

## STUDIES IN ESCHATOLOGY No. 2

May 4, 2003

### “The Motifs of Biblical Eschatology, No. 1”

We said last time that the term *eschatology*, though it literally means the “doctrine of the last things,” properly refers to the entire biblical doctrine of the future, including those parts of what was the future when certain parts of the Bible were written, but which now lie in the past. A modern way of speaking about this phenomenon of “future now in the past” is with the phrase *inaugurated eschatology*, that is, the future that has already come to pass, the already unfolded future, that forms the foundation for what must still come to pass. So we might speak of two dimensions of eschatology in the Bible: *inaugurated or already fulfilled* on the one hand and *the yet unconsummated, unfulfilled, and still future* on the other. It is particularly important to acknowledge this because so much of the Bible’s vision of what remains to come to pass is mixed together in biblical prophecy with predictions of events that have already come to pass. In fact, such is the nature of the biblical idiom of prophetic prediction – the form of words in which the prediction of the future is cast – that, very often, as we will see, there are today among Bible-believing interpreters constant argument over whether a particular prophecy has already been fulfilled or is still yet to be fulfilled. We spoke last week of the *prophetic perspective* or *prophetic foreshortening* in which the future is often seen in the vision of a biblical author as a single moment, a unity, which only history reveals to be, in fact, a succession of events, even a succession spread over long periods of time. It is by no means unusual that the Bible speaks this way and no discredit to the authority of its prophecy. We talk about the future this way all the time and know exactly what we are doing. We often talk about the past in this same way.

If, for example, I were to say that at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century two Englishmen would appear who would stop the advance of Napoleon and crush his empire, I would be stating as a unity events that, in fact, transpired over a number of years. Many battles would be fought, Trafalgar and Waterloo only the greatest and most decisive of them, and I’ve mentioned nothing of that. I have said nothing about the birth, the youth, or the development of the two English heroes, Nelson and Wellington, nor have I said when they would first engage the French fleet or army, I didn’t even mention that one was an admiral and one a general, nor did I state the number of battles that would have to be fought or the number of years it would take finally to vanquish the great French emperor. Nor did I mention that between Trafalgar and Waterloo would fall Napoleon’s first defeat, his exile, his return and the hundred days. But, what I said was true, was a fair summary of the history, and, more to the point, the material things that had to be known if only the great and final result was to be stated. Well biblical prophecy is, at the last, not really interested much in the details, but in the great sweeping vision of the future, the way history will turn out in summary. And so that is the way the future is predicted in the Bible. There are a few details, but only a few, enough to prove that God knows those too in advance.

Now, we could launch into our study by simply taking up prophecies one after another in the order they appear in the Bible. But that approach would not, I think, be true to the Bible’s own approach to the future. It tends to organize its view of the future according to certain important motifs, and I think it will be more profitable and helpful if we take up these primary motifs of biblical prophecy. The dictionary defines a *motif* as a “recurring thematic element” or a “dominant idea or central theme.” And there are a number of these in biblical prophecy. We

began, last time, with what we called the “mother prophecy” of the Bible, the promise, in Genesis 3:15, of the seed of the woman who would crush the head of the serpent. Well, the seed is one of those *motifs* of biblical eschatology. Who is this seed? What can we know about him. What will he be and what will he do? When will he appear? We learn more and more about the seed of the woman as the Bible progresses. We get a clearer and clearer picture of the seed as more and more prophecies are added in this motif.

But there are other such motifs, a number of others. There are, in addition to that of the seed, 1) the land; 2) the kingdom of God; 3) there are the offices of prophet, priest and king; 4) the servant of the Lord; 5) the restoration of the people of God; 6) the new covenant; 7) the outpouring of the Holy Spirit; 8) the day of the Lord; 9) the last days; 10) the judgment of the wicked; 11) the salvation of the nations; and 12) the renewal of the cosmos. There is a great deal of overlap here, of course – for example, the coming of the kingdom of the Lord and the salvation of the nations almost always appear together in biblical prophecy – and there appear in the Bible some other ways of saying the same things, but, in general, I think these thirteen *motifs* largely account for the Bible’s vision of the future, and have accounted for it from the beginning. That is, these same motifs account, in largest part, for the future that has already come to pass and for the future that remains yet unfulfilled.

I want to begin this evening with “the seed.” As we saw last time, immediately after the fall, in Gen. 3:15, God made a promise that there will be enmity or hatred between the seed of the serpent and the seed of the woman and that the seed of the woman will crush the head of the serpent. We know already that history will be the story of two communities and the struggle between them. And we have a promise, here at the headwaters of revelation, that somehow, out of the human race, a fatal blow will be struck that will crush the serpent and his power. What is more, it appears that while we are first talking about two communities, the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent, there is a hint that we are also talking finally about two individuals, the seed will be concentrated in an individual, because in the second half of 3:15 it is not the seed of the serpent that is crushed but the serpent himself, and the serpent will strike at “his heel,” suggesting that in the final contest, it will be individuals not peoples doing battle. [Vos, *Biblical Theology*, 54]

Now as we proceed into Genesis we discover that “seed,” “descendants,” “lineage,” is a great theme of the book. The Hebrew term *toledot*, or “generations” or “family history” is used as the organizing principle. There are ten toledots in Genesis and each is concerned in its own way with the progress of the seed. Constantly the narrator is defining the seed – who it is and who it is not. And, very interestingly, as a messianic history, for that is what it is, the seed almost never turns out to be the person one would expect.

Cain is Eve’s first born. She said, in a remark that still jars the spiritually sensitive ear, “With the help of the Lord I have brought forth a man.” Perhaps Eve thought that Cain was to be the fulfillment of the promise of Gen. 3:15. But, perhaps in part because of his mother’s bad theology (“Look what I have done with the Lord’s help” or “The Lord helps those that help themselves!” – not the sort of thing Hannah or Mary would ever have said!), what we learn instead is that there are two seeds in the home – something that will reoccur in Genesis. When in Gen. 4:25 we hear Eve, with much clearer faith, say in regard to Seth, “God has granted me

another child in place of Abel,” we have hopes of better things and these are not disappointed. And, as will be often the case in Genesis, it is not the first born who carries the promised seed, but the one chosen by God, Seth, not Cain. Again and again the law of primogeniture, so important in ancient culture, is overruled: Jacob over Esau, Rachel over Leah, Joseph and Judah over their older brothers.

In any case, Genesis is marked by genealogies, all the way through. The rejected line is given first in each case and then the line of faith. So we have Cain’s line at the end of Genesis 4, and Seth’s line in Genesis 5 leading to Noah. The story of the seed has reached that critical point. There is someone to carry the seed through to the other side of the catastrophe that will befall the world as God judges mankind with the flood. There is a long-standing argument in biblical theology as to whether the covenant God made with Noah should be regarded as a chapter in the unfolding revelation of the covenant of grace. It is pointed out by some that the promise of that covenant – of never-ending seasons and never again a worldwide judgment until the end of the age, the promise sealed by the rainbow – is made to the world and not to the elect people of God. In that sense it is very different from the various restatements of God’s covenant of salvation with his people. But, on the other side, it is pointed out that it was Noah that preserved the seed and so kept the promise of salvation alive.

After the flood, we are given the table of the nations in Gen. 10 and learn, what the rest of the Bible will confirm and human history since will reconfirm, viz. that the non-elect lines, the lines that do not carry the seed in them end in transitory kingdoms separated from God. None of the nations of the ancient world exists today. But Abraham’s people still do and in both respects: physically and spiritually.

Gen. 12:2-3 is the next great mother promise in the Bible, following on and elaborating Gen. 3:15. Here we are told that God chose Abraham to make from him a great nation and that all peoples of the world would be blessed through him. Once again, we have descendants in view. We start with an individual, from him will come a nation, by which God will reach the entire world. That is the Bible in a summary. And no early reader of the Bible would have drawn any other conclusion but that the seed of the woman promised in Gen. 3:15 was now to come from the line of Abraham. We are awaiting the one who would deliver mankind from the serpent. He has not yet appeared. But the promise of God’s salvation has now been fixed upon a particular family and its descendants.

Chapters 15-22 are all taken up with the question of the seed. Abraham has been promised a nation from his descendants, but he has no descendants, he has no child, no son. The foolish attempt to provide one by taking the matter into his own hands, with Ishmael as a result, is a dead end. God must provide the seed. It is not an accident, I think, that it lies in these chapters that circumcision is appointed as the sign and seal of God’s covenant with Abraham. The organ of procreation – that of the seed – is set apart to God. Years pass, Sodom and Gomorrah are destroyed. Even Lot’s daughters have sons, through incestuous relations with their father. *Everyone seems to have offspring except Abraham.* And, then, finally, God provides Isaac in Abraham and Sarah’s old age. The seed from which the nation will come that will bring salvation to the world has arrived.

The next *toledot* of Genesis is the account of Jacob and Esau in which we learn that the seed will come through the younger not the older son of Isaac and Rebekah. Jacob becomes more and more a man of faith and, as the seed, the Lord protects him from his enemies and provides him a large family. The final *toledot* of the book is the account of Jacob's dysfunctional family and how it was finally spiritually healed. As we learned, the hero of that history is not Joseph but Judah, the vile fourth son of Jacob, whose early life was so perverse that it makes for some of the seamiest narrative in the Bible. But it is Judah who is redeemed, Judah whose heart is transformed, and Judah who finally offers his own life for the life of his brother, Benjamin, the son of Rachel whom the sons of Leah had always despised.

And, so the great final development in the history of the seed is the promise of Genesis 49:10 that the seed would come, not from Jacob's firstborn, nor even from Joseph, but from Judah.

“The scepter will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until he come to whom it belongs.” [The reference to feet is a regular euphemism for private parts and so is a reference to Judah's progeny, his issue, his seed.]

And there is no doubt that we are talking about *the* seed: for in that promise we learn that he will be a great ruler, that the obedience of the nations will be his, and that his kingdom will bring unprecedented peace and prosperity to the world. That is the sense of v. 11:

“He will tether his donkey to a vine, his colt to the choicest branch.” [One wouldn't normally do that lest the donkey eat the grapes. But the idea is that there will be so much plenty that no one will care if the donkey also eats its fill.]

“He will wash his garments in wine, his robes in the blood of grapes.” [That is, there will be so much wine you can wash your clothes in it.]

So, we finish Genesis knowing that the seed of the woman, promised in Gen. 3:15, the seed of Abraham, promised in 12:2-3, the seed of Jacob, promised in 25:23, will be a seed of Judah. We know by now that he will be a man, we know from what people and what specific family among that people he will hail. We know that he will be a great king. We know that he will bring salvation to the world.

There is only one further development in the identification of the seed in the OT and that is the promise that, of all the families of Judah, the seed will come from the lineage of David, Israel's king. The promise of an everlasting house is made to David in 2 Samuel 7. As part of that promise we read in v. 12:

“I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, who will come from your own body, and I will establish his kingdom.” [The word for offspring is the Hebrew word *zera* or “seed.”] And the throne of the kingdom of David's seed, the Lord says in v. 13, he will establish *forever*.

Lest we miss the connection with what has gone before, the Bible is careful to clarify it, though it would have been clear to any pious Israelite pouring with great interest over the material about

the coming seed so far given. In Psalm 72, a psalm of David's son, Solomon, the great subject is the king, the royal son, and his reign. And at the end of that great account of his future reign, which will encompass the entire world we read in vv. 8-11 and bring prosperity to the earth, we read in v. 17:

“May his name endure forever; may it continue as long as the sun. All nations will be blessed *through him* and they will call him blessed.”

In other words, the very promise God made to Abraham in Gen. 12, that all the earth would be blessed through *him*, we now are told will be fulfilled through the reign of this descendant of David. He is, of course, a direct descendant of Abraham, of Jacob, and of Judah, but now is also identified as a descendant of the house and line of David.

That is what makes so significant:

1. The term Messiah, or anointed one, which is a term that designates a royal figure, a coming king; for the seed will be a king and a king from David's line;
2. The prophecy in Micah 5 that the coming king would be born in Bethlehem, which is not primarily a detail known ahead of time to amaze us with the accuracy of biblical prophecy – though it surely is that – but is primarily a way of saying that the coming king, the seed of the virgin mother, will be a Davidic heir, as Bethlehem was David's hometown;
3. That Judah was the tribe in which was continued, more than any other, the spiritual life of God's people after the spiritual collapse of the people of Israel following the death of Solomon. It is no accident that the good kings come from Judah not the northern kingdom; that the life of God's people continues primarily in the tribe of Judah, after the ten northern tribes are destroyed and broken up by the Assyrians; that it was Judah that went into exile from Babylon and came back from exile to repopulate the Holy Land, and that it is largely Judah from which were drawn the Jews who lived in the Holy Land when the Messiah was born.
4. That both Matthew and Luke, the two gospels that give an account of Jesus' birth, take pains to provide his genealogy, both of which demonstrate his lineage through Abraham, Judah, and David and both of which gospels make a point of identifying him as the long promised “King of the Jews” and the “Son of David.”
5. So many references in the gospels and the rest of the NT that identify Jesus as the seed: “Abraham rejoiced to see my day and was glad.” [John 8:56] The blind men and others called to him, “have mercy on us, Son of David!” [e.g. Matt. 9:27] “Hosanna to the Son of David,” on Palm Sunday. [Matt. 21:15] Peter, in his Pentecost sermon, makes a great point of saying, “Brothers, I can tell you with confidence that the patriarch David died and was buried, and his tomb is here to this day. But he was a prophet and knew that God had promised him on oath that he would place one of his descendants on his throne.” And Paul begins Romans speaking of the gospel “regarding his Son, who as to his human nature was a descendant of David, and who through the Spirit of holiness was declared with power to be the Son of God.” And he says to Timothy, “Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from – literally, from the seed of – David.” [2 Tim. 2:8]

In all these ways and others, the NT leaves us in no doubt that Jesus of Nazareth is *the seed!* And lest we still miss the point, Paul comes out and says it:

1. Gal. 3:16: “The promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. The Scripture does not say ‘and to his seeds’ meaning many people, but ‘and to your seed,’ meaning one person, who is Christ.”
2. 3:19: “What, then, was the purpose of the law? It was added because of transgressions until the Seed to whom the promise referred had come.”
3. Gal. 4:4: “But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law that we might receive the full rights of sons.”  
[That “born of a woman” refers back to Gen. 3:15. He is the seed of the woman.]

Now all of that is familiar to most of you, but you see how that one motif of the seed brings the entire biblical history together. And in another way as well. For, as we will see in other of these motifs, there is a back and forth between the Lord himself and his people within this terminology.

For Christ is not the only seed. We too are the seed of Abraham, we who believe in Jesus Christ.

As Paul goes on to say in Gal. 3:29: “If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s seed and heirs according to the promise.”

He is *the* seed, but we are the seed also because we are in him. He is *the* priest, but we are priests because we are in him. He is *the* king, but we are kings too and will rule over the nations because of our union with him. He is *the* prophet, but we too are all prophets because of our union with him. We will find this back and forth in the terminology of the servant of the Lord as well. Jesus is *the* servant of the Lord, but those of us who trust in him become also servants of the Lord.

What that means, of course, is that this motif of the seed carries us on to the end of history as well, just as we would expect. For if we are Abraham’s seed, Paul says, we are heirs according to the promise. And that promise, that all the nations of the world would be blessed through him and his seed has not been fulfilled in its entirety yet. There is a land for us yet to be given, there is a world that will be renewed and become ours sometime in the future. That is the promise that was made to Abraham and his seed. See how the Bible’s eschatology brings everything together in a whole.

If there is anything that this motif of the seed does, in binding the entire Bible together, is to throw all attention on the single person of the Lord Jesus Christ and unite us in all our salvation to him. It also concentrates our attention on the place of the family and of the relationship between one generation and another, which proves to be the instrument by which God preserves his seed in the world, both Christ and his people.

One more thing it reveals, as will these other motifs: revelation, the divine disclosure of the plan for human history and for the salvation of mankind, is given gradually and comes in pieces, not all at once. The seed of the woman becomes the seed of Abraham, then Jacob, then Judah, then David, then Joseph. Similarly, only later do we learn that the serpent is Satan. Only much later in Moses and the prophets do we begin to see how the coming Redeemer will crush Satan’s head.

This feature of revelation is often referred to as *progressive revelation* and it will be a fact bearing on all our study of biblical eschatology.

That, then, is the first motif: *that of the seed*. What we find is that according to this motif, we are in the same situation as those who went before us centuries ago. They waited and waited for the seed. The generations came and went, the centuries mounted up and still they waited for his appearance. They knew certain things about him, but they knew not when he would come. The mark of their faithfulness was that they continued to wait for the consolation of Israel in spite of the long years without the fulfillment of this promise. And, in the same way, we now wait today for the coming again of this same King. We should be greatly encouraged that he has already come once. But still, the generations pass away, the centuries mount up and it is easy to think, “where is this coming he promised?” [2 Pet. 3:4] And the challenge of the unfulfilled promise, no matter the inaugurated eschatology of 2000 years ago, has sifted and found out the false and insubstantial faith of a great many who were supposed to be the Lord’s people. No, the people of the Lord will always be those who are eagerly waiting for him, looking for his sign in the heavens, longing for his appearance. It is one of the truest marks of real faith and belonging to God that a man or woman longs for the appearance of the Son of God.

It sometimes troubles a young Christian that he doesn’t want the Lord to come just yet. After all, he has so much living to do in this world. He wants to accomplish something, he wants to fall in love and marry and have children, he wants to reach the fullness of life. Fair enough. The Lord understands that. Those are holy longings. But, true faith also recognizes that everything that a believer ever wants in this world will be swallowed up in the joy and the fulfillment and the satisfaction that will be his and his forever when Jesus comes again. From Gen. 3:15 God’s people have been looking forward to the Redeemer’s coming. And we look forward still.