

A First Testament Approach

John Goldingay

INTRODUCTION TO THE APPROACH

In the New Testament, the works we call “the Old Testament” are simply “the Scriptures.” The rather sad title “the Old Testament” was devised later. I like to call these writings the First Testament rather than imply that they are old, antiquated, and out-of-date. These Scriptures issued from the real relationship between God and Israel, as testimony to God’s acts with Israel and documentation of his speaking to Israel. The New Testament encourages us to let these Scriptures illumine Jesus for us, but my argument in this chapter is that we are unwise to read Jesus back into them and thus miss what they have to say. On the other hand, we are wise to read the New Testament in light of them and to read the two Testaments in light of each other, as both comprise the Christian Scriptures.¹

God has always been Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and Father, Son, and Holy Spirit were all involved in God’s relationship with Israel. But it was only through the incarnation and through Pentecost that this threefold aspect to God emerged, as it became actual in people’s lives. Whenever the First Testament refers to God, one may assume that Father and Son are included and that the Holy Spirit was also engaged in inspiring these references. But God’s speaking in the First Testament did not make Christ part of the content of the communication. Christ is everywhere in the First Testament story, involved in the events, but he is not “in the First Testament” as someone whom the text mentions. Its message to God’s people does not invite them to think in terms of him. It simply invites them to relate to God. In reading the First Testament, we are wise to look at what it tells us about God and to allow it to draw us into a fuller relationship with the God to whom Jesus wants to introduce people (John 14:6).

1. THE NATURE OF SCRIPTURE

In the study that follows we will first consider the God-breathed nature of the Scriptures and the difference between ascertaining their meaning and discerning their significance for us. We will go on to the unity of the Scriptures in their theology, ethic, and spirituality, and the sense in which Jesus is indeed the climax to the scriptural story. Thirdly, we will consider three approaches to the relationship between the Testaments that might encourage the idea that Christ is in the First Testament: God’s acts and typology, God’s use of language, and God’s promises and threats.

¹ I presuppose here arguments and convictions developed in John Goldingay, *Do We Need the New Testament?* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015) and *Biblical Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2016).

Two passages that come conveniently near each other in the New Testament encapsulate some assumptions about the First Testament that provide illuminating insight on reading the First Testament in light of Jesus.

The sacred writings . . . are able to make you smart with a view to salvation through faith in Anointed Jesus. Every Scripture is God-breathed and useful for teaching, for testing, for correcting, for training in right living. (2 Tim 3:15–16)

Having spoken in many varying ways long ago to our ancestors through the prophets, at the end of this time God spoke to us through a Son. (Heb 1:1–2)²

“The prophets” would cover anyone through whom God spoke to Israel whose words appear in the First Testament. The comment in Hebrews implies that the prophets were wholly reliable messengers for God. When Samuel told Saul to “devote” Amalek by eliminating them (1 Sam 15:3) or Jeremiah promised there would always be Levites to offer sacrifices in Jerusalem (Jer 33:18), they spoke as God’s reliable messengers to Israel. The same was true when prophets spoke of a girl who would soon have a baby and would have reason to call him “God-is-with-us,” or of God’s servant as crushed but destined to be exalted (Isa 7:14; 52:13–53:12). God spoke to Israel through them, and the meaning of the prophecies resides in what God was saying to those ancestors. The Holy Spirit did inspire prophets to speak to Israel about events to happen in a time to come (Isa 2:2; cf. 1 Pet 1:12). But Isaiah 7 and 52:13–53:12 do not indicate that these passages are referring to events that will happen in some centuries’ time. They point rather to events in the prophet’s own day. The passages’ spiritual meaning, the divine author’s meaning, lies in the message the Holy Spirit was giving to these ancestors for their lives with God. And we access the divine author’s meaning via the human author. What the human author meant is what the divine author meant.

On the other hand, Paul’s description of the Scriptures as “God-breathed” has a complementary implication. The implication of the Scriptures being God-breathed does not simply mean that the prophecies are infallible and inerrant (though they are). Other New Testament references to the Holy Spirit’s involvement with the Scriptures relates this involvement to their extraordinary capacity to say further things to people other than the audience that they originally addressed (e.g., Acts 1:16; 4:25–26; 28:25–28). The Scriptures being God-breathed provides the conceptual background or foreground to these extraordinary and surprising references. While the spiritual meaning of the prophets’ messages was the Holy Spirit’s message to their own people, everything that the First Testament says is also instructive beyond its original context. Being God-breathed underlies the Scriptures’ capacity to inform people about salvation through Jesus and be useful for teaching, testing, correcting, and training in right living. They have this capacity whether or not the authors were aware of saying things

² All scriptural translations are my own.

that would benefit people who would eventually believe in Jesus. That's why Matthew, for instance, when seeking to understand Jesus's virgin birth, can find illumination in Isaiah.

The Meaning and Significance of the Scriptures

We thus need to distinguish the meaning of the Scriptures from their significance or application. The meaning of something is inherent in it; a message's meaning is what the giver of the message was seeking to communicate to the recipient. The significance of something is the illumination the message might bring to someone else, which may have little to do with that original act of communication. Matthew's linking of Isaiah 7:14 to the virgin birth does not involve finding a new meaning in Isaiah or finding a "fuller sense" there; the full sense is the passage's meaning for Israel's ancestors. Nor does Matthew find the "spiritual" meaning as opposed to the "literal" meaning. Matthew finds significance in Isaiah that the Holy Spirit can produce when the Scriptures are read in a new context, and especially in the context of Jesus. The dynamic is similar when an African diplomat asks if Isaiah 53 is about the prophet or about someone else. Philip, "beginning from this Scripture, told him the good news about Jesus" (Acts 8:35). There is a suggestive gap between the question and the answer. Philip does not say that Isaiah 53 is about the prophet or the Jewish people or King Jehoiachin or any of the other people who have been suggested.³ But he also does not say, "It's about Jesus." He wisely sidesteps the question about the passage's meaning and goes on to explain its significance in connection with his own concern, which is to talk about Jesus. Elsewhere, the New Testament takes up Isaiah 53 to communicate its significance in a different direction: the chapter has implications for the way believers respond to abuse (1 Pet 2:22). The passage's meaning belongs to the Holy Spirit's speaking to the ancestors (about the prophet, in my view).⁴ But it can also have application to Jesus and to believers.

One might reframe this point in terms of two approaches to interpretation that emerged a few decades ago. It is possible to speak of there being an "intertextual" relationship between what God said through the prophets and the writings in the New Testament. Now the word "intertextuality" can be used in various senses; here I refer to the way the New Testament can be alluding to the First Testament and reflecting its words even when it is not quoting from it.⁵ Jesus speaks in this way when he takes up phrases from Isaiah 35 and 61 in describing what he has been doing (Luke 7:22). John 1 does so in describing the message (the "word") that was a reality from the beginning. Considering the meaning of a text that is taken up by a later writer can aid our understanding of the later writer, but there is no presumption that the later writer works with the meaning of the original text. More likely, the original text becomes the vehicle whereby the later writer makes a new point and uses the text to this end.

³ See, e.g., John Goldingay, "Servant of Yahweh," in M. J. Boda and J. G. McConville, eds., *Dictionary of the Old Testament Prophets* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012), 700–707.

⁴ See, e.g., John Goldingay, *The Message of Isaiah 40–55: A Literary-Theological Commentary* (London: T & T Clark, 2005), 473–77.

⁵ See, classically, Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989); *Echoes of Scripture in the Gospels* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2016).

To put it another way, the New Testament's linking Jesus with promises that God made through the prophets is an aspect of how the prophets have been "received" over the centuries, as other works from Second Temple Judaism interacted with them, and as did Christian and Jewish, agnostic and atheist, ordinary and critical readers over subsequent centuries. Studying the "reception" of the First Testament is unfailingly interesting and illuminating, but it does not imply that the interpreters of texts see themselves as defining the actual meaning of the texts.

God spoke "by" or "through" the prophets. The prophets emphasize God's initiative in connection with speaking, and they describe God as the source of their words. One sometimes gets the impression that God dictated these words (cf. 1 Sam 3:1–14). The prophets are then simply God's scribes. Yet the variety in the prophets' forms of expression indicates that dictation is not the only model for this speaking. The First Testament also suggests the model of king and messenger. When Sennacherib sends a message to Hezekiah (Isaiah 36–37), Sennacherib prescribes its content, but his lieutenant frames the words; the message loses none of its authority. Analogously, God may determine the burden of a message and the prophet may devise the words, but it is still God's message with his authority, and it loses nothing of its truth. It still results from the prophet being carried along by the Holy Spirit and speaking from God (2 Pet 1:21). It is both God's message and the prophet's words.

Different arrangements hold with other forms of speech. With narrative, Luke indicates that he takes the initiative (Luke 1:1–4). With most Psalms, worshipers take the initiative and say what they want to say by way of praise or prayer. Human authors did their work, and Israel recognized that they told the truth about God and us or about us and God in important ways. The New Testament's finding that they help believers understand Jesus then confirms that God had been involved in their origin even if the human author didn't know it. The human authors turn out to be God's instruments—a positive counterpart to the negative way whereby an Assyrian emperor could be God's instrument. Their words were wholly theirs, but they were also wholly God's.

There is variety in the relationship of human author and divine author, but for interpreters, it makes no difference. The Scriptures issue from a combined effort involving the Holy Spirit and human authors, and we discover what the Holy Spirit was saying by attending to what the human author was saying. It's the same whichever Testament we are reading.

One God Through the Two Testaments

Whereas God spoke in varying ways through the prophets, he has now spoken through his Son. There is no difference between the content of what he said through the prophets and through his Son. The difference lies in his varying ways of speaking through different prophets and the unified embodiment of this teaching in Jesus. Neither Jesus's followers nor his enemies saw him as saying anything new about God; what was new and scandalous was his presenting himself as an embodiment of God. The Jewish people knew that God was loving and merciful but also rigorous and capable of being threatening; so was Jesus. The Jewish people knew that God had power over the natural world and had supernatural knowledge; so did Jesus. Everything

the First Testament says about God is true in Jesus and about Jesus. The way the New Testament speaks of Jesus and of the Holy Spirit meant that believers in Jesus indwelt by the Holy Spirit needed to think in new ways about God's oneness, and this process of thinking eventually issued in the doctrine of the Trinity. But the New Testament tells us nothing new about God's character, nor does it suggest that there was anything about God that the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings lacked. The gift it reflects on is the embodiment of this God in Jesus.

"In the beginning was the word" (John 1:1). The "word" is the gospel message, the message that Jesus and the apostles proclaim (e.g., John 5:24; 8:31; Acts 4:31; 8:4). John begins, then, by asserting that this message was not novel; it went back to the beginning. But it is then embodied in Jesus, and he is therefore full of grace and truthfulness. Torah came through Moses; grace and truthfulness came through Jesus (John 1:14, 17). John hardly implies that grace and truthfulness were not proclaimed or present in the Torah. The words "gracious" and "abounding in truthfulness" come together in God's description of himself in the Torah (Exod 34:6), and "grace" and "truthfulness" recur many times elsewhere in the Torah. John's point parallels the one in Hebrews 1 about the prophets. In many different ways the Torah and the prophets declare God's grace and truthfulness; in Jesus they "came" embodied in a person.

The view that the First Testament God is a God of wrath and the New Testament God a God of love doesn't survive a reading of either Testament. There is no difference between God as he appears in the First Testament and Jesus as he appears in the New. And there is nothing about Jesus in the New Testament that was not present in God as he appears in the First Testament. While God often threatens to abandon Israel for its faithlessness, he never finally does so. He declines to go back on his commitment to them. "If we are faithless, he remains faithful, because he cannot deny himself" (2 Tim 2:13). The grace and truthfulness that God shows in many different ways through Israel's story and that are embodied in Jesus come to most spectacular expression in his letting himself be killed. Being faithless is what characterized Israel over centuries, and being faithful to the end is what characterized God. Being faithless is what characterized Israel when confronted by Jesus, and being faithful to the end is what characterized Jesus. He was the embodiment of what God had always shown himself to be, because he was God. Whatever Jesus is, God is. And as the theology of the First Testament and that of the New are similar, so are their spirituality and their ethics. They have a similar understanding of worship, praise, prayer, and thanksgiving. Both combine challenges about God's ultimate standards with allowance for human hardness of heart. Moses does it (Matt 19:3–12), and Paul did it, for instance in accepting slavery (e.g., Col 3:22).

Whatever Jesus is, God is. Conversely, whatever God is and has been also applies to Jesus. Whatever God has been doing, Jesus was also engaged in it. The story of God's involvement with Israel is the story of Jesus's involvement with Israel. "Before Abraham was, I am" (John 8:58). The rock from which the Israelites drank "was Christ" (1 Cor 10:4). When Isaiah saw God, he saw Jesus's glory (John 12:41). But Isaiah didn't know that. Jesus is not the subject of the revelation Isaiah gave to his people. The prophets were not telling the ancestors about Jesus.

Jesus as the Climax to the Story

The Scriptures are an account of God's activity in creating the world and placing humanity in his garden to serve it and enjoy it, and of his taking humanity to its destiny in a new world and placing humanity in his city to enjoy it as his servants. In the unfolding of this story, God attached himself to Israel and then came to Israel and to the world in Jesus. Intermingled with this story is teaching about its meaning and its implications for people's lives, about God's person and his intentions, and about their identity and his expectations of them, along with examples of the way people can talk to him. The story is one story, a metanarrative in the narrow sense, a big overall story, inferred from the many smaller-scale narratives in the Scriptures. The teaching is one body of teaching, a metanarrative in the looser sense of a coherent understanding of God, life, and humanity.

Jesus is the climax of the story. He came to restore and free the Jewish people, to announce that God was starting to reign. He came as the embodiment of God's grace and truthfulness, allowing the world and his own people to do their worst to him, and causing their action to be the means of sealing his relationship with them. His ministry to the Jewish people also issued in another way that he brought the scriptural story to a climax. It did it in a paradoxical fashion, in that the Jewish people's not being convinced about Jesus led to an emphasis on a proclamation of him to the Gentile world, in fulfilment of the vision of the Psalms. And he opened up the possibility of resurrection (1 Cor 15). To put it another way, he opened the door into the inner sanctuary for his people (Heb 9–10). In the terms of yet another image, he opened the gates of the new Jerusalem (Rev 21–22). His opening the way into God's eternal presence does not imply that Jewish people previously lacked access to God's presence. God met with them when they came to the temple and met with them elsewhere in their praise and prayer. It meant that both Jews and Gentiles could now look forward to resurrection life.

This last result of Jesus's coming meant that he brought something that one might call progress in revelation. In the First Testament, people didn't know about resurrection life; now they do. Yet the model of "progress" for understanding diversity and change within the Scriptures is misleading. In outline, all the truth we need about God and us, and about the world and life, is present in the creation story. Even the gift of resurrection life links with the presence of the tree of life at the beginning of creation (cf. Rev 22:14). What happens over the centuries is a filling out of the detail. No radically new truths need to emerge. New things happen, actions such as God's summons to Abraham, his rescue of Israel from Egypt, and eventually Jesus's coming. These events put more flesh on the bones of the truth, but they do not bring radically new truths. If anything, indeed, rather than progressive revelation, humanity's rebellion against God means that there is regressive de-revelation (see Rom 1–3).

In light of the progression in the story, however, like any story its beginning can be understood more fully in light of its end and its end must be understood in light of its beginning. In the Scriptures' teaching, there is accumulation rather than progress, and each part of the whole must be understood in light of the rest. Songs of Songs, for instance, needs to be understood in light of 1 Corinthians 7, and vice versa. Each Testament contributes to an understanding of the

other, not so much in the understanding of specific texts as in seeing their implications in the context of the whole. We can treat all the Scriptures in a similar way as a resource for a knowledge of God and thus of Jesus. Earlier Scriptures do not need to be corrected by later parts. If anything, Jesus's comment about hardness of hearts implies that later parts need to be corrected by earlier parts.

The Relationship between the Testaments

The New Testament begins by giving us the Scriptures' basic story line as its own starting point. It runs not from creation to fall to redemption to new creation, but from Abraham to David, from David to the exile, and from the exile to Jesus (Matt 1:1–17). We could broaden and spell out that scriptural story line by saying that it runs from creation, to rebellion, to Abraham, to the exodus, to Sinai, to Canaan, to David, to the fall of Jerusalem, to the rebuilding of the temple, to Antiochus Epiphanes, to Jesus, to the pouring out of the Holy Spirit, to the proclamation of the gospel around the Mediterranean, to the fall of Jerusalem, to the new Jerusalem. How can one see interrelationships between the episodes in the story as the two Testaments tell it? Thinking about this question can help readers understand the sense in which they may make a link between Jesus and a First Testament text. It can help readers see how to understand Jesus in light of the First Testament, and vice versa.

God's Acts: Typology

First, there are consistencies and recurrences in God's patterns of action. Jesus's coming constitutes the definitive expression of the patterns, while the expressions in Israel form smaller scale versions. In other words, there are typological aspects to the story.

There are three elements to typology.⁶ First, there are resemblances in God's actions. Rescuing the Israelites from Egypt was an exodus, a deliverance (Exod 1–13); rescuing them from Babylon was another exodus, another deliverance (e.g., Isa 43:14–21); rescuing them from sin was yet another exodus, another deliverance (cf. Col 1:13–14; in Luke 9:31 Jesus speaks of his *exodos*). Second, when God repeats the pattern, there is enhancement; it is not simply repetition. The rescue from Babylon was to be better than the rescue from Egypt: people won't have to rush this time (Isa 52:11–12). The rescue from sin is better still (Col. 1:14). Third, the original expression of the pattern is literal, in the sense that it refers to something material; the subsequent expression(s) may be figurative. The exodus from Egypt and from Babylon meant geographical movement; for the exodus from sin, geographical rescue is a figure of speech. Hebrews looks back to literal priests offering sacrifices in a literal sanctuary; it then sees Jesus as

⁶ See further John Goldingay, *Approaches to Old Testament Interpretation*, updated ed. (Leicester: Apollos, 1990), 97–115, with references to works such as D. L. Baker, *Two Testaments, One Bible* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1976); Patrick Fairbairn, *The Typology of Scripture*, reprint ed., Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1952); Leonhard Goppelt, *Typos: The Typological Interpretation of the Old Testament in the New* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982).

a priest in a figurative sense when it speaks of him offering a sacrifice that opens the way to a sanctuary that stands for being in the eternal presence of God.

In the First Testament, the priests, the sacrifices, and the sanctuary are not shadows of something else. They are the real thing. The sanctuary is where God really meets with people as they bring their worship and their prayers and know that God is present, listening, and answering there. They don't think of it as a shadow of another sanctuary to which people will have access later. But in Hebrews, the earthly sanctuary and its offerings help people understand that future sanctuary. While Hebrews is the chief body of typological thinking in the Scriptures, Paul also sees Adam as a type of Christ: Christ's action (potentially) affects the whole world, as Adam's did; Christ's action was obviously better (!); and whereas we are related to Adam in the body, we are related to Christ in the Spirit. Isaiah 52:13–53:12 is not a prophecy of a servant to come, but the servant who is described there did provide a type in light of which Jesus can be understood.

One cannot tell from the form of something or from the words describing it that it has a typological reference—that it prefigures something else or that it points to something else. Only *a posteriori* does one know that. There are no texts that were designed to be typological of something in the future for the people to whom God spoke through the prophets. It is when one looks back from Jesus that one can say that Adam or the high priest or the servant in Isaiah was a type of Christ. The value of doing so is then that it enables one to understand Jesus. It does not affect the meaning of the First Testament passage. The sanctuary, the priesthood, the sacrifices, or the servant's suffering do not point forward to Jesus. They point in the present to God as one to whom people could relate in the present. As readers, we then pay attention to them in that connection, not in connection to what they (don't) point to. And we have to be wary of losing the possible significances of the text by focusing too much on its typological significance.

God's Use of Language

Matthew's use of the First Testament can be seen as implying a typological way of thinking,⁷ though Matthew doesn't give any direct clues of this approach, as Hebrews and Paul do. It may rather be verbal links that stimulate Matthew's insights. He knows that Jesus embodied the presence of God and that he was conceived through the Holy Spirit's direct action on a girl who was not married, and he is stunned by Isaiah's talk about a girl being pregnant and having a baby who will embody the amazing fact that God is with us. Verbal parallels of this kind may also lie behind the connections he makes with other passages in Matthew 1:18–2:23.

Links in language thus suggest links of substance, an aspect of the verbal inspiration of the Scriptures, of the words being God-breathed. This principle may underlie allegorical interpretation, which starts from scriptural words and lets them suggest something different from the meaning they had as an act of communication between God and their human audience.⁸ The

⁷ See, e.g., the "Introduction" and the commentary on in 1:18–2:23 in R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007).

⁸ See, e.g., Goldingay, *Approaches to Old Testament Interpretation*, 102–115, with references to works such as James Barr, *Old and New in Interpretation* (London: SCM, 1966); also Andrew Louth, *Discerning the*

classic example is the interpretation of the love songs in the Song of Songs. They give no hint that they concern the love relationship between God and his people. Indeed, the Scriptures as a whole give no hint that the relationship between God and his people or Christ and the church is anything like the egalitarian relationship of the man and woman in the Song (they do indicate that it's like a patriarchal relationship, in a positive sense).

Paul uses the verb *allēgoreō* to describe his interpretation of Sarah and Hagar (Gal 4:24). He may not mean quite what we mean in English by allegory, but his interpretation of the story uses the words of Genesis to throw light on salvation in Christ in a way that look unrelated to their inherent meaning.⁹ Like Matthew, Paul shows that the Holy Spirit can use interpretation that ignores the text's meaning, and on two important occasions I have had God bless me through such allegorical interpretation. Still, I'd rather not take the risk of undertaking allegorical interpretation on my own initiative. It is in this connection that the difference between meaning and significance is worth preserving, because letting Genesis or Isaiah and Galatians or Matthew have their separate meanings gives us two texts to learn from. If we assimilate Genesis and Isaiah to Galatians and Matthew, we have only one meaning.

God's Promises (and Threats)

A more intrinsic link between episodes in the scriptural story as a whole features when God makes promises and keeps them (or restates them).

For example, in Genesis 41 and Acts 11, God reveals to Joseph and Agabus that there is to be a famine, and it happens. They make predictions that are fulfilled. But the general run of God's statements about the future in the Scriptures are not predictions. The word "prediction" hardly comes in the Scriptures. One reason is that Hebrew doesn't have a word for prediction; Greek has the word *prolegō*, but it doesn't occur in the New Testament. The more profound reason is that God doesn't predict things. What God does is promise and threaten things. A person predicts things that someone else will do, but that the person doesn't control. We do not predict what we ourselves will do. We declare intentions. And God in the First Testament (and in the New Testament) declares intentions. Whether he fulfills his intentions depends on the response he receives (as Jer 18:1–11 makes most explicit) or on whether he finds other reason to change his mind. And the intentions God announces in the First Testament rarely resemble an advance video of an event, as one might expect if they were predictions (I suspect that the same applies to intentions God declares in the New Testament about Jesus's final appearing). God declares the intention to cause the fall of Jerusalem, Babylon, and Egypt, but their fall doesn't correspond to the nature of the warning. God announces the intention to send a son of David to rule in Israel, but the son of David who came does not correspond to the promise: God speaks of someone sitting on David's throne and establishing proper exercise of authority, but makes no

Mystery (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983); Leroy A. Huizenga, "The Old Testament in the New, Intertextuality and Allegory," *JSNT* 38 (2015): 17-35.

⁹ On the Galatians passage see David I. Starling, "Justifying Allegory: Scripture, Rhetoric and Reason in Gal 4:21–5:1," *Journal for Theological Interpretation* 9 (2015): 227–45, with his references.

reference to him preaching, healing, expelling demons, raising dead people, cleansing people, engaging in controversy, calling disciples, or being crucified. It's hardly surprising that John the Baptizer wonders if Jesus is really the one who was to come (Luke 7:19).

To illustrate the point another way, 1 Kings 13:1–2 makes a declaration about Josiah, who will be born in several centuries' time. There could have been passages in the First Testament that refer to Jesus in a parallel way, but there are none. Isaiah 7:14 tests and proves the point; the name of the child to whom it refers will be Immanuel, not Jesus. Isaiah 9:6 speaks of a child who has been born for us and gives him a name, but neither the name Jesus nor the designation "Anointed" or "Messiah" is part of the name. Conversely, the New Testament never says that Christ himself is "in" the First Testament.

Jesus does say that there are "things about him" there (Luke 24:27). If we ask what they were, two earlier passages in Luke are illuminating. When John the Baptizer had his disciples ask Jesus if he was the one who was to come, he drew attention to his having healed people, expelled bad spirits, cleansed people, enabled deaf people to hear, and preached good news to the poor (Luke 7:22). He did not refer to any messianic prophecies, and we have noted that several actions he describes have no scriptural parallels. Some recall Isaiah 35, which is a prophecy, but not a messianic one. Some recall Isaiah 61, which are the words of someone anointed, but words in a testimony not a prophecy. Jesus quotes it earlier (Luke 4:16–21) and comments that this Scripture has been "filled" or "filled out" or "filled up" in his hearers' ears. The traditional translation "fulfilled" makes this comment sound as if the testimony was a prediction, but *plēroō* is a more ordinary (yet interesting) word than that, and one may set the occurrence of the verb here alongside the occurrence of it in Matthew 5:17 in connection with the Torah and the Prophets.¹⁰

Christian interest in First Testament prophecies also has to keep in mind that only a few passages there could count as messianic prophecies. God's main purpose in speaking through the prophets was not to give them promises about the Messiah. There are no First Testament passages that use the Hebrew word *meshiah* to refer to the Messiah. The word occurs only to describe a present priest or king. The clearest "messianic prophecy" appears in Micah 5:2, which Matthew 2:1–12 quotes, and it does not use the word *meshiah*, though it is a promise of a ruler to come and it can help people who believe in Jesus to understand him. The importance of such prophecies is the way they help us understand Jesus, but there are no promises of Jesus that parallel the promise or threat about Josiah. Thus, one cannot prove that Jesus is the Messiah from the First Testament. Jesus's response when John the Baptizer asks his question fits that conclusion. And rabbinic teachers seeking to counter the arguments of modern evangelists have no difficulty in demonstrating that the "messianic prophecies" to which the evangelists appeal are not messianic prophecies at all. The First Testament's significance in relation to Jesus as Messiah is to help us see what his messiahship means, not to prove anything. And we don't have to ask whether the scriptural author saw a passage as messianic, because all the Scriptures help us understand who Jesus is.

¹⁰ Cf. John Goldingay, *Reading Jesus's Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017), 209–11.

All God's promises find their "Yes" in Jesus (2 Cor 1:20). He hasn't "fulfilled" them all; there are key aspects to the way the First Testament talks about the son of David that he has not yet "fulfilled." But he has confirmed them all, guaranteed that God's promises will be fulfilled.

2. INTERPRETIVE STEPS FOR READERS

So how do we go about interpreting the First Testament—or for that matter the New Testament? Discovering a passage's meaning involves discerning what act of communication was happening or was designed to happen between the human author in the service of the Holy Spirit, and the human audience.

Questions and Steps

One might then think of a series of steps in reading the Scriptures. Here are some of them.

1. What sort of passage is it—for instance, narrative, exhortation, prayer, something else?
2. What was the question to which the passage was the answer?
3. How does it fit into the book in which it comes—how is it illumined by its context in this book?
4. If we know the book's historical or social context, how does it illumine the question?
5. How does who I am, and the context in which I live, help and hinder my understanding the question and the passage?
6. What was the passage's broad answer to the question it presupposes—in other words, what was it saying to the ancestors?
7. How do the different parts of the passage or the different characters in the narrative contribute to this answer?
8. When I set it in the context of the rest of the Scriptures, how does it illumine them and how do they illumine it?
9. When I set it in the context of my life, how does its being God-breathed prove itself?
10. And given our concern in this book we can ask of any text, what light does it throw on Jesus?

Discovering a passage's meaning happens as we ask the kinds of questions that we can ask as the people we are in our context, and as we listen for the answers from the text in light of what we can know about its context. We then seek to formulate new questions, if there seems to be more in the text than our first questions have unlocked. Other Scriptures may help us to formulate questions and guess at answers, and this dynamic includes the two Testaments in relation to each other.

For instance, I myself interpret the Scriptures as a free, modern, Western, urban, white, male, who is old enough to be retired, an academic, a married man, an Anglican priest, belonging

to a post-Christian society and a powerful nation. I have a home, food to eat, and healthcare. The Scriptures were exercises in communication between people who were few of those things. So I will be helped to understand the Scriptures if I seek to look at them through the eyes of people in a traditional society, of people who work on the farm, of women and people in need—and of readers from the past such as Jews in Second Temple times, the Jews who wrote most of the New Testament, and the Jewish, Christian, agnostic, and atheist scholars who have studied the Scriptures over two millennia. This reading helps me perceive aspects of the text's meaning that I might otherwise miss. It also enables me to how these readers were seeing the text's significance for themselves. This may also be its significance for me, or it may model the way I go about seeking to see its significance for me. None of these readings of the text determines the text's meaning or its significance. What they do is offer pointers or suggestions for my understanding of the Scriptures themselves.

We will be keen to understand the text's inherent meaning because that is what God was actually saying through the prophets, and we will want to listen in on that conversation because of what we may learn and because it may be directly important for us. In other words, the text's meaning may also be its significance for us. Yet it is not always so. We would have to think and pray about the significance for us of Jesus's command, "If you want to be perfect, sell your possessions and give to the poor" (Matt 19:21). Conversely, sometimes God may speak to us through a text in a way that has little to do with its original meaning. I have mentioned how there have been times when that has happened to me. The validity of someone's use of a text requires that it broadly fits with the Scriptures, but not necessarily that this use corresponds to this particular text's meaning.

The New Testament's Example

This consideration fits with the New Testament's use of the First Testament. Sometimes the New Testament uses a First Testament text in a way that ignores its inherent meaning. Its use of that text does not then determine its meaning. Allowing it to do so would dishonor the work of the Holy Spirit and the Scriptures' human author in speaking to "our ancestors." For instance, Paul's references to the Torah as suggesting that we get right with God by doing as it says (Rom 10:5–8; cf. Gal 3:10–14) do not override the Torah's own perspective, that we are right with God by his grace and through trust in him and that we respond to that grace by doing as the Torah says. Paul himself elsewhere draws attention to that dynamic; the comments just noted were counteracting the possibility that people might read statements in the Torah to make the opposite point. They counter a way in which people might see the text's significance; they do not define its meaning. Conversely, the meaning of a First Testament text in its context does not determine its significance as the New Testament uses it. At Sinai, God declares that he will be gracious and merciful to all the people he decides to be gracious and merciful to; he will not have his grace and mercy constrained (Exod 33:19). Paul quotes his words to indicate that God is free to withhold grace and mercy (Rom 9:15).

The different implications that those two statements have in the context of the Torah and of Romans draws attention to a different matter. In addition to understanding the meaning of a text as an exercise in communication between a divine and a human author on one hand and a human audience on the other, it is important to set this text in the context of the rest of Scriptures. As the opening sentence in Hebrews notes, there is rich diversity in the Scriptures. They need to manifest this diversity because most questions are complex and their answers need to be nuanced differently in different contexts. But the nuancing for one context may then not be the nuancing for another. And bringing texts into interrelationship is one safeguard against preaching yesterday's message in today's context. Interpretation involves holding together the point about the importance of obeying God and the point about God's grace being the reality that puts us in touch with God in the first place. The same applies to the Torah's point about God's generosity with his mercy and Paul's point about his sovereignty over his mercy. Whereas God had declared that Israel is not his people, he will declare once again that they are his people (Hos 1:10; 2:23), but Paul quotes this promise with reference to making Gentiles his people (Rom 9:25–26). Hosea's meaning does not determine the new significance that Paul sees in God's words, and Paul's quotation does not determine the meaning of Hosea. Both statements (about grace and mercy to God's people and about grace and mercy to the Gentile world) are important aspects of scriptural theology. An interpreter needs intelligence and the gift of the Holy Spirit to see whether one of these pieces of good news is the message for now. Reading the First Testament after Jesus and thus in light of the New Testament does not change the text's meaning, though it may make a difference to its significance for us.

In inspiring the First Testament, the Holy Spirit presupposes that the God who was at work in its entire story is the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. But we will be wise not to remind ourselves of the fact too often. We will risk missing what the Holy Spirit wanted us to see. Christ is not in the First Testament in the way Josiah is in 1 Kings 13 or the way Antiochus is in Daniel 11.

3. CASE STUDIES

Here is how I approach three sample passages in light of the principles outlined so far.¹¹

Genesis 22:1–19

The key motif in the story of Abraham and Sarah is God's promise that they would become the parents of a big nation. It was an implausible promise, because Sarah could not have children; it is almost as if God likes to make things difficult for himself. The story continually

¹¹ See further John Goldingay, *Genesis*, Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Pentateuch (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2020); *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs for Everyone* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2014); *The Message of Isaiah 40–55*.

underlines what a hazardous promise it was. Isaac's birth made the promise more plausible, but one chapter later God himself radically imperils it.

"God tested Abraham" (Gen 22:1). The Scriptures often refer to God testing people, usually by putting pressure on them to see if they will do as he says. Hebrews 11:17–19 takes Abraham's testing as an illustration of how God relates to us. He checks whether we, too, will operate on the basis of trust in him. Given that God can look into our hearts, it may seem odd that he tests our hearts (1 Thess 2:4). Perhaps it is a sign that he relates to us in the real world, not a virtual or theoretical world. The ancient Jewish commentary *Genesis Rabbah* comments on this story that testing is a kind of compliment.¹² It is the faithful people that God tests in this way, not the faithless (Ps 11:5). For many people, the greatest tests come not through something God commissions but through something that just happens. Before my girlfriend, Ann, became my fiancée and my wife, we found she had multiple sclerosis, and we lived with that reality for over forty years. It tested my faithfulness and I sometimes failed the test.

For God, then, the question that the chapter answers is whether Abraham really lives in awe of him. For Genesis, the chapter is also one of a series of stories that answer the question how God went about fulfilling his promise to Abraham. God uses the word traditionally translated "fear," which can mean "be afraid," but which often denotes a submission that acquiesces in whatever God expects of us (e.g., Exod 1:17, 21; Luke 1:50). This fear or awe is not very different from love, which also expresses itself in doing what God says.

We don't know how Abraham knew that it was really God telling him to offer up Isaac, but somehow he did. God's words to him underline the enormity of his bidding. But Abraham already knows that God is trustworthy, if also mysterious in some of the things he asks. He knows that God has made promises to him and Sarah. And God has squared a circle before. It is within this framework that Abraham hears God speak. You could never do what Abraham does unless you knew you had reason to trust God. That trust enabled him to follow God's bidding without hesitation and to know that offering Isaac would not be the end of the story. But neither Abraham nor Isaac knows where the journey will lead; both operate on the basis of trust and obedience.

God only needs Abraham to lift the cleaver over Isaac to establish that he would go the whole way in obedience. God can then stop him, and Abraham finds a ram and offers it instead. He comments that God is shown to be *Yahweh Yir'eh* (*Jehovah-jireh* in the KJV): "God sees to things."

The story leads into God repeating his promise about a multitude of offspring. Indeed, he turns the promise into an oath that he swears "by myself," on the basis of who I am. If he fails to keep this oath, he will have betrayed himself. He adds that as a result of Abraham's obedience all the nations will bless themselves by his offspring—that is, they will pray to be blessed in the way Abraham was blessed. The fact that we are thinking about this story is evidence that God kept his promise.

¹² H. Freedman and M. Simon, eds., *Midrash Rabbah* (London: Soncino, 1939) 1: 482–83.

For Israelites, the story may have signified that God doesn't ask them to offer a child as a sacrifice, as he could, and as other peoples of their time thought, and as Israelites sometimes did. Subsequently, as Israel's story continued into the story of the exodus, the people's arrival and flourishing in Canaan, the building of the temple, the restoration of the people, the rebuilding of the temple after the exile, and the deliverance from Antiochus, this story became one that the Israelites would listen to in the context of a relationship with the God whom they could trust. The trustworthiness of this God was newly embodied when God gave up his own son for his people and for the world, doing what he did not ultimately require of Abraham (Mark 1:11; Rom 8:31–32).

If we ask how God was speaking to the ancestors in Genesis 22, then the kind of interpretation I have suggested is the one that emerges from the chapter. There is nothing to put the ancestors on the track of the idea that the passage is messianic. Christ is not in Genesis 22, nor does Genesis 22 point to Christ. But Genesis 22 helped Mark and Paul understand Christ.

Proverbs 8:22–31

I was once the principal of a UK seminary, a position that is a cross between being a president and a provost. It meant I had to seek to ensure that the seminary encouraged the development of students as people of God and as potential pastors, teachers, and missionaries, that the seminary was well-known and attracted students, that the budget worked even if there was a financial crisis, that we made good appointments to the faculty, that the faculty received the right support and oversight, and that we developed good programs. It was a demanding job. Leadership places demands on a person. Proverbs 8 is concerned for leaders of various kinds (vv. 15–16), though it is also concerned for ordinary people, and it wants to urge them to listen as smartness (*hokmah*) summons them (v. 1).¹³ Translations traditionally have the word “wisdom,” but that word is a little high-flown. Proverbs is taking about something down-to-earth.

To commend smartness, Proverbs 8:22–31 draws attention to the fact that God could not have created the world without being smart. Ms. Smartness speaks, and declares, “God had me from the beginning of his creative work. . . . I was there by his side” (vv. 22, 30). She then describes herself by a word that doesn't occur anywhere else. Some translations have a rendering such as “master of crafts” (CEB). Others have something like foster-child, “one brought up with him” (KJV), which fits with her picture of delighting alongside God as he does his work. Wisdom sounds like something serious, but it then turns out to be something playful. You could infer that creation was itself an outworking of joy. Ms. Smartness was excited with the creation that God was bringing into being, and with humanity itself. Genesis 1 describes creation as good, but it's more solemn about it. Ms. Smartness claps her hands and dances.

God couldn't have created the world unless he had been smart; so people in general and leaders in particular need to cultivate smartness if they are to succeed in their lives and work. The alternative, the context indicates, is to cultivate stupidity. Smartness does mean truthfulness

¹³ Cf. Michael V. Fox, *Proverbs 1–9*, AB 18A (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 293.

and faithfulness, turning your back on wrongdoing and living in awe of God (vv. 8, 13, 20). Proverbs confronts the temptation of leaders to think that it's smart to sidestep truthfulness and faithfulness. Christian leaders remain vulnerable to this teaching in Proverbs, though they may not see themselves that way. As evidence, it seems that every week another Christian leader gets fired for yielding to unfaithfulness rather than evidencing smartness.

Again, Christ is not in Proverbs 8:22–31. But the passage helped shape an understanding of Christ. Its personification of Ms. Smartness pictures her being present at creation as a person distinguishable from God, even while being an aspect of God. So when John needed to speak about Jesus as existing before becoming a human being and as divine yet distinguishable from the Father, he picked up the idea of God's smartness from this passage. The description of Jesus as God's word in John 1 takes up terms that describe Ms. Smartness in Proverbs 8.

There is an amusing footnote to this development. Proverbs speaks as if God "had" Ms. Smartness at creation, and it uses the verb *qanah* that Eve used when she "had" Cain (it's the verb that lies behind Cain's own name). The Hebrew verb is less common than the English word "had," but it also has a range of meanings. The Old Greek translation of Proverbs uses the word "create" (as the NRSV does); this is a bit misleading in Proverbs, though harmless. But it caused trouble two or three centuries after Jesus, when Christians came to assume that Christ was in Proverbs 8. In Europe, theologians read the First Testament in its Greek translation, which made it look as if God created Smartness, which suggested that he had created Christ. The implication would be that Christ isn't God in the full sense or in the same sense as the Father is God. Finding Christ in the First Testament led into heresy!¹⁴ It needn't have that effect, though it serves as a warning as we interpret the Scriptures.

But the greater danger of looking for Christ in the Old Testament is that we miss the riches of what God was saying to our ancestors through the prophets.

Isaiah 42:1–4

"You as Israel are my servant, as Jacob you're the one I chose, as the offspring of Abraham you're my friend. . . . Don't be afraid, because I'm with you" (Isa 41:8–10). God speaks these words to people who have been under the domination of a superpower for half a century.¹⁵ They are understandably depressed and they think that God has abandoned them. They are not exactly wrong. In 587 BC, God had finally had it with their inclination to ignore everything he said, and he had walked out on them. But like a mother who walks out on her children, he can't maintain his abandonment, and the time has now come when he decides it has gone on long enough.

God had not previously described Israel as his servant, but he had used that description of people such as Moses and David and (ironically) of Nebuchadnezzar, the head of the world superpower. Being the servant of an important master is a position of privilege and security.

¹⁴ See, e.g., Athanasius, First Discourse against the Arians, 1.5, in *The Orations of St Athanasius against the Arians*, ed. W. Bright, reprint ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 5.

¹⁵ On this background, see Goldingay, *Message of Isaiah 40–55*.

Masters are bound to be committed to their servants and to protect them. So this was an accolade and reassurance.

Of course servants are also bound to be committed to their masters, to do the work they commission. So God now goes on to describe what he plans for his servant to do. His servant is one on whom he puts his spirit (42:1), which again calls to mind David as his servant (1 Sam 16:13). It implies being equipped for the work God wants done. His servant is one who will make God's government go out to the nations. The word for government (*mishpat*) is tricky to translate. The KJV has "judgment" here, which has the advantage of being concrete but sounds negative. The NIV has "justice," which has the advantage of being positive but sounds abstract. *The Message* has "he'll set everything right among the nations," which is a good paraphrase.

Whichever way one translates it, we will wonder: how would Israel fulfill that commission? Isaiah 42 is taking up Isaiah 2:2–4, another promise that envisages God "governing" among the nations. Many translations again have "judge" there, and that English verb may be less negative and less misleading than the noun "judgment." Isaiah 2 promises that God will decide things between the nations, and thus bring peace there because they won't need to fight; it will happen because God's "teaching" goes out from Jerusalem. Now God notes that foreign shores are waiting for this teaching (42:4), though they may not realize it. Jerusalem as the mountain where God lives and Israel as his servant are the means whereby God's teaching is to issue forth, to sort the world out. What that would look like, neither Isaiah 2 nor Isaiah 42 make clear. Both versions of the promise appear in contexts that indicate how the idea stands in conflict with what Jerusalem and Israel are at the moment. God has his work cut out if he is to achieve his aim. But he is pledged to it. He has made a commitment to Israel as the servant he will use, and he can't get out of that commitment. The following chapters reaffirm that Israel is his servant who is destined to serve him as his witnesses (43:8–12; 44:1–8).

Once again, if we ask how God was speaking to the ancestors in Isaiah 42, then the kind of interpretation I have suggested is the one that emerges from the passage. There is nothing to give the ancestors the idea that the passage is messianic. Christ is not in Isaiah 42, nor does Isaiah 42 point to Christ. But Isaiah 42 contributes to an understanding of Christ, as Matthew 12:17–21 affirms. God's Spirit would rest on Jesus as God's servant and his chosen one, and he would be gentle with people. His healing activity would "fulfill" or "fill up" or "fill out" what God had said. Jesus doesn't reach out to the nations in keeping with Isaiah 42, though this points to a link Matthew doesn't make. Luke hints at it when he describes Jesus as coming to bring about the restoration of Israel (Luke 1:54–55, 69–79). By bringing that restoration, Jesus will prepare the way for Israel to function as God's servant. When people decline to recognize Jesus, it threatens to derail God's plan again, but Paul sees a mysterious divine purpose in this refusal (see Rom 11:1–32). The refusal doesn't mean God has turned his back on Israel, and it was Jews like Paul who took God's teaching out among the nations. And as a result, the church comes to share in the servant vocation, so that Isaiah 42 is significant for Gentiles who believe in Jesus, as a revelation of God's vision for us.

CONCLUSION

The First Testament is rich in its portrait of God in his grace and faithfulness and in its account of how he was at work in the world and in Israel. God indeed spoke to our ancestors through the prophets, on the way to embodying that same speaking in Jesus (Heb 1:1–2). But a focus on reading Jesus back into the First Testament means we don't get to hear what it has to say. We learn what we knew already (because we knew it from the New Testament) and we miss the First Testament's own insight. We narrow down the Scriptures to our narrow interests. We will be wiser to seek to put ourselves into the position of those ancestors.

There is a British organization called the Scripture Union, one of whose main aims is to encourage Bible reading. I once heard a preacher comment that if its badge were ever redesigned, it should become a pair of raised eyebrows. The First Testament especially has a vast capacity to raise our eyebrows. Reading Christ into it short-circuits that effect. Reading it for what God was saying to the ancestors can mean we see more clearly how the God-breathed Scriptures speak to us.