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IS CHRIST IN EVERY PASSAGE OF THE OLD TESTAMENT?

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One of the hermeneutic approaches that is prevalent among reformed biblical scholars is that of the Christocentric hermeneutic. One of the main tenets of the Christocentric hermeneutic is to present every text of Scripture, both Old and New Testament, in its relation to Christ and His work.¹ Proponents of the Christocentric hermeneutic seek to use every text of Scripture to preach Christ.² While this is a noble aspiration, the question is whether this is a legitimate way to read Scripture. This paper will seek to evaluate the merits of whether Christ may legitimately be preached from all of Scripture or not, specifically as it relates to the Old Testament.

Christocentric Exegesis

The Christocentric hermeneutic is a view held by many but to varying degrees. Not all who hold the position would agree with the legitimacy of every example of Christocentric exegesis presented by all who claim the position. However, examples of this hermeneutic approach must be presented for consideration.

The Christocentric method can be traced back to the allegorical approaches of men like Origen. For example, Origen asserted that Rahab's scarlet cord hanging in the window was a

¹ Graeme Goldsworthy, *Christ-Centered Biblical Theology: Hermeneutical Foundations and Principles* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012), 76–99.

² “to preach Christ is to proclaim some facet of the *person, work, or teaching* of Jesus of Nazareth so that people may believe him, trust him, love him, and obey him.” (Sidney Greidanus. *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament: A Contemporary Hermeneutical Method*. [Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company 1999.]. 8.

type of Christ and stood for the redemptive blood of Christ.³ This is an admittedly extreme example and one that is disputed even among Christocentric proponents.⁴

While not going as far as the extreme allegorical approach of some, even conservative proponents of this method argue for the legitimacy of preaching Christ from every text.⁵ Some preachers accomplish this task by relating every text to the redemptive plan of God summed up in Christ, which is asserted as the context for the entire Bible.⁶ For proponents of the Christological hermeneutic, the grammatical-historical hermeneutic is not adequate on its own to produce the correct interpretation of a text. Instead, the text must also be seen in its context of redemptive history and related to the work of Christ.⁷ Other proponents of the Christocentric method assert that the entire purpose of preaching is to proclaim the gospel which finds its fulfillment in the work of Christ.⁸ Charles Spurgeon famously employed the Christocentric

³ Ibid., 87.

⁴ “to use allegorical interpretation for other genres of literature, say historical narrative, is to make a genre mistake and to read alien ideas into the text.” (Ibid., 88).

⁵ “Since the literary context of the Old Testament in the Christian canon is the New Testament, this means that the Old Testament must be understood in the context of the New Testament. And since the heart of the New Testament is Jesus Christ, this means that every message from the Old Testament must be seen in the light of Jesus Christ.” (Ibid., 51).

⁶ “By identifying where a passage fits in the overall revelation of God’s redemptive plan, a preacher relates the text to Christ by performing the standard and necessary exegetical task of establishing its context.” (Bryan Chapell on “The Redemptive-Historical View,” in Scott M Gibson and Matthew D Kim, *Homiletics and Hermeneutics: Four Views on Preaching Today* (Grand Rapids, Mi: Baker Academic, 2018. 4).

⁷ “Just as a historico-grammatical exegesis requires a preacher to consider a text’s terms in their historical and literary context, responsible theological interpretation requires an expositor to discern how a text’s ideas function in the wider redemptive context.” (Ibid., 5).

⁸ “the purpose of preaching is to proclaim the gospel, which I define as God’s saving actions recorded anywhere in the Bible that have greatest clarity in Jesus Christ. This purpose is larger than preaching any individual biblical text.” (Paul Scott Wilson on “The Law-Gospel View,” Ibid., 117).

hermeneutic regularly and claimed to see a road to Christ in every text.⁹ These are but a few examples of the Christocentric hermeneutic being employed as a way to preach Christ from every text of Scripture.

Critique of the Christocentric Method

It must be acknowledged that the motives of those proposing a Christocentric hermeneutic are admirable. Many seek to avoid the moralization or relativization of biblical passages that is prominent in many evangelical churches. Many reduce passages of Scripture down to an admiration of exemplary biblical characters who should be emulated. Many seek to contextualize the message of the Bible, especially the difficult passages of the Old Testament.¹⁰ This is certainly a pitfall to be avoided, but is ‘Christologizing’ every passage of Scripture the proper response?

An important question in this discussion is how much the biblical writers understood of their own writing. Did the authors of the Old Testament know of the coming Christ? And if so, did they intend their text to speak of that coming One? Abner Chou asserts that the biblical writers did, in fact, understand that the Messiah was coming and that they knew more of the significance of what they wrote than they are often credited with.¹¹ The biblical writers, even of

⁹ “I have never yet found a text that has not got a road to Christ in it, and if I ever do find one that has not a road to Christ in it, I will make one; I will go over hedge and ditch but I would get at my Master, for the sermon cannot do any good unless there is a savor of Christ in it.” (quoted in *Christ-Centered Preaching and Teaching*, ed. Ed Stetzer (Nashville, TN: Lifeway, 2013. 26).

¹⁰ “Now, even if elementary preachers are unsure how to preach a particular passage redemptively, they have sensitive antennae to detect sermons that are mere moralistic challenges to straighten up, fly right, and do better.” (Chapell, *Homiletics and Hermeneutics*. 3).

¹¹ “The prophets were cognizant of complex theological concepts, like a messianic individual, from the very beginning. They wrote with a view of God’s plan such that their texts intentionally set up for future

the Old Testament, knew of the redemptive plan of God and of the coming Messiah and they wrote what they did within that context.

The understanding of the biblical writers has significant implications for our hermeneutic method. If the biblical writers knew of God's redemptive plan, and were writing from a context of that knowledge, then a reorienting of the biblical text into a "wider redemptive context," as many Christocentric proponents encourage, is unnecessary. The Old Testament writers were writing in the wider redemptive context, and within that context they wrote exactly what the Holy Spirit inspired them to write. Since the authors of Scripture knew of the coming Christ and were writing according to the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, their writing should be understood exactly how they intended it within their historical and literary context.

While the prophets did prophesy about the coming Messiah, they did not prophesy exclusively of the Messiah.¹² If the Old Testament writers intended for Christ to be seen in every text of Scripture, they certainly could have included Him in the text. The exegete of Scripture must recognize the intent of the biblical writers in the message that they communicated. Failure to do so minimizes the theological competency of the biblical writers and misses the full scope of revelation contained in their writing.

When proponents of the Christocentric hermeneutic employ their method of finding Christ in every text, it diminishes the texts where Christ is found. The Old Testament writers

ramifications in redemptive history." (Abner Chou, *The Hermeneutics of the Biblical Writers : Learning to Interpret Scripture from the Prophets and Apostles* [Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2018] 218-219.

¹² "The prophetic hermeneutic not only affirms the Messiah is an important part of the Old Testament but defines how he is in the Old Testament. While they did prophesy about Messiah, the prophets did not make every text Christocentric. We need to make sure we find him in the Old Testament the way they intend." (Chou, *The Hermeneutics of the Biblical Writers*, 219).

revealed more than just the coming Messiah in their writing. Many Old Testament texts speak to and reveal other aspects of the grand storyline of Scripture. Rather than reinterpret every text of Scripture to see Christ in it, the exegete should respect the biblical authors enough to find the meaning that they intended their text to have and trust the inspired Scriptures to communicate the message they were inspired to communicate.

While the Old Testament is full of legitimate references and allusions to Christ, one need not look very far to see passages with no intended reference to Him. For example, one can read of God's dealings with Abraham, Lot, Sodom and Gomorrah and not see any direct or inferred references to Christ. While reading the book of Esther does inform one of the scope of divine providence and God's preservation of His people, the person and work of Christ is nowhere mentioned or presented in those passages. The prophet Jonah presents the reader with a story that contains many lessons and even revelation about the nature and character of God,¹³ but it is difficult to see how the prophet was intending to inform the reader about the coming Messiah in His written words. That is not to say that application from these texts cannot present principles that can be applied or illustrated in the life and work of Christ. However, to read those texts as though Christ is the true meaning of them is to miss what the writers intended for the readers of their text to see. Those texts were not meant to tell the reader about Christ.

The Old Testament prepared the people of God for the coming of Christ. The writers of Scripture make numerous connections to Christ and develop a rich understanding of who Christ is and would do to fulfill the plan of God. When the redemptive work of Christ is forced into

¹³ "One theological commentary claims, "The book of Jonah is all about Christ." No, the book of Jonah is all about God." (Ibid., 82).

every text of Scripture, the legitimate connections that are made throughout Scripture to the various aspects of Christ can be minimized or missed all together.¹⁴

When Christ, the second person of the Trinity, is forced into the meaning of every text, the other divine persons of the Trinity become minimized. Many texts in the Old Testament speak of God the Father or of the Spirit and are meant to communicate something of the nature or work of those persons of the Trinity.¹⁵ While Christ is the exact image of God, and many passages of the Old Testament speak of things more fully revealed in Christ, not every aspect of the persons of the Father or the Spirit can be legitimately redirected into a Christocentric interpretation.

Conclusion

While the aims of those who employ a Christocentric hermeneutic may be admirable, seeing Christ in every text is not a legitimate hermeneutic method. The authors of Scripture had a divinely inspired method and had a deep understanding of the details of which they wrote. The prophets did prophesy about the coming Messiah, but the fact that certain prophecies are explicitly messianic reveal that not every passage of Scripture was written with that same intention. To read Christ into every text diminishes the intention and competency of the biblical

¹⁴ “If we do not understand the Old Testament deeply, then when the New Testament draws on the Old Testament to speak of Christ, we will not know the full import of what is taking place. Because New Testament Christology draws from the Old Testament, a shallow understanding of the Old Testament leads to a shallow Christology.” (Abner Chou, “A Hermeneutical Evaluation of the Christocentric Hermeneutic,” *The Master’s Seminary Journal* 27, no. 2 [2016] 137).

¹⁵ “Though some Old Testament prophecies anticipate the Messiah, the effort of some preachers to find the second person of the Trinity in every prophetic pericope is misguided. Peter said that all the prophets testified about Christ (Acts 10:43; cf. 1 Pet. 1:21); but it’s one thing to say that prophets point to Christ, another to say every word they wrote is about Christ.” (Kenneth Langley, “The Theocentric View,” *Homiletics and Hermeneutics*, 82).

writers and misconstrues the message that they were intending to communicate. While many passages of the Old Testament do reveal much about the coming Messiah, to force Christ into every text serves to minimize those explicitly messianic passages. The student of Scripture must seek to preserve the intended meaning of Scripture and see the richness of God's self-revelation in the way that He gave it to His image bearers.

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