



Three Views on the NT Use of the OT - a review

Craig Blomberg

Three Views on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament

Kenneth Berding and Jonathan Lunde, eds.
Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007
256 pp.
ISBN 978-0-310-27333-2
Buy from Amazon.co.uk
Buy from Amazon.com

The Zondervan Counterpoints series continues to produce extremely valuable volumes of the two-, three-, four-, and five-views variety on important but controversial topics of theology and church life. Here the three main contributors well defend clearly differing but influential options, all of them building on previous and more extensive treatments of their varying approaches. Walter Kaiser tirelessly campaigns for Old Testament texts for which New Testament authors claim fulfillment actually to mean, at least in seed form, especially if one pays close attention to Hebrew word forms and reads entire contexts, what the later Scripture writers attribute to them. His view is well summarized by the tag, "*Single Meaning, Unified Referents*".

At the opposite end of the spectrum comes Peter Enns, who insists that the *only* link between corresponding texts in the two testaments is often "Christotelic". In other words, once Jesus' followers came to the conviction that he was the Messiah, they "found" him in all sorts of contexts in the Hebrew Scriptures whose authors never consciously intended to point forward to the

Messianic era at all. His view is labeled, "*Fuller Meaning, Single Goal*". But the goal is not one that unites the intentions of both Old and New Testament authors; it is the single goal of the latter to read the Old Testament retrospectively through the lenses of Christ and the arrival of the end times or Messianic age.

Darrell Bock mediates between these two options with his "*Single Meaning, Multiple Contexts and Referents*" position. An Old Testament text may often not have intended to say anything specifically about the Messiah or his times but the language used is susceptible to multiple persons or events in different periods of time fitting the bill as that which accomplishes the single meaning of the text. The editors bracket the main chapters of the volume by introducing and then summarizing the conclusions to five questions that each contributor addresses at some point in his essay:

§ is *sensus plenior* legitimate?

§ how is typology to be understood?

§ do New Testament writers take into account the contexts of the Old Testament texts they cite?

§ do they use extra-biblical Jewish methods of exegesis?

§ are we to replicate their methods today?

It could have been more helpful had each contributor been asked to address the same cluster of biblical passages in order to most clearly see the similarities and differences between their perspectives. As it is, they sometimes do refer to the same texts but by no means the majority of the time. This allows each scholar to use examples that more clearly support his own approach rather than being forced to analyze in detail texts that less obviously fit his methodology.

Psalm 16:10, as used in Acts 2:27, affords a straightforward illustration of how each of the three methods works. Especially in light of Luke's subsequent inclusion of Peter's commentary in verses 29-31, ascribing the authorship of the Psalm to David and pointing out that David died and was buried without any resurrection, it is easy to understand Kaiser's insistence that the line, "*you will not let your holy one see decay*" must have originally referred not to David but to the Messiah. For Bock, it is a single meaning – someone whom it is appropriate to call a holy one in both contexts – but multiple referents (David in

the Old Testament, and the Messiah as the climactic descendant of David in the New). Enns, however, sees nothing but strict synonymous parallelism in the Psalm: "*You will not abandon me to the realm of the dead*" immediately precedes the line about God's holy one not seeing decay, which likewise refers solely to David. But Peter's conviction that Jesus was the Messianic descendant of David allows him to see in the Psalm a fuller meaning not intended by David; it speaks of Messiah when, and only when, one re-reads the text through Christian and Christ-centered eyes.

As is regularly the case in books of this format, one of the most helpful parts involves the brief replies each author gives to the other two essayists. Kaiser applauds the restraint with which Bock argues and his concern to tie NT meanings to *some* fixed details of the Old Testament text, but shows little patience for Enns, whose interpretations he finds misleading and potentially dangerous. Enns treats Kaiser a bit less polemically but finds his approaches too often simply untenable exegetically, while approving of Bock's allowance for fuller meaning even if he thinks Bock still tries to tie too many of his interpretations at least to connotations (if not to denotations) of the Hebrew Scriptures themselves. Finally, Bock sits in the happiest place, able to agree with each of his conversation partners about the importance of key pieces of what they are trying to affirm – continuity between the testaments for Kaiser and Christological reinterpretation of the texts for Enns – without feeling drastically at odds with either.

As is often the case with theologically mediating viewpoints, Bock appears to have the best of this "debate". It is hard to imagine David shifting gears mid-couplet, given the parallelism between "*me*" and "*your holy one*", and be speaking of himself in the first line but only of the Messiah in the second. But it is likewise significant that Peter chose a Davidic passage to apply to the Messiah rather than one associated, say, with Gideon or Saul or Rehoboam. There is more continuity between the two testaments here than simply reading one person out of (or into!) a text designed to talk about someone altogether different (or a disobedient member of the royalty). Had this not been a *Davidic* passage, Peter probably would not have chosen it.

Along the way, Kaiser denies the legitimacy of *sensus plenior*, while Bock and Enns both affirm it (within differing constraints and prescribed forms). All three accept the importance of the broader biblical contexts for New Testament quotations, but Kaiser mines them for clues as to original meanings only when they come from antecedent Scripture, Bock allows for the New Testament to actually influence the meanings of Old Testament texts as well as *vice-versa*, while Enns varies his answer from one instance to the next. Enns, meanwhile, enthusiastically insists Jesus is simply a product of his time, using the full range of non-canonical Jewish exegetical techniques. Bock insists on further restrictions on the apostolic use of the Hebrew Scripture, while Kaiser sees no place for uniquely extra-canonical traditions or methods, however deeply embedded in Judaism they might have already been. Kaiser and Bock both require typology to be discernible, to varying degrees and in different forms, from the Old Testament texts or contexts, while Enns does not. All three agree that their particular articulations of the use of the First Testament in the Second can and should be replicated by believers today, but of course because they disagree over what they see the biblical authors doing the three scholars are not commending the *same* interpretive approaches to us when they say we should duplicate New Testament exegetical methodology.

Perhaps the most frustrating part of the format of this particular multiple-views book is the lack of anyone acknowledging that all three contributors could be correct, but each for different texts. There *are* straightforward predictions and fulfillments such as the requirement that the Messiah be born in Bethlehem. There certainly appear to be texts where Christological insights are applied purely retrospectively (and it *is* within the range of ancient Jewish typology to include such examples, a point none of the three authors concedes), such as with calling "*my son*" out of Egypt. And there are others, like the virginal conception where there are differing referents from one context to the next along with continuity of overall meaning. But if I had to choose an approach to follow the *majority* of the time, I would have to opt for Bock.

© Feb 2009 The Denver Journal

This article originally appeared in Volume 12

(2009) of The Denver Journal, a publication of the Denver Seminary, and is reproduced here by the kind permission of the editor.