

What does it mean “God draws”? (D. Mar)
A Series on the Old Testament Believer: Part 1

The book of John records Jesus speaking of “drawing” people on two occasions. Interpretations of these two passages have been a long source of debate and controversy. What did Jesus mean?

No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws (**helkō**) him; and I will raise him up on the last day.
(John 6:44)

And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw (**helkō**) all men to Myself. (John 12:32)

The Greek verb “helkō” is translated literally in English as “to draw” or “to drag.” In addition to the above two passages, “helkō” is used in seven other instances in the New Testament. In these seven instances, the literal meaning of “helkō” can be easily seen:

The “drawing” of a sword (John 18:10).

The “drawing” of fishing nets (John 21:6, 11).

The “dragging” in the sense of “seizing” of people to some form of imprisonment (Acts 16:19; 21:30; James 2:6).

In the two passages where Jesus speaks of “drawing” people to Himself (John 6:44 and 12:32), there is considerable debate, because it is less clear whether “helkō” should be understood in the literal sense. Since the apostle John reports “no one has seen God at any time” (John 1:18) and “indicated the kind of death by which Jesus was to die” (John 12:33), John may have intended “helkō” to be understood in the figurative sense (John 6:44 and 12:32); however, the New Testament does not have any other examples of the figurative use of “helkō” to compare with.

In the study of the Old Testament, the equivalent Hebrew term to the Greek verb “helkō” is “mashak.” Like “helkō,” the Hebrew verb “mashak” literally means “to draw, drag or seize”; however, its figurative meaning is “to attract.” This figurative meaning is also carried over into its Greek translation and attested in contemporaneous secular Greek and the Septuagint (Greek Old Testament) as seen in this example:

The Lord appeared to him from afar, saying,
“I have loved you with an everlasting love;
Therefore I have drawn (Hebrew: “mashak” / Greek: “helkō”) you with lovingkindness. (Jer 31:3)

Through Jeremiah, God indicates that He is drawing the nation of Israel with “lovingkindness,” which means “loyal love” or “covenant loyalty.” It is a statement of God’s faithfulness underpinned by the unilateral and unconditional covenant made with Abraham; it is a love that is not compulsory. Jeremiah is exhorting the nation of Israel to restore their covenantal relationship (Mosaic Covenant) and live a holy life.

In this context, Jeremiah uses “helkō” in the figurative sense as “to attract a person in the direction of values for inner life.”

A similar idea is repeated in Hosea 11:4. Where the Hebrew verb “mashak” was used, Greek translators of the Septuagint used the verb “ekteinō” which means “to stretch forth or towards” to translate the figurative meaning.

I led (Hebrew: “mashak” / Greek: “ekteinō”) them with cords of a man, with bonds of love,
And I became to them as one who lifts the yoke from their jaws;
And I bent down and fed them. (Hos 11:4)

What does it mean “God draws”? (D. Mar)
A Series on the Old Testament Believer: Part 1 (page 2)

Through Hosea, God recalls the past history of the nation of Israel, and the reference “as one who lifts the yoke from their jaws” is a figurative reference to the liberation from Egypt and vivid display of His love and compassion for His people. God’s very words to Moses are illuminating:

“You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings, and brought you to Myself. Now then, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be My own possession among all the peoples for all the earth is Mine.” (Ex 19:4-5)

The historical and monumental events of the Exodus was intended to demonstrate a tangible God who was faithful to His covenant of love and desirous for the nation of Israel to be His people.

But the Jews of Hosea’s time “refused to return” and “were bent on turning from God”; the Jews refused to repent and restore their covenant relationship with God (Hosea 11:5, 7).

In this context, Hosea’s figurative use of “mashak” can be understood in Paul’s words to the Roman Jews, “Or do you think lightly of the riches of His kindness and tolerance and patience, not knowing that the kindness of God leads you to repentance?” (Rom 2:4) Paul points out to judgmental Jews their failure of recognizing God’s lovingkindness that attempts to draw them to a life of holiness.

It would seem that in the Old Testament, human beings drawn to God the Father are attracted to His love which is historically actualized in the Exodus and faithfulness to His covenants; they believe in God the Father, have a faith relationship with Him and are obedient to Him. While the faith of Abraham believed in God without concrete evidence, the Exodus confirmed the historical reality of the Abrahamic Covenant (Ex 32:11-13; 33:1; Deut 31:9, 25-26).

With this understanding of “drawing”, the meaning of John 6:44 becomes clearer.

When Jesus spoke to the people, who were supposedly Old Testament Believers (John 6:26-40), He draws a parallel to manna and introduces Himself as the “bread of life.” Despite seeing the miracle of the feeding of five thousand, they did not see Jesus as the Messiah; instead they wanted to place their faith in Him as a human prophet like Moses (John 6:14, 30) or their own abilities (John 6:28).

Just as the nation of Israel sought miracles to validate Moses (Ex 4:3-9, 29-31), the people of Capernaum sought a miracle to validate Jesus as being sent by God (John 6:30; Deut 18:15-22).

But Jesus recognized that they placed their faith on the wrong object; Jesus was not sent to provide free food or to be a political leader (John 6:26; Luke 24:15-21). And because their faith was misplaced (John 6:36), they could not understand His words:

“All that the Father gives Me will come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will certainly not cast out. For I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me” (John 6:37-38).

“For this is the will of My father, that everyone who beholds the Son and believes in Him will have eternal life, and I Myself will raise him up on the last day (John 6:40).

What does it mean “God draws”? (D. Mar)
A Series on the Old Testament Believer: Part 1 (page 3)

Specifically addressing the Jews, He explains, “No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him on the last day. It is written in the prophets, ‘AND THEY SHALL ALL BE TAUGHT OF GOD.’ Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father, comes to Me.” Truly, truly I say to you, he who believes has eternal life (John 6:45-47).

No one could come to Jesus, unless they had a faith relationship with (“heard and learned from”) God the Father (Matt 16:13-20; Luke 2:25-32; John 1:33, 41, 45, 49; 12:44-45; 14:7). Without knowing God the Father, no one would know the Son of God.

It seems that the faith in God the Father of a genuine Old Testament Believer enables one to come to Jesus and have an intimate relationship with Him (John 6:65; Matt 11:27; Luke 10:22); these genuine believing Jews are in God’s possession as His own people (Deut 7:6) which He gives to His Son (Rom 8:9; 1 Cor 3:23; Gal 3:29; 5:24). In contrast, the Pharisees exemplified a people who did not have a genuine faith in God the Father and could not recognize that Jesus was the Promised One (John 8:19, 42-44).

Before anyone knew of His coming crucifixion and atonement for the sins of mankind, Jesus spoke plainly of the work of God the Father, “This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He has sent” (John 6:29). This context and understanding the figurative meaning of “drawing” provides the basis of understanding Jesus’ words in John 12:32. Here, instead of God the Father drawing men, Jesus says that He will!

Jesus’ conditional statement, “And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to Myself” indicates that Jesus’ ability to draw men won’t occur until His death on the cross (John 12:33).

With the completion of atonement and the Ascension of Jesus, the disciples receive the Holy Spirit who empowers them to be great witnesses (John 15:26-27; Acts 1:8) and sets the stage for the explosive growth of Christianity that commences thereafter (John 17:21).

Throughout Jesus’ time on earth, the disciples thought Jesus’ ministry was for the Jews only (Matt 10:5-7); however, the disciples learned that the gospel was for all (Acts 10:28-48). In the context of John 12:32, Greeks ask to meet Jesus, and Jesus intended the figurative meaning of “draw all men to Myself” as a reference to “attract a person in the direction of values for inner life” regardless of ethnicity or nationality.

Just as God the Father seeks to draw the nation of Israel with His loyal love (covenant loyalty) through world events like the Exodus, He seeks to draw the world through the provision of His Son for the sin offering of the world (John 3:16; Gen 12:3; 22:18).

What does it mean “God draws”? (D. Mar)
A Series on the Old Testament Believer: Part 1 (page 4)

References:

1. Brown F, Robinson E, Driver SR, Briggs C, *The New Brown-Driver-Briggs-Gesenius Hebrew-English Lexicon*, Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, (1985).
2. Brown C, ed., *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, vol. 3, Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, (1979).
3. Morris L., *The Gospel According to John*, Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. (1971).
4. Wescott BF, *The Gospel According to St. John*, Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. (1981).
5. Kittel G, ed., Bromiley GW, trans., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. (1964).
6. Bauer W, Danker FW, ed., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed., Chicago: University of Chicago Press (2001).

To understand the interpretive challenge of John 6:44 and 12:32, bear in mind Who is the object of faith.

Before the Crucifixion, to come to Jesus required a pre-existing faith - a genuine faith in God the Father. Jesus' principle ministry to the Jews was precisely because they were God's "holy nation and kingdom of priests" (Ex 19:6); only those with a genuine faith in God the Father would know and recognize the Son of God, and as God the Father's own possession, be given to His Son so that they could have an intimate relationship with Him.

After the Crucifixion, for His supreme virtuous act of atonement on the cross, Jesus attracted "all men" because: 1) Jews would recognize that He fulfilled the Old Testament prophecies and was indeed the Messiah (Luke 24:44-48; John 20:30-31), and 2) Gentiles would recognize the historical fact of the Crucifixion and Resurrection as evidence that Jesus was God and the means for salvation. And through Jesus, Gentiles would learn about God the Father, His covenants and His lovingkindness (John 14:6-7).

It is worthwhile to note that in either case, before and after the Crucifixion, God does not give faith.