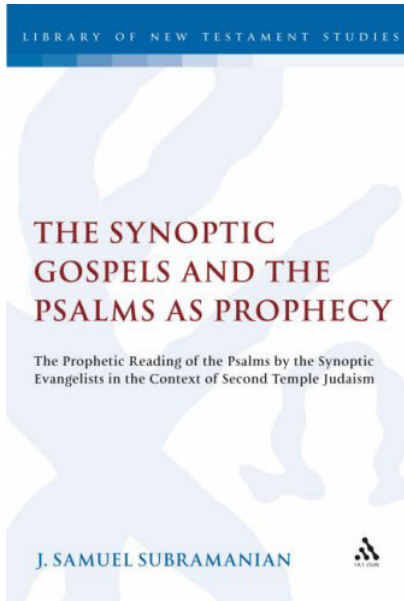


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Subramanian, J. Samuel

The Synoptic Gospels and the Psalms as Prophecy

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Edward J. Mills III
Kingsport, Tennessee

In *The Synoptic Gospels and the Psalms as Prophecy*, J. Samuel Subramanian has published a “lightly revised version” of his 2002 doctoral dissertation submitted to the Graduate School of McMaster University. I thoroughly enjoyed reading this book. It has many things to recommend it, and, as the way of all flesh, a few that do not.

The text is concise and tight; there are no extraneous words or excursions on ephemeral matters. The author provides a preface and six terse yet loaded chapters, chapter 6 being a summation of the whole. The first chapter summarizes the work in years past on Subramanian’s topic and provides his definition of terms and methods. The second traces the use of the Psalms as prophecy in Second Temple Israel. Chapters 3–5 examine the use of the Psalm texts by the Synoptic authors: Mark, Luke, and Matthew, respectively. In addition, there is a foreword by David B. Peabody of Nebraska Wesleyan University.

To begin, the author sets out what I believe are necessarily rigorous restrictions of what comprises a “gospel quotation of a Psalm text as prophecy” (9–15). First he lists five texts introduced by the Synoptic authors by an introductory formula as clear references to the Psalms: (1) 117(118):22–23 in Matt 21:42//Mark 12:10–11//Luke 20:17; (2) 109(110):1 in Matt 22:43–44//Mark 12:36//Luke 20:42–43; (3) 90(91):11–12 in Matt 4:6//Luke 4:10–11; (4) 77(78):2 in Matt 13:35; and (5) 8:3 LXX in Matt 21:16. He then lists five more Psalm

texts as certain references by the Synoptic authors (these without any introductory formulae) that “demonstrate verbal agreement (with a minimum of five words in identical form and order) with their probable source in the Psalms”: (1) 117(118):25–26a in Matt 21:9//Mark 11:9b–10//Luke 19:38; (2) 117(118)26a in Matt 23:39//Luke 13:35; (3) 21(22):2a in Matthew 27:46//Mark 15:34; (4) 6:9a LXX in Matt 7:23b; (5) 30(31):6a in Luke 23:46b.

His choices here are slightly different from those of the United Bible Societies *Greek New Testament* (13–14), omitting their 109(110):1 in Mark14:26a//Matt 26:64a//Luke 22:69 and adding 6:9a LXX in Matt 7:23b. He adds 6:9a LXX “because the Gospel text shares six words in the same form and order” (14). He omits 109(110):1 in Mark14:26a//Matt 26:64a//Luke 22:69 because “of the 20 words that make up Ps. 109(110).1, only two are found in the same form and order in Mk. 14.62a; and one other word is derived from the same root” (14). Of necessity, the author keeps tight criteria for his work, but here I believe that we do have a reference of the Synoptic authors to a perceived prophecy in Ps 109(110):1. But it is far less clearly so than the examples that Subramanian chooses. In the New Testament, one finds references to the Old Greek Bible (on the use of the name “Old Greek Bible” instead of “Septuagint,” see below) that range from loose references to tight quotations and many between these poles. One could argue that the Synoptic Gospels use several other Psalm texts as prophecy, at least by allusion, but for Subramanian’s purposes there is a real need for precise criteria of selection, which he provides nicely.

In the introduction Subramanian makes a comment on his assumption regarding the Synoptic Problem (which Synoptic Gospel/s used which). Of these Psalm texts Mark’s Gospel has four, Luke’s has six, and Matthew’s has nine. He examines the three Gospels’ use of these texts (in this order) in chapters 3–5. Subramanian claims not to “imply any particular chronological order in the composition of the Synoptic Gospels. The order has been adopted for pragmatic reasons.” (17). He avers to take no position in this work on the Synoptic Problem throughout, but his final chapter states, “This evidence [his whole work] is consistent with the Griesbach hypothesis that Matthew was written first; Luke, second; and Mark third.” (131). As I read his work, however, I could not escape the feeling that the whole work was written in order to buttress the case for the Griesbach hypothesis. I write this for a multitude of reasons, most of them intuitive, but some less so. For example: Subramanian analyzes the Synoptic texts in the same way as other Griesbachian writers (William R. Farmer, David Peabody, etc.) by first analyzing the Synoptic texts separately and within the context of their own Gospel’s idiosyncrasies and only then synoptically. Doing so allows one, in my opinion, to appreciate the ability to understand the Gospel relationships without the need for a Q source. Although Reginald H. Fuller schooled me in the Two Source Hypothesis in the 1970s and I assumed for years that there was no other logical solution to the Synoptic problem, I am now a

Griesbachian, or at least a modified *Griesbachian*.¹ I believe that this theoretical construct better explains the Synoptic Gospels' relationships than the postulation of a Q source for which there is no evidence in antiquity or in centuries of archaeology. Subramanian's book helps to solidify my views further in this regard. It also fits the unified patristic witness that Matthew's Gospel was the first to be written. I believe that Subramanian's work is *slightly* flawed by his lack of transparency about this theoretical commitment. Peabody's foreword already signals that it is there. I believe that it would have been better for the author to have admitted this theoretical commitment from the outset.

I now begin with some pluses and minuses, from my point of view. As to the pluses, I must begin with Subramanian's prose. It is clear, concise, and stylistically good. One does not wonder what he is, or is not, saying. The book is well and clearly organized. Each chapter on the respective Synoptic Gospels is tightly arranged around the themes of (1) text; (2) context of the Psalm text (in the Gospel and the original Psalm setting); (3) prophetic reading of the psalm in the New Testament quotation; and (4) conclusion. It was helpful that Subramanian examines each Synoptic parallel within the context of its own Gospel first before synoptically (re: the Synoptic Problem). The author is very agile in his ability to illustrate the multivalent uses of the Psalms by the Synoptic Gospel authors, as well as elucidating the different contexts within which they are framed in the different Gospels than in their original context in the book of Psalms. Their meanings are often transformed in their service of the Gospel writers.

As I read *The Synoptic Gospels and the Psalms as Prophecy*, I wondered who the author's intended audience was and what audience might use this text profitably. I am convinced that the author's intended audience was the academy and that his work is a strong argument for the Griesbach hypothesis in the ongoing debate surrounding the Synoptic Problem. However, it could be used profitably with graduate students and perhaps even undergraduates (Subramanian translates all his Greek, Hebrew, and Aramaic texts into English) as an introduction to how the Gospel writers and perhaps Jesus used the Old Greek Bible, specifically the Psalms. The author is, again, quite good in explicating the differences between the original context of the Psalm texts and their new context in the Synoptic Gospels. He is equally persuasive in explaining how the use of Psalm texts out of their original contexts, which initially looks to us to be tendentious, actually has a certain rationale in the larger sweep of the Gospel proclamation.

1. Or, more properly, a *Clementine*. Clement of Alexandria was the first author to clearly posit the solution to the origins and chronological order of the Gospels to be Matthew–Luke–Mark–John (*Strom.* 1.1.11; *Hyp.* 6; Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 5.11.3–4; 6.14.5–7. This thought was first suggested to me by Guiseppe Giov. Gamba, "A Further Reexamination of Evidence from the Early Tradition," in *New Synoptic Studies: The Cambridge Gospel Conference and Beyond* (ed. William R. Farmer; Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press. 1983), 17–35.

Subramanian's footnotes are extensive and thorough. In fact, I ended up reading quite a few of his referenced works, a couple by authors of whom I was unaware.

One useful aspect of the work is the clarity with which Subramanian demonstrates (without specifically arguing such) that the *gestalt* of the New Testament and its use of the Jewish Bible is dominantly Greek. All of the Synoptic authors swim in a sea of Greek, not Hebrew, not Aramaic. Their tendentious (although also compelling) use of the Psalm texts presumes the Old Greek version. Some of them do not make sense with the Hebrew text. But this begs the question as to whether the origin of this use of the Old Greek Bible was with the Gospel writers or with Jesus of Nazareth. The dominant answer of scholarship is that it began with the expansion of the Gospel into the Greek-speaking Gentile world represented in the publication of the Synoptic Gospels; Jesus surely did not speak Greek, after all. Here I am an iconoclast, and Subramanian's book pushed me further in this direction. Greek appears everywhere in Second Temple Judaism. Patriotic works such as 2–4 Maccabees were penned originally in Greek. Epigraphic evidence of the equal use of Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek is plentiful, even in memorials to the dead—where one assumes that one wrote in the language of the heart, that of fluency. Greek documents were found at Qumran and Nahal Hever. Caesar (regardless of which one), when he wished to stop grave desecration, ordered the Nazareth Inscription in Greek. Regardless of its provenance in Galilee, it was meant to be read and understood—in Greek. In Jerusalem, the heart of Second Temple Judaism, the dedicatory inscription to the first-century C.E. Theodotus Synagogue was inscribed in Greek. Even given that it was perhaps founded by Diaspora Jews, one would assume that the dedication as intended to be read—in Greek. Why, then, do we assume that Jesus, raised in multicultural Galilee, did not speak in Greek and quote the Old Greek Bible when it suited him? While assuming a great deal of freedom with the Jesus tradition exercised by the Gospel writers, I believe that this tradition of looking to the Old Greek Bible might well originate with Jesus. I would have loved to have had Subramanian tackle the problem of whether the use of the Old Greek Bible goes back to Jesus or not. However, this idea is so far off the radar in the field that it may not have occurred to him.

Subramanian address “the historical question” (129–30) primarily regarding Crossan's work on the passion stories (*Who Killed Jesus? Exposing the Roots of Anti-Semitism in the Gospel Story of the Death of Jesus* [HarperSanFrancisco, 1991]). Crossan posits that rather than *history remembered*, the use of the Psalm texts in the passion stories were *prophecy historicized*, that they were the key to inventing the details of the passion story—which had been either unknown or long forgotten. Without taking a strong position, Subramanian seems to prefer Goodacre's view (“Scripturalization in Mark's Crucifixion Narrative,” in *The Passion in Mark* [ed. G. V. Oyen and T. Shepherd; Leuven: Peeters, 2006], 33–48) that what happened was that historical events became *tradition scripturized*,

a more optimistic point of view than Crossan's. Whatever the historical answer may be, the Psalm texts were meditated and prayed upon so deeply over the years following Jesus' crucifixion in order to understand this suffering Messiah that they became a bedrock part of the Gospel passion stories when written. I would have liked the author to explore these issues more deeply.

As noted above, I also found that Subramanian's work clearly documents the Evangelists' freedom in use of both the Psalm texts and the Jesus tradition in order to tell their stories. This goes for their particular use of the Psalm texts and their manipulation of the Jesus tradition in their use of them. I found his analysis of the use of the Ps 117(118) texts with their juxtaposition to the string of parables in Matt 21:23–46 and its parallels particularly insightful. His survey of the various themes woven into each of the Synoptic Gospels, particularly in their individual use of the same Psalm texts to illustrate these themes, is also quite good. His book would be a fairly painless introduction to students to this authorial license and redaction criticism. It would be a gentle introduction to these realities to students with a faith commitment who often feel personally assaulted by such introductions.

As to the minuses, my first is of the author's free use of the term Septuagint/LXX as if there was a universal text of *the* Septuagint prior to the eighth or ninth century C.E.—there being seven hundred plus extant texts of the Greek Psalms or Greek Psalms and the Odes. One might also justifiably use the term *Septuagint of the Greek Torah*, but I would suggest the better term for the variety of Greek Bible/s is the Old Greek Bible. In light of this, I would have liked to have had the new Rahlfs and Fraenkel's *Verzeichnis der griechischen Handschriften des Alten Testaments* (vol. 1.1; recently reviewed in *RBL*) in order to chase down the Old Greek texts used by the Synoptic Gospels.

Also, I wish that Subramanian would have gone on to analyze the second half of Luke's work, Luke-Acts. After all, Acts contains further and/or redundant examples of how Luke (or the apostles) viewed Psalm texts as prophecy. Subramanian himself references examples of this in his work, but not with any comprehensiveness. Without this, his work seems a bit incomplete.

In *fine*, I enjoyed this book. As one who spends a lot of time in the pulpit, I shall return to it again and again to examine the way the Psalm texts were proclaimed as prophecies of the coming of the Christ. As mentioned above, Subramanian, when he writes upon the rationale of the Synoptic use of the Psalm texts, makes their thought and beliefs compelling—even to modern hearers. He also is particularly persuasive in how they also tie into the thought of the Gospel materials around them, their new context. Good work this.