Preaching and Teaching Old Testament Narratives:
Scriptural Context as Guide to Narrative Message

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I

Much has been done on exegeting narrative, and much on the science and art of preparing and delivering sermons on biblical narratives. My concerns today are not with either of these. I want to reflect on the place between these, where exegesis meets sermon in the case of biblical narrative. That is, the underlying and invisible outlook that controls the intuition of the preacher at the point of making the passage speak its message to today's congregants.[1]

I will illustrate narrative implications with the Jephthah story (Judg 11-12). I use this passage based on a technical presentation I delivered last fall for the Old Testament Narrative Study Group of the Evangelical Theological Society. I was invited to present in the first of four sessions, moving from "difficult narrative" (Jephthah) to sermon, with the goal of illustrating how it works. I have posted that paper with all of its arguments and footnotes so I can summarize the following points without the encumbrance of proving what I am saying. I invite you to consider the technical paper if you find these things helpful or irritating (see web address in notes below).

Dealing with Jephthah as a person or the account as historical events without reference to how he fits within one or more of the concrete biblical frameworks, like the book of Judges or the entire Christian Bible, often leads to mere moralistic interpretations and applications. Yes, Jephthah can be seen as a paragon of character deficiencies—bullying, ignorant, foolish, self-serving—and the leaders of Gilead as weak, compromising, and small minded. These negative traits may be appropriated as counterpoint analogues to moral principles we value and wish to promote. On occasion Paul, Jesus, and other New Testament teachers draw on scriptural characters as moral or immoral examples (see e.g., 1 Cor 10:1-11). These exemplaristic uses of biblical characters and events work fine since these New Testament teachers elsewhere ground their teaching in concrete biblical contexts. Reading narrative exemplaristically, that is, for moralistic principles, is worthwhile, but not if this is a preacher's exclusive approach.

Any story can be used to say don't be stupid, don't be a bully, don't be rash, you need to be patient, you need to listen to advice, you need to have wisdom when you are making decisions

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[1] An earlier version of this presentation was delivered at a pastor's conference, Ocean City Tabernacle, NJ (9.23.10).

and vows and the like. All of those things are true and good and simply based on our grid of values, and are entirely secondary to the story within any of its received biblical contexts. If we merely see the story of Jephthah as an example of an unwise person, which he is, then there is no particular force to studying or preaching from this story. Mere examplaristic application in no way distinguishes biblical narration from any stories of any media.

II

Messages are context specific. To approach specific biblical narrative contexts in an historical and/or biographical manner seems natural and is the problem. The problem is not with the scriptures presenting historical narratives, faithfully rendering meaningful accounts of real people. They do.

The narrative events and persons themselves within their historical, cultural settings may offer an analogue to today's parishioners. But if approached only as historical humans the messages they offer differ not at all from the human message we can assemble from any book, any movie, any account of any persons. The "something more" of scriptural narration are the authoritative scriptural contexts, especially the scriptures' presentation of the gospel of Christ.

The relevance of a given story is not simply that it happened to real humans. Theological relevance turns on the instructional value of biblical narration to any and every human society. The basis of the power and relevance of scriptural narration is that it is God's story. To approach it as historical is essential but of itself inadequate.

Scriptural contexts offer guidance for determining the viable messages of scriptural narrative. Given biblical narrative characters and events stand simultaneously in several legitimate contexts including episode, book, serial, canonical collection, and the entire Christian Bible. That the story stands comfortably and naturally in each of these contexts at the same time testifies to the inherent nature of story.

Biblical narration is typically episodic like Jephthah the outcast, Jephthah's letter, and Jephthah's vow. The episodes together comprise a relatively self-contained Jephthah story which sits among a series of judges stories. These episodic stories together comprise the Judges narrative which is a book in the full sense of the term. By book I am not referring to physical qualities but to the unity and coherence of the story. This book stands as part of a tightly connected serial narrative known as the Deuteronomistic Narrative in four books (Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings). This quadrilogy tells the Deuteronomy-flavored story of the rise and

fall of the Hebrew kingdom, and is itself a continuation of another serial story, the Torah of Moses. Together the nine book serial narrative of Genesis through Kings is known as the Primary Narrative which tells the big story from the creation of the heavens and the earth to the fall of the city of God.[2] The Primary Narrative provides the central framework which relates together the collection of books known as the Hebrew Bible. The Hebrew Bible and New Testament together are the Christian Bible.

All of these real biblical contexts provide legitimate frameworks from which to derive viable messages. Depending on what we are trying to accomplish in a given sermon, we may wish to use a message based on narration as episode, as part of a book or serial story, or within the canonical collections. There are wrong messages, but thinking a passage offers one right message fails to account for the way narrative works. The natural multifunctionality of narrative points toward many right messages.

If there are multiple right messages how do we avoid wrong messages? A necessary step is to interpret the narratives within their authoritative biblical settings. A message worth preaching will align with the framework and guidance of scriptural context.

III

A given biblical narrative promotes related but different kinds of implications as episode, as part of book, serial, Hebrew Bible, and Christian Bible. I need to exaggerate differences to illustrate the point I am getting at. These several biblical contexts are complementary and interrelated.

How does episode as context guide message? The difficult issues with the Jephthah story turn on how Torah instructions are supposed to work. Likewise challenges in other narratives often point readers toward studying God's commands and instruction for righteousness. First, for example, Jephthah's birth to a strange woman raises the question of who counts as a legitimate citizen for the sake of inheritance and leadership. The story baits listeners to consider and debate the meaning of the prohibition of a child from an illegitimate birth in Deuteronomy 23:2 [23:3 Heb]. Likewise, Jephthah's potential status as offspring from an illegitimate relationship raises questions of sovereignty and justice when he is chosen by God. When listeners take the bait they must study, discuss, and wrangle with the Torah instruction.

Second, Jephthah's letter raises a host of historical questions, forcing readers to carefully review several pentateuchal narratives. The difficulties include overt and more subtle tensions,

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[2] The Secondary Narrative (Chron-Ezra-Neh) retells the same story in a new way for a new situation.

inviting harmonization, or determining that Jephthah bent the truth. If he distorted the truth, did he do so by accident or intentionally? Was he ignorant or a bully, or some of each, and so forth? His letter also raises significant questions about God's relationship with the nations. Jephthah implies a standard ancient outlook that is not consistent with the Hebrew scriptures and seems to fly in the face of Deuteronomy 2. Moses affirmed God's sovereignty over Edom, Moab, and Ammon, but Jephthah implies Israel's God and Moab's god are each responsible for their own people (also see Amos 9:7).

Third, the Jephthah episode raises many exasperating issues surrounding what constitutes rightful vows and a rightful fulfillment of vows according to a number of teachings in the books of Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. Jephthah's outrageous vow, after the spirit of God had come upon him, and the oblique account of its fulfillment are notorious and have been constantly debated through the ages.

In sum, the Jephthah episode does not answer questions but forces readers to wrestle with difficulties. At almost every turn the Jephthah story creates opportunity and necessity to study the teachings of God and debate what it means and how we should live. Preaching and teaching narrative episodes often leads to interpreting how God's people need to learn righteousness. Trying to figure it out is an important beginning to humble devotion to God's will.

How does book as context guide message? The Jephthah narrative points to growing anarchy and chaos within the moral fabric of the Israelite society as they become more and more like the Canaanites. The moral unraveling of Jephthah's days sets up the Samson story and the last couple of episodes which repeatedly use the statement that without a king the people do what is right in their own eyes. Implications concern the dissolving of values and moral stability in a society left to its own devices even when it is a covenantally bound society. If episode guides readers to wrestle with biblical instruction for righteousness, book as context leans toward social and collective rather than individual and personal warnings. Studying narratives within biblical books as wholes should lead to messages that are not merely personal and self-oriented, but toward the collective responsibility of God's people. If episodes raise questions of individual responsibility books ground these in the collective structures of God's redemptive work.[3]

How does serial narrative as context guide message? What are the implications of the Jephthah story within a framework of the Deuteronomistic Narrative? The quadrilogy establishes

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[3] In reality these focuses and contexts do not separate this neatly, as I said, I am exaggerating differences for the sake of illustration.

the identity of the exiled people of God at a time when a Mesopotamian empire denied their worldview. The contradiction between tradition and reality created by the Babylonian oppression and ridicule is captured well in Psalm 137. The people need to know who they are within the framework of worldview crushing loss. The Jephthah story illustrates and signifies the kind of inevitability that is characteristic of the entire storyline of the first commonwealth of Israel. From the time the people entered the land they were on their way to captivity. Or, within the Primary Narrative the Jephthah narrative typifies the folly and stubbornness of the people of God as they diligently follow the path from Eden to Babylonia. Further implications within the Primary Narrative or Deuteronomistic Narrative serials are God's patience alongside and rattling up against his demand for righteousness. God's faithfulness intertwined with the inevitability of his people's condemnation forces faithful readers to look for another solution, to reinterpret the meaning of reality.

Serial narratives in the scriptures are oriented toward God's redemptive will. They explain the big story of identity and the meaning of reality.[4] The characteristically tragic addiction to rebellion by God's people points to the hope for redemption which only comes by his power, in his time. Whereas the episode points back toward the Torah the serial story points forward toward faith in God to redeem those who need it badly.

How does the Hebrew Bible as context guide message? The people of God are incapable of creating and sustaining a righteous society. The tendencies of both the people of Gilead and Jephthah himself demonstrate their failure to even be in the realm of critique or correction from God's instruction. They read like morally disabled people. They live as though there is no covenant. If the people of God have hope, it can be rooted only in faithfulness of God himself to accomplish the word he has spoken. The Jephthah story demonstrates the problem of the Hebrew Bible which calls for the answer in the gospel. In all of these respects the Hebrew Bible as context functions along the same lines as the major serial narratives that define its basic structure. But it goes beyond the serials.

The Hebrew Bible is more than the Primary and Secondary Narratives. These two versions of the big story serve as a dialectical framework to interpret and be interpreted by the prophets, psalms, and wisdom writings. First, if Jephthah had had a legitimate father, what

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[4] More than half of the Bible is made up of serials: Primary Narrative (the two parts of which are also serials in their own rights, Torah of Moses and Deuteronomistic Narrative), Secondary Narrative, and Luke-Acts. Matthew, Mark, and John each function as sequels of quasi-serials, namely, each evangelist situates his version of the gospel of Messiah as culmination of Israel's story considered from a particular vantage point.

counsel would he give him, or, at least, how should he advise him? The wise father in Proverbs has much to offer the lost foolish man that Jephthah became. Second, Jephthah, like David, spent much time with his band of fellow outcast warriors. For all of superficial commonality between these two men, David's prayers and songs housed in the Psalter embody a very different outlook and way of life. Third, if Jephthah is considered as a tragic leader helping Israel along a rebellious path, then the prophets' message of judgment speaks the wrath that comes from defying God. Jephthah personifies stubborn Israel who refuses to heed the prophets' warning to repent and turn to God.

The narratives of the Hebrew Bible are not alone. They can and should fruitfully be taught and preached in dialogue with the entire range of God's revealed will. Jephthah can be preached in relation to the wisdom of Proverbs, the pleadings of the psalmists seeking God, and the prophets who speak against stubborn, self-centered people who, unfortunately, achieve a standing as leaders of a society of God's people gone wrong. Preaching a narrative in biblical context includes not only the immediate, organic, and natural contexts of episode, book, and serial, but also includes the unified and coherent collection of the entire Hebrew Bible.

How does the Christian Bible as context guide message? When we talk about the message of the Christian Bible we speak of the gospel of Christ. This context needs to be privileged since it is always essential to preach Christ. This is the underlying context which makes Christian each of the other contexts discussed above. In a minor way, the Jephthah story provides significant intertextual dialectical tension with the stories of Abraham's near sacrifice of his only son Isaac and God's offering of his son, whether considered from the perspective of John 3 or Romans 8.[5] More directly, within the framework of the Christian Bible the Jephthah story typifies the tragedy of human-centered visions, goals, and even successes. Human successes lead to perversity and death even under leaders chosen by God. Whatever hope we have comes from God's mercy to bring humility, healing, forgiveness, and another chance to pursue a righteous life. This implication-cluster sees the absent counterpoint, the "what ifs" of the narration. Stated broadly, the story reveals the need for God's mercy and salvation reaching out to unworthy people in a new way. The natural answer to the Jephthah story is the gospel of Christ.

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[5] Note the use of "only begotten" (*monogene*) in John 3:16 and of Jephthah's daughter in Judges 11:34 LXX B. Also, compare "he did not spare …" in Rom 8:31ff.

When we talk about all scripture bearing witness to the gospel of Christ we need to get it right. A constructive approach will not simply add Jesus to every passage, or throw in a 3:16 before closing in prayer. Trivializing the scriptural message by spiritualizing the text should be avoided. Hyper-typers may treat historical narratives as simile: the new David slings down the sin giant. This kind of approach fails to get at the redemptive function of the entire Christian Bible. When Jesus, Paul, and the New Testament writers taught they did not need to add Jesus to every message because they were not merely thinking of the gospel narrowly defined.

The gospel of Christ is not just about conversion. The gospel functions to save sinners and call them to righteousness and the kingdom of God.[6] Seeking righteousness and obeying God's will are part of the gospel. True, seeking righteousness can also be practiced in ways that are opposed by the prophets and apostles. The prophets and our Lord often spoke against phonies. Yet the problem is not God's holy and righteous demands. The great commission does not end with conversion and baptism but leads to "teaching them to obey all which I have commanded." When Bryan Chapell talks about Christ-centered preaching he means more than a call to repentance and conversion or "imaginative leapfrogging to Christ." Old Testament narratives speak the gospel as part of the redemptive scriptures which culminate in Christ. Good preaching does not mean adding Jesus, but preaching passages for what they are: part of the biblical message of Christ and salvation.

The kinds of implications I have been sketching are not the only ones. These merely illustrate the ways tangible scriptural frameworks bear on God's people. The point is that our messages need to be grounded in and framed by the scriptures rather than using the scriptural ideals to make applications grounded in a merely anthropocentric framework.

IV

Theological force derives from the Jephthah narrative's place within the scriptural framework in the book of Judges, as a part of the history of salvation that runs through the Bible, and as illustration of the tensions and the difficulties of applying the law within the covenantal community, and so on. Without connecting Jephthah to his particular and specific scriptural contexts, we surrender immediately to exemplaristic moralisms that reduce the scripture's narrative to illustrating good and bad behavior.

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[6] It seems Mark borrowed and adapted *euangelion* (noun) from Isaiah 40:9 LXX (verb form) (see Mark 1:1, and note the use of Isa 40 in Mark 1:2-3). Isaiah 40 provides a broad and deep depiction of the function and purpose of the gospel.

Maybe I am saying it too strongly, but harnessing the scriptural quality of biblical narrative requires us to submit to its implications, or to obey its messages, which, like all messages and implications, are context specific. Scripture's own authoritative contexts should function as guide to hearing and preaching the message of scriptural narratives.

The several empirical biblical contexts each function in complimentary ways. A particular biblical story works as an episode which often points readers back to the Torah as a guide to God's will for righteousness. Episodes do not stand alone but are housed within unified and coherent narratives that explain something more than simply personal concerns. Biblical books tell specific stories about God's people, and as such accent corporate dimensions of his will. Serials tell the big story and explain the identity of God's people, the meaning of reality, and hope for redemption that is available from God alone. The entire Old Testament or New Testament provides an authoritative interrelated set of scriptures that can fruitfully be studied together with a sum that is greater than its parts. The Christian Bible as a whole bears witness to the gospel of Christ and is the defining context for Christian interpretation.

The teacher and preacher need to develop messages from the biblical contexts. These contexts serve as a guide to messages worth preaching.

NOTES

For extensive argument and notes concerning the theoretical exegetical and hermeneutical bases for the above proposal, see my essay "The Trouble with Jephthah" (2009) at www.ScriptureWorkshop.com/studies. After presenting "The Trouble with Jephthah" I realized the essay only provides the necessary bases for getting at the *kerygmatic* function of biblical narration. The present proposal is my attempt to take the next step.

For reflection upon some of the distinctive characteristics of the serial narrative of the rise and fall of the Hebrew kingdom (Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings) see my essay "Narrative Time in the Books of Joshua through Kings" at www.ScriptureWorkshop.com/studies. For two commentaries which offer the help for preachers using the book of Judges as context, see Daniel I. Block, *The New American Commentary*, vol. 6, *Judges—Ruth* (Holman, 1999), and Robert B. Chisholm, Jr., *A Commentary on Judges and Ruth* (Kregel, 2013) (thank you to Professor Chisholm for allowing me to use the manuscript before it was available). For an example of how Old Testament narrative directly bears on Christians, see "Genesis is your story" by Chris Petty at http://scriptureworkshop.com/hb/penta_audio.html. For a narrative approach to the first five books of the Bible emphasizing the Torah as the beginning of the gospel, see my *The Torah Story* (Zondervan, 2006) (TorahStory.com). For a helpful introduction to the way each of the gospels extends and plays off Israel's scriptures, see Richard B. Hays, "The Canonical Matrix of the Gospels," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Gospels* (ed. Stephen C. Barton; Cambridge University Press, 2006), 53-75.

In addition to the works cited in my 2009 essay listed above I reread and reflected at some length on several important pieces to prepare the present proposal. I am indebted to several writings of Brevard Childs, especially *The Church's Guide for Reading Paul: The Canonical Shaping of the Pauline Corpus* (Eerdmans, 2008); *The Book of Exodus: A Critical, Theological Commentary* (Westminster Press, 1974); and *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Fortress, 1979). I found helpful Gerhard von Rad's provocative "Postscript" to his *Old Testament Theology* (trans. D. M. G. Stalker; Harper & Row, 1965), 2: 410-29. He discusses the "unity" of the Old Testament, and speaks of the two Testaments as our "instructors." Also, I reread Martin Noth, "The Re-presentation of the Old Testament in Proclamation," in *Essays on Old Testament Hermeneutics* (ed. Claus Westermann; ed. and trans. James Luther Mays; John Knox, 1963), 76-88.

My address is focused on the place between scripture interpretation and sermon, thinking through how scripture provides authoritative contextual guidance for Christian messages. For a rich and helpful explanation of next steps in working out sermons, see Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1994, 2005), esp. chaps 10 and 11. For the expression "imaginative leapfrogging to Christ" see 301. While I affirm Tim Keller's point in his short essay "Moralism vs. Christ-centered Exposition" (http://www.monergism.com/thethreshold/articles/onsite/moralismkeller.html, accessed 7 July 2014), his illustration therein is very problematic. More useful is Keller's discussion on the implications of the gospel in *Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), see esp. chaps 1-6.

I am grateful to Greg Trull for sending me a copy of his paper "Making His Story Our Story," Evangelical Theological Society, San Antonio, Nov, 2004, unpublished. While I have gone a different direction than Trull, his paper led to fruitful conversations with Charles Zimmerman. I have also benefited from critical feedback from Chris Petty, Keith Plummer, Don Cheyney, Bryan Murawski, Keith Treadwell, and Matt McAlack.