

NEW TESTAMENT INTERPRETATION OF OLD TESTAMENT TEXTS

Virgil Warren, PhD

Several hermeneutical questions arise about the New Testament writers' use of Old Testament texts. In cases like Matthew's use of Hosea 11:1, we may broaden the definitions of *prophecy* and *fulfillment* as a way of legitimizing his use of the prophet's comment. Making this move reflects a prior commitment to the principle that inspiration makes New Testament authors "forever correct." People's prior commitment to "inerrancy" causes them to take a positive view on a text that they might not otherwise have chosen or would otherwise consider a matter of opinion. That does not weaken its validity; it merely demonstrates consistency. We cannot with finality settle some questions directly. We take views on derivative issues that harmonize with primary views. On the other hand, the possibility of other imaginable reasons for a writer's use of an earlier text does not invalidate one affirmed because of assumed inerrancy. We are involved here in the distinction between a presuppositional and phenomenological approach to the view of scripture. Without the assumption that divine inspiration kept writers from error, we would have less justification for using insights from one writer to clarify ambiguous words of another writer, for harmonizing two authors who could otherwise mean incompatible things, for interpreting biblical statements so as not to conflict with information we learn from science, for choosing this interpretation from among two or more otherwise equally plausible views, given only the text itself, or even for taking a less likely sounding interpretation.

One weakness in the phenomenological approach is that in practice interpreters tend to regard as mistakes anything that without inspiration could be a mistake. They do not give the "benefit of the doubt" that they normally would give a writer. In other words, the phenomenological approach puts the burden of proof on interpreters who tend to consider writers in their best light.

That leads to another point about broadening the meaning of the correlative terms *prophesy* and *fulfill*: there is no need to think that an author who elsewhere makes sensible interpretations is being irrational here if broadening the terms naturally relieves the tension. It seems more charitable to take a "benefit of doubt" approach to any writer that seems honest. Even aside from "God-breathedness," we should give benefit of doubt on something like word definitions because we expect people to be consistent. New Testament writers seem to be honest, intelligent people who use so many other Old Testament texts properly. Other data on "prophecy" and "fulfill" show that it is broader than what would fit a prediction-fulfillment context.

Matthew need not be using Hosea as proof in the sense that "leads to" a conclusion. "*Calling my son out of Egypt*" simply "fits with" Jesus' messiahship to the Jewish people. Because of Herod's persecution, Jesus did not simply go to the Egyptians to carry out the divine mission. "*Salvation is of the Jews*," as Jesus put it to the Samaritan woman. That is the way God predicted it, and that is the way it would happen. Jesus returned from Egypt for that reason among others, which parallels Israel's becoming a distinct people from the Egyptians in the exodus. Matthew's use of Hosea does not need to "teach us anything about the Messiah that Matthew hasn't already told us." He does not need to use Hosea as "evidence" for "the nature and mission of Jesus." He can "draw attention to" the fact by citing the Hosea parallel; he

“reminds” his original Jewish readership of this point: “*See, Jesus of Nazareth conforms to the prediction that God’s redemptive work would be carried out through Israel.*” In form of statement, Semitic idiom does not distinguish primary proof from confirmatory evidence. The data for that idiom is satisfactory.

In place of historico-grammatical interpretation, interpreters have wondered whether we might suppose that different “interpretation” techniques could be used on a passage at different times by different cultures and still be legitimate because God could inspire the prophets’ statements in ways that would later yield foreseen true ideas as extracted by these techniques. In this way we would not need an interpretation that was “forever correct.” That idea perhaps is not terribly far from writing a literary piece in a peculiar genre for people accustomed to that genre in anticipation of their recognizing it as being such and interpreting it accordingly. There is precedent for something similar in God’s using Near Eastern literary forms for communicating with the Israelites. That suggestion brings up the possibility of more than one legitimate meaning for the same utterance, which would undercut language communication, however; and it would counter our conviction that there are no peculiar principles of interpretation for scripture beyond what appear in human language elsewhere. Authorial intent implies that the meaning of a statement is objective and therefore “forever the same.”

The proposed approach to (at least divine) language puts little boundary on what persons using different techniques might infer from statements. They would not know they were getting a wrong idea because they would have no way to check it; they would not have the rules of word communication to limit what they do. The Spirit would have to tell them, and biblical interpretation could get pretty subjective. As it is, the nature of language itself sets the boundaries so that we cannot get more than one legitimate meaning out of a statement; “*the meaning of scripture is one,*” as the Westminster Confession puts it. One less known, albeit more important, triumph of the reformers was their abandoning the notion of multiple meanings that had grown up since before the time of Philo in biblical interpretation. Different techniques of interpretation might legitimately yield mutually exclusive meanings, for that matter, in which case even God could not inspire statements so as to avoid those meanings. Even if reasons like these do not tell against the suggestion, the positive evidence for it is lacking. The idea is not required by phenomena like those in Matthew, Galatians, and Hebrews; and it is less likely than proposals that do not depart from fundamental linguistic principles and laws of thought. To put it another way, doing such a thing sounds more like “reaching” to justify God than re-understanding Matthew’s reasons for citation to justify him. It is not a matter of viewing Matthew’s treatment from a first-century perspective rather than a twentieth-century one; time has nothing to do with it. It is “forever correct” or incorrect; what it meant is what it means and *vice versa.*