

Why Originalism? Part 2

The superiority of an originalist hermeneutic

In the previous article, I suggested that there are three essential principles for an originalist interpretation of Scripture: the text means what the author meant; the text means what it says; and the text cannot mean what it never originally meant. In this installment, I'd like to examine a few popular non-originalist hermeneutical approaches that are in vogue today, and then offer some reasons why I believe originalism is far superior to these approaches.

Popular Non-Originalist Approaches

For the purposes of this article, we won't be discussing approaches that have mainly held sway outside our fundamentalist and conservative evangelical circles (such as the higher criticism of Protestant liberalism or the new hermeneutic of Fuchs and Ebeling). One needn't embrace these obviously problematic approaches to drift into unsound hermeneutical waters. Here are just a few of the problematic hermeneutical approaches that have become popular closer to home.

Christocentric Interpretation

The Christocentric method has made significant inroads in conservative evangelical circles. On this view, the Old Testament must be *reinterpreted* in light of the New Testament, so that all Old Testament revelation is understood to be about

the person and work of Jesus Christ. Greidanus explains:

“[We] must move beyond strictly historical interpretation and interpret the Old Testament in light of its fulfillment in the New Testament. . . . Christocentric interpretation moves from the fullness of revelation in the New Testament to a new understanding of God's revelation in the Old Testament.” Thus, the meaning that Christocentric interpreters find in the Old Testament text is, by definition, *not* the meaning that its original audience would have (or could have) understood. For example, Jonathan Akin understands the account of David and Goliath as a picture of Jesus Christ (represented by David) vanquishing Satan (represented by Goliath)—even though those themes do not arise naturally from the text of 1 Samuel 17. He accomplishes this interpretation by interposing New Testament passages—such as the temptation of Christ in the Gospels and the defeat of Satan in Revelation 12—between the interpreter and the Old Testament text as though the New Testament passages were interpretive lenses. (Of course, those lenses were unavailable to the original readers of 1 Samuel. Too bad for them.)

This is not to say, of course, that the Old Testament is silent about Christ's person and work. Certainly, many passages in the Old Testament can be understood, on originalist interpretive principles, as pointing toward the coming Messiah and revealing things about Who He will be and what He will do. And taken as a whole, the entire Old Testament can be seen as anticipatory of what God would ultimately accomplish in Christ. But we would insist that those Messianic details must emerge naturally from the Old Testament texts themselves. Importing New Testament data into Old Testament texts introduces an unacceptable element of instability and subjectivity.

Theological Interpretation

A related concept, which often goes hand in hand with Christocentrism, is the theological interpretation of Scripture. This approach sees theology not as *the result of Scriptural interpretation*, but rather as *an axiomatic presupposition that guides and shapes the interpretive process*. So external theological conclusions (usually derived from sources such as the ecumenical creeds or Reformation-era confessions of faith) are given a controlling influence over one's interpretation of the Scriptural text. Just as Christocentric interpreters import New Testament data into the Old Testament text, so theological interpreters import extrabiblical data (creeds and confessions) into both Old and New Testament texts. In my judgment, this is putting the cart before the horse. Advocates of this approach are well-intended (the TIS movement seems to have emerged as a reaction to destructive critical readings of Scripture and to postmodern claims that meaning is malleable and certainty is provisional), but this is the wrong remedy for those maladies. A commitment to *Sola Scriptura* demands that our theological conclusions must always be submitted to and judged by the text of Scripture. That simply cannot happen if they are allowed to control how we interpret the text of Scripture in the first place.

Over-Typologizing

Here is an area where we dispensationalists have too often played fast and loose with the text. Typological interpretation seeks to recognize patterns in the unfolding of Scripture where earlier events or people (types) are understood to foreshadow later events or people (antitypes). There is some validity to this approach. Some Scriptural events do clearly stand in a typological relationship to one another: the bronze serpent and the crucifixion of Jesus are one clear example (John 3:14). The Jewish sacrificial system and Christ's substitutionary atonement are another (Heb. 10:1–14). Less clear examples might include Antiochus Epiphanes and the Antichrist (Dan. 11:1–35, 36–45) and the rock in the wilderness and Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 10:4).

Nevertheless, recognizing the presence of some typological relationships in the Scripture does not justify the over-typologizing that we have sometimes indulged in. A generation ago, it was not uncommon for dispensational interpreters to preach Genesis 24 (in which Abraham's servant seeks out Rebekah to be a bride for Isaac) as if its true meaning had to do with the Holy Spirit's seeking the church to be a bride for Christ—an interpretation that doesn't arise naturally from the Old Testament text, nor is it supported anywhere in the New Testament. Other examples of this kind of over-typologizing could be listed ad nauseam.

I think a proper originalist response to excessive typological interpretation should contain two components. First, Zuck has argued that we should only acknowledge as typological what is overtly designated as such in the New Testament. This advice is sound, and it would protect against much arbitrariness and excess in typological interpretation. Second, it is probably

better to see typology as a feature of *God's providential ordering of history* rather than as *a feature of textual meaning*. Scripture may record two events that God has providentially designed to stand in a typological relationship to one another, but the meaning of the texts that record those events should still be understood via sound (i.e., originalist) interpretive principles. There is not a deeper “typological meaning” in the text that originalist principles cannot uncover; rather, the text plainly and accurately records historical events or elements that happen to stand in typological relationship with one another.

Originalism Is Superior

I believe originalism is superior to these approaches for at least four reasons. First, originalism preserves objectivity. Non-originalist hermeneutics strip the text of its fixed, objective meaning, and pave the way for a subjective, “anything goes” understanding of the text. That, in turn, can completely undermine our commitment to Biblical inerrancy, authority, and sufficiency. We can't really submit to the Scriptures if we don't know what they mean, and if we abandon originalist hermeneutics, we can't really know for sure what the Scriptures mean.

Second, non-originalist hermeneutics make the *reader*, not the *author*, the ultimate determiner of what the text means. In that case, we aren't really *submitting* to what the text says; we're *deciding* what the text says, and that is a privilege God simply has not given us.

Third, originalism affirms God's role as the revealer of truth. What does it say about God's character if we believe His Old Testament Scriptures were totally incomprehensible until centuries after they were written when He finally doled out the magic decoder rings (the New Testament texts)? If that's the case, then the Old Testament Scriptures weren't really *revelation*, they were *obfuscation*. And that is inconsistent with the character of our God, Who is not only *totally truthful* but also *the ground and source of all truth*.

Fourth, originalism flows from the doctrine of perspicuity (“clarity”). According to perspicuity, God has revealed the Scriptures clearly and understandably so that ordinary people can read them, understand them, and so come to a saving knowledge of the true and living God and of His Son, Jesus Christ. But as we've already said, the Scriptures can only really be perspicuous (“clear”) if their meaning is objective and fixed, and that in turn requires an originalist hermeneutic.

In short, originalism is superior. If we truly believe that God has disclosed Himself to us through the written revelation of Scripture, then we dare not take liberties with the text. We must cherish it enough to let it speak for itself, and then we must submit to it.

In the next installment, we will examine and respond to some common objections to originalist hermeneutics. **B**

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