

Second Edition

Foreword by Haddon W. Robinson

The Art of Preaching Old Testament Narrative



Steven D. Mathewson

“Mathewson gifts us with a gold mine of insights into Old Testament narrative. He expertly guides pastors on how to approach a text, prepare a message, and deliver a sermon. There are resources for going as deep as one wants or can, from biblical examples and sample sermons to an introduction to Hebrew discourse and select bibliographies for many Old Testament books. Let’s bring the Old Testament to life and into lives! Here is an able guide.”

—M. Daniel Carroll R. (Rodas), Wheaton College

“Just about twenty years ago, Baker Academic wisely published Mathewson’s fine book *The Art of Preaching Old Testament Narrative*. It has helped to instruct, inspire, and guide at least two generations of preachers on how to handle some of the most engaging portions of God’s Word as they speak to God’s people. Now we’re blessed to have the newly minted second edition, and it’s even better than the first. Mathewson has gone the extra mile to skillfully incorporate much of the exegetical and homiletical work that has been done on this biblical genre over the past two decades. The result is a book that is fuller, richer, and even more valuable than the original. I can’t recommend it enough to pastors, professors, and preachers who seek to communicate these narratives in an accurate, clear, and compelling way!”

—Scott Wenig, Denver Seminary

“Mathewson brilliantly delivers the wealth of his experience preaching Old Testament narrative. It’s quickly clear you’re learning from a master of preaching who loves the biblical text and the hearers of God’s Word. Mathewson writes in the same engaging manner in which he preaches, showing and not just telling. He interacts meaningfully with scholarly and literary works on Old Testament narrative literature. Whether you’re a novice or highly experienced preacher, Mathewson offers valuable insights, resources, and examples to enhance your effectiveness and invigorate your desire and ability to preach narrative from the Old Testament. A must-read for students, pastors, preachers, and teachers of preaching.”

—Ingrid Faro, Northern Seminary

“The same passion to communicate that eventually led to the incarnation, first drove God to dress up vast amounts of his self-revelation in the narratives of the Old Testament. This updated edition from Mathewson is a

wonderful gift to every preacher: a guide to getting below the surface of these narratives along with coaching on how to preach them engagingly. This book combines exegetical skill, helping us to grasp the meaning of the text, with the wisdom of a seasoned preacher, encouraging us to communicate these texts effectively to others. God is a great communicator. God's heart is for you and your hearers. May this book guide you and those to whom you preach into the rich world of Old Testament narrative—a place where we can know ourselves better, but more importantly, a place where God reveals himself and points us forward toward Christ.”

—Peter Mead, pastor of Trinity Chippenham (UK); director of Cor Deo

“Mathewson has written the go-to book on interpreting and preaching Old Testament narrative. Clear, insightful, and practical, it deserves a place on every preacher's bookshelf.”

—Darryl Dash, pastor of Liberty Grace Church, Toronto, Ontario;
author of *8 Habits for Growth*

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To my wife,
Priscilla,
whose love for Jesus has stirred my own devotion
to him and whose love for me still fills up my senses

And to my parents,
Maynard† and Ruth Mathewson,
whose insistence that “God is still good”
during their respective struggles with cancer
has strengthened my trust in him

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Foreword to the First Edition

My grandmother lived in Northern Ireland, and I visited her once when I was a lad about eight years old. When I met her, she was wrinkled, had snowy white hair, and stooped a bit under the weight of her years. I felt I knew my grandmother. She was that thin old lady who gave me cookies and told me how much I resembled my grandfather who had died many years ago. Recently, I visited Ireland again and talked with cousins who knew my grandmother far better than I. They pulled out faded yellow photographs of grandma when she was a girl and later when she was first married. They shared their memories based on knowing her much longer than I did. I came away from that second visit wondering if I ever really knew my grandmother at all.

For many modern readers, the Old Testament narratives resemble my memories of my grandmother. We know them, but then again we hardly know them at all. Some of us grew up hearing these stories, and they form part of our memory bank. We listened to them at home curled up in a parent's lap, or we saw them pasted on flannelgraph boards in Sunday school, our short legs dangling from the big chairs. We identified with David, the brash teenager with slingshot in hand, taking on Goliath, who resembled the bully at our grade school. We smirked at the neighbors who mocked Noah and his boys for building a boat miles from the nearest lake because we knew how the story came out, and we decided the moral was not to laugh at someone doing something strange because you might need them later on if you were drowning in a flood. We pictured Moses and Aaron battling Pharaoh much like the Lone Ranger and Tonto standing

up against the bad guys, or we admired Daniel taming the lions in their den at the zoo. We knew these stories well, but we may not have known them at all! Because we thought of them as simple little stories, we missed how thick they were with meaning.

In recent years, many literary critics, both Christian and Jewish, have also read the stories again for the first time. Instead of regarding the narratives as cadavers to be dissected and “demythologized,” they began to approach them for what they are—sophisticated literature of great significance and splendid power.

Because narrative makes up the dominant genre of the Old Testament, biblical preachers need to revisit those narratives. As adults, we can look at the stories with fresh eyes, and we can develop an appreciation for the skill of the authors who composed them. They were not only corking good storytellers, but they were also brilliant theologians who taught their readers about God through stories. We can read these old, old stories in a new way and sense how much they speak to the condition of modern hearers. More than that, we can see God through them.

One of the strongest reasons for a serious and fresh study of Old Testament narratives is reflected in the sad history of what happens when we misread them, read them poorly, or read them to prove a point outside the purpose of the biblical storyteller. In fact, the more committed we are to the authority of Scripture, the more dangerous it is to read the narratives incorrectly. There is no greater abuse of the Bible than to proclaim in God’s name what God is not saying. God commands us not to bear false witness.

In this book, Steve Mathewson helps us to read Old Testament narratives perceptively. As you study them, you will realize they are not quaint tales crafted to teach children simple moral lessons. They are great literature, every bit as powerful as Homer, Milton, Shakespeare, or Hemingway. And as God-breathed literature, they speak to the entire person. I commend Steve Mathewson as a thoughtful guide to help us get a handle on the great stories of the Bible. I also commend him as a preacher who provides some very workable leads on how to effectively communicate these stories to modern listeners.

Haddon W. Robinson

Preface

I remember my fledgling attempt to preach through an Old Testament narrative book. In 1988, my second year of pastoral ministry, I decided to take my congregation (read: victims) through 1 and 2 Samuel. Coincidentally, I was reading John Steinbeck's novel *East of Eden*. A scene in *East of Eden* forced me to admit my ineptness at preaching the stories of the Old Testament. Three men are sitting at a table and discussing the Cain-Abel story in Genesis 4. Lee, Adam Trask's pig-tailed Chinese cook, pinpoints the genius of Hebrew narrative during the exchange with Adam and a neighbor, Samuel Hamilton. Lee argues, "No story has power, nor will it last, unless we feel in ourselves that it is true and true of us."¹ He concludes, "A great and lasting story is about everyone or it will not last. The strange and foreign is not interesting—only the deeply personal and familiar."²

I thought about the sermon I preached the previous Sunday from 1 Samuel 7. Did people leave with a sense that the story was about them? I had to admit they probably did not. After the worship service, a parishioner had approached and asked me to repeat point number three. I had presented the point too quickly for those taking notes. "Uh, point number three was 'The Resulting Prosperity of God's People' from verses twelve through seventeen," I said.

1. Steinbeck, *East of Eden*, 268.

2. Steinbeck, *East of Eden*, 270.

I had preached a sermon chock-full of exegetical insights and laced with historical-cultural data. I even pressed it into a neat analytical outline. But my sermon did not do justice to the purpose of Old Testament stories: to lure people into real-life dramas where they run smack into God's agenda and his assessment of their lives. Instead, I had created more interest in acquiring an outline of the story.

This experience, along with the conversation in Steinbeck's novel, prompted a quest to raise my level of preaching in Old Testament narrative texts. I invite you to join me in learning how to preach the narrative literature in the Old Testament. I have returned to these texts often in more than three decades of pastoral ministry and preaching.

You deserve to know a little bit about my journey in studying and preaching Old Testament stories. This will help you decide if you want me to serve as a mentor. My journey began in the spring of 1986 when I served as a teaching assistant in Hebrew grammar and exegesis to Dr. Ronald B. Allen at Western Seminary in Portland, Oregon. My esteemed professor asked me to fill in for him in his introductory Hebrew exegesis class and teach the lecture on "Exegesis in Hebrew Narrative Literature." This opportunity forced me to start thinking through a methodology for interpreting Old Testament narrative literature. I devoured Robert Alter's book *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, and the journey gained momentum. In fact, the title of my book that you're reading is a tip of the cap to his influence on my thinking. That same spring I completed a master's thesis on an Old Testament narrative text—Genesis 38.

Two years later, my first stab at preaching through an Old Testament narrative took place as I described it above. My struggles in preaching 1 Samuel propelled me further in my quest to learn how to preach Old Testament narratives effectively. I listened to homileticians like Haddon Robinson, Donald Sunukjian, and Paul Borden. I ordered their cassette tapes (remember those?!) and traveled to listen to them in person. I even had the nerve to write, email, and phone them for input. I cringe when I remember the sermon manuscripts from my 1 Samuel series that I sent to Paul Borden to solicit his input.

Eventually, I enrolled in a doctoral program in preaching at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary. My mentor was Haddon Robinson, and under his direction, I wrote my dissertation on preaching Old Testament narrative literature. That led to the first edition of this book.

Now, almost two decades later, I have the privilege of writing a second edition. I am grateful to Jim Kinney, executive vice president of Baker Publishing, for inviting me to do so. In the last two decades, I have not changed my basic approach to preaching Old Testament narrative texts, but I have had the opportunity to refine it. I have paid attention to my reviewers. In fact, one theological journal reviewed the first edition seventeen years after it was published! I have also had the opportunity to teach and learn from students at all levels of theological education—undergraduate level, master’s level, and doctoral level—at Montana Bible College, Moody Bible Institute, Moody Theological Seminary, Denver Seminary, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Heritage Theological Seminary, and Western Seminary. I also enrolled in a PhD program in Biblical Hebrew at the University of Stellenbosch. It is a privilege to work directly with Christo van der Merwe—one of my early mentors from a distance two decades ago when I began applying linguistics to the study of Old Testament narrative texts. The Lord willing, I will finish my dissertation and graduate within a year of the publication of this second edition—and shortly after I turn sixty. Not every pastor needs to pursue a PhD, yet all of us need to be lifelong learners. I still have much to learn. In fact, I am confident I will be learning how to preach Old Testament stories until the day I die.

Most important, I’ve tried to practice what I preach. Or to be more precise, I’ve tried to preach what I practice. Over the past three decades of pastoral ministry, I have preached regularly in every narrative book or section of the Old Testament. As I said in the preface to the first edition, I am attempting to write the book I needed when I first started preaching. I have often wished that someone else would have written the book I needed, for though I work hard in the Hebrew Bible, I do not feel worthy to carry the armor of first-class Hebrew scholars. Likewise, I do not envision myself in the starting lineup with the Michael Jordans of modern preaching—both preachers and teachers of preachers. But in the sovereignty of God, he has given me abilities and interests in two fields: Old Testament exegesis and homiletics. I write, then, with a foot in both disciplines.

This volume consists of three parts. Part 1 will prepare you to preach, looking at some of the challenges we face, including how to think about preaching Christ from these texts. Part 2 will take you from text to concept—what we call the *hermeneutical* side of the task. It will teach you a method for studying Old Testament narrative texts. You can apply

this method whether or not you can read biblical Hebrew. Then, part 3 will take you from concept to sermon—what we call the *homiletical* side of the task. This part of the book will help you take the raw exegetical material and craft a sermon that achieves accuracy, clarity, interest, and relevance. There are three appendices that provide (A) a sample sermon manuscript from an Old Testament narrative text, (B) instructions for using Hebrew in narrative exegesis, and (C) commentary suggestions for narrative exegesis.

If you're wondering about the differences between this second edition and the first edition, let me reiterate that my basic approach to interpreting and preaching Old Testament narrative texts has not changed. I have added a chapter titled "The Christ-Centered Preaching Debate." I did not deal with this sufficiently (in fact, hardly at all) in the first edition. Also, those who used the first edition will notice that the five sample sermon manuscripts are gone. Sample sermons—both manuscripts as well as audio and video—are more readily available than they were two decades ago. In order to streamline and tighten up this volume, I simply included a single sample manuscript in appendix A.

Finally, here's a personal word to my readers. I write as an evangelical pastor to other evangelical pastors and teachers who have the amazing privilege and awesome responsibility of proclaiming the Word of God to churches week after week. You are my heroes. We're in the trenches together, and I pray that I can help you. This means that I also write to pastors-in-training who are learning to preach. What a privilege to help shape a new generation of preachers. I hope I can help you get your hermeneutical and homiletical acts together in Old Testament stories a lot more quickly than I did. I also write with appreciation for those who communicate the Word of God in a variety of other settings, including Sunday School classes, small group Bible studies, and weekend retreats. The church needs all of you to exercise your preaching and teaching gifts well. I hope this volume helps you communicate Old Testament stories effectively.

Above all, I write for the glory of God, and his Son, Jesus Christ, the central character in the grand story of redemption. I am amazed at what God has provided for me through Jesus Christ. To God be the glory forever and ever.

Acknowledgments

A section of acknowledgments resembles the credits that roll at the end of a movie and don't seem terribly important to the viewer. As the reader, you can afford to skip these acknowledgments. As the writer, I cannot. I deeply appreciate the people who helped me turn my vision for this book into a reality.

It's easy to know where to start. I thank my dear wife, Priscilla, for her encouragement, support, and sacrifice. She never once complained to me about my preoccupation with this project and other writing projects. Her love for Jesus Christ, as well as her love for me, has had a profound impact on my life. Priscilla is the love of my life and the joy of my heart. I also thank my children and their spouses—Erin and Manny, Anna and Grant, Benjamin and Nicole, and Luke and Janzyn for their love, patience, support, and encouragement over the years. I pray that my love for and preaching of the stories of the Old Testament have contributed to their growth in the faith. I pray, too, that it will contribute to the faith of my grandchildren (seven so far).

I am grateful to Haddon Robinson for his interest in this project, as well as his input. Doing doctoral work in preaching under Haddon will rank as one of the greatest privileges of my life. I am a better man for God because of the time spent with such a brilliant, godly mentor.

I thank Paul Borden, Don Sunukjian, Alice Mathews, and Haddon Robinson for graciously sharing their sermon manuscripts with me for the first edition.

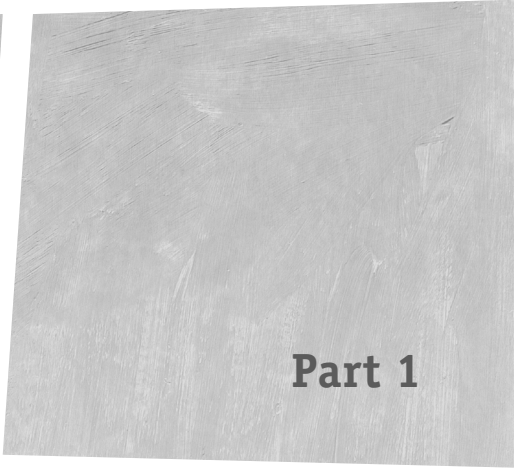
I am grateful for my Hebrew and Semitic language professors over the years: Ron Parkhurst, Jerry Vreeland, Ronald Allen, Ralph Alexander, Richard Averbeck (Ugaritic), and Christo van der Merwe (supervisor for my PhD studies).

Along the way, two congregations have given me time to research and write. More importantly, they have shared my vision for how my writing might help to enrich and equip other pastors. I am grateful for Dry Creek Bible Church (Belgrade, MT) and CrossLife Evangelical Free Church (Libertyville, IL).

I also want to thank Carmen Joy Imes for reading the draft of this second edition and providing invaluable feedback. This volume is much stronger because of her suggestions. I am grateful to Jennifer Hale of Baker Publishing for the fantastic work she did as project editor. I have already mentioned Jim Kinney's role in the publication of his volume, yet I want to express my appreciation for his patience and persistence as he encouraged me to complete this second edition.

At this point, I feel like the writer of Hebrews who did not have time to tell about other heroes of the faith at the end of a magnificent discussion (see Heb. 11:32). Like the writer of Hebrews, I, too, have run out of time—or space—in my acknowledgments. So I will simply list the names of others who have helped me, even though I wish I could tell the story behind their contributions. Here, then, are those who have helped me in some way, whether tracking down sources, offering feedback, or simply believing in this book: Jan Halvorson, Claudia Glover, Meredith Kline, Robert Stanbery, John Sailhamer, Warren Wiersbe, Dave Wyrzten, Brian Larson, Tim Walton, Eric and Lisa Pierson, John Ramer, Eric Price, Thomas Middlebrook, Lance Higginbotham, and Jim Coakley. My three younger brothers each contributed input: David Mathewson, Mark Mathewson, and Kevin Mathewson.

Last, but hardly least, I thank my parents, Maynard and Ruth Mathewson, for modeling faithful and effective service of Christ through the thick and thin of pastoral ministry. The preacher who has had the greatest impact on my life is my father. I'm thankful he got to read the first edition a few months before cancer took his life. The final words I heard him say were, "No matter what happens, remember that God is good." This book has its roots in his commitment to preach the Word of God "in season and out of season" (2 Tim. 4:2).



Part 1

Preparing to Preach



1

The Challenge of Preaching Old Testament Narratives

People crave stories. Just watch folks sitting in an airline terminal waiting to catch a flight. Several are reading novels by the likes of Toni Morrison, Cormac McCarthy, C. J. Box, or Marilynne Robinson—whether on a Kindle reader or in a hardback edition. Some of the passengers with earbuds are listening to biographies of Michelle Obama or Melania Trump. Another passenger fastens his eyes to his tablet, watching one of the three movies based on J. R. R. Tolkien’s fantasy-adventure novel, *The Lord of the Rings*.

Other people tell stories or listen to someone tell them. A thirty-something mom tells her sister about a run-in with her son’s fifth-grade teacher. A cluster of business professionals listen to a CEO describe how her company survived the economic downturn during the COVID-19 pandemic. A college student is on his phone, providing a friend with an animated account of a scene in the latest *Star Wars* movie.

When preachers open up the text of Scripture each Sunday morning, they speak to listeners whose “hearts traffic in stories.” Indeed, our “very orientation to the world is fundamentally shaped by stories.”¹ This is because “stories plant ideas and emotions into a listener’s brain.”² Yes,

1. Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom*, 108.

2. Gallo, *Talk Like TED*, 49.

listeners unknowingly get their theology from the stories they consume during the week. How does a preacher address boomers shaped by the “sermons” conveyed via news stories on Fox News or CNN? How does a Bible expositor communicate to millennials who come to church with scenes from a Netflix original dancing in their heads? How does a minister of the Gospel relate God’s truth to the fourteen-year-olds who have fed on the sermons preached to them by the “stories” contained in their social media accounts?

The sheer number of stories in the Old Testament seems to give preachers an edge. According to the most conservative estimates, stories account for 30 to 40 percent of the Old Testament. Preachers can cash in on the stories of David, Ruth, Samson, and Jezebel when they stand before their video-saturated, story-driven congregations.³ Theologian R. C. Sproul once said, “I’m big on preaching from narratives because people will listen ten times as hard to a story as they will to an abstract lesson.”⁴

Unfortunately, it is not as simple as it seems. Preachers often neglect Old Testament narratives or, like beginners playing the saxophone, preach them poorly. Neither problem says much about our reverence for God’s Word, let alone about our love for the people to whom God has called us to preach. As journalist Terry Mattingly observes, “Most people hear academic lectures at church, then turn to mass media to find inspiring tales of heroes and villains, triumph and tragedy, sin and redemption, heaven and hell.”⁵

Preachers who take Scripture seriously must do better. Venerable preaching professor Haddon Robinson argues, “Anyone who loves the Bible must value the story, for whatever else the Bible is, it is a book of stories. Old Testament theology comes packaged in narratives of men and women who go running off to set up their handmade gods, and of others who take God seriously enough to bet their lives on Him.”⁶ Evangelicals have taken Old Testament stories seriously enough to defend their historicity. Now

3. As long ago as 1995, David L. Larsen argued, “This is the milieu and matrix for the explosive rebirth and renewal of interest in the story, a rekindling that has reached and powerfully shaken the world of Christian communication as well. Good storytellers are gurus in our society” (*Telling the Old*, 14–15). One wonders if preachers have made progress since then in capitalizing on the power of stories and storytellers.

4. Dudit, “Theology and Preaching in the 90s,” 23.

5. Mattingly, “Star Wars.”

6. Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, 90.

it's time to learn to preach them effectively. While this volume focuses on Old Testament stories, readers can apply much of it to the stories in the Gospels and Acts.⁷

A Commitment to Expository Preaching

I am writing primarily for preachers who are committed to expository preaching. I want to help them do exposition in Old Testament narrative literature. By “expository preaching,” I refer to preaching that exposes the meaning of a text of Scripture and applies that meaning to the lives of the hearers. Two well-known preaching professors supply helpful definitions.

An expository sermon may be defined as a message whose structure and thought are developed from a biblical text, covering its scope, in order to explain how the features and context of the text disclose enduring principles for faithful thinking, living, and worship intended by the Spirit, who inspired the text. (Bryan Chapell)⁸

Expository preaching is the communication of a biblical concept, derived from and transmitted through a historical, grammatical, and literary study of a passage in its context, which the Holy Spirit first applies to the personality and experience of the preacher, then through him to his hearers. (Haddon Robinson)⁹

When people finish listening to an expository sermon, they should understand the author's meaning and should even be able to track the development of the author's thought in the text. They should also have some idea of what the truth will look like fleshed out in their lives. Listeners who hear expository preaching week after week will get to think through books and major blocks of text. They will learn how to read the Scriptures for themselves, following the argument of a particular text. While a series of expository sermons may cover assorted passages on a particular theme, expositors generally work through individual books of the Bible or major sections in those books. The payoffs are tremendous.

7. However, there are issues unique to the Gospels. Preachers will do well to consult a source like Pennington, *Reading the Gospels Wisely*, and J. Brown, *Gospels as Stories*.

8. Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching*, 8–9.

9. Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, 5.

As Tim Keller notes, expository preaching “expresses and unleashes our belief in the whole Bible as God’s authoritative, living, and active Word.”¹⁰

At its core, expository preaching is more of a philosophy than a method. That is, it amounts to a set of commitments or convictions rather than a particular method. Let me share a couple of convictions that expositors must bring to the task. Without these convictions, they are likely to pursue methods that sell short their efforts. While these convictions apply to preaching from any literary genre in the Bible, they are especially critical to preaching from Old Testament narratives.

1. *Exposition is more than an exegetical lecture.* A few expositors to whom I have listened seem to equate exposition with backing up the exegetical dump truck and unloading its contents on their congregations. They may even offer a running commentary on the text without any sense of unity. Hearers who exalt this style frequently describe it as “verse-by-verse teaching.” Often, such hearers come from preaching-deficient backgrounds. They are so starved for God’s Word that they are willing to receive raw data. They love baskets of exegetical nuggets, and they want preaching that squeezes every ounce of insight out of a Greek or Hebrew term. With this style of preaching, preachers can go until time runs out. It doesn’t matter if they quit at verse 4, verse 7, or verse 16. There is no development of a flow of thought—simply a litany of exegetical insights.

Richard Mayhue clarifies that expository preaching “is not a commentary running from word to word and verse to verse without unity, outline, and pervasive drive.” Furthermore, “it is not pure exegesis, no matter how scholarly, if it lacks a theme, thesis, outline, and development.”¹¹

While this approach hampers effective preaching of any literary genre in Scripture, it especially damns the preaching of Old Testament narratives. Stories unfold. Their ideas take time to develop and gel. Furthermore, their ideas may not be as highly concentrated as in other types of literature. In Old Testament narrative, it may take an entire chapter before the theological message of the text emerges. Colossians 3:1–11 is a great choice for a sermon text. Genesis 38:1–11 is not. The former text tells believers how to live as those who have been raised with Christ. However, the first eleven verses of Genesis 38 only provide the background necessary for understanding the story.

10. Keller, *Preaching*, 35.

11. Mayhue, “Rediscovering Expository Preaching,” 10.