

Introduction

THIS BOOK SERVES as an introduction to the writings of the New Testament (NT). Its subject is a set of writings ordinarily found with another collection in the large anthology called the Bible. These writings came to birth in a specific time and place and were generated by specific causes. It may seem odd to think of the “birth” of literature, but the word is a reminder that what the reader now meets as an ancient text began as a living expression of living experience, and entered the world with a still visible parentage.

The twenty-seven compositions in the NT are not, at first sight, terribly impressive. There are four narratives about Jesus called “Gospels,” and one about his followers entitled “The Acts of the Apostles,” some occasional correspondence by one apostle (Paul), a handful of letters by other more or less anonymous leaders, and a strange apocalyptic vision. They claim no great literary merit. None directly claims inspiration for itself. But their impact has been disproportionate to their size or claims. For two thousand years they have been regarded by much of the western world as inspired by God, part of a revelation that was recognized as the definitive norm by which life’s meaning is to be measured. Such disparity between cause and effect justifies the study of these specific writings and demands that fundamental questions be put to them. It is surprising that such questions are so seldom explicitly asked.

The first question is why these writings should exist at all. The question of sheer existence is one natural to poets and philosophers, who first allow themselves to be stunned by the realization that there are such things as trees and flowers before they try to describe and explain them. The existential question pertains to the NT in a fairly obvious way. It is not at all necessary that religious movements produce writings, still less that they in a short period of time certify those writings as sacred texts. Not every failed messianic figure generates a literature that insists he is still alive, and apparently makes this absurd claim plausible to others. Not all communities expecting the imminent end of the world produce documents remarkably unconcerned with timetables for demolition and more concerned with interpreting the past than predicting the future. The production of these writings should be a shock. The poet or philosopher would conclude from such an effect a commensurate cause, whether natural or magical. Something happened that gave birth to these writings.

A second question concerns the type of writings we find in the collection. Why four Gospels? They have unceasingly raised problems because of their odd combination of

agreement and dissonance, because of their refusal to be either simply biographies or simply legends, because of their uncanny verisimilitude and realism, even when their hero is doing patently impossible things. And why these particular letters? Romans, we might understand, and even the Corinthian correspondence. But why three pastoral letters, so alike yet so subtly different from each other, so Pauline yet seemingly so unlike Paul? Why both 2 Peter and Jude? Why, above all, Philemon? When we look closely at the writings, we are impressed most of all by their variety in outlook, form, and symbol. We sense the diversity of the movement that gave them birth, and wonder at the perceived coherence among them that made the community choose these writings as normative and not others.

Why do these writings look the way they do? This question is really two, each requiring equal stress. The first part asks: Why does the NT look so much like the Old Testament (OT)? Of all the obvious and important observations that are seldom expressed, this is the most significant: without any explanation or theoretical justification, these writings continue with the same characters and symbols as the Hebrew Scriptures (OT). The NT writings must be seen as Hellenistic literature, it is true. But their immediate parentage is unmistakable. Little in these documents would be intelligible if not read against the backdrop of the Jewish Scripture: Torah, Prophets, and Writings. It was neither accident nor violence that made the NT part of the Bible. The second part of the question, though, is equally important: Why does the NT look so different from the Old? The differences are not minor. Taking the NT seriously demands understanding the OT in an entirely different way. The symbols are the same, yet are radically reworked. The combination of continuity and contrast is expressed in the Pauline phrase “Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” An adequate analysis of that phrase would lead to the enigmatic heart of the NT. By taking seriously the dialectic of similarity and difference between the NT and OT, we gain our surest entry into the distinctive character of these writings. But further distinctions must first be made.

Ways Not Taken

The basic questions concerning the origin and appearance of the NT writings have been answered previously in ways that, in their inadequacy, help sharpen the focus of this book.

Some have answered the questions by appealing to direct divine inspiration. According to them, the NT looks like the OT because it has the same author, God. The human writers were passive recipients of the divine impulse, secretaries taking down dictation. God simply shifted from Hebrew to Greek. In this explanation, human causality is eliminated. There is, therefore, nothing to explain, for there is no problem. But this position, while attempting to take seriously the religious conviction that these

writings are authoritative, distorts the equally important Christian conviction that God works through human freedom, not through its suppression. One can, moreover, assert that these writings are authoritative, or even inspired, without using such a crude model of inspiration.

At the other extreme are conspiracy theories for the origin of Christianity and therefore of the NT. According to these theories, the writings serve to cover up what really happened. There are, naturally, several versions of what really happened. Some theories suggest that Jesus did not die on the cross but survived to continue teaching; others, that he died but that his disciples stole his body to give the impression that he had been raised. A further refinement (a more plausible one) has it that Jesus was in fact a revolutionary but that the Gospels portray him, for politically expedient reasons, as a religious teacher.

The conspiracy theories agree that the disciples manipulated the events of Jesus' life and death, as well as the messianic prophecies from the OT, in order to convince others that he was the expected messiah. Like all conspiracy theories, these tend to attribute at once too much and too little cleverness to the conspirators. Lucian of Samosata's parody, *Alexander the False Prophet*, shows us how a really successful religious scam could be pulled off in that time. It is unlikely that the disciples would have invented a messiah who fulfilled the prophecies so inadequately: Jesus did not match most of the important texts traditionally thought to refer to the messiah, nor was it suggested he did. It is hard to conceive that the disciples would have conjured up traditions that treated them as harshly as they are treated in the Gospels. And it goes beyond comprehension why they would have invented a movement that offered them nothing but the same fate as their master's, rejection and death.

Still, conspiracy theories all have germs of truth that give them plausibility. It is difficult to discern the "real" Jesus beneath the layers of interpretation in the Gospels. And there was a human process involved in the rereading of OT prophecies and the applying of them to Jesus. Indeed, this process is one of the keys to understanding the character of the writings. The process, however, had nothing to do with fraud or deception. It arose from the human impulse to interpret transforming experiences in the light of available symbols.

Other explanations are less radical than the supernaturalistic or paranoid options, but share the tendency to reduce Christianity to some cause other than religious. One explanation makes Christianity begin in the hallucinations of the disciples. This credits the disciples with sincerity but not with rationality. The writings of the NT are thereby seen as rather elaborate rationalizations of delusion. A classic expression of this view says that Jesus did not rise on Easter, faith did. There is, of course, a sense in which this can be asserted. I concentrate in this book on the pivotal importance of Easter faith as the catalyst *both* of the movement *and* of its interpretation. Psychological reduction, however, fails to deal with genuine religious experience and tends to read the texts themselves rather casually.

Another sort of explanation regards Christianity as the distillate of first-century political, social, and economic forces. According to this explanation, the NT writings are the propaganda and ideology of a proletarian movement that, because of its success, had to reinvent itself not as the critic but as the support of society. Or the explanation holds that the Christian movement succeeded because it matched the social needs of the age better than its rivals, such as Judaism and Mithraism. There is, again, some truth here: the social world of early Christianity is undoubtedly of great importance, especially for the explanation of its growth and eventual dominance. The attempt to locate the *cause* of the movement in specific economic or social factors, however, is less successful.

In each of these approaches the attempt to explain results in the loss of richness and complexity. When the religious element of the writings is asserted, the social dimension is lost; when the psychological dimension is emphasized, the religious disappears. Each explanation has merit, but each is too partial to allow for an adequate grasp of the writings. The narrowness of each approach reduces and distorts the writings themselves.

In this introduction, I offer another sort of explanation, namely that the writings of the NT emerged from powerful religious experiences that demanded the reinterpretation of a symbolic world. To grasp that sort of explanation, the reader must shift from a search for a single and simple explanation to a more complex understanding. Rather than a simple explanation, I offer here a model of interpretation.

The Search for an Interpretive Model

If the writings of the NT are to be grasped adequately, they must be approached as much as possible on their own terms. Readers must take seriously the writings' self-presentation and adjust their questions to them, rather than force the writings to the readers' preconceptions. What is needed above all is an adequate *model* for understanding the texts; one flexible enough to respect the variety of the individual writings, yet sufficiently definite to deal with them as parts of a coherent whole.

What do I mean by a model? A model is a paradigm within which the data appropriate to a discipline make sense. The adequacy of the paradigm can be measured both by the way it covers the data and by the way it enables further investigation. A model in this sense differs from a method insofar as it represents a sort of imaginative construal of the materials being studied, a structured picture of both process and product, within which the parts are seen not only to fit but also to function. A model can employ a variety of methods. But methods can themselves easily become unwitting models if we employ our methods without critical self-awareness. That is, a particular way of questioning data can unintentionally become an implicit but comprehensive understanding of what the material is about. When this happens, both data and method can become distorted.

Models and methods can be variously appropriate to the tasks they are asked to perform. A given subject can be made to fit several different models, but this is not to say that every model is equally adaptable. Likewise, a subject can be questioned using the tools of different methods, but not every method is appropriate to every purpose. Moreover, a specific model may be asked to do what it cannot, or a particular method of studying texts may fail to raise or respond to the questions deemed significant. When this happens, it is possible that a shift in models or methods is required.

An adequate model for the NT considered as canon would provide an explanatory framework for the birth and development of the writings in the first place (Why do they exist?) and for their specific shape (Why do they look the way they do?). It would enable us to deal with the documents as writings (that is, as literary productions) and not simply as sources of information. It would account for the process of their development as well as their final literary shape. The model would allow for the anthropological, historical, literary, and religious dimensions of the texts to be maintained in their integrity and to survive analysis.

Anthropological

By “anthropological,” I mean at the simplest level that the writings must be taken seriously as fully *human* productions. Divine inspiration is not excluded, but inspiration is not a fact available for study. Second, the term “anthropological” asserts that these are *fully* human writings, and that intrinsic to being human are religious experiences and ideas. Indeed, much of what anthropologists have traditionally studied has involved the way religions structure the lives of people. Third, the term has a more specific application: in the production of these writings, we find operative the universal dynamics of the human search for meaning. In particular, we find in them the interplay of myth and experience in the shaping of symbolic worlds (see pp. 10–16).

Historical

For the moment, I merely note that the NT writings must be read within their first-century Mediterranean setting, and in particular within the matrix of first-century Judaism. The NT came to birth among social structures and symbols different from our own. The writings are conditioned linguistically by that historical setting. Their linguistic code is not only alien but also only partially available to us. Precisely the “things that go without saying” are not accessible. Every responsible reading therefore demands historical adjustment. The writings are very much conditioned both by the times and places of their origin and by the settings and intentions of their authors. The more we can reconstruct those settings and intentions, the better readers we are. If the anthropological pattern of myth and experience provides the broad framework for

the model I am proposing, then the specific application of it is found within the historical setting of first-century Judaism.

Literary

An adequate model for the interpretation of the NT must deal with the documents as compositions. This means first that however important the prehistory of texts may be, however helpful the distinctions between tradition and redaction, the complete and finished literary form of the writing is what demands interpretation within the canon. Second, attention must be given to the literary conventions of the age of composition. The reader must take into account the implications of genre and the uses of rhetoric. Third, the writings must be read in terms of their self-presentation rather than reduced to the status of sources for another body of information. Finally, the model must seek for a fit between the form of a writing and its function, between literary structure and substance. What the term “literary” does not mean is a concern only for aesthetic techniques.

Religious

The writings of the NT are first and foremost religious writings. They were generated by a specifically religious movement, and were written by and for adherents of that movement. These assertions should not meet dispute, but some further distinctions are important.

I do not mean to equate “religious” with “theological.” There is theology in the NT, but it is not of a scholastic or self-conscious sort. There were philosophers and theologians in that age doing what we do not find being done in the NT: writing systematic treatises on virtues, for example, and composing extended commentaries on authoritative texts. The theology found in the NT is closer to what we would call *practical* theology. It works out the implications of religious experience and conviction for life in the community and world. It does not resemble what we call systematic theology, which correlates the propositions of belief with more comprehensive philosophical worldviews. The History of Religions School (*Die Religions-geschichtliche Schule*), which flourished in the early years of this century, rightly protested against the tendency to regard the writings of the NT as theological treatises and asserted that they more strongly resembled the writings of popular religion in Hellenistic culture.

The program and promise of the History of Religions School has never been fulfilled. This is partly because scholarship was diverted by the renewal of theology and the resurgence of literary-critical analysis in each postwar period. It may also be partly due to the problems of the program itself. Its understanding of religion tended to be somewhat narrow, at times almost seeming to equate religion with cult. Consequently, more of the NT was explained in terms of cultic activity than is justified. There was

also a tendency to *separate* “religion” from theology, ethics, and conscious literary expression—a separation that increasingly appears to be artificial. Finally, the approach tended to be over-rationalistic in its understanding of religious phenomena such as myth and ritual, while showing a reluctance to deal with the actual religious claims of the texts.

I use the term “religious” here to refer to experiences, convictions, and interpretations having to do with what is perceived as ultimate reality. The term points to a way of being human, a way both individual and social that asserts by word and deed that human existence is bound by, and defined in reference to, realities transcending everyday categories. To call these writings religious, therefore, does not prejudge their social setting, literary form, or intellectual sobriety. But it does recognize that they claim to be speaking about life as related to God. Their subject matter concerns what it means to be human in the light of faith, specifically in light of the experience of the Holy that the first Christians claimed to have had in Jesus.

The NT writings approach us as witnesses to and interpretations of specifically religious claims having to do with the experience of God as mediated through Jesus. They never claim, we notice, to mediate that experience themselves. They only witness and interpret. It should go without saying, therefore, that the contemporary reader cannot reach that experience by using the tools of anthropology, history, and literary criticism. But the contemporary reader can claim to come in contact with the witness and interpretation.

Historical Method but Not Historical Model

At this point, a delicate distinction must be drawn. I have already asserted the importance of recognizing the historical dimension of the NT texts. Because of the linguistic conditioning of these writings, because of the peculiar claims of the creed with its specifically historical elements, and because of the nature of the Christian community that claims continuity with a people of the past, such historical appreciation will continue to be desirable, necessary, and inevitable. The use of historical-critical methods therefore is entirely appropriate. Among the tasks necessary to the study of the NT are the attempts to hear the text in its first voice, to distinguish between levels of tradition, to evaluate sources, to determine the time, provenance, and authorship of the writings, and to describe their social settings. On the other hand, these tasks can be carried out within the framework of different models. I am suggesting here that it is not history as method that requires qualification, but history as the overarching model for understanding the NT.

Despite many minor disaffections, the historical model remains dominant in NT scholarship. The historical model provides a distinctive imaginative construal of the writings and the task of studying them. First, the task: in answer to the question,

“What are these writings about?” this model responds, “They are about the history of the primitive Christian movement.” The goal set by this model is the description, or possibly even the reconstruction, of that historical development. At least ideally this goal is detachable from the writings themselves. If we could ever achieve a definitive picture of that development, the writings could be consigned to the archives and we could move to the next historical period.

The writings themselves play a secondary role: they are nothing more or less than sources for the reconstruction. The historian evaluates the writings as historical sources (Are they first- or second-hand, authentic or inauthentic?), and asks of them questions that yield specifically historical information. Indeed, this model can use only this type of information. Whether the topic is ideas, rituals, literature, or institutions, the end result is the same: a picture of historical development. This model is neither unsophisticated nor without virtue.

Even taken on its own terms, however, the historical model has a difficult time with the texts of the NT. The problems stem from the paucity of genuine historical data in the writings, and the artificiality of the canonical frame for the historical enterprise. The two problems influence each other. The historical model has traditionally worked within the canon. It was obvious, of course, that as historical sources, the canonical writings were greatly deficient: they were fragmentary and biased. But the need to do history, with the stakes being regarded as theologically significant, led generations of investigators to proceed as though these pieces of the puzzle were the only ones. They were like people hunched over a hundred-piece jigsaw puzzle with only twenty-seven pieces in hand, and constrained to fit the pieces into some pattern of dependence and development. Not surprisingly, the resulting pictures were sometimes grotesque.

The interplay between dating and development was especially problematic. History lives off chronology but is never content with chronology. It seeks causality, which is to say, development. The historical model is not satisfied with a rich but disjointed collection of vignettes of the NT period. It reaches insatiably for sequence, for the possibility of a narrative. In fact, however, the NT canon offers, and will always offer, only scattered vignettes of the earliest Christian period. Worse, Christianity was at first so unnoticed by outsiders that there is little external framework for dating the writings so that they could securely be used as sources for a developmental picture.

Faced with the irreducible deficiency of their sources and the goal of doing history, investigators did the best they could. But the lack of data and controls led them inevitably to a focus on data that were assumed to be traceable, namely ideas. Even this, however, was made possible only by the employment of developmental models that helped fill in the gaps between documents. The process was circular, of course. The circularity was only occasionally broken by scholars who time and again allowed the stubbornly fragmentary data to upset the symmetry of developmental schemes.

These observations on the historical model are not novel. It has been more vigorously and acutely criticized by its practitioners than by its detractors. The critics have

deplored the overemphasis on theology and the neglect of data from outside the canon. They have recognized the narrowness of the imaginative portrayal of first-century Christianity in terms akin to a modern university setting, in which professors read and respond to one another's papers. They have questioned the tendency to stress only the temporal side of the space-time continuum, so that ideas and institutions appear to develop everywhere together in neat patterns through time.

As a result of these criticisms and the rich archaeological finds of recent decades, historians of early Christianity are making greater use of resources outside the canon. These include extra-canonical writings from within Christianity and literary sources both Jewish and Greek, as well as archaeological evidence that makes more concrete our sense of those times and places. Second, historians are giving greater recognition to the importance of place. They are less attached to overarching theories of development for the whole and are patiently studying the particular characteristics of regional development. Now, not "the Church" but the church at Corinth and the church at Antioch are the subjects of investigation. Third, historians of early Christianity are giving greater attention to the social realities of the first-century world, recognizing that not only ideas but the structures that support those ideas are the stuff of history. These investigations have yielded a more complete picture of the NT texts themselves. For example, conflicts that formerly were thought to reflect specific and competing Christian theologies are now recognized as variations on disputes concerning social practices within Hellenistic culture. The social analysis of the NT is not a fad; it is a better way of doing history.

An unfortunate aspect of this otherwise encouraging development is that many conclusions concerning the NT writings themselves (on matters of dating, dependencies, perspectives, etc.) have been left untouched, even though the methods for reaching those conclusions are now seen to be deficient. Nor has this broader conception of the historical model moved much beyond the programmatic stage. But it does indicate the direction in which the historical model is now being developed, and it is one in which the frame of the canon appears even more artificial than it did in the past.

If the model of history has as its goal the description of early Christianity, then it should use all available sources, without giving priority to the canonical writings. The NT writings can legitimately be placed in lines of development with gnostic and other apocryphal documents, as well as with those of the patristic period, without considering which are scriptural or which are orthodox. From the perspective of the historical model, the refusal of a historian to move outside the canon of the NT would appear to be motivated by other than genuinely historical convictions. The critical historian may with some legitimacy question the good faith and self-awareness of those who protest that they are studying the history of early Christianity when in fact all they know or care about are the canonical writings.

The refinement of the historical model, therefore, has made even more acute the question of its adequacy as a model for understanding the canonical writings of the

NT. The deficiencies that were there from the beginning are now becoming clearer. There are three major inadequacies of this model. First, it ought not to give special consideration to the writings of the canon—and when it does, it cannot justify giving them exclusive attention. In the logic of the model, the canon becomes a significant historical factor not at the earliest period but only later.

The second inadequacy of the historical model is literary. It treats the writings of the canon only incidentally *as writings*; its primary interest in them is *as historical sources*. This is not to deny that literary analysis has occurred within historical scholarship, but to recognize that it was always carried out in the service of historical reconstruction. Historical analysis of NT literary forms is highly developed; but adequate literary analysis of the NT writings as literary compositions is still in its infancy.

The third deficiency in the historical model has been its inability to deal with the *religious* content of the writings except in a comparative, developmental, or theological fashion. Although form criticism tried to align religious settings and literary forms, it did so by abstracting the forms of smaller units from their larger literary contexts. The connections between the logic of literary works and the logic of the religious experiences or convictions they express still require examination. Historians, moreover, have shied away from asking the question of origination in the strictest sense: what sort of religious experience gave rise to the Christian movement and motivated the writings that now interpret it? In short, the historical model, which is now being refined as it abandons the confinement of the canonical frame, is of little help for interpreting the canonical writings of the NT as *religious* literature.

There is need for a model that, if it does not demand that exclusive attention be given to the documents of the canon, at least allows the legitimacy of such exclusive study. This model would recognize the value of studying the normative collection of a religious tradition on its own terms, as the classic expression of that tradition and an expression that engenders further understandings. It would respect the anthropological, historical, literary, and religious dimensions of the writings. It would allow the study of their individual production, without forgetting their eventual canonical status. It would be able to ask the question of origination in specifically religious terms. It would be able to recognize the specific and distinct voice of each writing. It would recognize that those who canonized the NT writings found an implied harmony that distinguished these voices from others.

An Experience-Interpretation Model

To argue the need for some other model is not to claim that this other model is better in every respect, but only to suggest that it enables a better appreciation of the NT writings in their literary and religious dimensions than the historical model does. The model I am using owes something to sociological and anthropological approaches

but more to the reading of Jewish midrashim and the NT writings themselves. It applies the analysis of social responses to religious experience, within the specific situation of the first-century Jews who claimed to have experienced the ultimate in Jesus of Nazareth. The tag “experience-interpretation” points to the integral elements of the writings and to the dynamics of their production. The appropriateness of the model will become clearer if we work into it indirectly by considering its premises.

The Making of Symbolic Worlds

A symbolic world is not an alternative ideal world removed from everyday life. To the contrary, it is the system of meanings that anchors the activities of individuals and communities in the real world. Nothing is more down to earth and ordinary than a symbolic world. Like the grammar and syntax of a language, a symbolic world looks odd only when isolated from its task. The task of a symbolic world is that of making our lives work.

One of the great benefits of sociological analysis to the study of the NT has been its reminder that humans are not simply individuals but always parts of social systems. Even rebels and hermits play roles within larger social organisms. The Christian reality, likewise, is first of all a social reality. The first writings of the movement are addressed not to individuals but to gatherings (*ekklēsiai*; see, e.g., 1 Thess. 1:1; 2:14).

The development that has come to be called the sociology of knowledge, moreover, reminds us that social systems are more than mechanical arrangements. Human intentionality plays a key role. The social system of which we are a part works (and even exists) not only because of what we *do* but above all because of what we *think*. Social arrangements are constructions of human knowledge and commitment. The way humans organize themselves in the world depends little on biology and less on instinct but a great deal on people’s ideas about themselves and the world. Because of this, social groups are both fragile and conservative. Fragile, because they depend for their existence on the deep consensus and commitment of their members; conservative, because the world is frightening without a home.

These abstract propositions can be illustrated by an analysis of a universally recognized social entity within the symbolic world of academia, the group called the class. Notice first how it is *within* the academic world that the term “class” has a specific meaning that requires no further definition—to distinguish it from, for example, the homonymic term referring to economic-social rank.

A class is a social group. It gathers periodically and engages in certain joint activities. It is not imaginary, but “real”; both insiders and outsiders can know it as the class in Room 201. Closer analysis, however, shows that the class exists only because its members agree that it is real and continue to be committed to that perception. Whenever individuals miss class sessions or whenever individuals disrupt the ritual class activities, its fragile existence is threatened. If enough people miss a lecture or if

everyone starts giggling in the middle of a lecture, chaos results: the social world collapses. And if all the students should suddenly decide to drop the course, the class would no longer exist as a social reality. It may continue to be listed in the school catalogue and the teacher may show up every day, but there will be no class.

We notice as well, however, that as long as the group continues in its perception that the class is real and continues in its commitment to it, there is no need to debate at every session what the class means and why it meets. The ground rules for classes do not need to be debated within the symbolic world of academia. They are understood. There are definite rituals: the teacher stands there, we sit here; she lectures, we listen; we take exams, she grades them. If these rituals are radically or persistently questioned, the delicate social structure is once more threatened.

As this example of the class shows, the connections between the way we think and the way we structure our lives are deep. In the normal way of things, the way we think (our ideology) and the way we arrange ourselves (our social structure) will reinforce each other. We tend to interpret our social arrangements by reference to the sort of people we think we are; and our self-understanding tends to make our social arrangements appear natural and even inevitable.

A symbolic world, then, is a system of shared meaning that enables us to live together as a group. It includes more than specialized concepts; it involves in particular the fundamental perceptions that ground the community's existence and that therefore do not need to be debated or justified. The symbols pervade every level of the group's life. They effect spatial and temporal arrangements and the rituals that mark them. They are built into that special language the group shares, its argot. The symbolic world shared by a group can be discerned from the things that go without saying, the references implied by phrases such as "and so forth," or even by gestures. A NT phrase like "do you not know," for example, points to such a shared range of understanding and bears within it an implied rebuke: those so reminded *should* know (see 1 Cor. 3:16; 5:6; 6:2).

The symbolic world shapes, and is shaped by, the customary actions of the group—from simple signs of greeting and farewell to the complex systems of exchange involved in mating. That such symbols of interaction work at all, of course, is precisely because they do not need to be reinvented by every individual. It is because an American boy and girl think it natural to "date" and "go steady" that these have rituals functioned as stages of the mating process in our symbolic system. Only in the light of alternative practices does the relativity of our own become apparent. It was once thought "natural" for a man to stand, take off his hat, and offer a chair when a woman entered a room. Only because of an altered ideology do we now see such rituals as embodying a specific and socially structured ideology concerning men and women.

Symbolic World and Religious Myth

A symbolic world involves more than linguistic shorthand and a web of customs. It includes the broadest, most inclusive self-understanding of the group. Why do we exist at all? Why do we look the way we do? Questions of origin and of self-definition have an ultimate character. In groups that are life societies—that is, organized in a more intensive and inclusive fashion than clubs and schools—such ultimate questions tend to be answered with reference to transcendent powers. Correlative to a profound human sense of contingency is the awareness of dependence on an “other” (whether singular or plural in name or manifestation) to which must be credited not only the start but the continuation and peculiar configuration of the group. Reference to transcendent powers implies a “religious” response to the ultimate questions of origin and destiny. The sense of contingency and dependence implies being bound by a power beyond the control of the individual but perhaps not beyond the community’s reach.

These implicit understandings are given narrative shape by myth. As an anthropological category, myth does not refer to false stories but to narratives that seek to clothe transcendent realities with language and, by so doing, express the meaning inherent in the structures of shared life. In a society’s myths, we find the linguistic expression of its deepest self-understanding: how it has come to be, why it is different from others, what its future is. The recital of these myths renews the rituals of the society, and the rituals make self-evident the “truth” of the myths. The myths and the rituals make each other work, and because they do, they enable the life of the group to continue.

The terms “symbolic world” and “myth” can be used interchangeably but can also be distinguished. “Symbolic world” is best used of the whole complex system of actions and words that constitute the self-understanding of a group, including physical as well as linguistic products. “Myth” is best taken as referring to the narratives or parts of narratives that give linguistic expression to this self-understanding by asserting its ultimate origin. Both symbolic world and myth obviously serve to interpret social life. The tolerance of symbolic worlds for divergent interpretations varies; when the interpretation of a myth is so fundamentally new that it constitutes a different myth, the foundations of the symbolic world will shift.

These remarks are not meant to establish a technical vocabulary, but to assert simple though important ideas that are crucial for grasping the character of the NT writings. The ideas are these: humans are unstable and instinctually deprived creatures with an insatiable thirst for stability and meaning; the creation of meaning is essential to both stability and survival; meaning is found in the world of symbols shared by a society, from its manner of greeting to its myth of divine creation; inherent in this world of symbols is a process of interpretation.

The description I have been giving is obviously idealized. There is seldom so close a fit between the various factors involved in the making of human society. Two

tensions in particular deserve attention. The first is the tension that can exist between the symbolic world of a specific group and the symbolic structures of the wider, pluralistic context in which that group finds itself. So long as a people is totally isolated from others, its own symbols will function rather well to stabilize its common life. But when a group confronts alternative symbolic worlds, other ways of structuring life—with perhaps equally plausible appeals to divine origination expressed by an equally impressive battery of myths—then the stabilizing force of the first group's symbolic structure is inevitably weakened. Myths are relativized by the mere existence of other “ultimate” explanations. The confrontation with pluralism is threatening to a group's identity, and the group can respond in different ways: it can close up, communicate, or convert. Each response will have a profound effect on the group's previous symbols.

Another tension is that between the group and the individual. There are degrees to which individuals of a society fit within, or even accept, its self-understanding. All are born into some sort of symbolic world, and most simply accept it as their world (the ways things naturally are) and pass this understanding on to the next generation. They therefore help make that world even more “real” by adding the density of age to the symbols. But others in the group will be less wholehearted in their participation. Some may passively accept the dominant ethos, but contribute nothing to it. Others may take up a stance of skepticism; still others may challenge the group's self-understanding with some form of “heresy” or “apostasy.” Such marginal participation threatens the symbolic structure of the group, which depends on total commitment for its secure existence.

Every community must also develop the means to deal with deviance. Sometimes it will instruct, sometimes shun, sometimes excommunicate. The ritual of excommunication reveals the fragility of social life and how it depends on a concerted commitment to a certain way of knowing the world. There are also times when the threat to a community appears to be so great that the group seeks to extirpate deviance through persecution.

An individual member of the group may be in tension with its self-understanding in another way, of course, for there are also charismatic figures, prophets who seek to renew or reinterpret the group's commitment to its primordial symbols. One of a group's hardest tasks is distinguishing between types of marginal activity. Some threaten the group's identity by erosion; some by renewal.

Experience and Interpretation

Communities exist within a dialectic between experience and interpretation. This dialectic is of such fundamental importance for the model I am proposing that some attention must be given to it. The basic point, however, is simple: myths and symbols serve to interpret human experience, but sometimes they fail; when this happens, they must be abandoned or reshaped.

First of all, my symbolic world not only helps me interpret my experience after the fact; it actually gives me the capacity to perceive (i.e., to have my experience in the first place). Symbols shape my experience. Because of my symbolic world I perceive the rotation of the earth on its axis in relation to the sun as the sun rising. I do not perceive the same phenomenon as a god rising from the death of night, although someone in another symbolic world might well perceive it that way. The same point can be illustrated by an indefinite series of examples. I extend my hand to greet a stranger, and smile. The stranger approaches me the same way. Because of our shared symbolic world, we both perceive the interchange as friendly. In the ordinary course of things, it is—and the experience confirms the perception. When it does, the symbolic world is strengthened, and the symbolic structure that legitimates handshakes is renewed.

But the process can go the other way. What if the stranger should grasp my hand violently and slap me in handcuffs? What if he seizes my hand and cuts it off at the wrist? Then my experience radically disconfirms my symbolic world, which says that handshakes are signs of friendship. This experience shakes my view of the world, and the symbolic structure is threatened. In light of this experience, I must now struggle to find meaning where it appears to be absent. The quest for meaning is relentless; life cannot continue without it. We try first to stretch our symbols to cover the experience. Perhaps the stranger was an enemy in disguise, and his handshake was a camouflage. That makes his act of violence anomalous, the exception that proves the rule. Thus our myth is saved, our world secure.

Myths stretch to cover experience, and sometimes stretch exceedingly far. For example, remote islanders, with only a simple set of stories to norm their woodland existence, were visited by anthropologists who descended in helicopters, waving candy bars and cameras. Then the anthropologists departed, and the islanders stretched their simple stories to include such a totally other experience: they now had sky visitors and gift bearers in their symbolic world.

The elastic capacity of myths and symbols is, however, finite. Some experiences are so powerful and radical that they threaten to collapse the very structure of the world, the very structure of meaning. In our time, there is no better example of this than the Holocaust. The systematic murder of six million people guilty only of being Jewish tore to shreds the symbolic world of Judaism as it existed before that event. This social experience created a massive displacement in a symbolic structure two thousand years and more in the making. It did this so decisively that the basic symbols of Torah and messiah became, in a decade, empty of their previous content for millions of people. We can go further and state without paradox that the Holocaust was a religious experience in the proper sense of that word. Evil, too, is a religious category. And this was an experience of the “otherness” of evil so powerful that it shattered the capacity to explain or even intelligently to perceive it.

Yet, the search for meaning continues. Even in the face of apparently limitless and meaningless evil, there is the human struggle to understand. But what can be used

once the myths have been destroyed? Some have responded to the Holocaust with silence, insisting that any words will distort the event by diminishing it. Others have begun to interpret the experience of the Holocaust with words, using the bits and pieces of the myths that now lie scattered about. Torah will eventually encompass even the Holocaust. The myth, of course, will no longer look the same as it did before. The old symbols will be there, but they will be read in an entirely new way because of the event that forced the process of reinterpretation in the first place. And it will take time for the new interpretation itself to acquire the force of myth, that is, have the power to shape new experiences in a way that seems natural and even inevitable. Already some Jewish scholars have pointed to the birth of the State of Israel as a “resurrection of the just” following upon the death of the people at Auschwitz.

This dialectic of experience and interpretation is the basic model I am proposing for the understanding of the writings of the NT. It allows us to answer the fundamental questions of origin and shape: why the documents were written and why they look the way they do. It places the birth of the NT within the symbolic world of first-century Judaism. It allows us to ask about the experience that generated, indeed necessitated, the process of interpretation. And it enables us to read each of the writings of the NT as specific *modes* of interpretation: the reshaping of the symbols of Judaism in light of the experience of a crucified and raised Messiah.

The model also gives us the framework for our investigation. We need to ask first about the shape of the symbolic world of first-century Judaism within Hellenistic culture. Then, we need to look at the experience of the first Christians that forced the reshaping of that symbolic world. Next, we need to look in detail at each of the writings as specific ways of interpreting those new religious convictions and experiences. Finally, we need to explore the implications of the fact that those writings were gathered into a normative canon.

Study Questions

1. Why is each dimension of the New Testament (anthropological, historical, literary, religious) critical to its interpretation?
2. What is meant by the distinction between historical methods in the reading of the New Testament and a “historical model”?
3. How is an understanding of the social construction of reality—the making of symbolic worlds—helpful for reading religious literature?
4. What are basic features of the “experience interpretation” model used in this book?

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