

Interpreting Historical Books, II

To begin this lecture we will continue discussing the question we began looking at in the previous session. In particular we will talk about choosing a passage. These questions are all related to getting first things first as we begin to interpret and apply these Old Testament narratives. At the end of the last session we were talking about the importance of submitting the mind and heart to God as a preliminary step in studying the Old Testament historical books. Also, in order to study these books we must choose a passage, a focus of study. We need to be careful to define our passage rightly. If we truncate or cut off a passage inappropriately we may miss its message or misunderstand its point. The episodic character of the historical books makes it fairly easy to choose a passage. We do have in the Old Testament what might be described as a “scenic” mode of narration. That does not mean that it has elaborate description of scenery. Rather, it is scenic in the same way that a dramatic stage play operates in acts and scenes. The biblical narratives are scenic in this sense: they are episodic in nature. These episodes in the Bible generally involve a small number of active participants, perhaps two or three, though there may be a whole host of characters in the background. These episodes are also defined by a change in time or a change in place.

Let us look, for example, at 1 Samuel 13. This is a good example of how we can recognize a unit of text quite easily. In this passage, there is the regal formula of verse 1: “Saul was thirty years old when he became king, and he reigned over Israel forty-two years.” Then in verse 2 it says, “Saul chose two thousand men from Israel; two thousand were with him at Micmash and in the hill country of Bethel, and a thousand were with Jonathan at Gibeah in Benjamin. The rest of the men he sent back to their homes.” We learn right there that the main characters will be Saul and Jonathan, and we learn of their location. It is not until verse 3 that we get into the action of this scene as Jonathan attacks the Philistine outpost at Geba. The action continues until verse 15. In this verse the actors part. Samuel (who has come on the scene in verse 10) goes his way, and Saul goes his way. We later learn that Saul has gone to join Jonathan. Thus we see that these episodes in the narratives play out in much the same way that an episode or scene of a dramatic play involves one place, a set of actors. When the place and actors change, that is generally indicative of a new scene or episode. This makes it pretty easy to divide up the narrative text into units, objects of study. I do want to stress, however, the special importance of the broader context. You cannot understand well one scene in a play if you have not seen the other scenes—even if you think you understand it you may be misunderstanding it and misconstruing the significance of that scene. Therefore it is very important to read the entire story before you study one particular episode, so that you can interpret that episode in light of the broader story. For example, in 1 Samuel 13:8 it says, “[Saul] waited seven days, the time set by Samuel; but Samuel did not come to Gilgal...” That raises a question: what time set by Samuel? This is an allusion to an earlier event. Apparently Samuel and Saul agreed to meet in Gilgal. When did that happen? That is a question we have to ask. We will find the answer in the broader context, specifically in 10:8, Saul’s first commission. Later in the course we will study the rise of Saul and the nature of Saul’s offense so that we can understand why Samuel reacts as harshly as he does in this chapter to what may appear to be an inadvertent offense. Thus as we read a particular episode we must be careful to read it in the light of the ongoing story. Often we will not understand what is happening in a particular text unless we look more broadly.

Ian Proven, a friend of mine who has written a commentary on Kings, argues that discussions of Solomon’s wisdom often begin in the wrong place. Most begin by looking at 1 Kings 3:5-15 where the Lord appears to Solomon and says, “Ask for whatever you want me to give you.” Solomon answers, “...I am only a little child and do not know how to carry out my duties [...] so give your servant a discerning heart...” God is pleased with his unselfish request and grants his request for wisdom, giving

him also great wealth. Proven suggests that Solomon's wisdom is actually first mentioned in 1 Kings 2:9 where David says to Solomon, "You are a man of wisdom; you will know what to do with [Shimei]." David was telling him that as he was a man of wisdom he would know how to deal with these men, to rid himself of them. Solomon does this. Then it is only after this display of his own wisdom that Solomon says to God, "I am only a little child and do not know how to carry out my duties..." By beginning in the right place to study Solomon's wisdom we see that he had wisdom of his own, a human wisdom, and then when he realized that his own wisdom was not sufficient he asked for and received God's wisdom. Therefore we must be careful to read these passages within the overall sweep and structure of the book in terms of the major sections. Recognize that some boundaries in biblical books are artificial. The chapter divisions, for example, are not inspired and thus should not overly influence how we understand the divisions in the narratives.

The difficulty of understanding the larger story may be the reason some pastors seldom preach or some teachers seldom teach from the biblical narratives. And if they do, they may teach moralistic sermons such as, "Be like David," or "Be like Daniel." They may do this because they do not understand the overarching story of what God is doing in this particular passage. It is a challenge to read and know the larger context. But that is what we should do, taking on the challenge, and over a lifetime we will get better and better at this.

As we read one episode in the light of its broader context, we want to look for linkages between that episode and the surrounding text. I just mentioned the link between 1 Samuel 13 and 10:8. Genesis 27 tells the story of Jacob's deception where, having purchased the birthright from his brother Esau, he deceives his father into also giving him the blessing. We might read this story and think, and this is a patriarch? Does God approve of this? He was not punished for this, was he? Well, two chapters later we discover that Jacob the deceiver is himself deceived by his uncle who gave him Leah instead of Rachel as his wife. So though we are wondering for a while if there will be justice, two chapters later we discover that yes, we do reap what we sow. Sometimes we have to wait and continue reading before a question that is raised in our minds, a gap in our understanding, is filled. That is one of the standard techniques in Old Testament narrative, to use a device called "gapping." That is, to raise a question in our minds that peaks our interest, perplexes us, and engages us in the text. Then as we read, the text will often later fill the gap—answer our question. But we must read the broader context.

Let us ask how we establish the texts. How do we determine what the original text said? We should acknowledge the primacy of the Hebrew text. I understand that many will never be able to study Hebrew. But I think we need to acknowledge the primacy of the Hebrew text to prevent us from asking the question, what is the best English translation? as if we could ever communicate all of the force of the Hebrew text in a translation. As is a saying of ours in the West: "You always lose something in translation." Even at its best, translation involves sacrifice. "The art of a good translation is the art of making a good sacrifice." You will always lose something in translation, and so the art of translation is sacrificing the right thing. This does not mean at all that our translations are inadequate or cannot communicate God's Word to us. But by acknowledging the primacy of the Hebrew text we recognize that there is an original text of which our Bible is a translation.

What do you do if you have never studied Hebrew and will probably never be able to? If possible, consider more than one translation in your study. It is our tendency in the North American church to grasp onto one translation as the best and not even consider others. If there are multiple good translations of the Bible in your language, use all of them in your study. And for us with access to multiple translations, we should know what each translation is striving for. The NASB, for example, seeks to be a literal translation, as lexically accurate as possible. That is, it tries to be as accurate as it

can in dealing with the words of the text. Of course we must recognize that the range of meaning of a Hebrew word may overlap with an English word, but there will probably be some nuances of the Hebrew that are not included in the English, and some nuances of the English that are foreign to the Hebrew. Seldom do we find an English word and a Hebrew word (or Greek for the New Testament) that precisely overlap in their range of meaning. Thus what the translator seeks to do is choose the most appropriate English word to capture the connotation of that Hebrew or Greek word as it functions in a particular context. The same word in Greek or Hebrew may be translated by different English words in different contexts. We need to recognize that all translations are coming from a certain vantage point, and all must sacrifice something. The NIV strives to be more readable and puts more emphasis on conveying the sense of a passage than the most accurate translation of each word.

Which is more accurate, the NIV or the NASB? You have to ask, accurate in what sense? Amos 8:1-2 says in the NASB, “He said, ‘What do you see, Amos?’ And I said, ‘A basket of summer fruit.’ Then the LORD said to me, ‘The end has come for My people Israel. I will spare them no longer.’” How do you understand that? It is a little difficult to interpret as you study the Bible. You may think, summer fruit is probably over ripe, close to being rotten and therefore the analogy to the people—the time is about rotten for them, the end is near. This is close, but not exactly right. The NIV says, “‘What do you see, Amos?’ he asked. ‘A basket of ripe fruit,’ I answered. Then the LORD said to me, ‘The time is ripe for my people Israel; I will spare them no longer.’” That makes more sense. The Lord shows Amos a basket of ripe fruit and says, “The time is ripe for my people Israel.” How do we get these two different translations? The word for “end” and the word for “summer” sound alike in Hebrew. Thus God gives a vision that contains a word play—you saw summer fruit, and the end has come. Now, which is more accurate? The NIV or the NASB? It depends on your perspective. The NASB gives a more literal rendering of each word, especially of “summer” and “end.” The NIV, on the other hand, better communicates the rhetorical force of the text with the word play; it gives a dynamic equivalence. That is why we should reference both, if they are available to us. For serious study you should take advantage of all the translations available to you. This will help alert you to what is going on in the original text. If you have the opportunity to study Hebrew you will be able to read the text and see both at once. But barring that, you can certainly get very far along in this kind of study by making use of all the good translations available to you, and know what they are trying to accomplish.

In exegesis, thus, we must first establish the text and then acknowledge the primacy of the Hebrew text. Next, we must use the translations available to us intelligently, knowing what they are trying to accomplish. Sometimes, as Howard points out, it is important to notice not only the big things about a text but also the microscopic details. The hope is that we will, with a little experience and a close and careful reading of the Bible, learn to pay attention to the microscopic details and the macroscopic structures. It is in the details as well as in the large-scale sweeps that we learn about the messages of the Old Testament books and ultimately about God. Sometimes those little details are apparent more in the original Hebrew text than they are in our translations. In order to get an understanding of those little details you may just need to use a commentary. Your studying will be enriched by a good commentary. One example would be in the election of Saul and then the subsequent election of David in 1 Samuel 8:22. God condescends to do what the elders are demanding, saying, “Give us a king like all the other nations have.” God tells Samuel, “First warn them that this is an ill timed and inappropriate request, but having warned them, if they still insist, go ahead and give for them a king.” The phrase “for them” stands out a little more in the Hebrew. Then after Saul, that first king has been rejected by God at the end of chapter 15. God says to Samuel in 16:1, “How long will you mourn for Saul, since I have rejected him as king over Israel? Fill your horn with oil and be on your way; I am sending you to Jesse of Bethlehem. I have chosen one of his sons to be king.” In the Hebrew the phrase is “I have chosen *for me* [...] a king.” This contrasts with the phrase in 8:22 where God said, “Give for them a king.” This is a

very small detail, but then it is a very significant thing. David was God's choice; Saul was the people's choice. The people learned a lesson and Saul learned a lesson. But then God in His grace gave them His choice. Sometimes quite a lot of meaning is contained in very small details. If you need help determining what a translation is trying to do, read the preface or foreword to the translation. There are also some good third-party assessments of translations. There is a book by Jack Lewis, entitled *The English Bible from KJV to NIV: A History and Evaluation*. The second edition of this book goes beyond the NIV and talks about some more recent English translations such as the NRSV. I commend this book to you. It is from the Baker Book House, 1991. This provides an assessment of the relative value of these different translations.

We will not say much about textual criticism as that is a difficult discipline, especially when you are only able to use translations and not the original text. You may be alerted to some texts' critical issues by the footnotes in your translation or by commentaries. The almost all-encompassing principle of text criticism is this: that reading which most easily explains how the other readings arose is most likely to be original. At times you may bring that to bear in your studies. But most often you will be reading the text and notice, because of a footnote, that there are some varying translations and either go to a commentary or just trust the translators to have made a wise decision.

Having chosen and established the text, looked at several translations as they are available to you, and having made yourself aware of any difficulties in the translation, now you want to begin reading the text. I have divided this into three major sections: read the text literarily, reflect on the text historically, and then respond to the text theologically. First, as you read a text literarily you want to look for general literary features, general poetics. A language operates on certain principles of which native speakers are often unaware. But those who come in and learn that language often recognize the principles at work. They will construct a grammar in their mind that helps them learn that language more quickly. Thus languages have grammatical structure. Similarly, certain types of literature such as biblical narrative have a literary grammatical structure.

One main, general principle of narrative that you will look for is a plot and theme. If a text does not have some sort of plot and theme then it is not really a narrative—it would be more like a stream of consciousness prose composition. A plot will involve a point or perhaps several points of tension that arise in the narrative and then press for resolution. You expect to see some climax reached. In biblical narrative, the climax is often reached in a situation of dialogue where the actors are speaking with one another. Another general feature of narrative is characterization. We expect that those individuals who are involved in the narrative are somehow characterized by the writer. Often this characterization is not done directly. Often the narrator does not explicitly say, "The sons of Eli were wicked men." Sometimes he does, but more often he shows us that the sons were wicked or that this other character was arrogant. Sometimes physical features are mentioned, such as Eli's dim-sightedness. Why did the narrator choose to talk about Eli being dim-sighted and overweight? Perhaps because both of those could stand for something else that was going on in Eli's life. He was dim-sighted physically, but he had also grown dim-sighted spiritually. He was no longer seeing clearly. Moreover, he had grown corpulent. He had added weight to himself physically, and God charged him with giving more weight to himself and his sons than he was giving to God. God said, "Those who honor me, those who give me weight I will give weight to. Those who esteem me lightly will be lightly esteemed." Thus we see that the narrator will often characterize through indirect means. Therefore we should give close attention to the little details of the text because sometimes they carry much meaning for us. Another standard feature of narrative is what we call point of view. What is the point of view of the narrator? How does the narrator view what he is talking about and how does he want us to view it? Also, what are the points of view that are found in the depiction itself? In other words, if you are reading in the book of Job and one of Job's friends says

something, it is important to recognize that his statement is coming from the view of Job's "comforter," one of his friends. All the statements in the text are not necessarily coming from the narrator's point of view. We have to ask the question, who is saying what about whom in what context? What is the point of view of this particular statement?

Plot, characterization, and point of view—these are very general principles of narrative that would be discussed in most any kind of literary studies. Beyond these things we want to be looking for more specific literary features that are very typical of biblical narrative. I have already mentioned that biblical narratives tend to be scenic; they tend to be constructed like the scenes of a play. Also, biblical narratives tend to be succinct and economic in the way the story is told. There is not much wasting of words in biblical narrative. And because they are so economic with details and description we should be all the more careful to examine the details and description that is included in the text. Biblical narratives can also be very subtle. They make their points indirectly and thus subtly. Therefore it is worth looking for subtleties in the text. Sometimes you may feel that you are in danger of reading things into the text, which is indeed a possibility. If you see a subtlety in the text that no one else sees and you cannot convince anyone else that it is there, then it is probably in your mind and not in the text. But just because that is a danger does not mean that there are not subtleties in the text that we should see. The texts are subtle and we should be alert to that. Reading a good commentary can alert you to subtleties in the text that you might otherwise overlook. Let me give you one example. The story of Naaman in 2 Kings contains such a subtlety. Naaman is the man who had leprosy and whose slave girl was an Israelite who told him about the prophet Elisha. Then in 5:10-11 it says,

Elisha sent a messenger to say to him, "Go, wash yourself seven times in the Jordan, and your flesh will be restored and you will be cleansed." But Naaman went away angry and said, "I thought that he would surely come out to me and stand and call on the name of the LORD his God, wave his hand over the spot and cure me of my leprosy. Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than any of the waters of Israel? Could not I wash in them and be cleansed?" So he turned and went off in a rage. Naaman's servants went to him and said, "My father, if the prophet had told you to do some great thing, would you not have done it? How much more, then, when he tells you, 'Wash and be cleansed'!"

I think this is an example where a good commentary would help you with a translation. The way the text actually reads is just like the words of the serpent in Genesis 3 when he says to Eve, "Did God really say, 'You shall not eat from any of the trees of the garden?'" It is the same phrase. Noting that, Proven has suggested that there is not a question being asked here, as there is no marker of a question in the Hebrew text. Rather, Naaman's servants come to him and say, "My father, a great thing the prophet has said. Will you not do it? Did he really say, 'Wash and be cleansed'?" Something we will learn as we continue in our studies of these narratives is that repetition, and variation in repetition, is very important. Listen again to what Elisha said: "Go, wash yourself seven times in the Jordan, and your flesh will be restored and you will be cleansed." Now listen to what Naaman heard: "Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than any of the waters of Israel? Could not I wash in them and be cleansed?" Then his servants come to him and say, "Did he really say to you, 'Wash and be cleansed'?" They are saying, is that really what he said? Apparently having come all this way expecting that Elisha would wave his hand over the spot and cure him, he has heard that Elisha has commanded him to go and do some ceremonial cleansing. He is not pleased with this because the Jordan may have been muddy at the time and he has good rivers for ceremonial cleansing back home. But the servants say, "Did he really say that? Think it through again. What did Elisha say?" "Go, wash yourself seven times in the Jordan, and your flesh will be restored and you will be cleansed." That helps to make much more sense of this episode. The means by which Elisha was telling him to obey in order to be healed sounded very much

like just a ceremonial cleansing. And so he overlooked the very significant statement, “Your flesh will be restored.” He had been promised that for which he had come and he almost left without it. But his servants were listening. Often in the Bible the servants are doing a little better than their masters at listening to what is going on.

Our task as we approach the Bible is to be good listeners. The important things in biblical interpretation are listen, listen, listen. Really pay attention. If you simply observe very closely you will sometimes discover things that will surprise you. Other times you will discover things from commentaries that you might not be able to find in your translation. Therefore I encourage you to read through and study the passage on your own first, but then to go to a commentary and see what someone else has to say—if one is available to you. As you read you want to give special attention to weighted words and phrases. In this computer age, if we want to give weight to a word—emphasize it—we might put it in bold, underline it, or put it in italics. The Hebrew authors of course did not have such methods, and so they used others. Some of those methods of giving weight to words in biblical narrative include suddenly shifting to poetry. The diction is elevated, which should make you think that this might be a very crucial part of the narrative. Sometimes Jacob’s words to his sons are couched in poetic terms. Samuel’s rejection of Saul is poetry in the midst of narrative prose.