

## The New Testament Use of the Old Testament<sup>1</sup>

This theological compendium overviews New Testament use of the Old Testament including literal interpretation, intertextuality (not post-structuralist's intertextualism), Christocentric exegesis, canonical interpretation, *sensus unum*, *sensus plenior*, *reference plenior*, meaning of fulfillment.

Evangelicals with a high view Scripture who believe in factual inerrancy disagree on how the NT authors use the OT. Some argue the NT author uses the OT only to portray the OT authors historical meaning of a passage while others suggest the NT author changes or broadens the meaning of the Old Testament. This theological compendium overviews how evangelicals view NT to OT relationships and how they formulate their interpretive systems. The compendium does not include early church or early Jewish hermeneutical views. The following is a modification of Bock's categories of *Full Human Intent view*, *Divine Intent-Human Words Intent view*, *Historical Progress of Revelation or Christocentric Exegesis* and *Canonical Approach*.<sup>2</sup>

Any theological system encounters difficulties with the NT use of the OT and all systems acknowledge it is not possible to exhaustively classify all NT uses of the OT in a simple, single usage. Bateman correctly summarizes that everyone has a "presuppositional preference on one testament over the other"<sup>3</sup> and those presuppositions then determine one's hermeneutical starting point. Does one start with the NT to understand the meaning of an OT text through the lens of the NT (hence NT priority) or does one start with the OT textual, historical meaning and then try to understand how the NT author uses that OT historical meaning without changing the meaning of the OT text.

### I. Literal interpretation

Literal interpretation is an attempt to *discern the intention of the human author by examining what the human author affirms in the historical context of his writing*. The interpreter examines what the biblical author communicates within his own historical, grammatical, and cultural context. The *literal meaning* of a text is then limited by its immediate historical-textual context. "It means what it meant" so the meaning does not change; however, the significance or application of the meaning can change. The issue of debate entails if the NT biblical authors

---

<sup>1</sup> All material copyright to David Mappes, PhD (2023, all rights reserved); we do provide services to edit, refine, customize articles and material, etc. for ministry outlets, newsletters, training courses and other venues. Some material is adopted from "A Biblical and Theological Discussion of Traditional Dispensational Premillennialism," *The Journal of Ministry and Theology* (Spring 2013), 5-56 by Mappes and Dr. H. Wayne House. For further study from Mappes, see other articles on "davidmappes.com" such as "Literal Interpretation and Theological Method: What Is It and How to Do It?" *Ariel Ministries*, December 2017, 18-23 by Mappes and "A Biblical and Theological Discussion of Traditional Dispensational Premillennialism," *The Journal of Ministry and Theology* (Spring 2013), 5-56 by Mappes and Dr. H. Wayne House. Please email [david@davidmappes.com](mailto:david@davidmappes.com)

<sup>2</sup> Darrell Bock, "Part 1 Evangelicals and the Use of the Old Testament in the New," *BSac* 142:567 (July 1985): 209-220.

<sup>3</sup> Herbert W. Bateman VI, "Dispensationalism Yesterday and Today," in *Three Central Issues in Contemporary Dispensationalism* ed. Herbert W. Bateman IV (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1999), 38.

changed the meaning of an OT text and if so does that “change” create a kind of hermeneutic the reader today should follow.

## II. Hermeneutical Views of OT and NT Relationship.

- A. The *Full Human Intent*. Advocates of this view assert the OT authors possessed a full, comprehensive understanding of the meaning of their writing with the possible exception of time elements involved of when a prophecy is brought to full fulfillment. This model then posits a single historical, authorial meaning for any given text **hence God and the human author were coauthors who “affirm one and the same thing in one and the same text”** [emphasis mine]. (Norman L. Geisler and William D. Roach, *Defending Inerrancy: Affirming the Accuracy of Scripture for a New Generation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2011), 145. This one single-meaning (*sensus unum*) for any given text does not mean the human authors comprehend all the implications of the meaning nor does it imply that the author understood how God might later apply the meaning of a text. However, the model asserts that while the authorial meaning may be applied in different ways, the OT meaning itself is not altered. While the NT authors use OT verbal meaning in a variety of ways, they do not violate the human authorial sense of the historical meaning. In this model the OT author was fully conscious of the divine intent of his writing hence any fuller, hidden meaning to a promise from subsequent revelation is denied. **In summary, this model does not allow a fuller meaning or double meaning (*sensus plenior*) but does allow for various kinds of applications of that verbal meaning.** The interpreter can use prior revelation to help interpret a passage but should not read later revelation into a passage. Kaiser states, "The theological interpretation or exegesis of a given piece of text must be understood only in light of the antecedent revelations of God to that biblical author and those writers of scripture who historically preceded him . . . and who shared the same technical terms or analogous concepts in the progress of revelation . . . [and analogy of faith principle must not be used] until the present text's author has had a chance to indicate his own distinctive verbal meaning and theological contribution in light of the Bible available to him up to the time of writing" (Walter C. Kaiser Jr., "The Fallacy of Equating Meaning with the Reader's Understanding," *TJ* 6 (1977): 192). This model also distinguishes partial fulfillment of a prophecy (or some elements of a prophecy being satisfied) while noting other elements of the prophecy are yet to be fulfilled.
- B. The *Divine Intent-Human Words Intent*. This model allows for the God's intent to say more than what the OT human author, consciously intended or comprehended to say. **Thus, a distinction is allowed between what the OT biblical human author fully comprehended his text to historically mean and what the divine Author intended.** Importantly the divine intent always includes the human authorial intent and is controlled by the human authorial intent though subsequent revelation can clarify and reveal the fuller sense of the divine author. **This model allows for the NT author to demonstrate the richer and fuller divine intended meaning but does not change the human author's verbal meaning.** Importantly, any fuller NT explanation is only an extension and development of the OT authorial verbal meaning and thus always governed by the initial pattern of the OT authorial meaning; therefore, any *sensus plenior* or *reference plenior* remains a textually controlled extension of the grammatical-historical method of

interpretation of the OT meaning rather than a non-textually controlled allegorical method of interpretation. This model also distinguishes partial fulfillment of a prophecy (or some elements of a prophecy being satisfied) while noting other elements of the prophecy are yet to be fulfilled.

- C. *The Historical Progress of Revelation or Christocentric Exegesis*. In general, this approach **allows for the NT author to alter and change the historic verbal meaning of the OT text through what is alleged as NT exegetical and hermeneutical techniques. In this model the interpreter allows a New Testament author priority in interpreting or re-interpreting the meaning of the Old Testament text for Christian theology. In many respects the model allows a New Testament author to Christocentrize the Old Testament.** The basis for this model revolves round the A/author distinction of the text as both human and divine. Reformed author Poythress argues that any statement interpreted must be based on the context of the speaker/author but in Scripture there are two authors, human and divine and their contexts are never *exactly* the same (Vern S. Poythress, “Divine Meaning of Scripture,” *WTJ* 48, no. 2 (Fall 1986): 249–255). He posits the grammatical-historical-literal model is inadequate since he alleges that “the NT authors characteristically do *not* aim merely at grammatical-historical exegesis of the OT” (Poythress, “Divine Meaning of Scripture,” 276). He advocates for a progressive reading and meaning of a passage. The passage is first understood “in the context of the particular book of the bible in which it appears and in the context of the human author and historical circumstances of the book” and then understood “in the context of the total canon of Scripture available up to that point in time” and then understood “in the context of the entire Bible (the complete canon).” (Vern S. Poythress, “Divine Meaning of Scripture,” 241–279, esp. 267). This model does not always distinguish a partial fulfillment of a prophecy (or some elements of a prophecy satisfied) with all elements of a prophecy needing to be fulfilled. This model at times neglects unfulfilled aspects of a prophecy and asserts if one aspect of a prophecy is fulfilled then the entire prophecy is fulfilled. Some advocates of this model assert a typological phenomena that provides continuity between the testaments- in summary that the OT (and Old Covenant) in general is a type of Christ and New Covenant truth, so they view the OT as fulfilled through the New Covenant without strict fulfillment of the OT historical meaning.
- D. *Canonical Approach*. In general, advocates posit the entire Old Testament (not just select portions of OT) must be read considering the whole canon hence the New Testament takes full priority to unpack, interpret and even exclude the original authorial meaning of a passage. **Waltke argues that the meaning of a text in the canon is changed by later canonical revelation** as he writes, “older texts in the canon underwent a correlative progressive perception of meaning as they became part of a growing canonical literature.” Bruce K. Waltke, “Kingdom Promises as Spiritual,” in *Continuity and Discontinuity: Perspectives on the Relationship Between the Old and New Testaments: Essays in Honor of S. Lewis Johnson, Jr.*, ed. John S. Feinberg (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1988), 284. In summary, this view proposes the whole of the OT is Christological and must be read thoroughly in light of the whole of the NT which can redefine the meaning of the Old Testament. This model does not always distinguish a

partial fulfillment of a prophecy (or some elements of a prophecy satisfied) with all elements of a prophecy needing to be fulfilled.

### III. The Meaning of Fulfill.

Critical issues entail what the biblical authors mean when they assert that one event or person “fulfills” a section of OT Scripture. Some interpreters believe that issues of intertextuality and NT use of the OT are too complex and too varied to justify a hermeneutic that allows a re-interpretation or resignification of an OT text based solely upon the NT fulfillment nomenclature.

The use of the fulfillment formula in the NT is too broad to suggest that its mere appearance indicates a historical completion of a prophetic promise. The context and use of each passage must be compared to the antecedent historical promise to validate a fulfilled prophecy.<sup>4</sup> Zuck who allows for a controlled *sensus plenior* describes ten different ways in which a NT author may use an OT text without the altering historical meaning or claiming exhaustive, complete fulfillment: (1) to point up the current accomplishment or realization of a prediction; (2) to confirm that a NT incident is in agreement with an OT principle; (3) to explain a point given in the OT; (4) to support a point being made in the NT; (5) to illustrate a NT truth; (6) to apply the OT to a NT truth; (7) to summarize an OT concept; (8) to use OT terminology; (9) to draw a parallel with an OT incident; (10) to relate an OT situation to Christ.<sup>5</sup>

Since the NT fulfillment formula rarely indicates a full historical completion of a prophetic promise, the interpreters should first determine the OT literal meaning. Once the human authorial meaning (i.e., authorial intent) is determined then that meaning becomes fixed in time and does not change. The reader then examines how a later author uses that historically conditioned meaning in subsequent writings. Since the OT provides the foundational building block for NT theology, the OT literal interpretation must be preserved when considering later progressive revelation.<sup>6</sup> The authorial intent should be preserved when comparing one passage to another.

---

<sup>4</sup> See Charles H. Dyer, “Biblical Meaning of Fulfillment,” in *Issues in Dispensationalism*, ed. Welsey R. Willis and John R. Masters (Chicago: Moody P, 1994), 51-72.

<sup>5</sup> Roy Zuck, *Basic Bible Interpretation* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1991), 260-267.

<sup>6</sup> A correct Theological Method is necessary since the Scripture is progressively revealed and no one topic is fully addressed by any one author in any one-time era. Theological Method is the interpretative process starting with exegesis to determine the meaning and application of a text that entails various interrelated disciplines in the following order of priority: exegesis of a passage, biblical theology of the author or book, systematic theology, historical theology, practical/ pastoral theology, and apologetics. The interpreter should exercise great care to not misinterpret one passage while trying to integrate a truth from other passages. The Theological Method should be evaluated to ensure the Biblical authors meaning is not skewed in developing systematic theology, pastoral, theology, or apologetics. A Theological Method should be minimally measured by the following components:

1) *Canonical*: First priority and authority is given to the canonical books of Scripture over personal experience, personal and cultural sensibilities, other writing, general revelation, speculation, etc. though this does not preclude addressing one’s presuppositions.

2) *Comprehensive*: All biblical teaching on a topic must be examined with greater weight given to the clearest and most definitive passages rather than selecting vague passages used in a mere proof-texting manner.

Authorial intent simply means the authors meaning is determined by what an author affirms in his written statements as understood in their historical, cultural and literary contexts. It further asserts that a text cannot mean what its author did not understand and that the meaning of a text is in no way conditioned by the reader of that text.

---

3) *Consistent hermeneutical approach*: The interpretive philosophy must be consistently used within the theological method rather than changing the hermeneutical philosophy from topic-to-topic, passage-to-passage, covenant-to-covenant, etc. A Consistent hermeneutical approach does employ proper genre recognition.

4) *Congruency*: The method must allow for both harmony, complexity, and tension without creating illogical direct contradictions, and/or forced harmonization to remove complexities so as to alter the author's meaning of Scripture.

5) *Coherence*: The theological model must demonstrate a logical ordering of investigation providing greatest weight to didactic teaching noting the "prescriptive vs. descriptive" or the "is vs. ought," and the model must reveal clear steps of investigation.

6) *Call of Response/Application*: The model calls for an appropriate response(s) relate to the verbal meaning of the Scriptural truth/passage that is being considered and call of response reflects the specificity of the truth/passage. The call for response or significance of Scripture is always controlled by the authorial meaning of passage; hence the degree to which a pronouncement, pattern, or principle transfers into the contemporary setting is carefully evaluated. The *degree of transfer* is the degree to which the target audience is similar to or different from the originally intended recipients (see David Mappes, "Love Wins by Rob Bell: A Biblical and Theological Critique," *The Journal of Ministry and Theology* (Spring 2012): 91-93).