

Principles for Interpreting Narratives

We conclude this chapter by isolating ten summarizing principles for interpreting Old Testament narratives that should also help you avoid certain pitfalls as you read.

1. An Old Testament narrative usually does not directly teach a doctrine.
2. An Old Testament narrative usually illustrates a doctrine or doctrines taught propositionally elsewhere.
3. Narratives record what happened—not necessarily what should have happened or what ought to happen every time. Therefore, not every narrative has an individual identifiable moral application.
4. What people do in narratives is not necessarily a good example for us. Frequently, it is just the opposite.
5. Most of the characters in Old Testament narratives are far from perfect—as are their actions as well.
6. We are not always told at the end of a narrative whether what happened was good or bad. We are expected to be able to judge this on the basis of what God has taught us directly and categorically elsewhere in Scripture.
7. All narratives are selective and incomplete. Not all the relevant details are always given (cf. John 21:25). What does appear in the narrative is everything that the inspired author thought important for us to know.
8. Narratives are not written to answer all our theological questions. They have particular, specific, limited purposes and deal with certain issues, leaving others to be dealt with elsewhere in other ways.
9. Narratives may teach either explicitly (by clearly stating something) or implicitly (by clearly implying something without actually stating it).
10. In the final analysis, God is the hero of all biblical narratives.