

# Change and the Gospels

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## Abstract

A review of currents of change that have characterized traditional and recent interpretative models of critical gospel interpretation. The author characterizes changes that occurred up to and since the 1970s, noting how recent developments have integrated critical methods of the 19th and 20th centuries into a performance mode as in music and drama.

In his introduction to *THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION* (p. 1), John Barton remarks that the task of interpretation is never complete, as we are continually still faced with that age old question: what does the Bible mean? The problem is not so much that the Bible changes but that there are two realities involved in meaning: the text and the interpreter (or, to use the recent word, the reader). In each age people ask different questions and as a result different aspects of the text's mysterious meaning emerge. The Fathers, in their spiritual interpretation of a text, drawing freely on the whole Bible, asked in particular three questions that modern scientific exegesis has almost completely ignored: What are we to believe? Where are we going? What are we to do? No wonder, according to Barton, more recent interpreters are often at pains to insist that really their new paradigm is not new at all, but "the restoration of an older method which the intervening ascendancy of the 'historical-critical method' had temporarily effaced." He suggests that for post-structuralist we should read precritical.

## Why Change?

In a thought-provoking article, *Interpreting The Bible Amid Cultural Change*, Brevard S. Childs raises the fascinating question, Why is there such a phenomenon of change as each generation seeks to understand and use its scriptures authoritatively? On the fact there is no doubt. We remember that Paul Tillich once remarked how the felt needs of people change from age to age. Thus in the ancient world people were obsessed with a sense of decay and longed for the security of immortality and incorruption. Many in the Middle Ages, burdened with a fear of damnation and a sense of guilt, hoped for forgiveness and freedom. In our post-modern "wounded" age we are exhausted from many aspects of biblical *Wissenschaft* from source to form to redaction, and so many other criticisms. Eventually our modern approaches led to a "paralysis by analysis" impasse and did not produce the biblical fruits for which somewhat naively we expected to find the magic key. Our nightmare is one of meaninglessness as we desperately search for purpose and meaning

in life. The Liberation Theologians provoked our consciences by insisting that there may be something radically amiss with our approach to the Bible if it does not produce the fruits of love, justice and peace. Further it is extraordinary how different biblical books and themes seem to suddenly pop up out of nowhere to speak afresh to the different needs of people in a variety of situations and ages. The Johannine scholar D. Moody Smith recalls how shocked he was to hear his Professor, W. D. Davies, comment to the class that he believed Paul kept the law all his life:

I rushed up after class to protest, politely of course, in the name of the doctrine of justification by faith alone. Professor Davies reminded me, equally politely but firmly, that Paul must be read in his own setting rather than that of the Protestant Reformation [Smith: 218].

The nineteenth century with its preoccupation with sources and objectivity led curiously to the so called philosophies of suspicion of Freud, Marx and Nietzsche. It tended towards a naïve linear model of scientific development as a cumulative effort of fact-gathering and observation with the goal of ever growing progress. Unfortunately the tendency was to forget the imponderables involved and the problem that so many

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aspects of the human mystery can be so easily lost in such a narrow view of progress. A suspicious attitude to the Bible will never unlock its mysteries. As Hans Frei used to remark, it was traditional to use the Bible to understand our universe. Now the world of human progress has become the means to understand the Bible. Like the O.T. God, the Bible and its authoritative meaning played a game of hide and seek with its scholars.

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### Exegetes tended to use the text to recover what was not in the text.

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Childs notes, first, that, shifts in perception frequently take place quite suddenly and in some discontinuity with the old, operating not primarily on a purely rational level. A paradigm change from a historical approach to a literary approach was announced by D. Robertson in the supplementary volume to the *INTERPRETER'S DICTIONARY OF THE BIBLE* (p. 547). As Marshall McLuhan once said, however, by the time one notices a cultural phenomenon it has already happened. Viewed in the context of Western culture as a whole, this change can be described as a movement away from a preoccupation with history and a more helpful turning towards a concern with language. Robertson suggests that it may be part of the general secularization of Western culture and notes that many of its practitioners are teachers in secular institutions who have no particularly religious or theological interest in the Bible.

In the second place, Childs points out how difficult it is for the next generation to sustain the breakthroughs of the previous one. And third, the great shifts in the interpretation of the Bible turn on our understanding of the nature of God. The mysterious God of the Bible is one who both reveals and conceals aspects of her own being. Nevertheless, whatever shifts take place, the historical and apologetic methods will—or should—always play an essential role. One thinks automatically of the importance in current gospel research of the studies of the Catholic scholar John Meier and of the Anglican Canon N. T. Wright. Wright is a formidable scholar who has used Lonergan's critical realism approach to history to rewrite the Jesus Quest in terms much more acceptable to traditional Christianity. He insists that any Jesus hypothesis must provide reasonable answers to five major questions: (1) How does Jesus fit into Judaism? (2) What were Jesus' aims? (3) Why did Jesus die? (4) How and why did the early church begin? (5) Why are the Gospels what they are?

For John Meier, despite the questionable methods and positions of the infamous Jesus Seminar, which has projected a modern American agenda onto a first-century Palestinian Jew, the third quest for the historical Jesus has resulted in seven notable gains in comparison with the old quests:

1. The Third quest has an ecumenical and international character.
2. It clarifies the question of reliable sources.
3. It presents a more accurate picture of first-century Judaism.
4. It employs new insights from archaeology, philology, and sociology.
5. It clarifies the application of criteria of historicity.
6. It gives proper attention to the miracle tradition.
7. It takes the Jewishness of Jesus with utter seriousness.

To show the importance of the historical method one has only to consider the furor caused in Israel by one of Israel's leading minimalist archaeologists, the Tel Aviv University archaeologist Ze'ev Herzoy, who wrote in the cover story of the weekend magazine of Ha'aretz (October 29, 1999):

This is what archaeologists have learned from their excavations in the land of Israel: the Israelites were never in Egypt, did not wander in the desert, did not conquer the land in a military campaign and did not pass it on to the 12 tribes of Israel. Perhaps even harder to swallow is the fact that the united monarchy of David and Solomon, which is described as a regional power, was at most a small tribal kingdom.

### A Gospel as Story

In the second essay in John Barton's collection, David Jasper argues that recent literary approaches "often draw on the vast resources of precritical exegesis (Jewish and Christian) to revive insights into the text lost through historical criticism" (p 2). He stresses the current interest in holistic readings, in which biblical books are read just as they stand and without asking the questions about earlier sources and editions which were the typical questions of those with a historical interest.

For Leland Ryken, the dominant pattern of a gospel is story or narrative. Admittedly influenced by its culture and time, it still has many of the characteristics of storytelling even as we know it today. A plot unfolds carrying the story from the beginning of Jesus' life to his ministry, with its mixture of success, opposition, and failure, to his death and eventually his affirmative resurrection. Some of the characters, such as Jesus and Peter, are quite well developed while others are one-dimensional and even at times (like the Pharisees) reduced to caricature. The aim of the story, not unlike a parable, is to trap the reader with its momentum and dynamism to take sides and become involved. The full narrative dawns on us only when we read it continuously like a short story or novel. The dominant story becomes obscured when we read it piecemeal. We miss the adventure, excitement, and human interest of the drama or novel. Then the Gospels for most become bewildering collections of fragments lacking coherence with each other and roots in the life of Jesus. Each Gospel has its own story world, its own preoccupations.

R. E. Brown thus insists that the first step in studying a New Testament Book is to “read it through slowly and attentively” before any scholarly speculation. One should ignore the scholarly presuppositions based on past controversies. Brown, discussing Mark’s Gospel (p. 156), refers to Gundry’s wonderful list of 25 no’s, in which Gundry rejects presuppositions in interpreting Mark: “no ciphers, no hidden messages . . . no ecclesiastical enemies . . . no riddle wrapped in a mystery, inside a mystery.” Because we do not know if any of these existed, it is better to read Mark without them: “Mark’s meaning lies on the surface.” This approach contrasts sharply with the common principle of interpretation in which “everything is about something else.” One should read Brown’s brief description of the basic Marcan story to discover how rich a picture of Jesus Mark offers, allowing the different Christological titles to “color each other harmoniously” (p. 157).

Reviewing Joseph Fitzmyer’s monumental two-volume Anchor Bible Commentary on Luke, Charles H. Talbert commends it for providing an exhaustive coverage of Lucan scholarship between 1954, the beginning of redaction Criticism, and 1974, when Paul Minear’s lectures in a seminar at the Society of Biblical Literature meeting signaled a new way of doing Lucan studies. Talbert notes four basic points of difference since 1974:

First, prior to 1974 the normal approach was atomistic, using the pericopes of traditional “Gospel Parallels.” Thus Fitzmyer breaks Luke 10:1–24 into five units with little concern for what binds them together. After 1974 the concern was to examine the larger thought-units within a Gospel, based on indications within the actual text and analogies from the milieu.

Second, the earlier approach, using a synopsis, carefully examined every variant between the Lucan text and an alleged earlier source normally considered to be Mark or Q. The later approach begins with the continuous, finished text and does a close reading in the light of rhetorical or modern narrative criticism. Then, using a synopsis, it compares Luke with the other Gospels, which are seen not so much as sources but as independent developments of the same basic tradition.

Third, the purpose of the former is to present a history of the tradition going back to the historical Jesus. It is preoccupied not only with whether Matthew or Luke has the original version, but with Jesus’ actual words. The latter looks for the message of the text in its canonical form. The former sees the text as a window into the development of the tradition, and the latter sees the text as a mirror reflecting its own narrative world.

Finally, pre-1974 scholars entered into a dialogue with such scholars as Conzelmann and attempted to rehabilitate Luke in the face of post-Bultmannian depreciations of him as a theologian. The post-1974 period seeks to dialogue with Greco-Roman and Hellenistic Jewish literature and with modern literary criticism. The danger, according to critics of this approach, is that scholars plough a course through a maze of

secondary literature, without ever approaching the text as a religious document.

The year 1974 was also significant for the publication of *THE ECLIPSE OF BIBLICAL NARRATIVE*, by Hans Frei of Yale University. This was an effort to relate biblical study to contemporary literary criticism. Before the Enlightenment, according to Frei, the narrative texts of the Bible caused little or no problem because the world of the Bible resembled that of the reader. In the late eighteenth century there was a change of focus from texts themselves to their subject matter—from a literary to a more historical frame of reference. This generated a regrettable confusion between history and the history-like or realistic narrative of the Bible. It obscured the meaning of the biblical narratives, which are the result of a fusion of history and fiction. Thus there was the gradual realization that the Bible was a collection of documents from a rather alien culture, from a pre-critical, pre-scientific world with categories different from our own, and with and obstacles to clear understanding. Exegetes tended to use the text to recover what was not in the text. Biblical scholarship became dominated by what Robert Alter called “excavatory” or “genesis-concerned” methods, which attempted to get behind or beneath the text as we have it. Instead of the ancient tradition of reading the Bible as a whole, specialized critics tended to atomize the text into distinct units.

English-speaking scholars have tended to handle the problem in a different way from their German colleagues. German scholars such as Von Rad for the O.T. and Cullmann for the N.T. were interested in the ideas being communicated by the narrative and wrote theologies and histories of Israelite thought. English-speaking scholarship to this day has been preoccupied instead with the historical truth behind the biblical texts. Both shared the conviction that the main purpose of a narrative was to provide information about what happened or what people believed. This information could be extracted by using suitable techniques and then organized into an appropriate independent system. Frei called for a rediscovery of biblical narrative to take seriously the “narrativity” of a text so that it can be treated as literature and not merely as a reference book. In 1976 James Barr (pp. 1–17) long a critic of the Western obsession with history, proposed that “story” was a more suitable category than “history” to characterize much of the material in the Bible. As a result, the word “story” has now become as frequent as “history” was some twenty-five years ago.

On reflection, a gospel writer like Matthew can well be described as a storyteller with a hidden agenda—not unlike the O.T. storytellers. Today we realize that human beings reason largely by means of stories rather than by piles of data. Stories are influential because people can identify with them and feel that they could experience them. Stories are powerful ways of motivating people, spreading enthusiasm, loyalty and commitment. Concrete stories like parables are indirect teaching at its

best and excellent ways of correction, of penetrating behind prejudice. They reveal and challenge the underlying beliefs or doubts that people feel but are often unable to articulate directly. John R. Donahue (p. 569) makes the proposal that Mark, who is the first N.T. author to hand on our explicit Christological question (“Who do men say that I am?” 8:27) should be read as a narrative parable of the meaning of Jesus’ life. Matthew also has a very shrewd story line, full of surprises, contradictions, ambiguities and also allusions to the O.T. and to other parts of Jewish history. His bottom line is an unspoken warning to his own community:

“Look what happened to the Jewish community; it could also happen to you who are disobedient to the last command of Christ. The grace of the kingdom came to them and they refused it. If you refuse your gift of grace and mission the same could happen to you.”

### A Conversation With The Text

David Tracy describes a “classic” as a text that discloses a compelling truth about our lives, which “surprises, provokes, challenges, shocks and eventually transforms us” (p. 108). In *PLURALITY AND AMBIGUITY* (p. 15), he comments that classics are not easily tamed: “In our period the power of the biblical texts is often best found in the readings from the communities of the poor and marginalized.” As Mark W. G. Stibbe (p. 135) is careful to point out, however, some colleagues tend to treat the gospel as novelistic fiction, or a closed, autonomous world. Stibbe is rightly concerned to ask and answer questions posed by historically-minded critics. The danger today has moved to the other extreme—there is a *large* variety of methodologies available today.

In an epoch-making document of the Pontifical Biblical Commission, entitled *INTERPRETATION OF THE BIBLE IN THE CHURCH* (1993), some thirteen different critical approaches are presented, with a judicious evaluation of the constructive potential and limitations of each approach. These include such new approaches as literary criticism, narrative, rhetorical, canonical, sociological, psychological, and feminist approaches. This influential document, while discussing the history of the Historical Critical Method, briefly notes that the roots of the method can be identified in the exegesis of the early church. According to Joseph G. Prior (p. 43), this statement is “a response to recent arguments that call for replacing the Historical Critical Method with a ‘spiritual exegesis’ similar to that of the patristic and medieval periods.” The Pontifical Biblical Commission aims to show that “certain elements of the method have been recognized as important and necessary for proper exegesis even in the formative years of Christianity.” For Prior, even though the Historical Critical Method developed formally and systematically only after the Renaissance, in con-

junction with fifteenth century Humanism, its roots are found in the patristic and medieval periods—which use some of its procedures and techniques. He notes that biblical historians differ as to the originator of the method and that their suggestions cover scholars who lived during a wide expanse of time: L. Valla (d. 1457), H. Grotius (d. 1658), B. Spinoza (d. 1677), J. LeClerc (1697), R. Simon (d. 1712), J. Astruc (d. 1753), J. Ernesti (d. 1761), H. Reimarus (d. 1768), J. Michaelis (d. 1791), and J. Eichorn (d. 1827).

When discussing or criticizing the Historical Critical Method it is well worth recalling the reply of Francis Watson to Christopher Rowland (p. 518):

So far as I can remember, my book contains no disparagement at all of “the historical critical method,” largely because I do not believe that such an entity exists in the singular form that is normally envisaged. What does exist is a shifting set of conventions, never clearly defined and constantly under negotiation, about questions that it is proper to address to the biblical texts and the answers that it is proper to expect from them.

Clearly modern New Testament studies are interdisciplinary, as scholars can draw upon such disciplines as literary theory, historiography, political theory, social scientific theory, linguistics, classics, and archaeology. Quoting St. Paul (“We know only in part . . . 1 Cor 13:12”), Larry W. Hurtado in his inaugural lecture at the University of Edinburgh (2 October 1997) insists that the efforts of every exegete are “affected by his or her historicity, in time, geographical and cultural setting, language, life-experiences, gender, values, biases, beliefs, vices, and virtues” (p. 173). While he accepts that in the words of Roland Barthes’ book title, there is room for “the pleasure of the text”—a certain playful freedom with a text—nevertheless a hermeneutics of agape “seeks also to respect the text as it is” and “to take account of all that an author offers, the congenial and uncomfortable features, the exotic and banal, whether we like them or not, whether we find them relevant or not” (p. 176).

In his widely successful *CATHOLIC STUDY BIBLE*, however, Donald Senior is content to suggest three approaches: the historical, the theological, and the inspirational, while insisting that since the Bible is the Church’s book, “only in the context of the Church’s faith and tradition as a whole can the full meaning of the Bible be discovered” (see Senior’s Reader’s Guide, p. 8). The historical approach, which seeks “leads to the historical context of a given period or culture,” is a legitimate enterprise but “does not correspond to the fundamentally religious character of the Bible.” For the purpose of the Bible is not merely to inform the reader about the past. The theological approach seeks what the Bible has to say about a particular doctrinal or moral issue such as God, violence, or justice. In fact many perspectives on such issues are discovered in the Bible. In

the inspirational approach most Christians turn to the Scriptures for inspiration in living out their life of faith, as a stimulant for prayer, in times of trouble and for group reflection and as a source for preaching.

For example, *Lectio Divina* (Latin for “sacred reading”) is a meditative approach to the Bible under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, who leads the reader to mediation, prayer and contemplation. It was widely practiced in the early church—particularly in the golden age of monasticism—and is again popular in pastoral church life. It is done in three stages:

- Reading: A slow and reverent reading of the text, allowing the words to sink into the person's consciousness. If necessary, words or expressions are clarified using for example the notes and introduction of a study Bible.
- Meditation: Memories within the practitioner are stirred up so that one recognizes similar experiences or people in one's own life.
- Prayer: The mediation leads to prayer—to thanksgiving, humility and petition.

In a very practical overview of N.T. studies edited by Mark Allan Powell, the complex and diversified field that threatens to overwhelm its practitioners is described as a wonderful problem, an embarrassment of riches. What has been traditionally an old boys' club has changed forever as significant numbers of women have swelled the ranks of N.T. scholarship. The key question Powell posed to the contributing scholars is: “How shall we read the N.T. in the twenty-first century?”

According to Fernando F. Segovia, who contributes the reflection on methods, up to the 1970s there was widespread agreement on the elitist approach according to which academic reading of the Bible based on systematic and arduous training was “both inherently superior and hermeneutically privileged as the one proper and correct reading of the texts.” Claims of hermeneutical privilege and inherent superiority have been challenged from different, though related, directions. The result is that academic reading is seen as “a tradition of reading, subject to critical analysis with regard to its origins, presuppositions, strategies, results, and agenda” (p. 2). It is “but one among several traditions of reading, all similarly long-standing and comprehensive. Segovia notes that it has often been pointed out that academic reading of the bible is a relatively recent tradition. In contrast:

Today, scholars must study not only the history of academic reading as a discipline but also other traditions of reading the Bible. Such study has to include at least three such traditions: 1) the theological or churchly tradition, encompassing such different modes as dogmatic, fundamentalist, denominational, and liberationist; 2) the religious or devotional tradition, covering many beloved and enduring practices observed in daily life; and 3) the cultural or popular tradition, encompassing the broad appropria-

tion and use of biblical motifs, situations, and themes in cultural production at large [ibid].

Two more recent provocative books by Stephen E. Fowl and my colleague William M. Thompson are well worth reading for their contributions to the modern debate.

For Fowl many of the concerns of the Christian interpreter are “very different from, if not starkly opposed to, the concerns of professional biblical scholar” (p. 179). His aim is “a call to Christians to rediscover, re-invigorate, and re-appropriate important elements of their past practices and convictions which may have fallen into disrepair” (ibid). He tries to show the integral connections between Christian interpretation, doctrines and practices and Christian abilities to form and sustain a certain type of common life. A strength of Fowl's approach is that he risks readings of specific texts and particular life situations that “engage scripture” with courage and clarity. Thus, for example, Philippians shows that for Christians, practical reasoning is Christ-focused. There God's activity in Christ (2: 6–11) is the norm from which Paul moves to his own situation and that in which the Philippians are struggling.

Thompson argues for a “family practice” type of biblical scholarship, in which biblical study and theology are wed to form a united whole. He attempts to bridge the gap between theology and spirituality and recover the type of exegetical theology that was prominent in the early centuries and the greater history of the Church. He argues for more integrative works, a kind of second naiveté that does not ignore the challenges of contemporary thought.

One should also, perhaps, mention how William C. Spohn combines historical Jesus research, virtue ethics, and the Catholic tradition of moral theology and Christian spirituality (especially the Jesuit tradition of engagement with the text) in an ecumenical vision of discipleship, discernment and action. In particular, drawing on David Tracy and Jonathan Edwards, he develops ideas on imagination and analogy as a way for a Christian to relate to the modern world in a way similar but not identical to the early Christians' prophetic interaction with their social environment.

## Performing the Scriptures

According to Stephen C. Barton, (p. 179) recent studies have given considerable attention to the possibility that the metaphor of performance is the one appropriate metaphor for articulating what is involved in N.T. interpretation. The first to propose this analogy with the interpretation of a musical score or dramatic script was the Cambridge Catholic philosophical theologian Nicholas Lash in a seminal article published in *THE FURROW* in 1982. Lash rightly insists that for an adequate interpretation of Beethoven it is not enough to be able to read

the notes, play the instruments with technical accuracy, know in what circumstances the music was composed, or know how the score has been interpreted orchestrally in the past. The key act of the interpretation of a Beethoven score is the performance. This involves a creative fidelity that permits the musical score to come alive in the present moment, to inspire, give pleasure, or console. This requires not just a conductor and an orchestra but an audience of (more or less informed) listeners and of critics also. What the score means is derived from the creative contributions of both orchestra and audience. Likewise, the central act in the interpretation of *King Lear* is found in the performance of the play on a stage with a group of actors and the participation of an audience. A technically correct performance can be “flat,” “wooden,” or “lifeless” in contrast to “original,” “inspired” or “creative” when the audience is led to understand both the play and themselves in a new way.

Thus with musical and dramatic analogies Lash correctly insists that the fundamental form of the Christian interpretation of Scripture is the performance of the biblical text. His model has the “advantage of keeping the experts firmly in their place while acknowledging their skills to be indispensable” (p. 14). He suggests, first,

that although the texts of the N.T. may be read, and read with profit, by anyone interested in Western culture and concerned for the human predicament, the fundamental form of the Christian interpretation of Scripture is the life, activity, and organization of the believing community. Secondly that Christian practice, as interpretative action, consists in the performance of texts which are construed as “rendering,” bearing witness to, one whose words and deeds, discourse and suffering, “rendered” the truth of God in human history. The performance of the N.T. enacts the conviction that these texts are most appropriately read as the story of Jesus, the story of everyone else, and the story of God [p. 13].

For Lash this approach affords no license to that fundamentalism which is such a depressing and widespread feature of popular preaching and catechesis: “It takes two to tango and rather more to perform *King Lear*” (p. 14). The meaning of a document such as the American Constitution is never definitively captured. A judge’s business is to “make” the law by his interpretation of precedent. His interpretation is a creative act which is far removed from computer-like predictions. Thus the N.T., which once needed to be rescued from the ecclesiastical authorities, now needs to be rescued from the theology professors who, though indispensable, are subordinate to the quality and appreciation of the performance. The greatness of the text consists in its inexhaustible capacity to express the fundamental features of our human drama. Barton comments that “there is hardly anyone listening any more because the business of interpretation has become professionalized and institutionalized, iso-

lated and estranged from that very body of people that give it authority and legitimacy in the first place” (p. 183).

For Lash the best illustration of what he means is the celebration of the Eucharist. Barton suggests that an Anglican bishop finds it in the festal cycle culminating in Holy Week, while the Methodist finds it in preaching. None of these, at any rate, excludes the others. In the Eucharist, according to Lash, “that interpretative performance in which all our life consists—all our suffering and care, compassion, celebration, struggle and obedience—is dramatically distilled, focused, concentrated, rendered explicit” (p. 18). Barton quotes the independent example of Methodist patristic scholar Frances Young. For Young we should imitate the way early Church Fathers such as Irenaeus, Melito, or Origen interpreted the Bible. She explains this in the light of a musical canon and its contemporary performance (p. 21). Young remarks that the integration of scripture within tradition, so natural to Irenaeus, was “torn asunder by the Reformation” while historical-critical hostility to typological interpretation resulted in marginalizing the reading of the O.T. as scripture.

Barton finds that the performance model goes with the grain of the N.T. and the Bible as a whole. Thus the fact that the N.T. is an “open text” is seen in the way it “invites completion in the lives of its readers and looks forward to a future beyond its own time and place” (p. 195). It is a parable that subverts preconceptions: “Who is my neighbor?”; a testimony that invites response: “Do this in remembrance of me”; a prophecy that awaits fulfillment: “For now we see in a mirror dimly”; a revelation that calls for discernment: “He will teach you all things.” Barton points out how Matthew concludes with a resurrection appearance on an unidentified mountain with his commission to ongoing universal mission in the presence of the risen Son of God (Matt 28:16–20); Mark ends with an irony and openness, with a summons to “fearful” following of the One who goes before (Mark 16:1–8); Luke ends with an unfinished meal and the empowerment for ecclesial witness to come (Luke 24:28–35, 44–49); Acts ends on a mundane anti-climactic note with Paul in Roman custody, preaching and teaching (Acts 28:30–31); John “ends with Jesus appointing a successor to feed his sheep and with an implied admission that witness to Jesus has to be ongoing because no gospel text could possibly bear witness to the full reality of his life (John 21:15–19, 24–25).

Tom Wright (p. 142) compares the task of N.T. interpretation to the improvisation of a lost fifth act of a play by skilled actors who have immersed themselves in the first four acts—for Wright the biblical story comprises of four acts—Creation, Fall, Israel, and Jesus—with a fifth act incomplete and ongoing but with contours of its shape to be found in the eschatological texts like Romans 8:1, 1 Corinthians 15, and the Book of Revelation. For Barton we can do no better than to look to the lives of saints and mystics for the meaning and truth of the story and the idea of non-identical repetition of Jesus’ life.

Lash, in conclusion, insists that the quality of our humanity will be the criterion of the adequacy of our performance: "And yet this criterion is, in the last resort, hidden from us in the mystery of God whose meaning for man we are bidden to enact" (p. 18).

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