

Can that be Right? The Use of Old Testament Prophecy in the New Testament

Kevin DeYoung | December 8, 2015



It's Christmas season and that means renewed attention on Messianic prophecy. Ah, the familiar sounds of "a virgin shall give birth," "the government shall be upon his shoulders," and good ole "Bethlehem Ephrathah." It makes a churchgoer feel all warm and cuddly inside.

And frankly, a bit confused.

If we're honest, the way the New Testament uses the Old Testament seems a little far-fetched. I mean, we can see, just like the scribes did, that [Micah 5:2](#) is a foretelling of the Messiah's birth in Bethlehem ([Matt. 2:1-6](#)), but was Hosea really making a prediction about the Christ just because he happened to mention "Egypt" ([Hos. 11:1](#)) and Jesus' family fled to Egypt ([Matt. 2:15](#))? If we interpreted Scripture like Matthew does, we'd be chased out of our pulpits and small groups, right?

The New Testament's use of the Old Testament is a complicated subject. Even evangelical scholars don't agree on all the particulars of the best approach (see for example [this book](#) and [D.A. Carson's review](#)). Still, there are several principles, clarifications, and

reminders that can help us make sense of the Apostles' seemingly willy-nilly use of the Old Testament.

(For the most part, the following points were gleaned from Doug Moo's chapter "The Problem of *Sensus Plenior*" in [Hermeneutics, Authority, and Canon](#) [edited by D.A. Carson and John Woodbridge]. Jared Compton makes many of the same points in his fine *Themelios* piece "[Shared Intentions? Reflections on Inspiration and Interpretation in Light of Scripture's Dual Authorship.](#)")

1. Keep in mind the NT's purpose in referencing the OT. We often think every time the OT is referenced it must mean the NT author is trying to exegete the OT passage. But there is no rule of inerrancy which says the NT author must always be attempting to give the correct interpretation of a given passage. The NT author may not be attempting an interpretation at all. If someone asks me, "How is the editing work going" and I say, "It's tedious—line upon line, precept upon precept" this doesn't mean I'm trying to exegete [Isaiah 28:10](#). I'm simply employing the familiar language of a familiar passage.

2. Along these lines, remember the NT often uses the OT simply as a vehicle of expression. The NT writers were hugely familiar with the OT. It's no wonder they employed its vocabulary. In the same way, Westerners might use a line from Shakespeare or the Bible because it is familiar, but without intending to explain its context or original meaning.

3. The NT may press home the *significance* of a passage without trying to explain its original meaning. For example, Moo points to Paul's use of [Deuteronomy 25:4](#) ("You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain") in [1 Corinthians 9:9](#). Critics argue that Paul is taking the Law of Moses out of context by saying this passage is about paying ministers. But surely Paul is justified in pulling a fair inference out of the passage and applying it to his own context.

4. We must allow for a broader view of "fulfillment" language. A lot of trouble could be avoided if we understood that the use of *plēroō* (fulfilled) does not have to mean "and so this verse predicted that Jesus would do or say this thing that just happened." As Moo says, "The word is used in the New Testament to indicate the broad redemptive-historical relationship of the new, climactic revelation of God in Christ to the preparatory, incomplete revelation to and through Israel" (191). In other words, "fulfilled" does not mean the OT text in question is a direct prophecy. Consequently, Jesus flight to Egypt can fulfill [Hosea 11:1](#), not because Hosea ever intended to predict a Messianic trip down south, but because Jesus is God's greater Son who is the embodiment of a new Israel. Jesus is on an Exodus journey of his own. Hosea did not predict the Holy Family's flight to Egypt, nor does Matthew suggest the prophet meant to do so. But Matthew does see that the story of

Israel's exodus, alluded to in Hosea, is brought to its full redemptive-historical revelation in Christ.

5. Similarly, some OT passages are fulfilled typologically. This is different than allegory. And allegory looks for meaning behind the text where typology finds a developed meaning that is rooted in the text (see Moo 195). Jesus' passion can be seen as a fulfillment of David's heart cry in [Psalm 22](#) not because David thought he was predicting the death of the Messiah, but because David, as the king and as the promised progenitor of the Messiah, was a type of Christ whose cries anticipated the final dereliction of David's greater son.

6. OT prophecy is full of examples where there is a near and far fulfillment. [Isaiah 40](#), for example, was a word of comfort about the return from Babylon, but later we see it also was a word about John the Baptist who would prepare the way for the Messiah ([Mark 1:2-3](#)). Much of the prophetic witness implicitly anticipates a future, fuller, often eschatological fulfillment. Isaiah may not have known that his words about the virgin were Messianic, but this does not mean he'd be surprised to know they were. Israel was always waiting for the everlasting kingdom and the final Deliverer. I think the prophets understood that what they foretold (and forth-told) was for their day, but it could be for the future as well.

Two Other Questions

Of course, the foregoing principles raise two thorny questions:

1) Did the OT authors say more than they knew? That is, is there a meaning in some OT texts that we know by the NT but would have been unknown to the authors? Excellent scholars like Walter Kaiser have argued strenuously that there can be no double meanings or fuller meanings in the OT text. While Kaiser is certainly right to insist that many problem passages can be "solved" by paying careful attention to the original context and the theological background, I agree with Moo and others who argue, "There are places where the New Testament attributes to Old Testament text more meaning than it can be legitimately inferred the human author was aware of" (201).

Does this mean we are doomed to "hermeneutical nihilism?" I don't think so. First, every interpretation of Scripture must be constrained by Scripture. Many scholars now argue for "a canonical approach" to understanding the NT use of the OT. The Bible is a literary whole. In some sense, the OT is an incomplete, unfinished book. But once the whole is complete, we are able to make better sense of earlier parts and see things that the authors at an "unfinished" time may have missed. Second, we must remember that none of this undermines authorial intent. The NT authors did not find meanings in the OT the original authors never intended. Perhaps the human authors were unaware of the fullness of their words, but do not forget there is also a Divine author. Under the inspiration of the Spirit, the

NT writers were able to understand the authorial intent that may not have been fully known to the OT human authors. The NT does not find a meaning that isn't there, only (and on occasion) a meaning that was not obvious to one half of the writing team.

2) The second question raised by this discussion is whether we can imitate the hermeneutic employed at times by the NT writers. With Moo, I would give a firm "that depends." On the one hand, we do not have the Spirit's inspiration to know the mind of God in the same way. So we should be extremely cautious about finding "fuller" meanings in the text. On the other hand, we should read the Bible with same theologically informed, salvation-historical, whole canon approach that we see employed in the NT use of the OT (Moo 206, 210).

Lessons Learned

One of the practical lessons from all this is that we should avoid a simplistic approach to OT-NT fulfillment. Sometimes with good apologetic and evangelistic motives we will point to all the OT prophecies about Christ and then run down a list of all the NT fulfillments. There is truth here, but if we set things up as "here's the prediction; here's the prediction come true" we are bound to confuse people. We may even cause people to doubt the prophetic witness rather than trust it. All the prophecies cited in the NT are true and truly fulfilled, but it's all a bit more complicated (and actually more glorious) than we sometimes let on.

The other lesson is that we need not be embarrassed to use a strong theological lens on top of our appropriate grammatical-historical lens. This is not an invitation to allegory or a reason to search for hidden spiritual meanings like Super Mario finds his mushrooms. But it does mean we should, like the NT writers did, read the Bible across the whole Bible. We should see Jesus in all of Scripture. We should read the end in the light of the beginning and the beginning in view of the end. Above all, we can celebrate that Jesus is the perfect fulfillment of all that was imperfectly prefigured in the OT. This alone will make a fuller, deeper, richer Christmas story.

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