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Clark-Soles Engaging the Word

Engaging the Word

The New Testament and the Christian Believer

Jaime Clark-Soles

2

Different Ways of Reading

Promises and Pitfalls

The Word of the Lord: A reading from 1 Corinthians 11:27–32

> Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be answerable for the body and blood of the Lord. Examine yourselves, and only then eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For all who eat and drink without discerning the body, eat and drink judgment against themselves. For this reason many of you are weak and ill, and some have died. But if we judged ourselves, we would not be judged. But when we are judged by the Lord, we are disciplined so that we may not be condemned along with the world.

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

What if you went to church next Sunday and the passage above was the text for the day's sermon, with a special focus on verse 30: "For this reason many of you are weak and ill, and some have died." Or what if you were asked to lead a Bible study on it with adults, youth, or children? How would that go for you and your community? Would it strike you as puzzling and requiring some sort of deeper attention? Would people assume that it must be worth studying because it's in Scripture and Scripture is the sacred, authoritative text of the church? Would they feel like it's simply a vestige of ancient Christianity that can be summarily sloughed off by 21st-century Christians?

Or what about Acts 5:1–11, the story of Ananias and Sapphira?

> But a man named Ananias, with the consent of his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property; with his wife's knowledge, he kept back some of

> the proceeds, and brought only a part and laid it at the apostles' feet. "Ananias," Peter asked, "why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back part of the proceeds of the land? While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, were not the proceeds at your disposal? How is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart? You did not lie to us but to God!" Now when Ananias heard these words, he fell down and died. And great fear seized all who heard of it. The young men came and wrapped up his body, then carried him out and buried him.
>
> After an interval of about three hours his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. Peter said to her, "Tell me whether you and your husband sold the land for such and such a price." And she said, "Yes, that was the price." Then Peter said to her, "How is it that you have agreed together to put the Spirit of the Lord to the test? Look, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out." Immediately she fell down at his feet and died. When the young men came in they found her dead, so they carried her out and buried her beside her husband. And great fear seized the whole church and all who heard of these things.

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God (?).

Again, what questions would this text raise? How would it be handled?

The Revised Common Lectionary contains neither the Acts nor the 1 Corinthians passages. Do you wonder why? Sure, it contains the "words of institution" from 1 Corinthians 11:23–26:

> For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

The Revised Common Lectionary is a resource for Christian worship published in 1994 that lists for each Sunday four readings: a Psalm, another passage from the Hebrew Bible (or Apocrypha, or Acts), a Gospel lesson, and an Epistle reading (or a reading from Revelation). It is widely used in the United States and Canada, and to some degree in Great Britain. The readings run on a three-year cycle, coded to three of the four Gospels: A–Matthew, B–Mark, and C–Luke. Sadly, no year is devoted to the Gospel of John though some passages appear in various seasons annually.

But there it stops, just before our passage.

So how do we Christians fruitfully engage and interpret such difficult texts? Or any of our sacred texts, for that matter? In this chapter, I will outline premodern, modern, and postmodern biblical approaches. In each case, I will note the potential promises and pitfalls and invite you to do the same.

PREMODERN APPROACHES

Do you remember the song by Supertramp called "The Logical Song"? If not, now would be a good time to download and listen to it. First, it summarizes the premodern, modern, and postmodern epochs in intellectual history in a convenient way. Second, it sketches the spiritual development of a postmodern Christian.

The premodern approach to Scripture generally dates to the period between antiquity and the Enlightenment, so around 500–1500 CE.[1] In shorthand terms, it may be characterized as follows:

- Uncritical
- Unproblematic
- Acceptance of the supernatural realm
- Unquestioned acceptance of the received tradition
- Leaving room for mystery and religious experience

Picture the premodern interpreter singing the first stanza of "The Logical Song": life is "wonderful" and "magical"—it's a "miracle." Let's fill out the picture a bit more. In this era, the government was feudal; power lay in the hands of kings and nobles, and their access to power was set by tradition. Upward social mobility did not exist; one's social position was fixed by birth. Hierarchy in the church structure was no less rigid, and the magisterium dictated the shape and the details of the Christian faith. Literacy rates were quite low as compared to a current rate of 99% in America.[2] Laypeople were not expected to read let alone *interpret* the Bible; that was the job of the church officials. Belief in magic and miracles and what moderns would call "superstition" was assumed. The rituals of church life—baptism, liturgy, Eucharist, and so forth—provided the structure of one's religious life and community.

So when our premodern interpreters heard in 1 Corinthians 11 that some people were getting sick and dying by taking communion in an unworthy

1. I am indebted to Heath White's *Postmodernism 101: A First Course for the Curious Christian* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2006). Note that this presentation tends to refer to activity in Europe.

2. "Field Listing: Literacy," *CIA World Factbook*, https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/fields/2103.html.

manner, how would they have heard that? Most probably they would assume that if one takes communion in an unworthy manner, one might get sick and die. God judges. There is a strong separation between "the world," meaning "those people," and the church, meaning "us." But Christians should beware because present membership in the church does not guarantee safety. Excommunication was always an option.

As for Ananias and Sapphira, well, it happened like the Bible says it happened. They shouldn't have lied, and they should have respected the authority of the apostles. But they lied and defied, so they died.

PROMISES AND PITFALLS OF PREMODERN INTERPRETATION

By modern or postmodern standards, our premodern interpreter might be considered naive with respect to biblical interpretation. He or she interpreted the Bible as the church instructed. There was, however, an immediacy of religious experience, of seeing "signs" of God's action in ordinary life that I'm afraid has been lost or denigrated by the modern mind.

MODERNIST APPROACHES

Modernist approaches date from the Enlightenment to the late 20th century.[3] Using our shorthand, we might note the following:

- Strong confidence in reason and science
- An expectation that education and use of human reason would lead to a harmonious, unified, just, "civilized" world
- Impatient or dismissive of the supernatural realm and, concomitantly, of people or whole cultures who insist on holding on to such "unscientific, irrational superstitions"
- A drive to demythologize the texts and retain only the objective, universal, timeless truths or principles found therein

Filling out the picture, we would need to note some of the key figures and developments that led to the Enlightenment. Famously, in 1517 Martin Luther posted his 95 Theses, which led to the 16th-century Protestant Reformation. With respect to our concern, biblical interpretation, this was a

3. Needless to say, historical periods cannot be cleanly dated; we set dates merely for heuristic purposes, realizing that periods overlap and different criteria for dating will produce different results.

watershed moment in history as authority moved from the pope to Scripture. That is to say, Martin Luther declared that the rule of life and faith should be determined *sola scriptura*, by Scripture alone, rather than by the authority of the magisterium. This move was aided by the invention of the printing press by Gutenberg in the 15th century. Luther's commitment to translating the Bible into the vernacular to make it available for individual Christians to read must be noted and perhaps praised.

In terms of scientific developments (which always affect developments in biblical interpretation), recall the work of Copernicus (1543), Galileo (1610), and Newton (1686), which overturned the established Aristotelian worldview and placed Earth at the center of the universe. The realization that Earth and human beings are literally not the center of the universe had far-reaching effects upon every aspect of conceptualizing human life.

In terms of biblical interpretation, the Enlightenment brought the advent of rational biblical criticism, most notably inaugurated by Reimarus and others who produced a genre of literature called "Lives of Jesus" in which they sought to subject the biblical accounts of Jesus to the scrutiny of rational "scientific" critique. Those parts of the tradition that were considered irrational or mythological were questioned. Miracles were dismissed or explained away. In place of Jesus' walking on water, critics reasoned that he actually found a sandbar on which to stand such that he only *appeared* to be walking on water. These initial, entertaining soundings eventually developed into what is known as the historical-critical method, which until recently was the primary method used and taught in mainline seminaries. We'll address that in a moment.

Biblical scholars have come up with a useful threefold schema that envisions the world "behind" the text, the world "within" the text, and the world "in front of" the text. The "world behind the text" refers to the original 1st-century world in which the New Testament texts were produced. To understand that world, we have to ask about the social, economic, and political structures and realities of that time. What was it like to live under the Roman Empire? How did the education system work? How did people travel? How long did people live? Who had status and who didn't? What kind of art was produced? Was there birth control? How did medicine work? What were attitudes about gender, sexuality, philosophy, religion, politics, family, and so on?

The "world within the text" refers to the text itself, from the opening verse to the final verse. If we are studying a Gospel, we ask questions about narrative, questions about plot, setting, character, themes, language, metaphor, imagery, point of view, and conflict. We use methods of narrative and literary criticism. If we are studying an epistle, we use rhetorical criticism and note how the text relies on common rhetorical techniques of the time. For instance, Paul's letters typically open with reference to the sender and the

recipient, followed by a thanksgiving section, and the body of the letter in which he employs various speech techniques, depending upon the rhetorical aims of that particular letter.

The "world-in-front-of the text" refers to what we call the "reception-history" (*Rezeptionsgeschichte*)[4] of the text or "the history-of-effects" (*Wirkungsgeschichte*) of the text. How have the texts been received and used over the centuries that follow? How have they influenced art, society, government, economics, science? We know, for instance, that certain texts in the New Testament, such as John 8, have had dire consequences for Jewish-Christian relations over the centuries. We know that texts like Ephesians 5 and 1 Peter 2 were used by pro-slavery advocates to keep slavery legal and "ordained by God." We know that many people base their views concerning issues such as homosexuality or women's leadership in the church upon particular biblical passages. The history of effects that these texts have had globally over the centuries is an important area of study; a number of different methods are employed in studying those effects, from political history, to psychology, art history, cultural studies, anthropology, gender studies, postcolonial studies, and deconstructionism—to name just a few.

The historical-critical method aims to help the interpreter understand the world "behind" the text: the original context in which the scriptural texts were written. It asks, "What did the original author intend to convey through the text to the original audience in the 1st century?" In truth, the method is a conglomeration of methods: textual criticism, form criticism, source criticism, and redaction criticism. Let me say a word about each.

Textual criticism is the branch of study that reviews our some 5,000 ancient New Testament texts and fragments of texts (as well as ancient translations and quotations from the NT) and attempts to provide the most likely original wording of those texts. We have no autographs: that is, we have *no* original New Testament texts. Our earliest fragments of New Testament texts date to the 2nd century. The earliest complete New Testament we have dates from the 4th century, more than 300 years after Jesus' death. The textual critics among us pore over all of these ancient scraps, argue with one another over the most probable original readings, and then produce a Greek New Testament. They also provide a book (see Metzger's *Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*) that outlines the main issues and why they chose a particular reading for that edition (we are now using the 27th edition of the Nestle-Aland Greek New Testament, by the way).[5] Text critics operate

4. For a fuller explication of this concept, see "Reception Theory," in Richard N. Soulen and R. Kendall Soulen, *Handbook of Biblical Criticism* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 158.

5. Eberhard and Erwin Nestle, Barbara and Kurt Aland, et al., eds., *Novum Testamentum Graece*, 27th ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1993, with later, corrected printings).

by a very particular, detailed set of theories and practices that attend to the various dates, geographical factors, and scribal tendencies related to the transmission of these texts. So when your New Testament professor holds up a Greek New Testament, it's not as though we have an actual 1st-century, or even 2nd-, 3rd-, or 4th-century text that it mimics. It is a scholarly construct. From there, English speakers then produce a myriad of English translations guided by particular agendas. I do not use the word "agenda" pejoratively here; I simply want to note that there are many different translation theories at work and many different doctrinal stances, all of which influence the choices that the translators make. The reader of any English translation must remain aware that many choices have already been made for them, many meanings determined, all of which may be open to question and debate.[6]

Form critics study the individual units of New Testament texts that circulated in oral form before the stage of composition, that isin the period between Jesus' death around 30 CE, and the writing of the New Testament around 50–125. They argue that these individual units that circulated orally before the writing of the Gospels reveal the church's activity in its earliest years: evangelizing, preaching, teaching, baptizing, worshiping, serving Eucharist, exhorting, ministering to those in need—much like what the church is still up to today. We see lodged in our current texts older materialthat circulated earlier, such as hymns (see Phil. 2:6–11; Col. 1:15–20), baptismal formulas (see Gal. 3:27–28), miracle stories, parables, Passion narratives.

Redaction critics realize that at some point certain Christians decided that these traditions should be gathered together into a narrative whole and committed to writing; hence, the birth of a new genre of literature, Gospels. Typically, Gospels narrate the prebirth, birth, life, death, resurrection, postresurrection appearances, and ascension of Jesus, though most do not contain all of those elements. The Gospel writers took it upon themselves to edit their inherited materials and shape them into a unified whole that was useful for their own congregations who were meeting around 70–100, about 40 to 70 years after Jesus' crucifixion, though each of the four differ from one another in certain ways. To study this level of the tradition, historical critics use the method of *redaction criticism* to ferret out the theological intentions of each Gospel author by paying particular attention to the ways they edited the

6. For a good read on the various translations both ancient and modern, see Bruce M. Metzger, *The Bible in Translation: Ancient and English Versions* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001). I like this because it proceeds chronologically, which helps readers see who was reacting to what when they devised new English translations. For a useful book on the translation process, translation theory, and what is gained or lost by different approaches, see Steven M. Sheeley and Robert N. Nash, *The Bible in English Translation: An Essential Guide* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997). Also see Steven M. Sheeley and Robert N. Nash, *Choosing a Bible: A Guide to Modern English Translations and Editions* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999).

materials each had at hand in composing their Gospels. Redaction critics see the Gospel writers as creative authors who shape the material rather than as mere "stringers of pearls" who clumsily and artlessly paste together various received traditions. They are authors in their own right, and each singularly presents the material.

But where did the Gospel writers, not to mention Paul, who wrote decades earlier (in the 50s), get their material? Those interested in this question engage in *source criticism*. We will have much more to say about this in the chapter on the Synoptic Problem.

The *historical-critical method* emphasizes authorial intention; it assumes that the author had a clear intention and that it is recoverable to a certain degree by using the tools of the historian. Not surprising for a method that grew out of the Enlightenment, with its focus upon the genius of the individual, this method tends to imagine an individual (usually male) author composing largely alone (much as a scholar does when writing a book like this), with a particular audience in mind as the recipient. The historical critic understands the primary task to be recovering and reconstructing that process in an effort to understand its meaning in the past. The focus is on what the text *meant* then, not what the text *means* now.

Historical critics will first want to learn the languages in which the original texts were written: Hebrew for the Old Testament and Greek for the New Testament. This is known as *philological study*. They will want to understand and privilege what Paul, the Pharisaic Jew, meant when he used the term "faith" or "righteousness" or "salvation" instead of what the word might mean to a modern Lutheran or Catholic or Baptist. In other words, ideally interpreters will lay aside their own theological convictions and "simply let the text speak." They will do this by learning about ancient forms of Judaism and using a concordance to locate each place such a term appears in the Old Testament (Paul's and Jesus' scriptural texts) and in Paul's letters, in order to construct a sense of his meaning for each concept.

Modernist historians aim to objectively analyze the historical data, to reconstruct the past "as it actually happened." Personal biases should not cloud the issues or predetermine the outcome. If apparent contradictions arise in the historical record, they should be analyzed and adjudicated if possible; certainly they should not be swept under the rug in an effort to provide a seamless picture of the evidence. For example, if Matthew indicates that Jesus was born in the time of Herod the Great, and we know that Herod the Great died in 4 BCE, then the historian will be puzzled by Luke's indication that Jesus was born when Quirinius was governor of Syria in 6 CE. What are we to do about the 10-year discrepancy? Historically speaking, both cannot be "true." Likewise, Jesus dies on a different day in the Gospel of John than he does in

the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke). By the time he's conducting the Last Supper in the Synoptics, he's already dead in John.[7] And there are countless other examples of historical contradictions or puzzles that we could adduce. Historical critics boldly raise these issues and force us to consider the data and attempt to explain all of it using the tools of rational inquiry.

Thanks to the scholars of Greek and Roman history (classicists), we know much about the social history of the New Testament era. We have a sense of the political, social, economic, and religious structures of the time. We can imagine, as one famous New Testament scholar puts it, what is was like "to be an ordinary Christian in the time of Paul."[8] We do this by reading all of the available material from antiquity: Jewish, Christian, pagan, medical texts, blessing and curse tablets, philosophical treatises, legal documents, political speeches, graffiti, high literature, folk literature, ancient novels, dream interpretations, biographies of famous people—every piece of writing on paper (well, technically, papyrus and parchment), stone, or pottery that has been found. In addition to writings, we analyze every piece of material culture discovered and processed by archaeologists in order to reconstruct the life of ancient citizens.

New Testament scholars also routinely draw upon the work of both sociologists and anthropologists under the assumption that what we learn about modern groups and cultures might apply more or less to our ancient brothers and sisters as well. For example, in modern America one gains status through material wealth and conspicuous consumption. In contrast, the ancient Mediterranean world, the setting for the New Testament, maintained an honor/shame culture that operated according to principles quite foreign to the modern American eye. Many cultures today also operate on an honor/shame basis, so New Testament scholars are keen to read studies by sociologists and anthropologists that explain and delineate the shape of such societies in ways that seem applicable to ancient societies as well. In such a society, social relations operate by strict codes concerning how honor and shame are attained; this is especially true with respect to class and gender.

The modernist approach to the Bible, then, insists that the text be subjected to historical, scientific, rational analysis so that we can lay bare what the original author intended to convey to the original audience by means of the text. Only interpretations that remain within the bounds of historical plausibility and authorial intent gain a hearing. Our modernist interpreter is represented well by the next part of "The Logical Song": "logical," "practical," "clinical." The modern period (18th–late 20th century) placed its eggs in the basket of reason that marks the philosophical, political, and scientific

7. Felix Just has composed a useful chart that lays this out for you beautifully at http://catholic-resources.org/Bible/Jesus-Death.htm.

8. Wayne A. Meeks, *First Urban Christians* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1983).

activity of the time. Politically, there was a turn to the rights of the individual and democracy. Unbridled optimism abounded. Since human beings are rational animals, we would simply educate everyone; then we would apply rational, scientific principles to all areas of life and we would, as reasonable people using these objective methods of inquiry, all agree. We would create peaceful, just societies where all sing in perfect harmony—or at least refrain from routinely slaughtering one another.

The modernist confidence in the power of science and reason to save us from our sins has been severely chastened. On a small scale, take the historical-critical method, a scientific, unbiased method of exegeting Scripture that supposedly moves our own biases out of the way and "lets the text speak for itself." Why, then, do scholars who use the same so-called scientific method routinely arrive at diametrically opposed conclusions?

On a large scale, there's the ongoing slaughter. We slaughtered each other more in the 20th century than ever before, though science and reason taught us how to do it much more efficiently. "In broad outline, the critique looks like this: modernism, with its emphasis on reason, insists on resolving and eliminating the differences between people. But this leads, eventually, to coercion, oppression, domination, cruelty, and abuse of one form or another. Anyone who believes in One True Culture—one right way of doing things—is, knowingly or not, a closet tyrant."[9]

Enter postmodernism. But before turning to that, let's ask how our modernist interpreter would handle the 1 Corinthians and Acts passages. The modernist interpreter of 1 Corinthians 11 would read the text in Greek and ask about the sociohistorical context of the passage. He (rarely she) would ask about Jewish and Hellenistic beliefs regarding ritual eating and magical notions. He would demythologize the text by noting that we post-Enlightenment moderns do not believe that people die from taking communion incorrectly. He would say something like this: "Some people were sick and dying so Paul used that fact to argue backward from that to locate the cause in communion practices." At any rate, modernist interpretation would peel away the ancient, superstitious, prescientific medical, magical notions and turn attention to other parts of the Communion supper, such as how the rich were mistreating the poor. This is the move the lectionary makes. I find the lectionary to be a great example of modernist biblical assumptions; note its penchant for excising elements that appear parochial, uncivilized, untoward, and offensive to modern, rational, educated sensibilities.

The modernist interpreter would also dispense with the magical notions in Acts 5 and instead look for what it tells us about how the ancient community

9. White, *Postmodernism 101*, 43.

was structured and so on. More likely, the modernist would move on to a more rational text that could speak to a reasonable person. Modernist approaches generally "explain away" the miraculous and force the texts to conform to a scientific, materialist worldview. By "materialist," I mean a view that accepts as fact only what is available to the five senses.

PROMISES AND PITFALLS OF MODERNIST APPROACHES

Modernist approaches are beneficial in that they force us to draw out and honor the original meaning of the text in its original context so that we don't simply make the texts mean whatever we want them to mean. Drawing the original meaning out is known as *exegesis*, from the Greek *ek* (out) plus *hēgeomai* (lead)," which in this context adds up to "explain." Reading whatever meaning one likes into the text without attention to or regard for its original historical context is known as *eisegesis*, from Greek *eis* (into) plus *hēgeomai* (lead). While there may be no single correct interpretation, historical criticism provides a spectrum of more and less reasonable interpretations, better and worse. Furthermore, certain aspects of human existence seem to be timeless and universal; historical analysis can show connections between present and past.

My first-semester seminary students often find the fruits of historical-critical inquiry both disturbing and liberating simultaneously. Ironically, modernist criticism of the Bible can be disturbing patently because the students have been taught to think in modernist categories: that is, for something to be "true," it must be linear, rational, noncontradictory, and historically, scientifically accurate. So if the Synoptics say that Jesus cleansed the temple at the end of his ministry but John says it happened at the start of his ministry, both cannot be "true." And if one thing in the Bible is proved to be "untrue," then how do we know that anything in it is true? And if we don't know which parts are true, then how can we "trust" the Bible? And if we can't "trust" the Bible, then what is our knowledge and faith based upon? Is it all just sinking sand?

On the other hand, most of my seminary students are thinking Christians, and they noticed some of these issues before they ever came to seminary. But they found that when they raised them in their church, they were seen as complicated people who "overanalyze," "just don't have enough faith," or at worst are insubordinate heretics. For them, coming together with others to dig deeply into the critical issues surrounding biblical interpretation is challenging, but life giving. It helps them to make much more sense of the Bible and its contents, and they discover that they may have been sold a bill

of goods or at least just settled for much less than they should have with respect to the wonderful, transformative potential that exists for thoughtful Christians who apply themselves to the serious but delightful task of critical biblical interpretation. Sure, it may be that for a while the Bible that once seemed as familiar as the back of their hand now becomes somewhat foreign as it is placed back in its original 1st-century context, where people thought quite differently from us in a number of ways. But that same phenomenon allows them to read the Bible with fresh eyes and so to be addressed by it in new ways. They are delighted to discover that their mind is a tool of faith rather than its enemy, that Christianity is more than just a nice, warm feeling or matter of the heart. As the blessed apostle Paul commands: "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your *minds*, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect" (Romans 12:2).

We should be aware, though, that even the historian will not escape his or her cultural categories and will, therefore, overlay them onto the investigation. The notion that one's interpretation is "objective" or "scientific" may turn out to be unaware at best, disingenuous at worst. In addition, historians may tend to overidentify modernity with antiquity and wrongly assume that categories we use also apply to antiquity.

As some Bible professors like to say, their job involves making the Bible seem both familiar *and* strange. That is, for those who have loved and relied upon the Bible their whole lives, it can be hard to hear a fresh, scandalous, or convicting word from it because the reader assumes she already knows what it all means: whatever she has learned in her church Bible study over the years. These students are often helped by learning that the Bible really was produced in a culture different from our own and that fact should not be overlooked.

On the other hand, some students show up to class with little or no prior experience with the Bible, so that the Bible seems so foreign and strange and distant that it's hard for them to imagine (a) confidently interpreting it with respect to its original context and (b) confidently interpreting it in a meaningful way for the church today. They may wonder how something written "way back then" in a faraway place and time could have any real authority for the lives of modern Christians. Historical-critical methodology, though, shows that the tools with which students are already familiar from studying other literature can be fruitfully and faithfully applied to Scripture. Scripture did not fall out of the sky of a piece. It was written by real Christians living in actual historical places. Such students often discover that our ancient brothers and sisters struggled with many of the same issues we do today, to the degree that their experience illumines our own. After all, Christians believe

in a God who has always acted in history in very particular ways and will continue to do so. The Christian God is not aloof and distant, but involved in the messiest details of human history as a whole and the lives of each individual within it.

POSTMODERN APPROACHES

Postmodern approaches developed as a reaction to the premises, and what some considered the excesses, of modernism. Postmodernism dates from the 1960s to the present and can be characterized as follows:

- always questioning
- suspicious of authority
- highly attuned to power dynamics among individuals, societies, and cultures
- wary of any project that seeks to eliminate differences
- extremely attentive to the ways language is used, since language creates realities
- marked by epistemological humility: we don't know as much as we pretend to know
- views the world through an ironic lens: things are not as they appear
- eschews notions of ABSOLUTE TRUTH in order to defend truth
- notions of truth are less like Stonehenge (solid, monolithic, unchanging, hard) and more like Etch-a-Sketch (fluid, sketchy, diverse, subject to revision as more information or news is revealed)

The postmodern interpreter would identify strongly with this part of "The Logical Song": "Won't you please, please tell me what we've learned; I know it sounds absurd, but please tell me who I am."[10] Postmoderns do not find differences among human beings and cultures a "problem" to be resolved. They delight in difference and, at their best, extend hospitality and respect to the Other, treating them as one's equal rather than a mind to be colonized by one's own convictions. They know that they can best come to understand themselves by dialoguing with the Other. This often makes them brave in engaging Bible passages that are "out there" from a modernist perspective. To my mind, they are like the X-gamers of biblical interpretation; they seek out the extremes in order to max out their potential development.

Anyone who refuses to assimilate or blindly to participate in groupthink or be a "model citizen" is threatening and should expect criticism. Jesus had this problem, as did the apostles after him. They would understand these lyrics:

10. Supertramp, "The Logical Song," *Breakfast in America* (A & M Records, 1979), available several places online (you can Google it).

"Now watch what you say or they'll be calling you a radical, liberal, fanatical, criminal. Won't you sign up your name? We'd like to feel you're acceptable, respectable, presentable, a vegetable!" We see what choice they made.

When our postmodern interpreter reads 1 Corinthians 11, she will wonder what kinds of questions it raises for the interpretive community. She will want to know where God is in the passage and what it means for the way we do life and community. Do we really think that we'll die if we take communion in an unworthy manner? What does this text say about God's nature? I was always taught that God was hiding in the bushes, waiting to zap me for any mistake. Is this true? And what does it say about the community? How does one discern the body? What *is* the body? Do we really see ourselves as separate from the world? Aren't we part of it? What is it that God condemns, and why is the world condemned if God created it? A conversation would ensue, and each contribution would be considered and would push to further questions and points of agreement and disagreement, with no actual punch line declared by the pastor or teacher two minutes before it's time to go. The same would happen with the Ananias and Sapphira passage.

Because I have chosen two particularly difficult biblical texts for this chapter, the reader may get the impression that all of this interpretive work is needed only for the hard stuff we encounter in our texts. Such is not the case—it applies to each and every passage.

Emergent Churches as a Postmodern Case Study

You may have heard of a recent trend in Christianity referred to as "the emergent movement." It consists largely of postmodern postevangelicals who are rediscovering the value of ancient practices while creatively contributing new ones, especially in embodied ways that engage all the senses and with an emphasis on art. Indeed, many denominations now have an emergent arm (Luthermergent, Presbymergent, Anglimergent, etc.) and the movement is thriving internationally (see http://www.emergentvillage.com). Participants tend to be people conversant with and heavily influenced by a postmodern worldview, though they differ from their secular counterparts in a number of ways. In what follows I want to sketch some characteristic features of these emerging approaches to Scripture in order to flesh out my description of postmodern interpretation and to familiarize readers with this current trend. I will present emergents at their best and, of course, in oversimplified terms given the brevity of my presentation.

Emerging churches are not seeker churches; emergents tend to have been formed in churches where the Bible is front and center, so they are familiar

with the stories. When you delve into the meaning of a passage with them, they are likely to say, "Well, I was always taught that the moral of that story was such-and-such." That is, they tend to be formed in communities where the goal of biblical interpretation is to *narrow* the meaning ideally to one point rather than to open it up and glory in the many possible layers and angles. Where so-called Bible-believing churches (BBCs) strive for univocality, emergents are drawn to polyvalence; where the BBCs try to simplify the text, emergents complexify. Both will tell you they aren't *making* the text simple (for the BBCs) or complex (for the emergents); the text itself *is* simple, or complex.

Emergents tend toward *hopeful irony* and *serious play*. They relish paradox, and this often gives them eyes to see and ears to hear because irony is a key feature of the Bible, the gospel, and the life of faith. God's power is made perfect in weakness? Losing your life to find it? Dying to live? A crucified messiah? The likes of you and me as God's hands and feet? Ironic.

Their sense of irony breeds hope and joy, not despair and cynicism. I think it's because they take God very seriously and themselves less seriously. That seems like the right proportion to me. They readily understand that we have this treasure in clay jars and they aren't wracked with guilt over it. God appears actually to enjoy human beings, so why hate our weaknesses and why pretend? Prima donnas and sanctimonious types do not fare well among emergents. Remember the *pneumatikoi* in the Corinthian church? The spiritual know-it-alls? Emergents have as much patience with them as Paul did.

Emergents note that Jesus took special interest in those whose lives were an obvious mess. So when they approach the text, they don't fear the ugly parts—they shine a spotlight on them and ask what they can tell us about God's work in the world and our lives. How do those texts move us toward hope, and in what ways do they implicate us as a community and as individuals?

The Bible is *iconic* for emergents; that is, it makes God visible, but it is not God. It makes Christ visible, but it is not Christ; it makes the work of the Spirit visible, but it is not the Spirit. It is a sign, and signs point to things; they are not the thing itself. When the icon is taken for the thing it's signifying, it becomes an idol. Thus, emergents eschew Bibleolatry.

Emergents are a *narrative* people as opposed to, say, doctrinal, dogmatic, systematic, or propositional. They love stories and gravitate toward the narrative material in both the Old and New Testaments. They are often written off as merely postevangelical postmodernists, but with respect to Scripture they differ greatly from secular postmodernists. Secular postmodernists are queasy about metanarratives; but emergents see the overarching story of God with us from Genesis to Revelation. They do not doubt God's living, active, challenging, life-altering, humbling presence in the past, present, or future; they only

seek to discern how their own story and that of their community fits in and what that implies for their lives from this point forward. Therefore, the real pull for them is the connection, or lack of, between their own experience and the Bible. They do not feel compelled to smush their experience into biblical categories. If there's a disconnect, they want to explore it and see if the "problem" has to do with the Bible or their own assumptions. One emergent has the following as her tagline at the bottom of her e-mail: "I believe in parables. I navigate life by using stories where I find them, and I hold tight to the ones that tell me new kinds of truth."[11]

Emergents are *whole-Bible* people. The lectionary approach can appear troublesome since it tends to clean things up. For emergents, the devil is in the details, especially the troubling details.

Emergents reject *binary paradigms*. Where others see either/or, they see both/and. Thus they do not abide a secular/sacred divide. Everything in the universe was created by God and is loved by God. They hear the call of the prophetic literature. Because they are heavily missional, they worry about God's world and feel personal, global responsibility. This makes them immerse themselves in biblical texts about the stranger and alien, the orphan and widow, the "least of these" in our midst. The kingdom of God (or reign of God, for those attentive to inclusive language) consumes them and convicts them. Therefore, hospitality and charity and inclusiveness are highly valued. Many emergents have experienced a sense of exclusion and being the odd person out, so they are sympathetic to the plight of the misfit.

Jesus is the canon within the canon for emergents. They relate to him and take note of the types of people he hung out with. They feel his call on their lives and try to live out his vision. Therefore in the New Testament the emphasis is on the Gospel stories. As one member of an emerging church recently wrote to me: "I am now trying (on my best days) to be a living text much like Jesus is for me. For me, I need Scripture to come alive, not just in the reading and hearing of it because I think the Bible is filled with wonderful and horrible stories that need to be heard, but I need to struggle with it, fight with it, love on it, be loved by it, create just worlds with it, etc" (used by permission). Emergents are missional; they are praxis oriented; this leads many to take political action.

Emerging churches consider the Bible to be "a member of the community" whose voice must be heard and respected but not blindly obeyed. The Bible is meant to open a conversation, not shut it down. I use the word "conversation" advisedly here because it's a key practice that appears in the movement.

11. Quoting Barbara Kingsolver, *Small Wonder* (New York: Harper-Collins Publishers, 2002), 6.

The worship service doesn't have a sermon: it has a "conversation."[12] In place of Sunday school, there are Adult Conversations. One could say that here emergents have been deeply influenced by postmodernism and *reader-response criticism*, wherein the text does not have meaning until the reader or reading community imbues it with such.[13]

On the other hand, we could argue that emergents model an ancient practice, a rabbinical approach to Scripture. Remember that in Jewish tradition one has both the Written Torah and the Oral Torah, both given to Moses. The Oral Torah was codified in writing around 200 CE by Judah the Prince and is called the Mishnah. The Babylonian Talmud, which modern Jews still use, was produced in the 5th century CE. Looking at the Talmud, you see a passage from the Mishnah (2nd century) in the middle of the page, along with the earliest commentary, called the Gemara (4–6th century). Around the outside is later commentary by other rabbis, including Rashi (1040–1105). The rabbis rarely agree on their interpretations. For Jews, the Talmud is the primary scriptural text, and it contains the many layers of ongoing conversation about the meaning of each passage. In other words, our Jewish brothers and sisters have *canonized conversation* and believe that God delights in ongoing process and conversation.

So, like the rabbis, emergents remain in dialogue with the tradition and see biblical interpretation as the work of each generation for its own context; the Bible is a living force to experience, not a cadaver to dissect. Interpretive certainty is elusive but certainty is not the point. Like the rabbis, emergents are passionate and confident and feel conviction about their interpretation, but not certainty. There's no need to resolve the debate, but we are constantly called to dig deeper and deeper and especially to puzzle over the, well, puzzling aspects of Scripture.

One might also find similarities between the emerging approach and the four senses of Scripture used by Catholics from the time of the church father Origen onward. A passage of Scripture is first to be interpreted *historically* (what did it mean to the original hearers? this is what is meant by the literal sense, which differs from Protestant notions of literalism); second, *allegorically* (so Moses is a type for Christ); third, *morally* (also called tropologically; this is the ethical life application for behavior); and fourth, *anagogically*, that is, in relation to heaven and afterlife and the final consummation of God's will for God's creation.

12. See, e.g., Doug Pagitt, *Preaching Re-imagined: The Role of the Sermon in Communities of Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005).

13. For an introduction to reader-response criticism, see "Reader-Response Criticism," in The Bible and Culture Collective, *The Postmodern Bible* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995), 20–69.

So, just where the emergents are accused by their BBC fellows for being most modern by steering away from the so-called literal, commonsense meaning of the Bible, that's actually where emergents are planted on very traditional ground, as viewed from many angles of their Judeo-Christian heritage! I wonder how aware BBCs are of talmudic and Catholic interpretive traditions, which certainly have a far greater claim to antiquity than modern biblicist notions, which are based on Enlightenment, Newtonian principles. We tend to think of multivalent readings as a newfangled, postmodern notion. But by their strategies, emergents show their bent for something old and something new, à la Matthew 13:52: "And he said to them, 'Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.'"

Emergents value *diversity* and *inclusivity*, which makes them *ecumenical*. Because of their epistemological humility and their knowledge of the destruction unleashed by those operating under the banner of ABSOLUTE TRUTH and strong lines of insiders/outsiders, emergents tend to show respect for other traditions. Their critics accuse them of a relativism that denies any truth, but that is an unfair accusation. Emergents believe that God is the author of all truth but that truth appears in many forms. They aren't afraid of allowing extrabiblical truth to influence their biblical interpretations. Indeed, these days it may be our scientists who are more spiritual and attuned to mystery than are many religionists. This explains why emergents, unlike their BBC compatriots, happily employ monastic disciplines in their spirituality (indeed, there is a whole neomonastic aspect to emergent Christianity). Again, their evangelical critics who are tied into modernist, scientific, analytic strategies of interpretation tend to be suspicious of these practices. Really, anything that comes from the Catholics makes most Southern Baptists squirm.

Emergent ecclesiology heavily shapes their biblical interpretation. In contrast to most forms of Christianity, it is nonhierarchical and assumes the Holy Spirit works among the gathered group to pronounce or ferret out the good news from a biblical text on any given day. Thus no one is considered to be an expert on God or to have the special prerogative of acting as God's mouthpiece. Yes, I am the New Testament expert at my church, but I'm not the God expert even though I'm ordained. Notions of authority work differently among emergents. Nothing and no one has unquestioned, prima facie, absolute authority; authority is earned and always provisional. How does this compare to your own tradition? "Figure out who has the authority to interpret Scripture in your church. That is, who will get listened to respectfully, and who won't? What do people have to do (or be) to get this status?"[14]

14. White, *Postmodernism 101*, 38.

Emergents tend to value education and be well read. It's nothing in the course of a gathering to hear names like Plato, Buber, Nietzsche, Moltmann, Caputo, Volf, Gadamer, or the postmodern giants like Lyotard, Derrida, and Foucault. They bring all of this to the biblical texts so that every angle is approached. Emergents tend to think, and this can make them high-maintenance people to pastor.

Emergents are extremely communal. They do not countenance a spirituality where it's "me, Jesus, and my Bible." They do *not* "Come to the Garden Alone." Well, maybe they do, but then they quickly text their friends or post their status on Facebook or Twitter to find out if what the Son of God disclosed was normal or concerning. This anti-lone-ranger urge is quite likely a reaction to the excesses of some BBCs' focus on salvation as an individual experience, whose main purpose is to ensure procurement of a mansion in the sky and avoid the fires of hell. Emergents certainly invite and expect individuals to do their spiritual work, whatever that may be, and they work from a notion of communal accountability, though mostly of a gentle, nonjudgmental sort. But by gentle and nonjudgmental I don't mean uninvolved. If you want insight into yourself, your emergent brothers and sisters will most likely offer observations; but they will not blow smoke since authenticity is a deep value of emergent communities. In that way, they seem to be somewhere between certain churches that busybody into your business inappropriately in a paternalistic, perhaps even cultish kind of way, and liberal churches that politely refrain from being in your business to any degree that matters for spiritual transformation.

Emergents tend to "do life together." In common parlance, you might say "they spend a lot of time together outside of church," but that would be a problematic statement on many counts. First of all, many don't meet in a physical church building at all. They rent a space here or there, or they meet in homes or in a restaurant. Second, the notion of "outside church" implies that one can move between church and life as if they are different spheres; no emergent would buy that. It's all of a piece, and one does not change one's persona, behavior, dress, speech, or conversation topics; one doesn't put on a "church face" to come to church and make the pastor and congregation believe one has it all together. Emergents are hyperlinked and extremely technology savvy, and social networks are a given. Just visit emergentvillage.com for 10 minutes and you'll understand what I mean.

This way of being church tends to draw in some unchurched people; they aren't seeking, but they come via relationships since church spreads throughout life. Many emergent churches contain the extremes: burnt Baptists and totally secular, even atheist folks. These people tend to feel welcome to contribute to the conversation during worship even as first-time visitors. So in terms of our present topic, Scripture's meaning is best discerned in *community*.

Emergents are heavy on incarnation, on embodied faith that involves all of the senses. The Bible might be acted out in surprising or poetic ways; people might be invited to draw, to make prayer beads as they reflect on what God is saying through the text, or to pull a Scripture out of a sandbox. Emergents tend to value art, and art certainly can present the biblical text in a new way. There is an emphasis on the Experiential. The Tactile. The Creative. The Artistic. There is a concern not to simply locate one's faith in one's head. But understand this: *Emergents want to be engaged, not simply entertained*; they don't need to be protected from the Bible; they don't need it watered down and made palatable; they want to talk about it as it appears. This seems different to me from "seeker-sensitive" interpretive practices.

If the Word of God became flesh and dwelt among us—that is, if the Word of God came out of the birth canal of a woman's body, grew, ate, went to the bathroom, bathed, struggled against demons, sweated, wept, exulted, was transfigured, was physically violated, and rotted away in a tomb just before being gloriously resurrected—then the Bible must have flesh on it. If a valley of dry bones can live again, then bones and blood and bread and flesh and bodies should never be left behind when we are trying to understand the grime and glory of Scripture. Any interpretation that denounces the material, created order, including our own bodies, should be suspect. From birth to death our bodies swell and shrink; they are wet with milk and sweat and urine and vomit and sex and blood and water, and wounds that fester and stink and are healed and saved and redeemed and die and are resurrected. If you can't glory in or at least talk about these basic realities in church while reading Scripture, then how can Scripture truly intersect with or impact life? We might as well just go read a Jane Austen novel—though I doubt we'll ever be transformed or made whole or saved by it.

PROMISES AND PITFALLS OF POSTMODERN APPROACHES

Postmodern approaches remind us of the power that readers have, collectively or individually, over the text when determining its meaning. They remind us that texts cannot literally speak for themselves; they are always interpreted by readers who come from particular philosophical, epistemological, cultural locations that influence and, to some degree, predetermine the kinds of interpretive outcomes that ensue. These approaches call us to be self-aware and honest about the biases we bring to the text.

They also help us to regain a sense of imaginative play when engaging the texts; Scripture becomes a wide-open playground rife with delights to

discover rather than a small dingy gray prison with solid bars that restrict us, "protect" us from ourselves, and insist that play is dangerous. Postmoderns will not settle for merely understanding what *is* and submitting to that; they do cartwheels in a field of what *may be*.

Regarding potential pitfalls of postmodernism, in its extreme forms it may sometimes "throw the baby out with the bathwater" in its critique of institutionalized Christianity. It can lead to elitism and arrogance in its rejection of what came before, as if its practitioners are somehow smarter, more honest, and more insightful than any Christians before them. Cynicism can mask ignorance. Notions of truth or authorial intention can be jettisoned to such a degree that one wonders what the point would be anyway of gathering together in a group to study and interpret a given text. Instead of the text having absolute power over the reader so as to rob the reader of the opportunity to challenge the text, now the reader has so much power over the text that the text cannot challenge or confront the reader in any worthwhile way. At their best, postmodern approaches can act prophetically to call a morally flabby church to stand up for justice and the least of these; at their worst, they become exercises in solipsistic navel-gazing.

What of the tradition do postmodern Christians hope to pass on to the children in their churches and how do they plan to do that?

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Break into small groups and discuss the 1 Corinthians passage. Have one person in the group remain silent and observe the process. Try to note some of the assumptions about Scripture as God's address to the Christian community. What methods of interpretation do people in the group use to understand the text? What stands out and what's missing? Reconvene in a large group and debrief the process.
2. Break into small groups and discuss the Acts passage. Have one person in the group remain silent and observe the process. Try to identify some of the assumptions about Scripture as God's address to the Christian community. What methods of interpretation do people in the group use to understand the text? What stands out and what's missing? Reconvene in a large group and debrief the process.
3. What do you hope for your church and for yourself with respect to the Bible?
4. How does the Bible actually function in your church when it is gathered as a community (e.g., Sunday school for all ages; midweek gatherings; worship)?
5. Do people bring Bibles with them? Are they in the pews? Is the text projected on a screen?

6. How does the Bible function in the lives of the individuals in your church? Does anyone read it daily? Family devotionals? Never read it? Why or why not?
7. Would your people consider the Bible to be authoritative for your church or for the individuals in it? What would they mean by "authoritative"? Would they consider it sacred? What would they mean by "sacred"?
8. What aspects of modernist interpretive strategies would you say are helpful or important?
9. What aspects of postmodern interpretive strategies would you say are helpful or important?

3

Four Gospels

Problem or Gift?

Have you ever wondered why there are four different Gospels in the New Testament instead of one? In fact, having four sometimes creates confusion because certain discrepancies arise. In that case, how do we know which account is "true"? As the saying goes, "A person with one watch always knows what time it is; a person with two watches is never sure."

Take, for instance, the story about Jesus Cleansing the Temple (sometimes referred to as his "temple tantrum"). In the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke), this event occurs at the end of Jesus' ministry and provides the final straw for Jesus' opponents, who decide he has to be killed; in John, this event occurs at the beginning of Jesus' ministry. Given these data, the reader has to decide whether (1) the Synoptics are right and John is wrong; (2) to harmonize the accounts and try to argue that the event occurred twice, once at the beginning and once at the end; or (3) there is another way to view the situation.

TO HARMONIZE OR NOT TO HARMONIZE?

Many Gospel readers automatically and unconsciously conflate and harmonize the Gospels as a way to "solve" apparent differences, contradictions, aporiae (textual seams), lacunae (gaps, omissions), additions, and so on. The practice is promoted and encouraged by the church, particularly through liturgical habits such as sermons on the Seven Last Words from the Cross. Let's briefly explore the harmonizing tendency and alternatives to it, attending at every turn to the logic and motivation behind each approach as well

as what may be lost or gained by using various approaches. I will emphasize the usefulness of employing multiple approaches, whether diachronic or synchronic.[1] To do this, I will need to help readers discern for themselves why they are reading the texts anyway, what they hope to find there, if anything, and which techniques fit different aims. Ultimately, I will invite readers to allow the beauty, complexity, and, at times, mystery of the texts and the process of interpretation to reveal the beauty, complexity, and mystery of the God to whom the texts testify.

TO HARMONIZE

This is a true story. Just as I was sitting at my computer about to write this section of this chapter, I received an e-mail from A Word a Day, a site managed by Anu Garg. The entry was as follows:

> **maudlin**
>
> **PRONUNCIATION:** (MAWD-lin)
>
> **MEANING:** *adjective:* Overly sentimental.
>
> **ETYMOLOGY:** After Mary Magdalene, a Biblical character who was a follower of Jesus. In medieval art she was depicted as a penitent weeping for her sins (she washed the feet of Jesus with her tears) and her name became synonymous with tearful sentimentality.
>
> The name Magdalene means "of Magdala" in Greek and is derived after a town on the Sea of Galilee. The name Magdala, in turn, means "tower" in Aramaic. So here we have a word coined after a person, who was named after a place, which was named after a thing.
>
> In an allusion to her earlier life, Mary Magdalene's name has sprouted another eponym, magdalene, meaning a reformed prostitute.[2]

This is a perfect example of the problem of harmonizing: conflating different stories from the various Gospels to create a single story, though that single invented story does not appear whatsoever in the New Testament. But don't take my word for it.

1. *Diachronic* refers to approaches that study the development of a text over time, from Greek *dia-* (through) + *chronos-* (time), from the oral stages through the commitment to writing and editing. *Synchronic* refers to approaches that attend to the final form of text without regard for its historical development over time.

2. http://wordsmith.org/words/maudlin.html.

The Facts about Mary Magdalene (According to the Bible)[3]

Mary Magdalene in Matthew

Mary Magdalene appears first (canonically speaking) in Matthew 27:55–56, along with another Mary and another woman watching the crucifixion: "Many women were also there, looking on from a distance; they had followed Jesus from Galilee and had provided for him. Among them were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee." She appears next with "the other Mary" in 27:61, "sitting opposite the tomb." Finally, she and "the other Mary" go to the tomb on Easter: "After the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb" (28:1).

Mary Magdalene in Mark

In Mark, as in Matthew, Mary Magdalene appears only at the crucifixion and tomb:

> There were also women looking on from a distance; among them were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joses, and Salome. (15:40)
>
> Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joses saw where the body was laid. (15:47)
>
> When the sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. (16:1)
>
> Now after he rose early on the first day of the week, he appeared first to Mary Magdalene, from whom he had cast out seven demons. (16:9)

Mary Magdalene in Luke

In Luke, Mary Magdalene first appears during Jesus' ministry along with the disciples and some other important women:

> Soon afterwards he went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. The twelve were with him, as well as some women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, and Joanna, the wife of Herod's steward Chuza, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their resources. (8:1–3)

3 See also Jaime Clark-Soles, "Introducing the Real Mary Magdalene." No pages. http://sbl-site.org/educational/TBnewsletter.aspx.

In narrating Easter morning, Luke speaks of unnamed women who go to the tomb, find Jesus risen, and go back to proclaim the gospel to the disciples. At that point Luke names them: "Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles" (24:10).

Mary Magdalene in John[4]

Finally, Mary Magdalene appears in a crucial role in the Gospel of John. In John, Mary Magdalene is standing right at the foot of the cross and witnesses the birth of the church as Jesus gives his mother and beloved disciple to one another: "Meanwhile, standing near the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, 'Woman, here is your son.' Then he said to the disciple, 'Here is your mother.' And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home" (19:25–27).

As if that were not a powerful enough scene, Mary Magdalene becomes the first to encounter the risen Lord by herself and the first preacher of the resurrection in Christian history, according to John. It is *she* who proclaims the resurrection of Jesus to the disciples.

> Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. (20:1)
>
> But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!" (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"; and she told them that he had said these things to her. (20:11–18)

4. For visual images of Mary Magdalene in John, see http://catholic-resources.org/John/Art20.html.

Mary Magdalene: An Anointing Prostitute? NOT!

You the reader have just read all of the passages in the Bible that refer to Mary Magdalene. Where do you find in these texts any mention of her anointing Jesus' feet or being a prostitute? You don't. Then why is it that if you walk up to most Christians and say, "Quick. Tell me everything you know about Mary Magdalene," you will likely hear all about her prostitute ways and her anointing act (which never appears in Scripture), but nothing about Scripture's testimony to her role in supporting Jesus' ministry (Luke 8), her faithful appearance at the cross, her witness to the resurrection, her role as an apostle (defined as someone who walked with Jesus and was sent to proclaim the good news of his resurrection), and John's designation of her as the first preacher in Christian history?[5]

Harmonization leads to harlotization. The urge to simplify and reduce to a lowest common denominator has led to combining the various anointing stories on the one hand and some of the Marys on the other. Let's sort them out so that we get clear on what the Bible *actually* says versus what interpreters of the Bible have *said* that it says.

The Anointings

Anointing in Matthew

In Matthew 26:6–13, Jesus is in Bethany at the home of Simon the leper:

> Now while Jesus was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, a woman came to him with an alabaster jar of very costly ointment, and she poured it on his *head* as he sat at the table. But when the disciples saw it, they were angry and said, "Why this waste? For this ointment could have been sold for a large sum, and the money given to the poor." But Jesus, aware of this, said to them, "Why do you trouble the woman? She has performed a good service for me. For you always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me. By pouring this ointment on my body she has prepared me for burial. Truly I tell you, wherever this good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her."

An unnamed woman appears and anoints Jesus' *head* (not his feet). The woman is not a prostitute, not a sinner, and is not named Mary. There are no tears and she needs no forgiveness. She has served Jesus; he has not served her.

5. For a provocative, scholarly treatment of Mary Magdalene, see Jane Schaberg with Melanie Johnson-DeBaufre, *Mary Magdalene Understood* (New York: Continuum, 2006).

Anointing in Mark

In Mark 14:3–10, as in Matthew, Simon is identified as a leper. An unnamed woman appears and anoints *Jesus' head*. In Matthew, it's the disciples who chastise the woman. Not so in Mark. John, on the other hand, singles out Judas Iscariot as the culprit. Again, observe that the woman is not a prostitute, not a sinner, and is not named Mary. There are no tears and she needs no forgiveness. She has served Jesus; he has not served her.

Anointing in Luke

In Luke 7:37–50 the anointing occurs at the home of a man named Simon, as in Matthew and Mark, but this Simon is a Pharisee, not a leper. There is no mention of Bethany (the last city mentioned is Nain). An unnamed woman who is labeled a "sinner" (not a prostitute) entered and "stood behind him at his *feet*, weeping, and began to bathe his feet with her tears and to dry them with her hair. Then she continued kissing his feet and anointing them with the ointment." Simon is offended so Jesus tells a story that indicts Simon, but Jesus extends forgiveness to the woman, saying that her faith has "saved" her. Unlike in Matthew, Mark, and John, this act is not a service to Jesus that foreshadows his death. It is placed far earlier in Jesus' ministry, and Luke does not tie it to the Passion. This story has obviously been erroneously imposed upon Mary Magdalene and has given rise to the notion of her as a tearful penitent, a reformed "bad girl of the Bible."

Anointing in John

In John 12 Jesus is in Bethany, the town where the siblings Mary, Martha, and the resuscitated Lazarus reside.

> Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' *feet*, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" (He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.) Jesus said, "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me." (12:3–8)

This Mary is not a "sinner" and is not Magdalene. Like the woman in Luke, she anoints Jesus' feet and uses her hair, but there are no tears and it has nothing to do with repentance. As in Matthew and Mark, the anointing woman is shown as understanding who Jesus is and what fate soon awaits him

in a way the disciples do not. In Matthew and Mark, the woman is scolded by multiple detractors; in John, that role falls upon Judas Iscariot alone.

The Named Marys

Good luck, reader, sorting out all the Marys!

Marys in Matthew

At least two Marys appear in Matthew: Mary, Jesus' mother (who appears by name[6] at 1:16, 18, 20; 2:11; and 13:55), and Mary Magdalene (who appears at 27:56, 61; and 28:1). In Matthew 27:56 we read: "Among them were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee." There are at least two women here, probably three. In Mark, Mary, Jesus' mother, is named as the mother of James and Joses (Joseph), so it's not unreasonable to assume that this Mary in Matthew 27 is Jesus' mother. The mother of the sons of Zebedee is presumably a third woman. Matthew 27:61 and 28:1 refer to "the other Mary." The only other Mary consistently presented in Matthew and Mark is Jesus' mother, so it may be a reference to her. If not, it's a third, mysterious Mary.

Marys in Mark

Mark has two Marys: Jesus' mother and Mary Magdalene. Jesus' mother first appears by name at 6:3:[7] "Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary [that makes her Jesus' mother] and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?" Here Mary is the mother of Jesus, James, Joses, Judas, Simon, and multiple daughters. So when Mark refers in 15:40 to "Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joses," it may indicate Jesus' mother. Same thing in Mark 15:47 where we hear of Mary, the mother of Joses. I assume that's the same Mary that the author refers to in 6:3 and 15:40 as the author ties this Mary to Joses. In 16:1 the author refers to Mary the mother of James; again, perhaps this refers to the Mary first mentioned in 6:3 and then 15:40, Jesus' mother. Mary Magdalene appears at 15:40, 47; 16:1 (and 16:9 if you're an advocate of the longer ending).

Marys in Luke

In addition to Jesus' mother (Luke 1:27, 30, 34, 38, 39, 46, 56; 2:5, 16, 19, 34) and Magdalene (8:2; 24:10), Luke includes Mary, the sister of Martha (10:39,

6. She appears unnamed at Matthew 12:46–47, but here we are interested only in the appearances of the name Mary.

7. She appears unnamed at Mark 3:31–32, but here we are interested only in the appearances of the name Mary.

42). In that story, remember, Martha is engaged in domestic duties while Mary "has chosen the better part" by sitting at Jesus' feet and listening (she does *not* anoint said feet; also there is no mention that Mary and Martha have a brother Lazarus at all). Luke 24:10 speaks of Mary the mother of James, which, as indicated by Mark and Matthew, probably means Jesus' mother. If it's not Jesus' mother, there's a mysterious Mary. So there are at least three Marys in Luke: Jesus' mother, Mary Magdalene, and the Mary who is Martha's sister. None is a prostitute, sinner, or anointer.

Marys in John

John names three Marys: Mary, the sister of Lazarus and Martha (11:1, 2, 19, 20, 28, 31, 32, 45; 12:3); Mary Magdalene (19:25; 20:1, 11, 16, 18); and Mary, the wife of Clopas (19:25). Though Jesus' mother appears in the Gospel, John never names her.

By reviewing the data, we find that there is *no* Mary who is a prostitute, and the only Mary who anoints is not Magdalene but Martha's sister and only in John. The harmonizing tendency has created a character who never actually appears in Scripture! In 591 that harmonization was made official by Pope Gregory the Great, who declared: "She whom Luke calls the sinful woman, whom John calls Mary [of Bethany], we believe to be the Mary from whom seven devils were ejected according to Mark."[8] Our poor 6th-century ancestors had no way to fight back, however, since they did not have access to the Bible (or much education) except through church officials. We, on the other hand, have no excuse for tolerating gross misrepresentations of the details of the biblical texts. Shame on Pope Gregory.

One might work through all of this and throw up one's hands and say, "It's too hard to keep all this straight. Who cares?" I would argue that Scripture matters enough to do the work of keeping it straight. I would also argue that laziness should not be a warrant for rewriting Scripture. If one is going to rewrite Scripture by simplifying it, why stop there? Why not just scrap the text altogether and write a new, simpler story that one finds easier to deal with and "keep straight"? In other words, making such a move indicates that one does not actually consider the texts authoritative; they cease to be Scripture. The harlotization of Mary Magdalene (not to mention the Samaritan woman of John 4) has done damage to Mary Magdalene and the legacy the authors intended for her and has, at the very least, contributed to the church's ongoing negative view of women, their leadership in the church, and the nature of female sexuality.

8. Pope Gregory the Great, in a sermon on September 21, 591: *Homily 33*, in Patrologia latina (PL) 76, col. 1239; reported at http://www.catholic.net/index.php?size=mas&id=2886&option=dedestaca.

Seven Last Words from the Cross

I wonder if the church's Holy Week practice of preaching on Jesus' so-called "Seven Last Words from the Cross" perpetuates a harmonizing tendency among Christians.

No one Gospel depicts Jesus as saying all of these seven sentences; the list can be created only by combining all four Gospels into one long story, filling in the "gaps" in one Gospel with caulk from the other Gospels. Harmonizing. What is gained and what is lost by such a move? One might argue that this tradition is less problematic than that of Mary Magdalene insofar as the words ascribed to Jesus actually appear somewhere in the Bible itself. Certainly reflecting upon the cross during Lent is a desirable Christian practice; but the Seven Last Words tradition may tempt us to do so at the expense of each Gospel's particularity.[9]

It would be far better to consider Jesus' passion in each Gospel separately; in fact, not doing so gives the impression of a very confused, moody, erratic Jesus on the cross. The way each Gospel writer tells the story of the passion is tied to the way each has presented Jesus before the passion. Each Gospel is a self-contained piece of literature and should be read on its own terms first so that the reader understands the major themes and techniques and convictions of the evangelists. Once that's done, one can fruitfully compare the Gospels, note the similarities and differences, and then ponder the significance of those differences for the original hearers as well as for our own theologies today.

The Seven Last Words

1. "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34).
2. "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise" (Luke 23:43).
3. "When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, 'Woman, here is your son.' Then he said to the disciple, 'Here is your mother'" (John 19:26–27).
4. "Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?" that is, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matt. 27:46).
5. "I am thirsty" (John 19:28).
6. "It is finished" (John 19:30).
7. "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit" (Luke 23:46).

9. Granted, if each of the seven words from the cross is treated in an entirely different service with different music and different speakers, harmonizing may be less likely. Maybe.

In Matthew and Mark, for instance, Jesus utters his cry of dereliction. But any serious student of the Fourth Gospel knows that John would never depict Jesus as crying out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me," since in John, Jesus is equal to God and, in fact, participated in creation. As such, Jesus knows everything (John 2:24–25), and he confidently and fluidly unfolds the plan for what John calls Jesus' glorification and exaltation on the cross. When the work that he came to do is complete, Jesus says so: "It is finished" (John 19:30). Again, it would not make sense for John's Jesus to say, "Father into your hands I commend my spirit" for a number of reasons. First, Jesus repeatedly notes in John that "I and the Father are one." Second, the Spirit in John (and only in John) is called the Paraclete (Advocate, Comforter) and is bestowed upon Jesus' followers at the time of his death.

Jesus is quite reticent in Mark; notice that he makes only that one poignant statement from the cross, a bereft cry. Mark's Jesus could never say, "Woman, here is your son. . . . Here is your mother," as he does in John because Mark made it clear in chapter 14 that Jesus had been utterly deserted by his followers (14:50); some women looked on, but only "from a distance" (Mark 15:40). On the other hand, Jesus is quite talkative from the cross in both Luke and John. Anything he says in Luke he says only in Luke; likewise with John.

To harmonize the Seven Last Words profoundly affects the work of Christology, that is, the area of Christian doctrine devoted to the nature of Jesus the Christ and his work. When we mesh all of the distinct Gospel narratives, we create a Jesus that none of the evangelists' own original audiences would have recognized since they did not have access to four different Gospels placed side by side as we do. Blessing or curse?

NOT TO HARMONIZE

From the 2nd century onward, certain people have tried to remedy the "problem" of four Gospels, which are not identical, by producing a harmony of the four Gospels in which the details of each Gospel are taken and fitted into a single overarching narrative so as to eliminate any apparent contradictions. Most famously, Tatian's *Diatessaron* was constructed in Syria in the 2nd century and continued to function authoritatively there until the 5th century.[10] Irenaeus, a 2nd-century bishop in what is now Lyons, France, was the first

10. *The Jefferson Bible*, or, *The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth*, created by Thomas Jefferson (ca. 1820; published, Washington, DC: National Museum, 1885), follows some of the same tendencies, but it has other aims besides a thorough unified chronological rendering of all the Gospel data: http://www.beliefnet.com/resourcelib/docs/62/The_Jefferson_Bible_The_Life_Morals_of_Jesus_of_Nazareth_1.html.

> "But it is not possible that the Gospels can be either more or fewer in number than they are. For since there are four zones of the world in which we live, and four principal winds, while the church has been scattered throughout the world, and since the 'pillar and ground' of the Church is the Gospel and the spirit of life, it is fitting that she should have four pillars, breathing incorruption on every side, and vivifying human afresh. From this fact, it is evident that the Logos, the fashioner [*demiourgos*] of all, he that sits on the cherubim and holds all things together, when he was manifested to humanity, gave us the gospel under four forms but bound together by one spirit." (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.11.8.)

to argue in favor of four Gospels. Perhaps he did so in reaction to Tatian's *Diatessaron*, to Marcion's insistence that only the Gospel of Luke should be used, and to the gnostic dependence upon John alone, and so on. In the 4th century, the Christian canon was defined, and we have had four canonical Gospels since then. The church, then, canonized diversity from the start. Presumably the church could have canonized Tatian's *Diatessaron* or some other harmony and therefore made it such that later Christians would not have to deal with inconsistencies. But we have been given (gifted with) four Gospels, not one; Scripture is revelatory literature that has the power to transform. But the texts can't reveal if we don't allow them to speak, if we try to smooth over inconsistencies and puzzles and pretend they aren't there. Perhaps if we revel in them, they will reveal. If we suppress them, they can't surprise us.

QUESTIONS OF GENRE

What kind of literature is a Gospel anyway? Clearly it's a narrative, but what kind of narrative? Is it most like a historical account? If so, from whose perspective—first person or third person? Is it more like historical fiction? It should be obvious that the Gospels do not approximate a news report. Is it like an ancient novel? Notice that in each Gospel the narrator writes from an omniscient perspective. He or she can tell us what a character is thinking in their head but never says out loud. He can tell us what is transpiring in the praetorium between Jesus and Pilate (John 18:33) while also training our eyes on Peter's encounter outside the gates (18:16). Obviously a finite person cannot have actual access to all of this information simultaneously. The authors of the Gospels have created a narrative, and the Gospels follow literary conventions.

They make heavy use of symbolism (I am the Vine; I am the Good Shepherd; my flesh is true food, my blood is true drink); allegory (see the story of the King Who Gave a Great Banquet in Matt. 22); parables and other figures of speech (the kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed . . .); and hyberbole (if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out). Jesus loves to tell stories to make his point. Take the parables of the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son. When Jesus tells these stories, he's not entertaining his audience with a recounting of something historical that he has witnessed; he's conveying truth by means of story. The characters don't have to be historical, and the action doesn't have to conform to every literal historical constraint of its period to be "true." Read good fiction and poetry, and you'll know what I mean.

Story?

Truth, Belief, Reality, and History. For many courses that I teach, I assign the incisive chapters from Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* titled "Rebellion" and "The Legend of the Grand Inquisitor." Is the Legend of the Grand Inquisitor "true"? Well, what do you mean by true—that it happened in some point in history and was properly recorded and notarized? No. Is it true? Of course. Is Ivan "real"? Should we conduct a Quest for the historical Ivan? Must we dig behind the text to discover whether Dostoyevsky knew a historical man named Ivan Karamazov? Do we have to discern which part of Ivan, if any, is really a projection of Dostoyevsky's own personality and then discard Dostoyevsky's influence, or can we simply read Ivan as "real" just as he stands in the text—conveying shattering truths about the human situation? Is fiction "true"? Are the biblical stories "true"?

In connection with this question, which always comes up with respect to the Gospels, I show a clip from the movie *Secondhand Lions*. Robert Duvall plays Uncle Hub, who has told his young nephew, Walter, many stories about his heroic, fairy-tale-like adventures in his younger days, part of which involves falling in love with a beautiful princess named Jasmine. But Jasmine died in childbirth, along with her baby. Heartbroken, Hub went back to the Foreign Legion and fought for another 40 years, alone. One night Walter challenges the truth of these tales. Hub responds with an eloquent, provocative speech about the relationship between belief and truth: "Just because somethin' isn't true, that's no reason you can't believe in it." He goes on to explain that we are best shaped by believing in certain ideals whether they are true or not: that true love never dies, that honor outweighs power or money, and that good will eventually win over evil.

For some Christians—and you, dear reader, may be one—it is the power of stories that is important, not notions of how closely a particular recounting

aligns with "what really happened" (as if any human being could actually give an unbiased, uninterpreted account of any particular historical event). For them, even if someone could prove that the Prodigal Son event never happened historically, it would not make the story less true since, most likely, they've experienced that story in their own lives or the lives of those close to them. Read John 9. Historically speaking, I don't know whether that blind guy ever existed, but I do know that that story happens every day around the world. Every day some people look at those suffering from a particular illness and ask, in their own way, "Who sinned that this man was born blind?" And every day Jesus tries to set the record straight by reforming the theology of those who would ask such a question while simultaneously healing the one born blind. And those who have found their lives healed in some way by Jesus embrace the gift and then courageously follow Jesus, even though they must endure the wrath and hatred and condescension of the religious know-it-alls in their churches or workplaces or homes. And every day they rest in their knowledge that though they were blind, now they see. And with that, they step out on faith, praising God. That's true.

Recently I taught John at a weekend preaching/lecture series. After discussing John 9 a quiet, unobtrusive woman who had faithfully come to the lectures and worship services, accompanied by her daughter who has Down Syndrome, came up to me with tears in her eyes and said, "So, you're saying it's *not* my fault that my daughter has Down Syndrome because I had her too late?" (That is, indeed, the point that I had made, but only because the text made the point first.) I was so moved by her courage, perseverance, and faith and simultaneously so angry that any Christian would burden this poor woman even further by their nescience. Stories are powerful, whether they "actually happened" or not.

History?

Other Christians find talk of myth and symbol and allegory uninteresting at best, dangerous at worst. For them, the truth of the Gospels must be grounded in historical fact(s). Probably most Christians would agree that some aspects of historicity are important to their faith. Once I asked a group of Christians whether or not it matters that the Gospels are historical in some sense. One man strongly answered yes, and I asked, "What percent would have to be true for it to count?" He replied, only half-jokingly, "87%." Christianity is a faith tradition grounded in the conviction that God acts in history—always has, always will. God gets involved in the grimy and glorious details of human life in every epoch in very particular ways with very particular people (usually very unlikely types) with astonishing results. Including each of us. Christianity is a

wonderful, if perplexing, exercise in considering the importance of story and history and how the two relate.

If you want to determine your own comfort zone in this area, ask yourself: "What features of the Gospels *must* be historically accurate for my faith to stand?" The resurrection? The Virgin Birth? Herod's Slaughter of the Innocents? Jesus' birth year? Jesus' death day? The Last Supper as told by John? The Last Supper as related by the Synoptics? Jesus' words from the cross in Mark? Luke? John? All of them? Then ask yourself, Why these and not others? Why are they absolutely essential to your faith? What would be lost if the story were proved to be unhistorical?

An Exercise: *Big Fish*

Sometimes it's useful to explore these important ideas using a less emotionally charged text than one's Scriptures. The text can be written or visual. I recommend, then, that you watch the movie *Big Fish* alone or in a group and consider some of the questions provided below. At the very least, the movie *Big Fish* gets at the issues of

- the relationship between story/fact/truth
- the nature of communities that share well-known, oft-repeated (even if embellished) stories
- the ability and need to *find* the symbolic in the mundane or to *create* the symbolic from the mundane

On the day of Will Bloom's wedding, his father, Edward, steals the show by once again telling the epic tale of why he wasn't present at his son's birth: using his wedding ring, he was out catching a giant legendary fish. Will has had enough of this story, and in fact all of Edward's tall tales; he's tired of the fact that his dad is long on stories and short on facts. Will longs to know his father in a real way, but his investigative questions are always met with another (hardly believable) tale. Will loses faith and respect for his father and concludes that he cannot trust or know his father. Frustrated, Will ceases relationship and communication with his father for three years.

When his father has a stroke and is hospitalized, Will returns to Alabama from Paris with his pregnant wife, Josephine. In a series of flashbacks, we see Edward's life through his tales, a life peopled with mythic figures. There's the witch with the glass eye who tells him his future, including his death; there's the giant Karl, with whom he braves a haunted forest only to arrive at the small town of Spectre, wherein live an assortment of interesting characters. It's an idyllic town that houses the missing poet Norther Winslow and a young girl named Jenny to whom Edward becomes attached; he leaves Spectre but

promises Jenny he will return. He and Karl go to work for the circus, and there Edward spots the love of his life. He works three years for Amos Calloway: Calloway gives Edward one clue a month about the girl whom Edward admires. After three years he learns her name is Sandra Templeton and she studies at Auburn University. Edward then wins Sandra by collecting all the daffodils (her favorite flower) from five states and enduring violent treatment at the hands of her current beau. He marries Sandra but is sent to the Korean War, where he meets Siamese twins Ping and Jing, who help him make it back to the United States, where he promises to make them stars. Meanwhile, Sandra has received word that he's dead so she's surprised upon his return. He becomes a traveling salesman and helps former poet Norther Winslow rob a bank and become a millionaire. Winslow gives Edward $10,000 and Edward buys Sandra's dream house.

Questions to consider:

1. Are Edward Bloom's stories true or false? Is this a good question? Why, or why not?
2. Will, the son, is always trying to dig through the stories to get to the historical Ed. How would one get to the historical Ed? What criteria would you use? What would be the point?
3. Are the stories in the Gospels true or false? Is this a good question? Why, or why not?
4. Some people search through the Gospels to get to the historical Jesus. How would one do that? What criteria would you use? What's the point of such a project?
5. Think about Scripture in relation to the movie's statement at the end that we can become the stories. Short story author Tobias Wolff writes: "That sense of kinship is what makes stories important to us. The pleasure we take in cleverness and technical virtuosity soon exhausts itself in the absence of any recognizable human landscape. We need to feel ourselves acted upon by a story, outraged, exposed, in danger of heartbreak and change. Those are the stories that endure in our memories, to the point where they take on the nature of memory itself. In this way the experience of something read can form us no less than the experience of something lived through."* What does this mean for those of us who have a body of scriptural texts?
6. What do you make of the scene in which Will, ever the literalist, perhaps a slave to facts, turns to story in the moment of crisis (his dad's final moments)? What could that mean for us?

*Tobias Wolff, ed., *The Vintage Book of American Short Stories* (New York: Vintage Contemporaries, 1994), xiii.

Will is still impatient with all these stories and aims to discover the truth of his father's life. Rifling through Edward's office, Will finds a letter from Spectre and decides to go there. He arrives at the house of Jennifer Hill, whom he suspects was his father's mistress. As it turns out, Edward was the town's savior; when Spectre went bankrupt, Edward bought it and had it restored, with the help of his friends. Though Jenny loved Edward, he remained true to Sandra. He didn't have an affair with Jenny; he saved her home and the life she loved.

Will goes to visit his father in the hospital and finds that Edward is only partly conscious and cannot speak much. His health is clearly failing. He asks Will to tell him a story of how it all ends. Clumsily but poignantly, Will learns how to tell a story, and one that matters. He narrates Edward's death; no, he narrates Edward *into* his death. In Will's story, they escape from the hospital and make their way to the river where the big fish who swallowed Edward's wedding ring lives. All of the larger-than-life figures who have populated Edward's stories appear in the story to greet Edward on this final journey. Will carries his father into the river, where Edward becomes a big fish. As Will finishes the story, his father exclaims, "Exactly!" and passes away. At the funeral Will meets the characters he's heard about so many times. As it turns out, Karl isn't really a giant, just a large man. Ping and Jing aren't conjoined; they're just twins who are from Siam. When Will's own son is born, Will passes on the stories, stating that his father *became* his stories and thereby achieved a kind of immortality.

BOTH/AND/AND/AND: FOUR SENSES OF SCRIPTURE

Sometimes readers reduce the differences among the four Gospels to a game of textual telephone. Remember that game you played while sitting in a circle? The first person whispers a few sentences in the ear of the person next to her; then to the best of her abilities, that person relays the message to the person sitting next to her, and so on until, when the last person receives the message, he says it out loud. Usually during the transmission process the message undergoes considerable change, often to the point of being unrecognizable to the originator.

Another analogy I often encounter among people who don't quite know what to do with the variety among the Gospels is that of reporting the details of a car wreck. When asking four different people to report what they saw and how they interpreted what they saw, one will receive four different accounts that do not mesh. Everyone views events through a particular lens that makes them notice some details while missing others; each person brings

background experience that may bias their own telling of the story. Perhaps they recently caused a wreck or were the victim of a wreck; this may influence their interpretation of the "facts."

But the Gospels aren't a telephone game or a car wreck. To analogize them as such demeans the intention and care that went into their creation. These are texts that have shaped and transformed lives for thousands of years, not a silly game or momentary dip into a common occurrence.

Unlike Protestant Christians, Jews and Catholics have not been as locked into a single literal historical reading of Scripture. The rabbis are famous for wrangling with one another and even with God over the ambiguities in Scripture. They never deny those contradictions or ambiguities; rather, ambiguity simply gives cause for further study, conversation, and debate. For example, take this passage:

> Rabbi Eliezer and some other rabbis were having a dispute over whether a certain oven was clean or unclean according to Scripture: "On that day R. Eliezer brought forward every imaginable argument, but they did not accept them. Said he to them: 'If halakhah (i.e., the laws of Scripture), agrees with me, let this carob-tree prove it!' Thereupon the carob-tree was torn a hundred cubits out of its place—others affirm, four hundred cubits. 'No proof can be brought from a carob-tree,' they retorted. Again he said to them: 'If the halakhah agrees with me, let the stream of water prove it!' Whereupon the stream of water flowed backwards. 'No proof can be brought from a stream of water,' they rejoined. Again he urged, 'If the halakhah agrees with me, let the walls of the schoolhouse prove it,' whereupon the walls inclined to fall. But R. Joshua rebuked them, saying: 'When scholars are engaged in a halakhic dispute, what have ye to interfere?' Hence they did not fall, in honour of R. Joshua, nor did they resume the upright, in honor of R. Eliezer; and they are still standing thus inclined. Again he said to them, 'If the halakhah agrees with me, let it be proved from Heaven!' Whereupon a Heavenly Voice cried out: 'Why do ye dispute with R. Eliezer, seeing that in all matters the halakhah agrees with him!' But R. Joshua arose and exclaimed: 'It is not in heaven.' What did he mean by this? Said R. Jeremiah: 'That the Torah had already been given at Mount Sinai; we pay no attention to a Heavenly Voice, because thou has long since written in the Torah at Mount Sinai, "After the majority one must incline."' R. Nathan met Elijah and asked him, 'What did the Holy One, blessed be He, do in that hour?' He laughed with joy, he replied, saying, 'My children have defeated Me, my children have defeated Me.'"[11]

This rabbinic story presents Scripture as a playground, not a prison. God invites us into a wide-open play space of discovery rather than slapping a

11. Babylonian Talmud, tractate *Baba Metzi'a* 59b.

straitjacket on us and placing us in lockdown. God takes sheer delight in our serious study of Scripture, a knowledge of it so intent that we can engage God in debate and can wrangle and wrestle with God as Jacob did at the river Jabbok (Gen. 32:21–32).

Some early Catholics adopted the rabbinic attitude of delight in the multivalence and polysemy of Scriptural texts. This is especially highlighted in the traditional Catholic system of interpretation known as the four senses of Scripture. The first sense is the literal (also called historical): the meaning intended by the original author in the original historical context.

The second sense is allegorical (including typological readings) and is often employed when inconsistencies, obscurities, or other problems arise in interpreting a text. The allegorical interpreter appeals to a deeper meaning in the text, or one that is beyond the literal, often in order to make a particular text relevant to modern Christians who might otherwise read the story as a mere historical account, far removed from their own lived experience and faith. So when the Twin Towers in New York were smashed to bits on September 11, 2001, I received a phone call from a newspaper asking me to comment on how that event related to the book of Revelation. In this approach, numbers, characters, and events in the Bible stand for something else in the interpreter's own time period. Thus Saddam Hussein became the antichrist of Revelation for the moment, and so on. The Israelites' crossing through the Red Sea is taken to refer to Christian baptism. There are better and worse allegorical interpretations. Take a look at 1 Corinthians 10:1–4 or 1 Peter 3:20–21 and see what you think.

The third sense is called tropological: it relates to the moral example of a text. The fourth sense is anagogical and has an eschatological, future focus regarding the heavenly destiny of Christians. Often those who would explain these four senses of Scripture to the uninitiated, drawing upon John Cassian, use the city of Jerusalem to exemplify how the senses function: "The one Jerusalem can be understood in four different ways, in the historical sense as the city of the Jews, in allegory as the Church of Christ, in anagoge as the heavenly city of God, 'which is the mother of us all' (Gal 4:26), in the tropological sense as the human soul."[12]

What began with the Jews and the Catholics was contested by the Reformation and Enlightenment. Here we were taught that reason and science and *only* reason and science would lead us to truth. To be "true," something had

12. John Cassian, *Conferences*, trans. Colm Luibheid (New York: Paulist Press, 1985), 160. For a useful article on the multiple senses of Scripture, see Sandra M. Schneiders, "Senses of Scripture," in *The HarperCollins Encyclopedia of Catholicism*, ed. Richard P. McBrien (New York: HarperCollins, 1995), 1175–76.

to be historically accurate and scientifically tenable. As I indicated in chapter 2 with postmodernist concerns, such notions have been hotly contested.

Why have I employed these examples from Jewish and Catholic exegesis? Because I want to suggest that we need not fear looking too closely at the details of the four Gospels even though doing so raises serious historical questions. But earlier interpreters did not consider this devastating to the faith and necessary to wish away or sweep under the rug or pull a Wizard of Oz outlook: "Pay no attention to the man behind the curtain." They reveled in the details and enigmas of the texts and allowed the puzzles not to scare them away from their faith but drive them deeper into it. Perhaps we can do the same.

Many people find their first deep encounter with the variety among the canonical Gospels (not to mention the noncanonical gospels) disturbing. They find their notions of the inspired authority of Scripture challenged. The same holds true of *form criticism* and *redaction criticism* (treated in the next chapter), both of which posit development of the traditions over time rather than receipt of Holy Writ straight from God's hands with no significant human participation. It is useful for a Christian to reflect upon her notions of scriptural authority. Do you consider Scripture to be an authoritative source for your life of faith? In what way? If you don't, why not? If you do, is it the primary authority or is it one among others? What might those others be? For instance, a number of traditions explicitly value reason, experience, and community along with Scripture as resources for Christian living.

God has canonized diversity and we should all take that fact personally. God has validated different ways of viewing Jesus. There's Mark's Jesus for the politically persecuted and suffering and Luke's Jesus to afflict those of us who have grown too comfortable with the status quo, who propagate the status quo, and who, God forbid, use the name of God to affirm the status quo. There's Matthew's Jesus to remind us that following Jesus means being a church and there's John's Jesus, sovereign God striding across the earth. If God has chosen to celebrate diversity, why don't we? Why do we openly scoff or inwardly roll our eyes when African Americans, womanists, feminists, liberationists, and others come to the table to tell us of their experience of Jesus, to send a message in a bottle to us castaways awaiting news? God gives us opportunities to develop a richer picture of God than that with which we began our journey. Will we shrink away or boldly step forward to accept the gift? No doubt Matthew would have had little tolerance for and would have severely chastised John on a number of counts regarding John's presentation of Jesus. But unlike Matthew's church, we're not a one-Gospel church; we're a four-Gospel church. Praise God.

The multiplicity of voices, both in our Gospels and in our churches, does not result in a cacophony, but rather in a symphony of rich sounds, sometimes exhilarating, sometimes poignant, always gripping. All of the instruments, despite their distinctiveness, play a single piece: Jesus, the Christ. It is this Jesus who walked among us on a small strip of earth two thousand years ago, was crucified, died, and was buried; this Jesus who rose again on the third day and who lives and moves here and now in this place and in every place. It is this Jesus who unifies and this Jesus we confess as Lord. It is this Jesus who is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow. Come, Lord Jesus.

4

The Synoptic Problem

Some literary relationship exists between Matthew, Mark, and Luke. The puzzle of how they relate constitutes what scholars call "The Synoptic Problem."[1]

EXHIBIT 1: JESUS' BAPTISM

Compare the story of Jesus' Baptism in each of the Synoptics:

Matthew 3:13–17	Mark 1:9–11	Luke 3:21–22
Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." Then he consented.	In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee	Now when all the people were baptized,

1. A helpful Web site on the Synoptic Problem is maintained by Stephen Carlson: http://www.mindspring.com/~scarlson/synopt/.