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When The Bible Quotes The Bible

by William MacDonald

You might expect that when the New Testament quotes from the Old, it would always quote it in the same context and with the same meaning. That is far from true. The fact is that when the Holy Spirit quotes Old Testament passages, He is a law unto Himself. He refuses to be boxed in by man-made rules of interpretation.

We defend His right to do this. The One who wrote the Old Testament in the first place has a right to reinterpret it as He pleases. The ingenuity and variety that He employs in doing this are one of the fascinating studies of the wonderful Word.

Critics of the Bible point to differences in quotations as proof of inconsistency and error. E. W. Bullinger argues, "Thus it seems man may take any liberty he chooses in quoting, adapting, or repeating in a varied form his own previously written words, but he denies the Divine Author of Holy Scripture the right to deal in the same manner with His own words. This is the cause of all the so-called 'discrepancies' and 'difficulties' arising from man's ignorance." ¹

As we study the quotation of Old Testament passages in the New, we find a number of fascinating categories:

1. An Exact Quotation

Very often the New Testament writers or speakers quote a passage word for word to convey the exact same meaning. For example, when nailed to the cross our Lord prayed, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me" (Matthew 27:46). This is an exact quotation of Psalm 22:1.

2. A Partial Quotation

Sometimes the Spirit changes a passage because He is using it in a different dispensational setting. The classic example of this is when the Lord Jesus read from Isaiah 61 in the synagogue at Nazareth. He concluded with the words that said He had come "to preach the acceptable year of the Lord" (Luke 4:19). Then He closed the scroll, gave it to the attendant and sat down. However, if He had continued, He would have added "and the day of vengeance of our God," just as Isaiah states (Isaiah 61:2). But that would have been out of place dispensationally.

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**William
MacDonald**
(1917-2007)

His first advent began the acceptable year of the Lord. The day of vengeance of our God will begin with His second coming. We see a similar adaptation of an Old Testament verse when the Savior drove the money changers out of the temple courts. Quoting Isaiah 56:7, He said, "My house shall be called the house of prayer" (Matt. 21:13). But the Isaiah passage says, "My house shall be called a house of prayer for all people." Why did Jesus leave out the words "for all people"? During His earthly ministry the Temple was not for all nations. It was a a place of worship for the Jews. Gentiles were forbidden to go beyond the court that was especially assigned to them. However, during the Millennium, the Temple will be for all nations, and that is what the Isaiah passage is looking forward to.

3. A New Aspect Of Truth w aspect of truth

Sometimes a change is made in a quotation in order to introduce a new truth, or a new aspect of the truth. In Isaiah 52:7 we read, "How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him that brings good tidings...." Here Isaiah is speaking of the beautiful feet of the Messiah. But when Paul quoted that verse in Romans 10:15, he wrote, "How beautiful are the feet of them that preach the gospel of peace...."

In other words, the "him" in Isaiah becomes "them" in Romans. The explanation is obvious, Isaiah was thinking of our Lord's first coming to inaugurate the gospel era. But now He has gone back to heaven, and He has left us here to go forth with the gospel of peace. As Annie Johnson Flint wrote, "He has no feet but our feet to lead men in His way." So our feet should be beautiful today, just as His were 2,000 years ago.

Another illustration of a change designed to introduce a new aspect of the truth is Paul's quotation of Psalm 68:18 in Ephesians 4:8. In the Psalm, we read that the ascended, victorious Messiah "received gifts for men." In Ephesians we learn that He turned around and "gave gifts unto men," thus passing on that which He had received.

4. A New Meaning Altogether

Sometimes a verse is quoted to mean something entirely different than its original meaning. For example, in Psalm 19:4, David described how the sun and stars bear universal witness to the Creator: "Their line is gone out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world." Paul quotes this in Romans 10:18, but he is not thinking of the stellar heavens, but rather of the worldwide proclamation of the gospel. By inspiration of the Spirit, the Apostle Paul found these words to be appropriate, so he borrowed them for the occasion.

Another illustration of this is found in Paul's use of Hosea 1:10: "And it shall come to pass, that in the place where it was said unto them, 'You are not my people', there it shall be said unto them, 'You are the sons of the living God.'" Here God is clearly talking about the restoration of Israel after their captivity. But when Paul quotes the verse in Romans 9:26, he is not talking about Israel at all. Rather he is speaking of the call of the Gentiles to a place of divine favor.

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E. W. Bullinger
(1837-1913)

One of the Apostle's most difficult quotations is taken from Deuteronomy 30:12-13. There we read: "It is not in heaven, that thou shouldest say, Who shall go up for us to heaven, and bring it unto us, that we may hear it, and do it?" Here God us speaking about the law, and specifically the commandment to "turn unto the Lord thy God with all thine heart and with all thy soul" (v. 10). He says that law is not hidden, distant, or inaccessible. A man doesn't have to go up to heaven or cross the sea to find it. It is near at hand and waiting to be obeyed (v. 14). Yet when the Apostle Paul quotes these verses in Romans 10:6-7, he changes and expands them and applies them—of all things—to the gospel, the very antithesis of the law. He says, in effect, "The gospel the very antithesis of the law. He says, in effect, "The gospel doesn't tell you to go to heaven to bring Christ down; He has already come down in incarnation. Neither does it tell you to descend into the grave to bring Christ up; He already came up in resurrection. It tells you to believe the truths of the incarnation and resurrection, with all that is involved in these truths, and thus be saved" (vv. 8-10).

When Habakkuk was waiting for an answer to his fretful questions, the Lord said, "The vision is yet for an appointed time, but at the end it shall speak and not lie...And the just shall live by his faith" (Habakkuk 2:3-4). The writer to the Hebrews reworded the verse to read, "For yet a little while, and he that shall come will come, and will not tarry. Now the just shall live by faith" (Hebrews 10:37-38). He found God's promise of the coming vision to be transferable to an even greater coming, the coming of the Lord Jesus Himself.

5. Giving the Gist of Prophecy

Sometimes the New Testament writers give quotations that do not appear in the Old Testament. For instance, Matthew writes, "He came and dwelt in a city called Nazareth, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophets, He shall be called a Nazarene" (Matthew 2:23).

We cannot find any prophecy that Jesus would be called a Nazarene. However, the town of Nazareth was treated with scorn by the rest of the people, as expressed in the proverb, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" (John 1:46). So the words "He shall be called a Nazarene" may mean that the Messiah would be treated with contempt and mockery. Thus Isaiah prophesied that He would be "despised and rejected of men" (Isa. 53:3). In another place, the Messiah describes Himself as "a worm, and not a man, a reproach of men, and despised by people" (Psalm 22:6). So while the prophets did not use the exact words found in Matthew 2:23, this was undeniably the gist of several of their prophecies.

6. A Quotation from the Septuagint

Oftentimes writers quote from the Septuagint, a Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament, and this accounts for some of the changes we find in the New Testament. Here is an example: The writer to the Hebrews quotes Psalm 40:6 in Hebrews 10:5. In the original language of the Old Testament (Hebrew), Psalm 40:6 reads, "Sacrifice and offering thou didst not desire; mine ears hast thou opened."

***“Sound
doctrine is,
literally,
healthy
doctrine;
therefore, to
learn, teach,
and preach
doctrine
brings
spiritual
wellness and
wholeness to
the believer.”***

Dr. Charles Ryrie
from *Ryrie's Practical Guide to
Communicating Bible
Doctrine*



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In the Greek translation used in the first century it reads, "Sacrifice and offering thou wouldest not; but a body hast thou prepared me" (40:6). The writer to the Hebrews, writing in Greek, quoted directly from the Greek Bible instead of translating from the Hebrew Bible.

This, of course, does not affect the inspiration of the passage. It is just that the Holy Spirit made the change, using the Septuagint translation. And there is no contradiction between the two. There is a close connection between the opened ear and the prepared body. God the Father opened the Messiah's ear to hear and do His will. That will involved the Messiah taking on a human body so that as man He could die for all men.

7. A Collage Of Passages

It often happens that a New Testament quotation is a collage of Old Testament verses. For example, Romans 3:10-18 has at least six different sources. Likewise, 2 Corinthians 6:16-18 is a mosaic from several sources, some of them very obscure.

Conclusion

What it all boils down to is that the Holy Spirit is sovereign, both as the Author and Interpreter of the Scriptures. He does as He pleases, in utter disregard for man's ideas as to what is legitimate. But what He pleases is always meaningful, purposeful and exactly right. Instead of causing us to doubt, the changes impel us to search for reasons, knowing that each change unfolds some precious gem of divine revelation.

Endnotes

1. E. W. Bullinger, *Companion Bible*, Appendix 107, The Principle Underlying the Quotations From the Old Testament Into The New, (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 1999), p. 152

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