

The Continuum Biblical Studies Series

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The Continuum Biblical Studies Series is aimed at those taking a course of biblical studies. Developed for the use of those embarking on theological and ministerial education, it is equally helpful in local church situations, and for lay people confused by apparently conflicting approaches to the Scriptures.

Students of biblical studies today will encounter a diversity of interpretive positions. Their teachers will – inevitably – lean towards some positions in preference to others. This series offers an integrated approach to the Bible which recognizes this diversity, but helps readers to understand it, and to work towards some kind of unity within it.

This is an ecumenical series, written by Roman Catholics and Protestants. The writers are all professionally engaged in the teaching of biblical studies in theological and ministerial education. The books are the product of that experience, and it is the intention of the editor, Dr Steve Moyise, that their contents should be tested on this exacting audience.

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An Introduction

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Introduction

For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures. (1 Cor 15.3-4)

In this summary of the gospel, Paul is keen to demonstrate that the gospel he preaches is the same as that preached by the early disciples. He has not introduced novelty, as some are suggesting, nor does he claim any great originality. He passed on what he himself received. Having established this, he then moves on to the substance of the gospel. It concerns a person, namely Jesus Christ, though it is not clear whether *christos* is being used here as a name ('Jesus Christ died for our sins') or as a title ('the Messiah died for our sins'). Either way, the central thrust (judging by its repetition) is that his death and resurrection are both 'in accordance with the scriptures'. In other words, Christianity did not spring out of a vacuum but is in direct continuity with the religion enshrined in what Christians now call the Old Testament. Not only did Paul pass on what he himself received; the gospel itself is in accord with those writings which for centuries had been received and passed on by the Jews.

The emphasis here is on the death and resurrection of Jesus but Matthew also sees the details of Jesus' birth as a fulfilment of scripture. For example, in the infancy stories (Matt 1-2) we are told that scripture predicted the nature of his birth (1.23), its location in Bethlehem (2.6), the flight to Egypt and his departure when safe to do so (2.15), Herod's slaughter of the innocents (2.18) and his final settling at Nazareth (2.23). The stories are rehearsed each Christmas and taken by many to prove the supernatural origins of Christianity. Both the

beginning and end of Jesus' life is said to be 'in accordance with the scriptures'.

This is taken one stage further when Paul and other New Testament writers see the emergence of the Church (Gal 4.21–31), its persecution by the Jews (Rev 3.9), the inclusion of Gentiles (Rom 9.25) and even specific issues like choosing a replacement for Judas (Acts 1.20) and the payment of Church workers (1 Cor 9.9), as prophesied in scripture. The Old Testament (some scholars prefer 'First Testament') apparently contains a blueprint of events which would come to pass in the first century. And this is supported (then and now) by such verses as:

Then he [Jesus] said to them, 'These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you – that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.' Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, 'Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.' (Luke 24.44–47)

For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, so that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope. (Rom 15.4)

First of all you must understand this, that no prophecy of scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, because no prophecy ever came by human will, but men and women moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God. (2 Pet 1.20–21)

However, Jewish scholars have always protested that many of the cited texts have been taken out of context. For example, the famous prophecy of the birth of a child in Isa 7.14, when read in its own context, is clearly talking about a contemporary of the prophet. The promise in vv. 7–9, that the nations who are presently threatening Jerusalem will be destroyed, is ratified by a sign: 'Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel (Isa 7.14). The Greek translation of the Hebrew scriptures (known as the Septuagint or LXX, from the tradition that it was produced by 70 scholars) rendered the Hebrew *almah* ('young woman') with *parthenos* ('virgin'). This allows Matthew to quote it as a proof-text for the virginal conception of Jesus. But the words that follow Isa 7.14 say: 'For before the child knows how to refuse the evil and

choose the good, the land before whose two kings you are in dread will be deserted' (Isa 7.16). If this is a prediction of the birth of Jesus 700 years hence, then it makes utter nonsense of the story being narrated in Isaiah. Some early Christians even claimed that the original reading of Isa 7.14 was 'virgin' and that the Jews changed it to 'young woman' so as to deny the virgin birth.

Furthermore, Matthew's claim (2.23) that the holy family settled in a town called Nazareth in order to fulfil the prophecy, 'He will be called a Nazorean,' stumbles on the fact that no such text exists. Indeed, the town Nazareth is never mentioned in the Old Testament. Modern scholars have suggested that Matthew might be thinking of the Nazarene vow in Num 6 or perhaps the Hebrew word for 'branch' (*neser*) in Isa 11.1. But the fact remains that nowhere in the Hebrew or Greek Old Testament is there a text that says, 'He will be called a Nazarene.'

Discussion of the Old Testament in the New is thus sometimes conducted along the lines of those who are prepared to believe the Bible and those who are not. If Matthew says that Isaiah predicted the virgin birth of Jesus, then that must be what Isaiah meant, however puzzling it seems to us. If Matthew says there is a text that predicts the holy family will settle at Nazareth, he must have known one, even if it is now lost to us. Sometimes this is simply asserted as a requirement of faith. To doubt either of these things is to doubt the truthfulness of the Bible and the truthfulness of the God that gave the Bible. Other times it is supported by such reasoning as, 'Matthew would not have tried to convince his readers with proof-texts that he knew did not exist or obviously meant something else. His opponents would merely have to look up the texts in order to refute him.'

On the other hand, the movement known as the Enlightenment has made people suspicious of accepting 'truth' simply because a powerful body demands it. If words mean anything, then Isaiah is expecting the birth of a child in his generation and not 700 years hence, as Matthew suggests. Some are prepared to give this a sympathetic interpretation. For example, it has been argued that while the original text referred to Isaiah's time, Matthew sees an amazing parallel whereby the birth of a child is once again to be the sign of a great act of God. Such correspondences are known as 'typology' and have been important for understanding the use of the Old Testament in the New. Others, however, are less sympathetic and accuse Matthew of simply taking the text out of context and giving it a Christian meaning that it did not have in its original setting. Even France, who suggests that reading Matthew

'on his own terms' will 'achieve a more respectful appreciation of his literary ability and skill', acknowledges that our 'cultural and religious traditions would not allow us to write like this' (1994, p. 134).

An interpreted text

In our day, copyright laws mean that authors need to quote accurately, attend to the original setting of the utterance and then draw conclusions. In the ancient world, texts were living traditions, regularly updated to apply to new situations. The task of the interpreter then was not to discern what the text meant in the past but what it means today. As the author of Hebrews put it, 'Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son' (Heb 1.1). This does not necessarily mean that the old is now void (though according to Heb 8.13, parts of it are) but it does mean that it is now viewed in the light of later revelation. Paul can even speak of the impossibility of understanding the scriptures prior to Christ:

But their minds were hardened. Indeed, to this very day, when they hear the reading of the old covenant, that same veil is still there, since only in Christ is it set aside . . . whenever Moses is read, a veil lies over their minds; but when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed. (2 Cor 3.14-16)

As we will see in our next chapter, this has important implications for how texts were quoted in the first century. For example, because of the significance of Jesus' life, death and resurrection, Bethlehem is now regarded as an important place. And so Matthew quotes Mic 5.2 in the form, 'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah' (Matt 2.6). But the actual text of Mic 5.2 says that Bethlehem *is* the least among the tribes of Judah. Matthew has inserted the Greek word *oudamos* ('by no means') into the quotation in order to make this point. To us this seems fraudulent. We would have first quoted the text accurately (with acknowledgements) and then made the point that though the place is small in size, it is in fact very significant because Jesus was born there. But first century interpretation was quite happy to make this point by telescoping all this into a single *modified* quotation.

Another practice was to form composite quotations by taking part of one verse and combining it with part of another. In Acts 1, the disciples have to decide what to do about the treachery of Judas. Peter concludes

that they must elect another to take his place because it is written in the book of Psalms, 'Let his homestead become desolate, and let there be no one to live in it'; and 'Let another take his position of overseer' (1.20). However, this seems less impressive when it is noted that the first phrase comes from Psalm 69.25 and the second from Psalm 109.8, neither of which have any obvious connection with Judas. The point is that we are always dealing with an *interpreted text*. There is no obvious connection between these psalms and the decision to elect a replacement for Judas. Indeed, in the original, the relevant verse is in the plural ('May *their* camp be a desolation; let no one live in *their* tents.').

All this means that when we come to describe the use of the Old Testament in the New, we must be careful to distinguish between how it looks to us and how it may have looked to them. Scholars have sometimes used words like 'arbitrary' or '*ad hoc*' to describe the use of the Old Testament in the New. And from our point of view, it sometimes appears that way. But it is fairly certain that it did not appear 'arbitrary' or '*ad hoc*' to them. Thus in the example above, we can note that Psalm 69 contains the phrases 'for my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink' (69.21) and 'the insults of those who insult you have fallen on me' (69.9). It was 'obvious' to the early Christians that this psalm was about Jesus. And given that belief, it was not an enormous step to deduce that what the psalm says about the fate of his enemies applies supremely to Judas. Thus we must be very cautious when we hear arguments like, 'Matthew would never have done such and such.' The New Testament authors lived in a very different world to ours.

Quotations, allusions and echoes

Studies on the Old Testament in the New have found it helpful to distinguish between quotations, allusions and echoes. The former are usually indicated by a citation formula such as 'it is written' (Mark 1.2) or 'this was to fulfil' (Matt 2.15), though some think this should not be rigidly applied. Trudinger, for example, prefers a definition such as the presence of 'word combinations in a form in which one would not have used them had it not been for a knowledge of their occurrence in this particular form in another source' (1966, p. 84). This allows him to find a number of quotations in the book of Revelation, where no such formulae are used. Though it can only be a rough guide, the number of quotations listed in *The Greek New Testament* (United Bible Society) are:

Matthew	54	1 Corinthians	17
Mark	27	2 Corinthians	10
Luke	25	Galatians	10
John	14	Hebrews	37
Acts	40	1 Peter	12
Romans	60	Revelation	0

Allusions are less precise, picking up on a few key words and usually woven into the new composition. They are clearly more difficult to detect than quotations, though Beale insists that the wording should be almost the same as the source, have the same general meaning and could not reasonably have come from anywhere else (1986, p. 543). However, there is debate as to whether an allusion must be the result of conscious intention. For example, many people today use expressions like 'no peace for the wicked' or 'the powers that be' without having any idea that they come from the Bible. But to someone who knows the Bible well, they are instantly recognizable as allusions to Isa 48.22 and Rom 13.1. Others, perhaps the majority, would have some inkling that they come from the Bible but would have no idea where to find them. Thus estimates of the number of Old Testament allusions in a given book vary enormously. For the book of Revelation, this has ranged from about 250 to well over 1000. Not surprisingly, scholars have tried to refine the criteria used for detecting such allusions (see Paulien, 2001, pp. 113–29).

Finally, scholars often speak of 'echoes' when the allusion is so slight that conscious intention is unlikely. The biblical authors were so immersed in scripture that they naturally used many of its idioms and expressions as their own. But they were not intending to 'allude' to a text as part of an argument or as an important feature of their composition; it just came naturally. Thus Caird says that the author of Revelation 'constantly echoes the Old Testament writings (without ever actually quoting them), partly because this was the language which came most naturally to him, partly because of the powerful emotive effect of familiar associations, and partly no doubt because his vision had actually taken its form, though not its content, from the permanent furniture of his well-stocked mind' (1984, p. 74). Some regard 'echoes' as too tenuous and would prefer the more neutral term, 'literary parallels'. Others, however, regard echoes as important. After all, music critics do not confine their comments to the loudest instruments of the orchestra. It is often the subtle sounds at the very brink of hearing that determine the quality of the performance. And echoes can be quite loud if you are standing between two mountains.

Conclusion

In order to understand how the Old Testament functions in the New, we must immerse ourselves in the writings of the time. In our next chapter, we will look at a number of texts discovered at a settlement by the Dead Sea known as Qumran. This will help us to see what texts were available in the first century, how they were viewed, and what techniques were being used to interpret them (exegesis). However, we will also use modern approaches to biblical interpretation to describe how it appears to us. For example, we might conclude that there is no logical connection between Psalm 69.25 and finding a replacement for Judas. To us, such exegesis looks 'arbitrary' or even 'gratuitous' and we would not approve of such techniques today. But we should not thereby conclude that it appeared 'arbitrary' or 'gratuitous' to people at the time. Given their experiences and mindset, the connection was probably obvious. In this study, we are interested both in how it might have looked to them and how it appears to us.

Further reading

A. T. Hanson, *The Living Utterances of God. The New Testament Exegesis of the Old*, 1983

Hanson has written significant books on the use of the Old Testament in Paul (1974) and John (1991), which we will discuss later. In this book, Hanson offers an excellent introduction to the subject, with chapters on Jewish exegesis and the New Testament inheritance, a survey of the use of the Old Testament in the main New Testament books, and three concluding chapters. These cover the nature of the Old Testament, the relationship between New Testament interpretation and ours, and the role of the Old Testament in the Church today. In many ways, it is the purpose of this book to update Hanson by focusing on literature written since 1983.

G. K. Beale (ed.), *The Right Doctrine from the Wrong Texts?*, 1994

As the title suggests, the theme of this book is the legitimacy or otherwise of the New Testament use of the Old Testament. It consists of twenty-two essays, mostly published in journals or other collections and offering different answers to such questions as (1) Do the New

Testament authors respect the original context of their quotations?
 (2) Do they employ typology, allegory or other exegetical methods?
 (3) Does the New Testament authorize its exegetical methods or just its conclusions (should we use the New Testament the way they used the Old Testament?) This is an excellent resource and we will refer to it on a number of occasions.

1

Texts and Interpretation in the First Century

For much of Church history, the only comparisons that could be made with the New Testament were the later rabbinical writings. But since the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls from 1947 to 1956, we now have a vast array of texts dating from about 200–50 BCE. The origins of the community are disputed but their interest in scriptural interpretation, particularly the desire to see their own history and key personnel as its fulfilment, leads to important parallels with the New Testament. In this chapter, we will consider five passages from the Qumran library, selected to demonstrate both the variety of texts that have been found there, and the different ways that scripture was being interpreted.

The Habakkuk scroll (1QpHab)

This commentary was one of the first discoveries at Qumran and was published in 1950. The scroll works through the first two chapters of Habakkuk, quoting one or two verses followed by commentary. The commentary section is introduced by the word *pesher*, which means 'interpreted'. The interpretation applies the text directly to events and people of the author's period. The texts here quoted are taken from the translation by Geza Vermes (1997). For convenience, the biblical text is printed in italics. Words in parenthesis represent gaps in the scroll and are a reconstruction of what most probably was there (in the opinion of Vermes).

I will take my stand to watch and will station myself upon my fortress. I will watch to see what He will say to me and how [He will answer] my complaint. And the Lord answered [and said to me, 'Write down the vision and make it plain] upon the tablets, that [he who reads] may read