

## SOME THOUGHTS ON READING THE OLD TESTAMENT

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How do Lutherans read the Hebrew Bible, or, as it is commonly known among Christians, the Old Testament? This question can be answered in a variety of ways because, for one thing, there are a variety of Lutherans. The answer will also depend on the purpose of the question; that is, whether a general Lutheran interpretive approach to the Old Testament is being sought or more specific guidance for the interpretation of particular texts, themes or issues. So let us begin with the more general and proceed to the more specific.

Martin Luther, in his Preface to his German translation of the Old Testament, offers a striking image for the Christian reader of the Old Testament: “Here you will find the swaddling cloths and the manger in which Christ lies, and to which the angel points the shepherds. . . . Simple and lowly are these swaddling cloths, but dear is the treasure, Christ, who lies in them” (*Luther’s Works*, vol. 35, p. 236). In other words, in the Old Testament, as in the New, the Christian encounters Christ, God’s gracious Word of acceptance and promise. While Christ is not named as such in the Old Testament, for the Christian the Old Testament is nonetheless God’s Word of invitation, structured into creation, actualized in the call of Abraham, and lived out in the laboratory of the chosen people, Israel. In this sense, the New Testament is nothing more than the continuation of the story, and would not make sense without the Old Testament.

It is true that Luther continues by characterizing the Old Testament as a book of law and the New Testament as a book of grace, but he tempers this distinction by acknowledging that both Testaments contain the demand that kills and the good news that gives life. In this sense, then, the Old Testament is no different in its function from the New Testament; in both, the readers or hearers are confronted through the Holy Spirit with a Word that both kills them and raises them to new life. This is the spiritual work of the Word in the Bible; as the work of the Holy Spirit it is entirely a work of God’s gracious initiative.

But the Bible, and for our purposes here, especially the Old Testament, is also a book, or more accurately, a collection of books, that has a history of authorship, collection, editing and canonization. The writings in the Old Testament refer to events embedded in a distant culture and emerge from a historical and geographical context from long ago. In this sense, the Old Testament, beside its spiritual function for Christians, is also a very human book, produced by

humans and read by humans. A useful analogy in this respect is the doctrine of the Incarnation. Just as Jesus is both fully divine and fully human, so also the Bible is divine in its spiritual function and human in its history and form.

In fact, the human history and form of the Bible are indispensable to its spiritual function in that God chooses to work through the particularities of our human existence. In the Old Testament, the scandal of particularity is that God chooses to concretize God's gracious will in a particular people, Israel, who live in a particular time and place. The scandal of particularity in the New Testament is that God chooses to concretize God's gracious will by incarnating as a particular person, Jesus, who lives in a particular time and place. We tend to want to dissolve these particularities into some sort of universal absolute notions or truths, but the specifics of the biblical message, both Old Testament and New, in its human history and form, resist this subtle form of idolatry.

To respect the particularities of the biblical message, it is necessary to pay attention to at least two historical, and thus contingent (i.e. unpredictable and conditioned), set of contexts: (1) the set of contexts from which the biblical texts emerged (the world "behind" the text) and (2) our various contexts as contemporary hearers and readers of those texts (the world "in front of" the text).

- The first set, the contexts from which the biblical texts, emerged is investigated with the use of literary and historical tools such as knowledge of the original language of the text and various standard interpretive methods.
- The second set, the contexts within which we read the text today, is investigated by making explicit the various presuppositions we bring to the reading of the Bible, so that we can resist the temptation to find in the Bible only what we already expect to find there.

To summarize: in general terms, we as Lutherans read the Old Testament, as we do the New Testament, to encounter the gracious Word of God that liberates us from the prison of our self-centeredness. Any other purpose in reading is secondary. Such a reading necessitates attention to the scandal of the particularity of God's work, both as described in the Bible and as it happens in our own particular lives.

But we also approach the Bible seeking guidance on certain themes or issues, often moral in nature. Here it is helpful to reiterate what has already been said: the Bible, including the Old Testament, is not a book of absolute eternal rules but a book of the encounter between the divine and the human in particular and contingent historical circumstances. Thus, any guidance we attempt to deduce from the Bible on moral issues, for example, must be framed and limited by the Bible's primary purpose. Having acknowledged this primary purpose, however, several helpful guidelines can be suggested when approaching the Old Testament on specific issues.

First, it needs to be recognized that the Old Testament does not speak with one voice. It is a collection of various genres and books, and contains a variety of theologies, some of which seem

to be in opposition to one another. For example, the theology of Proverbs – do what is right and you will be rewarded – is radically questioned by the books of Job and Ecclesiastes. The prophetic tradition often speaks differently than the priestly tradition. And so on. We need to avoid the totalitarian impulse that attempts to force the Bible to speak with one voice on everything. The goal is, rather, to listen to the multiple voices as part of a conversation leading to Spirit-guided discernment.

Second, we need to avoid making prominent an issue or theme that is actually marginal in the Old Testament. Contrary to much popular opinion, the Old Testament is not obsessed with sexual morality. Much more prominent and central are themes of covenant and social justice. It would be far more in keeping with the preponderance of the content of the Old Testament to become obsessed with the morality of debilitating economic debt than to be agitated by the legitimacy of various sexual relations. Even the story of Sodom and Gemorrah, as it is understood by the Old Testament prophets, is more a story of condemnation of social injustice and the violation of hospitality than anything to do with a particular sexual act (Remus 2004).

Third, the Lutheran tradition distinguishes between matters central to the Christian faith and matters that, while perhaps in some instances acceptable or even edifying, are optional – adiaphora (see Deneff and Hordern 2004). The scriptural witness also contains both these elements, and Christians have always made a distinction between them even if they have not always acknowledged or recognized it. Much of the legal tradition of the Old Testament, for example, is considered by most Christians as abrogated and no longer in legal force. If part of that legal tradition is to be used in structuring Christian life, then careful consideration must be given to why only select parts of that tradition are invoked while other parts are ignored. To make mandatory what is optional or abrogated is one of the chief obstacles preventing the spiritual work of the scriptures.

Finally, we should be as attentive as possible to our propensity to read our current concerns and anxieties into the Bible, thus extracting from the scriptures the answers that we expect, answers that merely confirm our presuppositions and comfort us in our egocentricity. The Bible then becomes a weapon to attack *others* rather than the Word that kills *us* and brings *us* to life. A good example is the current concern in various circles with “family values,” a concern that often expresses itself in the idea that contemporary society is straying from the “biblical” concept of the family. What actually happens is that an ideal of the perfect nuclear family is read into scripture, an ideal that bears little resemblance to the actual families portrayed in the Bible. In the case of the Old Testament, a specific word for “family” (or, for that matter, for “husband” or “wife”) does not even exist. Closest is the concept of the *bet-‘av*, literally the “house-of-the-father,” denoting an extended grouping of related persons (usually three generations and including also servants, slaves, concubines, and/or sojourners) forming an economic unit of production usually in relation to a particular piece of property. Presiding over the *bet-‘av* was the male head of the household, in relation to whom the other members of the household, especially the women (daughters and often multiple wives/concubines), were construed as property. It is unlikely that many Christians would want to recreate that sort of family today.

To conclude: at the beginning of these reflections, it was mentioned that the question of how

Lutherans read the Old Testament could be answered in a variety of ways because there are a variety of Lutherans. In the preceding you have one approach; given the variety of Lutherans, there will be others. How these different approaches will be managed is a pressing issue. A fitting concluding note is thus a call for a conciliatory conversation. While it may feel more fulfilling to the ego to loudly push one's view and trample on everyone else, in the long run it serves the unity of the Christian community and the authenticity of its gracious message better if one is able to tread softly and diplomatically.

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