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Jewish and Early Christian Use of the Old Testament

Fr Michael Hough

[There were inconsistencies in the footnotes in the original printed version. Two footnotes, numbered “4”, were shown in the text. However, no footnote reference was shown for the first text reference, and it has now been omitted. There was no text reference to footnote number “18”. The location in the text for footnote number “18” has now been assumed. Further, there were no footnote numbers “22” or “23” in the text, or as footnotes. Footnote numbers “24” to “36” have now been renumbered “22” to “34”. Despite thorough searching, some reference details still have not been determined. –Revising ed.]

Introduction

In this paper we shall be continuing our reflection on the development of exegetical and hermeneutical methods in the scriptures, and parallel literature, and traditions. What we are primarily interested in is not the tracing of the history of the different traditions, but the approach to scripture that each displays. We believe that the key to building up a working hermeneutic cannot rest totally in the literature of the Bible itself. Just as important, is the appreciation of the early Jewish and Christian use of scripture – how they handled what was written, and how they used it in their communities. It is perhaps worth pointing out, once more; that what is being advocated is not a copying of the ancient forms of exegesis. Conditions have changed too much for that, and we are culturally very different. What is being stressed is that scripture is primarily a functional tool, used by the community for the building up of their faith, and for the resolution of human and spiritual struggles. It never was simply a book of recollections. It is this fluid and dynamic understanding of a text that can offer us so much more to our own modern exegesis.

Old Testament Exegesis

One of the difficulties with parts of the Old Testament is that it is often short of specific details. Authors tended to provide outlines that, then, had to be filled in at a later date. This is particularly troublesome in the areas of law, as things expressed in general terms are hard to apply to life. For example, the law, “Keep holy the Sabbath day”, seems specific enough, yet it fails to define what activities break the Sabbath command, and which are acceptable. Another example is the

law on divorce. Strangely, there is no specific legal text covering divorce as a subject. Deut 24:14 comes close, but that is dealing only with a specific problem – that of what happens, if a man wants to remarry his former wife, after she had remarried and divorced her second husband, or was widowed. From 24:1, we know that there was a process for the divorce:

Supposing a man has taken a wife and consummated the marriage, but she has not pleased him, and he has found some impropriety, of which to accuse her; so he has made out a writ of divorce for her, and handed it to her, and then dismissed her from his house; she leaves his home, and goes away to become the wife of another man.

The husband was obliged to deliver a written document to his wife before asking her to leave the house, based on the fact that he had found some “impropriety” (עֲרֻת דָּבָר (*er^evat dāvār*) – literally a nakedness of a thing/a disgrace) in her. But just what this means is difficult to establish. The same phrase is found in Deut 23:12ff, but, there, the meaning is somewhat different.

There, it is talking about the toilets, and how they must be built outside of the camp, so that God does not see the עֲרֻת דָּבָר (*er^evat dāvār*) among you (with the Septuagint adding that it has to be done so that God will not find this עֲרֻת דָּבָר (*er^evat dāvār*) in the camp, and turn away from the people in disgust). But what is this indecent, or unbecoming, behaviour that constitutes grounds for divorce? For Josephus, it needs a wide interpretation:

He that desires to be divorced from his wife for any cause . . . and many such causes happen among men (Antiq IV, viii, 23, 253).

About which time I divorced my wife also, as not pleased at her behaviour (Life of Flavius, 76, 426).

The Mishnah offers an even more liberal view of divorce, with Hillel accepting divorce over a badly cooked meal: “if she spoiled his dish” (Gittin 9:10,c)¹ and Rabbi Aqiba, finding it reasonable to put a wife out of the house, if “he found someone else prettier than she” (Gittin 9:10,e). By the time of Jesus, this

¹ *Gittin* (גיטין = “documents”) is part of the Misnah, and deals with the concepts of divorces and other documents. It consists of nine chapters.

had been made more restrictive, with the only justification for divorce being immorality.² But that still leaves a problem of definition – just what constitutes immorality? Clearly, it did not mean adultery, as that was punishable by death, but it could refer to a woman going about with an uncovered head, or with bare arms. Because of the imprecise nature of Deut 24:1ff, any interpretation was going to depend on local circumstances and traditions.

Another very good example of how texts were handled, in order to make them fit in with a changed theological sensibility, is found in the story of Abraham and Sarah's time in Egypt, which is told in Gen 12:10-19. The story, itself, is scarce on details, and the reader is left with a number of questions. How, for example, did he know that he would be in danger, if the Egyptians found out that his travelling companion was his wife? What happened to Sarah while she was in the harem? How did Pharaoh find out what was causing his problems?³ Josephus solves the first problem, by making it clear that Abraham knew of the Egyptian's lust for women: "(he) was afraid of the madness of the Egyptians, with regard to women" (*Antiq I, viii, 1, 162*). After all, this lust is the reason they allowed the female babies of the Hebrews to live, while putting to death all of the male infants.⁴ But there is another interpretation, which is found in the Qumran Genesis Apocryphon. Here, we find Abraham having a dream, which spells out what is going to happen at the hands of the Egyptians:

I saw in my dream, a cedar tree and a palm tree. . . . Men came and sought to cut down the cedar tree, and to pull up its roots, leaving the palm tree alone. But the palm tree cried out, saying, "Do not cut down this cedar tree, for cursed be he who shall fell it". And the cedar tree was spared, because of the palm tree, and was not felled.

Properly understood, this dream prompted Abraham to take the action that he did.

But what happened to Sarah? Josephus has an outbreak of disease and political activity coming to the rescue, when God sent "upon him a distemper, and a sedition against his government" (*Antiq I, viii, 1, 164*). Elsewhere, she is

² G. Vermes, "Bible and Midrash: Early Old Testament Exegesis", in P. R. Ackroyd, and C. F. Evans, eds, *The Cambridge History of the Bible*, vol 1, Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 1970, p. 206.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 207.

⁴ *Ibid.*

protected, because Abraham prays hard to God, who sends down an angel to look after her for the one night that she was in the harem. This angel apparently had a big whip, which he used to keep the lust-filled Egyptians away. Again, the Genesis Apocryphon has her rescued by God. He sends “an evil spirit” on Pharaoh, who made it impossible for him to come anywhere near Sarah, who, this time, is in the harem for two years. Whatever the details of the answers to the question, they all come out clearly stating that Sarah remained untouched and undefiled – as befits the wife of the progenitor of Israel.

That still leaves us with one question: how did Pharaoh find out that Sarah was married? Josephus’ answer is that:

when he (Pharaoh) inquired of the priests how he might be freed from these calamities, they told him that his miserable condition was derived from the wrath of God, upon account of his inclinations to abuse the stranger’s wife (Antiq I, viii, 1, 164).

The Genesis Apocryphon makes it more complicated, having the Egyptian priests being unable to heal the king, and, in their despair, turning to Abraham for some help. They are then told the truth by Lot. All of this sounds very strange to our modern ears, but they were important questions at the time. As they proved difficult for the community, it was reasonable to expect exegesis to come to the rescue.

Another problem that Jewish exegesis tackled was the reconciliation of texts. There are/were historically-irreconcilable difficulties, which the scholars sought to clarify in their expositions. A simple example is found in the law relating to female Israelite slaves. Ex 21:2-6 allows for male Hebrew slaves to have the right to release during the sabbatical year, a right that does not apply to female slaves: “If a man sells his daughter as a slave, she shall not go out as the male slaves do” (Ex 21:1). The later Deuteronomic Law adds to this certain payments, to which the freed slave is entitled, when he takes his release (Deut 15:12-18), but then goes further than just those concessions, contradicting the earlier laws, by making the status of women slaves the same as that of the man (v. 1). By the time of the priestly legislation, this has been further altered:

The servants you have, men and women, shall come from the nations round you; from these, you may purchase servants, men and women. You may also purchase them from the children of the strangers, who live among you,

and from their families living with you, who have been born on your soil. They shall be your property, and you may leave them as an inheritance of your sons after you, to hold in perpetual possession. These you may have for slaves, you to your brothers, the sons of Israel, you must not be hard masters (Lev 25:44-46).

Now the legislation has been written so as to explicitly exclude the making of fellow Israelites into slaves, while allowing Gentiles to be bought and sold. This apparent contradiction (between the Exodus reading, and that of Deuteronomy, which allows for the freeing of the female slaves) is resolved by reinterpreting the words used. In the Septuagint, for example, we find the word for female slave changed to read “housemaid”. Now, what the Exodus reading is saying is that the females are not released with the same conditions as the males. Further, with more changes to the words used we find that the Exodus passage comes to refer to a comparison between the lot of a Hebrew servant girl and a Gentile slave. But that then creates further difficulties as the Leviticus reading talks of these Gentile slaves being a “perpetual possession”. The solution to this is not easy, but worth pursuing to appreciate the subtle exegetical skills that such attempted harmonisation requires. Ex 21:26-27 reads:

When a man strikes at the eye of his slave, male or female, and destroys the use of it, he must give him his freedom to compensate for the eye. If he knocks out the tooth of his slave, male or female, he must give him his freedom to compensate for the tooth.

They understood this as clearly relating to Gentile slaves, as no master would treat a fellow Israelite in this way. But the freeing of the Hebrew slaves is covered by the laws governing the sabbatical and jubilee years. Complicating this further, in an attempt to reconcile the different messages, others see the Exodus regulation as, indeed, applying to the Israelite slaves, and these women were to be released at puberty, or at the age of majority (12 years of age). It is left to the Targum Pseudo-Jonathan on Ex 12:1 to put all of this together into a solution:

If a man, a son of Israel, sells his daughter, a minor, to be a bondmaid, she shall not go out, as do the Canaanite slaves, who gain liberty through a tooth and an eye, but, in the years of Release, through the tokens, at the Jubilee, the death of her master, and through the payment of money.

That is classical exegesis, ending up with a perfect harmony between the texts, and providing a practical, and clear, solution to a question that could be applied in any number of different situations.

A similar process can be seen at work on texts that later generations of Jews found to be relating to actions and things that were totally unacceptable. Take, for example, the case of child sacrifice to Molech. Lev 18:21 and 20:2 expressly forbid this practice:

- You must not hand over any of your children to have them passed to Molech.
- Any son of Israel, or any stranger living in Israel, must die if he hands over any of his children to Molech. The people of the country must stone him.

In Canaanite rites, children were sacrificed by being “passed through” fire, a practice that was condemned (Lev 20:2-5; Deut 12:31; 18:10). The rite had gradually forced its way into Israel, in the area south of Jerusalem (the valley of Ben-Hinnom – 2 Kings 16:3; 21:6; 23:10; Jer 7:31; 9:5f; 32:35; Ezek 16:21). Not only was this irrelevant to later generations of Jews, it was also very embarrassing.

The interpreters related the Hebrew word for “seed”, and the word “Molech”, as metaphors for “sons” and “pagan religions”, respectively. The texts then relate to fathers, prohibiting them from allowing their sons to become apostates:

Any man of the sons of Israel, who shall permit any of his sons to pass to idolatry, shall surely be put to death (Targum Neofiti, Lev 20:2).

Now the text makes perfect sense, is acceptable, and is in keeping with Israel’s understanding of her own destiny. The exegetes, respecting the text, have made it apply to their community.

Scripture in the Synagogue

The Targums are important in the study of the use of the Bible in the synagogue, as it is the link between the scripture and *Midrash*,⁵ containing all of

⁵ D. Patte, “Early Jewish Hermeneutic in Palestine”, in *Society of Biblical Literature: Dissertation Series* 22, Atlanta GA: Scholars Press, 1975, pp. 1ff.

the elements that were to be later taken up by *midrashic* methodology. Because it is related to a liturgical setting, it is not simply interested in translation, but involves, as well, an interpretation. Indeed, the Babylonian Talmud, in its interpretation of Neh 8:8, presents this useful description of the Targum:

Neh 8:8

And Ezra read in the book, in the Law of God, interpreting, and giving sense, so that the people understood what was read.

Talmud: Meg 3a

What is meant by the text . . . and they read in the book, in the Law of God, this indicates the Hebrew text; with an interpretation: this indicates the Targum; and they gave the sense: this indicates the verse stops; and caused them to understand the reading: this indicates the accentuation, or, according to another version, the Massoretic notes.

What is striking to a modern exegete, from the above quotation, is that interpretation is made on the basis of the punctuation and the accents used within the text. If you change the vowels (easily done in Hebrew, which was originally written using just the consonants, something taken up in modern Hebrew), then you can also change the meaning. An example will help make this clearer. Gen 22:14 reads: “And Abraham called the name of that place ‘the Lord will provide’”. This text has the Hebrew word **שָׁמַע** (*shm*). By writing it as **שָׁמַעַ** (*shām*), the Targum Ongelos interprets it, “Abraham worshipped and prayed there in that place”. However, by writing it as **שָׁמַעַ** (*shēm*), the Targum Pseudo Jonathan reads it, “Abraham gave thanks, and prayed there in that place” (with **שָׁמַעַ** (*shēm*) being understood as the Divine Name, i.e., God). Since, in Hebrew, the word **קָרָא** (*qārā*) can have either of two meanings: “to call” and “to pray”, it can also be read as the Fragmentary Targum has it, “And Abraham worshipped and prayed in the name of the word of the Lord God”. All this from changes in vowels, and using all possibilities of the verbal stems.

Obviously, this opened the Targums up to the possibility of abuse by interpreters. To try to minimise this possibility, the rabbis eventually (certainly by the end of the 2nd century AD) refused to allow anything to be added to the text:

If one translates a verse literally, he is a liar; if he adds thereto, he is a blasphemer, and a libeller. Then what is meant by translation? Our (authorised) translation.⁶

Thus, the traditional interpretation was the rule of exegesis about how that text had come to be understood by generations of scholars and communities.

A further insight into how the Targumists understood the Bible is found in their handling of scripture. They firmly believed in the unity of all scripture, and so, collected the Bible around a number of select places, dates and people.⁷ The principle of exegesis involved is that, in scripture, “there is no before and after”, which is one of the 32 rules of Rabbi Eliezer ben Jose Ha-Gelili. For them, the “before comes after in biblical sections”, and, conversely, the “after comes before”. This meant that the biblical chronology could be reversed, if required by exegesis, or ignored completely, if interpretation would be hampered by it. Therefore, the rabbis could identify Melchizedek with Shem, Balaam with Laban.⁸ It has tied Dinah (Jacob’s daughter) with Job’s wife, Og with the flood, and so on. The importance of this understanding is that, now, the meaning of an event can be understood through its links with similar events that took place, both before and after it. Patte puts it succinctly:

such an event is prefigured (or prophesied) by an event of the past, and prefigures (or prophesies) events of the future.⁹

Thus history, for the Targums, is “telescoped” through this identification of biblical events. The example that Paul uses for this principle is from the Targum Neofiti 1 on Ex 12:42: “The night, when Yahweh kept vigil to bring them out of the land of Egypt, must be kept as a vigil in honour of Yahweh for all generations.”¹⁰ The Targum uses this passage to bring together four most important nights in history – the night of creation, the night of Abraham (the night of the covenant with Abraham, or the night of the binding of Isaac on the altar), the night of the Passover, and the eschatological night of messianic salvation. They

⁶ From the Tosephta Meg 4:41, cf. M. McNamara, *The New Testament and the Paletinian Targum to the Pentateuch*, Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1966, p. 48.

⁷ Patte, “Early Jewish Hermeneutic”, p. 67.

⁸ D. Daube, *The New Testament in Rabbinic Judaism*, London UK: The London Athlone Press, 1956, p. 409.

⁹ Pseudo Jonathan on Num 22:5.

¹⁰ Patte, “Early Jewish Hermeneutic”, p. 69.

are allocated the same calendar date, 15th of Nisan, allowing for such an identification that the rabbis could interpret the Exodus in terms of the Creation story, and see Creation through the events of the Exodus. By studying the Exodus, from the perspective of the eschaton, this latter event becomes the move from this life to the next. This is possible, because of the understanding that all events are God events, and God is One, a belief that is regularly professed in the great Shema prayer of the Jews: "Hear, O Israel, the Lord your God is One God." God is acting throughout all history to achieve the one end that He has planned, and the intentions behind individual actions are all a part of this overall divine plan, and, therefore, linked together. Indeed, it would be possible to say that, for the Targumists, history is now closed (with the one exception being the eschatological event that is still to come). Everything that happens is now viewed in the light of these central interpretive events. The present just ceases to exist, there being only the past, and the yet to come.

How was this principle arrived at? It stems from the central motivating force behind the targums, that everything in scripture is meaningful, and that it has to be made meaningful for the community. That is why scripture was given, and that is why the Targumists have a role in the synagogue. This explains the strong moralising tendency of the Targums, with the main characters of stories taking on the role of moral types of all humans. To use the best-known example, we can look at the Targum Pseudo Jonathan on Gen 4:8 (the story of the murder of Abel):¹¹

And Cain said to Abel, his brother: "Come, and let us both go into the field." So, it was, that, when they had both gone out into the field, Cain answered, and said to Abel: "I can see that the world was created in love, and good works, because there is partiality in judgment; thus it is that your offering was accepted with favour." Abel answered, and said: "Certainly, the world was created in love, and by the issue of good works it is ordered, and there is no partiality in judgment. But, because the issue of my works was better than yours, so my offering has been accepted before yours, with favour." Cain answered, and said to Abel: "There is no judgment, and no judge, and no world hereafter; there is no good reward to be given to the righteous, nor any account to be taken of the wicked." Abel answered, and said: "Certainly there is judgment, and a judge, and a world hereafter: there is a good reward to be given to the righteous, and the wicked will be called to account." And,

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 70ff.

because of these words they fell into a dispute in the open field, and Cain rose up against Abel, his brother, and drove a stone into his forehead, and slew him.

We can see here how the text is made to fit into the contemporary situation, which is a debate over the existence or non-existence of the world to come, about judgment, and the role that good and bad deeds will have in that judgment. Abel is the good Jew, who goes to his death rather than deny his faith (that there is a judgment, and that good works determine its outcome). Cain, later identified with Satan's line, is the opposite, a person opposed to the teachings of the Law.¹² These two characters have been made into something that is not clearly obvious in the biblical text.

They have become "outstanding prototypes of specific virtues and vices",¹³ characteristics more of the Jewish community than of the biblical actors. Values were isolated, and then located in scriptural passages, the latter being interpreted to accentuate the values being taught (remembering that the Targums were essentially liturgical texts).

Typological Interpretation of Scriptures

The starting point in a study of typological interpretations is the Haggadah, as this covers the ethical/historical parts of the Bible, linking them for their message and teachings.¹⁴ The widely-accepted description of *haggadah* is that of Zunz:

The *haggadah*, whose aim it is to bring heaven nearer to men, and to lift men up to heaven, fulfils its calling, on the one hand, by glorifying God and, on the one hand, by comforting Israel. Hence, religious truths, moral lessons, discourses on just reward and punishment, inculcations of the laws, in which the nationality of Israel is manifested, pictures of the past and future greatness of Israel, scenes and stories from Jewish history, parallels between divine institutions and those of Israel, encomiums on the Holy Land,

¹² Cf. J. Bowker, *The Targums and Rabbinic Literature: An Introduction to the Jewish Interpretation of Scripture*, London UK: Cambridge University Press, 1969, pp. 132ff.

¹³ McNamara, *The New Testament and the Paletinian Targum*, p. 156.

¹⁴ L. I. Rabinowitz, "The Study of a Midrash", in *Jewish Quarterly Review* 58-2 (1967), p. 147.

inspiring narratives, and manifold consolations, constitute the primary content of the homilies in the synagogue.¹⁵

But, *haggadah* is not a scientific process, following, for example, the seven rules of Hillel, or the 32 of Eliezer. It is best understood as an attempt to make the scripture applicable to daily life, and address the texts to common problems faced by believers. To do this, the rabbis attempted to faithfully record, and comment, on every aspect of the nation's past, highlighting those events that showed her greatness, and reinterpreting the obscure and confusing.¹⁶ Israel's history, for them, was no ordinary unfolding of events. It was the action of the living God on, and among, a people that He had chosen as His own. Therefore, nothing happened that did not have the potential for carrying a message to a community living a thousand or more years later. If, today, we read Ex 17:11, we would probably find little more in the text than details of a rather spectacular miracle worked by God during the escape of the people of Israel from Egypt. Not so, for the rabbis: Eliezer ben Hyrcanus, writing about 100 years after Jesus, saw in it a message about the need for future generations to hold fast to the teachings of the Law, given to Moses on Sinai. While Israel kept faithful to the Law she prospered (as the people defeated the Amelekites, while Moses' hands were aloft). If Israel tired, and put faithfulness to the Law to one side, then she suffered greatly (as Israel was losing the battle when Moses' hands were lowered). Some 30 years later, Eleazer of Modiim saw this story as showing how Moses saved the people from the armies of Amelek, through his prayers, and through fasting. This was made difficult for him, because of the many sins of the people that weighed him down, and wearied his arms, though he was assisted in his task by the help given to him by the patriarchs.¹⁷ Moses (and his actions) then become a type of the rest of Israel, and for God's saving activities in them.

Eschatology, as we will see, was an area of thought that heavily relied on typological exegesis. It gained its impetus from the repressive, political situation the people were experiencing, and worked as a stimulus to their hopes. It helped them to look to the future, when God would turn their sufferings around, and restore them to the peace and happiness that was their lot in the past. The past represented a golden age, when things were as God planned them to be, and where

¹⁵ E. Schurer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ*, vol 2, Edinburgh UK: T. & T. Clark, 1986, p. 339.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 362.

¹⁷ L. Gopelt, *Typos: The Typological Interpretation of the Old Testament in the New*, Grand Rapids MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1982, p. 29.

every faithful person rejoiced in the fruits of His presence. It is, therefore, not difficult to see how the events of history, characters from the past, and the prophetic utterances, were looked at to find, in them, some confirmation of their hopes for future salvation. The creation story, for example, is an event that was reinterpreted in eschatological terms. There will be a new creation that is better even than the first one, and this will be preceded by a period of darkness and chaos. But it is there in the future, and this paradise will be again in the messianic age:

The first heaven shall depart and pass away; a new heaven shall appear; and all the powers of heaven shall shine forever sevenfold (1 Enoch 91:16).

Adam was also a prototype. His destiny is the destiny of all human beings. As he suffered the anguish of sin and death, so also does every created person have to undergo these trials:

Oh Adam, what did you do to all those who were born after you? And what will be said of the first Eve, who obeyed the serpent, so that this whole multitude is going to corruption? And countless are those whom the fire devours (2 Baruch 48:42).

Adam sinned first, and brought death on all who were not of his own time (2 Baruch 54: 14).

For a grain of evil seed was sown in Adam's heart from the beginning, and how much ungodliness it has produced until now, and will produce until the time of threshing comes! (4 Ezra 4:30).

All humanity bears the marks of Adam. But it is what Adam was like before the fall, who is the type of the newly-created man. He will live in paradise, there will be childbirth without pain, he will share in the tree of life and immortality, and enjoy perfect glory, the latter gifts representing things that even the first Adam did not enjoy. The new Adam will also be an improvement on the original one, being God's "second angel" (2 Enoch 30:121), who will be honoured by the angels, because he is made in the very image of God.^{18 19}

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 30.

¹⁹ There is a great story in the 1st-century *midrash*, *The Life of Adam and Eve*, that highlights this point: The devil replied, "Adam, what are you telling me? It is because of you that I have been thrown out of there. When you were created, I was cast out from the presence of God, and was sent

The flood also holds a special place in the typological assessment of the scriptures, representing, for later generations, the chaos and evil that is going to precede the final judgment: “and unrighteousness shall recur once again, and be spread throughout the earth” (1 Enoch 91:6). Just as the flood cleansed the earth of all this evil and godlessness, so, at the end, the final conflagration will carry out its cleansing work:

There shall be a great plague upon the earth, and the earth shall be washed clean from all its corruption (1 Enoch 106:17).

The flood was the first “end of the world”, which is typical of the second, yet to come (1 Enoch 93:4). That is why, when we read the account of the flood, in 1 Enoch 83:4, we find that it is written in language that is generally used to describe the apocalyptic end of the world:

I saw a vision of the sky being hurled down, and snatched, and falling upon the earth. When it fell upon the earth, I saw the earth being swallowed up into the great abyss, the mountains being suspended upon mountains, the hills sinking down upon the hills, and tall trees being uprooted, and thrown, and sinking into the deep abyss.

This is clearly not just moving the flood from the time of the ancestors into the future. It is a reinterpretation, using the original flood story as being “typical” of man, and his behaviour on earth, and God’s response to that behaviour, to interpret the present, and direct the communities’ thoughts to the future.

The Early Christian Use of the Old Testament

All of the Jewish methods of exegesis and hermeneutics that we have just looked at are to be found in use in the New Testament, and the early Christian writings. This should not be a surprise, seeing that the early communities were still basically Jewish, and still looked to Jewish history for its own traditional foundations. In this chapter, we shall briefly reflect on the use that Jesus made of the Old Testament, as well as the approaches that can be found in New Testament writings.

out from the fellowship of the angels. When God blew into you the breath of life, and your countenance and likeness were made in the image of God, Michael brought you, and made us worship you in the sight of God, and the Lord God said, ‘Behold Adam! I have made you in our image and likeness’ ”

There are two important, though somewhat obvious, general points in reflecting on the use of the Old Testament by the early Christian community. The first is that Jesus used the Old Testament as a support for His message, quoting it often, and with great effect. There are 39 quotations that are generally attributed to Him:²⁰

1. Quotations occurring in Mark, and the double or triple synoptic tradition:

A: *With introductory formulae:*

1. Mark 7:6f; Matt 15:8f (Is 29:13)
2. Mark 7:10; Matt 15:4 (Ex 20:12; 21:17 [LXX=21:16]; Deut 5:16)
3. Mark 11:17; Matt 21:13; Luke 19:46 (Is 56:7; Jer 7:11)
4. Mark 12:10f; Matt 21:42; Luke 20:17 (Ps 118:22f [LXX=117:22f])
5. Mark 12:26; Matt 22:32; Luke 20:37 (Ex 3:6)
6. Mark 12:36; Matt 22:44; Luke 20:42f (Ps 110:1 [LXX=109:1])
7. Mark 13:14; Matt 24:15 (Dan 9:27; 12:11)
8. Mark 14:27; Matt 26:31 (Zech 13:7)

B: *Without introductory formulae:*

9. Mark 10:7f; Matt 19:5 (Gen 2:24)
10. Mark 10:19; Matt 19:18f; Luke 18:20 (Ex 20:12-16; Deut 5:16-20)
11. Mark 12:29f; Matt 22:37; Luke 10:27 (Deut 6:4f)
12. Mark 12:31; Matt 22:39; Luke 10:27 (Lev 19:18)
13. Mark 15:34; Matt 27:46 (Ps 22:1 [MT=22:2; LXX=21:2])

2. Quotations found in Matthew and Luke, but not in Mark:

A: *With introductory formulae:*

14. Matt 4:4; Luke 4:4; (Deut 8:3)

²⁰ R. Longenecker, *Biblical Exegesis in the Apostolic Period*, Grand Rapids MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1975.

15. Matt 4:7; Luke 4:12; (Deut 16:16)
16. Matt 4: 10; Luke 4:8; (Deut 6:13)
17. Matt 11:10; Luke 7:27; (Mal 3:1)

B. Without introductory formulae:

18. Matt 23:39; Luke 13:35; (Ps 118:26 [LXX=117:26])

3. Quotations in Matthew alone:

A: With introductory formulae:

19. Matt 5:21 (Ex 20:13; Deut 5:17)
20. Matt 5:27 (Ex 20:14; Deut 5:18)
21. Matt 5:31 (Deut 24:1)
22. Matt 5:33 (Ps 50:14 [LXX=49:14])
23. Matt 5:38 (Ex 21:24; Lev 24:20)
24. Matt 5:43 (Lev 19:18)
25. Matt 13:14f (Is 6:9f)
26. Matt 21:16 (Ps 8:2 [MT & LXX=8:3])

B. Without introductory formulae:

27. Matt 9:13 (Hos 6:6)
28. Matt 12:7 (Hos 6:6)
29. Matt 18:16 (Deut 19:15)
30. Matt 19:19 (Lev 19:18)

4. Quotations in Luke alone:

A: With introductory formulae:

31. Luke 4:18f (Is 61:1f; 58:6)
32. Luke 22:37 (Is 53:12)

B: Without introductory formulae:

- 33. Luke 23:30 (Hos 10:8)
- 34. Luke 23:46 (Ps 31:5 [MT=31:6; LXX=30:61])

5. Quotations in John alone, with introductory formulae:

- 35. John 6:45 (Is 54:13; Jer 31:33)
- 36. John 7:38 (Is 12:3; 43:19f; 44:3; 58:11)
- 37. John 10:34; (Ps 82:6 [LXX=81:6])
- 38. John 13:18 (Ps 41:9 [MT=41:10; LXX=40:10])
- 39. John 15:25 (Ps 35:19 [LXX=34:19]; 69:4; MT=69:5; LXX=68:5])

There are some observations worth noting about the way that Jesus used the Old Testament. The first is the consistent use of the Septuagint. While most of the differences between the Septuagint and Masoretic texts are insignificant, there are times when the Greek is preferred to known Hebrew versions and the Targums, because the differences better suit the argumentation. In Matt 15:8f and Mark 7:6f, for example, Jesus quotes the Septuagint against the Hebrew:

LXX: In vain do they worship me, teaching doctrines and commandments of men.

MT: Their fear of me is a commandment of men learned by heart.

In Matt 21:16, Jesus quotes the Septuagint of Ps 8:3, reading “praise” instead of the Hebrew and Targumic “strength” and “stronghold”. This was done because He wanted to apply the words of Isaiah “out of the mouth of babes and sucklings, you have established praise” to the children in the temple. This, and similar examples, give the interesting insight that Jesus used the Bible in translation, rather than in either the traditional Hebrew, or the common Aramaic. And further, that He was sufficiently skilled to be able to pick and choose the most suitable text for His argument.

The second important general observation is that Jesus’ main “technique” of exegesis was the *peshet*. We find that, right from the beginning of Luke’s gospel, Jesus presents the theme of fulfilment. In the synagogue (Luke 4:16-21, He takes the scroll, and reads from Isaiah the prophet (Is 61:1f), and boldly proclaims: “Today, this scripture is fulfilled in your ears”. John has Jesus rebuking the Pharisees, saying, if they listened to Moses, they should be listening to Him,

because “he wrote of Me” (John 5:39-47). And there are many more that show this *peshar*/fulfilment theme:

Mark 12:10f; Matt 21:42; Luke 20:17:

The parable of the wicked tenants has clear allusions to Is 5:1ff, the parable of the vineyard. Jesus uses Ps 118:22f in a clear attack on His critics: “The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. This was the Lord’s doing, and it is amazing in our eyes.” Using the Septuagint again, Jesus takes the Psalm and interprets its meaning in the light of His own experiences of rejection.

Matt 11:10; Luke 7:27:

Here we find the clear *peshar* method: “This is the one about whom it is written. . . . See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.” He has taken the tests of Mal 3:1 and Is 40:3 and interpreted them in terms of John the Baptist.

John 13:18:

The setting here is the last supper, and Jesus takes the song of David (Ps 41:9 [LXX=40:10]) and applies it to His betrayal at the hands of Judas: “He who ate my bread has lifted his heel against Me.” This is presented in the language of the Septuagint, and introduced with the fulfilment verse: “But it is to fulfil the scripture.”

It is clear that Jesus is presented as seeing Himself as fulfilling the anticipations of the Old Testament, that He saw the Old Testament from the perspective of His own ministry. This was the approach that was then taken up by the writers of the New Testament, affecting the way they applied the various methodologies they inherited from Judaism.

General New Testament Approaches to Hermeneutics

Many scholars now refer to the “transformation” of scripture that was carried out by the early Christian writers. It was not that they changed the texts, but, rather, reinterpreted them from the standpoint of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, who they believed was the Christ. The Old Testament was searched for texts that could be found to support this developing awareness of who Jesus really was. This was based on two exegetical positions:

1. That the original texts were written with Jesus in mind, though this would not have been in the thoughts of the original author, or the receiving community.
2. That eisegesis was a legitimate form of scriptural analysis. That is, one could take a point and go back into the Bible and find texts to support that point.

This is an important starting point in any study of scripture. These sacred writings provided the authority for the faith, belief, and practices of the community, while, at the same time, were only truly capable of being understood and interpreted by the believing community. Exegesis did not lead to a change in meaning, but, rather, to a discovery of the true meaning of scripture. And this is how the early church understood what we know as the Old Testament. They did not see their hermeneutics as changing what was the accepted interpretation. It was more that they saw themselves as uncovering the full significance of what was originally written.

A major thrust of the exegetical energies of the early church was directed towards finding, in the Hebrew scriptures, proof for their theological position regarding Jesus. A well-known example of this is the great credal statement found in 1 Cor 15:1-11, which, as Paul says, is the faith “that had been taught myself”. This basic faith is:

Christ died for our sins	in accordance with scripture
He was buried, and was raised to life on the third day	in accordance with scriptures

This is a faith, then, that can be proved by scripture. That is, it was a part of the prophetic message of the Old Testament.

Another popular example is that of Acts 8, where Philip explains Is 53:7-8 to the Ethiopian eunuch, using this text to explain who Jesus was, and all about the significance of His ministry. It is also worth having a brief look at the passion narratives of the synoptics, for these are filled with allusions to the Hebrew scriptures, especially the Psalms. We have the soldiers dividing up the clothes of Jesus (Ps 22:18/Mark 15:24); the people walking past the crucifixion mock Jesus (Ps 22:7/Mark 15:29); the mocking words of the spectators round the cross (Ps 22:81/Matt 27:43); Jesus’ cry from the cross (Ps 22:1/Mark 15:34). In John, there is a similar usage: the casting of lots for the seamless robe (John 19:24/Ps 22:18);

the satisfying of Jesus' thirst (John 19:28-29) fulfils both Ps 22:15 and Ps 69:21. Ps 69 is thought to be behind other synoptic passages: Mark 15:23/Matt 27:34; Mark 15:36/Matt 27:48. John sees the groundless hatred of the Jews for Jesus as having been anticipated in Ps 69:4 (and possibly Ps 35:19). This same Psalm is, again, taken up by John to explain the cleansing of the Temple by Jesus (Ps 69:9/John 2:17). Paul uses it to show that Jesus was not doing His own work, or following His own plans, but His Father's (Ps 69:9/Rom 15:3), and that the Jews rejected Jesus, because of their spiritual blindness (Ps 69:22-23/Rom 11:9-10). Acts uses Ps 69:25 (and Ps 109:8) to show what happened to Judas (Acts 1:20).²¹

A similar process can also be found as applying to the resurrection. Some basic texts were used, and others were added to them. Going back to our quote from 1 Corinthians, we can ask where the scriptural evidence can be found to support the belief that Jesus' resurrection on the third day was "according to scripture"? It could be Hos 6:2: "On the third day, he will raise us up", or Jonah 1:17: "Jonah was in the belly of the fish for three days and three nights" (this is the way Matt 12:40 uses this verse). But the key Old Testament text for the resurrection is Ps 110:1 "The Lord says to my lord: 'Sit at my right, your foes I will put beneath your feet' ". It is important, because, in it, we find Jesus being taken up into heaven, and His exaltation, being enthroned in a position of power by God (Acts 2:34-35). We can find this interpretation pointed to in Jesus' discussions with the High Priest in Mark 14:62 (and its parallels):

I am; and you will see the Son of man seated at the right hand of power, and going with the clouds of heaven.

Here we have Ps 110:1 joined with Dan 7:13, and being used to predict the glory and honour that will be with Jesus after His resurrection. Hebrews takes it up the same way (1:3, 13; 8:1; 10:12; 10:13; 12:2).²² Heb 2:6-9 uses Ps 8:46 in a most-creative manner, as support for the same beliefs in Jesus:

But someone has testified somewhere, "What is the Son of Man, that you are mindful of Him, or mortals that you care for them? You have made them, for a little while, lower than the angels; you have crowned them with glory and honour, subjecting all things under their feet."

²¹ R. A. Greer, J. L. Kugel, *Early Biblical Interpretation*, Philadelphia PA: Westminster Press, 1986, p. 207.

²² See also Rom 8:34; 1 Cor 15:25; Eph 1:20; Col 3:1.

This same Psalm was also used in arguments with scribes, and applied as a proof text for the preexistent Lord (Mark 12:36, and parallels). Hebrews, in particular, makes use of this Psalm as the basis of various strands of its Christology. For example, Ps 110:4: “You are a priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek”. This is now used to establish Christ’s role as the true high priest of the new covenant. As we have already seen, in the way Jewish theology uses scriptural quotations, the texts were used, regardless of the meanings they had in their original settings. They now become proof texts for the living faith of the community. It was not strictly an exegesis, but an eisegesis. The New Testament *interpreted* the Old Testament, and the latter was seen as valuable, in as much as it could provide the foundation for their theology. Given that the early writers and communities were Jewish, that such a foundation could be found would not have been a question. It would have been presumed that it was there.

But these texts would not have been just pulled up out of the memory, and applied to Jesus. They were chosen texts, ones that had some history of messianic application (e.g., Ps 110:1), or which could be applied in a messianic fashion, in the light of the ministry of Jesus (Ps 22 and Is 53). A non-Christian Jew could well have come up with the allegory Paul wrote in Gal 4:21-31, and used it for another purpose. The same thing could be said of 2 Cor 3:7-18 (leaving out the specific Christian references), because the use the early writers made of scripture was not extraordinary. What were unique, were their specific applications and interpretations. The method was common.

They would take an event from the life of Jesus and read a particular text, in the light of what Jesus said or did. We can see this, for example, in Gal 3:8:

The scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, “In you shall all the nations be blessed.”

Abraham, of course, did not hear the gospel preached to him. The promise he received becomes “gospel” only when taken up and read in the light of who Jesus was, and the salvation He brought to all peoples. Because of Jesus, the original text takes on a new significance. When Paul talks about the veil covering the hearts of the Jews of his time, he is making a theological application of something that happened to Moses, and which had nothing to do with blindness in faith. Yet Paul, a great and competent biblical scholar could reinterpret the story in

this way. The key to his exegesis was *his* theology, and the needs of *his* community rather than the original sense of the text.

We can follow this line of thinking through, by seeing how a messianic text like Zech 11 is handled. There is no doubt that, in Jewish circles, it was read and understood in a messianic way, with Israel being the flock, and the prophet being the divinely-appointed shepherd. For the early Christian community, Jesus was the Messiah, and so, whatever already existing messianic texts there were, could naturally be applied to Him. Like the shepherd in the story, he is rejected by the sheep (Israel), and sold for 30 pieces of silver. Zechariah has the silver being thrown down in the Temple (“unto the potter” in Hebrew – the treasury), which brings in pictures of Jeremiah, with his images of the potter, and the buying of a field, as part of his prophetic ministry. For the early community, the link was clear – Judas taking the 30 pieces of silver, returning it, and throwing it down in the Temple, and then hanging himself in the potter’s field, bought with the money. For them, Jesus represented the fulfilment of the prophecies of Zechariah/Jeremiah, because they could match up some events in Jesus’ life with some statements in the prophetic texts. Through this process, new interpretations and new texts are produced that are a collation of the old ones.²³

Once you allow the meaning of a text to be determined by events in the time of the interpreter’s, you end up with a number of different interpretations for the same text. This is what we find in the New Testament.²⁴ One of the well-known examples of this is the proof text Gen 15:6. Paul uses it to show that Abraham was justified by faith alone, and not by his works (Rom 4:3ff; Gal 3:6). But James also uses it to prove that Abraham was justified by his works, and not by faith (Jam 2:23). Another good example is the use made of Ps 2:7. Paul’s speech at Antioch, refers to Jesus’ resurrection (Acts 13:33), while, in the gospels, it is taken up in reference to the coming down of the Holy Spirit at Jesus’ baptism (Mark 1:11, and parallels). Equally flexible, is the use made of Is 6:9f: “Hear and hear, but do not understand; see and see, but do not perceive”. In John 12:19f, it shows why the Jews do not respond in an enthusiastic way to the mission of Jesus, while, in Acts 28:25f, it becomes an explanation for why Paul turns from the Jews to take up his mission to the Gentiles. The synoptics use the same passage as a reason for Jesus’ use of parables (Mark 4:11f). How can this one passage have so many different meanings? Because the starting point for exegesis is not the setting of the text, but

²³ E. Ellis, *Paul’s Use of the Old Testament*, Grand Rapids MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1957, p. 144.

²⁴ James D. G. Dunn, [Reference details unknown], p. 96.

the circumstances, and demands, of the New Testament writer's community. To meet the crisis of faith of the believers, these Old Testament texts are taken up and reinterpreted, out of context, without regard for the original purposes and intent. It was the revealed word of God, and the divine message could be heard through it, whatever its application. It really is only a modern mind that would see such applications as "wrong" and unscientific.²⁵ Sometimes it goes further than just a reinterpretation. There are examples of where the Old Testament is completely changed by the New Testament. The clear example of this is in the beatitudes of Matt 5:21f; 5:27f. Jesus, here, is presented as the new interpreter of the Law, giving to the people a radically-new understanding of the commandments. Jesus goes far beyond just reinterpreting. The whole meaning of the texts is changed in such a way that it brings the old Law to an end. We see there (vv. 33-37) that He stops the traditional practice of swearing (Lev 19:12; Num 30:2; Deut 32:21). Mark 10:2-9/Matt 19:3-8 have Him putting an end to the Mosaic allowances for divorce (Deut 24:1).

Further to this, throughout the gospels, we see Jesus seemingly ignoring the requirements of ritual purity, even rejecting the whole notion completely in Mark 7. In his reflection on Stephen's speech in Acts 7:41-50, Dunn notes that "viewing the Old Testament, in the light of Jesus' words, Stephen used one part of scripture to justify the abandonment of the clear teaching of many other scriptures".²⁶ This is because Stephen appears to reread the history of Israel, in the light of Jesus' comments on the destruction and rebuilding of the Temple (see Acts 6:14). He sees it as a condemnation of Israel's worship, to the point where he claims that the original building of the Temple was the beginning of Israel's apostasy. This is in marked contrast with what is found in passages like 2 Sam 7:13, where Yahweh speaks in favourable terms of David's successor building Him a permanent house. Paul does a similar thing, clearly evident in his placement of Christ as the fulfilment and replacement of the Law. Jesus becomes the way to righteousness, not the Law, as spelt out in Lev 18:5. He presents Deut 30:12-14, traditionally interpreted as a call to obedience, in terms of righteousness/salvation through faith (Rom 10:4-9). Such an interpretation gives the Law a temporary authority. It was only meant to be valid for a short period of time, waiting for a more-authoritative revelation to come along from God (Gal 3:19-25). Now Christ has come, the Law is put aside (2 Cor 3:13f), an understanding of the scriptures that is uncomfortably

²⁵ B. Lindars, *New Testament Apologetic*, London UK: SCM Press, 1961, p. 18; cf. Dunn, [Reference details unknown], p. 97.

²⁶ Dunn, [Reference details unknown], p. 99.

new to the Jews. For this early Christian community, abandoning the clear and literal sense of the text was necessary, if they were to present, and defend, their new theology. The old interpretations and meanings were no longer relevant. If the Old Testament was to be retained as valid, it had to be radically reinterpreted to meet the new demands of the experiences of faith they had met in this man Jesus, whom they believed was the Christ.

It is clear, therefore, that the Jewish scriptures were of great importance for the early Christian community, as they established a link between the Israel of the Old Testament and the church of the New Testament. With salvation history seen as unfolding towards them, Jesus could be presented as the long-awaited, and promised, Messiah. He came, fulfilling their hopes, and the more they searched the scriptures, the more they found texts that could be interpreted to speak to some aspect of His life and ministry. This is why the Jewish scriptures remained important for the early church – because they could be reinterpreted in terms of the new revelation of Jesus Christ, though, at times, this reinterpretation meant some considerable modification and conflation of texts was necessary.

As we have already seen, the exegetical method of *midrash* was an attempt by the rabbis to contemporise the biblical text under consideration²⁷ so that it was made more meaningful to the faith community. We saw this in two ways: (a) interpretative translations in the Septuagint and the Targums,²⁸ and (b) explicit exegesis in the rabbinical commentaries.²⁹ An example of the first way is found in Matt 2:23, where Matthew says that Jesus' living in Nazareth fulfils the scriptures, which point to the Messiah being a *Nazoraïos*. But, which scripture is being fulfilled? Is the scripture being fulfilled Judg 13:5 [the Septuagint=13:7], where it speaks of Samson being dedicated to God as a Nazirite, or is it Is 11:1 (cf. 49:6; 60:21), where the word *netzer* is used, being the word for "branch"? Not that it matters all that much, because either word involves a considerable stretching of the significance of the name of Jesus' home town. But it was important for the early

²⁷ R. Block, "Midrash", in *Dictionnaire de la Bible: Supplement 5* (1957).

²⁸ We have already seen examples of this kind of thing. Is 9:11 (12) has Aramaeans and Philistines in the Hebrew text, and the more-contemporary Syrians and Greeks in the Septuagint. These were rewritings of the text.

²⁹ E. E. Ellis, "How the New Testament used the Old", in I. H. Marshall, ed., *New Testament Interpretation: Essays on Principles and Methods*, Exeter UK: Paternoster Press, 1977, p. 202, refers to these two ways of interpretation as implicit (translations) and explicit (commentaries) exegesis. While it is a somewhat artificial division, it is a useful framework for dividing up the various New Testament hermeneutics, and we will employ it here, and use some of his examples.

community to see everything Jesus did as having a potential message. It was more important than any establishment meaning of a word of scripture. We can also see this method in action in Rom 10:11:

The scripture says, “everyone who believes in Him will not be put to shame”.

The word “everyone” is not found in the Old Testament source. But that does not worry Paul. He has a message to preach, and by adding “everyone” his message is clear. He does a similar thing with Gen 21:10 in Gal 4:30. There, he changes the Hebrew text from “my son Isaac” to “child of the free woman”. Why? Because the change was necessary to apply the text to the problem Paul was addressing.

The early community tried to expound the meaning of the events of their faith by expressing it in established biblical terms. We can see this very clearly in the infancy narratives of Luke 1:26-38. This early part of Jesus’ life is not written in distinct historical language, but in the language of biblical theology. The facts of the Annunciation are presented for their spiritual significance: God is acting in a decisive way through this young virgin, bringing to fulfilment the history of salvation that has been unfolding through the history of Israel. The language of the Annunciation is the language of Is 6:1-9:7, specifically 7:13f with 1:27, 7: 14 with 1:31, 9:6f with 1:32, 35. There are also clear allusions to Gen 16:11 (1:31), 2 Sam 7:12-16 (1:32, 35), Dan 7:14 (1:33b), and Is 4:3; 62:12 (1:35). A reading through of the Magnificat (Luke 1:46-55) and the Benedictus (Luke 1:68-79) will show a similar compilation of Old Testament quotations and allusions.³⁰ This method is powerfully used by Jesus at His trial. In Mark 14:62, we find the words (modified) of Ps 110:1 and Dan 7:13 placed onto the lips of Jesus. In their setting in the gospel, they take on a clear messianic note, explaining to the listening community the significance of what is taking place. In this addressing of the contemporary needs of the community, the primary concern was not the original meaning of the text being used. Scripture was used as an adaptable God-given tool to reveal His saving power and presence. It was not seen as being confined to an historical event in the past.

This process is also linked to the *peshet* method of interpretation that we have seen in our brief look at the methods of exegesis from the Qumran

³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 202, 203.

community. New Testament *pesher* is eschatological, in that it takes the Old Testament quotations, and shows them as being fulfilled in the Christian community, which is the community of the end time.³¹ There are a number of clear uses of the *pesher* technique in the New Testament that are worth quoting as examples of the reinterpretation of scripture:

“It is through Isaac that descendants shall be named for you” (Gen 21:12). “*That is*, the children of the promise are counted as descendants’ (Rom 9:7-9).

“Do not say in your heart, ‘Who will ascend into heaven?’ (*that is*, to bring Christ down)” (Deut 30:12, from Rom 10:6-8).

“For this reason, a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two will become one flesh” (Gen 2:24). “*This is* a great mystery, and I am applying it to Christ and the church’ (Eph 5:31f).

“It is written, ‘Abraham had two sons’ ” (Gen 21). “*These are* the two covenants” (Gal 4:22-24).

This is sufficient to show how the Old Testament was understood, and used, by the early Christian writers. It was there to be applied to the events of the new covenant, so that they can be understood as the fulfilment of a long process of salvation. But these applications were not arbitrary. We look at them today, and we say that the methodology lacks a scientific basis, and that the interpretations they come up with are, in fact, “wrong”. Wrong, in that they misinterpret the original meaning the text had in its proper setting. They make it say more than was intended by the author. Exegesis, carried out in this way, runs the very real risk of becoming personal and individual, so that any message at all can be found in the Bible, and almost any position defended. But, such criticism misses the point of biblical interpretation for these early communities. They were not searching the scriptures to find out the original meaning of texts. They were searching the scriptures to see if any of the previous revelations of God can help them to understand the meaning of the revelation that had come to them in the person and ministry of Jesus. In doing this, they invested the written word with a depth and vitality that is so often missing from much of the modern historical/critical exegesis. The New Testament, understood from the perspective of Jewish

³¹ Ibid., p. 207.

interpretation, can be different from that which emerges from the critical methods of our Western sciences. The New Testament use of scripture reminds us that there is much more in a text than the original intent of the author. When we have a text, we must take into consideration the original meaning. That should be the starting point (though working out the original meaning is not always an easy thing to do), and is really the primary meaning of the passage. However, in the light of later traditions and experiences, these texts take on something of a prophetic role, witnessing to God's powerful acts in history. An example of this will help us to understand what is happening. Is 7:14 reads:

Therefore, the Lord Himself will give you a sign. Behold, a young woman shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.

Scholars differ as to the exact meaning of this passage. Presumably, it relates to a situation in Judah during the reign of Ahaz. We are not sure whose child this baby will be (the prophet's?), but, somehow, he will herald a new time in the relationship between Judah and God, and a closer relationship. God is working out His salvation in history, and this birth will be an important step forward. It is not hard to see how, over the centuries between the time of writing and the ministry of Jesus, this text took on something of a messianic message. It may even have been associated with a tradition of a virgin birth of a Messiah.³² Whatever of the details, the expectation would have been that this prophecy had to be fulfilled. In Matt 1:22-23, we see this step taking place, with it being presented as a prophecy of the virgin birth of Jesus. It seems that Matthew shows Isaiah as having had a clear and correct vision of what was going to take place some 800 years later. He also presents Jesus as fulfilling prophecies that go back into the past history of the people of God. What we end up with is a text that is now reinterpreted in the light of subsequent historical events. Because we believe that Jesus is God and man, the incarnation means that He is the "Immanuel", as predicted by Isaiah. While Isaiah might not have been talking about a virgin birth, his text, indeed, gives witness to its significance. Matthew, the Jew, could not have imagined a Bible that was not internally consistent, and in keeping with traditional religious beliefs, and it was these beliefs that marked the starting point of exegesis.

This does not mean that the early Christian writers consciously employed exegetical methods. They would not have chosen a specific method appropriate to the task at hand. Rather, they mixed up the various ways of interpretation so that

³² A. T. Hanson, *Living Utterances*, London UK: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1983, p. 180.

we find *midrash* combined with *peshet* exegesis, illustration with grammatical analysis, and so on. What they did consciously do was to formulate a theological filter, through which the Old Testament was viewed. At the very heart of New Testament exegesis is their belief that Jesus was the Christ:

The Christians began from Jesus – from His known character, and mighty deeds and sayings, and His death and resurrection – and with these they went to the scriptures and found that God’s dealings with His people, and His intentions for them, there reflected, did, in fact, leap into new significance, in the light of these recent happenings. Sooner or later, this was to lead, through a definition of what God had done, to something like a definition of whom Jesus was.³³

It was Jesus who, first of all, transformed the understanding of the messianic texts (and some of the non-messianic texts), and, in doing so, provided the later Christian community with an authority to do likewise.³⁴ This, they continued to do, using widely-accepted methodologies, and, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, ensuring that Jesus was an ongoing source of authority for their work. This represented an enormous change in the understanding of the direction of history, as the Jews were looking forward to the coming the Messiah. Now, after the resurrection, Christians were looking back at the person and ministry of Jesus, as the focus of God’s redemptive acts in the past. The Old Testament became a part of the divine preparation, and thus everything, in a sense, became “messianic” – a part of God’s preparation for Jesus.³⁵

Messianic prophecy is doctrine, rather than prediction. The prophets were preachers. If there was some, one messianic prediction, which they revealed, and unfolded from age to age, we should expect that they would present it in the form of a religious doctrine, for the practical benefit of the men of their times. . . . As the biography of Jesus is really doctrine, so the prophetic forecast of the Messiah is doctrine, rather than prediction, and is the heart of the religious teachings of the prophets.

³³ C. F. D. Moule, *The Birth of the New Testament*, New York NY: Harper & Row, 1966, p. 58.

³⁴ B. Gerhardson, *Memory and Manuscript: Oral Tradition and Written Transmission in Rabbinic Judaism and Early Christianity*, Lund: Gleerup, 1961, p. 327.

³⁵ Beecher, W. T., *The Prophets and Promise*, New York NY: Cromwell, 1905, pp. 175f. This is quoted in Longenecker, *Biblical Exegesis*, p. 109, fn. 6.

This is why the history of Israel becomes salvation history, with everything unfolding in the revelation of Jesus. The exegete's task became the presentation of this messianic message.

Conclusion to the Old Testament Reflections

These reflections began by looking at scripture and the meaning of texts, and wondering about the criteria for validity in hermeneutics. The questions arose out of observations made in the methods used in teaching exegesis in Newton Theological College, and wondering if our approach to scripture needs a reorientation. A vital part of this rethinking rests on our understanding of what scripture is, and how it has been used by those who see it as the revealed Word of God. Our studies, up to this point, have presented us with some very important insights, which can be applied in our hermeneutics. The first one is a matter of orientation. Commentators have not been concerned over the original message of a text, whether the author had one specific message in mind or not. The real question for them has been that subsequent generations of believers, in the light of their faith, and in their reflections on their living situations, could find more meanings in the texts than were originally intended. Because the texts are scripture, they have the possibility of breaking out of the normal limitations of language and linguistics. This is just what we have seen happening in biblical exegesis, from the time of the first editings. Other exegetical/hermeneutical observations that are worth noting, in summary, are:

1. The Torah was seen as the will of God for His people, and contained everything that man needed to be faithful to his calling. It was all there in the text, though it may have been hidden, waiting for someone to come along and, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, uncover its riches.
2. Texts are full of meaning, and it was impossible to imagine that these could ever be exhausted by the searchings of the human mind. In the word of Rabbi Ishmael, again:

Just as the rock is split into many splinters, so also may one biblical verse contain many teachings (Sanah 34a – Palestinian Talmud).

3. Finalising the canon of sacred scripture allowed for the full development of the exegetical sciences. The scribes accepted that the

texts could not be altered, as they were the perfect Word of God, and so simply needed proper interpretation. This led to a variety of styles of exegesis, as the scholars sought to reconcile differences, and *reinterpreted* existing texts in the light of community beliefs, and forms of worship and government, current in the community.

4. Books became sacred scripture, originating directly from the hand of God. They, therefore, were complete, and had a full and appropriate message for each new generation of believers.
5. The translation of the Hebrew Bible into Greek showed that, in the latter part of the Old Testament period, scribes were prepared to look at the meaning of scripture as entailing more than just the surface or literal meaning. Because scripture was sacred, and, therefore, without error, it always used appropriate language and images. Any apparent deficiencies had to be understood as symbolic language. Philo and the Targums, in particular, made use of this belief. With the use of allegory and metaphor, whole new meanings were given to the traditional stories, all on the basis that the text represented the eternally alive and valid Word of God.
6. *Halakah* and *Haggadah* were exegetical techniques that ensured that biblical passages were always alive and challenging to the receiving community. They opened up new dimensions to the texts that were far beyond those intended by the original authors and editors.
7. The Qumran *peshet* method showed that, for the community of Essenes, the key to interpretation was the life and times of the community. The true meaning of the texts were even hidden from the prophet delivering the prophecy!
8. Jewish *midrash* was the standard form of exegesis, which sought to discover in a text more than the literal meaning. It set out to find the true spirit of the scripture, examining it from all its possible angles to find interpretations not obviously meant. It held that a biblical passage should not just be explained. Such explanation was but the first step in exegesis. Further to this, its meaning had to be extended, and all possible implications drawn out of it, building on every possible association of ideas and images.

9. With the New Testament, we see that this reinterpretation of sacred scripture was an accepted method of exegesis. Jesus regularly reinterpreted texts, giving them their full, authoritative meaning. The early Christian community continued this tradition, reinterpreting the Old Testament in the light of Jesus, whom they believed was the Christ. The interpretive key was their creed, and they searched back through their received scripture's for proof texts that pointed to the redemptive activity of Jesus.
10. The New Testament authors used all of the exegetical techniques of their times, and approached scripture in the same way as their contemporary Jewish scholars. There is no evidence that their understanding of what a text was, and how it was to be approached, was any different to that of the scribes and Pharisees. Of course, they had a vastly different understanding of the theology of scripture, and, as to their pivotal point, but the basic approaches were the same.

It would seem, therefore, that what is needed in the teaching of exegesis and hermeneutics is a broad-spectrum approach. It must, of course, stress the importance of the scientific/critical methods, but should not stop there. Understanding scripture as scripture means far more than that. What is now needed is the turning of these observations into a methodology, with guidelines and limitations. It is just not possible to apply them directly to scripture today, but that should not rule them out as mere historical curiosities. They have a lasting value that can make God's Word truly alive and truly meaningful to today's world.

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