

What is Progressive Revelation?

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Introduction: The Bible as a Communication

The Bible is one Book, not two. It should be read from front to back, not in reverse. Tracing the chronology of Scripture is, in general terms, an important part of Bible study. Everyone is aware that there are cases where specific time-slots cannot be allocated with certainty to some episodes in Judges or the historical vantage point of Obadiah. You will always find a more liberally inclined person ready to correct you about the date of Daniel or “Second Isaiah” or Matthew’s Gospel. But from the standpoint of someone who says he believes in the inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture the Bible is a fundamentally Divine Word to creators formed in His image.

This Word from God, which we now have in the Bible, was produced over many hundreds of years. As the Story of the Bible unfolds certain things are put in place which will relate to things to appear later on. In most cases these key things are initiated by God Himself, the Author both of the Book we’re reading, and of the circumstances we read about.

The Bible is not simply a storybook. The Bible is, as I like to call it, “a word from outside.” By this I mean that it comes from the One who made and sustains our reality, both now and in the future. And this One, the God of Creation, has done two things which are presupposed by the existence of the Bible. He has spoken truth to human beings, and He has enabled human beings to speak His truth to one another. Putting aside for the minute the problem of our common failure to reflect God’s truth in our every communication (something I’ll return to), the fact remains that communication; from God first and then to each other, is going on. So before we can get into our main subject of progressive revelation, we must initially ponder what makes for effective communication.

Effective Communication

For communication to work well there needs to be a common language between the speaker or writer and the hearer or reader. Assuming, of course, the basic comprehension abilities of both, it is first necessary that they share many of the same pool of words and metaphors with each other. If they don’t, communication can hardly continue effectively. But if we grant this point the next one comes on its heels: that is, if the speaker wishes his or her meaning to be understood they will communicate in such a way as to minimize possible misunderstanding due to ambiguities or hidden meanings. Both of these increase the likelihood of the intended meaning of the speaker being missed.

One thing that the speaker may wish to do to help decrease possible misunderstandings of his words is to include certain keys or touchstones whereby his true meaning can be tested. A Users Handbook may have occasional reminders to the reader to make sure they have read Part 1 of the manual before proceeding to more complicated chapters for instance. Such touchstones help keep the reader on the right track, so that when they close the book they’re understanding of the author’s words closely overlaps that of the author himself.

If it turns out that the reader or hearer has come away with ideas which were far removed from the intent of the communicator, the fault lies either with the communicator or with the reader/hearer. If the first it is because they communicated their meaning poorly. If they wanted to be understood they should have used plainer language. This home truth is only

1 <http://drreluctant.wordpress.com/2013/06/03/what-is-progressive-revelation-pt-1>

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more so if the communicator has employed words which could very easily be misconstrued, or figures of speech about which people would come to wildly different ideas about. But in truth the fault lies with the speaker/author.

If, on the other hand, the communicator has clearly declared their intentions, it is the listener or reader who has failed. There could be several reasons for this failure, but surely the most common are a failure to pay attention to the words being communicated, or else the hearer persuading themselves that the speaker *really* meant such and such. In the former case the problem is inattention. In the second case the problem is an overreach of 'reason' (i.e. rationalizing more than is actually there).

God Has Spoken – so as to be understood

When we apply this basic theory to the Bible as the Word of God things can start to become problematical, although they really shouldn't! If we take for granted that God as a Communicator: indeed, the Supreme Communicator, wants to be understood by His creatures, then we can assume that He has said what He means to say in such a way that human beings can understand.

Objection 1: Time & Culture

Right here I can hear the objection about the Bible written to Semitic peoples thousands of years ago in a totally foreign culture. In shorthand this amounts to , "the Bible wasn't written to you!"

This is one of the objections with which I shall have to return to in this article. But to give a brief riposte, I would say three things:

- A) If the Bible is not written to me then, as an outlook on how I should look at the world it is irrelevant to me. The question is, in what way is the Bible addressed to me? Not certainly its every statute or command addresses me; there is much in it which doesn't; but *as a vehicle of Truth* I must receive it as God's Word to me or it leaves me in a position of having to say that it is not God's Word for me. And every cognizant person living or dead to whom the Word of God comes is in the same boat as me. God's Word demands right response, which presupposes right understanding.
- B) Just because there are many things recorded in Scripture which I am not included in directly, either because I was not there, or I was not being spoken to, or I do not belong to a specific group, does not mean that God did not want me to know what He said and did.
- C) Finally, if God wanted me to know the overarching meaning of the events in the Bible then He would have to have it communicated to me in a way that diminishes the temporal – cultural obstacles which would arise. Granted, there are many ancient understandings of which I am ignorant,

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but these difficulties would have to be but a small part of the overall communication which God as Author wanted me one day to read and assimilate.

As George N. H. Peters put it long ago:

[I]f God has really intended to make known His will to man, it follows that to secure knowledge on our part, He must convey His truth to us in accordance with the well-known rules of language. He must adapt Himself to our mode of communicating thought and ideas. If His words were given to be understood, it follows that He must have employed language to convey the sense intended, agreeably to the laws grammatically expressed, controlling all language; and that, instead of seeking a sense which the words in themselves do not contain, we are primarily to obtain the sense that the words obviously embrace, making due allowance for the existence of figures of speech when indicated by the context, scope or construction of the passage.²

Everything which might be said hereafter hinges on this. Every reason given for using the Bible in counseling or in apologetics or in ethics, or indeed in systematic theology, must begin here and must not forget it began here! This is the first touchstone or benchmark for interpretation. As we grow in learning and sophistication we are apt to forget our moorings. But we simply cannot proceed on in this subject without making this our starting point.

Towards a Definition of Progressive Revelation

Progressive revelation relies in the first instance upon the competence of how that revelation has been communicated. To deny this point is to cast doubt upon the utility of the modifier “progressive.” Revelation has to reveal or else it is not a revelation. Progressive revelation has to reveal progressively in a logically connectable way in order to be what it claims to be and to substantiate itself.

The Example of the Trinity

Think about the doctrine of the Trinity. It is a classic illustration of progressive revelation. As it starts out the Bible introduces God. Then it speaks about the Spirit of God who broods in contemplation over the unformed mass (Gen. 1:2). We get to the *schema* (Deut. 6:4), and we learn that the God who is “one” (*echad* – which can mean a plurality in unity as in Gen. 2:24) is perhaps just such a plurality in unity. Numbers 6:24-26 hints also at this, as of course do the inner discussions of God with Himself (the “let us” passages) in Genesis 1:26, and 10:4, 7, and the occurrence of the Visitor to Abraham, who, as Yahweh

² George N. H. Peters, *The Theocratic Kingdom*, 1.47.

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called down fire and brimstone from Yahweh in heaven in Genesis 19:24. Then we read Psalm 110:1 and Proverbs 8:22-31 add to the picture of a Deity who is alone God but is not unitarian. Indeed, Messiah is given Divine attributes in Micah 5:2 and is called “Immanuel” in Isaiah 7:14 and “Mighty God” in Isaiah 9:6. Yahweh is betrayed for thirty pieces of silver in Zechariah 11:12-13.

Without pressing the point too much the Book of Judges is filled with the activity of the Spirit of God. David says, in 2 Samuel 23:2: “The Spirit of the LORD spoke by me, And His word was on my tongue.” In Isaiah 48:16 we have the following intriguing passage:

Come near to Me, hear this: I have not spoken in secret from the beginning; From the time that it was, I was there. And now the Lord GOD and His Spirit Have sent Me.

The Spirit of God “grieves” (Isa. 63:10), and sends (Zech. 7:12). The New Covenant activity of the Spirit in the prophetic literature is pronounced: e.g. Joel 2:28-29; Isa. 32:15; Ezek. 36:27; 37:14; 39:29; Zech. 12:10. Throughout the OT the picture is being built up.

Once we come to the NT we are on unmistakable Trinitarian territory: e.g. Jn. 1:1-3, 18, 32-34; 14:7-21; 16:7-15; Rom. 8:14-17; Heb. 9:14, 10:29, etc.

The Example of Jesus Christ

Think about the OT predictions about Christ. I have provided a handful below:

- He would come from the tribe of Judah – Gen. 49:10 – c. 1750 B.C.
- His garments would be divided and His robe gambled for – Psa. 22:18 – c. 1000 B.C.
- His bones would not be broken – Psa. 34:20
- He would be born in Bethlehem Ephrathah – Mic. 5:2 – c. 700 B.C.
- He would be born of a virgin – Isa. 7:14 – c. 700 B.C.
- He would be the heir to the throne of David – Isa. 9:7
- He would be rejected – Isa. 53:3
- He would be buried with the rich – Isa. 53:9
- He would die for others – Dan. 9:26 – c. 539 B.C.
- He would be betrayed and the purchase money would be used to buy a potter’s field – Zech. 11:12-13 – c. 520 B.C.

This is not meant to be a comprehensive list, and I have been careful to select

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prophecies which can be clearly related to Christ's first coming. This is the sort of list one would use to prove to the non-believer that Jesus was indeed the Messiah prophesied in the OT. Please notice something very important. None of these predictions contradict or impinge on any of the others. They may impart some different information not given in other revelations, but they can all be taken as read without being specially groomed to point in the desired direction. In point of fact, it is crucial that they do so, for otherwise their usefulness for apologetic purposes would disappear. The "progressive" element in these examples depends upon a definition whereby one revelation is supplemented by others in a step by step manner without any interference of subsequent revelation upon the meaning of former revelation. What I mean by "interference" is not that certain aspects of a previous declaration cannot be clarified. I only mean that later revelation cannot act upon earlier revelations in such a way as it turns earlier revelation into an impenetrable mystery wherein the words of God do not in fact mean what they appeared to mean.

Verbal Consistency

The words revealed over time must be able to be traced so that the picture converges in the listeners mind. It does not transform from one definite portrayal, put there by God's words, into another picture completely. A true progression must be tracked as such. This means the earlier revelation must in some way determine the boundaries of the revelation. It cannot be that a set of disclosures, vitally linked together to reveal a certain subject (say, Messiah, or the land grant to Israel), may admit to wholesale ambiguities. Revelation is not a brainteaser written in code. such would be a contradiction in terms. There must be commonality around the subject of the disclosure. This is exactly what we see in the examples given above.

For instance, when Isaiah predicted that "**the virgin would conceive and bring forth a son**" (Isa. 7:14), the expectation of a miraculous virgin conception was set in stone. It would be no good if Jesus had been born as a result of normal sexual relations between Joseph and Mary to then claim that the prophecy was fulfilled because she was a virgin the night before Jesus was conceived. The revelation would not admit to that. Even though there is a single revelation, the way of progress is circumscribed.

The whole idea of progression in this sense must incorporate constancy of meaning. Like coming across leopard tracks in the snow; following them would lead you to a leopard. It would not lead you to a bear. Bears have different signatures. Just so, when God reveals He leaves a verbal signature which can be tracked. It cannot eventuate in a result which the revelation has rendered us totally unprepared for.

In view of this I offer the following working definition of progressive revelation:

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"Progressive Revelation is the view that supplemental disclosures about a particular subject are built upon and traceable back to an original grounding revelation. The combined witness to the subject must evidence enough commonality so as to present a comprehensible picture of the subject which can be cross-checked and verified against every instance of the progression."

We have seen that the idea of progressive revelation is connected to two things: the intent behind the communication, and the boundaries prescribed by previous revelation/communication. I have said that these two concerns, together with a definition of the adjective "progressive" as building or augmenting one thing upon another, necessitates an approach in which the picture does not change out of recognition, but is trackable both forwards and backwards from every point in the progression. This implies that the progressions are self-evident at every point along the line of revelation, even though the full picture may not be seen for what it is until the very end. This in turn produced the definition (above).

When "Progressive Revelation" Becomes Misleading

Notice that commonality and continuity of ideas are essential to this definition. If there is ambiguity there is always uncertainty about what is being revealed, and the "progression" may not appear as a true advancement. If that is the case the terminology "progressive revelation" only refers at best to the *completed* revelation, but not the *process* of revelation. This makes the adjective "progressive" misleading, for if one cannot trace the progression, then it hardly deserves to be called either "progressive" nor "revelation."

However, many ideas about progressive revelation do not include these salient ingredients of clear commonality and continuity. Consider these statements from Graeme Goldsworthy:

We begin with the New Testament because it is there that we encounter the Christ of the gospel, through whom by faith we are made God's children.³

...hermeneutics aims at showing the significance of the text in the light of the gospel. To interpret an Old Testament text we establish its relationship to the revelation of God in Jesus Christ...Our whole study of progressive revelation goes to show that the Gospel event is the reality which determines all that goes before and after it.⁴

³ Graeme Goldsworthy, "Gospel and Kingdom," in The Goldsworthy Trilogy, 48.

⁴ Ibid, 123, 125.

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Notice here that interpretation of revelation must begin where it ends: at the Christ event (which is reduced to the first coming). Thus, any “progress” in the revelation can *only* be seen from the final vantage point; it cannot be seen while it is being accumulated. Not only that, but Goldsworthy has confined God’s revelation to those “whom by faith... are made God’s children”, so that it wasn’t and isn’t a revelation to all who come across it. One upshot of this view is that one should not expect to use progressive revelation with the unbeliever for apologetic purposes, for the revelation can only be seen to be such by the believer. This turns progressive revelation into an esoteric thing.

We see the same thing here:

God’s gospel message is always the same. Yet God reveals it progressively with ever increasing clarity and fullness until he completes its disclosure in the New Testament.⁵

By gospel reformation Christ spiritually transforms God’s people from Hebrew Israel under the old covenant to Christian Israel under the new.⁶

In this view then, one must start at the end and interpret OT revelation from the perspective of its *transformation* in the NT.

If we go back to the leopard tracks illustration, leopard tracks lead to leopards, not to bears. It is no great help saying they are both animals and we are following animal tracks, because we are following definite animal tracks determined by the beast that made them. Their specificity cannot be ignored, and any asserted rough commonalities between leopards and bears will do nothing to disguise the fact that a leopard *is not* a bear. There exists a lack of constancy between the progress of the tracks we are following and the bear which could *not* have made them.

Discontinuous Continuity

It would be absurd for a person who professed to come across a bear to claim that the bear made the leopard tracks he was following. Even so, a person who looks back from Christ’s first coming and declares that the covenants which promised land and Davidic throne and prosperity to national Israel are “transformed” or “expanded” so that they are fulfilled spiritually by the Church, is acting the same way. Discontinuity in the meaning of words often features large of such approaches. In reality, this is a *non-progressive* approach, wherein any supposed connections between the building blocks of revelation (i.e.

5 Greg Nichols, *Covenant Theology: A Reformed and Baptist Perspective on God’s Covenants*, 131.

6 Ibid, 115.

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progressions) are not self-evident but merely dogmatically asserted to be such. What is on view here is not progressive revelation, it is “supercessive” or “substitutive”, “transformative”, or at least “revised” revelation, wherein one entity is switched out for another or morphed into something else.

It can easily be demonstrated that there is an inspired intertextual usage of earlier OT texts by later OT writers: earlier covenants are cited unchanged in Psa. 89:33-37; 105:6-12; 106:30-31; 132:11-12; Jer. 33:17-18, 20-22, 25-26; Ezek. 37:14, 21-26).

When we come to “land” in Genesis 13 and 15, we find it to be interpreted as the very same “land” hundreds of years later in Psalm 105:6-11:

To give an example:

- 6 O seed of Abraham His servant, You children of Jacob, His chosen ones!
- 7 He is the LORD our God; His judgments are in all the earth.
- 8 He remembers His covenant forever, The word which He commanded, for a thousand generations,
- 9 The covenant which He made with Abraham, And His oath to Isaac,
- 10 And confirmed it to Jacob for a statute, To Israel as an everlasting covenant,
- 11 Saying, “To you I will give the land of Canaan As the allotment of your inheritance,”

And when, during the Exile we reach Jeremiah 16, the “land” still hasn’t changed:

- 13 ‘Therefore I will cast you out of this land into a land that you do not know, neither you nor your fathers; and there you shall serve other gods day and night, where I will not show you favor.’
- 14 “Therefore behold, the days are coming,” says the LORD, “that it shall no more be said, ‘The LORD lives who brought up the children of Israel from the land of Egypt,’
- 15 “but, ‘The LORD lives who brought up the children of Israel from the land of the north and from all the lands where He had driven them.’ For I will bring them back into their land which I gave to their fathers.

Notice that the expectation of future restoration and blessing, in continuity with

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the patriarchal narratives, is still held out after the Babylonian Captivity. Moreover, this does not disappear in the NT era: Lk. 1:31-33; 19:11; Acts 1:6; 26:7; Rom. 11:25-29.

This example fits with those we gave in Part Two and with the stress on effective communication in Part One.

Without trying to get too complicated; on the view of men like Goldsworthy and Nichols (and very many others), all that is meant by “progressive” is that something God said about ‘X’ at T1 (i.e. Time index 1) looked like such and such, while what God said about ‘X’ at T2, T3, T4, etc., looked to be in line with earlier revelations. Yet when all the “progressions” in what God said concerning ‘X’ are completed, the final picture bears no necessary resemblance to what might have been expected at T1 through T4. Because of this, the “progress” which is claimed to have occurred to produce the completed picture cannot be checked against “revelations” T1 to T4. This is a scenario where the description of the final outcome and definition “progressive revelation,” defies the name given to it.

Revelation Cannot Be Divorced From the Character of the Revealer

Plain-speaking is usually thought to be a virtue. One should say what one means. On the other hand, it is not a virtue to use words which one knows beforehand may lead another person to conclude we mean one thing, when, in actuality, we mean something more obscure and inscrutable, or even utterly different.

To show how impactful this truth is, I’ll pick an example from another sphere. In his recent book against the false claims of Richard Dawkins, Jonathan Sarfati writes this:

It is...disingenuous for an ardent antitheist like Dawkins to profess concern about a creator’s alleged deception. However, biblical creationists respond that the real deception would be for a creator to use evolution then tell us in the Bible something diametrically opposed in every respect – the time frame, the method, the order of events, and the origin of death and suffering.⁷

The complaint against Dawkins stems from his blindness to his own presuppositions. However, the thrust of this statement is not against Dawkins, but against any “creator” who would employ language to beguile his creatures. Like a person who deceives a dog into running after a stick which she only pretends to throw, the kind of god who would “reveal” the creative work in the words of Genesis 1 and 2 when, as a matter of fact, he did it by evolution, would deserve to be labelled, as Sarfati says, “disingenuous.”

⁷ Jonathan Sarfati, *The Greatest Hoax On Earth?*, 26

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As I have said more than once before, our definition of “revelation” requires that we say something about the character of God. As one OT scholar puts it, “Revelation as an act of God reveals our God, with all of his goodness and perfections.”⁸ It also requires of us that we don’t forget this link between revelation and God’s character. Our doctrine of revelation is the bedrock of what ever else we as Christians might want to say. Revelation entails clarity of intention. In speaking about “progressive revelation” we are always talking about the character and consistency of the Revelator. For God to lead us into thinking He did X when He in fact did Y would be, as the example above declares, a disingenuous thing to do.

In light of this let us consider what someone like Willem VanGemeran says about progressive revelation.

VanGemeran says that God’s Name “I Am who I am” may communicate the fact that,

Yahweh declares that he is free in the progression of fulfillment of his promises...Further, no one can predict how or when he will work out the full redemption of his people (cf. Acts 1:7).⁹

Using Acts 1:7 to support his statement is a bit of a stretch. There the Lord Jesus was simply telling the disciples that it wasn’t for them to know the times or seasons when the kingdom would be restored to Israel (see v.6). Hence, Acts 1:7 in its context supports the idea of “progression” I have commended in these articles: that of supplemental revelation which can be traced backwards and forwards through all the others in the set. The revelation cannot undergo transformation in any sense which would affect that understanding of “progression”, otherwise the term itself becomes equivocal (that is to say, “progressive revelation” would mean different things depending on whether one is talking from an OT or a NT perspective).

VanGemeran himself restricts this “freedom” of God by making it clear that God’s acts “in fulfillment of his promises are intended to instill...confidence that he is faithful and able to deliver them.”¹⁰ This is an important point for him. Earlier he writes,

The purpose of the revelatory Word of God is to prepare individuals to respond to that Word when it is addressed to them.¹¹

⁸ Willem VanGemeran, *The Progress of Redemption*, (Paternoster), 446

⁹ Ibid, 149

¹⁰ Ibid, 150.

¹¹ Ibid, 155.

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Saying What We Mean

Nevertheless, in reading VanGemeren one senses that the underlying reason for the “freedom” and unpredictability of how God will work it all out, (and his use of Acts 1:7), is because he believes in wholesale *alterations* to what was to be expected based on earlier revelations in the set. This would involve tinkering with the word “progressive” to make it mean something like “modified.” The modification usually involves the substitution of one thing for another, and this significant alteration of *specified content* within the promises becomes not terribly unlike the homologous “adaptations” we’re all familiar with in evolutionary dogma.

Biblical theologian Charles Scobie avers that,

Later revelation can add to and modify what was revealed in the earlier stages.¹²

But then he adds a note of caution in using the term “progressive revelation”, noticing that some scholars avoid the term altogether. One can see why some prefer this option, especially if their view of “progression” involves discontinuities between earlier (esp. OT) and later (esp. NT) “revelation.”

To avoid confusion then, it would be better if those promoting “transformative revelation” would not utilize “progressive revelation” to describe a “progression” which is only really progressive because it is declared nominalistically to be so. We also should say what we mean by choosing the right word for what we are doing.

One is prompted to ask these “modificationists” why words taken one way in their original proclamation have of necessity to mean something different when their fulfillment is announced centuries later. For necessity there has to be, because God does nothing by caprice. There seems no reasonable excuse not to state somewhere in the OT: “The time is coming when I will dissolve national boundaries and make out of all nations one people who will inherit the whole earth.” But, although it may come as a surprise to some, there is no such promise. In fact, there are very clear promises, progressively revealed, which give the lie to such expectations. The comparative absence of similar references in the NT does not argue for a dismissal of the original OT words of promise and a re-application of some of them somewhere else.

Earlier in this article I referenced some things to which I should now like to return. Even before getting into what is meant when the two words “progressive revelation” are brought together, I said that we needed to settle on what revelation is. At bottom revelation is communication from God to man. The next question up is, how *accessible* a communication is it? Is it both constant and

¹² Charles H. H. Scobie, *The Ways of Our God*, 91.

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consistent? That is to say, does the revelation crop up repeatedly, and/or unequivocally? Does it have a character which is traceable backwards and forwards?

What Did You Expect?

I gave the examples of the Trinity and the Messianic prophecies to do with the first coming. I illustrated it by imagining tracking leopard tracks in the snow. One would expect the tracks to lead to a leopard. In the same way, a reliable progressive communication about a subject through time would produce an expectation based on the data contained *in the words* being revealed (unless the words were incompetent or else deliberately misleading). Just as one would *not* expect leopard tracks to lead to a bear, one would not expect OT predictions of Christ to be fulfilled in someone born in Jerusalem, from the tribe of Asher, begotten through an earthly father. Why? Because the those things were not part of what was communicated! And any “transformation” in the subject’s identity along the line of progression would manifestly terminate said progression!

Yet this is precisely what many evangelicals teach when they refer to “progressive revelation.” I provided some examples. One more is found in Michael Lawrence’s book, *Biblical Theology in the Life of the Church*. In his book, Lawrence makes a case for progressive revelation early on. He puts forth four features of progressive revelation as he understands it. The first is that Scripture was revealed at different points in history. This says nothing about the content of revelation or the nature of its progression other than it wasn’t given all at once. However, he does seem to say that the progression is fulfilled at “**the incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.**”¹³ That is to say, the progression is fulfilled at the first coming.

Lawrence’s second feature highlights a common view among many evangelicals that revelation is all about redemptive history. Again, once this is noted we can move on to the next feature. Before we do, I shall just note that the fourth feature is about practicality, so we need not be detained by it. In fact, of the four characteristics of progressive revelation Lawrence supplies, only the third one touches on what progressive revelation actually is.

Lawrence’s third characteristic refers to the “organic nature” of progressive revelation. This term is commonly used by those with supercessionist tendencies. It is the lead-in to a brand of typological hermeneutics and the theology based upon it. He writes,

It doesn’t simply proceed like a construction site, which moves progressively from blueprint to finished building. Rather it unfolds and

¹³ Michael Lawrence, *Biblical Theology in the Life of the Church*, 27.

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develops from seed-form to full-grown tree. In seed form, the minimum and beginning of saving revelation is given. By the end, that simple truth has revealed itself as complex and rich, multilayered and profoundly beautiful. It's this character of revelation that's going to help us understand the typological character of Scripture, the dynamic of promise and fulfillment, and the presence of both continuity and discontinuity across redemptive history.¹⁴

He will state that the discontinuity is that indicated in the Book of Hebrews between the temporary Old Covenant and the eternal New Covenant in Christ. The movement of progression is “the movement between shadow and reality” (80). To describe it in terms of our illustration: this translates into following leopard tracks and discovering that they lead to something utterly unexpected. The tracks, if literally interpreted as belonging to a leopard, would mislead the tracker.

But allow me to make some observations on the larger quote:

First, you will notice that in the opening sentence Lawrence uses the adjective “progressive” in the way we have been recommending in this article. When you look at the blueprint you can follow the building process till you see what you expected to see – a building. But he rejects this meaning.

Second then, he says the progression is akin to a simple seed which grows into a complex tree. The idea seems to be that because a seed is very different looking than the tree it grows into, so the words revealed progressively in the OT “grow” into a fulfillment which looks very different than what the prophecies would lead a person to expect. Of course, everyone knows what an acorn will grow into – and it isn't a gooseberry bush (I might also point out that leopard *prints* don't look like leopards).

Third, this “tree” illustration helps us understand “the typological character of Scripture.” That is, the revelation of God in the OT Scriptures communicated only shadows, not anything real. As we pointed out previously, the reality could not be known from the line of progression, but only in its “fulfillment” when it became something different than was expected.

This brings us to a fourth observation: the “progression” was merely that of historical pronouncements couched in types and shadows, not in plain language. All that is meant by “progressive” is “communication at different times.” Meanwhile, all “revelation” turns out to be is “obtuse disclosure” which would remain unclear and misleading until the “fulfillment” was announced!

So we get this:

¹⁴ Ibid, 27-28.

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“Progressive revelation amounts to obtuse disclosure, given at different times, which would remain unclear and possibly even misleading until the “fulfillment” was finally announced.”

Try *that* as an apologetic tool!

Objection 1 Revisited

In my previous response to the objection about cultural-historical distance (the ‘two horizons’ problem), I stated:

if God wanted me to know the overarching meaning of the events in the Bible then He would have to have it communicated to me in a way that diminishes the temporal – cultural obstacles which would arise. Granted, there are many ancient understandings of which I am ignorant, but these difficulties would have to be but a small part of the overall communication which God as Author wanted me one day to read and assimilate.

I want to extend this answer by making two more points. The first is that any denial of this statement would have of necessity to lean heavily on cultural and historical data discovered only relatively recently, and still not fully and harmoniously understood. We would be required to accept a chronologically formed esoteric hermeneutics wherein much of the OT could not be understood without recently acquired specialist or “insider” knowledge. Bang! would go the clarity and sufficiency of Scripture.

In the second place, this would do absolutely nothing to address the clear examples given above; both of the Trinity and the coming of Messiah, and also the intertextual quotations of covenant promises I have adduced in Part Two. Since these clear examples give the lie to defining progressive revelation in such obfuscatory terms as Lawrence’s view leads to, this objection falls to the ground.

So what is Progressive Revelation? We begin to see that it really depends on who you ask and how their theologies permit them to answer.

In this final section of the article I intend to do three things. First, I will be drawing the conclusion that there are two very different ideas and hence definitions of “progressive revelation” (PR), and both operative words mean something very different both separately and together, depending on who is using them. Thus, there is no really agreed upon definition of this term within Evangelicalism (or, indeed, biblical studies generally). Second, I want to quickly address the straw man issue (I’ll call it Objection 2). This is in case someone says that I have misrepresented the position of covenant theologians. I have not, and I shall furnish a couple more examples to prove it. Finally, in line with my call for plain

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speech and good communication, I want to close by asking which position on progressive revelation really is what one would be led to think it is.

Two Conflicting Ideas: And the Importance of Recognizing Fuzzy Definitions

The definition of progressive revelation which I have been commending in this article is as follow.

“Progressive Revelation is the view that supplemental disclosures about a particular subject are built upon and traceable back to an original grounding revelation. The combined witness to the subject must evidence enough commonality so as to present a comprehensible picture of the subject which can be cross-checked and verified against every instance of the progression.”

From what I have written in support of this definition several things come out:

1. Revelation is, for the most part, unambiguous clear communication or it is not good communication
2. The progressive revealing must be amenable to tracking so as to ensure it is cohesive and non-contradictory.
3. The idea of progressive revelation, then, also carries the notion of *expectancy*, based on the content of what God revealed.

Corollaries to this include (based upon the alternative use):

4. If what is declared to be the fulfillment of PR is not at all what one would be led to expect by what came before, then the revelation was not clear (at least until the very last), because the progress did not lead up to what was supposed. A kind of bait and switch was involved all along.
5. This contradicts cases of PR which can be shown to exhibit clarity and coherence from start to finish (like prophecies of Messiah. or God’s triunity).
6. The problem appears to enter in when the text is not driving some versions of PR, but rather is being used in the service of a more domineering theological perspective.

In light of these observations, we must conclude that versions of Progressive Revelation which allow, and even necessitate, unforeseeable “twists” at the end of the “progress”, make PR (especially in the OT) uncertain and unreliable, and render the whole concept practically meaningless. This is so since where the

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true meaning cannot be known till the “fulfillment” is declared, no gradual revealing has really occurred.

Hence, those who admit ambiguity into their idea of PR should define their terms better so as not to mislead people. And as I have had cause to [show before](#), a theology which permits such equivocation also *promotes* equivocation in those who must defend it. How often has this writer had to point out to some brother that their theological arguments are riddled with ambiguous use of terms (e.g. “land”, “Israel”, “temple”, “throne”, “promise”, “love”, etc.). Surely, this is not the result of the biblical revelation itself, but of imposing human ideas on that revelation?

Since the Fall our default position has been to reason independently of God and His revelation. We, like Eve, want to assess the rationality of God’s words. If what He says seems reasonable to us, we will accept it. If it seems unreasonable, we will alter it. This is what happened with the disciples in John 21:21-23. Jesus stated to Peter concerning John, “[If I want him to remain until I come, what is that to you? You follow Me!](#)”

But then what happened? The disciples allowed their reason a magisterial role in interpretation, and they came up with this:

[Therefore this saying went out among the brethren that that disciple would not die \(v.23a\).](#)

These were spiritual men, yet they still put reason above the words of Jesus and they came up with the wrong interpretation. To drive home this point the evangelist writes,

[...yet Jesus did not say to him that he would not die, but only, “If I want him to remain until I come, what is that to you?” \(v23b & c\).](#)

It is this problem which I believe is evident in the ambiguity of terms and definitions one meets with in some presentations of PR. Moreover, if covenant theology is to be believed, even after Jesus taught, “[of things concerning the kingdom of God](#)” (Acts 1:3), the PR up till then seems to have deceived Jesus’ own disciples. Their question, “[Lord, is it at this time You are restoring the kingdom to Israel?](#)” (Acts 1:6) was wholly mistaken according to Calvin, Goldsworthy, Beale and many others. Yet many of these men admit that previous revelation had encouraged this very expectation.

Progressive Revelation Opposing Itself – and Objection 2

Here one can expect to hear, “But we do *not* believe Progressive Revelation is equivocal”. Often the argument is that just as redemption is *historically* conditioned, so revelation is historically conditioned. Hence, revelation is

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incremental and thus progressive. There is an underlying issue which cannot be gone into here. This is the matter of understanding Scripture as (rather than including), a history of redemption, and interpreting it in those terms. Usually tied to this is the notion of theological covenants, and the belief that the NT [reinterprets the OT](#). Each of these dogmas involves arguments from silence to nullify expectations raised by PR up to that point, and prevarication over terms. For example,

In his book, *God of Promise* Michael Horton rightly ties the Davidic covenant in with the Abrahamic covenant and makes them incapable of annulment (44). This agrees with Galatians 3:15. But he then makes strategic terms typological (45), and wrongly ties the land grant given to Abraham's seed to the Mosaic covenant and *not* the Abrahamic covenant (47). He does this because it seems he can see nothing in the Abrahamic covenant but the promise of redemption (48). Therefore, if there is any progressive revelation in the outworking of the Abrahamic covenant it is shrouded in types and is stripped of its very prominent land promise. This is done (in Horton's case) by reinterpreting the OT covenants in terms of theological covenants inferred from a peculiar interpretation of the NT (e.g. 47, 48, 72-73). As is the case with covenant theologians, the record playing in the background is always their own set of NT interpretations. Even so,

Just as Israel had its book from God, so does the new Israel, the church, have its book, which is an already-not yet eschatological unpacking of the meaning of Israel's book.¹⁵

Progressive revelation cannot flourish within such a "dysfunctional" outlook. For in this view Israel's book contains in types major teachings discoverable only through the Church's book. It does not do any good pointing to OT types in the sacrifices of Israel to bolster these claims. For one thing, the promise of the coming Redeemer was in place before these institutions were set up, and any types were *conditioned* by that prior revelation. For another, we must be somewhat careful not to get too elaborate in our typological schemes, and we must always realize that our typologies are too conveniently tied to our own systems to build doctrines upon. And so we end up with a non-progressive obfuscation. G. K. Beale can claim,

Mark 10:45 depicts Jesus as beginning to fulfill the Daniel prophecy [7:13] *in an apparently different way than prophesied...in a hitherto unexpected manner.*¹⁶

Perhaps one of the most striking features of Jesus' kingdom is that it appears *not to be the kind of kingdom prophesied in the OT and*

15 – G. K. Beale, *A New Testament Biblical Theology*, 830

16 Ibid, 195 (my emphasis)

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expected by Judaism¹⁷

The word [*musterion*] elsewhere, when so linked with OT allusions, is used to indicate that prophecy is beginning fulfillment but *in an unexpected manner in comparison to the way OT readers might have expected...*¹⁸

Beale even thinks the OT believers were simply unable to comprehend the clearer revelation (643). But why, we may ask, was that? Surely because they had been conditioned what to expect by previous revelation?

Once again a dilemma is created for the conception of a progressive revelation. For “unexpected” outcomes of promises supposedly fulfilled, “in an apparently different way than prophesied,” upends the whole notion contained in either word in the term “progressive revelation,” flipping it on its head.

Making Progressive Revelation Make Sense

It appears that if we are going to preserve a concept of progressive revelation which does justice to the normal meaning of both words, we will have to accept a definition which incorporates the idea of traceability from A to Z and back again. This will require of us that we do not employ the term if we believe the revelation has been “subject to change” (Horton) in the OT, or once we have passed from the OT into the New. If we think any “transformation” (Beale) has taken place, we are better off adopting a different term so as to avoid confusing people. A “progression” which makes a bear spring up at the end of a series of leopard tracks belies the gradualism implicit in the word itself. In the same train, a “revelation” that fails to communicate what God had in mind *all the time*, until it is finally revised, is not really revealing anything until the revision occurs. As I have had cause to say elsewhere, “for covenant theologians, progressive revelation is not very progressive (as in one idea augmented by another), but is rather supercessive revelation (as in one idea being displaced by another).”

My main purpose in this article is simply to demonstrate that the name “Progressive Revelation” has to point to what the words which are used would lead people to expect, for otherwise, good communication has *not* occurred.

17 Ibid, 431 (my emphasis)

18 Ibid, 202 (my emphasis)

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