

The Relationship between Authorial Intent and the Use of the OT in the NT

by Dan Fabricatore

*Note: Since this short paper was written, I have moved even closer to Kaiser's view than I held in the paper

Perhaps no hermeneutical issue creates more discussion among evangelicals than that of the use of the Old Testament by New Testament authors. For the past twenty years, journal articles, books, and theological societies have hotly debated this issue, the result being that no consensus of opinion has emerged. To be sure, many have articulately stated their own position, yet the void is as great as ever. Perhaps the saddest thing of all is how certain evangelicals, because of their position, have either been associated with having a low view of Scripture, while on the other hand, others have been accused as having taken an unnecessary and indefensible position on the issue.

The Problem described

The issue at hand is in reality, a simple one. How are New Testament writers using the Old Testament when they quote or allude to it in their writings? The answer to this question will ultimately center in what was the intention of the Old Testament writer when he wrote (authorial intent). In other words, can Old Testament passages have a meaning beyond what the Old Testament writer intended? This will lead to how New Testament writers are using the Old Testament. Are Old Testament passages being fulfilled directly, typologically, or in some other manner? We need to first give a brief summary of the various positions of the use of the Old Testament in the New Testament.

Various Solutions to the use of the Old Testament by New Testament writers

Darrell Bock has provided a brief summary of the various schools of thought on how New Testament writers are using the Old Testament (*BibSac*, Jul-Sep, 1985).

A. The Full Human Intent School

The major proponent of this view is Walter Kaiser. The key argument of this view is that all that is asserted by the Old Testament passage, including how later New Testament writers would use that passage, was always a part of the human author's intended meaning. The key of this issue is his appeal to the "generic promise." Such a promise in the Old Testament only had one meaning expressed in the text and that the human author is aware of all the stages of the fulfillment of this generic promise. All that is unknown is the time of fulfillment of the final stage. Therefore the way that New Testament writers use the Old Testament is in complete agreement to what the Old Testament writer proposed. The New Testament writer does not mean any more than the Old Testament author intended or knew, with the exception of temporal aspects. In this view typology is nonprophetic.

B. Divine Intent-Human Words School.

Major proponents of this second view are S. Lewis Johnson, James Packer, and Elliott Johnson. The key point of this view is that prophetic passages all use the human words of the Old Testament passage, but the human author did not always fully understand or intend how his words would be used by New Testament writers in fulfillment of prophecy. As a matter of fact, they didn't always know that they were even writing prophecy as they addressed their contemporary audience. Therefore the New Testament reference is a "fuller" meaning of the intended Old Testament passage. S. Lewis Johnson and Packer refer to this as *sensus plenior* while Elliott Johnson opts for *references plenior*. To cite an overused concept, the Old Testament authors wrote better than they knew. In this school typology in prophetic.

A major criticism of this view is that the distinction between what God knows and human authors do not in regard to fulfillment is often blurred. This school responds by saying that later, "more full" fulfillment is actually only an extension of the original meaning. It would reject any charge of allegorical interpretation.

C. Historical Progress of Revelation and Jewish Hermeneutic School

A third school is the "Historical Progress of Revelation and Jewish Hermeneutic School" whose major proponents are Earle Ellis, Richard Longnecker, and Walter Dunnnett. This view stresses historical factors in determining the hermeneutical relationship between both Testaments. As Bock notes, "this school attempts to present the New Testament use of the Old as a reflection of the progress of revelation in Jesus Christ...especially making use of methods of first-century Jewish interpretation and exegesis (concepts such as midrash, pesher, and Hillel's rules of interpretation)" (p. 216).

While this view has many positive aspects, including the emphasis on historical factors and the focus on Christ at the heart of exegesis, its insistence on New Testament writers using various Jewish exegetical procedures is hard to substantiate, though the school has a number of excellent scholars in its camp.

D. The Canonical Approach and New Testament Priority School

The final school is championed by Bruce Waltke. Though influenced by Child's work, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*, and somewhat similar to *sensus plenior*, it is neither. For Waltke, progressive relation has made more clear what the Old Testament writers intended. Therefore the whole of the Old Testament must be read in light of later New Testament truth.

The major problem with this view is its misuse of the progress of revelation. The Old Testament passage had a particular message to its original audience. It is invalid to use later revelation to determine what that Old Testament author intended for his audience since they would not have the benefit of this revelation for their own interpretive purposes.

An Attempt at a Solution through Evaluation and Example

This issue of authorial intent and divine meaning goes back to the early church, and this attempt at a solution will not correct the quagmire. However, it is my attempt at the age-old debate.

Though I have a great deal of respect for Kaiser's exegetical prowess, I am not sure that his view squares with the reality of what New Testament writers were doing with the Old Testament text. In reality, I find myself wanting to agree with his view completely, but I cannot. His emphasis on meaning being found in the text as expressed by the author is admirable. My problem is that I am not sure that the Old Testament author foresaw how his words would be used in the future. In other words, I am not convinced that the Old Testament author was aware of all the stages of the fulfillment of this generic promise. In his admirable attempt to preserve the church from slipping into a subjective understanding of the text, Kaiser seems to have tried to make the Old Testament writers intend more in their words than appears on the surface.

Erickson, in summing up certain criticisms of Kaiser's view states,

“Here, then, is an interesting phenomenon. If we had only the Old Testament passages, it is unlikely that we would find in them the meaning that the New Testament writers seem to impute to them...It seems unlikely that the Old Testament writers consciously intended the meaning that Matthew finds in their writings” (*Evangelical Interpretation*, p. 15).

I find myself in general agreement with this statement. I am not convinced that it is a big problem if the Holy Spirit, being the author of the Old Testament (at least as much an author as man) saw in what He wrote a bit more than what the Old Testament writer wrote. In other words, everything that the Old Testament writer wrote he intended. It is just that the New Testament writers, under the influence of the Spirit, saw in certain text a more full meaning or fulfillment. The Old Testament writers intended all that God desired that they communicate to their respective audience. (This paints me as holding to *sensus plenior*, but with the likes of S. Lewis Johnson, I am not in too bad a company). I believe that for the most part, New Testament writers are using Old Testament passages typologically.

I do not believe that New Testament writers misused Old Testament passages. On the contrary, they used them in the way that the Holy Spirit ultimately intended. I realize that we are back to Divine-Human author issue, and in a sense, it is unfortunate that we have tied the New Testament use of the Old Testament to what “exactly” the Old Testament author intended.

For example, I am not convinced that Old Testament Jews nor Isaiah himself saw in Isaiah 7:14 the promised birth of the God-man to a virgin centuries later. LaSor notes,

“Until Matthew quoted Isa 7:14, would any Jew who carefully read Isaiah 7 have thought of the Messiah at all, much less have understood it to teach his virgin birth?”
(“*The Sensus Plenior...*”, p. 271).

Another example is Psalm 22:1: “My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?” I’m not convinced that David nor any Jew at that time understood this to be a prophecy of the Son of God who would die on a cross, crying out to His Father and questioning Him about being abandoned. I don’t believe that this was David’s known intent. I believe that New Testament writers, with the help of the Holy Spirit, saw in David a perfect example of the suffering of God’s anointed.

I believe that the necessity that all that the Old Testament passage would come to mean by later revelation was fully intended by the Old Testament author is unreasonable, unnecessary, and unsustainable. By the way, why would the Old Testament author need to be in the know any more than his readers were?

Another often used example is Hosea 11:1 as quoted by Matthew 2:15. Not only am I convinced that Hosea’s known intent isn’t to refer to the coming Messiah and his departure out of Egypt as a baby, I don’t think his perspective is future in any manner. He is speaking of the past! “When Israel was a youth I loved him, And out of Egypt I called My son.” I believe that Matthew is looking at Hosea and saying, “This is like that.”

What is so difficult is that Kaiser (like me) sees a variety of uses for how the New Testament writers are using the Old Testament (i.e. apologetically, prophetically, typologically, theologically, and practically). My beef is that I’m simply not convinced that all these uses that the New Testament writers employ were intended or known to the Old Testament author. I actually like Kaiser’s idea (not original with him) of a “generic promise,” one that is ultimately fulfilled in stages or an ultimate later stage. I’m just not convinced that the Old Testament writer was aware of all the details regarding when or in what manner it would be fulfilled.

The major stumbling block for me with Kaiser’s view is his insistence that all that New Testament writers saw in Old Testament passages was intended (known) by the Old Testament authors. I do not but into the argument that if one allows the New Testament writers to apply the Old Testament passage in a way that was not fully known to the Old Testament writer that it allows Pandora’s box to be opened allowing anyone to see what they want in a passage. We are talking about the way the Holy Spirit applied His own words, not us. When we interpret the Scriptures, we are not giving divine commentary on the text, as was the Holy Spirit.

Conclusion

I do hold to authorial intent. All that the Old Testament writer intended for his audience, he expressed in the text. I simply hold that the New Testament writers, under the influence of the Holy Spirit applied those passages to their own circumstances in a way

that might not have been fully known to the Old Testament writer when he penned his words.

With no real consensus of opinion regarding how New Testament writers are using the Old Testament, it is difficult to be dogmatic about one's position, nor is it really fair to be very critical of a differing position on the issue. Perhaps this is why it seems that many scholars opt for an eclectic position (cf. Bock, p. 220).