengeance to God. After some pastoral experiences sorting out drunken fights (in a worship band, of all places), Nabal's drinking seemed very relevant.

I notice this chapter is part of a triple-story,[11] where David is thrice tempted to kill: first Saul as he relieves himself (ch 24), then Nabal the rich fool, then the sleeping Saul (ch 26). Each time he struggles but ultimately resists temptation, and it seems David is meant to learn a lesson about using power responsibly. Reading on into the wider context of Samuel, abuse of power is the very sin that will kill Uriah and seriously damage David's family and kingdom (2 Sam 11 ff.). Preaching three chapters would be too much, so I will relate 1 Samuel 25 and briefly mention the connections. I would largely avoid 25:40–44 because polygamy raises a separate issue.

Often the text signals its divisions using changes in incident, location, subject, genre or speaker.

This sermon could stand alone, or could be part of a series on the life of David. I find a series on a biblical epic (David, Moses, Joseph, Esther) grip an audience for a number of weeks in church, or a number of lessons in class, and can help people grasp the broader theology of a book in a systematic way. Starting each week with a brief review of what has happened previously in the plot, as TV serials do, not only helps orient new listeners but reminds regulars of the key points. My first attempt at a serial covered too much biblical text each time because I worried I would not get enough material, but in fact there was so much good material that I preached long, felt rushed, and struggled to fit in enough application. Now I take a smaller part of the story and trust it to generate enough events and ideas. I find that attenders who connect with the first sermon or two will keep coming out of curiosity, and may invite friends, which helps build church attendance.

10. Exegesis of narrative uses similar principles to exegesis generally. See for example Craig C. Broyles, *Interpreting the Old Testament: A Guide for Exegesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001).

11. Cf. Cynthia Edenburg, "How (Not) To Murder a King: Variations on a Theme in 1 Sam 24; 26." *SJOT* 12.1 (1998) 64–85.

2. Translate (or read versions)

This takes time. I am tempted to apologize for that, but teaching Scripture is central to the minister's job description (Acts 6:4; 2 Tim 4:1–5; Mal 2:5–7), and poring over Biblical details can help us listen carefully to God, which is personally transforming. Take all the time you can.

You are not trying to outdo the specialists who produce versions, but translating (or reading commentaries based on the original language) makes you slow down and notice textual details. For example, look up nabal in a concordance and you will grin: "foolish," especially someone with "no perception of ethical and religious claims . . . , disgraceful." A nebel is a "bladder, skin-bottle, skin of wine," which suggests Nabal is characterized by his bladder – a serious drinker.[12] A mother would hardly choose this name, so perhaps he earned it. When Abigail loads two fat nebel wine-bladders (25:18), we smirk at her husband's expense.

The writer uses the name Nabal/ Bladder in a motif about wine and urination which may sound crude, but which creates memorable theology. David twice angrily speaks of planning to kill "anyone who urinates on the wall" (my translation). This is evident in the KJV, which fearlessly translates "any that pisseth against the wall" (25:22, 34). That was polite English in 1611, though it may sound like coarse slang today, and it accurately translates the Hebrew word shathan ("urinate"). The NIV translates as "male," which is more polite but misses the wordplay: David is talking about men, but his expression makes them sound like dogs. I just give the literal translation in passing and ask the audience to remember it for later, often seeing curious looks on their faces. It becomes important at the end of the narrative when God eventually acts in judgment on Nabal exactly when the wine is going out of Nabal /Bladder (25:37), as he urinates the morning after his drunken party. This is dark comedy and memorable poetic justice, because it is exactly what David wanted to do, but with one huge difference: God kills only the guilty, while David was planning to kill all the men, not considering innocent people like the servant who spoke up for him (25:14–17). David later admits his vengeance would have caused evil, as Abigail had already seen (25:39, 28). Human vengeance is flawed. We are self-serving and biased in our judgments, and even our best smart missiles are not smart enough to spare the innocent. Yet God's justice is pure in motivation, all-seeing, and perfectly targeted. Vengeance is his and – make no mistake – he will repay (Rom 12:19). Tell that to those who suffer injustice: perfect justice is on its way. And for the church, solid judgment theology hopefully makes us less judgmental ourselves: God is the judge. (This too is where psalms of lament and imprecation are so useful to believers in expressing our rage and enabling us to wait patiently for God's action.)

This is not the only OT story with adult themes, and certainly not the most

12. Brown Driver Briggs Lexicon, pp. 614–5. Others have recognized this: e.g., Peter J. Leithart, "Nabal and his wine," *JBL* 120/3 (2001) 525–527; Robert P. Gordon, "David's Rise and Saul's Demise: Narrative Analogy in 1 Samuel 24–26," *Tyndale Bulletin* 32 (1980), 37–64.

confronting. Preachers could gloss over these textual details, but if we believe all Scripture is inspired and useful (2 Tim 3:16–17), then a Spirit-led writer chose wordplay about urination to make a striking theological point about justice. In fact God later speaks of killing all who urinate on the wall (1 Kgs 14:10; 21:21; 2 Kgs 9:8),[13] wiping out entire royal houses in a way that recollects Nabal. We can hardly censor Scripture, as though we have a higher morality. Some Biblical scenes and expressions are meant to shock: Nabal's death scene shows sin paying its wages. If that startles my apathy, I should be grateful. If it shows me the horrible death I deserve as a sinner, and makes me appreciate Christ taking that death for me, I should be eternally grateful. Of course, preachers need to be careful that our expressions do not cause unnecessary offence in our hearers' culture. You might simply stick with the text and say this happened "while the wine was coming out of Nabal / the bladder," leaving adults to understand the picture and children to miss it. Yet we can trust this inspired literature to speak powerfully and frankly to people's lives today. Our hearers do not live in a nice polite world but in the real world, and Scripture meets them there.

If you are not confident in Biblical languages, there are good commentaries that offer these textual details, whether in print or software packages. Find a theological library or, if you are outside a city, ask if there is a shelf of commentaries in a large church near you. As a gift to yourself and your hearers, why not spend a morning there every week with your phone off.

3. Consider text critical questions

To which desert did David move: Paran (1 Samuel 25:1, KJV) or Maon (NIV)? Here the KJV follows the Hebrew Masoretic Text, and the NIV follows some Greek Septuagint manuscripts. The Hebrew usually preserves the better reading, but each case must be assessed on internal and external evidence. Maps show Maon close to Carmel, where Nabal's property was (25:2), while the Desert of Paran is some 300 km away, so the Greek translators probably thought Maon made more sense. Yet Samuel is dead (25:1), and no longer guiding David or restraining Saul, so David the constant fugitive might well run far south into a formidable desert to escape. Paran makes most sense here. Text criticism can feel threatening to Bible believers, but it need not be so.[14]

4. Muse and meditate

Read the story twenty times across a few days. Tell it to your children (where

13. KJV and Hebrew. Many versions read "male." Zimri killed a drunken king and his men in 1 Kings 16:8–11.

14. One helpful introduction is Ellis R. Brotzman, *Old Testament Textual Criticism. A Practical Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1994).

age-appropriate) and see if parts bore or confuse them. Ask them to imagine themselves as different characters, and how they feel. Value their questions.

To help you visualize it, break it into scenes like in a film:

- The death of Samuel (25:1a)
- The Funeral (25:1a)
- David runs (25:1b)
- General description of Nabal, Abigail (25:2–3). Not really a scene but an exposition.
- David briefs his men on what to say (25:4–8)
- Nabal abuses David's men (25:9–11)
- The men arrive and report to David, who sends 400 armed men straight back (25:12–13).
- Back at the farm with Abigail (25:14–19)
- On a mountain road, Abigail meets David (25:20)
- Flashback to David's angry comment (25:21–22)
- On the mountain road, they speak (25:23–35)
- At Nabal's farm: party night (25:36)
- At Nabal's farm: the morning after (25:37)

. . . and so on.

To kick-start your creativity, try a creative writing exercise sometimes called "Six Senses." Read each verse and note down each character's experience using six categories: See, Hear, Smell, Touch, Taste, and Emotion. This will not work on every verse, and you will not use everything you jot down, but it can generate sensory ideas that keep your audience virtually experiencing the story through different learning styles. Work hardest on visuals, because visual learners are most common today. Word pictures, and the theology they express, are long remembered.

Be frank about what is in the text and what details you have reconstructed. You can say, "I imagine . . ."

These exercises take time and are hard at first, but you are training yourself to meditate on Scripture (Psalm 1:2) and building your imagination.

5. Preach one big theme

This story mentions anger, alcohol, marriage, workplace politics, leadership, insults, revenge, power, violence, grace, judgment, kingship, conflict resolution – and probably more I have not yet seen. One message could not raise all these points without becoming a mini-series, so a preacher could use their knowledge

of the hearers to choose one theme to emphasize. Yet if we listen closely, stories reveal their primary theme. One way is through keywords. In Hebrew we find the words ra' and ra'ah ("evil") appearing seven times in this story. The narrator tells us that Nabal is ra' in his dealings with people (v.3). The servant tells Abigail that ra' is hanging over Nabal and his whole household (v.17) because of his actions. The servant expects that evil will always boomerang back onto the evil person, reflecting his view that the universe is basically moral, and yet he worries that one person's evil choices can bring evil consequences for others ("his whole household"). David seems to share this moral worldview, because he complains that life is unfair as his kindness to Nabal is paid back with ra'ah (v.21). Most people like to believe that "Justice prevails," even if they do not choose to believe in a God and do not have a mechanism by which justice can prevail. Many people expect a movie or novel to resolve happily for the "good" person (or the one we like), even though this would not be guaranteed at all in a godless universe, where the fittest (not the most moral) survive and thrive. Even believers find it a struggle to believe in justice when the race is not always to the swift nor bread to the wise, but time and chance happen to all (Eccl 9:11). Justice can seem terribly slow, and even believers scream, "How long . . . ?"[15] Why do so many people expect justice? Could a need for justice and God be wired into the human mind? Yet that same expectation, when disappointed, is what causes many people to doubt the existence of a just and kind God. The David story has not yet finished and will narratively demonstrate that, in this case at least, God makes life fair eventually. Abigail acknowledges that "someone" (Saul!) wants to do ra'ah to David (v.26), but challenges David not to do ra'ah himself (v.28) because God will act for him. This expresses the view that the universe is temporarily unjust, but justice will one day come. David chooses to believe this and to act accordingly, and finally God does act in justice. David's closing comment credits God for keeping him back from the ra'ah he intended to do, and for bringing Nabal's own ra'ah down on Nabal (v.39). Thus the narrative claims that God's justice may take time, but it is very effective. But this is not just cold karma. One can also hear the gospel in David's comment on the story: the wages of ra'ah are death, but forgiving grace and sanctifying grace are God's free gifts to the undeserving who simply trust Him. Seeing David's realization of this is more powerful than an abstract argument about justice and grace.

Some postmodern "reader response" theories suggest that a story can mean almost anything a reader may see in it. While there is scope for Scripture to speak to many situations, some interpretations do not stand up to a close reading of the text, and often the writer leaves a brief thematic statement near the beginning (cf. Gen 22:1) or end, or both (Judges 19:1; 21:25), or repeated throughout. Brevity is the key here: the Bible writers usually resist long moralizing speeches, showing great economy and restraint. As a young preacher, I made the mistake of trying to deliver a propositional homily at the end of a children's story – but the children

15. Cf. Ps 6:3; 13:1–2; 35:17; 62:3; 74:9–10; 79:5; 80:4; 82:2; 89:46; 90:13; 94:3–4; Is 6:11; Jer 12:2; Dan 8:13; 12:6; Hab 1:2; 2:6; Rev 6:10.

knew the action was over and dry moralism was coming. As soon as I said, "And so, girls and boys . . . ," they began wriggling and looking out the window. A wiser policy is to embed the main message in the story itself or state it briefly in a question early in the narrative, or in the mouth of a character while the action is still live, as Bible stories often do. Some story-tellers can simply tell a story almost without any explanatory comment, and trust it to convey its themes. This is a skill beyond most of us, but we can at least work on making our thematic summaries crisp and clear signposts in just a few well-chosen words.

It can be tempting to preach all the themes of a story, but this will confuse most audiences. Another temptation for the well-researched preacher is to get lost in the details of the text and try to express every detail that is there. To maintain a clear focus, force yourself to write the sermon's aim and target audience in one sentence. For example: "For people who doubt God because of pain and evil, to convince them that He is working on a solution and is worth trusting." You may be tempted to add: "And give them a strategy on personal vengeance. And touch on good marital communication, avoiding drunkenness, non-violence, and . . ." Resist this temptation!

If God's grace is not the major theme in a story, look again. Abigail's opening line is "Let the 'awon (guilt, punishment, iniquity) be on me" (25:24). Taking blame, giving to appease anger, and reconciling – does that attitude remind you of Anyone? David's statement, even though it was made some ten centuries before the ultimate expression of God's justice and mercy at the cross of Calvary, still reveals the same God of justice and grace. Even Nabal presumably had years of grace from Abigail and from God. Preaching has often focused too hard on moralizing from biblical stories.[16] Of course morality is part of their message, but pushing morals without a strong gospel framework amounts to legalism. The greater story is what God is doing in his gracious plans for us.

6. In delivery, let the plot work

Traditional preaching advice includes the saying, "Tell 'em what you're gonna tell 'em. Tell 'em. Then tell 'em what you've told 'em." This is deductive, but a narrative works by creating curiosity. What will happen? How? Why? And so stating the conclusion at the beginning can work like starting a joke with the punch-line[17] or reading a novel beginning with its last page. Build curiosity as much as possible early on. Repetition is the mother of learning, but it must be done artfully.

Kissling has argued that the sermon's structure, whether inductive or deductive, should simply follow the order of the story and allow "the arc of tension in the narrative to maintain interest and flow."[18] So if the writer does not at first

16. See Stephen D. Mathewson, *The Art of Preaching Old Testament Narrative* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 99.

17. Craddock, *Without Authority,* 52.

18. Paul J. Kissling, "Preaching Narrative: Characters," in Grenville J. R. Kent, Paul J.

reveal Jonah's real motives for not wanting to go to Nineveh, but keeps us guessing until Jonah 4:2, then this is likely to have some dramatic and theological reason. A preacher who reveals this too early can be like someone who tells you the ending of a movie you are about to watch. An audience needs some early introduction to the general topic, but the introduction should not give away all the conclusions or there is nothing left to wonder about. I find a question works well.

Bible stories manage to include a lot of other types of literature within them – proverbs, laws, songs, prophetic messages, letters, explanatory comments – and similarly the narrative sermon can include brief thoughts about textual details or background information, "questions raised by the biblical text and life, quotes from authorities . . . , critical analysis,"[19] and other helpful side comments as the narrative rolls. This requires a light touch because an overloaded narrative becomes boring. A story is not an exegetical lecture or an exhaustive commentary, so the skills required include those of a novelist in presenting an enthralling narrative that embodies its themes.

A lot of explaining can be done narratively. For example, Mathewson[20] shows that preachers could insert a historical lecture on child sacrifice in Canaanite religions, or could depict a brief imagined incident of child sacrifice in the background while telling a bible story. This is a fine example of the adage, "Show. Don't tell." As an old boxer told me, "One in the eye is worth two in the ear."

I am constantly surprised at how little church audiences know of Bible stories, especially from the OT, and even those who know what happens can still be interested in details of how and why, and details of background research you bring to the story can offer them fresh insights.

It is wise to be careful about imposing grids onto a narrative. For example, the "Lowry loop" has done preachers a favor in making us aware of plot movements and other elements in redemptive stories, but it may not fit all biblical stories, particularly those where redemption does not happen, for example Judges 19–21. Turner summarizes one helpful way of analyzing the elements of plots: the Initial Situation (life at the beginning of the story), the Complication (the event that changes things), the Transforming Action (which is a response to the Complication), the Resolution and Final Situation.[21] Shorter stories may not explicitly present all those elements (cf. Judges 3:31), and larger stories may repeat Complications and Transforming Actions a few times before coming to resolution, but overall this is a useful way to think about stories. Beyond any grids, it is important to look at what is really there.

Kissling and Laurence A. Turner, *Reclaiming the Old Testament for Christian Preaching* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2010), 30–46:41.

19. Ronald J. Allen, "Theology Undergirding Narrative Preaching," in Graves and Schlafer (eds), *Narrative Preaching*, 27–40:28.

20. Mathewson, *Narrative Preaching,* 142–143.

21. Laurence A. Turner, "Preaching narrative: Plot," in Kent, Kissling and Turner, *Reclaiming,* 13–29:16.

7. Help listeners relate to the characters

People relate to other people. Pastoral training can help us understand Bible characters, yet we should avoid the trend of importing large amounts of popular psychological theory and speculating about what characters "must have felt," and instead follow the agenda of the text. Narratives reveal character in basic ways:

- What people do
- What they say (to others and to themselves)
- Their appearance, costume, props, possessions and the way they move
- Other characters' comments about them
- Most authoritatively of all, the narrator's comments about them.

Watch introductions closely. In 1 Samuel 25:2, we meet "a certain man" and hear about his properties and wealth (the Hebrew word can also mean greatness, which makes us wonder for a while). Impressive! But then the narrator undercuts our first impression by using the down-putting name Nabal (Fool/ Bladder). What? Did we hear correctly? Then we hear his wife's name ('my father's delight'), and are told how wise and beautiful she is. Surely her husband must be a good man? But then the narrator resolves our confusion by bluntly telling us Nabal was mean and ra' (evil), even though descended from the great Caleb. Now we are wondering. Why did she marry him? Was it arranged? Or was he once a promising young man? If so, what changed him? Alcohol abuse? Arrogance? We can speculate about the reasons, but the writer leaves some matters without comment, perhaps to pique our curiosity.

Nabal's only speech begins by personally demeaning David as a nobody, a runaway slave. He uses words for "I," "me" and "mine" a self-absorbed eight times in the Hebrew of 15:11, and the KJV translates this while the NIV smoothes away some of the repetition, probably for contemporary tastes. Nabal's own servant describes his tone as shrieking (25:14).

Watch for character changes, because they usually reveal a theme. David begins speaking of shalom, (25:6, three times), then reacts violently. When Abigail reorients him to God, he again speaks of shalom (25:35).[22]

After Abigail's speech, David tells her, "I have lifted up your head" (25:35, my translation[23]). This expression is something a king would say. People bow to ask favours, and a king's positive answer sends them out with head held high. David elsewhere uses a similar expression of Yahweh, his king (Psalm 3:4 (3:3 English)). Nabal may see him as a runaway slave, but Abigail reminds him he is in fact God's chosen messiah (25:28), and in this expression David reveals that he has decided to live up to his calling. I would not let this opportunity pass without remembering

22. Compare his comments in Psalm 120:6–7.
23. It is literally lifting her face, but face-lifting has other connotations today.

that the gospel makes royalty of any believer (1 Pet 2:9; Rev 1:6; 5:10) and asks us to live up to that high calling, especially in difficult life circumstances.

Some listeners will connect most with David in his struggles. Some will identify with Abigail's marriage and wish they had her wisdom. Some may even see Nabal-like trends in themselves and be led to repentance. Above all one hopes they will learn from these characters about God, and relate directly to the character of God. This then is lived truth, embodied doctrine, word made flesh.

8. Show the relevance for real people

Exegesis asks what the story meant, but application asks what it means here and now. To do that, we preachers can ask ourselves:

- What general principles can we take from this specific case?
- What is cultural, and what is timeless?
- In this passage, what does God offer to do for me? How does He ask me to respond?
- Does the theme easily make sense to my hearers, or do they need persuasion? Does it surprise or challenge mainstream culture?
- Has this truth reached my own heart yet? My own lifestyle?

We also need to study our listeners. I most admire preachers who love skeptics and doubters, and who constantly do persuasive evangelism. They tell me that they make time to socialize widely – not just with believers, but being a friend of sinners – so that their sermons can be in conversation with experiences and questions of people not currently in church. This kind of preaching avoids cozy assumptions and builds a rugged faith for the real world.

May God help us see how fascinating and surprising and refreshing the Biblical literature is, and help audiences experience that in messages full of grace and truth.

Sample Sermon Outline:

Title: The Best Kind of Revenge

Optional Scripture reading: Romans 12:17–21. This is optional because OT stories can stand alone rather than just being illustrations of NT propositions, and yet this Pauline passage could almost have been written by Abigail.

Introduction A:

Have you ever suffered injustice? (Briefly describe someone else's recent story of this.) It hurts and offends us, and also prompts fair questions, like, "How can there be a kind, just God when the world has so much injustice and evil?" I find that question – often called "the problem of evil" – is the most common reason for people who don't believe in God. Can I show you a Bible story that raises that question?

OR: Introduction B:

Recently I broke a finger in a football game. As the physical therapist treated it, she told me about all the beautifully designed mechanisms in the human hand which I had damaged. I said, "Designed?" She didn't know I was a Christian minister, but she said, "Well, some people find that such intricate machinery in nature suggests there is a higher power." Immediately the back patient in the next bed groaned out his view, "Yes, but the existence of pain and evil in the world makes people think there couldn't be a God." We all had a fascinating discussion about that, and he's onto something: evil in the world is perhaps the major blocker to faith in God. Can I tell you a Bible story that raises that question?

You will do better than the above if you know your audience and what will provoke their curiosity.

Body: Tell the story with the central theme in mind, embedding brief theological reflections (as above) in amongst the narrative action. I usually plan which theological comments I want to make, and where in the narrative I will do this. I don't usually use notes, but if I am preaching a sermon for the first time I may pencil some key words in the margin of my Bible. For example, beside Abigail's speech I will write words like "Moral universe?" "Messiah's reign," or, beside Nabal's speech, "Sin = Selfishness."

Conclusion: God's judgment and the gospel will eventually answer the question of suffering and evil brilliantly. More specifically,

- God sees the problem, and took ra' (evil) and 'awon (guilt) onto Himself at the cross.
- God's justice may take time but will be perfect, finally destroying evil and those who stubbornly cherish it (Nabal) – yet showing grace to faulty people who are open to Him (David).
- One day earth will be as God intended. David will have a sure dynasty, as Abigail foresaw (1 Samuel 25:28), and the Messiah will rule forever. When human leaders disappoint (as David's polygamy will do a few verses later) we can still hope in David's perfect Son. Blind people can look forward to that (briefly recounting Matt 20:30–34). You and I can visualize his kingdom. Dare to hope. Dare to live like it's true.
- Major invitation: You can believe in a good God. Trust him. Repent and believe the good news.
- Minor invitation: If all this is true, a sensible response would be to hand your vengeance over to God. Trust his justice and grace. Choose to overcome evil with good (like Abigail). This point could be applied with a narrative of a person who did that.

Select Bibliography

For a well-researched and creative guide to theory and practice, see:

Stephen D. Matthewson, *The Art of Preaching Old Testament Narrative* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002).

For theory on reading biblical narrative, see:

Jean Louis Ska, *Our Fathers Have Told Us: Introduction to the Analysis of Hebrew Narratives* (Roma: Editrice Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 1990).

Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (USA: Basic Books, 1981).

For examples of reading Samuel, see narrative-aware scholars like:

Robert Alter, *The David Story* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co, 1999).

David Toshio Tsumura, *The First Book of Samuel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007).

David G. Firth, *1 & 2 Samuel* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2009).