

Intertextuality and the Synoptic Gospels

Oye-Oluwafemi, Femi Adetunji,

Life Theological Seminary,
Ikorodu, Lagos State
Nigeria

Oye-Oluwafemi, Oluwatobiloba Adetutu

Department of Language and Literary Studies,
Babcock University,
Ilisan-Remo, Ogun State
Nigeria

Abstract

Intertextuality is a literary theory, which posits that texts are shaped by, and in conversation with, other texts, through quotation, allusion, thematic echoes, typology, genres, and cultural references. The Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke), written decades after Jesus, interact heavily with the Old Testament. However, the precise nature and purpose of this interaction remain debated. While scholarly attention has been given to individual instances of intertextuality, a comprehensive analysis across all three Gospels remains a gap. This study aims to bridge this gap by examining the various forms of intertextuality employed and their theological implications. Through a combined literary and historical-critical approach, the paper analyzes how the Gospels utilize the Old Testament to shape Christology, convey theological perspectives, and position Jesus within salvation history. It illuminates the distinct theological voices of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, along with their intended audiences. Ultimately, this study argues that deciphering the web of intertextuality within the Synoptic Gospels is crucial for a nuanced understanding of their literary artistry and their role in shaping early Christian thought, thereby enhancing biblical studies in Africa.

Keywords: Intertextuality, Synoptic Gospels, Christological themes, Theological perspectives, Salvation history

Introduction

The study of intertextuality within the Synoptic Gospels—Matthew, Mark, and Luke—has long fascinated scholars and theologians alike. These foundational texts of Christianity, composed decades after the life of Jesus Christ, intricately engage with the Old Testament, forming a complex tapestry of literary and theological references. Intertextuality, as a literary theory, posits that texts are not isolated entities but are rather interconnected, shaped by, and in dialogue with other texts. This theory holds particular significance when applied to the Synoptic Gospels, where the interaction with the Old Testament plays a profound role in shaping the narrative, theology, and portrayal of Jesus Christ.



In the realm of biblical scholarship, the study of intertextuality within the Synoptic Gospels has been approached with meticulous attention to individual instances. However, a comprehensive analysis across all three Gospels remains a notable gap in scholarly discourse. This lacuna presents an opportunity for further exploration, particularly within the context of biblical studies in Africa. Africa, with its rich tapestry of cultures, languages, and religious traditions, presents a unique vantage point for examining the intertextuality of the Synoptic Gospels. The diverse cultural landscape of the continent provides a fertile ground for uncovering new insights into the nuanced ways in which these texts engage with the Old Testament and shape Christian theology. Moreover, Africa's vibrant Christian communities, spanning various denominations and theological perspectives, underscore the relevance and importance of engaging with the Synoptic Gospels through an intertextual lens.

This study seeks to bridge the existing gap in scholarship by undertaking a comprehensive examination of the various forms of intertextuality employed within the Synoptic Gospels and their theological implications. Drawing upon a combined literary and historical-critical approach, this paper aims to unravel the intricate web of references, allusions, and thematic echoes that permeate these texts. By doing so, it endeavours to shed light on how the Gospels utilize the Old Testament to shape Christology, convey theological perspectives, and position Jesus within the broader framework of salvation history.

Central to this investigation is the recognition of the distinct voices and theological emphases of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, as well as their intended audiences. Each Gospel writer brings a unique perspective to the narrative, influenced by their respective theological outlooks and the needs of their communities. By closely examining the intertextual dynamics at play within each Gospel, this study aims to uncover the theological nuances that characterize each text and elucidate their relevance for contemporary readers, particularly within the African context.

Furthermore, this study contends that a nuanced understanding of the intertextuality within the Synoptic Gospels is not merely an academic endeavour but has practical implications for the interpretation and application of these texts within African Christian communities. By discerning the intricate interplay between the Old Testament and the Gospels, scholars and theologians can offer deeper insights into the literary artistry of these texts and their role in shaping early Christian thought and practice.

Ultimately, this study endeavours to contribute to the ongoing dialogue surrounding the Synoptic Gospels and their significance for biblical studies in Africa. By unraveling the complex web of intertextuality within these texts, it aims to enrich our understanding of their theological depth and literary sophistication, thereby fostering a deeper appreciation for the enduring legacy of these foundational texts within the African context. Through rigorous scholarship and critical engagement, this study seeks to illuminate the timeless truths embedded within the Synoptic Gospels and their relevance for contemporary readers across the globe.

The Role of Intertextuality in Literary Interpretation

The term "intertextuality" was coined by French post-structuralist Julia Kristeva in 1966, building upon Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of dialogism. Kristeva argued that a text is "a mosaic of quotations" and "the absorption and transformation of another."¹ It is "the transposition of one (or several) sign systems into another."² In simpler terms, it is the process through which a text incorporates elements from other texts, and this incorporation can take various forms. Intertextuality is a crucial concept in literary and cultural studies that refers to the way in which texts (including literature, films, art, and more) interact with and refer to other texts. It is a complex and dynamic relationship in which one text is influenced by, responds to, or incorporates elements from another text. Intertextuality assumes that no text exists in isolation; rather, it is part of a broader intertextual web, shaped by the texts that precede it and influencing those that follow. Intertextuality can manifest in various forms, including direct quotations, allusions, parodies, adaptations, or even subtle references to other texts. These intertextual references may be explicit or implicit, and they enrich the meaning and interpretation of a text.

Moreover, intertextual references add layers of depth and complexity to a text. By understanding how a work draws upon earlier texts, readers can uncover hidden meanings, allusions, and subtle critiques. It challenges notions of originality and authorship. Every text is a product of its cultural and literary context, and authors consciously or unconsciously engage with a long tradition. Additionally, Intertextual readings highlight the potential for multiple, coexisting interpretations of a text. Recognizing references to other works opens up new interpretive possibilities. Finally, readers play an active part in constructing meaning. By identifying intertextual connections and understanding their cultural significance, readers enrich their interpretations.³

Intertextuality, as a critical framework, has significantly influenced the study of the Bible, offering scholars valuable insights into the complex network of textual relationships within the biblical corpus. This approach posits that biblical texts are not isolated entities but are rather interconnected, shaped by, and in dialogue with other texts. Through the lens of intertextuality, scholars have explored how biblical authors drew upon earlier texts, both within the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) and external cultural sources, to create meaning and convey theological messages. One seminal work that has shaped the discourse on intertextuality in biblical studies is Richard Hays' "Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul." In this influential book, Hays demonstrates how the apostle Paul's letters are replete with echoes and allusions to the Hebrew Scriptures. By meticulously analyzing Paul's use of scriptural texts, Hays argues that these intertextual connections serve to interpret and

¹Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, trans. Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine, and Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), 66.

²Ibid., 66

³ Ibid.,

illuminate Paul's theological convictions, particularly his understanding of Christ as the fulfillment of Israel's story.⁴

Building upon Hays' foundation, scholars such as Michael Fishbane have further explored the intertextual dynamics between the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. Fishbane's work on biblical exegesis and the inner-biblical interpretive tradition has highlighted the intricate ways in which later biblical texts engage with and reinterpret earlier ones. Through close examination of linguistic, thematic, and narrative parallels, Fishbane demonstrates the richness of intertextual connections within the biblical canon.⁵ Another prominent figure in the study of intertextuality in biblical studies is James Kugel, whose book "The Bible as It Was" offers a comprehensive overview of the interpretive practices of ancient biblical interpreters. Kugel's work illustrates how early Jewish interpreters engaged in a creative dialogue with biblical texts, producing a wealth of interpretive traditions that continue to shape our understanding of the Bible's intertextual landscape.⁶

In addition to these key scholars, various approaches to intertextuality have emerged within biblical studies, each offering unique insights into the relationship between biblical texts. Some scholars focus on thematic parallels and motifs, tracing the recurrence of certain themes across different biblical books. Others employ linguistic analysis to uncover echoes and wordplay that may indicate intentional intertextual connections. Still, others examine the socio-historical context of biblical texts, exploring how cultural influences and literary conventions shaped the authors' engagement with earlier sources. Overall, the study of intertextuality in biblical studies continues to be a vibrant and evolving field, with scholars employing diverse methodologies and approaches to uncover the intricate web of textual relationships within the Bible. By recognizing the intertextual nature of biblical texts, scholars gain a deeper appreciation for the rich tapestry of voices and traditions that contribute to the biblical narrative, enriching one's understanding of its theological, literary, and historical dimensions.

Previous Studies on Synoptic Intertextuality

Previous scholarship on Synoptic intertextuality has yielded significant insights into the complex relationship between the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Many studies have focused on individual cases of intertextuality, examining specific passages or themes within the Synoptic tradition. One notable work in this regard is David E. Aune's "The New Testament in Its Literary Environment," which provides a thorough analysis of literary influences on the New Testament, including the Synoptic Gospels. Aune explores how the Gospel

⁴Richard B. Hays. *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul*. (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1989).

⁵Michael Fishbane. *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel*. (London: Oxford University Press, 1985).

⁶James L. Kugel. *The Bible as It Was*. (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1999).

writers drew upon Jewish and Greco-Roman literary conventions, as well as earlier biblical texts, to craft their narratives.⁷

Similarly, scholars such as Graham N. Stanton, in "The Gospels and Jesus," and Francis Watson, in "Gospel Writing: A Canonical Perspective," have examined specific instances of intertextuality within the Synoptic Gospels. Stanton focuses on the portrayal of Jesus in each Gospel and the theological implications of the Gospel writers' engagement with the Old Testament.⁸ Watson, meanwhile, adopts a canonical approach, exploring how the Synoptic Gospels function as part of the broader New Testament canon and interact with other texts within the Christian tradition.⁹ In addition to these studies focusing on individual cases of intertextuality, some scholars have taken a broader perspective, seeking to elucidate overarching themes or patterns across the Synoptic tradition. For example, Michael Goulder's "Midrash and Lektion in Matthew" investigates how Matthew's Gospel utilizes Jewish interpretive techniques, such as midrash, to shape its narrative and theological message. Goulder's work highlights the continuity between Jewish and Christian interpretive traditions and emphasizes the importance of understanding the cultural context of the Gospel writers.¹⁰

While previous studies have made valuable contributions to our understanding of Synoptic intertextuality, this study seeks to distinguish itself through its comprehensive, comparative approach to all three Synoptic Gospels. Rather than focusing on individual instances or themes, this study aims to provide a wholistic analysis of the intertextual relationships within the Synoptic tradition. By examining the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke in tandem, this study seeks to uncover patterns, similarities, and differences in their use of intertextuality and their theological implications. Moreover, this study adopts a combined literary and historical-critical approach, drawing upon insights from both disciplines to enrich the understanding of Synoptic intertextuality. By situating the Gospels within their cultural and literary context, this study seeks to elucidate the motivations behind the Gospel writers' engagement with earlier texts and the impact of this intertextuality on their portrayal of Jesus and the theological themes of salvation history. In undertaking this comparative analysis, this study aims to fill a significant gap in scholarship by providing a comprehensive examination of Synoptic intertextuality that encompasses all three Gospels; thereby contributing to a deeper understanding of the literary artistry, theological significance, and historical context of the Synoptic Gospels.

An Overview of The Synoptic Gospels

The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke are known as the Synoptic Gospels – from the Greek "synopsis" meaning "seeing together" – due to their striking similarities in structure, content, wording, structure, and sequence of events,

⁷David E. Aune. *The New Testament in Its Literary Environment* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1987).

⁸Graham N. Stanton. *The Gospels and Jesus*. (England: Oxford University Press, 2002).

⁹Francis Watson. *Gospel Writing: A Canonical Perspective*. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2013).

¹⁰Michael Goulder. *Midrash and Lektion in Matthew*. (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1974).

leading to their classification as "synoptic".¹¹ These Gospels present a parallel account of Jesus' life, teachings, miracles, and passion narrative. However, they also exhibit distinct differences in theological emphases, narrative style, and the inclusion of unique material. The Gospels seem tailored to specific audiences. Matthew likely targets a Jewish-Christian readership, Mark a Gentile audience within the Roman Empire, and Luke a broader Greco-Roman world. Each Gospel contains exclusive stories and parables not found in the others. For example, the birth narratives of Matthew and Luke are quite different, and Mark offers a unique focus on Jesus as the "suffering servant." Each Gospel has distinct theological focuses. Matthew highlights Jesus as the fulfillment of Jewish prophecies, Mark emphasizes Jesus' actions and power, and Luke portrays Jesus as a compassionate saviour for all people, particularly the marginalized.¹²

Most scholars believe Mark was the first Gospel written (around 65-75 CE), and serves as a foundational source for Matthew and Luke.¹³ Its narrative is concise and fast-paced, emphasizing Jesus' actions and miracles. The strong similarities between the Synoptics have led to the "Synoptic Problem," a scholarly endeavour to understand their literary relationships. Most scholars support some form of the Two-Source Hypothesis, arguing that Matthew and Luke used Mark as a source and a shared collection of Jesus' sayings (known as "Q"), along with unique material specific to each Gospel. Matthew's Gospel, written for a predominantly Jewish audience, emphasizes Jesus as the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies and presents him as the authoritative teacher of the Law.¹⁴ It includes the Sermon on the Mount and other discourses not found in the other Gospels. Luke's Gospel, addressed to a broader audience including Gentiles, portrays Jesus as the compassionate Savior who reaches out to the marginalized and emphasizes themes of social justice and inclusion.¹⁵ It contains unique parables, such as the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son, and highlights Jesus' concern for the poor and oppressed.

The Gospels were composed during the Roman occupation of Judea, in the first century CE, within a few decades of Jesus' ministry; a time of political and religious tension. They reflect the social, cultural, religious, and political landscape of the Greco-Roman world under Roman rule and the early Christian movement. The Gospels emerged within early Christian communities seeking to preserve and proclaim the teachings and significance of Jesus Christ. This historical context of the Synoptic Gospels is crucial for understanding their composition and purpose.¹⁶

¹¹Raymond E. Brown. *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997), 112-118.

¹²D. A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 118.

¹³Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 115

¹⁴R.T. France. *The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2007), 35-50.

¹⁵Joel B. Green, et al., eds. *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text*. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997), 273-295.

¹⁶Robert H. Gundry. *A Survey of the New Testament. 5th ed.* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2012), 73-102.

The Centrality of The Old Testament in The World of The Synoptic Authors.

The Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) were written by early Christians deeply rooted in the Jewish tradition. They viewed Jesus, his ministry, and the unfolding events of early Christianity through the lens of the Hebrew Scriptures, which is now referred to as the Old Testament. This centrality is evident in several ways: Firstly, the Synoptic Gospels contain numerous direct quotations from the Old Testament, particularly from the Psalms, Isaiah, and other prophetic books. They also offer many implicit allusions, weaving echoes of Old Testament themes and language into their narratives. Secondly, the Synoptic authors understood Jesus as the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies. They frequently use the Old Testament to demonstrate Jesus' identity as the Messiah and to interpret his actions and teachings.¹⁷

Moreover, the Synoptics employ typology, finding prefigurations or foreshadowing of Jesus and the events of his life within the figures and stories of the Old Testament. For example, parallels are drawn between Jesus and figures like Moses, Jonah, and Elijah. Lastly, the Synoptic Gospels draw upon the moral and ethical teachings of the Old Testament, shaping Jesus' instructions and reinforcing the continuity between his message and the Jewish Law. Ultimately, it is crucial to note that the Synoptic authors likely relied heavily on the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament widely used in the 1st century CE. This translation sometimes offers interpretive differences from the original Hebrew, influencing how the Synoptics read and understood the Old Testament.¹⁸

Historical-Critical Analysis of The Synoptic Gospels Using Intertextuality

The Synoptic Gospels—Matthew, Mark, and Luke—are rich with intertextual references to the Old Testament. These references are not merely decorative; they are integral to understanding the theological narratives and Christological assertions made by each Gospel. This historical-critical analysis employs intertextuality to uncover the nuanced ways in which these texts interact with their antecedent scriptures, thereby illuminating the distinct theological perspectives and historical contexts of each Gospel.

Explicit Quotations

Explicit quotations from the Old Testament are a primary form of intertextuality in the Synoptic Gospels. They involve direct citation of Old Testament passages within the Gospel narratives. These quotations serve various functions, including prophecy fulfillment, theological commentary, and narrative reinforcement. For example, Matthew's Gospel frequently employs explicit quotations to demonstrate Jesus' fulfillment of Messianic prophecies.

¹⁷Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Gospels* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2016), 22.

¹⁸G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson, eds., *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 15-20.

France argues that Matthew's Gospel is structured around five major quotations demonstrating Jesus' fulfillment of Messianic expectations.¹⁹ For example, Matthew 1:23 quotes Isaiah 7:14 "*Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel*" to establish Jesus' identity as Emmanuel, "God with us" (Matthew 1:23). This citation links Jesus' birth to a divine plan and emphasizes his identity as the prophesied Messiah. In addition, quotations can illuminate Jesus' teachings as Matthew 22:37-40 quotes Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18 to emphasize the centrality of love for God and neighbour.²⁰

Mark's use of explicit quotations is more restrained but still significant. For example, Mark 1:2-3 combines quotations from Malachi 3:1 and Isaiah 40:3 to prepare the reader for the coming of John the Baptist and subsequently Jesus.²¹ This combination underscores the theme of preparation and fulfillment, setting the stage for Jesus' ministry as a continuation of God's covenantal promises. Furthermore, Old Testament passages can add weight to Gospel events. Mark 15:27-28 quotes Psalm 22:7-8 as a poignant commentary on Jesus' crucifixion.²² Luke also employs direct quotations to validate Jesus' mission. In Luke 4:18-19, Jesus reads from Isaiah 61:1-2 in the synagogue, declaring the fulfillment of this prophecy through his own ministry.²³ This moment emphasizes Jesus' role as the Spirit-anointed deliverer, aligning his mission with the prophetic tradition.

Allusions

Allusions in the Synoptic Gospels are subtle references or echoes of Old Testament texts, imagery, or themes. While not explicitly stated, these allusions enrich the narrative and deepen its theological resonance. Matthew's Gospel is replete with allusions to the Torah and the prophets. For example, the massacre of the innocents in Matthew 2:16-18 alludes to the plight of Rachel weeping for her children in Jeremiah 31:15, thereby linking the suffering of Israel with the early life of Jesus.²⁴ Additionally, Matthew's description of the magi following a star (Matthew 2:2) evokes the imagery of Psalm 72:10: "*May kings bring you incense; may they fall down before you, all the nations of the earth!*"; hinting at Jesus' universal significance.²⁵

Mark often uses allusions to highlight Jesus' authority and divine mission. In Mark 6:45-52, the episode of Jesus walking on water recalls Job 9:8, which describes God alone treading upon the waves.²⁶ This allusion subtly asserts

¹⁹ R.T. France, *Matthew: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove, Illinois, USA: IVP Academic, 2007), 112

²⁰ Donald A. Hagner. "Matthew 16-28" *Word Biblical Commentary* (Waco, Texas, USA: Word Books, 1995), 782

²¹ Joel Marcus. "Mark 1-8: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary." *Anchor Bible Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 142-144.

²² M. Eugene Boring. "Mark: A Commentary" *New Testament Library* (Louisville, Kentucky, USA: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), 388

²³ Green et al. *The Gospel of Luke*, 208-210

²⁴ France, *Matthew: An Introduction and Commentary*, 88-90

²⁵ Donald A. Hagner. *Matthew 1-12 Word Biblical Commentary* (Waco, Texas, USA: Word Books, 1993), 73

Jesus' divinity and his command over nature. In addition, Mark's portrayal of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness (Mark 1:4-13) alludes to Israel's wilderness experience (Exodus 16-17). This alludes to Israel's wilderness experience, highlighting Jesus' role as the new Moses (the leader who brought God's people out of Egypt) leading God's people to spiritual liberation.²⁷ Luke frequently alludes to the themes of justice and liberation found in the Old Testament prophets. The Magnificat (Luke 1:46-55) echoes Hannah's song in 1 Samuel 2:1-10, drawing parallels between Mary's and Hannah's roles in God's salvific plan.²⁸

Thematic Parallels

Thematic parallels in the Synoptic Gospels involve shared motifs, figures, or narrative patterns that link the Old Testament with the life and ministry of Jesus, underscoring his role within God's overarching plan of salvation. One prominent example is the motif of the Exodus found in Matthew's Gospel, where Jesus' journey from Egypt (Matthew 2:13-15) echoes Israel's exodus from bondage, emphasizing Jesus' role as the ultimate deliverer.²⁹ In addition, Matthew often draws thematic parallels between Jesus and Moses. The Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7) mirrors Moses receiving the Law on Mount Sinai, positioning Jesus as the new lawgiver who brings a more profound spiritual teaching.³⁰

Mark's Gospel, with its emphasis on the suffering servant, draws heavily on the themes from Isaiah's Servant Songs. Mark 10:45 explicitly states Jesus' mission to serve and give his life as a ransom for many, paralleling Isaiah 53:10-12.³¹ Luke's Gospel emphasizes the themes of mercy and inclusion, paralleling the broader prophetic tradition. The parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) reflects Levitical laws on neighbourly love and the inclusive vision of the prophets.³² Moreover, the concept of the "kingdom of God" central to Jesus' message finds echoes in Isaiah's prophecies of a restored and just kingdom (Isaiah 11:1-9). This connection emphasizes the continuity between God's work in the Old Testament and the fulfillment brought by Jesus.³³

Typology

Typology in the Synoptic Gospels involves seeing Old Testament events, persons, or institutions as foreshadowing or prefiguring New Testament realities. For instance, Matthew presents Jesus as the new Moses, embodying the lawgiver and liberator of God's people, thereby fulfilling the typological pattern established in the Old Testament.³⁴ In addition, the flight to Egypt

²⁶ Marcus, *Anchor Bible Commentary*, 416-418

²⁷ David L. Turner. "Mark" *Blackwell Bible Commentary* (Oxford, England: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), 42.

²⁸ Green et al., *The Gospel of Luke*, 98-100

²⁹ France, *Matthew: An Introduction and Commentary*, 72

³⁰ France, *Matthew: An Introduction and Commentary*, 161-163

³¹ Stanton, *The Gospels and Jesus*, 156-158

³² Green et al., *The Gospel of Luke*, 424-426

³³ N. T. Wright. *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis, MN: Crossway, 1996), 201-202.

(Matthew 2:13-15) and subsequent return echo the Exodus narrative, framing Jesus as the new liberator who brings a new covenant.³⁵ Furthermore, references to Jesus' lineage from King David (Matthew 1:1-17; Luke 3:23-38) connect him to the promises of a Davidic Messiah who would establish a lasting kingdom (2 Samuel 7:8-16). This reinforces Jesus' legitimacy as the rightful heir to the throne.³⁶

Mark employs typology to depict Jesus as the suffering servant. His Passion narrative is rich with typological references to the suffering servant of Isaiah 53, especially in his silent endurance before his accusers (Mark 14:61, Isaiah 53:7).³⁷ Luke's typological approach is seen in his portrayal of Jesus as the fulfillment of the promises made to David. The announcement to Mary in Luke 1:32-33 echoes 2 Samuel 7:12-16, presenting Jesus as the promised heir to David's throne.³⁸

Rewriting and Reinterpretation

The Gospel writers do not simply copy the Old Testament; they modify and re-interpret it, offering fresh perspectives relevant for their audiences. This rewriting and reinterpretation in the Synoptic Gospels involve how the Gospel writers modify and subvert Old Testament expectations, providing new meaning. Matthew frequently rewrites Old Testament narratives to highlight Jesus' fulfillment of prophecy. In Matthew 2:15, the citation of Hosea 11:1, "Out of Egypt I called my son," is reinterpreted to refer to Jesus' return from Egypt, transforming a historical statement about Israel into a Messianic prophecy.³⁹

Mark's Gospel reinterprets Psalm 22 in the crucifixion narrative. Jesus' cry of dereliction, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mark 15:34), echoes Psalm 22:1, recontextualizing the psalm's themes of suffering and deliverance to apply to Jesus' Passion.⁴⁰ This can also be seen in Luke's genealogy (Luke 3:23-38), which extends Jesus' lineage beyond Abraham to Adam, signifying him as the universal Saviour.⁴¹ This rewrites the expectation of a Messiah solely for the Jews, presenting Jesus as fulfilling God's plan for all humanity.⁴² Additionally, Luke reinterprets the Jubilee year described in Leviticus 25 through Jesus' proclamation in Luke 4:18-19. By declaring the

³⁴ David R. Edwards. *The Gospel According to Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 56.

³⁵ France, *Matthew: An Introduction and Commentary*, 79-81

³⁶ Andreas J. Köstenberger. *Encountering the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010), 112.

³⁷ Marcus, *Anchor Bible Commentary*, 1018-1020

³⁸ Green et al., *The Gospel of Luke*, 68-70

³⁹ France, *Matthew: An Introduction and Commentary*, 78-80

⁴⁰ Stanton, *The Gospels and Jesus*, 163-165

⁴¹ Gerd Theissen and Annette Merz, *The New Early Christian Fact* (London: SCM Press, 2008), 122.

⁴² Joel B. Green, *The Theology of the Luke-Acts Corpus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 121.

“year of the Lord’s favor,” Jesus redefines the concept of Jubilee, focusing on spiritual liberation and social justice.⁴³

Summarily, the historical-critical analysis of the Synoptic Gospels using intertextuality has uncovered the rich and complex ways in which Matthew, Mark, and Luke engage with the Old Testament. By examining explicit quotations, allusions, thematic parallels, typology, and reinterpretations, a deeper understanding of the unique theological perspectives and literary artistry of each Gospel is revealed. This intertextual approach not only enhances the comprehension of the Gospels’ theological messages but also highlights their relevance in various cultural contexts, including the African context where the Old Testament resonates deeply with many Christian communities.

Theological Implications of Intertextuality

The intertextual references within the Synoptic Gospels have profound theological implications. They help to construct the Christological portrait of Jesus, integrating him into the broader narrative of salvation history and emphasizing his role as the fulfillment of divine promises. Essentially, Old Testament texts inform how Jesus is understood as the Messiah, Son of God, Suffering Servant, and other theological motifs. Intertextuality shapes the Synoptic Gospels’ portrayal of Jesus’ identity. For example, Matthew’s Gospel frequently cites Old Testament prophecies to establish Jesus’ identity as the promised Messiah. The Gospel emphasizes Jesus’ fulfillment of Messianic expectations, presenting him as the heir of David (Matthew 22:41-45) and the authoritative interpreter of the Law (Matthew 5:17-19). Matthew’s use of explicit quotations and typological parallels underscores Jesus’ role as the fulfillment of Jewish hopes and aspirations.⁴⁴

In contrast, Mark’s Gospel emphasizes Jesus’ identity as the suffering servant, drawing on Old Testament themes of suffering and redemption (e.g., Mark 10:45 referencing Isaiah 53:12). Mark portrays Jesus as the obedient servant who willingly sacrifices himself for the salvation of others.⁴⁵ Intertextual echoes of Isaiah’s Servant Songs highlight Jesus’ mission to serve and save humanity through his sacrificial death.⁴⁶ Moreover, Luke’s Gospel, with its focus on Jesus’ compassion and universality, presents Jesus as the Saviour for all people, regardless of ethnic or social status. Intertextual references in Luke highlight Jesus’ solidarity with the marginalized and oppressed, echoing themes of liberation and restoration found in the Old Testament prophets.⁴⁷

Intertextuality in the Synoptic Gospels also contributes to positioning Jesus within the broader narrative of salvation history. The Gospels utilize intertextual references to position Jesus within the continuum of salvation history. Each Gospel author integrates Old Testament themes and prophecies to illustrate how Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection fulfill God’s redemptive plan

⁴³ Green et al. 1997, 208-210

⁴⁴ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 38; Edwards, *The Old Testament in the Synoptic Gospels*, 82

⁴⁵ Boring, *Mark: A Commentary*, 221

⁴⁶ Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 467

⁴⁷ Green, *The Theology of the Luke-Acts Corpus*, 120

for humanity.⁴⁸ The Gospels utilize Old Testament motifs and narratives to highlight Jesus' role as the culmination of God's redemptive plan for humanity. For example, Matthew's Gospel portrays Jesus as the new Moses, leading God's people to spiritual liberation through his teachings and miracles. Intertextual references to the Exodus and other Old Testament narratives underscore Jesus' role as the ultimate deliverer and lawgiver. Mark's Gospel, with its emphasis on Jesus' suffering and death, positions Jesus within the prophetic tradition of Israel, as the long-awaited Messiah who brings about redemption through his sacrificial death. Intertextual echoes of Isaiah's prophecies and the Psalms emphasize Jesus' identification with the suffering of God's people and his ultimate victory over sin and death. Luke's Gospel emphasizes Jesus' universal significance, portraying him as the Saviour of all humanity. Intertextual references to Old Testament themes of restoration and renewal highlight Jesus' mission to bring about reconciliation between God and humanity, fulfilling the promise of salvation for all who believe.

Analyzing significant patterns of intertextual usage in the Synoptic Gospels reveals the theological emphases of each author. Matthew's Gospel, with its focus on Jewish themes and the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies, reflects a theological perspective that emphasizes continuity with the Jewish tradition. Luke's Gospel, on the other hand, highlights Jesus' concern for the Gentiles and marginalized, reflecting a theological perspective that emphasizes inclusivity and universality. Luke's use of intertextuality underscores Jesus' role as the Saviour for all people, regardless of ethnic or social background. Mark's Gospel emphasizes Jesus' identity as the suffering servant and the urgency of his mission, reflecting a theological perspective that emphasizes discipleship and the cost of following Jesus. Mark's use of intertextuality underscores the radical nature of Jesus' message and the call to sacrificial service.

Intertextuality, Audience, And the African Context

The intertextual references to the Old Testament in the Synoptic Gospels would have resonated differently with their intended audiences, which included Jewish Christians, Gentile Christians, and others. For Jewish Christians, familiar with the Old Testament scriptures, these references would have reinforced their understanding of Jesus as the fulfillment of Jewish prophecy and the continuity between the Old and New Covenants. For example, Matthew's Gospel, written primarily for a Jewish audience, extensively cites Old Testament prophecies to demonstrate Jesus' Messianic identity, appealing to the Jewish expectation of a Davidic Messiah.⁴⁹ Similarly, Luke's Gospel, with its emphasis on social justice and inclusivity, would have resonated with Jewish Christians familiar with the prophetic tradition of advocating for the marginalized.⁵⁰

Gentile Christians, on the other hand, may have interpreted these intertextual references differently, drawing on their own cultural and religious backgrounds. For example, Mark's Gospel, with its emphasis on Jesus' suffering and humanity, would have resonated with Gentile Christians familiar with the

⁴⁸ Stanton 2002)

⁴⁹ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 38.

⁵⁰ Green et al., *The Gospel of Luke*, 273-295

themes of divine suffering in Greco-Roman mythology.⁵¹ Luke's portrayal of Jesus as the universal Saviour, reaching out to all people, regardless of ethnicity or social status, would have appealed to Gentile Christians seeking a message of hope and inclusion.⁵²

In the African context, understanding intertextuality is crucial for interpreting the Gospels within the cultural and religious landscape of many African Christian communities. Acknowledging the deep familiarity with the Old Testament in these communities, often rooted in oral tradition and communal storytelling, provides a rich foundation for exploring intertextual connections within the Gospels. For example, the motif of liberation and deliverance found in the Exodus narrative resonates deeply with African Christians who have experienced oppression and injustice.⁵³ Intertextuality can also serve as a bridge between cultural and historical contexts, facilitating a deeper engagement with the biblical text and its relevance to contemporary African realities. For example, the theme of hospitality and communal solidarity in African cultures can shed light on Jesus' ministry of inclusion and hospitality, as depicted in the Gospels.⁵⁴ Furthermore, intertextuality can empower African Christians to reclaim their cultural heritage and identity within the biblical narrative. By highlighting the presence of African themes and motifs in the Old Testament and their resonance with the life and teachings of Jesus, intertextuality reaffirms the dignity and value of African cultures and traditions within the Christian faith.

Conclusion

This study has delved into the diverse forms of intertextuality within the Synoptic Gospels, examining their theological implications and the distinct contributions they make to our understanding of the Gospels' literary artistry and theological perspectives. By exploring explicit quotations, allusions, thematic parallels, typology, and the processes of rewriting and reinterpretation, it has uncovered the rich tapestry of intertextual connections that underpin the narratives of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. This detailed analysis not only illuminates the unique theological voices of each Gospel but also underscores the importance of intertextuality in biblical interpretation, especially within the African context.

Understanding the intertextual connections within the Synoptic Gospels is crucial for appreciating their literary artistry and theological depth. The Gospels are not merely historical accounts but carefully crafted narratives that employ intertextuality to convey profound theological truths. By deciphering these connections, readers can uncover the rich layers of meaning embedded in the text, gaining a deeper understanding of the Gospel writers' theological intentions and the ways they sought to communicate the significance of Jesus'

⁵¹ Stanton, *The Gospels and Jesus*, 121

⁵² Green et al., *The Gospel of Luke*, 273-295

⁵³ Madipoane J. Masenya. *African Women, African Voices: Cultural and Religious Resistance*. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2014), 86.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 86

life and ministry. Deciphering intertextuality also reveals the distinct theological perspectives of each Gospel. Matthew's emphasis on Jesus as the fulfillment of Jewish prophecy reflects a theological perspective that values continuity with the Jewish tradition and the fulfillment of God's promises to Israel. Mark's portrayal of Jesus as the suffering servant highlights a theology of discipleship and sacrificial service, calling readers to follow Jesus' example of self-giving love. Luke's focus on Jesus' compassion and inclusivity underscores a theology of social justice and universal salvation, emphasizing the inclusive nature of God's kingdom.

This study's exploration of intertextuality within the Synoptic Gospels has significant implications for biblical studies, particularly in the African context. In the African context, where there is a deep familiarity with the Old Testament and rich oral traditions, understanding intertextuality is particularly important. It allows African Christians to find meaningful connections that resonate with their own experiences and cultural traditions. Similarly, themes of hospitality and communal solidarity in African cultures can enrich the interpretation of Jesus' ministry of inclusion and hospitality, as depicted in the Gospels. Furthermore, intertextuality can serve as a bridge between cultural and historical contexts, facilitating a deeper engagement with the biblical text and its relevance to contemporary African realities. By highlighting the presence of African themes and motifs in the Old Testament and their resonance with the life and teachings of Jesus, intertextuality reaffirms the interconnectedness of all human experiences within God's redemptive plan.

Bibliography

Aune, David E. *The New Testament in Its Literary Environment*. Kentucky, USA: Westminster John Knox Press, 1987.

Blomberg, Craig L. "Matthew's Use of the Old Testament." In *Gospel Perspectives: Studies of History and Tradition in the Four Gospels*, vol.1, edited by R.T. France and David Wenham, 15-59. Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1980.

Boring, M. Eugene. *Mark: A Commentary (The New Testament Library)*. Louisville, Kentucky, USA: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012.

Brown, Raymond E. *An Introduction to the New Testament*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997.

Burkett, Delbert. *An Introduction to the New Testament and the Origins of Christianity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019.

Carson, D. A., and Douglas J. Moo. *An Introduction to the New Testament*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005.

Edwards, David R. *The Old Testament in the Synoptic Gospels*. Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox Press, 1989.

Ehrman, Bart D. *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings*. 6th ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 2016.

- Fishbane, Michael. *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel*. Oxford University Press, 1985.
- France, R.T. *The Gospel of Matthew*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2007.
- Green, Joel B. *The Theology of the Luke-Acts Corpus*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995.
- Green, Joel B., et al., eds. *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997.
- Goulder, Michael. *Midrash and Lection in Matthew*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1974.
- Gundry, Robert H. *A Survey of the New Testament*. 5th ed. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2012.
- Hagner, Donald A. *Matthew 1-12*. Waco: Baylor University Press, 2007.
- Hays, Richard B. *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul*. Yale University Press, 1989.
- Hays, Richard B. *Echoes of Scripture in the Gospels*. Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2016.
- Kristeva, Julia. *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*. Translated by Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine, and Leon S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia University Press, 1980.
- Kugel, James L. *The Bible As It Was*. Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1999.
- Marcus, Joel. "Mark 1-8: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary." *Anchor Bible Commentary*. New York: Doubleday, 2000.
- Masenya, Madipoane J. *African Women, African Voices: Cultural and Religious Resistance*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2014.
- Moyise, Steve. *The Old Testament in the New Testament: Essays in Biblical Theology*. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001.
- Stanton, Graham N. *The Gospels and Jesus*. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2002.
- Theissen, Gerd and Annette Merz. *The New Early Christian Fact*. London: SCM Press, 2008.

Thompson, Richard P. "Old Testament Quotations, Allusions, and Echoes in the Synoptic Gospels." In *The Gospels and Jesus*, edited by Graham Stanton, Joel Marcus, and Michael L. Strauss, 373-378. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2021.

Turner, David L. *Matthew*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008. Beale, G. K. and D. A. Carson, eds. *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007.

Watson, Francis. *Gospel Writing: A Canonical Perspective*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2013.