Responsible Intertextual Reading

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[0:00] Hello and welcome. Today I'm joined by my friend and colleague at Theopolis, James Bajon, who is one of the most unorthodox people I know of on Twitter.

He will not follow any of the customs or the conventions of how you actually tweet. So he comes out with these incredible long reflections upon scripture and some of the most insightful threads that I've ever encountered in a Twitter format or even in a blog format.

So I'm happy to have asked him onto the show today to discuss a particular long thread that he wrote on the subject of the death of Judas as recorded in the Gospel of Matthew and in Luke's account in the book of Acts.

Now, many people have been troubled by the differences between these two accounts, which seem to put the two evangelists at odds with each other and raise questions about the truthfulness and reliability of scripture as a whole.

So without saying anything further about that, I would like to put things over to James. First of all, thank you for coming on the show. And then can you tell us a bit about your process of thinking through the meaning of these two passages and how to make sense of the differences?

[1:17] Sure. Yeah. Good to be here. I mean, one of the things which I guess I've picked up on recently is trying to actually, when I approach passages like this, not be too quick to harmonize them and to actually think sort of carefully about the passages as individual accounts and then see exactly what their points of difference are.

And then try to sort of think about what that might be telling me. I think you would probably be the same that as someone who believes holds to biblical inerrancy.

We would think that if there were two accounts, two historical accounts of a narrative that they can't be in complete contradiction to one another. There must be a way to piece them together into a coherent historical scenario.

But I don't want that to be all that I try to do when I find accounts like that. I kind of see that as a first step, but not an ultimate step.

I then want to drill down into what each individual author is telling me. Is that something that you'd kind of go along with as an initial claim?

[2:40] Yes, I think one of the challenges I've often found is how to think about a doctrine of inerrancy within our handling of scripture hermeneutically. And for me, it's been mostly something that provides a limit where if you arrive at, OK, there's a hard contradiction between these two passages and there's no resolution.

You know, you've taken a wrong turn somewhere, but there are other people, I think, who foreground the doctrine of inerrancy in a way that it makes it dominates their hermeneutic.

And it becomes the the approach that they take to the text so that their concern is primarily harmonizing the text. And I think that's to misuse the doctrine in some ways.

There's a confidence that we should have that we take to the text that is not going to be at odds with other teaching and scripture. And as we study it through in a disciplined and careful way, we will find that it is perfectly harmony with other parts of scripture and that the very differences are inviting our attention and our closer examination.

And there, I think, it leads to a slightly different emphasis upon or way of handling the differences. The first approach, I think, sees those as problems that need to be resolved and it's resolved by harmonization.

[4:04] The second approach takes a fundamental confidence to the text, a confidence in its truth and the fact that it's not fundamentally at odds with other parts of scripture.

And then uses that to give us the nerve to actually lean into the differences and to think more seriously about why we have the particular accounts that we have, rather than being nervous and actually trying to draw back from the differences and downplay them.

And there, I think, the sort of approach that you've laid out is a really good example of how I think that can be done well, not in a way that's dismissing the inerrancy of scripture, but in a way that's placing it within a proper position within our hermeneutics.

Right. And is ultimately grounded in the character of the God who we believe inspired the scriptures in the first place, in the sense that we believe in a God who is trustworthy and who won't give us this revelation, which the more we go into it will ultimately confuse and bewilder us, but will enable us perhaps over a long period of time to arrive at clear formulations of what's going on.

And there, I think, we're also dealing with concepts about what is scripture doing when it's doing history. Very often, I think we have an approach towards the text that projects onto it certain conventional ideas of what history looks like.

[5:38] And often those ideas can be very naive. Actual historians are a lot more alert to the art of telling history. But I think we can downplay the degree of theology that's going on in narrative texts of scripture, the degree to which the framing of the narrative, the foregrounding of particular elements, the parallels with other passages that arises just from the narrative art of the history writing, that that is part of the meaning of the text.

The text or the revelation that the text represents is irreducibly textual. The text is not just some clear window that you're supposed to see through to the events behind.

It's a faithful witness from a specific vantage point on those events that helps you to see what's significant and salient about them. So in terms of the specifics then, so the issue, the root issue, I guess, is fairly well known.

Matthew and Luke, Luke in Acts 1, have fairly different accounts of Judas's death. Matthew has Judas hang himself in a field which is purchased by the chief priests.

Meanwhile, Luke has Judas's body burst open, lying on the ground in a field which is said to be owned by Judas. Now, one of the things which I thought of as I started digging into this was I was intrigued by the account of Absalom, who is hung or said to hang from branches in a tree, but is later sort of hacked down from there and thrown into a pit.

[7:29] And I having observed that, I thought, well, there's no inherent contradiction between sort of Matthew describing the fact Judas hangs himself and then Luke focusing more on the final state of Judas, where his body ends up and the sort of state he ends up in.

So that sort of got me thinking of a historical scenario. And I then got thinking about the fact that both of these accounts seem to have some loose ends inherent in them, if you just consider them in isolation.

So in Matthew's account, you have this oddity that the priests don't want to just pocket, put in the treasury, the money which Judas hands back to them.

But you think, well, if they're not happy to put it in the treasury, why would they be happy to own a field which had been bought with it? And presumably you would get a receipt with this and sort of file it in the treasury or something.

Why would that be an OK solution to the issue? And also, why did the field come to get the name the field of blood? If ultimately Judas died in a bloodless death because he just hung himself and died of strangulation.

[8:54] And I then got to thinking that Luke gives us very convenient answers to those questions. He uses the slightly unusual, not unusual, but indirect phrase that Judas acquired a field, not just the normal term by.

And he also tells us that Judas didn't die a bloodless death. He describes Judas's body burst open in the field.

So I soon got to thinking that these accounts, at least in Matthew's case, it raises some questions and then those questions are answered by Luke.

And you can actually do the thing and vice versa. There are various questions raised by Luke. So I soon got to thinking that historically these are, I guess, what I'd call complementary accounts rather than contradictory accounts.

They go together very nicely. And I think as we look in the broader framework of those accounts, we'll see a lot of other details that actually reveal that the gospel writers or in the case of Luke, the account in Acts is they're very alert to some of the thematic issues and how it plays into their broader account of what's going on.

[10:17] And that whatever parallels or associations that they're not detached from a wider narrative that they're trying to tell.

And whatever connections there are are not incidental, but highlighting some of those themes that lie near the heart of their account.

Right. I mean, something which I thought was interesting, as I considered the similarity between Absalom's death and the fact that he's said to hang and Judas's death, which is various other things which go on.

So when Judas arrives to betray Jesus, Jesus refers to him as his friend, which is unique to Matthew's gospel and which is particularly a key word in in terms of the way David is betrayed by his enemies.

And I guess foremost among them by Absalom. We have even the prophecy. I think it's Nathan's when he talks about how a friend of David's will lie with his wives in broad daylight, which finds its fulfillment in Absalom.

[11:34] So I found that connection, the way in which both Judas and Absalom are friends of a messianic figure to be interesting. I found the sort of feigned loyalty to a king for selfish ends and the fact that when Absalom is reconciled with David, they kiss one another.

I found those to be some interesting connections. And so I was happy then to think of Judas as a sort of Absalom-esque traitor to Jesus as the Davidic Messiah.

That was then sort of something which seemed to work on various levels to me. And that, I think, also ties in with a larger background that you find within a number of the Gospels of Jesus replaying the events surrounding the coup of Absalom, where he leaves the city.

He crosses over the brook Kidron. He goes weeping up the Mount of Olives. And then there's encounters with people who are ministering to him. And there's the figure of Shimei who's throwing stones at him.

And then Jesus goes a stone's throw away from his disciples in the Gospels. And then his right-hand man, Abishai, wants to go and attack Shimei.

[13:02] And he prevents him. And in so many of these respects, Jesus is walking in the footsteps of his father David. And it seems within that framework, it's very natural to see some of the connections between specific figures and incidents and details of the text, because the text itself invites that.

I think we also have that even in some of the prophecies that are alluded to or the Old Testament texts. So Jesus refers to Psalm 41, verse 9, for instance, in John's Gospel, if I recall.

Even my close friend in whom I trusted, who ate my bread, has lifted his heel against me. And that connection between David's suffering and the betrayal that he suffers and the betrayal that Christ suffers, again, invites so many of these different wider connections.

It's all part of a cumulative case that I think strengthens seeing Absalom and other characters of that coup within the story of Jesus.

Right. So the idea would be that we've got independent grounds for thinking that there is David's story being played out within Matthew anyway. And then we can sort of plug this into it.

[14:26] Is that the rationale here? Yes, I think so. That when we're dealing with these patterns, we're often thinking about the larger story that the gospel writer or whatever part of scripture we're reading is telling.

And so, for instance, if you're reading Luke's gospel, you're very alert to the way that he is using specific Old Testament background. He really uses a lot of the book of Samuel.

That's very prominent, particularly at the beginning of his gospel. And so the figure of Hannah in the temple and the birth of Samuel is lying in the backdrop of the birth of or the announcement of the birth of John the Baptist, then of Jesus.

Then the birth of John the Baptist and Jesus, the presentation of Jesus in the temple, the early events surrounding Jesus going to the temple as a young child.

And so in the gospel of Matthew, there are different things being explored. There's a larger framework within which these specific associations fit.

[15:36] And so we're not just flying blind, as it were. We can have a sense of where to look for some of the most promising connections.

Hmm. Yeah. That then might take us on to Luke. But before we get there, I do just want to say I don't want to portray myself here as the guy who has got typology and intertextuality sorted kind of thing.

As I see myself as very much learning in this field. And part of why I, as you put it, behave unusually on Twitter is that you you get a huge amount of feedback, basically.

And I find that just so valuable, especially in the area of kind of trying out these sort of intertextual connections and seeing if they prompt other things in other people and if things do or do or don't work.

And as you say, you get huge amounts of that on Twitter, some of which is more useful than others. I was followed a while ago by a guy with the handle Satan and some of his feedback was not uniformly edifying.

[16:56] I can imagine. But I think I think I've found that in my own experience when we're reading the text, it's so much of a collaborative experience.

We're constantly bouncing readings off other people and looking for feedback and learning from skilled readers of the text. Looking for confirmation from other people who have read the text before and seen the same things independently that we are seeing or maybe seeing something that bolsters our reading or pushes back or hones it in some way.

And one of the reasons I invited you on was simply because we have a slightly different reading of these particular details in the text, which naturally provoked my curiosity, because I very much respect your approach to reading the text.

You see a lot of things that I've not seen. And then when I see them, as you show them to me, they can't be unseen. They're very clearly there. On this particular occasion, I had slight differences within great commonalities.

And I found that I thought it would be an interesting starting point for a conversation about how we go about reading the text. And what are some of the ways in which the instincts and the initial connections that we see can become more specific and different associations be assigned?

[18:22] So in the case of these particular texts, I've seen the connection with the coup of Absalom very much in the background of the text of Matthew, as you note.

But for me, the figure has been Ahithophel. He has been the one that connects with Judas more than Absalom.

And I see the constellation of the details working out slightly differently within the same fundamental background narrative. And so I thought it would be interesting to talk about that a bit.

So when we're talking about the characters in the story, Ahithophel is the counselor of David, his really wise counselor, who happens, incidentally, to be the grandfather of Bathsheba.

And he goes over to the side of Absalom and counsels him in a way that proves very successful. And it's only as the Lord frustrates his counsel and ensures that Hushai the Archite's counsel is heard over his, that Absalom is finally defeated.

[19:33] But that figure of Ahithophel looms large within the text. His going over to the side of Absalom is a great betrayal of David. It hurts very keenly, but it's also playing out some of the tragic, it's part of the tragic consequences of David's earlier sins with Bathsheba.

And so I'd be interested to hear your thoughts on why you lean towards Absalom rather than Ahithophel. Right. So, I mean, one reason would be that I probably didn't think of it at the time.

So that would be first and foremost. It did occur to me at some point, I was slightly turned away from Ahithophel because he said to be strangled rather than to hang in the text.

Which I thought was a slight pointer away. And I think I was particularly struck by, as I say, Jesus's reference to Judas as a friend.

And the way in which I explicitly had Absalom referred to as a friend and a friend who betrays soon after kissing David.

[20:58] So I had a few things that took me more towards Absalom. But I like Ahithophel at the same time in that he hangs himself.

You know, Absalom's death by hanging is slightly accidental, I guess, in that there's this beautifully worded passage where he's kind of going along and his head gets stuck.

And it basically just says, and the donkey kept on going, you know, hung between heaven and earth. And yeah, it's obviously a very tragic portrayal there of a sad end to a life.

And so those were, yeah, those were particularly my reasons for Absalom. Yes, as I've read it, Psalm 41 verse 9 has been in the back of my mind.

And I generally read that as referring to Ahithophel, Ahithophel as the counselor of David. And then thinking about the way that Judas plays in the story as one who goes over and advises the opposing people, the chief priests, etc.

[22:09] And that role seems to me to be more like Ahithophel, the counselor who was once trusted, who is now assisting the enemy, than that of Absalom, who's an individual rising up against his father.

And then I think the other thing is maybe stepping back a bit from the immediate connection of one figure with another.

There seems to be more going on in Matthew's gospel in the situation in which Judas's death is recounted. So the very fact that we have an axe, an account of Judas's death that is quite removed from the time of Jesus's death, it's placed after his ascension within the narrative, just shows that there's no reason why you need to tell about Judas's suicide where you do in Matthew's gospel.

The fact that it's recounted there is maybe worthy of note. And for me, it juxtaposes the two figures of Judas and Jesus.

Both of them are hanging in some sense. Jesus hangs on the cross. Judas hangs himself.

[23:29] And there's this juxtaposition of two distinct fates that suggest to me that maybe Matthew has some more theological purpose.

And then that throws me back to the text of 2 Samuel, where, again, you have two people hung or strangled.

In the case of Absalom, he's hung on the tree. And in the case of Ahithophel, he strangles himself, presumably by hanging. And that hanging of the counselor and the hanging of the son of David makes me think maybe there's something more going on with the connection here.

And that Ahithophel might be more connected with Judas and Jesus as a sort of inversion of Absalom. And looking back at the story of Absalom, Absalom's story grows out so much from the story of David.

And there are tragedies going on there in that David is a Jacob-like figure. And the whole earlier part of his life is framed by Jacob-like events, but in very positive, very positive key.

[24:49] And then after his sin with Bathsheba, everything becomes twisted and it takes a very different form. And Absalom is the focal point for all of this. So it's Jacob's experience with his sons, which is a deeply tragic one.

So like Reuben, Absalom sleeps with his father's concubines. Like Simeon and Levi, he seems to wipe out a whole house.

He was told originally that he's wiped out the whole of the king's sons. Like Simeon and Levi wiped out Shechem.

Then he's like Joseph. He's the lost son that the father grieves over bitterly. And he's like Judah, the one that has to, he ends up leaving the rest of the brothers and going off into a sort of exile.

And in those cases, I think the tragedy of David's house is being played out in the story of Christ. That Christ is taking the sin of David's house upon himself and him hanging on the tree as the rebellious son was supposed to be punished.

[26:02] And the fact that he's been punished is a fulfilling of the punishment of David, more generally, that we initially see in his son hanging on a tree, which again, I think, has lamb references.

Absalom is introduced to us as someone who always has to shave his hair at the around the same time as sheep shearing. And then he ends up hanging on a tree by his hair.

And it maybe should make us think of the ram caught in the thicket that substitutes for the firstborn. But Jesus ends up being the son of David who's hanging on the tree, the righteous in the place of the rebellious.

So that makes a lot of sense to me in terms of the broader framework. I mean, we're obviously both in the region of Absalom's death, aren't we, in terms of making links, but just perhaps putting more emphasis on particular characters.

A few things. Can I just ask you a question of clarification? Are you talking about the position of Judas's death in Luke when you're saying it's after the ascension or are you still in Matthew?

[27:19] I may have misunderstood you. In Matthew, it's in the context of Christ's death. So you have two people hung on trees within the same chapter. In Luke, it's after the ascension.

It's mentioned in the context of the choice of a new apostle in Acts chapter one. Yep. Yep. So maybe that could bring us on to.

So when I had tried to think, what is Luke doing here? I was keen on looking for a sort of type standing behind what Luke is doing, which exaggerated the differences between Luke and Matthew.

And so I thought to myself, OK, in Matthew, this sort of field ends up in Judas's possession, really due to a bit of a technicality in temple law.

But Luke focuses much more on Judas's love of money. He uses this specific phrase, the wages of unrighteousness, which is used in the New Testament only otherwise of Balaam.

[28:37] And it talks about the wages which he earned through unrighteous gain. And I then thought about the fact that it is Luke who focuses on the bloodshed and the bloodshed which is spilt on the ground.

And I then was thinking, well, is there a particular person in terms of Old Testament prophecy who I can think of who, you know, is moved by materialistic gain and consumed by that and who basically sacrifices a man's life to get some land which ends up stained by blood.

And that thing took me in the direction of Ahab. Now, you've gone in a very different direction. I don't recall who you likened Luke to.

Was that Joab that you went for there? Yes. My reasoning was that Luke makes a lot of use of Old Testament backgrounds. So mentioned already the importance of the book of Samuel within the gospel.

In the book of Acts, I think stepping back from the narrative and just seeing its larger shape, there are great similarities to the books of Kings.

[29:56] And the book of Kings begins with David is on the scene, but he's about to leave. He's about to die. And he needs to establish a successor, teach him concerning the kingdom.

And the kingdom is going to be established with the new temple being built, with Solomon gaining wisdom, with a new regime being set up in backwards order from that.

And Acts chapter one has a similar flavor to first Kings chapters one and two. David's about to leave the scene. He's establishing his successor.

And then certain people need to be removed from office. In the story of first Kings, it's Joab being replaced by Benaiah, the son of Jehoiada, and then priests being removed and Shimei has to be dealt with.

And we see a similar thing in the case of Judas being replaced among the 12. And the two verses that are quoted, the imprecatory Psalm verses, let his habitation become desolate, let another take his office, really reminded me of what's going on in the replacement of Joab by Benaiah, the son of Jehoiada.

[31:14] And I was thinking about that in terms of the larger arc where the next chapter, the church is given the gift of wisdom, the Holy Spirit. The new temple is being built.

The kingdom is rising to its great height. This is a new temple building context. It's a new Solomonic period, as it were, being initiated as the kingdom is being introduced through Christ.

And then the character of Joab stood out to me because Joab is perhaps the greatest example, to my mind, of betrayal by means of a kiss.

So in the story of Amasa, he deceives Amasa by a kiss and then stabbing him in the stomach so that his guts come out.

And then Amasa is placed in a field where he's bleeding out and people are passing by and seeing him. And then the battle is going on.

[32:18] And it seemed to me that Joab in 1 Kings chapter 2 is removed from his office. He's buried within his desert location.

Again, he's someone who flees to the temple. He's taken from the horns of the altar and then he's killed. And what happens to Judas is a sort of inversion of what it's a repeat of what happens to Amasa at the hands of Judas or the hands of Joab through his betrayal.

And so the fact that his guts spill out, it is a sort of poetic justice upon the Joab figure, who is the great serpent within the house of David.

And now the greater David has another serpent within his house and he is removed in a way that shows a sort of lex talionis approach to the person who rises up against the true Davidic king.

And so that was my process of reasoning. So, I mean, if you what one question I would have is whether there's a need to choose between the two.

[33:41] I mean, it seems to me quite widely acknowledged that if you wanted to think about different Old Testament characters who are embodied and relived in the life of Jesus, there would almost be no end to them.

And everyone would be very happy having multiple types of people finding their culmination and finding fulfillment in the life of Christ.

And I kind of wonder if Judas would be or could be seen as a sort of prototypical enemy of God's to embodying just whole whole strands of Old Testament thought in that sense.

It does feel to me as you read the Gospels that almost as soon as you start getting hooked onto one particular incident, like at the start of, say, Luke, almost as soon as you start getting very plugged into the Samuel narrative, you get something else introduced.

And the Gospel writers seem to like doing that, having sort of multiple illusions rather than following one character very uniformly.

[35:02] And so I suppose I would wonder, do you think we have to choose? And if not, do we sort of then get into a dangerous position where everything is a picture of everything kind of thing?

And as soon as we open any passage in the Gospels or anywhere else, we're just sort of bringing the whole Old Testament to it. And then we're just lost in this sort of scene which we can't navigate anywhere at all.

Because behind every page we've got the Fall, we've got Exodus, we've got New Creation, we've got like the Monty. So, yeah, thoughts on those?

Yeah, I mean, that's a very real concern. I think if everything is connected to everything else, at a certain point, it doesn't mean anything.

It just becomes this morass of interconnections. What we need to do, I think, is think more carefully about what the authors are doing with those connections, how those connections are serving a greater theological argument.

[36:10] And the parallels aren't just, oh, this is like that, isn't that neat? But there is a broader argument being made here that's part of the Gospel or whatever text it is.

Now, I think we're helped in that, in the fact that the Old Testament has all of this going on within itself. This isn't some novel thing. And often Christians have tended to approach typology and figural reading as a bipolar thing with the Old Testament pole and then the New Testament pole and seeing in, or actually the New Testament pole just being Christ and what he does, and looking in the Old Testament for parallels to what happens in Christ.

And I think that's fundamentally an incorrect way of going on within it. Rather, what we see in the Old Testament is constant interplays between the stories that are going on within it.

David is constantly playing out the story of Jacob, as I've already mentioned, even within the Old Testament. In a single book, we can see this played out.

We can see the way that the descendants of Abraham, even within the book of Genesis, are playing out his story again. So that desire, I think, to move, jump directly from the Old Testament to Christ, leaves us vulnerable to those sorts of weak connections.

[37:41] Whereas if we're thinking about a joined up narrative where everything is moving from the Old Testament, where things are interconnected, into the New Testament, where things are interconnected, and the authors are making careful arguments, there's a lot more of a discipline that we're bringing to that process of seeing connections.

For me, I think, for instance, you mentioned Matthew's account. Matthew is also doing a lot of work with Jeremiah in that part of his text.

So there's the potter's field and other references to that. And the importance of that background is focusing on the blood being brought into the temple itself.

Everything is being contaminated with this blood money. And it's hearkening back to the story of Jeremiah. There's also the purchase of the field in Anathoth and the way that that serves as a symbol of the promise of new life after exile.

And the purchase of fields is a big theme within the New Testament. I mean, clearly within the book of Acts, you have the sale of Christ by Judas, the money used by a field.

[38:58] But then you have other people who are taking money used to buy fields, used from the sale of fields and putting it at the apostles' feet.

And so there's an inversion of that theme. If we go back through the Old Testament, we'll see that theme cropping up on various occasions. The purchase of significant fields, the field that Shechem purchased from Hamor.

And more significantly, in chapter 23 of Genesis, the field and cave of Machpelah. And so I think trying to join these things together can be a means by which the arbitrariness and the sheer agglomeration of connections can be whittled down a bit.

Yeah, I think that's important to note the way in which in Old Testament history, we've got these repeated patterns.

And the Exodus is obviously one that you've written on before and is a very well-known one. The way in which there are multiple exits from Egypt or from foreign territory with the enemies defeated and with plunder as benefit from the battle and so forth.

[40:18] And I think what that does is that sort of introduces us to the cyclic pattern of history, the way in which God works in certain shapes, in a sense, to make what he does comprehensible to us.

So he's not just this unpredictable God who could do any old thing, but has certain patterns of working. And when we think that we're sort of introduced into that sort of thing as history, first and foremost, in the Old Testament narrative, I think that's important because then intertextuality isn't then just a case of sort of seeing neat ideas in an author's mind.

It is kind of seeing patterns in the very fabric of history, which its divine author has put there and has put there for reasons as part of his story and as part of his making a an intelligible world for us to exist in and for us to interact with and to use scripture to help us to help us understand.

I think that's the way in the textuality.

It's its own account.

[42:36] And are highlighted by the counter melody. So when we're reading the story of Jesus against the backdrop of the coup of Absalom and the betrayal of David, we're hearing lots of things in the text of Matthew and even in Acts that we wouldn't hear otherwise.

And that discipline, I think, is one that requires a sharp ear, but there is a discipline to it that means that it's none arbitrary.

You'll find people consistently settling upon these same readings, skilled readers, because they're coming at the text with a set of instincts.

They're used to the way that the text goes about these things. And they're hearing consistently the same thing. And that, I think, for me, at least, it has a confirming power that I'm not just imagining this.

Other people are seeing these connections. And we can have conversations like this where we're weighing up different approaches and trying to elaborate the fundamental connections that we both see.

[43:44] And that I find reassuring. But also, it's not a science or straightforward method.

But there is very clearly an art here. And it can be done well or it can be done poorly. And that recognition of counter melodies moves us beyond the idea of just playing out patterns again and again, that this pattern is like Jesus and it's just playing out again.

Now, this pattern is like Jesus, but its significance is found also in the fact that it is unlike Jesus. It's that similarity in difference that makes it important.

Yeah, I very much agree with that. I've found multiple textual connections, which I've noticed in scripture, in rabbinic works.

So sometimes midrashic things or sometimes just rabbinic expositions, you know, more exegetical work. And that I have found to be hugely exciting and confirmatory insofar as you have two people.

[44:53] You know, I read in a hugely different environment to, let's say, someone writing about scripture in a sixth century midrash or something.

And so we're hugely removed. But looking at the same text and making similar connections and similar exegetical manoeuvres. And so I like that a great deal.

I find that I find that when things are confirmed in antiquity, I find that to be particularly useful. Something I wouldn't mind coming back to is this idea of not being lost in a complete morass of possible connections.

One thing I like to do as a sort of antidote to that is to identify, if I can, just very small scale kind of local interconnections, which sort of don't try and do too much.

So they're not a theory which explains everything, but something that just makes quite a specific small scale connection between two texts.

[46:08] So something I looked into recently was the battle scene at the end of the book of Judges. There is this horrific incident in Judges 19, which is then reported to Israel in, I would say, a very tendentious way by a Levite who's involved in it.

And then we get this battle ensuing, which is sort of unusual. You think Israel are the good guys, and yet they start losing the battle and you start wondering why.

And so something which I've found helpful to shed a bit of light on that is a connection between the numbers, the numerical properties of those accounts.

Now, I won't go into it exactly, but basically when you start digging into the numbers there, you find that in the battle scenes, you have at one point just a sort of figure of 1,100 people just sort of appearing without any great explanation.

And then at the same time, you have sort of in a different account of the same battle, you have 900 people who are just sort of unaccounted for. And it's left hanging at the end of the whole story.

[47:27] And so you have these unexplained figures of 1,100 and 900 people. And that then has a very specific connection with Judges 17, where at the end of Samson's story, the text just sort of suddenly launches.

Launches, it moves back in time a good few hundred years and just starts without explanation, a new narrative. And you suddenly have these figures of you have 1,100 shekels mentioned without any explanation as to where they've come from.

They're just sort of there in the narrative. And it's assumed that the people who are talking about them have just presupposed them. And then at the end of that little incident, you have 900 shekels just unaccounted for, like 200 are used.

And it's said that one person will give the other person the remainder, but it's never again mentioned. So these 900 shekels are left sort of floating in midair. And that's, now I've got various ideas as to why I think there's that connection there.

But that's, if you like, the data that I like. Now, what we do with that is a further question, you know, how we take that forward in terms of interpretation.

[48:50] But I like noting things like that. And in a sense, I like just leaving them there. I don't want to sort of sculpt some great theory where 1,100s all over the Bible have this particular significance or where 900s always have that significance.

You know, there's 900 iron chariots at the start of the Book of Acts. And I don't see any clear connection with them. Rather, I just like the small scale way in which those two narratives at the end of the Book of Judges are tied together.

Yes. And what that helps you to do, I think, is also make a lot more sense of why would we actually have the account of chapter 17 of Judges?

And the more that you follow that particular line, the more it opens up the integrity and the unity and the argument, the theological argument that's being made by the Book.

And I think that strengthens the reading, among other things. The other thing I try and do is mentally to weight my reading.

[49:58] So much of the time when I'm reading the text, I am noticing possible potential patterns. And I just register them as like really skinny branches on a tree.

I'm not going to put any weight on them whatsoever, but I'm going to explore and see where they go. And so I'm curious to see whether anything more will develop from them. So a lot of my reading of scripture is exploratory and there's a sort of creative character to it.

You're testing and developing a hypothesis. You're seeing what cumulative evidence you can discover for it, but you're holding it very, very lightly.

You're not putting any weight on it. And you're recognizing the great differences between patterns in scripture that are very pronounced, certainly in their main body.

So, for instance, the Exodus pattern in scripture is very pronounced. The theme of the woman and the serpent and the seed, that's a very prominent theme throughout scripture.

[51:02] But in specific instances, it can be very weak. And what we're trying to think about is how to develop a cumulative case that does not depend too much upon one single reading.

Like the weight of a tree can be distributed along a wide root system. So our readings of these themes can recognize the validity and importance of particular themes without trying to leave every bit of that weight upon specific instances of it.

That allows us also a great deal more latitude to explore a particular motif without feeling the need to cast a lot in with it completely.

It can be very exploratory and just be open to being proved wrong. And many of my readings have that character to them. It's hard to communicate that, though, when you're engaging in these readings in public.

People don't always recognize, OK, I'm trying this out for size. I want you to push back against it. I want to see if it withstands challenge. And I don't see all the positions from which it could be challenged, which is why I'm airing it.

[52:14] I'm hoping that people are going to challenge it. And then I'll be able to hone it. Yeah, I find that incredibly helpful, especially the pushback. I mean, I guess most people are like most people, I guess, attached to my own ideas.

You know, if you see something and then you just naturally have an attachment to it. But I hope that I don't sort of cling on to them too tightly. And a number I have sort of abandoned on the strength of people saying, look, you know, it may be true that no one else has seen this, James, but there may be a reason why no one else has seen it, you know, because it's not there.

And so I have found that sort of feedback to be very useful because actually I don't find myself a particularly good judge of my own connections.

I have some that I particularly like, but in general, I tend to get more sure of them as other people see them and confirm them.

I remember a while ago I was listening to an interview with a comedian, Tim Vine, who I like a great deal. And the guy was saying to him, well, how do you write good jokes?

[53:28] And he said, I don't know. He said, all I know how to do is write jokes. And he said, I then just go to like a local pub or comedy club and just read them all out in a fairly deadpan voice, just like hundreds of them and see how people respond to them.

And he said that you can never until you sort of try these things out with a crowd of people, get a sense beforehand as to how well they're going to go down.

Now, I mean, I do think there's probably slightly more science and objectivity to trying out an intertextual connection than just sort of.

Although intertextual connections are very much like jokes. Yeah, they are. There's not a science of a straightforward science of humor. It's very much an art and it depends upon intertextuality.

Yeah, that's right. And actually, this one that we're talking about with Ahab and Absalom actually was one I wasn't particularly convinced of initially when I sort of first floated it.

[54:31] But it seemed to go down very well with the exception of you. And so that sort of strengthened me to some extent in it.

And so, yeah, I want to be in a position where I'm not clinging too tightly to these things. And as you say, the more weight you load on a given type, unjust weight, that is, I think the more you'll be prone to clinging to it too tightly, because you will feel that if you abandon it, then some whole chunk of your theology has fallen down along with it.

That's always the danger of bringing a system to the text. The text needs to be able to push back. And I find I'm constantly rereading texts that I thought I'd understood.

And then I realize, OK, there's more going on here. And there's a whole set of connections I'd never considered that may pull things in a very different direction.

And there are certain texts in the back of my mind that I'm constantly revisiting because there's so much going on there that's just tantalizing.

[55:47] I can feel it. I can see some of the connections, but I just don't have a clue what to make of them. A great example is the story of Judah and Tamar in Genesis chapter 38.

There is just so much going on in that text. And yet I'm only seeing a fraction of it. And I know that there are connections.

I'm virtually certain there are connections with some texts of which I just don't have a clue what the meaning would be. I mean, why would that particular text would there be a connection?

And that's one of those examples where I think you want to work it through in the Old Testament. And so you want to think about its connections, perhaps to an incident in Samson's life or to Ruth's story and to see what it's doing in the Old Testament, rather than trying to short circuit and make a very quick leap to the New Testament.

And just to sort of say something like, and all this is redeemed in Matthew's genealogy and job done. I've often compared it to the experience of wandering through terrain, following a careful itinerary.

[57:06] And you're looking at the path ahead of you. And at certain points, you have a more elevated spot where you can look back and see part of the place that you've walked. But much of your view is obscured through trees and through rocks and other things like that.

But you're working towards a great peak. And then as you follow the path that leads you up this mountain and eventually you reach the top and your whole itinerary unfolds as a unity.

You're seeing the entirety of the path that you walked, but also you're seeing the path in a more immediate way, in the same way that you'd see it as you're walking it. You're seeing the specific steps ahead of you or in this case behind you.

And that's very much the experience that I have reading the biblical text. As I'm reading through the Old Testament, I'm often reaching vantage points where I can see connections with parts of the path that I've walked before.

But the movement to Christ is not an airlifting from one particular point in the itinerary just to the top of the peak. Rather, it's a following through of the entire itinerary to the point where I can see that itinerary as a unity from the different perspective of the mountain peak.

[58:18] Yeah, I think that's a helpful analogy. Thank you very much for joining me, James. This has been a very stimulating conversation, and I'm hoping that we'll be able to continue it, talking about some other topics.

I'm particularly interested in working through some of your discussion of the Temple of Ezekiel and its connections with John's gospel, because there is some weird and wonderful stuff going on there that I think opens up a lot about the gospel and also the prophecy of Ezekiel.

But bringing together some of the themes, I think just the process of having conversations like this is so integral to the task of reading scripture and encouraging these sorts of conversations.

It's one of the means by which we become better at our reading. We learn from each other. Our readings are tested by each other. We're not always the best judges of our readings. That's certainly been my experiences like yours in that respect.

And it's one area where I've enjoyed Theopolis, for instance, the conversations that we have on the podcast and elsewhere, where we're constantly bouncing off each other and strengthening our own readings through other people's input.

[59:32] But how do you think, just in conclusion, we can, if you had just a couple of thoughts of how specific steps that people could take to improve their reading of scripture, do you have any suggestions?

So, specifically in terms of the intertextual dimension of it, I like to, as I guess I'm telling part, use connections which are quite, I don't know how to describe it, tight or specific or a connection which is not too general to work everywhere.

So, if the pattern I've seen is something like a fall and then a lifting up afterwards, and then I start linking together a big string of 10 or 12 texts which seem to have this pattern, that strikes me as just too general to be helpful.

And so, I'm wanting to be, I guess, led by the text and thinking what kind of things the writer is directing me towards in particular, and what kind of things he's not directing me towards.

So, a narrative which, well, narratives have their own sort of flow over time, and a few sentences can cover 20 years, and then one verse can kind of describe just basically one action, with a whole load of verbs, and he fell, and he slept, and he died, and there he lay fallen dead, or something.

[61:34] Where you've got this fairly long string of verbs in Hebrew, which are describing one thing. And so, I'm trying to use those sorts of considerations to think, where is the author trying to get me to focus my attention?

Because otherwise, I feel almost that I could do typology just with a newspaper or something. You know, I'm sure I could find intertextual connections there.

And so, I'm wanting to say, okay, this is scripture. And so, I'm wanting to find sort of where the human author, and ultimately the divine author, is leading me.

Rather than, which is easy to do, rather than to have a system, have a few little shapes that I like to fit things into, and then kind of allowing that to really straitjacket the particularities of the text.

I think that's, yeah, that's something I've found very helpful myself. And I've wondered about this in terms of the retrieval of certain pre-modern readings of scripture that were very alert to analogies and typology and figural reading, and maybe particularly within Jewish contexts, where they bring very clear skills of recognizing this intertextuality.

[63:05] But as moderns, we come with the skills and the instincts and the forms of attention that have been trained by a grammatical historical method. And I think, at the very best, what we're trying to do is to bring those disciplines to the service of the sort of instincts that a pre-modern reader of the text would have.

And so, those instincts are backed up with the extra witness of this is in the text itself. The way that this is worded is very clearly unusual.

There aren't many instances of this, but this particular phrase or these particular details in conjunction with each other show a clear literary pattern that's elusive towards some event that's occurred previously.

And that, I think, gives a way of pushing back against the arbitrariness that often comes with that more general approach that you describe. There's a discipline where, if it is there, you will see very clear evidence within the text.

And that evidence, there are ways that you can weight it, whether it's very strong or whether it's weak and more potentially fanciful. And that is something that I've always seen myself as trying to do, to bring the instincts of a pre-modern and maybe patristic reader or more Jewish reader of the text to the task of a more grammatical historical approach approach that's determined by Reformation instincts and the concern that we do not make the text into a wax nose.

[64:42] Yeah, I think part of that is cultural, as you say. I think part of it is linguistic as well. Often rabbinic works will identify very close grammatical similarities between two texts, just because they're hugely familiar with the text of scripture in a way which most Western readers aren't.

You know, most Western readers won't probably make their way through the Old Testament two or three times in Hebrew each year or something, whereas I've no idea how much the average rabbinic commentator would have done that.

But I would assume they would do that lots and lots, in part because there weren't a huge number of books available, particularly sort of earlier on in history.

And I find that kind of very close linguistic association to be so helpful. And I think it just comes through patiently reading the text, whether it's the New Testament in Greek or the Old in Hebrew, just as much as possible.

It's not the kind of thing which just word searches on a computer is always that helpful in, because often it might involve the sort of rearrangement of a word, a sort of pun, which isn't that searchable on a computer or just a very close bit of syntax grammatically, which, again, isn't so easy to search on.

[66:15] And so I think that's a really good way of looking at where the author is leading you. And the sort of practices of reading that they would have would be far more ordered towards the ear, reading aloud, and also reading in company, where it's not just an individual interpreter, but there's a group of people constantly testing each other's readings and collaboratively arriving at deeper insight.

Hmm. Which kind of brings to mind how much of a long term project this is. I mean, I've very much changed in the way in which I read scripture over the last sort of five years and probably will over the next five years as well.

And I hope that's changed for the good, you know, in a positive direction. But it's quite tempting to think, OK, I want to know what's going on in this passage.

If I just sit down with it and really go into it in detail over the next couple of days, I will get there. But I just don't think gains in our understanding of scripture come back quickly, no matter how much we try and cram into like a given day or something.

I think there are some things which just come over time. Yes. And meditation upon scripture, not just the task of reading it and then moving on, but the task of reading, rereading, rereading again and having it playing in your mind for the day and little things coming to mind in terms of connections and then leaving it to simmer for months.

[67:58] That's the way I've found it to be most fruitful to read the text. And I've often discovered many months after a first experience of getting into a text in some depth that some of the insights actually come to fruition.

And it's taken many months to get there. But it's been in the background alongside lots of other texts that I've put into a mix. A final point I think I might want to add is that I find reading critical commentaries to be quite helpful.

Now, I wouldn't recommend that to everyone. There are various people in my church who I would say is just not a good idea to read certain types of material like that.

But I think if you're sort of fairly well established in terms of what you think about the Bible and a happy recognising sort of the way in which a lot of that just comes from a completely different worldview instead of presuppositions.

I think if you're in that category, then critical commentaries can be very enlightening in that sense because writers like that are often seeing things which I don't see and have missed and then can kind of rework in a more evangelical framework.

[69:20] And I found that to be really, really useful. Often that's then a case of disentangling the data, which I see is the sort of textual similarities from the interpretation.

And that's been my experience, too. I think that takes us back to where we started, that there's something about the way that we view Scripture and its truthfulness that can give us a confidence when we come to the weirdness of the text and the seeming incongruous details or the tensions and apparent contradictions, that we're not scared of them and we can actually lean into them and explore them.

Whereas many evangelicals, I think, lack that patience and the ability to live with some of the tensions for a while and explore them.

And as a result, prematurely harmonize what is actually an invitation to a banquet. And increasingly, I'm thinking in terms of Scripture as giving us these invitations if we're attentive to it.

And if we follow them, I think we'll find a great many feasts. Thank you very much for listening. Thank you, James, for joining me. And Lord willing, we'll be able to continue this conversation soon.

[70:38] If you want to listen to more conversation with James, I highly recommend following the Theopolis podcast, where we have many conversations about texts. We're currently going through the book of Jonah, which is a rich and bountiful text.

There's so much going on there, so much intertextuality. And it's within a book that seems so much simpler on the surface than you would expect for a text that holds so much in terms of its treasures.

Thank you for listening. God bless and talk again soon.