



Introduction

There are two principal difficulties that those who aspire to NT exegesis must face: learning the biblical languages and becoming familiar with the myriad of cognate literatures. The first difficulty is overcome through the study of Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. But the second difficulty is not so easily dealt with. Because these cognate literatures are so diverse and involve numerous difficulties of their own, many students and even a surprising number of teachers and professors are acquainted with very few of them. Perhaps another factor is knowing that there are scholars who have made it their lives' work to master certain of these literatures. It is understandable then that a beginning NT interpreter often hesitates to plunge into the Talmud or the Dead Sea Scrolls or some other body of writings.

Nevertheless, if one is to do competent NT exegesis, one must know something of these writings and of their relevance for the NT. Some of these writings are vital for understanding the NT, some much less so. But all are referred to by the major scholars. Thus, intelligent reading of the best of NT scholarship requires familiarity with these writings (just as it is necessary to know the biblical languages), if for no other reason.

An Overview of the Writings

1. *The Old Testament Apocrypha*. All of the writings of the OT Apocrypha (or deuterocanonical books, as some call them) predate the NT (with the exception of portions of 2 Esdras). Most of these writings were written one or two centuries before the NT era. Most, if not all, were known to early Christians and to the writers of the NT. The OT Apocrypha forms, then, an indispensable bridge linking the worlds of the OT and the NT.

2. *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*. Many of the writings of the OT Pseudepigrapha, which represent the most diverse collection considered in this book, predate the NT; some are contemporaneous, and some postdate the NT.

Many contain themes that are represented in the NT. In a few instances NT authors even quote pseudepigraphal writings.

3. *The Dead Sea Scrolls*. The Dead Sea Scrolls probably represent the most sensational twentieth-century archaeological and literary discovery in biblical studies. These writings, mostly in Hebrew, though some are in Aramaic and Greek, either predate the NT or are contemporaneous with the earliest NT writings (e.g., Paul's letters and perhaps one or two of the Synoptic Gospels). The authors of these writings (i.e., those found near Qumran) were probably members of the group that Josephus called the Essenes. They lived throughout Palestine, not just in the Dead Sea area where the caves are located, in which the scrolls were discovered. The scrolls provide significant parallels to NT vocabulary and ideas.

4. *Versions of the Old Testament*. The Greek OT, called the Septuagint (LXX), is also central for researching the NT for the simple reason that more than one half of the NT's quotations of the OT are from the Septuagint and not from the Hebrew. Three recensions of the Septuagint need to be mentioned. This chapter will also treat the Masoretic Text (MT), the Old Latin, the Vulgate, and the Peshitta. The Aramaic tradition is treated in a chapter of its own.

5. *Philo and Josephus*. Two of the most noteworthy non-Christian Jewish authors of the first century are Philo and Josephus. Philo, who was born during the reign of Herod the Great, wrote several volumes in which he interprets various passages, institutions, and characters of the OT (primarily the Torah) in an allegorical manner. His allegorical interpretation parallels NT interpretation in a few places. Josephus, who lived a generation later, was raised in Palestine and became a participant in the Jews' bloody rebellion against Rome (66–70 C.E.). Befriended by the Roman conquerors, he wrote several works that describe the Jewish conflict and the biblical history of the Jewish people. His writings provide excellent background for NT interpretation, especially for the Gospels.

6. *The Targumim*. The Targumim are Aramaic paraphrases of the Hebrew Bible. They originated in the synagogue, though how early is debated. Some targumic tradition can be traced to the first century and some of it is clearly relevant to certain NT passages.

7. *Rabbinic Literature*. The sayings and traditions of some of the Tannaic rabbis may be traced back to the first century and may clarify certain aspects and passages of the NT. Here will be considered the Mishnah, Tosefta, and the early midrashim. Although not from the early period, but containing some Tannaic material, the Babylonian and Palestinian Talmuds and some of the later midrashim will also be briefly discussed.

8. *The New Testament Pseudepigrapha*. The NT Pseudepigrapha (or Apocrypha) is made up of numerous pseudonymous gospels, books of acts, epistles, and apocalypses. Although most of this material is of no use for NT interpretation, there are some scholars who maintain that in a few instances (esp. in certain gospels) tradition has been preserved that may derive from the NT period and shed light on what is obscure in the NT itself.

9. *Early Church Fathers*. In addition to examining the so-called Apostolic Fathers (Ignatius, Polycarp, Clement of Rome, etc.) this chapter will survey some

of the church's earliest exegetes and theologians, such as Origen, Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, Cyprian, Eusebius, Jerome, and Augustine. Some of these writings may preserve traditions that derive from the NT period that could aid in exegesis.

10. *Gnostic Writings*. The Coptic Gnostic Codices from Nag Hammadi, Egypt, provide us with most of our gnostic primary materials. Many of these fourth-century Coptic writings are based on much earlier Greek writings that in some cases might date from the late first and early second centuries. Some scholars claim that they may even contain sayings of Jesus that are either authentic or at least more primitive than their counterparts in the Gospels of the NT. Some think that Johannine and Pauline Christology may owe its origin to ideas preserved in the gnostic writings. A few other gnostic writings will also be considered.

11. *Other Writings*. In the final chapter the Hermetic and Samaritan writings, among others, will be reviewed briefly. The former have been compared to Johannine theology, while the latter contain traditions that cohere with distinctive elements in Luke-Acts. A few of the most relevant pagan authors will be included. The chapter will conclude with a survey of the most important papyri, inscriptions, coins, and ostraca. Although the items in this category do not constitute literature as such, they do offer text, even if quite brief, that is very important for NT study. Papyri are the most obvious in their importance, for they provide us with our oldest samples of the writings of the Bible itself. The non-literary papyri provide us with a wealth of everyday correspondence, such as personal letters, contracts, memoranda, agenda, receipts, and the like. The papyri assist us in identifying and defining with greater precision and nuance the semantic range of the Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek vocabularies of the biblical literature. Inscriptions and coins provide us with important insight into a variety of public declarations (such as imperial propaganda), and the ostraca, like the personal papyri, provide examples of names, receipts, and such. Thus these materials lend important background color to everyday life in the NT period.

The Value

How is NT exegesis facilitated by studying these writings? These writings clarify the following areas of exegetical concern:

1. *The meaning of words*. In older commentaries the meaning of words is often defined by appeal to the classics (usually Greek, though sometimes Latin). It is not clear, however, how relevant these parallels are. (Is the way that Plato used a word in fourth-century B.C.E. Greece germane to the way the same word is used in the Gospel of Mark?) Perhaps in some cases, but parallels that are closer in time (first century B.C.E. to first century C.E.) and location (Palestine, eastern Mediterranean world) are more likely to be relevant. Appeal to the LXX, which contains the Apocrypha, is therefore quite appropriate. Although written mostly

in Hebrew, Qumran documents often can be helpful in determining the meaning of certain words in the NT. Some of the pseudepigrapha circulating in Palestine and the eastern Mediterranean can therefore be helpful in determining the meaning of words used in the NT. As an example, consider the word *episkopē* (“visitation”), which occurs a few times in the NT (Luke 19:44; 1 Pet 2:12; for the verb form, see Luke 1:68, 78; 7:16; Acts 15:14). The NT’s connotation of judgment, either for reward or for punishment, is clarified by OT usage (*episkopē* in the LXX, *pequddah* in the Hebrew; cf. Isa 10:3; Jer 8:12; 23:12; 50:27), not classical. Other words are not found in the Greek or Hebrew OT, but derive from the Targum (e.g., “Gehenna”; cf. Mark 9:47–48; *Tg. Isa.* 66:24) or from pseudepigraphal writings (e.g., “Tartarus”; cf. 2 Pet 2:4; *L.A.B.* 60:3).

2. *Syntax.* The grammar of the NT is Koine, not classical. It is also heavily influenced by the Semitic style of the LXX. This is seen by the NT’s frequent use of *egeneto de* or *kai egeneto* (“and it came to pass”). This expression comes right out of the LXX. To “set one’s face” and to go “before one’s face” (cf. Luke 9:51–53) are idioms that derive from the LXX and whose meanings are clarified by the Greek OT. Other grammatical expressions reflect the Aramaic language of Palestine (“in truth” [Luke 4:25; 1QapGen^{ar} 2:5]; “he was seen,” meaning “he appeared” [Luke 24:34; 1QapGen^{ar} 22:27]). Some of the NT’s syntax seems to reflect Hebrew (preposition *en* with the articular infinitive meaning “while doing” [Luke 1:21; 2:6; 5:1]).

3. *The meaning of concepts.* When Jesus tells his disciples that they have been given authority to “tread upon serpents [*ophis*] and scorpions” and that “the spirits are subject” to them (Luke 10:19–20), he may have alluded to Ps 91:13 (“You will tread upon lion and the adder, young lion and the serpent you will trample under foot”). Psalm 91 has nothing to do with Satan; but Jesus’ words do (cf. Luke 10:17–18). Would a reference to treading upon serpents have been understood in first-century Palestine as a reference to Satan and demons? Very much so. Consider this eschatological hope expressed in one of the *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*: “And Beliar [i.e., Satan] shall be bound by him [i.e., an agent of salvation on whom the Spirit of God shall rest; Isa 11:2]. And he shall grant to his children the authority to trample on wicked spirits” (*T. Levi* 18:12; cf. *T. Sim.* 6:6; *T. Zeb.* 9:8). Since Satan is represented as a serpent (*ophis*) in Gen 3:1–15 and the righteous will trample serpents under foot it is not too difficult to see how the language of Psalm 91 could be adopted and applied to Satan and evil spirits as we find it in Luke 10 and *T. Levi* 18. The targumic tradition also links serpents and scorpions with Satan and evil spirits (and Gen 3:15, which speaks of the woman’s seed crushing the serpent’s head, is understood in a messianic sense in the Targumim).

4. *History.* Some of the writings that will be considered in this book contribute to what we know about the intertestamental and NT periods. First and second Maccabees are invaluable sources for our knowledge of the Jewish revolt against Antiochus IV in 167 B.C.E. Josephus’s *Jewish War* and *Jewish Antiquities* reveal helpful information about Jewish politics and history at the turn of the era,

especially with reference to Herod the Great and his family, and the time of Jesus and his earliest followers.

5. *Historical, social, and religious context* (i.e., *Sitz im Leben*). Following the death of Herod the Great Palestine went through a period of political instability and upheaval. Josephus cynically remarks, “Anyone might make himself a king” (*Ant.* 17.10.8 §285). Josephus has no sympathy for Jewish nationalists and would-be-liberators, calling them “brigands” (*lēstēs*). This is the very word that is used when Jesus is arrested and crucified (Mark 14:48; 15:27). In view of Josephus’s description of these kingly claimants as *lestai*, some of whom may very well have thought of themselves as messiahs, it is possible that when *lēstēs* is used of Jesus, it meant “insurrectionist.” Josephus also tells of false prophets who deluded the people by promising signs of deliverance, sometimes urging them to withdraw to the desert. The language that he uses (*Ant.* 17.10.7 §§278–284; 20.8.6 §168; 20.8.10 §188; *J.W.* 2.13.5 §§261–263; 6.5.4 §315) parallels, at places quite closely, the warnings that we read in the Gospels (cf. Matt 24:26; Mark 13:21–22).

6. *Exegetical context*. Of major importance is the fact that the noncanonical writings quite often shed light on the interpretation of the OT passages quoted or alluded to in the NT. For example, parts of 2 Sam 7:12–16, the “Davidic covenant,” are quoted (Heb 1:5) or alluded to (Luke 1:32–33) in the NT as fulfilled in Jesus. Since Nathan’s oracle originally spoke of Solomon the son of David, one wonders if early Christian interpretation would have been understood or accepted. Qumran has made it clear, however, that this oracle was interpreted in an eschatological sense, at least in some circles. The eschatological deliverer will be God’s Son (4QFlor 1:11–12; 4Q246 1:6–9; 2:1–4) and he will be seated on the throne of David (4Q252 5), thus fulfilling the promise of 2 Samuel 7 in a way that Solomon and his descendants did not. As another example, the presentation of Jesus in the Prologue of the Fourth Gospel as the Logos (“word”) is illumined by Philo and possibly by the Targumim. Philo describes the Logos as “God’s first-born, the Word” (*Confusion* 28 §146), through whom God created the world (*Cherubim* 35 §127). The Targumim say that God created humanity through the Memra (“word”): “The Memra of the Lord created man in his own image” (*Tg. Neof. Gen* 1:27; cf. *Tg. Isa.* 45:12). The presence of “Word” as agent of creation in Genesis 1 is highly suggestive, since John 1 (“In the beginning . . .”) echoes the language of the creation account.

7. *Hermeneutical context* (i.e., *how Scripture could be interpreted, how it could be applied, adapted*). The literatures surveyed in this book help us understand how biblical literature was interpreted and what role it played in the life of the Jewish and Christian communities of faith. Qumran affords us with examples of peshet interpretation whereby various prophetic details of Scripture were applied to contemporary events and events felt to be imminent. Rabbinic writings provide us with numerous examples in midrashic interpretation whereby Scripture was searched in an effort to find answers to the questions relating to how God’s people should live and how they should understand their sacred tradition. Philo’s writings illustrate allegorical interpretation. Do the details of Scripture point to meanings beyond the obvious and literal? The Targumim and some of the pseud-

epigraphal writings show how the biblical story can be paraphrased, expanded, and enriched. But perhaps more importantly, these various literatures aid us in understanding what role Scripture played in the life of the believing community. All of this sheds light on how early Christians understood their own sacred tradition.

8. *Canonical context (i.e., what was regarded as Scripture and why).* The literatures surveyed in this book also help us understand what it meant to regard certain writings as authoritative. By what criteria were certain writings preserved and treated with reverence and respect not accorded to other writings? What was the understanding of the relationship between the OT and NT? In what sense is the NT part of the Bible? (And from a Christian point of view: In what sense is the OT part of the Bible?) In what sense did the “canonical” writings possess authority? What does the author of 2 Esdras mean when he says that whereas both the worthy and unworthy may read the twenty-four books (i.e., the OT), only the wise should be permitted to read the “seventy” books (i.e., the Apocrypha/Pseudepigrapha) that were written last (14:44–47; cf. 12:37–38)? The literatures surveyed in this book do not definitely answer these and related questions, but they provide much of the raw data that must be processed before we can begin to answer them responsibly.

The Method

How are these writings put to use in doing NT exegesis? This is the principal concern of the present book. Comparative study of these writings constitutes an important step in the exegetical process.

In order to understand a given passage one must reconstruct as much as possible the world of thought in which the NT writer lived. Since the NT frequently quotes the OT (hundreds of times) or alludes to it (thousands of times) and everywhere presupposes its language, concepts, and theology, exegesis should be particularly sensitive to its presence and careful to reconstruct the exegetical-theological context of which a given OT quotation or allusion may have been a part. A comparative approach is essential. How was the OT passage quoted or alluded to understood by early Christians and Jews? To answer this question the interpreter should examine every occurrence of the passage. This involves studying the ancient versions and cognate literatures, the very writings treated in this book.

To assess properly the function of the OT in the NT the following questions must be raised:

(1) What OT text(s) is(are) being cited? Two or more passages may be conflated, and each may contribute insight.

(2) Which text-type is being followed (Hebrew, Greek, Aramaic)? What are the respective meanings of these versions? (Each may have an interpretive tradition of its own.) How does the version that the NT has followed contribute to the meaning of the quotation?

(3) Is the OT quotation part of a wider tradition or theology in the OT? If it is, the quotation may be alluding to a context much wider than the specific passage from which it has been taken.

(4) How did various Jewish and Christian groups and interpreters understand the passage? This question is vital, for often the greatest help comes from comparing the function of the OT in these sources.

(5) In what ways does the NT citation agree or disagree with the interpretations found in the versions and other ancient exegeses? Has the Jesus/Christian tradition distinctively shaped the OT quotation and its interpretation, or does the NT exegesis reflect interpretation current in pre-Christian Judaism?

(6) How does the function of the quotation compare to the function of other quotations in the NT writing under consideration. Has a different text-type been used? Has the OT been followed more closely or less so?

(7) Finally, how does the quotation contribute to the argument of the NT passage in which it is found?

If these questions are carefully considered, one's exegesis will be in large measure complete. Although the above steps have been applied to passages where the OT is present, either explicitly or implicitly, most of these steps are relevant for exegesis of any passage, for it is indeed a rare passage that alludes to or parallels no other. (For treatments concerned with other questions of exegesis consult the works listed in the bibliography below.)

In the chapters that follow the various literatures will be surveyed with the questions just considered kept in mind. In the final chapter a selection of passages from the NT will be studied and offered as examples of the benefits to be derived from addressing these questions and taking into account the various literatures of the biblical period.

General Bibliography

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