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The Old Testament as Christian Scripture

Some questions and comments with particular reference to the use of the New Testament in the interpretation of the Old

M. J. Evans

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For a Christian, the Old Testament is scripture, or to put it another way, the Old Testament is Christian scripture. This is an axiom, a starting point. But what are the implications of this axiom for our interpretation of the Old Testament, and what difference does it make that the New Testament is also Christian scripture? Too often, both in scholarship and the church, these questions have been set aside so that many Old Testament commentaries simply ignore the existence of the New Testament and many churches ignore, in practice, the existence of the Old Testament.

It is clear that the way in which the meaning of the word 'scripture' is understood will have a strong influence on answers given to questions raised about the relationship between the testaments, and questions of interpretation; but neither a definition of scripture nor a statement of faith about scripture actually answer such questions. To assert that the Bible is the inspired and authoritative word of God means that questions of interpretation become more significant but does not always solve such questions.

Let us consider three propositions concerning the Old Testament:

1. The Old Testament must be interpreted within its own context; the straightforward sense must be upheld if its claims as the word of God are to be taken seriously.

It is clearly true that any interpretation of the Old Testament which is quite separate from the text in context must be seen as eisegesis rather than exegesis. The text has to be taken seriously as it stands. When sermons, supposedly related to Old Testament passages, ignore this point, their teaching, possibly quite accurate in itself, cannot be seen as biblically based. One cannot for example, claim solely on the basis of Isaiah 41:6-7 that the Bible encourages neighbourly co-operation!

However, is it true, as many commentators of recent years seem to have assumed, that to take the Old Testament seriously means that, although we can use the New Testament as an expositional commentary on the Old, it cannot and should not be used as an exegetical tool?

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2. The Old Testament, rightly understood, speaks constantly of Christ and must be interpreted in the light of that.

The New Testament leaves us in no doubt that the Old Testament does speak of Christ and that this fact ought to have a very real influence on our interpretation of the Old Testament text. (Lk. 24:27, 44-47; Acts 8:35; 28:23; 2 Cor. 1:20). However, it does not necessarily mean that every prophecy and every proclamation refers directly to Jesus. There is a problem here: how can we take seriously the Christological implications of a text without throwing overboard the original context?

3. The Old Testament is the word of God. It is not simply an historical survey of God's dealings with Israel, it also speaks directly as God's word to us in our situation.

This is a statement of faith; the expression of an attitude towards the Old Testament. However, those who wish to make such a statement and take up such an attitude are not thereby entitled to ignore what the text is actually saying. There is a temptation for those involved in small group Bible studies to begin their study of the text with the question 'How does this verse or passage relate to me?' or even 'What blessing can I get from reading this verse?'; whereas such questions, although, perhaps, perfectly valid in themselves, cannot be answered until the prior question 'What does this verse say?' has already been satisfactorily dealt with. If this is not done, then it is not the text itself that is being allowed to speak; and it is the text as it stands, complete with its meaning, and not simply a collection of words taken out of context that are to be seen as the word of God.

So, if we do wish in some way to uphold all three of these propositions, to take the text seriously in its own right and within its own context, to recognize fully its Christological implications, and to acknowledge its relevance to our own situation; then how do we go about it? What does it mean in practice that the Old Testament is Christian scripture? How should we, as Christians, use the Old Testament, and in particular, in what ways can and should we use the New Testament in clarifying our understanding of the Old?

Central to this, of course, is the further question of the relationship between the testaments. 'It is a question which confronts every Christian in the Church, whether he be a professional theologian, a pastor of a congregation, or a layman. It is no exaggeration to say that on this question hangs the meaning of the Christian faith.' (B. W. Anderson)¹ It is certainly clear that, if scripture is the word of God, then rightly discerning that word has to be the key to everything else, and that the question of the relationship between the testaments cannot simply be seen as a matter of academic concern relevant only to scholars.

There are three major areas for debate:

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THE UNITY OF THE TESTAMENTS

Is it legitimate for us to speak of a biblical theology so that texts can and should be interpreted not only within their own immediate context—the primary task—but within the context of the whole testament and the whole Bible? In practice, this is the same question as that concerned with the legitimacy of Old Testament theology or New Testament theology, as the arguments, supporting unity or arguing for collection of differing and largely unrelated theologies, within a testament, also apply to the whole Bible.

These arguments tend to centre either on showing a continuous line of development, the working out of a consistent plan of salvation, or else on indicating unifying themes, whether a single key topic or a collection of various common ideas. Kaiser² argues that if we cannot find a key theme underlying the whole Old Testament, then 'the idea of an Old Testament theology as such must be permanently abandoned. Not only would it be necessary to acknowledge that there was no unity to be found in the Old Testament but the search for

¹ B. W. Anderson (ed), *The Old Testament and Christian Faith* (London, 1964) 1.

² W. Kaiser, *Toward an Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1978) 21.

legitimate and authoritative lines of continuity with the New Testament would need to be abandoned as well.' Whereas Hasel³ takes the view that it is impossible to do justice to the 'multiform and multiplex' nature of the biblical witness by a unilinear approach determined by a single concept.

Using the thematic arguments, Bright⁴ concludes that the theological structure of the two testaments is essentially the same; that each of the major themes of the Old has its correspondent in the New and is in some way resumed and answered there, and that by virtue of this fact a hermeneutical bridge is thrown between the testaments.

In the end, however, acceptance of the validity of a biblical theology is probably to some extent a matter of faith. As Goldingay,⁵ referring to the Old Testament but in a way that we can extend to the whole Bible says, 'In my view for a Christian to interpret the Old Testament implies that he has a confessional stance in relation to it. Although it is a collection of books by human authors it is one book having Scriptural status. He believes that its contents are coherent and that the insights of one part are to be seen in the light of the other and vice versa. To interpret the Old Testament involves seeking to relate diverse approaches to each other rather than to separate insight from error.'

If then we decide to take up this confessional stance and are convinced both by argument and by faith that there is a biblical theology, the question arises as to whether this in any way affects our interpretation of the Old Testament and our understanding of Old Testament theology. Some would argue that it does not, and that whereas any interpreter of the New Testament must take into account and have a good understanding of Old Testament theology, the reverse is not so. McKenzie⁶ for example, wrote his book on Old Testament theology as if 'the New Testament did not exist', taking it for granted

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that the one-way traffic hermeneutical pattern is the only legitimate one, and in practice most of the Old Testament commentators seem to have taken the same line.⁷

But is there any room for traffic in the opposite direction? Can it ever be legitimate to use the New Testament in order to make statements about the meaning of the Old Testament? Can it ever be valid to use an understanding of God gained at a later stage (for example, that he is the kind of God who becomes incarnate) in order to elucidate what is said by him or about him at an earlier time? It can certainly be argued that the New Testament in its own references to the Old, and indeed the Old, Testament itself commenting on earlier passages, provides us with justification for a two-way traffic in the case of those passages and that that at least leaves open the possibility in other cases.

This leads on to the second area of debate.

³ G. Hasel, *Old Testament Theology: Basic Issues in the Current Debate* (Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1972) 94-95.

⁴ J. Bright, *The Authority of the Old Testament* (London, 1967) 121ff.

⁵ J. Goldingay, *Approaches to Old Testament Interpretation* (Leicester, 1981) 33.

⁶ J. L. McKenzie, *A Theology of the Old Testament* (London, 1974) 319.

⁷ Although a number of more recent commentators have followed B. S. Childs, *Exodus* (London, 1974) in beginning to take seriously what the New Testament has to say about the passages to which it directly refers, and others, notably G. J. Wenham, *Leviticus* (Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1979); *Numbers* (Leicester, 1981) have gone further in bringing out the Christian implications of the text.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE TESTAMENTS

There appear to be four main ways of understanding the relationship between the Old Testament and the New Testament.

1. The Old Testament is background, the preface to the New Testament which is the only real scripture.
2. The Old Testament is the only real scripture with the New Testament being an interpretative gloss.
3. The Old Testament consists in its entirety of allegories of Christ.
4. The Old Testament and the New Testament are both scripture, both to be taken seriously in their own right.

D. L. Baker⁸ gives a full description of these different positions. Most churches would claim, at least in theory, to uphold the fourth option, though it is true that in some cases their practice would seem to indicate an adherence to one of the first three. But if we do accept as a 'defensible dogma' that the Old Testament and the New Testament are both scripture, both the word of God, then what difference does the existence of the New Testament make to our understanding and interpretation of the Old Testament? Does it make any difference that we also accept the 'Christ-event', the Incarnation, as unique, much more than simply one of many such events in the history of salvation?

How far are we justified in seeing the New Testament as elucidating, or making obsolete, or changing what the Old Testament says? In other words, if we do wish to use the New Testament as a help in interpreting the Old Testament, how far are we justified in using it as:

1. an enlarger making apparent things which were there all the time but perhaps not very clear to the naked eye;
2. a colour photo—replacing the old black and white picture of the same scene;

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3. an artist touching up and colouring an old photograph to give it a sense of reality and clarity but who may or may not reflect the original colours.

It is relevant here to ask how the New Testament uses the Old. It is certainly true that there is no explicit discussion of hermeneutical methodology in the New Testament and that, as von Rad says, 'the New Testament fails almost entirely to provide any norm, any handy rule for its (ie the Old Testament's) use'.⁹ However, the New Testament does provide within itself some validation for its own use as (1.) above (Mt. 22:29; Lk. 24:26; Jn. 20:9) and in some instances and to some extent as (2.) (Rom. 10:4; Heb. 8:13) although 2 Timothy 3:16 warns against taking this too far and assuming that the Old Testament itself, as opposed to certain aspects of its teaching, is obsolete. However (3.) above appears to be invalidated by the New Testament's use of the Old (cf 2 Pet. 1:20).

⁸ D. L. Baker, *Two Testaments: One Bible* (Leicester, 1976).

⁹ G. von Rad, 'Typological Interpretation of the Old Testament' in C. Westermann (ed), *Essays on Old Testament Hermeneutics* (Richmond, Va, 1963) 18.

However, though an examination of the way in which the New Testament uses the Old gives us some help, we still need to ask whether the hermeneutical methodology used in scripture is the only valid methodology for us. Is that methodology in some way sacrosanct? And should we in any case limit ourselves to using New Testament ideas to interpret only those Old Testament passages which are specifically quoted or referred to in the New Testament? It is certainly true that when we move away from these passages then the ever-present danger of eisegesis, the reading in of ideas which bear no relation to the original text, is increased, and the decision has to be made as to whether or not the danger is so great that the attempt is best avoided altogether. If we do want to use the New Testament to interpret the Old, we must at the very least recognize the first side of the two-way traffic. For example, it may be true that the New Testament sheds new light on Old Testament prophecies about the Messiah, but it is also true that 'once it is claimed that Christ is the fulfilment of Old Testament hopes then the nature of Old Testament hopes demands to contribute to our developing understanding of the significance of Christ'. (J. Goldingay)¹⁰

If we are willing to admit that at least in some instances it is legitimate to use New Testament ideas in the direct interpretation of the Old Testament, then the question arises as to which methods of interpretation are acceptable and appropriate.

IDENTIFYING ACCEPTABLE OR APPROPRIATE METHODS OF INTERPRETATION

Is it necessary that we search for one 'correct' way to interpret the Old Testament, or can we accept that different methods of interpretation will be appropriate in different instances, or at times in the same instance? Again using the New Testament exegesis of Old Testament passages as an example, it is possible to argue that the use of different

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methods is not only possible but essential, for to insist on one consistent approach ignores the variety of form and genre within the Old Testament itself and could therefore lead very quickly to error.

It is undeniable and not necessarily all bad that there have been fashions in hermeneutical method. At different times and in different groups it has been argued that 'only typology' or 'only the historicocritical approach' etc should be seen as 'true interpretation' with other methods being dismissed as irrelevant or at best as useful for exposition but unrelated to the proper meaning of the text. Does this then mean that a search for correct methods becomes meaningless? Not necessarily, but it does mean that any interpreter must recognize that his thinking can be influenced by patterns originating outside the text and must beware of assuming that the last word has been said.

Taking it for granted that a straightforward understanding of the text within its own context must come first, let us consider a number of possible ways of interpreting the Old Testament where the use of the New Testament in such interpretation may be relevant.

1. As background to the New Testament

¹⁰ *Old Testament Interpretation*, 119.

The Old Testament provides the context in which New Testament ideas are formulated and gives content to concepts used in the New Testament which could not otherwise be adequately understood, for example the idea of sacrifice. However it may be possible that the developed understanding found within the New Testament may give clarity and provide a greater appreciation of the meaning of earlier writings.

2. As salvation history

We have in the Old Testament and the New Testament a description of one single coordinated programme of God. It may be that looking at the New Testament will sometimes be able to clarify our understanding of the section of that programme described in the Old Testament.

There is a danger with both of these approaches to the interpretation of the Old Testament that it will be seen as simply the precursor to the New Testament and that its significance in its own right as the word of God will thus be missed. It is important therefore that such approaches are never seen as excluding other methods of interpretation.

3. As prophecy

It is clear that the Old Testament does point outside of itself. It has expectations. It proclaims and explains God's promises, looking to the future when such promises will be fulfilled. Built into the Old Testament is the concept of something more to come which will in itself help interpretation of the original text. If it is accepted that the New Testament does, as it claims, proclaim and explain events to which the Old Testament points and looks forward, then the Old Testament can

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be said to provide implicit justification within itself for using the New Testament as an aid to the interpretation of the Old.

Zimmerli notes that this process of using the fulfilment of prophecies to interpret the original prophecies can be discerned even within the Old Testament where prophets recognize that their message is not so fixed that the exact method of fulfilment could be predicted in advance but that 'only Yahweh himself can legitimately interpret his promise through his fulfilment and the interpretation can be full of surprises even for the prophet himself'.¹¹ The fulfilment tells us more about the initial prophecy than we could ever learn from considering that prophecy alone and having recognized the fulfilment it would be foolish, like deliberately wearing blinkers, not to take advantage of it.

The problem, of course, arises in the identification of correct fulfilments. Are we ever justified in claiming to have correctly identified fulfilments of Old Testament prophecies other than those which are identified for us within the New Testament? Certainly it cannot be assumed that this is always the appropriate method to use.

4. As containing hidden meaning not explicit in the text

At certain stages of Christian history, the main method of interpreting the Old Testament has been to see it in terms of typology, allegory, or containing some other form of *sensus plenior*. Perhaps because of the obvious dangers of indiscriminate use where imagination takes over from interpretation, this approach has tended to be avoided in recent scholarship. It is an approach found within the New Testament and some scholars have often preferred to avoid

¹¹ W. Zimmerli, 'Promise and Fulfilment' in Westermann, *Essays*, 107.

the dangers by limiting its use to the interpretation of those Old Testament passages directly referred to in this way within the New Testament. Certainly, there must be limits. Any 'fuller sense' must be one where there is a direct theological relationship with the original text and where the historical sense of the passage is perhaps a less complete version but not something totally unrelated. An 'out of the blue' reading in of unrelated ideas can never be seen as legitimate Old Testament interpretation.

5. As a set of beliefs about God

The teaching of the Old Testament is assumed and built on, but not repeated within the New Testament. We are then faced again with the question of how far it is legitimate to use the understanding of God gained in the New Testament to elucidate what is said by or about God in the Old Testament.

6. As an ethical standard

The Old Testament does contain guidance for right behaviour. Sometimes this guidance is specific to Israel, sometimes it reflects God's condescension and willingness to work with people where they are at, in spite of this not being ideal. The New Testament gives essential guidance as to how the Old Testament law is to be interpreted as God's

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word for today, when it must be taken into account that 'no-one is justified before God by the law' and that 'now that faith has come, we are no longer under the supervision of the law'. (Gal. 3:11, 25) Perhaps James can be seen as providing clues to the interpretation of the Old Testament as an ethical standard.¹²

CONCLUSION

Goldingay has identified the 'challenge to contemporary Old Testament interpretation' as arising from 'the two-fold nature of these Scriptures' (that is, as divine and as human word). 'It is so to use the techniques appropriate to the study of the human words that the divine word which they constitute may speak to us who live this side of the coming of Christ.'¹³ Part of that, or perhaps a further challenge, is to take the Old Testament seriously as Christian scripture, which must involve a much greater clarification of the relationship between the testaments and of the role of the New Testament in interpreting the Old than is found in most churches today. If these challenges are to be met within the churches, then maybe those involved in leadership training must grasp some of the nettles involved in such clarification.

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<http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/>

¹² Cf M. J. Evans 'The Law in James', *Vox Evangelica* 13 (1983) 29-40. [now on-line at http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/vox/vol13/james_evans.pdf]

¹³ *Old Testament Interpretation*, 155.