

He Gave Us Scripture: Foundations of Interpretation

LESSON
EIGHT

MODERN APPLICATION &
OLD TESTAMENT EPOCHS



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Lesson Eight

Modern Application & Old Testament Epochs

INTRODUCTION

Have you ever noticed that Christians tend to go to extremes when they think about applying the Old Testament to modern life? On one extreme, some believers think that we need to do precisely what God's people in the days of the Old Testament did. On the other extreme, some believers think that we should simply forget what God commanded his people to do in Old Testament days. But in reality, the truth lies somewhere between these two extremes.

When it comes to applying the Old Testament to our day, we need to remember two things: we should never return to the past, but we should never forget the past.

This is the eighth lesson in our series *He Gave Us Scripture: Foundations of Interpretation*, and we've entitled it "Modern Application and Old Testament Epochs." In this lesson, we'll explore the ways Old Testament faith developed through the great ages or epochs of history, and explain how these developments impact our own application of Scripture.

In a prior lesson, we saw that the original audiences of Scripture differed from contemporary audiences in at least three ways. The original audiences lived in different historical epochs than we do. Their cultures were different from ours. And they were different kinds of people than we are. Although these three differences interconnect in countless ways, in this lesson we'll focus our attention on the epochs of the Old Testament and how they affect modern application.

We'll explore the association between modern application and Old Testament epochs in two ways. First, we'll look at the epochal divisions of Old Testament history. And second, we'll consider the epochal developments that these divisions represent. Let's begin with the epochal divisions of Old Testament history.

EPOCHAL DIVISIONS

The Old Testament reports many theological changes that took place throughout history. Theological changes occurred every time God altered his expectations regarding the concepts, behaviors and emotions of his people. And when the changes were significant enough, they became the basis for identifying epochal divisions.

Christians have described these changes in many ways, but one common and helpful illustration compares Old Testament theology to a growing tree. A healthy tree goes through many changes as it grows from a small seed to full maturity. But the growth

of trees in most parts of the world is tied to annual weather cycles. Trees tend to change slowly in colder seasons, and rapidly in warmer seasons.

The growth of Old Testament theology was seasonal, too. Sometimes it changed relatively little. But at other times it changed dramatically and reached new stages of maturity. These stages of maturity correspond to the epochal divisions of the Old Testament. Each epoch is a period of time characterized by substantial and long-lasting transitions in Old Testament theology.

We'll discuss the epochal divisions of the Old Testament in three steps. First, we'll acknowledge the variety of ways scholars have divided the history recorded in the Bible. Second, we'll describe a helpful epochal outline that many Christian traditions use. And third, we'll point out some implications this outline has for the modern application of Scripture. Let's begin with the variety of ways Old Testament history has been divided.

VARIETY

It shouldn't surprise us to learn that theologians have found different ways to divide the history recorded in the Old Testament. For one thing, time doesn't pass in sharply segmented periods. So, transitions between epochs generally took place gradually, and the epochs themselves often overlapped. For another thing, the divisions theologians draw depend on the criteria they use. Think about the way this happens in science. Archaeologists tend to divide history according to developments in metallurgy. So, they talk about the early, middle and late Bronze Age; and the early, middle and late Iron Age. Sociologists tend to emphasize political developments. So, they talk about the tribal period, the early national age, the monarchical times, the exilic period, and the post-exilic period.

In a similar way, theologians obviously tend to use theological criteria to delineate the epochs. But they still don't always agree on the divisions because theology within the Old Testament developed in different ways at different times. When a tree goes through stages of growth, its different parts don't grow at the same time or at the same pace. Sometimes disease will actually stunt the growth of one branch as the others move forward. The bark of a tree's trunk might grow rather slowly and inconspicuously, and its tiny branches and leaves might grow quickly by comparison. In a similar way, some parts of Old Testament theology advanced slowly, others proceeded at a medium pace, and others changed rapidly. And many of these parts did their growing at different times. If every aspect of Israel's faith had shifted at the same pace and at the same time, it would be easier for interpreters to agree on its divisions. But as it stands, theologians have divided Old Testament history in a variety of ways.

Given that Scripture is a progressive revelation, that it's come to us over time, it's important to know exactly where we are in the unfolding plan of God. Theologians often talk about dividing God's plan into various eras and epochs... We have a number of examples in the New Testament of how the New Testament divides up the Old

Testament. You think of Matthew’s genealogy. It begins with Abraham, works through David. It looked through Old Testament history in terms of Abraham to David, David to exile, exile to Christ. That’s a way that the Bible divides up Old Testament history, seeing its unique importance and then how it comes over to us. There’s other ways that the New Testament also divides it up. You think of Paul in Romans 5, 1 Corinthians 15. You can speak of Adam and Christ before the Law, after the Law. So, the New Testament shows a number of ways to do this. I do think, in reflection upon the whole counsel of God, one crucial way that we can do this is through the biblical covenants. It’s very interesting that as you walk through Adam — creation covenant — through Noah, through Abraham — the Abrahamic covenant, the old covenant associated with Israel — and Moses, the Davidic covenant, and then the anticipation of the new covenant, this is, I think, a God-given way that redemptive history unfolds as covenant leads to the next covenant and ultimately its culmination in Jesus Christ. This is a really, really helpful way of thinking through how we move from Genesis to Christ, how the whole counsel of God fits together. And indeed many of the ways the New Testament speaks of Old Testament history, redemptive history, follows this covenantal pattern.

— Dr. Stephen J. Wellum

Now that we’ve acknowledged the validity of a variety of epochal divisions of Old Testament history, let’s consider one helpful outline that many interpreters have adopted.

OUTLINE

One of the most popular ways to divide Old Testament history is by associating each epoch with one of God’s covenants. God’s covenants with his people always entailed significant theological shifts, and therefore provide helpful boundaries for epochal divisions.

Many Christian traditions identify six major divine covenants in the Old Testament: the covenants associated with Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, and David, and the new covenant that Old Testament prophets predicted would come at the end of Israel’s exile from the Promised Land.

With regard to Adam, we should note that the record of Genesis 1–3 doesn’t use the Hebrew term *berith*, which we usually translate as “covenant.” Even so, Genesis forcefully implies that God made a covenant with Adam. As just one example, in Genesis 6:18, God said that he would “establish” his covenant with Noah. The Hebrew verb translated “establish” is *qum*, which was used to describe the confirmation of something that already existed, rather than the start of something entirely new. So, we can be

confident that the book of Genesis presented God's relationship with Adam as covenantal. Also, it's likely that in Hosea 6:7, the prophet referred to a covenant between God and Adam, or to a covenant between God and the entire human race as represented by Adam.

God's covenant in Noah appears in Genesis 6:18 before the flood, and in 9:9-17 after the flood. God's covenant in Abraham is mentioned in Genesis 15:18 before Abraham sought an heir through his wife's servant Hagar, and in 17:2 after he sought an heir through Hagar. God's covenant with Israel under Moses is recorded in Exodus 19–24 at the foot of Mount Sinai, and his closely associated covenant with the courageous Levite Phineas is mentioned in Numbers 25:13. God's covenant with David is recorded in 2 Samuel 7 and in Psalms 89 and 132. And finally, we find a prediction of a new covenant in Jeremiah 31:31. This same covenant is also called a "covenant of peace" in Isaiah 54:10 and Ezekiel 34:25. And passages like Luke 22:20 and Hebrews 8:6-12 assure us that this covenant has come in Christ.

These covenants represent times when God moved mightily in history, and they introduced long-lasting theological emphases. Adam's covenant relationship with God took place in the context of creation and God's initial reaction to humanity's fall into sin. It emphasized the foundations of humanity's service to God, and described how sin had complicated this service. It also contained God's promise that humanity would eventually succeed in this service.

In the days of Noah, humanity's horrific corruption of the world led God to send a great flood of judgment. Not surprisingly, the covenant with Noah emphasized God's promise to establish the enduring stability of nature, in order to give sinful people the time and opportunity to restrain their sin and fulfill their original service to God.

In Abraham's day, God chose Israel as the people who would lead humanity in service to God. So, the covenant with Abraham was oriented toward the election of Israel. This covenant epoch emphasized Israel's need to have faith in God's promises and to remain faithful to him.

God made a covenant through Moses after he had delivered the Israelites from slavery in Egypt and set them on their course to the Promised Land. Not surprisingly, this covenant was oriented toward Moses' codified national law, which guided the Israelites as they moved forward in their service to God.

In the days of David, God raised up David as king over Israel. His covenant with David established David's family as the permanent royal dynasty that would lead Israel's imperial expansion. This expansion was a significant aspect of Israel's service to God.

Finally, Old Testament prophets predicted that a new covenant would come at the end of Israel's exile, when God fulfilled all history. The Messiah would redeem God's people and spread God's kingdom throughout the world.

Each of God's covenants established different ways in which he related to human beings, and each provided his faithful people with new principles to follow in his service.

So far in our discussion of epochal divisions, we've seen the variety of ways biblical history has been divided, and provided a helpful outline of the epochs. At this point, we're ready to look at some implications this outline has for the modern application of Scripture.

IMPLICATIONS

The divisions of the Old Testament into ages makes it clear that God wanted his people to understand and apply theological themes in different ways at different times. And just as Old Testament believers weren't supposed to serve God as if they lived in earlier periods of history, New Testament believers should never apply the Scriptures as if they live in earlier periods of history.

Imagine that you're an Israelite living shortly after Solomon built God's temple in Jerusalem. You know you're living during David's covenant age. You know that in the earlier Mosaic epoch, Israel sacrificed at Moses' tabernacle. You also know that in your own epoch, God has commanded you to offer sacrifices only at the temple. In your historical context, sacrificing at Moses' tabernacle would violate God's will. The same would be true if you lived under Moses' covenant and returned to building altars and sacrificing in various locations, as Abraham and other patriarchs had done. Once God commanded a new way for sacrifice in worship, he expected his people never to return to the old ways.

In the same way, when we think about the modern application of the Old Testament theme of sacrifice in worship, we have to be aware that we live in the epoch of the new covenant. As the New Testament explains repeatedly, Christ's once-for-all-time, perfect sacrifice has superseded every earlier form of sacrifice. His death on the cross changed how God's faithful people are supposed to offer sacrifices in God's worship. That's why the New Testament author of Hebrews so strongly condemned Christians that wanted to return to Old Testament sacrifices. First, he argued that Christ has inaugurated the new covenant that Jeremiah has predicted in Jeremiah 31. Then he said that the new covenant was making the old system of sacrifices obsolete. Listen to what he wrote in Hebrews 8:13:

By calling this covenant “new,” he has made the first one obsolete; and what is obsolete and aging will soon disappear (Hebrews 8:13).

Here, the author of Hebrews said that the arrival of the new covenant made the old ways “obsolete,” using the Greek term *palaios* which may also be translated “made old” or “outdated.”

Now, we have to be careful, because many well-meaning Christians take this to mean that followers of Christ should simply discard the Old Testament and pay no attention to its teaching. But nothing could be further from the truth. The book of Hebrews itself applies the Old Testament to Christians. Its author wasn't telling Christians that the Old Testament was irrelevant. Rather, he was saying that we live in a different epoch, and that the new covenant requires us to reorient the practice of sacrifice. We don't ignore the old ways, but we should never try to serve God as if we still lived in the old days.

Another striking example is the theme of leadership in battle. Imagine that you live in the period of David's dynastic covenant. You know that God has ordained the kings of Israel to lead his people into war against evil. The kings receive direction from God, and in turn direct the ways that you participate in war. But now imagine that you

personally don't like the Davidic king, and want to return to the covenant epoch of Moses' national law. You might prefer to follow a local judge like Gideon, or an Ephraimite like Joshua, or a Levite like Moses himself, just like your ancestors did. But if you followed one of these instead of the house of David, that would be sin. You would be violating God's command for your epoch. You would be making a similar mistake if you lived in Moses' day but preferred to follow a tribal patriarch as God's people did in the covenant age of Abraham. In every age, we need to follow the military leadership that God has established for that age.

And that includes modern Christians. As people living under the new covenant, we follow Jesus, the great Son of David. He is our God-ordained king. And God has given him the exclusive right to lead his people into war against the forces of evil. But how do we do that? What is our current strategy for war? Listen to the way the apostle Paul explained new covenant war in Ephesians 6:12:

Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms (Ephesians 6:12).

This is a very different strategy from those of earlier epochs, when leaders like Moses and David led God's people into physical, flesh and blood battles. There were still spiritual battles, too, but these leaders didn't head up God's spiritual armies. By contrast, Jesus doesn't lead the church into physical battles. But he does lead us in spiritual warfare, and we violate God's will if we ignore this strategic shift.

The New Testament mainly sees the battles and the wars of the Old Testament as part of the massive battle between God and Satan and between God's people and Satan trying to destroy God's plan. So then it is also applied to Christians nowadays who are in the same way part of the same battle, if you think of Ephesians 6, that your struggle is against the evil forces of Satan and that Christians must put on the full armor of God to be able to stand firm in this battle.

— Dr. P. J. Buys

The New Testament writers take Old Testament depictions of spiritual and national warfare and really radicalize it in certain ways and apply it in a very different trajectory than people might popularly understand today. First of all, Christ came to fight spiritual warfare. He came to overcome the darkness, John 1 tells us. The problem wasn't the darkness not comprehending him but trying to overcome him, and he does battle against the darkness — we see that particularly in John's gospel. And so, Christ comes as the divine warrior fighting against the ruler of this world, that is, Satan. In fact, in John 12 Jesus says the hour of his glorification has now come,

which is the hour of his crucifixion, and he says at that moment the ruler of this world will be cast down... So when Paul says the weapons of our war are the word of God and prayer and faith and so on, as he does in Ephesians 6, saying this is no longer geopolitical, national warfare, that Christians must not be nationalistic in how they perceive war... There's the sword and there's the cross, and the tendency of us as human beings is to put down the cross and take up the sword. But Jesus said no one can be my disciple unless he take up his cross and follow me. So the way we fight spiritual warfare today is by the self-sacrificing, self-giving kind of love that Jesus demonstrated from the cross and in his whole earthly life and ministry.

— Rev. Mike Glodo

God has always expected his people to serve him in ways that were appropriate to the covenant age in which they lived. So, understanding how Old Testament history divided into major covenant epochs is essential for applying the Scriptures in our day. Rather than turning the clock back, as if God hadn't moved history forward, we have to trace every theological theme as it develops through every covenant age all the way to the new covenant in Christ.

Now that we've considered modern application and Old Testament epochs in terms of the epochal divisions of the Old Testament, let's explore the ways epochal developments should inform modern application.

EPOCHAL DEVELOPMENTS

To illustrate the concept of epochal developments, let's think once again about a growing tree. This time, imagine that you have a photograph of a seed, and a photograph of a tree grown from that seed. The seed and the tree look so different that it's hard to believe they're the same thing at different times. But they are. They are the very same organism at different stages of development. They even have the same genetic structures in their DNA to prove it.

In the same way, earlier and later Old Testament epochs have countless theological differences between them. But if we learn about their underlying theological structures, their DNA as it were, we discover that these theological changes actually reflect the organic development of a single growing faith.

We'll explore Old Testament epochal developments in four parts. First, we'll see that the two main characters behind these developments remain consistent throughout biblical history. Second, we'll see that each epoch connected to the others in a unified storyline. Third, we'll see that the Old Testament authors themselves often applied earlier epochs to later audiences. And fourth, we'll highlight some connections between the epochs that Old Testament authors relied on to make these applications. Let's begin with the main characters of biblical history.

CHARACTERS

Throughout the history recorded in Scripture, the same characters are engaged in the great conflict between the forces of good and the forces of evil.

In literary terms, we can say that the forces of good are led by the protagonist or hero of the story, namely God himself. And the forces of evil are led by the antagonist or villain, the supremely evil creature Satan, who tries to prevent God from accomplishing his goal. Satan is very powerful and clever. But he's still a creature, and always under the Creator's sovereign control. Even so, God has permitted Satan to stand against him while the divine drama plays out.

God is the supreme Creator-King who rules from his heavenly throne and fills his celestial palace with his brilliant glory. The creatures serving him in heaven already honor him. But God has always been determined to increase his honor by extending his glory throughout the earth. To accomplish this goal, God plans to extend his kingdom to earth, so that earth becomes like heaven. When that happens, every creature above, on and beneath the earth will render him unending worship and praise. God employs myriads of spirits that work toward this end. But he's given his earthly image, humanity, the honor of filling and subduing the earth. Throughout the Bible, we're God's representatives, preparing the world for the ultimate display of his glory.

On the other side of the conflict, Satan resists the spread of God's glory by trying to prevent humanity from filling and subduing the earth for God. In order to resist the spread of God's kingdom throughout the earth, Satan leads many spirits and human beings in rebellion against God, and into conflict with God's spiritual and human servants. He gains human allies in his cause through a wide variety of means, including lies, deception, false religion, and appeals to fallen humanity's sinful desires.

In every great story there is a hero, and there is someone who stands against that hero. There's the protagonist, which is the main character of the story, and the antagonist who stands against that character. And the Bible is the greatest of all stories, and so it's not surprising to see, as you read through the Old Testament, that there is a battle that has been joined between God and his promised Messiah and the Devil who is trying to do everything he can to prevent that Messiah from ever coming. So, already in the Garden of Eden when God gave the promise that a seed would be born to the woman who would crush the Devil, from that point on you see the Devil opposing God at every turn. And it strikingly, even when there's a young child, many times the Devil is trying to take the life of that young child, or when the people of God are thriving he tries to bring them into captivity and crush them. You see that story worked out time and time again all the way through the Old Testament.

— Dr. Philip Ryken

In the storyline of Old Testament history, right from the beginning, God is the protagonist and Satan is the antagonist. You see that right from the beginning in the Garden, because it's Satan who comes and tempts Adam and Eve, but he tempts them over against God... And then of course after the fall, we get this mention of this ongoing struggle that's going to take place throughout the rest of the Old Testament, and of course into the New Testament that is between the seed of the serpent and the seed of the woman, Eve. And of course this finally reaches its climax, its fulfillment in Christ who puts the Devil to shame and defeats him once and for all... And I think then you see that that keeps playing out over time in the Old Testament as the seed of the serpent, which I think we can generalize as the enemies of God, continually resist God, resist his people, go to war with his people, oppress his people, and so you see that throughout. And so you know, when you have Israel, say, being oppressed and in battle with, say, the Philistines, just for one example, that's more than just Israel verses the Philistines. I think behind that, under it, is that ongoing sort of warfare between God and Satan.

— Dr. Brian J. Vickers

Now, we should admit that modern Christians often miss the importance of this struggle between God and Satan. Many of us come to the Bible with very little awareness of how the empirical world is influenced by God and by the spirits that serve him, as well as by Satan and the spirits that serve him. But the original audiences of Scripture did not have this problem. They already understood the dynamic interconnections between spiritual and empirical realities. In fact, this belief was so common in the ancient world that the authors of Scripture never felt the need to provide a complete description of it. So, as modern people, if we begin to look at the drama of Scripture in terms of this spiritual conflict, we'll discover what the original audiences of the Bible already knew: this conflict underlies everything the Bible says.

With the main characters of Scripture in mind, let's turn to a second aspect of Old Testament epochal developments: the Bible's underlying storyline.

STORYLINE

Despite the countless differences between covenant epochs, all these variations fit within a unified, all-encompassing narrative about the conflict between God and Satan. For the sake of convenience, we'll treat the covenant epochs of Scripture as major chapters in the Bible's story, in which God is spreading his glory in order to obtain endless praise.

The drama opens in the first chapter, the epoch of Adam. In the beginning of this chapter, God put the first human beings in the one place where his visible glory initially appeared on the earth: the Garden of Eden, which served as his sacred palace. In accordance with his purpose for creation, God commissioned Adam and Eve to expand the boundaries of his holy garden by filling and subduing the earth. The goal was to turn the earth into an appropriate place for God to manifest his visible glorious presence.

Of course, Satan resisted this plan by leading the first humans into rebellion against God. And in response, God cursed his creation and made humanity's task difficult. He also announced that humanity would divide into rival factions from this point forward: the seed of the woman would consist of people that served God's purposes, and the seed of the Serpent would consist of people that joined Satan's rebellion. At the same time, God promised that the seed of the woman would eventually be victorious over Satan and his seed.

The remaining covenant epochs of the Old Testament form the body of the biblical storyline.

In the second chapter, the epoch of Noah's covenant, God cleansed the earth of the horrific violence humanity had committed as they followed Satan. He also rescued the remnant of the seed of the woman, Noah and his family, and established a stable world in which human beings were told to oppose further corruption as they filled and subdued the earth.

In the third chapter, the covenant epoch of Abraham, God chose Abraham's family as the portion of the seed of the woman that would lead humanity into conflict with Satan and his followers. God promised to multiply Abraham's descendants and to give them the land of Canaan. From that geographical starting point, they would eventually overcome all opposition to God and his plan. They would inherit the entire earth, and spread God's blessings to every family of the human race.

In the fourth chapter, the age of Moses' covenant, God gave Israel a great victory over the Egyptians and their satanic gods. He also constituted Israel as a nation, ruled by his law, and charged them to dispossess the Canaanites. As the Israelites moved into Canaan, God gave them victory over the Canaanites and the satanic spirits they served. He established and prospered the Israelites in the land, and moved them toward their ultimate goal of spreading God's kingdom throughout the earth.

In the fifth chapter, the covenant epoch of David, David's family was ordained to rule over God's people, and to lead them into further conflict with the nations that served Satan. David's dynasty brought security in Canaan and continued to extend Israel's borders in service to God's plan for the world. Sadly, over time Israel's kings flagrantly rebelled against God, to the point that God destroyed their empire and sent them into exile. During the exile, they suffered under the tyranny of foreign empires and their gods. Eventually, God offered to end the exile and returned a small remnant to the Promised Land so that they could attempt to restore the kingdom in Canaan. But even that remnant failed to remain faithful, so the exile continued under the tyranny of evil.

The final chapter mentioned in the Old Testament is the climactic new covenant God said he would establish when a remnant of Israel repented and the great son of David, the Messiah or Christ, atoned for their sins. The Messiah would lead Israel in final victory over Satan, the evil spirits and the nations that served them. He would crush Satan and judge all who followed him. In the end, the Messiah would make all things new,

reigning over the earth with God's people. God's glory would fill creation, and every creature would praise him endlessly.

This summary of the biblical story shows us that despite the differences between Old Testament covenant epochs, these epochs build on each other like chapters of a long narrative. Rather than contradicting, displacing, or even discounting each other, each of these stages of history contributes cumulatively to the developing, unified story of Scripture.

So far, we've considered the main characters behind Old Testament epochal developments, and shown that each epoch connected to the others in a unified storyline. Now we're ready to see that Old Testament authors frequently applied earlier epochs to later audiences.

AUTHORS

You'll recall that in the beginning of this lesson, we summarized the application of the Old Testament by saying: "Never return to the past, but never forget the past." We don't live in the past, and for that reason we should never think, behave or feel as if we lived in earlier times. But we're part of a story that includes the past. And the Old Testament authors knew this well. They recognized that the one true God had been revealing himself through the one true religion over time. And this meant that the things God had said and done in the past would continue to guide his people throughout time. In light of this, Old Testament authors regularly took what they learned from the past, and applied it to their own day. Think about it this way: There are six major covenant epochs mentioned in the Old Testament. But all our information about the three earliest epochs — the periods of Adam, Noah, and Abraham — comes from biblical books written in the later epochs of Moses, David and the new covenant.

We'll consider two common elements that Old Testament authors included in their writings that revealed their understanding of epochal developments. First, we'll see that Old Testament authors wrote about the past. And second, we'll see that they wrote for the present. That is, they wrote for audiences that lived in their own day, in their own present. Let's look first at the fact that Old Testament authors wrote about the past.

About the Past

All Old Testament books explicitly deal primarily with the past. Consider the Pentateuch — the books of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. Moses wrote all these books during his covenant epoch. But in Genesis he reported events that had taken place in the distant past, during the covenant epochs of Adam, Noah, and Abraham. In the books of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, he didn't reach back as far into history. But even there he focused on events that had taken place before the books were written.

The rest of the Old Testament books were written in David's covenant epoch. And they also took their audiences into the past. For example, the book of Job was most

likely written during the monarchical period of the Davidic epoch. But it reports events that had taken place in the Abrahamic epoch, long before the monarchy. The books of Joshua, Judges, and Ruth were written in the age of David's covenant, but they reported events that had taken place near the end of the Mosaic epoch, before David became king. The books of Samuel, Kings, Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther primarily referred their audiences to recent events in the past. This is also true of all the Old Testament prophetic books, Isaiah through Malachi. The prophets first ministered through prophetic speeches and actions, and only later recorded their ministries for the sake of expanding their contemporary audiences. So, their books were largely written records of prophetic actions and speeches that had already been delivered. In much the same way, Proverbs, the Song of Solomon, and Ecclesiastes were also theological reflections on the recent past.

Now that we understand that Old Testament authors wrote about the past, let's turn to the fact that they wrote for the present, that is, for their own contemporary audiences.

For the Present

When the biblical writers started writing the Scriptures ... they wrote to meet the needs of the readers, their people. And they didn't sit down and write just for the love of writing. Instead, they wrote to meet their people's need for learning, guidance and structure. For this reason, there was an intended purpose behind every book. The inspiration was not the issue of just "sit down and write." No, the issue was that there was a need — "rise up and write." That's why each writer took into account the need of his people to provide the information in a way the people could understand.

— Dr. Ghassan Khalaf, translation

Scripture authors paid close attention to the circumstances of the audiences they were writing for. We don't want to go overboard there. We don't want to say they're so tailored to the original circumstances that they can't mean anything for later readers. We know that from Romans 15:4 among other places where Paul says whatever was written was written for our encouragement. And yet, still, the Scripture writers did pay careful attention to what was going on in the lives of the people they were writing for... Genesis, for instance, is written to a group of people who had just left Egypt. They had just made angry the mightiest empire on the face of the earth. They are getting ready to go into a land where they're going to have to battle other enemies. They need to know that they don't have anything to be afraid of, and so the book of Genesis opens with this

picture of God who made everything, who is in control of all the nations, who has made promises to the patriarchs and is keeping those promises. Israel doesn't have to be afraid... So, once we know the circumstances of the original audience that actually helps us to see not only what Scripture says but why it says it. And then we can start to ask questions like, where are we facing similar circumstances to those of Israel in the desert after they had left Egypt? ... And we begin to see how God cares for his people as a shepherd and shows compassion for our needs.

— Dr. Jimmy Agan

The authors of Scripture understood that the past represented earlier stages in the organic development of biblical faith. But they were called to minister first and foremost to audiences that lived in their own day. So, they wrote about the past in ways that built bridges to the lives of their original audiences. They highlighted historical people, actions, words, institutions and the like in ways that connected these historical topics to the lives of their audiences. For the most part, the original audiences of Old Testament books were familiar with the literary conventions that biblical authors followed to build these bridges. So, the authors didn't normally bother to explain these connections. At other times, the authors provided small clues that pointed to the connections between the past and the present. And in still other passages, biblical authors offered rather direct explanations to help their audiences see how the past applied to them.

Just as the authors of the Old Testament found ways to connect the past to their own present audiences, modern Christians need to connect those writings about the past to ourselves. Yes, modern application is concerned with what's happening in our day. But it's always based on the ways of the past.

As God's people living in the modern world, our faith is deeply connected to what God revealed long ago. We're devoted to the modern application of Old Testament books that deal with the past. And even when we're applying New Testament books, we're still looking to the past. Now, some books like Revelation focus on the future quite a bit. But even Revelation is a record of the visions that its author John applied to his original audience in the past. In one way or another, every book of Scripture concentrates on what God did in the past. So, in order to apply those books in the modern world, we have to concentrate on the past, too.

To this point, our discussion of epochal developments has covered the main characters behind Old Testament epochal developments, the unified storyline of Scripture, and the fact that Old Testament authors applied earlier epochs to their contemporary audiences. So, now we're ready to focus on the types of connections biblical authors drew between the past and the present.

CONNECTIONS

We'll speak of three types of connections Old Testament authors drew between the past and the present. First, they provided their audiences with historical backgrounds to different dimensions of their faith. Second, they presented models for their audiences to imitate and to reject. And third, they provided anticipations of their audiences' experiences. Let's look first at how biblical authors provided their audiences with historical backgrounds.

Backgrounds

Old Testament authors most often showed the relevance of the past by explaining the background or origin of their audiences' current experiences. For instance, after Moses described the marriage of Adam and Eve, he paused his narrative to connect this event directly to his audience. Listen to Moses' words in Genesis 2:24:

For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh (Genesis 2:24).

In this verse, Moses explained how a feature from Adam's covenant epoch was relevant to audiences in the Mosaic epoch. Specifically, the marriage of Adam and Eve established the lasting ordinance of marriage, which extended to the days of Moses.

Once we see that Moses used this event as background for his original audience, we can connect it to ourselves in the same way. Adam and Eve's marriage was the background of marriage in ancient Israel, and it's also the background of marriage in our day.

At other times, biblical authors used backgrounds in ways that revealed God's approval or disapproval of historical figures. For instance, the book of Ruth finds no fault in Ruth, Naomi, or Boaz, and shows that they had God's full approval. We find the reason for this at the end of the book. Listen to the genealogy that closes the book in Ruth 4:21-22:

Salmon the father of Boaz, Boaz the father of Obed, Obed the father of Jesse, and Jesse the father of David (Ruth 4:21-22).

This genealogy shows that Boaz is a direct ancestor of King David. This ending connects the events in Moses' epoch to the time of the original audience, who lived in the time of David's covenant.

In all likelihood, questions had been raised as to the legitimacy of David's kingship because he descended from the Moabitess Ruth. But the story of Ruth demonstrates that her inclusion in Israel was exemplary in every way, and that God fully approved of her. In this way, the book of Ruth provided background that reinforced the selection of David as Israel's king.

And once again, in modern application we have the opportunity to extend the bridge that the author of Ruth built for his original audience. Just as God's approval of Ruth showed the legitimacy of David's dynasty in David's time, it also provides background that validates the kingship of David's greatest heir, Jesus, in our day.

Besides providing backgrounds the connections authors drew between the past and present also presented models for their original audiences to imitate or reject.

Models

Sometimes when we're reading a Bible story we ask ourselves, "Now, is this a good example or a bad example? Should I be doing the same thing that this person in the Bible has done, or should I do something different from that?" And answering that question may be different in different passages, but here's one very important principle that applies to a lot of biblical stories, and that is what I like to call the rule of outcomes, and that is looking at the end of the story and seeing what happens to that person. Do they receive God's blessing or do they receive God's judgment? And that's often all the clue that we need to figure out if someone is setting a good example for us or a bad example.

— Dr. Philip Ryken

Let's look at two examples of models from the book of Joshua, which recorded events from the Mosaic epoch for an original audience living in the Davidic epoch. The author of Joshua provided a positive model in Israel's performance in the battle for Jericho in Joshua 2–6, and a negative model in their performance at the battle for Ai in Joshua 7.

In the lengthy account of the battle of Jericho, there is no hint that Joshua, his spies, or the army of Israel did anything contrary to God's will. They showed their full devotion to God by submitting to circumcision a few miles away from Jericho in Gilgal, and they followed the Levites and the priests as they marched around the city singing, shouting and blowing trumpets, just as God had commanded. So, the author of Joshua concluded the story of Jericho with these positive words in Joshua 6:27:

So the Lord was with Joshua, and his fame spread throughout the land (Joshua 6:27).

But listen to how the account of the battle for Ai begins in Joshua 7:1:

But the Israelites acted unfaithfully in regard to the devoted things (Joshua 7:1).

This verse contrasts the positive model of Israel at the battle of Jericho with the negative model of Israel at the battle of Ai.

When Israel first attacked the tiny city of Ai, Israel's huge army was defeated because the Israelite Achan had stolen property from Jericho in rebellion against God's command that all the spoils of war be devoted to him. Joshua and Israel did not defeat Ai in battle until they had first been confronted by God, repented of their sin, and rendered severe judgment on Achan and his family.

The contrast between the battles of Jericho and Ai provided the readers of Joshua with both a positive model to follow and a negative model to reject. By observing these models, the original readers in David's epoch were supposed to learn how to follow their own kings into battle.

Of course, as followers of Christ, we no longer wage physical war like Joshua did, because the New Testament only calls us to spiritual warfare. Still, in modern application we extend the bridge of these same positive and negative models in order to learn the proper ways to engage in spiritual warfare. Simply put, we have to be devoted to God like Joshua was at Jericho, and we have to avoid neglecting his commands like Achan did at Ai. Of course, there are countless details related to these broad modern applications. But the connections that the author of Joshua drew to his original audience can all be extended in ways that help us determine those details for our own situations.

The Bible teaches us in many ways what a godly life is to look like, what sin is, etc., sometimes simply by stating it straight out, — thou shalt, or thou shalt not, or you shall, or you shall not — but also by giving us the history of real people who lived out their lives, everyday lives. And as we read them, we know that we are supposed to learn from their example positively or negatively. It says in the book of Romans, “For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.” So we have positive examples that we are to emulate, and we have negative examples that we are to shun... Like when David committed adultery with Bathsheba, we know from the Ten Commandments that that was wrong; we know it from the account as Nathan accused him of sin. And we have other indications. So we know that that's a bad example by a man who generally was a good example, a man after God's own heart... So what enables us to know the difference? The law of God, the clear teachings, the precepts, and then it's acted out, and we can put the two together.

— Dr. Andrew Davis

You know, sometimes it's very hard when you're looking at the Scriptures to figure out if a personal character or his life is one that we ought to be imitating. And we have to remember the only one that we know we can imitate is Jesus himself. That's the only one that gets a total pass on our critique. Everyone else we must examine very

carefully. The reason they're in the Bible is normally not primarily to be exemplary for us to imitate... But when we're trying to figure out when are we getting a life lesson to emulate and when not, you have to look at context, what's said about those actions, the outcomes of those actions, whether they contribute to the expansion of the kingdom or not, but primarily look to the moral precepts that are in the Scriptures and make your judgment there, and everyone's fair game except Jesus. We know that whatever he said and did is good, true, and beautiful. Everyone else comes under the microscope of biblical morality.

— Dr. Sanders L. Willson

Finally, besides providing backgrounds and models, Old Testament authors also drew connections between the past and present by incorporating anticipations of their original audiences' own experiences.

Anticipations

Biblical writers frequently wrote about the past in ways that pointed out how events from the past were very similar to the situations their audiences faced. This kind of bridge is similar to a literary device called “foreshadowing.” In foreshadowing, an author presents earlier details of a story in ways that anticipate later details. And biblical writers sometimes wrote about the past with similar intentions. They wrote about past events in ways that anticipated the experiences of their readers.

One well-known anticipation occurs in Moses' story of Abraham's sojourn in Egypt, recorded in Genesis 12:10-20. Of course, Moses told the truth of what happened in Abraham's epoch, but he explained the story in ways that helped his original audience recognize many parallels between Abraham and themselves. For instance, Abraham went to Egypt because of a famine, just as Moses' original readers had been in Egypt because of a famine. Pharaoh unjustly held Abraham in Egypt by taking Sarah into his harem, similar to the way the Egyptians unjustly held the Israelites as slaves in Moses' day. God delivered Abraham by sending a plague on Pharaoh's house, and he delivered Israel in Moses' day by sending plagues on Egypt and Pharaoh's house. Pharaoh sent Abraham away with great riches, and in the Exodus in Moses' day, Pharaoh and the Egyptians sent the Israelites away with the riches of Egypt.

Moses drew these parallels to show that Abraham's experience anticipated their own. Moses wanted to encourage his original readers to turn away from idealizing their time in Egypt, and to see their deliverance as a mighty act of God on their behalf.

Once again, in modern application our task is to see the bridge that Moses built from Abraham's life to his original audience, and to extend that bridge to our modern lives. For instance, the New Testament teaches that Christ has delivered us from the tyranny of evil, just like God previously delivered Abraham and later delivered Israel.

Through similarities like this, Abraham's sojourn to Egypt also anticipates the ways modern Christians should understand our faith and service to God.

Whenever we apply Scripture, we need to consider the epochal developments that have taken place between the times of the Bible and our day. And the connections Old Testament authors drew through backgrounds, models and anticipations provide patterns that help us bridge the gap between these historical epochs.

CONCLUSION

In this lesson on modern application and Old Testament epochs, we've looked at the epochal divisions of Old Testament history in terms of their variety, a common outline of the epochs, and the implications of these divisions. And we've considered the epochal developments between these divisions in terms of their consistent characters, unified storyline, use of earlier epochs by biblical authors, and the connections between the epochs that aid our application.

As we've seen, God's covenants divided biblical history into major epochs that had different theological orientations. So, we should never try to serve God in our day by returning to the ways of the past. But we are never to forget what God revealed in the past. When we factor in the ways that theological themes developed organically from one age to the next, we find that everything God revealed in earlier covenant ages has much to teach us about serving him in our age, even the age of the new covenant in Christ.

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