

DreamHouse Church Bible Study, Class #4 *Reading Scripture with the Gospel Writers*

“When Luther published his German translation of the Pentateuch in 1523, he composed a preface explaining why his German readers should value the Old Testament. Presumably then, as now, there was some tendency in the churches to denigrate or disregard Israel's Scripture in favor of the allegedly more pure and spiritual New Testament. Here is what Luther wrote:

There are some who have little regard for the Old Testament. They think of it as a book that was given to the Jewish people only and is now out of date, containing only stories of past times... But Christ says in John 5, "Search the Scriptures, for it is they that bear witness to me." ... [The Scriptures of the Old Testament are not to be despised but diligently read. ... Therefore dismiss your own opinions and feelings and think of the Scriptures as the loftiest and noblest of holy things, as the richest of mines which can never be sufficiently explored, in order that you may find that divine wisdom which God here lays before you in such simple guise as to quench all pride. Here you will find the swaddling cloths and the manger in which Christ lies... Simple and lowly are these swaddling cloths, but dear is the treasure, Christ, who lies in them.]¹

Luther is reading the New Testament figurally in order to proclaim the legitimacy of a figural reading of the Old Testament.

In other words, when John's Gospel quotes Jesus saying “Search the Scriptures, for it is they that bear witness to me,” the call to *search the Scriptures* is the call to read backwards and recognize what lies before you. As Luther says Jesus is *laying there* already in the Old Testament/Hebrew Scriptures, *in swaddling cloths*.

Perspective (A) | The Old Testament predicts Jesus

Perspective (B) | The Old Testament prefigures Jesus

Example: Scott & Charissa meeting in 1978. Looking back was that a prediction or prefiguration (the act of showing or suggesting that something will happen in the future) of their marriage?

This is not to say that the Bible doesn't make predictions. It does. But Jesus emphasized *bearing witness*, not prediction. I'd argue that a witness of the reality of something or

¹Richard Hays, *Reading Backwards: Figural Christology and the Fourfold Gospel Witness* (Baylor University Press, 2021) 1.

someone is more powerful than a prediction or prophecy (see 1 Corinthians 13:8-13 and how it speaks of prophecy and knowledge, what is partial, being set aside for when “the perfect comes,” that is, the real *thing*)

Richard Hays says that “the claim that the events of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection took place ‘according to the Scriptures’ () stands at the heart of the New Testament’s message. All four canonical gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, John) declare that the Torah and the Prophets and the Psalms mysteriously prefigure Jesus.”²

John 5:46, Jesus declares, “If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me.”

Hays argues that the Gospel writers “summon us to a conversion of the imagination.”³ In other words, “the Gospels teach us how to read the OT, and -- at the same time -- the OT teaches us how to read the Gospels.”

A few things about how the Gospel writers read and write:

- The Gospels are written as testimony. Each testimony presents a portrait of Jesus distinct from the other three. Resist the temptation to synthesize these four pictures into one.
- The Gospels teach us to read the OT figuratively which affirms the original historical reference of the text. (Back to prefiguring vs. predicting and the Crowder pic when they were kids)
- The Gospels teach us that Israel’s scriptures are part of the witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ. Even though Jesus isn’t mentioned in the text, he is there through and through in the story of Israel, and now the nations.

THE GOSPEL OF MARK

Mark’s narrative style is urgent, yet indirect and allusive.

He works with hints and allusions, giving clues to readers to further explore and meditate upon. For example, “Let the reader understand” in 13:14

[Mark 1:2-3: Who is the Kyrios? *READ THE PASSAGE* 1.2-8 |](#)

Mark shows John the Baptist preparing the way of the LORD (*kyrios*) in 1.3

From Scripture | Mark appears to be alluding to Malachi 3:1, Exodus 23:20, Isaiah 40:3

² Hays, *Reading Backwards*, 3.

³ Hays, *Reading Backwards*, 4.

Mark 1:7-8, the “one who is more powerful”

Mark, by looking back at Isaiah 40 and its original sense, seems to be making an implicit claim that this Jesus is divine. He is *the* LORD.

[Mark 2:7: Who can forgive sins but God alone? *READ THE PASSAGE* 2.1-12 |](#)

Jesus not only performs a miracle but asserts his authority to forgive sins. While there is no direct OT citation here the text itself mentions the law declaring Jesus to be blaspheming.

From Scripture | Exodus 34:6-7; Isaiah 43:25

Mark 2:8-11, the reference to the Son of Man (Daniel 7) which Mark goes on to show having dominion over the whole earth (14:62)

But in the light of 1:3, the reader would ponder that Jesus’ authority is not just delegated authority, for he is the *kyrios*.

[Mark 11:15-19: Prophetic action in the Temple *READ THE PASSAGE* |](#) The climactic scene in the Temple where Jesus, in an act of prophetic street theater, overturns the tables of the moneychangers.

A fusion of OT texts | Isaiah 56:7-8 (a vision of a restored Jerusalem with Gentiles worshiping alongside God’s people); Jeremiah 7:1-8:3 (read 7:3-4, 9-11a, 13-15; this passage shows God’s house being made a den of robbers, of which Jesus protests)

Follow up | Mark 13:1-2 (prophecy of the Temple’s destruction); Mark 11:12-14, 20-21 (the cursing of the fig tree)

By reading Isaiah’s vision of a restored Jerusalem and Jeremiah’s word of judgment against the city and its Temple, we see a fuller picture of Jesus’ meaningful actions.

THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW

Matthew shows little restraint compared to Mark as he presses Jesus’ claims.

Matthew is unmistakable in his belief that Jesus fulfills Israel’s scriptures.

He often uses scripture as a proof text as he emphasizes the harmony of Jesus with scripture.

[“God with us”](#) | Matthew 1:22-23 (Isaiah 7:14)

[“Out of Egypt”](#) | Matthew 2:13-15 (Hosea 11:1)

- Hosea’s metaphor goes back to Exodus 4:22-23
- Hosea 11 is a text about God’s compassion and faithfulness towards his chosen people, despite their waywardness. This climaxes with 11.8-9.
- Hays says, “The fulfillment of the prophet Hosea’s words can be discerned only through an act of imagination that perceives the figural correspondence between the two stories of the exodus and the gospel . . . Through the lens of Matthew’s figural imagination . . . the story of Jesus acquires the resonances of the story of

Israel's deliverance.”⁴

THE GOSPEL OF LUKE

Luke shows Jesus as the one “who opens the Scriptures” to his followers.

Luke creates a narrative world thick with scriptural memory.

Hays says, “The things that happen in Luke are the kinds of things that happened in the tales of the patriarchs and prophets, and the plotted action, while never simply identical to the OT stories, is often suggestively reminiscent of Israel's sacred past.”⁵

“Are you the only stranger visiting Jerusalem who doesn't know what has been happening in these days?” | Luke 24:13-35

Luke tells the reader what's going on as we begin the story. Jesus is walking with Cleopas and his unnamed companion.

Cleopas laments, “But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel” (24:21) connects us to the opening hope of Luke 1:68-68, as declared by Zechariah, who was filled with the Holy Spirit.

Luke has brought us through the story of Jesus to the question “Why has Israel seemingly not been saved?” Is Israel back to the place where they are at the hands of the enemies “who hate us” (Luke 1:71)?

Jesus' reply is huge. Luke 24:25-27, “He said to them, “How foolish you are, and how slow to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Messiah have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?” And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.”

Luke, in effect, has brought the reader *back* to the beginning of the Gospel to *reread it*. Look and see again how Jesus might be prefigured in Israel's Scripture (so reread the OT Scriptures as well), but this time, *read in the light of the resurrection*.

When *read in the light of the resurrection*, Jesus is shown to be much more than “a prophet powerful in deed and word before God and all people” (24:19).

⁴ Hays, *Reading Backwards*, 41.

⁵ Hays, *Reading Backwards*, 59.

THE GOSPEL OF JOHN

John, like Luke, is calling the reader to a retrospective reading of Israel's Scriptures, in light of the Gospel witness, focusing on the person of Jesus himself.

But John doesn't directly quote much of Scripture.

By count of references and allusions, Matthew uses scripture this way 124 times. Mark, 70. Luke, 109. John, 27 times.

But John evokes images and figures from Israel's Scripture.

For John, [Jesus becomes, in effect, the Temple](#) | Hays points out that "John declares Jesus' body is now the place God dwells, the place where God dwells, the place where atonement for sin occurs, the place where the division between God and humanity is overcome."⁶ (see John 2:21; John 14:1-4;

[Jesus as Word and Wisdom](#) | John 1:1-18

[Jesus as the embodiment of Sukkoth and Passover](#)

- **Sukkoth** (the Festival of Booths or Tabernacles). Jesus declares himself as drink for the thirsty and light of the world "taking onto himself the symbolism of the occasion, claiming both to fulfill and to supplant it."⁷ See John 7:37-38; 8:12 (Zech 14:7-8, 16-19)
- **Passover**. John shows Jesus' crucifixion taking place on the day of preparation for Passover (19:14), not on Passover itself as in the other Gospels. Jesus is the Lamb of God (1:29; 19:36 fulfills Exodus 12:46 about none of his bones being broken)

[Jesus is the Bread from heaven](#) | John 6:22-59 (see Psalm 78:24 which re-narrates Exodus 16, the story of manna in the wilderness). Where the people Jesus feeds think the story is about Moses Jesus teaches them that it wasn't Moses but God who gave bread from heaven. In this way, John is showing how Jesus teaches them (and us) how to read scripture.

Hays says | *John read the entirety of the OT as a web of symbols that must be understood as figural signifiers for Jesus and the life that he offers. In John's narrative, the Temple becomes a figural sign for Jesus' body, Like-wise, the great feasts of Israel's worship are newly seen, in retrospect, to be replete with signs and symbols of Jesus: the pouring of water, the kindling of light, the rededication of the Temple, the good shepherd who truly feeds and heals God's people, and the Passover lamb. And even the scriptural narrative of Israel's redemption in the exodus becomes also a vast figural matrix, a story in which the manna from heaven signifies Jesus' flesh. All this works hermeneutically because, at the beginning and the end of the day, Jesus is the Logos, the Word present before creation. All creation breathes with his life. He is the divine Wisdom whose very being is the blueprint of all reality. So, for John, reading*

⁶ Hays, *Reading Backwards*, 82.

⁷ Hays, *Reading Backwards*, 87.

Scripture figurally— reading backwards in light of the story of Jesus— is a way of discerning the anticipatory traces of God the Word in his self-revelation to the world.⁸

⁸ Hays, *Reading Backwards*, 91-91.