

Paul's Use of the Old Testament in 1 Corinthians 10:11-14

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PAUL'S USE OF THE OLD TESTAMENT IN I CORINTHIANS 10:1-4

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The use of the Old Testament in the New is not always easy to understand. There is no doubt that the Old Testament was the Bible of the early Christians. It was accepted as the Word of God and as authoritative for them. But when we read passages like Matthew 2:15, John 7:37 or Hebrews 2:13 we feel like asking, How did the New Testament authors read the Old Testament? What principles were they using in interpreting and applying the Scripture to their age? I Corinthians 10:1-4 is another of these question provoking passages and hopefully its examination will reveal some of the hermeneutical principles Paul used in common, it appears, with other New Testament writers.

That this is not seen as a mere academic exercise devoid of practical value, three benefits for such study can be presented from the start. First, it is useful for Christians to wrestle with these issues because such effort can clarify what the New Testament writer was saying as he used the Old Testament. Such clarification is an aid to intelligent response by us to God's New Testament word. Second, better understanding of the principles by which the New Testament writers interpreted the Old Testament Scripture is a proper preparation for answering the questions, Should we interpret and apply the Old Testament as these writers did? Should we use their hermeneutics? While this paper is not an attempt to answer these questions, in so far as its argument is correct it does some of the preparatory work needed for answers and reveals some of the implications of affirmative responses. Third, studies such as the one presented here help provide insights into the meaning of the Old Testament itself as the divinely intended implications of the original passages have been revealed in the light of the subsequent history of redemption. With these thoughts in mind we will consider Paul's use of the Old Testament in I Corinthians 10:1-4.

General Principles of Interpretation

The pericope of I Corinthians 10:1-4 is set in an ethical context. Preceding this Paul speaks of his desire to be a fellow partaker of the Gospel (9:23) and so also of his self-discipline so that he would not miss the prize. This is not just autobiographical information but a model for the Corinthians to follow (cf. 11:1). His desire is that they might not miss out on the prize either (10:12).

I Corinthians 10:1-10 is written to show how it is possible for Paul and the Corinthians to miss the prize. Hence it is connected with what precedes by gar. The thrust of the passage is that those who have participated in redemptive benefits may still not attain final salvation. In the Corinthian situation, and in relation to the context of the letter, Paul is pointing out that the idea of participation in the sacraments as a guarantee of salvation was mistaken - dangerously so.

Paul bases his argument on an interpretation of certain events in the Old Testament. Although all in Israel participated in the Exodus privileges, not all attained the goal of the promised land. Verses 1-4 stress, by the repeated use of "all" (pantes), the universal participation by Israel in the privileges of union with Moses and spiritual nourishment. By contrast verses 5-10 speak of how most of those, thus privileged, fell under God's judgement. In these latter verses, too, Paul includes application of the principle to the present situation, warning the Corinthians not to emulate the bad example of the Israelites lest the same fate of not attaining that which was promised would befall them. This application reaches its climax in verse 12.

Certain general principles of Paul's handling of the Old Testament material are evident in the overall section of verses 1-11. Especially in verses 5-10 attention is focused on events rather than quoted text. Verse 5 alludes to the events of Numbers¹ as do all the verses except verse 7 with its quotation from Exodus 32:6 (LXX). This concern with event rather than text indicates that allegory is not Paul's mode of interpretation but more likely some form of typologizing.

Paul's use of the words tupos and tupikōs in verses 6 and 11 also point in this direction, although it appears that in this context they should not be given the status of technical hermeneutical terminology. The context shows that the feature of warning example is in the forefront in verse 11, as it reflects on the Old Testament data of verses 7-10. Yet something of prefiguration seems appropriate for tupoi in verse 6 as the events of verses 1-4 are most likely included in its range of reference, which events are not warnings, but more like Old Testament parallels to the New Testament situation, as presented by Paul. However the terms are finally interpreted, the feature of "some correspondence in history" must be included and hence they indicate interpretation within the sphere of typologizing even if they are not technical terms for such.

In this passage the general typologizing pattern of Israel in the wilderness being a type of the Church and so the Promised Land being a type of ultimate salvation evident elsewhere in the New Testament is seen.² The events in the history of Israel are seen as warning examples or prefiguring patterns for Christians (v.6). They were written down for Christians (v.11).

For these events to be examples a likeness between the Old Testament situation and that of the New Testament must be presupposed. It is evident that the possibility of God rejecting those who are considered to be amongst his people is one likeness being emphasized here. But Paul also makes explicit the relationship between Old and New Testament situations in verse 1 where direct continuity is indicated by the term "our fathers." Gentiles are included in the people of God now, for Paul is addressing Gentiles in this letter. This is because Paul views the Church as the eschatological Israel.³ So Paul reveals in this correlation between the Old and the New Testament people of God his reliance on a principle of eschatological fulfillment, "the consciousness of living in the days of eschatological fulfillment."

Even from a view of these general principles of the passage, certain things are clear. The principle that Paul is seeking to apply is clear. It is possible to be reckoned among the people of God and to participate in the privileges of the people of God and yet undergo God's judgement. Also the way Paul applies this truth is clear. The New Testament people of God, as the continuation of the Old Testament people of God in that they participate in analogous privileges, may fall into analogous sins and suffer analogous judgements. Furthermore the nature of these analogous relationships is not arbitrary but ordered, for "these things happened as examples for us, that we should not (eis to mē tinai hēmas) act as they did (verse 6). Thus Paul also indicates that he uses the principle of correspondence in history as divinely ordered in his interpretation of the events of the Old Testament.⁵

Specific Principles of Interpretation

While Paul's general principles of interpretation in this section of I Corinthians are clear, what of the more specific principles applied in verses 1-4? How does he derive what he says in these verses from the evidence given in the Old Testament? In seeking to answer this question we should consider to what he is

alluding, what he does with these allusions and what principles are evident in this handling of the Old Testament material.

Verse 1 - "our fathers were all under the cloud."

This event is spoken of in Exodus 13:21. Here the cloud is said to go before Israel and to lead them. The idea of the cloud being over the fathers and, therefore, they being under it is found in Psalm 104:39, "He spread out a cloud for a covering to them" (diepetasen nephelēn eis skepēn autois - LXX). This verse speaks about the beginning of the exodus, and can logically be connected with the incident at the sea as Paul connects it in verse 1. The figure of the fathers being under the cloud is used, rather than that of leading, because this is more closely related to the idea of baptism, whether by immersion or pouring, where the element is above the recipient.

"and all passed through the sea."

Paul says of the Israelites: dia tēs thalassēs diēlthon. It is difficult to find a verbal parallel to Paul's statement in the LXX. Exodus 14:22 uses the verb compounded with the preposition rather than with dia (kai eisēlthon oi uios Israēl eis meson tēs thalassēs). On the other hand Zechariah 10:11 uses the verb compounded with dia to speak of a passing through the sea by God's people (kai dieleusontai en thalassēi stenēi). Yet this verse speaks of the return of the exiled in terms of the Exodus rather than of the Exodus event itself, although this passage may have provided terminology for Paul. Still the lack of clear verbal parallel here suggests that Paul was using his own terminology to speak of Old Testament events. As has been said, his focus was an event rather than text as he drew lessons from a correspondence in history between the Old Testament situation and that of the New.

So with respect to verse 1. It may be concluded that Paul points to Old Testament events rather than to specific texts. He points to these as facts, reflecting the principle that the Old Testament's record can be taken as presenting a faithful record of happenings in the past.

Verse 2 - "all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea."

Here Paul speaks of the same events as in verse 1. Yet the Old Testament text says nothing explicitly about baptism into Moses. It may be that Paul here draws on a rabbinic understanding of the Exodus event where it was interpreted in such a way as to give biblical justification for proselyte baptism.⁶ Yet such a background of interpretation is not necessary. Nor need this reference to baptism be understood as Paul referring to an Old Testament sacrament. Rather good sense is made of Paul's statement if his reference to baptism is understood as meaning incorporation into a relationship with another. Baptism then is a means of identification and the Israelites, by the Sea of Reeds incidents, were, according to Paul, incorporated into a relationship with Moses as their leader. If this is Paul's intended meaning, it is likely that he also has Exodus 14:31 in view where it is said that the Israelites not only "believed in the LORD" but also "in his servant Moses", indicating a new relationship between Moses and the people was effected by these events.

What principle of interpretation by Paul is evident from this understanding of his use of the Old Testament in verse 2? Clearly he is not moving from the Old Testament situation to that of the New, since what he applies is not explicit in the Old Testament text. Rather he moves from the New Testament situation, where the eschatological people of God are joined to their leader, Christ, by baptism into him and, using this

structure, opens up the significance of Old Testament events. "Paul interprets the Exodus event in the light of what has happened in Christ at the end-time."⁷ In this Paul exhibits a peshet method of exegesis where an interpretative key, now given, is used to open up a previously hidden meaning in the Old Testament.⁸ For Paul, Christ and the new situation brought about by him is that key.

Verses 3-4: "all ate the same spiritual food and all drank the same spiritual drink."

With respect to food, Paul is almost certainly pointing to the manna miraculously supplied in the wilderness. This is spoken of in Exodus 16:4-36, along with the provision of quail (verse 13), but it is manna alone that is spoken of in Deuteronomy 3:3 and 16, suggesting that this was the more significant aspect of the food provision. Miraculous provision of drink is spoken of in Exodus 15:25 (Marah), Exodus 17:6 (Raphidim), Numbers 20:12-13 (Meribah) and Numbers 21:16-18 (Beer). Although all those references may be included in Paul's thinking, his reference to a rock in the immediate context suggests that the incidents recorded in Exodus 17 and Numbers 20 are foremost in his mind. In joining the food and drink incidents together as he does, Paul follows the Old Testament pattern evident in Nehemiah 9:15, 20, Psalm 78:15-16, 24-25; and Psalm 105:40-41.

A major difficulty in understanding Paul's interpretive methodology arises in connection with his reference to these events. Paul speaks of the food and drink as being "spiritual" (pneumatikos). Since they are not designated thus in the LXX, Paul is engaging in interpretation when he uses this term of them. In the New Testament that which is "spiritual" (pneumatikos) "comes directly from God's sphere and gives divine power - that which is according to the Spirit of God."⁹ So it appears that by calling the food and drink "spiritual" Paul is indicating their divine origin.

Now it is evident from the Old Testament text that the provision of food and drink for the Israelites was by God.¹⁰ Yet Paul does not make an explicit reference to God but reckons the food and drink to be "spiritual" because of their source in "a spiritual rock."¹¹ To understand Paul's reference to this "spiritual rock" and his identification of this rock as Christ is to understand how he interprets the Old Testament evidence concerning the provision of food and drink for the Israelites. Therefore we must turn to the next section of verse 4 for a fuller understanding of Paul's methodology in interpreting the Old Testament.

"For they were drinking from a spiritual rock which followed them; and the rock was Christ."

In consideration of the problem of Paul's interpretative methodology here a number of different pieces of evidence need to be considered. Rock is spoken of in the Old Testament in connection with divine provision of drink in Exodus 17 and Numbers 20. Still there is no explicit data to indicate that the water given was from a rock that followed the Israelites. Now there was a Jewish legend which spoke of a source of water following the Israelites.¹² Yet this was not primarily a rock but in its later form a rock-shaped well and probably in its earlier form only a following stream.¹³ It is more likely that the earlier form would have been current in the first century.

Another non-biblical source of evidence for Paul's interpretative methodology has been suggested.¹⁴ Philo, a contemporary of Paul also speaks of the sustenance of the wandering Israelites. In speaking of the rock that sustained them, Philo makes connections between various Old Testament concepts which may give direction

in understanding Paul's methodology. For Philo, the rock in the wilderness was equated with the wisdom of God as was the well of Numbers 21:16-18. Also manna was equated with the rock on the basis of Deuteronomy 32:13 where honey and oil are both spoken of as coming from the rock. This connection between manna and honey and oil could be made on the basis of manna being spoken of in terms of these in Exodus 16:8 and Numbers 11:8. Philo also associated manna with the divine word, a concept closely related to the wisdom of God. Thus Philo not only connects giving a drink with the rock but also the giving of food - specifically manna - by reference to Deuteronomy 32. The rock, food and drink are also closely related by Philo because of their connection with the wisdom of God or the divine word. This data suggests that for Paul also Deuteronomy 32 may be a basis for his interpretation in I Corinthians 10:4.

A number of factors point to the probability that Paul did have Deuteronomy 32 in mind in his interpretation in I Corinthians 10:4. First, he alludes to Deuteronomy 32:17 and 21 in verses 21 and 22 of this chapter. So from the context of I Corinthians 10:4 it can be seen that Deuteronomy 32 was in Paul's mind as he wrote this section. Also the probable indication, mentioned above, that for Paul the rock was the source of manna as well as the source of water fits in with Deuteronomy 32:13 understood in the midrashic manner seen in Philo. Further, Deuteronomy 32 repeatedly speaks of Yahweh - the Lord - as the Rock. This could well be in Paul's mind when he terms the rock as "spiritual" and the food and drink as "spiritual" because being from the rock i.e. from the Lord.¹⁵ Again the translation of the tetragram, 'hwh, as kurios by the LXX would allow Paul to make the deduction: ROCK = kurios = Christ (i.e. the New Testament kurios). On this understanding of the use of Deuteronomy 32, Paul's statement that the rock was Christ becomes quite reasonable.¹⁶ There are good reasons, then, to believe that Paul, in his interpretation of the provision of food and drink to the Israelites, depended on Deuteronomy 32, understood midrashically, to explain the true nature of this provision.

Yet, although there appears to be obvious dependence by Paul on Deuteronomy 32 for his explanation of these wilderness events, difficulties still remain in understanding his methodology. For in Deuteronomy 32 the Rock, which is the Lord, and the rock from which sustenance came are not identical. Further, there is no indication in Deuteronomy 32 that God or a rock followed Israel. Rather God is spoken of as leading or guiding his people (v.12). In fact it is only in Isaiah 52:12 that something like the concept of God following his people is present, and that in an eschatological prophecy rather than in a reference to the Exodus events as in I Corinthians 10. Ellis sees a possible use by Paul of references in Psalm 104:41 (LXX) and Isaiah 48:21 (LXX) to water being given to Israel.¹⁷ But even here there is no clear reference to water being brought through the desert to the Israelites.¹⁸

How then does Paul interpret as he does? Of course it may be that he is not depending on the Old Testament nor on any other sources for his interpretation but rather independently giving new information to the Corinthians. Yet the links with Deuteronomy 32 appear too clear to neglect this as a source of Paul's interpretation. Still, if he uses Deuteronomy 32, it is not in a literalistic fashion. Rather, by relying on the same word having different references, in midrashic fashion he connects the rock which is Yahweh with the rock which was the source of food in Deuteronomy 32 and the source of water in Exodus 17 and Numbers 20. Once this is done the correlation of the rock with Christ by the New Testament application of the Septuagintal kurios is straight-forward.

The idea of the rock following is more difficult to account for. That the source of sustenance, being God, accompanied the Israelites is clear in the Old Testament narratives but the concept of following is not. Although it is not certain, it appears that Paul has used the "following" concept of a contemporary Jewish legend in his interpretation of the sustenance of Israel in the wilderness. That Paul took up rabbinic terminology to present a message is evident in 2 Timothy 3:8 where he speaks of Jannes and Jambres, and so this may also account for his interpretative method in I Corinthians 10:4. It would appear that the adoption of such a practice here would make best sense if the Corinthians were also familiar with the legend.

If this understanding of Paul's interpretative method is correct, then he can be seen as speaking to the Corinthians in the following manner. "You know that the Israelites received water from a rock. And you've heard that this source of water followed the Israelites through the desert. Deuteronomy 32:12 tells us that they received food from the rock as well. In fact according to the terminology of Deuteronomy that rock was God and so it and that which proceeded from it can be termed spiritual. Of course the one of whom Deuteronomy speaks, the rock who was the source of spiritual sustenance which followed Israel, was kurios, whom we call Christ." So Paul's interpretative procedure can be termed midrash-pesher-midrash because of the correlation of various passages of Scripture on the basis of verbal connections, and pesher because of the interpretative key used - Christ and the new eschatological situation introduced by him.

Conclusions

In the light of the above study let us return briefly to consideration of the practical benefits of such an examination of Scripture. What Paul was saying when he used the Old Testament here is clear. The main thrust of his message in I Corinthians 10:1-4 and its context is that spiritual privilege for the people of God does not imply immunity from judgement for the disobedient. If this was true for the wandering Israelites and for the New Testament Christians, it is hard to avoid Paul's warning of verse 12, based on his argument of verses 1-11, as being relevant still.

A number of principles were reckoned as being at work in Paul's use of the Old Testament here. First: the Old Testament instructs Christians by presenting in Israel a God-designed type of the New Testament people of God. The Church, then, is the eschatological Israel. Second: the events which are recorded in the Old Testament are factual. Third: the Old Testament events can be interpreted in the light of Christ's work by means of a pesher type of exegesis of which Christ is the interpretative key. Fourth: midrashic methodology, especially the linking of passages on the basis of word correspondence, can be used to relate various Old Testament texts to one another. Fifth: contemporary (and probably known) extra-biblical terminology can be used to present the teaching of the Old Testament. Should such methods be used today and, if so, why and when? Of course many have wrestled with these questions before but it is valuable to face them afresh so that we might be faithful to Scripture in our use of the Old Testament as well as in all our other activities. As was said at the study's beginning, this paper has not aimed at answering these questions. Yet it is hoped that it has made the issues clearer so that any answers given might be better informed.

Finally, Paul also gives insight into the meaning of Old Testament events, especially as spoken of in Deuteronomy 32. It was Christ who was sustaining the Israelites in the wilderness, for the yahweh of Deuteronomy 32 was Christ. How well, then, do

the Old Testament people of God typify their New Testament counterparts as to their spiritual privileges from Christ and how it behooves us, also recipients of Christ's privileges, to listen to Paul's exhortations based on their history.

Footnotes:

1. cf. Num. 14:29
2. cf. Hebrews 3:14-4:11
3. see verse 11, cf. Gal. 6:16; Phil. 3:3; Roms. 2:25-29
4. Richard N. Longenecker, Biblical Exegesis in the Apostolic Period, Grand Rapids: Wm.B. Eerdmans, Publishing Co., 1975, p.95.
5. Longenecker, ibid., pp.94-95
6. Andrew J. Bandstra, "Interpretation in I Corinthians 10:1-11," Calvin Theological Journal 6 (April 1971): 6-7
7. Bandstra, ibid., p.7.
8. Longenecker, ibid., p.43.
9. Bandstra, ibid., p.10.
10. cf. Psalm 105:40-41
11. Although only drinking is spoken of in connection with the rock, probably both food and drink are seen by Paul as from this source since both are qualified by the same adjective as the rock, which is introduced as an explanation for the "spiritual" character of both by the conjunction gar.
12. see E. Earle Ellis, Paul's Use of the Old Testament, Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1957, p.67.
13. E. Earle Ellis, ibid., pp.67-8.
14. Bandstra, ibid., pp.12-13.
15. It is true that the LXX does not have the word petra in Deuteronomy 32. But this need indicate no more than Paul using the version of the text most suitable to his current purpose, a practice found elsewhere in the New Testament and in contemporary Jewish interpretation.
16. It should be noted here that Paul's use of the imperfect, ēn, rather than the present, estin, indicates that he is not using a typological method of interpretation at this point. For Paul the rock was Christ and not merely a type corresponding to a present Christ.
17. E. Earle Ellis, ibid., pp.69-70.
18. Rather the object of the verb axei in Isaiah 48:21 is autous, referring to the Israelites. It is they, and not water, who are brought through the desert.

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