

Dr. Matthew S. Harmon, The Bible Use of the Bible, Session 1, The Value of Studying the Bible's Use of the Bible and How to Get Started, 6-Min. Video Overview

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The 66 books of the biblical canon are often read as a simple linear progression. In reality, the text operates as a massive self-referential network. Biblical authors practiced scriptural exegesis.

Inspired by the Spirit, they actively searched, inquired, and repurposed earlier revelation for new circumstances. Recognizing these connections requires moving past the casual cross-references found in modern margins. We have to look at the deliberate structural choices made by the authors themselves.

To read the text accurately, we need a precise analytical model. This involves tracking exegetical allusions, mapping a spectrum of textual influence, and navigating ancient translation variables. Tracing exactly how biblical writers used previous scripture is essential for tracing the coherent theological storyline running from Genesis to Revelation.

Mapping this network requires acknowledging our own hermeneutical starting lines. Two scholars reading the exact same passage can reach different conclusions based on their foundational assumptions. A reader with a naturalistic presupposition interprets fulfilled prophecy as a later editorial insertion.

A reader with a supernatural presupposition views that same text as divine foresight. Historical and geographical contexts also play a role. The biblical authors operated within specific Second Temple and ancient Near Eastern environments, often engaging with existing interpretive traditions.

Identifying genuine intertextual links requires us to strip away modern assumptions and adopt the historical lens of the original authors. To measure these connections rigorously, we use a three-part taxonomy—the donor text, the receptor text, and the exegetical outcome. The original passage supplying the foundational vocabulary is the donor text.

In Deuteronomy 29, Moses tells Israel that the Lord has not given them a heart to understand, eyes to see, or ears to hear. The later passage that integrates that earlier language is the receptor text. Centuries later, in Isaiah 6, Yahweh instructs the prophet to tell the people to keep seeing but not perceiving, and to blind their eyes.

The syntactic overlap is highly specific. This is a calculated repetition of Moses' phrasing, rather than a coincidence of common language. The third component is the exegetical outcome.

This is the interpretive move the later author makes with the borrowed text. Isaiah takes Moses' critique of Israel's spiritual dullness in the wilderness and applies it directly to the 8th century BC. Biblical authors repurpose past theology into an analytical tool, using it to interpret their present reality.

Intertextual overlaps are rarely announced explicitly, as-it-is written. We measure the density of textual borrowing along a spectrum of influence. On the far left is citation, a clear, nearly exact quotation of the original text.

Moving right, we find allusion. This occurs when an author intentionally borrows a specific cluster of vocabulary without a formal citation marker. Further right is the echo, the faintest trace of an earlier text, often relying on just one or two shared words.

At the far right is thematic similarity. Here, the text shares parallel concepts that evoke earlier scriptures, without using the same vocabulary. Identifying an allusion requires both the rigid science of counting words and the qualitative art of immersing oneself in the biblical storyline.

Tracing these connections involves a language barrier. The two testaments were composed in different tongues. The original donor texts of the Old Testament were written almost entirely in Hebrew.

By the time the New Testament authors were drafting their receptor texts, they were largely relying on Greek translations of those Hebrew scrolls. This Greek translation, the Septuagint, varies in its translation fidelity from book to book. This flowchart illustrates the split during the translation process.

On one path, books underwent a rigid, woodenly literal word-for-word translation to mirror the Hebrew syntax. Other books used dynamic equivalence, a meaning-based translation that tracks the original concepts rather than the exact phrasing. When an exegete finds a discrepancy between a Hebrew verse and a New Testament quote, they must determine if the author changed the meaning or is simply using a dynamic translation.

Academic study often separates the testaments into isolated fields, treating the Old Testament's use of earlier texts as a different phenomenon than the New Testament's use of the old. This sequestered approach leads to the assumption that New Testament authors invented entirely new ways to interpret Scripture. A connected approach recognizes that New Testament exegesis is a continuation of existing prophetic practices.

One specific shared technique is prosopological exegesis. Derived from the Greek word for face, this technique involves taking a statement made by one biblical speaker and reassigning it to the voice of a different speaker in a later text. Ultimately, tracing these shared hermeneutical techniques reveals a highly consistent interpretive logic that stretches seamlessly across the entire biblical timeline.

We can apply this analytical model to the Apostle Paul's letter to the Romans. In Deuteronomy 30, the donor text asks, Who will ascend to heaven for us and bring it to us? In the receptor text of Romans 10, Paul borrows this spatial metaphor. Setting the texts side by side reveals exactly what Paul copied and what he added.

Paul actively interrupts the borrowed text with his own interpretive parentheses, adding phrases like that is, to bring Christ down. This insertion bridges the gap between ancient law and his present theological focus. Paul is performing scriptural exegesis on the page, updating the ancient text to show its fulfillment in Christ.

To map this intertextual network, an exegete must read deeply, slowing down to catch localized vocabulary echoes and symbols. They must simultaneously read widely to ensure the macro storyline isn't lost in the data. Modern tools like color-coded translations and advanced indices have made identifying these donor and receptor pathways faster than ever.

Mastering the Bible's use of the Bible is the prerequisite for constructing a sound, unified, systematic theology.