

EARLY CHRISTIAN INTERPRETATION OF THE JEWISH SCRIPTURES: PRECURSOR TO MODERN HISTORICAL CRITICISM?

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Abstract. This essay explores C. F. D. Moule’s intriguing suggestion that early Christian interpretation of Scripture, especially the use of promise-fulfillment and typology as hermeneutical approaches, anticipated some aspects of the modern historical-critical method. Included is a discussion of the metaphorical use of “flat” (two-dimensional) and “round” (three-dimensional) to characterize ways of reading Scripture. Attention is given to two ancient authors—Philo of Alexandria and Ptolemy’s *Epistle to Flora*—both of whom exemplify three-dimensional approaches to Scripture interpretation, although in different ways.

Keywords: C. F. D. Moule, promise-fulfillment, typology, Philo of Alexandria, Ptolemy, *Epistle to Flora*, Scripture interpretation, dimensionality in Scripture, “flat,” “round” views of Scripture.

Of the many remarkable insights offered by C. F. D. Moule in his groundbreaking book *The Birth of the New Testament*, none is more intriguing than his suggestion that early Christian interpretation of the Jewish Scriptures foreshadows, and, in a certain sense, initiates historical criticism as it emerged and developed in the modern period.¹ This essay explores this claim and how it fits into Moule’s overall understanding of how the New Testament writings originated, especially in relation to his understanding of Jewish methods of interpreting the Bible that were both prior to and contemporary with emergent Christian interpretations of the Old Testament.²

¹ C. F. D. MOULE, *The Birth of the New Testament*, BNTC (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1962; 2nd edition, with minor revisions, 1966; 3rd edition, revised and rewritten, 1981).

² In exploring this aspect of the early Christian use of the Jewish Scriptures, I wish to honor the scholarly career of Prof. Dr. Karl-Wilhelm Niebuhr, with whom I have worked over the years in the Eastern European Liaison Committee of The Society of New Testament Studies. He has brought energetic, creative leadership to this initiative, and he has done so while carrying out his professorial duties at the University of Jena. His numerous publications relating to Second Temple Judaism have explored important aspects of Jewish hermeneutics, and many of these essays are now available in his collection of essays *Tora und Weisheit: Studien zur frühjüdischen Literatur*, WUNT 1/466 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2021).