7 Scholarly Articles
by N.T. Wright and Others
To Stretch Your Mind and View of the Bible
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Imagining the Kingdom: Mission and Theology in Early Christianity

N. T. Wright

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Abstract

The four gospels rightly stand at the head of the New Testament canon. They have, however, routinely been misread or misunderstood. They tell the story of the launch of theocracy – ‘the kingdom of God’ – in terms of the story of Jesus; but they tell that story as (a) the narrative climax of the story of Israel (presupposing the continuous story envisaged by many second-temple Jews in terms of Daniel 9’s prophecy of an extended exile), (b) the story of Israel’s God returning in glory as always promised, and (c) as the rival to the powerful first-century narrative of Rome, as told by e.g. Livy and Virgil in terms of Rome’s history reaching its climax in Augustus, the ‘son of God’, and his empire. The stories meet on the cross, and the purpose of the gospels is then to awaken the readers’ imagination: suppose, they say, that ultimate power looks like this, not like that of Alexander the Great or Augustus. Ironically, much gospel scholarship since the rise of the critical movement has appeared eager to silence this kind of reflection; this has been due to (a) a desire to avoid continuity of narrative, (b) the implicit Epicureanism of modern western culture, with its eagerness to keep God and the world at arm’s length, (c) the ‘two kingdoms’ theology implicit in much Lutheranism, and hence much New Testament scholarship, and (d) the triumph in modernism of what has been described by Ian McGilchrist as ‘left-brain’ over ‘right-brain’ thinking. Microscopic analysis has replaced the world of intuition, metaphor, narrative and imagination, leading to readings entirely against the grain of the gospels themselves (though understandable in an academic world where the doctoral process rewards left-brain work). If we are to take the gospels’ narratives seriously, however, we are projected forwards into a fresh vision of what the early church understood as its ‘mission’, focused on the εὐαγγέλιον which, for the first Christians, trumped that of Caesar. Because the early church was no longer marked by the cultural symbols of ethnic Judaism, it was the freshly imagined vision of the identity of the one God that sustained them in this mission, and the ecclesial life it demanded. This was the birth of ‘Christian theology’; and today’s task must include the imaginative recapturing of that vision of God’s kingdom, as a key element in a refreshed and gospel-grounded missiology.
The four gospels stand magisterially at the centre of early Christianity, as they stand at the head of the canon. Despite the occasional efforts to push them out of their central position and substitute other documents, whether actually existing (such as the wrongly named Gospel of Thomas) or reconstructed (such as the hypothetical document ‘Q’), the majority of scholars still believe, rightly in my view, that Matthew, Mark, Luke and John deserve their place. We might put it this way: if they had been lost for centuries, and then dug up last year in the sands of Egypt or Syria, they would be hailed as among the most extraordinary ancient documents we possess. The fact that they are well known should not blind us to their remarkable blend of page-turning narrative, vivid portraiture (especially of their central figure), historical verisimilitude and sophisticated theology.

And yet. Reversing what St Paul says about himself in 2 Corinthians 6:9, it remains the case that the gospels, though well known at one level, are unknown at another. An oversimplification, of course; but I refer to the overall drift of gospel studies, and indeed to the general perception of the four gospels in the wider church community to which the biblical studies academy remains tangentially, and sometimes uncomfortably, related. Huge strides have been made in helpful directions, not least by my predecessor but one, Professor Richard Bauckham, both in his work on the wide intended readership of the gospels and in his award-winning book on the gospels and the eyewitnesses. If his thesis is even half right – and I think it is at least that – then all kinds of assumptions, including some of those blessed things they used to call ‘the assured results of criticism’, will need to be torn up and worked again from scratch. But I believe we need to go still further. Despite generations of care and attention being lavished on the gospels as wholes rather than as assemblages of parts, I am not convinced that the main message of all four gospels has been grasped – and then, having been grasped, has been reflected in the methods employed for further study. And since I shall contend here that the four gospels stand at the centre of the missionary and

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hence theological life of the early church, a failure to understand their central thrust is most likely an index of a failure to grasp several other things as well about the life and work of the first Christians.

I don’t want to be thought alarmist. Fine work in many directions has been done on the gospels, a generation ago by another predecessor, Matthew Black of blessed memory. And of course Robin Wilson, of more recent memory, contributed much to our understanding of the hinterland of early Christianity within which the gospels and their early reception must be understood. But there comes a time in every discipline when one has to take a deep breath, stand back a bit and say, ‘Well and good; but perhaps we’re still missing something’. I think this is one of those moments. And, at such times, what is required is not simply more attention to detail, vital and central though that remains. What is required is precisely imagination: a willingness to think beyond the fence, to ask questions which have hitherto been screened out. And, to complete the list of predecessors over the last fifty years, Markus Bockmuehl published a remarkable book, Seeing the Word, in which he offered an eloquent and wide-ranging plea for just such an imaginative leap, a reassessment of the tasks and methods of the whole discipline.² That is the kind of exercise to which I now want to give attention.

I have three basic things to say. First, I shall propose a fresh thesis about the gospels, stressing the invitation they offered to their first readers to imagine a new state of affairs being launched into the world, a state of affairs for which the natural shorthand was ‘the kingdom of God’. This might seem rather obvious, but in fact the history of gospel scholarship for at least the last century has included many avoidance mechanisms, drawing attention away from the uncomfortable claim which the gospels are in fact making. This will lead to the second section, in which I want to pull back and survey the wider intellectual and cultural climate in which the discipline of ‘New Testament Studies’ was born and nurtured, and suggest that the failure to grasp the central message of the gospels flows directly from the post-Enlightenment agendas which have dominated the discipline. It is important, though, to stress both that my proposal is neither for a return to a pre-Enlightenment or anti-historical method, nor for a too-enthusiastic embrace of postmodern modes of operation, and that I regard a good deal of what has passed for ‘conservative’ or ‘orthodox’ responses to the mainstream Enlightenment agenda as sharing in, rather than solving, the underlying problems. This will send us back, third, to the gospels and the other New Testament writings with some fresh possibilities before us. I want to stress what seem to me the central grounding

features of early Christian mission, and the way in which what came to be
called ‘Christian theology’ grew out of that, not as a detached intellectual
element but as the necessary anchoring of the central Christian symbol.

How God became king: the story of the gospels
My proposal about the gospels is that they all, in their rather different ways,
tell the story of Jesus of Nazareth as the story of how God became king. They all, in
other words, announce the launch of what can only be called a ‘theocracy’.
And my contention here is that, by and large, research into the gospels has
for the last hundred or more years managed not to notice this, to screen out
the claim which would have been obvious in the first century and which
sustained the early church in its life and mission.3

The word ‘theocracy’, of course, sends shivers down many spines today.
In our current climate, with the uneasy stand-off between secularism and
fundamentalism, the idea of a ‘theocracy’ sounds uncomfortably like a return
to what people vaguely imagine as the situation of the Middle Ages, with
popes, bishops and priests ordering everyone about – or, indeed, to the
forms of theocracy envisaged and sometimes even implemented in other
religions today. (When I was lecturing in Ireland recently, someone asked
me to comment on the fact that only two countries in the world have clergy
sitting as of right in the upper chamber of Parliament: the UK on the one
hand and Iran on the other.) And most modern westerners, not least in our
great universities, react very strongly against any type of larger oversight,
rightly valuing their freedom both of action and of thought. Theocracy is
what we thought we’d got rid of, not something we wanted to discover in
some of the Western tradition’s most central texts.

But ‘theocracy’, in a sense yet to be defined, is of course what is
meant by ‘the kingdom of God’, which the synoptic gospels highlight at
the central motif of Jesus’ public announcements and which the fourth
gospel presupposes as his central theme.4 We know from Josephus that
the revolutionaries, in the last century before the disastrous Roman–Jewish
war, took as their battle-cry the slogan ‘no king but God!’5 Presumably they
thought they knew how God would exercise that kingly rule; presumably they
imagined that they themselves might act in some way as divine agents. But

3 Cf. N. T. Wright, How God Became King (San Francisco and London: HarperOne and SPCK,
2012).
4 The first time we meet the expression in John (3:3), it seems to be assumed that this
is what Jesus is all about.
5 Josephus, Ant. 18.23; see the discussion in N. T. Wright, The New Testament and the People
that ‘God’s kingdom’ denoted the long-awaited rule of Israel’s God on earth as in heaven there should be no doubt. The widespread assumption today that ‘the kingdom of God’ denotes another realm altogether, for instance that of the ‘heaven’ to which God’s people might hope to go after their death, was not on the first-century agenda. When Jesus spoke about God’s kingdom, and taught his followers to pray that it would arrive ‘on earth as in heaven’, he was right in the middle of first-century Jewish theocratic aspirations.

So when the gospels tell the story of Jesus, they do so (to repeat) as the story of ‘how God became king’. It wasn’t, for them, just an aspiration; it was an accomplishment. We can see this in three narratival strands which work together in all four gospels (though not, interestingly, in any of the non-canonical gnostic materials). As throughout this article, I here summarise material which could be set out in considerably more detail.

The three strands in question come in addition to, not in competition with, the two more normally observed. Gone are the days when people could confidently affirm that the gospels were in no sense ‘biographies’ of Jesus. Several studies have indicated the reverse: when placed alongside Graeco-Roman bioi, the four canonical gospels clearly belong in something like the same genre. Nor is there any problem in continuing to affirm that the gospels tell the story of Jesus as the story of the launching of the movement which, perhaps anachronistically, we refer to as ‘the church’. How precisely the gospels reflect early Christian faith and life is another matter, but that they do so is not in question. The gospels are, in a perfectly proper sense, ‘biographies’; they are also foundation documents for Jesus’ first followers. But the three further interlocking dimensions we must now explore are key elements which have, all too often, been missing from the discussion.

The first of these missing dimensions is that the four canonical gospels tell the story of Jesus as the continuation and climax of the ancient story of Israel. To say this is more than to say that the gospels portray Jesus as the fulfilment of ancient prophecy. That is obvious. It is the kind of fulfilment which matters here. The gospels give every sign – admittedly in four different ways – that they belong to that feature of the Jewish world of the day in which the longer story of Israel was being told in search of an ending, and that they are writing in order to provide such an ending. What matters – and what, I think, goes radically against the grain of Western thought for many centuries – is the idea of narrative continuity. Not just ‘narrative’ as such; that might lead simply to a repeated pattern, which we naturally find as well, for instance in the strong sense of a ‘new exodus’, the fresh and final repetition of ancient

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Israel’s greatest story. That is important, but it points beyond itself to the belief, which we can track in many Jewish texts of the time, that all these repeated patterns were part of a larger sequence that was going somewhere. History might be in some sense cyclic, but in a more important sense the cycles contributed to a forward, linear movement.

Thus, for instance, the book we call Pseudo-Philo tells the ancient story of Israel and breaks off at the point where David is about to become king. Its recounting of the tales of the Judges seems to be designed as a model for militant messianic movements in the writer’s own day. Similarly, the book of Wisdom recounts the story of the Exodus, not simply as a great historic moment in Israel’s ancient past, but as the model for the new and decisive act of judgement which Israel’s God is about to perform, condemning the wicked and vindicating his wise and righteous sufferers. At that level, despite the radical difference of genre, this is much the same as what we find in 4 Ezra and 2 Baruch, who look back to the horrible events of 586 BC as a kind of model for what they have now experienced in AD 70, and retell the ancient story as a way of leading the eye up to the great messianic deliverance which is about to burst upon the world, with (in 4 Ezra’s vision) the messianic lion triumphing over the pagan eagle.7

All of these, in their different ways, look back to the scriptures, and particularly the book of Daniel, with its intriguing combination of the genres of wisdom and apocalyptic. In fact, the storytelling at which we have just glanced belongs within a much larger movement of thought in which Daniel 9 in particular became seminal. In Daniel 9 the prophet asks how long the exile is going to be: will it not, as Jeremiah prophesied, last for seventy years? Back comes the answer: not seventy years, but ‘seventy weeks of years’; that is, seventy times seven.8 There are important echoes here of the Jubilee theme from Leviticus 25, but for our purposes the point is that this 490 years, predicted in Daniel 9, haunted the minds of devout Jews in the centuries immediately before and after the time of Jesus. There is plenty of evidence to indicate that people within various movements were calculating, as best they could, when that time would be up, and when the long-awaited deliverance from pagan domination would therefore occur. Their answers varied wildly. The Essenes, it appears, pinned their hopes on the climax coming around the time when Herod the Great died. Some Rabbis, however, did their sums quite differently (it all depends, of course, where you begin the sequence), so that when Akiba hailed Simeon ben Kosiba as Messiah in AD 132 some of his colleagues opposed him, not so much because ben Kosiba was not...

a suitable candidate but because, according to their calculations, the Son of David was not due for at least another century.⁹

All this, interesting though it is, simply points to the widespread phenomenon which is, I suggest, the presupposition for the story the gospels tell in the way they tell it: that Israel’s history, under the guidance of a strange and often opaque divine providence, had not come to a standstill, but was moving forwards towards its appointed goal. The story has many twists and turns, and many flashbacks and indeed flash-forwards, advance hints of what is to come. But it is a single storyline, and it is awaiting its proper and fitting fulfilment. My first point, then, is that all four gospels, in their different ways, are written so as to say that the story of the public career and fate of Jesus of Nazareth provides that proper and fitting, if highly surprising and subversive, fulfilment. Jesus is not, for the evangelists, simply the antitype of the various types such as Moses, or David, or the Passover lamb. He is the point at which the millennia-long narrative has reached its goal. Matthew makes the point, graphically, with his introductory genealogy. Mark does it with his opening quotations from Malachi and Isaiah; Luke, by telling the story of John the Baptist as a reprise of the story of Samuel. (They do it in many other ways, too, but these stand out.) John goes right back to the beginning, to the opening of Genesis, and structures his gospel so as to say that in Jesus not only the story of Israel but the story of all creation is reaching its decisive goal. And in all four gospels there are clear echoes and references back, in a variety of ways and contexts, to the various prophecies of Daniel, including those of chapter 9.

It is in Daniel, of course, that we find the strongest statement of what the climax will be, when it comes: it will be the arrival of God’s own kingdom, his sovereign rule, trumping the rule of all pagan powers. And it is to Daniel that we should look to find the text which, according to Josephus (echoed at this point by Suetonius), most incited Jews to rebel against Rome: the text according to which a world ruler would, at that time, arise from Judaea.¹⁰ Josephus and Suetonius, of course, refer this to Vespasian, called back from the campaign against Jerusalem to become Emperor in Rome. The four gospels, clearly, have another candidate in mind. And, for that matter, a different sort of kingdom. But to that we shall return.

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Much more could be said about the way in which the four gospels tell the story of Jesus as the climax of the continuous story of Israel, with the kingdom of God arriving at that climax. But I move rapidly to the second point, which is that the gospels tell this story as the story of Israel’s God. Here we must take a step back once more, because it is not as well known as it ought to be that in the world of Second-Temple Judaism there was a strong sense, not just that Israel’s fortunes needed to change, but that Israel’s God needed to come back to his people, to the temple. Ezekiel had described the divine glory leaving Jerusalem, and had prophesied that it would return to a rebuilt temple, but nobody ever said they’d seen it happen. There is no scene anywhere in the literature of the period to correspond to Exodus 40, where the divine glory fills the newly constructed tabernacle, or 1 Kings 8, where the same thing happens to Solomon’s Temple. There is no sudden appearance, as was granted to the prophet Isaiah. Plenty of texts say that it will happen (I think, obviously, of Isaiah 40 and 52; of Zechariah and Malachi), but none indicate that it already has.11

Here the four evangelists are quite explicit. John is perhaps the most obvious: ‘the word became flesh’, he says (1:14), ‘and tabernacled, pitched his tent, in our midst; and we beheld his glory’. In case we missed the point, John rubs it in again and again by his constant positioning of Jesus in relation to, or in the place of, the Temple (e.g. 2:21). Mark, outwardly so different to John, hits exactly the same note with his opening quotations from Isaiah and Malachi. Both passages concern the return of the divine glory, and the messenger who will prepare the way for it. Mark leaves us in no doubt that he thinks that this has now happened, in and through Jesus. Matthew and Luke in their own ways get at the same point, Matthew not least with the Emmanuel promise (1:23 and 28:20) and Luke not least through the terrifying scene in chapter 19 where Jesus, arriving in Jerusalem, tells the story about the king who comes back at last only to find a disobedient servant, and then announces Jerusalem’s imminent destruction on the grounds (19:44) that ‘you did not know the moment when God was visiting you’ (τὸν καυρὸν τῆς ἐπισκοπῆς σου).

This rather simple observation, clearly, puts the cat among several of the older critical pigeons. I grew up in a scholarly world where it was taken for granted that while John had a high (and most probably Greek) christology, the synoptics had a low (quite possibly Jewish) one. That only shows the extent to which people were asking the wrong question. Once we think into the world of first-century Jewish narrative, a very different picture emerges.

To the old sneer that Jesus talked about God but the early church talked about Jesus, we may reply that Jesus did indeed talk about God and God’s kingdom—in order to explain what he himself was doing and would accomplish.

It is this picture, third, which confronts—as Israel’s stories normally did confront—the power of pagan empire. The four gospels, again in their very different ways, are all written to tell the story of Jesus as the story of Israel, and the story of Israel’s God, reaching their proper climax, so as thereby to tell the story of how Israel’s God becomes king of the whole world. This is the clue to the mission, and the missionary theology, of the early church, to which I shall return.

Think for a moment of the narrative which had burst upon the world around the time that Jesus of Nazareth was born. The intellectual coup d’état which Augustus accomplished through his court poets and historians was every bit as stunning as the political coup he achieved in the double civil war which followed the assassination of his adoptive father, Julius Caesar. Everybody in Rome knew that Augustus’ attaining of supreme and unchallengeable power meant the overthrow of a centuries-long tradition of fierce republicanism (Augustus, of course, insisted that he had merely restored the republic, but nobody was fooled). But for Livy to tell the history of Rome through the long years of the Republic and climaxing with the rule of Augustus, with whom he had a lasting friendship, was a remarkable achievement. Scholars differ on the extent to which Livy himself believed that the rule of Augustus was an unqualified good thing, and Tacitus records (Annals 4.34) that in one of the later, and sadly lost, books of his great work Livy felt able to praise the conspirators Brutus and Cassius. But he knew which side his bread was buttered on, as is evidenced for instance by his distorting of key political details to suit the new regime. And the greatest writer to tell the long story of Rome as a history leading the eye up to Augustus was of course Virgil. His early Eclogues refer to the turbulent events of the civil war, and include the mysterious fourth, hailing the birth of a child who will usher in the golden age. Virgil read the Georgics to Augustus in person after his victory at Actium in 31 BC; and he was regularly in the company of Augustus during the years in which he composed the Aeneid itself, the greatest poem of the period. Here there is, as is well known, a ‘strong narrative teleology’, invoking ‘Fate’ as the force which will lead Aeneas to found Rome and Rome to produce, eventually, the wonderful new empire.

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12 E.g. 4.20, where Livy suggests that Cornelius Cossus was consul, not merely a military tribune, when celebrating his single-handed victory over an enemy commander four centuries earlier, thus supporting Augustus’ jealous retaining of military glory for himself in his own day.

13 OCD 1606 (D. P. Fowler and P. G. Fowler).
of Augustus. Already in the first book the scene is set, with Jupiter himself prophesying to the world, back then in the time of Aeneas, that from his noble line there will be born ‘a Trojan Caesar, who shall extend his empire to the ocean, his glory to the stars’ (1.286–7). His empire will be lavishly prosperous, and will bring peace to the world (1.289–96). Indeed, Aeneas himself is seen as a type of the coming Augustus, an indication that here, too, typology can flourish within an overall grand narrative. I am not aware of anyone before Augustus causing the story of his own accession to power to be told as the climax of a much longer narrative.14

It is only when the first of my three points is fully grasped (which, as I’ve suggested, is not normally the case) that the breathtaking phenomenon emerges. There is no sign that the Romans are borrowing from Jewish tradition the idea of a centuries-old history climaxing in a surprising but victorious, prosperous and peace-bringing reign. Nor is there any suggestion that Matthew, Mark, Luke or John had read Livy or Virgil.15 But their story of Jesus as bringing the long history of Israel to an unexpected climax was not only a remarkable parallel to the great Roman narrative, which Augustus and his successors were busily reinforcing in statues, coins and other symbolic artefacts. It was bound to be set on a collision course. The Jews, too, had cherished a prophecy about a coming king whose peaceful rule would extend from one sea to the other, from the River to the ends of the earth.16 And the four evangelists declare that this king has arrived, and that his name is Jesus. It is not surprising – to anticipate a later point – that we find the early church accused, in northern Greece which was such key terrain for the early Empire, of behaving contrary to the dogmas of Caesar, and saying that there was ‘another king (βασιλέα ἐτέρων), namely Jesus’ (Acts 17:7).

Rome is, of course, scarcely mentioned in the four gospels, yet for those with first-century ears attuned its presence is everywhere presupposed. John’s great climactic scene of Jesus and Pilate – the kingdom of God against the kingdom of Caesar, challenging one another’s visions of kingdom, truth and power – shows where, for him, the story was heading all along.17 Luke stages the birth of Jesus carefully in relation to the decree of Caesar Augustus, and his second volume ends with Paul in Rome announcing God as king and Jesus as lord, ‘openly and unhindered’.18 Matthew and Mark draw heavily on Daniel

15 Though Wallace makes a case for thinking that Virgil, at least, was widely known across the empire by the middle of the century.
16 E.g. Ps 72:8; 89:25; Zech 9:10.
7, the passage above all where God’s kingdom confronts and overthrows the kingdoms of the world, seen as a succession of four increasingly horrible monsters. There is no doubt, in the first century, that the fourth monster would have meant Rome. And it is possible that Mark himself may have deliberately framed his gospel with strong hints that in Jesus an empire was coming to birth of a completely different character to that of Caesar. A recent article contrasts the dove which descended on Jesus at his baptism with the Roman eagle, appearing as an omen to further the cause of Augustus or his successors.19 Furthermore, an increasingly common interpretation of Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem is to see that event not only as the staged fulfilment of Zechariah 9 but also as a deliberate parody of the regular entry into Jerusalem of Pontius Pilate, on horseback surrounded by soldiers, coming from his quarters in Caesarea.20 Whether or not that is correct, we should certainly see the muttered remark of the centurion (15:39) at the foot of the cross as vital. Mark hopes that his Roman readers will come to share this astonishing viewpoint. In a world where Caesar, unambiguously, was hailed as ‘son of God’, the centurion looks at the dead Jesus and transfers the title to him.

The cross, in fact, is for the evangelists the point where all the lines meet: the lines that run forward from Abraham, David and the exile; from 2 Samuel 7, Psalm 2 and Psalm 72; from Exodus 40 to 1 Kings 8 and Ezekiel 43; and, above all, from Isaiah 40–55 all the way into the mindset of Jesus himself and the interpretative work of the writers. The story told by all four gospels is the story of ‘how God became King’: not by the usual means of military revolution, but by the inauguration of sovereignty during Jesus’ public career, and the strange but decisive victory on the cross itself. All four evangelists report that Jesus was executed with the words ‘king of the Jews’ over his head; and, as they all knew though many scholars have long forgotten, the ancient Jewish dream was that the king of the Jews would be king of the world. Of course: if Israel’s God was the creator of the world, one would expect nothing less. And what the four evangelists are asking their readers to

20 Though not directly described in ancient sources, this seems to have become a common theme in sermons and popular addresses: http://www.christianity.org.uk/index.php/showdown.php. An earlier scholarly study of the possibilities is Brent Kinman, ‘Jesus’ “Triumphal Entry” in the Light of Pilate’s’, New Testament Studies 40/3 (1994), pp. 442–8; his proposal is based on the known behaviour of Roman governors elsewhere rather than on direct evidence about Pilate’s own coming to Jerusalem. However, the suggestion is certainly very plausible.
do, as they ponder this strange multi-layered narrative, is precisely to imagine: to imagine that this, rather than something else, is what it would look like when God became king. Along with music and the visual arts, narrative is a primary human means of stimulating the imagination. This, I suggest, is precisely what the four gospels are aiming to do.

These are the themes which I see prominently in the gospels but not so prominently in contemporary scholarship. Indeed, one might observe that much of the effort expended on the gospels over the last hundred years and more has been directed not towards grappling with these issues, but precisely towards holding them at bay. Narrative and imagination have been at a discount; the mechanical study of dismembered fragments has been the rule. Most of the much-vaunted ‘methods’ proposed in gospel scholarship have been generated from within a world where all that I have just said was ignored. Such methods are not neutral; they reflect the underlying assumptions of their makers, and I am suggesting that those underlying assumptions were deeply flawed. But why should this have been so? To try to understand that I turn to the second main section of my article.

Avoiding the kingdom: the story of biblical scholarship

Histories of biblical scholarship cover many issues, and it is important that in engaging with our predecessors as historically minded critics of the New Testament we contextualise them, as we must ourselves, in the climate of thought in which they lived. An obvious example, related directly to what I just said about dismembered fragments, is the great German Rudolf Bultmann. He was himself keenly aware of his own presuppositions, though many of his followers, not least in Britain and America, were inclined to treat his work as simply the objective results of neutral scholarship. Anything but: he was writing his major work on the gospels at a time when, after the First World War and the demise of the Kaiser and other ‘great men’, Germany was trying to become simply a ‘community’, a Gemeinde, in the Weimar Republic. What did Bultmann do? He wrote about the gospels as the collections of stories which die Gemeinde, the ‘community’, told amongst themselves to sustain their present faith, not at all intending reference to a recently departed ‘great man’, except for the sheer fact of his crucifixion. No thought of ‘kingdom’ there in any sense that a first-century Jew might recognise.

But that observation is simply the tip of the iceberg. So, too, is the necessary warning issued a generation ago by Hans Frei, that for much of the last two centuries narrative itself has been ‘eclipsed’ in biblical scholarship, which regarded stories as secondary and looked instead for nuggets of doctrinal and
ethical teaching.21 (We might compare the recent anti-Bible put out by the philosopher A. C. Grayling which, despite its attempt to parody the actual Bible, consists of no narrative at all but only wise sayings and advice.22) But, again, one has to go further back and ask why. This is a question which demands a multi-volume answer, and all I can do here is to put two or three items on the table for further discussion as we seek to understand how and why the discipline has gone in the directions it has. I shall, of course, greatly oversimplify many complex issues. My aim is to stimulate the disciplined imagination, not here to nail down exact arguments.

First, ever since the Renaissance the implicit narrative of Western culture has been tripartite. There is the good early period; then there is the bad or boring middle period; then there is the sudden reawakening, the shining of a great light, and we can retrieve the good early period – or some of it, anyway – in a newly formed culture or worldview. Thus the Renaissance itself, fed up with what was seen as the stodgy and unimaginative categories of the late Middle Ages, saw itself as a break with the immediate past and a retrieval of an earlier golden age. The Reformation, in its turn, went exactly the same route, returning not to the Renaissance’s pagan sources but to the Bible and the early fathers, largely agreeing about the dark middle period from which one needed a clean break. The Enlightenment, some of whose seeds were sown in both the Renaissance and the Reformation, has constantly tended to portray everything before it as ignorant superstition, hailing modern science and technology as the signs of the brave new world which enable us to draw an even thicker line between ourselves and our predecessors, retrieving only those bits and pieces of earlier wisdom which may commend themselves from time to time. One way or another, though, all these great movements have contained an implicit (and often explicit) narrative in which precisely what one does not want is continuity. Within Protestantism in particular – and until fairly recently most of the running in biblical scholarship was made by Protestants of one stripe or another – the sense of a major break in the narrative is deeply important. Anything else might signal, at least by implication, that the Catholics had been right all along, even though ostensibly the story being told would have been about the first century rather than the sixteenth. There has, then, been deep visceral resistance to any idea of a continuous narrative, and this itself has greatly impeded a recognition of what the gospels were actually doing.

Second, however, the movement of thought from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment can be characterised especially by the major revival of Epicureanism. Ever since Poggio Bracciolini rediscovered Lucretius’ great poem *De Rerum Natura* in an obscure European monastery in 1417 – exactly a century before Luther’s supposed rediscovery of Paul’s theology led him to nail his theses to the Wittenberg door – the great alternative philosophy of the first century (alternative, that is, to the otherwise dominant Stoicism) had been making its way in European circles.\(^{23}\) It came to its full flowering with the thinkers of the Enlightenment, taking in such seminal figures as Giordani Bruno, Montaigne, Galileo, Bacon, Hobbes, Newton, Hume and, not least, Thomas Jefferson, who famously proclaimed ‘I am an Epicurean’. (That claim has to be taken seriously, despite Jefferson’s attempts to have his cake and eat it by also noting his admiration for Epictetus, a first-century Stoic, and of course for Jesus himself; the latter two were subject to Jefferson’s own rather heavy-handed attempts to decontextualise them and present the cleaned-up results in a way which sustained his other agendas rather than undermining them, as left to themselves they might have done.) The point, of course, is that in Epicurean philosophy, over against the confused and often frightening paganism of the ancient world and then the confused and often frightening religion of the Middle Ages, the gods are removed far away, off to a distant heaven from which they don’t even bother to look down, let alone to get involved in the affairs of the present world. The world itself, according to the first-century Darwinism of Lucretius, consists of atoms, and the objects made up of them, moving under their own steam, without divine intervention, developing and transforming themselves according to their own energy, their innate ‘swerve’ (*clinamen*, a crucial Epicurean term), and the survival of the fittest. Human society, likewise, should be able to order itself from within, needing no divine intervention whether through kings or priests or anybody else. The modern movement of liberal democracy is thus the twin sister of modern atheistic science, both sharing Lucretius as the primary ancestor and the Enlightenment philosophers as the immediate parents. Biblical scholarship as we know it today was born in a world where the gods had been banished far away, a world in which humans and their societies moved under their own steam.\(^{24}\)

It is important to stress this matrix, because the majority of Westerners today simply do not realise either that they are Epicureans by default or


that Epicureanism always was only one philosophy among others. As a young theologian I was taught, quite fiercely, that the Enlightenment had opened up a new saeculum (as indeed the American dollar bill declares to this day), and that we could not think of challenging it. Everything earlier was therefore relativised; just as George Washington had suggested that the world prior to the eighteenth century had been full of superstition, so modernist theologians insisted that we simply could not, today, share ‘ancient worldviews’. That, of course, was the grand narrative against which postmodernity has protested so strongly, shaking the old Enlightenment certainties to the core. But people usually do not realise that the Epicurean stance of separating God or the gods from the world was always simply one option among others, philosophically speaking; that it was always an unstable option (since the gods always tended to sneak back in by other means, as in the Romantic movement’s pantheistic answer to Enlightenment rationalism); that it was always a costly option, easier to embrace if you were rich enough to enjoy the Epicurean lifestyle.25 But the most important point is that this unstable and costly option was always going to be a very bad framework for understanding the Jewish traditions, especially the New Testament itself.

Now of course, as a historian, I believe that people with all kinds of different worldviews can and should study the evidence of the past and offer what interpretations they can of it, and particularly – the heart of good history – what made people tick. As the great contemporary historian, Asa Briggs, has written in his recent account of his time at Bletchley Park, what made young historians such good codebreakers is that they were ‘well read, drawn to lateral thinking, and taught to get inside the mind of people totally different from themselves’.26

But there’s the point. To use the anthropologist’s jargon, historians of whatever background and context ought to have a stab at offering an etic account of the societies they are studying, that is, an outsider’s fair analysis of the phenomena before them. But, as with anthropology, so with history, the pressure is there to provide what purports to be an emic account – an account of how the people themselves actually thought – but which turns out to be the etic one in disguise. And when, in the case of Enlightenment historiography, the etic account was offered from within Epicurean principles, the chance of


getting anywhere near the emic account that first-century Jews (including the early Christians) might have offered was severely reduced. In fact, within the Epicurean worldview Judaism was reduced, first, to being a ‘religion’ (the word ‘religion’ having been already severely redefined to reflect Epicurean principles, meaning now ‘that which humans do with their solitude’), and then to being the wrong sort of religion (since the Jews persisted, perversely from the Epicurean point of view, in believing that the real world of creation, and human actions within it, actually mattered as part of the whole).

Those who embraced the Enlightenment but sought still to be good Christians thus portrayed themselves in a different light. Martin Luther’s Protestantism, in which Paul rose and smote the wicked Judaisers, came to birth in a new form, as Christianity had to become un-Jewish in order to hold up its head in European culture. I’m talking here about the 1830s, not yet the 1930s (and leaving the 1530s to fend for themselves), but the point should still be clear. Religion and ordinary life had to be kept as far apart as possible. That was part, it seemed, of the point of justification by faith. The French went all the way with the Enlightenment agenda, and tried to wipe out religion entirely – an attempt which is still in progress today with the banning of Muslim headscarves. The Americans compromised, and insisted simply on a rigid separation of church and state. The English, as usual, looked this way and that and muddled along. As a newcomer to Scotland, I had better not try to describe what happened north of Berwick-upon-Tweed, though the simultaneous influence of John Knox and David Hume has no doubt left an interesting legacy. As for Ireland, I am reminded of the remark of my good friend the Irish American biblical scholar, Dominic Crossan, who has said more than once in my hearing that the Irish never really got the Enlightenment, but they got the British instead, which they found most enlightening in other ways. But my point is this: Epicureanism, and its social and political outworkings, may or may not be the best way for us today to organise our world. I would argue not, but that’s not the point. But it is certainly not a good way for us to understand the world of the early Christians.

The discipline of New Testament Studies has reflected this, on both sides of various great debates. The fateful Enlightenment split between the gods and the world has generated a new meaning for words like ‘natural’ and ‘supernatural’. It is now widely believed by would-be Christian apologists that part of the task is to defend something called ‘the supernatural’, in which a normally distant divinity invades the ‘natural’ world to perform ‘miracles’ or even, in the Christian story, to become human. But this merely reinscribes and perpetuates the Epicureanism which still serves as the framework for the discussion. Thus, in the study of the gospels, so-called ‘liberals’ have done their best to offer would-be historical accounts in which Jesus was
‘really’ a Jewish revolutionary or teacher or apocalyptic prophet (the notion of ‘apocalyptic’ itself, by the way, has suffered radically through this process, but that’s another story), while the so-called ‘conservatives’ have done their best to offer a historical account in which Jesus really was a ‘supernatural’ being who really did do miracles and rise from the dead.

Since in my own work I have done my best to counter some of the revisionist proposals it might be easy to suppose I was simply taking the latter path. Rather, I want to insist that to understand the first Christians we must understand the radical difference between the ancient Jewish worldview and the ancient Epicurean worldview (remembering not least that one of the sharpest insults a Rabbi could offer to heretics was to call them ἀπικωρσίμ, Epicureans). In the ancient Jewish worldview, the one God was not removed from the world, but was mysteriously present and active within it, at least in theory, so that if he remained absent, as in the Second-Temple period, there was precisely a sense of that absence. And the modes of his presence and activity were concentrated on the major Jewish symbols: Temple, Torah, land, family, and not least the great narrative which was continuing and would be fulfilled even though it might have seemed for the moment, like a submerged stream, to be running underground. This was the air Jesus and his first followers breathed. The task of describing, from an emic viewpoint, the mindset and motivation of the earliest Christians is thus one for which the Epicurean worldview is singularly badly suited. And to the extent that the movement of nineteenth-century biblical scholarship was done from within that Enlightenment framework, in its various forms owing much to Kant, Hegel and later Feuerbach, it was bound to misunderstand and misrepresent what those earliest Christians were about. And since some of the nineteenth-century proposals are still alive and well, as the sheer inertia of a complex discipline keeps them alive long after their sell-by date, we still find ourselves facing categories like ‘Jewish Christian’ and ‘Gentile Christian’, like ‘Early Catholicism’ and ‘Enthusiasm’, which actually demand such radical overhaul that it might be better to draw a line, in our turn, across the false would-be Heilsgeschichte of triumphalist scholarship, and try to start again.

There is another element to all this which I just mention before turning to my final point about the cultural context of modern biblical scholarship. Much of the work I have described has been done within the Lutheran tradition. But, for all its strengths, the Lutheran world has long embraced a ‘two kingdoms’ theology in which God and Caesar simply won’t mix. And that, when coupled with the Enlightenment’s Epicureanism, has produced several generations of scholarship in which, for instance, it is simply off limits to imagine that Paul might have regarded Jesus as Israel’s Messiah, with all the overtones of world sovereignty which that word carried. The
general view of scholarship has colluded with the general view of popular Western Christianity, that the purpose of the whole thing is ‘to go to heaven when you die’, rather than discerning, ‘imagining’ shall we say, the kingdom of God on earth as in heaven and working for that end. Of course, liberation theology and its various exegetical offshoots have tried to present a rival view. But, as with the so-called ‘conservative’ reaction, this has often simply maintained the split world of the Enlightenment, proposing (for instance) that Paul was ‘really’ a politician and therefore not really a theologian after all.27 Similar things might be said about some of the work, important in its own way, which has gone under the umbrella of ‘sociology’ or ‘anthropology’. From the post-Enlightenment standpoint, this appears to be on the ‘worldly’ side of the divide while God, or the gods, remain elsewhere. From the Jewish and early Christian perspective, such a division has already given in to one version of the paganism which both were determined to resist.

One final element of our modern world which has militated against imagining the kingdom in our reading of the gospels, and much else besides, is the triumph of left-brain thinking over right-brain thinking which has been massively and memorably set out by Iain McGilchrist in his breathtaking book The Master and his Emissary.28 McGilchrist has been attacked from within his own field (he is both a brain scientist and a literary critic, and as such has a unique perspective on the history of ideas). His careful and detailed exposition of the way in which the left and right hemispheres of the human brain function will, no doubt, be modified as research progresses.29 But as I read his account of the way in which, in the last three centuries, the left-brain activities of analysing, calculating and organising have steadily taken charge of our world, squeezing out the right-brain activities of imagination, storytelling, and intuitive thinking, I find it uncannily accurate as a description of our world in general and of biblical scholarship in particular. And McGilchrist argues strongly on the basis of brain science itself that our human brains are designed to work in a two-way movement: from the right brain with its initial

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29 Cf. e.g. Grégor Borst, William M. Thompson and Stephen L. Kosslyn, ‘Understanding the Dorsal and Ventral Systems of the Human Cerebral Cortex: Beyond Dichotomies’, American Psychologist 66/7 (Oct. 2011), pp. 624–32. I am grateful to Prof. Malcolm Jeeves for this and other references and for important discussion on this subject.
intuitions, to the left brain which works on the detail, and back to the right brain to implement. The right brain is thus the ‘master’, and the left brain the ‘emissary’, working at its best within the framework given by the right and intending to pass the results back across. But, as with some observable pathologies (not least schizophrenia), the left brain has taken over, and we have (says McGilchrist) a world in which the master has been betrayed.

McGilchrist is not trying to talk about the world of biblical scholarship, but the following paragraph jumped out at me as a pretty accurate summary of how the discipline has often gone:

We could expect that there would be a loss of the broader picture, and a substitution of a more narrowly focussed, restricted, but detailed, view of the world, making it perhaps difficult to maintain a coherent overview . . . This in turn would promote the substitution of information, and information gathering, for knowledge, which comes through experience . . . One would expect the left hemisphere to keep doing refining experiments on detail, at which it is exceedingly proficient, but to be correspondingly blind to what is not clear or certain, or cannot be brought into focus right in the middle of the visual field. In fact one would expect a sort of dismissive attitude to anything outside of its limited focus, because the right hemisphere’s take on the whole picture would simply not be available to it.30

I recognise this picture. Having worked for the Church of England for nearly twenty years, I recognise it as an account of what has happened, damagingly, to our institutions. Whether it has happened in the universities too, in the years I have been absent, I couldn’t possibly say. My point is that this has manifestly happened in biblical studies, and especially in New Testament studies, and not least in the study of the gospels. All too often the microscopic analysis of details, vital though it is in its place, has been made to seem an end in itself. ‘Objective facts’ are all the rage, and whether you’re a left-wing hunter of objectivity, determined to disprove the gospels, or a right-wing hunter, determined to show that they are after all ‘factual’, you may still be missing the point and losing the plot. Facts are left-brain business; vital in their place, but only part of the whole.

Thus, on the one hand, those who presently trumpet the need for a purely and exclusively ‘secular’ study of the Bible are simply following through the anti-metaphorical agenda of the French Revolution.31 Meanwhile, those who respond with an attempted rationalistic proof of, say, Jesus’ divinity are often

31 So McGilchrist, The Master and his Emissary, p. 347.
themselves remaining within the same sterile antithesis. Like Marxism and capitalism, secularism and fundamentalism are simply the left and right boots of Enlightenment Epicureanism. Only when the detailed left-brain analysis can be relocated as the emissary to the right-wing intuition, with its rich world of metaphor, narrative and above all imagination, can the discipline become healthy again.

The good news is that the gospels themselves resist the destructive, atomising, Epicurean left-brain analysis on its own. They go on telling the story of ‘how God became King’, and demanding that serious readers learn to imagine a world in which that might be the case, a world reshaped around their account of Jesus. Perhaps, after all, biblical studies might be one place where the return of the Master, a theme indeed made famous by some of Jesus’ own stories, might begin to take place. This is a challenge, particularly, for those engaged in doctoral studies. It is much easier to do a purely left-brain doctorate, and there is still plenty of room for that. But we also need, and quite urgently, a new generation who won’t be afraid to see the bigger picture and, without in the least going slack on the necessary left-brain analytic and philological exactitude, come back and articulate a new, freshly imagined vision of the kingdom of God.

Early Christian mission and theology
All this leads to my concluding remarks on early Christian mission and theology. For over a century now it has been commonplace within the discipline called New Testament studies to assume that the early church had to jettison its Jewishness in order to be relevant to the Gentile world into which it quickly went. Thus, as we saw earlier, it has been assumed that Paul had to downplay the idea of Jesus as Israel’s Messiah and to switch, instead, to the more readily available category of the κύριος, the ‘Lord’. But this proposal, hugely influential though it has been, simply fails to imagine what ‘the kingdom of God’ meant to the early Christians, Paul included. Paul, in fact, held firmly to the ancient Jewish belief, rooted in the Psalms, in Isaiah and in Daniel, that a world ruler would indeed arise from Judaea, that Israel’s God would thereby return to dwell amongst and within his people, and that through this the long-awaited new creation of peace and justice would be inaugurated for the whole world. All of that standard Jewish expectation came to fresh flowering in his thought and writing. Of course, the communities which Paul founded were determinedly non-ethnic in their basis. But this

32 Paul does not, of course, use the phrase often; but when he does it is clear that it remains at the centre of his worldview. Cf. e.g. Rom 14:17; 1 Cor 4:20, 6:9. (Full list in Wright, Jesus and the Victory of God, p. 668.)
was not because Paul had as it were gone soft on the essential Jewishness of his mission, or because there was something wrong (as Epicureans imagine) with Judaism, but because he believed that it was precisely part of the age-old divine plan that when God did for Israel what he was going to do for Israel then the nations would be brought under the healing, saving rule of this one God. Paul’s ‘gospel’, his εὐαγγελία, was thus much closer in meaning to the various εὐαγγελία of Caesar than most of modern scholarship has imagined. It was, as Acts 17 (already quoted) indicates, the royal announcement, right under Caesar’s nose, that there was ‘another king, namely Jesus’. And Paul believed that this royal announcement, like that of Caesar, was not a take-it-or-leave-it affair. It was a powerful summons through which the living God worked by his Spirit in hearts and minds, to transform human character and motivation, producing the tell-tale signs of faith, hope and love which Paul regarded as the biblically prophesied marks of God’s true people.

The communities which sprang into surprised existence as Paul went around making this royal announcement were remarkably devoid of an obvious symbolic world. They were precisely not defined by the worldview-symbols of Judaism – Temple, Torah observance and so on. They certainly didn’t adopt the symbols of the surrounding pagan culture. How could this new community, this new sort of community, retain what for Paul was its vital centre, namely its strong unity across traditional social divisions, and its strong holiness in matters of those perennial categories of human life, money, sex and power? For Paul the answer was simple. The community needed to understand what it was that had happened in Jesus the Messiah, and in particular who the God was into whose new world they had been brought. What we see in Paul is thus properly characterised as the birth of the discipline which later came to be called Christian theology, by which I mean the prayerful and scripture-based reflection, from within the common life of the otherwise disparate body called the church, on who exactly the one God was and what his action in Jesus and by the Spirit was to mean. Early Christian theology was not an exercise undertaken for the sake of speculative system-building. It was load-bearing. If the unity and holiness of the early church were the central symbols of the movement, they could only be held in place if a vigorous theology was there to stabilise them in the winds and storms of the first century. Theology, in this sense, serves ecclesiology and thus the kingdom-based mission. Actually, I have come to worry about a post-Enlightenment theology which doesn’t do this, that thinks the point is

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33 This is why, in my view, Barclay’s picture of Paul as presenting a puzzle gets off on the wrong foot: see John M. G. Barclay, Jews in the Mediterranean Diaspora: From Alexander to Trajan (323 BCE–117 CE) (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), ch. 13.
simply to ‘prove’ the divinity of Jesus, or his resurrection, or the saving nature of his death in themselves, thereby demonstrating fidelity to the Creeds or some other regula fidei. In the gospels themselves it isn’t like this. All these things matter, but they matter because this is how God is becoming king. To prove the great Creeds true, and to affirm them as such, can sadly be a diversionary exercise, designed to avoid the real challenge of the first-century gospel, the challenge of God’s becoming king in and through Jesus.

This challenge, of course, required imagination: not the undisciplined fantasy of which left-brain thinking often accuses right-brain thinking, but the imaginative leap into a new worldview, significantly different from the worldviews of paganism, with their many gods who might either be far removed, as in Epicureanism, or rolled into one and close at hand, as in Stoicism – and indeed from the worldviews of ancient Judaism, with their fierce concentration on the symbols of land, nation, Temple and Torah. But the leap was not made into the unknown. The imaginative leap required was made on the basis of Jesus, Jesus the crucified and risen Jewish Messiah, Jesus the one in and through whom Israel’s God had at last returned in person to rescue his people and the world. And to sustain precisely that leap, the early Christians told and retold, and eventually wrote down, the story of Jesus, not of course as ‘neutral’ reportage (there is no such thing) but as the story of what the one God had done and how he had done it.

The four gospels, then, to return to our starting point, are thus appropriately named ‘gospel’, in line both with Isaiah 40 and 52 and with the contemporary pagan usage. They themselves, in telling the story of how God became king in and through Jesus, invite their readers to the imaginative leap of saying, ‘Suppose this is how God has done it? Suppose the world’s way of empire is all wrong? Suppose there’s a different way, and suppose that Jesus, in his life, death and resurrection, has brought it about?’ And the gospels themselves, of course, contain stories at a second level, stories purportedly told by Jesus himself, which were themselves, in their day, designed to break open the worldview of their hearers and to initiate a massive imaginative leap to which Jesus gave the name ‘faith’. The gospels invite their readers, in other words, to a multiple exercise, both of imagining what it might have been like to make that leap in the first century and, as a second stage, of imagining what it might be like to do so in one’s own day. For too long gospel study has been dominated by the attempt to make the gospels reflect, simply, the faith-world of the early church;

34 Isa 40:9; 52:7. The contemporary pagan usage is now widely discussed; see e.g. Graham N. Stanton, Jesus and Gospel (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), ch. 2.
why, after all, would the early Christians have been particularly interested in miscellaneous stories of what Jesus actually said or did, when all that really mattered was his saving death, making the gospels simply ‘passion narratives with extended introductions’? The conservative response has been that early converts would naturally want to know more about this Jesus in whom they had come to place their faith. But this stand-off, on both sides, has usually failed to reflect the larger question: that the gospels tell the story of Jesus not out of mere historical anecdote or faith-projection, but because this is how Jesus launched the kingdom of God, which he then accomplished in his death and resurrection. Even to hold this possibility in one’s head requires, in today’s Western church, whether radical or conservative, no less than in the non-Christian world, a huge effort of the imagination.

This imagination, like all good right-brain activity, must then be firmly and thoroughly worked through the left brain, disciplined by the rigorous historical and textual analysis for which the discipline of biblical studies has rightly become famous. But by itself the left brain will produce, and has often produced, a discipline full of facts but without meaning, high on analysis and low on reconstruction, good at categories and weak on the kingdom. The task before us – challenging, to be sure, but also richly rewarding – is that of imagining the kingdom in a way that will simultaneously advance the academic understanding of our extraordinary primary texts and enrich the mission and theology of tomorrow’s church. It is, after all, just as difficult today as it was in the first century to imagine what the kingdom of God might look like. Rigorous historical study of the gospels and the other early Christian writings has a proper role to play in fuelling, sustaining and directing that imagination, and in helping to translate it into reality.
‘How Do You Read It?’ Rowan Williams, Marilynne Robinson and Mapping a Postmodern Reading of the Good Samaritan Parable

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ABSTRACT
To explicate the Good Samaritan parable, this paper employs Rowan Williams’ interpretations of the parabolic imagination as explored in On Christian Theology (2000) and in Marilynne Robinson’s novel Housekeeping (1980). Williams identifies reading strategies that open possibilities for reading parables through the lens of contemporary texts. Robinson’s novel Housekeeping with its unconventional cast of unconnected women provides a contemporary way to explore the parable’s opening question. Both Williams and Robinson, in their respective thoughts about ‘housekeeping’ as mutuality, discover that privileging established answers, conventional families and coded traditions interrogates the question ‘who is my neighbor?’ Both the theologian and the novelist explore behaviors that open the boundaries of family and traditions so that the elusive/allusive answer to the parable’s question is found in unexpected haunting places with unfamiliar transients and on an ancient public road with one who has no name and voice.

KEYWORDS: parabolic imagination, reading strategies, On Christian Theology, metaphor, Housekeeping, tradition

As the early twenty-first century economic crisis exploded, then prime minister Gordon Brown explained his financial rescue plan by noting

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that ‘his Government could not simply walk by on the other side when people are facing problems’. In response to Brown’s citation of the well-known parable, former Archbishop Rowan Williams also points out the dangers of the fiscal stimulus policies as ‘unconditional loyalty to a system that blocks out human faces and stories’.

What about the unique concerns and crises of the pensioner whose savings have disappeared, the Woolworth’s employee, the hopeful young executive, let alone the helpless producer of goods in some third-world environment where prices are determined thousands of miles away.

In the allusion to the Good Samaritan parable, both the politician and the theologian highlight the economic dilemmas that commonly raise the question about ‘who is my neighbor?’ To creatively connect the biblical text with historical and contemporary contexts, Rowan Williams and novelist Marilynne Robinson locate webs of influences and an array of practices and patterns that complicate the reading of the parable.

Strategizing: ‘The Profound Hermeneutic of Parable’

In this contemporary situation that requires constructing meanings about who is ‘my neighbor’, the parable that Jesus tells in Lk. 10.25-37 becomes a contested site about one’s role in this daunting twenty-first-century global economy. Interestingly enough, in his noted publication *On Christian Theology*, Williams suggests that responding to the parabolic in the world and acting with a parabolic imagination are strategies to recover a ‘historical world of scripture’, and in that recovery, one discovers his or her neighbor.


5. Rowan Williams identifies parables not only as the designated gospel ‘parables’ but also narratives that are ‘effective images of a new world like the parables of Christ’. Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology*, in Gareth Jones and Lewis Ayres (eds.), *Challenges in Contemporary Theology* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2000), p. 27.

Throughout *On Christian Theology*, a compilation of essays that span a twenty-year period, several postmodern strategies on reading and interpreting biblical narratives thread through the entire collection. For example, the above interchange between the prime minister and the theologian engages one of the themes of the postmodern condition – the epistemological significance of narrative. The little narrative – ‘*petit récit*’ – unlike the grand narrative or metanarrative of modernism tells a local and particular story. In its cultural and historical location, it can discover other voices, suppressed history, and dominant structures of power previously overlooked or ignored.⁷

‘*Petits récits*’ are small narrative units at work everywhere locally. The ‘*petit récit*’ is at odds with tradition and authority, omniscence and closure. It challenges the authority of master narratives without itself seeking to become a narrative of mastery: it is, by definition, a subversive alternative open only to those ‘ousted possibilities’ at the margins of a social system.⁸

These initial observations do not necessarily classify Williams as a ‘postmodern theologian’, but they do suggest that he considers postmodern approaches when reading parables in this new century. For example, Williams’ theological method ‘displays [sic] modes of arguing and interpreting rather than advancing a single system’.⁹

Working away from hermeneutical tendencies that justify and explain human behavior, social structures, institutions, and texts in grand narratives, Williams critically engages contemporary critical theories, that is, new criticism, narrative criticism, and new historicism. To briefly explain, form criticism examines rhetorical and patterns that reverberate within the closed and self-sufficient world of the text, and, when employed in theological formulations, the requisite ‘close reading’ shows the integral connection between

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form and content.\textsuperscript{10} In this approach, each interpretation comes closer to finding a rhetorical ‘key’ that unlocks the correct meaning. Narrative criticism also focuses on the self-consistent holism of the text. As David Rhoads declares, ‘narrative criticism brackets historical questions and looks at the closed universe of the story-world’\textsuperscript{11}

Williams generously acknowledges that these ‘closed’ scripts may be various strategies to read the story-world intelligently and consistently. Indeed, Williams points out that economic motivations and ‘carefully calibrated exchange of material resources’ may characterize the framework for the gospel parables, an interpretation which could include the Good Samaritan parable.\textsuperscript{12} However, Williams equally cautions that when a religious discourse claims to be about the ‘whole moral universe’, then it must exhibit ‘imaginative skill sufficient to confront the full range of human complexity. Religious and theological integrity is possible as and when discourse about God declines the attempt to take God’s point of view – “a total perspective”’.\textsuperscript{13}

New historicism, appearing in the later part of the twentieth century helpfully highlights the interrelatedness of all human activities, cautions against prejudices and judgment, and accounts for how particular histories and cultures affect the writing and reading of the text. In this vein, Williams points out that in the consideration of


\textsuperscript{11} Narrative criticism discerns a theological, or ideational, viewpoint that may enhance the story’s structure. Rhoads points out the unifying dominant point of view in tension with the ideology of the characters and a close reading of other narrative elements has the potential to reduce the narrative to an ordinary story. David Rhoads, ‘Narrative Criticism and the Gospel of Mark’, \textit{JAAR} 50 (1982) pp. 411–34 (413). Narrative criticism also is critiqued because the influence of secular literary theory on biblical narratives has led to concern whether ‘this privileges against any kind of scrutiny that does not come from within the traditions of the faith community claiming the book as its own’. David Gunn, ‘Narrative Criticism’, in Steven L. McKenzie and Stephen R. Haynes (eds.), \textit{To Each its Own Meaning: An Introduction to Biblical Criticism and their Application} (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1993), pp. 171–95 (193).


\textsuperscript{13} Williams, \textit{On Christian Theology}, p. 6.
versions of human agency ‘the larger picture [of parabolic meaning] is not the one that economics or biology or psychodynamics dictates. It is the richly textured process of shaping a story that is one’s own.’\textsuperscript{14} What Williams proposes in his collection of essays about the ‘historical world of Scripture’ and the readings of the Good Samaritan parable in this paper has ‘something to do with the coherence of biography’.\textsuperscript{15} Williams is not suggesting that such coherence is illuminating the ‘story of God’, an illumination which might appear as a ‘total perspective’. Instead Williams discovers how biblical narratives and human biographies speak about God and the transformation of mortal vision, a vision that rejects the administration of addictive institutional power.\textsuperscript{16}

\textbf{Dismissing Total Meaning: ‘Perception Simplified and Unified in Contingencies of Human Biography’}\textsuperscript{17}

Given Williams’ perceptions, the Good Samaritan parable presents the dilemma of not only who is my neighbor but also whose biography/story is this? Does anyone have power in the parable? The innkeeper is the only one who may be making a legitimate profit, and there is no economic exchange between any other characters – other than robbers who take everything but life itself. Williams views the ‘historical world of Scripture’ not as an uncontested and optimistic linear historical progression toward a goal such as ‘ought’ imperative statements cast largely in a dominant Western grammar. The parable is simple enough in Jesus’ telling, but are there epistemic obligations for the priest, the Levite, and the Samaritan? Are there conflicting obligations; are there overriding obligations in determining whether or not any of the parable’s actors should or ought to assist the robbed and beaten ‘neighbor’? As symbolic logic states, the characters act on assumptions regarding whether their behavior is obligatory, permissible, impermissible, omissible, or optional given the defilement and ritual impurity in helping this wounded man – perhaps a lone Jew on the road to Jericho – or a Woolworth employee, or a developing-world coffee farmer?

In \textit{On Christian Theology}, Williams states that Scripture, far from being a clear and readily definable territory, is a historical world in

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{14} Williams, ‘Knowing our Limits’, p. 22.
\item \textsuperscript{15} Williams, \textit{On Christian Theology}, p. xvi.
\item \textsuperscript{16} Williams, \textit{On Christian Theology}, p. 14.
\item \textsuperscript{17} Williams, \textit{On Christian Theology}, p. 13.
\end{itemize}
which meanings are ‘discovered and recovered in action and encounter’, and, as such, parables inhabit a linguistic space that identifies the religious experience of a faithful historical community. As Mike Higton puts it, Williams understands that the revelation in Christ transforms key meanings in the language ‘which enables our exploration, our questioning, our innovations’. This extension of language is unified by the one figure of ‘Jesus Christ, and through the diversities of Christian humanity’. The language and grammar of the parable, such as the lawyer’s question and the Samaritan’s response, make traditional behaviors problematic. In this aspect, if the priest in the parable, an exemplar of the law, comes close to a ‘dead’ man, the priest is defiled and must be ritually cleansed, must spend money for a sacrificial heifer and must stand at the Eastern Gate with the unclean. These are requirements demanded by the law. This is the priest’s legal response, and the Levite is under similar moral and legal restraints. Ritual efficacy demands the exchange of money and time, and so the priest and the Levite are indeed good ‘neighbors’ within their respective traditions. This obligatory action for the priest articulates a particular identity for a community with a traceable historical unity. The parable itself is told in the context of the lawyer’s question to Jesus about how one inherits eternal life, and the

21. A postmodern view of history moves away from totalizing narratives and the notion that any historical period has a single point of view. On the other hand, biblical scholarship in whatever method has confronted the accuracy, objectivity, evidentiary sources, intentionality of how history shapes or does not shape the written text. J. Maxwell Miller helpfully describes two extremes of reading the Bible historically:

At one extreme are those who insist that the Bible is literally accurate in all historical details, including the chronological data provided in Genesis–2 Kings that place the creation of the world approximately 6000 years ago. ... At opposite extreme are those who regard the biblical accounts as being so theologically and nationally tendentious ... that any attempt to reconstruct the history of ancient Israel is fruitless ... an essentially ahistorical approach to the text.

answer has often been to overlook the economic language of the lawyer’s opening question. How can one inherit something grandly abstract as eternal life when the metonymic answer is oil, wine, and two denarii? Williams claims that ‘speaking and hearing parables is a willingness to lose the identities and perceptions we make for ourselves’, and ‘such learning must include transformations of scriptural narrative’.22

In describing an ‘historical world of scripture’, Rowan Williams considers how the canonical narratives ‘perform’ in the Old and New Testaments. ‘The roles Christians can take on are the roles created and enacted by the fathers [and mothers] of the Jewish faith.’23 As noted earlier, Williams views the Jesus narratives both as a unifying point of reference and as a movement in the fluid, unpredictable, and incomplete process of history. This suggests that if the Christian claim is offering ‘a direction for historical construction of human meaning’,24 then the resurrection narratives have something to say about Jewish and Christian life and faith of the first century, and, for this paper, how to read parables.

**Story-patterns and the Empty Tomb: Absence and Presence**

Williams notes that the believing Christian community sometimes has taken stances that distort the scope of divine love by exclusively identifying the actions of God with their particular belief system.25 Meditating on biblical images, Williams tackles interpretations of the tomb narratives – the liberals’ proclamation of God’s acting and speaking as the risen one and the fundamentalists’ ‘substance’ interpretation, defined as the historical demonstrability of the empty tomb. Williams’ description of these binaries suggests

(F’note continued)

‘I am not happy with either an apologetic colonizing of historical study or a theologically dictated indifference to history’. On Christian Theology, p. 194.


25. Williams, On Christian Theology, p. 188.
that proclamation/substance compete for power in how the story of Jesus’ death and resurrection is told. To deconstruct these opposites, it may appear at first reading that Williams takes a Derridean stance in discovering absence, gaps, deferral, and indeterminacy, in a text that ‘endlessly unravels itself’. To be sure, Williams resists closure, but he does this through a paradox that is modern and postmodern. He identifies a central image and simultaneously recognizes the failure of images.

The central image of the gospel narratives is not any one apparition but the image of absence, an image of the failure of images, which is also an absence that confirms the reality of a creative liberty, an agency not sealed and closed, but still obstinately engaged with a material environment and an historical process.

To recover image-patterning in the resurrection narratives, Williams focuses on the two angels flanking Jesus’ tomb in the Gospel of John. Recalling the Old Testament cherubim that border the ark and the God who is present between them but not bodily there, Williams says this gap between the images is where God would be if he were anywhere. The God of Judah and Jesus are seen by looking into the gap between the holy images. Williams suggests that in the resurrection narratives this ‘non-representable, non-possessible dimension of the paradoxical manifestation of God to God’s people’ may connect with the nest of critical questions which make closure so difficult. In the Good Samaritan parable, a version of presence in absence occurs in the narrative’s silence about a central character. The seven figures in the parable are identified: Jesus the narrator, the lawyer the questioner, the robbers, the priest, the Levite, the Samaritan, the innkeeper, but the one left beaten, robbed, stripped and half-dead is unidentified. Even the road is signed and connects two well-known ancient cities. The unnamed man has no identifiable biography, no face, no sense of presence, no voice, no

past and no account of a future. He just exists and abandoned in the break-down lane.

Markus Bockmuehl exploring the intense cultural idiosyncrasy of the resurrection claim with its apocalyptic language refers to Rowan Williams’ comments on the hyperbolic language of ‘here but not here’:

And for all its inalienable cultural specificity, the angelic announcement that “He is not here, but is risen” encapsulates the only possibly way in which the Jewish followers of Jesus could explain the confusing diverse and yet convergent experiences of absence and presence.30

Pursuing the possibility that the empty tomb narratives say something about the character of divine presence or action, Williams notes that ‘indeterminacy in the resurrection stories is one way of saying what the content of the stories is meant to convey: ‘Jesus of Nazareth who was crucified is not confined in the past.’31 One way in which Williams addresses this matter is to note that Jesus is not a ‘comprehensive ontological schema’ but a ‘universally crucial question’.32 Taking this tact, Williams retrieves an approach to inter-faith dialogue that counteracts a ‘cosmic Christ’ [Christian triumphalism] in favor of recognizing the “‘otherness’ of other faiths and the integrity of their systems’.33

Williams argues against a ‘consummation of history’ notion because it places, for example, Judaism and Christianity in conflict and rivalry. He calls for a postmodern understanding that the first-century historical ‘period’ and ‘facts’ do not form a single world view for either early Christians or Roman Jews: these two ‘comparable systems’ are particular units ‘determined by particular systems of power’.34 Jesus’ claim on Israel’s identity is in mortal conflict with the rulers of Israel’s claim on that identity ‘at a specific moment’,35 and in the Good Samaritan parable, it not only occurs in that initial encounter with the lawyer but also in that tremulous moment when the Samaritan first sees the wounded victim. The history of Jesus, as he reveals the nature of God, judges claims of total and authoritative meaning whether in

32. Williams, On Christian Theology, p. 94.
33. Williams, On Christian Theology, p. 29.
34. Williams, On Christian Theology, p. 97.
35. Williams, On Christian Theology, p. 98.
Judaism or in Christianity, and equally critiques any finalization of history that seals the people of God into a parodic church manifesting a form of tribalism. The parable challenges such tribalism whether that of the priest, Levite, lawyer or Samaritan. In fact, neither the narrator nor any other character labels the Samaritan ‘good’, but only as ‘neighbor’. What happens to the victim who is unidentified, who is neither from a recognizable neighborhood nor from an ecclesial ‘home’, demonstrates something about human community.

According to Kathryn Tanner, Christianity is ‘about a communal way of living, more specifically, the unified community of all peoples that Jesus enables to participate over the course of historical engagement in conversation and controversy with others in the world’. Just as Professor Tanner calls for an enlargement of the language of faith to engage the world in its historical and communal conversation, Williams locates the historical time of the text on a continuum with contemporary time. To read our world into the history of the text, Williams suggests that non-literal reading will too readily gloss over the rough and complicated historical learning to which the gospel calls. Literal reading, on the other hand, leads into the discipline of humility and finds ‘ways of allowing ourselves to pay attention to the text’s intractable resistance’.

**Engaging the Gospel Parable with a Contemporary Novel**

Interpretations of the Good Samaritan parable abound with conclusions that being merciful defines a good neighbor, but what ‘intractable resistance’ emerges that demands the reader’s attention and that complicates the reading? Much has been said about the legal scholar who poses the question in the parable, but what about the


victim? Is he a mere role-player for an ethics lesson? What if the victim is an eccentric transient woman who has unconventional thoughts about home and housekeeping, and once healed at the inn, she leaves to wander the railroad tracks? Should some change in behavior be required, even demanded, of the victim since money has been exchanged on her behalf? In *Crisis and Recovery*, Williams notes that there is an etymological connection between ‘housekeeping’ and ‘economics’.40

Noting the previously cited economic aspects of the Good Samaritan narrative, ‘intractable resistance’ emerges in the encounter between Williams’ explanation of those etymological connections and the 1980s novel by Marilynne Robinson, *Housekeeping*. According to Williams, ‘housekeeping’ develops our humanity, and equally, economic relations say something about humanity ‘in the context of God’s action’.41

‘Housekeeping’ theory is about how we use our intelligence to balance the needs of those involved and to secure trust between them. A theory that wanders too far from these basics is a recipe for damage to the vulnerable, to the regularity and usefulness of labour, and to the possibilities human beings have for renewing (and challenging) themselves through leisure and creativity.42

What Williams argues for in this housekeeping/economic theory connection is mutuality, an organic quality, ‘a common identity shaped by the fact that each depends on all others for their life’.43 Interpretations of the parable support such mutuality and the ‘housekeeping strategy’ (careful obedience to the legal code) of the two who pass by the beaten man destroy the nurture and stability that makes a household what it is.44 By his merciful action, the Samaritan is subsequently labeled ‘good’ housekeeper and neighbor, but now the question emerges what housekeeping practices allow any mutuality on the part of the one who has nothing to commend himself or herself as a neighbor? The nearly dead man in the parable has no ‘home’, and home with its concomitant housekeeping, as historian Joseph Amato points out, centers families. ‘Its walls, a set of enclosing surfaces,

42. Williams, ‘Speech to the Trinity Institute’, pp. 2–3.
43. Williams, ‘Speech to the Trinity Institute’, p. 3.
44. Williams, ‘Speech to the Trinity Institute’, p. 3.
enwrap our physical, social, and emotional selves. A womb, a room, and tomb, home is the repository of our being.45

In the novel *Housekeeping* by Pulitzer-prize winning author Marilynne Robinson, the narrator Ruth and her sister Lucille live in a weathered landscape in the American northwest. Throughout the novel, conventional home and housekeeping are disturbingly undermined, and yet a mysterious and strange kind of healing relationship occurs. At the outset, the mother abandons the girls and commits suicide, their father disappears for unknown reasons, and their grandfather dies in a breathtaking train accident and plunges into the dark, deep, cold Fingerbone lake. Two spinster aunts try to raise the girls until Aunt Sylvie Foster arrives with a radically different housekeeping strategy, one that completely disconnects her from being viewed as a ‘neighbor’. As Anatole Broyard puts it, ‘the novel is about a woman who is so far from everyone else that it would be presumptuous to put a name to her frame of mind’.46

In a strange twist, Sylvie is the wounded one of the parable, now discharged from the innkeeper but who remains the outsider with practices and behaviors that force the question again about why she should be considered someone worthy of being called ‘neighbor’. In a telling scene, Sylvie, wearing a scarf around her head and carrying a broom, appears the housekeeper, but in fact she opens doors and windows so that the wasps, bats, barn swallows, and leaves mix with scraps of paper in the corners. ‘Thus finely did the house become attuned to the orchard and to the particularities of the weather. She wrestled my grandmother’s plum-colored davenport into the front yard, where it remained until it weathered pink. Sylvie liked to eat supper in the dark.’47

‘Housekeeping’ for Aunt Sylvie means living throughout the house in constant cluttered disarray, eating dinner with the lights off, taking the girls on serendipitous trips at all times of the day and night into the wild landscape, sometimes to dangerous and mysterious locations. One of Sylvia’s housekeeping strategies is keeping the light off at dinner time:

> Just when the windows went stark blue, Sylvie would call us into the kitchen. Lucille and I sat across from each other and Sylvie at the end of the table. Opposite her was a window luminous and cool as aquarium

glass and warped as water. We looked at the window as we ate, and we listened to the crickets and nighthawks. [The women] in the house are one with all that is outside.  

For young Ruth, Sylvie’s permeable borders between inside and outside, become the symbol for living as the ‘other’. Walls and windows do not mark housekeeping boundaries.

Reading Diachronically to Enter the Parabolic World

Housekeeping creatively shows that ‘housekeeping’ can have a myriad of complicated and human expressions, and when read diachronically, the novel, as Catherine Rainwater points out, ‘explores the effects on people’s lives of absence, transience, disconnection and abandonment’.  

For Williams, reading diachronically is to read ‘literally’. In this mode, the reader follows the linear movement of the text, a single time-continuum.  

On the other hand, to read ‘synchronously’ is to read spatially, a strategy common to New Critical interpretive methods, and as Williams acknowledges, a reading tactic that also contributes to the search for unity.  

Diachronic reading, a practice that Williams acclaims, requires increased knowledge about the historical and cultural contexts, and in this paper, knowledge about all sorts of housekeeping. Who are the Samaritans? Is there a relationship between the Samaritan and the innkeeper, or is she merely a profit-minded woman with no ethical or moral investment in the arrangement? Is she also an ‘other’, an outsider or someone from the ‘house’?

Williams might argue that this parable needs to be ‘cross-referenced’ with other sorts of unnamed but analogical ‘neighborly’

51. Williams cites Old Testament narratives such as the reforms of Ezra that conflict with the contemporeity of Ruth’s mixed marriage and the tension between James’ letter and Paul’s soteriology. These two reading strategies Williams does not view as false modern polarizations, but these ways enable a Christian community to articulate itself as a point of reference, given competing interpretations emerging from the intratextual tensions in the Church’s diverse texts (On Christian Theology, pp. 53, 55).
or ‘non-neighborly’ persons in the parables. Who has not seen themselves like the elder brother as the government keeps the prodigal son’s house from foreclosing when they have faithfully paid their mortgage payments? To read diachronically is to follow the historical frame of the narrative and to enter the conversation with the narratives’ ‘location in its world’.\textsuperscript{52} In \textit{Death of Adam: Essays on Modern Thought}, Marilyne Robinson explores the vices and failures of modern culture and the loss of pleasure in ‘human presence’.\textsuperscript{53} In her comments on family, Robinson advocates ‘solace’ as the human work of families:

Imagine that someone failed and disgraced came back to his family, and they grieved with him, and took his sadness upon themselves and sat down together to ponder the deep mysteries of human life. This is more human and beautiful, I propose even if it yields no dulling of pain, no patching of injuries.\textsuperscript{54}

No injurious wound is patched in \textit{Housekeeping} but something relationally happens in the darkness:

Once when eating in the dark, Lucille pulled the chain of the overhead light. The window went black and the cluttered kitchen leaped, so it seemed, into being, as remote from what had gone on before as this world from the primal darkness. We saw that we ate from plates that came in detergent boxes, and we drank from jelly glasses. In the light we were startled and uncomfortable. As Ruthie remembers, it is in the quiet darkness one knows if the other one is awake because one feels with finer senses.\textsuperscript{55}

Sorting out the ‘inner life’ of the parable (not to be confused with ‘essential core’ that Williams rejects) takes time, and Williams sees diachronic reading as a movement in time where the ‘interiority’ of the text shows the complexity of temporal processes.\textsuperscript{56} To read diachronically is to experience temporal formation and an emergence of meanings analogous to the biographies and events

\textsuperscript{52} Williams notes that synchronic reading or the non-literal will always be less influential than unfolding diachronic reading, because as TeSelle points out, ‘we love stories because our lives are stories’. Sallie TeSelle, \textit{Speaking in Parables: A Study in Metaphor and Theology} (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), p. 138 quoted in \textit{On Christian Theology}, pp. 48–49, n. 15.


\textsuperscript{54} Robinson, \textit{Death of Adam}, p. 90.


\textsuperscript{56} Williams, \textit{On Christian Theology}, p. 55.
of characters in the parable. George Hunsinger, Professor of Systematic Theology at Princeton University, agrees that ‘literalism’ in modernity can be seen in theological language as univocal or equivocal, but ‘literalism’ in theological language of postmodernism is analogical.57 As Williams points out, ‘in the Old and New Testaments alike, unity is evidently articulated through analogy: diverse events, persons, patterns of behaviour are reconstructed in writing and in the editing process of canonical formation a shared form emerges – a family resemblance’.58

These similarities-in-difference (analogy) are produced when a primary analogue, focal meaning, is chosen for interpretation. According to David Tracy, this ‘focal meaning’ for the faithful Christian communities is ‘the event of Jesus Christ’.59 Jesus’ narratives are the primary analogue, and each ‘analogue’ is focused, interpreted, and relationships disclosed by that Christ event. Reading diachronically, then, offers that ‘analogical bridgehead’ – a mediation of a text – so that the concrete location of the parable and the location of the reader are open to their respective situations, experiences, and production of meaning.60

Focalizing the Sign

Although Rowan Williams does not use ‘grand narrative’ to describe the Christian claims, he does use ‘primal texts’ and ‘foundational narratives’ to situate Jesus’ living and dying and rising as a ‘focal sign’ so that lives of men and women are open to horizons of new creation’.61 The notion of ‘focalisation’ and ‘focaliser’, capably explicated by both narratologist Gérard Genette and later by Netherlands scholar and cultural analyst Mieke Bal, has implications

60. Williams, On Christian Theology, p. 53; a central aspect of establishing the unity of the God of the covenant and the God of Jesus is establishing the continuity, the analogical relation, between the role that a Christian may stand before the God of Jesus and the role of an Abraham or Moses before the God of Israel: this life now can have that [sic] kind of structure (On Christian Theology, p. 23).
for Williams’ understanding that Jesus is a unifying point of reference: the ensemble of human stories are drawn together and shaped in relation to Jesus. \(^{62}\) No conceptual pattern explains and predicts everything. No omniscient narrator and extensive third-descriptions unify the Jesus narratives: Jesus’ living, dying and rising hold the stories together.

As Genette notes, events observed by a traditional omniscient narrator are non-focalized, whereas events witnessed within the story’s world from the constrained perspective of a single character are ‘internally focalized’. Genette’s questions about ‘who speaks?’ and ‘who sees?’ open possibilities about the temporal and spatial relationship between narrator and story. \(^{63}\) For example, in the parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus’ parable comes to the reader first by an omniscient narrator who relinquishes his point of view to second person narrator, and then to first person narrator. In this changing focalization of who sees and who speaks, the parable becomes the stage for our first person narration. Williams notes the text read this way displays a ‘possible world’, a reality in which my human reality can also find itself: inviting me into its world, the text breaks open and extends my own possibilities. \(^{64}\)

One might say with Paul Ricoeur that parabolic ‘narration serves to displace anterior symbolizations onto a new plane, integrating or exploding them.’ \(^{65}\) Jesus, the focal sign, the center of interest in the parable embodies the law with its implicit interrogative mood. As the focalizer, ‘the law’ assumes a character’s view but does not yield the focalizing to him or her. By the conclusion of the parable, the focalization has shifted from the requirements for legal justification to coins offered for another kind of justice. The center of interest remains the same. In this parabolic explication, the focal sign does not pose the question, ‘is it the same God?’ but asks instead, ‘is it the same hope?’ and ‘is it the same pattern of holy life?’ \(^{66}\) Is it the same outsider? Is it the same neighbor as in Lev. 19.18? Is it the same odd aunt

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63. Genette describes the diegetic (telling of the story by a narrator), the metadiegetic (stories told by a character inside a diegetic narrative), and extradiegetic (stories that frame the primary story). Mieke Bal, *A Mieke Bal Reader* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), p. 11.
64. Williams, *On Christian Theology*, p. 133.
who stashes saltines in her pockets and sleeps upside down on the bed with her shoes on? Is it the same stranger? Philosopher and theologian Paul Ricoeur calls this a ‘respective character of narration closely linked to the prospective horizon of the future: narration preserves the meaning that is behind us so that we can have meaning before us’.67

Moreover, Williams is also confident that when the gospel is immersed in cultures that construct and construe the world in other ways, a robust belief can survive, even amidst drastic circumstances.68 One of Williams’ characteristic theological activities is the communicative, that is, ‘the gospel can be rediscovered at the end of a long and exotic detour through strange idioms and structures of thought in more than one cultural environment’.69 Mieke Bal connects culture, history, religion in this way:

This position [that the study of religion must be a branch of cultural analysis, whose boundaries with other cultural disciplines are porous and provisional] is grounded in a number of further premises. Knowledge of the past derives its relevance from this ongoing presence of the past within the present, not as its precursor or source but as an ineradicable, integral part of the present.70

In contrast, George Lindbeck, responding to contemporary ‘progressive de-christianization’ and ‘ineffective catechesis in one’s own religious language’ proposes an approach that places emphasis on the semblance of religions to languages, the ‘cultural-linguistic’ approach. Lindbeck primarily argues for intratextuality that redescribes reality within the scriptural framework rather than translating reality into extrascriptural categories. ‘The text absorbs the world, rather than the world the text.’71 George Lindbeck’s

68. Williams, On Christian Theology, p. xiv.
71. The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984), p. 119. In the ‘cultural-linguistic’ approach, prominence is given to how doctrine is used for communally authoritative rules of discourse, attitude, and action (p. 18). For Lindbeck recovering the historical world of scripture means to interpret a text in terms of its immanent meanings, ‘that is, in terms of the meanings immanent in the religious language of whose use the text is a paradigmatic instance’ (p. 116).
cultural-linguistic approach seeks to recover the loss of Scripture’s authority, to reverse the Church’s accommodation to culture, and thereby to define the Church’s identity within the social world. Williams acknowledges Lindbeck’s project to revive and preserve a ‘scriptural imagination capable of deploying decisive and classical narratives in the interpretation of the human world’. However, Williams questions Lindbeck’s endeavors to revive such scriptural imagination by inserting the human story into the ‘world of scripture’. Williams primarily objects to Lindbeck’s imagery: ‘framework’ and ‘territorial cast’ as a way to talk about the ‘world of scripture’ because the former archbishop believes reality is much more complex. Yale theologian, Miroslav Volf also points out that part of the problems with Lindbeck’s metaphors and reversing the directions of conformation and absorption is that one is never ‘outside’ the wider culture and the ‘wider culture is not a monolithic whole’. Novelist Robinson points out that ‘one acquires a culture from within a culture – for all purposes, from the family’. Ruthie creates an analogy that draws upon her familial and individual understanding of looking at outsiders:

Having a sister or a friend is like sitting at night in a lighted house. Those outside can watch you if they want, but you need not see them. You simply say, “Here are the perimeters of our attention. If you prowl around under the windows till the crickets go silent, we will pull the shades. If you wish us to suffer your envious curiosity, you must permit

72. John Riggs in Postmodern Christianity: Doing Theology in the Contemporary World agrees with Lindbeck that liberal theology sought to explain Christian claims in terms of human emotion and needs. Jesus was turned into a human person, and the Bible was turned into a ‘historical book in which one could find the truths that supported the liberal project. The answer to this unacceptable accommodation of Christianity to the modern world is to let God be God by letting the canonical narrative be the canonical narrative’ (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2003), p. 93.

73. Williams, On Christian Theology, p. 29.


75. Robinson, Death of Adam, p. 98.
us not to notice it.’’ Anyone with one human bond is that smug, and it is
the smugness as much as the comfort and safety that lonely people
covet and admire.76

Absorbing Narratives from the Margin

Although Williams agrees with Lindbeck that a unitary Christian
world-view has disappeared, Williams urges a re-reading of the
biblical texts that engages with ‘appropriations of biblical narrative on
the frontiers of the Church’.77 For instance, how will parables and
other narratives, in and out of the theological mainstream, and on the
‘frontiers of the Church’ be read and in turn be interpreted? Whereas
Lindbeck might call such readings ‘extratextual’ and subject to
becoming the governing framework of interpretation, Williams
believes that absorbing these narratives from the margins enlarges
understanding in the Christian community. The half-dead man in the
parable never speaks. Who is he? Maybe he is from Fingerbone, and
perhaps Ruth speaks for him as she observes transients wandering
like ghosts through Fingerbone:

We imagined that if they spoke to us they would astonish us with tales
of disaster and disgrace and bitter sorrow. For in the case of such pure
sorrow, who can distinguish mine from thine? The sorrow is that every
soul is put out of house.78

In André Gide’s The Return of the Prodigal Son, the re-telling of the
biblical parable in Luke 15 offers another construction of meaning. In
Gide’s account, the prodigal son assuredly claims that his father is
‘other than the House’, for certainly the moral strictures in the House
could not be the sum of the father. In turn, the father blames the
house-bound elder brother for making the laws and for forcing the
house rules to declare that ‘outside of the House, there is no salvation.’
In Gide’s parabolic imagination, the Father can be found waiting for
the prodigal in the wilderness. As the parable in Gide’s reading
concludes, the younger son prepares to leave for the desert where the
prodigal will join him.79 George Lindbeck might read Gide’s parable
as ‘extratextual’ with the potential to become a dominant framework

76. Robinson, Housekeeping, p. 158.
78. Robinson, Housekeeping, p. 179.
79. ‘The Return of the Prodigal Son’, in Peter Brooks (ed.), Western Literature:
(466, 473).
and in turn an ‘obstacle to intratextual theological faithfulness’. More likely, Gide’s parable presses judgment on the Christian community and allows for transformation even in the untamed desert. Rowan Williams claims that transformative judgment enacted in particular events is not only performed in foundational texts but also enacted outside canonical narratives. A telling site is Caravaggio’s ‘Calling of St. Matthew’ reproduced on the book cover of On Christian Theology. Mieke Bal notes that postmodern theology accounts for aspects that are ‘other’, including those elements of religion that function in the visual domain. Christ’s extended right hand and placement of his bare feet Bal might call gestures of ‘modernist theology’ based on historical reconstruction and ‘purity of theological meaning directly derived from theological documents’. From a ‘presentist’ perspective (a postmodern perception), Bal sees the sensual physicality of Caravaggio’s figures grouped around the table as an integral part of everyday life of the Counter Reformation. The light on their faces reveals indifference, surprise, curiosity, and as Bal puts it, ‘it can be on and in such bodies that the religious content took hold’. This becomes the historical account, and these images teach something about religion as lived experience instead of dead, authoritarian letters. The lesson is ‘relationality’. Robinson shapes her understanding this way: housekeeping has its own way of being and doing in the world:

Neighbor women and church women began to bring us casseroles and coffee cakes. They brought me knitted socks and caps and comforters. The visitors glanced at the cans and papers as if they thought Sylvia must consider such things appropriate to a parlor. ‘That was ridiculous. Who would think of dusting or sweeping the cobwebs down in a room used for the storage of cans and newspapers – things utterly without value?’ Sylvie only kept them, I think because she considered accumulation to be the essence of housekeeping, and because she considered the hoarding of worthless things to be proof of a particularly scrupulous thrift.

Williams says ‘not without each other we move towards the Kingdom. Christian history ought to be the story of continuing and

83. Bal, A Mieke Bal Reader, p. 395. In The Wound of Knowledge, Williams makes a cogent point that ‘the future has appeared already; what the Christian life moves towards is the pattern of a human life already lived, in the conviction that this life is of enduring authority for all ages because it is the life of God-as-man’ (p. 31).
demanding engagement with strangers, abandoning the right to
declare who they are.'85 John Dominic Crossan, in his explication
of the Good Samaritan parable takes this small narrative outside
Luke’s framing interpretation in order to give it oxymoronic
shape, a reversal of expectations. Linking the parable with versions
of Camus’s *The Plague* and Kafka’s *The Trial*, Crossan calls this story
morally inadequate for helping those in distress (the parable is not ‘a
cipher for concerned assistance’) but an ahistorical paradox in
which the ‘bad guy’ offers help and the good Jew passes by. Is this
a Jewish narrator with a Jewish story for a Jewish audience? Crossan
thinks not as the parable provokes the audience’s cherished views on
the outsider.86

The sheriff is at the house calling Ruth to come out of the dark
orchard, to sleep inside, to go to school, to live in someone else’s
home, to eat apple pie. Ruthie’s conclusion: Sylvie’s housekeeping
is no longer acceptable to the town’s moral standards. “We had
to leave, I could not stay, and Sylvie would not stay without me.
Now truly we were cast out to wander, and there was an end to
housekeeping.”87

In her extratextual reading, Tania Oldenhage in *Parables for our Time:*
*Rereading New Testament Scholarship after the Holocaust* contends that
subtexts in Crossan’s work suggest traces of twentieth-century
catastrophes: ‘hidden in Crossan’s hermeneutic premise is a promise
that Jesus’ sayings, like the writings of Camus or Vonnegut, can
be read and understood in confrontation with twentieth-century
catastrophes’.88 Both Crossan and Williams in different but equally
complex strategies are standing against paradigms of ideological
violence and oppressive power and privilege.

86. Tania Oldenhage, *Parables for our Time: Rereading New Testament Scholarship
88. Oldenhage, *Parables for our Time*, p. 107. This is not to take lightly
Oldenhage’s concerns regarding both Crossan and Paul Ricoeur’s anti-Judaic tones
in their interpretations. *Parables for our Time*, pp. 107, 122. Oldenhage believes
Crossan is attracted to these stories because they speak to the ‘horrors of this
century’ and that ‘hidden in Crossan’s hermeneutic premise is a promise that
Jesus’ sayings, like the writings of Camus or Vonnegut, can be read and
understood in confrontation with twentieth-century catastrophes.’ *Parables for our
Time*, p. 107. As Williams says about Crossan’s premises in *The Historical Jesus,*
Crossan identifies an ‘unbrokered’ society – one that does not work by privilege
In conclusion, Rowan Williams might say about ‘us’ and the parable of the good Samaritan:

We are invited to identify ourselves in the story being contemplated, to re-appropriate who we are now, and who we shall or can be, in terms of the story. Its movements, transactions, transformations, become ours [sic]; we take responsibility for this or that position within the narrative and as in the Paschal narrative as if we did not know the end.89

So, who is our neighbor in a postmodern understanding? Alain Badiou, French philosopher speaks not of ‘neighbor’ but ‘neighborhood’. ‘Neighboring’ is described as ‘openness’: ‘a neighborhood is an open area in a world: a place, a subset, or element where there is no boundary, no difference, between the inside of the thing and the thing itself.’90 Rowan Williams discovers the neighbor not in what religious meta-theory codifies but in expanding circles of encounter with the historical world of Scripture, the centrality of the Jesus event, and the engagement between past and present biographies. Throughout On Christian Theology, Williams maintains that theology equips us ‘to recognize and respond to the parabolic in the world – all that resists the control of capital and administration and hints at struggles to a true sharing of human understanding’.91 Marilynne Robinson takes up that task not by writing a more interesting or comprehensive parable in Housekeeping but by showing, as Williams puts it, that the Good Samaritan parable is ‘at “home” with all the varying enterprises giving meaning to the human condition’.92

In communities of shared hope, in parables exposing violence and injustice, in analogues of living, dying, rising, in housekeeping lived outside and against black windows, and in a bar in Uganda, the neighbor appears.

In Housekeeping, nature abides – the lake is always loomingly there – but people pass on, and then they haunt the others until they too pass on. At the end she becomes a drifter, a freight car rider.93

89. Williams, On Christian Theology, p. 51.
91. Williams, On Christian Theology, p. 42.
92. Williams, On Christian Theology, p. 142.
The patron sometimes calls in for a glass, perhaps; sits with his back to the door. Eyes shine and water in the woodsmoke; who can tell who might be welcome here?

- Rowan Williams, ‘Kampala; the El Shaddai Coffee Bar’

Tyndale's Gospel of St John: Translation and the Theology of Style

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Tyndale’s Gospel of St John:
Translation and the Theology of Style

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ABSTRACT
Building on Rowan Williams’s claims about William Tyndale’s importance for English Reformation theology, this paper outlines a theological matrix within which we can situate and interpret Tyndale’s translation work. Focusing on Tyndale’s translation of the fourth Gospel in his 1534 New Testament, the central claim is that in light of more recent developments in biblical interpretation, the very style of Tyndale’s translation has evident theological implications with compelling resonances for contemporary Anglicanism. This analysis of the theology of Tyndale’s literary style also attempts to contribute to the ongoing reassessment of Tyndale’s reputation. Tyndale’s biographer, David Daniell, has lamented that ‘Tyndale as theologian…has been at best neglected and at worst twisted out of shape’, while ‘Tyndale as conscious [literary] craftsman has been…denied’. As a close reading of Tyndale’s Gospel of John shows, Tyndale the theologian and Tyndale the craftsman can and should be approached as one and the same.

KEYWORDS: William Tyndale, translation, Reformation theology, literary style, Anglicanism, Rowan Williams

Early in his acclaimed history of the Reformation, Diarmaid MacCulloch remarks incisively on the effect that the encounter with koiné Greek had on readers in Western Christendom, ‘when scholars heard for the first time the unmediated urgency of the angular street Greek poured out by …Paul of Tarsus as he wrestled with the problem of how Jesus represented God’.1 As MacCulloch describes it:

The struggle sounded so much less decorous in the original than in Latin that the shock was bound to stir up new movements in the Church and suggest that it was not so authoritative or normative an interpreter of scripture as it claimed. If there is any one explanation why the Latin West experienced a Reformation and the Greek-speaking lands to the east did not, it lies in this experience of listening to a new voice in the New Testament text.2

A certain degree of hyperbole notwithstanding, MacCulloch’s point is accurate and arresting: the very style of the Christian Scriptures in their original language had far-reaching theological and ecclesial consequences. In MacCulloch’s example, the distinctive character and rhetorical power of Paul’s own Greek opens the ears to fresh dimensions of the faith. For the Latin West in the aftermath of the Middle Ages, the Greek made all things new. Of course, this is not to downplay the thorough-going ways in which the content of the New Testament was newly understood in the sixteenth century, but the style of the New Testament — to employ an admittedly somewhat artificial distinction — played a major role in itself. It is a detail perhaps too seldom appreciated in Reformation historiography.

In light of MacCulloch’s observation we can grasp better what lies behind Rowan Williams’s rather surprising remark about the great translator William Tyndale, when he characterizes him as ‘the true theological giant of the English Reformation’.3 Although recognized as a trail-blazing translator, Tyndale is rarely acknowledged as a major player in Reformation theology per se. Williams’s subsequent essay offers the beginnings of a reassessment, outlining a centerpiece of the reformer’s theology from the treatise The Parable of the Wicked Mammon, specifically, how for Tyndale ‘We are delivered by Christ from slavery into freedom; and that freedom is experienced and expressed as indebtedness — not to God, but to each other.’4 But Williams’s most provocative comments, which he chooses not to unpack, are found near his essay’s end:

By common consent, [Tyndale] achieves a vigour and a music in his work as a translator which no one has really rivaled in our language. And I should want to say in conclusion that the best testimony to his vision of communities and relationships that are not abstract or formal is the language he heard and wrote. He does not write for rootless individuals but for persons with flesh and history. The Bible is no record of God’s will for abstract

fraternity but the story of peoples and families working justice in their concrete situations and finding universal vision only through the specifics of local and particular callings…. Not the least of Tyndale’s gifts is to remind us what angular and particular persons sound like when they are praying, arguing or wooing.\(^5\)

Williams’s point is that the rhetorical qualities of Tyndale’s biblical translations exemplify a key element in his vision of Christian society; in other words, as in the case of Paul’s Greek mentioned above, style itself can and does have theological effects. I propose to take up where Williams leaves off. The purpose of this paper is to outline a theological matrix within which we can situate and interpret Tyndale’s translation work, and then to offer a reading of a small part of Tyndale’s 1534 New Testament — specifically, selections from his version of the fourth Gospel — that illustrates the viability and value of approaching Tyndale in this way. My central claim is that in light of more recent developments in theological reflection and biblical interpretation, the style of Tyndale’s translation has evident theological implications with compelling resonances for Anglicanism. Moreover, the analysis of the theology of Tyndale’s literary style can make a modest contribution to the ongoing rectification of the treatment Tyndale has received over the centuries, as lamented by his biographer, David Daniell. ‘Tyndale as theologian, making a Reformation theology that was just becoming discernibly English when he was killed, has been at best neglected and at worst twisted out of shape’, asserts Daniell. ‘Tyndale as conscious [literary] craftsman’, he continues, ‘has been not just neglected, but denied’.\(^6\) As a close reading of Tyndale’s Gospel of John shows, Tyndale the theologian and Tyndale the craftsman should be approached as one and the same.\(^7\)

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7. Tyndale’s Lutheranism, often overstated by critics, plays a large role in the ignoring of his theology, but David Daniell’s biography does an exceptional job of tracing out Tyndale’s frequent and significant departures from Luther’s thinking.
Theological Aesthetics and Translation

The Bible is by any estimation one of the great works of world literature, but what does the term ‘world literature’ mean? It is a thorny question, the possible answers to which are often fraught with a discomfitting combination of hubris, dilettantism, and literary essentialism. The comparativist David Damrosch, however, has recently proposed several characteristics of ‘world literature’ that point toward new directions for understanding the category. The cornerstone of Damrosch’s claims is that world literature has less to do with a mode of writing than with a mode of reading, and particularly with reading that consciously negotiates cultural boundaries in a way that allows the text to yield refractively new and creative interpretations not possible without such border crossings. Accordingly, as Damrosch says, ‘world literature is writing that gains in translation’. Translation is itself a mode of reading and interpretation, and what Damrosch has to say about it serves as an


effective starting point for a consideration of Tyndale: ‘In an excellent translation, the result is not the loss of an unmediated original vision but instead a heightening of the naturally creative interaction of reader and text.’9 Surely Tyndale produced ‘excellent translations’, in many ways unsurpassed in English thereafter, and although some translators can certainly work against such ‘creative interaction’, Tyndale was not one of them. Is it not worth considering how his (specifically) English Bible manages to invite and increase ‘the naturally creative interaction of reader and text’? It seems a reasonable supposition, partly because a broader readership in England could encounter the Bible in the vernacular than ever could in Latin (still less in Greek or Hebrew), but no less because that very readership was encountering no clumsy, clouded ‘translationese’, but a successful work of art in English.10

Before proceeding to Tyndale’s writing, however, it is important to reframe theologically these matters of art and creativity—the creativity of the reader as well as that of the writer—and then refine them to apply specifically to the art of translation. Rowan Williams again provides a useful springboard, this time in his recent book *Grace and Necessity*. Considering the analogous relationship between what he calls ‘the practice of art’ and the divine act of creation, Williams focuses on the ‘making other’ that not only constitutes creation but is ‘intrinsic to God’s being’.11 Human art is itself an act of ‘making other’, and that which is made is at once not the artist and infused with a kind of love by the artist that is revealed through a beauty that supplements—or, better, affords a superabundance of purpose to—mere functionalism.12 ‘Human making that is more than functional’, Williams contends, ‘more than problem-

10. It is worth noting the irony of how just as ‘a wave…of protestant fervour’ in the 1530s ‘led to the destruction of much that was ancient and beautiful’ in English churches (Moorman, *A History of the Church of England*, p. 171), a protestant William Tyndale was producing his final revisions of an English New Testament of great literary beauty.
12. Williams is aware of how it might sound strange to speak of the love of the artist for her/his work of art, but, as he recognizes, ‘It would be very eccentric to see art as central to the distinctively human and at the same time as operating independently of love’ (p. 166).
solving, gives us some clue as to what the theologian means by creation, the setting in being of something that is both an embodiment of what is thought or conceived and also a radically independent reality with its own logic and integrity unfolding over time.” Translation is often seen as a ‘lesser’ act of literary creation—if it is seen as one at all—in part because of the unexamined assumption that it is primarily if not solely ‘functional’. Tyndale’s work, however, illustrates for us that function and beauty in translation are not only not mutually exclusive, but ideally complementary. Tyndale may well have envisioned his work in quite ‘functional’ terms, and in the most ‘functional’ of images—the determination to have, as he put it, even ‘a boy that driveth the plough’ know God’s word—but the very success of Tyndale’s work shows how in Tyndale’s case, form, as it were, far outstripped the immediate goals of function. Tyndale the artist, like any artist, ‘imagines a world that is both new and secretly inscribed in all that is already seen’—in this case, new to the English language but somehow existing potentially and potently in the Greek. This act of imagination, which, according to Williams, involves an act of self-giving on the part of the artist (a dimension tragically literalized in Tyndale’s martyrdom) corresponds to nothing less than ‘an act of generative love that is at the centre of holiness’. These reminders are of immense import when we are considering translated writing—the medium of Scripture for the vast majority of believers throughout Christian history, be they readers of the Septuagint, the Vulgate, the Authorized Version, or what have you. As the Orthodox theologian David Bentley Hart remarks about the nature of Divine Being in general, ‘Such is the nature of God’s infinity that immediacy and mediation are the same in him’. God is revealed and mediated by the word that is Scripture and the Logos incarnate as Jesus, and the particularities of both, not to mention their irreducible otherness, play constitutive roles in the phenomenology of revelation. God is present, immediate, in both (and always), but mediated just the same. This confluence of immediacy and mediation, however, is raised to a new level when exper-

perienced through a translated text, since the text itself both makes immediate and actively mediates the word of God as written in the source language. Translation engenders at once difference and sameness, distance and presence. Consequently, reading Scripture in translation involves a meta-phenomenon that can itself reveal and comment on something of the primary encounter with Christ that reading God’s word can effect. It not only amplifies, so to speak, the creativity inherent in the act of reading, but opens it even more fully to participation in the ongoing act of divine creation itself. In T.J. Gorringe’s view, ‘human beings, whom even Barth did not shrink from speaking of as co-creators with God, are as it were God’s way of exploring the possibilities and reaches of God’s creation, precisely in and through the senses’. The translated text of Scripture, particularly when it achieves a distinctive beauty because of the very music possible in the target language, becomes a means by which God—along with author, translator, and reader—co-creates the world anew.

Here one might pause briefly to reflect on the need for human imagination as a means of participating in God’s creation and in reading Scripture. ‘Can we not see’, Christopher Herbert asks, ‘that God leaves space for us to enter his story, and leaves space for our imaginations to be deeply involved?’ The devaluing of the imagination and, with it, the recognition that ‘a gospel is a work of art’ has had, as Herbert laments, sad consequences for an Anglicanism that should recognize and celebrate such things:

I am concerned that in the Church of England at the moment, the most strident voices belong to those who do not seem to have much time for imagination or for playfulness. There is a noisy, almost angry, literalism... and... a plodding, narrow biblicism which is punitive in tone and joyless in character.

Walter Brueggemann’s pointed assessment of such biblicism is worth repeating: ‘The only way to turn [the Bible] into a fixed idol is to imagine that the final interpretation has been given, an act of imagination that is a deep act of disobedience to the lively God who indwells this text.’

Translation, to summarize, is a mode of ‘making other’. It is intrinsically an acknowledgment of, acceptance of, even a celebration of difference, of the diversity of God’s creation. In the case of Scriptural translation, it

becomes a replication of the Divine presence/absence, always immediate and always mediated. And in the case of truly artful Scriptural translation—as we see in the work of Tyndale—it reflects God’s enjoyment of diversity by enabling the discovery of new possibilities for beauty both in God’s world and in God’s Word.

**Tyndale’s Gospel of St John**

In his survey *A History of the English Bible as Literature*, David Norton concludes of Tyndale that apart from ‘the stylistic decision of major literary consequence that he would translate as simply and clearly as possible, a decision that was of course made for religious reasons, literary questions hardly mattered to him’.22 Perhaps Norton is right, but surely a lack of interest in ‘literary questions’ might be reasonably attributed to the canonical evangelists and the apostle Paul—all of whose texts have been subjects for illuminating literary readings which often demonstrate the inherent synergy of literary and theological issues in Scripture.23 In the case of the fourth Gospel, the intersection of literary and theological questions might be especially observable because of its intensive focus on signs. As is often pointed out, signification is a dominant theme in John’s Gospel. Mark McIntosh, for instance, writes of ‘John’s conception of the world’s reality as sacramental, that is, as pointing to and sharing in a reality beyond itself’, and consequently Jesus’ central discourse in the book is an example of him ‘training his disciples to read the world truthfully’.24 John Ashton takes the point even further when he argues, *contra* Bultmann, for the importance of both text and event in understanding John’s message:


For those who receive the message of Jesus’ disciples, as for the readers of the Gospel, the works have been transformed into words, spoken in the one case, written in the other. With Jesus’ passing the chance of witnessing his signs has gone forever. This is not a matter of regret: ‘It is good for you that I go.’ There is no longer any risk of wrongly assessing the function of signs, of following Thomas in confusing sight with faith. But whatever our final verdict upon the truth of the story told in the Gospel it cannot be preserved if the events of that story are swallowed up and cancelled by a proclama-
tion that has no room for them.25

The emphasis placed on signs and the process of signification gives this particular gospel a meta-literary dimension and invites its reader to con-
sider the potential analogies between the process of signification and the function of translation, since the translated scriptural word signifies simultaneously ‘another’ text (in this case, the original Greek) and a very present reality of the living God ‘in’ Scripture.

Under the rubric of the Gospel’s a meta-literary dimension, we might consider, just as an opening example, the final verses of John as trans-

25. John Ashton, Understanding the Fourth Gospel (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), p. 522. Ashton adds, ‘Not the least of the Gospel’s ironies is the emphasis upon dialogue and discourse at the expense of action, the stress upon words as opposed to works, so that Bultmann can actually argue that Jesus’ works must be thought of exclusively as words. The truth is that the two must be held together; no understanding of the book is possible if one loses sight of the simple fact that it is not a theological tract but a Gospel. What the divine agent “heard” from God is disclosed not in his words but in his life; the “what” is displayed by the “how”. The matter of the Gospel, its true content, is indistinguishable from its form: the medium is the message’ (p. 553).

John’s Gospel ends by self-reflexively representing a world of textual variation that encompasses both insecurity and infinitude. Peter’s sighting of the Beloved Disciple in the narrative moment opens into a flashback of the Last Supper, implying how events are already being transformed into memories (signs) by the disciples themselves. But at this moment that very memory does not bring into focus the koinonia experienced at the Last Supper itself but rather the potential for the fracturing of that fellowship. Jesus’ response to Peter’s question then leads, rather ironically, to a misunderstanding about John: that he ‘should not die’, which the passage explicitly seeks to clarify, even as it subtly eulogizes the disciple as truthful witness and writer (‘The same disciple is he, which testifieth to these things, and wrote these things.’). In other words, the passage serves at once to communicate and correct the precarious process of the reception of Jesus’ own sayings. We read the process of the text’s reception—that is, of its interpretation, indeed, its translation (in the widest sense)—canonized in synecdochic fashion. The book then ends with the prospect of unbounded fecundity—actions and a corresponding narrative that would not just exceed the book in question but could exceed creation itself. In translation, the redactor’s comment cannot help but point self-referentially to the translated text—the rewriting of the recording of the record made by this ‘same disciple’. Even without including the ‘many other things which Jesus did’, the translated text underscores in itself the inevitable productivity of the gospel in deed and word.27

The intersection of word and deed in the fourth Gospel can be illustrated more fully through an examination of its fourth chapter, particularly the artfully constructed conversation between Jesus and the Samaritan woman.

And it was about the sixth hour: and there came a woman of Samaria to draw water. And Jesus said unto her: give me drink. For his disciples were gone away unto the town to buy meat. Then said the woman of Samaria unto him: how is it, that thou being a Jew, asketh drink of me, which am a Samaritan? for the Jews meddle not with the Samaritans. Jesus answered and said unto her: if thou knewest the gift of God, and who it is that sayeth to thee give me drink, thou wouldst have asked of him, and he would have given thee water of life.

Although an admittedly somewhat old-fashioned ‘close reading’ of Tyndale’s text does not in itself exhaust interpretive possibilities, its diction, sound, rhythm and syntax should not be ignored. Tyndale’s careful use of rhythm and assonance as the Samaritan woman is intro-

duced sets the scene admirably. The thematically and theolog-ically significant ‘water’ varies the pace significantly at the end of the sentence, slowing down momentarily the pace of the narrative as well—an effect emphasized by the assonance of the vowel sounds in ‘draw’ and ‘water’. The directness of Jesus’ question to the Samaritan woman is contrasted with the phrasing put in her mouth, paradoxically at once convoluted and carefully balanced: ‘how is it’, interrupted by her ethnic identification of Jesus, ‘asketh drink of me’, followed by her own self-definition which would seem to separate her from her interlocutor in the same way it is separated from her label for him. Unlike the woman’s question, Jesus’ response in Tyndale’s translation maintains the word-order of John’s Greek as closely as possible in English, right down to its final word, ‘life’ (ζωή).

The entire conversation, of course, is in no small part about the erasure of boundaries—and, with them, enmities—made possible by the fact of Jesus, the divine act his very presence represents. The matter becomes clear when the dialogue culminates in the subject of worship, with the woman distinguishing between the tradition of her ‘fathers’ who ‘worshipped on this mountain’, and perceiving (erroneously, in the final analysis) that Jesus insists that ‘in Jerusalem is the place where men ought to worship’. Jesus’ reply reframes the entire question:

Jesus said unto her: woman believe me, the hour cometh, when ye shall neither in this mountain nor yet at Jerusalem, worship the father. Ye worship, ye wot not what: we know what we worship. For salvation cometh of the Jews. But the hour cometh and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the father in spirit and in truth. For verily such the father requireth to worship him. God is a spirit, and they that worship him must worship him, in spirit and truth.

Tyndale’s rendering of Jesus’ articulation of the difference between Samaritans and Jews is brilliant. The translator bookends the statement with the parallel phrases ‘Ye worship’ and ‘we worship’, accentuating the distance between them, and he employs an almost comical assonance along with the homonyms ‘wot’ and ‘what’ to allow his description of the Samaritans’ worship to give just a hint of the confusion that her worship involves, separated as it is from the salvation that comes from the Jews. This phrasing contrasts pointedly with the directness of Jesus’ statement of the Jews’ worship in the second half of the sentence: ‘we know what we worship’. Ultimately, however, such distinctions are rendered moot by the transcendence of God made manifest in Christ. God’s very holiness demands worship rooted not in a particular physical space but in a mode of Being, and Jesus the Messiah (‘I that speak unto thee am he’), the supreme act of divine signification, subsumes in
Himself the kind of divisions the passage contains and that Tyndale stylistically underscores.

It is interesting to note how Tyndale renders Jesus’ directness in this early chapter, since that stylistic characteristic comes to be of further importance, with further complexity, later in the Gospel. The lengthy discourses of chs. 14–17 in John’s Gospel enhance the reader’s sense that she is hearing Christ’s word without mediation, and Tyndale’s own directness, his ‘everyday immediacy’ in Daniell’s words, is especially appropriate for much of these chapters.28 As Daniell asserts, ‘The meditative nature of the fourth Gospel demands a particular kind of technique of translation. Here the Greek must be allowed its proper value all the time—it will do much of its own stylistic work in English if left unhindered.’29 He then goes on to cite the opening verses of John 14 by way of example:

And he said unto his disciples: Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God and believe in me. In my father’s house are many mansions. If it were not so I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go to prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you even unto myself, that where I am, there may ye be also.30

Tyndale’s short, declarative sentences do as little as possible to call attention to themselves rhetorically or stylistically—with the possible exception of the alliteration of ‘many mansions’, a good example of Tyndale’s willingness to adopt Vulgate usage (mansiones) when it allows for more mellifluous English (here via alliteration)—until Jesus’ promise of return and reconciliation is offered in a broadly paratactic sequence of phrases that at once maintains the directness of the message and allows it to attain a kind of climax. One finds such directness in Tyndale’s work generally, but it does unique work in the fourth Gospel, wherein there is both a close connection between deeds and words as signifiers of the Kingdom.

The fourth Gospel’s message, it has been argued, centers on Jesus’ essential role in our reunion with God. As Countryman puts it:

‘the unity of which Jesus speaks here is not, as in some mystical writings, a union simply of the worshiper and God. It is equally the worshipers’ unity with one another…. [J]ust as it is Jesus’ own oneness with the father that

30. Daniell remarks on the profundity of Tyndale’s ‘Let not your hearts be troubled’, contrasting it with an English version of Jesus’ advice, in this case from the Good News Bible, outside the Tyndale tradition: ‘Do not be worried and upset’ – ‘as if the disciples were being told by Jesus’, Daniell pithily comments, ‘to cheer up after having missed a bus’ (*William Tyndale*, p. 137).
makes of him the road by which others may come to God, so the believers’
loving unity with one another represents our journey back along that road
to our divine origin.31

Tyndale’s rendition of the extraordinary prayer to the Father from Jesus
that makes up the Gospel’s seventeenth chapter indeed exemplifies this
point, even as it shows Tyndale varying his style to complement the high
theology of the discourse. Consider the following passage: ‘I pray for
them, and pray not for the world: but for them which thou hast given
me, for they are thine. And all mine are thine, and thine are mine, and I
am glorified in them.’ It opens with the perfect iambic pentameter of the
first clause, while the second clause ends with the ringing pronoun
‘thine’, the vowel sound of which becomes insistent in the following
sentence. Now directed toward the Father and not (just) to his disciples
(and therefore not just to us), Jesus’ discourse in Tyndale’s rendition flows
through longer sentences, becoming expansive even as an increasingly
vivid picture of the interpenetrating unity of Father, Son, and the faithful
is painted:

I pray not for them alone: but for them also which shall believe on me
through their preaching, that they all may be one, as thou father art in me,
and I in thee, that they may be also one in us, that the world may believe
that thou hast sent me. And that glory that thou gavest me, I have given
them, that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and thou in me, that
they may be made perfect in one, and that the world may know that thou
hast sent me, and hast loved them, as thou hast loved me.

Tyndale’s style here demands a level of concentration from his reader
that enacts the theme of oneness that resonates throughout these sen-
tences, that draws the reader toward active participation in the text. The
preaching of the disciples here, their words, will lead others to belief, but
the temporal linearity implicit in that idea—first Jesus preaches to His
disciples, then the disciples preach to others—is complemented, power-
fully, by the resolutely non-linear and transcendent images of mutual
indwelling and simultaneously shared glory. The final sentence is a
nearly unbroken sequence of monosyllables, with only two uninflated
two-syllable words: ‘glory’ and ‘perfect’, which also happen to be the
only two words in the passage that have their origin in Latin rather than
the Anglo-Saxon lexicon. The simplicity of the diction, however, is com-
plicated by the swirl of repeated personal pronouns that invite the
reader to slow down over the passage, to reflect on the very Trinitarian
mystery in which we are caught up: how ‘I’, ‘we’, ‘thou’ and ‘them’ can
remain distinct yet be ‘one’ and in one another. Tyndale’s work is a tour

de force of balance that lexically puts the reader right at home yet stylistically forces her outside herself—toward the recognition that her true home must be elsewhere.

Tyndale’s greatest gifts, however, are found in his renderings of narrative, and it will not do to discuss Tyndale’s version of the fourth Gospel without some comment on the Passion narrative therein. Here, however, we see Tyndale’s translation manifesting the Gospel’s distinctively logocentric emphases. A narrative that had opened by invoking the creativity of the divine Word both transcendent and incarnate demonstrates, throughout the tense moments leading to the crucifixion itself, the dangers of the reification of the Word. ‘Word-made-flesh’ can never be reduced to ‘Word-as-thing’, capable of being possessed and therefore controlled. Pilate’s attempt in the interrogation scene of ch. 18 to label and thus objectify Jesus points to his terrible incapacity to imagine and thereby recognize a Person, the living God, before him:

Then Pilate entered into the judgement hall again, and called Jesus, and said unto him: art thou the king of the Jews? Jesus answered: sayest thou that of thyself, or did other tell it thee of me? Pilate answered: Am I a Jew? Thine own nation and high priests have delivered thee unto me. What hast thou done? Jesus answered: my kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, then would my ministers surely fight, that I should not be delivered to the Jews, but now is my kingdom not from hence. Pilate said unto him: Art thou a king then? Jesus answered: Thou sayest that I am a king. For this cause was I born, and for this cause came I into the world, that I should bear witness unto the truth. And all that are of the truth hear my voice. Pilate said unto him: what thing is truth?

The whole scene turns on the taking and putting of words from and into other mouths—an analogue to the act of translation itself, wherein Tyndale’s words here both are and are not John’s. ‘Art thou the king of the Jews?’ elicits first only Jesus’ query about the origin of such a label: where did it come from? Pilate’s response indicates he is relating what he has been told. ‘What hast thou done?’ then garners an oblique answer to the previous question—an answer that challenges the entire project of definition by acknowledging that Jesus both is and is not a ‘king’. Pilate’s failure here shows itself in deeply linguistic terms, inasmuch as his questions betray his inability to handle the ontological ‘is/is not’ of metaphor and the power inherent in it. Again, the analogy to translated discourse is evident. Tyndale’s own text functions in a Christ-like fashion; in its case it is and is not John’s words, ‘bear[ing] witness’ and thereby revealing the truth in a way that must be experienced as an activity, not a thing. ‘All that are of the truth hear my voice’: the act of hearing involves the reader through the living word (the ‘voice’) of Jesus in
‘truth’ conceived as relational event. Tyndale’s subtle addition to the Greek in Pilate’s famous last question clarifies for his reader Pilate’s blindness: ‘what thing is truth?’ Tyndale’s Pilate wants not a philosophical definition as much as a static, tangible object, the knowledge of which can be reduced to the knower himself.\(^3\) The irony is rich, of course: on the one hand Pilate is looking truth in the face in an unprecedented, physical way, but he cannot see Him because the incarnate Word which is Truth cannot be possessed like any other mere thing. Similarly, when reading Tyndale we must be careful; we run the risk of failing to experience Tyndale’s representation of John as such—as a re-presentation of the original which allows us, in the reading of it, to participate in a hermeneutic event rather than dominate a reified text.

The paradox of translation both erasing and re-inscribing difference, so resonantly parallel to the redemptive activity of Christ whose very historical particularity enables us to be one with each other and with God, as Christ and the Father are one, while maintaining the distinctiveness of all, plays out memorably in the linguistic self-referentiality of John’s Crucifixion story in the nineteenth chapter:

And they took Jesus and led him away. And he bare his cross, and went forth into a place called the place of dead men’s skulls, which is named in Hebrew, Golgotha. Where they crucified him and two other with him on either side one, and Jesus in their midst. And Pilate wrote this title, and put it on the cross. The writing was, Jesus of Nazareth, king of the Jews. This title read many of the Jews. For the place where Jesus was crucified, was nigh to the city. And it was written in Hebrew, Greek and Latin. Then said the high priests of the Jews to Pilate: write not, king of the Jews: but that he said, I am king of the Jews. Pilate answered: what I have written, that have I written.

Jesus’ bearing of the cross here coincides with his entrance into a place whose purpose is to turn human beings into things—‘dead men’s skulls’—and its purpose has itself become reified in its very name. Jesus is crucified amid other such victims, distinguished from them by Pilate’s further, final, futile attempt to label him. Rather shockingly, a scene focused on a tortured body momentarily turns into a scene focused on

\(^3\) Rowan Williams offers a summary of earlier Anglican approaches to John’s Gospel (by Westcott, Hoskyns, Temple, and Robinson, respectively) in ‘Anglican Approaches to the Fourth Gospel’, in Anglican Identities (Cambridge: Cowley Publications, 2003), pp. 121-37, tentatively concluding that such an overview shows how ‘If historical mediation is essential to a distinctively Christian account of the knowledge of God, that history must be seen as always and irreducibly other to us. There is a dimension of the knowledge of God in Christ that is never capable of being absorbed into self-recognition only’ (p. 136).
linguistic and interpretive variety and uncertainty: at the climactic moment of the Crucifixion itself, the reader is suddenly forced to think about language and writing. The multilingual sign Pilate writes is, ironically, an act of translation itself, but from a source text (presumably in Aramaic) that never existed—the ultimate translation betrayal. Jesus never makes the claim the Jews try to assign to him, and Pilate’s confining, reductive, and fictional label for him will shortly be demolished by the Resurrection. Tyndale’s translation, in contrast to Pilate’s multilingual representation of Jesus, is not only founded on the true Greek but is fruitful in its ability to allow its true source to become new. Etymologically, translation must ‘bear across’; artful translation of Scripture does more than that. It encourages, through its own unique aesthetic of style, its reader, like Jesus in this scene, to ‘bear the Cross’. Doing so allows the reader to participate in the powerful, sometimes terrible beauty of the Word.

Tyndale, the Theology of Style, and Anglicanism Today

William Tyndale—martyred prior to the Church in England’s break with Rome, not to mention before its theological first-flowering in the works of Richard Hooker—had nothing to say about the ecclesia anglicana. Nevertheless, he still speaks to much of that Church—our Church—daily, by means of his creation of a language and a style for biblical English that remains at the core of 1989’s NRSV. Read from the perspective offered in this essay, Tyndale’s translation can teach us much that could be genuinely relevant—or, at least, thought-provoking—for the contemporary Anglican Communion. It can do so because what Tyndale imagined and created was a style that, to reiterate Rowan Williams’ observation above, ‘remind[s] us what angular and particular persons sound like’. That is to say, Tyndale’s translation in its very style dramatizes the power of the particular, the way in which the transformation of the universal Good News into local terms—even when the Gospel has been claimed and colonized by a language, Latin, with universalizing pretensions—is fundamental to evangelization. Since Tyndale’s time, of course, the English language itself has become the language of subjugation for some—a medium for an ironically doubled message of freedom in Christ and oppression by occupiers. But by remaining cognizant of the text’s translated status and reading accordingly, we can not only re-inscribe Tyndale into contemporary Anglican controversies, but even suggest how his work may make a contribution toward resolving them.

For example, the global and hence culturally diverse nature of the Anglican Communion as it exists today has been well documented, as has the degree to which tensions among members of this diverse
Communion often arise out of profound differences of belief about the nature of Scriptural authority. Underlying such cultural and hermeneutic diversity, of course, are the unequal power relationships remaining even today in an Anglican Communion whose historical roots are colonialist. Christopher Duraisingh offers a provocative outline of the problem and its possible solution when he contrasts a eurocentric cultural model with a postcolonial one. The former, according to Duraisingh, is universalizing and monologic, while a ‘postcolonial way of visioning things is … multivoiced, dialogical, and polycentric’. A postcolonial perspective encourages us to read Scripture attuned to its multiplicities, for it is, as Duraisingh puts it, ‘only as the gospel is read and reread in a variety of cultures that its multifaceted splendor is drawn out’. The author suggests how this perspective sheds new light on a reading of Acts, for instance:

In the place of a single monologic tradition, vernacularization takes place on the day of Pentecost. All traditions and languages are destigmatized and affirmed. Perhaps the most powerful image of the Pentecost story is the richness of diversity. The colonialist approach to the Acts of the Apostles understands it as the story of the expansion of a conquering church, or the planting of it into every corner of the world. But it is equally valid to read the book as the story of the unfolding of the gospel, its nature being increasingly revealed as it is appropriated and reappropriated by culture after culture.

The communication of the gospel is itself here a matter of re-inscription and re-enculturation, which necessarily subverts any monologizing tendencies in the text even as its common message binds varied cultures together. Duraisingh warns us, however, that ‘it is critical to become aware how many of us uncritically share the monologic mind-set of the colonial past and tend, sometimes unconsciously, to reduce the dynamic and multi-voiced stories of the gospel to a unitary, unchanging, and static substance’. In other words, we must learn to recognize how, when faced with the truth, we can unwittingly replicate the interpretive desires demonstrated by Pontius Pilate.

Finally, Duraisingh asks, ‘Can the Anglican Communion become a movement away from eurocentrism to a Communion of genuine pluralism?

through acknowledgement of its plurality? We should hope so, and, perhaps paradoxically, one small part of effecting such a transformation would involve taking the five-centuries-old source of the Gospel in English, Tyndale’s translation, as an instructive example in itself—looking back on this ‘eurocentric’ text with a postcolonial eye. Tyndale’s translation is utterly committed to the remaking of the Gospel into a particular language for a particular people, and therein one finds its potential, realized over the centuries later, to speak to what would have been for the translator an unimaginably wider audience. It opens the possibility for bringing the Gospel into the world anew, for renewing the message by pointing toward the infinite re-creations made possible by the interaction of author, text and readers. Its very existence witnesses to the need for diverse renderings and experiences of the Gospel, and its very aesthetic qualities call attention to the beauty possible in such diversity. Tyndale’s translation, artful Greek rendered into artful English, with the distinctiveness of the latter serving to refract and supplement that of the former, does more than merely participate in the ‘pluralization’ of Scripture. It proves plurality to be essential to the creation and survival of a Church lived in English, even as that Church continues to evolve beyond the boundaries of the English language.

The New Moses and the Wisdom of God: A Convergence of Themes in Matthew 11:25–30

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The New Moses and the Wisdom of God: A Convergence of Themes in Matthew 11:25–30

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This article focuses on the confluence of Wisdom and Mosaic themes in Matthew 11:25–30, asserting that the convergence of these two themes points to an association between wisdom traditions and salvation history that is often overlooked. The two traditions evolved as Israel, trying to live life in obedience to Torah, encountered sin, suffering, trial, mystery, and an often turbulent history. As Israel encountered new and often painful life experiences, they remembered and appealed to tensive metaphors and traditions in order to understand the new experience and to provide stability in the midst of changing history. Recognizing that God’s revelation in Jesus is a mystery both transcending and occurring within human experience, Matthew uses traditional tensive metaphors in order to emphasize that while the revelation of God’s salvation in Jesus Christ is new, it is grounded in and continuous with salvation history. At the same time, this mystery transcends former expression. By describing Jesus as both a new Moses and personified Wisdom, Matthew imaginatively combines the symbolic worlds evoked by these two metaphors. The convergence of these symbolic worlds assures that Christological reflection moves beyond the familiar and is open to the mystery of God’s revelation in Christ.

Keywords: Moses, Wisdom, Gospel of Matthew, Mosaic typology, personified Wisdom, Christology, revelation

Wisdom literature has often been treated as an eccentric relative in the family of Old Testament texts. While there has been an outpouring of wisdom scholarship in recent decades, this scholarship is not well integrated into either recent or classic comprehensive Old Testament theologies.¹


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Old Testament theology has customarily focused on the major events of salvation history: the exodus from Egypt, divine election, and covenant. The lack of attention to salvation history in wisdom literature as well as its emphasis on daily experience and openness to international influence makes it difficult to fit the texts of wisdom literature into cohesive systems formed from reflection on salvation history. Consequently, Old Testament theologies either relegate wisdom literature to a minority status or treat it as a competing theological voice. Important insights for understanding Israel’s faith are lost, however, in positing a false contrast between wisdom literature and salvation history.

The lack of attention to salvation history in wisdom literature does not indicate a competing viewpoint and is not set in contrast to theology that emerges from reflection on exodus, divine election, and covenant. Instead, the aim of wisdom literature is to deepen the relationship between Israel

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2 Walter Brueggemann (Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy [Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997], 27–42) discusses the Old Testament theologies of Walther Eichrodt and Gerhard von Rad as the first two important models of Old Testament theology following the Barthian revolution of 1919. Discussing von Rad’s presentation of Old Testament theology as a theology of mighty deeds, Brueggemann states: “It was soon observed that a theology of mighty deeds allowed no room for the wisdom materials of the Old Testament in which God did not ‘act.’ Indeed, one way to handle the problem of wisdom was to treat the sapiential materials of the Old Testament as substandard, largely borrowed, and largely utilitarian, so that they hardly qualify as elements of Israelite theology” (36). See also Roland E. Murphy, “Israel’s Wisdom: A Biblical Model of Salvation,” Studia Missionalia 30 (1981): 1–16.


4 For a discussion of the role of the wisdom tradition in rabbinic Judaism, see Robert M. Seltzer, Jewish People, Jewish Thought: The Jewish Experience in History (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1980), 262. Seltzer writes: “As indicated in an earlier chapter, rabbinic thought had its roots in the fusion of the biblical wisdom tradition and the revealed word of God in Pentateuch and prophecy, a fusion that occurred under the stimulus and in the presence of the rich philosophical tradition of Hellenism. The result was a form of religious rationality unique to Judaism, combining verbal revelation through the written text (the Torah she-biktav) and the indirect inspiration through the oral discussions of the sages (the Torah she-be’al peh), which together formed Torah in the full rabbinical meaning.”
and God by integrating that relationship into the fabric of ordinary life. Wisdom literature recognizes daily life as the center of learning, knowledge, and revelation, and it values the connection between creation and salvation.5

The neglect of wisdom literature in Old Testament theology has consequences for interpreting wisdom themes in the New Testament. While many recognize that wisdom themes are present in the New Testament, interpretation of the impact of these themes often neglects the deep connection between wisdom and salvation history. An example of this problem is seen in interpretations of Matthew 11:25–30.

While almost all interpretations of Matthew 11:25–30 recognize wisdom motifs throughout the passage, particularly through the link between Jesus and personified Wisdom, interpreters differ from one another regarding the significance of this connection.6 Two important contemporary commentaries demonstrate these differences. Celia M. Deutsch, in her thorough analysis, sees the link between Jesus and the metaphor of personified Wisdom as the central point for interpretation.7 W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison recognize this link but state that the equation of Jesus with Wisdom is only “at the periphery of Matthew’s major concerns.”8 Their analysis argues that Mosaic motifs are of primary importance.9 Despite using different lenses for interpretation, these two exegetical opinions point to similar themes present in this passage. The emergence of similar themes, regardless of whether Mosaic or wisdom motifs are used as the primary lens for interpretation, suggests a connection between wisdom traditions and salvation history through the symbols, metaphors, and narratives of Second Temple Judaism.

5 Roland E. Murphy, The Tree of Life: An Exploration of Biblical Wisdom Literature (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990), 17–18.
7 Deutsch, Lady Wisdom, 42–80; see also Deutsch, Hidden Wisdom, 36–39.
8 Davies and Allison, Matthew, 2:295.
and indicates that Matthew 11:25–30 provides fertile ground for exploring this connection.

This essay explores the interplay of Mosaic themes and personified Wisdom in Matthew 11:25–30. I begin with a discussion of the importance of symbol, metaphor, and narrative as tools for theological reflection. This is followed by analyses of Matthew 11:25–30 using two different lenses for interpretation: the first focuses on Mosaic themes, while the second focuses on wisdom themes. The essay concludes with a discussion of the implications for interpretation when the text is viewed as a convergence of both themes.

I. Symbol, Metaphor, and Narrative as Tools for Theological Reflection

Dale Allison points out that the Moses of Haggadah is nearly omniscient, described with traits usually reserved for God.10 He gives this example:

Already the Exagogue of Ezekiel has Moses recount this: “I beheld the entire circled earth, both beneath the earth and above the heaven; and a host of stars fell at my feet, and I numbered then all;” and the text goes on to announce that Moses saw all “things present, past, and future.” Most startling here is the assertion, to my knowledge unparalleled, that Moses numbered stars. In Jewish tradition it was precisely this that human beings, with their comparatively feeble mental powers, cannot do. . . The rule is: only God can count stars. But in Ezekiel’s Exagoge Moses is the exception.11

Allison also provides a series of quotations from texts written after 164 BCE but before 70 CE that demonstrate a clear connection between Moses, knowledge, and wisdom.12 A method for theological reflection is glimpsed in these texts, one that makes use of both metaphor and myth to express theological truth. Furthermore, the historical narrative of the person of Moses is the foundation and anchor for more abstract theological concepts. The great truths of creation, salvation, and eschatology are not merely speculative but are revealed through a historical person in a particular time through remembered historical events.

A similar move is made by New Testament writers. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza explores the use of mythic language in the Christological hymns of the New Testament to speak of Jesus of Nazareth. Noting that these

10 Allison, New Moses, 224.
11 Ibid.
12 The series of quotations can be found in Allison, New Moses, 224.
hymns are “among the earliest Christological statements found in the New Testament,” Schüssler Fiorenza points out the strangeness of attaching the mythic language of preexistence, creation of the world, and exaltation over earthly and heavenly powers to a concrete historical person. She argues that this connection did not come about through reflection on a single myth but through a theological method that she refers to as “reflective mythology,” which “uses mythical materials as thought categories for its own theological reflection and conception.”

Theological reflection that links the historic figures of Moses and Jesus with abstract theological concepts such as preexistence, creation, and exaltation recognizes the intimacy of the relationship between these historical figures and God, and that this intimacy is a source of revelation. This theological reflection reaches toward symbolic language that is not limited to the arena of reasoning, but engages the imagination and emotions as well. While this theological reflection moves toward abstract concepts, it nevertheless remains rooted in tradition by using the symbols, metaphors, and narratives of Second Temple Judaism. Two symbols of Second Temple Judaism, the tensive metaphor of personified Wisdom and Mosaic typology, are used in Matthew as tools for theological reflection on the significance of Jesus.

As the metaphor of personified Wisdom is used as a tool for theological reflection in Matthew, the metaphor is transformed from revolving around the axis of Torah, as it does in Second Temple Judaism, to a focus on the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. This transformation marks a shift in the symbolic center of theological thinking from the realm of Torah to the realm of Christology. Jesus is identified with revelation and becomes the definitive embodiment of Wisdom.

The transformation of this symbol in Matthew provides an illustration of theological reflection that seeks to understand Jesus through the vehicle of traditional metaphors that are tensive. A tensive metaphor is not limited or adequately expressed by one referent. Rather, it has a set of meanings and may shift and expand to include new content in the face of new experiences and in shifting historical contexts. The use of these tensive but

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14 Ibid., 18.
16 Deutsch, Lady Wisdom, 1.
17 Ibid., 9, 77. Deutsch notes that a metaphor is a form of symbol, and often interchanges the two terms. She describes the figure of personified Wisdom as a tensive metaphor in Lady Wisdom but uses the language of symbol in “Wisdom in Matthew,” 14–16. She uses
familiar metaphors opens up new meaning for the whole community by linking the new content with a familiar form and therefore providing stability in the midst of changing historical situations.\textsuperscript{18}

Mosaic typology is also used in Matthew as a tool for theological reflection on Jesus that links the future of the Christian tradition to the stability of the history of Israel. Allison provides numerous examples of Mosaic typology in Scripture and points to the reason for this widespread use of typology: to anchor the new in the stability of the old. “Typology, which puts its perceivers in two stories at once, can provide an instant history for a community.”\textsuperscript{19} The new situation is seen in light of the old, and this confluence of stories appeals to the emotions, points to one God behind history, and gives birth to and nurtures a community’s symbolic universe.\textsuperscript{20}

The use of personified Wisdom and Mosaic typology as tools for theological reflection on Jesus in Matthew demonstrates the importance of symbol, metaphor, and narrative in expressing theological truth. The two symbols of personified Wisdom and Mosaic typology converge in Matthew 11:25–30. This text focuses on the intimacy of the relationship between Jesus and God as a source of revelation. In order to provide both continuity and stability for the novelty of his theological reflection, Matthew reaches back to two symbols of Second Temple Judaism. The convergence of these two symbols points to integration rather than competition between these symbols in Second Temple Judaism. Before moving to a discussion of this convergence, some preliminary comments on this text are in order.

\section*{II. Preliminary Observations on Matthew 11:25–30}

Matthew 11:25–30 begins with a prayer (vv. 25–26), followed by a revelation saying (v. 27), and concludes with an invitation (vv. 28–30).\textsuperscript{21} The prayer and revelation saying (vv. 25–27) are Q material also found in Luke (10:21–22). In both Matthew and Luke, the prayer and revelation saying follow the woes addressed to the Galilean cities and are surrounded by

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\textsuperscript{18} Deutsch, \textit{Lady Wisdom}, 1.
\textsuperscript{19} Allison, \textit{New Moses}, 277.
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid.
themes of acceptance/rejection and revelation/hiddenness. In Luke, however, the motif of acceptance/rejection is focused on the mission of the disciples and the peoples’ response to that mission, while in Matthew the focus shifts to the identity of Jesus and the significance of his words and deeds.22

There are redactional differences between Matthew and Luke’s use of Q material in these verses, but the most obvious and significant difference between them is the addition of the invitation (vv. 28–30) in Matthew.23 Allison and Deutsch are in agreement regarding the importance of the addition of these verses, but each interprets the significance of this Matthean redactional change differently. Allison argues that the invitation contains Mosaic themes and is therefore a confirmation that the major motif behind Matthew 11:25–30 is Mosaic.24 Deutsch claims that the invitation contains wisdom themes and highlights the wisdom context of the sayings in verses 25–27.25 Both claims are worth exploring more thoroughly, and so I will view the text first through the lens of Mosaic themes and then through the lens of personified Wisdom.

III. Mosaic Themes in Matthew 11:25–30

Allison provides ample evidence supporting his view of Mosaic influence on the Matthew 11:25–30.26 There are significant parallels between the prayer of Moses in Exodus 33:11–23 and the prayer of Jesus in Matthew 11:25–30. In both texts, reciprocal knowledge is declared in the form of prayer, and both texts introduce a promise of rest. The Exodus passage also influences the order of phrases in Matthew.27 Mosaic influence on Matthew 11:25–30 is broader than its parallels with Exodus 33:11–23, however. In the Jewish tradition, Moses is associated with meekness and Torah, and Torah is associated with yoke. Seeing God, knowing God, and all things being handed over to a human being are associated with Moses.28

26 Allison, *New Moses*, 222–33.
27 Allison (*New Moses*, 226) points out that the Father knowing the Son precedes the Son knowing the Father in Matthew 11:27. He argues that this is a reflection of Exodus 33:12–13, where God’s knowledge of Moses precedes Moses’ request for knowledge of God.
28 Allison, *New Moses*, 222–33.
Furthermore, the Mosaic themes that color Matthew’s understanding of Jesus in Matthew 11:25–30 are not isolated occurrences in the Gospel. There is a developed Mosaic/Exodus typology that occurs in the first eight chapters of Matthew’s Gospel, is picked up again in 11:25–30, and is evident in the account of the transfiguration in chapter 17. Matthew reaches back to these Mosaic themes and uses them in his theological reflection on Jesus in three significant ways. First, Matthew is intent on presenting a continuity between the new law of Jesus and the law of Moses. Moses is associated with Torah, and associating Jesus with Moses is therefore a way to say to the church that the new law of Jesus is in continuity with the law of Moses. Second, the use of Mosaic themes in theological reflection on Jesus has eschatological implications. Knowledge of God and rest were expectations of the eschatological kingdom, and their association with Jesus in Matthew 11:25–30 indicates that Jesus is the herald of the eschatological community. Third, the use of Mosaic themes in this passage points to the intimacy between God and Moses as the source of revelation.

The intimacy of the relationship between God and Moses as a source of revelation is a theme that is prevalent in both Jewish and Christian theological reflections. Three Mosaic texts lie behind and form the foundation for Matthew’s theological reflection on Jesus in these verses. The three texts—Exodus 33:11–23, Numbers 12:1–8, and Deuteronomy 34:9–12—are linked both verbally and thematically. Verbally the texts are linked by the use of the phrase “face to face,” by the word “know,” and by reference to Moses as a prophet. Thematically the texts are linked by a focus on reciprocal knowledge between Moses and God springing from the intimacy of their relationship. Matthew is not alone in linking these three texts; such a linkage also occurs in theological reflections on the subject of “seeing God” in the writings of Ecclesiasticus, Philo, the church fathers, and in rabbinic literature as well. These three texts are foundational for understanding the relationship between God and Moses that Matthew and other Christian writers use to reflect on the significance of the intimacy between Jesus and God as the source of revelation. For this reason, further exploration is in order so that

30 Ibid., 287–89.
32 Exodus 33:11 and Deuteronomy 34:9–12 share the term “face to face,” while Numbers uses “mouth to mouth” instead. Exodus 33:12–13 and Numbers 12:6 share the use of “know”; and Numbers 12:6 and Deuteronomy 34:10, the use of “prophet.” See Allison, *New Moses*, 220.
the rich nuance of Matthew’s use of these texts for theological reflection on Jesus can be fully appreciated.

Exodus 33:11–23 is not only the first text to which Allison points as background for the Mosaic images incorporated in Matthew 11:25–30. It is also of primary importance because the book of Exodus is one of the major narratives informing the symbolic universe of Matthew’s theological reflection. Attention to the narrative context of Exodus 33:11–23 is therefore vital. The dialogue in this passage comes at a crucial time for the people of Israel, occurring between the sin of the people in chapter 32 and the renewal of the covenant in chapter 34. These chapters are fraught with both literary and theological tensions. While redaction of various traditions plays a role in the literary tensions of these chapters, that tension is not merely redactional.34 Behind it, at the narrative root, lies a theological tension—namely, the uncertainty of the relationship between God and Israel.35

The relationship between God and Moses is described in verse 11: “Thus the Lord used to speak to Moses face to face, as one speaks to his friend.”36 Moses’ prayer to God (vv. 12–17) further elaborates on the intimacy of this relationship. In that prayer, Moses makes two claims regarding his special status before God: God knows Moses by name, and Moses has found favor in God’s sight (v. 12). Moses’ special status before God is the thread that runs through this entire dialogue.37 As the dialogue continues, however, it becomes clear that Moses is now unsure of the future and whether his status before God has changed. Israel’s disobedience is the reason. The uncertainty in the relationship between God and Israel seeps into and colors the relationship between Moses and God.

Exodus 33 emphasizes Moses’ special status before God, and that status involves the people of Israel. The people are central in the relationship between Moses and God from the beginning. In Exodus 3:4–14, when God first calls Moses by name, the reason for the call is given: “I have observed

34 Source analysis of these chapters has not yielded widespread consensus, and the majority of contemporary scholars agree that interpretive focus should be placed primarily on the final form of the text. See Walter Brueggemann, “The Crisis and Promise of Presence in Israel,” Horizons in Biblical Theology 1 (1979): 48; Brevard S. Childs, The Book of Exodus (Louisville, KY: Westminster, 1974), 584; Donald E. Gowan, The Bible on Forgiveness (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2010), 9; Gowan, Theology in Exodus (Louisville, KY: Westminster, 1994), 219.
36 All biblical quotations contained in this article are from the New Revised Standard Version Bible.
37 Gowan, Theology in Exodus, 230.
the misery of my people who are in Egypt” (3:7). Moses is given a responsibility to lead the Israelites into the Promised Land. When Moses questions his ability to perform such a task, he is given an assurance: “I will be with you” (3:12). Ever since the disobedience of the golden calf incident, however, God has threatened both to exterminate the people (32:9–10) and to no longer accompany them (33:3). Both aspects of the call to Moses—that he would lead the people of Israel and that God will be with him as he leads them—are threatened.

The tension in the dialogue in Exodus 33 is a tension rooted in the intimacy of the relationship between Moses and God, a relationship that includes the people of Israel but is also threatened because of their sin. Moses persistently inserts the people of Israel into the dialogue (vv. 13, 16), and with equal persistence God leaves them out.38 While God has promised to start over with Moses, Moses insists on a continued relationship between all of Israel and God.

Remarkably, in verse 17, God agrees to do as Moses asks. He reassures Moses of his special status: “You have found favor in my sight and I know you by name.” A turning point has been reached: this paragraph forms the bridge between the disobedience of the people of Israel in chapter 32 and the renewal of the covenant between God and the people of Israel in chapter 34. Moses’ special status before God is unique but not private. It is a relationship that has soteriological implications for the people of Israel.

Like Exodus 33, the focus of Numbers 12:1–8 is the unique status of Moses and the availability of God’s presence to Israel through the intimacy of the relationship between Moses and God. The passage in Numbers comes in the context of several stories that follow the pattern of rebellion on the part of the people of Israel and eventual forgiveness through the intercession of Moses, the same pattern that operates in Exodus 32–34. In Numbers 11, 12–13, and again in 16–17, controversy emerges regarding the unique status and authority of Moses.39 In the context of addressing questions about his legitimacy as the unique spokesperson for God, a characterization of Moses is offered: “Now, the man Moses was very humble, more so than anyone else on the face of the earth” (Num 12:13). This is one of the primary ways in which Moses is remembered by Israel and is also one of the key verbal links to Matthew 11:25–30.40 It is therefore essential to determine what is meant by this designation.

40 In the LXX, praus is used to translate anav in Numbers 12:3. For a discussion of the association of praus and tapeinos in the Old Testament and their use in Matthew’s
In his commentary on the Rule of Benedict, Terrence G. Kardong examines the biblical dimensions of the virtue of humility and makes an interesting observation. In his discussion of the two Greek words associated with an attitude of humility, *tapeinos* (humble) and *praus* (gentle or meek), he points to a difference in how these characteristics are perceived in Greek and Jewish culture. For the classical Greek writers, being *tapeinos* was not a quality valued in Greek society. In fact it was a quality associated with slaves, and “no Greek noble would want to think or act like a slave.”

On the other hand, Greek nobles were urged to act with gentleness, to be *praus*, toward their inferiors. Kardong notes that among Greek classical writers *tapeinos* and *praus* are never posited of one person. The two qualities were understood to be incompatible. This is not true of Jewish thinkers, however. Both *praus* and *tapeinos* occur together in the Septuagint translation of the prophet Zephaniah’s description of returning exiles (Zeph 3:12). Furthermore, the Messiah would be one who was kind to the weak (Isa 11:2–4) and also one whose character was marked by the quality of lowliness, being *praus* (Zech 9:9).

This observation of the difficulty of comprehending humility and meekness as qualities that belong together or that can converge in one person is an important one because it highlights the distinctiveness of the Jewish conception of leadership. The distinguishing characteristic of humility as a quality of leadership recognized both the transcendence of God and a limit imposed on the power of the leader. The leader of Israel did not have absolute power. Rather, that power was a gift from God to be used for the sake of the people. In Jewish tradition, Moses is identified as the existential model of a person who was *shefal ruah* (lowly of spirit), a person of utmost humility, and the basis for that identification is the description of Moses in Numbers 12:3.

Following the identification of Moses as “very humble, more so than anyone else on the face of the earth” (Num 12:3), he is described in exalted terms that point to the unique aspects of his relationship with God. Moses is not given visions or dreams like other prophets but speaks to God face to face.

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42 Ibid., 161; see also Luz, *Matthew*, 173.
face (vv. 6–7). He is entrusted with all of God’s house (v. 7). He beholds the form of God (v. 8). Philip J. Budd points out that this portrait of Moses shows a development that can be traced to Josiah’s reign in the seventh century BCE. During this period, interest in the figure and function of Moses increases, and there is a movement from descriptions of Moses as a leader of the people during difficult times toward understanding him as the heroic savior of the nation. It is a development that moves toward depictions of Moses in Deuteronomy and ultimately toward Mosaic religion, which urges unquestioning allegiance to Moses as an authority figure and author of Mosaic law. For this reason the book of Numbers’ description of Moses as humble before God is crucial. While Mosaic religion emphasizes the authority of Moses because of his unique and intimate relationship with God, at the same time it remembers that Moses’ relationship to God is characterized by humility. Ultimate power rests with God, and Moses receives his power for leadership as a gift owing to his intimate relationship with God. It is through Moses’ humility that God’s saving presence is available to the people of Israel (Num 11:2, 12:13, 16:48).

The third text linked with Exodus 33 and Numbers 12 is Deuteronomy 34:9–12. This text also focuses on the unique relationship between Moses and God and is especially poignant because it discusses that relationship on the occasion of Moses’ death outside of the Promised Land. This text forms the conclusion of the book of Deuteronomy, a book dominated by Moses’ figure and function.

Exploring the death report of Moses in Deuteronomy 34, George W. Coats finds three important motifs. The first motif is Moses’ strength at the end of his life (Deut 34:7). The second is the description of Moses’ spirit as a spirit of authority never to be equaled in the leadership of any other man (Deut 34:9). The third is the intimacy between God and Moses, an intimacy not known before Moses and not to be known again (Deut 34:10).

Coats points out that the final verses of Deuteronomy (vv. 10–12) depict Moses performing signs and wonders. In Exodus, the function of the signs and wonders of God is to make God known in all of Egypt. At the close of Deuteronomy, the signs and wonders of God are identified as signs and wonders performed by Moses and seen by all of Israel. There is a blending of the functions of Moses and God in this passage. Moses performs signs

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45 Budd, Numbers, 138.
47 Gowan, Theology in Exodus, 133–36.
48 Olsen, Deuteronomy, 169.
and wonders before the pharaoh, the people of Egypt, and all of Israel. The intimacy of Moses’ relationship with God becomes a means through which God is known in all of Israel, and through the human words of Moses Israel receives God’s blessing (Deut 33). On the occasion of Moses’ death, it is remembered that his life, words, and actions mediated the life, words, and actions of God.\(^49\)

Exploring the relationship between God and Moses in Exodus 33:11–23, Numbers 12:1–8, and Deuteronomy 34:9–12—the texts that lie in the background of Matthew 11:25–30—yields important insights. All three are focused on the intimacy and uniqueness of Moses’ relationship with God. It is clear, however, that the intimacy of the relationship between Moses and God is neither private nor unaffected by circumstances in the world. Rather, the relationship includes Israel, is disrupted by Israel’s sin, and is ultimately for and on behalf of the people of Israel. While Moses is exalted in these texts—as one who persuades God, speaks to God face to face, is closer to God than any prophet, and mediates God’s presence and forgiveness to the people of Israel—his humility is remembered as a distinguishing feature.\(^50\) Humility marks Moses’ attitude to God but is also a distinguishing quality in his relationship to the people of Israel. Time and again Moses takes up the cause of the people he is leading before God and insists on standing with them in their midst. Ultimately, with humility, Moses hands himself over to God and dies, but not without first continuing to serve the people through teaching and blessing them.

Our analysis of these texts also reveals a trajectory that moves from understanding Moses as the leader of the people to associating him increasingly with qualities normally reserved for God. This trajectory continues and is evident in extracanonical texts.\(^51\) The basis for this trajectory lies not only in the desire for authority and certainty of revelation but also in the theological reflection that occurs as faith is lived day by day. Inevitably, lived faith confronts questions of a more speculative nature. Why is there suffering? Why is there evil? Why is God’s presence hidden? How can we find God’s presence?\(^52\) The intimacy of Moses’ relationship with God is the source of revelation, and revelation is tied not only to God’s salvation of Israel but also to

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\(^50\) Allison, New Moses, 180–81; Deutsch, Lady Wisdom, 39.

\(^51\) Allison, New Moses, 224–25; see also Donald E. Gowan, Bridge between the Testaments: A Reappraisal of Judaism from the Exile to the Birth of Christianity (Allison Park, PA: Pickwick Publications, 1986), 132.

\(^52\) Deutsch, Lady Wisdom, 21; Deutsch, “Wisdom in Matthew,” 31.
broader, more abstract theological concepts concerning good and evil, creation, and eschatology.

Matthew 11:25–30 emphasizes the continuity between Jesus and Moses. Like Moses, Jesus has an intimate and unique relationship with God. Just as Moses is known by God and finds favor with God, Jesus is known by God and finds favor with God. The intimacy of this relationship is linked to revelation, since “no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him” (v. 27). Furthermore, the humility and meekness that are characteristic of Moses as the revealer of God are also characteristic of Jesus as the Son of God. Like the relationship between Moses and God, the relationship between Jesus and God is unique but not private; it is for the sake of the people who will accept him. Even though sin and rejection cause disturbance in the relationship between the people and God, Jesus, like Moses, stands on the side of the people, mediating, at great risk to himself, on behalf of them before God. The continuity between Moses and Jesus in Matthew’s Gospel provides stability for Matthew’s community, appeals to their emotions, points to the one God behind history, and gives birth to and nurtures their symbolic universe. Matthew reaches back to traditions about Moses in order to understand the theological implications of the new experience of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

IV. Wisdom Themes in Matthew 11:25–30

Support for the use of wisdom themes as the predominant lens for understanding Matthew 11:25–30 can be found in the explicit wisdom motifs in Jesus’ invitation (vv. 28–30). That invitation, “Come to me ... and learn from me” (vv. 28–29), echoes invitations to study wisdom found throughout wisdom literature. These invitations are issued by the sages and even by Wisdom herself. Those who accept Wisdom’s invitation wear her yoke; accepting that invitation and wearing her yoke are associated with rest. Deutsch claims that the explicit wisdom motifs in verses 28–30 confirm the more implicit depiction of Jesus as personified Wisdom in verses 25–27. While never using the word Sophia, the portrayal of Jesus in verses 25–27 mirrors the portrayal of personified Wisdom. Deutsch notes: “Wisdom is hidden, transcendent, known only to God. So, too, Jesus is known only to the Father and to those chosen to become privy to that knowledge. Wisdom is God’s child. Wisdom knows the hidden things of God, and

53 Allison, The New Moses, 277.
mediates that knowledge to the wise. So, too, Jesus is God’s son. He alone knows the Father and mediates that knowledge to others.”

We have already noted that in the Gospel of Matthew the metaphor of personified Wisdom that once centered on the axis of Torah is transformed to revolve around the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. The use and transformation of the metaphor of personified Wisdom have their roots in the theological reflection of Israel. The speculative questions that emerge as Israel attempts to live in daily obedience to Torah are addressed in wisdom literature. In a way similar to the reflection that emerges concerning Moses, the theological reflection concerning wisdom follows a trajectory that moves from descriptions of wisdom as expertise or perceptiveness to the development of the metaphor of personified Wisdom to the association of Wisdom with qualities generally reserved for God. As the metaphor of personified Wisdom is used and transformed in the theological reflection of Israel, an implied narrative develops. This implied narrative influences Matthew’s use of this metaphor in his theological reflection on Jesus.

In Second Temple Judaism the implied narrative of personified Wisdom involved the divine and yet hidden nature of Wisdom, its revelation by God, the human person’s active search for Wisdom, and the drama of Wisdom’s acceptance or rejection by human beings. The dominant theme of the implied narrative of personified Wisdom is that “transcendent Wisdom is immanent in creation, in history and in Torah.” As Deutsch puts it, “The many ways in which Wisdom’s myth—her ‘story’—is recounted, tell us that she is preexistent, transcendent. After all, she is God’s Wisdom. And yet she is immanent, active in the work of creation, to be found in the created order, in Torah and in the sages’ instruction. The quest for Wisdom is a paradox—at once labor and rest.”

The metaphor of personified Wisdom functioned as a means of addressing critical questions that emerged in Israel’s confrontation with history. The turbulence of history challenged Israel to reflect on why Israel suffered and why at times God appeared to be absent. Wisdom’s withdrawal therefore became an important element of the implied narrative of Wisdom. In this implied narrative the problem of Wisdom’s hiddenness is not the result of transcendence; Wisdom, in fact, seeks a dwelling with human beings. Wisdom’s withdrawal is the result of sin. Wisdom is forced to withdraw because human beings have

56 Deutsch, Lady Wisdom, 56.
59 Deutsch, Lady Wisdom, 18.
chosen iniquity over Wisdom. Despite this forced withdrawal, Wisdom, while difficult to find, is nevertheless available to those who seek her. Deutsch notes further:

The mythical imagery of these writers does indeed objectify and distance Wisdom from the human person, and it emphasizes the difficulty in finding knowledge or understanding of God. However, the terms of that imagery (daughter, bride, mother, lover, teacher, savior, etc.) equally suggest intimacy, affective attraction, and solidarity. Wisdom is not only free, transcendent, difficult to find, but she is near as nurturer and instructor, engaging the commitment of those who seek her. Free gift, she is also the sure reward of those who engage themselves in quest of her.61

The theological reflection of Israel that we see in the implied narrative of personified Wisdom clearly differs from the theological reflection associated with the figure of Moses. While the story of Moses begins with historical persons and events and moves later to address speculative theological questions, the narrative of personified Wisdom emerges from the lived experience of the corporate personality of Israel as they encounter mystery in the midst of ordinary life and seek to anchor questions of a more speculative nature in creation and history. Despite this major difference, however, there are interesting parallels between the two traditions. Intimacy with God as the source of revelation and life is emphasized in both traditions. Furthermore, while more explicitly stated in Mosaic traditions, the understanding that God is revealed and is related to Israel through Torah is assumed by both strands of theological reflection. In both traditions, obedience to Torah and humility are qualities associated with leadership, teaching, and discipleship. Leaders and teachers nurture their disciples, mediate for them with God, and promise rest to faithful followers.

Exploration of theological reflection using the tensive metaphor of personified Wisdom and culminating in the transformation of that metaphor to describe Jesus in Matthew’s Gospel leads to several important interpretive insights. Jesus is identified as Wisdom who functions in the role of prophet, teacher, preacher, and the doer of mighty deeds. Just as Wisdom is rejected, Jesus is rejected. Despite this rejection, Jesus offers an invitation to all who will come. Like Wisdom, Jesus is the source of revelation and mediates between God and human beings through teaching. Like the sages, Jesus urges his followers to observe Torah. His reinterpretation of Torah highlights the identification of Jesus with Wisdom. As Wisdom is the source of Torah, so Jesus is the source of Torah reinterpreted. Jesus is the source of revelation

61 Ibid., 31.
because of the quality of his relationship with God, and it is this relationship that lies at the heart of his teaching as well. His relationship to God is as a son who is meek and humble; that relationship is mirrored in his relationship with his disciples. He is not like the Pharisees, who lay heavy burdens on the people but refuse to share those burdens; rather, it is like Wisdom and gives his own yoke to them, one that is light and gives rest. Most importantly, to view Jesus as personified Wisdom emphasizes God’s immanence. Jesus is God-with-us and is promised to disciples until the end of time. Deutsch states that it is the quality of immanence that is most emphasized in Matthew’s transformation of the metaphor of personified Wisdom.62

V. Convergence of the New Moses and the Wisdom of God

While important insights emerge when Matthew 11:25–30 is read either in light of Mosaic themes or through themes associated with personified Wisdom, recognizing that a convergence of these themes occurs in Matthew’s text deepens these interpretive insights. This essay will conclude with some important observations that are gained by viewing the text as embodying this convergence.

First, the confluence of themes is not coincidental; it points to an association between wisdom traditions and salvation history that is often underplayed. The two traditions evolved as Israel, trying to live its life in obedience to Torah, encountered sin, suffering, trial, mystery, and an often turbulent history. As Israel encountered new and often painful life experiences, tensive metaphors and traditions were remembered and appealed to in order to interpret and understand these new experiences and to provide stability in the midst of changing history. Theological reflection done in light of changing experiences was not limited to rational thinking but also appealed to the imagination and the emotions. Therefore a convergence of symbols and metaphors is not only possible but likely, as Matthew reflects specifically on the intimacy of the relationship between Jesus and God as the source of revelation.63

Second, it is important to note that both Moses and personified Wisdom are associated with revelation that arises from an intimate relationship with God and is offered to the people of Israel. In both traditions, a desire to link abstract theological concepts with historical persons and events or with

63 While Davies and Allison do not think that Wisdom is an important theme in Matthew’s Gospel, they admit a convergence of themes in Matt 11:25–30 (Matthew, 2:287; see also 2:295).
a personified metaphor is present. This desire is born from recognition that knowledge of God involves all aspects of theological inquiry: creation, theodicy, salvation and eschatology—ideas that transcend history and yet are also rooted in and affected by history.

Recognizing that God’s revelation in Jesus is a mystery both transcending and occurring within human experience, Matthew uses traditional tense metaphors in order to emphasize that while the revelation of God’s salvation in Jesus Christ is new, it is grounded in and continuous with salvation history. At the same time, this mystery transcends former expression. By describing Jesus as both a new Moses and personified Wisdom, Matthew imaginatively combines the symbolic worlds evoked by these two metaphors. The convergence of these symbolic worlds assures that Christological reflection moves beyond the familiar and is open to the mystery of God’s revelation in Christ.

Third, the mystery of God’s revelation in Christ has a soteriological purpose. An intimate relationship with God dominates both the Mosaic tradition and the wisdom tradition, and yet in both, Israel’s sin causes disturbance and tension in the relationship. But all is not lost; even though there are consequences associated with sin and despite the tension created by sin, Wisdom continues to offer guidance to those who will seek her, and Moses continues to stand with the people and faithfully take up their cause before God. While Mosaic symbols and the metaphor of personified Wisdom color Matthew’s theological reflection concerning Jesus, God’s immanence with Jesus for the sake of Jesus’ followers dominates that reflection. Jesus as God-with-us does not disregard the consequences of sin or rejection but enters into history despite sin and rejection, offering life to all who respond to his invitation, at great cost to himself.

Finally, these verses serve as an invitation to discipleship. The convergence of Mosaic and wisdom themes in this invitation deepens our understanding of both the nature of discipleship and the nature of God. The Mosaic imagery in the invitation draws attention to the teaching of Jesus and the way that teaching is embodied by Jesus. Jesus is Torah incarnate; he is to be learned and followed in the way Torah was learned and followed in Israel. The wisdom themes deepen and enrich this Mosaic typology by drawing it into the realm of relationship. The relational imagery of Wisdom awakens awareness to the surpassing abundance and gift of this relationship that can only be entered into as a response to an invitation. The convergence of themes highlights the particularity and exclusive demands of following

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Jesus but situates these demands in the deeper, wider, and broader context of the mystery of communion with God in the person of Jesus Christ.

By situating discipleship in the wider context of communion with God in the person of Jesus Christ, Matthew indicates that the nature of discipleship is revelatory of the nature of God. Jesus describes his relationship to disciples and to God using the relational virtues of humility and meekness. These relational virtues are also prominent in both Mosaic and wisdom traditions. Humility and meekness are characteristic of Moses as the revealer of God, are associated with the sages, are seen in Wisdom’s nurturing guidance of her followers, and are characteristic of Jesus as the Son of God. It follows that gentleness and meekness are also revealed to be a characteristic of God who empties himself to be God with us and for us. It is God’s presence in Jesus that lies at the heart of the rest that is promised to all those who will respond to the invitation “Come to me ... and learn from me.”
Patience with God: The Story of Zacchaeus Continuing in Us. Four Perspectives - I

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FOUR PERSPECTIVES

I

Tomáš Halík invites his readers into the gospel story of Zacchaeus because he finds there an account of “us.” Like the best of Benedictine lectio divina or Ignatian spiritual exercises, Halík wants us to enter fully into the story of a little man “on the fringes” of his society. He wants us to sit with Zacchaeus in his tree, feel simultaneously his marginalization and his attraction to Jesus. He wants us to make that exhilarated climb down with Zacchaeus to respond to Jesus’ calling him by name. Finally and most importantly, he asks us to find in Zacchaeus our contemporaries who dwell in “the zone of questions and doubts” (9). These contemporaries may, like the author, be believers, or they may, like many in his post-Communist Czech Republic, be atheists. Yet, they—or perhaps more accurately—we may share a surprisingly common identity as seekers on the margins of a world in which center stage is given to the battle between an aggressive and dogmatic secularism and an equally aggressive and dogmatic religious fundamentalism. He is right to entitle this invitation Patience with God.

I find Halík’s approach to the contemporary dilemma of religious commitment compelling. It displays none of the pretenses of the modern aspiration to provide a definitive systematic treatment in defense of faith or, for that matter, atheism. The chapters are reminiscent of monastic commentaries on Scripture as described in the LeClercq classic, The Love of Learning, and the Desire for God. Halík interweaves his reflections on Zacchaeus and other familiar biblical narratives with a wide ranging selection from Western humanistic traditions as they extend into the twenty-first century. Each chapter is a discrete reflection, like a sermon, and at the same time, each chapter is part of a single argument or more accurately a single invitation to embrace a God who remains hidden and to embrace those who cannot embrace such a God. It is also a lectio divina of our time informed by Halík’s life as a psychotherapist and a priest ordained in an underground church that now functions out in the open air of the religious free market within a secular Europe. The results of his ruminations are sometimes surprising and frequently thought-provoking.
Halík’s counsel for “patience with God” has nothing to do with passive acceptance or denial of the dark nights of alienation and absence ever lurking in the lives of believers as well as unbelievers. In fact, he revels in the paradoxical proximity of belief and unbelief and asks us to join him in the revelry. A particularly intriguing instance is his juxtaposition of Nietzsche, the herald of God’s death, with Thérèse of Lisieux, the Little Flower of Jesus. Like others before him, Halík shows their connection is more than chronological. His pairing of Thérèse with Nietzsche is especially effective in extricating Thérèse from the saccharine piety of the Little Flower. Yet, he affirms her seemingly childish aspiration to be “love at the heart of the church” (31). Her singular importance as a doctor of the church for our time arises not from the brilliance of her theological writing but from her loving embrace of God’s utter absence as “a mark of solidarity with unbelievers” (28). As she lay dying, Thérèse knew the devastating experience of loss of faith; she knew of what Nietzsche’s madman speaks in proclaiming God’s death. Halík invites us to consider Thérèse’s witness as that of a mature faith, a faith displayed as “patience with God.” Thérèse responds to her darkness not with bitterness or madness but with an expansive love that encompasses even the dark night of unbelievers who became her companions surrounding her deathbed.

Thérèse’s response of love in the face of her uncertain final end echoes earlier discussions of negative eschatology, for example, a vision of the “absolute future” that follows from God’s hiddenness. Halík rightly observes the difficulties facing contemporary Christians in their attempts to speak with authority concerning “the last things.” He also calls into question secular alternatives that declare with unjustified confidence a future defined in absolute terms of global projects or political ideologies, particularly liberal democracy. Halík candidly acknowledges that negative eschatology offers little of the comfort found in an eschatology in which clear answers abound about heaven and hell. In fact, he chooses the word “thorn” to commend to us its effects. Negative eschatology can be a “critical thorn” in so far as it disallows any absolutizing ideology. More provocatively, Halík describes this eschatology as “a thorn of hope,” a wonderfully paradoxical image that evokes the feeling of discomfort that goad of hope creates especially in the face of an uncertain “absolute future.” No wonder he pairs “thorn of hope” with “holy restlessness.” A patient faith may rest in the knowledge that the future belongs to a boundlessly loving and therefore mysterious God revealed in Jesus. A patient hope in a loving God revealed in Jesus, on the other hand, pricks the conscience to act, to seek ways of living the patient faith in the God revealed in Jesus. The instability suggested
in the phrase, “holy restlessness,” becomes the sure grounding for and open horizon of “solidarity with seekers” (21–22).

The seekers whom Halík praises have little to do with aimless wandering or new age self-absorption. His description of his principal protagonist, Zacchaeus, proves instructive. Zacchaeus actively watched for Jesus and quickly responded when Jesus called his name. Halík uses this detail in Zacchaeus’ story not only to commend the watchfulness of the tree climber but also to instruct us about the origin of Zacchaeus’ seeking. Human watchfulness mirrors that of God who is “the foundation and fount of our seeking, our watchfulness, our openness, our self-transcendence” (53). As revealed in Jesus’ words and deeds, God watches for the right opening to bring his “love and openness” to the likes of Zacchaeus, the “other,” who dwells on the fringes of belief (54).

Jesus’ privileging of those on the margin is presented as a challenge not only to the individual Christian but also to the community of believers, to the church. He specifically questions whether the Catholic Church has really fulfilled its Vatican II promise to extend itself in love to all those who live in the modern world. He is not calling for capitulation to modernity with some facile claim about the world being good. He is considering something more difficult—“a profound awareness of God’s hiddenness, of how he ‘reveals’ Himself through the experience of ‘unbelievers’” (58). Thérèse’s acceptance of unbelief exemplifies the radical demands of loving God, a mirror of the radical love found in Christ. Halík extends those demands to the Vatican II promise to engage in the modern world as a commitment to enter into the depths of individuals’ messy lives and into the heart of their cultures that are like his own Czech homeland with its tepid faith and indifferent atheism. In describing this foray into the heart of unbelievers and secular cultures, he invokes yet another biblical story, the example of Moses, who found God in the harsh desert environment, but who approached the harsh reality of a burning bush with great delicacy. He entered barefoot because he recognized despite all appearance that he was walking on “sacred ground” (67). Halík asks us to walk with delicacy onto our own secular landscape which despite all appearances is sacred ground.

Though he often addresses himself to the individual believer, Halík finds the church too important to spare it from his hermeneutic of paradox. Halík invokes the wildly divergent perspectives of Sancho Panza and Don Quixote concerning the truth about Dulcinea del Toboso to instruct us concerning the truth about the church. The church merits both Sancho’s realistic assessments of her abysmal failings and Quixote’s ebullient proclamation of her beauty. Yet, Halík does not stop with this literary metaphor. He turns even more helpfully to a figure from
Scripture, to Mary Magdalene, another woman who continues to endure endless debates about who she really is. Halík identifies his perspective with that of St. Gregory. He draws the conclusion that Mary Magdalene “could be the image of the seeking church, a church triumphing through its patient seeking and passionate longing” (88).

I am reminded here again of Thérèse who mirrors Mary Magdalene in so far as her faith like that of the Magdalene has born the “patient dwelling in the night of mystery” (108). But their patience has as its companion “passion,” a passion deeply informed by their irrepressible love for God, even when God appears to dwell in the depths of the tomb. Here again is that paradoxical proximity between the passionate believer and the passionate atheist, that is, the atheist whose passion appears as a protest against those who keep company with death, for example, “evil, pain, and painful issues” (107). Their protest assumes the existence of something against which such a protest is justified. Halík reminds us that believers have their wrestling matches with God over such death-dealing matters, and some like Jacob come away wounded. These “limping pilgrims” may discover in the atheist’s passionate protest the familiar feel of a wrestling match with the holy. Once again the paradoxical proximity between passionate believer and equally passionate unbeliever appears. Halík invites the believer to transform his wrestling with the unbeliever to an embrace that comes from recognizing a shared passion for a justice hidden in the disorder of contemporary society (108).

The paradoxical proximity between unbelief and belief rests in God’s hiddenness. Halík shows us how even that hiddenness is enmeshed in paradox. “He is unknown not because He is too far away but because he is too close” (114–15). Halík illustrates his claim by pointing to that which is closest to us, our faces. Human beings never see their faces except in a mirror. Human beings never see God’s face except in the mirror of Jesus, and because of Jesus, humans are called to think quite differently about their neighbor. Jesus transforms what we see in gazing at the face of another human being. Nietzsche illustrates the point. As Halík notes, Nietzsche understood one of the consequences of God’s death to be the death of the old human being, a creature. A new human, a superhuman, needed to pass into existence. Paul, Nietzsche’s apparent “rival” (125), also proclaimed that in a singular death, that of Jesus Christ, a new life, a new humanity, came to be. Halík reminds us that at the heart of Christianity is “the paradox of the Easter story” which reveals God’s “boundless love” that encompasses all forms of darkness, even abandonment on a cross, with newness of life (131). Halík invites us to look into the “Easter mirror,” to see ourselves as participants in resurrectio continua. Like God’s continuous
creation, so the Easter triumph made possible through Jesus’ sacrificial love remains an effective presence into our very day (140). The questions that linger are: whether patience is enough faith “to trust in God’s power to do something substantial with the world” (184); will St. Zacchaeus the “patron and protector of the eternal seekers” (186) truly intercede for those who dwell in “the zone of questions and doubts” (9) or will the “eternal Zacchaeus,” who dwells in all of us and is concerned only for personal purity, be blinded by pride and fail to see in others what Jesus recognized in the little man perched in a tree? For the answers, I suppose we must wait in the patience enacted in faith, hope, and love.

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II

In a lecture delivered in 1980, which was later published as “The Church and Atheism,” Karl Rahner declared that while the church is obliged to “struggle courageously and with all legitimate means against atheism,” it is bound to do so in a manner proper to its own nature. That is, it must “struggle” in the same way it struggles with its own theism, namely, as a mystagogy of the experience of God. “The struggle against atheism,” Rahner states, “is foremost and of necessity a struggle against the inadequacy of our own theism.”

In a swift and elegant stroke, Rahner redirects the believer’s instinct to assume a defensive posture into the more searching and purgative work of internal critique. He points towards a path of mystagogy by summoning us away from institutional entrenchment and attachment to well-worn formulas and more deeply into the incomprehensible mystery of God, with all the ambiguity and adventure this entails. The “struggle” for the theist is one of passing through atheism more radically than even the atheist, not in a spirit of competition or dialectical negation but in a spirit of intellectual repentance and charity, with the intent that faith might become increasingly non-possessive and our discourse more hospitable to those for whom God has either become an obstacle or a trifling matter. We must “rearrange our proclamation to some extent,” he suggests, not by relinquishing the task of being witness to revelation but by rendering more compellingly the ongoing process of discovering the hidden God in our midst. With special appeal to the pastor, Rahner calls for experimentation in illuminating faith in

more “existential” (rather than primarily “theoretical”) ways. Although it is not immediately clear from the lecture what Rahner has specifically in mind when suggesting “shifts of emphasis” and a “rearrangement of certain materials” in the pastoral engagement with atheism,

we have more than enough clues when looking at Rahner’s work as a whole, which set about the task of rendering Christian life intelligibly and with intellectual honesty during a “wintry season.”

Supposing we were to look for a more recent example that pursues this pastoral task in an especially probing way, in a manner that exhibits a deep commitment to the heart of Christian faith while engaging atheism sympathetically and with uncommon intimacy, and in a way that wears its considerable theological sophistication lightly enough to speak to the “outsider” of faith—all with a personally disarming voice that instantly draws the reader into conversation with its author: supposing this, we will do no better than Tomáš Halík’s Patience with God: The Story of Zacchaeus Continuing in Us.

A professor of philosophy and sociology at Charles University in Prague, and a Catholic priest secretly ordained in the late 1970s and active in the underground church during Communist Czechoslovakia, Halík is on quite familiar terms with cultural and even politically sanctioned atheism. While the end of the Communist regime allowed long-suppressed religious sensibilities to reawaken and percolate, still today the Czech Republic is home to one of the most agnostic and atheistic populations in the world. So when Halík adopts the figure of Zacchaeus to represent those who remain “on the fringes” and who “keep their distance” from religious faith, he is speaking out of a milieu where Zacchaeuses abound.

“I like Zacchaeuses,” Halík tells us. “I think I have been given the gift of understanding them” (5). Such understanding is not merely studied, for Halík confesses that he too has sensed God’s absence, has at times felt estranged from the church he loves and formally represents, and in fact often finds more in common with those skeptical of religious belief than those of his own Christian faith. Halík’s instinct to inhabit the “gray zone between religious certainty and atheism” is a way of preserving a spirit of seeking, and in this way participating in Jesus’ own ministry to those at the periphery (16). “Blessed are the distant,” or “Blessed are you on the fringes,” is how Halík summarizes Jesus’ mission (12–23). Such is not a tactical contrivance to “convert” Zacchaeus, but a desire to understand and enter into fellowship with him. Salvation comes to the house of Zacchaeus, though we are never

\[2\] Ibid., 149.
told whether he becomes a disciple, or to what extent he converted from his previous way of life. Halík takes the Lucan silence (19:1–10) as an opportunity to play out imaginatively a variety of apocryphal endings to the story, including one in which Saint Zacchaeus becomes “the patron and protector of the eternal seekers” by watching over “their patience in the anteroom of faith” (186). Insisting that the future of Christian faith very much depends upon its ability to “win over” the Zacchaeuses in our midst, Halík is clear that this implies, among other things, that those who have a more definitive sense of who or what is “inside” and “outside” the church will need to rediscover Jesus’ creative confusion of boundaries (4). What we need is “a new type of ‘faith/nonfaith’ dialogue,” a new agenda for theology, a “different hermeneutic circle:” “it is necessary to read scripture and live the faith also from the standpoint of our profound solidarity with people who are religiously seeking, and, if need be, with those who experience God’s hiddenness and transcendence ‘from the other side’” (19).

As with Rahner, Halík frames the “struggle” with atheism in mystagogical terms: as a summons to enter more deeply into the “night of faith;” as a developing capacity for patiently enduring and even welcoming the ambiguities of human experience, including the perceived absence of God; as a process of interiorizing atheistic criticism so that religious illusions and unhealthy fixations preventing maturity might be purged; and as a rediscovery of the living, yet hidden, God with the “beginner’s mind” of the contemplative who has learned, only through a long “letting go,” that truth is continuously born out of gratuity. It is not insignificant that Halík wrote the bulk of the book “in the deep silence and total isolation of a forest hermitage near a monastery in the Rhineland” (xv). Nor is it insignificant that many of his chief interlocutors are those of a contemplative bent. Thus we find inventive encounters between Saint Thérèse of Lisieux and Frederick Nietzsche, Simone Weil and Franz Kafka, Thomas Merton and Václav Havel, among others. Having charted a mystagogical rather than a polemical course, Halík passes through the predictable antinomies that keep the recent and very public spectacle between anti-theists and theists locked in an intellectual spasm. No chest-thumping apologetics, no argumentative pyrotechnics, no rhetorical bluster to stoke further the recent “God wars.” With no pretensions of having done so, Halík has effectively staged a family intervention among brotherly rivals by recasting the issues against an infinite horizon—one that requires a more discerning and reconciling patience.

“God is mystery—that should be the first and last sentence of any theology. . . . Faith and atheism are two views of that reality—the hiddenness of God, His transcendence, and His impenetrable mystery;
they are two possible interpretations of the same reality, seen from two opposite sides” (46). To say that faith and atheism are two ways of interpreting God’s transcendence is not a matter of equivocation. Indeed, it is important to appreciate that for Halík the vocation of inhabiting the “gray zone” does not entail for him a revisionist or deconstructionist reading of classical affirmations of divine transcendence. He does not advocate for, nor does he presume, a process metaphysics, or a thesis of God’s “weakness,” or the recently repristinated “death of God” theology that regards transcendence as metaphysical fantasy and a source of political oppression. Granted that the more pastoral aim of the book tends to keep Halík from entertaining more technical and jargon-intensive considerations—we can actually be quite thankful for such admirable discipline—it is clear to those who are familiar with such considerations, and who think them crucial for the work of constructive theology, that Halík draws deeply from classical affirmations of divine transcendence precisely in view of discerning and valuing “the existential ‘truth of atheism’” and so “part of the treasure-house of faith” (35).

Atheism and faith have as their conditioning possibility the “radical difference” between God’s existence and ours (47). To be sure, there are a host of co-mediating factors of a historical, cultural, and political sort that need to be appreciated and negotiated; and certainly one must make distinctions between kinds of atheism (protest, indifferent, seeking, to name but a few) to understand better how those factors are at play and concretely lived out. But at the most fundamental level—that is, at an ontological level—atheism and faith are both possible, and in some sense fraternal twins, precisely because divine reality is wholly other. The paradox to be discerned here is that God’s “distance” is God’s “nearness;” God’s infinite “transcendence” precisely means that God is not limited or hemmed in by creation. Indeed, God is more “immanent” to creation than creation is to itself. God is the “unknown God” of the Areopagus not because God is a remote being “out there” for whom we strain and ultimately fail to reach; God is unknown because God is incomprehensibly near. As Halík puts it: God “is not ‘close’ to us, he is the closeness itself. We can still see close objects, but we can’t see closeness itself. We see objects in light—we do not see the light itself. If we don’t even see our own face, but only see their reverse reflection in a mirror . . . how could we possibly see the face of God?” (121).

To the extent God is regarded as a quasi-object, whether by the atheist as something to reject or by the theist as something to grasp, one has fashioned an idol—and hence lost patience. Herein lies the deepest criticism of atheism, namely, that its truth is incomplete. “I am not saying to atheists that they are wrong, but that they lack patience” (xiv).
This means that atheism too harbors religious idols in need of purging. It remains an “unfinished work” that needs seasoning and deepening (37). This is why the witness of mature faith can never finally be about defensive polemics. Faith must go “unarmed” into that far country, must enter that “dark night” with a poverty of spirit so that nothing of the human condition, not even the experience of the absence of God, remains unfamiliar and unloved. “If love overtakes faith on the path to the final goal and even survives ‘the death of faith,’ then it is capable of embracing nonbelievers too, and their unbelief.” Here, the pastoral and mystagogical movements converge: “faith can overcome unbelief only by embracing it” (35).

In a sense, then, the “struggle” with atheism must always end in defeat. But this is because there is nothing to defend. God is no one’s property. The great paradox therefore is this: only by entering willingly and unreservedly into defeat is victory at all possible. It is a strange victory with a christological shape, as Halík frequently points out. The “dialects of God’s concealment and disclosure” are most fully expressed in Jesus: in his parables, in his ministry to those on the fringes, in his experience of abandonment on the cross, and in the startling Easter appearances in which the risen Christ is frequently misidentified.

Though Patience with God is not intended as a work of systematic theology, its challenge to those so engaged is important, and in at least two ways. First, there is Halík’s concern that theological language too easily becomes sedimented with expressions and definitions that no longer seem nourished by common experience and scripture. Of course, Halík’s gift for language is everywhere evident in the book, as is his unique ability for establishing a relationship of trust with his reader. But it needs noticing just how conversant he is with scripture, the gospels especially. One readily hears the voice of a seasoned homilist, as well as one well acquainted with the art of spiritual direction. There is an essential role for doctrine, to be sure, and the broader work of theology involves a great variety of tasks, some quite technical; but if the activity of theology in its more systematic register is to assist in engaging (and being engaged by) a world where Zacchaeuses abound—indeed, within all of us—it will do well to take seriously Halík’s plea that it remain on intimate terms with the “primary theology” of the gospels and its ever surprising capacity to provoke and illuminate human experience. Here especially, I think, is how Halík would respond to Rahner’s call for experimentation in theology’s discursive practices.

Secondly, Halík’s emphasis on mystagogy in the engagement with atheism should remind us that the purpose of doctrine is not its ability to render the reality of God with Cartesian clarity, but to point more effectively (i.e., “iconically”) to the God who dwells in “inaccessible
light.” Doctrine ultimately serves a mystagogical end, and in so doing may serve an essential function in the maturation of faith. Michael J. Buckley puts the matter this way in an essay on the dialogue between atheism and the mystical theology of Saint John of the Cross: “The function of dogmatic stability is not to explain the mystery of God, but to lead into it and to safeguard its incomprehensibility. Dogma is to secure the inviolability of the mystery of the incomprehensible God.” It is a statement worthy of Rahner, and one presumably consistent with Halík’s own view. Perhaps if doctrines were thought of less as discrete propositions and more as scripts for performance—as markers for the itinerarium mentis in deum—then they too would be understood as essential for cultivating patience with God.

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III

Writing with an engaging, pastoral tone, Tomáš Halík refers to “a new liberation theology’ of inner liberation” (20) that would address the secularism and atheism of the modern Western world, adopting a standpoint of “solidarity with people who are religiously seeking. . . .” (18–20, emphasis in the original). Reference to the “new” brings to mind the “old” theology of liberation, immediately begging the question as to the necessity of a newer model. Could the older version serve to invite the Zacchaeuses of the West into relationships of solidarity? After all, some of its proponents also attend to the significance of spiritual freedom. As Gustavo Gutiérrez has often emphasized (see, for example, We Drink from Our Own Wells), true liberation begins interiorly as God frees one from sin through grace.

Perhaps the conceptual aspect of the older liberation theology most useful to Halík’s project would be the preferential option for the poor. As Halík rightly notes, its epistemological departure point is located on the margins of society, among the poorest and most vulnerable. This standpoint affords the angle of vision necessary to notice Zacchaeus through the foliage. But, to draw the connection more directly between the option for the poor and Halík’s effort to extend hospitality to today’s Zacchaeuses would require development of a point of theological anthropology that Halík did not explore: for a Western industrial and post-industrial context defined primarily by secular (but idolatrous)

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materialism, part of spiritual healing will involve the potential for conversion of life made possible through solidarity with and among those on the margins. By standing in relationship with those treated as expendable by the dominant materialist culture, one has the opportunity to meet Jesus in the images of God violated, tortured, and discarded in our midst. In touching the wounds of those rejected by the centers of secular (and sometimes ecclesiastical) power, one has the opportunity to exclaim with Thomas, “My Lord and my God!” (cf. 174).

As Zacchaeus’ narrative reveals, encounters of solidarity with the outcast have the potential to displace the idols of worldly wealth, power, and status competing for the minds and hearts of those struggling with belief (cf. 113–16). Challenging his people to confront the violent, secular materialism of the Salvadoran national security regime, directed by nominal Christians and funded by many other nominal Christians in the U.S. government, Archbishop Oscar Romero adapted a well-known phrase from Irenaeus, proclaiming “Gloria Dei, vivens pauper”—the glory of God is the poor person fully alive. Material creation, including each abandoned human being, is sacramental, calling to mind a Creator madly in love with God’s own creation. Do the Zacchaeuses of the West find Christians living in solidarity with the marginalized, reveling in God’s glory in their midst, or do they see Christians putting profit ahead of all else, including human life and the integrity of God’s creation?

The epistemological significance of opting for the poor shows up in action, practices that reflect a value system markedly different from that of secular materialism. Halik perceptively identifies the tension of values at stake as societies strive toward the good, offering, “Maybe it’s not too late to show by our example that the great values of modern times and the great values of religious faith can complement each other and mutually strengthen each other . . .” (154). Here he is in conversation with Madeleine Albright’s vision, raising a concern: to paraphrase an Alasdair MacIntyre book title, “which values and whose relationality?”

To sharpen his important treatment of values, it would be helpful to locate the discussion within particular faith traditions and local communities. In my specific context of a Catholic Worker community, for example, the invocation of Albright’s approach will immediately elicit a spirit of mourning as my companions recall her chilling response to a question raised about the escalating death toll among the most vulnerable Iraqis, especially children, as a result of U.S.-backed sanctions: She deemed it a price worth paying. Her judgment reflected the value system of realpolitik that has shaped the ascent (and now the descent) of American empire.
From that vantage point, perceived political expediency exercised in the name of security on behalf of a largely Judeo-Christian nation tends to hold greater value than the lives of the poorest and most vulnerable, in spite of Halík’s hope that we will make ourselves neighbors to one another (143, 163). For a current example of this phenomenon, U.S.-North Americans need look no further than the systematic abuse of economic refugees on the national border shared with Mexico, reaching perhaps its most acute manifestation in the feminicide in Ciudad Juárez spanning more than a decade. Little wonder, then, that the Zacchaeuses of our time waver in that liminal space on the threshold of faith communities. As the Catholic bishops asked themselves and the rest of the church at the 1971 Synod when discerning the arc of justice in the world, “What is the witness we give?”

Reflecting upon her own Zacchaeusian journey, Dorothy Day, founder of the Catholic Worker movement, noticed that what first attracted her, as a secular leftist activist, to the Catholic Church was the fact that the poor laborers of New York made it their ecclesial home, streaming in droves through the church doors for Mass. She longed to experience their faith, and the witness they gave, unknowingly, proved pivotal in her own deepening love relationship with God. Her narrative ties in with a central aspect of Halík’s message, for example, that “faith can overcome unbelief only by embracing it” (35, emphasis in original); ultimately, Dorothy let herself be embraced by God, in all God’s mystery, wooed by God’s glory in the poor person fully alive, and she in turn continues to witness to others through her legacy of the radical practice of works of mercy, guided by the values reflected in Mt. 25:31–46 (cf. 200).

Could this sort of witness provide the closeness that the Zacchaeuses of our time are seeking? Enactment of the preferential option for the poor has the power to lure our Zacchaeuses down from their trees because it demonstrates that God’s love includes each and every part of creation, even the most marginalized, and even the most doubtful. On this point, the “old” liberation theology would reinforce Halík’s insightful emphasis on God’s mercy (131, 183, 198, 200, 206). To his reflection on Mt. 25:31–46 it would add that human beings experience God’s mercy through one another in solidarity, insofar as humans cooperate, even if unknowingly, with the merciful love God extends to each of us, and in a special way, to those judged disposable from the standpoint of dominant power (200).

Unfortunately, in the value systems that guide world affairs, mercy often seems to be in short supply. As Halík notes, “It is not foliage that obscures the view of today’s Zacchaeuses but a rampart of weapons, wrongs, and hate” (144). He offers a prophetic challenge for our times
by observing of Jesus’ witness, “The fundamental characteristic that distinguishes ‘His Kingdom’ (i.e., His style of ‘government’) from the powers of this world is a consistent rejection of violence” (145). But, Halík clearly wants to distance himself from pacifism, giving a brief just-war argument for a society to exercise the option to defend itself by armed force, while recognizing that the threats posed by terrorism do not lend themselves to neat application of just-war thinking (154).

Will today’s Zacchaeuses perceive the reluctance of Christians to hold fast to Jesus’ witness of rejecting violence? If Christians have a difficult time making a more robust, imaginative, and prophetic case for the power of nonviolence, it is not surprising that those struggling with belief might choose to remain hidden behind the rampart. Halík acknowledges “that we have failed in something that is one of the basic tasks of Christians—and which is also, after all, related to the story of Zacchaeus—being experts in the field of forgiveness and reconciliation” (175, emphasis in the original). The preferential option for the poor affords a promising perspective for discerning the need for God’s reconciling love and forgiveness, particularly in situations of armed conflict in which those on the margins are most at risk, because of both the danger of direct harm and the indirect consequences of life-sustaining resources being diverted or destroyed in the name of “military necessity.”

Halík’s lively meditation provides a welcome opportunity for communities of faith to delve deeper into their dearest beliefs and values in preparation for extending hospitality to the Zacchaeuses among us. In reaching out to those wrestling with issues of faith, Christians may experience a graced call to renew our baptismal commitment to strive to incarnate what we profess.

*University of Notre Dame* MARGARET PFEIL

**IV**

Tomáš Halík comes with impeccable credentials as a Christian dialogue partner with atheists. Who better to engage in such a conversation than Halík who for forty years lived under Communism in Czechoslovakia where he was regarded as an “enemy of the regime”? Secretly ordained a Roman Catholic priest in Erfurt, Germany, in the 1970s, Halík returned to his homeland where he worked in the underground Church while assuming various ‘approved’ above ground occupations until the Velvet Revolution of 1989 when the regime collapsed and freedom was claimed under the charismatic leadership of Václav Havel.
Now, in 2011, should you visit Prague, the Czech Republic’s quintessential beautiful capital, and if you ask any native where you might find Tomáš Halík, you may be directed to Charles University where, with credentials in sociology, psychology, and theology, he is a professor on the faculty of philosophy. Or you may be pointed in the direction of the University Church of St. Saviour in the center of the city where he is Rector as well as presider and homilist at Sunday evening Eucharistic Liturgy which, by the way, is consistently filled beyond capacity. (I know; I’ve been there.) You may also learn that Halík was President Havel’s choice to be his successor (after seriously considering his options, he chose to remain active in priestly ministry), that his books are bestsellers in the Czech Republic and elsewhere, and that he enjoys unusual credibility as a Catholic priest in what even Halík acknowledges is “one of the most atheistic nations on earth” (62). He is no stranger to paradox.

*Patience with God* is Halík’s first book published in English where his facility with paradox is evident *in excelsis*. Taking a cue from Zacchaeus, a “curious seeker” who climbs a sycamore tree to observe Jesus at a distance, Halík willingly accepts a challenge to speak to those on the fringe, the many inquisitive, shy, contemporary Zacchaeuses who keep their spiritual longings under wraps. He follows the formula in the Gospel of Luke that netted at least initial results: Jesus called Zacchaeus by name, acknowledged his reluctance to get involved, accepted his dignity as uncommitted, and ruffled a few feathers among the religious elite by inviting himself to dine at Zacchaeus’ home. The occasion prompted largesse on Zacchaeus’ part—possibly a start to something more than mere curiosity.

Halík knows intuitively how to do the preparatory work of calling by name, of attending to another with respect and with honest dialogue, but he also knows instinctively when to move out of the way for grace to beckon a free response from a particular Zacchaeus in a particular time. This is Halík’s métier. He is able to put himself in the shoes of those on the margins. “I think I have been given the gift of understanding them,” (5) he writes. He knows their insecurities, their doubts, their profound experience of the silence and/or absence of God, their mistrust of and accumulated grievances with the Church, their recollections of relentless moralizing in sermons, their anti-clericalism, but most of all, he knows that God will respond to sincere seekers . . . in God’s good time. Sometimes the issue is not patience with God, but the patience of God that needs to be imitated by those willing to walk “barefoot”—Halík’s perfectly chosen image of the companion who comes unarmed, defenseless, and without pre-packaged answers to serve, not manipulate, the freedom of the other.
In the most riveting episode of all, and the one that intrigues me the most, Halík meets up with a very different situation in Chapter 6, titled “A Letter,” where he skims the lengthy correspondence from someone who not only categorically denies the existence of God but who also spews forth vitriol as intensely as lava gushes from an active volcano. The letter ends with the writer cursing God, and with Halík shaken. When he regains his composure, Halík regroups, reads the letter more closely, and identifies extenuating circumstances for the author’s anger: the death of a granddaughter after a brave battle with cancer. But the shock of the invective lingers. And the memory of the letter stings again when Halík visits Internet chat rooms that perpetuate “the harrowing experience” of a “shallow . . . haughty . . . self-assured atheism” characterized by “dreadful hatred and malevolence” (41, 92, 104). On these occasions, Halík travels in a different orbit, light years from the passionate seeking of Zacchaeus and eons away from the high level, sophisticated atheism of Nietzsche whose thoughts are sprinkled throughout this book. It is with Nietzsche in mind that Halík can write: “Atheism can be interesting and stimulating in its critical function . . . It can be useful as an opponent, paradoxically living from faith and reliant on it, as an inverted theology” (92). Not so in Internet chat rooms when passionate protest and passionate hate are the order, or more accurately “disorder,” of the day. Not so when ground rules of engagement are jettisoned, and when undisciplined rant becomes the proposed but unacceptable lingua franca.

What Halík describes in vivid detail from these angry diatribes seems akin to what we experience with the “New Atheism” that has descended on the United States with a vengeance (and with the assistance of TV talk shows). Because he has considerable mileage to his credit in negotiating state Communism, Nietzsche, Sartre, unsolicited letters from unbelievers, miscellaneous blogs, doubts of parishioners, and questions from students, it seems reasonable to turn to Halík for his response to the new atheists.

Truth be told, the lay of the land for dialogue does not seem particularly auspicious. The new atheists—Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens and Sam Harris (primus inter pares)—argue unequivocally that religion is the major source of the world’s problems. Dawkins holds that “Religion is a mental virus,” while Hitchens argues that “Religion

poisons everything”⁵ committed as it is to “teaching people to be extremely self-centered and conceited.”⁶ In his book *The Missionary Position*, Christopher Hitchens singles out Mother Teresa as one of the most self-centered of us all, and a money monger and fraud to boot.⁷ As outrageous as the claims regarding Mother Teresa would seem to reasonable beings, Dawkins agrees with Hitchens’ assessment and refers to her as “sanctimoniously hypocritical.”⁸ Further, both Dawkins and Hitchens argue that raising children in a religious tradition—any religious tradition—is a form of child abuse since religion contorts the mind into fanciful, imagined realities that do not exist now or ever in this world or anywhere else.⁹ What does exist is what is scientifically verifiable, but be forewarned that “all attempts to reconcile faith with science and reason are consigned to failure and ridicule.”¹⁰ The new atheists are also in agreement that believers are less moral than unbelievers. Among their convictions: that Christianity is responsible for the drug trade,¹¹ and that Francis Xavier brought the Inquisition to Asia.¹² And they share a similar point of view on violence as embedded in religion—all religion. Harris maintains that “[f]aith is the mother of hatred,” and “our religious differences—and hence our religious beliefs—are antithetical for survival.”¹³

Data to support most of these outrageous claims are either nonexistent or, in general, dependent on sources most scholars would regard as flimsy and unreliable. In fact, the undisciplined method and argumentation of the new atheists are baffling since several hold, or have held, respectable positions in their own fields. Those credentials notwithstanding, Michael Buckley, one of the most respected authorities on atheism, confirms: “Closely allied to the new atheists’ weakness in questioning is a cognate failure in arguments and method. The spate of books carrying water for the new atheism begins not with a question to be explored, but with the conclusions to be sustained.”¹⁴

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⁶Ibid., 74.
⁹Ibid., 300, 368, 381 and Hitchens, *God Is Not Great*, 56, 220.
¹⁰Hitchens, 64, 65.
¹²Hitchens, *God is Not Great*, 218.
¹³Harris, 30, 14.
¹⁴Michael Buckley, “The Madman and the Crowd: For the New Atheists, God is not Worth a Decent Argument,” *America Magazine*, May 5, 2008, 28. See also Michael
There are questions, however, that beg to be explored, if not by the new atheists, then by others. Michael Buckley, John Haught,\textsuperscript{15} and Michael Novak\textsuperscript{16} (along with Peter Feldmeier in his forthcoming book) have offered invaluable critique of the new atheists, but a question remains whether there is a unique approach available from someone who writes so eloquently on “patience with God”? Does that approach offer another way to respond to the many readers entranced by the disdain and mockery of religion reflected by new atheism authors as their books catapult to bestseller lists?

As I forward these questions to Professor Halík, I am aware that he has provided an important clue to their resolution through his incisive commentary on the life (and death) of Thérèse of Lisieux. Clearly, Halík is enamored with Thérèse, and he honors her influence and his affection for her in a superb chapter with the title “Far From All Suns,” words that Nietzsche’s madman used to sum up the death of God, and, as it happens, words very appropriate to the experience of Thérèse. It was she who, in the last year of her life, touched rock bottom both physically and spiritually, and few understand the heroism of someone trapped in this condition better than Halík. Thérèse was plunged into a black hole along with a complete loss of an intimate faith and an excruciating experience of total abandonment by God. Oddly enough for a pious nun of the late nineteenth century, she accepted this abyss in solidarity with unbelievers whom she did not demonize as miscreants or deviants. Rather, she embraced them as her brothers and sisters without an iota of sentimentality. Cosmologists tell us that no light whatsoever escapes black holes, and so it was with Thérèse as she and her “family” of atheists indwelled a desolation typified by Holy Saturday when all seemed lost but for one speck of her love, more powerful than death, that would pierce through the darkness and survive. (This exception to black holes is apparently untraceable by scientists but real nonetheless.)

Halík is fully conscious that some may not agree with Thérèse’s interpretation of atheism. He writes: “It would then not be surprising if atheists were to reject Thérèse’s interpretation of the hidden face of their atheism as an ‘unsolicited favor,’ as a romantic projection of her own image, which does not respect them, their self-understanding,

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their distinctiveness, and their right to be themselves, but rather attempts to manipulate them (maybe even by some kind of emotional blackmail) into coming back to where they do not want to go” (34).

On the other hand, perhaps the response to atheism, old and “new,” is a spiritual one. If so, we turn to Professor Halík to trace what the spiritual trajectory might look like as we move ahead in the twenty-first century. Is Thérèse to be our sole intercessor? Is Thérèse the role model for a select group of believers willing and able to imitate her fortitude and patience and love? Or is hers a call to all believers, not merely a chosen few?

That would be a daunting challenge indeed.

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DORIS K. DONNELLY

AUTHOR’S RESPONSE

Among other things, Sandra Yocum draws attention to two features of my book that I myself regard as my modest contribution to contemporary theological discussion, namely the idea of “negative eschatology” and resurrectio continua. Both are related to eschatology and eschatological hope. Pope Benedict is undoubtedly right to assert in his encyclical Spe Salvi that the chronic crisis of Christianity is above all a crisis of Christian hope. When people nowadays say they do not believe in something it sometimes simply means that they are unable to conceive it. What makes faith a heavy cross is that faith can scarcely do without images and visions, but the religious imagination is precarious: all the images and visions are related to what is inconceivable (“what no eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived,” as St. Paul maintains) and worse still, our religious images are often a temptation to indulge in idolatry, the worst sin against faith.

“Negative eschatology” seeks to rescue eschatology from naive notions about heaven and hell. What I mean by negative eschatology (by analogy to “negative theology”) is a conviction that all we can say about the “absolute future” prepared by God for people beyond the horizon of this life is what it is not. This also implies a sober recognition that we are still on our journey, that we are a communio viatorum and we must not regard any status quo in society or the church, or the state of our theological knowledge, as final and perfect. In the annual lecture I gave at Harvard University in 2009, I indicated the significance of “negative eschatology” for interreligious dialogue and tolerance. There is a need for “eschatological differences” between the “ecclesia triumphans” (the church of the saints in heaven) and the “ecclesia militans” on earth. When the church forgets that it is on its journey and not
at its destination, it gives rise to triumphalism and militant religion. The “ecclesia militans” (the struggling church) should struggle above all with the temptation of triumphalism, and not with those who “believe differently.”

The idea of resurrectio continua endeavors to show that the mystery of Christ’s resurrection, the central mystery of Christian faith, cannot be reduced to the mystery of what happened to Jesus’ corpse. In common with the concept of creatio continua it emphasizes that the work of creation continues and concerns us too (Augustine says that to pray means to realize that God is creating the world now), and also that Jesus’ resurrection is not simply a past event, but “flows through the history of salvation like a subterranean river,” cascading into historical time every time a human being “awakes” from the darkness of sin into the light of a life in truth and love. The moment of conversion (metanoia) is participation in the event of resurrection.

Sandra Yocum highlights my reflections on Thérèse of Lisieux, who experienced her crisis of faith as an act of solidarity with non-believers. In my book Dotkni se ran (Touch the Wounds—so far published only in Czech, Slovenian, and Polish) I deal with “wounded faith.” It is no accident that the only explicit proclamation of Jesus’ divinity “my Lord and my God” is to be found in the Gospels in the scene in which the Apostle Thomas touches Jesus’ wounds. The Easter story is framed by two different views of Jesus’ wounds: Pilate’s cry of “ecce homo” (behold the man) and Thomas’ insight “behold God.” Believing in the resurrected Christ means seeing God through Jesus’ wounds. The wounds of our world are Jesus’ wounds. Those who ignore the wounds in our world have no right to exclaim: “my Lord and my God!”

The wounds of today’s world do not comprise simply poverty, wars, terrorism, and violence of all kinds; they also include the crisis of faith—often resulting from the wounding of faith by contact with the pains and injustices in our world. Faith undergoes again and again the Easter drama—death and resurrection. But the resurrected Jesus also bears his wounds, and moreover he identifies himself to his disciples precisely by means of his wounds. His wounds are his ID in today’s world. “Through his wounds are we healed”—only wounded faith can heal the suffering of the world. I mention in that book a legend about St. Martin, in which Satan appears to Martin in the form of Christ. The saint does not let himself be bamboozled, however, and asks: where are your wounds?

I too cannot believe in a God, Christ, faith, and church that have no wounds. There are plenty of attractive goods on today’s market of religions: smiling idols and tawdry recipes for quick and easy
enlightenment, spiritual peace, success, spiritual fitness, and well-being. I fear that Jesus would expel the purveyors of these products as vigorously as he once expelled the money-changers from the Temple in Jerusalem: Stop turning my Father’s house into a market! The Christ who shows us His wounds gives us the courage not to be ashamed of our wounds either, or of the church’s wounds, or of the wounds of our faith.

Brian D. Robinette put his finger on the manner in which I confront atheism. It is not polemic, but mystagogy, not apologetics but rather an attempt to interiorize atheistic criticism, in order to rid faith of idolatry and by passing through the purgative fire of criticism achieve greater maturity and depth. I do indeed believe that “faith can overcome unbelief only by embracing it.” I seek to demonstrate that faith and atheism are two ways of interpreting God’s transcendence, that faith and atheism are two views of the same reality—the hiddenness of God, His transcendence, and His impenetrable mystery—seen from two opposite sides. I strive to find the existential ‘truth of atheism’ and make it part of the treasure-house of faith. I do not tell atheists that they are wrong, but that they lack patience and hence their truth remains incomplete. Conventional atheism and “facile belief” (superficial religious enthusiasm or naive fundamentalism) are both too simplistic in their treatment of the “problem of God”—precisely because for them God is a “problem” to be solved, a question to which one can give a quick “yes” or “no” reply. But God is not a “problem to be solved” but a radical mystery that demands a more profound answer than the mere “yes” or “no” of rational judgment. The “yes” of mature faith is the courage to enter with confidence the cloud of mystery, and also bear the burden of unanswered questions and doubts. “Love endures all things,” writes St. Paul (1 Cor. 13)—and mature belief, tested in many “dark nights,” is similarly powerful. It must be patient until the moment when we “see God face to face.”

In the present we can see God in the face of Christ—and see Christ’s face in the faces of our neighbors. No one comes to the Father except through the Son and we encounter the Son—or pass Him by—in “mere children” (Mt 11:25), in which He is present incognito. These little children include people on the periphery of the church, people on the fringes, seekers and doubters in “the gray zone between religious certainty and atheism.” It is to the latter-day Zacchaeuses above all that my books are addressed. I am convinced that our theology should be enriched with the hermeneutics of their religious experience, which are often painful experiences with a hidden God.

In my book Stromu zbývá naděje (The Tree Still Has Hope, which has been translated into several languages, but not yet into English),
I ask whether our theology should not be closer to Job, who perseveres with his painful questions and argues with God, until he falls silent in the face of God’s inscrutability, rather than arguing with his friends, who have so many pious and sophisticated answers and all too eagerly assume the role of God’s skilled advocates and interpreters of His actions and intentions. The Bible contains much evidence to indicate that God loves those who wrestle with Him. Only the lukewarm does He “spit out” (Rev 3:16). Do not the facile responses of many of the pious in the face of life’s painful paradoxes simply mask that lukewarmness?

I value the fact that Brian D. Robinette paid attention to the language and literary style of my book. I deliberately chose the theological essay as my style because it allows me to make more personal contact with readers than the strictly specialist monograph, although it does demand more energetic reflection from my readers than the usual “spiritual literature” for evening meditation. At one time the masters of the theological essay were Guardini, C.S. Lewis, or Chesterton, and sometimes the genre was adopted by such theologians as Karl Rahner or Hans Urs von Balthasar. I have the feeling that this style of writing is very necessary for our epoch and there is not enough of it. Dr. Robinette’s review—as well as the response to my book both in the “atheist” Czech Republic and “Catholic Poland,” as well as in Europe, the USA, Australia, and Southern Africa, where the author was invited to lecture on the theme of his books, indicate to me that there is a need for this kind of dialogue between Christian faith and the culture of our times. I feel committed to continue along this path.

In her review Margaret Pfeil focused on my proposal for the creation of “a new liberation theology.” When, during the Communist regime, we first came to hear about liberation theology, which basically reflected the experience of Christians in Latin America, I wondered whether the experience of the Christians’ struggle against totalitarian Communism for human rights and religious freedom might not give rise to an alternative “liberation theology,” and whether there should not be a “post-Gulag theology” in addition to “post-Holocaust theology.” Thanks to the classics of Latin American liberation theology we have “new hermeneutics.” Those authors highlighted that fact that Jesus addressed his message chiefly to the poor and to people on the fringes of society—and they infer therefrom that the Gospel can only be properly grasped by those who are poor or are in solidarity with the poor. The Gospel is not soothing reading for the sated, the rich, and the self-assured. Solidarity with the poor, the oppressed, the exploited, and with the victims of violence and unjust political and economic systems must remain within the heart and conscience of the church as
a permanent and crucial task. I was never in any doubt about it; the “new liberation theology” is not intended to displace or challenge the “old” one.

I simply add that people on the fringes are not only those people who are poor in a social or material sense, but also those who lack “religious certainties.” They are not only people on the fringes of society but also people on the fringes of the church. Jesus did not want to transform the poor into the rich or “seekers” into “religious professionals.” Poverty means openness. The poor perceive God and his gifts differently from the rich and sated. Likewise not only those who seek God and ask after God, but also those who struggle with God, perceive God differently from those who regard themselves as “beati possidentes,” the blissful possessors of the truth about God. I am convinced that if theology is to respond in our days to the “signs of the times,” it must also reflect the experiences of those who are more aware of the darkness of the Good Friday moment when Jesus cried out “My God, why have You forsaken me” than the “brilliant light of Mount Tabor,” and more aware of the silence of Easter Saturday than the bells of Easter Day. It was very aptly put by one of the classic practioners of political theology, J. B. Metz: If the cry of the crucified is not heard in our preaching about the resurrection then it is more a “mythology of victory” than Christian theology.

I must admit that Professor Donnelly’s question about “new atheism” disconcerts me. When I talk to people who declare themselves to be non-believers, I ask them what the god they don’t believe in looks like. When they proceed to describe their notion of the god they reject I am often obliged to say: “Thank God you don’t believe in such a god, I don’t believe in such a god either.”

When I read Dawkins I get the feeling that the god that he convolutedly refutes is not the God of my faith, the God of the Bible and Christian tradition, but rather a caricature of God. I would be even more radical than Dawkins: I would not say that the god of the creationists and fundamentalists “probably doesn’t exist;” I would say it almost certainly does not exist anywhere but in the imaginings of Christian fundamentalists and atheist fundamentalists like Dawkins. When I read what Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens write about Christianity, I do not recognize in it the Christianity with which I have personal experience. If one looks at the twentieth-century history of Christianity in all its various forms in different historical and cultural conditions, few will deny that there were and still are disreputable forms of Christianity (and let us recall Pope John Paul II’s declaration of “mea culpa” at the beginning of the new millennium). But what surprises me is that there are authors who pass off these degenerate forms as the true and only form of Christianity and ignore or trivialize what does not fit
their simplified image. In the case of people who often invoke science in their support, I consider this approach a grave violation of scientific seriousness and ethics. I am surprised by the dogmatic persistence with which Dawkins attributes to Christians the primitive religious notions that he himself has previously selected as the most simple target for his criticism. If religion, faith, and the church truly were “nothing but” what the “new atheists” make them out to be, then I myself would probably have to oppose them too.

I do not know what experience the “new atheists” base their assertions on. All I can add is that my experience with faith and the church is profoundly different. Dawkins urges his readers to have the courage to become atheists and promises that this conversion will bring them much freedom and happiness. I spent most of my life in a country where “scientific atheism” was the enforced ideology of the state and every heresy against that atheism was severely punished by the Communist inquisition. The world of that atheism was extremely dull, shallow, and empty. There was no room in it for freedom, not only of religion, but also of science and art. All expressions of mind or spirit were subject to ideological censorship. In the totalitarian atheistic regimes the persecuted church was an island of freedom, and also, among other things, a sanctuary for free and non-conformist art. I know scientists whose religious commitment to the truth gave them the courage to pursue their ideas and research beyond what was permitted by the ideology based on nineteenth-century “scientific materialism” (which rejected, for instance, the laws of genetics discovered by the Moravian priest Gregor Mendel).

The assertion of the “new atheists” that faith and science are incompatible is nothing new for me. I regard “new atheism” as one of the blind alleys of the history of the spirit, just like the creationism of religious fundamentalism or the tortuous “proof” of religious truths by “scientific arguments” (in the style of such books as “The Bible as History”). I believe that one of the major boons of our post-modern epoch is perspectivism, the recognition of the legitimate plurality of various views of the world, in which viewpoints in philosophy, art, and science (and even the plurality of various viewpoints in the framework of scientific, philosophical, and religious currents) are not regarded as mutually exclusive competitors, and in which no ideology seeks to curtail their variety and diversity and force them into oversimplified models.

Like many of my generation in my country, I discovered the multifarious world of faith and the spiritual and intellectual richness of the Catholic church in the 1960s, shortly after the church, at the Second Vatican Council, affirmed the principle of freedom of conscience and
religion. Pope Benedict XVI speaks of the need for dialogue between rationality and faith, between self-critical Christianity and secular humanism, a dialogue in which both sides can help correct their one-sidedness (cf. the Ratzinger-Habermas dialogue at the Catholic Academy in Munich, January 19, 2004). Yes, let us as Christians strive to be self-critical and overcome our one-sidedness—and let’s hope to see a similar development on the other side.

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TOMÁŠ HALÍK
JAMES D. G. DUNN’S

*THE THEOLOGY OF PAUL THE APOSTLE* ¹

by Leander E. Keck

Dunn’s *opus magnum* draws on nearly four decades of study and publication which have established the author as one of the Apostle’s major interpreters. Commentaries on Romans, Galatians, Colossians and Philemon, plus various books in which Paul’s thought is prominent as well as numerous articles, prepared the way for this comprehensive treatment of Paul’s theology. Between the Prologue and Epilogue, seven chapters of unequal length (chapter 4 needs over 150 pages) discuss God and Humankind, Humankind under Indictment, The Gospel of Jesus Christ (actually, Christology), The Beginning of Salvation, The Process of Salvation, The Church and Ethics. The chapters are divided into sections, each having between four and nine sub-sections. Subject, author and scripture indexes are provided. Most readers will be grateful for the thirty-one pages of bibliographies, and especially for the placement of the 3,281 notes at the bottom of the pages. Apart from the notes, the book generally avoids arguing with individual scholars; instead, each chapter begins with an overview of the major ways that the topic has been treated. This allows Dunn to examine the Pauline texts themselves. Repeatedly, the author calls attention to the import of the Apostle’s thought for today.

I. The task

The Prologue shows that Dunn, an active participant in the decade-long study of Paul’s theology by a group of the Society of Biblical Literature, is not unaware of the difficulties that

confront anyone who undertakes writing a comprehensive exposition of Paul's theology, particularly when 'theology' is seen as 'talk about God and all that is involved in and follows from such talk, including not least the interaction between belief and praxis' (p. 9, italics added). The task is even more daunting if one takes into account what Paul does not say but assumes, as Dunn rightly does. The more compendious the treatment, however, the more urgent is the need to devise a way of presenting Paul's theology that exposes the relation of the parts to the whole, a task made especially difficult by the diverse particularities of Paul's letters. For the content and sequence, Dunn relies on Romans, 'the most sustained and reflective statement of Paul's own theology by Paul himself' (p. 25), and for the structure on the loci of dogmatics. If the latter guarantees that nothing will be overlooked, the former assures that Paul's theology will emphasise justification, the law and Israel, even though 'participation in Christ leads more directly into the rest of Paul's theology than justification' (p. 395)!

Dunn finds 'Paul's own theology' in eight of the letters claiming to come from the Apostle (the uncontested seven plus 2 Thessalonians), of which Romans was probably the last. The result is a certain irony: having deconstructed the canonical Paul in order to deal with the real Paul, like the canon Dunn nonetheless makes Romans the 'template' (an image that suggests that everything is to be cut to this pattern). The consequences of making the historically last the theologically first are considerable, as we will see.

Dunn correctly observes that Paul's theology is more than that of the letters, since Paul did not write everything he thought, and often alluded to what he saw no need to spell out. In fact, Dunn relies heavily, probably too heavily, on this feature of the letters to argue for Paul's extensive knowledge of Jesus' teaching and mode of life. He wisely declines to talk of development' in Paul's theology or to locate its 'centre', preferring Beker's 'model of coherence within contingency' (pp. 21–2, his italics). Paul's theology, like any other, is 'the interaction (or 'dialogue') between three levels: (a) the deepest was the inherited convictions, axioms and presuppositions, i.e. Paul's Jewish heritage; (b) the 'transformative moments' that 'generate other insights', viz. Paul's conversion and his confrontation with Peter in Antioch
(Gal. 2:1-11); and (c) the surface level (i.e. the most apparent)—the immediate issues in the churches. In the Epilogue (‘Postlegomenon to a theology of Paul’) Dunn not only points out that this dialogue was ‘very personal’—Saul the Pharisee with Paul the Apostle, Paul at the beginning of his teaching with Paul as he grew in faith and insight—but that Paul’s theology ‘was itself the dialogue’, making it important for the interpreter to get ‘the balance right’ (p. 715). Because the chapters account for Paul’s diverse ways of talking about the law, the Spirit, or death, for example, by referring to one or more of these levels, reading this tome is rather like watching Dunn assemble a three-dimensional jigsaw puzzle, or perhaps better put, a Lego city with moving parts.

Despite the thoroughness and attention to exegetical detail, Dunn did not get the balance right, for what does not get its due is the role of Paul’s dialogue (to stay with Dunn’s favourite word) with the theological and moral dimensions of the Greco-Roman world into which Paul brought his gospel. The lopsidedness is disclosed in the ‘Index of Scripture and Other Ancient writings’: Jewish texts require almost fifteen pages, but the list of references to non-Jewish texts need less than a single page. To some extent, this imbalance reflects the role assigned to Romans, with its massive attention to scripture. But it reflects also a reaction against earlier excesses of the History of Religion School, whose emphasis on pre-Christian Gnosticism Dunn regards as ‘the wild goose chase for a pre-Christian redeemer myth’ (p. 393).

Like many scholars, Dunn too rejects, rightly, the long-discredited effort to derive Paul’s understanding of baptism and eucharist from the mystery cults. Still, he notes that ‘Paul does draw some sort of parallel between partnership of the altar (of the Jerusalem temple), sharing in the table of the Lord, and sharing in the table of demons’ (1 Cor. 10:18, 21; pp. 604–6). Granted that ‘analogy is not genealogy’, Dunn does not follow through on his observation that at least some of the Corinthians ‘were treating the sacraments as though Christianity was a mystery cult promising immortality through its rituals’ (p. 613). But where did they get the idea? Did they simply replace Paul’s view? Or had Paul’s understanding itself invited this misinterpretation? One cannot forget that the Corinthians first
learned of the sacraments from Paul. The problem, of course, is that the 'remembrance' tradition of 1 Corinthians 11 says nothing about 'participation', emphasised in chapter 10, and it is precisely the theology (and rite) of participation in Christ that lay at the heart of the problem. Unfortunately, the available sources do not disclose when, where or by whom this participatory theology was combined with the earliest traditions, and why Paul apparently assumed the former while transmitting the latter.

Actually, of course, understanding Paul's theology as expressed in his view of the sacraments does not require that the historical question be answered—unless one is prepared to argue that derivation determines construal, a view hard to maintain in light of the interpretations of 25 December, for instance. What does need attention is the theological logic or rationale of participation language as such, and more concretely, the logic for the human condition that is entailed in saying that one participates in a reality that recently was a particular man with a personal name and who was crucified. If New Testament scholarship is to press ahead toward a theological answer, and not be content with shunting the discussion into reconstructing the history of early Christian ideas or with exploring the social function of such language and ritual (both of which are legitimate), it must overcome its reluctance to press for conceptual theological clarity; only so will it become closer to understanding its own subject-matter. Bultmann, and in his own way Käsemann as well, understood this, however one may judge their respective ways of demythologising. Dunn's volume would have been strengthened by some dialogue with these interpreters of Paul.

II. The price of the template

If we had but a single letter from Paul, as we do from the author of 1 Peter or James, every interpretation of his theology would be deeply flawed, for each of Paul's letters is sufficiently different from the others that none really represents the whole. Dunn, alert to these differences, nonetheless makes Romans the 'template' for his presentation of the whole. His aim is to 'gain a picture of Paul's theology at the time he wrote Romans, the
most mature statement of his theology' (p. 298)—a statement that discloses what Romans is taken to be. Since the third level of Paul’s ‘dialogue’ plays no role in the base line on which Dunn constructs Paul’s theology until he turns to Paul’s moral counsels, beginning at Romans 12, the initial eleven chapters are treated as virtually a self-contained statement of Paul’s ‘mature theology’, whose distinctive character receives scant notice—probably because its character and content are regarded as reliable evidence for both what Paul thought and the steps by which he did so. But this is hardly to be taken for granted.

There are two signs that Dunn himself sensed that his use of Romans produces a distortion. The first has to do with structure. By ordering the loci in step with Romans, he first discusses God and the human predicament (Adam, sin and death, the law) before turning to the gospel. Yet he concedes that ‘in some sense at least’ Paul reconstructed his inherited theological convictions by moving ‘from solution to plight’, as E. P. Sanders contended (p. 181). Since Dunn declares that he wants to ‘theologise with Paul’ (p. 24), it would have been more appropriate to follow Sanders’ alternative and to begin with Paul’s gospel view of the Christ-event, and then trace the implications, beginning with the Jewish inheritance. That might have led Dunn to see the difference between how Paul thought and how he argues in Romans. In a word, Paul thought from solution to plight but argues from plight to solution because his letter intends to present the rationale of his mission to Spain so that the Christians in Rome might help support it. His argument therefore begins with the human condition for which the gospel provides the redemptive alternative for everyone. And since that indictment is cast first in terms of the distorted relation to God, the solution is cast in terms of rectification (justification). The second sign concerns emphasis, for Dunn notes that study of participation in Christ [which appears in Romans 5, after justification] leads more directly into the rest of Paul’s theology than justification’ (p. 395). If this is so, then it is the commitment to Romans that causes justification to be discussed first and given twice the space as participation.

Making Romans the ‘template’ also affects one’s overall grasp of the character of Paul’s theology, especially of justification. In keeping with the purpose of Romans, Paul does not so much
argue for justification by faith as use it to argue that the Christ-centred salvation for gentiles is God’s way of keeping the promise to Abraham. It is understandable, then, why the tone of the letter is more calm than agitated, for Paul explains; he does not correct, as in the Corinthian letters, or fight as in Galatians. Dunn too explains, but noticeably in regard to Galatians, he explains only Paul’s thoughts, not those of the Galatians, as does Martyn’s recent commentary. That does not make the explanation wrong, but it does detach it from precisely the third level of Paul’s theology. Symptomatic is the discussion of Genesis 15:6. Instead of asking how this probably was interpreted in Galatia and how its use there threatened Paul’s gospel, Dunn refers to ‘how the text was typically understood within contemporary Judaism’ (p. 375)—as if that were either the problem in Galatia or the key to Paul’s response to it. Because the mindset in Galatia is not given a sharp profile, the polemical character of Paul’s response is eclipsed. His ideas are explained but not his passion, because the Paul of Romans has overshadowed the Paul of Galatians.

To a considerable degree, this is true also of Dunn’s use of the Corinthian letters, for while he does explain the various factors at work as he deals with the problems addressed by Paul, no overall profile of the Corinthian mindset comes into view. Dunn discusses Paul’s treatment of Wisdom and of the Spirit, both prominent in 1 Corinthians, without probing what was going on in Corinth that prompted Paul to say what he does in the way he does, or whether and how the various glimpses into that church imply a coherent alternative construal of Paul’s gospel. In short, one side-effect of relying heavily on Romans is that the controversial character of Paul’s theology overall is rather muted. The irony is, of course, that from time to time it has been precisely through the influence of Romans that the challenging and controversial character of Paul’s theology has been discerned and released.

III. Central themes

What really matters, of course, is whether Dunn has grasped the multifaceted theology of Paul in a way that does justice to what mattered most to Paul. For Dunn, the persistent subtext of Paul’s theology is the law. Although Paul’s view of the law affects his
view of God, Christ, Israel, sin, salvation, church and the moral life—whether or not 'law' is actually mentioned in connection with each of these—here the comments that follow first focus on the nexus of law, Israel and church, then on Christology. Dunn differentiates three roles of the law in Paul: it defines sin and makes one conscious of sin as transgression; it is 'a kind of guardian angel' over Israel which lives in a 'protective custody' (the 'tutor' [paidagogos] in Gal. 3:24); and it regulates the life of the chosen people (pp. 133–54). Thus Paul retains the first and third use, but insists that the second has been made obsolescent by the coming of Christ.

Dunn, having been emancipated by E. P. Sanders from inherited distortions about the role of Torah in Judaism, insists that since the initiative of God's covenanting grace in giving the law was basic to Judaism, Paul's doctrine of justification essentially 'is simply a restatement of the first principles of his own ancestral faith' (p. 345). The 'works of the law' by which no one is justified (Rom. 3:20) refers not to Torah-obedience as such but to those aspects of the law that differentiated Jews from gentiles (circumcision, Sabbath and dietary rules) and which became the basis of pride in the Jews' privileged status before God as well. When Paul criticises the Jews for 'seeking to establish their own righteousness' (Rom. 10:3) he has in view not general human propensity for self-achieved rectitude but the assumption that 'God's righteousness was only for Israel, and only for Gentiles if they became Jews and took on the distinctive obligations of God's covenant with Israel' (p. 371). Paul's insistence on faith was 'his way of combatting the restrictiveness implicit in the counter emphasis on works of the law' (p. 372, his italics). Since God's covenant with Abraham had in view the blessing of the gentiles through the people of God, through the coming of Christ, this restrictive use of the law is obviated, for now gentiles can share in the blessing without becoming Jews. This reading of Paul, here grossly simplified, is plausible. It is also clearer than Paul.

In Romans 9–11 Dunn finds Paul's answer to the question, How, then, are Christian gentiles related to Israel? He notes that here Paul does not speak of 'Jews' (a word that 'defines primarily by relation to land and by differentiation from peoples of other lands') but of 'Israel', which 'defines primarily by
relation to God' (pp. 504—7). This distinction makes it possible for Dunn to insist that Paul had no intention to merge Jew and gentiles but rather to include the gentiles in ‘Israel’ instead of establishing churches ‘which were other than Israel’ (p. 523). Just as in 11:27–24 there is only one olive tree, so ‘there is only one Israel’ (p. 525). If that is the case for Paul, however, one wonders why the discussion of ‘Israel’ appears in Chapter 6 (The Process of Salvation) and the discussion of the church appears as Chapter 7. Here too the loci structure exacts its toll, for it separates precisely what Dunn claims Paul held together.

More significantly, according to Dunn, Paul’s use of ekklesia, the Septuagintal word for the qahal (assembly) of God, shows that he intended to ‘depict the little assemblies of Christian believers as equally manifestations of and in direct continuity with the “assembly of Yahweh”’ (p. 538, my italics, 540; also 529, 530 but without ‘direct’). Legally they could be seen as ‘extensions of the Jewish synagogues but from Paul’s angle they were ‘an extension of the assembly of God’, but without priest or temple for they were the temple because of the Spirit’s residence in them (p. 545). Dunn’s subsequent discussion of the church as the body of Christ and as charismatic community (pp. 548–62) lacks any reference to ‘direct continuity’ with Israel. Nor does the discussion of the diversity of body ever mention Jew and gentile.

The mischievous phrase is ‘direct continuity’. For one thing, that is precisely what Paul fought so strenuously against in Galatia, where it was given ritual expression in circumcision of the gentile believers. Without it, or some equivalent, how can there be ‘direct continuity’ with Israel? Using the same word for Israel and church no more discloses ‘direct continuity’ between the two groups than using ‘clergy’ for both rabbi and priest shows ‘direct continuity’ between them. It may be, of course, that Paul’s image of the olive tree implies more than he intended, for a successful graft, by definition, does result in ‘direct continuity’. In any case, it is doubtful that Paul meant to modify or annul what he had written about Abraham in Romans 4—that Abraham’s being the patriarch of uncircumcised believers and of circumcised believers is not a matter of continuity at all but of similarity: just as Abraham believed the promise from the God ‘who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist’, so gentiles and Jews through the gospel ‘believe
in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead’ (4:17, 24). Repeating Abrahamic faith is not a matter of ‘direct continuity’ but of an identical response to the same God. The continuity is not between the believers but in God. The significance of this mischievous phrase for Christian self-understanding is clear.

Dunn discusses Paul’s Christology under the following rubrics: ‘gospel’, Jesus the man, Christ crucified, the risen Lord, the pre-existent one, and the parousia. Since Dunn insists that Paul knew a good deal about Jesus’ ministry, it is not surprising that here too the theme of ‘continuity’ appears: between Jesus’ teaching and Paul’s own gospel, between Jewish hopes for a Messiah and the message of Jesus and Paul, and between Jesus and humanity as a whole, since Paul regards him as the Last Adam. The last item discloses the same confusion about ‘continuity’: whereas continuities between Jesus and Paul pertain to historical matters for which evidence can, at least in principle, be adduced, the Adamic continuity is an inference from an image. While Dunn judges it ‘likely that Paul himself had a fairly well-defined theory of sacrifice’ by which to interpret Jesus’ death (p. 218), he also recognises that Paul let one metaphor run into another (e.g. redemption and sacrifice, representation and reconciliation). Especially apt is his observation that ‘Paul’s teaching is not that Christ dies “in place of” others so that they escape death (as the logic of “substitution” implies). It is rather that Christ’s sharing their death makes it possible for them to share his death’ (p. 223).

Although incarnation and pre-existence belong together, Dunn not only separates them by over sixty pages but limits the discussion of ‘the incarnate Son’ to two pages dealing with Colossians (pp. 204–5). His discussion of ‘the pre-existent one’ (pp. 267–93) begins by granting that ‘some sort of pre-existence certainly seems envisaged’ in a number of passages and concludes by saying, ‘Paul does have a conception of the pre-existent Christ. But it is the pre-existence of Wisdom, now identified by and as Christ’—as if Wisdom had simply been renamed. That Paul drew on Jewish Wisdom theology, which Dunn conveniently outlines, is beyond dispute; but when Dunn interprets 1 Corinthians 8:6 (‘Jesus Christ, through whom are all things, and we exist through him’, REB) as ‘the pre-existence of divine Wisdom. That is, the pre-existence of God’, one’s eyebrows begin to move northward.
For Dunn, the passages that speak of the ‘sending’ of God’s Son (Gal. 4:4; Rom. 8:3) as well as 1 Corinthians 10:4 (‘the Rock was Christ’) and Romans 10:6–8, which refers to bringing Christ ‘down’ (using the language of Deuteronomy) are allowed only to ‘strengthen the conclusion that Paul worked with a lively Wisdom Christology and that he readily embraced the thought of Christ as pre-existent Wisdom’ (p. 281). The possibility that this is backwards—that Paul reinterpreted divine Wisdom as the pre-existent Christ—is not raised.

In the continuing debate over pre-existence in Paul, both sides have appealed to Philippians 2:6–11, 50 it is not surprising that Dunn, as in his Christology in the Making argues that what is in view here is Adam, not a V-shaped Christ-event that begins with the pre-existent one who exchanged equality with God for the form of a servant. In fact, the passage is declared to be ‘the fullest expression of Adam Christology in the New Testament’ (p. 286).

IV. Appreciation

In the Anglophone world, Dunn’s book will establish itself rapidly as a standard point of reference because its scope is comprehensive, its discussions thorough, its arguments clear, and its stance positive. It neither tells Paul what he should have said nor faults him for incoherence when pointing out what he does not say. Because Dunn takes Paul’s thought seriously as theology, he does not translate it into a thinly veiled rationalisation for apostolic power. One needs neither to agree with Dunn nor disagree with him in order to profit by reading this book. Not every book rewards engagement; this one does. As is often the case, one learns most precisely when one disagrees. Many will say that the same is true of Paul as well.

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Rejoicing in Dialogue: A Response to Lee Keck

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REJOICING IN DIALOGUE:
A RESPONSE TO LEE KECK

by James D. G. Dunn

I am most grateful for Lee Keck’s review. It is always a pleasure to read a review which actually describes the book and engages with it, and does not simply use the occasion to expound the reviewer’s own views. It is a particular pleasure to engage with one who has been the pre-eminent American New Testament theologian of his generation.

In the space available, I can respond on only three points. First, Keck’s view that *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (TPA) is unbalanced in the overwhelming emphasis it places on Paul’s dialogue with his Jewish background, with so little attention given to his dialogue ‘with the theological and moral dimensions of the Greco-Roman world into which Paul brought his gospel’ [Keck, p. 382]. The comment is slightly odd, since Keck seems to acknowledge the ‘earlier excesses of the History of Religion School’, and agrees with my rejection of ‘the long-discredited effort to derive Paul’s understanding of baptism and eucharist from the mystery cults’ [p. 382]. However, it is true that I regard Paul’s dialogue with his Jewish heritage as a much more determinative influence on and in his theology than his more occasional use of Stoic language or interaction with the ‘spiritual ones’ and ‘wise’ of Corinth. At the same time, I am certainly open to the desirability and need(?) to explore Paul’s dialogue on the other front at a deeper level.

For Keck the heart of the problem is Paul’s theology of participation in Christ. More needs to be said on the theological logic or rationale of saying that ‘one participates in a reality that recently was a particular man with a personal name and who was crucified’ [p. 383]. I agree. I find the language both fascinating and baffling at one and the same time. For quarter
of a century I have suggested that it is rooted in Paul’s own experience to a much greater extent than modern commentators have cared to admit. But I remain more struck by the diversity of language and imagery Paul uses (see, e.g. TPA, pp. 314–15 and 409–10) and wonder whether the ‘conceptual clarity’ which Keck desires is achievable—and at what cost! Second, Keck criticises me, as have others, for taking Romans as the ‘template’ for my attempt to lay out Paul’s theology. In so doing I have produced a distortion, by failing to follow the course of Paul’s own thought, ‘from solution to plight’, and by giving more weight to justification than participation [p. 384]. By detaching my treatment from ‘the third level of Paul’s theology’ (the dialogues of individual letters), I have eclipsed the controversial character of Paul’s theology overall [p. 385].

On the first two points I can simply say what I have said elsewhere: that I was not attempting a diachronic treatment of Paul’s theology—how it was expressed in different letters; I was attempting a synchronic presentation, such as only Romans allows. In a future project I will seek to follow a diachronic path. And the reason why ‘justification’ is given such prominence is not because it was so prominent in Paul, but because it has been so prominent in the history of interpretation of Paul (see TPA 395).

The question is whether it is possible to write a more reflective statement of Paul’s theology, less (never entirely not) caught up in the arguments and controversies of his day. In my judgment, that is precisely what Romans allows and facilitates: it is Paul’s own attempt to do just that. To work primarily from Romans, then, does give less place to Paul the polemicist of Galatians and strong counsellor of 1 Corinthians. Had we only Galatians and 1–2 Corinthians of the Hauptbriefe an attempt to lay out Paul’s theology such as TPA attempts, would have been impossible. But Paul did write Romans. We can hardly assume, can we, that the Paul of Galatians and 1 Corinthians is somehow the real Paul, while the Paul of Romans is somehow less authentic. I set out quite deliberately to expound and expand on the theology of Paul as he himself set it out when he wrote Romans. That is not a complete description of Paul’s theology (would such be possible?), but it does attempt to lay out Paul’s theology primarily on the basis
of his maturest and most rounded expression of it. Isn’t Romans controversial enough?

Third, on the ‘central themes’, I should just note that Keck’s description of ‘works of the law’ [p. 386] could perpetuate the chief misunderstanding which has dogged my earlier treatments, and would invite anyone interested to read TPA §14.4 with care. Likewise on the relation of Israel to Church [pp. 386–7], again I invite readers to consider the transition from the end of Romans 9–11 to the beginning of Romans 12, which the sequence of TPA §20 tries to reflect.

On the issue of ‘direct continuity’ with Israel (Keck speaks of ‘this mischievous phrase’), Keck asks, ‘how can there be “direct continuity” with Israel’ without circumcision? But that was precisely Paul’s problem: to maintain the continuity without the circumcision. It will really not do to try to cut the gordian knot by arguing that for Paul the relation of Abraham to believers was ‘not a matter of continuity at all but of similarity’ [p. 387]; ‘repeating Abrahamic faith is not a matter of “direct continuity” but of an identical response to the same God’ [p. 388]. Here Keck sides with Lou Martyn: ‘direct continuity’ is the language of Paul’s Galatian opponents, rather than of Paul himself. But with respect, I simply have to dispute that so much of Galatians can be thus handed over to Paul’s opponents. Were it simply a matter of believing as Abraham did, Paul could have said so: ‘Inheritance of Abraham is irrelevant!; don’t be misled by these troublemakers! To believe as Abraham did is sufficient!’ But Paul did not go so far: circumcision is irrelevant; but sonship to Abraham is evidently a vital part of Paul’s own argument and conception (Gal. 3:7, 29). Why else would Paul have continued to make much the same argument in the less polemical Romans 4? The attempt to relate Paul’s discussion of Genesis 15.6 more with the particular dispute in Galatians, and to question the relevance of showing how the text was understood within contemporary Judaism [p. 385], reveals the same blind-spot. It is not far fetched, is it, to assume that Paul’s Christian Jewish opponents in Galatia, zealous for the law, were influenced in significant measure by the theology of contemporary Judaism? If ‘direct continuity’ is a problem for Keck (and Martyn), I am the more bemused by the opposite thrust to cut Paul off from his Jewish heritage or milieu. At this point the theological crack
between us begins to widen markedly, and the theological consequences for Christianity's self-understanding, as instructed by Paul, could become serious.

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