

Article

# The Use and Reception of the Prophets in the New Testament

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**Abstract:** This article explores the use of the Prophets in the New Testament by looking at explicit quotations, clusters of allusions and narrative patterns. It shows that the NT authors applied the Prophets to a range of issues, such as God's inclusion of the Gentiles, as well as key events in Jesus' life. It also demonstrates that they generally used a Greek translation of the Prophets, though sometimes a revised or indeed Christian version of the text. Like the Jews of Alexandria, they believed that this was inspired by God, though that did not prevent them modifying the text to make the application seem more obvious to the readers.

**Keywords:** old greek; inspiration; fulfilment

## 1. Introduction

According to the fifth edition of the United Bible Societies' *Greek New Testament* (UBS<sup>5</sup>), there are 84 quotations from the prophets (consisting of 105 verses) in the New Testament (2014, pp. 857–63). They are mainly taken from Isaiah (55) and the Twelve (23), with only a few from Jeremiah (3) and Ezekiel (2). However, this does not give the full picture, for also listed are some 521 "allusions and verbal parallels" (pp. 864–83). There is much debate as to the criteria used to determine these (Hays 1989; Koch 1986), but the figures raise some interesting points. Isaiah is once again first (216), with the Twelve also about half as many (112) but now Jeremiah and Ezekiel are much more represented (93 and 100, respectively). It would appear that Jeremiah and Ezekiel did not lend themselves to direct quotation (the new covenant passage of Jer 31:31–34 being the exception) but their language and phraseology had a significant influence on the NT authors.

In terms of NT reception, Paul's letter to the Romans has the highest number (24), with only 15 in total from the rest of his letters. In terms of the Gospels, Matthew has around three times the number (22) as Mark (6), Luke (7) and John (6). There are 9 in the Acts of the Apostles. The book of Revelation is interesting in having no direct quotations but more allusions and parallels than any other NT writing (as befitting the apocalyptic genre perhaps). Of the 100 allusions to Ezekiel listed in UBS<sup>5</sup>, 57 of them come in the book of Revelation. They are a major component of John's throne vision (Rev 4), the description of Babylon (Rome or perhaps Roman power) as a harlot (Rev 17) and the New Jerusalem (Rev 21).

It is often thought that the NT authors used the prophets mainly to prove that Jesus was the expected Messiah. Thus, Matthew's infancy narrative is structured around the fulfilment of five texts: Jesus' conception by a virgin (Isa 7:14); his birth in Bethlehem (Mic 5:2); the sad consequences for the other children (Jer 31:15); his refuge in Egypt and subsequent departure (Hos 11:1); and his upbringing in Nazareth (text unknown but quoted as "He will be called a Nazorean"). However, this only accounts for around a third of the quotations in the NT and the aim of this article will be to show how the rest are applied to a variety of themes, such as the inclusion of the Gentiles (Isa 11:10; Hos 1:10), the stubbornness of Israel (Isa 6:9–10; Amos 5:25–27), the life of the church (Isa 28:11–12; Hab 2:4), future persecution (Hos 10:8; Mic 7:6) and future resurrection (Isa 25:8; Hos 13:14). We will begin with a brief discussion of whether the NT authors drew on Semitic sources (Hebrew or Aramaic) or made use of a Greek translation. We will then sample some of the



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quotations from Isaiah, Hosea, Zechariah and Habakkuk, before looking at the allusive use of Ezekiel in the book of Revelation.

## 2. Type of Text

Since the NT authors were writing in Greek, it is not surprising that most of the quotations appear to be taken from a Greek translation (Law 2013). For example, in Rom 2:24, Paul finds a condemnation of hypocritical Jews in the Old Greek (OG) of Isa 52:5 (“The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you”—NETS) and in Rom 15:12, he finds an affirmation of the Gentiles in Isa 11:10 (“in him the Gentiles shall hope”—NETS). However, in the Hebrew text, Isa 52:5 lacks the damning “because of you” and Isa 11:1 speaks of the Gentiles “inquiring” rather than “hoping” (Stanley 1992). Amos 9:11–12 says that the “booth of David” will be raised up “in order that they may possess the remnant of Edom”. It is hard to see why the early Christians would want to quote this text, but the OG (mis)translated it as “so that all other peoples may seek the Lord”, which supports James’ argument in Acts 15:16–18 (McLay 2003, pp. 17–23).

However, there are examples where the NT differs from the OG that has come down to us and a range of explanations have been offered for this. For example, both Rom 9:33 and 1 Pet 2:6–8 combine Isa 8:14 and 28:16 but use the noun *skandalon* instead of *ptōmati* in the former and the verb *tithēmi* instead of the OG’s *emballō* in the latter. Since literary dependence between Romans and 1 Peter is thought to be unlikely, it appears that both writers were quoting a Christian version of the text (Abl 1999). Indeed, we know from the so-called *Minor Prophets Scroll* (8HevXIIgr) that the OG had already been subject to revision, and this may explain a number of the differences (Menken 2004). Thus, Paul cites Isa 25:8 (“he will swallow up death forever”) as proof of the resurrection (1 Cor 15:54) but not according to the OG, which inexplicably made “death” the subject rather than the object (“death having prevailed, swallowed them up”—NETS). In fact, Paul agrees exactly with the second century (C.E.) version known as Theodotion, which also uses the passive (“death was swallowed up”) and translates/paraphrases “forever” with “in victory” (*eis nikos*). Since it is extremely unlikely that Theodotion borrowed from Paul, it is probable that both Paul and Theodotion are drawing on an earlier revision of the OG (Barthélemy 1963; Jobs and Silva 2015).

## 3. Isaiah

John Sawyer (1996) referred to Isaiah as “the fifth Gospel”, so important is it for the NT authors. The distribution of the quotations is interesting: Isa 1–9 (11), 10–19 (2), 20–29 (8), 30–39 (0), 40–49 (13), 50–59 (15) and 60–66 (6). Thus although the NT authors could find helpful material in Isa 1–39, such as the “stone” passages in Isa 8 and 28 (see above) and the coming of light to the people of Galilee in Isa 9 (Matt 4:15–16), the new age announced in Isa 40 (“Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together”—v.5) is seen as the main background for understanding the ministry of Jesus. Thus, Mark’s Gospel opens with the words: “The beginning of the good news (*euangelion*) of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. As it is written in the prophet Isaiah” (Mk 1:1–2a). Though the first line is traditionally taken as a title, Joel Marcus (1992) thinks Mark is claiming that “the beginning of the good news . . . is written in Isaiah”. He supports this by noting that Isa 40:9 speaks of “proclaiming good news” (*euangelizomai*—cognate with *euangelion*), as well as the direct quotation of Isa 40:3 that follows (“Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight”—Mk 1:3). Mark also has quotations for why his hearers are not responding to Jesus’ message: they are deaf to the good news (Isa 6:9–10); they prefer human teaching to divine teaching (Isa 29:13); they misuse the temple (Isa 56:7).

The case becomes even more persuasive in Luke’s writings, for his sequel (“The Acts of the Apostles”) also contains a number of significant quotations (Rusam 2003). Thus, Jesus is specifically identified as the suffering servant of Isa 52:13–53:12 in Acts 8:32–33 (“Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter”) and probably also in Acts 3:13 (“the God of our ancestors has glorified his servant Jesus”). Interestingly, whereas Mark quotes Isa 6:9–10 to

explain why the people are deaf to Jesus' teaching (specifically the parables), Luke only cites Isa 6:9 (Lk 8:10), saving the full quotation to the end of Acts (28:26–27). According to David Pau (2000), this degree of planning shows that Luke is using Isaiah as a template for his narrative of Jesus and the church.

We also see this at a micro level in Stephen's speech recorded in Acts 7. Stephen trawls through Israel's history to cite examples of Israel's disobedience, ending with the statement that "the Most High does not dwell in houses made with human hands" (Acts 7:48). This is then supported with a quotation from Isa 66:1–2a: "Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. What kind of house will you build for me, says the Lord, or what is the place of my rest? Did not my hand make all these things?". In the context of the speech, this looks like a total repudiation of the temple (perhaps even the very idea of the temple, according to some commentators) but Peter Mallen (2008) notes that Isa 66:2b recognises another group of people who are "humble and contrite in spirit". The guardians of the temple would of course think that this applied to them but according to Mallen, Stephen is reversing this and casting them as those who take delight in their abominations (Isa 66:3).

The Apostle Paul quotes around 28 verses of Isaiah, 20 of them coming in his letter to the Romans (Wilk 1998). It is no wonder that Ross Wagner subtitled his monograph, *Paul and Isaiah "in Concert" in the Letter to the Romans* (Wagner 2002). Paul finds himself in the position where Gentiles have embraced his message about Jesus but many of his fellow Jews have rejected it (Rom 9:30–31). He, thus, looks to Isaiah for support (and understanding) in three main areas: (a) God's plan to include Gentiles; (b) the stubbornness of Israel; (c) the ultimate fate of Israel. We have already touched on the first two themes so I will focus here on the third. In Rom 11:13–22, Paul has to rebuke the Gentile Christians for assuming that they have replaced Israel in God's plans. He tells them to remember that "it is not you that support the root, but the root that supports you" (Rom 11:18). He then concludes:

So that you may not claim to be wiser than you are, brothers and sisters, I want you to understand this mystery: a hardening has come upon part of Israel, until the full number of the Gentiles has come in. And so all Israel will be saved; as it is written, "Out of Zion will come the Deliverer; he will banish ungodliness from Jacob". "And this is my covenant with them, when I take away their sins". (Rom 11:25–27)

Although Paul calls what he is about to say a "mystery", he finds support for it in a quotation of Isa 59:20–21, with an additional phrase from Isa 27:9 ("when I take away their sins"), as he seeks to clarify what "banish ungodliness from Jacob" means. From this, he deduces that the current unbelief of Israel is both temporary and only affects a part, concluding that ultimately, "all Israel will be saved". Not surprisingly, there has been much debate as to what "all Israel" means in this context. It is unlikely to refer to "every Israelite that ever lived", for Paul begins this section of Romans by saying that "not all Israelites truly belong to Israel" (Rom 9:6; cf. Rom 2:29). N.T. Wright thinks that in the context of Paul's argument in Romans, it must refer to the true family of Abraham, consisting of both believing Jews and believing Gentiles (Wright 2013, pp. 1231–52). On the other hand, it seems unlikely that Paul would change the meaning of "Israel" in consecutive verses and so some sort of "faithful remnant" is probably meant.

#### 4. Hosea

As well as texts that specifically refer to the Gentiles, the NT authors were naturally interested in texts like Hos 2:1 and 2:25 (1:10 and 2:23 in the Hebrew text) which speak of those who were not God's people becoming God's people. In Hosea, this refers to unfaithful Israelites of the northern kingdom, but Paul and the author of 1 Peter apply it directly to Gentile believers. Quoting Hos 2:25, 1 Pet 2:10 says: "Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy". Paul adds a reference to Hos 1:10 when he says in Rom 9:26: "And in the very place where it was said to them, 'You are not my people,' there they shall be called children

of the living God". Paul is unperturbed that the phrase "in the very place" can hardly apply to the Roman Christians, although Mayer Gruber (2017, p. 102) thinks it can hardly apply to the northern tribes either. He suggests that it is equivalent to "in place of". Either way, Paul is taking a promise of restoration of the northern tribes as "really" speaking about Gentile believers in his day, a principle he enunciates in Rom 15:4 ("whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction").

Hos 6:6 ("For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice") appears as a saying of Jesus in Matt 9:13 and 12:7 (Wolff 1965). Both passages are interesting in that they come from stories that are also in Mark and Luke but only Matthew includes the quotation. The first is the controversy sparked by Jesus eating with "tax collectors and sinners", which results in the aphorism, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick" (Matt 2:12; Mk 2:17; Lk 5:31). Matthew follows this with a quotation of Hos 6:6, following the OG's rendering of *hesed* ("steadfast love") with *eleos* ("mercy").

The second incident is the controversy that arose when the disciples were seen plucking heads of corn on the sabbath. In all three Gospels, this ends with Jesus saying, "For the Son of Man is lord of the sabbath" (Matt 12:8; Mk 2:28; Lk 6:5). However, directly before this, Matthew says: "But if you had known what this means, 'I desire mercy and not sacrifice,' you would not have condemned the guiltless". What is striking is that neither of the controversies is directly about sacrifice and Robert Gundry (1994, p. 168) thinks it is the focus on "mercy" that has led Matthew to this text.

In Matthew's infancy story, Joseph is warned in a dream to flee to Egypt and this is said to fulfil the words of Hos 11:1: "Out of Egypt I have called my son". Most scholars agree that Matthew has some sort of typology between Israel and Jesus in mind (Bruner 2004, pp. 75–76), not least because he uses the singular "son" (as in the Hebrew), whereas the OG has the plural "children". Matthew will go on to portray Jesus as being "tested" in the wilderness for forty days (Matt 4:1–11) and feeding a multitude when there is nothing to eat (Matt 14:13–21). It would appear that Jesus is being presented as the true Israel, who accomplishes what Israel failed to accomplish (Strecker 1962).

However, there are at least three oddities about the quotation. First, it is being applied to Jesus' journey *to* Egypt, not *out of* Egypt. Of course, when the danger is over, he does depart from Egypt (Matt 2:21) but one would have expected the quotation to appear there, if that was what Matthew intended. Second, the words of Hos 11:1 are a backward reference to the exodus and not a future prophecy (there is no future verb). How then can Matthew say that the events in Jesus' time are a "fulfilment" of Hos 11:1? Third, Hos 11:2 goes on to say that the "more I called them, the more they went from me" (11:2), making it clear that it is rebellious Israel that is in mind. What is clear is that Matthew is operating with a broader understanding of "fulfilment" than mere prediction and using some complex exegetical procedures to demonstrate it (Davies and Allison 1988, p. 263).

## 5. Zechariah

There are five quotations from Zechariah in the NT, all coming from the second half of the book (8:16; 9:9; 11:12–13; 12:10; 13:7). We will consider the three that come in Matthew's passion narrative. Zech 9:9 proclaims that "your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey". Matthew omits the phrase "triumphant and victorious" and strangely takes the Hebrew parallelism to refer to two distinct animals ("mounted on a donkey, *and* on a colt, the foal of a donkey"—Matt 21:5). Craig Evans (2012, p. 359) thinks it is highly unlikely that Matthew did not understand Hebrew parallelism, given his evident knowledge of Greek and Hebrew manuscripts, nor that he imagines Jesus sitting astride two animals like some sort of circus act. Rather, he suggests that the foal and her mother walked together and the sight of the two animals struck Matthew as a literal as well as a general fulfilment of Zech 9:9.

Shortly after Jesus' entry to Jerusalem, he foretells the disciples' desertion and quotes Zech 13:7 in the form: "I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered" (Matt 26:31). It is likely that Matthew derived the quotation from Mk 14:27,

since he also uses an indicative (“I will strike”) instead of an imperative (“Strike!”) and the verb “scatter” instead of “fall away”. Matthew will later record that “all the disciples deserted him and fled” (Matt 26:56) and so the prophecy is seen to correspond to what happened to Jesus *and* what happened to his disciples. Nevertheless, the choice of text is surprising, especially if the shepherd of Zech 13:7 is the same as the shepherd of Zech 11:17 (“Oh, my worthless shepherd, who deserts the flock! May the sword strike his arm and his right eye!”). Clay Ham (2009, p. 54) thinks they are different and says, “the citation identifies Jesus as the rejected shepherd, who suffers a punishment deserved by other royal and prophetic leaders (Zech. 13.1–6), portrayed, for example, as the worthless shepherd in Zech. 11.15–17”. In light of Matthew’s quotation of Isa 53:4 (“He took our infirmities and bore our diseases”—Matt 8:17), a substitutionary interpretation is possible, but it is hardly obvious from Zechariah.

The third quotation concerns Judas and the chief priests. Matthew alone records the story of Judas agreeing to betray Jesus for thirty pieces of silver (26:14–16) and then, having regretted it, throws the money back at them and hangs himself. The chief priests decide that this “blood money” cannot go into the treasury and so bought “the potter’s field” as a place to bury foreigners (27:3–10). There is an obvious similarity to Zech 11:13 (“So I took the thirty pieces of silver and threw them into the house of the LORD, to the potter”—ESV) but Matthew’s quotation focuses on the chief priests and oddly attributes it to Jeremiah:

Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah, “And they took the thirty pieces of silver, the price of the one on whom a price had been set, on whom some of the people of Israel had set a price, and they gave them for the potter’s field, as the Lord commanded me”. (Matt 27:9–10)

Gundry (1994, p. 557) argues that Matthew mentions Jeremiah to aid the reader locate the less obvious source of the quotation (“potter’s field”) but it could simply be a lapse of memory or faulty manuscript. Ham (2005, p. 63) thinks the reference to a “potter” in Zech 11:13 led Matthew to Jer 19:1–13, and he used both passages to correlate with the events just described. He may also have been aware of an ambiguity about the word “potter”, for it is rendered “treasury” in the Peshitta and Targum (and followed by the NRSV).

## 6. Habakkuk

Paul opens his letter to the Romans by stating that the gospel he preaches “was promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures” (Rom 1:1–2). As we have seen, Paul supports this with his many quotations from Isaiah but his first quotation appears in the programmatic statement of Rom 1:16–17:

For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, “The one who is righteous will live by faith (*ho de dikaios ek pisteōs zēsetai*)”.

For the Reformers, this quotation of Hab 2:4b encapsulated Paul’s doctrine of “justification by faith alone” (Rom 3:20–22). However, close inspection of the language and context of Hab 2:4b raises questions. A literal translation of the Hebrew text is, “the righteous person will live by his faithfulness”, which the Qumran commentator took as loyalty to the law (1QpHab 8:1). The OG exchanged the masculine pronoun “his” for “my”, resulting in two main text types: “The righteous person will live by *my* faithfulness” (B,Q,V), and “*my* righteous person will live by faithfulness” (A,C). The latter form is quoted in Heb 10:38 (Docherty 2009) but Paul follows neither, quoting it without any pronoun in Rom 1:17 and Gal 3:11. Joseph Fitzmyer (1992, p. 265) concludes that Paul has taken “*pistis* in his own sense of ‘faith,’ and ‘life’ not as deliverance from invasion and death, but as a share in the risen life of Christ”.

However, Richard Hays challenges the view that Paul has simply read his doctrine of “justification by faith alone” into the text of Habakkuk. He argues that the main theme of Romans is not individual salvation (following Stendahl 1963) but theodicy. Paul constantly



returns to the issue of whether God's actions are just (3:26; 9:6, 20; 11:1, 33) and this is precisely the theme of Habakkuk (1:2, 19; 2:1; 3:17–18). Of course, Habakkuk and Paul have different concerns. Habakkuk is concerned about the "military domination of the Chaldeans . . . over an impotent Israel", whereas Paul's concern is the "apparent usurpation of Israel's favored covenant status by congregations of uncircumcised Gentile Christians" (Hays 1989, p. 41). However, there is no text more suited than Habakkuk to introduce Paul's key theme of theodicy.

## 7. Ezekiel

There are only two quotations of Ezekiel listed in UBS<sup>5</sup> (20:34/37:27) but 127 of its verses are listed under "allusions and verbal parallels" (Kowalski 2004). The majority of these come in the book of Revelation (83). Of particular note is the way that John's vision of the New Jerusalem appears to be patterned on the final chapters of Ezekiel (Moyise 2011, pp. 45–58. See Table 1).

**Table 1.** Key parallels between Ezek 37–47 and Rev 20–22.

<i>Ezekiel</i>	<i>Revelation</i>
The dead come back to life (37:10)	The dead come back to life (20:5)
They exercise dominion (37:21)	They exercise dominion (20:4)
Battle with Gog of Magog (38:2)	Battle with Gog and Magog (20:8)
Birds invited to gorge on bodies (39:4)	Birds invited to gorge on bodies (19:21)
Taken to a high mountain (40:2)	Taken to a high mountain (21:10)
Temple is measured (40:5)	City is measured (21:15)
Temple full of God's glory (43:2)	City full of God's glory (21:23)
River flowing from the temple (47:1)	River flowing from the throne (22:1)
Trees with leaves for healing (47:12)	Tree with leaves for healing (22:2)

However, what is surprising is that having borrowed so much from Ezek 37–48, John denies the very thing that these chapters are all about: "I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb" (Rev 21:22). Here, John is more influenced by traditions such as Isa 60:20 ("Your sun shall no more go down, or your moon withdraw itself; for the LORD will be your everlasting light"). See (Mathewson 2003)), but his use of Ezekiel is quite self-conscious. Thus, when Ezekiel speaks of measuring the temple (Ezek 40:5), John speaks of measuring the city (Rev 21:15), and when Ezekiel speaks of God's glory filling the temple (Ezek 43:2), John speaks of it filling the city (Rev 21:23). In addition, Ezekiel prophesies a battle with God of Magog (Ezek 38:2), while John sees these as separate protagonists (Rev 20:8), and Ezekiel speaks of a plurality of trees bearing their healing fruit but John appears to speak of a single tree in Rev 22:2 (it could be a collective singular, as in the phrase "planted with oak"), which he calls the "tree of life", a reference to the Garden of Eden (Moyise 1995, pp. 64–70; Beale 1999, p. 1106).

We see this same mixture of continuity and difference in John's throne vision. Like Ezekiel, he mentions precious stones, a rainbow and a crystal sea (Ezek 1:22, 26, 28), along with four living creatures having the faces of a man, a lion, an ox and an eagle (Ezek 1:5–6). They are also said to be "full of eyes", an expression only found in Ezek 1:18/10:12. However, each of Ezekiel's creatures had four faces (human, lion, ox and eagle) and the expression "full of eyes" refers to the wheels of what appears to be a heavenly chariot (Ezek 1:15–18). This sense of motion ("when the living creatures rose from the earth, the wheels rose"—Ezek 1:19), which was subject to much speculation at Qumran, has been eliminated by John.

## 8. Conclusions

The NT authors made extensive use of the prophets, whether by direct quotation, specific allusion or narrative pattern. Around a third of these are directly applied to Jesus but the rest are applied to a variety of themes, such as the inclusion of the Gentiles, the

unbelief of Israel and future deliverance. In some cases, this amounts to proof-texting but on other occasions, there seems to be a more reciprocal understanding. The ancient prophecies illuminate aspects of Jesus and the church, just as Jesus and the church illuminate the meaning of the prophets. Like the Jews of Alexandria, they seem to have regarded the OG as an inspired translation, even when it differed from the Hebrew text (Amos 9:11–12). Around half the quotations are *verbatim* or close to *verbatim* to a known Greek text but the other half are open to a number of explanations. In some cases, they were probably quoting either a revision of the OG or a specifically Christian version of the text, such as a collection of testimonies (Albl 1999). However, on other occasions, it seems that they were willing to modify the text, either to fit the grammar and syntax of the new context or to make the application more obvious. To a modern audience, tampering with the text would seem to imply a weak view of inspiration but we see the same thing at Qumran. Belief in divine inspiration demanded that the ancient prophets spoke to the contemporary situation and a range of exegetical methods were used to show how this is the case (Flint 2001). It is that same belief that allows preachers and teachers in our own day to show how the “dead prophets” continue to speak to our generation.

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