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# READING OT NARRATIVES AND PREACHING FROM OT NARRATIVES. SOME LITERARY AND HOMILETICAL PRINCIPLES WITH AN EXAMPLE FROM 1 SAMUEL 8

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ABSTRACT: With the rise of literary studies of the Bible in recent decades, OT narratives have been the object of studies with a focus on genre and literary aspects. This has further impacted the way sermons on narrative genre have been shaped, leading to the rise of narrative preaching. The argument in both hermeneutics and homiletics of narratives has been that form is just as important as content, when it comes to the impact of stories, both on the original readership as well as contemporary audiences. Therefore, in order to understand the meaning of an OT narrative and communicate it faithfully, one must understand the way a narrative is structured, namely around a plot. A narrative plot has an initial stage, a rising tension, a climax, a resolution, and a final stage. Following the structure of the narrative plot, one can identify, especially in the climax of the plot, the theme of the story. This theme must be communicated in a sermon by retelling the story and recreating the original impact, and then the preacher should show how the theme of the story is fulfilled in Christ and has practical relevance for the audience. All these aspects constitute the purpose of this article, which concludes with a suggestion of analyzing and preaching 1 Samuel 8.

KEY WORDS: OT narratives, genre, hermeneutics, homiletics, discourse analysis, plot, 1 Samuel 8

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## Introduction

How should we read and interpret OT narratives? Where does meaning reside in this type of genre? Once we discover the meaning and the theme of an individual story, how do we preach from an OT narrative? How do we communicate the message and intention of a story? How should we structure a sermon based on an OT narrative?

These are questions that will concern us in this article. They are raised from a personal interest as one who is involved both in academia, as lecturer in Greek exegesis and hermeneutics, and in ecclesia, as pastor responsible with teaching and preaching. My observation throughout the years of involvement in both these ministry capacities is that these fields rarely sit at the same table, as it were, to interact with each other.[2]

There is a greater interaction between the exegesis and interpretation of a text and the sermon based on that text when it comes to NT epistolary genre. Students and communicators of the biblical text are more at ease with studying and preaching from an epistle. There are many reasons why this is so, but I will mention one. The epistolary genre is easier to diagram since the passage has a more logical and grammatical structure with which the western thought is more at home. Thus, as we have rightly been taught, we must find the exegetical outline of the passage, based on the grammatical structure of the text, and then transform it into the homiletical outline. Once we find the main clause of a passage, we have discovered the main theme of the passage with its supportive, subordinate arguments, which form the backbone of the sermon. Easily said and easily done.

2 See, however, e.g., Walter C. Kaiser Jr. "Preaching from Historical Narrative Texts of the Old Testament" in *Giving the Sense. Understanding and Using Old Testament Historical* Texts, eds. David M. Howard Jr. and Michael A. Grisanti (Grand Rapids: Kregel; Leicester: Apollos, 2003), 439 -54 and his earlier work "Teaching and Preaching from Narrative Texts of he Old Testament," in *Preaching and Teaching from the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 63-82. In both these essays, Kaiser discusses both the elements of a narrative as well as provides an example of a sermon.

But when it comes to narratives, particularly OT narratives, there are at least two practices among students of the Bible. On the one hand, most of us tend to study them and preach from them as we do from epistles, based on an analytical outline. But according to literary studies, this is wrong since a narrative text communicates as much through its form as through its content, and narratival form is crucial in interpretation. On the other hand, even when we understand how a story works and is constructed to communicate meaning, we still find it difficult to transpose the structure of the narrative into the structure of the sermon.

The purpose of this article is to propose a way to integrate hermeneutics and homiletics in the study of OT narratives. More specifically, we will focus on how we should interpret OT narratives and how we should preach from OT narratives. What we propose is that the progression of an individual OT narrative should find its way in the progression of the sermon. In this way, what has become an accepted norm in the study and proclamation of an epistolary text finds its correspondence in the study and proclamation of a narrative text.

What we propose here is not necessarily an innovative idea. Students of the Bible have studied OT narratives from a literary perspective for some time now and recently some practitioners of homiletics have made inroads into narrative preaching. But we believe there is more to be learned in bringing these two fields of studies together at the same table. Thus, our focus will be on learning to diagram an OT narrative based on its plot scenes, which will form the basis for the sermon from that narrative.

To accomplish our goal, we will first say a few things about the state of both hermeneutics and homiletics of OT narratives. Then, we will explain the important elements of the narrative genre that communicate meaning and the role of discourse analysis in structuring a narrative. And lastly, we will provide an example of a sermon outline based on a study of an OT narrative: the request for a king in 1 Samuel 8.

## Literary Studies and Narrative Preaching

In this section, we will survey the state of studies of OT narratives as well as of preaching from OT narratives. Space and the purpose of this article do not permit us to make an exhaustive presentation. Thus, we will be succinct and selective, seeking to show where we are today.

### *Literary studies*

Biblical interpretation in the modern era has gone through two major paradigm shifts: from an interest in the history of the text to an interest in the literary aspect of the text and, more recently, to an interest in the reader of the text.[3] Each stage can be perceived from the viewpoint of the importance given to the text. In the first stage, the student of the biblical text is encouraged to look *behind* the text for meaning; the text is just a window into the world that is to be discovered. In the second stage, the student of the biblical text is encouraged to look *in* the text for meaning; the text is a picture to be interpreted, meaning being deposited in the text. In the third stage, the student of the biblical text is encouraged to look *in front* of the text to the reader; the reader is the determiner and not the discoverer of meaning, since the text is viewed as a mirror in which the reader sees reflected his/her own theological convictions.[4]

Each way of viewing the function of the biblical text has its minuses and pluses. It is not the purpose of this article to evaluate them, as this has been done by others.[5] Our focus will be on the second stage: the emphasis on the text as carrier of meaning. The important question for this

3 For an excellent survey, see e.g., Tremper Longman III, *Literary Approaches to Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), 19-45.

4 For these metaphors and explanation see Jeannine K. Brown, *Scripture as Communication. Introducing Biblical Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 69.

5 See especially W. Randolph Tate, *Biblical Interpretation. An Integrated Approach* (3rd ed.; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), who discusses each stance separately showing the advantages and disadvantages and then rightly opts for an integrated approach. See also Brown, *Scripture as Communication*, 57-78.

study will be: how does a text communicate meaning and how should we communicate that meaning to an audience?[6]

Ever since the rise of the New Criticism with its emphasis on the poetics and the aesthetics of the text, the reader of the biblical text has been encouraged to look both at *what* the text says and *how* it says what is says.[7] In other words, the meaning of a text is believed to reside both in the content of the text as well as in the literary form the text is clothed in the process of communication. Disagreements about what the Bible means often boil down to a neglect of how the Bible means, because the form of the text is just as important as the words of the text in carrying the intention and the message of the author.[8] Fokkelman argues: „all content which the writer may possibly have wanted to include in his story and convey to his audience can only be conceived of, and can only exist, by virtue of the forms of language, style and structure which he selected for it… There is no form without content, and no content without (being carried or indicated by) form."[9]

The importance placed on how a text communicates meaning has given rise to literary studies of the Bible. One example in this category is genre studies. Genre, according to Jeannine Brown is "a socially de-

6 It is important to note that in discussing paradigms of biblical interpretation, after the hermeneutics of the text, we must also consider the hermeneutics of culture. For an analysis of how textual meaning ultimately intersects with a diverse audience, see Ovidiu Hanc, "The Unchanging Word of God and Today's Fast-Changing Generation," *Semănătorul (The Sower)* 3, no. 2 (2023): 29–39.

7 See J. P. Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Narrative. An Introductory Guide* (trans. Ineke Smit; Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999), 26.

8 Leland Ryken and Tremper Longman III, in their introduction to *A Complete Literary Guide to the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), go even further to state that „With a literary text, form is meaning," 17. They make a distinction between literary text and expository text, the latter one communicates through propositions referring to „what", while the former one through form referring to „how." In their view, "literature enacts rather than states, shows rather than tells."

9 Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Narrative*, 29.

fined constellation of typified formal and thematic features in a group of literary works, which authors use in individualized ways to accomplish specific communicative purposes."[10]

Writers use literary and language tools specific to each genre, such as plot for narratives, figures of speech for poetry, etc., to communicate meaning. Their identification and interpretation are part of the process of understanding the Bible. Ryken and Longman correctly state that there is „a shared assumption that genre… influences how we interpret a biblical text."[11]

Another example of literary studies applied to Bible reading and interpretation is discourse analysis. Linguists have argued that meaning in communication is located not in individual words, but in larger textual units. Therefore, readers must identify the structures of these discourse units in order to grasp the meaning of the text. In OT narrative studies, the verbal shifts within the discourse are indicative of the progression in the plot. Thus, discourse elements, such as Hebrew grammar, continue to play a major role in identifying the scenes in a plot. But once we identify the shifts in the scenes, we are responsible to interpret the plot, that is, to understand not just the introduction and the conclusion, but the tension,

10 "Genre Criticism and the Bible," in *Words and the Word: Explorations in Biblical Interpretation and Literary Theory*, ed. David G. Firth and Jamie A. Grant (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 128 (emphasis original)," quoted by Andrew T. Abernethy, "Genre and Theological Vision" in *Interpreting the Old Testament Theologically. Essays in Honor of Willem A. VanGemeren*, ed. Andrew T. Abernethy (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2018), 44. Abernethy's essay is an introduction to genre studies, and it provides a justification for them, besides discussing elements of different genres of the OT. The most plausible justification is that God chose to communicate through different genres as the most appropriate way to disclose a certain aspect of reality (locution) and to accomplish a change in the reader (illocution and perlocution). Genres are "windows for a reader into various dimensions of reality."

11 Ryken and Longman, *A Complete Literary Guide to the Bible*, 18. See also Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse: Philosophical Reflections on the Claim That God Speaks* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 197-98, for the importance of genre for meaning.

the climax, and the resolution, points at which we find the meaning of the story.

Literary studies of the Bible have been part of introductions in biblical hermeneutics for some time now. Experts have written books that focus on the genres of the books of the Bible,[12] and others that focus on discourse analysis approach to Bible reading.[13] The integration of literary studies into Bible commentaries is slowly catching up.

Tsumura, for instance, claims that his commentary on 1 Samuel is the first to use discourse analysis of OT narratives. At the beginning of each individual narrative, he includes a division of the plot into three parts: SETTING, EVENT, and TERMINUS, each indicated by the „verbal sequence" of the text.[14] Then the whole narrative is analyzed in light of this three-part division. However, because of the scope and purpose of the series, the homiletical and practical implications are very limited. One understands how a narrative is structured, according to grammar and plot, but leaves us with too little understanding in terms of application and homiletics. Hermeneutics, after all, is discovering both what it meant then and there and what it means here and now. Nevertheless, the value of discourse analysis applied in his commentary on 1 and 2 Samuel is undeniable and should form the basis of any study of OT narratives.

In line with Tsumura's commentary is the series *Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the Old Testament.* The subtitle of each individual com-

12 See, e.g., Douglas Stuart and Gordon Fee, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* (4th ed.; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), chap.4. See Ryken and Longman, *A Complete Literary Guide to the Bible*, who quote Culler, 136, stating that genre is a „norm or expectation to guide the reader in his encounter with the text," 18.

13 See R. D. Bergen, ed., *Biblical Hebrew and Discourse Linguistics* (Dallas: Summer Institute of Linguistics, 1994); W. R. Bodine, ed., *Discourse Analysis of Biblical Literature: What it is and What it Offers* (SBL Semeia Studies; Atlanta: Schoars Press, 1995), esp. 7-11; D. A. Dawson, *Text-Linguistics and Biblical Hebrew* (JSOTSS 177; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994).

14 David Toshio Tsumura, *The First Book of Samuel* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 51.

mentary is *A Discourse Analysis of the Hebrew Bible*. Daniel Block, the general editor, states that "one of the distinctive goals for this series is to engage the biblical text using some form of discourse analysis to understand not only what the text says but also how it says it."[15] Kevin J. Youngblood, in his introduction to *Jonah* in this series, is in accord with Tsumura:

> The narrative verb forms (*wayyiqtol*)…serve as the plotline's backbone and advance the story through a sequence of reported events… The narrative verb form always occupies first position in the clause. Thus, typical word order in narrative clauses is verb-(subject)-object. Clauses displaying this word order and marked with the narrative verb form are typically referred to as mainline clauses. Interruptions to this plotline are referred to as offline clauses and may be indicated by direct speech, clauses beginning with some verb form other than the narrative verb, or by a change in the typical word order. When an interruption to the plotline occurs, the narrative slows down or pauses altogether in order to report an important conversation or speech, to provide background information, to report simultaneous or antecedent events, or to shift to a new scene or episode. These are the signals that guide the analysis of structure and meaning in the commentary.[16]

Keith Bodner's commentary on 1 Samuel approaches the text from a literary standpoint, paying attention to matters of plot, characters, point of view, direct speech, etc.[17] As he explains, "a literary approach has a

15 Gary V. Smith, *Ezra and Nehemiah* (ZECOT; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2022), x.

16 Kevin Youngblood, *Jonah* (ZECOT; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015), 36. Similar statements are found in John C. Gibson, *Davidson's Introductory Hebrew Grammar: Syntax* (4th ed.; UNKNO, 1994): "The narrative usually opens with a statement of circumstances, the subj. coming first, or a statement of time, with or without an impersonal *wayhi* .... The story line begins thereafter with *Vav* cons. YIQTOL and is continued with other *Vav* cons. YIQTOLs, identifying the main successive events," 80.

17 Keith Bodner, *1 Samuel. A Narrative Commentary* (Hebrew Bible Monographs 19; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2009), 8.

high degree of interest in the *poetics* of the text, that is, how it works as a piece of literature, and how language is used to convey meaning."[18] Its contribution to the literary study of OT narratives is welcome, but, as with most literary commentaries, it lacks the relevance for both application and homiletics. Reading his commentary, one gets an appreciation of the aesthetics of the text, but little of the meaning of the text, especially as it applies in the present.

When one reads a commentary that seeks to bridge the textual meaning with present significance, one is faced with a focus on the practical relevance, but with little emphasis on the literary structure of the narrative, thus paying little attention to how a narrative communicates meaning. For instance, the volumes in the *NIVApp Commentary* series are organized into three main sections: original meaning, bridging contexts, and contemporary significance. This division is to be commended, but the first section does not emphasize the literary and discourse analysis aspects of a narrative as means of conveying meaning. Thus, the application focuses on only one theme in the narrative and not necessarily on the message conveyed by the literary organization of the narrative.

From this succinct survey, one can see that there is an imbalance in the studies of OT narratives: either the literary aspects are emphasized but with little indication of how these aspects are to translate into meaning and significance for practical and homiletical purposes or the practical aspects are emphasized but with little indication of how these are related to genre analysis of narratives.

One exception merits mention here: Jonathan Pennington's book *Reading the Gospels Wisely: A Narrative and Theological Introduction*.[19] Though his book focuses on gospel narratives, his discussion applies to any narrative, including OT narratives. Thus, in Part 2 of the book, he focuses on the literary aspects of gospel narratives, and, in Part 3, he focuses on applying and teaching the gospel narratives. We will refer to these two parts when we discuss the elements of a narrative and apply the theory

18 Ibidem.

19 (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012).

to 1 Samuel 8. But it is worth mentioning here that Pennington is among thefew who integrate theory and practice, hermeneutics and homiletics.[20]

*Narrative preaching*

In the last couple of decades, studies in Homiletics have raised the concern that all sermons regrettably sounded the same regardless of the biblical genre on which they were based. In other words, preaching from a narrative sounded no different, at least in structure, from preaching from a prophetical text, or from an epistolary text, or from an apocalyptic text. This concern grew out from the realization that meaning is genre dependent; different genres communicate meaning differently.[21] As such, a sermon based on a narrative should conform to the structure of the narrative genre and not follow the analytical structure of an epistle. This means that a sermon from a narrative text should basically be a retelling of the story. This observation gave rise to narrative preaching.[22]

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20 Most books on literary analysis of narratives give biblical examples, but none to the extent that Pennington does in his book.

21 For earlier arguments that the shape of the literary text, according to its genre, should be reflected in the way the sermon is organized, see Ronald J. Allen, "Shaping Sermons by the Language of the Text," *Preaching Biblically,* ed. Don Wardlow (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983), 25-59, and Thomas G. Long, *Preaching and the Literary Forms of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1990).

22 Narrative preaching is not quite the same as first person narrative sermon. Simply put, when we say narrative preaching, we say preaching a biblical narrative. How one preaches from a biblical narrative may include first person narrative sermon, but is not exclusive to that. A first person narrative sermon is preaching that impersonates a character from the story and retells that story from his/her perspective. It is a type of performance. For more on this, see J. Kent Edwards *Effective First-Person Biblical Preaching. The Steps from Text to Narrative Sermon* (Zondervan Academic, 2005). Our focus here is more on the general idea of how one gets to the meaning of a narrative in order to transfer that meaning into a sermon, by preserving the structure and form of the narrative.

J. Kent Edwards is among the most recent advocates of narrative preaching.[23] In his book, *Deep Preaching*, he argues: „As an expert communicator, God combined the words and the best genre possible to communicate…It means that, in order to retransmit accurately the meaning of a biblical passage, preachers must preserve both the words and genre of the biblical text in their sermons." He adds: „If preachers tamper with either the words or the genre of a Bible passage, they are tampering with the meaning of that Bible passage. Only if both are acknowledged and preserved will authorial intent be correctly communicated."[24] Thus, his argument is that a sermon based on a narrative should simply retell the story, since stories are told for emotional impact and not merely for intellectual information and reasoned conviction, as an epistle. Sidney Greidanus argues similarly when he states: "The narrative form…enables hearers to be involved more holistically not merely logically but also intuitively, not only intellectually but also emotionally."[25] Leland Ryken likewise states: „Stories are *affective* by their nature."[26] As such, a faithful preaching of the biblical narrative means that the preacher must communicate not merely the ideas of the text, through a logical arrangement of the content, but also the impact of the story, through a retelling of the story. A preacher must let the narrative provide him not only with the content of the sermon but also with the shape of his sermon. This is what

23 See also Eugene Lowry, *How to Preach a Parable: Designs for Narrative Sermons* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1989); idem, *The Homiletical Plot: The Sermon as Narrative Art Form* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1980); idem, "Narrative Preaching," in *Concise Encyclopedia of Preaching*, ed. William H. Willimon and Richard Lischer (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995), 342–44. See the survey in Richard L. Eslinger, *Narrative Imagination: Preaching the Worlds That Shape Us* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995).

24 J. Kent Edwards, *Deep Preaching. Creating Sermons That Go Beyond the Superficial* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2009), 169.

25 Sidney Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text* (Relativism 2; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 151.

26 Leland Ryken, *How to Read the Bible as Literature… and Get More Out of It* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2016), 67.

expository sermon is: a sermon shaped both by the content as well as by the genre of the text.[27]

What we propose here is not very far from this understanding, with two caveats. First, a sermon based on a narrative must get its main idea from the structure of the plot. Second, a sermon based on narrative text is not just a retelling of the story, though it is not less than that, but involves, as we will see, an explanation of how the story fits within the metanarrative of the Bible, that is, how it leads to Christ, and, not the least, what its practical implications should be.

These last two points have been emphasized by Steven D. Mathewson in his book *The Art of Preaching Old Testament Narrative*.[28] Like Edwards, Mathewson also rightly argues that stories are different from speeches, in that stories do not convey meaning through analytical outlines and arguments but through stories which stir the imagination and invite participation and identification.[29] At the same time, a sermon should not just retell the story in order for the hearer to learn what to do or not to do, though that is a noble task and should be pursued, but it should also point to Christ.[30] The balance between the anthropological and Christological

27 See, ibid., 18-20.

28 See his *The Art of Preaching Old Testament Narrative* (2nd ed.; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2021), chap. 2.

29 See Ryken and Longman, *A Complete Literary Guide to the Bible*, where they state that "Literature enacts rather than states, shows rather than tells," 17.

30 See *The Art of Preaching Old Testament Narrative*, chap. 2 entitled „The Christ-Centered Preaching Debate." In this chapter, he presents two extreme positions: on the one hand, the exemplary approach, which reads the OT narrative in a moralistic way, and on the other hand, the redemptive-historical approach, which reads the OT narrative as pointing to Christ. He advocates a mediating position: theocentric or Christocentric approach. Within this position, he discusses the theocentric view of Kenneth Langley [see "Theocentric View" in *Homiletics and Hermeneutics: Four Views on Preaching Today*, ed. Scott M. Gibson and Matthew D. Kim (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2018), 81-106], the Christiconic view of Abraham Kuruvilla [see, e.g., his „Christiconic Interpretation" *Bibliotheca Sacra* 173 (2016): 131-46], and the redemptive-historic view of Bryan Chapell [see his "Redemptive-Historic

goals of the sermon must be kept. On the one hand, the danger is to be too atomistical in approaching the biblical text and thus focus too narrowly on the text and its moral lessons, without taking into consideration the metanarrative of the Bible. On the other hand, focusing on Christ too quickly falls into the trap of flattening the text so that every sermon communicates the same theological themes and misses the particularities of each text. Thus, OT stories have at least a dual purpose: to teach us how to live, by identification with the main character of the story, and to point to Christ as the one who exemplified the faithful behavior as well as the one who empowers us to live likewise. Thus, Andrew Abernethy is correct to state that genre studies do "not exhaust the entirety of the interpretive task… The canon introduces a unique dynamic into the interpretation of particular texts."[31]

Douglas Stuart and Gordon Fee, in their widely known book *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, insist that a biblical narrative should not be read for moral instruction. Therefore, they argue that a narrative should be interpreted on 3 levels.[32] The first level is the metanarrative level or the redemptive history level. At this level, we should seek to integrate the specific narrative into the universal plan of God seeking to redeem the fallen humanity through Christ. The second level is the middle

View" in *Homiletics and Hermeneutics: Four Views on Preaching Today*, ed. Scott M. Gibson and Matthew D. Kim (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2018), 1-29], and the Christotelic view of John Walton, *Old Testament Theology for Christians. From Ancient Context to Enduring Belief* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2017), 5-6. For an argument that the God who spoke in the OT also spoke climactically in Christ, see Christopher J. H. Wright, *Knowing Jesus Through the Old Testament* (2nd ed., Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2014).

31 Abernethy, "Genre and Theological Vision," 46, makes reference to Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse,* 203-8, who keeps a balance between the meaning of the individual discourse and that of the canon.

32 Stuart and Fee, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth,* chap.5.

level of interpretation. At this level, we should seek to integrate the specific narrative into the story of Israel. The third level is the bottom level of interpretation of the specific narrative. At this level, we learn what God did in that particular time in the history of Israel.

We appreciate their emphasis in the second and third level of interpretation of integrating the individual story both into the story of Israel and the story of God, but we disagree that a story does not have moral instruction, as they argue: „each individual narrative is [not] somehow to be understood as a direct word from God for each of us separately or as teaching us moral lessons by examples."[33] Rather, we agree with Tremper Longman that "biblical stories are often structured in order to shape the reader's ethical behavior."[34] That is, biblical stories also have a didactic function, not just historical, theological, and Christological.

From the development of narrative preaching, we have seen that it is important to shape the sermon according to the shape of the narrative on which it is based, as Edwards proposes. In other words, expository sermon means expounding the content and the shape of the narrative. That is necessary if one is to communicate the same impact as the story itself. But beyond the retelling of the story, a homilitician should also interpret the narrative at three levels: the first level is the historical level, where one seeks to integrate the individual story into its historical context (as Stuart and Fee propose at the second and third level); the second level is the Christological level, where one seeks to integrate the individual story into the metanarrative of the Bible and to show how the story, either through its theme or through its characters, point to Christ (as Mathewson argues);[35] and the third level is the practical level, where one seeks to show

33 Ibid., 110.

34 Tremper Longman III, *Literary Approaches to Biblical Interpretation* (Foundations of Contemporary Interpretation 3; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), 70. See his six major functions of biblical literature: historical, theological, doxological, didactic, aesthetic, and entertainment, ibid., 68-71.

35 See also Joel B. Green, "The (Re-)Turn to Narrative" in *Narrative Reading, Narrative Preaching. Reuniting New Testament Interpretation and*

how the individual story seen through the Christological lenses teaches us lessons to live by (as Longman argues).

**Elements of a story**

Reading OT narratives and preaching from OT narratives should be based on a prior understanding of the narrative genre and its basic elements, such as setting, characters, plot, narrator, repetition, dialogue. Space does not permit us to expound on all of these and other components of narratives, so we would point the reader to authors such as Fokkelman[36] and Ryken.[37] But there is a shared conviction that narratives are „the result of conscious composition, careful patterning, and [that they follow]… literary conventions prevalent at the time of writing and subsequently."[38] Therefore, our focus here will be on that element of the narrative which most reveals its composition and therefore its meaning: the plot. As Pennington argues, "in large part the meaning of a narrative comes through paying attention to its (i.e., plot's) form."[39]

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*Proclamation*, ed., Joel B. Green and Michael Pasquarello III (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 11-36, who focuses on the whole Bible as being a grand narrative, plotted from creation to new creation.

36 Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Narrative*, esp. chaps. 4-10.

37 See his *How to Read the Bible as Literature*, chaps. 2-3, where he discusses setting, characters, and plot in a narrative; see also Ryken and Longman, *A Complete Literary Guide to the Bible,* chaps. 4; more recently, see Ryken, *How Bible Stories Work: A Guided Study of Biblical Narrative* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2015).

38 Ryken and Longman, *A Complete Literary Guide to the Bible*, 18.

39 Pennington, *Reading the Gospels Wisely*, 173. This is not to deny that other devices, which we will mention later, such as repetition, dialogue, etc., do not play an important role in communicating the intent of the author. Walter Kaiser, argues that "this certainly fits most narratives, but it does not allw for the uniqueness of each narrative." See his "Preaching from Historical Narrative Texts of the Old Testament," 445.

Most authors define the plot of a story simply as "the arrangement of the events."[40] The events in a narrative are arranged into three main sections: a beginning, a middle and an end, each part contributing to the impact of the story.[41] A plot can be and usually is more complex than that, but this is the basic structure of all stories.

The beginning of the story functions as its introduction and establishes the setting of the action. Here, we usually find temporal and geographical details, the names of the main characters of the action, and a hint as to the main topic of the story.

The middle of the story includes the climactic tension towards which the story is building from the beginning. The tension is also called the conflict of the story, which is inherent in the concept of plot. At this point in the story, usually a question is raised in the mind of the reader as to how the story will advance. This stage of the story constitutes the turning point of the action and leads to a resolution. The whole story revolves around this climactic point, building up towards it and falling from it. Pennington, who applies literary studies to gospel narratives, in discussing the plot of a narrative claims that "without such a tension, there is no plot and therefore no story."[42]

The end of the story then is the final stage of the story, which is a step forward from the initial stage. There is thus a parallelism between the beginning and the end of the story, the end showing how the theme hinted at from the beginning is brought to a resolution. The resolution releases the tension, solves the conflict, and gives the answer to the question raised at the climax of the story.

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40 Ryken, *How to Read the Bible as Literature*, 40. See also Shimon Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible* (JSOTSup 70; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1989), 93, who defines plot as "a meaningful chain of interconnected events."

41 Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Narrative*, 76. The first to discuss plot was Aristotle, who argued that the connection between sections is that of cause-effect. The middle moves the action from initial situation to the final one; see *Poetics*, (Loeb Classical Library; Cambridge; Harvard University Press, 1995).

42 Pennington, *Reading the Gospels Wisely*, 172.

Fokkelman summarizes the progression of a plot as follows: "The full-grown story begins by establishing a problem or deficit; next, it can present an exposition before the action gets urgent; obstacles and conflicts may occur that attempt to frustrate the *denouement,* and finally there is the winding up, which brings the solution of the problem or the cancellation of the deficit."[43]

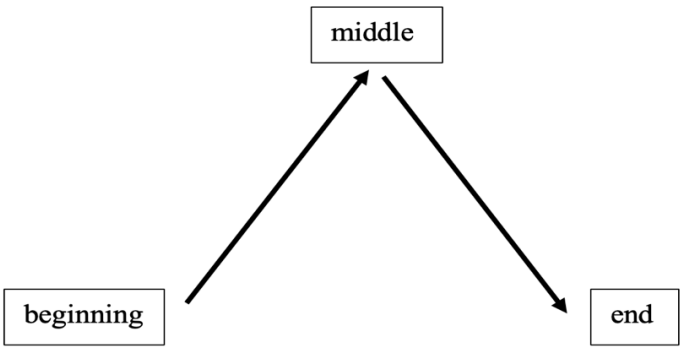
Given this form of a plot, one should start the interpretation of a narrative by identifying the individual scenes that constitute the action, or the plot.[44] Each scene belongs either to the initial stage, the escalation or building up to the climactic point, the tension, the resolution, or to the final stage. Breaking the story into scenes is the beginning of diagramming the plot.

The plot structure has been represented in different ways, using less or more complex diagrams. As mentioned, Aristotle has a very simple structure, that can be represented as such:[45]

43 Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Narrative*, 77. Longman, in "Biblical Narrative" in *A Complete Guide to the Bible*, states that arrangement of the events in a plot means that events are not merely narrated in succession, but are "usually motivated by conflict, which generates suspense and leads to a conclusion," 71.

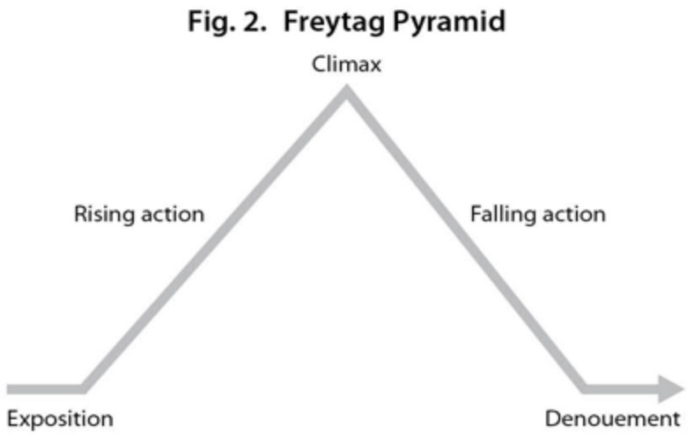
44 So, e.g., Ryken, *How to Read the Bible as Literature*, 45. Walter Kaiser, distinguishes between plot and scenes, and argues: "The scenic structuring seems to be a better way of unfolding the plot as it moves from time to time, place to place, or from character to character. This will keep us fresh and unique in our approaches to each biblical story rather than structuring the story in a predictable pediment or pyramid outline every time." See his "Preaching from Historical Narrative Texts of the Old Testament," 445. We think that it is more helpful to speak of a plot structure with its beginning, middle, and end, but each section including one or several scenes, as we will show in our example.

45 Aristotle, *Poetics*, esp. chs. 7-11, 17, 23. Shimon Bar-Efrat, "Some Observations on the Analysis of Structure in Biblical Narrative," *V T* 30 (1980): 165, calls the structure a "classical pyramid."

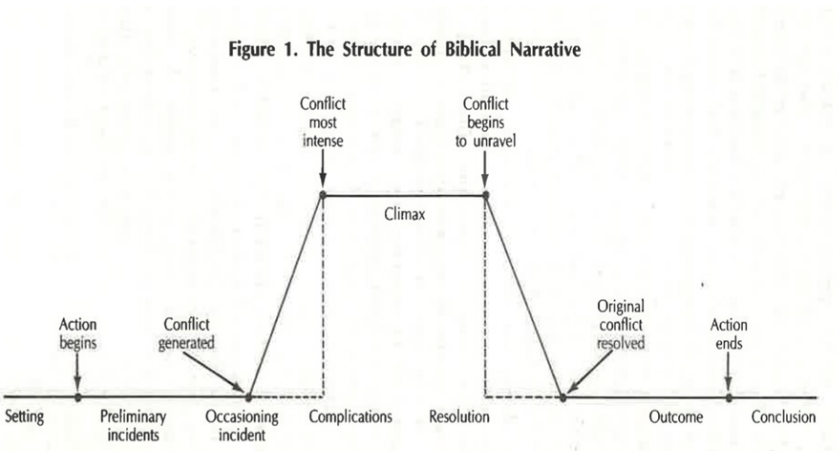



Pennington, in his analysis of gospel narrative plot mentions Gustav Freytag's *Technique of the Drama*.[46] According to Freytag's pyramid, a story includes also a rising action and a falling action and can be diagrammed as follows:

46 Originally titled *Die Technik des Dramas* (1863). The most recent translation is *Freytag's Technique of the Drama: An Exposition of Dramatic Composition and Art* (trans. Elias MacEwan; Charleston, SC: BiblioBazaar, 2008). See Pennington, *Reading the Gospels Wisely*, 172-3. For a similar structure, see Daniel I. Block "Tell Me the Old, Old Story. Preaching the Message of Old Testament Narrative" in *Giving the Sense. Understanding and Using Old Testament Historical* Texts, eds. David M. Howard Jr. and Michael A. Grisanti (Grand Rapids: Kregel; Leicester: Apollos, 2003), 417.



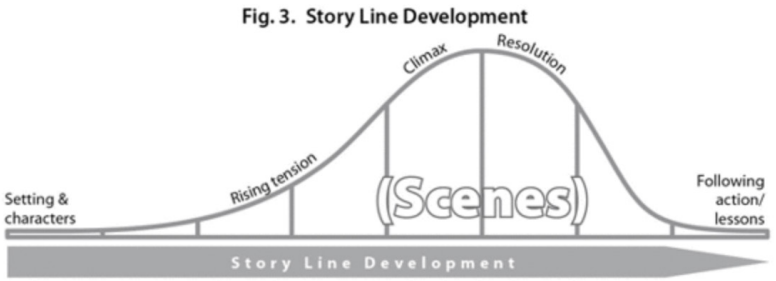

A more sophisticated structure is that suggested by Vern Poythress and found in Longman's *Literary Approaches to Biblical Literature*:[47]




However, in working with OT narratives, we have come to conclude that Pennington's graphical representation of a plot, which is an adjust-

47 Longman, *Literary Approaches*, 92.

ment of Freytag's diagram into a "roller coaster" depiction, is easier and yet sufficiently complex to include the major components of the plot of a story:[48]




Such a structuring of the plot has at least one important value, according to Pennington: "the most important thing we gain from doing narrative analysis is that we can see that the main point of a passage is usually found in the climax and resolution and/or the following action/ interpretation…"[49] With that in mind, we proceed to do an analysis of 1 Samuel 8 according to its plot structure and its division into scenes.[50]

48 The depiction comes from Daniel Doriani, *Getting the Message* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1996). See Pennington, *Reading the Gospels Wisely*, 173, n. 4.

49 Pennington, *Reading the Gospels Wisely*, 176. See also Walter Kaiser "Teaching and Preaching from Narrative Texts of the Old Testament," 74, where he argues that "the most natural part of structure to observe is the climax to a story. This is its denouement or peak, which usually serves as the focus of the story as well."

50 We do not pretend to suggest here a complete method. We point to Pennington's book *Reading the Gospels Wisely* especially in the section entitled "Revisiting Our Narrative Model (Finally) for Active Reading," 202-3. There, he suggests 8 steps: isolate the literary unit; read the story multiple times; identify the setting and the characters; observe the story; isolate the different scenes; analyze the narrative; think about the contexts; summarize the pericope.

CORIN MIHĂILĂ

## A case study of reading a narrative and preaching from a narrative: 1 Samuel 8

*Reading 1 Samuel 8 according to its narrative plot and literary features*
Chapter 8 of 1 Samuel is part of a bigger story which extends to chapter 15 and it is about king Saul:[51]

Chap. 8 – Request for a king
Chaps. 9-10 – Election of king Saul
Chap.11 – Confirmation of Saul as a rightful king
Chap. 12 – Warning for the king
Chaps. 13-15 – Rejection of Saul as king

Chapter 8 thus is a turning chapter in the book: from being ruled by judges, Israel will now be ruled by kings. Chapter 8 presents us the request for a king. This narrative follows the normal stages of a plot: initial stage, rising tension, climax, resolution, and final stage. And we will analyze the story according to this plot structure.[52]

51 Tsumura, *1 Samuel*, considers this chapter as transitional. He states: "it is reasonable to take ch. 8 as a transitional section from both literary and historical perspectives: literarily, at the transition point from the story of Samuel to the story of Saul; historically, changing from the judgeship to the kingship," 243. Antony F. Campbell SJ, *1 Samuel* (The Forms of the OT Literature vol. VII; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 104, considers this story as "one account of the initial stage in the process by which monarchy emerged in Israel. As we will see, 1 Sam 9:1-10:16 is another and different account of the initial stage in the process."

52 *Contra* Campbell, *1 Samuel,* 103; under discussion of "Genre" he states: "This demand from the people (8:1-22) could be told in story forn. As we have the traditions in the present text, *they are not in story form*. *They are recounted without any signals suggesting the arousal of interest through plot* or otherwise. The traditions are formulated as (—>) accounts;" emphasis added.

1. Initial situation (8:1-3)

The first three verses present us with temporal and geographical details, some of the names of the main characters of the action, and a hint as to the main topic of the story.[53]

*Time*

When "Samuel was old."

*Geography*

We learn later that the action of the story takes place at Ramah, where Samuel had his residence.

*Characters*

First we have Samuel. We know from previous chapters, that he was the judge of Israel and also the prophet, since he received messages directly from God. Here, we are told that he "grew old." This means that he must hand over the leadership of Israel and prepare Israel for the future. And he does so.

Here we encounter the second (colective) character of the story: Samuel's sons, Joel and Abijah. They receive the role of judges over Israel from their father.

*Problem*

In the introduction of the story we are presented with a problem: "they [i.e., Samuel's sons] did not follow his ways. They turned aside after dishonest gain and accepted bribes and perverted justice."[54] With these details, the narrator invites us to compare Samuel's sons to Eli's sons, from

53 Tsumura, *1 Samuel*, states that "the main sentences do not start with *wayqtl* followed by a stated subject. Therefore they constitute the SETTING for the EVENT starting in v.4," 246.

54 See Dt. 16:18-20 and 2 Chr. 19:6-7 for what was expected of judges. The description of Samuel's sons is exactly the opposite.

chapter 2.[55] Such a comparison means that we should expect a change in leadership, similar to the transition that took place from Eli to Samuel.

*Hinted Solution*

This detail about Samuel's sons constitutes the reason for the story. Their lack of qualification sets the story in motion and establishes the theme of the story, which the story will try to solve. The theme hinted in this detail is the following: who and how will Israel be led?

So, from this introduction we understand that the future of Israel's leadership is unclear. What should be done in order to ensure good leadership? The history of Israel so far teaches us that the people should do nothing. Nothing, because the solution always came from God. He initiated the process of election of a subsequent leader, as was the case with Samuel. But our story is not about God's plan but the people's solution for a leader. And here we get into the action of the story.

2. Rising tension (8:4-18)

The action starts with the statement: "and the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah." This is the third main (collective) character–the elders of Israel, who represent the people. Eventually, the elders in the story give place to the people. Their gathering at Samuel sets the story into motion and moves the plot towards a climax and a resolution. Again, the question of the story is: who will be the next leader?

This section of the plot is composed of 4 scenes, each building logically upon the previous one and leading to the climax. The scenes are in fact speeches and dialogues, but this is the way most OT narratives move the action along.[56]

55 See Bodner, *1 Samuel*, 69.

56 Dialogues or speeches are part of the narrative, though they are introduced by a different verbal form. For the importance of speeches in OT narratives, see Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (NY: Basic/London: Allen and Unwin, 1981), 63-87. Ryken and Longman, in *A Complete Literary Guide to the Bible*, argue that "of the four means by which a story can be told—direct narrative, dramatic narrative, description, and commentary—dramatic narra-

a. The elders' request (8:5)

Their request is clear: "appoint a king to lead/judge us, such as all the other nations have." Philips Long correctly notes that "the elders come not just to state the problem but also to state what is in their view the solution."[57] The request has three parts: (1) appoint a king, (2) to judge us, (3) as all the other nations have. The first two aspects of the request are not a bad thing in themselves, if we recall the law for kings that God already gave to Israel in Dt.17:14,15, 18-19 and if we recall the prophecy of 1 Sam. 2:10b "he will give strength to his king and exalt the horn of his anointed." The problem is with the third aspect of the request: a king like that of the nations. This request violated a fundamental aspect of Israel as a nation: to be distinct from the nations (cf. Lev. 20:26) and it was wrong because such a king had absolute authority; he was considered a god and Israel already had a God.

So, even if apparently the request was valid, given Samuel's sons' disqualification from leadership, the request was wrong, for it envisaged a leader with a godlike absolute power.

b. Samuel's reaction (8:6)

Samuel takes the request very personally and his focus is only on the first two parts of the request: "give us a king to judge us." He feels threatened by the elders' request. But he does the wise thing and goes to God in prayer.

c. God's response (8:7-9)

God corrects Samuel and tells him several things.

First, he tells Samuel to listen to the people. This is strange at first, but the subsequent narrative actually shows that God works his will through

tive dominates in the stories of the Bible, where direct quotation of speeches is a staple," 32.

57 V. Philips Long, *1 and 2 Samuel. An Introduction and Commentary* (TOTC; Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2020), 124.

the free choice of human beings.[58] Eventually, we will see, God raises a King according to his will and not according to the will of the people, and that is an indirect result of the people's request.

Second, he comforts his prophet by assuring him that they had not rejected Samuel. The story, says God, is not really about Samuel, but about God. God, thus, is the fourth and the most important character in this story.

Third, he clarifies that the people's request is a direct rejection of God as King over Israel. Thus, God's problem is not with the first two parts of the request, as Samuel thought, but with the third part. God sees behind the request for a king to judge as the nations have a request for a king to reign. Somebody to judge was nothing wrong, for God had raised many judges in Israel, but somebody to reign was something exclusively God's prerogative.

Fourth, God still shows understanding for his prophet and confirms that Samuel is also rejected by the people, but only because they rejected God first. Israel has a long history of such behavior of rejecting God and as a subsequent rejecting God's messengers.

Fifth, God asks Samuel to warn the people of the consequences of their request. With this, we move to the largest scene of the story.

d. Samuel's speech (8:10-18)[59]

His speech to the people has two parts.

58 B. C. Birch 'The First and Second Books of Samuel', in L. E. Keck (ed.), *The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 2 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998), 1031 states that "In 1 Samuel 8, God gives Israel the freedom to choose a king, but God does not give up the claim of divine sovereignty… human power is only subordinate to divine power."

59 Tsumura, *1 Samuel*, 255, states that "the section, which is a 'procedural' discourse, is not a narrative description of deeds of a king. As a literary genre, it is more like a 'manual' that explains what a king would do normally to conscript military and administrative personnel."

First, he explains what the king as the nations have will do. The description is largely negative. Here, the narrator uses repetition.[60] He repeats words such as "take," "use," and "give." These words communicate exploitation, oppression, and abuse, the exact opposite of what the people expect from their future king. They expect deliverance, but Samuel tell them that they will experience what they have experienced under foreign rulership. Then, the narrator repeats third person singular pronoun: "to him," "his" "for himself." These speak of self-service. He will be concerned for himself and not the wellbeing of the people. And he will take "the best of" and "the tenth of." These words refer to rights reserved for God, Israel's divine king. But now, the king will take what is not his to take.

Second, after such a negative presentation of the king as the nations have and they desire, Samuel warns them: "when the day comes, you will cry out for relief from the king you have chosen, but the Lord will not answer you in that day."

The impression we get from the dialogue of Samuel with God and from Samuel's speech is that what the elders are requesting is something absolutely absurd. They are rejecting God as rightful King over them, who has done only good to them, and in his place they are requesting a king who will be of no good to them; on the contrary, they will suffer under his domination and oppression.[61]

3. Climax (8:19-20)

It is at this point that we come to the climax of the plot, where a question comes to the mind of the reader: what will the elders choose? Anyone in the right mind would respond something like this: "Thank you Samuel for enlightening us! How foolish we were to request such a thing! Sorry

60 Robert D. Bergen, *1 and 2 Samuel* (TNAC; Nashville: B&H, 1996), 99, n. 9, for statistics.

61 Philips Long, *1 and 2 Samuel*, 126-7 agrees with Jonathan Walton "A King Like the Nations: 1 Samuel 8 in Its Cultural Context" *Bib* 96 (2015): 179–200, that Israel was not rejecting God as king in favor of some other god, but "the reduction of Yahweh to 'a god like the gods of the nations'. But this is precisely what Yahweh is not—passive and co-dependent!"

for even bothering you! We retract our request and we want to continue to have God as our King and Ruler, because we have had it really good under his leadership!"

But it is here that we encounter the surprise of the story, which is more like a shock, through the people's response: "NO!"[62] As readers, we are shocked by this unexpected response: a totally absurd response. In the words of Walter Brueggemann, "the elders do not discern that monarchy is in principle dangerous… Thus they want to 'be like the nations' (v. 20): like them in surplus, in taxation, in militarism, in oppression."[63] In their lack o perception of the danger, the people add: "We want a king over us! Then we will be like all the other nations, with a king to lead us and to go out before us and fight our battles." Now we see the true desire of the people: to replace God with a human political and military leader. If we recall from 7:9-10, the people asked Samuel to pray to God that he would deliver them and God responded by he himself fighting against the philistines. It was God who was fighting for Israel and was winning the victories for Israel. He was the mighty warrior.[64] But the people wanted the human king to give them what only God could give: victory. The absurdity of their request is that in chap. 7, the philistines had a king, in fact they had several kings, and yet they lost the battle against Israel, who had God as their warrior. And now they want a ruler like that of the philistines, who lost the battle. That is the absurdity: to replace God with something or someone that cannot help and is of no use to the people.[65] Now we understand that "the source of their demand was not to be found in their

62 Bergen, *1 and 2 Samuel*, 100, notes that "Israel's rejection of Samuel's warnings as reminiscent of the Torah language depicting Pharaoh's stubborn refusal to submit to Moses."

63 Walter Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel* (Interpretation. A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching; Louisville: JKP, 1990), 65.

64 See, e.g., Tremper Longman III & Daniel G. Reid, *God Is a Warrior* (Studies in Old Testament Biblical Theology; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010).

65 Philips Long, *1 and 2 Samuel*, 123, comments that against the backdrop of chap.7, "the elders' insistence in the present chapter on having a king like the kings of other nations comes as a surprise."

relationship with [Samuel] or his sons. Instead, it lay in their troubled relationship with God; Israel had rejected the Lord as their king (cf. Num 14:11). The people's demand for an earthly king represented the political manifestation of a spiritual problem."[66]

4. Resolution (8:21-22a)
The resolution of a story is usually much shorter than the rising tension. And so is here.

a. Samuel's reaction
Samuel no longer took it personally, for he understood that it was not about him but about God. So, he went before the Lord with the people's decision.

b. God's response
God answers: "Listen to them and give them a king!" This may be a second surprise in the story. We witness a certain ambiguity in God's response. Walter Brueggemann states that "the narrative show that Yahweh is in theological agreement with Samuel, but, in the end, turns against Samuel, sustaining the new request. The monarchy is left theologically doubtful by this 'permitted-but-disapproved' status."[67] Thus, the people get the answer that they asked for.

5. Final situation (8:22b)
As a result, the story comes to an end. We have come full circle with the story. It begins with a disqualified leadership and the need for a leader and ends with a promise of a king. It begins with the elders coming to

66 Bergen, *1 and 2 Samuel*, 100.

67 Walter Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel*, 66. Robert Bergen, *1 and 2 Samuel*, 99, notes that "consistent with his pattern of fulfilling even Israel's sinful requests (cf. Num. 11:18, 31), the Lord acceded to their will. A troubling future for Israel was thus assured."

Samuel and ends with Samuel's words to the people: "Everyone go back to your own town!"

The rest of the bigger narrative of which chap.8 is part of, relates how the king is selected and thus how the promise of God to the people is fulfilled. Bergen concludes: "Thus was set in motion the events that gave Israel a king who was far more 'like all the other nations' had than anyone could have imagined.'"[68] Saul, however, is only the first installment of fulfilment of God's promise, though a negative one. But the subsequent history of Israel will show us that God can turn a negative request into a positive answer. Thus, God's words to Samuel "listen to them and give them a king" are ambiguous. Philips Longs asks: "The pressing question is what kind of king this will be: a king of the standard ANE variety or a king in keeping with the standards of Deuteronomy 17:14-20?" Brueggemann believes that the ambiguity is intentional and the answer to such a question clear: "the narrative has Yahweh already looking past the dispute and past Saul to the coming of David. Even the hard principle of monarchy will be accepted for the sake of David."[69] Going even further into the future of redemptive history, the biblical history shows us that in the end, God raises the King after his own will, not that of the people.

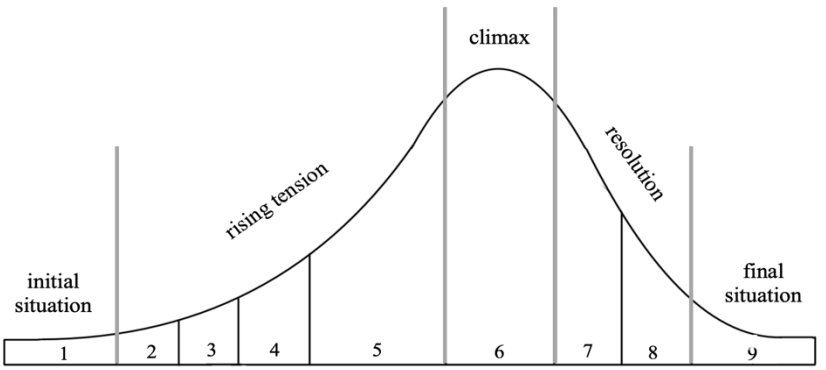
The story is composed of 9 scenes:[70]
8:1-4 setting
8:5 elders' request
8:6 Samuel's reaction
8:7-9 God's response
8:10-18 Samuel's speech
8:19-20 People's response
8:21 Samuel's reaction
8:22a God's promise
8:22b People leave

68 Robert D. Bergen, *1 and 2 Samuel*, 100.

69 Walter Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel*, 66.

70 For similar division, see Long, *1 and 2 Samuel*, 123.

Following Pennington's suggestion, the plot of the story can be illustrated through this figure:




Based on the plot development, we can see that the theme of the story, found at the climax of the action, is the absurdity of rejecting God as King.[71]

71 Any theme of a biblical narrative that the reader extracts from the text is tentative, since there is no direct statement in the narrative as to its subject. Ryken and Longman state that "With so little interpretive help forthcoming from biblical authors, the possibility for variability of interpretation repeatedly asserts itself in literary treatments of the Bible, which are not cordial to the 'single meaning' approach of some biblical scholarship." See *A Complete Literary Guide to the Bible*, 31. Pennington also states: "At the most general level we must keep in mind that there is no single correct or accurate way to analyze the narrative." See his *Reading the Gospels Wisely*, 177. Regarding this narrative, Campbell states that the short response of the people is open to different meanings. Thus, "the text can leave issues open; a storyteller or a theologian might choose to unfold them," *1 Samuel*, 103. This is not the same as Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 12, calls "indeterminancy of meaning" characteristic of much biblical narrative. John Goldingay in "Interpreting Biblical Narrative" *Themelios* 18.2 (1993): 6, correctly states that differences in how a story is perceived by different readers "reflect the differences among the audiences and the different ways in which the story of their own

*A sermon based on the literary aspects of 1 Samuel 8*

The surprise of the story, discovered by an analysis of the plot, should also be communicated in the process of preaching from this narrative. Based on the arguments presented in the first part of the article, a sermon should be a retelling of the story, following each scene towards the climax. Whatever explanations are added in the course of the sermon, all the details should build towards the suspense the people's response brings to the story.

Once this suspense is created in the retelling of the story, the preacher should then bring the story to its conclusion, by reminding the audience that the promise of God to the people to give them a king will find its fulfilment in the subsequent stories of 1 Samuel. This creates an expectation in the audience to hear the next episodes of the bigger narrative.

But we believe that the sermon should not end here. After the story is retold seeking to replicate its impact, the preacher should then clearly state the theme of the passage: "The absurdity of rejecting God as King."[72]

life resonates with that of the story they are listenint to, at the point it has at a given moment reached." Later in the same article, Goldingay adds that "different scholars often give different accounts of the structure of a story. While some stories give objective markers regarding their structure, many do not. The structure of a story may thus be difficult to identify and interpreters may differ in the say they understand it…This may mean that no one analysis is exclusively 'right' and that different aspects of the story's meaning emerge from various analyses of its structure. Perhaps structure lies in the eyes of the beholder—it is something we as readers of a narrative find helpful," 7. See further pp.8-9 about the reason why different people find in stories different themes and meanings, which do not contradict the idea of meaning being objective. See also Green, "The (Re-)Turn to Narrative," 27, for his stance on the finite polysemy of a text.

72 Not all students of narratives agree that a story should be stated in a theological proposition. See Pennington, *Reading the Gospels Wisely*, 180. He states: "Thus, a good story resists our impulse to merely reduce the story to abstract propositions, while inviting us to relive and enter the experiences presented. A literary text 'invites us to enter a whole world of the imagination and to live in that world before we move beyond it'" quoting Leland Ryken, *Words of Life: A Literary Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987), 23.

This theme should then be applied at the three levels of interpretation, explained earlier.

1. The historical level
At this level, the preacher should make a very short presentation of the subsequent history of Israel, showing how Samuel's speech and God's warning came true. Israel did have kings as the nations had, they did take for themselves, and God did not listen to them when they cried to him for help. The result was the Babylonian exile.

2. The Christological level
However, the story does not end in exile. For God eventually listened to their cry, brought them out of exile, returned them to their land, and gave them a King—King Jesus. At this level, the preacher should make the connection with the New Testament and show how Jesus was the King not as the people requested but as God envisaged. He came to serve the people, not to be served (Mt.20:28).

3. The practical level
But the absurdity seen in Israel's choice to reject God as King is replicated in the NT in the rejection of Jesus as King. So the audience is yet again faced with the question: will they accept or reject Jesus as their King? Will they choose to do the absurd thing and reject Jesus or choose the wisest course of action and accept Jesus as King?

**Conclusion**
Reading OT narratives and preaching from OT narratives should take into account the particularities of the narrative genre, especially the plot. Just as the epistolary texts should be diagrammed according to the logical and grammatical progression, likewise narratives should be diagrammed according to the scenes of the story and the stages of the plot. Only in this way, the student of OT narratives will be able to establish correctly

the theme of the passage, which he will then be able to communicate to an audience.

Once the plot is discovered in the reading of the narrative with special attention paid to literary features, the preacher should divide his message into two main parts. The first part should be a retelling of the story in order to recreate the impact. The second part of the sermon should interpret the story at the three levels: historical, Christological, and practical.

Literary studies have made their mark on biblical interpretation and rightly so. The biblical text comes to us as literature and a wise reading of the Bible should take into account this dimension. Narratives, in particular, communicate meaning not only through its content but also through its form, that is, through the aesthetics and poetics of the text, which impact the imagination, stir the emotions, and call for action.

This literary dimension of biblical narratives, however, as important as it might be to a right understanding of biblical stories, is not the only lens through which they should be read. The biblical text also has a historical and a theological dimension, which must be taken into account as we read and preach from OT narratives. Therefore, C. S. Lewis was right to claim that the Bible is "through and through, a sacred book. Most of its component parts were written, and all of them were brought together, for a purely religious purpose…It is…not only a sacred book but a book so remorselessly and continuously sacred that it does not invite, it excludes or repels, the merely aesthetic approach."[73]

73 C. S. Lewis, in a 1950 essay, "The Literary Impact of the Authorised Version," 32-33. Quoted by Ryken and Longman, *A Complete Literary Guide to the Bible*, 34. See also Daniel I. Block "Tell Me the Old, Old Story," 437, where he correctly states: "Although in many instances the author seems to take great delight in telling the story […], and many passages were intended to be enjoyed, we must remember that the authors were consciously writing Scripture, and that ultimately these narratives must transform the readers as they find themselves in the same sorry predicament as the biblical characters and encounter the living God who speaks through these narratives."

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