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**A Diagnosis of the Challenges of Making Exhortations Faced  
by Preachers who Employ Biblical Theology in Sermon  
Preparation of Old Testament Narrative Texts**

By  
Jonathan Dykes

A Dissertation Submitted to  
the Faculty of Covenant Theological Seminary  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Doctor of Ministry.

Saint Louis, Missouri

2019

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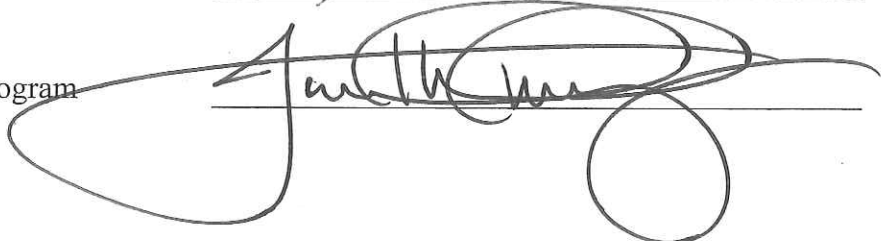
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## **Abstract**

The purpose of this study was to investigate how preachers who employ biblical theology in their sermon preparation of Old Testament narrative texts diagnose the challenge of making exhortations.

For preachers in Reformed circles who believe that application in preaching is a fundamental requirement, there is a key challenge: how to bring together biblical-theological method with practical exhortations to hearers in a sermon. In homiletics literature this challenge has been both acknowledged and described. In addition, the negative effects of this challenge -- such as boring, repetitive and complex sermons -- have also been described. Furthermore, a significant amount of literature exists on how to generate application in sermons. Little literature exists however, that describes the nature of the problem itself and its possible causes. Unless preachers who employ biblical theology in their sermon preparation correctly diagnose the sources of this problem within their method, they will not be well placed to address it.

This study used a qualitative design using semi-structured interviews with five preachers from several denominations, varied preaching contexts and extensive experience who were committed to using a biblical-theological method in their sermon preparation and who knew the challenged outlined above as a practical reality. The literature review and constant-comparative analysis of the five interviews focused on three key areas to comprehend in diagnosing this challenge: narrative and ethics, Old Testament narrative and Christian ethics and the issues and limitations of biblical theological schemas.

This study concluded that there are three primary sources of the challenge outlined above: the nature of Old Testament narrative itself as sophisticated literature, the limitations inherent in biblical theological schemas when applied to sophisticated literature, and the subjugation of the text by the preacher. To successfully address this challenge in practice, this study identified several commitments that the preacher must make: a commitment to the primacy of the text, a commitment to approaching Old Testament narrative as supremely sophisticated literature, a commitment to fight for adequate preparation time, a commitment to expand their hermeneutical tool kit, and a commitment to read as a reader, rather than as a professional.

To Sarah

For a man solemnly to undertake the interpretation of any portion of Scripture without invocation of God, to be taught and instructed by his Spirit, is a high provocation of him; nor shall I expect the discovery of truth from anyone who thus proudly engages in a work so much above his ability. But this is the sheet anchor of a faithful expositor in all difficulties; nor can he without this be satisfied, that he has attained the mind of the Spirit in any Divine revelation.

— John Owen, George Burder  
(1810) *“Pneumatologia: Or, A Discourse Concerning the Holy Spirit, Wherein an Account is Given of His Name, Nature, Personality, Dispensation, Operations, and Effects; His Whole Work in the Old and New Creation is Explained; and the Doctrine Concerning it Vindicated”*, p.332.

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## **Acknowledgements**

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# Chapter One

## Introduction

Since the 1930s and 1940s, the issue of application in preaching has divided like-minded church leaders within Reformed circles.<sup>1</sup> For those who, as a matter of theological conviction, believe application in preaching is a fundamental requirement, the issue has developed into a practical problem, one that this study will address.

### Problem Statement

In 1980, Dr. S. T. Logan wrote to thirty of his ministerial colleagues asking them to list the ten most serious failures of the contemporary Reformed pulpit.<sup>2</sup> Logan was outlining the content of a proposed volume on preaching. He received a penetrating reply from Rev. J.R. de Witt, which was later published.<sup>3</sup> Among the failures outlined, de Witt listed this one:

It seems to me that there is a problem...at the point of the redemptive-historical approach to the Scriptures. I have read Sidney Greidanus' *Sola Scriptura* and some of the other books on the subject, but I have yet to find in any of them a way of bringing together the redemptive-historical conception of Scripture and warm, pointed, applicatory preaching. I do not, it should be said, question the validity of the insights of the redemptive-historical method. But to warn off ministers from the exemplary and moralistic methods of a former time and of other schools is

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<sup>1</sup> Refer Sidney Greidanus, *Sola Scriptura: Problems and Principles in Preaching Historical Texts* (1970; repr., Eugene, OR: Wedge Publishing Foundation, 2001) for comprehensive detail on the substance of the historical debate.

<sup>2</sup> Samuel T. Logan, Jr., "Forward," in *Preaching: The Preacher and Preaching in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Samuel T. Logan, Jr. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing Company, 1986), v.

<sup>3</sup> John R. de Witt, "Contemporary Failure in the Pulpit," *The Banner of Truth* 1981, no. 3 (1981): 19–24.

not yet to have shown them how to be personal and applicatory without doing injustice to the scope and intent of the Word of God.<sup>4</sup>

[D]e Witt singled out a key struggle for preachers who employed a biblical-theological method in their preaching: how to bring together the biblical-theological method, also termed the “redemptive-historical method,” with “warm, pointed” exhortations to hearers in a sermon. Almost forty years later, the failure that de Witt so incisively circumscribed remains a problem.

In 2010 Dr. Tim Keller, best-selling preacher, author, and part-time lecturer on preaching, acknowledged this problem in a volume of sermons honoring one of his preaching mentors, Dr. E.P. Clowney:<sup>5</sup>

However, as most disciples of Ed Clowney have learned, the execution of his vision is extremely hard! How do you “get to Christ” in a way that truly honors the authorial intent in the particular text, without allegorizing or just simply “tacking Jesus on” at the end? ... Even when you could figure out how Christ was the fulfilment of the theme of the text, how do you get to application? Many Christ-centered sermons are hermeneutically sound and uplifting but leave you without knowing what difference it will make to how you live your life on Monday.<sup>6</sup>

The significance of Keller’s candid comment should not be underestimated. Clowney authored a seminal volume on biblical theology and preaching.<sup>7</sup> Through his writing, lecturing, and preaching, he influenced a generation of expositors. As a highly regarded and widely respected proponent of the use of biblical-theological method in preaching, he set the standard for many preachers in how they ought to handle the text,

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>5</sup> Tim Keller, “The Girl Nobody Wanted,” in *Heralds of the King: Christ-Centered Sermons in the Tradition of Edmund P. Clowney*, ed. Dennis E. Johnson (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2009).

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 55.

<sup>7</sup> Edmund P. Clowney, *Preaching and Biblical Theology*, 1st ed. (London: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1961).

especially Old Testament narrative texts. Yet, even a preacher of Keller's ability, dedication, and experience finds the task of bringing together the biblical-theological method and exhortations a struggle. He highlights the intrinsic element in the process of applying a biblical-theological method to the text of Scripture that makes generating exhortations difficult. To paraphrase Keller, it is almost as if "solving the puzzle" of how to "get to Christ," leaves the preacher stranded. Once they have "gotten to Christ," how do they ever get to the point of generating exhortations? Keller acknowledges that preachers feel the weight of this struggle the most when preaching "from the three-fourths of the Bible called the Old Testament."<sup>8</sup>

From the sermon-listener's perspective, the sermons sound repetitive and lack life-relevance for the present day. Dr. Bryan Chapell, accomplished preacher and author of the widely used seminary text *Christ-Centered Preaching*,<sup>9</sup> notes that one of the "unfortunate preaching repercussions"<sup>10</sup> arising from the biblical-theological method is a felt need to preach a Bible overview in every sermon, leading to messages that are "too academic, complex, and long."<sup>11</sup> Dr. Daniel Doriani, preacher and author of *Putting the Truth to Work*,<sup>12</sup> makes a similar observation. He comments, "The zeal to trace each passage to its culmination in Christ can obliterate the distinctiveness of particular

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<sup>8</sup> Tim Keller, "Preaching the Gospel in a Postmodern World" (Lectures presented at the Doctor of Ministry Programme, Reformed Theological Seminary, 2002), 35.

<sup>9</sup> Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing Group, 2005).

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 306.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 306.

<sup>12</sup> Daniel M. Doriani, *Putting the Truth to Work: The Theory and Practice of Biblical Application* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2001).

passages. At worst [this kind of] preaching repeats one sermon...every week.”<sup>13</sup> Keller draws attention to the same phenomenon. “There are major complaints about some preachers who follow this approach [utilizing the biblical-theological method]. One wrote me, ‘Each sermon merely becomes a “Bible-overview” sermon that sounds exactly the same.’”<sup>14</sup> Dr. Sidney Greidanus, author of major works on preaching and the application of biblical theology in preaching,<sup>15</sup> noted, “Some people experienced [this kind of] preaching as objective and irrelevant, rooted in the past but not linked with the present.”<sup>16</sup> Sermon-listeners have few formal publishing channels through which to voice their concerns. The fact that their objections have surfaced to this extent is significant.

The nature of the struggle singled out by de Witt has not been described in the literature and neither have its causes. Extensive debate in Reformed circles about the legitimacy of any exhortation in preaching at all has dominated the conversation.<sup>17</sup> Much of this debate has centered upon exhortation generated from Old Testament narrative texts. It is in relation to this genre that the debate is most heated and the struggle felt most keenly by preachers. But, for those who accept that application in preaching is a fundamental requirement, relatively little research has detailed the nature and causes of the problem. Keller,<sup>18</sup> for example, responds to the preacher’s struggle with an articulated

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 296.

<sup>14</sup> Keller, "Preaching the Gospel in a Postmodern World," 13.

<sup>15</sup> As an example refer: Greidanus; Sidney Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1988).

<sup>16</sup> Sidney Greidanus, "Redemptive History and Preaching," *Pro Rege* 19, December (1990) 14.

<sup>17</sup> Refer Greidanus, *Sola Scriptura: Problems and Principles in Preaching Historical Texts*.

<sup>18</sup> Though an unpublished work, Keller’s “Preaching the Gospel in a Postmodern World” notes are easily found and readily available on the internet. The accompanying lectures, given with Dr Edmund Clowney,

theology of application which justifies why application must be done; he also develops strategies for application, guidelines for appreciating the intellectual and cultural context of listeners, and a detailed methodology for entering into and changing a listener's worldview.<sup>19</sup> This discussion constitutes eighty pages out of 187 pages total. It is a detailed and practical guide to generating legitimate ethical application in preaching. Similarly, Doriani provides preachers with an even more developed methodology of application. In the first 120 pages of his volume, he develops a grid that enables the preacher to consider twenty-eight ways that any given text may be relevant to hearers.<sup>20</sup> In the remaining 190 pages, he applies this methodology to develop plans to apply narrative, doctrine, and ethical texts. Like Keller's work, it is a detailed, practical guide to generate ethical application.

Neither of these works, however, addresses the nature of the problem itself and its possible causes. Doriani states that his own lack of methodology was a major obstacle for generating application in the first fifteen years of his preaching "life."<sup>21</sup> He then provides a methodology. Keller acknowledges the preacher's difficulty and offers his own methodology as a solution. The net effect, however, is that if preachers want to overcome their struggle, they must adopt Keller or Doriani's methods wholesale. This position could be daunting given that both are detailed methodologies. More significantly, if it is

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are available on iTunes. It can therefore be considered as readily accessible to preachers as a printed volume.

<sup>19</sup> Keller, "Preaching the Gospel in a Postmodern World," 65-145.

<sup>20</sup> Doriani, *Putting the Truth to Work*, 1-120.

<sup>21</sup> Doriani. vii.



true that preaching is “truth through personality,”<sup>22</sup> preachers would want to be in a position to more organically assess, adapt, and develop someone else’s methodology of making exhortations to suit their own pattern of thinking and working. But, because preachers have not seen the root causes of the problem, they are not in a position to do this. They may have access to a general solution, but they still do not understand why they have a problem in the first place and thus are unaware of how they could solve it in their own preparation.

Less accessible literature for preachers, beyond what most would be accessing and synthesising in the course of their weekly work, addresses the problem tangentially. Studies comparing the character of Old Testament narrative against the character of the biblical-theological systems highlight some of the shortcomings in applying those systems to narrative texts. Extensive studies are available concerning redemptive-historical hermeneutics, the nature and place of application in preaching, and how best it should be done. Other literature touches upon the speed with which preachers apply their biblical-theological system to a text. Yet few of them, if any, offer the preacher a comprehensive account of the nature and causes of the problem and how they may be addressed practically in sermon preparation.

Both preachers and their listeners agree that the problem of bringing together the biblical-theological method and “warm, pointed” exhortation is of significance. If the nature of the difficulty remains unexplored in the more popular literature, and if tangential explanations of cause remain in the academy, then little help is readily available for the preacher. The pastor preparing a sermon each week, in the midst of other

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<sup>22</sup> Phillips Brooks, *Lectures on Preaching: Delivered before the Divinity School of Yale College in January and February 1877* (Harvard University, MA: E. P. Dutton, 1877), 32.

demands of pastoral ministry, has little realistic hope of ever solving the problem. Unless preachers who employ biblical theology in their sermon preparation correctly diagnose the sources of this problem within their method, they will not be well placed to address it. Their sermons will continue to lack application and will frustrate and disappoint both them and their hearers.

Therefore, more work is needed. Why is the preaching from Reformed pulpits so susceptible to the failure that de Witt outlined? What is it about the methodology of preachers who employ biblical theology that makes generating application so particularly difficult? What other factors, outside of pure methodology, may be contributing to the failure? The assessment, synthesis, and reflection of preachers are required to understand these issues from a practitioner's point of view. In order to more fully appreciate the nature of the problem and its causes, the sermon preparation process, and the factors that influence it need to be investigated. In light of the historical debate and also the contemporary comments noted above, this study will focus particularly on generating exhortations from Old Testament narrative literature.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this study is to investigate how preachers who employ biblical theology in their sermon preparation of Old Testament narrative texts diagnose the challenges of making exhortations.

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions will be used to guide this study:

1. What are the challenges in making exhortations faced by preachers who employ biblical theology in their sermon preparation of Old Testament narrative texts?
2. What do preachers who employ biblical theology in their sermon preparation of Old Testament narrative texts identify as the sources of these challenges?
3. In what ways and to what extent are these challenges related to the use of biblical theology in sermon preparation of Old Testament narrative texts?

### **Significance of the Study**

Understanding the nature of this problem and its causes offers significant, realistic hope for improvement in Reformed preaching. Greater understanding and delineation of the causes offer preachers an opportunity to address them. This greater understanding would better position them to avoid pitfalls, compensate for deficiencies, and correct unhelpful emphases in their methodology. Greater understanding may also alert them to the influence of external pressures or internal fears that they face in preparation. Finally, greater understanding may call their attention to the influence of ideological allegiances on their preparation. Once these steps have been taken, reformed preachers should no longer be unaware why they have a problem making exhortations.

Once the nature of the problem is delineated and the causes are identified and understood, a way forward is opened for improvement and resolution. Preachers can consider how to adapt and refine their practice. They will be in a stronger position to adapt other methodologies into their own. Additionally, they may be encouraged to develop skills they yet lack in key areas. Finally, they may realize the necessity of developing key attitudes of heart before God to handle his word rightly.

For those teaching in seminary, the insights gained from this enquiry may be applied to classroom instruction. Students being taught preparation methodologies and mentored by faculty can be better informed of potential problems, and unhelpful habits can be identified. The attitudes of the heart mentioned above can also be encouraged.

Sermon-listeners stand to benefit from all of these kinds of developments. Better exhortation will give listeners more clarity regarding what God gives them and expects of them. It may also remove significant frustrations and contribute towards hearing God's word preached as a rich, profound delight. In addition to the fruit that God may bring from that kind of preaching in the lives of his people, preachers will be further encouraged in their endeavours as they see the word of God make an impact.

### **Definition of Terms**

For the purposes of this study, terms are defined as follows.

#### *Redemptive-Historical Preaching*

The term "redemptive-historical" can be ambiguous in discussions concerning preaching. It was originally coined in debates about preaching in Reformed circles circa 1930-1940.<sup>23</sup> In that context, it came to be associated with a specific stance in regard to how the historical texts of Christian Scripture should be preached.<sup>24</sup> Since then, however, it has become more ambiguous, sometimes being used as a synonym for preaching that employs biblical theology in interpretation of the text and also as a descriptor of a general approach to reading and interpreting Christian Scripture.

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<sup>23</sup> Greidanus, *Sola Scriptura: Problems and Principles in Preaching Historical Texts*. 19-21.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 121-174.

It is in this more general sense that the term will be used in this study. Where the more specific meaning is required, this shift will be noted. As this ambiguity has the potential to be misleading, the researcher will endeavour to use the phrase “biblical-theological” in place of “redemptive-historical” wherever possible.

### *Biblical Theology*

Broadly defined, biblical theology is the discipline of biblical study that “attempts to grasp scripture in its totality according to its own, rather than imposed, categories.”<sup>25</sup>

There are, however, diverse theories and practices of biblical theology as a discipline.<sup>26</sup>

For the purposes of this study, biblical theology is more narrowly defined as follows:

Biblical theology, as its name implies, even as it works inductively from the diverse texts of the Bible, seeks to uncover and articulate the unity of all the biblical texts taken together, resorting primarily to the categories of those texts themselves. In this sense it is canonical biblical theology, “whole-Bible” biblical theology i.e., its content is a theology of the whole Bible, not a theology that merely has its roots in the Bible, or merely takes the Bible as the place to begin.<sup>27</sup>

### *Biblical Theologies*

As noted above, biblical theology is a discipline of biblical study. There are diverse theories and practices of this discipline. For the purposes of this study, these diverse theories and practices will be referred to as biblical theologies. As an example, an individual biblical theology as developed by a theologian may have a distinct primary

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<sup>25</sup> Craig Bartholomew, "Biblical Theology and Biblical Interpretation: Introduction," in *Out of Egypt: Biblical Theology and Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Mary Healy, Craig Bartholomew, Karl Möller, Robin Parry, Scripture and Hermeneutics (Milton Keynes: Paternoster Press, 2004), 1.

<sup>26</sup> Refer Edward W. Klink III and Darian R. Lockett, *Understanding Biblical Theology: A Comparison of Theory and Practice* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012) for a full overview of the spectrum.

<sup>27</sup> D. A. Carson, “Systematic and Biblical Theology,” in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander and Brian S. Rosner (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2000), 94.

organizing motif such as covenant or kingdom. Others may not have a primary organizing principle but be multi-thematic. As preachers are at liberty to choose which specific biblical theology they employ, and the choices are many, this study does not focus on any specific biblical theology, but on the discipline as defined above.

### *Biblical-Theological Method*

This term refers to the employment of the insights of biblical theology, by preachers, in their sermon preparation process.

### *Exhortation*

This term refers to the specific application of the sermon by the preacher to the hearers, where the hearers are emphatically urged, persuaded, and called upon to take practical action. This practical action is based upon the exegesis of the biblical text itself and therefore makes plain to the hearers what God requires of them, now that they have heard him speak. A scriptural example of such exhortation is Hebrews 12: 1-28. A more common and general term for “exhortation” in homiletic literature is “application.” “Application” will be used in this study where the more general meaning is acceptable.

### *Old Testament Narrative*

The Bible has many types of literary genres such as prophecy, poetry, apocalyptic, and narrative. Narrative is the Bible’s dominant literary genre.<sup>28</sup> Narrative as a genre is more commonly referred to as “story.” Numerous subtypes of narrative exist within the

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<sup>28</sup> Leland Ryken, “The Bible and Literary Study,” in *The Discerning Reader: Christian Perspectives on Literature and Theory*, ed. Roger Pooley, Leland Ryken, and David Barratt (Grand Rapids, MI: Apollos, 1995), 35.

Bible such as hero story, epic, tragedy, and comedy.<sup>29</sup> For the purposes of this study “Old Testament narrative” refers to the narrative genre of literature found in the Old Testament. In broad terms this encompasses the biblical books of Genesis to Esther. Extensive narrative sections are also found, however, within other Old Testament genres, most notably its prophetic books such as Isaiah and Jeremiah and also in others such as Daniel and Job.

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 107–158.

## Chapter Two

### Literature Review

The purpose of this study was to investigate how preachers who employ biblical theology in their sermon preparation of Old Testament narrative texts diagnose the challenges of making exhortations. In order to understand how the nature and causes of those challenges have been defined and addressed, three pertinent areas of literature will be reviewed: narrative and ethics, Old Testament narrative and Christian ethics, and the issues and limitations of employing biblical theology in sermon preparation.

### Narrative and Ethics

This section explores literature from the field of literary criticism, since Old Testament narrative is a form of literature. Specifically, this section reviews literature that addresses how narrative as a genre functions in relation to communicating ethical values to the reader and persuading them to adopt these values. This section investigates the didactic nature of narrative itself, its life-shaping potential, its inherent advantages for ethical understanding and finally, how it sharpens the readers' ethical perception.

#### *Narrative Is Actively Didactic*

Wayne C. Booth was the George M. Pullman Distinguished Service Professor Emeritus in English Language & Literature at the University of Chicago. His volume *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction*<sup>30</sup> is a key text in narrative studies. Booth's work

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<sup>30</sup> Wayne Booth, *The Company We Keep* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1988).



marked an ‘ethical (re)turn’<sup>31</sup> within this discipline, that is, a renewed recognition that works of fictional narrative contain ethical values of which they are attempting -- explicitly or implicitly -- to teach the reader.

Booth develops his argument using the metaphor of “friendship”: literary works such as fictional narratives are the readers’ “friends.”<sup>32</sup> Just as in other human friendships, narrative texts shape readers as they spend time in their company. Texts influence them, patterning their thoughts and desires, ordering their values, offering moral guidance.<sup>33</sup> In narratives, implied authors offer the reader a certain type of relationship, one in which they come as ones who would teach.<sup>34</sup> The reading of texts then, is a conversation with the implied author, continued with permission, where readers open themselves to be shaped by them:

Whenever I work my way into a narrative...the “I” that is “me” becomes increasingly like my picture of the implied author: I succumb – I begin to see as he or she sees, to feel as she feels, to love what he loves, or to mock what she mocks.<sup>35</sup>

Therefore, Booth argues, all stories have a practical dimension: they are actively didactic.<sup>36</sup>

Widely published philosopher Martha C. Nussbaum is currently the Ernst Freund Distinguished Service Professor of Law and Ethics at the University of Chicago. She also

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<sup>31</sup> Jeremy Hawthorn and Jakob Lothe, “Introduction: The Ethical (Re)Turn,” in *Narrative Ethics*, ed. Jakob Lothe and Jeremy Hawthorn (New York: Rodopi, 2013), 4.

<sup>32</sup> Booth, *The Company We Keep*, 151.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 201.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 215.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 256.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 151, 201.

insists on recognizing this practical, didactic dimension to narrative.<sup>37</sup> Nussbaum argues that, as in ancient Greek thought, both philosophical and aesthetic<sup>38</sup> inquiry into ethics should be recognized as being framed by a single and general question: how human beings should live.<sup>39</sup> In the ancient Greek world, the idea that:

...[A]rt existed only for art's sake, and that literature should be approached with a detached aesthetic attitude, pure of practical interest, was an idea unknown... Art was thought to be practical, aesthetic interest a practical interest – an interest in the good life and in communal self-understanding. To respond... was to move already toward this greater understanding.<sup>40</sup>

For Nussbaum art -- including narrative -- is a source of ethical reflection and speaks directly to life. Moreover, she holds that this didactic dimension of narrative is inescapable: narrative texts are “making a set of claims,” their content a creation of human intentions and conceptions.<sup>41</sup> Furthermore, this practical, didactic nature of narrative is already present and recognized by “ordinary readers”; only theorists deny it. Ordinary readers bring to texts they love their urgent questions and perplexities about life, searching for models, knowledge and guidance.<sup>42</sup> They “care for the books they read; and they are changed by what they care for.”<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Martha C. Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).

<sup>38</sup> That is, art forms such as narrative and poetry. *Ibid.*, 1–10.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 7–10.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>43</sup> Martha C. Nussbaum, “Reading for Life,” *Yale Journal of Law & the Humanities* 1, no. 1, Article 10 (March 22, 2013): 166.

In 2004, author and journalist Christopher Booker published *The Seven Basic Plots: Why We Tell Stories*.<sup>44</sup> This volume represents over thirty years work by Booker analyzing stories. For Booker, that stories are didactic is no accident. Rather, it is the reason they exist. Booker contends that stories have one overriding purpose: they show human beings how to be whole again.<sup>45</sup>

Booker notes that stories are ubiquitous across time, cultures, and language. Human beings have not only an ability and an impulse for storytelling but also a deep and instinctive need for them.<sup>46</sup> He notes that wherever human beings have engaged in storytelling, those stories have formed in the imagination and taken shape in the telling in remarkably similar ways.<sup>47</sup> In examining this phenomenon, he argues that stories take shape in the human imagination around a set of archetypal patterns and images and emerge from a level of the human consciousness that functions independently of conscious control. This force shapes human stories and their purpose and dictates their patterns and images and their basic plots and characters.

Booker explains the human “need to be whole again” via psychological analysis: at some point in the evolutionary process human beings experienced “a Fall”: they developed the capacity to choose and no longer live purely by instinct. Along with this capacity to choose, however, came the ego: the capacity to act selfishly.<sup>48</sup> The human psyche became divided between this new ego consciousness and the unconscious, which

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<sup>44</sup> Christopher Booker, *The Seven Basic Plots* (London: Continuum, 2004).

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 558.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 546–553.

is a person's core identity. Human beings therefore have two conflicting forces in their psyche that live in conscious tension.

At the deepest level, Booker argues, there is nothing that human beings want more than to re-establish the unity between these two parts of their psyche.<sup>49</sup> It is this driving force that fuels the human need for stories. In the telling of stories what is happening is the unconscious (core identity) is trying to put over the same fundamental point to human beings: the restoration to that lost state of unity can only happen according to a set of fundamental rules, under specific conditions, with certain elements in place. The orchestration of these rules, conditions and elements in human life is precisely what stories so powerfully articulate – they show human beings how restoration can be achieved. The *raison d'être* of stories, then, is to teach.

### *Narrative Has Life-shaping Potential*

The didactic nature of narrative is developed in the literature in discussions of its life-shaping potential. Booth highlights the inherent potential of narrative:

In one sense, everyone who has read much narrative with intense engagement “knows” that narratives do influence behaviour.<sup>50</sup>

Booth is saying that readers intuitively appreciate that narrative has a life-shaping quality. He illustrates this by citing numerous examples of personal testimony from readers citing how narratives have changed their conduct.<sup>51</sup> The striking feature about them, Booth says, is that the readers firmly believe the change in them was catalyzed by a

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 551.

<sup>50</sup> Booth, *The Company We Keep*, 227.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 278–280.

response to the fixed norms of the narrative. In other words, almost all of the readers “believed that the implied author intended something like the change that occurred.”<sup>52</sup>

For Booth himself, this life-shaping potential of narrative is potent. Certain authors have become “lasting friends,” ones that he “cares about the most” amongst all the others, whose company is “superior in some ways even to those he lives with.”<sup>53</sup> It is these authors who offer to teach readers “a life larger than any specific doctrine”:

You lead me first to practice ways of living that are more profound, more sensitive, more intense...more fully generous than I am likely to meet anywhere in the world. You correct my faults, rebuke my insensitivities. You mold me into patterns of longing and fulfillment that make my ordinary dreams seem petty and absurd. You finally show what life can be, not just to a coterie, a...remnant looking down on the fools, slobs, and knaves, but to anyone who is willing to work to earn the title of equal and true friend.<sup>54</sup>

This intense life-shaping power in narrative is a power he has experienced himself.

Cognitive scientist and Associate Professor of Philosophy at the University of Puget Sound, Shen-yi Liao, has recently nuanced the discussion of the persuasive potential of narrative by drawing attention to the importance of recognizing the diversity of sub-genres in fiction.<sup>55</sup> Whereas Booth and Nussbaum primarily discuss realist fictional narrative,<sup>56</sup> Liao points out that there are other, non-realist, types of fiction such

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 280.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 222.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 223.

<sup>55</sup> Shen-yi Liao, “Moral Persuasion and the Diversity of Fictions,” *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 94, no. 3 (September 1, 2013): 269–289.

<sup>56</sup> That is, in the works authored by them and cited in this paper.

as satire or comedic horror.<sup>57</sup> These non-realist forms possess different modes of moral persuasion. Different fictions persuade differently. Readers must vary the degree to which they bring their real-world perspectives -- physical beliefs and moral outlooks for example -- to bear upon make-believe genres such as science fiction or comedic horror. This variance in turn influences readers' responses to the text and what they "export" from it.<sup>58</sup> Liao does not explore in detail the effects that these differences in genre may have upon the degree of power a text may have for moral persuasion. It is also outside the bounds of his paper to address these issues in relation to historical narrative.

World-renowned philosopher Paul Ricoeur has provided a hermeneutic for the life-shaping potential of narrative, by considering the relationship of the world of human living and the world of a narrative.<sup>59</sup> Ricoeur develops Aristotle's idea of "mimesis" into a three-fold notion of "prefiguration," "configuration," and "refiguration."

"Prefiguration" is the world of action prior to its shaping for a narrative text.<sup>60</sup> An author must already possess an understanding of the world of human action -- goals, motives, and agents -- before they can successfully compose any narrative plot.

"Configuration" is the creative transformation of that real world of human action into a narrative plot.<sup>61</sup> Ricoeur locates the potential of narrative to shape readers here in its potential to create and project "worlds" for them to explore -- worlds of human values

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<sup>57</sup> See Liao, "Moral Persuasion and the Diversity of Fictions," 273–278 where he uses *Catch-22* and the film *Evil Dead 2* as examples.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 283.

<sup>59</sup> Paul Ricoeur, "Mimesis and Representation," in *A Ricoeur Reader: Reflection and Imagination*, ed. Mario J. Valdes (New York/London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991), 137–155.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 142.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 145–146.

and possibilities for existence.<sup>62</sup> In this way, narrative reflects the human experience of life but transforms it as well through the act of reading.

“Refiguration” is the appropriation of the action of the narrative by the reader.<sup>63</sup> The real-world human action present in the prefiguration, which was then configured in the narrative, is refigured back into real-world action in the life of the reader. The reader explores new possibilities, ideas, values, and different ways-of-being in the world.

The refiguration process therefore, is where the text can transform its reader, and where narrative can shape identity. Ricoeur holds that narrative texts lead readers to recast their experience after the shape of the “world” they have been presented with. Readers are not only changed, but also formed, by stories.<sup>64</sup> In exposing themselves to a text, readers enlarge their self-understanding:

To understand oneself is to understand oneself as one confronts the text and to receive from it the conditions for a self other than that which first undertakes the reading.<sup>65</sup>

In exposing themselves to a text, the readers see new ways-of-being in the world. The text makes proposals about life to the reader that may, or may not be, appropriated into real-world action.

Because narratives are able to project possibilities in this way, Noël Carroll argues that they are important instruments in human deliberation.<sup>66</sup> Carroll, an

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<sup>62</sup> Paul Ricoeur, “What Is a Text? Explanation and Understanding,” in *A Ricoeur Reader: Reflection and Imagination*, ed. Mario J. Valdes (New York/London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991), 44–45.

<sup>63</sup> Ricoeur, “Mimesis and Representation,” 148, 150–1.

<sup>64</sup> Refer Parry’s discussion in Robin Parry, *Old Testament Story and Christian Ethics: The Rape of Dinah as a Case Study*, 1st ed. (Milton Keynes: Paternoster Press, 2004), 23.

<sup>65</sup> G.B. Madison, “Ricoeur and the Hermeneutics of the Subject,” in *The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur*, ed. L. Hahn (Chicago, IL: Open Court, 1995), 82.

extensively published leading figure in the contemporary philosophy of art, reasons that narrative shows readers how the future emerges from the past and the present. “They [narratives] connect past events to future outcomes.”<sup>67</sup> This connection plays a role in human moral deliberation, as readers learn from narrative not only how to project future possibilities but also how to find their bearings ethically in relation to them, that is, choosing which future possibility best coheres with who they are.<sup>68</sup>

Ricoeur believes a major way that narrative makes proposals about life is in the actions of its characters. In reading narrative, readers tirelessly explore ways of evaluating characters and their actions. They provide thought experiments that readers conduct in their imagination; yet, he maintains, they are also explorations in the realm of good and evil.<sup>69</sup> These thought experiments allow readers to ethically explore characters, actions, situations, and contexts that their own life experience may not provide.

Carroll develops this notion of narratives as literary thought experiments and how characters can serve as sources of knowledge about virtue and vice for the reader’s appropriation.<sup>70</sup> Carroll argues that narrative art frequently deploys a structure he terms a “virtue wheel” -- an array of characters that correspond and contrast to each other in relation to one virtue or a package of virtues.<sup>71</sup> This dynamic in narrative prompts readers

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<sup>66</sup> Noel Carroll, “Narrative and the Ethical Life,” in *Art in Three Dimensions* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2010), 387–395.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 390.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 391.

<sup>69</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself As Another*, trans. K. Blamey (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 164.

<sup>70</sup> Noel Carroll, “The Wheel of Virtue: Art, Literature, and Moral Knowledge,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 60, no. 1 (Winter 2002): 3–26.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.



to identify, evaluate, apply, and judge virtue and vice in, and to, characters. Readers discriminate conceptually and reach conclusions. They see possible ways of understanding human actions and decisions. This process all happens in the mind of the reader during reading, or in what Carroll calls the “reflective afterlife” of the text.<sup>72</sup>

That readers reflect upon characters this way, Carroll views as undeniable. Readers read for character and understand them in approximately the same way they understand people in the real world.<sup>73</sup> Readers identify with them; they come to “trust their guidance,” as Nussbaum says.<sup>74</sup> This tendency leads inescapably to the reader reflecting not only on the character of virtue but also how it might be applied in their everyday life.<sup>75</sup> He views this moral elucidation of characters as a deeply ingrained part of our reading practice, one that is inculcated in readers from their very childhood.<sup>76</sup>

### *The Narrative Form Possesses Advantages for Ethical Understanding*

Nussbaum maintains that narrative alone is able to capture the complexity, mysteriousness, indeterminacy, and imperfect beauty of human existence.<sup>77</sup> Narrative succeeds, she argues, where the conventional prose of moral philosophy does not:

...[C]ertain truths about human life can only be fittingly and accurately stated in the language and forms characteristic of the narrative artist. With respect to certain elements of human life, the terms of the novelist’s art are...perceiving where the blunt terms of ordinary speech, or of abstract

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>74</sup> Nussbaum, *Love’s Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature*, 44.

<sup>75</sup> Carroll, “The Wheel of Virtue: Art, Literature, and Moral Knowledge,” 16.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>77</sup> Nussbaum, *Love’s Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature*, 3, 47.

theoretical discourse, are blind, acute where they are obtuse, winged where they are dull and heavy.<sup>78</sup>

Therefore, she believes narrative is uniquely placed to impart ethical understanding. Only the language and forms of the narrative artist can draw from the deeply felt experience of life and render it finely in all its complexity.<sup>79</sup> Narrative offers another way to be precise, lucid, and complete in expressing ethical thought.<sup>80</sup>

The specific advantages of the narrative form,<sup>81</sup> Nussbaum says, are that it can present the relevance of circumstances and the multiple, qualitative, ethical dilemmas that they can produce. Such dilemmas include the ethical relevance of uncontrolled events. Narrative portrays the connectedness of specific situations to their complex and concrete contexts. It not only represents but also activates emotions, surfacing some of the most deeply rooted views about what is important. Narrative characterizes human experience more richly, truly, and precisely by showing the mystery and indeterminacy of human life and the difficulty of moral choice.<sup>82</sup> Narrative becomes an extension of life: horizontally because it brings the reader into contact with events, places, people, and dilemmas they have not encountered; vertically because it gives the reader an experience that is deeper, sharper, and more precise than real life.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 37–50.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 37–47.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 47–8.

Carroll develops several aspects of Nussbaum's argument in various works.<sup>84</sup>

Carroll argues that narrative's advantages in engaging the reader to grapple with situated life problems come primarily from the fact that narratives "marshal the emotions" in their presentation of particulars.<sup>85</sup>

Carroll demonstrates how authorial selectivity is a necessary condition of narrative. That is, narrative is concrete. It is richer in detail concerning the thoughts, motives, and feelings of characters than philosophical discourse. Yet at the same time it is more abstract or "distilled" than ordinary life events.<sup>86</sup> Detail has been selected from an infinitely larger array of detail that could have been given. No narrative tells "the whole story." In the same way, narrative is complex yet also more simplified than real life; it is rich yet also more compact.

This characteristic enables the author to "pre-filter" or "emotively pre-digest" the details of narrative events in order to promote, and then sustain, selected emotional responses. This "critical pre-focusing"<sup>87</sup> is a major advantage of the narrative form in Carroll's view. It enables the author to emotively frame characters, places, states of affairs, actions, and events to elicit intended emotional responses from the reader. Emotions are fast mechanisms for judging circumstances, sifting stimuli, weighing variables, assessing information and clarifying situations in a context-sensitive way. Therefore, in narrative, the author can activate and direct them in order to clarify issues

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<sup>84</sup> Refer Noel Carroll, "Art, Narrative, and Moral Understanding," in *Aesthetics and Ethics: Essays at the Intersection*, ed. Jerrold Levinson, Cambridge Studies in Philosophy and the Arts (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 126–160; Carroll, "The Wheel of Virtue: Art, Literature, and Moral Knowledge"; Carroll, "Narrative and the Ethical Life" amongst other works.

<sup>85</sup> Carroll, "Narrative and the Ethical Life," 382.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 375.

<sup>87</sup> Carroll's term. *Ibid.*, 378.

morally.<sup>88</sup> In this way the author points to certain conclusions and sets up arguments for the readers to complete themselves.<sup>89</sup> Because their emotions have been powerfully engaged in ethical deliberation, the lessons learnt go more deeply.<sup>90</sup>

A further advantage of the narrative form for ethical understanding, Carroll maintains, is that it possesses the means “to exhibit both the inside and outside of virtues and vices.”<sup>91</sup> Narrative conventions allow the reader inside the mind of characters to see what they are thinking, feeling, seeing, and hearing as well as showing the characters’ behaviours. Narrative then directly links behaviour to the underlying beliefs, thoughts, attitudes, and feelings that gave rise to it, and it shows the dynamics of this interplay occurring over time. Thus, the plot reveals the coherence of the character traits, how they are “intelligible patterns of activity regulated purposively by governing habits of mind.”<sup>92</sup>

In this way narrative is uniquely placed to “show” a virtue or vice, giving readers a clearer sense of what it is and how to recognize it than if the author had simply related an abstract definition.

Booker points out that a part of the way that stories show readers the path to a state of restoration is by providing them with a unique mirror: one that reflects all the states of psychological imbalance that hold them back from that state in the first place.

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 380.

<sup>89</sup> Carroll, “The Wheel of Virtue: Art, Literature, and Moral Knowledge,” 14.

<sup>90</sup> Carroll, “Narrative and the Ethical Life,” 382.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 383.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 384.

Stories reflect back to their readers how their human nature works -- why they think and behave the way that they do and what is out of balance.<sup>93</sup>

In light of these advantages of form, Nussbaum contends that narrative's form must be seen as part of its content. Form is content. They are inseparable. Just as the plant emerges from the soil, taking on the character of both soil and seed, so narrative takes its form from the conceptions and intentions of the literary artist.<sup>94</sup> The form speaks, as well as the content. The manner in which the artist has chosen to tell the story and address the reader – the formal structures, sentences, language – expresses what the literary artist believes important. A paraphrase of a narrative in a different form and style will not convey these same conceptions.<sup>95</sup> To fully appropriate a narrative's value for ethical understanding, she argues, a full appreciation of, and sensitivity to, its form is required.

Nussbaum highlights the importance of this by drawing attention to how an appreciation of form is predominantly lacking in formal philosophical evaluations of narrative texts, in Anglo-American circles at least. She attributes this to:

...the long-standing fascination of Western philosophers with the methods and style of natural science, which have at many times in history seemed to embody the only sort of rigour and precision worth cultivating, the only norm of rationality worth emulating, even in the ethical sphere.<sup>96</sup>

Therefore narrative form is often disregarded -- divorced from content -- in evaluations or, if not wholly disregarded, considered mostly decorative: irrelevant and neutral in its relation to content. Nussbaum argues that unreflectively applying a method

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<sup>93</sup> See Booker, *The Seven Basic Plots*, 563, 698.

<sup>94</sup> Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature*, 5.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 4–5.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

apt for science into a sphere of life with a “different geography” thus “demands a different sort of precision, a different form of rationality.”<sup>97</sup>

### *Narrative Uniquely Sharpens Our Moral Sensitivity*

Building on her argument that only narrative is capable of adequately addressing certain aspects of human existence, Nussbaum asserts that reading narrative develops “perception”: a capacity for judgment, or, the ethical ability to read a situation and single out the salient factors for thought and action.<sup>98</sup> In ancient Greek thought, this ability was seen as the essence of practical wisdom. This ability is not a formulaic technique; rather it is learned by guidance. Literary imagining can be more potent than much of real life. Readers are led to imagine, describe, focus, and feel with greater precision, and so the reader develops a full, human perceptiveness.<sup>99</sup>

Booth agrees. He states that narrative leads the reader into practicing sensitive and subtle moral inference, which is exactly the kind that their everyday moral choices require. This inference is less the moral sensitivity of any given character and more that of the implied author who leads readers to truly “see.”<sup>100</sup>

Carroll also agrees. Narrative can cultivate readers’ capacity for moral perception. More than that, it can exercise and hone readers’ skills in judging the character of others. That is, it highlights for the reader the criteria they use in such judgments and “the rules

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 37, 44.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>100</sup> Booth, *The Company We Keep*, 287.

and conditions under which they apply them.”<sup>101</sup> Narrative thus develops a reader’s “grammar” of virtue and vice. It sensitizes readers and enables them to cultivate finesse in determining virtue or vice in all their varied manifestations.<sup>102</sup>

### *Conclusions From This Section*

This section has surveyed literature from the field of literary criticism, seeking to explore how narrative as a genre functions in relation to communicating ethical values to readers and persuading them to adopt these values. The literature surveyed has argued that narrative is actively didactic in nature. Not only do stories teach; it is what they exist to do. Narrative has power: it can change, form, and shape the reader in profound ways through processes such as refiguration. Narrative works can win the readers’ affections and become sources of guidance. Narrative therefore, can function as a source of ethical reflection and instruction for the reader. Narratives also present readers with different ways-of-being in the world for their ethical exploration, deliberation, and appropriation. The characters in a narrative are the primary vehicles for this powerful life-shaping process. The characters can render human experience potently and so become an extension of life for the reader: enabling them to experience circumstances, people and dilemmas that they have not encountered in real life. The literature has also argued that the narrative form possesses unique advantages for ethical instruction over other forms of more abstract discourse, such as being able to present life more precisely, richly, and truly. In this way, a narrative’s form should be considered as part of its content. Finally,

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<sup>101</sup> Carroll, “The Wheel of Virtue: Art, Literature, and Moral Knowledge,” 14–15.

<sup>102</sup> Carroll, “Narrative and the Ethical Life,” 386.

the literature has argued that reading narrative can sharpen a person's capacity for moral judgment, enabling them to develop ethical wisdom.

### **Old Testament Narrative and Christian Ethics**

This section explores literature from the field of hermeneutics, specifically the hermeneutics of Old Testament narrative. This section focuses on literature that addresses how Old Testament narrative as a genre functions in communicating ethical values to the reader and persuading them to adopt these values. In addition, this section begins by exploring how God's authorial intent impacts an understanding of the didactic nature of Old Testament narrative. Literature from the field of systematic theology that examines this issue in relation to speech-act theory is reviewed. Therefore, this section addresses the impact of God's authorial intent, the life-shaping purpose of Old Testament narrative, and the central role of both Old Testament characters and Old Testament narrative's form, in relation to ethical instruction.

#### *Because God Has Spoken, An Ethical Response Is Required*<sup>103</sup>

Scripture clearly portrays God as a God who speaks. In the Bible's opening chapter God, as Creator, brings the heavens and the earth into existence by speaking.<sup>104</sup> God repeats this action many more times: God speaks to Adam and Eve,<sup>105</sup> Noah,<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> I am indebted to Sam Chan for the concise outline of this section, see Sam Chan, *Preaching as the Word of God; Answering an Old Question with Speech-Act Theory* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2016).

<sup>104</sup> Genesis 1:1-31, NIV.

<sup>105</sup> Genesis 1:28-30.

<sup>106</sup> Genesis 6:13.



Abraham,<sup>107</sup> Moses,<sup>108</sup> Elijah,<sup>109</sup> Job,<sup>110</sup> and Jonah,<sup>111</sup> among many others in the Old Testament. In the New Testament, God speaks at Jesus' baptism<sup>112</sup> and also his transfiguration.<sup>113</sup> The author of Hebrews succinctly brings together God's Old Testament speaking activity with the present day in the opening of his epistle:

In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things and through whom he made the universe.<sup>114</sup>

What God speaks is his word. His word is a revealed message from God that comes to the recipient(s) either directly from him or indirectly, via a prophet.<sup>115</sup> This word is an expression of his will. His word is always effective in achieving his will because he is sovereign;<sup>117</sup> no one can thwart his purposes.<sup>118</sup> His word is also “authoritative and normative”<sup>119</sup> because he is the Creator. Therefore, everyone who hears his word is commanded to obey its message, which is why his word comes with the

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<sup>107</sup> Genesis 12:1-3.

<sup>108</sup> Exodus 3:1-4:17.

<sup>109</sup> 1 Kings 19:13.

<sup>110</sup> Job 38-41.

<sup>111</sup> Jonah 1:2; 3:2; 4:4; 9-11.

<sup>112</sup> Mark 1:11.

<sup>113</sup> Mark 9:7.

<sup>114</sup> Hebrews 1:1-2.

<sup>115</sup> Isaiah 6:9-13. Chan, *Preaching as the Word of God; Answering an Old Question with Speech-Act Theory*, 83.

<sup>117</sup> Isaiah 55:10-11.

<sup>118</sup> Isaiah 14:27; Job 42:2.

<sup>119</sup> Chan, *Preaching as the Word of God; Answering an Old Question with Speech-Act Theory*, 86.

exhortation to “hear,” the command to “believe it and conform [their life] to it.”<sup>120</sup> Such is the demand for an ethical response.

God’s word was also written down, i.e. inscripturated, upon his command.<sup>122</sup> This work enabled future generations to hear God’s word by reading this written record. This passing along is the purpose of Scripture – that generations, who come after the original proclamation of God’s word, can still hear that word.<sup>123</sup>

Therefore, in Scripture, God continues to speak to those who read it. It remains authoritative, normative, and effective, because he is the living, eternal God. Therefore, it is still accompanied by the exhortation to “hear”: to believe it and conform to it.<sup>124</sup> This imperative can be seen within Scripture itself, such as when the “Book of the Law” is discovered and Josiah responds,<sup>125</sup> or when the author of Hebrews recounts Israel’s wilderness wanderings and the admonitions in the Psalms as a warning to his new covenant listeners.<sup>126</sup>

Therefore, God speaks his word for a purpose: to achieve his will. Because it is God -- eternal, sovereign, Creator -- who speaks it, it demands a response: belief and conformity of life. Scripture is God’s word written, in which he continues to speak to -- and demand a response from -- those who read it. This authoritative connection between speaker (God) and hearer (reader) continues to this day. Old Testament narrative, as part

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<sup>120</sup> Ibid. Deuteronomy 6:4ff; Isaiah 1:2, 10.

<sup>122</sup> Deuteronomy 31:9, 24; Isaiah 30:8; Daniel 12:4.

<sup>123</sup> Chan, *Preaching As The Word of God; Answering an Old Question with Speech-Act Theory*, 87.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

<sup>125</sup> 2 Kings 22-23.

<sup>126</sup> Hebrews 3:7-4:11.

of Scripture, comes to present-day readers with the full authorial intent of the living, speaking, sovereign, Creator God. In other words, Old Testament narrative demands an ethical response -- one of belief and conformity of life -- from human beings by virtue of the identity of its Author.

Theologian and author Sam Chan has highlighted a complementary way of understanding God's communicative intent in Scripture. By applying the insights of Speech-Act Theory to preaching, Chan has shown how God's inscripturated word comes to present-day readers with full force and effect.<sup>127</sup>

Speech-act theory is a theory concerning the use of language. The central proposition of speech-act theory is that to speak is to perform an act. Chan summarizes the originating theory of John Austin and its development by John Searle. Austin theorized that there are three components to a speech act: the "locutionary act," the "illocutionary act," and the "perlocutionary act."<sup>128</sup>

The locutionary act refers to the performance of an act of saying something. It concerns the meaning of what has been said. The illocutionary act refers to the performance of an act in saying something. It concerns the force of what has been said. The perlocutionary act is the performance of an act by saying something. It concerns the effect of what has been said. An example of analyzing speech this way would be a conversation between a surf lifesaver and a swimmer at a beach:

The Locutionary Act – the meaning:  
He (surf lifesaver) said to me (swimmer), "You shouldn't swim here, due to the dangerous currents."

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<sup>127</sup> Refer esp. pp. 165-228 for this application and conclusions for preaching. Chan, *Preaching As The Word of God; Answering an Old Question with Speech-Act Theory*.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid., 178.

The Illocutionary Act – the force:  
He warned me not to go swimming.

The Perlocutionary Act – the effect:  
He persuaded me not to swim, or, he stopped me swimming.

Each act has its differences. The locutionary act refers to the verbal utterance, or, the propositional content of the sentence.<sup>129</sup> The illocutionary act refers to the force of that propositional content. In this example the propositional content comes with the force of a warning. The perlocutionary act refers to the effect of the locutionary and the illocutionary act, in this case “stopping” the swimmer from entering the water.

By applying speech-act theory to a theology of the preached word of God, Chan argues four points.<sup>130</sup> First, God can be understood as a “divine speech agent.” He is the God who speaks. Second, his word can be understood as a speech act. In speaking, God has performed an act because “the locution originates with God.”<sup>131</sup> Third, Scripture can be viewed as a speech act because it is God’s word written. Fourth, the speech acts of God occur within a definite context: the covenant he has established with his creation.

One of the implications of the above is that, if Scripture is a locutionary act of God, then its illocutionary acts are ongoing; that is, God continues to perform his illocutionary acts through Scripture.<sup>132</sup> He continues to promise, warn, encourage, and rebuke. His word has been spoken and inscripturated, yet it continues to come to its present-day readers with full illocutionary force. In addition, if Scripture is a locutionary

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<sup>129</sup> There is disagreement between Austin and Searle on the distinction between locutionary and illocutionary acts. For the sake of simplicity in this discussion the author has stayed with Austin’s definitions. Refer *Ibid.*, 180 for detail.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, 185–191.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, 195.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, 182.

act of God through which he continues to perform his illocutionary acts, then his demand for its perlocutionary effects -- belief and conformity of life -- also continues.

Furthermore, while Scripture can be viewed as a speech-act, it is a divine speech-act. In Vanhoozer's terminology, it can be understood as "double-agency discourse," and this has significant implications for the way Scripture's perlocutionary effects are understood. That is:

...we may say that the Bible is divine-human communicative action: its locutions and illocutions are the result of double-agency... The warnings, promises, assertions, prophecies, songs and so forth in Scripture are divine as well as human communicative acts... However, whereas human discourse relies on rhetoric to achieve the intended perlocutionary effects, Scripture's perlocutionary effects depend upon the Spirit's agency.<sup>133</sup>

This final observation calls attention to the significant fact that the Holy Spirit is "active and responsible"<sup>134</sup> for the perlocutionary effects of Scripture in the life of the reader. Therefore, Scripture comes to the reader not only with divine authorial intent, but with full divine power, from the Holy Spirit. Vanhoozer comments:

Now, the primary role of the Holy Spirit, I believe, is to *minister the Word*. The application of salvation is first and foremost a matter of applying both the propositional content and illocutionary force of the gospel in such a way as to bring about perlocutionary effects: effects which, in this case, include regeneration, understanding, and union with Christ... It is not simply the impartation, nor the transfer of mechanical energy, but the impact of a total speech act...<sup>135</sup>

Therefore, God's word written is accompanied by God's Spirit, powerful and active. This insight from speech-act theory complements the church's understanding of why Scripture rightly, and inherently, demands a response from those who read it. Not

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<sup>133</sup> Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *First Theology: God, Scripture and Hermeneutics* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2002), 155–156.

<sup>134</sup> Chan, *Preaching As The Word of God; Answering an Old Question with Speech-Act Theory*, 204.

<sup>135</sup> Vanhoozer, *First Theology: God, Scripture and Hermeneutics*, 248.

only does it demand a response because it is the word from the eternal, sovereign, Creator God. It demands a response because in it, God has acted. He has spoken to present-day readers, with full meaning and force. Therefore, as Old Testament narrative is part of Scripture, these observations apply. Old Testament narrative demands an ethical response: belief and conformity of life.

This authoritative, didactic nature of Christian Scripture can be seen even in the most challenging sections of Old Testament narrative. The Book of Esther has a reputation for being a challenge to interpreters.<sup>136</sup> God is explicitly absent.<sup>137</sup> The book opens by describing the glory and greatness of King Xerxes. In Esther 1:1<sup>138</sup> the reader is immediately confronted with the vast extent of his realm, arguably the majority of the known world at the time. In Esther 1:4-5<sup>139</sup> the reader is told the purpose of the lavish banquets Xerxes is holding: over a period of more than six months, they are to display the “riches of his glorious kingship” and “the honour of his beautiful greatness”<sup>140</sup> to his nobles, officials, military leaders, and princes gathered from all of his vast empire. Xerxes’ purpose, through exhibiting his splendour and honouring himself, is to inspire awe in those around him. The description of Xerxes’ banquet in his palace garden emphasizes substance: wealth, opulence, and bounty. Xerxes displays himself as both the

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<sup>136</sup> Sandra Beth Berg, *The Book of Esther: Motifs, Themes, and Structure*, SBL Dissertation Series 44 (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1979), 1 and Karen H. Jobes, *Esther*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1999), 19–32.

<sup>137</sup> Jobes, *Esther*, 43.

<sup>138</sup> Esther 1:1.

<sup>139</sup> Esther 1:4-5.

<sup>140</sup> Timothy S. Laniak, *Shame and Honour in the Book of Esther*, SBL Dissertation Series 165 (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1998), 44–46.

international sovereign and domestic provider.<sup>141</sup> Through these banquets, King Xerxes is delivering a message: he is a force to be reckoned with.

The awe-inspiring effect of this six-month effort comes crashing down, however, when King Xerxes' queen, Vashti, refuses to obey his command to appear before him.<sup>142</sup> Queen Vashti was to be the final act in King Xerxes' long display. She is his queen, called forth to fulfil her role as obedient, beautiful, and pleasing.<sup>143</sup> In doing so she would bring him honor. But in one fell stroke, she shames Xerxes before his whole empire.<sup>144</sup> King Xerxes is enraged.<sup>145</sup> His most valuable possession -- his honor -- is jeopardized.<sup>146</sup> As a result of her refusal, Vashti is removed from her royal position and banished from the king's presence.<sup>147</sup> Empire-wide action further redresses the shame and disrespect that Vashti has brought the king.<sup>148</sup>

For the original readers of Esther, the immediate message was clear. God's people were living as exiles, subject to a pagan king who held absolute power over the majority of the known world, including them and also their homeland. Acting in a way that brought that power shame was to endanger survival. Though this power was benign towards them, it remained open to persuasion by whoever brought the king what he believed was sound advice. Therefore survival in such a place would require courage,

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<sup>141</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>142</sup> Esther 1:11.

<sup>143</sup> Laniak, *Shame and Honour in the Book of Esther*, 41.

<sup>144</sup> Esther 1:9-12.

<sup>145</sup> Esther 1:12.

<sup>146</sup> Laniak, *Shame and Honour in the Book of Esther*, 56.

<sup>147</sup> Esther 1:19.

<sup>148</sup> Esther 1:16-22.

engagement, deftness, diplomacy, and action. These qualities are what Esther and Mordecai display through the course of the book.

Esther 1 contains other significant allusions however. First, the description in verses 6-8<sup>149</sup> of Xerxes' banquet is unusual in biblical narrative for its fulsome description.<sup>150</sup> Only the descriptions of the tabernacle<sup>151</sup> and the Jerusalem temple<sup>152</sup> are as detailed in their descriptions as the banquet in Xerxes' palace. Second, Xerxes' first banquet is described in verse four<sup>153</sup> as displaying the riches of his *kēbod malkut*. This construct is only found outside of Esther in Psalm 145 -- a hymn of praise to the God of Israel.<sup>154</sup> The construct appears within Psalm 145 twice, tying honor to divine royalty. God is praised for his greatness,<sup>155</sup> his everlasting kingdom,<sup>156</sup> his glory and splendour,<sup>157</sup> and his provision to those in need.<sup>158</sup> Third, the root word used to describe Xerxes' anger is, outside of Esther and Daniel, used almost exclusively of God, often without designating the divine subject.<sup>159</sup> In other Old Testament contexts such as Deuteronomy, Isaiah, and Jeremiah where the term is used, God is wrathful at Israel because he has been

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<sup>149</sup> Esther 1:6-8.

<sup>150</sup> Jobes, *Esther*, 62.

<sup>151</sup> Exodus 25-28.

<sup>152</sup> 1 Kings 7.

<sup>153</sup> Esther 1:4.

<sup>154</sup> Laniak, *Shame and Honour in the Book of Esther*, 57-58.

<sup>155</sup> Psalm 145:3.

<sup>156</sup> Psalm 145:13.

<sup>157</sup> Psalm 145:5-12.

<sup>158</sup> Psalm 145:9, 14-20.

<sup>159</sup> Laniak, *Shame and Honour in the Book of Esther*, 57-58.



disobeyed.<sup>160</sup> Furthermore, the word describing Xerxes' anger abating in Esther 2:1 is the same verb used in Genesis 8:1 to describe the receding flood of God's judgment.<sup>161</sup>

These associations give the reader pause for considering whether the narrative is drawing subtle associations between Xerxes and Israel's God. Xerxes is the king, the seemingly all-powerful sovereign and provider who commands a vast kingdom, yet is shamed and disgraced by his disobedient queen. Were the original readers of Esther to see in Queen Vashti, Israel as God's chosen, treasured possession?<sup>162</sup> Were they to see Israel as the subject-wife, who dishonored her king through her own disobedience, and was banished from his presence in the land and sent into exile?<sup>163</sup> If this interpretation is legitimate, its illocutionary force would function as both an encouragement to holiness and the commendation of a way of wise living. In reading the account of the seemingly all-powerful king – Xerxes, the original readers would have been reminded of the One who truly is sovereign: YHWH. In addition, the reminder of their angering of him in the past through disobedience would serve as an encouragement to honor him in the present. Therefore, living in exile subject to a pagan king will require them to honor that power and avoid bringing shame but, at the same time, honouring YHWH and entrusting their lives to him as the One who truly reigns over all things.

For the present-day reader of Esther 1, the illocutionary force of these truths remains. The God of Esther has spoken his word. Present-day readers are exiles also,<sup>164</sup>

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<sup>160</sup> Ibid., 57.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid., 57n56.

<sup>162</sup> Exodus 19:5.

<sup>163</sup> Laniak, *Shame and Honour in the Book of Esther*, 58.

<sup>164</sup> 1 Peter 1:1.

God's treasured possession<sup>165</sup> called above all else to be holy.<sup>166</sup> As aliens and strangers<sup>167</sup> they live lives subject to foreign powers. Those powers remain open to manipulation and can be turned against God's people. Yet, God's people are called to live in such a way that God is glorified above all,<sup>168</sup> entrusting the time of their lives to God himself as the One who alone is Sovereign and Judge over all.<sup>169</sup>

### *Old Testament Narrative Has a Life-shaping Purpose*

Gene C. Fant Jr. in *God as Author: A Biblical Approach to Narrative* has examined the implications of God's communicative intent in Scripture on how readers understand the purpose of narrative.<sup>170</sup>

Echoing Booker, Fant, Professor of English at Union University in Jackson, Tennessee, asks why stories are so ubiquitous, persistent, and powerfully moving across human experience. In a striking similarity to Booker, Fant argues that what human beings are doing in the repeated telling of stories is searching for a restoration of balance that was lost to them.<sup>171</sup> His explanation of this phenomenon however is quite different. God, as Author, has written a story -- that is, Scripture. His story has a definite pattern and trajectory to it: that of creation, fall, and redemption. God's story has a beginning, middle

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<sup>165</sup> 1 Peter 2:9-10.

<sup>166</sup> 1 Peter 1:13-17.

<sup>167</sup> 1 Peter 2:11.

<sup>168</sup> 1 Peter 2:11-12.

<sup>169</sup> 1 Peter 2:23.

<sup>170</sup> Gene C. Fant Jr., *God as Author: A Biblical Approach to Narrative* (Nashville, TN: B & H Academic Publishing Group, 2010).

<sup>171</sup> *Ibid.*, 94–107.

and end. Fant translates this pattern/trajectory into parallel terms -- balance, imbalance, and restoration of balance -- and applies it to general revelation.<sup>172</sup> He finds this pattern of God's story applies extensively to phenomena in the physical world: plate tectonics, pressure systems, the hydrological cycle, and homeostasis. He also sees correspondence in human experience: musical harmony and artistic principles of design. In all these areas the elements move between balance, imbalance, and a restoration of balance. He identifies the pattern not only in Western cultures but also Eastern.

Fant then applies his thesis to narrative.<sup>173</sup> He argues that the pattern of God's story forms the archetypal pattern and structure of much of human narrative. God's story is the paradigmatic story; "the only story we really ever know."<sup>174</sup> God's authorial role in the universe provides the hermeneutical key to interpreting human narrative. Fant joins J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, and others in suggesting that the world's great stories are glimpses of the [gospel] truth. That is, just as God used the Psalms, Prophets, and epic stories of the Old Testament to prepare his people for Christ's coming, so he could have used the great storytellers and poets of antiquity to prepare the hearts of pagans for the incarnation.<sup>175</sup> For Fant, this intentionality explains where the elements of story come from: general and special revelation. It explains why these elements exist in the first place, why they are so persistent in human experience, and why they resonate so deeply in the human heart and mind. In the creation of stories, "the human heart uses the tools of

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<sup>172</sup> Ibid., 69, 72–9.

<sup>173</sup> Ibid., 88–101.

<sup>174</sup> Ibid., 183.

<sup>175</sup> L. Markos, *From Achilles to Christ: Why Christians Should Read the Pagan Classics* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2007), 249, quoted in Fant 107.

reality.”<sup>176</sup> By virtue of the Fall,<sup>177</sup> a great conflict exists in the universe: there is tension, suspense, and an enemy. By virtue of Christ’s life, death, resurrection, and ascension, there is a great climax, a point at which a decision determines the end of the story. All these elements find their way into human narrative, Fant argues, precisely because they exist in reality.

What human beings are doing in creating and telling stories, then, is searching for the restoration of balance that was lost to them in the Fall. Scripture, Fant argues, is the story that God -- as Author -- has given human beings that “helps us understand our place in this world and leads us back to Him.”<sup>178</sup> Scripture shows human beings how to find the restoration of balance in God himself. This is its life-shaping purpose.

Gordon Wenham also contends that there is a definite life-shaping, ethical purpose to Old Testament narrative. Wenham is Professor of Old Testament at the University of Gloucestershire, author of major commentaries on several Old Testament books as well as *Story as Torah: Reading Old Testament Narrative Ethically*.<sup>179</sup>

In *Story as Torah*, Wenham’s primary contention is that Old Testament narrative books are “trying to instil both theological truths and ethical ideals into their readers.”<sup>180</sup> In a similar vein to Liao’s analysis of fiction, Wenham notes how the genre of historical narrative -- including Old Testament narrative -- influences its didactic authority and

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<sup>176</sup> Donald Miller, *Blue Like Jazz: Nonreligious Thoughts on Christian Spirituality* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2003), 32–33, quoted in Fant, *God as Author* 98.

<sup>177</sup> Genesis 3:1-24.

<sup>178</sup> Fant, *God as Author: A Biblical Approach to Narrative*, xv.

<sup>179</sup> Gordon J. Wenham, *Story as Torah: Reading Old Testament Narrative Ethically* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2000).

<sup>180</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

persuasive power for ethical instruction. It is amplified over that of fiction. Historical narrative “makes a much stronger claim”<sup>181</sup> upon its readers because its referent is actual happenings and real people who did what was recorded. In this way, historical narrative is especially powerful when recounting the history of a nation for its people.<sup>182</sup>

Wenham establishes his case for the purpose of Old Testament narrative via an analysis of the rhetorical function of both Genesis and Judges. Appropriating insights from Wayne C. Booth and literary criticism in general, Wenham’s inquiry focuses upon what the implied author is doing in telling these narratives. By examining the narrative structures, keywords, themes, and main stories of these two books, Wenham concludes that the narratives demonstrate significantly more than a desire to reinforce obedience to propositional rules, i.e. the Law. Rather, they exhibit an obvious interest in “the character of individuals and the virtue or otherwise of their actions.”<sup>183</sup> Calling upon his analysis of Genesis, Wenham summarises:

Thus, out of the stories of Genesis, we can build up a catalogue of the virtues... an identikit picture of the righteous. He or she is pious, that is prayerful and dependent upon God. Strong and courageous but not aggressive or mean. He or she is generous, truthful and loyal, particularly to other family members... Finally righteousness does not require asceticism: the pleasures of life are to be enjoyed without becoming a slave to them.<sup>184</sup>

Therefore, Wenham argues that the concern of Old Testament narratives cannot be viewed as restricted to simply encouraging readers “to be law-abiding citizens.”<sup>185</sup>

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<sup>181</sup> Wenham, *Story as Torah: Reading Old Testament Narrative Ethically*, 12.

<sup>182</sup> *Ibid.*, 12–13.

<sup>183</sup> *Ibid.*, 100.

<sup>184</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>185</sup> *Ibid.*

While obedience to the law is undeniably a central strand to most Old Testament books, it is not the only strand. This interest in portraying character development and virtue is another. Wenham goes on to argue that:

...[T]he Bible storytellers are not advocating a minimalist conformity to the demands of the law in their storytelling, rather...they have an ideal of godly behaviour that they hoped their heroes and heroines would typify.<sup>186</sup>

In other words, the Bible storytellers had more in mind than reinforcing obedience to rules. They set out to demonstrate that much more was required of the covenant people than keeping the letter of the law. They had a definite purpose in view: the commendation of an ideal of godly behaviour. There is “a *telos* to human behaviour that the Old Testament believes that virtue leads to,”<sup>187</sup> that is, holiness. The Bible storytellers

...[H]oped that in some way man, made in the image of God, would in some measure, imitate God, his creator, in maintaining creation and loving his fellow man. ‘Be holy, for I am holy’...sums up this aspect of Old Testament ethics.<sup>188</sup>

Therefore, the Bible storytellers had a lofty goal: to commend the imitation of God to their readers. It is God’s character “illustrated throughout the biblical narrative and celebrated in nearly every psalm”<sup>189</sup> that God looks for among his people. They are to “reflect, even positively imitate his character.”<sup>190</sup> This is the life-shaping, ethical purpose of Old Testament narrative. In this way, Wenham notes, the ethics of Old

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<sup>186</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>187</sup> Wenham, *Story as Torah: Reading Old Testament Narrative Ethically*, 4.

<sup>188</sup> Ibid.

<sup>189</sup> Ibid., 106.

<sup>190</sup> Ibid.

Testament narrative are closer to those of the New than is often appreciated, as “both look for divine attributes to be replicated in humanity.”<sup>191</sup>

John Goldingay, theologian, David Allan Hubbard Professor of Old Testament at Fuller Theological Seminary, and author of several major Old Testament commentaries, also argues for the life-shaping purpose of Old Testament narrative. Though primarily focused on how Old Testament narrative achieves this purpose, Goldingay agrees that narratives are aimed at teaching the reader belief and behaviour. Scripture is “dominated by story and this story is designed to shape us.”<sup>192</sup> In comparing biblical narrative texts to “instruction texts” -- laws, prophets, proverbs -- he maintains that narrative texts are “just as practical in purpose.”<sup>193</sup> They seek the same ethical commitments from the reader and “imply the same beliefs and imperatives.”<sup>194</sup> He asserts that the narrative form itself is aimed at shaping a worldview for the reader, which the reader then lives within.<sup>195</sup>

Goldingay however is concerned to maintain a priority at this point: that biblical narrative places its emphasis squarely upon God’s acts rather than human acts, even though it mentions the latter more than the former.<sup>196</sup> He agrees that readers are given portraits of people in the text who are like them: sharing strengths and weaknesses,

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<sup>191</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>192</sup> John Goldingay, “How Does Biblical Story Shape Our Story?,” in *Key Questions about Biblical Interpretation: Old Testament Answers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 165.

<sup>193</sup> John Goldingay, “What Is Involved in Understanding a Passage from the Bible?,” in *Key Questions about Biblical Interpretation: Old Testament Answers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 14.

<sup>194</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>195</sup> John Goldingay, “Biblical Narrative and Systematic Theology,” in *Between Two Horizons: Spanning New Testament Studies and Systematic Theology*, ed. Joel B. Green and Max Turner (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000), 136.

<sup>196</sup> Ibid.

virtues and vice, and dealing with the tests and trails of life. In this commonality, readers are “invited” to identify with them.<sup>197</sup> Yet, the primary concern of the narrative is to

...[E]xpound the gospel, to talk about God and what God has done, rather than to talk about the human characters who appear in God’s story. The common-sense view that biblical narrative is concerned to shape character is surely right, but the narrative assumes that expounding the gospel is the way to do that.<sup>198</sup>

Therefore, for Goldingay the reader is shaped in the process of apprehending God’s character and ways in the narrative.

An example of Old Testament narrative functioning in the way that Fant, Wenham, and Goldingay suggest above is Joshua 5:13-15. This section of the narrative describes events on the eve of battle with Jericho. The narrative shows Joshua alone and near Jericho.<sup>199</sup> Joshua lifts up his eyes, looks, and literally -- “Behold!” -- sees a man standing before him. This man is silent, and in his hand is a drawn sword.<sup>200</sup> The grammatical construction of this verse bears close resemblance to Genesis 18:2 where Abraham “looked up and saw” three men standing nearby him.<sup>201</sup> These men are travellers, two of whom are later revealed to be angels.<sup>202</sup> In addition, there are several other Old Testament narrative texts where lone figures with drawn swords appear. In Numbers 22:23, Balaam and his donkey encounter the angel of the LORD standing in the

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<sup>197</sup> Ibid., 137.

<sup>198</sup> Ibid.

<sup>199</sup> Joshua 5:13.

<sup>200</sup> Ibid.

<sup>201</sup> Genesis 18:2.

<sup>202</sup> Genesis 19:1.



road before them with a sword drawn, ready to deliver God's judgment upon Balaam.<sup>203</sup>

In 1 Chronicles 21:16 David "looks up" and sees the angel of the LORD standing between heaven and earth with a sword drawn in his hand, sent to deliver God's judgment upon Israel and David for David's sin.<sup>204</sup> There is no reference to the figure in Joshua 5:13 being the angel of the LORD; nor is there any suggestion in the text that God has found fault with Joshua. These associations however, are suggestive, and enough to give the sensitive reader pause for thought.

In Joshua 5:13, Joshua approaches the man and asks him to identify himself.<sup>205</sup> The man answers "No, as commander of the armies of the LORD, now I have come."<sup>206</sup> Joshua, realizing at the very least he is outranked, drops into the dust: "Joshua fell, face down, to the ground and bowed down."<sup>207</sup> If Joshua could have assumed any possible lower position before this figure, he would have. Joshua worships at the Commander's feet, and his worship is not refused.<sup>208</sup> Joshua asks him a second question, wanting to know what message the Commander has for him. For a second time, Joshua's question goes without a direct answer. Instead, the Commander instructs Joshua to remove his sandals, for "the place where you are standing is holy ground."<sup>209</sup> That is, the Commander gives Joshua precisely the same instruction that God gave to Moses, when

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<sup>203</sup> Numbers 22:23; 31-33.

<sup>204</sup> 1 Chronicles 21:16-17.

<sup>205</sup> Joshua 5:13.

<sup>206</sup> Joshua 5:14.

<sup>207</sup> Ibid.

<sup>208</sup> Ibid.

<sup>209</sup> Joshua 5:13.

Moses approached the bush that was burning yet was not consumed, in Exodus 3:5.<sup>210</sup>

Therefore, the text, somewhat enigmatically, signals that the Commander is a divine figure: the angel of LORD perhaps, or even YHWH himself.

If this is correct, the question remains as to the Commander's purpose here. Why is he appearing to Joshua? Joshua has already been commissioned for battle.<sup>211</sup> While there is not necessarily any given reason a second commissioning could not occur, it would be reasonable to consider alternative explanations. Clues may be found in the context. The battle against Jericho is Israel's first since crossing the Jordan River.<sup>212</sup> As Jericho is a fortified city, it also promises to be a significant challenge to capture. Furthermore, its strategic location within the Promised Land also makes its capture imperative for Israel. This strategic importance makes the LORD's actions in Joshua 5:1<sup>213</sup> all the more startling: just when Canaanite kings' hearts "had melted" at his actions and their courage has evaporated,<sup>214</sup> providing Israel a real strategic opportunity, the LORD commands Joshua to circumcise Israel, thus effectively immobilising all her fighting men, and then celebrate the Passover.<sup>215</sup> Therefore the LORD indicates to Joshua and Israel that, more important than being strategically prepared for battle, is being consecrated to him, and reminded of his saving grace and sovereign power, displayed so

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<sup>210</sup> Exodus 3:5.

<sup>211</sup> Joshua 1:1-9.

<sup>212</sup> Joshua 3:14-17.

<sup>213</sup> Joshua 5:1.

<sup>214</sup> Ibid.

<sup>215</sup> Joshua 5:10-12.

awesomely in the exodus from Egypt. The battle with Jericho will be won by God's power, in and through weakness.

Within this context, Joshua's first question and the Commander's response can be re-evaluated. Joshua asks the Commander to identify himself, but in a specific way: according to his allegiances. That is, Joshua asks the Commander if he is on Israel's side or Jericho's.<sup>216</sup> This appears to be a fair question at face value. Furthermore, if the Commander is indeed the angel of the LORD, or YHWH himself, then surely he is on Israel's side. Why does the answer reveal an arms-length detachment, an aloofness and remoteness about this figure?

Perhaps this distance is a major part of the lesson the text is teaching. Joshua's assumption behind his question is that the figure before him will fit into one of his two nominated categories. Though a perfectly understandable question to ask, his enquiry fails. The Commander's answer is "No," because it is not for Joshua to claim his allegiance, but for the LORD to claim Joshua's.<sup>217</sup> It may be a fair question to put to a man, but it is a poor question to put to YHWH. Therefore, it is entirely appropriate that, on the eve of such a battle, the LORD appears to Joshua in a way that Joshua cannot categorize him, label him, explain him -- or enlist him. His disclosure in this way to Joshua is gracious: before Joshua ever could commit the error, the LORD makes clear to Joshua that he will not be domesticated, toted around as a sponsor or mascot of anyone's army. He is YHWH -- Awesome, Sovereign, Free, Almighty. The drawn sword in his hand is a symbol of his wrath, about to be poured out upon the Canaanites whose sin has

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<sup>216</sup> Joshua 5:13.

<sup>217</sup> James Montgomery Boice, *Joshua: An Expository Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1989), 46.

now reached its full measure (Genesis 15:16).<sup>218</sup> This is his battle, in which Israel is playing a part.

What then, does he want with Joshua? It could be argued that what the Commander wants is the leader of Israel's army, at his feet, worshipping in the dust. This is where Joshua belongs. This is Joshua's preparation for battle. He is now ready: ready to receive some of the most seemingly foolish battle orders ever given.<sup>219</sup> He is ready to fight this battle YHWH's way. Joshua 5:13-15 points the reader to understand both God's ways and the human qualities of character he desires, especially in those who would lead his people: humility, submission, and obedience.

Interpreted this way, present-day readers can see that God is the protagonist of the narrative: its primary concern is with him and his ways. They will be mindful that God's ways are also unchanged, and that they see these qualities of character elsewhere in Scripture in those who lead God's people: the Lord Jesus Christ, on the eve of battle, given a seemingly foolish plan, in the Garden of Gethsemane<sup>220</sup> and the ministry of the Apostle Paul<sup>221</sup>. Like Joshua, Christ, and Paul, to be fit to lead God's people, leaders themselves must be ready to be led.

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<sup>218</sup> Genesis 15:16.

<sup>219</sup> Joshua 6:2-5.

<sup>220</sup> Matthew 16:36-46.

<sup>221</sup> 2 Corinthians 11:16-12:10.

*Old Testament Narrative's Characters Are Key Elements in Communicating  
its Life-shaping Purpose*

Fant maintains that narrative in general is “the written expression of shared human experiences.”<sup>222</sup> Narrative “works” because the “basics” of human experience transcend time, language, and culture.<sup>223</sup> Narratives from the past are still able to speak to the present precisely because they connect human readers via shared experience.<sup>224</sup> Therefore, human beings can learn from the experiences of the past and apply its lessons. The primary point of connection between the author and the reader is the human characters in the narrative.

Thinking parallel with Carroll’s assertion that “readers read for character,”<sup>225</sup> Fant argues that readers intuitively empathize and connect with characters. He argues that the stronger the connection between a main character and a reader, the more influential the voice of the text will be upon the reader.<sup>226</sup> For Fant, narrative -- by its characters -- has a capacity to “move us to view our shared humanity in ways that can be quite uncomfortable.”<sup>227</sup> It can bring readers face-to-face with their own potential failures:

Witnessing such failures in others as well as the shocking aftereffects in the characters’ lives yields a sobering reminder about temptation and sin. The effect is especially important: how much better is it to be reminded about temptation through a character than through our own personal

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<sup>222</sup> Fant, *God as Author: A Biblical Approach to Narrative*, 7.

<sup>223</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>224</sup> *Ibid.*, 132.

<sup>225</sup> Carroll, “The Wheel of Virtue: Art, Literature, and Moral Knowledge,” 15.

<sup>226</sup> Fant, *God as Author: A Biblical Approach to Narrative*, 172–175.

<sup>227</sup> *Ibid.*, 152.

experiences? It is better to read about...failures and heed...warnings than to live through such failures in our own lives.<sup>228</sup>

Therefore, narrative has a powerful ability to ethically shape its readers through its characters. Reflection and integration become the keys to learning from narrative, “pondering the ways that [narrative] might actually influence our lives.”<sup>229</sup>

Robin Parry, commissioning editor for Paternoster Press, refines this point. Parry acknowledges the fact that both ethically clear-cut and ambiguous characters confront the Old Testament reader. In *Old Testament Story and Christian Ethics: The Rape of Dinah as a Case Study*, Parry observes that characters work as models for the reader where their example is clear-cut; either morally good or bad. In contrast to the Ricoeurian notion that narrative makes proposals to the reader for their consideration,<sup>230</sup> some characters in Scripture come to the reader as “more than a suggestion.”<sup>231</sup> That is:

...[S]ome characters in Scripture *are* intended by the authors to be more than mere models for reflection which the readers are free to take or leave. They are models for imitation – exemplars of godly lifestyles whose actions are, in a loose sense, “rules” for the behaviour of readers.<sup>232</sup>

Therefore, these models make a far stronger claim upon the reader. Parry qualifies this point however, noting that even if a model is proposed as exemplary by an author, this example still needs to be read in light of the biblical canon. Some models may not be intended to be authoritative in every era of history or in every situation.<sup>233</sup>

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<sup>228</sup> Ibid., 153.

<sup>229</sup> Ibid., 149.

<sup>230</sup> Madison, “Ricoeur and the Hermeneutics of the Subject,” 82.

<sup>231</sup> Parry, *Old Testament Story and Christian Ethics: The Rape of Dinah as a Case Study*, 30.

<sup>232</sup> Ibid.

<sup>233</sup> Ibid.

Parry demonstrates, however, that biblical characterization works at various levels of complexity. The characters are not always clear-cut in their morality. Its most sophisticated instances present the reader with characters capable of both virtue and vice, such as Abraham, Moses, Samson, Saul, and David. These characters cannot be considered simplistically as either good or bad, because they are shown as nuanced people, with many of their actions being ambiguous. Parry acknowledges the difficulty this ambiguity gives the reader: “it complicates judgment and makes simple imitation or avoidance impossible.”<sup>234</sup> With these more ambiguous examples, the narrative is reflecting the moral complexity of life and opening up “different, but equally fruitful and enriching, dimensions of the moral life which impact upon the reader.”<sup>235</sup> Parry’s work shows that Genesis 34 is an example of this complex ambiguity. By the end of this chapter of Genesis, he argues, the reader cannot see any of the male characters as clear models to imitate, as the narrator has induced both sympathetic and disapproving responses to them all. There is a state of “permanent ambiguity” that invites serious reflection and deliberation on the part of the reader:

The narrative deals with a situation which is not easy to adjudicate...The complexities are carefully shown...By maintaining these ambiguities and complexities, the narrator challenges the reader to consider both the Israelites and the Hivites as human beings and not simplistically as caricatures.<sup>236</sup>

Therefore, careful and extended deliberation upon the characters, their values, and actions, may well be required on the part of the reader for correct interpretation.

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<sup>234</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>235</sup> Ibid.

<sup>236</sup> S.P. Jeansonne, *The Women of Genesis: From Sarah to Potiphar’s Wife* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1990), 97 quoted in Parry, *Old Testament Story and Christian Ethics*, 177-8.

Wenham agrees that Old Testament characters come to readers as complex and ambiguous figures. Old Testament narrative does not portray its heroes simplistically, but rather as people made in the image of God and attempting to imitate him in their dealings with one another and creation. Sometimes they succeed, and at other times they fall a long way short. This is purposeful:

But most often their behaviour is mixed, neither outstandingly virtuous nor catastrophic, perhaps somewhat better than the typical ancient reader but not too much better: good enough to be an inspiration, but not such paragons as to discourage the implied reader from trying to emulate them.<sup>237</sup>

In other words, the fact that the narrative portrays its characters as real people with virtues and vices, who mix obedience with unbelief and are neither perfect saints nor unredeemable sinners, is precisely what enables readers to identify with them and be ethically refigured by them. He agrees with Parry that this identification requires reflection on the part of the reader, particularly since Old Testament narrative often leaves events to speak for themselves and lacks specific moral judgments.<sup>238</sup>

In addition to the account of the Rape of Dinah in Genesis 34, the story of Lot serves as an example of the arguments above. For the present-day reader, 2 Peter 3:7-8<sup>239</sup> describes Lot as “a righteous man.” This description is emphatic: “righteous” is awarded to Lot three times in close succession in these verses. He is also described as being “distressed by the filthy lives of lawless men.”<sup>240</sup> Lot was deeply grieved by the sin that he witnessed in the city of Sodom, where he lived. He is also described as being

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<sup>237</sup> Wenham, *Story as Torah: Reading Old Testament Narrative Ethically*, 107.

<sup>238</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>239</sup> 2 Peter 3:7-8.

<sup>240</sup> 2 Peter 3:7.



“tormented in his righteous soul by the lawless deeds” he saw and heard as he “lived among them day after day.”<sup>241</sup> Therefore, Lot’s distress at the wickedness of Sodom was not temporary; it did not dissipate over time, or with increased familiarity. Lot did not become accustomed to it; he did not become unconcerned by it.

This description invites extended reflection upon the character of Lot and his choices, by the reader. Lot is introduced in the Genesis account in Genesis 12:4 where, with Abram, he leaves his country, people and household<sup>242</sup> and sets off for Canaan. In Genesis 13, the reader is again shown Lot following Abram up from Egypt to the Negev and then to Bethel and Ai.<sup>243</sup> Abram presents Lot with a choice between the whole plain of the Jordan and the land of Canaan<sup>244</sup> and, seeing that it was well watered and fertile, Lot chooses the plain of the Jordan.<sup>245</sup> The author brackets Lot’s choice in verse 11 by noting Sodom and Gomorrah’s destruction by God<sup>246</sup> and in verse 13 by noting Sodom’s wickedness and sin against God.<sup>247</sup> The reader is explicitly told that while Abram lived in the land of Canaan -- promised by God to his Abram’s offspring<sup>248</sup> -- Lot “lived among the cities of the plain and pitched his tents near Sodom.”<sup>249</sup> The next time that Lot is

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<sup>241</sup> 2 Peter 3:8.

<sup>242</sup> Genesis 12:1.

<sup>243</sup> Genesis 13:1-4.

<sup>244</sup> Genesis 13:5-13.

<sup>245</sup> Ibid.

<sup>246</sup> Genesis 13:10.

<sup>247</sup> Genesis 13:13.

<sup>248</sup> Genesis 12:7.

<sup>249</sup> Genesis 13:12.

mentioned, the reader is told that Lot is now living in Sodom itself.<sup>250</sup> Having settled near Sodom, Lot has now settled within it.

This information effectively forms the context for Lot's dramatic rescue from Sodom in Genesis 19. Two angels are sent by God to Sodom to warn and rescue Lot.<sup>251</sup> The men of Sodom surround Lot's house, demanding to rape his visitors.<sup>252</sup> Lot faces the mob outside of his house, "shutting the door behind him."<sup>253</sup> He attempts to appease the men by offering them his two virgin daughters to rape instead.<sup>254</sup> Rejecting Lot's implicit judgment of their wickedness, they threaten him with worse treatment and begin to break down Lot's door.<sup>255</sup> Lot is rescued only because of the angels' actions.<sup>256</sup> The angels then inform Lot that they have been sent to destroy the whole city.<sup>257</sup> They inform Lot that this destruction is God's judgment upon the city for its wickedness.<sup>258</sup> Lot believes the angels' message and urgently warns his prospective sons-in-law to flee the city immediately.<sup>259</sup> They do not believe him and so ignore his warning. As dawn breaks, the

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<sup>250</sup> Genesis 14:12.

<sup>251</sup> Genesis 19:1, 12.

<sup>252</sup> Genesis 19:4-5.

<sup>253</sup> Genesis 19:6.

<sup>254</sup> Genesis 19:8.

<sup>255</sup> Genesis 19:9.

<sup>256</sup> Genesis 19:10-11.

<sup>257</sup> Genesis 19:12.

<sup>258</sup> Ibid.

<sup>259</sup> Genesis 19:14.

angels urge Lot to get up<sup>260</sup> -- literally “as dawn rose... ‘Arise!’”<sup>261</sup> - and flee or be swept away in judgment.

This whole series of events renders what the author says about Lot in verse 16, astounding: “he hesitated.”<sup>262</sup> Lot could not leave. The angels had to grab Lot, his wife, and his daughters by the hands and pull them out of the city. The angels had to urge Lot and his family to run for their lives, to not look back, not stop, to run to the mountains.<sup>263</sup> This is the only reason Lot and his daughters escaped. His wife could not obey.<sup>264</sup>

For the present-day reader, in light of the text of 2 Peter 2:7-8, this is cause for deep reflection. As J.C. Ryle notes:

[Lot] was slow when he should have been quick -- backward when he should have been forward -- trifling when he should have been hastening -- loitering when he should have been hurrying -- cold when he should have been hot. It is passing strange!<sup>265</sup>

Therefore, Lot is presented in a morally ambiguous, complex way. Virtue is mixed with vice and decision with indecision. Some choices, such as following Abram, are implicitly commendable within the narrative. Many other of Lot’s choices however, are not commendable within the same context. Lot had settled in Sodom. Despite its wickedness and his grief at it, he had made Sodom his home. So much so, in fact, that even in the face of God’s impending wrath and divine messengers, he could not bring

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<sup>260</sup> Genesis 19:15.

<sup>261</sup> So Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, vol. 2, Word Biblical Commentary 2 (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1994), 57.

<sup>262</sup> Genesis 19:16.

<sup>263</sup> Genesis 19:17.

<sup>264</sup> Genesis 19:26.

<sup>265</sup> J.C. Ryle, *Home Truths* (London: Wertheim and Macintosh, 1854), 235.

himself, in his heart, to be done with Sodom forever. Certainly the narrative suggests this was the case with his wife.

The present-day reader is therefore left to ponder how a truly righteous person could make such choices and reach such a state of heart. How is it possible to be declared righteous, yet have such mixed allegiances and tangled priorities? Yet, might not Lot's life serve as a sobering example and warning of what James describes as the "double-mindedness" of believers<sup>266</sup> and their "friendship with the world", which he counts as spiritual "adultery"?<sup>267</sup> The trajectory of Lot's life, and the cumulative consequences of choices that may seem wise in a worldly sense, leaves the present-day reader to contemplate what it really means for a person to decisively leave "country, people and household"<sup>268</sup> to follow the commands of God.

### *Old Testament Narrative's Form Is Key to its Life-shaping Purpose*

The importance of Old Testament narrative form for ethical understanding is a recurring theme in the literature. Theologian, scholar, author, and Research Professor of Systematic Theology at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Kevin J. Vanhoozer, develops the discussion above concerning speech-act theory in relation to biblical genre. He suggests, "[T]here is a correlation between a text's genre, or literary form, and a text's illocutionary point and force."<sup>269</sup> Therefore:

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<sup>266</sup> James 1:8; 3:13-18

<sup>267</sup> James 4:4

<sup>268</sup> Genesis 12:1.

<sup>269</sup> Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "The Semantics of Biblical Literature: Truth and Scripture's Diverse Literary Forms," in *Hermeneutics, Authority, and Canon*, ed. D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge (Grand Rapids, MI: Academie, 1986), 91.

As Christian readers, we ought to be interested not only in the propositions themselves but in the manifold ways these propositions are presented for our consideration. In the context of Scripture's various genres, these propositions count as warnings, commands, prayers, questions, etc. as well as assertions.<sup>270</sup>

Vanhoozer would agree with Nussbaum on this point: literary form matters.

Citing the work of Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin, Vanhoozer holds that different literary genres "offer distinct ways of thinking about or experiencing the world."<sup>271</sup> Narratives can "do" things that other genres "do not or perhaps cannot."<sup>272</sup> He argues there are "generic illocutions" -- illocutionary acts performed on the level of a literary whole. Therefore, some illocutionary intentions of a text only come to light in a consideration of the text's genre. In relation to the genres of Scripture, Vanhoozer says:

...I maintain that we should recognize generic illocutions: the narrative act, the parabolic act, the apocalyptic act, the historical act, the prophetic act, and so on. In other words, each of the major forms of biblical literature has its own characteristic illocutionary forces: wisdom ("commending a way"), apocalyptic ("encouraging endurance"), prophecy ("recalling covenant promises and obligations"), and so on. To describe and ascribe generic illocutionary acts, then, is to say what an author is doing in his text considered as a whole.<sup>273</sup>

Therefore, Old Testament narrative as a genre can be said to possess its own, distinct, illocutionary force: "the narrative act." It demands an ethical response in its own distinct way. Vanhoozer suggests that this unique "narrative act" may be to instruct readers by, not only displaying a world, but also taking up a normative stance toward

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<sup>270</sup> Ibid., 92.

<sup>271</sup> Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *First Theology: God, Scripture and Hermeneutics* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2002), 191–2.

<sup>272</sup> Ibid., 192.

<sup>273</sup> Ibid., 193.

it.<sup>274</sup> The implication of these dual statements for interpretation, Vanhoozer says, is that a text must be understood as “a communicative act with matter (propositional content) and energy (illocutionary force).”<sup>275</sup> This matter and energy must be “conserved” in interpretation for it to be genuine, noting that authors may intend to communicate complex, multilayered intentions.<sup>276</sup>

Goldingay affirms this narrative act and also echoes Ricoeur when he argues that what biblical stories do is “create a world before our eyes and ears.”<sup>277</sup> For Goldingay, the Bible storytellers narrate a world where God is active, intervening, providentially working, and present. At the same time, however, it is a world that is “ruthlessly true to the suffering and sin that run through life and history.”<sup>278</sup> This ongoing tension means that this world both draws readers and makes them draw away; it is at once “reassuring and challenging, supporting and confronting, reinforcing and unsettling.”<sup>279</sup> Readers are drawn in because they want to be able to explain, confront, and overcome these realities. Yet they draw away from fear that this outcome is not really possible or that confronting these elements will bring unbearable pain or “a cost that is too high to pay.”<sup>280</sup> Goldingay maintains that narrative is by nature open-ended, imaginative, and experiential, and therefore, for it to be correctly understood, the readers must allow themselves to be drawn into the world created:

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<sup>274</sup> Ibid., 192.

<sup>275</sup> Ibid., 178.

<sup>276</sup> Ibid.

<sup>277</sup> Goldingay, “What Is Involved in Understanding a Passage from the Bible?,” 12.

<sup>278</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>279</sup> Ibid.

<sup>280</sup> Ibid.

The gospel story is designed to make something happen to people when they are drawn into its everyday but extraordinary world. It does not offer itself only to the intellect. It addresses the whole being in the power of that reality that it portrays and that created it. It draws us into face-to-face involvement with the God of Israel and the Lord Jesus Christ active in our world, grasps us, and changes us as we come to link our story onto the one related in the biblical narrative.<sup>281</sup>

Therefore, personal involvement is mandatory for a correct understanding of a narrative text.

The ability of biblical narrative to display a world before its readers is also discussed by Leyland Ryken. Ryken is Professor of English at Wheaton College and author of numerous books including *Words of Delight: A Literary Introduction to the Bible*.<sup>282</sup> Ryken maintains that biblical narrative must be read as literature. As such, it appeals to readers' imaginations. It aims to sufficiently recreate scenes so that readers can experience them imaginatively. In this way it is incarnational: the image, the form, the whole of the story, embodies the meaning.<sup>283</sup>

Ryken argues that the subject of literature generally is not abstract information but human experience, concretely presented. In biblical narrative, readers are given pictures of life and reality. The truth of biblical narrative often comes in the form of "truthfulness to reality and human experience."<sup>284</sup> When readers recognize and experience truth imaginatively as they read, they assimilate it. Therefore, an appreciation of biblical narrative as literature is essential to understanding it correctly. There will be sensitivity on the part of the reader to how a truth is expressed, how human experiences are

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<sup>281</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>282</sup> Leland Ryken, *Words of Delight: A Literary Introduction to the Bible*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1992).

<sup>283</sup> Ibid., 13,15,18.

<sup>284</sup> Ibid., 15.

presented, what concrete images are given and a realization that many of the effects of the narrative will be indirect and subtle.<sup>285</sup>

Fant and Goldingay also discuss this required sensitivity to narrative's form, warning readers in regard to false dichotomies and bias. Fant observes that in approaching narrative, adults -- as opposed to children -- are prone to drawing false dichotomies between truth and beauty, science and art, rationalism and aesthetics, objectivity and mystery, and intellect and emotion:

Our intellectual age is one of schism. Many people have segmented the realm of truth to the world of science, even as they have relegated beauty to the world of aesthetics.<sup>286</sup>

In failing to consider beauty, Fant insists, one diminishes truth. He sees this oversight as an ever-present danger in his own work as a literary critic:

I walk the intersection of truth and beauty on a daily basis. The risk I run is that I could become so rational in the way that I treat a text that I oppress the beauty right out of it.<sup>287</sup>

When this false dichotomy is upheld in interpreting Old Testament narrative, he observes the result:

Others [preachers] stew the life out of the text, performing the almost miraculous feat of turning God's Word into a boring string of clauses.<sup>288</sup>

He also warns readers to be watchful for their biases. He notes that theologically inclined adults may tend to exalt theological principles over narrative. He observes that emotionally reserved readers may be "shame-faced by the emotions that would come from making a clear connection between our own lives and the stories of the biblical

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<sup>285</sup> Ibid., 21–22.

<sup>286</sup> Fant, *God as Author: A Biblical Approach to Narrative*, xiii–xiv.

<sup>287</sup> Ibid., xiv.

<sup>288</sup> Ibid., 139.



text.”<sup>289</sup> Furthermore, he suggests that adults with a high view of their own intellectual sophistication may be embarrassed by the supernatural elements, simplicity, or perceived childishness of the Old Testament narratives.

As a corollary to his insistence that readers must allow themselves to be drawn into a narrative, Goldingay warns them against exercising the “scientific ideal of objectivity”<sup>290</sup> in interpretation. Like Ryken, he believes that narrative is incarnational and, with Nussbaum, holds it cannot be paraphrased or summarized “without losing something.”<sup>291</sup> He maintains that part of the genius of a good story may be a complexity that cannot be captured in a single formula.<sup>292</sup> Therefore it is not possible to reduce narrative “to straight didactic. The crucifixion story does things to the reader that a statement of the doctrine of the atonement does not.”<sup>293</sup> Both are needed in the Christian life, Goldingay argues. Sound interpretation then, requires:

...[A] demanding combination of sensitivity, openness, enthusiasm, imagination, and the rigour and slog of hard work that develops ideas and tests them.<sup>294</sup>

For Wenham, sensitivity to narrative’s form involves engagement with the Bible storytellers’ ideas and the sharing of his stance on issues, in order to understand his

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<sup>289</sup> Ibid., 141.

<sup>290</sup> Goldingay, “What Is Involved in Understanding a Passage from the Bible?” 14.

<sup>291</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>292</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>293</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>294</sup> Ibid., 19.

outlook. This sensitivity helps prevent what Wenham terms “reading against the grain, i.e. in ways that are contrary to the message that the author intended to convey.”<sup>295</sup>

An example of the significance of Old Testament narrative form for meaning can be seen in the literary structure and features of the Book of Esther. As noted above, in the Book of Esther God is conspicuously absent: he is not mentioned. Moreover, a reading of the whole book soon shows that no supernatural element -- of the kind common to Old Testament narrative -- exists within the story. God is not mentioned, and he does not speak. In contrast to other court tales in the Old Testament, notably the Joseph narrative and the Book of Daniel, there are no dreams, no visions, no prayers, no astounding occurrences, and no miracles where the laws of creation are suspended or given to work differently. There is no mention of the Law or temple or sacrifice. The narrative gives little, if any, indication of what God himself thinks of the behaviour of the characters in the story. This makes interpretation a challenge.<sup>296</sup> There is purposeful ambiguity.<sup>297</sup> What is the message of a narrative where God seems entirely absent? How is the reader to understand a story where God’s people come under threat, but seem to be delivered from this purely by a series of coincidences or luck?

The structure of the Book of Esther is crucial for interpretation.<sup>298</sup> It is ordered around the theme of reversal, or peripety.<sup>299</sup> The events are organised symmetrically, as a

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<sup>295</sup> Wenham, *Story as Torah: Reading Old Testament Narrative Ethically*, 45.

<sup>296</sup> Jobes, *Esther*, 19–22.

<sup>297</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>298</sup> *Ibid.*, 37–45.

<sup>299</sup> So Berg, *The Book of Esther: Motifs, Themes, and Structure*, 106 and Michael V. Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1991), 158–163.

series of theses and antitheses. Old Testament scholar and author of several commentaries on Esther, Michael V. Fox says:

The theses are situations portending disaster for the Jews and success for their enemies, situations which could be expected to lead, in the natural course of events, to the Jews' destruction.<sup>300</sup>

What occurs in the Book of Esther however is that events do not run their "natural course" and instead lead to the antitheses. The antitheses are the mirror opposites of the results originally intended.<sup>301</sup> The author emphasizes this structure by using identical, or near identical, phraseology in most of the pairs.<sup>302</sup> Although there are divergent views among scholars as to the exact pattern of these reversals, an argument can be made for a chiasmic structure of the book as a whole.<sup>303</sup> This structure sees the pivot point, the crisis of the narrative, hinging around Esther 6:1: the night when Xerxes could not sleep. In other Old Testament court tales, dreams and their interpretations can be decisive moments, but in Esther the turning point comes precisely when there is no dream.

By removing any supernatural element to the story, the author of Esther challenges the reader to explain the events he is relating. Was it just luck that Vashti decided to refuse Xerxes when she did? Was it only coincidence that Esther -- an orphaned, Jewish, exile -- happened to be so beautiful? Was it by luck she managed to find favor in the royal harem and to win Xerxes' favour more than any other? Was it by coincidence that Mordecai overheard the plot to assassinate Xerxes and report it? Was it by coincidence that, though this event was recorded in the royal record, it was not acted

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<sup>300</sup> Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther*, 159.

<sup>301</sup> Ibid.

<sup>302</sup> Berg, *The Book of Esther: Motifs, Themes, and Structure*, 106.

<sup>303</sup> See *ibid.*, 107–113 for an assessment and discussion.

upon immediately, but much later, just when the Jews needed Xerxes' power and favor? Was it sheer coincidence that on the night Haman came to Xerxes seeking permission to hang Mordecai, Xerxes had decided to honor Mordecai, signalling Haman's downfall? Was it sheer coincidence that Xerxes could not sleep that night and just so happened to ask for the record of his reign to be read to him? The implicit challenge to the reader is to explain such an astounding series of events and reversals, which seem so ordinary.

Yet it is precisely this structure that informs the message of the Book of Esther: the reversal of destiny, the turning of the tables.<sup>304</sup> Scholar and author Karen H. Jobes says:

The author is suggesting that beneath the surface of even seemingly insignificant human decisions and events, an unseen and uncontrollable power is at work that can be neither explained nor thwarted.<sup>305</sup>

Written to a Jewish readership, the author's suggestion is that while this power, whilst unseen, is not unknown. The suggestion is that just because God's deliverance is not present in the visible, miraculous and extraordinary, this does not mean he is absent. Rather, it suggests that he is just as able to deliver his people completely, through his control of ordinary events, even in and through the choices of those in the world's most powerful and pagan kingdoms, far from the Promised Land. Therefore, the purposeful ambiguity<sup>306</sup> of the content is complemented by the didactic clarity of the structure: the events are not random; there is order, purpose, intent and extraordinary power.

Therefore, the need to read sensitively to Old Testament narrative's form can be seen to be crucial to interpreting and understanding it correctly.

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<sup>304</sup> Esther 9:1.

<sup>305</sup> Jobes, *Esther*, 41.

<sup>306</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

### *Conclusions From This Section*

This section began by exploring how God's authorial intent impacts an understanding of the didactic nature of Old Testament narrative. Literature from the field of systematic theology that examines this issue in relation to speech-act theory was reviewed. This exploration found that Old Testament narrative as God's word demands an ethical response today, from the reader – one of belief and conformity of life. This response is required because of who the Author is (God), his declared intent in speaking (the achievement of his will) and the fact that he continues his illocutionary acts today, through what he has spoken in the past. Therefore, a connection of supreme authority exists between the Speaker of the word and the reader of Old Testament narrative.

This section also focused on literature that addresses how Old Testament narrative as a genre functions in communicating ethical values to readers and in persuading them to adopt these values. The literature argued that Old Testament narrative's purpose is to teach and to elicit an appropriate human response to what God has said. Its purpose is to shape human life by directing readers to God, a consideration of his holy character and ways, and so to an imitation of his character. Holiness therefore, is the response of "conformity of life" that it demands. Furthermore, it argued that the characters in Old Testament narrative are also key to this task, even though they are often portrayed in morally complex and ambiguous terms. The characters in Old Testament narrative also form a part of the connection that exists between text and reader, via the shared human experience they embody. Present-day readers learn from the past and face uncomfortable self-reflection. Finally, the literature argued that sensitivity to the form of Old Testament narrative as literature is an essential requirement for correct understanding and

interpretation. The literature has argued that Old Testament narrative in its own right demands an ethical response from the reader.

## **The Issues and Limitations of Employing Biblical Theological Systems in Sermon Preparation**

This section explores literature from several fields of biblical studies: systematic theology and biblical theology, Old Testament studies, and homiletics. The shared concern of the literature surveyed is how biblical theology functions in practice in the interpretation of biblical texts. The majority of the literature surveyed focuses on Old Testament narrative texts; however some address interpretation more generally. The nature and genre of biblical theology needs to be understood -- in particular reference to the nature and genre of Old Testament narrative -- to meet the challenge of using it for exhortation. Therefore, this section explores the inherent limitations of biblical theological systems, how the employment of a biblical theological system may lead to insensitivity toward narrative form, and how a biblical theological system may assume too much hermeneutical authority in the interpretation process.

### *Biblical Theological Systems Have Inherent Limitations by Virtue of Their Form*

In the literature surveyed one of the recurring themes is that biblical theology is, by nature, more abstract than Old Testament narrative. Karl Möller, Lecturer in Theology and Religious Studies at St Martin's College, Lancaster, has written reflectively on some of the recent work of Charles H.H. Scobie and the wider role of descriptive analytical

biblical theologies.<sup>307</sup> He notes Scobie's proposed definition of biblical theology as "the ordered study of what the Bible has to say about God and his relation to the world and to humankind."<sup>308</sup> Biblical theology conceived of this way attempts to present a "coherent picture of biblical thought."<sup>309</sup> Möller highlights that biblical theology as a genre is significantly more abstract than that which it seeks to order: the biblical material. Biblical theology, as academic discourse, can also be understood as "second-level discourse": that is, discourse about "first-level discourse," which is the biblical text.<sup>310</sup> This difference matters, Möller argues, because of the critical, constructive analysis and synthesis that occur in biblical theology "reflecting upon" the biblical text.<sup>311</sup> The second-level discourse of biblical theology is more descriptive and analytical than the text itself. Möller argues that "the biblical material is seen not to survive its encounter with biblical theology's second-level discourse unscathed."<sup>312</sup> Möller contends that systematic approaches to biblical theology are partly influenced by ancient Greek conceptual thinking and logic rather than by frameworks that arise from the text.<sup>313</sup>

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<sup>307</sup> Karl Möller, "The Nature and Genre of Biblical Theology: Some Reflections in the Light of Charles H.H. Scobie's 'Prolegomena to a Biblical Theology,'" in *Out of Egypt: Biblical Theology and Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Mary Healy et al. (Milton Keynes: Paternoster Press, 2004), 41–64.

<sup>308</sup> C.H.H. Scobie, *The Ways of Our God: An Approach to Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003), 4–5.

<sup>309</sup> Möller, "The Nature and Genre of Biblical Theology: Some Reflections in the Light of Charles H.H. Scobie's 'Prolegomena to a Biblical Theology,'" 44.

<sup>310</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>311</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>312</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>313</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

Goldingay observes the exactly same point in his discussions concerning the relationship between biblical narrative and systematic theology.<sup>314</sup> Though applied to systematic theology, several of Goldingay's assertions are relevant to the thematic approach of biblical theological systems. Goldingay highlights the fact that the Old Testament is predominantly narrative in form, and that this form corresponds directly to the nature of the Christian faith.<sup>315</sup> Therefore, the challenge of any theological system is to do justice to this fact. In Goldingay's view, the theological and philosophical frameworks that are imported from ancient Greek thought into any system make this a formidable task, because a system itself does not take narrative form:

It thereby has difficulty in maintaining touch with the narrative nature of the faith upon which it seeks to reflect, and therefore with the object of its concern. And it has difficulty in maintaining touch with the narrative contexts out of which aspects of God's character emerge, and thereby in understanding the significance of these aspects of this character.<sup>316</sup>

Therefore, the abstract form of a theological system is an inherent limitation in addressing narrative. Möller examines three further limitations in relation to this. First, he observes, as more abstract discourse, biblical theology requires a structure -- an organizing principle or principles. Even though some structures may reflect the biblical material more successfully than others, Möller calls for the acknowledgement that the schemes and structures -- whether systematic, dogmatic, thematic, or multi-thematic -- are all provisional, conjectural, and subjective.<sup>317</sup> He does so while citing what he regards as an "expectation" among some scholars that the discovery of the "right" structuring

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<sup>314</sup> Goldingay, "Biblical Narrative and Systematic Theology," 128.

<sup>315</sup> Ibid., 130.

<sup>316</sup> Ibid., 132.

<sup>317</sup> Möller, "The Nature and Genre of Biblical Theology: Some Reflections in the Light of Charles H.H. Scobie's 'Prolegomena to a Biblical Theology,'" 57.



principle will give rise to “the” definitive biblical theology.<sup>318</sup> Structure, in its least sensitive forms, will impose an alien pattern or false unity upon the biblical material.<sup>319</sup>

Second, Möller asserts that in developing orderly accounts of what the Bible has to say, the schemes and structures of biblical theology can become too rigid. In biblical theology’s desire for orderliness and coherence, schemes can easily overreach. Möller observes how “biblical theology strives for order where the biblical material itself resists it.”<sup>320</sup> Citing not only narrative texts to support this claim, but also texts such as Job and the Psalms, Möller notes the texts’ capacity to challenge the interpreter’s urge to be overly rationalist and coherent. Goldingay takes up the implications of this resistance for Old Testament narrative in particular. Biblical narrative by nature, he says, is “open-ended, allusive, and capable of embracing questions and ambiguity.”<sup>321</sup> Its ability to embrace mystery is “part of its genius.”<sup>322</sup> Yet it is precisely these things that descriptive analytical systems struggle to reckon with and risk eclipsing.<sup>323</sup>

Third, Möller argues that by virtue of its form, a biblical theology is reductionist. That is, the great diversity of genre in Scripture is “conflated into one single genre, that of didactic exposition.”<sup>324</sup> He also states it in the terms of speech-act theory: that in a

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<sup>318</sup> Ibid.

<sup>319</sup> Ibid., 47, 52.

<sup>320</sup> Ibid., 57.

<sup>321</sup> Goldingay, “Biblical Narrative and Systematic Theology,” 132.

<sup>322</sup> Ibid., 135.

<sup>323</sup> Ibid., 132–3.

<sup>324</sup> Möller, “The Nature and Genre of Biblical Theology: Some Reflections in the Light of Charles H.H. Scobie’s ‘Prolegomena to a Biblical Theology,’” 59.

biblical theology, the great variety of biblical performatives is replaced by constatives – statements that describe a certain state of affairs. The effect of this is:

...[T]hat the multifaceted multi-genre performative form of the biblical material is turned into a streamlined single-genre descriptive account...In particular there is a danger that, in comparison with the biblical material itself, descriptive biblical theologies may seem somewhat impoverished, timid, arid, bloodless and lacking in life...<sup>325</sup>

These inherent limitations require acknowledgement.<sup>326</sup> It must be asked how well the structures, categories, and schemas of a biblical theology can accommodate the literary sophistication of narrative texts.

*Employing Biblical Theology in Interpretation Can Lead to Insensitivity to Old Testament Narratives' Literary Form*

Pastor, biblical scholar, and widely published author Sidney Greidanus has noted a reductionist tendency in regard to literary genres on the part of those who employ biblical theology in interpretation:

The redemptive historical approach is so eager to discern redemptive history...that it looks right through the text...It looks through the text as if it were a clear windowpane and thus ignores the text itself. It fails to observe that the author has shaped the written text...[it] tends to overlook the Bible's literary/historical dimensions.<sup>327</sup>

Literary form, therefore, can be treated as largely unimportant when a biblical theological system is brought to the text. This tendency has been identified in the work of Graeme Goldsworthy, a widely published and recognized proponent of biblical theology. Andrew Reid, Principal of the Evangelical Theological College of Asia, completed

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<sup>325</sup> Ibid.

<sup>326</sup> Ibid., 57.

<sup>327</sup> Sidney Greidanus, "Redemptive History and Preaching," *Pro Rege* 19, December (1990): 13.

doctoral research into Goldsworthy's hermeneutics and practice.<sup>328</sup> Citing examples from both sermons and writings, Reid notes that Goldsworthy demonstrates little knowledge of the insights of narrative criticism and a readiness to quickly turn story into a set of propositions, driving "a neat wedge between meaning and narrative form."<sup>329</sup> Narrative form appears to be only the vehicle for the meta-narrative of Scripture:

...[T]here is little attention given to why either the human or divine author of Scripture has chosen different genres, how they convey meaning, and whether they are intended to convey more than just meaning (e.g. are they designed to bear and/or produce affective as well as propositional freight).<sup>330</sup>

Reid's assessment is that for Goldsworthy the importance of genre and associated literary concerns have been reduced to the extent they are almost insignificant. Rather, they have all been "overridden for the sake of pursuing theological themes."<sup>331</sup> What is occurring here in the process of interpretation, Reid says, is that the perceived divine authorial intent is allowed to overcome the authorial intent of the human author. This override borders on what Reid terms "an exegetical imperialism whereby the theological horizon of the Christian reader dominates the first horizon of the ancient text"<sup>332</sup> and only succeeds in "flattening out the richness of genre."<sup>333</sup> Significantly, he identifies that the immediate meaning of the text is relegated to secondary importance by the demand to

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<sup>328</sup> See Andrew Reid, "Evangelical Hermeneutics and Old Testament Preaching: A Critical Analysis of Graeme Goldsworthy's Theory and Practice" (Ridley Melbourne Mission and Ministry College, 2011).

<sup>329</sup> Ibid., 217.

<sup>330</sup> Ibid.

<sup>331</sup> Ibid., 319–320.

<sup>332</sup> Ibid., 320.

<sup>333</sup> Ibid., 348.

relate every text to Christ.<sup>334</sup> In this way biblical theological systems of the type that Goldsworthy advocates may be reductionist, as they aim at reducing a complex entity -- the diversity of Scripture in literary genre, historicity, particularity, and Testament -- into a more simple one. In this way they run the risk of “forcing the constituent elements of the whole into some artificial construct and ignor[ing] the complexities of the individual parts.”<sup>335</sup> In Goldsworthy’s case, this artificial construct is the motif of the kingdom of God as the center of the Bible.<sup>336</sup> Möller wonders whether this tendency to reduce story to proposition and narrative to ideas is driven by a logical-positivist view of language that holds that only statements that describe a state of affairs are meaningful.<sup>337</sup>

This insensitivity to literary form may be exacerbated when an interpreter employing biblical theology in interpretation is also fond of second-level discourse. In promoting literary analysis in sermon preparation, Leyland Ryken notes:

...a nearly universal tendency of seminary graduates to translate biblical texts into a series of abstract theological propositions. Theologically educated preachers do not see this tendency as a problem because they love theological discourse. Nonetheless, the immediate move toward theological abstraction *is* a problem if the goals are those of expository preaching.<sup>338</sup>

Therefore, a love of “theological discourse” can lead an interpreter to view passages in Scripture -- whatever their genre -- as primarily “a collection of theological or

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<sup>334</sup> Ibid., 233.

<sup>335</sup> Ibid., 306–7.

<sup>336</sup> Ibid., 306.

<sup>337</sup> Möller, “The Nature and Genre of Biblical Theology: Some Reflections in the Light of Charles H.H. Scobie’s ‘Prolegomena to a Biblical Theology,’” 59.

<sup>338</sup> Leland Ryken, “The Bible as Literature and Expository Preaching,” in *Preach the Word: Essays on Expository Preaching: In Honour of R. Kent Hughes*, ed. Leland Ryken and Todd Wilson (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2007), 48.

moral ideas.”<sup>339</sup> This view then results in theological and moral reductionism. Ryken argues that sensitivity to literary form is simply “doing justice to the specificity of a text.”<sup>340</sup> Furthermore, he notes that expository preachers face the combination of being captivated by both theological abstraction and the inter-locking story of biblical theology, so that the “orientation of their sermons is to whisk us away from the everyday world to a world of theological abstraction.”<sup>341</sup>

Ryken argues that a literary approach to Scripture is not optional but essential. The interpreter’s commitment must be to a close reading of the biblical text. This commitment, in turn, conditions the interpreter to dealing seriously with the specificity of a text, engaging in literary analysis and also textual explication, and respecting the authorial intent of Scripture.

Insensitivity to literary form may be amplified even further for interpreters by the practical issue of producing a finished sermon. Daniel I. Block, Gunther H. Knoedler Professor Emeritus of Old Testament at Wheaton College, has labelled this phenomenon “the homiletic hermeneutic.”<sup>342</sup> The need to preach a sermon from a biblical text is the driving force behind interpretation, rather than “a thirst for understanding its message in its original context.”<sup>343</sup> A homiletic hermeneutic includes the desire to be efficient and economic with time, thereby limiting time available for reflecting on, and wrestling with,

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<sup>339</sup> Ibid.

<sup>340</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>341</sup> Ibid., 50.

<sup>342</sup> 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*, ed. David M. Howard, Jr. and Michael A. Grisanti (Grand Rapids, MI: Apollos, 2008), 411–13.

<sup>343</sup> Ibid., 411.

the text. It also includes the valuing of secondary literature about the text, over the text itself. This literature enables the interpreter to move to what reputed authorities have said about the text, rather than wrestling with it themselves and allowing its voice to be heard.<sup>344</sup> In the end:

...[T]he need to preach a sermon from a biblical text may actually inhibit responsible interpretation and blind the preacher and audience to the authoritative meaning of the passage.<sup>345</sup>

Therefore, reductionism can enter the hermeneutical process simply via the pressure of the task at hand.

*A Biblical Theology Can Assume Too Much Hermeneutical Authority  
in the Process of Interpretation*

Don Carson, Research Professor of New Testament at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, has argued the importance of biblical theology, expressing a “profound willingness to work inductively from the text,”<sup>346</sup> both from individual biblical books and the entire canon. On the part of the interpreter, this willingness begins with the text and is controlled by its concerns. For Carson, such inductive study is a fundamental control on the exercise of biblical theology as it goes about its task of “uncovering and articulating the unity of all the biblical texts taken together.”<sup>347</sup> As biblical theology moves from analysis of individual texts towards synthesis, it is controlled by the agenda(s) of the biblical material. This agenda can act as a safeguard against extra-biblical agendas being

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<sup>344</sup> Ibid., 412.

<sup>345</sup> Ibid.

<sup>346</sup> D. A. Carson, “Current Issues in Biblical Theology: A New Testament Perspective,” *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 5 (1995): 29.

<sup>347</sup> Carson, “Systematic and Biblical Theology,” 94.

imposed upon, and domesticating, the concerns of the text.<sup>348</sup> Exegesis controls the development of biblical theology, but biblical theology does not control exegesis in the same way.<sup>349</sup> Therefore, the categories and schemes of biblical theology, in theory, should always be open to modification by the biblical material itself.

Unfortunately, Reid observes a “disappointing lack of exegesis” in Goldsworthy’s arguments in supporting, critiquing, and questioning his own theological conclusions and presuppositions, in spite of an insistence on Goldsworthy’s part that exegesis must constantly be fed back into the hermeneutical process. For Reid, in the absence of evidence from Goldsworthy’s sermons and published work, the question of if and when the parts -- Scriptural texts -- are ever engaged with to confirm, disconfirm, or modify, the whole rises to the forefront.<sup>350</sup> Therefore, a biblical theological scheme can avoid scrutiny by the text and, in doing so, assume greater hermeneutical authority for the interpreter than the text itself. As Möller warns:

The ordered account... must never ‘replace’ that complex and diverse mass [the biblical literature] or give the impression that the Bible’s complexity has been, or could ever be, mastered.<sup>351</sup>

Therefore, biblical theology has the opportunity to star in a supporting role, says Möller. Old Testament scholar and published author Christopher J. H. Wright, has helpfully expanded upon this point. Wright argues that interpreters may achieve great benefit from changing the terminology they use about their biblical theology:

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<sup>348</sup> Carson, “Current Issues in Biblical Theology: A New Testament Perspective,” 30.

<sup>349</sup> Klink and Lockett, *Understanding Biblical Theology: A Comparison of Theory and Practice*, 81.

<sup>350</sup> See Reid, “Evangelical Hermeneutics and Old Testament Preaching: A Critical Analysis of Graeme Goldsworthy’s Theory and Practice,” 230–1; 317–8; 344–8.

<sup>351</sup> Möller, “The Nature and Genre of Biblical Theology: Some Reflections in the Light of Charles H.H. Scobie’s ‘Prolegomena to a Biblical Theology,’” 61.

understanding it less as “framework” and more as “map.”<sup>352</sup> Maps, to some degree, cannot help but distort the reality they represent, Wright acknowledges. They attempt to produce a three-dimensional reality on a two-dimensional plane. They use symbols to represent that reality, and they are selective in what features of that reality they show. A map, however, helps a person to navigate. It enables a person to “find their way around” the reality that the map represents. It helps them to explore it, understand the features within it, and discover new things. When something is found that isn’t shown on the map, a person doesn’t deny its existence. Rather, they understand it in relation to the other features that are shown on the map.<sup>353</sup> Möller agrees with Wright. A map achieves the goal he believes biblical theology should aim for: leading interpreters back to the reality - the biblical text that it represents -- and encouraging them to appreciate the landscape “in all its stunning beauty and surprising jaggedness.”<sup>354</sup>

Carson also argues for the importance of employing “the full range of weapons in the exegetical arsenal, without succumbing to methodological narrowness or faddishness.”<sup>355</sup> Employing a full range of skills in exegesis and interpretation is another safeguard against any one methodology assuming too much authority. He has demonstrated this need and effect when dealing with what are challenging Old Testament

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<sup>352</sup> Christopher J.H. Wright, “Mission as a Matrix for Hermeneutics and Biblical Theology,” in *Out of Egypt: Biblical Theology and Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Mary Healy et al. (Milton Keynes: Paternoster Press, 2004), 138-140.

<sup>353</sup> *Ibid.*, 139.

<sup>354</sup> Möller, “The Nature and Genre of Biblical Theology: Some Reflections in the Light of Charles H.H. Scobie’s ‘Prolegomena to a Biblical Theology,’” 62.

<sup>355</sup> Carson, “Current Issues in Biblical Theology: A New Testament Perspective,” 34. These comments were addressed to those constructing biblical theologies, but they are relevant to the application of it also.



passages from a biblical theological interpretative point of view.<sup>356</sup> Without such a safeguard, the danger remains that the thematic system -- be it a systematic theology or biblical theology -- domesticates the concerns of the text. Carson also argues that the interpreter's understanding of the whole must aid the comprehension of the part.<sup>357</sup>

### *Conclusions From This Section*

This section explored literature from several fields of biblical studies that share the common concern of how biblical theology functions in practice in the interpretation of biblical texts. This examination was undertaken to understand the nature and genre of biblical theology in particular reference to the nature and genre of Old Testament narrative. The research sought to identify what the literature stated as the issues and limitations of applying a biblical theological system in the interpretive process. The literature identified several issues and limitations. First, that biblical theology, as second-level discourse, is a significantly more abstract form of discourse than Old Testament narrative. Biblical theology therefore can struggle to deal with literature that is sophisticated, complex, and at times mysterious and ambiguous. The result of this, the literature has argued, can be an eclipsing and reduction of the multi-faceted character of Old Testament narrative texts, with the accompanying impact upon interpretation. Second, employing a biblical theological system can lead to insensitivity to Old Testament narrative's form that, as argued in the literature surveyed in the previous subsections, should be considered part of its content. Third, it is possible for a biblical

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<sup>356</sup> D. A. Carson, "Biblical-Theological Ruminations on Psalm 1," in *Resurrection & Eschatology*, ed. Lane G. Tipton and Jeffery C. Waddington (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing Company, 2008), 115–134.

<sup>357</sup> *Ibid.*, 124.

theology to assume too much hermeneutical authority in the interpretive process, resulting in the domestication of the text's concerns to other agendas.

### *Conclusions from Literature Review*

This review set out to explore three primary areas of literature: narrative and ethics, Old Testament narrative and Christian ethics, and the issues and limitations of employing biblical theology in sermon preparation.

A number of important insights have come from this review. First, the literature has argued that fictional narrative has power: it can change, form, and shape the reader's character and life because narrative, by nature, is didactic: it exists to teach. Stories come to the reader with authorial intent. Stories therefore become sources of guidance and ethical instruction. They present readers with worlds -- including characters not dissimilar to themselves -- that explore, ponder, and appropriate life-lessons. In this way, readers are able to experience situations, people, and events beyond their real-world experience.

Second, Old Testament narrative also comes to the reader with authorial intent but with a much greater order of magnitude. God is its Author, and he has spoken in order to achieve his will. He continues to perform his illocutionary acts to present-day readers, through the word he has already spoken -- and inscripturated -- in the past. Old Testament narrative therefore, comes to readers not simply with suggestions for their consideration but with a demand for their compliance to what it says.

Third, Old Testament narrative, in its own right, is didactic: its purpose is to teach, and to elicit an appropriate response to what God has spoken. The literature has argued that this response is one of belief and conformity of life. In regard to the latter, it

is a response of imitating the character of God i.e. holiness. In this way, its ethical requirements are closer to that of the New Testament than may be thought at first reading.

Fourth, both the non-Christian and Christian literature has argued the central importance of characters for the performance of the didactic function of narrative. Shared human experience, concretely rendered, is a powerful point of connection between the reader and the characters in the text. What is portrayed about the characters' lives enables present-day readers to learn from the characters' life experiences, to draw lessons from the past and be drawn -- even unwillingly -- to profound self-reflection.

Fifth, both the non-Christian and Christian literature has emphasized the importance of understanding narrative's form as part of its content, for correct and whole interpretation. The direct implication of this, the literature has highlighted, is the necessity of readers developing the skills that enable them to read sensitively to the devices of sophisticated literature.

Finally, the employment of biblical theological systems in the interpretation of Old Testament narrative creates specific issues and limitations. Biblical theology can struggle with the nature and features of sophisticated literature. It can eclipse and reduce the multifaceted nature of Old Testament narrative and lead to an insensitivity to its form, with resultant negative effects upon accurate interpretation. It is also possible for the interpreter to assign it too much hermeneutical authority in the interpretative process, opening the way for the Old Testament narrative text's purpose to be subjugated to other agendas. These insights are significant for the light they bring to bear on the nature and genre of both Old Testament narrative and biblical theology.

No one has addressed the difficulty in generating application when using biblical theology, primarily from a preacher's perspective. A comprehensive account of the nature and causes of the problem and how they might be addressed in sermon preparation has not been offered. The questions raised in Chapter One of this study therefore still stand: Why is the preaching from reformed pulpits so susceptible to the failure outlined by de Witt? What is it about the methodology of preachers using biblical theology that makes generating exhortation so difficult? What other factors may be contributing to the failure? Therefore, more work is necessary in order to identify why generating "warm, pointed application" is such a challenge for preachers employing biblical theology in their sermon preparation of Old Testament narrative texts.

## Chapter Three

### Methodology

The purpose of this study was to investigate how preachers who employ biblical theology in their sermon preparation of Old Testament narrative texts diagnose the challenges of making exhortations. The assumption is that learning takes place in the context of ministry. Therefore, a qualitative study was proposed to understand the ministry practice and the diagnoses of the challenges that preachers have gleaned from their experiences.

### Design of the Study

The research design of this study followed a qualitative approach. Qualitative research methodology was chosen because its four characteristics are suited to the purpose of this study. First, the key concern of qualitative research is “understanding the phenomenon of interest from the participants’ perspectives.”<sup>358</sup> In qualitative research, the researcher is “interested in understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences.”<sup>359</sup> Therefore, the goal of qualitative research is achieving a deeper understanding of particular situations through discovery, insight, analysis, and understanding.<sup>360</sup> The focus of the research is the particular situation: its nature and how those involved in it make

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<sup>358</sup> Sharan B. Merriam, *Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2009), 14.

<sup>359</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>360</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

sense of it. Exploring the particular situation and understanding it from the participant's perspective is not primarily a means to an end, such as predicting what might happen in the future, but rather it is an end in itself.<sup>361</sup>

Second, qualitative research is an inductive process. It involves “gathering data to build concepts, hypotheses, or theories rather than deductively testing hypotheses.”<sup>362</sup> In qualitative research, the researcher builds towards theory from observations and understandings gained from being in the field. These observations and understandings synthesize as the work proceeds from the particular to the more general. This inductive process makes qualitative research ideal for the purpose of this study, as it invites insight, evaluation, and interpretation from both participant and researcher.

Third, qualitative research uses the researcher as the primary instrument for data collection and analysis. This method is desirable because the goal is the understanding of particular situations. The human researcher is able to be “immediately responsive and adaptive” and can also “expand his or her understanding through non-verbal as well as verbal communication...clarify and summarize material...and explore unusual or unanticipated responses.”<sup>363</sup> Finally, the product of qualitative research is richly descriptive and therefore able to adequately convey the substance of the research.

Therefore, a qualitative research methodology was chosen for this study, as it enabled the capture of the wide variety of specific situations that preachers find themselves in, in Christian ministry. Preachers undertake their task in different socio-economic areas, monocultural or multicultural settings, with varying degrees of Bible

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<sup>361</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>362</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>363</sup> Ibid.

literacy amongst their hearers, and a specific set of congregational needs. These factors can all influence how a preacher approaches the task of application and making exhortations. Furthermore, all preachers are shaped by a multitude of different influences in their sermon preparation and preaching: their training, books they have read, sermons that have deeply impacted them and the methodology that lies behind them, the methodology, instruction, and advice from preachers they admire and respect, and feedback from their hearers over time. All these factors combine to influence how preachers generate application and exhort their hearers. Qualitative research methodology provides the opportunity for the capture and analysis of these richly nuanced situations. Therefore, a basic qualitative research design was employed for this study.

### **Participant Sample Selection**

Purposeful sampling was used in this study. Purposeful sampling aims at selecting a sample of participants for the study from which the most can be learned and that are “information-rich.”<sup>364</sup> Furthermore, this study used “typical” purposeful sampling.<sup>365</sup> That is, participants in the study are not in intensely unusual, atypical, extreme, or deviant preaching situations.<sup>366</sup> Purposeful sampling therefore requires the delineation of selection criteria. The criteria for selecting participants for this study are as follows:

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<sup>364</sup> Ibid., 77.

<sup>365</sup> Ibid., 78.

<sup>366</sup> Ibid.

### *Existing Relationships*

The researcher occupies a full-time vocational position in Christian ministry and has ongoing relationships with others in preaching roles. Participants were selected from this broader group. This qualification was considered important because of the nature of the specific inquiry. That is, discussion concerning personal challenges and significant difficulties in preaching meant, on the part of the participant, admitting to the struggles and being willing to open up transparently about them. Therefore, participants who knew the researcher prior to the study were selected.

### *Preaching Experience*

Each participant had a minimum of ten years of experience in regular and frequent expository preaching. Preachers with this level of experience were much more likely to have seriously grappled with the challenges that this study was researching. They were also much more likely to have had some opportunity to reflect upon both the nature and the possible causes of the challenges and possibly to have developed solutions.

### *Variety of Preaching Contexts*

The researcher selected preachers who had reasonable to extensive experience preaching in different contexts in their own ministry life. This experience for each participant is detailed in Table 1 in Chapter Four. This experience provided a broader background for evaluating the challenges this study was addressing and in the completed analysis, provided rich data for conclusions and further study.



### *Reformed Evangelical Theological Commitment*

As this study was focused upon the difficulties encountered by preachers who used a redemptive-historical approach to the text of Scripture, a strong commitment to this theological position was essential, and all participants shared this.

### *Employment of Biblical-Theological Method*

Each participant was committed to the use of a biblical-theological interpretative method in his sermon preparation. Each had employed this methodology for a minimum of ten years, inclusive of the adaptations and changes made over that time. Participants had to be able to describe the challenges of using such methodology.

### *Awareness of the Problem*

Participants were aware of the challenges. That is, there was testimonial evidence that these challenges were a real issue in their preaching ministry and that they had sought to address them in some way, either through research or changes in preaching practice, or both. A pre-existing awareness of the problem was essential for participants to be able to describe and analyze the nature of the challenges.

### *Capacity for Description and Analysis*

Participants were also selected for their ability to articulate in detail their sermon preparation process. In addition, participants were able to demonstrate significant capacity for analyzing their processes and identifying possible causes of difficulty. Preachers who possessed these capacities were better placed to describe and reflect upon the methodological issues involved.

## *Sourcing*

In total, five participants were selected to take part in this study, from a total of eleven invitations. In light of the specific capacities required, the researcher personally selected all participants.

## **Data Collection**

The primary source of data collection for this study was a semi-structured interview protocol.<sup>367</sup> A semi-structured interview protocol allowed flexibility in the structure of the interview. Each participant was interviewed, and specific information was sought from each. The interview, however, was guided by “a list of questions or issues to be explored,”<sup>368</sup> where the precise wording and order of the questions was determined in the interview itself, rather than beforehand.

This semi-structured protocol allowed the researcher to respond immediately and clarify and probe for further detail where necessary, explore unexpected answers, and investigate emerging themes or contrasting statements across the range of interviews. This protocol was beneficial for exploring the multitude of factors in interpreting and applying Old Testament narrative and using biblical theology.

Each participant was invited by an email from the researcher, detailing the nature, topic and purpose of the study and also the selection criteria required. Once the participant had accepted, they were provided a consent form prior to the interview being undertaken. Each participant was interviewed personally, for approximately 90 minutes. The interviews with each participant were digitally recorded in full to preserve the data

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<sup>367</sup> Ibid., 89–91.

<sup>368</sup> Ibid., 90.

and allow further analysis. The researcher also took handwritten notes during the interview, recording descriptive and reflective observations concerning word choice, points of emphasis and connections to other sources.

### *Interview Protocol*

The following protocol was used for interviewing participants:

Research Question 1: What are the challenges in making exhortations faced by preachers who employ biblical theology in their sermon preparation of Old Testament narrative texts?

1. Can you describe your method for generating application from Old Testament narrative?
2. What do you find difficult about generating application and exhortation from an Old Testament narrative text?
3. Which of those difficulties do you only encounter when you are preaching from an Old Testament narrative text?

Research Question 2: What do preachers who employ biblical theology in their sermon preparation of Old Testament narrative texts identify as the sources of these challenges?

4. Are there any inherent characteristics of Old Testament narrative that you think give rise to these challenges?
5. Are there any parts of your methodology that you think give rise any of these challenges?
6. What have you tried, in your sermon preparation, to overcome these challenges?

Research Question 3: In what ways and to what extent are these challenges related to the use of biblical theology in sermon preparation of Old Testament narrative texts?

7. Do you believe you would have these same challenges if you were not using a biblical-theological method in your sermon preparation?
8. What dynamics does using biblical theology bring into your preparation that makes generating exhortation a challenge?
9. In light of the challenges it brings, why do you keep using a biblical-theological method?

## Data Analysis

The method of data analysis used for this study was the constant comparative method.<sup>369</sup> The constant comparative method involved extensive cross-analysis of the data gathered during the semi-structured interviews. By comparing the data within one interview and across subsequent interviews, categories, trends, and themes were identified. The constant comparative method enabled differences and discrepancies to be quickly identified. The researcher then coded these categories, themes, and differences. This analysis continued throughout the interviewing process. In this way, the categories and themes initially identified were continually tested and refined against the data in a repeated process, as explanations were sought and theories were formulated. In this study, the data consisted of the literature cited in Chapter Two and the interviews with the participants selected according to the criteria above.

During the interviews, apart from directing the questions, the researcher's primary role was that of an observer. The researcher was keen to observe the tone of voice and body language participants displayed while describing their experiences, as an indication of how significant the challenges this study was addressing actually were for them in practice. Also, the researcher was keen to observe any repeated references – either direct or indirect – to any personal allegiances that the participants had to specific schools of theological thought, influential preaching figures, and their methodologies or historical theological debates that may have been influencing their practice. In addition, the researcher watched for indications of any preaching methodologies, theological issues, or

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<sup>369</sup> Ibid., 199.

positions that the participants were strongly opposed to in principle. These observations were recorded in handwritten notes by the researcher in the interview.

Immediately after interviewing each participant, the interviews were transcribed by a third party. This step facilitated interpretation, extensive analysis, and coding. The researcher edited this transcription by exhaustive comparison with the audio recording using software. This step ensured the accuracy and reliability of the transcript. The researcher then analyzed and coded the transcript, in conjunction with listening to excerpts of the audio recording and referencing hand-written notes.

### **Researcher Position**

In a qualitative study, the researcher serves as the primary instrument for data collection and analysis, which means all observations and analyses are filtered through the researcher's perspective and values. Researchers must be sensitive to understanding how biases or subjectivity shape the research process and its findings. Therefore, it is important to employ critical self-reflection to identify and disclose potential sources of biases such as assumptions, worldview, theoretical orientation, and other connections to the study that may impact the investigation.<sup>370</sup>

Broadly defined, the position of the researcher in this study is that of a Christian Theist.<sup>371</sup> More specifically within Christian Theism, the researcher's position is that of a Reformed evangelical Christian. The researcher has over twenty years of experience preaching in both church congregational and itinerant evangelistic settings, as well as

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<sup>370</sup> Ibid. 229.

<sup>371</sup> As defined, for example, in James W. Sire, *The Universe Next Door: A Basic Worldview Catalogue*, 5th ed. (London: SPCK Publishing, 2010), 25–46.

seven years in lecturing in homiletics at seminary. The researcher is also committed to the insights of the discipline of biblical theology, its benefits for preaching practice, and the necessity of excellence in preaching in Christian ministry for the listeners.

The researcher is Australian who has gained the preaching experience mentioned above largely from preaching in and around the city of Sydney. Sydney has several denominational theological colleges and independent Bible colleges that advocate strongly for the importance of biblical theology in the hermeneutical process, which directly influences the way graduates employ biblical theology in preaching. The researcher has also been a professing Christian since early childhood and an engaged sermon listener in Sydney for over thirty-five years. This background has resulted in strong familiarity with the Reformed evangelical preaching in Sydney and its attendant strengths and shortcomings.

While this experience, location, and conviction have the potential to distort the researcher's perspective, the use of systematic data collection procedures and multiple data sources will help to correct any distortion. In addition, the researcher is a practicing preacher in the tradition beset by this problem, which fuels the desire to articulate the issue with integrity and offer the beginnings of a solution.

### **Study Limitations**

This study is limited in several ways. First, participant selection was limited to those currently ministering in an urban context in Australia. Specifically, all participants were ministering in Sydney, Australia, at the time of the interviews. The majority however, had previous ministry experience outside of this context. Therefore, due to the

limitations of resources and time, the interview analysis is not necessarily universally applicable to all times and situations.

Second, the study is limited to those who practice expository preaching. Although this study is prepared to recognize the validity of some other forms of preaching, it will concentrate on expository preaching because this form of preaching is where the challenges encountered are most pronounced.

Third, the study is limited to participants who employ biblical theology in their sermon preparation, which is a more specific focus than the wider concern of generating exhortation from Old Testament narrative.

Fourth, the study is limited to the insights of male preachers. Invitations to female participants who met the selection criteria were issued. Due to the practical circumstances of the researcher and the location of some participants interstate, interviews with these candidates were unfortunately not possible.

Finally, the study assumes that sermon application from Old Testament narrative is a theological necessity. There are historical, and ongoing, debates about this specific issue that have generated extensive literature for the review of those interested.<sup>372</sup> This debate is not entered into, nor reviewed, in any way in this study.

Some of this study's findings may be generalized to other similar preaching contexts in Reformed circles in Western cultures. Where readers seek to generalize findings, particular aspects of these should be tested in the readers' own context. Readers bear the responsibility to determine what can be appropriately applied to their context.

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<sup>372</sup> See Sidney Greidanus, *Sola Scriptura: Problems and Principles in Preaching Historical Texts* (Eugene, OR: Wedge Publishing Foundation, 1970) and; John Carrick, *The Imperative of Preaching: A Theology of Sacred Rhetoric* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2002) for the issues.

## Chapter Four

### Data Report and Analysis

The purpose of this study was to investigate how preachers who employ biblical theology in their sermon preparation of Old Testament narrative texts diagnose the challenges of making exhortations. Three research questions were framed to guide this study. The research questions were:

1. What are the challenges in making exhortations faced by preachers who employ biblical theology in their sermon preparation of Old Testament narrative texts?
2. What do preachers who employ biblical theology in their sermon preparation of Old Testament narrative texts identify as the sources of these challenges?
3. In what ways and to what extent are these challenges related to the use of biblical theology in sermon preparation of Old Testament narrative texts?

Five preachers were interviewed according to the methodology and criteria stipulated in Chapter Three. Table 1 shows the pertinent demographic information, preaching experience, and current ministry contexts of all the participants.

The following is a presentation of the data, analyzed with regard to relevance to the research questions above. The three sections below reflect the concerns of the research questions. The subheadings of each section have been formulated through the analysis of the data itself and the identification of themes, patterns and differences in their responses.



**Table 1: Research Participants**

Participant	Years Preaching	Preaching Context	Current Context	Denomination
Preacher A 42 years old	22	Congregational Evangelistic: youth, university, adults Conferences Cross-cultural: Africa, Asia, C. America	Full-time Pastor Multicultural Congregation: ages 25-90 Broad socio-economic spectrum Majority new to Bible	Anglican
Preacher B 52 years old	30	Congregational Conferences	Part-time Pastor Three congregations Majority Anglo Part-time seminary faculty	Presbyterian
Preacher C 46 years old	29	Congregational Evangelistic: youth, university, adults Conferences Itinerant Cross-cultural: Asia, Subcontinent, Eastern Europe, Middle East, N and S America, New Zealand.	Full-time seminary faculty	Anglican
Preacher D 39 years old	20	Youth ministry including evangelistic Congregational Conferences	Full-time Pastor Young adults and Millennials Majority Anglo, 25% Asian	Non-denominational church plant
Preacher E 40 years old	20	Itinerant Congregational Church plant Larger church Conferences 10 years Western Europe	Full-time seminary faculty	Baptist

## The Challenges in Making Exhortations

### *Adequately Understanding the Quantity of Biblical Text Required*

Understanding the sheer volume of text that Old Testament narrative usually covers was raised as a fundamental challenge by Preacher E. He noted that Old Testament narrative often contains subtle literary features, such as character development, which can occur over many chapters. Therefore, this development may only become apparent to the reader over “broad slabs” of narrative text. Even if the preacher is dealing with a short narrative pericope, an understanding of the much broader whole is still necessary if interpretation and exhortation are going to be adequate. As an example, he cited the necessity of understanding the whole of Genesis 37-50:

You’ve got to understand all of that even if you’re looking at a particular part, because there’s really subtle character development going on, with multiple characters in different ways and their interactions. All of that. You need to get your head around all of that to tease out a particular part. That’s the challenge. A lot of text to get through.

For Preacher E, this challenge was considered a given when working with Old Testament narrative texts.

### *Adequately Understanding Ambiguous and Complex Texts*

Preachers B, C, D, and E all raised the challenge of dealing with Old Testament narrative texts that were “complex” and “ambiguous.” In most instances and examples given, “complex” and “ambiguous” referred to the moral situation of the characters in the narrative. Examples cited by these participants included the accounts of Jephthah,<sup>373</sup> the

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<sup>373</sup> Judges 10:6-12:7.

Man of God from Judah,<sup>374</sup> the Witch of Endor,<sup>375</sup> the rape of Dinah,<sup>376</sup> and the book of Esther.<sup>377</sup> Preacher E stated the challenge:

Is this descriptive or prescriptive? How do you tease those things apart? Often, it's far more subtle and greyer than you want it to be. Black and white is always good, isn't it! You're in or you're out; you're right or you're wrong. Not 'maybe!'

Therefore, the moral complexity and ambiguity of Old Testament narrative – the “maybe” of the text -- posed an interpretive and applicatory challenge. Referring to his attempt some years ago to preach on Jephthah, Preacher C said:

...this is where the more I dug, the more it got complex. You know, is he [Jephthah] being righteous? What did he do with his daughter in the end? Did he keep his word? Is it about keeping your word no matter how hard the cost? Or is it saying it's about vows? Don't make...let your 'yes' be 'yes'? . . . Do you take it about vows, the foolishness of the vows?

For Preacher C, the moral situation of the main character portrayed in the narrative posed the challenge. Characterization sometimes also posed a challenge for Preacher B. In discussing preaching on the book of Esther, he said:

I felt ambivalent about the characters as well, and so I didn't know where I was meant to...[pause], where my sympathies were meant to lie. I didn't have a point of identification, I guess, as well.

The portrayal of characters in the book of Esther therefore made it unclear for Preacher B who, as a reader, he was expected to identify with in the story. Discussing Genesis 34 and the rape of Dinah he said:

Who's right and who's wrong? Was that a good lie? Should you tell that lie? So many of, so many of the patriarchal narrative stories you're not sure who's good and who's bad, and was that right or was that wrong?

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<sup>374</sup> 1 Kings 13.

<sup>375</sup> 1 Samuel 28.

<sup>376</sup> Genesis 34.

<sup>377</sup> Esther 1-10.

These challenges posed significant complications in the task of interpretation and application for these preachers. They found it a challenge to apply the text to their hearers and exhort them while they remained unsure whether they had adequately grasped what the text actually meant.

*Avoiding Repetitive, Predictable, Formulaic, One-dimensional,  
Boring Sermons*

All participants either raised or spoke to the challenge of avoiding repetitive and predictable sermons that gave only generic application to hearers. Expressing the challenge as he encountered it, Preacher A stated, “You have to be saying the same thing all the time, and it becomes really predictable for your audience.” Preacher E, in reference to listening to sermons given by those he is training, said, “We end up saying the same point every week.” That is, he meant, even though the sermon he is hearing is meant to be dealing with an Old Testament narrative text, it becomes a sermon about the New Testament: “Same New Testament sermon, different Old Testament introduction!” Preacher D stated that in listening to preachers he is trying to train, he frequently finds himself thinking:

...this sermon feels a bit predictable. Because we get to the end, and it feels like “I know where he’s going to go with this.” You know he’s going to climax in the gospel.

For Preacher D the structure and trajectory of sermons can be repetitive and therefore, predictable. Preacher C described this characteristic of sermons as:

...one dimensional. It just felt, whatever text you’ve got, I’m going to walk you through Fall, redemption, etc., and it always ended in atonement, not even resurrection.

For Preacher C it sounded as if a “one-size-fits-all” formula was being applied to every text handled.

### *Successfully “Getting to Jesus”*

Preachers A and D both raised finding a way to relate the Old Testament narrative text to Jesus Christ as a challenge often, but not always, encountered. In some instances, they found it quite easy to do. Preachers A and D gave this insight in contexts where they both found generating ethical application from Old Testament narratives quite straightforward. It was the link to the New Testament and to Christ Himself that was presenting the challenge to them.

## **The Sources of the Challenges**

### *The Nature and Genre of Old Testament Narrative*

One source of the challenges was the nature of Old Testament narrative itself. Preacher E understood that dealing with large amounts of text was inherent in working with Old Testament narrative, that is, there is “a lot of text to get through.”

Similarly, the preachers interviewed understood that Old Testament narrative texts could be complex and ambiguous by nature. In a further comment concerning narrative complexity, Preacher E commented, “So I think that [the moral complexity of narrative] is always a challenge, and that’s just a part of narrative. It’s not always clear.” Preacher A, discussing the nature of life situations dealt with in Old Testament narrative said, “I mean, the narrative is not systematic. It’s broken, it’s ugly, it’s...do you know what I mean?” For Preacher B, the method of characterization in the text of Esther made

it markedly more difficult for him to find a point of identification than in other Old Testament narrative texts.

Preacher D believed that one source of the challenges of preaching on Old Testament narrative texts was the structure of the narratives themselves. He found that the structure of the text often shaped the structure of his sermons. Thus, either due to his hearer's existing knowledge of the story or simply the Bible reading prior to the sermon, "everyone [knew] the end of the story." Maintaining interest, building a climax, and avoiding "clichéd, predictable sermons" posed a significant challenge.

### *Lack of Familiarity with Old Testament Texts*

Several of the preachers interviewed believed that lack of familiarity with the Old Testament narrative material was a significant source of the challenges. Preacher C cited the example of preaching through the book of Judges and then sometime later reading a monograph on "rest" that "nuanced" the book significantly. It highlighted motifs, themes, and theological links that he had not previously seen and opened up "multiple avenues" of immediate, specific application and exhortation he could have used.

Preacher B noted that a source of his challenges in preaching on Esther was his comparative lack of completed historical and exegetical work and the sum of the thinking that goes with it. Such material is often readily available with other Old Testament texts due to his vocation and can be "sitting in the back of [his] mind" when preparing sermons, but he felt its absence in this particular instance. Preacher E echoed this observation, noting that familiarity with a text or a book makes it easier to deal with the volume of material because, "you are more attuned to what is going on." Lack of familiarity, he said, meant, "you're starting cold rather than warm."

### *Lack of Familiarity with Old Testament Narrative as a Literary Genre*

Preacher C also noted that his lack of familiarity with Old Testament narrative literary device meant that he did not know “what to look out for” in the text at times. He could miss literary cues and signals as he reads, because “often I’m just reading it [the text] as a big narrative, and I’m not paying attention, or necessarily looking out for [the right cues].” The significance of these cues was brought home to him while reading Old Testament narratives with his young son:

Whenever I talked about a genealogy, “He did evil in the sight of the Lord, as did his father, Jeroboam son of Nebat,” as soon as my son would hear “Jeroboam son of Nebat,” he’d go, “Oh my goodness.” You know. And so, it was interesting because it gets repeated a lot. But he picked up on those subtleties of the larger narrative.

This experience helped Preacher C appreciate the rhetorical impact of the repetition and its significance. Becoming more familiar with the functional features of narrative has helped Preacher C develop application more tightly connected to the text and specific to his hearers. He cited a sermon on Joshua 5 as an example.

### *Overfamiliarity with Old Testament Texts*

Preacher C said he also thought his overfamiliarity with certain Old Testament texts was a source of the challenges. Again, reading the Old Testament with his son made him realize this:

When we got to...Samuel, I remember when Jonathan dies, when he got struck down and died, my son gasped and said, “No! No! Not Jonathan!” And it was him hearing it. He was picking up some of those things.

His son’s fresh hearing of the text was helpful to Preacher C:

It was refreshing to read it with somebody for a first time, for them to actually pick up those cues, that interestingly have been lost on me because I’m overly familiar with some of those narratives.

Therefore, being familiar with certain Old Testament narratives prevented Preacher C from hearing the text freshly and feeling the text's impact.

*Failure to Grapple with the Old Testament Text due to the Influence of  
Biblical Theology*

Three of the preachers interviewed referred to the phenomenon of biblical theology altering their reading of the text in some way. Preacher C noted that, combined with his overfamiliarity with Old Testament texts, his overfamiliarity with the metanarrative of biblical theology also played a part in the challenges. His son's response to the narrative stood in contrast to his own:

It was because of his Oooohing and Aaaahing that I realized, "Oh. Because I already know 'Jesus is the answer,'" because I already know the metanarrative, I actually...because I know, maybe because that metanarrative so shadows my thinking, that I'm not reading the narrative...

His son's fresh response to the story made Preacher C realize that he had allowed the metanarrative of biblical theology to "shadow," and reduce, his reading of the narrative itself. It altered his stance toward the text:

...because I am, maybe in a calculated way, just trying to work through the text...I'm missing some of the punch...Some of the punch has been lost because of overfamiliarity, or my awareness that "Hey! We're going to get to the New Testament..."

Therefore, through familiarity with the metanarrative pattern Preacher C had learnt to read in a "calculated," reductionist way. Preacher B also identified the capacity of biblical theological schemas to reduce his reading of the text, if allowed. He noted how biblical theology can move a preacher to simply read "looking for" categories, types, motifs, or vocabulary that fit the schema:



It's [biblical theology] looking for the type, it's looking for the promise that will take me to Jesus, or the type that will take me to Jesus. And so then, just really, just rubs out – erases – all this other weird stuff that's going on [in the text].

Preacher C experienced the same phenomenon: the specifics of the narrative being “erased,” even in the act of reading, because the metanarrative is so dominant in the preacher's mind. This dominance not only “erases” content but can also affect literary device, Preacher B said:

And so then all of that other stuff we've been talking about: how narrative works emotionally, identification, formation of self, Ricoeur, Bakhtin, and the dialogue between myself and text, and so on; those things disappear if you're just going hunting for your preconceived motifs.

Therefore, dominance of biblical theology in a preacher's mind can also render literary device invisible and other hermeneutical tools either redundant or unlooked for.

Preacher E had observed a failure to grapple with the different dimensions of narrative texts among those he was training to preach. This failure led to “very generalized, Christian-ese application that doesn't necessarily reflect what's going on in the starting text at all,” particularly whenever it was combined with a reductionist Christology, where “the only thing we can say about Christ is that he died on the cross.”

Preacher E cited the cultural dominance of biblical theology in the interpretation of Old Testament texts as a primary source of their reductionist treatment at the hands of some interpreters. In Sydney, he observed, biblical theology had become the supreme lens through which to read the Old Testament. He thought this was particularly unhelpful because of “all the aspects of the Old Testament it has to leave out.” He noted the light treatment of atonement and wisdom in Goldsworthy's formulations and their incapacity to deal with priestly texts.

### *The Metanarrative of Biblical Theology Forcing an Interpretation*

Several of the preachers interviewed mentioned feeling “constrained” or “straight-jacketed” by biblical theology and forced along a particular trajectory that they did not feel was true to the text. Discussing “one-dimensional” sermons, where the trajectory was always creation, fall and redemption, no matter what the text, Preacher C said:

It didn't matter what the sermon, here's the straightjacket: fall, redemption... 'I've got to get to atonement.' It felt very straight - jacketish... It's a good well intentioned [idea]... But sometimes you're forcing it.

Therefore, Preacher C felt that the employment of a biblical theological schema was forcing him along a trajectory where texts were not necessarily headed. Preacher D also raised this concern, saying, “I think there was this sense of constraint that we'd all picked up from a Goldsworthy framework that ended up just a little predictable.”

Preacher D said he encountered this problem when the text before him did not seem to fit the biblical theological schema he was using:

And you feel this tension of [pause] I feel a need to spiritualize this somehow because these promises don't fit my gospel grid... And so the temptation then is, “I've applied my reformed soteriology as a grid... that means I can't apply this.”

This made Preacher D feel uncomfortable, because he was “squeezing something out” of the text that was not really there. He cited the sermon he was preparing that week on Genesis 32 as a related example. Much of what he had read and listened to in preparation he felt was pushing him to see Jacob's encounter with God as his “conversion moment.” Preacher D said:

I think there's a “Reformed thing” that wants to do that, you know, like, because we want to get to... when you encounter Jesus He saves you!... But I feel my wrestle is that's not Jacob's story, because he's a mess before it, he's still a mess after it, he's still manipulating, he's still conniving, he's still freaking out.

For Preacher D, there was a dissonance between his reading of the text and a biblical-theological trajectory that he could not reconcile.

*Lack of Clarity in Regard to What Makes a Sermon from Old Testament  
Narrative ‘Christian’*

Four of the five preachers interviewed raised the issue of feeling compelled to connect an Old Testament narrative text to the “story” of biblical theology. When asked what impact removing biblical theology from his sermon preparation would have, Preacher A said:

It’ll sound like a really good sermon that you can give in a synagogue and you won’t be persecuted for it. It wouldn’t be Christian. I think it has to be traced through the lens of the New Testament. The sermon has definitely got to go there.

This statement was made in the context of Preacher A readily generating application and exhortation from narrative texts, largely without the use of biblical theology. Preacher D’s comments around this issue were similar. He was also readily generating present-day application for his hearers, from Old Testament narrative, without significant use of biblical theology. Yet, he still felt the challenge of “getting to Jesus.” Referring to his sermon preparation on Genesis 32 he said:

We’ve got some beautiful rich textual application there but, that could apply to any Hebrew, you know? And so, part of my wrestle has been I don’t want to just say “Oh well...fast forward and BOOM! You get to Jesus!”

Therefore, Preacher D was actively searching for links to Christ and the cross as a necessary application to make the sermon ‘Christian.’ Preacher C cited criticism he had received from another preacher after preaching a sermon on Romans 12:3-8. This person had approached him after the sermon and said, “You could have preached that sermon in

a Jewish synagogue,” meaning that Preacher C’s focus on the atonement from a text concerning spiritual gifts was not sharp enough. Preacher E noted the strong tendency of Reformed preachers in Sydney to engage every Old Testament text with “that kind of shift across [to the New Testament], we have to fit this into a story, or we’re not preaching the Old Testament.” Preacher E believed the insistence upon this “shift across” was a major source of the predictability of many sermons.

### *The Preacher’s Pre-commitment to Model How to Read the Bible*

In talking about predictability of sermons, Preacher A said that the common feedback during his time preaching in the United Kingdom was that he was moving too quickly from the Old Testament to the New. More specifically the feedback was that he was not “sitting” long enough in the Old Testament text and not working hard enough to “build the case” for the move to the New, in the sermon. This oversight was a problem for his hearers:

...[N]ot necessarily tenuous, just too quick. So, you know [they would say] “I’m here in the Old Testament dealing with something, and you’re already moving me straight to Jesus rather than just working it through.” So the transitional period. . . they just wanted me to work harder.

Therefore, for Preacher A’s hearers, his preaching wasn’t working the text through in its own right prior a move to the New Testament. When this pattern was repeated in Old Testament narrative sermons by Preacher A, his hearers found them predictable. Preacher A believed several factors drove his faster move to the New Testament. These were first, time pressure. Preacher A did not want to preach for more than twenty-five minutes, as he thought that was the optimum sermon length for his hearers. Therefore, dealing with substantial tracts of narrative adequately was a

challenge. Second, he was concerned for his hearer's biblical literacy. He wanted them to learn to read the Old Testament in light of the New Testament -- in light of Christ and "filtered through grace." He was concerned they would read the Old Testament moralistically and appropriate it incorrectly. He was particularly concerned about countering any effect of prosperity doctrine and other forms of teaching readily accessible on the internet. He wanted preach the gospel from the Old Testament.

Speaking in the context of countering moralism, Preacher A said:

You know the default position. "Try harder," right? We've got people from other cultures here. Greek Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Muslims, Buddhist, Hindu, and that's their default. And it's really about trying to educate them as quickly as possible, how to read the Bible, how to model how to read the Bible.

Therefore this "modelling" was a significant influence in Preacher A's sermon preparation. Preacher A made a point of stating that this modelling did not just happen in his sermons but in the church's home groups and other contexts as well.

### *The Preacher's Pre-commitment to a Redemptive Historical Hermeneutic*

One source of predictable and "flat" sermons for Preacher C was a "high" commitment to a redemptive-historical hermeneutic on the part of the preacher. Noting the challenge to keep application and exhortation specific to hearers, he mentioned the tendency for preachers to quickly "move up the abstraction ladder" to more general categories and application and, in doing so, "minimize the connectedness to life through application." When asked to identify what dynamics might be in play in the sermon preparation process to cause that to happen, Preacher C said:

I think it comes from a theological construct that's in some ways helpful because it's designed to have a Christological reading but... maybe because of presuppositions in regards to biblical anthropology of total

depravity they've just, they basically say, "Well, man's got nothing to contribute, nothing, really, so, straight to Jesus."

Although Preacher C agreed there was truth to these positions, he believed that the "low view of humanity" combined with the redemptive-historical hermeneutic resulted in an "over-reading" of the text. In a preacher's "desire to get a Christo-centric reading," possible applications to present-day life were either discounted or missed entirely. "Missing the obvious" reading and application and moving quickly up the ladder of abstraction resulted in sermons where:

...it just seems to jump straight to Jesus. And I just think that provides very flat sermons and I actually think you are missing [the obvious] application.

Therefore, the trajectory of the sermon becomes predictable and application generic. Asked to drill a little deeper as to what factors he thought may be fuelling a "high" commitment to a redemptive-historical hermeneutic, Preacher C identified a "nervousness about moralism" as significant. This nervousness meant for some preachers that they "didn't want anything that sounds remotely exhortative or imperatival. So, to minimize that they rush straight to 'Only Jesus can do it.'" Pinpointing what he believed was the source of this nervousness, Preacher C said:

I think this is born out of Reformed conviction. With anything that sounds remotely exhortative [it] will lead to moralism. And by that they mean works salvation. Now I hear people say "Be wise in the way that you speak." ...and some will say "You can't tell people that, because they'll think they're going to get to heaven based on whether they do it [or not]" ...All of a sudden they infuse all of this...they employ all of this... "we can't do this; only Jesus can do it."

For Preacher C therefore, the preacher "infusing" a dynamic into the text from their theological pre-commitments can be a significant source of the challenges, especially when combined with the "low view of humanity" and the Reformed tradition's

“suspiciousness about works.” He acknowledged the challenge of ministry contexts where moralism was present and needed to be addressed. He held, however, that there was an opposite extreme to moralism of not exhorting hearers to any action at all.

The reason application becomes so generic when this happens, Preacher C believes, is because the specifics of the text have been passed over, and whatever is unique has been minimized. In the speed of the jump to the metanarrative, “there’s a minimization of localized theology in a particular unit.” In other words, Preacher C said:

It just feels like it doesn’t take the original context seriously...Because sometimes I read [famous preacher and author name], and I think he’s just too cleverly getting to Jesus...if it’s not allegory, it’s a twin brother. It’s still impressive...and thoroughly orthodox...but I’m just thinking, “I’m not sure that’s what would have been understood [by the original hearers].”

Slowing down the move to the metanarrative and remaining longer with the Old Testament narrative text and interrogating it with pertinent questions about its original context is the way this problem can be overcome, Preacher C believes.

Another factor fuelling a preacher’s “high” commitment to a redemptive-historical hermeneutic was fear, Preacher C said. Specifically, he was referring to a preacher’s fear of criticism from within their own tradition:

...but nobody wants to be under the fear that you didn’t get to Jesus, or you didn’t honor Christ in your sermon. But I think that’s where some people...because they’re so scared, they miss the obvious imperative or exhortation because they’re so scared of being lambasted “Oh! That’s just moralism”...we start pointing the finger.

This fear, Preacher C believed, was a motivator for many preachers and a powerful one for young preachers. Finally, Preacher C observed that moving quickly to the metanarrative could be an attractive way for some preachers to maneuver around difficult Old Testament narrative texts:

And I think when it comes to really difficult passages it's easier to just go really, really high [up the abstraction ladder]... "I don't know what's going on. I don't understand it." Or "It's difficult." So I go way up [the abstraction ladder].

When this occurs application remains general, Preacher C said, becoming "all about the glory of God," with the challenging specifics of the narrative safely avoided.

### *The Preacher's Pre-commitment to Evangelizing Hearers*

Preacher D stated that part of his preaching team's "philosophy of ministry" is to "deliberately engage the secular unbeliever who is in [their] gathering." Therefore, this principle has significantly shaped the way Preacher D and his team view preaching. They desire to call unbelievers to repentance and believers to continue trusting the gospel. This pre-commitment gives rise to the problem of predictability and repetitiveness, because explaining the gospel can become the end-point or goal of every sermon:

...we get to the end and it feels like "I know where he's going to go with this." You know he's going to climax in the gospel.

For hearers, the trajectory of the sermon can track in the same direction every week. Preacher D believed there were at least two other contributing factors to the predictability problem. First, a lack of creativity on the part of the preacher could be a contributing element. Preachers needed to be thoughtful and creative about how they trace a link to Christ. Second, because "all the [biblical] themes climax in the one thing," repetition was hard to avoid:

But the answer is Jesus, and that can feel repetitive. So, I think that's our struggle. Because you're preaching the same message every week essentially.

Therefore, the pre-commitment to evangelizing hearers exercised a significant control over the trajectory and content of many sermons.



### *Reductionism from Homiletic Method*

The practical constraints of sermon preparation were acknowledged as realities by all the preachers interviewed. Time pressure in preparation was chief among them, as was the necessity of selectivity of content. Time constraints in the pulpit were also noted. Notwithstanding, Preacher E raised the point that the necessity of selectivity can readily develop into a “drive to boil it [the text] down as quickly as possible to get to the big idea.” This tendency was especially evident among younger preachers, he believed, and resulted in large amounts of detail in the text being unexamined and unprocessed in preparation. Preacher E was of the firm opinion that “boiling the text down to proposition just kills the text...it destroys it.”

Preacher D noted that, in certain ways, his approach to the text for sermon preparation felt like a “very different approach” to the text than when he reads devotionally. He did not believe the differences were absolute; rather that his sermon preparation process was very structured – a sequence of steps – and his devotional reading was marked by an attitude of “I have no set agenda to this text, whatever jumps out at me I’m going to focus on.” In his devotional reading he observed that, as part of his reading, he was not thinking about “what he was going to say to other people” or how he was going to communicate certain points. He was simply reading the text and personally asking, “God, what are you saying to me?” Even though there was not necessarily a “major gear change” between the two approaches, Preacher D acknowledged that there was one present brought about by the preparation process.

## **The Extent to Which These Challenges Are Related to the Use of Biblical Theology**

From the analysis of the interview data, the relationship between the challenges identified by the preachers interviewed and their use of biblical theology was marked by one primary dynamic. The more effectively a preacher had relativized the place and nature of biblical theology in their preparation, the less acutely the challenges were felt. The preachers interviewed had relativized biblical theology using the factors listed below.

### *Biblical Theology Relativised by an Appreciation that Old Testament Narrative Is Sophisticated Literature*

Preacher B observed the rich, nuanced nature of Old Testament narrative:

It's that capacity to sit with ambiguity and mystery and like Jacob wrestling...and even the book of Job...there's a sense in which those, the texts, they're inexhaustible aren't they?

This characteristic, he said, makes it a challenge for a preacher -- especially a rookie preacher -- to try and capture everything in a text and miss nothing. An increased familiarity with rabbinic literature and the way it functions has sharpened Preacher B's appreciation of some features of Old Testament narrative's literary form. The way that rabbinic literature is content to "just leave things riddled and hanging" and the way it continually questions things without resolving them has given Preacher B pause to consider if that is a function of the ambiguity of some Old Testament narratives. The ambiguity is intended to make the reader pause and reflect, and not necessarily resolve:

And so I feel like it's that more Jewish way of storytelling...that, that forms us because it trains in the way we do our life is to just be self-reflective, keep questioning your own motives and behaviors and that's how you form character.

Therefore, Preacher B has linked the form of the narrative to its didactic function.

Pondering why God gave us the book of Job primarily in the form of dialogue, Preacher

B said:

...for some reason under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, we get this ridiculous long-winded speech, as though I need you to sit with dialogue and the to and fro and know that even in that literary form, I'm instructing you about something.

This consideration of form then directly discloses areas of possible application and exhortation to Preacher B.

### *Biblical Theology Relativized by an Appreciation of Old Testament*

#### *Narrative's Didactic Function: Stories Exist to Teach*

An appreciation of narrative's didactic function resulted in biblical theology being relativized in the preparation of several of the preachers interviewed. Discussing the relationship between narrative texts and legal texts in the Old Testament, Preacher E observed that Torah, understood as "instruction" rather than "law," encapsulated both "narrative and rules." Legal texts, he said, such as casuistic laws, use small narrative thought experiments as test cases. The author is trying "to form moral and ethical thinking." The narratives can be seen to work in a similar manner, as:

...just test cases of kind of either positive or negative examples of heeding or not heeding other instructions. It can be worked out in the narrative context. In many ways that's the contribution of narrative, isn't it? Like you get to live in the shoes of other people; experience what they experience, hear what they heard, say what they say, without ever doing that, and you are shaped morally by that very act. You get to live out lots of experiences without actually doing them and, hopefully, learn wisdom in that process. That's a primary function of narrative, is to allow readers to do that, perhaps even force them to when they don't want to.

Preacher E therefore grasped the didactic function of Old Testament narrative firmly, which created a fruitful approach to interpretation and application. An understanding of the relationship between narrative and legal texts, narrative's invitation to the reader to enter into the story and be shaped by it, and narrative's function to teach wisdom combined to disclose multiple avenues of interpretation and application to explore for his hearers.

These dynamics of story were also important for the shape and trajectory of the sermon, he believed. Preacher E appreciated Old Testament narrative's capacity for subversion. He noted that sometimes, after careful consideration of how the story would read with an Israelite audience, the whole effect may be subverted because readers end up judging themselves: "So you're drawn into the story to judge a particular person and then realize actually, you're that person." This, Preacher E said, was part of the power of narrative. From that point, part of the preacher's job is to "help your audience to feel some of that same trajectory."

Entering into the story and drawing direct lessons from it in this way, without necessarily filtering it through a metanarrative grid, has biblical warrant, Preacher E believes. He cited 1 Corinthians 10 as an example of the way the New Testament writers read the Old Testament, stating, "Paul opens the door wide open in Corinthians where he reads the Corinthians into Israel's story and says, 'Here's the narrative – it's you!'"

Biblical theology was relativized by Preacher A in his sermon preparation as a result of the interplay of two primary factors: his intuitive grasp of how stories work and his much later adoption of biblical theological schemas. Preacher A found generating

application and exhortation from Old Testament narratives “easy” on a significant number of occasions:

But Ruth, for example, is, you know, working through narrative so it’s slightly easier to connect people with the story. I find it a lot easier to do that. I find it easier, but narrative is my strength. I like preaching narrative and just connecting it with [pause] I guess nothing really changes in life experience. I think we’ve all got the same struggles so it’s just not hard to make those connections...I find it easier to make pastoral applications with narrative.

Therefore, Preacher A identified a connection from the narrative to his hearers via shared life experiences of the characters. The constancy of human experience speaks across time, from ancient text to modern hearers, and he reiterated this point in different ways more than three times during the interview. This connection of life-experience between the characters in the narrative and his hearers functions as the source of much of Preacher A’s application to life.

Such application is informed significantly by Preacher A’s commitment to spending time with people:

Preachers have got to spend time with people...I’ve got to be spending time talking to people, and I find the multi-ethnic mix in the church fascinating because some of their contexts and cultural experiences resonate with Old Testament experiences...So just hanging out with them and asking them questions about their life experiences, what they’re struggling with. The narratives, you know you go, “Wow! This is exactly like such and such.”

For Preacher A therefore, application is frequently “easy” because he is able to readily and directly connect the present-day lives of his hearers with the life-experience of the characters in the text.

When asked why he was comfortable generating application and exhortation in this way, Preacher A identified three factors. First, his understanding of New Testament passages such as 1 Corinthians 10 and Hebrews 11 informed him. His conviction was that

Old Testament narratives have been placed in the Bible by God to teach salvation history but also to warn and encourage:

But 1 Corinthians 10 says they're there also to warn us not to be like the Israelites, and so ought to be like the heroes in some sense in Hebrews 11. So, I think Hebrews 11 kind of gives us a good model of how to read narrative...It's either warning us or it's to encourage us in faith.

Like Preacher E, Preacher A believed reading Old Testament narratives this way was the authoritative, biblical pattern. Second, he stated the influence of his father who is "a phenomenal storyteller":

I've thought about this. He speaks in parables, or he speaks when he wants to make that one major point. He'll give you a massive story behind it. When the punch line comes, you've got it, right? He's from an oral tradition. He finished school in year 1, 7-8 years old [because of WW2]. So, they're used to talking. They're used to telling stories.

Preacher A's storytelling education from his father has helped develop within him an intuitive love and grasp of story and how it works. Third, that education has combined with the way Preacher A believes God has made him: highly relational. Preacher A feels naturally "drawn" to biblical genres such as narrative and apocalyptic because often the language in those genres is "picture-language, it's emotional, it can tell me different things. Preacher A often reads for the "emotion" of the text; for the "emotional impact and dynamic" and the "emotional movements." As a result, Preacher A finds it easy to deal with Old Testament narrative. He finds "painting pictures, retelling stories, pick[ing] up on...the emotional cues" comes to him readily and enables him to enter into the story:

I picture myself in the stories. Like if I was watching it, you know, what's going on.

And:

You've got to feel it [the story]. You gotta see it. But you've gotta see it, actually, "I do that!"

Entering into, and exploring, the story in this way means that biblical theology did not feature prominently for Preacher A in this sphere of his preparation. Where it enters, and does so most helpfully for Preacher A, is mapping the path to the New Testament. Preacher A was convicted of biblical theology's importance in a particular Master or Arts (MA) unit he completed, after he had been preaching regularly for a considerable time, and his capacity for understanding story was already well developed. He was convicted of biblical theology's role in "protecting" him from moralistic preaching and "making the Old Testament heroes, the heroes." The completion of the MA unit provided him with a "grid" of possible pathways -- categories, types, motifs -- to the New Testament that he was frequently using and found helpful. When asked about biblical theology's role in his preaching, Preacher A said:

I think it keeps it fresh...So if it has to do with a typology or category...it makes an easy link. And then you can...get your specific application to the people. So, I don't find it a hindrance. I actually enjoy the challenge [of figuring out the pathways to the New Testament] and it makes it easy...The pieces fall together.

The challenge for Preacher A is using variety for his hearers, and the "grid" gives him that capability. With his application as a whole, Preacher A said he was trying to do two things interpretively, "thinking through from the text, 'How do we get to the New Testament?' and 'How do we get also just to the normal application?'"

*Biblical Theology Relativized by Widely Reading,  
and Listening for, Application*

Preacher D also stated that, usually, he did not struggle to generate application. He identified three key factors that made application straightforward for him: listening to Christian podcasts and sermons, reading "pastorally minded" books and commentaries,

and being mindful of pastoral issues. Preacher D cited a Christian podcast that analyzed contemporary culture as a source of excellent application. Most weeks he also made a habit of listening to two other sermons on the passage, often the source of good insights into the passage or helpful application, or both. He had also made a point in recent years of seeking out and reading “more pastorally minded books” and commentaries on the passages and topics. These “pastorally minded” commentaries were “almost like a sermon” in themselves, Preacher D said. In other cases, knowing what members of his church are going through feeds his application. The combination of these three things results in a particular temptation for Preacher D:

...not to build my sermon around “Oh, ok. I’ve got this great application point” and force that into the text...It’s like, “Oh! That’s so great, our people need to hear that!” I want to jam that into a sermon rather than letting the text feed me, or ... you’re like, “I know this person is struggling through something”... and thinking, “I want to get that in there somehow...”

This ability to garner application from a variety of sources meant that the challenge for Preacher D was to allow the text itself to drive the generation of the application. Therefore, similarly to Preacher A, Preacher D found himself working at two elements or “strands” of application in his sermon preparation: one that flowed from the life circumstances of the narrative and its characters and the other from a Christological interpretation. In seeking the Christological interpretation, biblical theology comes into play. In practical terms, biblical theology had become relativized in his preparation. Citing a sermon series from Genesis, Preacher D gave examples of when he had been “using character studies” from Genesis 27 for Isaac, Rachel, and Jacob. He used three character studies to generate warnings and encouragements for the Christian life. He showed each character’s response to God’s plan and then applied it directly to the present



day. In addition however, he also examined “Jacob’s inner motives of wanting the [first born] blessing,” and this line of thought generated a Christological interpretation: Christ being the firstborn who dies so that believers could be adopted into God’s family.

Similar to Preacher A, Preacher D intuitively understood the narrative to be connected with “the everyday struggles that people have.” The connection between the characters in the text and his present-day hearers was that they shared the “same struggles, same weakness[es], same God.” Generating application this way is attractive to Preacher D because it gives him “such an easy way to make this drive home for people” and enabled him to minister to them: “I want my sermon to be transformational. I don’t want it just to be the information about historical accounts...I want them to encounter the Spirit sanctifying them, changing them through the text.”

When asked if he knew why he was comfortable in approaching application this way, Preacher D identified six factors. First, he admitted to having:

...a little bit of a rebellious spirit in me that says, “I’m not going to do it that way,” meaning, “I’m not going to tow the party line.” I’m not going to just preach, you know, like what Goldsworthy taught us...to approach Old Testament narrative.

An independent spirit and a reaction against what he had been told was the “right” method was therefore a factor. The other side to this was, second, “a very robust doctrine of Scripture”:

What God intended this to mean in its original setting is what it means. And I don’t have the right to change that...So if my doctrine of Scripture drives me to say, “If I’m arriving at conclusions that the original author didn’t arrive at...” I’m probably, I’ve lost the [pause], I’m off the mark there.

This comment came after all his remarks in the interview about feeling “constrained” by biblical theology. Preacher D was therefore emphasizing his

unwillingness to entertain interpretations and application from a biblical theological schema, if he did not believe it was congruent with the original meaning.

Third, Preacher D had seen other high profile, well respected preachers apply Old Testament narrative in a similar manner and had taken his permission from them. Fourth, he stated that discovering there was no “one, right” biblical theological schema, but that in fact there were many, gave him “a sense of freedom to think, “I’m going to let the text shape this [application from the text] rather than an external grid.” Fifth, Preacher D believed that his sustained devotional reading of the Bible and habit of applying the text to himself had helped him learn how to generate application for others. Finally, he appreciated the input and impact from listening to preachers outside his own Reformed tradition:

...it gets me out of my world, gets me out of my little Reformed circle and makes me think ‘Oh, hang on, they’ve, they’ve done this with that text!’ ...so sometimes it helps me go ‘I see the text in a whole new light now...’

Selective listening to preachers outside of his own circle helped Preacher D glean new insights. He said, “I might not write a sermon like theirs, but I’m helped by them at times.”

*Biblical Theology Relativized by Reading for the Affective Dimension,  
or Emotions, of the Text*

Preacher E stated that “looking for the affective dimension of the text” was also a key component of his methodology. By this he meant a consideration of how a particular text was meant to make readers feel. For example, “Ought they to feel warm? Ought they

to feel confronted?” Determining the affective dimension often involved “doing work” on the original context, Preacher E said. That is:

You’ve got to make some decisions on what you think that is, and trying to get a sense of how this story would have been heard. How would recipients have responded to that? So paying attention to characters, to...the subtle ethics within a text, which are often really subtle in Hebrew narrative. Yet trying to feel for an Israelite audience. Who are they going to warm to? Who are they going to be angry at? Who are they going to judge? Trying to work that out.

Reading for the affective dimension of the text opened up another way for Preacher E to consider its meaning, in addition to its propositional content. For him, the affective dimension of the text captured an additional element, “not just the cognitive input” of the text:

It has that. But it’s much more...It’s heading further towards poetic texts, in the sense that you’re caught up emotionally in the story, which actually aids the teaching process, by either creating strong feelings of attraction towards a particular person, or a particular response, or the opposite, a kind of revulsion.

By reading this way, Preacher E was able to capture some of the emotional force and power of narrative texts.

Reading for emotions was a significant feature of Preacher B’s sermon preparation. Preacher B focuses on determining “what claim the text is making on [him]” and being attentive to what emotions the text is eliciting in him. In addition to formulating a propositional statement that summarises the content of the text -- a “big idea” -- he is also formulating a “big feeling”:

And then I try and work out how does that feeling inform or develop the propositional content of it as well. And the feelings come from the suspense of the story, or the sense of injustice in the story, the sense of disorientation in the story.

Therefore, Preacher B identifies not only an ideational meaning but an interpersonal meaning as well. After thirty years of preaching, Preacher B believes he has adopted this approach out of an understanding of what is determinative for human life:

I guess it's my sense of 'What is a human being?' and what makes us human...I think my feelings and the images that are in my head are pretty determinative for how I live. And so, I think if the preacher isn't paying attention to that, there's a whole element missing. So, I don't think that really, I live out, out of information. And so, I don't want the preacher just to give me information. I live from how I feel about the information.

Therefore, the images that narrative generates and the emotions that it elicits in the reader are of real significance to Preacher B. He mentioned during the interview, "I sort of think I live from my emotions. I think I live from my stories as well." In his preparation and preaching, Preacher B works at bringing these features to the fore from a desire to serve his hearers. Preacher B views the emotion of the narrative as an avenue by which his listeners can enter the story. He calls this "inhabiting the story." He readily acknowledged this was a "nebulous" concept. In examples he gave, it was a strong identification with the situation of the characters in the narrative. He said, "I have to be Ruth, and a foreigner, and I have to be Boaz, and I have to be..." It was, however, more than this, and Preacher B likened it to tapping into "a dynamic. There's an energy, there's a narrative energy there." He cited an example from a sermon he had prepared on Exodus 3-4 on Moses and the burning bush. While the ideational meaning here was "God is sovereign over history," the interpersonal meaning focused on the narrative energy of the text. In this case it was the interaction between God and Moses, and Moses realizing that it wasn't about his insecurities but rather about God and what he was determined to do. Therefore, Moses had a sense of fear and awe and being "decentred." Preacher B then

helped his hearers -- through his sermon -- inhabit a story where they were decentred, where they were part of a story where they were not the protagonists, but God was.

Preacher B believed that narrative's ability to work on multiple levels, such as affective and propositional content, was by divine purpose and beauty:

It's the glory of the fact that God hasn't revealed himself propositionally. He didn't send us a systematic theology; he sent us story! Because it's like [pause] he knew! He knows! That, that story has this power and multidimensionality...

This appreciation of the "multidimensionality" of the text enabled Preacher B to overcome any predictable, stereotypical, biblical theological trajectories in his sermons. Referring back to his Exodus 3-4 example, the connection for his hearers is that they too, are God's people. Thus:

...I'm not finding Jesus as the flame, or the burning bush, like I'm not needing to find Jesus as a type, or an allegory, or something. He's just existentially the place to which we come to this God.

Preacher B, in similar fashion to Preacher A, has identified the constancy of human experience but also the nature and character of God as important and legitimate elements to consider.

### *Biblical Theology Relativized by an Expansion of the Preacher's Hermeneutical Skills and Range of Tools*

Two of the preachers interviewed mentioned the role of speech-act theory in their preparation. For Preacher E it was particularly formative. He described becoming familiar with speech-act theory as a "watershed moment" because it provided "a clarity of language to what I was already trying to do" in capturing and articulating how texts, including narratives, work:

Speech theory just allows you to articulate how a text is kind of multi-functional. It's doing more than one thing. So much application and thinking lives in the realm of assertion...But what else is the text doing? And is the assertion primary?

Speech-act theory has provided Preacher E with a conceptual model that opened the text up to examining primary and secondary illocutions of the text and considering "What is this text doing, originally?" and "What is God still doing with this text?" This inquiry, in turn, led to:

Close attention to all narrative devices: poetics of the text, repeated words, all the signals in the text – usually in the detail – that kind of drives towards...the theological intent of what's going on...So constantly going backwards and forwards between 'What is this book doing?' and 'What is this text doing?' and 'How do those two things fit together?'

Introducing speech-act theory concepts into his sermon preparation has sharpened Preacher E's investigation of the specific detail of the narrative text and its devices. Consideration of textual illocutions has opened up fruitful avenues of application and exhortation from Old Testament texts. Some of the original illocutions of those texts persist. Preacher E cited an example of Leviticus 8-10 that deals with the inauguration of the Old Testament priesthood. Interpreting the text's illocution as a strong affirmation of the legitimacy of the priesthood led Preacher E to consider why such an affirmation was needed for Israel. He considered this "against an Israelite backdrop" where priesthood was "either neglected or defunct." Considering the attitudes of his present-day Christian hearers to the concept of priesthood, he immediately explored canonical avenues of application and exhortation, appreciating the work of Christ as our High Priest and what corporate priesthood means for Christian life.

Paying attention to the illocutions of the text enabled Preacher E to develop strong application for the present day from some more challenging texts. He mentioned an

example from Leviticus 11 and Israel's food laws. When he utilized the tools from speech-act theory, again, rich practical application unfolded for his twenty-first century hearers. Preacher E contrasted this process with the way biblical theological schemas would handle such a text, stating, "Biblical theology would either not incorporate at all or just quite glibly say, 'Oh, it's done away with!' or 'Ceremonial!' or whatever. It no longer applies." Therefore, expanding his hermeneutical skills to include speech act theory has enabled him to overcome the reductionism that he finds occurring when biblical theological schemas encounter textual material they cannot accommodate.

Therefore, speech-act theory has become an important hermeneutical tool for Preacher E. Returning to the example of his sermon from Leviticus 8-10, Preacher E noted the canonical "lines" that his method opened up, that could be "teased out" for his hearers in application and exhortation. He also noted how any "disjuncture" between the Testaments is lessened, rather than heightened, as in some biblical theological schemas.

Preacher E also found that consideration of a narrative text's illocutions kept the trajectory of his sermons faithful to the trajectory of the text, because it enabled him to better identify the text's purpose. If the primary purpose of the text was using propositional content in order to warn or rebuke, then:

...you've got to preach the rebuke. Otherwise you're no longer preaching in line with the text. You're doing something else with it, you're taking the words and using them for a different end.

Preserving the illocution of the text in sermons enabled Preacher E to avoid, on the one hand, an "unwitting lack of respect to the text" by reducing it to only a proposition and, on the other hand, a "mispreaching" of the text by "making it say something it's not actually [saying]."

Therefore, biblical theology had become one hermeneutical tool among many for

Preacher E:

...biblical theology is good, it's useful but it's one tool in the box, and it doesn't fit everything. Each of them has its particular use. It's very good for some things but you've got to understand how to use it properly, how not to use it. So, all of those different facets, they all have their place: historical critical approaches, literary approaches, rhetorical, speech-act theory, biblical theology, they're all useful tools, and they all have their part to play. So, in a sense the onus is to become a master of all of those.

Other important tools have relativized biblical theology's place and influence in Preacher E's preparation. He has reached a stage in his ministry where he can appreciate the value of each of many tools but, more importantly, their value when used together.

Out of the preachers interviewed, Preacher B arguably employed the most hermeneutical tools in his sermon preparation. Speech-act theory was one such tool. In his consideration of a text, his working assumption was that it was "acting upon" him. Similar to Preacher E, he assumed that in addition to the ideas in the text that could be stated as propositions, the text was "doing something." His inquiry in preparation then, was into precisely what it was doing. Speech-act theory had also helped Preacher B with texts he found challenging. Returning to preaching on Esther as an example, his ambivalence about the characters and lack of certainty about where to place his sympathies as a reader "confounded" him. Rather than working around, avoiding or "fighting" this dynamic, he focused upon it:

...when a text is confounding me, I try to pay attention to the very phenomenon of feeling confounded and I think maybe, maybe that's what...maybe that's the speech act that this text is performing.

Therefore, the categories of speech-act theory provide Preacher B with an important way to consider a difficult text. In turn, this process led him to a more nuanced view of how to apply the text:



...so then it sort of turns into an application to be able to tolerate moral ambiguity or to be able to look at your own behaviours critically...to be able to see what's good and bad about your own behaviours, to not, to not just settle for a quick, surface, "goody" and "baddy" analysis [long pause] Which then may be morally formative.

Considering the text with the tools of speech-act theory opened up avenues of application and exhortation for Preacher B, in addition to using what he described as "his old functional systemic grammar," that is, "I do my Hebrew work, I do my grammatical work, I do my historical work -- they're all kind of 'givens.'"

Other influences upon his hermeneutics were an increased familiarity with rabbinic literature as a result of doctoral work, some of the scholarly work of John Goldingay, the work of Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann, the work of literary scholar Mikhail Bakhtin, some of Kevin Vanhoozer's works, Poythress' notion of symphonic theology, psychological hermeneutics, and also narrative therapy. He also mentioned the importance of recognizing the pattern in Old Testament scholarship in relation to biblical theological schemas. Old Testament theologians "get a paradigm" and write a schema but then recognize that "there's too much stuff in the Old Testament that it doesn't account for," so then they create another paradigm and write another schema. He cited the multiple volumes of von Rad, Goldsworthy, Goldingay, and Brueggemann as examples. Recognizing this dynamic is helpful in keeping both biblical theology and the text in their right place. "So it's like the Old Testament theologians, they get a system, but then the material beats them."

Biblical theology, along with the challenges that it can present, has been relativized in his preparation. Writing a commentary on an Old Testament prophetic book was "an important methodological moment" as it gave him the opportunity to further develop and explicitly articulate his approach to application:

...like in my book...I do “What did it mean in the eighth century?”, “What did it mean in the sixth century?”, “What did it mean for Jesus?”, “What does it mean today?” That was me saying the “Jesus thing” is good but let’s not reduce it just to that.

Therefore, expanding the number of horizons that application could be explored upon was a key factor for Preacher B. It enabled him to avoid the reductionism he saw happening from the application of biblical theology. Having biblical theology as one of many hermeneutical tools allows him to employ biblical theology when “it’s the right tool for a particular text.” It has also enabled him to experience the significant benefits of its correct employment:

It adds coherence. I think it’s biblical theology that’s taught me how faithful and reliable God is...the emotional impact of that is fantastic for me...I think that actually informs a lot of the way I preach God.

And:

I enjoy that Old Testament narratives make Jesus richer and richer. They show me what a good king can be. They show me what a sage is like. They show me what a priest is all about...The Old Testament gives me the categories to understand Jesus and then Jesus enriches the Old Testament categories. So, it sort of makes me love Jesus more.

Using biblical theology well thus provided personal and homiletical growth for Preacher B.

### *Biblical Theology Relativized*

#### *by the Preacher’s Approach to the Preaching Task*

Preacher B described a personal approach to the biblical text in his sermon preparation process. Primarily, prayer and constant reading of the narrative text were paramount for Preacher B. When asked how he usually approaches generating application

from narrative texts, he said, “I read and read. I just read it and read it and read it and ask God to tell me.” When asked what he petitions God for, he said he asks God to:

Show me what this text, show me what this text is doing and show me what you want it to do in the lives of the congregation.

Preacher B placed an obvious importance on seeking God’s enabling for understanding. When asked what he enjoys about approaching the text this way, Preacher B said:

I feel like it’s...It’s kind of...Like I feel excited by...Like I feel like I’ve encountered God in the text which, nine times out of ten that happens, that’s lovely because then on Sunday I’m really excited about what I’ve got to say, it’s not a chore, it feels like a privilege, and it feels like, “Thus says the Lord!”

This reliance upon God in prayer, the genuine seeking of God’s illumination in the understanding of his word, and the experience of the result, meant that Preacher B’s dependency rested primarily upon God himself. His hermeneutical tools then fell to their proper, secondary place. In his preparation, these habits were combined with a clear pastoral goal for his hearers:

I think it’s that they will...keep trusting God in the face of an increasingly hard secularism and cynicism around them...I feel like at the moment the church’s task is to commend the gospel to a generation that finds it either implausible or worse, sort of morally repugnant...And so I want to encourage a community to keep on being a community of grace, forgiveness, love, mercy, kindness, so that, so that as we rub shoulders in the world and are present in the world, there’s that smell of life about us.

Therefore, Preacher B frames his immediate purpose around seeing his hearers grow in the fruits of the Holy Spirit and be enabled to fulfil their role in the world.

### *Summary of Findings from the Interview Data*

This chapter presented an analysis of how the five preachers responded to the questions asked in a semi-structured interview process.

The interviews yielded rich data. The participants shared how the major challenges they faced in making exhortations were adequately understanding the sheer quantity of Old Testament narrative required, accurately understanding ambiguous and complex texts, avoiding repetitive and boring sermons, and “successfully” making a link from the Old Testament text to Jesus Christ.

The participants identified a significant number of key sources of these challenges. These were the complexity of Old Testament narrative material itself and also their lack of familiarity with its devices as a literary genre. They also detailed their lack of familiarity with some texts and, conversely, their overfamiliarity with others that resulted in missing important features of the text. Participants cited their failure to grapple with the details of the text due to biblical theology “overshadowing” their thinking and feeling constrained or forced by biblical theology toward a certain interpretation as additional sources. The interviews revealed participants’ pre-commitments as significant sources of the challenges. These pre-commitments included a determination to connect the Old Testament text to a biblical theological metanarrative in order to make it a ‘Christian’ sermon, a determination to model how to read their Bibles, a determination to evangelize hearers every week, and a high commitment to using a redemptive-historical hermeneutic. The practical constraints of sermon preparation – notably shortage of time – and the reductionism this can lead to were also cited.

The relationship of these challenges and their sources to the use of biblical theology in sermon preparation was complex but marked by one primary dynamic. That is, the more effectively the participant had relativized the place and nature of biblical theology in their sermon preparation, the less acutely they felt the challenges. This relativising of biblical theology occurred in several significant ways: through an appreciation by the participant that Old Testament narrative is sophisticated literature, and that it has a didactic function: it exists to teach. Participants also relativized biblical theology by reading and listening widely for application, reading purposefully for the affective dimension of the text, purposefully expanding their hermeneutical skills and tools, and adopting a personal approach to the sermon preparation process.

The following chapter discusses this data, together with the data from the literature reviewed in Chapter Two and discusses conclusions.

## Chapter Five

### Discussion and Recommendations

The purpose of this study was to investigate how preachers who employ biblical theology in their sermon preparation of Old Testament narrative texts diagnose the challenges of making exhortations. This study was undertaken due to the repeated occurrence of a widespread phenomenon that the researcher had observed in Reformed preaching -- in his own, in that of other preachers in his own country, and also in several different countries around the globe. This phenomenon had been ably described by Rev. J.R. de Witt in the 1980s:

It seems to me that there is a problem...at the point of the redemptive-historical approach to the Scriptures. I have read Sidney Greidanus' *Sola Scriptura* and some of the other books on the subject, but I have yet to find in any of them a way of bringing together the redemptive-historical conception of Scripture and warm, pointed, applicatory preaching. I do not, it should be said, question the validity of the insights of the redemptive historical method. But to warn off ministers from the exemplary and moralistic methods of a former time and of other schools is not yet to have shown them how to be personal and applicatory without doing injustice to the scope and intent of the word of God.<sup>378</sup>

The fact that almost forty years later the failure that de Witt so incisively circumscribed remains a problem -- both for preachers and their hearers -- was what sparked the researcher's interest. Preachers have a wealth of resources available concerning application. As the discussion in Chapter One has shown, however, the majority of this material addresses how application can be generated and exhortations made from biblical texts. If the resources do acknowledge the challenge for Reformed preachers specifically, then what they address is how preachers may overcome those

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<sup>378</sup> de Witt, "Contemporary Failure in the Pulpit," 20.

challenges via improved preaching methodology and/or better utilization of resources. This instruction does not identify the root causes of the problem. As noted in Chapter One, improved preaching methodology and better uses of resources may well offer solutions to preachers. The issue is that they still do not understand why they have the problem in the first place. It is the researcher's conviction that Phillips Brooks was close to the truth when he described preaching as "truth through personality."<sup>379</sup> Ideally, preachers would be able to understand the root causes of their problem and then, in an organic, personal way, process those causes and develop their own approach that overcomes the issues. It is to that end that this study has been undertaken.

Therefore, a detailed study targeted diagnosing the root causes of the failure described by de Witt. Three research questions guide this study:

1. What are the challenges in making exhortations faced by preachers who employ biblical theology in their sermon preparation of Old Testament narrative texts?
2. What do preachers who employ biblical theology in their sermon preparation of Old Testament narrative texts identify as the sources of those challenges?
3. In what ways and to what extent are these challenges related to the use of biblical theology in sermon preparation of Old Testament narrative texts?

## **Summary of Findings**

### *From the Literature Surveyed*

Chapter Two reviewed literature from three spheres of scholarship: non-Christian literature addressing narrative and ethics, Christian literature addressing Old Testament narrative and Christian ethics, and Christian literature examining the limitations inherent in biblical theologies. This survey drew attention to several prime factors. First, the

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<sup>379</sup> Brooks, *Lectures on Preaching*: Delivered before the Divinity School of Yale College in January and February 1877, 32.

literature has argued that fictional narrative has power. It can change, form, and shape the character and life of the reader. Narrative by nature is didactic; it exists to teach. Stories come to the reader with authorial intent. Therefore, stories become sources of ethical instruction and guidance. Stories present readers with worlds to explore, ponder, and appropriate lessons from. These worlds include characters not dissimilar to themselves. In this way, readers experience unfamiliar situations, people, and events.

Second, Old Testament narrative, like fictional narrative, also comes to the reader with authorial intent, but on a much greater order of magnitude. God is the Author of Old Testament narrative, and he has spoken in order to achieve his will. He continues to perform his illocutionary acts to present-day readers, through the word he has already spoken – and inscripturated – in the past. Old Testament narrative, therefore, comes to the reader not simply offering suggested ways-of-being in the world for their consideration but with a demand for an ethical response.

Third, Old Testament narrative, in its own right, is didactic: its purpose is to teach the reader and to elicit an appropriate human response. The literature has argued that the appropriate response is one of belief and conformity of life. In regard to the latter, it is more specifically a response of imitating the character of God. In this way, its ethical requirements are closer to that of the New Testament than may be thought at first reading.

Fourth, both the non-Christian and Christian literature has argued the central importance of characters for the performance of the didactic function of narrative. Shared human experience, concretely rendered, is a primary point of connection between the reader and the characters in the text. This connection causes powerful moments of insight. What is portrayed about the characters' lives enables present-day readers to learn



from their (the character's) life experience, to draw lessons from the past and be drawn – even unwillingly – to profound self-reflection.

Fifth, both the non-Christian and Christian literature has emphasized the importance of understanding narrative's form as part of its content, for correct and whole interpretation. The direct implication is that readers must develop the skills to read the devices of sophisticated literature.

Sixth, the employment of biblical theological systems in the interpretation of Old Testament narrative creates specific issues and limitations. Biblical theology can struggle significantly in dealing with the nature and features of sophisticated literature. It can eclipse and reduce the multifaceted nature of Old Testament narrative and lead to insensitivity to Old Testament narrative's form, with resultant negative effects upon accurate interpretation. It is also possible for the interpreter to assign too much hermeneutical authority to biblical theology, opening the way for the Old Testament narrative text's purpose to be subjugated to other agendas.

### *From the Interview Data*

Chapter Four reported the data gained by interviewing five preachers according to the methodology outlined in Chapter Three. These preachers related their practical challenges in making exhortations while employing biblical theology.

First, the participants shared the challenges of adequately understanding the sheer quantity of Old Testament narrative required, accurately understanding ambiguous and complex texts, avoiding repetitive and boring sermons, and “successfully” making a link from the Old Testament text to Jesus Christ.

Second, the participants identified a significant number of key sources of these challenges. These were the complexity of Old Testament narrative material itself and also their lack of familiarity with its literary genres and devices. They also detailed their lack of familiarity with some texts and, conversely, their overfamiliarity with others, which resulted in missing important features of the text. Participants cited their failure to grapple with the details of the text due to biblical theology “overshadowing” their thinking and feeling constrained or forced by biblical theology toward a certain interpretation, as additional sources. The interviews revealed participants’ pre-commitments as significant sources of the challenges. These pre-commitments included a determination to connect the Old Testament text to a biblical theological metanarrative in order to make it a “Christian” sermon, a determination to model to hearers how to read their Bibles, a determination to evangelize hearers every week, and a high commitment to using a redemptive-historical hermeneutic. The practical constraints of sermon preparation -- notably shortage of time and the reductionism this can lead to -- were also cited by participants.

The interview data revealed that the relationship of these challenges and their sources to the use of biblical theology in sermon preparation was complex and marked by one primary dynamic. That is, the more effectively they had relativized the place and nature of biblical theology in their sermon preparation, the less acutely they felt the challenges. This relativizing of biblical theology occurred in several significant ways: through an appreciation by the participant that Old Testament narrative is sophisticated literature and is didactic in function. Participants also relativized biblical theology by reading and listening widely for application, reading purposefully for the affective

dimension of the text, purposefully expanding their hermeneutical skills and tools, and adopting a personal approach to the sermon preparation process.

This final chapter discusses the findings from this data together with the researcher's own perspective.

## **Discussion of Findings**

### *The Challenges in Making Exhortations*

This study has identified four primary challenges in making exhortations faced by preachers who employ biblical theology in their sermon preparation of Old Testament narrative texts. First, adequately understanding the volume of text often covered by Old Testament narratives takes much longer than other narratives. Second, adequately understanding Old Testament narrative texts requires analysis of ambiguous and/or complex texts, particularly in relation to the moral situations of the characters in the narrative. Third, avoiding repetitive, predictable, formulaic, one-dimensional and boring sermons stretches their ability to be creative. Finally, successfully “getting to Jesus” means connecting dots in the abstract, which is difficult to preach.

### *A Diagnosis of The Sources of the Challenges*

From an analysis of the data gathered, this study has identified three factors which the researcher believes are the primary sources of the challenges. From the testimony of the preachers interviewed, the literature surveyed, and the researcher's own twenty-year experience preaching, these factors constitute several root causes. They are as follows:

## 1. The Nature of Old Testament Narrative Itself

Old Testament narrative is sophisticated literature. The literature surveyed for this study, and the participants interviewed, have paid testament to this fact. Narrative fiction, the literature has argued, possesses the ability to shape the reader.<sup>380</sup> It comes to the reader with authorial intent. That is, it is the product of human intentions and conceptions.<sup>381</sup> It contains ethical values which it is attempting to teach the reader. It, more than any other literary genre, can capture the complexity, mystery, indeterminacy, and imperfect beauty of human existence, for human existence is its true subject.<sup>382</sup> It alone can draw from the deeply felt experience of life and render it in all its fine complexity. In its presentation of particulars -- the details of thoughts, motives, and feelings of its characters -- it “marshals [our] emotions.”<sup>383</sup> In this presentation of human life, it is complex, yet simplified; rich yet compact.<sup>384</sup> In sharpening its readers’ capacity for moral judgement, it may develop wisdom: the ability to read a situation and single out the salient factors for thought and action. It possesses power to shape the reader as readers open themselves up to be shaped by it.<sup>385</sup> Narrative literature invites the reader in. As readers, we accept the invitation and, because of our affection for these same narratives, we “are changed by what [we] care for.”<sup>386</sup> Narrative literature projects worlds to explore; it grants us an opportunity to learn and enlarge our self-understanding.

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<sup>380</sup> Booth, *The Company We Keep*, 201.

<sup>381</sup> Nussbaum, *Love’s Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature*, 7–10.

<sup>382</sup> *Ibid.*, 3,5,47.

<sup>383</sup> Carroll, “Narrative and the Ethical Life,” 382.

<sup>384</sup> *Ibid.*, 375.

<sup>385</sup> Booth, *The Company We Keep*, 256.

<sup>386</sup> Nussbaum, “Reading for Life,” 166.

Narratives can become experiments in thought and extensions of life -- circumstances, emotions, ethics -- that have the power to transform. A primary point of connection between the text and reader is the characters within the narrative, which are also a primary vehicle for this transformation.

All of these literary features can be found operating within Old Testament narrative. Old Testament narrative comes to the reader with clear authorial intent. It has a definite life-shaping purpose, imparting both theological truth and ethical ideals. As the participants have readily testified, it captures the ambiguity, moral complexity, and imperfect beauty of human existence, to the point where simple black-and-white questions about right and wrong are not readily answered. Because of this ambiguity, it invites extended thought, meditation, and consideration, sharpening the reader's ethical and theological judgment. As the literature surveyed demonstrates, Old Testament narrative is "by nature open-ended, allusive, and capable of embracing questions and ambiguity."<sup>387</sup> Its capacity to sit with and embrace mystery, ambiguity, and situational complexity is inexhaustible and "part of its genius."<sup>388</sup> Like narrative fiction, Old Testament narrative is "the written expression of shared human experiences,"<sup>389</sup> transcending time, language, and culture to convey its meaning, often in indirect ways. Its truthfulness often comes in the form of its truthfulness to human experience. It is imaginative and experiential: "it creates a world before our eyes and ears"<sup>390</sup> that both

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<sup>387</sup> Goldingay, "Biblical Narrative and Systematic Theology," 132.

<sup>388</sup> Ibid., 135.

<sup>389</sup> Fant, *God as Author: A Biblical Approach to Narrative*, 7.

<sup>390</sup> Goldingay, "What Is Involved in Understanding a Passage from the Bible?," 12.

draws readers in and makes them draw back; it is at once “reassuring and challenging.”<sup>391</sup> Yet, for readers to correctly understand, they must allow themselves to be drawn in personally. They must accept the narrative’s invitation and enter into the story -- as Preachers A, B and E so ably demonstrated. Old Testament narrative is multidimensional. It is matter (propositional content) and energy (illocutionary force). As such, it engages mind, heart, and will; thought, feeling, and behaviour. It “does not offer itself only to the intellect.”<sup>392</sup> Like narrative literature, it is irreducible -- it cannot be distilled into propositional summaries without loss.

Therefore, Old Testament narrative can fairly be considered as sophisticated narrative literature. Yet, there is a point of departure. Old Testament narrative comes to the reader with a set of greater claims. The question then becomes, “Old Testament narrative may be literature, but is it more than literature?” From the data gathered, the answer is yes. First, Old Testament narrative claims to be the living word of the eternal, sovereign, Creator God. It comes to human beings with an authorial intent of a much greater order of magnitude than any other literature. Not only is Old Testament narrative the living word of the living God, but in speaking it, God himself has acted and continues to act. He addresses present-day readers with full meaning and force. Therefore, Old Testament narrative issues not only an invitation to the reader but also an unequivocal demand: for belief and conformity of life. Second, Old Testament narrative comes with a stronger claim upon the reader because it does not purport to be fiction but historical narrative, with its referent being actual happenings and real people who did what was

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<sup>391</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>392</sup> Ibid., 14.

recorded. Therefore, both its authority and persuasive power are amplified over that of fiction. Third, Old Testament narrative lays claim to a greater life-shaping goal than other narrative literature: the instilling of both theological truth and ethical ideals. Through its portrayal and interest in the character of individuals and their actions, Old Testament narrative aims at nothing less than the commendation of the imitation of God. Fourth, Old Testament narrative lays claim to a greater life-shaping power, as the primary agent of Old Testament narrative's perlocutionary effect is the Holy Spirit himself.

Therefore, Old Testament narrative can be considered as supremely sophisticated literature, which presents the Christian interpreter with a significant hermeneutical challenge. That is, understanding Old Testament narrative's authorial intent and didactic purpose requires acknowledgment that it speaks in its own right. As ancient literature composed for an original audience, it possesses an original intent, purpose, and force that was given, by its author, prior to the existence of what we now call the New Testament. Old Testament narrative may mean more, in light of the New Testament documents, than it originally did, but can it mean less? To state the point differently, Old Testament narrative meant something to its original hearers and readers in its own right about God and his ways, and his demands of them. Therefore, an essential part of interpretation, it could be argued, is to understand what that meaning was.

Old Testament narrative, therefore, is demanding of its readers and preachers. This demand is why Old Testament narrative itself is one primary source of the challenges. It is able to initially present, on occasion, as simple story. As Preacher B stated, Old Testament narrative is "inexhaustible." For readers and preachers, there is so much to understand: how the narrative text functions, what it originally meant, what it

means now, and how to communicate that faithfully and compellingly. The task of interpreting Old Testament narrative can quickly become overwhelming, engendering a sense of awe at the text and a deep sense of inadequacy in the preacher.

## **2. The Limitations Inherent in Biblical Theological Schemas When Applied to Sophisticated Narrative Literature**

Biblical theology as a task could be defined as “the ordered study of what the Bible has to say about God and his relation to the world and humankind.”<sup>393</sup> Conceived of this way, biblical theology strives to present a “coherent picture of biblical thought.”<sup>394</sup> It uses structures and categories that are the Bible’s own rather than ones that have been imposed upon it. It presents biblical material in a unified, coherent way, without losing any of its diversity. Therefore, it is reasonable to suggest that its inherent task is to analyze, synthesize, and organize what Scripture has to say.

Biblical theology, therefore, is of a different nature and genre to Old Testament narrative. They are not of the same kind. To state the obvious, Old Testament narrative is literature. Biblical theological schemas, however, are systems. They are “second-level discourse.”<sup>395</sup> They are academic discourse about “first-level discourse,”<sup>396</sup> which is the biblical text itself. They “reflect upon”<sup>397</sup> the biblical text in critical, constructive analysis

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<sup>393</sup> Scobie, *The Ways of Our God: An Approach to Biblical Theology*, 4–5.

<sup>394</sup> Möller, “The Nature and Genre of Biblical Theology: Some Reflections in the Light of Charles H.H. Scobie’s ‘Prolegomena to a Biblical Theology,’” 44.

<sup>395</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>396</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>397</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.



and synthesis. In this way, biblical theology is, by nature, more abstract than that which it seeks to order. This natural difference may be due, in part, to influence from philosophical conceptual thinking and logic and a high valuing of the rigour and precision of rationality. These habits feature pre-eminently in many Western cultures in the present-day, most notably in the realm of science, and trace their roots back to ancient Greek thought. Möller, Goldingay, and Nussbaum all drew attention to the influence of this thinking and its effect upon an appreciation of literature and literary form, in the literature surveyed in this study.

Therefore, when preachers introduce biblical theological schemas into their methodology and sermon preparation of Old Testament narrative texts, they are bringing together two things of different natures. The significance of the friction between the two becomes apparent when preachers apply their biblical theological schema to an Old Testament narrative text, and the text does not fit it. For instance, both Preacher C and Preacher D expressed feeling a sense of “constraint” or “straight-jacketing” by biblical theology. They felt that biblical theology was “forcing them” along a path of interpretation false to the text and was leading them to “squeeze something out” of the text that was not there. This phenomenon is most pronounced when engaging with a text that might be considered “difficult” or “challenging.” Four of the five preachers interviewed for this study -- Preachers B, C, D and E -- all readily specified Old Testament narrative texts that fell into this category. Part of their challenge was dealing with the “maybe” of the text -- its moral complexity and ambiguity. How well can the structures, categories, and schemas of a biblical theology accommodate the literary sophistication of Old Testament narrative texts? How well can a biblical theological

“grid” or “framework” accommodate the nuances and subtleties of narrative? How successfully can a biblical theology bring order to mystery or unity to ambiguity? Can the “written expression of shared human experience”<sup>398</sup> be systematized?

By virtue of its more abstract nature, biblical theology “has difficulty in maintaining touch with the narrative nature of the faith upon which it seeks to reflect, and therefore with the object of its concern.”<sup>399</sup> In order to address the challenges in making exhortations when employing biblical theology, preachers need to acknowledge this inherent limitation. Until they do so, they will not be able to understand the dynamic occurring in their preparation process. The more conversant they are with the limitations and inadequacies of biblical theology, the more they will be able to compensate for them, guard against them, avoid them, and, most importantly, continue to use biblical theology as a fruitful hermeneutic tool.

This inherent limitation of biblical theology can be further detailed, as Möller has shown. Biblical theological schemas have limitations of categorization, coherence, and reductionism. Regarding categorization, preachers must understand that the categories and structures that biblical theological schemas use are – to varying degrees – always provisional, subjective, conjectural, and ultimately inadequate. Whatever schema is formulated, it cannot accommodate the diversity, specificity, and multidimensional nature of the narrative. It consistently comes up short of the goal. As Preacher B noted, “...the Old Testament theologians, they get a system, but then the material beats them.”

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<sup>398</sup> Fant, *God as Author: A Biblical Approach to Narrative*, 11.

<sup>399</sup> Goldingay, “Biblical Narrative and Systematic Theology,” 132.

Regarding coherence, driven by a search for order and organization, biblical theological schemas can easily become too rigid; they can overreach. There can be a “striv[ing] for order where the biblical material itself resists it.”<sup>400</sup> Schemas can express their creator’s urge to be overly rationalist and coherent. The more rigid the schemas are, the greater the possibility of over-simplification and misrepresentation of the text.

Regarding reductionism, the dynamic that can automatically occur when using biblical theology is that first-level discourse is converted, in the sermon, to second-level discourse. Narratives are translated into theological propositions; stories are converted into ideas; the concrete is translated into the abstract. Such translation is not necessarily illegitimate, but the first-level discourse of the text may be replaced by the second-level discourse of the schema. The voice of the text is subjugated to the voice of the academy. A narrative is transformed into didactic exposition and theological abstraction, a major change in genre. Biblical theological schemas aim at reducing what is a complex entity – Scripture and its genres, historicity, and particularity – into a simpler one.

When these inadequacies and limitations are examined, it is apparent that, while much may be gained from employing a biblical theological schema, much may be lost as well. In addition, sermons can become repetitive, one-dimensional, formulaic, and boring if the preacher is not aware of these built-in limitations. Every sermon from an Old Testament narrative text will sound the same if it is always being transformed into didactic exposition and theological abstraction by the influence of a biblical theological schema. Only if the preacher is conversant with the inherent limitations of biblical theological schemas can the same limitations can be addressed and overcome.

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<sup>400</sup> Möller, “The Nature and Genre of Biblical Theology: Some Reflections in the Light of Charles H.H. Scobie’s ‘Prolegomena to a Biblical Theology,’” 57.

### 3. The Subjugation of the Text

The third primary source of the challenges identified by this study is the subjugation of the biblical text by the preacher by assigning biblical theological schemas too much hermeneutical authority, a subversion the purpose of the sermon, and an alteration of the preacher's stance toward the text.

#### *a. The hermeneutical authority granted to biblical theology*

As noted in the literature surveyed in Chapter Two, and the interview data in Chapter Four, preachers can assign biblical theological schemas too much authority over a biblical text. This may happen in several ways.

First, overzealousness for redemptive historical interpretation can subdue, even effectively silence, an Old Testament narrative text's voice, because it amplifies biblical theology's inherent limitation of reductionism. As Greidanus notes:

The redemptive historical approach is so eager to discern redemptive history...that it looks right through the text...It looks through the text if it were a clear windowpane and thus ignores the text itself. It fails to observe that the author has shaped the written text...[it] tends to overlook the Bible's literary/historical dimensions.<sup>401</sup>

This "eagerness to discern redemptive history" can lead to a near-complete insensitivity to the form of Old Testament narrative. As Reid noted in his discussion of Goldsworthy's work, little attention is paid to how different genres convey meaning and whether or not "they are intended to convey more than just meaning."<sup>402</sup> A consideration of the text's propositional content -- its "matter" in Vanhoozer's terminology -- and its

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<sup>401</sup> Greidanus, "Redemptive History and Preaching," 13.

<sup>402</sup> Reid, "Evangelical Hermeneutics and Old Testament Preaching: A Critical Analysis of Graeme Goldsworthy's Theory and Practice," 217.

illocutionary force -- its “energy”<sup>403</sup> -- is not entered into. Therefore, whatever avenues of fruitful application and exhortation such consideration may have opened are lost. Old Testament narrative is not approached, in its own right, as sophisticated literature. An extended examination of its original meaning to its original readers -- and therefore possible applications for the present-day -- is not undertaken. A consideration of what it was originally intended by God to teach its original readers about him and his ways, his holiness and his character, are overlooked. Instead, sermons immediately jump to a biblical theological schema to impart meaning. As a result, story is turned into proposition; Scripture’s narrative form is reduced to serving only as the vehicle for the metanarrative schema. The rationale for such sermons lies in “the perceived divine authorial intent...overcom[ing] the authorial intent of the human author”<sup>404</sup> but ignoring the possibility that the Divine Author may well have had intentions beyond communicating only the metanarrative. As Reid notes, this methodology is more akin to “an exegetical imperialism whereby the theological horizon of the Christian reader dominates the first horizon of the ancient text.”<sup>405</sup> Great loss thus occurs: the richness of a narrative text is “flattened out”<sup>406</sup> and reduced to second-level discourse. The specificity of the text is also lost, because the preacher looks straight through it. The immediate meaning of the text is relegated to secondary importance, after the metanarrative’s overarching meaning. All this can result in repetitive, predictable sermons.

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<sup>403</sup> Vanhoozer, *First Theology: God, Scripture and Hermeneutics*, 178.

<sup>404</sup> Reid, “Evangelical Hermeneutics and Old Testament Preaching: A Critical Analysis of Graeme Goldsworthy’s Theory and Practice,” 320.

<sup>405</sup> Ibid.

<sup>406</sup> Ibid., 180.

The impact of this dominance can be exacerbated if the preacher has an innate love of second-level discourse. In Ryken's words, the preacher can "be captivated" by the combination of "theological abstraction and the inter-locking story of biblical theology."<sup>407</sup> Ryken noted the "near-universal tendency of seminary graduates to translate biblical texts into a series of abstract theological propositions."<sup>408</sup> The graduates fail to see the problem because of their love for theological discourse. Again, while not necessarily illegitimate, this love does, however, exacerbate the negative results for preaching detailed above.

Second, biblical theological schemas may be assigned excessive authority over a biblical text by default through the lack of development of other hermeneutical options. As noted in the Data Report and Analysis in this study, the relationship between the challenges identified by the preachers interviewed and their use of biblical theology was marked by one primary dynamic. The more effectively preachers had relativized the place and nature of biblical theology in their sermon preparation, the less acutely the challenges were felt by them. Expanding the range of hermeneutical tools available to the preacher eased the entire sermon preparation process. The more extensive a preacher's range of hermeneutical tools, the more biblical theology was relativized, and the more effectively the challenges of making exhortations were overcome. To state the phenomena negatively in terms of cause: if preachers' biblical theological schema is effectively the only means they employ to comprehend the text, then the greater the impact of the other primary causes will be felt. Preacher A and Preacher D noted the need

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<sup>407</sup> Ryken, "The Bible as Literature and Expository Preaching," 50.

<sup>408</sup> Ibid., 48.

to get to the New Testament from the Old, because otherwise it somehow would not be Christian preaching. It would be a sermon that could have been given “in a synagogue” or an application fit “for any Hebrew” – in other words, orthodox, but something less than Christian. In practice, Preachers A and D were overcoming this challenge by virtue of their own relativizing of biblical theology. The case can be seen however, that if biblical theology had been the only tool they had to utilize to “get to Jesus,” then repetitive, predictable, and formulaic sermons would more than likely be the result. When few or no other hermeneutical options are at hand, there is little chance of any corrective of biblical theology’s inherent inadequacies and limitations, and it is automatically granted a position of hermeneutical dominance.

Third, biblical theological schemas may be assigned excessive authority over a biblical text from a fear of encouraging moralism. This issue is related to the first issue listed above. As Preacher C reported, “nervousness about moralism” on the part of preachers, in his experience, could lead them to avoid anything that sounded “remotely exhortative or imperatival.” This nervousness about moralism was born out of a fear that by exhorting hearers, they would be promoting works salvation. In Preacher C’s experience, several negative effects occurred. First, the opposite extreme meant no good works were encouraged at all. Second, preachers “infused” their sermons with a “we can’t, only Jesus can” dynamic, which led to a rapid move to biblical theology that went “straight to Jesus.” In this way, the “connectedness” of the passage to life through any application was “minimized.” Therefore -- and again, almost by default -- the biblical theological schema reigned over the Old Testament narrative text, subduing its voice. The specifics of the text and whatever may be unique about them are discarded.

*b. The subversion of the purpose of the sermon*

Several reasons can cause preachers to subvert the purpose of a sermon, unwittingly adding to their preparation challenges.

First, many preachers in the Reformed tradition, who are committed to the use of a redemptive-historical hermeneutic, are aware of the historical debates surrounding this approach, particularly the conviction to avoid moralism in sermons at all costs. All five preachers interviewed raised, or spoke to, the issue of moralistic interpretation in some way. Even though in one sense this debate has been argued, it remains a potential trap for preachers, allowing the debate to hijack their sermons. The researcher has observed this phenomenon. It can happen when the preacher and/or their hearers have strong feelings about the issues. They may be on the same side of the debate or the opposite, but it is precisely because feelings run so high and allegiances are declared that there is a danger for preachers to use their Old Testament narrative sermons as vehicles to continue the debate. The main purpose of the sermon becomes proving that the redemptive-historical interpretation of the text is the correct one. At this point, preachers will have allowed their allegiance to the redemptive-historical cause to subvert the purpose of the sermon. The preacher may go to great lengths to demonstrate that this narrative is about Christ, not the human characters. They are not heroes to be emulated. They all have their faults. None of them is perfect. Readers shouldn't be drawn to them in such a way. Jesus alone is the hero. Therefore, the purpose of the text -- and therefore the legitimate purpose of the sermon -- is subjugated to that of proving a biblical theological interpretation. This interpretation grants a biblical theological schema dominance over the text. Of course, the burden of proof that their interpretation of the text is the correct one rests upon the preacher. The issue in these circumstances, however, is whether proving their



interpretation is correct should be the purpose of the sermon. If this stance is taken often, then each Old Testament sermon will follow the same trajectory for the listener -- it will be predictable. But what they might call a trajectory is, in fact, the preacher's line of argument. For the listener, the sermons all sound the same because they are all the same - - the same line of argument is being pursued every time. It is possible that a preacher does this unintentionally or that they believe that this is what preaching Old Testament narrative texts is all about. Whatever the case, the specificity of the text itself is reduced, its literary and historical features cast aside -- unless they contribute to the argument -- its purpose overridden, and its voice largely lost.

Second, a preacher may desire to model to their hearers, in the sermon, how they should read the Bible. Preacher A reported that his desire to do this was one factor driving the speed of his move from the Old Testament to the New Testament in his sermons. His hearers did not feel he had "built the case" for moving from the Old Testament to the New Testament and found the resulting sermons predictable in their trajectory. The desire to model to hearers how to read their Bibles can be driven by the concern of the preacher for their biblical literacy, as was the case with Preacher A. He reported a concern that his hearers may interpret the Old Testament moralistically and appropriate it to themselves incorrectly. This concern is perfectly legitimate. The question remains however as to whether this desire, and some might say need, should influence the trajectory of the sermon. Although driven by a different motive, the result for the sermon's trajectory is the same as in the first danger listed above: the trajectory of the sermon becomes a line of argument that is repeated in every Old Testament sermon.

Hearers detect that some kind of formula is being followed, which is helpful to some but creates unease in others.

*c. The alteration of the preacher's approach to the text*

A further source of the challenges identified is the alteration of some preachers' approach to the text due to the influence of biblical theology in their thinking and the pragmatic pressures of time constraints. Thus, preachers no longer approach the Old Testament text as readers and so their conclusions are out of step with their hearers.

i. Due to the influence of biblical theology

Three of the preachers interviewed mentioned biblical theology's capacity to alter their stance toward the text in a negative way, if allowed. Preachers B and C spoke in most detail to this phenomenon. Reading Old Testament narrative with his son and witnessing his son's fresh response to the text alerted Preacher C to how dominant the metanarrative of biblical theology had become in his own thinking. Without his being aware of it until that point, biblical theology had come to "so shadow" his thinking that he was no longer genuinely reading the text. He was now reading in a "calculated" way and was missing the details, cues, and emotional impact that his son was hearing and thus was "missing some of the punch."

Therefore, a biblical theological method of interpreting a narrative text can assume a position of dominance within the preacher's own mind, to the point where the specifics of the narrative are being erased even in the very act of reading. Biblical theology can alter the way preachers read the text, training them to read in a reductionist manner: always looking for the category, the type, the motif, the symbol, the pathway, or

the vocabulary that will snap to the metanarrative grid and move forward to the New Testament. Considerations of literary device and other hermeneutical tools are -- even subconsciously -- rendered redundant or simply are not considered. As preacher B stated, "...those things disappear if you're just going hunting for your preconceived motifs."

ii. Due to time constraints

Time constraints featured in each of the interviews and also in one area of the literature surveyed. Preacher E called attention to the sheer volume of text that must often be dealt with when preaching from Old Testament narrative. Preachers B, C, D, and E all raised the challenges of dealing with Old Testament narrative's complexity. Preacher E noted how, under time pressure, the selectivity necessary in sermon preparation can easily turn into a "drive to boil it [the text] down as quickly as possible to get to the big idea." In other words, the process became reducing the narrative text into proposition; a process Preacher E observed "just kills the text...it destroys it." From this testimony, Block's description of the "homiletic hermeneutic" is apt. The preacher's approach to the text becomes driven by the economy of time and the need to preach a sermon from it, rather than "a thirst for understanding its message in its original context."<sup>409</sup> This approach can "inhibit responsible interpretation and blind the preacher and audience to the authoritative meaning of the passage."<sup>410</sup>

Immediately employing a biblical theological schema can become a straightforward solution, quickly providing a preacher with something to say about a text. Preacher C observed that an immediate move to a biblical theological metanarrative

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<sup>409</sup> Block, "Tell Me the Old, Old, Story: Preaching the Message of Old Testament Narrative," 411.

<sup>410</sup> Ibid., 412.

could even function as a convenient way for preachers to deliberately maneuver around complex texts. Therefore, due to time pressure, a biblical theological schema can be granted dominance over the text, with all the resulting shortcomings: the specificity of the text is not addressed, literary considerations are superficially considered, and the same sermon trajectory adopted. The result is repetitive, predictable, and formulaic sermons.

*d. One result of an altered stance*

When these factors are considered together, it can be argued that the requirement to produce a sermon can move a preacher from approaching the text as a humble reader to approaching it as a professional who has a job to do. In subtle ways, the preacher can move from approaching the text before God with humility, trembling, and a contrite spirit to dealing with it as simply the raw material for their craft. They move from reading “under” the text in humility, to reading “over” the text as a scholar, perhaps confident in their interpretative tools and theological education. What once may have inspired awe now only breeds frustration when it is too difficult to understand quickly. Aside from the major point (the extreme provocation that this attitude is to the Living God), it blinds the preacher to two facts that have become apparent in this study: first, that a direct and compelling connection already exists between the Old Testament narrative and its readers before they ever stand up to speak; and second, that they are no longer reading the text in the same way as their hearers.

Both the non-Christian literature and Christian literature drew attention to the fact that human beings have a deep and instinctive need for stories, primarily in the works by Booker and Fant. Both these authors cited the fact that stories are ubiquitous, persistent, and powerfully moving across human experience and that despite gulfs in time, language,

and culture, they have taken shape in the imagination and in their telling in remarkably similar ways. Fant's explanation, from a Christian theistic worldview, was that this instinctive need for stories is driven by a desire to find the restoration of the balance lost to them in the Fall. Scripture, Fant argues, is the story that God has given human beings that "helps us understand our place in this world and leads us back to Him."<sup>411</sup>

Therefore, whether the details of Fant's explanation are accepted or not, both spheres of literature surveyed for this study -- non-Christian and Christian -- drew attention to the fact that this instinctive need exists, and drives, the human interest in stories. It is determinative for how readers approach stories. A major point of connection between readers and narratives is the characters in the narrative. As Carroll observed, readers "read for character"<sup>412</sup>; they reflect upon them, understand them in approximately the same way that they understand people in the real world, and in some cases "come to trust their guidance."<sup>413</sup> Readers intuitively empathize and connect with characters because they see elements of themselves reflected in them. Of most significance is Carroll's observation that readers' moral elucidation of characters can be a deeply ingrained part of reading practice -- one that is inculcated in readers from their childhood. In other words, a preacher's hearers have likely been trained to read narrative this way, and therefore, they are reading it the same way as they listen to the sermon.

The connection between the narrative text and the reader is a strong and compelling one, even more so given the Holy Spirit's work in the heart and mind of readers when they are reading alone or with others. As this study has shown in its

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<sup>411</sup> Fant, *God as Author: A Biblical Approach to Narrative*, xv.

<sup>412</sup> Carroll, "The Wheel of Virtue: Art, Literature, and Moral Knowledge," 15.

<sup>413</sup> Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature*, 44.

consideration of authorial intent and speech act theory, when read, the biblical text speaks to present-day readers. Therefore, the strength of the connection may well be multiplied by the Holy Spirit's work. The point for preachers is that an understanding of this already existent connection between their hearers and the text can assist them in appreciating their hearers' complaint concerning one-dimensional and boring sermons. What their hearers may be alluding to -- knowingly or not -- is the dissonance between the text they are reading and the sermon they are hearing. Listeners can intuitively sense the drama, tension, and complexity of Old Testament narrative. They read, identifying instinctively with certain characters and their life predicaments, struggles, or temptations. But when the sermon fails to engage with these elements of the text and instead deals only with theological abstracts, the sermon sounds "timid, arid, bloodless, and lacking in life."<sup>414</sup> For the listener then, the preacher has just accomplished the remarkable: they have turned what is immensely fascinating into something excruciatingly dull.

### *Summary of the Discussion*

First, the preaching task may be analyzed and described in many ways by preachers and scholars. Yet fundamentally, the task involves a divinely inspired and living text, a preacher, and hearers. What became increasingly evident to the researcher was how significant a part each of these "elements" had to play in the creation of these challenges. This observation is reflected in the above delineation of these three primary causes of the challenges. The biblical text is divinely inspired, supremely sophisticated literature. In sermon preparation, preachers bring to it an abstract system of human origin,

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<sup>414</sup> Möller, "The Nature and Genre of Biblical Theology: Some Reflections in the Light of Charles H.H. Scobie's 'Prolegomena to a Biblical Theology,'" 59.

their own theological or practical pre-commitments, allegiances, fears, and habits of thought. The hearers sit, reading and listening according to the ways of understanding stories that have been inculcated in them for years, if not for as long as they can remember. Given the nature of these three elements, it should come as little surprise that, when they are brought together, the complex challenges identified in this study are experienced and that the failure articulated by de Witt has prevailed for so long.

Second, de Witt's articulation of the failure was specific to "the redemptive-historical approach to the Scriptures."<sup>415</sup> It asks why redemptive-historical preaching, in particular, is so susceptible to the failure he describes. After all, any preacher dealing with Old Testament narrative texts will encounter the challenge it presents, as sophisticated literature, to generating application. Arguably, every preacher brings to the biblical text their own theological pre-commitments, their own allegiances, fears, and habits of thought. So, what is it that makes preaching of the redemptive-historical approach to the Scriptures so susceptible to this failure? The discussion of the primary sources of the challenges sheds some light on this question. It is preachers who subscribe to "the redemptive-historical approach to the Scriptures"<sup>416</sup> who, arguably, most extensively utilize biblical theological schema in their sermon preparation. Therefore, the inherent inadequacies and limitations identified in this study are immediately latent in their sermon preparation process. Additionally, preachers using a redemptive-historical approach to the Scriptures can be the most zealous for its implementation, therefore increasing the likelihood of experiencing the challenges identified in this study.

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<sup>415</sup> de Witt, "Contemporary Failure in the Pulpit," 20.

<sup>416</sup> Ibid.

Furthermore, because of their theological heritage, these same preachers often possess the most acute fear of moralism, due to its association with salvation-by-works and their theological heritage to the Reformation. In other words, out of a range of preaching traditions, it is Reformed preachers who have three unique factors in their approach to the Scriptures that, on their own or when combined, can cause them to experience the failure that de Witt described to a high degree.

Third, one of the most significant issues is the matter of hermeneutical authority. As seen from the discussion above, the text's authority can be practically overridden in many ways. It is the researcher's conclusion that many of the challenges identified in making exhortations arise because the primacy of the text in preparation has been lost.

The more authority a preacher grants their biblical theological schema, the greater the impact of the limitations noted in this study upon the sermon. Even though biblical theology is used in order to understand a particular part of Scripture, in light of the whole, the whole can end up domesticating the part.<sup>417</sup>

## **Recommendations for Practice**

### *Make a Commitment to the Primacy of the Text*

When a preacher brings a biblical theological schema to an Old Testament narrative text, which one has final authority? Though verbally preachers may testify to an orthodox answer affirming the text's authority, in the day-to-day practice of ministry and sermon preparation the reality may be quite different. Precisely how much authority should a preacher's biblical theological framework have? Because biblical theological

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<sup>417</sup> Carson, "Biblical-Theological Ruminations on Psalm 1," 124.



schemas deal with metanarrative, it is straightforward for a preacher to assign that schema a final say in sermon preparation. At what point, however, does the text ever critique the schema? Möller's warning needs to be genuinely heard:

The ordered account...must never "replace" that complex and diverse mass [the biblical literature] or give the impression that the Bible's complexity has been, or could ever be, mastered.<sup>418</sup>

A preacher's biblical theological schema is a significant hermeneutical tool. But it is a tool. It is not the text. As Carson notes, exegesis maintains, and should maintain, a controlling influence upon biblical theological schemas, but those schemas do not control exegesis in the same way. In sermon preparation a biblical theological schema must be content to "star in a supporting role."<sup>419</sup>

Therefore, an important step for preachers in overcoming the challenges they face in making exhortations from Old Testament narrative texts is to make a conscious commitment, in humility, to honor the primacy of the biblical text in all stages of sermon preparation and delivery. One practical step to take is to acknowledge the fact that grids, frameworks, schemas, and systems almost always have inherent limitations. Biblical theology is not immune from this. Acknowledging this is not to slight biblical theology as a task or a discipline. Nor is it to impugn the reputation of those who have formulated schemas, some who may be personally respected or dear friends of the preacher. It is simply to acknowledge that little human endeavor is perfect. By coming to terms with this, preachers place themselves in a better position to preach. In applying their schema, they will be expecting to discover some new things but wary of losing others. They will

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<sup>418</sup> Möller, "The Nature and Genre of Biblical Theology: Some Reflections in the Light of Charles H.H. Scobie's 'Prolegomena to a Biblical Theology,'" 61.

<sup>419</sup> Ibid.

be able to compensate for the schemas' limitations. Preachers will be able to adopt the stance toward the text that Carson recommended for scholars: that is, "a profound willingness to work inductively from the text,"<sup>420</sup> to begin with the text, and to be controlled by the text's concerns. This willingness is the fundamental control on a sermon because it is a safeguard against other agendas being imposed upon and domesticating the concerns of the text. In understanding what response God requires from people, from the text, preachers discovers the purpose of their sermons.

Practically then, their allegiance and loyalty must always be to seeing God's word come to their hearers with the effecting work of the Holy Spirit. Their concern must be that their listeners hear the voice of God and know -- in an experiential sense -- the power of his word. It is only by keeping this purpose paramount that they will avoid allowing their sermons to be subverted by lesser goals.

The best apologetic for a redemptive-historical interpretation of Old Testament narrative is to use it to "produce" these kinds of sermons. Having experienced this kind of preaching, listeners will not need any arguments to persuade them that such handling of Old Testament narratives is correct. The sermon will speak for itself. Moralistic interpretations will, by comparison, be less attractive. To do this, the purpose of the sermon as derived from the text -- not from an historical debate -- must be allowed to stand. Preachers must subordinate their allegiances to respected preachers, exegetes, and theologians to the primary concern: seeing human lives changed through an encounter with the Living God.

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<sup>420</sup> Carson, "Current Issues in Biblical Theology: A New Testament Perspective," 29.

A second practical step preachers may take is to change the terminology and, over a short period of time, the way they conceive of their biblical theological method. Wright's analogy of biblical theological schemas as less "framework" and more "map,"<sup>421</sup> outlined in Chapter Two, is helpful here.

*Make a Commitment to Approaching Old Testament Narrative as Supremely  
Sophisticated Literature*

As argued in the discussion of findings above, Old Testament narrative is sophisticated literature. Yet, it is more. If Old Testament narrative is -- at the very least -- sophisticated literature, then it needs to be comprehended as such. It needs to be approached, prayed over, read, considered, interpreted, and explained as such, by preachers. To put the case another way: secular narrative literature is read, considered, interpreted, and explained by conventions considered appropriate to its genre -- scholarly arguments notwithstanding. If Old Testament narrative in its form and function exhibits similar features as literature and can be considered as literature, then it should be treated as literature -- at the very least. Handling Old Testament narrative this way is not suggesting that narrative literature is all it is. It is not, as some may perceive it to be, placing Old Testament narrative on a level with all other literature. On the contrary, to handle the Old Testament narrative this way is to make a fundamental assertion about the primacy of the text. It is to pay the full and necessary respect and honor to the Divine Author who, in his supreme wisdom, chose to reveal himself to humankind in the literary genre of narrative. In fact, if Fant's argument, outlined in Chapter Two, is accepted, then

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<sup>421</sup> Wright, "Mission as a Matrix for Hermeneutics and Biblical Theology," 138–140.

we should expect to see precisely this dynamic. That is, if God’s story in Scripture is the paradigmatic story, and all other stories are “glimpses of gospel truth,”<sup>422</sup> then what we should expect to see is Old Testament narrative exhibiting character traits reflected in other literature, yet surpassing them, amplifying them, and magnifying them. And that is precisely what this study has found. Old Testament narrative is sophisticated literature, but it is more than literature.

Therefore, for preachers to genuinely understand how Old Testament narrative conveys its meaning, its “affective freight”<sup>423</sup> and its life-shaping purpose, they must learn to read it as sophisticated literature. That is, they must become conversant with literary conventions -- of form, device, language, and function -- and be able to read the text for these things. The more the preacher develops the capacity to appreciate the features of narrative form and device, the more deeply its meaning will be apprehended, and the more powerfully its capacity to shape a life will be felt. This means learning to read “sensitively”<sup>424</sup> and humbly, according to the literary genre.

This study has found that the preachers who had developed the deepest understanding for Old Testament narrative as literature most successfully overcame the challenges to making exhortations while using biblical theology in their sermon preparation. The researcher’s conclusions on this point are as follows. First, approaching the Old Testament narrative text this way most successfully grants it its full voice in sermon preparation. The more the narrative text is allowed its full voice, the richer the

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<sup>422</sup> Fant, *God as Author: A Biblical Approach to Narrative*, 183.

<sup>423</sup> Reid, “Evangelical Hermeneutics and Old Testament Preaching: A Critical Analysis of Graeme Goldsworthy’s Theory and Practice,” 217.

<sup>424</sup> Ryken, *Words of Delight: A Literary Introduction to the Bible*, 122–123.

application to life. Second, it enables the preacher to understand the direct, compelling connection that already exists between the Old Testament narrative and the reader -- their hearers -- before a word of their sermon is ever spoken. As a result, some of the challenges they face in making exhortations are avoided or at least mitigated.

Comprehending Old Testament narrative as literature drives the preacher to deal with the specificity of the text. It drives attention to detail. It enables the preacher to adopt a humble stance toward the text and consider its form and function. Primary among these specifics will be Old Testament characters. The preacher will be able to appreciate how the narrative is “the written expression of shared human experiences,”<sup>425</sup> how those experiences transcend time, language, and culture to connect their present-day hearers to the characters in the narrative; how Old Testament narrative speaks via the characters and not despite them. In Jeansonne’s words, the preacher will be able to “consider both the Israelites and Hivites as human beings and not simply as caricatures.”<sup>426</sup> The preacher will be better able to grasp the function of difficult texts that may be present to shape readers through their extended reflection on the actions of characters, rather than a simple right or wrong answer. It will better place preachers so as to deal with the ambiguity of the lives of major Old Testament figures, such as Abraham, Moses, Samson, Saul, and David, and explain how it is possible to find such a mixture of virtue and vice in a single person. In the careful consideration of the situational circumstances of these characters, and the way they chose to respond, the preacher will be better placed to identify analogous circumstances in the present-day for their hearers and successfully generate

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<sup>425</sup> Fant, *God as Author: A Biblical Approach to Narrative*, 7.

<sup>426</sup> Jeansonne, *The Women of Genesis: From Sarah to Potiphar’s Wife*, 97 quoted in Parry, et al., 177-178.

“warm, pointed application.”<sup>427</sup> Such application is apart from additional application generated by the preacher’s consideration of the other literary dimensions of the text. These are dimensions such as those mentioned by Preachers B, C, and E: reading for the emotions or “affective freight”<sup>428</sup> of the text, understanding its illocutionary force, and considering both its past and present function as God’s word. In addition, both the preachers interviewed and the literature reviewed noted numerous other features of form, device, and language that could be considered. Respected this way, the biblical text is allowed to have its full voice. Over time, such an approach to the text will assist the preacher in overcoming the challenges of the narrative’s literary devices and enabling them to freshly read passages taught often.

The appreciation of Old Testament narrative as sophisticated literature, yet more than literature, prevents drifting into application that could be construed as moralistic. This appreciation brings with it an understanding of the divine authorial intent of the narrative and that God is the Protagonist, not the characters. It brings with it the knowledge that the *telos* of the ethical instruction of Old Testament narrative is holiness - the imitation of the character of God himself. It brings with it a knowledge that Old Testament narrative’s power to shape a life comes, not from the reader, but from the Spirit who inspired it. With this understanding, the Scriptural precedents for application to present-day hearers from the lives of Old Testament characters -- noted in the literature surveyed and also by Preachers A and E -- can be employed in full confidence.

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<sup>427</sup> de Witt, “Contemporary Failure in the Pulpit,” 20.

<sup>428</sup> Reid, “Evangelical Hermeneutics and Old Testament Preaching: A Critical Analysis of Graeme Goldsworthy’s Theory and Practice,” 217.

### *Fight to Find the Time*

Approaching and dealing with Old Testament narrative as sophisticated literature requires time. Unfortunately for preachers, there is no natural substitute for this, nor easy answers. In times of acute crisis and circumstances beyond a preacher's control, supernatural help may be relied upon to overcome inadequate preparation, but preachers lack a promise from God to honor preparation that has been reduced because ordinary matters were deemed more important. In the twenty-first century world, time and space to prepare well are in short supply and need to be fought for. Since preaching from Old Testament narrative texts requires additional labor, one possible way forward is to plan ahead well, seeking help from other preachers to preach in the weeks prior an Old Testament series and seeking understanding from church leaders that to produce such a series requires more time.

### *Commit to Expanding the Range of Hermeneutical Tools Available*

In order to address the challenges identified in this study, preachers should also make a commitment to expanding their hermeneutical "toolkit." When biblical theology is used as one tool among many, the challenges in generating application and making exhortation are less acutely felt. The experience of the preachers interviewed and the ways that biblical theology had been relativized by each of them supported this solution. Using the "full range of weapons in the exegetical arsenal, without succumbing to methodological narrowness or faddishness"<sup>429</sup> is the goal. Or, as Preacher E put it:

...biblical theology is good, it's useful, but it's one tool in the box, and it doesn't fit everything. Each of them has its particular use. It's very good

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<sup>429</sup> Carson, "Current Issues in Biblical Theology: A New Testament Perspective," 34.

for some things, but you've got to understand how to use it properly, how not to use it. So, all of those different facets, they all have their place: historical critical approaches, literary approaches, rhetorical, speech act theory, biblical theology, they're all useful tools, and they all have their part to play. So, in a sense the onus is to become a master of all of those.

Interpreting Old Testament narrative fruitfully requires an understanding of how the Old Testament relates to the New Testament. Further study by the preacher will open up connections between Testaments that can be useful hermeneutical tools. Other avenues, such as the character of God and his ways, more-or-less unchanged beliefs, the requirement of holiness, legal and ethical prescriptions, and promises and fulfillments, will supplement connections to the New Testament. It is one thing for preachers to admit that they do not know all there is to know about God's Word. It is sometimes quite another to translate that admission into the discipline of continual learning. Sometimes, the temptation is to believe that with their hermeneutics, they have 'arrived.'

The expansion, development, and refinement of a preacher's hermeneutical tool kit, therefore, is a positive way to compensate for the limitations inherent in a biblical theological schema. The use of these additional tools offers a practical corrective. It also provides fresh lines of fruitful inquiry that enable a preacher to appreciate the richness of the text and its links to other parts of the Bible. Preachers may well wonder where they will get the time for such a task. It does not, however, all need to be done at once. Mastering, or at least become reasonably proficient at, using one tool then another is a beginning -- it is a place to start.

### *Make a Commitment to Read as a Reader*

As noted in the discussion of findings above, factors exist that can alter a preacher's stance toward the text. Preachers begin to approach it in a different manner to



their hearers. Therefore preachers should thoughtfully examine their personal approach to the Bible and identify what elements of their preparation may have come to stand in the way of them approaching it in humility. It will require asking for God's forgiveness and his enabling to return to a contrite, humble, awe-filled approach to his word.

Comprehending Old Testament narrative as sophisticated literature can enable a preacher to approach the text in such a manner -- and more like some of their hearers -- rather than someone who needs to produce a sermon. Approaching Old Testament narrative as sophisticated literature means grappling with its specificity, its detail, its characters and their circumstances, its ambiguity, and its moral complexity. A preacher may learn Old Testament narrative's contented-ness to sit, at times, with ambiguity and complexity. In doing this, they may become content themselves to give the text its full voice, even if this results in one or more "loose ends" in their sermons. This manner of approach and dealing with the text will resonate more strongly with hearers, if for no other reason than it resembles the way they are reading the text themselves.

Comprehending Old Testament narrative as sophisticated literature can change the preacher's stance toward the text and has the potential to bring it closely in line with the way their hearers are reading it. If done with excellence, it will result in the hearer's growth in comprehension and genuine love of Old Testament narrative, not only as sophisticated literature, but as more -- the living word of the Living God.

Preaching the word of God is an awesome task. It is more than working through a methodology of preparation. It is more than simply joining the dots of doctrine. Reading a diagnosis of the challenges they face could lead to despair on the part of some. Who indeed, is fit for such a task? Yet, preachers are not alone. They have divine enabling --

the indwelling of God himself, the Holy Spirit, by whose agency God's word is living. Therefore, preachers can take great heart. One of the most encouraging facets of undertaking this study for the researcher was listening to the five preachers interviewed talk about their concern for their hearers, their love of God and his word, their earnest desire to become better preachers, and their profound insights about preaching itself. They remind preachers everywhere that, as important as hermeneutical tools are, our starting point with the text as preachers must always be what Preacher B articulated: "I read and read. I just read it and read it and read it and ask God to tell me."

### **Recommendations for Further Study**

This study has focused upon diagnosing the challenges for preachers of making sermon exhortations from Old Testament narrative texts when using biblical theology in sermon preparation. Further scholarship could focus on the following areas.

First, further study could be pursued on the subject of Old Testament narrative as sophisticated literature, yet as more than literature, in light of Old Testament narratives claim as Christian Scripture. This research could further the start made on the similarities and differences between fictional narrative and Old Testament narrative, with reference to interpretation. These findings could then be discussed in light of Old Testament narrative's "greater claims" outlined above in the discussion of findings, namely its divine authorship, didactic purpose, historicity, and illocutionary force. This discussion could be oriented toward preachers and their current practice to enable them to grasp these ideas coherently.

Second, research could examine what hermeneutical tools, and in what combination, might form an "essential" tool kit for preachers of Old Testament narrative.

The preachers interviewed for this study exhibited a range of tools, some quite extensive. Further work could be done on identifying what might form a basic yet satisfactory range of hermeneutical tools for preachers, including the study of preachers who successfully overcome the challenges identified by this study.

## **Conclusion**

This study explored the challenges in making exhortations and application from Old Testament narrative when preachers employ biblical theology in their sermon preparation. It was sparked by a written observation, penned almost forty years ago, describing a phenomenon that continues to exist in preaching today. The literature that was reviewed and the preachers who were interviewed provided an abundance and depth of insight into the nature of Old Testament narrative itself, the almost inevitable shortcomings of systems and schemas developed by human beings, and the actual experience of attempting to preach Old Testament narrative in a way that honors its Author and his intent for his people, while addressing our own shortcomings and limitations as fallible preachers at the same time.

These three elements – Old Testament narrative itself, the limitations of biblical theological schemas, and the limitations of preachers and their methodology – represent the primary sources of the challenges identified. They are significant challenges. Yet, as discussed above, preachers are not alone in their task. It is God's Spirit that makes his word effective in the human heart. There are practical ways the challenges identified can be overcome: honoring the primacy of the text, honoring Old Testament narrative as sophisticated literature, fighting to find the time required, expanding hermeneutical tool kits and skills.

Above all however, sits one requirement. Preaching is not simply the mastering of skills and tools, the dedication of time, nor reading the text sensitively. It is the overflow of a life. May God grant preachers the one requirement of heart and mind they so desperately need when they come to his most holy word: humility.

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