

THE NT USE OF THE OT: A KERYGMATIC APPROACH

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The self-disclosure of God is one of the most amazing elements of Christian theology. Even in a world of satellites and video cassette recorders I am amazed that the transcendent God has chosen to communicate with us in ways that are comprehensible to human beings.

And as one follows the course of salvation history through the Biblical literature the amazement only increases. Not only does God speak to human beings, but he does so in such a manner that the very revelation of himself serves to heighten our awareness of his wisdom, majesty and power.

His communication with the patriarchs, with the monarchs, with the prophets has been exceeded only by the ultimate revelation of himself in the person of his Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, and in the eschatological Spirit who inhabits the body of Christ and who inspired the Christian Scriptures.

It is in this attitude of amazement and worship that the current task has been assumed. The Scriptures are the inspired Word of God, inerrant in the autographs, effective in Christian ministry, and the means of discipline for mind and life. What I attempt to do here is a humble act of worship, an attempt to understand Scripture on its own terms, in the context in which it was delivered and on the basis of the evidence that it provides about itself.

My study of the relationship between the Testaments has been largely textual. Under the overarching umbrella of evangelical theology the text itself has called into formulation the thesis being presented here. Many scholars and writings have contributed to this understanding, but the evidence of Scripture has remained primary.

What has impressed me most in my Biblical studies has been the dominance of the gospel. Most pronouncedly this appears in the NT with such intensity that at times it appears to diminish the OT and at other times to be entirely congruent with the OT. Yet what is striking about the NT is that it always talks about the gospel, in a third-person kind of reference. It is the gospel from which Paul wrote his letters. It is this same apostolic preaching that Mark converted to a new literary form, the written gospel. And it is the gospel that gives John's Apocalypse its unique character among Jewish apocalypses.

So also, I propose, it is this gospel—the gospel that preceded the NT writings—by which we must understand the relationship between the Testaments. And that is why I have subtitled my paper "A Kerygmatic Approach." There are other more particular ways to describe various instances of the NT uses of the OT, but none of them gives a naturally comprehensive understanding of larger and smaller expressions of the relationship. Let me present six reasons

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why I think a kerygmatic approach is most satisfactory, since it gives both holistic perspective and allowance for variation in the particulars.

1. *The apostolic Church worked in the ideological context of first-century Judaism.* Since the Church did not arise out of a vacuum it inherited language, ideology, liturgy, Scriptures, and interpretive methodologies that were common to its generation. This logical observation has been affirmed by the comparative study of contemporary exegetical methods with those used by the NT writers.¹ In addition it was the necessity of the situation that the apostles preach in a manner and with an argumentative method that was acceptable to the target audiences.² Just as Christ spoke intelligibly to the 'am hā'āreš, so the apostles argued in manners that were persuasive to their generation, using the same ideological, cultic, literary and linguistic arguments that we find represented in sectarian Judaism. What has been learned in the last half century about sectarian Judaism has affirmed both the historical accuracy of the NT writings and the Judaistic environment that illumines our understanding of them.

It must be understood at the outset, therefore, that the interpretive method of the early Church resembled that of their Jewish contemporaries. The apostolic task was to make an ancient message relevant to the present. In doing so they employed the same exegetical techniques of Jerusalem and Qumran, including such features as midrash, *raz pēšer* and the rules of Hillel.

2. *The apostolic purposes were immediate and pragmatic rather than an historical-grammatical interpretation of the Hebrew canon for academic purposes.* The NT authors were not so concerned with exegeting the OT as they were with delivering the good news of Jesus Christ.

The message of the apostolic Church was gospel. In manners both similar to and different from Qumran, they read the text in the light of the contemporary situation, which was an eschatological and Christological advance in

¹R. Longenecker's extended description of this phenomenon includes the literalist, midrashic, *pēšer* and allegorical methods of interpretation as exhibited in Jewish hermeneutics and in the NT. He affirms: "The Jewish roots of Christianity made it *a priori* likely that the exegetical procedures of the NT would resemble to some extent those of then contemporary Judaism." "What the NT writers are conscious of, however, is interpreting the OT (1) from a Christocentric perspective, (2) in conformity with Christian tradition, and (3) along Christological lines. And in their exegesis there is the interplay of Jewish presuppositions and practices, on the one hand, with Christian commitments and perspectives on the other, which joined to produce a distinctive interpretation of the OT." *Biblical Exegesis in the Apostolic Period* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975) 205, 206.

²In regard to the OT quotations in 1 Pet 2:1-10, K. R. Snodgrass has presented evidence to show that "the very attraction of these verses to Christian writers is due to the previous use of Isa 28:16 in Judaism." "At the very least, one must grant that Isa 28:16 was interpreted eschatologically in pre-Christian Judaism. Increasingly the evidence points to a long tradition of the use of the stone testimonia, a tradition that is pre-Christian in origin." "1 Pet 2:1-10: Its Formation and Literary Affinities," *NTS* 24 (1977) 100.

revelation.³ The pragmatic purposes of the apostolic Church determined the perspectives from which they read the Hebrew canon and the means by which they took the sense of an OT passage and applied it to the new situation. I observe five primary purposes for such use of the OT exhibited by the apostolic writings.

(1) Eschatology. The ultimate intentions of God had begun to happen in the mission of Christ and the Church. The apocalyptic new age had dawned, and the aspirations of Israel were being realized with an incremental revelation of the transcendent purposes of God.

(2) Christology. The constructive development of the Church's teaching about Christ employed not only the apostolic traditions but also used the comprehensive expectations, the imagery and the language of the OT to explicate the incarnation both as catechesis and in preservation of a normative gospel.

(3) Continuity. The gospel is affirmatively described as the extended revelation of the same God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. It is the continuation of the same purposes revealed through his spokesmen and recorded in the Hebrew Scriptures.

(4) Apologetics. Against negative attacks, the OT is used to demonstrate that the Church is not an aberration or interruption of God's dealings with his people. It is actually the divine realization of eternal intentions.

(5) Exhortation. In a full range of interpretive and rhetorical modes the apostles used OT literature, themes, sentences and grammar to urge their churches to Christian thought and behavior. Even the renarration of Hebrew history served the gospel first and only secondarily elaborated on the significance of the literature and national experience.⁴ These writers declared the eternal purposes of God now revealed more clearly than ever before. And they used the Hebrew canon itself to demonstrate that the gospel had transcended previous revelation.

The attitude of Paul regarding his use of the OT would no doubt be the same as his answer as to whether he knew he was writing canonical literature. In both cases he would insist that he was declaring the truth of divine revelation. If he was delivering divinely revealed truth, then his writings bore the verity of canonical literature. And similarly, if he was speaking divinely revealed truth, then this had to be what the OT meant.

3. *The NT authors wrote in the context of developing Christian traditions to which they contributed and from which they drew and were influenced in their writings to the churches.* The "teaching of the apostles" (Acts 2:42)—that is,

³"The OT became a book full of lessons for Christians and full of intimations of the coming Messiah, who was identified as Jesus of Nazareth. Somewhat in the way in which the Qumran community around the same time read the text in the light of their contemporary situation, so the early Christians saw everything in a new and relevant way." C. H. Pinnock, *The Scripture Principle* (San Francisco: Harper, 1984) 180.

⁴This is exemplified by both 1 Cor 10:6 ff. and the exhortation to the Hebrews. The latter stresses the superiority of the gospel of Christ, not as an exposition of how things used to be (the fault of the romantic readers) but as a denunciation of any effort to revert to the limitations of previous understandings.

the growing gospel tradition (1 Cor 15:1-8)—was paralleled by and inclusive of commonly accepted modes of understanding and using the OT.⁵ The development of this gospel tradition and the correlative use of the OT gave common character to their Christian experience, understanding, and theological method. This process resulted in an unformulated collection of frequently used OT passages as well as conventional manners of interpretation. This phenomenon explains both the number of commonly used passages of the OT and the variations in form and application.

4. *The apostles and NT authors engaged in a full range of rhetorical devices as appropriate to each situation.* Part of the effectiveness of Jesus' teaching lay in his rhetorical skills, in his use of illustrations and figures of speech appropriate to his audience, and in his willingness to deal simply with one topic at a time. So also the extensive use of rhetoric by NT authors created a continuum of references to the OT ranging from the same literal message in the original context to an extra-contextual meaning based upon the sense of the words employed.⁶ In their transpositional use of the OT they modified vocabulary, semantics, grammar, figures of speech, ideological context, and the makeup of the quotation or allusion itself.⁷ Their rhetorical skill made it possible for them to declare the truth of the gospel with persuasive power. And at the same time, it was the gospel that served as the control. It both stimulated and limited their understanding and use of the OT.

It is the combination of developing traditions and rhetorical devices that produced the imponderable variety in the NT use of the OT. There is no single hermeneutic, whether it be fulfillment, typology, midrash or any other exegetical method. All such modes were operative in one way or another, in one situation and another.

So also with the rhetorical devices. And the full representation of rhetorical skills overlaps with the varied ways of understanding and using the OT. The result was an interpretive/rhetorical collage that is subject to description, but

⁵Snodgrass described the formation of 1 Pet 2:1-10 on the basis of the author's "direct knowledge of the Biblical text" and "the adaptation of traditional material for the author's own purposes." "The bulk of the material in 2:4-10, however, was formed from traditional material, or at least the initial attraction to those passages was because they were well known in the early church." "1 Pet 2:1-10" 103-104.

⁶D. L. Bock has argued that "meaning involves the sense of a passage and not primarily the referents of a passage; but the language of an OT passage and its NT fulfillment can be related in terms of referents in one of several ways." "Evangelicals and the Use of the OT in the NT," *BSac* 142 (October-December 1985) 314. V. S. Poythress pertinently indicates that the very imprecision of language is what makes it workable and at the same time restricts the degree of precision that can be demanded or communicated. He cites J. Frame to the effect that "infallibility does not entail a claim to comprehensiveness" and that "lack of comprehensiveness does not refute infallibility." "Language and Accommodation," in *Hermeneutics, Inerrancy, and the Bible* (ed. E. D. Radmacher and R. D. Preus; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984) 351-376.

⁷In addition to these, notice must be given to the textual matters that range from conformity to the MT to the use of a preferential selection of variants. In our unpublished LXX reader, H. Bullock and I have identified an instance of parablepsis by the LXX translator in which he omitted v 7 of Isaiah 40. The quotation in 1 Pet 1:24-25 follows that parablepsis exactly.

certainly not within the scope of a single methodological formulation.

5. *The gospel was the focal lens through which the early Church viewed the Hebrew Scriptures.* The Christian experience was an after-the-fact experience. It was the mission and teaching of Jesus implemented by the eschatological Spirit that gave content and definition to OT literature and the anticipations of contemporary Judaism.⁸ It was the apostolic preaching, the oral tradition, the *kérygma*, or, as Paul says it, "my gospel," that was the basis upon which all of salvation history was to be understood. By hindsight, through the eyes of the gospel the realized intentions and meanings of God were perceived in this new stage of revelation.

This is clearly evidenced by the nature of the NT writings. They were all produced after the incarnation. Hindsight gave clarity of vision, understanding not previously possible, and certitude based on the very revelation and teaching of Jesus Christ. And this was all impelled and confirmed by the Spirit who was their teacher on behalf of Christ.

It must be admitted, however, that this description is not an adequate statement with regard to Christ himself. His use of the OT was a projection of the divine intention, using the OT in novel perspectives and for eschatological purposes. But even so, the emphasis of Luke 24 is that Jesus interpreted himself after the fact to his disciples, using the Hebrew Scriptures for clarification and confirmation of what the disciples had already observed.

In turn the apostles emulated the post-facto nature of Jesus' self-interpretation as they extended the process and methodology. Peter, for example, in his Pentecostal sermon interpreted their amazing experience after the event, primed by the interpretive work of Christ. The NT authors continued the pattern. They used the OT in a variety of techniques to affirm the gospel message and to extend its theological implications for the life of their churches.

In addition it was the gospel that became the evaluative standard by which the Church operated. Not only in projective situations of the new age but also in retrospective understanding of prior revelation it was the gospel that served as the representation of the mind of God. The gospel was the control for understanding the OT, just as it was the control for interpreting the new experience of Christ in the churches.

6. *Any effort to reconstruct the eternal mind of God in the progress of revelation will at best produce a fallible theological construction.* The extensive work in the relationship between the two Testaments and the inability to come to consensus on a single method as an adequate explanation of all of the phenom-

⁸Arguing in favor of a canonical approach to the NT use of the OT, D. Moo makes a point that I think appropriate to a kerygmatic approach. The OT has a *sensus praegnans*, a "meaning of the text that takes on deeper significance as God's plan unfolds." "The Problem of Sensus Plenior," in *Hermeneutics, Authority, and Canon* (ed. D. A. Carson and J. D. Woodbridge; Grand Rapids: Zondervan) 206.

ena are indications of the profundity of the task.⁹ What can be said is that the presuppositions brought to the phenomena are determinative as regards one's ultimate conclusion. It is possible to maximize the particularistic differences between the Testaments and thus suggest that reconciliation is impossible or to conclude that the NT writers worked as fallible human beings in ways that are both acceptable and objectionable.

On the other hand, those of us who bring a high view of Scripture to the study of the issue are able to construct a logical scheme by which to reconcile the differences, to demonstrate the unity of the two Testaments and to affirm the dual authorship of Scripture.

It is the viewpoint of this paper that by focusing on the centrality of the *kérygma* in the early Church one can provide a perspective by which to understand and respect the phenomena of the relationship between the two Testaments. This method affirms the whole of the OT. It emphasizes the new stage of revelation in Jesus Christ. It affirms the pragmatic mode of operation among the apostles and allows for a realistic description of the phenomena. It affirms the accuracy of holy Scripture at all stages. And it gives praise to God, who reveals himself ever more clearly in his relationship with his people.

⁹Poythress ("Language" 376) willingly admits the problem of ambiguity when he discusses the presuppositions and implications that are operative in Biblical sentences. But there is an opposite danger that he describes also: "Zealous inerrantists, in my opinion, too often overdraw the implications and presuppositions of sentences. We are afraid of a domino process that will leave us nothing. And so we prove prosaic, literalistic, unimaginative, arthritic, overdogmatic in claims about the implications. We fear to allow for vaguenesses, exceptions, and manners of speaking."