

Hermeneutical Principles Relevant to the Two Testaments

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Hermeneutics is defined as the science of biblical interpretation. Its main concern is to formulate rules or principles as guidelines for understanding the Scriptures. No one approaches Scripture with a mind that is *tabula rasa*. One brings to the text a “preliminary understanding,” which often determines quite largely what he finds in the Scriptures. Therefore it is important that the interpreter make explicit the views which he implicitly holds. Then he moves on to the formulation of principles that will help the text to speak even in contradiction to his “preliminary understanding.” He must be willing to reshape his entire outlook on life by what he finds in the Scriptures.¹

Today the subjective side of interpretation is recognized as greatly influencing one’s conclusions. To understand the text one must personally interact with the written word. The interpreter confronts the question, what does the text mean *for me now*? James Smart goes so far as to claim that one can not understand the mind of the original author without taking this question seriously.² This step leads to the recognition of the need of the Holy Spirit working within man so that he may have the proper perspective to begin the interpretation task.

The scope of this study encompasses two important hermeneutic principles which are provoking vigorous discussion on the contemporary scene. Both of these principles are based on the belief in the essential unity of the Old and New Testaments.

About the turn of the century, emphasis on the history of religions made a deep impression on the approach to the Old Testament. The

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1. James D. Smart, *The Interpretation of Scripture* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1961), p. 50.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 43.

theology of the Old Testament became a study of the religion of the Old Testament, namely the religion of ancient Israel. The Old Testament was only a source book for one of the many world religions. This method deliberately neglected the fact the Old Testament was part of the Bible still recognized as authoritative for a large segment of the world.³ Although the history of religions school offered many important insights into Scripture, it lacked the vitality to provide a faith through which men would stand in times of severe adversity.

Along with the history of religions approach, the unity of each Testament was challenged. While scholars were occupied with the great diversity within each Testament, they spent little time treating the concepts and ideas which united them. A little over a decade ago there came a resurgence of interest in the theology of the Old Testament. But to have a theology of the Old Testament, one must assume some basic unity among the various books. The underlying unity will be based on the fact that all the books are written before Christ and witness to Yahweh's speaking and acting as Israel's God.⁴

Many scholars have gone beyond accepting an underlying unity in the Old Testament to the belief in a unity existing between both Testaments. The unity is based upon the conviction that the God of Jesus Christ is the same as the God of Abraham or, it is the same God who is seeking out man and revealing Himself to man.⁵ Since the revelation centers in the same Person, one can assume that many of the basic concepts are the same. Also if the Old Testament came from God, He could not later repudiate it.

On the other hand, the New Testament can not be understood apart from the Old. Its writers permeated their works with quotations from the Old. Their terminology gained its form and content from the Old Testament. Some words may have gained a new dimension, but this newness was founded on the thought-patterns of the Old Testament. The Old Testament was the storehouse for the concepts and imagery used to express the new faith.⁶ For instance, when John the Baptist cried, "Behold

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3. Claus Westermann, "The Interpretation of the Old Testament," trans. Dietrich Ritschl, *Essays on Old Testament Hermeneutics*, ed. Claus Westermann, trans. ed. James Luther Mays (Richmond, Va.: John Knox Press, 1946), p. 42.
 4. Hans Walter Wolff, "The Hermeneutics of the Old Testament," trans. Keith Crim, *Essays on Old Testament Hermeneutics*, ed. Claus Westermann, trans. ed. James Luther Mays (Richmond, Va.: John Knox Press, 1964), p. 162.
 5. H. H. Rowley, *The Unity of the Bible* (London: The Carey Kingston Press, 1953), p. 8.
 6. Smart, *op. cit.*, p. 111.

the Lamb of God," his words were rich in the light of the Passover event.

Further, Christ built His ministry on the Old Testament. He did not come to annihilate the law, but to fulfill it. When He replaced the law, "an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth," with the law of love, He based it on the Old Testament. The love of God as man's supreme obligation was given in Deuteronomy 6:5, while the necessity of loving one's neighbor was found in Leviticus 19:8.⁷

In this paper the unity of the two Testaments is accepted. The writer does not overlook nor neglect the great diversity between the two covenants. But while each revelatory event is different, each contains qualities which contribute to the whole. The New Testament rightly claims to be the culmination of the Old. Thus both Testaments encompass the entire scope of God's purpose: the Old sets the stage for the New, and the New indicates where the Old leads.

Assuming a basic unity between the two Testaments does not limit one to a narrow fundamentalist theology, for such men as H. H. Rowley, Karl Barth, Eichrodt, Jacob, Vriezen, and Knight believe the Old Testament reaches its goal in Jesus Christ.⁸ However, it does separate one from the Bultmannian school, for Bultmann believes the New Testament is fulfilled in its inner contradiction to the Old Testament. It shatters it and makes it of none effect.⁹ Jesus Christ as the Word of God is so completely new and unique for him that "the Old Testament can no longer be called The Word of God."¹⁰

PROMISE AND FULFILLMENT

The first hermeneutical principle is the concept of Promise/Fulfillment. The Bible views history as a linear course of action. It delineates the continual movement from the promises of Yahweh to their fulfillment. Although God can break into history at any moment with new events, He usually announces beforehand the coming event.

The promises cover both short and long spaces of time. The promise of a son to Abraham took place in his own life time, that of a land and posterity hundreds of years later, while that of being a blessing to the nations to counter the curse of Eden came centuries later. In the New

7. Rowley, *op. cit.*, pp. 102-103.

8. Smart, *op. cit.*, p. 75.

9. Rudolph Bultmann, "Promise and Fulfillment," trans. James C. G. Creig, *Essays on Old Testament Hermeneutics*, ed. Claus Westermann, trans. ed. James Luther Mays (Richmond, Va.: John Knox Press, 1964), p. 72.

10. Smart, *op. cit.*, p. 71.

Testament the promise of Pentecost was accomplished shortly after the ascension of Christ. However, the reappearing of Christ is still awaited.

The employment of the category, promise/fulfillment, secures the event as God's work. God announced long before the Exodus that He would deliver His people from slavery. By declaring the act beforehand, God made it impossible for the Israelites to say they had escaped in their own strength. The event possessed "word-character": they experienced the deliverance as a direct fulfillment of the Word of God.¹¹ In the case of the death of Christ, the majority of the onlookers saw only the death of another man. However, those to whom God had spoken and revealed His promises realized God was in the event and determining its significance. Only by giving the promise beforehand could the event be shown to be meaningful and not merely another accident of history.

According to Walther Zimmerli, "In Israel the category promise/fulfillment takes the place of the mythical orientation which prevailed in its environment."¹² Israel's faith in God looked back to unrepeatable events and forward to new acts of God. The cult was not concerned with reactivating the primeval events to insure the fertility of the land in the way in which Israel's neighbors sought to abrogate the limits of space and time. Rather, the cult brought to remembrance the gracious acts of God in thanksgiving. It challenged the present generation to be faithful to their obligation under the covenant with God. The cult also inspired hope that the unfulfilled promise soon would be accomplished.

It must be strongly emphasized that these fulfillments always take place in the midst of history. They never lead to the a-historical. As Zimmerli states: "This category guards against every flight into a timeless, mystical understanding of God's nearness, as well as against an understanding of encounter with God reduced to a single existentialistic point without historical relatedness."¹³ Therefore to understand adequately the fulfillment, the interpreter must take all pains to determine the historical situation in which the promise is given. In no way does the employment of promise/fulfillment as hermeneutical principle negate historical exegesis.

The ability of Israel to work within the framework of promise/fulfillment reflected its concept of God. He was faithful and steadfast, full

11. Westermann, *op. cit.*, p. 48.

12. Walther Zimmerli, "The Hermeneutics of the Old Testament," trans. James Wharton, *Essays on Old Testament Hermeneutics*, ed. Claus Westermann, trans. ed. James Luther Mays (Richmond, Va.: John Knox Press, 1964), p. 96.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 97.

of mercy and loving kindness. He would not, and by His nature could not, capriciously change tomorrow what He had promised today. However, the prophetic word is never fixed. God might effect the fulfillment with surprise to the advantage of Israel. The exegete must bear this in mind when treating the promise in relationship to its fulfillment.

The interpreter finds that the category of promise/fulfillment creates tension within Scripture. There is the frustration of unfulfilled promises. The one addressed is required to feel a positive response to the word of yesterday and a hope toward which he walks. However, the time interval affords the listener the opportunity to bend himself to the will of God so that God can use him in effecting the promise. The greater the time interval, the greater becomes the tension.

At times the individual messages appear to be full of contradiction. Zimmerli shows how Isaiah faced this difficulty: "Isaiah sought to clarify the deeds of Yahweh figuratively in the parable of the farmer who does different things at different times, and yet whose total activity is the expression of a profound wisdom. Yahweh remains in the right even when the messenger does not understand the secret relatedness of the individual message."¹⁴

The New Testament understands its relationship to the Old in the language of promise/fulfillment. "The core of the New Testament good news is the preaching of the Today of fulfillment."¹⁵ The Incarnation, when bound to the Old Testament and viewed as an unrepeatable event of history, can not be singled out as a timeless event of proclamation. Thus the Old Testament guards against every "Christ-myth."¹⁶

The category of promise/fulfillment is a method of revelation common to both Testaments. H. H. Rowley observes: "By this is meant that the revelation is given in a combination of personal and impersonal factors. It is given through a Person, yet it is guaranteed by historical events which could not be controlled by any impostor. . . . It is in the structure of both that the uniqueness (of Biblical revelation) lies."¹⁷ Thus the two Testaments are tied closer together, the one as the fulfillment of the other and yet taking up many of its promises and proclaiming them as the hope of the future. On the other hand, the acceptance of this category leads us further from an existential interpretation.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 107.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 114.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 120.

17. Rowley, *op. cit.*, p. 97.

TYOLOGY

The second hermeneutical principle for discussion is Typology. Building on the unity of the Scripture and on the category of promise/fulfillment is a typological hermeneutic. In modern times typology has been under a severe suspicion as the product of the interpreter's fancy and thus as not having a great deal of validity. An example will help to show the extent to which one may go in seeking the New Testament in the Old. From the Epistle of Barnabas:

But you will say, surely the people has received circumcision as a seal: Yes, but every Syrian and Arab and all priests of the idols have been circumcised: are then these also within their covenant? indeed even the Egyptians belong to the circumcision. Learn fully then, children of love, concerning all things, for Abraham, who first circumcised, did so looking forward in the spirit to Jesus, and had received the doctrines of three letters. For it says, "And Abraham circumcised from his household eighteen men and three hundred." The eighteen is I (-ten) and H (-8)—you have Jesus—and because the cross was destined to have grace in the T he says "and three hundred." So he indicates Jesus in the two letters and the cross in the other. He knows this who placed the gift of his teaching in our hearts. No one has heard a more excellent lesson from me, but I know that you are worthy.¹⁸

Technically this example is closer to allegory than typology, but this manner of treating Scripture has undercut constructive employment of typology, and has brought it under suspicion.

Today typology is being revived. Karl Barth has employed it extensively in his theology. Von Rad is a leading exponent in Old Testament circles. Therefore if typology is to be accepted as a hermeneutic means, there need to be some clearly defined guidelines within which typology can be employed.

A type is defined by Eric Lund as "a kind of metaphor which does not consist merely in words but in acts, persons, or objects which designate similar acts, persons, or objects in times to come."¹⁹

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18. Kirsopp, Lake, ed., *The Apostolic Fathers*, Vol. I: "The Epistle of Barnabas" (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1959), p. 373.
19. Eric Lund, *Hermeneutics or the Science and Art of Interpreting the Bible*, trans. P. C. Nelson (Enid, Okla.: The Southwestern Press, 1941), p. 122.

Eichrodt states: "The so-called *tupoi*, if we follow these limits, are persons, institutions, and events of the Old Testament which are regarded as divinely established models or prerepresentations of corresponding realities in the New Testament salvation history. These latter realities, on the basis of I Peter 3:21, are designated 'antitypes.' "20

Above it was shown that the immutable God was interacting with His people that they might accomplish His complete will on earth. However, for man to be in a position for God to use him, his sin must be forgiven. In the New Testament the atonement is wrought through the redemptive work of Christ. However, for man before Christ God provided means for forgiveness which were effectual, not in themselves, but only in so far as they rested upon the work of Christ. Since they looked forward to Christ's redemptive work, they contained many elements which were also essential to Christ's sacrifice and helped to explain the events surrounding His atoning deed. For instance, a sacrifice which atoned for the sins of man required shedding the blood of an unblemished animal. Thus the unblemished life of Christ had to be sacrificed on a bloody cross in order to become the supreme atoning sacrifice. In other words, the entire cult which was employed to atone for the sins of Old Testament man included many features which can help to explain the nature of Christ's sacrifice, because both sacrifices sought to accomplish the same results before the same God. The difference was that the Old Testament sacrifices were imperfect while Christ's was perfect and thus *ephapax*.

The Book of Hebrews draws out many of the types which foreshadow the redemptive work of Christ. The author of Hebrews also implies that there are many more correspondences which the reader can find for himself. The basis of typology does not rest on a view that the person, object, or event has ontological significance beyond itself, but it rests on the conviction that God is leading up to a supreme event and is preparing the way so that man will realize the full import of that event. That event is the Christ-event, the Incarnation with all that it implies.

By placing the basis for correspondences between the two Testaments on God's activity, typology does not negate historical exegesis, but employs it rigidly in looking for the significant correspondences between the type and the antitype. The antitype appears in a brighter and more complete way than the type, as the new covenant foreseen by Jeremiah exceeds the old covenant. The new covenant first restores the old covenant

20. Walter Eichrodt, "Is Typological Exegesis an Appropriate Method?" trans. James Barr, *Essays on Old Testament Hermeneutics*, ed. Claus Westermann, trans. ed. James Luther Mays (Richmond, Va.: John Knox Press, 1964), p. 225.

which was broken and then includes new provisions written on the heart of the believer and enclosing all of mankind.

When employing typology, the antitype must not be expected to fit exactly into the mold of the type. There are many points of correspondence between the two, but there are also great differences. Neither should an isolated fact be claimed as a type to something in the New Testament. Every item needs to be seen as a part in the entire history of the Old Testament, as well as possessing meaning in its own context. Further, the relationship between type and antitype must be substantial, not accidental or superficial.²¹ In these principles the typological method resembles the rules for interpreting parables.

Generally types are not to be used for establishing doctrines unless there is clear New Testament authority for such.²² Their purpose is to illustrate truth and to present doctrine more firmly to the mind. On the other hand, they can amplify doctrines and be correctives to them. A careful study of the patterns by which God works will provide a more extensive knowledge of God.

Typology is a method employed within each Testament. It elevates the Old Testament from a purely historical document to one of proclamation which has meaning for man who lives in the eschaton of Jesus Christ. Since it appeals to the fancy of a lively imagination it must be carefully controlled. Within these controls as a hermeneutic it causes the light of God's Word to shine more brightly.

CONCLUSION

This article has attempted to show the essential unity that binds the Testaments together without ignoring the fact that in many places they are far apart. Both Testaments work on the belief that God speaks and then confirms the Word by an Act. Man's response is faith and obedience.

The study of the Oriental environs of Israel and the Jewish successors to Old Testament Israel clarifies many details and customs of the Old Testament. However, in treating the essential meaning of the Old Testament, according to Hans Walter Wolff, "Only the New Testament offers the analogy of a witness of faith to the covenant will of God—a witness founded on historical fact—who chooses out of the world a people for

21. Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: W.A. Wilde Co., 1950), p. 141.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 146.

himself and calls it to freedom under his Lordship.”²³ Thus the New Testament can provide more essential help in understanding the Old than any other comparative literature.

The New Testament as the fulfillment of the Old provides the perspective to interpret properly many passages in the Old. On the other hand, the New Testament scholar can no longer remain unconcerned about the origin of the ideas, images and terminology which appear in almost every page of the New Testament; as Claus Westermann states, “In order to understand the Old Testament we must listen to the New, and . . . in order to be able to interpret the New Testament we must know the Old.”²⁴

23. Wolff, *op. cit.*, p. 180.

24. Claus Westermann, “Preface,” *Essays on Old Testament Hermeneutics*, ed. Claus Westermann, trans. ed. James Luther Mays (Richmond, Va.: John Knox Press, 1964).