

## **The Old Covenant "Shadow" and New Covenant "Reality"**

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Most Bible students would agree that one of the most difficult areas of biblical study is the relationship between Old Testament prophecies and their New Testament fulfillment. Anyone who has spent much time studying NT quotations of OT passages has had to come face to face with the fact that many of these quotations do not appear to be "fulfilled" in what we in the western world of the 20th century would consider to be a literal way - not, at least, based upon their OT contexts. In his book *Prophecy and Hermeneutic in Early Christianity* [Baker Books], E. Earl Ellis confronts the problem:

To many Christian readers, to say nothing of Jewish readers, the New Testament's interpretation of the Old appears to be exceedingly arbitrary. For example, Hosea 11:1, "Out of Egypt I called my son," refers to Israel's experience of the Exodus; how can Mt. 2:15 apply it to Jesus' sojourn in Egypt? In Psalm 8:4ff. the "son of man" given "glory" and "dominion" alludes to Adam or to Israel's king; how can Hebrews 2:8f. and I Cor. 15:27 apply the text to Jesus? If Gen. 15:6 and 2 Samuel 7 are predictions of Israel's future, how can the New Testament writers refer them to Jesus and to his followers, who include Gentiles as well as Jews? [p. 163].

These are interesting and difficult questions for anyone who wants to honestly and "correctly handle the word of truth" (II Tim. 2:15 NIV). Without getting into too much detail I will deal with a couple of issues in this regard and then make reference to books which deal with the subject more completely.

### **Biblical Language**

Any investigation of the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies in the New Testament must take into account the manner of speaking and writing of the Old and New Testament writers. This involves many different aspects but one that is especially important is the semitic use of hyperbole. G.B. Caird explains in his book *The Language and Imagery of the Bible*:

Hyperbole or overstatement is a figure of speech common to all languages. But among Semitic peoples its frequent use arises out of a habitual cast of mind, which I have called absoluteness - a tendency to think in extremes without qualification, in black and white without intervening shades of gray [p.110].

Such language can be seen throughout the Bible especially with contrasts between the absolute usage of words such as "love" and "hate" or "light" and "darkness" when the intended meaning is not in fact absolute (e.g. Gen. 29:30-31; Rom. 9:13). This use of hyperbole is especially prevalent in prophetic language. Caird goes on to explain:

Prophecy deals more often than not in absolutes. The prophets do not make carefully qualified predictions that the Israelites will be destroyed unless they repent. They make unqualified warnings of doom, accompanied by unqualified calls to repentance ... The prophet is sometimes as absolute in his optimism as in his forecasts of ruin.

Once we have acquired some familiarity with this prophetic idiom through instances in which the referent is incontrovertibly defined by the context, we may perhaps be ready to cope with advanced hyperbole in which no such direct clue is provided. The Book of Isaiah ends with a prediction of the final victory of God,

*For, as the new heavens and the new earth which I am making shall endure in my sight, says the Lord, so shall your race and your name endure; and month by month at the new moon, week by week on the Sabbath, all mankind shall come to bow before me, says the Lord ... (Isa. 66:22-23).*

Even if we constrict ourselves to the geographical limits of the prophet's world and to the level of population in his day, the prospect of all mankind traveling on weekly and monthly sightseeing tours to Jerusalem is too ludicrous to take literally; under ancient conditions of travel, time alone would be enough to make the idea impossibly absurd. We are dealing with a poet who has chosen this hyperbolic symbol to express his confidence in the coming of a new age in which the whole world will accept the worship of the one true God [p. 112, 115-6].

This same use of hyperbole can be seen in many OT passages which many people today insist have not yet been fulfilled and must therefore be fulfilled in a strictly literal way in some future age.

But this leads us to another and even more important question. Almost all such OT prophecies - including the one quoted above - are expressed in terms that mention the retention of old covenant practices - i.e. Sabbaths, New Moon celebrations, religious festivals, altars and sacrifices - all of which, according to the New Testament, are clearly abolished and done away through the redemptive work of Christ and the institution of the new covenant era of salvation. How then could such practices be reinstated in some future time or age, according to the will of God, without making the work of Christ of none effect?!

### **The Shadow and the Reality**

After taking into account the type of biblical language employed in specific prophetic sections of the Old Testament we must always conform our own thinking about their New Testament fulfillment to the interpretation given by the inspired writers of the New Testament documents themselves. As to their understanding of this topic there can be no doubt that their entire perspective was shaped by Christ - both his own teachings and, most importantly, his redemptive work including his life, death, resurrection, ascension, giving of the Spirit and his future return. The following verses state explicitly the perspective which every NT writer shared:

*For no matter how many promises God has made, they are "Yes" in Christ. And so through him the "Amen" is spoken by us to the glory of God. Now it is God who makes both us and you stand firm in Christ. He anointed us, set his seal of ownership on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come (II Cor. 1:20-22).*

*The Law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming - not the realities themselves (Heb. 10:1).*

*Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ (Col. 2:16-17).*

With the coming of the Spirit on the day of Pentecost the new covenant has been established "once for all." There can never again be a

reinstitution of the old covenant Law without making of none effect that which Christ has already accomplished through his life, death and resurrection. From the New Testament perspective the old covenant has simply been made obsolete (Heb. 8:13), and now *everything* is to be interpreted in the light of Christ and the new covenant which he has brought. This "spiritual perspective" from which the NT views the lives of new covenant believers can be summed up in many NT verses including the following:

*Such confidence as this is ours through Christ before God. Not that we are competent in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God. He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant - not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life (II Cor. 3:4-6).*

*But now, by dying to what once bound us, we have been released from the law so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit, and not in the old way of the written code (Rom. 7:6).*

Simply put, with the coming of the new, the old is gone forever. As a result, all of life, including one's understanding of the OT scriptures, is to be viewed from this perspective. This does not mean that the old covenant regulations were not meant to be understood literally by the people of their day. However, with the coming of Christ the Old Testament "shadow" is now recognized. Spiritual realities that had never before been understood were made known (e.g. Matt. 13:11-12; Eph. 3:4-6; etc.), and the Old Testament is now to be interpreted in the light of these truths. In short, Christ's death, resurrection and giving of the Spirit were the decisive steps in God's plan of salvation. From that time onward "the old has gone, the new has come" (II Cor. 5:17) and all of life is to be viewed in this way. As Ellis states concerning the Old Testament,

Not only persons and events but also its institutions were "a shadow of the good things to come" [ibid., p. 166].

In this light it seems impossible that there could ever be a time again when Old Testament institutions such as the sacrifices, religious festivals, Sabbaths, New Moon festivals, food laws, etc. of the

Mosaic Law could ever again be instituted - that is, according to the will of God. With the coming of the new covenant "reality" in Christ the old covenant "shadow" is no longer necessary. In fact, to continue old covenant practices as though they are still prescribed by God can have very harmful effects on the body of Christ. As F.F. Bruce states regarding Paul's meaning in Col. 2:16-18:

Perhaps he means that the reality which was foreshadowed by the now obsolete ceremonial economy is the new order whose distinctive feature is that believers of the most diverse origins - Jews, Gentiles or whatnot - are alike united by faith to Christ, incorporated into him by the Spirit. To adhere now to the ceremonial regulations of a bygone age is to fail to grasp this new order, to fail (in other words) to "hold fast to the Head, by whom the whole body is equipped and supplied through its joints and ligaments and thus increases with the increase of God" (Co. 2:18f.) [F. F. Bruce, *The Time is Fulfilled*, Eerdmans, p. 78].

In short, any expectation that Old Testament prophecies (e.g. Zechariah 14; Isaiah 65-66; etc.) which speak of sacrifices, religious festivals, Sabbaths, altars, etc. are still to be fulfilled in a

strictly literal sense at some future time seem to have grave difficulties in the light of the new covenant that has already been established by Christ. Rather than searching the Old Testament for prophecies that one thinks have not yet been fulfilled and then teaching that they must be literally fulfilled in the future - including the re-institution of old covenant regulations - it seems far wiser to simply let the New Testament writers be our guide for the proper interpretation of the Old Testament - especially, as they point to the clear fulfillment of all God's purposes in Christ. The message of the new covenant is clear: the "shadow" has passed and the "reality" has come.

[Recommended books for studying this subject that are available from CBD include: *The Time is Fulfilled*, by F.F. Bruce; *The Language and Imagery of the Bible*, by G.B. Caird. Also, available at book stores is the highly recommended *Jesus and Israel* by David Holwerda (Eerdmans) and, though difficult to find, the excellent work by E.E. Ellis, *Prophecy and Hermeneutic in Early Christianity*, esp. pp. 147-172, (Baker)]