

Inner-Biblical Allusion

by G. Brooke Lester

INTRODUCTION TO ALLUSION

The observation that some biblical texts appear to rely on other biblical texts has long fascinated critical readers of the Bible, especially since the onset of the Enlightenment period with its interest in the human authors of the Bible and their varying historical contexts and concerns. Over time, biblical scholarship has made ever more sophisticated distinctions between kinds of textual interdependence, and between the different scholarly goals for making these distinctions. The literary trope of “allusion” has emerged as a rhetorical literary strategy commanding special attention in biblical studies. At the same time, anyone seeking an entrée into the scholarship is likely to be confused by the methodological disorder from which the topic is still emerging. One first wishes to distinguish the trope “allusion” from such closely related concepts as “influence” and “intertextuality.” Attending then to scholarship on inner-biblical allusion, one can then discern an emerging trend from an emphasis on historical criticism to a focus on allusive poetics, and an accompanying trend from isolation towards deeper engagement with secular literary criticism on allusion.

In any act of reading, meaning can be said to “unfold” between the text and the reader. When an author alludes, she crafts her words so as to *intentionally evoke another text with which her reader will be acquainted*. In this way, the connotations of the *evoked* text interact with the *alluding* text in the meanings unfolding for the reader. The author will have some desired set of allusive patternings that she seeks to produce in the reader, but the range of these allusive patternings is ultimately unpredictable. Some articles on allusion that have gained traction among biblical scholars include “Allusion” (Miner 1965; 1994), “The Poetics of Literary Allusion” (Ben-Porat 1976), and “On Alluding” (Perri 1978).

To varying degrees, biblical scholars will seek to distinguish “allusion” from “influence” (the effects that older texts may have on later texts, regardless of an author’s intent to evoke those older texts) and from “intertextuality” (sometimes an umbrella term for textual interdependence, but more recently referring to any creative cross-readings of texts undertaken by a reader, without any claim that one text intends to evoke another). The *New Princeton Handbook to Poetic Terms* edited by T. Brogan (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994) is a ready resource on such distinctions. Attentive scholars will also distinguish allusion from interpretation or “exegesis”: in exegesis, the literary work at hand exists primarily to explain or interpret the text it cites; in allusion, the source text is evoked for the contribution it might make to the rhetorical and poetic strategies of the work at hand. An excellent example is John Collins’ *Daniel: With an Introduction to Apocalyptic Literature* (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans, 1984, especially 9-10, 42-43, 56 and 113).

ALLUSION IN BIBLICAL STUDIES

Two factors conspire to hide the history of the study of inner-biblical allusion from the newcomer. First, claims of allusion in the Bible have been for the most part buried in the biblical commentaries, usually using *ad hoc* language for the phenomenon. For just one example: several commentaries have proposed that the book of Daniel depends in some way on the book of Isaiah (Ginsberg 1948, 78 n. 21; Bentzen 1952, 68–69, 80–87; Delcor 1971, 199; Lacocque 1979, 197; others). But only the most exhaustive review of the literature would bring this conversation to light, since these claims are isolated from general methodological discussions of literary dependence. Such

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methodological work as is done appears rather in journal articles than in book-length treatment (e.g., Sarna 1965; Eslinger 1992; Leonard 2008). Second, this customary looseness of jargon—whereby one work is said to “correspond to,” “reflect the meaning of,” “go back to,” or “be best explained by” another, for some examples—has tended to persist in the field even as allusion in the Bible comes under more focused study, especially where the scholar is hesitant to date the two texts relative to one another.

As biblical studies began to attend to inner-biblical allusion as a phenomenon in its own right, the usual purpose in making claims of literary dependence was just this historical-critical task: the dating of two texts relative to one another. This can be seen in the first book-length treatment of inner-biblical allusion, the watershed *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* by Michael Fishbane (NY: Oxford University Press, 1985). Fishbane’s work did not describe literary dependence in terms conventional to non-biblical literary study of allusion. Instead, he ascribed to the alluding biblical writers the same midrashic modes of interpretation common to the much later, rabbinical authors of the Mishnah and Talmud. Thus, this initial definitive work stands in isolation from earlier and contemporary non-biblical literary study of allusion. Nonetheless, response to Fishbane’s work has shaped all ensuing discussion of allusion in biblical studies, and the work is so exhaustive and well indexed that many later claims of inner-biblical allusion are seen to find early expression in Fishbane’s work. Ironically, this same year saw an essay in *Prooftexts* by Chana Kronfeld that reflected a trend in the literary study of allusion away from historical-critical goals and toward appreciation of allusion as a figurative literary trope akin to metaphor or satire (Vol. 5, 1985: 137-63).

Where the study of inner-biblical allusion involves texts whose relative date is already secure, critics naturally have begun to put the study to uses other than the *extrinsic*, historical-critical task. They focused more singly on what the trope of allusion accomplishes in its literary context: how does an allusion contribute to the rhetorical strategies by which the work at hand is articulating its theological claims? In this approach, allusion is studied for its *intrinsic* contribution to the poetics of the alluding work. Naturally accompanying this trend is a greater acknowledgment of the study of allusion in the classics. Works concerning allusion in Greek poetry include Richard Garner’s *From Homer to Tragedy* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990) and *Poetic Memory* by Heather van Tress (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2004). In the Latin of Pliny one might consult Ilaria Marchesi’s *The Art of Pliny’s Letters* (Cambridge, UK and New York: Cambridge, 2008) or *The Rhetoric of Imitation* co-written by Gian Conte and Charles Segal (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986). See, too, John Hollander on Milton in his *The Figure of Echo* (Berkeley: University of California, 1981), or Christopher Reynolds on modern music in his *Motives for Allusion* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003). All of these works will include introductory sections or chapters on allusion as a poetic trope, an aspect of allusion increasingly engaged by scholars of inner-biblical allusion.

THE OLD TESTAMENT IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

Because the relative dating of the two Christian testaments is secure, biblical scholars found themselves free to go beyond the mere relative dating of texts, examining how allusions to the Hebrew Scriptures function in their New Testament literary contexts. Two early works that emerge soon after Fishbane’s are Donald Juel’s *Messianic Exegesis: Christological Interpretation of the Old Testament in Early Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988) and Richard B. Hays’ *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven: Yale, 1989). The former examines oft-made claims concerning Christological allusion to (or exegesis of) Old Testament texts in Christian literature including the New Testament, for example the claim that Isaiah’s “suffering servant” (Isaiah 52:13– 53:12) is evoked in the Passion

narratives of the Gospels. Hays for his part more clearly attempts to outline a methodology for discerning inner-biblical allusion, seeking to find how the evoked Old Testament texts contribute to Paul's rhetorical strategies. A basic methodological tension is apparent between these works by Juel and Hays: while Hays is optimistic that an allusion may activate wide-ranging associations from far-flung elements of the context of the targeted text, Juel finds New Testament exegesis and allusions rather to "proof-text" their sources, targeting snippets without activating their wider literary contexts.

Hays' *Echoes of Scripture* has had a strong influence on the field. J. Ross Wagner, a student of Hays, focused especially on Paul's use of Isaiah. His subtitle, *Isaiah and Paul "in Concert" in the Letter to the Romans* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2001), suggests the book's attention to a poetics of allusion in Paul. Work on allusion in the Gospels has followed a similar vein with *Allusion and Meaning in John 6* by Susan Hylen (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2005) and a work by Stephen P. Ahearne-Kroll entitled *The Psalms of Lament in Mark's Passion* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007). A breakthrough of sorts is also discernible in Thomas Hatina's *In Search of a Context*; there, allusions to the Hebrew Bible are assessed in terms of their contribution, not only to the rhetoric and theology of the Gospel of Mark, but also and especially to that Gospel's *narrative poetics* (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002).

THE OLD TESTAMENT IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

Perhaps because the relative dating of Old Testament texts remains both difficult and desirable, studies of allusions within that material must beware to resist circular arguments: apparent allusions may be used to argue for a direction of dependence (and so a relative dating of the two texts), but claims about rhetorical and poetic functions of the allusion in the alluding text must themselves depend on that relative dating. These books, then, more clearly show the struggle to accomplish the "old fashioned" historical-critical work with literary allusion, while also seeking to rise to the more poetic assessments of the allusive trope that characterize non-biblical literary criticism.

Risto Nurmela approaches inner-biblical allusion in Zechariah 1–8 and 9–14, focusing principally on the historical-critical task (Åbo: Åbo Akademi University Press, 1996). In rapid succession then appears Patricia Tull Wiley's work on Second Isaiah's use of Scripture, *Remember the Former Things* (Atlanta: Scholar's Press, 1997) and Benjamin D. Sommer's work on Second and Third Isaiah entitled *A Prophet Reads Scripture* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998). Wiley's method more closely follows on that of Hays' *Echoes of Scripture* (above). Sommer would prove influential in the field by carefully distinguishing allusion from the different kinds of intertextuality and influence, and by overtly engaging secular literary critics on the poetics of allusion. This influence can be seen, for example, in Mark Boda and Michael Floyd's work, *Bringing out the Treasure*, with Zechariah 9–14, which overlaps the subject matter of Risto (above) but whose acknowledged debt to Sommer is evident (London and New York: Sheffield Academic Press, 2003).

More recently, Nurmela has again written on inner-biblical allusion in his *Mouth of the Lord Has Spoken*, adapting the methods from his earlier work to the same biblical material read by Wiley and Sommer: Isaiah 40–66 (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2006). In his dissertation, Brooke Lester writes on allusion to Isaiah in the book of Daniel, attempting to assess narrative poetics of allusion in a text having a complex authorial history (Princeton: Princeton Theological Seminary, 2007). New ground has been broken also by Michael Lyons, in that he investigates how the exilic prophet Ezekiel makes use of pre-exilic priestly law in his *From Law to Prophecy: Ezekiel's Use of the Holiness Code* (London and New York: T & T Clark, 2009).

SUMMARY

Inner-biblical allusion represents the earliest stages of an effort that readers of the Bible have performed continually since: re-imagining and re-appropriating the revered utterances of the past. In offering its select bibliography, this essay hopes to have captured for the newcomer something of the state of the art in the study of inner-biblical allusion, including its persistent limitations and terrific possibilities for the future.

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