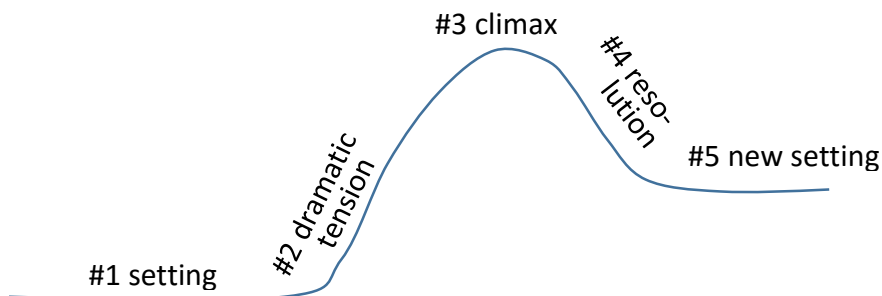


Structure: how narrative works

A word on narrative literature

In the same way we write by forming sentences and paragraphs with purposeful structure, the biblical authors assembled their writings with intentionality. Each passage of Scripture has a Holy Spirit inspired structure. This structure is what holds all the pieces together and gives it shape, and which reveals the author's emphasis to the reader. When we are able to discern the shape and emphasis it can help lead us to the main idea of the passage. Therefore, learning how to spot structure is an important skill. One of the challenges to be aware of is that different genres use different tactics to form passages. For narrative literature the most popular literary devices used include the following.

PLOT ARC— stories are often written with five elements: 1st, there is a setting; 2nd, a dramatic tension emerges; 3rd, the tension reaches a breaking point (climax) where something must happen; 4th, once it is completed there is a relief of tension (resolution); 5th, this takes us to a new setting (not necessarily geographically). At times not all of these elements are present, but in general there are two places on the arc where the author may intentionally draw our attention to in order to reveal the emphasis and main point of the passage. First is the climax. Spot that and often you have found the emphasis of the passage. One way to think through where it might be, is to ask yourself if the passage was shown on television where the major dramatic commercial break would be¹. This will be the peak breaking point, and you'll want to pay special attention to the material immediately leading up to it and after it, which together may reveal the main idea of the passage. The second place it may show up is in the new setting, where sometimes the author gives the interpretation. In this case the author straight up tells us what the point is after the story is complete, sort of like, "This all happened so that/because..." (Josh. 4:23-24).



CHARACTERS – pay attention to the way the author portrays each character (first introductions, names given or not given, positive and negative authorial descriptions, changes in the character's internal world, speeches

¹ 1 Sam. 17:49a, as David's stone is in the air and the future of Israel hangs in the balance (they either become slaves or the Philistines become theirs – so were the stipulations according to Goliath) – and the commercial begins. The one hope is that David's speech will prove accurate (vv. 46-47), so that all would know there is a God in Israel who does not deliver by sword or spear, and that if David wins then Israel gets to join in the plunder (vv. 52-53).

or silence). Sometimes an author will structure a passage with multiple characters – especially in a contrasting way – to make a point (Ruth 4:1-12).

REPETITION – this is a universal strategy across all genres. Any time an author repeats a word, phrase or concept it is worth paying attention to. Keep in mind that we want to look for “key” terms, not just anything will do. For example, the word “the”, showing up a dozen times probably is not significant. But the word “redemption” occurring even half that probably is (1 Sam. 25, “kept”, “restrained”; 1 Sam. 3:1-4:1, “word”).

GENRE INSERTION/SHIFT – at times an author may insert a different type of literature into the middle of a narrative (1 Sam. 15:22-23). A common genre insertion is poetry, which often is be done through one of the characters. When this happens it may be a hot spot of the passage, indicating emphasis and directing us to the main point. This is not always the case, but pay close attention when you see it.

EDITORIAL COMMENTS – as the author tells the story, sometimes he will take a break from the action to give the reader information to help them think straight about what is happening (Josh. 9:14). This information may not even be necessary for the story itself, but the author for some reason feels it is necessary for his reader to know it. That reason may be because it is meant to draw attention to emphasis. Again, this is not always true, but listen closely to those comments and try to discern why the author included them.

General interpretation pitfalls to avoid with narrative literature

UNIVERSALIZING – this happens when something occurs in a passage, and then the reader assumes it is standard practice across all times and cultures – like a prescription or formula – and that we should either do the same or expect the same. The historical context and reasoning for such occurrences is neglected. For example, Gideon’s fleece becomes something that we should do too (Judges 6:36-40).

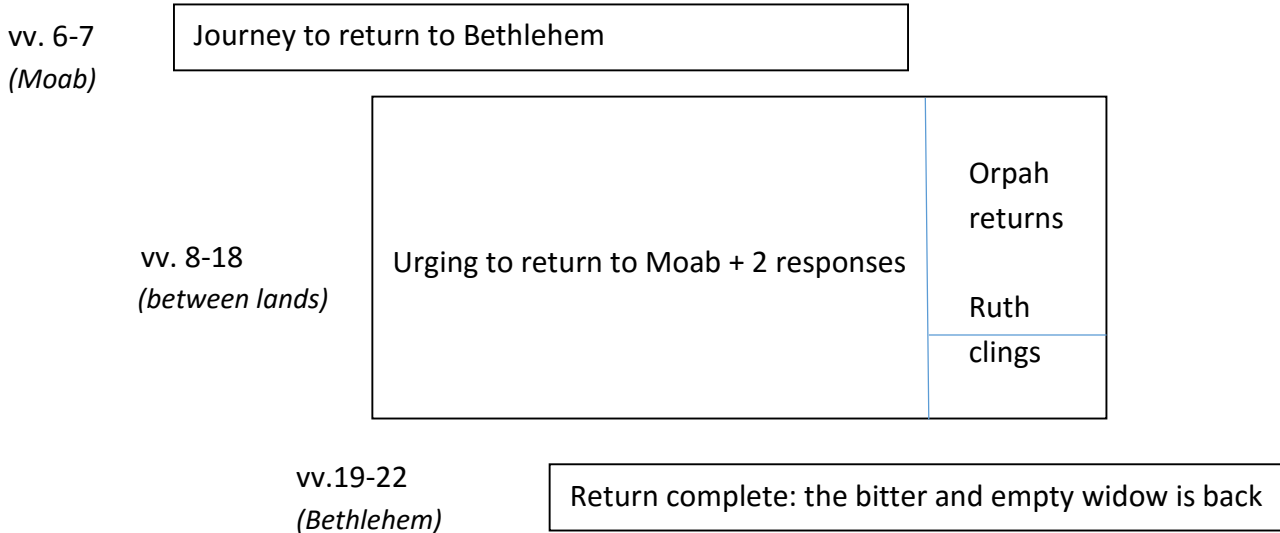
ALLEGORIZING – this happens when someone looks for hidden meanings behind items or persons in the passage. The historical significance and meaning of the item is disregarded, in place of the hidden message. For example, the five stones David grabbed to fight Goliath (1 Sam. 17:40) become a representation of the five-fold ministry of the church spoken of in Ephesians 4:11 (apostles, prophets, evangelists, shepherds, teachers). This may sound wild but this was actually aired in a sermon on Milwaukee radio several years ago.

MORALIZING – this happens when we look for moral principles to live by in the text. Often this happens when a biblical character does something good, and we believe the message is essentially, “Be like them – go and do likewise. David had great faith, so should I/we.” Granted there are reasons to follow biblical characters, but we must consider how the original audience read the text. It is doubtful that when they read the biblical stories they walked away with the simple message of imitating the hero, even though it is a true statement, they should imitate them. The problem was that their hearts kept taking them in the other direction, and what they needed was someone like that hero back, to lead them and rescue them. For example, rather than simply encouraging one another to have faith and fight the giants the way David did, they would most

certainly identify with the army of Israel, afraid and on the sideline. What they needed was someone like David to go into battle before them, and then they could join in behind him.

SPIRITUALIZING – this happens when we use the language or imagery from the passage concerning something physical (event, object, person) and then bring it into the spiritual realm in a way that matches the language. The leap goes from the natural, physical world of the text, to the spiritual world. For example, the lion's den Daniel was thrown into becomes the pit of depression or fear that the enemy throws us into.

OUTLINE/SCENES



PLOT ARC QUICK THOUGHT

Commercial break options:

1. After v. 15, after Naomi tells Ruth to turn back for a second time and then Ruth gives a beautiful speech pledging her loyalty.
2. After v. 19, after Naomi and Ruth arrive in Bethlehem and the whole town is stirred because of them. The story takes a twist when Naomi declares her bitterness, etc.

POSSIBLE POINTS/QUESTIONS TO ANTICIPATE/PAY ATTENTION TO

1. The popular spots for the climax may be after vv. 15 or 19. Ask them to consider if they placed it at the other spot and how that might change the emphasis and main point of the passage.
2. How would you describe Naomi at this point? Is she believing but struggling, or is she accusing God and bitter at Him?
3. People may jump ahead on #2a into the redemption Naomi is going to experience. Encourage them to wait on this until they get to #2b and application. This reinforces that #2a is looking at interpretation for that passage to the original audience/context.
4. Did you notice the word “return” is used 12x’s? Do you think that is a significant term or one that is more incidental and/or secondary?
5. Someone may demonstrate they believe the main point has to do with Naomi returning empty and bitter, but then in application place the focus on being like a Ruth for someone. Ask about the relationship between the main point and application (application should flow from #2a & #2b interpretation).

OUTLINE/SCENES

vv. 1-2 (home)

Ruth's plan for survival: the dangerous task of gleaning

vv. 3-17 (field)

God's provision for survival through Boaz

vv.18-23 (home)

Naomi's plan for survival: stay with the redeemer

PLOT ARC QUICK THOUGHT

Commercial break options:

1. After v. 7, after Ruth is identified to Boaz, and the big question is how Boaz will treat Ruth and whether or no her plan for survival will work.
2. After v. 18a, after Ruth returns home to Naomi and we get to watch her see the results of the day in the field, and even catch a glimmer of hope beginning to immerge.

POSSIBLE POINTS/QUESTIONS TO ANTICIPATE/PAY ATTENTION TO

1. Did you notice the author's introduction to a word that is repeated through the book ("redeemer" in v. 20). How do you think this might impact our understanding of the main point of the passage?
2. Do you think the passage emphasis is placed on Naomi or Ruth or Boaz? Naomi shows up at the beginning and ending, with perhaps a different outlook on their situation (2:20, 22). Ruth and Boaz obviously has more content spoken about her, and the author informs us about their character (Ruth, 2:11-12; Boaz, 2:1).
3. How would you describe Naomi in this passage? Does she change at all? Is she active or passive? Do you think this would be significant in our interpretation of the passage?
4. The popular spots for the climax may be after vv. 7 or 18a. Ask them to consider if they placed it at the other spot and how that might change the emphasis and main point of the passage.

OUTLINE/SCENES

vv. 1-5 (home)

Naomi's plan for provision for Ruth

vv. 6-15 (threshing floor)

Ruth's proposal to which Boaz agrees...but there is a hurdle

vv.16-18 (home)

Naomi's hope: the pledge is received...now they wait

PLOT ARC QUICK THOUGHT

Commercial break options:

1. After v. 9, after Boaz discovers Ruth laying at his feet and she tells him to redeem her. It is the long pause after a proposal...how will he respond to this Moabite widow?
2. After v. 15, after Ruth arrives back home with a giant pledge of food supply, telling Naomi she is no longer empty – Boaz will redeem the Moabite woman, and Naomi too will benefit...if he can...

POSSIBLE POINTS/QUESTIONS TO ANTICIPATE/PAY ATTENTION TO

1. The popular spots for the climax may be after vv. 9 or 15. Ask them to consider if they placed it at the other spot and how that might change the emphasis and main point of the passage.
2. For the second passage in a row the action begins and ends at Naomi and Ruth's home. How might this be intentional by the author to show what his point is in the passage or book as a whole?
3. How do you picture Naomi's character in this passage? How does it compare to what we've seen in the book so far? How is she different? How is she the same?
4. Do you think this passage is more about Ruth's loyalty risking everything for the sake of Naomi, or about Boaz being willing to redeem the Moabite woman?
5. Did you notice the word "empty" in verse 17? It is the same word from 1:21. Naomi came back empty, but for now is empty no more. Do you think this is intentional and significant by the author? If so, do you think it should have an impact on the main point?

OUTLINE/SCENES

vv. 1-6 (character #1)	Redemption's cost rejected by the guy not worth naming
vv. 7-12 (character #2)	Redemption's cost embraced by Boaz and blessed by the people

PLOT ARC QUICK THOUGHT

Commercial break options:

1. After v. 5, after Boaz tells the first redeemer the stipulations of redemption. The big question is whether or not he will redeem everything and everyone...
2. After v. 6, after the first redeemer turns down the deal. The big question is whether or not Boaz is really going to pay the high cost of redemption – will he take off his sandal and proclaim his desire to redeem Naomi's land, and Ruth, and continue that family line...

POSSIBLE POINTS/QUESTIONS TO ANTICIPATE/PAY ATTENTION TO

1. The popular spots for the climax may be after vv. 5 or 6. Ask them to consider if they placed it at the other spot and how that might change the emphasis and main point of the passage.
2. Do you think this passage is organized more with a plot arc or with contrasting characters, or some other tool?
3. Paying attention to application: who do you think the reader is most to identify in this passage (the first redeemer, Boaz, Ruth or Naomi)?
4. How do you think the historical placement of this story (during judges) impacts what the reader is to feel as they read it?