

Why Study Old Testament History? I

Why study Old Testament narrative? Why study the Old Testament? First of all, Old Testament historical narratives form a large part of God's Word to us. The Old Testament itself is 77% of the Bible, and narratives comprise about 40% of the Old Testament. Narratives also are a large part of the New Testament. Some of what we will learn about narratives in this course and some of what we say about the significance of narratives applies equally to the narratives in the New Testament, such as we find in the Gospels. A large part of God's Word is narrative. And as we are told by the apostle Paul in 2 Timothy 3:16, "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work." Narratives are a large part of God's Word, all of which is profitable to us. Therefore we should concern ourselves with it. Old Testament narratives are God's Word to us. They are not simply a word to people who lived in the past, but they are our Word as well. Some from certain theological persuasions might dispute that, but the apostle Paul himself said in Romans 15:4, "For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope." And in 1 Corinthians 10:11 Paul also says, "These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the fulfillment of the ages has come." Later on in this course we will discuss the dangers of applying this principle too freely, of taking as examples people like David as if they did not have feet of clay or were not people like us. We will need to talk about these dangers, but we also need to bear in mind that Paul says, "These things happened to them [...] as examples for us." We are to learn from the things that happened in their human experience. It was a human experience with God, though. By seeing their life and their experience of God's work in their lives, we may be instructed in how God may be at work in our lives. These Old Testament narratives were not only for the original audience, but are also for us now.

Why are these Old Testament narratives important? They capture the imagination. Stories (I am using the term broadly, applying it to the historiography of the Old Testament) provide vicarious experience. When you apply for a job your prospective employer will probably be looking for education and experience—this is one of the frustrations of trying to get your first job. Why do employers want experience? I think it is because they understand that by experience is the way we truly get to know something. Illustrations in teaching provide vicarious experience which draws us in and helps us understand the truth that is being taught. Real knowledge comes by experience. The stories of the Bible offer vicarious experience. Moreover, these stories help us grasp the truth. Often in teaching children we emphasize the Old and New Testament stories over the Pauline epistles. This is not because the Pauline epistles are not important—they are—but they are harder for children to understand. The stories help children and all of us grasp the truth. Take this statement: "Human strength is no match for God's strength, thus we need not fear human opposition." Do you believe that? Do you find that particularly gripping or motivating or energizing? We should if we truly believe it. But if we are trying to train someone in this truth it might be much more effective to recount to them the story of David and Goliath, even in the way the Bible does.

In 1 Samuel 17:4-7 we have a description of Goliath. One characteristic of biblical narrative is that it tends to be rather sparse about physical description. It does not often have descriptions like, "The mist was rising from the Jordan as Joshua rose on that sultry morning..." We do not find that sort of description in the Bible. The narratives tend to economize and focus on what is important. Thus when a large amount of physical description is included, we are to understand that to be significant. Listen to how Goliath is described: "A champion named Goliath, who was from Gath, came out of the Philistine camp. He was over nine feet tall. He had a bronze helmet on his head and wore a coat of scale armor of

bronze weighing five thousand shekels; on his legs he wore bronze greaves [like shin guards], and a bronze javelin was slung on his back. His spear shaft was like a weaver's rod, and its iron point weighed six hundred shekels. His shield bearer went ahead of him.”

It is very unusual to find so much physical description in the Bible. When we do find this sort of description, it is meant to convey some message. What is the point here? What might be the modern day equivalent to this Goliath—in military terms? He would be like an armored tank! He was armed to the teeth, huge, well armored, and he had a spear most could not even wield. The Bible gives so much detail in order to make a point. Rather than just saying, “Human strength is no match for God’s strength, thus we need not fear human opposition,” that truth may be much more gripping and understandable if we can imaginatively enter into this story and feel like the Israelites who were trembling in fear. Look at this man! He is huge and fearful!

David comes along at this point in the story. He overhears what is being said and sees the fear of the Israelites—even the Israelite giant. Saul is described as taller than his fellow Israelites, and he is king. He ought to be leading, yet Saul, like all the other Israelites, is trembling in fear. David comes and asks a question of the men standing near him in 17:26: “What will be done for the man who kills this Philistine and removes this disgrace from Israel? Who is this uncircumcised Philistine that he should defy the armies of the living God?” David is asking a theological question. I try to encourage all my students to think theologically. By thinking theologically I do not mean abstractly or academically. Rather, we should think theologically in the sense of bringing God into the center of every consideration in our lives. So often we consider God on Sundays and in Bible studies, but then we turn around and are overwhelmed with the cares of life because we are not thinking theologically. We are leaving Him out of the picture. Apparently, at this time all of Israel was doing that. They were looking on the outside. Man looks on the outside appearance, but God looks at the heart. They were all looking at this massive threat and trembling. Then David comes and says, “Who is this man? How dare he defy the armies of the living God?” He did not say, “How dare he defy us! We are strong and great! I am little but I can defeat him.” That is the danger of exemplar preaching: too often we say, “Be like David. He was small, but he knew he could defeat that giant.” He knew no such thing. He did not think he could do it, but he knew God can do it. This is very different from positive thinking, which says, “I can do it if I believe in myself.” We can do very little no matter how much we think we can do. But God can do it. David was making a theological pronouncement: “Who is this man to defy the armies of the living God?”

David is then brought before Saul, who tries to fit him out with his armaments. Now, David did not say armaments were bad. But Saul’s armor did not fit him. This was inconsequential to David. I do not think we can apply this to our military stratagems. David did not say armor is bad and we should not have armor, and I do not think we should say our defense forces are bad and we should not have an army. But like David we should not trust that our army is strong enough to deliver us. Only God is strong enough to deliver us. David tried the armor; it did not work and so he put it aside. He went out in God’s strength, and he said some very daring things. As Goliath comes out spouting insults, David approaches him (17:45-47): “David said to the Philistine, ‘You come against me with sword and spear and javelin, but I come against you in the name of the LORD Almighty, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied. This day the LORD will hand you over to me, and I will strike you down and cut off your head. Today I will give the carcasses of the Philistine army to the birds of the air and the beasts of the earth, and the whole world will know that there is a God in Israel. All those gathered here will know that it is not by sword or spear that the LORD saves; for the battle is the LORD’s, and he will give all of you into our hands.’”

David will give Goliath and Israel a lesson in theology. He wants them to realize that God is real and active. Notice that David makes the point explicit that all of Goliath's armor that was described in such detail and seems so impressive is not consequential. "It is not by sword or spear that the LORD saves." God gives the victory. The battle is the Lord's. We see in 17:48 that this is the case: "As the Philistine moved closer to attack him, David ran quickly toward the battle line to meet him. Reaching into his bag and taking out a stone, he slung it and struck the Philistine on the forehead. The stone sank into his forehead, and he fell facedown on the ground. So David triumphed over the Philistine with a sling and a stone; without a sword in his hand he struck down the Philistine and killed him."

It is interesting that the word for "forehead" and the word for "greaves" in Hebrew sound very similar. Taking into account the intricate word play that can often be found in these well crafted literary narratives, it is possible that this indicates an irony. Despite Goliath's greaves, he was hit in the forehead.

By telling this story we could instruct someone in the truth that "Human strength is no match for God's strength, thus we need not fear human opposition" in a way that goes beyond simply stating the proposition. Thus one of the reasons stories are so important is because they provide vicarious experience. We can enter into them imaginatively and grasp the truth in a much more vital way than if we are simply given a list of propositions. If all you wanted to know was what the truths about God are, those could be condensed into propositions such as "God is love." But that is very different from experiencing God's love in your own life. People can give assent to the proposition without really understanding what it means. I am reminded of the man who on his wedding day said to his wife, "Helen, I love you. There, I have said it. Do not expect me to keep on repeating it. Believe me, I love you. But I will not be repeating it." This man has stated a proposition that he believes to be true. She may also believe it to be true, but she will be frustrated if over time she does not experience his love in some way that helps her understand what all that means. In fact, if there is no experience of that love then the man's statement means very little. Thus experience is important, and stories give us vicarious experience. Now, a made up story—one that is not true—can illustrate a truth, but it cannot establish a truth. You can illustrate something you know to be true by using a made up story, but you cannot prove something to be true simply by making up a story.

That is why these Old Testament stories are important in this second way: they recount redemptive history. History is the stage of God's activity and self-revelation. Christianity is an historical religion. This is distinct from other religions that might involve themselves more with a philosophy of life, a way of looking at things, a theory about the universe, or a code of ethics or behavior. All these things are a part of Christianity, but Christianity is distinct because it involves the in-breaking of God in history. That is the nature of the incarnation of Christ. It was necessary for God to break into history if He was to redeem real people with a real problem involving real sin. You may hear people say today that the historicity of the biblical text is inconsequential. That may be true of certain texts like a parable, which need not be historical because it is illustrating rather than establishing a truth. Now, when Jesus tells a parable, because of His authority as God incarnate, He is in a sense establishing a truth just by telling that parable, regardless of whether the parable is historical. He has the authority to pronounce a truth and illustrate it through that parable. But truths of redemption are not established simply by a book of fiction. People today do say that it is not really important whether we regard the accounts of Israel's past and God's actions on their behalf as historical. They say that these are books which they believed to be true, influenced their thinking, and helped them to develop a certain lifestyle. We need to be careful about that way of thinking because it betrays our poor understanding of the essence of the Christian faith. If Christianity were no more than a way of thinking or a code of behavior and a lifestyle, then the historicity of the biblical text would not be important. But because we are truly dead in sin we need a

true revelation from God if we are to find any true redemption. In other words, history—not philosophy, mysticism, speculation, or any realm of purely mental or spiritual enlightenment—is the stage of God’s activity and self-revelation. God has acted in history in a revelatory and redemptive fashion. This comes to its climax in Christ, but we really do not understand Christ until we understand the way in which He has been foreshadowed and prepared for in the story that has led up to Him. Also, God is an historical agent. The late G. B. Caird, in his book, *The Language and Imagery of the Bible*, stresses the importance of history for the writers of the New Testament. He writes this, talking about the writer of the Gospel of John: “According to John, there is no Christianity apart from the solid reality of the earthly life of Jesus recorded in the apostolic tradition. Eternal life remains an unsubstantial dream unless in one man’s life it has become earthly reality. Without the Jesus of history we know neither the Christ of faith nor the God He came to reveal. From first to last the Bible lays great stress on the fact that God is uniquely active in human history.”

Why do I stress the historicity of the biblical text? Since the Enlightenment, it has become common to rule God out of historical discourse. The general idea has been that historical explanation can involve only natural causation or human causation. In other words, they believe that history is driven by natural causes—a flood, an earthquake, a change in climate, something that causes people to move around and do different things—or it is caused by human personal agency. But in their view you cannot talk about God as an agent in history. That is an Enlightenment assumption that I think we need to question in light of biblical teaching. The biblical teaching is that God involves Himself in history. Often He is working behind the scenes, but He also at times involves Himself directly as a causal agent in history. The primary example of this is of course the resurrection. That was nothing that was caused by natural forces or human agencies, unless you believe one of the various theories like that one of the apostles stole the body. Even Christians who believe the Enlightenment idea will say that in the resurrection we see God active. My question is if He is active there why would He not be active in other places? God is an historical agent.