

Preaching Christ from the Old Testament: A Review of Elliott Johnson and Vern Poythress

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REVIEW OF ELLIOTT JOHNSON, "EXPOSITORY PREACHING AND CHRISTO-PROMISE"

It is a privilege to comment on Elliott Johnson's essay, since I was a former student of his at Dallas Theological Seminary. His essay is brief. He writes in order "to demonstrate that a grammatical interpretation of various Old Testament (OT) mentions of promise includes the presence of Christ" (p. 36). Accordingly, this promise is unfolded as redemptive history progresses. He makes an important hermeneutical conclusion: biblical authors, like Moses, intend to express that Christ is the ultimate object of the promises (e.g., of the Abrahamic promise that his seed will bless all the nations) and that this authorial intent could be understood by readers of the time, despite whether or not there is any evidence that they, in fact, did understand. He successfully demonstrates this through his discussion of a few OT texts, especially texts from Genesis: Genesis 3:15; 12:1-3; 15:1-6;

2 Samuel 7:11b-16; and Psalm 16:10.

There is, of course, much more that Johnson could have discussed that would have further supported his argument. He cites 2 Corinthians 1:20 (“For every one of God’s promises is ‘yes’ in him”), which supports the notion that all of God’s promises in the OT begin fulfillment with Christ’s first coming and will be consummated in him at his final coming. Likewise, Johnson adduces Luke 24:27: “beginning in Moses and all the prophets he (Jesus) expounded to them in all the Scripture things concerning himself” (HCSB). Elliott never tells us to what “all the Scripture” refers. Does it refer only to those places where there is direct verbal prophecy of the Messiah or where there are promises that ultimately look forward to him (the latter of which he focuses upon in his essay)? Or, does “all the Scripture” include not only these direct prophetic or promissory assertions but also, in some way, the other portions of Scripture containing historical narratives and wisdom literature? In other words, is “all the Scripture” to be understood in the former qualified sense or is it unqualified, so that in some way every part of Scripture (including every verse) concerns Christ. Johnson *appears* to favor the qualified perspective though he never explicitly says. Of particular note are the wide swaths of material composed of historical narratives. It would have been helpful to hear how Johnson viewed this material in relation to Christ.

Thus, as far as it goes, Johnson’s essay on finding Christ in the OT was fine, but one wonders what he would say about those vast portions of Scripture that do not contain direct prophecies and promises about the Messiah.

I have a quibble on another issue that Johnson raises. He says that Christ was not prophesied to “replace those called from the human race, Israel, but would represent them that they might realize the role to which they were called” (p. 44). (Since Johnson is a dispensationalist, his point here is that Christ’s coming as true Israel would not cancel out ethnic Israel’s future possession of their land and reign with their messianic king in a premillennial kingdom. I would rather say that Jesus sums up Israel in himself and is the continuation of true Israel and that all, whether ethnic Jew or Gentile, who identify with Christ become part of true Israel (so Gal 3:16, 29). This would leave open an amillennial, postmillennial or premillennial perspective. Obviously, I cannot delve more into this issue,

since Johnson only raises it briefly. Perhaps there will be another occasion when Johnson and I can discuss this issue in more detail.

REVIEW OF VERN POYTHRESS ON “CHRISTOCENTRIC PREACHING”

I am happy to evaluate Vern Poythress’s essay, since he is a colleague of mine at Westminster Seminary (Philadelphia) and we have had many conversations about biblical interpretation and hermeneutics.

Poythress has a multifaceted perspective on how Genesis 15:1-6 relates to Christ and, as such, he raises many issues for which there is not space to respond to all of them. He begins by making some general introductory comments. First, he says that preaching should not be Christomonic. One should not focus only on Christ’s incarnation but should also pay attention to his pre-existence. In addition, Christ-centered interpretation should be accompanied by Trinity-centered interpretation, since Christ is to be understood as being a person of the Trinity, in relation to the Father and the Spirit. This is a good corrective, but it needs to be recalled that the NT is dominated by portrayals and discussions of Jesus Christ much more than by mention of God the Father or the Holy Spirit. Therefore, it is suitable that in preaching a passage from the OT and putting it into the context of the Bible’s storyline that climaxes with Christ in the NT, the preacher should be focused more on how the specific passage is related to Christ than to other persons of the Trinity (indeed, Poythress does later acknowledge in the last sentence of his essay [pp. 65-66] the “principal importance of Christ in teaching in the church”).

Secondly, Poythress acknowledges that expository preaching is preferable over other homiletical approaches, though he never mentions them (I assume he has in mind various forms of “topical” preaching). However, he says that Scripture does not restrict preaching to the expository preaching form, especially since one cannot find examples of expository preaching in Acts or the epistles. But one can find something close to expository preaching in various segments of the NT that are based on whole segments from the OT.¹ Furthermore, in the only place in the OT where a worship service in the temple court is elaborated on in some detail, the priests “read from the book, from the law of God, explaining to give the sense so that they understood the reading” (Neh 8:8; so also 8:7). This appears to be an

extended time of consecutive reading of the Torah (Neh 8:2-3), though it is not clear where they commenced reading. Finally, should we not give contemporary congregations the opportunity to hear books of the Bible consecutively read (e.g., Paul's epistles) and commented on in the same way in which the first century Christians were able to experience hearing letters read, which later became Scripture (e.g., see Rev 1:3)?² Such preaching over the years will ensure that congregations will hear the "whole counsel of God" (Acts 20:27). For these reasons, I would say that expository preaching is not only preferable but should be the rule rather than the exception.³

Among Poythress's multifaceted ways of relating Christ to Genesis 15:1-6 is that of placing the passage in its canonical context and storyline: "because God has a plan from the beginning, we may also consider how all this history leads to Christ," and Genesis 15:5 concerning Abraham's seed "offers us one point on this developing line" (p. 57). Thus, "a sermon focused on verse 5 could dwell on how Christ brings to fulfillment the covenantal promises in the verse" (p. 59).

Poythress also sees a typology of Christ in the Genesis 15 text:

Also, the redemptive plot that consists in the movement from distress to deliverance is typological in its relation to the antitype of redemption accomplished by Christ.

Here in Genesis 15:1-6 are found many of these themes. In particular, the obstacle is that Abram has no proper heir. It is a trial, corresponding to the trials of Christ and of Christians. The answer is given in terms of the character of God and his promises. Near fulfillment is found in Genesis 21, when Isaac is born, after overcoming the threat in Genesis 20. This deliverance is typologically related to the climactic deliverance in the death and resurrection of Christ (p. 60).

Poythress could have adduced Hebrews 11:17-19 in support of this (perhaps he is assuming it). While I agree with Poythress's interpretation here (and his proposal on "covenantal fulfillment" above), I do not think it is the central exegetical focus of Genesis 15:1-6, but that his typological view is included in what I would call the "cognitive peripheral vision"⁴ or "tacit or subsidiary knowledge"⁵ of the biblical writer. That is, one must go to other passages in the OT and NT to validate the interpretation. Another way to put this is if you asked Moses at this point whether or not he had such a

typological view, he might say “yes” but this was not his explicit conscious authorial intention. Geerhardus Vos puts it a bit differently,

Our dogmatic constructions of truth based on the finished product of revelation, must not be imported into the minds of the original recipients of revelation. The endeavor should be to enter into their outlook and get the perspective of the elements of the truth as presented to them. There is a point in which the historic advance and the concentric grouping of the truth are closely connected. Not seldom progress is brought about by some element of truth, which formerly stood in the periphery, taking its place in the center. The main problem will be how to do justice to the individual peculiarities of the agents in revelation.⁶

A number of Poythress’s interpretations of Genesis 15:1-6 are, in my opinion, to be placed in this “tacit” category. For example,

Ever since the fall, God’s speech needs to be mediated to avoid death of the recipient. The mediator is the Son, the Word. Because of the necessity of mediation, we can confidently infer the presence of Christ and his work when God speaks to Abram. Christ’s role in Genesis 15:4 anticipates his incarnation and verbal ministry on earth (p. 61).

I would need for Dr. Poythress to explain this in, at least, one more paragraph for me to understand this better and for me even then to place it in the tacit category.⁷

One of Poythress’s interpretations cannot even be placed in the tacit category. He says that the phrase in Genesis 15:4, “the word of the Lord came ...” “hints at a differentiation between God who is the origin and the word that” comes from God but as distinct from his as speaker. This “adumbrates the fuller NT revelation of the distinction between God the Father and the Word, the Son” (p. 63). Dr. Poythress would have to elaborate in much more depth to present a convincing case that this “adumbration” is present in Genesis 15:4.

Similarly, on the same page, Poythress says that “the coming of the word” [in Genesis 15:4] is a coming of God that is by grace,” and that “as such it ... foreshadows the climactic coming in Christ” (p. 63). He then cites Hebrews 1:1 in support (p. 63), but that passage does not present Christ as God’s word that came but one through whom the word of God

came: that, just as God spoke through OT prophets, now “in these last days he has spoken to us through his Son.”

I have similar caution concerning Poythress’s statement about the trinity:

The actions of God in history reflect the eternal trinitarian relations of action. The Father begets the Son eternally. This eternal begetting has a reflection in the causal unfolding of time on the level of the creature. Thus, the before-and-after structure articulated in the word after in Genesis 15:1 reflects the priority and posteriority of begetting and begotten in the Trinity (p. 65).

This appears to me to be an unnecessary reading in of a theological point that cannot be found even tacitly in Genesis 15:1. Now, it may be that there are *philosophical-theological* implications of Genesis 15:1 that could ultimately relate it to the “before-and-after structure” of the Trinity, but this appears to be something different than the *hermeneutical* christological implications of Genesis 15:1-6.⁸

Truly, Dr. Poythress’s essay is far-reaching and represents a multiperspectival stance on Genesis 15:1-6. I have registered agreements, qualifications, and some disagreements. However, I am confident that if I sat down with my colleague to discuss my disagreements that he would “be ready to make a defense ... for the hermeneutical hope in him, yet with gentleness and reverence” (cf. 1 Pet 3:15).

MY OWN VIEW OF LUKE 24:27

This conclusion serves as a partial response to Elliott Johnson’s perspective on Luke 24:27.⁹ First, I think “all the scriptures” in this verse includes every portion of OT scripture, including every verse. This may sound like an extreme, maximalist view, but I would contend that “all the scriptures” refers not only to explicit messianic prophecies but also to historical narratives that were typological foreshadowings of Christ or had their indirect fulfillments in Christ. Does this mean that every verse in the OT has to do with Christ? Well, yes and no. Graeme Goldsworthy has summarized this “yes and no” answer aptly:

While some texts may be more peripheral to the main message, no text is totally

irrelevant. Thus, an event or person in the historical narratives of the Old Testament may never be specifically mentioned again. But it functions theologically within its own epoch, even if only to be one of the less prominent events or people in the outworking of God's plan. It will always be part of a larger whole whose theological significance can be determined.¹⁰

In this respect, such *apparently insignificant* events are part of and are inextricably linked to larger narratives that point more clearly to Christ. So to whatever degree these apparently insignificant events or persons are inextricably linked thematically to the larger narratives, to that degree they have Christological significance.

My interpretation of Luke 24:27 may best be explained by an illustration adapted from C. H. Spurgeon.¹¹ In every town, village, and tiny hamlet in England there is a road leading to London. In the smallest hamlet there is a path leading to a tiny village. This pathway may be going in the opposite direction of London. Then from this village there is a small road leading to a larger village, which may be going parallel with London. From there is a larger road leading to a town, which is curving toward London. From that town is a major road going in the general direction of London. Finally, from that town is a highway going directly to London. Not all the paths and roads from each town go in a straight line toward London but they eventually get you to London. We may call this a "Londonocentric" view of road systems in England. Likewise, a "Christocentric" view of all the passages in the OT may not appear to be going in the direction of Christ but they are parts of larger wholes that more clearly point to or prophesy of Christ. It is in this sense that Christ says in Luke 24:27 that "he explained to them **in all the scriptures** the things concerning himself."

¹ Examples may be found in Jesus's own synoptic eschatological discourse that is based on Daniel 7-12, in Revelation 4-5 (based on Daniel 7), 13:1-18 (based on Daniel 7), and Galatians (possibly based on Isaiah 49-55). In fact, the same kind of examples based on Daniel 7 or Daniel 11-12 can also be found in early Jewish writings (on all the passages adduced in this note, see G. K. Beale, *A Handbook on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2012), 80-86.

² We know that among the roles of Greco-Roman and Jewish letter carriers was that of explaining parts of the letter as they read it (on which, e.g., see Beale, *Handbook*, 10).

³ We have not yet defined expository preaching, but for a good definition see Sidney Greidanus: "Expository preaching is 'Bible-centered preaching.' That is, it is handling the text 'in such a way that its real and

essential meaning as it existed in the mind of the particular Biblical writer [and of God] and as it exists in the light of the over-all context of Scripture is made plain and applied to the present-day needs of the hearers." (The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988], 11, citing Merrill Unger, *Principles of Expository Preaching* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1955], 33). I would add here that such preaching goes through biblical books consecutively, paragraph by paragraph.

- ⁴ For this concept, see G. K. Beale, "The Cognitive Peripheral Vision of Biblical Writers," *Westminster Theological Journal* 76 (2014): 263-293.
- ⁵ On which see further Michael Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension* (Garden City: Doubleday & Co. 1966), 10-19, 55-62, 92-93.
- ⁶ Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948), 25-26.
- ⁷ Poythress's view is that Christ is the one who speaks in Gen 15:5-6.
- ⁸ In the next sentence after the above quotation Poythress says, "All this represents implications of the teaching of the Bible as a whole" (p. 13), but it appears to me that he is departing from the sphere of hermeneutical connections and referring to philosophical and theological implications, which is different.
- ⁹ In truth, it also applies to Dan Block's view of Luke 24:27.
- ¹⁰ G. Goldsworthy, *Preaching the Whole Bible as Christian Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 256.
- ¹¹ See Justin Taylor, thegospelcoalition.org, "Spurgeon on Preaching," March 20, 2008, which I have adapted with changes.