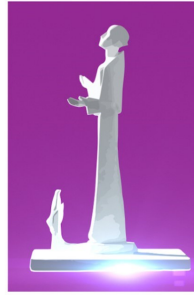


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Theme 3: Reading the Old Testament

Question 3c. What's in the Old Testament and how should we approach it?

1. The Old Testament is such a varied collection of documents that make up one section of our Bible. Can you think of another text like it?
2. Law, prophets, writings...do you have a section you are particularly taken with? Why is that?
3. Marie-Louise talks about some bits of the Old Testament that some might find disturbing. Do any of these come to mind for you? How do you deal with them? Is her advice helpful?

Jonathan Holland

The Old Testament usually gets divided up into 3 areas, the Law, the Prophets and the Writings. There are 39 books and the first five, Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy are called the Law. There's a lot more in them than Law, but they include a lot of laws which governed the future life of the Israelites and the Jews.

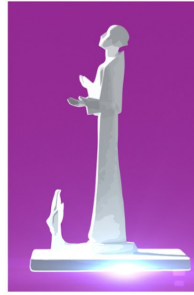
Then you have the prophets. You've got minor prophets like Amos and then you've got the major prophets Isaiah, Ezekiel, Jeremiah. They are the big prophets.

And then you've got the writings. They include things like the Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and those kind of things.

So you've got a real variety of things in the Old Testament, we divide them into 3 areas. You've got poetry, you've got history, you've got stories with meanings, you've got love songs, you've got all kinds of different genres amongst those categories amongst the 39 books in the Old Testament.

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Marie-Louise Craig

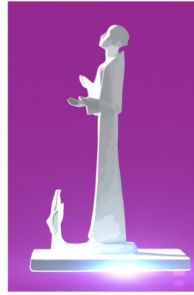
Because it is literature of an ancient culture, it is actually quite difficult for us to read some sections of the old Testament and actually understand what's going on. In fact we can be quite disturbed by some of the stories in the old Testament. What we need to remember is, it is an ancient culture with a whole different set of norms, different ways to worship, different understandings about how civilisation works and how culture works. So when we read out Old Testament, we need to start understanding how that culture worked in order to be able to say, "Well this was the principle they were working on and this is why, but then what does that look like in the 21st century?" That's a really important thing to do with the Old Testament.

Remember this is history written with an agenda, which is theological, You can't just read it as history because they don't put everything in. They only put in the stories that actually tell the theology that they want to tell. So you always need to be asking yourself when you read the old Testament, what is God like in this story, who is God in this story or how is God relating to the people in this story? Why is He behaving in the way He is and what does that tell me about God and what should I be taking away from this? Why was this story kept in the first place? What message did the people who collected it and kept it, what did they want us to learn from it?

A lot of us when we read our Old Testaments, and I'm thinking about reading through morning prayers and evening prayers and you've got your readings for the day, and sometimes you just think 'that was really not life giving' you know that particular reading. We can be

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quite afraid of it, we can actually push it away in a sense. But I think the best thing to do is to actually learn to read it well. And so you know you don't need to come to theological college, (although I'd love to have you in my class), but it would be more to pick up a beginner commentary and start to understand what the content is of a particular book and why these things are happening. So to get that theological understanding of why these things were kept and what they teach us .

Yes, you will struggle with things. I still struggle with passages. It's the struggle that's important, actually. As we struggle with these passages, our relationship with God deepens and our understanding of Him becomes more mature and so it's good to struggle with difficult passages.