

Dabney Center

Fall '03

Biblical Theology

Lecture #3

What structure has God given to history?

The Bible gives us several different ways of “rightly dividing the word” – that is, of slicing up the basic phases of history. Examples:

Rom. 5:12ff

Adam – (law) – New Adam

2 Pt. 3

creation – flood – 70 A.D.

Mt. 1

Abraham – David – exile – Jesus (14 generation blocks, 6 7 generation periods)

Hebrews 8

Old Covenant (Moses) – New Covenant (Christ)

Patterns in history

The biblical story is structured by the various covenant renewals God makes with his people. Ultimately, there is one covenant – the Triune God himself. God created humanity in order to expand and share the Trinitarian ring of fellowship, love, and joy. Through Christ, humanity has been integrated in the divine family as both bride and daughter. The Triune Covenant between Father, Son, and Spirit, now includes redeemed humanity.

Thus, the various covenants and covenant renewals we find in Scripture (Adam, Noah, Abraham, etc.) are all manifestations of this one covenant. The covenant matures, or develops, through the course of history, moving from glory to ever greater glory.

These covenant renewals in Scripture fall into a pattern, showing both continuity and progress. Thus, history has a sort of spiral shape. Understanding this fact enables us to understand the rhythms God has built into history.

The rhythm of history: spiral theology

The *upward spiral* of redemptive history as a whole (old covenant as preparation):

The pre-fall Adamic covenant + six sub-covenants of the old
covenant era + new covenant = eight covenant
administrations/epochs

or

The pre-fall Adamic covenant + priestly-kingly-prophetic cycle x 2
+ the new covenant (in which Christ is our priest, king, and
prophet) = eight

In detail:

The original covenant God made with Adam before the fall is described in Gen. 1-2. It is something of a prototype for all later covenants in history. Adam was created to serve God as priest, king, and prophet. As priest, he was to guard the garden-sanctuary as well as his bride. As king, he was God's vice regent, overseeing God's earthly kingdom. As prophet, he received God's word and was to interpret and transform the world accordingly.

This original covenant did not last long. Adam failed to guard the garden from the serpent, he became discontent with the high position

of royalty God had bestowed upon him, and he put the serpent's word over God's, changing the world for the worse rather than for the better. As a result, he was cast out of the garden. But before leaving the sanctuary, God promised Adam and his wife a son who would act as redeemer and restore paradise. He sealed this promise with a typological sacrifice.

The covenantal promise of Gen. 3 emphasizes Adam's ongoing priestly role. Kingly and prophetic roles have been diminished, but the fact that God teaches him to sacrifice indicates that Adam will still serve God as a priest (albeit a priest in exile). We see the outworking of the almost immediately in the Genesis narrative, as Cain and Abel offer sacrifice. Cain does not act as a faithful priest and so his offering is rejected. Later, the Sethites are characterized by their priestly worship, as they called upon the name of God.

But this priestly post-fall covenant begins to go bad when the Sethites begin to intermarry with unbelieving women. Eventually God brings the flood to cleanse the defiled earth and start anew.

After the flood, we find another covenant renewal with Noah. This time, God adds back in kingly prerogatives, as man is given the right to execute murderers. (Remember, no one could exercise this kind of rule and punish Cain.) This is a sign of greater glory and maturity in the covenant.

This kingly power is abused at Babel, as man tries to raise his throne to the heavens. The Noahic, kingly covenant begins to break down, so the Lord brings judgment.

God calls Abraham in the aftermath of the curse at Babel. The family of Abraham is given special rights and privileges, in order to perform her special calling. This calling emerges in Gen. 20, when Abraham becomes the first man in the Bible to be called a "prophet." Abraham receives a word from God, but is also allowed to speak a word that shapes history. This prophetic wisdom continues to be on display in the careers of Jacob and Joseph.

This completes the first covenant spiral: there is a priestly Adamic covenant, a kingly Noahic covenant, and a prophetic Abrahamic covenant. Then the cycle repeats itself, but with greater power and glory.

God's people fell into bondage in Egypt, but God rescued them through Moses. Through Moses, a new covenant order is established, forming the people into a theocratic nation. But the focus of the Mosaic covenant is priestly, centered round the tabernacle.

The Mosaic covenant began to break down in the days of Eli. After the ark is lost to the Philistines, it is never returned to the old Mosaic tent. Instead, God moves history forward again by establishing the Davidic covenant. While David and Solomon made important liturgical reforms (e.g., creating the Levitical choir and building the temple), the focus is clearly on kingship and dominion. God promises a Davidic son who will establish a worldwide empire.

But the kings after David and Solomon failed to remain faithful. Finally the north, then the south, faced the curse of exile. But after 70 years of exile (for Judah), God renewed his covenant with them. The people returned to the land in a new exodus and a new temple was constructed. But this "new covenant" clearly has a prophetic focus. The prophets dominate this period of Israel's history. We also find God working on a more international scale, as he did in the earlier prophetic phase of history.

But even this restoration covenant fell apart. The Jews tried to keep covenant blessing and privilege for themselves (e.g., Jonah, Esther, Galatians) rather than these gifts with the nations. Finally Jesus, the covenant incarnate entered history. He established the definitive and final new covenant, fulfilling all previous covenantal administrations. In Christ, all God's people are now priests, kings, and prophets in the fullest sense.

However, the rhythm of history established in the canonical books carries on beyond 70 A. D. The same typological patterns continue to reverberate, the spiral continues to climb. The same priestly-kingly-prophetic cycle is found in the first 2000 years of church history. By discovering where we are in the spiral, we can know what God would have us do.