

Interpreting the Bible

Lesson 4: Christ-Centered Old Testament Interpretation

Historical Narratives, Poetry, and Wisdom

Table Question

- What is your greatest challenge in reading the Old Testament?
- How can we pray Psalms that seem to imply that we are innocent and others are wicked?

Christ as the Main Point of the Old Testament

NT passages affirm that OT is about Christ:

- Matthew 5:17 “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.”
- Luke 24:27 “And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself.”
- Hebrews 1:1–2 “Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world.”

Redemption: The message of the OT like the NT is about salvation which will be accomplished by Christ.

- WCF I.1. Although the light of nature, and the works of creation and providence do so far manifest the goodness, wisdom, and power of God, as to leave men unexcusable; yet are they not sufficient to give that knowledge of God, and of his will, which is necessary unto salvation. Therefore it pleased the Lord, at undry times, and in divers manners, to reveal himself, and to declare that his will unto his church; and afterwards, for the better preserving and propagating of the truth, and for the more sure establishment and comfort of the church against the corruption of the flesh, and the malice of Satan and of the world, to commit the same wholly unto writing: which maketh the Holy Scripture to be most necessary; those former ways of God's revealing his will unto his people being now ceased
- WCF VII.5. This covenant was differently administered in the time of the law, and in the time of the gospel: under the law, it was administered by promises, prophecies, sacrifices, circumcision, the paschal lamb, and other types and ordinances delivered to the people of the Jews, all foreshadowing Christ to come; which were, for that time, sufficient and efficacious, through the operation of the Spirit, to instruct and build up the elect in faith in the promised Messiah, by whom they had full remission of sins, and eternal salvation; and is called the old testament.
- St. Augustine has said, “In the Old Testament the New is concealed; in the New Testament the Old is revealed.”
 - Without the New Testament, we would not properly understand the point of the Old Testament or many of the offices, ordinances, etc. found there.
 - Without the Old Testament, we would not have the right context or categories for understanding all the Christ is and does as our redeemer.

Representative Head: The concept of having a representative (or federal head) is familiar to most Christians. For instance, we understand that Christ took our place on the cross. We, however, sometimes overlook this concept when interpreting scripture. God often uses figures not as personal examples but as representatives. They point us forward to Christ in the unfolding plan of redemption.

It is more common for us to notice prophecies about Christ or possible OT appearances of Christ but overlook intentional types of Christ. These types often function as placeholders for roles that Christ will fulfill.

- Adam
 - Adam represents all of humanity in his sin. He establishes God's pattern of using a representative head.
 - Romans 5:12 "Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man [Adam], and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned"
 - 1 Corinthians 15:22 "For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive."

- Israel
 - Israel is God's chosen representative to bring the blessing of salvation to all the world (Genesis 12:2)
 - Ex. 4:22 God declares Israel his firstborn Son.
 - Hosea 11:1 "When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son." Matthew 2:15 teaches this passage is fulfilled in Jesus.

- Offices in Israel (prophet, priest, king)
 - There are only three roles in the OT that are anointed. Christ will fulfil each of these offices in his role as redeemer.
 - Prophet – Mark 1:15
 - Priest – Hebrews 9:11-14
 - King – Rev. 19:16

- Davidic King
 - God makes a covenant with David to raise up an heir to his throne that will reign forever. Christ means anointed and refers to the anointed king.
 - Peter quoting Psalm 16 then interpreting it:
[29] "Brothers, I may say to you with confidence about the patriarch David that he both died and was buried, and his tomb is with us to this day. [30] Being therefore a prophet, and knowing that God had sworn with an oath to him that he would set one of his descendants on his throne, [31] he foresaw and spoke about the resurrection of the Christ, that he was not abandoned to Hades, nor did his flesh see corruption. Acts 2:29-31

Conclusion

When reading the Old Testament, we need to read it as a story about Christ and the salvation he is bringing. We don't need to hunt for Christ as if he were making a cameo appearance in the background of a movie. The central role and the central action all point to him and his work of redemption.

If you think of the Old Testament as one grand story, there is one central plot. Whenever you read a book of the Bible, your first job is to know where you are in the plot.

Basic Narrative Plot of OT:

- Some will say the story of the Bible goes like this: Creation, Fall, Redemption, Consummation. But, almost the entire story of the Bible focuses on Redemption.
- The Old Testament plot: Humanity exposed by the Law; God's grace triumphs over our failure.

Genesis	Ex, Lev, Num Dt	Joshua, Judges, Ruth	1&2 Samuel, 1&2 Kings, 1&2 Chron.	Prophets	Ezra, Neh.
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Abraham's Family	A Standard for Judgment	Flawed Conquering	Failed Kings	Temporal Consequences	Still Awaiting a full return
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When did Israel turn bad? What do we learn about human depravity and God's patience and grace? How would you feel if the story ended here?

Genres (Narrative, Poetry, Wisdom, Prophecy)

Understanding the Message of Christ through the Different OT Genres

1. Narratives (OT Historical Books)

Over 40% of the Old Testament is written in narrative form.

- The following 15 Old Testament Books are largely or entirely composed of narratives: Genesis, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings, 1 and 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Daniel, Jonah, and Haggai.
- Another 7 books have a substantial amount of narratives: Exodus, Numbers, Leviticus, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Isaiah, and Job (That's 22 of 39 books of the OT).

Putting the Passage in Context: Three Levels

1. Top level: The overarching story of God's plan of redemption.

2. Middle level: Where is the story in the context of redemptive history? Pre-Fall, Patriarchal, Mosaic, Theocratic, Exilic, Apostolic, etc.

- Under what covenant administration does the narrative take place?
- What are the stipulations and promises in the immediate covenant context?

3. Bottom Level: Analyzing the particular stories.

- Who are the characters?
- What is the plot?
- Where is the climax?
- Who's perspective is the story given? Where does it take place?
- Repeated phrases or ideas? When did it take place? Etc.

Making Adjustments Before Application

- Epochal Adjustments: continuities, discontinuities, and fulfillment in Christ
- Cultural Adjustments: overcome the cultural gaps that are not related to epochs. What in my world, corresponds with things in that world? (analogy)
- Personal Adjustments: old/young, male/female, rich/poor
(Taken from Pratt, *He Gave Us Stories*)

Examples of reading narratives as a message about Christ:

- David and Goliath: If we read ourselves as David, we think the story is about having faith to overcome our Goliaths (corresponding to the obstacles in our world). What permits us to say that David is a type of me? Why is this dangerous?

We are not David. We cannot defeat enemies of God or be faithful on our own. Christ is the true faithful king who defeats all of God's enemies. But once in Christ, I can do what He did. I am not a sacrifice as Jesus but am to present my body as a living sacrifice.

We need a David. Because of Christ our true David, we now, put on the full armor of God (Christ) and see victory in spiritual warfare.

- Galatians 3-4: Who is Abraham's son? His true heir is Christ. We in Christ become his true heir.

Helpful Tips

1. "God is the hero of the story if it is in the Bible...God is the supreme "protagonist" or leading decisive character in all narratives.
2. Narratives are not allegories or stories filled with hidden meaning
3. Narratives don't always teach directly: You are not told explicitly "do not commit adultery" but 2 Samuel 11 (David & Bathsheba) powerfully illustrates its harm.
4. Narratives are not written to answer our specific questions. Pay attention to the purpose that the author is getting at.

Most Important Rule

"Perhaps the single most useful bit of caution we can give you about reading and learning from narratives is this: Do not be a monkey-see-monkey-do reader of the Bible. No Bible narrative was written specifically about you. The Joseph narrative is about Joseph, specifically

about how God did things through him—it is not a narrative directly about you...you can never assume that God expects you to do exactly the same things that Bible characters did.”
Fee & Stuart

2. Psalms

Reading the Psalms as a Story: The Lord’s reign through his messianic King

Overall Message: The Book of Psalms moves from mourning to praise. Laments are piled up at the beginning of the book, starting at Psalm 3. The book ends on a glorious note of praise. This teaches us that our worship ought to end in praise.

“Jesus sang the laments for us. So there is a sense in which we will never have to sing the laments, not in their ultimate depths. We may sing them honestly but never ultimately, never as one truly abandoned by God, because Jesus was abandoned in our place.” Futato 22

Outline of the Story:

Book I (Ps 1-41)

- Psalm 2 teaches us to expect a story about the successful reign of the Lord through his messianic king. But by the time we get to the end of Book III we discover there is no messianic king reigning over Israel, let alone over the nations.
- Book I ends: “Praise be to the LORD, the God of Israel, from everlasting to everlasting. Amen and Amen.” Ps. 41:13

Book II (Ps 42-72)

- Psalm 72 transfers kingship expectation from David to Solomon.
- Book II ends: “Praise be to the LORD God, the God of Israel, who alone does marvelous deeds. Praise be to his glorious name forever; may the whole earth be filled with his glory. Amen and Amen.” Ps. 72:18-19

Book III (Ps 73-89)

- This book brings us to the depths of despair. The last two psalms 88-89 are the darkest in the Psalms. There is no son of David on the throne.
- Book III ends: “Praise be to the LORD forever! Amen and Amen.” Ps. 89:52

Book IV (Ps 90-106)

- The theme here is faith that the Lord reigns in spite of evidence. Ps. 90 brings us 450 years before David, all the way back to Moses.
- Book IV ends: “Praise be to the LORD, the God of Israel, from everlasting to everlasting. Let all the people say, “Amen!” Ps. 106:48

Book V (Ps 107-150)

- Live obediently (not legalistically, but with a living faith) with hope that the king will come.
- Book V ends with Psalms 146-150 as the grand doxology of the entire Psalter.

Making Adjustments in light of the Full Story about Christ

- Blessing: in the Psalms blessing is temporal. Blessing looks like political success, prosperity in the land and victory over enemies. In Christ, this is the hope of heaven, the progress of the gospel, and victory in spiritual warfare. Peace is redefined by our salvation, true peace in Christ.

- Curses: They are either what we deserve that Christ took for us on the cross or curses that our spiritual enemies deserve. We still want God to judge and condemn evil, even if we hope he will save sinners.
- David or the King: The prayers for David or the King to reign, are prayers answered in Jesus and for the expansion of Christ's kingdom.
- Righteous or Blameless Psalmist: Only Christ is righteous and blameless. We can read this as his prayer. It becomes our prayer as we are righteous through Christ. We cry for God to save us from those things that attack our assurance and accuse us (undermining our justification).
- The Law: The Law is a gift from God not a strategy to get something from him.

The Psalm are ultimately the prayers of Jesus. He alone is worthy to pray them. He alone is the ideal king. He alone suffers for righteousness and emerges victorious over evil. Yet, we can pray these with Jesus because he has made us royal sons and daughters.

3. Proverbs

Does the Proverbs promise too much? It seems like in our experience, contrary to Proverbs, the wicked do prosper and the drunkard enjoys life.

The wisdom of Proverbs is noteworthy in its lack of reference to salvation. It is creation theology: God is viewed as the creator not necessarily covenant partner. Yet, the Proverbs present wisdom as our hope of life and blessing.

Our limitations and hope: We are unwise (even foolish). Since we are sinners, we cannot perfectly correct the unwisdom of our ways. Thus, we need an all wise substitute to get us the "Life" which is the result of perfect wisdom.

The Person of Wisdom

- Hebrew wisdom moves people to a proper relationship with the God of Wisdom ("fear of the Lord")
- New Testament further develops this concept of the person of wisdom by identifying Jesus Christ as creator and source of all Wisdom (Col. 1:15-17; 2:1-3)

Parallelism

Most Proverbs are a two-line composition using parallelism. There are three types of parallelism

- Synonymous: the second line repeats the first line.
 - Ex. Prov. 10:1 "My son, be attentive to my wisdom; incline your ear to my understanding."
- Antithetic: the second line is in contrast to the first, but the two make the same point.
 - Ex. Prov. 5:1 "A wise son make a glad father, but a foolish son is a sorrow to his mother."
- Synthetic: the first line creates a sense of expectation which is completed in the second.

- Ex. Prov. 16:31 “Gray hair is a crown of glory; it is gained in a righteous life.”

Proverbs should be studied topically by grouping them by themes: Money, parenting, sloth, sexual temptation, discipline, etc.

Does Proverbs promise too much? We live long enough to see the proverbs generally hold up. Wicked get what’s coming to them...but not always.

Following the Proverbs means walking by faith not by sight. It means trusting the Lord’s wisdom, even when our eyes tell us that sin might work out better for us. “Trust in the Lord with all of your heart and lean not on your own understanding” Proverbs 3:5

If the story of the Bible were to end with the cross, Proverbs would be proven untrue. But, the Bible ends with the resurrection. Put in light of God’s judgment and eternity, the proverbs are validated. We are foolish outside of Christ and will be condemned at judgment. Christ alone is wise. In Christ, we are wise, too, and God will grant us salvation.

4. Ecclesiastes

Martin Luther: “We should read this noble little book every day, precisely because it so firmly rejects sentimental religiosity”

- “Vanity” a word that will occur 38 times in the book.
 - Hebrew, “Hebel” – can mean breath or vapor. It can also mean frustration. Like trying to capture a cloud with your arms.
- “Under the sun” (29 times in book): Life simply with what can be perceived. It is a secular perspective. How does the major qualifier change how you read the book?
 - “In order to be prepared to hope in what does not deceive, we must first lose hope in everything that deceives.” George Benanos, quoted by Jacques Ellul
 - Another scholar wrote, “*Under the sun... has the effect of making the readers ponder what may be possible in life that is not ‘under the sun’.*”
- What is the Christian response to the sentiment that there is nothing new under the sun? What does Jesus offer that is new?
- Continue to see life beyond human resources: live in light of the resurrection
- Fear God in order to turn a vain, empty life into a meaningful life which will enjoy God’s gifts.

5. Lamentations

What difference does it make that this book is in the Bible? What does it mean to have a faith that permits and requires this form of prayer?

Think about what it means if God did not allow us to pray laments. Loss of lament is a loss of genuine covenant interaction because the petitioner has become voiceless or is only permitted to speak praise and doxology. Lament isn’t blaming God for doing wrong, but faith seeking understanding. Protest to God is also protest for God.

Artistic Style

Ch 1-4 are all acrostic, each verse begins with a different letter of the 22 letter Hebrew alphabet. Chapter 5 drops the acrostic sequence of opening letters, but still has 22 verses.

This is a journey through grief, not wallowing in it. There is an intentional completeness. Here is all our pain, from A to Z. It is an encyclopedia of suffering. It brings some control to the chaotic swirl.

Chapter 3 the acrostic effect is tripled, as all three lines in each stanza begin with the same successive letter

The Historical Context

- Years and years of prophetic warning and pleading by God (from Moses through Prophets)
- 609 Josiah the godly reformer is killed in the battle of Megiddo trying to prevent the Egyptians from coming to the aid of Assyria. For a very short time, Judah came under Egypt's power and they put Jehoiakim on the throne of Jerusalem. The rising power of Babylon, however, was unstoppable. From 605 Babylonian defeat of Egypt question of Jewish submission or rebellion
- 605 king Jehoiakim deliberately burnt the whole scroll containing twenty-three years of Jeremiah's preaching-a breath-taking act of blatant defiance of the world of God.
- 597 Jehoiakim died in rebellion and his son Jehoiachin surrendered, sparing worst of damage. This is the first deportation to Babylon.
- Another rebellion against Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar decided to finish the job. He invaded Judah and destroyed its towns and villages (Jeremiah 52). 18 months of siege ending in starvation, death and disease. 587 Babylonians broke through Jerusalem's wall and invaded.
- Those who survived the starvation and disease were marched 1,000 miles by foot into exile, leaving survivors behind (Jeremiah among them) on display.
- Archeologists estimate 80% of towns and villages destroyed or abandoned. The Temple of YHWH was defiled, looted, and burnt. "The most traumatic moment in the whole history of the Old Testament."

Not only physical devastation but utter humiliation of their national pride. It questioned their theology and their future hope?

God does not speak: The silence of God in Lamentations is inspired...it shows brilliant restraint. It prevents us sliding prematurely over suffering towards happy endings. It gives the book daring power because it honors human speech. God's absence forces us to attend to voices of grief and despair, and it can reflect, vividly or remotely, our own experiences of a silent God.

The center of the book is hope: Lamentations 3:19-26
[19] Remember my affliction and my wanderings,
the wormwood and the gall!

[20] My soul continually remembers it
and is bowed down within me.

[21] But this I call to mind,
and therefore I have hope:

[22] The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases;
his mercies never come to an end;

[23] they are new every morning;
great is your faithfulness.

[24] "The LORD is my portion," says my soul,
"therefore I will hope in him."

[25] The LORD is good to those who wait for him,
to the soul who seeks him.

[26] It is good that one should wait quietly
for the salvation of the LORD. (ESV)

Lamentations as a story about Christ

"Still the captivity of Jerusalem in Jeremiah's day was not yet the final catastrophe which Jesus lamented. The tears of Israel, carried captive in the sixth century B.C. from here paradise land of milk and honey, were more like the tears Adam and Eve might have shed as they were driven into exile out of the garden of God. The threatened curse had come; but there remained the prospect of restoration." Meredith Kline

Christ is the one who has seen affliction. Christ is the one who entered darkness on our behalf. He was righteous, yet experienced the curse of death.

The Heidelberg Catechism

Q: Why does the creed add, 'He descended to hell'?

A: To assure me during attacks of deepest dread and temptation that Christ my Lord, by suffering unspeakable anguish, pain, and terror of soul, on the cross but also earlier, has delivered me from hellish anguish and torment.

Purpose of Lamentations a call for repentance and prayer. It instructs us in the nature of godly sorrowing before their heavenly Father.

"Christ, the God-human, takes on the path of human suffering so that we are not pioneers in the darkness, so that we are not in a free fall. Instead, even when our suffering seems senseless, even when we feel like we are in a free fall, we can look to Christ to see, hear, and taste that we are still in the ever-faithful, ever-loving hands of God."

J. Todd Billings