

QUOTATIONS AND THE CANONISATION OF THE NEW TESTAMENT IN EARLY CHRISTIANITY

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the role of quotations in the canonisation of the New Testament to illuminate how biblical authority and meaning were formed, transmitted, and interpreted, especially within early Christianity. Focusing on the New Testament's extensive use of Old Testament material (some 350 direct quotations), the work analyses varied quotation methods: Masoretic alignment, Septuagint reliance, formula quotations, typological readings, and adaptive composite citations to show how early Christian authors presented Hebrew Scripture as authoritative fulfilment in Christ. While canonisation is shown as a communal, historical process grounded in worship, apostolic reception, and teaching, textual criticism is framed as the scholarly practice required to evaluate manuscript variants and recover the most trustworthy text. The interaction of these fields reveals that Scripture's authority rests on reception, citation, and careful scholarly assessment rather than instantaneous revelation. The work then explores implications for African Christianity: quotations model a dialogical, inculturation-friendly hermeneutic that resonates with African oral and ancestral traditions; they encourage contextual theology that creatively reinterprets inherited sources; and they demand critical discernment to distinguish culturally edifying practices from those at odds with the gospel. Overall, the combined study offers African theologians both validation for contextual engagement and methodological safeguards, showing how faithful interpretation integrates historical awareness, literary sensitivity, and communal responsibility in shaping doctrine and praxis.

KEYWORDS: Quotation, Canonisation, New Testament, Old Testament, intertextuality, and African contextual theology.

INTRODUCTION

It can be stated that the New Testament is rich with quotes that are drawn from a variety of sources, primarily the Old Testament, but also including other texts which are non-canonical sources and some cultural references. These quotes have always been questioned as being rooted in non-canonical sources, and some are praised to have revealed the progressive revelation of God in both testaments. To understand these quotes, one requires the knowledge of both the textual sources and the context in which

they were used, as well as the theological implications they carry for Christian belief and practice, particularly for African Christianity.

Quotations and canonisation are closely related disciplines of biblical research that influence how the Bible is cited, accepted as authoritative, and interpreted in the Christian tradition. In a biblio-Christian context, canonisation refers to the historical process by which some books were acknowledged as Scripture, quotations refer to the use of biblical language within Scripture itself and in later theological writing, and textual criticism examines manuscript variations to recover or at least to reconstruct the most trustworthy version of the biblical text (Ehrman 1-3).

Beale and Carson assert that quotations are important because the New Testament frequently cites the Old Testament, showing that early Christian writers read Israel's Scriptures as foundational for understanding Christ and the church (23-25). Canonisation is equally significant because the Christian Bible did not emerge fully formed; rather, its contents were discerned over time through worship, teaching, apostolic authority, and communal reception (Bruce 18-21). Textual criticism then becomes necessary because the biblical text was transmitted by hand for centuries, producing variants that scholars evaluate through manuscript comparison, internal evidence, and historical context (Metzger and Ehrman 167-69).

Taken together, these fields help scholars trace how biblical authority developed, how scriptural quotations functioned in interpretation, and how the wording of the Bible has been preserved and studied. A strong introduction to this topic, therefore, requires attention to literary usage, historical development, and manuscript evidence, since each dimension contributes to a fuller understanding of the Bible in the Biblio-Christian world.

OLD TESTAMENT QUOTATIONS IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

Hagner argues that the New Testament contains approximately 350 direct quotations from the Old Testament, demonstrating the profound continuity between the Hebrew Scriptures and the Christian writings. These quotations serve various theological purposes, including establishing Jesus as the Messiah, validating apostolic teachings, and demonstrating the fulfilment of prophecy (45). The most frequently quoted Old Testament book is Isaiah, with over 80 citations, followed by Psalms with approximately 70 quotations and Genesis with around 35 citations (Longenecker 112). This extensive intertextual relationship reveals how early Christian authors understood their faith as the legitimate continuation and fulfilment of Israel's religious heritage.

The methods employed by New Testament authors in quoting the Old Testament vary significantly, reflecting different interpretive traditions and theological emphases. Some quotations follow the Masoretic Hebrew text closely, while others align more closely with the Greek Septuagint translation, which was widely used in the first-century Jewish diaspora (Funk 78). Wright states that Matthew's gospel particularly favours formula quotations that explicitly identify Old Testament passages as prophecies fulfilled in Jesus' life, such as "Out of Egypt I called my son" (Hosea 11:1) applied to Jesus' childhood flight to Egypt (Matthew 2:15). Paul's epistles demonstrate

more adaptive quotation methods, often combining multiple Old Testament passages to support theological arguments about salvation and righteousness (203).

Carson argues that the theological significance of these quotations extends beyond mere literary borrowing to fundamental claims about divine revelation and redemptive history. New Testament authors consistently present Old Testament quotations as authoritative Scripture that validates their message about Jesus Christ and the Christian community (2 Timothy 3:16-17) (156). For instance, Peter's Pentecost sermon quotes extensively from Joel and the Psalms to demonstrate that the outpouring of the Holy Spirit represents the fulfilment of Old Testament prophecy (Acts 2:16-21). Hebrews particularly emphasises the superiority of Christ by interpreting Old Testament priestly ceremonies and sacrifices as types and shadows that find their ultimate reality in Jesus' perfect sacrifice (Hebrews 8-10) (Atkinson 89).

The interpretive challenges presented by New Testament quotations of the Old Testament have generated considerable scholarly debate regarding hermeneutical principles and authorial intent. Some quotations appear to take liberty with the original context, employing what modern critics might consider questionable interpretive methods, such as typological interpretation or *peshier*-style application (Hays 134). The quotation of "They looked on him whom they pierced" (Zechariah 12:10) in John 19:37, applied to Jesus' crucifixion, demonstrates how New Testament authors could apply Old Testament texts to situations that differ significantly from their original historical context while maintaining theological coherence (Kaiser 67). These interpretive practices reflect first-century Jewish exegetical traditions rather than modern historical-critical approaches.

Understanding Old Testament quotations in the New Testament remains essential for biblical theology and Christian interpretation today. These quotations demonstrate that Christian faith is not merely a novel religion, but rather the fulfilment of God's covenant promises to Israel (Dumbrell 234). The continuity between the testaments provides crucial foundations for understanding the unity of Scripture and the coherence of God's redemptive plan throughout history. Contemporary biblical scholarship continues to explore these intertextual relationships, recognising that proper interpretation requires sensitivity to both the original Old Testament context and the New Testament authors' theological intentions (Richards 178).

QUOTATIONS OF OTHER SOURCES IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

Does a quotation from a non-canonical source become valid in a canonical document? It is obvious that the New Testament frequently quotes other sources to ground its message in earlier revelation and to speak to its first-century audience with authority. These quotations are not ornamental; they function as proof, interpretation, and theological connection. The writers of the New Testament cite the Old Testament most often, especially when presenting Jesus as the fulfilment of Scripture and the early church as the continuation of God's saving work. As scholars note, New Testament authors read the Hebrew Scriptures as living texts that pointed forward to Christ and the church (Wright 112). At the same time, they sometimes drew from non-biblical sources to communicate effectively within Greco-Roman culture.

One of the clearest patterns in the New Testament is the direct quotation of the Old Testament. The Gospel writers and apostles repeatedly introduce quotations with formulas such as “it is written” to show continuity between God’s former acts and the Christ event. Matthew, for example, presents Jesus’ life as the fulfilment of prophetic expectation, while Paul and the author of Hebrews use the Old Testament to explain Christ’s priesthood, suffering, and resurrection. These quotations often do more than repeat earlier words; they recontextualise them for a new historical setting. Childs explains that the New Testament’s use of Scripture reflects both reverence for the older text and confidence that its deeper meaning emerges in Christ (74). Thus, quotation becomes an act of theological interpretation.

The New Testament also quotes or alludes to non-Jewish sources when addressing Gentile audiences. Paul’s sermon on the Areopagus includes a citation from a Greek poet: “For we are indeed his offspring” (Acts 17:28). The epistle of Jude also cites the Book of Enoch, alluding to the intriguing fact of the Jewish testament of Moses (Jude 14-15) (Esler and Pryor, 136-153). Likewise, in Titus 1:12, Paul quotes a Cretan writer to make a rhetorical point about local culture. These references show that the New Testament was not isolated from the wider intellectual world. Hemer observes that such citations demonstrate the apostles’ willingness to engage the surrounding culture without surrendering biblical truth (89). In this way, quotation serves both apologetic and missionary purposes.

The function of quotation in the New Testament is therefore multi-layered. It validates claims about Jesus, strengthens doctrinal arguments, and creates bridges between the biblical message and its audience. Quotations also reveal that the biblical writers understood themselves as interpreters of inherited tradition rather than isolated authors. Their use of earlier sources shows continuity with the past while advancing a new theological claim: that in Christ the promises of God find their fulfilment. As Longenecker argues, citation in the New Testament is not merely literary borrowing but a mark of scriptural transformation and fulfilment (153). This makes quotation central to the literary and theological texture of the New Testament.

It is worthy to note that quotations of other sources in the New Testament are essential to its message and method. The writers quote the Old Testament to demonstrate fulfilment, quote Jewish and Greco-Roman sources to engage broader audiences, and reshape inherited words for Christological ends. Their practice reflects both fidelity to tradition and creative theological interpretation. For readers and scholars, these quotations provide a window into how the early Christian movement understood Scripture, culture, and the person of Jesus Christ. The New Testament, then, is not only a record of faith but also a carefully constructed dialogue with earlier texts and living traditions.

IMPLICATIONS FOR AFRICAN CHRISTIANITY

The extensive use of Old Testament quotations in the New Testament carries profound implications for African Christianity, particularly in shaping hermeneutical approaches that resonate with African oral traditions and communal reading practices. African Christians, inheriting a biblical canon deeply rooted in Hebrew scripture, find in

these quotations a validation of their own cultural emphasis on ancestral wisdom and intergenerational transmission of knowledge (Bediako 45). The New Testament authors' practice of citing Old Testament texts as authoritative fulfilment mirrors African traditional approaches to tradition, where earlier teachings are continually referenced and reinterpreted considering contemporary circumstances, thereby establishing a hermeneutical continuity that African Christianity can embrace authentically (Sanneh 78).

The Christological interpretation of Old Testament quotations in the New Testament provides African Christianity with a theological framework for understanding Jesus within both Jewish and African cosmological contexts. As Kwame Bediako argues, the New Testament's presentation of Christ as the fulfilment of Old Testament promises enables African believers to see Jesus as both the ultimate revelation of Yahweh and the ancestral figure who bridges the divine and human realms (112). This dual understanding allows African Christians to maintain fidelity to biblical revelation while simultaneously engaging with indigenous concepts of ancestry and mediation, creating a distinctive theological synthesis that honours both scriptural authority and cultural identity (Mugambi 156).

The contextual application of Old Testament prophecies in New Testament writings offers African Christianity a model for enculturated theology that addresses contemporary African challenges while remaining grounded in biblical authority. The New Testament writers' practice of recontextualising Old Testament texts for their first-century audience demonstrates hermeneutical flexibility that African theologians can emulate in addressing issues such as poverty, disease, political corruption, and spiritual warfare (Galambush 89). This approach validates African interpretive practices that prioritise practical application and communal transformation over purely academic exegesis, thereby empowering local churches to engage scripture in ways that speak directly to their lived experiences (Verstraten 234).

The canonical connection between the Old and New Testaments through quotation establishes a theological foundation for African Christianity's engagement with both Western missionary heritage and indigenous religious expressions. The intertextual relationship demonstrates that biblical interpretation is inherently contextual, challenging African Christians to develop reading strategies that honour the text's original meaning while embracing culturally relevant applications (Gawande 67). This recognition enables African Christianity to move beyond mere adoption of Western interpretive frameworks toward developing distinctive theological voices that contribute meaningfully to global Christian discourse while remaining rooted in the biblical tradition that unites all believers across cultural boundaries (Sanneh 203).

The New Testament's quotations of other sources matter for African Christianity because they show that Christian faith has always been dialogical, contextual, and willing to engage surrounding cultures without losing its theological centre. The New Testament does not present itself as a text isolated from earlier traditions; rather, it quotes and reworks the Old Testament, Jewish interpretive traditions, and occasionally non-biblical sources to clarify meaning and strengthen argument. This pattern shows that revelation in Scripture often comes through reinterpretation of inherited sources in new historical settings, which is highly relevant to African Christianity, where the

gospel must speak meaningfully within African languages, symbols, and worldviews (Mbuvi 23; Sanneh 48). Such quotation practices encourage African theologians to read the Bible not as an import but as a living text capable of engaging oral traditions, proverbs, and communal ethics.

For African Christianity, one major implication is that the quotation validates inculturation. If New Testament writers freely drew from older sources to address their audiences, then African Christians may also use indigenous wisdom, traditional idioms, and communal forms of knowledge in faithful interpretation and preaching, provided these are tested by the gospel's core claims. This approach supports contextual theology because it allows Christianity to take root in African soil without becoming captive to Western categories of expression (Bediako 91; Njoroge 112). It also helps believers see that engaging culture is not a compromise but a biblical pattern of communication.

Another implication is that quotations in the New Testament encourage critical discernment. Not every source quoted in Scripture is affirmed in the same way, and African Christianity must likewise distinguish between cultural practices that enrich Christian discipleship and those that conflict with the gospel. This tension is especially important in areas such as ancestor veneration, leadership authority, gender roles, and communal identity, where Christian faith must both affirm human dignity and challenge harmful traditions (Kalu 67; Mbiti 15). In this sense, the New Testament's use of sources offers African Christianity a model of respectful engagement joined with theological evaluation.

CONCLUSION

The intertwined disciplines of quotations and canonization together illuminate how biblical authority and meaning have been formed and transmitted. The New Testament's frequent and varied quotations of the Old Testament, sometimes following the Hebrew text, sometimes the Septuagint, and sometimes recontextualizing passages typologically reveal early Christian interpretive practices that both preserved and transformed Israel's Scriptures. Canonization shows that the Bible's contents emerged through communal recognition and apostolic reception rather than instantaneous revelation, while textual criticism helps reconstruct the most reliable text from a long manuscript tradition marked by variants. Together, these fields demonstrate that Scripture's authority rests on a historical process of reception, citation, and careful scholarly assessment, and that understanding this process is essential for responsible exegesis and doctrinal reflection.

For African Christianity, these insights offer both validation and guidance for contextual theology. The New Testament's practice of quoting, reinterpreting, and even engaging non-biblical sources models a dialogical and incarnational approach that African Christians can adopt in bringing the gospel into conversation with indigenous traditions. Quotation as fulfilment supports an understanding of Christ that resonates with African emphases on ancestry and communal memory, while the canonical and critical safeguards urge discernment in distinguishing culturally edifying practices from those contrary to the gospel. Thus, the combined study of quotations and canonisation equips African theologians to root faithful, context-sensitive interpretations in both the

historicity of Scripture and the lived realities of African communities. But the question remains: how can a quotation from a non-canonical source become valid in a canonical document?

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