

Christopher Seitz and the Priority of the Christ Event

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Abstract

While Seitz's *The Elder Testament: Canon, Theology, Trinity* shows some sympathy for historical-critical readings of the Old Testament, he rightly insists on a theological starting point: he maintains that the Old Testament itself provides providentially inserted clues that demand a Trinitarian reading, and so he maintains that the Old Testament itself "pressures forth" a Christian reading of the text. We should keep in mind, however, that it is only through the acknowledgement of the ontological priority of the Christ event (and of the church's identity within the Christ event) that the Spirit enables us to recognize the hidden, deeper meanings of the text.

Keywords

Canonical criticism, Christopher Seitz, historical criticism, Old Testament, theological exegesis

Chris Seitz has done a great service, both to the scholarly community and to the church, with his latest book, *The Elder Testament: Canon, Theology, Trinity*. It is the product of many years of reading and teaching the Old Testament. Seitz's prodigious scholarly output is beyond question. Whoever reads Seitz's listing of his many biblical commentaries and technical studies cannot but be impressed with his credentials for the project he is undertaking in this book (2). The current volume is really Seitz hammering home some of the central concerns that have come to take centre stage in his interpretive approach to the Old Testament. The 16 chapters of this volume are various soundings in the area of (for the most part) Old Testament hermeneutics, and the author deftly puts forward and defends some of his main concerns.

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As the subtitle of the book makes clear, it is concerned with three themes: canon, theology, and Trinity. The book moves from the general to the particular. It begins with the question of “canon,” which for Seitz is a reality that necessarily has interpretive priority. The book’s first four chapters, therefore, deal broadly with the question of the nature of the Old Testament, or its “ontological” character, as Seitz terms it. Part 2 takes us to the more technical question of historical criticism – its relevance, limitations, and shortcomings. Here Seitz argues in a variety of ways that while historical critical methods have their use, they are typically “improperly attuned to theological evaluation focused on the peculiar character of the final form of the biblical canon” (7). The third part of the book looks at various biblical passages in order to make clear that the Old Testament itself “pressures forth” Christian, Trinitarian readings of the Old Testament. In short, Seitz’s book moves from canon (Part 1), via theology (Part 2), to Trinity (Part 3).

Chris Seitz is well known, of course, for his canonical hermeneutic. As an independent-minded student of Brevard Childs, Seitz is among the most theologically attuned students of the Old Testament, something for which I am deeply grateful. This theological orientation comes to the fore in two ways. First, Seitz is fearless in his criticism of historical-critical approaches to the Old Testament. Much of the book’s second part is devoted to deconstructing the historical criticism associated with Julius Wellhausen in favour of an approach that takes the canonical context of the biblical text seriously. This is not to say that Seitz simply rejects historical criticism. He anticipates that some readers may take this as his aim, but he pre-empts such a reading of his endeavour: “Our goal in this book would be misunderstood if it was viewed as a rejection of historical interest or the critical reconstructions of the past centuries and the insights they have brought to bear” (276). Indeed, Seitz believes that in some ways historical-critical readings of the Old Testament are indispensable, “precisely so that the theological heart of its canonical articulation can be appreciated ...” (33; cf. the positive comments on historical criticism on 49 and 69). Seitz is intent on retaining a place for historical criticism, though he is arguably even more theologically inclined than Childs was.

I must confess that I am less favourably inclined to historical criticism than Seitz is – from all I can tell, while reconstructions can sometimes be made, with varying degrees of plausibility, for the most part these insights are exegetically fruitless. My judgement in this regard stems from what I consider the exegetical task to be, and while going behind the text in search of hypothetical sources is not in principle an impossible endeavour, the exegetical task is to find Christ in the text, to renew the life of the readers, and to search for the seeds of the kingdom of God. This task is much more forward- than backward-looking. Historical criticism erroneously operates with a methodological naturalism that separates historical investigation from the realities of faith. This approach fails to begin

with the newness of the Christ event and, as a result, treats nature as *pura natura* – a strictly autonomous realm subject to an empirical mode of human investigation that ignores the supernatural *telos* of the created order. In short, historical criticism is grounded in a strict separation between nature and the supernatural (if not at times in an outright denial of the latter). As such, it's an approach to Scripture that takes its starting-point outside of Jesus Christ and the church, and its exegetical results can, for the most part, safely be ignored.

Seitz is far too careful an Old Testament scholar to put things as baldly as I just did (and I doubt that he would entirely buy into my suggestions), but these matters need to be stated up front. If we don't, not only will we constantly be playing defence, but we run the danger of adopting subconsciously the naturalist presuppositions of the higher critics. Exegesis – both of the Old Testament Scriptures and of the New Testament – must begin with the newness of the Christ event. That is to say, we ought to approach the Old Testament not on its own premises – if by this we mean premises that don't always already have Jesus Christ as their very heart and centre. If we were to treat the Old Testament as a public witness that is equally accessible to all (through our natural gifts), as if by reading the text carefully everyone, regardless of their pre-understandings, would arrive at identical theological conclusions, we would afford to the “realm of nature” a kind of autonomy and independence that fails to reckon with Christ at the outset. In other words, on my understanding, Christ (and, indeed, the church's rule of faith more broadly) is not only the end product of the exegetical task; he is its source and its beginning. We know from the outset that the Old Testament Scriptures are about the Christ who died for our sins and has risen for our justification. Getting these theological-metaphysical issues clarified from the start is important in order to avoid getting caught up arguing with our historical-critical friends on turf that is ultimately alien to the Christian faith.

Seitz is largely on the side of the angels here. His canonical reading of Scripture treats divine providence as the theological warrant for the Scriptures' unity. The manifestation of the Logos in the flesh was “preplanned,” Seitz argues in line with Justin Martyr and Clement of Alexandria (263). And he insists that since “God has been at work from eternity,” “the Elder Testament had and has its own providential role in articulating the doctrine of God” (264). Seitz's doctrine of Scripture – and his understanding of the relationship between Old and New Testaments—is grounded squarely in his belief in divine providence. What is more, for Seitz this theological starting point means that we can legitimately search for the contents of the Christian faith in the Old Testament Scriptures. In fact, Seitz sees the contents of the Old Testament Scriptures as the basis for our knowledge of Jesus Christ: “Jesus Christ the Word is revealed as such by the prophets,” Seitz boldly and rightly claims. It is this providential structuring of the Scriptures that determines Seitz's entire book.

Perhaps the book's main emphasis (which comes to the fore particularly clearly in the third part) is that the Old Testament Scriptures themselves exert prospective theological pressure. That is to say, the Old Testament *demand*s some rather than other interpretations. Time and again, this inherent "pressure" of the text yields for Seitz a Christian theological reading of the Old Testament text. For example, the monotheist confession of Isaiah 45:20–25 exerts "pressure" on the acknowledgement in Philippians 2:5–11 that it is Jesus before whom every knee shall bow (187). Indeed, the various forays into the history of exegesis in Part 3 all serve as "examples of how the Elder Scripture may be said to pressure forth and open onto a dimension of ontology that finds more explicit articulation in the early church's confession of One LORD God: the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit" (201). Put differently, the early church neither invented the doctrine of the Trinity nor imposed its trinitarian readings onto the Old Testament. On Seitz's reading, the Old Testament itself provides providentially inserted clues in the text that demand a Trinitarian reading.

The advantage of Seitz's approach is obvious. The Old Testament can be seen as its own independent witness to the Christian faith. When we read the Old Testament Christianly, we are not engaging in a postmodern reader-response hermeneutic but are in line with the objective reality of the Old Testament text itself. Perhaps this is in good part why Seitz titles his book *The Elder Testament* and refers to the Old Testament in this way throughout much of the book. While he is not trying to change the terminology from "Old" to "Elder" Testament (14, 17), Seitz uses the expression "Elder Testament" to draw attention to an aspect of the term "Old" that we could easily overlook: in antiquity the term "Old" meant "venerable, original, and time-tested" (15). The term "Elder" draws explicit attention to this connotation of tested, wise, and venerable. Seitz's book is in good part an attempt to make us listen to the Old Testament's discrete witness to the Trinitarian faith. In other words, the literal meaning of the venerable Elder Testament itself calls forth the truths of the rule of faith that the New Testament also proclaims.

The august status of the "Elder Testament" has implications for how we treat it. Seitz repeatedly draws attention to Christological and Trinitarian implications of a literal reading of the Old Testament. Christians are not reading the crucifixion back into Psalm 22 ("I can count all my bones"); instead, they understand the Passion in the light of a literal reading of Psalm 22 (44). In other words, the ontological reality of the church's faith is already at work in the Old Testament. For Seitz, the rule of faith arises from the early church's literal reading of the Scriptures (the Old Testament). In that regard, the apostles were no more privileged than we are today: neither have "unmediated

access” to the truth of the gospel, since both rely for access on a literal reading of the Old Testament (47). As Seitz puts it at one point: “The literal and historical were so designed as to speak forth the dogmatic reality of the Son” (190-191; cf. 269). In short, it is Christological and Trinitarian literalism that calls forth the early church’s confession of the rule of faith.

There is much in this approach that has my warm endorsement. In particular, Seitz’s repeated insistence that the Christian understanding of God is “embedded” within the Old Testament’s discourse about God strikes me as profoundly true (12, 16). Reflecting on the Emmaus Road story in Luke 24, Seitz rightly sees the risen Lord’s interpretation of “all the Scriptures” as implying that the Lord was known here “in figures and under signs,” so that the Scriptures manifested Christ in their own way, distinct from the sacramental reality itself, “seen” only by the eyes of faith (181). At this point, Seitz appeals in a footnote to a beautiful quotation from Henri de Lubac:

In the literal meaning of Scripture, the Logos is not, properly speaking, incarnated as he is in the humanity of Jesus, and this is what allows us still to speak of a comparison: he is, nevertheless, already truly incorporated there; he himself dwells there, not just some idea of him, and this is what authorizes us to speak already of his coming, of his *hidden presence*. (181n2; emphasis added)

Seitz’s language of “embedding” and of “sacramental reality” indicates that for him the New Testament reality (what he often terms “ontology”) is always already present in the Old Testament. Therefore, a Christian reading is not an arbitrary, *ex post facto* reading back into the Old Testament what we already believed anyway.¹ This sacramental approach to Old Testament interpretation seems to me right in important respects.

If I have a criticism of Seitz’s book, it would be this: it does insufficient justice to what de Lubac terms the *hidden* character of Christ’s presence in the Old Testament. Concerned as he is to counter reader-response interpretations of the Old Testament, Seitz wants to insist that the Elder Testament *when read literally* yields, ultimately, the ontological reality of the rule of faith. This results in a markedly strong emphasis on the Old Testament’s own discrete reality. The Elder Testament receives a rather independent status vis-à-vis the New Testament reality, so much so that the Elder Testament is for him primarily the “Scriptures of Israel” (as in the subtitle of chapter 1). Christians reading the Scriptures are standing in the “hall of the Gentiles,” as “invitees,” “guests” (60), “outsiders looking in” (57), so that our stance as readers should be “one

1. Cf. Seitz’s repeated insistence that we are not simply retrospectively “reading back” into the Old Testament the truths of the Christian faith (43-44, 46, 194, 196-197, 251).

of caution, humility, and respect for our status as invitees” (61). Seitz reminds us that Jesus “opens the scriptures for his brethren and declares them to be everywhere about him, not about you and me” (60). By treating the Old Testament on its own discrete terms, Seitz ends up treating it only secondarily as the church’s Scriptures: they are, for him, primarily, the Scriptures of Israel.

The Old Testament does have *chronological* priority over the New Testament. But the hidden reality of the Christ event has *ontological* priority over the literal account that we read in the Old Testament Scriptures, just as God’s eternal, providential plan in Jesus Christ is the ontologically determining factor of the entire biblical narrative, from beginning to end. Grace, in that sense, is prior to nature. When Christians read the Old Testament in the light of Christ, they do so not as invited guests but as “fellow citizens with the saints,” as “members of the household of God” (Eph. 2:29), as “Abraham’s offspring” (Gal. 3:29), as “the circumcision” (Phil. 3:3), as the “Israel of God” (6:16), and as the people to whom Paul applies Hosea’s discourse of “my people” (Rom. 9:25–26; cf. Hos. 1:10; 2:23) and in whom Peter recognizes “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession” (1 Pet. 2:9; cf. Exod. 19:6). *Pace* Seitz, when Jesus opens the Scriptures, their reality is not just Jesus Christ (as an individual) but the *totus Christus*: Christ and all who are *en Christō*. Ontologically speaking, the Old Testament is first and foremost Christian Scripture. The entire Scripture, Old and New Testaments, is the church’s Bible, and it is only *within* that acknowledgement of the ontological priority of the Christ event (and of the church’s identity within the Christ event) that it makes sense to acknowledge a *relative* autonomy of the Old Testament witness and to speak of a proper, literal meaning of the text. The allegorical sense ontologically precedes the literal sense.

Seitz believes that it is by means of a literal reading of the Old Testament that we arrive at the ontological reality (i.e., the Christological and Trinitarian faith of the church) implied in the Old Testament. I am not convinced that the early church knew of such Christological or Trinitarian literalism. It knew of various levels of spiritual meaning – which developed into the common distinction between allegory (Christology), tropology (morality), and anagogy (eschatology) – and it saw these various meanings as providentially hidden within the (Old Testament) Scriptures. On the early church’s understanding one could arrive at these hidden, deeper levels only by a distinct illumination of the Spirit. (As Seitz himself acknowledges in connection with Luke 24, it is only with “eyes of faith” that we recognize the sacramental reality.) The Christological reality (*res*) of the Old Testament sacrament (*sacramentum*) was hidden, and it is not the case that just anyone can decipher it. The pervasive discourse among the church fathers about spiritual discernment means that only if the reader is transfigured by the reality of Christ does he gain the

ability of also recognizing the transfigured Christ in the Old Testament text. Origen goes so far as to identify eating the Passover lamb (Exod. 15) with the allegorical reading of Scripture, so that with Christ we “pass over” into the heavenly realm as we read the Scriptures allegorically or spiritually, rather than merely literally or physically. When the pro-Nicene fathers read Proverbs 8 as referring to the eternal generation of the Son, they did so because they already knew the mind (*dianoia*) of Scripture from the rule of faith. Gregory of Nyssa’s invective against Eunomius as a “slave of the letter” who “attends in Jewish fashion to the mere sound of syllables” and is a mere “scribbler” has to do with his conviction that (neo-)Arian readings of Proverbs 8 are literal rather than allegorical. They do not do justice to the “hidden” (*kekrymmenōs*) or allegorical manner in which the proverbs communicate.²

Perhaps one way to put my reservation is by raising the question: Is it not *in the historical climax of the Incarnation* that we see the ontological reality to which the Old Testament obliquely refers? Seitz speaks repeatedly of the latter (the ontological reality), but not often of the former (Christ as the climax of history). That is to say, he refers to the ontological pressure embedded within the Old Testament, which yields a Trinitarian mode of reading it, but he has much less to say about the fact that this pressure arises from the climax of salvation history. I agree wholeheartedly with Seitz’s claims about the ontological pressure arising from within the Old Testament, and we should not lose sight of this important point of agreement: Seitz and I share a concern to read the Old Testament Scriptures sacramentally, and so we agree that embedded within the Old Testament is the ontological reality that lies anchored in God’s own, eternal providence. But we should follow up with the claim that this ontological reality becomes incarnate in Christ. That is to say, the early church allegorized the Scriptures because it recognized that hidden within the Old Testament is its chronologically future sacramental reality. For Henri de Lubac, Christian allegory was not only a vertical move upwards, but also a historical move forward. De Lubac puts it this way: in Christian exegesis we move “from history to history.”³ He continues, saying with reference to the Incarnation: “Everything culminates in a Great Fact, which in its unique individuality has multiple repercussions; which dominates history and is the bearer of all light as of all spiritual fecundity: *the Fact of Christ*.”⁴ The reality of the Old Testament has become flesh in Christ, and this means that when we read the

2. I may refer here perhaps to my book *Scripture as Real Presence: Sacramental Exegesis in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017) 97–102, 159–186.

3. Henri de Lubac, *Scripture in the Tradition*, trans. Luke O’Neill (1968, repr; New York: Herder & Herder – Crossroad, 2000), 163.

4. *Ibid.*, 164.

Old Testament we know its reality *not simply because of its own distinct witness* but primarily because this reality has revealed itself at the climax of the redemptive history.

Frances Young, discussing Athanasius's reading of Proverbs 8, writes, "Athanasius is confident that his interpretation is correct because he has received insight into the 'mind' of scripture through the Canon of Truth received from his predecessors."⁵ For Young, therefore, there is a certain circularity in Athanasius's reading that we must acknowledge. This is not to say that Athanasius "retrofitted" Proverbs 8 to fit with a theory of eternal generation that he held irrespective of the Old Testament witness, and we should heed Seitz's repeated warnings against "reading back" Christian truths into the Old Testament in an attempt to retrofit the church's faith. But the question is whether just anyone can recognize the sacramental presence of Christ in the Old Testament Scripture. In Origen's context, Jewish and Gnostic readers would not have sensed the "pressure" of the Old Testament text when confronted with Origen's allegorical, Christological reading of, say, the Book of Joshua. Nor would Eunomius have sensed this "pressure" when he faced pro-Nicene claims of the eternal generation of the Son. Spiritual things are spiritually discerned (1 Cor. 2:14). In other words, it seems to me that only *retrospectively* and in light of the Christ event does it become clear to his disciples and to the church why and how the Scriptures are all about him.⁶

Regardless of how vertical (and Platonic) we may want to be in orientation, we cannot lose sight of the historical, horizontal progression of the Scriptures climaxing in Christ. Seitz polemicizes against dramatic, narrational approaches to Scripture as articulated by scholars such as Craig Bartholomew and N. T. Wright (57–58, 71–78). I am very much on Seitz's side in the polemic, since these dramatic readings are nominalist in character: they treat historical facts as part of a purely chronological unfolding of events. As such, they fail to recognize the embeddedness of the ontological reality within the Old Testament text. So, Seitz is right: a purely dramatic approach to Scripture is deeply problematic, and given

5. Francis M. Young, *Biblical Exegesis and the Formation of Christian Culture* (1997, repr.; Peabody: Hendrickson, 2002), 44–45.

6. In an earlier book, Seitz objects to Francis Watson taking Paul's reading of the Old Testament as normative for today, and he seems to link this objection to Watson's "retrospective" reading the Law and the Prophets in the light of Christ (*The Character of Christian Scripture: The Significance of a Two-Testament Bible* [Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011], 145). Now, it is true that we dare not retrospectively *impose* a new meaning on the Old Testament Scriptures. But we can and should, I think, retrospectively *recognize* a meaning that was always already present as their deeper, allegorical or sacramental truth, a meaning that previously we were unable to see but now are able to discern because of the newness of the Christ event.

its influence in biblical scholarship, we need Seitz's polemic. At the same time, however, the ontological reality of which Seitz speaks assumes flesh in the new covenant reality within history. That is to say, the ontological reality is revealed in time, in the Incarnation, as the climax of the covenant (to use Wright's term). And because the ontological reality has taken on flesh, in time, we cannot ignore the salvation-historical thrust of Scripture.

For de Lubac (as well as the fathers and medieval theologians whose mouthpiece he was), the ontological reality is already known in the *factum Christi* through faith. Furthermore – and this is where the acknowledgement of salvation history becomes important in my discussion of Seitz – *because the ontological reality is known already*, it is now possible to discern it also in the Old Testament as its deepest allegorical truth. The Christ event allows us to look back and recognize the “pressure” that emanates from Old Testament witness with regard to the reality of Christ. This, it seems to me, is the approach that Saint Paul himself takes to the Old Testament in 2 Corinthians 3. The chapter draws a fairly sharp contrast between the glory of the old and new covenants. Paul nonetheless upholds the books of Moses, by insisting that when we turn to the Lord, the veil covering our hearts is taken away (2 Cor. 3:14–16). In other words, once in conversion (or turning) the veil is removed, we recognize *in Moses* the glory of the Lord.⁷ Only by the light of the *factum Christi* can we recognize also in the Old Testament the hidden realities of the faith. This is typically how the church fathers thought of the relationship between Christ and the Old Testament. Saint Augustine, for instance, understood John 1:17 to read, “The Law was given through Moses; it was made grace and truth through Jesus Christ.” On Augustine's understanding, through Christ, the Law itself *becomes* grace and truth. Michael Cameron comments that this Christological reconfiguration of the Law enabled Augustine to assert its continuing role for the church. “For Augustine,” explains Cameron, “Christ fulfilled the Law by making it grace and truth.”⁸ Augustine maintained – and I think rightly so – that we are able to recognize the hidden, sacramental reality of Christ in the Old Testament only because we have already placed our faith in him in the first place and know, therefore, that he is present throughout the Scriptures.

Discerning the sacramental reality in the pages of the Old Testament Scripture is not a matter of Christological literalism; it is, rather, a matter of Christological

7. See further Hans Boersma, *Sacramental Preaching: Sermons on the Hidden Presence of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016), 190, 193.

8. Michael Cameron, *Christ Meets Me Everywhere: Augustine's Early Figurative Exegesis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 262; italics omitted.

allegorizing.⁹ The Old Testament truth is hidden and needs to be uncovered by means of allegory. Theologians such as Athanasius, Basil of Caesarea, and Gregory of Nyssa engaged in exegetical debates about specific Old Testament passages not because they were convinced that at a purely natural level they might arrive at agreement with their opponents, but (1) because they wanted internally to shore up the faith of the church against heretical attacks from those who could no longer see the truth of the gospel (in other words, in good part the fathers were engaged in protective measures, addressing those who did have spiritual eyes to see) and (2) presumably in part in the hope that in debate, the Spirit might work so as to give heretics the spiritual eyes to see, so that they, too, might recognize the reality of the faith in passages such as Proverbs 8 and Psalm 110. The internal “pressure” of the Old Testament text cannot be discerned equally by all – it is faith that sensitizes one to the reality that, according to the church’s teaching, is present in the Old Testament witness.

It is important to underscore the agreement between Seitz’s approach and my own. He and I may not quite see eye to eye on the Old Testament’s own discrete character as a witness to the reality of faith. Seitz gives greater latitude towards the autonomy of nature and hence to the shared ability of Christian and non-Christian alike to recognize the sacramental reality embedded within the Old Testament. As a result, where Seitz sees Christological literalism, I want to talk of Christian allegorizing. Nonetheless, I am grateful for an Old Testament scholar who boldly and rightly proclaims the reality of the faith as always already embedded within the Old Testament Scriptures. Seitz’s canonical reading recognizes that the Scriptures are pregnant with meaning and that in God’s good providence they are *meant* to be read with a view to the truth of the gospel. We may have a slight disagreement on how we get there, but on this we agree: the Old Testament tells the good news about Jesus.

Author biography

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9. See my discussion of patristic readings of Proverbs 8 in *Scripture as Real Presence: Sacramental Exegesis in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), 159–186. (Neo-)Arian readings of Proverbs 8 relied on a “plain” reading of the text, whereas the pro-Nicenes maintained that this passage yields its truth only when we allegorize it in light of the Incarnation—God’s economic self-revelation in Christ.