

Narrative Studies: Biographies of Biblical Characters

PRINCIPLES FOR PROPER INTERPRETATION

An in-depth study of a biblical character provides both concrete examples and precedents toward understanding God's saving work in history and in discerning patterns of living that are pleasing to the Lord. Follow these basic principles and guidelines in preparing a bible study on those the Lord used to bring about His will – as found throughout the Scriptures.

THE PRINCIPLES

1. Do not be overly broad in your scope.

The student of the Word should not tackle the life of David for a half hour study. Yet, one could look at David's relation to Saul and make application from his life in dealing with a spiritual inferior superior. Again, a study of the life of Moses is far too broad, but a study on how Moses dealt with dissenters in the Old Testament would narrow down your target.

2. Historical facts and events become symbols of spiritual truths only if the Scripture so designates them.

The basic principle here is to not become allegorical in your approach to historical people and events. Paul did use the Red Sea crossing as a picture of baptism in I Corinthians 10, yet we should not then go beyond this and say that the Red Sea was a picture of the blood of Christ and our being cleansed as we walk through the New Covenant promises. The story of David and Goliath is not about facing our fears in a general sense, or practicing our aim for when such a moment comes. Correlating with other passages, it is more a picture of the little rock made without hands destroying the kingdoms of the world – as spoken of in Daniel.

However, Jesus did specifically say that the Old Testament spoke of Him. David is seen as the type of Christ the King, and David's words in various places in the Psalms can be applied to the Lord Jesus. Having said this, utmost caution should be used and strong support for making a connection to Christ must be substantiated with other texts.

3. Historical narratives should be interpreted by the didactic.

This is not an absolute rule but a good rule of thumb. Similar to the above principle, the student should not make a practice of building a doctrine or a practice from an historical narrative unless he has ample support from other clear references in Scripture. Jephthah's vow in Judges 11 and Judas' and Saul's suicides are not examples for us to follow.

4. Historical narratives should be seen in light of their redemptive historical context.

In the Old Testament both God's Laws and His redemptive purposes were not always clearly seen. Penalties for the sins of polygamy and lying in the life of David appear to not have been as strongly enforced as one finds in the New Testament. Paul took traditional vows, had Timothy circumcised, and went through ceremonial washings. But these do not represent explicit patterns for each of us to follow today.

THE PRACTICE

1. Chose your person and set some reasonable boundaries around what aspect of their life you want to cover. Some characters in the Bible will lend themselves to a broad overview of their whole life due to the fact that there is less information about them; others will need to be broken down into more manageable time periods.
2. Using a concordance and any other helpful tools, find all the references to your character that are applicable to your study. Particularly look to correlate what other passages outside the main narrative have to say about the person.

NOTE: If the student is going to narrow down a character's life to a more specific time period, he will still need to become familiar with all the information outside of that time period – which may help explain how and why the character acted in a certain way.

3. Using the following observational questions, write out everything you find about this person, and create an historical chronology of their life.
 - Where was he born? Who were his parents and family members?
 - Who was his spouse? What was she (or he) like? Did the spouse help or hinder?
 - What was his vocation? A farmer, teacher, king? Where did he carry out his occupation?
 - What were the political, religious, social, and economic conditions of his day? (You may find helpful information to start with in your study bible, but will likely also need to consult additional resources that contain cultural and historical information.)
 - Where did he go and what did he do? What were his major accomplishments?
 - How and when did the person die?
4. Start answering other questions. Why did God consider this person evil or great? What was the cause of this designation? What are the character's strengths and weaknesses? Take your thoughts and put them in paragraph form. If any applications come to mind, write them out now, but then sort through them later when you are putting your final thoughts together.
5. Contrast or compare your character to other persons in the Bible. You can also contrast them from how others lived or acted in similar situations. For example, David would not kill Saul, but Joab certainly would kill Abner.
6. Note also any problems that arise from things you do not understand. Consult conservative commentaries to help sort out any apparent discrepancies, and speak with trained bible teachers to bring further clarification.
7. Come up with a key thought that represents your character's life during the period you are covering. Use this key thought to be your one "big thought" in the lesson.

Following these steps should allow you to develop a sound and insightful character study.