

Interpreting Historical Books, I

Psalm 1:11 says,

Praise the LORD.

I will extol the LORD with all my heart
in the council of the upright and in the assembly.

Great are the works of the LORD;
they are pondered by all who delight in them.

Glorious and majestic are his deeds,
and his righteousness endures forever.

He has caused his wonders to be remembered;
the LORD is gracious and compassionate.

He provides food for those who fear him;
he remembers his covenant forever.

He has shown his people the power of his works,
giving them the lands of other nations.

The works of his hands are faithful and just;
all his precepts are trustworthy.

They are steadfast for ever and ever,
done in faithfulness and uprightness.

He provided redemption for his people;
he ordained his covenant forever—
holy and awesome is his name.

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom;
all who follow his precepts have good understanding.
To him belongs eternal praise.

I especially like to read this psalm in courses on the historical books of the Old Testament because it talks about God's works and deeds, which are marvelous, mighty, and majestic. It also says, "He has caused his wonders to be remembered; / the LORD is gracious and compassionate." Later in the psalm it says, "He provided redemption for his people." These redemptive deeds of the Lord He has caused to be remembered. How are they remembered? In the pages of Scripture. As we study the historical books, we are studying the remembrance of the mighty deeds of God. It is not our task to find what is behind the text—this is God's record of what He has done. Therefore we value the text as His remembrance and we learn from it. I especially like the last verse from this psalm: "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom; / all who follow his precepts have good understanding." This verse with variation is repeated over and over throughout the Bible. It is the motto of Proverbs, occurring at the end of the first chapter. I think we will do well to remember this verse as we study the historical books. If we do not fear the Lord, we may accumulate knowledge but it will not be to good effect. Let us begin with prayer.

Father, we thank You that You are a God who did not simply create the world and then leave it. Rather, You have seen fit to continue to be a personal agent in the lives of Your creatures. We thank You that You are a God of deeds, a God who has intervened redemptively in our situations. We thank You also that You are a God who has caused Your works to be remembered. We pray that You would enable us to rightly value the words by which Your works are remembered. Let us be diligent students of Your Word, not simply that we may gain knowledge, but that in knowledge we could be turned to be Your obedient servants. May we in gratitude recognize all that You have done in our lives. We commit our study to

You. Please guard all the students of this course from anything that might hinder them in their studies. And please guide my words that they may be in keeping with Your Word, and any that are not may You suppress and cause to be forgotten. In Jesus' name, amen.

At the beginning of a course I like to speak a little about hermeneutics, principles of interpretation. I want to begin by asking some preliminary questions. First, what is to be found in the historical books? History. How do we define history? History is the past, but in its written form history is an interpretive account of the past. It is important that we recognize that history is not only the past, but it is an interpretive account of the past. The historian is called upon to catch a vision of what the past events mean, and then to come up with a way of conveying their understanding or vision of the past to contemporary readers so that they catch the same vision. In biblical history we have the advantage of dealing with inspired historians. The biblical narrators were inspired individuals who were able not only to catch their own vision, but who were able to catch God's vision of what the past means. And they were able to convey that to us in their documents. In addition to history, we expect to find theology in the biblical historical books. The principle by which certain events are chosen to be recorded and others are left out is simply this: what is of interest theologically? The biblical text is revelatory of who God is. There is much that is left out because it does not bring us further in understanding who God is. Those events are selected to be recorded which enable us to learn something about God. We find theology in the historical books. Anyone who has heard two or more eyewitnesses of an event understands that as they give their accounts of the event, those accounts will differ because they have seen the event through different eyes. They have perceived the event in different ways. Modern historians will write their histories from various vantage points. Some modern historians are primarily interested in the sociological aspects of the historical past. Others are interested in economical questions. Many are interested in political affairs. Their principle of selection depends upon whatever matters they are most concerned with. They will select for their historical writing that which is of interest to the questions they are asking.

The historical narratives we find in the Bible are often of interest to the sociologist, economist, and political scientist. But that is not the concern of biblical history writing. The primary concern is to teach us something about God. Thus the biblical historiographers concerned themselves with human events in relation to God's faithfulness to His human creatures and His goal-directed redemptive plan. How is God sovereign over human affairs? So in the historical books we will expect to concern ourselves with matters of history and the way in which certain past events have been selected to teach us something theologically, to teach us something about God. But also in the historical narratives we will need to concern ourselves with questions of literature. The historical books are written as literary works. Now, definitions of literature vary. Some of the texts we read will seem more literary in an artistic sense while others will seem more straightforward. But I think the Bible is far more literary than we often give it credit for. Events of the past may be represented in various ways. They may be recorded in a simple, sequential manner—though as we have seen, all historiography involves interpretation. Some ancient Near Eastern literature, Babylonian and Assyrian chronicles for example, have something of this nature such as a simple listing of what happened in a given year of a king's reign.

In the Bible the genealogies may be an example of this more straightforward and simple historiography. But often even the genealogies imply far more than a simple chain of generations, though we sometimes do not recognize that. If we look carefully, for example, at the genealogy of Genesis 10, we see that it moves toward Abraham. Thus even in what seems to be a rather straightforward recording of generations, we see that the historiographer knew what was significant and was moving in a certain direction. There was a principle of selection whereby he chose to move us toward Abraham rather than any other of the branches of that genealogy. Similarly, the genealogy of Jesus in Matthew 1 records four

mothers. Of all the mothers who could have been chosen, it mentions four mothers, all of them foreigners. Christopher Wright observes that these four may have been chosen to suggest the universal significance of the Jewish messiah, Jesus. Why choose foreign mothers? To suggest that Jesus' coming is of universal significance and not only of significance for Israel. It is also interesting that many of these women, with the exception of Ruth, were caught up in some context of sinfulness. Jesus came through sinners for sinners.

Now, the history of Israel's relationship to God is reflected in other parts of Scripture outside of the historical narratives, for example in its songs (such as the songs of Deborah, Moses, or David) and psalms. In many of the psalms there are historical events recorded or reflected upon. There are also historical aspects of the legal corpus. The wisdom writings are often deemed to be devoid of any particular interest in Israel's history. But even in these we can sense that Israel's history provides the background to what we are reading. However, the predominant method of teaching history is narrative. As we think about principles of interpretation, hermeneutics, we will need to focus our attention on how we should understand biblical narrative. Narrative comprises about 40% of the Old Testament. And some of what we will have to say about the Old Testament narratives will also apply to New Testament narratives such as we find in the Gospels.

In order to do justice to the historical books, we must be willing to look at three facets of the texts. We should concern ourselves not solely with history, but also with theology and literature. Our interest is not just in the events themselves, but in the picture presented of those events. Through our reading of the text we want to try to get the picture of the past that is provided by the biblical narrators. This means that we need to give attention not only to the subjects of the texts we will read, but also to the slant and the style of the authors. What is the perspective from which this subject is viewed and presented? And what is the style by which the subject is presented to us? It may seem that I am belaboring the obvious, but there are some who will say, "The Bible is literature, not history or theology." Or, "The Bible is theology, not literature or history." These three aspects of the texts are often wrongly set in opposition to each other. The Bible has all three aspects and we need to concern ourselves with all three. And as we learn to read the text better as the kind of literature it is, we will better understand the truth claims and the theology—what we are to learn from the text.

What is to be learned from the historical books? Many, many things! But we want to read these texts preeminently for what we can learn about God and the various ways in which God involves Himself in human history. It has often been observed, and bears repeating, that the true hero of the Bible is God Himself and God alone. We are sometimes tempted to elevate David, Elijah, Moses, or Daniel, saying, "Be like David," or Elijah, etc. There is a real danger in that. The biblical histories are not provided to simply give us moral examples that we strive to follow. Rather, they are provided to teach us something about God. If we read these narratives carefully, we discover that even David, Elijah, Moses, and Daniel had feet of clay—they were sinful people as we are. God is the foremost, and ultimately the only hero of the Bible. Accordingly, our foremost objective in reading the Bible should be to discover what God has revealed about Himself. In some portions of the canon we learn about God from what He explicitly states about Himself. For example, in the prophetic corpus we hear, "Thus says the Lord..." He addresses His people directly through His spokesmen, the prophets. In the books of the law we discover what God requires of people. In the historical books we do not hear God speaking as much as we see God acting. Of course, He does intervene with words occasionally in the historical books. But we first and foremost see God at work in history most of the time behind the scenes but sometimes intervening directly in human affairs, the affairs of history. Thus the historical books give us an opportunity to learn about God not just from what He says, but by what He does—in the lives of His people and in the lives of those who are not His people.

Just as we can learn about God, we can also learn about human beings. It is important to see what we can learn from the human experiences in these books. We learn of the various ways in which humans respond to God's sovereign rule. God is in charge, and human misbehavior does not change that. But their misbehavior does change what humans experience from God, who is in charge. The historical books give us an opportunity to learn about human beings. Despite the manifold differences between the experiences, the setting, the style of life, and so on of the biblical characters and us today, the fundamentals of human experiences have not really changed much over the millennia. It is very interesting to read the Bible and other ancient texts and discover that the same things they were struggling with then are things we continue to struggle with now. God is the same yesterday, today, and forever—and in a sense human nature and the frustration, futility, and joys of life remain much the same yesterday, today, and forever. Therefore we can learn from the experiences of biblical characters. We can glean something from their example. The apostle Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 10:11 that "these things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the fulfillment of the ages has come." We can learn from their examples. The danger is in focusing so much on the human example that we forget the text is primarily meant to teach us about God. We need to keep a Theo-centric focus in our study while learning what we can from men and women like Abraham. Abraham was the father of the faithful in that he demonstrated faith. And yet we would be amiss if we held him up as the paragon of faithfulness. After all, the man offered up his wife as his sister—twice!—because he was afraid. How faithful was that? Joshua was a very godly leader, but even he and his fellow Israelites on one occasion failed to pray about an important decision they had to make. They paid dearly for failing to call upon God in that situation. They failed to operate theologically, which is the way we must always operate if we want to stay on target. We can learn from the successes and the failures of these people. We can learn from Abraham's faith and from the fact that he was sometimes faithless. Are we ever faithless? Absolutely. Did God reject Abraham? No. Does God reject us when we are faithless? No. Though we are faithless He remains faithful. He cannot deny Himself. We can learn about ourselves in relation to God by looking at others and how their relationship to God progressed.

We can learn about human beings and ourselves from these narratives. We can learn what will likely result from our own responses to God. We do not have to make all our own mistakes. We can learn from the mistakes of others. We can also learn from the successes of others. For example, what was it that gave David success when he faced Goliath? Was it because David had so much confidence in himself that he was able to overcome overwhelming odds? No, he believed in God. That was how he was able to face an overwhelming threat without paralyzing fear. If we are facing an overwhelming threat in our lives, we will not succeed by telling ourselves we can do it. Rather, we should remind ourselves that we cannot do it, but we know God can. Thus we can learn from their successes and failures. We can learn from Hannah's confession that God debases the proud and raises up the humble. We can learn from her experience in a very difficult marital situation where her husband had two wives. She was ridiculed by her husband's other wife for her childlessness, abuse was heaped upon her. From her response we can learn of ways that might be the right way to respond. She did not strike back in anger. She had a weapon she could have used against her rival wife, for her husband had said to her, "Is my love not greater for you than ten sons?" The text makes it clear that Hannah was the recipient of her husband's love more so than Paninah, even though Paninah had children and Hannah did not. She could have used that and said, "For all the children you have, our husband still loves me best." But she did not do that. Rather, she took her problem to God. So we can learn from both the positive and the negative example. But we are learning about our relationship to God. We are not learning to be this or do that—to strive by our own human efforts to be or do something—but rather we learn the nature of our dependence on God.

We can also get sober warnings from the stories of these books. We will talk later about the life of Solomon and ask how it is that the wisest man who ever lived and was greatly gifted with every advantage—wisdom, wealth, and power—that he went so badly awry. How is it that he ended his life in apostasy? How do these things happen? We will learn from these books that these things happen sometimes in very subtle ways. The account of Solomon's reign in 1 Kings 4 is overall positive. In 4:20-21 it says, "The people of Judah and Israel were as numerous as the sand on the seashore; they ate, they drank and they were happy. And Solomon ruled over all the kingdoms from the River to the land of the Philistines, as far as the border of Egypt." In 4:25 it says, "During Solomon's lifetime Judah and Israel, from Dan to Beersheba, lived in safety, each man under his own vine and fig tree." Israel is doing very well under Solomon. Then 4:26 says, "Solomon had four thousand stalls for chariot horses, and twelve thousand horses." This is presented without any critique at this point in the narrative, but it lets us know that Solomon is beginning to disregard the commands of the Lord. He is beginning to accumulate chariot horses. Deuteronomy 17:16, part of the law of the kings, says, "The king, moreover, must not acquire great numbers of horses for himself or make the people return to Egypt to get more of them, for the LORD has told you, 'You are not to go back that way again.'" This is a little seed of destruction planted in Solomon's life, and it happens very subtly. The law of the kings also says, in Deuteronomy 17:17, "He must not take many wives, or his heart will be led astray." Even prior to this in 1 Kings we read of Solomon's marriage to the daughter of Pharaoh. This is the first of many foreign wives who would become a part of Solomon's harem. The biblical text is very clever because the way it tells us about Solomon's preliminary breaking of the law is very subtle, as these transgressions were subtle in his life. The reader is almost unaware of it, even as Solomon was probably almost unaware of what was beginning to grow. You plant a seed and it is out of sight under the soil for a very long time. Eventually it begins to come up out of the ground, and then it may grow into a mighty plant. Little seeds of destruction can be planted very subtly. I think that is part of the message of Solomon's life. He did not mean to go bad. But he was not as watchful as he should have been; he may have been a little careless in his comfortableness. So we pray that God will alert us to seeds of destruction that we may be allowing to be planted in our lives. Even if no one else sees, or even if we do not see, they go in only to sprout up sometime later.

Even this very short overview of what is to be learned from the historical books tends to confirm the assertion of systematic theologian Richard Muller who writes that the Old Testament is "a primary source for Christian doctrines." This is a rather astonishing assertion: the Old Testament is a primary source for Christian doctrines. Muller goes on to claim that the Old Testament is "*the* primary source for doctrines not directly bound to the order of salvation established in Christ, and the primary source of doctrines like covenant that provide context for understanding the offer of redemption in Christ. Specifically, the foundational character of the Old Testament is evident in the doctrines of God, creation, providence, human nature, the Fall, sin, and the covenant. That is, in the doctrines placed traditionally in the first half of a theological system. Doctrines that set the stage and provide the interpretive foundation, both theological and anthropological, for all that follows."

In short, the greater part of the body of Christian doctrine rests on the Old Testament. Sometimes we do not realize that because we may not read the Old Testament very often. But without the Old Testament there is much Christian doctrine that we would not know about. The New Testament is the flowering, the fruiting, of a rather larger plant of which the Old Testament is three-fourths. Elizabeth Achtemeier concurs with this sentiment. She says, "It is no wonder that our forbearers included the Old Testament in the canon of Scripture. For the Old Testament is indispensable for understanding the nature of the world, of human beings, and of God. And it is indispensable for knowing who Jesus Christ is and who we are as His new covenant people, the Church." We cannot even really understand ourselves unless we understand our story. This is one of the points that Achtemeier makes in her very interesting book,

Preaching from the Old Testament. She says, “The story of Israel is our story.” We live in a time and culture (in the West) where many of us do not have a story. We cannot remember who our great-grandparents were, and we hardly know where we come from. But if we are in Christ then we are in Israel, the new Israel. Christ is Israel; He is all that to which Israel was pointing. And so the story of ancient Israel is our story, it is our family history.

Having asked some preliminary questions (what is to be learned from the historical books?), let us talk about some fundamentals of exegesis. Exegesis is, simply defined, the interpretation of Scripture. It is the attempt to draw out of Scripture its intended sense. There is much discussion among scholars about intention, meaning, intended sense, and whether meaning can be determined or is indeterminate. Let me say at the outset that I hold a fairly strong view of the importance of authorial intent as imbedded in the text, that it is discoverable and that meaning is determinate. We as human beings may never adequately and perfectly understand that determinate meaning. But it is stable in the mind of God, who is the ultimate author of these texts. Therefore I am not a deconstructionist.

In exegesis we want to determine and discover what it is the text is trying to teach. To do this we need to have in mind some kind of program or approach that will enable us. A very simple approach is to ask some questions: what does the text say? This is an observational question. To answer it we look closely at the text, observing all the features we can. What does the text mean? This is a question about the implications of the text. This is moving us in the direction of application. Therefore the next question is how does this text apply to me? That is a very simple, three-part approach. I will now introduce to you a more complex approach, but these are not to be regarded as mutually exclusive approaches. I want to introduce this more complex approach to try to shed some light on the way I think you can fruitfully use some of these approaches and maybe warn you of some of the dangers along the way. Among the exegetical steps we want to begin to engage our minds with the biblical text by submitting our minds and hearts to God and invoke His blessing on our study. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. That is not to say that we cannot understand anything from the text without His aid. Unbelievers can discover certain things about the text from which we can learn, but both the Old and New Testaments emphasize spiritual discernment and say that some things are spiritually discerned. For example, Mark 4:11-12 says, “He told them, ‘The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you. But to those on the outside everything is said in parables so that “they may be ever seeing but never perceiving, and ever hearing but never understanding; otherwise they might turn and be forgiven!””

This is a fairly clear statement of the fact that there are insiders and outsiders. There are those to whom God is imparting information. And there are those on the outside who are ever seeing but never perceiving, and ever hearing but never understanding. Some say that the New Testament has this insider-outsider mentality where the Old Testament does not. This is surprising to me because Mark here is quoting the Old Testament, Isaiah 6:9-10. This causes me to believe that the Old Testament also has this idea of spiritual discernment, of insiders and outsiders. Now, Deuteronomy 30:11-14 says, “Now what I am commanding you today is not too difficult for you or beyond your reach. It is not up in heaven, so that you have to ask, ‘Who will ascend into heaven to get it and proclaim it to us so we may obey it?’ Nor is it beyond the sea, so that you have to ask, ‘Who will cross the sea to get it and proclaim it to us so we may obey it?’ No, the word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart so you may obey it.”

The Word is accessible. We do not have to send for it, it is there. But in Deuteronomy 29:2-4 Moses says to the people, “Your eyes have seen all that the LORD did in Egypt to Pharaoh, to all his officials and to all his land. With your own eyes you saw those great trials, those miraculous signs and great wonders. But to this day the LORD has not given you a mind that understands or eyes that see or ears that hear.”

There could hardly be a clearer declaration that God is the one who gives understanding. Thus the insider-outside mentality is in both the Old and New Testaments. It is God who gives understanding. Therefore the first step for us in exegesis is to submit our minds and hearts to God. He is the one who will open our eyes and our ears to understanding. Does this mean that the Bible is an utterly closed book to unbelievers and that we as believers stand to gain nothing from their commentaries? I think we can learn from commentaries written by unbelievers. They are often very clever and uncover much data that can be very helpful. They may synthesize the data in an unhelpful way—indeed as their starting point is lack of faith that is likely to be the case. Thus we need to be careful. But in terms of the content of the truth claim, what it is the text is trying to say, we can often learn from the commentaries of unbelievers. But I do think we also need to bear in mind that our eyes are influenced by our background beliefs. We see sometimes certain things because we come at the subject from a certain vantage point and are inclined to see those things. What we bring to the observation does affect what we see. The eyes of faith will be able to see certain things that the eyes of unbelief will not see. Therefore we submit our minds and hearts to God before beginning our exegesis of a text.