# PROGRESSIVE REVELATION
## Does Meaning Change?

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An issue to which dispensational theology must give careful attention is *progressive revelation*. Two questions that will direct our considerations:

What is at issue?
What happens to the meaning of themes in the progress of revelation?

WHAT ARE THE ISSUES IN THE PROGRESS OF REVELATION?

First, progress in revelation is recognized in literature through an intertextual comparison of texts. Intertextuality helps the theologian trace the developments of doctrines within the Bible. The literary unity of the whole canon is assumed based on divine authorship.

Second, progressive revelation is defined by Charles Ryrie[1] to include these components:

1. God's message to man was not given in one single act.
2. Revelation was unfolded in a series of successive acts. "Its parts and features are seen, not as arranged after their development, but as arranging themselves in the course of their development, and growing through stages which can be marked, and by accessions which can be measured, into the perfect form which they attain at last."[2]
3. Revelation was expressed by many individuals with varying backgrounds over many generations.

Third, what, then, is in question?
In the unfolding of the revelation, what *changes* have taken place . . .?

first, *within* what has been said.
What has been said may be developed or unfolded, but remain stable, in some essence;

second, *adding* to what has been said,
New revelation not previously known may be added to what has already been revealed;

third, *transforming* what has been said, so that what has been said must be *reinterpreted* by *expanding* what has been originally said; the issue is described as *sensus plenior* rather than *sensus plenus*.

or by *revising* what has been originally said.
Does that include reversal?
The need to "interpret earlier writing to meet new historical situations and so advance our understanding."[3]

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[1] Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1995) 31.
[2] T. D. Bernard, *The Progress of Doctrine in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, n.d.) 20.
[3] Bruce K. Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007) 126.

PROGRESSIVE REVELATION CONSIDERED

There is no question that meaning changes as it unfolds, but what are legitimate changes? *Legitimate change* corresponds to what the doctrine of special revelation and inspiration *prescribe* for biblical meaning. The doctrine and proposed instances of change must always be kept in review with each other. Evangelicals differ. But the review is to keep them in tension to see if one may refine his/her thinking. The principle issue is whether earlier revelation is *transformed* by later revelation or whether earlier revelation is *stable*. Rather than prescribe a conclusion, two cases will be examined.

SERPENT

1. Genesis 3:1-5

Who is the serpent?

"Now the serpent was more crafty than any other beast . . ." Gen. 3:1ff.

- *the serpent was an animal*
  Literal interpretation may stop the consideration with this direct comparison and conclude that it is merely an animal.

- *a talking animal*
  It is plausible, as C. S. Lewis speculated, that the created world was alive in the sense of more animated participation, than the fallen world. He distinguished it as summer and winter. Eve does not seem to be taken aback by a talking animal.

- *the enemy of God*
  The identity of the speaking animal is judged by what it says: it questioned God's word (3:1) and denied God's word (3:4).

In this proposed reading of the text, the serpent is a type of enemy who challenges God and His word revealed to man. The challenge implied that God was man's enemy and in man's rebellion, man treated God as his enemy. Thus, the Gospel satisfied the need for reconciliation.

Further, there is evidence that within the type of enmity, the serpent is *the* enemy of God. Such is the case because Genesis is the book of beginnings and because of the fundamental challenge that the questions make.

2. Isaiah 27:1

"Leviathan, the fleeing serpent, Leviathan, the twisting serpent . . . he [the LORD] will slay the dragon that is in the sea."

Isaiah adds the pagan image in referring to the enemy: *Tiamat* from the Chaldean mythology and *Rahab,* the seven-headed *Leviathan*, the Canaanite image. Isaiah distinguishes between the image which he adopts and the mythology which he does not adopt.

Wakefield describes the crucial actions in the mythology which aren't in the Bible:

(1) a repressive monster restraining creation

(2) the defeat of the monster by the heroic god thereby releases the forces essential for life.

(3) the hero's final control over these forces [4]

The Bible alludes in Genesis 1:2 to the uncreated condition of water, which is the domain of the dragon.

3. Revelation 12:7

"Now war arose in heaven, Michael and his angels fighting against the dragon and his angels. . ."

Revelation 12:8

"The great dragon was thrown down [to earth)] that ancient serpent, who is called the devil and Satan."

*Conclusion*

The meaning at the type level (the enemy of God) is stable, but the token images (serpent or dragon) may change. What is unfolded is the clarity in the identity of the disguised presence of God's enemy. The true identity of the enemy is first disclosed in the presence of Jesus (Matt. 4:1 and Luke 4:2).

GOSPEL

Dispensational theology has been accused of advocating two ways of salvation. We certainly have not emphasized one way of salvation as clearly as covenant theology. A textual way of asking the question is whether there is only one gospel in Scripture?

Paul offers a clear answer to that question in his summary of a promise given to Abraham: ". . . preached the Gospel beforehand to Abraham saying, 'In you shall all the nations be blessed.'" (Gal. 3:8)

In this quote of Genesis 12:3, 18:18, 22:18, 26:4, 28:14, what is the Gospel? I would propose in our terms:

> The Gospel is the type of promise in which God commits himself to bless all nations through Abram and his offspring.

*Is this the Gospel in the Old Testament?*

The church posited that the Gospel first appeared in Genesis 3:15, the *protoevangelism*. Does this express the same type of promise? It is not directly stated, but the type of meaning is implied.

Directly stated, Gen. 3:15 pronounces judgment against the serpent-enemy in conflict with the woman's offspring. This is not a promise to man of deliverance, but such is implied in the final conquest of the woman's offspring in conflict with the serpent. The serpent strikes the heel of the offspring, as an animal serpent does, but the offspring strikes the head of the serpent. While the word, "strike" is the same for both statements, implying death for both, at the same time the head death is more

[4] Mary Wakefield, *God's Battle with the Monster: A Study in Biblical Imagery* (Leiden: Brill, 1973).

destructive than a heel death. Implied in the figurative description of conflict, God will deliver the offspring of the woman when the conflict is finished. The means of deliverance after a death blow is not clear.

Genesis 12:3 etc. When the *gospel* is "preached" to Abraham (Gal. 3:8), the following *changes* in meaning are evident:

- the implied promise is made explicit to Abraham
- the human involved in the work of God is the offspring of Abraham, further specified from the offspring of the woman
- the implied promise of deliverance is stated as the promise of blessing
- the beneficiaries are clarified from an implied human race to all nations
- the benefits are received by faith (Gen. 15:6 and Gal. 3:9)

*Is this the Gospel in the New Testament?*

Many would agree that in the Gospel of John's conclusion, the Gospel is expressed:

"these things are written
that you may *believe* that Jesus (historic Savior)
is the *Christ*, the *Son of God* (the promised Deliverer as revealed in the Old Testament)
and that believing you might have *life*. . ." (blessing)

CONCLUSION

At the level of type of meaning, Gospel *content* has not changed: the GOSPEL is the type of promise in which God commits himself to give life through Jesus. In the New Testament the particular tokens are now known.

Does the Gospel not include an explicit mention of the cross and the resurrection? (ICor. 15:3-5). Both are implied as "the necessary means of God's commitment of himself to give life." They are revealed in the Old Testament in relation to Christ, the Son of God, and are the necessary evidence that God's promise is true.