

Preaching Christ from the Old Testament: A Response to Daniel Block, Elliott Johnson and Vern Poythress

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My assignment given by the editor is to respond to the papers by Daniel Block, Elliott Johnson and Vern Poythress and to discuss what I take to be their strengths and weaknesses in the light of the approach to interpreting Scripture that I describe in my book, *Interpreting Scripture with the Great Tradition*.¹ It might be helpful if I quickly summarize a few of the main points of that book before moving to critique.

THE INTERPRETATION OF SCRIPTURE IN THE GREAT TRADITION

The basic thesis of the book is that a great deal of the best Evangelical preaching in the contemporary church is at odds with much of the hermeneutical theory taught in modern, Evangelical seminaries. This situation results from the fact that academic hermeneutics has been more influenced by Enlightenment-inspired historical criticism, whereas church preaching has been more indebted to an oral tradition of Great Tradition

hermeneutics handed down from generation to generation and connecting the best evangelical preaching of today to traditional orthodoxy. With apologies to any professors of hermeneutics who may read these lines, it must be said that many preachers park their hermeneutical theories at the door of the seminary as they leave and proceed to preach the way their revered mentors in ministry do. My proposed solution, however, is not to call for preaching to be brought into line with academic theory (which currently is in a state of considerable confusion), but instead to reform academic hermeneutical theory in such a way that it becomes more suitable for supporting and enhancing the great evangelical preaching of the church—a tradition that stretches all the way from Irenaeus and Athanasius to Augustine and Calvin and on to Wesley and Whitefield and down to Charles Spurgeon, W. A. Criswell and John R. W. Stott.

The Christ-centered preaching of the Old Testament (OT) has nourished the faith of the people of God and has linked the church in every age to the apostles. However, it appears that many modern Evangelicals have been influenced by the rise of historical criticism and, as a result, have become hesitant to interpret Scripture as divinely inspired by the Triune God and given to point us to salvation in Christ. This is particularly apparent in their academic writing. Since we lack the theoretical apparatus to express our conviction that Christ is present throughout his Word, the issue of how the OT bears witness to Christ has become problematic for us on the theoretical level.²

I describe the rise of Enlightenment-inspired historical criticism in chapter four of the book as the systematic rejection of the theological metaphysics generated by the Nicene doctrine of God, which became integral to the Great Tradition of Christian orthodoxy. Evangelical hermeneutics has resisted many of the worst elements of higher criticism, yet Evangelical scholars have not remained untouched by its errors. Since it is a fact that the philosophical naturalism of the Enlightenment has come to dominate Western university culture, anyone wishing to operate within the university context has to contend with an atmosphere dominated by the rejection of classical metaphysics and Christian orthodoxy. Compromises and confusion are inevitable in such a situation and the wonder is that Evangelical hermeneutics has managed to avoid even worse corruption. Here I point out four specific areas of confusion.

First, historical criticism puts all the emphasis on human authorial intent (HAI); the text means only what the original human author meant to say to the original audience in the original situation. This is what modern historical critics mean by the “historical meaning.” However, this approach ignores Divine authorial intent (DAI) and is therefore extremely reductionistic.³ I would suggest that to do this is to render the doctrine of divine inspiration partially inoperative in one’s interpretative work regardless of how strongly one affirms inerrancy.⁴ Reducing the meaning of the text to the conscious intention of the human author is to view the text as merely a repository of human meaning arising from the mind of the human author, through the influence of the culture in which the text was written. Reconstructing the historical context, therefore, is seen as the key to determining the author’s meaning. One result of this approach is that long-term, predictive prophecy becomes impossible, which is why even fairly moderate biblical scholars, such as Walter Moberley,⁵ routinely deny the existence of long-term predictive prophecy in the Bible, despite what I take to be the obvious presence of long-term predictions in the text and the practically unanimous witness of the church to that fact for two millennia.⁶ Such confusion arises when one argues for the single-meaning of the text in such a way as implicitly to rule out DAI, which thus unwittingly emasculates inspiration.

Secondly, historical criticism creates confusion by moving the interpreter’s attention from the text itself to the author’s subjective state of mind (intentions). The inconvenient truth is that we do not have access to the human author’s mind. Even though, in some cases, we have quite a bit of biographical information to go on, it is problematic that, in other cases, we have very little and, in some cases, none to go on. In some cases, the canonical form of the text owes a great deal of decisive importance to the anonymous redactor or editor of the final form of the text. For example, the presence of Davidic psalms such as Psalm 110 in Book Five of the Psalter is crucial for understanding the overall theology of the Psalter and the relationship of the Davidic Messiah to the final redemption of the world.⁷ Yet, we do not even know the name of the editor of the final form of the Psalter! What was that editor thinking in putting Davidic psalms in the final book of the Psalter? A focus on HAI here can easily degenerate into baseless speculation absent hard evidence. We are thrust back on the HAI of the psalm itself, which is fine as far as it goes; but the result is an atomizing

effect on the Psalter and a loss of appreciation for the shape and meaning of the book as a whole. I do not have time to develop this discussion here, but my main point is that a focus on the meaning of the text, including DAI and canonical structure, is necessary in order to interpret the text responsibly and any aspect of our hermeneutical theory that militates against that is unhelpful. Moving the focus from the subjective state of the human author's mind (without, of course, completely ignoring the HAI as a step toward understanding the text) and putting the focus on the meaning of the text itself as our ultimate goal allows us to understand the text as the Word of God and not merely the human words alone.

Thirdly, historical criticism is rooted in a materialistic metaphysics of philosophical naturalism and thus is blind to the full scope of reality. The eliding of DAI and the shift from the text to the subjective intentions of the human author understood in his historical context is hardly accidental in Enlightenment-inspired historical criticism. These moves are rooted in metaphysics. In chapter three of my book I argue that Modernity can be understood as a point-by-point rejection of the main tenets of the Christian Platonism that emerged as the metaphysical framework for the Trinitarian and Christological orthodoxy at the heart of the Great Tradition. Philosophical naturalism says that the universe to which we have access through our five senses is the sum total of reality and there is nothing real beyond this universe. The Bible, on the other hand, teaches the reality of a spiritual realm that is connected to the universe to which we have access and cannot be reduced to this universe. Augustine's understanding of the phrase "the heavens and the earth" as the sum total of spiritual and material reality was already traditional in his day. The Bible presupposes the existence of heaven as a real place; angels go back and forth on assignments and the resurrected body of Jesus ascended to heaven, is there now, and will return from heaven to earth in the second coming. So biblical interpretation must occur within a context of metaphysical realism and must reject nominalism, materialism and mechanism.

In particular, we must reject the Enlightenment myth of the world as a giant perpetual motion machine that moves itself and is self-sufficient. Cheerful and confident embrace of the supernatural may be frowned on in the secular academy, but it is as natural as breathing for Christian orthodoxy and should be natural for Evangelical hermeneutics. A Christian theological

metaphysics is the natural and healthy context in which exegesis is done.

Fourthly, the anti-supernatural bias of philosophical naturalism can be seen in the subtle but devastating re-definition of the word “history” since the eighteenth century. Whereas history used to be understood as “the interpretation of past events,” it has come to be understood within historical criticism as “the interpretation of past event assuming that there is no such thing as the supernatural.” This materialist understanding of history eviscerates the biblical narrative, denies the reality of the mighty acts of God in salvation history and reduces the reconstructed history behind the text that is thought to hold the key to the meaning of the text to that which is human, natural and non-supernatural. It is like the Gnosticism that Irenaeus combated in that it seeks to read an alien metaphysical system into the Bible as if biblical texts were to be understood in terms of the “myth of the world as self-sufficient machine” instead of being interpreted from within the theological metaphysics generated by Scripture itself. What we need to see is that all interpreters work in the context of some set of metaphysical assumptions or other and no one is “neutral.” Either interpretation occurs within a philosophical naturalist context or within a Christian theological metaphysics or it occurs within some other worldview. It can also be done in the context of confused and logically contradictory assumptions held together by arbitrary decisions of will, but in that case the results will be all over the map and hardly satisfactory. It behooves biblical interpreters to get their metaphysical act together if they want to interpret Scripture well.

Reform and renewal of evangelical hermeneutics needs to focus on these four areas as priorities: bringing DAI back into the picture, focusing on the text itself rather than on the human author of the text only, making a realist metaphysics operative for hermeneutics, and abandoning the reductionist version of history that is the poison fruit of philosophical naturalism. If we were to reform hermeneutics along these lines, much of the confusion over how to preach Christ from the OT would dissipate and the preaching of the church over the past twenty centuries would appear in a different light. Some of the persistent problem we face as interpreters such as those which appear in these papers we are about to consider could be resolved. We would be able to see Christ in all of Scripture because we would be able to give a rational account of a sacramental metaphysics in which the world is held together by the Word of God and all reality participates in the ideas

in the mind of God, which make things in the world what they are, keeps their natures constant thorough time and ultimately gives them their *telos* or end. As the One in whom “all things hold together” (Col 1:17) Christ is the eternal Son of the Father and is present in all places and at all times. All things point to him and in him all things make sense. So for Christ to be present in the OT as the one whose Spirit inspires the prophets (1 Pet 1:11), as the one to whom the Scriptures point (Luke 24:27) and as the one who himself speaks in the Scriptures (Heb 10:5; cf. Ps 40:6-8) is perfectly comprehensible. It is little wonder that this has been believed by the vast majority of the great pastors and theologians of the church throughout church history.

DANIEL BLOCK AND CHRISTOTELIC INTERPRETATION

Dr. Block begins with a statement that his fundamental concern is to proclaim the truth with integrity and with the passion of God’s heart and that bringing these two together is a great challenge (p. 7). This is a common way of defining the task of a believing OT scholar. It is a challenge to mediate between the secularized academy and the church of believers and we all feel the tension at times.

Block discusses the relationship between human authorial intent and divine authorial intent and posits two alternatives: one the one hand there are those who say that “what the human author said the divine author said” and, on the other hand, there are those for whom there is no connection between these two (p. 13). Block affirms the first alternative and blasts the second alternative as irresponsible. He never considers a third alternative, however, in which there is an expanded or extended literal sense, that never breaks off from its connection to the literal, humanly intended sense, but does go beyond what the original human author had in mind.

It seems to be the case that an OT prophet like Isaiah, at many points, records the oracle God inspired him to write but does not, himself, understand all that the oracle means. What would it mean for Isaiah to fully understand all the meaning inherent in the poem he wrote in Isaiah 52:13-53:12? Would it mean that he understood that a baby would be born to a virgin, centuries later in Bethlehem after the return from exile, and that he would grow up to be a messianic figure who would die on a Roman cross

as an atonement for the sins of the world? Well, it seems to me that we have to say that Isaiah had some inkling of a divine Servant who would atone for the sins of Israel by suffering vicariously, but the details and timing were very unclear to him. And Isaiah had a vision of an anointed conqueror who would fulfill the promises of the restoration and glorification of Zion. In his mind, how did these two figures relate to each other? It is difficult to say precisely. However, the contemporary interpreter has advantages Isaiah himself did not have in understanding what Isaiah's oracle means.

It seems to me that Peter is talking about this very ambiguity when he writes:

Concerning this salvation, the prophets who prophesied about the grace that was to be yours searched and inquired carefully, inquiring what person or time the Spirit of Christ in them was indicating when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glories. It was revealed to them that they were serving not themselves by you, in the things that have now been announced to you through those who preached the good news to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven, things into which angels long to look. (1 Pet 1:10-12)

Notice where Peter conceives Christ to be. Christ was in the prophets by his Spirit. Christ was also future to the prophets as the Suffering One their prophecies foretold. And Christ is currently glorified following his period of suffering. The sacramental presence of Christ is magisterially present in all times because no time can contain or limit the divine presence. Also note that Peter distinguishes between the revelation given through the prophets (what person or time the Spirit of Christ was indicating) and the prophets' own partial understanding of that revelation. This is the basis of the distinction between human and divine authorial intent. But both of these sources of meaning inhere in the text of Scripture and both can be understood by the interpreter who is aware of the "good news" of Jesus Christ and guided by the Spirit. Isaiah did not know "who" or "when" but he had an inkling of "what" the coming One would do. Isaiah 53 is about divine provision for sin as necessary for the forgiveness of intransigent sinners who otherwise could not be saved. What the people of God could not do for themselves, even with the provision of the temple, sacrificial system and priesthood, YHWH would do for them through the mysterious

figure we know as the Suffering Servant.

If Block were to recognize the presence of this gap between the human and the divine authorial intention in the text, his constant rhetorical attacks on straw men such as those who supposedly see Christ in every text of Scripture would be unnecessary (p. 14). He could honor the human authorial intent while also recognizing that the meaning of an OT text often goes beyond the human intention because of divine inspiration. In his discussion of the sacrificial system, he correctly asserts that the author of Hebrews understood the OT sacrificial system as pointing to Christ. But he also stresses that Moses and the Israelites who brought their sacrifices to the tabernacle were not looking forward to a “coming sacrificial Messiah.” (p. 17) The question left open here is the thorny issue of how the author of Hebrews can justifiably interpret Christ as the fulfillment of the sacrificial system if the meaning of the OT text does not contain a reference to Christ. Has the meaning of the text changed? If so, this sounds like the New Testament (NT) writers in fact did exactly what those Jews who reject Jesus as the Messiah accuse them of doing: namely, they hijacked the Jewish Scriptures by reading into them meaning that is not really there. The issue is what the OT really *means*. Either the apostles got it right or they got it wrong. They either correctly discerned the meaning of the text put there by the Spirit of Christ that the original human author did not fully understand or else they read their own meaning into the text. Everything hangs on which it is; does the OT really point to Christ?

Block wants the apostolic interpretation of the OT to be accepted as valid. He wants to affirm that the Christian understanding of the prophets is objectively true, not arbitrary and subjective. And that is commendable. But if he were to recognize the role of DAI in the OT text as extending beyond the conscious intention of the human author he would be able to affirm a *sensus plenior* that goes beyond the literal sense without breaking off from the literal sense and becoming a free-floating “anything goes” kind of interpretation. This would anchor the gospel of Jesus Christ in the OT text and it would allow the OT text to be fully Jewish and fully Christian at the same time.

The methodological confusion surfaces when he argues that the underlying assumption of Christian exegesis is that “Jesus Christ is the heart and goal of all revelation” but this is “not the starting point of biblical

analysis.” (p. 18) How can an “underlying assumption” not be a “starting point”? The overly sharp rhetoric about evangelical credibility being undermined by “dishonest” and “fraudulent” contrasts with his actual procedure. He quotes Austin Farrer who says “It is an exegetical fraud to read developed Christian dogmas between the lines of Jewish narratives,” (p. 18) but he does not explain how Christ being an underlying assumption of exegesis escapes this criticism. What Block appears to mean is that if we read the OT without using the lens of Christian dogma we can conclude at the end of our reading that it points to Christ. But we cannot use our Christological convictions in our actual exegesis. This appears to leave open the possibility, however, that a non-Christian reading of the OT would be another valid reading for one who does not believe in Christ. Therefore, the view appears to be that we believe in Christ on other grounds than the OT witness and then we read him into the OT and this is one possible valid reading of the OT. I want to say it much more strongly than that; I would want to say that this is the only, *right* reading of the OT. And I want to emphasize with the church fathers, such as Justin Martyr and Irenaeus, that the fulfillment of OT prophecy by Jesus Christ is the strongest possible evidence that he is the one who was to come.

When he comes to Genesis 15:1-6 Block first criticizes Ambrose for saying that this text means that Abram believed in Christ. Block comments: “Really? The text offers no hint that this was either what Abram was thinking or what the author of this text (human or divine) had in mind.” (p. 17) So it would seem that Block is against a Christological interpretation of Genesis 15:1-6. But then, a few pages later, Block says: “This means that the person who encounters Abram in this text is none other than Jesus.” (p. 20) How do we explain the apparent contradiction?

I suggest that the confusion goes back to the failure to distinguish clearly between different definitions of authorial intent. Let us think of five possible meanings of “authorial intent” and label them M1, M2, M3, M4 and M5. M1 is the straightforward human authorial intent. M2 is the Divine authorial intent. M3 is the intention of the character in the text. M4 is the meaning of “the text” as opposed to any author’s or character’s subjective intentions. M5 is the meaning of the text as embedded in the chapter, book, testament and canon as a whole. It would seem that Block is thinking of one or all of M1, M2 and M3 on page 17, but he is thinking of M5

on page 20. What drives Block's rhetoric condemning the Christological reading of the OT seems to be his confusion over the relationship of M5 to M2. If he were to recognize that M5 is M2, he could say that the correct interpretation of Genesis 15:1-6 (and a great many other OT texts) would be a Christological one and he could also say, consistently, that Jesus Christ is our underlying assumption in exegesis in the sense that M5 is connected to M2 by the doctrine of divine inspiration. The worry that viewing the meaning of the text as going beyond the conscious intention of the human author opens the door to interpretive anarchy would be alleviated by the canonical control on the *sensus plenior*.

ELLIOTT JOHNSON AND VERN POYTHRESS: SOME REFLECTIONS ON THEIR APPROACHES

My comments on Johnson's and Poythress's papers will be brief. Johnson recognizes the importance of understanding the Christological meaning being inherent in the OT text and not merely read into it after the fact. He says: "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." (p. 36). Johnson argues that a grammatical interpretation of OT texts lead to a Christological interpretation. This emphasis on the objective Christological meaning of the text is a welcome one insofar as it grounds the Christological meaning identified by the apostles as inherent in the text itself.

Where Johnson runs into difficulties is in trying to explain how this is not reading NT meaning into the OT text. In considering Peter's use of Psalm 16, he says that the promise in Psalm 16:10b, cited by the Apostle Peter on the Day of Pentecost in Acts 2:32 "referred ultimately to Jesus and his resurrection." He would be better off avoiding labelling the Christological meaning as "NT meaning" and seeing the Christological meaning as validly present in both testaments. I believe he is very close to doing this and the reason is his high doctrine of inspiration and his emphasis on prophecy and fulfillment. In these two ways, Johnson stands in continuity with the church fathers. A closer analysis of the relationship between HAI and DAI would help him clarify what he means by the "intention-directed revelation" of

the OT. But he is very close to this way of thinking in his closing sentence: "In the progress of revelation, what is known of Christ is always true but is more fully understood as more is revealed" (p. 44).

Vern Poythress makes an important point about Christocentric preaching being Trinity-centered preaching. He rightfully sees the doctrine of the Trinity as undergirding a Christian approach to interpreting the OT. He also stresses the crucially important fact that the NT indicates that the OT is about Christ. I also found his affirmation of the validity of a variety of interpretive approaches to be helpful and reasonable. He affirms the basic necessity of grammatical-historical study, which nobody should consider optional. He affirms the value of a redemptive-historical movement hermeneutic, which leads the interpreter from the OT to Christ. He considers that this approach, properly executed, is a valid form of Christotelic exposition. But Poythress also seems to be open to seeing Christ in the OT text in a more substantial sense, as indwelling the text and not just being predicted by the text. In his discussion of the key phrase "the word of the LORD" in Genesis 15:4, Poythress points out that all divine speech to man in Genesis is mediated. Since the fall, God's speech, he says, must be mediated in order to avoid the death of the recipient. This theological insight leads him to write: "Because of the necessity of mediation, we can confidently infer the presence of Christ and his work when God speaks to Abram. Christ's role in Genesis 15:4 anticipates his incarnation and verbal ministry on earth" (p. 61). This affirmation of the presence of Christ in the OT text is what we find throughout the Great Tradition, but sadly neglected in modernity.

Poythress points out that Genesis 15:4 says that the word of the LORD "came to him, that is, Abram." This way of putting it expresses a differentiation between "God and the word that comes out from him, traveling out as a word distinct from the speaker" (p. 63). He views this as an anticipation of the NT revelation of the God (Father) and Word (Son) differentiation. The key thing to note is that for Poythress the idea of the differentiation of the Father and Son as God and his word is not something dreamed up by the NT writer; rather, John gets it from the OT. This does not mean that there is no advance between the word that comes to the patriarchs and the Word become flesh (John 1:14). But it does mean that they are not unconnected either. And the main way this connection can be

seen to be real and not imagined or subjective is the ontological constancy of the eternal Triune God who inspired Genesis and became incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth. It is the same God. That is ultimately why Christ can be said to be present in the OT.

There is one other little detail in this passage that adds to what Poythress has already pointed out about the distinction between the speaker and his word. Michael Heiser points out that in v. 4 it says that the word of the LORD came to Abram and in v. 5 it says that “he” brought him (Abram) outside. Now, we usually think of a word as a disembodied sound, but v. 5 sounds like a visible person is doing something: “he brought him outside.” Either the LORD was made visible to Abram or the word of the LORD was a visible presence to Abram. One way or another, Abraham was having an encounter with a person. Looking back on this passage from a Trinitarian perspective, it seems hard not to conclude that Abraham experienced a theophany in which the pre-incarnate Christ appeared to him.

Is Christ present in the OT text? I think he is—literally—present. I would argue for an Augustinian Christological literalism as the best label for a hermeneutic rooted in a sacramental metaphysics derived from Nicene Trinitarianism. Block seems to resist such a hermeneutic, Johnson seems to implicitly presuppose something like it and Poythress comes the closest to explicitly affirming it. All of us wish to affirm that the OT text, in this case Genesis 15:1-6, points to Christ. But I would want to go further, with Poythress, and view Christ himself as doing the pointing. I would also like to affirm a sacramental worldview as the metaphysics that makes sense of such a hermeneutic. Christological literalism sees Christ as not just predicted or pointed toward, but actually present in the OT text—the Word in the words of Scripture.

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1. Craig A. Carter, *Interpreting Scripture with the Great Tradition: Recovering the Genius of Premodern Exegesis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018).
 2. This is so despite the fact that many Evangelical scholars preach themselves in church in ways that do not seem to follow logically from the academic, hermeneutical theories they espouse in their scholarly publications. This kind of inconsistency is an occupational hazard faced by those who try to inhabit the academy and the church simultaneously.
 3. A key text here is 1 Peter 1:10-12. I will discuss this text later in the paper, but for now just note the distinction made by Peter between what the prophets knew humanly (HAI) and what the Holy Spirit was saying through them (DAI): “the prophets who prophesied about the grace that was to be yours search

and inquired carefully, inquiring what person or time the Spirit of Christ in them was indicating when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glories.”

4. I do not deny inerrancy; rather, I affirm it wholeheartedly. But the concept of inerrancy is only part of the doctrine of inspiration. Believing in inerrancy is a necessary, but not a sufficient, condition for a good hermeneutical theory.
5. R. W. L. Moberley, *Old Testament Theology: Reading the Hebrew Bible as Christian Scripture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 146-53.
6. Allis remains the indispensable resource here. See Oswald T. Allis, *The Unity of Isaiah: A Study in Prophecy* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2000).
7. For an outstanding discussion of these and related issues, see O. Palmer Robertson, *The Flow of the Psalms: Discovering Their Structure and Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2015).