

Lesson 3: Biblical Theology Tools 1

Review of lesson 2 - Exegetical Tools – What’s the text saying? (15)

In lesson 2 we looked at the basic tools for understanding the author’s original intent in any particular text. We considered the grammatical-historical method, a method that seeks to read out of a text the meaning of the words on the page as the expressed mind or intent of the author. We also talked about the fact that context was king. Therefore inevitably we would need to consider not simply the words, but the sentences and paragraphs, which are the real unit of meaning. We also spent time considering the importance of genre, the way in which knowing a text’s genre would impact our understanding of the words, and how the grammatical-historical method applied in different genres.

But having mastered the art of exegesis, are we now ready to read the text of scripture and construct a theology that is not only biblical, but is also a theology that tells the whole story of the whole Bible? Not quite. There are two other sets of tools every reader of Scripture needs if we’re to put it all together faithfully. We not only need exegetical tools, we also need Biblical Theology and Systematic Theology tools. In lessons 3 and 4 we’re going to consider a number of Biblical Theology tools, before turning to Systematic Theology tools in lessons 5 and 6. And if you’ve previously sat through the lessons on Systematic Theology, I can assure you that lessons 5 and 6 are not repeats, there is more valuable information for you to take from it. It is only after these next four lessons that we will do a biblical theology together.

Self-Revelation through Covenants (15)

In lesson 1 we talked about the fact that God’s revelation, and therefore the Bible as the record of that revelation, is necessarily self-revelation. Unless God tells us Who He is and What He’s doing, we’re in the dark. We also talked about the fact that when God in his self-revelation condescended to enter into relationship with human beings, the creatures He’d made in His own image, He structured those relationships in terms that we have come to recognize as covenants. As we’ll see, on the one hand, God’s use of covenants is an extraordinary act of condescending communication. On the other hand, we’re also going to see that there are few more important concepts to grasp if we’re going to understand both the whole story, and each part of the story, of the Bible.

In the ANE, in the late second millennium BC, the time of Abraham and Moses, international relations were governed by treaties between Great Kings and Vassal Kings. These treaties took the specific form of covenants, in which the Great King promised his protection and blessing in return for the vassal king’s loyalty and obedience. So long as the vassal obeys, he enjoys the Great King’s favor. But should the vassal break the terms of the covenant, then the Great King promised a swift and final judgment. What’s more, the vassal stood as a mediator or representative for his entire people. So his obedience or disobedience did not merely affect him, but all those who stood under him as their federal head.

In its formal literary form, the covenants of the late second millennium took a consistent, standardized form. It began with a *preamble*, identifying the Great King who authors the covenant. What follows next is generally a brief *historical prologue*, outlining what the Great King has already done for the Vassal King, which now serves as the foundation for the vassal’s obedience. Next come the *stipulations* of the covenant, both *summary and detailed*—what is expected of the vassal. Following the stipulations there was often a *document clause*, a paragraph requiring that *copies of the covenant be placed in the Temples of each of the kings, and that the Vassal King periodically read the covenant publicly and pass it on to his*

sons. Next, witnesses were called - typically the gods of both kings. Finally, the covenant concluded with a list of the *blessings* that would accrue if the covenant was kept, and a list of *curses* that would be invoked should the covenant be broken.

In the providence of God, Moses was inspired to write the first five books of the Old Testament at a time when this covenantal structure was widely known and recognized. In condescension to our own understanding, God used this covenantal structure to reveal his own relationship as The Great King to the people He had made in his own image to rule over the earth as vice-regents, vassal kings to the Great King of Heaven. Listen as I read from Exodus. **Read Exodus 20:2-3, “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. “You shall have no other gods before me.”** (preamble, historical prologue, beginning of the stipulations). The stipulations are given in summary form in the 10 commandments, and then in more detail in Ex 21-23. **Read Ex. 24:1-11, “Then he said to Moses, “Come up to the LORD, you and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel, and worship from afar. ² Moses alone shall come near to the LORD, but the others shall not come near, and the people shall not come up with him.” ³ Moses came and told the people all the words of the LORD and all the rules. And all the people answered with one voice and said, “All the words that the LORD has spoken we will do.” ⁴ And Moses wrote down all the words of the LORD. He rose early in the morning and built an altar at the foot of the mountain, and twelve pillars, according to the twelve tribes of Israel. ⁵ And he sent young men of the people of Israel, who offered burnt offerings and sacrificed peace offerings of oxen to the LORD. ⁶ And Moses took half of the blood and put it in basins, and half of the blood he threw against the altar. ⁷ Then he took the Book of the Covenant and read it in the hearing of the people. And they said, “All that the LORD has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient.” ⁸ And Moses took the blood and threw it on the people and said, “Behold the blood of the covenant that the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words.” ⁹ Then Moses and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel went up, ¹⁰ and they saw the God of Israel. There was under his feet as it were a pavement of sapphire stone, like the very heaven for clearness. ¹¹ And he did not lay his hand on the chief men of the people of Israel; they beheld God, and ate and drank.”** So we see the public reading of the covenant, God himself is witness, as are the people. Ex 25:21 states that the covenant is to be placed in the ark in the Holy of Holies, which is both God’s throne room and Israel’s temple (only one God!). But where are the blessings and curses? In fact, Israel breaks the covenant before they ever have a chance to recite them. We don’t finally get the blessings and curses until **Deuteronomy 27-28**.

Now the Mosaic covenant is not the only place we see the structure. But I’ve taken the time to show it to you here so that you’ll appreciate that a covenant is not merely a contract or a promise as we understand such things. *By definition: A covenant is a bond that establishes an all-encompassing relationship. It’s not merely a financial obligation or military treaty. It’s a claim on someone’s total loyalty and allegiance.* It has an authority structure to it, with on-going obligations, blessings and curses. And what’s more, it’s generational.

But not only was a covenant written out, it was also *cut*. The OT term for making a covenant is in fact to cut a covenant. That's because a covenant almost always involved the shedding of blood, as both a sign and a seal of the covenant. So as we just read, in Exodus 24, Moses sacrificed young bulls, took their blood, and sprinkled it on both the altar and the people as the "blood of the covenant." In the ANE, not only would animals be sacrificed, they would also be mutilated, torn in two, or have a leg shoved down their throat, all as a sign of what would happen to the vassal and his people should they break the covenant. So, a covenant is not simply a bond, it's a bond in blood, a commitment to loyalty and allegiance and secured with the life of the covenant mediator, the vassal king, himself—represented vicariously by the sacrificed and mutilated animals.

Questions or comments?

Covenants of works and covenants of grace (16)

Now if that is the basic structure of the covenant as we find it in the Bible, I need to introduce one important variation. Sometimes, out of the magnanimity of his heart, a Great King would decide to enter into a covenant with someone that was essentially a covenant of grant or promise. In this covenant, there were no conditions or terms that the vassal had to keep, no "obey, and I'll bless you; disobey, and I'll curse you." Instead, the Great King simply staked himself, his word and his resources, as guarantor of the covenant blessings. In contrast to the standard covenant of works, this sort of covenant is what we would call a covenant of grace. In the ANE, you'd find this most typically in the granting of an inheritance to a warrior or faithful servant by a great king. And we see this kind of covenant in the OT as well. Look at Genesis 15:9-21, **"He said to him, 'Bring me a heifer three years old, a female goat three years old, a ram three years old, a turtledove, and a young pigeon.'"¹⁰ And he brought him all these, cut them in half, and laid each half over against the other. But he did not cut the birds in half.¹¹ And when birds of prey came down on the carcasses, Abram drove them away.¹² As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell on Abram. And behold, dreadful and great darkness fell upon him.¹³ Then the LORD said to Abram, "Know for certain that your offspring will be sojourners in a land that is not theirs and will be servants there, and they will be afflicted for four hundred years.¹⁴ But I will bring judgment on the nation that they serve, and afterward they shall come out with great possessions.¹⁵ As for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you shall be buried in a good old age.¹⁶ And they shall come back here in the fourth generation, for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete."¹⁷ When the sun had gone down and it was dark, behold, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces.¹⁸ On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying, "To your offspring I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates,¹⁹ the land of the Kenites, the Kenizzites, the Kadmonites,²⁰ the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim,²¹ the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Girgashites and the Jebusites."**

So we have two kinds of covenants: covenants of works and covenants of grace. Both follow the same sort of pattern. But *the difference lies in who takes the oath and so undertakes to suffer the curses should the covenant be broken.*

What then are the major examples of covenants that we see in the Bible? I want to briefly lay out seven. The word covenant is not necessarily used in each case, but I'm following the old hermeneutical law: if it looks like a duck and quacks like a duck, it's probably a duck. I'm not saying there are no other covenants recorded. But these, as we'll see, are significant not only in their own right, but are significant because they serve to structure the narrative of the whole Bible.

SEVEN BIBLICAL COVENANTS (pg. 13)

Covenant of Works: Made with Adam in Gen 2:15-17, “The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it. ¹⁶ And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, “You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, ¹⁷ but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.” The promise of confirmation in eternal sinless life is implied. The probationary test, or work to be performed, was not indefinite. The test occurred in Gen 3, and was failed. The curses followed immediately.

Covenant of Redemption: Implied in Gen 3:15, “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.” Interesting, because in the midst of the curse on the serpent, God himself undertakes obligations and promises. Covenant of Grace in seed form. Its outlines, including the agreement between the Father, Son and Spirit, are worked out over the course of the rest of Scripture.

Noahic Covenant: Made with Noah and all living creatures in Genesis 9:8-17, “Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, ⁹ “Behold, I establish my covenant with you and your offspring after you, ¹⁰ and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the livestock, and every beast of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark; it is for every beast of the earth. ¹¹ I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of the flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.” ¹² And God said, “This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: ¹³ I have set my bow in the cloud, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. ¹⁴ When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, ¹⁵ I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh. And the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. ¹⁶ When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth.” ¹⁷ God said to Noah, “This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth.” Covenant of common grace; unilateral promise on God's part. Provides the field for redemption. Sign of the rainbow is the warrior's bow at rest! Mike D. ;)

Abrahamic Covenant: *Gen 15:1-21. (Read part of it earlier) Made with Abraham and his seed. Covenant of grace and blessing promising a people, and a place under God's benevolent rule. The sign of the covenant – circumcision – given in Gen 17 (people disagree over whether this is a different covenant or not).*

Mosaic Covenant: *Exodus 20-25; Deuteronomy. Covenant of works, made with the people of Israel, with first the Judges and then the Kings as the covenant mediators. Sign of the covenant: both circumcision and the Sabbath. Passover as the covenant meal. Blessing: continued possession of the land. Curse: exile.*

Davidic Covenant: *2 Samuel 7 (specifically verses 12-17) Covenant of grace, guaranteeing Davidic inheritance of the throne of Israel, God's people. The sign seems to be the birth of a son.*

New Covenant: *promised in Jeremiah 31:31-34, “Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, ³² not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the LORD. ³³ For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. ³⁴ And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the LORD. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.” Also promised in Ezekiel 36:24-28, “I will take you from the nations and gather you from all the countries and bring you into your own land. ²⁵ I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. ²⁶ And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. ²⁷ And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules. ²⁸ You shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers, and you shall be my people, and I will be your God.” And fulfilled by Christ, who is both the covenant mediator and the guarantor of the covenant through his own blood. Matthew 26:27-30, “And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, “Drink of it, all of you, ²⁸ for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. ²⁹ I tell you I will not drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom.”*

If these then are the major covenants of the Bible, then what we are looking at when we look at the covenants is God's revelation of how, in history, he is relating to his people. When we recognize that, we realize right away that how these various covenants relate to each other is a matter of real importance in understanding the story of the Bible, and how that story unfolds. We also realize that it's pretty important to understand which covenant we stand under, and which covenant any text of Scripture we're reading stands under. Otherwise, we run the risk of reading our covenant situation back inappropriately, or conversely, we run the risk of reading a previous covenantal situation onto ourselves inappropriately.

To help with this ultimate question of context, I want to introduce you to the idea of covenantal epochs, periods of history in which God related to his people in a way that was characterized by one covenant, or sets of covenants, rather than another. When we've grasped this, we realize that there is a second horizon of interpretation for every text in the Bible.

THREE HORIZONS OF INTERPRETATION (17)

Textual: (*What we have been learning up to this point.*) Up until this point, we've been considering texts largely in their immediate context. So the story of God's covenant with Abraham in Genesis 15 can be understood and interpreted solely in terms of what God is doing with Abraham. But when we back up a little, we realize that the call and covenant with Abraham marks a turning point in the story, and everything that follows builds on and relates to it. From Genesis 12 to Exodus 2, the entire narrative revolves around understanding how God is faithful to his promise to Abraham.

Epochal

But then, in Exodus 2 and the birth of Moses, a new epoch dawns. God's people are now a nation, defined by the Exodus events and their relationship with God is put on a new footing, outlined in the Mosaic Covenant. The Abrahamic covenant isn't gone or revoked. But something new is happening, and subsequent stages of the story now have to take this new epoch into account in God's unfolding plan.

Now in pointing out different epochs, defined by different covenants that have different terms, I don't mean to say that God saved people in different ways at different times. Nothing could be further from the truth. God doesn't change, and neither do his promises of salvation. However, I do mean to say that the way God unfolds the fullness of the revelation of that salvation does develop, as a seed grows into a tree. And it matters what stage the passage we are reading is in, for interpreting it correctly.

So for example, Leviticus 17 forbids offering sacrifices anywhere but at the Tent of Meeting. Later, that would be the Temple at Jerusalem. But the point is the same. You couldn't offer sacrifices just anywhere you wanted or happened to be. But Genesis tells us that wherever Abraham went, he built an altar and offered sacrifices. So was Abraham breaking the law of Leviticus 17? And by the way, where are you offering your sacrifices these days? You see my point. If we're going to correctly understand the restriction of Leviticus 17 and the freedom of Abraham, we're going to need to understand each passage within its larger epochal context. Abraham was an alien and a stranger in the land, who had not yet received the promise. So every time he built an altar, he was declaring in hope: this is God's land! Israel, on the other hand, was coming into possession of the land, but a land filled with local altars to every local god imaginable. God wanted to make clear to every Israelite that he was part of a single people, with a single God, who had revealed exactly how and when and where He would be worshiped. That worship would itself be an act that assembled the people in their unity as a nation of priests, rather than fragment and disperse them to worship however they saw fit.

How do we decide where one epoch begins and another begins? As I've said, the covenant themselves serve as markers. But we have more help than that. The Biblical authors themselves point the way. The most obvious division is that between the Old and New Testaments. In Romans 5, Paul speaks of the division of time before and after the giving of the Mosaic Law (verse 13), as well as the division before

and after Adam's Fall (verse 16). In Galatians 3:23-29, Paul refers to the Mosaic epoch as a caretaker period, preparing us for, but not actually delivering salvation. **"Now before faith came, we were held captive under the law, imprisoned until the coming faith would be revealed. ²⁴ So then, the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith. ²⁵ But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian, ²⁶ for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. ²⁷ For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. ²⁸ There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. ²⁹ And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise."** Peter marks a major division of world history at the flood in 2 Peter 3:6-7, and then goes on to look forward to yet another world still to come. In Acts 7, Stephen divides history into the epoch of the patriarchs (1-19), the Mosaic epoch (20-43), and the monarchy (44-53).

We need to understand the divisions in epochs, we also need to pay attention to the main themes and concerns of each epoch. So the patriarchal period is very much concerned with faith in the promises of God, while the Mosaic period, not abandoning faith, sounds much more clearly the note of God's people as holy and distinct from the world, as well as the theme of judgment. The monarchy continues those themes, but adds another—the Messiah King, the champion and representative of the nation who so identifies with the people that it's not overstatement to say, as the King goes, so goes the nation.

So, if we're going to understand a text, not only do we need to understand the words, sentences and paragraphs through the grammatical-historical method, we're also going to have to ask the question, what covenant governs God's people at this point, and therefore, what epoch is this text in? How does this text fit in to God's revelation of Himself at this point in time, and how did it function for God's people at that point in time?

Questions?

Canonical (17)

There is one other horizon, or context that we need to consider, if we are going to understand a text in its full and complete context, and that's the canonical context. *From Moses to John, the conviction of all the Biblical authors is that God is faithful. The promises that He made in one epoch, he fulfills in another. The fulfillment may not look exactly like what was expected, but there is fundamental continuity across the breadth of the story because God fulfills His Word.*

It's the task of this final horizon of interpretation, this final contextual reading, to discern how it all fits together. So, to return to Gen 15 and the covenant with Abraham, if the textual horizon is asking questions like: what's going on with cutting up animals, and what did this mean for Abraham, and if the epochal horizon is asking questions like: how was this promise fulfilled and kept in the life of Isaac and Jacob and Joseph, and how does it relate to the patriarchal family's departure from the land for Egypt; the canonical horizon asks the question, how does this promise relate to the new covenant established in Christ's blood; in just what sense are Christians the seed of Abraham and so participants in that promise, and should we expect an inheritance in Palestine, or does intervening revelation suggest that the land/rest promises are fulfilled in Christ some other way?

The way in which a canonical reading of any passage asks and answers these questions involves thinking through the questions of promise-fulfillment and the biblical use of types. We're going to spend the entire fourth lesson looking at the promise-fulfillment dynamic in Scripture, the symbolism of typology, and the questions of how to work through aspects of continuity and discontinuity that the very notion of fulfillment introduces. These are inevitably difficult matters of interpretation, and the divisions between Presbyterians and Baptist, and Dispensationalists and non-Dispensationalists largely turn on our understanding of these things.

What I want to focus on this morning is that for most of the Bible, the OT and the Gospels, we can't even begin to think about applying those texts to our lives until we've thought through this context. For not only do we live in the NT as opposed to the OT age, we live on the Resurrection side of the cross. So for example, when Jesus says to the 10 lepers he healed, "Go and show yourselves to the priests" we can't move directly from that text to our lives in application for the simple reason that we don't live under the Mosaic Law for lepers as Jesus and those men did.

But what this also means is that there is no way we can understand Jesus and the rest of the NT without understanding them in light of the OT. Jesus is repeatedly presented as a Second Adam, a Second Moses, a Second David, a Second Solomon. The salvation he brought is described as a Second Exodus, a return from exile. How are we going to understand and apply these NT texts if we haven't grappled with the canonical context, the story as a whole. By the same token, unless we have this larger context, the entire OT is really nothing more than a chronology that gets us to Jesus; interesting history if you're into that sort of thing, but otherwise largely irrelevant now that Jesus has come.

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER – PSALM 18 (17)

I want to conclude by trying to demonstrate for you how these three horizons come together as we look at a single text of Scripture: Psalm 18.

Textual: note the vivid imagery; example of parallelism in vv.4-5. Song of personal thanks for deliverance.

Epochal: drawing on the imagery of Sinai theophany and events of Exodus and Conquest in vv. 16-19. The King represents the nation, and he speaks of his relationship with God in those terms. Helps us understand the language of covenant faithfulness in vv. 20-29. Also, his triumph over his enemies in vv. 37-42 patterned after the image of holy war (no mercy) in Joshua. Verses 43ff point beyond Mosaic context to the Davidic covenant of 2 Samuel 7.

Canonical: ultimately fulfilled in Christ, who experienced these things not just figuratively, but really. And the covenant faithfulness he fulfilled was not just a keeping of Moses, but the perfect personal obedience required of Adam. Psalm 18 finds its truest sense on the lips of Jesus, who both saves his people, who is God come down, but who also suffers for his people the pangs of death. But is vindicated by God and triumphs over all his enemies, crowned as King of the nations, forever.