## Expounding the Story

1. The issues (1); Samson and Delilah (50)
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## Interpreting Narrative (50m)

### The Issues (1)

My starting point for considering the interpretation of scripture is suggested by the opening of the Letter to the Hebrews, which observes that “God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets.” Scripture has a variety of ways of speaking, and the process of interpretation requires a variety of hermeneutical approaches, corresponding to this variety in types of text. Discussion of how we are to interpret scripture (and how we are to preach on scripture) has often implicitly assumed that there will be a single approach to the task, but that assumption takes no account of the diversity of the ways in which scripture itself communicates. It utilizes many forms of speech, and I want to focus on four broad ones, from an Old Testament angle: history or story, instructions about behavior, warnings and promises in the Prophets, and prayers and praises and sayings in the poetic books. Our interpretation and our exposition of scripture need to allow for its diverse forms, and to reflect them.

In one sense, understanding is a quite straightforward task, a task people are successfully fulfilling every day as they read newspapers or novels or weather forecasts, watch plays or cartoons or advertisements, and listen to confidences or sermons or jokes. At the same time it is one which periodically catches us out, when we cannot see the point of the novel or the play, or mishear the confidence and hurt the one who shared it. When we are seeking to understand something cross-culturally the task of understanding increases, whether one moves within different ethnic or cultural groups in one’s own country, or moves between different world cultures. Further, beneath the recurrent experience of failure in understanding or awareness of difficulty in understanding lies something of a mystery: what is this thing called understanding, anyway? What makes it possible, what encourages it, what hinders it, what prevents it?

Like understanding in general, understanding scripture is in one sense a quite straightforward enterprise which ordinary people accomplish as effortlessly (courtesy of the labor of translators) as they understand newspapers, television, or each other. It, too, periodically catches them out, partly because of cultural differences beyond the linguistic gulf which separate most modern readers from the Bible: they make little sense of ritual instructions in Leviticus or visions in Daniel, they are unsure what we are supposed to learn from the nasty stories in Judges, or they read Genesis 1 - 3 as more historical, or more parabolic, than it may inherently be. Understanding scripture, too, raises questions of baffling depth: what do we mean by understanding scripture, anyway? What makes it possible, what encourages it, what hinders it, what prevents it? How can we hear what these human authors wanted to communicate in God’s name to their hearers? How can we hear what God wants to say to us through scripture? How far or on what basis can we perceive significances in scripture which go beyond the awareness of their authors, as the New Testament writers seem to in their appropriation of the Old?

With scripture, too, occasions when we have difficulty in understanding a text, or when an interpretation which is compelling to us is quite unconvincing to someone else, remind us of the element of mystery about the task of interpretation, and raise a further question. Who knows whether we miss whole aspects of the meaning of particular texts, or fundamentally misconstrue them, even when we feel no uncertainty about their meaning or do not find our understanding of them contradicted by someone else? Texts, after all, cannot answer back (“No, I didn’t mean that”) as people can. It is an advantage to feel we have grounds for being confident of the meaning of scripture; we can then obey and preach that meaning with confidence. It is difficult at the same time be open to being coaxed towards some other understanding of it. Openness to new understanding presupposes the willingness to yield old convictions.

The task of understanding can be considered in the abstract, but discussion of it can then become rather rarified, and I propose to forgo discussing the task in its “neat” or theoretical form. Understanding is a multiplex skill or art (understanding Hamlet, understanding the football results, understanding an atlas, understanding my husband ...). Ultimately a different approach is required for each form of the task. The varying objects of understanding with which scripture presents us similarly require varying approaches. Further, it happens that many of the insights which have emerged from the study of interpretation at the rarified, abstract level over recent decades come into sharper focus and are of more obvious application when applied to specific kinds of material. To be comprehensive would involve examining every scriptural genre one-by-one - ultimately examining every scriptural text; but that would be to sacrifice ourselves to the concrete as fatally as we might otherwise do to the abstract. The four broad genres that provide us with headings for considering how we think about scripture in its diversity of form also provide us with headings for considering how we interpret scripture in its diversity of form.

The object of preaching is to do something to people: to engender or to deepen the response of faith, questioning, hope, anger, love, reflection, repentance, obedience, worship. In order to do that, preaching is also involved in dispensing information, otherwise those attitudes and actions would not be a response. There is thus an overlap between preaching and teaching. In preaching, however, we are not merely dispensing information, and if people have forgotten the content of the sermon by Tuesday, or even by Sunday bedtime, this does not in itself mean that the sermon failed in its object. We are seeking to give people an opportunity to respond to God.

Attending to the written word is even harder than attending to the spoken word. We easily cut off our partner in mid-sentence; the text provides the preacher’s subject, but the preacher provides the predicate, which decides the nature of the statement made. Alternatively we may rely on having listened to this text on an earlier occasion, instead of listening anew in order to see if we are now in a position to hear it more fully or freshly and thus to preach a new sermon rather than re-preach yesterday’s. Or again, we may assume we know what the text “says” - indeed, we may have chosen this text because we “knew” what it said - and therefore that we have no need to listen to it. The preacher’s calling is that of a vicarious listening. We are set aside and invited to spend time listening on behalf of other people. Our task is to do that, and then to come before our congregation not as prophets who speak the word of God, but as people who have heard the prophets and apostles and are therefore in a position to share with them the results of such listening (Johnson).

If preaching involves taking up a task which the scriptures themselves are concerned with, it is natural to examine the ways the scriptures themselves go about the task to see how these are instructive for us. This leads us to consider another aspect of the diversity which characterizes all aspects of scripture. Preachers often settle into one particular approach to preaching, perhaps one valued in their own Christian tradition. In scripture itself different kinds of texts communicate in different ways, and they point towards diversity in the way we expound scripture.

There is a classical form of expository preaching which works by seeking to explain systematically and explicitly what is the central message of a text and how its various parts contribute to this message. It remains a means of opening up the significance of scripture in a powerful way, and it is vastly preferable to the three-point “thoughts which have occurred to me and which I am prepared to attribute to the Spirit and inflict on you” which can be the fare of the pulpit. But it is mainly appropriate for the texts in the Bible which are themselves directly expository or conceptual such as the prophets, the Sermon on the Mount, and the epistles. It is less appropriate for the history/story material in scripture. A common homiletic approach to the latter has been to summarize the story itself at the beginning of the sermon and then ask, “Well, what do we learn from this?”: at which point the sermon falls flat on its face as the preacher abandons the text’s story form and turns it back into the kind of direct teaching which those other parts of scripture offer.

It may also be less appropriate for texts such as the Psalms or other first person passages. The Psalms, at least, do not offer teaching about prayer or stories about prayer but models of prayer. When we read them, we are accepting an invitation to listen in on the Psalmists praying, to overhear what was going on between them and God. We are being invited to see if we can make their prayer our own and to test our prayer by theirs. We are not being invited to learn something about prayer, but to pray. Such a distinctive method of communicating within scripture points towards a distinctive method of communicating scripture. What could be involved in expounding the Psalms is to pray them oneself in order to draw the congregation into praying them - to preach by praying.

Francis Young likens the preacher to someone offering a performance of a work of art. “A classic repertoire ... encompasses a variety of genres: symphonies, concertos, tone poems, opera, comedy, tragedy, satire...”. These require different styles of performance. Similarly “each genre within the Bible will have its proper mode of performance. Narrative, poetry, prophecy, law, wisdom, hymns, prayers, visions - all these require different approaches” and are not to be assimilated to each other.

Different kinds of texts suggest different, complementary approaches to the interpretation and exposition of scripture. My aim in these four sessions is to work these out a bit.

### Samson and Delilah

Samson is one of the great examples of faith in the New Testament, someone the Bible expects us to learn from. So what sort of man was this hero of faith?

The Israelites had again done wrong in the eyes of Yahweh, who had given them into the power of the Philistines. At a political level it is a period of considerable violence in Israel's national relationships. Arguably international relations are thus in their 'normal' state; strife is more that normal state than is peace. On a gloomy day it can seem that to seek peace is always to work against the grain, that nations are inherently violent ‑ they always have been and they always will be. The individuals who make up nations are likewise innately violent (especially the men, for gender questions do seem to come into play here) ‑individual and national violence feed each other. The story of Samson in Judges is part of the story of violent relationships between the Israelites and the Philistines; Samson was to be the man to give the Philistines something to think about. It is also the story of his personal violence.

Samson was indeed someone God used. He was a man with a calling. Yet he was a tragic hero. But none of that is where the story starts. The first fact that becomes clear in his story is that Samson was the Old Testament James Bond. He fancied a Philistine girl, and went to win her. On the way a lion attacked him and he tore the lion apart the way you kill a goat (which would be more than enough for most of us), with his bare hands. 'But he did not tell his father or mother what he had done', the story says. Well, you wouldn't, would you? When he got to Timnah, the Philistines swindled him out of 30 lengths of linen and 30 suits (£3000?). So he went on to the next Philistine town, killed 30 men, and paid his debt with their clothes.

It seems he was not really satisfied with this revenge. Eventually he went and caught 300 foxes, tied torches to their tails, and turned the foxes loose in the Philistine cornfields and orchards. The Philistines, in their turn, killed Samson's wife and her father, though Samson got his own back on them in the end. 'He smote them, hip and thigh, with great slaughter.' This time the Philistines invaded Judah, looking for him. Samson's own people persuaded him to surrender himself, and the Philistines tied him up, but he broke their ropes as if these were sticky tape. He looked around and spotted a dead donkey, grabbed the donkey's jaw and went flailing at the Philistines, killing another thousand of them. The interwovenness of personal and national violence, and the place of God in all this, is noted in the observation that his parents have to be forgiven their opposition to Samson's marriage plans because they did not realize that these were giving Yahweh opportunity to intervene in politics and take some action to free Israel from Philistine oppression for a while (Jdg. 14:4).

The way the story has opened has revealed Samson's other obvious characteristic as well as his violent streak, his eye for girls. Mieke Bal has noted how the interwovenness of sex and violence is characteristic of the Book of Judges as a whole, and it is the combination of sex and violence that invites us to view Samson as an Old Testament James Bond, though it must be noted that in due course even James Bond cleaned up his act somewhat in the light of Aids. Samson is pre‑Aids, more a child of the 1960s. Samson first got into trouble because he fancied a Philistine girl, and later he was nearly caught in Gaza when he was spending a night with a girl there. But then there was Delilah, who was not just pretty or sexy: he fell for Delilah.

That brings us up short. James Bond does not fall in love. This is the point at which we move from Samson the Old Testament James Bond to Samson the tragic hero. Women and violence are the two themes that link Samson and James Bond, but the links are superficial. James Bond is always the successful ladies' man. If a heart is broken, it will not be his. He rides off into the sunset with a sequence of attractive girls.

For all the similarities, Samson is not quite the same. There are four women in Samson's story. There is the girl he married, the girl he picked up, and the girl he fell in love with, who occupy Judges 14, 15, and 16. But before we come to them, we read in chapter 13 about a very different woman, the one who bore him. She was like a number of other women in the Old Testament such as Sarah and Hannah. For years she had not been able to have children. They had tried and tried and hoped and prayed, and it had never happened. Then God promised she would have a son, and they called him Samson. It is a suggestive name: it means 'Sunshine'. As far as his mother was concerned, the sun shone out of his eyes. You can almost see her glowing pride as he grows to be bigger and stronger than anyone else in the area. That was the first woman in Samson's life. The picture of her and her husband contrasts sadly with the story of the woman he married because he fancied her and the woman he spent the night with because he felt like it.

Then there was the woman he fell in love with. Here is when Samson becomes a human being, when he softens and becomes vulnerable ‑ though I suspect there would be a feminist/psychoanalytical critique of this so‑called falling in love. If he does grow as a person, it is the means of his downfall. The tragedy was that it was a tale of unrequited love. Delilah was able to be the woman who found out the secret of Samson's strength and to tell the Philistines, for 30 pieces of silver. 'And the Philistines seized him and gouged out his eyes, and brought him down to Gaza, and bound him with bronze fetters. And he ground at the mill in the prison.' Delilah is a woman like Ya'el but working for the other side, using her womanliness in that connection as Samson is using his manliness, but also using her intelligence as he is not, because men so easily throw sense to the winds when diverted by what they think is love. In Judges Yahweh's spirit may convey power but it does not necessarily convey insight.

What exactly was it that was tragic about Samson? He was a disappointment to his family, he made a mess of his relationships, his manliness and strength were pathetically overcome and made fun of by the Philistines, but what was tragic about Samson was the contrast between what he was and what he was supposed to be before God. Samson was a man with a calling. He was supposed to be God's agent in liberating Israel from the Philistines. What happens, however, is that at the beginning of the story he marries a Philistine, and at the end of the story he dies with the Philistines.

There were other aspects to his calling. To mark him out as Yahweh's servant, he was supposed to be a Nazirite, someone especially devoted to God. A Nazirite was different in three ways from other people. He abstained from alcohol; it was perhaps a symbol of being filled with another Spirit. He avoided eating certain things, keeping a special version of the kosher laws that all Israelites observed. The point was not that there was anything wrong with these foods; they were not a threat to health. Abstaining from them simply marked the Nazirite out. His third distinctive mark was that he kept his hair long. That was another sign of his consecration, and thus another sign of the strength which came from the God he was consecrated to.

Those were Samson's vows. He breaks each one of them. First we see him at the same kind of wedding feast as everyone else, where (no doubt) the wine flowed freely. Then he eats some honey produced by bees who had made their nest in the carcass of that lion he killed, which means that the honey would be unclean. Finally there was his hair. 'How can you say you love me', said Delilah, 'when you keep your secrets from me? What is the secret of your strength?' She nagged him day after day until she wore him down and he told her. 'It's the fact that scissors have never been near my head, not since I was born, because I have been set apart as a Nazirite since birth. If my hair were cut off, my strength would go. I would be as weak as anyone else.' When Delilah saw that he had now told her the truth, she sent word to the Philistine SAS. 'Come back one more time. He has told me'. They came with the eleven hundred shekels they had promised her. She lulled him to sleep on her lap. Perhaps he was tired of fighting, like Sisera, and subconsciously wanted out ‑ in which case he reminds one of the tragic violent heroes of films such as *Once Upon A Time In America* who find they can never get out. As he slept like a baby on its mother's lap, Delilah called a man to cut off his seven plaits of hair, whereupon his strength left him. Then she shouted out, 'Samson, the Philistines are on top of you'. He woke up with a yawn and said to himself, 'Well, I shall soon see them off again', not realizing that Yahweh had left him. It was the contrast between the man he was and the man he was supposed to be that constituted his tragedy.

This might have been the end of the story, but it is not, and that is one good reason why the story appears in the Bible. We do not, of course, need the Bible to tell us James Bond stories. We have Ian Fleming to do that. But part of the reason why this kind of story is there is that inside most of us there is a little James Bond (or a little Delilah). That is partly why so many people like those films. They are fantasies.

The Bible's James Bond, however, lives in the real world, where sex and violence rebound on us. It makes us live in the actual world, not in a celluloid one. Then precisely because many of the instincts of Samson or Delilah are inside us, something of the tragedy of their stories also appears in our lives. We misuse our opportunities, mess up our relationships, and hurt people. We know that we fall short of God's vision and of the commitments we make to God.

The Samson story challenges us to look in the eye what it is that God wants to do with us and to look in the eye the kind of special commitments God asks of us, and to see how we are getting on with them. It presents us with a man who made a mess of his life, his relationships, and his calling. But it then tells us that this is not quite the end of the story, because even in that situation it is still possible to be the person God uses. This does not undo the tragedy, as the end of the story shows, but it takes a little of the edge off it.

The Philistines had captured Samson, gouged out his eyes, and taken him to Gaza. John Milton wrote a poem about Samson, whose blindness he shared. Many painters have painted Samson in his blindness, too. It is this aspect of Samson that has caught their imagination, perhaps because to them sight is so all‑important; they recall the sculptor in the play *Whose Life Is It Anyway*, who wishes to commit suicide when paralysis makes him unable to continue the creative activity which defines him as a human being. Milton also wrote a poem in which he overtly reflected on his own blindness.

God doth not need  
Either man's work or his own gifts: who best   
Bear his mild yoke, they serve him best. His state   
Is kingly: thousands at his bidding speed,   
and post o'er land and ocean without rest;   
They also serve who only stand and wait.

In a terrible sense that will also be true of Samson. Perhaps Yahweh was using Samson's love for Delilah just as had been the case with his attraction for the Philistine woman with whom the story began.

The Philistines had chained him up and set him to grinding corn in the prison. There the hair that had been cut off began to grow again. Then the time came for a festival in honour of their god, Dagon, and they assembled to worship him for delivering their troubler, Samson, into their hands (a woman never gets the credit, even if she does do the work). They fetched Samson from the prison and stood him in the middle of the temple to perform for their entertainment. Samson had to be led by a boy, of course, because he could not see. He asked the boy to put him where he could feel the pillars in the temple. It is helpful to know something about Philistine architecture: temples had two pillars in the middle to support the roof, as is illustrated in examples that have been excavated in Palestine in recent years.

Samson began to press with the strength of each arm on the two pillars; and Samson prayed. Samson is praying! 'Yahweh, remember me. Give me strength just once more, Yahweh. Give me one chance to get revenge on the Philistines, at least for blinding me. I will be happy to die with them!' He pushed with all his might, and the temple collapsed on the Philistine rulers and people and on Samson himself. He killed many more when he died than while he lived. The story ends with his family going to get his body, and burying him between Zorah and Eshtaol in the tomb of his father.

It is the end of the story, but Samson is mentioned that once more in scripture, in Hebrews 11. 'What more shall I say? I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson….' Even Samson is in the list of the heroes of faith; even Samson is among the cloud of witnesses. If there is room for Samson, there is room for you and me.

### The Nature of Biblical Stories

What have I presupposed in preaching on Samson in that way? First, I’ve presupposed that scripture points us to God’s deeds more than to our obligations. Its stories focus on God’s activity, on God’s grace, on God’s achievement of an aim or aims, rather than on human activity, humanity’s reaching out to God, or humanity’s activity in the cause of God.

Now when the believing communities preserved stories about Abraham or Moses, Joshua or Ruth, Josiah or Daniel, Nehemiah or Esther, Stephen or Paul, partly to offer examples for other believers called to live by faith, to exercise leadership, to withstand the pressures of life in a foreign land, to witness boldly before Jews and Gentiles. It is this function of stories which is taken up by a passage such as Hebrews 11. In the Old Testament it is perhaps more prominent in Chronicles than it is in Samuel-Kings’ account of the same period. Stories illustrate the commitments which the faith entails.

Focusing the interpretation of biblical narrative on its capacity to provide examples of how believers should or should not behave is thus a quite biblical procedure. Yet books on preaching often protest at such a “moralizing” approach (so e.g., Keck), and the protest is substantially justified. This way of using stories is very common indeed in the church, especially with children and in family services; in scripture it is much less so. There are theological and spiritual reasons for that. It is a use of scripture which focuses on God’s word to people as a challenge to them to perform certain acts or to manifest certain characteristics, and this is its fundamental limitation. The focus of the gospel story lies on what God has done for us. The New Testament is thus strikingly reticent in its use of the Old to provide examples for our behavior.

When we take stories as examples of what we should do or be, we risk turning the faith into something we do, rather than something God has done. Further, it is striking that the stories which centre on human initiative, bravery, faith, and fortitude commonly concern rather out-of-the-ordinary characters such as foreign heroines, Israelite kings, young princes, imperial officials, and exiled queens. People such as these will not commonly be direct examples for anyone else to follow, and their stories appear in scripture at least in part because in their out-of-the-ordinariness they became part of God’s story. Thus when Wesley Kort identifies four elements in biblical narrative, he sees all four as means whereby God’s person, power, wisdom, and grace are revealed, in plot (in a book such as Exodus), in characterization (in a book such as Judges), in atmosphere (in a book such as Jonah with its apparent negativity but its actual inclusiveness), and in tone or point of view (in a book such as Mark with its authoritative stance).

Perhaps one reason why preachers are inclined to use stories as examples for human behavior to a greater extent than scripture itself does is that as preachers we may feel that we only fulfill an aim and actually achieve something in our preaching if we tell our congregations what to do - they can then go and do it. Perhaps scripture gives this concern less prominence because it recognizes that when believers do not act or live as they should, it is commonly not because of ignorance, so that being given the right example will show us something we do not know. We need to be affected at a different level in order for our attitudes and behavior to change. Merely being given the correct positive or negative example may not help a great deal. “If we are to have changed obedience, we must have transformed imagination” (Brueggemann). Indeed, scriptural history implies that God’s story advances despite the deeds of the people of God (let alone those of outsiders) as often as through them. Here, too, it is not a question of “examples to be avoided”; the story is too realistic to think that they will be. Rather it portrays for us a world in which human sin and tragedy are real, but God’s grace and providence are bigger, and it invites us to flee from moralizing to grace.

Thus scripture uses stories to illustrate the experiences which the faith may involve at least as commonly as it uses them to illustrate the commitments which the faith entails. The stories are about God and the ways of God with the people of God; they show us how God characteristically relates to people like us. They encourage and challenge us not by giving us a clearer picture of what we should or should not be, but by giving us a clearer picture of who God is. The stories in Genesis, for instance, focus more on the way God deals with Abraham and Sarah than on the way Abraham and Sarah relate to God. Their emphasis is on God’s purpose, God’s promise, God’s initiative, God’s blessing, God’s covenant undertaking. They offer mirrors for identity more than models for morality. The Old Testament relates God’s story. It is the person and activity of Yahweh which are its narratives’ supreme interest and which come into clearest focus.

Sometimes Genesis expresses implicit or explicit approval of human attitudes and actions (e.g., 15:6; 22:16), but this is relatively rare. Commonly it is difficult to tell whether people are doing the “right” or the “wrong” thing, or acting from right or wrong motives, as is reflected in the longstanding difference of interpretation of passages such as the Hagar story in Genesis 16. If Genesis saw Abraham and Sarah primarily as examples to us, rights and wrongs would surely have to be made clear. If the stories mainly function to show how God fulfils a purpose for the world, despite as much as through human actions and circumstances, clarity about human motivation is less important. It is thus natural that when Isaiah 51 comes to appeal to the story of Abraham and Sarah, it appeals to it as an example of what God can do, not to the story as an example of what human faith can achieve.

To take stories as illustrations of the experiences which the faith regularly involves comes closer to their intrinsic nature, but it leaves certain problems unresolved. Not all stories embody characteristic experiences of faith. In particular, what is the purpose of miracle stories? If God marvelously delivered Israel at the Red Sea, rescued Daniel from the lions, brought back to life the widow’s son at Nain, and resurrected Jesus himself from death, we cannot infer that God with any frequency acts in that way for later believers. Martyrdom may be an infrequent occurrence, but it is much more common than miraculous rescue. The prominence of such miracle stories in the Bible, raising the question what message the preacher is to draw from them, brings to the surface particularly clearly an issue which arises with many stories. They do not indicate what God may do with us, any more than what God expects of us.

For stories which do not indicate what God may literally do with us, any more than what God expects of us, bring out a key characteristic of the biblical story as a whole: they bring to life the events on which the faith is based. The story of what God has done in Israel and what the God of Israel has done in Christ, as well as recounting the characteristic pattern of events which Christian faith can look to see repeated, also recounts the once-for-all events which are the foundation and object of the faith - its aetiologies and not merely its paradigms (R. Smend). This faith is a piece of good news with implications for the present and for the future, but it is news about events which are essentially past; they have happened once-for-all.

The statements in Luke-Acts and John regarding the purpose they were designed to fulfil (Luke 1:1-4; John 20:30-31; Acts 1:1-5) points to this significance in the story they tell. In the opening chapters of Mark, the chief significance of Jesus’ miracles stories seems to be the historical one that they indicate that Jesus has won a victory over forces of evil which inaugurates the reign of God in this world and this age. In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul assumes that the story of Jesus’ resurrection is important, not because it models the kind of experience of new life Christians may have in this life (though this point is made elsewhere), but because that was the once-for-all event in the past which guarantees our own rising from the dead at the End.

Stories in the Old Testament, too, were written to bring to life the once-for-all past events on which faith for the present and for the future have to be based. The Abraham story reminded Israel that they possessed their land only as God’s gift, in fulfillment of God’s promise. The exodus story reminded them that they had been only a herd of demoralized slaves in a foreign country, and would still be that but for the exercise of Yahweh’s power on their behalf. The Books of Kings showed how Israel ignored Yahweh’s expectations over centuries, and thus explained why they had ended up in exile. The fundamental function of biblical stories in general is to bring to life the events on which the faith is based. They are events which will not be repeated in our experience, yet ones which remain of crucial importance for us. The Bible’s nature as a witnessing tradition suggests that its primary concern is to relate what God did for us once-for-all, not what God regularly does, still less what we are supposed to do for God.

Individual biblical stories are not limited to fulfilling only one of the three aims just described; their depth may derive partly from their fulfilling several functions at once. Yet in any story one function will usually be more important than others. The dominant point in Ruth may be the way God’s providence takes two women through bereavement and exile into new life (“the experiences which the faith may involve”), though it also makes these events part of the introduction to the story of David (“the events on which the faith is based”) and probably implies that Ruth is a model of caring for a widow in need, Boaz of caring for a girl in need, and Naomi of how to get God and man to act. Disagreements about the present relevance of some stories (e.g., the use of Exodus in liberation theology or the use in charismatic renewal circles of stories from the Gospels and Acts about healing or raising the dead) are sometimes disagreements about whether these stories relate solely “the events on which the faith is based” or also offer paradigms of how God may act now or of how we should act now.

## Group work: Hannah (20m)

## Plenary (20m)

## Break (20m)

## The Issues (2) (30m)

## Groups (20m)

Is it right that we need to focus more on the story than on the events behind the story?

Is it correct that we evaluate the scriptural story by our story rather than the other way around?

What are the main ways in which our lives and ways of thinking make it hard for us to get into the biblical story?

## Plenary (20m)

## History and story

No book has aided me more in understanding the place of the Bible in church and academy in the West than Hans W. Frei’s *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*. In reading Scripture, Frei argues, people used to make two key assumptions about its narrative, and specifically about the truth of its narrative. It was true historically and true theologically. The narrative recounted things that actually happened, and its readers needed to see their lives in light of this narrative. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, these two assumptions and these two links collapsed.

On one hand, critical study established that there was a difference between the story the Scriptures told and the events to which the narrative refers. It then assumed it had to decide which of these it was interested in. But there was no contest. In the context of modernity, history was God. So critical study abandoned the study of the biblical text in its own right for the investigation of the events that lie behind it. And that became the focus of scholarly biblical study for much of two centuries. And one consequence was that scholarly study had virtually nothing for the preacher or the ordinary Christian who wants to live in light of 2 Tim 3:16-17.

One can now see that Frei’s own work was a sign of the “collapse of history” and the resurrection of narrative. This is not to go back on the discerning of a difference between story and history, but to reckon that God was involved in the crafting of the story as well as in the events in the history, and was involved in the crafting of the story even when it differed from the history. God likes history, but God also likes stories such as the parables, and does not mind mixing them. And generally it is the story, not the history, that preaches.

But with grievous irony, the postmodern context that made possible a renewed interest in narrative, or of which it was a sign, also made more radical the abandonment of the other link that Frei described. It was once the case that Christians assumed that the biblical story was true not only historically but theologically. It was the metanarrative in light of which we understand our story. The second unraveling that Frei analyzed involved the abandonment of that assumption. Instead of evaluating their story by the scriptural story, people came to evaluate the scriptural story by their story.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, a distinguishing mark of evangelical scholarship and faith was to resist both the developments Frei analyzed. Evangelicals insisted that the biblical narrative was wholly historical; this was the context of the development of concepts such as the infallibility of Scripture. There was no gap between narrative and history. Evangelicals also insisted that the scriptural story was theologically true; this was the context of the development of concepts such as the authority of Scripture.

Given the choice between either holding onto the narrative or giving up the conviction that the locus of revelation lay there and relocating it in the history that lies behind the narrative, they made the right decision. It is still appropriate to resist the assumptions of the Jesus Seminar. But standing on the shoulders of giants, we can now say that the choice was a false one. God was involved in the events of the biblical story and in the development of a narrative that was sufficiently factual but could incorporate nonfactual material. Both the investigation of the divinely-engineered or divinely-overseen events and the study of the divinely-inspired or divinely-overseen narrative are proper tasks, and we do not have to assimilate either the events and the narrative or the two forms of study.

With regard to the second issue, the irony is that many evangelicals have come unconsciously to share in modernity’s assumptions about the relationship of Scripture’s story and our story. Whereas once the principle was to understand our story in light of the scriptural story, now that order is reversed. Whereas once the principle was that the scriptural story is true and my experience needs to be interpreted in its light, now the principle is that my experience is true and the scriptural story needs to be interpreted (which often means “evaluated”) in its light. Generally we do not feel free to do this by actually saying that the Bible is wrong. Rather people note that the Bible is located in its culture, with the inevitable result that it has limitations that emerge from this. But we deceive ourselves about the principle that makes it possible to perceive this: namely, our assumption that we are right. We do not ask questions about the way our thinking is distorted because of the culture we live in. In such evangelical circles, authority lies in the contemporary church and its tradition and in the individual believer, not in Scripture.

What would happen if we were to start giving the scriptural narrative its due? A number of aspects of its nature are worth noting in this connection. The first is that the Bible is about God. The Old Testament reminds us that Christian faith is not about me but about God. And it reminds us that Christian faith is not about Jesus but about God, as Jesus himself kept emphasizing. The point about Jesus was to embody who God is, to show God’s power and God’s mercy, to embody God’s willingness to pay the price for human sin, to restore Israel in its relationship to God, and to make it possible for the Gentile world to relate to God.

Further, the Old Testament is about acts of God. Whereas it is possible for such an emphasis to give Christians the excuse to avoid being active in the world and leave everything to God, we are in more danger of the opposite mistake, of thinking that we are responsible to bring about the fulfillment of God’s purpose, to bring about or at least to further the kingdom of God, to bring about social justice in the world. One would have thought that two Christian millennia might have suggested we are unlikely to achieve this. It is God who is key.

The Old Testament is about things God did – created, chose, delivered, gave, and so on. Those are aorist verbs. Key to the achievement of God’s purpose in the world is acts God undertook once and for all. That is integral to the notion of Christian faith being a gospel, a piece of news about something God has done. In Romans 4, that fact is key to Paul’s argument that Abraham came before Moses, that a relationship based on an act of trust came before the filling out of that relationship by obedience expressed in symbolic acts such as circumcision or substantial acts such as those the Torah goes on to detail.

What does the Scripture say? “Abraham trusted in God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness”…. It was not written for him alone that “it was reckoned to him” but also for us.” (Rom 4:3, 22-23)

At the same time, this Old Testament narrative is far longer than necessary in order merely to recount God’s once-for-all acts, and one reason is that narrative makes it possible to discuss complex theological questions. Another feature of evangelicalism has been its attachment to the idea of a simple gospel, and the basic nature of that gospel is indeed straightforward. “Abraham trusted in God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.” But many key questions about God and us are also mysterious. What is the relationship between God’s grace and our obedience, God’s love and God’s anger, God’s sovereignty and our responsibility? The Old Testament narrative with its theological implications rescues us from an oversimplified faith and gives us ways of thinking about mysterious, complex, involved questions of this kind.

Textbooks such as John Bright’s *A History of Israel* have long been popular with people who study the Bible. There a number of reasons for this. The actual history of Israel is to be expected to be theologically illuminating both in itself and as the background to the Christ event, and is thus worth studying; further, Bright’s work had a relatively high estimate of the Old Testament’s historical value and is thus a more reassuring example of the genre than some others. But another reason for its popularity is the assumption that in recounting Israel’s history it could be presumed to be giving the reader an understanding of the meaning of the Old Testament itself.

This assumption takes no account of the fact that the truth of the biblical story is more than its historical facticity. The task of understanding the meaning of that story cannot be reduced to the task of establishing the historical facts that underlie it. Indeed, the understanding of the story is not much furthered by books called A History of Israel. The scriptural narrative exists in order to offer a patterned portrayal of events, to express a vision. This central aspect of its importance is ignored when interpreters are preoccupied with discovering what historical events it refers to (the open, critical approach to the task) or with proving that it refers to historical events (the apologetic, conservative approach to the task) - or with disproving that it has any significant reference to historical events (the correlative skeptical approach to the task). Any of these concerns are distractions from the task of interpreting the narrative itself. We may question whether Karl Barth was right to proscribe the attempt to get behind the biblical witness to actual historical facts. There is a place for that. But Barth is right that hearing the witness of scripture is a matter of just that - listening to its actual witness, to the story that it tells, as it tells it.

Concern with the factuality of Genesis 1 offers an instructive instance of the way in which, if we are preoccupied with investigating the historical events to which a narrative refers, our attention easily becomes distracted from the narrative’s meaning. Various aspects of the chapter’s message or vision become clear when one considers it in its contexts in the literary work to which it belongs (Genesis-Kings; Genesis-Exodus; Genesis 1 - 11; Genesis 1 - 8; Genesis 1 - 3). Others become clear through consideration of its own internal dynamic: e.g., its structured form with its recurrent features (God speaking, God seeing, God calling) and its double climax in the creation of humanity and in God’s rest. Much of the depth and the excitement of this opening chapter of the Bible has been missed, however, when the focus in interpretation has been placed on the relationship between its picture and the possible scientific/historical facts about world origins.

Literary approaches to biblical narrative give concentrated attention to the story in which its witnessing tradition is mediated. Such approaches to interpretation are by no means confined to narrative, but in their application to scripture they have flourished and been especially creative here.

In *The Mirror and the Lamp* M. H. Abrams devised a helpful diagrammatic grid for understanding developments in literary criticism as they then stood. He categorized approaches to interpretation according to where their focus lay: whether it lay in the origins of the text (its date, sources, authorship, and purpose), in the external realities to which the text refers (such as historical and theological matters), in the text itself (for instance, in the structure and language of a story, its plot, characters, and points of view), or in the readers of the text (the nature of the audience presupposed by it, the way it communicates with them, and the way readers go about making sense of it). Abrams’s grid still provides a convenient starting point for a consideration of literary approaches to scripture.

Biblical interpretation has commonly concerned itself with the first two of Abrams’s four foci. Traditional critical interpretation has been centrally interested in establishing the historical background of the narratives, the historical process whereby they came into being, and the historical realities to which they refer. In the pre-critical period interpreters would have taken for granted that there was no distinction between the story told by a biblical narrative and the events that actually took place in biblical times, nor between the figure traditionally associated with a particular book and its actual author. During the critical age it is has been these distinctions which have been taken for granted, and the major focus of the stories’ interpretation has been the establishing and defending of views on their historical background and reference.

The views that have been held on these matters have varied, and fashions have changed regarding the degree to which we can derive historical information from the Pentateuch or can recover the historical Jesus. Social context, personality, and personal faith-convictions influence whether scholars take more conservative or more skeptical views on such matters. Yet scholars who take quite different positions on these historical questions share the same understanding of what is involved in interpreting the material. All are concerned with the stories’ historical background and historical reference; all overtly agree that the historical method enables one to investigate these. They disagree on the results of the investigation but agree on the nature of the questions to be investigated and - formally - on the methods for approaching them.

Now the prophetic books and the Epistles tend to draw attention to aspects of their historical background, and imply that knowing something of this background will help us to interpret them. The same has been widely assumed to be the case with narratives, and scholarship has spent considerable effort in seeking to place biblical narratives historically. The value of this can again be illustrated from Genesis 1, since several of its features seem to gain their significance from their exilic context, and an awareness of that context helps one to spot those features. The delay in making reference to sun, moon, and stars until the week of creation is half over, and the failure to name sun and moon even then, reflects the temptation to overestimate their significance in a Babylonian context, while the portrait of God doing a week’s work and then observing the sabbath reflects the converse temptation to underestimate the sabbath’s significance in that context. General features of Israelite or first-century life are often an important part of the taken-for-granted background to biblical narratives. Nevertheless the value of efforts to establish their precise historical context has been overrated. It is unusual for us to be able to place them geographically and historically with certainty and precision. This issues from an aspect of their inherent nature. Prophets and Epistles work by revealing their background, intention, and message. Narratives work by being more reserved about such matters.

In awareness of such facts, a substantial critique of the historical approach to interpretation has now accumulated.

First, the fact that its practitioners cannot reach agreed results reflects not merely the fact that some are using the wrong methods or starting from mistaken assumptions, but the fact that all are asking questions whose answers the text by definition conceals. Admittedly this may make these questions paradoxically attractive to a profession which thrives on asking questions that are not too readily answered. Much study of the Song of Hannah in the story of Samuel’s birth, for instance, has focused on locating it in a specific socio-historical setting rather than interpreting it in its literary context in 1 Samuel. There is broad agreement that its origin is later than the events the story is relating, but little agreement about the particular historical context from which it did originally emerge. South African interpreters of the Cain and Abel story have sought to consider it in the light of socio-critical insight, but their study suffers from radical diversity in conclusions even among people committed to the black struggle.

Second, and conversely, because the historical approach’s interest centers on a topic on which the text does not overtly focus, it misses the text’s specific burden and thus misfocuses the interpretative task. It cannot directly help exegesis. We have noted that establishing the historical events which lie behind the story does not in itself establish the story’s meaning. The many biblical commentaries which concentrate on the historical background, reference, and implications of their texts, and on the process of development whereby the traditions reached their final form, are sidetracked by these from the actual task of exegeting the text. The point has been put with special trenchancy by Robert Polzin in a review of works on 1 Samuel. He notes the effort put into establishing its correct text, which is then ignored out of a desire to excavate behind it to its hypothetical earlier forms, so that the object of study is the pre-text rather than the text.

Third, the historical approach is capable of casting doubts on the truth of the text it studies, by questioning its historical value, but it is not capable of vindicating its truth. Its historical results are always tentative, and by their nature thay cannot establish the religious heart of the stories’ truth-claim. They cannot establish what is now sometimes called the viability of the world they portray to their audience.

Fourth, again to extend the previous point, the historical approach inevitably thus fails to realize the text’s own aim. The form of objectivity it seeks is not only unattainable but not worth attaining. Whatever the text’s concern to convey historical information, it sought to do this not for its own sake but in order to bring a religious message. A piece of historical exegesis will generally acknowledge that it is handling a text with a religious message and will summarize that message, but it will not feel obliged to go beyond such a summary of this message’s surface structure. This fourth difficulty is compounded by the fact that for many people the stories being studied are not merely a religious text but part of their scriptures. To put this point in less confessional terms, the historical approach ignores the actual text which “has helped shape Western civilization and the Judeo-Christian culture at its core” (Polzin). Indeed it may make that achievement rather a mystery.

It is in part the sense of impasse which historical method has reached which makes literary approaches to the text worthy of investigation.

## Focusing on the story’s own form and structure

This sense of impasse draws us initially to the “formalist” approaches of what was once the “new criticism.” These focus on the story itself, on the precise nature of a text’s structure and language, on narrative plot and characterization as these unfold in the work as a whole, and on matters such as the development of themes within a story, its patterns, motifs, images, and actual words, its use of anticipation, flashback, questions, and irony, and the points of view from which it is told.

The interpretation of a story thus emerges from the story itself rather than from attempts to trace the process whereby it came into being or the events it refers to. Formalism’s stress on rigour of attention to the actual text forms an important complement to talk of intuition and openness in reading stories. Interpreting a story requires a demanding combination of sensitivity, openness, enthusiasm, imagination, the rigour and slog of hard work that develops ideas and tests them (cf. Haller). We do not wish to be reading an alien insight into the text - or more likely a marginal idea into the centre of it. I believe, for instance, that the theme which runs through Genesis is that of God’s blessing - originally given, deservedly compromised, graciously promised, variously imperilled, partially experienced. This understanding is suggested by verbal clues in the text itself, but it must be tested by \FT considering how the book’s various episodes relate to this theme. Interpretation is not arbitrary, imagination imagining its own meanings into the text. It “cannot be based merely on an imaginative impression of the story but must be undertaken through minute critical attention to the biblical writer’s articulations of narrative form”; we require not merely imaginativeness but precision (Alter). “Imagination and the distrust of imagination go together” (Fisch).

The central principle for the interpretation of scripture pressed by Benjamin Jowett in his paper in Essays and Reviews was “Interpret the Scripture like any other book.” Read the text itself. That is the concern of formalist interpretation.

## Authors and audiences

Stories themselves presuppose certain sorts of hearers, and sometimes indicate what sort of audience can hear them aright. Reader-oriented approaches to interpretation ask questions about the nature of the readers presupposed by a story and about the effect a story is designed to have on them. The human authors of a story are all-important to its existence, but the form of a story enables them to hide; its audience is invited to collude with them in acting as if the story came into existence of itself and is its own authority. In the same way, the audience of a story is usually not directly addressed by it, as they are in some other forms of speech, but it is thereby the more compellingly manipulated. Although formally absent from the story, it is substantially omnipresent insofar as stories are created not just for their own sake but in order to do something to some people. A story has “implied readers” (Iser) - people who are in a position to make the proper response to it. A story is told in such a way as to work for an audience, e.g., by means of the order in which it relates events (commonly not the chronological one) and the rate at which it releases information. It tantalizes, teases, challenges, upsets, makes the audience think, forces it to come inside the story and involve itself with it if it is to understand (Keegan).

Given that we are not the originally envisaged audience of any biblical story, we are invited to an act of imagination which takes us inside the concerns of such an audience. The fact that we cannot precisely locate these hearers geographically or chronologically need not matter because it is the concerns that the stories themselves express that we seek to share. We are invited to listen to them as people for whom such stories were told, to listen to them from the inside. We have noted in chapter 2a that interpretation involves not the exercise of untrammeled imagination but close attention to the particularities of this text, but also that it is not merely an analytic and intellectual affair but one which involves being willing to be drawn into stories. Thus with regard to their interpretation “a man without an imagination is more of an invalid than one who lacks a leg” (Barth).

We cannot live our real lives inside these stories. We have to live them in our own context, confronted by its questions, needs, and pressures. If the stories are to do to us what they were designed to do to their original hearers, a further act of imagination is needed, one which sets some of our questions, needs, and pressures alongside those which the stories directly addressed, in a way which is open to seeing how they address these, so that we may respond to them by telling our story in a way that links it onto the biblical stories.

Conceptually these two acts of imagination can be clearly distinguished. In their operation they are likely to interpenetrate each other. Grasping the biblical stories’ significance may enable us to see how to tell our story; bringing the latter to the biblical stories may also fill out our grasp of their own significance. Interpretation involves the whole person, feelings, attitudes, and wills, as well as minds; it also involves us, not merely people 2500 years ago.

## The role of ambiguity and openness in stories

One of the ways in which stories do things to an audience is by leaving questions and ambiguities for their audience to answer or to resolve. We have to recognize and accept the presence of such ambiguity in texts rather than working on the assumption that if only we had all the right information everything would be clear. Sometimes authors do not make themselves clear. This may happen either by accident or on purpose; whichever is the case, ambiguity is then a fact to be acknowledged and made the most of. It can be creatively provocative. Beyond this kind of deliberate or accidental ambiguity, no story can tell us everything that happens in the course of the events it relates, or everything about its characters. “There is something more to the reception of the meaning of a literary work than simply its decoding by means of universally held deep structures. What is in need of decoding by the reader is not entirely determined.... The structure itself involves potentialities. Gaps that occur in the text are deliberate and essential.” As a result, the same story can be actualized in a variety of ways by different readers (Keegan, summarizing Iser).

Traditional biblical interpretation has difficulty tolerating ambiguity and openness; it assumes that the author aimed at clarity and precision, and it brings all the resources of historical and linguistic scholarship to bear on the elucidating of the text’s clear meaning. Apparent ambiguity in texts is likely to be assumed to derive from our not sharing the conventions and assumptions that author and first audience shared. Formalist interpretation also seeks by means of its close study of the objective data provided by a biblical text to discover its inherent meaning and to provide a check on our intuitions as to its meaning. But there are aspects of the intrinsic meaning of biblical stories on which such data seem to be missing. An audience-oriented approach to interpretation presupposes that ambiguity is inherent in a story and asks what its opennesses do to an audience, or what it does with them, aware that precisely in its ambiguity at such points the story can challenge an audience regarding its own attitude. This comes about through the need for us to “fill in the blanks” in the story (so e.g., Miscall). We do not do that once and for all; the openness of the story means we have to keep coming back to it, “brooding over gaps in the information provided” (Alter). In this sense the meaning of a story is something which its audience provides; “readers make sense” (McKnight’s repeated aphorism).

There are irresolvable ambiguities in the portraits of biblical characters such as Moses, Saul or David, which prohibit simple understandings of their stories. Is David raised up by God to be Israel’s king, or does he emerge as an epic hero? Is he the man who does the right thing and the man with God’s blessing, or is he the man with an eye to the main chance and the man who always manages to fall on his feet? What are we to make of the two accounts of his introduction to Saul (see Alter)? When Moses strikes out at the sight of an Egyptian beating an Israelite (Exod 2:11-15), is he using the wrong method to reach the right end, or manifesting the qualities of spirit worthy of one who is to be the means of Yahweh’s smiting Pharaoh? There are hints in the passage pointing both ways, so that it brings out rather than resolves the ambiguities in the act of violence (so Childs).

Alter suggests that the “indeterminacy of meaning” characteristic of much biblical narrative, with its “complex moral and psychological realism”, reflects an implicit theology. “God’s purposes are always entrammeled in history, dependent on the acts of individual men and women for their continuing realization. To scrutinize biblical personages as fictional characters is to see them more sharply in the multi-faceted, contradictory aspects of their human individuality, which is the biblical God’s chosen medium for His experiment with Israel and history”. This links with the disinclination of biblical narrative to pronounce on people’s inner thoughts: leaving the gaps leaves room for the “conjectures of grace” and “the mystery of God-with-us” (Buttrick).

## What we bring to stories

If understanding stories inevitably involves us as whole people, it involves our hearing them with the advantages and disadvantages of our background, experience, and commitments. Colluding with custom, I began by treating the historical and formalist approaches as if they were objective and positivist rather than hermeneutical in their own nature. But this is not so.

Liberation and feminist hermeneutics illustrate the way in which audiences with particular backgrounds are able to perceive, articulate, and respond to aspects of texts which audiences with other backgrounds may miss and be missed by, even though they also illustrate how the same audiences (like all audiences) are also by virtue of their background liable to mishear the text in other respects. Both can be seen as instances of reader-response approaches to scripture, ones which use their particular initial horizons or pre-understandings as their ways into the text’s concerns, and both make it clear that what we are able to see reflects not merely our intellectual pre-understanding but our practical pre-commitment. Interpretation is shaped by the way we live. This has been so with slavism, racism, sexism, homophobia, and capitalism (which has discounted the Hebrew Bible’s proscription on usury) (Cannon). It has also been so with their antonyms (see Swartley).

There is another sense in which the objectivity of formalist interpretation may be questioned. It might seem that analyses of the structure of texts were objective and easy to agree on, but this does not seem to be so. The theory was that formalist approaches should enable us to discover something of the stories’ own burden. By taking their own structural, rhetorical, and linguistic features as the key to identifying their central concerns, we should be able to concentrate attention on questions raised by the chapters themselves rather than ones extrinsic to them.

## How stories preach

Stories are a key means by which scripture communicates and therefore a key resource for the preacher. How do these stories work as a way of preaching? How do they suggest we go about preaching on them?

We have noted that classical expository preaching has essentially one form, taking an analytic and discursive approach to all kinds of texts and thus not utilizing a variety of ways of communicating in the way that the Bible itself does. Some years ago I took a course on communicating on television. We had to do a five-minute presentation of one of the parables, and I adopted an abbreviated version of the usual approach I would use for the exposition of a story, summarizing the story at the beginning of the talk, asking “Well, what do we learn from this?” - and telling them. The tutors on the course pointed out that this was not how the biblical stories themselves work. Further, they pointed out, when the sermon makes the transition from retelling the story to analysing its lessons, the sermon’s dynamic collapses. I think I recognized the point, but did not quite know what to do about it.

As I was wondering how to develop an approach to preaching which would deal better with story texts, I came across a book called Communicating the Word of God by John Wijngaards which looks helpfully at appropriate ways of preaching on many different kinds of scriptural material. It was the chapter on history/story that especially interested me. I was due to preach on Abraham soon after, and decided to try a method Wijngaards suggests, retelling part of the story fairly straight, then reflecting on that part (perhaps talking about a modern experience which might be equivalent), then telling more of the story, then reflecting again, then telling more of the story once again....

As I preached the sermon, I quaked at the knees, feeling I was taking people back to an old-fashioned children’s Sunday School. Yet I do not remember ever receiving more appreciative comeback from a sermon. I proved to myself that there is a power about stories which reaches adults as profoundly as it reaches children. Like children, they will collude with us if we tell the story in a way that invites them to forget that they know it (avoiding the use of phrases such as “As we know, ...”), so as to enable themselves to be drawn into its wonder once again. A. T. and R. P. C. Hanson criticize a preacher who, despite not taking the view that the story of Jesus and Nicodemus actually happened, in preaching on that story retold it in the way one would if it had actually happened. Even an undeniably fictional story such as a parable needs to be preached in such a way that it works once more as a story; all the more so, then, the realistic stories in the Gospels. Many of these we may not be able to locate with certainty on the continuum between fact and fiction; but that may make no difference to the way they preach.

The Hansons’ remark does raise an issue which church life needs to handle. James Smart tells a story about the introduction of a new Christian education curriculum in a church. For the first time historical and literary questions were to be handled and questions about matters such as the factuality of Genesis 1 - 2 were to be raised. The new literature was met by a storm of protest. “In one village three men, prominent in the local church, were standing in the street reviewing the situation with some concern when a retired minister, who had been their pastor many years before, joined them. They told him what they were discussing and received from him the assurance that there was nothing really new or disturbing in the approach of the curriculum to the Bible. `We had it all in seminary fifty years ago,’ he said, to which the immediate retort of one of the men was, `Then why in hell didn’t you tell us about it?’“

The pulpit is rarely the place to do so, because the pulpit is designed for another purpose, and because it does not allow the kind of discussion that the issues need (though when I preach on material such as Genesis 1 - 3 or Jonah where the issues are already in people’s awareness I generally tell people my view on the story’s historicity; this usually brings appreciation from members of the congregation who are glad to be given a way into thinking about the question, but sometimes induces concern in the resident minister for one reason or another!). Elsewhere in the church’s programme there need to be occasions when people can think about these questions as part of their Christian maturing. It is pardonable that the minister in seminary fifty years ago found the questions difficult to handle. It is easier now for us to see how to hold together (for instance) a confidence in the witnessing tradition’s trustworthiness with an openness to its being imaginative rather than positivist history. As ordinary Christians help theologians keep in touch with God’s speaking to us through scripture, so theologically literate Christians owe it to their brothers and sisters in Christ to facilitate their thinking these issues through.

So how do stories preach?

## How biblical stories preach

The Gospels illustrate four ways of going about the telling of a story so as to enable it to be effective. One is by simply telling it. Interpretative comments by the narrator are rare; events speak for themselves. Many narratives in the Hebrew Bible work on this basis; but Mark’s Gospel is the most powerful driving straight narrative in scripture. In this breathless accumulating chain of stories, John Drury notes a “lack of relaxation or indulgence”; “every incident is a summons to recognize the mystery of Jesus and to follow him”. In this sense the story is quite straightforward in its message and way of working. At the same time readers who try to give themselves to individual stories in Mark find that they are puzzling opaque in their straightforwardness. They rarely tell us what to learn from them beyond what they contribute to the thrust of the Gospel as a whole. Drury comments that this work in which Mark first “took the momentous step of presenting the (Pauline) gospel of the cross entirely as history” has the “primeval power” of something done “powerfully and roughly for the first time”, compared with the “more elegant and digestible” work of subsequent masters such as Matthew and Luke. The latter do much more of the work for their readers. There is a theology implicit in Mark’s story of Jesus, but it is less overt than those of the other Gospels.

The reminder this issues to the preacher is the power of the bare story. The philosophy of story presupposes that a story can communicate and convey a world without the storytellers necessarily making explicit what principles or lessons they want people to draw from it. Mark’s Gospel points us towards a style of preaching which is simple, the mere retelling of a story, but which may be extremely powerful. The openness of the bare story means that neither the Evangelist nor the preacher can control what the listeners hear or receive and how they respond. The preacher realizes this and feels a responsibility to make explicit and underline what that point is. But by doing so we may destroy the dynamic of the story itself, which gets home in power precisely by working more subliminally.

Matthew’s Gospel illustrates a second way of telling stories, by building an application of the story into the way one tells it. We noted in chapter 2b how Matthew contemporizes Mark in order to draw his readers into his story. This is the way he makes his story work as “preaching”, as the bringing home of a message from God intended to change the faith and life of the hearers. A story such as that of the storm on the lake becomes a story about what can happen when you “follow” Jesus (the technical term for Christian discipleship). Matthew’s version of the story is distinctive first for the addition of two of Jesus’ sayings about such “following” (8:19-22). After that Matthew tells us that the disciples themselves “follow” Jesus into the boat (Mark says they “took him along”). So getting into the boat is an act of following Jesus, the storm is the kind of experience that sometimes comes to Christian disciples, “save, Lord” is the way they pray in crises, “of little faith” is his assessment of his followers (8:23-26).

In subtle ways, then, Matthew brings home the story’s application to the life of the church by the way he retells the details of the story. Similarly the preacher’s occasional sentences expressing what Jesus “said” (i.e. would have said) to people like us make it possible both to keep the story form, with its potential for reaching mind, heart, and will, and also to make clear how the story applies to us, without appending another sermonette on the end of the story such as risks destroying its impact.

There is another implication of the difference between the approaches of Matthew and Mark. In the terms we have used in chapter 2c, Mark is mainly concerned with “the events on which the faith is based”, with the Jesus of Galilee and Jerusalem to whom its readers have committed or should commit themselves. Matthew is more concerned with “the experiences which the faith may involve” and “the commitment which the faith entails” - with the Christ event’s continuing concrete implications for discipleship.

The point should not be exaggerated; Mark’s healing stories likely presuppose that the living Christ will continue to exercise his Lordship over the forces of evil in the church’s life as he did in the context of his earthly ministry. Conversely, as we have noted in chapter 2d, Matthew’s very beginning with its list of names establishing Jesus’ Jewish and Davidic ancestry indicates that Matthew is interested in the once-for-all historical Christ event. But a concern with the church’s life is nearer the surface in Matthew than it is in Mark.

In the Old Testament, Kings is more like Mark: as we have noted, it is an account of how the exile came about, “an act of praise at the justice of the judgment of God”, not an attempt to draw detailed lessons from the distant past for the present. Genesis and Chronicles are more like Matthew, retelling the story not only out of a concern that people may come to the right act of faith in regard to the events of the past, but also so that they may see the story’s implications for ongoing life in the present. Thus Genesis is concerned for the significance of sabbath, abstaining from blood, and circumcision for people taken into exile, while Chronicles emphasizes the significance of David’s arrangements for the temple and of the defeats and triumphs of pre-exilic history for people after the exile.

John’s method of contemporizing the story of Jesus is less subtle than Matthew’s. He offers examples of something like the procedure which subsequent preachers have often used (but which is otherwise rarer in scripture itself), whereby the point of the story is driven home by direct teaching material attached to the story to bring out its theological and ethical implications. Even here, however, the teaching can be presented as the words of Jesus himself rather than as the words of the evangelist (one might compare sermons within the Old Testament such as that in Joshua 1), so that the framework of the story form is kept.

A fourth form of biblical storytelling is instanced by Luke, which continues the Gospel story into the life of the church. Luke’s Gospel “becomes a sort of Old Testament to which the Book of Acts is the New Testament” (J. M. Robinson). Our story is thus linked onto the biblical story. This process had had a long history in Israel, most clearly in the way that Ezra and Nehemiah continue the story told in Kings and Chonicles. It also probably underlies the accumulation of the history in Genesis to Kings as a whole, which was repeatedly brought up-to-date by having new episodes linked onto it, as well as by being itself retold in updated ways. The eventual result of this process which contributed to the development of the scriptures as a whole is the macro-story which stretches from Beginning to End with Christ at its centre.

Because it looks forward to the End as well as back to the Beginning, it thereby actually embraces our story. It is possible to present a sermon by setting a biblical story and a modern story side-by-side, but whether we do precisely that in the pulpit, Luke’s work offers a suggestive clue to a way we may go about preparing the sermon (or studying scripture for ourselves). We are seeking to set an appropriate aspect of our story alongside the biblical story. We are linking our story onto God’s story (cf. Frei). Perhaps the untidiness, even incompleteness, of Luke-Acts (and that of Kings and Ezra-Nehemiah) constitutes an invitation to do this: as if to say, “We have added our story to what came before; now we leave it open to you to add yours.”

## How stories engage their readers

Stories engage their readers. How do they do that, and how do we enable them to do that in the retelling? The following observations may not be universals, but they may serve as broad generalizations.

First, stories have a beginning, a middle, and an end; that is, they are structured. They have a plot of some kind. We are presented with a problem which is to be solved; quite likely there are difficulties to be overcome on the way or consequences when the main events are over. In Gospel stories some point in them may lead to a significant remark by Jesus, and it is for the sake of the remark as much as for any other reason that the story is told. Interpreting a story involves working out how it works; it may then be natural for the sermon’s structure to follow that of the biblical story. The sermon may not have a structure in the sense of four points beginning with R, but it will still (for the congregation’s sake) be a structured entity rather than a ramble, in the more subtle way that a story is.

Second, they offer a concrete portrayal of a series of events against a particular historical, geographical, social, and cultural background. There is movement from one area to another, political and religious heroes and villains pass before the audience’s eyes, pressure points of economic or family or social life are alluded to or emphasized. For the story to grasp its modern hearers, the significance of these allusions have to come home to them. It is possible to convey this information in a ham-fisted way; there is no need to incorporate all the learning that may be gleaned from valuable works such as de Vaux’s Ancient Israel or Jeremias’s Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus, and one should spare the congregation the phrase “When I was in Israel...” (as rigorously as the phrase “The Greek word means...”!) - invaluable though a visit to the scene itself is to understanding and preaching on biblical stories. But the skilled storyteller can bring to life the concreteness and thus the reality of a story by more subtle, low-key explanations of the meaning of this detail or that, in the course of the imaginative reconstruction of a significant scene.

A third feature of biblical stories is that they invite their hearers to identify their life and circumstances with those presupposed by the story. In this way the story makes clear in the telling that it is about the hearer as well as about the subject. Features that mark biblical stories as unhistorical often originate with this characteristic. We have noted it in a Gospel story such as the stilling of the storm, which makes Jesus and his disciples use the language of the life of the church. In the Old Testament, Chronicles pictures priest and people of old behaving the way they would in the Chronicler’s day. The preacher, in retelling the story, similarly encourages the congregation to see the story as about people like them in situations like theirs - not by telling them that this is so, but by using the kind of language that makes it so.

In order to do this, as well as portraying the scene, the setting, and the action, the preacher may look at the events through the eyes of each of the characters in the story. One needs to be wary of psychologizing characters, imposing on the story modern interest in and modern forms of expression of the inner workings of people’s minds, and also of biographizing them, since biblical stories also do not share our interest in the way characters develop over time. Yet we can ask what the event concerned would mean for the kind of person involved, and how th ese characters would relate to each other, noting especially what we can learn from the words, feelings, and actions that are actually attributed to them.

For a fourth feature of many stories is their focusing on individual people with whom the hearers are invited to identify. Luke 7, for instance, offers its hearers a series of brief sketches involving a galaxy of players: Jesus, centurion, slave, elders, friends, crowd (verses 1-10); Jesus, disciples, crowd, widow, mourners, youth (verses 11-17); John, his disciples, Jesus, crowd, recipients of Jesus’ ministry, Pharisees, lawyers (verses 18-35); Pharisee, sinful woman, Jesus, guests (verses 36-50). The stories engage their hearers by offering them various characters with whom to identify. Different hearers then grasp different facets of the stories’ significance, so that group meditation on a story naturally leads different people to focus on and identify with different characters, in a way that can then be illuminating for the whole group. Different facets also come home to individual hearers at different times in their lives; there is no once-for-all hearing of a story. Our task as preachers is to open up as much as possible of the resources that lie in these various character portrayals, all of which can open up for people aspects of the gospel. It is to help people to get into the story, identifying with characters and situations as if hearing it for the first time, so that they can in doing so respond to the gospel in the way that they must.