

THE ESCHATOLOGICAL HERMENEUTICS OF "EPANGELICALISM": PROMISE THEOLOGY

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1. THE PROBLEM

Amongst Biblical scholars, no question has begged more insistently for an answer than the problem of the Christian interpretation of the O.T. No other issue seems to get closer to the heart of the problem than the concept of prophecy and the Old and New Testament allusions to specified fulfillments, for "whether modern scholars like it or not, prediction was the way the New Testament writers themselves related the testaments. . . ."¹

Evangelicals have not doubted, at least in theory, that there is a unity to be found between the testaments and that verbal prediction of the future was one of the ways this unity evidenced itself. This admission immediately scandalizes a large segment of Biblical scholarship which feels that the Claus Westermann collection of *Essays on O.T. Hermeneutics* (Richmond, 1963) has effectively said "no" to that type of intra-testamental and inter-testamental correspondence; rather the relationships are now to be sought on a level of a typological correspondence; between the events of history (not the words) of the two testaments.²

Evangelical scholarship, while acknowledging O.T. revelation to be a revelation in a person and in historical events, also has found a Biblical claim to revelation on the verbal level. This increases the complexity of the answer to the problem of the amount, and kind of continuity/discontinuity between the Old and New Testament. The questions come quickly: What parts of the text are to be jettisoned and on what bases? What about Israel and the Church? Does our Lord have two peoples or one at a time in the history of redemption? Certainly there is growth and progress in the unfolding of revelation since Hebrews uses the comparative word "better" and Jeremiah and Hebrews talk about a "new covenant." Wherein, then, lies the continuity? In a covenant? In a system of redemption? Or are there distinguishable and conditional economies laid out in stages of testing and failure? What of the mass

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1. Raymond E. Brown, "Hermeneutics," in *Jerome Biblical Commentary*, II, Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1968, p. 615, § 51.
2. See especially in that volume the two essays of W. Eichrodt (pp. 224-45) and Gerhard von Rad (pp. 17-39). The essays of W. Zimmerli (89-122) and C. Westermann (40-49) using the promise/fulfillment category are much the same in their stress on history to the exclusion of verbal revelations.

of O.T. predictions made to Israel and reflected in such N.T. passages as Romans 9-11? Does the Church fulfill them? Interrupt them? Or partially continue them?

2. THE POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS

Two solutions have dominated the theological scene for the past century: Covenant Theology and Dispensationalism. Indeed the historical roots of both systems antedate their popularization and confrontation of the past century, for as Charles Ryrie has shown,³ dispensationalism can be found before the *Collected Writings of John Darby*, (1867), its most famous exponent, in the 1687 work by Peter Poiret, *The Divine O'Economy*, and the idea of two covenants of God with man, one before the Fall and the other coming after the Fall, is to be found in the 1648 work of Johannes Cocceius.⁴

In the meantime, an unnoticed third solution, (while not offered as such) had nevertheless appeared in the Stone Lectures delivered at Princeton Theological Seminary at the turn of this century by Willis Judson Beecher. These lectures with some expansions were published in 1905 under the title of *The Prophets and the Promise*.⁵ It is the thesis of this paper that those lectures not only supplied us with a third theological alternative for the problem of continuity and discontinuity, but they had also delivered to us that one Biblical category utilized by both testaments to present a unifying theological theme and a consistent hermeneutic capable of embracing such varied and diverse topics as the people of God, the Kingdom, Israel, the Church, the Son of David, the Seed of the Woman, the Abrahamic Covenant, and the Salvation and the Triumph of God. That single theme is the Doctrine of the Promise: The *epaggelia*, a word which the N.T. writers used some forty times as the summary and quintessence of O.T. teaching.

This Promise theme deserves greater visibility and more careful inspection as the intramural debate among evangelicals over the theological and hermeneutical validity of Covenant Theology or Dispensationalism continues. Add Epangelicalism or Promise Theology to the discussion of Covenant Theology and Dispensationalism.

3. A KEY ISSUE

However, before we can begin in earnest an analysis or an application of this third alternative, one key issue still needs to be confronted: the great gap that exists between Evangelical hermeneutical theory and Evangelical exegetical and homiletical practice: *viz.*, the role of double fulfillment, inferred typology, *sensus plenior*,⁶ peshet and midrashic exegesis and all gradations of allegorization of the text.

It would appear that there are at least three ways of getting at this

3. Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1965, pp. 17-75.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 180-81.

5. Willis J. Beecher, *The Prophets and the Promise*. New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1905. More recently it has been reprinted by Baker Book House, 1963.

bifurcation in theory and practice, especially as it relates to a view of revelation which happily includes predictions on a verbal level: (1) a discussion of the legitimate use of typology,⁷ i.e., Bishop Marsh's rule *vs.* my creative abilities in types; (2) a study of the interpretive freedom afforded to us by the midrashic, *pesher*-like and allegorical interpretations which are alleged to have been found in Jesus, Paul and the early Christian community, e.g., I Cor. 10:1-11, (Christ as the rock that followed in the wilderness), Gal. 4:21-31, (Hagar and Sarah, as allegories of bondage and freedom), and II Cor. 3:12-18 (the Mosaic veil still present today); and (3) an investigation of the alleged double fulfillment and "meta-historical" senses of Biblical predictions. For the purposes of this paper, we will focus on this third issue since it also is at the heart of the controversy between the two classical evangelical systems of theology.

Is it true that these authors of Scripture wrote "better than they knew" in the sense that they were frankly bewildered or even just plain ignorant of many of the eventual ramifications their words were to take on beyond the sense they directly intended and which their words originally conveyed? Is there a "mystery" aspect to their prophecies in the sense used by Paul in Romans 6:25-26 and if so, what did it concern? Is I Peter 1:9-11 the proof for this division between the literal meaning of the author and *sensus plenior* as intended by God, especially in these predictive sections?⁸

6. See the excellent discussion by Raymond E. Brown, *op. cit.*, pp. 610-19, §§ 32-79. The definition of *sensus plenior* which he gives on p. 616 is "...the deeper meaning, intended by God but not clearly intended by the human author, that is seen to exist in the words of Scripture when they are studied in light of further revelation or of development in the understanding of revelation." The key issue is the fact that the *sensus plenior* was "not within the clear intention of the human author." On p. 607 he defines the literal sense as "the sense which the human author directly intended and which his words convey." Any and all ramifications which his words might take on in the larger context of Scripture are excluded from the literal meaning and belong to the *sensus plenior*.
7. See Stanley N. Gundry, "Typology as a Means of Interpretation: Past and Present," *JETS*, 12 (1969), 233-40.
8. Charles C. Ryrie, *The Grace of God*, Chicago: Moody Press, 1963, p. 49 says "...There are several specific statements which show the ignorance of Old Testament saints regarding salvation through Christ—John 1:21; 7:40; I Peter 1:11". Again in *Dispensationalism Today*, p. 130, Ryrie says the average Israelite's understanding of the Messiah was very feeble "...and even the prophets lacked comprehension (I Peter 1:10-11)." In another otherwise superb work, my colleague, Gleason Archer, Jr. (*A Survey of O.T. Introduction*, Chicago: Moody Press, 1964, p. 20) comments "...the human authors themselves did not fully know all that these divinely guided words actually signified. Because of verses like these [I Peter 1:10-11], we must in interpreting Scripture seek to establish not merely the intention of the human author who wrote the words, but also (and more important) the intention of the divine Author who guided in the composition of those words." So with J. Barton Payne, *The Theology of the Older Testament*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1962, p. 21: "...Even the best of them [Israel's leaders] failed to grasp all that God had revealed (Dan. 12:8; I Peter 1:10-11)..." Also Hobert E. Freeman, "An Introduction to the O.T. Prophets," Chicago: Moody Press, 1968, p. 73: "Often it [the word of the Lord] is not fully comprehended by the speaker himself (Dan. 7:15; 12:8; cf. I Peter 1:10-11)."

Notice what is clearly at stake here. Do the principal author (God), and the instrumental author (the Scripture writer) supply us with one truth-intention, whose meaning is to be found in the intention of the human writer and the sense conveyed by his words or with two or more independent or related meanings, of which one or more of the meanings are totally unknown to the human writer? If a passage does have a double meaning or a multiplicity of meanings, then who or what shall authoritatively decide the limits of the truth of that passage? This is not to confuse the issue of the application of the text of Scripture which admittedly can be a thousandfold, nor the reality of the Holy Spirit's work in illuminating the application of that text to individual needs; but it does raise the question of the authoritative meaning and truth-intention of any given passage. If later ramifications are found to be located in words which a previous writer ignorantly wrote, what shall be the authority status of these more-than-literal senses?

The passage in I Peter 1:10-12 is a *crux interpretum*. The Authorized Version reads:

(10) of which salvation the prophets inquired and searched diligently, who prophesied of the grace that should come unto you: (11) searching *what, or what manner of time* the spirit of Christ which was in them did signify when it testified beforehand the sufferings of Christ and the glory that should follow. (12) unto whom it was revealed that not unto themselves, but unto us did they minister the things which are now reported unto you. . . ." (italics ours).

The disputed Greek phrase is *eis tina e poion kairon*. The R.S.V., N.A.S.V., the Berkeley, the Amplified and the footnote in the N.E.B. all translated this phrase to the effect that the prophets inquired and searched for "*what person or time*" (italics ours) was indicated in the Scriptures they were writing. This interpretation would vindicate the widespread evangelical belief that the writers were ignorant of some eschatological themes which the Spirit led them to record. On the other hand, the A.V., N.E.B., Goodspeed, Williams, and the paraphrases of Wuest, Phillips and Ken Taylor all have the prophets puzzling over the *time* of these events but *not* over the *person* or his work.

The question is strictly one of syntax and grammar: can one dissociate *tina* from *kairon* and render it "in reference to *whom*" or must *tina* and *poion* both be left to modify *kairon* with the resulting translation: "searching for *what time* or for *what manner of time*." The Greek grammars respond in favor of this last option. A. T. Robertson cites Acts 7:49 as an instance of this tautological usage of *tis* = *poios*.⁹ Blass, DeBrunner, and Funk also suggest that *tis* may be combined with *poios*

9. A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek N.T. in Light of Historical Research*, Fourth Edition, 1923, p. 735-36.

as "a tautology for emphasis"¹⁰ and the translation would be "what time." Therefore, if any distinction be observed, it must be that *tina* refers to the time itself, i.e., a fixed period of time while *poion* speaks to the general character or circumstances of these times.

Definite corroboration for understanding *eis tina e poion kairon* as listing only a single question as the object of searching and inquiring (the time or seasons) rather than two (the person and the time) can be seen in the prophet's own words. Daniel 12:4, 9, and 13 make it plain that the "when" of the fulfillment is what is unknown to the prophet. The appointing of certain visions and prophecies "for many days to come" (Ezekiel 12:27) or for "that time" (Zephaniah 3:20) only led all the more to the question "what time? and when shall these things be?" (Luke 17:20; Acts 1:6, 7). Surely Christ should also give the prophets the same scathing rebuke that He gave to the men on the road to Emmaus for being ignorant of his person and work from the O.T. if this text of I Peter so classifies them (Luke 24:25-27). The two on the road were branded as stubborn fools in that they did not believe precisely what the prophets had said concerning Christ! Simeon knew and waited until he saw the child of whom these prophets had spoken (see his *nunc dimittus* of Luke 2:25-33). Anna also spoke in a similar manner for all such knowledgeable people living in Jerusalem at her time (Luke 2:36-38).

The conclusion is of major significance, for the prophets knew they were predicting four things according to I Peter 1:10-12: (1) the sufferings of Christ, (2) the glories of Christ, (3) the order of these two events, i.e., "the glory that should follow," and (4) that they were ministering unto us in the N.T. era. They were ignorant of the same things of which we are ignorant concerning our Lord's second return: (1) the exact date and (2) the circumstances surrounding that time. Therefore, we look for the divine intention in these and other predictive words, but the divine truth-intention as found in that single truth-intention of the human author through whom God was pleased to reveal these words. This is not to insist on a lazy Ebionite approach to the text which contents itself with the cultural, historico-critical approach to the text to the exclusion of its application, as did nineteenth century destructive higher criticism, and obviously this view resists a docetic view which dehistoricizes the text and allows it to say anything just as long as one "gets a blessing" from any and all novel interpretations. It simply says that the authority for any later ramification or application in any his-

10. F. Blass and A. Debrunner, *A Greek Grammar of the N.T.* (rev. and translated by R. W. Funk), Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1961, p. 155, par. 198 (2). See also Charles Briggs, *ICC on I Peter*, p. 107-108; W. F. Arndt and F. W. Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of N.T.*, Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1957, p. 691 under *poios* say "what time or what kind of time." See also Moulton who is in agreement; Edward G. Selwyn, *The First Epistle of St. Peter*, London: Macmillan & Co., 1955, pp. 134-38 and John Edward Huther, *Critical and Exegetical Handbook to the General Epistles of James, Peter, John, Jude*, New York: Funk & Wagnell, 1887, pp. 218-24.

torical period must rest with the single truth-intention and the authoritative commitments of the accredited vehicles of revelation: God's writers.

4. THE PROMISE DOCTRINE

This hermeneutical platform presents us with the opportunity to suggest some solutions to some old conundrums in the two traditional systems of theology. Rather than imposing theological categories over the text or adopting a *sensus plenior* or a more-than-literal approach to many of the predictive passages, i.e., a type of Biblical theology which distinguishes the ancient interpreter ("what it meant") from the contemporary interpreter, ("what it means"),¹¹ promise theology would suggest that there is a built-in category announced by revelation in the text and explicitly understood by all the writers of Scripture to be the unifying theme in both testaments incorporating the inclusiveness of a "corporate solidarity" of all the people named, yet one which can be so sharpened in focus that this corporateness yields up the unique individual who epitomizes the whole group and its calling. Herein lies a divinely revealed solution to the continuity problem. Nevertheless, subsumed under one eternal promise are the aspects of discontinuity and variety which are inherent in the promise itself from the beginning and explicitly declared to be elements of discontinuity by the Biblical writers.

The N.T. men regarded this one Promise as the theme of the whole O.T. Paul argued this way before Agrippa in Acts 26:6-7 saying "And now I stand to be judged for the hope of the promise made of God unto our fathers; whereunto our twelve tribe nation, strenuously serving night and day, hopeth to obtain. . . ." The writer of Hebrews (6:13-15, 17) says Abraham "having endured, . . . obtained the promise." Isaac and Jacob were also "heirs with him of the same promise" (Heb. 11:9). There is the formula: "the promise made of God unto our fathers"; not promises, but promise, not predictions, but promise, not *a* promise, but *THE* promise doctrine. This promise is eternally operative, immutable and irrevocable as witnessed by Hebrews 6:13, 17-18 where God made a promise to Abraham and swore by himself "to show more abundantly unto the heirs of the promise the immutability of his counsel. . . ." Nor does this immutability concern just the "spiritual seed," but the "national seed" also as shown by the prophets prediction in Zechariah 10:9-12, after Israel's return from the Babylonian exile and Paul's discourse in Romans 9-11.

This one promise stretches over the total history of the Scriptures in an arc from promise to fulfillment. Often the language of the promise is cast in technical terms of collective nouns (e.g., "seed") and in care-

11. See e.g. K. Stendahl, "Biblical Theology," *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, I, pp. 418-32.

fully chosen phrases deliberately reflecting a "corporate solidarity"¹² of a representative office or a personified people, which finally narrows down to the man Christ Jesus (e.g., Son, Servant, Messiah, Holy One, Chosen One, Branch, etc.).¹³ In this way of speaking, the will of God remains single and ever open to its ultimate fulfillment in the triumph of the Man of Promise, but the interim between promise and fulfillment is not filled with separate meanings or senses to these promises which will await another and later sense or meaning in Christ (double fulfillment), but rather the interim is filled with a series of fulfillments or historical events which in themselves as corporate parts of the single plan of God, as seen in this representative office or personified people, constitute a further realization and/or "pledge" of the final accomplishment of that multi-form salvation and triumph of God. Hence the expressions are deliberately made inclusive of this larger whole by the writers of Scripture, to denote either the many (Israel) or the one person (Christ) and so Paul argues in Galatians 3:16, 19. This is neither a double meaning, equivocation of terms, rabbinic exegesis or spiritualizing the text for Christian edification; on the contrary it argues that the writers of Scripture knowingly intended that both their readers and our contemporaries might see that the Promise doctrine was a generic unit with a series of parts, separated by time intervals, but expressed in a language which deliberately could be applied and was applied to the whole process: its nearest fulfillments or even ultimately to the crowning fulfillment which supplied the perspective,¹⁴ joy, and hope for each contemporary manifestation. Only on this basis can one explain the "Servant" simultaneously being explicitly designated as "Israel" (Isa. 44:1) and the person of Christ (Isa. 52:13-14) or the "Son" at once being explicitly designated "all Israel" (Ex. 4:22, Hos. 11:1) and Christ (Matt. 2:15).

12. It is customary to credit the coining and application of this concept in Biblical Studies (though under the more objectionable phrase of "Corporate Personality") to H. Wheeler Robinson in his *Corporate Personality in Ancient Israel* (1935), however W. J. Beecher had already used it in 1905. See pp. 265-66, 380, n. 1 in *The Prophets and the Promise* and the *American Journal of Theology* (July 1903), p. 543.
13. The W. J. Beecher discussion is superb on some fourteen terms of this type. In the Baker Book House reprint, it is pp. 263-343.
14. Some will argue that "the analogy of faith or of Scripture" is a hermeneutical tool given to us in addition to the single truth-intention of the author argued for above (see e.g. L. Berkhof, *Principles of Biblical Interpretation*, 2nd ed., Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1952, pp. 163-66 or John Bright, *The Authority of the O.T.*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1967, pp. 143 f and 170 f for "the theology that informs the text." These methods belong more to the discussion of a prolegomena to Systematic Theology than to hermeneutics, for the doctrines and the Scriptures must be established exegetically first before the analogy can be drawn. It is safer to see an "analogy" or an "informing theology" which goes forward in the text (wherein the author expresses the future in terms of the past vocabulary and events) as R. B. Girdlestone pointed out in his *Grammar of Prophecy*, Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1955, pp. 66-75, than a reverse flash-back analogy. The latter analogy must be carefully excluded until it is established on its own terms in the O.T. text.

Therefore, the promise of the "seed" to Abraham is "fulfilled" when Isaac is born and the promise of "a place" is "fulfilled" when Joshua takes Canaan. Fulfilled, yes, but only as "pledges" of the one who can gather up all of the manifold parts of the one promise in himself in their ultimate fulfillment. Thus, a connection is seen between the doctrine of the promise and many of the great doctrines of the gospel, e.g., the salvation of the Gentiles (Gal. 3:8, 29), the gift of the Holy Spirit (Gal. 3:14; Acts 2:33; 38-39; Luke 24:49; Acts 1:4-5), and the Kingdom of God (Ps. 2:8; 45:8; Luke 1:51-55).

5. THE CONCLUSION

Some will undoubtedly wonder if this paper belongs to the "Promise and Fulfillment" school of interpretation as held by such men as Walther Zimmerli.¹⁵ The answer is no! While similarities could be noted and appreciated, Zimmerli is emphatic on the point that the prophetic promise is not a coming *something* which can be compressed into a unified formula such as the prophetic promise (this, he claims, is just a soothing level of interpretation) but only a coming *someone*. On the contrary, this paper argues that the prophets claimed both propositional, and personal, and event revelation.

Others will feel that the promise is only another word for the covenant. However, this is to confuse the content (promise) with the form (covenant). Scripture records that God made many such formal covenants, but he has had only one promise. Further, while the idea of two covenants is not particularly objectionable in itself, the problems of dehistoricizing circumcision and baptism as equivalent signs of the covenant¹⁶ and giving a more-than-literal interpretation to Israel as the Church of God¹⁷ is directly avoided by following the authoritative commitments of the author.

While covenant theology has stressed the continuity of God's redemptive program for the people of God and thereby faithfully exegeted that aspect of the promise which related Abraham's seed to the gospel to be proclaimed to all nations, it has failed to include the other aspect of that eternal promise where that same seed in the nation Israel is the "pledge," symbol or "earnest" of God's presence in man's history and its conclusion. God will conclude history with that same people who were the first to be the "pledge" of his presence in the complete soteriological and eschatological triumph. On the other hand, dispensationalism stresses the different times, methods, growth and progressive revelation too strongly while legitimately sensing an element of discontinuity between

15. See e.g. Walter Zimmerli, "Promise and Fulfillment," *Interpretation*, XV (1961), pp. 310-38 or *Essays in O.T. Hermeneutics*, pp. 84-122.

16. Notice the fine exegesis of Col. 2:10-13 in Leslie Newbiggin, *The Household of God*, New York: Friendship Press, 1954, pp. 30-34.

17. A brilliant exegesis of Romans 9-11 by a reformed covenant theologian is to be found in Hendrikus Berkhof, *Christ the Meaning of History*, Richmond: Knox Press, 1966, pp. 141-153.

Israel and the Church,¹⁸ especially in the judgment themes on that part of Israel not included in the remnant of Israel.

Certainly the two peoples only represent two aspects in that one eternal promise just as surely as the two aspects of prophet and priest signify two offices of the one Messiah.

"Then why," someone will ask, "should such a big issue be made over something which seems to result in what the dispensationalist want (two peoples and two programs)¹⁹ and what the covenant theologians want" (the one redemptive purpose of God²⁰ from the Fall to the Eternal State)?

Simply this: the two systems can only be reconciled by meeting where the Bible writers have authoritatively claimed the divine outlook rested, i.e., in the *epaggelia*, to use the N.T. term, or in the contents of the O.T., e.g., the protoevangelium, Abrahamic covenant, Davidic covenant and its exceedingly rich amplifications in words and deeds. The content of an individual's faith remains the same in all dispensations: the man of promise and his promised work and fulfillments.²¹ The topics included in the promise are larger than just that of an individual's salvation or the provision of that salvation.²² It is a philosophy of history, a triumph of a God,²³ a soteriology embracing everything from the creation and those institutions like government to individuals and their bodies.

While this study has only been programmatic in its approach and seminal in nature, it offers a third theological and hermeneutical system with its dual emphasis on the single truth-intention of the author and the "corporate solidarity" expressed in many of the terms found in that one eternal promise.

18. The continuity term for believing Israelites in the O.T. and believers in the Church would be "the people of God." I Peter 2:9-10 also adds "a chosen generation," "a royal priesthood," "an holy nation," "a people for a possession" and those who had "obtained mercy" (cf., Hos. 1:6-9 for "not my people" and "no mercy" and Exodus 19:5-6 for a "royal priesthood" and "an holy nation" and "a people for God's possession" and Isaiah 43:20 "a chosen race.")
19. Charles Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today*, p. 45-47. "The essence of dispensationalism, then, is the distinction between Israel and the church." p. 47.
20. Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology II*, London: Nelson, 1872, p. 368: "The same Saviour, the same condition, the same salvation."
21. For a different view, see C. Ryrie, *op. cit.*, p. 123ff.
22. For opposing tendencies, see O. T. Allis, *Prophecy and the Church*, Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, pp. 236-62.
23. It is to be remembered that one of the two "seed" in Genesis 3:15 represents the "seed" of Satan which is a corporate term for the anti-messianic or anti-Christian forces. This seed is a "people" also who can be epitomized in a King of Babylon or King of Tyre or in any one of the many "antichrists" that will come throughout history (I John 2:18) until antichrist himself comes. Those who called Hitler the antichrist should received part credit for their answer!