



Mind the Gap: Reading Hebrew Bible/Old Testament* Stories

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Hebrew Bible stories never give you as much information as you'd like. The narrators rarely tell you what characters are thinking or feeling; they only show what they *do*. Why a character acts in a particular way or what her motives and emotions are is left open for the reader. Similarly, the narrators rarely reveal their own opinions. They most often tell stories from a third-person point of view, and even when they speak as the third party they remain tight-lipped. **When a story does reveal the narrator's views or those of a character, pay close attention.** Those times are priceless. **When a story gives you neither, look for other clues to what the narrator thinks is important:** how actions follow one another, who acts, and who gets the most attention. In my online project, *Reading the Bible as an Adult*, (<http://juliamobrien.net/index.php/bible-for-adults>) I note such places. In the section on David, you will note that the narrator uses a specific technique for making David more likeable than Saul.

For stories to make sense, readers will have to fill lots of gaps. Taking into account all the details of a story (such as setting, action, who is speaking and how, etc.) will help with this process, but gaps are also—and perhaps most usually—filled by the assumptions, beliefs, and passions of readers themselves. In reading as in life, we react to people and events based on how our experience and religious traditions have taught us to interpret what we see. And as no two readers are identical they will never fill in the gaps in exactly the same way. Because Hebrew Bible stories have so many gaps, they provide lots of opportunities to notice the whole process of gap-filling and to discuss why we interpret the way we do. **Pay attention to how you and others fill the gaps in the Old Testament stories. In the session on Jacob's Entourage, for example, readers are asked to notice what they made out of the "minor" characters in the story of Jacob.**



Of course, you can argue about whose gap-filling takes into account more of the story's details, but you can also **let go of seeking the "right" interpretation** and take advantage of the diverse gap-filling to get to know yourself and other readers better. This can also be a way for your students to appreciate diverse approaches to the Bible, and to make connections between reading the Bible and reading good literature—both of which invite the reader to approach the text with attention and creativity.

Why are these stories so terse? One factor is the Hebrew language from which they are translated. For example, verbs function differently in Hebrew than they do in English. While English distinguishes past, present, and future tenses, Hebrew verbs are either "perfect" (signifying completed action) or "imperfect" (signifying incomplete and/or on-going action). The Hebrew version of a story may not clarify whether someone "is walking," "was walking," or "will walk." Faced with such ambiguity, English translators choose the tense that best fits their own sense of the storyline; the result, of course, varies by translator. To make matters more complicated, biblical Hebrew sometimes leaves out verbs altogether, leaving translators to fill that gap as well. **When a verse especially intrigues you, look it up in another translation.** Rather than trying to decide which is right, play with the possibilities that each allows. If you're interested in getting more of a feel for the Hebrew itself, consult a word-for-word translation like the New American Standard version. (See the note below about biblical translations)

The stories also might be short and terse because of the way they were passed down over many centuries. Although we don't know the exact process by which biblical books were produced, (see Volume 1 issue 1 of *TB* to learn more.) it's clear that the Old Testament has

gone through an involved history. Literary readings don't deny that the stories may have come from diverse hands, but they look for unity in the midst of diversity. Readers are asked to notice how the pieces add up to a whole, what cumulative effect reading the biblical stories have on the reader. **When stories seem to jump around and change, ask what impression you get from the jumps and what you think holds them together or would be needed to hold them together.** Why would someone (whoever it was) have put all of this material together? How does it all work as a unit?

Readers of the Old Testament have also taught us to pay special attention to dialogue. We learn about characters not only from what they say but also from how they say it—whether their speech is blunt or profuse, crass or polite, profane or pious. When a character repeats what someone else has told him to say, we can also infer something about him by how faithfully he sticks to the script: does he repeat the earlier speech verbatim, or does he change the message in small but telling ways? Does a character report an event differently to a new audience? **Pay attention to how characters talk.** When speech seems to be repeated, slow down and see if any of the details change from one telling to the next. As highlighted in the session on Bathsheba, Tamar, Absalom, and Solomon, for example, the speech of Tamar in 2 Samuel 13 is profuse and pleading, while Amnon's is blunt and cruel.

Old Testament narratives were composed (and compiled) in cultures very different from our own, and some of customs and vocabulary they assume will be strange to modern readers. Likewise, our modern interest in self-revealing first person narratives is apparently not shared by the writers of the biblical texts. Even some aspects that may appear familiar, such as descriptions of sibling rivalry and parental love, may reflect ancient societal configurations and understandings of what is normal. But don't assume that you know exactly what ancient Israel was like from reading the HB/OT. These are stories, not documentaries. So, let them do what stories do best: engage the imagination and spark discussion: Remember as you discuss these stories to mind the gaps—to notice how what is left out of the story reveals information about ourselves as readers and about the world of the Bible.

* note about the names for this collection of biblical writings:

This collection of documents goes by several names. Jews call it Tanak (an acronym for the three major sections of the collection: **T**orah, **N**evi'im (Prophets) and **K**etuvim (Writings).) or simply Bible. Christians organize the individual books in a different way and apply the label Old Testament, as they understand it as incomplete without the New Testament that follows. In academic settings the term Hebrew Bible has been adopted as a generic term. Each of these terms reflects a different understanding of the books and how they should be read. I use the hybrid term Hebrew Bible/Old Testament as a way to reflect the different ways in which the collection is read. For a fuller discussion, see my website, *Reading the Bible as an Adult.*)

Note about translations:

I recommend working from the New Revised Standard Version. It comes in lots of packages (The New Oxford Annotated Bible, The Access Bible, The HarperCollins Study Bible, etc), but the thing to look for is the name of the translation. Somewhere on the title page it should say NRSV, not New International Version, King James Version, the Tanak, or The Message. I recommend the NRSV for several reasons. One is that it was translated by a committee made up of people from different religious backgrounds who tried to be faithful to the Hebrew and Greek manuscripts rather than to advance a particular religious perspective. Another is that it is fairly recent. Its translators had access to more manuscripts than earlier translators did, and the English they use is closer to modern speech than the King James (from 1611). You may find the language of the NRSV little stiff, especially compared to The Living Bible and The Message, but that's because it attempts to translate the ancient texts while in the others the authors retell the story in their own words (known as paraphrases).

I think a NRSV is a good thing to own, but if you don't want to buy it the text is available at various websites. On the National Council of Churches website, for example,

<http://www.nccusa.org/welcome/sitemap.html>. You can search the NRSV by

word/phrase or chapter/verse. For the Jacob story, for example, you could enter Gen 25 and then click arrows to get the following chapters.

Sites for other Bible translations:

<http://www.biblegateway.com/>

<http://bible.logos.com/#ref=Ge%201&ver=NIV>

Others are listed at the NTGateway website:

<http://www.ntgateway.com/bible-translations/>

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