

HOW TO READ THE BIBLE: EPISODE 7

Setting in Biblical Narrative

the BIBLE
PROJECT

STUDY NOTES

SECTION 1: INTRODUCTION TO SETTING

00:00–01:04

Jon: In every story you've ever heard, the action took place somewhere. And that place is called "the setting." And since we've been learning how to read Biblical narrative, let's talk about how settings work in the Bible.

Tim: So settings are a crucially important tool in the hands of the biblical authors.

Jon: Really?

Tim: Yeah. Think of it this way: when you start a story, everything is new. The plot and the characters are a mystery, until things unfold.

Jon: Yeah, we have no idea what to expect.

Tim: Except authors can use the setting of a story¹ to prepare you for what's coming.

Jon: How so?

1. **Setting acts as a stage from which the author positions the story. It frames and orientates the reader to the "when" and "where" of the story.**

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Tim: So let's say a story begins in a courtroom. What do you think is going to happen?

Jon: I expect a story about crime and justice.

Tim: Yeah. Or how about the setting of a dark, old, run-down house?

Jon: Oh, something scary is about to happen.

Tim: Exactly. So settings evoke memories and emotions because of other stories you know that happened in similar places. The authors know this, and they can use settings to generate expectations about what could happen in this story.² And a good author will get creative with settings, and they'll mess with your expectations in order to make a point.

2. This literary convention is called a "type-scene."

Jon: This happens in the Bible?

Tim: All over the place. For example, think about the setting of Egypt in the Bible.

Jon: Yeah—big, middle eastern empire on the Nile.

Tim: Sure, now think about the first biblical story where someone ends up in Egypt. It's about Abraham. God calls him to journey by faith to a new land, and he promises to give him a huge family.³ So he sets out, but he arrives during a famine. Now, is he going to trust God and stay in the promised land, or will he leave the land and go look for food on his own?

Jon: Yeah, Abraham leaves and goes down to Egypt.

Tim: And there in Egypt, things go downhill fast. Abraham denies that Sarah is his wife to save his own neck, and then Pharaoh tries to marry her for himself.

Jon: Okay, first impression of Egypt—not a great place to visit.

Tim: But God then rescues them. He strikes Egypt with plagues, and so Pharaoh relents and sends Abraham away with loads of wealth. So what do we learn about Egypt as a setting from this story?

Jon: It's the place people end up because of stupid decisions, but it's also a place where God comes and rescues his people.

Tim: Yeah, and the next main story in Egypt follows the same pattern. Abraham's great-grandsons make a bunch of stupid choices, and they eventually lead them to Egypt because of another famine.⁴

3. You can read this story in Genesis 12:10-13:2.

4. This story can be found in Genesis chapter 42.

Jon: Down in Egypt, uh-oh.

Tim: So generations pass, and the family ends up as slaves in Egypt. And what do you think is going to happen?

Jon: God's going to send some plagues and rescue his people.

Tim: It's like you saw it coming! After the Israelites get back to the promised land, God tells them to never go back to Egypt for any reason.⁵ It's the place of trouble and oppression.⁶

Jon: So when future biblical characters go to Egypt, I'm supposed to cringe.

Tim: Right. Like Solomon, at the peak of his wealth and power, he married the king of Egypt's daughter, and then he started sending Israelites there to import Egyptian stallions.⁷ And then a generation later, that alliance goes bad. Egypt oppresses Israel all over again.

Jon: So biblical settings carry with them all of these memories of previous stories, which create expectation.

Tim: Yeah. It's a brilliant literary device to infuse stories with meaning. Now, biblical authors, they're brilliant. They can build up your expectations, but also creatively mess with them.

5. [You can read this in Deuteronomy 17:16.](#)

6. *"In the Bible, places are not only real locations, but also contain meaning. Frequently the geographical location and/or physical circumstances themselves convey a stereotypical atmosphere, and therefore influence the meaning of the action. Today in America, Las Vegas is associated with gambling, Hollywood with movie star glitz, and Washington, D.C. with*

power politics. These settings have all gained a character because of unique patterns that are frequently seen there. Biblical settings likewise are stigmatized because typical things come to be associated with them." – RAY LUBECK, READ THE BIBLE FOR A CHANGE

7. [See 1 Kings 3:1 and 10:28. For more, check out Tim's blog post "King Solomon: Love Him or Hate Him?" at \[thebibleproject.com\]\(http://thebibleproject.com\).](#)



Jon: Like how?

Tim: Egypt is a perfect example. In the Gospel of Matthew, when Jesus is born, his family flees to Egypt.⁸

Jon: Uh-oh, so this is a problem.

Tim: You would think so, but pay attention. Instead of Egypt being the bad place, it's the place of safety. Because who are they fleeing from? King Herod, who is behaving exactly like Pharaoh did, but he rules Jerusalem, not Egypt.

Jon: Matthew is messing with me to show how Jerusalem has become Egypt.

Tim: Exactly. You can find these kinds of patterns in many different biblical settings: Babylon, Moab, the wilderness, Bethlehem, the list goes on.

Jon: Which is a big list.

8. You can read this in Matthew 2:13-23.



Tim: And it gets bigger because sometimes the setting isn't just a place on a map, it's a type of situation, but they work the same way that settings do.⁹ For example, when people move "toward the east," expect trouble. Adam and Eve are banished "to the east," and then Cain¹⁰ wanders "to the east."

Jon: People move "to the east" to build Babylon.

Tim: And all of these narratives are designed to point forward to

9. **DISCUSS:** There are a ton of type-scenes in biblical narrative. Think about what happens when a man meets a woman at a well, or when a character passes through a body of water. What other type-scenes can you identify in biblical narratives? What connections come to our minds when we read about the sea in the Bible? A garden? The wilderness?

10. Associations between a character and their chosen location also paints a fuller, more meaningful picture of them. Think of John the Baptist in the wilderness, Lot in Sodom, David in Jerusalem, Jesus at Capernaum in Galilee, Naomi living in Moab, etc.

when the Israelites as a people will be exiled “to the east” in Babylon.¹¹

Jon: Aha. Nice.

Tim: Which leads to one more type of setting in biblical narrative, and that’s time, or how long events take. Like time periods of forty are often associated with stories where people’s faithfulness is tested. Noah in the boat for forty days and forty nights, then he gets off and gets totally drunk. The Israelites get impatient during their forty days of waiting for Moses on Mount Sinai, so they made the golden calf. Or after the Israelite spies investigate the land for forty days, the people rebel, so they have to wander in the desert for forty years.¹²

Jon: But then there’s the story of Jesus, who is tested in the desert for forty days, and he reverses the expectation—he overcomes the test!¹³

Tim: Exactly! Across the whole Bible, places, situations, and time periods¹⁴ become full of meaning by evoking memories and setting expectations. And the New Testament authors reuse all of these settings to show how Jesus is the one carrying our world from the garden, out of Egypt and the wilderness, and into the new creation.

11. You can read about Adam and Eve being banished east in Gen. 3:23-24. Cain lives east of Eden in Genesis 4:16. People move eastward to build Babylon in Genesis 11:1-2. Israel’s exile to Babylon can be found in 2 Chronicles 36:15-20 and all throughout the Old Testament. For more about the exile, check out the blog post “Jerusalem Has Fallen: Despair & Hope” at thebibleproject.com.

12. See the story of Noah in Genesis chapters 6-9; the Israelites waiting for Moses in Exodus chapter 32; the spies investigating the land in Numbers 13;

and the wandering in the desert in Numbers 14:34.

13. You can read this in Matthew 4:1-11.

14. **DISCUSS:** Consider how the stage is set in the very first verse of the book of Ruth. What associations immediately come to mind regarding the time of the judges? Now combine that with the meaning Bethlehem and Moab and how they contrast to each other, both in their Hebrew names and in past narratives. Right away, what kind of mood does this setting give the book of Ruth?