

Intertextuality and historical approaches to the use of Scripture in the New Testament

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ABSTRACT

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In a previous article in this journal (2002:418-31), I offered a taxonomy of five ways that the term “intertextuality” is being used in biblical studies. In this article, I wish to clarify the relationship between intertextuality and historical approaches to the use of Scripture in the New Testament. I take as a case study the use of Isaiah 8:12-13 in 1 Peter 3:14-15 and conclude that historical and literary approaches both have an important role to play in elucidating the meaning of this text. I also take the opportunity of responding to some of the arguments put forward by critics of intertextuality.

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Intertextuality

Intertextuality is not a method but a theory (or group of theories) concerning the production of meaning. Julia Kristeva is generally credited as the first to introduce the term *intertextualité* into literary discussion in 1969. Drawing on the work of Bakhtin, Kristeva suggested a dialogical relationship between “texts”, broadly understood as a system of codes or signs (Kristeva 1986:36-61). Moving away from traditional notions of agency and influence, she suggests that such relationships are more like an “intersection of textual surfaces” rather than a fixed point. No text is an island and contrary to structuralist theory, it cannot be understood in isolation. It can only be understood as part of a web or matrix of other texts, themselves only to be understood in the light of other texts. Each new text disturbs the fabric of existing texts as it jostles for a place in the canon of literature. Intertextuality suggests that the meaning of

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a text is not fixed but open to revision as new texts come along and reposition it (Moyise 2002:418-31).

1.2 Relevance to New Testament studies

The relevance of this to the New Testament and subsequent theology should be obvious. On the one hand, the scriptures of Israel were accepted by the New Testament authors as the “oracles of God” (Rom 3:2). On the other hand, the Christ-event introduced an interpretative lens that led to some texts being set aside and others given new meaning. This phenomenon led to the production of other texts which would eventually sit side by side with the scriptures of Israel to form one canon of Scripture. Henceforth, commentators and interpreters could not define the meaning of one particular text without reference to the other texts in the collection. The canon of Scripture is a mutually interpreting or dialogical collection of texts.

1.3 The dominance of the historical-critical method

However, the championing of the historical-critical method as the only valid form of interpretation changed all this. The goal of interpretation during the last 200 years has been to discover the original intention of each biblical author or editor in their specific historical context. Texts are not to be interpreted in the light of later texts but only in their historical context. Meaning is that which the original author intended and hence Old Testament theology becomes a separate discipline from New Testament theology and both are separated from dogmatic or systematic theology.

With respect to the use of Scripture in the New Testament, this has led to two competing positions. Some argue that the New Testament authors preserve the original meaning of the ancient texts and are merely “extending” or “applying” this meaning to new contexts (Beale 1999b:152-180). This involves demonstrating that those texts which the New Testament authors regarded as “fulfilled” in the Christ-event were intended as “messianic” promises in their original contexts (Kaiser 1994:55-69). On the other hand, other scholars are more struck by the discrepancy between the original meaning of the ancient texts and the meaning assigned to them in the New Testament. Their goal is to try and understand the thought processes that led to the New Testament authors assigning new meanings to ancient texts. The discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls was a major impetus to this, for just as the Qumran interpreters appear to have interpreted texts in the light of their own history and

personnel, the New Testament authors appear to have done likewise in the light of the Christ-event (Lindars 1961).

1.4 Singular versus multiple meanings

Though these positions represent opposite ends of the spectrum, they have one thing in common. Working within the historical-critical paradigm, they both assume that texts have one single meaning. In particular, they assume that a text taken from one context and transposed into another will result in a single resolution, a “fixed point” in Kristeva’s words. From a literary point of view, this is most unlikely. A citation is a pointer to a previous context (e.g. the exodus) or subsequent contexts (e.g. Isaiah’s use of exodus imagery). How these “voices” interact when they are transposed into a further context (e.g. Mark’s Gospel) is likely to be complex and understood differently by different readers.

1.5 An example from the Apocalypse

During the 1980s, it was practically a consensus among Christian commentators that John reinterprets the messianic warrior *lion* with the sacrificial *lamb* of Christian tradition. Caird’s view has been quoted with approval by a number of scholars (Sweet 1990:125; Boring 1989:110; Bauckham 1993:183; Beale 1999b:353; Bredin 2003:187):

‘Wherever the Old Testament says “Lion”, read “Lamb”.’
Wherever the Old Testament speaks of the victory of the Messiah or the overthrow of the enemies of God, we are to remember that the gospel recognizes no other way of achieving these ends than the way of the Cross (Caird 1984:75).

However, it seems to me that not only has the warrior lion been transformed by its juxtaposition with a lamb, the lamb has also picked up many of the traits of the warrior lion. For example, in Revelation 6:16, the people of the world are said to hide from the “wrath of the lamb”. In Revelation 14:10, the enemies of the lamb receive double for their sins and “will be tormented with fire and sulphur in the presence of the holy angels and *in the presence of the Lamb*”. There is a battle in Revelation 17 but the outcome is not in doubt, for the “Lamb will conquer them, for he is Lord of lords and King of kings” (Rev 17:14). In my reading of the Apocalypse, the introduction of the messianic warrior lion has significantly disturbed John’s story of the lamb. As Resseguie (1998:129) notes, “the Lamb,

though not in nature a strong animal, is a being of incontrovertible might in this book”.

Indeed, there is a line of interpretation that draws a contrast between the all-powerful lamb of the Apocalypse and the lamb “who takes away the sin of the world” in John 1:29. Thus Dodd cites 1 *Enoch* 90 and *Test. Joseph* 19:8 and concludes that “we have here a prototype of the militant seven-horned ‘Lamb’ of the Apocalypse of John” (1968:232). Barrett looks to passages like Exodus 12, Isaiah 53 and Leviticus 16 as possible backgrounds for the lamb of John 1:29, but discounts *Test. Joseph* 19:8 since it “recalls the conquering lamb of Revelation ... rather than the present passage” (1978:147). And Brown concludes his discussion of John 1:29 with the words, “Thus we suggest that John the Baptist hailed Jesus as the lamb of Jewish apocalyptic expectation who was raised up by God to destroy evil in the world, a picture not too far from that of Revelation xvii 14” (1966:60). These might be considered overstatements but they point to the fact that John’s presentation of the lamb has many “lion-like” features. It is by no means obvious that we are talking about the gentle lamb who takes away the sins of the world.

1.6 Dialogical intertextuality

In Thomas Greene’s analysis of imitation in Renaissance poetry, he speaks of reproductive, eclectic, heuristic and dialectical imitation. His last category is particularly relevant to the example just discussed. Dialectical imitation, Greene says, is when the subtext is not negated but allowed a subversive influence on the new context: “The text makes a kind of implicit criticism of its subtexts, its authenticating models, but it also leaves itself open to criticism from [the text]... it had begun by invoking” (1982:40). Despite Caird’s argument that John intends to replace all the military associations of the “lion of Judah” by the sacrificial lamb of Christian tradition, this is not the impression the book makes on the majority of readers. The lion imagery is simply too powerful to be silenced. In Revelation 5:5-6, John *hears* that the messiah is the “Lion of the tribe of Judah” and then *sees* “a Lamb standing as if it had been slaughtered”. Now some commentators have supported Caird by suggesting that John is utilising a literary device whereby what he *hears* is always reinterpreted by what he *sees* (Resseguie 1998:34). But this is manifestly false. In Revelation 1:20, John *sees* the seven lampstands and then *hears* the interpretation. The meaning of the lion/lamb juxtaposition in Revelation 5:5-6 is not that one image replaces the other (what I

have elsewhere termed a “hermeneutic of replacement”) but in their mutual or dialogical interaction.

1.7 Critiques of intertextuality

The strongest critic of my use of intertextuality to interpret the Apocalypse is Greg Beale. Beale denies (1999a:99) that John has created tensions in his work. The juxtaposition of lion and lamb is adequately explained as “Semitic paratactic thinking, which allowed him to set in close proximity two different, and sometimes seemingly contradictory, ideas or a word, without the discomfort experienced by some twentieth-century readers”. Beale (1998:46) prefers a temporal solution: “Christ’s past defeat of the enemy as a ‘lion’ has begun in an ironic manner through death and suffering as a ‘lamb’, but the future, consummate form of the enemy’s defeat will be more straightforward: Christ will judge decisively and openly both his earthly and cosmic enemies, including Satan himself”. However, I find it interesting that when he speaks more generally of the relationship between the testaments, he says:

The place of the OT in the formation of thought in the Apocalypse is that of both servant and a guide: for John the Christ-event is the key to understanding the OT, and yet reflection on the OT context leads the way to further comprehension of this event and provides the redemptive-historical background against which the apocalyptic visions are better understood; the New Testament interprets the Old and the Old interprets the New (Beale 1999a:97).

Radu Gheorghita comes to a similar conclusion in his recent monograph on *The Role of the Septuagint in Hebrews* (2003). He distinguishes what he calls traditional intertextuality, a “static and diachronic concept, which depicts various ways in which authors make use of previously written texts”, from postmodern developments which maintain that a “precursor text can never be just a simple presence in the successor text” (Gheorghita 2003:73). He sees no value in the latter and opts for a strictly “author-centred” approach for his investigation. However, after 230 pages of analysis, his conclusion is that:

The Scriptures were not only read in light of the Christ-event, but the Christ-event was read in light of the Scriptures. Although the Scriptures were clearly interpreted through the lens of the Chris[t]-event, they also supplied the informative and theology-

cally formative perspective from which the Christ-event had to be interpreted (Gheorghita 2003:231).

Beale and Gheorghita both conclude that the New Testament authors were involved in a dynamic process whereby the Christ-event affects the interpretation of the ancient texts and ancient texts affect the interpretation of the Christ-event. Neither, however, is interested in a literary theory that might help us to explain or analyse this phenomenon. As Gheorghita declares, his only interest in intertextuality is when it is being used as a “static and diachronic concept”. I deduce from this that while Beale and Gheorghita recognise a dynamic interaction between new and old, they believe that what we have in the New Testament is the author’s *resolution* of that dynamic. Lion and lamb may once have jostled in the author’s mind but by the time the Apocalypse were written, the images had been reconciled. In short, the New Testament books do not present the reader with dynamic tensions that require modern literary theory to explicate; the author has already resolved them for us.

1.8 Response to critiques

Now there is clearly some truth in this. The authors of both the Apocalypse and Hebrews are writing for specific rhetorical purposes where the admission of unresolved tensions might have weakened their case. John is clearly not saying that the Messiah is both lion and lamb and that he has absolutely no idea how these images can be reconciled. But he might be saying that the meaning of Messiah lies in the complex interaction between the two images, an interaction which cannot be captured by silencing one at the expense of the other (whether by direct replacement or temporal sequence). Indeed, he might have juxtaposed lion and lamb in Revelation 5 for a particular purpose, without realising all of the possible effects this will have on future readers. This is particularly apt for the study of scriptural quotations in the New Testament, where a particular rhetorical purpose might have led to a specific quotation, without necessarily analysing all the possibilities this opens up for future interpreters.

2 HISTORICAL AND LITERARY APPROACHES CONTRASTED

2.1 The use of Isaiah 8:12-13 in 1 Peter 3:14-15

<p>Isa 8:12-13</p> <p>Do not call conspiracy all that this people calls conspiracy, and do not fear what it fears, or be in dread</p> <p>(τὸν δὲ φόβον αὐτοῦ οὐ φοβηθῆτε οὐδὲ μὴ παραχθῆτε). μὴ</p> <p>But the LORD of hosts, him you shall regard as holy (κύριον αὐτὸν ἀγιάσατε); let him be your fear, and let him be your dread.</p>	<p>1 Pet 3:13-15</p> <p>Now who will harm you if you are eager to do what is good? But even if you do suffer for doing what is right, you are blessed. Do not fear what they fear, and do not be intimidated</p> <p>(τὸν δὲ φόβον αὐτῶν μὴ φοβηθῆτε μηδὲ παραχθῆτε),</p> <p>but in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord</p> <p>(κύριον δὲ τὸν Χριστὸν ἀγιάσατε)</p>
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2.2 Historical approaches

Though there is no introductory formula or explicit marker to indicate a quotation, several things point in that direction (1) The abrupt and somewhat unusual phrase τὸν δὲ φόβον occurs in the LXX only at Isaiah 8:12 and Proverbs 1:29. (2) This is followed by two verbs (φοβηθῆτε and παραχθῆτε) as in LXX Isaiah 8:12 (A few manuscripts omit μηδὲ παραχθῆτε and one could argue that a later scribe has added them in order to conform the text more closely to the LXX. However, the words are well attested and probably slipped out because of the common ending with φοβηθῆτε). (3) This is followed by a command to sanctify/reverence the Lord (κύριον ... ἀγιάσατε), as in LXX Isaiah 8:13. (4) He has already quoted Isaiah 8:14 in 1 Peter 2:8, thus increasing the probability that Isaiah 8:13 is in mind here. I conclude that the author of 1 Peter is quoting from LXX Isaiah 8:12-13 (see Rensburg & Moyise 2002:275-286).

However, it is more difficult to discover why he has quoted Isaiah 8:13 at this point. In the book of Isaiah, the prophet is being told not to share the fear or dread that has overtaken “this people”. The genitive is therefore subjective (“Do not fear what they fear”). However, in 1 Peter, the “they” must refer to the opponents

mentioned in the previous verse, those who are causing the readers to suffer. It would be very strange for the author to urge his readers not to fear what his opponents fear, for that would have no relevance. Read on its own, 1 Peter surely intends an objective genitive (“do not fear them”) rather than a subjective (“do not fear what they fear”). As Best (1971:133) remarks:

In Isaiah the prophet is told not to fear the king of Assyria as the Israelites do; here the meaning has been changed; when the words are isolated from their context they can be translated as in 1 Peter; the original meaning ‘do not fear with their fear’ would be impossible in the context of 1 Peter.

Selwyn is more defensive: “φόβος can take either a subjective genitive (fear felt *by* someone) or an objective genitive (fear felt *of* someone); and, even if the former was the construction in Isaiah viii.12, St. Peter was fully entitled to use the latter construction here” (1952:192). Michaels thinks the answer lies in an ambiguity created by the singular pronoun (αὐτοῦ) used in the LXX. In the Hebrew text, the 3rd person singular pronominal suffix (מִירְאָהוּ) looks back to “this people” and is thus rightly translated “their fear”. However, Michaels (1988:186-7) suggests that the singular αὐτοῦ changes the focus to an individual, namely the king of Assyria, so that “Peter’s modification of the LXX represents a move back in the direction of the Hebrew, yet Peter’s context shows that he follows the LXX in assuming the pronoun to be an objective genitive”. This would be an interesting if complex use of Scripture but it is not clear that the LXX’s αὐτοῦ does make the change Michaels suggests. It could just as easily refer back to “this people” (ὁ λαὸς οὗτος) as the Hebrew text did.

2.3 Literary approaches

This is about as far as historical criticism can go. But literary criticism is bound to ask what effect this quotation of Isaiah has on the reader. Anyone who either knows the text (it immediately precedes the “stone” text quoted in 1 Pet 2:8) or is in a position to find it, will be confronted with a choice. Should anything from the old context be allowed to influence the meaning of the words in 1 Peter? If 1 Peter 3:14 stood alone, most readers would probably conclude that Isaiah 8:12 is best ignored. As Best says, it looks like the words have simply been taken out of context. But 1 Peter 3:14 is followed by the words “but in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord”.

The two verses thus form a rhythmic pair (μὴ φοβηθῆτε μηδὲ παραχθῆτε... κύριον δὲ τὸν Χριστὸν ἀγιάσατε), which strikingly parallels the rhythm of Isaiah 8:12-13 (οὐ μὴ φοβηθῆτε οὐδὲ μὴ παραχθῆτε... κύριον αὐτὸν ἀγιάσατε). The reader is thus urged to seek some contribution from the Isaiah passage because of what confronts them in 1 Peter, even though the author's historical intentions cannot be discerned with any degree of confidence. But future readers have always had to interpret texts without the benefit of the author's intentions.

2.4 Intertextual possibilities

Ever since the pioneering work of C.H. Dodd (1952), it has almost been an axiom that a quotation is a pointer to its wider context. This has generally been used in a positivist way, citing connections that support a particular interpretation while ignoring those that do not. An intertextual approach is interested in both, for a reader can notice dissonance as well as harmony. For the former, although 1 Peter is primarily talking about fearing enemies, the context of Isaiah 8:12-13 might add a second "voice" that neither should they fall into fear like non-believers do. It would not be the primary meaning of 1 Peter but could easily be taken as a complimentary theme. The readers should not fear enemies and neither should they fall into the fear of enemies *like non-believers do*. The contrast is aided by what follows. Because they are the ones who sanctify Christ as Lord, they are set apart from non-believers and should not therefore be subject to the same fears as they are. Whether the author of 1 Peter ever considered this second "voice" is impossible to say but the dynamics of his quotation makes it a possibility, at least for some readers.

On the other hand, readers of 1 Peter are told to sanctify/revere Christ as Lord, while at the same time being directed to a verse that insists that God alone is to be sanctified/revered. It does not appear to be the author's purpose to suggest that Christians should stop revering God and start revering Christ. But the tension produced by these two statements will occupy the Church for many centuries to come. Foregoing the Marcionite option of simply rejecting the Jewish scriptures, the early Church had to wrestle with twin sources of authority which were not easily reconciled. There is no hint that the author of 1 Peter thought he was saying anything daring or controversial. Quite the opposite; he appears to be echoing common Christian belief. But the dynamic set loose by quoting a text that demands absolute loyalty to God and applying it directly to Christ

was not so easily resolved. Though apparently unproblematic to the author of 1 Peter, it was not unproblematic for future generations of believers.

It is also possible that more distant texts might be recalled. To a certain mindset, being confronted by two conflicting texts prompts a search for a third text that will reconcile or explain them. Isaiah 51:12-13 might be such a text:

I, I am he who comforts you; why then are you afraid of a mere mortal who must die, a human being who fades like grass? You have forgotten the LORD, your Maker, who stretched out the heavens and laid the foundations of the earth. You fear continually all day long because of the fury of the oppressor, who is bent on destruction. But where is the fury of the oppressor?

The echo is certainly faint in terms of identical wording, but it is perhaps significant that the reason given for why the people should not fear human opponents is that they “are but grass”. The author of 1 Peter has already quoted Isaiah 40:6-8 to make the point that “all flesh is like grass” (1 Pet 1:24). The point is not that the author of 1 Peter had this text in mind but the document that he has left us has the potential to evoke it, at least for some readers.

2.5 A recent challenge by Christopher Stanley

Such intertextual connections are strongly challenged by Christopher Stanley (2004) in his work on the apostle Paul. Contrary to the Jewish exegetical practices usually cited by scholars to explain Paul’s exegesis, Stanley insists that the focus should not be on Paul’s supposed mental processes (“the intentional fallacy”) but levels of literacy among Paul’s Gentile readers (which is easily extended to the readers of 1 Peter). He then adopts a type of reader-response criticism to reconstruct how three different types of readers, which he designates as “informed”, “competent” and “minimal”, might have understood Paul’s quotations. This could have significant parallels with an intertextual approach but Stanley wishes to limit the meaning of a text to the reading/hearing experiences of its first readers. But suppose the text fell into the hands of someone like the author of the epistle to the Hebrews, whose superior knowledge of the scriptures allowed him to see all sorts of intertextual connections that the original recipients might have missed. Must we call this a “misreading”? It is a legitimate goal of historical criticism to enquire

how a text might have been understood by its first readers but a particular ideology that insists its “meaning” is limited to that.

3 CONCLUSION

Thomas Hatina (1999:28-43) has correctly observed that historical criticism and intertextuality belong to conflicting ideologies and are not to be equated. However, contrary to scholars such as Beale and Gheorghita, I take this to imply that both have a role to play in discerning the meaning of scriptural quotations in the New Testament. Historical criticism that only pursues original authorial intention is of limited use when studying Scripture, for the very nature of Scripture is to speak to new generations. On the other hand, an intertextuality that locates meaning in an infinite matrix of possible influences is unable to say anything specific about a text. In their extreme form, neither historical criticism nor intertextuality are suited to the task of studying the use of Scripture in the New Testament. But used together, they are able to compliment one another. Historical criticism has many important tasks, such as establishing the availability and form of texts, delineating the most likely meanings in their cultural context and establishing the most likely influences in the light of linguistic similarities. But it goes astray when its ideology of single authorial meaning is to the fore. Intertextuality requires such historical “fences” to contain the otherwise infinite number of possible influences but reminds the reader that meaning can never be isolated from other phenomena. If the meaning of Scripture is reduced to its original authorial intention, it ceases to be Scripture.

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