

Reading Between the Trees: The Bible from Beginning to End

by

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The Bible is book-ended by trees. Have you noticed them?

Over here is the tree in the garden, of which the people must not eat. Presumably they may climb it, or hang a swing in its branches, or lean against its trunk to eat a snack, so long as the meal doesn't include its fruit. But before they think to do any of these things, the crafty serpent invites them on a disastrous picnic; and suddenly there they are, left with pain and enmity and exile instead of joy and intimacy and home.

And then, a whole Bible later, here is another tree, of which the people may freely eat; and a city that is full of joy and intimacy and homecoming instead of pain and enmity and exile.

Two trees, planted by God the Creator and Redeemer at the beginning and end of the Bible like bookends on a shelf. Whatever we decide to do with the pages between the trees will make either sense or nonsense out of the bookends. Do we read in the Bible one story, or many? Is there a deliberate path from that first tree to this last tree, a progressive revelation that explains this shift from exile to homecoming? Or are the trees just random props in a series of disconnected stories, stories that are maybe myths, maybe symbols, maybe do-it-yourself moral instruction, depending on the mood that strikes me as I read? How am I to read this Bible, between these two trees?

From priestly control of the text to today's unexamined acceptance of individual interpretations, Christians have often resisted learning from the Bible itself how to read those intervening pages. Here is a vision for tracing a path between the two trees that involves an "unfolding mystery,"¹ a progressive revelation that gradually clarifies God's plan of redemption in Christ, from Genesis to Revelation. From its root to its fruit, this divine plan gives the Bible its organic unity.

Seeing the End from the Beginning: The Promises

Let's start with the Owner of the trees, who is also the Author of the book between them. As Inventor of trees and Caretaker of creation, it is God's prerogative to shape his apples and oaks according to his pleasure and will. And it was apparently his pleasure and will to shape them originally for the delight and use of people: "And the Lord God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground – trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food" (Gen. 2:9). In that beauty and provision there is a strong hint of the divine character, and of a divine purpose behind trees and all things made. Paul has the joy of announcing what the general revelation of apples and oaks cannot articulate:

For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will. (Eph. 1:4-5a)

This forested planet, then, was intended to shelter a holy family of God. When at the foot of the one tree holiness was exchanged for sin, and sonship for homeless exile, the Lord God began to reveal the outline of his plan:2 “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel” (Gen. 3:15). And so it is at the foot of the first of these two book-ending trees that we begin to learn to read the Bible properly.

Someone is coming. Who will he be? Where will he go? What will he do? How will we know him? The promise of Genesis 3:15 raises more questions than it answers, but it answers some: a particular human being, a violent struggle, and enmity once again located between the people and the serpent, rather than between the people and their God. The restoration of intimacy through this Man of Promise, the unfolding of this mystery, begins here.

This is not an isolated instance. There are stepping-stones of promise all the way through our Old Testament, as the gracious prophecy of Genesis 3:15 is reiterated and elaborated through God’s specific revelations to his people. Abraham receives a similar announcement of a “Son of Promise” and hears the additional good news of land and mission, as through him “all peoples on earth will be blessed” (Gen. 12:3; cf. Gal. 4:28). Moses learns about a prophet like himself, whose God-given words will demand the riveted attention and obedient response of his people (Deut. 18:18). David finds out he is the progenitor of an eternal king (2 Sam. 7:11-16). Jeremiah broadcasts the secret of the coming new covenant, a law that is internal and a God who is known by “the least of them to the greatest” (Jer. 31:31-35). Isaiah comes startlingly close to portraiture in his description of the suffering servant (Is. 53).

As post-resurrection believers we see these things clarified, as we read with our New Testament eyes, looking back. We in the Church are not the first to do so; after all, Jesus himself “began with Moses and all the Prophets” to exegete the events of his story to the despondent disciples on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:27). But how fascinating to consider that those who could only look forward to the Man of Promise were graciously justified by Christ alone through faith, even though their sight of him was dimmer than that of the disciples on the road. “Abraham saw my day and was glad,” as Jesus says (John 8:56).

And Abraham, it is said, saw the end from the beginning: the unshakeable city of holiness, intimacy and joy, purchased for him by the Child of Promise (cf. Heb. 11:10). Reading the Old Testament, we watch as if over the shoulders of his descendents as, generation by generation, the saints among them grasp each new revelation of God’s plan. It is green and growing, like a shoot from a stump. Their faith is trust that the One who makes things grow will certainly bring it to flower and fruit.

Reading the OT with NT Eyes: Types and Shadows

If the promises are the stepping-stones between the tree of the garden and the tree of the city, the “types and shadows” are the way-stations, treasure houses splendid with christological meanings. Here, too, we are guided by the hermeneutic of Jesus, who claimed to be the fulfillment of it all, and whose Spirit prompted the apostles to unpack the treasures that had been there all along in the Hebrew Scriptures. From the formal “types,” people and things that strongly prefigure Christ, to the myriad metaphors and events that, in hindsight, were hints of Jesus and his work, the Old Testament is lively with connections to the Son.

Some connections seem obvious, boldface figures that shout even louder than the skies about the Lord's handiwork. But some are subtle, easy to miss, just a whisper of divine deliberateness. Examples abound. We quickly recognize the significance of the Passover, the high priest and the annual atoning sacrifices, and that substitute ram caught in the thicket for Isaac. With a little help we can catch the references in the manna and the water from the Rock that was Christ – "spiritual food and drink," Paul calls these (1 Cor. 10:3-4). Dig deeper and strike the almost playful interplay of the roles of shepherd and king in David's reign and writing, and wonder that it was the shepherds of David's hometown who received a heavenly announcement of the birth of the royal Good Shepherd.

In his passing comments and incisive commentary, Jesus occasionally opened an interpretive window onto an Old Testament figure or event, suddenly endowing a familiar passage with arresting newness. What did his hearers make of his claims about the manna, or "the sign of Jonah," or Solomon's temple, or Isaiah's Spirit-filled "Servant"? Well, those who should have known him had him killed; if anyone thought that all of these sacred and ancient things referred to himself, they reasoned, he must have a God-complex. What shall we now make of these claims, this permission given to believers to read the Old Testament with New Testament eyes?

The Errors, Take One

Fallen humans that we are, we are likely to err either on the side of over-application, or on the side of indifference and ignorance. On the one hand, there is a great temptation to "run" with Old Testament passages once we have grasped the concept that "it's all about Jesus": suddenly we see him everywhere, in every leaf and stone! On the other, there is the temptation of narcissism, that is, of mining the Scriptures of both testaments primarily for moral guidance and spiritual uplift – "it's all about me."

From the ancient church to the Reformation, the first of these tendencies often resulted in spiritualized, allegorical interpretations that ignored the context and downplayed the historicity of narratives. By the Middle Ages, the church had perfected a four-part form of interpretation called the quadriga, Latin for "four-horse chariot," in which the symbolic, moral, and eschatological steeds had clear priority over the lowly historical nag. A favorite allegorical justification for this kind of reading is drawn from the Song of Songs. According to one twelfth-century commentary, the Bridegroom (Christ) introduces his wife (the human soul) into a chamber (holy Scripture), in which there are "four large jars of honeyed sweetness" (corresponding to the four senses contained in Scripture). Uneducated commoners may drink from the first jar (history), but more perfected individuals with greater spiritual capacity can be refreshed (and eventually intoxicated) by the more potent contents of the other three.[i]

Making a passage run on all four "horses" took such spiritual acumen – if not, from our point of view, such imaginative license – it is no wonder the heads of the Church sought to keep the reins firmly in their own hands. Were the rabble to try to drive the quadriga, who knew where it would end up?

The Errors, Take Two

Yet placing the Scriptures in the hands of the common people was precisely Martin Luther's intent when he protested against Rome. Through translation and pastoral instruction, Luther encouraged the laity to take responsibility for at least some of their own biblical education. In doing so, he challenged the hierarchy and hermeneutic of the Roman Catholic Church, rejecting the notion that the "Mother

Church” was alone competent to discover what the Scriptures meant. Neither was the Bible a magic book, accessible only to a privileged, super-spiritual few who could decipher its cryptic symbolism. Rather, even as Christians themselves comprised a royal priesthood, needing only one mediator, Jesus Christ, so the Scriptures were inherently clear in their proclamation of real, redemptive history and the gospel, and could be understood by anyone regarding matters of salvation.

For the Reformers, the doctrines of the clarity of Scripture and the priesthood of believers went hand in hand with the implicit expectation of responsible exegesis, knowledgeable pastoral guidance, and the humble attitude of the reader.[ii] Among contemporary evangelical Protestants, however, these doctrines often seem to be coupled instead with the democratic assumption that every believer’s opinion about a passage is equally acceptable. Whether this assumption is a product of postmodernist thinking, fundamentalist anti-intellectualism, or a well-meaning but untutored graciousness (among other possibilities) probably depends on the context in which it is found. In any case, the results are the same: teaching and sharing about Scripture that is too often moralistic, self-centered, or inventively spiritualized, rather than Christ-centered and guided by Scripture.

When we know what to look for, we begin to recognize exegetical individualism everywhere, from Sunday morning instruction to Christian publications, and also in our own conversation. We are startled to hear a novel interpretation offered in the firm tone of authoritative doctrine. We suspect an author of favoring a particular translation because it confirms his point. We discern in ourselves and others a tendency to jump from a key word to a moral or uplifting application without much regard for text or context. We wonder if Jesus had to die in order to make a pastor’s message true, or if an unbeliever could have arrived at the same conclusions. We sometimes even find ourselves puzzling over allegories worthy of Origen – for example, “Elizabeth was barren because she didn’t trust God; she stands for all of us who refuse to let the Lord do his work in us.”

Such individual conclusions betray a remarkable indifference to “the way the words go” in the biblical text,[iii] from grammatical categories (e.g., indicatives and imperatives) to the overarching storyline. Often this sort of hasty exegesis is excused via an appeal to the doctrine of illumination. It is true that as believers in Christ we may trust that the Holy Spirit is actively illuminating our minds as we read the Bible; but it is also true that we are to read it in community, enjoying the help of those whom God has placed among us and particularly gifted as teachers. Especially if we are newly developing a working familiarity with this clear but complex book, we will do well to lean on those whose grasp of the Bible’s own “big picture” of redemptive history offers a counterweight to our tendency to let our imaginations or our natural self-centeredness run away with our exegesis. Rather than bowing to ecclesiastical control of interpretation, and in contrast to our culture’s elevation of the individual, acknowledging both the learning curve of exegesis and the God-given gifts of preaching and teaching is a sign of wisdom and humility before the biblical text.

Reading Both Testaments with Jesus

How are we to learn to read our Bibles responsibly, then, between the two trees? First by recognizing in the unfolding mystery of redemptive history an organic unity, like the trunk of a great oak; then by remembering that the roots of the Son of God incarnate are in a real human family, whose history is also written in this book; and, finally, by the light of the leaves of the New Testament, which is our only reliable guide for identifying the rich christological treasures stored in the Old Testament narratives and prophecies. “Do not go beyond what is written,” Paul warns the Corinthians (1 Cor. 4:6); here a corollary might be, “Find out what is written,” lest we let our imaginations and emotions be our guides.

Will we recognize Christ in the Old Testament in places that are not confirmed in the New? It is very likely. Can we receive moral instruction and examples from the narratives in the Scriptures? Most certainly. May we pause to consider how a passage resonates with our own hearts and lives? Absolutely. But let us be neither dogmatic about our typological conclusions, nor content to see only ourselves in these pages. It matters deeply that we fix our eyes on the unfolding story of Christ, given our propensity to try somehow to save and perfect ourselves. Jesus alone can lead us from the country of enmity and exile to the warm welcome that awaits us at his Father's house.

It is also vital that we not assume we have reached the end of the story when we arrive at the manger in Bethlehem, or even the cross at Calvary. The Epistles are more than just a post-script to Jesus' earthly ministry, the section of the Bible that we mine for tips on Christian living – tips which we sometimes feel are rather inconveniently buried in all kinds of extraneous theologizing! No, this teaching, too, is from Christ himself, no less than when he lectured on the mountain in Galilee; but it is imbued now with the clarifying power of resurrection life.

In the Gospels, the Lord Jesus stands at the junction between the testaments, directing us to see himself as both their author and their subject. Even as he speaks newness into so many Old Testament passages and figures, so do his teachings bear in seed-form all of the content of the rest of the New Testament. In Thomas Bernard's words, "Every doctrine expanded in the Epistles roots itself in some pregnant saying in the Gospels...The words of Prophets on the one side, and of Apostles on the other, are forever justified and maintained by the words of him who came between them." [iv]

So – "I am the door," proclaims Jesus; and, "You know the way to the place where I am going" (Jn. 10:7,9 ESV; 14:4). The expressions are bewildering without the further teaching of the Master, which comes now through the writer to the Hebrews:

"Therefore, brothers,...we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body" (Heb. 10:19-20);

...and now through Paul: "For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit...We have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into the grace in which we now stand" (Eph. 2:18, Rom. 5:1-2).

Having entered through the crucified body of Jesus, we stand in grace – that is, peace granted in place of enmity, joy in place of grief, adoption in place of alienation. Definitively saved, we are being kept safe now to walk in love; and one day we will arrive safely home at that City where the Tree of Life grows, whose leaves are for the healing of the nations. This is the true end of the story, which Abraham glimpsed; and really, it is another beginning – planned before the beginning of time by the Inventor and Creator of trees and all things made, who intends after all to dwell forever with his beloved people.

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1 Ed Clowney, ***The Unfolding Mystery*** (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1988).

2 Ibid., p.37.

3 Manna: John 6; Jonah: Mt. 12:39-41; Lk. 11:29-32; Temple: Mt. 12:6; 26:61; 27:40; Mk. 14:58; 15:29; Jn. 2:19-21; Servant: Lk. 4:18-21.

[i] Henri de Lubac, ***Medieval Exegesis: The Four Senses of Scripture***, Vol. 2. Tr. E.M. Macierowski. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), p.191.

[ii] James Callahan, ***The Clarity of Scripture*** (Downers Grove, IL:InterVarsity Press, 2001), pp.140-147.

[iii] Ibid., p.215.

[iv] Thomas Bernard, ***The Progress of Doctrine in the New Testament*** (London: Pickering and Inglis, 1864), pp.60-61.