

8a: Interpreting Old Testament Narrative

I. Ten Principles for Interpreting Old Testament Narratives

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.
 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 the Old Testament narratives are far from perfect and their actions are far from perfect, too.
 6. We are not always told at the end of a narrative whether what happened was good or bad.
 7. All narratives are selective and incomplete.
 8. Narratives are not written to answer all our theological questions.
 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.
- see G. D. Fee and D. Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 106 for these 10 points.

II. What Old Testament Narratives are NOT

1. Old Testament narratives are not allegories or stories filled with hidden meanings.
2. Old Testament narratives are not primarily intended to teach moral lessons. Their overall purpose is to tell what God was doing in Israel.
3. Old Testament narratives are implicit examples of explicit teaching given elsewhere in Scripture.

III. How to Discover the Message

1. Recognize the nature of Old Testament narrative
 - a. Narratives are selective history.
 - b. Recognize that the stories are carefully arranged with a plot, with characters, and they come from a specific point of view.
 - c. We need to analyze the flow of the plot, pay attention to the dialogue, and see how certain events help to develop the message that the author is trying to communicate.

d. Remember that the author of the narrative will, many times, leave the judgment call on the characters in the story to the reader. The author will typically not tell you how to view the characters.

2. Recognize the purpose of the narrative.

a. The narrative is history, but not just history. The story being told was selected in order to teach theology.

3. Read the narrative within its larger literary context.

4. Obviously, you need to analyze the specific passage, read it carefully and closely.

Pay special attention to: **Repetition** (1 Kings 1:1-6)

Pay attention to: **Actions**, like repeated actions (the “sin cycle” in Judges, like Judges 3:7)

Pay attention to: **Dialogue**, because the narrator is showing special attention in dialogue and that’s where he’ll give hints to the point of the story (see Judges 14:1-2 and Judges 16:21)

5. Interpret the passage theologically, understand the story from God’s perspective. Always ask this question: What is God doing in and/or through the story?

IV. Example Interpretation

-In Judges 6, Gideon put out a fleece to confirm God’s calling him to deliver Israel from the Midianites

-A closer look at Judges 6-8 suggests that Gideon is not a model for how believers are to seek guidance from God

-His response is actually a response of doubt and fear, and it even borders on unbelief

-Judges 6:16 makes it clear that God’s will was totally clear in Gideon’s mind

-Judges 6:12 refers to him as a “valiant warrior”

-Gideon incredibly objects to this and says that he’s unworthy for the task (Judges 6:14-15)

-Judges 6:17-18-Gideon makes his first request for a sign by asking the angel to wait as he prepares an offering for him

-When the Lord commands Gideon to destroy his father’s altar to Baal and the Asherah pole, Gideon responds in fear

-Gideon first asks for the wool fleece placed on the threshing floor to be wet and for the ground to be dry

-the fact that the fleece was wet enough to wring water out of it while the ground was dry suggests something miraculous has happened

-The second sign with the fleece is probably even more supernatural: the ground is all wet and the fleece lying on the ground is dry

-Background Information:

-tests about the fleece were related to God demonstrating his sovereign power over Baal

-Canaanite mythology taught that Baal was the source of fertility and the rains needed for good crops and harvests

-signs with the fleece were designed to show that the Lord was more powerful than the gods that the Midianite oppressors worshipped

-God had demonstrated his power and control over Baal when Baal did not avenge the destruction of his own altar

-the thing that finally convinces Gideon to trust God is when he overheard the dream of a pagan soldier about a loaf of bread rolling through his camp, as told in Judges 7:13-14

-We are to obey God's will as revealed in the commands and directives of Scripture.

-Our responsibility is to obey and trust prayerfully God's wise and loving direction in our lives

8b: Bible Translations

I. The Spectrum: Categories for Bible Translations Philosophies

The four categories on this spectrum are: highly literal, modified literal, functional approximation, and unduly free.

1. Highly Literal: A highly literal translation is a translation that does not attempt to keep English grammar rules, focusing almost entirely on the words.

-Isaiah 10:7 (NIV) reads: But this is not what he intends, this is not what he has in mind; his purpose is to destroy, to put an end to **many nations**.

The Julia Smith translation: And he will not thus purpose, and his heart will not reckon thus; for in his heart to destroy and to cut off **nations not few**.

2. Modified Literal: A modified literal translation focuses closely on words, often modifying the Hebrew and Greek grammar just enough to fit into acceptable English sentence structure.

3. Functional Approximation: A functional approximation translation 1) focuses less on finding one English word to translate each Hebrew and Greek word, 2) does not try to reflect Hebrew and Greek literary style, 3) places a higher priority on clarity and naturalness, and 4) has as its goal to clearly express the meaning of the original text in a form that represents current, acceptable, English literary style.

4. Unduly Free: An unduly free translation disregards basic translation principles, freely changing the meaning, historical setting, and/or participants to suit a particular audience. This philosophy is also referred to as a “paraphrase”

- Highly literal translations are like Julia Smith’s translation and interlinears
- Modified literal translations include the NASB (1995), ESV, NKJV, and the KJV
- Functional approximation translations include the NLT, and the CEV
- An unduly free translation is like the Message
- Some translations choose a mediating approach, like the CSB, the NIV, and the NET.

II. Modified Literal Translation Philosophy

-An excerpt from the preface to the extremely popular ESV:

The ESV is an “essentially literal” translation that seeks as far as possible to reproduce the precise wording of the original text and the personal style of each Bible writer. As such, its emphasis is on “word-for-word” correspondence, at the same time taking full account of differences in grammar, syntax, and idiom between current literary English and the original languages. Thus it seeks to be transparent to the original text, letting the reader see as directly as possible the structure and exact force of the original. In contrast to the ESV, some Bible versions have followed a “thought-for-thought” rather than “word-for-word” translation philosophy, emphasizing “dynamic equivalence” rather than the “essentially literal” meaning of the original. A “thought-for-thought” translation is of necessity more inclined to reflect the interpretive views of the translator and the influences of contemporary culture.

Some examples of the ESV not being “essentially literal”

Luke 1:34b

Literal: since I do not know a man

NKJV: since I do not know a man

ESV: since I am a virgin

Mark 12:19b

Literal: his brother should take the wife

KJV: his brother should take his wife

ESV: the man must take the widow

1 Corinthians 1:26b

Literal: not many wise according to flesh

NASB: not many wise according to the flesh

ESV: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards

The ideal range is the stated objective, but, upon analysis, the real range shows the actual renderings. So a translation like the ESV has many translations that fall into the mediating category and even the functional approximation category.

III. Functional Approximation Translation Philosophy

-Examples of the NIV being more literal than some modified literal translations.

Proverbs 24:32a

Literal: I set my heart

NIV: I applied my heart

ESV: I considered

NASB: I reflected

Lamentations 2:3

Literal: every horn of Israel

NIV: every horn of Israel

ESV: all the might of Israel

NASB: all the strength of Israel

Psalms 69:14

Literal: those who hate me

NIV: those who hate me

ESV: my enemies

NASB: my foes

Philippians 1:14

Literal: my bonds

NIV: my chains

ESV: my imprisonment

NASB: my imprisonment

A functional approximate translation, the best example of which is the NLT, tries to stay in a nice, neat category, but it also has a range, both an ideal (what they say they will do) and a real or actual (what they actually do).

IV. Four Bible Translations

I want to talk briefly about four Bible translations: the NIV, the ESV, the NLT, and the CSB

1. The NIV: The NIV is mostly known for the 1984 version, though this is quickly changing

- new translation from the original languages
- updated in 2011
- when updating to the 2011 version, the NIV translation committee made many great changes

2. The ESV

- first published in 2001
- a revision of the RSV, which is a revision of the ASV, which is a revision of the ERV, which is a revision of the KJV
- made minor updates in 2007, 2011, and 2016.
- still might update the ESV, though they say the updates will be minimal and infrequent.

3. The NLT

- first published in 1996
- a revision of the Living Bible, which was a revision of the ASV, which was a revision of the ERV, which was a revision of the KJV
- Major revision in 2004, which was a huge improvement over the 1996 edition
- made minor revisions in 2007, 2013, and 2015

4. The CSB

- originally called the Holman Christian Standard Bible (the HCSB)
- first published in 2004
- a new translation from the original languages
- a minor revision published in 2010
- major update in March, 2017 and was renamed the CSB.

1. There were changes made for the sake of consistency. For example, in 1 Corinthians 1:12

“I follow Paul, I follow Apollos, I follow Cephas” (NIV, ESV)

“I am with Paul, I’m with Apollos, I’m with Cephas” (HCSB)

“I belong to Paul, I belong to Apollos, I belong to Cephas” (CSB)

2. There were changes made for modern English purposes.

1 Corinthians 1:10

“Now I urge you, brothers” (HCSB)

“Now I urge you, brothers and sisters” (CSB)

3. Major distinctives of the HCSB were revised.

There were four categories of major distinctives for the HCSB.

1) Rather than translating YAHWEH in the Old Testament as LORD, it was translated as Yahweh

2) The HCSB translated the same Greek word either as Christ or Messiah. They translated it as Christ when in a Greco-Roman context, and Messiah if in a Jewish context.

3) The HCSB tried to consistently translate the Greek word *doulos* as slave rather than as servant.

4) The HCSB tried to capitalize pronouns that referred to deity. However, there are several verses where the pronoun referent is ambiguous. So, sometimes, it’s hard to know whether or not to capitalize.

In all four areas, the CSB did a better job, made an improvement, over the HCSB. There are other areas, as well, but these are the major four areas.

V. Gender-Neutral Bible Translations

-gender-neutral Bible translation controversy” (Gender-Inclusive or the Gender-Accurate Bible translation controversy)

-Languages don’t match up in their use of gender. For example,

-in Spanish, the word “table” is feminine; in English, it is neuter

-in Greek, the word “sin” is feminine; in English, it is neuter

-in English, the word “man” used to be a generic word to reference “people” or “humankind.” However, the English language has changed and most people don’t use the word “man” in that way anymore

- translations should reflect the common use of a language.

Here are three significant points on this:

1. This is **not** a feminist agenda
2. This is **not** about changing theology
3. This **is** about linguistics

Examples:

Matthew 4:4a

“Man shall not live **by** bread alone...”

- ESV, KJV, NKJV

“Man shall not live **on** bread alone...”

- NASB, NIV

“Man must not live on bread alone...”

- CSB

“People do not live by bread alone...”

- NLT

Matthew 5:9 says this:

ESV: “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God”

KJV: “Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God”

Proverbs 6:12 says:

Literal: “A worthless man”

KJV: “A naughty person”

ESV: “A worthless person” (CSB, NKJV)

Ezekiel 44:25a

Literal: “And they shall come at no dead man”

KJV: “And they shall come at no dead person”

ESV: “They shall not defile themselves by going near to a dead person”

CSB: “A priest may not come near a dead person so that he becomes defiled”

There are several categories that serve as examples for this.

1) The first category is the word “children” for “sons”

Matthew 5:45a

ESV: “so that you may be **sons** of your Father”

KJV: “That ye may be the **children** of your Father”

2) The second category is the word “people” for “men”

Matthew 4:19

ESV: “I will make you fishers of **men**”

KJV: “I will make you fishers of **men**”
NIV: “I will send you out to fish for **people**”
CSB: “I will make you fish for **people**”
NLT: “I will show you how to fish for **people**”

3) The third category is the word “ancestors” for “fathers”

1 Samuel 12:6b

ESV: “The LORD is witness, who appointed Moses and Aaron and brought your **fathers** up out of the land of Egypt” (cf. KJV, NASB, NKJV)

CSB: “The LORD, who appointed Moses and Aaron and who brought your **ancestors** up from the land of Egypt, is a witness” (cf. NIV, NLT)

4) The fourth category is “brothers and sisters” for “brothers”

Philippians 4:1a

ESV: “Therefore, my **brothers**...” (cf. KJV)

NASB: “Therefore, my beloved **brethren**...”

CSB: “So then, my ... **brothers and sisters**...”
(cf. NLT, NIV)

VI. Which Bible Translation Should I Use?

-Which Bible translation should I use? This is actually not the best way to ask the question

-The better question is this: Which Bible translations should I use?

Here is an illustration why to do this.

Malachi 2:16a

KJV: For the LORD, the God of Israel, saith that he **hateth putting away**

NASB: “For **I hate divorce**,” says the LORD, the God of Israel

NKJV: For the LORD God of Israel says That **He hates divorce**

NLT: “For **I hate divorce!**” says the LORD, the God of Israel

NIV: “The man who **hates and divorces his wife**,” says the LORD, the God of Israel

CSB: “If he **hates and divorces his wife**,” says the LORD God of Israel

ESV: For the man **who does not love his wife but divorces her**, says the LORD, the God of Israel

VII. Conclusion

-The two best in the modified literal category are the ESV and NASB. I recommend for this category the ESV.

-The best functional equivalent translations are the NLT and CEV. I recommend the NLT.

-The best “mediating translations” are the CSB, NIV, and NET.

I recommend both the NIV and CSB.

-When you are doing a deep study of the text, use at least one translation from each category.

What about study Bibles?

-the ESV Study Bible is spectacular

- beautiful, accurate pictures and illustrations on various topics

-“contextual” overviews for sections of Scripture are excellent

-notes are written by conservative evangelicals

-each book of the Bible has a helpful introduction

-2,700+ pages long and contains many helpful articles.

-(new) NIV study Bible is excellent

-over 60 scholarly contributors

-articles on major themes of Scripture

-almost 20,000 study notes

-contains hundreds of color illustrations

-Each book of the Bible has an introduction to that book

-a 35,000 verse concordance.

-CSB study Bible is a great option

-NIV Grace and Truth Study Bible, being released in 2021, should be a great addition to the options

-If you are looking for one book to read on Bible translations, my highest recommendation is for Dave Brunn’s book, *One Bible, Many Versions*