



**Mennonite
Church
Canada**

Resource Centre

From our Churches

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Have You Never Read ...? Jesus as Interpreter of Scripture in Mark's Gospel

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This resource is part of a broader project, tentatively titled *Reading the Bible with Jesus*.

The forthcoming parts are projected to be:

- Part 2: "Scribes Trained for the Kingdom" – Jesus as Interpreter of Scripture in Matthew's Gospel
- Part 3: "If You Believed Moses, You Would Believe Me" – Jesus as Interpreter of Scripture in John's Gospel
- Part 4: "All That the Prophets Have Declared" – Jesus as Interpreter of Scripture in Luke's Gospel

Introduction

These explorations have been prompted by a process in Mennonite Church Canada called *Being a Faithful Church* – a process of discernment about a series of vital matters facing our church and our world.¹ Since 2009 there has been a particular focus on how we understand Scripture to function in the life of the church, and in our discernment about important (and often controversial) issues. Congregations and individuals have been invited to give feedback and share experiences and perspectives on how we understand Scripture to function.²

This invitation got me thinking – how did Jesus interpret Scripture, and understand Scripture to function? Knowing that John Howard Yoder’s study of “the *politics* of Jesus” has been so important and impactful in our Mennonite community (and beyond), I wondered what a sustained look at “the *hermeneutics* of Jesus” might reveal, and whether this might also be important and helpful for us in the midst of our own processes.

With that in mind, I embarked on a project of re-reading the Gospels, paying specific attention to how Jesus is portrayed as an interpreter of Scripture. A small group of fellow explorers accompanied me closely on this journey. Together we explored dozens of passages that depict Jesus engaging Scripture and interacting with different conversation partners about complex issues of the day.

This turned out to be an enriching process that surprised us in a variety of ways. We expected to see that Jesus was knowledgeable about Israel’s Scriptures, but we had not realized the extent to which his conflicts with the religious authorities are consistently portrayed as centering on matters of Scripture interpretation. This is not a case where one side of a debate “appeals to Scripture” and another side does not.

¹ Five issues have been identified:

- a) Unity and Diversity in the life of the Church;
- b) Being a Peace church;
- c) Confessing and witnessing to Jesus Christ as Lord in a religiously pluralistic context;
- d) Human sexuality in the life of the church;
- e) Ecological concerns from a perspective of faith.

² You can find all of the documents from the “Being a Faithful Church” process at www.mennonitechurch.ca/tiny/2012.

To be sure, Jesus is often portrayed as interpreting Scripture in ways that are not self-evident or conventional or obvious to the scriptural “experts.” In fact, his interpretations are frequently seen as surprising and even scandalous. And yet Jesus consistently argues from Scripture, and his understandings of Scripture permeate everything he says and does – including creative “original” teaching that does not appear to be drawn from specific Scripture passages. Jesus does not do away with Scripture, or denigrate its authority, or create new “Scripture” to replace the existing Scriptures – he consistently draws from Scripture, argues from Scripture, and claims that he is interpreting Scripture correctly and his opponents are not.

As we immersed ourselves in these explorations, we noticed that certain dynamics and characteristics are repeated over and over again... and we have become convinced that there is much that we could learn by paying attention to these dynamics.

This booklet highlights four representative passages from Mark’s Gospel. While this is clearly a small sample, it is enough to enable us to make some meaningful observations about how Jesus is portrayed as interpreter of Scripture.³

Using This Booklet

This resource is:

- an invitation to embark on a journey of exploration.
- a tool for personal study/reflection, and a resource to support group study/reflection.
- simple and straightforward in its method - a careful reading of Gospel texts that portray Jesus interpreting Scripture, and then a careful reading of the Old Testament texts that appear to be “in play” in those interactions.
- a community enterprise. This project was sparked by a process in Mennonite Church Canada, the “first round” of explorations was done in the context of a small group of

³ While there are of course significant differences between the canonical Gospels, we have found these observations to be remarkably consistent with patterns in Matthew, Luke, and John as well. This booklet is envisioned to be Part 1 of a broader project exploring how Jesus is portrayed as interpreter of Scripture in each of the four Gospels.

fellow explorers, the material in this booklet has been tested in the context of a joint adult Bible study group from the Mennonite churches in the Markham-Stouffville area of Ontario, and the current booklet is offered as an aid to further Scripture study and discernment in other communities.

This resource is NOT:

- a complete or exhaustive study of Jesus' use of Scripture.
- the result of extensive consultation of commentaries and other secondary materials.
- an attempt at hypothetical historical reconstruction.⁴

Methodology

Here is a simple methodology that I have found to be helpful in working through this material in group settings. These ideas may be a useful starting point for using this resource in your own community.

At the beginning of the first session, use a flipchart or projection and write the words "Jesus" and "Scripture." The following question can be a good starting point: As we begin this exploration, what are our initial thoughts/ideas/assumptions about the relationship between "Jesus" and "Scripture"? Brainstorm and list the responses of the different members of the group. (eg: responses can be anywhere from "Jesus used Scripture a lot" to "Jesus didn't use

⁴ The approach outlined above is not intended in any way to de-value biblical scholarship. It is simply to be clear about the simple and straightforward methodology used in this study, and to suggest that this method can be (and has been) a fruitful one, even in the absence of systematic consultation of secondary resources.

That said, I should make a few comments about the role of biblical scholarship in these explorations. Certainly I bring my own background, experience, and study to this project, and the initial "round" of explorations included regular interaction and participation by biblical scholars. While no effort has been made to systematically consult what others have said, my own perspectives on how "Scripture interprets Scripture" have been particularly impacted in recent times by the scholarship of people like Richard Hayes ("Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul" and "The Conversion of the Imagination: Paul as Interpreter of Israel's Scripture"), Michael Fishbane ("The Garments of Torah" and "Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel"), Walter Brueggemann (many writings), and others.

I am well aware that the methodology followed here is subject to questions about describing "the hermeneutics of Jesus" given the differences between Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John and given the complex communities and processes by means of which we receive the Gospel narratives. I do not see these questions as a hindrance to this study. Throughout this process I have been careful to clarify that my goal is not to attempt a hypothetical historical reconstruction. Nor have I concerned myself with historical-critical questions that attempt to sort out what portions of the Gospels are considered "authentic sayings of the historical Jesus" and so on.

Rather, the approach has been to accept the Gospels as they have been given to us, as part of the canon of Scripture, and to proceed on that basis. This is an exploration of how Jesus is portrayed in the Gospels as an interpreter of Israel's Scriptures.

Scripture much"... "Jesus represents continuity/fulfillment of Scripture" to "Jesus was critical/challenging of Scripture"... etc.)

In each session, I have found this sequence to be helpful:

- 1) Open with prayer.
- 2) Make sure that all have access to a Bible. Invite one or several volunteers to read the Gospel passage out loud so that all can hear.
- 3) Together make a list of all the places in the passage where we see Old Testament Scripture coming into play in some way.
- 4) Ask the preliminary question - "what do we notice about how Jesus is portrayed as interpreting Scripture in this passage?"
- 5) Read and explore/discuss the Old Testament texts that are referenced/echoed in the Gospel passage.
- 6) Ask again – "Now that we have spent more time exploring these OT texts, what do we notice about how Jesus is portrayed as an interpreter of Scripture?"
- 7) A good closing question can be: "What difference might this make for us, as we interpret Scripture today?"

One participant in the first "round" of explorations put it this way: "On one hand, these observations about how Jesus interprets Scripture regarding the Sabbath, etc. have nothing to do with the specific issues that we are facing as a church today. On the other hand, they have everything to do with what we are facing. That is why I think this material is so useful." It is my hope that, by paying careful attention to how Jesus is portrayed as interpreting Scripture, we can learn to be better interpreters ourselves, as we seek to follow the way of Jesus.

Chapter 1 - Mark 2:23-3:6

A. The scene:

Mark narrates a fast-paced sequence of events that follow immediately (a very “Markan” word) after the arrest of John the Baptist and the beginning of Jesus’ public ministry (1:16-3:6). The sequence comes to a dramatic climax with the two episodes that we will consider here. First the Pharisees question Jesus about his disciples picking grain on the Sabbath (2:23-28), then Jesus questions the Pharisees about what is “lawful” to do on the Sabbath, healing a man with a “withered hand” (3:1-6). This last episode concludes with the startling assertion that the Pharisees are already conspiring with the Herodians to kill Jesus.

B. The conversation partners:

In both scenes the conversation is between Jesus and the Pharisees – once apparently in the fields, and then in the synagogue.

C. The Old Testament passages:

The Pharisees, questioning Jesus re: what is “lawful” to do on the Sabbath, are not described as quoting a particular passage, but some of the relevant texts would seem to be Exodus 20:10; Leviticus 23:3, Deuteronomy 5:14 (re: keeping the Sabbath day), and Deuteronomy 23:24-25 (re: permissibility of small-scale picking “your neighbour’s standing grain” by hand...). Jesus responds by referring to what David did (1 Samuel 21:1-6), and some of the relevant texts regarding the “bread of the Presence” seem to be Exodus 29:32-34 and Leviticus 24:5-9.

Old Testament references/echoes in Mark 2:23-3:6

Exodus 20:10
Leviticus 23:3
Deuteronomy 5:14
Deuteronomy 23:24-25
1 Samuel 21:1-6
Exodus 29:32-34
Leviticus 24:5-9

D. What do we notice about how Scripture is being interpreted here (by Jesus and by others)?

1) The Pharisees seem to take for granted that what Jesus' disciples are doing (picking grain on the Sabbath) is "not lawful." The question for them is not whether it's lawful or not – their "interpretive tradition" seems to be clear on that point, and they apparently assume that this is common knowledge.

Jesus' counter-argument is intriguing, and rather strange.

Jesus brings scriptural citations into the argument, but not the ones we might expect. One would think that Jesus might refer to the specific Sabbath laws (Ex 20:10; Lev 23:3, Deut 5:14), and offer a different interpretation of what constitutes "work."⁵ Or Jesus could have made reference to Deuteronomy 23:24-25, which might have given some scriptural/legal support for what his disciples were doing.⁶

But Jesus chooses none of those options. Instead, he responds to the accusation/question by introducing a different strand of Scripture altogether – and a rather puzzling one at that.

2) Jesus says "Have you never read...?" and then appeals to a story of David, from 1 Samuel 21:1-6, as a precedent for his disciples' actions. This strikes me as surprising and odd, if not downright quirky. So David lies to the priest about being on a special mission from the king (Saul), and talks the priest into giving the "holy bread" to him and his men, in direct contravention of the law in Ex 29:32-34 and Lev. 24:5-9... This constitutes scriptural support for Jesus' argument?

I have the impression that Jesus, with this quirky scriptural choice, is trying to jolt his audience not just into re-thinking their interpretation of particular Sabbath laws, but into re-examining their priorities altogether. I don't know that Jesus, with this reference, is

⁵ See also the following narratives, which give a sense of the development of different traditions and understanding of what constituted "work" on the Sabbath - Ex 16:23-29; Numbers 15:32-41; Isaiah 56:1-8 and 58:13-14; Jeremiah 17:19-27.

⁶ There is no mention of "Sabbath" in this text, but it indicates that small-scale picking "by hand" is allowed in a neighbour's property, but not a larger scale operation involving "container" or "sickle". Interestingly, Luke's version of this story includes an additional detail ("his disciples plucked some heads of grain, rubbed them in their hands..." Lk 6:1), perhaps signaling to the reader that the disciples were acting in accordance with Dt 23:25.

advocating breaking scriptural commandments or behaving deceitfully like David did. (In fact, Jesus' reference to this David story is a rather "loose" one, which strays from the details of the narrative in a number of ways.) My sense is that by introducing this scriptural narrative, and adding his own emphasis that David and his companions "were hungry and in need of food," Jesus is essentially saying "Look, people, give your heads a shake – you've got your priorities all mixed up."

The "clincher" to Jesus' argument suggests such a need for re-thinking priorities: "The Sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the Sabbath..." (2:27).⁷

3) By drawing a direct parallel between himself and David – a hero and massively influential character for Israel – Jesus is already making a remarkable claim. And then he goes on to say "The Sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the Sabbath; so the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath." While the term "son of man" is notoriously multi-faceted and challenging to interpret (does Jesus use the phrase here in a way that means something like "ordinary human," the way it's used in Ezekiel, or as a "special/unique one" as in Daniel?), it seems clear that Jesus is positioning himself (and, perhaps, other people) in a remarkably authoritative position vis-a-vis the Sabbath (and interpretation of Scripture re: Sabbath laws).

Not surprisingly, this does not ease the tension or controversy between Jesus and the Pharisees. These scenes are placed at the conclusion of a sequence of episodes at the very beginning of Jesus' ministry that portray Jesus healing and teaching in the midst of escalating opposition. The Pharisees' question in our passage ("why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?") is a culmination of a series of other "why" questions (1:24, 27; 2:7, 16, 19, 24). By the end of the next scene there is already a conspiracy to "destroy" Jesus (3:6).

4) From the controversy in the grain fields, we now move to the synagogue, where there was "a man... who had a withered hand" (3:1). This dramatic scene seems to be a climax toward

⁷ In Matthew's version of this story, Jesus introduces yet another strand of scripture, quoting the prophet Hosea 6:6 "...if you had known what this means, 'I desire mercy and not sacrifice,' you would not have condemned the guiltless." (Mt 12:7).

which Mark's narrative has been building. It is striking that here again Jesus is portrayed as engaged in teaching/healing ministry. THIS, it seems, is his priority – whereas those-who-are-becoming-his-opponents are continuously questioning what-and-why-and-when he's doing what he's doing. They are not portrayed as having concern for the needs of the people (lepers, demon-possessed, sick, hungry), but only for customary procedure (which they, presumably, would see as being faithful to Scripture).

The scene in the synagogue is a vivid enactment of Jesus' approach. Where his opponents have been putting their interpretations of the law at the centre, Jesus calls the man with the withered hand to the "centre" (Jesus says "Come forward" (3:3), which could also be translated "Come into the middle" or "come into the midst.") In other words, Jesus is – quite vividly and dramatically – putting the needs of this needy person "in the middle" – "at the centre" of his agenda... including the way he understands Scripture (an enactment of his 2:27-28 teaching and his foundational, vocation-defining declaration in 1:14-15).

E. What can we say about Jesus' approach to Scripture in this passage?

- 1) Jesus introduces Scripture into the conversation/debate in a surprising way, challenging assumed-and-expected interpretations.
- 2) Jesus brings a different strand of Scripture (the story about David) into interaction with other strands of Scripture (Sabbath laws).
- 3) Jesus claims authority to interpret Scripture – an authority that challenges the official and "authorized" experts and interpreters of the day.
- 4) Jesus interprets Scripture in the context of healing ministry with those who are in need (lepers, demon-possessed, hungry, the sick). Jesus puts the needs and wellbeing of needy people "at the centre" of his agenda, including his "interpretive agenda" vis-a-vis Scripture, and criticizes others for not doing so.

Chapter 2 - Mark 7:1-23

A. The scene:

The “Pharisees and some scribes” question the practice of Jesus’ disciples “eating with defiled hands.” Jesus extends the conversation to a critique of their handling of the law (the Corban issue), and then Jesus teaches further re: what does and does not “defile.”

B. The conversation partners:

In this passage there are three distinct sets of conversation partners. First Jesus talks with “the Pharisees and some of the scribes,” then Jesus speaks to “the crowd,” and then he has further discussion in “the house” with just his disciples.

C. The Old Testament passages:

Jesus quotes Isaiah 29:13 in response to the Pharisees and scribes, and then quotes the law (“Honour your father and your mother” – Ex 20:12; 21:17; Lev 20:9; Deut 5:16) in contrast to what he calls “your tradition.”

Old Testament references/echoes in Mark 7:1-23

Isaiah 29:13
Exodus 20:12
Exodus 21:17
Leviticus 20:9
Deuteronomy 5:16

D. What do we notice about how Scripture is being interpreted here (by Jesus and by others)?

1) In this scene, “...the Pharisees and some of the scribes” have come all the way from Jerusalem to Gennasaret in Galilee, apparently for the express purpose of investigating Jesus. They certainly waste no time proceeding to criticize, again, what Jesus’ disciples are doing (eating without washing their hands according to Pharisaic practice). Again, as we saw in Mark 2:23-28, there is a “why” question (“why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?”), and again Jesus responds with specific references to Scripture.

2) In Mark 2:23-28 we saw that Jesus responded to the Pharisees' use of "the law" (re: Sabbath) by referring to other scriptural streams (the David-taking-bread story from 1 Samuel 21:1-6, and a citation of Hosea 6:6 in Matthew's version of the story). In Mark 7 Jesus is the one insisting on Mosaic law (re: honouring father and mother) in response to the Pharisees' reference to "the tradition of the elders." Jesus is emphatic about this. "You abandon the commandment of God and hold to human tradition" (7:8), and again "You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to keep your tradition! For Moses said... but you say..." (7:9).

3) I am struck by the way that Jesus uses Scripture to "change the channel." While the "Pharisees and some of the scribes" want to accuse Jesus for not following the hand-washing and purity practices, Jesus quickly pivots the conversation to again question their priorities, and to address a contextual justice issue that he wants to talk about (misuse of the "Corban" or "offering to God" system⁸).

In other words, Jesus is an astute reader not only of Scripture but also of context. He is very aware of issues of injustice in his local context (the "Corban" issue and "many things like this" – 7:13), he is concerned about addressing those issues, and he uses Scripture to address those issues.

4) Jesus quotes Isaiah 29:13 to critique his questioners and raise the issue of the difference between God's commandments and human tradition, but reading further in that same chapter from Isaiah, we find many other resonances with this debate between Jesus and the Pharisees. The Isaiah text speaks of "a human commandment learned by rote,"⁹ and that God will "do amazing things with this people, shocking and amazing" in tension with "the wisdom of their wise" which "shall perish" (Isa 29:13-14). The poem goes on to describe those who plot/conspire "in the dark" (Isa 29:15), and "the scoffer" and "those alert to do

⁸ "Corban" is a Hebrew word meaning "offering" or "a gift to God" (eg: Lev 1:2; 2:1; 3:1). The Jewish Annotated New Testament includes the following note on Mark 7:11: "The controversy here involves both the determination of which part of Torah, honoring parents or keeping vows, supersedes the other, and also whether a vow can be repudiated... When something had been declared devoted to God, it was generally not permitted for the giver to take back the gift. Rabbinic tradition... also allowed release from "korban" when it deprived parents of their due." (JANT, p. 74).

⁹ In this passage Jesus quotes the ancient Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible (the Septuagint, or LXX), where the rendering of Isaiah 29:13 is "... in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines" as compared to the Hebrew version which says "... their worship of me is a human commandment learned by rote."

evil... who set a trap... and without grounds deny justice to the one in the right” (29:20-21). This is contrasted with the good news for “the deaf,” “the eyes of the blind,” “the meek,” and “the neediest people” (Isa 29:17-19).

It doesn't take a lot of imagination to see multiple connections between this Isaiah 29 text and Jesus' teaching/healing ministry amidst escalating opposition. Jesus' brief citation of Isaiah 29:13 speaks incisively to the current debate, and echoes from the broader context of Isaiah are clearly audible as well.

5) After this scriptural argument with the Pharisees and scribes, Jesus turns to “the crowd” (7:14), and then to “his disciples” in a house (7:17), and continues his teaching about what really “defiles” or “makes common.” Where the first discussion is full of specific Scripture references, the address to the crowd is a brief and succinct (almost “distilled”) version of Jesus' teaching. Then, in private and in response to the disciples' questioning, Jesus gives further explanation - rather colourful and graphic - of the teaching that he gave in brief form to the crowd.

The address to the crowd and more extended comments to the disciples do not seem to draw on Scripture explicitly – in fact, this teaching seems to be in considerable tension with scriptural purity laws (see Lev 10:8-11, and Lev 11). At the same time, Jesus' forceful emphasis on what does and does not “defile” resonates with many prophetic texts that critique human (and divinely mandated) ritual practices, emphasizing the (also divinely mandated) overarching concern for justice (eg: Isaiah 58, Micah 6:6-8, Amos 5:21-27, Hosea 6:6, etc.)

6) All of this is happening in a context full of references to being in northern Galilee, a very diverse and largely Gentile territory. So there would seem to be identity and “insider-outsider” dynamics at play here beneath the surface of the controversies about “purity laws.” The kind of contact that Jesus is described as having with Gentiles – both before and after this Mark 7:1-23 passage – would seem to suggest that Jesus is prioritizing the healing and wellbeing of Gentiles higher than the purity traditions of the Pharisees. Is this in continuity with what we noticed earlier – Jesus' pattern of putting the wellbeing of needy people (in this case, including ethnic “outsiders”) “at the centre” of his agenda (including his interpretive agenda)?

E. What can we say about Jesus' approach to Scripture in this passage?

- 1) Jesus again brings Scripture to bear on a current, contextual issue/debate.
- 2) Jesus again draws upon different "streams" of Scriptural tradition - in this case, quoting both the prophet Isaiah and the law/Torah re: honouring father and mother.
- 3) Jesus is an astute interpreter of both Scripture and context, paying attention to local justice issues and looking at those issues in light of scriptural teachings.
- 4) Jesus quotes a brief passage of Scripture (Isaiah 29:13), but the broader context of that brief reference also resonates in multiple ways with the situation at hand.
- 5) Jesus addresses/engages different audiences/conversation partners (Pharisees-and-scribes, the crowd, the disciples) in different ways.

Chapter 3 - Mark 10:1-31

A. The scene:

In this chapter there are 2 incidents of intensive Torah interpretation, with the scene of Jesus “blessing the children” sandwiched between them. The Pharisees question Jesus about divorce, and a man asks “what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

B. The conversation partners:

In both scenes the conversation alternates between Jesus’ response to the questioner (the Pharisees, the man), and then further dialogue between Jesus and his disciples.

C. The Old Testament passages:

The discussion of divorce hinges, at first, on Deuteronomy 24:1-4, until Jesus introduces Genesis 1:27 and 5:2; 2:24 into the conversation. The discussion with the man is first centred around “the commandments” (Exodus 20:12-16; Deuteronomy 5:16-20), and the ongoing discussion has echoes of Psalm 52:7 and 62:10, Deuteronomy 24:19-22, Jeremiah 32, and Genesis 12:1-3.

Old Testament references/echoes in Mark 10:1-31

Deuteronomy 24:1-4
Genesis 1:27
Genesis 5:2
Genesis 2:24
Exodus 20:12-16
Deuteronomy 5:16-20
Psalm 52:7
Psalm 62:10
Deuteronomy 24:19-22
Jeremiah 32
Genesis 12:1-3

D. What do we notice about how Scripture is being interpreted here (by Jesus and by others)?

1) In both of these scenes it is striking to note the posture of those who come to Jesus with a question. The Pharisees – as we have come to expect in Mark’s Gospel – are portrayed as questioning Jesus “to test him” (10:2). They are not portrayed as sincerely seeking after the meaning and appropriate application of Scripture re: divorce. Rather, they are depicted as being certain of their own interpretation, and their question is raised for strategic purposes – to “test” Jesus with this controversial question – in the context of what we have already seen to be their conspiracy “to destroy him” (3:6).

The posture of “the man,” on the other hand, is more ambiguous. He “ran up and knelt before him and asked him, “Good teacher, what must I do...?” This could well be set up as a vivid contrast to the Pharisees’ self-serving question – this man is a sincere “seeker.” Given what we learn at the end of this story (that the man is a member of the economic elite, and unwilling/unable to accept Jesus’ call to follow), it could also be that his question is essentially self-serving - a flattering approach to the “good teacher,” and a means of publicly asserting his status as a faithful, law-abiding, Torah-observant man.

In either case, the effect is the same. Both are examples of people who are unwilling/unable to accept and re-order their lives according to Jesus’ “take” on these familiar, core texts from Israel’s Scriptures.

In both cases, these responses are contrasted with those of Jesus’ disciples who are struggling to keep up with the surprising interpretive moves that their master is making. The disciples ask for further clarification (10:10), they are “perplexed” and “greatly astounded” (10:24, 26), and while their posture is different (“Look – we have left everything and followed you!” 10:28), it is evident that they, too, are struggling to “get it.”

2) Again we see Jesus drawing on different streams of scriptural tradition in order to respond to a particular question of scriptural interpretation. When the Pharisees ask him to declare himself on the issue of divorce, Jesus first asks for the scriptural basis of their understanding – “What did Moses command you?” (10:3). When they respond in accordance with the legislation in Deuteronomy 4:1-4, Jesus says “For your hardness of heart he wrote you this commandment,” and goes on to quote Genesis 1:27 and 5:2 (“from the beginning of creation, God made them male and female”) and Genesis 2:24 (“For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh”). Then Jesus adds his own brief commentary and a concluding “zinger” to emphasize where he’s going with this teaching about divorce – “So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let no one put asunder” (10:7-9).

Jesus does not answer the question directly (“is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?”) - his rhetorical strategy seems to be to get his questioners to answer their own question (“what did Moses command you?”), and then he proceeds to put that legislation into a broader scriptural context to understand its purpose and rationale. In this way, Jesus adroitly shifts the conversation from the question of “what is lawful” (under what conditions is it acceptable for a man to divorce his wife) to the question of God’s original intentions for marriage.

A similar dynamic may be at play in the second scene, where “a man” asks Jesus “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” and Jesus responds by pointing to the Decalogue from Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5, highlighting 6 of the 10 commandments (with the phrase “you shall not defraud” instead of “you shall not covet.”). When the man says “I have kept all these since my youth,” Jesus’ response is not an explicit quotation of a particular Scripture passage, but it resonates with the overriding concern for the poor that is everywhere in evidence in the Hebrew Scriptures (torah, prophets, and writings).

At the end of Jesus’ interaction with “the man” we are told that “he (the man) was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions” (10:22). The Greek word here translated as “possessions” can also be translated as “properties” or “pieces of land.” Intriguingly, Deuteronomy 24 – which begins with the legislation about divorce that was the focus of the earlier debate with the Pharisees – ends with a series of instructions to landowners regarding how they are to deal with their fields in order to care for the needs of the poor (Deut 24:19-22).

These two scenes in Mark 10 offer a vivid demonstration of Jesus’ approach to Scripture, and Deuteronomy 24 in particular. In both cases Jesus begins with a focus on the commandments in Deuteronomy, and then extends the conversation, drawing on other strands of Scripture to address current contextual realities and questions.

3) A common contemporary stereotype of Jesus is that his teachings moderate Old Testament laws. In these two scenes in Mark 10, however, it would seem that Jesus is not relaxing but intensifying the meaning and requirements of “the law.” In both scenes this is evident to some degree in the initial exchange with the questioner, and then intensified even further in the subsequent “private” conversation with his disciples.

We have already noted how Jesus responds to the Pharisees’ question about divorce. In private conversation with his disciples “in the house,” when they “asked him again about this matter,” Jesus goes even farther, with a radical “take” on marriage that intensifies the Deuteronomy legislation in a number of ways.¹⁰

¹⁰ Compare Matthew’s version (Mt 19:1-12) and Paul’s writing in 1 Corinthians 7 for other examples of the early church’s wrestling with this question.

Deuteronomy 24:1-4	Mark 10:10-12
A man can divorce his wife	A man can divorce his wife, and a woman can divorce her husband ¹¹
After her husband has divorced her, a woman can marry someone else	After divorce, if either the man or the woman marries someone else, it is adultery
If her second husband divorces her, or he dies, the first husband is not permitted to re-marry her	
The man is the active agent	Both men and women are active agents

Similarly in the second episode, Jesus seems to be intensifying the demands of the law in his interaction with “the man,” and still further in subsequent private conversation with his disciples.

We have already noted that Jesus’ initial response to the man’s question is to point to a selection from the Ten Commandments. When the man responds by saying “these things I have kept from my youth,” we are told that “Jesus looked at him, loved him, and said, “You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.”” (10:21) This response was too much for the young man to take – “When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions (properties)” (10:22).

¹¹ The Jewish Annotated New Testament includes the following note on this verse: “Biblical law allowed only men to initiate divorce (Deut 24:1-4), but in this period Jewish women, in accordance with Roman law, also initiated divorces, as Mark and Paul assumed.” JANT, pp. 80-81.

Then Jesus turns to his disciples and comments twice about “how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God” – particularly for those who have wealth. The disciples are “perplexed” (10:24) and “greatly astounded” (10:26), asking one another “then who can be saved?”

While care for the poor is a theme that is pervasive throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, it seems that Jesus’ teaching here is considerably more radical than what the Torah-observant young man or Jesus’ own disciples are used to. Texts like Psalm 52:7 and Psalm 62:10 – warning of the temptation to trust in riches rather than God - may form a backdrop for Jesus’ comments here. And in response to the disciples’ bewildered query “then who can be saved?” Jesus states that “for God all things are possible,” which appears to be a quote (or a strong echo) of Jeremiah 32:17. This connection is especially intriguing, given that Jeremiah 32 has to do with Jeremiah’s purchase of land in obedience to God’s command (a sign of hope in the midst of exile – “nothing is too hard for you (God)”). That Jesus would quote this text about the divinely mandated purchase of property - in reference to his call to relinquish property and possessions for the sake of the poor - is remarkable and intriguing indeed! (More on this in point #4 below.)

Deuteronomy 24 – as we noted above – deals with the issue of divorce (24:1-4) as well as the matter of landholdings and care for the poor (24:19-22). The rich man has good reason to be “shocked” and the disciples have good reason to be “perplexed” and “greatly astounded” at Jesus’ teaching on these matters. Deuteronomy 24 specifies how a landowner is to handle the harvest in order to leave food for the sojourner, orphans, and widows – but Jesus’ call for the man to sell his holdings and give the money to the poor goes well beyond the Deuteronomy legislation.

As we noted with the question of divorce, Jesus’ answer to his questioner is further developed in private conversation with his disciples. A comparison of the Deuteronomy 24 text and the content of Jesus’ follow-up teaching to his disciples again illustrates the way that Jesus is portrayed as intensifying the meaning and requirements of scriptural law.

Deuteronomy 24:19-22	Mark 10:28-31
Words addressed to owners of fields, olive trees, vineyards	Words addressed to those who “have left everything and followed” Jesus
Property is retained	House/family/property are relinquished “for my sake and for the sake of the good news”
Sojourners, widows, orphans are cared for by leaving some of the harvest (grain, olives, grapes) in the fields	People are cared for by receiving new family/houses/fields in the context of the community of Jesus’ followers
Social positions are maintained (landowners remain landowners, sojourners/widows/orphans remain so)	Social positions are inverted (“many who are first will be last, and the last will be first”)

4) Earlier (#2 above) we noted that, in response to questions about “the law,” Jesus proceeds by commenting on the law and then bringing other streams of scriptural tradition into interaction with it, resulting in a different “take” on the law in question. Having noted just how radical Jesus’ teaching seems to be in these two scenes, we may ask if Jesus is pictured as riding roughshod over Scripture. Radically intensifying the requirements of the Deuteronomy legislation is a significant interpretive move. Referencing Jeremiah 32:17 and 32:27 in this context seems counter-intuitive, to put it mildly. What are we to make of Jesus’ bold approach vis-à-vis Scripture in these episodes?

A closer look at further scriptural echoes and allusions in this passage gives evidence that Jesus is in fact portrayed as knowledgeable and rigorous, as well as radical and creative, as an interpreter of Scripture. His teaching in Mark 10 represents a masterful interweaving of different scriptural streams and traditions in order to address current realities and questions.

We have seen how Jesus does this in relation to the question of divorce – drawing on texts from Genesis to understand the “law of Moses” in the context of the “big picture” God’s intentions for marriage. A similar dynamic is at play in the second question – the interaction

with the rich man – where the Deuteronomy legislation is brought into dialogue with other scriptural traditions that are alluded to rather than directly cited.

a) One such scriptural tradition is the jubilee legislation of Leviticus 25. These commandments deal with the distribution and periodic re-distribution of land, to ensure that all have access to a viable livelihood, and to ensure that there is not a permanent “underclass” of people that are forced to sell their property (and eventually themselves) to repay debts.

Our chart above indicates a sharp contrast between Deuteronomy 24, where “social positions are maintained (landowners remain landowners, and sojourners/widows remain so),” and Jesus’ teaching in Mark 10 where “social positions are inverted.” When we understand this in the context of the jubilee, however, it becomes clear that even those retaining land (Deut 24) are doing so only in a relative way, subject to the jubilee provisions of regular re-distribution land. And Jesus’ words about relinquishing-and-receiving property come into focus as a new articulation of a kind of jubilee vision.

On the face of it, Jesus’ words in Mark 10 seem to be a stark contrast to Deuteronomy 24. But when we consider both Deuteronomy 24 and Mark 10 in light of the provisions of jubilee (Leviticus 25), we can see that these apparently contrasting texts are both undergirded by, and expressions of, a common “big picture” vision of God’s intentions for a peoplehood that lives justly and cares for the poor and vulnerable... including in its ways of dealing with property and possessions.

b) At first glance, Jesus’ reference to Jeremiah 32 also seems to be a strange choice in the context of a call to sell possessions/property to give to the poor. Jeremiah 32, after all, tells the story of how the prophet is instructed by God to purchase property, not relinquish it. How are we to understand this?

A closer look reveals a number of close linkages between Jeremiah 32 and Jesus’ teaching about possessions/property in Mark 10. In both cases there is a surprising and controversial call to be ready to give up property (in the Jeremiah text the prophet is relaying the shocking message from God that “I am going to give this city into the hands of the Chaldeans and into the hand of King Nebuchadrezzar of Babylon” Jer 32:28ff). In both cases, despite these surprising words, it is made clear that God’s intentions for the future are in fact for the wellbeing of a concrete, viable, historical community in the land (compare Jer 32:36-41 with Mark 10:29-31). In both cases

(exile in the case of Jeremiah, voluntary relinquishment of property in Mark 10), this is precisely the context of the exclamation “is anything too hard for me?” (Jer 32:27) and “for God all things are possible” (Mark 10:27). And in both cases, this astonishing circumstance (the giving up of land) is the context of an emphatic assertion that the community will, in fact, have access to “fields” (Jer 32:43 and Mark 10:30).

While Jesus’ concluding words in this episode (“many who are first will be last, and the last will be first”) do not appear to be explicitly drawn from a specific Old Testament text, this theme of dramatic reversal as God’s doing is pervasive throughout the Hebrew Scriptures. And these words could as readily serve as a climax for the assertions of Jeremiah 32 as for Jesus’ teaching in Mark 10.

Is it too much to suggest that Jesus’ statement in Mark 10:27 is self-conscious reference to Jeremiah 32? It seems to me that the connections are too many, and too convincing, to be ignored.

c) Yet another potential scriptural allusion in this passage should be considered. In the earlier discussion about divorce, Jesus cited Genesis 2:24 (“For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife...”). It is striking that in the subsequent discussion about possessions/property, Jesus again speaks of those who “have left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields...” As we have noted, this preparedness to “leave” possessions/property/family “for my sake and for the sake of the gospel” is not to wander forever aimlessly and homelessly – it is a call to participation in a concrete, historical, viable community that is faithful to God.

The foundational Old Testament example of this, of course, is Abraham and Sarah, who in Genesis 12 heed God’s call to “go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing... in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Genesis 12:1-3). It seems abundantly clear that Jesus’ words in Mark 10:29-31 are not an articulation of some radically novel vision, but a re-statement of what has been the purpose and character of the peoplehood of Israel from the very beginning.

Again, is it suggesting too much to hear echoes of Genesis 12:1-3 in Jesus’ words in Mark 10:29-31? I don’t think so. Our comparison of Deuteronomy 24 and Mark 10 has indicated that Jesus had a radical “take” on these scriptural laws – even to the point of

revising them significantly in a number of ways. And yet it seems equally clear that Jesus is pictured as masterfully weaving together different streams of Scripture to re-articulate the vocation of the community in a compelling way that is in profound continuity with the scriptural witness, even where it is at variance with some specific elements of scriptural laws.

D. Given what we see in this passage, what can we say about Jesus' approach to Scripture?

1) Jesus is deeply concerned with matters of Scripture interpretation, and is portrayed as a knowledgeable, rigorous, creative interpreter and teacher of Scripture.

2) Jesus draws on different streams of scriptural tradition in order to respond to particular contextual questions and issues.

3) Jesus demonstrates a readiness to radically re-interpret scriptural law while placing it in a broader scriptural context in order to understand the "big picture" of God's enduring intentions for the world.

4) Jesus' use of Scripture includes specific citations as well as allusions and more subtle echoes. When Jesus references Scripture, either explicitly or allusively, multiple layers of meaning can be found by paying attention to the broader context of those scriptural passages.

5) Jesus engages in Scripture interpretation in multiple contexts, with multiple conversation partners.

6) Jesus does not approach Scripture interpretation as a speculative enterprise, but as a way of addressing current contextual issues and questions of what to do and how to act, with a particular consistent focus on the needs and realities of the poor and vulnerable.

Chapter 4 - Mark 12

A. The scene:

After Jesus' dramatic entry into Jerusalem (Mark 11:1-10) and confrontations in the temple (11:15-19, 27-33), Mark 12 describes a series of hermeneutical debates with different "parties." These are high-stakes, urgent discussions about numerous "hot button" issues of the day, carried out in a very public context (the temple).

B. The conversation partners:

"As he was walking in the temple, the chief priests and the scribes and the elders came to him..." (11:27) and they question Jesus' authority (not surprising, considering the dramatic events of the previous days). The ensuing debates come thick and fast, with different people "taking the lead" for different parts of the conversation ("... some of the Pharisees and some of the Herodians... Sadducees... one of the scribes..." - 12:13; 12:18; 12:28). All of this happens in the context of "the crowds" who are mentioned a number of times (11:32; 12:12; 12:37). Jesus is also described as engaging in ongoing teaching (presumably to "the crowds" - 12:37-38), and at the end of the chapter he "called his disciples to him" for further specific instruction.

C. The Old Testament passages:

Jesus' "parable of the vineyard/tenants" in the first part of chapter 12 is a re-working of Isaiah 5:1-7, and then Jesus quotes Psalm 118:22-23. The Sadducees ask a question arising out of Deut. 25:5, and Jesus bases his response on the story of Moses and the burning bush (Ex. 3). The scribe's question about "which commandment is first" gives rise to a flurry of

Old Testament references/echoes in Mark 12

Isaiah 5:1-7
Psalm 118:22-23
Deuteronomy 25:5
Exodus 3
Deuteronomy 6:4
Leviticus 19:18
Deuteronomy 4:39
Isaiah 45:6, 14
Isaiah 46:9
1 Samuel 15:22
Hosea 6:6
Micah 6:6-8
Psalm 110:1

scriptural citations and allusions (Deut. 6:4, Lev. 19:18, Deut. 4:39, Isaiah 45:6, 14 and 46:9; 1 Sam 15:22; Hosea 6:6; Micah 6:6-8). Jesus' refutation of the scribes re: how David's "son" could be his "lord" is based on a citation of Psalm 110:1. And there are some interesting non-scriptural "texts" that are also interpreted in this chapter - the text inscribed on the coin (12:13-17), and the contribution of the poor widow (12:41-44).

D. What do we notice about how Scripture is being interpreted here (by Jesus and by others)?

Mark 12 is a gold mine for our study, structured as a series of episodes hinging around urgent and controversial contextual questions of Scripture interpretation. This section of temple teaching/debating begins with the question of "authority" (11:27-33), which Jesus adroitly turns on its head. The table is now set for a series of intense debates about Scripture where Jesus' sophisticated opponents have clearly met their match.

1) In Mark's Gospel we have seen Jesus responding to hostile questioners multiple times regarding matters of scriptural interpretation. Now, in dramatic fashion, Jesus turns the tables and goes on the offensive with a devastating re-working of the ancient "parable of the vineyard" from Isaiah 5:1-7.

Jesus appropriates this familiar imagery, where "the vineyard... is the house of Israel, and the people of Judah are his pleasant planting" (Isa 5:7), and transposes it into a new key, introducing new characters (the tenants, the owner's messengers, the owner's son) and revising/expanding the plot dramatically (even apparently writing himself into the script). In so doing, Jesus transforms this prophetic critique of the people of Israel/Judah (see the whole of Isaiah 5) into a sharply focused critique of Israel's leadership (the "tenants" who have been charged with care of the vineyard). While this certainly represents a dramatic adaptation of Isaiah 5's vineyard metaphor, it is in keeping with the use of that same imagery earlier in Isaiah (Isa 3:14: "The LORD enters into judgment with the elders and princes of his people: It is you who have devoured the vineyard; the spoil of the poor is in your houses.").

Isaiah's "love song" (Isa 5:1) ends with the LORD unmaking the vineyard (Isa 5:5-6: "I will remove its hedge... break down its wall... make it a waste... briars and thorns... no rain...") This is a picture of the coming exile that is described in other vivid imagery at the end of the same chapter. In Jesus' imaginative "cover version" of the song, the vineyard remains intact but the owner "will come and destroy the tenants and give the vineyard to others" (Mark 12:9).

Clearly Jesus' creative adaptation of this imagery is pointed and provocative (it is certainly perceived that way – Mark 12:12), but at this point it is imaginative and allusive (there is no explicit reference here to Isaiah or to "Scripture"). The explicit "Scripture" reference comes next...

2) In previous chapters we have seen Jesus bring together diverse strands of Scripture in creative and often surprising ways. Here Jesus does so again, with devastating rhetorical effect. Jesus concludes his adaptation of Isaiah's parable of the vineyard with a citation of Psalm 118:22-23. "Have you not read this scripture: The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord's doing, and it is amazing in our eyes." (Mark 12:10-11).

Linking his "cover version" of Isaiah's "song" with Psalm 118 (another "song") would seem to be quite an intuitive leap. I get the sense that Jesus is indeed thinking and communicating like a songwriter here, linking different sources/traditions through intuitive word associations in order to communicate in a fresh way to a contemporary audience. "Stones," "building," and the theme of "rejection" all feature prominently in both the Isaiah 5 and Psalm 118 texts. The concluding line ("this was the Lord's doing, and it is amazing in our eyes") is also a perfect fit for what's going on in the Gospel narrative, as "amazement" is one of the constant reactions to Jesus' teaching and work.

This one-two scriptural "punch" certainly seems to hit its rhetorical mark. "When they realized that he had told this parable against them, they wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowd. So they left him, and went away." (12:12).

3) “They” (presumably “the chief priests, the scribes, and the elders” from 11:27) may have “left him” and gone away, but this signals the beginning, not the end, of an ongoing series of confrontational debates regarding Scripture interpretation. Immediately we are told “they sent to him some Pharisees and some Herodians to trap him in what he said” (12:13). This group of questioners is already familiar to us from an earlier round of debate in Mark’s Gospel (3:6), which should give us pause when we read about their flattering approach to Jesus (12:14). There can be no doubt that we are meant to see their question as a trap and part of their ongoing conspiracy “to destroy” Jesus (3:6).

The question that they raise is one of the most “hot button” issues of the day – “Is it lawful (that is, in accordance with scriptural law) to pay taxes to the emperor, or not? Should we pay them, or should we not?” (12:14, 15). This was certainly a valid and critical (and intensely controversial) question. But the narrative is clear - the religious leadership is bringing this question forward, ostensibly because it needs “discernment,” but their real agenda is to use this particular “moral issue” to trap Jesus. In other words, they are portrayed as not really being sincerely interested in appropriate discernment and interpretation of Scripture at all - their interest is in using this issue “to trap him in what he said.”

Jesus here shows himself to be a sophisticated interpreter not only of scriptural texts, but also of the “sub-text” behind their question (“... but knowing their hypocrisy, he said to them...” 12:15). Jesus also proves adept at interpreting yet another kind of text - the inscription on the coin.

On other occasions we have seen Jesus entering into specific and detailed Scriptural debate with the religious authorities, but in this instance he is not drawn in to their insincere, (in fact, hostile) request for scriptural discernment. Instead, he masterfully interprets the other contextual “texts” (on the coin) and “sub-texts” (the plot of his questioners) that are at play. The response is that “they were utterly amazed at him” (12:17).

4) The Sadducees are the next to step up to the hermeneutical plate (12:18-27) - again, ostensibly with a legitimate question about another current hot-button issue (resurrection from the dead), but actually with little interest in the real situations and people involved. The

Sadducees, “who say there is no resurrection” (12:18), were opponents of the Pharisees on this question (the Pharisees did believe in the resurrection of the dead).

The Sadducees frame their question to Jesus as an issue of Scripture interpretation (“Moses wrote for us that if a man’s brother dies and leaves a wife, but leaves no child...” – referring to Deuteronomy 25:5-10). It is soon evident, however, that the Sadducees’ reference to this law is little more than a pretext to push their own agenda. Deuteronomy 25:5-10 deals with a serious matter of inheritance and succession, with the widow as an active and respected agent seeking justice and fairness in a matter with significant economic implications. The Sadducees, however, show no interest in any of these issues at all – they simply reference this Scripture text in order to frame their pet issue in such a way as to push it to ridiculous extremes, constructing a "straw man" designed to make their opponents' belief in resurrection seem silly and absurd. As members of the economic elite, it is striking that the Sadducees’ reference to Deuteronomy 25 shows no interest in economic justice issues at all – they simply use that legislative text as a springboard to a speculative question about the (disputed) afterlife. Their real agenda, as in Jesus’ previous debate with the Pharisees/Herodians, appears to be to trap Jesus into publicly "taking sides" on a hotly contested issue.

Jesus' response again demonstrates his unwillingness to be politically "used" in this way, and his sophistication in reading/interpreting the sub-text of political intrigue-and-positioning behind the question(s). Jesus replies emphatically and pointedly: “Is not this the reason that you are wrong, that you know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God?” (12:24). Jesus does indeed "take sides" on the resurrection issue, with an interesting angle on the Exodus 3 story, asking “have you not read in the book of Moses, in the story about the bush...” and declaring the Sadducees to be flat out wrong (12:26-27).

Clearly Jesus is portrayed here not only as a capable interpreter of Scripture, but also as an incisive critic of the faulty, self-serving interpretations of others.

5) The next interaction, 12:28-34, is a conversation within the "guild" of professional Scripture-interpreters. This time a scribe approaches Jesus, again with a question, but this

incident is framed differently. The scribe is described sympathetically (12:28 - "seeing that he (Jesus) answered them well..."), and he asks a question which would appear to be rather obvious to anyone with even a passing knowledge of Torah. I get the impression that this scribe, observing the previous dialogues and aware of the "political games" being played here, is sympathetic to Jesus, so he lobs a "softball" question: "Which commandment is first..?" or "the greatest?" There is an interesting interplay, where Jesus answers by quoting Deut. 6:5,¹² and draws attention to "the second" as well (neighbour-love, Lev. 19:18). Jesus holds those two together (love of God, love of neighbor), saying there is no other commandment greater than these two, together.

The scribe then replies by affirming Jesus' response,¹³ and affirming Jesus' addition of neighbour-love (Lev. 19:18) to this "greatest" category, going on to say that "this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices" (echoing texts like Hosea 6:6, 1 Sam 15:22, Micah 6:6-8).

Then we have a rare occurrence indeed - Jesus AFFIRMS the hermeneutical move of a "scribe"...! "You are not far from the kingdom of God." (12:34). In stark contrast to the agenda of the Pharisees/Herodians and then the Sadducees in the previous interactions, this "scribe" is portrayed as being "on the same page" as Jesus, in agreement that love-of-God and love-of-neighbour are at the centre of an appropriate approach to Scripture.

While Jesus affirms this scribe, the context is clear that this dialogue is taking place in an atmosphere of considerable tension. It may be (as I have hinted in footnote #11) that even this interaction includes some under-the-surface "tug-of-war" as to who (Jesus or "the scribe") should really be considered an authority on matters of Scripture interpretation. This sense of tension is highlighted by the comment that "After that no one dared to ask him any questions" (12:34).

¹² With a slight adaptation - Jesus refers to "heart, soul, mind, and strength" instead of just the "heart, soul, might" in Deut 6:5.

¹³ And re-stating the traditional list of three ("heart... understanding... strength..." instead of the 4 listed by Jesus. Is this an implied gentle critique? The scribe's attempt to demonstrate his own scholarly "chops"...?

6) Next Jesus is described as “teaching in the temple,” without specifying a specific audience or set of conversation partners (12:35-37). While Jesus is not portrayed as responding to a specific question, this teaching is a direct critique of the scriptural interpretation of “the scribes.” Jesus asks “How can the scribes say that the Messiah is the son of David?” and goes on to give a close reading of Psalm 110:1.

We are not told why this particular matter (Davidic descent of the expected Messiah) is singled out for analysis by Jesus at this point, but a look at the whole of Psalm 110 makes it easy to see how expectations of a particular kind of coming kingship/messiah-ship would contrast with what we see in the life and ministry of Jesus. If Psalm 110 represents expectations of the character and behaviour of the coming Messiah, then perhaps the confusion of Jesus’ own disciples (eg: Mark 10:35-40) is easier to understand.

In any case, clearly Jesus is signaling a different approach to interpretation of this passage, in opposition to that of “the scribes.” And in so doing he seems to be scoring rhetorical “points” with the crowds – “And the large crowd was listening to him with delight” (12:37).

7) In fact, Jesus’ pointed critique of “the scribes” is far from finished. In the subsequent verses (12:38-40) Jesus gives an explicit warning that their behaviour is not to be imitated. “Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honour at banquets! They devour widows’ houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.” (12:38-40).

These are harsh words, indeed, and particularly striking given Jesus’ apparently positive affirmation of “the scribe” just a few verses earlier (12:34). Is Jesus contrasting that scribe with these other scribes? Or is the more sympathetic portrayal of that scribe to be understood more ambiguously, perhaps like the “rich man” in Mark 10:17-22?

In any case, it seems clear that Jesus is here providing a vivid counter-example of appropriate interpretation of Scripture. His comments about the scribes “devouring widows’ houses and for the sake of appearances saying long prayers” is a contextual commentary on

Hosea 6:6 and other related prophetic texts (Amos 5, Micah 6:6-8, 1 Samuel 15:22, etc.). The very ones who are presumably experts in Scripture interpretation are precisely the ones who are not doing so appropriately. Their mistake has to do with not keeping the ethical injunctions of "love-of-God-and-neighbour" and "mercy-over-sacrifice" as essential to appropriate interpretation of Scripture.

8) The concluding episode in Mark 12's long sequence represents a dramatic contrast. We have seen that the series of debates in this chapter provide a systematic refutation of the various hermeneutical options represented by the different segments of Israel's religious leadership – the Pharisees, the Sadducees, and the scribes. Now, in stark contrast to all of these interactions, we are witness to a scene where Jesus unreservedly praises the actions, and the implied "hermeneutics," of an unlikely exemplary figure.

"He sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. Then he called his disciples and said to them, "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on." (Mark 12:41-44).

Although no Scripture is explicitly quoted or debated in this text, the context of the "temple treasury" (see 2 Kings 12:9) and the generosity of the widow (see 1 Kings 17:7-16) are full of scriptural resonances. The rhetorical effect of the way Mark 12 is put together makes the dramatic conclusion unmistakable. After all of the previous debates, it is the widow, giving her two copper coins, who is lifted up as an appropriate model. She is, in effect, the model interpreter of Scripture here, in stark contrast to the other so-called experts whose hermeneutical approaches have been exposed and systematically torn to shreds.

This unlikely candidate is lifted up as a model of appropriate interpretation because she – and not the so-called scriptural experts - is actually living out and following the teachings of the Scriptures.

E. What can we say about Jesus' approach to Scripture?

The series of episodes and interactions in Mark 12, so intensively focused around matters of scriptural interpretation, reinforce what we have seen previously and add emphasis to several defining characteristics of “the hermeneutics of Jesus.” As a result, I will expand this chapter’s list of what we have noticed to incorporate not only what we have seen in Mark 12, but what we have seen in the 4 passages that we have been exploring in this study. That will then serve as the “conclusion” to this study of the portrayal of Jesus as interpreter of Scripture in Mark’s Gospel.

Conclusion

Here is a list of some of the repeated patterns and characteristics that we have noticed in this preliminary exploration of how Jesus is portrayed as interpreter of Scripture in Mark's Gospel.¹⁴ What are the implications for our own interpretation of Scripture, as we seek to be faithful followers of Jesus in our time and place?

- 1) Jesus engages with Scripture, and engages others with Scripture, a lot.
- 2) Jesus is portrayed as a very knowledgeable, rigorous, and creative interpreter of Scripture.
- 3) Jesus takes the initiative to bring Scripture to bear on given situations/issues, often in a surprising way, challenging assumed-and-expected interpretations. Jesus also responds – often with more Scripture – when others take the initiative to introduce Scripture in relation to a given situation/issue.
- 4) Jesus draws broadly from different strands of Scripture (Torah, Prophets, Writings), often bringing different (and surprising) Scripture passages together in new ways in addressing contextual realities and questions.
- 5) Jesus claims authority to interpret Scripture, and conflicting interpretations of Scripture are at the heart of Jesus' conflicts with the religious authorities.
- 6) Jesus is portrayed as a knowledgeable and capable interpreter of contextual “texts” as well as (and in relation to) scriptural ones. Jesus reads his context scripturally, and reads Scripture contextually.
- 7) Jesus engages in Scripture interpretation and teaching in multiple contexts and with multiple audiences/conversation partners.

¹⁴ As mentioned in the Introduction, this study is Part 1 of a projected series looking at the portrayals of Jesus as interpreter of Scripture in each of the 4 Gospels. While there are certainly differences between the Gospel portrayals, the characteristics noted here are remarkably consistent with what we find in the other Gospels as well.

8) Unlikely people are sometimes portrayed more positively as exemplary interpreters of Scripture (sincere seekers, desiring to act on what they learn) than the “professional” Scripture interpreters (often portrayed as raising questions of Scripture interpretation for strategic/power purposes, in order to “trap” Jesus).

9) For Jesus, as well as for his opponents and conversation partners, interpretation of Scripture is closely linked to ethics – how to act, what to do.

10) Jesus consistently interprets Scripture in reference to, and with regard for, the needs/realities of “the least” – the most needy and vulnerable (the poor, the sick, the foreigner/outsider, women, social outcasts, etc.)

11) When Jesus cites or refers to Scripture, the broader context of the cited passage often contains further “echoes” that also relate to and “resonate” with the issue under discussion.

12) Jesus assumes that Scripture speaks decisively to current realities.

13) Jesus demonstrates a readiness to re-interpret scriptural law while placing it in a broader scriptural context in order to understand the “big picture” of God’s enduring intentions for the world.

14) Jesus uses Scripture in different ways – quoting Scripture directly in formal public addresses, engaging in detailed debates about specific texts, appropriating particular texts and applying/adapting them to particular situations, and more “freely” and creatively drawing upon scriptural narratives and imagery, re-working them to make a particular point in a particular context.

15) Jesus interprets Scripture in the context of healing ministry. Jesus puts the needs and wellbeing of needy people “at the centre” of his agenda, including his “interpretive agenda” vis-a-vis Scripture, and criticizes others for not doing so.