

Plot in Biblical Narrative

STUDY NOTES



SECTION 1: DEFINING PLOT

00:00 – 00:50

Jon: We're learning how to read different types of literature in the Bible, and we're going to start by talking about biblical narrative.

Tim: So narratives, in their most basic form, have characters in a setting going through a series of events. And how those events are selected and then arranged by an author, that's called "the plot."

Jon: A basic plotline begins with a character in her setting. But then something new or unexpected happens, causing problems that lead up to some ultimate conflict, which is then resolved. And the character finds herself changed, living in a new normal.¹

Tim: Now, when reading narratives, it's important to understand every scene in the context of its larger plotline. You can make the same story have a totally different message if you ignore where it occurs in the plot.² This happens all the time when people read the Bible.

1. This plot structure can also be understood as: [Ordinary Life](#) » [Call to Adventure](#) » [Rising Tension](#) » [Climax](#) » [Resolution](#) » [Denouement](#).

2. "The very first, and only really rigid, rule in literary theory is that texts must be read from beginning to end. The meaning of a word is not determined by its definition, but by its context. So also a single story's meaning is only determined by the relationship of all its elements to the whole text."

SEAN MCEVENUE, INTERPRETATION & BIBLE

Jon: Really?

Tim: Yeah. Take for example the story about Gideon. There's this well-known scene where Gideon's trying to discern whether God will help him win a battle, and he requests a sign from God.³

Jon: Yeah! Gideon lays a wool fleece on the ground and asks that in the morning the fleece be wet with dew, but the ground totally dry. And God does it.

Tim: Now, if you look at this scene just by itself, what is the conflict?

Jon: How can Gideon know if he'll succeed?

Tim: And the resolution?

Jon: Test God, ask for a sign, and find out.

Tim: Yeah, and that's how many people actually read this story, and it totally misses the point because it's ignoring the larger plot line.⁴

Jon: Really?

Tim: Yeah, so let's start from the beginning, you'll get the context. The story begins with Gideon and the Israelites living in fear because they're oppressed by an invading people, the Midianites.

Jon: Got it.

3. The story of Gideon and the fleece, his defeat of the Midianites, and a few others can be found in Judges chapters 6, 7, and 8.

4. "Stories and plots are the crucial agents that invest events with meaning. The way the bare facts are described, the point at which the tension or climax

occurs, the selection and arrangement of the parts—these all indicate the meaning which the events are believed to possess; and thus what the author means to communicate by telling them to the reader.

N.T. WRIGHT, THE NEW TESTAMENT AND THE PEOPLE OF GOD.

Tim: Then there's the call to action: God commissions Gideon to defeat the Midianites and save Israel.

Jon: Yeah. This is shaping up to be a good story.

Tim: But then Gideon's super hesitant, so he asks God to do this magic trick, a sign: "So I can know it's really you talking to me." And God stoops to his level. He gives him a sign by lighting this fire on an altar.

Jon: So Gideon's already asked for a sign?

Tim: And that's not all. In the next scene, God tells Gideon to tear down an altar to another god, but Gideon's so afraid he does it at night.

Jon: So Gideon's skeptical and also a bit of a coward.

Tim: Then we come to the moment where Gideon's about to face the Midianites, and he's still uncertain, so he asks for another sign, the fleece. He says, "I want to know if you'll save Israel by my hand."

Jon: And God gives him that sign.

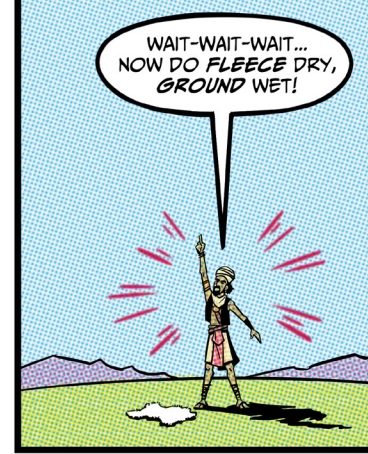
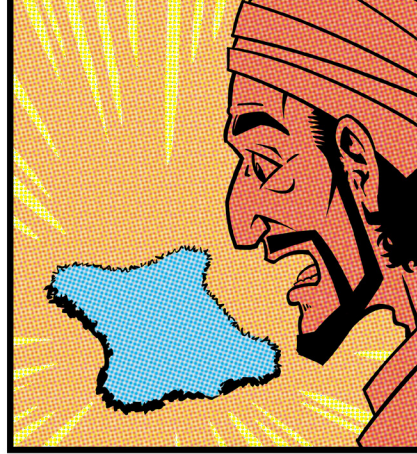
Tim: And he's still uncertain, so he asks for even one more sign, which is just a variation of the previous sign.

Jon: Okay, so Gideon's asking for way too many signs.

Tim: Exactly! In the larger context, it's clear the plot conflict is not, "how can Gideon discern the mysterious will of God?" The real conflict is, "when will this guy get his act together and start trusting God?"

Jon: Okay, so then what's the resolution?

Tim: We have to keep reading. So Gideon gathers this huge army—30,000 soldiers—to fight the Midianites, and God says, "no, way too many men." He whittles the army down to 300.



Jon: Why would he do that?

Tim: Well, Gideon's been testing God, so now God returns the favor. He tells Gideon to arm these 300 soldiers with trumpets and torches and then surround the Midianites at night and make all this noise in the hills, which sounds ridiculous, but Gideon does it. And the noise scares the Midianites into this frenzy. They starting destroying each other in the dark while Gideon looks on safely from the hills.

Jon: So this story isn't offering the reader tips for discerning God's will.

Tim: No. It's about God's commitment to use weak people with deep flaws to do more than they could've imagined.⁵

5. Comedy and tragedy are two different classic plot structures identified by Aristotle, namely in his work *Poetics*.

Comedy features "ascent stories" where the protagonist needs to climb, overcome challenges, and become transformed. The message to the reader is they ought to become like the protagonist. They are asked: What's valuable in the world? What's worth the struggle? What kind of people win? An example of this is the Joseph story in Genesis 37-50. At first Joseph is a brat, and his brothers abuse him. But because of his integrity, he rises from slavery to a place of influence where he can later save his undeserving brothers.

Tragedy features "descent stories" where the protagonist is set-up well, but due to character flaws or bad choices, they self-destruct. The message to the reader is they want to avoid becoming like the protagonist. They learn what will ruin them. They are asked: What's worth the effort to avoid? What kind of people lose? The story of Saul in 1 Samuel 8-31 is an example of this. Saul is tall, handsome, and a go-getter. But he's prideful and thinks he knows better than everyone else. He is unable to recognize his own mistakes and can't take criticism.

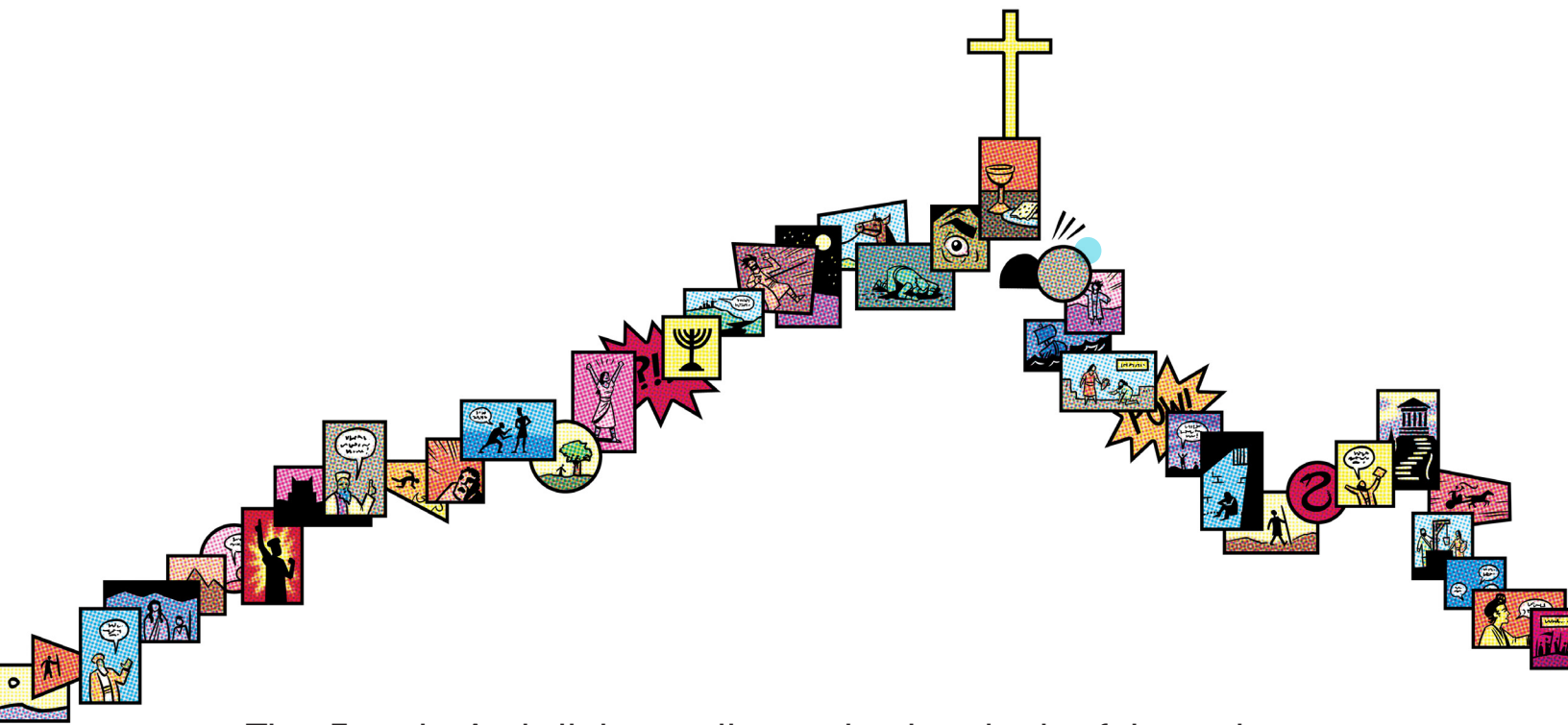


Jon: Okay, so short scenes, like Gideon and the fleece, are combined with other scenes making up a larger plotline. And tracing the conflict and resolution through the plot helps you see the message the author is trying to get across.

Tim: Now, Gideon's story has been set alongside many other stories that are also about these flawed, often questionable leaders called judges. And each of these has its own internal plotline, but then altogether they make up a whole movement of the biblical story, the period of the judges. And that has its own unified plotline.⁶

Jon: And there are many "movements" within the story of the Bible.

6. Find out more by watching the Read Scripture video on the book of Judges.



Tim: Exactly. And all the smaller stories, hundreds of them, they fit within the context of their own movements, and then these movements together make up the building blocks of the grand plotline of the whole story of the Bible.⁷

Jon: So no matter where I'm reading in the Bible, I need to pay attention to these different layers of the plot, so I can read each story in context.

Tim: Exactly! The Bible is such a sophisticated piece of literature, and so all these smaller plotlines keep overlapping, building up the tension. And when you back up, you can see how they've all been woven together into the unified story that leads to Jesus.

7. Level 1

- One overall storyline in the Bible
- e.g. the reunion of Heaven & Earth

Level 2

- The multiple movements of that overall storyline
- e.g. The period of the judges

Level 3

- The hundreds of individual narratives that make up each of these movements
- e.g. Gideon and the fleece

