

New Testament Use of the Old Testament

by Roger Nicole

THE NEW Testament contains an extraordinarily large number of Old Testament quotations. It is difficult to give an accurate figure since the variation in use ranges all the way from a distant allusion to a definite quotation introduced by an explicit formula stating the citation's source. As a result, the figures given by various authors often reflect a startling discrepancy.

1. RANGE OF OLD TESTAMENT REFERENCES

The present writer has counted 224 direct citations introduced by a definite formula indicating the writer purposed to quote. To these must be added seven cases where a second quotation is introduced by the conjunction "and," and 19 cases where a paraphrase or summary rather than a direct quotation follows the introductory formula. We may further note at least 45 instances where the similarity with certain Old Testament passages is so pronounced that, although no explicit indication is given that the New Testament author was referring to Old Testament Scripture, his intention to do so can scarcely be doubted. Thus a very conservative count discloses unquestionably at least 295 separate references to the Old Testament. These occupy some 352 verses of the New Testament, or more than 4.4 per cent. Therefore one verse in 22.5 of the New Testament is a quotation.

If clear allusions are taken into consideration, the figures are much higher: C. H. Toy lists 613 such instances, Wilhelm Dittmar goes as high as 1640, while Eugen Huehn indicates 4105 passages reminiscent of Old Testament Scripture. It can therefore be asserted, without exaggeration, that more than 10 per cent of the New Testament text is made up of citations or direct allusions to the Old Testament. The recorded words of Jesus disclose a similar percentage. Certain books like Revelation, Hebrews, Romans are well nigh saturated with Old Testament forms of language, allusions and quotations. Perusal of Nestle's edition of the Greek New Testament, in which the Old Testament material is printed in bold face type, will reveal at a glance the extent of this practice. These facts appear even more impressive when one remembers that in New Testament times the Old Testament was not as today duplicated by the million but could be obtained only in expensive handwritten copies.

If we limit ourselves to the specific quotations and direct allusions which form the basis of our previous reckoning, we shall note that 278 different Old Testament verses are cited in the New Testament: 94 from the Pentateuch, 99 from the Prophets, and 85 from the Writings. Out of the 22 books in the Hebrew reckoning of the Canon only six (Judges-Ruth, Song of Solomon, Ecclesiastes, Esther, Ezra-Nehemiah, Chronicles) are

not explicitly referred to. The more extensive lists of Dittmar and Huehn show passages reminiscent of all Old Testament books without exception.

It is to be noted that the whole New Testament contains not even one explicit citation of any of the Old Testament Apocrypha which are considered as canonical by the Roman Catholic Church. This omission can scarcely be viewed as accidental.

2. AUTHORITY OF OLD TESTAMENT REFERENCES

From beginning to end, the New Testament authors ascribe unqualified authority to Old Testament Scripture. Whenever advanced, a quotation is viewed as normative. Nowhere do we find a tendency to question, argue, or repudiate the truth of any Scripture utterance. Passages sometimes alleged to prove that the Lord and his apostles challenged at times the authority of the Old Testament, when carefully examined, turn out to bolster rather than to impair the evidence for their acceptance of Scripture as the Word of God. In Matthew 5:21-43 and 19:3-9, our Lord, far from setting aside the commandments of the Old Testament, really engages in a searching analysis of the spiritual meaning and original intent of the divine precept, and from this vantage point he applies it in a deeper and broader way than had been done before him. In some passages in which comparison is made between the revelation of the Old Testament and that of the New (John 1:17; 2 Corinthians 3:6; Galatians 3:19ff.; Hebrews 1:1, 2, and so forth), the superior glory of the New Testament is emphasized, not as in conflict with the Old, but as the perfect fulfillment of a revelation still incomplete, yet sanctioned by divine authority.

It is noteworthy that the New Testament writers and the Lord Jesus himself did not hesitate on occasion to base their whole argumentation upon one single word of Old Testament Scripture (Matthew 2:15; 4:10; 13:35; 22:44; Mark 12:36; Luke 4:8; 20:42, 43; John 8:17; 10:34; 19:37; Acts 23:5; Romans 4:3, 9, 23; 15:9-12; 1 Corinthians 6:16; Galatians 3:8, 10, 13; Hebrews 1:7; 2:12; 3:13; 4:7; 12:26), or even on the grammatical form of one word (Galatians 3:16).

Of special interest are the formulas by which the New Testament writers introduce their quotations. In a particularly significant way these formulas reflect their view of the Old Testament Scriptures, since they do not manifest any design to set forth a doctrine of Scripture, but are rather the instinctive expression of their approach to the sacred writings.

The formulas emphasize strongly the divine origin of the Old Testament, and commonly (at least 56 times) refer to God as the author. In a number of passages God is represented as the speaker when the quotation is not a saying of God recorded as such in the Old Testament, but the word of Scripture itself, in fact, at times a word addressed to God by man (Matthew 19:5; Acts 4:25; 13:35; Hebrews 1:5-8, 13; 3:7; 4:4). These "can be treated as a declaration of God's only on the hypothesis that all Scripture is a declaration of God's" (B. B. Warfield, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible*, p. 143).

Often passages of the Old Testament are simply attributed to the Scripture, which is thus personified as speaking (John 7:38, 42; 15:25; 19:37; Romans 4:3; 7:7; 9:17; 10:11; 11:2; 1 Corinthians 14:24; 2 Corinthians 6:2; Galatians 3:8; 4:30; 1 Timothy 5:18; James 2:23; 4:5). In Romans 9:17 and Galatians 3:8 the identification between the text of Scripture and God as speaking is carried so far that the actions of God are actually ascribed to Scripture, which is represented as speaking to Pharaoh and as foreseeing justification by faith. Warfield urges that “These acts could be attributed to Scripture only as the result of such a habitual identification, in the mind of the writer, of the text of Scripture with God as speaking that it became natural to use the term ‘Scripture says,’ when what was really intended was ‘God, as recorded in Scripture, said’ “ (*ibid.*, pp. 299 f.).

The collaboration of man in the writing of Scripture is also emphasized. The names of Moses, David, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Daniel, Joel and Hosea appear in the formulas of quotation. It is noteworthy that, in the majority of the cases where the human author is named, reference is made not to a personal statement recorded in Scripture but to an utterance of God, which the writer was commissioned to transmit as such. In a number of passages both the divine and the human authorship appear side by side.

“... which was spoken by the Lord through, the prophet...” (Matthew 1:22). “David himself said in the Holy Spirit.” (Mark 12:36; cf. Matthew 22:43). “... the Holy Spirit spake before by the mouth of David” (Acts 1:16; cf. 4:25). “Well spake the Holy Spirit through Isaiah the prophet...” (Acts 28:25). “He saith also in Hosea...” (Romans 9:25).

These passages supply clear evidence that the divine superintendence was not viewed as obliterating the human agency and characteristics of the writers, but rather, that God secured a perfectly adequate presentation of the truth through the responsible and personal agency of the men he called and prepared for this sacred task.

“It is written” is one of the frequent formulas of introduction, the one, in fact, which our Lord used three times in his temptation (Matthew 4:4, 7, 10). This expression does not connote merely that an appeal is made to the written text of Scripture but, as Warfield so aptly has said, “The simple adduction in this solemn and decisive manner of a written authority carries with it the implication that the appeal is made to the indefectible authority of the Scriptures of God, which in all their parts and in every one of their declarations are clothed with the authority of God Himself” (*ibid.*, p. 240).

The use of the terms “law” (John 10:34; 15:25; Romans 3:19; 1 Corinthians 14:21), or “prophets” (Matthew 13:35), where reference is made to passages belonging, strictly speaking, to other parts of the Hebrew Canon, indicates that the New Testament writers viewed the whole Old Testament Scripture as having legal authority and prophetic character.

In their formulas of quotation the New Testament writers give expression to their conviction as to the eternal contemporaneity of Scripture. This is manifest in particular

in the many (41) instances where the introductory verb is in the present: “He says,” and not “he said.” This is reinforced by the use of the pronouns “we,” “you,” in connection with ancient sayings: “That which was spoken unto you by God” (Matthew 22:31); “The Holy Spirit also beareth witness to us” (Hebrews 10:15; cf. also Matthew 15:7; Mark 7:6; 12:19; Acts 4:11; 13:47; Hebrews 12:5). This implication gains explicit statement in Romans 15:4: “Whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning” (cf. also Romans 4:23, 24; 1 Corinthians 9:10; 10:11).

The New Testament writers used quotations in their sermons, in their histories, in their letters, in their prayers. They used them when addressing Jews or Gentiles, churches or individuals, friends or antagonists, new converts or seasoned Christians. They used them for argumentation, for illustration, for instruction, for documentation, for prophecy, for reproof. They used them in times of stress and in hours of mature thinking, in liberty and in prison, at home and abroad. Everywhere and always they were ready to refer to the impregnable authority of Scripture.

Jesus Christ himself provides a most arresting example in this respect. At the very threshold of his public ministry, our Lord, in his dramatic victory over Satan’s threefold onslaught, rested his whole defense on the authority of three passages of Scripture. He quoted the Old Testament in support of his teaching to the crowds; he quoted it in his discussions with antagonistic Jews; he quoted it in answer to questions both captious and sincere; he quoted it in instructing the disciples who would have readily accepted his teaching on his own authority; he referred to it in his prayers, when alone in the presence of the Father; he quoted it on the cross, when his sufferings could easily have drawn his attention elsewhere; he quoted it in his resurrection glory, when any limitation, real or alleged, of the days of his flesh was clearly superseded. Whatever may be the differences between the pictures of Jesus drawn by the four Gospels, they certainly agree in their representation of our Lord’s attitude toward the Old Testament: one of constant use and of unquestioning endorsement of its authority.

3. ACCURACY OF OLD TESTAMENT REFERENCES

A difficulty comes to the fore, however, when the New Testament citations are carefully compared with the original Old Testament texts. In their quotations the New Testament writers, it would appear, use considerable freedom, touching both the letter and the meaning of the Old Testament passages.

Opponents of verbal inspiration repeatedly have brought forward this objection mainly in two forms:

1. The New Testament writers, not having taken care to quote in absolute agreement with the original text of the Old Testament, it is urged, cannot have held the doctrine of plenary inspiration. Otherwise they would have shown greater respect for the letter of Scripture.

2. The New Testament writers, in quoting the Old “inaccurately” as to its letter, or “improperly” as to its sense, or both, cannot have been directed to do so by the Spirit of God.

The first argument impugns mainly the inspiration of the Old Testament, the second mainly that of the New. Both will be met if it can be shown that the New Testament method of quotation is entirely proper and consistent with the highest regard for the texts cited. In the present treatment it is possible only to delineate the main principles involved, without showing their application to particular cases. We shall consider first, principles involved in the solution of difficulties arising from the New Testament manner of quoting, after which brief comments will be offered regarding the methods of interpretation exhibited by the New Testament authors in their application of Old Testament passages.

Form of Quotation

It must be recognized that each of the following principles does not find application in every case, but the writer is of the opinion that, singly or in combination, as the case may be, they provide a very satisfactory explanation of apparent discrepancies in almost all cases, and a possible solution in all cases.

1. The New Testament writers had to translate their quotations. They wrote in Greek and their source of quotations was in Hebrew. They needed therefore either to translate for themselves or to use existing translations. Now no translation can give a completely adequate and coextensive rendering of the original. A certain measure of change is inevitable, even when one is quoting by divine inspiration.

When the New Testament writers wrote, there was one Greek version of the Old Testament, the LXX. It was widespread, well known, and respected in spite of some obvious defects when appraised from the standpoint of modern scholarship. In most cases, it was a fair translation of the Hebrew text, and possessed distinctive literary qualities. Its position in the ancient world is comparable to that of the Authorized Version before the Revised was published. A conscientious scholar writing nowadays in a certain language will use for his quotations from foreign sources the translations which his readers generally use. He will not attempt to correct or change them unless some mistake bears directly on his point. When slight errors or mistranslations occur, generally he will neither discuss them, for in so doing he would tend to direct the reader’s attention away from his point, nor correct them without giving notice, for this might tend to arouse the reader’s suspicion. This practice is followed by many preachers and writers who use the Authorized Version in English or Luther’s translation in German. They are often well aware that some verses rather inadequately render the Hebrew or the Greek, but no blame can be laid on them as long as they base no argument on what is mistaken in the translation. Similarly, the writers of the New Testament could use the LXX, the only Greek version then existing, in spite of its occasional inaccuracy, and even quote passages which were somewhat inaccurately translated. To take advantage of its errors, however, would have been inadmissible. We

do not find any example of a New Testament deduction or application logically inferred from the Septuagint and which cannot be maintained on the basis of the Hebrew text.

Some of the recently discovered Dead Sea scrolls at times provide the Hebrew text which underlay the LXX where it differs from the Massoretic text. This is the case, for instance, in Isaiah 53:11, where the scroll Isaiah A reads “He shall see light,” thus supporting the LXX rendering. While great caution is still necessary in any textual emendation of the Massoretic text, the possibility that in some divergent translations the LXX occasionally represents the primitive Hebrew original may be held to have received some support from these discoveries. In such cases, of course, it would not only have been proper for the New Testament writers to quote from the LXX, but this would actually have been preferable.

The use of the LXX in quoting does not indicate that the New Testament writers have thought of this version as inspired in itself. *A fortiori* they did not confer inspiration upon the translation of the passages they have used. Samuel Davidson was laboring under a regrettable confusion when he wrote: “It will ever remain inexplicable by the supporters of verbal inspiration that the words of the LXX became literally inspired as soon as they were taken from that version and transferred to the New Testament pages” (*Sacred Hermeneutics*, Edinburgh, Clark, 1843, p. 515). This statement misconstrues verbal inspiration. When the New Testament authors appealed to Scripture as the Word of God, it is not claimed that they viewed anything but the original communication as vested in full with divine inerrancy. Yet their willingness to make use of the LXX, in spite of its occasional defects, teaches the important lesson that the basic message which God purposed to deliver can be conveyed even through a translation, and that appeal can be made to a version insofar as it agrees with the original. It would be precarious, however, to rest an argument on any part of the LXX quotations which appears not to be conformed to the Hebrew original nor to the point of the New Testament writers, for the mere fact that the quotation was adduced in this fashion was not meant as a divine sanction upon incidental departures from the autographs. In the quotations made from the LXX we have indeed God’s seal of approval upon the contents of the Old Testament passage, but the form of the citation is affected by the language and conditions of those to whom the New Testament was first addressed. Such use of the LXX was not a case of objectionable accommodation. That the inspired Word is accommodated to humanity is an obvious fact: it is written in human languages, uses human comparisons, its parts are conditioned by the circumstances of those to whom they were at first destined, and so forth. But we cannot admit of an accommodation in which inspired writers would give formal assent to error. In their use of the LXX, however, the New Testament authors were so far from actual endorsement of error that the best scholars of all times have used similar methods in adducing translated quotations, as noted above.

The frequent use of the LXX, it must also be noted, did not impose upon the New Testament authors the obligation to quote always in accordance with this version. Whenever they wanted to emphasize an idea which was insufficiently or inadequately rendered in the LXX, they may have retranslated in whole or in part the passage in question. In certain cases the reason for their introduction of changes may remain

unknown to us, but we are not on that account in a position to say either that a careful reproduction of the LXX is illegitimate or that a modification of that text is unjustifiable.

2. The New Testament writers did not have the same rules for quotations as are nowadays enforced in works of a scientific character. In particular, they did not have any punctuation signs which are so important in modern usage.

a. They did not have any quotation marks, and thus it is not always possible to ascertain the exact beginning, or the real extent of quotations. They were not obliged to start actual citations immediately after an introductory formula, nor have we a right to affirm that their quotations do not end until every resemblance with the Old Testament text disappears. In certain cases they may very well have made shorter citations than is generally believed, and also may have added developments of their own, retaining some words taken from the original source but not actually intended as part of a quotation. Criticism of such passages if they were not intended as actual citations is manifestly unfair.

b. They did not have any ellipsis marks. Thus special attention is not drawn to the numerous omissions they made. These ellipses, however, are not to be considered as illegitimate on that account.

c. They did not have any brackets to indicate editorial comments introduced in the quotation. Thus we should not be surprised to find intentional additions, sometimes merely of one word, sometimes more extended (cf. Ephesians 6:2).

d. They did not have any footnote references by which to differentiate quotations from various sources. Sometimes we find a mixture of passages of analogous content or wording, but we are not justified on that account in charging the writers with mishandling or misusing the Old Testament.

We readily recognize that the New Testament writers fell into these patterns, whose legitimacy is universally granted, much more than a present-day author would. Modern punctuation rules make such practices tiresome and awkward. One tries nowadays to omit, insert or modify as little as possible in quotations, in order to avoid the complexity of repeated quotation marks, ellipsis marks, brackets, and so forth. Yet this common present usage is by no means a standard by which to judge the ancient writers.

3. The New Testament writers sometimes paraphrased their quotations.

a. Under this heading we might first mention certain cases where we find a free translation of the Hebrew rather than a real paraphrase. Such a procedure certainly needs no justification, since a free translation sometimes renders the sense and impression of the original better than a more literal one.

b. Slight modifications, such as a change of pronouns, a substitution of a noun for a pronoun or vice versa, transformations in the person, the tense, the mood or the voice

of verbs, are sometimes introduced in order to better suit the connection in the New Testament. These paraphrases are perhaps the most obviously legitimate of all.

c. There are cases in which the New Testament writers obviously forsake the actual tenor of the Old Testament passage in order to manifest more clearly in what sense they were construing it. In this they are quite in agreement with the best modern usage, as represented, for example, in W.G. Campbell, *A Form Book for Thesis Writing* (New York, Houghton Mifflin 1939): “A careful paraphrase that does complete justice to the source is preferable to a long quotation” (p. 15).

d. In certain cases the New Testament writers do not refer to a single passage, but rather summarize the general teaching of the canonical books on certain subjects in phrasing appropriate to the New Testament, although as to the essential thought they express indebtedness to, or agreement with, the Old Testament. This method of referring to the Old Testament teachings is obviously legitimate. The following passages might be viewed as examples of “quotations of substance,” as Franklin Johnson calls them in his able treatise on *The Quotations of the New Testament from the Old Considered in the Light of General Literature* (London, Baptist Tract and Book Society, 1896): Matthew 2:23; 5:31, 33; 12:3, 5; 19:7; 22:24; 24:15; 26:24, 54, 56; Mark 2:25; 9:12, 13; 10:4; 12:19; 14:21, 49; Luke 2:22; 6:3; 11:49; 18:31; 20:28; 21:22; 24:27, 32, 44-46; John 1:45; 5:39, 46; 7:38, 42; 8:17; 17:12; 19:7, 28; 20:9; Acts 1:16; 3:18; 7:51; 13:22, 29; 17:2, 3; Romans 3:10; 1 Corinthians 2:9; 14:34; 15:3, 4, 25-27; 2 Corinthians 4:6; Galatians 3:22; 4:22; Ephesians 5:14; James 4:5; 2 Peter 3:12, 13.

e. Finally, we must consider the possibility that the writers of the New Testament, writing or speaking for people well acquainted with the Old, may in certain cases have intended simply to refer their readers or hearers to a well-known passage of Scripture. Then, in order to suggest it to their memory they may have accurately cited therefrom some expressions, which they then placed in a general frame different from that of the original. At times the actual words quoted may have been intended merely or primarily to indicate the location of a passage, as the general context of the Old Testament in which the stipulated truth could be found, rather than as an express citation.

4. The New Testament writers often simply alluded to Old Testament passages without intending to quote them. It was quite natural that people nurtured and steeped in the oracles of God should instinctively use forms of language and turns of thought reminiscent of Old Testament Scripture.

The speakers or writers, in such cases, do not profess to give forth the precise words and meaning of former revelations; their thoughts and language merely derived from these the form and direction, which by a kind of sacred instinct they took; and it does not matter for any purpose, for which the inspired oracles were given, whether the portions thus appropriated might or might not be very closely followed, and used in

connections somewhat different from those in which they originally stood (Patrick Fairbairn, *Hermeneutical Manual*, Edinburgh, T. & T. Clark, 1858, p. 355).

Only in cases where the New Testament authors definitely manifest the intention of citing by the use of a formula of introduction can we require any strong degree of conformity.

With respect to what might be viewed as formulas of introduction, the following remarks may be made:

a. Only a quotation which immediately follows such a formula is to be certainly considered as a formal citation. In cases of successive quotations “and again” always introduces an actual citation (Romans 15:11; 1 Corinthians 3:20; Hebrews 1:5; 2:13; 10:30), but in the case of “and” or “but,” or of successive quotations without any intervening link, criticisms are quite precarious, since no formal quotation may be intended.

b. Even when a definite formula points directly to an Old Testament passage, we may not expect strict adherence to the letter of the source when this quotation is recorded in indirect rather than in direct discourse. In such cases we often find remarkable verbal accuracy, but we cannot criticize departure from the original when the very form of the sentence so naturally allows for it.

c. When what may appear to be a citation is introduced by a form of the verbs “say” or “speak,” it is not always certain that the writer actually intended to quote. Rather, the possibility must at times be taken into consideration that we are facing an informal reference to some saying recorded in Scripture. Perhaps some of the clearest examples along this line may be found in the discourse of Stephen in Acts 7, in which free references are made to sayings of God, of Moses, and of the Jews, woven in the survey of covenant history presented by the first martyr. In Acts 7:26, a declaration of Moses is mentioned which is not found at all in the Old Testament and obviously was not intended as an actual quotation. In all cases of this type it must certainly be acknowledged that a considerable measure of freedom is legitimate and that one could scarcely expect here the exactness looked for in actual citations. The following passages may belong to this category: Matthew 2:23; 15:4; 22:32; 24:15; Mark 12:26; Acts 3:25; 7:3, 5-7, 26-28, 32-35, 40; 13:22; Romans 9:15; 11:4; 2 Corinthians 4:6; Galatians 3:8; Hebrews 1:5, 13; 6:14; 8:5; 10:30; 12:21, 26; 13:5; James 2:11; 1 Peter 3:6; Jude 1:14.

5. The New Testament authors sometimes recorded quotations made by others. Not all quotations in the New Testament are introduced by the writers themselves for the purpose of illustrating their narrative or bolstering their argument. Sometimes they record quotations made by the personalities who appear in the history, as by Jesus, Paul, Peter, James, Stephen, the Jews, and Satan. In two cases we have a record of a reading --

Luke 4:18, 19 and Acts 8:32, 33. The New Testament writers had at their disposal at least three legitimate methods of recording such quotations:

- a. They could translate them directly from the original text;
- b. They could use the existing Septuagint and quote according to this version, as suggested earlier;
- c. They could translate directly from the form used by the person quoting, often presumably an Aramaic translation of the Hebrew text. A few words are needed here only with reference to the last possibility. Of course, we expect the persons quoting, at least those who were inspired (Jesus, Paul, Peter, James and probably Stephen), to quote accurately, so that in these cases no divergence from the original can be explained by the mere fact that somebody else's quotation is recorded. Since, however, probably most of these quotations were originally made in Aramaic according to a current oral or written Aramaic translation, certain discrepancies between the Old Testament and the New, which cannot be accounted for on the basis of the Septuagint, may have their true explanation in the use of this probable Aramaic version.

6. Other principles whose application must be limited. Under this heading we need to consider briefly three additional principles of explanation of apparent discrepancies between the text of the Old Testament and that of the New. These principles, in the writer's opinion, may well be at times the ground of a legitimate explanation, but they ought to be handled with utmost discrimination, lest the assured present authority of Scripture appear to be placed in jeopardy.

- a. The texts may have been altered in the process of transmission. We have ample reasons to be grateful for the marvelous state of conservation of the text of Scripture: the New Testament possesses a degree of certainty no doubt unequalled by any other ancient text transmitted to us by manuscript; the Hebrew Old Testament has been the object of the loving and painstaking watchcare of the Jews and the accuracy of the Massoretic text has been confirmed in a striking way by the Dead Sea scrolls. Nevertheless, it is conceivable that at times an early mistake in copying may have vitiated our texts, thereby introducing a discrepancy which was not present in the autographs. Still, it would be very injudicious to indulge in unrestrained corrections of the texts on the ground of the quotations, and the present writer has not found any instance in the New Testament where such a correction might appear as the only possible legitimate explanation of a quotation difficulty.

- b. In the quotations, as well as in other inspired texts, the personality of the writers has been respected. It is an unsearchable mystery that the Holy Spirit could inspire the sacred writings so as to communicate his inerrancy to their very words and, at the same time, respect the freedom and personality of the writers so that we might easily recognize their style and their characteristics. The same thing is true of the quotations, for there also we may discern the individuality of the writers in their use

of them, in the sources quoted, and in the method of quoting. There is, however, a dangerous distortion of this principle in the appeal made by some to slips of memory in order to explain certain difficulties in the quotations. Now the very idea of a slip of memory undermines seriously the whole structure of inerrancy and is therefore out of keeping with a consistent upholding of plenary verbal inspiration. In fact, as C. H. Toy himself recognized -- and he cannot easily be charged with undue bias in favor of the conservative view of Scripture I -- so many quotations show verbal agreement with the LXX "that we must suppose either that they were made from a written text, or, if not, that the memory of the writers was very accurate" (*Quotations in the New Testament*, p. xx).

c. The Spirit of God was free to modify the expressions that he inspired in the Old Testament. While this is no doubt true with respect to the interpretation of Old Testament passages and with respect to allusions or distant references, the statement should not be made too glibly with respect to quotations, and some conservative writers may have been too prone to advocate this approach when other less precarious solutions might be advanced. Nevertheless, in this connection, one may well give assent to the judgment of Patrick Fairbairn:

Even in those cases in which, for anything we can see, a closer translation would have served equally well the purpose of the writer, it may have been worthy of the inspiring Spirit, and perfectly consistent with the fullest inspiration of the original Scriptures, that the sense should have been given in a free current translation; for the principle was thereby sanctioned of a rational freedom in the handling of Scripture, as opposed to the rigid formalism and superstitious regard to the letter, which prevailed among the Rabbinical Jews.... The stress occasionally laid in the New Testament upon particular words in passages of the Old... sufficiently proves what a value attaches to the very form of the Divine communication, and how necessary it is to connect the element of inspiration with the written record as it stands. It shows that God's words are pure words, and that, if fairly interpreted, they cannot be too closely pressed. But in other cases, when nothing depended upon a rigid adherence to the letter, the practice of the sacred writers, not scrupulously to stickle about this, but to give prominence simply to the substance of the revelation, is fraught also with an important lesson; since it teaches us, that the letter is valuable only for the truth couched in it, and that the one is no further to be prized and contended for, than may be required for the exhibition of the other (*op. cit.*, pp. 413 f.).

Meaning of the Old Testament Passages

It has been urged at times that the New Testament writers have flouted the proper laws of hermeneutics, have been guilty of artificial and rabbinical exegesis, and thus have repeatedly distorted the meaning of the Old Testament passages which they quote.

1. This type of objection may appear at first more weighty than those which affect merely the wording of the quotations, since an alleged discrepancy in meaning is more grievous than a mere divergence of form. Yet the problems raised in this area are probably less embarrassing to the advocates of plenary inspiration, since a verbal comparison is largely a matter of plain fact, while the assessment of the full extent of the meaning of a passage calls for the exercise of human individual judgment and fallible opinion. Few Christians, it is hoped, will have the presumption of setting forth their own interpretation as normative, when it runs directly counter to that of the Lord Jesus or of his apostles.

2. There is obviously a deep underlying relationship between the Old Testament and the New: one purpose pervades the whole Bible and also the various phases of human history, more especially of Israel. Thus the Old Testament can and must be considered, even in its historical narratives, as a source of prefigurements and of prophecies. It has been widely acknowledged that, in spite of certain difficult passages, the New Testament interpretation of the Old manifests a strikingly illuminating understanding of Old Testament Scripture. C. H. Dodd, although not a defender of verbal inspiration, could write: "In general... the writers of the New Testament, in making use of passages from the Old Testament, remain true to the main intention of their writers" (*According to the Scriptures*, London, Nisbet, 1952, p. 130). And again: "We have before us a considerable intellectual feat. The various scriptures are acutely interpreted along lines already discernible within the Old Testament canon itself or in pre-Christian Judaism -- in many cases, I believe, lines which start from their first, historical, intention -- and these lines are carried forward to fresh results" (*ibid.* , p. 109).

3. There are certain Old Testament passages in which the connection with the New Testament is so clear that there can hardly be doubt about their applicability and about the fact that the Old Testament writers foresaw some events or some principles of the new covenant. This is not necessary in every case, however, and the Spirit of God may very well have inspired expressions which potentially transcended the thoughts of the sacred writers and of those to whom they addressed themselves. This certainly occurred in the case of Caiaphas (John 11:49-52), and there is no ground to deny the possibility of such a process in the inspiration of the Old Testament Scripture.

4. While the doctrine of verbal inspiration requires that we should accept any New Testament interpretation of an Old Testament text as legitimate, it does not require that such interpretation be necessarily viewed as exclusive or exhaustive of the full Old Testament meaning. In many cases the New Testament makes a particular application of principles stated in the Old, whose fulfillment is accomplished in more than a single event. Thus certain Old Testament prophecies may have conveyed to the original hearers a meaning more restricted than the perspective opened in the New Testament pages. The original understanding was a legitimate interpretation of the prophecy, yet one which does not preclude the propriety of the larger vistas, authoritatively revealed in the New Testament.

5. Not all the passages quoted in the New Testament are necessarily to be considered as definite prophecies, but many are cited as simply characterizing in a striking way the New Testament situation. At times the New Testament writers may have simply used Old Testament language without intending to imply that there is a distinct relationship of prophecy to fulfillment, or of antitype to type.

6. Writing about this subject, C. H. Toy makes a remark which he apparently intends only with respect to apostolic times, but which may well be viewed as having more general reference: "The deeper the reverence for the departed Lord and for the divine word, the greater the disposition to find him everywhere" (*op. cit.*, p. xxv).

Conservatives hope that, judged by this standard, they will not be found to have less reverence for their Lord and for the divine Word than the New Testament writers!

In conclusion, one could wish to quote at length some remarks of B. B. Warfield (*op. cit.*, pp. 218-220), which for the sake of brevity we shall be constrained to summarize here. The student of Scripture is not bound to provide the solution of all the difficulties which he encounters in the Bible. It is better to leave matters unharmonized than to have recourse to strained or artificial exegesis. Even when no solution of a difficulty is offered, we are not thereby driven to assume that the problem is insoluble.

Every unharmonized passage remains a case of difficult harmony and does not pass into the category of objections to plenary inspiration. It can pass into the category of objections only if we are prepared to affirm that we clearly see that it is, on any conceivable hypothesis of its meaning, clearly inconsistent with the Biblical doctrine of inspiration. In that case we would no doubt need to give up the Biblical doctrine of inspiration; but with it we must also give up our confidence in the Biblical writers as teachers of doctrine" (*ibid.*, p. 220).

It has been the writer's privilege to devote substantial time to the consideration of all quotations of the Old Testament in the New. This study has led him to the conclusion that the principles mentioned above can provide in every case a possible explanation of the difficulties at hand in perfect harmony with the doctrine of the inerrancy of Scripture. There is no claim here that all the difficulties are readily dispelled, or that we are in possession of the final solution of every problem. Nevertheless, possible if not plausible explanations are at hand in every case known to the present writer. It is therefore with some confidence that this presentation is made. In fact, the quotations, which are often spoken of as raising one of the major difficulties against the view of plenary inspiration, upon examination turn out to be a confirmation of this doctrine rather than an invalidation of it. To this concurs the judgment of men who can surely be quoted as impartial witnesses, in statements such as the following, made precisely with reference to Old Testament quotations in the New:

We know, from the general tone of the New Testament, that it regards the Old Testament, as all the Jews then did, as the revealed and inspired word of God, and clothed with his authority (C. H. Toy, *op. cit.*, p. xxx).

Our authors view the words of the Old Testament as immediate words of God, and introduce them explicitly as such, even those which are not in the least related as sayings of God. They see nothing in the sacred book, which is merely the word of the human authors and not at the same time the very word of God Himself. In everything that stands “written,” God Himself is speaking to them (R. Rothe, *Zur Dogmatik*, Gotha, Perthes, 1869, pp. 177 f.).

In quoting the Old Testament, the New Testament writers proceed consistently from the presupposition that they have Holy Scripture in hand.... The actual author is God or the Holy Spirit, and both, as also frequently the *graphe*, are represented as speaking either directly or through the Old Testament writers (E. Huehn, *Die Alttestamentlichen Citate... im Neuen Testament*, Tübingen, Mohr, 1900, p. 272).

Such statements, coming as they are from the pen of men who were not at all inclined to favor the conservative approach to the Scripture, are no doubt more impressive than anything a conservative scholar could say. They may be allowed to stand at the end of this study as expressing in a striking way the writer’s own conclusions on the subject.

Source: <http://www.bible-researcher.com/nicole.html>