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## Q&A#145 Who Are James Jordan's Influences?

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Today's question: "Who are Jim Jordan's sources?"

It would obviously be fair to describe him as "innovative", but it seems very much that there's a chain where you have followed on from Peter Leithart, who followed on from Jim... but where did Jim learn his hermeneutic? Is he really so innovative an expositor that we can't read what he's read and see where he learned it all?"

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## Transcript

Welcome back. Today's question is, who are Jim Jordan's sources? It would obviously be fair to describe him as innovative, but it seems very much that there's a chain where you have followed on from Peter Lighthouse, who followed on from Jim. But where did Jim learn his hermeneutic? Is he really so innovative and expositive that we can't read what he's read and see where he learned it all? In the past, Jordan's mentioned people like Meredith Klein, Gordon Wenham, Austen Farrer, and various Dutch theologians like Homer Hoeksema, I think he mentions at some point.

And all of these he's highlighted as influences upon his thought, maybe upon his earlier thought. Over time, there's been further influences that I would say could be added to that list. So you think about someone like David Dorsey, his work on chiasms, N.T. Wright, and his work on the Gospels, and the reading of Paul.

I think maybe someone like Robert Alter probably had an influence at various points, foregrounding of certain literary elements of the biblical text type scenes, things like that. And so there are various sources that have played into his thought. Imagine David Daube, perhaps Callum Carmichael, and people in that particular school of thought, they've also had an influence.

If you look at Jordan's thought against the backdrop of the Old Testament academic guild, you'll also see many of the sources that he's drawing upon. If you read the commentaries on various books, often you'll see them drawing the same sort of literary patterns and parallels and recognizing some of the common themes that Jordan brings out. So much of this is within the literature as it exists.

What Jordan, I think, brings to the table, which is more than that, is synthesizing a lot of it together in a broader picture of Scripture, giving a unified account of the biblical text that is grounded upon a very strong doctrine of Scripture, and then applying that in the form of biblical Bible teaching. If you read most commentators, most commentators can read the text very well. Often they're a bit too narrow in their focus, but they can often pick out some very important details from the text.

But most of them are not Bible teachers. They're not communicating the Bible as something given for the life of the church. Whereas Jordan brings that and a very close eye for the literary features of the text together.

And I think it's in that sort of union, that synthesis of the broader, the synthesis of all these different details within a vast number of different texts into a broader system of theology and typology. That's something that Jordan really brings that's fairly unique, fairly unusual. So these things are recognized by the commentators, but there aren't many people who would be thinking in terms of prophet, priest, king, or prophet, king, prophet, patterns, other things like that.

Other people who would notice some of the bigger structures of the texts and the ways that certain themes play across the Testaments as well. Jordan really brings a knowledge of Scripture as a whole, I think, to the table. And that helps him to see things that people who are very much stuck within a particular area of their guild or within New Testament studies or Old Testament studies, they'll often miss.

You can read dozens of New Testament scholars and they'll all treat the same text again and again. And just about without fail, they can miss some of the Old Testament parallels. If you read a bit deeper into the academic discourse surrounding some of these

texts, you may find some stuff that's really helpful.

You'll find it, for instance, in monographs or academic papers, things like that. And then you can have a more insightful reading of certain New Testament passages in the light of the old. But for the most part, people are not good at recognising these intertextual plays, especially between the Testaments where you have the division of the guild as an obstacle at that point.

And just the fact that most people just do not know the Old and New Testaments very well. And so they don't bring these things together. Whereas Jordan's work really flows from a mind that recognises, knows the material of Old and New Testament very well, recognises some of the larger patterns, the symbols and the structures, the way in which it has an architectonic order to it.

It develops from symbolism in Genesis and elsewhere. And he really knows the symbolism and typology as it's playing out throughout the biblical text. Now, there are some people who are very, have keen eyes for some of these literary patterns.

I think another person I didn't mention, Richard Davidson, his work on typology is very important, I think, for Jordan's work. If you read these sorts of authors who are dealing with these literary patterns with the typology and the symbolism, they'll be seeing things that I think many will miss. So if you're reading someone like Richard Hayes or you're reading someone like Robert Halter or David Daube, they will recognise some of these patterns like Exodus pattern playing out.

David Daube's work on that is very important. If you're reading Richard Hayes, you will see the Old Testament playing in the work of Paul or in the work of the Gospels and be able to trace how these texts are, as literary texts, using the Old Testament or other parts of Scripture to make some theological point. David Dorsey's work on literary structure, I think, also some other commentators who are far more alert to the literary form of the text.

I've described Scripture as very much like doing a jigsaw puzzle in the past. You need to focus upon the shape of the pieces, not just the picture upon them. And that sort of work on the literary features of the text and the fact that Jordan has an ear for literature, I think that gives him a unique advantage in reading the text that many people who come from a more systematic theological background or a more dogmatic confessional background to the text, they'll miss things quite consistently because they're not able to get on the same wavelength as the text.

Whereas Jordan has really grounded himself within the work, the Old Testament world, and from the Old Testament world, he's able to read a lot of things through new eyes in ways that people do not usually read these texts. So I think that's an important part of it. The other thing is his sources are not so easy to see because he's a Bible teacher.

Most of his work is written for a lay audience. And for that reason, he wears his scholarship fairly lightly. It's not something that he's always foregrounding or it's not something that he's pushing in people's face.

His books don't generally have a large amount of footnotes that you have to wade through. The material's there to back it up, but often you have to dig in a bit and find out where he's getting these things from. He'll leave clues at various points.

He'll have footnotes, but you don't usually have footnotes when you're reading, when you're listening to a lecture, for instance. You just don't have that many references or Bible study. You're not going to have many references to the sources.

That's not to say that there haven't been sources. I think one thing that makes Jordan's work particularly important is the fact that he has both deep and broad roots. So the deeper roots are within a tradition, Dutch Reformed, and that broader tradition of reading the Bible covenantally.

Reading the Bible as a unified narrative of God's work in human history, in working out the covenant. Now that's a standard feature of Reformed thought and there's been a lot of work done within Dutch Reformed circles, particularly on working out that sort of pattern of reading scripture. Now Jordan works within that tradition, but he's in that tradition drawing upon a wide range of different sources beyond that tradition in this broader realm of the Old Testament guild in particular.

So he'll be reading people like David Dorb and others like that who are not confessionally Reformed or even conservative, but they are people who are dealing with the text in a very rigorous way, looking for some of the patterns. He'll deal with the people who are looking at the text as a more literary artifact and recognizing some of the type scenes and things like that. He'll think about the way the text is read within Jewish tradition.

So I think he uses people like Cassuto. I suspect he's familiar with Rashi, Rambam, others like that. So his work is drawing upon a wide range of different authors.

Now if you read just within that deep tradition of reading the biblical narrative as a unified story of covenantal, God's covenantal work in history and salvation, you will get a big picture but it's very hard to fit the pieces together within that. And often that covenantal picture is something that kind of flies a bit above the surface of the text. It doesn't really get into the nitty-gritty of the text.

And often the nitty-gritty of the text troubles the picture because the covenantal perspective has often been very weak at dealing with temporal elements. What you have is a sort of systematic structure and it's almost spatialized. It's a spatialized approach to the history of scripture.

And so it's very hard to see these developments over time. And Jordan's work has really

paid a lot more attention to the temporal development of covenant history and the way covenant is not just spatialized categories like old and new covenant but it's an ongoing development through history in God's work. Now having that broader, trying to form a broader picture, a broader understanding and a narrative and then drawing upon a wide range of different works I think gives him the best of both worlds.

So he's working with some of the scholarly literature and in the wider guild of Old Testament studies but he's drawing that into a more broader synthesis of this material in a unified account of covenant history and salvation which he gets very much from the Dutch Reformed and the Calvinistic Presbyterian tradition. That's always been a strength of that particular tradition. And so the roots are there but the roots are very much from different contexts that he's drawing together.

If you read most evangelical commentators on biblical books, if your experience is anything like mine you'll find them frustrating and not very illuminating. Most of the more illuminating stuff comes from liberal commentators, from academic papers, monographs, things like that and people who are maybe a bit outside of the conservative evangelical tradition. If you read people from the Jewish tradition you'll find a lot of stuff there.

Modern Jewish writers like Alter or someone like Casuto writing about a century ago, these are important writers to think about biblical texts and Old Testament texts. They're getting into the depth of the symbolism, the structures, other things like that. They see things on the literary level that most readers don't see and they also have a lot more attention to, or some of the more conservative ones have a lot more attention to the larger patterns of the text and the meaning of those patterns.

Now I found more recently the work of Rabbi David Forman immensely illuminating and he uses Rashi and the wider tradition quite a bit and I would recommend getting into some of those Jewish writers. Also read a lot more liberal stuff because the liberals are very good with the textual dimension. Often they're good at getting into some of the nitty-gritty of the structures which often evangelical writers, since they're so concerned about the application and so concerned about the broader synthesis, they often miss the details of the text whereas those who are coming at the text primarily as a literary artifact and not thinking about it as inspired are ironically often able to see things that the evangelicals are not.

Now if you think that the Bible is given to us in a form that is inspired in that form for a reason then I think you have the best of both worlds. You will pay attention to the nitty-gritty of the text and the literary features of it but you'll also recognize it's part of a unified revelation and it's something that should be synthesized into a bigger picture or a bigger narrative. Now the liberals, their strengths are often seen in dealing with these detached literary texts so they've got a particular segment of the text that they're

treating in that literary way.

They're not often as good at recognizing the connections between texts that are very far removed because they don't have such a strong view of the canon but people who are drawing from that body of material and then bringing that into a more conservative framework they can often do that very well and I think Jordan is playing within that particular area. He's bringing the strengths of that broader range of scholarship, often liberal scholarship, into the framework of a more conservative reformed approach to covenant history and he's reforming that understanding by switching it from a more dogmatic and confessional structure into one that's more informed by the structure of the biblical text itself. So I would recommend going to the very back of *Through New Eyes* which is a fantastic book if I've not recommended it before.

I have recommended it many many times but go to the back of it and you'll see a bibliography that's briefly annotated and in there he explains some of his sources. Most of the sources that he mentions are evangelical. I think he's drawing a bit more broadly than that but the point of that bibliography is to tell people some of his influences but also where they can go to find more material themselves.

Now when he's drawing upon these more liberal sources they're not necessarily the things that he would recommend to the average lay person who wants to get into these issues in more detail but if you want to see where he's got his thought from a lot of it comes from those sorts of sources I would imagine. Certainly in my experience my greatest insights are often ones that have been sparked by liberal commentators and so I would recommend read broadly but read within a context that is trying to synthesize things and bring things together in terms of a very strong evangelical understanding of scripture. An understanding of scripture that's not just an isolated doctrine but as an understanding of scripture that is formed and informed by the actual form that the biblical text has itself and that's what I think what Jordan really does well.

He's saying okay we need a biblical way of approaching our lives and our world and all these sorts of things but the danger is that we're going to bring a system to the bible and try and fit the bible into that system. Trying to construct something out of the bible is alien to it. What we really need to do is to get on the text's own wavelength and understand how the bible crafts its own world.

Now there's a lot of stuff there that I think informs his broader approach to scripture. That doctrine of scripture and then that attention to the details of the text in a way that's informed by people who are not just reading the text in terms of a confessional or dogmatic framework but people who are reading it more as a literary text and bringing those things together within a conservative theology. I think it allows for that conservative theology to be strengthened and leavened by the more literary insights that you have from these broader range of sources.

Also bringing in to play those Jewish influences. You'll find that within Jewish tradition there is a lot more attention to the actual literary features of the text and some of the strange details of the text. They have their eyes open to the deep weird stuff and a lot of midrash is very helpful on this front too.

The midrash needs to be treated carefully but it's worth getting into. The other thing that you'll find along those lines is some of the more modern literary stuff that you'll see in someone like Robert Alter or someone like Richard Hayes. That will really help you.

They give you a more technical vocabulary for thinking about the parallels between texts, the relationships between texts and then some of the work that you find within Richard Davidson for instance on typology. All of these things are giving a tighter methodological approach to the text and then that can inform the theological insights in a way that is far more in keeping with the form of the text of scripture not just framed by a confessional structure. Now that confessional structure is not something we're just going to abandon but it is something that we should be careful not to bring that as a procrustean bed upon which the actual text of scripture has to be find parts lopped off to fit.

Rather when you read the text on its own terms that can inform our confessional stance. So if you want to understand Jordan's thoughts I would say first port of call should be the conclusion concluding bibliography of *Through New Eyes*. Look in the footnotes of some books like *Through New Eyes* or the end notes in the case of *Through New Eyes* and some of his commentaries and other things like that and you'll see some further sources mentioned.

I would recommend if you want to do this sort of study yourself ground yourself very much within the history of a more covenantal reading of scripture within the reformed tradition and then bring into that a broader engagement with liberal thought articles and scholarly articles and monographs and books that are more attentive to the literary features of the text and then bring those into this more synthesized framework and I think you'll find that it will stand you in good stead. Read widely but root yourself deeply in a strong doctrine of scripture and a very clear tradition of reading the bible as a unified text. Thank you very much for listening.

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