

Forty Reasons for Not Interpreting the Old Testament by the New Testament

© 2017 Paul Henebury

[This article was adapted from a Blog article.¹]

1. Introduction

It seems to be almost an axiom within contemporary, evangelical Bible interpretation that the New Testament must be allowed to reinterpret the Old Testament. That is, the New Testament is believed to have revelatory priority over the Old Testament, so that it is considered the greatest and final revelation. And because the NT is the final revelation of Jesus Christ, the only proper way to understand the OT is with the Christ of the NT directing us. Though proponents of this hermeneutic may define “reinterpret” with slippery words like “expansion” or “foreshadowing,” they are still insisting the OT can be, and in some cases, should be, reinterpreted through the lens of the NT.

Not unusually the admission is made that the original recipients of the OT covenants and promises would not have conceived of God fulfilling His Word to them in the ways in which we are often told the NT demands they were fulfilled. This belief in the interpretative priority of the NT over the OT is accepted as “received truth” by a great many evangelical scholars and students today. But there are corollaries which are

often left unexplored or ill-considered. Did the prophets of the OT speak and write in a sort of Bible Code which had to be picked through and deciphered by Apostolic authors resulting in hazy allusions and unanticipated concretizations of what seemed to be unambiguous language? Did God speak to men in times past in symbolic language so that we today could unravel what He really meant? Doesn't this strongly imply that the OT was not really for them, but for us?

Here are forty reasons (there could be more but it's a good number) why a student of the Bible should not adopt the common tactic of reading the New Testament back into the Old, with the resultant outcome that the clear statements of the Old Testament passages in context are altered and mutated to mean something which, without universal prevenient prophetic inspiration, no Old Testament saint (or New Testament saint who did not have access to the right Apostolic books) could have known.

In presenting these objections to the reinterpretation of OT passages by favored interpretations of the NT I am not throwing down the gauntlet to anyone. If someone wishes to respond to these objections I would be fascinated to read what they have to say. But no one is under pressure to

¹ <https://drreluctant.wordpress.com/2017/04/25/archive-forty-reasons-for-not-reinterpreting-the-ot-by-the-nt-the-first-twenty/>

agree with me. However, I hope these forty reasons will be given thoughtful consideration by anybody who comes across them.

I believe, of course, that the NT does throw much light upon the OT text. But it never imposes itself upon the OT in such a way as to essentially treat it as a sort of 'palimpsest' over which an improved NT message must be inscribed. By way of illustration, there are huge ramifications in making a dubious allusion in John 7:38 to Zechariah 14:8 a basis for a doctrine of the expansion of the spiritual temple over the face of the earth. Such a questionable judgment essentially evaporates huge amounts of OT material from, e.g., Numbers 25; Psalm 106; Isaiah 2; 33; 49; Jeremiah 30-33; Ezekiel 34; 36-37; 40-48; Amos 9; Micah 4-5; Zephaniah 3; Zechariah 2; 6; 8; 12-14; and Malachi 3, as well as all those other passages which intersect with them. I believe that the cost is too high as well as quite unnecessary.

With that introduction in mind, here, then, are my forty objections for consideration:

1. Neither Testament instructs us to reinterpret the OT by the NT. Hence, we venture into uncertain waters when we allow this. No Apostolic writer felt it necessary to place in our hands this hermeneutical key, which they supposedly used when they wrote the NT.
2. Since the OT was the Bible of the Early Christians it would mean no one could be sure they had correctly interpreted the OT until they had the NT. In many cases this deficit would last for a good three centuries after the first coming of Jesus Christ.
3. If the OT is in need of reinterpretation because many of its referents (e.g. Israel, land, king, throne, priesthood, temple, Jerusalem, Zion, etc.) in actual fact refer symbolically to Jesus and the NT Church, then these OT "symbols" and "types" must be seen for what they are in the NT. But the NT never does plainly identify the realities and antitypes these OT referents are said to point towards. Thus, this assumption forces the NT into saying things it never explicitly says (e.g. that the Church is "the New Israel," the "land" is the new Creation, or the seventh day Sabbath is now the first day "Christian Sabbath").
4. Furthermore, this approach forces the OT into saying things it really does not mean (e.g. Ezekiel 43:1-7, 10-12).
5. It would require the Lord Jesus to have used a brand new set of hermeneutical rules in, e.g., Lk. 24:44; rules not accessible until the arrival of the entire NT, and not fully understood even today. These would have to include rules for each "genre", which would not have been apparent to anyone interpreting the OT on its own terms.
6. If the OT cannot be interpreted without the NT then what it says on its own account cannot be trusted, as it could well be a "type," or even part of an obtuse redemptive state of affairs to be alluded to and reinterpreted by the NT.
7. Thus, it would mean the seeming clear predictions about the Coming One in the OT could not be relied upon to

- present anything but a typological/symbolic picture which would need deciphering by the NT. The most clearly expressed promises of God in the OT (e.g. Jer. 31:31f.; 33:15-26; Ezek. 40-48; Zech. 14:16-21) would be vulnerable to being eventually turned into types and shadows.
8. It would excuse anyone (e.g. the scribes in Jn. 5:35f.) for not accepting Jesus' claims based on OT prophecies – since those prophecies required the NT to reinterpret them. Therefore, the Lord's reprimand of the scribes in the context would have been unreasonable.
 9. Any rejection of this, with a corresponding assertion that the OT prophecies about Christ did mean what they said, would create the strange hermeneutical paradox of finding clear, plain-sense testimony to Christ in the OT while claiming the OT cannot be interpreted without the NT. One could not maintain this position without calling the whole assumption under review.
 10. The divining of these OT types and shadows is no easy task, especially as the NT does not provide any specific help on the matter. NT scholarship has never come to consensus on these matters, let alone "the common people" to whom the NT was purportedly written.
 11. Thus, this approach pulls a "typological shroud" over the OT, denying to its Author the credit of meaning what He says and saying what He means (e.g. what does one make of the specificity of Jer. 33:14-26 or Zeph. 3:9-20?).
 12. If the Author of the OT does not mean what He appears to say, but is in reality speaking in types and shadows, which He will apparently reveal later, what assurance is there that He is not still speaking in types and shadows in the NT? Especially is this problem intensified because many places in the NT are said to be types and shadows still (e.g. the Temple in 2 Thess. 2 and Rev. 11).
 13. This view imposes a "unity" on the Bible which is symbolic and metaphorical only. Hence, taking the Bible in a normal, plain-sense should destroy any unity between the Testaments. What we mean by "normal, plain-sense" is the sense scholars advocating this view take for granted their readers will adopt with them, which we would identify as "literal."
 14. However, a high degree of unity can be achieved by linking together the OT and NT literature in a plain-sense, even though every question the interpreter may have will not be answered. Hence, this position that the NT must reinterpret the OT ignores or rejects the fact that, taken literally (in the sense defined above) the OT makes good sense. But in ignoring this truth, Christians may pull down upon themselves the same kind of accusations of defensive special-

- pleading which they accuse religions like Islam and Mormonism of using.
15. Saying the types and shadows in the OT (which supposedly include the land given to Israel, the throne in Jerusalem, the temple of Ezekiel, etc.), are given their proper concrete meanings by the NT implies neither the believer nor the unbeliever can comprehend God's promises solely from the OT.
 16. Thus, no unbeliever could be accused of unbelief so long as they only possessed the OT, since the apparatus for belief (the NT) was not within their grasp.
 17. This all makes mincemeat of any claim for the perspicuity of Scripture. At the very least it makes this an attribute possessed only by the NT, and only tortuous logic could equate the word "perspicuity" to such wholesale symbolic and typological approaches.
 18. Thus, the OT is deprived of its own hermeneutical integrity. This would render warnings such as that found in Proverbs 30:5-6 pointless, since the meaning of the OT words must be added to in order to find their concrete references.
 19. A corollary to this is that the authority of the OT to speak in its own voice is severely undermined.
 20. In consequence of the above the status of the OT as "Word of God" would be logically inferior to the status of the NT. The result is that the NT (which refers to the OT as the "Word of God") is more inspired than the OT, producing the unwelcome outcome of two levels of inspiration.
 21. Saying the NT must reinterpret the OT also devalues the OT as its own witness to God and His Plans. For example, if the promises given to ethnic Israel of land, throne, temple, etc. are somehow "fulfilled" in Jesus and the Church, what was the point of speaking about them so pointedly? Cramming everything into Christ not only destroys the clarity and unity of Scripture in the ways already mentioned, it reduces the biblical covenants down to the debated promise of Genesis 3:15. The [true] expansion seen in the covenants (with all their categorical statements) is deflated into a single sound-bite of "the Promised Seed-Redeemer has now come and all is fulfilled in Him." This casts aspersions on God as a communicator and as a covenant-Maker, since there was absolutely no need for God to say many of the things He said in the OT, let alone bind himself by oaths to fulfill them (a la Jer. 31 & 33. Four covenants are cited in Jer. 33; three in Ezek. 37).
 22. It forces one to adopt a "promise – fulfillment" scheme between the Testaments, ignoring the fact that the OT possesses no such promise scheme, but rather a more relational "covenant – blessing" scheme.
 23. It effectively shoves aside the hermeneutical import of the inspired inter-textual usage of an earlier OT

text by later OT writers (e.g. earlier covenants are cited and taken to mean what they say in Psa. 89:33-37; 105:6-12; 106:30-31; 132:11-12; Jer. 33:17-18, 20-22, 25-26; Ezek. 37:14, 21-26). God is always taken at face value (e.g. 2 Ki. 1:3-4, 16-17; 5:10, 14; Dan. 9:2, 13). This sets up an expectation that covenant commitments will find "fulfillment" in expected ways, certainly not in completely unforeseeable ones.

24. It forces clear descriptive language into an unnecessary semantic mold (e.g. Ezek. 40-48; Zech. 14). A classic example being Ezekiel's Temple in Ezek. 40ff. According to the view that the NT reinterprets the Old, it is not a physical temple even though scholars across every spectrum declare that a physical temple is clearly described.
25. It impels a simplistic and overly dependent reliance on the confused and confusing genre labeled "apocalyptic" – a genre about which there is no scholarly definitional consensus.
26. It would make the specific wording of the covenant oaths, which God took for man's benefit, misleading and hence unreliable as a witness to God's intentions. This sets a poor precedent for people making covenants and not sticking to what they actually promise to do (e.g. Jer. 34:18; cf. 33:15ff. and 35:13-16). This encourages theological nominalism, wherein God's oath can be altered just because He says it can.
27. Since interpreters in the OT (Psa. 105:6-12); NT (Acts 1:6); and the

inter-testamental period (e.g. Tobit 14:4-7) took the covenant promises at face value (i.e. to correspond precisely to the people and things they explicitly refer to), this would mean God's testimony to Himself and His works in those promises, which God knew would be interpreted that way, was calculated to deceive the saints. Hence, a "pious transformation" of OT covenant terms through certain interpretations of NT texts backfires by giving ammunition to those who cast aspersions on the God of the OT.

28. The character of any being, be it man or angel, but especially God, is bound to the words agreed to in a covenant (cf. Jer. 33:14, 24-26; 34:18). This being so, God could not make such covenants and then perform them in a way totally foreign to the plain wording of the oaths He took; at least not without it testifying against His own holy veracious character. Hence, not even God could "expand" His promises in a fashion that would lead literally thousands of saints to be misled by them.
29. A God who would "expand" His promises in such an unanticipated way could never be trusted not to "transform" His promises to us in the Gospel. Thus, there might be a difference between the Gospel message as we preach it (relying on the face value language of say Jn. 3:16; 5:24; Rom. 3:23-26), and God's real intentions when He eventually "fulfills" the promises in the Gospel.

Since it is thought that He did so in the past, it is conceivable that He might do so again in the future. Perhaps the promises to the Church will be “fulfilled” in totally unexpected ways with a people other than the Church, the Church being just a shadow of a future reality?

30. Exegetically it would entail taking passages in both Testaments literally and non-literally at the same time (e.g. Isa. 9:6-7; 49:6; Mic. 5:2; Zech. 9:9; Lk. 1:31-33; Rev. 7).
31. Exegetically it would also impose structural discontinuities into prophetic books (e.g. God’s glory departs a literal temple by the east gate in Ezekiel 10, but apparently returns to a spiritual temple through a spiritual east gate in Ezekiel 43!).
32. In addition, it makes the Creator of language the greatest rambler in all literature. Why did God not just tell the prophet, “When the Messiah comes He will be the Temple and all those in Him will be called the Temple”? That would have saved thousands of misleading words at the end of Ezekiel.
33. It ignores the life-setting of the disciples’ question in Acts 1:6 in the context of their already having had forty days teaching about the very thing they asked about (“the kingdom” – see Acts 1:3). This reflects badly on the clarity of the Risen Lord’s teaching about the kingdom. But the tenacity with which these disciples still clung to literal fulfillments would also prove the validity of #’s 23, 26, 27, 28 & 32 above.
34. This resistance to the clear expectation of the disciples also ignores the question of the disciples, which was about the timing of the restoration of the kingdom to Israel, not its nature.
35. It turns the admonition to “keep” the words of the prophecy in Revelation 1:3 into an absurdity, because the straight forward, non-symbolic understanding of the numbers (7, 42, 144000, 1260, 1000, etc) and persons and places (twelve tribes of Israel, the Two Witnesses, the Beast and False Prophet, Jerusalem, Babylon, New Jerusalem, etc.), which is in large part built upon the plain sense of the OT is rejected in favor of tentative symbolic/typological interpretations. But how many people can “keep” what they are uncertain is being “revealed”?
36. It makes the unwarranted assumption that there can only be one people of God. Since the OT speaks of Israel and the nations (e.g. Zech. 14:16f.); Paul speaks of Israel and the Church (e.g. Rom. 11:25, 28; Gal. 6:16; 1 Cor. 10:32; cf. Acts 26:7), and the Book of Revelation speaks of Israel separated from the nations (Rev. 7), and those in New Jerusalem distinguished from “the kings of the earth” (Rev. 21:9-22:5), it seems precarious to place every saved person from all ages into the Church.
37. In reality what happens is that the theological presuppositions of the interpreter are read into the NT text and then back into the OT. There is a

corresponding breakdown between what the biblical texts say and what they are presumed to mean. Thus, it is the interpretation of the reader and not the wording of the biblical text which is often the authority for what the Bible is allowed to teach.

38. This view also results in pitting NT authors against themselves. E.g. if "spiritual resurrection" is read into Jn. 5:25 on the rather flimsy basis of an allusion to Dan. 12:1-2, that interpretation can then be foisted on Rev. 20:4-6 to make John refer to a spiritual resurrection in that place too. Again, if Jesus is said to refer to His physical body as "this temple" in Jn.2:19, then He is not allowed to refer to a physical temple building in Rev. 11:1-2. This looks like what might be called "textual preferencing."
39. This view, which espouses a God who prevaricates in the promises and covenants He makes, also tempts its adherents to adopt equivocation themselves when they are asked to expound OT covenantal language in its original context. It often tempts them to avoid specific OT passages whose particulars are hard to interpret in light of their supposed fulfillment in the NT. What is more, it makes one overly sensitive to words like "literal" and "replacement," even though these words are used freely when not discussing matters germane to this subject.
40. Finally, there is no critical awareness of many of the problems enumerated

above because that awareness is provided by the OT texts and the specific wording of those texts. But, of course, the OT is not allowed a voice on par with what the NT text is assumed to make it mean. Only verses which preserve the desired theological picture are allowed to mean what they say. Hence a vicious circle is created of the NT reinterpreting the Old. This is a hermeneutical circle which ought not to be presupposed because it results in two-thirds of the Bible being effectively quieted until the NT has reinterpreted what it really meant.



Source: SpiritAndTruth.org