

# Interpreting Scripture #3: Interpreting the Old Testament

## INTRODUCTION

1. The next two sessions will briefly examine some of the major different types of literature in the Bible, and provide some guidelines for interpreting them.

**Note: The prophetic literature will not be considered in this lesson.**

## OLD TESTAMENT NARRATIVES

1. A narrative is a story.

**About 40% of the Old Testament is narrative. It is the most common genre in the Bible.**

- Narratives do not provide us with full biographies of individuals. They usually serve to reveal something about God and/or his redemptive purposes.

**The characters are not always presented as role models. The narratives show us the consequences of choices—sometimes good, sometimes bad.**

- Narratives are not full of mysterious, hidden meanings.

**Some things are not clear. We are not always told what, how, or why God did or did not do something.**

**Narratives should always be read and interpreted in light of their historical-cultural context.**

- Narratives illustrate truths and principles taught directly elsewhere, especially in the Mosaic Law.

**Narratives should be read in the context of the larger purpose of the book they are found in.**

2. Dialogue is an important feature of Old Testament narratives.

- Old Testament narratives often have more dialogue than action.
- People are portrayed by dialogue, not by the description of the narrator. Therefore, dialogue provides insight into their character.

For example, Joseph's statement to his brothers in Genesis 50:20, "You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives," reflects his deep trust in the providence of God.

## THE MOSAIC LAW

1. The Mosaic Law makes up a substantial portion of the Bible and provides the foundation for the entire Old Testament.
  - Yet it records many laws that seem strange to us in the twenty-first century.

"Do not cook a young goat in its mother's milk." (Exodus 34:26)

"Do not wear clothing woven of two kinds of material."  
(Leviticus 19:19)

"Make tassels on the four corners of the cloak you wear."  
(Deuteronomy 22:12)

2. How should we understand the Mosaic Law in relation to the New Covenant, and how should we apply it to our lives today?

The following is a method developed by J. Daniel Hays for understanding and applying the Mosaic Law.<sup>1</sup>

- Step # 1: Identify what the particular law meant to the original audience.
  - Look for the historical and literary context of the specific law by asking the following questions.
    - Was the law given in response to a specific situation?

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<sup>1</sup> J. Daniel Hays, "Applying the Old Testament Law Today," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 158: 629 pp. 21-35.

- What other laws are in the immediate context and is there a connection between them?
- Did the law govern how people were to relate to God or to others?
- Did the law relate to agriculture, commerce, civil affairs, or life in the Promised Land?
- Step # 2: Determine the differences between the original audience and believers today.

**For example, we do not approach God through the sacrificial system; we do not live under a theocracy; and we are not preparing to enter the Promised Land.**

- Step # 3: Develop universal principles from the text.

**Each Mosaic law had a meaning for its first audience. But that meaning was based on a broader, universal truth, applicable to all God's people, regardless of which covenant they live under.**

- Step # 4: Correlate the principle with New Testament teaching.

**Filter the universal principle through the New Testament teaching regarding that principle.**

**For example, the universal principle of the prohibition against adultery (Exodus 20:14) is the sanctity of marriage. In the New Testament, this principle is augmented through Jesus's teaching, "But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (Matthew 5:28).**

- Step # 5: Apply the modified universal principle to life today.

**Paul applied the universal principle in the Old Testament law, "Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain" (Deuteronomy 25:4) to defend his right to receive material support from the Corinthians (I Corinthians 9:4, 9, 11, 12).**

## **THE PSALMS**

1. The Psalms are poems written to be sung in worship to God.

- They appeal to our emotions as well as our intellect, and help us express ourselves honestly to God, including our joys, sorrows, hopes, fears, and regrets.

2. There are different types of psalms which functioned in different ways. Some examples are listed below.

- Lament psalms express struggles, suffering, or disappointment.

**It is the largest group of psalms (more than 60). There are individual laments (3, 22, 39, 42, 71, 120, 139) and corporate laments (12, 44, 94, 137).**

- Thanksgiving psalms express joy over good circumstances and God's blessings.

**There are individual thanksgiving psalms (18, 32, 40, 66, 92, 116, 138) and corporate thanksgiving psalms (65, 75, 107, 136).**

- Praise psalms honor God for his greatness and goodness.

**For example (8, 19, 33, 66, 100, 117, 148).**

- Salvation History psalms review God's great deeds done for Israel.

**For example (78, 105, 106, 135, 136).**

- Celebration psalms affirm a divine covenant, a specific monarchy, the enthronement of the king, or God's holy city Jerusalem.

**For example (2, 18, 46, 50, 81, 89, 93, 132, 144).**

3. It is important to recognize the figurative language throughout many of the Psalms.

**The Psalms employ hyperbole, metaphor, personification, simile, and more. One should not read such figurative language literally.**

## **THE PROVERBS**

1. The proverbs are mostly brief, memorable expressions of wisdom meant to help an ancient Israelite make wise, godly choices in life

lived out under the Mosaic Law.

2. Proverbs are not legal guarantees from God. They are general principles that point to outcomes which are likely to occur when one chooses a wise, godly life.

**For example, Proverbs 10:3 says, “The Lord does not let the righteous go hungry, but he thwarts the craving of the wicked.” Yet the apostle Paul often went hungry (I Corinthians 4:11).**

3. No single proverb or set of proverbs should alone be used to develop a doctrine (authoritative teaching). Instead, everything the Bible teaches on a given subject must be considered.

**The brevity of a proverb aids memorization, but prevents it from being an exhaustive statement. No individual proverb is a complete statement of truth. Each must be balanced with other proverbs and the rest of Scripture.**

## **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. Which literary genre would you like to study more: narrative, law, psalms, proverbs (or prophetic literature)? Why?
2. Which literary genre has been the least interesting to you up to now? What do you think you would have to do to get more spiritual value out of reading and studying these portions of the Bible?

## **HOMEWORK**

Select one of the following:

1. Read Psalm 91 and classify it in its proper category. Examine the many figures of speech in the psalm and try to explain as many as possible. Check your findings with reference works, if possible.
2. Examine 2 Corinthians 10:3-5 in light of its context. What does Paul mean by the terms he uses in these verses? (HINT: Because chapter ten begins a new section, the important context for this passage is the flow of thought that follows.) Have you ever heard this passage misinterpreted and misapplied?