

Lesson 4: Biblical Theology Tools 2 (19)

Introduction: Review of Epochal & Canonical Horizons

In lesson 3 we considered the way in which God has chosen to use the language and structure of ANE covenants to describe His relationship to humanity and His saving purposes for His people. We considered two different kinds of covenants, covenants of works, in which the lesser party must fulfill stipulations in order to receive the promised blessings of the covenant, and covenants of grace, in which the Great King undertakes Himself to secure and obtain the blessings for His vassal.

We also talked about the fact that these covenants, though always involving a mediator, did not simply define the relationship between God and the individual mediator. Rather, the covenant applied to all whom that mediator represented. The result is that redemptive history, the narrative of God's saving activity, plays out in several different epochs, each defined and characterized by a covenant or set of covenants. And so we talked about the importance of not only reading a text in its immediate context, but also in its epochal context.

Finally, we also briefly touched on the fact that not only is there an immediate textual context, or horizon, and a somewhat broader epochal horizon of interpretation. Given that the Bible is ultimately a single unfolding story with a single Divine author, every text also must be understood in its broadest canonical context or horizon. Not only does this final canonical reading allow us to properly see how each part fits into the whole, it also keeps us from wrongly applying or misinterpreting texts out of their epochal context.

THE PROPHETIC CHARACTER OF SCRIPTURE: PROMISE-FULFILLMENT (19)

You cannot read far in the Bible before encountering one of the most fundamental characteristics of God's self-revelation. *Not only is God a speaking God, He is a promise-making God.* From the promise of judgment in Gen 2:17 to the promise of salvation through judgment in Genesis 3:15, through the promises made to Noah and Abraham, to Moses and David, right through to Jesus' final words to his disciples before He ascended to heaven in Matt. 28:20, God makes promises to his people.

Now if God were like us, this might be nothing more than a curiosity. But in fact, God is not like us. He keeps his promises. And it is this conviction of the faithfulness of God that underlies so much of the Biblical authors' frame of mind as they write. They understand themselves not only to be recording the oracles of God, his promises. They also understand themselves to be witnesses to God's faithfulness in fulfilling those promises. And that same perspective gives them faith and hope concerning promises yet to be fulfilled, a faith to which they call us. Here, in the character of God, is the glue, the thread, that holds the diversity of the canon together, and that allowed the Biblical writers to write, and us to read, the Bible with the expectation that promises once made either already are, or will someday be, promises kept.

What's more, *these promises are not simply random good intentions.* Rather, as we read the promises of God recorded in Scripture, we see that these promises together *point to and delineate a divine plan for history*—a plan by God to rescue for Himself a people for the praise of His glory, and to effect that rescue, that salvation, through a judgment that God Himself would bear on our behalf to the praise of His grace. Now what that means as we read the Bible as a narrative of redemptive history is that history itself

is not a mere repetition of patterns. Rather history is heading somewhere; it's developing and progressing toward an end God has already prepared. There is one God and one plan to solve one problem with one solution. What that means is *though redemptive history is linear, it also follows a pattern or framework*. The ways and purposes of God do not change, though the years roll by. History progresses and develops, but not randomly. The present is tied to the past in Scripture, not as repetition, but as development according to the pattern of God's ways with men, leading in due course to fulfillment of not only the plan but also fulfillment of the pattern that gives shape and structure to the plan.

For example, in Gen 2:17 God promised that sin would bring death, which it did. But God also promised to save in Gen 3:15. And so, in due time, God gives His people the system of animal sacrifice as an atoning substitute for their sin. A pattern of death for sin unless a substitute offered is established. We see it with Abraham and Isaac, the Passover night in Egypt, and eventually the entire sacrificial system of the OT. Ultimately, this pattern finds its fulfillment in the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross. There, as Hebrews tells us, a better sacrifice was offered, one that does not need to be repeated, because it was perfect and sufficient. At the cross, not only is God's plan of salvation accomplished and fulfilled, but so is the pattern of sacrifice that gives meaning to the plan. Animal sacrifices and all that surrounded them cease in the NT church, not simply because they are not necessary, but more precisely because they have been fulfilled in Christ. The implicit promise has been kept.

Multiple Horizons of Fulfillment (19)

This character of Scripture as recording a redemptive history that is both linear, but one that proceeds according to a pattern that develops and unfolds, helps us understand another aspect of the promise fulfillment dynamic in Scripture—the fact that *the promises of God (prophecies in the broadest sense of the term) typically have multiple horizons of fulfillment. What's more, each successive fulfillment is not only later in time chronologically, but greater in significance both theologically and historically*. This pattern of fulfillment does at least two things for us as we try to read the Bible canonically. On the one hand, the various fulfillments help us see the way in which the pattern is developing and the plan is progressing. On the other hand, the various fulfillments help us to be sensitive to the distinctive epochal emphases along the way, helping to safeguard us against hoping in the wrong fulfillment for our epoch.

Let me give an example that illustrates both the multiple-horizons and the ever-greater character of God's promise-keeping. Consider God's promise to Abraham in **Gen 12:1-3**, **“Now the LORD said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. ² And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. ³ I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”**

God promised that childless Abraham will be the father of a great nation that will bless the nations of the earth. A few verses later He promises to give Abraham's offspring the land of Canaan. Now the promise of descendants and a great nation begins to be fulfilled with the miraculous birth of Isaac, and then takes on steam with Jacob and his twelve sons. Centuries then pass. But God isn't done fulfilling His promise. A new epoch dawns with Moses and the covenant of Sinai. And there Israel, the descendants of Abraham are constituted by God, not simply as Abraham's family, but as a nation holy to God. The book of Joshua then records the first fulfillment of God's promise concerning the land, as the nation goes in and conquers the land. But God still isn't done. Both the great nation blessing other nations, and the land promise, find

yet further and greater fulfillment under King Solomon (who is himself the fulfillment of yet other promises). Under Solomon, we see the nations being blessed by his wisdom, and we see for the first time, the entire Promised Land, from the Euphrates to the Mediterranean, from Lebanon to the Sinai, under Israel's control. There is rest on every side. But God still isn't done. As Paul makes clear in Galatians & Romans, the true promised offspring wasn't Isaac or Jacob or David or Solomon. It was Jesus. And by faith in Jesus, men and women from every nation are blessed, as they become children of Abraham, a spiritual nation that spreads to the very end of the earth, and like Abraham, they once again live as aliens and strangers. So we know that there must be yet more. In fact there is, for according to Hebrews 4 and Revelation 21-22, the promises of a great nation in the land under God's blessing and rule find their final fulfillment in a New Heaven and New Earth, in which all the people of God, OT and NT, form one new humanity in God's perfect New Creation. How many times was the promise to Abraham fulfilled? I count at least 5 times, all clearly identified in Scripture. And each time greater than the one before.

Questions or Comments?

TYOLOGY (20)

But there is more to the prophetic character of Scripture than the direct fulfillment of spoken promises. God not only speaks, He is also the Lord of History, providentially ordering events and even individual lives so that they serve to prefigure what is yet to come, so that they exist as historical analogies that correspond to future fulfillment. The biblical language for this is types, which simply means pattern or example. *Typology is simply symbolism with a future reference to fulfillment in a later epoch of biblical history. It involves a fundamental relation between events, persons, and institutions in one epoch and their counterparts in later epochs.* But to refer to types as symbols doesn't mean that they are nothing more than fanciful arbitrary allegories or expressions of general truths. In other words, while allegory makes arbitrary and mere linguistic connections between symbol and the thing symbolized, *types involve a comparison of historical realities that establish an analogy or pattern that organically develops and expands.*

Again, let's consider an example from Scripture. In Romans 5, Paul is concerned to explain how it is that Christ's obedience to death on the cross could bring the gift of life to sinners like us. In Rom. 5:14, he refers to Adam as a pattern or type of Christ. **“Yet death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sinning was not like the transgression of Adam, who was a type of the one who was to come.”** Just as Adam represented the human race, and so brought the whole race into condemnation through his act of disobedience, Christ, the second Adam, stood as a federal representative whose obedience brings life and forgiveness for those who are in Christ. Paul is not simply drawing a comparison. He's arguing for a historical correspondence in which the type, Adam, points forward to and finds its redemptive fulfillment in the antitype, Christ. The former helps us to understand and even defines for us the work and meaning of the latter. But Christ is not merely a repetition of Adam. Like the multiple horizons we saw earlier, the fulfillment in the antitype involves a difference in degree. The type points forward to something greater than itself. **Read Romans 5:15-17, “But the free gift is not like the trespass. For if many died through one man's trespass, much more have the grace of God and the free gift by the grace of that one man Jesus Christ abounded for many. ¹⁶ And the free gift is not like the result of that one man's sin. For the judgment following one trespass brought condemnation, but the free gift following many trespasses brought**

justification. ¹⁷ For if, because of one man's trespass, death reigned through that one man, much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ."

We could multiply the examples—Moses, Joshua, David, Solomon, Sampson and Jonah, just to name a few, all in one way or another serve as types of Christ, explicitly identified in the NT. And in doing so, the epochs of the past are linked to the present and vice-versa. But it's not just the NT that uses typology. The OT explains itself in these terms. So in the prophets, the Babylonian Captivity and return from Exile is repeatedly explained in terms of the Exodus; but then so is Jesus' redemptive activity in the gospels. *Like the prophetic promise, the type in Scripture often finds its fulfillment in multiple antitypes, each pointing beyond itself to one still greater yet to come.* Until we get to Jesus, who declared that He was the fulfillment and point of the Law and the prophets. (Matt. 5:17; Luke. 24:27)

Are there any interpretive rules on recognizing and interpreting 'types' across the epochs of Scripture? Yes. Sometimes the Biblical writers themselves make the connection. That's what most of the book of Hebrews is doing, as it explains the way in which the OT Temple, priesthood and sacrificial system all pointed as types to Christ. It's what Paul does in Romans 5 and 1 Corinthians 10. Once a Biblical author makes a typological connection explicit in one text, it's fair to see that connection in every instance of the type.

But do we have any basis for recognizing typical relations not explicitly identified by a Biblical author? I think so, but only when we follow the pattern already set by Scripture itself for types.

1. *There must be a real, historical, and essential resemblance or analogy between type and antitype. King David/King Jesus*
2. *The type must clearly be providentially designed to foreshadow God's ultimate redemptive activity in Christ. Accidental similarity is not enough to make the connection. For example, Balaam's donkey rebukes a false teacher, but that doesn't make Balaam's donkey a type of Christ.*
3. *Unlike a mere symbol, which represents a general truth or idea, a type by its nature must look forward to its greater fulfillment in the anti-type. For example, in the OT, blood is a symbol for life. Christ gives life, but blood isn't a type of Christ. But the sacrificial lamb, whose blood is shed as a substitute, is a type, because it looks forward to a greater sacrifice.*
4. *One other benefit of understanding typology is it keeps us from moralizing and allegorizing the OT. Too often, we tend to move directly from OT example to personal application by way of moralism. David and Goliath becomes a morality tale on finding courage in God. Typology starts with the OT, seeks to understand the significance of the text in its original context, then moves from there to Christ and his redemptive work. Only then does it make the move to application. David and Goliath therefore ultimately gives us insight into what Christ accomplished for us in our salvation, which moves the primary point of application from moralism to worship and faith.*

Questions?

CONTINUITY AND DISCONTINUITY (21)

So far I've been stressing the fundamental unity of the grand narrative of Scripture, as prophetic promises are kept and types are fulfilled in antitypes. But if you've been paying attention, I've also repeatedly mentioned that this movement from promise made to promise kept, from type to antitype, is an organic movement in which the fulfillment is always greater than the original promise or type.

But the difference between promise and fulfillment cannot simply be explained as a difference of degree. *Despite the continuity of the story, despite the continuity of God's saving plan and actions, the movement from promise to fulfillment is described in Scripture as the movement between shadow and reality (Col 2:16-17), "Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. ¹⁷ These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ."* *between a mere copy and the genuine article (Heb. 8:1-6), "Now the point in what we are saying is this: we have such a high priest, one who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven, ² a minister in the holy places, in the true tent that the Lord set up, not man. ³ For every high priest is appointed to offer gifts and sacrifices; thus it is necessary for this priest also to have something to offer. ⁴ Now if he were on earth, he would not be a priest at all, since there are priests who offer gifts according to the law. ⁵ They serve a copy and shadow of the heavenly things. For when Moses was about to erect the tent, he was instructed by God, saying, "See that you make everything according to the pattern that was shown you on the mountain." ⁶ But as it is, Christ has obtained a ministry that is as much more excellent than the old as the covenant he mediates is better, since it is enacted on better promises."* *between mere symbol and the truth it represented (John 15:1), "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser."*

In addition to continuity, there is significant discontinuity as we move across the epochs from one horizon of fulfillment to another.

Sometimes, 1) *discontinuity is required to ultimately fulfill the promise.* So for example, in 2 Samuel 7, God promises David that a son from his own body will sit on his throne forever. In its original context, that could easily be taken to mean an unending dynasty. But in fact, in its ultimate fulfillment, the promised son is not only the descendant of David, but the eternal Son of God, Incarnate of the Virgin Mary, resurrected to an immortal body and given an eternal dominion as Christ the Ascended King, enthroned at the right hand of God the Father.

In other cases, 2) *discontinuity is not so much a requirement in order to fulfill the promise, but the very nature of the fulfillment itself.* So for example, in Jeremiah 31, as He prophesies the New Covenant, God the Father explicitly says, "It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers, when I led them by the hand out of Egypt." How will it be different? For one thing, it will be unbreakable. For another, all the members of that covenant will be regenerate, the law written on their hearts. Yet another difference will be that the covenant will not operate according to natural lines of birth and descent, but through spiritual birth and descent. Here the discontinuity between the Mosaic and New Covenants is enormous: a covenant of grace, not works, a covenant that regenerates, rather than kills, a covenant entered into through spiritual rather than natural birth. And yet for all this discontinuity, Jeremiah is clear that this New Covenant is the ultimate fulfillment of God's promises to Israel.

How do we make sense of both kinds of discontinuity? The New Testament gives us the key. On the one hand, in terms of accomplishing the redemptive promises of God, Paul makes clear in Galatians 3:21 that if the Old Covenant had been able to bring life, it would have. But it couldn't. And so a better, an effective covenant would have to be made. On the other hand, as the book of Hebrews makes plain, as glorious as the Old Covenant was, Jesus is superior to Moses, and the covenant in his blood is superior to that of a covenant sealed with the blood of mere sheep and goats. Superior because it's effective, but also superior because Jesus fulfills all that came before, because He reveals the fullness of the glory of God, because He is the ultimate and final Word of God, because He is the True High Priest and the True Lamb of God, superior because He is the True Temple, where God and man meet, superior because He brings us into the true rest of God, an eternal rest, not in Palestine, but in the New Creation itself.

When we consider the grand sweep of redemptive history, we realize that were there not discontinuity between promise and fulfillment, our basis for hope in the midst of the trials and tribulations of this world would disappear. As Paul says, "If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men." But that is not our condition. Aaron's line of priests pointed to Christ, but Jesus does not descend from that line. For that line failed, and the sacrifices they offered could not bring life. Instead, as Hebrews declares, "on the basis of the power of an indestructible life...[Jesus is] declared a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek" and on the basis of his priesthood, "we draw near to God." Praise God that he keeps his promises, and praise God that He keeps them even better than they're made!

CONCLUSION

To summarize where we have come in this class so far: In lesson 2, we considered some basic tools for exegeting a passage of Scripture. In lesson 3, we talked about interpreting a text within its context of the storyline of the Bible, which is called biblical theology. The storyline of the Bible is structured by covenants, we said, and therefore interpreting a text requires us to look at the epochal horizon (what covenants have preceded it) and the canonical horizon (where does it fit in context of the whole). In this lesson, we looked at three more tools that are useful in understanding how texts fit into the storyline and tie the story together across the epochs. Promise & fulfillment, which operates across multiple horizons of fulfillment; Typology, which points forward, but also upward to something and someone greater than what has come before; questions of continuity and discontinuity, which help us make sense not only of how God has kept His promises, but why. This is a story that points ultimately to His glory, in the supremacy and superiority of Christ and the covenant in His blood.

Don't feel intimidated by the speed and weight of the things we are discussing, we are still laying a foundation before we actually do a Biblical Theology together. But before we get to our Biblical Theology still, let's spend a few lessons reviewing some Systematic Theology tools that will help us to do Biblical Theology better!