

Abner Chou

The Hermeneutics of the Biblical Writers: Learning to Interpret Scripture from the Prophets and Apostles.

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Abner Chou, an associate professor at *The Master's University*, is persuaded that hermeneutics is not only academic, but the matter of Christian living (13). He believes that the Bible is able to teach us even how to study it, (14) and we should not ignore the way its “writers interpreted previous revelation” (17). His is determining “the quest for authorial logic” (19) as how the biblical writers came to their conclusions. (18) He suggests that “the apostle’s use of the Old Testament begins in the Old Testament itself”, and that we should study the hermeneutics of the prophets and key concepts and contexts the apostles were pointing to in their interpretations (20). One of the key terms of the book is “intertextuality” (along with “directionality,” “authorial intent,” and “meaning and significance”). Intertextuality “discusses how the biblical writers allude to other parts of Scripture” (21). One of the insights of the book is that the apostles have utilized the very hermeneutic and logic of the prophets, and therefore “prophetic hermeneutics continues into the apostolic hermeneutics, which is the Christian hermeneutics” (22).

Chou lays down his presuppositions and method. Authorial intent is “the substance of the Bible’s true meaning” (26), which is often challenged in this time of deconstructionism and the “breakdown of communication” between “author, text, and reader” (27). Chou devotes several pages to answer these postmodern critics and points to the doctrines of revelation and inspiration, the nature of Scriptures, as well as biblical admonitions against twisting its text (28). The most important question under this presupposition is “what did the author mean?” (29). His second presupposition deals with “the distinction between meaning and significance” (30). He defines meaning as “the particular ideas of the original author in the text.” On the other hand, significance of the text “denotes the various valid repercussions, inferences, or implications stemming from the author’s meaning.” It is interesting that theological bearing of the passage is subordinated under the significance, and not under the meaning of the text. Basically, the difference between the two is between what the author wanted to communicate to the first recipients (meaning), and the conclusions that one can draw from his argument about faith and practice in general (significance). Nevertheless, both are under the control of author’s intent (32-33). Chou also illustrates it in terms

of “the ‘letter’ of the law versus the ‘spirit’ of the law” and the “notion that ideas (meaning) have consequences (significance).” He wrote that classically scholars speak of these “in terms of a single intent of the author but multiple applications of his intent” (32). Therefore, the way a NT author uses the OT would comprise of both meaning and significance (33). Chou then brings in another presupposition, that of intertextuality. Interconnectedness of Scripture means that “(n)o text is an island” (35). He reminds us that “from the perspective of God in eternity, the Scriptures are really a ‘timeless unity in which each and every verse is simultaneous with every other, temporally and semantically” (36, n. 49). Not only that, but contrary to our usual assumptions that biblical writers quote or allude only to one text, often they are appealing to multiple texts (37-39).

Next Chou moves to methodology. He illustrates it as “connecting the dots” and calls it “detecting intertextuality.” He gives Hays’ criteria for intertextuality: “availability of the source text, volume of echo (linguistic clarity of the allusion), recurrence..., thematic coherence..., historical plausibility..., history of interpretation..., and satisfaction” (39). In other words, when he studies the text, he wants to check if the author left “a trigger” that would enable him to recall other texts that were available to the author. Then he determines how is the author using these triggers with regards to the meaning and significance, as well as “how each text connects with the other” (40). He concludes his chapter by reminding us that many times scriptural authors deal with the significance of the text, not its meaning (41). Jesus’ quotation in Luke 20:37 of Exodus 3:6 to prove the resurrection illustrates this well, because the Exodus passage is wonderfully connected to God’s promises to the patriarchs that He will be faithful to them personally, thus showing that Moses implies they are still alive (42).

After giving us his presuppositions and methodology, Chou spends the next two chapters extrapolating prophetic hermeneutic. Intertextuality, he proposes, shows that prophets were not only channels of God’s revelation, but also “exegetes and theologians” (47). Biblical prophets have had a comprehensive and detailed knowledge of other Scripture, combined with a high view of God’s revelation (50). As exegetes, the prophets skillfully quoted, but even more often alluded not only to the individual parts of Scripture (verses, phrases, words), but also “to the main ideas of large sections of texts” (54). Chou mentions several of these: land promises, seed promise, blessing (55). Most importantly, the message of the prophets “is predicated upon a consistent interpretation of the law” (57). He writes that it is important to note that the prophets “do not change or reverse the overarching ideas of” biblical texts, but “remain consistent with the meaning originally established” (59). They are also very knowledgeable about the details of the text, (63) including its context and meaning. Chou also deals with several alleged misuses of the OT by the prophets, nevertheless he shows that these do-

ubts are ill founded, because the prophets did “not compromise the meaning or significance of the old but rather complete and refine the ramifications of previous revelation” (70).

In the second part of the chapter, Chou shows that the prophets were also profound theologians (71) and rather sophisticated thinkers (73). He shows this by describing how biblical writers developed “the Second David” theology from the promise of the Seed through Noahic and Davidic covenants, and then further by the prophets (73-80). The same is true with regards to the development of the vine motif (80-82) and the rich intertextuality of Genesis 3:15 (83-89). In the end, he concludes that “the presence of new revelation does not overturn or distort the prophets’ hermeneutical fidelity,” since “the role of the prophet was to uphold the law, as opposed to deconstruct” it. “New revelation thereby builds upon the implications the text already has” (91).

Chapter four is devoted to the question of directionality of prophetic revelation. Chou writes that there “is a way that the Old Testament intentionally moves to the New Testament such that the New Testament’s use of the Old s a ‘natural’ development of what has progressed” (93). In other words, the prophets knew more than we give them credit for (95). Even when they wrote about their own time, they were aware that their writings also have implications for the future (97). They were aware “of God’s plan and the direction of history” (98) and we can see this directionality, for example, in the way the covenantal themes develop in Moses, monarchic period, during the exile and then even after the exile ended. Indeed, even after the Jews returned to their land, there was still this understanding that “Israel has come back to the land but is still in sin... are still ruled by foreign powers” and therefore are “slaves today,” which “alludes back to the days of the Exodus and wilderness wanderings” (101). In other words, the exodus/exile is not yet over, but points and progresses “forward to the Davidic king” (102, n. 33). This prophetic anticipation of the future means that the apostles did “not need to force complex theological ideas into the Old Testament” (103), because these were already there. There was no need to find *sensus plenior* or to use the contemporary hermeneutic, because prophets already “intend(ed) for their writings to have ramifications beyond” their time (105).

Our author dedicates almost 15 pages to several case studies, choosing some of the hardest passages (for example, Hosea 11:1; Isaiah 7:14) in order to show this hermeneutic at work. We will not delve into them, but they are invaluable both for understanding hermeneutics and for understanding those specific passages. He concludes that, even though prophets did not “*exhaustively* know the way later writers would apply their words” (119), they did write with theological complexity and deliberation (120).

This naturally prepares us for the next two chapters (ch. 5-6). These deal with

the apostolic hermeneutic. Chou believes that apostles continued the hermeneutic of the prophets. New Testament writers used the OT “robustly contextually” (122). They often used introductory formulas to “introduce Scripture as the foundation for and proof of the legitimacy of” their conclusions (123). They also believed that the OT authors were aware that their writings refer to Messiah. This means that apostles did not need to find “a hidden meaning in Scripture but one already intended” (124). Apostles were an extension of the prophets, not totally distinct from them, (125-6), and believed to “operate on the same level” of authority “as the prophets” (127). They also engaged in intertextual hermeneutic (129-130).

Nevertheless, some object to this postulate of continuity, and Chou shows that the apostles did provide new information but only “within the boundaries of legitimate application” (131). For example, when the apostles say that an event has fulfilled the previous revelation, we should not think of that too rigidly as predictions of the future. Many times, these are the “working-out and accomplishing of the ramifications of prior revelation” (132). For example, when it seems as if, in Luke 24:25-27, “Christ interpreted the Old Testament in light of himself”, this is not a new Christocentric reading of Scripture, but Christ affirmed “the prophets’ knowledge and intentionality about him” (133). Chou concludes the same about other passages in Scripture he already mentioned as examples in previous chapters, (134-137) as well as from several other passages where the NT writer uses the OT. (137-152) Even through these examples Chou proves his point, they are again very valuable and insightful.

He concludes the chapter with two remarks. First, he opposes those who believe that new revelation meant that the apostles employed hermeneutic that is “far different than our own.” Chou believes that we must distinguish between apostolic hermeneutic and their adding new revelation. Second, the apostles continue “the prophet’s rationale,” that is, “the pattern of application found in Old Testament intertextuality.” As he has helpfully shown, apostles further develop those themes and progression the prophets have already broached. For example, in Hosea the “first Exodus leads to a new Exodus and a New David... which is picked up by Matthew” (153). This leads him to conclude that, as is the case with prophets and apostles, we also “do not have grounds to employ a new or novel hermeneutical methodology because of a change in testaments” (154).

The sixth chapter is an extended showcase of biblical theology ranging all NT writers and demonstrating that they all had a unified hermeneutic. The nature of the chapter makes it very repetitive, but this is understandable for its goal to show this hermeneutic continuity the author has previously already observed. The chapter is divided into seven parts (Jesus-Gospels-Acts, Paul, Hebrews, James, Peter, Jude, and John), and each part is further divided into additional three:

Redemptive History, Individual Passages (the author has tried to use the same passages for all NT authors to show their consistency) and a Synthesis. Chapter ends by stressing three conclusions about this hermeneutical continuity. First, “apostolic hermeneutic continues the prophetic;” second, “the apostles themselves are remarkably consistent;” and third, “this consistent reasoning of using the Old Testament produces rich and cohesive theology in the New” (196-7). This logically takes us to consider the question of “how do we read” (198), that is, what should Christian hermeneutic look like. Chou takes this question in the next chapter.

In “The Christian Hermeneutics: Reading as They Read and Intended,” Chou does several things. First, he reiterates his understanding of prophetic and apostolic hermeneutic and concludes that we should employ the same hermeneutic, of course, without any new revelations (200). He believes biblical writers have showed us how to interpret the Scriptures (201). Second, Chou goes through the hermeneutical process and shows how what he has taught us looks like when employed at its various disciplines. For example, while ascertaining a passage’s historical context, we should also be aware of redemptive historical direction that can be read from the author’s intention. (205) Establishing literary context of the passage means not only seeing it in its immediate context, but also “the entire flow of the book” and even whether the author “makes connections to earlier texts” (206). This will enable us to connect the dots (207) to understand his whole reasoning (208). Word study is very helpful in understanding how theological themes develop in progressive revelation (208).

Third, Chou gives five cautions for employing this hermeneutic. In short, not every text has intertextual connection back to a previous text (210), he advocates that only “*antecedent* revelation” informs our reading of the text (211), we should always follow normal hermeneutical process (211), we have to be precise, and all of this is “no small effort” (212). Fourth, Chou then talks about some special issues, like New testament use of the Old, using the Law, Messiah in the OT, and application. In the end, he concludes that as Christian interpreters, our job “is to read the text to gain the author’s intent and that intent is complex” (229), even if its focus is plain. He states the same in his last and shortest chapter. Chou says that there are many other factors to consider, because the “intent of the scriptural authors is sophisticated” (231), and one book would not suffice (232). Nevertheless, throughout his work and his eighteen pages of bibliography, Chou recommended many apt and valuable resources to grapple with the task at hand.

At times repetitive, the book was clearly written with didactic purposes in mind. Its (adapted from Hirsch) distinction between meaning and significance is interesting and contributes to the discussion, even if a bit synthetic. I believe that Chou’s book does a much-needed task of calling us to a greater understanding of

hermeneutic task and then to a greater precision in dividing the word of truth. By “us” I mean both professional interpreters - pastors, exegetes, and theologians – and believers in general, especially those who will forgive Chou for using some Hebrew and Greek words and technical terms. Indeed, as Chou wrote at the very beginning, hermeneutics is “essential for the Christian walk” (13). We could then say that, to ignore this work would, to an extent, mean ignoring the richness of the Scriptures, as its purpose is to open our eyes and prepare us to discern the intertextual and directional tapestry, indeed, hermeneutical and theological artistry of scriptural authors.

Miroslav Balint-Feudvarski

Andrew David Naselli

How to Understand and Apply the New Testament: Twelve Steps from Exegesis to Theology

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In March 2017 P&R Publishing published the book, *How to Understand and Apply the New Testament*, by the author Andrew David Naselli. Naselli, who is associate professor of New Testament and Theology at Bethlehem College & Seminary in Minneapolis, wrote a book that seeks to explain how to interpret and apply the Bible, but his focus is on the New Testament. This book came as a result of notes that Naselli prepared for a course, “New Testament Exegesis” back in 2015 and this is reflected in the text, because the books maintain informal tone and personal anecdotes from those lectures. The book has introduction, twelve chapters, conclusion, two appendixes, and ends with glossary, selected bibliography, index of scripture and index subjects and names.

“Introduction” starts with a question, “What is an Exegesis?” and Naselli begins his response with Ezra 7:10 saying that practice precedes teaching others, but in order to live and practice the Word of God, we must know it. Hence, we must study it. With that in mind, Naselli says: “That’s what this book is about: How should you study the Word so that you can practice and teach it? More specifically, how should you understand and apply the New Testament (p. 1)?” Naselli claims that exegetes are primarily concerned with interpreting a text, that is, discovering what the author meant. But an exegesis is not enough because we must also do biblical, historical, systematic, and practical theology, and apply what the text means in our contexts. Naselli then briefly discuss the difference between exegesis and hermeneutics, where does expository preaching fit into this process,