

Making Sense of the Old Testament

*A sermon preached on Deuteronomy 6:1-9 by Emily Hull McGee
at First Baptist Church on Fifth, Winston-Salem, NC on June 10, 2018*

I.

I'll never forget the first crisis of faith I had in divinity school. Everyone has these in seminary, of course, when encountering material and knowledge that brushes up against long-held convictions or ideas about Scripture. For me it came in room 210 of Wingate Hall on a fall Tuesday morning in my Old Testament class with words of the prophet Isaiah right in front of me. My professor was offering an introduction to the study of the Old Testament, framing within a Christian perspective these ancient words that formed the foundation of our faith. He was showing us some of the writings that for Christians, foretold the coming birth of the Messiah, prophecies long-held of the one whose name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. And to the astonishment of many in the room who had never considered the original context of these prophecies, learning that there was born another child who became a king in ancient Israel soon after shook me. 'But wait,' I wondered, 'these words are only about Jesus, right? Are you suggesting that they could have had another meaning at another time?'

I shared these thoughts with my dear seminary friend, Greg, wracked with dual parts anxiety and wonder about the scripture I thought I knew. And in my stupor, I remember exclaiming to him: 'what does this mean — about God, about Jesus, about us?!' At the time, Greg still practiced an academic

detachment and responded rather matter of factly: “Emily, these are just words on a page. That’s all this is. Words on a page!”

That same friend was transformed by scripture that year — as we all were — and knows now the folly of his response. For these aren’t just words on a page, as you and I know intimately! As the hymn says, these “ancient words are ever true,” and they are the ancient words we call the Old Testament to which we turn our attention today, trying to make sense — as I did then and now — of the story of God and the story of us contained within.

II.

So as we begin, hear first some factual information about what the Old Testament is and how it came to be. Comprised of 39 books that we in the Protestant church recognize, the Old Testament is what our Jewish brothers and sisters call their Bible. Those books are divided into three sections — the Torah (or the Law), the Writings, and the Prophets — and share a variety of authors over hundreds of years and an intentional process by which they were formed together into what we call the ‘canon’ of scripture.

What is contained within, you might wonder? Well at its core, the Old Testament shares the story of the people of Israel, the collected faith testimony of a people that spans centuries. Testimony, with history, liturgy, ethics, and narrative, join together in sacred word to bear witness to a *particular people’s intimate experience of God and their life as the community of God’s people*.¹ Scholar Ellen Davis’s take on the central claim of the Old Testament says it best: “The key piece of Good News that the Old Testament communicates over and over again is that God is involved with us, deeply and

¹ Bruce Birch, Walter Brueggemann, Terence E. Frethem, and David L. Peterson, *A Theological Introduction to the Old Testament*, p18.

irrevocably so.”² As we discovered last week, through their story we hear our own story.

That story begins ‘in the beginning’ of course, where we meet God at work in the world in a book called Genesis. In its earliest pages, Genesis begins before the particular experiences of the people of Israel with instead the universal experiences of all humanity. But before we learn of people, we learn of God – for ‘in the beginning, God!’ The writer of Genesis assumes the reader already has a frame of reference for this God called Yahweh, or ‘the Lord’, and thus we need no introduction for this One who appears to be wholly (holy) active in the world – creating, blessing, giving laws, judging, grieving, saving, electing, promising, making covenants, providing counsel, protecting, conferring responsibility, and holding accountable – all in just the first eleven chapters of just the first book! Thus the beginning of the story is of God’s fundamental character and nature. For this is not a God who is distant and aloof, but rather a God who is deeply involved in the created world, such that both the world and God are eternally affected by such relationship.³

Genesis 1-11 doesn’t just introduce us to God, but also to ourselves – you and me otherwise known as Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Noah and all his descendants. In *them, then*, we’re reminded of our universal human struggles *here and now*: with temptation and pride, the lure of sin and

² Ellen Davis, *Getting Involved with God: Rediscovering the Old Testament*, p1.

³ Birch et al., p41-42.

violence when we don't get our way, and our longing for power and primacy over each other and even over God.⁴

With such a broad foundation of God and humanity established, from Genesis 12 through books and stories to follow, we zero in on a particular people born from one particular family of Abraham and Sarah. This family is called Israel, and the rest of the Old Testament tells of these Israelites and their unique relationship with God.⁵ It's a relationship founded and bound by covenant: of God committing to Abraham to make of him a great nation and descendants who number as plentiful as the stars, to guide and protect them, and to give them land long promised and hoped for. In return, the people of Israel were to follow and obey God with their whole being.

No telling of the story of the Israelites and how that covenant relationship came to life would be complete without a clear focus on the Exodus experience. Some scholars call this narrative found in Exodus 1-15 "the birth story of Israel as a people."⁶ Themes of bondage and confrontation, oppression and liberation are at the heart of the Israelite experience. And although none of this would have happened if not for an involved God intimately bound up with a people, it's the imperfect leader in Moses who is called by God to exercise his human agency for the sake of justice among this wily band of God's people.⁷

⁴ Rob Bell, *What Is the Bible?*, p15.

⁵ Adam Hamilton, *Making Sense of the Bible*, p24.

⁶ Birch et al., p99.

⁷ Birch et al., p126-127.

Liberation is not the end of the story, for just as soon as God and Moses release the Israelites from slavery in Egypt, they enter into the wilderness in search of God's Promised Land. There, they learned to become a covenant community, ordering their common life together with laws and structure. They create spaces to encounter God, rituals through which to worship God, and kingdoms to uphold God. The God once found on mountaintops and in fancy palaces now desires to take up a home among God's people, risking the intimacy of relationship with vulnerability and presence.⁸

But the cycle repeats. When the Israelites are doing well, they seem to forget about God and their covenant of faithfulness, and focus instead on prosperity or power, prestige or pleasure. God withholds protection, and their enemies exploit. Attacked, the Israelites cry out to God and God delivers them only to find that quickly, they forget again the promise to love God first with heart, soul, and might. Creation or generation leads to degeneration, degeneration to regeneration, and back again.⁹ Kings both help and hinder the Israelites' obedience, and two history-making and culture-changing events occur in the story of Israel.

The first was in 722 B. C., when the northern half of the country was captured by the foreign nation of Assyria. Ten of the twelve tribes of Israel were forced out and folded into the Assyrian Empire, losing their distinct identity and location. 130 years later in 587 B. C., it happened again in the

⁸ Birch, et al., p135.

⁹ This beautiful read on the story of the people of God (generation/degeneration/regeneration) came from Randall Lolley's sermon on Genesis from *Journey With Me: Redemptive Threads Woven Through the Bible*, p7.

southern half of Israel called Judah. But this time, the conquering army was Babylon, and the Babylonians didn't just capture the people of Judah, they decimated the city of Jerusalem. Their treasures were plundered, the Temple burned, residents' homes destroyed, the king and his sons — the heirs of the throne — murdered, and as they were marched into exile in Babylon, the Israelites wept with immeasurable grief. Where was the God of Abraham who had promised them land and protection and a future? In the words of the Psalmist, 'how can we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?' This time, God's people refused to assimilate and spent the fifty years of exile shoring up their identity. Within decades of their return to the Promised Land, they had rebuilt the Temple and spent valuable time and energy on writing this story, making sense of the past, and promising to God once more to be God's covenant people.¹⁰

Alongside this remarkable story of a people, a promise, and their land — “covenant making and covenant breaking,” one theologian calls it — are varying writings of song and wisdom, prophecy and warnings, all of which capture the poetic heart and soul of the Jewish people.¹¹ From the questions of suffering in Job, to the laments and praise and cries for help in the Psalms, to the quotable quotes in Proverbs, to the existential wanderings of Ecclesiastes, to the very human desire captured in Song of Solomon, the section of the Old Testament called the “Writings” gives us a window into the other side of that human/divine intimacy.

¹⁰ Hamilton, p35-36.

¹¹ Albert Outler as quoted by Adam Hamilton, *Making Sense of the Bible*, p26.

If the Writings give us a window into such intimacy, you might say the Prophets blare through a bullhorn about it. Prophets lived and proclaimed during some of the more tumultuous years of Israel's history – from roughly 700-400 B. C., before, during, and after the fall of Jerusalem and exile. Such disastrous events were about which some prophets warned the people. “Do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God,” they'd say, acting as the moral and ethical conscience of a people too quick to forget what it means to live a life of faithfulness. But even in their acute alarm, these prophets returned to the words of comfort and refuge from the God whose promise of redemption became their North Star into the future. For there we hear words of a coming king, an anointed One called *Messiah* in the Hebrew and *Christ* in the Greek, one upon whom “the Spirit of the Lord shall rest.” And there we who follow Jesus know that the God intimately involved with this world will come into fullness in the Word made flesh who came and dwelled among us.

III.

When I meet with couples for premarital counseling, we read together a section of M. Scott Peck's book *The Road Less Traveled*. In it, he defines 'love' as 'willing the spiritual growth of your partner.'¹² Thus in the period of time when a couple is dating and learning one another and falling in love, it is normal for one partner to wonder: what can he do for me? How can she enhance the life I live? But when you enter into the covenant relationship of marriage, that question flips. No longer is it all about me, but now you ask: how can I love her more fully? What might I do to enliven his spirit? It was a

¹² M. Scott Peck, *The Road Less Traveled*, p81.

stark reminder for me to hear way back when, and it is each and every time I share that with a new couple.

I couldn't help but to think of that framework though as I immersed myself in the story of the Old Testament this week, reading it through the lens of God's intimate involvement – deeply, fiercely, personally – with the created world. Our text from Deuteronomy 6 captures that very spirit. Spoken by Moses to the Israelites whose memories of Egypt still were close, he claimed these truths for them just across the river from the Promised Land. You could almost see the hope for what was ahead, shimmering into the distance. “Hear O Israel,” he proclaimed, “The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.” Meaning, we must return to God the intimacy God gives to us with everything we are and with all we have. In this covenant relationship, no longer is it all about me, but now it's all about God. These words are called the Shema, the heart of Jewish practice and scripture.

They also became the heart of Jesus's ministry. When asked what was the greatest commandment of all the law and the prophets, he said this: ‘love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself.’

And so the challenge rings through these words on the pages of scripture into this very room today to those of us in covenant relationship with God through Christ. What if we put the very best of what we have and who we are into loving God? Instead of allowing ourselves like the people of Israel to be distracted by prosperity or power, prestige or pleasure, what

might happen if we poured ourselves into loving the God who created us, redeemed us, and sustains us?

What might happen? We might just realize that loving God helps us to love more fully those who God loves. We may imagine new ways to love God with our time, our resources, our relationships, our church, even very lives. And we may discover that the God we seek has been near us all this time.

“Hear o Israel! Hear o Church!” For the steadfast love of the Lord endures forever. Amen!