

# Do We Need the New Testament to Understand the Old?

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It is a common feature of discussions with some fellow believers to hear them say that the New Testament interprets the Old. This maxim, which is almost a cliché in some circles, is seldom explained. It is usually taken for granted. “Surely,” we are told, “you understand how the NT throws light on passages in the OT?” “Surely you see how NT authors point to fulfillments of OT promises?”

Naturally, we are not commending a program of hermeneutics which totally dispenses with the voice of the NT when it speaks about the OT. The NT is the Word of God and is a continuation of the OT (which the NT calls the Word of God). And it is upon this fact that the truth of progressive revelation is built. What one Book or inspired author may say at one place and time is supplemented by another author. We can tell this is going on because of the correspondence of subject-matter. So, for instance, we can build up a pretty detailed picture of Messiah; where He will be born, from what tribe He will arise and when; what He will do, what His mission involves, etc. We do this, of course, by giving attention to the plain meaning of the words of the inspired writers.

However, our covenant theologian friends (among others) go beyond this and tell us that Messiah-Christ pops up in all sorts of unexpected places. Not only that, but the Church, the body of Christ, which is the fruit of His death and the resurrection (cf. Jn. 7:39; Rom. 4:25; 5:10; Col. 1:18), can also be found in the OT. This despite clear statements to the contrary in the NT (Matt. 16:18; Eph. 2:19-20; 3:1-6; Col. 1:24-26).

The reason our CT friends can do this sort of thing is their maxim: “the NT is needed to interpret the Old.” But the attentive reader will notice that I have just cited several NT passages which prove that the Church is not in the OT. How then, can they bypass these texts and insist that the reason they find the Church in the OT is because of the NT? I hope the answer is rather obvious. They are not interpreting the NT correctly. So as it turns out, the maxim really ought to be worded more accurately to: “the NT, as understood by us, is needed to interpret the OT.” To put it another way, the NT itself is not allowed to clarify the OT. Rather, the OT is interpreted on the basis of the highly debatable interpretations of certain groups and individuals. Thus, it is fallible human interpretation of the NT which is read in to the OT!

Now, getting our CT brothers to face up to this fact is like planting flowers in concrete. But there it is, and we have provided numerous examples of this in recent posts. This throws up several interesting problems, of which I shall list but two:

1. This thesis – which is nowhere asserted in the NT – would require that any appeal to the OT to validate something in NT times, and in the NT itself, would be rendered defunct, for it presupposes that an appeal to the plain-sense of the OT text is unsatisfactory for correct comprehension of the OT. The thesis states that the OT cannot be understood without the NT. Hence, although the NT might validate the OT, the OT cannot be appealed to for verification of the NT.

Imagine this scenario:

Jesus: “The [OT] Scriptures testify of Me..”

Pharisees: “Where are you in the Scriptures?”

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Jesus: "In types and shadows"

Pharisees: "How can anyone rightly interpret these types and shadows?"

Jesus: "By the New Testament"

Pharisees: "By the what?"

Jesus: "It won't be written for about 50 years, and won't be widely available for longer than that, but you need the NT to rightly interpret the [OT] Scriptures."

Pharisees: "?!?!?!?... So until we can read a copy of this NT I guess we can suspend judgment on your claim that the Scriptures testify of you?"

Get the picture? The thesis begins to look absurd!

Yes, but it could be replied that there are plain and clear statements in the OT which do not need the help of the NT. To which we may reply, "How much of the OT can be interpreted without the NT?" It is at that point that the cherished private NT interpretations of CT will come to the fore! In the end we ought to find ourselves doing what we should have been doing all along; studying the passages in their context to get their meaning, and then trying to fit the results of our exegesis into the wider meaning of the Canon.

2. Following on from above, this maxim would mean that Christians without the NT – and there were many of them in the First Century – could not comprehend the scripture they had – the OT. This puts Timothy in rough shape in 2 Timothy 3:15-16!

Once again the CT thesis does not hold up under scrutiny. What is the way through the problem? I will tell you. It is for CT's to stop being disingenuous and own up to the fact that to enforce their preferred view they have to resort to spiritualizing and/or allegorizing parts of *both* Testaments (recall what they do with Matt. 24; 2 Thess. 2; the whole of Revelation)! Bruce Waltke is at least candid enough to admit that he spiritualizes the text.

But then we are right back into this issue of a god who says one thing in plain language, while knowing he does not mean it in the way he is leading people to understand him. He would be, as I have called him, a "disingenuous god." For such a god, "the gifts and calling...are without repentance," but not, it would seem, without equivocation.