

THE OLD TESTAMENT IN THE NEW

S. Lewis Johnson, Jr. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1980. 108 pp.
Reviewed by Zachary S. Maxcey*

“The New Testament lies hidden in the Old, and the Old is made plain in the New.”¹

These words form an age-enduring dictum of the colossal fourth-century church father, Augustine of Hippo. Although the preceding maxim is both valid and trustworthy, it is often exceedingly difficult to fully comprehend how the apostles and writers of the New Testament (NT) make use of the Old Testament (OT) in their first-century writings. This is due to the fact that the NT writers frequently appear to use OT passages in ways which seem to differ distinctly from the intent and purpose of the original human authors. In *The Old Testament in the New*, S. Lewis Johnson analyzes six particular NT citations² of OT passages in order to distill the interpretive methods of the NT writers.

Before summarizing the more salient points of Johnson’s trailblazing work, it is necessary to highlight the particular process he employs to hermeneutically analyze the six selected NT citations of the OT. It is interesting to note that Johnson’s process is virtually mirrored in Gregory Beale and Donald A. Carson’s *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*.³ First, Johnson analyzes the NT context of the particular passage, in order “to establish the topic of discussion, the flow of thought, and where relevant, the literary

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¹Cited in S. Lewis Johnson, Jr., *The Old Testament in the New: An Argument for Biblical Inspiration* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1980), 21.

²The six New Testament citations of the Old Testament are the following: Revelation 19:15, John 10:34-36, 1 Corinthians 9:7-10, Hebrews 10:5-7, John 13:18, and Hebrews 1:10-12.

³This is not altogether surprising for two reasons. First, Dr. S. Lewis Johnson, Jr. is celebrated as one of the leading Biblical exegetes of his time. Second, Gregory K. Beale studied as an M.Th. student under Dr. Johnson at Dallas Theological Seminary.

structure, genre, and rhetoric of the passage.”⁴ Second, the original context of the Old Testament is considered. Echoing Johnson, Beale and Carson note that it is necessary to analyze not only the citation’s immediate context but also “the wider context of the whole book and even the whole OT where relevant for contributing themes.”⁵ Third, Johnson compares the different Old and New Testament Texts (primarily the Greek NT, the Greek OT – Septuagint, and the Hebrew OT – Masoretic Text) and comments on the textual variations.⁶ The final two steps of Johnson’s process are an analysis of the NT author’s *hermeneutical use of the OT* and his *theological use of the OT*. Echoing Johnson, Beale and Carson essentially mirror Johnson in their final two steps, which seek to explain “the nature of the connection as the NT writer sees it,” whether it be linguistic, analogical, typological fulfillment, or perhaps even theological.⁷ Now, this review will highlight the significant points which Johnson presents in his work.

The first significant principle is that “the doctrine of inerrancy does not demand exact, verbatim citation from the Old Testament.”⁸ The methods by which the NT authors cite the OT vary significantly; for instance, the citation could be any of the following: a direct quotation from the LXX, the author’s own translation from Hebrew, a quotation from memory, or even an *inspired* apostolic alteration of the quotation. Johnson continues: “It [the doctrine inerrancy] merely requires that the meaning the New Testament author finds in the Old Testament and uses

⁴Gregory K. Beale and Donald A. Carson, *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), xxiv.

⁵Ibid.

⁶Johnson’s third step differs with that of Beale and Carson, who consider how “the literature of Second Temple Judaism or (more broadly yet) of early Judaism” handled the particular OT passage prior to analyzing the source texts and their variations. See Beale and Carson, *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, xxiv. This is not to hint or imply that S. Lewis Johnson ignored how early Judaism interpreted passages from the OT; such a conclusion would be patently false. Although he does not delineate it as a separate step (as Beale and Carson do), Johnson nevertheless incorporates early Jewish interpretations (when appropriate) into his analysis. See Johnson, *The Old Testament in the New*, 31, 48.

⁷Beale and Carson, *New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, xxiv-v.

⁸Johnson, *The Old Testament in the New*, 66.

in the New is really in the Old Testament.”⁹ The second point is that the NT authors used a distinctly Christotelic hermeneutic, whereby they viewed Christ as the ultimate figure and ultimate end of all Scripture. This principle can be seen in Hebrews 1:10-12, where the author of Hebrews applies Psalm 102:25-28 (a passage which refers directly to Yahweh) to the Lord Jesus Christ.¹⁰ Johnson writes: “The author’s identity of the name ‘Yahweh,’ the covenant name with Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is a tribute to his high regard for the Second Person of the Trinity.”¹¹ The third significant principle is that a NT author may often cite an OT passage being “directly predictive” of the NT person or event, which is frequently the case in Matthew’s Gospel.¹²

However, the NT author may utilize OT citations in more indirect ways. For instance, a fourth point that Johnson highlights is that very often a NT author will use an OT citation to demonstrate a *typological*, not directly predictive, fulfillment. He writes:

It is a common misconception of casual Bible readers that when the New Testament states that a text from the Old Testament is fulfilled in the New, the use of the Old Testament text is that of a precise predictive fulfillment. Thus readers are puzzled when they discover from a careful reading of the Old Testament that the Old Testament passage does not seem to speak precisely to what the New Testament seems to suggest....They [the NT authors] did not think it necessary to define the precise kind of fulfillment found in New testament texts, for it was God who controlled the prophets who wrote direct predictive prophecy and the other authors of Scripture who wrote of people, events, and institutions as types or foreshadowings of the future.¹³

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Ibid., 81-94.

¹¹Ibid., 92.

¹²Ibid., 19. Johnson emphasizes this with the OT citation of Psalm 2 in Revelation 19:15.

¹³Ibid., 76. Johnson emphasizes this with the OT citation of Psalm 41:9-10 in John 13:18 and the OT citation of Psalm 40:6-9 in Hebrews 10:5-7. On page 77, Johnson emphasizes that types and figures may refer to more than just the Lord Jesus Christ. For example, not only is Christ predicted in Psalm 41:9-10, Himself being a type of David, but Judas Iscariot is shown to be in view as well, as a type of Ahithophel.

A fifth significant principle is that at times the NT authors may use an OT citation in a “spiritual or moral” sense, *without* violating or ignoring its original grammatical-historical meaning.¹⁴

Johnson highlights Paul’s use of Deuteronomy 25:4 in 1 Corinthians 9:9 as an example:

Thus the apostle acknowledges that the Old Testament text, while not exclusively for men, does have an application to them. The literal meaning is not excluded, but the text is given a further spiritual or moral sense. In one sense, the passage is seen as referring to God, not as *the* Creator who cares for His creation (cf. Ps. 104:14, 21, 27; 145:9, 15; Matt. 6:26; 10:30), but as the Law-giver. As such it had a significance beyond the oxen, namely, that of moral justice to men. This viewpoint is in harmony with the apostle’s words in 1 Corinthians 10:6, 11.¹⁵

In Galatians 4:21-31, this “spiritual or moral” interpretation takes the form of a typological allegory between Hagar, Ishmael, Sarah, and Isaac. Johnson concludes, “It is also clear from this use of the Old Testament in the New that there may exist more than one sense in the same Scripture.”¹⁶

A sixth point is that all biblical interpreters should be “interested not only in what the inspired author meant but also in what God meant.”¹⁷ Johnson continues: “Therefore, the New Testament understanding of the Old Testament is the true exposition of it, because it supplies the reader not simply with what Moses and the prophets understood but also with what the Holy Spirit understood, gave to them, and empowered them to write down.”¹⁸ The seventh and final significant principle is that all believers should seek to understand and apply the interpretive methods of the NT apostles and prophets in interpreting Scripture. Johnson writes:

In conclusion I raise the question again: “Can we reproduce the exegesis of the New Testament? Unhesitatingly the reply is yes, although we are not allowed to claim for our results the infallibility of the Lord and His apostles. They are reliable teachers of biblical doctrine and they are reliable teachers of hermeneutics and exegesis. We not only *can* reproduce their exegetical methodology, we *must* if we are to be taught their

¹⁴Ibid., 48.

¹⁵Ibid., 48.

¹⁶Ibid., 49.

¹⁷Ibid., 94.

¹⁸Ibid.

understanding of Holy Scripture. Their principles, probably taught them by the Lord in His post-resurrection ministry, are not abstruse and difficult. They are simple, plain, and logical. The things they find in the Old Testament are really there, although the Old Testament authors may not have seen them fully.¹⁹

¹⁹Ibid., 93-4.