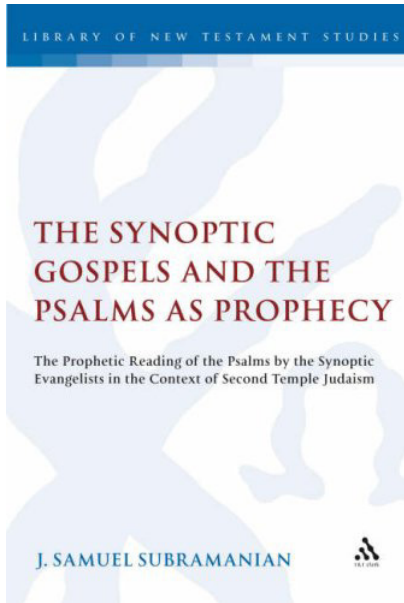


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Subramanian, J. Samuel

The Synoptic Gospels and the Psalms as Prophecy

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As J. Samuel Subramanian states in the preface (xi–xii), the present book is the “lightly revised version” of his dissertation at the Graduate School of McMaster University in 2002 under the auspices of Stephen R. Westerholm. Subramanian claims to have detected that “[t]he Synoptic evangelists seem to have read the Psalms not primarily as prayers but as prophecies of the future” and attempts to place this prophetic reading of the Psalms also within the general use of Jewish Scriptures in the writings of the New Testament. It is natural that he must address definitional matters and Second Temple Jewish literature in order to assess the textual evidence appropriately; of course, Subramanian defines his own method so that readers are enabled to identify the approach to the use of the Psalms in the three Synoptic Gospels easily and to evaluate it soundly.

A colleague of mine once suggested that reading the Psalms is almost enough to get to know all the facets of Old Testament theology. According to him, individual psalms or groups of them not only contain the most relevant topics but also could serve as role models for a condensed and poetic way to express in short what the Pentateuch, the Prophets, or the wisdom literature do in a more narrative manner. Only the historical books evoked in him doubts whether they can really be “substituted” by the Psalms. There is no need to argue against such a notion here in this review, because such views are methodologically out of the question. However, they show at least one positive aspect:

the Psalms are fascinating and versatile texts, no matter if they are regarded individually or in sets of texts that belong together more closely (thematically and formally); the Psalms even invite readers to slip into a certain perspective that is shaped by, for example, their current life situation or their individual socialization.

With his approach to regard the Psalm quotations in the Synoptic Gospels and to search for clues that the Evangelists have read the Psalms as prophecies, Subramanian adopts an attitude that is new and innovative, an attitude that appears convincing from the very beginning: Why shouldn't the Evangelists use the Psalms as prophecies of Jesus' life and work, his theological relevance, and God's mighty deed in him for humankind?

After a preface, a foreword (mainly about previous and other projects that may be relevant for Subramanian's work and a brief outline of his academic career), and a list of abbreviations, Subramanian introduces his topic and method (ch. 1: "Introduction," 1–18). With his work Subramanian "attempts to provide a comprehensive picture of the extent to which each evangelist reads the Psalms as prophecy" (3). Although others have addressed this issue for individual or groups of psalms, the desideratum of a comprehensive study of the subject still exists, and Subramanian successfully fulfills it in his book. Then follows a brief history of relevant research (3–9) and the essential definition of terms and methods. Subramanian distinguishes between "direct quotations" with and without introductory formula. By applying this rough scheme he identifies ten clear quotations of the Psalms in the Synoptic Gospels, five for each group. His list of texts is in close accordance with the list provided by the United Bible Societies *Greek New Testament*, though Subramanian adds Ps 6:9a LXX in Matt 7:23b and does not accept that Ps. 109(110):1 can be identified in Mark 14:62a (cf. Matt 26:64a; Luke 22:69) with certainty. Methodologically speaking, Subramanian wants to place the Psalm quotations found in the Synoptic Gospels within their context of Second Temple Jewish literature with regard to the prophetic reading of the Psalms. It is not surprising that he addresses the differences in quotations and consequently the modifications of the cited texts and that he investigates the contexts the Psalm quotations are placed in by the Evangelists. What is missing here is the issue whether the Hebrew or the Greek (LXX) text of the Psalms has been quoted by the Synoptics. Nestle-Aland and *Greek New Testament* distinguish between the two of them, although it appears rather problematic to display two lists of quotations stemming from the Hebrew and the Greek Psalms. The interrelation of texts, the issues of transmission and translation, and the evident identification of a quotation as being from the Hebrew or Greek Vorlage are only a few crucial problems that speak against such an operation. Be that as it may, the problem should have been discussed (or at least been mentioned).

In addition, Subramanian hopes that his study of the specific psalm quotations will shed new light on the Synoptic Problem, as he examines the quotations in each of the three Gospels on their own first and then reflects upon the interrelation of the quotations in the Synoptics (which quotation is found in which Gospel[s]).

The second chapter is given to “The Prophetic Reading of the Psalms in Second Temple Jewish Literature” (20–44), where Subramanian mainly addresses Jewish Scriptures (biblical writings), the Qumran Psalms Scroll (11QPs^a), Philo, Josephus, the pesharim (Qumran), and 1 Maccabees. It is not surprising that Subramanian does not deal with texts and contexts *in extenso*. How could he have done so in twenty-five pages? He focuses on certain thematic issues (e.g., David) and concentrates on sample texts. Chapter 2 would have deserved (and obviously required) a book-length study on its own. For the purpose pursued in this study, Subramanian made a reasonable choice, and the sample he offers is adequate.

According to his strategy (see 19), he starts with the Psalms quotations in Mark’s Gospel (ch. 3 [45–70]), in Luke (ch. 4 [71–90]), and in Matthew (ch. 5 [91–123]). Every single quotation (for a list, see 13–14)—four in Mark, six in Luke, and nine in Matthew—is presented in comparison to its “original” text in the Psalms, contextualized, read as a prophetic text, and finally assessed (conclusions). In addition to the fine specific observations for individual psalm quotations, Subramanian examines the interrelation between the Synoptic Gospels and the Psalms quoted in them, so that readers get to know if all three or only two Synoptics share certain quotations or if they are present in one Gospel alone.

Chapter 6 (124–31) is a summary of Subramanian’s findings and conclusions, but it also offers “Suggestions for Further Research,” among them a proposal for investigating the prophetic reading of the Psalms in other books of the New Testament, the historical question (of course, by discussing John D. Crossan’s approach), and the source question (with focus on the Synoptic Problem). The last issue mentioned might be the most interesting, and what Subramanian learned about the reading of the Psalms as prophecy in the Synoptic Gospels may help to refine or even modify existing models explaining the Synoptic Problem and the source question, as Subramanian’s study seems to support William R. Farmer’s hypothesis and the Two-Gospel (or neo-Griesbach) hypothesis. Still, such a claim would require further work; Matthew’s Psalm quotations may have served as models for Luke and Mark. Thus, “the evidence is consistent with the Griesbach hypothesis” (131), which says that Matthew might have composed the first of the three Synoptic Gospels, Luke the second, and Mark the third, using the material of the former two.

The book comes with a comprehensive bibliography (that could have been enlarged by adding, e.g., Ulrich Rösen-Weinhold, *Der Septuagintapsalter im Neuen Testament: Eine textgeschichtliche Untersuchung* [Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 2004]), an index of references (in the slightly awkward sequence Old Testament, New Testament, Pseudepigrapha, Qumran, early Jewish and Christian literature), an index of subjects, and a table (Psalm quotations in the Synoptic Gospels).

There is no doubt that Subramanian fulfills the desideratum he identified in the very beginning of his book: he offers the first comprehensive investigation into the reading of the Psalms in the Synoptic Gospels as prophetic texts. His observations are sound, his method is well thought-out, and the conclusions he draws are compelling. With this study he serves different areas of research (New Testament and Old Testament exegesis, source criticism, Septuagint research, just to mention a few). It is a landmark study for all those who will examine this topic or dedicate their research to similar topics in the future, and it raises questions that must really be addressed again, among them, above all, the source question.