

Richard N.
Longenecker's
*Biblical
Exegesis in the
Apostolic
Period*
(Vancouver,
B.C.: Regent
College).

A Review

by

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In this influential tome, first published in 1975 and revised in 1999, the author notes that it is a common mistake to confuse hypotheses for evidence and to accept historical formulations on the basis of their coherence and widespread acceptance. The pages of theological history provides for us, he points out, the devastating effect that this perversion has had and is still having. Longenecker laments that even in view of such empirical evidence, the tendency to emulate these interpretive forms persists. He admonishes that we must guard against our own

inclinations and refuse to yield to various pressures to adopt these erroneous interpretive approaches to the New Testament writers' use of Scripture. His view is that a careful historical exegetical investigation can and should be done in order to garner proper understanding of the Scripture. The necessity of applying due diligence in this respect cannot be substituted with pietism, speculation or emulation neither should it be sacrificed on the altar of the perpetuation of some traditionally erroneous views, says Longenecker.

He, calls for an abandonment of assumptions that the New Testament writers' treatment of the Old Testament were either mechanical collation of proof texting to show exact fulfilment or an illegitimate twisting and distortion of the ancient texts. While he admits to be understandable criticisms that the exegetical treatment by NT writers, 1. Could give rise to the assumption that the writings were 'doctored' in order to prove literal fulfilment, (although in his view it only proved continuity with Scriptures of the old covenant); and 2. Makes the exegesis of the early Christians appears forced and artificial (albeit when judged by modern criteria), the author believes that the critics ignore the obvious, namely, that New Testament hermeneutics vis a vis the

Christian faith, came to birth in the Jewish milieu characterized by certain basic pattern of thought and common exegetical methods.

The author espoused that though it may be difficult to prove that the New Testament writers were consciously employing varieties of exegetical genres or following particular modes of interpretation, an analysis of their work reveals that they did in fact engaged in historico-grammatical exegesis, illustration by way of analogy, midrash exegesis, peshet interpretation, and allegorical treatment and interpretation based on the concepts of 'corporate solidarity' in their presentations. He observed no difficulty, however, in identifying that they were consciously interpreting Old Testament Scripture along three major lines; (1) a Christocentric perspective; (2) in conformity with a Christian tradition and (3) along Christological lines.

Longenecker identified as the undergirding premises for the interpretive approach of the New Testament writers (1) the use of exegetical conventions that were common within various branches of Judaism that is- the New Testament is heavily dependent on Jewish procedural precedents. Christianity speaks of divine redemption, worked out in a particular history and expresses itself in the various concepts and methods of that particular people and day. (2) Jesus' use of Scripture as the source and paradigm for their own use. When Jesus identifies certain messianically relevant passages and explicitly transformed the pre-messianic Torah into the Messianic Torah, His identifications and interpretations were preserved. (3) They believed that they were guided by the exalted Christ through the immediate direction of the Holy Spirit in their continued understanding and application of the Old Testament. This means that Christians continued to explicate Scripture along the lines laid out by Jesus and under the direction of the Spirit.

The Christocentric perspective of the earliest Christians caused them to take Jesus' own use of Scripture as normative, to look to Him for guidance in their ongoing exegetical tasks and gave them a new understanding of the course of redemptive history and their place in it. The Jews believed that redemptive history was building to a climax under God's direction. For them the focal point of history was yet to come and only from that point in the redemptive program would all previous history and all future time fit into place. Christians, however, persuaded by the resurrection of their Lord from the dead, are prepared to stake their lives on the fact that in Jesus of Nazareth the focal point of God's redemption had been reached. In view of the foregoing, using concepts of corporate solidarity, and correspondences in history, all the Old Testament became for them God's preparation for the Messiah. It was viewed

as ‘messianic prophecy’ and ‘messianic doctrine.’ From this perspective, the mission and future of God’s new people – a combination of both believing Jews and Gentiles- were determined. To summarize, the whole history of Israel in the past was converged upon Jesus and from Him the whole future of God’s people was deployed.

From all of this, Longenecker identified the following exegetical patterns among NT writers; common, diverse and developed. The common ones identified were 1. All shared in the Jewish presuppositions of corporate solidarity and redemptive correspondences in history. 2. All used a Hillelian exegetical principle *qal wahomer* (light to heavy) and *gezerah shawah* (analogies). 3. They exercised freedom in the use of Scripture based on an assumption that they knew the conclusion to which biblical testimony was pointing. 4. They utilized quotations from Scripture as well as extra-biblical sources (Jewish, pagan or uncertain). 5. They worked from two fixed points a) the messiahship and lordship of Jesus, as validated by His resurrection and witnessed by the Spirit and b) the revelation of God in the Old Testament as pointing forward to Jesus.

The diverse exegetical patterns and procedures were highlighted as follows; 1. Literature intended for a Jewish audience or audience that was strongly influenced by Jewish culture contained more numerous quotations than those intended for audiences unaffected by such. The rationale behind this practice is that only among Jews and Jewish Christians would a direct appeal to the Old Testament be appreciated and could be understood. 2. Peshet type exegesis – this approach was distinctive of only Jesus and His immediate disciples and not those who merely associated with them or who followed after them. The early apostolic band were not so much concerned in applying biblical texts to the issues and principles of the day as they were in demonstrating redemptive fulfilment in Jesus of Nazareth. They believed that the teaching and person of Jesus expressed the fullness of divine revelation. As such, their exegetical task was to explicate more fully previously ignored significance in the nation’s history and the prophet’s message. This being said, note must be made that the earliest apostolic treatment of Scripture also included a literalist midrashic approach. 3. Persons and writers outside of the twelve seemed to have no compulsion to adhere to peshet type exegesis. The apostle Paul for example differed from the twelve in his historical relation to Jesus, his revelational understanding of the course of the redemptive program and his closer affinity to rabbinic exegetical norms.

Longenecker noted that the developed exegetical patterns that emerged during the apostolic period constitute a blending of commonalities and differences. Such are reflected in the preaching of Stephen, the teaching of James, the exhortations of the writer of Hebrews and the editorial comments of Mark and Luke.

He concludes that in our approach to biblical exegesis we must be cognizant of what he coined descriptive exegesis and normative exegesis. Descriptive addresses the issue as to what actually took place and Normative investigates how relevant or obligatory are such exegetical procedures today. The implied question really is, Can we reproduce the exegesis of the New Testament? Are we able to? Ought we to try? The answers are numerous and are listed in the category of negative and positive by Longenecker. Chief among the proponents of the negative views is Bultman who asserts that 1. Much of the exegesis of the New Testament is an arbitrary and ingenious twisting of the biblical texts that goes beyond the limits of any proper hermeneutics. And 2. The self-understanding of contemporary people and the critico-historical thought of modern study separate us from the methods of the New Testament. In his view, the Old Testament represents a religion that stands outside of and apart from the New Testament. As such, it cannot be treated as prolegomena to the gospel but as a witness to the gospel. Bultman concludes that the New Testament writers, not realizing the abovementioned truths engaged in exegetical procedures which demonstrate continuity and fulfilment. From his supposedly enlightened and more knowledgeable perspective, Bultman deemed such overtures impossible and stringently recommends their discontinuance.

Those who positively supports a perspective of a continuance from the Old Testament to the New usually fall in the following categories and give the following responses; 1. **Conservative interpreters** believe that the paradigm for interpretation of Scripture today must follow from to the exegesis of the New Testament in order that those same procedures may be reemployed today. Their belief is that the descriptive then must be the normative now. 2. **Roman Catholic scholars** recognized that the New Testament frequently uses the Old Testament in a way that gives to biblical texts a fuller meaning thus the term *sensus plenior*. 3. **Existential exegetes** argue that New Testament exegesis is open to go beyond the NT types and other correspondences. They, like Bultman, disavows any continuity of detail between the testaments but unlike him, recognize a continuity in the faith that exists between prophets, apostles and ourselves each in his own way and using categories of thoughts to one's own time- must engage in similar exegetical tasks.

Longenecker proposed three considerations that he deemed important in resolving the relationship of the Testaments and to arrive at a proper exegetical hermeneutic for today. The first is to have a proper *historical* understanding of the NT exegetical procedures. These include an understanding of not only the literalist modes but also the pesher, midrash and allegorical treatments. The second is *theological* that is to have an appreciation for the purpose of biblical revelation. The third is to develop *sensitivity* as to what is normative and what is descriptive in biblical revelation.

Conclusion and Personal Reflection

It is clear from Longenecker's treatise that he desires for those who expound Scripture to develop a sound approach to biblical exegesis. He believes that we cannot reproduce the pesher exegesis of the New Testament writers. In the use of pesher mode of exegesis, however, I believe that we too can assert like the New Testament writers that 'this is that' to the extent that we are representing the revelation that was given to them at the time. Also, with the fluid nature of prophecy – the already not yet understanding derived from biblical prophecy- I believe that today's prophets can use the pesher type interpretation of Scripture as long as it falls within the ambit of the canon (not attempting to claim new revelation and seeking to equate it to Scripture). Today we see an attempt to engage in the pesher type interpretation by modern day preachers who are alluding to current activities and events as being directly related to biblical prophecies. What is essential is that we bear in mind the instructions from the apostle Paul that we should not, "... treat prophecies with contempt. (but rather to), "Test everything. Hold on to the good. Avoid every kind of evil" (1Th 5: 20-22 NIV).

Longenecker also believes that no attempt should be made to reproduce the midrashic handling of the text, the allegorical explications or much of the Jewish manner of argumentation employed by NT writers. I agree to this position to the extent that their usage can be clearly identified as strictly a part of the cultural context through which the transcultural and eternal gospel was expressed. But in terms of the Scripture being the standard for Christian morals, ethics and how we relate to each other in community, a midrashic approach is quite in order. Longenecker, however, maintained that where the exegesis is based on revelatory stance, evidences itself to be cultural or shows itself to be circumstantial we should not seek a reproduction of it. That I absolutely agree to. This stance, however, should not be interpreted to mean that a midrashic interpretive approach is to be avoided in a

wholesale way. I believe that in order to uphold with the concept of the gospel being eternal it must also be interpreted today to have relevance to the way we live.

The thoughts expressed by Longenecker were certainly enlightening. Without such studies and information being made available, who among us could claim that as we seek to present a gospel which we believed to be eternally relevant, that we had given due consideration to all the other relevant issues such as its historical context, theological import and developing a sensitivity to what is normative and descriptive? I agree with Longenecker, that preparing to preach, warrants the herald having an awareness of the historical and theological context of the text. Having an understanding of what is descriptive and what is normative in biblical revelation is also essential for proper hermeneutics to take place. These exegetical standards shared by Longenecker, will in some way restrain those who tend to be 'super creative' in their interpretation and application of Scriptures (though from experience they are claimants to special revelation somewhat of a Gnostic strain). It goes without saying that an awareness of the exegetical approaches of the New Testament writers will inform our approach and better equip us to handle the word in a more meaningful and contemporarily relevant way.

Additionally, it is my opinion that such awareness, while useful in providing a measure of restraint to the subjective use of Scripture, does not in any way restrict the creativity of the exegete. There is a measure of freedom within these boundaries. It is impossible to separate the preacher from his sermon. In other words, the training, individual spiritual experience and the context in which one serves will inevitably inform the interpretation of the text. This is not to say that the word of God is subject to arbitrariness and twisting and contortion which if were not so perverted and demonic would be comical to the extreme. What is being suggested here is that context and personality will determine the exegetical genre and language of the preacher or teacher. So in a similar fashion that Jesus and the band of Twelve utilized the pesher approach, that Matthew and John utilized numerous quotes from the OT, that Mark and Luke showed preference for editorial comments and that the apostle Paul showed a unique pesher approach, such peculiarities will also characterize the contemporary preacher.

I recommend the text as good reading material that will furnish you with valuable insights for your exegetical enterprises.