THE HERMENEUTIC OF G. K. BEALE

It is a sad fact that many followers of Jesus have little understanding of the Old Testament and its theology, and treat the Bible as if it began with the book of Matthew. Yet the New Testament is meaningless and unintelligible apart from the Old Testament. The dependence of the New Testament upon the Old Testament story of which it is a continuation and a conclusion is evidenced by the preponderance of Old Testament quotations and allusions found in the New Testament. In order to rightly hear the voice of God in the New Testament, it is important that the church is striving to hear his address in the Old Testament as well. Not only that, in places where the NT authors quote or allude to an OT text, the church must also listen for the voice of God as communicated through the NT’s re-contextualization of those OT passages. How exactly Christians should do this is a subject of intense debate. As G. K. Beale has said, “The use of the OT in the NT is the key to the theological relation of the Testaments.”1 Earlier this year, D.A. Carson said this about Beale: “During the last four decades, not a little serious work has been undertaken to understand better how the New Testament cites the Old. Quite a lot of it was written by Greg Beale.”2 In this paper I will examine the hermeneutic and theology of G.K. Beale, paying particular attention to his view on the New Testament use of the Old Testament, and demonstrating the great influence Beale’s biblical theology exerts over his exegetical conclusions.

Five Questions Concerning the NT Use of the OT

The majority of this paper will discuss Beale’s view on the New Testament use of the Old Testament, and it will do so by asking five crucial questions. Those questions are: (1) Is *sensus*

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2 Ibid., back cover.
plenior an appropriate way of explaining the NT use of the OT?; (2) How is typology best understood?; (3) Do the NT writers take into account the context of the passages they cite?; (4) Does the NT writers’ use of Jewish exegetical methods explain the NT use of the OT?; and (5) Are we able to replicate the exegetical and hermeneutical approaches to the OT that we find in the writings of the NT? 3 In giving Beale’s answers to these questions, we will also have opportunity to discuss the hermeneutical presuppositions of the NT writers and the early church, Beale’s views on progressive revelation and the progressive fulfillment of prophecy, and the NT writers’ view of eschatology. Foundational to Beale’s understanding of the way NT writers use the OT are the assumptions that he believes the early church held about Jesus, redemptive history, eschatology, and soteriology.

The Hermeneutical Presuppositions of Jesus and the Apostles

According to Beale, the NT writers’ use of the OT can largely be explained by appealing to the hermeneutical presuppositions held by Jesus and the Apostles. Beale writes, “The NT writers were absorbed and soaked in the OT. In interpreting the OT with these [hermeneutical and theological] presuppositions, the NT writers were following the model of the most grand redemptive-historical interpreter: Jesus Christ.” 4 In his 1989 article, “Did Jesus and His Followers Preach the Right Doctrine from the Wrong Texts?,” Beale identified five such presuppositions of Jesus, the Apostles, and the early church. First, they assumed “corporate solidarity or representation.” Second, they understood that Christ served as the representative head for the entire community of faith throughout history, including all true believers in Israel and in the church. Third, they believed that “history is unified by a wise and sovereign plan so

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3 These questions are taken verbatim from Kenneth Berding and Jonathan Lunde, eds., Three Views on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 12.

4 Beale, Handbook, 120.
that the earlier parts are designed to correspond and point to the latter parts.” Fourth, they recognized that “the age of eschatological fulfillment” had been inaugurated (but not yet fully realized) in Christ. Finally, they concluded (largely on the basis of the third and fourth presuppositions above) that the earlier stages of biblical history should be interpreted within the larger, canonical context of its later stages. In other words, they believed that “Christ and his glory as the end-time center and goal of redemptive history are the key to interpreting the earlier portions of the OT and its promises.” This fifth presupposition leads to the first question regarding the NT use of the OT: Is sensus plenior an appropriate way of explaining NT use of the OT?

**Question 1: Is Sensus Plenior an Appropriate Way of Explaining the NT Use of the OT?**

Although Beale’s answer to this question is essentially “yes,” his understanding of sensus plenior is complex and carefully nuanced. This likely explains why he prefers not to use the term sensus plenior in describing his views. He freely admits the possibility that OT authors “did not exhaustively understand the meaning, implications, and possible applications of all that they wrote,” with the result that “NT Scripture interprets the OT Scripture by expanding its meaning, seeing new implications in it and giving it new applications.” He speaks of the NT writers placing OT texts in a “new context,” providing them with “new significance,” and presenting “new understandings . . . which may have been surprising to an Old Testament

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7 Beale, “Did Jesus and His Followers,” 90-91.

8 Ibid., 91.
Beale maintains that these new understandings are consistent with a text’s immediate historical significance (what we might call the ‘original force’ of the text). “Later biblical writers further interpret prior canonical writings in ways that amplify earlier texts. These later interpretations may formulate meanings of which earlier authors may not have been exhaustively conscious, but which do not contravene their original organic intention.”

Far from contravening the original intention of the text, Beale says that each ‘new understanding’ offered by the NT authors (what we might call the ‘contemporary’ or ‘progressive force’) is grounded in the ‘original force’ of the OT text and develops naturally from it. He suggests that the prophets of the OT, if asked to comment on the early church’s appropriation of their canonical writings, would agree that the expanded meanings given to them had been intended by God all along. This coheres with the presupposition (noted above) that “history is unified by a wise and sovereign plan so that the earlier parts are designed to correspond and point to the latter parts.” Also closely linked to this presupposition is typology, which leads to the second question concerning the NT use of the OT: How is typology best understood?

**Questions 2: How Is Typology Best Understood?**

Beale suggests that typology belongs to the general category of prophecy. That is, it is intentionally predictive in nature. However, whereas verbal prophecy is directly and explicitly communicated through the predictions of a prophet, typology (or “event prophecy,” as Beale

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13. Beale, “Did Jesus and His Followers,” 92
suggests calling it) is indirectly and implicitly communicated through the events of a narrative.\textsuperscript{14} Similarly, although the prophetic nature of a verbal prophecy is usually evident at the time of its utterance, the prophetic nature of a type may not be immediately recognizable. Despite these differences, the function of these two kinds of prophecy to foreshadow future events is very much the same. “The \textit{ultimate} equation of direct verbal prophecy and indirect typological prophecy is illustrated by the observation that introductory fulfillment formulas are attached to both.”\textsuperscript{15}

Beale explains typology not only in terms of its prophetic element, but its analogical aspect as well. He defines typology as “the study of analogical correspondences among revealed truths about persons, events, institutions, and other things within the historical framework of God’s special revelation, which, from a retrospective view, are of a prophetic nature and are escalated in their meaning.”\textsuperscript{16} In his view, in order for a person, event, or institution to be a type, it must include the following characteristics: “(1) analogical correspondence, (2) historicity, (3) a pointing-forwardness (i.e., an aspect of foreshadowing or presignification), (4) escalation, and (5) retrospection.”\textsuperscript{17} Although he does not make this explicit in his definition, another crucial feature of typology for Beale is \textit{intentionality}. In order for a type to be legitimate, it must be intended (at least by the divine author) as a foreshadowing of a later event. Beale thus excludes allegorical interpretation from his discussion of typology.\textsuperscript{18} He is clear that legitimate

\textsuperscript{14} Beale, \textit{Handbook}, 58.

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 14.

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{18} Beale, “Did Jesus and His Followers,” 91.
typological foreshadowing is limited to “broad historical patterns” rather than “minutiae,”¹⁹ and suggests that the prophetic nature of typology can be discerned even before it is identified as such in the NT. For instance, Beale believes that “the literary clustering of repeated commissions and failures is evidence of a type within the OT itself . . . . Candidates for types may also be those major redemptive-historical events that in some fashion are repeated throughout the OT and share such unique characteristics that they are clearly to be identified with one another long before the era of the NT.”²⁰ In this way, Beale is able to categorize typology as “contextual exegesis,”²¹ an observation which leads to the third question regarding the NT use of the OT: Do the NT writers take into account the context of the passages they cite?

**Question 3: Do the NT Writers Take Into Account the Context of the Passages They Cite?**

Beale’s answer to this question is a resounding “yes.” He reacts strongly against the suggestion that NT writers used the OT only for rhetorical purposes and were unconcerned with the original contexts of the passages they used, recognizing the threat such a view poses to the doctrine of the inerrancy of Scripture. In his view, “the best evidence against a mere rhetorical force of Old Testament references is that the rhetorical impact is heightened when the broader contextual meaning of the Old Testament passage is taken into consideration.”²² He admits that there are instances where a NT writer’s use of the OT appears at first glance to be non-contextual, but maintains that this appearance can often be explained by an “ironic or polemical intention” on the part of the NT author. Interpreters must also consider the possibility that the reference in question is an “unintentional or unconscious allusion,” in which case one would not

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¹⁹ Ibid., 93.


²¹ Ibid., 25.

necessarily expect the author to have the original context in mind.\textsuperscript{23} For example, Paul, being expertly trained in the Hebrew Scriptures and intimately familiar with their contents, surely had a mind that was saturated with the language of the Old Testament. Therefore it is not surprising to find that Paul sometimes expresses himself using distinctly OT language, even if he is not consciously intending to do so (much less intending to communicate some special meaning through it). Beale is therefore in agreement with the following statement: “The New Testament authors, despite appearances, were actually respecting the context of the Old Testament text they are citing. Although it may not be obvious to us, there must be some legitimate trigger in the Old Testament text, since no inspired writer would handle the Old Testament so irresponsibly. Careful examination will reveal that the New Testament’s use of the Old Testament is actually based in and is consistent with that Old Testament author’s intention.”\textsuperscript{24}

While Beale agrees that NT writers do take into account the context of the passages which they cite, if you were to ask him what ‘context’ means to him, you would get a nuanced and multifaceted response. He writes, “NT authors were aware of broad OT contexts and did not focus merely on single verses independent of the segment from which they were drawn. Single verses and phrases are merely signposts to the overall OT context from which they were cited.”\textsuperscript{25} What appears to be a reference to a single OT verse may in fact be a reference to the larger literary unit in which that verse is found. The literary unit to which the NT writer intends to refer

\textsuperscript{23} Beale, “Did Jesus and His Followers,” 90.

\textsuperscript{24} Gregory K. Beale, The Erosion of Inerrancy in Evangelicalism: Responding to New Challenges to Biblical Authority (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008), 90-91. The statement is a quotation from Peter Enns, Inspiration and Incarnation: Evangelicals and the Problem of the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 115. In his book, Enns is summarizing a position with which he disagrees. Beale quotes Enns in order to indicate his support of such a view.

\textsuperscript{25} Beale, “Did Jesus and His Followers,” 90.
may be a single pericope, the whole book, or the entire canon.\textsuperscript{26} When we consider that within the OT itself later texts regularly quote or allude to earlier ones, often developing the force of the earlier texts and loading them with different or greater significance, the question of context becomes even more complex. According to Beale, “The NT may quote an earlier OT passage but understand it in the light of the way that passage has been interpretatively developed later in the OT canon. Sometimes an earlier text may undergo interpretative development by several subsequent OT texts, so that the canonical trajectory of that development may well need to be kept in mind in understanding how the NT understands the earlier text being cited.”\textsuperscript{27} Once the interpreter considers things like this, Beale says, he is ready to answer the fourth question concerning the NT use of the OT: Does the NT writers’ use of Jewish exegetical methods explain the NT use of the OT?

**Question 4: Does the NT Writers’ Use of Jewish Exegetical Methods Explain the NT Use of the OT?**

In Beale’s view, it is illegitimate to make any \textit{a priori} assumptions about the supposed influence of 1st-century Jewish exegetical methods on Christian writers’ exegesis of the OT. Rather, “the way NT authors handle their Scripture should be analyzed first from their own writings, independent of Jewish methods of interpretation.”\textsuperscript{28} When this is done, Beale claims, the exegetical approaches of the NT writers are found to be highly contextual. In this, the NT writers are following the exegetical methods found in the OT itself (in instances of intertextuality and quoting of earlier canonical texts) and possibly even practiced by some 1st-century Jewish

\textsuperscript{26} Ibid. Beale writes, “Consideration of the immediate literary context of OT verses . . . should therefore be supplemented with the canonical literary context.” Ibid.

\textsuperscript{27} Beale, \textit{Handbook}, 98. “It is also possible that a NT writer might be influenced by some OT theme (found in multiple passages) through which he understands the OT text to which he is making reference.” Ibid, 45-46.

\textsuperscript{28} Ibid., 4.
Beale rhetorically asks, “Is it really inappropriately modernist to believe that Jesus and the apostles could have had understandings of the Old Testament that had significant links to the Old Testament’s original meaning? . . . Could not divine revelation break through to cause New Testament writers to perceive the original intention of Old Testament texts?” In other words, the NT writers did not have to use OT texts non-contextually in order to connect them to the person and work of Christ because they were connected to his person and work from the very beginning! This explains why “Jesus and the apostles believed that the Old Testament foretold the revelatory events connected with Jesus to such a degree that people could be held accountable for their understanding of and response to such Old Testament prophecies and their fulfillment in Jesus.” Therefore, because of his conviction that the NT writers employed a consistently contextual method for exegeting the OT, Beale answers affirmatively to the fifth question concerning the NT use of the OT: Are we able to replicate the exegetical and hermeneutical approaches to the OT that we find in the writings of the NT?

**Question 5: Are We Able to Replicate the Exegetical and Hermeneutical Approaches to the OT that We Find in the Writings of the NT?**

Beale believes that contemporary Christians not only can, but should replicate the exegetical approaches of the OT found in the NT. This includes the use of typological

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30 Ibid., 121-122.

31 Ibid., 118.

32 Beale, “Did Jesus and His Followers,” 94. “I believe a positive answer can and must be given to the question, ‘Can we reproduce the exegesis of the New Testament?’ True, we must be careful in distinguishing between the normative and descriptive (and this is an area in which there is disagreement in many areas among evangelicals in general), but in the case of the NT’s method of interpreting the OT the burden of proof rests upon those attempting to deny its normativity.” Ibid.
Recognizing that many evangelicals find this advocacy of typology unsettling, Beale is quick to note the limitations inherent in its contemporary use, saying, “We today cannot reproduce the inspired certainty of our typological interpretations as either the OT or NT writers could, but the consistent use of such a method by biblical authors throughout hundreds of years of sacred history suggests strongly that it is a viable method for all saints to employ today.”

Beale acknowledges the possibility of the typological method being abused, but says that the proper response to this danger is not to abolish the method completely (as if the method itself were the problem) but to use it carefully, in recognition of its limitations, and with an awareness of the hermeneutical and theological presuppositions behind the NT authors’ own use of it.

When identifying typology in the OT, Beale stresses that types are not to be sought “among the minute details of a passage but in the central theological message of the literary unit.” Furthermore, potential types “should concern God’s acts to redeem a people or . . . to judge those who are faithless and disobedient.”

On the topic of sensus plenior, Beale himself does not hesitate to follow the lead of the NT writers by providing OT texts with new significance and “new understandings . . . which may have been surprising to an Old Testament audience.” This is perhaps most evident in his interpretation of the eschatological temple prophesied in Ezekiel 40-48, which he sees as finding its fulfillment in the new heaven and new earth of Revelation 21, the “universally expanded” and

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34 Ibid.

35 Beale, “Did Jesus and His Followers,” 93.

36 Beale, Handbook, 22.

Beale thus sees the OT temple sanctuary (in all of its various permutations, including the prototypical garden temple of Eden, the tabernacle in the wilderness, the Solomonic temple, and the eschatological temple prophesied in Ezekiel 40-48) as a type pointing to the ultimate reality of “Christ and his subsequent dwelling through the Spirit in the worldwide Church as his temple.” This is an acceptable fulfillment of the prophesied physical temple because “the progress of God’s revelation has made the fulfillment of apparent prophecies of an architectural temple even greater than originally conceived by finite minds.” Furthermore, this interpretation is perfectly compatible with the original force of the text (and should be described as contextual exegesis) because “Christ not only fulfills all that the Old Testament temple and its prophecies represent, but…he is the unpacked meaning for which the temple existed all along.”

Beale’s Theology: An Overview

The foundation of Beale’s theology is his interpretation of Genesis 1-3. The way he understands these opening chapters of the Bible influences his understanding of everything that follows: “Everything in the biblical canon should be seen to have roots in Gen. 1-3 and to move forward toward its final goal in Rev. 21.” The legitimacy of his entire theological system rests on his particular interpretation of Genesis 1-3. In A New Testament Biblical Theology, Beale expresses his view that the garden in Eden was a temple in the first creation, and that as its priest and king, Adam was commissioned to rule well as God’s image-bearer in the land while

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38 Beale, Temple, 26.
39 Beale, “Eden, the Temple, and the Church’s Mission,” 29.
40 Ibid.
41 Beale, Temple, 379.
guarding and expanding the boundaries of the temple sanctuary. Adam’s task was to rule and subdue the entire earth, essentially achieving worldwide dominion, extending the geographical boundaries of the sanctuary until the presence of God filled the earth. He was to defend the sanctuary from the invasion of evil and consummate the eschatological goal of eternal rest for all of creation through a final victory over evil. Had Adam been successful in completing these tasks, he would have ushered in the new creation and experienced heightened blessings. These escalated conditions would have included final victory over evil, the moral incorruptibility of Adam’s spirit (i.e., freedom from the possibility of sin), decisive protection from death and corruption for Adam’s physical body, and the incorruptibility of the physical creation (i.e., new heavens and new earth). The irreversible nature of this “eschatologically enhanced stage of final blessedness”\textsuperscript{43} would have led to an eternal Sabbath rest for all of creation. This is why Beale can say that “eschatology originally preceded soteriology.”\textsuperscript{44}

When Adam failed to accomplish all that he was commissioned to do, his commission was passed on first to the Patriarchs and then to other Adam-like figures throughout the history of Israel, producing one failure after another. “At various stages in the OT the engine of the new creation gets started again, and its missional expansion seems to begin but stalls and ultimately breaks down because of sin.”\textsuperscript{45} Christ, as the last Adam, is the true priest-king who obeys God perfectly and not only redeems humanity and creation from the curse brought by mankind’s sin, but also completes the mission given to Adam at the very beginning of history. Christ himself is the temple sanctuary where the full presence of God dwells bodily, and in redeeming and creating the church he expands the boundaries of the temple from himself to others, as his

\textsuperscript{43} Ibid, 42.

\textsuperscript{44} Ibid., 89.

\textsuperscript{45} Ibid, 63.
followers are united to him through faith and themselves become temples of the living God. The church then continues the task of spreading God’s presence to others (through the proclamation of the gospel and the multiplication of disciples) until the end of the age, when God’s presence on earth will be fully realized. Christ’s life, death, and resurrection have thereby inaugurated the new-creational kingdom.

Every aspect of our salvation is therefore eschatological in nature, according to Beale, and “every major theological concept breathes the air of a latter-day atmosphere.” He concludes, “The definition of eschatology should be refined as the movement toward the new-creational reign, with other associated eschatological concept being understood as subcategories of this. This eschatological new creation reign is a movement toward a regaining of what was in Eden before sin.” By his own admission, Beale’s interpretation of Genesis 1-3 determines how he reads everything that follows, and nothing that follows can escape the shadow cast by those opening chapters. Interestingly, in Beale’s later writings it becomes clear that at some point in the development of his theology (which would have gradually taken shape based on the exegetical conclusions that resulted from his hermeneutical approach), his theological assumptions came to exert such an influence over his exegesis that the theology itself became a dominant feature of his hermeneutical method.

That Beale’s hermeneutic is largely driven by his theology is especially evident throughout the pages of his 2011 book, *A New Testament Biblical Theology*, but this dominance is apparent in his earlier works as well. This excerpt from a 1997 essay demonstrates the extent to which his theology (dominated as it is by his interpretation of Genesis 1-3) often shapes his exegesis:

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46 Ibid, 18.

Christ’s ministry of casting out demons was an expression of His beginning, though
decisive, defeat of Satan, who had brought creation into captivity through his deception
of Adam and Eve….It is certainly not coincidental that in resisting the Devil in the
wilderness he is depicted by the Gospel writers as doing what Israel should have done in
the wilderness wanderings, and even what Adam should have done in the Garden of
Eden. . . .

Jesus’ three responses [to the Devil’s temptations] also allude to the temptation of
Eve in Eden, which may be apparent from considering their themes . . . Luke’s ending
of his genealogy with Jesus being related to ‘the son of Adam, the son of God’, directly
preceding the temptation narrative, points further to Jesus as an Adamic figure in the
temptation, as does Mark’s apparently off-hand comment that immediately after the
temptation, Jesus ‘was with the wild beasts’, apparently residing in peace with them (Mk.
1:13). 49

This example exemplifies the kind of theology-driven hermeneutic that is found throughout
Beale’s writings.

Conclusion

I have examined the hermeneutic and theology of G.K. Beale, paying particular attention
to his view on the New Testament use of the Old Testament, and demonstrating the great
influence Beale’s biblical theology exerts over his exegetical conclusions. I discussed five
hermeneutical and theological presuppositions that Beale believes guided Jesus and the Apostles,
and gave Beale’s answers to five key questions regarding the NT use of the OT. In doing so, I
also examined Beale’s views on progressive revelation, typology and prophecy, and the ways in
which the NT writers understood and used the OT. I concluded by summarizing Beale’s biblical
theology and giving an example of the profound influence it has over his exegetical conclusions.

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49 Ibid., 29n43.
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