

“Making Sense of the Old Testament”

Date: Sept. 11, 2016

Place: Lakewood UMC

Theme: Old Testament, Bible

Occasion: Making Sense of the Bible, series

Texts: Deuteronomy 31:14-29; Exodus 20:1-20

To understand the Old Testament, we first have to understand what the Bible is and what it is not. In an earlier sermon we concluded the Bible is not an owner’s manual, a Magic 8 Ball, a systematic-theology textbook, nor a book of promises.

What, then, is the Bible? It is first the story of the people of Israel and their faith in God. It is also a story about their God, and God’s will and purpose for God’s people. It does not read like a book dictated by God. It reads like a diverse set of writings.

In the Bible you will find all kinds and types of literature: short stories, law codes, court histories, poetry, prophetic warnings and promises. All of these were written by people who were reflecting upon *their* story in the light of their faith.

Here’s what makes the Bible so exciting and so relevant, indeed here’s what makes this book holy. Through the stories of these ancient people, through their experiences and reflections about God, we hear God speaking to us. That’s a holy experience. Amen?

Adam Hamilton, whose book we’re using for this sermon series - *Making Sense of the Bible*, begins the fourth chapter by telling a story about a time when he was sitting on an airplane reading his Bible. The fellow sitting next to him struck up a conversation and said this: “I’ve always thought it was amazing how God wrote out the entire Bible on tablets of stone!”

Rev. Hamilton gently replied, so as not to embarrass him, “It was only the Ten Commandments that were said to be written on stone tablets by the finger of God.” His fellow passenger said, “Oh. I always wondered how they carried that whole thing around!”

He tells the story to introduce the question, “who wrote the Bible?” If the entire Old Testament was not inscribed by the finger of God on stone tablets, how and when and by whom was it written? He begins with first five books of the Bible.

These five books hold a special importance and they have been called by various names: The Torah, the Pentateuch, the Law of God, the books of the Covenant, the Law of Moses, the books of Moses, or simply Moses. Who wrote them? Well, it is presumed that Moses wrote the first five books; for some it is common knowledge.

They have *traditionally* been ascribed to Moses, but since at least the 1600’s this idea has been questioned. The books themselves never claim that Moses wrote them. In fact, the books speak of Moses in the third person, as though they were written by someone else. But there are other clues as well.

In Genesis 12:6 it says “At that time the Canaanites were in the land.” That statement presumes the people hearing or reading this would have known of a time when there *weren’t* Canaanites in the land. But the Canaanites lived in the land the entire time that Moses was alive. Therefore that sentence doesn’t make sense he would have written it.

Here’s another clue, Numbers 12:3 – “Now the man Moses was very humble, more so than anyone else on the face of the earth.” Now, if Moses wrote that, he was not indeed the most humble man

on earth. And I shall refrain from making any comparison to any person running for a high political office today.

Here's another clue that Moses didn't write all five books entirely by himself. If you turn to the last 8 verses of the book of Deuteronomy, you'll find that those verses describe Moses's death. Clearly it would have been impossible for Moses to have written that.

However, there are several places within the first five books that clearly claim Moses did write some things down, particularly the Law, or portions of it that were given directly to him by God. So, what can we conclude? Moses wrote some of the books, or some of what we find in those books, but probably not everything.

At this point, Hamilton in his book begins to describe the great divide among biblical scholars and archaeologists. There are those who are skeptical of the historical value of what's written in the Old Testament. And then there are those who believe that everything in the Bible is to be taken at face value and if given enough time archaeology will validate everything found in the Old Testament.

I'm skimming the highlights of Hamilton's discussion and encourage you to read his book. I touch upon it because much of the divisiveness in the Church today surrounds people's view of Scripture, whether it was literally written by God, or if it was written by people reflecting upon their experience of God in their history.

Personally, I tend to side with Adam Hamilton, who holds a moderate position. Portions of the Torah were written by Moses, whom I believe to have been a historical person. But large sections of the story of Moses and of the Exodus, were stories that were passed down orally, told and retold over several, many generations.

Individual stories and groups of stories were eventually committed to writing, then collected and edited together into the stories as we have them today. That final editing process was not likely done until the time of the Exile, or even after it.

But someone may ask, “Doesn’t that diminish the scriptures, if we say that people wrote it and not God?” I don’t see how it does. Jesus didn’t write the Gospels and yet they are sacred to us. Nor does the idea that the Torah had a long history of being told out loud as stories and then multiple writers and editors did their work, none of that refutes the idea that the Holy Spirit was at work in this process.

God still speaks to His people today through these pages, even if God did not dictate every single word, or even if God did not write every word on a stone tablet. God’s Holy Spirit was involved in the inspiration of the writing of Holy Scripture through the entire process.

In fact, it confirms what I have said on many occasions, though the thought is not original with me. It was St. Teresa of Avila who first said, “God has no hands but our hands.” God, through the Holy Spirit, inspired people of old to tell their faith stories.

God, through the Holy Spirit, inspired people to eventually put the words on ancient papyrus, and later onto paper. God, through the Holy Spirit, inspired people to decide what writings would be included in the Bible. That in itself is another discussion.

And it is God, through the Holy Spirit, who inspires us today when we read these pages. When we allow ourselves to be open to the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the ancient stories touch our hearts and inspire our lives. We read the ancient words and allow the Holy

Spirit to speak to us in our own context. Who are we to be as God's people? What are we supposed to do as God's people?

For some the process is simple: "Read it and do it but don't think too much about it." For others, myself included, we have questions. And it is all right to have those questions. We're curious about how the Bible came to be. Who were the authors? What was their context in history? Why did they write what they did?

I don't know about you, but have you ever wondered why the Catholic Bible, the Orthodox Bible, the Jewish Bible and the Protestant Bible, all have a different number of books in them?

Ask a rabbi how many books are in the Hebrew Bible and the rabbi will tell you 24. Ask a Catholic priest how many books are in the Old Testament and he will tell you 46. Ask an Eastern Orthodox priest how many books in the OT and he will tell you 49 or 50. Ask a Protestant pastor and you'll hear that we have 39 books in the Old Testament.

Why are some books in their Bible and not in ours? And who chose which books make it into the Bible? To find out the answers to those questions, I hope you'll join us for study tomorrow night at 7pm.

The Old Testament was important to Jesus; it should be important to us as well. It contains both Israel's story and the story of the God who chose them to be his people. God loved his people as a parent loves a child or a lover loves the beloved. God delivered God's people from slavery and gave them a land of their own. (The Exodus)

And yet, God watched them as they turned from their covenant, worshiped foreign gods and oppressed their own people. It is the

story of God hiding God's face from his people, and of the neighboring nations who attacked and destroyed the ancient nation of Israel. Some thought it was a battle over real estate; others saw it as the judgment of God against his own people. (The Exile)

And in the end, it is the story of God restoring His people once more, bringing them back from exile and promising them a new king. As we read the Old Testament, we as Christians come to understand who Jesus is and where he came from.

I commend this holy book to your reading, as complicated as it may be. As you read its pages, may God speak to your heart and inspire you in our own time. May it be so. Amen!

Much of this sermon is borrowed from the book *Making Sense of the Bible*, by Adam Hamilton, HarperCollins Publisher, NY, NY, 2014. Chapter 4 "Who Wrote the Old Testament, When, and Why?" pp. 31-37,