

Dr. Matthew S. Harmon, Bible's Use of the Bible, Session 4, A Case Study: Isaiah 49 in Galatians 1 Networks, Podcast Audio Overview

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What if I told you that one of the most famous foundational letters in ancient history isn't actually original? Right, like it's a remix. Yeah, exactly. Like, what if its author essentially, you know, sampled a 700-year-old text just to justify this highly controversial, radical new movement? It completely changes the entire way you read the document, honestly.

Oh, absolutely. Because you stop looking at just the surface-level arguments and you start seeing this architecture underneath. You start looking for these intentional, hidden connections that the author left for his audience to find.

And today's deep dive is all about uncovering that exact hidden architecture. We are exploring how ancient writers took these earlier, sacred texts and, well, completely recontextualized them to make profound new points. That's some fascinating detective work.

It really is. And our guide for this is a lecture by Dr. Matthew S. Harmon from his series, *The Bible's Use of the Bible*. Right, specifically session four.

Yep. Session four, which is sponsored by BiblicalLearning.org and Ted Hildebrandt. And the core of this lecture, our mission today, is a detailed case study.

We are looking at exactly how the Apostle Paul uses the ancient book of Isaiah when he's writing his letter to the Galatians. And what makes Harmon's approach so compelling here is that we basically get to look over the shoulder of an ancient author. Oh, I love that image.

Yeah, we're trying to, you know, reverse engineer his theological process. We want to know why he chose a very specific older text and what explosive point he's trying to make by dragging that ancient text into his own contemporary letter. Okay, let's unpack this.

Because Harmon lays out a really natural framework for analyzing these texts, he treats it almost like a forensic investigation. Very methodical. Right.

So first, you have to prove the connection actually exists, which he calls identifying the illusion. Then you have to study the donor text, which is the original source material. Exactly, the source material.

After that, you examine the receptor text, which is the new document that's doing the borrowing. And finally, you step back to look at the theological outcome, basically the big so what that resolves the tension. And, you know, throwing around academic terms like donor and receptor text can sound like you need to read ancient Greek or Hebrew to even participate in this.

Oh, for sure. It sounds intimidating. But Harmon points out that anyone can do this work.

I mean, yes, scholars spend lifetimes on the minutiae. But if you have a good English translation and a cross-reference tool, which is pretty easy to find these days. Exactly.

He suggests the Connecting Scripture New Testament or the notes in the Net Bible. And with those, you can find these embedded connections yourself. Those tools literally highlight the overlapping phrases, allowing you to trace the author's thought process directly, which makes this so much more accessible for all of you listening.

So let's just dive right into that first phase, identifying the illusion, the detective work, right? Because obviously we can't analyze a connection if we aren't absolutely sure it's intentional. We have to prove Paul is deliberately pointing to Isaiah in Galatians and not just, you know, accidentally using similar vocabulary. You have to establish deliberate intent.

Otherwise, you're just drawing lines between random dots. I always think about this kind of intentional referencing the way a hip hop producer samples a classic soul record. Oh, that's a great analogy.

Right. Because they don't copy the whole song. They take a highly recognizable, maybe like a four-second drum loop or a very specific vocal hook.

Just a tiny fragment. Exactly. And they weave it into their new track.

They give you just enough of that sample so that if you know the original music, the entire ethos and emotional weight of that classic song just floods into your mind while you're listening to the new one. Right. It brings all that baggage with it.

So applying that to our ancient texts, what are the specific, let's call them vocal hooks, that Paul is sampling in Galatians chapter one? Well, when you line these two texts up side by side, the specificity of the sample is actually striking. Harmon directs us to Galatians 1: 15 through 17. Okay.

And he argues that Paul is heavily pulling from Isaiah 49 verses one through six. First, you just look at the shared phrasing. In Isaiah, the speaker says, God called him from my mother's womb and that God called my name.

From my mother's womb. Right. Jump forward several centuries.

And Paul uses those exact same phrases in Galatians to describe his own origin story and his calling. That is pretty direct. It gets better.

On top of that, both texts share a very specific, almost existential anxiety. It's this concept of running or labeling in vain. Oh man.

For a guy like Paul, who spent his entire life traveling the Mediterranean, getting stoned, shipwrecked, and, you know, constantly opposed to pushback. Yeah. That fear of laboring in vain, of doing all of that suffering for absolutely nothing.

That must have been a deeply visceral terror for him. Absolutely. So mother's womb called my name, laboring in vain.

The pattern is definitely taking shape here. It is. But the most compelling piece of evidence actually comes down to a fascinating translation nuance.

Oh, I love these little details. Right. So Paul, writing to a Greek-speaking audience, was likely reading and referencing the Septuagint, not the original Hebrew.

Okay. So he's working off the Greek translation of the Old Testament. Correct.

Now in the Greek translation of Isaiah 49 verse three, the translator made a very interesting choice. The Greek word they used for servant in that specific verse is *doulos*. *Doulos*.

Okay. Why does that matter? Here is why that matters. Everywhere else in the Greek translation of Isaiah, where the servant is mentioned, and this includes the incredibly famous suffering servant passage in chapter 53.

Right. The one everyone knows. Exactly.

Everywhere else, the translator uses a completely different Greek word, *pais*. Wait, really? Just a totally different word? Yes. *Pais* can mean child or servant, but *doulos* carries a much heavier connotation.

It means absolute subjection, like a bond servant whose will is entirely subsumed by their master. Oh. And Isaiah 49 is the only place in the entire book where *doulos* is used for this figure.

That is a wildly specific translation quirk. Let me think. If Paul is intentionally lifting from Isaiah 49 to describe his own ministry, what word does he use in Galatians 1.10 to describe himself? He describes himself as a *doulos* of Christ.

No way. Yes. He zeros in on that exact, unique vocabulary choice from Isaiah 49.

It's not a generic reference to being a servant. It is a laser-targeted sample of that one specific chapter. Okay.

That definitely strengthens the case, but I do have to play devil's advocate for a second here. Go for it. People talk about destiny from the womb or working for nothing all the time.

I mean, the Book of Jeremiah famously has that line, before I formed you in the womb, I knew you. Very true. So couldn't Paul just be referencing Jeremiah? Or maybe he's just using the standard religious jargon of a first-century rabbi.

And Harmon addresses that Jeremiah parallel directly, because it is a very fair question to ask. Jeremiah 1.5 absolutely has similar mother's womb language. Right.

If Paul had only used that one phrase, Jeremiah would have a perfectly viable source text. But literary analysis is really about the cumulative weight of the evidence. It's stacking the clues.

Exactly. When you stack mother's womb together with called my name and then add the shared anxiety of laboring in vain and top it all off with that highly anomalous use of the word doulos. Right.

The doulos thing is huge. The sheer volume of overlapping specific vocabulary makes Isaiah 49 the undeniable source. The statistical probability of hitting all those specific notes by accident in the exact same sequence is virtually zero.

OK, I'm sold. So we have the intent. We know Paul is intentionally looping that specific Isaiah 49 track into the background of Galatians.

He's making sure his audience hears that sample. Exactly. Which means we have to understand the donor text.

If we know what track he's sampling, we need to know what that original track meant to its original audience. Why Isaiah 49? Out of all the scrolls he had access to, why that one? Well, what's fascinating here is that to figure that out, we have to look at the horizontal context of Isaiah. Meaning the chapters right around it.

Right. Reading the chapters immediately surrounding our target text to understand the flow of the prophet's argument. If you rewind just a bit to Isaiah 42, the text speaks extensively about God's servant.

OK. And in that context, it sounds very clearly like the servant is the entire corporate nation of Israel. So the whole nation is the servant.

Yes. They were called to be a light to the nations, to represent God to the world. But if you keep reading to the end of chapter 42, verses 18 and 19, the prophet suddenly calls that exact same servant blind and deaf.

Oh, so the nation failed the mission. Completely. They were given this cosmic job description, and they just entirely dropped the ball.

They failed spectacularly as the corporate servant. So for the next several chapters, the text builds this incredible narrative tension. If God's chosen servant has failed, how will God's promises to the world ever be fulfilled? That's a massive cliffhanger for an ancient text.

Right. And that tension hangs in the air until we arrive at Isaiah 49. Suddenly, the text introduces a new servant.

But not a nation this time. Exactly. This time, it is an individual servant who is being raised up to obey perfectly in the exact space where the nation failed.

This one individual will take on the mission that the whole group abandoned. You know, if we zoom out and look at the grand sweep of the biblical narrative, this sounds like a recurring motif. It is the central motif.

Harman actually calls this the vertical context. It's how this specific text fits into the overarching theology of the Bible as a whole. OK, explain that a bit more.

So there is a deeply ingrained pattern where God repeatedly raises up an individual servant to rescue or create a servant people. We see this with Adam, who fails. We see it with Moses, who delivers the people but ultimately falls short.

We see it with David. Oh, I see. And in the Christian narrative, this culminates in Jesus.

The pattern is always that one individual steps into the breach to redeem the many. It's the ultimate archetype. An individual takes on the burden of the collective.

And Harman highlights a stunning piece of grammatical proof for this dynamic right inside the book of Isaiah. Oh, I love grammatical proof. Lay it on me.

From chapter 40 all the way through chapter 53, the word servant is used exclusively in the singular. Singular, just one person. Entirely focused on this one coming figure.

But in chapter 53, this individual servant suffers and completes his redeeming work. The very next chapter, Isaiah 54, the text suddenly shifts. For the first time, it uses the plural servants.

Wait, really? It just flips to plural right after the victory? Right after. Because the individual succeeded, the community is birthed. That is wild.

The singular servant literally generates a new community of plural servants. That is a massive theological payload. It carries immense weight.

Isaiah 49 is a text fundamentally about ultimate cosmic purpose, the redemption of a failed nation, and a solitary figure appointed to bring light to the ends of the earth. So if Isaiah 49 is about this ultimate singular messianic servant who succeeds where a whole nation failed, how on earth does Paul justify claiming it for himself in Galatians? That is the pivotal question of this entire study. Because here's where it gets really interesting for me.

I'm having a really hard time with this, and I imagine anyone familiar with the New Testament would too. It's a jarring claim. Extremely jarring.

In the Christian tradition, Jesus is the ultimate servant. The Gospel of Matthew explicitly quotes these exact servant prophecies from Isaiah and points directly at Jesus. Right.

It's definitively messianic. So isn't Paul being incredibly arrogant here? He's taking this massive, sacred messianic prophecy about the savior of the world, and he's basically saying, yeah, this 700-year-old text is actually about me and my missionary career. I mean, that sounds borderline heretical.

It sounds incredibly audacious, honestly. And Harmon leans right into that shock value. To understand how Paul can make this claim without being a complete megalomaniac, we have to look at the horizontal context of the receptor text.

OK, so Paul's letter to the Galatians. Yes. We have to ask, what is happening in Paul's life when he writes this letter? And the reality is, Paul is in the middle of a brutal, existential fight for his apostolic authority.

He's dealing with the Judaizers, right? The faction saying you have to become culturally Jewish before you can become Christian. Right. Paul's unique, God-given calling was to take the message of Jesus to the Gentiles, the non-Jewish nations.

And he was doing it without requiring them to adopt the Mosaic law, like circumcision or dietary restrictions. Which at the time was unheard of. It caused a massive scandal back in the Jerusalem church.

Leaders were questioning his credentials, his theology, and his right to even call himself an apostle. His authority was under total assault. So he needs heavy artillery.

He needs a robust, unassailable scriptural foundation to justify why he is operating outside the traditional boundaries of Judaism. He needs to prove that his rogue mission to the Gentiles is actually the fulfillment of the ancient Jewish scriptures. And what better text than Isaiah 49, right? Precisely.

And Harmon notes that Galatians isn't an isolated incident of Paul doing this. Oh, he does this elsewhere. Yeah, if you look at the book of Acts, chapter 13, Paul is preaching in Antioch, facing a crowd that is turning hostile and totally rejecting him.

Typical Tuesday for Paul. Pretty much. And in that moment of intense opposition, he literally quotes Isaiah 49.6 out loud to the crowd.

He says, Wow. Okay, I understand the historical pressure he's under. I get why he needs the text to validate his mission.

But my fundamental problem is still sitting right there. The arrogance issue. Right.

How does he claim the title of the servant without stealing the spotlight from Jesus? How does he usurp a messianic prophecy without essentially replacing the Messiah? Resolving that tension is the final phase of Harmon's method, finding the exegetical outcome. We're looking for the theological mechanism that makes this whole thing work. Okay, what's the mechanism? Harmon points out that to find the answer, we don't look back at Isaiah.

We look slightly deeper into Galatians itself. We look for the master key in chapter two. Galatians 2.20. Yes.

Christ who lives in me. The phrasing there is so incredibly specific. It all hinges on that preposition.

Harmon points out that earlier in Galatians, Paul doesn't say God revealed his son to me. He says God revealed his son in me. Oh, wow.

Paul has fundamentally redefined his own identity. His ego, his separate self has been completely dismantled. Okay, so think about this set of traditional Russian nesting dolls.

Oh, I like that. Right. If you look at the outer doll, you see Paul.

You see this controversial, fiery guy traveling around the Mediterranean, writing letters, arguing with Peter and starting churches among the Gentiles. That's the physical outer layer. Invisible Paul.

But Paul is arguing that if you open up that outer doll, he isn't driving his own life anymore. The doll inside of him is Jesus. Jesus is the ultimate suffering servant from Isaiah 53.

And because Jesus lives inside Paul, Jesus is actually the one fulfilling the mission of the Isaiah 49 servant through Paul's physical actions. That analogy captures the mechanics perfectly. Right.

So Paul hasn't replaced Jesus at all. Paul has become the physical vessel for Jesus to continue his work on Earth. Exactly.

Paul is the outer doll, but the inner operating reality is Christ. Harmon refers to this theological concept as a form of indirect fulfillment. Indirect fulfillment.

Paul is not saying, Isaiah looked through the corridors of time and saw me, Paul of Tarsus, as the savior. That would be the megalomaniac reading. Right.

Instead, he is saying, Isaiah saw Christ. And because my individual identity is now entirely surrendered to and subsumed by Christ's identity, I am caught up in the wake of that prophecy. Wow.

Paul's calling to the Gentiles was prefigured in Isaiah precisely because his life is no longer his own. You know, it completely flips the script on my earlier objections. It's not an ego trip at all.

Not at all. It is actually the ultimate expression of humility. He is saying, I am nothing more than the glove on the hand of the true servant.

And once you grasp that mechanism, Paul's use of scripture stops looking like this arrogant, out-of-context cherry-picking. Right. It's not just a debate tactic.

Exactly. It reveals a profound, lived theology. He isn't reading the Bible as a static history book or like a theoretical document.

He is reading it as a living script that he is actively, physically participating in. So what does this all mean? We've gone deep into the translation nuances of the Septuagint. We've talked about first-century church politics and the complex theology of indirect fulfillment.

How do we bring this conceptual theology down to the ground level for you, the listener? What does this actually mean for us today? Well, the brilliance of Harma's conclusion is that the nesting doll analogy doesn't stop with the Apostle Paul. It keeps going. It keeps going.

Because Christ lived in Paul, Paul could act as the servant to the Gentiles. But according to this theology, Christ also lives in the broader church. He lives in everyday believers.

Oh, man. Which ties us right back to that grammatical shift in Isaiah. Yes.

The shift from the singular servant to the plural servant. You see the architecture coming together now. It's mind-blowing.

In Isaiah 54, the individual servant's success birthed the plural servants. If Christ lives in the church today, then the people of the church collectively are those plural servants. We become the outer nesting dolls.

The mission didn't end when Paul died. Not at all. The mandate to be a light of salvation to the ends of the earth is transferred to anyone who shares that inner identity with Christ.

Paul was the pioneer of this Gentile inclusion. But he was never meant to be the end of the line. Right.

The church itself is meant to be the physical space where Christ dwells and through whom he continues to reach the nations. That is just a staggering paradigm shift. It completely reorients how someone would view their own ordinary life and purpose.

It elevates everything. It really does. It takes faith out of the realm of just believing a set of historical facts, and it turns it into embodying a millennia-old cosmic mission.

Every action becomes charged with this ancient significance. It truly does. And as we conclude this deep dive, I want to leave you, the listener, with a final thought to mull over.

A provocative idea that stems directly from all this text analysis, but goes a little beyond it. Let's hear it. We just spent this time exploring how Paul read an ancient 700-year-old scroll.

And he didn't just analyze it academically. He realized that his own daily struggles, his career, his conflicts, they were actively fulfilling that text. The ancient words were alive in his present reality.

Exactly. He found the hidden architectural blueprint and realized it was the map to his own life. Wow.

So it begs a really profound question for you. When you engage with deeply significant text, whether you're reading history, studying philosophy, or reading scripture, how are you approaching the material? That's a great question. Are you just reading about the past? You know, analyzing it like a dead artifact behind museum glass? Or like Paul, are you looking for the blueprint of what you were supposed to be doing right now? Are you allowing the text to read you and challenging yourself to see your own life as an active participant in a much larger ongoing narrative? That is the perfect question to end on.

We are always looking for the hidden remake, the deeper layer of the story we are currently living. Thank you all for joining us on this deep dive into the hidden connections of ancient texts. We hope you found a few Easter eggs of your own today.

Until next time, keep digging and keep asking the big questions.