A House for My Name

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A House for My Name

A Survey of the Old Testament

Peter J. Leithart

Canon Press
MOSCOW, IDAHO

Peter J. Leithart, *A House for My Name: A Survey of the Old Testament*

Published by Canon Press, P.O. Box 8729, Moscow, ID 83843
800-488-2034 / www.canonpress.org

06 07 08 09 10 9 8 7 6 5

Cover design by Paige Atwood

Printed in the United States of America.

Leithart, Peter J., 1959–
A House for My Name : a Survey of the Old Testament /
Peter J. Leithart.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and indexes.
ISBN 1-885767-69-2 (pbk.)
1. Bible O.T.—Textbooks. I. Title.
BS1194 .L39 2000
221.6'1—dc21 00-009910

To Lindsey

יִשְׂמַךְ אֱלֹהִים
כְּרוּת וְכְאֶסְתֵּר
אִם בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל

Contents

Acknowledgments

Readers familiar with the work of James B. Jordan, especially his *Through New Eyes*, will recognize his fingerprints on every page of this book. I even toyed with the notion of entitling this book *Through New Eyes For Dummies*, but feared that would infringe some kind of copyright or patent. Over nearly two decades, Jim has been a continual source of stimulation and insight, as well as being a generous and helpful critic. If this book does nothing more than encourage readers to buy and read Jim's books and papers, it will have served a useful purpose.

Thanks also to Professor Tremper Longman, III of Westmont College, who read the manuscript and made encouraging comments. Rev. Jeffrey Meyers of Providence Presbyterian Church in St. Louis read portions of the book and offered correctives at a number of points.

I am grateful to Doug Jones of Canon Press, who commissioned the book and whose generosity and enthusiasm for the project kept me going through those moments when I was sure the whole thing was a very bad mistake.

My oldest son, Woelke, helped at the early stages by turning old teaching outlines into prose. I owe thanks to all my children. I have been teaching them the Bible since they were very young and have learned more from them than they or I can possibly know.

Preface

I learned the characters and events of the Old Testament in Lutheran Sunday School, and though profoundly grateful for this training, I realize now that there were some significant weaknesses. The least important of these was that the teaching was very selective. Selectivity in itself is not a problem. Unless a writer simply wants to reproduce the entire Old Testament, he must highlight some events rather than others. The problem had more to do with the principle of selection. We learned about Samson's strength and power, but we were never taught about Ehud's sword disappearing into fat Eglon or about Jael pounding a tent peg through Sisera's head. Doubtless, the curriculum writers were protecting us from something. What would Mom think if I brought home a picture of splattered brains from Sunday School? But leaving out these stories impoverishes one's understanding of and interest in the Old Testament.

A more serious problem was that the story was never quite finished. The curriculum almost always stopped at Solomon or shortly thereafter, so that I received only the vaguest idea of the history of the divided kingdom and the exile. A few scattered stories from the latter part of Israel's history made it into the Sunday School pamphlets, but I had little sense of the setting of Elijah and Elisha or of Jonah and Haggai. If I was taught about the Babylonian exile, I forgot somewhere along the line and had to relearn it. Daniel just

popped up in the court of Nebuchadnezzar and that was that.

Perhaps I was taught all these things, but my failure to retain any memory of them points to the most serious problem with many Sunday School curricula: They do not connect the dots. Children learn a story here, a story there, but they do not get the sense that the Bible is telling one story and that each of the little stories is an episode of something bigger. And this weakness is rooted in an even more fundamental hermeneutical flaw. Christians teaching the Old Testament are constantly tempted to treat it as a collection of moral fables. Abram "lies" to Pharaoh in Genesis 12, and we draw the conclusion that Abram's faith was not sufficiently strong, and that lying is a bad thing. But the story ends with Abram being treated well by Pharaoh and receiving all manner of livestock (Genesis 12:16). How such an ending discourages lying is not exactly clear: Abram does not just get away scot free—he is richly rewarded for his "lack of faith." To make this work, the moralizer has to say that the riches Abram receives are "deceptive riches," rather than the true riches received by faith. Moral piles on moral, all of them obscuring the passage they are supposed to illuminate. If we cut through the layers of moralizing, we realize that the story is not well-designed as a warning against lying. Why does Abram have to go to Egypt to lie? Why *this* lie? Why is he rewarded? One must simply say that something else is going on in Genesis 12, something that a moralistic reading of the Bible does not even hint at (see chapter 2 following).

This book is also selective, and necessarily so. I do not try to tell every story in the Old Testament, and, in fact, I give short shrift to many of the most popular stories or ignore them completely, while I give detailed attention to some of the lesser known books and figures, Jeremiah for instance. For the most part, I have also ignored the historical background to the Old Testament, concentrating instead on the internal workings of the text itself.

I hope to provide a framework for the whole Bible and particular books that will help readers make sense of

individual stories and passages. Given this focus, this book will be most useful to readers who already have some basic knowledge of the facts of the Old Testament.

And so, this book lacks balance. In two senses, however, I have attempted to be comprehensive: This book covers the entirety of Old Testament history. Solomon makes his appearance in chapter four, but then the three chapters that follow trace the history of the divided kingdom, the latter days of Judah, and the exilic and postexilic periods. Second, and more importantly, I have attempted to show how the episodes of the Bible fit together into the single story of God's works within the creation and especially with Israel. In this way, I have avoided moralizing. There is, of course, moral instruction to be had in the Bible. But the point is that the events recorded in Scripture happened in real history and are episodes in the outworking of God's plan for humanity and for His world. Moral inferences should be drawn *after* we have grasped the shape of a particular passage and how it fits into the larger sweep of biblical history.

The setting I have in mind for my readers is not the library or even the pastor's study, though I hope this book will be useful to pastors and other teachers. Instead, this book is designed to be read aloud at the dinner table during family devotions, and I have tried to write it in such a way that even very young children will begin to grasp the sweep and beauty of the Bible. Because I want to get across the main point and do it in an understandable way, I have placed technical details in the endnotes that conclude each chapter. This has sometimes produced overstuffed endnotes, but that is preferable in this case to an overstuffed book.

I encourage parents not to underestimate what children can learn about the Bible. Unlike many books of theology, the content of the Bible is fairly easy to grasp. Even (especially?) a two-year-old understands what happens when someone's head is bashed with a tent peg. If trained to read properly, children can begin to see how parts of the Bible are connected to each other and to one big story. I have been

teaching the Bible to my children for many years, and years ago they began to teach me by noticing wonders in the Scriptures that I had never noticed.

Though this book is designed for families, it is not, I trust, a simplistic book. For those who want to know, the introduction is an eggheady discussion of the importance of the Old Testament for Christian faith and practice and a description of the rules for reading that guide my work. If you are the type who does not care to know about the gears making things go, you should turn immediately to the first chapter. But if, like me, you are a theological engineer who gets a thrill out of the music of the gears, the introduction may be of interest.

Introduction: The New Concealed

In his lovely study of medieval monasticism, Jean Leclercq notes that the medieval monks studied and commented on the Old Testament even more than the New. They did this not because they confused the Old and New but because of their understanding of what God was doing in the Old Testament. For the medieval monks, the Old Testament was not merely a prefiguration of salvation in Christ, but the beginning of that salvation, albeit in a veiled form. Their study of the Old Testament was closely tied to their understanding of the New, for "the Old and the New Testament taken as a whole tell the same story of the same people of God." If the New Testament was necessary to a proper understanding of the Old, the principle worked in reverse as well: "truth [in the New Testament] unveils the figure [in the Old] and shows forth its meaning; once revealed, the figure in turn illuminates the Truth." Knowing Christ meant knowing Him not only from the pages of gospels and epistles, but knowing Him as He is presented in type and shadow in the Old Testament. Studying the Old Testament was thus never merely an historical interest—never a study of "Hebrew religion"—but a central means for growing in "compunction," the desire for God in Christ that was the goal of the monastic life.[1]

Though the Reformation departed in a number of ways from medieval methods of biblical interpretation, the Reformers treated the Old Testament in much the same way.

Calvin insisted, along with the medieval theologians, that the Old Covenant saints communed with Christ and were saved in and by Him. The Old Testament, as Calvin understood it, was an exhibition of the gospel under the veil of figures and shadows. As with the medieval monks, Calvin's goal in studying the Old Testament was to know Christ and to serve Him, promptly and sincerely.

Modern Christianity, by contrast, has not quite known what to do with the Old Testament; or, better, it has known precisely what to do with the Old Testament—toss it in the rubbish bin. This dismissive attitude toward the Old Testament is seen especially in classic liberalism, a product mainly of the nineteenth century. Two of the key ingredients in the making of theological liberalism were what Stephen Sykes has called the "inwardness tradition" and a sharp separation of Christianity from the religion of the Old Testament. Liberal separation of Old and New was similar to the view of Marcion, the early church heretic who taught that the God of the Old Testament is a different God from that of the New.[2]

Sometimes, the connection of liberalism and Marcionism was very explicit, as in the church historian Adolf von Harnack. Harnack's views also illustrate how the Marcionite division of the Old and New leads to a certain view of the content of Christian faith. In his third lecture on the *Essence of Christianity*, which was delivered at the turn of the century, Harnack offered this description of the kingdom of God:

> Anyone who wants to know what the kingdom of God and the coming of this kingdom mean in Jesus' preaching must read and meditate on the parables. There he will learn what the kingdom is all about. The kingdom of God comes by coming to *individuals*, making entrance into their *souls*, and being grasped by them. . . . Everything externally dramatic, all public historical meaning vanishes here; all external hope for the future fades also. . . . It is not a matter of angels and devils, nor of principalities and powers, but of God and the soul, of the soul and its God.[3]

As Harnack continued, the Marcionite basis for this description of the kingdom became clear. Jesus "severed the connection existing in his day between ethics and external forms of religious worship and technical observance" and traced moral issues to their "root, that is, to the disposition and intention."[4] Religion for Harnack had to do with inner feeling and intentions, not with public worship or questions of political or social concern. Continuing this work, Paul "delivered the Christian religion from Judaism," by virtue of his insight that "religion in its new phase pertains to the individual" and by introducing the dichotomies of spirit/flesh, inner/outer, life/death.[5] Harnack recognized that the gospel has a bearing on the problems of law, society, culture, and work, and he justified the formation of churches by noting that religion cannot remain "bodiless." But these "externals" are not part of Christianity *per se*, and the genius of Christianity is its liberation from externals. Harnack claimed that the church fell when the externals of religion began to take on too much importance. In the West, the church came to be seen as a necessary institution, and in Eastern Christianity, worship turned from "a worship of God in spirit and in truth into a worship of God in signs, formulas, and idols."[6] In his work on Marcion, Harnack was explicit in his endorsement of a modernized Marcionite program.[7] Thus, the "inward" form of Christianity is defined by opposition to the "external" form of religion found in Judaism and the Old Testament. Marcion is brought forward in defense of pure inward piety.

Already at the beginning of the nineteenth century, Friedrich Schleiermacher had set modern Protestant theology off on a similar course. Despite his opposition to the Enlightenment's rationalistic view of religion, he shared its view of the Old Testament. In what has been called the "decisive sentence of his dogmatics," Schleiermacher argued that the connection of Christianity with "Mosaic institutions" was purely historical, while "as far as concerns its historical existence and its aim, [Christianity's] relations to

Judaism and Heathenism are the same." The Old Testament itself, Schleiermacher claimed, "ascribed to the New Covenant a different character from the Old," even an "antithesis" between them. This view of the transition from the Old to the New meant, theologically, that the Old Testament might be safely ignored by the theologian, indeed that it was to be "utterly discard[ed]," since it was merely the "husk or wrapping" and since "whatever is most definitely Jewish has least value." The "most definitely Jewish" elements are "a legalistic style of thought or a slavish worship of the letter," which improperly entered the church when the Old Testament was used for the expression of Christian piety.[8] The medieval monks, in other words, were Judaizers when they used Old Testament terminology to express the faith of the church.

Most important for Schleiermacher, the form of Christianity's piety and of its religious consciousness was wholly different from that of Judaism.[9] The members of what Schleiermacher called the "true church," as opposed to the institutional clingers-on, had no need of text or letter, as was necessary under the old system. This was consistent with Schleiermacher's effort to define an irreducible "essence" of religion and religions. Such a program falters when applied to the religion of Israel, in which the covenant with Yahweh, embodied in its texts, rites, feasts, sanctuary, and religious hierarchy, embraced the whole of the nation's life. The externals in Israel's religion were not a dispensable husk protecting an internal seed but much more like the layers of an onion: Keep peeling away the layers and eventually you're left with nothing. Schleiermacher's definition of religion as a "modification of feeling" or a "taste for the Infinite," however brilliantly qualified to accommodate the social aspects of religion and to explicate the connection of feeling with acting and knowing, simply could not embrace the religion of the Old Testament. Schleiermacher did not follow Immanuel Kant in denying that Judaism was a religion,[10] but he treated the forms of Old Testament religion as rubble that must be

removed to find the religious treasure buried beneath. In short, some variation of Marcionism was essential to Schleiermacher's definition of religion and therefore at the heart of his entire system, as Harnack realized.[11]

Evangelicals are rightly horrified by the evils of liberalism, including its hostility toward the religion of Israel. But it is not clear exactly how modern evangelicalism differs from liberalism on these fundamental points. Reading Schleiermacher leaves the evangelical of the late twentieth century with a feeling of eerie familiarity. Attacks on the "external" supports of religion, emphasis on emotional religious experiences, the idea that the kingdom of God is a nebulous and mainly inner reality—all these are themes that can be found in countless books from modern evangelicals. And Schleiermacher's attitude toward the Old Testament, while never stated in so bold a form, is the working assumption of much evangelical theology. When examined on these related issues—treatment of the Old Testament and the emphasis on the "inwardness" of Christianity—liberalism and evangelicalism begin to appear as two aspects of a single theological enterprise. Their wars are civil wars.

In recent years, mainstream theology has begun to recognize the disaster that followed from the Marcionism of classical liberalism. R. Kendall Soulen is a leading figure in efforts to restore the importance of the Old Testament to Christian theology. In his book, *The God of Israel and Christian Theology*, Soulen recognizes that the "standard model" of dismissing the Old Testament fosters a "double impoverishment for Christian theology":

> On the one hand, the standard model has led to a loss of biblical orientation for Christian theology, especially with regard to the Scriptures of Israel. On the other, it has led to a loss of creative theological engagement with the hard edges of human history. As a result, the standard model has fostered and supported a damaging dislocation of the gospel about Jesus Christ. Estranged from its proper context in the Scriptures of Israel and in public history, the gospel has been resettled in

> very different contexts. Alienated from the Hebrew Scriptures, the gospel has been interpreted in the context of accounts of human religiosity more or less foreign to the theological idiom of the Bible. Disconnected from the sweep of public history, the gospel has been contextualized one-sidedly in the realm of the personal and private.[12]

Unfortunately, the target of Soulen's attack includes most of what has counted as orthodox Christianity throughout its history. In Soulen's telling, it is not only modern theology that has wrongly rejected the Old Testament; Christian theology as such is marred by the same "flaw in the heart of the crystal." According to Soulen, Christian theology has always taught a doctrine of "supercessionism," that is, the belief that

> God chose the Jewish people after the fall of Adam in order to prepare the world for the coming of Jesus Christ, the Savior. After Christ came, however, the special role of the Jewish people came to an end and its place was taken by the church, the new Israel. The church, unlike the Jewish people, is a spiritual community in which the carnal distinction between Jew and Gentile is overcome. . . . the Jews failed to recognize Jesus as the promised Messiah and refused to enter the new spiritual Israel. God therefore rejected the Jews and scattered them over the earth, where God will preserve them until the end of time.[13]

By contrast, Soulen endorses the view summarized in a statement of the Presbyterian Church (USA): "The church has not 'replaced' the Jewish people. . . . Hence, when speaking with Jews about matters of faith, we must always acknowledge that Jews are already in a covenantal relationship with God."[14]

There are many problems with Soulen's analysis, but I will limit myself to three criticisms. First, he is simply wrong in his understanding of the covenant with Abraham. Citing the Jewish theologian Michael Wyschogrod, he claims that the "mystery" of the election of Israel is that it "concerns a natural human family." Rather than choosing His people

according to faith or moral excellence, "God chose the seed of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, a human family neither better nor worse than others." Thus, the election of Israel is a "corporeal election," and even observance of Torah is subordinate to the "fundamental reality of Judaism," which is "the corporeal election of Abraham's children."[15]

Soulen's point contains a profound truth, namely, that when God acts in the world to save mankind, He works "with the grain" of human life as He created it. His grace flows through the created channels of family and descent, through speech and food. But Soulen is arguing that blood descent from Abraham was the backbone of the covenantal arrangements with Israel, and that point is simply false. Right from the beginning, the covenant embraced many who were not in any way related to Abraham by blood. All the male members of Abraham's household were circumcised (Genesis 17:12–14), and in a household that included 318 men of fighting age (Genesis 14:14), this must have been a sizable number of men—far more than the blood descendants of Abraham, who at that time included only Ishmael! When Israel came from Egypt, they came out as a "mixed multitude" (Exodus 12:38) that included thousands of converted Egyptians who did not want to hang around Egypt after it had been nearly destroyed by plagues. It was never the case that "the family identity of the Jewish people as the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob" was the foundation of the faith of Israel. That is perhaps the modern Jewish view, but it is not the view of the Bible. This fundamental error leads Soulen off in the wrong direction from the start. He maintains that the Jews continue to have a covenantal identity because they are descended from Abraham, when in fact descent from Abraham was never the criterion of covenantal identity. Within the covenant, those who are not blood descendants of Abraham have *always* outnumbered those who are.

Second, though Soulen thinks he is attacking those who separate Christian theology from the Old Testament, he perpetuates that same error. He is still working within the

liberal framework that regards the religion of Israel as a different kind of religion from the religion of the church. Take, for example, his understanding of "redemption." Supercessionism, which Soulen rejects, teaches that the covenant with Israel is part of a larger story that begins with Adam's fall in the garden of Eden; the covenant with Israel is a means for achieving redemption from the effects of Adam's sin. However, Soulen wants to give Israel's covenant with God an independent standing, as a permanent structure in God's dealings with the world. He writes:

> [Within the supercessionist framework] the vast panorama of the Hebrew Scriptures is made to unfold within the basic antithesis of Adam's sin and redemption in Christ. This soteriological framework foreshortens the Hebrew Scriptures both thematically and temporally. Thematically, because the Scriptures are thought to relate a story whose fundamental presupposition is the catastrophe of sin and whose goal is therefore deliverance from the negative conditions of existence. This perspective obscures the possibility that the Hebrew Scriptures are not solely or even primarily concerned with the antithesis of sin and redemption but much rather with the God of Israel's passionate engagement with the mundane affairs of Israel and the nations. . . . the standard model also foreshortens the Hebrew Scriptures in a temporal sense. As perceived through the lens of the standard model, the Hebrew Scriptures do not relate a story that extends indefinitely into the future.[16]

In this context, Soulen quotes Bonhoeffer to the effect that the Hebrew Bible is not a book about redemption from death, but rather about how Israel's God delivers His people "so that it may live before God as God's people on earth."

Again, we give Soulen his due. It is true that the Old Testament is concerned with "God's passionate engagement" with the real world of nations, and it is also true that ignorance of the Old Testament has led Christian theology to miss that crucial point. As noted above, modern theology has treated Christianity as a religion of the inner man rather than

an account of God's works in history. But to play God's engagement with the nations off against "redemption," as if the two were opposites, assumes an unbiblical definition of "redemption." For the Bible, delivering Israel from Egypt to live before God on earth is precisely an act of "redemption" (see Exodus 6:6). Soulen has narrowed the scope of terms like "sin" and "redemption" so that they do not encompass God's actions among the nations and in history. Narrowing these biblical terms, however, is precisely the kind of thing that Soulen dislikes in supercessionism, because it detaches scriptural teaching from the "hard edges" of history. The fact that Soulen accepts such truncated meanings for key terms suggests that he is defining them without much reference to the Old Testament. This is a perfect example of the kind of "gnosticism" that Soulen rightly deplores. Will the real "historical gnostic" please stand up?[17]

Finally, Soulen's treatment of New Testament texts announcing the removal of the dividing wall between Jew and Gentile is, to put it mildly, deeply unsatisfying. The church, he claims, is not a place where the identities of Jew and Gentile are erased but the place in which they are reconciled: "Reconciliation does not mean the imposition of sameness, but the unity of reciprocal blessing," and this means that the church is "a particularized form in which the basic relation between Jew and Gentile is actualized."[18] Soulen is clearly right that peoples incorporated into the church are not required, or at least not always required, to give up their distinct cultural identities. Insofar as modern Jews form a subculture, they may join the church and maintain their own traditions, so long as these are consistent with the faith of the church. It is also true, as Soulen says, that "what God has done in Jesus engages Jews as Jews and Gentiles as Gentiles."

Soulen is wrong, however, to suggest that the union of Jews and Gentiles in the church does not produce a "third column of biblical ontology next to that of the Jews and that of the Greeks," for clearly Paul envisions a new sort of human being emerging in the body of Christ (Ephesians 2:15).

More disturbingly, Soulen somehow moves (leaps?) from this recognition of the church as a place of reconciliation of Jew and Gentile to the notion that Christians in the church are in union with Jews who are not: "the church can only desire the faithful preservation of the distinctiveness and integrity of Jewish existence wherever this takes place, whether within or without the church."[19] We are treading on delicate ground here. Jews have suffered enormously in the twentieth century, but sensitivity to Jewish suffering and abhorrence of horrific crimes against the Jews should not lead us to abandon the clear teaching of Jesus and Paul. Absolutely nothing in Soulen's argument supports the idea that Christians should strive to maintain Judaism outside the church. Jew and Gentile are reconciled *in Christ*, in Christ's body, but to suggest that Christians and Jews are reconciled whether or not Jews turn to Christ makes utter nonsense of the New Testament. Perhaps Soulen would respond by saying that "Christ" is bigger than the church, saving some who have never heard the gospel and joined the church, but this leaves him again dangling over the precipice of gnosticism.

Soulen's book offers two challenges to evangelicals, one that we desperately need to heed, another that we need to reject in the strongest possible terms. The positive lesson is that the Old Testament must be our book if we are to be fully Christian. The modern tendency to demean the Old Testament has wrought untold falsehood, misery, incoherence, and oppression. When the Old Testament is ignored, Christianity is conceived as a private "spiritual" religion with little to say to the world, and the world goes on its merry, bloody way. But Soulen wants us to read the Old Testament as a book having an integrity of its own, without reference to the New Testament, and this we must, with the church in every age, reject utterly. We must recover the medieval and reformational way of reading the Old Testament as the crucial early chapters of the single book that is the Bible. We must recover the Old Testament as a book about Jesus.

Interpreting the Old Testament

But reading the Bible as a single book requires some training in the art of reading. Since the Reformation, "grammatical-historical" biblical interpretation has been the main hermeneutical method among Protestants. A development of the medieval idea of "literal" meaning, the grammatical-historical approach attempts to understand Scripture in the light of the grammar of the original languages and the historical and cultural setting in which the text was written. Something like the grammatical-historical method has been foundational to all biblical interpretation throughout the history of the church. Biblical interpretation would be a free play of signifiers without grounding in the vocabulary, grammar, and historical setting of the Bible. But the grammatical-historical method, essential as it is as a foundation, cannot provide the overarching "grammar" for the interpretation of Scripture. If it becomes the sole method of interpretation, the study of the Old Testament will be reduced to a study of "what they did then" rather than a study of the glories of the Christ who was yet to come. Liberal interpretation of the Old Testament can, in fact, be understood as the product of an exclusive reliance on the grammatical-historical method, and evangelical biblical study often has the same narrow focus. Interpretation of the Old Testament must be grounded in grammar and history, but if it does not move to typology, it is not Christian interpretation.

"Typology" is a loaded word. In this book, the word has more baggage than usual, for I use the term not only to highlight the principle that the Old Testament points ahead to Christ, but also to describe the structure of the Old Testament itself. The Old Testament is composed according to a rhythm of "repetition with difference" that is a microcosm of New Testament typology. David is a "type" of Jesus, but he is also an "antitype" of Adam. When I speak of a "typological" understanding of the Old Testament I am further calling attention to the literary devices that the Bible uses to communicate its message. These are "typological" in the

sense that they are the means by which the Bible presents the rhythms of history, as well as the means by which the Old Testament in particular points to Christ. The point is difficult to grasp at this level of abstraction, so let me explain more specifically what I mean.

Let me begin with a brief discussion of different approaches to meaning in language. Linguistic theories of meaning can be classified as either "concept" or "system" theories. A concept theory of meaning says that each word has its meaning attached to it by usage and history. Thus, through the usage of English speakers over time, a certain meaning has attached itself to the word "dog." Any competent user of English forms a concept whenever he hears or reads the word "dog." This concept is not necessarily a mental image of a dog, but it is a mental response of some sort, one awakened in the mind by the linguistic unit "dog." The word has sense, though it can have any number of different referents. "Dog" can refer to Maggie, Fluffie, or Phaedeau. In this view, a word can be used metaphorically, but when it is used metaphorically, it is referring to a thing in the world other than its normal referent or with a meaning other than its normal meaning, as when a teenage boy calls a teenage girl a "dog."

Most linguists in this century have operated with a "field" or "system" orientation. Each word has a place in the system of words within a language, and the word takes its meaning by its place in the system. Meaning is not "attached" to the word, rather it is established by the difference that one word has with another. The word "few" does not have a packet of meaning attached to it but is understood by contrast to related words like "many," "some," "all," and "several." Similarly, the word "dog" has meaning not because it has inherent sense but because it fills a place within the system of language and within a variety of subsystems. "Dog" means what it does by contrast to "wolf," "fox," "canine," "Great Dane," and so on. Here, meaning is not located in the word but in the differences between this word and that.

Like many dilemmas in philosophy and theology, this is a false one. Both the "concept" and the "system" viewpoint capture some truths about the mystery of communication. Though I believe that the meanings of words are constituted by some combination of system and concept, here I want to focus on the "system" orientation. The point I wish to make about biblical interpretation is this: We come to understand the words, sentences, paragraphs, and books of the Bible by examining them within a set of overlapping "systems" or contexts. Many studies of hermeneutics focus on what I will call the "lexical" context. Determining the meaning of a word in its "lexical context" not only means looking it up in the dictionary, though it does mean that. It also has to do with determining which of the possible dictionary meanings of a word is being used in a particular sentence or paragraph.

Several sorts of problems arise when dealing with a word's place in a lexical system. When a word has several lexical meanings, we are faced with a problem of "ambiguity," a possible confusion of meaning. If someone says, "He's blue," that could mean he is sad, or it could mean he is painted up for a Duke University basketball game, or it could mean that he has held his breath for just a moment longer than he should have. Several solutions to ambiguity are possible. Normally, the word is being used in one or the other of its senses, and we determine which one is being invoked by looking at the context in a text or the situation in which a statement is made.

There are cases when ambiguity is deliberate, however. The apostle John, for example, is very fond of deliberate ambiguities. In John 1:5, the word translated as "comprehended" can mean either "comprehend" or "seize." Did the darkness fail to "comprehend" the light come into the world, or did the darkness fail to "seize" the light? As we go through John's gospel, it becomes clear that both meanings are in play. Jesus is constantly slipping away from His enemies, so that they fail to "seize" Him until His hour comes. (He is, after all, the one born of the Spirit who, like the wind, blows

where He will, though no one knows where it is coming from or where it is going.) Yet, it is also clear in the gospel that Jesus' opponents do not comprehend or understand Him. Another famous example occurs in John 3, where Jesus tells Nicodemus that he must be born *anothen*, a word that can mean either "from above" or "again." Given John's track record, we are safe in concluding that he is being deliberately ambiguous. Being born again is being born from above, by the Spirit, through the One who was sent from above.

Another sort of problem for the lexical meaning of words is "synonymity," which is when two or more words are very close in meaning ("house" and "home," for example). Here the problem is to determine why the author has chosen one word rather than another, and how significant a choice it is. Again, a number of resolutions are possible. Grammar or usage sometimes determines why one word is used and another is not. In the dictionary, "strong" and "powerful" are synonymous, but there are certain contexts where one is the right word and the other sounds strange to a native English speaker. "My car has a strong engine" sounds odd, as does "This coffee is too powerful." If I say, "My employer is a strong man," you think my employer works out during his lunch hour. But if I say, "My employer is a powerful man," I am making a statement about his influence, prominence, or clout. Moises Silva, whose book on semantics provided these examples, discovered from a study of Paul's use of different words for "know" that the particular word used is almost always determined by the constraints of Greek grammar. When "know" occurs with a direct object, Paul uses one verb, but when he writes "know that," he uses another. When Paul uses the words according to this rule, his choice is not an important one. But it may be significant to notice when he departs from this normal usage. Variations like this do not arise from any subtly different shade of meaning, but from grammatical considerations, and this means that you should not put a lot of weight on a particular use of the word "know" in Paul.[20]

In general, the greater the difference between the uses and meanings of the words, the more significance you may attach to the choice of one over another. "Writer" and "author" are close synonyms, but if I call someone a "poet," I have made a more specific designation. Secondary shades of meaning and nuance also help to determine a word choice; connotations of similar words can be quite different. In English, "house" and "home" overlap a great deal, but they have a different feel. A "home" is where your heart is, where people welcome you, but a "house" is just the bricks and wood that provide the physical setting for a "home." "Horse" and "steed" are no different in denotation or dictionary meaning, but they differ markedly in nuance. If I say, "He mounted his steed," you will picture a knight in armor. But if I say "He mounted his horse," you think of a jockey.

I am giving rather cursory treatment to issues of lexical context because others have treated this issue much more thoroughly than I am capable of doing.[21] But if, in our study of Scripture, we remain fixed on seeking to understand words in their "lexical context," we will be missing much of the richness and beauty of Scripture. In addition to the "lexical context," this book will be based on the study of words in their "literary context." This can be subdivided into several levels. Most hermeneutics texts will include extensive discussions of "non-literal" uses of words. Puns, metaphors, similes, and other "tropes" fall into this category, and the Bible is full of them. The Bible's tropes, however, are never merely artistic adornments; they carry significant theological content. For example, in 2 Samuel 7, David, having defeated the Philistines and Jebusites, wants to build a "house" for the Lord. Instead, the Lord says He will build a "house" for David. The word "house" (*bayit*) is used in both a literal sense (house = temple) and in a figurative sense (house = dynasty), and the two are playing off each other. A substantial part of the meaning of the passage comes out in the interplay of these different senses of "house." This is "play" with words, but it is play of the most serious kind.

The Bible's tropes, furthermore, fit into a system of imagery and metaphor. When Isaiah compares the growth of righteousness to the earth's bringing forth fruit like a garden (61:11), the garden reference is not just a homely metaphor but is linked with the pervasive garden theme of the Bible. It refers ultimately to the garden of Eden, picks up on the imagery of the Pentateuch and Psalms that compares Israel to a garden or a vineyard, and is linked to Isaiah's notion that Israel has become a wilderness because of her sin. Isaiah's prophecy is thus a promise of restored Edenic righteousness and fruitfulness. In Psalm 1, to take another example, the simile comparing the righteous man to the tree by streams of water is again rooted in the garden setting of Genesis 2. A righteous man is like a tree not only in His stability and firmness and fruitfulness, but also because his life, in some measure, recaptures human life in its integrity.

Tropes can be recognized by examining the immediate context of a sentence, but in addition to this level of context, an interpreter has to examine how words are used throughout entire books of the Bible. Like great novelists, the biblical writers repeat a theme, word, or image throughout a book, and it accumulates significance as it goes. Looking at the use of a word or image in chapter twenty-five without first tracing how the author has packed meaning into the word in chapters 1–24 is like seeing the end of a movie first. We might get some of it, but mainly we will be left confused. On occasion, looking at an author's use of a word or phrase is essential to an accurate grasp of its meaning in a particular passage. A good example of this is Jesus' use of the phrase "this generation" in Matthew 24:34. Studied solely in its lexical context (i.e., looking it up in the dictionary) and in the immediate context of Matthew 24, it is possible (though just barely) to understand the phrase as "this race." What Jesus is saying, on this interpretation, is that the things He predicts will occur before the Jewish race disappears from the world. Once we see how Matthew uses the phrase, however, this interpretation becomes quite impossible. Throughout the

gospel, Matthew has used "this generation" to refer specifically to the generation that witnessed the ministries of John and Jesus (11:16; 12:39ff; 16:4; 17:17; 23:36). By the time we get to chapter twenty-four, we should not be confused about it anymore.

Seeing the repeated use of a word or image is sometimes important not for grasping precisely what is being said, but for grasping the fullness of what is being said. For example, in 1 Samuel, we frequently see Saul holding a spear (18:10–11; 19:9–10; 22:6; 2 Samuel 1:6). This seems an entirely unnecessary detail, added perhaps to make Saul a more vivid character. If we begin to examine the "spear" motif through 1 Samuel, we realize that most Israelites are without spears (1 Samuel 13:22). The first character who has a spear is Goliath, a Philistine, who wants to kill David with it (17:7). Through the rest of the book, Saul is the one with the spear, and he too wants to kill David with it. David, by contrast, never uses a spear (see 17:45–47). The writer has noted several specific incidents that involved spears in order to associate the spear with oppressive power. As Samuel warned, Saul-of-the-long-ash-spear is a king like the kings of the nations; he acts like a Philistine giant. We will grasp this important theme only if we read "with the grain" of the text, paying attention to the accumulating associations of words and phrases as we go. If we read stories in isolation from one another, we will miss this.

The third level of literary context is the whole Scripture. Here we are dealing with what Michael Fishbane, a Jewish scholar, has called "innerbiblical interpretation." This refers to the way biblical writers interpret their own times through the lenses of earlier events in Israel's history. Sometimes, this takes the form of direct allusion. In Exodus 2, the baby Moses is placed in an "ark," and the Hebrew word is the same as the word for Noah's ark in Genesis 6–8. Like Noah's ark, the "ark" of Moses is covered with pitch too. This allusion to the flood story is not window dressing but is intended to tell us something about the nature of the ministry of Moses. Like Noah, he will pass through the waters

unharmed, both in infancy and later in adulthood; more importantly, like Noah (whose name means "rest"), Moses will be the one who brings Yahweh's people from slavery to Sabbath. Like Noah, Moses will be the instrument for destroying the old world of Egypt and bringing Israel into a "new creation."

Sometimes, the allusions are found not in verbal quotations but in analogous situations, events, and settings. Here at last we get to something that looks like typology in the traditional sense, but here "typology" is not merely describing the relation between the Old and New Testaments; rather it but is operating already within the Old Testament. It is remarkable, for example, to note the incidence of "death by head wound" in the Old Testament. Sisera, Abimelech, Goliath, Absalom—many of the enemies of God have their heads crushed. When a scene or event is repeated in this way, it is deliberate and theologically grounded. All these are types of the serpent, whose head the Seed of the woman will crush (Genesis 3:15).

Thus far, we have been examining interpretation at the word level. But the Spirit is responsible not only for the words of Scripture, but also for the way the words are ordered. If we want to grasp the full meaning of the Scriptures, we must pay attention not only to the way words are being used, but also to how the Scripture is structured at larger levels. Here I wish to discuss two main categories: One is "literary structure" and the other is "plot structure." By the former, I mean a formal and abstract pattern in the text, a pattern that can be applied to a number of different types of writing. A "chiasm," for instance, can be used to organize a story, a Psalm, an exhortation in an epistle, or even a single sentence. By "plot structure," I mean recurring stories. The "death and resurrection" story is an example of a plot structure, though the death and resurrection can take very different forms from one specific story to another.

Let me begin with an example of a chiasm from Deuteronomy 12. Examined as a whole, the chapter follows this outline:

A. Observe carefully in land, v. 1
  B. Destroy Canaanite worship, vv. 2–4
    C. Worship at central sanctuary, vv. 5–14
      D. Meat and blood, vv. 15–18
        E. Don't neglect Levites, v. 19
      D´. Meat and blood, vv. 20–25 ("well with you"; "do what is right," v. 25)
    C´. Worship at central sanctuary, vv. 26–28 ("well with you"; "do what is right," v. 28)
  B´. Beware Canaanite worship, vv. 29–31
A´. Be careful to do commands, v. 32

John Breck has argued in his fascinating study, *The Shape of Biblical Language*,[22] that chiasms proper always have a central section that contains the main point of the passage. Here, strikingly, the reference to the Levite stands at the center. The centralization of worship is prominent, but supporting the Levite at the central sanctuary is the main point.

Alternatively, the first fourteen verses of Deuteronomy 12 can be outlined into two smaller chiasms, as follows:

I. Eliminate Canaanite worship, vv. 1–4
  A. Observe statutes and judgments, v. 1
    B. Destroy places of false worship, v. 2
    B´. Destroy objects of false worship, v. 3
  A´. Don't act like Canaanites, v. 4

II. Establish true worship, vv. 5–14
  A. Seek Lord in place He chooses, v. 5
    B. Bring offerings and contributions, v. 6
      C. Rejoice with house, v. 7
        D. Rest given, vv. 8–9
    B´. Brings offerings and contributions, vv. 10–11
      C´. Rejoice with house, v. 12
  A´. Offer offerings in place Lord chooses, vv. 13–14

In verses 5–14, the main point is to emphasize the rest that the Lord promises to provide Israel when they have entered the land. It is not unusual for biblical texts to be organized by

several overlapping structural principles, which enables the text to teach a number of things simultaneously.

Another sort of "literary structure" is called a "panel" construction. Here, instead of the chiastic pattern of "ABCBA," we have an ABC-ABC pattern as the text follows through the same sequence two or more times. As with the chiasm, the panel structure is often a clue to theological significance and sometimes uncovers the theological point of a passage that may seem to be arranged arbitrarily. In 2 Samuel 5–7, for instance, the text cycles through the same topics three times, with some important variations. In chapter five, David is first anointed as king over all Israel, then he fights the Jebusites and conquers Jerusalem, then we are told that Hiram helps him build a palace, and finally there is a list of the sons born to him in Jerusalem. In verse seventeen, we have a reference to his anointing, which suggests that the story is starting over where it began. Again, we follow through the same cycle: After the reference to David's anointing, he fights the Philistines, takes the ark into Jerusalem, and then decides to build a house for Yahweh. The Lord responds by saying that He will build a house for David (chapter 7). Thus, we have two sections following this same sequence: Anointing, battle and victory, house-building. The pattern continues in a somewhat different form into chapter eight, which records David's victories over the Philistines and Hadadezer and then lists the members of his administration, his royal "house." When we see that the text is structured as a set of variations on similar themes, it takes on a considerable weight of significance. David fights and then builds a house from the spoils, just as Jesus will later build His church from the spoils of His victory on Golgotha.

A final "literary structure" is the Bible's use of sequences of seven, all of which are rooted in the creation account of Genesis 1. A sevenfold pattern can be used to structure a narrative, a letter, or a set of speeches. In Exodus, for example, the description of the tabernacle is divided into seven speeches, which are marked by the phrase "Yahweh

spoke to Moses, saying" (25:1; 30:11; 30:17; 30:22; 30:34; 31:1; 31:12). Some of these sections correspond in striking ways to the creation week, but the mere fact of seven "words" of God suggests that the tabernacle is to be understood as a new creation or as an aspect of a new creation. Similarly, in Leviticus 8, the description of the ordination of Aaron and his sons as priests is divided into seven speeches that are marked off by the phrase "as the Lord commanded Moses" (8:5, 9, 13, 17, 21, 29, 36). As Aaron is brought through these seven "words," he is made a new man. This pattern continues into the New Testament, especially in Revelation, which is structured by a complicated set of sevens. Some of the sequences of seven in Revelation are ironically related to the creation account, although they depict a "decreation" rather than a "recreation."

In addition to these and other literary patterns, the Bible also makes use of repeated plot or story lines. The Bible tells the same story over and over, though never in exactly the same way twice. One of the main story-lines of the Bible is the "Creation-Recreation" story. The clearest example of this is found in the early chapters of Genesis. God creates the world (Genesis 1–2); then Adam sins and an initial judgment is passed when Adam is thrown out of the Garden (Genesis 3). There follows a period in which sin ripens and grows, a period of decline (Genesis 4–5); finally, God passes a "final" judgment, destroying the world corrupted by sin, in this case by the flood (Genesis 6–8). On the other side of the judgment, however, the Lord brings in a new creation with a new Adam, Noah, who is sent out to rule, multiply, and fill it (Genesis 9). We see this pattern repeated in the rest of the Bible, both in large sections of text and in smaller stories. As James Jordan has suggested, the whole Bible can be organized by this pattern:

Creation	*Fall*	*Initial Judgment*	*Decline*	*Final Judgment*	*Recreation*
Creation	Fall	Gen. 3	Gen. 4–5	Flood	Noah
Exodus	Kadesh	no entry	40 years	death of first generation	conquest
Conquest	failure to conquer, Judg. 1	nations remain	Judges	capture of ark	return of ark
David/Sol	Solomon	division	divided K	exile	return
Return	Jews reject Jesus	turn to Gentiles	Jews reject apostles	Jerusalem, A.D. 70	Church

Recognizing this kind of repeated story-line helps us to see the analogies between different parts of the Bible. From the chart, we see the "typological" relation between Adam and Solomon, for example. Sometimes the Bible makes explicit allusions that indicate these connections. Deuteronomy 32:11 speaks of the Lord "hovering" over Israel at the time of the Exodus, and this is the same (rare) word used in Genesis 1:2 to describe the Spirit's hovering over the deep of the original creation.[23] This allusion, in short, indicates that the Exodus is a new creation and that Israel is being formed by the Spirit as the people of the new creation. Another example is found in Jeremiah 4:23, where Jeremiah describes the judgment on Jerusalem and Judah with another allusion to Genesis 1:2: The land is "formless and void," and there is no light. This suggests that the judgment on Judah returns the world to a pre-creation state, to a "prime matter" that will be formed into a new cosmos.

Another common story-line follows this pattern: God speaks a word of command or promise, people respond to the Lord's command, and then God evaluates the response, passing a judgment of innocence or guilt. Again, this story is, in a sense, the story of the entire Bible. God commanded Adam not to eat from the tree of knowledge; Adam disobeyed, so God pronounced curses and cast him from the garden. The gospel is that another Adam obeyed perfectly and therefore was judged righteous and readmitted to the Garden. Sometimes, the command or promise is implicit, and therefore it is necessary to compare Scripture with Scripture to determine what command is being broken. 2 Samuel 6 describes David's first attempt to bring the ark into Jerusalem, which leads to disaster as Uzzah reaches out to touch the ark to keep it from toppling over and is struck dead. This seems to be a harsh judgment until we read the text against the background of Numbers 4:15 and 7:9, where we learn that the Levites were not supposed to be carrying the ark on a cart in the first place and that no Levite was allowed to even see, much less touch, the ark.

When we get to the book of Exodus in chapter two, we will look in more detail at the "exodus story-line," which is very frequent in Scripture. In a sense, this is a variation on the "victory-housebuilding" story. Yahweh fought against and defeated Pharaoh and the gods of Egypt and then commanded Israel to build His house with the spoils of victory. Other exodus stories in the Old Testament—preeminently, the exodus from Babylon—also follow this pattern of Yahweh's victory followed by the building of a house. And this points, typologically, to the victory of Jesus over Satan and His project of building His house, the Church.

Conclusion

Recovering the Old Testament as a text in which Christians live and move and have their being is one of the most urgent tasks before the church. Reading the Reformers is good and right. Christian political activism has its place. Even at their best, however, these can only bruise the heel of a world that has abandoned God. But the Bible—the Bible is a sword to divide joints from marrow, a weapon to crush the head.

[1] *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God: A Study of Monastic Culture* (Fordham University Press, 1974), pp. 87–109.

[2] I have developed this point at greater length in my article, "Marcionism, Postliberalism, and Social Christianity," *Pro Ecclesia* 8:1 (Winter 1999) 85–97.

[3] *What is Christianity?* (5th ed.; trans. Thomas Bailey Saunders; London: Ernest Benn, 1958), pp. 49–50.

[4] *Ibid*., p. 60.

[5] *Ibid*., p. 130.

[6] *Ibid*., pp. 153–154, 169.

[7] *Marcion: The Gospel of the Alien God* (trans. John E. Steely and Lyle D. Bierma; Durham, NC: Labyrinth, [1924] 1990), pp. 133–142.

[8] *The Christian Faith* (2d ed.; trans. H. R. MacIntosh and J. S. Stewart; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1928), pp. 60–62, 608–611.

[9] In *On Religion*, Schleiermacher claimed that the leading idea of Judaism was its belief in "universal immediate retribution," that God disciplines individual sins. By contrast, Christianity's leading idea is that God overcomes all obstacles and the resistance of finite being to unity with the Whole

(*On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers* [trans. John Oman; New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1958], pp. 239–241). It should be noted that Schleiermacher was not personally anti-Semitic; he took the unpopular stance of defending the extension of full civil rights to Prussian Jews.

[10] According to Kant, "The *Jewish faith* was, in its original form, a collection of mere statutory laws upon which was established a political organization; for whatever moral additions were then or later *appended* to it in no way whatever belong to Judaism as such. Judaism is not really a religion at all but merely a union of a number of people who, since they belonged to a particular stock, formed themselves into a commonwealth under purely political laws, and not into a church; nay, it was *intended* to be merely an earthly state so that, were it possibly to be dismembered through adverse circumstances, there would still remain to it (as part of its very essence) the political faith in its eventual reestablishment (with the advent of a Messiah)."

Christianity "completely" forsook Judaism and was "grounded upon a wholly new principle" that required "a thoroughgoing revolution in doctrines of faith," though this was a revolution for which Judaism somehow prepared. Typological and allegorical efforts to connect Judaism and Christianity are not theologically substantive but only provide evidence of the sensitivity of Christians to the prejudices of the first-century; early Christianity sought to introduce a "purely moral religion in place of the old worship, to which the people were all too well habituated, without directly offending the people's prejudices" (*Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone* 2d ed.; trans. Theodore M. Greene and Hoyt H. Hudson; LaSalle, IL: Open Court, 1960), pp. 116–118).

[11] According to Harnack, critical philosophy, as developed by Schleiermacher and others, implies that the Old Testament cannot have any authority in Christianity. He commended Schleiermacher for recognizing this and giving Marcion his due (*Marcion*, p. 137).

[12] *The God of Israel and Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996).

[13] *Ibid*., pp. 1–2.

[14] Quoted in *ibid*., p. 3.

[15] *Ibid*., pp. 5–6.

[16] *Ibid*., p. 53.

[17] With regard to "temporal foreshortening," it is difficult to see how supercessionism has this effect, even if it is wrong. The church has always taught that the story of the Hebrew Bible continues indefinitely into the future.

[18] Soulen, *God of Israel*, p. 170.

[19] *Ibid*., pp. 169–171.

[20] For further examples and discussion, see Moises Silva, *Biblical Words and their Meaning: An Introduction to Lexical Semantics* (rev. ed.; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994).

[21] See, in addition to *ibid*., James Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (Oxford: OUP, 1961); Dan McCartney and Charles Clayton, *Let the*

Reader Understand: A Guide to Interpreting and Applying the Bible (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1994).

[22] Subtitled *Chiasmus in Scripture and Beyond* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1994).

[23] Meredith Kline, *Images of the Spirit* (Published by the author, 1986), pp. 14–15.