

TOWARD A HOLISTIC HERMENEUTIC:  
EXEGESIS, NARRATIVE, DOCTRINE, CHURCH, AND APPLICATION IN  
CONCERT

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Fragmentation is a hallmark of modernity. One of the many results of the Enlightenment is that disciplines, projects, and tasks are split into well-defined segments that, in theory, do not interact. For instance, the Industrial Revolution segmented manufacturing into minute tasks. Instead of a gun being built by one craftsman, the various parts were made by a number of different manufacturers and then assembled at one location. Higher education has followed a similar path. Instead of training students to become well-rounded learners with integrated knowledge in a variety of areas, education has often become segmented, specialized, and focused on pragmatic, vocational knowledge within one's field.

Biblical interpretation has likewise been affected by this tendency toward fragmentation. Unlike pre-modern interpretation, which often moved from exegesis to doctrine and back again, modern hermeneutics tends to splinter the interpretive task into sub-disciplines – biblical exegesis, biblical theology, systematic theology, applied theology, and homiletics. We are grateful that a growing number of scholars and pastors

are increasingly integrating such disciplines, and we see many positive steps toward a more holistic hermeneutic.<sup>2</sup>

We write this essay to urge further steps toward a holistic hermeneutic and to suggest what aspects should be incorporated into such an integrative interpretive process. The task is so enormous one could almost shrink back from addressing the issue. After all, who is competent in any of these academic fields, let alone in all of them? Who is competent to work through the thicket of contemporary questions of epistemology, hermeneutics, and theological method, let alone approach the intersection of these disciplines? Without claiming such breadth or depth, we are convinced of the unity of truth, the inherent interrelationships of the disciplines, and the need for a more holistic approach to hermeneutics.

In this article we argue hermeneutics ought to be holistic. A proper method for biblical interpretation ought to include a concern for exegesis, narrative, doctrine, the church, and application. Much like an orchestra, each of these fields has a part to play in biblical interpretation, and, while each may have a featured part at some stage, none should be allowed to play a purely solo act. Exegesis both rests on and results in theology, for example. Similarly, churches not only shaped the original context of the biblical material, they are still the primary interpretive context and central focus of the application. Our hope is that a holistic hermeneutic can produce a fuller symphonic interpretation. In what follows, we seek to sketch the overall contours of these aspects, suggest how they fit together, and offer an example of this method in practice.

## Exegesis

The first part in an interpretative symphony, and the one with which many readers are most familiar, is exegesis. In studying any biblical text, the interpreter needs to employ a variety of exegetical tools in order to gain a full grasp of its details, which in turn help the reader to comprehend the author's intent. The biblical authors employ a diverse assortment of literary devices in conveying their meaning, and the exegetical task is to understand these elements in order to understand the author's point.<sup>3</sup> Literary and historical analyses are key, as the former orients the reader toward the textual strategies of the author and the latter helps the interpreter overcome cultural barriers. Historical information that may be important includes idioms or colloquialisms, cultural practices unexplained by the text, and the political and religious climate at the time of writing.<sup>4</sup> Idioms, or colloquialisms, are phrases unique to author's culture that may not be as illustrative to modern readers. Jesus' statement in Matthew 6 about making sure the left hand does not know what the right is doing is an example. Cultural exercises that are no longer practiced, such as Abraham's servant placing his hand under Abraham's thigh, or Jesus' mention of Corban, also need to be understood in order to grasp the author's intent.

It is important to recognize here, though, that God's revelation to us lies in the biblical writings and not in the details behind the text. Further, our reconstructions of the biblical background are usually highly provisional and typically change when new material is discovered. Historical background information, then, is supplemental; it

remains an important tool that assists us in understanding context, colloquialisms, and unexplained cultural practices.

The foundation of interpretation is an understanding of the biblical material in front of us. We strive to understand the author's intent in interpretation, and we do so primarily through the text he has written.<sup>5</sup> While the interpretive objective is not to enter into the original author's mind (an impossible task), the meaning of a text is directly tied to the author's original intent. What the author meant is what the text means. The divine and the human authors communicate this intended meaning through textual details. In terms of literary features, it is important to recognize that the biblical writers were capable of complex writing and that they employed a wide variety of strategies in authoring each book. When studying any particular passage, the interpreter needs to pay attention to literary strategies unique to the genre of the book, such as parallelism, assonance, alliteration, conjunctions and prepositions. Many times these details are veiled in translation, and so familiarity with the biblical languages, or at least possession of good commentaries, is critical.

Literary context is also critical, as the placement of any given passage assists the interpreter in understanding what a biblical author meant. For instance, the popular story of Jesus calming the storm in Matthew 8:23–27 occurs in the midst of material that highlights Jesus' authority. The Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7) demonstrates Jesus' authority in giving and interpreting God's Word. The healings and exorcisms in Matthew 8 demonstrate His authority over sickness and demons. Christ's calling of the disciples demonstrates his authority over his followers. When studying the storm story, interpreters ought to keep in mind that the rest of the chapter, and indeed an entire section

of the book, is about Jesus' authority.<sup>6</sup> Thus the passage is most likely intended to highlight Jesus' authority over nature, which in turn points to his divine status (as do the other stories mentioned above).

The biblical authors also employ intertextuality, a literary device that connects their material to previous material within their own book or from another biblical book. In other words, the biblical writers often quote and allude to previous passages of Scripture to tie in their work with the whole. For example, the Minor Prophets (Hosea-Malachi) consistently quote or allude to Exodus 34:6–7 to explain God's stance towards Israel and the nations. We tend to be most familiar with direct quotations, such as Mark's quotation of Isaiah 40:3, Exodus 23:20, and Malachi 3:1 in Mark 1:2–3, but the biblical authors often simply repeat a few words or phrases from another book without a quotation formula. They also utilize typology and narrative recapitulation to tie in their work with previous books. This repetition of a pattern throughout the Old Testament produces an expectation of the fulfillment of the type in the New Testament. Intertextuality, typology, and narrative recapitulation depict the narrative thrust of the entire Bible, as mirrored people, places, and events throughout the scriptures point the reader to its emphases and plot line.<sup>7</sup>

### Narrative

The second aspect of a holistic hermeneutic involves an understanding of the historical-redemptive story of Scripture. Ultimately the context of every biblical passage is the entire canon, which has a particular narrative thrust that moves from creation and the fall to redemption and new creation.<sup>8</sup> Locating particular pericopes within the plot

assists the interpreter in discerning its fit in the Christological intent of the Bible. For instance, one could note Genesis 38 and the troubling story of Judah and his sons. A study of its context, not only in Genesis but also in redemptive history, allows the interpreter to see its crucial place in the biblical story.

Particularly helpful in situating passages within their canonical context is the tool of intertextuality. As noted above, this approach seeks to identify verbal parallels and allusions between two or more different texts. When studying a particular passage, how an author connects textually to one or more other passages is immensely helpful in understanding intent. Moses, for example, textually connects Abram's dalliance with Hagar to Adam's fall by the parallel phrases, "Because you have listened to the voice of your wife" (Gen. 3:17) and, "And Abram listened to the voice of Sarai" (Gen. 16:2). Moses uses the same phrase in Hebrew here, with the difference being the referent – Eve in Genesis 3 and Sarai in Genesis 16.<sup>9</sup> These sorts of connections happen throughout Scripture, as the Bible is like a verbal tapestry woven together by textual threads.

Sometimes the biblical authors connect whole sections of biblical material, as do seams like Deuteronomy 34, Joshua 1, Psalm 1, and Malachi 3.<sup>10</sup> Additionally, an author often will connect his writing to multiple earlier biblical verses (e.g. the aforementioned Mark 1:2–3). In such cases the biblical author is tying in his work with the larger story of Scripture, the story of creation, fall, redemption, and new creation in Christ. For instance, in Genesis, Moses seems to be relating Abram's sin with Adam's fall. In Mark, Jesus is apparently bringing the promised new exodus. When interpreting any section of Scripture, then, it is crucial to note how the author ties in his work with previous biblical material. In the same way, one must observe how subsequent biblical authors like their

books to the passage under consideration. Both considerations help one understand how each part fits into the larger biblical storyline.

Another important aspect of understanding the canonical context of a biblical passage is the book's placement in the canon. As Greg Goswell states,

The sequential ordering of the biblical books is part of the *paratext* of Scripture. The term 'paratext' refers to elements that are adjoined to the text but are not part of the text *per se*. . . . The (differing) order of the biblical books is a paratextual phenomenon that cannot be put on the same level as the text itself. It is a post-authorial imposition on the text of Scripture, albeit an unavoidable one when texts of different origin are collected together in a canonical corpus. Where a biblical book is placed relative to other books inevitably influences a reader's view of the book, on the supposition that juxtaposed books are related in some way and therefore illuminate each other. A prescribed order of books is a *de facto* interpretation of the text.<sup>11</sup>

In other words, the books surrounding the biblical book under consideration are a part of the book's context.

Additionally, the order of the books also draws out the history of redemption and the progress of revelation, moving from creation to fall to redemption – first hinted at in the seed of woman (Gen. 3:15), clarified in the Abrahamic covenant (Gen. 12:1–3), further understood in the Davidic covenant (2 Sam. 7), and accomplished in Christ's fulfillment of the new covenant. The canon is ordered in a narrative structure, moving from a garden through exilic wilderness to a garden-city-temple, and this provides context for every book and indeed every passage of Scripture. This narrative culminates in the person and work of Christ, which therefore gives Christological focus to what comes before and after the Gospels.

## Doctrine

A third significant component of holistic biblical interpretation is doctrine. In one sense, this requirement is obvious, even axiomatic. Along with Jesus himself, Scripture is the primary mode of God's self-revelation, which is personal, historical, progressive, and reliably sets forth truth through diverse literary forms. Thus, by its very nature, Scripture communicates who God is and what he is like, as well as what he has done, is doing, and will do. Scripture is theological and should be interpreted accordingly.

Scripture is likewise authoritative. God's Word for us and to us is the norming norm, guiding our beliefs and behavior. Scriptural authority comes from God, not the church. The church and interpreters stand under the Word, trusting its affirmations, embracing its judgments, and obeying its commands. As a result, the church and interpreters should strive to interpret the Bible in accordance with and under the guidance of the biblical worldview.<sup>12</sup> To seek to do otherwise, by interpreting Scripture from perspectives other than one shaped by the biblical worldview, is erroneous from the start. Such critical, outsider approaches to interpretation are colonializing, imperialistic, and revisionist, as they intend either to critique biblical texts from their presumed ideology or conform those texts to that presupposed ideology. This approach is the opposite of reading the Scripture as humble listeners, placing ourselves and our communities under God and, thus, under his Word.

Further, all Scripture and, thus, all exegesis rests on a theological foundation of the biblical narrative and the particular writer. The biblical authors write from theological convictions and with theological intents, holding and advancing views of God, humanity, salvation, and the future. They also write within the biblical narrative, in light of its

teachings about God, creation, humanity, providence, redemption, God's people, and eschatology. While particular doctrines are not always the primary goal of the particular passage, they do shape what the writer seeks and why the writer seeks it. At minimum, theology is always implicit in the text.

Even more, sound theology is often explicit and remains a primary goal of the biblical writers. Often interpreters stress the biblical writers were not trying to produce a systematic theology, but wanted to show believers how to live. While the sentiment rightly counterbalances certain modern errors, it omits something critical: the biblical writers *are* teaching theology so that God's people can follow God appropriately. The writers explicitly teach God's people about who He is, what He wants, what He is doing, where He is taking creation, and more. Indeed, the Gospels, Acts, Pauline Epistles, General Epistles, and Revelation all stress theology. They declare Jesus to be the long-awaited Messiah, Servant, Son of Man, and Son of God. He is the One comes from heaven as the incarnate Lord, lives in perfect obedience to the Father, represents humanity, bears the kingdom, dies as a substitute for sins, is resurrected unto new life, gathers a community, reigns, promises to return to judge and to save, and will bring about a new creation. Our love, worship, faith, and hope rest on such truths.

In addition, all biblical interpretation is done by interpreters, people who read texts with, from, through, and sometimes to an already existing theology. No one comes to passages with a clean slate. We all bring perspectives of God, ourselves, the Bible, Jesus, salvation, the church, history, and the meaning of life to our reading of the Bible. If we are not careful, we (and/or our interpretive communities and traditions) may presumptuously equate our interpretation of God's Word with God's Word. While these

presuppositional and perspectival realities have led some persons to suspect and decry the whole hermeneutical enterprise as circular, we would suggest otherwise.

We all bring ourselves and our views to the interpretive symphony. However, this belief does not necessarily lead us to skepticism. Instead, if readers acknowledge and seek to discover their existing theological assumptions, if readers are open to the illumination of the Spirit and the wisdom of the church, and if readers trust the biblical revelation as authoritative, then there is a very real sense in which every time the submissive interpreters study the Bible, their interpretive lens are adjusted.

A close interpretation of a particular text may incline the humble, believing reader to change or adapt his previous theological convictions. Given enough time, this approach can lead to improved theological perspectives and increased interpretive accuracy, which can lead to better theological perspectives and increasingly developed and sound interpretations.

The assumption of a hermeneutical circle is unnecessary. A holistic hermeneutic contains a hermeneutical spiral,<sup>13</sup> even a theological spiral. In our symphonic metaphor, no matter how out of tune our instruments were, we can tune them according to a standard. It may take a while, but it can happen. Similarly, if interpreters embrace God and his self-revelation in Scripture as the standard (conviction), increasingly recognize their own assumptions and biases (humility), consistently read and study God's Word (diligence), and listen to the wisdom of the church (community), their theology and interpretation can mature in and toward the truth.

## Church

A fourth, and often neglected component of holistic biblical interpretation, is the church. Most of us in the West tend to read the Bible individualistically. We often read the Bible in a binding and translation of our choice in a comfortable chair in a particular room, usually at a certain time. We read it to learn about God and how to follow Him better, usually thinking of ourselves as the primary audience. We tend to forget this approach is peculiar to our age and culture. The Bible is remarkably ecclesial, and seeing how the church impacts the interpretative process is critical.

First and fundamentally, needs within the church provided the occasion for biblical writings. In the New Testament, the authors spoke to the situations and needs of the church.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, the real-life problems of real-life churches provide a major component of the historical context. The New Testament epistles were likely composed to be read in their entirety to churches, and as such were viewed primarily as a whole.

Second, the biblical writers have a theology of the church that shapes their goals. They are writing so that these churches would know, be, and live in accordance with what the church is. The biblical authors write toward a theology of the church. It grounds and informs their teachings about the church as the community of Jesus' followers. This community flows from Israel and the messianic community and was rooted in the already and not yet of the messianic kingdom. It was fully inclusive believing Gentiles and was marked by unity, love, holiness, and truth, serving God and others through worship, evangelism, discipleship, fellowship, and ministry.

Third, the church is a primary goal and means in the biblical story—creation, fall, redemption, new creation. As the eschatological community of Christians that exists in

the already and the not yet, the church is to display God and the realities of the new creation, but still awaits the culmination of history, the final stage of the new creation. The church is has its origin in the eternal purposes of God, its basis in the saving work of Christ, its life from union with Christ, and its end as the glory of God. The church is God's showcase for his eternal plan of bringing forth cosmic reconciliation and highlighting Christ as the focal point of all history.

The church is God's "display people," showcasing not only God's purposes but even God himself. The church also represents God by heralding the gospel to unbelievers so they can receive salvation and become worshippers of Jesus. In and through the church, God shows his grace, wisdom, love, unity, and holiness. In and through the church, God seeks and finds worshippers, displays himself, and glorifies himself.<sup>15</sup>

The biblical text emerges from apostles of the church, writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit to churches to address particular church needs (theological, ethical, cultural, etc.). The biblical authors write from a theological perspective which included specific tenets about the church and toward the goal of strengthening the church to be and live according to its role in God's historical and eternal purposes.

Further, the church is critical to holistic hermeneutics as it has been the historical interpreter of Scripture. One must remember that we enter into a symphony that has been playing music for thousands of years. While we are convinced that historical church teachings are not authoritative over us in the same way that Scripture alone is (*sola Scriptura*), we do fear that modern and postmodern approaches to interpretation have sometimes highlighted the individual interpreter (modern) or contemporary communities of readers (postmodern) at the expense of historical church teachings.<sup>16</sup> Surely, we stand

in the historical stream of God's people throughout the centuries. We may diverge from the stream of thought with great hesitancy, and then only when we are convinced by sacred Scripture or evident reason.<sup>17</sup>

Fifth, the primary intended context of contemporary interpreters should be the church, not the individual Christian reading in his living room, not the student in a world religions class, not the scholar in the research library, and not the blogger trying to build his network. As such, interpreters should read the Scripture in the context of their church community, realizing that a vast portion of it guides their lives together with other believers. Further, pastors interpret and preach the Bible to the church, in view of church needs, in light of the church's occasion, and toward a biblical view of what the church is called to be—a community display of God, his goodness, and his kingdom.

### Application

The final component in the interpretive symphony is what is commonly referred to as application. Often this component is divorced from meaning. Some scholars argue the interpreter should first understand the propositional point of a passage and only then move to what it means for the listener. Scripture, though, and communication in general is not neatly divided along these lines. The Bible is not just for information; it is God-inspired truth for transformation.

God is changing his people into his Son's image through the Spirit's Son-testifying work. As we behold Christ in Scripture, we are changed into his image (2 Cor. 3:17–18). All Scripture is inspired by God and “profitable for rebuke, reproof, correction, and training in righteousness, that the man of God may be equipped for every good work”

(2 Tim. 3:16–17). Interpreters should study passages not only to understand the expected transformative effect, but also to live accordingly.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, this altering effect of Scripture is for the entire church body, not just individuals. The letters of the New Testament, for example, are written to instruct congregations. Indeed, all biblical teaching is intended to be transformational.<sup>19</sup>

As such, sound application includes appropriate church and individual responses to the biblical texts as well as appropriate church and individual responses “to the diversity of present contexts in which the church finds herself.”<sup>20</sup> This concept recognizes the intersection of multiple contexts and cultures (not merely the standard two: the biblical context and the present context). It also brings together the historical context of the biblical authors, the historical context of the biblical recipients/churches, the present context of the interpreter, and the particular context of the contemporary church. Thus, sound application requires careful analysis of these four cultural contexts.

Sound application also flows from and requires appropriate ways of being, loving, thinking, believing, and following.<sup>21</sup> Such application is a kind of ecclesial and personal participation, as the biblical story is both external to us (historical) and, through union with Christ, linked to us (personal). Since we are included as the people of God, the biblical story is our story, and the story of the church is our story. We are derived from it. We are defined by it. We are extensions of it as we live, love, and serve in our ever-changing cultural contexts.

Remembering the Christological focus of the Bible is also important in proper application.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, Jesus is the “ultimate content, author, and interpreter of Scripture.”<sup>23</sup> Too many times, our application becomes moralism – “do this, don’t do

that” directives divorced from the gospel and from Christ our example. Moralistic directives without any mention of Christ’s work divorce ethical imperatives from gospel power. Only through Christ’s atoning work and its application through the Spirit can believers obey. Even so, all application ultimately points to Christ and his accomplishment.

This understanding can be exceptionally complicated, especially when interpreting Old Testament passages because both the author’s original intention(s) and the role(s) of the passage in the narrative of Scripture play a major role. However the details of this complex matter are understood, we need to remember the Christological melody of the whole Bible in order to avoid moralistic exemplary preaching. “Be like David, don’t be like David” misses the main tune of Scripture, which is Jesus. David, Abraham, Daniel, Joseph, Solomon, Esther, Ezra, Tamar, Ruth, Rahab – all were fallen men and women who came short just like everyone else. Their impact on biblical readers is not to say, “be like us,” but to say, “grow in wisdom as you follow God” and especially “look at Jesus, to whom we point.”

Hebrews 11 is a quintessential example. After the writer lists members of the “Hall of Faith,” he exhorts his readers to look to Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith. We strive to imitate Christ. Even Paul, when urging the Corinthians to imitate him, says, “Be imitators of me, *as I am of Christ*” (1 Cor. 11:1). The ultimate pattern for imitation is Jesus, and it is to him that we ought to point when urging listeners and readers to heed moral examples. In sum, just as the Bible itself is theological, Christological, ecclesiological, soteriological, and missiological, so sound interpretation of it will be as well.

## An Example

To conclude, we offer an example of how exegesis, narrative, doctrine, the church, and application interweave in Genesis 17 and the Abrahamic covenant.<sup>24</sup> The context of this passage includes the story of Abraham (Gen. 12–25), the larger story of Genesis, and the canonical narrative of creation, fall, redemption, and new creation. Within the immediate context, the covenant made with Abraham, Sarah, and Isaac is in direct contrast with the covenant made with Hagar and Ishmael in the wilderness in Genesis 16. The former is eternal, for spiritual salvation, and made in the land, while the latter is purely familial, for physical protection, and made in the wilderness. This interpretation is also supported by the literary details of Genesis 17, as the covenant with Abraham is specifically referred to as “eternal” a number of times.

Within both the Genesis and canonical contexts, as fulfilled in Christ the Abrahamic covenant (seen here and also in Gen. 12 and 15) is a reversal of the curse of Genesis 3: the serpent is cursed, while Abraham is to be a blessing; Adam and Eve are expelled from the Garden, while Abraham is promised a land; Adam’s task of cultivating and keeping the Garden is affected through the curse on the ground, while Abraham is promised a land flowing with milk and honey; Eve is punished through procreation becoming more difficult, thus limiting her ability to “be fruitful and multiply,” while Abraham is promised more descendants than he can count; and Adam and Eve do not exercise their God-given dominion over the Garden, while Abraham is promised that kings will come from his line. God’s promise in Genesis 3:15 of the seed of woman, who will destroy the source and effects of sin, is narrowed to Abraham and Isaac’s line in

Genesis 17. The Abrahamic covenant as fulfilled in Jesus Christ is thus intended to reverse Adam's curse and restore the fallen creation. It finds specific application not in an automatic, universal salvation, but in those persons who repent and receive Christ. The ultimate application to the rest of creation occurs in the recreation of the earth in the end days.<sup>25</sup>

Particularly important in reversing Adam's curse is the restoration of his task, namely to be fruitful and multiply. The promise to Abraham of many descendants who will bless the peoples of the earth is the epitome of the restoration of the procreative task. This concept widens the reader's scope to the entire canonical narrative, as the Abrahamic covenant holds promise for God's global redemptive purposes. The promise is fulfilled in Christ, Abraham's seed, who frees his people from sin, defeats the enemy, restores creation, and purchases a multitude for himself from every tribe, tongue, and nation, a people that will dwell with the Triune God for eternity on the renewed earth.

These contextual, literary, and narrative observations naturally lead the reader to doctrinal and ecclesial considerations. On the theological level, the Abrahamic covenant's promise to reverse Adam's fall has implications for a number of doctrines, including Christology, soteriology, anthropology, and missions. Christologically, God's promise to Abraham is fulfilled in Christ. Thus, when we think about Jesus' person and work, we ought to think in Abrahamic terms. The aspects of the promise to Abraham – land, descendants, rule, and blessing – are accomplished by Christ, in his life, death, resurrection, ascension, giving of the Spirit at Pentecost, and return.

When we think about soteriology, bound up intimately with Christ's work, we also can see the impact of the Abrahamic covenant – salvation includes a forensic

forgiveness of sin and a restoration of the whole person and even the entire cosmos.

Anthropologically, individual human beings are restored to Adam's tasks, as the promise to Abraham reverses all that Adam lost in that regard, and collectively redeemed humans will live together with Yahweh in a renewed earth as promised to Abraham. Finally, because Christ's fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant restores the Adamic tasks, and specifically the task to be fruitful and multiply, the church can think about missions in Adamic and Abrahamic terms. Note, for example, the language of the Abrahamic covenant in Matthew 28:16-20.

Ecclesially, then, the covenant with Abraham reminds the church that God is redeeming a people for himself from every tribe, tongue, and nation. The church is not a homogenous unit, but a global people who worship the Triune God. Abraham's covenant is a promise to complete Adam's uncompleted task to be fruitful and multiply and fill all the earth with worshippers of Yahweh. Jesus does that through sending his Spirit at Pentecost and beyond to draw people from around the world to himself.

Finally, the transformative impact of Genesis 17 can be seen in a number of places above, but we will here draw out two implications. First, Genesis 17 reminds us that salvation is not by blood relationship or family ties but through the eternal purposes and salvific work of God in Christ. Genesis 17 is directly contrasted with Genesis 16, where Abraham's first physical son is given a covenant of physical protection but not spiritual salvation. Isaac is the son of the promise, not Ishmael. This truth reminds readers that physical characteristics, birthrights, and the like do not matter in the salvation economy of God. Justification is by faith, not works of the flesh. Second, the Abrahamic covenant reminds readers that God is saving and transforming the whole person and the

whole world. This idea affects how believers view their vocational tasks and their missional purpose in the world, as well as how they treat the material creation. Genesis 17 is thus an exegetically, narratively, doctrinally, ecclesially, and transformationally rich text, one that provides a fitting example of how exegesis, narrative, doctrine, the church, and application all interpenetrate and thus of our need to strive toward a holistic hermeneutic.

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<sup>2</sup> Examples include Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005); Anthony Thiselton, *The Hermeneutics of Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007); D. A. Carson, *The Gagging of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996); David K. Clark, *To Know and Love God: Method for Theology*, Foundations of Evangelical Theology, ed. John S. Feinberg (Wheaton: Crossway, 2003); Michael S. Horton, *Covenant and Eschatology: The Divine Drama* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002); John D. Woodbridge and Thomas Edward McComiskey, *Doing Theology in Today's World: Essays in Honor of Kenneth S. Kantzer* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991); and Carl F. H. Henry, *God, Revelation, and Authority*, 6 vols (Waco: Word, 1976-83).

<sup>3</sup> For a standard introduction to the exegetical issues involved in each genre of Scripture, see Walter C. Kaiser and Moisés Silva, *An Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics: The Search for Meaning* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 69–162.

<sup>4</sup> See, for instance, Jeannine K. Brown, *Scripture as Communication: Introducing Biblical Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 189–212.

<sup>5</sup> Bruce Ashford and David Nelson, "Meaning, Reference, and Textuality: An Evangelical Appropriation of Hans Frei," *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* 28.2 (2010): 195-216. By "authorial intent" we are referring to Kevin Vanhoozer's articulation of it in relation to speech act theory. See Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There A Meaning in This Text? The Bible, The Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 201–280.

<sup>6</sup> For more on the confluence of doctrine and literary context, see the "Doctrine" section below.

<sup>7</sup> See, for instance, G. K. Beale, *Handbook on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament: Exegesis and Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 40, although Beale prefers the term "inner biblical allusion"; Jeannine Brown, *Scripture as Communication*, 212–231; Stephen G. Dempster, *Dominion and Dynasty: A Biblical Theology of the Hebrew Bible* (NSBT 15; Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 31–32.

<sup>8</sup> For an overview of the biblical storyline, see, for instance, Roy Ciampa, "The History of Redemption," in *Central Themes in Biblical Theology: Mapping Unity in Diversity* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 254-308.

<sup>9</sup> Matthew Y. Emerson, "Arbitrary Allegory, Typical Typology, or Intertextual Interpretation? Paul's Use of the Pentateuch in Galatians 4:21–31," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 43.1 (2013): 14–22.

<sup>10</sup> Stephen B. Chapman, *The Law and the Prophets: A Study in Old Testament Canon Formation* (FAT 27; eds., Bernd Janowski and Herman Spieckermann; Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 2000), 112; and John H. Sailhamer, *Introduction to Old Testament Theology: A Canonical Approach* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 101.

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<sup>11</sup> Greg Goswell, "Two Testaments in Parallel: The Influence of The Old Testament on the Structuring of the New Testament Canon," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 56.3 (2013): 459–60.

<sup>12</sup> Vern S. Poythress, *Symphonic Theology: The Validity of Multiple Perspectives in Theology* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2001), 21.

<sup>13</sup> Anthony Thiselton, *The Two Horizons: New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Description* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 104–110, 129, 143–54, 161–69, 194–97, 284, 303–310, 315, 323, 382.

<sup>14</sup> For the sake of focus and simplicity of language, we will focus on the New Testament here. Obviously, just as in the New Testament the authors/apostles spoke to the situations and needs of the church, so in the Old Testament the authors/prophets spoke to the situations and needs of Israel.

<sup>15</sup> For more on this, see Christopher W. Morgan, "The Church and God's Glory," in *The Community of Jesus: A Theology of the Church*, ed. Kendell H. Easley and Christopher W. Morgan (Nashville: B&H, 2013), 213–35.

<sup>16</sup> Kevin Vanhoozer keenly observes an irony: many modern interpreters espouse the authority of church tradition but neglect the actual content of the same tradition. He further reminds that church authority is ministerial rather than magisterial, as the NT assumes that churches and pastors may stray from the truth. Indeed, the NT documents themselves are written in part to correct error and prevent false teaching to spread. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 164–65, 206–10.

<sup>17</sup> This is not to suggest that these two are contradictory, but complementary.

<sup>18</sup> Jeannine Brown, *Scripture as Communication*, 120–36.

<sup>19</sup> Anthony Thiselton, *The Hermeneutics of Doctrine*, xvi–xxii.

<sup>20</sup> Kevin Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, 240.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 239–41, 284–85.

<sup>22</sup> "Jesus Christ is the content of the Scriptural witness, the one who interprets the Old Testament witness, and the one who commissions the New Testament witness. Accordingly, Jesus is both the material and formal principle of the canon: its substance and its hermeneutic." *Ibid.*, 195.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 197.

<sup>24</sup> The following is not intended to be an exhaustive interpretation of Genesis 17, but only a heuristic device that provides a picture of what a holistic hermeneutic entails.

<sup>25</sup> James M. Hamilton, "The Seed of Woman and the Blessing of Abraham," *Tyndale Bulletin* 58 (2007): 253–73; *idem*, "The Skull Crushing Seed of the Woman: Inner-Biblical Interpretation of Genesis 3:15," *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 10.2 (2006): 30–54; Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50* (Word Biblical Commentary 2; eds., David A. Hubbard and Glenn W. Barker; Waco: Word, 1994), 7.