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MINISTRIES

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Brit Hadasha: Are Old Testament Prophecies Taken Out of Context?

An objection often raised by counter-missionaries is that the authors of the *Brit Hadashah*, or New Testament, often seem to take prophecies from the *TANAKH*—the Old Testament—out of context. It is argued that we cannot trust what the authors of the *Brit Hadashah* say since they’re either ignorant of the *TANAKH* or they’re purposely misleading their readers. How can we respond to this?

Before we dive in, if you haven’t seen our teaching, **Why Yeshua is the Messiah**, we recommend watching that teaching first. We make a positive case for why Yeshua is the only possible candidate for Israel’s Messiah according to Scripture.

So why do the counter-missionaries make this objection? Well, when we think of prophecy as being limited to a prediction-fulfillment formula, it’s easy to see why some people say the authors of the *Brit Hadashah* took passages from the *TANAKH* out of context. For instance, consider this verse from Matthew:

Matthew 2:13-15

[“An angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, “Rise, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you, for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.” And he rose and took the child and his mother by night and departed to Egypt and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, “Out of Egypt I called my son.””](#)

In this passage, Joseph and Mary fled to Egypt until Herod died so that Yeshua would remain safe. Matthew quotes Hosea 11:1 in reference to Yeshua returning from Egypt back to Israel. But in context, Hosea 11:1 is not talking about Yeshua at all, but clearly referring to Israel’s exodus from Egypt.

Right after this passage in Matthew, Herod ordered that all the male children of Bethlehem under two years old be killed. Matthew writes that this was a fulfillment of a prophecy from Jeremiah:

Matthew 2:16-18

“Then Herod, when he saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, became furious, and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had ascertained from the wise men. Then was fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah: “A voice was heard in Ramah, weeping and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be comforted, because they are no more.””

The problem here is that when we look at this passage from Jeremiah in context, it’s clearly referring to the Babylonian exile. The original passage has nothing to do with this account of Herod ordering the death of baby boys in Bethlehem.

These are just two examples out of many. So how do we deal with this apparent misuse of biblical prophecy on the part of the authors of the *Brit Hadashah*?

The first thing we should understand is that the nature of biblical prophecy is not limited to a prediction-fulfillment formula. Judaism of the first century had many approaches to interpreting Scripture. Dr. Paul Copan comments on this issue in his book, “That’s Just Your Interpretation”:

Jewish interpretation of the Old Testament during Jesus’ time was nuanced: There were four basic approaches to interpreting Scripture. Many critics of the Bible claim that the “fulfilled prophecies” regarding Jesus were simply lifted out of their original context in order to “prove” a point about Jesus. But these critics fail to understand the way that first-century Judaism handled and interpreted Scripture. This treatment of the Old Testament was not simply a phenomenon among early Christians who were trying to make sense out of their experience with Christ based on the Old Testament Scriptures. They were familiar with certain approaches to interpreting Scripture used by the rabbis of the day: the literal, midrash, peshet, and allegorical. If we understand this, we will not be confused by the apparent “quoting out of context” methodology that New Testament writers seemed to use.

- Paul Copan, *That's Just Your Interpretation: Responding to Skeptics Who Challenge Your Faith*

So we shouldn’t be surprised to find these common methods of interpretation utilized by the first century Jews who wrote the New Testament. When Matthew quoted Hosea and Jeremiah in reference to Yeshua, he was certainly aware of the original context of those passages. When Matthew says that these events related to Yeshua’s life were a fulfillment of prophecy, he wasn’t limiting “fulfillment” to the narrow definition of the term that we’re used to. As Copan says, “Not all prophecy is predictive, and not all fulfillment implies completion of prediction.”

Indeed, when we explore uses of the Greek word *pleroo*—translated “fulfill”—we discover that many times it has nothing to do with completing a prediction. Many times it means to “perfect” or “embody,” such as in Matthew 5:

Matthew 5:17

“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill [*pleroo*] them.”

In this verse, the idea of fulfillment is much more broad than merely fulfilling a prediction. Yeshua was embodying the full extent of the Torah. In his commentary on this passage in Matthew, Messianic

scholar and teacher, J.K. McKee, puts it well:

When Yeshua came to “fulfill the Law,” it was with the expressed intention to demonstrate how valuable the Torah is for the instruction of the faithful, because His very sermon on the Mount is predicated upon the validity of Moses’ Teaching [...] Yeshua the Messiah, as the Word of God made manifest in the flesh (John 1:1), came to fulfill the Torah for humanity by embodying it to its fullest extent in His teachings, actions, and deeds.

-J.K. McKee, *The New Testament Validates Torah: Does the New Testament Really Do Away With the Law?* p. 91

This is to say that the Torah finds its full meaning and expression in Yeshua the Messiah. The Torah is a shadow, so to speak, which points to the substance found in Messiah. That fact doesn’t diminish the value of the Torah, but is simply to say that Yeshua is the full embodiment of the Torah.

We can view some of these quotations from the *TANAKH* in a similar way. Yeshua’s life and teachings typify or reflect the events described in the *TANAKH*. So when Matthew quotes Hosea in reference to Joseph and Mary fleeing to Egypt to escape from Herod, he was essentially saying, “Just as it happened to God’s ‘son,’ Israel, so it also happened to God’s Son, Yeshua, who is the ideal representative of the people of Israel.”

Yeshua uses Scripture in a similar way when He rebukes the Pharisees:

Matthew 15:7-8

“You hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy of you, when he said: This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.”

When Yeshua quotes this passage from Isaiah, He is not saying that Isaiah made a prediction about these particular religious leaders of the first century. No, Yeshua was using Isaiah’s situation as a picture of the situation in Yeshua’s day.

Now, this doesn’t mean that prophecy is never predictive at all. Of course it is. For instance, consider this passage from Micah:

Micah 5:2

“But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days.”

From this passage we see that the Messiah, the prophesied king of Israel, would be born in Bethlehem, which is where Yeshua was born, thus fulfilling this predictive prophecy:

Matthew 2:1

“Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem.”

What about this passage from Zechariah:

Zechariah 9:9

“Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your king is coming to you; righteous and having salvation is he, humble and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.”

In the gospel of John, we read about Yeshua’s Triumphal Entry to Jerusalem, which was a fulfillment of Zechariah’s prediction:

John 12:12-16

“The next day the large crowd that had come to the feast heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem. So they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him, crying out, “Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, even the King of Israel!” And Jesus (Yeshua) found a young donkey and sat on it, just as it is written, “Fear not, daughter of Zion; behold, your king is coming, sitting on a donkey’s colt!” His disciples did not understand these things at first, but when Jesus (Yeshua) was glorified, then they remembered that these things had been written about him and had been done to him.”

The prophet Isaiah predicted that the Messiah would be buried in a rich man’s tomb:

Isaiah 53:9

“And they made his grave with the wicked and with a rich man in his death, although he had done no violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth.”

We see in the gospel of Matthew that Yeshua’s burial fulfilled this prediction:

Matthew 27:57-60

“When it was evening, there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who also was a disciple of Jesus. He went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. Then Pilate ordered it to be given to him. And Joseph took the body and wrapped it in a clean linen shroud and laid it in his own new tomb, which he had cut in the rock. And he rolled a great stone to the entrance of the tomb and went away.”

The prophets in the *TANAKH* also predict that the Messiah would come as a suffering servant and that He would need to arrive and do certain things before the destruction of the Second Temple, both of which were fulfilled by Yeshua. For more examples of how Yeshua directly fulfilled the predictive elements of biblical prophecy, we’d again invite you to watch our teaching, **Why Yeshua is the Messiah**, and also our teachings on **Daniel 9** and parts 1 and 2 of **The 4th and 7th Day**.

So it’s true that biblical prophecy is indeed predictive, but the point of this teaching is to show that the nature of biblical prophecy is not limited to the prediction-fulfillment formula. We should understand that many times when the authors of the *Brit Hadashah* speak of Yeshua fulfilling prophecy, that they were speaking of Yeshua being the perfect picture or embodiment of events, people, and symbols in the *TANAKH*.

Again, this approach to the *TANAKH* is not unique to the authors of the *Brit Hadashah*, but mirrors the common Jewish interpretive practices of the first century. A first-century Jew reading the apostles’ writings would have been very familiar with the substance and style of the biblical quotes and would not have thought that the apostles were mishandling the text at all.

In fact, even in the later rabbinic literature, we see similar approaches to interpretation. A common tradition in Judaism is to recite Deuteronomy 6:4-9—called the *Shema*—every morning and evening. Consider this passage from the Babylonian Talmud concerning why the *Mishna* addresses the question of when to recite the evening *Shema* before it addresses the question of when to recite the morning *Shema*:

The Gemara asks: And furthermore, what distinguishes the evening *Shema*, that it was taught first? Let the *tanna* teach regarding the recitation of the morning *Shema* first. Since most *mitzvot* apply during the day, the *tanna* should discuss the morning *Shema* before discussing the evening *Shema*, just as the daily morning offering is discussed before the evening offering.

The Gemara offers a single response to both questions: The *tanna* bases himself on the verse as it is written: “You will talk of them when you sit in your home, and when you walk along the way, when you lie down, and when you arise” (Deuteronomy 6:7). By teaching the laws of the evening *Shema* first, the *tanna* has established that the teachings of the Oral Torah correspond to that which is taught in the Written Torah [...] Just as the Written Torah begins with the evening *Shema*, so too must the Oral Torah.

-Berakhot 2a

In this passage we see that the author cites Deuteronomy 6:7, “when you lie down and when you get up,” to explain why the *Mishna* addresses when to recite the evening *Shema* before addressing when to recite the morning *Shema*. But the passage from Deuteronomy has nothing to do with the question of why the *Mishna* addresses the reciting of prayers in a particular order. Indeed, the author of this passage took Deuteronomy 6:7 completely out of context to support their position regarding an unrelated question.

This interpretive approach to the *TANAKH* is not unusual in rabbinic literature. Not only are verses taken out of context, but also many times verses are misquoted or interpreted *contrary* to their contextual meaning.

This isn't to unfairly criticize rabbinic literature, but simply to show that early Jewish teachers took a lot more liberty in their interpretive methods than what people today might be used to. The writings that make up the *Brit Hadashah* are no exception.

In fact, you could actually argue that the authors of the *Brit Hadashah* are much more careful in their handling of the *TANAKH* than the authors of other rabbinic writings.

Biblical scholar and translator, Moises Silva, writes:

“If we compare the bulk of quotations in the New Testament with the bulk of quotations in rabbinic literature, we cannot but be struck by the greater sensitivity of New Testament writers to the original context [...] a sympathetic study of the relevant New Testament passages reveals a notably sane, un fanciful method.”

Moises Silva, *The New Testament use of The Old Testament: Test Form and Authority*

In conclusion, this objection from the counter-missionaries is based on their failure to understand the broader meaning of “fulfillment” as the authors of the *Brit Hadashah* use it. Here is a summary of what

we've learned:

- Fulfillment is not limited to a completion of a prediction; it can also mean to embody or typify.
- While fulfillment of biblical prophecy is not limited to the prediction-fulfillment formula, Yeshua did in fact fulfill many of the predictions of the biblical prophets.
- The interpretive methods used by the authors of the *Brit Hadashah* were common to Jewish teachers of their day.
- The authors of the *Brit Hadashah* were NOT given to fanciful interpretations, but rather they highly respected the text of the *TANAKH*, unlike like what we often find in other rabbinic writings.

We pray that this teaching has blessed you. Remember, continue to test everything. Shalom! For more on this and other teachings, please visit us at www.testeverything.net

Shalom, and may Yahweh bless you in walking in the whole Word of God.

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