

Intertextuality in the Bible

When it comes to studying the Bible (especially the New Testament), one thing we must be aware of is the concept of **intertextuality**. Defined simply, intertextuality is “the study of links between and among texts.”¹ According to Greg Beale, when it comes to biblical studies, the term is used in reference to “the procedure by which a later biblical text refers to an earlier text, how that earlier text enhances the meaning of the later one, and how the later one creatively develops the earlier meaning.”² Note: intertextuality may also be referred to as “*inner-biblical exegesis*” or “*inner-biblical allusion*.”

To expand on this, it is helpful to add a point made by John Sailhamer:

“Many written texts, especially biblical ones, were written with full awareness of other texts in mind. Their authors assumed the readers would be thoroughly knowledgeable of those other texts. The New Testament books, for example, assume a comprehensive understanding of the Old Testament. Many Old Testament texts also assume their readers are aware and knowledgeable of other Old Testament texts...If there is an authorially intended inter-textuality, then it stands to reason that some loss of meaning occurs when one fails to view the text in terms of it.”³

If it is true that we lose aspects of a text’s intended meaning by not being aware of the underlying connection to other parts of Scripture, we as readers must diligently seek to become “fluent” in the language of the Bible—both the Old and New Testament. This makes a foundational assumption about the *context* of any given biblical passage. Kevin Vanhoozer puts it this way:

“A text must be read in light of its intentional context, that is, against the background that best allows us to answer the question of what the author is doing. For it is in relation to its intentional context that a text yields its maximal sense, its fullest meaning. *If we are reading the Bible as the Word of God, therefore, I suggest that the context that yields this maximal sense is the canon, taken as a unified communicative act.* The books of Scripture, taken individually, may anticipate the whole, but the canon alone is its *instantiation*. If God is taken to be the divine author, in other words, then it is the canon as a whole that becomes the communicative act that needs to be described...Better said, *the canon as a whole becomes the unified act for which the divine intention serves as the unifying principle.*”⁴

To state this simply, the fullest meaning of a passage of Scripture is found only within the context of the entire Bible, which is a single, unified work, divinely inspired by God.

What then is the best way to detect intertextuality in the Bible? When it comes to the way the New Testament makes use of the Old, the most obvious connection is found in the use of **direct quotations**. Often, an author will quote directly from another place in the Bible (e.g., Mat 2:4-6, quoting Micah 5:1-2), and will usually mark the quotation with an introductory formula (e.g., Rom 1:17 “As it is written”). These are not terribly difficult to spot, and almost all English translations

¹ John H. Sailhamer, *Introduction to Old Testament Theology: A Canonical Approach* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995): 212.

² G. K. Beale, *Handbook on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament: Exegesis and Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012): 40.

³ Sailhamer, *Introduction to OT Theology*, 212-13.

⁴ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text? The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998): 265; emphasis his.

indicate in some way that the text in question is quoted from the Old Testament, usually by means of quotation marks, bold or italics letters, or a footnote.

Less explicit than direct citation is what is referred to as an **allusion** (Note: *not* “illusion”). An allusion is when an author makes a deliberate reference to another text of Scripture. Put another way, “An allusion may simply be defined as a brief expression consciously intended by an author to be dependent on an Old Testament passage.”⁵ Allusions are made through a connection to words, phrases, themes, motifs, events, type-scenes, figures, etc. This is in contrast to a direct reference or quotation, as most often, the original wording is not directly reproduced.

How are we to identify these points of connection (i.e., intertextuality) within the biblical text? At its core, the most reliable measures for determining an allusion are *verbal coherence* (similar vocabulary, syntax, grammar, etc.) and/or *thematic coherence* (common themes, motifs, images, etc.). Greg Beale provides similar ground rules when he says this: “The telltale key to discerning an allusion is that of recognizing an *incomparable or unique parallel in wording, syntax, concept, or cluster of motifs...*” He continues, “When both unique wording (verbal coherence) and theme are found, the proposed allusion takes on greater probability. Recognizing allusions is like interpretation: there are degrees of probability and possibility in any attempt to identify an allusion.”⁶

Within scholarly circles, the most oft-quoted criteria for validating allusions is that proposed by Richard Hays. He lays out seven conditions that cumulatively point toward the presence of an allusion. Though not perfect, his work here is helpful overall, and is quite beneficial when seeking to discern the nature and validity of an intertextual allusion. Here is a summary of his criteria:⁷

1. Availability: Was the proposed source of the allusion available to the author and/or the original readers? The writer would have expected his audience to be able to recognize an intended allusion (on a first or subsequent reading), which means that they would need to have access to or knowledge of the source text—normally the Hebrew Bible, or the Greek translation of it known as the Septuagint (LXX).
2. Volume: The “volume” of an allusion is determined by the degree of explicit repetition of words or syntactical and grammatical patterns. Additional factors include the prominence of the earlier text within Scripture, and the rhetorical stress placed on the allusion within the New Testament context. Especially in regards to the repetition of vocabulary or syntax, the more overlap between the two texts, the more likely it is that a genuine allusion has been found.
3. Recurrence: How often does the author elsewhere cite or allude to the same passage, or to the context in which that passage is found? If there are references in the immediate context (or elsewhere by the same author) to the same Old Testament context from which the supposed allusion is drawn, there is likely an intentional connection.
4. Thematic Coherence: How well does the alleged allusion fit into the line of argument or the narrative that the author is developing? Does it align with other quotations or allusions in the same book, or elsewhere in the author’s writings? Do the themes, images, and ideas

⁵ Beale, *Handbook on the NT Use of the OT*, 31.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 31-32; emphasis his.

⁷ These seven criteria are laid out in Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989): 29-32. Here I have drawn from my own summary of Hays’ work, as well as the summary of Beale in his *Handbook on the NT Use of the OT*, 33.

of the precursor text clarify the later author's argument? A legitimate allusion will be suitable and satisfying in that the original meaning of the Old Testament text not only fits thematically into the later author's argument, but illuminates it.

5. *Historical Plausibility*: Similar to criteria #1, it should be asked, Could the New Testament author have intended the alleged meaning of this allusion? Could his readers have understood it? It is reasonable to assume that a writer could have intended an allusion and that his audience could have understood it (especially upon subsequent re-readings). However, it is always possible that readers may not pick up on an intended allusion. Though moving outside the technical parameters of exegesis or interpretation, the study of Jewish writings contemporary to the first century that use the same Old Testament passages may provide parallels and analogies that affirm the validity of this allusion.

6. *History of Interpretation*: Have other readers, both contemporary and throughout Church history, noted these same allusions? It is important to survey whether anyone has ever observed this same intertextual connection. With this point it should be cautioned that the history of interpretation is not an extremely reliable test for recognizing an allusion, as no past commentator has fully exhausted the biblical text. Though this criterion should not serve as the litmus test for intertextual legitimacy, it may help check and stimulate our identification of biblical allusions.

7. *Satisfaction*: Finally, with or without clear confirmation from the previous six criteria, does the proposed reading make sense? Does its use fit in the immediate context and illuminate the surrounding context? Does it enhance the rhetorical force of the point being made by the author? Does the use of the allusion result in a satisfying account of how the author intended the allusion, and how this use of the allusion would have made its effect upon the reader?

In using these criteria, quantity counts. As Richard Hays notes, "There are always only shades of certainty when these criteria are applied to particular texts. The more of them that fall clearly into place, the more confident we can be in rendering an interpretation of [the allusion] in a given passage."⁸ It should be noted, however, that the final three proposals made by Hays are less reliable guides to validating allusions, and thus should bear less weight in analyzing intertextuality. Additionally, criteria #5 and #7 could likely be combined with #1 and #4, respectively. Nonetheless, these points all remain helpful as we seek to be faithful and responsible readers of God's Word. Ultimately, though, there is no hard and fast criteria applicable to every single biblical allusion; a case-by-case study must be made in each scenario.

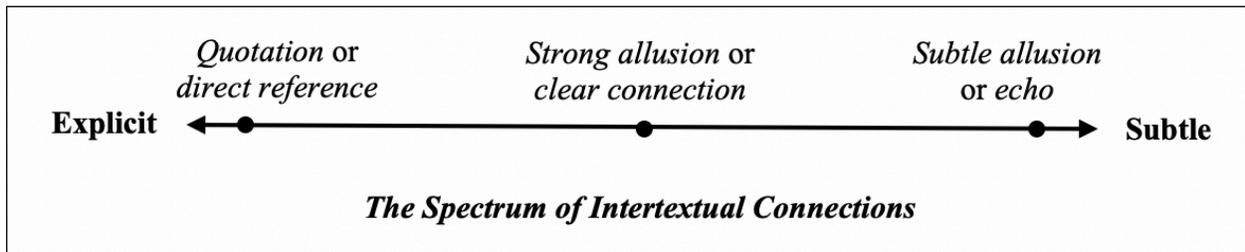
Something else to be aware of is that when an author alludes to a previous text, the context they have in mind is almost always more than just the single verse they reference, and is the entire chapter, section, or even book. Additionally, the New Testament authors frequently made use of the popular translation of the Hebrew Bible into the common Greek language, known as the "Septuagint" (abbreviated as "LXX"). Often, there are verbal and syntactical connections between the Greek of the New Testament and the source of the allusion in the Septuagint. Since the Septuagint was itself a translation from Hebrew, and because there may have been some differences between the underlying text (German: *vorlage*) and the modern Hebrew text most English Bibles are translated from, there may be differences between quotations and allusions in the New Testament and the way a particular English translation renders the source verse in the Old

⁸ Hays, *Echoes of Scripture*, 32.

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Testament (e.g., Heb 1:6). When studying the Bible, it is very beneficial to always go back and read the Old Testament verse being cited or alluded to, and also to note the immediate context. Knowing this piece about the use of the Septuagint helps us understand why in an English Bible, the original Old Testament reference may not perfectly align with the later New Testament allusion. Nearly all English Bibles have a footnote or cross-reference specifying that the allusion or quote aligns with the Septuagint (usually abbreviated “Grk.” or “LXX”). If there is a significant difference, most study Bibles or commentaries will explain what is going on. Sometimes, consulting a modern English translation of the Septuagint is also worthwhile.

When surveying the use of allusions in the New Testament, there is a spectrum of sorts in relation to the explicitness or “volume” of the intertextual link. The primary source of this variance on this spectrum is the verbal and semantic distance between the two texts, ranging from a direct quote (i.e., a verbatim reproduction of a string of words) to a faint allusion (i.e., the inclusion of only a single phrase, word or image that alerts the reader to the reference to an earlier text). Some scholars refer to these subtle allusions as *echoes*. Additionally, biblical authors often use literary *analogies* to draw connections between two texts, which works in tandem with quotations, allusions, and echoes, and involves the use of parallel plot structures, settings, and themes.



So, as a reader, be aware of the fact that not all intertextual connections are created equal. The farther one moves away from an overt citation, the intertextual connection becomes less determinate, and there is a greater demand “placed on the reader’s listening powers.”⁹ As we move forward on the journey of reading God’s Word, we must also be careful not to force our own meaning onto the text. While we should do everything in our power to be attune to the allusions and inner-biblical connections of a text, we must avoid the costly error of attempting to force connections that are simply not there. Richard Hays reminds us of this, saying, “As we near the vanishing point of the echo, it inevitably becomes difficult to decide whether we are really hearing an echo at all, or whether we are only conjuring things out of the murmurings of our own imaginations.”¹⁰ John Sailhamer likewise provides caution here: “If there has been no intentional inter-textuality, then an attempt to read the text in terms of a supposed linkage with another text will likely distort the meaning of that text.”¹¹

In conclusion, intertextuality is an important and common literary strategy used by the biblical authors to convey meaning and intention within their own texts. There are many techniques that they used to reference earlier texts, and inner-biblical allusion helps provide unity to the Scriptures, and also reveals the great beauty and depth of the Bible. By being aware of this concept and its related strategies, we may be better prepared to faithfully read and understand the Triune God’s eternal and precious Word, contained within the Holy Scriptures.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 23.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 23.

¹¹ Sailhamer, *Introduction to OT Theology*, 213.

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Definitions

Intertextuality: the intentional connection between and among biblical texts, by which a later text refers to an earlier text to enhance its own meaning and creatively develop and reflect on the meaning of the earlier text. (Also known as: inner-biblical exegesis or inner-biblical allusion)

Quotation: an explicit citation or implicit quote indicated by a verbatim reproduction of a chain of words easily recognizable from a known source text.¹² (Also known as: direct reference/citation)

Allusion: when an author intentionally and deliberately references another text of Scripture through the use of common words, phrases, themes, motifs, events, type-scenes, figures, etc. (Also known as: intentional link or strong allusion or clear connection)

Echo: a sub-category of an allusion, identified as a more subtle literary technique, which may involve the inclusion of only a single phrase, word, or image that alerts the reader to the reference to an earlier text.¹³ (Also known as: subtle/faint allusion)

Analogy: works in tandem with quotations, allusions, and/or echoes, in order to indicate some kind of analogy between two texts (comparison, contrast, intensification, etc.) through the use of parallel plot structures, patterns, characters, settings, themes, etc.¹⁴ (Also known as: literary design patterns or type-scenes)

<i>Summary Chart of Biblical Intertextuality</i> ¹⁵			
<i>Type of Connection</i>	<u>Quotation or Citation</u>	<u>Allusion</u>	<u>Echo or Faint Allusion</u>
<i>Level of Communication</i>	Explicit	Implicit	Subtle
<i>Reader's Comprehension</i>	Assumed	Expected	Hoped for
<i>Author's Technique</i>	Direct quotation of source text	Use of key words, themes, phrases, etc. from source text	Use of key words, themes, phrases, etc. from source text
<u>Analogy:</u> Parallel design patterns of character, plot, setting, etc. which indicate an intended analogy between entire storylines and texts			

¹² Tim Mackie, *Reading an Intertextual Bible: The New Testament Gospels*, BLS 502 Course Notes (Portland: Western Seminary, 2017): 1.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹⁵ Chart adapted from *Ibid.*, 2.