Kingdom, Covenants & Canon of the Old Testament

Lesson 4

The Old Testament Canon

Manuscript
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Contents

INTRODUCTION.................................................................................................................. 1

CANON AS MIRROR........................................................................................................... 2
   Basis.......................................................................................................................... 2
   Character of Scripture ......................................................................................... 2
   Biblical Examples .............................................................................................. 3
   Focus.................................................................................................................... 4
   Doctrines ........................................................................................................... 5
   Examples ............................................................................................................ 5
   Personal Needs ................................................................................................. 6

CANON AS WINDOW ..................................................................................................... 7
   Basis.................................................................................................................... 7
   Character of Scripture ......................................................................................... 8
   Biblical Examples .............................................................................................. 10
   Focus................................................................................................................... 12
   Synchronic Snapshot ....................................................................................... 12
   Diachronic Trace ............................................................................................... 14

CANON AS PICTURE ................................................................................................... 18
   Basis..................................................................................................................... 19
   Character of Scripture ....................................................................................... 19
   Biblical Examples .............................................................................................. 21
   Focus................................................................................................................... 23
   Writer ............................................................................................................... 23
   Audience ........................................................................................................ 25
   Document ......................................................................................................... 27

CONCLUSION ............................................................................................................... 29

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Everyone who has led a large group of people — a church or some other kind of organization — knows that it’s important to have an overarching goal for the group and to establish some basic policies. But as time passes, it’s often necessary to address specific opportunities and challenges as well.

In the ancient world of the Bible, great kings had the goal of strengthening and expanding their kingdoms, and they established basic policies through international treaties. But these kings also addressed specific opportunities and challenges their kingdoms faced through a variety of royal communiques, some of which we actually have in museums today.

It was no surprise to ancient Israelites, then, that the God of Israel, the King of all creation, did much the same. His goal was to strengthen and expand his kingdom on earth, and he established the basic policies of his kingdom through covenants. But God also addressed specific opportunities and challenges that his kingdom faced through a variety of royal communiques, some of which we now have in the canon of the Old Testament.

This is the fourth lesson in our series Kingdom, Covenants & Canon of the Old Testament. In this lesson, we’ll focus on “The Old Testament Canon.” The word “canon,” is an ancient Greek and Latin term meaning our “standard” or “measure.” And in this lesson, we’ll see how the Scriptures were written as God’s authoritative standard for his people throughout the ages.

All Old Testament authors believed that God was spreading his kingdom from heaven to the ends of the earth. They also believed that God administered his kingdom through the basic policies he established in a series of major covenants. God made covenants in the days of Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, David and in the new covenant that the prophets predicted would come in the future. Now, as far as we know, there were no Scriptures written when God made covenants in Adam, Noah and Abraham. But as Israel grew into a kingdom in the days of Moses and David, God applied the policies of his covenants to the lives of his people through the Scriptures of the Old Testament. These Scriptures were first designed to address ancient Israel, but they were also designed to be the canon or standard of faith and life for every generation of God’s people.

We’ll reflect on the Old Testament canon in this lesson by exploring three major strategies that God’s people have used to apply his ancient royal Word to their lives. First, we’ll look at the Old Testament as a mirror that reflects on a variety of themes or topics. Second, we’ll examine the Old Testament as a window to history. And third, we’ll explore the Old Testament as a picture — as a series of literary portraits that emphasized certain outlooks for the people of God. These three strategies never stand apart from each other; they are highly interdependent. But for our purposes, we’ll explore them separately, beginning with how the Old Testament canon is like a mirror.
CANON AS MIRROR

Have you ever noticed that when you read a book with a group of friends, some things grab your attention and other things capture the attention of others? The book itself may mention many different topics, but we all tend to give special attention to the things that matter most to us. This has always been true as God’s people have handled the Old Testament. Old Testament authors touched on many subjects as they applied the theology of God’s kingdom and the policies of God’s covenants to his people through their books. And as we approach the Old Testament, we can highlight any of these themes that are significant for our lives.

When we approach the Old Testament canon as if it were a mirror, we look primarily for what the Old Testament has to say about our concerns and our questions, even if those themes are only secondary or minor aspects of the Scriptures themselves. We call this strategy “thematic analysis” because we look for the ways the Old Testament reflects on themes or topics that are important to us as we seek to be faithful to God.

To understand how the Old Testament canon often serves as a mirror in thematic analysis, we’ll touch on two issues: first, the basis or justification for this strategy; and second, the focus of this strategy. Let’s look first at the basis of thematic analysis.

BASIS

Whether we realize it or not, when we read the Old Testament, it’s impossible to divorce ourselves entirely from priorities that rise out of our experiences. We look to the Old Testament as God’s royal word to his people. So, to one degree or another, we always go to these Scriptures hoping to find out how they address issues that are important to us. But this common practice raises a question: “Is this the right thing to do?” Is it right to read the Old Testament with our interest in mind?

There are at least two factors that serve as the basis for approaching the Old Testament as a mirror of our interests: first, the character of Scripture itself supports this approach; and second, many biblical examples affirm it. Consider first how the character of Scripture supports using thematic analysis.

Character of Scripture

Like most well-written books of any significant length, Old Testament books consist of many smaller elements that fit together into segments. These segments come together to form larger sections and these sections form entire books. Each of these levels makes its own contribution to what Old Testament books offer us. And we should feel perfectly free to focus our attention on any of these levels.

Unfortunately, many well-meaning Christians often think of the meaning of Old Testament passages far too narrowly. They act as if every passage presents a very thin
laser beam of instruction, and there is only one way to summarize it properly. But in truth, rather than being like a laser beam, the significance of biblical passages compares more closely to a gradually diffused beam of light. Some themes are quite important and passages shine brightly on them. These are the more prominent themes of biblical passages. And other topics, may be more “minor” themes that are addressed as if illumined by weaker levels of light. Thematic analysis recognizes this entire range of the significance of biblical passages and often draws attention to secondary or minor topics. In fact, minor topics usually become the primary objects of study in thematic analysis.

To give a simple example of what we have in mind, let’s look at Genesis 1:1, the first verse of the Bible. There we read, “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.” Now, if we were to ask ourselves, “What does this verse teach?” at first glance, we might think that the answer is very simple: Genesis 1:1 tells us that God created the world. Most of us would probably agree that this is a fair way to summarize the main idea of this verse. But, as true as this summary may be, if we restrict ourselves to this central topic, we ignore many other themes this verse touches.

Just how many themes or motifs appear in these few words? Actually, the list is quite long. Besides speaking of the fact that God created the world, this verse touches on theological themes like “there is a God” and “God existed before creation.” It also tells us that God is powerful enough to create and that God should be acknowledged as the Creator.

Genesis 1:1 also tells us about the creation itself. It tells us the fact that there was a creation event, a time when all things were made. It reveals that creation is not self-sufficient; it depends on God for its existence. And it explains that heaven is a dimension of creation and that the earth is a dimension of creation. This one verse touches on these and many more minor themes, and we can legitimately focus our attention on any of them.

If so many topics appear in just one verse like Genesis 1:1, imagine how many appear in larger passages. Most Old Testament passages of significant length touch on many issues related to our interests and our experiences. Of course, we must be careful not to read our own ideas into the Scriptures. But if Old Testament passages explicitly or implicitly address issues, it’s quite appropriate for us to benefit from these themes.

We can also see the basis for treating the Old Testament as a mirror in biblical examples of thematic analysis. Divinely-inspired biblical authors and authoritative characters in the Bible often drew attention to relatively minor aspects of Old Testament passages.

**Biblical Examples**

As just one striking example, consider Hebrews 11:32-34:

Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah … David and Samuel and the prophets … through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, were made strong out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight (Hebrews 11:32-34).

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Everyone familiar with the stories of Jephthah and Samson in the book of Judges knows that the book did not present these men in a consistently favorable light. In fact, the author of the book of Judges repeatedly drew attention to the moral failures of Israel’s leaders during this period of history, including Jephthah and Samson. He highlighted their failures to demonstrate that the judges were not capable of providing adequate leadership for the people of God.

Still, the accounts of Jephthah and Samson in the book of Judges also report positive, but relatively minor facts about these two judges. Both of these men achieved victories over God’s enemies when they turned to God in faith. So, the writer of Hebrews drew upon the positive accomplishments of these men as he looked for examples of faith in the Old Testament. Even though he stressed these minor themes that were important to him, the writer of Hebrews remained faithful to the book of Judges.

New Testament writers can reference Old Testament relatively minor points of detail and draw from that points of application, as long as they’re faithful to the text. Jesus makes an astounding claim. He says that not a jot or a tittle of the word of God will pass away before the law of God is fulfilled. And one of the things that we can deduce from that is that every portion of the Scripture, from the major to the minor, is inspired of God, meaningful, and has value and purpose. And so, we actually see several examples of this in the New Testament — New Testament writers referring back to Old Testament events and teachings and drawing from them even minor points, points of application. The writer of Hebrews, in chapter 11, lists several Old Testament saints and draws from their particular experiences more general principles that apply to all believers everywhere in view of their broader hope of the gospel.

— Rev. Kevin Labby

Now that we’ve seen the basis or justification for treating the Old Testament as a mirror, we should turn our attention to the focus of this strategy.

FOCUS

Our interests in the Old Testament vary from person to person, time to time, and place to place. And for this reason, when we handle the Old Testament as a mirror, we can focus on a wide variety of issues. This wide range of thematic analysis appears in ancient Jewish interpretations in the writings at Qumran or the Dead Sea, other early Jewish texts and the Talmud as well. Variety appears in Christian interpretations of the Old Testament in every century. Still, there are certain topics that typically move to the foreground as we look at the Scriptures through thematic analysis.

As we consider the focus of thematic analysis, we’ll speak first of an emphasis on theological doctrines, second, of an emphasis on examples, and third, of attention to
personal needs. Perhaps the most widespread focus has been to discern what Old Testament passages have to say about theological doctrines.

**Doctrines**

For millennia, the Old Testament has been viewed as a source of authoritative teachings on traditional doctrinal issues. For example, Christian theologians often employ thematic analysis by asking questions that derive from the topics of systematic theology. We approach an Old Testament passage and ask, “What does it say about the attributes of God?” “What does it say about the condition of humanity?” “What does it say about the doctrine of salvation or the doctrine of judgment against sin?” Perhaps you’ve seen a topical Bible that arranges Old Testament passages according to these and similar topics. These kinds of themes may not be the main focus of the passages in view. But if the texts touch on them, either explicitly or implicitly, we can find answers to many of the traditional questions that concern us.

Doctrinal thematic analysis often takes the form of proof-texts — quick references to specific Old Testament passages that support this or that teaching. Nearly every time we read a book on systematic theology, a confession of faith, or an official church doctrinal statement, we find a number of Old Testament references mentioned to support doctrinal positions.

Unfortunately, some theologians have so grossly mishandled Old Testament texts at times, that many interpreters have rejected the process of proof-texting altogether. But if a passage touches on the issue in view, proof-texts are valid, quick ways to highlight themes in biblical passages, even when these themes are minor.

In addition to a focus on doctrine, another common form of thematic analysis is to highlight moral examples. Often, we look to the Old Testament for characters whom we should imitate or reject.

**Examples**

For instance, consider the well-known story of David and Goliath in 1 Samuel 17. Through the centuries, pastors have appealed to David as an example for believers to imitate. We frequently hear David extolled for refusing Saul’s armor, for trusting in the power of God, and for defeating Goliath. His attitudes, words and actions are treated as models for all believers to follow as they face their own personal spiritual challenges.

Sadly, in recent decades a number of interpreters have insisted that treating David in 1 Samuel 17 as a moral example is inappropriate. They argue that this segment of the book of Samuel was designed to explain why David’s house replaced the house of Saul as Israel’s permanent royal dynasty. So, they conclude, David’s victory over Goliath should lead Christians to think only of Christ the great Son of David and his ultimate victory over evil. This is a prominent theme, but it is, in no way, the only instruction we can derive from this passage. David’s faith in his circumstances should be imitated by every believer, much like the New Testament calls us to imitate Christ.
The Old Testament is full of examples to be imitated or rejected. And searching for these examples is a legitimate way to delve into the authoritative teaching of the Old Testament through thematic analysis.

A third common and legitimate focus of thematic analysis, in addition to theological doctrines and biblical examples, is devotional reading for personal needs. Thematic analysis helps us discern how Old Testament passages address the variety of issues that believers face in their personal lives.

**Personal Needs**

We’ve all heard lessons from the Old Testament on how to be a good father or mother, how to be successful at work, how to worship God, or how to deal with emotional struggles. Old Testament passages are often viewed through thematic analysis as a way of addressing these kinds of personal concerns. Although these matters may only be minor features of biblical passages, it can still be very important to us to explore how the Old Testament addresses them.

For instance, ministers rightly warn fathers about David’s failures as a father. They derive principles of hard work from Jacob’s 14 years of labor for his wife. Pastors turn to the story of Melchizedek and Abraham to illustrate elements of worship. They look at Elijah’s emotional struggles after Mt. Carmel to guide believers who face spiritual depression.

I find that Bible is the reliable guide for our ethical life primarily because Bible gives the incidences of people who have failed but were restored, but also people who failed and never got restored, to help us to understand that God is still there to forgive us. And when he restores us, we are able to live a life of victory because of God’s grace... And so to me, Bible is a, very much, a reliable guide to our ethical life. We cannot misuse the Bible. We cannot misquote the Bible, primarily because the incidences where people failed are for us to learn and not repeat that behavior, but rather to learn from that behavior, to see where we are prone to sin, where we are prone to fail, and so safeguard us through the power of the Holy Spirit by asking Christ to guide us so that God will be preeminent in our lives.

— Dr. Ashish Chrispal

Treating the Old Testament as a mirror through thematic analysis takes many forms. And this strategy is of such value that we must never ignore it. As we explore the Old Testament canon, it’s right to pay attention to every theme that these Scriptures present, even their relatively minor ones.

Now that we’ve seen some of the ways we may approach the Old Testament canon as a mirror, we’re in a position to turn to a second major strategy that God’s people have followed — approaching the Old Testament canon as a window to history.
Time and again, Old Testament prophets warned Israel that faithful service to God required them to remember what God had done for them in the past. In response to this warning, the faithful in Israel and the Christian church have always treated the Old Testament as a window to history. Biblical faith is not rooted in mythology, political propaganda, nor abstract philosophy. Rather, it’s rooted in the fact that God has acted in history and that the Scriptures give us a trustworthy record of what God has done. The Holy Spirit frequently led Old Testament authors to reflect on the acts of God in history. And for this reason, historical analysis of Old Testament books is a crucial strategy for understanding and applying the Old Testament to our lives.

When we read an ordinary book that concerns events from the past, it’s only natural for our attention to move toward the historical events it describes. Sometimes we’re so engrossed in the history that we stop thinking about themes that arise out of our own experiences. Instead, we see the events through the book and imagine how things must have been in the days it describes.

In a similar way, the Old Testament canon describes the world as it existed long ago. And God’s people have submitted to God’s royal authority over their lives by approaching the Old Testament as a window that allows us to see into that world. We’ll speak of this strategy as “historical analysis” because it focuses on past events and on what the Old Testament says about these events.

To explore historical analysis of the Old Testament canon, we’ll look at two issues once again: first, the basis or justification for handling the Old Testament as a window to history, and second, the focus of this strategy. Let’s look first at the basis for historical analysis of Old Testament Scriptures.

**Basis**

Unfortunately, for centuries now, many archeologists and historians have claimed that no reasonable person believes that the Old Testament canon is historically reliable. In their view, it’s at best little more than pious fiction that offers some spiritual or moral guidance. This skepticism about the reliability of Old Testament historical records has been so widespread for so long that it’s even impacted some evangelical Christians. Some evangelicals have given up on treating the Old Testament as a window to history.

There are many reasons for pursuing historical analysis of the Old Testament. But for the sake of consistency, we’ll limit ourselves to two issues that we touched on earlier: the character of Scripture itself and biblical examples. Let’s think first about the ways the character of Scripture provides a solid basis for historical analysis.
Character of Scripture

Listen to Paul’s well-known words in 2 Timothy 3:16:

All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness (2 Timothy 3:16).

Following the teachings of Jesus and his first century apostles and prophets, Christians affirm that the Old Testament comes from God, that it is inspired, or “breathed out by God.” In line with this teaching, Christians are obligated to study the Old Testament with the conviction that every claim the Scriptures make is true.

Second Timothy 3:16 obligates us as believers to read Old Testament Scriptures and their historical claims as being true, because in that passage of Scripture, 2 Timothy 3:16, it’s where we read that God’s word is God-breathed. And so, from a perfect God comes a perfect word, free from error. With the Holy Spirit’s inspiration, we believe in the infallibility and the inerrancy of Scripture. And so, beginning with that presupposition, we understand what the Bible says concerning matters of history to be true.

— Rev. Kevin Labby

Much like New Testament faith is based on what God actually did in history through Christ, all Old Testament teachings are based on what God actually did in history prior to Christ. For this reason, faithful followers of Christ affirm that every Old Testament historical claim truthfully represents real historical events. When the Old Testament teaches that something happened, it speaks with the authority of God himself. So, we can be sure that it actually happened.

Many different kinds of objections have been raised against this point of view. For instance, many scholars insist that the Scriptures are so selective that they cannot be trusted. It’s true that the Old Testament historical record is highly selective. It omits much, much more than it mentions. But this should not surprise us at all. You’ll recall that the apostle John, in John 21:25, said this about the life of Jesus:

There are also many other things that Jesus did. Were every one of them to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written (John 21:25).

If it’s true that the world cannot contain the books required to report everything about Jesus’ life, we should acknowledge that the Old Testament only reports a small fraction of the countless events that took place in Old Testament times. Still, this selectivity does not impinge on the veracity of what the Scriptures tell us about history.

Skeptical biblical interpreters have also objected to the historical reliability of the Old Testament because it refers to supernatural events. God and spirits play major roles in the Old Testament record, and this fact is often off-putting to modern naturalistic
interpreters. But this should not bother us because the Christian faith is a supernatural faith from beginning to end. Anyone who follows Christ as the Lord risen from the dead shouldn’t have any problem believing in the supernatural events that the Old Testament describes.

I believe it’s important for people to understand and believe that the supernatural events as described in the Bible are trustworthy because it speaks to the trustworthiness of the Bible itself… As Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15, if Christ has not been raised, our faith is futile; we are still in our sins. In the same way, if the exodus did not happen, if the exile did not happen, if the return from exile did not happen, if those things are not true in the way that the biblical writers are describing them, if Christ did not actually rise from the dead, the very basis of our faith has been undermined. If these events are not the way in which they actually happened, the Bible itself is not trustworthy. And if the Bible itself is not trustworthy, we do not have an accurate picture of what it is that God is revealing to his people. So, the supernatural events are a key piece of the trustworthiness of the revelation that we have received from God.

— Dr. Jim Jordan

Perhaps the greatest objection to the historical veracity of the Old Testament comes from modern scientific research. Highly respected archaeologists and other scientists have pointed to evidence that they believe disproves the reliability of the Old Testament. For instance, geologists raise questions about the creation account and the worldwide flood in Noah’s day. Archaeologists raise evidences against the Bible’s presentation of many historical events.

We all should admit that it’s sometimes difficult to reconcile Old Testament historical claims and scientific research. But it’s important to know why this is so. Why are there tensions between the Old Testament and modern science? Well, there are at least three reasons why the Old Testament might seem to contradict scientific evidences.

First, at times scientists misunderstand the evidence supporting their claims against the Scriptures. As much as we should value archaeology and other sciences, scientists make mistakes. Their conclusions are always subject to correction by further research. For example, in the past many scholars insisted that the Old Testament was in error when it referred to the Hittite people because there were no extra-biblical records of Hittites. But in the last century archaeologists discovered the Hittite culture. In fact, writings from the Hittites have provided very fruitful insights into Old Testament studies. In much the same way, a century ago it was a settled scholarly opinion that the Old Testament’s date for the exodus and conquest was much too early. In recent decades, however, the archaeological data has been evaluated again, and strong arguments have been put forth, even by unbelievers, in favor of the biblical record. These and countless other examples alert us to the fact that when the Old Testament does not correspond with scientific evidence, the scientists may simply be wrong in their assessments of their evidence.
A second reason that scientific research seems to contradict the biblical record is because biblical interpreters have misunderstood the Old Testament itself. The classic example of this kind of controversy is the struggle between Galileo and church authorities near the beginning of the 17th century. Galileo argued that the earth revolved around the sun; whereas, the church argued on the basis of Scripture that the sun revolved around the earth. Much of this controversy centered around Joshua 10:13, where we read these words:

The sun stood still, and the moon stopped… The sun stopped in the midst of heaven and did not hurry to set for about a whole day (Joshua 10:13).

For centuries, the church had taken this verse to mean that the sun literally stopped revolving around the earth for a time, and they ruled out the possibility of a solar system. Today, however, scientific investigation has firmly established that day and night are factors of the earth spinning on its axis as it orbits around the sun. As a result, most modern Christians have changed how they interpret Joshua 10:13. We can be sure that somehow daylight was miraculously extended for Joshua. But we now take this verse and others like it as ordinary, phenomenological language, speaking about things as they appear, akin to the way we speak in the modern world of “sunrise” and “sunset.” The strength of scientific evidence for the solar system has not caused us to reject the historical reliability of the Old Testament, but it has helped us correct our interpretation of this portion of the Old Testament.

There’s a third reason why scientific evidences and the Scriptures sometimes seem incompatible: we may have misunderstood both. Scientists and biblical interpreters are prone to error. So, we must always be open to the possibility that further research will demonstrate that both scientists and biblical interpreters are mistaken.

As we pursue historical analysis of the Old Testament, we must always keep in mind that some apparent discrepancies between actual history and the Old Testament record may never be resolved. Every discipline of study will continue to present new challenges to our trust in the historical reliability of the Old Testament, and we should not expect to resolve all of these challenges. We may often gain a degree of understanding, and even offer some plausible solutions, but still not come to the point that we eliminate all historical difficulties.

No matter what tensions arise between scientific outlooks and the Old Testament historical record, God’s faithful people should follow what Christ and his first century apostles and prophets taught about the Scriptures. The divine inspiration of the Old Testament establishes its historical veracity. And for this reason, we are right to approach the Old Testament as a window to history.

Now that we’ve seen how the character of Scripture supports historical analysis, we should turn to a second basis or justification for this approach to the Old Testament: biblical examples.

**Biblical Examples**

Scripture contains many examples of biblical authors and authoritative biblical characters who affirmed the historical veracity of the Old Testament. In all of the
Scriptures, there is not one instance of biblical writers questioning the historical reliability of the Old Testament. For example, consider the way the writer of Chronicles, in 1 Chronicles 1:1-4, relied on the historicity of the Old Testament in his genealogies. He began his genealogies in this way:

Adam, Seth, Enosh; Kenan, Mahalalel, Jared; Enoch, Methuselah, Lamech; Noah, Shem, Ham and Japheth (1 Chronicles 1:1-4).

For modern Christians, the author of Chronicles did something remarkable here. He treated the first five chapters of Genesis as historically reliable by mentioning thirteen men from the opening chapters of Genesis. Most modern people consider these chapters to be legendary or fictional. But the Chronicler demonstrated his full trust in the historical reliability, even of the early chapters of Genesis. He used Genesis — as he went on to trust many other Old Testament books — as an authoritative window to history.

In a similar way, consider Luke’s record of Stephen’s speech in Acts 7. Using various portions of the Old Testament, Stephen spoke of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Aaron, Joshua, David and Solomon as historical figures. He affirmed that the stories about them recorded in the Old Testament were factual. As far as Stephen was concerned, the history reported in the Old Testament was true. And that historical record served as a basis for his theology as he called his fellow Jews to repentance and faith in Christ.

The biblical writers are convinced of God’s work in history, and so from the earliest pages of the Old Testament — Deuteronomy 26, for example — we see that the worship of Israel is rooted in the actions of God. We’re told that the Israelites were to bring their offerings into worship and say this, that “My father [Abraham] was a wandering Aramean.” And so part of the worship of God’s people has always been historical rehearsal, to reenact, to remember — remember what God has done in history... We see this also with Paul. When he’s preaching in Pisidian Antioch in the synagogue there, he is talking about the work of God among the people of God. He starts with the exodus, he comes into the period of the judges, and he says God has raised up leaders, and he uses that theme of: God has raised up with his mighty arm the son of David, and has raised him up from the dead. So, God’s work in history and using the Scriptures to account for that and to depend on their account for that is something that every biblical writer does.

— Dr. Gregory R. Perry

Now that we’ve seen the basis for approaching the Old Testament canon as a window to history, we should turn our attention to a second issue: what is the focus of this interpretive strategy? What are the goals of historical analysis of Old Testament books?
**FOCUS**

In general terms, handling the Old Testament as a window to history has the same goal as other approaches to the Scriptures. The faithful seek to know the will of their divine King. But historical analysis has a rather specific way of discovering what God has communicated to his people. The most basic form of historical analysis of the Old Testament is historical reconstruction — simply using the Old Testament, along with other evidences, to establish what actually happened in the past. But historical analysis has also taken a distinctively theological form as well. The Old Testament has been used as a window to history to discover the actions and words of God in the past and then to apply their theological significance to the lives of God’s people.

In the last century, one popular form of theological historical analysis came to be known as “biblical theology.” The term “biblical theology” can refer to several different approaches to the Scriptures, but we’ll highlight one form of biblical theology that is widespread among evangelical Christians.

This prominent form of biblical theology generally focuses on two main steps: first, biblical theologians create what we may call a “synchronic snapshot” of historical periods, and second, they explore what we may call a “diachronic trace” through Old Testament history. These two steps are interconnected in countless ways. But for our purposes we’ll look at each of them separately, starting with creating a synchronic snapshot.

**Synchronic Snapshot**

The word “synchronic” refers to events happening within a set period of time. Biblical theologians create synchronic snapshots by focusing on a period of biblical history and then summarizing the complex networks of God’s acts and words that took place during that period. These summaries treat segments of time in biblical history as synchronized units or slices of time.

Now, we need to remember that Old Testament history flowed like a river. Its history was not divided into distinct segments. So, creating synchronic snapshots of Old Testament history is always somewhat artificial, much like dividing a flowing river into distinct segments is artificial. Still, it can be beneficial to speak of different segments of a river. And, in the same way, it can be beneficial to divide Old Testament history into periods of time and to summarize what God did and said during those periods. We can do this in many different ways.

You’ll recall that in our earlier lesson on the kingdom of God, we spoke in terms of the primeval history, the history of the nation of Israel and the future New Testament history. Noticing what God said and did during each of these periods helped us understand a number of things about God’s kingdom.

But you’ll also recall that in our lesson on divine covenants, we divided biblical history into covenantal periods. We spoke of God’s universal covenants, God’s national
covenants with Israel, and God’s future new covenant. And we went on to divide these three large epochs into smaller periods of time. The universal covenants included the age of God’s covenant with Adam — the covenant of foundations; and God’s covenant with Noah — the covenant of stability. Then we divided the period of national covenants into the times of Abraham — the covenant of Israel’s election or promise; Moses — the covenant of law; and David — the covenant of kingship. And we also segmented the period of the new covenant — the covenant of fulfillment — into its inauguration, continuation and consummation. These divisions helped us distinguish the basic kingdom policies that God established through different covenants. But these historical divisions are only two of many ways to create synchronic snapshots of Old Testament history.

For instance, the seventh chapter of the Westminster Confession of Faith refers to the period of the “covenant of works” — the time before Adam sinned — and the “covenant of grace” that covers the rest of biblical history, including the New Testament. It also refers to an important division in the covenant of grace between the period that was “under the law,” meaning the time of the Old Testament, and the period that was “under the gospel,” meaning the New Testament.

In the last century, the widely respected biblical theologian Geerhardus Vos, of Princeton Theological Seminary, divided the Old Testament by using other criteria. Rather than focusing on covenants, he identified periods according to major shifts in the form and content of divine revelation. He spoke of the pre-redemptive era before the Fall; the first redemptive era following the Fall and preceding Adam and Eve’s expulsion from the Garden; the period leading from the expulsion to the flood of Noah’s day; the period after the flood leading to the patriarchs; the period of the patriarchs; the period of Moses; and the prophetic period after Moses. And of course, as a Christian, he also added the period of the New Testament.

Now, once a period of time is identified the job of the biblical theologian is to focus on the network of historical events that revealed God and his will during that period of time. Of course, in any historical period, all events that took place were interrelated. But the Scriptures highlight some events more than others. So, biblical theologians typically focus on these more formative or central events of biblical history.

For instance, when biblical theologians focus on the slice of Old Testament history often known as the “period of promise” — the time of Israel’s patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob — they often observe that God revealed himself in this time primarily through direct speech, visions and dreams. They also note that there was a narrowing of the ethnic focus to the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. They see that the patriarchs performed worship at many altars. They described the promise of many descendants given to the patriarchs. And they noticed the importance of the promise of land to the fathers. These kinds of observations are attempts to characterize the patriarchal period as a whole, identifying formative events that played major roles throughout that time frame.

Or, when biblical theologians choose to focus on the “period of law” — the time of Moses who led Israel through the exodus and toward the conquest of the Promised Land — they often focus on how God revealed himself primarily through the law of Moses. They also observe how the narrowed ethnic focus on Israel grew into a national focus. They describe how the tabernacle was constructed and worship was centralized there. They note that Israel had grown to large numbers. And they show how God led
Israel to possess the Promised Land. These kinds of events characterized the period of Moses as a whole and give us a snapshot of this time in biblical history.

Theologians often talk about dividing God’s plan into various eras and epochs... We have a number of examples in the New Testament of how the New Testament divides up the Old Testament. You think of Matthew’s genealogy. It begins with Abraham, works through David. It looks through Old Testament history in terms of Abraham to David, David to exile, exile to Christ. That’s a way that the Bible divides up Old Testament history... There’s other ways that the New Testament also divides it up. You think of Paul in Romans 5; 1 Corinthians 15. You can speak of Adam and Christ; before the Law, after the Law. So, the New Testament shows a number of ways to do this.

— Dr. Stephen J. Wellum

With the results of synchronic snapshots in hand, biblical theologians usually move to a second step, what we may call a diachronic trace.

**Diachronic Trace**

The term “diachronic” simply means “through time.” It refers to the ways something has developed or changed over time. So, a diachronic trace focuses on the ways God’s actions and words connect with each other through time, from one period to another.

We can summarize the process of establishing a diachronic trace in this way: When we compare the formative events of various periods of biblical history with each other, we recognize that there are alignments or affinities between events in one period and events in another. Biblical theologians note these associations and explain how they reflect developments in Old Testament faith.

One of the most difficult but rich features of interpreting the Old Testament is the fact that it doesn’t describe just one period of history. It touches on events over thousands of years. As we learn what God did and said over this long stretch of history, it’s obvious, even to a casual reader, that God’s revelations represent many kinds of theological developments.

What God revealed in the time of Adam’s covenant was not simply repeated in the time of Noah’s covenant. God’s revelations in the period of Abraham’s covenant did not simply repeat what had been revealed earlier. And the same was true for the time of Moses’ covenant and David’s covenant. And divine revelation during the new covenant went beyond David’s covenant as well.

But divine revelations during these ages did not contradict each other. Revelations in later periods incorporated and built on earlier periods. The differences among different periods of time represent maturation or organic growth. Old Testament faith grew much like a seed grows into a sapling, then into a small tree, and then into a mature tree.
Describing these developments in Old Testament history is the process that we call “diachronic tracing.” To illustrate what we mean, let’s consider just one facet of what God’s covenant with Abraham emphasized. We’ll look at God’s promise to give Abraham the land of Canaan. In Genesis 15:18 we read these words:

On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram, saying, “To your offspring I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates” (Genesis 15:18).

As this passage indicates, God promised Abraham the land of Canaan for his descendants. This event is central to any well-formed synchronic snapshot of the period of the patriarchs.

But to understand the significance of this promise from God to Abraham in Old Testament history, we must explore other periods of time as well. We need to ask, “What earlier events form the background to this promise of the land of Canaan?” and “How do events afterwards serve to unfold the significance of this promise?” Consider first, the earliest period of biblical history, the primeval history, that included God’s covenants in Adam and Noah. As we saw in another lesson, during Adam’s time, God first established humanity as his royal priests and instructed them to have dominion over the entire earth. As we read in Genesis 1:28:

And God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth” (Genesis 1:28).

At this time, humanity had not sinned, and dominion over the earth would have been relatively easy. But sin complicated the process of dominion by making humanity’s efforts difficult and painful. As God himself said to Adam in Genesis 3:17-19:

Cursed is the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground (Genesis 3:17-19).

Nevertheless, even after the fall into sin, God expected human beings to continue to strive for dominion over the earth. Even after humanity’s wickedness grew so great that God destroyed the world in Noah’s day, God maintained his command to spread his kingdom to the ends of the earth. As God instructed Noah in Genesis 9:1, immediately after the flood:

Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth (Genesis 9:1).

Knowing this background helps us understand that God’s promise of land to Abraham was a step forward in the fulfillment of humanity’s call to have dominion. In the primeval times, God called his image to build his kingdom on earth by having
dominion in a world of futility and sin. This dominion came to further expression when God called Abraham and his descendants to take possession of the promised land of Canaan. Now, this step of fulfillment in the patriarchal period was not an end in itself. The promise of a land to the patriarchs was a step toward an even greater fulfillment in the future. As God promised Abraham in Genesis 22:18:

   In your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed (Genesis 22:18).

   This verse reminds us that God gave the Promised Land to Abraham and his descendants as a foothold. It was to be a beginning point from which they were to lead all families of the earth toward the blessings of redemption and God-honoring dominion over the entire earth — just as God originally ordained for humanity.

   For this reason, our diachronic trace of humanity’s dominion should move forward toward the period of God’s covenant in Moses. In this period, God established Israel in the Promised Land as the nation’s homeland, furthering the promise to the patriarchs by giving Israel the land in Joshua’s conquest. As God said to Joshua in Joshua 1:6:

   Be strong and courageous, for you shall cause this people to inherit the land that I swore to their fathers to give them (Joshua 1:6).

   The original call for humanity to have dominion, and God’s promise of land to Abraham, were furthered when Israel took possession of the Promised Land.

   Israel’s initial possession of the land in the days of the exodus and conquest was also fulfilled further in the period of David’s covenant. This was the time when Israel secured the land against enemies and matured into a great empire. The security of the land provided by the house of David was a further step toward solidifying and expanding the initial conquest of the land. But the imperial realities early in this period also anticipated a day in the future, a day when the righteous rule of David’s house would reach dominion over the entire earth. This hope in David’s house is expressed in Psalm 72:8-17:

   May he have dominion from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth! … May all kings fall down before him, all nations serve him! …
   May people be blessed in him, all nations call him blessed! (Psalm 72:8-17).

   The hope during the period of David’s covenant was that David’s house would prove to be faithful to the Lord and that the kingdom would expand and bring redemption and dominion of the faithful over the entire earth.

   Sadly, this great hope in the house of David collapsed during the time of exile and failed restoration. Rather than being a time of further fulfillment, it was actually a time of failure. This period became a terrible setback for the dominion of God’s people over the earth. God’s judgment came against his people, and he sent both the northern and southern kingdoms out of their land and into exile.
And more than this, in his mercy, God brought back a number of Israelites to the land. He raised up Zerubbabel, the descendant of David, as the governor of his people and offered him great victory over the nations of the earth. As we read in Haggai 2:7-9:

I will shake all nations, so that the treasures of all nations shall come in, and I will fill this house with glory … The latter glory of this house shall be greater than the former … And in this place I will give peace (Haggai 2:7-9).

Had Israel been faithful, the blessing of redemption through the dominion of David’s house would have begun to spread throughout the world. But time and again the Israelites who returned to the land rebelled against God, so that the offers of blessing and expansion never materialized. In fact, the restoration was a miserable failure.

It is at this point that Christian biblical theologians turn to the final stage of biblical history — the climax of history in the new covenant. The New Testament assures believers that God acted in Christ to reverse the failures of the exile and failed restoration and to bring fulfillment of redeemed humanity’s dominion over the earth. Jesus came to reverse the curse of the exile, to bring freedom and redemption from sin, so that those who follow him may rule over the earth with him. As Jesus himself said in Revelation 2:26:

The one who conquers and who keeps my works until the end, to him I will give authority over the nations (Revelation 2:26).

We need to go back and understand in church history and in history how God has been working, that even when God chose Abraham — 2000 B.C. — that God already had intended a blessing for the world. God, in choosing one man, is going to bless the whole world. So, he did that by working with Abraham, by creating a relationship with Abraham and establishing him, showing him what it was to receive grace totally unmerited, and then to work through him, through his family in a covenant relationship … so that, when Christ would come — this is not only for the Jews, that it’s not just for Abraham and for and his children, but for the whole earth to understand; this is the God of the whole earth — this is how he relates to people. And when Jesus came, he fulfilled all of those hopes and promises, and fulfilled so that even the New Testament says Abraham was awaiting that day, and Abraham is still awaiting the fullness of that, when he will be resurrected and all believers with him throughout the whole earth.

— Dr. Clay Quarterman

This brief example illustrates just one of the many ways diachronic traces of the biblical record of history give us insights into the Old Testament. Looking through the
Old Testament to the history that it reports is a vital way to discern the significance of the Old Testament canon.

Now that we’ve sketched how we can receive the Word of our King as we approach the Old Testament canon as a mirror and as a window, we should turn our attention to treating the Old Testament canon as a picture — as a collection of literary portraits.

**CANON AS PICTURE**

Everyone familiar with the Old Testament knows that it doesn’t come to us as a list of themes or topics. Nor is it a straightforward record of historical events. Now as we’ve already said in this lesson, the Old Testament gives us authoritative insights into all kinds of themes, and it provides true records of history. But first and foremost, the Old Testament canon is a collection of literary works, a library of books, as it were. As we’re about to see, biblical authors wrote the content and structure of each of these biblical books to teach ancient Israelites to further God’s kingdom by submitting to the policies of God’s covenants in particular ways. And for this reason, God’s faithful people throughout the ages have gained many insights into the significance of Old Testament books by approaching them as pictures or literary portraits.

In many respects, approaching the Old Testament canon in this way is like going to an art museum. If you’ve ever been to a museum or a display of visual art, then you know that it’s not unusual to hear an expert, or even a fellow onlooker, pointing out things like the artists’ use of light, color, line, form and texture. And they often go on to speak of how these artistic elements reveal what the artist was trying to “say.” Was the artist’s purpose religious? Was it political? Was the artist extolling some ideal? Exposing some evil or injustice? The list goes on and on.

To answer these kinds of questions, art critics often take into account much more than what appears on the canvases of the paintings themselves. They ask, “Who were the artists?” “How did the artists’ experiences influence their art?” And they also ask, “For whom was the art created?” “How did the artists design their art to impact the beliefs, actions and emotions of others?”

In much the same way, we can speak of approaching the books of the Old Testament as pictures. We not only take into account what appears on the pages of Old Testament books, but we also focus on the Old Testament authors’ lives and their attention to the needs of their original audiences. We call this strategy “literary analysis” because it focuses on how biblical writers designed their books to impact the beliefs, actions and emotions of the people of God for whom they first wrote.

To explore how Old Testament books may be treated as pictures through literary analysis, we’ll follow the same approach we’ve taken before. First, we’ll speak of the basis or justification for approaching the Old Testament in this way. Second, we’ll look into the focus of this strategy. Let’s look first at the basis for literary analysis.
BASIS

There are many ways to see the basis for literary analysis, but for our purposes we’ll limit ourselves once again to two factors: first, the character of Scripture itself; and second, examples of biblical authors and authoritative characters. Let’s consider first how the character of the Old Testament indicates the value of approaching Old Testament books as literary portraits.

Character of Scripture

Literary analysis is based on at least three rather obvious features of the Old Testament canon. First, the canon comes to us in books or literary units. The Old Testament is a collection of relatively independent scrolls or books that were written to address the needs of ancient Israel over a period of 1000 years. A quick glance at the table of contents of a modern Bible reveals that it contains 39 books. Most students of the Bible are familiar with the traditional list of Old Testament books, but we should mention several features about these literary units.

To begin with, we must not put too much stock in the names of Old Testament books because they were not original. Some titles come from older Jewish traditions, some come from the Septuagint — the ancient Greek translation of the Old Testament — and some of the titles in our modern Bibles come from much later Christian traditions.

We should also mention that 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings and 1 and 2 Chronicles were originally just three books: Samuel, Kings and Chronicles. In a similar way, many interpreters have argued that Ezra and Nehemiah were also originally one book. As we read the Old Testament with a view to literary analysis we want to keep in view the units of the canon as they were originally given.

And as we think about the Old Testament canon, it’s also important not to depend too much on the order or arrangement of its books. The order of Old Testament books has differed throughout history.

As early as Josephus in the first century, Jewish communities have divided the Old Testament into three major sections: The Law, or Torah (תורה) in Hebrew; the Prophets, or Nabi’im (נביאים) in Hebrew; and the Writings, or Ketuvim (כתובים) in Hebrew. This is why, for centuries, Jewish communities have referred to the Hebrew Bible as the Tanakh — “T” for the Law of Moses or the Pentateuch, “N” for the Prophets, and “K” for the Writings. The New Testament reflects this tradition in its own ways, sometimes referring to the entire Old Testament as “the Law and the Prophets” or as “the Law, the Prophets and the Psalms” — the first book in the Writings.

But by and large, the Christian church has ordered the books of the Old Testament canon according to the Septuagint, the Greek Old Testament. Rather than following the order of the Tanakh, we usually speak of the Law — or the Pentateuch; the Historical Books — Joshua through Esther; the books of Poetry — Job through Song of Songs; and the Prophets — Isaiah through Malachi.

These variations in the order of the books of the Old Testament canon reveal something very important for literary approaches to the Old Testament. The books of the
Old Testament were originally relatively independent literary works. So, when we approach the Old Testament canon as a picture, we should concentrate, in the first place, on understanding each book as a unit. We look at the book of Genesis as the book of Genesis with its own distinct design and theological concerns; the book of Exodus as the book of Exodus, and so on.

The basic literary unit in the Bible for the most part — you might find certain exceptions like the book of Psalms or the Psalter — but for the most part, the basic literary unit of the Bible is the biblical book. Writers basically plan and write books. And that means, then, that context is not confined just to the passages that immediately precede and follow, which of course it is, and that’s very important, very important indeed. But really, it’s important to note how a passage functions, what role it plays within the whole book of which it is a part.

— Dr. David R. Bauer

A second Old Testament characteristic that indicates the importance of literary analysis, is the fact that Old Testament books display sophisticated literary qualities. From common experience, we all know that some writings require more attention to their literary artistry than others. It would be strange, for instance, to find a shopping list written with the flare of a poem. A quick memo isn’t usually designed as intricately as an elaborate novel. When we come upon simple writings, we don’t usually need to pay much attention to their literary qualities. But when we read a sophisticated novel or poem, if we want to gain insights, we must give attention to the author’s literary techniques.

As it turns out, archaeologists have discovered a wide range of written materials from other cultures in biblical times. We have letters, lists, receipts and the like that don’t exhibit much literary complexity. But we also have wonderfully complex literary works from the ancient Near East. The great cultures of biblical days had elaborate myths and legends, complex legal documents and intricate ritual texts. These were literary works that were designed with great care.

Without a doubt, the books of the Old Testament are among the most elaborate literary works that we know from the ancient world. By most standards, Old Testament books equal or surpass the artistry of the greatest literature of the greatest cultures of the ancient world. Understanding these sophisticated literary qualities of Old Testament books enables us to grasp how Old Testament authors sought to impact the lives of their audiences.

A third reason we should pursue literary analysis of the Old Testament is because of its literary variety. The Old Testament canon isn’t a flat terrain with the same kind of writing on every page. Instead, it’s like a varied landscape of mountains, rivers, lakes, fertile plains, deserts and oceans. In other words, the books of the Old Testament represent a variety of genres or types of literature.

Some Old Testament books are predominantly narrative, such as Genesis, Joshua, Judges and Ruth. These books also include brief genealogies, lists, poems, as well as...
worship and social instructions. Other books in the Old Testament canon are predominantly poetry, such as the Psalms, Job, and many of the prophets. Still other books are highly stylized prose, such as Ecclesiastes and Malachi. Beyond this, speeches characterize the book of Deuteronomy.

Realizing that Old Testament books were written in various genres is important because each genre had its own ways of impacting audiences. Law must be read as law; speeches must be read as speeches, stories as stories, poems as poems, proverbs as proverbs, visions as visions, prophecies as prophecies. To uncover how Old Testament books were originally designed to impact the lives of God’s people, we must take into account the genres that characterize each Old Testament book. This is yet another way that the character of Scripture itself reveals the importance of literary analysis.

It’s important to understand the genre of a biblical passage that someone is studying because it helps us to properly interpret. It helps us to ask good questions of the text. Genres — largely poetry, narrative, law sections; these big category genres — help us to understand what should we be expecting. It helps us to ask questions of the text. If it’s a poetic text we’re going to ask different questions than if it’s a narrative text. Poetry is often not trying to describe in detail the specifics of how a historical event came to pass. They’re often describing in much more figurative language; they use metaphors. So, you interpret these different types of genres in different ways.

— Dr. Jim Jordan

In addition to the character of Scripture itself, literary analysis is also based on biblical examples, examples of biblical authors and authoritative characters who treated the Old Testament canon in this way.

**Biblical Examples**

Every time biblical writers and characters approached the Old Testament in the light of the author’s purposes toward his audience, they employed a kind of literary analysis. For instance, Jesus focused on literary analysis as he dealt with what Moses wrote about divorce in Deuteronomy 24:1. In Mark 10:4, some Pharisees challenged Jesus’ view of divorce with these words:

Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of divorce and to send her away (Mark 10:4).

In Jesus’ day, some Pharisees had interpreted Deuteronomy 24:1 as teaching that a man could divorce a woman for practically any reason, so long as he gave her a certificate of divorce. But Jesus corrected this false interpretation by reading this passage
in the light of Moses’ purposes and the condition of his audience. In Mark 10:5, Jesus said:

Because of your hardness of heart he wrote you this commandment (Mark 10:5).

Jesus pointed out that Moses had permitted divorce as a concession to the Israelites’ hardened hearts.

For our purposes here, it’s important to realize that Jesus refused to lift the text of Deuteronomy 24 out of its historical setting. He viewed the passage in the light of what he knew about Moses as the author and the ancient Israelites as his audience. The Pharisees had failed to account for Moses’ intentions toward his hardened audience. Jesus, however, knew the importance of these factors, and rightly concluded that Moses’ regulation was actually a concession to their sinfulness, not an ideal.

Another example of literary analysis appears in Galatians 4:22-24. Listen to what Paul wrote about the Old Testament stories of Abraham’s wife Sarah and her son Isaac, and Sarah’s handmaiden Hagar and her son Ishmael:

For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by a slave woman and one by a free woman. But the son of the slave was born according to the flesh, while the son of the free woman was born through promise. Now this may be interpreted allegorically: these women are two covenants (Galatians 4:22-24).

In verse 24, Paul said that the Genesis account of Abraham’s interactions with Sarah and Isaac and with Hagar and Ishmael “may be interpreted allegorically” because they represent “two covenants.” In other words, Paul understood that the account of Abraham’s interactions with Sarah and Hagar was written for a particular purpose for the original Israelite audience of Genesis.

The Genesis record made it clear that Abraham faced a choice of two ways of relating to God: the way of Sarah and Isaac on the one hand, and the way of Hagar and Ishmael on the other. On one side, Abraham was faithful to God when he relied on God to keep his promise of a child through Sarah. This path of relying on God and his promise was difficult, but it was the way to God’s blessing. On the other side, however, Abraham was unfaithful to God when he relied on his own efforts to have a child through Hagar, the Egyptian handmaiden. This path of relying on his own efforts resulted in God’s judgment against Abraham.

As Moses wrote about the life of Abraham, he was keenly aware of the grand significance of Abraham’s choices for his Israelite audience. He told these stories in Genesis so that his Israelite readers would connect with two ways of life in their own day. On the one side, Moses wrote about Sarah and Hagar to call his original audience to rely on God to fulfill his promise of many descendants to possess the Promised Land. Relying on God and his promise was difficult, but it was the way of blessing. On the other side, Moses called the Israelites not to rely on human efforts by longing for Egypt, just like Abraham had turned to the Egyptian handmaiden Hagar. Turning back would result in God’s judgment against Israel.
Following this emphasis on Moses’ original purpose, Paul applied these stories to the situation in the churches in Galatia. The Galatians were faced with a choice between the true gospel from Paul and a false gospel that had come to their churches from representatives of Jerusalem. The true gospel was that salvation comes by trusting in the promises of God in Christ. The false gospel turned people away from faith in the promises of God to human effort of obedience to the law as the way of salvation.

As Paul said in Galatians, those who follow the true gospel of faith in God’s promises are children of Sarah and heirs of the promise. But those who follow the false gospel are children of Hagar and not heirs of the gift of salvation. Paul made it clear that the true gospel of faith in God’s promises leads to blessings, and the false gospel of obedience to the law leads only to judgment. It was Paul’s concern with literary analysis — his attention to the ways Moses designed his historical record for his original audience — that led him to apply Genesis in this way to the situation of the churches of Galatia.

Now that we’ve seen some of the basis for treating the Old Testament canon as a picture, we should turn our attention to the focus of literary analysis. What are the main concerns of this strategy toward the Old Testament canon?

**FOCUS**

Evangelical Christians often refer to the proper way of interpreting the Scriptures as “grammatico-historical exegesis.” By this we mean that exegesis or interpretation should focus, in the first place, on the grammar or the design of the biblical text. But at the same time, exegesis must also be historical. And by this we mean that the grammar of a text must be viewed in the light of the historical settings of the author and the original audience of the passage. To one degree or another, these factors also come into view in responsible approaches to thematic and historical analyses. But they are especially crucial in literary analysis.

To see the focus of literary analysis, we’ll look at three concerns. First, the writer; second, the original audience; and third, the document or text that we have in view. Let’s think first of the importance of considering the writers of the Old Testament canon.

**Writer**

Christ’s followers understand that God inspired and superintended the writing of the entire Old Testament canon. But as we saw earlier in this series, this inspiration was organic. God used the backgrounds, thoughts, feelings, and intentions of his chosen human authors to create the books of the canon. So, we should also be concerned with this human side as we read the Old Testament. We’ll look at this facet of literary analysis in two ways. On the one hand, we should be aware of a number of dangers, and on the other hand, we should see a number of benefits of this approach to the Old Testament.
In the first place, we face serious dangers when we speculate too much about the human writers of Old Testament books. In the past, many interpreters tended to focus on authors in ways that left them entangled in webs of psychological and sociological speculations. They did this, in part, by assuming too much about the precise identification of the writer, the specific circumstances he faced, and the details of his theological motivations. As important as these kinds of issues may be, if we go beyond what we know, we can make our interpretations depend too much on speculation. This kind of overemphasis on the writer may be dubbed the “intentional fallacy,” giving too much weight to our reconstructions of a writer’s intentions.

But in the second place, a careful and responsible focus on biblical authors offers us many benefits. We may not know as much as we would like to know about them, but we can still grasp many things that will help us understand their writings. We can have varying degrees of general knowledge about their identities, about their circumstances, and about their basic theological motives.

The information about the author of a biblical book is of great help to us as we try to understand its meaning. And this is because the Holy Spirit — in the way that only the sovereign God could — used human individuals in their personalities, in their background of experience, to deliver his inerrant Word. And often when we can get some sense of how he formed the human author to be the one through whom he would speak the Word, it enriches our understanding of the text. I think of … Psalm 51, a classic, the psalm of David’s repentance and of his recognizing his terrible sin against his faithful soldier Uriah with the taking of Bathsheba, and that confession. That whole psalm just comes alive as we see it as a confession of a king who is a man after God’s own heart and yet who has sinned grievously but finds forgiveness in God.

— Dr. Dennis E. Johnson

To illustrate what we mean, let’s consider what we know about two important Old Testament authors: the author of 1 and 2 Kings and the author of 1 and 2 Chronicles. We don’t know precisely who these authors were. We don’t know their names or exactly when they wrote. We certainly don’t know much about their psychological tendencies. So, to rely heavily on these sorts of considerations as we interpret their books runs the risk of building our interpretations on little more than speculation.

At the same time, however, we can derive valuable information about both of these authors from the Old Testament itself. For example, we know that the author of Kings wrote during Israel’s exile in Babylon. The last scenes of 2 Kings 25:27-30 clearly indicate that the author wrote sometime after 562 B.C., after Jehoiachin had been released from prison in Babylon. But the author never mentioned the crucial edict of Cyrus in 538 B.C. that allowed the Jews to return to the Promised Land. So, the book of Kings almost certainly was completed before the release of Israel from captivity in Babylon.

By contrast, the author of Chronicles — often called “the Chronicler” — wrote after Israel’s release from captivity. We know this because, among other things, the
genealogies in 1 Chronicles 9 list those who returned to the land. Moreover, the Chronicler ended his book, in 2 Chronicles 36:22, 23, with the Cyrus edict.

We also know that both of these authors were among the educated elite of Israel. Both authors referred to information in the royal annals that would have been available only to the leaders of God’s people. And the author of Chronicles also referred to collections of prophetic oracles that are not contained in the Bible.

Just knowing these few facts about the authors helps us understand the differences in their general theological motives. Various interpreters have rightly concluded that the author of Kings emphasized God’s justice in sending his people into exile. He also focused on the need for the Israelites to repent before they could return to the Promised Land.

By contrast, several interpreters have rightly concluded that the author of Chronicles emphasized the practical steps that the Israelites needed to follow after they returned to the Promised Land. And he focused on the blessings they would receive for obedience and curses for disobedience as they rebuilt their nation.

There are a number of things we could say about these author’s beliefs and hopes, but the main point is this: we have sufficient knowledge about them to analyze the way they used literary techniques to influence their original readers. And we have even more information about other biblical writers, so that regularly focusing on the writer in our interpretations can be quite beneficial.

Now in addition to focusing on the writer, responsible literary analysis of the Old Testament also considers the original audience. Who first received the Old Testament books? What was their situation? How were they to be influenced by these Scriptures?

**Audience**

Just as there are dangers and benefits when we consider the writers of Old Testament books, we also need to be aware of the dangers and benefits of focusing on the original audiences. On the one hand, there are dangers when interpreters speculate too much about the audience. They imagine their precise identification. They reconstruct specific details of the audiences’ circumstances. They speculate about their psychological conditions. They go too far imagining their strengths and weaknesses. These kinds of overemphases on the audience may be called the “affective fallacy.”

The affective fallacy is where we take that psycho-emotional state of the reader and use it to exclude other considerations of a text. For instance, just because a psalm of lament written for the sake of people in exile is something we can identify with, it doesn’t mean that psalm doesn’t speak to us when we’re not under those same psycho-emotional conditions. So that’s number one, is, the affective fallacy can lead us to believe or accept that Scriptures don’t speak beyond those original circumstances. The other great risk is where we misidentify the psycho-emotional state with our own psycho-emotional state such that we’re reading things in or failing to read.
things that are in the text so that we’re essentially imposing our own personal situation on the text. And that’s a pretty common thing these days because, in terms of the text and the author and the audience, our day is dominated by reading texts in what’s called a “reader-centered” way. We have to let the author speak according to the author’s intentions, and we have to let the words of the text itself, as well as the reader’s situation, go into the understanding of meaning.

— Rev. Michael J. Glodo

At the same time, however, there are many benefits we can derive from considering the audience of Old Testament books. We know lots of helpful information. We often know their general location. And we frequently know some of the major events that they experienced. We also know that, as with most groups of people, some were faithful and others were unfaithful to their covenant responsibilities before God.

In this light, let’s consider what we know about the original audiences of the books of Kings and Chronicles. We know, for instance, that the audience of Kings was still in exile. From the emphases of the book of Kings, at least some of the original recipients needed to be convinced that God was just in sending his people into exile. And we know that some of the audience needed to understand that repentance was required before Israel could return to the Promised Land.

By contrast, the author of Chronicles wrote to an audience that had returned to the Promised Land. The books of Ezra, Nehemiah and Haggai make it clear that many among those who returned had failed to be loyal to God. And as a result, they needed to grow in their devotion to rebuilding God’s kingdom in Israel. Simply knowing these facts about the original audiences of Kings and Chronicles helps us understand much about the literary portraits of these books.

God revealed himself to an original audience, people in a particular place, in a particular time. This is one of the remarkable things about the Bible. It is not merely a collection of prescriptions from on high. God was speaking to particular people in a particular setting, and so when we know how they understood what they were hearing from God, what they were receiving from God, that helps us to know what the limits are for our own understanding. If I’m understanding the Bible in some way very different from what the original hearers understood it, there’s something wrong. Surely, my own context will make a difference, but my own context has to be understood in light of their context, and then I’ll know what the probable limits of interpretation can be.

— Dr. John Oswalt

Now that we’ve touched on how literary analysis focuses on the writer and original audience, we should turn to the third and primary focus of a literary analysis of the Old Testament — the document itself.
Document

The documents of Scripture are the primary focus of literary analysis because they are the fully-authoritative Word of God. So, we need to pay special attention to the dangers and benefits of focusing on the document itself.

On the one hand, there is a danger in focusing solely on the document. Unfortunately, in recent decades, a number of interpreters have urged that the texts of Scripture themselves are all we need for interpretation. In an attempt to avoid the uncertainties we face when we consider the writer and audience, these scholars have argued that we must downplay attention to the writer and audience. In reality, this is not a good direction to follow. The same document, whether biblical or not, can mean very different things depending on who wrote it and for whom it was written. When interpreters try to focus exclusively on the document and ignore the writer and original audience, they fall into what we may call the “graphic fallacy,” relying too much on the document by itself.

There’s a fallacy in reading texts, and Old Testament texts for example, called the “graphic fallacy,” which means all we need for meaning are the words and that the words themselves contain all the meaning. Now, that sounds good, especially if you have a high view of Scripture and you believe these words have been inspired. But what it does, it excludes the author and the reader. And the meaning of texts, while located within the words of the text, is also made up of the author’s intentions to the people to whom it’s written... So, the graphic fallacy is leaving out the author and the original readers, because those are fundamental components. We don’t always know as much as we’d like to know about author and reader, but the sufficiency of Scripture tells us that God gives us enough information to interpret the texts fairly and faithfully, and it’s on that basis that the author, text and reader as the things that comprise meaning.

— Rev. Michael J. Glodo

On the other hand, there are many benefits associated with knowing everything we can about the document itself. The vocabulary, grammar, figures of speech, sentence structure, outline, literary context, genre and so on, all contribute greatly to discovering the original meaning and modern applications of Scripture. So, understanding as much as we can about these facets of a passage is crucial to interpreting the Scriptures correctly. We simply cannot interpret Scripture responsibly without paying very close attention to the particular features of the documents we are studying.

But we gain the most benefits when we consider every passage in light of the writer and original audience. To illustrate the benefits of looking carefully at Old Testament texts in the context of the writer and the audience, we’ll look briefly at the reign of Manasseh found in 2 Chronicles 33:1-20. When we study this passage, we have
the great advantage of having a parallel account of Manasseh’s reign in 2 Kings 21:1-18. As the writer of Chronicles designed his record, he copied, changed, omitted portions and added elements to 2 Kings 21 in ways that fit with his intentions toward his audience. Let’s see how this is true by looking first at the account in 2 Kings 21.

Second Kings 21 divides into five symmetrical parts: first, verse 1 — the opening of Manasseh’s reign; second, verses 2-9 — Manasseh’s sin of idolatry; third, verses 10-15 — the prophetic condemnation Manasseh received; fourth, verse 16 — Manasseh’s additional sins of violence; and fifth, verses 17, 18 — the closure of Manasseh’s reign.

As this outline suggests, in 2 Kings 21 Manasseh is characterized as evil from beginning to end. He is introduced as a great sinner. The second portion of the story elaborates on how he defiled the temple with idols and led the people to do more evil than the Canaanites. The third part of the narrative amounts to a prophetic condemnation of Manasseh. According to this prophetic word, Manasseh’s sins resulted in Jerusalem’s destruction and the exile of its people. The fourth portion of the narrative adds that Manasseh also filled the streets of Jerusalem with innocent blood. Then the final portion reports that Manasseh died and was buried.

In all of 2 Kings 21 there is not one positive feature of Manasseh’s reign. But now, let’s compare the record of Manasseh’s reign in 2 Kings 21 with the parallel account of his reign in 2 Chronicles 33. The Chronicler didn’t contradict 2 Kings 21, but his intentions toward his original audience led him to give a very different account. Second Chronicles 33:1-20 also divides into five main parts. First, verse 1 introduces the opening of Manasseh’s reign, which is largely copied directly from 2 Kings. Second, in verses 2-9, Manasseh’s idolatries are recounted with only slight differences from 2 Kings 21:1-9.

Up to this point, the Chronicler’s account closely resembles that of 2 Kings. In both records, Manasseh is presented as a terrible sinner. But the third, fourth and fifth sections of 2 Chronicles 33 differ dramatically from 2 Kings. The third section completely omits the prophets’ announcement that the inhabitants of Jerusalem would be exiled because of Manasseh’s sins. Instead, in verses 10-13, the Chronicler described how Manasseh himself was personally exiled to Babylon. And more than this, he reported that Manasseh repented of his sins while in exile and received forgiveness from God. Then, in the fourth section, instead of mentioning Manasseh’s violence reported in 2 Kings, the Chronicler reported in verses 14-17 that Manasseh returned to Jerusalem, rebuilt the city, and restored proper worship of God at the temple. And finally, in 2 Chronicles 33:18-20, the closing of Manasseh’s reign expands on 2 Kings by including another reference to Manasseh’s prayer of repentance. How should we explain these differences between the record of Manasseh’s life in 2 Kings and the record in 2 Chronicles? Why are these accounts so different?

In brief, the differences can be explained by the fact that Kings and Chronicles were composed by different writers and for different audiences. Each author designed his account to impact the lives of his audience in different ways. The writer of Kings didn’t write to give a comprehensive, objectified account of Manasseh’s reign. Rather, he wrote about Manasseh’s terrible sins to explain one of the main motifs of his book: God was just to bring judgment against Jerusalem and to send his people into exile because of Manasseh.
But as we’ve seen, the Chronicler’s situation was very different. He wrote his history after the exile in an attempt to motivate the struggling restored community to move forward in faithful service to God. For this reason, the Chronicler omitted and added true things about Manasseh that fit with his purposes. He brought to light details from Manasseh’s life that paralleled details in the lives of his own Israelite readers. Manasseh had sinned terribly, and they had done the same. Manasseh had been exiled to Babylon, and they had been too. Manasseh had repented and been forgiven, and so had they. And perhaps most importantly, once Manasseh had returned to the Promised Land, he had rebuilt the city of Jerusalem and had restored proper worship. And this was the precise challenge that the Chronicler’s audience faced in his day. The Chronicler’s main point was this: If the king who had caused Judah’s exile also rebuilt and restored the kingdom when he returned to the land, surely the Chronicler’s own audience should do the same.

This comparison between the accounts of Manasseh’s reign demonstrates why it is so important to treat Old Testament books as pictures, or literary portraits. While themes that are of interest to us and true historical records appear in the Old Testament, we must also be mindful of this fact: Old Testament authors designed the contents and structures of their books to emphasize particular ways their original audiences were to live. This kind of literary approach opens many insights into Old Testament Scriptures for us today.

CONCLUSION

In this lesson, we’ve seen that the Old Testament canon addressed God’s people’s needs by applying what they believed about God’s kingdom and his covenants to the situations they faced. Old Testament books did this in many ways. When we approach the Old Testament canon as a mirror, we see how these books touch on countless themes that are important to us. When we approach the canon as a window, we see how they provide true outlooks to history. And when we consider the Old Testament canon as a collection of literary pictures or portraits, we recognize certain perspectives on all of these themes and historical events.

As faithful followers of Christ, we must learn how to approach the books of the Old Testament as mirrors that address our interests and needs, as windows that reveal God’s mighty acts in history and as literary portraits that emphasize particular paths of service that God’s people should pursue. The books of the Old Testament canon were first written for many different people who faced a variety of opportunities and challenges in the ancient world. And as we face similar opportunities and challenges in our lives today, the books of the Old Testament also teach us how we are to be loyal to God’s covenants so that we may further the kingdom of God on earth until Christ returns in glory.

-29-

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