

‘You Have No Need That Anyone Should Teach You’ (1 John 2:27):

An Old Testament Allusion That Determines the Interpretation

D. A. Carson

In an unguarded moment some years ago, in a book treating the use of the Old Testament in the New, I wrote, ‘The most striking feature relevant to our subject in these [Johannine] epistles is the absence not only of OT quotations but even of many unambiguous allusions to the OT.’¹ At one time, I think, Judith Lieu would have agreed; even the one Old Testament name, the reference to Cain (1 John 3:12), she had written, more likely springs from Christian catechesis than from independent use of the Old Testament.² Subsequently, however, she argued that my published judgement is ‘wrong’³ because ‘the Cain narrative may be already in mind in 3:7 and even continue to the end of the chapter; behind 2:11 lies Isa 6:10; other passages too may go back to OT passages and their exegesis, while ... many of the images have Old Testament roots.’⁴ Still more recently, she has developed her argument regarding the Cain narrative lurking behind much of 1 John 3,

¹ D. A. Carson, “John and the Johannine Epistles,” in *It Is Written: Scripture Citing Scripture* (Fs. Barnabas Lindars; ed. D. A. Carson and H. G. M. Williamson; Cambridge: CUP, 1988), 256.

² Judith M. Lieu, *The Second and Third Epistles of John: History and Background* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1986), 181-82, 188-89.

³ Judith M. Lieu, *The Theology of the Johannine Epistles* (Cambridge: CUP, 1991), 87, n. 99 (though she misquotes it).

⁴ Lieu, *Theology of the Johannine Epistles*, 87.

and in addition has traced Old Testament roots behind 1:9–2:2 and behind 2:11.⁵

Old Testament Roots

Formally, I suppose, my quotation is correct: there is no explicit Old Testament quotation in the Johannine Epistles, and, on a tight definition of ‘allusions’ and a generous reading of ‘many’, there are not ‘many unambiguous allusions’ either. Nevertheless, my statement is misleading in two respects. The first is that the Old Testament is John’s Bible: it is the matrix out of which his understanding of Christ and the gospel grew, the seedbed for many of his categories. As Lieu puts it, many of the images have Old Testament roots, even if in some cases they have been mediated through the gospel: light and darkness, son of God, Christ, ἰλασμός, and certain covenantal notions. Even the insistence that valid knowledge of God is accompanied by principled obedience sounds very much like an Old Testament theme. On the other hand, these developments in Old Testament categories mostly build upon broad themes and recurrent usage, rather than upon discrete and identifiable texts. Still, my statement could have been more nuanced.

Old Testament Theme

The second misleading element in my quotation is that in addition to the passages in which Lieu detects Old Testament rootage, there is one particular Old Testament text that goes a long way to explaining an important theme in 1 John.

To get at it, we must come to a decision on the extent to which covenantal notions play an important part in this epistle. Almost a century ago, Kennedy argued that, despite the fact that 1 John does not explicitly use the word ‘covenant’, covenantal patterns of thought

⁵ Judith M. Lieu, “What Was from the Beginning: Scripture and Tradition in the Johannine Epistles,” *NTS* 39 (1993): 458-77.

are never far away.⁶ The covenant idea in the Old Testament is bound up with the ‘religious community’, i.e. with the relation of the people to the God whose call and care constitute them. So John says that ‘what we have seen and heard’ we ‘announce also to you’, and the purpose of this proclamation is that the ‘you’ may have ‘fellowship’ with ‘us’, and ‘our fellowship’ is with the Father and his Son. If then we make certain claims to have fellowship with God while walking in the darkness, we lie, we are not practising the truth (1 John 1:3-4, 6-7). Indeed, the sharp antithesis between the faithful community and those who belong to the world reflects this consciousness of a ‘society constituted by fellowship with God in Christ’, and this ‘calls up the Covenant-conception of the ideal of the Hebrew community’.⁷ Kennedy also argues that, just as under the Mosaic covenant the problem of sin was dealt with by the sacrifice prescribed for the Day of Atonement, so John deals with the problem of sin in the community by referring to the sacrifice of Christ (1:9; 2:1-2): Jesus is the ἱλασμός, a word used more than once to render כִּפּוּרִים (*kippurim*, ‘atonement’, e.g. Lev 25:9; Num 5:8), ‘which belongs to the very heart of the covenant-ceremonial’.⁸ Obedience is bound up with the covenant (Exod 24:7); here we are sure that we know God if we obey his commands (1 John 2:3). On God’s part, divine fidelity is what establishes the faith of the people; so in 1 John 1:9, God is ‘faithful and just’, or the terms of the new covenant could not be counted on. Kennedy also argues that while the closest New Testament parallel to the ‘sin unto death’ in 1 John 5:14-15 is Heb 10:26-29 (which is awash with covenant categories), the Old Testament passage behind both of them is Num 15:22-30, which specifies at what point a person may be cut off from the covenant community.

⁶ H. A. A. Kennedy, “The Covenant-conception in the First Epistle of John,” *ExpT* 28 (1916): 23-26.

⁷ Kennedy, “Covenant-conception,” 24.

⁸ Kennedy, “Covenant-conception,” 25.

Old Testament Categories

In 1949, without referring to Kennedy, Boismard published an important article arguing that the knowledge of God in 1 John derives its categories from Old Testament promises of the new covenant, especially the characteristics of the knowledge of God under the new covenant (especially Jer 31 and Ezek 36).⁹ His arguments are in the main convincing, and need not be repeated. In 1978, Malatesta published his doctoral dissertation, tying the categories εἶναι ἐν and μένειν ἐν, so important to 1 John, to ‘interiority and covenant’.¹⁰ One need not agree with every jot and tittle in these works (dissertations commonly go over the top) to perceive their importance, and many of their arguments have been taken up in recent commentaries. Nevertheless, it is vital to recall that the promise of the new covenant in Jer 31 and Ezek 36 specifies that it will come to pass in the last days. It is not only a covenant of eternal life, but it is an internalized covenant: God will write his law on the hearts of his people, or (in Ezekiel) pour out his Spirit upon them, with the result that they will obey him. It was a covenant for the whole people of God (young, old, men, women — all flesh), and dealt radically with the problem of sin. It is difficult not to overhear echoes of such themes in 1 John.

Indeed, the arguments in support of the importance of covenantal categories in 1 John can be strengthened if we are right in seeing the same author behind both the Fourth Gospel and 1 John. Pryor has shown that many of the Gospel’s themes are covenant categories: the use of ἴδιοι in 1:11 with reference to Israel and in 13:1 with reference to Jesus’ followers, the true vine language (John 15), the portrayal of

⁹ M.-E. Boismard, “La connaissance de Dieu dans l’Alliance Nouvelle d’après la première épître de S. Jean,” *RevBib* 56 (1949): 365-91. A more popular version appeared elsewhere: see his “‘Je ferai avec vous une alliance nouvelle’ (introduction à la première épître de saint Jean),” *LumVie* 8 (1953): 94-109.

¹⁰ Edward Malatesta, *Interiority and Covenant: A Study of εἶναι ἐν and μένειν ἐν in the First Letter of Saint John* (Analecta Biblica 69; Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1978).

Jesus as the Mosaic prophet, some of the 'sending' terminology (cf. Num 16:8), the shepherd and flock categories, the links between Jesus' glory dwelling among us (viz. the messianic community) and the Old Testament covenantal antecedents (1:14-18; cf. Exod 32-34), and much more.¹¹ Why Smith, following Bultmann, says that in the Fourth Gospel 'the concept of God's covenant with his people Israel, his election of them, plays no explicit role (cf. Romans 9-11)',¹² I am uncertain. True, John does not use the word 'covenant', but then again neither does he use the word 'church', yet most commentators find not a little to say on ecclesiastical matters. There is no explicit mention of the election of Israel, yet there is a systematic theological interchange between Jesus and his opponents as to what it means to be a son of Abraham (John 8) — and in any case the plentiful election terminology in John is now focused on the messianic community.¹³ In my commentary on John, I strongly sided with those who see Ezek 36:25-27 behind John 3:3, 5, and tied some of the Holy Spirit passages to other new covenant passages (e.g. Joel 2).¹⁴

None of this authorizes us to read material of the Fourth Gospel into 1 John. Yet given the strong reasons for thinking that there is a common author, or (if you prefer) at very least a more or less unified tradition, and that the two books were written perhaps a decade or so apart, there is little reason to think that some fundamental shift has taken place in the move from one to the other. 1 John is saturated with the categories deployed in the Fourth Gospel; and those categories are

¹¹ John W. Pryor, *John: Evangelist of the Covenant People* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1992).

¹² D. Moody Smith, *The Theology of the Gospel of John* (Cambridge: CUP, 1995), 67; Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament* (2 vols.; London: SCM, 1952-55), 2:7-8.

¹³ Cf. D. A. Carson, *Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility: Biblical Themes in Tension* (London: Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1981), 181-92.

¹⁴ D. A. Carson, *The Gospel according to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 191-96, *passim*.

saturated with the imagery and language, and sometimes the quotations, of the Old Testament Scriptures. In 1 John the Old Testament is not so much a source that is quoted as the very matrix of reflection of a Christian who for many years has thought hard about the relation of Christian truth to antecedent revelation.

Old Testament Allusion

In this light, one element in particular from Jer 31 casts considerable light on 1 John 2:20, 27. John's readers are told that they all know (οἶδατε πάντες, 2:20), and need no one to teach them (οὐ χρείαν ἔχετε ἵνα τις διδάσκη ὑμᾶς, 2:27). Many have noted the parallel with Jer 33:34 (LXX 38:34): οὐ μὴ διδάξωσιν ... ἕκαστος τὸν ἀδελφὸν αὐτοῦ λέγων Γνωθὶ τὸν κύριον, ὅτι πάντες εἰδήσουσιν με ... Assuming the reading πάντες in 1 John 2:20, it is hard not to detect a link with Jeremiah's promise that under the new covenant *all* Israel will know the Lord, from the least to the greatest. The parallel has been picked up by commentators as diverse as Westcott and Brown.¹⁵

Yet despite this rather obvious connection with an Old Testament passage, it appears that one important element of the Jeremiah text is regularly overlooked. It might be simplest to quote Brown at length:

Nevertheless, in his opposition to false teaching the author goes to the extreme of denying the need of any teacher. Other NT works inculcate the need for authoritative teachers (I Tim 4:11: 'Command and teach these things'), and indeed 'prophets and teachers' were a regular feature in many churches (I Cor 12:23; Eph 4:11; Acts 13:1) ... Since it is the anointing of the Christian that dispenses with the need for a teacher, the author is most likely basing himself on the promise of Jesus that the Paraclete would teach all things and guide the Johannine Christians along the way of all truth (John 14:26; 16:13) ...

¹⁵ B. F. Westcott, *The Epistles of St John: The Greek Text with Notes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1966 [1892]), 79; Raymond E. Brown, *The Epistles of John* (AB; London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1983), 349.

Despite the author's clear statement against the need for human teachers, some scholars persist in referring to the 'we' of 1 John 1:1-5 and 4:6 as if a group of apostolic teachers were involved. I have argued that more likely the Johannine School (including the author) thought of themselves as 'witnesses,' a title that would offer no rivalry to an anointing by the Spirit. ... I have suggested that the lack of organized teaching authority in the author's branch of the Johannine Community was what made the propaganda of the secessionists such a threat, and that eventually some churches in that Community had to develop local authority with the power to teach. Even if I am correct in judging that the author's vision of a Christianity without human teachers ultimately failed, subsequent Christianity, which had a fully developed magisterium of human teachers, still accepted into its canonical Scripture his dictum, 'You have no need for anyone to teach you.' Already Augustine, a teaching bishop himself, wrestled with this problem (*In Epist.* 3.13; SC 75, 210): 'There is here, my brothers, a great mystery on which to meditate: the sound of my voice strikes your ears, but the real Teacher is within. Do not think that one learns anything from another human being. We can draw your attention by the sound of our voice; but if within there is not the One who instructs, the noise of our words is in vain. ... The internal Master who teaches is Christ the teacher; his inspiration teaches. Where his inspiration and anointing are not found, the external words are in vain.' ... Among the many commentators who have opted for an interior teaching by the Spirit corresponding to an exterior teaching are Belser, Bonsirven, Chaine, de Ambroggi. A particular variant is expounded by Paulinus of Nola (*Epistolae* 23.26; CSEL 29, 193) who died *ca.* 431. He points out that since the Spirit dwells in each faithful Christian, the faithful as a whole have a guide to the truth. This has resulted in the thesis that the universal and constant belief of the Christian community guarantees Christian truth. Still another interpretation is that the anointing of a Christian by the Spirit guarantees the private exegesis of the Scripture. Obviously these interpretations go beyond what the author had in mind, but all of them reflect a continuation of the line of thought he represented. In the long run, his position has meant that the Church has to live with a

tension between authoritative teachers and the Spirit enlightening individual Christians, both of which are attested in the NT.¹⁶

All sides recognize, of course, that elsewhere the author provides other firm advice as to how to remain faithful. It appears that the secessionists thought of themselves as progressives (2 John 7, 9). Against this John urges that true believers must maintain what was taught from the beginning (e.g. 1 John 2:7), and that the ‘anointing’ that they have received (most plausibly referring to the Spirit) teaches them about all things (1 John 2:27). If that were all our author said, there would be no puzzle. But for him to ban all teachers, when transparently what he is doing is teaching himself, seems, on first reading, to be more than a little strange. If that is what he is doing (as Brown, for instance, thinks, as witnessed in the extensive quotation, above), it is difficult to avoid charging the author with rather serious (however unconscious) inconsistency.¹⁷ It is as if he were saying, ‘Ban all teachers, look to yourself and the work of the Holy Spirit within you — provided you agree with my teaching.’¹⁸ Add in all the usual caveats — that any teaching has to be ‘tested’ for its truth (4:1-5; 2 John 9-10),¹⁹ that the ‘truth’ in question may be primarily the kind of basic Christological truth that establishes who is ‘in’ or ‘out’ and

¹⁶ Brown, *Epistles*, 374-76. Cf. similarly Georg Strecker, *The Johannine Letters* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 76-77; and many others.

¹⁷ Cf. Hans-Josef Klauck, *Der erste Johannesbrief* (EKK; Zürich/Neukirchen-Vluyn: Benziger/Neukirchener, 1991), 168-70.

¹⁸ Cf. Stephen S. Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John* (WBC; Waco: Word, 1984), 125: ‘So complete is the spiritual instruction which the true believer has received, John concludes, that the need for temporal teaching is removed. However, as many commentators point out, this absolute declaration about the dispensability of earthly teachers appears in the course of a document which is heavily didactic!’

¹⁹ On which see especially R. Schnackenburg, *The Johannine Epistles: Introduction and Commentary* (London: Burns & Oates, 1992), 149-50 — though, strangely, Schnackenburg does not think that the ‘anyone to teach you’ clause could have the heretics in view. See also Pierre Bonnard, *Les épîtres johanniques* (CNT; Genève: Labor et Fides, 1983), 62.

nothing more basic, that the opponents may well be Gnostics who think they 'know' everything and that John is determined to take them down a peg or two — and the fact remains that this way of wording things is still somewhat puzzling. John does not simply say that his readers do not need any new teaching, or that they should not listen to any false teaching, but that they do not need anyone to teach them.

One of the most denunciatory assessments to arise from this clause comes from Rensberger:

By identifying the opponents with the expected antichrist, the author has transferred the concept of a leader of evil *outside* Christianity to the realm of *internal* Christian dissension. This is a step with potentially dangerous consequences, the first of many such identifications in Christian history. It opens the way for Christians who disagree with other Christians to demonize them altogether, as indeed the author will do in chapter 3.

At the end of this section, the author puts forward a powerfully antiauthoritarian, nearly anarchic concept of the church and of Christian doctrine, by declaring that the only teaching needed is that which comes directly from the Spirit.²⁰

What Rensberger prefers is an ongoing tension between the work of the Spirit and the authority of tradition.²¹

But all of this indignation may be entirely misplaced if we observe a little more closely the context of the Old Testament passages to which (most scholars agree) John is making reference. In particular, Jeremiah's promise of a new covenant (Jer 31:31-34) is preceded by

²⁰ David Rensberger, *1 John, 2 John, 3 John* (ANTC; Nashville: Abingdon, 1997), 83.

²¹ Rensberger's argument begs several issues that are not germane to my argument in this paper, but which should not go unnoticed. In particular, he assumes that because the secessionists emerged from the church (1 John 2:19) that they are still Christians. The conflict, then, becomes the equivalent of denominational squabbling wrongly labelled something more substantive. That is certainly not the author's view, of course, and Rensberger can adopt this view only by saying that John's theological arguments as to what constitutes a Christian do not stand up.

the comment, 'In those days people will no longer say, "The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge." Instead, everyone will die for his own sin; whoever eats sour grapes — his own teeth will be set on edge' (Jer 31:29-30). The proverb is clearly the same as that in Ezek 18:2, though the application in the two contexts is somewhat different. There is a trend in recent commentaries on Jeremiah to argue, correctly, that this proverb is not meant to justify a mere individualizing of religion. Instead, it is commonly argued, the blessings associated with the new covenant will be so sweeping in their extent ('they will all know me', 31:34) that the experience of judgment will fade into the past.²² Doubtless this is true as far as it goes, but it does not deal adequately with the *structural* change that the wording implies. True, Yahweh will bring about an amazing transformation, caused by his writing his law on the hearts of all the people (31:33). But notice the antithesis in the new covenant promises that mirrors the antithesis in the rejection of the old proverb: the new covenant will *not* be like the old covenant, in exactly the same way that the people will *not* say what they used to say in the words of the old proverb. In both instances, the change is the same. Under the new covenant, *all* will be transformed (which suggests not only that there is an increased intensity of religious faithfulness, but an increased sweep of those affected); and under the expectation that the proverb will no longer apply, *all* face judgment without facing the judgment inherited from the 'fathers'.

The point is that the old covenant was tribal and representative. Prophets, priests, kings and a few others received special endowment of the Spirit, and functioned as intermediaries, charged, amongst other things, with telling the rest of the covenant community, 'Know the Lord.' In such a tribal and representative system, when the leaders

²² See, among others, William McKane, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Jeremiah* (2 vols.; ICC; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1986-96), 815-17, 820-27; Gerald L. Keown, Pamela J. Scalise and Thomas G. Smothers, *Jeremiah 26-52* (WBC; Dallas: Word, 1995), 134-35.

(the ‘fathers’) went astray, judgment fell on all — an experience not rare in the history of Israel, as even David managed to demonstrate. All of these intermediaries were in some ways Israel’s teachers. But under the terms of the new covenant, they will no longer be needed, for all who are under that new covenant will know the Lord. In short, those who will no longer be needed, according to this context, are not simply teachers, but intermediary teachers.²³

If this is the thrust of Jer 31, and if John understands it, then his allusion takes on new specificity. By telling his readers that ‘you do not need anyone to teach you’ (2:27; cf. John 6:45; 1 Thess 4:8-9; Heb 8:11), he is, by the allusion, actually saying, ‘You do not need any mediating teacher to teach you’, or, ‘You do not need anyone to teach you in a mediating sort of way.’ The context of Jer 31 makes it clear that what is in view is the *mediating* teacher. Under the old covenant, ideally teaching was mediated to the people through specially endowed prophets, priests, kings; there would be no need for such mediation under the new covenant, for all who are under this covenant would know the Lord. Thus if any group claims, as some Gnostics were wont to do, a special insight that only they and those who joined them enjoyed, part of John’s response is in terms of Johannine theology that itself claims to fulfil Old Testament promises regarding the dawning and nature of the new covenant, a new covenant that would guarantee the gift of the Spirit and consequent illumination to all within its embrace, forever relegating to the sidelines those who claim the authority of specially endowed mediating teachers.

²³ Occasionally commentaries pick up on this distinction, but most do not make much of it. See, for instance, J. A. Thompson, *The Book of Jeremiah* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 581: ‘The extent of the transformation *in those days* would be that intermediaries like Moses, priests, prophets, teachers, would no longer be needed to instruct people and say “Know Yahweh,” because all of them shall *know* (*yāda’*) him, young and old, from the least to the greatest.’

Although it would take another essay to demonstrate the point, all this is happily in line with Johannine theology. It is often noted, for instance, that in the Fourth Gospel Jesus becomes the new temple, the new Passover, the new lamb; he takes over the rites of the Feast of Tabernacles and provides the rest of the Sabbath. The old covenant was tribal and representative; the new covenant extends to the world, and abolishes the representative structures that were constitutive of the Mosaic legislation. That, at any rate, is how John reads Jer 31 and Ezek 36 — and he is not the only New Testament writer to read Old Testament promises that way. This is also why John keeps reiterating that all true Christians must simply hold on to the gospel that has been there from the beginning. To follow the teaching of the secessionists would be to follow something esoteric, something for an inside group that claims a mediating teaching role.

This in turn suggests that some of the categories that many scholars have used to wrestle with 1 John 2:27 — the claims of the Spirit versus the authority of tradition, the universality of the ‘anointing’ but the need for teachers provided that what they teach is appropriately tested — though important in their own right, rather miss the mark here. The Protognostics appear to have been claiming that they have a special insight, a special $\gamma\nu\omega\sigma\iota\varsigma$, that only they, on the inside track, could impart. But that would elevate them to the role of mediating teacher, to the position of those who do more than expound the truth that is in the domain of the entire church and accessible to the entire church: they claim to teach from the vantage point of superiors, the elite of the elect, the mediators. And that class of teacher, the sixth-century prophets foresaw, would forever be abolished.