

# Gospel writers harmonize; they don't sing the melody of Jesus in unison

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WACO—Reading Scripture well is like listening to a chorus, the dean of Duke Divinity School explained during the 2011 Winter Pastors' School at Baylor University's [Truett Theological Seminary](#).



Richard Hays, dean of Duke Divinity School, autographs books and visits with students and faculty at Truett Seminary between sessions of the 2011 Winter Pastors' School.  
(PHOTOS/Matthew Minard, Baylor Marketing & Communications)

Hearers appreciate music best when they listen for and distinguish between the parts as well as take in the whole, said [Richard Hays](#), the George Washington Ivey professor of New Testament at Duke.

Nearly 200 people attended the event, presented by the Kyle Lake Center for Effective Preaching at Truett. Hays' theme was "Reading Scripture Alongside the Gospel Writers."

The first three books of the New Testament—Matthew, Mark and Luke—are called the Synoptic Gospels. They include many of the same stories, often in the same sequence and sometimes with nearly exactly the same wording, scholars note.

But a close examination shows very different approaches, each of which enriches the reader's understanding, he added.

Mark begins by "plunging roughly to the point of Jesus' baptism," Hays said. But Matthew anchors his account in Jesus' genealogy, stretching back 42 generations to Abraham instead of "bursting out of nowhere" as Mark does.

Matthew's approach is "hardly an electrifying way to begin the narrative, but it ensures the continuation between Israel's story and the one Matthew is about to tell," he said.



Debbie Rarick, a doctor of ministry student at Baylor University's Truett Theological Seminary, listens during the seminary's Winter Pastors' School. (PHOTOS/Matthew Minard, Baylor Marketing & Communications)

While Mark's introduction to Jesus is straightforward—recounting the way John the Baptist heralded Jesus' arrival—his Gospel also demonstrates "a reticence about the shocking claims he is making about Jesus," Hays said. Mark rarely points explicitly to Old Testament Scripture references to the Messiah. And the Gospel ends with the women fleeing the tomb in fear, rather than the longer, bolder accounts of the Resurrection, which are described in the other Gospels.

Matthew, meanwhile, is "far more overt in many passages, providing explicit explanation of things only hinted about" in Mark, he said.

"Matthew erects a large highway sign to make it clear that Jesus is the fulfillment of Scripture," Hays said. Matthew cites myriad allusions and quotations from Old Testament law and prophecies to frame his text in "an

authoritative voice.”

The message is “beginning the world anew,” Hays said. “Jesus is both the son of David, the anointed king, and the son of Abraham.

“Matthew uses a lens of mercy for interpreting the Torah. Mercy is not in opposition to the law, but what the law is all about. Jesus’ Sermon the on Mount is one of incredible moral rigor, but the theme of mercy occurs over and over again.”

Matthew reconfigures the Torah, “inviting us to become characters in the re-shaping, to become disciples,” he noted.

In the third Gospel—Luke—the story of Jesus is “deeply counter-cultural,” referring to the Old Testament not so much as a collection of predictions but as a collection of promises.



Richard Hays, dean of Duke Divinity School, focused on the Gospels as he addressed the 2011 Winter Pastors’ School.

(PHOTOS/Matthew Minard, Baylor Marketing & Communications)

Jesus is portrayed as an agent of liberation, a Spirit-anointed servant who will bring grace to outsiders, Hays said. His followers in the church will be a counterculture within Judaism and within the Roman Empire—in effect turning the world upside down.

Unlike Matthew, “Luke almost never says, ‘By the way, let me explain to you that this is a quote’” from the Old Testament, Hays observed. “He puts the word in the mouths of the characters. It’s like actors on the stage with sepia images on the screen behind them that correlate.”

Luke emphasizes re-shaping Israel, not as a coercive power by a violent Messiah, but rather a nonviolent one.

“Israel is not to be saved by some new Moses, but God himself will appear on the scene—someone far greater than what John the Baptist was looking for,” Hays said.

The Gospel of John, which is not part of the Synoptics, parallels but stands apart from the other three Gospels, he added.

John can be compared to “the soaring descant or the deep bass notes” of a chorus, Hays said. “It adds flavor and texture to the tight harmony of the Synoptic Gospels.”

John begins his Gospel with the same metaphor the Old Testament writer of Genesis used to begin the Bible, he noted. Just as Genesis reports how God spoke creation into being, John calls Jesus the “Word” through whom “all things were made.”

John further parallels Hebrew Scripture by presenting Jesus as a substitute for the Jewish Temple, Hays said.

“Jesus’ body is the place where God dwells, where atonement takes place, and where God and humanity are reconciled,” he said, explaining how the spiritual destination the Jews sought in the Temple is reached in Jesus. “The Temple always was a sign, a configuration pointing toward Jesus.”

Throughout John, Jesus is seen as the fulfillment of Old Testament feasts, events and prophecy, Hays reported. “John understands the Old Testament

as a matrix of symbols, all pointing toward Jesus ... the truth and glory of God embodied in Jesus.”

Jesus himself encouraged his listeners to read the Scripture with new eyes, Hays said. “The Old Testament teaches you to read the New Testament, and the New Testament teaches you to read the old.”

The purpose of [The Kyle Lake Center for Effective Preaching](#) at Baylor’s Truett Seminary is to prepare seminarians for preaching and to provide continuing education for pastors and other ministers. The center’s namesake, a 1997 Truett Seminary graduate, died while he was pastor of University Baptist Church in Waco. His parents, David and Shirley Lake, helped establish the Center so their son’s influence would be felt for generations.

*-With additional reporting by Baptist Standard Editor Marv Knox.*