

Preaching from Judges

The Nature of Narrative

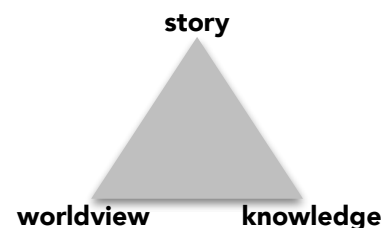
Much of the Old Testament, and indeed a fair proportion of the New, is narrative. This raises a number of challenges to those of us who are called to preach God's Word, especially if we have had little or no training in understanding and dealing with various genres of literature. The issue is at its most acute when dealing with Old Testament narrative, such as the book of Judges as many of those we are teaching God's Word to may be at best unfamiliar with, and at worst ignorant of, the Old Testament as a whole.

The area where we often feel most at home would be perhaps in the letters, where the discovery of the "Main Point" seems somewhat more straightforward, and diagramming a section of a letter has become almost second nature as we seek the flow of an argument. Our time will be spent in exploring the detailed meanings of various words within the text to discover the point the writer is making. When we then preach the text, much of our emphasis is on *informing* people of what the text says and then "to urge our listeners to respond to the "how-tos" of spiritual life seen in the text."¹

When we turn to narrative (and indeed other genres, such as poetry) the flow of argument is not the same and the 'Main Point' may not be so immediately apparent. Narrative does not always give simple answers, and the answers it gives must be drawn from the text carefully, we are "seeking clues for what is most often left unstated"² or at least understated. The close reading of the text that is demanded when tackling narrative is of a different nature than when tackling the letters—but we still need to read the text closely.

Narrative is a powerful way of purveying world views rather than propositional truth, in other words giving the theological (in biblical terms) framework or scene within which the drama of human existence is played out. Narrative has the power to transform because it tackles not just knowledge - what we know - but also world view - the context within which we know. Without preaching from narrative, and preaching well from narrative, the world view of Christians is seriously impoverished. This is not to say that the world view we are meant to be expressing is that of the culture of the author's time; narrative criticises the world view of the time, confronts that world view (and ours), in order to bring a truly biblical one.

In missiological terms, preaching narrative and bringing a biblical world view to bear on the lives of our listeners, is about getting below the surface of the individual, below mere assent to certain Christian truths while everyday life continues normally, and transforming the core values of listeners so that their thinking becomes biblical.



[Narratives] cannot therefore be translated into 'propositional truth' without reducing the complex but powerful triangle of story, knowledge and worldview to something with far less public relevance or meaningfulness or indeed transformative power.³

Preaching from narratives demands faithfulness to the text, as in any other preaching, but it also involves seeking to be faithful to the original *intention* and *purpose* of the author. In so doing, we aim at eliciting

¹ Lubeck R, 2004, "Dusting Off the Old Testament for a New Millennium" in Gibson SM (Ed), *Preaching to a Shifting Culture*, Baker Books: Grand Rapids, 31

² Lubeck R, 2004, 23

³ Moritz T, 2000, "Reflecting on N. T. Wright's *Tools for the Task*" in Bartholomew, C, Green C & Möller K, *Renewing Biblical Interpretation Volume 1*, Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 185

the same response from our listeners as the author was aiming for in the original story⁴; this is what *homiletics* (saying the same thing) means in preaching narrative. It is partly here that the close reading of the text mentioned above takes place: in the discovery of what the author's original intent was.

Our preaching will also have to ensure that we do not fall into the trap of simply preaching what is *in* the text. As Tate points out, "what is said *in* the story is quite distinct from what is said *through* the story."⁵ So, in the story of Gideon, we need to avoid the trap of simply preaching that Gideon put out a fleece, without considering what we are actually being told *through* the story of whether this was an act to be emulated or not.

This raises the issue of narrative perspective. It is rare, though not unknown, for the narrator in biblical narrative to make specific moral statements about the acts of their protagonists. Our understanding of the 'rightness' or 'wrongness' of any act needs to be gleaned from the overall world view presented by the author and by the overarching narrative structure of the story, the book and the Bible.⁶ Thus, the question of the laying out of the fleece has to be seen in the context of Gideon's story as a whole, and of the book of Judges as a whole in order for its meaning to be discovered.

This is an even bigger question when we deal with actions which we find abhorrent and where we could wish for a clearer condemnation from the narrator. Thus, one writer when discussing Judges 19 can decry the fact that, "The biblical narrator does not raise a literary eyebrow" when the Levite uses his concubine to defend himself, or when he then defiles her a second time after she has been returned to him dead.⁷ While it is true that the narrator makes not specific condemnatory remark concerning this act, the narrative flow of Judges as a book uses this story as a graphic example of what happens to a country - and to the spiritual leaders of that country - when Yahweh is no longer acknowledged as King; the act is thus condemned implicitly through the story.

When we combine the issues of genre, the nature of biblical narration, and authorial intent with those of history, culture etc. we have to admit that we are left with "a substantial interpretive river to cross."⁸ But a river that can be crossed nonetheless.

Repetition

One of the major aspects of biblical narrative is the use of repetition. This can be on the level of individual words and even sounds; thus in Genesis 2:25, the word 'naked' sounds like the word 'crafty' in 3:1. In the story of Abimelech (Judges 9), Abimelech kills the sons of Gideon on "a single stone" (9:5, 18), he is then killed by a millstone (9:53), the repetition of this idea forms a narrative thread in the story and the irony can be used in structuring a sermon.

Repetition also happens on a larger scale and in Judges this is most clearly shown in the cyclical nature of the book. This pattern involves, firstly, a situation where God's people fall from a position of faithfulness to their covenant King, Yahweh, and start to worship and follow the gods of the peoples around them. The consequence of this is one that God had warned about (see Deuteronomy 28:15-68), they are oppressed by the other inhabitants of the land, the Canaanites, Philistines and others until they recognise their predicament and turn to him for help. As a gracious God, he responds to their cry for help and raises up deliverers – the judges.

⁴ See Lubeck, 2004, 31

⁵ Tate WR, 2008, *Biblical Interpretation An Integrated Approach*, Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers Inc, 106

⁶ For more, see discussion below.

⁷ Bach A, 1999, "Rereading the Body Politic: Women and Violence in Judges 21" in Brenner A (Ed), *Judges: A Feminist Companion to the Bible*, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 146-47

⁸ Duvall JS & Hays JD, 2005, *Grasping God's Word*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 307

This pattern repeats itself throughout the book, so that it needs to be seen not so much as a cycle but more as a spiral. The situation at the end of the book is far worse than that at the beginning - spiritually, morally and theologically. The final few chapters (*Judges* 17-21) make sense when seen in this light. These depict the ultimate consequence of a people which has gradually but inexorably slipped from the demands of the covenant.

This narrative structure to the book encourages us to read it more in terms of theological development rather than simple chronology. This is shown very clearly if we contrast the very first judge, Othniel with the final judge, Samson. Othniel is portrayed as the perfect, or archetypal judge (*Judges* 3:7-11) with his deliverance of Israel leading to forty years of peace. Samson, on the other hand (*Judges* 13-16) is shown very negatively in terms of his morality and ethics, the final comment on his life being simply that, "He had led Israel for twenty years" (*Judges* 16:31).

This theological shape of the book of *Judges* is echoed in the use of two repeated phrases:

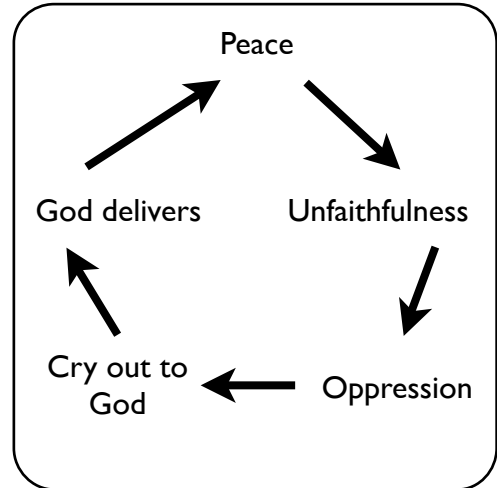
- "The land had peace" (*Judges* 3:11, 30, 5:31, 8:28),
- "In those days Israel had no king." (*Judges* 17:6, 18:1, 19, 21:25).

The very repetition of these phrases helps give a narrative structure to the book and they mirror the decline we see in other ways. Thus, the statements concerning peace occur in the first half of the book; God brings peace to the people at the time when they are, spiritually speaking, most close to him. The reference to the lack of a King is to be found in the second half of the book, portraying the theological slide that has occurred. As God is further and further removed from his people, the possibility of peace becomes less likely and the need for a true king becomes clearer.

Plot

As can be seen from the above examples, repetition is often used to structure and enhance the plot of the narrative, and plot is central to what narrative is. Plot, though, works on a number of different levels or layers which work as literary and theological contexts for the stories we are dealing with. Preaching from narrative involves the exploration of these layers. Plot is the driving force of a story, providing not just its framework but also much of its interest. It is through the plot that we discover what is being said. Sermons on narrative need to retain something of this 'shape' in order to remain true to the story - in order to be truly homiletical.

Narratives are not theses supported by logically subordinate arguments leading to practical implications. Any sermon based on a narrative which is structured in this manner has failed to engage with the literary essence of the story.⁹



⁹ Turner LA, 2010, "Preaching Narrative: Plot" in Kent GJR, Kissling PJ & Turner LA (Eds) *'He Began with Moses...'* Preaching the Old Testament Today, Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 21

There are a number of different ways to outline the plot of a story, the simplest probably being that a story starts with a *conflict* which is followed by a *complication* which leads to a final *resolution* or *dénouement*. However, a more detailed and helpful structure expands this slightly into five components.¹⁰

1. Initial Situation
2. Complication
3. Transforming Action
4. Dénouement
5. Final Situation

We can show this if we think of the repetitive cycle of actions that we mentioned above.

1. Initial Situation - Unfaithfulness of the Israelites
2. Complication - Specific oppression
3. Transforming Action - Yahweh responds to the people's cry
4. Dénouement - Yahweh rescues his people through the chosen judge
5. Final Situation - The land has peace

It can also be used as a structure of the whole of *Judges*:

1. Initial Situation - The continuing conquest of Canaan
2. Complication - The apostasy of Israel
3. Transforming Action - Yahweh responds to the people's cry
4. Dénouement - Yahweh rescues his people through the chosen judges
5. Final Situation - The need for a King

It should be clear that the plot of the book is an over-arching one within which the individual stories are played out within the second, third and fourth. So we can see it in this way when we consider the story of Jephthah:

Initial Situation	1-3	Intro to Jephthah and his situation
Complication	4-28	War with Ammonites
		the approach to Jephthah
		the messages to the Ammonites
Transforming Action	29-33a	Spirit comes on Jephthah
		Jephthah's vow
Dénouement	33b	Victory
Further Complication	34-39	Sacrifice of daughter
Final Situation	40	annual lament

¹⁰ See Turner's chapter (note 8) for a detailed description of this, 15f

But within that overall narrative, we have smaller narratives. So the story of Jephthah's vow has a structure all of its own.

Initial Situation	29	Battle against the Ammonites
Complication	30-31	Vow
Transforming Action	34-35	Jephthah's daughter comes out of the house
Dénouement	36-39a	Jephthah fulfils his vow
Final Situation	39b-40	Commemoration of Jephthah's daughter

Narratives will not always contain all of the elements and will on occasions, as in the example above, include further complications. Also, they may not have a resolution which is 'closed'—it may be open-ended. Indeed, the end of the whole book of *Judges* is just such an open-ended final situation, opening the way for the narrative of Samuel and the eventual coming of David.

Another way of discovering the story is through *pivotal points*, the moments when something happens upon which the next stage of the story hinges. Thus in the Jephthah story, we might consider four major pivotal points:

11:4-6	They turn to Jephthah
11:27	May Yahweh, the Judge, decide
11:30	The vow
11:34	Daughter comes out to meet him

These four moments have a profound effect on the development of the story and any sermon on Jephthah will need to deal with them and, indeed, use them in its development.

Character

Another important element in narrative is character. This and plot are inextricably linked and need to be dealt with in this way. The story of Jephthah is not just about the actions in the story—the plot—it is also about the *man* Jephthah; it is about *how* he acts and *why* he acts. Our preaching on narrative needs to take serious account of the characterisation of the protagonists.

Kissling¹¹ points out that there are four major areas where we need to exercise caution when looking at characters in the Bible and how we deal with them in preaching.

1. Reading human characters heroically
2. Oversimplification of the narrative portrayal
3. Reading characters as moral models
4. Psychologising of characters

These four dangers are linked but generally tend towards a presentation of black-and-white situations where the 'good' characters are always to be seen as acting correctly and the 'bad' characters badly. The biblical narratives are much more complicated and subtle than that. Thus, in terms of *Judges*, the danger is to reduce people such as Gideon to the status of a hero. The biblical narrative is much more subtle than that, and much truer to real life. It shows Gideon as a complex character who exhibits lack of faith in the midst of faith and who bows to pressure from the Israelites and creates an ephod which becomes a stumbling block to them and leads them into idolatry (*Judges* 8:22-27). Perhaps it is not coincidental that the last time we are told the land had peace is during Gideon's time.

¹¹ Kissling PJ, 2010, "Preaching Narrative: Characters" in Kent GJR, Kissling PJ & Turner LA (Eds) *'He Began with Moses...'* *Preaching the Old Testament Today*, Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 31

If we do not recognise and acknowledge the complexities present in the biblical presentation of characters, we will tend towards oversimplification, where we fail to preach the contradictory nature of Gideon’s (or other judges’) character. This can easily lead to a point where we find ourselves using all the actions of our ‘hero’ as models to be followed and emulated, as we fail to see that even Gideon can make mistakes. Our argument all too easily runs something like this: “Gideon puts out a fleece, Gideon is a good guy therefore putting out a fleece must be a good thing to do.”

This tendency helps explain the difficulties we have with the sacrifice of Jephthah’s daughter. If we reduce Jephthah to a ‘hero’, we have to explain away the plain meaning of the text—that he sacrificed his daughter—by saying she simply remained unmarried because a ‘hero’ would never act like that. If though, we remember that the characters are flawed, that the book shows a spiritual decline and the gradual canaanisation of Israel, then Jephthah’s actions make sense—horrible sense, but sense nonetheless.

Biblical characters' actions should not be simply taken at face value but filtered through the overall narrative of the story, the book and of scripture as a whole. Biblical narrators do not work as modern narrators and rarely comment explicitly on the morality of actions (as we saw above), preachers, therefore, have to work hard!

A final concern is our tendency to miss the point of OT narratives and the depiction of characters within them. OT depictions of human characters are generally not given to vilify Israel’s enemies or to heroise her ancestors... [They] refuse to hide the weaknesses, failings, sins and foibles of its human characters because their character and example is not the focal point. In fact their weaknesses point to the remarkable fact that the Lord chooses to use them anyway.¹²

This final sentence may well be one of the most important ones to remember when preaching from Judges - God uses us, in his grace and mercy, despite our failings not because of our perfection. In this way, OT characters are an encouragement to all of us as we struggle to live out a life of faith in the real world.

A final point in terms of character is that the only truly reliable character in OT narrative is God himself. Preaching OT narrative will necessarily deal with the OT world view that God is active in history and in the life of his chosen people. Narrative reminds us that the primary purpose of scripture is the revelation of God himself.

Character is important and as we preach from the OT - and from Judges - we need to deal with the characterisation of the individuals involved. Thus we need to read the text closely in search of the markers which give us a clue to their character.

Jephthah

	Character Point	Thoughts
:1	Mighty warrior	Usually a positive description
	Son of a prostitute	Parentage raises issues of morality - not something we are comfortable with, but a ‘clue’ we are expected to pick up on.
:2	Driven away from family	The outcast - links back to another outcast in the book, perhaps: Abimelech
:3	Leader of outlaws	His companions are ‘empty’ men
:9	Ambitious	“if <i>Yahweh</i> gives them over to me, I will be your head” - There was no king in Israel...

¹² Kissling PJ, 2010, 34-5

	Character Point	Thoughts
:11f	Knowledge of Israel's history	Is his biblical knowledge genuine? Perhaps, but how does this tie in with later actions?
:27	Yahweh, the Judge	Mentions God, but sense something else is happening—using God, as he does earlier for his own ends. Manipulation...
:29	Spirit of Yahweh comes on him	What are we to make of this? Does this mean that God approves of all he does?
:30	Vow	Manipulation, naivety or ruthlessness, pagan influence—the canonisation of Israel
:35	Cannot break vow	Lack of knowledge of God's Word (but see above), or unwillingness to lose face?

We can sum this up in this way:

An ambitious and ruthless man who is ready to manipulate God and people for his own ends and who, despite seemingly good knowledge of God's dealings with his people and his word, uses pagan ideas of how to manipulate God for his own ends and is then unwilling to lose face, even when that means the sacrifice of his only child.

Biblical Context

Having considered the context of the narrative within the book of Judges, the nature of the plot and characterisation in the story itself, our preaching will want to place the story in the overall narrative of scripture. There are a number of narratives we could consider and use but in some way we will want to remain faithful to the OT text as well as to the reference to Jephthah in Hebrews 11:32 and to the reality that we live post-Golgotha.

Our preaching will want - without oversimplifying or simply sloganising - to move between the world of the narrative and the world of the worshippers to bring a meaningful story. This is something narrative is particularly well placed to provide as it is not always clear-cut, it deals with the realities of living as God's people in God's world, but as fallen people in a fallen world, and it reminds us that only God himself is truly reliable. Our application will, therefore, be a 'running application' as part of the retelling of the story not a separate section towards the end of the sermon or tacked on in our conclusion. Application will be woven in to the story so that our listeners are drawn into the OT narrative and confronted by a worldview which is radically different from our culture's, and so question their own actions in the light of that biblical worldview.

While there are a large number of overarching themes that we could draw from the book of Judges, the four below are especially important from the story of Jephthah.

- God is sovereign
- God cannot be manipulated
- God protects Israel because of the coming Messiah
- God uses even fallen people

Conclusion

It is important we preach from OT narrative and that we preach from it recognising all of its detail, intricacies and beauty. Our culture is a story-telling culture, perhaps not in the traditional sense of stories around the camp fire, but television and film tell stories which we watch, listen to and are moulded by. All preaching is (or should aim to be) transformational. Narrative with its emphasis on world view and its abil-

ity to speak to the heart and not just the head is a vital component in the transformation we look for in ourselves and our listeners.

A Sample Sermon Outline

This is not meant to be a 'perfect' example of what a sermon outline from the story of Jephthah might look like, but an example of how some of the issues we have discussed can be brought together.

It is imagined as being one of a series of sermons on the judges, so the congregation has some background knowledge already.

I. Introduction

- I.A. The bringing of peace through earlier judges
- I.B. The recurring 'need for a king' in the later judges
- I.C. The cycle of rebellion, restoration etc

II. Jephthah - Introduction

- II.A. Who is he?
 - II.A.I. Son of a prostitute
 - II.A.II. Disinherited and cast out
 - II.A.III. Leader of outlaws (hollow men)

III. The call from the people

- III.I. Call to Jephthah NOT to Yahweh
 - III.I.I. Spiritual decline
 - III.I.II. Our own tendency to turn to human rather than divine assistance
- III.II. Jephthah accepts call
 - III.II.I. God is reduced to a spectator
 - III.II.II. He spiritualises his own ambition
 - III.II.III. Our own tendency to pay lip service to God while pursuing our own plans

IV. The battle

- IV.I. Jephthah invokes God's name
- IV.II. Jephthah knows God's saving acts from the past
- IV.III. Jephthah doubts God's willingness to act now - so...

V. The vow

- V.I. What does he expect to come from his house?
- V.II. What does this show about his view of God?
 - V.II.I. A small God
 - V.II.II. A God to be manipulated
 - V.II.III. A God he has confused with the god's of the peoples around.
- V.III. God cannot be manipulated - either then or now
- V.IV. God cannot be offered anything that is not already his - then or now.
- V.V. Where do we confuse our God with the gods of this age?
 - V.V.I. Materialism
 - V.V.II. Narcissism
 - V.V.III. Self-gratification...

VI. The victory

- VI.I. God brings the victory not Jephthah
 - VI.I.I. God uses Jephthah despite his confusion
- VII. The return
 - VII.I. Jephthah's daughter comes out of the house
 - VII.I.I. Human sacrifice in the peoples around
 - VII.I.II. Rash words come back to haunt him
 - VII.I.III. The potential way out
 - VII.I.III.I. Leviticus 27:1-8
 - VII.II. Ignorance or fear of loss of face?
 - VII.II.I. Our tendency to continue on a path of sin because to back down means losing face...
 - VII.III. Really sacrifices his daughter
 - VII.III.I. the climax of the story
 - VII.III.II. a picture of the moral and spiritual decline of the judges
 - VII.III.III. a picture of the moral and spiritual decline of the nation
- VIII. Where did it all go wrong?
 - VIII.I. Created a god in his own image rather than serving the God who created humanity in his image
- IX. Conclusion
 - IX.I. God uses even people like Jephthah
 - IX.II. Post Golgotha there is always a way back to forgiveness and service whatever the sin
 - IX.III. Life must be lived in God's way not ours

A Basic Structure of Judges¹³

Chapters 1:1 - 3:6 - The Background to the Canaanisation of Israel

Accounts of some events immediately prior to and following the death of Joshua. This section ends with the comment that the Canaanites and other nations "were left to see whether [Israel] would obey the Lord's commands." (Judges 3:4) The rest of the book portrays this struggle in graphic detail.

Chapters 3:7 - 16:31 - Cycles of Apostasy and Deliverance

The stories of the judges themselves which comprises those we know as 'minor' judges - of which there are eight - and those judges which have more space devoted to their stories and which are the ones we are most familiar with (in **bold**).

Othniel	Judges 3:7-11
Ehud	Judges 3:12-30
Shamgar	Judges 3:31
Deborah	Judges 4:1-5:31
Gideon	Judges 6:1-8:35
Abimelech	Judges 9:1-57
Tola	Judges 10:1-2
Jair	Judges 10:3-5
Jephthah	Judges 10:6-12:7
Ibzan	Judges 12:8-10

¹³ This is simplified and adapted from a number of sources. One of the most helpful, very brief, introductions to Judges is to be found in *NIV Proclamation Bible*, 2013, London: Hodder and Stoughton

Elon

Judges 12:11-12

Abdon

Judges 12:13-15

Samson

Judges 13:1-16:31

Chapters 17:1 - 21:25 - The Evidence of the Canaanisation of Israel

Events during the time of the judges which, all too clearly, portray what happens when God is left out of the equation.