

Dr. Robert Vannoy, Old Testament History, Lecture 25

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Preaching Historical Narratives – Gen. 24

3. Abraham's Lapses, or Failure, Shortcomings

We were discussing Abraham, and number 3, under “Abraham's lapses, or failures, shortcomings,” and I had just begun to make some comments at the end of the hour on Friday on Genesis 16, Abraham and Hagar. And we noticed that in Genesis 16, because she remained barren and ten years had gone by, Sarah gives her Egyptian slave Hagar to Abraham. Hagar conceives and bears a son, so the plan in a certain sense seems successful. But you read further in the chapter that it injected serious problems in the relationship between Sarah and Hagar, as well as between Sarah and Abraham. You read verse 4 of chapter 16, “he went in unto Hagar, she conceived, when she saw that she conceived her mistress was despised in her eyes,” and in verse 6 you read, “but Abraham said unto Sarah, ‘Behold your maid is in your hand; do to her as it pleases you.’ When Sarah dealt harshly with her, she fled from her face.” So those problems were introduced and we find that the son who was born to Hagar, Ishmael, is not to be the son of promise. In chapter 17, verse 20, God says to Abraham, “As for Ishmael, I have heard you: behold, I have blessed him, and will make him fruitful, and will multiply him exceedingly; twelve princes shall he beget, and I will make him a great nation. But my covenant will I establish with Isaac, whom Sarah shall bear unto you at this set time in the next year.” So in 17:21 it is quite explicit, the line of promise is not to go through Ishmael via Hagar but through Isaac, who is yet to be born to Sarah. The genealogy of Ishmael is recorded in chapter 25, verses 12-16, where you read, “these are the generations of Ishmael, Abraham's son, whom Hagar the Egyptian, Sarah's handmaid, bore unto Abraham.” Then you get the line of Ishmael. But that, as far as Scripture is concerned, becomes one of these sort of dead-end branches.

God's Word for Abraham

The continuing line is going to go through Isaac, so you see in Genesis 25:17: “these are the generations of Isaac, Abraham’s son.” That’s the line of narrative that continues on through Genesis. Now one further comment on this. Vos says in his *Biblical Theology of Abraham*, “that Abram was not permitted to do anything through his own strength or resources to realize the promise that’s before him.” So that in the events associated with Abraham’s life I think the thing that stands out in biblical material is that God is at work and there is a strict supernaturalism that’s involved in the giving of the promise and the realization of the promise that comes to Abraham. Ishmael’s descendants intermarried; in Genesis 28:9 you read, “Then went Esau unto Ishmael, and took unto the wives which he had Mahalath the daughter of Ishmael Abraham’s son, the sister of Nebajoth, to be his wife.” So you get an interconnection between descendants of Ishmael and Esau, and it’s out of those people that the Arab nations, I think, would be traced. What about the Midianites? The Midianites come from the line of Abraham through a later wife, Keturah. He takes Keturah as a wife and there are a number of people that are listed. In the first part of Genesis 25, verse 4, you see a number of peoples there that come out of descendants of Keturah, including Midianites. So it’s related back into Abraham and of course then you have the Ammonites and the Moabites that come from Lot. So you get these sort-of cousin peoples through the Israelites, the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Ishmaelites, the Midianites, and so forth, who trace back into Abraham’s family by one connection or another.

4. Abraham’s Meaning for Us

a. Redemptive=Historical Significance

All right, number 4 is, “Abraham’s meaning for us.” I don’t have any sub-points there. What I want to do under this heading is give you two sub-points and then discuss a matter that I think is of some significance as far as how we approach these historical narratives, as far as meaning, significances and such. So under this meaning for us, A. would be “Redemptive-historical significance.” I think when you look at these stories

about Abraham, you have to keep that redemptive historical significance in your mind. That is important because Abraham is the person whom God chose to give his promises to and to prepare the way ultimately for the coming of Christ. It's God who is at work in and through Abraham to realize that redemptive purpose. So in Abraham and his life, we see the work of a sovereign God, working out his redemptive plan. Certainly that promise given in Genesis 3:15, "the seed of the woman is going to ultimately crush the serpent" is the beginning point and Abraham is in the line of the realization of that promise. God is the one who is at work to redeem all of mankind to bring fulfillment of his promise to Adam and Eve in Genesis 3:15. So that's a redemptive historical perspective, and I think that's important to keep in mind when you look at the Abraham narratives.

b. An Exemplary or Illustrative Significance

B. is: "An exemplary or illustrative significance." By that, I mean Abraham can be viewed as a great example of faith and faithfulness. We can look to Abraham as a sort of model, as an example for us and the New Testament does that in Romans 4, Hebrews 11, and James 2. Abraham is given as a model or example of a man of faith, someone who in that sense we can emulate. He's probably used as much in that regard as any other Old Testament figure; probably Abraham, Moses, David, would be the significant individuals in that respect.

Redemptive Historical Versus the Illustrative Kind of Perspective on Historical Sections

But those are, I think, two things to keep in mind with respect to leaning or significance – redemptive historical significance and then this illustrative or exemplary significance. Now what I'd like to do for pretty much the rest of this session is talk about those issues in a more general way. Redemptive historical versus the illustrative kind of perspective on historical sections are the things we're interested in, in this course on Old Testament History. If you were to preach a sermon on a historical text in the historical sections of the Bible, you have to face that question: how do you go about it?

What's the meaning of this historical or narrative text? What's the meaning for today? Certainly when we want to preach on any text of Scripture, we want to bring out the message that God has placed there for his people. We don't want to use the text as a pretext for our own ideas; we want to preach the word. Now I think we would all agree that preaching on a historical text is more than simply retelling the Bible story. In other words, I think Bible history should be treated in a different manner than, say, a course like this which is a Bible survey course or a Sunday school class where you're basically interested in content, retelling the stories. Bible history should be treated in a different manner from the pulpit in a sermon.

For example, take Genesis 24, which is the chapter that tells about how Abraham arranged for a wife for Isaac when he sent his servant to Mesopotamia, and he there finds this girl at the well, and of course he had prayed in advance to the Lord that the one that came out and gave him water and the cattle also, that would be the one and she agrees to go back. Rebekah goes back, and marries Isaac. If you take that chapter of Genesis 24, as an example, a sermon on that chapter should do more than simply retell the narrative. And I think if you're preparing a sermon on that passage, you have to ask the question: What is the message of God in that story for God's people today? It's not a simple question to answer. It's quite easier to ask it than it is to answer. If the preacher simply tells his congregation how Isaac found his wife, or more accurately, how Abraham's servant found a wife for Isaac, I think he's falling short of his task. There's more than that there.

A Dutch professor said that preaching out of the Old Testament is not simply the retelling of history, no matter how dramatically and fascinatingly one might be able to do this. There are some who are very good at that, retelling the story in a very dramatic way. The Old Testament indeed relates history, but in this history it brings us to understand the significance and meaning of God's special revelation as it has been given to his people. Old Testament history at the same time prophesies. We have, in essence, prophetic preaching that has a great deal to say to us in the many needs and questions we have in our own lives. So he is saying there's more there than simply the story. I

think we would agree that historical texts in the Bible have a lot to say to us. The question is, how do we get at that? How do we arrive at the message? That's where the difficulties arise and I don't profess to have all the solutions to the difficulties but I want to focus on the problem here.

The stories in the Bible put us in a totally different historical context and very different circumstances than we find ourselves in today. That's one of the problems of preaching on an Old Testament historical text. We live in a totally different time and cultural context. How do we understand God's word for our time and our circumstances out of these ancient stories? What must be done is to translate what is in those stories, the message that's contained, into our situation. I don't have an argument with that. I think that's right, but still the question is: How do you do that?

Genesis 24 Using an Allegorical Approach

Over the centuries various methods have been used. Probably the first one that might be mentioned and certainly one used extensively in the early church is the allegorical method. What that method basically does is spiritualize the stories of the Bible, so that the historical facts in themselves really are not very important. But they become bearers of deeper spiritual truths, and that's what's then considered to be important. Now that method has a long history and was followed by many of the church fathers. It is not widely used today. We still run into certain forms of it, but it's not something that is widely used today.

Let me give you an example of that method, utilizing Genesis 24 again – the story of the marriage of Isaac. With the allegorical method, the facts of the story become bearers of deeper spiritual truths. Some examples are as follows (and this is taken from different people). Isaac becomes a figure of Christ who marries his bride, that is, the church, represented by Rebekah into that kind of symbolism. The servant of Abraham – probably Eliezer, although he is not mentioned by name – who secured Rebekah for Isaac is the preacher who by proclaiming God's word must bring the members of the church to Christ. Rebekah's daily practice of going to the well to draw

water means that the church must live by daily drawing from the well of God's word. The camels that cannot draw water for themselves, but must be given water, are those who cannot themselves use God's word but must be instructed in it. And Rebekah received earrings and bracelets from Eliezer, which means that the church is to be adorned with the virtues of patience and perseverance by the proclamation of the word. Rebekah dismounted from her camel when she met Isaac, meaning that the church must put away sin when she meets Christ. You notice that the image can switch. One time the camels represent those that are to be instructed out of the Word; the other time they are the image of sin from which the believer can separate. It doesn't bother people with that kind of a method. Others see in the camel the image of the law, as Eliezer went on his journey with ten camels, which could represent the ten commandments. As camels have a great capacity for water and hardly ever have enough, so it is with the law that never says, "that is enough." Man can never satisfy the demands of the law. That kind of treatment of a text does make it relevant, it brings it up to date, but of course the basic question is: is that what the text is saying? Is that why God gave us the story of Abraham and Isaac and Rebekah? There's a long history of this allegorical method. You know in the early church that this method of preaching was commonly done.

By way of comment on that, I think we kind of smile at it, although we do encounter it in less radical forms – maybe not as radical as some of these points I have mentioned, but we do encounter that today from time to time. I think what is clear is that this kind of approach has nothing to do with exposition or exegesis of the Scripture, nothing to do with it. It's purely eisogesis, or reading things into these stories. By this method, you can make the Scripture mean or say almost anything by the different analogies that are drawn by different expositors showing that you can get totally different messages out of the same text. I don't think that is listening to the Scripture; it's imposing the message on the Scripture, sort of utilizing the story to give a message that you've gotten from somewhere else. The facts of the story cease to be important. The real message becomes the spiritual idea by way of analogy that's made and imposed on the text. So then I think the real message of the text is lost or obscured.

Now that's not to say there's no allegory in the Bible, because there is. But I think where it occurs it's quite clear. The story of the Lord's vineyard in Isaiah 5:1-7 is an example. The vineyard is cultivated, has a hedge built around it, and represents Israel. There are a number of them in Ezekiel. So there are allegories. There, you are not dealing with historical events or stories, but certain facts are presented in images or figures. And I don't think it's legitimate to treat Old Testament narratives simply as allegory.

Genesis 24 Using the Exemplaristic Approach

But if we don't do that, in order to get a meaning for today the question still remains. How do we do this? Some years ago, in fact 5 years after the Second World War, in the late 40's and early 50's in Holland, there was a big debate in theological circles in particular over the issue of homiletics in what was termed exemplaristic preaching versus redemptive historical preaching. The question was: what's the proper way to preach? Do we preach from a redemptive historical perspective or from an exemplaristic historical perspective? Now unfortunately, I don't think those two necessarily have to be set against each other. In that debate, there were people who were either arguing for one side or the other side of it.

But exemplaristic preaching was preaching in which the stories of the Bible were proclaimed as examples of how we today should or should not act. So what happens then is that the sins of various Old Testament personalities stand as warnings that we should not follow. We should not fall into the same evils that they did. The faith, prayer life and good deeds of many of these great Old Testament saints are held up to us as examples that we should follow. So exemplaristic preaching basically follows this pattern: do as this one did or don't do as that one did.

Now go back to Genesis 24 again and look at that for an example for an exemplaristic sort of use of that passage. Abraham desires a wife for his son Isaac and he doesn't want Isaac to take a wife from the daughters of the heathen Canaanites. He wants him to have a wife from his own family back in Haran where the worship of the

Lord is known. So he sent his servant to Haran to find a wife. The exemplaristic approach would say, so must parents today take care that their children don't marry fellows or girls of the world but rather other believers. Of course that's important. Depending on how you take that Genesis 6:1-4 passage, some feel that the issue there is an example of the wickedness of the time, seen in mixed marriage – the godly marrying ungodly.

But was Abraham concerned about that? Now if somebody objects that in the culture of Abraham's time the parental say in marriage was something that was common and that today we live in different culture and parents have little or nothing to say as to whom their children marry, then you could respond that maybe our system is not right. Maybe the results of our system illustrate the problem, maybe parents should be doing more. Don't we have an obligation to do as Abraham did?

The other thing that some would say about Genesis 24 is the matter of prayer. The servant comes to Haran and he prays for God's leading. He says "O LORD God of my master Abraham, I pray, send me good speed this day, and show kindness unto my master Abraham," and then he asks for a sign, "let it be that the girl comes to the water and does this certain thing that will be the one you have chosen." The girl comes and she draws water for him and his cattle and the point then would be made that seeking a life's partner should be a matter of prayer. The servant prayed and we should do the same, including the prayers of parents for their children. I don't see anything necessarily wrong with that, certainly it is a good principle, but is that what the text is telling us?

In Genesis 24, some people can go further and say that Rebekah's readiness not only to give Abraham's servant a drink, but also the camels, teaches us that our daughters should desire to be good wives and mothers. They must live not just for themselves, but with joyful service give themselves to others. See, you get a principle of conduct from the way in which Rebekah behaved herself in that context. In the story of Isaac's marriage you can find a lot of lessons or examples you can draw from the story. We can then take these in our own practice of godliness.

Arbitrary Objection

Now against that kind of treatment, if you just left your treatment of the text at that point, various objections have been made and this comes out of the debate of exemplaristic versus redemptive historical kind of approach. In the first place there's something arbitrary in that approach. The question is, what do you take as an example for us and what don't you take as an example for us? Someone might say in connection with Genesis 24 that a fellow or girl today should ask for a sign from the Lord in order to know whether or not the fellow or girl they meet is intended by the Lord to be their partner. Is that section of the chapter also intended to be an example for us today? Is that the way you select a partner, pray to the Lord then let the person who comes and does whatever, that's the one God's chosen? You have a difference of opinion, some today would see no problem with that as a procedure but others would say rather emphatically that asking for that kind of special revelation now that we possess God's revelation in the Bible is not proper—it's presumptuous. The canon is closed and revelation has ceased. Revelation accompanies redemption; it's not an individualistic kind of thing. But the point I'm trying to make is not so much that issue – you can wrestle with that issue yourselves – but how do we decide what to use as being exemplary and what not to use? Do we use it in a positive sense or negative sense? How do we decide that? So there's something arbitrary in that kind of message if you just leave it at that.

Anthropocentric Objection

The second thing about this kind of method is that it tends to be anthropocentric. It's very easy to preach do's and don'ts. There's the danger of legalism and moralism, of moralizing that kind of thing in a sermon that just focuses on that aspect of the text. You then constantly measure yourself by various Bible characters: Abraham, Jacob, Peter, and Mary. You place them as examples that are either to be followed or not to be followed. Now the objection, it seems to me, is not that in itself it's wrong – there's a

place for it – but if that’s all you do, the objection is that, in that way, God himself and his great works may not come sufficiently into focus. It’s anthropocentric. You have to remember these stories do involve people, but God is at work in these stories. You don’t want to ever lose that perspective, that’s the redemptive historical perspective. But if you just treat passages in an exemplaristic way, it is possible that the congregation may see nothing of God in his mighty works and acts for his people. That’s really what the stories of the Bible are all about. It’s not so much what Abraham, Isaac or anyone else did, it’s what God has done and still does that’s most important in Bible history because it’s redemptive history.

Genesis 24 Using Redemptive-Historical Preaching

Now for that reason, over against what is termed exemplary type of preaching, some have advocated redemptive historical preaching. That is preaching that first of all tries to emphasize the place which the events recorded in the Bible have in the history of the revelation of redemption. What is the place that this story has in that progress of revelation? Now, of course, in the history of revelation and redemption you encounter what some people do or don’t do. History basically is a record of what man has or has not done, but in Bible history, there’s more than just what men do, because in Bible history you are also confronted with God’s history. God is at work. It’s a history of his acts, and his acts become visible in the history of man. It is a history that points forward to the coming of Christ. I think the congregation should see that history when they encounter a historical text from the Bible, because from biblical stories God’s people learn to understand who God is, what he has promised, what he has done, and how he deals with people. It’s in that history that the basis for the faith of God’s people for all ages lies. Our faith is rooted in that history. So here in that history lies the source for life for God’s people, not in legalisms or moralisms.

Now let’s go back to Genesis 24, with the redemptive historical approach. I think we would say that in the story of Isaac’s marriage, we must first of all we see what God does. Because in this story, we see that God is fulfilling his promise to Abraham and

Isaac, that they would be ancestors of a great people through which all the peoples of the earth would be blessed. That points forward to the coming of Christ into the world. Now, of course, that doesn't happen apart from the faith and the prayer of men. We see the faith of Abraham and the prayer of his servant and all of that, but above all else it seems to me that we are to see God at work in the fulfilling of his promises in Genesis 24. We are not primarily to see Abraham, the servant, Rebekah or anyone else. We are to see God at work and the marriage as one small part of God's mighty work in this world. The fact that he incorporates man into that work, the fact that he uses man, that he renews man and ultimately has the salvation of man in view, is something that is humbling and something that gives reason to praise God. It seems to me that to see God at work in history is a source of great comfort and encouragement to God's people, that fact alone. That's not insignificant. The knowledge that he still uses man and that he brings together marriages, that he keeps his covenant now as he did then, can stir us up to serve God in obedience and faith. So we don't just receive examples in the Bible; in these stories we have a revelation of God himself, who he is, and how he works. This is the God who even today is involved in our lives down to all the details of it.

Exemplaristic and Redemptive Historical Preaching

Now I don't think it's necessary to see a conflict or contradiction between exemplaristic and redemptive historical preaching. We clearly receive examples in the Bible. I think the problem is that often, particularly in this country, exemplaristic is separated from the redemptive historical perspective and you get messages on Old Testament stories that are purely moralistic or exemplaristic with no attempt to tie them into the great work of God's revelation of redemption.

Unity Problem from an Exclusively Exemplaristic Approach

Now the weakness of that exclusively exemplaristic or illustrative method is that it tends to reduce biblical history into numerous little independent stories. And each one of these stories can be taken as an example for us, but little or no attention is paid to the

place or function of the event in the ongoing movement of redemptive history. This tends to isolate each little story.

I think biblical historical narratives should be seen in relationship with each other and in their unity within the history of redemption that ultimately comes to Christ. Now that doesn't mean that those who treat the Bible in exemplaristic fashion do not regard Christ as the center point of Bible history – they do – but the point is that in their method of preaching, that doesn't become apparent. On the other hand, a person who works from a redemptive historical perspective need not deny that many events of biblical history were recorded for our example. But then the person from the redemptive historical perspective is concerned with the questions of why? how? and, in what sense? They may be an example, but that has to be related to the redemptive historical perspective.

I would relate that to just get back to Genesis 24, to that sign thing you see in the redemptive historical perspective. In my own perspective, the continuing validity of that approach ceased with completion of the canon spiritually. At that point we had no canon of the Scripture, and the sign had a different function. But the point is that I think we should handle these stories as real history, not as parables to illustrate some truth.

The Relation of the Doctrinal Sections of Scripture to the Historical Sections

That brings up another aspect of this whole discussion, which I think is worth reflecting on for a minute. That is the relation of the doctrinal sections of Scripture to the historical sections. I think if you reflect on that a little bit, you will conclude that the doctrinal rests on the historical and not the reverse. In other words, in the Bible, history is foundational to doctrine. Now if you really grasp that, then you can't look at history as merely illustrative. It may be illustrative, but it's far more than that. History does not just illustrate doctrine, it provides a basis for doctrine.

If you take the historical sections of the Bible just as illustrative, then it is really not important whether the event occurred or not. Think about that. A parable or an allegory may convey the same message. If you take Bible history simply as illustrative,

you could agree with S.R. Driver, who was of the Wellhausen school of criticism, when he says, “How much of these narratives is strictly historical, how much is due to popular fancies or embellishment we cannot say, but the importance and real significance of the narratives lies in the types of character which they exhibit and in the moral and spiritual lessons. Whether they are strictly historical or not may be deduced from that.” The patriarchs are examples of faith and goodness and also sometimes of unworthiness and failure. You see, for someone like Driver, these things never happened, but it doesn’t make any difference to him. In these stories we can find good illustrations and good examples or bad examples as the case may be. Now to Driver, whether or not those stories tell something that actually happened in the unfolding redemptive history is of no consequence. He’s only concerned with the religious or moral lessons. He’s lost the perspective of the role and function of those events in redemptive history. These things are important and they happened and they are part of this unfolding plan of God’s revelation redemption. But you see Driver’s faith is not rooted in history. History for people of Driver’s perspective is of no importance; our faith is.

Further Reflections on Preaching Historical Texts

Look at the preaching of Peter and Paul. What did they do? Basically they recounted the acts in the course of redemptive history. They went back and traced the line of promise through the Old Testament. We need to see how God is at work in a revelatory redemptive way in the events that are recorded in the Bible. If you are just going to get lessons, you could preach from Aesop’s fables and make an equally valid point in many cases. Now, again, that doesn’t deny that a certain doctrine or truth can be illustrated from an historical account. A sermon on James 1:6, “He that doubts is like a wave of the sea,” can be illustrated by a story on Thomas in John 20 when he doubts. You can certainly do that legitimately. But if you look for an illustration like that, you don’t have to confine yourself to the Bible. You can look in church history and find other equally valid illustrations. So you can illustrate a doctrinal text with a historical text. But if you choose a historical text or sermon to preach on, it seems to me you must

take it in its integrity, in its context in the history of redemption, and attempt to draw out the significance in that perspective. So it's not only illustrative, although it may be illustrative. It's intricately related in some way to the progress of revelation redemption.

Okay, that's been kind of a long side discourse. I wanted to get that in somewhere because I think it's important to reflect on some of those questions with respect to how we are to derive relevance from these historical narratives today. With that redemptive historical perspective you see with Abraham, I think it's quite clear. With some other narratives in the Old Testament, it's not quite as clear and in some it seems rather obscure. You're really going to have to struggle to see how this plugs in, how that fits, and you may or may not come up with a way in which to do that. I would just mention that if you start looking in commentaries and published materials, there is very little that helps you in this redemptive historical kind of perspective. Most is in the other directions, in the illustrative exemplaristic kind of perspective, especially the homiletics books. They are full of the illustrative, exemplaristic kind of perspective, and very little of the redemptive historical approach.

I think that the way in which it becomes illustrative or exemplaristic always has to be put in this context of the redemptive historical function, because otherwise it's very hard not to be arbitrary in how you use the illustrative function. Certainly it's legitimate and there are a number of texts that teach that, but I can't give you the chapter or verse. Any other questions or comments?

Okay, I think I'll stop then for today. And we'll pick up then tomorrow with Isaac capital E.

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