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## Seeing the Old Testament through a Lens

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Readers of this journal will be aware of the interaction between Greg Beale and myself on the use of the Old Testament in the New.<sup>1</sup> In personal correspondence, Beale has been kind enough to say that my work has prompted him to think more deeply about certain matters and this short article is a result of my thinking more deeply about his work.<sup>2</sup> In his monograph, Beale says that what 'to some may appear to be John's novel interpretations of the Old Testament are the result of his new presuppositional lenses through which he perceives the Old Testament'.<sup>3</sup> John's use of Scripture is not arbitrary or *ad hoc* but is the result of a set of presuppositional lenses through which he now views the ancient texts. According to Beale, the most significant of these are:

(1) Christ corporately represents true Israel of the Old and New Testament; (2) history is unified by a wise and sovereign plan, so that the earlier parts of canonical history are designed to correspond typologically and point to later parts of inscripturated history; (3) the age of end-time fulfillment has been inaugurated with Christ's first coming; and (4) in the light of points 2 and 3, the later parts of biblical history interpret earlier parts, so that Christ as the centre of

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<sup>1</sup> My 'Reply' to his monograph was published in *IBS* 21 (1999), 54-58. His 'Rejoinder' appeared in *IBS* 21 (1999), 151-180. This perhaps might be called a 'Reflection'.

<sup>2</sup> For a full discussion of these issues, see my book, *The Old Testament in the New* (Continuum, forthcoming).

<sup>3</sup> G. Beale, *John's Use of the Old Testament in Revelation* (JSNTSup 166; Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), p128.

history is the key to interpreting the earlier portions of the Old Testament.<sup>4</sup>

If we grant the viability of these presuppositions, he says, then 'John's interpretation of the Old Testament shows a careful understanding of Old Testament contexts'. On the other hand, if we regard them as false, then John's interpretation of Scripture 'must be seen as alien to the intention of the Old Testament'.<sup>5</sup> In other words, what might seem to us as 'novel interpretations' are explained by understanding (and accepting) the lenses through which the New Testament authors viewed the ancient texts.

This raises three questions for me. First, are the four presuppositions an accurate description of what John believed or thought he was doing? Second, are they an accurate description of what he was doing from *our* perspective? Some confessional stances will assume that these are one and the same but it is implicit in the 'lens' analogy that people from a different time and culture will see things differently. At the very least, the fall of the Roman empire and the co-existence of Jews and Christians for two thousand years will give us a different lens (or lenses) to that which John possessed. Third, does citing these four presuppositions 'explain' John's use of Scripture? In other words, we might agree that John employed lens 1 when he used the Exodus plagues and lens 3 when he used Dan 7 but does this 'explain' or merely 'rationalise' his use of the Old Testament?

I will take these in reverse order. That the New Testament authors saw the Old Testament in the light of their current beliefs and experience is non-controversial. Indeed, one would be hard-pressed to find an ancient author who did not do this and numerous scholars have used the 'lens' analogy to describe it. However, the analogy is not without its problems for fundamentally, it is an analogy of predictability. There is a direct correspondence between what one

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

sees and how things are. If it makes objects look smaller or fatter, then it always makes objects look smaller or fatter. Thus once one has got to know the particular properties of the lens, one ought to be able to predict what one will see. But when one starts to speak of lenses, in the plural, the image becomes less useful, for how will the interpreter decide which lens or combination of lenses to use in particular situations? In other words, what is the principle at work when a New Testament author cites some texts as being literally true, others as true only when understood in the light of recent events, others as true only when quoted in variant forms, others only when the wording is altered, and yet others only when given an inverted or ironic meaning? The lens image might be an appropriate description for each single instance, but it does not have the explanatory power to describe the overall situation. At root, there is always a deeper question: What is it that governs the *choice* of which lens to use on any particular text?

For example, in order to explain how in Rom 3:10-18, Paul can take texts that draw a distinction between the righteous and the wicked (Psalms 5, 10, 14, 36 and 140) and use them as proof that 'all, both Jews and Greeks, are under the power of sin' (Rom 3:9), Dunn<sup>6</sup> suggests that Paul now reads the scriptures without the 'blinkers of Jewish presumption of privilege'. Thus texts that originally referred to Gentiles can now be applied to Jews and texts which originally applied to Jews can now be applied to Gentiles. And this explains how in Rom 9:25-26, Paul is able to cite promises addressed to Jews (from Hosea) and apply them to Gentiles. However, when Paul wants to make a particular point about Gentiles (as in Rom 15:9-12), he thinks it is sufficient to cite a number of texts which all contain the word 'Gentiles'. Thus Paul can sometimes apply texts to Gentiles because they contain the word 'Gentiles', and sometimes apply them to Jews because there is now no distinction between Jews and Gentiles. What sort of lens is it that can explain both phenomenon?

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<sup>6</sup> J.D.G.Dunn, *Romans 1-8* (WBC 38, Word books, 1988), p149-151. See my article, 'The Catena of Romans 3:10-18', *ExpT* 106 (1995), pp367-70.

Thus I agree with Beale that John's use of the Old Testament is neither arbitrary or *ad hoc*. One can certainly detect patterns, such as throne visions (Isa 6; Ezek 1; Dan 7) being used to describe a throne vision (Rev 4-5) and restoration oracles (Ezek 40-48; Isa 61) being used to describe the new heaven and earth (Rev 21-22). But I do not think that the four presuppositions listed by Beale 'explain' John's use of Scripture for they are unable to tell us (1) why he chose precisely these texts; (2) which lens or combination of lenses to apply in each instance; and (3) why the wording of some texts required alteration but others are reproduced exactly. The four presuppositions identify John as a Christian of the first century but they do not explain why the book of Revelation is so different from other New Testament books. The lens metaphor, if it is to be useful, would suggest that one could point it at Genesis or Isaiah or Daniel and predict the result. But who could have predicted that John would allude so extensively to the new temple section of Ezekiel (chs 40-48) and then deny the existence of a temple in the new Jerusalem?

I would call this the Postmodern objection. It is not that the four presuppositions are necessarily wrong but it is wrong to think of them as a sort of meta-narrative that 'explains' the book of Revelation. One could not, for example, programme a computer with these four presuppositions and expect the book of Revelation to emerge. They are our attempts to rationalise John's interpretations but they do not explain them in a causal way. Other New Testament authors shared these presuppositions and yet produced something very different. If scholars wish to continue using the 'lens' analogy, they need to clarify (as with all analogies) which aspects of a lens they have in mind.<sup>7</sup>

The second question is the traditional modernist debate that has been raging for over two centuries. John almost certainly thought that his vision of a 'temple-less' New Jerusalem was the true interpretation of Ezek 40-48. But can we? We can certainly be

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<sup>7</sup> It was Beale's use of the 'bowl of fruit' analogy that prompted me to question the nature of the 'lens' analogy.

sympathetic to it and (perhaps) show that it is a *plausible* reading in the light of other scriptures, Jesus' teaching about the temple and perhaps (depending on date) the historical fall of Jerusalem in 70 CE. But can we agree that John has given us the true meaning of this text, what Beale would argue is the meaning intended by Ezekiel? I do not think so. And I believe that this is the cause of much confusion in 'OT in NT' studies. Some scholars try and describe an author's use of Scripture in *our* terms and hence speak of 'arbitrary' '*ad hoc*' and 'out of context', because that is how it looks from a modern historical-critical perspective. Others try and describe how it would have looked to the New Testament authors, who would certainly not have used terms like 'arbitrary' '*ad hoc*' or 'out of context'. They believed they were Spirit-filled people offering the true meaning of the ancient texts. A third group deny that there is any difference between then and now. The New Testament authors believed they were offering the true meaning of the ancient texts and so should we. It seems to me that there would be less confusion if scholars were more explicit about where they stood on these matters.

Thirdly, are the four presuppositions an accurate description of what John thought he was doing? As our previous debate indicates, Beale is much more confident than I am about reconstructing the intentions of an ancient author. He suggests that it is illogical to believe that we can know the intentions of modern authors, whilst being sceptical about reconstructing the intentions of ancient authors. I would suggest that the difficulties we have experienced in understanding one another's positions (even with dialogue) points in the opposite direction. But let me be more pragmatic. Are the four presuppositions consistent with what we find in the book of Revelation? The answer is probably Yes, though I will conclude this 'reflection' with the following thoughts:

The first needs rewording in that John is unlikely to have thought in terms of Old and New Testament.

John probably thought that 'history is unified by a wise and sovereign plan' but I wonder if there should be some mention of the major disruptions caused by evil forces, disruptions that (on some

readings) are never unified but remain as permanent divisions (Rev 22:15).

Some scholars (eg. N.T.Wright) have questioned whether the New Testament authors thought in terms of first and second comings of Christ.

In general terms, the Christ-event is clearly the most important factor in John's interpretation of Scripture. But it would be wrong to conclude that every text alluded to in Revelation is given a particular 'Christological' interpretation. Richard Hays has made the same point about Paul's use of Scripture.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> R.B.Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (Yale University Press, 1989), ch. 5.