CORPUS LINGUISTICS AND THE PROBLEM OF INTERTEXTUALITY
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Writing over thirty years ago, Douglas Moo suggested an overlooked category of literary connection between the Hebrew Bible and New Testament. He proposed that some citations and allusions arise from the degree to which earlier biblical texts permeated the thinking of later biblical authors:

Granted the prominence played by the Old Testament in the lives and cultural milieu of the New Testament authors, it is more than probable that they frequently used scriptural language other than as authoritative proof. . . . New Testament writers often—without intending to provide a ‘correct’ interpretation of the Old Testament text—use Old Testament language as a vehicle of expression.\(^1\)

More recently G. K. Beale identified a similar category that he terms the “assimilated use” of Scripture.\(^2\) He explains this as occurring “simply because [the authors]’ minds are so steeped in Scripture that such verbal patterns provide the linguistic frameworks in which they think.”\(^3\)

These formulaic expressions shaped later texts by the conventions of ancient rhetoric to impact and persuade readers by appealing to a common well of cultural fluency and authority.

Modern biblical scholarship has often neglected this aspect. Interpreters have sought rigorous methodology,\(^4\) with many adopting the terminology and methods of intertextuality.\(^5\) Yet intertextuality remains a controversial approach. On the one hand, defining intertextuality remains notoriously elusive, with little consensus on a standard definition.\(^6\) On the other, many criticize the practitioners of intertextuality for their disregard of the term’s origin and meaning, their inconsistent and ill-defined criteria, their errant notions about authors and readers, and their anachronistic assumptions about the literacy of ancient audiences.\(^7\)

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The rise of intertextuality in biblical scholarship, especially in view of these critiques, calls for a fresh assessment. This essay moves beyond the proposals of Moo and Beale to focus on the neglected angle of rhetorical convention in the use of earlier texts. The field of corpus linguistics, with its emphasis on formulaic language, and the subsidiary field of lexical priming, with its study of pre-configured phrases, offer another method for assessing difficult texts in NT interpretation. These disciplines analyze the “priming” of earlier discourses for later discourses, analogous to the practice of mimesis, in which ancient rhetors and writers interspersed well-known or classical phrases in their discourses. I propose that biblical authors and redactors likely used antecedent Scripture to similar ends, for rhetorical purposes rather than from an intention to change the meaning or from a careless neglect of the original context. I begin by outlining the field of corpus linguistics and its contributions to the study of discourse. These insights will be applied to a handful of texts from the Gospel of Matthew, a touchstone for the use of the Hebrew Bible in the NT, under the rubric of canonical priming.

Corpus Linguistics

The linguist J. R. Firth is considered the pioneer of corpus linguistics. Firth stressed the importance of context in determining semantic meaning. He suggests that these connections jointly create a network of meaning for a term, recognized intuitively by fluent speakers. No word is known in isolation but from its customary linguistic connections in the speaker’s cultural encyclopedia. These contextual alignments create what Sinclair calls the “idiom principle,” in which a language user has at her disposal “semi-preconstructed phrases” that constitute a single, not multiple, linguistic choice. Thus, for example, in English the direct object fire occurs after the verb set or light (rather than place or burn), terms like work and evidence attract the adjective hard (but not the antonym soft), and the verb happen is mostly associated with unpleasant events. A word is to be defined not solely from its etymology or contemporary use, but from the repertoire of its collocations with other words and phrases that constitute collectively its “units of meaning.”

Alison Wray hones these analyses in her exploration of “formulaic language.” Formulaic language, according to Wray, consists of preset lexical patterns. She argues that

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12 Firth proposes three categories of usage: (1) semantic collocation: configured words often appear together; (2) semantic colligation: configured words often form prefabricated syntactical constructions; and (3) semantic association or prosody: configured words go together “naturally” while other words do not (see M. Pace-Siggs, Lexical Priming in Spoken English Usage [London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013], 9–11; J. Sinclair, Corpus, Concordance, Collocation [Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1991], 3).


although a fluent speaker carries the capacity for generative grammar, this is not the customary or preferred mechanism for language use.\textsuperscript{17} Rather, “formulaicity” is pervasive.\textsuperscript{18} Several factors motivate such prefabricated frameworks, including the reduction of the speaker’s and listener’s processing effort, the signaling of the speaker’s “in-groupness” or fluency, the persuasion of the listener, and the organization of the discourse.\textsuperscript{19} These frameworks serve an overarching, perlocutionary goal: to promote the speaker’s interests through the skilled use of rhetorical convention.\textsuperscript{20}

Walter Ong argues likewise that these formulaic language patterns were vital in ancient, non-typographic contexts where “fixed, formulaic thought patterns were essential for wisdom and effective administration.”\textsuperscript{21} To retain and retrieve precise formulations required memorable linguistic patterns such as rhythmic and balanced repetitions or antitheses; alliterations and assonances; communally-fixed appellations; and standard, formulaic expressions.\textsuperscript{22} In such an economy “mnemonic serviceability is a sine qua non.”\textsuperscript{23}

\textit{Lexical Priming}

Michael Hoey identifies these discourse patterns as \textit{lexical priming}.\textsuperscript{24} He explains lexical priming as the subconscious, accruing record of the context and co-text of a given word or phrase. This lexical record, imprinted on the memory of language users, influences speakers toward preset linguistic constructions.\textsuperscript{25} Every speaker has a “mental concordance” of each word encountered, a matrix “glossed for social, physical, discoursal, generic, and interpersonal context.”\textsuperscript{26} These fixed word patterns govern language mapping in oral and written discourse.\textsuperscript{27} This generated semantic constellating drives language use and structure and serves as a primary factor in discerning the meaning of words.\textsuperscript{28}

\textit{The Hebrew Bible as “Canonical Primer”}

These fields offer a refined understanding for scriptural discourse. In a highly-oral, manuscript culture, the mnemonic patterning of speech suggests that formulaic, primed phrases shaped the thinking and writing of biblical authors.\textsuperscript{29} David Carr has laid the groundwork for

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16 Wray defines these lexical patterns as “a sequence, continuous or discontinuous, of words or other elements, which is, or appears to be, prefabricated: that is, stored and retrieved whole from memory at the time of use, rather than being subject to generation or analysis by the language grammar” (ibid., 9).
17 Ibid., 10.
18 Ibid., 13.
19 Ibid., 16, 93.
20 Ibid., 101.
22 Ibid., 34.
23 Ibid., 69.
26 Hoey, \textit{Lexical Priming}, 11.
27 Hoey proposes seven categories of association (“Lexical Priming and Literary Creativity,” 8).
28 Hoey, \textit{Patterns of Lexis in Text}, 188.
29 Ong, \textit{Orality and Literacy}, 117.
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these correlations in his study of education and scribal training in the ancient Near East. Scribes, the literate elite of the culture, trained initiates through a process of oral-written education. The memorization and recitation of biblical texts served as an “indigenous curriculum,” and cognitive discipline and retention were crucial to formation and professional proficiency. I propose that the canon of Scripture provided an authoritative linguistic map or “canonical primer” for biblical writers. Later authors’ use of earlier texts followed the conventions of ancient rhetoric with several goals: to boost authority and credibility, to organize units of discourse, and to persuade readers toward certain conceptions or behaviors. Although biblical scholars have hesitated to recognize some intertextual links or have employed tortuous logic at times to absolve NT writers from allegations of abuse of context, the rubric of “canonical priming” provides another external reference point for charting literary connections. The category strengthens the link between written texts and the role of memory and oral/aural associations.

**Canonically-Primed NT Texts**

The following selected Matthean texts, debated by interpreters, serve as possible examples of canonical priming.

**Jer 31:15 in Matt 2:17–18**

Matt 2:17–18 cites the lament of Jer 31:15 to characterize Herod’s slaughter of the infants: “Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah: ‘A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more’” (NRSV). Many interpreters see here a form of typology, as the text in Jeremiah is not a prediction and does not use the yiqtol conjugation to signify a future occurrence. Others decry the citation as the NT’s “most striking case of disregard” for the original context.

Although Matthew uses fulfillment language, several factors point to canonical priming. First, clues in the Jeremiah text hint that the prophet himself may have been employing a well-known refrain. Lindars points out that Ramah is an unexpected place for Rachel to be weeping.

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31 Ibid., 156.
34 C. Edelburg has examined this nexus in her discussion of sound, memory, and other cognitive processes for creating and discerning literary connections (“Intertextuality, Literary Competence and the Question of Readership: Some Preliminary Observations,” *JSOT* 35 [Dec 2010]: 145).
37 The nature of Matthew’s fulfillment language is a vast topic. I side here in the main with France’s conclusion that πληρόω in Matthew regularly connotes the realization of the full potential of a historical pattern in the life and work of the messiah rather than the singular closure of predictive prophecy (Matthew, 183–86).
over the loss of her people. Although one tradition identifies her own burial place as nearby, nowhere in Scripture does she weep for her family. More likely, her mourning serves as a metaphor for the decimation of the population of Ephraim (Ramah borders Ephraim) during the deportation by the Assyrians in 722 BCE. As Ramah was also a gathering point for the exiles sent from Judah in 587 BCE (Jer 40:1), the prophet may have adopted the refrain to express a like sense of despair at their removal to Babylon. This conclusion finds support in the structure of Jer 31:15–22, where the rhythmic poem concerning Rachel’s weeping (v. 15) is set off from the reply, constituting the oracle proper, by the repetition of “thus says the LORD” (v. 16) (םֹאֵר הַיְהוָּה). Jeremiah’s repurposing of a traditional refrain to express his grief signals a “priming” that precedes Matthew. Second, the use of quotations in Matt 1:18–2:23 serves as a structural key to arrange the five sketches covering the infancy of Jesus. Each sketch focuses on a HB citation said to be “fulfilled” (πληρόω) in an aspect of Jesus’ childhood, with the quotations, rather than their narrative introductions, functioning as the structural framework. This concatenation of quotations is in keeping with the practice of mimesis, lending credence that the citations here serve chiefly a rhetorical purpose. Third, Matt 2:17 uses a unique fulfillment formula (“then was fulfilled”; cf. Matt 27:9) emphasizing the timing and evil human agency of the event rather than its singular closure of predictive prophecy (elsewhere as “this was to fulfill”). If, as suggested by some, Matthew restricts his formula-quotations to citations from the prophets, his use of this formulaic text signifies messianic realization.

Ps 2:7 and Isa 42:1 in Matt 3:17

At the baptism of Jesus a voice from heaven proclaims, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased” (Matt 3:17 [NRSV]). Many see here a HB allusion, although various sources have been suggested, including LXX Jer 38:20 (=31:20 MT); Exod 4:23; and Ps 2:7. A conflation with Isa 42:1 (“Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights”) is widely held. Both texts were understood in at least parts of pre-Christian Judaism as messianic (cf. 4Q174 I 1, 10–14 with Tg. Isa. 42:1). Given the circulation of these texts and their rhythmic formulation, these phrases probably circulated in the Second Temple era as canonically-primed messianic formulations centering on the roles of son and servant. Matthew adopts the formulas here for rhetorical purposes to emphasize the inception of Jesus’ public ministry as fraught with messianic expectation.

Zech 11:12–13 and Jer 32:6–9 in Matt 27:9–10

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39 France, Matthew, 168.
In recounting the aftermath of Judas’s death, Matt 27:9–10 has been designated “the strangest fulfillment quotation” in Matthew:47 “Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah, ‘And they took the thirty pieces of silver, the price of the one on whom a price had been set, on whom some of the people of Israel had set a price, and they gave them for the potter’s field, as the Lord commanded me’” (NRSV). The closest verbal parallels are Zech 11:12–13, which refers to the thirty pieces of silver the prophet throws down in the temple for the potter, and Jer 32:6–9, which describes Jeremiah’s purchase of a field in Anathoth.48 Matthew’s citation follows the rabbinical practice of conflating texts and identifying their source by the most obscure reference. Interpreters often view Matthew’s citation as an example of typological fulfillment.49 Several factors, however, suggest that Matthew employs formulaic language primed canonically by sundry texts from the prophets.

First, Matthew’s language is rhythmic and poetical, while the prophecies in Zechariah and Jeremiah are narrative prose. This suggests that Matthew is reworking preset phrasing to achieve cadenced lines for rhetorical purposes rather than aiming at precise citation. His purpose is to establish the divine authority behind even the treachery of Judas to persuade readers of the messianic implications of Jesus’ trial and death. Second, the fulfillment formula is similar to Matt 2:17–18, which emphasizes the timing and evil human agency rather than the closure of predictive prophecy. Third, Matthew adapts the citation to tie in rhetorically to the theme of “innocent blood” so as to underscore the pollution of the land and the ransom aspect of Jesus’ death.50 Matthew uses “blood” (αἷμα) three times in the preceding verses (27:4, 6, 8), and the theme is highlighted by the threefold repetition in v. 9 of “price” terminology (τιμή and τιμάω). These factors suggest a formulaic use of the Hebrew Bible in this case for rhetorical purposes.

**Conclusion**

In this essay I have argued that some examples of NT citations or allusions find better categorization as the rhetorical use of canonically-primed texts from the Hebrew Bible. In these cases, the NT author is likely more concerned for the authoritative and persuasive effect these texts provide his audience than for explaining the original context or for indicating direct fulfillment of predictive prophecy. This approach may prove fruitful in the analysis of other NT texts with clear literary connections to the Hebrew Bible.

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47 Blomberg, “Matthew,” 95.
48 Gundry suggests a closer affinity to Jer 19:1–13, in which Jeremiah shatters a potter’s vessel to foretell the demise of Jerusalem (The Use of the Old Testament in St. Matthew’s Gospel, 124–25).