

## Does John Quote the Old Testament Out of Context? An Examination of John 19:17 – 42

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John speaks of Exodus 12:46 – ‘not a bone of him shall be broken’ – as being ‘fulfilled’ in John 19:36. But Exodus 12:46 is not a prediction! Obviously, John the writer of the Gospel believes that the Passover lamb symbolism from Exodus is significant to understanding Jesus. But, on a flat reading of any English translation, he seems to be taking a gross liberty by pulling an Old Testament reference out of context and converting it into a prediction when it clearly was not. Also, in John 19:28 – 30, Jesus triggers the sour wine being given to him, alluding by this to Psalm 69:21b – ‘and for my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink’ – but David’s anger – ‘May they be blotted out of the book of life’ in 69:28 – does not correspond with Jesus’ forgiveness. Is Psalm 69 a prophecy of Jesus or an experience of David? And if it is a prophecy, can Jesus intentionally ‘fulfill’ part of it? What’s going on here? Our understanding of John 19:17 – 42 will be greatly helped if we understand how these Old Testament passages were connected to each other *prior to Jesus and prior to John’s writing*.

First, let me make a parallel on how literary connections are made in an unfolding canonical story. Consider the following quotes:

Quote	Source	Circumstance
‘We believe that all men are created equal...	U.S. Constitution	Founding of the U.S. and its stated ideals, although slavery was still a vexing problem, women’s suffrage had not been extended, and property ownership was required for voting.
‘Four score and seven years ago, our forefathers brought forth on this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.’	Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address, 11/19/1863	The States could not resolve the issue of slavery, which contributed to the Civil War. Lincoln saw that the struggle was not just for the Union, but for the triumph of individual rights over states’ rights. He later issued the Emancipation Proclamation, and then the U.S. passed the 13 <sup>th</sup> and 14 <sup>th</sup> Amendments, which granted political equality for blacks.
‘I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: ‘We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.’	Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s speech at the Lincoln Memorial 8/28/1963	After the Civil War, Jim Crow segregation in the South and racism in the North made the Civil Rights Movement necessary. MLK expressed this hope for true political equality.

These are all political speeches that are very significant in U.S. history because they affirm the equal dignity of all people as an ideal for the United States. They are part of a *canonical story*. From time to time they are repeated by politicians and the public as a declaration of what makes the U.S. special, but also the long way we still have to go to fill that ideal to the full. Those words are not ‘predictive’ in a flat sense but they are very special markers of hope in a story that is still unfolding. Because of a meaningful story and continuity of hope, those quotes can be ‘filled to the full.’ We need to understand how the Jews expected their story and words from the past to be ‘filled to the full.’

***The first Passover lamb, the firstborn of Israel:*** When God delivered Israel out of Egypt through the Exodus, He instituted the Passover lamb ceremony. The Passover Lamb was therefore a symbol of liberation from bondage. Symbolically, the lamb was the ‘firstborn’ of Israel slain so that the rest of Israel could go free.

Exodus 12:1 The LORD said to Moses and Aaron in Egypt, <sup>2</sup> ‘This month is to be for you the first month, the first month of your year. <sup>3</sup> Tell the whole community of Israel that on the tenth day of this month each man is to take a lamb for his family, one for each household. <sup>4</sup> If any household is too small for a whole lamb, they must share one with their nearest neighbor, having taken into account the number of people there are. You are to determine the amount of lamb needed in accordance with what each person will eat. <sup>5</sup> The animals you choose must be year-old males without defect, and you may take them from the sheep or the goats. <sup>6</sup> Take care of them until *the fourteenth day of the month*, when all the members of the community of Israel must slaughter them at twilight. <sup>7</sup> Then they are to take some of the blood and put it on the sides and tops of the doorframes of the houses where they eat the lambs. <sup>8</sup> That same night they are to eat the meat roasted over the fire, along with *bitter herbs*, and bread made without yeast... <sup>12</sup> On that same night I will pass through Egypt and strike down every *firstborn* of both people and animals, and I will bring judgment on all the gods of Egypt. I am the LORD. <sup>13</sup> The blood will be a sign for you on the houses where you are, and when I see the blood, I will pass over you. No destructive plague

will touch you when I strike Egypt...'<sup>21</sup> Then Moses summoned all the elders of Israel and said to them, 'Go at once and select the animals for your families and slaughter the Passover lamb.'<sup>22</sup> Take a bunch of *hyssop*, dip it into the blood in the basin and put some of the blood on the top and on both sides of the doorframe. None of you shall go out of the door of your house until morning.'<sup>23</sup> When the LORD goes through the land to strike down the Egyptians, he will see the blood on the top and sides of the doorframe and will pass over that doorway, and he will not permit the destroyer to enter your houses and strike you down...'<sup>42</sup> It is a night to be observed for the LORD for having brought them out from the land of Egypt; this night is for the LORD, to be observed by all the sons of Israel throughout their generations...'<sup>46</sup> It is to be eaten in a single house; you are not to bring forth any of the flesh outside of the house, *nor are you to break any bone of it.*' (quoted in Jn.19:36)

***The Davidic King of Israel as a firstborn, Passover Lamb:*** The King of Israel was considered to be the 'firstborn' of all kings, in the sense of being privileged: 'I also shall make him My firstborn, the highest of the kings of the earth.' (Psalm 89:27). Each subsequent king was crowned and coronated with the words of Psalm 2 sung over him, which said with God's voice, 'You are my son, this day I have begotten thee' (Psalm 2:7). The sense of Israel's King being God's *firstborn* son among the world's kings is implied. King David developed the precedent and the pattern that the King would suffer, because David endured the persecution of the then-reigning king (Saul) during the long years that he gathered Israel around himself and reconstituted the kingdom under his own reign, a life-threatening ordeal that spanned 1 Samuel 16 to 2 Samuel 5. Israelites moved from one ruler (Saul) to another (David), like the original Exodus from one ruler (Pharaoh) to another (God). Thus, during his suffering, David poetically described himself using Passover lamb language: 'Many are the afflictions of the righteous; but the LORD delivers him out of them all. He keeps all his bones; *not one of them is broken*' (Psalm 34:20, alluding to Exodus 12:46).

David also expressed lament in Psalms 69 and 22, saying that the Gentiles 'pierced' his hands and feet (Psalm 22:16). This weaves another element into the picture that would become part of Jesus' own experience. Piercing of the ear was an act Israelite servants did to voluntarily become permanent servants of their master's household, out of love (Exodus 21:5 – 6; Deuteronomy 15:16 – 17). David's usage, 'They pierce my hands and my feet,' suggests he felt like the Gentiles were forcibly and painfully making him a permanent vassal of theirs, though he eventually escaped. David saw his escape as God-orchestrated, and a reason for Gentiles to acknowledge the God of Israel. Here is one such prayer, Psalm 22:

Psalm 22:6 But I am a worm, not a human being;  
I am scorned by everyone, despised by the people.  
<sup>7</sup> All who see me mock me;  
they hurl insults, shaking their heads.  
<sup>8</sup> 'He trusts in the LORD,' they say,  
'let the LORD rescue him.  
Let him deliver him, since he delights in him' ...  
<sup>15</sup> My mouth is dried up like a potsherd,  
and my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth;  
you lay me in the dust of death.  
<sup>16</sup> Dogs surround me,  
a pack of villains encircles me;  
they pierce my hands and my feet.  
<sup>17</sup> All my bones are on display;  
people stare and gloat over me.

<sup>18</sup> They divide my clothes among them  
and cast lots for my garment... (quoted in Jn.19:24)  
<sup>27</sup> All the ends of the earth  
will remember and turn to the LORD,  
and all the families of the nations  
will bow down before him,  
<sup>28</sup> for dominion belongs to the LORD  
and he rules over the nations.  
<sup>29</sup> All the rich of the earth will feast and worship;  
all who go down to the dust will kneel before him—  
those who cannot keep themselves alive.  
<sup>30</sup> Posterity will serve him;  
future generations will be told about the Lord.  
<sup>31</sup> They will proclaim his righteousness,  
declaring to a people yet unborn: *He has done it!*

***The Messiah as a firstborn, Passover Lamb:*** Various Old Testament authors then saw David's experience and language as a pattern for David's final heir: the Messianic King of Israel, who would become King of the world. The Messiah will be a kind of Passover lamb, for he will lead people into a new Exodus. And he will call the Gentile nations to turn to the God of Israel.

Isaiah 53:5 But He was *pierced* through for our transgressions, (developing Ps.22:16)  
He was crushed for our iniquities;  
The chastening for our well-being fell upon Him,  
And by His scourging we are healed.  
<sup>6</sup> All of us like sheep have gone astray,  
Each of us has turned to his own way;  
But the LORD has caused the iniquity of us all to fall on Him.  
<sup>7</sup> He was oppressed and He was afflicted,

Yet He did not open His mouth;  
 Like a *lamb* that is led to slaughter, (alluded to in Jn.1:29, ‘Behold the Lamb of God...’)  
 And like a *sheep* that is silent before its shearers...

Zechariah 9:9 Rejoice greatly, O Daughter of Zion! Shout, Daughter of Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and having salvation, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey... 12:10 And I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and supplication. *They will look on me, the one they have pierced,* and they will mourn for him as one mourns for an only child, and grieve bitterly for him as one grieves for a *firstborn son*. (developing Ps.22:16, quoted in Jn.19:37)

Implications: (1) The word ‘fulfilled’ in John 19:24, 28, 36 should really be translated ‘filled to the full.’ ‘Fulfilled’ means that each quotation from the Old Testament was predictive in an explicit sense, which is not true. ‘Filled to the full’ means that the Old Testament story *as a whole* was prophetic: In addition to explicit predictions, key stories like the Exodus-Passover story and the David story take on more significance because they are re-read within larger patterns of God’s activity on behalf of Israel and the world.

(2) Furthermore, the New Testament writers do not violently grab proof-texts from the Old Testament to make whatever claims about Jesus it possibly can. Rather, the New Testament writers discern themes that were already woven together in the Old Testament itself. They are being utterly respectful and true to the Old Testament story, including John.

(3) Finally, then, we have a clue as to how Jesus himself read the Old Testament, and trained his followers to do so.

Scripture	A Suffering Hero (i.e. a Passover Lamb)	Suffers on Behalf of	To Set Them Free (i.e. via an Exodus Deliverance) From
Exodus 12:46	Passover Lamb	Nation	Bad circumstances: Slavery in Egypt
Psalms 2, 22, 34, 69 (cf. 1 Sam.16 – 2 Sam.5)	David	Nation-State	Bad government: Saul
Isaiah 53, Jeremiah 23 – 31, Zechariah 12:10	Messiah	All humanity	Corrupted human nature

Psychologist Carl Jung, in a BBC interview in 1959, said, ‘*We need more understanding of human nature, because the only real danger that exists is man himself... We know nothing of man, far too little. His psyche should be studied because we are the origin of all coming evil.*’ Israel’s story teaches us the same thing. It’s not enough for people to be removed from bad circumstances and bad government. Israel’s story was one of deliverance from bad circumstances into good circumstances, from slavery in Egypt to life in the Promised Land. But that external change was not enough to solve the internal human problem. Then the story turned to a deliverance from a bad dynasty and government to a good dynasty and government, from Saul to David. But that external change was not enough to solve the internal human problem, either. People need their human nature healed and transformed. That’s why the deepest deliverance is Jesus’ deliverance.

Earlier deliverances were not enough. God delivered Israel out of bondage and slavery in Egypt and into freedom in the Promised Land, so Jews after the Babylonian Captivity (586 BC) longed for another fresh act of God’s deliverance: a new Exodus (e.g. Isaiah 40 – 55). That much all Jews agreed upon. But whereas all Jews during Jesus’ day expected a militarist Messianic King to defeat the Romans, cleanse Jerusalem so God’s glory could return to the Temple, and open the door for Jews everywhere into the reign of God, Jesus perceived a different role for the Messiah. He must defeat the true enemy, the ‘flesh’ (John 1:14), cleanse his own humanity so he could share his Spirit with others to make them a new, living Temple of God with him, and thus, he would be the door for all human beings into the true reign of God. So Jesus changed human nature itself. In Jesus, God took on the ‘flesh’ (John 1:14, compare with Romans 7:14 – 25) – that is, the corrupted human nature – in the human person of Jesus and fought against it all his life without sinning. Here he is at his death, in John 19:17 – 42, killing it, saying ‘It is finished’ to the corruption of sin. He will rise again in his resurrection as a new kind of human being, wearing a humanity that has been totally purified by the love of God, healed, and transformed. Then he gives the Spirit of his new humanity to anyone who asks. It’s as if God took a diseased human body, fought the disease in that body in order to defeat it, crushed the disease and worked out the antibodies so he could share his own antibodies with us, if we only receive him.