

Nazareth and The Branch

Matthew 2:23 and Interpretation of the Old Testament

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I often hear the comment that as Christians we should interpret the Old Testament through the lens of the New Testament. Along with this perspective usually goes the affirmation that Paul, or the Gospel writers, must have understood the OT better than we do, so we should automatically take the NT as the final authority on interpretation of the OT. There is some sense in which the first comment is true. That is, we as Christians will never be able to hear the OT apart from the Incarnation and God's self-revelation in Christ. We will always be looking at the OT texts as Christians.

However, there is also a dimension in which it is not true. That is, the OT is not inherently a Christian book, and if we impose categories onto the OT which are alien to it, we may risk not really hearing the OT for what it says, on its own terms. It is more likely that we will simply impose onto the OT biblical texts our more modern and Christian perspectives. And we may even distort or not fully understand the rich confession about God if we do not let the OT speak from its own categories and in its own way.

As to the second comment, there is an interesting assumption at work that we don't usually acknowledge. We assume that Paul or the Gospel writers are *trying* to understand the OT on the same level that **we** are trying to understand it. I would say strongly that **no**, they are not. They are *not* doing OT exegesis; they are trying to communicate a truth about the Incarnation and its results in the world. They are interpreting current revelatory historical events (the Incarnation) for their own day. And they are using a vast array of literary techniques to do so, including the OT in direct quotes, in indirect allusions, in thematic references, in allegorical applications, in secondary references that only make sense from the Greek or Targumic (Aramaic) translations, sometimes incorrect citations from memory, vague references, connections of single words or even sounds of words, word plays, etc.

Some of those ways of using the OT we would *not* use today. Does that mean they were wrong in how they used the OT? Of course not, unless we impose the narrow criteria that they were intending to give us the "correct" meaning of the OT passage. I don't think they were; they were trying to tell people about Jesus in any and all ways that they thought people would understand. They did not feel bound to a particular method of interpretation, because ***they were not interpreting the text of the OT***; they were bearing witness to the revelation of God in Christ. They did that one way to the Jews, and another way to the Greeks. Their ***testimony*** is primary, not their interpretive methodology.

That does not mean that they twist or pervert OT scripture to accomplish that goal, nor does it mean we can *interpret* Scripture today, OT or NT, with the same methods. But it does mean that they felt more freedom in using the text than we might allow, especially since we have a far narrower understanding of the "authority" of the written word than they did.

It also means that **we** even have to do exegesis **on the NT** to understand what they were doing, just like we have to do exegesis on the OT to understand it! So the answer to this issue is not to shift absolute truth from the text of the OT to the NT writers' application of the OT. The answer is to interpret the NT in terms of what the NT is and says, and to interpret the OT in terms of what it is and says, and then ask questions of how they relate to each other in terms of theology.

Now, let's look at an example. It is Matthew's Gospel that most often uses the formula "this happened that it might be fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet, saying . . ." This is usually used with a particular event in the life of Jesus that Matthew connects with the OT, something he is much more concerned to do, it seems, than are the other Gospel writers. The most common assumption here is that the OT was predicting this event, and that event then happened to fulfill that prediction. So the connection is seen as directly historical, working forward. (This is even apart from the implications concerning predestination that this assumption raises!) Sounds good. Well, maybe. But if we don't make that assumption, what are other possibilities?

There is an interesting verse in Matthew 2:23 that seems rather enigmatic: "And he went and dwelt in a city called Nazareth, that what was spoken by the prophets might be fulfilled, 'He shall be called a Nazarene.'" This is the conclusion of the birth narratives in Matthew, immediately preceding the accounts of John the Baptist (ch. 3) and the beginning of Jesus' public ministry in (ch. 4). It simply says that Joseph and his family returned to live in Nazareth of Galilee. And Matthew seems to make the simple connection that this is "fulfillment" of an OT "prediction" that this would occur.

The problem is that there is no such prediction, or even remotely similar comment, anywhere in the OT. In fact, the city of Nazareth is never mentioned in the OT or Apocrypha, even though it existed as a tiny village from around 900 BC until the Babylonian exile, and was then reestablished during the Maccabean era around 200 BC. It remained a small, remote, and virtually unknown rural village, although it was not far from the major Roman center of Sepphoris in Jesus' time.

Now, did Matthew just make a mistake in his use of the OT? If we cast this directly in terms of NT interpretation of the OT, it appears he did. Or, we are reduced to scrambling to find some sort of extrabiblical or rational explanation in order to salvage a certain view of prophecy or the authority of Scripture or Matthew's integrity. But there may be a far simpler explanation that comes directly from Scripture. It is one that pointedly raises the issue of how Matthew is dealing with the OT, and how our assumptions about the Bible lead us to ask the wrong questions about it.

Several OT prophets express the conviction that God would once again act in the life of the Israelite nation to raise up a righteous king who would lead them to a recovery of their vitality as the people of God. Zechariah, speaking to the post exilic community who was without a king (c. 520 BC), talked about God again empowering a restored monarchy, and a new high priest (Zech 6:9-15). Jeremiah had little good to say about Israelite kings, especially Jehoiakim. He spoke from the impending collapse of the Israelite nation to the Babylonians (c. 600 BC), yet looked forward to a time when God would raise up a new king who would execute justice and righteousness in the land (Jer 33:14-26). Isaiah of Jerusalem spoke from the Assyrian crisis in

which the pitiful king Ahaz was willing to sell out the very soul of Israel to Assyria to retain his power (c. 700 BC). He talked about God working through a new king whose reign would be marked by wisdom, justice, and peace (Isa 11:1-9).

The prophets used various metaphors to refer to this anticipated revival of the ideal monarchy to replace the corrupt kings of the day, including "servant" (Haggai, Isaiah), "signet ring" (Haggai), "shepherd" (Micah, Ezekiel), or simply "David" (Amos). But in all three of the above examples, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Zechariah also use the term "branch" as a metaphor to refer to the new king that God would raise up from the line of David (Isa 4:2, 11:1, Jer 23:5, Zech 3:8, 6:12). The metaphor is most clearly expressed in Isaiah 11:1: There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a **branch** shall grow out of his roots.

In Hebrew, the word "branch" is *netzer*, actually only three consonantal letters: **NZR**. Note that the town **NaZaReth** contains the same three primary letters (plus an ending often attached to nouns). In the Aramaic form of *Nazareth*, (Aramaic was the common language spoken by most Israelites after the exile; some have suggested that the entire book of Matthew was originally written in Aramaic rather than Greek), it comes very close in sound to the Hebrew word for "branch."

It seems, then, that Matthew was not at all "mistaken" in this OT reference, although he was certainly not exegeting Isaiah. He was identifying the obscure Galilean town of Nazareth in which Jesus grew up with the OT reference to a *netzer* God would raise up to bring justice and righteousness and peace to His people. In other words, this was the means Matthew used to identify Jesus, even as a child returning to an obscure town in remote Galilee ("can any good thing come from Nazareth?" John 1:47), as the "King" from the line of David whom God had finally raised up to restore His people.

It is no coincidence that it is Matthew more than the other Gospels in which the idea of the Kingdom of God and the reign of God through His King finds particular prominence. This is Matthew's way of confessing Jesus to be the Messiah (the Christ)! But he is *not* doing it historically, or geographically, as we so often assume, nor is he simply connecting predictive prophecy with its later fulfillment. He is doing it *theologically*, by using the similarity in sound between a word in Hebrew and a word in Aramaic, as he is (probably) writing in Greek! He is not interpreting Isaiah directly; He is bearing witness to Jesus as the Christ, the Messiah, the **Branch!**

What all of this suggests is that it is very unlikely that Isaiah in 700 BC, or Jeremiah in 600 BC, or Zechariah in 520 BC had in mind the city of Nazareth as they talked about the Branch. They were not predicting anything about the city of Nazareth. Matthew's application here cannot be used as the key to understand those books. It *must* work the other way; we cannot really understand Matthew's reference without *first* understanding the entire concept and set of metaphors, and some cultural history, from the OT prophets. What those prophets affirm in the metaphor of the Branch is that God will not leave His people without a leader to show them how to be His people. It is not a predictive prophecy; it is an affirmation about God's grace, that He will continue to work in history to enable His people to respond faithfully as His people.

And Matthew, understanding both the significance of the coming of Jesus, and the affirmation about God that those prophets of long ago made, links the two in affirming that in Jesus, the Christ, the Branch, God has once again been faithful to His people by entering history and providing a way for them to be His people. Matthew takes the insignificant town in which Jesus grew up and uses it as a metaphor to confess Jesus as the fulfillment of the hopes of a thousand years, and the revelation of the faithfulness of God to His people. To me that is a far more significant affirmation than trying to figure out how to use Matthew to interpret Isaiah, or to use this as an example of predictive prophecy.

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