



THE WORD BECAME FRESH

HOW TO PREACH FROM OLD TESTAMENT NARRATIVE TEXTS



Dale Ralph Davis

MENTOR



There is no more gifted expositor of the Old Testament in our day than Ralph Davis. His book not only brings scholarly research to bear on the subject, but also reflects his many years of preaching week after week through the OT. What a gift to the church to have such a fine book.

Dr Richard L. Pratt, Jr.

Adjunct Professor of Old Testament, Reformed Theological Seminary
President, Third Millennium Ministries

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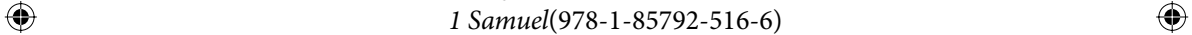
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P R E F A C E

This book was not my idea. I'm leery of saying too much about preaching. Over a decade ago I taught a course on expository preaching and concluded from that experience that I never wanted to teach preaching. These pages therefore focus on the proper interpretation of Old Testament narratives in preparation for preaching. A step removed!

I am a bit puzzled over why many Christians seem to think the Old Testament is such a 'problem.' I know the usual answers to that, but I can find many of the same 'difficulties' with the New Testament. I am not so puzzled about why some pastors and teachers are perplexed about expounding Old Testament texts. For nearly two hundred years a skeptical brand of Old Testament criticism has largely held sway in our universities and divinity halls; it 'un-godded' the Old Testament, implied the Old Testament documents were extremely complex and involved, and managed to make Old Testament studies mostly boring, lifeless, and dull. Of course the occasional student finds this high priestly craft of Old Testament criticism attractive. But many simply write the Old Testament off. If it's as complicated as they have been taught, it is far too bewildering and esoteric for them to bother about, except for dipping into the Psalms for occasional funerals.

Examples of this deadening approach literally drip out of commentaries. Look up Exodus 19:21-25 in Martin Noth's *Exodus*. He spends eight lines on the passage, dubs it 'secondary,' makes a couple of factual observations, notes a difficulty on one





half verse, and calls the last verse a 'fragment.' Even a passing but half-thoughtful glance at the passage shows a marvelous theology of Yahweh's compassion-in-severity. But Noth can't see it – he's too busy analyzing for fragments and additions.

I'm not on a crusade against the villains of Old Testament studies. One learns even from the 'villains.' And there have been far more hopeful signs in Old Testament studies in recent years. But I still believe that traditional Old Testament criticism has had the effect of killing the Old Testament for the church. This little tome can hardly reverse that, but it is meant as an exercise in reading the Old Testament for fun and profit. As my mother-in-law used to say, 'It's different anyway.' And maybe it will help.

Most of what I do in the following pages involves discussing examples of Old Testament narratives. I have tried to select examples from a broad range of possibilities. I have previously written expository commentaries on Joshua through 2 Kings (available through Christian Focus), but I have tried to cite a majority of my examples outside of those books (to avoid repetition from those commentaries). However, the Joshua-through-2 Kings segment does contain a pile of narrative and so I have had to dip into those materials occasionally. By the way, I assume that you have the biblical text handy in order to carry on your 'Berean' work.

One always owes a debt to his taskmasters! Because of kind invitations in recent years I have been forced to pull together some work on Old Testament narrative. Hence my hearty thanks to hosts and hearers at Proclamation Trust, London; Parkside Church, Chagrin Falls, Ohio; the Scottish Ministry Assembly, Glasgow; Faith Mission Bible College, Edinburgh; *Preaching and Preachers*, South Africa; ministers' fraternals in south Wales; and Reformed Theological Seminary, my erstwhile employer, where I was able to teach courses on Old Testament narrative.

I send forth this study as a token of gratitude to Dr. Alec Motyer, who has always demonstrated that rigorous study and devotional warmth are amicable bedfellows.

Easter 2006, The Resurrection of our Lord





CHAPTER 1

Approach

Begging – the place to start

I was reading Richard Pratt's fine book, *He Gave Us Stories*. He was discussing what precious little attention we give to the work of the Holy Spirit in the task of interpreting Scripture. Of course, some articles and brief pieces discuss this, but Dr. Pratt stated that to his knowledge the most recent work of any size on this matter was written by John Owen over three hundred years ago. I looked up the end note for the documentation; there Pratt cites Owen and John Owen's words smacked me between the eyes:

For a man solemnly to undertake the interpretation of any portion of Scripture without invocation of God, to be taught and instructed by his Spirit, is a high provocation of him; nor shall I expect the discovery of truth from any one who thus proudly engages in a work so much above his ability.¹

We are guilty of arrogance, not merely neglect, when we fail to beg for the Spirit's help in the study of Scripture. We may even have such arrogance even when we seem to be seeking the Spirit's aid – I think of those times when in a light-headed tokenism we utter our slap-happy prayer that the Lord would 'guide and direct us as we study this passage.' One shudders to think how flippant we are. But how many more times we neglect any overt seeking of the Spirit's help! The pressure

is on. The passage must be studied for the sermon or lesson. We pull out our exegetical notes; we grab several of the better commentaries off the shelf; make sure one Bible dictionary of choice is close at hand. Deep into our study time the thought occurs to us that we have not looked – nor did we think of looking – to the God who breathed out this Scripture to give us an understanding of the Scripture. He will likely give that understanding through the tools we use, but when we use tools while neglecting him the tools have become idols.

We may have a high view of the Bible; we may be distraught because large sectors of the church seem to ignore its authority. Yet in our own Scripture work we easily ignore its chief Interpreter. Professionalism rather than piety drives us. We needn't be surprised at our sterility and poverty if we refuse to be beggars for the Spirit's help.

There is that well-worn story of George Gillespie at the meeting of Parliament and the Westminster Assembly. Someone made a long and studious argument in favor of Erastianism.² His associates urged young Gillespie to answer it. Gillespie repeated the substance of the previous discourse and refuted it. It was common in the Assembly for those listening to take notes while someone was speaking – as an aid to their own memory. George Gillespie had seemed to be doing just that while listening to the speaker he later refuted. But when his friends could sneak a look at Gillespie's notebook, all they could find were scribblings like, 'Lord, send light,' 'Lord, give assistance,' 'Lord, defend thine own cause.'³ That must ever be our attitude toward interpreting Scripture. We must begin with the Spirit (cf. Gal. 3:3), and we must not only begin with him but we must keep returning to him again and again. We always must begin with begging.

The Smoke-filled Room and Asking Questions

I think sometimes we can have – or give – the impression that there is a smoke-filled room hidden away somewhere in the Palace of Biblical Interpretation where a few hermeneutical

high priests parcel out the secrets for *really* understanding Scripture, especially the Old Testament. Of course, this is simply mental mythology and sometimes it helps for someone to say so. Hence I was much heartened to read Alec Moyter's confession:

There is no special mystique or approach to preaching that has to descend on preachers when the Lord leads them to minister from the Old rather than from the New. There are no special avenues into preaching from the Old Testament nor any special tricks of the trade that I can share with you.⁴

Nor do I have any tricks. I cannot offer any magical procedure which, if followed, will unlock the riches of Old Testament narrative. I only intend to highlight various angles on narrative texts which assist in interpretation for preaching and teaching. I'll cite a bunch of examples which are either culled from my own study or hawked gratefully – and with credit – from others. I simply want to stir up the biblical juices of preachers and students, to help people walk away from the text muttering about what a delightful book God has given us. So if you are looking for a learned and intricate discussion on the aspects of Old Testament narrative or for a careful and complicated technique for unlocking narrative texts, you have blundered into the wrong book. Check the refund policy.

If I reject some esoteric technique that does not mean I have no procedure or plan when approaching a biblical text. In facing Scripture one must take account of two realities: Spirit and text. This fact forces me to one of my operating presuppositions: *God has given his word in the form of literature, part of which is narrative; I should therefore use all available tools for understanding such literature.* So I seek the Spirit's aid and use an approach suited to the form of his word. Hence, at the very least, I ask *questions* of the text. This is my 'procedure' so far as it goes. There is nothing super-

charged about it. I do not follow this regime of questions in any decreed order. It is all very basic. I use it partly because it is simple and I can carry it around in my mental hip pocket. Let me briefly discuss these questions.

Why? (Intention). Why did the writer include this text? What was he trying to get across by relating it? What does he mean to teach by/in it? It's safe to say that usually the writer's purpose is *theocentric* – he intends to communicate something about God, i.e., his character, purposes, demands, or ways. Sometimes intention is obvious, right on the surface of the text. Note 1 Kings 12:15 and 24 for understanding Rehoboam's fiasco. And if one pays attention to Yahweh's statement in Judges 7:2 it will keep one from accusing most of Gideon's men of drinking in a 'self-centred manner' (a la one expositor). At other times repetition may betray intention (see Gen. 39, Exod. 1, and 2 Kings 1). Sometimes the literary shape of the passage helps isolate the intention (e.g., Rahab's confession of faith at the heart of Joshua 2, or the Spirit's power at the hinge of 1 Sam. 11:1-11). Or the writer may suck you into his intention by drawing you into the particular mood of the story (try 2 Sam. 13). Again, it may be the strange stuff that leads you to his intention – Why, for example, a genealogy as the climax of the Book of Ruth (Ruth 4:18-22)?

Of course, the skeptic is perfectly free to ask whether we can always be sure we have – or can get at – the writer's intention. Maybe not, but I find that stubbornly asking this question opens up more texts for me. What is this doing here? Why on earth would anyone tell this strange story at this point? It is good exercise in itself and, more often than not, it yields pay dirt. If one still comes up empty, Walter Kaiser's counsel shows the 'way of escape': '[W]henever we are at a loss as to what we should preach on a passage, *we will never go wrong if we focus on God*, his actions and his requirements.'⁵

Now all this concern with a writer's intention is terribly out of step. I call it 'dinosaur hermeneutics.' Reader-response

criticism is more the current rage; it only wants to answer, 'How does this text affect me?' There is no precise or correct meaning but only meanings which arise from within the reader.⁶ I admit my preoccupation with a writer's intention is dated. And I really don't care. It's hard to get away from the suspicion that someone meant to mean something with a text. Sooner or later folks will recognize that – again.

Where? (Context). I have a note from our middle son when he was in middle school. It's on a torn-off slip of paper and reads: 'Wake me up at 7:30 tomorrow morning so I can read the Bible.' You might think we raised a very pious thirteen-year-old. But you have to understand the 'context': our boys were avid fans and imitators of those muscular dramatists of 'professional wrestling.' They would watch it on TV and then put on their own shows. Because of the time they spent watching this stuff, I, instead of forbidding it, legislated that they had to do an hour of Bible reading for every hour they were going to watch wrestling. My parental wisdom or lack thereof is not the issue here. The point is that knowing the context may temper your estimate of Seth's piety.

And so of every text or narrative we always ask: Where does this occur? Where does it occur literarily? What story comes before it? What account follows it? Does remembering Genesis 27, for example, affect the way you hear Genesis 28:13-15? Where does the text appear historically? The Book of Lamentations is not a narrative text, but who would dream of interpreting the 'great is thy faithfulness' of chapter 3 apart from the smoke, ruin, and despair of 587 BC? Or where does the text occur religiously or culturally? Knowing something about paganism, for example, helps one with 1 Kings 18:27 (and Ps. 121:3-4).

How? (Structure). I want to know if the text is 'packaged' in a certain way. Does it have a symmetrical development? Is it put together after a definite pattern? Does the structure reveal an intended emphasis (cf. my remarks on 'intention')? I also include in this category matters of literary art. Simply

recognizing the intended contrast between the captive Israelite girl and the unbelieving Israelite king in 2 Kings 5:2-7 can't but stir homiletic juices.

What? (Content). Much of the grunt work of exposition happens here. We must carefully observe what is in the text. I especially focus on what may be puzzling – it may be a word or phrase or idea which I feel I must understand in order to grasp the passage properly. I want to isolate the conundrums that keep me from understanding the text – and solve as many as possible. But much of my time in this category may simply consist of close observation of the text. And there may not be a whole slug of problems. I may simply need to observe, ponder, and draw inferences. Think of Jonah 1:1-2:

Now the word of Yahweh came to Jonah son of Amittai, saying: 'Rise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and preach against it, for their evil has come up before me.'

Simply *thinking* about the text shows there are at least two implications in it – or two assumptions Yahweh makes: (1) Every nation is accountable to him. Yahweh may be specially the God of Israel but he assumes pagan nations (like Assyria) are accountable to him. He is a 'world-class' deity, not the mascot of an Israelite ghetto. (2) Every servant owes obedience to him. He assumes he has the right to command the obedience of specific human servants. So in two verses one sees Yahweh's sovereignty depicted in the big sweep and in the personal dimension. Here is, in the same text, both international and individual sovereignty. God makes the most massive assumptions. This comes from simple observation of the text.

So what? (Appropriation/Application). There's a story in American baseball lore about Lou Novikoff ('The Mad Russian'), who was an outfielder for the Chicago Cubs. Like many baseball players he was superstitious – he insisted that his wife Esther deride him from the stands. He claimed

her mockery inspired him. It all began when Novikoff was playing in the Pacific Coast League. He stepped up to bat. Esther was in a box seat behind home plate, and she yelled, 'You big bum! You can't hit!' Lou swung on the first pitch and smacked it over the left-field wall for a home run. Fans asked Esther why she berated her husband like that. She patiently explained that she did it to make him mad because 'when he gets mad, he gets hits.' Novikoff had a fine year and then went up to the Chicago Cubs for the 1941 season. He had to leave his family behind and he turned in a poor showing that year. But at the 1942 season opener when Novikoff stepped to the plate, a female voice rang out from the box seats: 'Strike the big bum out! He can't hit!' It was his loving Esther. Novikoff smacked a base hit.⁷

Now biblical interpretation is a bit like that. We need to hear some loving mockery behind us, crying, 'So what? What difference does all this study make for anyone? Why should I want to pay any attention to this?' If we are constantly 'berated' that way, it will make us far better interpreters.

More on this later. In my view, however, if we omit 'application,' if we fail to answer the 'So what?', we are short-circuiting the whole purpose of Scripture ('and is profitable for...', 2 Tim. 3:16). If I cannot rub the results of my labor into the pores of the souls of God's people (or of pagans), why am I taking the trouble to do this? If what I study won't preach, there is something wrong with the way I study what I study.

Those are my questions. There's no reek of the smoke-filled room on them. And remember: they are no sure-fire formula. We only hope they will be tools the Spirit will use.

In the e.g. mode...

Look at Judges 13. We can use it as an example of how these questions press us into the text – and then from the text. We're not looking at all the details of the chapter, only some highlights for illustration.

Notice verses 2-5. Here we meet inability, obscurity, and promise. That's a matter of content – the 'what?' question. This woman is both barren (like Sarah in Gen. 11:30) and nameless. She is simply Manoah's wife – she has no name. The memory of Sarah's situation (and that of other biblical 'barrens') can help you here. Isn't this all vintage Yahweh? Starting with nothing, with helplessness, with people who don't have the power even for natural work? And isn't it like him to choose obscure folks as servants? He has no bias for bluebloods. Have we not passed out of 'what?' into 'so what?'

We also find a clear clue about the 'why?', the intention of the writer. Well, at least we have Yahweh's intention clearly stated in giving a son to Mrs. Manoah: 'And he will begin to save Israel from the grip of the Philistines' (v. 5b). Apparently the writer's purpose is to tell us how Yahweh raised up this savior who would begin to save. But we have run into other saviors God has raised up in this book and so this story of a coming savior invites comparison with the previous ones. To some degree this raises the 'how?' question, not in terms of the literary structure of Judges 13 but of the literary contrast between this savior story and all the preceding ones in the book. This Samson will be different from other judges in Judges, for here God isn't using someone who's already on the scene knocking around the hill country of Ephraim somewhere. No, here we have a nativity story – the only one in Judges. God will *grow* a deliverer this time. God is not in a hurry. Indeed, according to verse 5, Samson will only 'begin to save.' Deliverance will be a long haul. Yahweh has a plan but he is not in a panic.

Doesn't this literary observation with its theological freight spill over into the 'so what?' category? Doesn't this come home for you? Doesn't God's deliberate pace bother you sometimes? You set deadlines and he ignores them. There's a deliverance you need, a trial that seems excruciating, and he has not rushed to put everything to rights. Does this text

then solve your dilemma? No. But it at least tells you that you are likely dealing with the real God, for, according to the Scripture, you are facing one of his typical ways.

When I was in high school the teen-age fellows in our congregation took up the offering at our church's morning worship service. For whatever reason, the church leaders had given the oversight of this task to one of our friends, Dennis. That was no problem, except that an unbiased observer could tell that the 'authority' of the position had gone to Dennis' head and made him a bit pompous. One Sunday morning we were singing the hymn before the offering. My friend Dave and I were in a sort of overflow alcove. For some reason Dave had an anxiety attack. He nudged me and indicated that Dennis must have forgotten about having ushers down for the offering. It was nearing the end of the hymn and no ushers were coming down when they should. Why I didn't use my sense and tell Dave to allow Dennis to dangle in his own swagger, I'll never know. So, quick and efficient young fellows that we were, Dave, myself, and two other lads walked in from the side and piously took our position in front of the communion table to await the offertory prayer. Of course, the hymn was not *quite* over and momentarily one felt the tremor in the floor as Dennis and his own legion of ushers began coming down the aisle from the rear of the sanctuary. Fortunately, there was another side door to the left of us that led into the church parking lot, and we usurping ushers quickly vacated and dashed through it. It was both embarrassing and stupid; it came from that impulse that can't wait. And we really run into problems when we think Yahweh should have high blood pressure like we do. It's a whole lesson, isn't it, in the usual ways of God?

That is not a full look at Judges 13. But the passage easily shows that God is surprising (vv. 1-5), fearful (see vv. 8-23), and deliberate (vv. 5, 24-25). And whenever you see God clearly in a text you can be sure there is something very applicable there for you.

Endnotes

1. Cited in Richard L. Pratt, Jr., *He Gave Us Stories* (Brentwood, TN: Wolgemuth & Hyatt, 1990), 404.
2. The view that the state has the right to intervene and overrule in church affairs.
3. James Reid, *Memoirs of the Westminster Divines* (1811; reprint ed., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1982), 2:281-82.
4. Alec Motyer, 'Preaching from the Old Testament,' in *Preaching the Living Word* (Ross-shire: Christian Focus, 1999), 99.
5. Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Preaching and Teaching from the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 57 (emphasis mine).
6. Dan McCartney and Charles Clayton, *Let the Reader Understand* (Wheaton: Bridgepoint, 1994), 281. See their discussion and cf. also Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., and Moises Silva, *An Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 240-45 (by Silva). A reader should be appropriating a text's meaning – but not determining it.
7. Bruce Nash and Allan Zullo, *The Baseball Hall of Shame 4* (New York: Pocket Books, 1990), 180.