
The Future of the Word

O Lord, bring me to perfection and reveal to me the meaning of these pages. . . . Do not desert your gifts, and do not despise your plant as it thirsts.

—Augustine, *Confessions*

The writer of Matthew understands Jesus' life in terms of texts.¹ In his gospel, the writer links all of the major events, many of the major speeches, and several of the parable sequences to Old Testament scripture passages. Apparently, Jesus' life is all about fulfilling scripture. Sometimes the writer explicitly uses the term "fulfill"—as in the fulfillment citations—and sometimes other formulae, such as the "you have heard that it was said . . . but I say to you" passages. In both, Jesus embodies the word, reinterprets the word, and sets forth the future of the word. Matthew pictures a Jesus who reshapes the future of Israel in terms of the kingdom of God through a pattern of what Brandon D. Crowe has called "eschatological reversal."² Matthew's

Gospel constructs Jesus out of the future of the word, a savior, who, in renewing the word, renews the nation of Israel in the kingdom.

As the future of the word, Jesus is interpreter of the word and the kingdom. Indeed, the text shows Jesus positioning himself throughout the Sermon on the Mount as a new sort of scribe, one who has interpretive authority over the central texts of Jewish faith. Jesus describes his reading and interpreting practice as fulfillment: the bringing forward and expanding of the written word. He uses again and again the pattern, “You have heard that it was said . . . but I say to you,” to help listeners reread ancient commands in light of the kingdom of God that Jesus announces (Matt. 5:21-22; 5:27-28; 5:31-32; 5:33-34; 5:38-39; 5:43-44). He has authority over the meanings and purposes of the texts he interprets. And Matthew acknowledges it: the Gospel tells us Jesus “taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes” (Matt. 7:29).

In Matthew 13, the authoritative scribe appears again, this time fulfilling the word by telling parables, wherein lies instruction about the expanding kingdom of God. The parables themselves, their very proclamation, are “to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet” (Matt. 13:35). In Matthew 13, parables work not in the same formula but still according to the same pattern as the “you have heard that it was said . . . but I say to you” of the Sermon on the Mount: they are another fulfillment of sorts—a future of the text—and they deal almost meta-textually, insofar as they are futures of the text that are about the expansion of the kingdom of God. The parables of Matthew 13 make more explicit the kingdom-expansion taking place in Matthew 5: the parables of the sower, the wheat and tares, the mustard seed, and the treasure hidden in the field—all of these picture how the kingdom expands and flourishes despite various obstacles. The future of the kingdom (told by and through the future

of the word) is embodied in stories (words) about the future of the kingdom.

Jesus explains parables a great deal in this section, and at the end of the chapter, even shares a parable about someone who tells parables or reads them, a person Jesus calls the “scribe who has been trained for the kingdom.” In this parable, Jesus as new scribe opens to others a place among his kingdom’s scribes: “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” (Matt. 13:52). The scribe for the kingdom is, of course, Jesus, the master of the world who brings out his word anew in what is old. Yet, as Jesus explains the scribe “trained” for the kingdom, a posture that he has modeled by bringing out the new meanings from the old scriptures and stories that he reinterprets, he also extends that capacity to his listeners: we too may be scribes for the kingdom, whose reading and interpreting advance the future of the word.

Yet Jesus’ fulfillment is not his termination of the word—and all the fulfillment language actually extends the future of the word rather than giving it the sense of an ending, though it maintains the idea of purpose. Two major meta-critical moments of the book demonstrate this. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished” (Matt. 5:17-18). Given that heaven and earth do not pass away when Jesus dies and is raised from the dead, one presumes there is a further fulfillment, a further future of the word through the resurrected Jesus. The end of the book reaffirms this: in Matthew 24, in a long discourse thoroughgoing with eschatology—the future of the kingdom of God—Jesus takes things even further than the law and the prophets. In fact, he expands

the force of the future of the word of God to include his own words: “Heaven and earth will pass away,” he says, “but my words will not pass away” (Matt. 24:35). The future of the words of Jesus in this passage is marked out as continuing on in fulfillment—not ending.

The future of the word that Jesus embodies and extends through his resurrection and inauguration of the kingdom of God is a future that potentially infuses all words—all texts. In the introduction, I argued that contemporary understandings of reading literature, whether instrumental or not, fall into one of two problems: they are insufficiently eschatological or eschatologically insufficient. In this chapter, I will seek a surer eschatology for literature by grounding the future of texts in the future of the word of God, that is, in the future of Jesus. The future of Jesus Christ gives texts meaning, and the eschatological implications of this fact affect our understanding of how texts mean. The future of the word of God, Jesus, gives texts eschatological purpose and signification.

The Theology of the Future of the Word

God created everything by the word, that is, by Jesus, the second person of the Trinity, the incarnate one. The Gospel of John tells us, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people” (John 1:1-4). This word, Jesus, with God and in being God, is the creator. And, as chapter 1 verse 14 reminds us, “the Word became flesh and lived among us.”

Two things are important to note here. The first is that God’s creation is by the word *in relation*. “The Word was with God and the Word was God” stresses the Trinitarian nature of creation. The

fellowship between the persons of the Trinity, what some have called the perichoretic dance, is inter-reception, which involves motion or action. Because God is love, God is interactive in the Godhead. Creation *ex nihilo* is a production of their active, expanding, and plentiful fellowship: the Trinity's love creates. When the Trinity's love expands outside of the Godhead and God creates, the fellowship extended to creation does not subsume the creation into the Godhead, but rather, expands God's love outside of himself. As Athanasius writes in *Contra Gentes*, "[H]e envies nobody's existence but rather wishes everyone to exist in order to exercise his kindness."³

In addition, God's creation of all things is enacted by the word of God that *became* flesh. That is, by the Jesus who, through the incarnation, has the human quality of becoming. Jesus' coming and his choice to become—words used no fewer than nine times in the prologue to the book of John—is the becoming of the word.⁴ It's not, of course, that the word becomes the word of God—for the word is always already the word of God. But as the word, Jesus becomes. And as the resurrected incarnate word of God, Jesus is *still* becoming—*still* has a future: as Jürgen Moltmann has written, "all statements and judgments about him must at once imply something about the future which is to be expected from him."⁵ That is, Jesus has a future—his creating, like his word, is not over or done with; it proceeds according to the eschatological purpose that he has set forth for the cosmos.

In the becoming of Jesus, which is an action emerging out of the generative love of divine perichoresis, we find a way of understanding the creation, too, as becoming. The world, says Athanasius, is "called into existence by the Word's advent [*parousia*]"—or, to put it in other terms, the world *becomes* by the word's *coming*—and perhaps we are back at the wordplay of the

prologue to the book of John.⁶ Colin Gunton has argued that “[t]here is . . . no creation ‘in the beginning’ without an eschatological orientation. . . . Creation is ‘out of nothing’ in that it is made both to be and to become something.”⁷ Our existence, being created out of the love of the Trinity, is fashioned to become toward the Trinity’s love; our existence in time is eschatological in shape because the word creates us and gives us a future. In fact, the creation itself is in the word, as Origen’s commentary on the book of John notes: “It is because God thus established Wisdom that every creature is able to exist, for each participates in the divine Wisdom, according to which all were made. For according to the Prophet David, God made all things in Wisdom. There exists a great number of creatures thanks to participation in this Wisdom, but without their grasping the one by whom they have been established in being; very few understand Wisdom, not only in what concerns themselves, but also insofar as it concerns other things, for Christ is complete Wisdom.”⁸ Because of the creation’s participation in the word, in divine wisdom, its coming to be is made possible. So rather than becoming being merely a function of Jesus’ condescension to humanity, the coming to be of all things is a function of Jesus’ wisdom. Becoming is thus divinely sourced.

Our becoming is an even-now and not-yet expression of God’s community of the new creation, since our becoming occurs in time and through the formation of community. Our time is the time of God’s revelation, as Karl Barth has emphasized, but further, our time is a shadow of God’s relational time in the Trinity, a shadow longing to participate in the substance. And the consummation of time, devoutly hoped for, is that for which all creation “waits with eager longing” (Rom. 8:19).

We see an eschatological shape in the whole of scripture, in the way that God’s sustaining creation is not static but generative. For

example, in the text of Jeremiah's book of consolation, the prophet marks out the sustenance of generation as emerging out of the word of God:

Thus says the Lord,
 who gives the sun for light by day
 and the fixed order of the moon and the stars
 for light by night,
 who stirs up the sea so that its waves roar—
 the Lord of hosts is his name:
 If this fixed order were ever to cease
 from my presence, says the Lord,
 then also the offspring of Israel would cease
 to be a nation before me forever. (Jer. 31:35–36)

The fixity of the word sustains creation; it guards generative nation building—the offspring of Israel that will yet persist, despite their sin-ridden and guilt-laden state, because of the goodness of the Lord.

Creation, as I've been describing it, is an act not only of invention or of development, but also of *signification*. That is to say, the word of God's creation out of the generative love of the Trinity is also an *ordering and arranging of perfect judgment*, such that creation has significance according to God's purposes. God's presence is a discernment and arrangement and judgment of creation; these are, in fact, part and parcel of the creation itself—and certainly part of the ongoing activity by which creation is upheld. "Being the Word," Athanasius writes, "he was not contained by anyone, but rather himself contained everything. And, as being in all creation, he is in essence outside everything but inside everything by his own power, arranging everything, and unfolding his own providence in everything to all things, and giving life to each thing and to all things together."⁹ Augustine muses in *The City of God* that "the good and right judgment of God" would have been the means by which the

creation could be “maintained” even if there had been no sin and Adam and Eve had lived “in eternal blessedness.”¹⁰ So, when granting meaning, God is both the maker and interpreter of what he has made.

The authority of God over his creation is the comprehension of God, and his granting significance to the cosmos is both creation and salvation. When God creates the world, it is out of nothing; his arrangement is the defeat of chaos. In a parallel way, when God rescues the world from sin, he rescues it from what Josef Pieper calls “the orientation toward nothingness and the reduction to nothingness,”¹¹ that is, the true nature of sin—or what Paul calls being “subjected to decay” (Rom. 8:20). For sin may be understood, as in Athanasius, as humans “despis[ing] and overturn[ing] the *comprehension* of God.”¹² Sin is a movement toward both nothingness and meaninglessness; but the salvific, creative word of God is a sign, an interlocution of the Trinity that pours something—meaning through love—into nothing. The salvific word of God refuses de-creation and meaninglessness in his saving power. Thus the incarnation preserves the legibility of us all.

Understanding Christ’s identity as *logos* is particularly important to understanding his incarnation as signification; indeed, the term as it is used in the Gospel of John establishes Christ’s signifying power. The meaning of the biblical use of *logos* differs in part from Greek understandings, though there is, naturally, some commerce between these, since *logos* is, in John, the primary conceptual means of connection between Greek philosophy and Christian doctrine.¹³ In Greek philosophy, the word carries massive weight; it is “symbolic of the Greek understanding of the world and existence.”¹⁴ The root contains the ideas of reckoning, by means of gathering or separating; the word itself evolves toward narration, and even definition: as Walter Bröcker has written, the Aristotelian sense of the term looms

large—the “causing of something to be seen for what it is, and the possibility of being oriented thereby.”¹⁵

Understanding Jesus as *logos* in the way John does establishes Jesus as generative and interpretive creator. In John is the idea that Jesus’ creative power comes not only through invention but through the reckoning and bestowal of meaning. Further, though, the use of *logos* in John’s Gospel shows the word of God as both interpreter and *interpreted* creator; ongoing interpretation of Jesus—from inside and outside his circle—seems fundamental to John’s establishment of Jesus’s divinity.

One common scholarly view suggests that the New Testament *logos* emerges from ideas about wisdom in the Old Testament, because of the association of both Jesus and Wisdom with creation. This would link the *logos* of Christ with divine wisdom in Proverbs 8, which emphasizes not only creation by wisdom, but the ordering and reckoning of that creation.

I was there when he set the heavens in place,
 when he marked out the horizon on the face of the deep,
 when he established the clouds above
 and fixed securely the fountains of the deep,
 when he gave the sea its boundary
 so the waters would not overstep his command,
 and when he marked out the foundations of the earth.
 (Prov. 8:27-29)

According to this connection between word of God and wisdom, then, titling Jesus the word of God is, for John, tantamount to an assertion that Jesus both establishes, and in fact *is* the significance of the created order, an idea whose implications echo the Christ hymn of Colossians 1. As Stanley Grenz articulates it, the idea of Christ as word “refers to what is revelatory, to what reveals the significance of

an event or even reveals the nature of God.”¹⁶ Jesus, the word of God, creates the world and has the power to grant significance.

But the word’s signifying creation goes even further—as I hinted above, Christ’s signification is also participatory and becoming. John Ronning in *The Jewish Targums and John’s Logos Theology* suggests that John’s use of the term *logos* to refer to Jesus is the result of the influence of Jewish targums—Rabbinic paraphrases and interpretations of the Hebrew Bible in Aramaic—and their references to the word of God. His carefully argued assertion is that the targum linkage to the *logos* title for Jesus in John has a particularly Christological payoff; Ronning suggests that it allowed Jews to make textual connections (via translation, an idea that I will return to in chapter 2) that facilitated their understanding of Jesus as fully God and fully human.¹⁷ A targumic source also, Ronning argues, allows John’s Gospel to reread—and reinterpret—targumic references to the word of God as unwitting messianic prophecies. Understanding the targumic source for the Johannine *logos* thus makes John’s use of the term *logos* and his use of the scripture itself into something multivalent over time. John thus could be considered, in the targumic view, but also in several other views of the Johannine *logos*, to understand the divine significance of the word as inherent within earlier texts and brought forward to expanded significance in his interpretation in the gospel.

So Jesus grounds the world’s significance, and through ongoing participation is ever more expansively understood as the word of God. But Jesus the word, also in fact *is* the particular significance of the world. His arrangement and unfolding of creation also reveal God, and he is the subject of the world’s meaning. For Barth, the New Testament witness to revelation always demands Christ as the subject of its revelation, the only true subject, the arbiter by which

all other concepts are comprehensible or bear any meaning at all. Nothing, he writes, no principle, narrative, ethic, or maxim “has any value, inner importance or abstract significance of its own . . . apart from Jesus Christ being the Subject of it all.”¹⁸ The biblical witness to revelation, for Barth, is the pattern for our response to the divine revelation of Christ. Now, the evangelical discomfort with Barth’s assessment of scripture has its place here—perhaps the Bible has to do with other things than solely Christ—but I wonder if part of the difficulty might be solved by expanding rather than diminishing or dismissing this claim. For, significance itself is the predicate of the subject *Jesus Christ*, the act of the word of God with God. John Milbank has suggested, for example, that the significance of Jesus for the significance of the cosmos is tied to Jesus as language. He writes in *The Word Made Strange* that it is “*only* an insistence that the Son is also *logos* in the sense of language, that allows us to make any sense of this place at all.”¹⁹ Jesus, as the language-*logos*, is the Lord of sense-making who saves us by signifying. We might say, then—and perhaps I simply will paraphrase—that signification is found in no one else, for there is no other signification to be found in heaven and earth by which we must be saved.

Now, these three theological points have implications for how we think about text. Taking the part for the whole, we may say that texts are part of the created order and the qualities that apply to all creation also apply to texts. These theological points suggest that in considering texts, we ought not to seek an ontology of texts, nor even an ethics of texts, but rather develop an eschatology of texts.

The Theology of the Future of the Text

Because text is a part of God’s creation, it is a making by the word of God, and is sustained by him. All our words are words within the