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One Meaning or Many? A Study in New Testament Interpretation of Old Testament Texts

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The belief that the Bible is open to a variety of valid interpretations, that it is necessarily polysemous or indeterminate, is widespread amongst Evangelicals and the wider Church. So, for example, it is often asserted that there are no right or wrong answers when studying the Bible or that the Bible says different things to different people and that this is evidence for its inspiration. This is no new development and is evidenced by the emphasis on multiple scriptural readings in works of patristic through to late medieval theology. Before that, a stress on the polysemous nature of the biblical text was a significant element of rabbinic writing whilst polysemy also featured prominently in certain schools of Homeric scholarship.¹ In more recent theology, scriptural polysemy has been celebrated by postliberalism (possibly as a feature of postmodernity) and is perhaps exemplified in both the theology and theological method of theologians like John Milbank and Rowan Williams.² Consequently, the belief that a biblical text is determinate, that it has one correct interpretation (though perhaps many implications or applications)³ has become a hallmark of 'fundamentalism' or 'literalism' in the eyes of many. The question must then be asked: does the New Testament, much of which is concerned with scriptural interpretation, demonstrate an understanding of Scripture as polysemous? One might suppose that since New Testament authors often interpret the Old Testament christologically, in ways which might seem obscure to the modern reader, a degree of interpretative freedom is permitted. However the New Testament authors, and indeed the Lord Jesus himself, at no point suggest that an Old Testament text has a variety of legitimate meanings. Moreover, it is typically the case that the interpretation supplied by a New Testament author to a text is described in terms that claim it as the definitive interpretation. If this is the case, contemporary readers of the Bible should, in the power of the Holy Spirit, strive for the single meaning of the biblical text in study, in teaching and in debate.

Jesus in the Synoptic Gospels: 'How can he be his Son?'

In the Synoptic Gospels the Lord Jesus rarely discusses the interpretation of a scriptural text. His debate with the religious authorities regarding Psalm 110:1 and the Davidic sonship of the Messiah in Matthew 22:41-45, Mark 12:35-37 and Luke 20:41-44 is a notable exception. Matthew and Luke differ slightly in the wording of Jesus' exegetical question that concludes the discussion from Mark, and include their words in a slightly different order from each other, though the question remains essentially the same: 'If David calls [the Christ] Lord [in Psalm 110:1], how can he be his son?' Jesus appeals to David as the author of the Psalm to allow its statement about the Christ to be understood. Since Jesus and his audience know David to be the author of the psalm and know that the psalm describes God's chosen King it becomes clear with Jesus' question that the Christ cannot be David's son: rather he is his Lord.⁴ With his question, Jesus renders implausible any previously held interpretation of the psalm as referring to another human king like David. Psalm 110:1 has a correct interpretation and that interpretation will not permit the view of those who see the text as pointing to an earthly king. Jesus employs the text in such a way as demonstrates his belief that the text has a single clear meaning. This is consistent with Jesus' other uses of Scripture, such as Mark 7:6, where Isaiah 29:13 is seen to refer directly to the Pharisees and Scribes with whom Jesus is eating and Matthew 12:17, where Isaiah 43:1-3 is seen to directly prophesy Jesus' ministry. With these quotations from Scripture, Jesus in no way indicates that they could have multiple referents.

Luke-Acts: Scripture Fulfilled

Luke-Acts and Hebrews provide the most detailed exegetical arguments of the New Testament and because of this will be discussed in greater depth here. Luke presents the most sophisticated account of how the Old Testament is to be interpreted, though there remains some degree of scholarly disagreement over the precise nature of this interpretation. The dominant view has been that Luke emphasises the Old Testament as providing 'proof from prophecy'. The Old Testament necessarily points forward to a single referent: God's anointed King and the new age that he will bring in. Luke also, to an extent that exceeds that of the other Gospel writers, weaves Old Testament language and allusion into his narrative so as to be clear to his readers that he is writing Scripture and that the events of Jesus' life and those of the earliest Church are the completion and climax of previous Scripture.

This is clearly seen in the wonderful opening sentence of Luke's Gospel where Luke promises to provide an 'orderly account' 'concerning that which has been fulfilled amongst us'. Forms of the verb *πληρῶ* ('I fill/fulfil,' usually in the passive) are greatly favoured by Luke as a description of scriptural fulfilment, to the extent that the use of such a term in the prologue as a description of Jesus' ministry makes it clear that the Gospel is thoroughly anticipated in the Scriptures of Israel.⁵ The use of this 'filling' verb makes it clear that the Gospel 'makes full' the meaning of the Old Testament promises, leaving no room for further interpretation.

The gospel is to be understood by Theophilus as the completion and perfection of all that has been promised in the past.⁶ This is confirmed straight after the prologue in the great hymns of the infancy narrative as Mary rejoices in God's faithfulness to that which he spoke to Abraham and his descendents (Luke 1:54-55) and as Zechariah praises God for acting in accordance with his words through the prophets, his promises of mercy and his holy covenant (1:70, 72). These hymns are both in response to hearing the good news of what God was about to do in sending his Son. That Jesus' ministry provides the true prophetic referent of Old Testament passages is seen throughout the Gospel. The most striking occurrence of this is in 4:18-22 as Jesus proclaims himself 'today' to be the one who liberates captive Israel in Isaiah 61:1-2. The prophecy has been fulfilled, completed. At the end of the Gospel Jesus confirms himself and his saving work on the cross and over the grave as the true referent of the Hebrew Scriptures. On the road to Emmaus and in Jerusalem the risen Lord explains how 'Moses and all the prophets' (24:27) and 'the law of Moses, the prophets and the psalms' (24:44) point to himself. This is seen in 24:45 as a gracious divine act of revelation as the disciples' minds are 'opened up' to perceive the true message of the Scriptures.

Hans Conzelmann notes here that, for Luke, only after the resurrection can the Old Testament be understood since the ministry of Jesus provides the essential hermeneutical key to the truth of Scripture. Conzelmann cites Acts 3:17 in support (see also Acts 13:27). Here the 'men of Israel' are pronounced ignorant of the true Christological meaning of Scripture and so are in some way excused for handing over Jesus to death.⁷ It is as though the correct interpretation of Scripture is hidden from view until the ministry of Jesus is placed at the heart of God's revealed plan for the salvation of the world.⁸ In Luke, the whole of

the Old Testament points forward to the climactic events of God's visitation of the world and the birth of the Church. This is not seen to be an optional extra reading that can be added to some other reading of the text, rather this is simply what Scripture is about.

The exegetical methods employed by the apostles in Acts also serve to limit the possible meaning of the Old Testament texts under discussion. For example, Peter explains how Psalm 16 can only refer to the risen Christ in Acts 2:25-31. Here, Peter argues that Psalm 16:8-11 cannot refer to David (understood to be the text's author) since the well-known historical facts about David's life do not permit this interpretation. The fact of David's tomb contradicts the psalm's claim that its speaker will not see corruption (2:27). Moreover, since David is known by Peter and his audience as a prophet,⁹ it is reasonable to suppose that he is speaking of someone else who will live at a later time.¹⁰ The eyewitness accounts of Jesus' resurrection provided by the apostles (2:32) now provide the only plausible referent for the psalm: Jesus Christ. It is interesting here that the proclamation of the text's newly understood meaning is accompanied by a destruction of the older meaning of the text which is no longer to be recognised as faithful or reasonable interpretation. 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 univocity of the Old Testament.¹¹

Hebrews: God's Promises Remain

Hebrews 3:7-4:13 is probably the largest portion of New Testament literature devoted to the exposition of a single text. As in Matthew 22:41-45, Mark 12:35-37, Luke 20:41-44, Acts 2:25-31 and 13:35-37, Scripture is not simply quoted and interpreted, but the reasons for the given interpretation are made clear. Accordingly, this passage is of immense importance when considering how New Testament authors make use of the Old Testament. The author of Hebrews argues that Psalm 95:7-11 cannot refer to the continued promise of earthly land for God's people. His argument is designed to limit the way in which the text is being interpreted. The principal way this is achieved is by the

use of a rabbinic *gezerah shewah* argument in 4:3-5. This is where the author defines what God's rest really is in Scripture by comparing *κατάπαυσίν* ('rest') in Psalm 95:11 with *κατέπαυσεν* ('he [God] rested') in Genesis 2:2. The Genesis parallel shows that God's rest cannot be a land but must be an eschatological time of resting enjoyed by him as an eschatological Sabbath day.¹² Even more decisive is the author of Hebrews' next argument in 4:6-10. Here, 'rest' cannot refer to the land since, if it did, Psalm 95 would not exist. The author knows that the psalm, attributed to David, was written after the settlement of Israel into the Promised Land, so why does it threaten to bar the unfaithful from entry into the land (4:8)? The author of Hebrews is keen to carefully define what Psalm 95 means and allows no freedom at all to interpret it incorrectly. This is despite the fact that it had doubtless been interpreted as referring to the promise of land for generations (though not from its composition, as the argument from Davidic authorship attempts to make clear). God's rest is still available as a promise to believers and the text is able to function as God's 'living and active' word (4:11-13) challenging God's people to persevere.

Whilst it may seem that Hebrews is a 'hermeneutic-free zone' when it comes to placing scriptural passages into the mouth of Christ (as in the catena of chapter one),¹³ the rigorous attempt to demonstrate a single indisputable meaning for Psalm 95:7-11 should steer us away from thinking that this kind of interpretation is unprincipled: one hermeneutical choice amongst many possible options in the mind of the author.¹⁴

Paul: The Veil Lifted

Like Jesus, Paul does not typically make his hermeneutical methods obvious but simply places Old Testament texts within an interpretative context, usually employing versions of the formula 'it is written...' (Rom. 1:17, 2:24, 3:4, 10, 4:17, 8:36, 9:13, 33, 10:15, 11:8, 26 etc.). Paul uses texts to prove what he is asserting as though their meaning is obvious. 2 Corinthians 6:16-7:1 is a good example, as a conflation of Leviticus 26:12 and Isaiah 52:11 is cited as proof of the Church's status as the 'temple of the living God'. This apparent lack of scriptural ambiguity can also be seen in the Pauline formula 'according to the Scriptures...' used without explanation to describe events of Jesus' life (1 Cor. 15:3 and 4). For Paul, Scripture has a single, clear and obvious meaning.

J. Louis Martyn points to 1 Corinthians 1:17-24 to explain Paul's understanding of Scripture. He points to the apparently false dichotomy between the Gospel as foolishness to those who are perishing and the Gospel as the power of God to those who are being saved, suggesting that the Gospel is not mere wisdom (to be contrasted with foolishness) rather it is a tool used by God to save. The Gospel cannot be learnt, nor can it be discovered by reading the Old Testament. God must take the initiative.

Paul did not make his way from Isaiah's words about God's destroying the discernment of the discerning to the foolish word of the crucified Messiah.

His hermeneutic worked exactly the other way around, from the previously unknown and foolish gospel of the cross to the previously known and previously misunderstood Scripture.¹⁵

Once the gospel has been grasped as a result of God's grace, the Scriptures can be understood. Paul does not need, therefore, to explain his use of the Old Testament. He believes that its meaning ought to be obvious to believers and alternative readings must be the false readings of spiritual ignorance (as in Acts 3:17 and 13:27). This necessity of spiritual insight is emphasised in 2 Corinthians 3:14-16. The Israelites are prevented from understanding the law of Moses as though a veil were before their eyes, a veil that is removed when someone is in Christ. In Christ, believers are moved from false interpretation of the Scriptures to true interpretation. Old Testament texts have a clear and unambiguous meaning in Paul. Variant readings are those of ignorance and unbelief, made without grace and without Christ.

Conclusion

Whilst this brief enquiry has failed to provide exhaustive analysis of the relevant New Testament material (Johannine and Petrine literature is regrettably not mentioned at all and the study has concentrated purely on the interpretation of actual quotations without giving proper attention to scriptural allusion as another example of interpretation) it seems likely that what has been studied departs significantly from rabbinic ideas of scriptural polysemy. The New Testament authors convey the idea that scriptural texts have one proper referent connected to the climax of salvation history: the incarnation, life, death, resurrection and reign of the Lord Jesus. To interpret Scripture without Christ as the subject would be to grossly misunderstand the emphasis of God's action within history, perhaps akin to attempting to

understand a story without reading its ending (as in Luke–Acts), or else would be a sign of a life headed for destruction (as in 1 Cor. 1:18). The implication of this for those engaged in Bible teaching ministry is relatively straightforward. Bible teachers who seek to reflect a biblical understanding of Scripture ought not to provide multiple interpretations of the same text in preaching but should work hard to discern the correct interpretation of a text, prayerfully recognising that our own sin may be a barrier to true understanding. Furthermore, when preaching an Old Testament passage, one could do no better than to model exposition of that passage around its treatment in the New Testament whenever possible.

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ENDNOTES

1. On the rabbinic commitment to polysemy see David Stern, “Midrash and Indeterminacy,” *Critical Inquiry* 15:1, 1988: 132. Outside the mainstream of rabbinic material the writings of Philo are replete with references to scripture’s need of ‘enlightened’ allegorical interpretation to supplement the baser material sense of the text, recognising polysemy (e.g. de Plant 9). It is interesting to note, however, that polysemy is denied in the eschatological pesher exegesis of Qumran. The common citation ‘it’s interpretation is...’ following a scriptural quotation makes it clear that the quotation refers exclusively to the person or event named by the exegete. See, for example, 1QpHab, 4QpNah, 4QpPsa and 4QpIsab (4QFlor and 11QMelch provide good examples of similar exegesis outside of the pesher literature). In Greek literature on Homer, Sosibius and Ezekiel Tragicus represent an indeterminate approach.
2. John Milbank, *The Word Made Strange: Theology, Language, Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), p. 94 “...while medieval exegesis fully maintained the dualism of res and (human) signum, it nevertheless tended to understand the res alluded to by the primary “literal” sense of the scriptural signs as ontologically symbolic and internally polysemous in so far as nature was the language of the infinite God himself’. See also Benjamin Sargent, “John Milbank and biblical hermeneutics: the end of the historical-critical method?” *The Heythrop Journal* forthcoming 2011. For Rowan Williams, see Rowan Williams, ‘The Literal Sense of Scripture,’ *Modern Theology* 7:2. 1991.
3. Psalm 119 seems to suggest that the clear biblical text may be both promise and

- condemnation to the reader. See Benjamin Sargent, "The dead letter? Psalm 119 and the spirituality of the Bible in the local church," *Evangelical Quarterly* 81:2: 2009.
4. C. K. Barrett, "Luke/Acts," in D. A. Carson (ed.) *It is Written: Scripture Citing Scripture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 234.
 5. See David Peterson, "The Motif of Fulfillment and the Purpose of Luke-Acts" in Bruce W. Winter and Andrew D. Clarke (eds.), *The Book of Acts in its First Century Setting: Vol 1: Ancient Literary Setting* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993) for a comprehensive survey of Luke's fulfillment language.
 6. John T. Squires, *The Plan of God in Luke-Acts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 121 argues that this fulfillment motif is a crucial element in Luke's understanding of the sovereignty of the God who orders the whole of time in accordance with his promises in Scripture.
 7. Hans Conzelmann, *The Theology of Saint Luke*, trans. Geoffrey Buswell (Faber and Faber: London, 1960) p162 and idem. *Acts of the Apostles: A Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles* (Fortress Press: Philadelphia, 1987) pXLVI.
 8. Jacob Jervell, 'The Future of the Past: Luke's Vision of Salvation History and its Bearing in his Writing of History' in Ben Witherington (ed.) *History, Literature and Society in the Book of Acts* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1996) p105.
 9. An interesting history of this idea which is unattested in the Old Testament is provided by Joseph Fitzmyer, 'David, "Being therefore a Prophet..." Acts 2:30', *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 34:3. 1972.
 10. Mark L. Strauss, *The Davidic Messiah in Luke-Acts: The Promise and its Fulfillment in Lukan Christology* (Sheffield Academic Press: Sheffield, 1995) p138.
 11. J. W. Bowker, 'Speeches in Act: A Study in Proem and Yelammedenu Form,' *New Testament Studies* 14:1. 1967 shows quite convincingly that the Sermons of Acts (including those in Acts 2 and 13) follow forms common in synagogue worship though is unable to account for the actual exegetical technique which employs the identity of the Old Testament author to interpret a text. It is my opinion that such arguments are unique to the New Testament in the ancient world and depend significantly on Christian understandings of history as 'salvation history'.
 12. Though, as Lane points out, this is a promise already entered into in the present, claiming that εἰσερχόμεθα γὰρ εἰς τὴν κατάπαυσιν (4:3) should not be understood simply as a proleptic entry. William L. Lane, *Hebrews 1-8* (Word Books: TX: 1991) p. 99. This has significant value for the debate regarding the extent to which κατάπαυσιν still refers to a physical place. Gerhard von Rad notes that נחמה in the Massoretic Text represents 'tangible safety from enemies', a physical land, yet also regards its use in Psalm 95 as eschatological. Gerhard von Rad, 'There

Remains Still a Rest for the People of God: An Investigation of a Biblical Conception' in *The Problem of the Hexateuch and Other Essays*, trans. E. W. Trueman Dicken (London: SCM, 1966), pp. 95, 99. The eschatological language of Hebrews demonstrates the typical materiality of apocalyptic Judaism (Marie E. Isaacs, *Sacred Space: An Approach to the Theology of the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press: 1992), p. 86, yet this understanding of *katapausin* suggests that it is a physical reality entered into spiritually prior to its fulfillment. See the discussions in Paul Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993), p. 254 and Harold W. Attridge, "Let us Strive to Enter that Rest': The Logic of Hebrews 4:1-11," *Harvard Theological Review* 73:2, 1980: 282-3.

13. Stephen Motyer, "The Psalm Quotations of Hebrews 1: A Hermeneutic-Free Zone?" *Tyndale Bulletin* 50:1, 1999: 8. See also Iutisone Salevao, *Legitimation in the Letter to the Hebrews: The Construction and Maintenance of a Symbolic Universe* (Sheffield Academic Press: Sheffield. 2002), p. 6 and D. H. Wenkel, "Gezerah Shawah as Analogy in the Epistle to the Hebrews," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 37:2, 2007:65. This seems to contradict James Thompson's assertion that Ps 95 merely 'grounds speculation' on a Philonic and transcendent *καταπαυσιν*. James W. Thompson, *The Beginnings of Christian Philosophy: The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Washington: Catholic Biblical Association of America, 1982), pp. 81, 86.
14. The perspicuity of Scripture is something I discuss in more detail in Benjamin Sargent, "John 4:1-42 and the Clarity of the Bible," *Churchman* 123:3, 2009.
15. J. Louis Martyn, *Theological Issues in the Letters of Paul* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1997), p. 221. According to Martyn, the Gospel of John presents a similar approach to Scripture, p. 217.