A Search for the Biblical Epistemic Horizon
Towards Meta-Hermeneutics

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Abstract

This article will propose a meta-hermeneutical approach that could help to uncover the deeper assumptions and epistemic horizon of a given biblical author. Firstly, the logic of the biblical beginning story will be examined and assessed in terms of its worldview horizon, a horizon that might constitute the larger perspective within which the subsequent authors might be thinking. Secondly, the article will engage in a broad analysis of the subsequent covenant narratives, tracing their plot-lines in terms of anticipating the future, a future that the apostolic stories perceive as the fulfillments. Finally, there will be a brief sketch of some hermeneutical principles that may serve as guidelines for the reading and applications of the biblical materials in terms of doctrine and religious practice.

It is generally recognized that the biblical Canon is composed of micro and macro stories but not agreed that such stories form a coherent theological narrative. While there was, in the mid-twentieth century, a renewed interest in searching for the levels of unity in the Canon, the dominant trend in biblical scholarship was the search for diversity; a search that has largely been driven by the modernist deistic and naturalistic assumptions of source, form and historical literary criticism (Kaiser Jr. 2009, 11–24).¹

N. T. Wright argues that when it comes to recovering the meaning of the biblical texts the “pre-critical and modern ways of articulating this have not met with success” (Wright 1992, 122). The apparent weakness of both the historical

¹ For an overview of the issues and challenges implied in the contemporary hermeneutical debates see: Thiselton 2009; Thiselton 2006; Thiselton 2007. See also Silva 1996.
critical and historical grammatical methods of biblical studies is that they both fall short of detecting the interpretative significance of the meta-narrative perspective in the biblical texts.\textsuperscript{2} Thus the idea of a metanarrative level of unity in the Scriptural stories has generally been challenged or abandoned by the majority of scholars within the disciplines of biblical studies.

However, more recently the proponents of the biblical theology movements called “New Perspectives” have called for a reassessment of the hermeneutical impasse by advocating a more narrative approach. More recently N.T. Wright, Craig Bartholomew, Michael Goheen and others have insisted that the biblical texts actually form a coherent metanarrative by insisting that the biblical stories must be understood from within their own worldview logic for their meaning to be unlocked. They insist that although the biblical Canon is the product of a long complicated process, “the end product needs to be examined in its own right” (Bartholomew et al. 2004, 146‒147).\textsuperscript{3}

What is gradually dawning on the post-modern contemporary consciousness is that all humans inhabit a certain worldview perspective whether they recognize it or not, a worldview that ideologically controls their interpretation of observed and experienced reality.\textsuperscript{4} Craig Bartholomew and Goheen actually state that worldviews “offer a lens through which to view everything else”. However, such a concern for reading the Bible as a grand unified narrative mostly comes from the disciplines such as “systematic, practical, ethics and missiology – but sadly not from within biblical studies,” except for N.T. Wright a “rare example of a major biblical scholar in whose work, story, in the grand sense, is central” (Bartholomew et al. 2004, 146‒147).

Their thesis is that all humans inhabit a worldview paradigm that serves as the mental lens through which they observe and interpret the experienced empirical world and which informs their values and actions. Thus unless the biblical world of thought is an exception to this general cultural phenomenon, the biblical authors likewise inhabit an epistemic worldview horizon informing the meaning of their theology.

\textsuperscript{2} For a more comprehensive discussion see: Pedersen 2016.

\textsuperscript{3} The issue is that they fall short of detecting the interpretative significance of the epistemic world horizon in the biblical texts. For a more comprehensive discussion of this problem see: Pedersen 2016.

\textsuperscript{4} For a more comprehensive discussion of the role of worldviews and their importance for retrieving the meaning of the biblical story/stories see Pedersen 2009.
A Search for the Biblical Epistemic Horizon

In a recent series of articles the Adventist theologian Fernando Canale has called attention to the importance of the biblical metanarrative as the epistemological key to understanding how the Scriptures can yield a unified belief system. He argues that textual exegesis (Canale 2004; idem. 2005; idem. 2006) as currently practiced does not uncover the biblical worldview perspective; it is uncovered through the discipline of systematics (Canale 2006, 126–138).

Canale refers to the Adventist systematic theologian Norman Gulley who insists that a canonically based systematic theology needs the “hermeneutical guide of the biblical metanarrative,” and “worldview” for constructing a coherent belief system. Gulley thus argues that “the biblical metanarrative operates as a guiding light orienting our interpretation of Scripture and biblical doctrine. Furthermore, it also identifies and “corrects any interpretation that does not fit in with the biblical worldview.” Finally, “it guides us in understanding the inner logic of biblical thinking” (Canale 2006, 135–136). Whether one agrees with Canale or not, concerning the discipline by which to retrieve the biblical epistemic worldview horizon, his core observation resonates with the emerging awareness that without discovering the biblical worldview paradigm the text will be taken captive to the worldview of the interpreter.

So, for theology to be biblical it must reflect the realities of the biblical texts including its inherent worldview. If the dominant feature of the biblical Canon is diversity and discontinuity representing multiple theologies and worldviews, any attempt at detecting a unified theology is pointless. If, on the other hand, there is an ideological and thematic level of unity in the biblical material then a unified biblical theology appears to be possible.⁵ Accordingly, the methodological challenge is to formulate a search that would allow the Biblical authors to tell their own story/stories on their own premises; a method that is not controlled by the worldview lenses of the interpreter.

Biblical theology could thus be defined as a search for the epistemic horizon or worldview paradigms of the biblical authors and thus to discover what kind of “meta-story” they inhabit and which governs their thinking, logic and interpretation of cosmos. If their worldview story is ultimately theistic then

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the lens through which they see everything will be theological. Thus to discover the “epistemic horizon” in which the biblical authors think, live, move and have their being is to discover their theology. Biblical theology is thus concerned with thematic analysis of the Scriptural stories as it attempts to identify the epistemic horizon of the biblical authors, explore their logic, and to assess its narrative implications. Such a methodology could accordingly be entitled: *A Theistic Narrative Method of Biblical Theology*.

Methodological Steps
While there clearly is a growing awareness among some scholars regarding the need to recover the worldview horizon of the biblical authors and thus an increasing attention to its meta-hermeneutical significance, there is nevertheless a limited scholarly attention to the methodological process by which the epistemic worldview horizon of the various biblical authors might be retrieved, identified and assessed without imposing an alien perspective on the biblical texts. The aim of this study is thus tentatively to suggest some basic methodological steps by which to retrieve the epistemic horizon of the biblical authors and to outline its structural meta-historical implications and briefly sketch some of its potential hermeneutical implications. We propose that the first step in the search for a unifying common epistemic horizon in the Scriptural material could start with the Genesis literature by mapping out its major and minor themes.

1. A Threefold Foundational Perspective
In reading the first eleven chapters of Genesis it strikes the reader that it contains a unique story concerning the world and its origin. Canonical criticism does not change the fact that over time the Genesis literature became the pre-amble to the Hebrew Canon. Our working hypothesis is that the canonical authors could generally be thinking in terms of the triple thematic worldview perspective introduced in the Genesis literature, a worldview paradigm constituted by the following major themes, that is, a theistic creation-theme, a theistic crisis-theme and a divine remedial-promise-theme. If such a triple perspective is traceable in the plotline from Genesis to the Apocalypse then the biblical authors share a triple epistemic horizon and thus inhabit a common unifying world-view paradigm despite any diversity.
1.1 Creation-Perspective
The Creation-Perspective is foundational in the Genesis story and is located as the preamble to the entire biblical Canon and apparently introduces a foundational world-view horizon within which the author understands all of divine and physical time-space reality. Thus the most general, comprehensive, all-embracing, all-inclusive statement about everything encountered in the biblical preamble is: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” (Gen. 1:1). So if a world-view paradigm is defined as the most general and most inclusive assertion about everything then Genesis 1:1 states its world-view paradigm up front.

The first part of the sentence thus constitutes the radical first-principle in a unique theistic world-view, providing an all-embracing view about everything. The logic of this statement is that before everything else God is. God is seen prior to everything as God is presented as the cause and originator of everything else. So the logic is that God is the uncreated ultimate dimension as everything else is seen as derived from and contingent on Him. Furthermore, the next most important principle about everything is stated in the next sentence namely that “the heavens and the earth” are created and thus depend on the creator for their origin, order, form and structure. Thus the first statement in the Genesis account defines a unique two-dimensional universe in which there is God and creation and beyond this dual horizon there is nothing. Accordingly, the Genesis preamble defines all of reality in a single sentence.

Furthermore, this creator/creation logic implies God can be without creation as He exists prior to created reality and constitutes its pre-condition as creation itself is seen as contingent on Him for its very being. The principle accordingly implies that there is an ontological and dimensional difference between God and creation. The logic of the creation statement clearly implies that nature is not self-originating or self-generating nor eternal but contingent on a theistic dimension for its origin, form, structure, function and being. Accordingly, there is an all-inclusive dependency principle implied in the Genesis formula with regard to created reality including humans (Gen. 2). The tree of life (Gen. 2–3) logic implies that such a dependency is a continual existential condition.

Accordingly, the most general, comprehensive, all-embracing and all-inclusive theory about everything is stated up front in the opening sentence of the Genesis account (Gen. 1:1). This theistic creator/creation formula thus provides
the first principle or ultimate epistemic horizon or worldview paradigm encountered in the Canon. However, the Genesis account immediately modifies this horizon by introducing a disruptive crisis principle.

1.2 Crisis-Perspective
A second general comprehensive thematic principle embracing all of human existence is likewise stated up front in the Genesis preamble (Gen. 3:8–24). A Crisis-Perspective appears that concerns the intrusion of a mysterious evil that radically disrupts the divinely intended Paradise order and thus God’s plan for the world. While the creation story did warn against evil as a potential option it did not present it as an inherent necessity. God is seen as giving humans a radical choice between the established Paradise order and a potential evil alternative, a choice that He upholds at all costs. The tree of knowledge motif regarding good and evil was attached with a divine health warning (Gen. 2:16–17). Accordingly, the crisis story concerns the fatal choice of the acclaimed progenitors of humanity.

The serpent power is depicted as a mysterious antagonistic force challenging the ontological first principles regarding God’s character; a challenge that when accepted by humans will lead to fatal existential consequences. According to the Genesis account the serpent power plants an evil idea in the minds of the human progenitors, subverting their worldview, their response to God and thus their actions (Gen. 3:1–7). The subsequent Genesis story describes how the human consciousness is altered from being in a state of mental orbit around God to an orbit around the human “self” leading to an accelerating state of selfishness and violence (Gen. 4–11). Human evil will thus appear as the functional result of a disrupted interactive relationship with God.

Thus, the social and physical suffering, cruelty, violence, decay and death are seen as originating in the “fall” event and not in the created order itself. The resultant struggle between the values of good and evil is not seen as the result of an ontological but an ideological dualism in God’s universe. Although physical and social evil now appear natural and normal to any human empirical observer it is not presented in the Genesis account as something inherent to God’s original Paradise order. The natural world in its current state is thus no longer depicted as only life supporting but also as life disruptive and even life destructive. The state of Shalom in Paradise is replaced by deception, war, struggle, violence, suffering and death. The Genesis crisis-principle thus
signals that things are no longer as God intended them to be from the beginning.

Furthermore, while the Genesis account does not explicitly explain why the deceptive event, leading to an act of defiance against God, causes physical death, later biblical authors will apparently ground this fatal effect in the human separation and exclusion from God’s life supportive presence. The Genesis account itself only depicts the radical development of human depravity through the seed-line of Cain, a story that accelerates to the point where God is seen as taking further action in terms of the challenge of evil (Gen. 6–9). So while the theistic creator/creation formula constitutes the first principle of a foundational epistemic worldview horizon, the crisis formula constitutes the central theme around which the continuing story revolves, traceable through the accelerating violence of Cain’s descendants corrupting the Genesis antediluvian world. The crisis theme thus sets the stage for the third Genesis principle, namely God’s dual remedial response to the crisis of evil and death.

1.3 Remedial Perspective

The third general thematic principle embedded in the Genesis worldview horizon concerns the dual Remedial Perspective embodied in the divine promise that God will exercise damage control by taking actions to restrain, contain and undo the evil force that now disrupts the Paradise order and thus take redemptive actions to restore humans to the Paradise life now seen as lost. The key word is “curses” in contrast to the preceding Paradise Blessings (Gen. 3:14–19).

1.3.1 Curses

Thus the Genesis account indicates that God immediately takes actions in response to human defection by subjecting the world to a string of natural, social, spiritual and cosmic “curses.” Firstly, the Serpent power as the agent of human evil is unconditionally condemned to eternal destruction (Gen: 3:14); secondly as a result of the evil disruption, the male-female social relationship is radically altered (Gen. 3:16); thirdly, the “curse” is seen as resulting in radically changed environmental conditions, as humans are seen as losing their divinely given supremacy over the natural order which now turns hostile (Gen. 3:17–19), leaving the created order in a state of self-regulating struggle,
decay, suffering, distress and death, and finally the human interactive relationship with God is disrupted resulting in exclusion and death (Gen. 3:22–24). The Genesis story depicts God as twice taking further actions extending the physical and social curses in response to a continued growth in human violence (Gen. 3:5–21; 11:1–9) and the rise of systemic organized evil. Thus, the curses appear as God’s temporary damage control actions by which He seeks to restrain the human empire of evil.

1.3.2 Blessings
However, this is not God’s only response to the rise of evil. Actually, He is seen as taking positive actions aiming at restoring the lost blessings. Thus, God is seen as simultaneously issuing a string of redemptive promises in response to the human predicament, promised divine actions that would ultimately undo the effects of evil and terminate its instigator and that this will happen through a human agency, that is, the “seed of the woman” (Gen. 3:15). God is thus seen as issuing a double promise to humanity to undo the serpent and all he brought to the human experience – his lies and death; a promise to empower humanity to resist the serpent power and ensure that through the “seed” or descendants the serpent power would be destroyed. The genealogies in Genesis chapters 5, 10 and 11 are thus parading descendants who are all seen as being part of the same family line, a family story that will eventually narrow down into further subsections with Noah and Abraham. The first 12 chapters of Genesis thus logically set the stage for the Israel-centred story that follows, which in turn sets the stage for the Christ story, which in turn sets the stage for the apostolic story, which in turn sets the stage for the future restoration of all things.

Now while the overarching promise theme in the Genesis account is a victory motif, this cryptic promise does not specify how, when and by whom this will happen; it only provides a general promise that it will happen. Thus is introduced a general direction and goal towards which God will lead the human story. However, the logic of this promise is that all the evil that has been caused by the serpent-power will eventually be undone and the curses removed and the Paradise life form restored. While the latter implications are not stated directly, the victory motif makes no logical sense if this is not the anticipated outcome.
Thus, the Genesis promise regarding God’s double response logically implies that one could anticipate a God-directed story; a plot-line advancing to a divinely set goal of termination and restoration. The narrative nature of the emerging covenant story thus appears to be anticipated in the Genesis epistemic horizon itself. The subsequent plotline of the entire book of Genesis clearly follows this kind of rationale, advancing the story in stages through divine actions. The first 12 chapters of Genesis thus logically set the epistemic horizon for an Israel-centred story that will follow the Abraham covenant, which in turn will set the stage for the Christ story, which in turn will set the stage for the apostolic story, which in turn will set the stage for the future restoration of all things.

So while the theistic creator/creation formula provides the first principle or foundational epistemic worldview horizon, the crisis formula immediately modifies this horizon by adding a second principle of human evil as a disrupting and distorting force in the world, while the remedial formula provides the third principle promising the subsequent divine resolution to the problem of evil. Accordingly, the interaction between the central crisis theme and the divine redemption theme forms the grand narrative plot-line around which the subsequent story could be expected to revolve, a plot-line advancing the drama to a divinely promised goal of the termination of evil and thus the restoration of God’s intended goodness for creation embodied in the Paradise order. The Genesis triple thematic perspective has all the hallmarks of a unique theistic world-view paradigm, or epistemic horizon, and as such it appear to provide the controlling worldview boundary within which the subsequent narratives are logically to be understood.

1.4 Tentative Methodological Considerations
The critical question concerns whether this triple Genesis perspective constitutes the worldview horizon inhabited by the subsequent Canonical authors. If this worldview perspective can be traced in the plotline from the Genesis account to the Apocalypse then it would mean that not only do the Canonical authors inhabit a common unifying worldview paradigm despite any diversity, they also inhabit the particular worldview of the Genesis account. In particular the dual theme of human evil and God’s remedial response would serve as the centre around which the subsequent divine-human drama might be understood. Actually, the Genesis account itself introduces the reader to
the first three successive historical stages in the human drama: the creation-stage, the crisis-stage, the promise-stage, a promise stage that logically anticipates an ultimate fulfilment-stage. So the story would include at least four major stages, stages that would be crucial for meta-hermeneutics.

As the first methodological step we propose the following questions as helpful in searching for the epistemic horizon within which the various Canonical authors are thinking. Firstly, (a) there is the need to trace to what degree and in what manner the triple thematic principle is assumed, maintained, deepened, applied and expanded by the various authors of the Bible. If we find that the biblical authors think in terms of the triple Genesis first principles then we have discovered what N.T. Wright, Craig Bartholomew, Norman Gully and others call the biblical “meta-narrative” or “worldview” and thus their epistemic horizon. Secondly, (b) there is a need to explore and identify the redemptive covenant promise introduced in the Genesis account, and to trace to what degree and in what manner this redemptive covenant promise is assumed, maintained, deepened, applied and expanded by the various authors of the Bible, and thirdly (c) there is a need to evaluate the manner in which this redemptive covenant promise directs the advancing redemptive plotline through the various stages in the projected Israelite covenant history. Those critical analytical questions might help to establish not only the stages and sub-stages in the advancing story but also its worldview horizon and thus guard against imposing alien dogmatic or naturalistic assumptions on the Canonical literature. Thus the narrative Genesis logic will progressively be revealed in the advancing stages in the emerging story. Given that the Genesis account itself provides the first three successive historical stages in the divine/human drama in anticipation of an ultimate fulfilment stage, we may have a major hermeneutical key to the meaning and theology of the various authors of Scriptures.

2. An Emerging Staged Story
The critical issue concerns the method by which this story is detected in the subsequent Canonical literature. The texts of the Pentateuch, Joshua, Judges, Psalms, Prophets, Ezra Nehemiah, Matthew, Luke, Acts and Romans all seem to reflect a Genesis covenant interpretation of the Israelite story and even the usage of genealogies is an ingenious shorthand for linking the past and present into a coherent covenant history. Comparing the covenant interpretations
of the Israelite history by the various biblical authors appears to yield a rather consistent picture. N.T. Wright expressed the Israelite consciousness as it matured in the hopes and expectations of Second Temple Judaism by saying, “many first-century Jews thought of the period they were living in as the continuation of a great scriptural narrative, and of the moment they themselves were in as late on within the ‘continuing exile’ of Daniel 9” (Tom Wright 2009, 42). In other words they saw their covenant history as a God-directed journey extending from its perceived biblical past to its future consummation according to the biblical promise. The issue in biblical theology is not to prove that the recorded biblical history is true, but that there is a detectable unanimity in its perception and interpretation of that history and thus a common theological horizon.

2.1 Era of Promise

The genealogies in Genesis chapters 5, 10 and 11 parades a whole line of recipients of the initial redemptive promise, a promise that is seen as passing on through the descendants of Noah and which finds its constituent form in a covenant with Abraham (Gen. 12; 15 and 17). The first 12 chapters of the Genesis story thus logically set the stage for the specific promise era expected to follow, which sets the stage for the anticipated fulfilment era.

With the covenant charter with Abraham God is seen as advancing the redemptive promise story through the family of Abraham as the historical human agent of bringing the promised divine blessings to the world. The covenant blessing pronounced to Abraham appears to be an echo of the primordial blessing from Paradise where it embodied the essence of God’s abundant purpose for the world (Gen. 12:2–3). Thus, the story of Abraham’s family is the story of God’s redemptive agent of blessing in the world. The covenant charter is thus foundational for the subsequent history as God here is seen as

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6 The chronological covenant structure does not follow the order in which the various texts are located in the Canon. However, these texts implicitly and explicitly contain a historical chronology expressed by the thematic and historical markers in the text itself along with their covenant interpretation. For examples of how biblical authors thinks in terms of covenant story see: 1 Samuel 12:6–12; Psalms 78; 80; 83; 105; 106; Nehemiah 9:6–37; Daniel 9; Matthew 7:1–17; Luke 3:23–33; 24:1–50; Acts 7:1–60; Romans 11; 12; 13.
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taking action to advance his specific plan to the restore the lost Paradise blessing for the world through the family of Abraham.

Thus, the Abraham story initiates a divine covenant commitment that guides the subsequent patriarchal history and moves it towards the promised Exodus and beyond. The descendants of Abraham are seen as the collective seed of Abraham (Ex. 1 and 19) delivered according to the covenant promise recorded in Genesis by the specific actions of God. The exodus event thus marks the historic action of God in directing the redemptive plotline and understood as such by the narrators of the alleged event. Faithful to the covenant, God is seen as hearing their cry and brings rescue and redemption from slavery and oppression (Ex. 3; 20). The covenant consciousness about Israel’s role and mission appear to be foundational for the Pentateuch projection of the future story of Israel. Accordingly, the Israelite covenant story is seen a progressing within the boundaries of God’s dual remedial response to evil in terms of blessing and curses (Deut. 27–30).

The exodus event is thus seen as God taking specific actions to further advance his plan for the world by constituting the nation of Israel. Even the amendment to the Abraham covenant (Ex. 19–25) with its institutions, places, objects and offices within the community of Israel is seen as additional divinely instituted means to ensure the mission of Israel as projected in the Covenant with Abraham (Ex. 25:8). From this juncture the divine plan for the world is seen as advancing through the turbulent history of Israel, from the time of Moses through the Judges to the rise of the monarchy, guided by the provisions of the covenant.

The appointment of David and the constitution of his dynasty as a permanent institution in Israel through a divine oath of covenant, represent a further sub-stage in the promise story. This appears as a further amendment to the constitution of Israel which fits thematically into all the previous promises as it provides a more explicit agenda God’s plans for the world (2 Sam. 7; Gen. 17:6, 16) than those given to Abraham and Moses. This amendment to the covenant promise will definitively shape and determine the Israeli anticipations concerning God’s plan for the world. From now on the idea of the kingdom,

7 In the comment of the Apostle Paul the Sinai event is best understood as an amendment as he insists that whatever the Sinai covenant adds it must be understood within the premises of the Abraham agreement. See Galatians 3:15–29.
and the king as God’s servant within the servant Israel, will take centre-stage in the Israelite theological consciousness. (Psalms 2; 22; 72; 89; 110; 132).

However, the story of the kingdom after David will reveal that the kingship institution is not a cure for the problem of evil and that Israel despite the dynasty will continue to gravitate towards apostasy and disaster. Their history reveals that the remedial actions taken by God are apparently only provisional in nature as they are followed by a deepening crisis followed by further remedial actions. A repetitive negative drama thus unfolds through the biblical stories, reaching a catastrophic low point during the demise of the Israelite kingdom ending in destruction and exile (2 Chron. 36:11–21).

This is precisely the context in which prophets will begin to introduce a string of significant messianic-kingdom promises pointing to a “day” when God will take decisive remedial actions and thus liberate the world from the disruptive force of evil destroying Israel and the world. The prophet Isaiah in particular provides a grand vision of the future beyond the exile, a vision that will be echoed in other exilic and post-exilic prophetic writings. They will cast a grand vision of a glorious blessed future day when God will enter upon his world-wide rule through the anticipated kingship of a future son of David, who will terminate the reign of evil, restore the divine/human communion with God, spiritually renew the human hearts as the precondition for a renewed creation (Is. 9; 11; 35; 42; 49; 53; 59; 65). The prophetic vision leaves the inheritors of the covenant with a massive expectation regarding a future transitional intervention in which God will eventually deliver on the promises.

God’s remedial actions and prophetic promises, in response to the deepening crisis of evil in the late Israelite kingdom era, will thus generate a growing anticipation of a coming major transitional event where everything will be transformed and renewed. Thus the whole Israelite journey reveals that the Israel provisions were only temporary provisions and not the real solutions to the problem of evil. The prophetic vision of the future messianic final solution to the human predicament thus points to a coming transition point in the Israelite narrative conceptually dividing the covenant story into two major parts, broadly defined as eras of promise and fulfilment. This, however, does not indicate that no covenant promises have been fulfilled in the past, but only that there is a significant build up to an anticipated future transitional grand messianic event, when the problem of evil causing continued disaster will eventually be resolved, and the eternal rule of the lost Paradise blessing will finally
be restored. Thus it is the Hebrew Scriptures themselves that anticipate the coming of a future decisive transitional stage in the human story, an anticipation that was already inherent to the logic of the Genesis worldview paradigm.

2.2 Era of Fulfilment
Given that it is the Hebrew Scriptures themselves that anticipate the coming of a future decisive transitional stage in the advancing Israelite drama, the real force of the apostolic proclamation is that with Jesus the decisive transition in God’s mission to the world through Israel has arrived. The Apostles thus introduced Jesus as the fullfiller of all that was promised, predicted and intended in the antecedent covenant charter and accordingly they proclaim him to be the provider of the ultimate remedy to the problem of demonic/human evil.

Jesus is presented as the promised descendant of Abraham and David (Matt. 1:1) in line with the prophetic promises. His life, ministry, death, resurrection and ascension are part of the final exodus from the continuing exile from Paradise into which humanity was plunged in the fall (Luke 9:31; John 8:33‒36). Thus, Jesus is depicted as dealing with more than the temporal predicament of the Israelite nation but with the primordial human problem of exclusion from God through the evil arising according to the Genesis event (Luke 24:47; John 8:34‒36). The Apostles will argue that with Jesus the great reversal in the cosmic drama of good and evil has occurred, thus initiating the anticipated grand era of fulfilment of God’s plan for the world through the house of David. Jesus is thus being proclaimed from day one on the Day of Pentecost to be seated at the right hand of God as the rightful Lord and saviour, advancing the story to its ultimate goal (Acts 1‒5).

However, the Apostles not only connect Jesus with the past kingship promise package but also present him as the one who deals with the central theme of evil as he is the one who crushes the head of the serpent (Heb. 2:14‒15; John 12:31). Furthermore, they explicitly claim that through his death he has resolved the exclusion problem from God, opening the way for humans to return to God (John 14:6; Acts 4:12). Christ is thus seen as the one who graciously reconnects humans to God and renews their spiritual life before restoring all things (Acts 3:21) as promised by the prophets. Given that it is the Hebrew Scriptures themselves that anticipate the coming of a future decisive transitional stage in the advancing Israelite drama, the real force of the apostolic proclamation is that with Jesus the decisive transition in God’s mission to the
world through Israel has arrived; the Apostles thus proclaim Jesus as the ful-
filler of all that was promised, predicted and intended in the antecedent cov-
enant history.

However, the apostolic understanding is that this fulfilment will not be re-
alized as a single event (Luke 19:11) but rather in major successive stages
broadly seen as an apostolic already and not yet. Thus, in the apostolic procla-
mation, the past and present work of the Messiah is embodied in the “al-
ready” in anticipation of the “not yet”. Actually, it is Jesus himself who draws
this line highlighting that the fulfilment will come in stages. More specifically,
the fulfilment scheme divides the redemptive work of Christ into past, present
and future stages. So while the Hebrew prophetic promise story leaves the
impression that when the Messiah comes everything will be restored as a sin-
gle cluster of events, it is Jesus himself who claims that he as the Messiah will
orchestrate this fulfilment in a series of temporal stages. In other words, the
fulfilment era will also be subdivided into further stages that will be crucial
for the meta-hermeneutical reading of the biblical narrative.

Thus, the drama of Jesus does not end with his death, resurrection or even
his ascension. Thus synchronized with his ascension, a new stage in the fulfil-
ment story opens. In this new apostolic “already” phase of fulfilment Israel is
seen as the restored as a community of faith centred in Jesus Christ without
the support of an earthly temple and civil state (Acts 2–4; 10; Rom. 3:28–29; 9–
11). The mission story now widens to include all the nations promised to par-
ticipate in the blessing given to Abraham. Christ and his heavenly priestly-
kingly work is thus depicted as constituting the ultimate divine antidote to
the problem of human depravity as introduced in Genesis and portrayed in
the biblical storyline (Gal. 3:13–14; Rom. 3:24). In this stage of the fulfilment
the newly constituted community of believers now tells the story of God’s
redemptive provisions for a fallen world and presents Jesus as the one who
will be the ultimate fulfiller of God’s plan (John 15:26; Acts 1:8; Rom. 1:1–6).

So, while Jesus is seen leading humans into a permanent relation with God
through his priestly ministry in the apostolic “already” of fulfilment, he is also

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8 The Apostles from the Day of Pentecost clearly distinguish between the past, present and future
restorative work of Christ, thus further clarifying that the kingdom will not be restored as a single
2 Timothy 4:1.
presented as the one who in the “not yet” of the fulfilment will lead humans into a restored new creation through his kingly ministry, that is, the shalom of Paradise (Matt. 25:31–34). The Day of the Lord stage is in the apostolic thinking a future “not yet” activity of Christ in which he will fully execute his kingship as the judge of all the earth (Acts 10:42; 17:30–31; Rom. 2:16). Only after the termination of evil and death does the narrative finally arrive at the stage of God “being all” in all and thus a renewed Creation (1 Cor. 15; Rev. 21–22). This is where the curses will end and sin, death and all evil will be no more as all will be restored to the shalom of Paradise. Heaven itself is depicted as coming down on earth as God will dwell with humanity in a built-up Paradise named the Holy City (Rev. 21:1–10). The exclusion from God’s Paradise presence is now past and humanity will embark on its eternal journey with God, participating in His immortality (Rev. 21:4; 22:1–5).

Thus, this climactic activity of Christ is depicted as the final great transitional event in the human drama, effecting the final great exodus of all humanity from the present post-Paradise state of existence. This is depicted by the Apostles, especially Paul, as the great transitional event and includes a whole cluster of divine actions such as the judgment, Christ’s advent, the resurrection, the termination of the rule of evil and thus the final destruction of death, preparatory to the restoration of God’s rule in all creation (1 Cor. 15). While the Day of the Lord is seen as having the Parousia as its great central transitional divine act, it appears to embrace a series of pre-advent, advent and post-advent judicial activities of Christ (Dan. 7–9; Rev. 16–20).

Several scholars argue that the biblical covenant narrative divides into five or six major stages.9 On the basis of the apostolic evidence we suggest that the covenant story may best be divided into seven major stages and that such a division will be more in line with the inner meta-narrative logic of the biblical Canon seen as a whole, especially in the light of the apostolic “already” and “not yet” principle regarding the staged messianic fulfilment of the restorative promise. These seven major stages could be defined as: the creation event, the crisis event, the promise era, Jesus and the fulfilment, the gospel and fulfillment, the judgment and fulfilment and the restoration and fulfilment.

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Fig. 1: A 7-Stage Theistic-narrative Method (Pedersen and Barna 2011: visual illustration on p. 2)

3. Concluding Hermeneutical Reflections

The general pattern of promise and fulfilment and the specific subdivisions of the fulfilment principle into the “already” and “not yet” thus provide the reader with a major key to understanding the staged structure of the biblical covenant story, a structure that has formative implications for the exegetical reading and doctrinal application of the Hebrew and Apostolic Scriptures. So when the apostolic fulfilment story is seen as proceeding through a temporal “already” and “not yet” sequence, the critical hermeneutical reading issue then relates to which aspects of the promise, purpose and predictions have already been fulfilled, which aspects are in the process of being fulfilled and which aspects are still to be fulfilled as seen from an apostolic perspective.
We propose that the biblical epistemic worldview horizon with its seven-staged covenant-history thus provides the necessary meta-hermeneutical controlling framework by which the Scriptures are allowed to tell their own story on their own premises. Actually, the biblical epistemic worldview horizon with its seven-staged covenant-history could be compared to a giant telescope with three sets of lenses, that is, the lenses of beginnings, the lenses of promises and the lenses of fulfilment. Thus this worldview perspective provides the mental lenses by which to interpret experienced and observed reality as it brings to view the promised divine hope for the future, a view that hermeneutically depends on the right setting of the lenses.

Accordingly, when it is textually and thematically established that a given Canonical author/text thinks in terms of the Genesis worldview horizon with its emerging stage covenant-history, then the immediate meta-hermeneutical implications are, that an antecedent context principle must apply in the reading of that Scriptural author/text. Irrespective of where that author/text sits in the Canonical literature one would then need thematically to trace backward in order to read the theological themes of that author/text in the light of the preceding Genesis epistemic horizon and its covenant-history and thus assess how the author/text is contributing to its vision and advance of the that covenant-history.

Furthermore, the apostolic principle of the “already” and “not yet” of messianic fulfilment when applied respectively to the goal of restoration and the means of restoration, will determine which elements in the Hebrew remedial institutions, practices and values have continuous validity despite temporary accommodations, and which elements will progressively discontinue and be redundant in the apostolic era of fulfilment. Accordingly then, this meta-hermeneutical principle has crucial implications not only for comprehending the continuities and discontinuities in the advancing covenant history but also for its doctrinal implications in the advancing stages of the covenant history.

Finally, the proposed biblical epistemic worldview horizon with its seven-staged covenant-history seems to provide the opportunity for a re-mapping of the methodological process by which the reader mentally moves from text

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10 For a more comprehensive discussion of the interpretative implication of the apostolic “already” and “not yet” principle of fulfilment see: Pedersen 2016, 166–174.
to system. Methodologically we will suggest a triple methodical process beginning with textual exegesis, proceeding through a thematic analysis and ending in systematic application. Unfortunately the activity of thematic analysis both in part and as a whole is frequently sidelined, or neglected and thus appears as a missing link in the mental process of proceeding from text to system. Even when thematic analysis is recognized as a necessary methodical link in the theological process of moving from text to system, it is not always granted a critical bridging hermeneutical role as a discipline in its own right. Accordingly, we propose that it is the process of thematic analysis that is the hermeneutical hall-mark of the discipline of biblical theology.
Reference List


Zusammenfassung


Résumé

Cet article proposera une approche métaherméneutique qui pourrait aider à découvrir les hypothèses plus profondes et l’horizon épistémique d’un auteur biblique donné. Premièrement, la logique de l’histoire biblique du début sera examinée et évaluée en fonction de son horizon de vision du monde; un horizon qui pourrait constituer la perspective plus large dans laquelle les auteurs suivants pourraient penser. Deuxièmement, l’article s’engagera dans une large analyse des récits d’alliance ultérieurs retraçant leurs intrigues en termes d’anticipation de l’avenir; un avenir que les récits apostoliques perçoivent comme des accomplissements. Enfin, il y aura une brève esquisse de quelques principes herméneutiques qui peuvent servir de lignes directrices pour la lecture et les applications des matériaux bibliques en termes de doctrine et de pratique religieuse.

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