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Teacher: How Will You Approach the Old Testament?

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Abstract: This article discusses several teaching perspectives of the Old Testament, including literary, cultural, and historical, and concludes that [t]eachers should approach the Old Testament as a scripture containing the word of God."

INERRANT

● Some months ago the *New York Times* printed the following: "An English rector startled the convocation of Canterbury today by asking that he not be required to read spiritual junk and poison from the Old Testament to his congregation."

The rector contended that such statements as: "They shall be burnt with hunger, and devoured with burning heat, and with bitter destruction: I will also send the teeth of beasts upon them, with the poison of serpents of the dust" (Deut. 32:24), was indeed spiritual junk. A God of love would never send a beast to devour his children, he suggested.

It has been obvious to teachers and students—as well as English rectors—that many have had difficulty in understanding the Old Testament.

Because of this, the teacher called by divine authority to teach an Old Testament class should spend some time in quiet contemplation. He needs to be aware of the several approaches that can be used in teaching the Old Testament and to select the approach that will best serve his needs. The following summarizes these various approaches:

As Great Literature

When Benjamin Franklin was United States minister to France, he joined a sophisticated philosophical society made up of the best minds in France. These sophisticates delighted in ridiculing and pointing out the contradictions in the Bible, particularly the Old Testament. This group often presented plays for each other. When it came Franklin's turn to entertain them, he hired some performers to present a great old

GREAT LITERATURE

HISTORY

TRADITION

CULTURAL DEPOSIT

TEACHER:

HOW WILL YOU APPROACH
THE

OLD
TESTAMENT

?

BY KENNETH W. GODFREY

INSTITUTE INSTRUCTOR (CURRENTLY ON LEAVE OF ABSENCE)

Five commonly used teaching approaches are evaluated.

masterpiece. His friends were awed by the performance and the superb story. After basking in their plaudits for a sufficiently long time, Franklin disclosed that what they had witnessed was a presentation of the Book of Ruth from the Old Testament.

Edgar Allen Poe listed several things that make short stories great, and the story of Ruth more than meets his standard.

Literary people also consider the Book of Job to be of great literary merit. To them, the struggle of Job to understand both good and evil in the world classifies the book as a literary classic. The book forcefully teaches that goodness does not lead to a life free from pain, sorrow, and suffering. It also stresses that illness and troubles are not necessarily the result of sin.

Perhaps Psalms and Proverbs and other books of the Old Testament can thus be taught as examples of great literature.

As a Cultural Tradition

The Old Testament can also be taught as a reservoir of a great cultural tradition. If one were to approach the volume in this manner, he would find that the nature and extent of the Old Testament have contributed greatly to our own civilization. Who among us has not, almost without thinking, quoted Ecclesiastes 1:9, "there is no new thing under the sun"; 8:15, "eat, drink, and be merry"; Psalm 8:2, "out of the mouth of babes"; Isaiah 53:7, "a lamb to the slaughter"; or 1 Samuel 13:14, "a man after his own heart"? The Old Testament has become a part of the American tradition. To appreciate this statement more fully, one needs only to read early American Puritan history.

As a Historical Cultural Deposit

Many Latter-day Saints have been reluctant to read any of the Bible scholars. We seem to have forgotten

that Joseph Smith could perhaps be called a Bible scholar. We should remember that Bible scholarship has added much to our reservoir of knowledge. Bible scholars have not always been correct in their claims and assertions; however, their contributions have been notable. In general, they have had as their objective the understanding of the Bible, not its ridicule or condemnation.

Many parts of the Bible can be understood only in their historical settings. For example, the "abomination of desolation" spoken of in Daniel is clearly understood in terms of historical background. Antiochus, bent upon Hellenizing, or forcing Greek culture upon, the Jews, built an altar to Zeus in front of the Temple of the Jews. On this altar he offered swine's flesh as a sacrifice. This act is called by the writer of Daniel the "abomination of desolation," and it precipitated the Maccabean uprising.

No matter which approach one uses in teaching the Old Testament, a knowledge of history and people will prove invaluable.

As Absolute Scripture

Some Protestant denominations have contended that God dictated each and every word in the Old Testament. They have argued that every part of the book is as valuable as every other part. For some years our article of faith states, "We believe the Bible to be the word of God as far as it is translated correctly," was held in some ridicule by some denominations.

Latter-day Saint teachers should remember, however, that Joseph Smith said that the Song of Solomon was not inspired. And Brigham Young said, concerning the Bible, "I believe the words of God are there; I believe the words of the devil are there; I believe that the words of men and the words of angels are there; and that is not all—I believe that the words of a dumb brute are there. I recollect one of the prophets riding, and (Continued on page 892)

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Teaching

(Continued from page 883)

prophesying against Israel, and the animal he rode rebuked his madness." (*Journal of Discourses*, Vol. 14, p. 280.)

John A. Widtsoe opined that men in the Old Testament attributed some things to God that were in reality the acts of men. Modern prophets have clearly said that some parts of the Bible are less scriptural than other parts, and that the words and thoughts of uninspired translators have crept within its pages.

As Scripture Containing the Word of God and Teachings That Will Affect the Lives of People for Good

Some teachers in the past have been guilty of teaching only chronology and facts. They have felt their job was completed if the students could answer detailed questions on long tests or verbal quizzes.

In reality, the Old Testament—or any scripture—has little value to us apart from how it affects our lives. Old Testament people should be taught as men and women who had real problems much like the people today. They were trying to find solutions to these problems and to follow the will of the Lord. They often fell short, as do we. They were not perfect and should not be taught as such. Nor were they mere puppets, performing only as God pulled the strings.

An important message of Jonah is not that a fish can swallow a man but that God is the God of the whole world and man cannot hide from him.

When teaching about the flood we sometimes concentrate on the dimensions of the ark and have long drawn-out discussions on whether or not all the animals could fit into a vehicle of such a size. In reality, we might teach that God has standards.

A key message of the creation is that it was done by God and is good. Who among us cannot profit from the knowledge that God is the God of all men and that he does have standards? or that the creation of man was good?

In Deuteronomy 14, the chapter on clean and unclean animals, the

genuine purpose is not to give information about a Jewish scientific attempt to classify animals, but rather to enforce and make concrete the demand for cleanliness in daily life. When this is understood, the fact that we believe the classification of animals to be incorrect in several respects does not matter.

An important purpose of the account of Abraham being commanded by God to offer Isaac as a sacrifice is to tell about confident obedience to God—how necessary it is and how it opens the way to freedom and blessing.

These are some of the concepts teachers should impart to their students. Unimportant details or omissions are miniscule in comparison. The books of the Old Testament are God-centered or religious in content. God gave man the Bible to show man the way to eternal life. The Bible gives us a creative and saving revelation necessary for eternal life.

Teachers should approach the Old Testament as a scripture containing the word of God and teachings that will and can affect the lives of students for good. As Esdras points out, students should open their mouths and drink what their Father gives them to drink:

"Then I opened my mouth, and, behold, a full cup was offered to me; it was full of something like water, but its color was like fire. And I took it and drank; and when I had drunk it, *my heart poured forth understanding, and wisdom increased in my breast, for my spirit retained its memory; and my mouth was opened and was no longer closed.*" (2 Esdras 14:37 [Apocrypha]. Italics added.)

OCTOBER

BY MARY L. LUSK

*Here in a blue October day,
In the tang of leaf fires' smoke . . .*

In the way

*A football lifts to an arching pass,
Or a schoolboy loiters, late
for class . . .*

*In red gold of maples, and sumac's
rust,*

Is a bit of eternity, held in trust.