

SYMPHONIC THEOLOGY

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CHAPTER 2: PERSPECTIVES IN THE BIBLE

[Title Page](#)

[Table of Contents](#)

Do the observations in chapter 1 about perspectives relate to Bible study and theology? Do differences of perspective occur there? If so, how do we handle them? Before answering these questions, I consider here whether there are variation of perspective within the Bible itself. The answer depends to some extent on what one means by "perspective." So far we have used the word in loose, flexible way. We have noticed various ways in which people have concentrated on one particular aspect of something that they are studying. But now we need to make some distinctions.

ANALOGIES AND METAPHORS

First, any analogy or metaphor is a kind of perspective. For example, if we talk about a "price war" between two stores, we are drawing an analogy between literal wars and the stores' competition in pricing. We invite people to view price competition as a kind of war. In terms of perspectives, we invite them to see competition from the perspective of war. In this sense, any analogy or metaphor is a perspective. The Bible, of course, uses many analogies and metaphors and so provides a multitude of perspectives on all kinds of subjects. The sun is like a strong man running (Ps. 19:5). Wisdom is like a woman who invites guests to her feast (Prov. 9:1-5). The Pharisees are like the elder brother in the parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:1-2, 11-32). The kingdom of God is like a great stone (Dan. 2:44-45) or like a mustard seed (Luke 13:19). The undersides of leviathan are like jagged potsherds (Job 41:30). And so on.

MODELS AND PERVASIVE ANALOGIES

But a simple analogy or metaphor is not a sophisticated scientific model, nor is it a consistent, pervasive way of looking at the world. Therefore, we need to

distinguish a second sense in which people use perspectives, namely, a consistently developed way of attending to particular features of some object of study. The husband shopping for curtains may consistently ask questions about the mechanical utility of the curtains, while the wife consistently asks questions about the beauty of the curtains and whether they will harmonize with the decor of their house. This kind of consistent pattern can pervade a whole academic discipline. Freudian psychology consistently looks for explanations in terms of biological drives. Behaviorism consistently looks for explanations in terms of patterns of stimulus and response. A theoretical model in natural science is also of this kind. Chemists consistently try to explain and predict chemical reactions in terms of interactions of atoms and their electronic shells to form molecules.

Does the Bible have pervasive models, or perspectives, in this sense? Some analogies and some ways of thinking do appear frequently. For example, a number of important analogies and metaphors provide us with perspectives on God. God is our Father (an analogy with human fathers). God is the great King (an analogy with human kings). God is light (an analogy with physical light). God is holy (indirectly, invoking an analogy with the holy objects and persons connected with the tabernacle and Israel's worship). God is a shepherd (Ps. 23). Each of these analogies invites us to see God from a different perspective, that is, to see God as analogous to a different aspect of the created world and its relationships. In the context of the whole Bible, we also know that each analogy is limited: God is like a human father in some ways but unlike one in other ways. None of these analogies by itself represents a complete "theory" of God.

These analogies, though limited, are invoked many times. They are thus to be distinguished from the one-time analogies such as the comparison of the sun to a strong man running (Ps. 19:5). God is called a king and a father not once but many times. Quite a few times a Christian's responsibilities are compared with those of a servant or a slave.

Sometimes a particular analogy has a dominant role in one passage or one book of the Bible. The comparison between Christ and Adam is developed extensively in Romans 5:12-21, a little in 1 Corinthians 15:45-49, but not much elsewhere. Isaiah 40-66 compares God's work of salvation to creation, to the exodus from Egypt, and to new birth. The same themes occur in other books, but less prominently.

Although one analogy may be the main point in a particular passage, the Bible as a whole uses a multitude of analogies, each of which makes a contribution. No one analogy tells the whole story. In short, the Bible does not use a single dominant perspective in an exclusive way.

Paul, John, Amos, Ezekiel, and all the other human authors of the Bible characteristically express themselves in different ways. The Gospel of Mark presents us mostly with the theme of the kingdom of God, while the Gospel of

John dwells on the themes of truth, light, glory, love, indwelling, and faith. Some of the differences between these two gospels consist in differences in the analogies that the authors use. Light is used as a prominent analogy in the Gospel of John for describing who Christ is and what he does. It does not occur this way in the Gospel of Mark.

I believe that, in principle, all such differences are harmonizable (though we may not always see right away how to harmonize). Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, Mark and John select different things to tell about and tell them in slightly different ways, because they are focusing on or emphasizing different truths or different aspects of the same truth.

SELECTIVE INTEREST

We must distinguish yet a third kind of perspective: selectional perspectives that arise from differences in interest. Differences in peoples' interests lead to differences in their selection of facts and to differences in theme when people talk about the same subject matter.

The example of a husband and wife shopping for curtains is in fact an example of this type of perspective. The husband and wife are not using two different analogies. Rather, they choose to talk about different facts because their interests are different, and therefore what they notice is different.

We can see a similar kind of selectivity in the Bible. The Gospel of Mark and the Gospel of John are different partly because they tell about different events. John concentrates on Christ's ministry in the area of Jerusalem, while most of Mark concentrates on the Galilean ministry. Mark includes an account of the Last Supper, while John includes the upper room discourse.

Many times a book of the Bible selects events with a particular purpose in mind. The book of 2 Chronicles concentrates almost wholly on the history of the southern kingdom (Judah), while 1-2 Kings devotes much attention to the northern kingdom (Israel) as well. Chronicles selects events that show God's punishments and rewards to wicked and righteous kings, while Kings selects events that show the fulfillment of God's prophetic words. These two accounts of the period of the kings have different, although sometimes overlapping, interests. The two accounts are different perspectives on the same period of time. These differences are not so much differences in a dominant analogy but rather differences in the interests and themes that a person may see and emphasize in the period.

WORLD VIEWS AND BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE

The Bible, then, does not use only one dominant analogy or model, nor does it have only one way of selecting events and themes. In both of these senses, the Bible uses many perspectives. But in a fourth and final sense, there is a single dominant perspective in the Bible. That is, the Bible teaches us a particular view of God, ourselves, and the world. According to the Bible, there is one God, there are three persons of the Godhead, human beings were created good but fell into sin, Christ came to save us, he died for us, he was raised bodily from the dead, he sits at God's right hand, and he will come again to renew us and the world and to condemn the wicked.

In short, the Bible provides us with a world view. It explains the origins and purpose of everything, tells us who we are, tells us how to deal with our sins, and shows us our basic responsibilities toward God and toward our neighbors. These teachings and other central doctrines of the Bible are intended to provide us with a basic framework for serving God in every area of life--in our Bible study certainly, but also in our study of science, our use of money, our activity in government, and every other area.

The Bible, then, provides us with a Christian world view, or a Christian perspective, on everything. In a sense, this perspective is one among many. There is a Buddhist world view, a materialist world view, a hedonist world view, humanist world views, and so on. Each of these world views provides a background of assumptions and values against which people carry on their detailed reflections and decision making, in academic disciplines as well as in practical life. But the biblical world view is right, and the other, competing world views are wrong. Hence we ought not to compromise with other world views.

On the other hand, we must realize that our own understanding of the Bible's teaching is not perfect or infallible. Because of error or deficiency in understanding, Christians may disagree slightly among themselves over certain aspects of their common world view. Moreover, people who are not Christians are still people in the image of God and still live in God's world. Here and there they will acknowledge some bits of truth deriving from the biblical world view. Therefore we can learn from them, though the Bible must be our supreme judge of the truth.

When we were examining perspectives in the first three senses, we frequently dealt with complementary truths and ways of looking at something. Here, we have an exclusive category: one view is right, while the others are wrong. In the nature of the case, people can have only one world view. With effort, they may be able to see to a certain extent how things look from an alternate world view. But they themselves *believe in* only one world view, because world views, by their very nature, are ultimate frameworks for human knowledge. To begin to adopt a second world view, in the sense of believing it and treating it as an

ultimate framework, is to leave behind (or at least subtly alter) one's former world view.

For these reasons, I will simply use the term "world view" to describe this fourth sense of the word "perspective." From now on I will reserve "perspective" for the first three meanings only, that is, for (1) one-time analogies; (2) consistently used, pervasive analogies; and (3) selectivity and emphasis controlled by a thematic interest. However, we can still notice a certain connection between world views and perspectives in these three senses. In both cases we are dealing with abilities of human beings to see things in one way rather than another, to see a facts against the background of one framework rather than another. The difference in the case of world views is that the framework claims to be ultimate, universal, and therefore exclusive.