

Why Study OT History? II

In the previous lecture we were looking at the reason why it is so important to have these biblical narratives and what these stories have to teach us. We saw that these stories capture our imaginations in a way that drives home the truth of what the Scriptures are teaching. We also saw that these stories are more than simple illustrations of truth. Because they recount redemptive history they actually establish the truth of God's work on behalf of His people. The last thing we were looking at is that God is an historical agent. The Bible from beginning to end lays great stress on the fact that God is active in history. Near the beginning of the Bible in Exodus 15 we have the song of Moses which emphasizes greatly God's active deliverance of His people as He brought them out of Egypt and through the waters safely to escape from their pursuers. Exodus 15:1-11 says,

Then Moses and the Israelites sang this song to the LORD:

“I will sing to the LORD,
for he is highly exalted.
The horse and its rider
he has hurled into the sea.

The LORD is my strength and my song;
he has become my salvation.
He is my God, and I will praise him,
my father's God, and I will exalt him.

The LORD is a warrior;
the LORD is his name.

Pharaoh's chariots and his army
he has hurled into the sea.
The best of Pharaoh's officers
are drowned in the Red Sea.

The deep waters have covered them;
they sank to the depths like a stone.

Your right hand, O LORD,
was majestic in power.
Your right hand, O LORD,
shattered the enemy.

In the greatness of your majesty
you threw down those who opposed you.
You unleashed your burning anger;
it consumed them like stubble.

By the blast of your nostrils
the waters piled up.
The surging waters stood firm like a wall;
the deep waters congealed in the heart of the sea.

The enemy boasted,
'I will pursue, I will overtake them.
I will divide the spoils;
I will gorge myself on them.
I will draw my sword
and my hand will destroy them.'

But you blew with your breath,
and the sea covered them.
They sank like lead
in the mighty waters.
Who among the gods is like you, O LORD?
Who is like you—
majestic in holiness,
awesome in glory,
working wonders?”

The Lord is a warrior, and a warrior is active. A warrior who never goes to battle is not a warrior. God is presented in the Bible as an historical agent, one who is active. The uniform biblical testimony is that God is not only the creator of time and space—which is the stage of history—but He is also the chief actor in that realm. Isaiah 64:4 says, “Since ancient times no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who acts on behalf of those who wait for him.” God acts. Psalm 66 tells us how we should respond to that: shout with joy to God, all the earth!

Sing the glory of his name;
make his praise glorious!
Say to God, “How awesome are your deeds!
So great is your power
that your enemies cringe before you.
All the earth bows down to you;
they sing praise to you,
they sing praise to your name.”
Come and see what God has done,
how awesome his works in man's behalf!

Over and over the Bible emphasizes that God does things. Just as the Bible began with this stress on God doing things (as in Moses’ song), the Bible also ends with the same stress. Revelation 15 refers back to the song of Moses—they are still singing the song of Moses at the end of time! Revelation 15:2-4 says,

And I saw what looked like a sea of glass mixed with fire and, standing beside the sea, those who had been victorious over the beast and his image and over the number of his name. They held harps given them by God and sang the song of Moses the servant of God and the song of the Lamb:

“Great and marvelous are your deeds,
Lord God Almighty.
Just and true are your ways,
King of the ages.
Who will not fear you, O Lord,
and bring glory to your name?
For you alone are holy.
All nations will come
and worship before you,
for your righteous acts have been revealed.”

God acts and He reveals or interprets His actions for us, not only in the historical books that we are studying now but throughout the Bible. He acts, and then He explains and interprets His actions. History is His story. And this story finds its climatic chapter in Jesus Christ.

Another reason we concern ourselves with the Old Testament histories is that the Old Testament reveals to us who Christ is. Jesus' coming is the climatic chapter in a much larger story. History is the stage of God's self-revelation and mighty deeds, and His mighty deeds include acts of deliverance for His people. Therefore it should not surprise us that the Old Testament historical narratives provide essential background for understanding Jesus. In Jesus we have the quintessential self-revelation of God and the supreme act of salvation. Jesus is that to which all of the other has been driving. But it could be asked, "If Jesus is the climax of redemptive history, does not knowledge of Jesus then obviate the necessity of the other? Why do we have to bother reading the preceding chapters if Jesus is the climax? The climax, the end of the story, is very important. If you are reading a story or watching a movie it is easier to understand it if you miss part of the beginning rather than the end. But if you only watch or read the last quarter of a story, there will be much of it that will puzzle you and much that you will miss. Jesus is the climax of the story, but it is a much larger story. Thus we concern ourselves with what has gone before in order to understand who Jesus is. Christopher Wright insists, "If we were to jettison the Old Testament we would lose most of the meaning of Jesus Himself. For His uniqueness was and is built upon the foundation of the uniqueness of the story that came before Him." There may be a slight bit of forgivable overstatement in that, coming from an Old Testament scholar, but I think Wright is right. Why does Wright say this? It is important to recognize the role that what we call the Old Testament played in Jesus' life. Our Old Testament was His Bible. It was the Bible He read. Thus Jesus Himself learned from the larger story. Wright says this:

I find myself aware that in reading the Hebrew Scriptures [the Old Testament] I am handling something that gives me a closer common link to Jesus than any archeological artifact could do. For these are the words He read, these are the stories He knew, these were the songs He sang, these were the depths of wisdom and revelation and prophecy that shaped His whole view of life, the universe, and everything. This is where He found His insights into the mind of His Father God. Above all, this is where He found the shape of His own identity and the goal of His own mission. In short, the deeper you go into understanding the Old Testament, the closer you come to the heart of Jesus.

How do you respond to a quotation like that? When I first read it I found it a little troubling. I think my understanding of Jesus was perhaps beginning to grow a little docetic. That is, I was perhaps stressing the deity of Christ at the expense of His humanity. I was not ready to hear about Jesus learning. We think of God as knowing everything at all times and in every way. But there is something mysterious about the incarnation that I will not try to solve for us or fully explain here, because I do not think I would be able to. But there is something in the life of Jesus and in the incarnation that involved Him in a learning process. Just as we assert that He was God in His entirety, 100% God, He was also 100% human. He was entirely human, yet without sin. Luke 2:52 says, "And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men." We are talking about God incarnate, and we are saying that He grew—not just physically, but in wisdom. We tend not to think in those terms, but I think we need to understand what Wright is saying. When we read the Old Testament, we are reading a book that Jesus studied and from which He learned and with which He astounded the religious teachers when He was 12 years old. I do not think it was simply miraculous infusion of wisdom and knowledge in Jesus; I think He learned—by the power of the Holy Spirit and by the power of His Bible—the Old Testament.

Now, I am not at all suggesting that Jesus began reading the Scriptures and thought, “There seems to be a theme here, pointing to the coming of a messiah. Hey, I would like to be that messiah!” He obviously read the messianic passages a great deal better than His contemporaries. He realized that being the messiah would not be easy. He read the royal aspects, but He also read the suffering servant aspect of what it would mean to be the messiah. I think He would have had a sense of who He was. Partly from what His mother may have told Him about the unusual circumstances of His birth—I do not think she would have kept that secret. It says she pondered these things in her heart, and I think she would have imparted them to Him as He grew. I think He would have known also by virtue of His innate sense of being the Son of the Father. We cannot claim to know all about that. But whatever He knew about His identity, I think He began to understand what all that implied as He read about the messiah in the Old Testament: reigning king, but also and foremost, suffering servant. After His baptism God said, quoting both a royal passage from Psalm 2 and a suffering servant passage from Isaiah 42 (Mark 1:10-11): “As Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: ‘You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.’” In hearing this proclamation, Jesus would have heard Old Testament echoes of royalty and suffering that we often do not hear because we are not so familiar with the Old Testament. It was right after His baptism that Jesus was driven into the wilderness to be tempted to give up His calling, to worship Satan and gain the kingdoms of this world that way. Jesus learned more fully what it meant to be messiah by reading His Bible, the Old Testament. It is exciting to think that in some way we can retrace His steps by reading the words He read, singing the songs He sang, even thinking—at least in part—some of the thoughts He thought. Thus we come to understand Him better. Wright says: “The Old Testament tells the story which Jesus completed. It declares the promise which He fulfilled. It provides the pictures and models which shaped His identity. It programs a mission which He accepted and passed on. It teaches a moral orientation to God and the world which He endorsed, sharpened, and laid as the foundation for obedient discipleship.”

I would suggest that this is reason enough for us as Christians to study the Old Testament. And we should give the study of the Old Testament a very high priority in our lives of discipleship to draw us near to the heart of our Savior.

There is one other reason we should study the Old Testament narratives, a far more mundane reason. These stories, these historical narratives, are often at the center of debates over biblical authority. This is for a couple of reasons. Historical narratives can at times, though not always, be checked. Historiography claims to make reference to the real world. It is a kind of writing that, for all of its artistry and crafting, is constrained by a point of reference outside the text. This is different from fiction, which is unconstrained. A fictional writer can write realistically, but he or she is unconstrained by any real events in the real world. An author of fiction can make up whatever world he wants. But in historiography there are points of reference. The history, whatever the artistry, crafting, and eloquence with which it is told, has to bear the real events in mind and be constrained by them. This claim means that the truth and accuracy of these narratives can, in some instances at least, be checked. Now, we cannot go back and re-watch history. Even if we could the interpretation of different people would be different. The same event could be interpreted in many different ways. Historiography is always interpreted, and thus the stories in the Bible are interpreted history. But historiography is also constrained by real events. Thus there are points of reference that can be checked. If you can prove, for example, that the flood never happened, then whatever interpretation you give is fallacious because the event never happened. Therefore these stories are at the center of debates over biblical authority because some of them, at least, can be checked out.

These can be cross-examined like a witness at the stand. In trials the person at the stand can be cross-examined and the person doing the cross-examination may use several different methods. She may try to find internal inconsistencies in what the witness is saying. If the witness' story is internally contradictory, if it contradicts itself, then that witness is discredited. Thus one way biblical narratives are inspected is in terms of internal consistency. If they can be shown to not make sense as a story then certainly they could not be believed as history. Another way that these narratives are examined is by external checks. How do they match up with archeological discovery or whatever material evidence can be found? How do they match up with inscriptional or other literary evidence? Thus in many different ways it can at least be attempted to examine or check the truth of historical narratives. Of course, if they can be examined then they can also be challenged. For example, they can be challenged on internal consistency or coherence. A majority of scholars today insist that the story of Saul's rise to power does not make sense; it cannot be read as a sensible or sequential account of what might have happened. They claim that it does not make sense as a story and therefore cannot be read as history. My own study of Saul leads me to believe that it does make much sense as a story. Later in this course we will go through some of the Saul narrative, partly to show that what on the surface may seem not to make sense in the end can make sense. If we look at it more deeply, study it for a while, and pick up on some key elements, we will realize that the problem was ours all along. It seems like a story that does not make sense, but the problem was us—we did not understand it in the way it was meant to be understood. Now, I realize that not everyone will agree with my interpretation of Saul. But I will simply be presenting what I regard as a coherent reading of Saul, and we will see if you agree. Thus one way to check the biblical testimony is to see if it is internally consistent—does it agree with itself? We need to be careful, though, to take it on its own terms as ancient historiography and apply the appropriate standards.

Another way of challenging these texts is with evidence external to the biblical text, such as archeology. One prime example right now is the issue of the defeat of Jericho in Joshua's time. You may hear people citing various different views on the archeology of Jericho. Some say Jericho was not even inhabited at any time when Joshua could have invaded the land of Israel, and therefore they say Joshua could not have defeated Jericho in the way the Bible describes—or in any other way if the city was not inhabited. This is often cited as a prime example of how the Bible and archeology disagree. One scholar says, "On the basis of Jericho alone, we have to redirect our thinking about the Bible." With cases like this I try to slow down and ask myself, have I rightly understood the archeology? The archeological evidence does not present itself with explanations of what it signifies. Archeology itself requires interpretation. As soon as archeologists begin to talk about the artifacts they have uncovered and what their results are, they are providing an interpretation of those artifacts, that evidence. Archeologists have come up with some widely differing interpretations of the evidence from Jericho. A man named Bryan Wood is reassessing the evidence from Jericho and the published results from one of the main archeologists of the site, and he is finding some things that are really challenging her interpretation of the evidence. These biblical narratives are important not only because they capture our imagination, teach us the truth, recount redemptive history, and reveal who Christ is and what sort of preparation was being made for Him, but they are also important for this reason of apologetics and being able to defend the authority of the Bible. Of course we need to be careful that we are rightly reading the text. Is the text actually claiming that this or the other thing actually happened in history? And we need to bear in mind the way in which historiography represents or depicts the past—all historiography involves interpretation. Bearing these things in mind, if the Bible proved to be inaccurate where it is making historical truth claims then we would have to begin to question our confidence in the Bible.

I received a letter from a colleague and scholar who said, "I struggle with matters of faith and history. Like you, I consider history fundamental for biblical faith. But the evidence against the historicity of certain events seems compelling to me. Where does that leave me, then? With many questions." I have

received many similar letters from scholars who say, “History is important for my faith, but my faith is in crisis because I cannot ignore the history.” I would not tell my friend that I could sit down with him and answer all his concerns. But I would try to encourage him, perhaps by saying, “I worked several years on the story of Saul which is considered by many to be internally inconsistent. The more I studied it, the more I discovered its internal consistency. This encourages me when I encounter other things that are perplexing in the Bible—the problem is not in the Bible, the problem is in my lack of understanding.” It is a matter of which side you give more weight to. Do you give more importance and consider more compelling the scriptural evidence or the historical, archeological evidence? My friend would give more importance to the archeological evidence, but I do not think it is as compelling as he thinks. We will be looking at this sort of thing in later lessons. I want us to realize that this is an issue. Because it is an issue for scholars and college professors, it often becomes an issue for pastors and others who are teaching in the church, and thus it becomes an issue for all Christians. This is important; it is not just a mind game.