

The Value of Old Testament Narratives: A Personal Reflection

Editorial: Paul R. House

Paul R. House is Rogers Professor of Old Testament Interpretation at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and Editor of *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology*. He is the author or editor of eight volumes and several scholarly articles.

A lifetime of Bible reading produces countless personal impressions. Some of these impressions are fleeting in their impact. Others, however, shape our lives. After some thirty years of consistent Bible reading, I have found that the Old Testament narratives have had a tremendous impact on my thinking, scholarship, and spiritual development. As we shaped this issue of the journal I had reason to reflect upon why this was so. I discovered that these powerful accounts challenge my questionable actions and affirm my correct decisions. They also press me to pass their message on to the next generation so that they, too, can grow towards maturity. I found that my academic preparation, writing and preaching, and personal devotion have all been affected by these passages. I also realized that these experiences have contributed to the shaping of my character.

Academic Preparation

I entered Southwest Baptist College as a Bible major with the intent of preparing for pastoral ministry. After a year of study, I encountered literature teachers who impressed me so much that I added an English major. What Tom Padgett, Betty Gipson, Joe Brown, and John Mercer gave me was an understanding of how to read and understand poetic and narrative texts. I learned from them how to analyze characters, plot, and themes, as well as how to appreciate literary artistry, which they considered evidence for human beings

having been made in God's image. They also forced me to read as if every text mattered and to deem valuable any information that shed light on a text. They made me a textual person, one who valued the written word. A subsequent Masters degree at the University of Missouri reinforced these convictions at a time when other institutions were chasing literary fads.

I never read the Old Testament narratives the same again. The text's depiction of historical figures like Joshua, Samson, David, Huldah, and others now took on added texture. Plots spanning Joshua-Kings became more evident and increasingly rich. Themes and images I had not considered emerged. I learned that real events do not have to be recounted in a boring manner.

Often I read Old Testament scholars who treat the biblical text as if it has minimal value. When that happens I recall what Gilbert Porter, a Contemporary Novels teacher, told a class at the University of Missouri: "We take these novels seriously because they teach us how to live." Then I wonder why a biblical scholar cannot take an Old Testament narrative as seriously, and with as much reverence, as Porter took *Catcher in the Rye* or other novels.

Writing and Preaching

The first two books I wrote took a literary approach to prophetic texts. My next three volumes reflected a growing interest in literary method, the literary unity

of the Old Testament, and 1-2 Kings respectively. Old Testament narrative dominated much of that research and writing, and as a consequence also influenced my choice of preaching texts. Writing and preaching these passages forced me to find God in the story and to be more personal as I related the personal stories of great and small biblical characters.

Finding God in 1-2 Kings led me to pursue theological ideas. Here God was the main character, and a main character whose dimensions just kept growing. He was clearly the creator, sustainer, ruler of history, lover of Israel, redeemer of the lost of all nations, judge, and renewing one. He defied full characterization even as more knowledge of his nature came to light. Everyone else in the story played off him. God's dealings with them became a grid for sharing how God deals with us. Their flaws became warnings; their strengths became models. In due time I became more focused on God and less focused on human problems as I read. Literary theory led to theological and historical methodology, which in turn shaped my hermeneutical sensibilities.

Personal Devotion

I have no idea how many times I have read through the Old Testament's historical narratives. I do know, though, that reading the Hebrew text of Ruth and teaching that text repeatedly over the past two years changed my view of hope. I am also certain that reading 1-2 Samuel during a time of serious reflection ordered my thinking in crucial ways.

Ruth is a book of hope forged in the furnace of reality. Beloved ones die. Separation occurs. Bitterness ensues. But loyalty and conversion converge, and a good and honest and humble man meets and

marries a woman he dared not dream would love him. Years later, David comes from this union. Centuries later hope still comes from these accounts. If Naomi and Ruth can find shelter under God's wings, then it is not inconceivable that we may as well. If Boaz can do the right thing and be glad he did, then we can take the plunge as well.

My encounter with 1-2 Samuel taught me to let God work. I can serve him, but history—mine or anyone else's—is in his hands. My job is to let the Lord shape me and those I love. God's job is to govern history. If David could trust God to deal with Saul and with Jonathan, then my friends are safe with the Lord. If David could be willing to be dependent on God, then I can be also. If Saul could fail, then I ought to know that I may too. This reading left me chastened but wiser, or, at least, with the opportunity to live more wisely.

Conclusion

I could expand my list of significant narratives, but the point has been made. I have not the slightest doubt that these accounts can and will change lives for the better. I have no hesitation in recommending them as worthy of the most serious academic research. I have no reason to believe that they have lost their spiritual force. My only regret after spending years with them is that I have not learned more from them and explained them better to others. Therefore, I commend the articles in this issue to you not just as examples of good scholarship (which they are), but as commentary on God-breathed scripture that will help you learn how to live.