

The weekly newsletter article of Parkside Chapel

LIFENEWS

The Old Testament & The Christian

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by Jeremiah Shawver, Youth Pastor

This month, I want to delve into the profound significance of Martin Luther's hermeneutic approach to the Old Testament. This approach, which extends beyond the reformation of the Church, offers a unique perspective that is relevant to everyday Christian life. Hermeneutics, the art and science of reading texts, is a key element of Luther's approach. It defines the rules of reading and guides us in drawing out meaning from the text, a process known as exegesis. Depending on who you ask, you will get different answers to how we should read the Bible. The reader has a number of decisions to make into how they will understand a given text. Typically, we define the hermeneutic of Evangelical Christians using a historical-grammatical approach. The goal of this approach is to understand the language and culture of the people who wrote and received the text. As it comes to the Old Testament, we look to understand the context of a given text and only apply the scriptures where there is overlap between our experiences and those of the Israelites. This is a good starting point that keeps us from thinking of ourselves as the heroes of Scripture. This month I would like to point out something that is somewhat obvious but important: we ought to understand the Old Testament as Christian Scripture.

Martin Luther describes his hermeneutic approach to the Old Testament as finding the *sensus literalis*. This term means the literal sense. In one way, the Historical-Grammatical approach reaches a literal sense. Luther's concern is, in colloquial terms, that Christians would check their Christianity at the door of the Old Testament. Our understanding would be limited to a before-Christ understanding of the text. Therefore we would miss the sense intended by the Divine author of Scripture. He suggests instead that we read the Old Testament as Christian Scripture. ^[1]

Christian Scripture here means reading the Bible as the story of God redeeming people to himself through the person and work of Christ. The Scripture can be exegeted through the 5 *solas*, specifically *solus* Christus – Christ alone (focusing on Justification by grace through faith). In the New Testament, this is obvious. The authors make clear that the revelation they pass on is based entirely on Christ and the Gospel. In the Old Testament, this is much harder. However, this approach assumes that all of Scripture is inspired by God and His revelation of himself and his will.

Here, we need the caution that we are not David – or Joshua, Moses, Daniel, or Solomon. We are called to imitate these heroes of the faith, but in the stories we read in the

Continued on Page 2

Old Testament, our focus should not be on finding ourselves in the text but on finding Christ. As we read of David fighting Goliath, we see that we are not David. Instead, Jesus is the greater David who defeats our enemies – death, hell, and the grave – when we are helpless. This does not mean that Old Testament texts have no application for us, but this application must be filtered through the Gospel.

So, how should we approach the Old Testament? Firstly, we should read the text slowly, paying careful attention to context. It's beneficial to read introductions to different books to understand the historical setting and religious context. This approach acts as a safeguard, ensuring that a text cannot mean what it could never have meant. For instance, a text can point to Christ as the better Moses – Moses sets up this expectation – but without context, the exact expectation can be missed. The context allows us to understand that Scripture is a progressive revelation of the redemption of people made in the image of God. This is particularly useful in prophetic books, which often dive straight into the content of a prophecy. By understanding the context of Scripture, we become part of the audience with the original readers.

Reading slowly is important because we often miss details in stories, which we think we know, or portions of Scripture that we think are less than significant. Take Genesis 5; this text is mainly a genealogy that moves us from Adam to Noah. Yet, in the middle, we read of Enoch. This short verse tells us that Enoch walked with God until he was taken to be with God. Even before the law is given we see a person walking with God is the one who receives the reward of being with God. The others are described in Genesis 6 as constantly doing evil. We see the faith of Enoch and are told to imitate it in Hebrews 11.

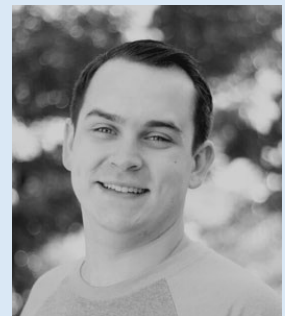
Secondly, we should consider how the New Testament uses the text. For instance, concerning Baptism, the crossing of the Red Sea and Noah's Ark are used as types. These passages guide us on how to relate the text to the Christian experience. This will be especially helpful when

considering how the Gospel writers apply the text to Christ. In this way, we get to the meaning that God intended for a given text.

Thirdly, we should consider how the hero reflects the character and work of Christ or the Gospel. To give an example – Joshua, at the end of Deuteronomy and the beginning of Joshua, takes over leading the people of Israel. He is one of two men who left Egypt and entered the promised land. The reason for this is their faith in God. How does this point us to the Gospel? As a representative of the law, Moses does not enter into the Promised Land, but Joshua leads the people of Faith into the land – we see that it is not perfect law following but faith that will allow us to reach our promised land.

Finally, we should ask what this means for us. Often, the answer is that we behold the glory of the Gospel and learn to love God and Christ more. We know more of God's unknowable love, which he has revealed in his Word. At times, we find applications for how we can love God and our neighbor in ways that are pleasing to God. In this way, the Old Testament is a historical work and Christian Scripture.

¹For a deeper explanation of this: Marsh, William M. *Martin Luther on Reading the Bible as Christian Scripture: The Messiah in Luther's Biblical Hermeneutic and Theology*. Princeton Theological Monograph Series. Pickwick Publications. 2017.



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