

God's Big Picture, Part 1

Why look for a "Big Picture"?



Underlying convictions about the Bible

- The Bible is God's revelation of Himself to man (the Word of God rather than man's words about God) – all Scripture is inspired by God and useful for us (II Timothy 3:16-17; I Peter 1:10-12; II Peter 1:19-21; Romans 15:4).
- All Scripture speaks of Jesus – He came to fulfil the OT (Matthew 5:17-19) and it testifies to Him (John 5:39; Luke 24:25-27,44-47).
- The OT is in perfect harmony with the gospel of Jesus Christ revealed in the NT (Acts 24:14; Romans 1:2; 3:21) and the gospel message is understood "according to" the OT (I Corinthians 15:3-5).

Therefore, we should expect that:

- The Bible will be concerned not primarily with history but with the person of God and the relationship between God and people.
- The Bible, as originally given, will be true and free from error – this does not mean that everything in it is true (it contains words of people as well as God's words) but that it is an accurate record of what actually happened and what was actually said.
- The Bible will convey meaning that can be understood and that it relevant to people today as well as to the first hearers.

The challenge of the Old Testament

Many Christians struggle with reading the Old Testament. The reasons for this can broadly be summarised in two categories:

- 1) *Relevance* – how does it connect with my life today (e.g. genealogies / Samson)?
- 2) *Relationship* – how does it connect with the New Testament in terms of who God is and how He relates to us?

The result is that Christians often engage in deficient ways of reading the Old Testament including:

- *Allegory (as opposed to typology)* – disregarding the historical meaning in favour of hidden spiritual meanings
- *Proof-texting* – using verses out of context to support a particular doctrinal position or decision (e.g. Jeremiah 29:11)
- *Moralising* – looking for the moral of the story (as if we were reading Aesop's fables)
- *Character studies* – looking to characters for examples to follow or warnings to avoid
- *"Thought for the day"* – reading a passage out of the context of the book

Typology

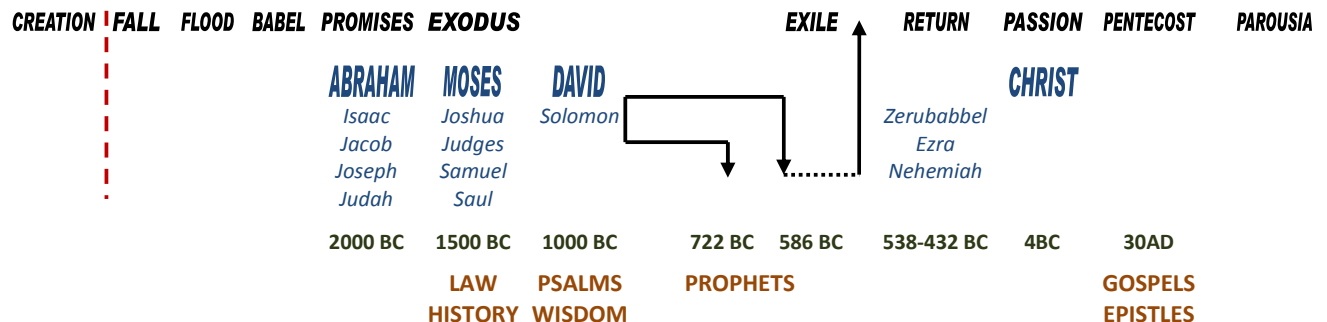
The New Testament recognises that Old Testament details may be examples that have benefit for us (I Corinthians 10:11). We call these examples "types". True types must have the following features:

- 1) *Historical* – both type and antitype must be actual historical events, people or institutions.
- 2) *Theological* – there must be a theological as well as a historical correspondence between type and antitype.
- 3) *Messianic* – true types always point to Christ in some way or another. In this sense:
 - Every historic act of redemption is a type of Christ's ultimate redemption (e.g. the Exodus)
 - Every historic anointed leader (whether prophet, priest or king) is a type of Christ
 - Every historic deliverer (e.g. the Judges) or mediator (e.g. Abraham and Moses) is a type of Christ
- 4) *Intensification* – the antitype must be more significant than the type
- 5) *Intention* – there should be some evidence in Scripture that the type was planned by God to foreshadow the antitype
- 6) *Instruction* – the type and antitype must both have spiritual meaning for the people of God at the time

Salvation History and the "Big Picture"

The big picture is history, but it is more than history. If we chart the major events (Creation, Fall, Flood, Babel, God's promises to Abraham, Exodus, Exile, Return, Passion, Pentecost, Parousia) and people (Abraham, Moses, David, Christ) in Bible history, we may end up with the following diagram. I have included some key dates from Abraham onwards (we cannot date earlier events in Genesis with any degree of certainty) and the position in history where each of the major genres of literature in the Bible begin to become prominent:

- History and Law began with Moses
- Psalms and wisdom found their golden age in the time of David and Solomon
- The writing prophets began recording their oracles during the divided monarchy and continued until after the Exile
- Gospels and Epistles belong to the Church period after Pentecost).



I have added dashed vertical lines in five places which mark significant shifts in God's way of working with mankind:

- The Fall and the expulsion from Eden
- The call of Abraham, which marks the beginning of God's focus on the nation of Israel
- The birth of Christ
- Pentecost, which marks the beginning of the Church
- The return of Christ (Parousia)

So much for the history, but the Bible is not simply a record of history; it is a record of God's perspective on, and action in, history. How can we find a unifying story of God's revelation of Himself in Scripture? How can we identify God's Big Picture?

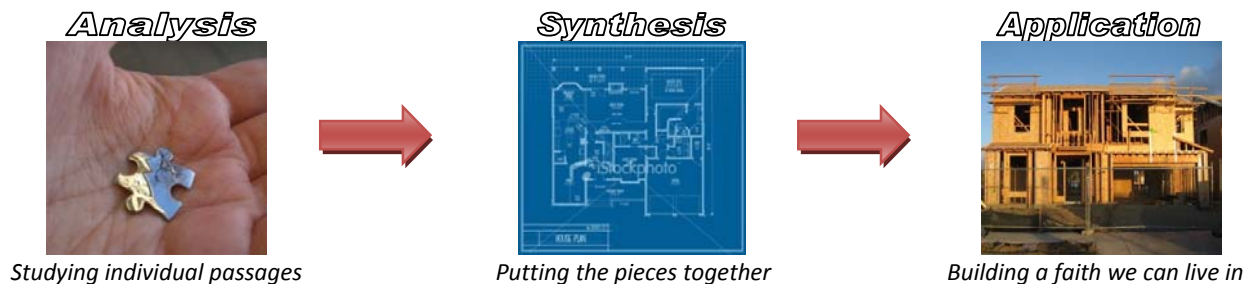
Biblical Theology

Theology, in its simplest definition, is simply the study of God. In this sense every Christian is a theologian because every one of us is a learner who seeks to understand more about God. Biblical theology is the study of Scripture with the aim of describing the overall story of God's revelation of Himself. It looks for a "big picture" or unifying theme in the Bible. It seeks to understand theology from the perspective of the writers of Scripture in their context within salvation history. It can be contrasted with systematic theology, which seeks to bring together under topical headings everything that the Bible says on individual doctrines. Using the illustration of a movie, biblical theology is like a synopsis of the movie, while systematic theology is like an encyclopaedia about the movie. Systematic theology has its place, but God's revelation was given through a story (perhaps because our lives unfold as stories and we need to see our lives as part of God's big story). Every Christian should seek to have a basic grasp of the Bible's storyline so they can know God better.

There are two major approaches to biblical theology:

- Thematic* – e.g. Graeme Goldsworthy and Vaughan Roberts on the Kingdom of God. Other themes that have been suggested include the dwelling place of God, promise and covenant. Weakness = it is very difficult to find a single theme that truly unites all of Scripture (e.g. the idea of the "Kingdom of God" is absent from the Wisdom books).
- Redemptive Historical* – e.g. Willem VanGemeren lists twelve periods in redemptive history. Weakness = we can get lost in the history at the expense of understanding the plot. This approach may not do justice to the progressive revelation of God and the unity of the story. It also suffers from becoming overly complex and from displacing Christ from the centre of the scheme.

Stages in the process of interpreting Scripture



An outline sketch of the "Big Picture"

I would suggest that a one sentence summary of Scripture's theme:

God's revelation of His power and holiness, love and faithfulness demonstrated in creation and in the redemption of mankind through His Son Jesus Christ through whom all things will be brought to eschatological completion

There are several important truths contained in this statement:

- God is the source of Scripture and that it is His revelation of Himself
- Scripture reveals the core qualities of God's nature (power and holiness) and character (love and faithfulness)
- Scripture reveals God as Creator and Redeemer
- Scripture's central emphasis is on Christ – He is the centrepiece of the Bible
- The story of Scripture contains a progressive movement from Creation to the eschatological (end times) fulfilment of all things

Based on the lines drawn on the historical chart above, I divide salvation history into five periods, which are book-marked at either end by Creation and the New Creation. The whole Bible story can, therefore, be divided into seven periods as follows:

