

Intellectual Honesty:

Interpreting the Bible with the Conscience

Richard Murray

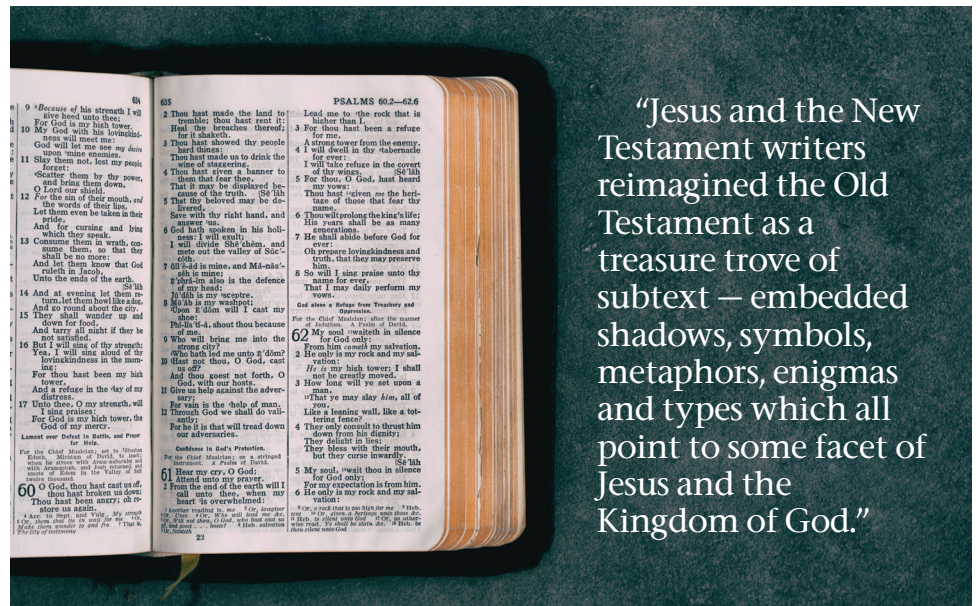
If nothing else, Law School taught me to be intellectually honest about the text of the law — what the text might mean, what it could mean, what it shouldn't mean, and how its various applications could be evolved by engaging it as an open rather than a closed text. The law allows for what is beautifully termed “the enlightened conscience of the jury” to be the ultimate “fact-finding” determiner of whether the spirit of the law has been broken in any given situation.

I practiced law for four years before I encountered Christ. Right after that, in 1990, I left my practice for two years and attended Regent University to obtain a Master's Degree in Practical Theology. Sometimes I asked questions that got me on a professor's bad side.

One such incident occurred during my first week in my hermeneutics class. I was excited because I was sure this class would show me the best way to read the Scripture, particularly the Old Testament. Here the professor said we would learn rules that would keep us from ever quoting passages out of their historical or grammatical context.

There was no place allowed for our conscience to be our illuminative guide in any of these concentered rules. If Scripture, by the surface letter, portrayed God as a child-drowning, infant-burning, throat-slitting, plague-sending, people-smiting killer, then our conscience couldn't dare say otherwise. I thought to myself, “I came to seminary to learn this?”

before entering seminary and had noticed a very obvious thing. When Jesus, Paul, and most of the other New Testament writers, quoted the Old Testament, they broke every rule this professor was advocating. They all routinely took Old Testament Scripture out of its original historical context, out of its original grammatical context, and out of its surface



“Jesus and the New Testament writers reimagined the Old Testament as a treasure trove of subtext — embedded shadows, symbols, metaphors, enigmas and types which all point to some facet of Jesus and the Kingdom of God.”

ILLUMINATING SPIRITUAL DYNAMICS

The more I learned these clinically complex rules, the more disturbed I became. I had studied the Bible with fresh eyes for the previous 15 months

meaning context. Instead, they freely reinterpreted the Old Testament passage altogether whenever they felt inspired to do so. This blew my mind. Below were some of the examples I raised to my professor.

Old Testament “historical characters” were depersonalized to represent New Testament spiritual dynamics. In Galatians 4:21-31, the characters of Sarah and Hagar, along with Isaac and Ishmael, were transfigured by Paul to instead represent two distinct and contrasting covenants. Hagar and Ishmael were translated into the Old Covenant of the law, while Sarah and Isaac were transformed into the New Covenant of the Spirit.

Similarly, entire “historical narratives” were reinterpreted to illuminate our own current spiritual journey as New Covenant Christians (1 Corinthians 10:1-11). Here, the Israelite’s *physical* walk through the waters of the Red Sea in the Old Testament is transfigured into a type of our *spiritual* walk into being baptized into Christ. Elsewhere, in the book of Hebrews, Israel’s Old Testament journey into the Promised land became symbolic of a New Testament believer’s journey to enter into the spiritual and relational rest of God where we cease from our own works and enter into his (Hebrews 4:1-11).

TRANSFIGURING LITERAL MEANING

Old Testament ceremonial “objects” were transfigured to represent some aspect of Jesus and his Kingdom of light. Jesus frequently allegorized objects in the Old Testament. Using key imagery from Old Testament passages which were *only* seen as literal, he would then transpose

their literal meaning into an allegorical application toward himself. He referred to himself as the Temple of God (John 2:19-22), the true manna from heaven (John 6:50), Jacob’s supernatural ladder (John 1:51), the sign of Jonah (Matthew 12:38-40), the I AM burning bush of Exodus 3 (John 8:58) and the brazen Serpent in the wilderness who was lifted up on a pole to provide healing for all (John 3:14-15).

Let’s look at some other examples from the mind of Paul. Literal foreskin-circumcision in the Old Testament transforms into spiritual heart-circumcision in the New Testament (Romans 2:29). The Law written on literal-

The New Testament fills in gaping holes about God’s nature that the Old Testament left us.

tablets of stone in the Old Testament is transposed into the Law of Christ’s love written on the spiritual-tablets of our heart in the New Testament (2 Corinthians 3:3-9). The literal-temple in the Old Testament is transformed into the spiritual temple of our living bodies in the New Testament (1 Corinthians 3:16-17). In fact, Hebrews 9 and 10 transfigures all the Temple objects, the Temple ceremonies, and even the law itself, into allegorical shadows of a greater inner dynamic to be found now only in Christ. Paul confirms this in Colossians 2:17 when he likewise translates the Old

Testament’s holy days, its dietary laws and its religious festivals into shadows of spiritual realities found in Christ. And the list goes on and on.

The point is that all these New Testament applications listed above were all out of context, both grammatically and historically. In short, Jesus, Paul, and the other New Testament writers would have flunked my (and most any other) seminary class on hermeneutics. That should give us pause.

Jesus and the New Testament writers reimagined the Old Testament as a treasure trove of subtext – embedded shadows, symbols, metaphors, enigmas

and types which all point to some facet of Jesus and the Kingdom of God. This is the type of Christ-centered, illuminated interpretation in

which the Old Testament text means *more* or *other* than what it is grammatically and contextually saying.

The New Testament fills in the gaping holes in knowledge about God’s nature that the Old Testament left us. And when these gaps are filled, the semantic content of the Old Testament changes into Christological manna.

And by the way, I never did get an answer from my seminary professor. □

Richard Murray is a lawyer based in Dalton, Georgia who applies his expert mind to theological conundrums.