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HOW TO UNDERSTAND AND APPLY THE OLD TESTAMENT

TWELVE STEPS FROM EXEGESIS TO THEOLOGY

Jason S. DeRouchie

FOREWORD BY D. A. CARSON

P&R

An Exercise in Genre—Exodus 19:4–6

This book offers numerous biblical examples to illustrate whatever point I am trying to make. At times I reuse some texts, relooking at them from fresh angles as we walk through the interpretive process. But I will look at one text at every one of the twelve steps from exegesis to theology. It is Exodus 19:4–6, perhaps the clearest, simplest snapshot of the revealed makeup of the old covenant that we have in Scripture.

When we consider the genre of Exodus 19:4–6, we immediately recognize two things. First, it is a speech of God recorded by his prophet, and therefore we can rightfully call it a *prophetic oracle*. More specifically, it is a messenger speech from God through Moses to the people, and it includes instruction mixed with implied exhortation. Second, the speech itself falls within a grand narrative that begins in Genesis and continues unbroken through the end of 2 Kings, only to be picked up again in Daniel and carried on to the end of 2 Chronicles (see "Putting Genre within Its Biblical Context" earlier in this chapter). The narrative relays the history of salvation that ultimately climaxes in Christ and the New Testament.

Thus we can tag the genre of Exodus 19:4–6 as a prophetic-messenger speech made up of instruction and implied exhortation. It is part of the historical narrative of Exodus, the Pentateuch, and the greater Old Testament.

Historical Narrative

The Distinctive Nature of Biblical Narrative

The Bible's historical narratives chronicle connected events in story format, usually in past time. Around 65 percent of Scripture is narrative—Genesis through Kings, Daniel through Chronicles, the Gospels and Acts, and even parts of Revelation. These books recount the true story of God's workings in history to make a people and a name for himself, ultimately through Jesus.

On the surface, biblical historical narrative resembles the factual historical reporting that we read today in a news account or a history book. As in contemporary historical writing, the Old Testament records a chronology of key persons, ages, places, powers, and events from creation to Israel's initial restoration from Babylon. But the Bible does so much more than simply register facts. It intentionally selects which facts to include and then shapes them from God's perspective and for God's purposes. Biblical historical narrative stands distinct in at least four ways.

1. Old Testament narratives commonly contain various subgenres within them.

The Bible's stories are often peppered with numerous subgenres, such as genealogies (e.g., Gen. 5; 11:10–26), deathbed blessings (e.g., Gen. 49; Deut. 33), songs (Ex. 15:1–18; Deut. 32:1–43), predictive prophecies (Num. 23–24), sermons (Deut. 5–26), and covenants (Josh. 24:1–28). You can find this incorporation in other ancient texts, but it is very pronounced in the Bible.

2. Old Testament narratives focus on God and anticipate the Christ.

As with all history writing, the Bible's narratives are selective and purposeful in their presentation. But in biblical narrative God is the key character and the key mover—his words and his deeds guide each story. This is true even in the book of Esther, where the narrator never mentions the Lord's name or title explicitly but where God's providential purposes are evident at every turn. With this, the Old Testament stories themselves offer God's perspective on history and disclose that his redemptive program for the world climaxes in Christ Jesus and his church. The Old Testament story creates longing for a better king, a blessed people, and a broader land—all of which God promises as the answer to the world's problem detailed in the Old Testament.

3. Old Testament narratives teach.

Because Scripture is God's revelation, biblical historical narratives are designed not simply to inform but also to instruct—they are sermons in story form. Scripture's narratives seek to convince us of God's revelatory message and of the need to repent, believe, and obey. God's purposes guided what stories the narrators told and where they placed their focus. We must read not simply to gain the facts but to hear the message that the authors intended. Regularly the narrators detail sins and failures without clarifying whether they are good or bad. Not all decisions and actions of biblical characters are normative for us. The narrators expect us to know our Bibles well enough to read the history of the covenant in light of the covenant—both the covenant instruction and promises and the character of the covenant Lord. In Scripture, people are examples for us to follow only insofar as they point us to the supremacy and worth of God.

4. Old Testament narratives often have intentions other than our own.

Because the narrators were ultimately preaching as they crafted their stories, they at times were not as concerned with including certain details that concern us. They

spoke accurately, but matters such as strict chronology and sequencing were not always their interest. As much as we may want to know the name of the Pharaoh of the exodus, the Bible is silent, being intentionally more concerned with God's name—YHWH. It is the Chronicler's prerogative to pass quickly over Saul's reign to get us to David, to focus almost completely on the southern kingdom, and not to even mention David's affair with Bathsheba, all things that are approached differently in Samuel-Kings. Such selection does not call into question the accuracy of what is there. It simply guides us to see that the message of Samuel-Kings is different from that of Chronicles.

History, Myth, and the Biblical Narratives

Scripture is God's written Word, which means that the biblical text should stand as our highest authority. It also means that insofar as it aligns with the original wording, the Bible is an *infallible* rule and guide in its claims regarding faith (doctrine) and practice (ethics) and *inerrant* in its claims of fact (history, geology, chronology, science). With respect to Scripture's authority, in biblical narrative, as with every other genre, we must respect the biblical authors' intentions and the literary conventions under which they wrote. We must allow for partial reporting, paraphrasing, and summarizing and must not require the Bible to give definitive or exhaustive information on every topic. We must allow for phenomenological language, with which the authors describe a phenomenon as they observed it or experienced it, not necessarily how it scientifically occurred. And we must allow for the reporting of a speech without the endorsement of that speech's truthfulness; a biblical character may truly say something that is not true. These things stated, outside those passages that are explicitly treated as parables, the biblical narratives present themselves as accurate accounts of what happened in space and time, so we should approach them this way.

In contrast to this approach, in recent days there has been a resurgence of scholars—even among those claiming to be evangelicals—who prefer to call the biblical narratives "myths" or just "stories," by which they mean fictional accounts related to the supernatural that include profound truths but that do not supply us with actual facts of history. They assert that the biblical text alone is what is authoritative and what gives rise to our faith; faith grows out of the Bible's message, they say, and is not related to the historicity of the events addressed. I have eight responses.

1. As a genre, biblical narrative is not myth.

It is true that the biblical story line is thoroughly centered on the Lord—his deeds and his words overseeing and judging all events in space and time. But the inclusion of

God does not make the Bible myth. We have already noted that Old Testament narrative seeks to show that what was myth in the ancient world has real and factual substance in Israel's time and history. We must recognize that Scripture is focused on a very real world, with real persons, real places, and real times, and that the biblical authors believed God to be part of this real world. Mythical monsters and places are not part of the presentation. They are present in Scripture in other genres, such as apocalyptic (e.g., Dan. 7), but they are not found in biblical narrative. We do find a tree of life and a talking serpent (Gen. 3), even a talking donkey (Num. 22)! Yet these are no different from other intrusions of the miraculous in space and time that we can only describe as the intervention of God—things such as the angel of death passing through Egypt, forty years of daily manna in the wilderness, YHWH's fiery glory visibly settling in the temple, the widow's son being raised to life, and an ax head floating. The Bible presents itself as history, not myth, and indeed it calls us to guard ourselves from the latter (1 Tim. 1:3–4; 4:7; 2 Peter 1:16).

2. Priority lies with texts.

Far too often scholars assert, "Archaeology has proved such and such." But the social sciences (archaeology, anthropology, sociology, etc.) deal only with general features of societies and cultures, and pots don't talk. Texts alone clarify specific events and individuals, and this places a priority on Scripture as an ancient textual witness.

3. Historicity and authority go hand in hand.

Because the Bible is God's revelation (2 Tim. 3:16), its historicity and authority are intimately united. We cannot deny the reality of an event that the biblical authors believed to be historical and still say that we affirm Scripture's authority. Moreover, we must recognize that the Bible is *not* like any other book, for it alone is special revelation. Thus, the level to which we affirm its claims is the level to which we submit ourselves to God himself.

4. The mention of the divine or of supernatural events does not mean that they are unhistorical.

Since the late 1800s, historical criticism has asserted that a belief in God is unscientific and that any claims to the intrusion of the supernatural are unverifiable and therefore unhistorical. In their attempt to gain greater objectivity, however, historical critics have increased subjectivity, limiting the possibilities to only that which their worldviews allow. Rather than being initially skeptical about Scripture's truth claims (= ***principle of criticism***), scholars should engage in a thoughtful appraisal of the evidence in keeping with its source. Rather than limiting what can qualify as "history" to present human experience (= ***principle of analogy***), they should judge historical plausibility by the reasonableness of arguments made for belief in occurrences with which the historians may themselves have no personal connection. Rather than limiting potential historical causation to natural forces or human agency (= ***principle of***

correlation), they should broaden causation to include all *personal* forces (such as God) and not limit it to just natural or material forces.[10]

With these, atheistic biblical historians should at least give the same level of credence to the biblical witness that historians working in areas other than Scripture give to their source data. When historians engage extrabiblical texts that mention the supernatural, even those who do not affirm such a possibility read the testimonies as religious encoding that in no way calls into question the viability of the other facts. For example, scholars do not question Sennacherib's firsthand account of his conquest of the Levant even though it is loaded with theological perspective and propagandistic bias.[11] Why, then, should scholars question the historical claims of the same events in 2 Kings 18:13–19:37? Similarly, as noted by ancient historian Edwin Yamauchi, Herodotus's belief in the "Delphic Oracles" does not disqualify him as an accurate source for Greek history, nor does Joan of Arc's unverifiable divine call to action move scholars to doubt that she roused her countrymen to push English forces out of France.[12]

5. Verifiability is not essential to make history.

We should not require extrabiblical confirmation in order to justify biblical claims, for there are just too many gaps in our knowledge of the past. For example, only in 1842 did we gain secondary attestation of the reign of Sargon II (Isa. 20:1).[13] Furthermore, as Yamauchi notes, it was not until 1932 that scholars identified the Babylonian exile of Jehoiachin on extrabiblical tablets (2 Kings 24:11–13), and only in 1961 and 1966, respectively, did archaeologists discover epigraphic attestation of Pontius Pilate (Luke 3:1; 23:1; Acts 4:27) and Felix the procurator (Acts 24).[14] The James Ossuary discovery in 2002 was the first extrabiblical source that directly mentioned the names of Jesus, his brother James, and their father Joseph.[15] No one can question that these findings accent the historicity of the biblical assertions, but the biblical figures did not all of a sudden become real when these texts were unearthed.

Furthermore, many of the events to which Scripture points are not the type to which we would expect material outside the Bible to refer. The patriarchs, for example, were relative "no-names" in the ancient world, so we should not anticipate finding "Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob" mentioned elsewhere. Nevertheless, the details of the

10. For these three responses, see William J. Abraham, *Divine Revelation and the Limits of Historical Criticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982); cf. Craig S. Keener, *Miracles: The Credibility of the New Testament Accounts*, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011).

11. See *ANET* 287–88; *COS* 2:300–305.

12. Edwin Yamauchi, "The Current State of Old Testament Historiography," in *Faith, Tradition, and History: Old Testament Historiography in Its Near Eastern Context*, ed. A. R. Millard, James K. Hoffmeier, and David W. Baker (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1994), 27–28.

13. See *COS* 3:293.

14. Yamauchi, "The Current State of Old Testament Historiography," 26–27.

15. Some scholars do question the genuineness of the James Ossuary, but for a strong case for its authenticity, see Hershel Shanks and Ben Witherington III, *The Brother of Jesus: The Dramatic Story and Meaning of the First Archaeological Link to Jesus and His Family*, 2nd ed. (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2004).

patriarchal stories fit very nicely into the time period of which they propose to be a part.[16] Similarly, because so much ancient historiography was designed to make monarchs look good, we should not expect to find extrabiblical attestation of major imperial embarrassments such as YHWH's victory over Egypt at the exodus (Ex. 14–15) and his decimation of Sennacherib's army in the days of Hezekiah (2 Kings 19:35; Isa. 37:36). Still, there is substantial extrabiblical support for the veracity of both these biblical accounts.[17] Moreover, we should see the Bible's inclusion of both the victories and the failures/defeats of its key human characters as support for its own historical claims.

6. We should view the Bible's claims as innocent until proven guilty.

There is no evidence that Israel falsified or invented statements of fact, and this is highly unlikely due to the nature of the message and the judgment that the text itself places on false teachers (e.g., Deut. 13:1–5).[18] Furthermore, no other field of historical research practices a "guilty until proven innocent" approach, so why should this be done in biblical studies? As Craig Blomberg notes, historians should assume the factuality of the details in a work unless there is a good reason to believe otherwise.[19] K. A. Kitchen notes that in Egyptology, for example, the *Turin Papyrus of Kings*, dating to Egypt's Nineteenth Dynasty, lists seventy-six monarchs for the Fourteenth Dynasty, some five hundred years before, and although most of the rulers named are found only in this document, historians do not deny the existence of these kings.[20] Similarly, G. J. Renier notes that most of the works of Livy, the first books of Gregory of Tours's *A History of the Franks*, contain events known only from these sources, yet "since there is no other way of knowing the story they tell us, we must provisionally accept their version."[21]

7. God's revelation in history is the source, not the product, of biblical faith.

Biblical faith is grounded in God's revelation in history, and the significance of the biblical testimony stands or falls on whether or not the central events actually happened. If we view the central events as historical—creation, fall, flood, patriarchs, exodus, Sinai, wilderness, conquest, kingdoms, exile, initial restoration, Christ's death

16. See K. A. Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 313–72.

17. On the exodus, see Charles F. Aling, *Egypt and Bible History: From Earliest Times to 1000 B.C.*, Baker Studies in Biblical Archaeology (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981); John Bimson, *Redating the Exodus and Conquest*, 2nd ed., JSOTSup 5 (Sheffield, UK: Almond Press, 1981); James K. Hoffmeier, *Israel in Egypt: The Evidence for the Authenticity of the Exodus Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996); Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament*, 241–312; David Rohl, *Exodus: Myth or History?* (St. Louis Park, MN: Thinking Man Media, 2015); Timothy P. Mahoney with Steven Law, *Patterns of Evidence: Exodus* (St. Louis Park, MN: Thinking Man Media, 2015). On Sennacherib's 701 B.C. siege of Jerusalem during the days of King Hezekiah, see William R. Gallagher, *Sennacherib's Campaign to Judah: New Studies*, Studies in the History and Culture of the Ancient Near East 18 (Leiden: Brill, 1999); Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament*, 40–42, 50–51.

18. See Stuart Lasine, "Fiction, Falsehood, and Reality in Hebrew Scripture," *HS* 25 (1984): 25–40.

19. Craig L. Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2007), 304.

20. K. A. Kitchen, *Ancient Orient and Old Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1975), 30.

21. G. J. Renier, *History: Its Purpose and Method* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1950), 90–91. I was directed to this source in Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels*, 304.

and resurrection, the growth of the early church—then we ought to consider the other noncentral events as factually accurate as well.

Most professing evangelicals will affirm the necessity of Jesus' resurrection for our faith to stand (1 Cor. 15:14). Nevertheless, some of these same persons discount many of the Old Testament's historical claims, viewing them more as parables than as testimonies to God's acts in history. Sternberg once noted that when interpreters view the Bible's historical narratives as fiction, they change YHWH from "the lord of history into a creature of imagination, with the most disastrous results."[22] Many dangerous teachings are being propounded today.

For example, many want to affirm Jesus' historicity yet deny a historical Adam and fall. But they should ask themselves, "In what *Jesus* do I believe?" Is he the one who said that not simply the ideas but the very letters and words of Scripture matter and point to him (Matt. 5:18)? Is he the Jesus who was the Word made flesh, who was "in the beginning with God" and through whom "all things were made" (John 1:2–3)? Is he the Jesus whose human lineage stretches back to Adam (Luke 3:38) and who affirmed the historical reality both of God's creating male and female in the beginning as a paradigm for marriage (Matt. 19:4) and of the global rebellion in the days of Noah (Luke 17:26–27)? Is he the Jesus who declared that Scripture "cannot be broken" (John 10:35) and who Paul emphasized answers the sin problem produced by a historical Adam (Rom. 5:12–19; 1 Cor. 15:22, 45)? If the *Jesus* we affirm is not *this Jesus*, then we are in peril of losing the historical grounding of our faith.[23]

8. Taking the Bible on its own terms requires a Christian theistic rather than a non-Christian or atheistic approach to interpretation.

The Spirit of the triune God guided every word of the Bible (2 Tim. 3:16; 1 Peter 1:21). The whole of it is *Christian* Scripture, with all the Old Testament pointing to Christ and fully understood only in light of his coming (Luke 24:44–46; 2 Cor. 3:14) and all the New Testament built on his person and work (Eph. 2:20).[24] Every reader of Scripture has a worldview and approaches the Bible with certain assumptions about the nature of reality (i.e., faith claims). We take Scripture on its own terms, however, only when we approach it through the lens of Christian theism. When atheism or aberrant forms of theism guide one's hermeneutical system, one cannot expect to grasp Scripture's *intended* message.

In conclusion, I believe the biblical authors viewed their narratives as "history"—accurate accounts of what God was doing in space and time. A faithful interpretive approach to the biblical text requires us to take it on its own terms, affirming Scripture's claims in accordance with its revealed intentions.

22. Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading*, Indiana Studies in Biblical Literature (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1985), 32.

23. For more on this, see Jason S. DeRouchie, review of *Genesis: History, Fiction, or Neither? Three Views on the Bible's Earliest Chapters*, ed. Charles Halton, *Themelios* 40, 3 (2015): 485–90; for an abridged version of this review, see http://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/book-reviews-genesis-history-fiction-or-neither-three-views.

24. For more on the Old Testament as *Christian* Scripture, see chapters 10 and 12.

How to Interpret Old Testament Narrative

Narrative is one of the most difficult biblical genres to preach and teach well, because the message is usually more hidden and illustrated than explicit. Numerous named and unnamed characters, various levels of drama, and numerous speeches challenge the best of interpreters to discover a narrative's main point. Yet it can be found, and its clearest statement is usually located in a speech, which in turn provides the lens for understanding the rest of the story.

In this section I am going to highlight four guiding principles for interpreting biblical narrative. In the next section we will then apply these principles to a specific episode in the biblical story.

1. Distinguish the episode and its scenes.

Like many TV dramas, biblical narratives are made up of episodes shaped by scenes (for more on this, see "Basic Rules for Establishing Literary Units" in chapter 2). The sermonic message that stands behind a given story is bound up in the whole episode, and we can easily miss a story's main point if we make our focus too narrow, looking only at a scene. So after establishing that you are looking at a story, the next step in interpreting biblical narrative is to identify the narrative episode and its various scene divisions, remembering that verse and chapter divisions were not inspired. If we are preaching in 1 Samuel 17, we would want to preach the entire story of David's defeat of Goliath and not just cover David's encounter with his brother Eliab or his dialogue with Saul regarding armor and weapons. Only when we look at the whole story do we clearly recognize that it is ultimately *not* a story about David but that he is merely an instrument to point us to the true warrior in the episode. As David says to Goliath in the longest speech of the episode: "This day the LORD will deliver you into my hand . . . that all the earth may know that there is a God in Israel, and that all this assembly may know that the LORD saves not with sword and spear. For the battle is the LORD's, and he will give you into our hand" (1 Sam. 17:46–47).

2. Consider literary features and theological trajectories.

a. The Literary Context

As you focus in on your episode, you need to ask, "What leads up to the episode, and how does the episode itself begin and end?" You also need to look more broadly to consider whether the narrator elsewhere offers any clarity on how we are to read a given passage.

b. The Plot Development and Characterization

There are a number of questions to ask here: (i) What is the nature of the drama? What is the conflict or problem? How is it resolved? (ii) Is there repetition? If there is, it can often clarify issues of structure or draw attention to what is important. (iii) God is always the most important character, so what is he saying or doing, and how do his words or deeds relate to the covenant or give clarity to the various scenes of the episode? (iv) Who are the named and secondary human characters, and what relationship do they have with God? What are they saying and doing, and how do their words or actions relate to the covenant or give clarity to the various scenes of the episode? Remember that human characters are examples for us to follow only insofar as they point us to God.

c. Any Editorial Comments

At times the narrator himself will speak into a story, offering commentary and thus giving God's perspective on an event. Such comments are especially helpful to us in discerning the point of an episode, section, or book.

d. How the Narrative Anticipates the Work of Christ

Christ is the ultimate goal of all of the Bible's story, so it is fair and expected to ask of every narrative episode how it helps set the stage for Jesus' coming. It could come through a divine or human speech or action, human failure, or a related event or institution.

3. State in a single sentence the narrative episode's main idea.

Three features are noteworthy here: (a) The main idea will almost always tell us something about God and may also focus on how we are rightly to relate to him. (b) While at times modeled in the characters' actions, the main idea is usually stated explicitly in a speech (whether directly from God, his prophet, or another main human character). (c) The main idea should speak to any generation and should thus be worded to convey the timeless message of the narrative episode.

4. Draft an exegetical outline of the narrative episode.

We'll cover exegetical outlining in greater detail in chapter 6. Nevertheless, the central thrust of the task is to clarify in outline form how every scene and all the parts relate and contribute to the overarching main idea.

As with any other part of Scripture, the goal in working through biblical narrative is to grasp the author's intent for the account. Why did he include the details he did? What was he wanting to teach? Why did he write it that way? Robert Stein has proposed the following helpful exercise for getting at the "why" of biblical narrative. He suggests that we attempt to complete the following sentence:[25]

> I, the author of X-biblical book, have narrated to you this account of X-scenario because _____.

25. Robert H. Stein, *A Basic Guide to Interpreting the Bible: Playing by the Rules*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 157.

Through this simple exercise, we take good steps toward getting to God's sermon bound up in the story—his lasting message for us.

Note that the intention behind a story is different from the story itself. The subject matter is different from its purpose. In the next section we'll apply these principles to the story in 1 Kings 17 that introduces the ministry of the prophet Elijah and highlights his role as a validator of God's Word.

An Example of Interpreting Historical Narrative—1 Kings 17

I now want to apply the principles for interpreting historical narrative to the first account of Elijah the prophet in 1 Kings 17. The ESV opens chapter 17 this way: "Now Elijah the Tishbite, of Tishbe in Gilead, said to Ahab, 'As the LORD, the God of Israel, lives, before whom I stand, there shall be neither dew nor rain these years, except by my word.'" It's clear that the ESV translator thought chapter 17 marked a fresh beginning, for he translated the וְ (and) of the initial *wayyiqtol* (*waw*-consecutive imperfect) as "Now." There are at least two good reasons to affirm this approach and to see a new episode beginning here. First, 17:1 is the first time we have met Elijah the prophet, and his words to King Ahab point the reader forward to anticipate a new drama related to lack of rain. Therefore, 1 Kings 17:1 marks the beginning of a new topic and with that a new episode. Second, the previous chapter ends by using a series of marked clauses to signal the completion of a discourse unit, which suggests that the *wayyiqtol* verb at the head of 17:1 indeed begins something new. Even though it continues on the narrative of King Ahab's reign, it is still a fresh episode in the story.

As we move beyond 1 Kings 17:1, we see a handful of scene divisions that appear to be intentionally tied together. Verse 2 reads, "And the word of the LORD came to him . . . ." In this unit God calls Elijah to go to a brook near the Jordan River where he can drink and where he will be miraculously fed by ravens. "I have commanded the ravens to feed you there," God says (17:4). And the Lord is faithful to his word, meets Elijah, and supplies. But then we read in verse 7, "And after a while the brook dried up, because there was no rain in the land."

First Kings 17:8 repeats, "Then the word of the LORD came to him . . . ." This repetition with verse 2 raises the possibility that the narrator is about to introduce a parallel account. God now calls Elijah to go outside the boundaries of Israel along the Mediterranean coast to Sidon, where we are told that God has now commanded a widow to feed him. The mention of a command and of food recalls the miraculous provision through the ravens and suggests that this new scene does indeed parallel the first.

Upon meeting the widow, Elijah requests both drink and food. This foreigner then vows before YHWH that she has but enough for herself and her son to have one more meal, and then they will die. At this we get the most extensive quotation in the episode and the only speech that includes a speech within a speech. These factors suggest that it likely has something to do with the main point of the text (1 Kings 17:13–14): "And Elijah said to her, 'Do not fear; go and do as you have said. But first make me a little cake of it and bring it to me, and afterward make something for yourself and your son. For thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, "The jar of flour shall not be spent, and the jug of oil shall not be empty, until the day that the LORD sends rain upon the earth."'" Just as God purposed the ravens to meet Elijah's need at the brook, so he purposed this widow to be the instrument through which he would sustain his prophet. And as his word had proved true at the Jordan, so his word would again prove true here. We are told that the widow did as Elijah said and that she and her household ate for many days. Thus we read in verse 16, "The jar of flour was not spent, neither did the jug of oil become empty, according to the word of the LORD that he spoke by Elijah."

This seems like a natural break in the story, for we have had two parallel scenes of God's declared word and his faithful fulfillment of his promise. But at this point the story continues, for we read in 1 Kings 17:17, "After this the son of the woman, the mistress of the house, became ill. And his illness was so severe that there was no breath left in him." God's word is powerful enough to supply bread, but is it powerful enough to awaken the dead? The woman asks Elijah, "What have you against me, O man of God? You have come to me to bring my sin to remembrance and to cause the death of my son!" (v. 18). At this Elijah took her son and pleaded with God for the boy's life, and the Lord listened to the prophet and revived the child. And when the woman saw her living son, she declared to Elijah, "Now I know that you are a man of God, and that the word of the LORD in your mouth is truth" (v. 24). The miraculous awakening of the boy validated the words of God through his prophet.

All these various scenes work together to contribute to the episode's message. In contrast, 1 Kings 18:1 moves in a new direction, recalling the initial promise of a drought: "After many days the word of the LORD came to Elijah, in the third year, saying, 'Go, show yourself to Ahab, and I will send rain upon the earth.'" Chapter 18 shifts the temporal context from immediately following the initial prophecy to three years later, which suggests that we have likely moved to a new episode. The tightness of the introductory statement and three scenes in chapter 17 suggests that the various units are part of a single episode, focusing significantly on the truthfulness of God's word and his willingness and ability to care for the needy in miraculous ways.

In light of the flow of the story and the content of key speeches, in figure 1.4 I offer a main idea and exegetical outline for the episode:

Main idea: Because God has proved his willingness and ability to provide for even unlikely believers by raising a non-Israelite widow's son from the dead, we should affirm that God's word through his prophets is true and authoritative.

I. The Setting to Affirm the Truth and Authority of God's Word: Lack of Rain at God's Word (v. 1)

II. Affirmation of the Truth and Authority of God's Word for an Israelite Prophet (vv. 2–7)

III. Affirmation of the Truth and Authority of God's Word for a Foreign Widow (vv. 8–24)

A. The experience of the truth and authority of God's word (vv. 8–16)

B. The validation of the truth and authority of God's word: God's willingness and ability to raise the widow's son from the dead (vv. 17–24)

Fig. 1.4. Main Idea and Exegetical Outline for 1 Kings 17

Upon seeing her boy, the woman declared, "Now I know that you are a man of God, and that the word of the LORD in your mouth is truth" (1 Kings 17:24). Because God is both willing and able to care for even the least, we should affirm that his word through his prophets is true and authoritative.

This introductory truth then guides our reading of all the remaining episodes in the section, all of which are governed by the reality of no rain. You likely remember the story of the clash between Elijah and the 450 prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel. That happens in 1 Kings 18, where the storm god Baal is called on to go head-to-head with YHWH: "If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him. . . . You call upon the name of your god, and I will call upon the name of the LORD, and the God who answers by fire, he is God" (18:21, 24). Even with all the prophets ranting and raving, no fire came. Then Elijah prayed for God's miraculous intervention, that "it be known this day that you are God in Israel, and that I am your servant, and that I have done all these things at your word" (18:36). At this, YHWH's fire came, resulting in the people's turning back to the true God in worship (18:38–39). After this, God brought rain on the earth (18:41–46).

When someone is raised from the dead on our behalf, we should realize that God has the power and willingness to fulfill his promises. His Word is both true and authoritative. For the exiles first reading 1–2 Kings, this widow woman's final affirmation of YHWH's truth and authority would have given hope that their context of death could be overcome. What is more, for those of us who have identified by faith with the death and resurrection of Christ, our hope in God should be all the more realized. "Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive" (1 Cor. 15:20–21). The story in 1 Kings 17 points to the truth of the gospel and should heighten our hope in God's faithfulness both today and forever.