

HOW THE NEW TESTAMENT QUOTES AND INTERPRETS THE OLD TESTAMENT

C. John Collins

As C. S. Lewis once observed, “one of the rewards of reading the Old Testament regularly” is that “you keep on discovering more and more what a tissue of quotations from it the New Testament is.” Conscientious readers of the Bible may well acknowledge this; but there is much disagreement among NT interpreters on just *how* the NT authors saw the OT from which they quoted. Questions include: Did the NT authors respect the original meaning of the OT texts? Did they put new meanings into these OT texts, and if so, how closely tied were these new meanings to the original meaning? Did a citation of an OT passage invoke the whole context of the OT passage, or was the NT writer really only interested in what he could make a particular “verse” do for him? What kind of text did the NT authors use: the original Hebrew, or the Septuagint, or another Greek version—and did the NT authors depend on the Greek, even when its rendering of the Hebrew is inadequate?

This short essay cannot supply a complete discussion of all these questions, nor does it suggest that all faithful interpreters see things the same way. Rather, the aim here is to offer a way of looking at these issues that does justice both to the NT and to the OT.

A Variety of Kinds of “Uses”

We begin by observing that there is a variety of ways the NT authors can refer to the OT. They can quote it directly (as Matt. 1:23 cites Isa. 7:14; this kind of use is the focus of Beale and Carson’s commentary); they can allude to it (as John 1:1–5 alludes to Genesis 1); they can use OT vocabulary with a meaning conditioned by OT usage (e.g., “the righteousness of God”); they can refer to the OT’s broad concepts (such as monotheism and creation); and they can refer to the basic over-arching story of the OT (e.g., Rom. 1:1–6).

The second observation is that there is no reason to expect a single, one-size-fits-all explanation that covers every instance of the NT using the OT. For example, an author may be intending to specify the one meaning of the OT text, or he may be using the OT text as providing an example or pattern that illuminates something he is writing about. He may draw a moral lesson from some event (e.g., Mark 2:25–26), and he might find an analogy between his audience and the ancient people (e.g., 1 Cor. 10:6–11). He might be making a point about how the Gentile Christians inherit the privileges of Israel (1 Pet. 2:9–10), or he might be explaining why Christians need not keep some provision of the OT (e.g., Eph. 2:19; Mark 7:19). Paul describes his own calling in terms that remind us of the Servant of the Lord (Gal. 1:15, evoking Isa. 49:1): since Isaiah’s Servant is a Messianic figure (as Paul knew, cf. Rom. 10:16; 15:21; Acts 13:47), it is best to see Paul as likening his own calling in some way to that of the Servant, rather than as claiming that *he* was the Servant.

Text Form

This part is the least controversial. As a general rule, NT authors cite the OT in a Greek form that is basically the Septuagint that is available in printed form today. There are places where the NT author’s citation differs slightly from that of the Septuagint: either because the author has adjusted the quotation to fit the syntax of his own sentence or otherwise adapted it to his purpose, or because he has quoted the Septuagint from memory, or because the quotation represents a textual variation. There are places where the NT author has apparently corrected the Septuagint in order to be closer to the Hebrew: for example,

“grieve” in Eph. 4:30 is far closer to the Hebrew of Isa. 63:10 than the Septuagint’s “provoke.” In John 1:14 “full of grace and truth” may be a free paraphrase of “abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness” (Ex. 34:6).

Many Hebraists view the Septuagint as a translation with some value, but with many obvious deficiencies. The truth is, the translation quality varies with the kind of material being translated (poetry is harder than narrative), the skill of the individual translator, and the purposes of the translation (e.g., it seems that the translators of Proverbs intended to adapt the Hebrew wisdom to their setting in the high Hellenistic culture of Alexandria, at the expense of faithfully conveying the meaning of the Hebrew). More to the point, it is not clear that translational infelicities cloud any particular NT use of the Septuagint—generally the point for which the verse is cited depends on the part where the translation is close enough to the original.

Therefore one cannot say that in using a Greek version, the NT authors have slighted the original intent of the OT authors.

NT Reflection on the Use of the OT

Several NT texts discuss the general stance by which Christians should approach the OT. The first is Rom. 1:1–6, where Paul describes the “gospel of God” as “promised beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures.” The content that follows narrates Jesus’ public entry onto his Davidic throne through his resurrection, and Paul’s apostleship as the outworking of Jesus’ program “to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of his name among all the nations”: Paul is explaining that the events of Jesus’ victory, and the witness of the early Christians, are just what the OT had foretold. This is the kind of reading the OT itself invites (see the essay, “The Theology of the Old Testament”). Later in the same letter (Rom. 15:4), Paul says, “For whatever was written in former days [i.e., in the OT] was written for our instruction [i.e., as Christians].” He then goes on (in vv. 9–13) to cite several OT texts about the expectation of the coming era when the Gentiles would receive the light and join in worship with the faithful of Israel: the mixed congregations of Jewish and Gentile Christians are the fulfillment of that hope.

In 1 Cor. 10:1, Paul alludes to OT events, saying “our fathers” experienced them. The church in Corinth, however, had a considerable proportion of converted Gentiles; so this means that Paul is treating the Gentile Christians as having been “grafted in” to the olive tree (the people of God, cf. Jer. 11:16), and every bit as much heirs of the story as Jewish Christians are. After listing the ways that God judged the unfaithful among the ancient people (1 Cor. 10:6–10), Paul explains that “these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come.” God expects those who profess to be Christians to be sure their faith is real, just as he did the people in the Pentateuch.

Hebrews 11 is able to parade the OT faithful before his audience (probably mostly Jewish Christians), to show them that they must persevere in faith just as the ancients did.

In Luke 24:25–27, 44–47, Jesus “interpreted to [his disciples] in all the [OT] Scriptures the things concerning himself.” Luke does not tell us what that Bible study actually said. Some Christian interpreters have understood this to mean that it is possible to find in every part of the OT a “foreshadowing” of some aspect of the work of Jesus. However, I think it is far better to recognize both that there are specific texts that predict the Messianic work, and that the entire trend of the OT story was heading toward Jesus’ victory

after his suffering, which would usher in the era in which the Gentiles would receive God's light (v. 47, "to all nations"). For more on "foreshadowing," see discussion below.

The remarks in 1 Pet. 1:10–13, indicating the prophets' interest in when the Christ would suffer and the glories would follow, reflect this same idea that the OT story was headed somewhere. The prophets "were serving not themselves but" Peter's audience of Jewish and Gentile Christians, because the prophetic message looked forward to this era.

Basic Catalogue of NT Uses of the OT

When the apostles applied the OT to NT realities, they were following a long line of citing earlier Scripture, using a set of practices that can be found in the OT itself. For example, OT writers could allude to an earlier passage and elaborate on it (e.g., Psalms 8 and 104 use Genesis 1–2); or they could allude to an earlier text and give a more precise nuance to it (as Ps. 72:17 takes the more general Gen. 22:18 and ties it specifically to the house of David). They could recognize a promise (e.g., Dan. 9:2 finding in Jer. 25:12 a promise for the length of Babylonian domination). They could see patterns of God's behavior repeated (e.g., many Psalms allude to Ex. 34:6–7 as God's way of dealing with his people). They could also take texts from earlier generations, and apply them to new situations (e.g., Neh. 8:14–17 is often seen as an example of actualizing the laws of Lev. 23:39–42 in concert with Deut. 16:13–15; cf. also the well-known pairing of Jer. 22:24–27 and Hag. 2:23).

The NT writers exhibit these uses, due to their conviction that Christians are the heirs of Israel's story; they exhibit other uses as well, due to their conviction that the resurrection of Jesus had ushered in a new era, the Messianic age—"the last days" foretold by the prophets. These authors saw themselves as God's authorized interpreters for this new era that God had opened in the story of his people.

The early Christian missionaries went to synagogues to prove from the OT Scriptures that Jesus is the Christ (cf. Acts 17:3; 18:28). This implies that they relied on publicly accessible arguments from the text itself, rather than merely private insights, in their arguments—otherwise, they would have been unjust to hold anyone responsible for failing to see something that was not truly there. Luke praises the Berean Jews, who examined the OT to see whether what Paul and Silas told them was so (Acts 17:11): this implies that the NT invites critical interaction over its appeal to the OT, and is not solely dependent on the "insider's" point of view.

In classifying these uses, the basic questions are: What is it about the OT text that enables the NT writer to use it the way he does? What is the NT writer's stance toward the "original meaning" of the OT text? What rhetorical goal is the NT writer trying to achieve by using the OT text as he does? In what ways does the NT author resemble and differ from interpretive principles found among other interpreters who come from the same period of time, particularly other Second Temple Jewish authors who were not Christians? The categories in this catalogue are intended to be broad and suggestive; there is no substitute for a case-by-case examination of the various passages.

Promise and fulfillment. In many cases the NT writers understood their OT texts as providing a promise about where the story was headed, and identify a particular event as the fulfillment (or partial fulfillment) of a promise. For example, Matt. 12:17–21 understood the Servant of the Lord in Isa. 42:1–3 as the Messiah, with Jesus being the promised person. Likewise, in Rom. 15:12 Paul sees the spread of Christian faith among the Gentiles as fulfilling the expectation of Isa. 11:1–10.

Pattern and fulfillment. This is often called “typology,” and it refers to the way patterns found in the OT enable Christians to understand their own situation in, through, and under Christ. For example, the way that a lamb in the sin or guilt offering serves as an innocent substitute to work atonement explains how Jesus’ sacrifice benefits believers (observe how Isa. 53:7 serves as the probable background to John 1:29). Many scholars speak of OT persons, institutions, and events as “foreshadowing” later persons, institutions, and events, but this way of speaking can have the drawback of obscuring what the text meant to its first audience, or of obscuring the historical order of revelation. Rather than talk about foreshadowing, then, it is better to think of the shape of the story, and where that story is headed.

Analogy and application. Sometimes the NT writers find some kind of resemblance between their situation and an earlier one, and derive principles from the OT passage for addressing the new situation. The examples of Mark 2:25–26 and 1 Cor. 10:6–10 have already been mentioned.

When an author is using an analogy, he is not offering an interpretation of the original intent of the OT text; nevertheless, the analogies respect the original intent. For example, in Matt. 21:42, Jesus uses Ps. 118:22–23 (about “the stone the builders rejected”) to describe the way the Jewish leaders rejected him. Many suppose that Jesus is claiming that this is a “Messianic promise” (or perhaps he was revealing a previously secret promise); but it does more justice to the psalm to recognize that Jesus’ point is that the leaders who rejected him were no wiser than the great world powers that thought so little of Israel (see ESV Study Bible note on Ps. 118:22–23).

Understanding the use of analogy in this way will help as we encounter some NT texts that are more difficult. In 1 Cor. 9:9 and 1 Tim. 5:18, Paul cites an OT law (Deut. 25:4) about not muzzling an ox, and he applies it as a justification for paying those in ministry. The OT text is based on a principle of caring for working animals; Paul’s application seems to be based on a “How much more should we care for those who serve us with the word” kind of argument. In Gal. 4:21–31, Paul constructs an “allegory” from Hagar and Sarah in Genesis, in order to convince his readers to reject the false teachers. There is no need to think he is disclosing any kind of additional meaning in Genesis, nor is he disregarding the original intent of the OT passages; he is simply likening those who follow his message to the “children of promise” (supernaturally produced like Isaac), and those who follow the false teachers to him “who was born according to the flesh” (i.e., to Ishmael).

Eschatological continuity. As indicated in the essay on “The Theology of the OT,” “eschatology” in the OT is focused on the coming era in which the Messiah will lead his people in bringing the light to the Gentiles; the NT position is that this era began with the resurrection and ascension of Jesus. These are separate chapters in the unfolding story of God’s work in the world, but they exhibit continuity, because it is the same God at work, who saves people in the same way (cf. Rom. 4:1–8), who grafts believing Gentiles into the olive tree of his people (Rom. 11:17), and is restoring the image of God in them. Hence Christian believers, both Jew and Gentile, share the privilege of the mission of Israel (e.g., 1 Pet. 2:9–10, looking back to Ex. 19:5–6 and other texts). Thus, the Ten Commandments supply moral guidance to Christians (Rom. 13:8–10). The same “righteousness of God”—God’s uprightness and faithfulness in keeping his promises—that the OT celebrates lies behind God’s sending Jesus (Rom. 1:17).

Eschatological discontinuity. This category is related to the previous one, and reflects the change in redemptive era. For example, God's faithful no longer need to observe the OT food laws, whose purpose was to distinguish Israel from the Gentiles (Lev. 20:24–26; cf. Acts 10:9–23). Other aspects of the Sinai covenant are likewise no longer applicable in the same way to God's people, such as the sacrificial system and the theocratic government centered in Jerusalem.

Development. Psalm 72:17 does not change the promise of blessing-to-the-nations of Gen. 22:18, but rather develops it by bringing the manner of fulfillment into sharper focus. In the same way, Isa. 52:13–53:12 certainly describes the career of the Messiah in terms of rejection and humiliation followed by vindication and victory. As the ESV Study Bible note on Isa. 53:10 explains, death is clearly not the Messianic Servant's end; but resurrection is not explicit there (although it now seems to be the natural inference). Thus 1 Cor. 15:3–4 can say, "Christ died *for our sins* [ὕπὲρ τῶν ἁμαρτιῶν ἡμῶν] in accordance with the Scriptures" (probably echoing a phrase from the Isa. 53:10 LXX, περὶ ἁμαρτίας, "an offering for sin"), and "he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures" (developing, or clarifying, Isa. 53:10). The assumption behind these examples is that the story is moving along, and God can feed new events and insights into the process (in the case of Ps. 72:17, by giving an oracle establishing the Davidic covenant; in the case of 1 Cor. 15:4, by raising Jesus from the dead).

"Fuller sense." Christians have used the Latin term *sensus plenior* ("fuller sense") for cases where the NT seems to find a meaning in the OT that goes much farther beyond the original intent of the earlier passage than simple development. There is every reason to allow for such cases, when one considers that God is both planning events and inspiring the biblical authors as his authentic interpreters. Nevertheless it is wise to be careful: in many cases the suggestion of *sensus plenior* stems from a misapprehension of the earlier text or of the NT usage (see discussion of Matt. 2:15 / Hosea 11:1 below; see ESV Study Bible notes on Ps. 16:9–11). There are some instances, however, where this does in fact seem to be what the NT author has done: e.g., in John 1:1–5, John describes "the Word" as a divine Person active in the creation; he is echoing Gen. 1:1–2:3, but seeing something there that Moses did not say. Nevertheless, as the ESV Study Bible notes on Ps. 33:4–9 explain, this is not out of step with Genesis (see also ESV Study Bible notes on Gen 1:26 for the Trinity; see also *Genesis 1–4*, 59–61). One can imagine Moses saying, if he had been presented with John's Gospel, "Well, I never thought of it that way, but now that you come to say it like that, I can see where you got it, and I like it": that is, he would not think that his original intent had been violated. It is tenuous, however, to advocate a *sensus plenior* that dispenses with original intent.

Matt. 2:15 is often taken as a case of *sensus plenior* because it says that when the holy family took shelter in Egypt (later to return to Palestine), this was to "fulfill" the words of Hos. 11:1, "Out of Egypt I called my son." Is Matthew finding a "Messianic meaning" in Hosea that no one could have seen before? Probably not: it is more likely that Matthew found in Hosea a convenient summary of the exodus that contained the term "son." (Many prophets summarize the exodus as a way of reminding Israel of their obligations to the Lord: cf. Am. 3:1–2.) One of Matthew's themes is that Jesus showed himself the true Messiah (the Davidic representative of Israel) by embodying all that Israel was called to be, and by doing so faithfully (in contrast to empirical Israel). On the "son of God" idea, an important theme for Matthew, see ESV Study Bible notes on Ps. 2:7. So Jesus' experience

“fulfilled” the pattern of the exodus, which means that this is a case of pattern and fulfillment.

Concession for the sake of argument. In some cases, an author may be making a rhetorical move: “if you take the text the way you do, then here are the consequences.” The purpose of this rhetorical move is *not* to endorse the line of interpretation. For example, in Luke 10:25–29, a Jewish lawyer asked Jesus a question: “What shall I do to inherit eternal life?” The Greek of this question shows that the lawyer was using Lev. 18:5 (“if a person does them he shall live by them”); he was reading it as saying that the doing *qualifies* a person for eternal life (see v. 29, where the man was “desiring to justify himself”). Jesus answers him on the basis of that assumption (vv. 26–28); a paraphrase would be, “OK, if you want to try that approach, then here is the standard; do this and you will live.” Jesus’ purpose is to help the man grasp the folly that lies behind his question. It is possible (and in my judgment very likely) that Paul’s citations of this text from Leviticus (Rom. 10:5; Gal. 3:12) are of the same sort: the person who wants to use the law of Moses to gain a “righteousness that is based on the law” (Rom. 10:5)—a purpose for which the law was never intended—must then obligate himself to unswerving obedience in order to gain this righteousness, or else give up in despair. (For more detail, see the essay on Lev. 18:5.) In a forthcoming article on echoes of Aristotle in Rom. 2:14–15, I intend to show that Paul’s “work of the law written on their hearts” does in fact echo the “new covenant” prophecy of Jer. 31:31–34, but with irony, to show up the vaunted “new covenant experience” of post-exilic Jews—and this kind of irony would be a version of the “concession for the sake of argument” I am discussing here.

Deity of Christ. NT authors often apply to Jesus OT texts that originally applied to Yahweh, the God of Israel. For example, Heb. 1:10–12 describes Jesus by using Ps. 102:25–27, which is about God’s eternity. This is not because the psalm is directly Messianic, but because NT authors accept that Jesus is Yahweh incarnate (cf. John 1:1–14). Thus the NT uses these texts consistently with their original intent—they describe the Lord—and recognize that their description applies to Jesus, as being no less truly the Lord than is the Father, Jesus’ Father and ours in him.

In all of these cases the NT authors view themselves as the proper heirs and faithful interpreters of the OT.

NOTES ON DISCERNING ECHOES IN SCRIPTURE

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Anyone can claim to have found an “echo” of one text in another. The key question for us is, by what criteria can we properly make the shift from “*I can imagine* that my author is alluding to this other author” to “*You ought to accept* that my author is alluding to this other author”? The key here is that we must *warrant* the shift, if we are to play fair both with our author and our contemporary audience.¹

Unless our author directly tells us that he is making an allusion, we are left to infer it, and thus we must build a case based on arguments. Generally speaking, to be valid this kind of case must fulfill four criteria:²

- *Empirical adequacy*: Our case must cover all of the data without fudging.
- *Simplicity*: All things being equal, we prefer the case that has the fewest complicating assumptions, qualifications, and exceptions.
- *Coherence*: A good case must be consistent with itself and with good logic.
- *Fruitfulness*: A good case opens up fresh understanding for other topics.

The purpose of this essay is to apply these requirements to the specific situations we encounter in the way Biblical authors cite other authors (Biblical and otherwise). Some of the most helpful efforts at establishing sound criteria come from scholars studying how Paul used the OT.

Richard Hays served the academic world when he put forward a set of seven criteria for discerning “echoes” (i.e., literary allusions):³

- (1) *Availability*. Was the proposed source of the echo available to the author and/or original readers?
- (2) *Volume*. The volume of an echo is determined primarily by the degree of explicit repetition of words or syntactical patterns; how loudly does it evoke the alleged precursor?
- (3) *Recurrence*. How often does Paul elsewhere cite or allude to the same scriptural passage?
- (4) *Thematic coherence*. How well does the alleged echo fit into the line of argument Paul is developing?
- (5) *Historical Plausibility*. Could Paul have intended the alleged meaning effect? Could his readers have understood it?

¹ See my brief discussion in *Science and Faith: Friends or Foes?* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2003), 25-26. Arthur Gibson, *Biblical Semantic Logic* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1981), refers to “a modal fallacy, that of promoting possibility to necessity without empirical or logical warrant” (p. 31). It is far better to talk this way, about fulfilling one's responsibilities to God and to others, than to talk of “controlling meaning,” as McCartney and Clayton do in *Let the Reader Understand* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2002), 159.

² Mentioned in *Science and Faith*, 428; cf. also Ian Barbour, *Religion in an Age of Science* (New York: HarperCollins, 1990), 34-35.

³ Richard Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven: Yale, 1989), 29-32. Cf. my citation and comment in *Genesis 1-4: A linguistic, literary, and theological commentary* (Phillipsburg: P & R, 2006), 30-31.

(6) *History of Interpretation*. Have other readers, both critical and pre-critical, heard the same echoes?

(7) *Satisfaction*. With or without clear confirmation from the other criteria listed here, does the proposed reading make sense?

As I have noted, this list does not give as much weight as I would to explicit verbal echoes as the first criterion, nor does it indicate where the burden of proof lies when such explicit echoes are missing. However, it does serve as a place to begin, and we can benefit from the criteria.

In his PhD thesis, Timothy Berkley has refined Hays' list along the following lines:⁴

(1) *Common vocabulary* between the OT passage and the Pauline text.

(2) *Vocabulary clusters*. There are several significant vocabulary correspondences between the Pauline text and the OT context.

(3) *Links with other texts*. The vocabulary links with other OT texts that may also be in Paul's mind.

(4) *Explication*. The OT text that meets these criteria sheds light on Paul's argument.

(5) *Recurrence*. Paul refers to this text (or its larger context) elsewhere, either in the same letter or in another.

(6) *Common themes*. The themes found in the OT reference are also important in Paul's context.

(7) *Common linear development*. The themes develop in Paul in the same order as they appear in the OT text.

Berkley indicates that he has amplified and refined Hays' criteria of *volume*, *recurrence*, *thematic coherence*, and *satisfaction*; his list does answer more of my own observations on Hays' list. At the same time, he acknowledges that he has omitted the criteria of *availability* and *historical plausibility*, since these are not really in question when dealing with OT references in the NT. He has dropped the criterion of *history of interpretation*, since he expects that in his PhD research he has discovered some connections that other scholars have overlooked.

Berkley's list may be better for the specific task of examining Paul's use of the OT, but the items he has dropped from Hays' list are important in the larger project of discerning how Biblical writers allude to other writers – whether these be OT authors using OT texts, or NT authors using the OT, or canonical authors using non-canonical texts. Further, the list we use is a heuristic device, i.e. it helps us to use good critical thinking in answering a question that requires us to make judgment calls; no one should suppose that the procedure is a mechanical one.

⁴ Timothy Berkley, *From a Broken Covenant to Circumcision of the Heart: Pauline intertextual exegesis in Romans 2:17-29* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2000), 60-65.