



Continuity and discontinuity

The relationship between the two Testaments

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The supposed dichotomy between the wrathful God of the Old Testament¹ and the loving one encountered within the New Testament persists in popular culture, and even in current church contexts. This can lead, sadly, to a side-lining of the Old Testament in the life of the Church, and/or to the implicit suggestion that it is too hard, too foreign, or too difficult for the contemporary Christian reader. This ends up effectively neutralising the Old Testament, denuding it of its capacity to address the Church, and shape the life of the faithful believer. It also seemingly endorses, conceptualises perhaps, the perception of a fundamental discontinuity between the two Testaments, i.e. the first demarks an era of law, the second, by contrast, the era of grace. Such a demarcation is fallacious of course, both theologically and historically, as recent work on Second Temple Judaism(s) and the New Perspective on Paul has demonstrated,² and it is rooted in serious misunderstandings of the respective textual corpora. But, for whatever reason, the unfortunate dichotomy persists, and the variety and depth of the Old Testament's scriptural repository – hymnody, wisdom, narrative, prophecy – can easily end up ostracised or overlooked.

By contrast, an informed biblical reader wants to enable the hearing of both Testaments, to ponder seriously the continuities and discontinuities between them, and to embrace the interpretative and theological questions that these similarities and differences occasion. We would wish to argue that both Testaments corporately form 'one' whole Word of God, and manifest a coherent and ultimately consistent, if still complex, 'biblical

theology'. The alleged points of discontinuity or difference – the 'tensions' so to speak – are not eradicated or dismissed by this premise, nor is there by implication just the one scriptural voice; indeed, there are a multiplicity of voices operative within the biblical record, thereby creating both melody and disharmony. But, equally, such plurality does not negate the essential unity of the canon, and the one mind/purpose of God may still be said to subsume the 'whole' biblical text; the diversity within the unity need not compromise that unity, and may be said even to enrich and enhance it. A key lens – or window – onto such matters comes when one considers the intertextual – or even intratextual – engagement functioning within the canon, namely when the New Testament writers use and appeal to the Jewish Scriptures.

The Old Testament is the starting point for the New Testament

One of the earliest – if not the earliest – received ecclesial traditions was that Jesus Christ died, and was raised, *according to the Scriptures* (1 Corinthians 15.3–4). The Old Testament testimony to the Christ event was not just a convenient happenstance therefore; rather it was integral, fundamental even, to the christological formulation in which the early Church invested itself. Paul (sadly!) does not specify the specific scriptural texts he has in mind here – the appeal may reflect the 'combination' of the fullness of scriptural testimony rather than individual, particular texts – and it probably represents tradition he has inherited rather than formulated

himself. But either way, the evident, pre-Pauline perception was that the crucifixion and resurrection had scriptural warrant and proof.

The significance of this should not be overlooked. The *death* of Jesus – and the resulting worship of a crucified Messiah – was the presenting question, the contradiction in terms to which the early Church needed to respond. Why did God's Messiah have to die, and why so on a Roman cross? The justification was thought to be found in the Old Testament, interestingly so bearing in mind the lack of an explicit scriptural text that spoke of a crucified Christ.³ Whilst some Christians might point, for example, to the testimony of Isaiah 53 in this regard, that text speaks of a servant figure rather than a 'Christ' one (and 1 Corinthians 15.3 is clear that Christ died). Similarly, Isaiah 53 does not appear to be a text to which the New Testament writers greatly appealed (and/or if it were, one might expect more explicit evidence of it). They looked to the Psalms, and particularly the righteous sufferer psalms like Psalm 22 or Psalm 69; the so-called cry of dereliction (Psalm 22.1) is put on the Markan Jesus' lips (Mark 15.34) or the Johannine Jesus is said to be thirsty (John 19.28), in fulfilment of Psalm 69.3. The narratives of Jesus' death are invested significantly with appeal to the Old Testament (with the Gospel of John notably so), even if it necessitates finding scriptural fulfilment in some rather curious events – such as the splitting of Jesus' clothing (John 19.24) or the death of Judas (Matthew 27.9).

Across the New Testament, we find the Gospels, Paul, Hebrews and other New Testament writers all likewise drawing on the Jewish Scriptures for communicative effect. Jesus frequently bases his teaching on the Old Testament, and much of the Gospels' portrayal of Jesus depict him debating with others on matters of scriptural interpretation. Matthew, in particular, portrays Jesus in terms of continuity with the Old Testament, whether that is through the manifold appeal to scriptural fulfilment in the Matthean birth narrative (Matthew 1.22; 2.5,15,17,23), or the explicit declaration of Torah fulfilment that contextualises the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5.17–20). Paul can appeal to the parts of the Decalogue (Romans 13.9), and also develop their understanding (cf. Galatians 5.14), and scholars have also suggested that his wider theology is shaped by Old Testament themes or texts (for example, that Deuteronomy 32 contains 'Romans *in nuce*').⁴ Even someone like the writer to the Hebrews, who seems to note – in whatever fashion – an end to the first covenant/testament, still finds the origins of that second covenant fundamentally within the first (Hebrews 8.7–13; cf. Jeremiah 31.31–34); the 'new' derives from the old. Likewise, Hebrews presents God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit all speaking (present tense) the language of Scripture (cf. Hebrews 1.5–6; 2.12–13; 3.7–11); Scripture is put on the divine lips, so to speak (pun intended). Indeed,

we might view Hebrews' hermeneutical agendas as exemplifying continuity and discontinuity; the continuity is preserved, but the discontinuity or 'newness' is not foreign to the preceding scriptural testimony; instead, it necessarily draws on it.

Hence one might suggest a rule of thumb that, when exegeting a New Testament text, the first

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question be asked is 'where is the Old Testament in this?' Such presence may be explicit, for example a marked scriptural quotation, but it may be more subtle or allusive. It could be through some form of narrational usage, thematic application or the deployment of Old Testament characters. The motif of exodus, for example, whether that of Deutero-Isaiah (Isaiah 40–55) or of the wilderness generation, permeates the New Testament, and the pattering of the Christ event, albeit in different ways by the respective New Testament authors, is almost always indebted to the portrayal. To put it another way, and perhaps in terms that focuses the presenting question *in nuce*, as the biblical scholar Martin Hengel is apocryphally alleged to have said: 'If you only know the New Testament, you don't know the New Testament.' That is, to put it bluntly, one cannot read the New Testament without the Old – the two corpora are inextricably linked – theologically, hermeneutically, content-ly. The Old Testament – the Hebrew Bible – can stand on its own feet, but the New Testament 'needs' the Old Testament for its communicative intent to be achieved.

Textual 'meaning' is fluid rather than fixed

How does one construe or derive the 'meaning' of a text, particularly when it re-occurs at different places across the Bible? To answer this question, one will want to explore the relationship between the author and the reader as the respective arbiters of 'meaning'; similarly, one will also need to consider the degree to which texts evolve and their meanings develop or even change over time and place. Core to the consideration of the New Testament's use of the Old Testament is recognising the capacity for texts to have multivalent sense or interpretation; textual meaning is fluid rather than fixed, with the context of a text determinative of such meaning. The transfer or 'relocation' of a scriptural text (from Old Testament to New Testament) necessarily impacts upon its meaning, and the referent of an Old Testament citation, when re-presented or re-contextualised in a New Testament milieu, is impacted by such relocation. This can be explicit (Luke 20.37, and its seemingly unrelated citation

NOTES

1. As will be seen, the terminology and nomenclature of Old and New Testaments are not without significant difficulties, but they remain (rightly or wrongly) the terms generally used by Christian readers and hence, if only for convenience, we will use the terms.

2. See *inter alia* KL Yinger, *The New Perspective on Paul: An Introduction* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011).

3. The nearest ones are perhaps Ps 89.38–45, 49–51, but they are not explicitly cited by the NT authors.

4. R Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), p. 164.

5. On this example, see P Enns, *Inspiration and Incarnation: Evangelicals and the Problem of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), pp. 114–15.

6. Some argue for an essential continuity or extension of textual meaning when an OT text is relocated into another context (cf. GK Beale, *Handbook on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament: Exegesis and Interpretation* [Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012]; A Chou, *The Hermeneutics of the Biblical Writers: Learning to Interpret Scripture from the Prophets and Apostles* [Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2018]). Others stress the fundamental change in meaning that can occur if/when texts are re-contextualised – cf. S Moyise, *Evoking Scripture: Seeing the Old Testament in the New* (London: T&T Clark, 2008).

7. F Watson, *Paul and the Hermeneutics of Faith* (London: T&T Clark, 2004).

of Exodus 3.6 in respect of the resurrection)⁵ or perhaps more subtle (the allusion to Isaiah 45.23 in the Christ hymn of Philippians 2.9–11, where Christ rather than YHWH becomes the recipient of worship). But either way, the interpretative ramifications are significant. Scholars debate as to whether this equates (just) to the evolution of meaning (with it thereby remaining somehow consistent with the ‘original’ Old Testament context) or whether there becomes an inherent ‘newness’ to the quotation such that its original sense is superimposed or supplanted by its New Testament relocation.⁶

discontinuity between and within the Testaments is not, in and of itself, a barrier to confidence in God’s Word

Clearly, the more the ‘newness’ is stressed in such matters, the more the argument for testamental discontinuity is present. And along with the new context for the citation, the role of the ‘reader’ as a core ingredient in defining textual meaning becomes integral. Like other first-century commentators, such as the Qumran Peshierists or Philo of Alexandria, the New Testament writers are effectively reader-response critics who are engaging with their Scriptures in the light of their own experience (i.e. in their case, the impact of Jesus Christ). Such experience may well generate new (or different) meaning or perspective on the received Old Testament text, and potentially in ways that might look strange to their Old Testament forebears. Yet for all this potential ‘newness’ or discontinuity, by rooting their reflections in the scriptural record, the New Testament writers still assume some inherent consistency with previous understanding, otherwise the communicative effect is lost. When using the same corpora of Old Testament material, whereas the New Testament writers sometimes find points of similarity with each other (cf. their various, related appeal to Psalm 110.1), they equally find fundamental points of difference, even when utilising the same text. For example, Mark’s Gospel presents the crucified Jesus as abandoned by God (Mark 15.34), but that would not be the case for John, for whom God is very much ‘present’ in the cruciform action. Thus, if there is discontinuity between the two Testaments, there is equally discontinuity with the New Testament in its usage of scriptural material.

That is not to water down the significance of those points of testamental difference, nor negate the significant theological questions that so arise, but rather to contend that difference, in and of itself, is *not problematic*. No performance of a play or piece of music is identical with any other, as it always assumes the interpretative lens of its performer

or musician. As such, textual ‘meaning’ can be somewhat different to that in its previous location, sometimes quite radically so, but this does not necessarily render it false or invalid or ‘unfruitful’. Presumably the starting point for such discussion is to allow the juxtaposition of the different textual ‘performances’, so as to see what explanatory fruit is so yielded. Furthermore, such difference may be as much intratextual as intertextual. Within the Old Testament itself, we find traditions reworked, re-presented and re-contextualised (cf. the similarities and contrasts of Exodus and Deuteronomy), and hence such internal differences are core to unpacking the ‘whole’ picture, even of the Hebrew Bible. Likewise, in his work on Paul’s use of the Old Testament, Francis Watson argues for Pauline awareness of two voices within the Jewish Scriptures, a voice of law and a voice of grace. He suggests that Paul recognises these two traditions, and sets them in opposition to each other, effectively establishing an interpretative discontinuity, but a discontinuity located within the Old Testament itself, rather than one between the first and second Testaments.⁷

‘Discontinuity’ has interpretative value

If there is a case for the dependence of the New Testament on the Old Testament, and if there is still a strong element of continuity between the Testaments, the question of Old Testament–New Testament discontinuity still persists and impacts on the perception of a coherent ‘oneness’ to the biblical record. Discontinuity, or difference, or tension, are not, in and of themselves, a barrier to confidence in God’s (one) Word. Firstly, tension(s) between the Testaments – or even within a Testament itself – is not, of itself necessarily problematic. Handled well, and handled sensitively, discontinuity can manifest the richness and diversity of the scriptural record, exemplifying the complexity of the human encounter with God. Even within the New Testament itself, of course, there are points of tension and discontinuity, whether chronological (when did Jesus clear the Temple?), pneumatological (when, and from whom, did the disciples receive the Spirit?) or soteriological (compare the realised soteriology of John with the futurist perspective of Paul). Such differentiation is ‘explainable’ and the diversity can faithfully co-exist within the one corpus.

Secondly, where discontinuity is present, it can equally be overstated. Hebrews, for example, speaks of an end to certain covenantal practices (Hebrews 8.13), but not all aspects of covenantal life are ‘discontinued’ – the Law, for example, seems to be generally upheld by the Epistle (though cf. 13.9).

Thirdly, when matters of discontinuity are ignored or negated, this can have damaging effects. One thinks, for example, of the potential supercessionism of 1 Peter, and the way in which it appropriates imagery drawn from the Jewish

Scriptures that was formerly the preserve of Israel, and re-applies it to the Petrine Gentile authorship (1 Peter 2.9–10). Likewise, the portrayal of the Jews in Matthew's passion narrative raises challenging interpretative questions, as does their wider depiction in the Johannine portrayal (cf. John 8.34–59); the significance of John's Jesus speaking of 'their law' (John 15.25) would certainly warrant questions as to continuity of John's Gospel with the first testamentary discourse. Hence, if anything, glossing over such points of discontinuity can have dangerous ramifications for the interpreter; discontinuity can perform a helpful reorientation role in this regard.

In sum, therefore, such cautions and concerns do not cease the exploratory exercise, but rather commend it. Disharmony, or tension, can yield explanatory power, and, just as musical discord can be 'revealing', so textual disharmony can also be valuable and fruitful. There will be melodious incidences between the texts – ways in which they work together, but equally the juxtaposition of two 'opposing' (or discontinuous) texts reveals fundamental points of disjuncture within the biblical testimony for interpretative benefit. One thinks of the so-called *herem* passages, for example, and their textual appeal to divine vindication of violence; read in isolation, or as the literal 'mind of God', such passages can be seen as depicting a divine particularism and mode of vengeance. It takes the explicit *discontinuity*, though, between this and other texts of Scripture –

whether drawn from the first or second Testament – to contextualise the message accordingly; the juxtaposition with texts like Amos 9.7–10 at the very least expand the portrayal of God found there. A text may be God-breathed and inspired, but it may be dangerous when left in isolation; the dangers of 'silencing' discontinuity are prevalent even when dealing with the Old Testament.

Conclusion

The full contours of the biblical canon give 'space' for texts to interact with and against each other, for continuity and discontinuity to be explored as part of profitable theological dialogue. One might think therefore of the biblical testimony as an orchestra, as a body of voices who 'play' together and whose overall effect or function comes from that combined voice. The biblical canon gives the context – the concert hall one might say – for the orchestra to play, for the sounds of the texts to be heard. It also offers a defining point – a boundary marker that precludes not every option being used. It opens up a plurality of explanation, a plurality of performance once might suggest, but not an infinite or inexhaustible one.

Good biblical reading, informed biblical reading, gives space for the full orchestra to be heard, for all the instruments to have their moment and place. The symphony may contain places of harmony, just as it also contains places of disharmony; but the 'whole' effect of that symphony is when all elements are given space to be heard.

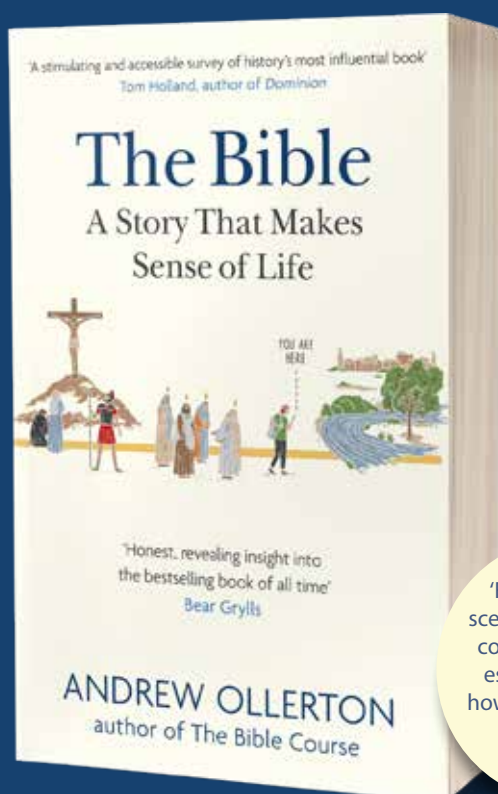
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