Looking Back: Responses to Questions

*Is* *scripture (especially books like Job, Esther and Ruth) inerrant?*

\*\*Let’s suppose that Job, Esther, and Ruth are not accounts of exactly what Job and his friends, Haman and his wife, and Boaz and his staff said to each other—it seems more likely that the creativity of the books’ authors has come into quoting their words. Does that mean the books are faulty, errant, not really inspired? Insofar as the Old Testament narrative books are concerned, where they are talking about events that actually happened, they need to be giving us the right impression of the kind of things people said and did. I believe that God’s providence will have ensured that they give us the right impression, but that fact doesn’t mean God inspired them to put down the kind of account that you would have if someone recorded the conversations. So to say they are inerrant seems misleading and to say that they are not inerrant also seems misleading. I’d rather say that God is entirely happy with the Job, Esther, Ruth, and the other books in the OT, and that we can thus totally rely on then to tell us about God and his ways with us.

*Is there a single sexual ethic or a diverse one within the OT (e.g., in Ruth, Esther, and Song of Songs)?*

\*\*Let’s suppose that a proper sexual relationship is one in which one man and one woman give themselves to each other for life in an exclusive socially-recognized commitment in which they respect each other, treat each other as equals, and give themselves generously to each other sexually. I’d say that Esther compromises that vision in becoming part of the king’s harem, and that the story assumes it is okay to do so as an alternative to being executed; it’s an aspect of the way scripture accepts polygamy without enthusing over it. Other OT stories such as David’s compromise it over polygamy, too. These stories also compromise in not maintaining the egalitarian vision of the relationship, in the way that the Song of Songs does. I suspect that the other question behind the question is the awareness that in Ruth and the Song of Songs the process whereby people reach that socially-recognized commitment that we call marriage is different from the one we are used to. But if Ruth and Boaz have sex on the threshing floor, it’s an act that risks compromising the vision, though only slightly because it’s an act that is designed to be part of a process that leads to marriage; but it’s not clear that they do, only that she is in effect proposing. Likewise if the Song of Songs implies that the couple or couples in the Song are having sex and are not married, that compromises it, too, though again only slightly, because the relationship the poems describe is surely one that implies they are on their way to that socially-recognized commitment. But again, it seems more likely to me that they are a couple growing in sexual familiarity and enthusiasm while on the way to marriage without actually indulging in full-on sex—at least, that would be the basis on which the poems came to be accepted in a community that lived by the Torah.

*Can you characterize the depiction of God in the OT? How would you make sense of all these different portrayals? We seem to have several different characterizations. Ruth and Esther seem to see God working providentially behind the scenes. The Psalms see God as someone worth actively praising, though sometimes neglects to follow through on his promises. Lamentations sees God as punishing Israel’s sinfulness, whereas in Job God is behind the suffering of a righteous man. Proverbs and Ecclesiastes see God standing behind everything but somewhat remote, and instead portray life on the ground as much more nuanced than a strict religious system might.*

*Many of the texts we have read emphasize both divine and human action playing equal roles in accomplishing God’s plans on earth, could you perhaps give some final remarks on this balance?*

*We have said several times that the Messiah mentioned in the OT is never explicitly known as Jesus (as the Jews point out). Is there OT evidence for Jesus, or do we even need it? How does the OT relate to the coming Messiah? Did any of the authors write something that was incongruent with the fact that the coming Messiah turned out to be Jesus of Nazareth? Did the Israelites think the Messiah would be a continuation of King David? If so, why could they not consider a Messiah such as Jesus? Were they materialistic?*

*What is the nature of sin in OT terms?  How does that relate to sin in the NT?

How did Jesus read the OT for his context/vocation/identity?*

*How does our knowledge of the afterlife make our theology different than that of someone that lived before Christ’s resurrection? What can we learn from the perspective on death (given they did not know about the resurrection) that is presented in the OT?*

*Are there any major differences in the outlook(s) on life and God in the Torah, the Prophets, and Writings?*

*What does the OT tell us about whether or not God cares about our individual lives? It seems like he cares more about the people of God as a whole, and how we interact collectively with the nations.*

*What is a working model of interpretation from both the historical-critical and literary/reader-response angle. When is it appropriate to ask historical questions of the text and when are these questions unimportant. How does one draw a line between the meaning of the text, itself, and the meaning the reader attributes to it? How is it possible to ascertain the text’s original intent?*

*Authorship. In the course of our readings in class and outside reading, I’ve discovered that authorship in the Bible is basically all guess. I find it difficult to explain to a non-believer how the Bible is my handbook to life, etc. if I can’t even tell them who wrote what.*

*Aren’t we afforded a different relationship with God because of Christ? How might this affect the way that things such as Psalms look, or the meaning we take from Job?*

*Do we take the Bible literally or we should have some skepticism as to find out if all the Scriptures in written by inspiration of God?*

*How does Israel’s covenant relationship with Yahweh relate to the church and the new covenant?*

*Do you see any danger in teaching the stories in the OT as if they actually happened? How necessary is it to clarify that God inspires fiction? Do we do our congregations a disservice by perpetuating a literal belief of the OT?*