

Jesus and the Psalms

Danijel Berković
Biblijski institut, Zagreb
berkovicd@gmail.com

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Summary

The whole set of beliefs and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth, as a Jewish Rabbi, are based and rely profoundly on Old Testament writings and characters, such as Abraham, Moses, David and Isaiah, but also on quotations from the “Scriptures” (the Law, Psalms, Prophets). All of these form a programmatic basis and common denominators of the teaching and doctrines of Jesus of Nazareth. All of these frequently feature in his duels with traditional religious leaders. The NT Gospels attest to Jesus’ reliance on scriptures, law, and the psalms in particular. In comparison with the apostle Paul’s peculiar discontinuity between the two Testaments (cf. 2 Cor 5:17), Jesus’ teaching builds positively on its continuity. In soteriological terms, Pauline discontinuity is understandable. On the other hand, from the perspective of Jesus’ teaching, the continuity between the two Testaments is clearly worth investigating. This study considers the importance and the role of the Psalms in Jesus’ life, his teaching, and his death. Psalmic references or quotations in the Gospels will be examined, particularly (i) in the way in which Jesus himself uses the Psalms, and (ii) how some Psalms are associated with the circumstances of Jesus’ life and death.

Introduction

The New Testament text is permeated with OT textual references, more particularly from the Psalms and Isaiah. The development of the NT overall message shows significant reference to OT characters such as Abraham, Moses or David.

In all that, the ministry and mission of Jesus of Nazareth are markedly defined by the Old Testament.¹ At crucial shifting points in the life and mission of Jesus, he customarily turns to passages from the Psalms. At one of his final meetings with his disciples and followers he concludes,

The words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the law of Moses and in the prophets and psalms must be fulfilled (πληρώω) (Lk 24:44).

In this, the issue of the criteria for considering a quotation being a citation (verbatim) from the Old Testament, or just an allusion to an OT text, will also be discussed.

Within the limitations of this work, in the section *Jesus and Old Testament*, the question, “*How did Jesus himself understand his mission?*” will at this point only be discussed indirectly, although this question certainly deserves a separate treatment and focus by paying more attention to the historical and religious context, which is here only mentioned in passing.

Many of Jesus’ verbatim references to Old Testament texts seem to be observed with suspicion. France notes that,

The prevalent attitude to the words of Jesus recorded in the Gospels is one of scepticism as to their dominical origin. The quotations of the Old Testament attributed to him are tacitly, and sometimes explicitly, regarded as reflecting the scriptural interpretation not of Jesus himself (France 1985, 13).

He then concludes that the “*thought of the founder is allowed to recede behind the screen of that of his followers*” (1985, 13).

Any person with a moderate knowledge of the Bible and a reasonable acquaintance with Christianity will be able to associate some of the utterances of Jesus of Nazareth from the Gospels with the texts of the Psalms. The accounts of Jesus’ mortal agony in the garden of Gethsemane, his trial at Pilate’s court, and his death on Calvary are well-known narratives in the four Gospels, and many of them refer to psalmodic texts.

Ordinary readers will probably be familiar with the famous, almost legendary cry of Jesus as he was dying on the cross, recorded by the evangelist Matthew, “*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*” (Mt 27:46), echoing Psalm 22 (cf. Mk

1 A number of works on the use of the Old Testament in the New Testament have been written, particularly during the 1960s, many of them now being reference works. The following are some of them: Stendahl, K., *The School of St Matthew and its use of the Old Testament* (Uppsala, 1954); Ellis, E.E., *Paul’s use of the Old Testament* (Edinburgh, 1957); Gundry, R.H., *The use of the Old Testament in St. Matthew’s Gospel* (Leiden, 1967). And, of course, there is Dick France’s, *Jesus and the Old Testament* (1971, Tyndale Press; 1985 Baker House). However, it still seems that the subject is relatively neglected.

15:34).² Some days prior to these final days, the same evangelist registers Jesus' messianic entry into Jerusalem, which the Christian church today celebrates as Palm Sunday. Again, there is an echo of a psalmodic text, this time Psalm 118. According to Matthew, the crowds in Jerusalem "*went before him and those that followed him shouted, 'Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Hosanna in the highest!'*" (Mt 21:9; cf. Ps 118:25).³ Matthew's Jewishness prompts him to emphasize the "*fulfilment of scriptural prophecies in the person of Jesus*" (Hill 1972, 39).⁴ However, in reference to linking the Psalms and Jesus, a same or very similar course is also taken by other NT authors.

Whether these or other psalmodic references in the Gospels are factual or editorial interventions, they all affirm the textual coupling of Jesus of Nazareth with the Psalms, which was evidently crucial for his *life*, *ministry* and *mission*. In more than one way, Jesus and the Psalms are inseparable. At times, there are clear verbatim citations, while at other times there are only allusions to individual psalms or passages.

Jesus and the Old Testament

Scriptures fulfilled

It is tempting to simply interpret fulfilments of the Old Testament in the New Testament by verbatim OT quotations. This kind of treatment would make the Old Testament only a blueprint for the fulfilment of the New. Such an interpretative strategy may not only be questionable, but makes hermeneutics a matter of mechanical interpretation. It also bypasses and ignores the re-contextualization and appropriation of the Scriptures, which is particularly true in the case of the Psalms.

Reading through the New Testament shows beyond any doubt that Jesus of Nazareth was to be understood as the fulfilment of the Old Testament. In this regard, of all the writers of NT texts and theology, the evangelist Matthew is most insistent. His formulaic pattern, "*to fulfil*" (ἵνα πληρωθῆ), is almost a trademark

- 2 Here Mark's report is in Aramaic (cf. Mk 15:34) while Matthew blends Hebrew and Aramaic.
- 3 Here John the evangelist remarks that his own disciples did not understand what was really going on at the time and what it all meant. Only after Jesus was glorified "*they remembered that this had been written of him*" (cf. Joh 12:16).
- 4 The 'Jewishness' of Matthew is widely acknowledged and rarely disputed (cf. Hill 1972; France 1985, etc.).

which occurs throughout the chapters of his Gospel: Mt 1/2/4/8/12/21/27.⁵ In his account of the birth of Jesus (Mt 1:18-25) and Joseph's uneasiness because of Mary's pregnancy, Matthew records that Joseph was seriously considering putting her away. Only after heavenly intervention did he finally make up his mind and stand by her. The evangelist concludes that, "All this took place to fulfil what the Lord had spoken by the prophet" (ἵνα πληρωθῆ τὸ ῥηθῆν) (Mt 1:22). Emphasizing the fulfilment of Scripture, John prefers the formula, "what has been written (Scripture) is fulfilled" (ἵνα ἡ γραφή πληρωθῆ) (cf. Joh 13:18).

No doubt there were events in Jesus' life which happened the way they did in order to recall OT scriptures. Matthew's detailed account of Jesus' messianic entry into Jerusalem, riding on an ass, is there to show that the prophet's words were fulfilled. He insists this or that happened *so that...* (Τοῦτο δὲ γέγονεν ἵνα).

Go into the village opposite you, and immediately you will find an ass tied, and a colt with her; untie them and bring them to me... *This took place to fulfil what was spoken by the prophet* (Mt 21:4)

Continuity and discontinuity

The use of the OT in Jesus' life and teaching reveals continuity, even though there are peculiar elements of re-interpretation. He confirms that his mission is not to *abolish* or *destroy* (καταλύω) the precepts of the OT, but to accomplish and *fulfil* (πληρώω) them.

Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets, I have come not to abolish them but to fulfil them." (cf. Mt 5:17).

The religious leaders of the time, horrified by Jesus' treatment of the Sabbath and fasting, concluded that this revolutionary Nazarene rabbi was set to overturn the OT (the Law) completely. This was indeed the case with some later Christian sects, such as the Marcionites, who completely abandoned and abolished the OT. But what does "*fulfil*" entail? Several interpretations may be appropriate. Firstly, can it be taken in the sense of *obeying and keeping* the entire Law? Secondly, it may refer to revealing the real, deeper meaning of the Law. Thirdly, it may mean bringing the Law to its ultimate and final end, thus abolishing it (cf. France 1985).

Jesus clearly did not advocate the abolition and rejection of the Law, but rather introduced a novel re-interpretation of the Scriptures which indicated the necessity for something new, since patching up the old was neither wise nor likely

5 cf. Mt 1:22-23; 2:15; 2:17-18; 2:23; 4:14-16; 8:17; 12:17-21; 21:4-5; 27:9-10.

to succeed. Luke's account of Jesus' simile of the wineskins illustrates this:

They said to him, "The disciples of John fast often and offer prayers, and so do the disciples of the Pharisees, but yours eat and drink." And Jesus said to them, "Can you make wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them? The days will come, when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast in those days." He told them a parable also: "No one tears a piece from a new garment and puts it upon an old garment; if he does, he will tear the new, and the piece from the new will not match the old. And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; if he does, the new wine will burst the skins and it will be spilled, and the skins will be destroyed. But new wine must be put into fresh wineskins" (Lk 5:33-38).

By this he indicated that he was not to be regarded as a repairer, for such efforts would ruin both the new and the old. The new "garment" would be spoilt, and the old would not last in its weak state. Though Jesus' aim was not to "patch up" the traditional Judaism, his re-interpretation of the Law is not so much a revolution as an emphatic reminder that the message of the Old Testament needed full implementation (cf. Jer 29:11-14; 31:31).

Paul's emphasis, on the other hand, is on the discontinuity between the old and the new. The apostle declares that "*the old has passed away, behold, the new has come*" (τὰ ἀρχαῖα παρῆλθεν, ἰδοὺ γέγονεν καινὰ) (2 Cor 5:17).

Jesus' mission and the OT context

A careful examination of the intentions, mission and general approach of Jesus of Nazareth to the Old Testament raises several questions.

Was his aim really to establish a new faith? Could it not be that the *mission* of Jesus of Nazareth was really the radical *cleansing, reformation* and *redefinition* of Judaism, in its global *capacity* and its role in the context of salvific history? Where do his *critical dependence* and reliance on the Jewish Scriptures come from? And, why did he not begin his universal mission with a "clean slate"? Did he use Scripture reference as a prop for himself and his completely original mission? Was he *using* first century Judaism for his own purposes, or relying on it?⁶

To be able to tackle some of these questions, we need to put the issue in the

6 In his extensive volumes, *The New Testament and the People of God* (NTPG) and *Jesus and the victory of God* (1996), N. T. Wright deals with many of these questions in an attractive way. He himself admits his work is "standing on the shoulders" of other giants of NT studies (e.g. George Caird, Charles Moule, Oliver O'Donovan) as well as scholarship and authors on the life of Jesus (from Albert Schweitzer to Edward Schillebeeckx).

context of the time. One way or another, the *doctrinal significance of the OT* and his use of the Jewish scriptures were *crucial* for Jesus of Nazareth in terms of:

- (i) pre-Christian Jewish reformation and *redefinition* of first century Judaism, in the light of its universal salvific role, and
- (ii) the birth of Christianity, in which the universal salvific role of Judaism would be crucial

After careful consideration, I agree with Wright that the initial intent of Jesus of Nazareth was “*eschatological redemption in Judaism*” (Wright 1996, 576). Christianity, as a religion, was almost a by-product of this.

The first part of this study will focus on the *general precepts* of Jesus’ relationship with and use of the Scriptures, set in the secular and religious context of the time. The second part will refer more *specifically to the use of the Psalms* in Jesus’ life and ministry.

Historical context

All quiet on the eastern front. The appearance of Jesus of Nazareth, his self-proclaimed mission, teaching and doctrines, must be placed in a pluriform context, primarily the religious context of the day, and the wider socio-political context.

Times were relatively quiet when Jesus appeared on the historical and religious scene. The Roman power of the day and the Pax Romana were successfully keeping things under control in the Palestinian/Judean province. The rule of Emperor Tiberius (AD 14-37) was proceeding more or less smoothly, though there were constant tensions and threats of Judean insurrection.⁷ Most of the time there was only minor unrest provoked by Jewish “bandits” (*lestoi*), which did not require major military intervention (cf. Wright 1996, 155).

In his record, Luke felt it was important to establish a precise historical framework with a definite starting point:

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, and Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of the region of Iturea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene, in the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas (Lk 3:1).

7 Tiberius was one of the greatest Roman generals, prolific in expanding the Roman rule, particularly in Dalmatia and Pannonia. Somewhat unwillingly, he became emperor and took the full name, *Tiberius Claudius Nero*. Tiberius came from an old and very prominent Roman patrician family of the Claudiuses, hence, Claudius.

Apart from setting the regional political context, the evangelist considers it important to maintain a record of local Jewish history, or what was left of it. So he includes details of the ruling clerical party – Annas the high priest (AD 6-15 – succeeded by five of his sons), and Caiaphas, his son-in-law.⁸

In his *Histories*, Tacitus describes the geopolitical situation of the time and states that “all was quiet” in Palestine during Tiberius’ rule.

However, it was not exactly peaceful. “Quiet” seems to mean there were no large-scale military operations. Here is how Tacitus the chronicler portrays this period:

The first Roman to subdue the Jews and set foot in their temple by right of conquest was Gnaeus Pompey: thereafter it was a matter of common knowledge that there were no representations of the gods within, but that the place was empty and the secret shrine contained nothing, the walls of Jerusalem were razed, but the temple remained standing. Later, in the time of our civil wars, when these eastern provinces had fallen into the hands of Mark Antony, the Parthian prince, Pacorus, seized Judea, but he was slain by Publius Ventidius, and the Parthians were thrown back across the Euphrates: the Jews were subdued by Gaius Sosius. Antony gave the throne to Herod, and Augustus, after his victory, increased his power. After Herod’s death, a certain Simon assumed the name of king without waiting for Caesar’s decision. He, however, was put to death by Quintilius Varus, governor of Syria; the Jews were repressed; and the kingdom was divided into three parts and given to Herod’s sons. *Under Tiberius all was quiet* (Tacitus 5.9).

Tacitus was only partly correct. Perhaps the last sentence was a political statement to appease the powers of the time. Namely, in the Jewish province anyone who talked of the “*reign of Israel’s god*” would be considered a potential plotter. The Romans in Palestine had to deal with many Jewish revolutionary groups. And no doubt they considered that Jesus himself belonged to one, as he...

habitually went about from village to village, speaking of the kingdom of the god of Israel, and celebrating this kingdom in various ways, not least in sharing meals with all and sundry (Wright 1996, 150).

Furthermore, the biblical record mentions characters who were, in one way or another, agents of revolutionary movements or involved in suppressing them. In the time of the Maccabean revolt, 1 Maccabees 4:28f describes the insurrection of a certain Simon Judas. The text and context show that this was not only a political revolutionary movement but had clear religious connotations and expectations. After resisting the Roman forces, Simon and his fellow warriors devised a plan to protect the altar from the Temple.

8 In order to exercise relative authority in Jerusalem, the high priests mostly supported Roman rule (cf. Otzen 128f).

They deliberated what to do about the altar of burnt offering, which had been profaned. And they thought it best to tear it down, lest it bring reproach upon them, for the Gentiles had defiled it. So they tore down the altar, and stored the stones in a convenient place on the temple hill until there should come a prophet to tell what to do with them (1 Macc 4:44-46).

This gives us a good picture of the political situation. But it also clearly indicates the level of religious eschatological expectations, which to some extent form the wider background to Jesus' teachings.

Religious context

Jesus of Nazareth appeared on the scene not only in the context of a complex political situation in which the aim was the secular liberation of the Jewish nation, but which was also fraught with great religious expectations. For the Jews, no-one but the Messiah could resolve it. However, if the political situation in Palestine was complex, religious Judaism in the first-century was even more so.

There were many fast growing spiritual revival movements. Different Jewish religious sects, a plethora of new spiritual movements, and groups of pious believers were sprouting up. The fertile ground for this had been prepared by the emergence of the *Pharisaic movement*, probably around 150 BC, at the time of the Maccabean revolts.⁹ Later came the influential Qumran sect (cf. Otzen 1990, 116f). So the times were clearly ripe for the emergence of a messianic figure. It was also the beginning of Judeo-Christian eschatological expectations. Within only a few years, Jewish Christians would be searching the Scriptures, seeking for answers to the social, political and religious turmoil they witnessed. With the rise of Christianity and the *goyim* (non-Jews) sharing in Israel's story and history, the first Christian NT writers would conclude that the last days were upon them and the Messiah about to return (cf. Armstrong 2008, 60f).

Quotations From OT Scriptures

OT quotations in the NT, particularly in the Gospels, are critical in at least two ways. One is *technical*, and the other *theological*. The former reflects Jewish methods of

9 Of this period, Otzen remarks that we have "numerous grounds for the supposition that the turbulent years after 170 BCE were decisive for the development of Early Judaism" (Otzen 116). Otzen here refers to Early Pharisaism and the Hasidic movement, i.e. the "company of the pious," which as he notes "formed the popular background of the Maccabean revolt" (id.).

argumentation and quotation, whether verbatim or allusory. The latter acknowledges that most of the NT doctrinal basis in one way or another rests on the OT.

Quotation criteria

In the life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth, we ought to look at what can be considered as a clear quotation from the OT and what is an allusion to an OT text.

The very beginning of Jesus' public ministry opens with Isaianic or psalmodic texts. Some of his other quotations are taken verbatim from the Psalms, but he also makes many indirect allusions. For example, when Jesus is dying on the cross, Matthew and Luke use verbatim quotations from Ps 22:1, "*My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?*" (Mt 27:46, NAB); and Ps 31:6, "*Into your hands I commit my spirit*" (Lk 23:46, NAB). At other times, as in Mt 13:35,

All this Jesus said to the crowds in parables; indeed he said nothing to them without a parable. This was to fulfil what was spoken by the prophet: "I will open my mouth in parables, I will utter what has been hidden since the foundation of the world" (Mt 13:34-35, RSV).

Although this is not a direct quote, it alludes to words in Ps 78: "I will open my mouth in a parable; I will utter dark sayings from of old" (Ps 78:2, RSV). In his first public Temple appearance, according to Luke (Lk 4:17-19), Jesus quotes Isaiah 61 verbatim:

The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me; He has sent me to bring glad tidings to the lowly, to heal the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners (Is 61:1-2; cf. Ps 2; Ac 13; Heb 1; 5.).

This raises the issue of when a quotation is a true quotation, and when it is not. Must it be word-for-word, or will close verbal similarity suffice?

E. R. Dalglish proposes the following criteria: (a) a *formal* introduction to a quotation; (b) a *sufficient length* of a text which can be determined as "quotation" rather than a common phrase; and (c) when in a *situational setting* it is obviously more than an allusion or a common phrase.

Jesus' quotations

Why does Matthew say that Jesus' words, "*I will open my mouth in parables*" (Mt 13:35), were to fulfil what was spoken by the prophet, when they clearly echo the quotation from Psalm 78, "*I will open my mouth in a parable*" (Ps 78:2)? There are suggestions that link this quotation with the prophet Isaiah. David Hill suggests

that for Matthew, all OT quotations have a prophetic value (cf. Hill 234). In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus says, “*Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth*” (Mt 5:5), clearly in reference to Psalm 37. The psalmist repeats the very same promise for the *poor* and the *righteous*:

The poor shall possess the land, and delight themselves in abundant prosperity
(37:11).

The righteous shall inherit the land, and dwell therein for ever (37:29).

David Hill’s commentary on Mt 5:5 is useful. He reckons that the promise to inherit the land refers to all those who follow the will of God and is thus prescribed by Jesus as the means of entering the Kingdom of God (cf. Hill 1972, 112). However, are Jesus’ words to be taken as a quotation or a popular allusion to Ps 37, as well as other OT texts?¹⁰

There are important “quotations” which Jesus uses, some of which carry theological weight, for which the real source cannot be found. In Luke’s unique Emmaus story, at the end of the scene Jesus appears to the disciples.

Then he said to them, “These are my words which I spoke to you, while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the law of Moses and the prophets and the psalms must be fulfilled.” Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead” (Lk 24:45-46).

It is not clear here where the “*thus it is written*” (ὅτι οὕτως γέγραπται) can be found.

Psalmic Poetry in the NT

Victory songs of the Old Testament

Firstly, we should investigate the rich heritage of the *psalmic literary types* in the Scriptures of both Testaments. The Old Testament Psalter is a compilation commonly called the Book of Psalms. However, psalmic poetry, particularly Yahwistic psalmic poetry, is common to both the Old and New Testaments. The biblical evidence shows that psalms and psalmic compositions were deeply ingrained in the *birth, life, mission* and *death* of Jesus of Nazareth.

Secondly, ancient Yahwistic poetry, particularly the type known as *victory*

¹⁰ In reference to possessing the land, see Ps 69:36b and De 4:1; 16:20.

songs, actually precedes *psalmodic poetry*. This type clearly overflows into the New Testament. There are several characteristic songs of victory in the Old Testament which serve as a pattern for later psalmodic literature, particularly that of the New Testament. These are the *Song of Moses* (and the *Song of Miriam*) in Exodus 15, and the victorious *Song of Deborah* in Judges 5. They display underlining common motifs, rejoicing in the majesty and power of Yahweh, which are echoed in the New Testament – compare for example the *Song of Moses* and the *Magnificat*. Moses sings:

I will sing to the LORD, for he is gloriously triumphant for he has triumphed gloriously; the horse and his rider he has thrown into the sea. The LORD is my strength and my song, and he has become my salvation; this is my God, and I will praise him (Ex 15:1-5).

The psalm of Mary, the mother of Jesus, has an almost identical opening:

My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God (μεγαλύνει ἡ ψυχὴ μου τὸν κύριον καὶ ἠγαλλίασεν τὸ πνεῦμά μου ἐπὶ τῷ θεῷ), my Saviour... for he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name (Lk 1:46f).

Investigating ancient psalmodic literary types, Frank Cross and David Freedman, in *Studies in Ancient Yahwistic poetry* (1975), examined the general literary characteristics typical of psalmodic literature (such as *metrical* and *strophic* patterns or *parallelisms*). They also examined the linguistic and lexical features, and established that “*linguistic features are genuinely archaic*” (Cross & Freedman 1975, 5-6). In conclusion Cross and Freedman established that these were “*literary units,*” also typical of later OT psalms.

Narrative poetry

The *Song of Moses*, opens up another important aspect of biblical psalmodic poetry, namely that of *narrative poetry*. That is to say, a psalm or a song also tells a story, whether as a public reminder or personal recollection of the actual event. In this, poetry “antedates prose as a vehicle of literary expression” (Alter 2011, 122), and its language is more “condensed” than that of a narrative with an added value (cf. Bar-Efrat, 199). Psalmodic poetic versification is not a requisite of mere repetition. It is important to note that the structure of biblical psalmodic parallelism and its constant repetitions of half-lines is never really repetition, and it is only approximately synonymous. In the introductory section (The Poetry of Psalms) of his *The Book of Psalms*, Robert Alter (2007) thoroughly describes the functioning and purpose of psalmodic parallelisms. The repetitions are not really mere repetitions and the synonymy is only approximate. Such parallelistic

repetitions serve for the building up of *semantic momentum*, which really heightens the tension in a poetic narration (cf. Alter 2007, XXIII). Alter's explication on this is valuable:

Poets in any language are rarely content simply to repeat the same thing in different words. If the more common or general term for a concept appears in the first verset, as is usually the case, the "synonymy" in the second verset is often a more unusual term, a stronger word, some sort of specification of the first term, or a metaphorical substitution for it that carries with it the vividness or heightening involved in figurative language (Alter 2007, XXII).

Such narrative poems are characteristic of many Psalms in the Psalter (cf. Psalms 78 and 89). As for the Song of Moses, "*the hymn is our earliest and most reliable source for reconstructing the actual sequence of events in the passage of the Red Sea*" (Cross & Freedman 6). Biblical psalmodic poetry and its occurrences in the New Testament attest to this narrative element in poetry. Quotations of or allusions to Psalms in the NT in relation to Jesus of Nazareth also intend to tell a story and a history, before and beyond his earthly life.

Mary's Magnificat

New Testament psalmodic compositions such as the *Magnificat* or *Zechariah's Song* (Lk 1:46-55, 67-79) are typical *victory songs* and have motifs common with ancient Yahwistic poetry.

According to Luke, Mary the mother of Jesus, in response to the angel Gabriel's announcement to her that she would bear the Son of God, uttered a psalmodic song of praise (Lk 1:46-56), known as the *Magnificat*. This is a psalmodic literature type, illustrative in form and content, and typical of the OT:

My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour, for he has regarded the low estate of his handmaiden. For behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed; for he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name. And his mercy is on those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm, he has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts, he has put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted those of low degree; he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent empty away. He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his posterity for ever (Lk 1:46-56).

The pattern for this, in structure and main motif, is Samuel's mother Hannah's song of praise:

My heart exults in the LORD; my strength is exalted in the LORD. My mouth

derides my enemies, because I rejoice in thy salvation. There is none holy like the LORD, there is none besides thee; there is no rock like our God. Talk no more so very proudly, let not arrogance come from your mouth; for the LORD is a God of knowledge, and by him actions are weighed. The bows of the mighty are broken, but the feeble gird on strength. Those who were full have hired themselves out for bread, but those who were hungry have ceased to hunger. The barren has borne seven, but she who has many children is forlorn. The LORD kills and brings to life; he brings down to Sheol and raises up. The LORD makes poor and makes rich; he brings low, he also exalts. He raises up the poor from the dust; he lifts the needy from the ash heap, to make them sit with princes and inherit a seat of honour. For the pillars of the earth are the LORDS, and on them he has set the world. He will guard the feet of his faithful ones; but the wicked shall be cut off in darkness; for not by might shall a man prevail. The adversaries of the LORD shall be broken to pieces; against them he will thunder in heaven. The LORD will judge the ends of the earth; he will give strength to his king, and exalt the power of his anointed (1 Sam 2:1-10).

Both of these reflect psalmodic types describing royal military victory. Yet if any praise was to be given to heroes, in Israel's religious experience there was only one bringer of victory, and that was YHWH (cf. Gunkle 237).¹¹

Zechariah's Benedictus

Zechariah's prayer is a typical psalmodic thanksgiving song. He blesses YHWH joyfully at the beginning:

Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,
for he has visited and redeemed his people (Lk 1:68).

"Blessed be the Lord" is the typical psalmodic opening to many psalms in the Psalter (cf. Pss 28:6; 31:22; 41:14; 66:20; 72:18). Even the vocabulary is close to psalmodic lexica. In the next line, there is a reference to a symbol of power and strength:

...and has raised up a horn of salvation (κέρας σωτηρίας) for us in the house of his servant David (Lk 1:69).

This is a clear reference to Psalm 132:17: "*There I will make a horn to sprout for David*" and a "*lamp for my anointed*" (132:17b). The "horn" is a "horn of salva-

11 Though Gunkel gives a brief analysis of the victory songs of Ex 15, for some reason he does not refer to other psalmodic poems which are clearly of the victory type.

tion,” since it denotes a defensive power as well as a dominion, just as the lamp has been promised and established by YHWH to David, to be followed by the “son of David.” Before the falling apart of the United Kingdom, by the prophecy of Ahijah, this divine light was given and granted to the “house of David.”

Yet to his son I will give one tribe, that David my servant may always have a lamp before me in Jerusalem, the city where I have chosen to put my name (1 Ki 11:36).

The horn, being a symbol of strength, here designates a mighty/messianic king to come. YHWH is indeed the “horn of salvation,” as in Ps 18:3 and as suggested by Kraus (cf. Kraus 1992, 195), but here this is to be his anointed messianic king.

Psalms in the Gospels and in the Life of Jesus

Of all the psalmodic quotations in the Gospels, it is the *royal-messianic* psalms that are most frequently quoted (e.g. Psalms 110, 118) in the context of Jesus’ kingship, followed by the lament and suffering psalms (e.g. Psalms 22, 31) in the context of his suffering and death.

The most frequent quotations or psalmodic allusions are found in Matthew (10) and John (9). The lowest numbers are found in Mark (4) and Luke (5).¹² Of all these, the majority relate to the *messianic* and *royal* psalms. Most refer to Psalm 110, “*Sit at my right hand till I make your enemies your footstool*” (110:1); Psalm 118, “*The stone which the builders rejected has become the head of the corner*” (118:22); and “*Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD*” (118:26).

The royal messianic Psalm 110 resembles Psalm 2 and most likely alludes to and narrates the celebration of a military victory by the king: “*Sit at my right hand, till I make your enemies your footstool*” (110:1); and this can only be achieved with divine help, “*Grant us help against the foe, for vain is the help of man!*” (Ps 60:11).¹³ In the traditions and expositions of the Early Church, through the words and quotations of Paul the apostle, the royal messianic role is attributed to Jesus, who “*must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet*” (1 Cor 15:25). Such Christian reinterpretation

was made easier by the fact that it is precisely the fundamental religious ideas of the psalms themselves, with their theocentric tendency and their universal outlook (cf. Weiser 1962, 693).

12 cf. Table of quotations at the end of this work.

13 The „seat“ and the „footstool“ probably refer to the throne (cf. Dahood PS III, 114)

The wider context is a religious ceremony during which secular kingship is authorized and sealed by God.

His childhood

Psalmodic texts provide crucial theological support for Jesus' public activity and ministry (cf. Dalglisch, 1984, 25). His birth, the beginning of his earthly ministry, and the grand finale of his life began with a psalmodic overture and ended in psalms.

The narrative of Luke 2:41-52 describes the young boy Jesus (Ἰησοῦς ὁ παῖς) (cf. 2:43b) staying behind in Jerusalem, while his parents went on home to Nazareth after the feast of the Passover that they attended every year. After they returned to find him and rebuked him for getting lost, the young boy replied to his parents in words which they found incomprehensible, or even hurtful (2:50):

Why were you looking for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house? (Lk 2:49) (ἐν τοῖς τοῦ πατρὸς μου δεῖ εἶναί με).

How were they, particularly Joseph his father, to understand the reference to his "father's house"? Although in this story there are no direct allusions or psalmodic quotations, it contains probably the earliest messianic allusion that will later be regularly linked to psalmodic texts.

The beginning of his ministry

The period of preparation for Jesus' public ministry really began with the temptations (Lk 4). There, OT quotations played a crucial role, particularly the psalmodic quotation from Psalm 91.

For it is written, "*He will give his angels charge of you, to guard you*" (Lk 4:10) (Ps 91).

However, Jesus' public ministry begins with a text from Is 61:1:

The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me to bring good tidings to the afflicted; he has sent me to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound (Lk 4:17-19).

The messianic anticipation

When the people welcomed Jesus to Jerusalem with acclamations, singing part of Psalm 118 (cf. Mt 21:9), it must have been both a fascinating and enigmatic event.

This is the day the LORD has made;
let us rejoice in it and be glad.
Save us, we beseech thee, O LORD!
O LORD, we beseech thee, give us success!
Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD.
We bless you from the LORD'S house.
The LORD is God and has given us light.
Join in procession with leafy branches up to the horns of the altar (Ps 118:24-27).

Psalm 118 is a hymn of public thanksgiving which became part of the Passover festivities. It is the concluding Psalm of the so-called *Egyptian Hallel Psalms* (Pss 113-118), which were recited and sung with joyful recollection of the Israelites' exodus and deliverance from Egyptian slavery. But it was also sung in confident anticipation of the Messiah's arrival. Bearing in mind this context, it is no wonder that the chanting crowds made many in the city bemused, while "*all the city was stirred*" (ἐσειόσθη πᾶσα ἡ πόλις) (Mt 21:10).¹⁴ Upon seeing all this noisy, festive welcoming of a rabbi entering Jerusalem riding on a donkey, they were intrigued and asked, "*Who is this?*" (21:11). This event, set in the (con)text of a Psalm, was a preface to another significant turning point in Jesus' life and mission.

Long before the festive entry into Jerusalem, at his baptism (Lk 3) clear messianic allusions linking Jesus to the Old Testament and Psalms were given in a particularly intriguing fashion:

After all the people had been baptized and Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, heaven was opened. And the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased (Lk 3:21) (NAB).

What makes this incident particularly fascinating is the double allusion and the merging of two distinct themes, the *son* and the *servant*. One is taken from Psalm 2 (2:7b), "*You are my son, today I have begotten you,*" and the other from Isaiah 42:1, "*Here is my servant whom I uphold, my chosen one with whom I am pleased.*" Shortly afterwards, when Jesus is tempted (Lk 4), a diabolical challenge is thrown out, "*If you are the Son of God...*" (Lk 4:3). Clearly, the "Son of God" here is the king, and indeed the messianic king (cf. Yoder, 1972, 26-40).

The trial of the Son of Man

At the hearing before Caiaphas, the high priest, Jesus in his defence says to the

14 The same verb (σειώ) = to tremble, to shake, is used in Mt 27:51. When Jesus died, the "earth shook."

jury:

But I tell you: From now on you will see the *Son of Man seated at the right hand of the Power* and coming on the clouds of heaven (Mt 26:64).

This is followed by a somewhat cynical reply of Jesus to the high priest, who challenged him to say whether he was the Christ: “*I adjure you by the living God, tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God*” (Mt 26:63).

Clearly Jesus here alludes to the psalmodic text of Ps 110:1, “*Sit at my right hand, till I make your enemies your footstool.*” A similar debate regarding his identity occurs in Mt 22:41-46 concerning the titles of “Christ” and “Son,” where again Psalm 110 is quoted verbatim.

Psalms and the Death of Jesus

Gethsemane

There are allusions to psalmodic passages in the account of the mortal agony of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane (Mt 26). His lament, “*My soul is sorrowful even to death*” (Mt 26:38), clearly echoes and alludes to the text and context of Psalms 42-43:

Why are you downcast, my soul;
why do you groan within me?
Wait for God, whom I shall praise again. (Ps 42:6)

The element of soliloquy which appears in both Psalms can be noted in “my soul” of Jesus’ prayer. The experience of the psalmist’s desolation is reminiscent in Jesus’ experience, which will have its culmination on the cross, in the question: “*why have you forsaken me?*” (Mt 27).

The cross

Although barely alive, on the cross Jesus utters a prayer, “*Father, forgive them...*” This takes place during a cruel, pathetic scene in which a man is dying in agony, while those gathered beneath the cross, following the general custom of the day, cynically divide up his clothes: “*They cast lots to divide his garments*” (Lk 23:34). Again, this is taken almost verbatim from Psalm 22:

They divide my garments among them;
for my clothing they cast lots (22:19).

Matthew perhaps best records Jesus' death on the cross (Mt 27). He quotes Jesus' last words, echoing Psalm 22:1: "*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*" (27:46). The "Jewish" evangelist curiously omits another psalmodic quotation, which Luke includes. At the moment of his death, Jesus was heard to say, "*Father, into your hands I commend my spirit*" (Lk 23:46), which is an almost verbatim quotation from Psalm 31:6.¹⁵ At the same point in his narrative Matthew alone records that, after Jesus was given a kind of sedative, "*They took a sponge, filled it with vinegar, and put it on a reed, and gave it to him to drink*" (27:48), an obvious allusion to Psalm 69. The suffering psalmist, seeking compassion and comfort, says, "*They put gall in my food; for my thirst they gave me vinegar*" (Ps 69:21). Matthew then records, "*Jesus cried again with a loud voice (κράξας φωνῆ μεγάλης) and yielded up his spirit*" (27:50).¹⁶

John is the only gospel writer to allude to Psalm 34, when he comments, "*Not a bone of him shall be broken*" (Joh 19:36, cf. Ps 34:20 (21)).

Conclusion

In the life of Jesus of Nazareth, his ministry, and his death as portrayed in the Gospels, the Old Testament has a significant part. Particularly the Psalms and psalmodic poetry carry a crucial role and help us better understand his mission. This short study may present only an introductory impetus for a continuing examination of this subject matter.

Several issues have been brought forward, drawing attention to the religious and historical context of the Old Testament, as well as eliciting the question whether Jesus of Nazareth really intended to establish a new faith, Christianity. Though the doctrinal basis of the New Testament rests on the Old Testament, we feel that hermeneutics is not a matter of a mechanistic process whereby the fulfilment of the OT in the NT is a matter of mechanical interpretation, a kind of copy-paste hermeneutic strategy in which verbatim quotations or psalmodic allusions in the NT and the life and mission of Jesus of Nazareth will by default grant the fulfilment of OT Scripture.

Evidently the Psalms were crucial in Jesus' life and ministry. His birth, childhood and adulthood, the launch of his public ministry, and above all his death, were all rooted in the Psalms. The New Testament texts relative to the Psalms

15 "*Into your hands I commend my spirit; you will redeem me, LORD, faithful God*" (Ps 31:6).

16 "*They gave me poison for food, and for my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink*" (Ps 69:21). Psalm 69, after Psalm 22, is the most frequently quoted psalmodic text in the New Testament referring to Jesus in a messianic context.

may be allusions or verbatim quotations from the Old Testament. Sometimes word-for-word quotations are bolstered with additional allusions. As has been observed, we should avoid the temptation to construct the fulfilment of the Old Testament in the New merely on citations and quotations.

Psalmodic quotations form only a part of Jesus' use of the Psalms. He goes further than mere quotation. Re-contextualizing psalmodic experiences and appropriating the psalmist's experience for himself is an important dimension. This is particularly true of the lament psalms of suffering. In contrast, the Magnificat and Song of Zechariah can be read as personally appropriated psalmodic songs of victory. There is no doubt that the theme of Jesus and the Psalms will have more and further examinations to accomplish.

Table: Quotations from the Psalms in the Gospels

PSALM	GOSPEL	
	<i>Matthew</i>	
8:3	Mt 21:16	Out of the mouths of babes
22:1	Mt 27:46	My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?
78:2	Mt 13:35	I will open my mouth in a parable
91:11	Mt 4:6	For God commands the angels...
110:1	Mt 22:44	Sit at my right hand, till I make your enemies your footstool
	Mt 26:64	
118:22	Mt 21:42	The stone which the builders rejected
118:26	Mt 21:9	Hosanna to the Son of David! Blessed is he who comes ...
	Mt 23:39	Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD
110:1	Mt 22:44	Sit at my right hand, till I make your enemies your footstool
	<i>Mark</i>	
22:1	Mk 15:34	My God, my God
110:1	Mk 12:36	Sit at my right hand, till I make your enemies your footstool
118:22	Mk 12:10-11	The stone which the builders rejected
118:26	Mk 11:9-10	Save us, we beseech thee, O LORD!

Luke

31:5	Lk 23:46	Into thy hand I commit my spirit
91:11	Lk 4:10	God commands the angels to guard you in all your ways.
110:1	Lk 20:42-43 (22:69)	Sit at my right hand, till I make your enemies your footstool
118:26	Lk 13:35	Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD
118:22	Lk 20:17	The stone which the builders rejected

John

22:18	Jn 19:24	They divide my garments among them
34:20 (21)	Jn 19:36	He keeps all his bones; not one of them is broken
35:19	Jn 15:25	Who hate me without cause
41:9	Jn 13:18	Who ate of my bread, has lifted his heel against me
69:4	Jn 15:25	More in number than the hairs of my head are those who hate me
69:9	Jn 2:17	Zeal for thy house has consumed me
78:24	Jn 6:31	And he rained down upon them manna to eat
82:6	Jn 10:34	You are gods, sons of the Most High, all of you
118:26	Jn 12:13	

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Danijel Berković

Isus i Psalmi

Sažetak

Cjelokupni skup vjerovanja i učenja Isusa iz Nazareta, kao židovskog rabina, duboko je utemeljen i oslanja se na tekstove i likove iz Starog zavjeta poput Abrahama, Mojsija, Davida i Izaije, ali i na citate iz hebrejskih svetih spisa (Zakon, Psalmi, Proroci). Oni čine programsku osnovicu i zajedničke odrednice učenja i doktrine Isusa iz Nazareta. Često se ističu u njegovim duelima s tradicionalnim vjerskim vođama. Novozavjetna evanđelja svjedoče o Isusovu oslanjanju na svete spise, Zakon i posebno na Psalme. U usporedbi s apostolom Pavlom, kod kojeg se uočava čudna pojava diskontinuiteta između dva Zavjeta (2 Kor 5, 17), Isusovo je učenje upravo izgrađeno na takvom kontinuitetu. U soteriološkom smislu, Pavlov diskontinuitet može se razumjeti. S druge strane, iz perspektive Isusova učenja, kontinuitet između Staroga i Novog zavjeta vrijedno je i nadalje istraživati. Ovaj

rad razmatra važnost i ulogu Psalma u Isusovu životu, učenju i njegovoj smrti. Istražuju se navodi ili doslovni citati Psalma u evanđeljima, a posebice (i) načini na koje Isus koristi Psalme i (ii) kako su neki psalmi povezani s okolnostima Isusova života i smrti.