

Introduction

WRITING A COMMENTARY on a book of the Old Testament, particularly in a series geared toward application, is not a straightforward enterprise. It is hard to imagine anyone working on a commentary such as this who would not feel pressed to work out deliberately an approach to Old Testament interpretation that leads to application.

Toward that end, the question that has been my constant companion over the past three years or so since I began this commentary has been a simple one to ask, but exceedingly difficult to answer: **How should a Christian interpret the Old Testament?** Answers to this question will vary among Christians, and I certainly respect the diverse thinking among those who confess the name of Christ. Indeed, even in the process of writing this commentary there have been some extremely fruitful discussions among several of the authors and editors regarding the best way to answer this question. Input from a variety of sources greatly enriches the insights that any one person would have if left to himself or herself, and so I have benefited from this interaction.

The approach taken in this commentary is one that, like the question it answers, seems straightforward at first but is in fact difficult to address: **A Christian should interpret the Old Testament from the point of view of Christ as the final word in the story of redemption. That final word is displayed for all the world to see in the cross, the empty tomb, and the existence of the church by God's Spirit.**

Such an approach to Old Testament interpretation is not a personal idiosyncrasy. Although the specific comments on Exodus that follow are certainly my own (unless cited otherwise, of course), **reading the Old Testament in light of the person and work of Christ is one with a long and honored history—going back to the New Testament authors themselves.** Moreover, several of the commentaries in this series share a similar perspective.

Hence, in view of this overarching principle, it seems wise at the outset to offer some words of explanation for how I handle the three categories that form the structure of every commentary in this series: **Original Meaning, Bridging Contexts, and Contemporary Significance.**

What Is "Original Meaning"?

WHAT IS IMPLIED by "original meaning" is the meaning as it was intended by the writer to be understood by his audience. In one sense, such a quest is a

welcome corrective to many unfortunate trends in modern biblical interpretation (and literature in general) that are prone to flights of fancy and absurdity. Most will quickly acknowledge the benefits of having our interpretations “anchored” somehow in what the writer himself wanted to say. No effective communication can occur when an author’s intention is simply brushed aside.

The Question of Authorship

THE PROBLEM, HOWEVER, is that arriving at a text’s original meaning is not a simple task. For one thing, a good number of biblical books are essentially anonymous, so the quest for uncovering an *author’s* intention takes on a dimension of difficulty. Exodus seems to fit into this category.

As is well known, the authorship of Exodus (and the Pentateuch) has been a disputed point, not only over the past three hundred years of Old Testament scholarship, but earlier as well. A number of theories to account for the present state of the Pentateuch have without doubt overreached the biblical evidence. In my view, the well-known Documentary Hypothesis, popularized by the German scholar Julius Wellhausen in the latter half of the nineteenth century, is certainly guilty of this. Recent dissatisfaction with this theory among scholars of various stripes is a welcome countertrend.¹ The criticisms of this hypothesis offered by conservative scholars over the past 150 years (e.g., W. H. Green, U. Cassuto, O. T. Allis, E. J. Young) have largely been vindicated. The thoughtful exegetical works of these and other scholars, therefore, deserve renewed and careful attention, not simply by conservative scholars but by the academic community as a whole.

It is equally clear, however, that data in the Pentateuch and the book of Exodus complicate the matter of identifying an author with any certainty. In a manner of speaking, it is the Pentateuch itself that raises the question of authorship. For instance, nowhere in the Pentateuch is Moses described as the writer of the whole work. To be sure, he is said to write—the first instance being the episode with the Amalekites (see Ex. 17:14). Elsewhere in the Pentateuch where Moses is said to write, the reference is to the law (24:4; 34:1, 27, 28; Deut. 31:9, 24), the only exception being Deuteronomy 31:19, 22, which tells us that Moses wrote down the words of a song (Deut. 32:1–43). The Pentateuch has no more to say on the subject. To say more is to go beyond the pentateuchal evidence.

1. Two prominent examples of this countertrend are R. Rendtorff, *The Problem of the Process of the Transmission of the Pentateuch*, trans. J. J. Scullion (JSOTSup 89; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1990), and R. N. Whybray, *The Making of the Pentateuch: A Methodological Study* (JSOTSup 53; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1989). For helpful overviews of the history of the debate see R. N. Whybray, *Introduction to the Pentateuch* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 12–28, and G. Wenham, “Pentateuchal Studies Today,” *Themelios* 22/1 (1996): 3–13.

Furthermore, it seems difficult to maintain that Moses wrote the account of his own death (Deut. 34) or that he referred to himself as "more humble than anyone else on the face of the earth" (Num. 12:3).² Few would dispute this. However, despite the glaring inadequacies of the Documentary Hypothesis, strongly dismissing this theory does not in and of itself settle the question of authorship. An attitude of reverential open-mindedness seems most consistent with the evidence.

A similar situation involves the identification of the original audience. The precise identity of the audiences of biblical books is often difficult to determine. To be sure, some general observations can be made with a fair degree of certainty. For example, many, if not most, books may safely be labeled "postexilic," or "monarchic," or "premonarchic," and so forth. These designations are helpful for interpretation and in many cases virtually certain (no one would label Ezra or Nehemiah "preexilic").³ But such designations do not actually identify the original audience but the general time period in which that audience might have lived.

The result of this relative lack of firm evidence, however, is not interpretive chaos. To acknowledge that the author and the audience cannot be precisely identified is not to say that we can freely mold the text to any shape we desire. Even though we do not have access to the mind of an author, we most certainly have the words he has produced, and it is to these *words* that we are bound. Our starting point for interpreting the text, therefore, is not a private notion of what an author intended. It is the other way around: A correct handling of the words on the page—the only "objective" data we have—allows us in due time to offer some suggestions as to what the author's intention might have been. In other words, understanding an author's intention comes at the end of the interpretive process, not the beginning.

One important factor to keep in mind in interpreting the Bible is that the question of biblical authorship is more than simply identifying the *person* who did the writing. All Christians who confess some notion of inspiration believe that the Bible is "authored" by God in some sense. Theories of how inspiration works vary, though we cannot get into a discussion on that issue here. The point to be made is that simply the question of authorship

2. These are two of a number of "standard" difficulties with Mosaic authorship raised by the Pentateuch itself. It should be made clear, however, that these non-Mosaic elements have no bearing whatsoever on whether Moses is responsible for some writing. In fact, the passages listed in the previous paragraph demonstrate that Moses did write. I might also add that many of these standard difficulties have been routinely pointed out by conservative scholars, so I am offering nothing new here.

3. On the other hand, determining the dates of many psalms is still uncertain, since historical markers in the psalms are for the most part conspicuously absent.

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of any biblical book—precisely because it is God's Word—*must* go beyond merely the question of human authorship, his historical setting, and the setting of his audience. Scripture ultimately reaches beyond its own time and place, for it is a book that ultimately comes from God. The fact that all Scripture has not only a human author but a divine author is vital to any investigation of a text's meaning.

These authors, the human and the divine, do not compete with each other, nor do they contradict each other. But to say that the divine author inspires the human author does not mean that a human author at any one time knows fully the grand scheme of God's revelation. The divine author is perfectly cognizant of the "big picture" at every moment. The human author is not privy to the same total grasp of the sweep of history. In other words, the intention of the divine author, the Holy Spirit, is ultimate. I often wonder what advantage there is in limiting meaning to what the human author intended. If there is anything we *do* know about Scripture, it is "God-breathed" (2 Tim. 3:16). This is something Scripture itself makes plain. The Bible is God's book, and it seems wise to allow this fact to enter into the equation. I have often mused that the reason why the Bible itself is so relatively mute and even ambiguous on the question of human authorship is to remind us of who the ultimate author is.

Of course, to speak of God's intention is not to say that we can get into God's head and see what he intended! But just as a human author's intention can only be discerned by working backward from his final product (the words he has produced), so, too, can God's intention be discerned. And the final literary product that God has produced is the Bible as a whole. To speak of God's intention, therefore, is not to look at the bits and pieces of Scripture to ask what his intention was here or there. Rather, it is to take a step back from the details and look at the sweep of Scripture as a whole.

This is where the gospel comes into play. To look at God's intention is ultimately to look to the *end of the story and work backward*. We know how the story winds up; not every detail, but the bold contours of the story are clear—we are living in the still, fresh blast of light from the empty tomb. Like the mystery buff who sneaks a peek at the final chapter, we know the conclusion, and that knowledge forms the proper setting within which Christian interpretation of the Old Testament takes place.

If I can put this another way, for a Christian it seems that the "meaning" of an Old Testament text cannot simply be equated with what was intended by its human author and what it meant to its original audience. It means more. Ultimately, the question turns to the connection between the meaning of a text in its original setting and the effect the resurrection of Christ has on our understanding of that meaning. (We are getting a bit ahead of ourselves here, so we will come back to this below.)



None of this is to imply that discerning the meaning of the text, once you know the conclusion, is an easy thing to do and that every Christian will agree. People have been engaging in biblical interpretation in some sense for well over three thousand years, and the end is nowhere in sight. There have been points of agreement and disagreement throughout this great span of time. Even reasonably like-minded Christians who live in a similar social setting and in the same time period will both agree and disagree over certain matters. This is because the quest for meaning in the Bible is an arduous, ongoing process, which no one can claim to have mastered. Quite to the contrary, we are mastered by it.

This is to say that biblical interpretation is a spiritual matter, taken up by spiritual people, whose object is ultimately the deeper understanding of who God is and what he has done (1 Cor. 2:14–16). When we interpret Scripture, we are involved in a spiritual exercise. **It is therefore not simply a matter of applying some “neutral” tools and methods to the text. It is both an adventure and a journey. Hence, to say a text means such and such may not always be the end of the matter but actually the beginning.** All of us engaged in biblical interpretation, whether professionally or privately, enter into a long and honored stream of faithful people of God who have done likewise. Knowing that we are surrounded by this “great cloud of witnesses,” it is best to keep an open mind, which is what I have tried to do in this commentary. Toward that end, I will not hesitate to offer explanations when I feel it is justified. Neither will I hesitate to confess ignorance where needed.

The Question of History

THERE IS AN IMPORTANT MATTER related to original meaning that should be touched on briefly here, especially since it comes up so frequently in discussions over Exodus. This is the perennial, thorny question of historicity. The historical veracity of the Old Testament has been rigorously attacked in modern biblical scholarship, and this fact has no doubt contributed toward the conservative tendency to spend much effort in defending the Bible as a reliable historical document. Such defense is often needed and has paid off important dividends, especially in recent years.⁴ The point to be raised here,

4. A well-known example in recent years is the discovery of an inscription in Tel Dan that makes reference to the “House of David,” thus lending extrabiblical support for the historicity of David’s reign. The discovery and interpretation of this inscription has sparked a great deal of controversy. See A. Biran, “David’ Found at Dan,” *BAR* 20 (March-April 1994): 26–39; W. Schiedewind, “Tel Dan Stela: New Light on Aramaic and Jehu’s Revolt,” *BASOR* 302 (1996): 75–90. With respect to the historicity of Exodus specifically I suggest the recent study by J. K. Hoffmeier, *Israel in Egypt: The Evidence for the Authenticity of the Exodus Tradition* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1997).

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however, is the relevance of history for ascertaining original meaning. The matter will come up now and then in the commentary itself, so it is appropriate to outline the issue here.

It is often simply stated that if what the Bible says happened did *not* happen, then the truth claims of the Bible are rendered suspect and we have little reason to trust it. Defense of the Bible's historicity is, of course, important, but it is not the goal of biblical interpretation. To use an obviously relevant example, you have not *understood* the book of Exodus when you have successfully defended the historicity of the event of the Exodus. There is more to interpreting the book than demonstrating that this or that happened.

The Old Testament is not a journalistic, dispassionate, objective account of events. Its purpose is not just to tell us "what happened" so that we can "look objectively at the data" and arrive at the proper conclusions. The Old Testament is *theological history*. It has been written to teach lessons. The primary lesson I would argue is to teach us what God is like and what it means for his people to live with that knowledge.

If I can put it another way, the Bible is an *argument* to God's people that God is worthy of our worship. It is not designed merely to set out "objective data." It is a deeply spiritual book that has deeply personal implications. It is not a book to be held at a distance, but a book that the interpreter is required to enter into, because it is God's book and we are his people. That the Bible has such a purpose should rightly affect the types of questions we bring to that reading, which in turn affects our interpretation of the text. We must be careful to expect from the Bible only those things it is prepared to yield. And it is not a science textbook or owner's manual. It is a book about God and his creation. It is about who he is, who we are, and how the former determines the standing of the latter.

To push this one slight step further, to say that the Bible is *theological history*, history with a driving theological purpose, is not to concede that it is somehow "less objective" than what we might see in history textbooks or newspapers. The fact of the matter is that there is no objective history in the commonly understood sense of the word. There is no account of events that is free from one's bias, one's perspective. All one has to do is watch the major news networks report on the same "objective" event, or read high school American history textbooks written in the wake of the Second World War, or read differing evaluations of the Civil War from northern or southern observers. What reporters choose to include in their accounts, how they report it, and the conclusions they draw differ from station to station and between books of different eras. Who we are *always* determines what we see and how we interpret it.

In this sense, what the Bible gives us is the *divine* perspective on events, that is, what God wants us to see and understand. I am not suggesting that

God's perspective is in any way faulty or merely one among many. Rather, simply put—what the Bible contains is what God wants to present. This is why I hesitate in this commentary to introduce prolonged discussions on historicity. It is not because history is unimportant. *These things really happened!* But what we have is the text in front of us, which is a gift from God. It is the text that is the focus of our attention, not what might lie behind it. To be sure, the Bible has a referential subject matter, but when the topic turns to *biblical interpretation*, there is no "behind it." The "it" is the object of study. Some concrete examples will be explored in the commentary.

One final matter concerning history is the fact that a good many historical issues remain hopelessly unresolved. In what century the Exodus took place will remain a point of debate for some time, even among evangelicals. We still do not know who the pharaoh of the Exodus was. Curiously enough, we are not told (see Ex. 1:8). To this day we do not know what route the Israelites took, what specific body of water they crossed,⁵ or where Mount Sinai is. These events form the very basic historical contours of Exodus and yet they continue to elude us. Can proper interpretation of the book proceed only after these basic questions are answered? No. In fact, the church has been deriving spiritual benefit from Exodus for a long time without such firm knowledge.

The Text in Front of Us

WHAT, THEN, ARE WE to make of original meaning? It is, as mentioned above, located in the text. I realize, as does anyone familiar with the debate, that this does not settle every matter. My focus, nevertheless, will be on the *words in front of me*—ultimately the Hebrew text—and how those words form impressions in my mind as to how an ancient Israelite audience might have understood those words.

This means that the goal of the Original Meaning sections will be to draw out the *theology* of the text. We must remember that the original purpose of Exodus was theological, to teach God's people about himself and their relationship to him. It was not to have its readers enter into discussions of who the pharaoh was or some other piece of historical trivia. **Exodus was written as a theological treatise, and hence any original meaning we might discern from the text will have to proceed firmly from that basis.** Such an approach does not claim a basis in an objective point of departure outside of the text. **It claims rather to immerse itself in the text and to come up with some informed and defensible (but not necessarily final) answers that will hopefully contribute to the church's understanding of Exodus.**

5. On the lack of the precise identification of the location of the Red Sea, see Hoffmeier, *Israel in Egypt*, 215.

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Since the theology of Exodus is communicated through the words on the page, my efforts to disclose the theological message of the book will require me to pay attention to things like wordplays, unusual turns of phrases, repetitions of themes, and so forth, in the Original Meaning section, not the Bridging Contexts section. In other words, it is precisely because original meaning is theological and textually bound that we must discuss already in the first section the principles involved in making certain interpretive decisions. The Bridging Contexts section will be reserved for designing a different kind of bridge for bringing meaning into our contemporary setting.

What Does It Mean to "Bridge the Contexts"?


I MENTIONED ABOVE that the following question has been my constant companion in writing this commentary: "How should a Christian interpret the Old Testament?" This is not the same as asking, "How should I as a Christian interpret the Old Testament for my life?" We have not yet arrived at the "I" question. That comes next. The question we are asking here is still much more basic. It is a topic where opinions among Christians differ sharply. Let me say again that I am aware of these differences and that I greatly respect other approaches. No interpreter is omniscient.

Nevertheless, I have become firmly convinced that Christian interpretation of the Old Testament has its own flavor, so to speak. It looks different, or at least should look different, from what others do. This has been the case throughout the history of the church, and indeed it should be. Is there nothing about Christian interpretation that makes it look different from, say, Jewish exegesis or secular exegesis? Yes. We believe that God has raised Jesus from the dead. We know the end of the story, and now we can—must—go back and read Israel's story in light of that great culminating event. In doing so, Israel's story becomes ours. This is why Christian interpretation is not a neutral undertaking, but one that, like every other area of our lives, rests in the reality of the gospel.⁶

To put it another way, a Christian reads the Old Testament armed with the knowledge that Christ actually did rise from the dead, and that that fact affects the interpretive process. The resurrection of Christ is the absolute center of our existence. It is the event that has shaped us as a people of God. It was not just a trick that God pulled off at the last minute to prove how powerful he is. It was a new beginning for all the world and for all God's people. This highest of all


6. A seminary professor of mine, the late Raymond Dillard, would evaluate student sermons on the Old Testament by asking, "Could this sermon have been preached in a synagogue?" The answer had better be "no"! His point was that there should be something distinct about Christian preaching of the Old Testament.

realities makes a difference in everything we do and think. It should also make a difference in how we approach Old Testament interpretation.


The Old Testament is not an ancient text with which *we* have to struggle somehow to find creative ways to bring its timeless principles into our world. God has already “interpreted” the Old Testament by raising Christ from the dead. In doing so, God has put the period and exclamation point on Israel’s story. This is something that the New Testament writers go to great lengths to demonstrate. Israel’s story must now be understood in light of the coming of Christ and of his death and resurrection. The fact that these things have happened, by God’s design and purpose, is what drove the New Testament writers *back* to the Old Testament in an effort to understand the *entire* Old Testament—not just an isolated prophecy here and there—from this new, fresh point of view. 

Let me illustrate. Have you ever read the New Testament where it quotes an Old Testament passage, and then gone back and looked at the Old Testament context only to find, perhaps with a slight sense of awkwardness and embarrassment, that it doesn’t really “fit”? (As a professor, I get this question a lot.) This could be demonstrated dozens of times within the pages of the New Testament, and several will come up in the course of the commentary. One example is worth bringing up here in order to illustrate the point.


In 2 Corinthians 6:2 Paul cites Isaiah 49:8: “In the time of my favor I heard you, and in the day of salvation I helped you.” Paul then goes on to declare, “I tell you, now is the time of God’s favor, now is the day of salvation.” What does Paul mean here? A look at the context of Isaiah 49:8 makes it plain that Isaiah’s words speak to the situation of the Babylonian captivity, that is, the period of Judah’s exile in Babylon in the sixth century B.C. Isaiah’s prophecy certainly seems to concern Israel’s eventual release from Babylon and their return home beginning in 539–538 B.C. Isaiah is not prophesying about the coming of Christ. There is really no indication *in Isaiah* that suggests he is referring to Christ. Paul, however, does not allow the fact that Isaiah’s words do *not* speak of Christ to prevent *him* from doing so.


Paul quotes Isaiah and then says, “I tell you, *now* is the time of God’s favor, *now* is the day of salvation.” The salvation that Isaiah spoke of several centuries earlier is happening *now*. What is this “*now*”? Paul clarifies this in the closing verse of chapter 5: “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor. 5:21). The apostle is not contradicting Isaiah. Rather, he is building on his words. He is saying that the salvation of which Isaiah spoke was merely a *prelude* to the fullness of God’s salvation as seen in the cross and the empty tomb. The “*now*” that Isaiah referred to (Israel’s release from Babylon) was real and true, but foreshadowed the final *Now* with the coming of Christ. 

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There is nothing in Isaiah 49:8 that an “objective” reading would lead one to think of Christ! You can only see Christ there if you are standing at the end of the story, as Paul was and as we still are today. In other words, Paul, knowing that Jesus is the final answer to Israel’s story, goes back to the Old Testament, rereads Israel’s story, and then says, “Oh, now I get it.” He claims Israel’s story and puts it at the feet of King Jesus, saying as it were, “Now we know the whole story, now we know what God was ultimately saying through Isaiah.” 

This is just one example, but it demonstrates an interpretive principle repeated throughout the New Testament. What we call the Old Testament⁷ is rightly understood fully only in light of the resurrection of Christ. This is because the resurrection of Christ is the ultimate fulfillment of everything the Old Testament—God’s book, Holy Scripture—pointed toward in the first place. My contention is that proper Christian interpretation of the Old Testament cannot and must not proceed without taking seriously into account the interpretive stance of the apostles themselves. The New Testament itself drives us in this direction.

This, then, is how the contexts between the Old Testament and our contemporary setting will be bridged in this commentary—not by seeking timeless moral principles in the Old Testament and then seeking to apply them to our lives, but rather by asking ourselves what the Old Testament tells us about the nature of God (i.e., how he acts, what he expects of his people) and then seeing how these things can be understood in light of the gospel. It is reading back into the Old Testament the final word that God has stamped onto the pages of history—the death and resurrection of his Son. This event is the “answer” to Israel’s story, and God, by his grace, has given us, Jews and Gentiles, the privilege of participating in the final chapter of that story. 

This great fact should indeed enter our interpretive activity of the Old Testament. Let me say, however, that a commitment to this approach does not in any way imply that the matter of interpretation is easy! To interpret the Old Testament is to interact with it with an intimacy that characterizes the high view of Scripture that Christians confess. It is in the pages of Scripture that we get to know God better. Such personal interaction implies struggling and wrestling with the text. What God has done in Christ is the proper subject of a lifetime of discovery, where each of us experiences both highs and lows. 

What God has done in Christ, in other words, is the proper context within which we interpret the Old Testament. But this does not mean that Jesus is

7. Jesus and the apostles typically referred to this as “the Scriptures.” It seems to me that sometimes the term “Old Testament” puts up barriers for contemporary interpretation that would have been wholly foreign to what the New Testament itself not only presents but assumes.

a magic key that quickly unlocks the door to every corner. Knowing the end of the story does not mean that Old Testament interpretation is a superficial process! We are, after all, dealing with the Word of God. Its author is deep and even mysterious.

It is with this thought in mind that I proceed to bridge the contexts of then and now. How I see the gospel fulfilling the book of Exodus is the result of my own wrestling with the text, but I do not presume to have the final word on the matter. *The gospel is the final word, not my understanding of how the gospel is the final word!* Our thinking will always develop as we continue to live with Scripture and ponder the nature of the gospel.

To anticipate perhaps another objection, reading the Old Testament from the point of view of the resurrection does not mean, as it is commonly misunderstood, that we must find Jesus in every verse. *The "Christocentric" interpretation I am advocating is not mechanical.* There are places in the Old Testament, of course, where the gospel is more transparent than others. Isaiah, for example, has sometimes been called in the history of Christianity "the fifth Gospel." But not everything has such an obvious Christological dimension as, say, Isaiah 52:13–53:12 (even here the precise nature of this Christological dimension is up for discussion).

The fact that Christ has been raised from the dead and that we are raised with him to a new life should affect our reading of the Old Testament. At times that means seeing clearly how the Old Testament prepares the way for the gospel. At other times, however, there is no one-to-one correspondence between the Old Testament and Christ, and in such instances the matter should not be pushed.

Let me use *the example of the tabernacle in Exodus to illustrate.* As we will see later on, the fact that the glory of God is seen in Christ and that the New Testament refers to Christ both as the tabernacle and the temple (see John 1–2) is clearly intended to challenge Christians to see Christ as somehow fulfilling the role that the tabernacle (and later the temple) had in the Old Testament. *Briefly stated,* the tabernacle is the premier symbol of God's continued presence with his people, a role assumed by Christ at his first coming.

But recognizing this explicit theological connection between Christ and the tabernacle does not mean that we have to find Christological significance in every detail in the tabernacle. For example, I have no interest in "finding Jesus" in the goat hair curtains or the acacia wood crossbars. *A Christological reading is not like a hermeneutical "Where's Waldo."* Rather, to read the tabernacle section of Exodus Christologically means to see how the *theological significance of the whole* can be seen from the point of view of the gospel. Again, it is the *theology* of Exodus that is our focus for deriving original meaning. Likewise, *it is that same theology that encourages us to expand our*



interpretive horizons to appreciate how Christ's coming helps us to see these Old Testament realities in a different, fuller light. As we will see clearly in the case of the tabernacle, the New Testament itself drives us toward that end.

In light of this, there are a number of times in the commentary where I do not provide a separate Original Meaning, Bridging Contexts, and Contemporary Significance section for each section of Exodus. A rigid adherence to this threefold scheme would run into some significant problems in treating, for example, the plagues. Each plague does not have to be individually bridged to our contemporary setting. It would be tedious indeed to bridge the plague of flies narrative separately from the plague of gnats. Moreover, it would be rather ridiculous to try to argue that each plague offers its own application to the contemporary setting (can you apply the plague of gnats any differently than the plague of flies!?). Hence, the nature of the book of Exodus at times lends itself to drawing theological implications from larger blocks of text. I have tried to be as sensitive as I can to where this approach is appropriate. At each of these sections I have offered an explanation for why I think it is so.

The Question of "Contemporary Significance"

THE QUESTION OF APPLICATION follows directly from bridging the contexts. That is, we understand the significance of the Old Testament for us by first understanding what the Old Testament has to say about God and how the gospel expresses this in final form. We typically approach the question of application with two assumptions. (1) Application means bringing the Old Testament into our lives. It has to be understood in such a way that it "speaks to us where we are." (2) Application is something demonstrable and concrete. Specifically, it pushes us to *do* something, that is, it has to be "practical." Both of these assumptions are at the same time right and wrong.

(1) As for the first assumption, it is certainly true that the Old Testament, as God's Word, must enter our lives in some way. It is not an artifact from a bygone era, a book of law and wrath that can be dismissed now that Jesus is here. The Old Testament has always spoken powerfully to the church throughout its two-thousand-year history, and we are right to expect it to do the same in our day. The problem with this assumption, however, is that it does not account easily for the fact that much of the Old Testament is *narrative*.

Narrative portions of the Old Testament are notoriously difficult to apply. One need only go to Christian bookstores and see copies of the "New Testament and Psalms." The reason why the book of Psalms is included is because it is perceived as having more immediate relevance for our lives today (although I think that the interpretive issues surrounding the Psalms are dif-

ficult in their own right). Still, just once I'd like to see "New Testament and 2 Kings," "New Testament and Judges," or even "New Testament and Genesis." The reason why Psalms (and I might add Proverbs) are apparently so much easier to bring into our lives is that they are not as bound to a particular place and time. Exodus, however, is; it is a *story* about something that *happened*, and therefore it is not as apparent how that story should be applied.

But the problem may not be with Exodus. It is not nearly as stubborn a book when we learn to ask the right questions of it. When we think of application, we tend to think of *ourselves* as the immovable point and the Old Testament as something that has to be *brought into* our lives. We think that it has to speak to *our* circumstances without always considering whether it is our particular circumstances that the Bible is designed to speak to.

There is another way of thinking about application. The book of Exodus is not waiting there for *us* to bring it into *our* world. Rather, it is standing there defining what our world should look like and then inviting us to enter that world. That may sound a bit esoteric, so allow me to explain. Who we are and what we are experiencing should not always be the starting point for thinking about how the Old Testament relates to us. To give a specific example, the story of Exodus is not designed to tell us what God will do to those people who oppress us today, say, if you as a Christian are facing hostile opposition from unbelievers. True, oppressed people may be able to identify with certain aspects of the book and thus connect with it differently from nonoppressed people. The story of Exodus, however, is designed to tell us what *God is like*, how he thinks of his people, the lengths to which he will go to deliver them, and the proper response of God's people to this great deed. Applying the book of Exodus begins with understanding what the story is supposed to do and then seeing how we, as God's people, fit into that story.

And the way we today fit into that story is, *first and foremost*, by understanding that the Exodus story is ultimately not a self-contained unit whose boundaries must not be crossed. The story of Exodus does not actually end until we come to the cross and the empty tomb—or even beyond, not until the Second Coming. In other words, seeing how *we as Christians* fit into the story must be seen in light of how *Christ completes* the story. We do not draw a straight line from something in Exodus to our lives. We take a part of the story, we see how it fits into the whole story, which comes to a conclusion in Christ, and *then* we begin to see more fully how this story affects how we look at ourselves and our God. Hence, application follows upon bridging the contexts.

(2) Related to this is the second assumption: The ultimate goal of application may not always be to tell us how we should act. It may also be to change how we *think*, how we look at the world around us, and how we understand what it means to be a child of God. "Application" may mean that

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we grow in our understanding of how great God is and how full of love he is. Proper application may be no more than coming to the truly heartfelt conclusion that our God is indeed great. Application is worship.

Maybe it is the society in which we live, but we are always asking, "What's the payoff?" If one's understanding of a biblical text does not translate into concrete action, something demonstrable and "practical," then it is not thought to be something worthwhile for God's people. I understand and sympathize with the motives behind this sentiment. It is all too common for our Bible study to become merely an arid intellectual or academic exercise. This is wrong. What I am saying, however, is that "practical" application need not always translate into something we do. Rather, what may be in order is to change how we define "practical."

Let me put it this way. The goal of Old Testament application may not be to "love your wife more" or to "be kinder to your husband." We may not get this directly from the Old Testament. Rather it may be, "Now that I have come to understand this story better, I see that I have become selfish and shortsighted. I have forgotten how great God is, how wonderful he is. But now I see Jesus more clearly, and therefore myself more clearly." And as a result of gaining (or relearning) this practical insight, the Christian goes out and has a renewed motivation for doing such things as loving a spouse.

This commentary attempts to explain Exodus in light of Christ's coming. In doing so, I have tried to listen as carefully as I can first to what the story would have communicated to ancient Israelite readers of the book. The theology of the book pushes me outward to consider how that theology fits into the whole story, a story that culminates in the person and work of Christ. It is knowing how the story ends up that forms the proper context within which we who are "in Christ" (to use Paul's words) apply those words to ourselves.

In working toward this goal, I do not hesitate to say I have much to learn. This commentary is an attempt to work out the implications of what a Christian interpretation of Exodus looks like in principle. Nothing would make me happier than to be completely outdone by others in this task, if it would lead to greater understanding of who the God of Exodus is and what it means to be bound to him through the death and resurrection of his Son.