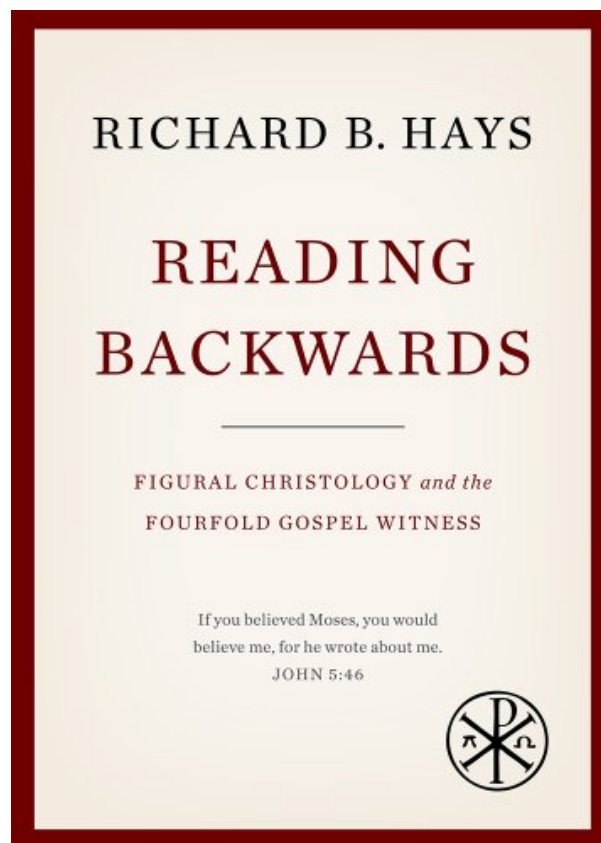


READING BACKWARDS: FIGURAL CHRISTOLOGY AND THE FOURFOLD GOSPEL WITNESS BY RICHARD B. HAYS



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RICHARD B. HAYS

READING
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Modernity's incredulity toward the Christian faith partly rests upon the characterization of early Christian preaching as a tendentious misreading of the Hebrew Scriptures. Christianity, modernity claims, twisted the Bible they inherited to fit its message about a mythological divine Savior. The Gospels, for many modern critics, are thus more about Christian doctrine in the second and third century than they are about Jesus in the first.

Such Christian "misreadings" are not late or politically motivated developments within Christian thought. As Hays demonstrates, the claim that the events of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection took place "according to the Scriptures" stands at the very heart of the New Testament's earliest message. All four canonical Gospels declare that the Torah and the Prophets and the Psalms mysteriously prefigure Jesus. The author of the Fourth Gospel puts the claim succinctly: "If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me" (John 5:46).

Hays thus traces thereading strategies the Gospel writers employ to "read backwards" and to discover how the Old Testament figuratively discloses the astonishing paradoxical truth about Jesus' identity. Attention to Jewish and Old Testament roots of the Gospel narratives reveals that each of the four Evangelists, in their diverse portrayals, identify Jesus as the embodiment of the God of Israel. Hays also explores the hermeneutical challenges posed by attempting to follow the Evangelists as readers of Israel's Scripture?can the Evangelists teach us to read backwards along with them and to discern the same mystery they discovered in Israel's story?

In *Reading Backwards* Hays demonstrates that it was Israel's Scripture itself that taught the Gospel writers how to understand Jesus as the embodied presence of God, that this conversion of imagination occurred early in the development of Christian theology, and that the Gospel writers' revisionary figural readings of their Bible stand at the very center of Christianity.

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Hays brilliantly lays out the diverse ways in which all of ...

By Phil Aud

Hays sets out his "twofold thesis that the OT teaches us how to read the Gospels and that—at the same time—the Gospels teach us how to read the OT." He boils this down even further in saying that "Scripture is to be reinterpreted in light of the cross and resurrection." If we understand scripture as unveiling God's story, this should seem obvious. And yet, how often is such reading discouraged. Goldingay, for example, acknowledges that "The biblical gospel is...a narrative about things God has done." And yet in his method he does not "discuss the way what is concealed in the Old is revealed in the New." "Moses" he writes, "suggests that his teaching, and the Old Testament by extension, is not a repository of concealment but a repository of revelation. The New certainly assumes that there are things that are revealed in the New, but that is not a basis for reading them into the Old. They are new." Hays disagrees. For example, in writing about Jesus' claim to be the "bread of life" in reference to the crowd's question about manna, Hays writes that "According to John's Gospel, that is the true meaning of what Moses wrote." The Gospel writers are teaching us how to re-read scripture in light of Jesus' death and resurrection.

Hays brilliantly lays out the diverse ways in which all of the Evangelists do this, and concludes with a final chapter on why such diversity is important, albeit complicated. One reason why such reading is crucial is that allows us to see (as intended, I believe) that all of the Gospel writers, and not just John, have a “high Christology” if we are reading correctly.

I’ll end with this quote, which seems appropriate for the review, from Hays:

“To read Scripture well, we must bid farewell to plodding literalism and rationalism in order to embrace a complex poetic sensibility. The Gospel writers are trying to teach us to become more interesting people—by teaching us to be more interesting readers.”

Hays “Reading Backwards” helps us to become such people.

[As an aside, I do hope this book comes down in price. It is very expensive for a 109 page book.]

13 of 13 people found the following review helpful.

I appreciate the intertextual reading of the Scriptures

By Richard Carr

Richard B. Hays’ new book is a short read but there is a lot to digest in its 109 pages. Each of the four Gospels is given a chapter. In this post I will limit my reflections to his chapter on the Gospel of Mark.

By way of review about the book in general, in the preface Hays states clearly that the book is an "account of the narrative representation of the identity of Jesus in the canonical Gospels, with particular attention to the ways in which the four Evangelists reread Israel’s Scripture, as well as the ways in which Israel’s Scripture prefigures and illuminates the central character in the Gospel stories."

For Hays, the concept of ‘mystery’ is essential for understanding how Mark crafts his narrative around the person of Jesus. He points out that Mark is generally more cryptic and allusive than Matthew (who much more often states explicitly “This took place to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet , saying...”). Mark’s strategy of indirect reference and subtle allusions to the Old Testament cautions us against speaking too quickly about the mysterious identity of the Carpenter from Nazareth. In other words, there is something crudely wrong with stating so blatantly and matter-of-factly that “Jesus is the God of Israel.” Such a brash declaration fails to do justice to the transcendence and profoundness of the truth contained in the affirmation. And some might even say that kind of statement oversimplifies an incredibly complex identity; Hays quotes Rowan Williams, “There is a kind of truth which, when it is said, becomes untrue” (31). The point is that the identity of Jesus cannot be boiled down into such an unqualified two-dimensional statement. Instead, Mark chooses to drop dynamic hints about the identity of Jesus by way of careful selection of stories (and careful telling of those stories), hints that leave the reader to silently ponder who this Jesus was, drawing his categories from the Old Testament.

Here is how Hays concludes his interpretation of Mark’s figural Christology (an interpretation which he notes is not far from the way Mark’s Gospel is read in the Orthodox tradition):

"So, if we seek to read Scripture through Mark’s eyes, what will we find? We will find ourselves drawn into the contemplation of a paradoxical revelation that shatters our categories and exceeds our understanding. We will learn to stand before the mystery in silence, to acknowledge the limitation of our understanding, and to wonder. The ‘meaning’ if Mark’s portrayal of the identity of Jesus cannot be rightly stated in flat propositional language; instead, it can be disclosed only gradually in the form of narrative, through hints and allusions that project the story of Jesus onto the background of Israel’s story. As Mark superimposes the two

stories on one another, remarkable new patterns emerge, patterns that lead us into a truth too overwhelming to be approached in any other way."

I do have some questions about how Hays establishes an Old Testament allusion. As one example, at times Hays seems to rest his reading of the OT allusion on the repetition of a couple key phrases (and perhaps also thematic similarity?). I want to ask, is the repetition of phrases enough to establish an admittedly cryptic allusion? It would be nice if more evidence could be adduced to demonstrate the presence of an allusion.

Notwithstanding my unanswered questions, I deeply appreciate this kind of reading of Mark's gospel. As a footnote, I think it provides a convincing explanation of the shorter (in my opinion, genuine) ending of Mark. If the shorter ending is original, then Mark ends his gospel with this authorial comment: "Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid" (Mark 16:8). This mysterious concluding statement has generated a history of complex textual emendations and additions by scribes in the centuries to follow Mark's writing. Why would Mark end his gospel in such an unexpected way? Well, if Hays' reading is correct then it should not be so unexpected after all. Mark has been preparing his readers for this kind of reaction all along. As Hays puts it, "readers who listen carefully to the resonances of Israel's Scripture in Mark's Gospel and then see how the story drives toward the passion narrative may find themselves, like the women in Mark's artful dramatic ending, reduced, at least for a time, to silence...The fear of the women is, of course, a response to the message of the resurrection of Jesus the Crucified One. I would suggest that a similar response of reticent fear and trembling is equally appropriate when we read the story of the crucifixion, if we have rightly followed Mark's narrative clues about the identity of the one on the cross."

To this I simply offer a hearty AMEN and AMEN!

18 of 21 people found the following review helpful.

A Needed book on understanding the Bible

By Steven Gunderson

I am so frustrated with the majority of sermons I hear using the Bible as a fix-it manual ("how to fix your finances', 'how to fix your marriage', etc.). What I love about writers like Hays is that he shows us that (surprise! surprise!) the Bible is really about God, who he is and his plans to deal with an alienated world. Whether one agrees or not, Hays shows Jesus to be truly divine (somehow the Hebrew God in human form), plus shows that the New Testament cannot be fully understood without understanding the OT. This is a wonderful contribution to BIBLICAL hermeneutics as well.

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