

PROGRESSIVE REVELATION: The unfolding of God's revelation.

The concept of progressive revelation is closely related to the historical nature of Scripture. It can be very simply defined as God's revealing of his will in successive stages, each founded upon and further illuminating the previous stages. Dr. J. Barton Payne says: "Since God's redemptive acts were progressive, preparing the way for Christ who should come in the fullness of time (Gal 4:4) the accompanying truths that were progressively revealed show in most cases a progressive development. That is., God graciously unfolded both His redemption and His revelation in ways corresponding to man's capacities to receive them." (J. Barton Payne, Theology of the Older Testament, p. 18)

Progressive Revelation is not an evolution of religion and doctrine. Some maintain we see in Scripture the gradual transition from polytheism and nature worship to monotheism; the shift from cultic blood sacrifices to ethical religion; the shift from fearing the capricious gods of natural forces to encountering the God of love. Rather even as an oak tree is completely present within an acorn, and progressively grows to its fullness, so the basic truths of Scripture are in their essence present in the first 11 chapters of Genesis, yet progressively in stages unfolded, explained, clarified and brought to their fullness in the New Testament. Thus the doctrines of Creation, God's nature and attributes, Man as created and as fallen in sin, God's covenant of redemption, the Savior - his person and work, Faith and repentance and salvation through grace, judgment are there from the beginning, though the fullness (and along with it, the understanding) of them undergoes a gradual development through Scripture.

Because of this, we must not demand the same understanding God's truth by an old Testament individual as we would find in Paul or John. Because God's revelation is both through word and deed, there is an unfolding revelation through the events of Israel's history- Abraham's covenant and pilgrimage, Israel's captivity and exodus, of judges, kings, prophets, captivity and restoration. God did not present Moses with a complete systematic theology, but He did in "nutshell" form lay out all the basic truths of the Bible.

"This perspective of Progressive Revelation is very important to the interpreter. He will expect the full revelation of God in the New Testament. He will not force New Testament meanings into the Old, yet he will be able to more fully expound the old knowing its counterparts in the New. He will adjust his sights to the times, customs, manners and morals of the people of God at any given state in the Old Testament period of revelation, and he will be aware of the partial and elementary nature of Old Testament Revelation. . . . Progressive revelation. . . states simply that the fullness of revelation is in the New Testament." (Bernard Ramm, Protestant Biblical Interpretation, pp. 103-104)

The applicable principles are implied already. We must look for the clearest and most complete understanding in the New Testament, while recognizing that the Old Testament is the progressive unfolding of those truths. The book of Hebrews helps us understand the Old Testament ritual and sacrifices, but without the books of Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers - Hebrews would not be as meaningful. We need to see the Old Testament from the New Testament understanding, without imposing that understanding on the Old Testament saint.

Henricksen expresses the important principle Of progressive revelation quite simply: "God does progressively reveal himself as history unfolds. But this does not mean that God's standards become progressively higher or that God changes along the way. Rather it is our understanding of God and His revelation that progresses. God never changes." (Laymen's Guide to Interpreting the Bible, P. 77)

The Bible teaches this. Jesus said that he had not come to abolish the Law and the Prophets (i.e. the Old Testament) but to fulfill. (Matt 5:17-19) Paul speaks of God sending His

Son when the fullness of time came. (Gal 4:4). Hebrews 1:1,2 reflects this as well. Jesus on the Road to Emmaus opened up the Old Testament and showed how it spoke of Him from the beginning.

Some examples of the progressive nature of revelation:

- **The doctrine of redemption.** The initial promise of the Gospel is Gen 3:15- the seed of the woman will crush the head of the serpent, though bruised on the heel. (cf. Rom 16:20, Rev. 12:9; 20: 3,10 on the serpent, Isa 7:14, 9: 6,7, Mt 1:18f, Rev. 12:1-9 on the seed of the woman.) The blood sacrificial system was to teach of the necessity of the redeemer to sacrifice his life for the salvation of his people. "The patriarchal, sacrificial system and later the entire levitical ritual, point forward to Christ and His redeeming work. The plan of salvation develops with ever increasing clarity and fullness as the messages of the prophets and the Psalms are historically unfolded. In such a passage as Isaiah 53 the richness of the Gospel is almost complete." Buswell., Systematic Theology, p. 382,383. God progressively expands man's comprehension of the Savior that when He came in the fullness of time- man was ready to recognize Him and understand His coming
- **The Varied Uses of the Divine Names** "The revealed names of God connect the knowledge of God in a special way with his creation of the universe and with his redemptive deeds of Israel and the founding of the Christian church. . . the truly remarkable factors in the disclosure of God's names are these: that the Living God transcendentally and absolutely discloses his name in historical revelation and that the successively revealed names of God signal distinctive epochs in the progressive manifestation of God's redemptive purpose. The fact that the Hebrew people come to know God now by one then another revealed name bears its own testimony to the enlarging significance of these names. Viewed from the side of human comprehension, no single name wholly expresses God's being; the many names reveal his perfection, purposes and personal distinctions. . . . Yet we shall see that the Hebrew-Christian revelation not only periodically unveils new names for the living God, but that in successive periods of redemptive history earlier names of God are retained side-by-side with later names. Later divine disclosure does not annul the force and significance of the earlier names, for God does not deny himself in the progressive revelation of his names," (Carl. F.H. Henry, God, Revelation and Authority, pp. 180, 181-182)
- **God's covenant of Redemption.** The basic covenant expressed perhaps best in Gen 17:7 "And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your descendants after you through out their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your descendants after you." is progressively repeated in the history of God's dealings with man: Adam (Gen 3:15), Noah (Gen 9), Abraham (Gen 17), at Sinai (Exo 19 & 20), with Levi (Num 25:12,13) and David (II Sam 7) and is in essence the New Covenant (Jere 31:31-34, cf. Hebr 8, cf. Mt 26:28, Lk 22:20) and the Covenant of Peace (Ezek 16:60, 34:25). The Scripture comes to its climax in Rev. 21:3 with the fulfillment of that covenant: "Behold the tabernacle of God is among men and He shall dwell among them, and they shall be his peoples, and God Himself will be among them." The relationship man was created to have, though lost through the fall, is restored in Christ, and will be brought to fulfillment in the New Heavens and earth. God's revelation of this is, in the successive stages of Biblical history, expanded and clarified- though it is there from the beginning.