
The Use of Biblical Narrative in Expository Preaching

by Walter C. Kaiser, Jr.

Nothing can be more discouraging and disheartening for contemporary believers gathered to hear the Word of God than to listen to the simple recounting and bare description of an Old Testament or Gospel narrative as an excuse for expository preaching. This kind of preaching is nothing more than narrating a “B. C. story” or “first century A. D. homily” which merely engages in stringing verses or events together, rather than attempting to come to terms with the truth taught by the writer in that narrative.

What is needed for such narrative portions is some method of pointing out the abiding meanings and items of continuing significance for all believers of all times. This method we propose to call the Syntactical-Theological¹ Method of Exegesis, which employs the special technique of principlization. While the term “historico-grammatical” exegesis has had the honored place in exegetical procedure since 1788, when Karl A.G. Keil announced it,² we feel the emphasis of that method could be sharpened even more by stressing the *syntactical* relationships within the unit under discussion and the antecedent theology that became the backdrop against which God delivered this new truth. The matter of principlization is one of the most important features in treating historical and narrative texts.

Principlizing a biblical passage is that procedure which seeks to discover the enduring ethical, spiritual, doctrinal, and moral truths or principles which the writer himself set forth by the way in which he selected his details and arranged the contextual setting of his narrative. Principlization seeks to bridge the “then” or “back-thereness” of the text’s narrative with the “now” needs of our day; and yet refuses to settle for cheap and quick solutions which confuse our own personal point of view (good or bad) with that of the

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inspired writer.

No portion of Scripture is more vulnerable to both forms of abuse than the Old Testament in contemporary preaching and teaching. With no less than 77 percent³ of God's total revelation at stake, the Old Testament continues to receive very little and very poor attention even from its friends who rightfully protest so loudly when any attempt is made to denigrate that Testament in its doctrinal form. Why do so many pastors admit to having a mental block or feelings of inadequacy or plain guilt when it comes to preaching the Old Testament?

Very little profit will come from attempting to fix the blame on one factor or another. We all have our own impressions and guesses: shortage of preparation time, topical, theological and even so-called expository sermons which are jacks of all the texts on the subject and master of none, an exaggerated view of the discontinuity between the Testaments, or just plain old-fashioned laziness. Meanwhile, the crisis in evangelical practice grows to critical proportions. It is critical because the generation of interpreters that follows ours will level out their doctrine of Scripture to match our exegetical practice — and critical also because an enormous famine of the Word of God continues to exist in most evangelical churches. We have talked *about* the Word of God without losing that Word itself so that the power of God could be demonstrated to all.

Consequently, all sorts of “short-cuts” and “innovative ideas” are being introduced as substitutes for the real problem of the famine of the Word of God. Substitutes range from relational theology, transactional therapy, fellowship groups, “what-do-you-think” (pooled ignorance) Bible study groups, topical seminars or just plain Christian entertainment in music, films, and variety programs. Some of these (in their most wholesome form) may have a function in the Body of Christ but never as substitutes for the declaration of the Word of God. The formula of the Reformation is epitomized in I Thessalonians 1:5: the Word of God plus the convicting work of the Holy Spirit equals dynamite — the power of God and full conviction of men and women.

But let us be even more forthright. Our biblical institutions and seminaries have been as guilty as anyone else in fostering this problem. The pulpit and the lectern are both victims of over-specialization. James Smart brilliantly assessed the problem in his recent work entitled *The Strange Silence of the Bible in the Church*

when he said:

The predicament of the preacher has been created to a large extent by the hiatus between the Biblical and the practical departments in our theological seminaries.⁴

He detailed his charge by protesting that:

The Biblical departments in seminary rightly make the student labor with care to discern what the text meant when it was first written or spoken. But frequently the assumption is made that, without any further research or assistance or extension of his methodology, he can move from the original meaning to the contemporary meaning as though there were no serious problems in making that transition.⁵

This “jump” from the “then” of the B.C. text to the “now” of the A.D. audience has received so little attention in our evangelical training centers and pulpit practice that it now is crippling our best efforts. Even what little use is made of the Old Testament narrative in our preaching is questionable in its effectiveness or authority as a word from the Lord because we cannot or do not leave enough time to the “priesthood of believers” in the pews to biblically decide whether the assertions made on a given topic are indeed precisely those affirmed by the writer of Scripture.

Our generation is being called upon to test in practice whether the reformers’ principle of *sola Scriptura* is sufficient for a vital, living encounter with our God. It is *exclusively* in the Holy Scripture — all of it — that we alone can guarantee the validity and divine authority of the Gospel, the fullness of the whole counsel of God, the relevancy of the churches’ ministries to men’s needs.

Or is there a new “tradition” vying for equal recognition with Scripture as it has in the past history of the Church? Is not this new tradition the basis, as C. Trimp concluded in a recent article,⁶ for the new growing consensus between the two non-evangelical branches of Christendom? As this consensus would have it, the sermonic “representation” of truth is once again actualized in the preached word itself, but apart from its “then” meaning in the text. But if that is true, is this not the same claim as made by the Roman Church that Christ is actually sacrificed again each Sunday during the celebration of the

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Lord's Supper?

At what a high price is the problem of the “then” of the Old Testament text solved by the “now” of this *sacramental* view of preaching. Certainly, such modern liberal and new-orthodox methods successfully avoid the deadening effects of a dry, antique, purely descriptive, B.C., Ebionite-like⁷ word. But it has thereby also forfeited its right to claim any *divine authority* for its message, since the tradition or preached word is of our own making and not another revelation equal to Scripture. If it is *man* who has made his message “relevant” apart from what God meant, *man* must also vouch for its authenticity as a divine perspective — all of which is an impossible feat unless these men happen to be the ones who were prepared by God to stand in the very councils of eternity to receive such authentication.

If the dry, detached so-called scholarly method is “Ebionite” in that it wrestles only with the historical or earthly aspects of the message, then this “re-presentation” or sacramental view is basically “Docetic”⁸ in that it rejects all historical connections and it isolates the Word from its contextual events into some kind of new “Word-event” of preaching. In that case, every preacher is inspired for 30 minutes each Sunday!

But we must still ask how *can* such historical distance between the first listeners of the Word and later generations be bridged? How *can* the sermon be protected from our superficial analyses of what we consider to be the “human situation” or our “favorite ideas?” Are there some type of “blood-less abstractions” to be found in some type of “canon within a canon?” Or are there “sets of rules” for divesting texts of timeless, rational, moral, and theological truths?

At this point evangelicals are tempted to appeal to the heretical “double author theory” as a license to establish the “dual (or multiple) meaning” of the text, which allows both Israel and the Church to have their Old Testament cake and eat it too. Easy and earnest support is also alleged from the “double meaning of prophecy” and a “dual logic theory” which finds the prophets’ and unbelievers’ understanding to be distinctly separate from the meaning God intended for the Church.

Such bifurcation has been tried historically at Alexandria, Egypt in the second and fourth centuries A.D. and currently in the neo-orthodox existential separation between what the text *meant* and what it *means* to me⁹ — each with disastrous effects. Instead of

glorifying God and exulting the *sola Scriptura* principle, as one might assume, it deprecates the original work of the Holy Spirit and tends to stumble at the same point that offended the Greeks — the scandal of the historical note in Scripture and its particularity which linked its message to specific men in specific times and specific situations.

What then is the key? If the older historical-grammatical exegesis, as practiced by our biblical departments, has left incomplete the job of preparing a text for preaching (especially Old Testament and first century A.D. narrative texts) and many of the current “gap fillers” fall into either Ebionite, Docetic, or bifurcational errors, what is left?

Good teaching and preaching has a two-fold job: it must teach the *content* of truth as set forth in each passage, and it must also suggest a *reproducible method* of Bible study. That is why, unlike allegorizing or spiritualizing, the method of principlizing seeks to derive its teachings from a careful understanding of the text. Rather than importing an external meaning into the Bible — even by prematurely using the analogy of subsequent doctrines in the Bible — and assigning these new meanings to the details of the earlier narrative, which meanings were not in the mind of the original author, we must receive only those meanings authoritatively stated by the authors themselves.¹⁰

The unique aspect of the narrative portion of Scripture is that the writer usually allows the words and actions of the people in his narrative to convey the main thrust of his message. Thus, instead of letting the writer address us through direct statements, such as are found in doctrinal or teaching portions of Scripture, he tends to remain instead somewhat in the background so far as direct teaching or evaluative statements are concerned. Consequently, it becomes critically important to recognize the larger context in which the narrative fits and to ask why the writer used the specific selection of events in the precise sequence he has placed them. The twin clues to meaning now will be *arrangement* of episodes and *selection* of detail from a welter of possible speeches, events, persons or episodes. Furthermore, the divine reaction and estimate to these people, places and events must often be determined from the way the author allows one or another person or groups of people to respond at the *climax* of the selected sequence of events if he has not interrupted the narration to give his own, that is, in this instance, God’s estimate of what has taken place.

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One clear example of this phenomena of *arrangement* and *selection* of detail can be seen in the book of Nehemiah.¹¹ Nehemiah recorded what God had done for Israel at a crucial moment in their history after the exile.

One method of preaching on Nehemiah would be to merely tell the B.C. story and feel that all responsibility for edification and teaching had ended when all the historical events, characters and lines had been dutifully trotted out for memorization. But this can hardly be the total purpose why God has this history recorded for posterity.¹² This is an Ebionite approach to Bible study and preaching.

But will a Docetic approach to Nehemiah be any better? It attempts to increase the spiritual value of this book by what amounts to an allegorization of the text. For example, one such approach will take the 10 gates rebuilt and described in Nehemiah 3:1-32 (plus the two gates added from Nehemiah 12:39 to make the necessary but debatable total of 12 gates) and interpret them in this fashion: (1) the Sheep Gate is a reminder of the cross and the Lamb of God; (2) the Fish Gate is our Lord's promise to make us "fishers of men;" (3) the Old Gate reminds us that subjection to the will of God made relevant involves using the ancient and tried paths (Jer. 6:16); (4) the Valley Gate clearly urges that we be humble (Ps. 84:6); (5) the Dung Gate brings to mind our need for cleansing from defilement (I Jn. 1:7-9); etc. But where has one's authority gone in this situation. If it is argued, which it will be, that the truth is taught elsewhere in the Bible anyhow, so why the fuss, then I say, let's go to these passages to teach those truths rather than staying here. Again, we may be teaching good theology, but obviously it is from the wrong text and therefore devoid of any power or authority from God.

Then how shall we preach from Nehemiah? I would suggest the following topics as those which the writer, under the Spirit of God, would wish to inculcate in all believers:

1. The primacy of prayer to any undertaking in life (Neh. 1)
2. The significance of setting goals (Neh. 2)
3. The principles of successful leadership (Neh. 3)
4. The way to meet opposition in God's work (Neh. 4-6)
5. The way to encourage spiritual renewal (Neh. 8)
6. The importance of learning from history (Neh. 9)
7. The necessity of preserving the gains made in the work of God (Neh. 10-13)

Especially instructive is Nehemiah 6:1-19. It provides a great study on how Godly men handle personal attacks while attempting a ministry for God. Nehemiah 4 had depicted how open violence was an obstruction to the work of God. Nehemiah 5 focused on the need to deal with internal problems if the work of God was not to be damaged. The attack on God's work in Nehemiah 6 was from an even more subtle angle. This time the enemy resorted to ruining God's leader through secret and devious tricks.

The four paragraphs with their repeated phrases, such as "let us meet together" (Neh. 6:2, 7, 10) and "to make me afraid" (Neh. 6:9, 13, 15, 19), help form the basis for the four main romans, or major points, of our message. The means by which these enemies of God's work secretly attempted to counter God's servant were: (1) fraudulent summitry (6:1-4), (2) smear tactics (6:5-9), (3) religious compromise (6:10-14), and (4) the pressure of naive friends (6:15-19).

Within each of these four paragraphs the writer gave God's abiding principles for Nehemiah and for all subsequent writers who find themselves hard pressed in leadership roles. These key speeches in each of the paragraphs are:

1. "I am doing a great work and I cannot come (6:3)."
2. "Nothing you are saying is true . . . But now, O God, strengthen thou my hands (6:8-9)"
3. "Then I knew that God had not sent them (6:12)"
4. "They perceived this work had been accomplished by the help of our God (6:16)."

Thus we are now ready to construct our sermon. God's leaders, we shall proclaim, may use the following God-given principles when they are harassed by intrigue, innuendo, and intimidation:

1. A God-given sense of direction (6:1-4)
2. A God-given spirit of determination (6:5-9)
3. A God-given heart of discernment (6:10-14)
4. A God-given demonstration of approval (6:15-19)

The climactic assertions of verses 16 and 19 are clear as to the theology of the passage — the enemy knew that Nehemiah was doing the work of God, for they perceived that what had been accomplished in the rebuilding of the wall had been accomplished only with

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the help of God. Why then should Nehemiah ever fear them? These two verses are the “hinge” to the passage and what we would call the “central point of reference” from which we are given perspective on the writer’s *selection* of incidents. That the incidents in this chapter were selected is clear from Nehemiah 6:17, which says there were “many (such) letters” and 6:14, which says many other false prophets came with similar so-called revelations and 6:4, which lists four other such invitations. Moreover, the *arrangement* of these details not only reflected the actual reality of happening, but it also increased the need for spiritual discernment, as the enemy even dared to use prophets and friends to defeat the work of God. When chapter six is viewed along with the similar materials in chapters four and five, it is clear that the sequence of attacks in chapter six is not recorded haphazardly. The climactic phrases of verses 16 and 19 offer us the clues we need in locating the authoritative message and use of this passage. The interpreter is now in a better position to suggest possible applications of this authoritative principle in different areas of our modern world where some of these same tensions arise.

But there is more — there is also the question of the theology of the passage. What aspect of the whole corpus of doctrine or theology shall I stress if I am to urge personal response and growth to the ever-relevant Word of God?

We must stress that theology which Nehemiah 6:1-19 explicitly or implicitly had in mind. This theology may be found by the use of quotations from existing biblical authors which made the Bible available to writer and audience at that time. It might also be ascertained from the author’s special use of words and concepts, which have now taken on technical status, or from historical events which were inseparably linked to the continuum of God’s dealings with Israel and through her to all the nations of the earth. In the Nehemiah 6 passage, the theology will appear first negatively from the slur made by Geshem and Sanballat that Nehemiah had messianic pretensions of becoming a king in Judah (Neh. 6:6-7). But it also set forth positively in the very work of rebuilding the walls, which was no isolated act of diligence or heroism, but was itself the work of God (Neh. 6:16) for Israel and, as such, another piece of God’s great plan for history, eternity, Israel and the nations. There was an accumulation of all *antecedent* doctrine about the theology of the land and Israel’s role as a servant and light to the nations — yes, even to Geshem, Sanballat and Tobiah themselves — in the books

which preceded Nehemiah and which legitimately were part of the author's truth — intention and now a part of the interpreter's job.

We propose that preaching will again become effective if: (1) it is *contextually* limited or narrowed in its focus and treated sequentially within a book or sections of a biblical book, (2) it is strictly developed according to the *syntactical relationships* observed within the statements of the narrow passage, (3) it is duty-bound to unleash the part that the *theology which historically preceded* this text had in "informing" this text in historical-redemptive plan of God, and (4) it is composed of *timeless principles* drawn solely from the biblical author's single truth intention. All four steps must be in evidence, or the B.C. "then" will overcome the A.D. "now," or the "now" will obliterate the significance of the "then" of the text.

Accordingly, the exegete must first "come to terms with" the biblical author. Since we know not a syllable from God except through the pens of those who stood in His divine council, we first must go the human author's words. To find God's meanings and emphases, we must discover what the author's were,¹³ first in the book as a whole and then in the particular section and passage we wish to use for our messages.

Key functions will involve reading over and over the whole book, so as to capture its central message in a most concise statement. We will also want to list the major sections of the book and note the precise contribution each section makes to the whole and the relations one section has to another in light of the central idea.

Next, the identification of key words (technical terms, emphasized or repeated concepts) will supply the special language of the author and may be the very connection we seek to link up this passage with the preceding theology or plan of God. Often these terms were "bell-ringers" for concepts already known (to some degree) by the audiences addressed by the authors and, as such, were meant to trigger a whole host of associated ideas and theology.

But these terms need to be put into propositions and this the author will do in a preliminary way in the theme or topic sentence in each paragraph (in prose) or strophe (in poetry). The skeleton of the author's logic (and therefore God's logic) now begins to emerge. We may trace the logical connections the author makes by doing a "mechanical layout" of each paragraph (or strophe) where the simple subject and predicate of the theme or topic sentence will be written out on a sheet of paper, extending from a margin of two or three

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inches left on the sheet for our matching sermon outline. Then every other sentence, clause or phrase will be subordinated and written under (or above, if it precedes the topic sentence) the word it modifies or explains with an arrow drawn to that word to show its grammatical and syntactic (not logical) dependence. Such a layout of the syntax should give to the interpreter an analysis of the function of the various connectors, development of the author's argument, and a visual presentation of the levels of subordination in his text.

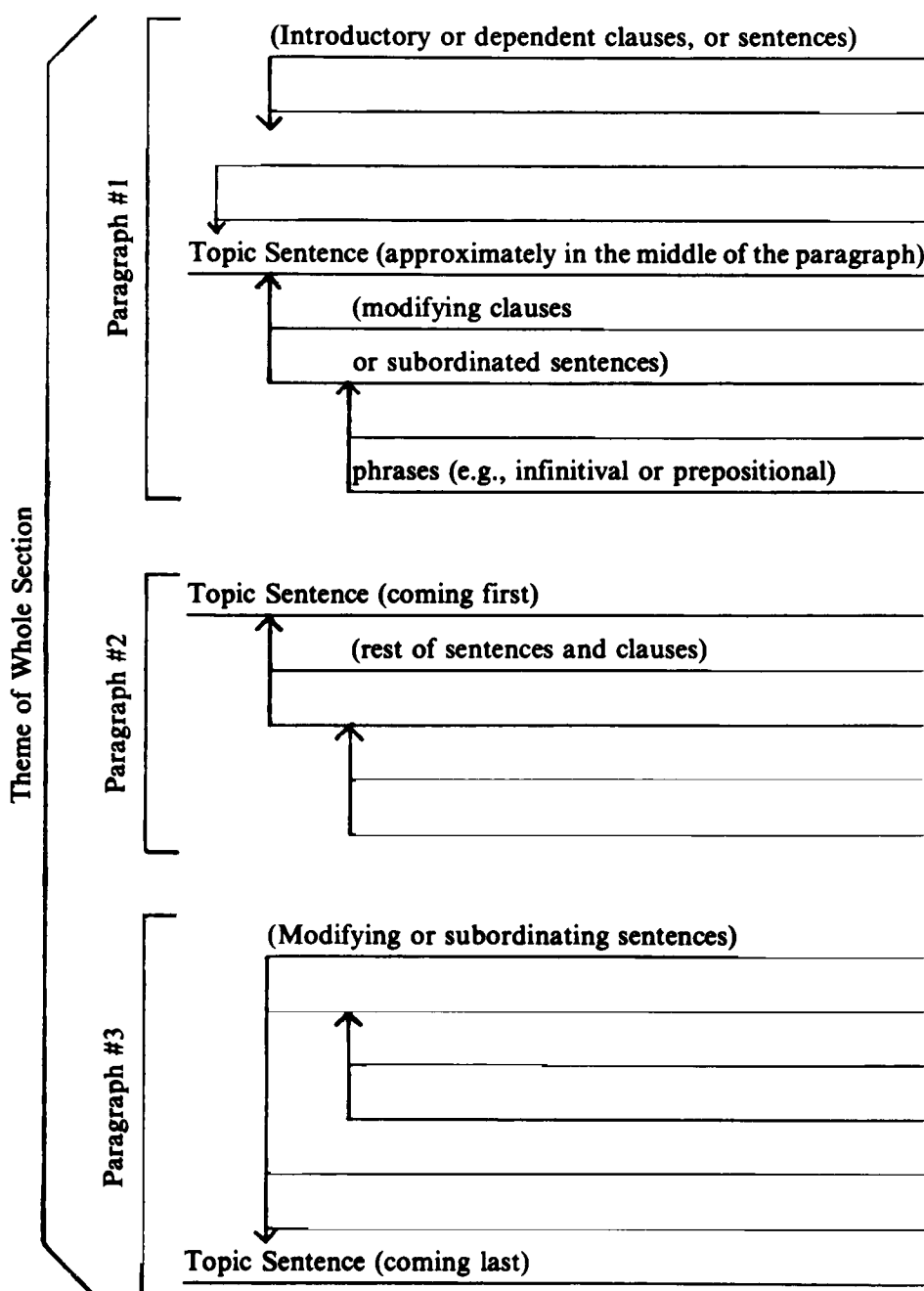
The pastoral exegete, however, must also "come to terms" with the audience, for his work is still unfinished until this is done.¹⁴ This is done simply by taking the previous analysis of the syntax found in the mechanical layout or display of the text and "principlizing" it into message points. Here we must thoughtfully restate the author's major concerns in timeless abiding truths. This must not be subjectively executed. The Scripture writer's major concern or central point of reference and contextual setting will supply the *subject* for the message. The author's key terms and the topic sentences in each paragraph will supply the *main romans* for our message. All we must do is try to make "common-coinage" out of the author's subject and emphases — this is "common-cation," or, as we say today, "communication."

In order to principlize without spiritualizing, historicizing, psychologizing, moralizing, or allegorizing, we must first restate the author's propositions *without* including a reference to men or places in our sermon points. It is only God's person, character, work, demands, teaching and comfort which we now wish to urge upon all men. Second, we must develop our message as the writer did his — e.g., giving *reasons* if he has talked about "because," *consequences* if he has given a "therefore" or "since," and *conditions* if he has developed an "if" argument. Third, we must re-examine our sermon points to see if they get at the heart response — the internal and external changes desired by God from that original audience. Here is where we keep these principles from becoming cold, bloodless abstractions. A simple eight to 15 word summary sentence that gathers up the whole two or three (or more) paragraphs into one statement from the viewpoint of what God was urging His people to do, believe, or say in this passage will give a center and focus to the whole passage. This summary sentence should agree with the focal point or central clause or phrase in the text of this passage. Fourth, we must demonstrate that we understand how those original writers received this new word

A Model of a Mechanical Layout or Display of a Syntactical Analysis

(in Hebrew, Greek, or English)

A Selected Passage of 8 to 14 verses



against the backdrop of the Bible and the plan of God's redemption available up to that point in the history of revelation. Failure to spot those "loaded phrases," "bell-ringers" or "technical terms" with their built-in history of associations with the good promise of God would be stultifying to any live, relevant, warm word from God. This process is what we wish to call the "Analogy of Scripture." It would be wrong to *prematurely* introduce the "Analogy of Faith"¹⁵ under the guise of Scripture interpreting Scripture or the equally fallacious concept that every Old Testament needs to have a New Testament text paired with it if the Word of God is to be heard in the Church. Again, a Marcionite spirit creeps in and steals the *sola Scriptura* principle away by claiming that the text, in its primitive, pristine form cannot supply its own meaning in the progress of revelation.

Such are the processes to be accomplished by the preacher of the Old Testament. The seminary departments of Greek and Hebrew exegesis must also carry the students all the way across this bridge from the "then" to the "now" much as we have described. Only when we have come to terms with the author and studied the text with a steady eye filled with the grandeur of the historical progress of revelation and let that text call forth a personal response from us as the exegete-preacher, will the theology and authority of that text grab hold of other men to whom we proclaim it. And their finest compliment will be this — I went home and re-read that Old Testament text over this past week and God has continued to use it to change me. Or I went home and imitated your method of approaching a passage in another part of the Bible, and has that ever helped me to hear the Word of God more clearly! In our judgment, that's what exegesis and preaching is all about. ■

Footnotes

¹For a description of the "Syntactical-Theological Method of Exegesis," see Walter C. Kaiser Jr., "The Present State of Old Testament Studies," *Journal of Evangelical Theological Society* 18 (1975), pp. 71-74.

²This opinion is found in Milton S. Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids; Zondervan, n.d.), p. 203.

³The figure is from Carl Graesser, Jr., "Preaching From the Old Testament," *Concordia Theological Monthly* 38 (1967), p. 525.

⁴James D. Smart, *The Strange Silence of the Bible in the Church*, (Phila: Westminster Press, 1970), p. 29.

⁵Smart, p. 34.

⁶C. Trimp, "The Relevance of Preaching," *Westminster Theological Journal* 36 (1973), pp. 1-30, especially pp. 6-9.

⁷The Christological heresy called The Ebionite heresy received the human phenomena about Jesus but rejected any and all supernatural claims; Daniel Lys, *The Meaning of the Old Testament* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1967), pp. 38, 150 applies this term to a “lazy explanation of the text” that stops after it has explained its background, its rationale and purpose.

⁸Docetism stressed Christ’s divinity, but wrongly argued that Jesus did not come in the flesh, but only *appeared* to be a man. See Lys, pp. 42, 151.

⁹For the most famous expression of this distinction, see Krister Stendahl, “Biblical Theology, Contemporary” *Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1962), I: 418-32.

¹⁰On this distinction between analogy of Faith and Analogy of Antecedent Scripture, see Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Toward an Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), pp. 18-19. Also Kaiser, “Present State of Old Testament Studies,” pp. 73-74 and 11-12 (see N. 1).

¹¹For a recent and suggestive study on Nehemiah, see Cyril J. Barber, *Nehemiah and the Dynamics of Effective Leadership* (Neptune, N.J.: Loizeaux Brothers, 1976).

¹²On the problem of past particularity and present significance, see already the early contribution of Patrick Fairbairn, “The Historical Element in God’s Revelation,” in *Classical Evangelical Essays in Old Testament Interpretation* (ed. Walter C. Kaiser, Jr.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1972) pp. 72-79.

¹³This point has been argued elsewhere: W. C. Kaiser Jr., “The Single Intent of Scripture,” in *Evangelical Roots* (ed. Kenneth Kantzer; Nashville: Thomas Nelson 1978), pp. 123-141; *idem*, “Legitimate Hermeneutics,” *Inerrancy: The Extent of Biblical Authority* (ed. Norman Geisler; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, Forthcoming, 1979).

¹⁴This point is argued in more detail in Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., “The Current Crisis in Exegesis and the Apostolic Use of Deuteronomy 25:4 in I Corinthians 9:8-10,” *Journal of Evangelical Theological Society* 21 (1978), pp. 3-18.

¹⁵See J. L. Johnson, “*Analogia fidei* as a Hermeneutical Principle,” *Springfielder* 36 (1973), pp. 249-59. After I completed this manuscript, I read the fine article by Daniel P. Fuller, “Biblical Theology and the Analogy of Faith,” *Unity and Diversity in New Testament Theology* (Robert A. Guelich, ed; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 195-213. His rejection of “The Analogy of Faith” as a hermeneutical principle or even a competing principle to *sola Scriptura* is exactly the point that needs to be made.