

## BIG BIBLE SATURDAYS

### JANUARY 5<sup>TH</sup>: THE BIBLE IN THE BIBLE

#### Introduction

In this 'Big Bible' teaching session we look at 'the Bible in the Bible'—in other words, part of the Bible—the NT—looks back at another part—the OT—as its 'Bible'. The NT's use of the OT raises many important issues, such as what authority it accorded the OT, what OT canon it recognised, and what OT text(s) it used. However, our purpose in this study is to consider just one: NT interpretation of the OT. How did NT characters and authors understand the OT, and what lessons can we learn from this for *our* interpretation of biblical texts?

#### Jesus' Use of the OT

From the gospel records of Jesus, John Wenham offers the following synopsis of Jesus' understanding of the OT:<sup>1</sup>

- Jesus regarded OT historical accounts as factual;
- He viewed OT commands as authoritative and to be obeyed;
- He saw prophecy as requiring fulfilment;
- In all such aspects, His assessment of the OT was that it was inspired truth. Furthermore, there was in His mind "no trace of the modern idea that the men were inspired but not the writings."<sup>2</sup>

In view of such an assessment:

- In Christ's view, the OT required careful study;
- Yet also, to Jesus, the OT could only be fully understood through 'spiritual understanding'. Wenham notes Jesus' use of Isaiah 54:13 (Jn. 6:45) in this regard.

Much of what Wenham identifies is unquestionable. It is perhaps his third point, about prophecy, which leads us into more controversial territory, and relates to his final point, about 'spiritual understanding'. For instance, according to Luke 4:21, 23-24, Jesus claims the fulfilment in His own person of a prophecy (Is. 61:1-2) which actually has the original author in the **first** person singular, as if it is really on Isaiah that the Spirit rests, rather than on any later individual. How does Jesus make this identification? With what criteria is He pursuing this interpretation?

His audience's response to His exposition was mixed, with initial enthusiasm (Lk. 4:22:- "All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his lips.") soon followed, as He continued, by outright rejection (Lk.4:28:- "All the people in the synagogue were furious when they heard this.") What should our response to His exegesis be? Do we too regard His appropriation to Himself of Isaiah 61:1-2 as 'gracious', or is it invalid exegesis, ignoring the original meaning of the prophecy, and arbitrarily reading new meaning into it, to suit his own agenda? The question is well illustrated by looking at the times the apostles in their writings interpreted the OT, for such 'christocentric' interpretation of OT texts is far commoner in their own compositions.

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<sup>1</sup> *Christ and the Bible*, pp. 17-44.

<sup>2</sup> *Christ and the Bible*, p. 30.

## The Apostles' Use of the OT

As we study the apostles' use of the OT in the gospels, Acts, the letters and Revelation, we frequently find similar use of OT narrative and prophecy. Rather than being interpreted in its own terms, the OT is being 'reinterpreted' in terms of the Christ-event. So Hays and Green comment of the apostles, "With transformed eyes, they read and reread Scripture, discovering there prefigurations of the grace of God they had come to experience."<sup>3</sup> This well illustrates the claims of such stance-based hermeneuts as feminists that what you see depends on where you are looking from. The apostles had a new perspective, and they consequently understood the Scriptures in a new way.<sup>4</sup> They interpreted Scripture in the light of experience. In so doing, they often *seemed* to ignore the original meaning of texts(!).

Discussion question 1: Look at Matthew 2:15. How does this understand the 'son' of Hosea 11:1?—who is referred to? Look at Hosea 11:1 itself. Who is the 'son' here? What is going on? Does Matthew take Hosea's intention seriously?

A number of explanations may be offered for this common NT phenomenon.

1. NT authors were so swayed by their experience of Christ that they simply went to the Scripture for 'proof texts' to justify their experience. In so doing, they handled texts, 'atomistically', with no regard for context. Apparent examples would be Matthew 1:22-23 and John 19:24. It is further argued that they were thus being Jewish 'children of their day', for parallels can be claimed with other contemporary forms of Jewish exegesis, such as the 'raz-pesher' exegesis of the Qumran community. The conclusion might be that they were employing exegetical techniques which we have long-since (and wisely) learned to abandon.

In response, Moo readily admits that the NT shows evidence of exegetical approaches which were also evidenced in contemporary Jewish interpretations of Scripture. He gives some examples, including the following:

- Acts 2:25-34 (Ps. 16:8; Ps. 110:1): an example of *gezerah shawah*, whereby texts are quoted together because they resemble each other verbally ('at my right hand');
- John 7:23 (circumcision and Sabbath law): an example of *qal wahomer*, in which an argument is developed from issues of lesser significance to those of greater significance.<sup>5</sup>

However, he concludes that, "A vast gulf separates the often fantastic, purely verbal exegeses of the rabbis from the generally sober and clearly contextually oriented interpretations found in the New Testament."<sup>6</sup>

2. The apostles were inspired to see in the OT text a *sensus plenior*. *Sensus plenior* ('fuller sense') was discussed at length by Raymond Brown. He defined it as that additional, deeper meaning, intended by God but not clearly intended by the human author, which is seen to exist in the words of a biblical text ...

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<sup>3</sup> *Hearing the New Testament*, p. 223.

<sup>4</sup> Luke 24:25-27 indicates the time it took for Christ's followers to achieve this hermeneutical transition.

<sup>5</sup> *Hermeneutics, Authority and Canon*, p. 192.

<sup>6</sup> *Hermeneutics, Authority and Canon*, p. 193.

when they are studied in the light of further revelation or development in the understanding of revelation.<sup>7</sup>

He further characterised it as being in “very real connection to the literal sense, of which it is an evolution.”<sup>8</sup> Faced with examples such as Matthew 2:15, this is clearly a very attractive proposition. It enables us to accept that the NT authors were departing from a straightforward reading of the natural sense of the OT text, while accepting nevertheless that they did so legitimately, as God revealed His unique ‘fuller sense’ to them.<sup>9</sup>

It does, however, pose problems. In practice, the ‘excuse’ of *sensus plenior* is used to justify exegesis in circumstances where, according to Brown’s strict criteria, *sensus plenior* does not exist. Thus Stuart and Fee claim *sensus plenior* as the explanation for Matthew 2:15’s use of Hosea 11:1, admitting that Matthew apparently by-passed “the usual considerations of context, intent, style and wording” to “identify ...[the] passage as having a second meaning.”<sup>10</sup> This is despite Brown’s careful advice that *sensus plenior* should only be considered where it has a “very real connection to the literal sense.”<sup>11</sup> The weakness of Fee and Stuart’s argument at this point can be seen in their insistent caution that we *cannot follow the example* of the NT authors in interpreting the OT in this way. One is left with the suspicion that if we should not do it, then the apostles should not, and perhaps did not, do it.

More fundamentally, the idea of *sensus plenior* suggests a sense that is unknowable according the ‘rules’ of human communication. We can (perhaps inaccurately) identify the meaning intended by the human author, but if the intended meaning of the divine author is in fact different, by what criteria will we identify it? Moo, who is actually keen to defend *sensus plenior*, nevertheless listens carefully to this criticism, and expresses it well:

A notion of inspiration that “divides” the human and divine authors of Scripture may be theologically as suspect as a Christology that too rigidly separates the divine and human natures of Christ.<sup>12</sup>

Discussion question 2: You may not have come across the technical term, *sensus plenior*, but have you ever thought that NT authors were simply inspired to see things in the OT that you can’t? Are you comfortable with the idea that God could mean something in the inspired word different from what the human authors meant? If it different, how can we gain access to it?

3. The apostles handled the OT typologically. Moo offers Baker’s definition: “a *type* is a biblical event, person or institution which serves as an example or pattern for other events, persons or institutions.”<sup>13</sup> According to France,

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<sup>7</sup> *The ‘Sensus Plenior’ of Sacred Scripture*, p. 92. His italics removed.

<sup>8</sup> *‘Sensus Plenior’*, p. 93.

<sup>9</sup> Among evangelicals, the idea of being able to find *sensus plenior* is supported by Douglas Moo, William LaSor, James Packer, and Stuart and Fee.

<sup>10</sup> *How to Read the Bible for All its Worth*, p. 166.

<sup>11</sup> *‘Sensus Plenior’*, p. 93.

<sup>12</sup> *Hermeneutics, Authority and Canon*, p. 203. Moo regards the objection as “not decisive” (p. 203).

<sup>13</sup> Quoted by Moo, *Hermeneutics, Authority and Canon*, p. 195.

typology as a way of understanding Scripture assumes that God is consistent in His dealings with humanity, and that there is a recurring rhythm in history, climaxing in Christ. France highlights the fact that typology is *not* prediction. A type is simply a historical event, person or thing, recorded *with no reference to the future*. An antitype is not the fulfilment of a prediction. It is a further, or final, example of a principle previously exemplified in the type. Thus typology looks *backwards*. Furthermore, typology is not allegory, nor is it a method of exegesis, but rather of application. It is characterised by the following features: the type is real and intelligible in itself; there is real correspondence between the type and antitype.<sup>14</sup>

Because typology is not an allegorical interpretation of texts, but a certain understanding of history, in which events are understood in the light of later history or of heavenly reality ('horizontal' and 'vertical' typology), it is able to see spiritual significance in OT entities without abandoning the original meaning of OT texts. It may be that this is, in many cases (e.g. Jn. 3:14; 1 Cor. 10), an adequate explanation of how the apostles interpreted the OT.

Discussion question 2: Go back to Matthew 2:15 and Hosea 11:1. How does a typological understanding of history help us to make sense of how Matthew saw this OT text? Also consider John 3:14. What light does typology throw on the parallel that was seen here?

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<sup>14</sup> *Jesus and the Old Testament*, pp. 39-40.