

The Law of First-Mention

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(Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from the NASB)

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.

Arlen Chitwood presented some of these beautiful truths in his writings:

There is a law of “first-mention” in Scriptural interpretation which states that the first time a subject is mentioned, the subject remains unchanged throughout Scripture.

Exodus chapter seventeen presents the first mention following the Exodus of Satan’s move against Israel, along with God’s attitude toward this move. Thus, the pattern is set in this chapter for Satan’s strategy in his efforts to destroy Israel through the use of Gentile national powers, and the pattern is also set (based on previously revealed principles) concerning God’s attitude toward a Gentile nation which would allow itself to be so used. The basic principles governing God’s attitude toward and treatment of individuals or nations participating in anti-Semitism were established during the days of Abraham (Gen. 12:3), and these principles, as the principles governing the law of first mention in Exodus chapter seventeen, remain unchanged throughout Scripture.

(Arlen Chitwood: *By Faith*)

Two cities figure prominently in events on earth during the 2,600-year period covering “the times of the Gentiles”: Jerusalem, and Babylon. And these two cities, both mentioned very early in Scripture (Gen. 10:10; 14:18), stand in complete contrast to one another at every point. Babylon is **first mentioned** in connection with Nimrod (the name means “rebel,” “one who revolts”), and Jerusalem is first mentioned in connection with Melchizedek (meaning, “King of peace” [Heb. 7:2]), **establishing first-mention principles which hold constant throughout Scripture.**

(Arlen Chitwood: *Focus on the Middle East*)

The “cherubim” (singular, “cherub”) are **first mentioned in Scrip-**

ture in connection with the earth's government, **establishing an unchangeable way** — a first-mention principle — in which angels designated by this name are seen throughout Scripture. They are first seen in Scripture guarding the entrance to the garden in Eden following man being driven from the garden because of sin. They were placed as guardians to prevent man from reentering the garden, in his fallen state, and eating of the tree of life — the tree which would have provided (and will yet future provide) the wisdom and knowledge for man to rule and reign over the earth.

And a “mountain” in Scripture signifies a kingdom. Satan, in his unfallen state, was given a kingdom (this earth), and he was placed, by God, in the position of the messianic angel (the ruling angel) over this “mountain,” this kingdom (v. 14).

(Arlen Chitwood: *From Acts to the Epistles*)

Genesis 14:18, 19 provides the first mention of heavenly blessings associated with Abraham and his seed, though such was in view within God's original promise to Abraham in Ur of the Chaldees, as recorded in Gen. 12:1-3. And this first mention of heavenly promises and blessings appears in a Messianic type.

Melchizedek, one of two central figures forming the Messianic type (Abraham being the other) is also presented in Scripture for the first time in this passage. The type surrounds that day when Christ will come forth in the antitype of Melchizedek, as the great King-Priest in Jerusalem, with bread and wine (cf. Matt. 26:29), and bless Abraham and his descendants — both heavenly and earthly.

Thus, **more than one first-mention principle is established in Gen. 14:18, 19**, and that which is established in this passage remains constant throughout Scripture. Heavenly and earthly blessings reside only in the seed of Abraham (something which never changes in Scripture), and these blessings will be realized during that coming day when Christ exercises the Melchizedek priesthood.

(Arlen Chitwood: *From Egypt to Canaan*)

The connection of “God's breath” with life (the connection between II Tim. 3:16 and Heb. 4:12) is given in Gen. 2:7. Man was not created alive. Rather, man was formed from the dust of the ground as an inanimate, lifeless being. Then God, through breathing into His lifeless new creation, imparted life. God “breathed into his [Adam's] nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul.”

This is the first mention in Scripture of life in relation to man, **establishing a first-mention principle which can never change throughout Scripture.** Any time beyond this point in Scripture when one finds life in relation to man, this life must always be effected by means of “the breath of God.” There must always be a breathing in on God’s part in order for life to exist (cf. Ezek. 37:1-10; Luke 8:54, 55).

(Arlen Chitwood: *From Egypt to Canaan*)

The context of Rev. 1:10 and central message of the book clearly reveal that the writer, through the use of the expression, “the Lord’s day,” could have had only one thing in mind — the future “day of the Lord.” John was not only removed from the Isle of Patmos and taken to heaven but he was also moved forward in time to the end of the present dispensation. He was transported to a place and time where he saw Christ occupying His future position as Judge in the midst of His Church (1:11-20). And from that point forward, the Book of Revelation has to do with things either anticipating judgment (chs. 2, 3, 5), with judgment itself (chs. 1, 6-20, or with things resulting from judgment (chs. 4, 19, 21, 22) during “the Lord’s day,” “the day of the Lord.”

The first reference to the Day of the Lord in Scripture **forms a first-mention principle, establishing a meaning and usage for this day which holds constant throughout Scripture.** The Day of the Lord is first mentioned in Isa. 2:12 as a day when the “lofty looks of man shall be humbled, and the haughtiness of men shall be bowed down, and the Lord alone shall be exalted” (vv.11-17). To bring the latter to pass (the Lord’s exaltation), the Day of the Lord is always associated in Scripture with God’s judgment, both upon man and the material creation. Judgment during this day falls first upon the Church (cf. Rev. 1:10-20; I Thess. 5:2-4), then upon Israel and the Gentile nations (cf. Rev. 6:1ff; Joel 1:15; 2:1, 2, 11, 31; 3:14), and then upon the material creation (cf. Rev. 21:1; II Peter 3:10). This is the way the Book of Revelation is structured.

(Arlen Chitwood: *In the Lord’s Day*)

When Christ exercises the Melchizedek priesthood, He will have a dual reign. He will sit on His Own throne in the heavenly Jerusalem, ruling over the earth with His co-heirs, His consort queen; and He will also sit on David’s throne in the earthly Jerusalem in the midst of His people, Israel (the nation which will look upon the Pierced One and be saved at His second advent). Occupying a dual reign of this nature, Christ will thus be a King-Priest in both the heavenly Jerusalem and the earthly Jerusalem.

This will be in perfect keeping with both heavenly and earthly promises associated with Abraham and his seed, first brought to light in connection with the first mention of Melchizedek in Scripture (Gen. 14:18, 19). Melchizedek blessed Abraham as “possessor of heaven and earth”; and the seed of Abraham, both heavenly and earthly, are to “possess the gate of [rule over] his enemies” (Gen. 22:17, 18).

(Arlen Chitwood: *Let Us Go On*)

A first-mention principle has been established in Gen. 2:7, and life which man derives from God must always be acquired through the same means set forth in this verse. God alone initially “imparts” and subsequently “continues” and “sustains” life; and this is always accomplished, in its entirety, through the Neshamah of God.

(Arlen Chitwood: *The Neshamah*)

Now, the question: Why is the Word of God “alive,” “powerful,” and “sharper than any two-edged sword”? The answer: Because of its origin. The Word is “*Theopneustos*”; The Word is “God-breathed.”

But, what does that mean? And why is the Word “alive” because of its origin? This is where one has to go back to beginning points in the Old Testament and find the first mention in Scripture of God bringing a matter to pass through the use of His breath.

This is necessary not only because of the need to compare Scripture with Scripture but also because of a principle of Biblical interpretation, called, “**the first-mention principle.**” **This principle has to do with unchangeableness, and it centers around an unchangeable structure of the Word given by the unchangeable God. Because of the inherent nature of the Word, the first time a subject is mentioned in Scripture, a pattern, a mold is established at that point which remains unchanged throughout the remainder of Scripture.**

Remaining within this principle, the first time one finds the breath of God mentioned in Scripture is in Gen. 2:7, in connection with life imparted to man; and, consequently, at this beginning point, this verse connects life with the breath of God after an unchangeable fashion. God formed and fashioned man from the dust of the ground, but man was not created alive. Life was subsequently imparted through God breathing into man’s “nostrils the breath of life,” resulting in man becoming “a living soul.”

Thus, at this point in Scripture the unchangeable connection between God’s breath and life is established and set. Only God can

produce life, and any time life is produced beyond this point it must always be through the one means set forth at the beginning, revealed in Gen. 2:7.

(Arlen Chitwood: *Theopneustos*)

Thus, the law of first-mention unlocks many treasures in the Word of God, for the principle is always completely consistent throughout Scripture.

This can be seen quite clearly in the first mention of the word “**sword**” in Scripture. The word is first mentioned in Gen 3:24: “*So he drove the man out; and at the east of the garden of Eden He stationed the cherubim and the flaming sword which turned every direction to guard the way to the tree of life.*” The first mention of the word “sword” had to do with access or denial to the tree of life.

In Ephesians 6:17 we read: “The sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.” The principle in Gen. 3:24 shows what is mentioned here in Eph. 6:17. The Word of God here has to do with access or denial to the tree of life. This perfectly agrees with the context, which had to do with the Word of the Kingdom, not with the gospel of God’s grace.

It can also be seen in the word “**trumpet**” in Scripture. The first mention is in Exodus 19:13: “When the trumpet (ram’s horn) sounds a long blast, they shall come up to the mount.” The trumpet has to do with a gathering, whether for blessing, for war, or for judgment.

Note Matt. 24:31 and I Thess. 4:16 how this principle remains unchanged in Scripture.

However, the law of first-mention is not only limited to words, but can be applied also to concepts which appear for the first time in Scripture. For example, words such as “polygamy” and “monogamy” don’t appear in Scripture, but the first mention of this concept in Genesis 1 and 2, shows that monogamy — one man, one woman, with the union of the two forming one flesh — is the form for marriage in the mind of God. etc.

The law of first-mention shows that God’s truth doesn’t fluctuate, but that His truth is an evidence of His own steadfastness. This greatly challenges us as we press on to reach the end-goal of our faith (1 Peter 1:9), which necessitates our coming into a mature knowledge of His Word. And the principle of first-mention is therefore a principle which

Christians do well to heed in their study of the Word as they move toward that goal.