

12: Kaiser #1

The Christian and Old Testament Theology

Ralph D. Winter

Introduction

We will now be studying the Kaiser material. His input is a very significant element in Module One, and is what we call the kernel course. It is actually three-eighths of the entire module—three semester units out of eight—so it is almost half of the work. Everything else is related to it.

It seems fitting to me that before we launch into Kaiser's input we should consider its significance. It is a very unusual course. It is not just another course on the Old Testament, nor even a survey of the Old Testament. Rather, it presents the Old Testament in a very unusual light. I almost said "new." But it is not a new light; it is an old light. Yet, for many people today, this course will no doubt bring a new perspective—in fact, a phenomenally new and significant perspective!

The readings include two or three testimonies from different people. You have one from Kaiser himself, which is very subdued, very academic and very scholarly. You also will read Dr. Hesselgrave's testimony, *A Missionary Hermeneutic*. This is a breathless and astounding reflection of a man already retired who has been teaching the Bible, amongst other things, for many years. Yet, even for Dr. Hesselgrave, Kaiser's perspective has been really revolutionary! Then, you have my own perspective, which I was asked to write as a chapter in a book entitled *The Greatest Lesson I've Ever Learned*. I have no difficulty at all saying that this same new perspective is the greatest lesson I have ever learned!

I am not trying to downgrade my conversion to Christ or anything like that, but from my point of view, seeing the Bible from this new perspective was, indeed, the greatest intellectual revolution of my life! It did not take place in one day. Like Paul, I had to "go into Arabia" to figure it out. It took him three years to gain this same revolutionary understanding of the "Old Testament." It took me six or seven years, and I'm still re-studying the Bible from this point of view! I know that in the last six or seven years I have spent more time, energy and interest studying the Bible than I had in my entire previous life, and I have been close to the Bible all my life.

So, the introduction on this particular day should be very, very special for you! Earlier we commented that "this is the first day of the rest of your life." Well, maybe this will be the first day of your second rebirth. If afterward it does not seem special to you, maybe you haven't understood what we are talking about! If it does not shake you up, then what we are saying is not clear. We are convinced that once what is being said is clear, it will shake you to your foundations! But, so far as I know, nobody in our generation grew up in Sunday school or came out of seminary with this particular perspective of the Bible or of the Old Testament.

Let me just give you an anecdote about Kaiser and my own reflections along this line. For fifteen or eighteen years I had been teaching the story of the Gospel beyond the Bible, that is, the story of the impact of the Bible down through history. There really are only two subjects in the last four thousand years: the biblical revelation, and then the impact of that revelation. All of human history in the last four thousand years relates directly or indirectly to that simple, single picture.

During the years in which I was teaching about this four thousand year period, I was trying, naturally, to track the continuity throughout. That is, my professional assignment while teaching for ten years at the School of World Mission at Fuller Seminary was to teach what happened after the Bible. Of course, I was focusing on the Great Commission. But, as a former missionary now taking up this kind of a scholarly activity I soon made a dismaying discovery. The Great Commission, which was so important to me and which had changed my life, was a subject virtually absent from all Christian literature following the Bible itself!

You see it in the Bible (although some do not even see it there). But following the Bible, the great Christian Fathers of the ancient church—like Tertullian, Ambrose and Augustine, etc.—never talked about the Great Commission. The Nicene Creed does not make any reference to our obligation to the nations. Neither does the Chalcedonian Creed nor the Second Helvetic Confession, nor the Augsburg Confession. None of

the theological traditions (which, of course, are securely established in the various seminary traditions) are aware of the Great Commission.

My problem as a professor was to figure out how to explain that oversight. As I was teaching over the years about the third, fourth, fifth, sixth, seventh and eighth centuries, etc., I noted to myself that these people had surely received the Great Commission. It was not as if it was not in force. Jesus did not say, “Now, here is a Great Commission, which is not to be taken seriously until William Carey comes along, and then I want you to take it seriously.” Yet it was hundreds of years before the Protestants began to engage the Great Commission, even though during the same period of time the Catholics took it seriously. But in the early centuries and in most of the Christian tradition, the Great Commission is absent in the theological literature. And I had to figure out how that could be.

How could the Great Commission have been given formally and officially by Jesus Christ Himself—and how could it be found in all four Gospels—and yet be so completely absent in Christian history? You can buy books which present at a sweeping succession the great sermons preached throughout Christian history. But you will not find the Great Commission there. I don’t care what set of sermons you look at, the editor seems to be as unaware of the Great Commission as are the preachers from whom he quotes!

Now here is the key point. And if you can get it, you can save yourself years of rethinking because it took me a long time to think this out. I thought, “Now, if a whole massive global Christian tradition can get along for century after century with virtually no reference whatsoever to the Great Commission, why couldn’t it also have been true that the Jewish people received the Great Commission at the time of Abraham but also did very little about it?”

Now, I knew about the Abrahamic Covenant. I knew that it talked about all the peoples of the world. But for many, many years I did not think, “Well, the Jewish people did not take it seriously. Or they did not know it was in force even if it was.” It never even occurred to me that it was in force, and that God actually expected His chosen people to be missionaries—and that they did not do any worse than we have with the Great Commission.

Sometimes I think that people talk as though the Jewish people did understand God’s concern for all people as expressed in the Abrahamic Covenant! And I playfully say that Joseph’s brothers took up an offering and sent him off as a

missionary to Egypt. Right? Wrong! They didn’t think they were doing that. But God did have that in mind! Years later Joseph’s brothers were completely under his power and could easily have supposed that he was going to harm them in retribution. Joseph looked at them and said, “You sold me...”

You can imagine that like a bad dream what they had done to him years before swished through their minds. They know that the man they are looking at has complete power of life and death over them. Then he goes on with his sentence, “You sold me, but God sent me!” He saw clearly that it was God who had sent him.

But his brothers did not understand that point. They did not have the Great Commission clearly in mind. They were not rehearsing those key verses in Genesis 12:1-3. Obviously not. But does that mean those verses were not intended to be taken seriously? This is a key point. There is, for example, what I call a “Mickey Mouse” theory that in the Old Testament the mission of the church was in effect only for those who came to Israel but that in the New Testament, Israel was to go to the nations. In other words, the idea of going was a new idea given by Jesus. The fancy words used for this theory are “Old Testament mission is centripetal, New Testament Mission is centrifugal.” It is simplistic.

As I look further on in the Bible, I feel almost sick that most of my life I understood only that God was punishing the Northern tribes when He sent them out in the Diaspora (a seminary term for the dispersion or for being sent away). Well, it was a punishment. But it was more than that. God was in the Mission Business, whether they were or not. Now this is a key point. All through the Old Testament, looking at it once the scales fall off your eyes, you can see that God is in the Mission Business, whether His people recognized their Commission or not.

You can say the same thing about the period following the Bible. Twenty centuries have gone by since the Great Commission was clearly given. During most of that period Christians did not understand about the Commission. But God was in the Mission Business, whether they were or not. This will all become clear in Module Three.

Going back to my personal story—what I am saying is that this new perspective on the Bible was boiling through my mind when I ran into Kaiser’s 1978 book, *Towards an Old Testament Theology*. This was in 1980 or 1981—the year the Billy Graham Center was inaugurated. I was at that meeting and was asked to give a little talk one afternoon. Many important people were there.

But Kaiser was asked to give a talk every morning, and after his first morning's talk, I went up to him and asked, "Why did you put the word *Promise* in the heading of every chapter of this book you have written? Every chapter employs the word *promise*. *Promise* is not the right word. You know that the Abrahamic Covenant was not just a promise." I was troubled with that word due to this new perspective I now had.

He looked at me and smiled, and he said, "Well, I called it the Promise because Paul did."

Oh yes! That is right. Paul did.

"Well, why did Paul call it the Promise?" I answered back. "It is because He was talking to Jews who had misunderstood the Commission as merely a Promise, and so Paul employed the term they knew, saying, 'Now what you call the Promise...' and he went on to refer to it as a mysterious phenomenon."

This is why we call this phenomenon in this course the Fifth Mystery—the Mystery of God's Plan which became clear in Christ, or maybe when William Carey finally dug it up, but which should have been clear from the time Abraham first received it. There is a great mystery here. Well, you know we are trying to put this kind of perspective into a course (what we now call our Perspectives course).

Kaiser said, "As a matter of fact, you can call the Abrahamic Covenant the Great Commission if you want."

At that I was staggered. I had never heard anyone important say that before! I could hardly believe an eminent scholar like Kaiser would say that!

So I said to Kaiser, "I don't have the standing as a Bible scholar to go around saying Genesis 12:1-3 is the Great Commission. People would laugh at me, and tar and feather me and would run me out of town." I simply couldn't get away with it. So I said, "I need to be able to quote someone like you, somebody who is a Hebrew and Old Testament professor and the head of a major seminary. I need to quote you. Do you have that statement in print?"

So now—this is the phrase I will never forget—Kaiser said to me, "You go ahead and quote me, and I will put it in print."

I said, "Quote you saying what?"

He said, "Well, you know, those verses in Genesis 12:1-3, which don't speak simply of a Promise. You can call that the Great Commission if you want."

Well, where is it in print? It is not in these books. It is not even in the book that was written later than that conversation. His 1987 book does

not contain it. The phrase *Great Commission* is not in that book. This is what scholarly handling of subjects will do for you!

But you will find this phrase is in his chapter in the Perspectives reader, chapter 4. That is one of the readings which you need to take a good look at. That brief chapter by Walter Kaiser is more directly on the subject of today's lesson than his books themselves. That is where he kept his promise about putting it into print. He sent us a cassette tape of a chapel talk. We transcribed it and he looked over and now it is Chapter Four of the Perspectives Reader.

Don't miss the forest for the trees. Don't get hung up on a paragraph here or there. Just look for this momentarily different and new perspective. If you find it, if it becomes clear, then this whole course will unfold. Otherwise, it will be just one maze of unrelated facts.

So this is the beginning of an incredible course, Walter Kaiser's course. I hope it will give a great blessing to you.

Review

1. What are the major questions posed by the Old Testament?

This first question of Kaiser's essentially elicits all the different Bible passages that he refers to: Luke 24; Matthew 5; John 5:39, 45-46; Romans 15; Hosea; I Corinthians 10; Hebrews 6:18. All these passages assure us in one way or another that the Old Testament is really an up-to-date book. And—this is something we are going to have to wait to see—he also gives a little hint that the term "Old Testament" is not a Biblical designation. Isn't that interesting? See, he says, "Now that's the ancient church tradition, you know." But we get the impression that there is something defective—I think really defective—about the phrase *Old Testament*. "Old" is a word which gives you a bum steer right there. I refer to the Old Testament as Part I of the Bible. And I don't know what Kaiser is going to come up with, but we'll have to wait and see.

4. What new mission vision would you infer that the disciples gained from the events of Luke 24? In what way did this illumine the disciples' understanding of the OT?

The question is, is Luke 24 merely a clarification as to the reason Jesus had to die, or is it also a clarification as to why the whole world should have been in their perspective?

Now, it's an amazing story, but those two elements, as you get to the end of the chapter, are both very much a part of Luke 24:47. Jesus says very clearly that the whole world is in the picture as it should have been, and essentially asks, "How come you didn't understand this?"

Now I think Kaiser slightly exaggerates when he says you could translate the Luke 24:25 "Oh foolish men" phrase as "You dummies!" I don't think Jesus was trying to belittle these people so much as to point out the incredible foolishness of what they were saying. I would prefer to translate Jesus as saying, "Look, you guys! You are incredibly foolish in this thing!" It isn't that they were dummies; they were perfectly intelligent people. But see, the problem was they were slow of heart to believe, as it goes on to say.

The Luke 24:23-34 passage is fantastic. I know of no more powerful, dramatic event in the New Testament that talks about the nature of faith and belief and obedience and of why our understanding hinges upon our obedience. Kaiser has already told you how he interprets that little episode. Let me just give you my own interpretation.

For years this passage has been one of great excitement to me, too. I agree with Kaiser that these guys were "kicking stones," although I had never thought of that phrase. I have said to myself that these two men were downcast; their vision was shattered. They were in a hopeless mood, just trudging out of the city with all of their hopes dashed. And they were probably a little bitter. Why did things turn out the way they did? Why did everything go wrong?

And then this Man joins them. They don't pay any attention to who He is. And, of course, they do not recognize Him. So when He asks, "Hey, what's the problem?" they just burst out in anger, I really believe. How else can you interpret the phrase, "Are you the only one in Jerusalem who doesn't know what has gone on there the last few days?" I mean, that answer is very much of a put-down, right? They snarled at him. And it would come out of anger.

Well, now, stop and think how far removed these two were from the realities. Jesus was by no means "the only one in Jerusalem who didn't understand," He was in fact the only one in Jerusalem who did understand what was going on.

What a cataclysmic difference between those of us who many times in our lives, may be

stumbling along in despair and dismay and hopelessness simply because we were not aware of what God was doing. And the difference between what God is doing and our understanding of that is sometimes just black and white. In our weak moments we may think He is the one who does not understand. However, He is the only One who does understand!

And so, this is a momentous passage. This has to do with the same burning in the heart that Hesselgrave was talking about, that my little testimony, "The Greatest Lesson I Ever Learned," is talking about. We're talking about something which hopefully will be a burning in your hearts also: this recognition of the genuineness and the usefulness and the up-to-dateness of the Old Testament—both in respect to the Redeemer that was to come, and also with respect to the whole globe that was in the picture from the beginning, from Genesis 12 on.

Note that from the first announcement of the Plan, there was nothing more to be added. The Great Commission was there in all its splendor—right there in Genesis! And when you realize that, then all of a sudden the story of the Jews is a story which could be the story of the United States. Or it could be the story of the Armenians who had the glory, had the Gospel, had the blessing—everything that God wanted them to have—but somehow did not push on in belief to the rest of it: the crucial fact that blessing was to be shared, that that glory was to be shared, that their inheritance from the Father was not just for them, but for all peoples of the earth!

Now, when that understanding suddenly comes upon you, it is like a second conversion. It is an incredible experience. These disciples were staggered when they finally understood. They should have known. They were exposed; there was no reason they did not understand. It was a mystery, as Paul said, that they did not understand.

But some of them did. Some of them did, all the way down through history. The Psalmist speaks of declaring His glory among all nations. Isaiah talks about, "You are to be My salvation to the ends of the earth, a light to the nations" (Isa. 49:6).

Looking back I can't believe that I used to think that the Jewish people were essentially waiting for the commission for 2000 years. I can't believe I was such a dummy (I'm using that word now!). I had the idea that the Jewish people were just supposed to behave in the meantime; just supposed to be good boys and girls, keep their noses clean—as if God merely said, "Just don't get into trouble..." You know what I mean. The point was, I thought that they didn't have any mission,

any message, any mandate, any purpose. They were just supposed to keep out of trouble, and then, one day, 2000 years later, God was going to say, “Now, by the way, I’ve got a job for you to do.”

But no! That commission in Genesis 12:1-3 was no “hibernating mandate.” It was always in force.

So, this first lesson, this whole subject, this whole Kaiser course has got to be revolutionary. I hope it will be for you, as these same truths have been to Kaiser, and to Hesselgrave, and to me, and to Don Richardson, and to many others.

5. What is the significance of the Old Testament for believers today? How do Kaiser and Marcion differ in answering this question?

Let’s push on to his fifth question. Marcion is the wealthy businessman who had time to dabble in spiritual things, and probably was an earnest person. We have had many earnest Marcions down through history who have somehow gotten the idea that the Old Testament is out of date and no longer applies. And it is perfectly possible to read it that way in the New Testament because Paul, Jesus, and all of the church leaders there try to throw off the legalistic burden that the Jewish religious tradition had accumulated. But in throwing off that legalistic burden (and this is the really important point), they were not throwing off the Old Testament but a misunderstanding of what we call the Old Testament. Our Old Testament was their Bible, their scripture. They were not throwing out the scriptures.

Probably the clearest example of that is something that I myself remember vividly waking up to for the first time in my life. I don’t know if I was still a teenager when I came to this understanding, but probably a little older than that. I had always read and heard people refer to Matthew 5 as, you know, “You have heard it said, but I say unto you.” Ah! There you have it. The Old Testament said these six things, but Jesus trumped them. He came out with something better.

The telltale clue—I mean the easiest thing to latch onto to find out what’s really going on, is the sixth of the six illustrations when Jesus says, “You have heard it that way; I tell you this way.”

But note well—before we look at the sixth—He started out this whole series of six illustrations by saying, “Look, I am not here to overthrow the law.” So, does He go ahead to overthrow the law in six ways? Does that sound reasonable? No, but people do interpret it that way: insisting that the

Old Testament—the Law—says one thing, but that the Gospel says something else. Such people face this problem: the Gospel is in the Old Testament. You can’t contrast the Gospel with the Old Testament.

Okay, now let’s go to the sixth illustration. We take it to say, “Moses said, the Torah said, the Pentateuch says, the Old Testament says clearly, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’”

How did this happen? This is really embarrassing, and I do not mean to be anti-Jewish at all because everybody and his brother has probably come to the same conclusion in their weak moments. But people latched on to the love part and simply assumed the hate part. They said, “Yeah, love your neighbor. Oh yeah, That means you can hate your enemy! Right, right, right! Hate your enemy but love your neighbor.”

Well, Jesus said, “You have heard it said (by your teachers), ‘Moses said you should love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ And I tell you that that was not what Moses said. That is a misquotation. Look back in the Old Testament. It does not say to hate your enemy. That is not in the text. The text merely says love your neighbor. It doesn’t say hate anyone!

Oh! So now you realize that Jesus is not comparing His teaching with the teaching of Moses but with the contemporary interpreters of Moses. Jesus is not quoting Moses, He is quoting Moses’s misled expositors.

Let me make sure you understand this. Every one of those six examples of popular teaching to which the hearers of Jesus had been exposed — where He has to make a correction—He is not making corrections of Moses. These are not updatings of Moses. These are updatings of their misunderstanding of what Moses had said.

Jesus starts right out in verse 17, saying, “Don’t think I came to abolish the law.” Okay! Then He goes on, “Now, here’s some examples. You heard that the ancients were told, ‘You shall not commit murder.’ I say to you that everyone who’s angry shall be guilty...” Jesus is not overthrowing Moses; He’s pointing out the true significance of Moses. In other words, the key phrase is, “I did not come to abolish but to fulfill—to reinstate, to clarify, to reinforce.” And all six of these are like that one.

For example, “You have heard it said to you, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I want to point out that you can commit adultery in your heart.”

The Old Testament talks about the heart. The heart is the heart of the matter, whether you’re in Deuteronomy or Genesis or wherever. Right? And

so it isn't as if the Old Testament says, "All you need to do is to do things outwardly, and you'll get along just nicely," but that in the New Testament it says, "Well, we're going to go to higher things! We're going to talk about the heart!" That is a fallacy, a dreadful, ghastly, tragic fallacy. And it throws the whole Old Testament into a shadow. Unfortunately for many people that has very, very commonly been the case. In any case, I'm sort of elaborating a little on what is said in this passage in Matthew.

Now, Marcion obviously thought that Jesus was condemning the Old Testament in these statements. So he throws the whole Old Testament out except for certain narratives. But, alas, he finds that he has to throw out much of the New Testament, too. By the time he gets through, he is left with a kind of a theoretical gospel that sounds a lot like some of the modern heresies. "Easy believism," for example, is a modern heresy; it's neo-Marcion talk, or it's a resurrection of the Marcionitic point of view. And this neo-Marcion stuff is a danger that constantly surrounds us. Do we look down our noses at the Old Testament?