

YOBL

Year of Biblical Literacy

Week 35: Introduction to the New Testament

Daily Reading for Week

- Matthew 3-4, Psalm 82
- Matthew 5-6, Psalm 83
- Matthew 7-8, Psalm 84
- Matthew 9-10, Psalm 85
- Matthew 11-12, Psalm 86
- Matthew 13-14, Psalm 87
- Matthew 15-16, Psalm 88

Focus of time together

To establish a framework for how to explore the Gospels in light of the Hebrew Scriptures and to practice reading the Gospels “backwards” together.

Connecting Exercise

What part of the Old Testament (that you can recall) seemed to most call your attention to Jesus, and why?

Opening Prayer

Pray corporately for your upcoming journey through the Gospels, expressing your hopes and desires as well as your concerns and confusions, and ask the Holy Spirit to be gracious to you in the journey.

Intro to Discussion

The term ‘Old Testament’ is a Christian invention. Up until the time when the early community of Christian Jews crafted and collected the Gospel stories and epistles that make up our New Testament, Israel’s Scriptures were simply called ‘the Scriptures’. The term Old Testament indicates the church’s firm belief that Jesus must be understood as both a consistent continuation of the Jewish story told in the Hebrew Scriptures and a surprising twist in that story that constitutes a brand new era in the story of God’s people. Indeed, the New Testament writers declared repeatedly that Jesus was the climactic fulfilment of the Biblical story; and yet, they also taught and modelled radical

reinterpretation of that story. In other words, Jesus and the church both affirmed and reinterpreted the Hebrew Scriptures.

Therefore, this is key to how the New Testament is intended to be read. The New Testament does not replace the Old Testament and deem it obsolete; on the contrary, it is actually written almost entirely using the symbols and language of the Jewish Scriptures. In a sense, the New Testament speaks a new message about Jesus the Crucified Messiah, but it speaks this message through the language of Old Testament ideas and imagery. The Gospels particularly are like intricate tapestries that weave the many familiar fabrics of Jewish thought together into a new, unfamiliar art piece. Put differently, the Gospels are brilliantly layered, literary masterpieces that use the meaning-saturated imagery and language of the Old Testament to paint a narrative depiction of Christ. This technique of reference and allusion aims to create “echoes” in the reader's mind of various Old Testament texts, and these echoes are meant to create a deep well of meaning that undergirds the surface-level significance of the Gospel texts.

As the scholar Richard Hays illuminates in his work, *Echoes of Scripture in the Gospels* The story is intelligible, at one level, for readers who do not hear the scriptural echoes. But for those who do have ears to hear, new levels of complexity and significance open up. To cite an obvious example, Mark tells the story of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem riding on a colt without any authorial comment whatever about scriptural fulfilment (Mark 11:1-11). But the reader who perceives the subliminal symbolism of Zechariah 9:9 imbedded in the action will more fully grasp the significance of the episode. In this case, the readers who lack the requisite ‘encyclopaedia of reception’ to ‘get’ the allusion are helped out by one of Mark's earliest readers, Matthew, who eagerly supplies the quotation of Zechariah, along with an explanatory reassurance that this event took place in order to fulfil what was written by the prophet (Matthew 21:4-5). But this example is merely the tip of an iceberg of intertextual allusion...

Indeed, as we will begin to see over the next five weeks, nearly every sentence in the Gospels is ripe with Old Testament significance; theologian John Goldingay says “the New Testament is little more than footnotes on the Old Testament.” In Matthew alone, there are over sixty explicit quotations and hundreds of more indirect allusions to the Old Testament. What this means is that to read the Gospels as the authors intended requires that we read slowly and carefully, paying attention to these allusions and “reading backwards” by returning to the Old Testament to understand the scriptural language and symbolism being referenced and repurposed. When we discover an Old Testament reference, we should stop and look up the passage referenced and then consider how the original meaning of the Hebrew text changes or enhances the meaning of the Gospel passage. Most study Bibles include footnotes to the more obvious and explicit references to help us read this way.

This process of reading backwards will reveal whole new worlds of meaning beyond what we notice upon a surface-level reading. But it will also reveal something further to us: specifically, our continued Biblical illiteracy. For many of us, this will be deeply humbling, revealing that it isn't just the Old Testament that we lack fluency in. Indeed, because we aren't very familiar with the Old Testament, we are also oblivious to much of what the New Testament is really trying to get at. Therefore, as we explore the Gospels today and over the next five weeks, we should treat it both as an illuminating exercise that, like a litmus test, reveals how little we know as well as a practice for a future lifetime of Biblical engagement. Let this experience be humbling and enlightening, not disheartening. And enjoy the journey. This walk through the Gospels should be not just humbling and challenging but also beautiful and enriching. As we discover new depths of profundity in our sacred texts, we ought to be entranced and enthralled with just how rich and ingenious they are.

And one further note to consider before we begin: last week, we discussed the covenants between God and Israel and the promises God made as a part of staying faithful to these covenants. These promises and the expectations of their "fulfilment" set the emotional and ideological stage upon which the New Testament enters. Though sometimes the Gospels seem to interpret the Old Testament as predictive of Jesus the Messiah, more often Jesus is seen as a figural fulfilment of these Old Testament promises. In other words, when we say that the Bible is a cohesive narrative that points to Jesus, we do not mean that the prophets and psalmists knew about Jesus centuries prior and wrote predictive clues for us to decipher. Rather, the kind of people, world, and future that God promised have reached their figurative fulfilment in Jesus. This means that our search for deep meaning in the Gospels isn't a scavenger hunt for Old Testament proof texts. Instead, it's a discovery of how Jesus embodied and inaugurated the Jewish hopes awaited for in the "end of the age." This is why Jesus came proclaiming the "good news that the kingdom of God is [finally] here." Remember this difference between prediction and prefiguration as we explore the New Testament together over the rest of the year.

Specifically, during each of the next five weeks we will follow the same pattern. We will read through a story from one of the four Gospels and reflect on what it appears to mean at the surface level. Then we will read through some Old Testament passages that the story was likely alluding to and explore the point and significance of those passages. Then we will go back to the Gospel story and see how the Old Testament allusions either change or enhance the meaning we first saw. To make the connections between texts easier to see, we will include all Scripture passages in the material and will italicise notable lines and words (NB: This will make material a bit longer than usual). This week, we will do a similar activity with one short example: the baptism of Jesus.

Whole Group Discussion (75 minutes)

Questions for Basic Understanding

These questions are to help us interpret and understand the text as it was intended to be interpreted and understood.

Read Mark 1:9-11

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptised by John in the Jordan. And when he came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, “You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.”

1. What stands out to you as the significance of this scene of Jesus’ baptism?

Questions for Interacting with Scripture

These questions are to help us slow down, to taste and notice Scripture, savour its richness and meditate on its complexity of meaning.

Read Isaiah 63:15-64:4

Look down from heaven and see,
from your holy and glorious habitation.
Where are your zeal and your might?
The yearning of your heart and your compassion?
They are withheld from me.
For you are our father,
though Abraham does not know us
and Israel does not acknowledge us;
you, O Lord, are our father;
our Redeemer from of old is your name.
Why, O Lord, do you make us stray from your ways
and harden our heart, so that we do not fear you?
Turn back for the sake of your servants,
for the sake of the tribes that are your heritage.
Your holy people took possession for a little while;
but now our adversaries have trampled down your sanctuary.
We have long been like those whom you do not rule,
like those not called by your name.
O that you would tear open the heavens and come down,
so that the mountains would quake at your presence—
as when fire kindles brushwood
and the fire causes water to boil—
to make your name known to your adversaries,
so that the nations might tremble at your presence!
When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect,
you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence.

From ages past no one has heard,
no ear has perceived,
no eye has seen any God besides you,
who works for those who wait for him.

Now reread Mark 1:9-11

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptised by John in the Jordan. And when he came up out of the water, immediately he saw the *heavens being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove*. And a voice came from heaven, “You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.”

1. Notice the prayer in Isaiah, “*O that you would tear open the heavens and come down*” In light of this line and the passage of Isaiah, it is contained within, what significance is added to the scene of Jesus’ baptism? Consider Mark’s narration that the heavens were torn open and the Spirit descended (1:10).
2. Considering the overall meaning of the petition we read in Isaiah 63 and 64, what is Mark suggesting that it means for Jesus to have arrived on the scene?

Read Genesis 22:1-2

After these things God tested Abraham. He said to him, “Abraham!” And he said, “Here I am.” He said, “*Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I shall show you.*”

Read 2 Samuel 7:12-16

When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come forth from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. *I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me.* When he commits iniquity, I will punish him with a rod such as mortals use, with blows inflicted by human beings. But I will not take my steadfast love from him, as I took it from Saul, whom I put away from before you. Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me; your throne shall be established forever.

Read Psalm 2

Why do the nations conspire
and the peoples plot in vain?
The kings of the earth rise up
and the rulers band together
against the Lord and against his anointed, saying,
“Let us break their chains
and throw off their shackles.”
The One enthroned in heaven laughs;
the Lord scoffs at them.

He rebukes them in his anger
and terrifies them in his wrath, saying,
“I have installed my king
on Zion, my holy mountain.”
I will proclaim the Lord’s decree:
*He said to me “You are my son;
today I have become your father.*
Ask me,
and I will make the nations your inheritance,
the ends of the earth your possession.
You will break them with a rod of iron;
you will dash them to pieces like pottery.”
Therefore, you kings, be wise;
be warned, you rulers of the earth.
Serve the Lord with fear
and celebrate his rule with trembling.
Kiss *his son*, or he will be angry
and your way will lead to your destruction,
for his wrath can flare up in a moment.
Blessed are all who take refuge in him.

Read Isaiah 42:1-4

*Here is my servant whom I support.
Here is my chosen one with whom I am pleased.
I have put my Spirit on him.*
He will bring justice to the nations.
He will not cry out or raise his voice.
He will not make his voice heard in the streets.
He will not break off a damaged cattail.
He will not even put out a smoking wick.
He will faithfully bring about justice.
He will not be discouraged or crushed
until he has set up justice on the earth.
The coastlands will wait for his teachings.

Now reread Mark 1:9-11 once more

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptised by John in the Jordan. And when he came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, *“You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.”*

1. Put yourself in the shoes of a Jew in Jesus’ day who would have been readily familiar with the above texts and the language of a figure beloved by God, anointed with the Spirit by God, and in a special enough relationship with God to use father-son titles with one another. And look carefully at the characters discussed in such terms in

these texts. What specific characters or types of figures would Mark's allusion have brought to mind from these passages?

2. What does Mark's identification of Jesus as a kind of representation or embodiment of these figures allude to about the identity and purpose of Jesus?
3. How did your understanding and/or appreciation of Mark's baptism story change after reading the selected Old Testament passages?

Questions for Self Examination

These questions are to help us look at ourselves, be aware of who we are in the light of our interaction with Scripture and consider any appropriate action.

1. We've been looking at just 3 verses of the entire New Testament (which contains nearly 8,000 verses). How does it strike you, to reflect on the depth of meaning underlying these few verses, showing just how much Old Testament familiarity Mark was expecting his readers to have?
2. Do you feel humbled, challenged, excited, mind-blown, curious, overwhelmed, intrigued?

Closing Prayer

Pray corporately once again for your time in the Gospels, expressing any new or continued desires from this time as well as expressing whatever emotions this initial study brought up in you.