

The New Testament's Exegesis of Old Testament Passages (With Special Emphasis on the Psalms)

By Martin Pickup

The books of the Old Testament were inspired by God as a preparatory revelation to the New Testament, and that is why we see quotations of the Old Testament on page after page of the New Testament. Yet when we look closely at the interpretations that New Testament writers give to the passages they cite, we are faced with a puzzling problem. Their interpretations often depart significantly from the apparent meaning of the Old Testament verses in their original contexts. New Testament writers sometimes read a verse as if it spoke of someone or something other than the person or thing originally in view, or they may assign new senses to the words of an Old Testament verse. Even passages that are cited in the New Testament as prophecies of Jesus Christ can fall into this category. Many of these Old Testament passages, when we look at them in their original context, do not appear to be speaking of the Messiah at all.

This fact has not gone unnoticed by liberal critics of the Bible. They routinely point to the New Testament's use of the Old Testament as an example of error in the Bible, asserting that the writers of the New Testament misconstrue the plain meaning of many Old Testament texts. Theological liberals claim that the New Testament writers "twist the Scriptures" and derive interpretations that are "artificial," "far-fetched," and "entirely foreign to the original."¹ As a result, many people denounce the verbal and plenary inspiration of the Bible as an indefensible doctrine.

The way that New Testament writers exegete the Old Testament is not a matter that Bible believers can afford to brush aside. In fact, any Christian who has looked carefully at the Old Testament passages cited in the New Testament will have to admit being troubled at times by the

interpretations that a New Testament writer gives. “How did he get *that* out of the passage?” — we wonder as we read what Paul, Luke, John or Matthew have to say about the meaning of certain Old Testament verses. Sadly, not a few Bible believers have lost faith in the inspiration and authority of Scripture because of these instances where it seems that a New Testament figure has taken liberties with the plain meaning of an Old Testament text. In my judgment, the New Testament’s way of reading and interpreting the Old Testament is one of the most significant problems facing Christian apologists today.

In this article I want to address this problem head-on by explaining what I believe to be the overall solution. Space will not allow me to give an exhaustive analysis of the issue, but if in the following pages I can make clear the basic concept, then I will have accomplished my purpose. In keeping with the theme of this *festschrift*, I will confine myself to the New Testament’s interpretations of the Psalter, the Old Testament book that the New Testament cites more often than any other. However, the things I say here about the New Testament’s method of reading the Psalms apply equally to the New Testament’s use of the Old Testament in general. Let me begin by laying out the nature of the problem in more detail.

WHAT EXACTLY IS THE DIFFICULTY?

Whenever we read an Old Testament passage, we naturally want to discern the meaning that the inspired Old Testament author tried to convey to his original readers. Our goal is to interpret the words of a verse according to their grammatical sense within the literary and historical context of the particular Old Testament book where they are found. We are seeking what is commonly called the *plain meaning* of the passage² — or, to use technical language, we seek the passage’s *grammatical-historical* sense.

Though a grammatical-historical reading of the Old Testament is exactly what the New Testament writers give in many instances where they cite Scripture,³ it is not the case with several of their citations. Sometimes a New Testament writer will assign a meaning to an Old Testament passage that does not seem to square with the passage's grammatical-historical sense. (I am not talking here about instances where the New Testament merely borrows language from the Old Testament in order to describe a New Testament person or event, but cases where the New Testament actually gives an interpretation of an Old Testament passage.) Consider the following cases where New Testament writers interpret statements in the Psalms in ways that differ from what would appear to be the plain meaning of the psalmist's words.

- In Psalm 8 David expresses his thanks for the exalted position God gave to human beings when He created man to “rule over the works of Your hands” and “put all things under his feet” (v. 6). The psalm would seem to be talking about the dominant state of human beings in this current world. But Hebrews 2:6-8 and 1 Corinthians 15:27 interpret it to be speaking of the future exaltation of God's people still to come in the Messiah's heavenly kingdom. Nothing in the context of the psalm appears to suggest this eschatological or messianic idea.
- Psalm 95:7-11 recounts the failure of the exodus-generation of Israel to enter into the promised rest of Canaan, and the psalm admonishes all subsequent Israelites not to follow that generation's example:

Today, if you would hear His voice,
Do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah,
As in the day of Massah in the wilderness,
When your fathers tested Me ...
Therefore I swore in My anger,
“Truly they shall not enter into My rest.”

The divine “rest” of which the psalm speaks is clearly the promised land of Canaan that God swore the exodus generation would never enter (Num. 14:20-35; Deut. 12:9). This plain-sense interpretation of the psalm is precisely what the Hebrew writer gives in chapter 3 of his book (vv. 15-18). But then in chapter 4 he interprets the psalm differently — as if it spoke of the heavenly rest that God’s people will enjoy in the future (vv. 1-11). It is easy to see, of course, how the promised land could serve as a type of the heavenly abode to come, but the Hebrew writer does more than make an analogy. He actually reads Psalm 95 as if it spoke of God’s rest on two levels: first as referring to Canaan, then again as referring to the heavenly kingdom. It is difficult to see how the assigning of a double meaning to the words “My rest” can be justified.

- In Psalm 16:10 David says to God, “You will not abandon my soul to Hades, nor allow Your holy one to undergo decay.” In context, David appears to be speaking about himself (note the words “*my* soul”) and to be thanking God for delivering him from the hand of those who wanted to kill him. Similar statements about divine deliverance from Hades (i.e., Sheol, the realm of the dead) are found throughout the Psalter, and they speak of a person being rescued from the brink of death but not actually dying and being resurrected (e.g., Pss. 18:4-6; 28:1-9; 30:1-3; 40:1-2, 11-17; 49:5-10, 14-15; 86:13-17; 116:1-9; 143:7-9). Psalm 16 would seem to be no different. Yet on two occasions the Book of Acts interprets this psalm as a specific prophecy about the resurrection of the Messiah (Acts 2:25-32; 13:34-37). From a grammatical-historical point of view, Psalm 16 does

not seem to be foretelling the future at all, nor does it appear to be talking about a Messiah or anyone else rising from the dead.

- Psalm 68:18 praises God with the following words: “You ascended on high, You led captive Your captives; You gave gifts to men [or, received gifts among men].”⁴ In context, the psalmist seems to be celebrating Yahweh’s conquest of the land of Canaan as a home for Israel and His triumphant ascent of mount Zion to dwell in His temple. That is why Paul’s interpretation of the psalm in Ephesians 4:7-12 is so amazing. The apostle says that the psalm spoke of Jesus’ victorious ascension into heaven. How can Paul apply these words to the Messiah when it is Yahweh’s activity in the Old Testament era that the psalmist has in view? Even more puzzling is the way Paul explains the psalm’s reference to the bestowal of “gifts.” He says that the verse is talking about Christian apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers! How can Paul derive such an interpretation?

The above cases are illustrative of the many instances where we find the New Testament’s exegesis of the Old Testament diverging from the “plain sense” of the passage. This is a problem that demands attention.

COMMONLY SUGGESTED RESOLUTIONS

Some people will quickly respond by saying that the problem lies with us as readers of the Old Testament. Our grammatical-historical interpretations of all of these Old Testament passages may simply be wrong. As Christians, shouldn’t we just accept a New Testament writer’s inspired explanation of an Old Testament verse whether or not we understand how he derived that interpretation?

There is a point here, for it certainly is not our place to stand in judgment upon the word of God, and we need always to be cognizant of our fallibility as interpreters of Scripture (2 Pet. 3:15-16). On the other hand, if the New Testament apostles and prophets interpreted Old Testament passages in ways differently than we would, should we not as their disciples seek to understand the basis upon which they arrived at their interpretations? This seems particularly necessary in those instances where a New Testament figure argues for the validity of his teaching by citing Old Testament texts as proofs. In many of these instances, arguments from the Old Testament are made before unbelieving audiences who would not presuppose that the Christian speaking with them was an authoritative spokesman of God. And even though the New Testament books were written to believers, the polemical way in which New Testament authors use the Old Testament would indicate that, at least to some degree, they expected their Christian audiences to be able to see the validity of their interpretation of the Old Testament on the basis of the reasonableness of the interpretation itself, rather than merely because of an *a priori* acceptance of their authority as God's spokesmen. We also need to realize that modern liberals who attack the Bible's inerrancy are not going to be silenced simply by hearing conservative professions of faith in the Scriptures. The New Testament tells us to be able to give a defense of our faith and to respond to the gainsayer (1 Pet. 3:15; Ti. 1:9). So there is a legitimate need for Christians to try to understand the rationale behind the New Testament's exegesis of the Old Testament.

How, then, have conservative Bible students sought to explain the rationale of the New Testament's exegesis?⁵ One suggestion is that God may have imbued Old Testament texts with an additional meaning or meanings not discernible through ordinary human exegesis, and this

fuller sense — the technical term is *sensus plenior* — is what the inspired New Testament writers are revealing.⁶

I believe there is an element of truth in this suggestion, for many of the New Testament's explanations of the Old Testament look very much like a typological or double meaning of some kind is being derived from the Old Testament verse. Moreover, the New Testament explicitly says that some aspects of Old Testament prophecy were a “mystery” in times past; God's full intentions were hidden to the original readers and even to the Old Testament prophet himself (see, e.g., 1 Pet. 1:10-12; Eph. 3:3-5). On the other hand, appealing solely to this concept does not adequately explain all of the problematic cases of the New Testament's exegesis of the Old Testament, especially those cases where a New Testament figure cites an Old Testament passage polemically in order to prove a point to his audience. In such instances, there would have to be some objective basis for his interpretation of the passage in order for the argument to have validity and persuasiveness.⁷

The inability of the *sensus plenior* approach to preserve a valid polemical role for Old Testament citations has caused some conservatives to suggest another possibility. Modern readers sometimes fail to appreciate the generic or corporate nature of Old Testament promises. Perhaps when the New Testament gives an explanation of an Old Testament verse that differs from how the original readers would have explained it, the reason is not because of any kind of double or hidden sense within the passage, but because the passage was stating *one generic principle* that allowed for multiple applications.⁸ So when the New Testament argues for the “fulfillment” of a verse, it may only be affirming another application of what in reality was a general prophecy, and this could mean that the New Testament always reflects a grammatical-historical exegesis of the Old Testament after all.

This suggestion can be defended in a few cases,⁹ but one would be hard-pressed to prove that all of the New Testament's puzzling interpretations of the Old Testament can be explained on the grounds that the Old Testament writer was stating a general principle that modern readers have missed. I do not see, for example, how any of the citations of the Psalter that I introduced earlier can adequately be explained along this line.¹⁰ It is also telling that the New Testament never explicitly gives a generic interpretation to any of the Old Testament texts that it cites as fulfilled in Christ.

So if none of the above suggestions provides a complete answer to our dilemma, then what does? Several years ago Phil Roberts made the following observation:

[We] often feel embarrassed when attempting to “justify” the hermeneutical practices of the New Testament by the grammatical-historical principles generally accepted in the world of Biblical scholarship. Perhaps the real hermeneutical problem is the difficulty of fully participating in the first century view of Scripture.¹¹

In my opinion, Phil was on precisely the right track. Bible students have failed to place the New Testament's exegesis of the Old Testament within the hermeneutic milieu of ancient Judaism. The simple fact of the matter is that there is a strong similarity between the hermeneutics of New Testament writers and the hermeneutics of ancient Jewish interpreters.¹² When we analyze the intertestamental writings, the Qumran Scrolls, or the Rabbinic Literature, we find exactly the same phenomenon of exegesis that we observe in the New Testament: the practice of reading Old Testament statements in something other than a grammatical-historical sense.

Now conservative Bible students have been reluctant to grant too great a similarity between Jewish exegetes and New Testament exegetes. The Qumran Scrolls and the Rabbinic Literature are filled with examples of exegesis that look arbitrary and fanciful, so conservatives naturally feel reticent about aligning the New Testament's hermeneutics with any ancient method

that seems indefensible.¹³ But the problem here is largely one of appearance, for most people fail to understand the fundamental nature and philosophy of Jewish exegesis and therefore they dismiss it unfairly.¹⁴ Though there are many instances of far-fetched exegesis among ancient Jewish interpreters, one should not assume that those cases serve to undermine the fundamental methodology that Jews were using.¹⁵

Bible students with liberal leanings have been more willing than conservatives to admit the Jewish nature of the New Testament's exegesis of the Old Testament, yet theological liberals will dismiss the hermeneutic as illegitimate because it departs from a strictly grammatical-historical method of exegesis (Hays 8-9, 180).¹⁶ They claim that while the New Testament's manner of interpreting the Old Testament may have convinced first-century minds, it cannot be considered valid in our world today (e.g., Neil 22; Williamson 441). That is not the position that I hold at all. People who affirm such an idea have an overblown loyalty to what they deem to be a modern "scientific" approach to hermeneutics. They often fail to grasp the way in which the Jewish premise regarding Scripture's verbal inspiration (which I explain below) generated the Jewish hermeneutic approach — or, even when they do grasp the concept, they do not accept it for themselves and so they reject the validity of the method out of hand.¹⁷

Christians today should have no difficulty with the presuppositions of Jewish hermeneutics. I believe that if one truly understands this Jewish approach to Scripture, the New Testament's interpretations of the Old Testament begin to make sense and the so-called "problem" of New Testament exegesis disappears. Furthermore, the reason why this method of interpretation was used is because it is the very method that the nature and function of God's Old Testament revelation warrants. Let me now explain this hermeneutic approach.

JEWISH HERMENEUTICS

The technical name that modern scholarship uses for Jewish hermeneutics is *midrash*, an ancient Hebrew word that means “exegesis.”¹⁸ Unfortunately, some people think of midrash as just a fanciful way of making Scripture say whatever one wants it to say — which, if that were true, would make it a method of interpretation that undermined the inspiration and authority of the Bible. But that is not what midrash is about. The irony here is that midrashic exegesis is actually dependent upon the presumption of the verbal and plenary inspiration of the Old Testament — the concept that every word of the entire Old Testament canon was authored by God (Kugel, *Ancient Interpretation* 15-20). To help us understand this Jewish hermeneutic method, let me contrast it with the grammatical-historical approach.¹⁹

If one reads the Old Testament from a grammatical-historical point of view, he will interpret the words of a given passage according to their plain, grammatical sense within the context of the particular biblical book where they are found. Such a reader seeks to answer this question: what was the Old Testament author of the passage trying to say to his original audience? When looking at a particular psalm of David, for example, one would ask what meaning was in David's mind when he wrote the words of the psalm? Or, to take matters a bit further, what idea did the psalm convey to the Israelites of that day as they sang it in their worship? Such is the grammatical-historical approach, and it is used today by all readers of the Bible, both conservatives and liberals alike. As a method of interpretation, however, the grammatical-historical approach does not require a belief in the divine inspiration of Scripture, for it is the same hermeneutic one would use to interpret any kind of document. So when this method is strictly applied to an Old Testament verse, it would not require one to assign intentionality or relevance to every observable correlation between that verse and what another

Old Testament author may have written at an earlier or later point in Israel's history. Similarities of wording or subject matter between passages in different Old Testament books could be treated as mere happenstance, or as the result of a later writer borrowing material, either consciously or unconsciously, from an earlier writer. In any case, such interconnections between biblical passages might easily be viewed as carrying little or no exegetical weight.

But what if one regards the Old Testament books as the ancient Jews did — as the verbally inspired word of almighty God?²⁰ How might this affect the way one reads an Old Testament verse? If every word of the Old Testament was actually the utterance of God, then a given statement in one Old Testament book would need to be considered not only within its own documentary context, but also in light of the broader contexts of the canon as a whole. The reason is because the Old Testament canon is recognized as more than just an anthology of documents. The Old Testament is understood to be the work of one Author — God himself — who foreordained in eternity a plan for the world that He revealed in piecemeal fashion over time, using human spokesmen throughout Israel's history. With such a presumption, a diligent reader of an Old Testament passage would need to take note of any potential verbal and thematic parallels, analogies, or other correspondences with other statements in the rest of the Old Testament corpus wherever they might be found and whenever they might have been written.²¹ The presence of such interconnections would have to be viewed as the deliberate intention of God, the omniscient Author of the Old Testament (Neusner 11; Stern, *Midrash and Theory* 29).

This is exactly how the Jews approached their Scriptures. They read the Old Testament not merely as a collection of different books written by different human authors on different occasions, but as if it were all one book. This one book was the product of the mind of one Author who had declared to Israel in historical time the fundamental components of His eternal

purpose.²² Now this high view of the nature of the Old Testament is precisely what the Old Testament affirms about itself, and today's Bible believers would agree wholeheartedly with it. But since we are products of our modern western culture, we still tend to read a given Old Testament passage only in a grammatical-historical way, considering it almost exclusively from the perspective of the human's author's point in time. Of course we recognize that interconnections exist between numerous verses located in a variety of Old Testament books, but we tend to treat all of this as something to be noted *after* the job of exegeting a given passage has been accomplished — that is, at the point when we are trying to systematize the teaching of the Old Testament. But the ancient Jews' high regard for the inspiration and unity of Scripture caused them to regard such systematization of Scripture as part and parcel with the process of exegeting a verse itself (Aaron 402-403).

Here's what I mean. Jewish exegetes kept in mind something that we tend to overlook: the fact 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" (Stern, *Language of Exegesis* 108). As a result, the various contexts of Genesis through Malachi are ultimately all connected. So when a given verse is considered from that broader perspective, the words of the verse often call to mind an additional truth when they are read in the light of other contexts that God has revealed (Fishbane, *Jewish Thought* 1-2, 12-13).²³ Words are vehicles of thought, and context is largely what gives words meaning. So when a Jewish reader saw that the words of a passage expressed another truth if they were read in a different, divinely revealed context, he concluded that such a phenomenon could not be coincidental; all such intertextual connections — and therefore the fuller or multiple significations of the text that those connections brought to mind — must have been in the mind of God when He inspired the human

author to state those words in the first place. This concept highlights the fundamentally different aims of midrashic exegesis and grammatical-historical exegesis: the latter seeks to understand what was in the mind of the human author of an Old Testament text, whereas the former seeks to understand what was in the mind of God (Stern, *Midrash and Theory* 29). All of this will become clearer if we look at some specific examples where midrashic exegesis was applied.

The New Testament's Interpretation of Psalm 8

Take, for instance, the New Testament's eschatological interpretation of the words of Psalm 8 that I introduced earlier. By inspiration, king David declared,

What is man that You take thought of him,
And the son of man that You care for him?
Yet You have made him a little lower than God,
And You crown him with glory and majesty!
You make him to rule over the works of Your hands;
You have put all things under his feet. (vv. 4-6)

As I noted earlier, if we gave these words a strictly grammatical-historical exegesis, we would understand the psalmist to be speaking of the exalted position that the Creator gave to human beings in the current world. David is looking back to what God established at the creation when he gave rulership of the world to Adam and his descendants (Gen. 1:26-28), an exalted position that king David and the nation of Israel currently held in the world. But when Psalm 8 is viewed midrashically — that is, when it is considered in light of the entirety of what the Old Testament revealed about God's eternal purpose — the words of the psalm call to mind God's promise of a world to come where His people will be the exalted citizenry of the Messiah's eternal kingdom (Isa. 9:2-11; Jer. 23:5-8). Indeed, in the kingdom of heaven all things will be put under man's feet in the fullest sense.²⁴ So in addition to the idea that David's words expressed in their original context, the same words express an even profounder truth when considered within the broader context of God's revelation about the end-time. This does not mean that the psalmist must have

been aware of all of the significations of his words, for biblical inspiration never demanded such (cf. 1 Pet. 1:10-12; John 11:51). But what it does mean is that the fullness of thoughts that the words of the psalm evoke when viewed in this way must have been in the mind of God when He inspired David to write the psalm.

This is the rationale that explains the eschatological reading of Psalm 8 that we observe in Hebrews 2:6-8 and in 1 Corinthians 15:27. Ancient Jews would not have deemed such a reading unusual. Of course, the Christian affirmation that Jesus was the promised ruler of the eternal kingdom and his followers its true citizenry was a novel idea, but there was nothing surprising about Christianity's eschatological interpretation of Psalm 8 itself. When the psalm was viewed in light of what the entirety of Scripture revealed about God's eternal plan, it was evident that the psalm spoke on one level of man's dominant position in the current world, but also on another level of man's more glorious position in the world to come.²⁵

The New Testament's Interpretation of Psalm 95

A midrashic hermeneutic is also what undergirds the Hebrew writer's commentary on Psalm 95:7-11. As I explained previously, in chapter 3 the Hebrew writer initially gives a grammatical-historical reading of Psalm 95 by interpreting the words "They shall not enter My rest" as a recounting of God's oath that the exodus generation would never enter the land of Canaan (3:16-19; also 4:6; cf. Num. 14:20-35; Deut. 12:9).²⁶ But then in chapter 4 the writer also gives an eschatological interpretation of the same words, saying that God's oath refers to forfeiture of future rest in the heavenly kingdom (4:1-11). What also strikes modern readers as odd is the fact that in vv. 3-5 the Hebrew writer relates the words "My rest" with God's resting on the seventh day of creation week (citing Gen. 2:2), thereby seeming to say that God's rest at the beginning of time is to be associated in some way with the heavenly rest to come, and that this

idea is what Psalm 95 was addressing. From a grammatical-historical point of view, nothing in the psalm seems to justify the two-fold interpretation of “rest” that we see in Hebrews 3 and 4.

Yet ancient Jews interpreted Psalm 95 in the same dual way that the Hebrew writer did! According to the Rabbinic Literature, Rabbi Akiba understood the words “They shall not enter My rest” to mean not only that the exodus generation would never enter the land of Canaan, but that they would never enter the world to come (e.g., m: Sanhedrin 10:3).²⁷ Other Rabbinic works likewise interpreted the “rest” of Psalm 95 in an eschatological sense (e.g., *Leviticus Rabbah* 32:2; *b: Sanhedrin* 98a), as did *Joseph and Aseneth* 8:11, a pseudepigraphic document written perhaps as early as the first century BC. This argues that the Hebrew writer and his Jewish contemporaries were using the same hermeneutic method to interpret this psalm.

Like his Jewish contemporaries, the Hebrew writer read Psalm 95 midrashically — that is, in terms of the entirety of what God’s Scriptures had revealed about His plan. The fullness of Old Testament revelation indicated that Israel’s peaceful inhabitation of the promised land, with God in their midst, was intended as a kind of symbolic return to Eden — the time when God had rested from His work of creation, and the world was in a state of sinless perfection with man in full fellowship with the Creator (cf. Deut. 12:9-14). Israel’s observance of God’s sabbaths (viz., the sabbath day, sabbath year, and Jubilee) served as a reminder of this symbolic connection (Ex. 31:12-18; Lev. 25-26). But God intended all of these things as a foreshadowing of the future bliss of His eternal kingdom (Isa. 51:3; 61:1-2; Ezek. 36:33-36). Furthermore, though God rested on the seventh day from His work of creation, that did not mean that He ceased all activity. Just as He spoke the world into existence, so God continued to speak throughout human history to produce His special people, a kind of second creation.²⁸ The two halves of Psalm 95 — vv. 1-6 and vv. 7-11 — made this very analogy (Enns 258-267).²⁹ This new creation would be completed

at the end of the age, at which time God's people who heeded His voice would rest with Him from their labors.

All of this explains why the Hebrew writer connects God's "rest" in Genesis 2:2 with the "rest" that is spoken of in Psalm 95. It is why he reads the latter passage on one level as referring to rest in the land of Canaan, but on another level as referring to rest in the world to come. Appropriately, the Hebrew writer speaks of the latter state as a *sabbatismos* — the ultimate "Sabbath rest" wherein God's people will rest from their works even as the Creator rests from His (4:9-11; *m. Tamid* 7:4 uses similar terminology). Since all of these themes were interwoven throughout the Old Testament, how could any knowledgeable student of Scripture fail to think of the whole picture when reading Psalm 95's comment about entrance into "My rest"?³⁰ A midrashic interpreter would conclude that this was exactly how God intended the words of the psalm to function.

While it is important for us to understand the above interconnections of Scripture in order to appreciate the rationale for the Hebrew writer's exegesis of Psalm 95, I doubt that any of these points would have been disputed by ancient Jews, much less by the Jewish Christians to whom the epistle was written. As we have seen, an eschatological interpretation of the "rest" of Psalm 95 was quite normal in the Jewish world. The real point of issue in Hebrews 4 is not whether a heavenly rest existed, but whether that rest could easily be forfeited.³¹

Psalm 95 was a perfect text to cite in order to show that indeed it could be forfeited. Long after Israel obtained possession of the land of Canaan, God inspired David to write Psalm 95 and warn the people to heed God's voice "today" lest they suffer the fate of their forefathers who failed to enter rest (4:6-9).³² David's warning — one that was issued centuries after Joshua had successfully settled the Israelites in the land — implied that the potential for rest and peace in the

land still existed for future generations, but only as long as each new generation of Israelites remained faithful to God. So in effect, the inspired psalmist had done more than recount God's oath in Numbers 20; Psalm 95 updated that oath by teaching that God's promise of rest remained available into the future as long as the people remained faithful.³³ Throughout Old Testament history the nation did enjoy rest in the land whenever the people were diligent to obey God's voice (cf. Deut. 12:10-11; 25:19; Josh. 21:43-44; Judges 2:14-23; 2 Sam. 7:8-11; 2 Chron. 14:7). As Old Testament worshipers sang the words of Psalm 95, perhaps they understood its words chiefly along the lines of continued rest in the land of Canaan. But as God gradually unfolded His Old Testament revelation, perceptive Jewish readers could not have been content with a mere this-world application of the psalm. As I noted above, the entirety of God's Old Testament revelation indicated that one's entrance into the fullness of God's rest would be realized in the world to come. So when the words of the psalm were read within this larger context, the reference to "My rest" brought to mind the ultimate rest with God in the heavenly kingdom. This is the way of reading Psalm 95 that the Hebrew writer presents in chapter 4. Since the psalm's promise of rest did have application to the heavenly kingdom, he argues, then so must the psalm's warning about potential apostasy and the loss of that rest (4:11).³⁴

Exegetical Riches

As the above examples illustrate, Jewish hermeneutics recognized that, in a sense, there could be multiple meanings in the words of the Old Testament, for a statement made in one context might convey another relevant truth when considered within another context that God had revealed.³⁵ All of this was due to the intention of the omniscient God who authored the Old Testament Scriptures. Ancient rabbis liked to express the matter like this: "The words of Torah are poor in their own context and rich in another context" (y: *Rosh Hashana* 3:5). This meant that

the fullness of God's mind could be perceived only by examining an Old Testament utterance in the light of God's entire revelation so that all of the connections between those words and all other utterances of God might be grasped. Only then would one discern the full riches of God's word — indeed, the full riches of God's mind.

We also see from the above examples that the “other context” in which an Old Testament statement might be read would often be an eschatological context. This was because the Scriptures that God gave Israel were inherently teleological; they adumbrated His eternal purpose and so were always forward-looking. A careful reader of Scripture needed to recognize therefore that a promise of God in one verse, or a record of His actions or the actions of His people in another verse, could never be relevant solely for that one point in time since all of those things pertained to the furtherance of God's plan for the last days (cf. Rom. 15:4; 1 Cor. 10:11). With that idea in mind, let me now explain how this Jewish hermeneutic related to messianic prophecy and, in particular, to messianic prophecy in the psalms.

THE MESSIANIC INTERPRETATION OF THE PSALTER

Bible students today are prone to overlook two important facts about the Psalter. (1) The psalms were initially intended for use in Israel's corporate worship at the temple. In essence, the Psalter was the nation's hymn book, and just like the songs in our hymn books today, the psalms used language that was purposely broad and general so as to be relevant to worshipers of any generation (Longman 37-50). (2) Though biblical scholars have traditionally categorized only a handful of psalms as “royal psalms,” the truth is that the role of the king permeates the Psalter. Several of the psalms offer a portrait of what an ideal king would be like (e.g., Pss. 2, 45, 72, 110).³⁶ The vast majority of the psalms were written by king David, and often the individual

language that we see in the psalms (i.e., the use of first-person singular pronouns) seems to be because the understood speaker in the psalm is the king himself.³⁷

With these two points in mind, we can see that, throughout the first temple period the psalms possessed special (though not exclusive) applicability to the particular Davidic king reigning at the time.³⁸ Thus, for Israelites during the united monarchy, hearing the words of the psalms in worship often would have evoked images of David or Solomon. When, for example, Psalm 18 was sung — a psalm where the king praises God for “delivering me from my enemies” (v. 48) — it naturally called to mind the successful battles of king David that allowed him to gain peace for the nation of Israel. But generations later, the singing of the same words would have spoken just as meaningfully of the victories of kings like Joash or Uzziah. Or consider David’s words in Psalm 21:1-4.

O Lord, in Your strength the king will be glad ...
He asked life of You,
You gave it to him,
Length of days forever and ever.

During the united monarchy, these words would readily call to a worshiper’s mind the many times that the Lord had answered David’s petitions, rescued him from the hand of his enemies, and allowed him to reign until a very old age. But if the same words were sung in another context — for example, in the time of king Hezekiah and his life-threatening illness (2 Kings 20:1-11) — the words “He asked life of You, You gave it to him” would surely have caused one to think of how king Hezekiah prayed to be healed and God granted his request. Such was the nature of the psalms that God provided for Israel’s worship throughout the generations. The words of the psalms were intended to convey meaning in a variety of circumstances with a number of Davidic kings.

Now God's prophets made it clear that one day a messianic king would reign over God's eternal kingdom; the Psalter's portraits of an ideal king would find realization in the last days. This provided yet another context within which the Psalms could be read — a messianic one — and this was the most significant context of all since the Messiah would establish God's eschatological kingdom so that God's eternal purpose would achieve full realization. Therefore, when many of the statements in the Psalter are considered in terms of what God revealed about the Messiah, they take on a special meaning. For example, God's prophets declared that all of the enemies of God and His people would be defeated by the hand of the Messiah (e.g., Isa. 9:1-7; Amos 9:11-15; Psa. 2:8-9). This meant that the Psalter's many references to the victorious battles of Israel's king had to function on one level as prophecies about the eschatological victories of the Messiah. Likewise, the words of Psalm 21 — “[The king] asked life of Thee, length of days forever and ever” — conveyed a unique meaning when viewed in the context of the nation's end-time ruler. The Messiah would never need a successor because he personally would reign forever; quite literally, he would have “length of days forever and ever.” It is not surprising, then, to see that ancient Jews interpreted this portion of Psalm 21 in precisely this way — as a prophecy about the Messiah's eternal reign (*b: Sanhedrin 98a; Psalms Targum*).³⁹

An understanding of the above concepts will now enable us to see how Jesus and his apostles argued that the rejection, crucifixion and resurrection of Christ were all in accordance with prophecy.

A Suffering Messiah

Ancient Jews conceived of the Messiah to come as a grand and mighty king who would be adored by his joyful nation. There were plenty of statements in the Psalter that yielded such an idea. But the psalms were also filled with lamentation statements where the king mourned his

mistreatment and persecution, and sometimes even his rejection by supposed friends.

Historically, David and several of his royal successors endured mistreatment and turmoil. Could such lamentations in the psalms also have relevance for the Messiah?

Before the advent of Jesus, Jews apparently assumed that the answer was no, for ancient Jewish literature contains no hint of a suffering-messiah concept in pre-Christian Judaism (Collins 123-126; Pickup, "Suffering Messiah" 143-144). But the Gospels show us that Jesus applied many of the Psalter's lamentations to himself in an effort to get his disciples to see that rejection and suffering was also a part of the Messiah's lot. During the Last Supper, when Jesus spoke of his imminent betrayal by one of his own disciples, he quoted Psalm 41:9 ("He who eats my bread has lifted up his heel against me") and applied those words to himself (John 13:18). He also said that the Jewish nation's unjust hatred of him fulfilled the words of Psalm 69:4, "They hated me without cause" (John 15:25). When Jesus was nailed to the cross, he uttered the plaintive cry of Psalm 22:1, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matt. 27:46; Mark 15:34). The Jews had never considered that such laments might come from the lips of the Messiah, but Jesus affirmed that even words of sorrow like these could have a messianic application.⁴⁰ The Gospel of Luke tells us that after Jesus' resurrection, he opened the minds of his disciples so they would understand the Scriptures: "Now he said to them, 'These are my words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things which are written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets *and the Psalms* must be fulfilled'" (24:44).

The New Testament's Interpretation of Psalm 16

We noted earlier that the Book of Acts presents the words of Psalm 16 as a messianic prophecy of the resurrection of Jesus (Acts 2:25-32; 13:34-37). In this psalm David offered a prayer of thanksgiving for God's protection, saying, "My flesh also will live in hope, because

You will not abandon my soul to Hades, nor allow Your holy one to undergo decay” (vv. 9-10).

In Acts 2 Peter quotes this section of the psalm to the crowd of Jews on Pentecost and then makes the following statement:

Brethren, I may confidently say to you regarding the patriarch David that he both died and was buried, and his tomb is with us to this day. And so, because he was a prophet and knew that God had sworn to him with an oath to seat one of his descendants on his throne, he looked ahead and spoke of the resurrection of the Christ, that He was neither abandoned to Hades, nor did His flesh suffer decay. This Jesus God raised up again, to which we are all witnesses. (vv. 29-32)

From a grammatical-historical perspective, the psalmist’s words “You will not abandon my soul to Hades, nor allow Your holy one to undergo decay” would not seem to refer to actual resurrection from the dead, for other psalms use the same kind of language to speak of a godly man’s rescue from the hand of would-be slayers (e.g., Pss. 18:4-6; 28:1-9; 30:1-3; 40:1-2, 11-17; 49:5-10, 14-15; 86:13-17; 116:1-9; 143:7-9). It is in the sense of not being killed that the psalms speak of one’s deliverance from Hades, and Psalm 16 would seem to be no exception. It would also appear that David is writing about himself in this psalm, for he speaks of “my flesh” and “my soul,” and the term “holy one” (*hasid*) is used elsewhere in the Psalter as a term for David (e.g., Pss. 4:3; 18:25; 32:6; 86:2).⁴¹ There seems to be nothing in the psalm to cause a reader to think that the Messiah is in view.⁴² But what if we do not restrict our reading of Psalm 16 to a grammatical-historical perspective?

All ancient Jews recognized that God intended the psalms to have application throughout the history of Israel, and that this history would culminate with the advent of the Messiah in the last days. (Not surprisingly, therefore, we see Psalm 16 being interpreted eschatologically in the Dead Sea Scrolls and in the Rabbinic Literature; see 4Q177, *Genesis Rabbah* 88:5, and *Midrash on Psalms* 16.4). On many occasions God had rescued David or a royal successor from the brink of death and, in that sense, had not abandoned the king to Hades. But eventually, of course,

David and the kings that followed him did die and their bodies decayed in Hades — so one could apply the language of Psalm 16 to David and his successors, just not in an absolute sense.⁴³ But a Jew understood that it was different when a psalm like this was viewed midrashically and set in an eschatological context, for the promised Messiah would reign forever; the final king of Israel would never need a successor because he would never die. Most Jews, therefore, would probably have taken the words of Psalm 16 as a prophecy of the Messiah's immortality (just like Psalm 21 that we discussed above). That is why the death of Jesus seemed to prove that he could not be the promised Messiah, because the Messiah — in an absolute sense — was never to be “abandoned to Hades” and his flesh was never to “undergo decay.”

But in Acts 2 Peter calls upon his Jewish audience to realize that the words of Psalm 16 could indeed refer to a slain Messiah if he were not *abandoned* to Hades; Jesus could still fulfill the messianic reading of the psalm as long as God raised him from the dead *before his corpse underwent decay*. And that, the apostle argues, is exactly what God did when He restored Jesus to life on the third day after his crucifixion. (In Jewish thinking, death was a process, and the third day after a person died was when the soul was said to completely depart from the body. This was because visible signs of decomposition set in after three days; see *m: Yebamot* 16:3 and *y: Moed Qatan* 82b.)⁴⁴ Peter is asking his audience to view David's words in Psalm 16 within a messianic context just as they commonly would do with such psalms, and this meant treating in an absolute sense the statement about the king not being abandoned to Hades nor undergoing decay.⁴⁵ But Peter urges the people to consider something they had never thought of before — the possibility that God's plan for the Messiah might be that, before assuming his throne, he die for the sins of his people and be raised on the third day unto royal glory (vv. 29-31).⁴⁶ That this indeed was God's plan was confirmed by the empty tomb and the eyewitnesses who had seen the

risen Savior (v. 32). The apostle's argumentation was overwhelming. Three thousand Jews eagerly submitted themselves to Jesus Christ.

The New Testament's interpretation of Psalm 16 becomes very clear when we realize that it is giving a midrashic exegesis of the psalm wherein David's words are read within the context of God's full revelation about the Messiah. In this case, that full revelation included two historical facts about Jesus — viz., his death and resurrection on the third day — and this necessarily shaped the messianic reading of the psalm.⁴⁷

There were other facts about Jesus that shaped the messianic reading of other psalms, and that matter now warrants discussion. We need to understand how the New Testament can take Old Testament statements about Yahweh and legitimately read them as references to the Messiah.

The New Testament's Interpretation of Psalm 68

Psalm 68:18 praises God with the following words:

You ascended on high,
You led captive Your captives;
You gave gifts to men [or, received gifts among men].⁴⁸

Contextually, the psalmist is recounting Yahweh's defeat of the enemies of Israel as He led the young nation through the wilderness and into the promised land, culminating with His triumphant ascent of mount Zion to dwell in His temple (Kidner 238-245). That is what the psalm conveys when we read it in a grammatical-historical way.⁴⁹ But in Ephesians 4:7-12 Paul gives these words quite a different interpretation.

To each one of us grace was given according to the measure of Christ's gift. Therefore it says, "When He ascended on high, He led captive a host of captives, And He gave gifts to men." (Now this expression, "He ascended," what does it mean except that he also had descended into the lower parts of the earth? He who descended is himself also he who ascended far above all the heavens, so that he might fill all things.) And he gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and

some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints....

Paul says that Psalm 68 spoke of Christ's incarnation and ascension into heaven. The apostle takes statements that clearly referred to the activity of Yahweh in the Old Testament and interprets them as references to the Messiah. He even goes so far as to say that the psalmist's statement about Yahweh's "gifts to men" referred to Jesus' bestowal of apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers. Surely the ancient Israelites would never have understood the psalm in this way when they used it in their temple worship, nor could God have expected them to do so. So we ask, how can Paul's interpretation of the psalm be legitimate? The answer lies in the fact that Paul is reading the psalm midrashically — that is, he is reading it within the context of what God's full revelation indicated that He would do in the last days and through whom He would do it.

Before elaborating on Paul's exegesis of the psalm, let me point out that his application to Jesus of Old Testament statements about Yahweh parallels the way that ancient Jews applied statements about Yahweh to the agents through whom He functioned. For example, God had declared that He would make Moses "as God to Pharaoh" (Ex. 7:1), and this special role as God's agent seems to be the impetus behind the Jewish practice of taking appropriate biblical statements about Yahweh's actions and applying them to Moses. For example, the Rabbinic Literature takes the words of Psalm 68:18 — the very passage we are discussing — and applies those words to Moses because he "ascended on high" to receive the Law of God on mount Sinai and deliver it to the people (*b: Shabbat* 89a; *Midrash on Psalms* 68.11).

Ancient Jews also took Old Testament statements about Yahweh and applied them to the angels through whom He functioned. For example, one of the Qumran Scrolls (11Q13) quotes

Psalm 82:1 — “God (*elohim*) takes His stand in His own congregation; He judges in the midst of the rulers” — and applies these words to Michael the archangel. This was because the Hebrew word *elohim* sometimes referred to angels, and Michael was understood to be the angel who would execute judgment on Yahweh’s behalf (Collins 162).⁵⁰ (The Qumran document is not denying that the psalm spoke on one level of Yahweh himself. But reading the psalm midrashically, it interprets those same words on another level as referring to Michael.) New Testament Christianity, of course, affirmed that Jesus the Messiah was the one who would bring about judgment on Yahweh’s behalf — and as God (*elohim*) in the flesh, Jesus was greater than any angel. So it really is not surprising to see the New Testament taking Old Testament statements about the deeds of Yahweh and reading them as references to Jesus, for he was the incarnation of Yahweh in the last days and the one through whom Yahweh functioned.⁵¹

Returning now to Ephesians 4, we first need to realize that Paul is not rejecting the grammatical-historical intent of Psalm 68. The apostle understood that, within an Old Testament context, the psalm praised Yahweh’s march to the promised land, His defeat of the Canaanites and triumphant ascent of mount Zion. But the Old Testament prophets had revealed that God’s greatest triumph would occur in the last days when He established His eternal kingdom through the Messiah and defeated every enemy once and for all. So Paul is reading Psalm 68 in that eschatological context. Ancient Jews did too, as both the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Babylonian Talmud illustrate (1Q16; *b: Pesahim* 118b). But Paul is doing more than that. Since Christians knew that God had come in the person of Jesus and conquered every spiritual foe, Paul affirms an eschatological meaning for the psalmist’s words within the context of what God had accomplished through Jesus. Jesus was the one through whom God functioned and who now reigned triumphantly in the heavenly Zion. So it was quite fitting to interpret the words of Psalm

68 in terms of Jesus, for he truly did “ascend on high” and “lead captive a host of captives.”

Commenting specifically on v. 18 of the psalm, Paul says, “Now this expression, ‘He ascended,’ what does it mean except that he also had descended into the lower parts of the earth? He who descended is himself also he who ascended far above all the heavens, so that he might fill all things.” The Old Testament depicted Yahweh as “descending” from heaven to travel with the Israelites to the promised land before achieving His great victory over Israel’s enemies (Ex. 19:20; 40:34-38). Paul points out that God’s eschatological exaltation also required Him to “descend” before ascending to glory — i.e., God came down to this world in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, was slain and then resurrected from the dead before ascending again to glory in heaven. And just as Yahweh’s exaltation atop Jerusalem’s temple mount had meant gifts and blessings for His Old Testament people, so the exaltation of Christ to the heavenly Zion was followed by the outpouring of spiritual gifts that provided God’s church with apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers.

So when we look at the apostle’s exegesis of Psalm 68 in terms of midrashic hermeneutics, the rationale for his interpretation becomes clear. Taking note of another point may help us as well. I mentioned earlier the “ascent” of Moses to the presence of God on Sinai. That unique event generated discussion among ancient Jews about Moses’ virtual enthronement as ruler over the people of Israel, and this conception of Moses’ role is in evidence in Jewish documents prior to Paul’s writing of Ephesians (Collins 144-145).⁵² It may be, therefore, that Paul is playing off this idea in his interpretation of Psalm 68:18 (Fishbane, *Jewish Thought* 71). Rather than emphasizing Moses as the agent of God who ascended mount Sinai, Christians needed to focus their attention on Jesus, the incarnation of God and the one who ascended to heaven to rule on Yahweh’s throne.

THE PARAMETERS OF LEGITIMATE INTERPRETATION

It has become increasingly evident in recent years how important it is to understand the Jewish background of the New Testament if we want to fully understand Christianity (Helyer 597-601; Evans and Sanders 171-211). Jesus and the New Testament writers used language and concepts that were indigenous to the Jewish world, and while they came in conflict again and again with Jewish opponents of the gospel, they nevertheless engaged in those conflicts from within a Jewish milieu. I have tried to show in this article that the difficulty modern Bible students have with the New Testament's use of the Old Testament is, again, the result of a failure to fully appreciate this Jewish milieu, particularly with regard to the method of reading the Old Testament.⁵³ When we see New Testament figures repeatedly interpreting the Old Testament in something other than a grammatical-historical manner just as their Jewish contemporaries did — even to the point of giving, at times, nearly identical interpretations of the same verses — we must admit that the same basic hermeneutic approach to the Old Testament is at work here. To affirm otherwise is simply to “kick against the goads.”

Midrashic exegesis was not some peculiar hermeneutic that was practiced by an obscure group of Jewish sectarians. It was the method of interpreting the Scriptures that virtually all Jews used because it was the only method that comported with the unique nature of the documents that God had given Israel. It should not surprise us to see Jesus and the New Testament writers using that same method of reading Scripture, for how else could one properly study a corpus of documents that, down to the last jot and tittle, was an unfolding to Israel, in the temporal realm, of the atemporal, unified plan of the eternal Author?⁵⁴

Midrashic exegesis was a way of vividly highlighting the interconnections that existed throughout the Old Testament material. It sought to discern the fullness of God's mind by

M. Pickup, p. 29

looking at the words of a passage not only within their original context, but also within other contexts that God revealed. Contrary to what many people have thought, the aim of this hermeneutic method was not to make Scripture say whatever one wanted it to say or to relativize truth. Far from it. The parameters of legitimate interpretation extended only as far as the explicit revelation of God itself and could never contradict it, and this is what gave the method an objective basis (Pickup, *Eschatological Interpretation* 99; Fishbane, *Jewish Thought* 21).⁵⁵ Furthermore, no matter how many levels of meaning might come to be seen in a statement of Scripture, that statement still possessed definite meaning. This meaning — that which was in the mind of God in all of its fullness — was what an interpreter was pursuing.⁵⁶

Yet non-Christian Jews failed to accept Jesus as the ultimate spokesman of God, and this is where the conflict between Christian and Jewish interpreters ensued. Christ provided the final measure of God's explicit revelation. He was, and is, the ultimate context in which all of the Old Testament is to be seen. But most Jews rejected Jesus as their Messiah and as the one who could fully explain the Scriptures. With a veil over their hearts (2 Cor. 3:12-16), unbelieving Jews failed to fully grasp the mind of God — and therein lies the great and tragic irony. In the centuries after the advent of Jesus, non-Christian Jews continued to flounder in their misunderstanding. Without Jesus to provide the key to the Old Testament mystery, Jews used midrashic exegesis speculatively and to little profit (even as the Rabbinic Literature attests). Without Christ to provide the final elucidation, the Old Testament remained for Jews like a jigsaw puzzle with all of the key pieces missing. May it not be so with us.

WORKS CITED

- Aaron, David H. "Language and Midrash." In *Encyclopedia of Midrash*. Eds., J. Neusner and A. Avery-Peck. Leiden: Brill, 2005.
- Barrett, C. K. *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*. New York: Harper and Row, 1968.
- Bernstein, Moshe J. "Interpretation of Scriptures." In *The Encyclopedia of the Dead Sea Scrolls*. Eds., L. Schiffman and J. VanderKam. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.
- Bock, Darrell L. "Evangelicals and the Use of the Old Testament in the New: Parts 1 & 2" *Bibliotheca Sacra* 142 (1985).
- Boyarin, Daniel. *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990.
- Bruce, F. F. *The Epistle to the Hebrews*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990.
- Bruns, Gerald L. "Midrash and Allegory: The Beginnings of Scriptural Interpretation." In *The Literary Guide to the Bible*. Eds., R. Alter and F. Kermode. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987.
- Collins, John. J. *The Scepter and the Star: The Messiahs of the Dead Sea Scrolls and Other Ancient Literature*. New York: Doubleday, 1995.
- Ellis, E. Earle. *Paul's Use of the Old Testament*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957.
- Enns, Peter E. "Creation and Re-creation: Psalm 95 and Its Interpretation in Hebrews 3:1-4:13." *Westminster Theological Journal* 55 (1993).
- Evans, Craig A. "The Function of the Old Testament in the New." In *Introducing New Testament Interpretation*. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1989.
- Evans, Craig A., and James A. Sanders. *Luke and Scripture. The Function of Sacred Tradition in Luke-Acts*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993.

Fishbane, Michael. *The Exegetical Imagination: On Jewish Thought and Theology*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998.

_____. "Inner Biblical Exegesis: Types and Strategies of Interpretation in Ancient Israel." In *Midrash and Literature*. Eds., G. Hartman and S. Budick. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986.

Glenny, W. Edward. "The Divine Meaning of Scripture: Explanations and Limitations." *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 38 (December, 1995).

Goldin, Judah. *Studies In Midrash And Related Literature*. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1988.

Hays, Richard B. *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989.

Helyer, Larry R. "The Necessity, Problems, and Promise of Second Temple Judaism For Discussions of New Testament Eschatology." *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 47 (December, 2004).

Johnson, S. Lewis. *The Old Testament in the New: An Argument For Biblical Inspiration*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1980.

Kaiser, Walter. *An Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics: The Search For Meaning*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994.

_____. *The Messiah in the Old Testament*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995.

_____. *The Uses of the Old Testament in the New*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1985.

Kermode, Frank. "The Plain Sense of Things." In *Midrash and Literature*. Eds., G. H. Hartman and S. Budick. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986, pp. 179-194.

Kidner, Derek. *Psalms 1-72*. Downer's Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1973.

- Klein, William, Craig Blomberg, and Robert Hubbard, Jr. *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*. Dallas: Word Publishing, 1993.
- Koester, Craig. *Hebrews*. New York: Doubleday, 2001.
- Kraemer, David. *The Meanings of Death in Rabbinic Judaism*. New York: Routledge, 2000.
- Kugel, James. "Ancient Biblical Interpretation and the Biblical Sage." In *Studies in Ancient Midrash*. Ed., J. Kugel. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001, pp. 1-26.
- _____. *The Bible As It Was*. Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1997.
- _____. "Two Introductions to Midrash." In *Midrash and Literature*. Eds., G. Hartman and S. Budick. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986, pp. 77-103.
- LaSor, William S. "Interpretation of Prophecy." In *Hermeneutics*. Ed., B. Ramm. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1987, pp. 94-117.
- Lim, Timothy H. "Origins and Emergence of Midrash in Relation to the Hebrew Bible." In *Encyclopedia of Midrash*. Eds., J. Neusner and A. Avery-Peck. Leiden: Brill, 2005.
- Longman III, Tremper. *How To Read the Psalms*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1988.
- McCasland, S. Vernon. "Matthew Twists the Scriptures." *Journal of Biblical Literature* 80 (1961), 143-148.
- Moo, Douglas. *The Epistle to the Romans*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996.
- _____. "The Problem of *Sensus Plenior*." In *Hermeneutics, Authority and Canon*. Eds., D. A. Carson and J. D. Woodbridge. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986.
- Neil, William. *The Epistle to the Hebrews: Introduction and Commentary*. London: SCM, 1955.
- Neusner, Jacob. *What Is Midrash?* Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987.
- Pickup, Martin. "The Apologetic Function of the Old Testament Citations in the Gospel of John." <http://www.valricococ.org/articles/academic>.

- _____. "Eschatological Interpretation In Shirata." In *The Annual Of Rabbinic Judaism: Ancient, Medieval, And Modern* 1. Leiden: Brill, 1998, pp. 83-99.
- _____. "Old Testament Citations in the Gospel of John." In *God So Loved: Studies in the Gospel of John*. Temple Terrace: Florida College Press, 2002.
- _____. "The Seed of Woman." In *The Gospel In The Old Testament* (Florida College Annual Lectures). Temple Terrace: Florida College Press, 2003.
- _____. "The Emergence of the Suffering Messiah in Rabbinic Literature." *Approaches to Ancient Judaism: New Series* 11. Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997.
- Pinnock, Clark H. *Biblical Revelation: The Foundation of Christian Theology*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1971.
- Porton, Gary. "Definitions of Midrash." In *Encyclopedia of Midrash*. Eds., J. Neusner and A. Avery-Peck. Leiden: Brill, 2005.
- Roberts, Phil. "A Hermeneutical Framework For the Use of Psalm 16 in Acts 2." Unpublished paper, 1992.
- Schiffman, Lawrence H. "Biblical Interpretation in Dead Sea Scrolls." In *Encyclopedia of Midrash*. Eds., J. Neusner and A. Avery-Peck. Leiden: Brill, 2005.
- Stern, David. "Midrash and the Language of Exegesis." In *Midrash and Literature*. Eds., G. Hartman and S. Budick. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986, pp. 105-124.
- _____. *Midrash and Theory. Ancient Jewish Exegesis and Contemporary Literary Studies*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1996.
- Vincent, Marvin. *Word Studies in the New Testament*, vol. 4. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1946.
- Williamson, Ronald. *Philo and the Epistle to the Hebrews*. Leiden: Brill, 1970.

ENDNOTES

¹ These evaluations are representative. They come from S. V. McCasland, "Matthew Twists the Scriptures" 145-146; M. Vincent, *Word Studies* 456; W. Neil, *Hebrews* 22. See also the on-line critique of Christian messianic prophecy arguments by Farrell Till in *The Skeptical Review* (1993, No. 4) at <http://www.infidels.org/library/magazines/tsr/1993>. Though Till is absolutely wrong in his rejection of the Bible and messianic prophecy, he does make some valid criticisms of the messianic prophecy arguments that Bible believers often employ today. Bible believers need to hone their thinking about messianic prophecy argumentation. For more information on this matter, see M. Pickup, "The Apologetic Function of the Old Testament Citations in the Gospel of John" at <http://www.valricococ.org/articles/academic>.

² Different readers approach the Bible with different presuppositions and perspectives, all of which can affect what each person will consider to be the "plain meaning" of a passage (see F. Kermode, "The Plain Sense of Things" 179-194). Nevertheless, people are not usually poles apart on such matters and, in general, we may speak appropriately of the "plain meaning" of the Old Testament.

³ For example, I count at least 17 occasions where, in my opinion, the New Testament interprets the Psalter in a grammatical-historical manner: Pss. 4:5 (Eph. 4:26); 5:10 (Rom. 3:13); 10:7 (3:14); 14:1-3 (Rom. 3:10-12); 22:23 (Heb. 2:12); 24:1 (1 Cor. 10:26); 32:1-2 (Rom. 4:7-8); 34:13-17 (1 Pet. 3:10-12); 36:2 (Rom. 3:18); 44:23 (Rom. 8:36); 69:22-23 (Rom. 11:9-10); 78:24 (John 6:31); 82:6 (John 10:34); 94:11 (1 Cor. 3:20); 112:9 (2 Cor. 9:9); 116:10 (2 Cor. 4:13); 118:6 (Heb. 13:6).

⁴ For an explanation of the textual-critical issue associated with this verse, see note 48 below.

⁵ For a survey of evangelical views on this matter, see W. E. Glenny, "The Divine Meaning of Scripture"; D. Bock, "Evangelicals and the Use of the Old Testament in the New."

⁶ Key proponents of this approach include D. Moo, "The Problem of *Sensus Plenior*"; S. L. Johnson, *The Old Testament in the New*; W. S. LaSor, "Interpretation of Prophecy."

⁷ Another difficulty with the *sensus plenior* approach is that it would seem to be a method of interpreting the Old Testament that is limited to persons inspired of God. Hence, it would not be a hermeneutic that is replicable today. See also note 42 below.

⁸ Walter Kaiser is the major defender of this view (see *The Uses of the Old Testament in the New*; *Biblical Hermeneutics* 139-158). For a critique of Kaiser's views as they relate to the apologetic function of messianic prophecy, see M. Pickup, "The Apologetic Function of Old Testament Citations" at <http://www.valricococ.org/articles/academic>.

⁹ Most notably, a generic explanation of 2 Samuel 7:14 — one that sees the word "seed" as having generic reference to all of David's royal offspring from Solomon to Christ — goes a long way in helping to explain the New Testament's affirmation that Jesus fulfills this prophecy. See

W. Kaiser, *The Messiah in the Old Testament* 77-90. But see note 10 below. Also, I believe that the generic nature of the promise regarding the “seed” of the woman in Genesis 3:15 is what underlies the Bible’s explanation of that passage. Nevertheless, to fully understand how the Bible interprets Genesis 3:15, one must go further and see matters in terms of ancient Jewish hermeneutics (see M. Pickup, “Seed of Woman” 62-70).

¹⁰ W. Kaiser has tried very hard to explain in this manner the New Testament’s interpretation of Psalms 16, 68, and 95 (*Uses of The Old Testament* 25-41, 153-157; *Messiah in the Old Testament* 118-122, 130-133). He argues that Psalm 16 was making a generic prophecy about future resurrection that would include the resurrections of both David and the Messiah, that Psalm 68 was making a generic prophecy about Yahweh and the Messiah’s advents, and that Psalm 95 was making a generic prophecy about God’s provision of rest for His people. Kaiser’s biggest difficulty, however, is trying to prove that the generic ideas that he alleges in these respective texts were really something that a pre-Christian reader could have (and should have) understood by means of a grammatical-historical reading alone. In my judgment, Kaiser is not successful. Though he claims to read these Old Testament passages solely on their own terms, he fails to realize how much his supposedly “objective reading” is really shaped by his prior knowledge of the New Testament’s explanations. See note 8 above.

¹¹ P. Roberts, “A Hermeneutical Framework” 18.

¹² Earlier scholars like E. Earle Ellis were pushing this similarity soon after the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, though Ellis’ explanation of Paul’s Old Testament hermeneutic as “grammatical-historical plus” was inadequate (*Paul’s Use of the Old Testament* 147-149).

¹³ Daniel Boyarin is correct when he says that Jewish readings of the Old Testament are “generated by hermeneutic principles, which although different from ours, are not arbitrary or unexpected within their own system” (*Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash* 119).

¹⁴ Even good scholars can display an inadequate grasp of Jewish hermeneutics because most have not widely studied Jewish literature (e.g., W. Klein, C. Blomberg, R. Hubbard, Jr., *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* 125-132; C. Evans, “The Function of the Old Testament in the New” 163-193). Many authors explain Jewish hermeneutics as little more than a list of exegetical rules (e.g., the seven rules of Hillel), or as the practice of associating Old Testament verses that contain a common word (*gezerah shavah*). These features are certainly found in Jewish hermeneutics, but reducing this method of exegesis to such matters is overly simplistic and fails to address its fundamental philosophy and purpose.

¹⁵ In Rabbinic documents one may find midrashic interpretations based upon the individual letters that comprise a word, or even on the visual appearance of the written letters of the Hebrew alphabet. Semantic significance is sometimes assigned to minor particles of speech that serve no actual semantic function in Hebrew grammar (Aaron 408-409). These kinds of fanciful manipulations of the text are basically a peculiarity of Rabbinic Literature, and one does not observe this kind of extremism in the New Testament’s midrashic exegesis of the Old Testament.

¹⁶ Theological liberals often approach the matter from a post-modern perspective that denies any basis for claiming that there can be a “correct” or “incorrect” interpretation of a document. Many scholars of Jewish midrash employ literary-critical techniques that have been closely associated with the ideas of post-modernism and deconstructionism (e.g., G. Hartman and S. Budick, eds., *Midrash and Literature*; G. Bruns, “Midrash and Allegory”; J. Kugel, “Two Introductions to Midrash”; D. Stern, “Midrash and the Language of Exegesis,” *Midrash and Theory*; D. Boyarin, *Intertextuality*; R. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture*). See note 19 below.

¹⁷ I am not endorsing, of course, all of the particular interpretations of the Old Testament that one finds in ancient Jewish literature. I am defending the general hermeneutic approach that was employed, not the specific interpretations that were derived.

¹⁸ The term *midrash* is used today in multitudinous ways and the end result has been great ambiguity and confusion (see J. Neusner, *What Is Midrash?* xi-xii, 1-3; Hays 10-14). I want to make it clear that I do not use the term here to speak of a literary genre, or of the practice of creating homiletic stories or expansions of Old Testament narratives. I restrict the use of this term to an exegetical procedure, the methodology of which I explain in the following pages. Yet even in the context of exegesis, many writers use the term *midrash* to designate the particular form of exegesis that we observe in Rabbinic Literature, and they distinguish it from the so-called *peshet* exegesis of the Qumran sectarians. *Midrash* is sometimes used as a virtual designation for the *gezerah shavah* technique of joining together passages that share a common word. Such uses of terminology can be quite misleading. It is becoming more common for scholars today to use *midrash(ic)* as a generic description of the hermeneutics used by virtually all Jewish groups of Late Antiquity in their religious writings, and that is how I use the term in this article.

¹⁹ For substantive discussions of midrashic exegesis, see J. Neusner, *What Is Midrash?*; D. Boyarin, *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash*; G. Porton, “Definitions of Midrash.” For an overview of the history of academic studies of midrash, see T. Lim, “Origins and Emergence of Midrash” 595-612; D. Stern, *Midrash and Theory* 1-13. Most recent studies of midrashic exegesis seek to explain it in accordance with modern literary-critical categories. There is value in these studies, but if one treats midrashic exegesis only as a radical example of literary “intertextuality,” the fundamental theological impetus for this hermeneutic method may be minimized or even overlooked entirely (see, e.g., R. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture* 154-178). In this article I am giving an explanation of the basic methodology of midrashic exegesis along *religious* grounds, rather than literary grounds. I am presenting the theological basis that undergirded the thinking of Jews as they employed this approach to their Scriptures — a theological conception that derived from the Scriptures themselves. See note 16 above.

²⁰ In this article I am explaining the theological premise of the midrashic exegesis that ancient Jews employed, but even though this conception undergirds the exegetical techniques of virtually all Jewish groups of Late Antiquity, one should not think that there were no methodological differences between the various groups. For example, the midrashic method of the Qumran sectarians, known as *peshet*, is markedly different in form and purpose than the midrashic method of the later rabbis of the Rabbinic period. But even so, there is a basic commonality in all

of the permutations of exegesis that we observe among the ancient Jews, and that commonality is what I am discussing here (Bernstein 382).

²¹ At times a divine promise or some other Old Testament statement lacked specificity or detail, and the resulting absence of information generated questions. But other correlative portions of the Old Testament were a potential source of explanation. Modern scholars of midrash commonly describe this as “gaps” in the text that prompted midrashic exegesis.

²² Ancient Jews recognized that, due to the nature of God’s revelation, their Scriptures were a declaration of a kind of mystery that needed to be uncovered (J. Kugel, *The Bible As It Was* 17-18). The New Testament, of course, teaches the same thing, but asserts that the mystery is fully revealed in Jesus Christ (Mark 4:11; Rom. 16:25; 2 Cor. 3:14-16; Eph. 1:9; 3:9; Heb. 1:1-2).

²³ Reading the words of one context in light of another context is a procedure that is graphically illustrated in Rabbinic Literature. There a base verse is quoted and interpreted in light of another verse, and typically that intertext is explicitly quoted. But the intertext does not need to be quoted; sometimes the connection between passages was so well known as to require no explicit reference. The normal New Testament practice is not to cite an intertext when giving a midrashic interpretation of an Old Testament verse. This is sometimes because of the well-known nature of the connection, but it is often due to the fact that Jesus himself serves, so to speak, as the “intertext.” Jesus becomes the new, divinely revealed “context” in which Old Testament statements are viewed (see Pickup, “Old Testament Citations” 50-52). This procedure is very similar to what we observe in the *peshet* exegesis of the Dead Sea Scrolls where the Qumran sectarians interpret the Old Testament in light of their Teacher of Righteousness and the Qumran community (see Schiffman 48-53).

²⁴ There is a strong thematic and verbal connection between Psalm 8 and Psalm 110. The latter psalm presented a picture of an ideal king of Israel that, ultimately, had to be interpreted messianically. According to Psalm 110:1, God would make the ideal king’s enemies “a footstool for his feet,” and this language is reminiscent of the statement in Psalm 8:6, “You have put all things under his feet.” Thus, an eschatological interpretation of Psalm 110 went hand-in-hand with an eschatological interpretation of Psalm 8, which is exactly what the Hebrew writer does with these psalms in Hebrews 1 and 2.

²⁵ The Qumran scrolls reflect the idea that the promised seed of Abraham would receive the “glory of Adam,” i.e., that they would inherit the glorious position that Adam originally knew in Eden as ruler of God’s world (1QS 4.21-22; CD 3.20; 1QH 7.15; 4Q171 3.1-2). Paul himself, in Romans 4:13, succinctly describes the Abrahamic covenant as a promise that Abraham’s seed would be “heir of the world,” and then turns in the very next section of his letter to discuss Adam and Christ. It is quite evident that God intended the end-time exaltation of His people in the world to come to be a restoration of the original Adamic lordship over God’s creation. Given this perspective, how could one read the language of Psalm 8 and *not* call to mind God’s promises about man’s eschatological glory?

²⁶ Literally, the psalm says “*if* they will enter My rest.” This is a Hebrew idiom for the giving of

an oath wherein one party obligates himself never to permit the stated action. The actual curse, should the oath be violated, is left unstated (Koester 257).

²⁷ Most rabbis disagreed with Akiba and said that God *would* allow the exodus generation to enter the world to come after all. They believed that virtually every Jew could expect to receive atonement for the sins he committed in life by virtue of having performed the Mosaic rites and having suffered the penalty of death; see *m: Sanhedrin* 10:1-3; *b: Sanhedrin* 110b. (The Hebrew writer, of course, would have differed strongly with such an idea; Christianity affirmed that sin could be propitiated only by the death of the Messiah.) Because of this doctrinal presupposition, the rabbis argued that when Psalm 95:11 said that God swore *in His wrath* that the exodus generation would not enter His rest, this meant that He uttered His oath impulsively, out of anger, and so He subsequently retracted it (*t: Sanhedrin* 13:10-11; *Leviticus Rabbah* 32:2). Putting aside the obvious theological problems that such an interpretation creates, what is important for our purposes is the fact that, despite their disagreement over the eternal fate of the exodus generation, Rabbinic Jews uniformly assigned an eschatological meaning to the divine “rest” of Psalm 95 just as the Hebrew writer did.

²⁸ Cf. Jesus’ point along this line in John 5:16-17.

²⁹ The first half of Psalm 95 (vv. 1-6) praises the God of Israel as the one who made all things. The voice of the one who spoke all things into existence now speaks to Israel and seeks to work in their hearts. This, then, is the logical grounds for the subsequent warning of vv. 7-11 that the Israelites not emulate their ancestors who refused to heed God’s voice. It is these latter verses that the Hebrew writer quotes, but the connection he draws between these verses and God’s rest in Genesis is a connection suggested by the prior verses of the psalm.

³⁰ Many commentators have a minimal understanding of Jewish hermeneutics and simplistically explain the Hebrew writer’s exegesis as an example of *gezerah shavah*, a procedure where passages with identical words are interpreted in light of one another (see, e.g., one of the most recent academic commentaries to be published on Hebrews: C. Koester, *Hebrews* 278). While it is true that in the Septuagint the word *katapausis* (“rest”) is used in both Psalm 95:11 and Genesis 2:2, it is not the mere presence of common terminology that generates the Hebrew writer’s midrashic interpretation of the psalm. It is the theological connection that the Old Testament presents, when viewed as a whole, between the concepts of (a) God’s rest at the completion of creation, (b) the rest associated with the promised land of Canaan, and (c) the rest in the heavenly kingdom.

³¹ The Hebrew writer’s concern about his audience’s spiritual decline and loss of heavenly reward is what prompted the writing of this epistle (cf. 2:1-4; 3:6, 12-16; 6:7-17, etc.). The four Gospels, as well as numerous works of ancient Jewish literature, reveal how firmly ensconced in the Jewish mind was the confident presumption that they, as God’s chosen people, were virtually guaranteed a place in the eternal kingdom. The Hebrew writer is seeking to disabuse his Jewish Christian readers of any similar conception. They would have a place in God’s kingdom only as long as they continued in faith.

³² Psalm 95 has no authorship heading in the Masoretic Text, though the Septuagint attributes the psalm to David. The Hebrew writer also appears to affirm Davidic authorship by using the expression “in David” (4:7). It is possible, however, that this phrase was intended as a designation for the Psalter rather than as an authorship designation. But whether David or a later inspired psalmist composed the psalm, the Hebrew writer’s argument is not materially affected (see Bruce 107-108). Nevertheless, I think it is more likely that the Hebrew writer is attributing the authorship of Psalm 95 to David.

³³ This is a good example of the fact that midrashic exegesis has its roots in the Old Testament writers themselves and their own inspired re-contextualizing of Old Testament themes and concepts (see Neusner 17-20; Fishbane, *Inner Biblical Exegesis* 19-37; Lim 605 -610).

³⁴ Another factor may also have contributed to the Hebrew writer’s (and other ancient Jews’) eschatological reading of Psalm 95. There are two ways that one could potentially understand the statement in Psalm 95:11, “As I swore in My wrath, *They shall not enter My rest.*” The italicized portion could be treated, on the one hand, as a loose quotation of God’s oath in Numbers 14:20-35 concerning the exodus generation’s exclusion from the land of Canaan. Modern versions of the Bible generally view it this way, so they enclose the italicized words in quotation marks. On the other hand, these words could be taken as a similar, yet different oath that God was now communicating through the psalmist, an oath specifically forbidding the exodus generation’s participation in the future “rest” of the afterlife. A vagueness like this in the Old Testament text — particularly a statement that allowed for two possible readings, both of which expressed divine truths — was commonly highlighted by midrashic interpreters, and both ways of reading the text were recognized as a purposeful part of God’s revelation (Goldin 271-281; Pickup, “Old Testament Citations” 30-33).

³⁵ A mere *statement* in an Old Testament psalm might find relevance in another context; it was not necessary that the entire psalm yield a midrashic reading. Due to its nature, midrashic exegesis tended to look at the text of the Old Testament atomistically. See note 39 below.

³⁶ I find it significant that there is no psalm that similarly portrays an ideal prophet or Levitical priest.

³⁷ Notice, for example, the individual language that is used throughout Psalm 18, culminating with v. 50. It seems best to understand the king as the individual who is speaking here.

³⁸ I am not saying that the psalms could *only* find meaning in the context of a king. The king may be the dominant figure throughout most of the Psalter, but the psalms were clearly designed for corporate use so that their words would have potential applicability to every Israelite.

³⁹ As noted above (see note 35), only a portion of a psalm might warrant a midrashic interpretation, perhaps only a mere statement. So if, for example, one verse of a psalm were interpreted in a messianic context, that did not mean that the entire psalm could necessarily be interpreted in that way. Ancient Jews took some psalmodic statements about the king — e.g., statements about his victories in battle or his blessed life — and applied them to the Messiah, but

they did not do the same thing with the many verses in the psalms where the king confessed his sin. God had declared that the ideal (messianic) king was to be a completely righteous monarch (Psa. 72:1-14; Jer. 33:15). Recognizing this fact should help us see that just because a New Testament writer applies a portion of an Old Testament psalm to Christ, that does not mean that the entire psalm is necessarily to be viewed as “messianic.” For example, Hebrews 10:5-10 applies a portion of Psalm 40 to Jesus (vv. 6-8), but it does not apply to Jesus a subsequent portion of the psalm where the king confesses his iniquity (v. 12).

⁴⁰ Compare also the New Testament’s messianic application of the following lament statements: Psa. 22:18 (John 19:24); Psa. 69:9 (John 2:17; Rom. 15:3); Psa. 118:22-23 (Matt. 21:42; Mark 12:10; Luke 20:17; 1 Pet. 2:7).

⁴¹ Someone might suggest that David’s shift in Psalm 16:10 from the first person (“will not abandon *my soul*”) to the third person (“*holy one* to undergo decay”) indicated to Peter that David shifted his attention in mid-verse from himself to the Messiah. But this suggestion will not work, because in Acts 2:31 Peter applies *both* phrases to Jesus.

⁴² W. Kaiser argues that Psalm 16 was making a single generic promise of resurrection that would include the resurrections of both David and the Messiah (*Uses of the Old Testament* 30-41). But Peter’s comment in Acts 2:29-31 argues strongly against this view, for Peter specifically says that his explanation of the psalm in terms of resurrection was *not* applicable to David (cf. also Acts 13:36). See note 10 above. Peter’s statement also poses a major difficulty for the traditional *sensus plenior* approach, for while one might try to argue that Psalm 16 is a psalm about David but that he functions in the psalm as a type of the Messiah, Peter himself seems to negate that explanation since he says that David did not fulfill the words of the psalm. Phil Roberts expresses well the situation among conservative scholars when he says, “It seems that evangelicals in particular are brought to an impasse over Peter’s use of Psalm 16. Seeking a hermeneutic method that can be justified to contemporary society, and appearing to find it in typology, Peter tells us that is not what he is doing!” (Roberts 16-17). I believe this “impasse” is overcome when we realize that Peter is giving a midrashic interpretation of the psalm, as I subsequently explain in this article. Peter’s point in vv. 29-31 is not that the psalm could never have application to David in any sense, but that when the psalm’s language was read in an absolute sense, it then could have application only to the Messiah.

⁴³ By not pressing the psalm’s language absolutely and instead treating it somewhat figuratively, some rabbis interpreted Psalm 16:9-10 as a promise of David’s resurrection in the last days. The idea seems to be that though David’s flesh did decay in Hades, his eventual resurrection at the end of the age would effectively overturn this process, thereby rendering it powerless and of no effect (*b: Baba Batra* 17a; *Midrash on Psalms* 16.10-11). Peter’s messianic reading of the psalm, on the other hand, treats the language of the psalm quite literally and affirms that the Messiah’s flesh was never to undergo the corruption of Hades at all.

⁴⁴ Kraemer 82-84. This is the significance of Martha’s response to Jesus when he ordered the tomb of Lazarus to be opened. She said, “Lord, by this time there will be a stench, for he has been dead four days (Luke 11:39). See note 47 below.

⁴⁵ This is the point of Peter's remark in Acts 2:29, "Brethren, I may confidently say to you regarding the patriarch David that he both died and was buried, and his tomb is with us to this day." Peter is asking his audience to read the words of Psalm 16 in an absolute sense, and when one did so, the words of the psalm could be applied legitimately to the Messiah, but not to David.

⁴⁶ In vv. 30-31 Peter says, "Because [David] was a prophet and knew that God had sworn to him with an oath to seat one of his descendants on his throne, he looked ahead and spoke of the resurrection of the Christ." Some people take Peter to mean that David himself understood that his psalm was specifically predicting the resurrection of the Messiah. In my opinion, that view tries to press too much out of the apostle's words. The phrase "he looked ahead and spoke of ..." denotes the action of prophesying about the future, and does not necessarily mean that the prophet comprehended all that he was predicting. There are many other places in Scripture where a prophet is said to have "spoken" or "prophesied," yet the prophet clearly did not understand the full meaning of his own words. (See, e.g., Dan. 8:27; 12:8; Matt. 3:11-15 [cf. 11:3]; Acts 2:39 [cf. 10:9-35]; John 11:51. Consider also the "fulfillment quotations" of Matt. 2:15; 2:17, etc., as well as 1 Pet. 1:10-12 where Peter indicates that the Old Testament prophets knew they were predicting the future, but did not understand all that they were speaking.) David certainly knew that God had promised his dynasty an everlasting throne, and he wrote about the ideal (messianic) king to come (2 Sam. 7; Pss. 2, 110, etc.). Accordingly, Peter says in v. 30 that "[David] was a prophet and knew that God had sworn to him with an oath to seat one of his descendants on his throne." But how much David himself understood about the details of God's eschatological plan is something that we cannot know for sure. In my judgment, the most one can conclude from vv. 30-31 is that Peter is saying David understood that Psalm 16, like other psalms, had relevance not only to himself, but on another level (i.e., in an absolute sense) to the future ideal king. But though David understood that fact, the specifics about how God would prevent this future Messiah from decaying in Hades — viz., that it would be by having him slain and then raised on the third day — may have been as much a mystery to David as it was to anyone else before the advent of Christ. I see no reason to conclude that Peter is saying otherwise. (Let me say, however, that if Peter *does* mean that David knew specifically that his words predicted the Messiah's resurrection from the dead, that still would not materially affect my contention in this paper. It only would mean that God had revealed to David the specific details of how a messianic reading of his psalm would be fulfilled. Nevertheless, I see no reason to take Peter's statement that far.)

⁴⁷ Luke's Gospel records the following statement by Jesus: "*Thus it is written*, that the Christ would suffer and rise again from the dead *the third day ...*" (Luke 24:46). This statement may suggest that the occurrence of Jesus' resurrection specifically on the third day was a part of Old Testament prophecy. Paul's statement in 1 Corinthians 15:3-4 most naturally lends itself to the same interpretation: "For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was *raised on the third day according to the Scriptures...*" The grammar would not absolutely demand this interpretation, however, and Bible students have traditionally declined to understand Luke and Paul in this way because of the apparent difficulty of locating any Old Testament text — whether expressly cited in the New Testament or not — that might be understood as predicting

a third-day resurrection (Barrett 340). I would suggest that there actually are two Old Testament passages that yield such an understanding when read midrashically: (1) Jonah 1:17 (“Jonah was in the stomach of the fish three days and three nights”), which Jesus himself associated with his third-day resurrection (Matt. 12:39-41; Luke 11:29-32); and (2) Psalm 16. As stated above, the Jewish conception of death was that a deceased person’s spirit did not completely depart the body until three days after death. Only after three days would a corpse manifest graphic signs of decay, so only at that point could it be said that the person had been abandoned to Hades. I would argue, therefore, that Luke (in his Gospel) and Paul (in 1 Corinthians) are indeed affirming that the occurrence of Jesus’ resurrection specifically on the third day was a part of Old Testament prophecy. Accordingly, in Acts 13:35-36 we see Paul citing Psalm 16 and arguing (just as Peter did in Acts 2) that Jesus’ resurrection on the third day fulfilled the words of the psalm, and we see Luke, the author of Acts, giving prominence to this Christian explanation of the psalm.

⁴⁸ There is a textual-critical matter here. Paul employs a form of the text that reads, “[God] gave gifts to men,” whereas both the Masoretic Text (reflected in our Old Testament Bibles) and the Septuagint read, “[God] received gifts among men.” Interestingly, the *Psalms Targum* agrees with Paul’s text form, as may the *Testament of Dan* 5:10-11 in a possible allusion to Psalm 68:18 (Fishbane, *Jewish Thought* 71).

⁴⁹ W. Kaiser (*Messiah in the Old Testament* 130-133) gives an amazingly strained exegesis of Psalm 68:18, claiming that the passage refers to a pre-incarnate appearance of the Messiah on mount Sinai and his taking Levites “captive” (?) for the service of Israel. Kaiser further maintains that this interpretation of the psalm is what the ancient Israelites, using grammatical-historical exegesis, should have been able to derive. Kaiser is at pains to try to explain Paul’s messianic reading of the psalm as a case of grammatical-historical exegesis in accordance with Kaiser’s theory of generic prophecy (discussed earlier in this article). Readers may judge for themselves whether Kaiser is successful. See notes 8-10 above.

⁵⁰ Psalm 82 is discussing Yahweh’s judgment upon the rebellious angelic forces to whom God subjected the nations of the world. For a further discussion of this psalm and Jesus’ use of it, see M. Pickup, “Old Testament Citations” 35-39.

⁵¹ We see the same phenomenon in Hebrews 1:10-12 where Psalm 102:25-27 is interpreted as referring to Jesus the Son of God.

⁵² This concept is presented in *Exagōgē* 68-89, a Hellenistic work from the second century BC, and in Philo’s *Vita Mosis* 1.155-158, written in the first half of the first century AD.

⁵³ In addition to the citations of the Psalter that I have analyzed in this article, readers may also want to consider the following verses that are used by New Testament writers in ways that, in my judgment, can only be explained adequately as midrashic exegesis: (1) Psalm 102:25-27 (quoted in Hebrews 1:10-12). In the original context, the psalmist is speaking of Yahweh’s act of creating the world. The Hebrew writer interprets these words as a reference to the Messiah, the one through whom Yahweh made all things. (2) Psalm 40:6-8 (quoted in Hebrews 10:5-7). In the

original context, the psalm speaks of God's desire for a worshiper's voluntary obedience rather than a mere animal offering. The Hebrew writer interprets these words as a reference to Jesus' sacrifice of himself on the cross, an act which served to supplant the Mosaic sacrificial system. (3) Psalm 45:6-10 (quoted in Hebrews 1:8-9). In the original context, the psalm describes an ideal king and his consort on the day of their wedding, with everything cast in an ancient Near Eastern setting. The Hebrew writer takes the psalm's description of the king and interprets it as God's proclamation to Christ as he reigns on his heavenly throne. (4) Psalm 19:4 (quoted in Romans 10:18). In the original context, the psalm describes the way that the heavens "declare" the glory of the Creator (i.e., God's general revelation). Paul cites these words as a reference to the spread of the gospel throughout the world. (Paul is doing more here than merely "borrowing" scriptural language; see Moo, *Romans* 667.) In each one of the above instances, an Old Testament passage is cited but is not given a grammatical-historical interpretation. Instead, the words of the passage are read within a new context in keeping with God's full revelation. This is midrashic exegesis.

⁵⁴ Midrashic exegesis can only be applied legitimately to the books of the Old Testament, not to the books of the New Testament. The New Testament authors are providing the final explanation of God's Old Testament mystery. One would not treat the explanation as if it were also a mystery. Correspondingly, we see that the Rabbinic documents midrashically exegete the Old Testament, but not other Rabbinic documents, and the Qumran literature midrashically exegetes the Old Testament, but not other Qumran literature (Aaron 406).

⁵⁵ The problem of someone seeking to go beyond these parameters may be what generated Peter's warning in 2 Peter 1:20-21.

⁵⁶ Such a concept in no way squares with the tenets of post-modernism or deconstructionism (see note 16 above). Nor does Jewish hermeneutics have anything at all to do with the so-called "new hermeneutic" that gained prominence among theological liberals in the latter decades of the 20th century (see Pinnock, *Biblical Revelation* 217-227).