

Sermon Transcript from April 24th, 2016 How to Read and Interpret the Old Testament Pastor John Walton, Bridgetown Church

Okay. So, I'm sitting over there and my heart's pounding and my body's shaking and I'm saying, "I am really pumped for this." Then I figured out it was the subwoofer. Subwoofer. You know, back Midwest we'd call that a Chicago-style hotdog. Stay with my folks. Stay with me. I'm moving. I'll be here all week. No I won't. You know, when you live through the Jurassic period, you get the right to be corny. So, I tell my students that it's kind of a toggle. You get either boring or corny, and I figured you'd prefer corny, so I'll go with that. I've heard it both ways.

So, you're reading through Scripture and you feel absolutely lost because you're wondering, "How is this God's Word to me? What am I supposed to do with this? I want it to be real, I want it to be meaningful, but I don't know what to do."

The fact is, long before Christ came to die for us, God had bestowed a wonderful act of grace on us. Long before Christ came to live among us, God had given an immeasurable gift of grace. Because, what God did was He gave us His revelation of Himself. He gave of Himself by telling us about Himself. It was an act of grace. In the ancient world, gods did not reveal themselves. Because when you reveal yourself, you commit yourself. When you say, "This is what I'm like," you've got to be like that. And, in the ancient world, gods did not do that. In the ancient world, people were left to guess what God was like. All they could do is like at the world around them and speculate.

But, for Israel, God came down in the form of His Word to communicate Himself to them. With His great act of grace, we feel the compulsion on us to understand it as best we can. This is a gift of God, and we wouldn't want to not take advantage of the blood of Christ and we wouldn't not want to take advantage of Christ's incarnate ministry among us. We certainly don't want to fail to take advantage of God's Word delivered to us. People in the ancient world would have longed for gods to communicate. We look at Abraham and we read about the times where God comes and speaks to him and we say, "Oh, I wish that God would come and speak to me like that."

Hold it right there. Eight times God came and spoke to Abraham and, most times after God left, Abraham was more confused than when God came. And if you had asked Abraham, "Do you want those eight conversations as is or do you want a whole book of God's revealing Himself to you?"

Take the book! That's what we have. But, so often, we don't know what to do with it. So, that's what I want to talk about tonight. Especially with the Old Testament. You know, the Old Testament, wow. I love it. It's my life. It's my profession. It's my ministry. It's my vocation. It's my passion. But, I realize that lots of people open it up and find only frustration and confusion, and it's because we don't have a working reading strategy. We're not even sure what we're looking for. And in our worst moments we feel like saying, "God, couldn't you have thought of better things than Leviticus to put in your book?"

Because we don't know how that's God's Word to us. We want God's Word. So, what do we do? Well, let's talk about it. Let's talk about what we've got in this thing we call the Old Testament and maybe develop a little bit of strategy for reading it. So, any website has "about." So, okay, let's do a little "about" here. "About the Old Testament."

First of all, the Old Testament is made up of, of course, a number of books. It's not a book, it's a collection of books and its various genres. So, in other words, the literature works in lots of different ways. Prophets, Psalms, Proverbs, narrative. Right? Okay. You know this. But, the fact is, all of those genres are working together to present a common religious perspective. In fact, that's the very point of it, because in it God is giving us some material that is consistently theological. It may give us accounts of events that actually happened in the past, but that's not because it wants to give you history. It's consistently theological as it talks about those events. It may talk about people and their lives, but it's not giving you biography. It is consistently theological in the information that it's giving.

So, we recognize that the Bible is focused on trying to give us certain kinds of information, and we call it God's self-revelation. Now, that's not new language to most of you. You've probably heard that before. God's revealed word. Right? We use that language often.

But, what happens is that we hear that turn and we embrace it and we accept that, but we don't always then move the next step and carry that through how we read the text. And that's where our strategy has to pick up.

What I want to suggest is that it's not enough to know what the Old Testament is. "Oh, it's God's revelation." We have to reorient to what it does. What is it that the Bible is doing? Okay, now, we're going to get to that as we move through an understanding of what it is that the Bible is. So, I've got a little acronym for us. "AIR Bible."

Now, one of the things that I really love doing, and unfortunately I'm doing it at this moment at home, but I, for 15 years in the various churches I've been involved in, I teach sixth grade Sunday school. I love it. Sixth grade is just such a ripe age. They're kind of done with the Bible stories and they're ready to start thinking more deeply. And they're at that cusp where they're not yet middle school and high schoolers with all of that going on, and they're starting to think about, "Is this my faith or is it just what my parents taught me? Do I believe this or is it just kind of that I'm in this church and this is what I was taught?"

So, they're ripe to think about what it takes to shift this whole enterprise to "who I am." My identity and not my parents and not my church. So, I love it. Sixth grade is great opportunity. So, I talk to them. My course is called "We Believe" and it's a course on doctrine. Plain and simple. Yeah, that's what it is. A course on doctrine. But, we wanted to introduce them to what is it that you believe? What is it that you're identifying as? And we spend the first six weeks talking about the Bible and what it is because, of course, everything else they believe comes out of the Bible. So, I use "AIR Bible" to introduce that to them, and I'm not trying to treat you like sixth graders, but it does give us the key information that we need to work with.

So, first of all we recognize that the Bible has authority. That's the "A" if you're following in your menu. Okay? It has authority. Now, what does that mean? Authority is something that we are accountable to and that we submit to. We recognize the Bible as having come from God and, therefore, it has the authority of God. That's why we submit to it. Okay? That's why we are accountable to it. So, that's authority.

The "I" stands for "inspiration." And, of course, all that really says is that its source is God. It would be really sad if this was stuff we just made up ourselves. It wouldn't be worth the commitment of our lives. Now, this is a gift from God, and it's from God. If it were just some smart or spiritual or pious people who made this stuff up, that's not worth our commitment. It's our conviction that it comes from God – through human intermediaries, yes, but it comes from God, and that's what gives it that authority.

Then, of course, the third one, the "R" is for "revelation." Those are the three basic terms that describe what the Bible is to us. It has authority, it comes from God and it is characterized as God's revelation of Himself. So, let's follow that up a little bit. How does authority work? How do we think through this? The center of authority is not in what it tells us to do. Though, of course, we have to pay attention when it tells us to do things. We can't just ignore them. But, its authority is found in how it wants us to believe and to think. We don't just want to read the Bible to get an action plan for the next week, we want to read the Bible to fill that reservoir of knowledge in us so that we'll be armed and equipped to face the things that come at us in life.

We can't just live our life trying to figure out which command of the Bible we now need to do. The Bible's a lot bigger than commands. It's asking a life response from us. We are supposed to believe certain things. When I learn something about God from the Bible or somebody explaining the Bible to me, I might not need that this week or next week or next month. I might not need it for 20 years, but I want it there so that when I need it I can draw on it. We have to read the Bible so that we become instinctive in our responses to life and its situations.

If you're a pianist and you're going to do a recital, you don't walk in and sight read. That would be a really miserable experience for everybody. Just saying. You practice and practice and practice and practice. What's the goal of all of that? The goal is so that piece – not even just the notes – becomes instinctive. If you've got to think too much about it, it's not going to be a fun experience. Your fingers know what to do instinctively, and that's how life has to be for us. Once we take in the knowledge of God, we fill up this reservoir of belief so that we know, instinctively, how we need to respond to the situations of life.

So, the Bible is not just giving us a list of rules. Oh my goodness, no. It's showing God to us. The core of its authority is to be found then in what it tells us God is like. It's

interesting. Some people, even Christians who have been Christians for a long time, read the Bible and they get to some parts and they say, "Oh, boy. God's doing some strange things here. I don't like that very much. I'm just going to leave that part out."

Oops. We can't do that. It's the whole package. You know, when my computer asks me to upload something or install something or whatever, it asks me whether I want the full installation or a custom installation. Now, I don't know about you, but I am fully persuaded that I'm far too stupid to know what custom installation I ought to do, because I'm afraid I'm going to leave something out that's really important, you know? So, I end up with all the ads and the pop-ups and ugly. Okay? But, I do full installation.

In the Bible, we get a full installation. You can't tailor it. You can't say, "I like these parts of God." And, especially, what some people do, "I like the New Testament God. Love. I don't like the Old Testament God. Grr. Angry. Punishing."

You have misunderstood the Old Testament God. Jesus kind of thought the Old Testament God was pretty cool. Oh, it was Him. Okay. So, we have to be careful there. So, the core of the authority is to be found in what it tells us God is like. The core of the authority is not in a bunch of rules. Its authority is: "This is the picture of God. Take it or leave it."

We are compelling to accept this picture of God, to put it in the center of our worldview and make it the basis for everything that we do. It's easy to have a fully developed view of God. People grow up in the church and they say, "Oh, I learned all about God in Sunday school and at church. I go to church all the time, I read my Bible, I know all about God."

But then, they take that very beautifully developed picture of God and they shove it away into the corner of their life and don't pay any attention to it in how they live. That won't fly. There are other people who are filled with zeal for God for acting on God's behalf, for being God's person in the world. But, they don't have a well-informed view of God. They don't really know what He's like. And, as a result, everything's off-kilter.

We have to do both. We have to have a fully developed, well-informed view of God and we have to have it smack in the middle of our life so everything revolves around it. That's what the Bible's after for us. So, that's the idea of authority. We're accountable to it. So, its picture is true and it demands response.

Revelation. So, what is it? Okay. So, when you're trying to get to know somebody – I just met John Mark today. First time ever. Okay? So, there we are kind of trying to get to know each other a little bit. How does that work? You do it all the time. You meet new people. I mean, in one sense, you do it when they stop and say, "Turn around and greet one another. Say hello to somebody you don't know."

Right? How do you do that? How does it work? Okay. Some of you are introverts and you're saying, "I have no clue. I have no idea. Don't. Wow, you know, I usually pretend I have to tie my shoe."

So, granted, it's a little more difficult for some people. But, how does it work? It works because what we do is we start sharing little bits of information with each other. You know, when I sit down at the table in the lunch room with some students I haven't seen before and they're all saying, "Why is this professor invading my space?"

So, I sit down and I say, "So, tell me about yourself. Where are you from? What's your major? What year are you in? What activities?"

And they feel like they're being grilled. You know? "Interrogation?"

So, I'm just trying to find out a little about them. You know, if it's going the way it should, they'll ask me some of the same questions about myself. So, we start to get to know each other. And, as you know, when you get to feel like someone's a friend, you would describe that by feeling like you know a lot more of their story and they know more of your story. Then people kind of meet somebody that they're really really really interested in and they just want to hear story and story all the time and spend all their hours sharing stories. Right? And that's how we get to know each other.

Then you get married and five years later you've heard all the stories and they're

changing. What's up with that? But, that's how we get to know each other. Story. Now, haven't you sometimes sat down and asked yourself, "I want to know God, but I don't know how to do it? Because it doesn't work the same way, you know? I don't know His phone number. I don't know how to do it. How do I get to know God?"

Well, guess what? It's the same way. The Bible's God's story. That's what it is. When we say it's God's revelation of Himself, it's His story. And we can get to know Him by knowing His story. Remember that story is not just about your past, story is about your past and your present and your future. Your hopes and dreams, your ambitions, your passions. That's all part of your story, and that is what God tells us as He gives us His word. He's giving us His story.

And if we want to know God, that means we have an endless desire to hear more of the story. Lots of people say they want to know God, but they somehow think that should happen kind of mystically or automatically. I say, "Well, why don't you read your Bible?"

"Oh, that's too boring."

"Well, you just told God His story is boring."

You know, once we recognize it's His story, that becomes – catch this – our reading strategy. No matter what genre we're in, no matter what testament, our reading strategy is: this is God's story. And, therefore, first question out of the shoot no matter which part of the Bible I'm in: what did I just learn about God? That's what it's there for. That's what the Bible is. That's what it's doing. That should be our question. What did I just learn about God? What does this tell me about God?

So, it's God's story. To know Him, we must know His story. There's really no short cut. We can't know Him by meditating harder. When we pray, we are sharing our story. But, it's God's Word that's sharing His story. Do you want to know Him? Open the book. Spend time in it. It demands response from us. And what response is that? We are supposed to be hearing God's story, sharing our story with Him, because we are partners. We are partners in the plan and purposes of God. So, we're trying to read what it's all about to be part of the Kingdom of God, to be part of God's plan and purpose. That's what we are as God's Church. That's what Israel was as God's covenant people. Brought into the program, now you're part of the team.

So, how do we take our place as partners in God's plan and purpose? Well, we have to understand what the program's all about and we have to understand who's running the program. So, let's turn our attention specifically to narrative. We could do any of the genre's, but they asked me to do narratives, so that's what we'll focus on and talk about how narrative works.

You might think that's the one you need the least help on. "Oh, they're Bible stories. Woohoo. I know Bible stories."

Okay. But, you didn't want me to talk about Leviticus. You really didn't. Although, that'd be fun. But, narrative. Let's start there. Because, even though we often think we know what to do with it, sometimes it doesn't go so well. So, when we approach a narrative, first of all, we imagine and we understand that the writer is writing intelligently with a purpose. Okay, so, news flash: Bible stories are not isolated, individual, autonomous stories. They're in a book. Whether it's Judges or 2 Samuel or 1 Chronicles, it's in a book. And that particular narrative plays a role in that book and the role in that book was given to it by the author who is using that narrative in a particular way with a particular reason. It's not self-standing. It contributes to the book.

The narrator is being moved by the Holy Spirit and producing inspired word of God. Therefore, the narrator's purposes are important to us because we need to track with the narrator, and that means much more than just reading a single, individual story. He's writing intelligently with a purpose. We assume that each segment contributes. So, when I'm reading a story, a narrative, I'm going to ask, "What does this narrative contribute to the book? How's the narrator working all of this out?"

The interpreter, then, must identify various literary structures and devices that will convey the author's intent. We want to track with the author. Now, what happens sometimes is we're not necessarily content tracking with the author, because we read a story – let's pick the story of Esther – and we say, "Wow, you know, there's some intriguing stuff

going on here. I'd really like to understand a little more about what's motivating Esther or what's driving Haman or what's Mordecai thinking when he refuses to bow down or what's Xerxes smoking that he can't sleep?"

No. Okay. We have all kinds of curious questions that we have and we want them answered. But, here's the problem: the text doesn't tell us those things. Lots of times, then, when we read narrative, we find ourselves wanting to kind of lift up the curtain of the literary characterization and get behind to the "real people." Who are the "real people" in the book of Esther? So, we try to kind of bypass the literary presentation that we have in front of us to get to, "Yeah, what's back there?"

You know, we'd love to do a Myers-Briggs test on Haman. Man, what makes that guy tick? Well, we can't. We can't get to the real person. We believe they are real people, but we can't get to the real person. What we have is the literary characterization. And, by the way, that's what's most important because that's what has authority. Anything that we make up, we made up. And that doesn't have authority because we made it up. But, we do it all the time. If you're doing a Bible story in a narrative or even a Sunday school class, you might end up speculating all sorts of things about why the people are doing what they're doing or what they're thinking. That doesn't accomplish anything.

We have to get an idea of what the text is doing, what the author is giving us. So, we have to be careful about what we're doing. We want to identify what the author's up to. Now, the medium we have is story. That's what we've got to work with. Okay, but what do we do with those stories? Lots of times we get talking with narrative we get talking about the heroes of the Bible. The problem with that line is that there's a grammatical error in it. It should be "hero" of the Bible, because there's only one. His name is God.

There's only one hero in the Bible. All the rest? Abraham, Moses, Ruth, Esther, Joshua, David? Bit players. God's the hero. So, we're not so much interested in what those characters are doing or why they're doing it, except insofar as God is revealing Himself through them. I'm not interested knowing David's story, I want to know God's story through David. I want to know God's story through Ruth. The characters, they're bit players.

So, when we read a narrative, we ought to be asking, "What does this tell me about God?"

Sometimes we think that it should be telling us about ethical models, role models, behavioral objectives or the little boy who shared his lunch. Do you share your lunch with your coworkers? You know, I'm sorry. The feeding of the five thousand is not about a little boy sharing his lunch. That story's told in all four Gospels, though the kid is mentioned only in one. I suspect he was kind of intimidated by Peter. "Here, take it!"

I don't now. But, that's not the point. You know, Jesus is God. He's feeding the multitudes. There's big deals going on there, and it's not to teach us to share. We often miss the point of the story. So, one Sunday I was hanging around and had two things at different times, so I had the middle time free. And, as usual, I went down to the kid's department and I said, "Do you need any help in any of the rooms? I'm free. Happy to sit in there."

You know, just an extra body in the room. So, they put me in the four-year-olds. I love four-year-olds. So, there I am in the four-year-old class. And you know how it is with four-year-olds. You just get down and start playing with them and next thing you know you're BFF and they're like, "Oh, Mr. John this," and, "Mr. John that." Great. I love it.

So, it's story time and we go over for story time and all 12 of them are trying to sit on my lap and, you know, I'm in heaven. So, it's very cool. Now, the story's coming. Now, of course, I don't have to do anything here. I just was a last minute volunteer. And so, I'm interested in what the story's going on. So, he starts saying, "So, kids, do you know that Jesus had friends? For instance, there were friends named Mary and Martha and – here's a tough one – Lazarus. Say that with me kids. Lazarus. Okay. Good. Those are Jesus' friends."

I'm thinking, "Okay. This is John 11. It's the story of Lazarus being raised from the dead. Cool."

So then, he starts getting the kids to talk to him about their friends and how important friendships are and that they have friends. You know, somewhere in the process, I think he did mention in passing that Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead when he got sick

and died, but, you know. Then it was, "Kids, what did we learn today?"

"Oh, Jesus had friends. Mary was Jesus' friend. Martha was Jesus' friend. Oh, lalalala... Lazarus. Yeah. He was Jesus' friend."

Then, "Okay. It's time to go over and do our craft."

And I'm dying. I'm saying, "Okay. I'm just crowd control. Don't get upset. Don't have a hermeneutical moment, okay? Just take it easy."

Now, usually in cases like that, I really depend on my wife being with me because she has this way of sticking her hand on my knee here and getting that spot that just makes me forget all about what's being said and suffer the pain. But, she wasn't there. So I'm like, "No, okay. Let's just go do the craft. Help color the picture. Come on. You can do it... Kids, do you know what I learned in the lesson today?"

"No, Mr. John. What did you learn?"

"Jesus is God! He raised that man from the dead! Hallelujah!"

"Mr. John, you're scaring me!"

What are we doing? The Bible is not about Jesus having friends. You'd think it was a straightforward story. But, we do it over and over again. So, we try to make a behavioral objective out of it, we try to make it a role model. Now, let me say, I mean, you can get a role model anywhere. You can get role models certainly out of the Biblical narratives; good or bad. You can get role models out of Dickens, you can get role models out of Harry Potter, you can get role models out of anything. Tolkien, B. Sam. Fine. But, is the Bible there to give us role models? I know it's not because, so often, it doesn't really explain to you whether what they're doing is good or bad and it's not always obvious.

Those stories are there to tell you about God, not to tell you about those characters. And, by the way, these things that we tend to do wrong, I ended up finally writing about them. I've got this book called "The Bible Story Handbook." It's really a reference for parents and teachers and pastors, too. Anybody who really wants to know what these Bible stories are about. I introduced the theory for a couple of chapters, but then I go through 175 Bible stories, Old Testament and New Testament. New Testament's that back part by the maps.

And I don't tell the stories, but we just talk about "what's going on in this story, what's it doing here, how does it fit to what the author's doing, how does it contribute, what are some things you shouldn't be doing with this story?" Okay? Just a resource for those who might have use for it if you're dealing with Biblical narrative. So, we do all kinds of things with the stories that we shouldn't be doing with the stories. We shouldn't be making metaphors out of them. Sometimes the Bible uses metaphor, but we shouldn't make up our own.

"So, David went down into the valley and he picked up five smooth stones and then marched across the field to meet the gigantic Goliath... who are the giants in your life that you have to overcome? What five stones has God put into your bag to have you fight against the giants and to overcome them?"

We turn it into metaphor. But see, that can go nowhere but bad, because the minute you start saying what you think those five stones are, guess what? You're making it up. The Bible doesn't do anything like that. And if you're making some identification of the five stone the teaching of the text, it's not the teaching of the text, it's the teaching of your imagination. We can't do that. So, we can't just turn it into metaphor. We can't think as if everything's a promise. We don't go through the Bible extracting promises. Yes, God makes some promises. But, most of the time, they're to somebody else. Sorry. Nothing personal. Okay?

We can't do that. We can't go through extracting proof texts and reading through narratives to find that little zinger of a line that we try to pick up to mean something else. There's so many things that we do with narratives that we've got no right doing because they do not lead us to the teaching, the authoritative teaching, of the Bible author, and that's our pipeline to God. We have got to be doing with the story what the narrator's doing with the story, understanding from the story what the narrator wants us to understand from the story.

And they give us clues. There are ways to work this out. But, that would take all semester. Okay?

Our response is important. We need to have an informed, responsive relationship with God. A relationship is a pretty tricky term here. What do we mean by this "relationship" with God? Again, we've already talked about sharing stories, getting to know one another through sharing stories. But, the other part of it is we have become members of the Kingdom of God. If we've come into God's family, if we've received what Christ has to give us through His work on our behalf, we have become members of the Kingdom of God. We don't just take the benefits and go our merry way. We have been enlisted in the Kingdom of God. That means that we are partners with God in the kingdom doing kingdom work. Day in and day out.

So, we want to be able to respond to this picture of Himself that God has given us. So, let's take a look at this verse in Hebrews 12.

"Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses," – don't get that word wrong. That's not talking about witnesses meaning they're all watching you, it means they're witness like in a court case where they are giving testimony. So, the author of Hebrews has called the witnesses to the stand and they have given their testimony of faith. So, we're surrounded by this great cloud of those who have travelled the path before us and are giving their testimony, but it's their testimony of faith to God's faithfulness. Okay?

So, we have that witness that's given to us and we have their stories in our narratives.

"Let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles."

We all experience that. Trying to walk that path of being participants in God's Kingdom, all kinds of things get in the way. Obstacles of every sort. And we don't look to those who encounter them before to see how they fixed them, we look to God who leads people through them.

Don't you find it fascinating that God is able to use both people who are cooperative and those who are not at all? That He uses people who are great successes and do things right and He likewise accomplishes things through people who are failures and mess it up all the time? That should give us some hope that even we, in our frailty, in our failures, can be used by God as instruments in His Kingdom. You want to lay aside those sins that entangle us so that we can take our role in the kingdom.

"And let us run with perseverance the race..." – that "race" is defined by the Kingdom of God moving forward – **"...marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter."**

There is one situation in the Bible where we've got a role model. Jesus. Yes. He is a role model. Go with that one. So, we follow Him because He's shown us the way to live; to be part of the kingdom. Remember, Jesus came preaching the kingdom. "What is the Kingdom of God like?" He asks. And then He tells them stories and He teaches them about the nature of the kingdom. That's what He does because that's what He wants them to be part of. That's that great enterprise. The Great Commission sends them out to recruit people for the kingdom.

So, we follow Christ. That's what the Bible is doing for us. That's what the Bible is giving us. A picture of God so that we can know Him and that, knowing Him, we can serve Him. And all that we have in the Old Testament is pointing us to the ways in which we can know God more deeply. There are other strategies for other kind of literature. I'll have to do that another time. For now, stand with me and let's pray.

Lord Jesus, we long to be Your people. We long to know You more and better. We learn to serve You, but we realize we cannot serve You well if we don't know You. Help us. Help us to know how to know You. Help us to avail ourselves of Your story so that we can be Your people, so that we can partner with You effectively, so we're not obstacles that You pass by but that we're instruments who You can use.

We thank You that You not only can do that, but want to do that in us. Help us to be willing to be part of that process. We pray in Jesus' name, amen.