

Essay: 'The presentation of Jesus in the Gospel of Mark has been profoundly influenced by the author's reflections on the Jewish Scriptures'. Discuss.

Before considering the extent to which the author of Mark's Gospel was influenced by the Jewish Scriptures it is worth outlining how Jewish Scriptures are reflected and used more generally within the New Testament (NT), including in Mark's Gospel.

It is generally agreed that Jewish Scriptures (in both Greek and Hebrew) were circulating in a variety of forms in the first century CE; the Dead Sea Scrolls providing significant evidence to demonstrate this.¹ As a consequence NT writers were able to draw upon several scriptural sources and Evans notes that all three major text types are reflected in Mark's Gospel (that is the Greek, Hebrew/proto-Masoretic and Aramaic/Aramaic texts).² It may also have been likely that NT writers did not always have access to full scrolls of scriptures (due to expense and availability) but possibly only to collections of 'testimonia' listing short extracts from scripture.³ This demonstrates the plurality of sources available to NT writers and their use indicates that several texts were seen as scripturally authoritative allowing authors to select the most appropriate text to make their points.

There are three key ways that scholars generally describe how the Jewish Scriptures appear to be intertextually referenced in the NT, these are quotations, allusions and echoes.⁴

Quotations are usually explicitly cited text. They are generally given a clear introduction such as "It is written..." or, if spoken by a character, "Have you not read..." to indicate that it is derived from an earlier source. Allusions are material from Jewish Scriptures that are not quoted directly and do not have an introduction. However, they are likely to be identified by the reader because of the use of repeated key words, phrases or the

1 Susan Docherty, "Do you Understand what you Are Reading?" (Acts 8.30): Current Trends and Future Perspectives in the Study of the Use of the Old Testament in the New', *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 38 (2015), p. 115.

2 Craig Evans, 'The Beginning of the Good News and the Fulfillment of Scripture in the Gospel of Mark', in *Hearing the Old Testament in the New Testament*, ed. Stanley E. Porter (Grand Rapids, Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2006), p. 85.

3 Docherty, *Do you understand...*, p. 121.

4 Margaret Daly-Denton, 'Going Beyond the Genially Open "Cf.": Intertextual Reference to the Old Testament in the New', *Milltown Studies* 44 (1999), p. 51.

highlighting of themes or concepts that the reader is enabled to make the connection with another passage. Unlike quotations or allusions, echoes are much more subtle and are not made explicit by the author. They tend to be more elusive and may only have a single word in common with an earlier passage and as a consequence may only be discerned by those who are significantly familiar with these previous passages.

Daly-Denton describes these three elements as representing a “sliding scale”⁵ where the author deliberately makes the source text within each category less obvious and thus the reader requires greater knowledge and awareness to identify the earlier source being referenced and to thus understand any potentially deeper meaning within the text. Not all scholars agree with the designation of these elements and Docherty notes that Foster, for example, warns of the dangers of giving too much weight to passages that cannot be readily analysed and appear unclear (in particular those claimed to reflect scriptural echoes).⁶

The use of scriptures in the ways described above is not unique to NT writers. It is likely they approached the scriptures in similar ways to other Jewish scholars of their time, building on their shared background and exegetical tradition.⁷ However, as Carter notes, NT writers would be reading Jewish scriptures christologically, in the expectation of finding Jesus within them, to discover details of his identity and his role in God’s purposes.⁸

Turning now to Mark’s Gospel. It was written in Greek and dated possibly just before, or shortly after, the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem (approximately 70 CE). The Roman Empire was undergoing, or had just undergone, a time of significant destabilisation and civil war. Christians will have known a period of persecution under the Emperor Nero (amongst others). It is not known who the author of Mark’s Gospel is although there have been suggestions that it could be Mark who was the interpreter of Peter; John Mark, the companion of Paul and Barnabus in Acts or potentially an anonymous second generation

5 Daly-Denton, p. 52.

6 Docherty, *Do you understand...*, p 117.

7 Susan Docherty, ‘New Testament Scriptural Interpretation in its Early Jewish Context: Reflections on the Status Quaestionis and Future Directions’, *Novum Testamentum* 57 (2015), p. 10.

8 Warren Carter, ‘Constructing Images of Jesus from the Hebrew Bible’, in *The Blackwell Companion to Jesus*, ed D. Burkett (Chichester, John Wiley & Sons, 2013), p. 130.

Christian.⁹ It is the shortest Gospel with only sixteen chapters: the initial ten chapters are considered to be fast-moving and reflect Jesus' teaching and activities; the remaining six chapters focus on Jesus' final week and passion. The author of the Gospel is likely to have collected and compiled oral-based traditions circulating about Jesus amongst Jewish-Gentile Christian communities. These were then shaped into a coherent, unified story, providing a christological "narrative theology" of Jesus.¹⁰

Moyise identifies that the author of Mark's Gospel uses twenty-five quotations from the Old Testament (OT); the only editorial quotation is at the beginning of the gospel and the others are quoted by characters within the gospel; twenty-two of these are directly spoken by Jesus and drawn from the law (ten), prophets (seven) and psalms (five).¹¹ Moyise contrasts Mark's use of OT quotations with the other Gospel writers whom he states use OT quotations as a running commentary on their narrative. Moyise rather asserts that the author of Mark's Gospel makes use of extensive allusions and echoes to effect this and engage his readers.¹² Watts interestingly notes that the references to the OT approximately double in the second half of Mark's Gospel when Jesus is journeying to and within Jerusalem, possibly indicating the importance of this final week and passion of Jesus.¹³

The first reference to the OT in Mark's Gospel is found in verse 2 of the opening chapter and is a quotation the author attributes to the prophet Isaiah. However, it is actually a composite of three OT verses: Malachi 3:1, Exodus 23:20 and Isaiah 40:3. Moyise suggests the most commonly held explanation for this is that Mark's author was using a "testimony" source where these texts had already been combined.¹⁴ The author may either have been unaware of the combination or simply used 'Isaiah' as a catch all for 'prophets'. (Which is how the early translators of the King James Version referred to it).

9 William Telford, 'Mark's Portrait of Jesus', in *The Blackwell Companion to Jesus*, ed D. Burkett (Chichester, John Wiley & Sons, 2013), p. 15.

10 Telford, pp. 23-24.

11 Steve Moyise, *Jesus and Scripture* (Grand Rapids, Baker Academic, 2011), p. 13.

12 Steve Moyise, *The Old Testament in the New: An Introduction* (New York, Continuum, 2001), p. 21.

13 Rikk Watts, 'Mark', in *Commentary on the New Testament use of the Old Testament*, eds. Gregory K Beale and Donald A. Carson (Grand Rapids, Baker Books, 2007), pp. 111.

14 Moyise, *The OT in the New...*, p. 21.

Moyise notes, however, that others (in particular, Joel Marcus and Rikk Watts) think the author of Mark's Gospel was intentional in ascribing the quotation to Isaiah.¹⁵ Marcus considers that the quotation is intrinsically linked to the opening title of the Gospel found in verse 1 and suggests that the quotation is a commentary on it. He offers a translation for the opening few words to illustrate this: 'The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Messiah, the Son of God, as written by Isaiah the prophet, "Behold, I send my messenger before your face..."'.¹⁶ In essence Marcus is arguing that the author of Mark believes the good news had been previously announced in Isaiah; specifically within the context of Isaiah 40 (a significant passage foretelling the deliverance and restoration of Israel) and equating Jesus with the eschatological expectation of the coming of Yahweh, which Marcus sees at the central theme of Mark's gospel.

Within this opening verse of Mark's Gospel Jesus is described as the "Son of God" and this idea that Jesus is acknowledged as revealing God is repeated three further times within the Gospel. Two occasions refer to divine speech: 1) at Jesus' baptism where he is recorded as hearing a voice: "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." (Mark 1:11). and 2) at the transfiguration when a similar voice is recorded as being heard by Jesus and three of his disciples: "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" (Mark 9:7). Watts describes the OT allusions related to these verses (including Psalm 2:7 "He said to me 'You are my son; today I have begotten you.'") as continuing the eschatological focus of Mark's narrative.¹⁷ The third reference to Jesus as the "Son of God" is the acknowledgement of the Roman Centurion at the death of Jesus on the cross (Mark 15:39). Although there doesn't appear to be any allusion to the OT this verse does reinforce the theme noted through earlier allusions.

It is interesting to note that Evans believes that Mark's Gospel was written at the time, and in response, to Vespasian becoming Emperor and bringing stability back to the Roman Empire. There were rumours that Vespasian was being seen as a fulfilment of Jewish prophecy and the imperial cult claimed that the emperor was the "Son of God", "saviour" and bringer of "good news to the world". Evans sees the use of the image of Jesus as the

¹⁵ Moyise, *The OT in the New...*, p. 22.

¹⁶ Marcus, Joel, *The Way of the Lord: Christological Exegesis of the Old Testament in the Gospel of Mark* (Edinburgh, T&T Clark Ltd., 1993), p. 18.

¹⁷ Watts, pp. 129, 187.

“Son of God”, in fulfilment of the prophecy within Isaiah 40:3, as the Gospel writer’s challenge to this claim and rather to state that the good news begins with Jesus who is the only true Son of God.¹⁸

Moyise further notes the importance of Isaiah in Mark’s Gospel as the author uses quotations and allusions to record Jesus specifically engaging and criticising his opponents. There are four passages in particular Moyise notes that Jesus uses to criticise his opponents 1) Mark 4:12: Jesus describes that his use of parables is so that outsiders would not be able to understand or be forgiven (Isa 6:9-10) – criticising his opponents for their blindness; 2) Mark 7: 1-13: Jesus accusing the Pharisees of hypocrisy (Isa 29:13) for upholding tradition above the Law; 3) Mark 11:15-17: Jesus overturning the moneylenders in the Temple and quoting from a combination of Isaiah 56:7 and Jer 7:11; it is uncertain whether the emphasis in the OT passages refer to ‘house of prayer’ or ‘den of robbers’ and thus whether the criticism Jesus makes relates to the exclusion of the Gentiles from the Temple or the corruption of the practice occurring. Moyise favours the latter given the cursing of the fig tree follows this; 4) Mark 12:1-12: The parable of the vineyard and tenant’s; although there are some differences it is arguably based on Isaiah 5:1-5 where Moyise sees Jesus as criticising his opponents for their unfruitfulness and violence.¹⁹

Moyise suggests that in using Isaiah’s prophecies against his opponents and in being the recipient of this opposition that Jesus might have viewed himself as the suffering servant as described in Isaiah 40-55 (and specifically Isaiah 53).²⁰ However Hooker strongly dismisses this claim by arguing that the lack of language similarities, the weakness regarding any other references within other NT passages and the lack of evidence of the expectation of a ‘suffering servant’ prior to the first century CE.²¹

Several quotations from the OT are recorded as having been spoken by Jesus in relation to matters of the law. These are generally in response to questions put to him following challenges from the Pharisees or Sadducees. These quotations not only demonstrate Jesus’ extensive knowledge of the law but also his fresh interpretation and application of it.

18 Evans, pp. 86-87

19 Moyise, *Jesus and Scripture*, pp. 19-23

20 Moyise, *Jesus and Scripture*, p. 24

21 Moyise, *Jesus and Scripture*, p. 24

This is likely to have contributed to Jesus being described as one who “astounded” people with his authoritative teaching (Mark 1: 22). Below are several examples where Jesus used quotations in this way:

- In Mark 7:10-13 the Pharisees challenge Jesus’ disciples for not following the tradition to appropriately hand-wash and Jesus’ response is to challenge their hypocrisy (quoting from Isaiah 29:13) in upholding the tradition of Corban, devoting a gift to God, and thus undermining the commandment to honour one’s parents. A similar example occurs when Jesus heals a man with a withered hand on the Sabbath challenging the Pharisees with Deuteronomy 30:15 as to what was lawful to do on the Sabbath. In both these examples Jesus is seen to uphold the intent of the law against traditions that undermine it and could cause harm.
- In Mark 10:6-8 Jesus is asked to comment on the controversy regarding divorce; he does not answer the question directly but rather refers back to Genesis 1:27; 5:2 and 2:24 highlighting the primacy of the earlier texts over the concession provided by Moses.
- In Mark 10:17-22 Jesus is questioned about inheriting eternal life by a rich ruler; Jesus interestingly responds with summarising only the second half of the ten commandments (Ex 5:12-16; Deut 5:16-20) and makes no mention of those related to God, before stating the rich ruler must give up his wealth and follow him. Watts note that in his response Jesus is putting himself, that is following him, as the centre of achieving righteousness.²²
- In Mark 12:18-27 the Sadducees ask Jesus about marriage at the resurrection but Jesus’ answer addresses the wider issue of the reality of resurrection by quoting Exodus 3:6 (‘And as for the dead being raised, have you not read in the book of Moses, in the story about the bush, how God said to him, “I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob”?’). To this quotation Jesus adds an interpretation that it demonstrates that God is God of the living and in doing so affirms the resurrection.
- In Mark 12:28 Jesus is asked by a scribe “Which commandment is the first of all?”. Jesus’s response is to cite two OT passages, quoting the Shema (Deut 6:5) and Leviticus 19:18, to assert that loving God and loving ones neighbour are the

²² Watts, p. 201.

greatest commandments. Moyise notes that Jesus is not alone in combining these two commandments but that in stating they are more important than any other commandment, is unique.²³

In several instances the author of Mark's Gospel did not have Jesus directly answer the question or challenge but recorded him providing a wider explanation demonstrating not only knowledge of the law but also insight into the heart of the issue.

Within Mark's Gospel there are three OT passages that are quoted which appear to specifically relate to Jesus' death. Firstly at the end of the parable of the vineyard (in Mark 12:10-11) Jesus quotes from Psalm 118: 22-23 indicating that, though in the parable he acknowledges he will suffer and be killed as the rejected "beloved son", God will vindicate him and rebuild his temple. Secondly, when the disciples and Jesus go to the Mount of Olives following the last supper (Mark 14:26-28), Jesus quotes from Zechariah 13:7 where Jesus predicts his disciples will desert him. Yet again there is a positive outcome in that Jesus stating he will be raised up and will go on ahead of them to Galilee. Thirdly, in Mark 15:34 Jesus' cry from the cross is a quotation from Psalm 22:1 "My God, my God why have you forsaken me". Although as some have mentioned it is unexpected that the Messiah should end his life with such a cry, there is within the passage the description of the curtain in the Temple being torn in two (potentially implying increased access to God) and an acknowledgement (as mentioned earlier) of the centurion stating and recognising Jesus as "God's Son" (Mark 15:39). Although it is clear these quotations describe the suffering Jesus underwent it also does appear that the author of Mark's Gospel is leading the reader along a path towards him being vindicated by God through a demonstration of power in the evidence of the empty tomb (Mark 16:6).

From the passages commented on above it is clear the author of Mark's Gospel uses a range of Jewish scriptures to paint a broad picture as to who he presents Jesus to be. These include the one who is the "good news", the "Son of God", an amazing and knowledgeable teacher, as one who will suffer, be killed and be raised to life. The extent to which the scriptures influenced the author and shaped his presentation of Jesus or whether it was the author's prior knowledge and view of Jesus that enabled him to find

²³ Moyise, *The OT in the New...*, p. 25.

Jesus in these scriptures is uncertain and difficult to quantify. A helpful summary of this conundrum is perhaps given by Marcus in the final paragraph of his book: "Mark has certainly learned much of what he knows about Jesus from the Scriptures. He would never have learned it, however, if he had not already known that Jesus Christ is the key to the scriptures".²⁴

Word count: 2,624

²⁴ Marcus, p. 203.

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