

Question: How did the gospel writers use the Old Testament to tell about the life of Jesus?

Answer: The gospel narratives are riddled with snippets of text from the Old Testament. In many Old Testament books, especially those during or after a major tribulation, one primary theme emerges: hope. The Israelites hoped for God's intervention in the world through powerful action and magnanimity (*New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, 77:175-176). What exactly this divine plan and intervention would entail was up for broad and sometimes polarizing discussion and disagreements amongst Jews. Most felt that God's divine plan would be initiated through the return of the Messiah (= anointed one). Yet, who and what the Messiah would be was up for debate. Nevertheless, the Messianic hope abided in the Israelite people. Thus, the words of the prophets and prophecies of the Old Testament were looked upon by believers in the True God as words that would bear ultimate truths in the future.

The writers of our four gospels had one primary point they needed to convey to their audiences: that Jesus was the Son of God, chosen by God to do God's work in accord with the One who called himself, "I AM" (Exodus 3:14) and who also said, "You shall not have other gods besides me" (Exodus 20:3). If Jesus' works and deeds were not validated by God and His history found in the Old Testament, then Jesus would have been nothing more than an imposter. The use of the Old Testament to explain the identity of Jesus was thus imperative to reveal his true identity.

Those passages in the Old Testament we as Christians understand to be predictions about Jesus were made by real people hundreds of years before he was born. Some of the prophecies in the Old Testament that found their way into the New Testament are taken out of context from their original source. The intent of the gospel writer was not to mislead the readers of the gospels. Instead, they found new meaning and perhaps *ultimate* meaning of these texts in the life of Jesus. One case in point is Isaiah 7:14. The verse reads, "(T)he Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel." Literally translated, the word "Emmanuel" means "God is with us." Matthew, a scribe who would have been well versed in the Old Testament texts would have known that this passage from Isaiah 7:14 in its original context referred to a conversation that Isaiah had with King Ahaz. Isaiah, when speaking of a child that would be called Emmanuel is referring to the son King Ahaz's wife would eventually conceive and bear. This is the child that will be named Emmanuel in the original text. Yet, Matthew saw in these verses of Isaiah a deeper truth and meaning. Knowing that Jesus is the Son of God and *literally* Emmanuel, Matthew felt it necessary (and rightly so) to explain a new and fuller truth in Isaiah's words through Jesus. Thus, in some instances we find the initial truth in prophecies to pale in comparison to the eventual truth found to be fulfilled in Jesus.

Using the Old Testament to explain who Jesus was is not unique to the gospel writers themselves. In fact, they learned it from Jesus who often taught in ways that proved he was the one the prophecies were talking about. An example of this is found in Luke when Jesus says, "And then they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory" (Luke 21:27). Jesus here is using the text of Daniel to talk about his own immanent return after resurrection. The original passage in Daniel reads, "One like a Son of Man coming, on the clouds of heaven" (Daniel 7:13).

There is no doubt that some passages in the Old Testament emulate Jesus' life perfectly. This can best be exemplified in Isaiah's discussion regarding the servant of the Lord. Isaiah 42:1 says, "Here is my servant whom I uphold, my chosen one with whom I am well pleased, Upon whom I have put my spirit; he shall bring forth justice to the nations." In the gospels, God utters these words at Jesus' baptism when he says, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased" (Mark 1:11; Matthew 3:17; Luke 3:22). Isaiah 40-55 is riddled with references that all point to Jesus. Isaiah's hope when writing these texts was that an individual who possessed a unique and unmatched holiness would come and rescue the Israelites by serving God (*New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, 21:6). Jesus identifies himself as this person, and through the process of his ministry fulfills them fully when he says, "For the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45).