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Responsible Intertextual Reading (with James Bejon)

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James Bejon joins me for a discussion of our principles and practices when attempting intertextual reading of Scripture, particularly focusing upon the different accounts of the death of Judas in Matthew 27 and Acts 1. James tweeted on this recently:

<https://twitter.com/JamesBejon/status/1359286462383067146>.

Transcript

Hello and welcome. Today I'm joined by my friend and colleague at Theopolis, James Bejon, 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? 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 you kind of go along with as an initial claim? 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, okay, 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 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 in 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. 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, 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 priest. 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. And having observed that, I thought, well, look, 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? And I think also 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 were 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 that very alert to some of the thematic issues and how it plays into their broader account of what's going on. And that whatever parallels or associations that they're drawing in this particular juncture are 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 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. 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.

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 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 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. 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 the 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 and 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 and there's a larger framework within which these specific associations fit 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. 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 on if things 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.

I can imagine but I think I've found that in my own experience when we're reading the text it's so much of a collaborative experience and 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 and 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. 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 counsellor of David his really wise counsellor 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 prostrates his counsel and means and ensures that Hushai the archite's counsel is heard over his that Absalom is finally defeated 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 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 the 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.

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 left them 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 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 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 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 on hangs himself 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 second Samuel where again you have two people hung or strangled in the case of Absalom he's hung on the tree and then 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 key 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 and 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 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 round 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 that Jesus ends up being the son of David who's hanging on the tree the righteous in the place of the rebellious so that that makes a lot of sense to me in terms of the the broader framework I mean we're we're obviously both in in the 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 could I just ask you a question of clarification are you talking about the position of Judas's death in Luke when you you're saying it's after the ascension or are you still in Matthew 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 a new apostle in Acts chapter one yeah yeah 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 okay in Matthew this sort of field ends up in Judas's possession really due to a bit of a technicality in in temple law but Luke focuses much more on Judas's love of money he he uses this specific phrase the wages of unrighteousness which is used in the New Testament only otherwise of Balaam and it talks about the wages which he earned sort of through unrighteous gain and I then thought about the fact that it is Luke who focuses on the bloodshed and the bloodshed which is sort of 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 then took me in the direction of Ahab now you've gone in a very different direction there I don't recall who you likened Luke to was 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's there are great similarities to the books of kings and the book of king first 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 backward 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 then Naya the son of 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 Ben Naya the son of Jehoiada 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's going on and it seemed to me that Joab in first kings chapter two 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 what's a repeat of what happens to Amasa at the hands of Judas or at 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 Judah 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 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 sort of 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 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 having lots of you know or rather than following one character very uniformly 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 full 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 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 about 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 Jacobus 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 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 laid brought into the temple itself everything is being contaminated with this blood money and it's hearkening back to the story of Jeremiah where 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 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 the purchase of significant fields the field that Shechem purchased from Hamel and more significantly that 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 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 as benefit from the battle and so forth 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 and interpret I think that way in which intertextuality helps us to interpret is crucial and one of the illustrations I found helpful here is from Rabbi David Foreman who refers to the Old Testament typological backgrounds within those stories as a sort of counter melody so when you're listening to the text what you're trying to discern is not just the melody of the surface of the text it's of its own account but what counter melody corresponds to it so when you're reading the story of David you're reading it alongside the story of Jacob and all sorts of things start to come out with an extra piquancy they just have so much more power to them because you're beginning to see Jacob's story is being replayed in a different form here and both the similarities and more significantly often the variations 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 non-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 has 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 and that I find reassuring but also it's not a science or a 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 indifference 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 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 maneuvers 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 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 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 levi who's involved in it and then we get this battle in stewing 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 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 1100 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 left hanging at the end of the whole story and so you have these unexplained figures of 1100 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 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 1100 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 is 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 the data that I like now what we do with that is a further question you how we take that forward in terms of interpretation 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 1100s 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 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 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 the woman and the serpent and the seed that's a very prominent theme throughout scripture 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 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 okay i'm 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 position the positions from which it could be challenged which is

why i'm airing it 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 what i like most people am 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 on the strength of people saying look you know um it may be true that no else has seen this james but there may be a reason why why no one else has seen it you know um i.e 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 um judge of my own connections i have some that i particularly like but in general i i tend to get more uh sure of them as other people see them and confirm them i remember a while ago i was listening to um uh an interview with a comedian uh tim vine who i like a great deal and the guy was saying to him well how do you write good jokes and he said i don't know he said all i know how to do is write jokes um and he said i then just go to like a local uh 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 he said that you can never until you sort of try these things out with a crowd of people get a a sense beforehand as to how well they're going to go down now i mean i do think there's probably uh slightly more science and objectivity to um trying out an intertextual connection than just sort of although intertextual connections are very much like jokes um yeah 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 um uh ahab and absalom actually was one i wasn't particularly convinced of initially when i sort of first floated it but seemed to go down very well um with with the exception of you and um and and so that sort of strengthened me to to some extent in in it and and um uh so yeah i want to be in a position where i'm not clinging too tightly to these um things and as you say the more weight you load on a given type um unjust weight that is i think the um the more you'll be prone to clinging to it too tightly because you you will feel that if you uh 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 um 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 okay 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 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 um the story of judah and tamar in genesis chapter 38 there is just so much going on in that text and yet i am i'm only seeing a fraction of it and i 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 uh leap to the new testament and 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 in a careful itinerary 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 yeah i think that's a helpful 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 this just the process of having conversations like this is so integral to the task of reading scripture and encouraging these sorts of conversations is 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 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've said in part use connections which are quite i don't know how to describe it tight or specific or a connection which is which is not too general to work everywhere so if the pattern i've seen is something like a um a fall and then a lifting up afterwards um 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 uh to be helpful you know and so um 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 and what kind of things he is not directing me towards so um 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 where you've got this uh a fairly long string of verbs in in hebrew which are just describing one thing and and so i'm i'm trying to use um those sorts of considerations to think where is the author um trying to get me to focus my um attention because otherwise i feel almost that i could do typology just with a newspaper or or something you know i'm sure i could find intertextual connections there and so i'm wanting to say okay this is um uh 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 um rather than to have a a system have a few little um uh 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 found very helpful myself and i've 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 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 um 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 that's determined by reformation instincts and the concern that we do not make the text into a wax nose 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 um close grammatical similarities um 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 um 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 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 in hebrew um just as much as possible it's not the kind of thing which um uh which just word stuff word search is 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 um syntax grammatically which again isn't so easy to search on and and so i think that's a really good way of looking at where 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 which kind of brings to mind how 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 um for the good you know in a positive direction but it's it's quite um tempting to think okay 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 um i will get there but i just don't think gains in our understanding of scripture come back quickly um 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 um 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 um coming to mind in terms of connections and then leaving it to simmer for months um 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 um and it's taken many months to get there but it's been in 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 or i would say it's just not a good idea to to read certain types of material like that um but i think if you're sort of um fairly well established in in terms of what you think about the bible and a happy recognizing sort of the way in which a lot of that just comes from a completely different world view instead of presuppositions um i think if you're yeah 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 um framework and i i found that to be really really useful um often that's then a case of disentangling the 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 um incongruous details or the tensions and the 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 um 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 that's increasingly i'm i'm thinking in terms of scriptures 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 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