

How Bible Stories Work

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summary of: How Bible Stories Work, Leland Ryken

Setting

The 3 basic components of a story are Setting, Characters, and Plot.

Definition

At a high-level, setting is anything related to **spatial** or **visual** details of the narrative.

- Clothing
- Where people stood, sat, or reclined
- Physical place, geography
- Time of day
- Cultural attitudes, beliefs, customs

Examples

In [Acts 12:21](#), we read that Herod put on his royal robes and sat upon the throne. When you see details like that, it's helpful to ask what significance they have to the narrative.

In [1Kgs 12:32](#), we read that the king placed priests of the high places in Bethel. Bethel has important associations in the historical era of the narrative and in the culture that prevailed at the time. High places referred to an area of idol worship.

In the story of rescuing Lot from Sodom ([Gen 19](#)), Sodom was not only a physical place, but a moral monstrosity. When we see the name Sodom, it brings up thoughts of God's judgment against the evils it represents.

How Setting Functions in a Story

The purpose of a setting is to provide a suitable container for the characters and events. This generally happens through enabling, correspondence. or symbolism.

Enabling: For instance, in [Ruth 2](#), the setting of a grain field at harvest time **enables** the encounter of Ruth and Boaz, their conversation, Ruth's demonstration of industriousness, and Boaz's generosity.

Correspondence: In [Luke 8:27](#), we read about a demon-possessed man who wore no clothing and lived among the tombs. His disheveled appearance and the tombs **correspond** to his disordered state.

Symbolism: When King Hezekiah received a threatening letter, he took it to the house of LORD and spread it before the LORD ([Isa 37:14](#)). He could have spread the letter before God anywhere. This should prompt us to consider what the temple **symbolized** to the OT believer.

How to Discover Setting in a Story

Global level: Begin with a general look. Is the setting a rural world of nature as in Genesis, an idealized farming world as in Ruth, or a corrupt city as in the story of Sodom and Gomorrah.

Enabling, correspondence, symbolism: Next, look for places that may have symbolic significance or which enable or correspond to the action that occurs.

Specifics: Finally, consider the scene. Is it a scene of terror, conflict, encounter...? Is it a street scene, murder scene, worship scene...?

Pay Attention to the Setting

Even when you elect not to do a detailed analysis of each verse, pay attention to the setting. Ask yourself how the setting contributes to the story. With a better understanding of the setting, you can increase your enjoyment of the story while gaining more insight on the lessons God wishes to teach you.

Anything that gets you to spend time in the biblical text is a good thing. As you think about the setting, exercise your imagination to visualize the scene. See if you can place yourself in the scene.

Characterization

Without an author telling us about a character, we have to draw our own conclusions from the plot. It is easy for us to draw the wrong conclusions. Some storytellers (narrators, authors) focus on the plot without developing characters. This may provide an action-packed story, but it can make it difficult for readers to relate to the characters or care about the story. Action is great if it has a purpose.

Examples of Characterization

- **Direct From Author:** Leah and Rachel ([Gen 29:15-20](#)): In the story of Jacob and Laban, Leah was the substitute bride. The author describes Leah, "Leah's eyes were weak" and Rachel, "Rachel was beautiful in form and appearance." The author also comments that working an additional seven years to get Rachel, "seemed to him but a few days because of the love he had for her."
- **One Character of Another:** Elijah and Ahab ([1Kgs 18:17](#)): Sometimes the author has one character characterize another. When Ahab faced Elijah after the murder of Naboth, Ahab greeted Eljah with, "Have you found me, O my enemy?"
- **Self-Characterization:** Jacob ([Gen 47:9](#)): When Jacob stood before Pharaoh, he described himself with, "Few and evil have been the days of the years of my life."

Methods of Characterization

The two categories for means of characterization are direct and indirect.

Direct

- **Explicit:** The text attributes a trait or role to a character. This can be descriptive or observational. In the story of the Fall, the narrator tells us directly that the serpent was more crafty than any other beast ([Gen 3:1](#))
- **Evaluative:** The statement about the character contains an element of assessment generally ascribing the trait as either favorable or unfavorable. In the story of Abraham and Lot, the author describes the residents of Sodom as "wicked, great sinners against the Lord ([Gen 13:12-13](#)).

Indirect

- **Actions of the Character:** In most Bible stories, the narrator tells us what the character did. We are left to draw conclusions. In the story of Lot's rescue, the author says that Lot "lingered" and that the angels had to drag him out of Sodom ([Gen 19](#)). We may conclude that Lot's laxity in living in a corrupt city made it difficult for him to leave his sinful lifestyle behind.

- **Dialogue:** Dialogue lets us overhear what the characters are saying to one another. Our task is to attribute meaning to what they say. In Exodus 1, we hear the Egyptian king ask the midwives why, against his orders, they have let the Hebrew male children live. We hear the midwives reply that the Hebrew mothers are vigorous and give birth before the midwives arrive. From that we can characterize the midwives as clever and deceptive and the king as obtuse
- **Tone:** The attitude the storyteller takes toward the subject matter is the tone. This tone draws attention to some feature of a character. In the story of the Pharaoh and the midwives, the storyteller uses a tone that appears to mock the king and hold up the midwives in admiration.
- **Foil:** A foil is something that sets off another thing. It is often a contrast, but can be a parallel. In the story of Cain, his villainy stands out in sharp contrast to the virtuous behavior of Abel, the foil [Gen 4:1-16]. In the story of Ananias and Sapphira, their deceit is a contrast to the honest person who gave the full amount for the sale of his land [Acts 4:36-37, Acts 5:1-10].

Role of Sympathy and Aversion

Pay attention to how you react to characters in a Bible story.

Notice what the storyteller has done to get you to react positively or negatively toward aspects of a character.

Do your best to compare your reaction to how the Bible indicates that God reacts to those types of behaviors or character attributes. If you react differently than it appears God does, consider why.

Substance of a Bible Character

- **Physical actions:** We can tell much about a character from how that character behaves. When Jacob takes advantage of his brother's hunger and impulsiveness, he reveals himself as a scheming and selfish person.
- **Thoughts:** The Bible doesn't often reveal what characters are thinking. Most of the time we must infer the thoughts and possible motivation for the character's actions.

- **Spoken words:** It helps to notice both the **content** of a character's words and the **style** of their speaking (direct, poetic...). When Jesus tells the paralytic, "My son, your sins are forgiven," we know that Jesus is the one who forgives sins [Mark 2:5]. The style of Jesus' beatitudes characterize Him as a poet and master of oratorical speech [Mat 5:3-12].
- **Feelings or emotions:** Sometimes actions imply feelings as when Jacob "wept aloud" when meeting Rachel at the town well [Gen 29:11]. Other times, words explicitly state the feelings as when Jesus was "moved with pity: during an encounter with a leper [Mark 1:41].
- **Traits and abilities:** Occasionally, the storyteller names a character's trait. In Gen 25:27, we read that Esau was a skillful hunter.
- **Relationships and roles:** We gain a sense of a character by their relationships and roles. We learn about Abraham's relationship with God, his role as husband and father, and his role as a sojourner in Egypt and wanderer in Canaan.
- **Responses to events or people:** We get a glimpse into a person by how that person responds to things. We see Esau respond to hunger by placing his appetite higher in priority than other values. We see Jacob respond to Esau's weakness by taking advantage of him.
- **Archetypal character types:** We can often establish an important part of a character's identity by noticing if they fit an archetype such as hero, villain, traveler, tyrant, benevolent leader, virtuous wife, or martyr.

Description and Interpretation

From a description, we can interpret its significance related to a character's attributes.

In Elijah's duel with the prophets of Baal, the text simply describes what Elijah did [1Kgs 18:20-40]. From that, we can attribute the qualities of courage and faith in God to Elijah.

When we see that Peter denied Jesus, we can infer that Peter was fearful and cowardly.

Example: the Call of Gideon

Judges 6:11-40

- **Physical actions:**
 - ▶ Description: Gideon beats out wheat in a concealed place. He converses with an angel of God, hesitates to accept his call to be a leader, and asks the angel for confirming signs. He tears down a pagan altar at night because he is afraid to do it during the day.
 - ▶ Interpretation: Gideon is timid and defeatist in his outlook. He resists the idea of being a heroic leader. Gideon is obedient to the angel's commands and therefore capable of heroic action. He persists in resisting the call to leadership.
- **Thoughts:** The description of his outlook is fearful, defeatist, and resistant to his call. We can infer that he is a reluctant hero.
- **Spoken words:** Gideon's words show his potential as a leader. He speaks to the angel in a reverent, respectful way.
- **Feelings or emotions:** We can infer that Gideon feels inferior and timid about the call to leadership.
- **Traits and abilities:** Gideon's primary trait at first is his reluctance to become a leader. Evidence that he has ability to become a leader serves as a counterbalance. This presents a paradox. Gideon has the ability to become a leader, but does not want to become one.
- **Relationships and roles:** Gideon is firmly entrenched in a community and attuned to the supernatural world. He interacts with family, community, the angel of God, and his servants.
- **Responses to events or people:** Gideon responds in a timid manner. To the angel, he is fearful, respectful, complaining, obedient, and persistent. He responds to the call to leadership by delaying his acceptance.
- **Archetypes:** In this passage, Gideon is the archetypal reluctant hero.

Tips for Character Analysis

1. Make a list of the characters.
2. Divide the list into two categories: primary characters and secondary characters. (alternatively use protagonist and antagonists)
3. For each character, note their physical actions, thoughts, spoken words, feelings, traits/abilities, relationships and roles, responses to events, and whether they fit an archetype.

4. Analyze what you noted in step 3 and create a brief interpretive profile for each character.
5. Ask yourself what the storyteller is saying about life through the characters. What lessons can you apply to your own life?

Plot

Sequential Structure of a Plot

A plot is a sequence of related events. Each incident should be relevant to the action. Incidents should unfold sequentially using cause-effect logic,

- Look for a way to divide the story into units.
- The idea is to create an outline of the story.
- The outline should keep your focus on the unifying action.

Overriding Unifying Action

Look for the core plot of the story. It should be a single unifying **action**. Stories are not about a topic; they are about an action.

Examples:

- The story of the fall in Genesis 3 is one of crime and punishment. The sequential structure is 1- what led to the crime, 2-committing the crime, 3- the consequences of the crime.
- The unifying action in the story of Gideon ([Jdg 6-8](#)) is Gideon's deliverance of his nation from the oppression of the Midianites.
- The unifying action in the story of Daniel and his three friends is testing ([Dan 1](#)). The sequence is 1- what led to the test, 2-the process of the test, 3- the result of the test.
- The core action in the story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well is Jesus' quest to bring the woman to saving faith in Him ([John 4:1-42](#)).

Some stories are complex with multiple plots. For instance, the story of Abraham has three overall storylines ([Gen 12-25](#)).

1. Abraham's quest for land and a son
2. God's progressive revelation of His covenant to Abraham
3. The ongoing conflict with Abraham between faith and expediency.

These three plots unify the story as a whole.

Plot Conflict

Conflict is inherent in the concept of a plot. Typically, stories don't announce the plot conflicts. We need to determine them.

The paradigm into which all plots fall is that of plot conflict moving to resolution. Without a resolution, the plot dangles in midair.

Types of Conflict

Character conflict	characters in conflict with one another
Environmental conflict	characters in conflict with nature or society
Spiritual conflict	characters in conflict with God, angels, demons; ex. fighting the prompting of the Holy Spirit
Inner Conflict	characters in conflict with themselves; mental or emotional

Example: Paul and Silas

Acts 16:16-40

Unifying Action

The core action is the imprisonment and release of Paul and Silas

Sequential Structure

- Prelude to the imprisonment (**Acts 16:16-18**)
- Attack on Paul and Silas leads to imprisonment (**Acts 16:19-24**)
- Miraculous breaking of prison bonds (**Acts 16:25-26**)
- Interaction with jailor leading to his and his household's salvation (**Acts 16:27-34**)
- Negotiations with city officials over the imprisonment (**Acts 16:35-39**)
- Release from prison (**Acts 16:40**)

Plot Conflicts

Paul & Silas vs.	Resolution
Annoying slave girl and spirit inside her (Acts 16:16-18)	Casting out the slave girl's spirit (Acts 16:18)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Slave girl's owner (Acts 16:19) ● Jewish leaders and city magistrates (Acts 16:20-24) ● Oppressive bondage of prison (Acts 16:24) 	God's miraculous intervention (Acts 16:26)
Threatened suicide of jailor (Acts 16:27-30)	Saving message of the Gospel (Acts 16:31-34)
City magistrates (Acts 16:35-38)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Apology of city officials when they discover Paul and Silas' credentials (Acts 16:38-39) ● Official release from prison (Acts 16:40)

Shape of a Plot

Fully developed stories follow this pattern

Shape of a Plot

Exposition ➤ Inciting Moment ➤ Rising Action ➤ Turning Point ➤

Complication ➤ Climax ➤ Denouement

Example of plot shape in story of Joseph:

- Exposition: Joseph in his family environment
- Inciting Moment: selling Joseph into Egypt
- Rising Action: Joseph's early fortunes in Egypt ending in imprisonment
- Turning Point: journey of Joseph's brothers to Egypt
- Complication: Joseph testing his brothers
- Climax: Joseph disclosing his identity to his brothers
- Denouement: Jacob moving to Egypt and death of Joseph

Beginning of a Story

The opening phase of a plot is **exposition** which gives background material that **enables** the reader to understand the story. (introduction of characters, basics of setting, hints of impending conflict)

Sample Story Openings Inciting Moments:

- ...**now** there was a famine in the land...
[Gen 12:10]
- ...**now** when Jacob was cooking stew...
[Gen 25:29]
- ...**now** the angel of the LORD came... [Jdg 6:11]
- ...**one day** Elisha went on the Shunem...
[2Kgs 4:8]
- ...**on the same day**, when evening had come...
[Mark 4:35]

Middle of a Story

Foreshadowing: Something happens that makes us aware of something that will occur later in the story.

- Direct: The storyteller can state this directly as a prophecy or prediction. Ex. When the men of Penuel refused to give food for Gideon's army, he claimed that when he returned from defeating the Midianites that he would tear down the tower of Penuel [Jdg 8:9]. That prediction foreshadowed what happened in [Jdg 8:17].
- Subtle: Because we know that Samson's Nazarite vow required him not to cut his hair as a precondition of his strength, we experience foreshadowing of his demise when he tells Delilah that he will become weak if someone cuts his hair [Jdg 16:17].

Suspense: Suspense is a moment in a story when we wonder what will happen. Joseph experienced many misfortunes. They leave us wondering how the dreams he had will ever come to pass. In the story of Jacob stealing Esau's blessing, there is suspense wondering if Isaac will recognize it is Jacob in disguise instead of Esau [Gen 27:18].

Testing: The device of testing is common in story plots. Any situation that requires a character to make a choice is an implicit test of what the character is like.

- God tested Abraham when He asked him to sacrifice Isaac [Gen 22:1-2].

- Potiphar's wife attempt to seduce Joseph was a test of his chastity [Gen 39:6-12].

Poetic Justice: Poetic justice is when virtue gets a reward and vice gets a punishment. Storytellers can use this to show us what behavior we should approve or disapprove.

Surprise and Reversal of Expectation: We tend to enjoy surprises. They can keep our interest in a story

Irony: Irony is a discrepancy between two things.

- Verbal irony: This occurs when someone makes a statement that is the opposite of their intended meaning.
- Situational irony: This occurs when a situation is contrary to what we expect or what is appropriate.
- Dramatic irony: This occurs when readers know something that one of the characters does not know. For instance, we know that no one can hide from God [Psa 139:7-12]. Ironically, Jonah thought he could manage to escape from God. To intensify the irony, Jonah acknowledged that God made the sea then he used the sea as his means of escape [Jonah 1:9]. We are aware of this; however, Jonah seems clueless.

End of Story Conventions

Most stories move toward a decisive event near the end (climax).

- Casting Daniel's accusers into the lions' den to punish them for their attempt to execute Daniel [Dan 6:24]
- Peter's third denial of Jesus accompanied by the crowing of the rooster [Luke 22:54-62]

Stories do not simply end. Part of story closure is the denouement of a plot. This refers to tying up loose ends to update the reader on the final outcome of issues. This could include some of the following:

- brief recapitulation of the main action
- summary of immediate results of the action
- summary of long-term effects of the action
- account of the fortunes that later befall one or more characters in the story
- some echo or reminder of what happened earlier or the issue that began the plot
- narration of the physical departure of one or more characters to a new place

Formulas That Signal a Plot Ending:

- Change of location: So Abram went up from Egypt... (**Gen 13:1**)
- Filling in information about what happened to a character: Meanwhile the Midianites had sold [Joseph] in Egypt to Potiphar... (**Gen 37:36**)
- Summary of preceding action and look into the future: So Midian was subdued...the land had rest forty years in the days of Gideon (**Jdg 8:28**)
- Change of scene and action: And immediately [Jesus] got into the boat with His disciples and went to the district of Dalmanutha (**Mark 8:10**)

Example: Ehud's Assassination of Eglon

Judges 3:15-26

- 3:15: exposition, background information
- 3:16: foreshadowing; dramatic irony (left-handedness enabling Ehud to conceal his weapon)
- 3:17 foreshadowing (saying that Eglon was very fat)
- 3:18: foreshadowing (Ehud finding a way to be alone with Eglon)
- 3:19: suspense; dramatic irony (we know something Eglon does not); surprise (no reason to expect Ehud to return to Eglon's palace)
- 3:20: suspense
- 3:21-22: poetic justice (Eglon portrayed as oppressive and worshipper of pagan idols); surprise and reversal (we don't expect a message from God to consist of a sword in the belly) first climax
- 3:23: complication
- 3:24: dramatic irony (servants assumed Eglon was relieving himself)
- 3:25: final climax (Eglon's death discovered); surprise (servants had no idea he was dead)
- 3:26: denouement (explanation of Ehud's escape)

Hero Stories

Definitions

Hero Story

A hero story is a story built around a central protagonist who the author holds up for admiration. The main focus is the character and exploits of the hero.

The purpose of a hero story is to give expression and shape to our own experiences.

Hero / Heroine

- A hero (or heroine) is the leading character in a story.
- The hero embodies the experiences, conflicts, and struggles of the culture or group of origin. Sometimes a hero is universal enough to represent humans in general. Other times, a hero represents a specific group or subculture.
- A hero embodies the values of a group. The hero serves as an example to follow for the group members.
- A hero shows us what constitutes the good life and proper way of living for that culture or group.
- A hero may not be perfect, but largely demonstrates what is good and admirable.
- A hero possesses qualities that capture people's imaginations. A hero inspires us.

Analyzing a Hero Story

1. What experiences, conflicts, and struggles does the hero enact?
2. According to the hero's character and actions, what does the story propose as the right way to live?
3. What character traits does the story encourage us to emulate? What negative traits does the story offer as errors to avoid?
4. What traits of the hero capture your imagination? What do you find inspiring about the hero or heroine?

Example: Daniel in the Lions' Den

Dan 6:1-24

1. **Conflicts, Struggles:** Although Daniel enjoyed the favor of three Persian kings, he belonged to a captive nation. The Persians opposed and persecuted Daniel's people. As a Christian, it is easy to compare Daniel's struggles to what you face with our opposing culture.
2. **Right Way to Live:** Daniel demonstrates the importance of being loyal to God, worshipping God regardless of persecution, and trusting God even under extreme duress.
3. **Character Traits to Affirm:** Daniel's serves as a model for courage, devotion to God, integrity, and faithful prayer.
4. **Inspiration:** Daniel's courage and devotion to God are inspiring. Even a pagan king admired Daniel.

* * * Other hero stories to consider: **Jesus**, Joseph, Gideon, Ruth, Esther.

Meaning of a Story

A story exists to convey truth about living. There are four common methods for determining the meaning of a story. You don't need to use all four every time.

Uncover the Meaning

1-Example to Follow or Avoid

- Divide the story into units of action. Name each one.
- Determine what example the story portrays.
- Consider whether the example is a positive one to follow or a negative one to avoid. Pay attention to your reactions (sympathy, aversion, approval, disapproval).

2-Topic and Theme

- Identify the topic of the story.
- Formulate a statement of what the story says about the topic.

3-Experiment in Living

- Identify the experiment in living for the characters and its **outcome**.
- Notice the storyteller's **point of view**. Details about the characters, action, or setting will be clues.
- Watch for **authorial commentary**. Sometimes, the author will directly provide his opinion.
- Determine whether the story offers the experiment in living as something we should practice or something we should reject in our own lives.

4-Picture of the World

- Notice what the storyteller gives us as a picture of the world.
- Observe what the picture presents as virtues and what it presents as vices.

Example: Abraham and Sarah's Sojourn

Gen 12:10-20; Story sequence:

Arrival > Crisis > Fear > Expediency > Divine Intervention > Escape from Egypt

- **Example to Follow or Avoid:** The story is an example of what happens when we resort to our own methods instead of trusting in God to protect us. It is an example of the negative effects of failing to trust God.
- **Topic and Theme:** The topic is trusting in human ability instead of God. The theme is that it is unwise to trust ourselves instead of God.
- **Experiment in Living:** Abraham and Sarah's experiment in living was to take matters into their own hands during a crisis. The story doesn't give an explicit negative verdict. They do escape Egypt; however, we can infer that these types of experiments are not worth the risk.
- **Picture of the World:** The story presents the world as a dangerous place in which to live. It shows that we must make difficult choices without knowing everything that would be useful in the process. Further, the story shows that God can intervene on our behalf. The story presents good behavior as trusting God, being truthful, respecting others, and not leaping to conclusions. It presents bad behavior as trusting in human ability, being deceptive, manipulating others to benefit ourselves, and not trusting God.