I am sure that many readers share my experience, and often find it perplexing trying to read the Old Testament in the hope that it will give strength for the day. Since the OT is written across such a wide time-frame and encompasses so many different historical situations, it is often difficult to get a grip on the situation of a particular chapter of a book. (Are they in exile at the moment, or not? Who is the king in this chapter?) The setting of a particular episode, and understanding the text in its historical context can be very challenging, and it is easy to give up altogether on the whole enterprise. Even if we can, to some degree understand the text successfully in its historical context, the question of how to apply a passage or a verse often seems just as difficult. Sometimes we tend not to worry too much about principles of interpretation, but the danger of simply making random connections in our minds between OT events and our own lives is a real one. On the other hand, sometimes we are simply 'stuck', and feel unable to make any connections at all.

In this article, the intention is merely to highlight a few examples of devotional books which have done a good job of keeping the balance between historical context and practical application; between faithfulness to the text and clear exposition. Not being an OT specialist, I am certainly not an expert in this area, but I hope to recommend some literature that I have found useful, on the assumption that most readers are not specialists either.

Some things to look for in a good exposition

There is no fail-safe check-list to determine which are the good books and which are the bad, any more than there is an all-encompassing formula to apply to each part of the OT, yielding three nice points of application each time. In any case, of course, the process of reading the OT devotionally is not primarily an academic or mechanical exercise. The starting point should be a willingness to submit to God's word, and prayerfully to meditate on the text. I will however begin with a short summary of a few key principles which are important for any exposition of an OT book to follow.

Beware of Fanciful Allegorising

This is a common failing for all of us who try and investigate the OT, although a number of writers have sounded warnings about this issue already. Probably the best-known is Graeme Goldsworthy's classic example of the five stones of David. How, the teacher asks the Sunday school class, did David defeat Goliath? Answer: with his sling and the five stones. How can we defeat the spiritual Goliaths in our lives? Answer, with the five stones of obedience, service, Bible-reading, prayer and fellowship.

The rest of Goldsworthy's book gives excellent guidelines on how to interpret various passages in the OT through the grid of God's Kingdom consisting in God's rule over God's people in God's place. Therefore David is God's anointed ruler who rescues God's people from the enemy. The proper analogy to David for us is actually Jesus, who is also God's anointed ruler, who has rescued us by defeating God's enemies on the cross. So, we should not so much identify with David, though that is not completely ruled out: really, as Christians, we are closest to being the Israelites who are standing on the touch-lines cheering after God's servant has won the victory over our enemies.
So there is a sense in which there is some truth in the process of ‘allegorising’, that is, in making a connection between something in our experience and something in the text because of a suggestive resemblance. What Goldsworthy does is provide some basis for how we work out what are real, theological ‘resemblances’, and what are not. Do not despair, however, if it seems an enormous task to do this. Working out the principles of biblical interpretation has been an ongoing challenge throughout the history of the Church, and we do not have to have everything worked out in order to be blessed by God through the Bible.

Beware of a Restrictive Salvation-Historical Approach

It is possible, however, to go so far in reacting against allegorising that the OT ends up even more difficult to apply. If the focus is exclusively on the way in which OT passages provide types, or prefigurings, of Christ’s death on the cross, the danger then is that the application will be almost the same every time, whether one is reading Deuteronomy, Psalms or Ezekiel. In addition to understanding OT figures constantly as types of Christ, the NT authors also frequently make use of them as examples. Abraham is an example of how God justifies by faith: ‘The words “it was credited to him” were not written for him [Abraham] alone, but also for us, to whom God will credit righteousness - for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead’ (Rom. 4:23-24). Similarly, Elijah is an example of the power of prayer; ‘Elijah was human just as we are. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years. Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops’ (Jas. 5:17-18).

One crucial way in which we can be helped in applying an OT passage is by understanding the vital link between Christ and the Christian. (Since the focus here is on devotional reading, I am focusing on the individual rather than corporate, ‘church’ dimension.) Since the NT must be our guide to reading the Old, we can see some of the ways in which Christ’s experience is the pattern for that of the Christian also. In the gospels Jesus commissions his disciples to teach just as he has been doing (Matt. 10:1; 28:20). He foretells that Christians will experience the same hardships as he has experienced: because the world rejects the Father, so it also rejects the Son, and those whom the Son sends out (John 16:1-3; 17:14). This is acted out in the book of Acts, as we see the peculiar way in which the lives of the apostles’ become mirror images of the life of Jesus in the gospels. Stephen, like Jesus, is martyred on some of the same charges that were levelled against Jesus (Acts 6:13-14, cf. Mark 14:58). His words which precipitate his execution echo Jesus’ words in the same situation (Acts 7:56, cf. Luke 22:69). Finally, his dying words mirror the dying words of Jesus (Acts 7:59, cf. Luke 23:46; Acts 7:60, cf. Luke 23:34). Paul’s ministry in Acts also bears an uncanny resemblance to the ministry of Jesus. In his letters, Paul provides some of the theological basis for this. As Jesus died and rose again, in baptism we died and rose with him (Rom. 6:3-4). As we are now ‘in Christ’, we share in his sufferings in the present, in anticipation of sharing in his glory in the future (Phil. 3:10-11, 20-21).

One the one hand, of course, Christ is unique, and there is no sense in which we will achieve what he has achieved in his death and resurrection. It, however, is also true that the experience of death and resurrection is a pattern which Jesus sets down for all of humanity, even all of the created order. Adam ‘surely died’ in Genesis 3, but the same chapter also forecast the downfall of Satan. Israel’s history is established in Deuteronomy as one of death followed by life, of exile followed by restoration. In Hosea 6:2, the nation of Israel is described as having been revived or restored on the second or third day after being dead in exile. David in the Psalms laments that he has gone down to the depths of Sheol, but is brought back to the light of life by God. The ‘suffering servant’ of Is. 52-53 has the same career-path, as does Jonah.

So, to take some practical examples, we can share in David’s laments in the Psalms (as most Christians instinctively do) because we are simply doing what David did: sharing in the sufferings of Jesus, who is the one the Psalms are really about. See for example Acts 2:24-32, where Peter talks about Jesus’ resurrection in his Pentecost sermon:

David said about him: I saw the Lord always before me. Because he is at my right hand, I will not be shaken. Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices; my body will also live in hope, because you will not abandon me to the grave, nor will you let your Holy One see decay. You have made known to me the paths of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence (Ps. 16:8-11). Brothers and sisters, I can tell you confidently that the patriarch David died and was buried, and his tomb is here to this day. But he was a prophet … Seeing what was ahead, he spoke of the resurrection of the Christ, that he was not abandoned to the grave, nor did his body see decay (Acts 2:29-31).

What appears in the quoted Psalm, to be David’s triumphant resurrection is actually not his own, but Christ’s! Sharing in the sufferings of Christ was a reality for OT saints just as much
There are, however, reasons why we cannot apply everything in the OT directly to ourselves. Here, there is a balance to be struck between two key points. On the one hand, the way in which God deals with people never changes through history. So, for example, Bultmann is profoundly wrong to say that advances in scientific knowledge have put an end to ‘mythical’ concepts like spirits and demons; [6] Christ’s pre-existence and second coming; [3] and his sacrificial atoning death. [4] But it is also true that the old covenant functioned in a different way from the new. For example, while obedience to the old covenant led to prosperity, for Christians, the opposite is the case: ‘All those who want to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted’ (2 Tim. 3:12). The best way to learn how the OT books apply to us is gradually to absorb the way in which the NT uses the Old. The NT authors certainly do not think that OT figures cannot be used as examples for us.

Beware of an approach with excludes Christ from the OT

On the other hand again, it is all too common to find Bible study books and devotional commentaries that sometimes make no mention at all of Christ in an exposition. In this connection, we should remember the comment often made by the Australian evangelist John Chapman, who notes that if an exposition of an OT passage would be acceptable to a Jew or a Muslim, then something must have gone wrong. If Christ is ‘in all the Scriptures’ (Luke 24:27), we must take that seriously. (Luke 24 as a whole is a good place to start to understand how Jesus saw the OT as about himself.) There is no sense in reading the OT and coming out with an understanding of God as omnipotent, omnipresent, omniscient and the like in abstraction from Christ. Similarly, any ethical application about self-discipline, commitment to God, holiness or whatever, must be concretely connected with the gospel if it is to be true. I choose these two examples because I have had personal experience of both.

The first, in a series of Bible studies called Meeting God provides a series of questions designed to draw out the key points of content in, and application of Daniel 4. [5] In this chapter, Nebuchadnezzar has his dream, and is brought to the position of crawling around on the ground and eating, then comes to the realisation that Daniel’s God is all powerful. Unfortunately, however, in the list of questions in the Bible study, there was no mention of Christ, and so we had a last ditch attempt at the end of the Bible study to salvage something Christian out of it!

In the second case, I must myself plead that I have been guilty in the past of bolting on to biblical passages (even NT passages) practical application which is not related to Christ and the gospel. Again, I was recently part of a house group in which the booklet Christian Character was used. [6] For two chapters in succession, however, the questions made no mention of Jesus at all. The first was on ‘Resisting Temptation’ in Genesis 39, using Joseph as an example of how to resist temptation from the ‘Potiphar’s wives’ in our own lives. The second was on ‘Trusting God’ in Genesis 22, using Abraham as an example of trust and faithfulness in his willingness even to sacrifice his own son. The Joseph story, with its emphasis on God’s providence and God’s constant presence with Joseph finds its fulfilment in the Gospel, where God’s presence with his people is eternal in Jesus (Matt. 28:20). Similarly, the Abraham’s offering of Isaac has its fulfilment in the gospel, in that God ‘did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all’ (Rom. 8:32) and provided a lamb in our place. We must remember Luther’s warning about approaching the Bible: we can either accept Scripture as law or gospel. If we see the crucified incarnate Son in the Scriptures (i.e. in New and Old Testaments), then the Scriptures are good news for us. But if we see the Scriptures (again, whether Old or New Testaments) in abstraction from the crucified incarnate Son, the Scripture is law and only condemns us.

Beware of an approach which sees Christ as an ‘add-on’ to the Old Testament

There is a similar mistake to the one above, which sees Christ and the gospel as referred to in the OT in a kind of ‘secondary’ or ‘additional’ way. The reasoning goes something like this. The ‘real’ meaning of the OT is its original, historical setting, but when Jesus comes he applies these things to himself which do not strictly speaking refer to him. Echoes of this approach can be heard in the editor’s introduction to the OT ‘Daily Study Bible’ series, in his description of the primary purpose of the series:

Professor Barclay summed it up for his New Testament series in the words of Richard of Chichester’s prayer - to enable men and women ‘to know Jesus Christ more clearly, to love Him more dearly, and to follow Him more nearly’. In the case of the Old Testament we have to be a little more circumspect than that. The Old Testament was completed long before the time of Our Lord, and it was (as it still is) the sole Bible of the Jews, God’s first people, before
it became part of the Christian Bible. We must take this fact seriously. Yet in its strangely compelling way, sometimes dimly and sometimes directly, sometimes charmingly and sometimes embarrassingly, it holds up before us the things of Christ. [7]

If what Jesus says about the OT is true, do we really need to be a little more circumspect when reading the OT? Is the OT primarily, as is implied here, the Bible of the Jews? Jesus’ statements on the subject, give us the confidence that the OT holds up before us not just ‘the things of Christ’, but Christ himself.

Some take the view that Jesus’ application of these OT institutions and prophecies to himself are regarded as legitimate, because he is so great. Others, however, regard his approach as a bit cavalier. These approaches however are fundamentally wrong. As we have seen, Christ is the key to all the Scriptures. Augustine and the Reformers have valuable insight on this issue. Modern scholars, even evangelical scholars, tend to privilege the original, historical meaning of the text as the primary and then the Christian, theological meaning as secondary. The Reformers however saw the literal sense of the OT as referring to Christ. This was not because they were in any sense sloppy in their scholarship. One scholar has written of Calvin, one of the most brilliant Reformation exegetes, that he ‘spoke of Christ when expounding the Old Testament because for him this was the literal meaning of the text’. [8] All this is entirely in line with Jesus’ statement that ‘If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me’ (John 5:46). Similarly, 1 Peter 1:12 records that the prophets in the OT knew that they were not merely writing for their own time, but were actually writing about the Messianic age. Jesus was not a plan ‘B’ thought up after the OT was completed (or even after it was started). The OT was, all along, directly about our Lord Jesus Christ.

Focus on God

Martyn Lloyd-Jones has said that the first consideration when reading the Bible is to ask what it is saying to us about God. What lessons can be drawn about his character, what he likes and dislikes, how he is towards us? This approach safeguards us from jumping immediately to the question of how the text applies to us, or asking which character in the story represents us. Asking where we are in a passage may be very difficult to answer. If however we ask what a verse or chapter tells us about who God is, we may find that applications arise very naturally in terms of how we are to think and act in response to the God we see in Scripture.

Some Recommended Reading

Of the multitude of literature on the market, both good and bad, I have tried in particular to highlight examples which readers might not have come across, in order to provide an introduction to some possibly new gems, mostly recently published. I have not, for example, provided a review of any volumes in the Bible Speaks Today series, since readers are probably aware of many of these, and they are easy to find in most Christian bookshops. Many of these volumes are excellent, and I have found Michael Wilcock’s Chronicles and Barry Webb’s Isaiah particularly helpful. Again, the emphasis in this article will be on devotional books: I do not include commentaries which are more strictly exegetical, even when they are very accessible like a number of the volumes in the New International Biblical Commentary series. In this series, for example, Chris Wright’s on Deuteronomy is very good, and Iain Provan’s on 1-2 Kings superb. [9] The latter provides marvellous short excursus on the place of Solomon, Elijah and Elisha in their canonical context which are alone worth the price of the book. Provan sets an excellent example of how to identify typology, seeing the patterns of certain figures throughout Scripture, without speculative allegorising.

Pentateuch and Historical Books

A series which has a similar aim is The Gospel in the Old Testament series, edited by Tremper Longman and Alan Groves: ‘A series of studies on the lives of Old Testament characters, written for laypeople and pastors, and designed to encourage Christ-centred reading, teaching, and preaching of the Old Testament.’ Unfortunately not many of these have appeared yet, but one which has, is Iain Duguid’s on Abraham. [10] This is particularly welcome, because as far as I have observed, the Pentateuch is perhaps the least well served by devotional books of all the OT literature. The emphasis, in keeping with the focus on Abraham, is on the need to trust God even when our situation does not seem to fit with what we expected. Duguid highlights well both cases in which Abraham responds to such situations well, and badly. For example, when Abraham goes down to Egypt and pretends that Sarai is his sister so that Pharaoh does not kill him and marry her, Duguid comments:

Abram’s logic, natural as it was, was fatally flawed. He had forgotten that the God whom he served was greater than his problems. He thought that God needed some help in fulfilling his promise. He thought too much about the potential disasters that might befall him and too little
about obeying God and letting the chips fall where they may. Isn't that what we do so often?
We ask, 'What if this were to happen? What if things don't work out? What if I lose my job for
telling the truth? What if I don't get that promotion because I wasn't willing to put in the extra
hours, because I wanted to spend more time with my family?'

Duguid makes the application flow very naturally from the passages themselves, and does
not force applications out of things which were specific to Abraham's special role in salvation
history.

A number of commentaries on the historical books have appeared recently from Dale Ralph
Davis. In my judgement these are excellent commentaries, in which each section is easy-to-
read and a manageable length (8-10 pages on average). Davis's comments provide a
welcome emphasis on the sovereignty of God. English readers may feel put out by the
strange combination of large amounts of American and Scottish illustrations! But the practical
parts are very good, although they focus largely on application to our thinking and attitudes.

Davis makes good use of current OT scholarship, though it is only included in the main text
when it is of direct interest: other material is relegated to the footnotes so that the reader can
take them or leave them. He also makes constant appeal to the classic commentaries by the
likes of Calvin, and Keil and Delitzsch. Davis makes this scholarship very accessible by
showing that it brings into focus what we can already see through a glass darkly, rather than,
as with much OT scholarship, trying to conjure a completely new meaning for the text out of
ancient Babylonian parallels. One of the reasons I enjoy Davis's exposition so much is that I
feel confident that he has done his exegetical homework, and so is not just delivering blessed,
unhistorical thoughts on the text. Yet at the same time, he applies the text so well. This is the
case even when the raw material does not seem very promising, and the historical books can
contain material which appears very difficult to apply.

For example, Joshua 18-19 deals with the different lots (allotments of land) which are
assigned by God to each of the tribes. Joshua is entrusted with administering this process. 'A
contemporary Christian reader of Joshua 18-19 would have to confess that he is not
interested in lots. However, I would again insist that all Scripture is profitable and that
informative notes ring in these chapters as well.' [11] Davis's application of the 'lots of lots', as
he entitles his exposition, rings true:

There could be no end of complaint, quarrelling, or discontent unless the tribes were assured
that their lot was determined by the hand of God, that their territory was theirs by Yahweh's
decision. The heart of the matter differs little for the Christian, though it may seldom involve
real estate. Only as I am convinced that 'my times are in thy hand' (Ps. 31:15 …) and that
Yahweh really does hold my lot (cf. Ps. 16:5), can I be kept from bitterness and discontent.
There is, by a strange chemistry, something oddly consoling when I realise in a fresh way that
my present lot is what my Lord has intended for me. [12]

Davis's 2 Samuel commentary is also challenging in its constant attention to David and his
opponents. [13] We also read that David is no sinless saint, the contrast between David as
God's legitimate king and his opponents who try to undermine God's rule is brought out well.
This means that the christological dimension of David's reign is well covered: Jesus is of
course David's greater son, the anointed King over God's people. The personal application
which Davis makes is also profound: he reminds us that the Kingdom of God cannot be built
by natural worldly means. The political machinations and military means which David's
opponents employ cannot dent the kingdom of God; nor can the people of God bolster or
build up the Kingdom of God by similar devices. Davis has also done excellent commentaries
in much the same style on 1 Samuel (Looking at the Heart) and Judges (Such a Great
Salvation). These are also available in Christian Focus's Focus on the Bible series, and in the
USA from Baker Book House.

Another commentary on Judges, with Ruth in the same volume, is from David Jackman in the
Mastering the Old Testament series. [14] To focus on the Ruth section of the volume,
Jackman provides here a wonderfully heart-warming and challenging exposition, which
emphasises the sovereignty and faithfulness of God in particular. The chapters here are full of
solid exegesis and application, as well as numerous illustrations and quotations which provide
a model of readable and reliable interpretation. Jackman has a way of making the application
naturally emerge from simple explanation of what a passage is saying. For example, on Ruth
1:19-22, where Naomi retains her trust in God despite the fact that he 'dealt very bitterly' with
her, Jackman comments astutely, and also provides a good summary of the whole book:

She consciously places all her pain, bitter experiences and hopelessness within the structure
of God's sovereignty, and she leaves the explanation and responsibility with him. Whether
that is escapism or realism entirely depends on the character of God. This book is designed to
vindicate that character of steadfast love and dependability and to generate a similar faith in the Lord. He provides in his person the only context in which faith can learn to cope with the uncertainties, pain and bitterness of life. For he is also Yahweh - the God of covenant-love and faithfulness (323).

The exposition is particularly easy to read because it is broken down into chapters, as well as subdivided into three to four page chunks.

Similarly, sections of about three to four pages per portion come in the Daily Study Bible series. Gordon McConville’s on Chronicles has a lot of excellent, profound personal application. However, it is too cautious in making connections between the OT and Jesus. It is surprising that Jesus is not mentioned in the exposition of the key passage in 1 Chronicles 17, where David is promised a kingdom and a throne forever in his offspring. On the other hand, the application is thoughtful. The fact that David is not permitted to build the temple, a job which is reserved for Solomon, is applied in this way: ‘Often we may have to accept that the work which we would dearly like to perform in terms of Christian service is not that for which we are best equipped and not that to which God has in fact called us. It may be, like David’s, a preparatory work’. [15] Again, on David’s desire to build the temple, McConville puts well the mistake David had made: ‘David failed to appreciate that it was the Lord who was the real architect of the continuing healthy relationship between himself and his people.’ [16]

Prophets

Iain Duguid’s hefty commentary on Ezekiel comes in the NIV Application Commentary series. I cannot make much comment on it, having only just bought it on the strength of enjoying his Abraham book. The commentary weighs in at about 500 pages, but since Ezekiel is a long book, Duguid’s sections of comment on each chapter are manageable-10-12 pages. This series has a number of excellent contributions from OT scholars who also have a keen interest in applying their research to the church. Some of the commentaries in this series are quite technical, making reference to the original language frequently. Each commentary in this series consists of sections of commentary which are further sub-divided into three parts, ‘original meaning’, ‘bridging contexts’ and ‘contemporary application’. The original meaning section of each commentary employs ‘all of the elements of traditional exegesis’, [17] although the contributors are all conservative theologically, and so not all conceivable literary approaches are employed. The main object of study here is the historical, literary, and cultural contexts of each passage. The ‘bridging contexts’ section aims to identify what is timeless in the text, and what was timely, in other words specific to the original historical context of the book. Thirdly, the ‘contemporary significance’ section aims to cover a range of ways of applying the text to people today. The volumes are probably aimed primarily at ministers preparing sermons, but, depending on the lengths of the sections, could also be used for quiet times.

Bob Fyall’s Daniel commentary is another fine book in the Focus on the Bible series. (He is also preparing the volume on 1-2 Kings in this series.) A brief look at Fyall’s comments on Daniel 10 will give a flavour of the book as a whole. The chapter begins with Daniel’s fasting and his vision of Jesus, ‘a pre-incarnate appearance of the Son of God who is also the Son of Man’ (154), which overwhelms him, and knocks him out, and into a deep sleep. The Son of Man appears to Daniel in 10:12 in response to his prayers; he has been delayed because, with the archangel Michael, he has been fighting against the prince of Persia (i.e. the demonic angel who fights for Persia against Israel). Fyall explains clearly the implications for our understanding of the spiritual realm and its impact on our lives in the world, as well as the power of prayer. In a summary section (159-60), he offers three main implications. First, there is ‘the reality of the unseen world’. Here he explains the importance of being aware that there is a demonic realm without which world events of great horror become incomprehensible. This is of course extremely relevant for us all at the present time. Second, ‘the reality of conflict’ places us in this spiritual reality. Citing ‘our struggle … against the powers of this dark world and the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms’ (Eph. 6:12), Fyall comments: ‘Any effective living for God is impossible without recognising the reality of, and engaging in this conflict’ (160). Finally, ‘the reality of prayer’, which enables us to participate in this heavenly world. In order to reinforce these points further, Fyall provides ‘Questions for further study’ which facilitate more reflection on the text. Books like this are invaluable in the current Christian climate where, as C.S. Lewis warned, we are constantly tempted by one or both of the mistaken attitudes to evil: either to imagine it does not really exist, or to have an unhealthy interest in it. For theological students in universities, rationalism constantly crouches at the door, but there is also a constant barrage of trashy end-times literature filling our bookshops with speculation about angels and demons. Let the buyer beware.

Peter Craigie has produced two volumes in the Daily Study Bible series on the Minor
Prophets. [18] Craigie is strong on historical background to the prophets, and helpfully argues (without too much scholarly detail) that a sceptical approach to the historical events described by the prophets is unjustified. One weakness is his theological emphasis on how prophecy has more to do with the importance of human choice rather than divine providence. Many readers might be confused by statements such as (in his exposition of Joel), 'The point of the prophet was not so much to predict some future event, as it was to see the possibility of such a future in the present … The divine will does not change the nature of the future, for human evil can still create its own apocalypse, but it does make it possible for the future to be changed.' [19] Nevertheless, there is a lot of useful application. The exposition of Jonah has a number of different warnings based on the prophet’s actions and attitudes. In Jonah 4:1-5, ‘Jonah was angry because his theology was in evident conflict with the nature and action of God’ (233), or in 4:6-11, ‘if God cares for castor-oil plants, not to mention cattle (v. 11), was it not possible that he also cared for people, even foreigners?’ (237). Craigie draws out astutely a number of Jonah’s attitudes which we are also prone to, as well as clearly bringing out God’s challenging responses.

Wisdom Literature

A useful introduction to the Wisdom literature is provided again by Graeme Goldsworthy, and is now available in a very cheap edition from Paternoster. [20] This has general introductions to the relationship between biblical wisdom and ‘worldly’ wisdom, the place of wisdom in biblical theology, and a characteristically helpful emphasis on the need to see OT wisdom through the lens of Christ and the gospel. Christ embodies the true wisdom of both God and man, and therefore the gospel has ‘intellectual’ content because it entails a way of looking at the world, and challenging false conceptions of the world. [21] There are also specific chapters on Ecclesiastes, Job, and Proverbs. He focuses on a number of important points to remember in interpreting Proverbs: the basis of wisdom being fear of the Lord (Prov. 1:7), the fact that wisdom is an expression of the order of the cosmos (Prov. 30:21), but also that the proverbs are not precise theological formulations, but ‘wisdom distilled from one or a number of actual experiences’. [22] He cites the example of Bookworm Basil, an unfortunate academic who finds pearls of wisdom in great tomes and puts them into practice with disastrous effect. He finds the (non-biblical) proverb ‘still waters run deep’, and coming across a fast stream reasons that it must therefore be shallow. So he steps into the stream to cross it, and disappears under the water. Similarly, when we come to read Proverbs, we are in for a shock if we try and see them as theological doctrines which are applicable in every situation. Goldsworthy gives a number of examples of particular proverbs and how to interpret them, making this a useful introduction to reading the collection as a Christian. Many of us are probably not used to reading Proverbs all the way through, though Billy Graham’s example of reading a chapter a day (and so, reading the whole book every month) is a challenging one.

Further, there is also a nice, recent introduction to the so-called Five Scrolls (Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes and Esther) by Barry Webb. [23] It contains a good survey of the recent commentaries and scholarship on these books, but reviews them in a very readable way, and from a thoroughly evangelical stance. For example, on the Song of Songs, Webb looks at the literary features, arguing against others that the Song is one song, rather than merely a collection (22-26), and shows that the book is a celebration of ‘bodily existence and sexual relationships’ (31-32). He also highlights well the biblical-theological context of the books he discusses. Song of Songs, for example, displays that in male-female relationships, there is a ‘return to Eden’. He makes the connection with Genesis 2:25: ‘The man and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame.’ Webb comments, ‘With some justification the Song of Songs may be seen as a kind of extended commentary or poetic meditation on this verse.’ [24]

A similar approach to Song of Songs is seen in Iain Provan’s commentary in the NIV Application Commentary series. Provan’s commentary on Song of Songs has a fair amount of reference to the meanings of Hebrew words. This may be off-putting (though it should probably not be for Themelios readers!), but there is a lot of good material in Provan’s commentary, and a strong biblical-theological orientation. As in Barry Webb’s chapter, there is a strong emphasis on the Song displaying a reversal of the fall. But Provan pushes this in a different direction, and emphasises the dimension of the woman being treated as an individual in her own right. She does not have to be in a relation of subjugation or oppression; rather a male-female relationship should be mutual. Some readers will find the emphasis which Provan repeatedly puts at the beginning of his commentary on male-female equality in the church a bit grating, but the basic point is a useful one.

Bob Fyall’s exposition of Job is a treat to read. [25] It is very short (under 100 pages), not a commentary on the whole text, but an exposition of some of the key sections. In common with his Daniel commentary, it is shot through with a profound understanding of the spiritual forces at work in the book. Perhaps for these reasons, Fyall’s books make excellent reading material
for the Christian life. One of the most perplexing questions raised in the book of Job is what mistake is it of which the friends are guilty: one would often be hard-put to find much theological unorthodoxy in the statements of ‘Job’s comforters’. They may not be the most pastorally sensitive people in the world, but how can God pronounce the verdict near the end of the book (Job 42:7) that Job with all his complaining was in the right, and the friends were in the wrong? Fyall presents a challenging and compelling answer: ‘There is no place in the friends’ universe for Behemoth and Leviathan, and that is no small part of their inadequate understanding of God’ (120). Fyall provides good evidence that these two beasts are not merely animals, but rather represent spiritual forces: Behemoth is the embodiment of evil, chaos and death (119), and Leviathan is actually Satan himself (121). Fyall acknowledges that there is still considerable mystery to the book of Job, but argues persuasively that at least some of the problems of the book are solved when Job is seen as a battleground, over whom these spiritual forces are engaged in warfare.

Conclusion

It is hoped that this provides some fresh inspiration, or at least some fresh suggestions of reading material, to turn again to the OT for spiritual upbuilding. Themelios readers are no doubt aware of a number of the challenges and potential pitfalls in reading the OT devotionally, but we can all benefit from seeing biblical exposition done well. The examples above generally model good expository practice from scholars who are both fully engaged in the exegetical task, and concerned with the practical dimension of the biblical text. May God give us the strength to know and obey Christ through reading the Old Testament.

EndNotes

[1] G. Goldsworthy, Gospel and Kingdom, 9-10. For a similar warning against mistakes on the NT side, see Gordon Fee’s example of a medieval interpretation of the Parable of the Good Samaritan. The man who fell among thieves was Adam, the priest and the Levite who did not help him were the OT law and priesthood, the Samaritan is Christ, the inn where he was taken was the church, and the innkeeper was either Paul or the Pope. G. Fee and D. Stuart, How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), 124.
[9] Iain W. Provan, 1 and 2 Kings (NIBC; Peabody: Hendrickson, 1995).
[12] Davis, Joshua, 143-44.
[19] Craigie, Twelve Prophets: Volume 1, 100.
Recommended Reading. Law is not of Faith - Estelle. Bryan D. Estelle, J.V. Fesko, David VanDrunen (Editors). Kerux - A Primer on Biblical Theology Biblical Theology approaches the Bible as an organic drama of God revealing revelation through history. In distinction from doctrinal or systematic theology, biblical theology follows the progressively unfolding revelation of God’s words and deeds through history. This linear aspect of revelation unites each revelatory event and proclamation both retrospectively and prospectively. Geerhardus Vos described the organic continuation of revelation in history as a flower expanding from bud to blossom. A Crash Course on the Discipline of Biblical Theology. Audio/MP3 by Greg Beale. The Bible’s Big Story. Suggested reading on many different topics. Everything from Grudem’s Systematic Theology to Bronte’s Jane Eyre.

The following is a list of some of the top books we recommend. The list is divided into the main categories of a well-rounded Christian worldview. It is rare (probably impossible) to find a book in which you agree with literally everything (other than the Bible), and this list is no exception. We consider these books to be very useful and important and solid, but this list should not be taken to imply that we are in complete agreement with literally everything in every book. The following is a list of some of the top books we recommend. The list is divided into the main categories of a well-rounded Christian worldview. It is rare (probably impossible) to find a book in which you agree with literally everything (other than the Bible), and this list is no exception. We consider these books to be very useful and important and solid, but this list should not be taken to imply that we are in complete agreement with literally everything in every book. 


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