

INTRODUCTION

The theme of this issue of *Letter & Spirit* is “Christ and the unity of Scripture.” From the perspective of the hermeneutic of faith, the primary purpose of biblical narrative is to recount humanity’s familial history in the light of God’s covenant plan for his people. Biblical history stands in sharp contrast to the mythical view that was widely held throughout the ancient Near East. Outside Israel, time was understood in terms of a fatalistic, never-ending cycle where the gods often controlled everyone’s destiny. Most of these societies exhibited a deep pessimism about both the past and the future.

The modern Western approach to history is quite different. It is, first of all, quite secular, meaning that there is little patience for the idea of gods or God controlling or superintending events. Remarkably, modern history tends to be optimistic—fueled by an ever-increasing parade of dazzling technological achievements (overlooking its colossal moral failures). Modern history is linear and progressive. When a new “age” arrives—the “industrial,” the “electronic,” the “information”—the old age is superseded, and, to a greater or lesser degree, simply swept away. Even core values and fundamental principles can and sometimes should be jettisoned; societal progress is the goal. Progress means moving forward, and that is generally understood in terms of bull-doing the past, not returning to it.

Biblical history is progressive, but not supersessionist. It moves forward, but it neither forgets nor overthrows the past. What follows *fulfills* what has preceded. What has preceded will return, but with each return there is a fuller flowering, a brighter dawn. As recent Popes have noted, with the coming of Christ in the New Covenant the Old is not revoked but renewed, not taken away but transformed, not forgotten but fulfilled. “Christ is in the Old concealed; Christ is in the New revealed”—here is the very DNA of sacred scripture, from Genesis to Revelation. Not an endless, pessimistic cycle; nor an aimless, cynical post-modernism. Biblical history—the story of salvation—is what it is because Christ is there, from beginning to end. *Christ unifies all*, making the story of salvation history—like the music of a great symphony—ever-expansive, increasingly dynamic, and minutely purposeful.

In his essay “The Matthean Christ, Center of Salvation History,” **Leroy Huizenga** maintains that the Gospel of Matthew stands at the center of salvation history and thus at the center of the biblical canon by describing Christian faith as a story in the four acts of creation, fall, redemption, and glory, with redemption consisting of Israel, Jesus, and the Church. The Gospel of Matthew stands at the fulcrum of the story of salvation history and is thus first in the New Testament and first among the canonical Gospels in terms of both position and importance because its Christology shows most clearly the continuities of redemption, namely, how Israel’s mission to the Gentiles is fulfilled in Jesus and the Church he founds.

It is then suggested that a proper estimation of Matthean Christology rooted in the continuities of salvation history pays hermeneutical and theological dividends.

In Matthew 5, Jesus insists that he has come not to “abolish” (*katalysai*) but to “fulfill” (*plēroō*) the law (Matt. 5:17). Yet, in the following section a series of sayings, often called “antitheses” (Matt. 5:21–48), seem to do just that. Perhaps most striking is Jesus’ rejection of a practice sanctioned by the law; Jesus defines divorce and remarriage as adultery, a teaching that is reiterated in Matthew 19:4–9. In his article “Jesus as the ‘Fulfillment’ of the Law and His Teaching on Divorce in Matthew,” **Michael Patrick Barber** argues that in Matthew, somewhat like Ezekiel, Jesus explains that certain elements of the law were only given because of Israel’s sinfulness. These represented “statutes that were not good” (Ezek. 20:25). Such accommodations underscored Israel’s need for a “better righteousness,” which biblical and Second Temple texts associated with the eschatological age. For Matthew, Jesus comes to fulfill these hopes and thus maintains God’s original design for marriage without the need for such concessions.

In his article, “‘These Least Brothers of Mine’: A Reappraisal of the Great Judgment Scene as Apocalyptic Retribution in Matthew 25:31–46,” **William Bales** contends that the popular understanding of the Great Judgment scene in Matthew 25:31–46, particularly regarding the identity of “these least brothers” of Jesus, is seriously flawed. Bales first gives an analysis of the glaring problems connected with today’s popular interpretation. Then, employing Matthean parallels and a sensitivity to the apocalyptic genre of Matthew 24–25, he offers a more satisfactory understanding of the great scene, along with some implications of his findings for the church today.

The accounts of the Last Supper are often neglected by contemporary Jesus research. In his study “The Last Supper and the Quest for Jesus,” **Brant Pitre** contends that the Last Supper accounts are essential for answering the four key questions in the historical quest for Jesus: What was Jesus’ relationship with his Jewish context? Who did he think he was? What did Jesus expect to happen in the future? What were his intentions toward the growing community of his followers? The Last Supper accounts strongly suggest that Jesus’ identification of the bread and wine with his body and blood ma1(e)-18(y (d)1(t)-16(h)7(e))TW a)-20(nM4a)-3(t

the Prologue to the Gospel of John with St. Augustine” examines St. Augustine’s interpretation of the Prologue to the Gospel according to John (John 1:1–18). John’s Prologue offers a far-reaching vision of all things in relation to the Word of God. Augustine develops the Prologue’s teaching into a synthetic account of “all things in Wisdom” (Ps. 103:24 quoted by Augustine in *Tract. Ev. Jo.* 1.16) wherein all created realities, and human beings in particular, creation and redemption, revelation and reason, the Old and New Covenants, are all inter-connected with one another by virtue of their relation to Christ, the Word and Wisdom of God.

In his article “Covenant Fulfillment in the Gospel of John,” **Vincent P. DeMeo** demonstrates that a covenant theology is operative in the background of John 13–17 by showing that the kinship-by-covenant rule disclosed in the Old Testament is employed as a formative and controlling principle with respect to how Jesus, and through him the Father, relates to and guides his community of disciples. DeMeo argues that in the actions and discourses of his last supper, Jesus has established the new covenant with his eschatologically gathered community and, in doing so, has formed a divine kinship relation with them grounded in familial obligations. They are the definitive covenantal children of God. DeMeo’s intent is to further and deepen the recent research on the covenant tradition in the gospel by explaining how Israel’s covenantal kinship relation and obligations with their God, are, according to the gospel of John, fulfilled with a realism that is heightened in an unexpected manner.

In his article “Fulfillment in Christ: The Priority of the Abrahamic Covenant in Paul’s Argument against the Galatian Opponents (Galatians 3:15–18),” **Scott W. Hahn** argues that Paul’s controlling argument in Galatians 3:15–18 is that the Abrahamic covenant enjoys historical priority and theological primacy over against the Mosaic covenant at Sinai. In the process, Hahn shows that the Greek word *diathēkē* in Galatians 3:15 should be taken as “covenant,” which accords well with the actual statements of the verse and the “covenant logic” of 3:15–17. Hahn demonstrates that for Paul, the Mosaic covenant cannot possibly supplement or alter the conditions of the covenant-oath sworn by God to Abraham at the Aqedah (the “binding” of Isaac), in which God took upon himself the responsibility to bless the Gentiles through Abraham’s seed. The background of the Aqedah also elucidates the obscure argument in Galatians 3:16: Paul sees Isaac, the “only son” of Abraham, as a type of the Christ, the “one seed” of Abraham *par excellence*, whose self-sacrifice would be completed and serve to actualize the promised blessing of the Gentiles merited at the Aqedah. Paul’s argument in Galatians 3:15–18, though subtle, is coherent and persuasive when we acknowledge his contextual use and typological reading of biblical texts.