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**Beale**

*Steve Moyise*

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In my article on Mark's use of Scripture,<sup>1</sup> I suggested that Mark juxtaposes Old Testament texts with Christian reality (as he understands it) in order to force certain interactions between them. For example, in the parable of the vineyard, the story is almost all gloom; the servants are abused, the son is killed and the landlord is forced to use violence to get what he wants. But the story is 'capped' with the very positive sounding Ps. 118.22-23, 'The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone. This is the Lord's doing; it is marvellous in our eyes.' Drawing on my monograph on *The Old Testament in the Book of Revelation*, I suggested that for Mark, Psalm 118 was not so much an object of interpretation but a means to highlight the transfer motif in the vineyard (by calling it marvellous). The effect of this juxtaposition is that the new affects the old and the old affects the new. The psalm has been given a new subject, while the emphasis of the parable has been changed.

Greg Beale agrees that the 'New Testament interprets the Old and the Old interprets the New' but takes issue with me on three points: a) It is wrong to speak of Old Testament texts receiving new meanings; b) New Testament authors do not take texts out of context; and c) Meaning derives from authorial intention, not the creative processes of readers. In order to establish the first, Beale draws on the work of Hirsch, who distinguishes between 'original meaning' and 'ongoing significance'. With me in mind, Beale offers the following analogy:

The notion that readers create meaning is likely due in part to a hermeneutical flaw of confusing original 'meaning' with 'significance'... By way of illustration, we

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<sup>1</sup>'Is Mark's Opening Quotation the Key to his Use of Scripture', *IBS* 20 (1998), pp.146-158.

Moyise, **The Old Testament in the New** IBS 21 May 1999 can compare an author's original, unchanging meaning to an apple in its original context of an apple tree. When someone removes the apple and puts it into another setting (say, in a basket of various fruits in a dining room for decorative purposes), the apple does not lose its original identity as an apple, the fruit of a particular kind of tree, but the apple must now be understood not in and of itself but *in relation to the new context* in which it has been placed... The new context does not annihilate the original identity of the apple, but now the apple must be understood in its relation to its new setting.<sup>2</sup>

The point of the analogy is that though the apple might now be viewed in a different way, it never becomes a pear. Old Testament allusions certainly gain new 'significance' by being placed in a new setting but this does not result in new 'meaning'. The meaning of an Old Testament text is what the original author intended and that never changes. It is only the text's 'significance' that changes. But this sounds to me like a hermeneutical cover-up. If Beale can speak of New Testament authors offering 'new understandings' of Old Testament texts 'which may have been surprising to an Old Testament audience',<sup>3</sup> then why is it so wrong to speak of 'new meanings'? If he can agree that New Testament authors offering 'new interpretations' (see below), why must this be understood in terms of 'new significance' but not 'new meaning'? Alternatively, we could adopt Beale's terminology and simply point out that what he means by 'new significance' is what most of us mean by 'new meaning'.

As for the analogy, I would agree that Old Testament texts are not annihilated (though some texts are untraceable) and that they now have to be understood in the light of their new setting. But I would suggest a better analogy would be that of a fruit salad, where we no longer have nice shiny apples but *pieces* of apple, mixed up with

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<sup>2</sup> *John's Use of the Old Testament in Revelation* (JSNTSup 166; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), pp.51-2. Emphasis original.

<sup>3</sup> *John's Use of the Old Testament*, p.128.

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*pieces* of pear and *pieces* of banana and covered in syrup. There is a *connection* with the shiny apple that once hung on a tree but on this analogy, one is much more struck by the differences. It is no longer round, the skin has been removed and it has been severed from its core. And the experience of eating it will be considerably different from biting into the original apple.

However, the real problem with this type of analogy is its corporeality. Texts do not have hard surfaces that protect them from change of context. They are more like ripples on a pond, which spread out, intersect with other ripples and form new patterns. Or even less corporeal, texts are like sound waves which ‘interfere’ with one another, producing a series of harmonics and distortions (hence the image of ‘intertextual echo’, which is proving popular). Thus my reply to Beale’s attempt to show that texts do not change meanings is that texts are *not* like apples which retain their shape when placed side by side with other fruit. As Worten and Still state in their introductory essay on intertextuality, ‘every quotation distorts and redefines the “primary” utterance by relocating it within another linguistic and cultural context’.<sup>4</sup>

Beale’s second point is that it is wrong to speak about taking texts out of context. He acknowledges that John sometimes uses Old Testament texts in ways that are very different (even diametrically opposite) to their Old Testament contexts. But this is explained by noting that ‘these new interpretations are the result of John’s new, presuppositional lenses through which he is now looking at the Old Testament... *Granted the legitimacy of these presuppositions*, John’s interpretation of the Old Testament shows respect for Old Testament contexts.’<sup>5</sup> But I would suggest that a better way of putting this is to say that while John shows an *awareness* of Old Testament contexts, his Christian presuppositions nevertheless allow him to change, modify and even (on occasions) invert them. In other words, if ‘respect for context’ simply means

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<sup>4</sup>M.Worten & J.Still, ‘Introduction’, in *Intertextuality: Theories and Practices* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990), p.11.

<sup>5</sup>*John’s Use of the Old Testament*, p.127. Emphasis original.

Moyise, **The Old Testament in the New** *IBS* 21 May 1999 'understandable given the author's presuppositions', then it surely becomes a truism. Even the most bizarre allegorical use of Scripture could be said to 'respect the context' if we accept the legitimacy of the author's presuppositions. I have no desire to claim that the New Testament authors were ignorant or uninterested in where their quotations and allusions come from. But insisting that they always 'respect the context' does not seem to fit with their practice of offering 'new understandings' and 'new interpretations' and viewing them through their 'new presuppositional lenses'. I would suggest that 'awareness of context' is a more useful phrase than 'respect for context', which suggests some sort of conformity.

Thirdly, Beale places me with those reader-response critics who (he says) believe that a text can mean whatever they like. I am unaware of any reader-response critics who go that far but it is certainly not my position. The point that I tried to make in my monograph was that because texts can point in a number of directions, the reader is always *involved* in configuring these different 'voices' in order to arrive at a coherent meaning. For example, the text of Psalm 118 does not 'cry out' to be linked with the parable of the vineyard (itself based on Isaiah 5). Someone (probably Jesus, in the light of *Thomas* 65-66) decided to link them and thus produced a set of interactions (ripples) which we as readers now have to make sense of. I made such an attempt in my article. Others have come up with different suggestions. My point is not that readers make texts mean whatever they like. It is that in order to arrive at a coherent interpretation, readers have to make choices. How far should we allow the context of Psalm 118 to influence our interpretation of the parable? Should we be concerned with the original utterance of the Psalm, its meaning as part of the Book of Psalms, or how it was being interpreted in the first century? Are we trying to decide what Jesus had in mind or what Mark thought it meant? None of these are simply 'given' to us by the text.

Beale does not see this as a problem for though 'we all have presuppositions which influence the way we read texts, these presuppositions do not blind us from perceiving authorial intentions incompatible with our hermeneutical lenses and from discerning the

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different presuppositions of others'.<sup>6</sup> But since scholars do arrive at positions that differ from Beale, it would appear that what he really means is that *his* presuppositions have not prevented *him* from correctly discerning authorial intention. But it is one of the enduring insights of liberation and feminist writings that 'what one knows and sees depends upon where one stands or sits... the knower helps constitute what is known'.<sup>7</sup> Pursuit of authorial intention can be a useful goal. But it needs to be remembered that it is a 'construct' rather than a 'given'. Readers have to make decisions as to what constitutes evidence and how it should be construed. And there is no consensus on how to do this. I would suggest that the differences between Beale and myself are confirmation of this.

Steve Moyise

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<sup>6</sup>*John's Use of the Old Testament in Revelation*, p.53, n.130.

<sup>7</sup>W.Brueggemann, *The Bible and Postmodern Imagination* (London: SCM, 1993), p.8.