



Why Originalism? Part 3

Common Objections and Questions

by DAVID GUNN

Previously, we argued that the soundest hermeneutical approach is what we are calling *originalism*. This method restricts itself to the original meaning of a text as determined by the original author at the time of its writing. We suggested three essential principles for an originalist hermeneutic (the text means what the author meant; the text means what it says; and the text cannot mean what it never meant). We also offered reasons why this approach is superior to other popular hermeneutical methods (such as Christocentric interpretation, theological interpretation, and over-typologizing). In this final installment, we will address some objections and questions that commonly arise from critics of originalism.

What about Christ in the Old Testament?

In part 1, I took issue with Mohler's statement that we should "look to the Old Testament and find a constant, continual, cumulative, consistent testimony of Christ." This can't be correct, I argued, because the original audience couldn't have possibly understood *every* part of the Old Testament text in that way. And yet, Jesus did affirm that the Old Testament Scriptures speak of Him. John 5:39 makes this point, and Luke 24:27 is even more explicit: "And beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, He expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself." Verse 26 even connects this specifically with Christ's cross work and resurrection. So how does this square with an originalist approach that affirms the principles of single meaning and Old Testament priority?

In fact, originalists do not deny that the Old Testament speaks of and points toward Christ. We recognize numerous Old Testament passages that foretell of a coming Messiah. The Old Testament reveals much about His identity and destiny: He would come from the line of Abraham (Gen. 12:2-3) and David (2 Sam. 7:12-16), be born of a virgin (Isa.

7:14) in Bethlehem (Micah 5:2) about four centuries after the rebuilding of Jerusalem (Dan. 9:25–26), minister in Galilee (Isa. 9:1–2), and present Himself to the nation as king while riding a donkey (Zech. 9:9). This Messiah, Who is identified with God Himself (Isa. 9:6–7), would be rejected by His own people (Isa. 53:3), pierced (Zech. 12:10) and killed as a vicarious sacrifice for their sins (Isa. 53:5–6), buried with the rich (Isa. 53:9), and ultimately resurrected (Isa. 53:10–12). Furthermore, insofar as the Old Testament describes the fall of mankind into sinfulness (Gen. 3) and promises that the Seed of the woman would someday arise to reverse the effects of the Fall (3:15), and insofar as it repeatedly reaffirms and emphasizes the persistent sinfulness of all people (even those who are generally righteous) and the ongoing need for a sacrifice, we affirm that the Old Testament points toward Jesus Christ.

But here's the important point: these affirmations can (and should) be made *using purely originalist hermeneutics*. There is no need to veer into allegorical interpretation, typology, or Christocentrism (i.e., finding specific, detailed references to Jesus Christ in every single Old Testament passage) to uphold this. When Christ explained to His disciples that the Old Testament testified of Him, doubtless it was passages and themes like these that He specifically expounded. He was not saying that every single Old Testament passage was specifically about Him or that the Old Testament contains hidden meanings, double meanings, or anything of that sort.

To reiterate: Originalist interpreters *do* believe that the advent, ministry, cross work, and resurrection of the Messiah (Jesus Christ) are significant themes throughout the Old Testament and that the Old Testament points to Christ in a very real sense. We *do not* accept the idea that every single Old Testament passage is specifically about Christ.

What about the Limitations of the Human Authors?

Some have objected that originalism invests the human authors of Scripture with too much determinative authority at the expense of the divine Author. Isn't God the ultimate author of Scripture, and therefore isn't it possible that He injected deeper meanings into the text that even the human authors themselves might not have been aware of? After all, Daniel didn't fully understand his own prophecies (Dan. 12:8–9), and 1 Peter 1:10–12 indicates that this was true of multiple Old Testament prophets.

I think the key to resolving this difficulty is found in the distinction between *meaning* and *reference*. The *meaning* of a word or sentence is ascertained simply by reading and interpreting it according to the customary rules of language, but that doesn't mean readers will always know everything about whatever the writer is *referring to*. For example, I might say to my children, "A man is coming to dinner later this week." They can easily grasp the *meaning* of my words, but they might not know everything about the *referents* in that sentence (i.e., "a man" refers to my colleague Mike, and "later this week" refers to Thursday evening). When Thursday night arrives, they will receive additional information pertaining to the *reference* of my

earlier remark, but that doesn't in any way alter the *meaning* of the original statement.

I would argue that Old Testament prophecy works in much the same way. An Israelite in Isaiah's day could have read Isaiah 53 and legitimately understood, using originalist interpretive principles, that the "Servant of the Lord" would suffer and die vicariously for the sins of the Lord's wayward people, even though neither He nor the human author (Isaiah himself) knew everything about the prophecy's referents (e.g., the "Servant" refers to Jesus of Nazareth; the method of execution is crucifixion; and the executioners are Roman soldiers acting at the behest of Pilate and the Jewish religious leaders).

So yes, it is quite true that in some Scriptural passages (especially prophetic literature), the *reference* included information that was unavailable to either the human authors or their human audience at the time of writing. But that doesn't change the fact that the *meaning* encoded into the written text was intended to be understood according to normal interpretive processes (i.e., originalist hermeneutics). This is simply the way that written communication works. All writers expect their works to be read with a view toward uncovering the original meaning intentionally encoded therein. The fact that the ultimate author is omniscient in this case, and that He knows far more about what He is revealing than either His penmen or addressees do, doesn't mean He expects His readers to adopt abnormal or extratextual interpretive strategies to understand Him.

What about the New Testament's Use of the Old Testament?

Roy Zuck wrote, "The use of the Old Testament in the New Testament is one of the most difficult aspects of Bible interpretation." He's right. This area also poses the greatest challenges to the case I've been making for originalist hermeneutics, because there are quite a few places where the New Testament writers seem to interpret Old Testament texts in ways that wouldn't have occurred to the original Old Testament audiences. Does this undercut originalism and justify other, less textually restrictive, interpretive approaches?

Originalists have struggled mightily to answer this objection. Sometimes we have grudgingly conceded that the New Testament writers occasionally understood Old Testament texts in abnormal ways. (Robert Thomas, for example, argued forcefully for the principle of single meaning, but then suspended that principle where the New Testament writers were concerned, going so far as to call his model "inspired *sensus plenior* application"!.) On this view, the New Testament writers were permitted to take some interpretive liberties with the Old Testament text because they were doing so under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, but of course that doesn't justify us in doing the same thing, since we are not privy to the same miraculous work of revelation and inspiration that they were. This is a novel approach that seems to solve the problem, but I'm not sure it's the best way forward. To me, it smacks of special pleading.

Instead, I think a much more satisfying explanation can be found in the recognition that the New Testament writers did not always quote Old Testament passages in the exact same

way or to the exact same intended effect. By my lights, there are at least three different categories into which New Testament quotations of the Old Testament can be assigned.

Direct Application/Fulfillment

Oftentimes, the New Testament writers interpret the Old Testament text in a very straightforward, originalist way and then apply it directly to their present situation or frame of reference. When Matthew quotes Isaiah 53:4 (“Yet he himself bore our sicknesses, and he carried our pains,” CSB) and applies it to Christ’s healing ministry (Matt. 8:16–17), he is saying that this Jesus directly fulfilled this prophetic passage. Similarly, in 21:5 he quotes Zechariah 9:9 and explains that Christ’s triumphal entry is a direct fulfillment of Zechariah’s words.

Indirect Application/Fulfillment

In this usage, New Testament writers indirectly apply Old Testament passages to their present situation or frame of reference. They aren’t necessarily making an interpretive ruling on the Old Testament text or implying that it is a direct reference to what they are discussing; rather, they are invoking Old Testament passages in a more illustrative way. When Peter quotes Joel 2:28–32, he isn’t claiming that the descent of the Spirit on the Day of Pentecost is a direct fulfillment of Joel’s prophecy; after all, most of the specific things mentioned in Joel’s prophecy did not occur in any way, shape, or form on the Day of Pentecost! Rather, Peter is saying that this present phenomenon (the descent of the Spirit and accompanying attestation through the exercise of charismatic sign gifts) is the same kind of phenomenon that Joel prophesied about (the specific fulfillment of which will not occur until the tribulation period). It’s as though Peter is saying, “Don’t be surprised by this. This is the work of the Holy Spirit—the same kind of thing Joel prophesied about.”

Paul does something similar in Romans 9:25, where he quotes from Hosea 1:10 and 2:23 to explain the ingathering of Gentiles into the church. Of course, in their original context, those passages in Hosea were not really talking about Gentiles at all; they were referring to the restoration of Israel and Judah after they undergo judgment for their sins. But Paul isn’t really claiming otherwise. His point isn’t that Hosea specifically predicted the ingathering of Gentiles into the church; rather, he’s pointing out, on the basis of Hosea 1:10 and 2:23, that *it is in God’s character to bring lost people into relationship with Himself, even though they formerly were not His people and lived in a state of rebellion against Him*. It’s an indirect, illustrative way of applying an Old Testament text to a New Testament situation, not a reinterpretation of the original text.

Loose Usage of Scriptural Language

Finally, I think there are times when New Testament writers are simply using familiar Old Testament language in a loose, informal way without thereby intending to say anything at all about the meaning of the original Old Testament passage. We do this sometimes: if someone narrowly avoids disaster, we

might say he escaped “by the skin of his teeth” (taken from Job 19:20). Or if someone goes out of her way to help a stranger in need, we might call her a “good Samaritan” (an allusion to Luke 10:30–37). Of course, when we use Biblical language this way, we aren’t making a claim about the meaning of those Biblical passages, nor are we consciously applying those Biblical passages directly to the situation at hand. We’re just using familiar Biblical language because it is a part of our common cultural lexicon and there happens to be some point of similarity between the text’s verbiage and the matter at hand.

I think a good case can be made that the New Testament writers did this sometimes too. This is evidently the case when Paul invokes the words of Psalm 19:4 (“their message has gone out to the whole earth, and their words to the ends of the world”—a statement about general revelation) when discussing Israel’s having heard the Word of the Lord from the prophets (an instance of special revelation). Other quotations that might fit into this category would include Matthew 2:18 (quoting Jer. 31:15), Galatians 4:22–31 (alluding to Genesis 16–21), and Hebrews 1:5–13 (quoting various lines from the Psalms).

Granted, it is not always easy to decide which of these three senses a New Testament writer intends with any given Old Testament quotation, but the point still stands: in quoting the Old Testament, New Testament writers aren’t necessarily saying anything about the passage’s intrinsic meaning. Sometimes they are, but other times they aren’t. Therefore, it isn’t necessary to see the New Testament as *reinterpreting* the Old Testament text or assigning it a new meaning that is different from its original, authorially determined meaning.

Conclusion

Other objections and questions could be multiplied, but these are the ones that are raised most frequently against originalist hermeneutics. I trust this article has demonstrated that although challenges certainly do exist for practitioners of originalism (indeed, that is true for *every* method of interpretation!), they are not insurmountable. Consequently, Christians needn’t adopt hermeneutical strategies that make *anything other than the text of the passage in question* the determining factor in Biblical interpretation. God has seen fit to reveal Himself to us through a specific medium: the written words of ordinary human language. Let us respect His choice of that medium by taking those words seriously and by jettisoning any and all ideas that call into question the clear meaning of the words on the page.

“What is written in the Law?” Jesus asked. “How do you read it?” (Luke 10:26, ESV). That question has abiding significance for all of us. How will we choose to read God’s revelation—His self-disclosure—in the pages of Holy Scripture? Will we read it carefully, diligently, and submissively? Will we acknowledge its claim on our lives and conduct? Will we cherish it and honor it enough to let the text speak for itself? **B**

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