

Reading the Old Testament in the New: The Gospel of Matthew

I. Course Introduction & Overview

A. *The Power of Allusion*

On August 28th 1963, Martin Luther King Jr delivered his famous "I Have A Dream" speech. It's a beautiful, powerful, evocative speech. It stirred thoughts & emotions in the hearts & minds of the people who heard it then & it still makes for stirring reading & listening today.

What makes King's speech so powerful & evocative is the way it's written, the way it weaves a subtle thread of literary & historical allusions & echoes. Without quoting directly from anybody, King brings together references to Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, Shakespeare's Richard III, the biblical prophets Amos & Isaiah, The Declaration of Independence, & an old hymn, "America."

King's borrowing from & allusions to traditional texts is more than simple ornamentation. The use of Lincoln implies that King's cause is the continuation or completion of the freeing of the slaves. The allusion to Shakespeare is a way of asserting that King cannot be easily dismissed - he is intimately familiar with the educational tradition of his white opponents. The lines from the Bible appeal to a sacred text with authority for both the white & African American communities &, more than that, imply that God is on King's side. The use of The Declaration of Independence & 'America' announce that King is a patriot - some had slandered him for not being such - whose dream for his people is the fulfilment of the American dream in general.

The same kind of evocative artistry is at work in the Bible. This is the artistry we are going to study in this course with particular focus on Mt's Gospel.

2. Giving the NT a New Hearing

A. *Testimonies & Proof-Texts: What Scholars Used to Think*

Before we start reading Mt, let's look at a relatively recent advance in NT scholarship - reading the OT in the NT. In many ways it's a rediscovery of the way the Catholic Church has always read & interpreted the Bible in its liturgy & in its early dogmas & creeds. We'll come back to that later. For now, it's important to remember that the way we're going to approach Mt is not the way the Bible has been read by scholars for most of the modern period.

At the risk of over-simplifying, the scholarly consensus for many years was that when NT writers were quoting the OT, they were taking the texts totally out of context & giving them new meaning to make their point. Scholars thought the

NT writers didn't have complete copies of the OT to work from. They were presumed to be working from so-called *testimonia* - anthologies of "messianic proof-texts," quotes pulled out of the OT to convince or "prove" to the Jews that Jesus was the Messiah. Scholars said this explained why so often the OT quotes in the NT don't seem to make any sense. Or, if they do make sense, they seem to distort the original meaning of the OT passage.

B. NT in a New Light

In the mid-20th cent., this scholarly consensus was turned upside down. Until then, we didn't have a lot to compare the NT to. If we wanted to see how it compared to other religious writings from the same time & culture, we didn't have much to go on. We had some texts written by the rabbis from a little later than the period of Jesus & the apostolic writers. We also had some "inter-testamental" writings - texts written in the period between the OT & the NT.

This changed in the 1950s when archaeologists began uncovering & translating the Dead Sea Scrolls - religious writings by a radical Jewish community known as the Essenes. Many, written between 200-50 years before Christ, were detailed commentaries & elaborate interpretations of OT texts. Suddenly, a whole new world opened up for us. We could see that the NT writers were part of a larger tradition of interpretation in 1st cent. Judaism.

3. Our Father Abraham

A. Common Assumptions About Scripture

Paul, Mt, Jn, Pt were all 1st cent. Jews. Scholars began to notice that they shared certain habits, assumptions & techniques with other 1st cent. Jewish writers:

1. Scripture, read as a whole, is totally self-consistent. Jewish interpreters assumed the Scriptures were written under God's inspiration & hence couldn't possibly contradict each other. If they found a passage e.g. in Isaiah, that seemed to contradict something they read in Genesis, they went back to the drawing board. Even "apparent" contradictions were assumed to point to more penetrating, deeper truths.
2. Every detail in Scripture is significant. Because God was the author of Scripture, Jewish interpreters presumed there was no word or phrase that wasn't intended to communicate divine meaning. Even minor & seemingly trivial details should be mined for further insights into the mind of God.
3. Most importantly, Jewish interpreters believed Scripture is always understood according to its context. They never read a text out of context.

In fact, many interpretations found in the writings of the scribes & rabbis don't make any sense unless you know the context of the texts they're referring to.

Scholars found all three of these assumptions at work in the NT.

B. Methods of Interpretation in the Bible

Scholars also found certain methods of interpretation in the NT that are found in the Dead Sea Scrolls & elsewhere in early Jewish interpretation. Here are two:

- *Pesher* or "explanation" is taking a Scripture text & applying it to your own contemporary situation. This kind of commentary "actualizes" the OT text i.e. it relates the text to the here & now. Peter is doing a sort of *pesher* in his speech at Pentecost where he quotes the prophet Joel & explains that what's going on is "*what was spoken through*" Joel (cf. Acts 2:14-36 & Joel 3:1-5).
- *Derash*, another method found in the NT, is searching out the deeper, hidden meaning of a text & applying it to present experience.

Paul does this when he describes the story of Israel's Exodus in writing to the Corinthians about the dangers of temptations & false worship (cf. 1 Cor. 10:1-22). He does this by making an interesting & telling comparison. He likens Israel to the baptized Christian, implying that each was born by Spirit & water. Israel was under "*the cloud*" (i.e. the *shekiniah*, the cloud of glory that represented God's abiding presence), & Israel passed through the waters of the Red Sea in its Exodus. In the same way, the baptized Christian passes through water & receives the Holy Spirit in Baptism. After its "baptism," Israel was given "spiritual food" & "spiritual drink," Paul says, just as the newly baptized Christian is admitted to the Eucharistic table.

Paul explains this to get to his more critical point - that though they were given new life & new nourishment, many Israelites fell into idolatry & immorality & because of that failed to make it to the Promised Land. He refers to the golden calf incident & the worship of Bael Peor, the two great rebellions in Israel's history (cf. Exod. 32, Num. 25). The lesson he wanted the Christians at Corinth to draw from this was clear. But what's important for our study of the Bible was that Paul seemed to be assuming there was some deeper, more symbolic link between Israel's history & the experience of the Church. He says that what happened to Israel was intended by God to be an "*example*" for the Christians "*upon whom the end of the ages has come*" (1 Cor. 10:11).

The word Paul uses here, *typikos* in Greek, implies more than a simple "*lesson*" to be drawn from the past. In Jewish interpretation, "*a type*" implies a certain

symbolic, futuristic quality or meaning - as when Paul says in Rom. 5:14 that Adam was "*the type of the one who was to come.*" A "*type*" is a divine announcement ahead of time of things to come in the future, in the Church, when the end of the ages has come.

C. Typology & the Biblical Worldview

The widespread use of typology - from the Greek word *typos* ("*model*" or "*pattern*") - is the major difference between the NT & other 1st cent. Jewish writings. Everything in the Scriptures of Israel was seen as pointing to the coming of Jesus & His establishment of the Church. Evidence suggests it was Jesus Himself who taught the apostolic writers to read "*typologically*" (cf. Lk 24:27-45).

While the word "*typology*" was coined later by scholars, it's use in the NT is unquestioned. Throughout the NT, the events, promises & people of the OT are assumed to be patterns or "*types*" that prepare, prefigure & announce the realities that God brings about in Jesus & His Church.

The NT writers don't deny the "*actuality*" or "*historicity*" of the OT. But what they assume is that these moments & figures from Israel's history were intended by God to have even greater meaning once Christ comes & shows us that meaning. In other words: Moses was real. But he was also, as we'll see, a "*type*" of Jesus. So was King David. The Exodus was real, as Paul assumes in writing to the Corinthians, but it was also a "*type*" of Baptism. The feeding of the Israelites with manna in the wilderness was also a real historical event. But it was also a "*type*" of the Eucharist, the true bread from heaven. (For more on typology, see *Catechism*, nos. 129-130, 1094).

It's important to understand what typology is & isn't. Typology isn't a technique by which NT writers mechanically read the OT like a fortune-teller. Typology is a way of seeing all of reality - past, present & future - according to certain patterns of God's consistent dealings with His people. Typology, as practiced in the NT, presumes there is a divine plan at work in the world (cf. Eph. 1:10). It assumes, too, that God works in certain consistent ways & that we can understand what God is doing in Jesus & the Church by looking at the models & patterns of His dealings with Israel in the past.

It's not that they believed history repeated itself. Elijah or one of the prophets doesn't come back from the dead, as many of Jesus' contemporaries expected (cf. Mk 8:28). Instead, God raises up a new & greater prophet in Jesus. What Jesus says & does evokes & builds upon the symbolic words & deeds of Elijah & the prophets, but goes way beyond them.

Elisha multiplied barley loaves to feed His followers. So did Jesus. But when Jesus

does it, He not only points back to Elisha, but points us forward to a new & even greater miracle - the giving of His flesh & blood as bread & wine in the Eucharist (cf. Jn 6:1-14; 2 Kings 4:42-44).

As we said, Jesus appears to have taught the apostles to read the OT this way. But in the OT, we see Israel's prophets taking the same approach. For the prophets, the past was prologue & preparation. God's great works in Israel in the past were seen as the foundations, the promissory notes, for new & greater works He will do in the messianic age to come. The shape of what's to come can be seen in what's already been.

Prophecy is nothing but the typological reading of history. Look at the later chapters of Isaiah, especially chs 65 & 66. Isaiah is describing the future redemption the coming Messiah will bring. He describes this redemption in terms entirely drawn from the high points of history as it's told in Israel's Scriptures. He says what's coming is a new creation, a new paradise, a new exodus, a new kingdom, a new temple & a new Jerusalem. Which is it? It's all of the above!

The NT writers saw all these "types" being fulfilled in Jesus. He is the New Adam (cf. Rom 5:14), the first born of a new creation. His body is the new Temple (cf. Jn 2:19-21). He leads the new Exodus (cf. Mt 2:15) & His Church is the new Jerusalem & the new Kingdom (cf. Gal 4:26; 1 Pt 2:9; Rev 1:6).

4. How the NT Uses the Old

A. C.H. Dodd's According to the Scriptures

All of the above represents a relatively new discovery (or re-discovery) for NT scholarship. Probably the decisive turning point in the scholarship was a book published in 1953 by a Protestant scholar, C.H. Dodd, *According to the Scriptures: The Sub-Structure of NT Theology*.

Dodd began by challenging the presumption that the NT writers didn't know what they were doing or that they quoted the OT out of context. His careful study proved two things:

1. That the NT writers always quote OT passages in context. & although they bring a fresh & deeper interpretation to those passages, their interpretations remain largely faithful to the original intentions of the OT authors.
2. Dodd proved that in their quotations from the OT, the NT writers always pointed the reader to "*the whole context*" of the passage being referred to. In interpreting these passages, he added, the NT writers always followed

"intelligible & consistent principles." That is to say, they worked from a basic agreement that there was a "right way" to read & interpret Scripture & they always followed those rules.

Those conclusions - which flew in the face of the scholarly consensus - were dramatic, especially coming from Dodd, who was one of the most respected NT scholars in the world at the time. But Dodd went on to argue - convincingly, too - that the OT texts cited in the NT were just the tip of the iceberg. He said the entire OT served as a kind of "*narrative sub-structure*" for the NT, as well as for the dogmas, creeds & sacraments of the early Church. He wrote:

Though not stated explicitly in the NT it is everywhere presupposed....[T]he history of the people of God is built upon a certain pattern corresponding to God's design for man, His creature. It is a pattern, not in the sense of a pre-ordained sequence of inevitable events, but in the sense of a kind of master-plan imposed upon the order of human life in this world by the Creator Himself....It is this pattern, disclosed 'in divers parts & divers manners' in the past history of Israel, that the NT writers conceive to have been brought into full light in the events of the Gospel story.

What Dodd describes sounds very like the way we described the "biblical worldview" above. & it is.

B. Subtexts & New Contexts

The implications of these findings for us, as present-day interpreters of the Bible, are significant. Why? Because most of us have been brought up to read the Bible with the same prejudices that formed the scholarly consensus we have described. We've been taught to read the OT almost as if it's a different book to the NT. You still hear this when people talk of "*the God of the OT*" as if He's different from the God of the NT; there's talk of the "*Hebrew Scriptures*" as if they're not a part of the Christian Scriptures, & so on.

This divorce of the OT from the NT was the stuff of heresy in the early Church. What we have today is less heresy than naivete. We think we're being more "scientific" in reading this way. We examine Scripture almost like a botanist might examine a leaf – through dissection & cross-section. But what Dodd & others since have shown, is that we can't even scratch the surface of understanding the NT if we read this way. We have to pay attention to the "*narrative sub-structure*." Which means we need to study the OT context of the NT texts.

That is what we're going to do in this course, using Mt's Gospel as our focus. We're going to study not the veins of the leaf, but the whole leaf. Not only the whole leaf, but the tree the leaf came from. We're going to be interested not only in quotations & citations from the OT but also echoes & allusions. We'll

look at the larger contexts of those quotations. We will find that the whole OT forms the context for what Mt is doing in his Gospel.

For prayer & reflection:

The Gospel of Mt's account of the Resurrection is the last of nine Scriptures traditionally read during the Easter Vigil Mass on Holy Saturday night. Read all the readings for the Vigil, the Responses &, if possible the prayers that go with the readings. Ask God to help you understand how the liturgy envisions the promises of the OT being fulfilled in the NT, using this prayer that's said during the Vigil after the reading of Genesis & the Psalm:

*Almighty & eternal God,
Glorify Your Name by increasing Your chosen people
as You promised long ago.
In reward for their trust,
may we see in the Church the fulfilment of Your promise.
We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen*

The readings for the Easter Vigil are:

Genesis 1:1-2:2 Response: Psalm 104:1-2,5-6,10-14,24,35

Genesis 22:1-8 Response: Psalm 16:5, 8, 9-11

Exodus 14:15 – 15:1 Response Exodus 15:1-6, 17-18

Isaiah 54:5-14 Response Psalm 30:2-6, 11-13

Isaiah 55:1-11 Response Isaiah 12:2-3, 4, 5-6

Baruch 3:9-15, 32 – 4:4 Response Psalm 19:8-10, 17

Ezekiel 36:16-17, 18-28 Response Psalm 42:3, 5; 43:3-4

Romans 6:3-11 Response Psalm 118:1-2, 16-17, 22-23

Matthew 28:1-10 (Year A) or Mark 16:1-7 (Year B) or Luke 24:1-12 (Year C)

