**The Workshop Format:**

**A. Introduction**: 1) my story, Jesus story, why story,

**B. Story Theory**: loglines, elements (stakes, protagonist, antagonist), plot structure (beginning/middle/end, values, learning)

**C. Questionnaire and Study Guide for Ruth**

**Introduction---make this into a story about finding my vocatio**

My Background.

How many of you have found something that makes you lose track of time? Since moving to Oxford, I’ve discovered I love doing midrash poetry. I love sitting with a piece of scripture, letting it seep in, allowing time for the Spirit, or my muse, to enter the process, and then I’m usually surprised by the result, as if the poem didn’t come from me. I feel closer to God through this process. This is why I find the stories in the Bible as precious as rubies.

In hindsight I can see that I’ve been training to do this all my life. Understanding complexity, structure, and project management in my twenty-five years as an architect. Learning about story theory while I earned a screenwriting certificate at UCLA. Finding my way around the scriptures in thirty years of small group bible studies. Deepening my relationship with the scriptures and solidifying my theology while obtaining a Master’s degree in Theology at Fuller Seminary. Looking back, all my prayers have been answered and the crooked path was baffling but brought me to a place of peace. I highly recommend personal daily study and small group study weekly.

But I’ve learned it helps to have some tools for studying any book in the Bible. I’m going to share with you some of what I’ve learned and then we are going to practice on a story from the new testament that points to why we should study the old testament.

**Why study the Old Testament?**

I’m going to have Jesus tell us a story. This is on your handout- can three people read aloud – one be Jesus the narrator, one read Abraham’s quotes, and one read the rich man?

LUKE 16:19-31 (NIV)

The Rich Man and Lazarus

**19**“There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day. **20**At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores **21**and longing to eat what fell from the rich man’s table. Even the dogs came and licked his sores.

**22**“The time came when the beggar died and the angels carried him to Abraham’s side. The rich man also died and was buried. **23**In Hades, where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side.

**24**So (the rich man) called to him, ‘Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire.’

**25**“But Abraham replied, ‘Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here and you are in agony. **26**And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been set in place, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us.’

**27**“(the rich man) answered, ‘Then I beg you, father, send Lazarus to my family,**28**for I have five brothers. Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment.’

**29**“Abraham replied, ‘They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them.’

**30**“‘No, Father Abraham,’ he said, ‘but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.’

**31**“(Abraham) said to him, ‘If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.’”

**Why study Story Theory? Here are three of reasons I’ve found it valuable:**

**God has chosen to engage with us through stories.** We can see this in the story Jesus just told. The Gospel- the good news about Jesus- is told in story form.

The book of Ruth is a narrative story.

The Bible contains many stories. Some are meta-stories that encompass the entirety of the scriptures, and some are only one verse long. If we know how to look, we can find the stories in unexpected places: in the psalms, in the laws of Leviticus and Deuteronomy, in the wisdom sayings of Ecclesiastes. The histories and geneologies in the Old Testament are edited stories.

There are medium sized narratives: The forming of the Israelites as a people, human attempts at government, the prophets’ collective efforts to return people to God.

There are stories about individual characters: Noah, Abigail, Isaac, Hannah, David, Ruth. While these stories might be ancient, they have the potential to engage us in a living relationship with the Lord- right now, in our world today.

We might miss some of the potential for these stories to engage us if we don’t understand how story works- understanding can help us find the branch stories, the tree stories, and the forest stories.

**Stories are formative.** Most people in our culture are experts on stories. We recognize a “good story” or a poorly told story right away. We love some stories- they are affirming; and we are disturbed by stories that upend our vision of the world. We readily recognize genre- romance, drama, science fiction. If you don’t gloss them over with soaring arias, most bible stories are horror stories.

Name some everyday stories: (tv serials, movies, media memes, twitter statements, advertisements, novels, newspaper, newscasts, Netflix, cartoons, school lessons- maths story problems, book covers, consumer packaging, poems, sports games.)

What do I mean by formative? Scientists have shown that, through ‘mirror neurons,’ we experience a sports event or movie or tv advertisement as if we are in it.

The viewer’s neurons mimic- are activated in the same way- as the athlete’s neurons when they score a goal. You experience the win or the happiness of buying that brand in the same part of the brain as the athlete or character in an advertisement.

Stories call us to action and belief. They can also define our identity. All tribes have stories and if you believe the tribal story, you are part of that tribe.

We accept some stories so naturally that we don’t realize we are being manipulated. We fail to ask important questions about what we are being told -this is what generates the concern around manipulation of elections and of consumers.

**We view stories from our personal addresses, which we might take for granted.** We all come from a certain part of the world, a particular family situation, we have certain physical characteristics and limitations, innate personalities, and we have lifetimes of experiences that impact us. All these ‘addresses’ establish how we interpret a story- we view through our personal point of view.

For example: People who drink alcohol in their culture don’t concern themselves about why someone might serve wine at a wedding in a Bible story. Poor cultures might wonder how a wedding party that includes alcohol can be afforded, suffering alcoholics might wonder why this is encouraged, dry societies for holiness reasons might wonder if such a story corrupts the validity of the scripture.

Understanding how stories work can help us discover how our expectations and prejudices affect our interpretation of the story.

Understanding can help us break through some of our initial reactions to events or characters in the story and find deeper levels of relevance and meaning.

**Conclusion- why study story theory: We study stories because it’s how God has chosen to engage us, they form us whether we like it or not, and awareness of our own point of view can help us interpret and engage Biblical stories from different cultures and eras.**

**Story Theory**

When I talk about ‘modern’ story theory we can all laugh because these story ‘techniques’ have been around for four centuries before Christ. They are grounded in Aristotle’s Poetics- he lived from 384-322BCE.

**What is a story?**

In screenwriting the first thing they teach us is a good story fits in a neat logline of 25 words or less and follows this pattern:

“Someone wants something important and is having a hard time getting it because of X.”

Lazarus wants to save his brothers from Hades but can’t because they won’t listen to God’s word.

Romeo and Juliet want to be together forever but can’t because their families are at war.

DCI Vera Stanhope wants justice for a murder victim but can’t get it because the murderer and others are not forthcoming for self-serving reasons.

Why does Hollywood suggest this? Because if you happen to get on an elevator with someone important you have to be able to sell your story in 25 words or less.

Could you give an enticing logline of the entire Biblical story in 25 words or less? Prepare for this, you never know when someone might ask, “What’s the Bible About?”

**What might be a logline for a football match?**

If the story compacted into a logline isn’t compelling, the listener will turn away, and the impact will be lost. I encourage you to explore your own walk-with-faith story. Write it out, so that you can have an elevator pitch, a logline, that convinces your non-Christian friends and family to become curious about Jesus. If you find this difficult, read the Bible more, you might recognize your story in its characters and find a pattern.

**Elements**

The three main elements to discern are: the protagonist, the stakes, and the antagonist.

The person who wants something is the protagonist,

the “something important they want” is the stakes- often heightened by a ticking clock-

and reason they are having a hard time getting it is the antagonist.

The antagonist can be external- an evil person or a famine- or the antagonist can be internal- a personality problem of the antagonist- most often it is both.

These three elements can shift depending on the Point of View of the story. Usually the point of view means telling the story as the main protagonist is experiencing it. But not always. Misinterpreting the primary point of view of Biblical stories can be dangerous. Ask yourself: whose story is it?

What questions are left unanswered? Things that are not important to these main elements, which consist of the protagonist getting what they want, are left out. Jewish midrash is an exercise in looking at the gaps in what the scriptures say and imagining or debating what went on in the gap.

If questions can’t be answered by the actual words in the passage- we can use that to help us discern what the passage is about, and how our addresses taint our interpretation. It is helpful to ask ourselves why we are obsessed with getting an answer to a question not addressed by the words in the text.

Let’s look at our story from Luke:

In our story about Hades, we don’t know why Lazarus was with Abraham. We can mistakenly assume it is because he was poor and we can rush out and give away everything we own, but still end up in Hades. Or that Lazarus suffered without complaining and decide its okay to stay in an abusive situation because our reward will be in heaven. Although it might be a comfort to a poor person, or it might help someone endure unjust suffering, neither of these issues enters into why Jesus told the story. We can also get hooked by our own assumptions- the rich man couldn’t listen because he was powerful- so being rich and powerful must lead to being evil – or maybe it just makes it more difficult to listen because you don’t have to, but the story does not imply that simply being rich prevents listening. We might conclude that if Lazarus was fed by the rich man that he would have brought him water in Hades, or that he would not be there. This again is the wrong conclusion, as the story does not tell us this. Jesus’ message is about the brothers, who had no interaction with Lazarus in the story. Others might also conclude that Jesus is just being mean and should have let the rich man have water, or even be saved for his lovely concern for his brothers. But that isn’t the point of the story either. Listening to the word of Moses and the Prophets is the only salvation offered in the story. This will not be the same means of salvation offered for anyone in the book of Ruth, or is it? You will need to discern: what are the questions asked in the story and what are the answers? Where might I be making assumptions?

Ask:

Who is the protagonist?

What do they want?

Who or what is keeping them from getting it- who/what is the antagonist?

**What might that be a meta-story logline for the entire bible? Mine is:**

God wants to love us but is having a hard time convincing us of this because we seek peace, security, or love from other sources.

Shape- How the story is told

Most stories have a recognizable shape or pattern. Hollywood and tv recognize that audiences demand a certain plot pattern.

Analysis by Aristotle and Horace show the same patterns. Analysts have shown Shakespeare used these patterns. Whether they are conscious for the writer, or unconscious, is not the point.

We talked about the logline: “Someone wants something important and is having a hard time getting it because of X.”

Now we are going to flesh that out:

Someone wants something important and is having a hard time getting it…

until they learn something new, remember something, or change something…

then implement the lesson—practice how to use it and triumph….

Or they fail to learn it or fail to use it well enough and thus fail to get what they want.

In the psalms people often cry out because everything is going wrong, there is no rest from the evil that is after them…then they remember God’s love or power or protection, and they are at peace and can go to sleep. In our Lazarus and the Rich man story, anyone in the brothers’ position learns- from hearing the story- that they need to listen- before it’s too late- to Moses and the Prophets in order to not end up in Hades. Thus Jesus does ‘save the brothers’-- by telling the story. Often there is a character we ‘step into’ so we experience what they experience and learn from their story. We are not always the main protagonist. Aren’t we meant to be the brothers in Jesus’ story?

The shape is expressed in progressive acts:

Every complete story has a Beginning, a Middle, and an End expressed as:

Act One: The Ordinary World where the protagonist encounters a problem

Act Two: A battle or journey ensues to correct the problem (longest act)

Act Three: The problem is resolved and the world is different.

There are different theatrical varieties of these acts.

Examples:

Act One: Thesis, Act Two: Antithesis, Act Three: Synthesis

Act Two can have three parts- to make a five-act play

A seven act play:

1. There is a problem
2. Must leave the familiar world
3. Protagonist goes on a journey
4. Finds a solution—or think they have—at a point of no return
5. Take solution in hand
6. Try to return home but consequences of taking “it” pursue them
7. They overcome the consequences, solve their problem, the world changes

A story may not have an easy ‘one answer’ meaning. Jewish Midrash begins from gaps sensed in the texts and questions that readers feel arise in them, which encourages reflection on issues that concern the readers.

E Frankel has written The Five Books of Miriam that use the technique of midrash to expound “what the Torah means to women”… a variety of comments on issues in the form of conversation between the text and its interpreters… this is us as we study.

The manner of Talmudic discussion often leaves the conversation on a passage open rather than closed… so that we can add our own interpretations.

Questions may be more important than answers. We need to remember to pray and ask the Spirit to participate in our interpretations.

**Questions to consider for the story in the book of Ruth:**

Logline

Protagonist

Antagonist

Obstacles

Acts I, II, III or more

Key turning points

More than one story

Who do you relate to the most?

Pick one character and tell the story from another point of view

Unanswered questions

Stories within the story

How does this story pull you into relationship with God?