

EDITORIAL

Theological method has been the subject of considerable discussion in recent years. As in all matters, I believe it is crucial that in such discussions we take our cue from Scripture itself. Specifically, I will suggest in my brief remarks below that the Apostle John has a lot to offer as we ponder how Scripture ought to be interpreted. What is more, not only does John's use of the OT actually make sense of the OT and does not distort it, John's use has normative status, whereas ours does not. As is well known, John's keen theological acumen earned his *magnum opus* the epithet "the spiritual Gospel," and the Apostle's theological method has the potential of making a significant contribution to our thinking on this subject. Specifically, with regard to John's use of antecedent texts I have proposed in a recent publication that John, as part of his theological program, regularly engaged in theological transposition of motifs, not only by drawing on OT passages directly, but also by taking up and transforming themes found in Mark, possibly Luke (if not Acts), and even Matthew ("John's Transposition Theology: Retelling the Story of Jesus in a Different Key," in Michael F. Bird and Jason Maston, eds., *Earliest Christian History* [WUNT 2/320; Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 2012] 191–226). In my brief remarks here, I will focus on just one such transposition, John's use of Isa 6:9–10 compared to its treatment in the Synoptics.

By way of background, let's take a moment to look at use of this Isaianic passage in Mark, Matthew, and Luke. Mark incorporates Isa 6:9–10 as follows: "And when he [Jesus] was alone, those around him with the twelve asked him about the parables [i.e. the parable of the sower and other parables]. And he said to them, 'To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside everything is in parables, so that **they may indeed see but not perceive, and may indeed hear but not understand, lest they should turn and be forgiven**'" (Mark 4:10–12). Matthew provides a fuller account of the same scenario (Matt 13:10–17), while Luke mentions Isaiah 6 almost in passing (Luke 8:9–10). In varying degrees of detail, all three Synoptic Gospels feature the passage in the context of Jesus' teaching in parables. The reason why Jesus communicates spiritual truths in form of parables is the spiritual obduracy of his Jewish opponents, in keeping with Isaiah's prophecy. The disciples, on the other hand, are privileged to receive further instruction regarding the spiritual truths conveyed by Jesus' parables, truths which are hidden from those who, in keeping with Isaiah's prophecy, are intransigent to divine revelation.

Matters are different with John. In characteristic fashion, the fourth evangelist goes his own way, transposing the Synoptic teaching into a different key. Rather than occur at an earlier juncture of Jesus' ministry, the Isa 6:9–10 quote serves as part of the conclusion of John's "Book of Signs": "When Jesus had said these

things, he departed and hid himself from them. Though he had done *so many signs* before them [the Jews], they still did not believe in him, so that the word spoken by the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: ‘Lord, who has believed what he heard from us, and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?’ Therefore they could not believe. For again Isaiah said, **‘He has blinded their eyes and hardened their heart, lest they see with their eyes, and understand with their heart, and turn, and I would heal them.’** Isaiah said these things because he saw his glory and spoke of him” (John 12:36b–41).

No longer is the Isaiah quote found on *Jesus’ lips*—it is now part of the *evangelist’s* twofold scriptural demonstration that the Jewish rejection of Jesus’ messianic signs fulfilled biblical prophecy—and no longer is it set in the context of Jesus’ *parables*. Instead, the citation, located at the end of John’s narration of Jesus’ ministry to the Jews, serves as a major plank in the evangelist’s theological assessment of the Jewish leaders’ rejection of Jesus’ *signs*. This transfer is remarkable, especially in light of the fact that John does not feature any of the Synoptic parables (or other parables) in his Gospel. How are we to explain John’s omission of parables? In the above-mentioned recent publication, I conjecture that the reason may be his desire to impart spiritual truths on the basis of *real-life historical events* rather than *invented stories*—parables. The clearest example of this kind of dynamic is the story of the man born blind in John 9, which ends with Jesus’ pronouncement that he came into this world for the purpose of judgment: “that those who do not see may see, and those who see may become blind.” When some Pharisees ask whether or not they are blind, Jesus replies, “If you were blind, you would have no guilt; but now that you say, ‘We see,’ your guilt remains” (John 9:39–41). From this historical event—one of Jesus’ signs—John extracted the spiritual lesson that a reversal had taken place in Jesus’ messianic ministry: he gave sight to the blind but confirmed those who claimed to be able to see in their spiritual blindness.

According to the fourth evangelist, the same dynamic was at work in *all* of Jesus’ signs (John 12:36b–41). Isaiah’s prophecy concerning the spiritual blindness of God’s people provided the scriptural matrix for the Jewish rejection of Jesus the Messiah. By transferring the referent of Isa 6:9–10 from Jesus’ *parables*—on the assumption of John’s knowledge of at least one of the written Synoptic Gospels—to his *signs* (called “miracles” in the Synoptics) John extends the scope of Isaiah’s prophecy and deepens its theological application beyond Jesus’ *teaching* to his *works*. What is more, in conjunction with John’s “signs” theology, the primary significance of Jesus’ works lay not in the fact that they were acts of power—miracles—but that they were signs pointing beyond themselves confirming Jesus’ true messianic identity.

John’s interpretation of Scripture—certainly of Isa 6:9–10 and possibly also of one or several of the Synoptic Gospels—penetrates to the heart of the matter, interweaving the themes of obduracy, Jesus’ teaching in parables, and his working of miracles/signs, and constitutes a significant theological achievement. John’s interpretive method deserves to be given utmost attention in contemporary discussions of how Scripture is to be interpreted. As the sage preacher well said, there is

nothing new under the sun. John's masterful theological exposition stands forever as the gold standard for how Scripture is to be interpreted. John's primary purpose in his use of the OT was not to teach us hermeneutics; it was to teach us God's purposes in Jesus. Nevertheless, there are hermeneutical lessons to be learned from his handling of Scripture. We can hardly do better, and we can certainly do a lot worse than taking our cue from the Apostle as we develop our own hermeneutical method and theological approach to Scripture.

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