

How to Study the Bible (Hermeneutics)

Part 3 - Reading & Studying the Old Testament

Old Testament Narrative

- Narratives are purposeful stories that retell the historical events of the past and are intended to give meaning and direction for a given people in the present.
- Narratives record what actually happened, not necessarily what should have happened or what ought to happen every time (Descriptive vs. Prescriptive).
- We should seek to understand the author's intended meaning by studying each story in its original context.
- Like studying any narrative, seek to follow the plot and look for main characters and their roles. Also pay attention to dialogue, repetition, and irony.
- Each story contains both historical truths and theological truths. God should be seen as the "hero" of all biblical narratives.
- Seek to understand how each narrative plays into the grand narrative of the Bible.

Law

- Following a long period of slavery in the land of Egypt, it was essential that the Israelites received direction on how to live in community with one another and with God. Therefore, God gave the law to his people as a gift and as a way to show them how to be set apart.
- The law was a benefit to Israel. Many dietary laws kept the people from foods that carried diseases or caused allergies. The sacrificial system taught the Israelites about the severity of sin and the grace of God. Many prohibitions kept the people from doing things that were symbolic in other religions.
- Threefold use of the law:
 - The first function of the law is to be a mirror that reveals God's righteousness and our sinfulness.
 - The second function of the law is the "civil use," that is the way the law restrains evil.
 - The third function of the law is to guide believers into the good works that God has planned for them.
- "[U]nder the new covenant the Mosaic Law no longer carries the force as law under the old covenant. It carries the authority of Scripture; it prophesies of Christ; it shows us how to live; it provides principles and patterns of wisdom; it does not carry the weight of covenantal force over you." - Wyatt Graham

Poetic and Wisdom Literature

- Poetry is addressed to the mind through the heart. Therefore, much of the language is intentionally emotive and metaphorical.
- A key to interpreting poetry is to understand the structure of the passage.
- Wisdom is the ability to make godly choices in life. True wisdom does not come primarily through intelligence or life experiences; it comes from God.
 - The “fear of the Lord” is an important theme in Wisdom Literature.

Considerations about the Different Books in this Genre

- There are different types of Psalms. These types include: Psalms of Praise and Celebration, Thanksgiving Psalms, Laments, and Wisdom Psalms.
 - Imprecatory Psalms, a certain type of Lament, can seem incredibly harsh, but they should be understood in context and can be used to help us express our anger to God and cry out for His justice.
- The Psalms should be used as a guide to worship and prayer. The Psalms ultimately tell us the story of God and His people and this story finds its true meaning and ultimate fulfillment in the person and work of Jesus.
- Proverbs are not promises. They are general guidelines for wise living.
- Job provides wisdom for difficult times in life. The book centers around the question, can God be trusted in every situation in life? It is important to read each passage in context of the entire book.
- The book of Ecclesiastes provides wisdom for pursuing significance and fulfillment in life. Take note of the positive and negative content, and balance it in light of the central purpose of the book.
- Song of Solomon provides wisdom for romantic relationships. It should be read in light of what the whole Bible says about God’s purpose and design of marriage.

Prophecy

- Probably more than any other genre, it is imperative to understand the historical context of each prophet.
- Most prophecies were fulfilled in the near future. A small percentage of prophecies were solely focused on the coming of the Messiah or are still waiting any fulfillment. However, many prophecies experience both near and far fulfillment.
- Prophets mainly spoke judgments of the law. They may have used new phrases and applications, but overall their messages were applications of the law.
- The main themes of the prophets were repentance and restoration. We can apply these truths to our lives, keeping in mind that only Jesus makes true repentance and restoration possible.