

Plagiarism and proof-texting: Hebrew Bible citations in the New Testament

A Bible Study
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Audience: This Bible study is intended for an adult/young adult group discussion class. It is pitched toward people who are fairly familiar with the gospels' narratives, but who perhaps have never read the texts closely. There is no expectation that participants will have familiarity with historical context, textual criticism, or other academic disciplines of Biblical Studies, but participants should have fairly open minds and be willing to engage intellectually. This is not intended for a group hostile to academic study of the Bible, but a group who is unfamiliar with that way of reading.

Format: The current arc of the lesson plans extends over four hour-long discussion periods, scheduled weekly. Each week there is a main New Testament passage, and a primary discussion topic for that day. Students do not need to prepare for the discussion beforehand, but interesting secondary readings are provided. The class time is centered not on lectured content, but on group discussion of issues of text and source criticism and historical context. Each lesson includes some background context to set up and guide the discussion. The discussion facilitator (leader/teacher) should have at least some familiarity with where to find text critical or historical context information, but they do not need to know the "right answers" of the discussion. The pedagogical intention is to come to a deeper understanding of the text together, not to impose an interpretation with unquestionable academic authority. I want participants to leave with more questions and deeper curiosity than when they started.

Learning objectives: The primary goal of the study is to bring participants to a deeper understanding of the intertextuality of Biblical texts, and how to use historical knowledge to untangle the interpretations of interconnected Bible passages. The study raises questions for

investigation, but the answers are not meant to be definitive and should be different when the study is used with different groups. Main questions for discussion, to be kept in mind throughout the study, but concentrating on subsets each week:

- Why and how do New Testament authors quote and allude to Hebrew Bible texts?
- How, practically, on the printed English Bible page, can we notice these quotes and allusions?
- Who was the original audience of the New Testament text under discussion? What would they have understood from the Hebrew Bible quote? Why would they have found that convincing/convicting/etc.?
- Would the original audience of the Hebrew Bible text have interpreted the quote the same in its original context? What tools are available to help us investigate these issues?
- Given the modern definitions of plagiarism and proof-texting, how can we think about New Testament use of Hebrew Bible texts? What about New Testament use of other New Testament texts?
- Why, in general, do we quote and cite other texts? How do we indicate that they are quotes? Do we cite every quote? Every allusion? Where is the plagiarism line drawn?
- What is the problem with “proof-texting”, when it seems like Biblical authors are doing that? When we cite other texts, how do we make sure we are not divorcing the quote from its original context?
- Ultimately: how is our relationship with text different from/similar to Biblical authors’?

My hope is that participants will gain new knowledge and tools for approaching texts that will deepen their relationship with the Bible. The discussion around these questions should engender more questions, not more answers.

Lesson Plan Outline

Week 1: Prophecy: The gospels' (re)interpretation of the Prophets

Main text: Luke 3:2-6

Main discussion topics: Original context of the Hebrew Bible prophets, what is a “prophet/prophecy” in the Hebrew Bible and how would those texts have been understood by the original Israelite/Jewish audience?, how are these texts used by the New Testament authors (fulfillment citation?)?, what is the New Testament historical context that would influence the original audience’s interpretation?

Text tools: how do our Bibles indicate quotes/citations on the printed page?

Week 2: Pedagogy: Jesus’ teaching on the Law

Main text: Matthew 5, concentrating on vv. 38-42

Main discussion topics: Original context of the law vs. Jesus teaching, Jesus as interpreter of the Law, why does Jesus cite Hebrew Bible laws as opposed to other legal codes of the day?, why does Jesus quote older laws at all (as opposed to just new teaching as in other parts in the Sermon on the Mount), where does Jesus’ pedagogical authority come from?

Text tools: where can we go for Jewish/non-Christian interpretations of the cited texts?

Week 3: Passion: New Testament use of Psalms and non-Greek citations

Main text: Mark 15:33-39

Main discussion topics: what “Bible” would the New Testament authors have been quoting from (Septuagint? Hebrew? Aramaic?)? What would the original connotations of a Psalm quote have been? What is the significance of an Aramaic quote – what language would have been spoken in what historical context? What is the significance of putting Jesus last words in Aramaic? This same quote happens in Matthew – what can that tell us about how the gospel texts are related to each other (Synoptic problem/“plagiarism”)?

Text tools: where can we go to learn about the original language texts and how they are translated?

Week 4: Paul: Primordial proof-texting?

Main text: Galatians 3:1-14

Main discussion topics: how does Paul use the Hebrew texts? What was the Hebrew Bible context of the quotes and does that match with Paul's line of thinking? What is the purpose of quotations in general? Where is Paul getting his authority? Where does the Bible get authority? Is Paul reading the Hebrew Bible in the same way that we read the Bible in the 21st century? What is proof-texting and why does it have negative connotations? What is a faithful way of quoting a text?

Text tools: How do we indicate quotes and allusions when we talk about the Bible? How should we be doing that?

The following pages are a sample lesson plan for Week 1. The first section is the *text tools*: some questions to guide a discussion through critical/intentional engagement with the (printed) text itself. A discussion of digital/hyperlinked scripture access could also be included, depending on the audience. The second section is some historical context for use in interpreting the passage(s), and the third section is the discussion questions based on the passages themselves and our interpretation of them using a critical historical lens as well as keeping intertextuality in mind. The last section includes links to further interesting reading on historical context/textual study tools (these could be given the week before if participants want to come prepared).

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Week 1: Prophecy - The gospels' (re)interpretation of the Prophets

Luke 3:2-6 and Isaiah 40:3-5

Avoiding plagiarism: how to cite like a Gospel author

- What indications do we see that a quote is happening? Is the original/Hebrew Bible author names in the New Testament text?
- What punctuation or other typographical features are used in your Bible?
- Are there any footnotes? Study notes? Or concordance notes? Some other way to indicate where to find the quote? What might the different locations/methods of citation indicate? (cf. Mark 1:2-3)

Historical context: where is the wilderness, and who is crying out?

Luke (written 80-85CE, set c. 30CE)

- John the Baptist: contemporary (and cousin) of Jesus, prophet, in the sense that he calls the people to repent of their sins before God's justice comes
- John lived in the wilderness outside Jerusalem, which was occupied by the Roman Empire

Isaiah (Deutero-Isaiah, written 597 BCE – 538 BCE):

- Babylonian Exile: Jerusalem/Solomon's temple destroyed in 597BCE, the Jewish people were captured and taken to Babylon
- Isaiah 40 looks towards the time when the Jewish people will return to Israel through the wilderness separating Babylon from Jerusalem

What is a prophet? Some dictionary definitions:

- a) a person who speaks for God or a deity, or by divine inspiration.
 - b) a person regarded as, or claiming to be, an inspired teacher or leader.
 - c) a person who foretells or predicts what is to come
 - d) one of a band of ecstatic visionaries claiming divine inspiration and, according to popular belief, possessing magical powers.
- Biblical prophets: speak God's message to (usually) repent because God's justice is coming (eg. Jeremiah, Jonah)

Discuss:

- What sort of prophets/prophecies do we see in these passages?
- Is the text being used in the same way/referring to the same things in Luke vs. Isaiah?
- How would the original audience of Isaiah have understood the Isaiah passage? How is this different from how the audience of Luke might have understood the same words?
- Do we see any difference in the written form of the quote from Isaiah to Luke? (look particularly at the punctuation around “in the wilderness”.)
- Does a difference in the cited form in Luke vs the Isaiah original indicate a difference of interpretation? (Remember, some Bibles may make different choices; what does this say about the translators’ interpretation?)
- Why could it have been important to cite Hebrew Bible prophetic literature in the gospels?
- What are some reasons that Luke (and the other gospels) could have chosen to use this particular passage from Isaiah? What makes it important to the gospel message?

Further reading

Bible cross-references (searchable data visualizations):
<https://www.openbible.info/labs/cross-references/>

Biblical prophets: <https://www.biblestudytools.com/dictionary/prophet/>

Babylonian exile: <http://www.aish.com/jl/h/cc/48938087.html>

John the Baptist (podcast):
<https://www.ssje.org/2014/12/07/found-in-the-wilderness-br-john-brought/>