

Scripture reveals certain principles needed for the proper and faithful interpretation of that book. These principles have to be recognized as Bible students seek to properly understand the Word.

One of these principles is called "the law of first-mention". It's a principle that has received hardly any attention in books written on hermeneutics, and one can only come to the conclusion that this principle has fallen into disuse.

What is this "Law of First-Mention" or "First-Occurrence Principle"?

The "law of first-mention" is the principle in the interpretation of Scripture which states that the first mention or occurrence of a subject in Scripture establishes an unchangeable pattern, with that subject remaining unchanged in the mind of God throughout Scripture.

Down through the years this important principle has been recognized by able commentators of the Bible.

A. T. Pierson called it "the Divine Law of Firsts."

Benjamin Willis Newton (Brethren movement, 19th century), wrote about this principle:

"I find in Scripture a principle of interpretation, which I believe, if conscientiously adopted, will serve as an unfailing guide as to the mind of God as contained therein. The first mention of a thing, the very first words of any subject of which the Holy Spirit is going to treat, is the keystone of the whole matter."

Arthur Pink wrote in his book "Interpretation of the Scriptures":

The law of first-mention. Very frequently this is of great help in arriving at the meaning of a word or expression. Since there be but one Speaker throughout the entire Word, and He knew from the beginning all that He was going to say, He has so ordered His utterances as to forecast from the outset whatever was to follow. Thus, by noting its setting and associations, the initial occurrence of anything in the Scriptures usually intimates to us how it subsequently will be employed. In other words, the earliest pronouncement of the Holy Spirit on a subject very frequently indicates, substantially, what is found in the later references thereto. This is of real assistance to the expositor, supplying him with a kind of key to what follows. So far as we are aware, attention was originally directed to this canon of exegesis by Lord Bacon (1600) , and for more than forty years this writer has made use of the same, putting it to the test in scores of instances; and while he has found a few cases where the first mention of a term failed to intimate clearly its future scope, he has never met with one that was out of harmony therewith; and the vast majority of them were invaluable in serving to define their significance and scope. This will appear from the illustrations which follow.

The first prophecy recorded in Scripture supplies the key to the whole subject of Messianic prediction, furnishing a remarkable outline and forecast of all that was to follow. Said the Lord God to the serpent, " And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel" (Gen. 3: 15) .

First, it is to be noted that those words were not addressed to Adam and Eve, implying

that man was not the immediate party in the covenant of recovery; that it depended not upon anything of, by, or from him.

Second, that this Divine pronouncement was made after the fall, and from this point onwards prophecy is always consequent upon human failure, not coming in during the normal state of affairs, but only when ruin has begun and judgment is impending -- the next prophecy was through Enoch (Jude 14, 15) just before the Flood! In the prophecy of Genesis 3: 15, it was revealed that all human hope was to center in a Coming One. It made known that the Coming One should be man, the woman's "seed," and therefore of supernatural birth. It announced that He would be the object of Satan's enmity. It foretold that He should be temporarily humiliated -- bruised in His heel. It also proclaimed His ultimate victory, for He should bruise the serpent's head, and therefore must be more than man. It intimated the age-long strife there would be between the two seeds: the children of the Devil and those united unto Christ.

And the Lord said unto Cain, "What hast thou done? the voice of thy brother's blood crieth unto Me from the ground" (Gen. 4:10).

That is the first time that all-important word "blood" is mentioned in the Scriptures, and like all the initial occurrences of fundamental terms it well re-pays the most careful attention and meditation. Profoundly important is this reference, foreshadowing as it does some of the most essential and outstanding features of the atonement of Christ.

Abel was a shepherd (Gen. 4:2) and was hated, though without cause, by his brother (I John 3: 12). He did not die a natural death, but met with a violent end: as the good Shepherd was crucified and slain by wicked hands (Acts 2:23). In the light of those facts, how deeply significant are the words "the voice of thy brother's blood crieth unto Me." That is the all-important but inexpressibly blessed thing in connection with the blood of Christ: it is vocal Godwards! It is "the blood of sprinkling, that speaketh better things than that of Abel" (Heb. 12:24), for it satisfied every demand of God and procured inestimable blessing for His people.

The next mention of "blood" is in Genesis 9:4, where we learn that life is in the blood.

The third reference is Exodus 12: 13, where it delivers from the avenging angel. Put the three together and we have a complete outline of all the subsequent teaching of Scripture upon the blood. They treat, respectively, of death, life, salvation.

The law of first-mention opens up Scripture in a way God has not treasured up in any of His other principles of Biblical interpretation. Scripture passages that are otherwise unknown to the Bible student, present Biblical truths of utter beauty and serve as a basis to open up other passages in Scripture.