

Real Thick Meaning and Preaching Christ from the Old Testament

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“As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another” (Prov 27:17). Proverbs reminds us of the necessity of critical yet constructive dialogue. It grinds out our error, sharpens our reasoning, and roots (and unifies) us more deeply in the truth (cf. Eph 4:15). We need more of these discussions.

Thus, we should be immensely thankful for the contributions of Drs. Block, Johnson, and Poythress. Their articles have provided the opportunity for iron to sharpen iron regarding the crucial matter of preaching Christ from the Old Testament (OT).

My goal is *not* to critique these senior scholars as much as to aid in thinking through what we might learn from them. To facilitate this, I would like to put these articles in conversation. That way we can synthesize these scholars' major contributions and observe how they refine each other as they make point and counterpoint. We can see how iron sharpens iron. Within this, I specifically want to note the hermeneutical contribution they make together. As we will discuss, their assertions and concerns formulate an essential hermeneutical point that instructs us on why and how we can

preach Christ from the OT.

Hence, I want to build upon these articles so that we can gain further hermeneutical clarity on this important issue. I hope that this insight will help us in preaching Christ in a way that honors his Word.

THE SHARED CONCERN OF HERMENEUTICS

As just stated, the focus of this review article will be on hermeneutics and for good reason: all three scholars wrestle with the same hermeneutical tension. On one hand, all three desire the preaching act to champion Jesus and believe the OT speaks of him. On the other hand, all three also express concerns that this be done in a way that upholds the integrity of the OT and the intent of the author. Poythress, who might be considered the most “Christocentric” of the three, is quite vocal on this matter. He warns against Christomonism, preaching Christ apart from the Trinity, preaching only in relation to Christ’s first advent, as well as adding or subtracting from God’s Word.

So, all three scholars are emphatic that the way we preach Christ from the OT matters. They agree that Christ must be preached from the OT in a manner that values grammatical-historical methodology. Their unity on this is important and a contribution to the discussion in and of itself. The issue of Christocentric hermeneutics seems so polarizing. However, those on different sides of the issue have more common ground than we might think. Though Poythress concedes he may not represent the whole movement, he represents a growing consensus that has the same aims and concerns. Namely, they want to exalt Christ and do so from a legitimate process. These two realities comprise the goal and tension that these respective articles contemplate.

VERN POYTHRESS: THE NEED FOR THICK MEANING

With this in mind, we can begin putting the three articles in dialogue with each other. Poythress’s article begins to tackle these hermeneutical concerns by reminding us that the meaning of Scripture is sophisticated. Poythress stresses that the interpreter should respect the entire biblical canon and the unity it brings. He points out that texts often connect

with other passages and are a part of a unified storyline culminating in Christ (cf. Gal 4:4). Because the prophets' writings participate in grand theological developments, they have theological depth of meaning. Poythress observes that such depth results in multifaceted significance or implications. A text may pose a moral example, development of a theology or theme, or function typologically. Poythress asserts that this complexity of meaning and significance is instrumental for preaching Christ from the OT. We can see how this works in Genesis 15:1-6. That text is part of God's agenda of Genesis 3:15 which is about Christ. Consequently, it advances the themes of seed, inheritance, and faith which climax in Christ (cf. Rom 4; Heb 11). It also showcases Abram as a moral example which directs us to having faith in Christ. Thus, Poythress reminds us that the unity of Scripture establishes the depth of Scripture and this helps us to see ways the OT connects with Christ.

In fact, because biblical texts have such depth, Poythress contends that Christocentricity not only extends to every verse but "every word in every verse." He backs this up with the example of Genesis 15. The very term "word" in Genesis 15:1 is case in point. Because of God's activity of speaking in creation and the personification of the "word" (it/he moves to Abram), Poythress argues that this refers ultimately to God the Son (cf. John 1:1). Block also affirms this observation. In this case, a single term is loaded with Christology in light of its union with a greater context. Overall, while stressing that the interpreter has "executive authority" to exhort but not "legislative authority" to invent what Scripture says, Poythress emphasizes that the canon exists, passages connect with canon in various ways, and so texts have a lot more dimensions to them than we might think.

In making these claims, Poythress introduces us to the literary concept of "thick" meaning. Thick meaning refers to how texts convey more ideas than the sum of their parts because of how they import from and interact with other texts.¹ Consistently, because of the Bible's interconnectivity, even simple stories, phrases, or individual words can have theological depth because of how they draw from and develop the truths of prior revelation. Poythress reminds us that because of the unity of Scripture, it has thick meaning; it is theologically rich. That depth provides the grounds for Christ focused preaching in the OT for he is present and anticipated.

This sounds good but raises a problem as Johnson and Block point

out. This dilemma in sum is “Where is meaning found?” Since Poythress has heavily emphasized canon, one might wonder if this “thick meaning” is really *in* the text or because it is *in* the canon. Poythress’s qualification on expository preaching may reflect this struggle. He affirms expository preaching relative to teaching sound doctrine based upon the canon. Yet, Poythress perceives that expository preaching relative to explaining a specific text (like a verse or verses) is too restrictive. Poythress’s reticence seems to suggest shifting the locus of meaning from a single text to something broader, more canonical. Contrast this with Johnson who insists that authorial intent can be discerned from a single text. He calls this assertion the “basis of expository preaching” (p. 36). This is not merely a contrast of style but rather of hermeneutical underpinnings. Where is meaning found? Does thick meaning come from the author in a text or is it found on the level canon and read into a text?

Block presses this point. He contemplates whether people’s Christocentric conclusions really come from the text itself. Poythress’s response to such a question is telling. For example, he acknowledges that his connection of the “word” with the “Word” in Genesis 15:1-6 might be considered a stretch. However, he argues that the archetypal communications within the Godhead provide ultimately justification for it. In other words, since it is true of the Godhead, it must be true of the Godhead’s activity in this text whether Moses was aware or not. Block’s objection would be that this is a theological abstraction and not exegetically grounded even though it could have been as Block will demonstrate. In any case, Block points out the problem of such a rationale. In essence, it removes the restriction of what the human author communicated and “has led to all sorts of bizarre perlocutions, which typically say more about the interpreters’ ingenuity than the text itself” (p. 13). At that point, Block wonders whether one has preached Christ *from the OT* or from somewhere else. Can one really say that they have said “thus says the Lord” as opposed to acting like false prophet who proclaim from their own impulse (Ezek 13:2-3)?

Poythress’s essay indicates he does not object to this pushback. Rather, Poythress reads a text quite closely as he discusses individual phrases and words in Genesis 15:1-6. He explicitly affirms the need to pay attention to grammatical-historical information of the text. Moreover, he mentions the tensions between the generals of canonical unity yet the particulars of

a given passage. So these authors are not disunified on this point but in agreement. Their counterpoints are refinements.

All of this shows that Poythress's emphasis on the thickness of meaning is absolutely valuable. Indeed, seeing that texts carry theological depth and thereby sophisticated ramifications is essential to knowing God's Word in general and preaching Christ from the OT specifically. However, the pushback has indicated that we are searching for more than just thickness. If we are to preach Christ *from the OT*, we want to make sure that this thickness is *in the OT* and not somewhere else.

ELLIOTT JOHNSON: THE NEED FOR MEANING/AUTHORIAL INTENT

This is where Johnson steps forward in the conversation. He presses the need to account for authorial intent as conveyed through the text. In his own words:

It is the intent of this essay to demonstrate that a grammatical interpretation of various Old Testament mentions of promise includes the presence of Christ ... The presence of Christ is the result of the author's intent as the promise is expressed in the text and is capable of being understood at that time in history; whether or not we have indication in the text that characters did understand. This thesis is then the basis of expository preaching (p. 36).

Johnson's goal, then, is to show that Christ is present in authorial intent. To accomplish this, he proposes the notion of "Christo-promise." He traces through the OT noting how God's promise drives its framework and storyline. Based upon this, he argues that the OT prophets wrote the entire OT with the expectation of future fulfillment, one that culminates in Christ. Thus, the prophets both directly proclaimed Christ in developing this promise and necessarily implied Christ as the fulfillment of what they outlined. In the case of Genesis 15:1-6, Johnson contends that Abram believed God about his promise of seed. In context, this promise built upon God's first promise of Genesis 3:15 and thereby has messianic elements in it. Being part of the redemptive historical storyline, it also has an expectation of future fulfillment beyond Abram. Thus, when the New Testament (NT) claims Abram believed in the gospel and Christ (Rom

4:3-5; Gal 3:8), that is a legitimate inference. After all, the Messiah was already implied in context in God's promise and that text look forward to a future fulfillment. The NT usage fits well with the OT writer's intent.

Johnson's entire notion of Christo-promise anchors preaching Christ from authorial intent. We preach Christ from the OT because the prophets discussed and anticipated him; we preach Christ per its "intention-directed revelation" (p. 44). Such an emphasis healthily balances Poythress's emphasis on thick meaning. It reminds us that thickness of meaning is because both human and divine author willed that complexity. That is why we can preach Christ *from the OT*.

The pushback against Johnson's suggestion is not necessarily in the proposal itself but its lack of comprehensiveness. Though Poythress agrees with Johnson on promise, he would note that the text contains more Christological elements than just mere promise. For instance, Johnson does not comment upon the potential activity of the second person of the Trinity via the "Word of the Lord" in the passage. Poythress's pushback then is not about having less authorial intent but more. His assertion would question whether we have read them thoroughly enough. Christo-promise is a good start but does not encompass their full sophistication.

Block raises this concern from a methodological side. This revolves around the issue of typology, a topic that all three scholars comment upon. Johnson argues that certain historical figures are types of Christ in light of the OT's promissory nature. Poythress also suggests this possibility. Block bristles at this, arguing that such typology drowns out authorial intent with a foreign grid. He uses Joshua as an example. Block observes that many have seen Jesus as a new Joshua. However, the data of both OT and NT point to the fact that Jesus is not a new Joshua but rather the God of Joshua. From this, Block observes the deceptive nature of imposing grids like Christo-promise or typology on a text: they can make us think we have authorial intent when we do not. The tragedy of this is that we may miss a vital Christological point (Christ's deity) to make a connection we had no grounds to make. Accordingly, like Poythress, Block's pushback on Johnson's emphasis is not less authorial intent but more and to truly have it.

Hence, Johnson contributes an important ingredient to the discussion: authorial intent. If we are to preach the OT, we must not merely preach what is true on a canonical level but what those authors specifically intended for

they can and do speak of Christ. The criticism is not that we need less of this emphasis but more. We need a higher view of the biblical writers in all their complexity and a method that is rigorous enough to ensure we glean all they articulated and implied, and nothing but that.

DANIEL BLOCK: THE NEED FOR REAL MEANING

This concern for proper methodology leads us to Block's contribution. The opening line of his article declares "my fundamental concern in conversations about preaching is that we proclaim the truth of God with integrity and with the passion of God's own heart" (p. 7). He desires that we have preaching which is true to the content of Scripture. Block scorns "cheap and trivializing typologizing and Christologizing, which often actually reflects a low view of Scripture and a low Christology" (p. 11). He also rightly debunks the notion that Luke 24 supports a Christocentric hermeneutic.

At the same time, Block also states that our methodology cannot be atomistic. Block warns against grammatical-historical interpretations that are in isolation from other Scriptures. He reminds us that the Scripture has a Christotelic quality. Every passage participates in God's agenda that culminates in Christ. The OT does witness to Christ. The key is to have the right starting point. He advocates that instead of reading Scripture backwards that we read Scripture forwards. Newer revelation does not rewrite what previous revelation meant. As Block observes about Genesis 15:6, "How Jesus fits into the message of Genesis 15:1-6 is an important question, but I cannot answer it until I have dealt with other issues" (p. 18). In having such a strict method, Block contends we will not only gain legitimate insights about Christ from the First Testament but also ones far deeper than the artificial connections we manufactured. Block's example of Joshua is case in point. As noted, proper method would lead us to conclude that Jesus is not merely a new Joshua but the God of Joshua.

All these exhortations ensure that we focus on the actual unique witness of the OT. Block's exegesis of Genesis 15:6 shows he practices what he preaches. From his thorough analysis, he comments on the wide range of theological implications that stem from the text. This affirms certain observations already made (like the involvement of the second person

of the Trinity in Gen 15:1). He also brings up certain observations not emphasized by the other scholars. For example, he brings out how God in context is refining Abram in using him in his redemptive plan. This has ramifications upon God's faithfulness, our sanctification, the privilege of serving God, and participating in God's saving work that focuses upon Christ. These implications and applications go beyond Christology proper but still honor Christ. This affirms Block's point. Careful and proper methodology will produce all that we desire to exalt Christ and more.

Having made these assertions, Block also warns about the dangers of not practicing a faithful methodology. He declares that a faulty Christologizing hermeneutic undermines evangelical credibility; it makes us "dishonest, fraudulent interpreters" (p. 18) because we read into a text something it never meant to say. This not only strips the OT of any substance but even more, Block contends that this is really an act of false prophecy (cf. Ezek 13:2-3). Block's warnings exhort us that methodology is not merely about preference but about pleasing God.

With that, Block reminds us that we not only need to observe thick meaning in the OT, but it must be real. We need to make sure that what we observe in the OT is the intent of the dual author as opposed to some other source (including our own theological ingenuity). Such verification happens through discipline to a rigorous methodology.

Poythress and Johnson would not disagree with such a methodological emphasis in principle but may push back on its application. This revolves around two assertions Block makes in discussing Genesis 15:1-6. First, Block asserts that the seed promise in this context does not have the Messiah in view. While the line of Abraham culminates in Jesus (cf. Matt 1:17), Block argues that the seed promise of Genesis 15 refers to his corporate line. So, Abram's faith was about that corporate promise. The pushback would be whether the seed promise can be so restricted. Both Poythress and Johnson argue that the seed promise intentionally develops Genesis 3:15. That promise then encompasses both a corporate line and an ultimate singular referent (Messiah). Even Block admits that the seed promise has a singular element in certain texts (Gen 22:16-17). If this is the case, the promise of seed does not so harshly distinguish between the singular and corporate aspects of this promise. Rather, even if one is emphasized in a context, it still encompasses an agenda that necessarily has

corporate and singular elements. With that, Abram's trust in God was more visibly Christotelic than Block articulates.²

Second, Block argues that God accounting Abram as righteous primarily refers to an acknowledgement of righteous behavior rather than his status. While the language of Genesis 15:6 can be used to describe righteous behavior (cf. Deut 6:25; 24:13), its closest parallel in Psalm 106:31 refers to covenant status. That idea fits well with Genesis 15:1-6 since, in that context, Abram will go through a covenant ceremony (cf. Gen 15:9-21). Hence, Genesis 15:6 speaks of how God concluded that Abram was righteous before him and thereby eligible to enter into a covenant. Unlike other situations where one's behavior is a factor (cf. Deut 6:25; 24:13; Ps 32:1), Genesis 15:6 states that God's verdict is based upon Abram's faith. Such a contrast would impress upon Israel that their covenant relationship is not grounded in works but faith. In context, this faith pertains to relying solely upon God to accomplish his promise of seed. These ideas of faith in God's seed promise (which includes Messiah), righteous status, and covenant entrance all coincide closely with Paul's later soteriological usage (Rom 4:3; Gal 3:6).³ Again, Genesis 15:6 is more directly Christotelic than Block expresses.

On both of these issues, the pushback might be that Block's rigorous methodology may have omitted data that might make the Christotelicity of a text more forceful or deliberate. This takes the "conversation" full circle as one now desires a "thick" meaning that Poythress presented at the beginning of this discussion. Nevertheless, Block's incisive assertions make a major contribution into the discussion. We should have thick meaning, but we must make sure that this is *real* in that it comes from the OT prophets and no one else. Only then are we truly preaching Christ from the OT.

REAL THICK MEANING AND THE PROPHETS AS THEOLOGIANS

So, what should we learn from all of this? As we put the articles in conversation, we can see what these three scholars were wrestling with and looking for. They want meaning that is thick (Poythress) yet within the author's intent (Johnson) and can be proven to be so via a rigorous method (Block). In sum, they want "real thick meaning." For these scholars, this becomes the underlying justification and regulating principle to preaching

Christ from the OT. We can preach Christ from the OT because the prophets' intent is sophisticated enough to speak of and set up for him. At the same time, since the prophets' intent is the source of preaching Christ, that becomes the hermeneutical standard and prevents the abuses the three scholars were concerned about. Thus, real thick meaning is instrumental in resolving the aforementioned hermeneutical tension of how to preach Christ while honoring the OT.

The question now becomes whether real thick meaning exists in the OT and how do we know that? Even more, if it does exist, how do we discern it? I would submit the answer to these questions is that the prophets are theologians.

People have different perspectives on the OT prophets which affects their view of the OT. For example, if, as in the case of liberal scholarship, one perceives the prophets as political strategists, then their works become political justifications or rebuttals of certain social movements in Israel. If one views the prophets as merely historians, then their works are just records of what happened in the past. If one views them as merely shepherds or farmers, then one may see their works as simple. In any of these cases, seeing the presence of theology, much less Christ, is difficult if not impossible. How we view the prophets determines how we read them.

However, the Bible gives a different picture than anything mentioned above. It compels us to see the prophets as theologians. On a deductive level, Scripture declares that the prophet's role is to reveal divine truth (Deut 18:18). They are thereby givers of theology. Consistently, Scripture also claims that the prophets had sophisticated knowledge when writing. The OT declares that the prophets were immersed in Scripture (Josh 1:8; Ps 119:15; Isa 8:20). The NT affirms this also. It asserts that certain prophets knew of Messiah and the resurrection (Acts 2:31; 1 Cor 15:4). Directed by the Spirit, they knew of the Messiah's suffering and the glory thereafter even if they did not know the timing or exact circumstances (cf. 1 Pet 1:10-11; John 12:38-41). Although Luke 24 does not claim that every OT text speaks of Christ, it acknowledges that the OT collectively proclaims him and that the prophets willfully did so. That is why Jesus condemns the disciples for not believing "all the prophets have spoken" (Luke 24:25). With that, Scripture gives overarching evidence that the prophets themselves wrote theology consciously and intelligently.

From an inductive standpoint, we can see why this is the case. Numerous studies have observed that the prophets frequently alluded to earlier revelation.⁴ Some of these connections are on the level of a single phrase or word. Thus, the prophets were constantly explaining, developing, applying, and interacting with other passages of Scripture. That activity is theology. With that, Scripture not only deductively portrays the prophets as theologians, but we can also inductively observe their theological work through the way they connect with previous revelation. The prophets, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, are brilliant theologians.

As noted, how we view the prophets determines how we read them. If they are profound theologians, then what they write is profound theology. This demonstrates why real thick meaning exists in the OT. It is thick because the prophets write deep theology which has enough sophistication to both discuss Christ (at times) as well as establish implications that will connect with Christ. It is meaning because such depth is in their immense knowledge of prior revelation and in what they, under inspiration, said in developing those concepts. It is real because we can demonstrate that this complexity came from the prophets themselves. They establish the theology of their writings through their linguistic connections with antecedent passages. Even more, at times, a series of prophets will highlight and refine how the ramifications of an earlier text will lead to the NT. Thus, we do not make up the complexity of the OT. The connections the prophets make establish their theology and even the significance of certain texts. With that, the OT has real thick meaning because the prophets are theologians. Under the Spirit's perfect guidance, they have engaged in theology. Our job then is to just trace what they have done.

What does that look like? How do we do that? We should be cautious of forcing categories on a text. After all, we just learned that the author makes the connections and we follow them. Hence, fundamentally, we need to look for ways the author makes allusions via distinctively similar wording. We then need to prove that this was intended by the author.⁵ Having done so, we can see how the connection brings out the theology of the text and how that may participate in a chain of texts leading to Christ. There is no substitute for such an inductive method.

Nevertheless, I can still suggest four major ways this may occur:

1. The prophets can directly prophesy about Christ. All three scholars have mentioned this.
2. The prophets can describe situations which imply the participation of the second person of the Trinity. For instance, Block and Poythress observe this in the activity of the Word of the Lord in Genesis 15:1-6.
3. The prophets can prepare for Christ on a micro-level via individual theological themes and truths. Non-predictive parts of the OT still establish a theology that may have pertinence in thinking about Christ. For example, Poythress and Johnson mention that the theology of faith and righteousness in Genesis 15:1-6 sets an important foundation for understanding faith in Christ in the NT. The NT also draws from OT scenes (John 4:1-38; Exod 2:16-19) and concepts (John 1:29; Lev 4-5) as the backdrop for the life of Christ. Understanding OT theology ensures we not only have real thick meaning in the OT but also in the NT.
4. The prophets can prepare for Christ on a macro-level or relative to redemptive history because they wrote with a view to God's grander plan (cf. Neh 9:1-38; Dan 9:1-19). We can see how a moment advances God's agenda towards Christ. For instance, Block, Johnson, and Poythress all comment on how Genesis 15:1-6 functions in God's plan about the seed.

These four ways happen often in the OT. They illustrate that much of the OT has bearing on Christ in ways that go beyond what we might anticipate. Nevertheless, all of this is determined by the author. This reiterates, as Block already asserted, the importance of carefully reading the OT. Doing this not only ensures we do not make a baseless conclusion but also prevents us from missing all the immense ways the OT does magnify Christ.

Hence, real thick meaning reminds us that, in preaching Christ, our hermeneutical task has not changed. The prophets are theologians who have established a theology that proclaims and prepares for Christ in textually discernible ways. So, we do not need a new method to find Christ in the OT. Rather, we just need to do what we are always supposed to do with all Scripture: say what the biblical writers say (cf. 2 Tim 2:15; 2 Pet

3:16) because a Christ exalting theology is there.

CONCLUSION

With that, a final contribution Block, Poythress, and Johnson have made is that they clarify for us why preaching Christ from the OT is difficult. It is not because the OT is somehow deficient, and we need to come up with creative methods to find or insert Christ into the text. Rather, it is because the OT is complex and rich, and doing justice to all of that is an intricate task. They remind us that we need to work hard to grasp all that is there with the confidence that by carefully connecting the dots, the prophets themselves will direct us on how to magnify the Savior. In doing this, we will not only proclaim Christ legitimately from the OT but also glean the full truth to help our people honor him. My prayer then is that we keep “iron sharpening iron” so that we learn better to exalt Christ in ways that honor what he has written.

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1. Juliana Claassens, “Biblical Theology as Dialogue: Continuing the Conversation on Mikhail Bakhtin and Biblical Theology,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 122 (2003): 129; Jacob Meskin, “Textual Reasoning, Modernity, and the Limits of History,” *CrossCurrents* 49, no. 4 (1999): 477.
 2. See discussion in T. D. Alexander, “Royal Expectations in Genesis to Kings: Their Importance for Biblical Theology,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 49 (1998): 205.
 3. See further discussion in K. A. Matthews, *Genesis 11:27-50:26* (New American Commentary; Nashville, TN: B&H, 2005), 168.
 4. Abner Chou, *The Hermeneutics of the Biblical Writers: Learning Interpretation from the Prophets and Apostles* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2018), 51–54; Michael Fishbane, “Types of Biblical Intertextuality,” in *Congress Volume* (ed. A. Lemaire and M. Saebø; Leiden: Brill, 1998), 39–44; Martin Pickup, “New Testament Interpretation of the Old Testament: The Theological Rationale of Midrashic Exegesis,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 51, no. 2 (June 1, 2008): 353–381.
 5. See discussion in Chou, *Hermeneutics of the Biblical Writers*, 206–207.