

# READING THE OLD TESTAMENT AS GENTILES LIVING IN THE PACIFIC

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How can we read the Old Testament as Pacificians in a way that will make the biblical text applicable to us today? I have maintained in a number of previous publications that the proper question for theological contextualisation is how the Bible speaks to us today in the Pacific, addressing the issues that we face in our respective social and cultural contexts. In this article, I shall propose some practical ways in which we, Pacificians, can appropriate more fully the text-mediated content of the Old Testament. My overall aim is to enable Bible believers, and anyone interested in searching the scriptures, to come to a better understanding of what the Old Testament says, and make it applicable to today's situation.

## **PACIFICIANS AS GENTILES: A POINT OF DEPARTURE FOR READING THE OLD TESTAMENT**

I wish to begin this discussion by looking for a category or concept from the Bible, with which we can identify as Pacificians in the broad sweep of God's plan unfolded in the Bible. The Bible, as Barth argued, confronts us with its textual content as a rather strange book. It is strange, not only because it portrays a world no longer familiar with us today, but it also speaks of God's dealing with a particular people – His own people, the descendants of Abraham, or the nation of Israel.

As Pacificians reading the Old Testament, we immediately find ourselves excluded from the story line of the Bible, because, for the most part, it describes God's plans for His elected people, Israel. Since God's purposes are to do specifically with the nation of Israel, I must enquire alongside Gerhard von Rad:

At this point the question automatically imposes itself: What part have I in the Old Testament, as a Christian believer, and what part has the church, if it cannot be that I identify myself, at least partly (it was never a question of more than that!), with the religion of ancient Israel? If I yield myself to the Old Testament's own kerygmatic intention, I must, as we have seen, ask what part I have in its witness to historical facts, and to the redemptive benefits promised to Israel. But I belong to none of the twelve tribes, I do not offer sacrifice in Jerusalem, nor do I hope, in terms of Is 2:1-4, for the glorification of the Temple mountain. I am not even a proselyte, and so able to appropriate for myself the great-hearted consolation of . . . Isaiah (Is 56:1-8). In other words, I have not "come to a mountain that can be touched" (Heb 12:18). God's gracious provisions, so lavishly bestowed on Israel, seem to pass me by, because I do not belong to the historical people Israel; and the Old Testament maintains its connection with this historical Israel to its very last word. Is it not possible that a great unease will once more make itself felt in many of our congregations, instructed as they have been, for so long; an unease from which this inadequate teaching of the religion of Israel has, up till now, protected them?<sup>1</sup>

Indeed, as Pacificians, we have no part in the "redemptive benefits" promised to the "historical people Israel", with which the Old Testament maintains its connection until "its very last word". As a result, we cannot apply the Old Testament directly to us Pacificians in the same way that historical Israel does, because the book was not written primarily with us Pacificians in mind, or even as a description of ourselves. It is this recognition that the Bible records God's redemptive dealings with the nation of Israel that directly contributes to the difficulty people have with reading the Old Testament.

I wish, therefore, to suggest an approach to reading the Old Testament by taking as my point of departure the fact that as Pacificians we belong, together with the rest of the non-Jewish world, to the biblical category of the

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<sup>1</sup> Gerhard von Rad, "Typological Interpretation of the Old Testament", in *Essays on Old Testament Interpretation*, Claus Westermann, ed., J. L. Mays, tran., London UK: SCM Press, 1963, pp. 35-36.

*Gentiles*. The Jews were the chosen people of God. Beyond their cultural ethnic boundary was the rest of the world, who were the non-Jews or the Gentiles. Moreover, the Jews were physically distinguished from the Gentiles by circumcision, which fundamentally determined the covenantal boundary between Israelites, as God's people, and those who were not.<sup>2</sup>

## **THE SPECIAL PRIVILEGES OF ISRAEL AS GOD'S PEOPLE IN THE BIBLE**

This understanding of the special privileges of God's people underlies Paul's statement about his "kinsmen according to the flesh", the "Israelites":

Theirs is the adoption as sons; theirs the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship, and the promises. Theirs are the patriarchs, and from them is traced the human ancestry of Christ, who is God over all, forever praised. Amen" (Rom 9:4-5).

The question of "Israelites", and their benefits, that Paul is talking about in this passage has perplexed many. Johannes Munck thinks that these prerogatives of Israel point to their past, but which are no longer theirs in the present time.<sup>3</sup> Lucien Cerfaux thinks that, although these privileges used to belong to Israel according to the flesh, they have now been given to the

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<sup>2</sup> The identification of "covenantal boundary markers" has been the hallmark of the "New Perspective on Paul", which scholars, such as James D. G. Dunn among others, has adopted as an interpretive framework, from which Paul is being construed. For a concise summary of this perspective, and its origin, see S. J. Hafemann, "Paul and His Interpreters", in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, G. F. Hawthorne, and Ralph P. Martin, eds, Leicester UK: IVP, 1993, pp. 666-679, and the literature cited therein. While my approach for reading the Old Testament relies on the cultural ethnic distinction between Jews and Gentiles, I remain unconvinced by the new perspective on Paul. It seems to me that this viewpoint should have been known as the "new perspective on 1st-century Judaism", for that is the vantage point from which it attempts to reinterpret Paul. Moreover, it entails a revision, and with all due respects, a reductionistic approximation of Pauline theology, since, for the most part, it does not seriously take into account all the writings attributed to Paul in the canonical scriptures.

<sup>3</sup> Johannes Munck, *Christ and Israel: an Interpretation of Romans 9-11*, Philadelphia PA: Fortress Press, 1967, p. 30.

church.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, E. Dinkler maintains that “the promises refer, not to the empirical-historical Israel, but to the eschatological Israel”.<sup>5</sup>

However, in its literary context, it makes more sense to say that Paul is speaking here of the election benefits of historical Israel, despite its general refusal to accept Jesus as their Messiah. Paul maintains that, although the Israelites are unconvinced that Jesus is their Messiah, one can never rule out the fact that they are God’s elected people (Rom 11:28-29). In John Piper’s words: “The privileges given to Israel can never be construed to guarantee the salvation of any individual Jew, or synagogue of Jews, and, therefore, the unbelief of Paul’s kinsmen in the flesh cannot immediately be construed to mean that God’s promise has fallen.”<sup>6</sup> Hence, the privileges, to which Paul is referring here, are those of Israel in the flesh, regardless of their unbelief in Jesus their Messiah.

From a primarily Jewish point of view, non-Jews in the Bible are often spoken of in negative terms. Jesus, for instance, refers to the Syro-Phoenician woman – a Gentile, for that matter – who asks Him to drive out a demon from her daughter, as one of the “dogs” in stark contrast to the “children”, who live in the house, and sit around the family table enjoying their bread (Matt 15:26; Mark 7:27). While some commentators view Jesus as being “incredible”, and even “atrocious” in saying this about this Gentile woman, R. T. France is correct: “Jesus is expressing the contemptuous Jewish attitude to Gentiles, in order to explain why her request does not fit into His mission to Israel”.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Lucien Cerfaux, “Le Privilege d’Israel selon saint Paul”, in *Recueil Lucien Cerfaux* 2 (Gembloux) (1954), p. 341, cited in J. Piper, *The Justification of God: an Exegetical and Theological Study of Romans 9:1-23*, Grand Rapids MI: Baker Books, 1993, p. 24.

<sup>5</sup> Erich Dinkler, “Praedestination bei Paulus: Exegetische Bemerkungen zum Roemerbrief”, in *Festschrift fuer Gunther Dehn*, W. Schneemelcher, ed., Neukirchen, 1957, p. 88, cited in Piper, *The Justification of God*, p. 24.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> R. T. France, *The Gospel According to Matthew: An Introduction and Commentary*, Leicester UK: IVP, 1985, p. 247. According to France, F. W. Beare, *The Gospel According to Matthew: a Commentary*, Oxford UK: Blackwell, 1981, describes this saying as an “atrocious saying” expressing “incredible insolence” and based on “the worst kind of chauvinism”.

Indeed, Jesus is not making a rude remark. He is simply assuming the woman's status as a Gentile before God and before Israel. Jesus' mission was restricted only to the "lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matt 15:24, see also 10:5-6). The "house of Israel" corresponds to the "children", who rightly belong to God's family. Theirs is the "bread" of salvation. It is theirs by virtue of God's election purposes (cf. Rom 11:28).

The rest of the non-Jewish world, to which the Syro-Phoenician woman belonged, does not belong in the family "house". Rather, from the Jewish perspective, their proper place is "outside" the house with the dogs. They are not to sit on the table and partake of the bread of the children, but are to be outside the house, awaiting the mercy of the children for their sustenance. From Jesus' viewpoint as a Jew, this is where Gentiles belong.

Hence, what Jesus is expressing in this story is a perception of the non-Jewish world from the Jewish world. Similarly, Paul expresses the same idea of non-Jews. He reminds the Gentile counterparts of the Ephesian congregation of where they belong as Gentiles:

Remember that formerly, you who are Gentiles by birth, and called "uncircumcised" by those who call themselves "the circumcision" (that done in the body and by the hands of men) – remember that, at that time, you were separate from Christ, excluded from the citizenship in Israel, and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope, and without God in the world" (Eph 2:11-12).

Again, Paul, like Jesus, is merely pointing out the rightful status of Gentiles in relation to God's salvation purposes. Peter T. O'Brien comments that Paul's usage of "Gentiles by birth" here arises from a Jewish viewpoint, since neither Romans nor Greeks would think of themselves as "Gentiles". According to Paul, Gentiles being "separated from the chosen people of Israel was a serious disadvantage, since it meant being outside the sphere of God's election, and isolated from any covenant relationship with Him . . .

they had no share in the covenants, which promised the messianic salvation”.<sup>8</sup>

## **PARTICIPATION OF GENTILES IN GOD’S BLESSINGS IN THE OLD TESTAMENT**

This implies that, when we read the Bible as Pacificians, and as Gentiles, for that matter, we find ourselves necessarily occupying a position *outside* the sphere of God’s salvation plan, unfolded in the story line world of the Bible. We are excluded from God’s blessings. His blessings were the benefits of Israel alone. As Gentiles, we occupy a “world” outside God’s sphere of promised blessings.

But, in His great mercy, God did not leave us Pacifician Gentiles without hope, outside the sphere of His salvation purposes. For Paul goes on to say:

But now [ $\nu\nu\iota$  = *nuni*] in Christ Jesus, you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Jesus Christ. For He, himself, is our peace, who has made the two one, and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing in His flesh the law, with its commandments and regulations. His purpose was to create in Himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, and, in this one body, to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which He put to death their hostility. He came and preached peace to you who were far away and to those who were near. For, through Him, we both have access to the Father by one Spirit” (Eph 2:13-18).

The Gentiles and the Jews are being recreated as “one new man”, through the death of Jesus, and, through the crucified Jesus, this one new man is reconciled to God. In that sense, the cross of Jesus acts as the *bridge* for the “spiritual gap” that exists between the Gentiles and the world of God’s blessings, unfolded in the scriptures.

However, it was not only the Gentiles, who were drawn near to participate in the blessings of God, through the cross of Christ. Surprisingly, the Jews

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<sup>8</sup> Peter T. O’Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, Grand Rapids MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1999, p. 189.

also, or “those who were near” to God’s blessings, according to Paul, were reconciled, through the cross of Jesus, to partake of God’s blessings, which were meant to be theirs by merit of the promise to Abraham. Thus, it is only through the cross of Christ that both Jews and Gentiles cross the hermeneutical gap that separates them from God’s blessings in order to lay claim of God’s blessings in the narrative world of the Bible.

Through the blood of Jesus Christ, those of us Gentiles “by birth” have been recreated together with Israel into “one new man”, and, therefore, joined together with them in the household of God. As a result, Paul says of those who have crossed the “gap”, which separates the Gentiles from the blessings of God, through the blood of Jesus:

You are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God’s people, and members of God’s household, build on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus Himself being the chief cornerstone. In Him, the whole building is jointed together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord (Eph 2:19-20).

We, who were once outside the “house” of God, are now becoming the very “temple” of God, in which His Holy Spirit dwells.

So far, I have dealt with what may be regarded as the objective dimension of the way in which Gentiles can partake in the blessings of God, specifically reserved for His own people. There is, however, a subjective element in the way we can cross the hermeneutical spiritual gap, which separates us Gentiles from God’s blessings. Paul tells the parable of the olive tree, whose natural branches have been cut off, and, in their place, branches of a “wild olive” have been “grafted in among others, and now share in the nourishing sap from the olive root” (Rom 11:17).

The “root” of the olive tree here is “the people of Israel, in its covenant relation with God”.<sup>9</sup> That is, the people of Israel, as the seed of Abraham, through whom God’s blessing of salvation was destined to come to the

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<sup>9</sup> D. W. B. Robinson, “Not Boasting over the Natural Branches: Gentile Circumspection in the Divine Economy”, in *The Gospel to the Nations: Perspectives on Paul’s Mission: in Honour of Peter T. O’Brien*, Peter G. Bolt, and Mark D. Thompson, eds, Leicester UK: Apollos, 2000, p. 165.

Gentiles, according to the promise. The implication is that Israel is likened to an “olive tree”, and the unbelieving Israelites correspond to the natural branches, which have been cut off, due to their unbelief. In their stead, Gentile believers have been “grafted in” as “wild olive branches” among the rest of the natural branches, which have come to believe in the Christ.

This parable is the basis upon which Paul warns Gentile believers to refrain from being boastful, due to the fact they have been grafted in, and the natural branches have been cut off, since “[the natural branches] were broken off, because of unbelief, and you stand by faith” (Rom 11:20). Here then is another indication of the way in which Gentiles can come to partake of God’s blessings that were primarily reserved for His own people, Israel. They are being “grafted in” *through faith* to share in the “nourishing sap from the root”. Through faith, the Gentiles, as branches taken from a wild olive tree, can partake of the “life” that naturally belongs to the root of the natural olive tree. Faith, therefore, is the subjective element of the process of crossing the “spiritual gap” that separates us Pacifician Gentiles from God’s blessings in the Bible.

Thus, the cross is the objective element and faith is the subjective element that enables Pacifician Gentiles to share in God’s blessings, promised to His people Israel. Faith, so to speak, is the Bible readers’ acceptance that it is only by means of the cross of Christ that Pacifician Gentiles, who do not naturally belong to the “nourishing sap from the root”, can cross over and share in the blessings of God, reserved for His own elected people. Barth describes this relation as being invited, by grace, to enter, by faith, and share in the righteousness of heaven, which is “within the Bible for us”.<sup>10</sup> The cross of Jesus is thus God’s gracious invitation for us Pacificians, and Gentiles, for that matter, to dare to come in by faith and be blessed with the blessings of His people, within the story line world of the Bible.

## **READING THE OLD TESTAMENT IN LINE WITH JESUS’ VIEW OF SCRIPTURE**

The foregoing considerations mean that, for us Pacifician Gentiles, living in the 21st century, or any other century, we can appropriate the blessings of

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<sup>10</sup> Karl Barth, *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, Douglas Horton, tran., London UK: Hodder & Stoughton, 1935, p. 50.

God, mediated in the story line of the Bible, through faith, and by the Cross. This is derived from Jesus' view of the Old Testament, to which we have pointed in the previous section.<sup>11</sup> Jesus told the Jewish scholars of His day that the scriptures (i.e., the Old Testament) were written in order to bear witness about Him (John 5:39-40). This is one of six passages in the fourth Gospel, where scripture, or some writer of Old Testament scripture, is said to speak or write of Christ (cf. 1:45; 2:22; 3:10; 5:45-46; 20:9). Commenting on this passage, D. A. Carson observes: "By predictive prophecy, by type, by revelatory event, and by anticipatory statute, what we call the Old Testament is understood to point to Christ, His ministry, His teaching, His death and resurrection."<sup>12</sup> Even Moses wrote about Jesus (John 5:46).

After His resurrection, Jesus opens the heart of His disciples to the meaning of the three-fold division of the scriptures, the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings. According to Jesus, the Old Testament scriptures refer to: (1) His suffering and death; (2) His resurrection, and, presumably, His ascension; and (3) The proclamation of repentance for the forgiveness of sins in His name to all the nations (Luke 24:44-47). L. L. Morris asserts that the mentioning of the three main divisions of scripture, namely, the Law of Moses, and the prophets, and the psalms, as testimony to the Christ, indicate that "there is no part of scripture that does not bear its witness to Jesus".<sup>13</sup> That the scriptures are a testimony to Jesus is meant to give us a specific understanding of the Old Testament.<sup>14</sup> While specific passages originated from different historical contexts, addressing specific historical audiences, ultimately, the literal sense of the text is Jesus Christ.

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<sup>11</sup> For a fuller treatment of Jesus' attitude to the Old Testament, see R. V. G. Tasker, *Our Lord's Use of the Old Testament*, Campbell Morgan Memorial Bible Lectureship, London UK: Westminster Chapel, 1953; and also R. V. G. Tasker, *The Old Testament in the New Testament*, 2nd edn, London UK: SCM Press, 1954, ch. 2; see also J. W. Wenham, *Christ and the Bible*, Guildford UK: Eagle Books, 1993, pp. 16-49; J. I. Packer, *Fundamentalism and the Word of God: Some Evangelical Principles*, Grand Rapids MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1958, pp. 54-62.

<sup>12</sup> D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, Leicester UK: IVP, 1991, p. 263.

<sup>13</sup> Leon L. Morris, *The Gospel According to St Luke: an Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale New Testament Commentary, Leicester UK: IVP, 1974, pp. 342-343.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. the thesis of Vern S. Poythress, *Symphonic Theology: the Validity of Multiple Perspectives in Theology*, Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan, 1987

This implies that the literal sense of the Old Testament text is essentially Christological.<sup>15</sup> Graeme Goldsworthy asserts that, since Jesus Christ, as He is revealed in the gospel, is the key to the interpretation of the whole Bible, “the task before us is to discern *how* He interprets the Bible”.<sup>16</sup> On the basis of the foregoing considerations of Jesus’ view of the scriptures, I shall propose a step-by-step method by which we Pacifician Gentiles may read the Old Testament as a book which finds its literal sense, ultimately and finally, in the person of Jesus Christ.<sup>17</sup>

## **STEPS FOR READING THE OLD TESTAMENT ON THE BASIS OF JESUS’ VIEW OF SCRIPTURE**

There are three steps, through which we may approach any given passage of the Old Testament, as Pacifician Gentiles, living after the death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus.

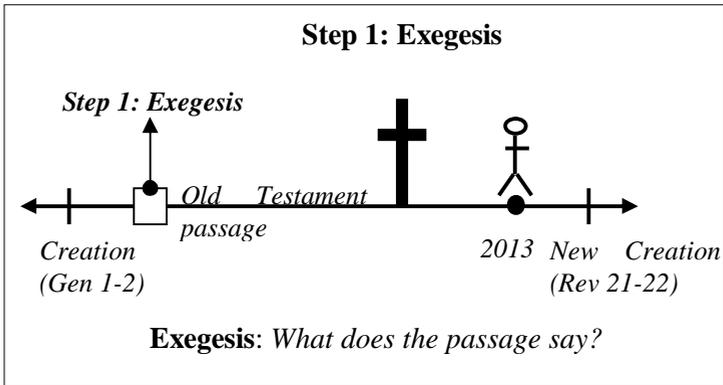
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<sup>15</sup> Contra Westermann who argues that it is “reading more into the passage than it really intends” when the New Testament interpreted some of the Old Testament passages to mean Christ (e.g., 1 Peter 2:4-6, quoting Is 28:14-22). See Claus Westermann, *The Old Testament and Jesus Christ*, Omar Kaste, tran., Minneapolis MN: Augsburg Publishing, 1970, p. 31. See also John Bright, *The Kingdom of God: The Biblical Concept and Its Meaning for the Church*, Nashville TN: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1953, p. 212.

<sup>16</sup> Graeme Goldsworthy, *Gospel and Kingdom: A Christian Interpretation of the Old Testament*, Carlisle UK: Paternoster Press, 1981, p. 85 (his emphasis).

<sup>17</sup> For a more consistent application of what I am proposing here to the text of the Old Testament, see Graeme Goldsworthy, *Preaching from the Whole Bible as Christian Scripture: The Application of Biblical Theology to Expository Preaching*, Grand Rapids MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2000, pp. 135-139. See also Graeme Goldsworthy, *Gospel and Wisdom: Israel’s Wisdom Literature in the Christian Life*, Carlisle UK: Paternoster Press, 1987. Moreover, see Barry G. Webb, *Five Festal Garments: Christian Reflections on the Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Esther*, New Studies in Biblical Theology, D. A. Carson, ed., Leicester UK: Apollos, 2000.

## EXEGESIS OF THE TEXT



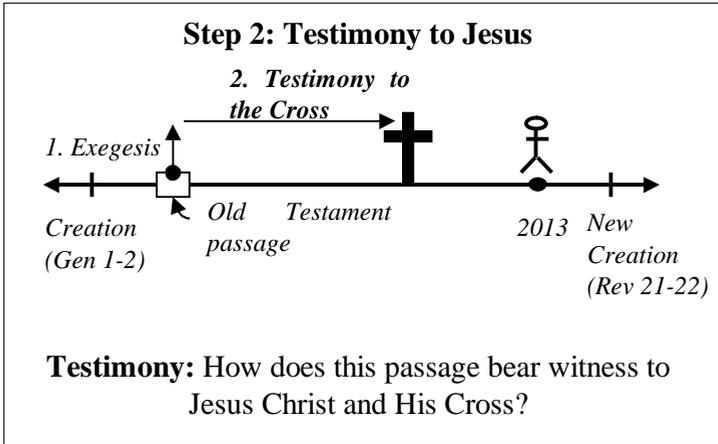
The main task of the reader in this step is not only to establish the text, through textual critical apparatus, but also to work out the meaning of the passage, on the basis of its grammar. The leading question is meant to focus the reader on the people, the events, and the places described in the passage, and how they are interrelated to produce the general meaning of the text. Two questions that can help to accomplish this step are: (1) *Who are the people in the story?* (2) *What are they doing in the story?*

The textual critical apparatus is to assist the interpreter in this step, to establish the literary limitation of the passage. Similarly, the literary and the grammatical-historical critical methods should assist the interpreter in this step to find the major emphasis of the human author, as it is presented to us in the text, as well as the verbal meaning of words deployed by the author. The historical-critical method helps to provide a reconstruction of the world “behind” the text, as mediated to us by the literary-grammatical element of the text.

But, even without the first-hand knowledge of critical approaches for biblical interpretation, the reader can still read the biblical text in a way that could help them understand what the passage is about. Working from a translation of the Bible that is consistent with the original language, (which includes most Bible translations today), the reader can answer the two basic questions of this step: *Who are the people involved in this story?* *What are they doing in the story?* The Reformers’ belief in the clarity of the scriptures

is foundational to the doing of this step. The Bible is sufficiently clear for any well-intentioned reader, who honestly seeks to understand the Bible.

## TESTIMONY OF THE TEXT TO JESUS CHRIST



Since Jesus told us that Moses wrote about Him (John 5:46), and that the entire Old Testament is a testimony about Him (John 5:39-40), it is essential for interpreting the Old Testament that, after seeking to understand the text on the grammatical-historical level, the reader must think carefully how this passage bears witness to Jesus Christ and His Cross. A question that helps in doing this step is this: *How are the activities of the people in this story fulfilled in the ministry of Jesus Christ, His death, resurrection, and ascension?*

This step implies that the literal sense of the Old Testament is not limited simply to the completion of “Step 1”. If biblical exegesis of the Old Testament is to be faithful to Jesus Christ, as the Word of God made flesh, then we must read it in the way Jesus reads it. Critics see this claim on the importance of the Christological sense of the Old Testament as “forced” exegesis, or as an approach resulting in the “veiling” of the historical value of the Old Testament. The same charges were levelled against the Reformer Martin Luther, in his employment of the Christological principle, as the

basis for interpreting the scriptures.<sup>18</sup> Ultimately, these charges have to be brought against Jesus and the Apostles. For, it is they themselves who interpreted the Old Testament with a Christological principle. Jesus, for instance, in the synagogue in Nazareth, after reading that portion of Isaiah, which we now know as Is 61:1, says that, “Today, this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing” (Luke 4:21; see also John 12:37-41; Acts 2:17-36; Gal 3:16).

Therefore, after establishing the general meaning of the passage by means of the “Step 1”, the reader must then seek to understand how this passage testifies, in a prophetic way, to Jesus Christ, His death, and resurrection. Not every word of the Old Testament points to Jesus Christ, of course. But, thankfully, the Old Testament authors did not write mere words, but words organised into sentences to form narratives. Individual words, therefore, by themselves, are meant to be understood in view of the immediate literary context in which they occur in a given text. They are to be understood, as they relate to each other, in sentences and chapters in books that contribute to the flow of the story line of the Bible in its final canonical form.

In the Bible, the foundational story is provided by God, who is its ultimate author. The events therein expressed the mystery of His will and His purposes. God’s purposes, as expressed in the Old Testament, are ultimately fulfilled in Jesus (Matt 5:17; Luke 24:25-27; 44-47; Rom 1:1-4). Therefore, an interpretation of the Old Testament that fails to give adequate consideration to how the story line of the Old Testament is ultimately fulfilled in Jesus, has sorely missed the true literal meaning of the biblical text.

Hence, “Step 2” is essential for interpreting the Old Testament. What I am proposing in this step is not new. I am following the Reformers, who argued that the entire scripture is “prophetic”, meaning, that its literal sense was not fulfilled in the historical context in which they were spoken and written. In actual fact, the human authors of the Old Testament were looking forward to a time in which the literal sense of what they had written will be fulfilled in Jesus Christ. This is Peter’s point in his spirit-filled sermon he preached on

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<sup>18</sup> D. S. Dockery, “Martin Luther’s Christological Hermeneutics”, in *Theological Journal* 4-2 (1983), pp. 193-194.

the Day of Pentecost. When King David, in Ps 16, spoke of the body of God's Holy One not being abandoned to destruction in Hades, he was prophetically looking forward to the resurrection of the Christ (Acts 2:30-31). Hence, New Testament authors, in many and various ways, assumed that the reference of the Old Testament is literally fulfilled in the person of Jesus, and the events of His life, death, resurrection, and ascension (e.g., Acts 2:17-36).

Many Old Testament scholars understandably insist that New Testament authors were breaching all the principles of modern exegesis by interpreting the Old Testament, in its literal sense, to be fulfilled in the person of Jesus Christ.<sup>19</sup> A milder form of this idea states that, although the Old Testament is Christ-centred, it is, however, not Christological.<sup>20</sup> Both of these conclusions fail to accept the authority of New Testament authors, and the inspiration of the Spirit that results in the final document. Indeed, Jesus taught His disciples that the Spirit would "teach them all things", and remind them of everything He said (John 14:26; cf. 16:13). In that sense, the way New Testament writers used the Old Testament is to be attributed to the ministry of the Holy Spirit.

Thus, we need to regard the Christ-centred interpretation of the New Testament authors as the Holy Spirit's reminding the apostles of the way Jesus interpreted the Old Testament. As Muller asserts, "In the new covenant community, they have the scripture of the old covenant alone interpreted in a Christian interpretation, as it is found in the New Testament scripture".<sup>21</sup>

For various reasons, the scholarly rejection of the view of Jesus, and the New Testament authors, of the Old Testament, relates to their being

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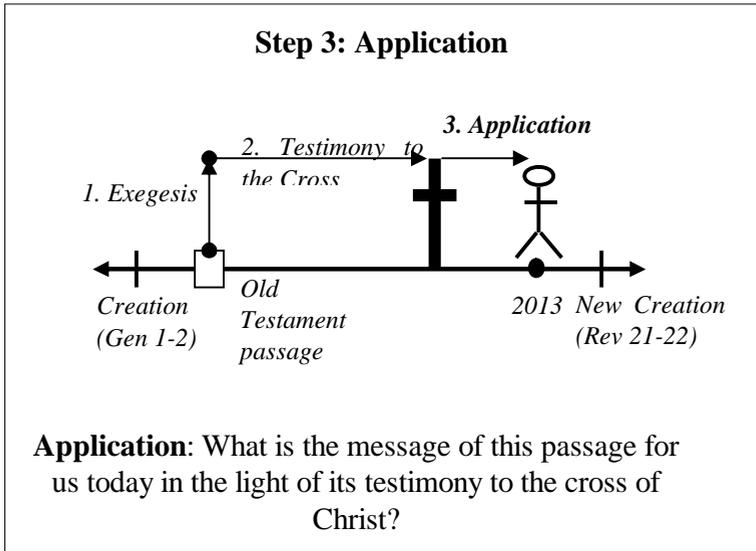
<sup>19</sup> See J. Bright, *The Kingdom of God: The Biblical Concept and its Meaning for the Church* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1953), p. 212.

<sup>20</sup> This is almost certainly a position resulting from a pre-millennialism hermeneutics. For the standard premillennialist hermeneutic opts for the "literal" interpretation of prophecy. To do this, however, it cannot have a Christological hermeneutic. However, Jesus and the apostles did interpret the Old Testament Christologically (e.g. Luke 24:25-27, 44-47; John 12:37-41; Acts 2:17-36; Gal 3:16). I am indebted to Dr Graeme Goldsworthy on a private correspondence for this insight.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. M. Muller, "Neutestamentliche Theologie als Biblische Theologie: Einige Grundsatzliche Uberlegungen" *New Testament Studies* 43 (1997), pp. 475-490, see p. 490.

overwhelmed by a view of the biblical text, which is in line with the Enlightenment, namely, that the Bible is a purely human book. But, as Watson observes, to read the Old Testament “in Christological perspective, is to revive a central concern to traditional Christian Old Testament interpretation, long suppressed by the hermeneutics of the Enlightenment”.<sup>22</sup>

### APPLICATION OF THE TEXT TO US TODAY



Once we understand how the passage from the Old Testament, with which we are dealing, testifies to the Lord Jesus Christ, then we can apply it to us Pacifician Gentiles, in the light of the social and cultural issues that we face. In relation to the historical timeframe of the biblical story, we are living in the time after the cross, and after the resurrection, with the near expectation of the return of Jesus and the Day of Judgment. So we need to ask: *What issues in our lives, our families, our churches, and our country does this passage address, in view of its already being fulfilled in Jesus’ ministry?*

We can never truly appropriate the message of the Old Testament as Pacifician Gentiles, apart from its fulfilment in Jesus Christ. As we have

<sup>22</sup> See F. Watson, *Text and Truth: Redefining Biblical Theology*. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1997), pp. 16-17.

seen in “Step 2”, the Old Testament is essentially a testimony to the Lord Jesus Christ, and not to us. If we fail to apply the Old Testament to us, through Jesus Christ and His Cross, we will have to draw on an allegorical method of interpretation to make the passage relevant to us. The allegorical interpretive schema downplays the clarity of scripture. It implicitly claims that there is an ἄλλος (*allos* = “other”), a hidden meaning of the text, which is inaccessible to the eyes of the biblically untrained. In the postmodern way of thinking, a new form of allegorical interpretation has arisen, which asserts that the hidden meaning of the passage is whatever the reader can create for the text, since it is believed that no one can discover the true meaning of the text.

By taking Jesus’ view of the Old Testament seriously, therefore, we can say that the incarnated Word is the literal referent of the inscripturated word. Indeed, the incarnated Word is God’s final word for us in these “last days” (Heb 1:1). We can only rightly appropriate the inscripturated word when it is being applied to us through its fulfilment in the incarnated Word. This is the basis of this third step in the approach that I am proposing here for reading the Old Testament, as a Pacifician Gentile. This step is traditionally associated with hermeneutics, but it seems more appropriate to include it under homiletics, since it deals with the application of God’s word to the present context in which we live.

### **THE PLACE OF THIS READING MODEL IN BIBLICAL STUDIES**

The step-by-step approach, I am proposing here, for reading the Old Testament as a Pacifician Gentile, may appear too simple. Biblical interpretation is, indeed, a complicated process. We cannot hope to accomplish it with a few, quick steps, as just outlined. However, the envisaged audience, for which this reading model can be useful, are lay people, and those untrained in the difficult ideas of biblical interpretation. But, even theologically-trained students and pastors may find this approach to reading the Old Testament of some assistance for weekly sermon preparation, within a busy schedule.

Smart raised two criticisms of the common biblical studies curriculum in theological seminaries.<sup>23</sup> Firstly, there is too much occupation with the question of linguistic, textual, and literary, that minimal attention is given to the theological content of the Bible, which is of foremost importance to the pastor. Secondly, there is too much emphasis on general introduction to the Testaments than specific training in exegesis, which becomes the normal activity of Bible students, in preparation for preaching and teaching in ministry.

Furthermore, Smart observed that, when exegesis is taught in theological schools, it is done in a way that one would think the students were trained to write commentaries, rather than to exegete scriptures for a local parish. This is not to deny the usefulness of books on the technical elements of biblical interpretation. Indeed, seminary students, and pastors alike, should consult those books, if necessary.<sup>24</sup> But such technical guides for exegesis are specifically aimed at those who are constantly engaged in writing scholarly projects that require a thorough acquaintance with the biblical text, on a more technical level. Lay people and the average church-going person need something far less technical as a guide to understanding the scripture rightly. This is what this study attempts to outline, with the step-by-step approach to reading the Old Testament as a Pacifician Gentile.

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<sup>23</sup> James D. Smart, *The Strange Silence of the Bible in the Church: a Study in Hermeneutics*, Philadelphia PA: Westminster Press, 1970, p. 167. Even though Smart is helpful in pointing out the problems, which seminary students would face from being educated in a curriculum, which does not envisage the parish situation, he is not very promising in his views of the Bible, and how it may be made applicable to us today. While he is properly concerned with the “strange silence of the Bible in the church”, and thus seeking to make the Bible’s voice more audible in our churches today, his heavy reliance on the results of higher biblical criticism to achieve this noble aim is misleading, because the more sceptical ideology underlying that approach only leads to the dampening of people’s confidence in the authority of the Bible, resulting in the silencing God’s word in the contemporary situation.

<sup>24</sup> See, for example, Otto Kaiser, and Werner G. Kummel, *Exegetical Method: a Student’s Handbook*, New York NY: Seabury Press, 1981; John H. Hayes, and Carl R. Holladay, *Biblical Exegesis: A Beginner’s Handbook*, Atlanta GA: John Knox Press, 1982; I. H. Marshall, ed., *New Testament Interpretation: Essays on Principles and Methods*, Grand Rapids MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1977; Gordon D. Fee, *New Testament Exegesis: a Handbook for Students and Pastors*, 2nd edn, Louisville KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993; Richard N. Longenecker, *Biblical Exegesis in the Apostolic Period*, 2nd edn, Grand Rapids MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1999.

## CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS

This essay proposes a practical method for reading the Old Testament by Pacifician Gentiles, who occupy a place outside God's promised redemptive blessings, but which could also be useful for lay people, pastors, and seminary students. I agree with Smart in his observation that the curriculum for biblical studies in theological seminaries should constantly keep the parish situation in view, so that it will be more practical in its training objectives. The practice of applying the model of biblical interpretation, outlined in this chapter, would hopefully begin to reverse this current trend, not only here in the Pacific, but also in the wider theological context.

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