

Interpreting Historical Books, III

We are talking about how to do exegesis, how to draw the meaning from biblical texts. We have discussed submitting the mind and heart to God as the first step, choosing a passage, and establishing the text—that is, coming to some understanding of what the original text is in so far as we are able. Then we began talking about reading the text literarily. We talked about first looking at general principles of narrative: plot, characterization, and point of view. Then we talked second about looking at special literary devices that are particularly characteristic of biblical narrative.

The main characteristics of biblical narrative that I mentioned are scenic, succinct, and subtle. The Bible is scenic in its depiction—it sets itself out as scenes of a play. It is succinct; it says things in a few, short words. And it communicates its messages sometimes quite boldly and explicitly, but sometimes subtly and implicitly. We need to be alerted to those potentially subtle messages and so we look for clues in the text. What are weighted words and phrases? We discussed in the previous lecture that an author can add weight to a word, phrase, or verse by elevating the diction, shifting from prose to poetry. You may notice when you are listening to a good sermon that at a certain point the preacher may begin to wax eloquent when he wants to emphasize and drive home his main message. As a good preacher he may have spent some time crafting just how he wants to say that. Subsequently it will often ring in our ears as poetry. We do the same thing even in everyday conversation. When something is important we will elevate the diction and say it in a carefully crafted way. The same thing happens in biblical text. So be careful when you come across poetry in the midst of prose. Do not believe the commentaries that tell it must therefore be from a secondary source since it is written in another style. Rather, it may be doubly important because of the change in style.

Another way that a particular line, phrase, or word may be emphasized is simply through repetition. We in the West do not very much like repetition, finding it boring and redundant. But in the biblical narratives that were written to be read and heard, repetition is sometimes used to draw our attention back to something that has already been said. This is a similar method to how a film will sometimes have a flashback, a replay of a scene. Repetition in the biblical narratives is often meant to help us recall something that happened earlier and draw our minds back to that. It is a kind of flashback. Other times we have simple repetition of basically the same thing being said by different characters and the narrator. We are meant to listen to how each character says this thing and to compare and contrast what is being said. Sometimes the examples are very obvious. In 1 Samuel 15 God communicates to Samuel that Saul has not carried out his instructions. Samuel goes to meet Saul, who tells him, “I have carried out God’s instructions.” Obviously we have a difference in opinion here. The question is, whose opinion counts? God has a different assessment of what Saul has been doing. That is a very simple example but there are many, many examples of repetition. You will want to watch for the sometimes very subtle variation that may carry much meaning. Robert Alter in his very interesting and provocative book, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, describes the function of repetition and the function of repetition with variation. We want to be watching for that kind of thing.

Also, in so far as we can observe it we want to be watching for word play. That is another way in which attention is drawn to a particular word or two and thus weight is added to those words. We also have inter-textual allusions where one text alludes to another text. That may be suggestive of a particularly significant phrase. One example that intrigues me is Joshua 10:21. I need to set the context for you, because the context is very important for understanding what a particular section within that context means. This is the story of the defense of the city of Gibeon by Joshua. Chapter 9 recounted the Gibeonite deception where the citizens of Gibeon came out, having disguised themselves in such a way

as to look like they had been journeying and convinced the Israelites that they were from a far country. We read in 9:14 that “the men of Israel sampled their provisions but did not inquire of the LORD.” There is the crucial mistake that they made. Then they were fooled by the Gibeonites into making a covenant with them, even though the Gibeonites were Canaanites. They lived in the land of Canaan, and the Israelites had been ordered to “drive out the Canaanites, because if they remain in your midst they will become thorns in your side, they will test you, they will bring you down.” The Canaanites were to be driven out because their iniquity was great.

That is the context. A covenant has been made between Israel and Gibeon. Gibeon then suddenly finds itself in military danger and the Israelites have to go out to defend a Canaanite city rather than attack it. They defend the city successfully. In 10:20-21 it says, “So Joshua and the Israelites destroyed them completely—almost to a man—but the few who were left reached their fortified cities. The whole army then returned safely to Joshua in the camp at Makkedah, and no one uttered a word against the Israelites.” Because I understand that biblical narrative tends to be succinct and not add extraneous details, I wonder what the significance of this note might be: “and no one uttered a word against the Israelites.” So I did a search in a concordance to see if that phrase occurs elsewhere. The same phrase, translated quite differently, occurs in Exodus 11:7. This is the only other place this phrase occurs. I am very tentative about this, but it intrigues me as a little detail that may carry much meaning. Exodus 11:7, at the end of the account of the plagues on Egypt, says, “But among the Israelites not a dog will bark at any man or animal.” Strangely enough, the same phrase, “no one uttered a word,” is translated here, “not a dog will bark...” The word “dog” is a difference in the two phrases. Literally in the Hebrew it says in Joshua, “no one sharpened his tongue...” Likewise here in Exodus it says, “not a dog sharpened its tongue...” Then Exodus 11:8 goes on to say, “Then you will know that the LORD makes a distinction between Egypt and Israel.” I wonder if this is a rather sophisticated and ironic allusion. The author may have put that detail in to remind those aware of Israel’s history of this other event. They might think, “That is a strange way to say that... oh, I remember another time that was said, in the account of the plagues where it says, ‘Then you will know that the LORD makes a distinction between Egypt and Israel.’ And here, because we did not inquire of the LORD, we are already blurring that distinction, though we are already in the Promised Land. We are out fighting battles to defend the Canaanites rather than to drive them out.”

Now that example may not be correct; it is something that I have only been thinking about for a short time. But that is the kind of thing that we need to be alerted to. Sometimes these kinds of allusions are in the text. In various different ways the biblical narratives are distinct in some of the narrative techniques and devices they use: repetition, word play, inter-textual allusion, and elevated diction. We want to be aware of and looking for these kinds of things.

In terms of reading the text literarily, we also want to look for significant words and phrases. This is what we would call lexical and grammatical analysis. We want to look for and note words or phrases that are repeated or otherwise emphasized. You may want to do a word study on those words by consulting a Bible dictionary or a concordance to see where else that word occurs and what it signifies in those other contexts. That can enrich your understanding of a word in this particular context. Look for significant words and phrases. Now, you may wonder how you will know if it is significant. There is no easy answer. Exegesis is both an art and a science. There are certain principles we apply, but there is also some intuition involved. The better trained you become in observing things the better you will become at intuiting that something may be significant. Then you pursue a word to see if it is truly significant. The simple recurrence of a word may be an indication that it is a key word we should study. It may carry some thematic significance.

The next thing is to look for structure. Some of you may be aware of an issue in literary studies called structuralism, but that is not what I am talking about. I am talking about structural analysis. This can be as simple as looking for the outline of a particular passage. How does the discourse progress? This may be more similar to discourse analysis than structuralism as defined by literary criticism. To give you an example of how I think structure can be important, let us look at the beginning of 1 Samuel. In chapter 1 there is the introduction of Hannah and her problem: childlessness and the provocations she was getting from Peninnah because she had children and Hannah had none.

In chapter 1 we hear of how God heard Hannah's prayer; she had a son, and she dedicated him to the LORD. Eli appears in chapter 1. Then in chapter 2 the focus shifts suddenly off of Hannah and her son Samuel and onto the sons of Eli. In 2:12 we learn that "Eli's sons were wicked men; they had no regard for the LORD." The focus stays on the abuses of Eli's sons for a while. Then we come to 2:17, which kind of sums it up: "This sin of the young men was very great in the LORD's sight, for they were treating the LORD's offering with contempt." And in verse 18 Samuel is back: "But Samuel was ministering before the LORD—a boy wearing a linen ephod." The same word in Hebrew is used for Eli's sons and for Samuel, which in the NIV is translated once as "young men" and once as "boy," but it is the same word. There is a comparison and contrast being established between Eli's sons, who are wicked, and Samuel, who is serving before the Lord. The focus stays on Samuel until verse 21. Then in verse 22 the focus shifts to Eli: "Now Eli, who was very old, heard about everything his sons were doing to all Israel..." He has to hear—he is not being very observant in his dim-sighted state, even to what his sons are doing. The focus continues on Eli, who goes and rebukes his sons in verses 23-25a. But it says in verse 25b that "His sons, however, did not listen to their father's rebuke, for it was the LORD's will to put them to death." That is a little bit of heavy theology there, something about the sovereignty of God and His right of control over His creatures. They did not listen because it pleased God to put them to death. In other words, sometimes God punishes repetitive, unrepentant sin with the inability to do otherwise. The idea that I will wait to be converted on my deathbed is a very risky proposition. God softens our hearts and opens our eyes. The focus is back on Samuel in verse 26, "And the boy Samuel continued to grow in stature and in favor with the LORD and with men." Then we are back to Eli in verse 27. It continues this way with the focus shifting back and forth. This is a structural aspect of the text that lets us know that the narrator is intending to develop a contrast between Eli and his sons and Samuel. The narrator wants us to see that contrast so that we can discern why it is that God rejects Eli and his sons, and what it is in Samuel that is characteristic of what God is looking for in His servants. By noticing the way these characters are interwoven we learn something about the message of the text.

It is very important as you study a text to outline it. That will help you see what the structure is—what the discourse is. Another thing you want to look for is special forms. This is what we refer to as form criticism. Form criticism has something of a bad reputation, and for good reason. Form criticism is sometimes abusive of biblical texts. The potential difficulty with form criticism is that if we get an idea of ideal forms into which biblical texts ought to fit, we may seek to force the text into those forms rather than seeking to discover the particular form of this particular text. We need to look at the particularity and not seek to force texts to fit into some ideal structure. For example, in the story of Eli we have what is called a prophetic-judgment speech. That is a formal description, a prophetic-judgment speech. If you have ever had to chastise one of your children, the form of this type of speech will probably seem quite logical. The two major components are accusation and announcement of judgment. If I have heard it once I have heard it a thousand times from my dad. I had a midnight curfew when I was a teenager. I would come in at ten minutes after the hour, saying, "I do not know, Dad. There must be something wrong with my watch..." He would say, "Why were you late? You are supposed to home by midnight and it is ten minutes after. Why are you late? Why did you not call?" Now, he was not asking for information. That was an accusation. Those are what we call accusing questions. Very often in the Bible

the question is, “What have you done?” or “Why have you done that?” Often a prophetic-judgment speech begins with some description of the benevolence of God to His people. In Samuel’s speech to Eli God begins by saying in 2:27-29: “Did I not clearly reveal myself to your father’s house when they were in Egypt under Pharaoh? I chose your father out of all the tribes of Israel to be my priest. [...] I also gave your father’s house all the offerings made with fire by the Israelites. Why do you scorn my sacrifice and offering that I prescribed for my dwelling?”

My father would say, “We have given you a reasonable curfew. Midnight is a generous curfew. So why are you late?” The same sort of thing happens in judgment speeches. God has been good to you, so why have you done that? Then there comes the announcement of judgment: because you have done that, therefore this is what will happen to you. In this part of the speech there is often what is called a correspondence motif: here is the offense, here is the judgment. The judgment matches the offense. Later it is said to Saul, “Because you have rejected the word of the Lord, so the Lord has rejected you from being king.” All this is to show that the judgment is fair, right, and good. That is the basic form of a judgment speech. I think knowing that this is typical, that this is the way a rebuke and judgment is often issued, helps us to understand this speech to Eli.

Understanding general forms helps us even more in chapter 10 of 1 Samuel. In 10:17 Samuel gathers the people together to elect a king, to see who it is that God will choose. The point is, Samuel has already anointed Saul and given Saul a task. Samuel has given Saul a charge that he has hesitated to even embark upon. In my view, it is because Saul has done nothing to distinguish himself, to bring himself to public attention, that Samuel finds it necessary to convene an assembly and conduct a lot casting. Lot casting was typically used to find out who the criminal was. Many commentators have noted that this begins like a judgment speech. It is as if Samuel is mad about something, that Saul is guilty of something. When we study 1 Samuel specifically I will explain more of what I think Saul was guilty of and why I believe Samuel’s speech here does begin like a judgment speech. The accusation is there, but then where you would normally have the announcement of judgment Samuel says, “Okay, let us cast lots.” The lots fall on Saul. Thus Saul is, in a sense, given to the people as a judgment.

The reason I go into all this is because I think there is a valid use of form criticism, even though it is something that has been misused by critics in the past and thus is suspect. We need to be careful how we use something like this. But we also need to recognize that there is some validity to it. We can use it in our study as long as we continue to embrace a proper set of presuppositions about the text. We should reject the philosophical underpinnings that sometimes come along with form criticism.

The next thing we need to look for is evidence of composition. How has the text come to be? This is not an absolutely necessary step. But sometimes we find ourselves dealing with texts that are quite perplexing. We will later have a chance to look at the Davidic promises. God makes an astonishing promise to King David in 2 Samuel 7. Comparing that to 1 Chronicles 17 we see that those two events are described in somewhat different ways. Even the words of God to David are described in different ways. In that instance it is important for us to realize that the chronicler is well aware of the Samuel text. It is clear as we read Chronicles that he is making use of source material. He is using Samuel and Kings and mentions or alludes to other sources at his disposal: the writings of Samuel the seer, Gad the prophet, and Ido the prophet. He mentions other sources at his disposal and he is using these in the writing of his rather homiletical history of Israel. I believe that he presupposed that his hearers were aware of his sources. Therefore when he takes some liberties with the exact wording of 2 Samuel 7, for example, he is drawing out what is only implicit in 2 Samuel 7 and making it explicit, in my view. He is putting it in God’s mouth, making it explicit. I believe that is acceptable because he and his readers are aware of the other source. It is not as if he was twisting the facts or anything like that. He was drawing

out something that was implicit in those earlier words and making it more explicit to his hearers. We will have to look at the text in detail for you to feel at all comfortable with that. I know it is a perplexing idea, but it is there in the text and so we need to assess it in one way or another.

We look for the way in which sources have been used and the way in which the writer had redacted those sources. I know that this is again a dangerous issue because redaction criticism has been grossly abused by some unbelieving or liberal critics. But I am talking about what we find in the text, a kind of construction of the narrative in order to make the chronicler's point to his audience. This is similar to what a preacher might do. A preacher is, in a sense, a redactor of the text. He reads it, the congregation hears it, and then he begins to elaborate. He begins to draw out the implications of the text. That is the sort of redaction that I mean.

We also need to look for the contextual significance of whatever it is we are reading. We have talked about the necessity of reading the broader context. This is where we get into biblical-theological analysis, or what is sometimes called canonical criticism. We want to explore the text's significance in the story of which it is a part. We want to look more broadly and ask how this functions in the broader story. Take, for instance, Judges 19. This is the horrific story of that Levite whose concubine leaves him and runs home to her father. The Levite goes south to Bethlehem to regain his concubine and there the father-in-law engages him in four days of hospitality. Hospitality is a good thing, but it is going on too long and each day the Levite wants to leave. But the father-in-law cajoles him, saying, "No, no, please stay a few more days. Let us eat and drink again. Enjoy yourself, rest over the night and then go in the morning." On the morning of the fifth day the Levite says, "I really must leave." But the father-in-law convinces him to stay and eat. So it is late on the fifth day before the Levite is able to leave with his concubine. They only get as far as Jebus, which is Jerusalem, when nightfall begins to encroach on them. The Levite's servant says, "We must find lodging. We do not want to be out on the road after dark. Let us go into Jebus." The Levite says, "No. We will not go into a Canaanite city, we will go into an Israelite city. We will press on as far as Gibeah or perhaps Ramah." They reach Gibeah and are sitting in the main square there. The men of Gibeah ignore them. No one comes to take them in. Finally, an old Ephraimite who is so-journeying comes in from the field. He sees them there and asks what they are doing. The Levite says they are on their way from Bethlehem back to Ephraim. The old man says, "Come to my house. I will keep you there." They do so. But then the men of the town come out, surround the house and say, "Send out the guest you have. We want to know him," which means they want to have sex with him. Instead of that the host says, "Take my daughter." Then the Levite, maybe to save the host from doing that, takes the concubine, whom he has gone to so much trouble to woo back and is taking home, and casts her out to the crowd. They abuse her all night. Then it says that in the morning when the Levite got up and unlocked the door—that does not seem reasonable to me! Apparently he had locked the door, counted his losses and gone to bed. This does not seem right. He finds her on the doorstep and says, "Get up. Let us get going." She does not move. It is not absolutely clear if she is dead or alive at that point. He loads her on his donkey, takes her back to his home, and divides her into 12 pieces. He sends the pieces of this woman throughout the land of Israel. Thus he provokes inter-tribal warfare. The people are aghast that this kind of thing has happened and they come out to deal with the tribe of Benjamin and the city of Gibeah, an Israelite city.

We need to consider the context of this passage. When I first read this story I kept thinking, how can this be? Was the Levite doing the right thing? Is it excusable what the host did? But then when I began to read the context I realized that in those days Israel had no king, as it says in Judges 19:1. Everyone did as he saw fit. I do not think it means simply that there were no human kings, but that during the period of the Judges God was not being honored as king. The Israelites were running wild; everyone was doing what was good in his own eyes. What is good in our own eyes is not necessarily good. The refrain,

“Israel had no king,” is repeated in 18:1 and 19:1. Judges ends in 21:25 with this: “In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit.” Finally I realized, well of course everything is going wrong! The hospitality is exorbitant; the father-in-law is doing what he thinks is best but it is not right. The host is doing what he thinks is best, but it is not right. The Levite is doing what he thinks is best, but it is not right. Even the concubine may have been doing what she thought was best in running home to her father, and maybe that was not right. It says, “She was unfaithful to him.” There is a translation difficulty there, so we do not know if she was the innocent party or if she was partially to blame as well. By looking at the context we begin to realize that no one was doing what was right. We do not need to look for the good characters here. The message of this story is that nothing that was happening was right.

When we begin to explore the broader story in the context of the book, it begins to make more sense. This story is meant to characterize the religious degeneracy of the period of the Judges. This was a bad time. And we can look even more broadly. What other story does this remind you of? Where has this happened before? This happened in Genesis 19, the story of the three angels visiting Lot in Sodom. The men of Sodom surrounded the house and demanded that the visitors be given to them, that they may know them. But these angelic visitors were able to strike the men of the city blind. That speaks loudly about the condition of Israel in the period of the Judges. Even Sodom, the proverbial wicked city, came off a bit better than Gibeah. The disaster was looming but was prevented by a divine action as God prevented this thing from happening. That did not happen in Gibeah. God did not prevent it this time. So low has Israel sunk at this period of time. Exploring the broader context is sometimes called narrative analogy. We are looking at narratives that are somehow analogous. This begins to enlighten us as to what the full significance of a particular passage may be.

We have been talking about how to interpret the historical books. We talked first about some preliminary questions related to the historical books. What is to be found in them? What kinds of things are we to learn from them? Then we began talking about basic exegetical steps that we should take in studying the historical books of the Old Testament. We talked about the necessity of getting first things first: submitting the mind and the heart to God. We gave some guidance for choosing a passage, establishing the text—by comparing different translations to come to some determination as to what the original readings were. Then we began talking about reading the text literarily. We went through different types of approaches or exegetical methods that are all involved in reading the text literarily.

Now we will talk about two other steps in the exegetical process. One is to reflect on the text historically. We are talking about reading the historical books. It is important that we acknowledge that these are historical books that make historical truth claims. I distinguish between truth claims and truth value. Let me explain it this way. Imagine with me that your mother or father comes to you and begins to communicate with you in some way. You know your mother or father to be completely truthful. They have never lied to you. You trust them implicitly. Therefore you acknowledge the truth value of what they are saying. You know that what they are saying is true. However, that does not guarantee that you understand them. You may not understand what kinds of truth claims they are making. If they just begin telling a story you may not know if this is to be understood as a true story, something that actually happened, or if it is a made-up story to illustrate a point, like a parable. You may have to listen carefully to understand exactly what your parent is trying to communicate in order to discern what their truth claims are. That in no way means that you question the truth value of what they say, once you understand it. I think in our debates over the Bible we sometimes get confused over that issue. We argue among ourselves, conflating this notion of truth claims and truth value. We say things to one another like, “If you do not believe that the text means this, then you do not believe the Bible.” The other person may simply understand the text differently. I am not saying that everyone’s understanding is equally

valid or that there is not a way of adjudicating between different viewpoints. But it is a matter of discussion. You can embrace the other individual, saying, “I believe that you believe the Bible, but I think you are reading it wrong. Let us discuss. We agree on the truth value, but let us discuss the truth claims.”

As we emphasize the literary crafting and character of the historical books, we need to be careful that our literary approach does not cause us to forget about, underestimate, or dispense with the historical truth claims of the text. We read them, trying to discover if they make certain claims about actual events that happened in history. My contention would be that in the historical books that is exactly what we have. You may think that is an obvious point. But there are many biblical scholars today who would not say that. They say, “These are just pious stories meant to teach us theological lessons. The stories you find in Joshua are not at all to be considered historical accounts.” I would say that the burden of proof is on them to demonstrate that these books are not to be regarded as telling a true story, a story of something that actually happened, while saying that we must make allowance for the manner of the telling, the crafting, of the story. When we read historical books we need to read them historically. We need to reflect on the text historically, not just literarily. The literary reading helps us understand what the truth claims are. It is very important. You cannot dispense with the literary reading. You need to read it honestly as a literary work, and that will establish the truth claims of the text. Then you want to assess the truth value.

You may be thinking, “Did we not just accept the truth value of the text? If we are those who place our faith in the Bible as God’s Word then we do accept, on faith—with good evidence, we believe—the truth value of the Bible.” However, it is still useful to assess the truth value for two reasons. First, there is a certain apologetic value in trying to demonstrate the truth value of the truth claims made in the text. We will never prove the Bible to those who have not been given the eyes of faith. But we can at least press them, if they are making claims that are not well-founded and that are actually unfair to the evidence. There is value in trying to establish some cross-references between the biblical stories and what we can discover archeologically, because it demonstrates the reasonableness of a particular reading of the Bible. The second reason it is useful to assess the truth value of a text is that as believers sometimes looking at the extra-biblical evidence may alert us to the fact that we have been misreading the text. If something does not make sense we have to ask ourselves, are we misinterpreting the extra-biblical data?—which is always a possibility. Or, are we misinterpreting the biblical data? Thus it may serve as a corrective to our interpretation of the Bible. I am not sure that Christians ever believed that the earth was square because of the Bible talking about the four corners of the earth. But it is possible that Christians may have believed that way. Or they may have believed that the sun actually moves because the Bible talks about the rising and the setting of the sun or the sun like a bridegroom coming out of his chamber. This kind of description certainly seems like movement. Well, learning a little about the solar system can be a corrective, so we read that as phenomenological language. The authors are describing what appears to happen in the natural world. They are not making a scientific statement about the sun actually moving and the earth standing still.

We can sometimes improve our interpretation by assessing the truth claims that are made and seeing if they have truth value in terms of other things we learn. There are two ways we do this. If you think of a text as a witness on the stand, one way you try to establish the credibility of the witness—the truth value of his or her claims—is by checking the internal consistency of the story. If it does not make sense and contradicts itself, then it is not likely to be credible. We probably should not believe it if it is internally contradictory. Or if it is contradictory with other evidence that is assured, we should not believe it. I need to emphasize that the other evidence must be assured. In archeology, artifacts are found and require interpretation. As archeologists or biblical scholars discuss them, they are interpreting the artifacts.

Therefore another question we have to ask is, is the external evidence consistent? Once we establish that there are assured data, we ask if the witness agrees. When we read historical books we not only read them literarily, but we also read them with an interest in their historical truth claims and the truth value of those claims.

Then we want to respond to the text theologically. We want to ask questions like how did the text challenge and encourage its earliest hearers? This begins to move us toward applying the text to ourselves. What did the text teach its original hearers about God, about His character and actions? Furthermore, what did it teach them about themselves as human beings? What did it teach them about their fallen condition as sinful creatures? This is very important, because as we discover the fallen condition focus in the text we begin to build a bridge to our own fallen condition. We begin to say, I have that same kind of problem. The way in which the text addressed the original audiences many years ago may be the same way it can address us today. We ask questions like, how does the text challenge and encourage us today? In what way is our situation analogous to theirs? What can we learn about God and about the human condition?