Theological Approaches to Interpretation

Introduction to Theological Hermeneutics

We’ve been looking at different methods of interpretation related to understanding the text within its original historical context and asking questions about the author and the author’s probable intent and what the readers might have or most likely would have grasped. We have looked at the text and its context being a very significant aspect of interpretation, looking at the wording and the meaning of crucial and important words and grammatical constructions and so on. What I want to do is look at a further important facet of the interpreting process and that is what I’ll call “theological analysis.” There’s actually a whole movement today that seems to be picking up steam and that is something that is called “theological hermeneutics” or “theological interpretation.” I don’t intend to go into detail about what that is. Certainly there are some questions that can be raised about it, but what is valuable is it tends to recover the theological nature of the Old and New Testament and the theological nature of the enterprise of interpretation.

Part of interpretation is interpreting the Old and New Testament texts theologically. This goes back to the fact that Christians confess that the scriptures are inspired and they are the very words of God, therefore the Old and New Testament are more than, though not less than simply historical documents. They’re more than just documents written and produced in a specific historical setting, but they are also highly theological. Therefore, we must ultimately read the Bible in a theological manner. By even calling it “Scripture,” when we refer to the Old and New Testament as “Scripture,” that entails a recognition that the Bible is a religious book. It entails the recognition that one cannot merely read it as just a historical document, although again it is that, but when we confess that the Old
and New Testament are Scripture it is that they are the scriptures for the church. They are the documents that testify to God’s redemptive dealing with his people. We testify that it is God’s revelation of himself in history, of his will to his people, therefore, any interpretation of a biblical text is incomplete until we interpret the text, the New or Old Testament texts theologically, that is, within its theological context.

Related to that also is the fact that we possess a Bible as Christians today, in which the Old and New Testament are conjoined into an entire book. Therefore, they stand in relationship to one another. So the Bible as it stands, and as we possess it, consists of the Old and New Testament, that now stand in relationship to each other, and in a sense then provide the entire context in which any given Old Testament book is to be understood. So we’ve talked about the historical context and the literary context of a book, but ultimately the final and ultimate context is the canonical context. Right now I don’t intend to go into detail as far as justifying the 66 books that we find in our canon of Scripture in the Old and New Testament, but my assumption is the 66 books of the Old and New Testament that we have constitutes the word of God and the context for doing interpretation and therefore the entire canon of Scripture, is the ultimate context for doing interpretation. So the Old and New Testament books form a unity and come together and provide the ultimate context for interpretation and are, therefore, to be read theologically, that is, we confess that the Old and New Testament are the scriptures of the church and therefore that means that we read any text in light of its ultimate theological canonical context.

The church is the word of God to his people, and as his people, we confess that God has spoken through his word and continues to speak through his word as Scripture to his people. Therefore, it seems to me then, based on that, there are a number of important themes or principles to consider when interpreting the Bible theologically, or analyzing the Bible theologically. Again, I am assuming that one has done the work of interpreting biblical texts in light of its historical context and
what we can know of the literary genre and the historical background, the
historical cultural reference in the text, asking questions of the literary context and
what the author most likely would have intended and what the readers would have
most likely understood by the text, examining it with its literary grammatical,
historical context, understanding the meanings of crucial words. That forms the
basis for reflecting on the text theologically, but to make a number of important
observations, or to raise a number of important themes regarding a theological
analysis of Scripture and then we’ll ask what that might look like, and by giving a
couple of examples of how one might analyze an Old Testament text and a New
Testament text theologically, or from a theological perspective.

**Unity and Diversity**

First of all, a theological perspective operates with the unity and coherence
of Scripture, that is, by focusing on Scripture as God’s word, by focusing on it as
canonical Scripture. We assume it is an essential unity, so we can understand that
the ultimate canon forms the broader theological context, and provides the broad
theological unity for understanding each New or Old Testament document. So the
canon provides the broader theological unity to which each book belongs and
contributes. So understanding the Bible theologically points to an understanding,
the Bible as canonical Scripture points to coherent portrayal of God’s redemptive
work, and God’s redemptive activity on the part of his people. But it’s important
also to understand that. Much of this owes itself to the fact that the Bible is both a
divine book but a human book as well. We’ve discussed that concept back when
we discussed inspiration, but understanding the book as a human document, we
also confess that the Bible consists of a diversity within that unity. So individual
books make up that unity, yet they reflect a diversity we saw that we’ve already
seen that there are diverse literary types within the Old and New Testament, there
are diverse authors that write out of diverse backgrounds. There is a diverse
vocabulary, diverse perspectives, yet all of those come under the umbrella of the
essential coherence and unity of the Old and New Testament so that doing
theological analysis, at least from a Christian perspective, understands that the Old and New Testament texts are not at odds with each other. They do not contradict each other the books do not stand at odds with other books.

For example, Paul and James do not stand at odds with each other however much diversity exists and however different the perspective. Ultimately within the broader theological unity of the Old and New Testament canon, they do not stand in contradictory relationship. While confessing there are diversity of authors and literary types and backgrounds, these documents, even, especially New Testament documents are as we have seen highly occasional, the responses to very diverse situations in history. We find multiple responses to different perspectives, but still, all of that, while exemplifying a coherence and a unity within the broader canon.

This perspective, I realize, is in contrast to more post-modern trends, to see a variety of voices that are diverse but even contradictory and refusing to acknowledge a meta-perspective or a meta-story that would account for all the others, so that there are multiple, even contradictory voices within interpretation, within the Old and New Testament canon. However a theological approach from a Christian perspective affirms the unity and the coherence of Scripture as the word of God to his people, as the final canonical Scripture consisting of the Old and New Testament that stand in relationship to one another.

**Promise – Fulfillment Relationship**

A second important theme, or principle that is significant for doing theological analysis of biblical text and related to the one we just discussed concerning coherence and unity of Scripture is that one also confesses and assumes the canonical relationship between the Old and New Testament. As we’ve already mentioned, the scriptures that we possess provide the ultimate context for interpreting any Scripture, and what we possess is the Old and New Testament conjoined in relationship to one another, and they stand in a relationship primarily and generally of promise and fulfillment. The Old Testament is seen as participatory of the final climactic revelation in the person of Jesus Christ. This
perspective is found in texts such as Hebrews chapter one and the first couple of verses where the author says, “In the past, God spoke in various ways and through various means to our forefathers through the prophets, but in these last days, God has spoken through his Son.” That verse establishes a relationship, an integral relationship, an organic relationship between the Old and New Testament, so the New Testament is seen as the ultimate fulfillment of what is promised and what is anticipated in the Old Testament.

So the scriptures then are a testimony to God’s ongoing redemptive acts on behalf of his people in the world. What this means, when we read the Bible as a unity that consists of a relationship between the Old and New Testament, that means that one must be sensitive to and be able to relate the interpretation of any text to the overarching theme or themes or the overarching story of the entire biblical text in the biblical canon.

It’s a story that is rooted in creation in Genesis 1 and 2 where God creates a people and God enters into a covenant relationship with them and desires and determines to dwell in their midst and gives them the land as his gracious gift which they are to care for and that they would as God’s image bearers, that they would spread God’s rule and his kingdom. They will spread his glory throughout the entire earth and throughout all of creation. But it is also a story of how sin enters into that desired intention for creation and for humanity and wrecks that, or begins to unravel that part of the story and so the rest of the Old Testament and the New Testament is how God now chooses Israel. God chooses Israel to be his people, he redeems them from Egypt, he then takes them out of Egypt and enters into a covenant relationship with them, takes them to the land he would give them, and intends to dwell with them through a temple and establishes his relationship to restore them and eventually his intention to restore all of creation, which was his original intent from Genesis 1 and 2. But, it’s also then a story of how God intends to ultimately rescue all of creation and rescue the nation of Israel itself and eventually all of creation and all people, which reaches its zenith in the person of
Jesus Christ.

In the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God now begins to establish and fulfill his intention for humanity, and that was begun in creation, and was reestablished with the redemption and with God working through Israel. Now that reaches its climax in the person of Jesus Christ, His death, his resurrection, and his establishment of a new people of God who will obey him and who will spread his rule and his glory throughout the entire earth.

But again this story is one that reaches its ultimate climax in a new creation and a renewed earth. It is a renewed heavens where God’s intention for humanity, where God’s story is fully and perfectly realized and fulfilled. So given this overarching narrative, or overarching story, or these overarching theological themes then, theological interpretation asks, how does each part fit into and contribute to this whole, as one is studying a biblical book or a biblical text. A theological analysis asks: how do the different books, how do the different texts fit into the story of God’s redemptive dealing with his people and ultimately all of creation? How does each text, how does each book contribute to that, and fit within those themes and that story?

What that means is first of all, that the New Testament is ultimately read in light of the Old Testament. But furthermore, ultimately, the Old Testament will be read in light of the New as well. As we will see that does not mean that we do not study the Old Testament in its original historical contexts and ask what it would have meant to the original readers. We let the text have its own integrity and understanding of the historical context, but ultimately, once again, we confess that the Old and New Testament stand, in its ultimate context, in theological relationship.

So it’s valid then to read the New Testament in light of the Old Testament and the validity of that move is rather obvious because we’ve looked at the use of the Old Testament and the New. The New Testament authors themselves, and Jesus himself demanded that this new revelation be seen in light of and with
continuity with the old covenant revelation as bringing it to fulfillment. But I think it’s also legitimate when one has done his exegesis and the interpretation of the Old Testament texts, to understand and explore how it gets fulfilled in the New Testament, how it reaches its climax in the person of Jesus Christ.

A Theological Approach

So a theological interpretation works with at least these two themes so far, the unity and coherence of Scripture that the broader Old and New Testament canon form a unity that must be considered when interpreting any individual book. Second, the Old and New Testament within the New and Old Testament canon stand in theological relationship with each other. Again this does not ignore the distinct contribution of each text, or it does ignore or undermine the unique contribution that each individual author makes in its historical context. It does not ignore how the text functions for its readers etc. and its place in salvation history and it’s working for God’s purposes. But it does recognize again that each text is a part of a larger canonical whole, as we have already said. The final canon of Scripture ties together the Old Testament and the New Testament in a relationship which now testifies to God’s ongoing redemptive activity on behalf of his people and on behalf of all of creation. So in light of the meaning of a text in its historical context, then one needs to ask, what role does it play within the broader canonical and theological context? What role does it play as a part of its overarching story of God’s redemptive work for his people in history and ultimately for all of humanity and the entirety of creation? So it is important to understand when we think of context and interpreting Scripture in context, we’ve examined things like it’s broader literary context and understanding texts and its historical context, but now I’m arguing for ultimately understanding a text in light of its theological context, that is, the context of the broader canon of Scripture and how it fits in this ongoing story of God’s redemptive activity in the world and for his people.
Christologically Focused

A third important principle, or theme, is that Christian theology is Christologically focused, that is, ultimately the focus of, or the climax of God’s redemptive dealing with humanity comes in the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus’ teaching, Jesus’ death and his resurrection, all of these are seen as the fulfillment as the climax of God’s redemptive activity on the part of his people and all of creation. So this overarching narrative or story that we talked about finds its climax in the person of Jesus Christ.

We’ve already seen, especially when we talked about the Old Testament usage in the New, that for New Testament authors, the primary lens through which they would have interpreted the Old Testament was the person of Jesus Christ. They saw Jesus Christ as the fulfillment of Scripture. Perhaps they took their cue from Jesus himself who said things like, “I have come not to abolish the law and the prophets but to fulfill them,” or in Luke 24 how he discussed with the two individuals on the road to Emmaus, he discussed how everything in Scripture was fulfilled in him so that one, when one reads the Old and New Testament, we ultimately have to understand how everything reaches its climax and fulfillment in the person of Jesus Christ. Even New Testament authors took a couple of Old Testament texts and understood them and how they got fulfilled in the person of Jesus Christ. So theological analysis will ultimately demonstrate how everything finds its fulfillment in the person of Christ and his life and teaching, his death and his resurrection.

Matthew 1:1: a Theological Reading

For example, when you even open up to the very first verse of the New Testament, at least in the order in which we have it, the very first verse demands that number one, that we read the Old, New Testament in light of the Old Testament. At least Matthew’s book demands that we read it in light of the Old Testament. Second, it assumes that Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of the main Old Testament story. So chapter one, verse one in Matthew begins like this, “A record
of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the Son of David, and the Son of Abraham.”

Now there are three things interesting about this verse. Number one, this notion of
the genealogy of Jesus Christ probably recalls a material from Genesis or similar
language of Genesis, the order or the beginnings of, so Jesus is actually rooted in
the Old Testament story beginning with creation, beginning with Genesis 1 and 2.
But notice the explicit references to son of David and son of Abraham, which
immediately takes one all the way back to the covenant that God made with David
and Abraham in the Old Testament. David in 2 Samuel chapter 7 David’s kingdom
is promised, or his throne is promised to be a perpetual one, his throne will be
established forever. Then in Genesis chapter 12, Abraham is the one who is
chosen to become great, but who would ultimately be a blessing to all the nations
of the earth. So Jesus now is placed within this broader story, he picks up the main
themes of the broader story going all the way back to creation, to the covenants
made with David and Abraham. Now he is seen not just to continue that story, but
to fulfill it and bring it to its intended goal and climax. So Jesus fulfills the
promise to Abraham. He fulfills the promise to David. He is the son of Abraham.
He is the true Davidic king who now fulfills both of those promises.

**Jesus and the Sacrificial System**

We also see for example in the New Testament that Jesus is seen as the
ultimate sacrifice in fulfillment of the Old Testament sacrifices and sacrificial
system. You don’t have to read too far into Hebrews to see how this is important
to the author to demonstrate that Jesus is the ultimate once-for-all sacrifice. He
doesn’t merely abolish and put to an end Old Testament sacrifices, but again
brings them to their true goal and intention and to their fulfillment. He is the final
and perfect high priest. The book of Hebrews portrays Jesus as the ultimate high
priest. Although the author of Hebrews portrays Jesus as in a different line of high
priests than in the Old Testament, yet Jesus is the final and ultimate high priest
who offers up that sacrifice.

Jesus is portrayed as the Passover lamb, for example in 1 Corinthians
chapter 5 verse 7 for example, Jesus’ death is understood in Old Testament perspective. So 1 Corinthians chapter 5 and verse 7 the author says, “get rid of the old yeast that you may be a new batch without yeast as you really are, for Christ our Passover lamb has been sacrificed.” So again the author draws on Old Testament features of the Old Testament overarching story of God dealing with his people, and now finds parts of it fulfilled in the person of Jesus Christ. He is our Passover lamb.

He also inaugurates a new covenant and fulfillment of Old Testament and prophetic text such as Jeremiah chapter 31 and Ezekiel chapter 36 and 37. Jesus now brings that promise, the promised new covenant. He initiates a new exodus where he now is the deliverer and savior of his people from bondage to sin. His resurrection from the dead is the installment and fulfillment of what was promised in the Old Testament so he inaugurates a new creation, you remember the text in 2 Corinthians chapter 5 where the author says, “if anyone is in Christ,” literally, “there is a new creation.” In other words, Jesus Christ himself inaugurates a new creation, anticipated in texts like Isaiah 65, so that now we can already participate in that new creation by virtue of belonging to Christ. So while every text has its own integrity and must be understood in light of its original historical context, at the same time, it must be read ultimately in light of how it gets fulfilled in the person of Jesus Christ and how God’s redemptive activity ultimately reaches its fulfillment and climax in Jesus Christ. So a theological analysis of the Old and New Testament reads the Bible and reads the text Christologically. It is Christologically focused.

Again, I’m not talking about doing the kind of wild allegorizing that some did in the past to read something in the life of Christ and every literal detail in the Old Testament. Still, ultimately, one must be sensitive to how any given text and book functions within the broader canonical context where the Old and New Testament stand in relationship to promise and fulfillment where Christ is the fulfillment and the ultimate revelation of God to his people that climaxes and
fulfills his revelation under the old covenant.

**Sensitive to the History of Interpretation**

A fourth principle or theme is that a legitimate theological approach to interpreting scripture, to interpreting the Old and New Testament will affirm and recognize the importance of history in interpretation. As Christians we confess that Scripture, and we talked about this when we discussed inspiration, testifies to God’s activity in history, to God’s acting for and on behalf of his people in history. Therefore ultimately, we understand the Old and New Testaments historically, that is how God has acted in history to bring about his intention. The overarching story is one of God’s mighty acts in history redemptively. This approach tempers both historical critical approaches. We talked about the historical critical approaches or historical criticism several sessions back. It tempers historical criticism but at the same time tempers modern literary and postmodern approaches. So, for example, it tempers historical criticism in that theological analysis of the text must make room for the supernatural, it must make room for the intervention of God into history on behalf of his people. It must make room for the universal significance of the death of Jesus Christ, that Jesus Christ’s death and the cross was not just a mere example of someone sacrificing for what they believed in, or was a historical accident, but it understands the historical and universal significance of the death of Christ. It confesses his resurrection. It confesses that God himself has become incarnate in the person of Jesus Christ, and that the biblical story portrays and testifies to a God who exists and a God who intervenes throughout the Old and New Testament on behalf of his people.

So in contrast to some historical critical approaches to the New and Old Testament text, which read Scripture in a closed continuum of cause and effect that refuse to acknowledge anything that has no analogy to the present day that again reads the Old and New Testament from a completely natural standpoint while still advocating or confessing the value of a historical critical approach of focusing on history, that God is dealing with history and at the same time, a
theological analysis that tempers historical criticism by recognizing and affirming a God who acts and intervenes in the affairs of history. It confesses a God who intervenes to do things like raise the dead and become incarnate in the person of Jesus Christ. It also tempers literary and postmodern approaches in that the historical understanding of the Bible affirms theologically that God intervenes in history. God acts in historical events on behalf of his people. This tempers literary and postmodern approaches because it reminds us that our historical approaches, especially when literary criticism only considers literary dimensions of the text and refuses to relate those to historical events, theological approaches can temper mere literary approaches or approaches that devalue the author and the text and the author’s intent and the historical background such as in some postmodern approaches. These types of approaches as we’ve said, however valuable they are, need to be revised or at least tempered in light of a theological analysis of the text that confesses that God has acted in history and that we’re dealing with more, however much literary criticism draws our attention to the aesthetic value of the text a theological analysis reminds us that the God acting in history cannot be ignored.

So however much a postmodern approach serves to chase and prod in interpretation and reminds us of our limitations, it still reminds us of the need to understand, in an attempt to uncover the meaning of God’s historical acts on behalf of his people as well as his mighty acts in history as the creator and the ruler of the entire world. Our faith is ultimately rooted in past acts of God in history. So a theological analysis is historically rooted.

The final thing I want to say is that when it comes to theological analysis of Scripture, theological analysis uses the major themes in terms of the Bible itself. In other words, a theological analysis begins with the Bible’s own terms and own themes that arise from an interpretation of the biblical texts. Some of those terms or themes might be creation, covenant, promise, blessing, judgment, redemption, kingdom or kingship, temple, faith, priesthood, reconciliation, justification, these
are the terms and themes that emerge out of the biblical texts themselves and
describe the theology of the Old and New Testament. So, primarily, a theological
analysis begins with the terms and themes of the biblical text itself, and of this
overarching story.

This is different from what is often known as systematic theology that is
using systematic theological categories, broader categories that function primarily
to, to categorize, or to summarize the major teaching of the Bible on any one
theme, as considered important by the theologian. So, systematic theology will use
categories of philosophical inquiry and other categories and understand how the
Old and New Testament as a whole and all the data, how it speaks to those
categories. It examines how it can be arranged and organized logically to speak to
a variety of categories that are usually deemed important. The kind of theology we
think of and talk about systematic theological textbooks or a systematic theology,
but instead we’re primarily beginning with the larger biblical theological text and
the overarching story and the themes and the terms that emerge from that and then
tracing those themes throughout the Old and New Testament, recognizing how
they develop from the Old to the New Testament and through the text. It
recognizes how each book or text contributes to that theme, and how that theme or
the terms function in different places in the Old and New Testament. So, a biblical
theology or a theological analysis of the biblical text begins with the terms and the
themes that emerge from the text itself.

Again, rather than thinking systematic theologically, I don’t want to say
that’s not valid, I think it obviously is, but at this point, we’re asking the question
of what the text itself contributes to what are the main themes and ideas that
emerge from the text and then how does that fit within the overarching story of
God’s redemptive activity as testified in the entire canon of the Old and New
Testament.

Summary Approach

So, how do we interpret a biblical text theologically? What role does
theological analysis play when in one’s interpretation? Well, the first step, obviously is to apply sound principles of interpretation to the biblical text that we’ve talked about asking what was most likely the author’s probable intention by placing the text in its historical and cultural context. We examine the text in light of its broader literary context, looking at the literary features of the text, also examining its vocabulary, its grammar, and trying to understand the text on its own terms, and what it most likely meant in its original historical context. So sound interpretive principles, or sound interpretation is the first step, or the foundation or basis for theological analysis.

But the second step that I would suggest is that one should identify the major theological themes in your text that is out of a study of the text, by considering the main themes or the main terms. I’ve already suggested the themes or terms that emerge out of the Bible, such as, creation, covenant, blessing, faith, justification, reconciliation, kingship, redemption, etc. etc. Sometimes, how the Old Testament is quoted or alluded to in the New Testament is a key for New Testament text as to what some of those main theological themes are. Actually when we discussed the use of the Old Testament in the New in the last couple of sessions we were in essence doing theological analysis. We were understanding how the New Testament picks up Old Testament texts and those themes and develops them and shows how they get fulfilled in the person of Christ. So the first stage then is to identify the main theological themes, and then to ask how are they developed in your text? What contribution does your text in the Old or New Testament that you are studying, relate to this theme, and how does this theme function within the text that you’re interpreting. Let me say, at this stage it might be helpful to read a number of important Old or New Testament theologies that will introduce you to some of these themes, and to isolating themes in different books, and demonstrating how themes get developed and try to understand what themes emerge and how they’re developed. What do they contribute to your text, and recognize the historical setting from these themes are emerging and what
issues they are addressing.

The third step is to ask, how does your text then, fit within the broader canonical account, or story of this overarching story of God’s redemptive dealing with creation and with all of humanity. What does your text contribute to that story, where does it fit? Where within this grand narrative of God’s dealing with his people that begins all the way back in the creation narrative and gets developed through God’s dealing with Israel and climaxes in the person of Jesus Christ, where does your text fit within that story? Again, this is a story that ultimately achieves its fulfillment in the person of Jesus Christ. Where does your text fit within that?

Again we said, if that’s the case, then one will ultimately read the New Testament in light of the Old Testament story to see how it fulfills it. Ultimately one will also read the Old Testament in light of the New Testament as well. Again, not that we don’t allow the Old Testament to have its own integrity, and understand what it meant in its historical context, but ultimately to move beyond that place within its broader canonical context and ask how it finally gets fulfilled in the New Testament.

The final question one could ask, although this begins to take us more beyond interpretation of biblical text, but very briefly, one will ultimately want to ask how your text contributes to the church’s broader feel for theological complexion, in terms of systematic theology. Again, the latter systematic theology must be based on the former on understanding the text theologically on its own terms. Theology or systematic theology usually concerns a coherent expression of the church’s faith. It tries to systemize the Bible’s teaching, the entirety of the Bible’s teaching, in a coherent framework, in light of issues usually deemed important. Our focus has been more on what is often called biblical theology, that is examining the text in light of the themes and terms that emerge from the Bible itself, but also placing the text within the broader biblical, theological story of
God’s dealing redemptively with his people and with all of creation.

**Analyzing a Biblical Text Theologically**

Now having said that, let me give you a couple of brief examples of analyzing a biblical text theologically, and what that might look like. My intention is not to give you a full interpretation of the texts, but just to probe maybe not all, but some of the theological dimensions of these two texts. These two texts are ones that we already considered in other places or other contexts in our discussion, but I think they both provide very good examples, and helpful examples of how theological analysis can work.

**2 Samuel 7**

The first one that I want to look at is 2 Samuel 7 and especially focusing on verse 14. We’ll focus on some of the verses around it as well, but 2 Samuel 7:14. 2 Samuel 7, in its broader context is the prophet Nathan comes to David with a message, a prophetic message, and at the center of that is usually considered to be verse 14, where through Nathan, God says to David, “I will be his father and he will be my son.” In fact, that is language that you see getting picked up later on in the New Testament, but the whole context of this is again God now speaking to David where he will establish a covenant with David and affirm his intention to establish his relationship with David on his throne forever.

Now when you look at the text to kind of follow the guidelines, there are a number of important themes that emerge theologically, such as temple. Notice the reference, especially some of the earlier verses in chapter 7. There is an emphasis on building a house or a temple for God, a place where he will dwell with his people. So 2 Samuel 7 reflects temple imagery, kingship, and especially the language of the Davidic monarchy. We find the covenant, although the word “covenant” is not used in 7:14. The language of, “I will be his father, he will be my son” is at the heart of covenant language. We also find language of the seed and descendants of David, so those are important biblical theological themes or terms that arise from the text itself. Notice also an important facet of this text is
found in both verses 13 and 16, verse 13 “He is the One,” in other words God tells David, David you will not build me the temple, but one of your seed, your offspring will build the temple.

So God said “your offspring who will build a house in my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever.” Verse 16 then says, “your house and your kingdom will endure forever before me, your throne will be established forever.” So what we find here is not just the emphasis on kingship and the Davidic monarchy, but that the throne will be, and David’s kingship will be perpetual. At this point we’re not told whether God is promising that the throne will be perpetual in terms that there will always be a king on the throne, even if there is a succession, or whether there is going to be one king who will emerge that will rule forever himself. At this point, I don’t think that it is stated explicitly.

But where does this fit, looking at this theme, these themes of temple, God’s dwelling with his people, kingship, especially Davidic monarchy, Davidic Kingship, covenant, the covenant he makes with David, the emphasis on his seed and descendants, David’s perpetual and enduring kingship and throne. Where does this fit within the broader canonical story of God’s redemptive dealing with his people and with all of creation?

First of all, when you read the text, it’s difficult to miss some of the allusions back to the Abraham story in chapter 12 of Genesis. For example, notice some of these connections or allusions, in verse 9 of 2 Samuel 7, he says, “I have been with you” God speaking through Nathan to David, “I have been with you David, wherever you have gone, and I have cut off all of your enemies from before you. Now I will make your name great, like the names of the greatest men on the earth.” Another text that reflects the promise made to Abraham is where God says, “I will make your name great, and I will bless you, and you will be a blessing ultimately to the entire nations of the earth.” But another one, verse 12, notice the language with the theme of offspring or seed. Verse 12, “When your days are over and you rest with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring or your
seed” which again, reaffirms and picks up the promise that God made to Abraham
over and over, that his seed and his offspring being numerous. Now that seed or
offspring has seemed to continue through the Davidic Kingship. But one other
one, verse 10 “I will provide a place for my people Israel, and will plant them so
they can have a home of their own,” which again, probably reflects, and is a
continuation of a promise made to Abraham to bring him to a land and to give the
people the land.

So, the author of 2 Samuel 7, and God’s speech to David through Nathan,
makes it clear that the Davidic promise then, and the Davidic covenant is the
primary means through which God’s promise to Abraham would be fulfilled and
established among the people Israel.

But there’s another interesting connection, to context to read it in light of
the ongoing story. Chapter 7 of 2 Samuel also, I think, picks up even if suddenly at
times, language from Genesis 1 and 2, and the garden of Eden. Perhaps even that
language in verse 10, “and I will plant my people Israel, and I will plant them, so
they can have a home of their own,” perhaps that imagery of planting recalls
Eden-like imagery, but even then still placing the people in the land, although that
goes back to the promise of Abraham. By giving Abraham the land, this is seen as
the fulfillment of God giving the land and the earth to Adam and Eve, to take care
of it and to live in it. But as we saw, because of sin they are expelled, so God
giving Abraham the land, is meant to fulfill his intention for creation where God
gives the land to Adam and Eve as a gracious gift. Now that promise is continued
by God, once again, intending to settle the people in the land, which was his
original intention in creation.

Even the language, of kingship, the fact that God intends in verses 13 and
16, of 2 Samuel 7, to establish David’s throne and his rule forever, is certainly to
be seen as the ultimate fulfillment of creation, where Adam and Eve are created in
God’s image to subdue and rule over all of creation. So now, the Davidic covenant
and the Davidic king and monarchy are the means by which God’s intention for
humanity to rule over all of creation, it is now going to be fulfilled in his people Israel. So 2 Samuel 7 stands within this story and contributes and continues a story that goes all the way back and is directly linked to the Davidic covenant, but has also linked back to creation as well.

But to move forward, we also see that 2 Samuel 7 also provides the backdrop for much of the prophetic expectation of restoration. Without appealing to any text in particular, though one could appeal to Isaiah chapter 9 for example and Isaiah chapter 55, one could appeal to Ezekiel 36 and 37. But without referring to any specific prophetic texts, we find the prophets anticipating, over and over, a time when God will restore his people. Usually God’s restoration of his people in the Old Testament is always seen in terms of God restoring the Davidic throne, and God restoring a king to rule over the people, and that usually goes back to, and assumes the Davidic promise, or the Davidic covenant from 2 Samuel 7.

Then finally, to move the story to its end, we find in the New Testament that Jesus is the ultimate Davidic king. He is the one who ultimately fulfills the promise made to David in the Davidic covenant, where his throne would be an eternal one, and an everlasting one. So in the New Testament, not only do we find references to the kingdom of God, and Jesus proclaiming the kingdom and inaugurating it, but we also see Davidic language applied to Jesus. For example, Matthew 1:1, he is the son of David, but we even find 2 Samuel 7:14 quoted, for example in Hebrews 1:5, where we even find “I will be his father, he will be my son,” quoted in reference to Jesus Christ.

Then to push even further in Revelation 21 and 22, we find that the ultimate intention of God, of having a Davidic son, who will sit on the throne and rule over all creation along with his people, interestingly, the Davidic promise, the Davidic covenant gets applied to the people themselves in Revelation chapter 21. For example, in chapter 21, at the very beginning of the account of the new creation, this is rather interesting, while in the rest of the New Testament, it seems to be
applied, usually, except for a couple of other places applied exclusively to Jesus Christ, notice what happens in chapter 21. Here we find these words, if I can locate them. Verse 6, “he said to me, it is done, I am the alpha and the omega, the beginning and the end, to him who is thirsty, I will give to drink without cost from the springs of the water of life, he who overcomes will inherit all of this, I will be his God, and he will be my son,” which is a repetition of the Davidic covenant formula. So not only is Christ the ultimate fulfillment of the promises made to David, but now his people as well, who belong to him, participate in and fulfill the Davidic covenant. This is the original intention of creation, that all of humanity, that God’s people would rule over all creation as his representative. Now that finally reaches its climax, where through Jesus Christ, we also participate in the Davidic covenant and rule over the new creation.

So 2 Samuel 7 plays an integral role, not only in developing number of biblical themes such as creation, covenant, Davidic kingship and monarchy, seed, temple as the dwelling of God; but at the same time, it also plays an integral role in the overarching story of God’s redemptive dealing with his people.

In the next session now, we will look briefly at the New Testament text, and look again at some of the theological themes that emerge from it, and how it might fit within the overarching story. Then we’ll move on to consider, perhaps what I think, is the most crucial and important stage of biblical interpretation, and that is, making application, or some would call it “contextualization.” So we’ll look at that in the next session.