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Three Views on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament
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Chapter One

SINGLE MEANING, UNIFIED REFERENTS

*Accurate and Authoritative Citations of the
Old Testament by the New Testament*

Chapter One

SINGLE MEANING, UNIFIED REFERENTS

Accurate and Authoritative Citations of the Old Testament by the New Testament

Walter C. Kaiser, Jr.

One of the key debates of the past four decades has been the problem of identifying the meaning of Scripture for our day and times. Should that meaning be limited to what the human writer of Scripture obtained as a result of standing in the revelatory counsel of God, or were there additional, or even alternative, meanings to be found that God somehow quietly incorporated into the text in some mysterious way, thus hiding them from the author, or perhaps even new meanings that the audience brought to the text on their own?¹ This whole debate has been no small tempest in a teapot, for it is also tied in with several contemporary philosophical and literary movements of our own day and age, affecting the entire theological community, including, of course, many of the evangelical scholars.²

1. One of my earlier articles on this topic was, "The Single Intent of Scripture," in *Evangelical Roots: A Tribute to Wilbur Smith*, ed. Kenneth S. Kantzer (Nashville: Nelson, 1978), 123–41.

2. C. K. Barrett, "The Old Testament in the Fourth Gospel," *JTS* 48 (1947): 155–69; D. L. Bock "Evangelicals and the Use of the Old Testament in the New," *BSac* 142 (1985): 306–19; E. Earle Ellis, *Paul's Use of the Old Testament* (1957), reprint ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981); E. D. Freed, *Old Testament Quotations in the Gospel of John* (NovTSup 2; Leiden: Brill, 1965); R. H. Gundry, *The Use of the Old Testament in*

Early in my career of teaching the Bible I ran across this assessment of the problem by Bishop J. C. Ryle (1818–1900):

I hold it to be a most dangerous mode of interpreting Scripture, to regard everything which its words may be tortured into meaning as a lawful interpretation of the words. I hold undoubtedly that there is a mighty depth in all Scripture, and that in this respect it stands alone. But I also hold that the words of Scripture were intended to have one definite sense, and that our first object should be to discover that sense, and adhere rigidly to it. I believe that, as a general rule, the words of Scripture are intended to have, like all other language, one plain definite meaning, and that to say words *do* mean a thing, merely because they *can* be tortured into meaning it, is a most dishonourable and dangerous way of handling Scripture.³

I could not agree more heartily; for this has become the standard by which I not only interpret the text as a biblical teacher, but it is the same view I urgently press other evangelicals to adopt.

More frequently, however, there has emerged a strong consensus running in evangelical work in this area that tends to regard the majority of the OT quotations in the NT as “hav[ing] no semblance of predictive intention.”⁴ Donald A. Hagner continued:

St. Matthew's Gospel (NovTSup 18; Leiden: Brill, 1967); Donald A. Hagner, “The Old Testament in the New Testament,” in *Interpreting the Word of God: Festschrift in Honor of Steven Barabas*, ed. Samuel J. Schultz and Morris A. Inch (Chicago: Moody Press, 1976): 78–104; Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *The Uses of the Old Testament in the New* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1985); Richard N. Longenecker, “Can We Reproduce the Exegesis of the New Testament?” *TynBul* 21 (1970): 3–38; I. Howard Marshall, “An Assessment of Recent Developments,” in *It Is Written: Scripture Citing Scripture; Essays in Honor of Barnabas Lindars*, ed. D. A. Carson and H. G. M. Williamson (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1988): 9ff.; Douglas J. Moo, *The Old Testament in the Gospel Passion Narratives* (Sheffield, Almond Press, 1983); Stanley E. Porter, ed., *Hearing the Old Testament in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006); Moisés Silva “Old Testament in Paul,” in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, ed. G. F. Hawthorne, R. P. Martin, and D. G. Reid (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 630–42; Bruce K. Waltke, “Is It Right to Read the New Testament into the Old?” *Christianity Today* 27 (1983): 77.

3. Bishop J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1953), 2:383.

4. Hagner, “The Old Testament,” 92. There are, of course, a good number of prophecies that have an undeniably predictive intention, such as Isa 9:1–2; Joel 2:28–32; Mic 5:2; Zech 9:9.

All of this leads us to the recognition of what has been called the *sensus plenior*, or “fuller sense,” of the Old Testament Scripture. To be aware of *sensus plenior* is to realize that there is the possibility of more significance to an Old Testament passage than was consciously apparent to the original author, and more than can be gained by strict grammatico-historical exegesis. Such is the nature of divine inspiration that the authors of Scripture were themselves often not conscious of the fullest significance and final application of what they wrote. This fuller sense of the Old Testament can be seen only in retrospect and in the light of the New Testament fulfillment.⁵

It is this wide acceptance of various versions of *sensus plenior* among contemporary evangelicals that renders this discussion so crucial for our day.

But there are several other important issues that relate in some way to this central question—issues such as (1) the extent to which the NT authors also used ancient Jewish exegetical and interpretive methods in their use of the OT; (2) the NT authors’ awareness or disregard of the larger OT context of the passages they quote; (3) the appropriate understanding of the function of typology; and (4) the question of whether contemporary interpreters may replicate the NT writers’ techniques of appropriating and applying the OT Scriptures. After an initial discussion of *sensus plenior*, therefore, I will move to discuss each of these related areas in turn. I will conclude with my perspective on the legitimacy of contemporary Christians employing the same interpretive approach to the OT as was employed by first-century Christians.

CAN WE APPEAL TO *SENSUS PLENIOR*?

Father Raymond E. Brown published his dissertation in 1955,⁶ in which he gave a fixed definition as to what a *sensus plenior* meaning was. Brown defined it this way:

5. Hagner, “The Old Testament,” 92.

6. Father Brown, of course, was not the first one to speak of *sensus plenior*. That distinction belongs to F. Andre Fernandez, who coined the term in his article “Hermeneutica,” *Institutiones Biblicae Scholis Accommodata*, 2nd ed. (Rome: Biblical Institute, 1927), 306.

The *sensus plenior* is 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 (or group of texts, or even a whole book) when they are studied in the light of further revelation or development in the understanding of revelation⁷

Later he clarified matters further by candidly instructing interpreters:

Let us apply the term *sensus plenior* ["fuller sense"] to that meaning of his [the author's] text which by the normal rules of exegesis would not have been within his clear awareness of intention, but which by other criteria we can determine as having been intended by God.⁸

Since Brown takes it out of the hands of the human authors who stood in the counsel of God, the question is: In whose hands now does the final court of appeal rest for discovering the authoritative meaning of a biblical text? Roman Catholic scholars, of course, can fall back on the magisterium of the church, to the ecclesial tradition. But to what can Protestants appeal that matches such additional grounds of appeal?

Norbert Lohfink,⁹ a Jesuit scholar, tried to find a way to get at this additional divine meaning that was free of the writer's understanding, which ordinarily was to be found in the grammar and syntax of the author's words. At first he went to the "final redactor" of Scripture, the one who had allegedly placed the books of the Bible in their present canonical shape, but then he shifted his ground to appeal to that which the whole Bible taught. Thus, above, behind, and beyond that which grammatico-historical exegesis established as the author's original meaning of the text, there was another meaning: the one that the whole Bible taught.

7. Raymond E. Brown, *The Sensus Plenior of Sacred Scripture* (Baltimore, MD: St. Mary's Univ. Press, 1955), 92. Also see idem, "The History and Development of the Theory of *Sensus Plenior*," *CBQ* 15 (1953): 141–62.

8. Raymond E. Brown, "The *Sensus Plenior* in the Last Ten Years," *CBQ* 25 (1963): 268–69.

9. Norbert Lohfink, *The Christian Meaning of the Old Testament*, trans. R. A. Wilson (Milwaukee: Bruce, 1968), 32–49.

But what was there in the whole Bible that could not be found in its individual books or in the exegesis of individual passages using the standard tools such as grammar, syntax, and the like? Trapped by his own logic, Lohfink turned, as so many evangelicals now tend to do, to the theory of *sensus plenior* in an attempt to get *beyond* the writer of Scripture. Whereas the older form of literary criticism had tried to sort out the sources that allegedly were used by the writers of Scripture in an attempt to get *behind* the biblical text, now the goal was to go *beyond* the text as it was written. God, who is viewed in this analysis as the principal author, is depicted as supplying to later interpreters of the text additional and subsequent meanings, thereby relegating the human authors of Scripture to, at best, a secondary level, if not a nuisance for getting at the really deep things of God.

But in a rather brilliant review of this theory, coming from the same Catholic side of the aisle, Bruce Vawter recognized *sensus plenior* as abandoning the old scholastic *analogy of instrumental causality*. He explained:

... if this fuller or deeper meaning was reserved by God to himself and did not enter into the writer's purview at all, do we not postulate a Biblical word effected outside the control of the human author's will and judgment ... and therefore not produced through a truly *human* instrumentality? If, as in scholastic definitions, Scripture is the *conscriptio* [writing together] of God and man, does not the acceptance of a *sensus plenior* deprive this alleged scriptural sense of one of its essential elements, to the extent that logically it cannot be called scriptural at all?¹⁰

The effect of Vawter's argument was to declare that the *sensus plenior* meaning (despite its high claims for being a deeper meaning from God himself to the interpreter) simply was not "Scripture" in the sense that it came from what was "written." That is to say, if the deeper meaning was one that was not located in the words, sentences, and paragraphs of the text, then it was not "Scripture," which in the Greek is called *graphie*, "writing" (i.e., that which stands written in the text)! Moreover, if this

10. Bruce Vawter, *Biblical Inspiration* (Theological Resources; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1972), 115.

“fuller sense” opened up new vistas for the interpreter, how did it also escape the sacred writers of Scripture? Could not the same process that, according to this theory, aided the interpreter likewise have aided those who were writing the words declared to be from God? As Vern S. Poythress also noted (even though he admitted his view had “certain affinities” with the idea of *sensus plenior*), this theory left “an opening for the entrance of later Church tradition,”¹¹ and the addition of new dogmas, rather than just the development of the biblical canon. That, of course, is precisely the point noted here thus far.

On the evangelical side of the aisle, it is interesting to see how a slipperiness in interpretation developed — one that slides from a search for “more *significance*” to eventually seeing this “*significance*” as one of the *meanings*, albeit a deeper one, of the text. Graeme Goldsworthy, for example, was most candid in summing up his view on this matter. He opined:

The *sensus plenior* of an OT text, or indeed of the whole OT, cannot be found by exegesis of the texts themselves. Exegesis aims at understanding what was intended by the author, the *sensus literalis*. But there is a deeper meaning in the mind of the divine author which emerges in further revelation, usually the NT. This approach embraces typology but also addresses the question of how a text may have more than one meaning. While typology focuses upon historical events which foreshadow later events, *sensus plenior* focuses on the use of words.¹²

Such statements are confusing. If this deeper meaning cannot be found in an exegesis of the OT text, then how can it be found in the “words” vis-à-vis typology, which focuses on “events”? If the meaning of the words must await their further elaboration in the NT, then we have to answer two questions:

11. Vern S. Poythress, “Divine Meaning of Scripture,” originally in *WTJ* 48 (1986): 241–79, but reprinted in *The Right Doctrine from the Wrong Texts? Essays on the Use of the Old Testament in the New*, ed. Greg K. Beale (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 108, n. 25.

12. Graeme Goldsworthy, “The Relationship of the Old Testament and New Testament,” in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander et al. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 88.