

# THE HERMENEUTIC OF JESUS

• Mary Healy •

“A closer attention to the hermeneutic of Jesus can help provide a deeper theological grounding for the spiritual sense and thus be an impetus for a renewal of biblical preaching, teaching, and prayer in the ancient tradition of spiritual understanding.”

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## 1. Introduction

For two millennia the Church’s lectionary cycle has been based on the conviction that all Scripture finds its ultimate meaning and fulfillment in Christ. On Sundays, feast days, and most weekdays in the special seasons, the Old Testament reading is selected to coordinate with the Gospel in such a manner as to display prophecy and fulfillment, a type and its antitype, or a theme amplified and brought to completion in Christ.<sup>1</sup> The lectionary thus both presupposes and teaches a christological reading of the Old Testament—what ancient tradition calls the “spiritual sense”—which is itself rooted in a christocentric vision of the whole economy of salvation. For most of Christian history, understanding the two testaments as a single unified witness to Christ was regarded not as an optional devotional flourish but as foundational to the faith. Yet oddly enough, such a christological reading of the Old Testament is

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<sup>1</sup>This coordination was also evident in the *Roman Missal* prior to Vatican II, although far fewer Old Testament readings were included.

rarely taught today in Catholic institutions of higher education, or even in seminaries preparing priests to preach on these very readings. The result is a disjuncture between the Church's traditional manner of interpreting the word and contemporary preaching and teaching. Homilists, catechists, and theologians today are unprepared to expound with confidence and clarity on Old Testament events and persons as figures of Christ. The principle that "All sacred Scripture is but one book, and this one book is Christ, 'because all divine Scripture speaks of Christ, and all divine Scripture is fulfilled in Christ,'"<sup>2</sup> is affirmed in theory but largely ignored in practice.

The reason for this state of affairs is not hard to discern. Modern historical criticism has discredited many of the naïve presuppositions of earlier interpreters and insisted that the primary meaning of the text is to be found in the meaning intended by the original author(s) and the historical circumstances that gave rise to the text. Spiritual interpretation as practiced in ancient Christianity, even where admired for its poetic beauty and its capacity to edify the faithful, is regarded as a superimposition of meaning on the texts, a procedure that cannot meet the standards of properly critical exegesis. As critics point out, appeal to the spiritual sense has often been used to justify arbitrary, artificial interpretations, undermining the objectivity of the biblical message. In the words of one biblical scholar, "When the Hebrew Bible is explored for types, and given allegorical meanings, its literal sense is overwhelmed."<sup>3</sup> More disturbingly, recourse to a spiritual sense can seem to entail a denial of the ongoing validity and significance of God's dealings with Israel, reducing the former covenant to a mere preamble for the new. As John J. Collins observes, "The view that the profoundest meaning of the Hebrew Bible is disclosed by its relation to the New Testament . . . was accompanied by a highly distorted view of Judaism."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Hugh of Saint Victor, quoted in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 134.

<sup>3</sup>Roland Murphy, "What Is Catholic about Catholic Biblical Scholarship?—Revisited," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 28, no. 3 (1998): 112–19.

<sup>4</sup>Collins, "Is a Critical Biblical Theology Possible?" in W.H. Propp et al. (eds.), *The Hebrew Bible and Its Interpreters* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 1–15, here, 4. The Pontifical Biblical Commission, in its document *The Jewish People and Their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible*, speaks even more strongly of "harsh judgments by Christians of Jews and their reading of the Old Testament: the more reference to Christ is found in Old Testament texts, the more the incredulity of

Given these problems, it is not surprising that spiritual interpretation has largely gone by the wayside.

Historical criticism does not, of course, deny a relationship between the two testaments. What remains intact after the critique of spiritual interpretation is an affirmation of intertextuality, that is, the common literary phenomenon by which a text cites, alludes to, echoes, or otherwise draws on earlier texts. It is an obvious fact that the New Testament is saturated with Old Testament quotations and allusions. The New Testament authors constantly present the Gospel in images borrowed from the Jewish Scriptures and insist on a narrative continuity between the story of Israel and the story of Jesus. Historical critical scholarship recognizes this fact and devotes considerable energy to exploring what is usually termed “the New Testament use of the Old Testament.”<sup>5</sup> Such textual linkages are examined in terms of the biblical authors’ exegetical techniques and their relative degree of dependence on the rabbinic or Hellenistic methods of the time.

By focusing on the New Testament’s christological interpretation of the Old Testament as a literary phenomenon, the relationship between the testaments can be studied without any compromise of exegetical objectivity. This approach thus seems to hold promise as a way of retaining what is valid in traditional interpretation of the Old Testament while affirming the advances made by the critical methods. The traditional notion of the “spiritual sense” can be rehabilitated by being grounded in a recognition of the capacity of texts to be reread and acquire new meanings in light of new circumstances. More specifically, it can be described in terms of the well-known biblical tendency, even within the Old Testament, to interpret present and future events typologically in relation to past events: Abraham’s sojourn in Egypt prefigures that of the people (Gn 12:10–13:1); the prophets depict the return from exile as a new

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the Jews is considered inexcusable and obstinate” (21).

<sup>5</sup>Helpful recent works include G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson (eds.), *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007); Dale Allison, *The Intertextual Jesus: Scripture in Q* (Harrisburg, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 2000); C. A. Evans and W. R. Stegner (eds.), *The Gospels and the Scriptures of Israel* (JSNT Supp. 104; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994); Richard N. Longenecker, *Biblical Exegesis in the Apostolic Period* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999).

exodus (Is 41:17–20; 43:16–17); the Messiah would be a new David (Is 9:7), and so on.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, the focus on intertextuality provides a ready-made control to hold in check the tendency toward unrestrained allegorizing for which some patristic writers are faulted. Only those spiritual interpretations are valid that have an objective basis in the New Testament (or in subsequent Church tradition); others may have homiletic usefulness but cannot be said to have true exegetical value.<sup>7</sup> The New Testament's christological reading of the Old Testament can be affirmed in its results without being imitated in its method.

Such seems to be the approach of the Pontifical Biblical Commission in its recent documents *Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* (1993) and *The Jewish People and Their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible* (2001). In *Interpretation* the Biblical Commission notes that modern hermeneutics recognizes that “a written text has the capacity to be placed in new circumstances, which will illuminate it in different ways, adding new meanings to the original sense.”<sup>8</sup> It then defines the spiritual sense as “the meaning expressed by the biblical texts when read under the influence of the Holy Spirit, in the context of the paschal mystery of Christ and of the new life which flows from it.”<sup>9</sup> Similarly, in the 2001 document the Biblical Commission describes Christian interpretation of the Old Testament as “retrospective re-readings through Christian eyes” and affirms,

Although the Christian reader is aware that the internal dynamism of the Old Testament finds its goal in Jesus, this is a retrospective perception whose point of departure is not in the text as such, but in the events of the New Testament proclaimed by the apostolic preaching. It cannot be said, therefore, that Jews do not see what has been proclaimed in the text, but that the Christian, in the light of Christ and in the Spirit, discovers in the text an additional meaning that was hidden there.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>See Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, vol. 2, trans. D.M.G. Stalker (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), 323.

<sup>7</sup>The Pontifical Biblical Commission makes this distinction in its discussion of the “fuller sense” (*sensus plenior*) in its 1993 document *Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, II.B.3.

<sup>8</sup>*Interpretation*, II.B.1.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup>*The Jewish People*, 21. See the critique of the document by a subsequently-

The Biblical Commission thus offers a new way of understanding the spiritual sense that describes it in terms of contemporary hermeneutics and thereby provides it with exegetical legitimacy. At the same time, the Commission strongly affirms the traditional principle that the spiritual sense is a meaning intended by God and is objectively rooted in Christ's fulfillment of Scripture.<sup>11</sup> The Biblical Commission's approach thus marks a significant step forward in establishing a place for the spiritual sense in critical exegesis, an arena from which it had been previously excluded.<sup>12</sup>

The question remains, however, whether this manner of reconceiving the spiritual sense adequately preserves what is essential to Christian interpretation of the Old Testament. Does it sufficiently account for the relationship between the spiritual sense and the divine economy, the wise dispensation by which God ordered all history in stages toward its fulfillment in the mystery of Christ,<sup>13</sup> which for the Fathers was the indispensable foundation of the spiritual sense? Does it provide a grounding for the close correlation between spiritual interpretation and the personal transformation of the interpreter, which was also axiomatic for the Fathers? Does it account for any essential distinction, other than the weight of authority, between a Christian rereading of the Old Testament and other examples of recontextualizing texts in new circumstances, such as the Qumran community's rereading of Habakkuk or a Marxist rereading of Exodus?

These questions point to the need for continuing theological reflection on the spiritual sense in order to discern what belongs to

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appointed member of the Biblical Commission, Denis Farkasfalvy: "The Pontifical Biblical Commission's Document on Jews and Christians and Their Scriptures: An Attempt at an Evaluation," *Communio: International Catholic Review* 29 (2002): 715–37; as well as the reviews by Reinhard Hütter and Matthew Levering in "A Symposium on 'The Jewish People and Their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible' from the Pontifical Biblical Commission, 2001," *Pro Ecclesia* 13, no. 1 (2004): 13–38.

<sup>11</sup>*Interpretation*, II.B.2.

<sup>12</sup>See Peter S. Williamson, *Catholic Principles for Interpreting Scripture: A Study of the Pontifical Biblical Commission's "The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church"* (Subsidia Biblica 22; Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 2001), 200–03.

<sup>13</sup>For this definition of the economy, see Jean Corbon, *The Wellspring of Worship*, trans. Matthew O'Connell (New York: Paulist, 1988), 6.

its essential core and is of continued significance for theology and the Christian life in the post-critical age. As with every theological question, there is no better place to begin than by taking a fresh look at the Scriptures themselves—all the more so in this case, since the Church Fathers regarded their manner of interpreting the Old Testament as based on that of the New Testament authors, who claimed in turn to take their cue from Jesus.

The question I propose to investigate in the remainder of this essay is, What is the hermeneutic of Jesus? That is, what implicit hermeneutical assumptions and principles can be gleaned from Jesus' own manner of interpreting the Old Testament as presented to us in the gospels? For the purposes of this article, I will prescind from the question to what degree the gospels report the actual words of the historical Jesus and to what degree their accounts have been shaped by the evangelists' own theological perspectives. That is, I will consider the hermeneutic of Jesus *as portrayed by the evangelist* rather than the hermeneutic of a Jesus reconstructed by sifting out from the gospel account whatever can putatively be ascribed to the early Church. Whatever the relative merits of various attempts to reconstruct the historical Jesus, they remain hypothetical; only the canonical gospels give us a portrait of Jesus that is inspired and normative for Christian faith. Moreover, recent studies have challenged the facile assumptions by which sayings attributed to Jesus are judged to reflect the concerns of the early Church projected back onto the lips of Jesus.<sup>14</sup>

I will focus on two passages in the gospel of Mark. Mark is generally considered by biblical scholars to be the first canonical gospel written and thus the closest to the oral tradition.<sup>15</sup> It is also the gospel that has the least evidence of a programmatic vision of Old Testament fulfillment, lacking Matthew's pervasive fulfillment

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<sup>14</sup>See, for instance, James D. G. Dunn, *A New Perspective on Jesus. What the Quest for the Historical Jesus Missed* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005); Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: the Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006); Greg Boyd and Paul Eddy, *The Jesus Legend: A Case for the Historical Reliability of the Synoptic Jesus Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007). Biblical scholars have not sufficiently questioned the plausibility of the thesis that the New Testament's pervasive christological interpretation of the Old Testament had little or no basis in the teachings of Jesus himself.

<sup>15</sup>Although this majority view provides a useful starting point, the present study does not presuppose any particular hypothesis regarding gospel origins.

motif, Luke's self-conscious resumption of Old Testament narrative, and John's profound biblical-sacramental typology. For these reasons Mark is a good place to begin a study of Jesus as interpreter of the Scriptures. Mark's Jesus quotes the Old Testament seventeen times and alludes to it at least thirty times, not counting more indirect biblical "echoes" and typologically significant gestures. I will explore two passages in which Jesus refers to David, Mark 2:23–28 and 12:35–37, and consider what they reveal about the hermeneutic of Jesus.

## *2. Lord of the Sabbath*

Mark 2:23–28 is the fourth in a series of five controversy stories in the early part of the gospel, in which Jesus faces increasing opposition from the Jewish leaders. In this episode, Pharisees observe Jesus' disciples plucking heads of grain as they walk through a grain field on the sabbath, and they confront Jesus with an accusatory question: "Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the sabbath?" (Mk 2:24). The Pharisees apparently regard hand-plucking as reaping, a form of work explicitly prohibited on the sabbath (Ex 34:21). Jesus responds by citing a passage in 1 Samuel 21: "Have you never read what David did, when he was in need and was hungry, he and those who were with him: how he entered the house of God, when Abiathar was high priest, and ate the bread of the Presence, which it is not lawful for any but the priests to eat, and also gave it to those who were with him?" (Mk 2:25–26). In this narrative, David, anointed but not yet king, was fleeing for his life from the murderous Saul. En route, he stopped at the shrine at Nob to beg some bread from the priest on duty, Ahimelech. Having nothing on hand but the bread of the Presence, the twelve special loaves that were set before the Lord every sabbath and that priests alone could eat (Ex 25:30; Lev 24:5–9), Ahimelech gave some to David on condition that he and his men have maintained sexual abstinence. After citing the story, Jesus concludes with a twofold pronouncement: "The sabbath was made for man, not man for the sabbath; so the Son of Man is lord even of the sabbath" (Mk 2:27–28).

This brief passage presents numerous problems for interpreters. First, Jesus' account differs in several significant details from the

Old Testament version. In 1 Samuel there is no mention of David's hunger, of his entering the "house of God," or of his sharing the holy bread with his men. Nor is there any explicit reference to the sabbath, leaving the relevance of the example unclear. The priest at the time was not Abiathar, as Jesus indicates, but his father Ahimelech. Moreover, in the context of 1 Samuel, David's claim that "the king" has sent him on a secret mission and that his men are stationed nearby (21:2) appears to be a fabrication designed to secure the priest's help. Finally, it is not immediately clear what connection there is between this story and Jesus' claim to lordship over the sabbath.

The standard interpretation of the pericope is to view it as an example of Jesus' liberalization of an overly stringent and legalistic interpretation of the Torah.<sup>16</sup> In this view, Jesus appeals to biblical precedent by citing a loosely parallel occasion where human need took priority over a legal prohibition. By means of a *qal wahomer* argument (from the lesser to the greater), Jesus argues that if David had freedom to override the law in case of need, all the more so does he, the lord of the sabbath. The saying in v. 27, which only Mark records, grounds the dispensation in a general principle: the sabbath is not an absolute value in itself but is for the sake of humanity.<sup>17</sup> Human concerns take precedence over regulations concerning sacred things such as the sabbath and the holy bread. As most commentators note, this principle is consistent with rabbinic tradition, which recognizes occasions where sabbath rules should be set aside for the sake of human need (cf. 1 Mac 2:34–38). The Mekilta, the Tannaitic commentary on Exodus, even records a saying closely parallel to that of Jesus: "The Sabbath is handed over to you, and not you to the Sabbath."<sup>18</sup> Jesus' concluding line, "the Son of Man is lord of the sabbath," asserts in absolute terms his authority over the sabbath and by extension the whole Mosaic law.

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<sup>16</sup>Donahue and Harrington, *The Gospel of Mark* (Sacra Pagina; Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2002), 111. See the nuanced critique of this interpretation by Joseph Ratzinger (Pope Benedict XVI), *Jesus of Nazareth*, trans. Adrian J. Walker (New York: Doubleday, 2007), 106–12.

<sup>17</sup>Donahue and Harrington, *The Gospel of Mark*, 111, 113.

<sup>18</sup>Rabbi Simeon ben Menasyra (c. 180 AD), in Mekilta, *Shabbata* I to Ex 31:14; cf. b. *Yoma* 85b.



While there is no reason to question the basic outlines of this interpretation, an attentive theological exegesis shows there is more going on. Jesus is not primarily concerned with sabbath legalities, since he neither affirms nor disputes the Pharisees' interpretation of what counts as work. Instead, he raises a counter-question: "Have you never read . . . ?" The tone of the question is slightly ironic, and implies that if they *had* read (and properly understood) the passage, they would not have made their accusation.<sup>19</sup> Answering a question with a counter-question was a standard form of rabbinic argumentation, and is frequent in Jesus' dialogues in the gospels. But Jesus' questions are more than a debate tactic. They nearly always signal an invitation to his interlocutors to reflect more deeply on Scripture and on the meaning of his own words and actions.<sup>20</sup> Here, the implied reproach suggests that the issue is both intellectual *and* existential: it is not simply that the Pharisees have failed to apply the proper exegetical methods to 1 Samuel 21, but that their hearts are closed to a revelation of its true meaning. In the very next conflict story, a sabbath healing, Jesus will display his grief over "their hardness of heart" (3:5). Throughout the gospel, lack of understanding is closely linked with hardness of heart. Not only hostile outsiders but even Jesus' disciples "have eyes but do not see," "have ears but do not hear," and do not "perceive or understand" because their hearts are hardened (8:17–21).<sup>21</sup> Yet Mark strategically frames Jesus' indictment of spiritual blindness and deafness with his healing of a deaf man (7:31–37) and of a blind man (8:22–26), signifying that ultimately only God himself can provide the solution to his people's spiritual disabilities. In the context of the gospel, the ability to "read" accurately the actions of Jesus and his disciples in light of Scripture is inseparable from conversion of heart and mind, which in turn is by a gift of divine grace.

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<sup>19</sup>This form of question is a pattern in the Synoptic Jesus; for other examples cf. Mk 12:10, 26; Mt 12:5; 19:4; 21:16, 42.

<sup>20</sup>For other examples see Mk 2:9, 19; 3:4, 23, 33; 7:18–19; 8:19–20, 29; 9:12; 10:3, 18; 11:17, 30; 12:10–11, 26, 35–37.

<sup>21</sup>Cf. Mk 4:11–13; 6:52; 9:32. Jesus' reproof of spiritual blindness and deafness echoes the prophets' indictment of Israel (Jer 5:21; cf. Is 6:9–10; 43:8; Ez 12:2) which, having seen so many wondrous acts of God on their behalf, had failed to recognize what those deeds revealed about God himself.

By citing the precedent of David, Jesus indicates that the requirements of his messianic mission (in this case, his disciples' need for nourishment on the road) take priority over the prescriptions of the law. But a complex typological relationship is also at work. David, the "anointed one" who had been chosen by God to lead Israel (1 Sam 16:13), spent years hunted down by Saul before finally taking up his royal throne. So too Jesus, the Lord's Anointed, is pursued and persecuted by the leaders of Israel until the day when he will take up his kingly throne. A careful reading of the context of 1 Sam 21 discloses the double meaning in David's words to Ahimelech: the unnamed "king" who had "sent" him (21:2) was in fact the Lord (20:22), the king of Israel!<sup>22</sup> Jesus too was "sent" by the Father (Mk 9:37), accompanied in his mission by a band of faithful followers. As David's men were on a divinely-appointed expedition and were thus granted a dispensation to eat the priestly bread, so the disciples who share in Jesus' mission are doing God's work and are therefore dispensed from the sabbath regulations. Further, we read in 1 Samuel that Saul's servant Doeg the Edomite happened to witness David's exchange with the priest and later reported it to Saul, precipitating the execution of Ahimelech and all the priests.<sup>23</sup> The Pharisees, apparently spying on Jesus and his disciples as they walk through a grain field, are cast in the role of the treacherous Doeg. Indeed, in the subsequent passage their hostility will harden to murderous hatred (6:3).

Jesus' citation of 1 Samuel 21 thus demonstrates not only attention to its context but profound sensitivity to contextual resonances. Likewise, his resumé of the passage is not as disparate from the Old Testament version as may first appear. That David was hungry, that he entered the "house of God" (i.e., the shrine at Nob), and that he shared the bread with his men are reasonable inferences from the narrative.<sup>24</sup> The explicit mention of the weekly replacement of the holy bread (1 Sam 21:6) suggests that the event

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<sup>22</sup>Rikki E. Watts, "Mark," in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, 111–249; here, 140.

<sup>23</sup>Except Abiathar; see below.

<sup>24</sup>It is certainly also reasonable to infer that the disciples were hungry and not merely plucking heads of grain to pass the time. Mark takes care to note at several points that Jesus and the disciples are so busy ministering to the throngs of people that they have no time even to eat (3:20; 6:31; 8:1).

took place on the sabbath.<sup>25</sup> Jesus' mention of Abiathar instead of his father Ahimelech may be a case of substituting the more important for the less.<sup>26</sup> After Abiathar escaped Saul's bloody purge, he brought the ephod to David and became his chief priest, symbolizing the transfer of priestly loyalty from Saul to David and further confirming God's vindication of David.<sup>27</sup>

Jesus does highlight David's initiative and authority more than the 1 Samuel version: he says David "entered the house of God," ate the bread and "gave it to those who were with him." The latter phrase has strongly eucharistic overtones, anticipating the pattern of Jesus' own gestures in the two bread miracles and at the last supper (Mk 6:41; 8:6; 14:22). It is noteworthy that in the two previous conflict stories, as in the present one (the central three in the series of five), opponents object to the fact that Jesus or his disciples are *eating*: "Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?" (2:16); "Why do . . . your disciples not fast?" (2:18); "Why are they doing what is not lawful [in eating grain]?" With these textual clues Mark hints at what Jesus' opponents have utterly failed to recognize: that by his words and gestures he is presenting himself as the host of the messianic banquet.<sup>28</sup> Later in the gospel, Jesus will demonstrate his authority to give his disciples the true "bread of the presence" (Greek, *artous tēs protheseōs*; Hebrew, *léem happaním*, literally "bread of the face"), the bread that perpetuates his own presence with them (Mk 14:22).

After establishing the dispensation, Jesus grounds it simultaneously in the original purpose of the sabbath ("The sabbath was made for man") and in his own authority as "Son of Man" (2:27–28). With this title (cf. Mk 2:10) Jesus identifies himself as the

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<sup>25</sup>Such is the rabbinic interpretation given in *b. Menah* 95b; *Yal.*130, based on David's words in 21:5, "Of a truth women have been kept from us as always when I go on an expedition; the vessels of the young men are holy, even when it is a common journey; *how much more today* will their vessels be holy?"

<sup>26</sup>Morna Hooker, *The Gospel According to St. Mark* (BNTC; London: SPCK, 1991), 103.

<sup>27</sup>Watts, "Mark," 141.

<sup>28</sup>Mark 2:15, 19; 6:41; 8:6; cf. Is 25:6; 55:1–2; Jer 31:12–13. It is also intriguing to note that as David requested "five loaves, or whatever is here" (1 Sam 21:3), so Jesus, the true Giver of bread, received from his disciples the "five loaves" they happened to have on hand (Mk 6:38) before multiplying them.

mysterious cloud-borne figure of Daniel's vision, presented before God and invested with God's own dominion and glory (Dan 7:9–14). Moreover, by asserting lordship over the sabbath Jesus claims a prerogative that belongs to God alone, the Creator who instituted the sabbath (Gn 2:2–3), thereby pointing in a veiled way to his own divinity. That the Son of Man is “lord of the sabbath” means not only that he has authority to give the final word on sabbath law but that his mission is the *fulfillment* of the sabbath and the revelation of its deepest meaning. The purpose of the sabbath was to raise human beings above the drudgery of earthly labors each week, to enjoy their unique privilege of existing in covenant relationship with God (Ex 31:16–17; Dt 5:15). For those with eyes to see, Jesus demonstrates his lordship of the sabbath by liberating people from the effects of sin and inaugurating the new creation in which human beings are restored to full communion with God.

From the above it is evident that Jesus' hermeneutic in Mark 2:23–28 does not involve merely a “use” or convenient appropriation of a text, freely rewriting it to suit the occasion.<sup>29</sup> Nor is it simply an extension of typology as practiced in the Old Testament, which involves “the interpretation of persons, events, and institutions in light of their resemblance or correspondence to other persons, events, and institutions, within a common framework of sacred history.”<sup>30</sup> It entails, rather, the far more sweeping though implicit claim that *all* Old Testament figures, institutions, and prophecies converge in him—the figure of David, Israel's anointed but fugitive king; the priestly bread; the institution of the sabbath; the Danielic son of man; the lordship of Yahweh. These not only correspond in various details with Jesus' life and ministry but find unexpected, definitive, and unsurpassable fulfillment in him. But at the same time Mark suggests that Jesus' fulfillment of the Old Covenant can only be recognized by hearts that are open to perceiving the hidden significance of Scripture as it comes to light through Jesus' words and deeds.

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<sup>29</sup>Cf. Donahue and Harrington, *Mark*, 111.

<sup>30</sup>Richard N. Soulen and R. Kendall Soulen, *Handbook of Biblical Criticism*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Louisville/London: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 203.

### 3. David's Lord

Jesus' second reference to David occurs within another round of conflicts centering on the issue of his authority, this time taking place within the temple near the end of his public ministry. After answering challenges and questions from all sides (Mk 11:27–12:34), Jesus takes the initiative with a provocative question of his own: "How can the scribes say that the Christ is the son of David?" (12:35). He goes on to pose a conundrum by quoting Scripture: "David himself, speaking by the Holy Spirit, declared, 'The Lord said to my Lord: "Sit at my right hand until I put your enemies under your feet.'" David himself calls him 'Lord.' How then can he be his son?" (12:36–37).

Jesus' apparent repudiation of "son of David" as a messianic title in this passage is puzzling, since it is the very title that blind Bartimaeus had proclaimed and Jesus had implicitly accepted during his messianic journey to Jerusalem (10:47–48; cf. 11:9–10). Moreover, Jewish messianic expectation was founded on the prophetic promise of a deliverer-king to come from the line of David.<sup>31</sup> Thus, for the early Church, Jesus' Davidic lineage was an essential part of his messianic credentials.<sup>32</sup> Commentators offer various explanations: Jesus disavowed the title because of its political, nationalistic connotations; it displayed an inadequate Christology, and so on.<sup>33</sup> But Jesus' question does not necessarily imply any disavowal at all. The form of the question, "How do they say (*pōs legousin*) . . . ?" is very similar to his question to the disciples in 9:12, "How is it written (*pōs gegraptaī*) of the Son of Man that he should suffer many things and be treated with contempt?"<sup>34</sup> Obviously the latter cannot be a denial that the Son of Man will suffer, given the three other explicit passion predictions (8:31; 9:31; 10:33–34). Rather, in both

<sup>31</sup>Is 9:6–7; 11:1–10; Jer 23:5–6; 33:15; Ez 34:23; Ps 89:35–36.

<sup>32</sup>Mt 1:20; Lk 1:27, 32, 69; 2:4, 11; Rom 1:3–4; 2 Tim 2:8; Rev 5:5; 22:16.

<sup>33</sup>See Francis Moloney, *The Gospel of Mark. A Commentary* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2002), 242–45. The NAB interprets it as an implicit denial by translating *legō* as "claim" (compare RSV, NIV "say"; NJB "maintain").

<sup>34</sup>The question as repeated in v. 37 uses *pothen* ("how"), which similarly does not imply negation but can be "used of an unsettling or surprising fact that requires explanation" (Rikki E. Watts, *Isaiah's New Exodus in Mark* [Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2000], 287).

cases Jesus is posing a genuine question. Once again, he is inviting his listeners to reflect more deeply on what Scripture reveals and on the hidden meaning of his own words and deeds.

In this case Jesus cites Psalm 110, a psalm attributed to David. Before quoting the text he emphasizes its authority by noting that David was “speaking by the Holy Spirit” (literally, “in the Holy Spirit”; cf. 2 Sam 23:2; Acts 1:16). The implication is that the psalm—and by extension, all Scripture—is inspired by the Spirit, and therefore has divine authority (cf. 2 Tim 3:16; 2 Pt 1:20–21). Could there also be an implicit suggestion that proper interpretation of Scripture likewise requires hearing “in the Spirit”?<sup>35</sup>

Psalm 110 in its original context was a royal psalm, probably sung at the coronation ceremonies of the kings of Judah. The psalmist addresses the king as “my lord,” a standard title of honor (1 Sam 26:19; 1 Kg 1:37), and declares that “the LORD,”<sup>36</sup> that is, God, invites the king to sit at his right hand, the place of highest status and power (cf. Gn 48:13–14; Ex 15:6; Ps 80:17; 98:1). By the time of Jesus, when the monarchy had long ceased to exist, Psalm 110 was viewed as a messianic prophecy. But how, Jesus asks, can the messiah be David’s son if David himself calls him “lord”? In Ancient Near Eastern culture, it would be unthinkable for a father to address his son or descendant as “lord.” Thus the point of Jesus’ question is to invite reflection on what this psalm reveals about the identity of the messiah. What are the implications of the fact that David, Israel’s most honored king, reveres the messiah as his lord? Is the messiah, then, merely an earthly monarch descended from David, or is he something far greater? Could he even be “Lord” in the same sense in which Yahweh himself is “the LORD”? Jesus’ identification of the messiah as “lord” is all the more striking since, in the immediately previous dialogue, he had recalled the Great Shema: “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one” (Mk 12:29).

Although Jesus has posed the question in an apparently “academic” manner, his listeners could hardly have interpreted it as irrelevant to his own identity, given his recent triumphal ride into

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<sup>35</sup>See *Dei Verbum*, 12.

<sup>36</sup>The Hebrew text reads YHWH. Reverence for God’s holy name eventually led to the oral substitution of *Adonai* (the LORD), hence the Septuagint translation *Kyrios* (Lord).

the city amid messianic acclamations (Mk 11:7–10).<sup>37</sup> Elsewhere the gospels indicate that Jesus is “greater than the temple” (Mt 12:6), “greater than Jonah” (Mt 12:41), “greater than Solomon” (Mt 12:42), “greater than Jacob” (Jn 4:12), “greater than Abraham” (Jn 8:53); here Jesus hints that he is greater than David. “David’s son” and “David’s lord” are not mutually exclusive: in Jesus’ interpretation, Psalm 110 foreshadows a messiah who is born of the royal stock of God’s people yet in a mysterious way also far transcends them in dignity.

In interpreting this passage, it is beside the point to question, as many commentators do, whether David himself actually composed Psalm 110 or whether it comes from a later hand. Literarily, David is the speaker, according to the traditional interpretation of the psalm’s superscription, *l’Dāvid mizmôr* (“a psalm of David”).<sup>38</sup> The ancient Jews had a broader view of authorship than we do today, and many of the psalms were ascribed to David, the father of Israel’s hymnody. Jesus’ question presupposes that in its worship, all Israel joins David in addressing the messiah as “my lord.”

The broader context of the verse Jesus quotes is also illuminating. Psalm 110:4 makes the unique claim that the Davidic king is a *priest* “after the order of Melchizedek.” David had, in fact, engaged in the priestly activities of wearing the linen ephod and offering sacrifice (2 Sam 6:12–18; 24:25); the psalm declares God’s approval of this royal prerogative. By citing this text in the course of his own teaching in the temple, Jesus hints at his own priestly authority over Israel’s worship, superseding that of the present temple authorities.<sup>39</sup> He had already hinted, with the parable of the wicked tenants, that God was deposing the present corrupt leadership and turning over his vineyard Israel to new managers who will

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<sup>37</sup>R.T. France, *The Gospel of Mark* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 483.

<sup>38</sup>Many scholars today hold that the original meaning of *l’Dāvid mizmôr* was not “a psalm of David” (i.e., written by David) but rather “a psalm for David” (i.e., dedicated to the Davidic king, or to be sung by the Davidic king), or “a psalm belonging to a Davidic collection.” Whatever the relative merits of these hypotheses, Jesus’ interpretation relies on the meaning of the text as it was understood in his day.

<sup>39</sup>France, *The Gospel of Mark*, 483.

care for it properly (Mk 12:1–9). Later, Jesus will again intimate that he himself is the “lord of the house” (13:35)—that is, of the temple.

As in the 1 Samuel passage discussed above, Jesus’ hermeneutic in interpreting Psalm 110 involves more than a convenient appropriation or “rereading” of the text in light of new circumstances. It involves, rather, the claim that God’s plan for a transcendent messiah far surpassing David in dignity was already mysteriously present, in however inchoate a form, in the Spirit-inspired prayers of Israel. David’s original royal son, Solomon, and the other Davidic kings in their divinely-conferred privileges are but an image and shadow of the true Davidic priest-king seated at the Father’s right hand. Jesus’ citation does not entail any downplaying or denial of the literal sense but rather depends on appreciating its full, rich value as well as its broader literary context; his “fuller sense” or “spiritual sense” is not an addition to the literal sense but a deeper penetration of it. By alluding to the Spirit’s inspiration of the biblical text Jesus seems to suggest, albeit indirectly, that such understanding is a divinely-intended deeper meaning that the Spirit inspired.

For the early Church, Psalm 110 becomes one of the most significant prophecies of Christ, fulfilled in its deepest meaning at his resurrection, when he wins victory over his enemies—sin, Satan, and death—and is enthroned in glory at the Father’s right hand.<sup>40</sup> There is no sound reason to doubt that this interpretation originates with Jesus himself, in the dialogue here recorded by Mark (cf. also the allusion to Psalm 110 in Mark 14:62 and parallels).

#### 4. Conclusion

This brief exploration of the hermeneutic of Jesus in two Markan passages suggests that the contemporary effort to redefine the spiritual sense, although it is a helpful step forward, does not do full justice to the New Testament and the tradition based on it.<sup>41</sup> I

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<sup>40</sup>The psalm is quoted or alluded to in Mk 14:62 and parallels; Mk 16:19; Acts 2:34–35; Rom 8:34; 1 Cor 15:25; Eph 1:20; Col 3:1; Heb 1:3, 13; 8:1; 10:12.

<sup>41</sup>For an excellent summary of Henri de Lubac’s critique of such contemporary reformulations of the spiritual sense, see Marcellino D’Ambrosio, *Henri de Lubac and the Recovery of the Traditional Hermeneutic*, unpublished doctoral dissertation, The Catholic University of America, 1991.



will conclude by briefly summarizing three ways in which the spiritual sense as traditionally understood is rooted in Jesus' manner of interpreting the Scriptures.

First, for the tradition, it is not merely the text but the *events* recounted that have a hidden signification willed by God. In Thomas' classical definition (drawing on Augustine), the literal sense is that which is signified by the text; the spiritual sense is that which is in turn signified by the *realities or events* signified by the text.<sup>42</sup> The spiritual sense is thus a property unique to Scripture as authored by the Author of all history. The contemporary reformulations tend to reduce the spiritual sense to a literary phenomenon, a property of texts rather than of history. But Jesus' citations of the Scriptures regarding David entail not merely a reinterpretation of texts but the claim that Israel's kingship, worship, priesthood, and sabbath all belong to a divinely orchestrated plan, hidden within history, that is fully revealed and brought to fruition only in him.

The second point follows closely from the first: in the Church's ancient understanding, the transition from the Old Testament to the New involves not merely a further extension of biblical typology but its definitive, eschatological culmination in Christ. Christ's coming is not simply another event in history that can be typologically paralleled with other events, but rather a turning point of radical newness, breaking outside the bounds of history.<sup>43</sup> The former things are mere shadows or copies (cf. Col 2:17; Heb 8:5; 10:1); in Christ the reality has come.

Third, the very term "spiritual sense" reminds us that such understanding of the Scriptures is dependent on the Spirit, and consequently on a heart that is docile and receptive to the Spirit's work. Deeper conversion of heart leads to deeper penetration of the word, and vice versa. In Henri de Lubac's succinct expression, "The

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<sup>42</sup>*Summa* I, 1.10. Thomas' definition does, however, need to be modified in light of modern hermeneutics. The spiritual sense is not a property of events in themselves, nor of texts in themselves, but of *the events precisely as mediated by the texts*.

<sup>43</sup>Henri de Lubac, *Scripture in the Tradition*, trans. L. O'Neill (New York: Crossroad, 2000), 144. The Pontifical Biblical Commission affirms this point in *Interpretation*, I.C.1: "above all, the Church reads the Old Testament in the light of the paschal mystery—the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ—who brings a radical newness and, with sovereign authority, gives a meaning to the Scriptures that is decisive and definitive (cf. *Dei Verbum*, 4)."

entire process of spiritual understanding is, in principle, identical to conversion. It is its luminous aspect.”<sup>44</sup> This leads to the provocative conclusion that biblical interpretation can never be fully achieved through the application of proper methods alone, apart from the personal transformation of the interpreter.<sup>45</sup>

These points place in a new light the question of the status of the old covenant and of Jewish interpretation. Far from eclipsing or devaluing the history of God’s relationship with Israel, Jesus’ interpretation reveals its inconceivable significance as the foundation of an eternal, universal plan of salvation. That such fullness of meaning was already present in a veiled way in the old covenant is no argument for the “obstinacy” of those who do not see it, since it can only be seen in retrospect through the gift of faith in Christ.<sup>46</sup> “The new is hidden in the old, and the old is made plain in the new.”<sup>47</sup> Rather, there is reason for awe and gratitude at the privilege granted to us “on whom the end of the ages has come” (1 Cor 10:11), to see the fulfillment that “many prophets and kings longed to see . . . and did not see” (Lk 10:24).

Of course, to demonstrate that Jesus’ biblical interpretation is far more than an exercise in intertextuality is not yet to demonstrate that it is defensible from the perspective of contemporary biblical criticism. In his preface to the 2001 Biblical Commission document, Cardinal Ratzinger raised the question whether the christological interpretation of the Old Testament is tenable in view of the rules of interpretation developed by modern historical consciousness. One might turn the question around to ask whether contemporary criticism is capable of validating the hermeneutic of Jesus—which clearly depends on a stance of faith in God’s revelatory acts in history—or whether it should remain content with simply

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<sup>44</sup>Ibid., 21.

<sup>45</sup>De Lubac, *Scripture in the Tradition*, 23. The Biblical Commission too affirms the correlation between biblical interpretation and spiritual maturity, although without linking it explicitly to the spiritual sense: “As the reader matures in the life of the Spirit, so there grows also his or her capacity to understand the realities of which the Bible speaks” (*Interpretation*, Introduction, A).

<sup>46</sup>This is not to deny that, historically, such a non sequitur has too often been adopted by Christian interpreters; only that its logic fails. The Pontifical Biblical Commission makes a similar point in *The Jewish People*, 6.

<sup>47</sup>Augustine, *Quaestionum in Heptatenchum* 2, 73 (PL 34, 623).

analyzing its results in the New Testament and in the history of interpretation. There is need for continuing discussion of the assumptions implicit in much contemporary criticism, as well as its limitations. At the same time, a closer attention to the hermeneutic of Jesus can help provide a deeper theological grounding for the spiritual sense and thus be an impetus for a renewal of biblical preaching, teaching, and prayer in the ancient tradition of spiritual understanding. □

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