



Making Sense of the Bible

Week 2: Making Sense of the Old Testament

Lori Lampert - 05/01/2022

I'm going to confess something to you. And since we are also live streaming and putting it on Youtube, I guess I better be willing to risk a few of you being disappointed in me. Here goes. I have not always known how to get where I'm going. You see, my mom and dad moved to Athens Georgia in the summer of 1973. Almost 50 years ago. That was the fall I started college. Yes, I was an incredibly young genius. Humble, of course.

For a few years, I arrived for visits by the Greyhound bus from Birmingham to Athens. The trip could take three hours on the express route, but it often took six hours on the local, stopping at every little town along the way. Once I had a car—toward the end of nursing school—I would sometimes drive to Athens, but often by then I was a passenger and Ben was driving.

And for many of these decades that was my spot, front seat passenger, often hanging over the back of the seat dealing with our kids until we discovered the wonder of VCR tapes. Finally, when the kids grew up, we began flying into Atlanta because you can't fly into Athens, renting a car, and then Ben would drive us the rest of the way. As the years have passed I have done this by myself, occasionally, like the week after Easter.

But you would think, wouldn't you, that in all those years, visiting family, working an occasional part-time job over Christmas break, driving to and from and around Athens, I would know my way from any point A to any point B. Seriously. It's been almost half a century. It's not like mom and dad moved that much, only twice. It's not that Athens is a giant city, it's only about 125,000 people.

The truth of my navigational struggle is this: I've never really paid much attention. I let someone else drive. Someone else told me a direct route to wherever I needed to go, and I would never deviate from their instructions.

Whenever Athens would add a new road, or a bypass, or complicate my life by putting in a new exit, I would get lost. 50 years in a place and I didn't know the roads, the markers, even the restaurants.

Now, my friend on Google Maps takes care of me. Sometimes she takes me on a new route or a detour to avoid road construction, and that really freaks me out. But even for the short distance of about five miles from my brother's home to my mom's apartment, I make sure their addresses are correctly entered, and I invite the friendly disembodied voice to lead me.

Call it being oblivious. Call it being cautious. Call it being lazy. Call it being afraid. Whatever you call it, I'm not proud of this story. It makes me totally dependent on others for something that by now I surely should understand. And this last trip made me acutely aware that it's way past time for me to take responsibility to know what I need to know to navigate my way.

We are starting a six-week journey today that I hope and pray will cause you to take greater interest and responsibility for reading and navigating your way through the most sacred, powerful book on the planet, the Bible.

Most of you have known about it nearly all your life. You may have been raised being told the stories or heard passages explained by another through worship, podcasts, and books. You may have been a front-seat passenger, trusting someone else to get you from point A to point B.

And please, please understand—I am not assuming anything about your biblical experiences. Some of you may never have even opened a Bible. Some of you begin each day reading scripture. Some of you have taught more bible classes than I will ever attend. I'm not presuming. We begin this study because I feel that it's time for us here at The Downtown Church to make some sense of the Bible. And that's the name of our resource for this series: *Making Sense of the Bible*, by Adam Hamilton. I want us to use this resource to understand—and hopefully choose to take in our own hands—the Bible. To read and to learn from it the wonder of the God of love, justice, grace and mercy.

I first read Hamilton's book when it was published in 2014, and it gave me important insights that have helped shape the way I approach scripture. I've led small groups before using his resource, but I've been hesitant to do what we are doing now—using it in worship and offering it more widely to this church. I'm not sure why. I think it's because I have been concerned that this book's approach, or its content, or its tone might cause a rift here. Maybe I've hesitated because we live in a mostly religiously conservative part of the country, and I might turn some of you off. But despite never having tackled it broadly, I've never lost the desire to do this together. And I believe it's time.

And I'm excited that it's time. This book doesn't dictate my personal theology, it describes it. The first time I opened its pages I was overwhelmed by how similar my own thoughts were, albeit Hamilton's are far more elegantly written. He has a gift for explaining with research, scholarship, and clarity how to approach the Bible in such a way that it builds faith, teaches us about

God, brings hope and courage for the days ahead, and—most importantly of all—teaches us to know our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

The Bible has done all of this for me. And yet, for far too many people, it has also been misinterpreted, misunderstood, and used to misrepresent God. There are far too many people who want nothing to do with the God they have been taught. Taught that if they did not accept the inerrancy of scripture, if they did not believe each word was literally true, they could not be a Christian.

What do you do when you pick up this sacred text and read words that sound like God condones slavery? What do you do when you are a woman feeling called by God to preach? Where do you take your understanding of science—DNA, technology—and try to fit it into a belief that the Bible has already spoken about everything? A belief that tells you your questions are simply a lack of faith? These are the kinds of questions we'll consider during this series.

Hamilton describes what the Bible is not:

- An owner's manual with instructions for what to do before you die
- A magic 8 ball that you approach with questions
- A book of systematic theology where every verse is explaining doctrine and dogma
- A book of promises

These are flawed understandings. Each of them breaks down when questions arise. The Bible is much more complex, more challenging, and more beautiful than any of those limited ideas.

It is a book written through time by a huge variety of human beings. Each of those authors sought to explain what they have learned to be true about God through their own lenses and experience.

The Bible starts with the stories of people in the ancient Near East thousands of years ago, followed by books of poetry. Then come the prophets, warning of the vengeance of the Assyrian and Babylonian armies. The New Testament begins with the Gospels written to tell the story of Jesus Christ, his life, death and resurrection. Then 21 letters, called epistles, written by the Apostles to specific people in specific places to address specific concerns. The Bible ends where it begins, in a garden where the world is again restored. It ends with words written almost 2000 years ago in a Roman occupied Near East world.

Let me quote Adam Hamilton here as he answers the question: “What is the Bible?”

It is first the story of the people of Israel and their faith in God. It is also a story about their God and his will and purposes for his people. It does not read like a book dictated by God. It reads like a diverse set of writings—short stories, law codes, court histories, poetry, and prophetic warnings and promises—written by people who were reflecting upon their story in the light of their faith. In the midst of reading Israel’s story, we find our own story. And through their stories, and their experiences and reflections about God, we hear God speaking to us.

We read the Bible from this side of the resurrection. We read it knowing that God came in Jesus Christ, and when we read what we call the Old Testament, we do so looking for the thread of Jesus. And we are not disappointed, for the threads are there. But there is much more.

When we open Genesis and read the two stories of creation, we are holding in our hands the words of ancient people describing with awe and wonder the Creator God. They didn't understand photosynthesis, or the need for the sun to exist before plants could grow. They were telling—from two different perspectives—how they understood the enormity of God, who creates order from chaos, life from nothingness. Thanks be to God.

The first five books of the Old Testament are called the books of Moses, the Law. For many, it is important that we accept that they were written by Moses himself. I totally believe Moses was a real person who was called by God to lead the captive people of God out of Egypt to the promised land. But to understand this defining story of the Jewish nation, it is ok to know it was recorded by others who experienced this story. That especially makes sense when we read the words of Moses' death included in the story—he probably didn't write that part himself.

Yes, I believe the ten commandments were given by God to Moses and to us today. Absolutely. Let me say that again, I am not debating that God wrote them and handed them to Moses. These words are sacred and the foundation for faith. And it doesn't diminish their importance to expand our understanding as we read the words of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy to consider the time and place they were written. The history surrounding the people of God, the geography of the land, the people already occupying the Promised Land. Instead, we get a fuller picture of how very important this story will always be to the people of God.

For Jesus himself, the Bible was not a book. It was written on scrolls held in a synagogue. As a Jewish child, around age five, he would have begun to study them. By ten, he would have studied the *Mishnah*, the commentaries on the scripture. At 13, Jesus would have celebrated his bar mitzvah, a recognition

that he had become a man. The words *bar mitzvah* mean he is a son of the commandments.

Throughout his recorded time on earth, Jesus quoted most often from the Psalms, Isaiah, and Deuteronomy. And Jesus did more than just quote scripture—he called us to go deeper in our understanding of it. He taught that we were to go beyond the letter of the law to the spirit of the law. The words “Don’t commit adultery” expand to become not looking on another with lust in our hearts. Where the law was an “eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth,” Jesus calls us to love our enemies and forgive.

From Luke 4 we read:

¹⁶When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, ¹⁷and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

**¹⁸“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
¹⁹to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”**

²⁰And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him.

²¹Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

Ancient words, written by ancient people in an ancient language. Yet, these words become alive to us when we read them seeking to understand. What did these words mean at the time of Isaiah? What is Jesus telling us about who he is? What did this mean to those hearing him for the first time? What did it mean for the early church? What does it mean for you and me today?

Friends, it is so much easier to stay in the passenger seat and let someone else drive you around. It is simpler to close our eyes and believe that eventually we are going to get where we want to go. Someone else will take us there. Someone else will make sure we are getting it right. Someone else will tell us what to believe and how to think. It may be easier, but it cannot remain how we approach the most important issue in our life—our understanding of God revealed in Jesus Christ as contained in the Bible.

It's time to take control of the direction you will travel. Make no mistake—I'm not offering to drive you. Nor am I telling you that Adam Hamilton should be your driver. I want everyone to drive themselves.

I invite you to pick up the book, *Making Sense of the Bible*, and dive in. We have copies for \$10 on your way out, or of course you can find it easily online. Starting this week, and for the next six weeks, we will have three different opportunities for you to unpack what you are learning: tonight at 6 where there will be childcare (please let me know today if you will join me this evening), Wednesday morning at 10, and Wednesday evening at 6:30. You can sign up on our website or email me. Also, our 9:15 class led by Jim Millsap will explore the book as well.

This last time I went to Athens, I tried something for the first time. It may seem like nothing to you, but it was really something to me. I actually drove from my brother Mark's home to my Mom's without my friend on Google maps. Small victory, but a victory nonetheless. I was going to try to do the

same to the Atlanta airport, but I chickened out. But I made a start, and I am giving myself permission to build on it.

After almost 50 years it is way past time, but it's not too late. And it is never, ever too late to find our way through the gift of the Holy Bible.

Let's pray: Almighty Good and Gracious God, we open our hearts and minds to learn from you by the power of the Holy Spirit. We ask that you create in us the desire to fearlessly approach Scripture eager to learn of you, to learn of your people and to learn of ourselves. We pray with gratitude for the many who wrote and preserved for us your word that we might know Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.