SUGGESTIONS FOR EXPOSITIONAL PREACHING OF OLD TESTAMENT NARRATIVE

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A large and significant part of the Bible is devoted to sections of narrative literature, also referred to as "story." The advantages of preaching from this type of passage have not been fully realized because preachers have not preached the sections just as they are in the text. Advantages to be capitalized on include the intrinsic interest involved in such stories, the patterned nature of the stories, the timeless truths illustrated in the stories, and the way the stories lend themselves to easy application. Yet certain precautions are necessary in preaching narrative sections. An artificial structure must not be imposed on them. They must not be used solely as a resource of illustrations for the rest of the Bible. They are not just examples of obeying or disobeying God's law. By observing these guidelines and precautions, the expository preacher can utilize narrative sections to great advantage in his preaching.

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Song titles such as "I Love to Tell the Story," "Tell Me the Old, Old Story," and "Tell Me the Story of Jesus" reflect the important role of stories in a Christian's life. For example, evangelistic efforts commonly include the use of stories, just as Stephen and others told (e.g. Acts 7:2-50). A "testimony" is *the believer's* story about how Jesus has worked in his life. It is the essence of the gospel message`*Jesus'* story about His exemplary life and substitutionary death. In Christian educational programs, teachers instruct children in one of the most effective ways possible: they tell them stories, both biblical and contemporary. If all the above are true, then why do preachers usually not preach biblical narratives (i.e. stories[1]) as stories? Often expositors

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[1]The English word "story" sometimes conveys the notion of a fictional account. In this essay, however, the word is always used to denote what is factual and in accord with actual happenings. The "God-breathed" quality of Scripture guarantees the

use an illustration (i.e. a story) to clarify a point, apply a principle, or wake up a sleepy congregation. They do this because stories make sermons clear, relevant, and interesting.[2] Yet many seem uncomfortable in preaching narrative as story, perhaps fearing to appear ridiculous or sound condescending. Consequently, they either refrain from preaching narrative, or in preaching it, reduce the narrative to the stereotypical, three abstract propositions/points without dealing with the story's plot or allowing the story to have its full impact on the reader. Either of these reactions is unnecessary. Narrative makes its own point(s) in an interesting and effective manner, while the selection and arrangement of the story's details provide clues for finding them.[3]

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historical accuracy of narrative portions.

[2]Adams argues that stories are the best teachers, particularly where the story appeals to the senses: "It is true that we learn best what we see, touch or hear and that, in discursive language, a story comes closest to the very experience of an event" (Jay E. Adams, "Sense Appeal and Storytelling," *The Preacher and Preaching* [ed. Samuel T. Logan, Jr.; Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1986] 350). A well-known preacher describes how he was impacted by the narrative sermons of evangelist Billy Sunday who captivated thousands: "When he preached on Elijah, he did it so vividly that I thought I was looking at Elijah. When he preached on Naaman going down into the dirty Jordan, I suffered all the agony that Naaman suffered. For nearly an hour Naaman lived in Billy Sunday" (William Ward Ayer, "The Art of Effective Preaching," *BibSac* 124 [Jan-Mar 1967] 38).

[3]The present discussion will focus on preaching the narrative portions of the OT. It will not deal with either narrative preaching, which turns every passage or topic into a narrative preaching format, or narrative theology, a theological system in which stories play a major role. Neither will it deal comprehensively with characteristic features or methods of preaching biblical narrative. Much has already been written on this subject. Works dealing specifically with the nature of OT narrative and the method of preaching it are Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *The Old Testament in Contemporary Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1973); *idem.*, *Toward an Exegetical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981); *idem.*, *Toward Rediscovering the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987); Tremper Longman, III, *Literary Approaches to Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987); and Leland Ryken, *How to Read the Bible as Literature* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984). A comprehensive text which deals with all types of biblical literature and methods of preaching them is Sidney Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988). Perhaps the three best brief discussions of the nature of biblical narrative are John Goldingay, "Preaching on the Stories in Scripture," *Anvil* 7/2 (1990) 105-14; Tremper Longman, III, "Storytellers and Poets in the Bible," *Inerrancy and Hermeneutic: A Tradition, a*

Challenge, a Debate (ed. Harvie M. Conn; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988); and Leland Ryken, "And It Came to Pass: The Bible as God's Storybook," *BibSac* 147/586 (Apr-June 1990) 131-42. A thought-provoking application of Longman's work coauthored by Raymond Dillard addressing the use, sometimes misuse, of biblical narrative by Christian counseling theorists is Tremper Longman, III, and Raymond B. Dillard, "Hermeneutics and Counseling," *The Institute of Biblical Counseling Perspective* 2/1 (1988) 21-30.

Nearly one-third of the Bible is narrative. Because the story-format of biblical narrative hinders expositors from preaching this large proportion, two general suggestions in understanding and preaching OT narrative will help the expositor capitalize on this gold mine of preaching material.

PREACH THE STORY LINE

Following the story line[4] facilitates a grasp of some of the characteristics of narrative. "Narrative, in its encompassing sense, is an account of events and participants moving over time and space, a recital with beginning and ending patterned by the narrator's principle of selection."[5] Biblical narratives are stories in which the message is "embodied in a structure of events and persons, rather than in a structure of verbal generalizations."[6] Why change the format when preaching them? If the preacher's goal is to be expositional, what is more expositional than preaching the text in its story-line form?

The following are characteristics that mark biblical narrative as story-like. These features of narrative are best preserved by preaching narrative as God gave them, i.e. in story form.

Narrative Has Literary Power

"Story" means story-like history. Biblical narrative combines qualities of literature and history. From a literary standpoint,

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[4]The "story line" is the plot or general plan of a story.

[5]Gabriel Fackre, "Narrative Theology: An Overview," *Int* 37/4 (1983) 341.

[6]Henry Grady Davis, *Design for Preaching* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1958) 157. These characteristics make narrative easier to preach with few or no notes for the simple reason that the message is couched in real life situations involving people, places, and events. Research has demonstrated that stories are easier than most sermon formats to remember, both for the preacher as he delivers the sermon, and for the congregation as they take the message with them. For an interesting study of how professional storytellers learn the stories they recount for hours at a time, see Albert B. Lord, *The Singer of Tales* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960).

narrative is very carefully written and employs a set of conventions not combined in other types of biblical literature.[7] Even many of the dialogues embedded in narratives display unique literature-like features.[8] On the other side, history focuses on the cause-and-effect relationships of events. Understanding the cause of an event enhances one's understanding of the event itself. Comparing biblical narrative with a history of Israel shows that the literary features of narratives do more than inform historically. So a narrative's concentration is not so much on historicity versus fictionality as it is on how biblical writers chose to recount historical events.[9] Spirit-inspired writers were not trying to report all that happened, because most biblical narrative is narrowly focused. God led these writers to include what He wanted recorded and to do it in the way He wanted it recorded and without error. Because narrative blends features of history and literature, the story is the best format for preaching the narrative's message in the form God gave.

Biblical narrative, then, is neither history, strictly speaking, nor is it prose.[10] Prose does appear in the OT, in letters (e.g. 2 Sam 11:15),

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[7]In this way narrative behaves like the story, selectively "omitting much that is irrelevant or that in real life may distract, while focusing on and emphasizing the major factors in the event" (Adams, "Sense Appeal" 351).

[8]Savran maintains that much of the direct discourse of narratives is artistically patterned: "The phenomenon of quotation describes the intersection of a number of central aspects of the narrative. It is both direct speech of the present narrative moment and recollection of prior words. It presents the quoting character as the teller of his own story, but also as the subject of the narrator's discourse. Perhaps most important is the way quoted direct speech functions as an exegetical exercise, a rereading or respeaking of the past at a later time and in a new context" (George W. Savran, *Telling and Retelling: Quotation in Biblical Narrative* [Blooming-ton: Indiana University, 1988] ix).

[9]Regarding the confusion of story line with fiction, Sternberg argues, "With God postulated as double author, the biblical narrator can enjoy the privileges of art without renouncing his historical titles" (Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* [Bloomington: Indiana University, 1985] 82).

[10]Defining prose continues to present a major challenge to all who attempt to

proclamations (e.g. Ezra 1:2-4), some dialogues (e.g. 2 Sam 9:1-4), and other forms, but it does not share many of the characteristics of biblical narrative.[11]   The latter is a different type of literature and should be preached in a way that maintains its distinctiveness.[12]   One of the qualities that separates biblical narrative from prose and provides clues for its interpretation and preaching is the thoughtful structuring displayed in its symmetrical format and patterns of expression.

Narrative Is Patterned.

Patterning, a primary characteristic of OT narrative that notes its formation into a specific literary plan, offers two advantages in preaching. First, it presents a unifying framework essentially marking the narrative's parameters. The story follows a prescribed but general pattern which identifies it as a story.[13]   A more complex pattern

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systematize genre. For purposes of this discussion, prose is "the ordinary form of written or spoken language without rhyme or meter" (*Webster's Unabridged Dictionary* [2nd ed.; New York: Simon and Schuster, 1972] 1445). When writers like Polzin speak of biblical Hebrew prose, they intend a broader connotation (Robert Polzin, *Late Biblical Hebrew: Toward an Historical Typology of Biblical Hebrew Prose* (Missoula: Scholars, 1976). The line between prose (narrative) and poetry in biblical Hebrew is fine. James Kugel sees the distinction as western and artificial (James Kugel, *The Idea of Biblical Poetry* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981] 69). W. T. W. Cloete challenges Kugal's thesis on the grounds that "the lines or cola . . . are the distinguishing characteristic of verse" (W. T. W. Cloete, "Verse and Prose: Does the Distinction Apply to the Old Testament?" *JNSL* 14 [1988] 13).

[11]Prose tends "to suppress ornamentation or figures of speech. A general principle is that, the more the author intends to inform about the real world, the more literariness decreases" (Tremper Longman, III, "Storytellers" 138).

[12]Normally, the resulting "message" of the narrative cannot be reduced to theological propositions without losing its uniquely persuasive character. Also, didactic biblical literature (letters, commandments, etc.) can be restated concisely in lists of admonitions and prescriptions more easily than narrative (Robert C. Tannehill, "Narrative Criticism," *A Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation* [eds. R. J. Coggins and J. L. Houlden; Philadelphia: Trinity, 1990] 489).

[13]A story is a series of events that can be seen to have a beginning, a middle, and an end. It is important, of course, to recognize the logical relationships among these

occasionally unites the entire story, giving it a deliberate symmetry. For example, some narratives form an "X" or chiastic pattern, where the middle through the last episodes parallel closely the first through the middle ones, but in reverse order. One oft-used saying illustrates this pattern: "When the going gets tough, the tough get going."

A second aspect of patterning is its provision of a form for the sermon. This helps in capturing the text's intended emphases, one of the hardest, but most important parts of sermon preparation. One of the most difficult decisions for a preacher before preaching is determining the form of his message. Expository preaching purposes to preach the *message* of the biblical text. What about the *form* of the scriptural message? Form is part of the text, too.

In a sense, preaching requires the messenger to make at least minimal changes of the message from one form, say a psalm, a letter, or a narrative, into another called a sermon. In other words, a preacher must structure his sermons, unless he merely reads the text.[14] His message, then, may be in a form or forms inconsistent with the text treated.

Both the preacher who moves verse by verse through a well-studied passage and the one who preaches without a preplanned text or message have decided on the form of their sermons. The former chooses to follow a commentary-application format, probably because he feels that it is the truest to the original. The latter follows a stream-of-consciousness format, perhaps because he feels that he must rely

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three parts. The beginning always describes a situation of need that must be addressed through some kind of action. The middle grows out of the beginning by describing what is done about this needed action. The end in turn grows out of the middle by showing what happens as a result of the action taken in the middle. At the same time, the end relates to the beginning by resolving its situation of need. The end allows the reader to say, "Yes, this is `the end,'" either by showing how the need described in the beginning has been met . . . or by describing how all reasonable opportunity for future action has been cut off (Thomas O. Long, *Preaching and the Literary Forms of the Bible* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989] 71-72).

[14]Donald E. Demaray, *Introduction to Homiletics* (2nd ed.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990) 103.

directly on the Holy Spirit. Part of the frustration of expositors in trying to preach narrative comes in attempting to translate the form of the text into a sermonic structure. What form should it assume?

If the sermon needs to represent the entire message of the original, will the usual point-by-point outline suffice? What will constitute the individual points? Summaries of the separate episodes? Behaviors or attributes of the characters in the narratives? Theological propositions inferred from the text? No wonder would-be expositors are often perplexed by narrative.

The structuring stage is greatly simplified by selecting the story line as the format to represent his narrative passage and by following the emphases in the patterning of the narrative for deriving emphases for the sermon. This requires deliberate effort by the preacher, because narrative sermons should stress the message of the narrative. A simple retelling of the story may not do this. As one homiletician suggests, the preacher must "move in and out of the story with analogues, explanations, and interpretations as the plot line of the story moves along."[15] Whether he does this with points of the sermon or with pauses for elaboration at the text's points of emphasis is a matter of individual judgment. But by preaching the story, the expositor can simplify a potentially complex task of representing patterns and preserve the narrative's patterned quality most effectively.

Narrative Is Timeless and Universal.

Biblical narrators concern themselves with relaying facts, that is, they do indeed convey historical information.[16] Yet they also guide perspective and responses to events.[17] It is this subtly prescriptive

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[15]David G. Buttrick, *Homiletic: Moves and Structures* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987) 335.

[16]John Goldingay, "That You May Know that Yahweh Is God: A Study of the Relationship between Theology and Historical Truth in the Old Testament," *Tyndale Bulletin* 23 (1972) 58-93.

[17]Longman, "Storytellers" 146.

quality of biblical narrative that makes it inherently "sermonic." Biblical narrative assumes "that what happens to the characters in the story is somehow a model of the enduring human situation"[18] and that the characteristics of God in the story are timeless as well. When people hear or read a biblical narrative, they have a strong tendency to say, "I can relate to that." Preachers sometimes refer to the generalizations drawn from such passages as "timeless principles" and the activity of drawing such generalizations as "principlizing the text."[19]

But not all that occurs in narrative is truly timeless. In fact, much of the detail is culture-specific, such as the sacrifices and offerings prescribed for Israel under the law. Issues of this type are affected by progressive revelation, e.g. the nexus between Israel and the church. All such items that fall under the continuity/discontinuity rubric must be considered carefully. The tendency to become overly prescriptive or exemplary to the exclusion of the Bible's forward movement in redemption history must be avoided. Each passage must be interpreted carefully to learn its intended message before being taught and applied. But one of the best formats for bringing out

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[18]Ryken, *How to Read* 44. Not all agree that narrative is capable of this universal quality. "An opposing view is skeptical or agnostic about how narrative relates to universal human experience (if, indeed, there is any such reality), and starts with the specific characteristics of Christianity. . . . The first [position] assumes a common basis in human consciousness; the second questions that and stresses specificity and differences" (David F. Ford, "Narrative Theology," *A Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation* [eds. R. J. Coggins and J. L. Houlden; Philadelphia: Trinity, 1990] 490). The perspective of Martin Noth ("The `Representation' of the O. T. in Proclamation," *Essays on Old Testament Hermeneutics* [ed. Claus Westermann, trans. James Luther Mays; Richmond, VA: John Knox, 1964] 86) that biblical characters cannot function as "ethical models" is unacceptable.

[19]Walter C. Kaiser, *Toward an Exegetical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981) 92. "To `principlize' is to state the author's propositions, arguments, narrations, and illustrations in timeless abiding truths with special focus on the application of those truths to the current needs of the Church" (ibid., 152). Cf. also Richard L. Mayhue, "Rediscovering Expository Preaching," *The Master's Seminary Journal* 1/2 (Fall 1990) 121.

either the narrative's timeless and universal character or its redemption-historical development is the story-line sermon.

Narrative Relates Experience.

A natural tendency in preaching narrative is to sound like a historian. Extreme manifestations exasperate congregations as, for instance, when the sermon becomes a lecture on cultural anthropology. This extreme points once again to confusion regarding the major distinction between historical writing and biblical narrative. Historiography, as traditionally conceived, seeks to reconstruct historical events based on facts. The objective is to tell what *happened*. Biblical narratives aim to impact readers with what *happens*, that is, "they provide a vicarious *experience* of the truth to be taught, and thus they move persons to identify with and live by that truth."[20] In short, narrative as story is very application-oriented. For this reason, the story line in the sermon tends to preserve the narrative's experiential quality more cogently than most other formats.

On the other hand, because narrative impacts its audience in such subtle ways, it is difficult to codify fully into a set of interpretive principles or procedures. In the Joseph story, for example, the listeners' sympathy for poor Joseph being led off as a slave could be

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[20]Henry H. Mitchell, "Preaching on the Patriarchs," *Biblical Preaching: An Expositor's Treasury* (ed. James W. Cox; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983) 37. But to what the narratives are calling their reader has been debated repeatedly. Should the congregation be looking for ethical directives, theological instruction, or both? We cannot deny that the teaching of the narrative will somehow result in some form of ethical response (Carl G. Kromminga, "Remember Lot's Wife: Preaching Old Testament Narrative Texts," *Calvin Theological Journal* 18/1 [1983] 33). For a historical chronicling of the ethical vs. theological debate over the purpose of biblical narrative, cf. Sidney Greidanus, *Sola Scriptura: Problems and Principles in Preaching Historical Texts* (Toronto: Wedge, 1970). Goldingay combines theology and ethics when he argues that the narratives aim at the following: (1) the *commitments* which faith entails; (2) the *experiences* which the faith may involve; and (3) the *events* on which the faith is based (Goldingay, "Preaching" 106-9).

lost unless time for audience reaction is not allowed at that point. For this reason, reduction or cutting the story down in size and scope, is a great challenge. Some would say it is impossible, but not if one presents the story line carefully.

Narrative Is Difficult to Reduce.

Reduction is the process whereby the expositor takes a larger and more detailed block of text and summarizes it, perhaps in a brief single sentence, clause, or word. A question could be raised regarding the wisdom of reducing biblical narratives to sermon propositions and points. If the biblical writer intended a strictly propositional format to communicate his message, why did he employ narrative?

Perhaps the answer is that narrative communicates that particular message better. This does not mean that the preacher may never use summary points, propositions, or theological abstractions. It seems that the message of a narrative must be reduced somehow, either by the preacher or the listener, before it can become contemporary. If nothing else, time requires this. So the process of generalizing requires at least some reduction.

Even from the standpoint of pedagogy, when some might contest the narrative's capacity to teach, the story line can hold its own. This is the lesson of the OT itself. Much of OT religious symbolism and many OT rituals, monuments, feasts, etc., were designed to prompt the children to ask questions like "What does this rite mean to you?" (Exod 12:26) or "What do these stones mean to you?" (Josh 4:6). The teaching response was almost always a story.

The issue remains, "What is the best way to preach biblical narrative?" In most cases, presenting the narrative as story is technically the easiest, exegetically the safest, rhetorically the most effective, and lends itself to the most natural application. "Moreover, developing the sermon in the same form as the text will enable the congregation all the better to follow the exposition of the text and to

test and remember the sermon."[21]   Attempts to handle narrative sections in other than a story-line format may account for the frustration of expositors in trying to preach narrative.

LOOK TO THE TOTAL THEOLOGICAL MESSAGE

A second general suggestion in handling narrative revolves around three possible ways of mishandling such portions. Special precautions are necessary to avoid overlooking major theological emphases.

*Substituting the Preacher's Conceptual Structure
    for the Narrative's Unifying Structure*

Biblical narratives are complete stories. Even the Joseph story (Genesis 37-50),[22] although part of a larger complex of narrative, has its

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[21]Greidanus, *Modern Preacher* 225. An added advantage of preaching narrative as story applies to developmentally handicapped believers who need a strong plot structure, simple vocabulary, concrete language, and a clear beginning, middle, and end to the lesson. They will comprehend narrative sermons better than the abstract types (August Baker and Ellin Greene, *Storytelling: Art and Technique* [New York: R. R. Bowker, 1977] 77).

[22]It is tempting to draw ethical examples from the Joseph story. Some think the author intended Joseph's behavior to be a moral example, because they view the text as wisdom literature. Characteristically, wisdom literature is well-suited for exemplary purposes in that it prescribes behavior as an ethical response to the fear of God. In Joseph's words "You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good" (Gen 50:20a), Von Rad hears echoes of Prov 16:9: "A man's mind plans his way, but Yahweh directs his steps" (James L. Crenshaw, *Gerhard Von Rad* [Waco, TX: Word, 1978] 122-26). Crenshaw has persuasively argued against Von Rad's classification of this as wisdom literature, however (James L. Crenshaw, "Method in Determining Wisdom Influence upon `Historical' Literature," *JBL* 88 [1969] 129-42). Another major problem in determining whether the Joseph story is ethical, theological, or both is that many narratives such as this are part of the larger literary context of Redemption History. What, then, constitutes a preaching unit within such large narrative units? Because the Joseph story is introduced with the /odO? (*tldt*, "the generations of") formula (cf. Gen 5:1; 6:9; 10:1; 11:10, 27; 25:12, 19; 36:1, 9), it is safe to take Gen 37:2 to

own introduction and conclusion. Unifying patterns, in joining together parts of the story, give it a cohesiveness that makes it a story. The preacher sometimes ignores a narrative's inherent unity, however, by focusing on some of its tantalizingly colorful details.

Does the following exemplify a familiar title, proposition and outline of a narrative sermon?

> *Text:* Genesis 37`50
> *Title:* "Joe Christian"
> *Proposition:* BE LIKE JOSEPH: Respond Correctly
> A.*Flee Immorality:* Potiphar's wife enticed Joseph.
> B.*Work Hard:* The jailer and the Pharaoh assigned work to Joseph.
> C.*Forgive Others:* The brothers mistreated Joseph.

This arrangement is right as far as it goes. The title, proposition, and outline focus on the attributes and behavior of Joseph. All three outline-points are supportable by clear didactic passages elsewhere in Scripture. They are not unbiblical. But they do not go far enough.[23]

Sermons that focus primarily on the behavior or character of an individual in the narrative (sometimes called "biographical sermons") *may* miss the passage's broader theological teaching. Some narratives do prescribe behavior, but the Joseph story does not merely present a model of how young people should be or behave. If the preacher is looking for an exemplar and settles on the Joseph story, he has

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mark its beginning and the end of Genesis its conclusion. Setting limits for a preaching unit is not always this easy, however.

[23]This is not to say that subsections of narratives may not be used to preach or teach topical, biographical, or other conceptual formats originating with the preacher or another writer of the Bible. Smaller units of stories do affirm various truths, but do not do so independently of the total narrative of which they are a part. The function of such lessons as subordinate to the primary message of the whole story must be kept in perspective. This is the only way to assure that one's interpretation of the passage and expositional preaching based on it will capture the intention of both its divine and human authors.

exchanged the story's unifying structure for his own conceptual structure. He chooses the narrative only for the sake of select details within the story. Joseph's behavior may well be part of the message, but the preacher has made it the whole message. This inevitably leads to no more than prescriptive mimicry.

A simple corrective for this is to focus on the entire message to its original audience instead of having the congregation identify with specific characters in the story.

Searching for Details in the Narrative
to Illustrate NT or Other OT Passages

A second mistaken approach preaches OT narrative only to illustrate NT or other OT principles. Illustrations, if not overdone, perform an important function in teaching or preaching situations. Using OT stories as illustrations of either good or bad behavior is not wrong. Joseph's behavior toward Potiphar's wife, his ten brothers, and God is exemplary.[24] Using OT narrative *only* to illustrate NT teaching, however, results in ignoring much OT instruction that may serve as background for NT theology or else as teaching not repeated in the NT. Creation, law, and covenant are in OT narrative which if ignored or used for illustrations only, will create many problems of biblical imbalance. An adequate theological framework must include the whole OT (cf. 2 Tim 3:16, "All Scripture . . .").

NT writers use characters, events, and all kinds of phenomena from the OT as illustrations (e.g. Hebrews 11, etc.). Nevertheless, this does not prove that the incorporation of details of an OT narrative for illustrative purposes is the way to *preach* that OT narrative. An OT narrative as a textual unit presented an entire theological message to

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[24]For some, Joseph's attitude toward his dreams and treatment of his brothers after their arrival in Egypt raise a question of just how exemplary his behavior was (e.g. G. W. Coats, "From Canaan to Egypt: Structural and Theological Context for the Joseph Story," *Catholic Quarterly Monograph Series 5* [Washington: Catholic Biblical Association of America, 1976] 82-86).

its original audience. Through theological abstraction, it may have called for an ethical change, either directly or indirectly. Or it may move the history of redemption forward, demonstrating how God's redemptive purpose is at work in the world. Should it not do the same in sermons today? To preach the message of a narrative passage is to take it in its entirety, not to dwell just on character/behavior traits of individuals in the narrative.

An expositor should use great caution in proving a theological or ethical principle by employing an OT narrative. He should find clear admonitions of "do or believe this" or "do not do or believe this" elsewhere in Scripture before drawing on narrative illustrations to elaborate on the point. Adopting the theology of Job's counselors indiscriminantly, for example, is not wise. Similarly, a blind following of the ethical example in narrative portions of Scripture is unsafe. In other words, the expositor wants to assure that the Bible advocates a certain doctrine, attribute, or behavioral quality *before* illustrating it with an OT narrative. Professing Christians have at times wrongly justified bad theology or immoral actions on inferior grounds, that "so and so, an otherwise virtuous Bible character, spoke/did it."[25]

Limiting the Narrative to an Ethical Reflex of the Law

A different but related way of mistreating narrative is to use it to show what happens when God's people obey or disobey His law.[26]

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[25]Stuart's advice is wise: "Avoid the principle of imitation (the idea that because someone in the Bible does it, we can or ought to do it, too). This is the most dangerous and irreverent of all approaches to application since virtually every sort of behavior, stupid and wise, malicious and saintly is chronicled in the Bible" (Douglas Stuart, *Old Testament Exegesis: A Primer for Students and Pastors* [2nd ed.; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984] 84).

[26]This approach should not be confused with Carmichael's. He argues that the Deuteronomic laws and perhaps some or all of Proverbs were based on earlier narrative portions (Calum M. Carmichael, *The Laws of Deuteronomy* [Ithaca, NY: Cornell University, 1974]). Briefer explanations of Carmichael's theory of narrative and law are found in his articles "Uncovering a Major Source of Mosaic Law: The

Following this assumption is a way of strengthening ethical norms not specifically stated in Scripture. In this third interpretive scheme, Joseph's good behavior and subsequent reward are viewed as part of the complex of the blessing and cursing which came as a result of his obeying or disobeying the law. A case in point is his ascendancy to the role of second-in-command in Egypt because of his obedience to God's law. Preaching of this type often dwells on disobedience as a cause of lost blessing or punishment. Using narrative thus seems to make good sense, for characters in the narratives are demonstrating either good or bad ethical behavior. In a certain sense, it is correct. Yet the question is the same: "Is this *all* that the narrative teaches?" or more significantly, "Is this what the narrative was intended to teach?" Clearly, some narratives have more to say.[27] A problem here is that the sovereign grace of God, clearly prominent in the Joseph story, is omitted because of exclusive attention to human works.

The three misuses of OT narrative just summarized emphasize the need for caution in preaching. *What the Bible itself teaches* often differs considerably from *the ways one uses the Bible to teach*. Without special precautions, the expositor may use narrative characters to teach something that is only supported in another part of the Bible, whether it be through substituting the preacher's propositions/points, careless use of illustrations, or ill-advised choice of legal-case exemplars. The Joseph story does not merely affirm this young man's exemplary behavior. A sermon reflecting the story's true emphasis must take the complete message, the theological dynamic of Joseph's character within God's sovereign plan`salvation history.

Joseph's response to his brothers' pleas for forgiveness pointedly summarizes the details of the whole story. The God-given

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Evidence of Deut. 21:15`22:5," *JBL* 101 (1982) 505-20, and "Forbidden Mixtures," *VT* 32 (1982) 394-415.

[27]Note that this approach to OT narrative would probably ignore Joseph's important statement, "You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good" (Gen 50:20a). These words capture the major theological lesson of the story.

dream (Genesis 37) is fulfilled by God when the brothers, upon recognizing Joseph, fall before him (Gen 50:18). Thus the dream marks the beginning and ending of the preaching unit *and* provides clues to an interpretation featuring God's providential care and guidance. Joseph's two statements to his fearful brothers are also part of the narrative patterning. These two emphasize God's sovereign control over all that has happened as a result of their sin: "You sold me. . . . God sent me" (Gen 45:5; cf. 45:7, 8) and "You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good" (Gen 50:20a). The brothers had evil intentions and bad behavior. God allowed the latter, but curtailed the former that His purpose to build a nation, even from such a poor breed as slave traders, might not be thwarted.

The point is that the expositor should not indiscriminantly use Joseph or any other biblical character as an example. Far more importantly, he should not neglect to preach and teach such portions for their truth intentions as represented in the entire textual unit. Or more boldly, if he focuses on Joseph's behavior only, he has not preached Genesis 37-50.

The question remains, "How does one preach narratives like the Joseph story?" Perhaps the easiest, most effective way, the way truest to the biblical form, is just to retell the story, allowing the story itself to heighten points of application. Is this not the way that Sunday School teachers teach children these stories? Why stop at age 8 or 9? Why reduce the story to three points (often just three examples of good behavior), when telling the whole story brings honor to the sovereign hand of God? Homiletically speaking, which has more impact, hearing an abstract proposition about God's sovereignty (e.g. "God is sovereign") or seeing it borne out in the experience of God's people? When a preacher states an abstraction, he usually follows it with an illustration to enhance comprehension of the abstraction. Narrative preached as narrative has already incorporated the illustration.

CONCLUSION

One final question may enter the preacher's mind when

approaching OT narrative. Who is sufficient for the task of preaching OT narrative? It is true that identifying the conventions of narrative, then formulating them into interpretive guidelines is as complex as it is important,[28] but those who read and study the narrative portions of Scripture come to understand these conventions intuitively. Not only does understanding come through careful reading, but also "there is a certain commonality among narrative traditions of whatever age and culture, just as there is a certain commonality among different language systems."[29]   Readers "tend to apply most of these rules intuitively, simply as close readers to the biblical text."[30]

Preaching narrative is important.   If the expositor has committed himself to preaching "the whole counsel of God," he will soon discover that a large portion of Scripture is either narrative or narrative-like. Because narrative follows a story line, (1) it has literary power, (2) it is patterned, (3) it is timeless and universal, (4) it relates experience, and (5) it is difficult to reduce. In light of these factors, the expositor does well to maintain the story format.

Preaching the story line in its entirety has the advantage of guarding against at least three common shortcomings in the

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[28]Cautioning the reader against assuming correspondences between narrative traditions in western literature and the Bible, Longman writes, "In ordinary reading, much of this understanding comes automatically. We passively let the narrator shape our interpretation of the event he or she is reporting to us; we make an unconscious genre identification. But as interpreters of the text, it is important to make these explicit. This is doubly so for the Bible, since it is an ancient text and the conventions employed are often not ones we are used to" (Longman, "Storytellers" 148, alluding to Anthony C. Thiselton, *The Two Horizons: New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Description* [Grand Rapids: Eerd-mans, 1980]).

[29]V. Philips Long. "Toward a Better Theory and Understanding of Old Testament Narrative," *Presbyterion* 13/2 (Fall 1987) 105.

[30]Ryken, *How to Read* 68. Regarding the real but often unspoken fear that narrative interpretation is an impossibly complex process, Ryken responds, "Such a myth of complexity, however is to be rejected. The literature of the Bible is subtle and artistically crafted but essentially simple. . . . Talking about the Bible's literature does not require intricate tools and theories. It does, however require *literary* tools" (Ryken, "And It Came" 137).

interpretation of narrative: (1) ignoring the narrative's unifying structure for the sake of the preacher's conceptual format, (2) searching for details in the narrative merely to illustrate NT and other OT passages, and (3) limiting the narrative to an ethical reflex of the law. None of these methods handles the entire textual unit or looks for the complete theological and ethical message.

When preaching narrative, one should take the spotlight off the Joseph-like heros and shine it on the only praise-worthy character in the story`God. Perhaps because of such a focus, those to whom he preaches will make God the focus of their life stories. As a byproduct, human behavior will probably improve also, and not in just a threefold way to correspond to a three-point message.