

A Divine Dovetail? An Exploratory Study of the Relationship between the Four Gospels and the Threefold Hebrew Canon.

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Introduction

While initially it may seem a rather rudimentary observation, it is obvious that each of the Gospels has a different starting point. Furthermore, in every case this is a different starting point *in the Old Testament*. Not only did the Gospel writers take their cue from the Old Testament, but - with an eye to fulfilment - they were picking up the story of Israel's history at different points. Particularly where the earlier Scriptures left "loose ends" or where the story was open-ended, the Evangelists may well have been inclined to commence their own stories at precisely such points. Where a Gospel begins also becomes a controlling consideration for the picture of Jesus it presents.

Mark

Mark is probably the clearest example. In 1:2, 3 the tone is set with a composite quotation from Exod 23:20, Mal 3:1, and Isa 40:3:

² It is written in Isaiah the prophet:

"I will send my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way"—

³ "a voice of one calling in the desert,
'Prepare the way for the Lord,
make straight paths for him.'"¹

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, Bible quotations are from the NIV.

As the only editorial quotation in this Gospel it sets the agenda for all that follows. Both this quotation and Isa 40:3 stand as landmarks in their respective contexts. Thus at the very outset of his Gospel, Mark wants us to think of Isaiah's New Exodus. This opening sentence conveys "the conceptual framework for his story."² This provides an illuminating perspective for the reading of Mark. Rikki Watts sees the Isaianic New Exodus as lying behind the threefold structure of Mark's Gospel. In the Galilee section Jesus fulfils the role of the Yahweh warrior and healer figure who delivers his people from bondage. Then he leads the spiritually blind along a New Exodus way. Finally he arrives at his appointed destination of Jerusalem. It is then that the quote from Malachi presents an ominous counterpoise. While the Isaiah citation heralds a time of promise and fulfilment, Malachi strikes a note of warning. Jesus does not come to restore Jerusalem but to pronounce judgement. Even in Jesus' ministry the Isaianic New Exodus is only partially fulfilled. Nevertheless, it is clear that Jesus' person and work as presented in Mark are to be viewed through the lens of this introductory quotation.³

The remaining three Gospels also link up with key points in the Old Testament. In fact, each seems to take up where the story of Israel's history left off at the close of the three major divisions of the Hebrew Canon. Matthew picks up the story from the end of 2 Chronicles which is the last of the Writings (*Ketuvim*) and also the final book of the Hebrew Bible (*Tanakh*). Luke commences with the conclusion of Malachi, the last of the Prophets (*Nevi'im*). John reaches back the furthest into Old Testament history, and takes his cue from the Pentateuch (*Torah*).

² Rikki E. Watts, *Isaiah's New Exodus and Mark* (WUNT 2:88; Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1997), 5.

³ Particularly the complexities of the Jerusalem section can be better understood from this perspective. As Watts, *New Exodus*, 6, explains: "The two themes – Jesus as the one who fulfils the INE but is rejected by Israel's leaders – intersect in Mark's account of the events of Jesus' arrival and death in Jerusalem. . . . At the same time, Jesus' rejection and death echoes the career of the enigmatic Isaianic 'suffering servant'."

Matthew

The book of 2 Chronicles commences with the building of Solomon's temple and with the house of David at the very zenith of its power, wealth, and influence. By the end of the book the temple lies in ruins, the last of the Davidic kings have been deported to Babylon, and the house of David whose decline has been traced throughout the book is about to go into eclipse. The only ray of hope, which shines briefly in the closing verses, is that Cyrus king of Persia has issued a proclamation that the temple at Jerusalem is to be rebuilt (2 Chr 36:22, 23).⁴ The story of 2 Chronicles, and hence also of the Hebrew Bible as a whole, is left open-ended. It is precisely the loose threads left at the end of the Jewish Canon that are picked up in the opening chapter of Matthew's Gospel.⁵

In Matthew Jesus is not only introduced as "the son of David" (1:1), but he is also to be called Immanuel or "God with us" (1:23). He therefore both restores the fallen house of David and fulfils the role of the temple as the place where God dwelt with his people.

⁴ A hint that for both Matthew and Luke this was the close of the Hebrew Bible is found in the phrase "from the blood of (righteous) Abel to the blood of Zechariah" (Matt 23:35; Luke 11:51). If this was the Zechariah of 2 Chr 24:20, 21, this phrase is intended as a comprehensive reference to all the martyrs in the Old Testament

⁵ This connection has also been identified by John H. Sailhamer, "The Messiah and the Hebrew Bible," *JETS* 44 (2001): 14, where he argues for a direct link between the end of the Old Testament and the beginning of the New. His argument, however, rests upon a very slender foundation, namely the use of the jussive verb *וַיַּעַל* ("let him go up"), which is the very last word of 2 Chronicles. He then surmises that as this is a verb without a subject, "[i]ts subject could very well be taken from the first chapter of Matthew in the NT." On this basis he imports a messianic meaning into the last verse of the Hebrew Old Testament. At best this is overplaying the use of a single word; at worst it is sheer speculation. The connection between 2 Chronicles and Matthew depends on large themes these books have in common, rather than on the morphology of an individual word. More to the point, therefore, is Sailhamer's observation that both Chronicles and Matthew begin with genealogies (i.e. 1 Chr 1-8 and Matt 1:1-17). Matthew's genealogy from David to the deportation to Babylon seems to depend on the list provided in 1 Chr 3:10-17. To arrive at fourteen names for this section of his genealogy Matthew omits Ahaziah, Joash, Amaziah and Jehoiakim.

Beginning with the genealogy Jesus is portrayed consistently as the son of David throughout this Gospel (1:1; 9:27; 12:23; 15:22; 20:30, 31; 21:9, 15; cf. 22:42).⁶ In fact, Matthew's very first quote from the Old Testament comes as early as 1:3-6a which cites the genealogy of David from one of the earlier *Ketuvim*, namely Ruth 4:18-22. The main difference between the two lists is that Matthew, anticipating his theme of universalism which will peak with the Great Commission (28:18-20), includes the names of three Gentile women (Tamar, Rahab, and Ruth). Hence in this Gospel Jesus is portrayed as the universal Davidic king. While 2 Chronicles ends with a rescue package offered by a Gentile king, Matthew concludes with universal dominion in the hands of the risen Jesus who commissions his followers to make disciples of all the Gentiles. In him the promises of the Davidic covenant are finally being fulfilled (2 Sam 7:12-16).

Luke

In Luke's Gospel the first reference to the Old Testament comes in the announcement of the angel Gabriel to Zacharias. In the declaration that John the Baptist will come "in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children" (1:17) there is a strong allusion to Mal 4:5, 6 (3:23, 24 MT; 3:22, 23 LXX). In the Hebrew these verses are the concluding words of the final chapter in Malachi's prophecy. This chapter's dark threats of judgment (Mal 3:5, 19, 23 MT) certainly seem to have informed John's preaching (Luke 3:7, 9, 16, 17). Jesus takes up this theme of judgment in his own teaching (Luke 12:59-53), but he radically transforms it by first taking the judgment upon himself. The baptism in the Holy Spirit and fire which John presaged of the Coming One (3:16) would indeed occur, but only after Jesus himself had undergone such baptism. It is within the rubric of such a dual baptism that this entire Gospel is to be understood.

⁶ Jesus is referred to explicitly as "the son of David" only in the Synoptics (9x in Matthew, and 3x each in Mark and Luke).

Another prominent theme in Mal 3, and one closely associated with judgment, is that of the Lord suddenly coming to his temple (v. 1). This is also a strong motif in Luke, the Jerusalem temple being the location where the narrative both begins and ends (1:8-23; 24:52, 53). In the intervening chapters it also has a crucial role to play. It features in the infancy narratives (2:27, 37) and again during Jesus' boyhood (2:46).⁷ It is the scene of the third temptation (4:9). Only when Jesus has cleansed the temple does the conflict with the authorities become deadly (19:45, 47; cf. Mark 3:6),⁸ and it now becomes the venue for his teaching ministry during passion week (20:1; 21:5, 37, 38; 22:53).⁹ When he dies the veil of the temple is rent in two (23:45). As in Mal 3, the temple will also be the locus of God's judgment (13:35). Having taken his starting point in the concluding chapter of the second major division of the Jewish Canon, Luke has cast Jesus in the role of the eschatological prophet who both warns God's people of impending judgment and identifies himself completely with their fate. In Acts this theme of warning and judgment continues unabated (2:17-21; 7:1-53; 28:25-28).

John

John's opening phrase *in the beginning* is a clear echo of Gen 1:1, a feature well recognised by most commentators. Yet the

⁷ Jack D. Kingsbury, "The Plot of Luke's Story of Jesus," *Interpretation* 48 (1994): 370-371, makes a pertinent observation: "That the temple should be the setting for Jesus' first encounter with authorities is entirely fitting, for the temple is both the place of God's presence – God, whom Jesus calls 'Father' (2:49) – and the seat of the authorities' power. In other words, the temple is the place where both Jesus and the authorities are 'at home.'"

⁸ Kingsbury, "Plot," 373.

⁹ For Hans Conzelmann, *The Theology of St. Luke* (trans. G. Buswell; London: Faber & Faber, 1961), 77, this is one of the major purposes of the temple cleansing, an act that he deprives of any eschatological significance: "In Luke it is not a question of the eschatological end of the Temple, but of its cleansing; in other words Jesus prepares it as a place he can stay, and from now on he occupies it as a place belonging to him. The cleansing is no longer an eschatological sign, but a means of taking possession, and therefore of itself it has no significance." Such a view, however, artificially isolates the temple cleansing from the earlier predictions of destruction and warnings of judgement (13:35; 19:41-44).

phrase is more than an echo. It signals an intertextuality that operates between the two passages at a deep level without ever surfacing in a direct quotation. Although subtle, the dependence of John's prologue on Gen 1 is nevertheless unmistakable. Peder Borgen makes two observations in this regard:

- (1) John i. 1-18 draws heavily on Gen. i. 1-5, the verses which complete the first day of creation.
- (2) No material from Gen. i. 1-5 is used in John i. 6ff., apart from the repetition of terms and interpretative phrases already utilized in John i. 1-5. Thus John i. 1-5 is the basic exposition of Gen. i. 1-5, while John i. 6 ff. elaborates upon terms and phrases from John i. 1-5.¹⁰

The inter-relationships between Gen 1 and the prologue, and particularly between Gen 1:1-5 and John 1:1-5, have profound implications for the way the Gospel is read. Some have linked the first day of creation which John is expounding in his introductory paragraph to the references to "days" in 1:29, 39, 43; 2:1, and then calculate the total as being seven days. From this observation Bruce Milne concludes:

John presents Jesus' early ministry as a week-long activity culminating in the first sign at Cana in Galilee. Recalling the background of Genesis chapter 1 in the prologue, it is not inconceivable that John is consciously presenting the work of Jesus, the Word made flesh, as the week of re-creation, climaxed in the first of the signs which reveal his glory.¹¹

A schema of this nature runs the risk of imposing an artificial and alien structure on the data from a superficial reading of the text. Why should the activity of Jesus climax as early as the first miracle? Creation and re-creation motifs are certainly present in John, but they

¹⁰ Peder Borgen, "Observations on the Targumic Character of the Prologue of John," *New Testament Studies* 16 (1970): 291.

¹¹ Bruce Milne, *The Message of John: Here is your King!* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1993), 56.

are to be sought at a deeper level than the mere stringing together of time references which have a diversity of underlying Greek terms. Moreover, it is likely that the prologue sets the tone for the whole Gospel and not merely for the opening sections.¹²

More convincing therefore are the connections drawn by Martin Hengel who links the “beginning” of this Gospel not with Jesus’ early ministry but with the completion of his ministry:

. . . the gospel begins with *en arche*, the very beginning, before the six days of Creation. Jesus dies in the evening of the sixth day of the week and thereby finishes God’s work . . . At the beginning of Jesus’ prayer for the disciples we read: ‘I have finished the work (*ergon*) that you gave me to do (*poiein*).’ (17:4). There is a clear allusion with all this to Gen 2:2 (LXX): ‘And on the sixth day God finished his work (*erga*) which he had done (*epoiesen*).’ God’s work of Creation and Salvation, which begins with *en arche* in Gen 1:1 and John 1:1, is ‘finished’ in the death of the Son on Golgotha at evening of the sixth day. There follows, according to John 19:31, the enigmatic ‘great Sabbath’ – for the dead Jesus, it is a ‘day of rest’ in the grave.¹³

If, paradoxically, death is the consummation of creation, the events between the beginning and the consummation must also be embraced

¹² James T. Dennison, “The Prologue of John’s Gospel,” *Kerux* 8 (1993): 6, makes a succinct claim: “The Prologue is proleptic of the gospel. One must read the *gospel* retrospectively (to the Prologue). Yet one must also read the *Prologue* prospectively (anticipatory of the gospel as a whole).” Simon R. Valentine, “The Johannine Prologue – a Microcosm of the Gospel,” *Evangelical Quarterly* 68 (1996): 304, holds that the prologue provides “the exegetical key to the right understanding of the entire book.” Michael Theobald, *Die Fleischwerdung des Logos: Studien zum Verhältnis des Johannesprologs zum Corpus des Evangeliums und zu I Joh* (Münster: Aschendorff, 1988), 160, views the prologue “als *Metatext zum Evangelium*,” even though for him it belonged to the latest compositional stage of the production of the Gospel (399, 489), so that it can be regarded as its oldest commentary (373).

¹³ Martin Hengel, “The Old Testament in the Fourth Gospel,” *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 12 (1990): 33-34.

by this overall creation theme. Jesus' ministry as a whole can therefore be seen within a creation framework. This is the perspective that has been adopted in the work of Leonhard Goppelt who views the entire Gospel in the light of creation. From the prologue's correlations with Gen 1 he concludes that in this Gospel Jesus is portrayed primarily as "the perfecter of creation."¹⁴ It is in this role that the nature of Jesus' person is to be found and this in turn is "the central concern that dominates everything else,"¹⁵ including Johannine typology:

Jesus is not compared with individual phenomena in OT prophecy or with prophetic types in a colorful variety of historical events, but he is proclaimed as the one who with creative power brings all to fulfillment. . . . The basic orientation of this Gospel accounts for the fact that Jesus' work moves exclusively on the level of creation typology. It also explains why the mediators of salvation are not related to Christ as types. Only the redemptive gifts of the Old Covenant that give life and, therefore, announce the new creation are related to him typologically and they are related to him exclusively.¹⁶

Thus the significance of the beginning of John's Gospel and its relationship to the opening chapter of the Pentateuch has generally been well recognised. What is not as obvious is the open-ended nature of the Pentateuch's conclusion and John's apparent concern to resume the story where it left off.

At the time Deuteronomy was written, no prophet had yet arisen in Israel like Moses (34:10). There was none to equal Moses either in terms of his intimacy with God (34:10) or of the awesomeness of the miracles he was sent to perform (34:11, 12). Thus the promise that God would raise up a prophet like Moses (18:15, 18) remained

¹⁴ Leonhard Goppelt, *Typos: The Typological Interpretation of the Old Testament in the New* (trans. D. H. Madvig; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 181.

¹⁵ Goppelt, *Typos*, 180.

¹⁶ Goppelt, *Typos*, 180-181.

unfulfilled. From John's Gospel it is clear that this promised prophet has now arrived (1:21, 25; 6:14; 7:40). In each of these verses the reference is to *the* prophet (ὁ προφήτης), namely the Mosaic prophet of Deut 18: 15, 18.¹⁷ Ironically, when people recognised Jesus as such, their confession was insufficient and their recognition tragically mistaken (6:14; 7:40). While in and of itself this was an accurate identification, when Johannine characters confess Jesus as a prophet (4:19; 9:17) or even as the Prophet (6:14; 7:40), such adulation is invariably regarded as inadequate and needs to be followed up by a more precise confession (4:25, 26, 29, 42; 9:35-38).

But why is such a confession insufficient when it appears to draw its inspiration so directly from the Old Testament? Why, by the same token, is Nicodemus' designation of Jesus as "a teacher come from God" (3:2) deemed inadequate? The reason on both counts would seem to lie in the fact that, although Jesus was both a teacher and a prophet, these titles fall short of the description of him in the prologue.¹⁸ He is a prophet, but he is more than a prophet. He not

¹⁷ The concept of Jesus as the Prophet has been discussed extensively by Oscar Cullmann, *The Christology of the New Testament* (trans. Shirley C. Guthrie and Charles A. M. Hall; rev. ed.; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1959), 13-50. The issue surrounding this concept is a complex one, but it can be simplified if we make "a clear distinction between the concept of the Prophet who is the forerunner of God and the concept of the Prophet who is the forerunner of the Messiah" (23). In the Synoptics John the Baptist is seen as oscillating between both roles, although he thought of himself only as a prophet (26). In the Fourth Gospel John is denied the role of *the* Prophet in either sense, and only the crowd applied the title to Jesus (36), but Cullmann claims that the concept "does seem to have had a certain meaning to the writer of the Fourth Gospel" (37). In reporting the Baptist's rejection of the title for himself (1:21), the author wants to reserve this title for Jesus. The motive behind this lies in the contrast with Moses: "If Jesus is at the same time the Prophet as well as the Logos and the Christ, then Moses can no longer be regarded as the absolute Prophet" (37). Cullmann further states that the title of prophet "takes the human character of Jesus fully into account: the eschatological Prophet expected by Judaism appears on earth as a man" (43). In so far as this title does function as a positive designation of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel, it therefore underscores his humanity. "The Prophet is, at bottom, simply the preacher of repentance at the end of days" (45).

¹⁸ For R. Alan Culpepper this is central to the development of John's narrative. As he explains in "The Plot of John's Story of Jesus," *Interpretation* 49 (1995): 347, *Vox Reformata*, 68

only brings the word of God, he is the divine Word. Even the Prophet who was expected to fulfil the Mosaic ideal of Deut 18 was no more than a human figure. Jesus certainly fills in the blank left by Deut 34:10-12 in that John presents him as one who both knew God more intimately than Moses (1:18) and whose signs exceeded those of Moses (7:31; 9:16, 32). Yet this is not where the primary emphasis lies. As Cullmann has observed, Jesus' role as the Prophet is played down in this Gospel, and Jesus never claims the title of prophet for himself.¹⁹ He is more than the Prophet. He is the Logos who speaks a new creation into being.

As the Word Jesus answers to both the divine Creator at the beginning of the Pentateuch and the Mosaic prophet at the end. He fulfils both roles. Between the images of Creator and prophet, John applies much of the intervening imagery in the Pentateuch to Jesus as well. According to Richard Longenecker, Jesus is also "the antitype of the brazen serpent, the true manna, the true water-giving rock, the true fiery pillar, the eschatological Moses, the new Torah, and the true Paschal Sacrifice."²⁰ These parallels merely scratch the surface of the affinities between the five books of Moses and the Fourth Gospel. This Gospel is quite literally saturated with symbolism, imagery and typology from the Pentateuch.²¹

348: "The story unfolds in a series of recognition scenes, until at the end the question becomes whether the reader has recognized the eternal Word in Jesus ... The prologue announces the coming of the Revealer, and episode after episode replays and develops the story of the Revealer who is met by various responses of belief and unbelief."

¹⁹ Cullmann, *Christology*, 37.

²⁰ Richard N. Longenecker, *Biblical Exegesis in the Apostolic Period* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 153-154. Longenecker's language here is a little extravagant and not completely precise. It therefore stands in need of some qualification.

²¹ For example, the image of "the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man" (1:51) can be traced back to the vision of Jacob's ladder in Gen 28:12, thus linking Jesus to Bethel, meaning "house of God" (Gen 28:17, 19). This lays the groundwork for the variegated tabernacle and temple imagery in the Fourth Gospel. More complex, but no less relevant, is the relationship between Jesus' many "I am" (ἐγώ εἰμι) sayings and Yahweh's pronouncement in Exod *Vox Reformata*, 68

Conclusion

Where Gospels begin would therefore seem to provide a significant pointer both backwards and forwards. Looking backwards, these starting points suggest locations from which the Gospel writers may have taken their cue in the Old Testament. Mark's opening (and only) editorial quotation comes from the beginning of Isaiah's New Exodus section, and he seems to have based his structure on the major themes of those chapters (Isa 40-66). This is not the whole story, however. This composite quotation begins with a reference to Mal 3:1. This presents the ominous counterpoise of judgment – a motif that Mark will develop in paradoxical ways. Matthew takes up the Old Testament story where the Hebrew canon leaves it at the end of 2 Chronicles. Luke's first clear allusion to the Old Testament comes from the last chapter of Malachi. This means that he – like Mark – picks up the theme of judgment. The Fourth Gospel's opening phrase *in the beginning* is the strongest possible echo back to the creation account in Genesis 1. It also picks up on the theme of the Mosaic prophet from Deuteronomy 34. The intervening material in the Pentateuch is also thoroughly mined by the Fourth Evangelist for allusions, images, characters, types and themes.

The Gospels' starting points also point forward to the portraits of Jesus they are about to present. For Mark, Jesus is the triumphant warrior figure who casts out demons and triumphs over his enemies. He resembles Yahweh who in Isaiah's New Exodus overcomes the idol gods of Babylon. But then Mark's story takes an ironic twist. The reference to Malachi 3 has injected a note of judgment. It is not a judgment that Jesus inflicts as much as it is one that he suffers, as did the Servant of Isaiah 53. Matthew's Jesus as the *Immanuel* fulfils the role of the temple as the place where God dwells with his people. He is also the long-awaited son of David. Not only does he restore the eclipsed Davidic kingdom, but he raises it to new heights of

3:14: "I AM WHO I AM". Some of the major feasts in John, such as Passover and Tabernacles, also have their origin in the *Torah*.

universal dominion. In Luke's Gospel Jesus again takes the judgment of his people upon himself. He is the eschatological prophet who warns them of impending judgment and identifies himself completely with their fate. In the Fourth Gospel Jesus is again portrayed as a prophet, but also as more than a prophet. He is the divine Word through whom the creation came into being and whose work culminates – in the ultimate paradox – on the cross.

This brief overview would therefore suggest that the four canonical Gospels are profoundly complementary. They have complementary starting points in the Hebrew canon – at the beginning of Isaiah's New Exodus, and at the end of the Writings and the Prophets, and at the beginning and end of the Law. They also present complementary and contrasting portraits of Jesus – the triumphant Yahweh figure and the suffering Servant; the *Immanuel* and the Davidic king; the eschatological prophet and the divine Word.