

Prolepsis

Almost everything in the Old Testament in some way anticipates or prefigures something greater that will come in the future. In the field of exposition, such narratives are called “proleptic.” They “speak” in advance. In previous lessons, we’ve looked at or mentioned many narratives that are proleptic. Let’s continue doing that in this lesson. Here are a few more.

I. In 1 Kings 10, we read that the Queen of Sheba traveled to Judea to visit King Solomon. Now, this wealthy queen must have enjoyed a life filled with luxuries and thrills, knowledge and wonders, greatness like no one could even imagine. Yet when she saw Solomon she was in awe. Solomon in his glory was far greater than anything she might have anticipated. He left her breathless and speechless at his wisdom, his giftedness, his splendor, at everything in his kingdom. She probably went there to show off her greatness, but what she experienced at Jerusalem humbled her, so much so that her testimony in vv.6-9 is thrilling for us to read today. I submit that this episode is proleptic of our encounter with the Lord Jesus. Jesus is a greater than Solomon. The more we get to know Jesus, the greater is our awe and delight. And when the day comes that we will stand before Him, and see Him in His exalted glory, we’ll also be breathless and speechless at His splendor, at His supreme greatness. May that day hasten.

II. In 1 Samuel 17, David slays Goliath. Probably all my readers are familiar with the account. I don’t need to review it here. Let’s just focus on a few details: Goliath was a super-powerful enemy of Israel, seeking to annihilate that nation. In consummate arrogance, he defied God, and he instilled terror in the hearts of the Judeans. Notice in v. 9, he sought to make the Israelites his servants. In contrast, David was humble before God, and, representing all Israel and in the power of the Lord he defeated that fierce enemy of God’s people. David risked his life and the fate of all Judea in that confrontation; David really should have been killed. But God gave His people the victory. I submit that this episode is proleptic of what Jesus accomplished for us on the cross. Jesus is the greater David. In total dependence on God he obediently and in unique, supernal love went to an agonizing death purposely to defeat Satan. Just as David didn’t actually kill Goliath, God did on the basis of David’s faithfulness, it was the Father who brought Satan’s reign of terror to an end on the basis of the Son’s faithfulness.

III. Achan’s sin in Joshua 7 is a wonderfully proleptic episode. To review the story, during the conquest of Jericho, Achan disobeyed God by taking for himself some loot. Doing that placed the entire body of Israel at risk, for they were a corporate unity in God’s eyes. The Conquest of the Land would fail if this sin of taking what was devoted to God weren’t dealt with. God led Joshua in discovering that it was Achan who had taken what wasn’t his to have. Achan was punished with death, and the Conquest proceeded as intended. The text significantly states several things: (1) Israel violated God’s covenant (v.11); (2) Achan would glorify God by suffering death, thereby saving the Nation (v.19); and (3) God and the Nation were reconciled, the alienation ended (v.26b). Achan anticipated, or was proleptic of, or personally embodied the grievous sins of Israel in the Book of Judges and early Samuel (e.g., asking for a king like all the surrounding pagan nations had) as well as the Exile. More ultimately, though, this episode points to Jesus, whose death glorifies God, saves Israel (and Gentiles too) and results in reconciliation for all humanity. This adumbration of the cross however does even more. It also serves as a warning to us in the church: Specifically, the “warning” in Joshua 7 has to do with (i) obedience to God’s commands; (ii) with divisions within the body caused by selfishness; and (iii) with a necessary fear of God. Achan didn’t obey, and his selfish acquisitiveness disrupted the unity of the entire body nearly resulting in the annihilation of them all, and he had to learn the hard way, by his death, that God is to be greatly feared. All these warnings are for the Church.

IV. Adam and his wife are proleptic of Jesus’ atoning sacrifice for His Bride. Exactly what Adam was thinking when he took the fruit from his wife isn’t stated in the text, so we have to use our imagination. Forgive me for doing this bit of conjecture, but I may not be far off. Let’s first understand that Adam, having just been made by God, was the most intelligent human ever. In an instant he must have fully understood everything about what was happening there in the garden. And that the woman was given to him as his bride. God married them. And when he took and ate that fruit, he did it intentionally. Why? Because he loved his bride and was committed to her. The two were united as one (Genesis 2:24). So he joined her in the disobedience, taking her sin upon himself, for her sake. He was willingly and knowingly

sacrificing himself for her sin. That's a perfect foreshadowing of what the Son did, taking upon Himself the sins of His beloved Bride and suffering God's deserved punishment. The Son and His Bride are united, the meaning of marriage.

V. Speaking of marriage, let's observe that the whole Book of Genesis is really all about marriage. It deals with husbands and brides, and threats to marriage, from beginning to near the end. We start with 2:24 and Adam and his bride, Eve. Then there's Lamech and his wives. Then the marriages in 6:2, and Abram and Sarai in 11:29. In 12, Abram's marriage is severely threatened. The incident with Hagar violated their marriage. The incident with Lot and his daughters made a perversion of marriage. The incident with Abimelech again threatened marriage. Isaac took Rebecca as his bride, and later Jacob took Leah and Rachel as brides under constrained circumstances. Isaac's marriage also was threatened with an Abimelech. Marriage was flaunted in the incident with Dinah in Chapter 34, with Tamar in Chapter 38, and with Potiphar's wife in Chapter 39. What all this means is, as Genesis is the book of beginnings, marriage is a key to understanding the message of the Bible. Marriage is proleptic of the covenants God will make with Israel.

To illustrate marriage as proleptic further, let's think about Genesis 24: Abraham sends his servant back to his own country to fetch a bride for his son, Isaac. Under God's silent but obviously sovereign supervision, the servant finds and returns with Rebecca. That's the story of Scripture!! God sends His servants to find those who will be a Bride for His Son. And the Bible closes (Revelation 19,21) with the marriage supper of the Lamb and the description of the Bride. Mission accomplished! The entire Book of Genesis is proleptic of the great, cosmic message of all Scripture. Thus, by the way, the quest for a Bride for the Son is also proleptic of the Great Commission; it's the role of the Church, it's why the Church exists.

VI. Many, many other episodes in the Old Testament are proleptic of greater things that unfold later in time; and sometimes there's even a chain of fulfillments. The banishment of Adam and his wife from the Garden, for example, anticipates David's expulsion from Jerusalem because of his sins with Bathsheba and Uriah. And it anticipates the Exile of Israel from the Land because of inveterate idolatry and unrighteousness. And it anticipates the death of Israel's King on a cross. And finally it anticipates the expulsion of unbelievers from God's presence into hell at the end of time. The Great Flood of Genesis 6-8, for another example, anticipates the Great Tribulation of Revelation, and even more ultimately the Great White Throne judgment at the very end of the Bible. The Tower of Babel episode anticipates the rise of Babylon and the Times of the Gentiles, as prefigured by the great statue of Daniel Chapter 2, and as it is brought to judgment in Revelation Chapters 17-18. The Exodus event anticipates the greater exodus that followers of Jesus make from their old manner of life in the world under the control of Satan into the Kingdom, as well as the future exodus of Israel from Exile. The entrance of the people of Israel into the Land in the Book of Joshua anticipates John the Baptist in the wilderness baptizing people preparing them to enter the Kingdom that Jesus was placing on offer, and the future entry into the millennial Kingdom. The Conquest of the Canaanites under Joshua anticipates the greater conquest that Jesus effected at the cross, which will be fulfilled and realized at His Return. And there's more, lots more.

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What does all this mean? In God's sovereign control of history, and in loving anticipation of the wonderful things He plans, He causes events earlier in time to foreshadow His great works. It is thrilling to read the O.T. to see how God has ordained events in human history to anticipate the more climactic things He does later on. As the prophet Amos says, "Surely the Sovereign Lord does nothing without revealing his plan to his servants the prophets" (3:7). He reveals what He is doing in real events and real lives lived in space and time.

We also should understand that even our own lives are proleptic. We glorify God by our obedience to His will, by our sanctification, anticipating a future existence in which we'll wondrously glorify God by being holy, by being just like the Son. Our love of the brethren and the unity of church life anticipates the one body we'll all constitute in God's presence.

Something else: The Bible is a coherent whole. It's not really a "library of books" as some allege. It's a miraculous Book, a unified whole, chronicling God's great works, promises, and truths, as well as the revelation of Himself. These proleptic events, as well as all the types and prophecies, prove that the Bible is supernatural. A wise person would avail himself of its truths. A wise person also would obey its instructions and commands. And a wise person would seek to encounter the living Creator God in its pages. The Bible is a love-letter from God.