

How the New Testament Quotes and Interprets the Old Testament

A Variety of Kinds of “Uses”

We begin by observing that there is a variety of ways the NT authors can refer to the OT. They can quote it directly (as [Matt. 1:23](#) cites [Isa. 7:14](#)); they can allude to it (as [John 1:1–5](#) alludes to [Genesis 1](#)); they can use OT vocabulary with a meaning conditioned by OT usage (e.g., “the righteousness of God”); they can refer to the OT’s broad concepts (such as monotheism and creation); and they can refer to the basic overarching story of the OT (e.g., [Rom. 1:1–6](#)).

The second observation is that there is no reason to expect a single, one-size-fits-all explanation that covers every instance of the NT using the OT. For example, an author may be intending to specify the one meaning of the OT text, or he may be using the OT text as providing an example or pattern that illuminates something he is writing about. He may draw a moral lesson from some event (e.g., [Mark 2:25–26](#)), and he might find an analogy between his audience and the ancient people (e.g., [1 Cor. 10:6–11](#)). He might be making a point about how the Gentile Christians inherit the privileges of Israel ([1 Pet. 2:9–10](#)), or he might be explaining why Christians need not keep some provision of the OT (e.g., [Mark 7:19](#); [Eph. 2:19](#)). Paul describes his own calling in terms that remind us of the servant of the Lord ([Gal. 1:15](#) evoking [Isa. 49:1](#)): since Isaiah’s servant is a messianic figure (as Paul knew, cf. [Acts 13:47](#); [Rom. 10:16](#); [15:21](#)), it is best to see Paul as likening his own calling in some way to that of the servant, rather than as claiming that *he* was the servant.

Text Form

This part is the least controversial. As a general rule, NT authors cite the OT in a Greek form that is basically the Septuagint that is available in printed form today (see [The Septuagint](#)). There are places where the NT author’s citation differs slightly from that of the Septuagint: either because the author has adjusted the quotation to fit the syntax of his own sentence or otherwise adapted it to his purpose, or because he has quoted the Septuagint from memory. Therefore one cannot say that, in using a Greek version, the NT authors have in any way slighted the original intent of the OT authors.

NT Reflection on the Use of the OT

Several NT texts discuss the general stance by which Christians do, and should, approach the OT. The first is [Romans 1:1–6](#), where Paul describes the “gospel of God” as “promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy Scriptures.” The content that follows narrates Jesus’ public entry onto his Davidic throne through his resurrection, and Paul’s apostleship as the outworking of Jesus’ program “to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of his name among all the nations”: Paul is explaining that the events of Jesus’ victory, and the witness of the early Christians, are just what the OT had foretold. This is the kind of reading the OT itself invites (see [The Theology of the Old Testament](#)). Later in the same letter ([Rom. 15:4](#)), Paul says, “For whatever was written in former days [i.e., in the OT] was written for our instruction [i.e., as Christians].” He then goes on (in [vv. 9–13](#)) to cite several OT texts about the expectation of the coming era when the Gentiles would receive the light and join in worship with the faithful of Israel: the mixed congregations of Jewish and Gentile Christians are the fulfillment of that hope.

In [1 Corinthians 10:1](#), Paul alludes to OT events, saying “our fathers” experienced them. The church in Corinth, however, had a considerable proportion of converted Gentiles; so this means that Paul is treating the Gentile Christians as having been “grafted in” ([Rom. 11:17ff.](#)) to the olive tree (the people of God, cf. [Jer. 11:16](#)), and every bit as much heirs of the story as Jewish Christians are. After listing the ways that God judged the unfaithful among the ancient people ([1 Cor. 10:6–10](#)), Paul explains that “these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come.” God expects those who profess to be Christians to be sure their faith is real, just as he did the people in the Pentateuch.

[Hebrews 11](#) is able to parade the OT faithful before its audience (probably mostly Jewish Christians) to show them that they must persevere in faith just as the ancients did.

In [Luke 24:25–27, 44–47](#), Jesus “interpreted to [his disciples] in all the [OT] Scriptures the things concerning himself.” Luke does not tell us what that Bible study actually said. Some Christian interpreters have understood this to mean that it is possible to find in every part of the OT a “foreshadowing” of some aspect of the work of Jesus. However, other interpreters think it is enough to recognize both that there are specific texts that predict the messianic work, and that the entire trend of the OT story was heading toward Jesus’ victory after his suffering, which would usher in the era in which the Gentiles would receive God’s light ([Luke 24:47](#), “to all nations”).

Basic Catalog of NT Uses of the OT

When the apostles applied the OT to NT realities, they were following a long line of citing earlier Scripture, using a set of practices that can be found in the OT itself. For example, OT writers could allude to an earlier passage and elaborate on it (e.g., [Psalms 8 and 104](#) use [Genesis 1–2](#)); or they could allude to an earlier text and give a more precise nuance to it (as [Ps. 72:17](#) takes the more general [Gen. 22:18](#) and ties it specifically to the house of David). They could recognize a promise (e.g., [Dan. 9:2](#) finding in [Jer. 25:12](#) a promise for the length of Babylonian domination). They could see patterns of God’s behavior repeated (e.g., many Psalms allude to [Ex. 34:6–7](#) as God’s way of dealing with his people). They could also take texts from earlier generations and apply them to new situations (e.g., [Neh. 8:14–17](#) is often seen as an example of actualizing the laws of [Lev. 23:39–42](#) in concert with [Deut. 16:13–15](#); cf. also the well-known pairing of [Jer. 22:24–27](#) and [Hag. 2:23](#)).

The NT writers exhibit these uses due to their conviction that Christians are the heirs of Israel’s story; they exhibit other uses as well due to their conviction that the resurrection of Jesus had ushered in a new era, the messianic age—“the last days” foretold by the prophets. These authors saw themselves as God’s authorized interpreters for this new era that God had opened in the story of his people.

The early Christian missionaries went to synagogues to prove from the OT Scriptures that Jesus is the Christ (cf. [Acts 17:1–3; 18:26–28](#)). This implies that they relied on and used publicly accessible arguments from the text itself, rather than merely private insights—otherwise, they would have been unjust to hold anyone responsible for failing to see something that was not truly there. Luke praises the Berean Jews, who examined the OT to see whether what Paul and

Silas told them was so ([Acts 17:11](#)): this implies that the NT invites critical interaction over its appeal to the OT, and is not solely dependent on the “insider’s” point of view.

In classifying these uses, the basic questions are:

- What is it about the OT text that enables the NT writer to use it the way he does?
- What is the NT writer’s stance toward the “original meaning” of the OT text?
- What rhetorical goal is the NT writer trying to achieve by using the OT text as he does?
- In what ways does the NT author resemble and differ from interpretative principles found among other interpreters who come from the same period of time, particularly other Second Temple Jewish authors who were not Christians?

The categories in this catalog are intended to be broad and suggestive; there is no substitute for a case-by-case examination of the various passages.

Promise and fulfillment. In many cases the NT writers understood their OT texts as providing a promise about where the story was headed, and identify a particular event as the fulfillment (or partial fulfillment) of a promise. For example, [Matthew 12:17–21](#) understood the servant of the Lord in [Isaiah 42:1–3](#) as the Messiah, with Jesus being the promised person. Likewise, in [Romans 15:12](#) Paul sees the spread of Christian faith among the Gentiles as fulfilling the expectation of [Isaiah 11:1–10](#).

Pattern and fulfillment. This is often called “typology,” and it refers to the way patterns found in the OT enable Christians to understand their own situation in, through, and under Christ. For example, the way that a lamb in the sin or guilt offering serves as an innocent substitute to work atonement explains how Jesus’ sacrifice benefits believers (see note on [Isa. 53:7](#), the probable background to [John 1:29](#)).

Analogy and application. Sometimes the NT writers find some kind of resemblance between their situation and an earlier one, and derive principles from the OT passage for addressing the new situation. The examples of [Mark 2:25–26](#) and [1 Corinthians 10:6–10](#) have already been mentioned.

When an author is using an analogy, he is not offering an interpretation of the original intent of the OT text; nevertheless, the analogies respect the original intent. For example, in [Matthew 21:42](#), Jesus uses [Psalm 118:22–23](#) (about “the stone the builders rejected”) to describe the way the Jewish leaders rejected him. Though many understand this to be a messianic prediction, the main point Jesus makes is that Jewish leaders who rejected him are (by analogy) just as wrong and wretched ([Matt. 21:41](#)) as the great world powers that thought so little of Israel (see note on [Ps. 118:22–23](#)).

Understanding the use of analogy in this way will help when encountering some NT texts that are more difficult. In [1 Corinthians 9:9](#) and [1 Timothy 5:18](#), Paul cites an OT law ([Deut. 25:4](#)) about not muzzling an ox, and he applies it as a justification for paying those in ministry. The OT text is based on a principle of caring for working animals; Paul’s application seems to be based on a “How much more should we care for those who serve us with the word” kind of

argument in [Galatians 4:21–31](#), Paul constructs an “allegory” from Hagar and Sarah in Genesis, in order to convince his readers to reject the false teachers. There is no need to think he is disclosing any kind of additional meaning in Genesis, nor is he disregarding the original intent of the OT passages; he is simply likening those who follow his message to the “children of promise” (supernaturally produced like Isaac), and those who follow the false teachers to him “who was born according to the flesh” (i.e., to Ishmael).

Eschatological continuity. As indicated in [The Theology of the Old Testament](#), “eschatology” in the OT is focused on the coming era in which the Messiah will lead his people in bringing the light to the Gentiles; the NT position is that this era began with the resurrection and ascension of Jesus. These are separate chapters in the unfolding story of God’s work in the world, but they exhibit continuity because it is the same God at work, who saves people in the same way (cf. [Rom. 4:1–8](#)), who grafts believing Gentiles into the olive tree of his people ([Rom. 11:17](#)), and who is restoring the image of God in them. Hence Christian believers, both Jew and Gentile, share the privilege of the mission of Israel (e.g., [1 Pet. 2:9–10](#), looking back to [Ex. 19:5–6](#) and other texts). Thus, the Ten Commandments supply moral guidance to Christians ([Rom. 13:8–10](#)). The same “righteousness of God”—God’s uprightness and faithfulness in keeping his promises—that the OT celebrates lies behind God’s sending Jesus ([Rom. 1:17](#)).

Eschatological discontinuity. This category is related to the previous one and reflects the change in redemptive era. For example, God’s faithful no longer need to observe the OT food laws, whose purpose was to distinguish Israel from the Gentiles ([Lev. 20:24–26](#); cf. [Acts 10:9–23](#)). Other aspects of the Sinai covenant are likewise no longer directly applicable to God’s people, such as the sacrificial system and the theocratic government centered in Jerusalem.

Development. [Psalm 72:17](#) does not change the promise of blessing-to-the-nations of [Genesis 22:18](#) but rather develops it by bringing the manner of fulfillment into sharper focus. In the same way, [Isaiah 52:13–53:12](#) certainly describes the career of the Messiah in terms of rejection and humiliation followed by vindication and victory. As the note on [Isaiah 53:10](#) explains, death is clearly not the messianic servant’s end; but resurrection is not explicit there (although it now seems to be the natural inference). Thus [1 Corinthians 15:3–4](#) can say, “Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures” (probably echoing [Isa. 53:10](#)), and “he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures” (developing, or clarifying, [Isa. 53:10](#)). The assumption behind these examples is that the story is moving along, and God can feed new events and insights into the process (in the case of [Ps. 72:17](#), by giving an oracle establishing the Davidic covenant; in the case of [1 Cor. 15:4](#), by raising Jesus from the dead).

“Fuller sense.” Christians have used the Latin term *sensus plenior* (“fuller sense”) for cases where the NT seems to find a meaning in the OT that goes much farther beyond the original intent of the earlier passage than simple development. There is every reason to allow for such cases, when one considers that God is both planning events and inspiring the biblical authors as his authentic interpreters. Nevertheless it is wise to be careful: in many cases the suggestion of *sensus plenior* stems from a misapprehension of the earlier text or of the NT usage (see discussion of [Matt. 2:15/Hos. 11:1](#) below; see note on [Ps. 16:9–11](#)). There are some instances, however, where this does in fact seem to be what the NT author has done: e.g., in [John 1:1–5](#), John describes “the Word” as a divine Person active in the creation; he is echoing

[Genesis 1:1–2:3](#) but seeing something there that Moses did not say. Nevertheless, as the notes on [Psalm 33:4–9](#) explain, this is not out of step with Genesis (see also note on [Gen. 1:26](#) for the Trinity). One can imagine Moses saying, if he had been presented with John’s Gospel, “Well, I never thought of it that way, but now that you come to say it like that, I can see where you got it, and I like it”: that is, he would not think that his original intent had been violated. It is tenuous, however, to advocate a *sensus plenior* that dispenses with original intent.

[Matthew 2:15](#) is often taken as a case of *sensus plenior* because it says that when the holy family took shelter in Egypt (later to return to Palestine), this was to “fulfill” the words of [Hosea 11:1](#), “Out of Egypt I called my son.” Is Matthew finding a “messianic meaning” in Hosea that no one could have seen before? Probably not: it is more likely that Matthew found in Hosea a convenient summary of the exodus that contained the term “son.” (Many prophets summarize the exodus as a way of reminding Israel of their obligations to the Lord: cf. [Amos 3:1–2](#).) One of Matthew’s themes is that Jesus showed himself the true Messiah (the Davidic representative of Israel) by embodying all that Israel was called to be, and doing so faithfully (in contrast to Israel). On the “son of God” idea, an important theme for Matthew, see note on [Psalm 2:7](#). So Jesus’ experience “fulfilled” the pattern of the exodus, which means that this is a case of pattern and fulfillment.

Deity of Christ. NT authors often apply OT texts to Jesus that originally applied to Yahweh, the God of Israel. For example, [Hebrews 1:10–12](#) describes Jesus by using [Psalm 102:25–27](#), which is about God’s eternity. This is not because the psalm is directly messianic but because NT authors accept that Jesus is Yahweh incarnate (cf. [John 1:1–14](#)). Thus the NT uses these texts consistently with their original intent—they describe the Lord—and recognize that their description applies to Jesus as being no less truly the Lord than is God the Father.

In all of these cases the NT authors view themselves as the proper heirs and faithful interpreters of the OT.