

APOSTOLIC HERMENEUTICS REVISITED:

An Examination of Enns' Examples

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Introduction

Six years ago Peter Enns wrote a stimulating article entitled “Apostolic Hermeneutics and an Evangelical Doctrine of Scripture: Moving beyond a Modernist Impasse.”¹ Much of his argument was revised and expanded in the fourth chapter of his controversial book *Inspiration and Incarnation*.² His argument has a number of strengths. He identifies apostolic hermeneutics not as Christocentric, where “every psalm or proverb speaks directly and explicitly of Jesus,” but as “Christotelic,” where Jesus is seen as the end to which the whole OT points.³ Enns compares reading the Bible to reading a good novel, where only on the second reading does one see how all the pieces fit together, and he criticizes those who read the Bible in “a dispassionate, unbiased, objective” way, limiting themselves to a grammatical-historical reading without asking where the OT as a whole is headed.⁴ He also challenges the idea that the apostles’ authority gave them the right to handle the OT in ways that we would not be permitted to do and argues that we are to learn from the apostles in their hermeneutic as well as in their doctrinal teaching.⁵ These theses are well-defended and are a positive contribution to the study of the NT use of the OT.

At the same time Enns makes some questionable claims that are rightly subject to scrutiny. To Enns, the fact that apostolic hermeneutics is a Second Temple phenomenon means that while we should follow the apostles in their “*hermeneutical goal*,” we should not follow them in their “*exegetical method*,” because the latter is “a function of their cultural moment.”⁶ He argues that apostolic interpretation is not always consistent with the OT author’s intention (265),⁷ that “the Apostles did not seem overly concerned to put [grammatical-historical hermeneutics] into practice,”⁸ and that the evangelical doctrine of inerrancy as it is traditionally stated is a product of modernism and is based on faulty assumptions about “the nature of historiography and ... the relationship between general and special revelation.”⁹ This last claim will be addressed briefly in the next section. In regard to the other claims, Enns gives six

¹ Peter Enns, “Apostolic Hermeneutics and an Evangelical Doctrine of Scripture: Moving beyond a Modernist Impasse,” *WTJ* 65 (2003): 263-87.

² Peter Enns, *Inspiration and Incarnation: Evangelicals and the Problem of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005).

³ Enns, “Apostolic Hermeneutics,” 282.

⁴ Enns, “Apostolic Hermeneutics,” 276.

⁵ Enns, “Apostolic Hermeneutics,” 281-282.

⁶ Enns, “Apostolic Hermeneutics,” 275, emphasis removed.

⁷ For example, on page 265 of “Apostolic Hermeneutics,” Enns argues that “the implications of understanding apostolic hermeneutics [as] a Second Temple phenomenon has [*sic*] been in direct conflict with an evangelical doctrine of Scripture, which includes among other things the notion that proper interpretation *must be consistent with the author’s intention*” (emphasis added). On page 267 he says, “NT writers attribute meaning to OT texts that *clearly differ from the intention of the OT author*” (emphasis removed). On page 269 he says, “We see again and again that the Apostles approached the Old Testament *in ways that are adverse to grammatical-historical exegesis* but are firmly at home in the Second Temple world” (emphasis added).

⁸ Enns, “Apostolic Hermeneutics,” 268. Enns does acknowledge that the apostles sometimes interpret the OT “literally,” but his argument is that “Apostolic hermeneutics, apart from the expenditure of significant mental energy and denial of plain fact, cannot be categorized as being ‘essentially’ grammatical-historical” (“Apostolic Hermeneutics,” 269).

⁹ Enns, “Apostolic Hermeneutics,” 264.

examples of interpretive methods that supposedly demonstrate a lack of concern for the OT context, and the bulk of this paper will deal with these texts. Because of space constraints, this paper will not deal with Enns' examples of the apostolic use of Second Temple interpretive traditions, though his argument there also deserves a response. Nor will this paper deal with Enns' other arguments in *Inspiration and Incarnation*. The goal of this paper is to question Enns' argument that the interpretive methods of the apostles "were a function of their cultural moment" that should not be followed by Christians today.¹⁰

The Supposed Modernist Assumptions behind Inerrancy

Before addressing the apostolic exegetical methods, something should be said about Enns' claim that inerrancy as it is traditionally defined is based on modernist assumptions. While it is often held that inerrancy is a 19th century doctrine, formulated as a response to the rise of liberalism, this position does not do justice to the historical position of the church. Enns argues that the assumption that a "historical account is true only to the extent that it describes 'what actually happened'" is a modernist assumption.¹¹ Yet we find this assumption shared by many premodern interpreters of Scripture. So when Jerome suggested that Paul did not actually confront Peter as he states in Gal 2:14, Augustine responded, "It seems to me that most disastrous consequences must follow upon our believing that anything false is found in the sacred books." To Augustine, an account of something that did not actually happen would be a "deception" by the Holy Spirit.¹² Though Augustine believed that the Scriptures were accommodated to human nature, he would not allow for the kind of accommodation that Enns argues for in his work. Similarly, when Erasmus argued that Matthew had a slip of memory when quoting Micah 5:2, Johannes Eck responded, saying, "Do you suppose any Christian will patiently endure to be told that the evangelists in their Gospels made mistakes? If the authority of Holy Scripture at this point is shaky, can any other passage be free from the suspicion of error?"¹³ Countless other examples can be added to demonstrate that historical accuracy is important not only to those influenced by modernism, but to inerrantists throughout the history of the church.

Enns also argues that "the practice of harmonization, although at times legitimate, owes more to modernist assumptions of the nature of what historical accounts should look like than to allowing the varied witness of Scripture to speak."¹⁴ In reality, however, the practice of harmonization goes at least as far back as the second century and was a practice of the church long before modernist assumptions came into play.¹⁵

Furthermore, Enns argues that the assumption that divine revelation has a "necessarily unique quality" has "muted the proper role that extrabiblical evidence should take in shaping our own ideas of the nature of Scripture."¹⁶ Enns believes that Second Temple Jewish interpreters in general were not concerned with the original context of the passages they quoted, and therefore

¹⁰ Enns, "Apostolic Hermeneutics," 275.

¹¹ Enns, "Apostolic Hermeneutics," 264.

¹² Augustine, *Epist.* 28, in Philip Schaff, *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. I (Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, 1997), 251.

¹³ Desiderius Erasmus, *The Collected Works of Erasmus: The Correspondence of Erasmus*, vol. 5, trans. R. A. B. Mynors and D. F. S. Thomson (Toronto: Buffalo University of Toronto Press, 1977), 289-290.

¹⁴ Enns, "Apostolic Hermeneutics," 264.

¹⁵ Harmonies by Tatian (ca. AD 160-175), Ammonius of Alexandria (3rd century AD), and Augustine (ca. AD 400) are the clearest early examples.

¹⁶ Enns, "Apostolic Hermeneutics," 264.

we should not expect the apostles to be any different. David Instone-Brewer has demonstrated, however, that while many nonscribal traditions as well as post-AD-70 rabbis interpreted Scripture out of context and felt free to change the text to fit their interpretation, pre-AD-70 scribal exegesis sought the plain sense of Scripture according to its original context.¹⁷ Hillel's seven rules of interpretation seem to support such an idea. And G. K. Beale has shown that much of the Jewish apocalyptic literature displays an awareness of the original context of the passages it cites.¹⁸ Therefore to identify apostolic hermeneutics as a Second Temple phenomenon does not resolve the question of whether or not the apostles shared with modern exegetes a concern for the original context of the passages they quoted. For this we must turn to the examples of NT use of the OT and examine whether or not the apostles' use of the OT lined up with the OT context. While countless examples could be given to demonstrate that this is the case, we will limit ourselves to Enns' examples that he states prove the contrary. If these six "difficult" cases can be shown to not be so problematic, then it must be argued that Enns has not developed a strong enough case for evangelicals to reject the idea that the NT authors were concerned for the OT context of the passages they cite.

Enns' Examples

In his article, Enns gives four examples of interpretive methods that demonstrate that apostolic hermeneutics is a Second Temple phenomenon (read: that it interprets the Old Testament without concern for the author's intention): the use of Exod 3:6 in Mark 12:18-27 and par.; the use of Hos 11:1 in Matt 2:15; the use of Isa 49:8 in 2 Cor 6:2; and the reference to Abraham's seed in Gal 3:16, 29. In *Inspiration and Incarnation* he repeats these four examples and adds the use of Isa 59:20 in Rom 11:26-27 and the use of Ps 95:7-11 in Heb 3:7-11. Our analysis of these passages will show the depth of interaction with the context of these OT passages.

Exodus 3:6 in Mark 12:18-27 and Parallels

In Mark 12:18-27 (par. Matt 22:23-33; Luke 20:27-40), Jesus responds to the Sadducees' question about the resurrection by saying that the Sadducees err because they "know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God" (Mark 12:24).¹⁹ According to Jesus, "even Moses showed [that the dead are raised], in the passage about the bush, where he calls the Lord the God of Abraham and the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob. Now he is not God of the dead, but of the living, for all live to him" (Luke 20:37f). Enns says here that we have an example where the apostles are reading the OT "in ways that are adverse to grammatical-historical exegesis.... To understand Exod 3:6 as demonstrating that 'the dead rise' (Luke 20:37), as Jesus does, violates our hermeneutical sensibilities, and we should not pretend otherwise."²⁰ In *Inspiration and*

¹⁷ David Instone-Brewer, *Techniques and Assumptions in Jewish Exegesis before 70 CE* (Texte und Studien zum Antiken Judentum 30; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1992).

¹⁸ G. K. Beale, *The Use of Daniel in Jewish Apocalyptic Literature and in the Revelation of St. John* (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 1984), 12-153. Most of the argument in this paragraph was previously made by Beale in "Did Jesus and the Apostles Preach the Right Doctrine from the Wrong Texts? Revisiting the Debate Seventeen Years Later in the Light of Peter Enns' Book, *Inspiration and Incarnation*," *Them* 32 (2006): 26-31.

¹⁹ All Bible quotations, unless otherwise noted, are taken from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version*®, copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

²⁰ Enns, "Apostolic Hermeneutics," 269-270.

Incarnation, Enns says, “No one reading Exodus and coming across 3:6 would think that resurrection was suddenly the topic of conversation.... There is no persuasive connection between that passage and how Jesus uses it.”²¹

In response to Enns, a number of observations should be made. First, Jesus is not suggesting that the “topic” in Exodus has changed, but he is arguing that a necessary implication of God’s self-identification in Exod 3:6 is that “the dead are raised.” Whether or not the Exodus narrative changes topics is not the issue. The issue is whether or not what Moses says necessitates a belief in the resurrection.

Second, notice that Jesus did not pick some arbitrary text that had an ambiguity that could be stretched to refer to the resurrection. He chose one of the greatest moments of God’s self-revelation in the entire Old Testament, when God broke 430 years of silence to call the man of God to the mission that would be God’s supreme display of power in the Old Testament.²² The text Jesus chooses is in itself both a synopsis of what God has done in the past and a preview of what God will do in the future. When God identifies himself as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, he is calling to mind the covenant that God had made with them (cf. Exod 2:24) which appears to have been broken since Israel had long been in slavery and suffering. God does not merely identify himself as “the God of your father” (Exod 3:6a) or as Yahweh (Exod 3:15), but as the God of these patriarchs (3:6, 15, 16, 4:5), who according to the Sadducees no longer have any existence. As Bradley Trick argues, the Sadducees’ own example of levirate marriage presupposes that death annuls a covenant. If God is remaining faithful to the covenant, the patriarchs must continue to exist in some sense.²³

Enns argues that this use of the OT is “unappealing ... for *our* eyes, [but] it seems to have served its purpose for Jesus’ audience.”²⁴ He calls this “a very important piece of information,”²⁵ because to Enns it suggests that the “methods” of apostolic interpretation “were a function of their *cultural* moment, [but] *why* they engaged the OT was driven by their *eschatological* moment.”²⁶ But the question must be asked, would Jesus’ audience really have been moved by Jesus’ use of the OT if there is no contextual link to the OT passage he quotes? We have already seen that Instone-Brewer’s work suggests that many Jews would have been dissatisfied with an atomistic use of Scripture. Furthermore, it should be noted that Mark is showing Jesus as the greatest interpreter of the OT here. As Mays argues, in Mark 11-12, “the relationship between Jesus and Scripture is a recurrent feature.” He is portrayed in 11:1-12:12 as a great interpreter, and then in 12:13-34 we find three stories in which he is tested by Pharisees, Sadducees, and scribes as an interpreter of Scripture, and finally in 12:35-44 Jesus condemns the scribes for failing to properly understand Scripture.²⁷ His responses to the opponents’ questions, while not necessarily convincing the Sadducees to embrace a doctrine of the resurrection, were powerful enough to embarrass the Sadducees so that they would no longer ask him any questions. It is

²¹ Enns, *Inspiration and Incarnation*, 114.

²² So James Luther Mays, “Is This Not Why You Are Wrong?” Exegetical Reflections on Mark 12:18-27,” *Int* 60 (2006): 36.

²³ Bradley R. Trick, “Death, Covenants, and the Proof of Resurrection in Mark 12:18-27,” *NovT* 49 (2007): 232-256. D. A. Carson notes that Jesus does not need to prove resurrection over against some other form of afterlife but against the Sadducees’ concept of nonexistence since these are the two options being considered (“Matthew,” pages 1-600 in *Matthew, Mark, Luke*, vol. 8 of *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, ed. by Frank Gaebelein [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984], 462).

²⁴ Enns, *Inspiration and Incarnation*, 115.

²⁵ Enns, *Inspiration and Incarnation*, 115.

²⁶ Enns, “Apostolic Hermeneutics,” 275, emphasis his.

²⁷ Mays, “Is This Not Why You Are Wrong?” 33f.

highly unlikely if Jesus was not taking them into a consideration of the implications of the covenant for the patriarchs' afterlife that the Sadducees would have been as silenced by Jesus' response as they were. Enns is correct that the effectiveness of Jesus' response is "a very important piece of information," but it seems likely that this evidence leads in a different direction than Enns argues.

Hosea 11:1 in Matthew 2:15

Enns' second example is perhaps more telling. Matthew claims that Jesus' sojourn in Egypt fulfilled "what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: 'Out of Egypt I called my son.'" Enns argues,

The real problem is this: scanning the context of Hosea 11, it becomes quite clear that Hosea himself is not talking about the boy Jesus, nor is he thinking of a future messiah. In fact, Hosea 11 is not looking to the future at all but simply alluding to the past, as the context of 11:1 makes clear. ... This passage is not predictive of Christ's coming but retrospective of Israel's disobedience.²⁸

Enns' comments are strange here since Hosea 11 is clearly future-referring. In context the argument is as follows:

1. Israel was brought out of Egypt as God's son (11:1)
2. Israel did not measure up to the status of a son (11:2)
3. Israel will be sent back to Egypt (11:5)²⁹
4. Israel will be faithful again and will come from Egypt again (11:10-12)

Matthew's point is that Jesus is the faithful one who measures up to the status of son and is brought out of Egypt thereby bringing this prophecy to its fulfillment. From this we see that Matthew was not randomly selecting a proof-text but was interpreting Hosea 11 in its context and finding its fulfillment in Jesus.

Isaiah 49:8 in 2 Corinthians 6:2

The next text Enns deals with is the use of Isa 49:8 in 2 Cor 6:2. Enns says Isaiah is speaking of "the future deliverance of Israel from Babylon."³⁰ While Isaiah is clearly speaking of this deliverance (see, e.g., 48:20) his message is not limited to the return from exile. Rather, this passage is part of Isaiah's prophecies about the Suffering Servant (see 49:3). While in one sense Israel is the Suffering Servant there are plenty of reasons throughout the Suffering Servant passages to believe that Isaiah had in mind one person who would fulfill the prophecy in himself.³¹ This can be seen in Isa 49:3 where the servant is explicitly identified as "Israel," and then two verses later the servant is spoken of with these words, "[The LORD] formed me from the womb to be his servant, to bring Jacob back to him; and that Israel might be gathered to him" (Isa 49:5; cf. 49:6). Just verses before our quotation, Isaiah shows that the Servant is both Israel and an individual who will bring Israel back to him. Similarly there are passages that show that the "day of salvation" is not referring to a 24-hour period or even to the period of time that Israel

²⁸ Enns, *Inspiration and Incarnation*, 133.

²⁹ The LXX has the better reading here.

³⁰ Enns, *Inspiration and Incarnation*, 135.

³¹ For more of a discussion on the servant having both a corporate and an individual referent see Peter Balla, "2 Corinthians," in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, ed. G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 767, and G. K. Beale, "The Old Testament Background of Reconciliation in 2 Corinthians 5-7 and Its Bearing on the Literary Problem of 2 Corinthians 6.14-7.1," *NTS* 35 (1989): 550-581.

would be returning from Babylon, but instead to an eschatological day of salvation (see, e.g., Isa 51:6, 8). Here the grammatical-historical context calls for an interpretation that includes two referents, first Israel in the day of return from exile and ultimately the individual Servant who will complete the goal of making Israel “a light to the nations” (49:6). It seems clear that Isaiah intended a dual fulfillment, and therefore Enns’ conclusion that Isaiah’s words are “understood not on their own terms”³² is unwarranted.

The “Seed” of Abraham in Galatians 3:16, 29

Enns also points to Paul’s argument in Gal 3:16 that God does not make the promise to Abraham’s *seeds*, referring to many, but to his *seed*, referring to Christ. Because both זרע in the Hebrew and σπέρμα in the Greek are collective singulars, Enns argues that “Paul is using the Old Testament in a way that has nothing to do with how the Old Testament is to be understood in its original context.”³³ But it should be noted first of all that this is one point within a larger argument that is rooted in the contextual meaning of the Genesis promise. Paul actually examines the historical backdrop for the adding of the law and its relationship to the promise to Abraham both historically and within the canonical context in the Pentateuch to demonstrate that the inheritance does not come through the law, but through the promise (Gal 3:18). Second, as Enns notes, Paul later refers to his readers (plural) as the seed (singular). If Paul’s point is merely that the promise cannot be for the many since the word “seed” is singular, then Paul disproves his own argument in a way that would be obvious to his readers. Therefore it is more likely that Paul is doing something different with his discussion of the singularity of the seed. Throughout the Genesis narrative it is clear that the promise is not for all of Abraham’s descendents, nor even for all of Isaac’s descendents, but it is limited to a select seed. This is the very point that Paul makes in Rom 9, where he quotes Gen 21:12, “Through Isaac shall your seed be named.” It is likely that this is also the point Paul is making in Gal 3 – it is not the many descendants through whom the seed is named, but the one, ultimately Jesus (Gal 3:16), and his followers are also the seed, but only in Christ (Gal 3:29). If so, this argument flows naturally from the Genesis narrative. Once again a NT author has not interpreted the OT atomistically but has demonstrated an awareness of the passage in its original context that allows him to see a deeper meaning in the text.³⁴

Isaiah 59:20 in Romans 11:26-27

In Rom 11:26-27, Paul quotes Isa 59:20 using the words, “The deliverer will come *from* Zion,” whereas the MT says, “The deliverer will come *to* Zion” and the LXX says, “The deliverer will come *for the sake of* Zion.” Enns argues “that Paul adjusts the wording of Isaiah to reflect his theological goal.”³⁵ While it is true that Paul regularly adjusts the wording of OT texts, it must be noted that Paul does not change the contextual meaning of the texts he cites. In fact, Paul *is* arguing that the deliverer will come to Zion and for the sake of Zion; his broader argument is that ethnic Israel will be saved, so Paul is interpreting the passage as it was intended. He likely changes the preposition to bring Psalm 14:7, which calls for salvation to come from

³² Enns, *Inspiration and Incarnation*, 136.

³³ Enns, *Inspiration and Incarnation*, 137.

³⁴ It is noteworthy that Psalm 72 reiterates the promise to “the royal son.” We see here an OT precedent for understanding the promise as referring ultimately to a singular referent, namely the one anointed by God. Also consider the discussion over the “protoevangelium” in Gen 3:15 and the “seed” language throughout Genesis.

³⁵ Enns, *Inspiration and Incarnation*, 139.

Zion, into the picture, just as he brings other texts into this quotation here.³⁶ Paul is summarizing the OT teaching on the subject and is doing it in a way that is faithful to the original contextual meaning of each OT passage to which he refers. Enns also argues that Isaiah was speaking of God's redemption of Israel from exile whereas Paul uses Isaiah's words as "a picture of Christ's redemption of Israel from sin."³⁷ But must Isaiah's words be limited in their original context to return from Babylonian captivity? These chapters are thoroughly messianic and are not completely fulfilled in the return, so Paul is not reappropriating Isaiah's words based on an analogous situation; rather Paul is explaining how the original meaning of Isaiah's words will ultimately be fulfilled.

Psalm 95:7-11 in Hebrews 3:7-11

Finally, Enns discusses the altered wording of Psalm 95:7-11 in Heb 3:7-11.³⁸ Here the author of Hebrews adds the word *διό* ("therefore") to the Septuagint text of Psalm 95. Enns argues that by placing the word after *τεσσαράκοντα ἔτη* ("forty years") rather than before, the author of Hebrews has made the forty-year period refer to "the duration of God's works" rather than "the period of God's wrath."³⁹ According to Enns, the author does this because "in order for the psalm to be read as a Christian psalm ... some changes need to be made."⁴⁰ Otherwise, the analogy between the church and the wilderness generation "breaks down."⁴¹ But once again it can be observed that the author is building off of the contextual meaning of Psalm 95, and the story that Psalm 95 refers to makes it clear that the forty year period was characterized by both God's works and God's wrath, so the author has been true to the context in his entire argument.

Moreover, Enns has not adequately demonstrated that the reason the author adds *διό* where he does is to prevent the analogy from breaking down. The analogy does not break down for the early church any more than it would have for the psalmist's original audience. The fact that seven verses later the author refers to God *being angry* for forty years at the wilderness generation does not suggest that the author is reading the text differently in 3:10 and in 3:17 as Enns argues, but rather that the author correctly interpreted Psalm 95. A more likely explanation is that the author added the word as close to the verb that he was highlighting as possible – the wilderness generation tested God; *therefore* God was *angry*.

Conclusion

Upon examining Enns' six examples of Second Temple interpretive methods in the New Testament, we find that in none of these has he demonstrated that the New Testament authors did not respect the context of the Old Testament passages they quoted (much less that they "approached the Old Testament in ways that are adverse to grammatical-historical exegesis"⁴²). On the contrary there were contextual links between each of the passages and their use in the NT. Often a deeper understanding of the OT context illuminates how the NT author is using the text, and it therefore becomes clear that the apostles were thoroughly immersed in the OT text,

³⁶ So Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1998), 619, and Mark A. Seifrid, "Romans," in G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson, eds., *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 674.

³⁷ Enns, *Inspiration and Incarnation*, 139.

³⁸ Enns, *Inspiration and Incarnation*, 139-142.

³⁹ Enns, *Inspiration and Incarnation*, 140, emphasis removed.

⁴⁰ Enns, *Inspiration and Incarnation*, 142.

⁴¹ Enns, *Inspiration and Incarnation*, 141.

⁴² Enns, "Apostolic Hermeneutics," 269.

interpreted it in line with the grammatical-hermeneutical context, and, in agreement with Enns, came away from their reading with a deeper understanding of the text because they saw the end to which it pointed. Therefore we must conclude that while the apostles used a Christotelic hermeneutic, this hermeneutic always respects the grammatical-historical context of the OT.

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