

Survey of the Bible

Notes from 5-19-19 Class

We briefly reviewed what had been discussed in the previous class: that you must keep the genre for each section of the bible in mind when reading/studying; That you must keep the historical context in mind when reading/studying the bible; and that the bible is divinely inspired, but still human made.

We had begun, in the last class, discussing the 3 central theological themes of the Old Testament:

1. That it created monotheism out of a world where monotheism had not existed.
2. That the people of Israel were the elected or chosen of God.
3. And that the Old Testament had a distinctly future thrust, leading without question toward the New Testament.

Today we pick up where we left off, at (2) the Election of Israel:

The people of Israel believed, based on their interpretation of communications with God, that they were elected by God, or chosen by God, and that that election was universal in scope – in other words they were elected out of all peoples on earth *for* all peoples on earth. This election agreement was called a covenant. It mirrors the ancient City-State vassal treaties which emerged around 4000 BCE. A vassal treaty was a treaty between the Lord of a manor or area and his vassals, in which the vassals provided loyalty and service in exchange for the Lord's protection and favor. The word 'Hessed' is used in the bible, and only applies to the covenant that God establishes with his people. It means God's [unmerited] covenantal grace/favor for or to his people. This word is intended to represent the highest and most ardent of loves.

With relation to (3) the future thrust of the Old Testament, we discussed again the fact that the first book of the bible begins with the word "Beresheet", which does not necessarily mean, "In the beginning." It could just as easily, and probably more likely, mean towards a beginning, towards something better, toward the best or toward the prime. The ancient Hebrew words used in the OT all push toward the future, toward God's aims, or toward God's ultimate purpose. Some other things we need to keep in mind:

1. We have to remember that the old testament was not originally a written book. It was an oral tradition that was retold and retold over a thousand years, from generation to generation. And that oral tradition was what you might call 'alive'. It was maintained in its essence, but was modified to accommodate changes in society generation after generation. The whole effect was to keep God's elected people moving forward, toward God's end/aims/purposes etc.
2. The Jewish homeland was, geographically, a tiny nation of people sandwiched between 2 enormous empires (Egypt on their west side, and the Empires of the fertile Crescent to the east). This location put them in the crosshairs of history, and the result was a lot of suffering for the Jewish people. That suffering created the forward thrust found in the OT. It created Messianism, the longed-for hope that someone would come to save them. It also created Apocalypticism, the idea that in the future God would end everything and stand as the final judge of all that is.
3. OT wasn't put into writing until around 1400 BCE (just the first five books, which have been ascribed to Moses), and then rest was added in writing over the next 1000 years. In that time, the people of Israel turned this living, forward moving, forward thinking tradition into a present or historically focused, immovable set of rules, and subjected it to much criticisms - which we will discuss now...

Biblical Criticism can also be thought of as biblical study or biblical scholarship - an attempt to understand the document in one way or another - and the different methods of biblical criticism can be grouped into 4 main categories:

1. Textual Criticism
2. Higher Criticism, comprised of:
 - a. Source Criticism, or
 - b. Form Criticism
3. Redaction Criticism
4. Literary Criticism

Textual Criticism - examines the text of the bible itself. Textual critics are linguists that pour over the original texts, in their original languages, and compare all the different languages used in the bible to try to come up with the most accurate meaning. Some things to note with regard to textual criticism:

1. The New Testament has been preserved in more manuscripts than any other ancient work, having over 5,800 complete or fragmented Greek manuscripts, 10,000 Latin manuscripts and 9,300 manuscripts in various other ancient languages including Syriac, Slavic, Gothic, Ethiopic, Coptic and Armenian.
2. As mentioned, the bible was written over a very long time, by a large variety of people, and then it was copied and copied, over and over again. As a result, as you can imagine, it is wrought with errors: misspellings, emendations (question marks where people weren't sure what something should say), dittography (a mistaken repetition of a letter, word or phrase), Haplography (material that was inadvertently left out completely), mistaken letters (which can completely change the meaning of words), and inherent ambiguity because the copyists were not the original authors. All of this makes it difficult to know what the bible actually meant to say.
3. We rely today, on the work of past linguists who (after many years of work) arrived at the two main translations we use today, the Septuagint (which is the earliest Greek translation of the Hebrew scriptures from the original Hebrew, and was done in the 3rd century BCE), and the Vulgate (which is a Latin translation done by Jerome in the late 4th century CE, and is primarily used by the Catholic church).

Source Criticism – is the search for the original sources that comprise the bible, and generally it aims to try to identify the different sources within each bit of text. Some notes with regard to source criticism:

1. In 1753 a Frenchman named Jean Astruc postulated that Moses, in writing the Pentateuch (the first 5 books of the bible), used two different sources. He came to this conclusion because the words used to reference similar thoughts or ideas changed from the early section and the later sections (for example, different names are used when referring to God), and different writing styles are used. His work gives us two different dates for the writing of Genesis (562 BCE for part 2, and 620 BCE for part 1).
2. Source criticism tries to isolate written sources and chronologize them in order to understand the development of the bible and how it came into being.

Form Criticism – began in the early 20th century, when scholars observed that the Gospels are composed of short units, which they believed were remnants and evidence of the oral tradition that preceded the writing of the gospels. Form criticism breaks the bible down into these short units, and then categorizes them based on their genre (poetry, histories, letters, laws, etc) and historical setting. Some notes about form criticism:

1. Gunkel, toward the end of the 1800s, along with one or two other men, are the main scholars giving us this sort of criticism. He hoped that once he analyzed the forms, or individual units, and figured out the genre and historical setting, he would have a much better understanding of what was happening at the time the oral traditions were first set down.

2. Form criticism enlightens us on the original social history and attitudes at the time the oral traditions were first written down. It also shows us just how violent the times were, and how little justice and mercy could be found.

Redaction Criticism - focuses on discovering how the literary units were originally edited—"redacted"—into their current forms. Redaction is the process of editing multiple sources into a single document. Redaction of multiple sources of oral traditions into one book in the bible could have had a *huge* roll in how that book is interpreted. Some notes regarding redaction criticism:

1. Redaction criticism developed after World War II.
2. All of the books of the bible from Joshua through II Kings are history books. They record the tenure of the Israelites on their land from about 1220 BCE until about 587 CE. These histories are not written like ours are, with multiple witnesses that verify facts. Although sometimes there are witnesses, often they are just stories.
3. A redactor may come along and edit down the entire book to just one theme, or one sugar coating ('fake news' in ancient times), or just one person trying to make sense of a whole enormously complicated thing. Ecclesiastes is a good example of a heavily redacted book. The whole of the book, until the end, is very dreary and depressing, lamenting the vanity of life, its hopeless futility, etc, and then the redactor comes along in the last paragraph and says:

“Besides being wise, the Preacher also taught the people knowledge, weighing and studying and arranging many proverbs with great care. The Preacher sought to find words of delight, and uprightly he wrote words of truth. The words of the wise are like goads, and like nails firmly fixed are the collected sayings; they are given by one Shepherd. My son, beware of anything beyond these. Of making many books there is no end, and much study is a weariness of the flesh. The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil.”

Literary Criticism – these critics say the other forms of biblical criticism break up the bible too much, and that it should be looked at as a whole. These mid to late 20th century critics believe that the bible should be read for its deeper truth as literature first and foremost.

Next time we will start in with the bible itself, in its earliest and longest sustained account, which is Genesis 2. We will keep all of this background information in mind as we examine the entirety of the bible.

Some people expressed interest in reading additional book on biblical criticism. While these are scholarly works, and will not be riveting or exciting to read, these are the suggestions:

The Westminster Guide to Books of the Bible, by William Ramsay

The Kingdom of God, by John Bright

The History of Israel, by John Bright