

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Churchman* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_churchman_os.php

THE OLD TESTAMENT IS EXPLICITLY CHRISTIAN

Andy Saville

Introduction

What did the authors of the Old Testament know of the Trinity, the Incarnation, and the gospel of the death and resurrection of the Messiah? A common view amongst evangelicals is that the Old Testament authors did not understand these doctrines, and the Old Testament saints did not exercise conscious faith in them, and thus the Old Testament is only implicitly Christian. A well-known illustration of this view is from B. B. Warfield:

The Old Testament may be likened to a chamber richly furnished but dimly lighted; the introduction of light brings into it nothing which was not in it before; but it brings out into clearer view much of what is in it but was only dimly or even not at all perceived before. The mystery of the Trinity is not revealed in the Old Testament, *but the mystery of the Trinity underlies the Old Testament revelation, and here and there almost comes into view*...It is an old saying that what becomes patent in the New Testament was latent in the Old Testament.¹

The implication of this view is that if we were able to travel back and interview Abraham, Moses or David they would have affirmed a Unitarian doctrine of God. However if we explained the Trinity to them they would have replied something like this: ‘We’d never have worked it out from what we know, but now you’ve revealed it we see that it makes much fuller sense of the nature of the God we believe in.’

On the gospel they would probably have affirmed that salvation was a divine work promised by God, to be received by faith, requiring the death of a sacrifice. However, if we explained the death and resurrection of the incarnate second person of the Trinity they would have replied something like this: ‘We’d never have worked it out from what we know, but now you’ve revealed it we see that it is the only way in which God could justly justify sinners.’

In this article I want to argue that the Old Testament is *explicitly Christian* and that the Old Testament authors would have affirmed

¹ B. B. Warfield, ‘The Biblical Doctrine of the Trinity’ in *The Works of B B Warfield*, volume 2, *Biblical Doctrines*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1929, pp. 141–2. See for example the use of the quotation in *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament* by Sinclair B. Ferguson, (*PT Media Paper Number 2*, PT Media, 2002), p. 4.

the doctrines of the Trinity, the Incarnation, and the gospel, and the Old Testament saints exercised conscious faith in them. In the terms of Warfield's illustration, I want to argue that the light was already on, and these Christian doctrines are patent in the Old Testament as well as the New.²

I will seek to make my argument chiefly from the New Testament quotations of the Old Testament, and I will divide the material up into the following sections: first, some broad lines of argument that are relevant to several categories of New Testament text; second, the chief New Testament texts that support the view that the Old Testament is explicitly Christian; third, New Testament texts that might seem to contradict or qualify this view; and fourth, drawing some conclusions about how we should read the Old Testament.³

Some Broad Lines of Argument

The following general points could be made with reference to a number of the passages I refer to, and therefore for convenience I will group them together here, although their justification will require a study of the texts themselves.

i. The evangelistic and apologetic use of the Old Testament amongst Jews

The New Testament contains many quotations from the Old Testament which are designed to persuade Jews of the truth of Christianity. For such an argument to be persuasive the Old Testament must be explicitly Christian. If the Old Testament were merely implicitly Christian, and the Christian reading was only able to be discerned in the light of subsequent

² I know of no similar published summary of this position, although the particular arguments can be found in the writings of many other authors. The closest to such a summary has been my own survey of the position of Dr Paul Blackham in 'Paul Blackham: a Trinitarian Reading of the Old Testament,' *Churchman* 123.4 (2009): p. 341–60. Blackham has been a significant influence on my thinking, and I share his primary conclusions, but my approach is somewhat different, focussing on the New Testament interpretation of the Old. As with my article on Blackham I hope that this article will serve to stimulate further discussion.

I would like to thank Rev Glen Scrivener for reading an earlier version of the article and making valuable suggestions. He has made his own significant contributions to this issue at www.christthetruth.org.uk, and his linked blog.

There is now a substantial critical response to Blackham's position by Andrew S. Malone in two articles published in *Churchman*: 'Paul Blackham 1: Weak Exegetical Links' *Churchman* 125/1 (Spring 2011), pp. 51–71 and 'Paul Blackham 2: Weak Theological Links' *Churchman* 125/2 (Summer 2011), pp. 151–172.

³ My assumption in all that follows is that the New Testament writers correctly understand and interpret the Old Testament.

revelation, then a Jewish sceptic could rightly counter that belief in Christianity was not required by the Old Testament, since it was not the clear and natural meaning.⁴

ii. The rebuke of Jews for their failure to understand the Old Testament

The New Testament reports several rebukes of Jews, including some of Jesus' rebukes of his disciples, for failing to correctly understand the Old Testament and thus be Christians. For such a rebuke to be justified the Old Testament must be explicitly Christian, otherwise they could reply that the rebuke was unwarranted because the evidence of the Old Testament was not clear.⁵

iii. The lack of surprise or debate about Christian doctrines

If doctrines such as the Incarnation and the Trinity were only made patent in the New Testament, particularly after the resurrection of Christ, one might have expected significant debate about these doctrines recorded within its pages. However the New Testament is the almost totally lacking in any such debate. Warfield expresses this point with regard to the Trinity:

In presenting this one Jehovah as Father, Son and Spirit, they do not even betray any lurking feeling that they are making innovations... it is clear, in other words, that, as we read the New Testament, we are not witnessing

⁴ We might also add the 'confirmatory' use of the Old Testament in Hebrews, where it seems likely that the recipients were Jewish believers. Blackham makes this point when he writes:

The first chapter of Hebrews is a compilation of Hebrew Scriptures indicating the relationship of the Son to the Father, particularly in contrast to the angels... all these Scripture quotations are listed as *manifestly* showing those relations between the Son and the Father that we now label Trinitarian... If the writer of the book of Hebrews were engaged in a theologically driven eisegesis we must ask to what extent this would have been persuasive to his original audience. If these Scriptures were *not* recording the Father's declarations concerning his divine Son, then what value would they have to the Hebrew readers who were struggling to understand the identity of Jesus? ('The Trinity in the Hebrew Scriptures' in *Trinitarian Soundings in Systematic Theology*, ed. Paul Louis Metzger (T&T Clark, 2005), pp. 36–7.)

⁵ Malone develops an analogy of Peter Enns in an attempt to counter the position I am advocating. 'It is like reading a murder mystery for the second time, spotting some of the obscure clues in the opening pages, rightly deducing their significance for the outcome of the story, but then insisting that our prior knowledge of the outcome has played no part in our interpretation of those clues.' Malone, 'Paul Blackham 1,' p. 55. I think that the element of rebuke, even before the outcome of the story is known on the first reading, shows that the clues are not obscure.

the birth of a new conception of God...The doctrine of the Trinity does not appear in the New Testament in the making, but as already made.⁶

Warfield makes a similar point with regard to the divinity of Christ, in contrast to issues that *were* the subject of debate within the New Testament church:

It was not without a long struggle that they were constrained to acknowledge the abrogation of the Mosaic law and the opening of the door of faith to the Gentiles. But there was no trace of any similar struggle in regard to Christ's superhuman dignity...From the exclamation of Nathaniel it is evident that the thought did suggest itself to the Jews, before the veil of unbelief settled down upon their hearts in the reading of the Old Testament.⁷

The lack of surprise or debate about these fundamental Christian doctrines, and their immediate acceptance, is best explained by the theory that they were seen to be clearly taught in the Old Testament. Thus the New Testament does not give the impression of revealing new information about these central doctrines that was previously unavailable, but merely of insisting on the clear meaning of the Old Testament.

The Chief New Testament Texts

There are three main types of New Testament material that relate to this question of the Christian understanding of the Old Testament. They overlap, but it may be helpful to distinguish between them before we approach the chief texts themselves:

First, there are New Testament statements about what was taught by the Old Testament. Such texts provide the most direct evidence. I will examine those which favour my argument in this section, and examine those which seem to counter or qualify it in the following section.

Second, there are several references in the New Testament to the activity of the pre-incarnate Christ in the Old Testament, often termed Christophanies.

Third, there are a number of Old Testament passages quoted in the New Testament as statements made either to or by Christ.

⁶ Warfield, 'The Biblical Doctrine of the Trinity,' p. 142.

⁷ B. B. Warfield 'The Divine Messiah in the Old Testament,' *The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield* volume 2, *Biblical Doctrines*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1932), 2:85. I would suggest that the debate in the Gospels about the identity of Christ turns primarily not on whether a man could also be divine, but whether *this* man, who seemed to break the Sabbath law and died a cursed death, could be the promised divine Messiah of Old Testament expectation.

There are many passages we could look at but I will select just a few to examine here. In the texts I discuss, a variety of issues are touched on: in some the persons of the Trinity, in others the divine nature of the Messiah, in others the death and resurrection of the Messiah.

The fullest modern treatment of the relevant texts has been made by Professor Anthony Hanson in a number of books, and I will therefore quote him in support.⁸

i. New Testament Interpretation of the Old Testament

a. *The Testimony of Jesus*

John 5:39–47 on ‘Moses’ and ‘the Scriptures’

You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me,...But do not think I will accuse you before the Father. Your accuser is Moses, on whom your hopes are set. If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me. But since you do not believe what he wrote, how are you going to believe what I say? [John 5:39, 45–47]

In order to see what in particular Jesus understood Moses to have written about him we need to note the context which is a dispute about a healing by Jesus on the Sabbath. Jesus justifies his action on the grounds of a comparison between himself and God.

Jesus said to them, ‘My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I, too, am working.’ [John 5:17]

Jesus’ Jewish disputants understood the implications of this statement to be a claim to equality with God.

For this reason the Jews tried all the harder to kill him; not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God. [John 5:18]

Jesus then builds on the assumption that he is equal with God by showing, in vv. 19–29, that although he is equal, he is also different—he is the Divine Son to the Divine Father. In support of his claim Jesus

⁸ Professor Hanson is an interesting advocate since he not only thinks that the New Testament clearly and consistently views the Old Testament as explicitly Christian, but also that it is mistaken in doing so! See, for example, *The Living Utterances of God: The New Testament Exegesis of the Old* (DLT, 1983), p. 185. I note Malone’s caution: ‘Nor have modern academics Walter Kaiser and Anthony Hanson won the day with certain of their interpretations of the Old and New Testaments’ in Malone, ‘Paul Blackham 2,’ p. 157.

introduces a series of witnesses in vv. 30–47: John the Baptist in v. 32; his own works in v. 36; and the Old Testament Scriptures, in v. 39, which is the witness given to him by the Father. Thus, according to Jesus, Moses testifies to his divine Sonship and his submission to the authority of the Father. In other words, Moses writes about the inner-Trinitarian relationship between the Father and the Son.

However if these truths were only latent within the Old Testament his case here would collapse since to believe or disbelieve Moses would not lead necessarily to belief or disbelief in the role of Jesus as the divine Son in relation to God the Father. For the argument to work the evidence about the inner-Trinitarian relationships must be explicit in Moses.

Jesus' rebukes of the Disciples

In Luke 24, on the Road to Emmaus, Jesus rebukes the two forlorn disciples who don't yet believe in his resurrection:

'How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?' And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself. [Luke 24:25–27]

Jesus' rebuke was based solely on the teaching of the Old Testament, and thus such a rebuke would be unjustified unless the evidence in the Old Testament for the Messiah's death and resurrection in the Old Testament was explicit, and not merely implicit and thus only able to be discerned with hindsight in the light of additional evidence.⁹

Further, the fact that the disciples were kept from recognising the risen Lord in Luke 24:16, presumably by God, may well be because he wanted their faith in the resurrection to be based on the Old Testament, prior to a knowledge of its fulfilment. Later Paul would make a similar statement of faith in the resurrection, prioritising the Old Testament evidence:

For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. [1 Corinthians 15:3–5]

⁹ Malone counters by noting of the word translated 'explained' that 'scholars regularly conclude that the verb here means 'to explain on a more extensive and formal level the meaning of something which is particularly obscure or difficult to comprehend'... Jesus is introducing new concepts to his disciples rather than explicating the obvious.' Malone, 'Paul Blackham 1,' p. 67 n. 14. Such a reading, as Malone acknowledges, is not the only option, and fails to account for the element of rebuke.

After Jesus left the disciples in Emmaus, later that same evening, he again conducted an Old Testament Bible study with a larger group of disciples back in Jerusalem. Here the note of rebuke is absent, but Jesus gives an even more extensive statement of the truths clearly taught by the Old Testament:

Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. He told them, ‘This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem... [Luke 24:45–47]

In stating that ‘he opened their minds’ Luke indicates that the reason the disciples had failed to understand these truths as taught by the Old Testament was not due to some lack of clarity in the revelation, but a failure on their part to see them: their minds were closed.

b. The Testimony of the Apostles

The Apostles follow Jesus in their reading of the Old Testament as explicitly Christian in its teaching on the Trinity, the Incarnation and the gospel.

Paul’s defence before King Agrippa and Festus

Paul’s defence before Agrippa in Acts 26 is just one of several recorded occasions when he defends the gospel against Jewish critics, or those knowledgeable of Judaism. The climax of Paul’s defence comes in vv.22–23:

I am saying nothing beyond what the prophets and Moses said would happen—that the Christ would suffer and, as the first to rise from the dead, would proclaim light to his own people and to the Gentiles.

Paul claims absolute unoriginality for his message: he is teaching nothing but what the Old Testament teaches.¹⁰

Paul’s example of Moses’ gospel preaching

According to Paul, in Romans 10, Moses didn’t just write prophetically about Christ but he also called the Old Testament church to put their trust in Christ. Paul quotes from Deuteronomy 30 which he understands as an

¹⁰ The response of Festus indicates that the rejection of this reading of the Old Testament is not new: ‘At this point Festus interrupted Paul’s defence. ‘You are out of your mind, Paul!’ he shouted. ‘Your great learning is driving you insane.’ [Acts 26:24] Paul’s response is robust: ‘I am not insane, most excellent Festus,’ Paul replied. ‘What I am saying is true and reasonable.’ [Acts 26:25]

evangelistic sermon preached by Moses in which he sets before the Jews the gospel of faith in the Lord Jesus, who was to die and rise:

But the righteousness that is by faith says: ‘Do not say in your heart, ‘Who will ascend into heaven?’ (that is, to bring Christ down) ‘or ‘Who will descend into the deep?’ (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). [Romans 10:6–7 quoting Deuteronomy 30:12–13]

In summary Paul says that Moses preached the same gospel as he did:

But what does it say? ‘The word is near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart,’ that is, the word of faith we are proclaiming: That if you confess with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. [Romans 10:8–9 quoting Deuteronomy 30:14]

Paul then continues by quoting from the prophets, with the implication that they too called for the Old Testament church to exercise conscious faith in the Lord Christ.

As the Scripture says, ‘Anyone who trusts in him will never be put to shame.’ [Isaiah 28:16] For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile—the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him, for, ‘Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.’ [Joel 2:32] [Romans 10:11–13]

For Paul, the Lord Christ is the only way of salvation and object of faith for both Jew and Gentile, and for both those living before and after the incarnation. Professor Hanson concludes:

To sum up the conclusion we have drawn from Paul’s OT citations in Romans 10: according to Paul, Christ spoke in OT times to Moses, to David, and to Isaiah, proclaiming a gospel of faith in himself, and commissioning them to preach this faith, and foretelling his incarnation, cross, resurrection, and the accession of the Gentiles.¹¹

Peter’s summary statement about the prophets’ knowledge

Peter’s fullest statement on the understanding of the Old Testament prophets comes in 1 Peter 1:10–12.

Concerning this salvation, the prophets, who spoke of the grace that was to come to you, searched intently and with the greatest care, trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them

¹¹ *Jesus Christ in the Old Testament* (SPCK, 1965), p. 46.

was pointing when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow. It was revealed to them that they were not serving themselves but you, when they spoke of the things that have now been told you by those who have preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven.¹²

Peter is clear that the Old Testament prophets had explicit knowledge of the future sufferings and glories of Christ.¹³ Peter equates their past knowledge with the present knowledge of Christians when he says that the prophets ‘spoke of the things that have now been told you.’ The information Peter says that the Old Testament prophets lacked was merely to do with ‘the time and circumstances’ of Christ’s sufferings and glory.

ii. The Old Testament ministry of Christ

In this section I want to mention just a few of the many references in the New Testament to the pre-incarnate activity of Christ in the Old Testament.¹⁴ These references fall into two main categories: appearances, often called Christophanies; and statements, made either by or to Christ.

¹² See the discussion of Professor Kaiser for rejecting the translation ‘what person or time’ (adopted, for example, by the ESV), most recently in *Three Views on the New Testament use of the Old Testament* (Zondervan, 2008), ed. by Kenneth Derding and Jonathan Lunde, pp. 55–6; also *The Uses of the Old Testament in the New* (Moody Press, 1985), pp. 18–21.

¹³ This passage, with its claim of extensive conscious knowledge, would seem to make a notion of *sensus plenior* redundant. See also the comments of Blackham on this passage in an Appendix entitled ‘Frequently Asked Questions’ to *Bible Overview* by Steve Levy (Christian focus, 2008), question 2, pp. 286–7. The most extensive discussion and rejection of the Sensus Plenior is by Kaiser, summarised in *Three Views*. A similar conclusion is drawn by Revd. Benjamin Sargent in a recent article in *Churchman*:

Peter explains how Psalm 16 can only refer to the Risen Christ in Acts 2:25–31...A similar method of interpretation is employed later in the same sermon to explain Psalm 110:1 with the same conclusion: that the text must refer exclusively to Jesus. In Acts 13:35–37, Paul uses the same argument as Peter to interpret Psalm 16:10, suggesting that the use of certain texts and accompanying arguments were normative proofs for the resurrection in the earliest Church which consequently provide a good indication of a widespread belief in the univocacy of the Old Testament. [‘One Meaning or Many? A Study in New Testament Interpretation of Old testament texts,’ by Benjamin Sargent, *Churchman* 124/4 (Winter 2010), p. 360.]

¹⁴ There are also many passages in the Old Testament that testify to multiple divine persons, but are not quoted or alluded to in the New Testament. Examples where the three persons are commonly held to be mentioned in close proximity are Isaiah 48:18; 63:9–10; Psalm 33:6; and Haggai 2:5–7. However, I will limit myself to passages quoted by the New Testament in the expectation that they will be more persuasive.

These references are evidence that the New Testament writers understood the Old Testament to distinguish between two divine persons.

a. Pre-incarnate appearances of Christ

The two clearest passages in the Gospels in which Old Testament saints are said to have seen the pre-incarnate Christ are both in John's Gospel.

Abraham and John 8:56–59

‘Your father Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day; he saw it and was glad.’ ‘You are not yet fifty years old,’ the Jews said to him, ‘and you have seen Abraham!’ ‘I tell you the truth,’ Jesus answered, ‘before Abraham was born, I am!’ At this, they picked up stones to stone him, but Jesus hid himself, slipping away from the temple grounds. [John 8:56–59]

This is probably a reference to Abraham's meeting with the LORD in Genesis 18. The reaction of the Jews shows that they understand Jesus to be claiming not simply that Abraham had some sort of prophetic foresight of him, but a face-to-face meeting with him. The Jews reason this is impossible since Jesus isn't even 50 years old. Jesus doesn't correct their interpretation, but rather confirms it, and adds that this was possible because ‘I am.’ The move by the Jews to stone him suggests that they understand Jesus to be claiming to be divine. Further, since Jesus says that the cause of Abraham's rejoicing was meeting him, it must have been a conscious recognition of him as a divine person distinct from the Father. Hanson concludes:

The implication hidden behind all this slightly ambiguous language is that Abraham has met the pre-existent Word, not in paradise, as some commentators have desperately suggested, but in the course of Abraham's life. This must mean that John identified one of the three men who visited Abraham as described in Genesis 18 with the pre-existent Word.¹⁵

Thus Genesis 18 records a Christophany in which Abraham knew he was meeting Christ.

Isaiah and John 12:37–41

John later gives us his own reading of the Old Testament's witness to Jesus. In commenting on the unbelief of many, John states that this is in fulfilment of Isaiah.

¹⁵ A. T. Hanson, *The Prophetic Gospel: A Study of John and the Old Testament* (T & T Clark, 1991), p. 126.

Even after Jesus had done all these miraculous signs in their presence, they still would not believe in him. This was to fulfil the word of Isaiah the prophet:

‘Lord, who has believed our message and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?’ [Isaiah 53:1]

For this reason they could not believe, because, as Isaiah says elsewhere: ‘He has blinded their eyes and deadened their hearts, so they can neither see with their eyes, nor understand with their hearts, nor turn—and I would heal them.’ [Isaiah 6:10]

Isaiah said this because he saw Jesus’ glory and spoke about him. [John 12:37–41]

The sense in which Isaiah ‘saw’ Christ’s¹⁶ glory is clarified when we turn to Isaiah 6:

I saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted, and the train of his robe filled the temple. [Isaiah 6:1]

John understands not that Isaiah ‘saw’ Jesus’ glory in the sense of prophetic foresight but that, as with Abraham, he actually met him. Professor Hanson concludes:

We must take both quotations, Isaiah 53.1 in 12.38 and Isaiah 6.10 in 12.40, with the utmost seriousness, in the sense that according to John the pre-existent Word did really converse with the prophet Isaiah and Isaiah was well aware of the events of the coming messianic era. The phrase ‘our report’ in Isaiah 53.1 is understood by John to mean the prophet’s foretelling of Christ’s career...The great majority [of commentators] agree that according to John Isaiah saw the pre-existent Word in his great temple-vision, not the invisible Father.¹⁷¹⁸

¹⁶ It is striking that John 12:41 refers to the pre-incarnate Christ by the name Jesus. Hanson discusses other New Testament passages which may similarly refer to Jesus, and some of the Patristic support for this usage, in *Jesus Christ in the Old Testament*, pp. 61–63. However because this is uncommon in modern discussion, and to save confusion, I will refer to Jesus in his pre-incarnate ministry as ‘Christ.’

¹⁷ Hanson, *The Prophetic Gospel*, p. 166, 167. Malone notes Calvin’s rejection of this clear identification, and that in Acts 28:25–27 Paul attributes the commissioning speech of Isaiah 6 to the Holy Spirit. [Malone, ‘Paul Blackham 1,’ p. 53] However for words spoken by the Son to also be attributed to the Spirit, or for words spoken about the Son, such as Isaiah 49.6, to also be applied to his delegates such as the Apostles in Acts 13:44–47 does not seem to me necessarily inconsistent.

¹⁸ Just as the Apostles follow Jesus in their reading of the Old Testament as explicitly Christian, so they follow him in discovering his pre-incarnate activity in its pages. Hanson gives many instances. For example, on 1 Corinthians 10:1–11 he comments:

b. Old Testament statements made to or by Christ

There are a number of Old Testament passages, from the Psalms in particular, which are quoted in the New as statements either to or by Christ. The most significant for establishing that the Old Testament had a conscious knowledge of more than one divine person are those which record statements by one divine person to another. I will examine one example from the Gospels and one from the Epistles.

Psalm 110

Towards the end of his public ministry Jesus questions the Pharisees about the interpretation of Psalm 110.

‘What do you think about the Christ? Whose son is he?’ ‘The son of David,’ they replied. He said to them, ‘How is it then that David, speaking by the Spirit, calls him ‘Lord’? For he says, ‘The Lord said to my Lord: ‘Sit at my right hand until I put your enemies under your feet.’ If then David calls him ‘Lord,’ how can he be his son?’ No-one could say a word in reply, and from that day on no-one dared to ask him any more questions. [Matthew 22:42–46]

Jesus’ argument turns on the observation that in the Psalm David calls the coming messianic king his ‘Lord.’ However the assumption seems to be that for a descendent to be offered such an honorific title he must be more than merely human. Therefore Psalm 110 refers to two divine Lords. Certainly subsequent usage suggests that Jesus understood the second Lord of Psalm 110 to be a divine figure. So he alludes to Psalm

This is the one passage in the New Testament where everyone admits that we have a clear example of Christ’s pre-existent activity in Old Testament history, ... [Hanson, *Jesus Christ in the Old Testament*, p. 10.]

On Hebrews 11:24–27 he writes:

The difficulty lies of course in explaining how Moses could have shared the reproach of Christ centuries before Christ came... If our author believed that it was Christ who appeared to Moses in the burning bush it would be perfectly natural for him to refer to the act of Moses in joining his people at this time as ‘sharing ill-treatment with the people of God’ and encountering ‘abuse suffered for Christ.’...The beautiful phrase ‘as seeing him who is invisible’ must then be understood to refer to the incident of the burning bush... It does not mean ‘seeing the invisible God by faith,’ but ‘he had been granted through the visible Christ a sight of the invisible Father.’ [Hanson, *Jesus Christ in the Old Testament*, pp. 73, 74, 75.]

And on Jude 5, following the reading ‘Jesus’ in the Bible Society’s text, Hanson concludes,

Jude...attributes to Jesus the deliverance from Egypt and the slaughter of those Israelites who disobeyed Moses,... [Hanson, *The Living Utterances of God*, p. 156.]

110 in Matthew 26:64 when he tells the High Priest that he will see the Son of Man ‘sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One,’ to which the High Priest responds that Jesus ‘has spoken blasphemy.’¹⁹

Returning to Jesus’ question in Matthew 22, the failure of the Pharisees to reply implies that this was the clear meaning of the text which could not easily be refuted. Thus belief in two divine persons is clear.²⁰

Psalm 45:6–7

Perhaps the clearest example in the Epistles of two divine persons being found in the Old Testament is the reading of Psalm 45 in Hebrews 1:8–9.

But about the Son he [God] says, ‘Your throne, O God, will last for ever and ever, and righteousness will be the sceptre of your kingdom. You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness; therefore God, your God, has set you above your companions by anointing you with the oil of joy.’

The writer to the Hebrews understands Psalm 45 as an address of God the Father to God the Son, both of whom are called ‘God.’ This reading is all the more striking if Hebrews is in part an attempt to dissuade Jewish Christians from reverting to Judaism by highlighting the superiority of Christ. If this is the case, then the writer to the Hebrews needs to convince his readers from the Old Testament in its own terms. Thus he must believe that the divinity of Christ is clearly and persuasively taught by Psalm 45.

Hebrews also gives many other ‘Christian’ readings of Old Testament texts. Even where those texts seem to have less *prima facie* evidence than Psalm 45 of a plurality of divine persons, the writer is still able to identify which person the Trinity is speaking to which, and expects his Jewish readers to be persuaded. This is Professor Hanson’s summary:

The author of Hebrews seems to take for granted that all his readers will understand his habit of quoting Psalms as if they were prophetic dialogues between the Father and the Son. Thus at the very beginning of his work in 1.5, 7–13 we have the Father addressing the Son in Psalms. In 2.12, 13 we find the Son addressing the Father. In 5.6, 7 the Father addresses the Son in the words of Psalms 2.7 and 110.4. And in chapter 10 of Hebrews the

¹⁹ This understanding is confirmed by later New Testament usage. See Acts 2:34–36 and Hebrews 1:13.

²⁰ Malone raises a number of exegetical questions about Jesus’ interpretation of Psalm 110. [Malone, ‘Paul Blackham 2,’ p. 171, n. 58. Also ‘God the Illeist: Third-Person Self-References and Trinitarian Hints in the Old Testament.’ *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 52.3 (2009), p. 500, n.3] However the later usage of Jesus and the later New Testament writers, along with the reaction of the Pharisees and the High Priest, indicated they had a sufficiently clear understanding of a second divine person in the Psalm.

very nerve centre of his argument concerning the nature of Christ's work is expressed in a Psalm quotation in which the Son addresses the Father.²¹

²¹ Hanson, *Jesus Christ in the Old Testament*, p. 140.

If we ask how the distinction between Father and Son is determined in the Old Testament, Hanson argues that the key criterion for the New Testament writers is that the divine person who is seen is God the Son, and the divine person who is unseen is God the Father, based on passages like John 1:18:

No-one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father's side, has made him known. [John 1:18]

This line of argument is followed in a discussion on John 1:

We maintain, in line with a great many scholars, that behind this passage [John 1:14–18] lies the implication that when God appeared to Moses in Sinai as related in Exodus 34.5–9, it was not God the Father who appeared, but the Word of God. It was the pre-existent Christ whom Moses saw; he did not see God, 'for no man has ever seen God.' [Hanson, *The Prophetic Gospel*, p. 21. Professor Hanson notes, 'I expounded this thesis on my book *The New Testament Interpretation of Scripture* which I published in 1980. [Footnote: '...chapter 3, 97–109. I had already made this suggestion in *Jesus Christ in the Old Testament* (London, 1965) 108–113.')] p. 21.]

In summary:

John identifies the pre-existent Word with Yahweh of the OT *when Yahweh is described as appearing or speaking*. [Hanson, *The Prophetic Gospel*, p. 167, emphasis original.]

Hanson also argues that this point about the unseen Father is also a key step in Jesus' argument in John 5:37–8:

And the Father who sent me has himself testified concerning me. You have never heard his voice nor seen his form, nor does his word dwell in you, for you do not believe the one he sent.

Hanson concludes:

In [John] 5.37 Jesus says that the Jews have never seen God's form or heard his voice. But Moses has seen the form of God and heard him speak. They search the Scriptures, which do indeed witness to Christ, for when Moses recorded in Numbers 12.1–8 the divine testimony to his intimacy with the Lord, he was in fact telling us that it was Christ whose form he had seen, Christ who spoke with him in the Tabernacle...when John says that Moses wrote concerning Jesus, he does not mean that Moses prophesied concerning Jesus. He means that Moses wrote about the Jesus whom he had seen on the mount and in the Tabernacle. [Hanson, *Jesus Christ in the Old Testament*, p. 115, 116.]

Malone has offered an extensive critique of this argument in Malone, 'Paul Blackham 1,' pp. 55–58, in which he also refers to a previous article, Andrew S. Malone, 'The Invisibility of God: A Survey of a Misunderstood Phenomenon,' *Evangelical Quarterly* 79.4 (2007): pp. 311–29. Although he highlights a number of difficulties in establishing a clear distinction between the divine persons based on visibility alone, I think the evidence of the New Testament is that such a distinction is sufficiently clear to enable such a distinction.

Some possible ‘Problem’ passages

Amongst modern academic writers those who have written most extensively from the perspective of this essay are Walter Kaiser and A. T. Hanson. I have already quoted extensively from Professor Hanson. Professor Kaiser has most recently presented his understanding of the Old Testament in *Three Views on the New Testament use of the Old Testament*.²²

Modern evangelical objections are usefully summarised in the responses to Walter Kaiser in *Three Views*.²³ We now also have the substantial response to Paul Blackham’s view in Andrew Malone’s two articles in *Churchman*.²⁴

There are several biblical texts which may seem to counter the claim that the Old Testament was explicitly Christian, and that the Old Testament saints had a conscious knowledge of a plurality of divine persons, and placed their faith in the death and resurrection of the incarnate Son of God.²⁵

i. ‘Mystery’

The chief category of such texts are those New Testament references to mysteries which had been previously hidden but are now revealed. There are several references to mystery in the New Testament, but two in particular seem to refer to information that was not known, or at least not widely known, in the Old Testament but that was revealed in the New. The first is in Ephesians 3, and particularly v. 6:

This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus.

While in the Old Testament Gentiles could receive the blessings of the covenant by becoming Jews, the new thing revealed is that they can now be blessed as Gentiles, together in one body with Jews. This same issue is under discussion in the other passage in Colossians 1:

the mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations, but is now disclosed to the saints. To them God has chosen to make known

²² ‘Single Meaning, Unified referents’ in Kaiser, *Three Views*, pp. 45–89, and various ‘Responses’ through the book.

²³ Alternative positions, and criticism of Kaiser’s position, are offered by Darrell L. Bock and Peter Enns.

²⁴ Malone has also published two articles which critique important aspects of Blackham’s position. Further literature is mentioned in my article on Blackham.

²⁵ A number of objections are treated briefly by Blackham in an Appendix entitled ‘Frequently Asked Questions’ to Levy, *Bible Overview*, pp. 286–308.

among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. [Colossians 1:26–27]

The mystery now revealed is that Christ indwells the Gentiles: ‘Christ in *you*,’ as Gentiles. Thus they are accepted on equal terms to Jews, but without having to become Jews.

In the New Testament we discover that it was precisely this issue of the terms on which Gentiles were to be welcomed into the one new body of the church that was the chief area of debate in the New Testament church. It may be that the reason this issue was so controversial was because it was based on new revelation, rather than clear Old Testament teaching. Thus the novelty of the New Testament was not the gospel, the Trinity or the Incarnation, but the terms on which the Gentiles would receive the blessings of the gospel.

ii. Hebrews 1:1–2

In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, [Hebrews 1:1–2]

Hebrews offers a contrast between the means of revelation in the Old and New Testaments: formerly through the prophets, but now by the Son of God. However this does not mean that God the Son was unknown previously, since in order to illustrate his point the writer goes on to give a string of Old Testament quotations, and attributes many of them to God the Son. For example,

So Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers. He says, ‘I will declare your name to my brothers; in the presence of the congregation I will sing your praises.’ And again, ‘I will put my trust in him.’ And again he says, ‘Here am I, and the children God has given me.’ [Hebrews 2:11–13]

These verses also provide the clue to understanding the meaning of the opening verses. Hebrews understands these quotations from Psalm 22 and Isaiah 8 to have been uttered prophetically by Jesus in his pre-incarnate ministry. However Jesus only actually fulfilled them, or spoke them, in his incarnate ministry. Thus the new thing in these last days is not new information, but the medium of revelation: Jesus now speaks directly.

iii. God is one

Those Old Testament passages which refer to God being ‘one’ might seem to contradict the claim that they knew God as Trinity. Perhaps the most famous example is the *Shema* of Deuteronomy 6, which begins:

The LORD our God, the LORD is one. [Deuteronomy 6:4]

Without examining the possible range of meanings of the word ‘one,’ which commonly refers to compound unity, as in John 17:22, it is clear that Paul sees no contradiction between the *Shema* and New Testament teaching, when he alludes to it in 1 Corinthians 8:

there is no God but one... yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live. [1 Corinthians 8:4, 6]²⁶

We may also note a broader objection:

iv. The Old Testament simply isn't that clear

But, it may be objected, isn't it simply the case that the Old Testament is not as clear as the New? To take the example of the Trinity, Warfield notes:

Certainly we cannot speak broadly of the revelation of the doctrine of the Trinity in the Old Testament. It is a plain matter of fact that none who have depended on the revelation embodied in the Old Testament alone have ever attained to the doctrine of the Trinity.²⁷

Now some caution needs to be exercised to compare like with like. The Old Testament contains no ‘creedal’ Trinitarian statements, but then nor does the New. In both cases, as Warfield himself points out, the Trinity is assumed rather than argued. But I believe that the evidence of the many New Testament quotations above suggests that the apostles read the Old Testament as explicitly Christian.

Further, there is a question of the threshold of proof required. Malone concludes his critique of Blackham's position by arguing that ‘Blackham's chain of argument is hardly as strong as it appears. The many links do not

²⁶ A further issue, raised by Malone, is the discontinuity in the work of the Spirit before and after Pentecost, particularly in the light of Jesus' teaching in John 7:37–39 and 14:16–17. [See Malone, ‘Paul Blackham 2,’ p. 158, and footnote 41, where he refers particularly to the work of James M. Hamilton Jr.] An article length response is now available from Kaiser: ‘The indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit in the Old Testament’ *Evangelical Quarterly* 82/4 (October 2010), pp. 308–15. He writes:

We conclude, then, that the Holy Spirit did indwell Old Testament believers. The promise of the Spirit that was new was their incorporation into the universal church, the Body of Christ. [p. 315.]

²⁷ Warfield, ‘The Biblical Doctrine of the Trinity.’

reinforce each other, but offer the increased likelihood that one (or more) of them will prove weak...²⁸ However I think that the position Warfield advocates is more vulnerable than commonly realised, since it has to refute every interpretation of those New Testament texts that suggests a conscious knowledge in the Old Testament of more than one divine person. If such an interpretation is established as likely for only one text, then a key step towards my case is made since it establishes that there was explicit Christian faith in the Old Testament.²⁹

Conclusions

If the view I am advocating is correct, what are the consequences? I will briefly mention two.³⁰

1. The objectivity of Old Testament interpretation is established

If the Old Testament is explicitly Christian then the New Testament writers could come to their Christian reading of it through the use of the grammatical-historical method. However if it is not explicitly Christian, then meaning does not reside in the intent of the original authors, but in its fuller meaning or *Sensus Plenior* that the original authors did not grasp, but was understood in the light of further revelation.³¹ The issue has perhaps been most fully explored amongst modern evangelicals by Walter Kaiser, and he argues that the *Sensus Plenior* leads to an inevitable subjectivity in interpretation:

²⁸ Malone, 'Paul Blackham 2,' p. 164.

²⁹ Even if this single text came chronologically late in the formation of the Old Testament, it would enable the latent meaning of other texts to be interpreted correctly prior to the New Testament. In fact the New Testament quotes more commonly from the older parts of the Old Testament.

The fact that the majority of Jews before Christ rejected this Christian understanding is not a counter argument, as Paul explains the basis for this in 2 Corinthians 3.

But their minds were made dull, for to this day the same veil remains when the old covenant is read. It has not been removed, because only in Christ is it taken away. Even to this day when Moses is read, a veil covers their hearts. But whenever anyone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away.
(verses 14–16)

From the time of Moses to Christ this failure on the part of most Jews wasn't due to a lack of revelation, since Moses did understand it, but rather a lack of reception, since they failed to understand it.

³⁰ See also Saville, 'Paul Blackham,' pp. 351–355.

³¹ A brief and helpful introduction to this and related issues is given by Lunde in his 'Introduction' to Kaiser, *Three Views*. On *Sensus Plenior* see especially pp. 13–18.

The absolute necessity of establishing a single sense to any writing, much less to Scripture, has been acknowledged by all interpreters—at least as a starting principle...Louis Berkhof argued:

Scripture has but a single sense, and is therefore susceptible to a scientific and logical investigation...To accept a manifold sense...makes any science of hermeneutics impossible and opens wide the door for all kinds of arbitrary interpretations.

... This raises the whole question of how far the psalmist (or any writer of Scripture) understood his own words and to what degree he was conscious of the way in which his words would be fulfilled if they pointed to some future development. Psalm 16, however, is an ideal Psalm for a discussion of this question since Peter did authoritatively comment on this very question of the psalmist's understanding and precise consciousness of the future fulfillment. Therefore we believe the dictum as stated most simply by John Owen will best unlock the depths even of the messianic psalms: 'If the Scripture has more than one meaning, it has no meaning at all.'³²

If the Old Testament is explicitly Christian then such necessary subjectivity in interpretation is avoided.

2. The directness of Old Testament application is established

If the Old Testament is explicitly Christian it does not result in any different conclusions on the Trinity, the Incarnation and the gospel from other evangelical readings. Rather these conclusions, as well as many other aspects of Christian life and doctrine, are taught explicitly by the Old Testament, and thus it speaks directly to us.

Further, once the Old Testament is understood to be explicitly Christian I think that the basis of the New Testament's interpretation becomes comprehensible. Speaking of Paul, Professor Hanson comments:

Once grant Paul his one great assumption, that Christ spoke and acted in Old Testament times, and his interpretation becomes homogeneous and comprehensible.³³

³² Kaiser, *The Uses of the Old Testament in the New* (Moody Press, 1985), pp. 25–26. This is a point made regularly and forcefully by Walter Kaiser in various places, most recently his chapter in *Three Views*, entitled 'Single meaning, unified referents.' See also Blackham's answer to the question: 'Did the writers of the Hebrew Scriptures understand what they were writing?' in Levy, *Bible Overview*, p. 288.

³³ Hanson, *Jesus Christ in the Old Testament*, p. 47.

I believe that what Hanson says of Paul can equally be applied to the rest of the New Testament. From this it follows that we can follow Jesus and the Apostles in their principles of interpretation.³⁴ This should be a great incentive to preach and teach from the Old Testament, to the enriching of the church. Conversely, Kaiser issues a warning, which can also serve as a summary of this article:

The Old Testament was the Bible of the early church. Yet one more objection can be heard from some detractors. ‘Now that we have the New Testament, should we not go to the New Testament first to form an understanding of the Bible’s teaching and then go backward into the Old Testament, interpreting it in the light of the New Testament?’ This whole approach is wrongheaded historically, logically, and biblically. As we have seen, the first New Testament believers tested what they heard from Jesus and his disciples against what was written in the Old Testament. They had no other canon or source of help... To make the preaching or teaching of the Old Testament contingent on a prior commitment to making normative for all matters of faith the teaching at the end of God’s revelation (i.e. the New Testament) obscures the uniqueness of many of the Old Testament’s teachings. It also trivializes up to three-fourths of what God had to say to us. The tendency to interpret the Bible backward is a serious procedural problem, for it will leave a large vacuum in our teachings and provide seedbeds for tomorrow’s heresies...The value of the Old Testament is immeasurable for all believers.³⁵

Rev Dr ANDY SAVILLE is Vicar of All Saints, Laleham, in the Diocese of London.

³⁴ See Scott A. Swanson, ‘Can We Reproduce the Exegesis of the New Testament? Why Are We Still Asking?’ *Trinity Journal* 17.1 (1996): pp. 67–76 for a similar conclusion in the context of evangelical discussion. Lunde sets this question in context in Kaiser, *Three Views*, p. 32ff.

³⁵ Kaiser, *Preaching and Teaching from the Old Testament* (Baker Academic, 2003), pp. 26–28.