

# The Big Picture of Scripture

## Lesson 3: Reading the Bible in Three Dimensions

### I. Recap

- A. A method of interpretation that demands the OT promises be fulfilled literally involves the error of not listening to what the NT says about fulfillment. It assumes that the fulfillment must correspond exactly to the form of the promise, which the NT shows is not the case, Mt 12.40. In fact, *literalism* assumes that the meaning of history is self-evident, which revelation itself declares is not the case, cf. Mt 2.13-15; Jn 13.18; 2.18-22; Lk 24.25-27, 44-47.
- B. From the NT, we learn that the OT was fulfilled *Christologically* not literally.

### II. Interpreting the Old Testament. Is it *literature*, or *history*, or *theology*? *It's all three*. We're always reading the Old Testament (and the whole Bible) in three dimensions.

#### A. The Old Testament as Literature

1. The Bible is not a collection of 21st-century works. It's an ancient collection using an ancient language to communicate in ways different than we do now. For example, it uses historical narrative, laws and statutes, prophetic oracles, genealogies, parables, wisdom sayings, poetry, laments, and apocalyptic visions.
2. It was as normal then as it is now to use figures of speech, metaphors, hyperboles, poetry, and non-literal language to describe real events. We intuitively adjust to different kinds of writing depending on what we're reading, whether a comic, a headline, political satire, or an editorial.
3. The demands and nature of the literary medium used in the OT must be taken into account in seeking the meaning of a text. We can't simply impose a single method of interpretation on the whole Bible—such as a literal approach—and ignore the literary medium being used by the author.

#### B. The Old Testament as History

1. We can't hope to understand the way the OT functions as part of the Bible without some grasp of the whole sweep of OT history (cf. the next lesson). We need to begin with a basic framework of biblical history, a birds-eye view, that'll show us the main events in the progression of the history.
2. The simplicity of a basic outline allows further detail to be added as one becomes more familiar with the contents of the OT. But it can't be overemphasized that without a sense of the historical progression and of the relationship between the principal events and characters, it would be very difficult to make much sense out of the Bible.
3. The overwhelming conviction of the biblical authors is of the activity of God in history. God acts, not in a fragmentary, arbitrary, or unrelated way, but in a single purposeful span of history—from the First to the Second Adam. The Bible is not a deposit of abstract ideas or even of formulated doctrines, but a marvelous unity of salvation-history that begins with the creation of all things and consummates with the new creation in Christ.
4. This history, and its progressive nature, must be taken into account in interpretation. God is going somewhere with it all and He's moving in step with real-time, real-life history.

#### C. The Old Testament as Theology

1. As far as it's history, the OT is *theological history*. It's God's record of God's own dealings with the world, telling the story of what *God did in history* to bring about the salvation of His people in Christ.
2. So *it's God* who calls Abraham up from Ur, who brings Israel out of Egypt, who settles Israel in Canaan, who exiles Israel out of Canaan, who raises up Cyrus to free Judah from Babylon, and who judges human actions according to whether they're good or bad in His sight. It's this purposeful element in biblical history that makes the Bible unique, giving it its distinctive dimension as redemptive- or salvation-history.
3. Furthermore, it's God's own *interpretation* of the events of biblical history that makes known to us the purposes He's pursuing *within* history, cf. Hos 1-3. It's this interpretation of the events by God that gives the Bible its character of *divine revelation*. So what we find is that God *speaks* in His Word declaring His purposes and intentions, *acts* on the basis of that Word, and then *interprets* the events by His Word.
  - a) *For example*, God told Abraham that He would bring His descendants out of Egypt (Gen 15.13-14). When He sent Moses to lead in that deliverance He told him He was fulfilling His promise to Abraham (Ex 3.15-17; 2.24-25). And after He did it, He told the Israelites that their experience was the fulfillment of His promise to Abraham (Dt 6.20-23).
4. The point to understand here is that this *purposeful nature* of biblical history as God's salvation-history governs both the selection of events *and* the recording of details. The theology controls the writing of the history because the main Actor in it all is GOD.
5. Biblical history is theological history, God's history. Therefore, above all else, what creates the Bible's unity is its theology. And that theological message is one unified discourse from creation to new creation.
6. \*The most important concern, then, in the study of the Bible is *the revelation of God*. What is God saying to us in the record of His acts? What did God do in entering in a special way into the history of mankind? *Our task is to discern what God is saying* (the theology). But we must not separate what God says and does from the *context* in which He says it (the history) or from the *medium* He uses to say it (the literature).

### III. The Principle of Typology

- A. \*Understanding the OT as "the progressive revelation of God's theological history" *establishes* the important principle of *typology*. Typology refers to the fact that God purposely used particular parts of human history to reveal Himself and His purposes by way of *foreshadowing* (e.g. in Israel's prophets, priests, and kings, sacrificial system, etc.).
- B. In typology, the underlying relationship between shadow and substance and promise and fulfillment remains the same, but the initial form undergoes development and expansion until the fulfillment is reached, which then infallibly interprets the original shadow.
- C. The NT recognizes this principle of typology by showing Christ to be the *antitype*, God's fulfillment of all OT promises, but in ways that differ from the actual terms of the promises, Col 2.17; Heb 10.1.
- D. For example, Abraham was chosen as the father of the people of God and promises were given to him regarding his natural descendants and the land they would inherit, Gen 12, 15. And as the history unfolds, so does the nature of the *fulfillment* and, with it, the nature of the *original promise*.
  1. Soon we learn that the descendants of the promise will come through Isaac, but not through Ishmael, and then through Jacob but not Esau, and then through Judah but not Ephraim, and

then through David and not Saul, and then through Solomon and not Adonijah, and then finally through Abraham's spiritual descendants and not through his physical descendants, Rom 9.6-18; Gal 3.28-29.

2. What was in the mind of God when He originally gave the promise and all through its progression in history *didn't become clear until its fulfillment in the NT*. And when it did become clear there was no way we could've known what we were looking at unless Christ, *the Word of God*, had told us, Acts 11.18; 15.11; Rom 2.28-29; Gal 3.26-29.
  3. \*This reminds us of two things: 1) the *OT historical narrative is not self-interpreting* and 2) *the fulfillment of the OT type is not self-evident*. We need Christ and the NT to tell us what the fulfillment is, cf. Hos 11.1 & Mt 2.13-15; Jn 4.25-26; 6.30-45.
- E. Thus, through the stages of redemptive history, the *type* is progressively clarified and the fulfillment of it in the NT is referred to as the *antitype*. The historical types are significant but they're incomplete revelations and depend on the antitype for their real meaning.