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*Reading Backwards: Figural Christology and the Fourfold Gospel Witness.* Richard B. Hays. Waco: Baylor University Press, 2014. Pp. xxii, 155.

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In *Reading Backwards: Figural Christology and the Fourfold Gospel Witness*, Richard Hays provides us with a kind of “progress report” of his more wide-ranging study still in germination. This work focuses on the canonical Gospels and is a sequel to his earlier book on Paul, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (1989). Here, Hays’ specific topic is to offer an account of the narrative representation of Jesus according to the rereading of Israel’s Scripture by the four Evangelists; an exercise in intertextual close reading.

In his introductory chapter, Hays argues that the canonical Gospels embody and enact *figural Christological interpretation*, and clarifies that this figural reading does not need to presume that Old Testament authors were conscious of predicting or anticipating (prefiguration) Christ. Hence, figural correspondences are retrospective rather than prospective; the death and resurrection of Jesus makes Israel’s Scripture “to be comprehensively construed as a witness to the gospel” (p. 16).

The second chapter focuses on the Gospel of Mark, that is, on the Evangelist’s “mysterious story enveloped in apocalyptic urgency” (p. 17). Richard Hays insists on both: the citation of Isaiah 40 in the opening lines of this Gospel suggesting that, in Jesus, Isaiah’s promised new exodus is being enacted. He stresses the importance of Mark 4:21–25 as a hermeneutical directive for the Gospel, since it would be drawing the readers’ attention to a hidden Christological signification that may be discerned by attentive listeners. The narrative style involves hints and allusions that project Jesus’ story onto the background of Israel’s story; and this superimposition of the two stories on one another creates extraordinary new patterns that lead us into acknowledging Jesus as the embodiment of the God of Israel.

In the next chapter, on Matthew’s reading of Scripture, Hays elaborates on how Matthew provides explicit explanations of Mark’s hints and allusions, especially on how Matthew presents Jesus as the embodied presence of God. The Evangelist’s identification of Jesus as *Emmanuel* (God’s presence) “establishes the structural framework on which the story is built” (p. 38), as it appears in the beginning, middle, and end of the story (Matt 1:23; 18:20; 28:20). In short, the prophecies in the infancy narrative and throughout the entire Gospel connect both the history and future restored destiny of Israel to the figure of Jesus through figural correspondences.

According to Hays’ understanding of Luke’s narrative, the words spoken on the road to Emmaus in Luke 24 point out to the deepest truth about Jesus: he is the Redeemer of Israel. The Gospel of Luke contains intertextual references that are implicit correspondences, allusions and echoes that do not function as direct typological prefigurations of events in the life of Jesus. Instead, “they create a

narrative world thick with scriptural memory” (p. 59), where Luke regularly weaves together different strands of material.

Hays’ chapter on the Gospel of John studies some of the Evangelist’s *images* and *figures* evoked from Israel’s Scripture. Richard Hays’ understanding of the way that Scripture functions in John is that of the identity of Jesus as being “deeply imbedded in Israel’s texts and traditions—especially the traditions centered on the Temple and Israel’s annual feasts,” e.g., Passover and *Sukkoth* (p. 82). Crucial to the Fourth Gospel is its prologue situating Jesus in relation to Jewish scriptural traditions about *creation* and *wisdom* while also transforming these traditions through the claim that the *Logos* was made flesh in Jesus.

In his last chapter, Hays turns to the task of highlighting what we can learn from reading the Gospel’s common fourfold witness. He insists on the importance and benefits of reading Scripture along with the Evangelists, for whom “to produce richly intertextual narrative accounts of the significance of Jesus” was “Their way of pursuing what we call ‘doing theology’” (p. 103).

As for the weaknesses of this book, I would point out first, with most reviewers, Hays’ apparent ranking of the Synoptic Gospels with regards to their way of narrating the divine identity of Jesus: with Luke offering the most adequate one, followed by Mark, and lastly Matthew. It is difficult to know whether that conclusion (possibly Hays’ own preference) and its arguments will succeed in convincing the majority of New Testament scholars—perhaps mainly because of Hays’ approach to the Synoptic issues, which shares the Markan priority consensus and Matthew and Luke’s dependence on Mark, but places no weight on the hypothetical Q source (p. xiv). Second, again with most reviewers, one can also highlight Hays’ lack of attention to Second Temple Jewish interpretive traditions that may have influenced the Evangelists in their understanding of Israel’s Scripture, although Hays provides a few extra-canonical references (e.g., to Philo and *I Enoch*) in his chapter on the Gospel of John.

Hays’ successful effort, it seems to me, to validate and encourage figural reading of the Old Testament will be greatly welcomed among many laic readers, scholars, and the clergy. Indeed, Hays’ last chapter focusing on retrospective readings of the Old Testament—where he suggests ten ways (based on the Evangelists’ hermeneutic) that might teach us how to read Scripture (e.g., conversation of the imagination; importance of “story,” reader competence to discern the *metaleptic* character in references and allusions)—provides readers with fresh and helpful insights. Another great contribution found in Richard Hays’ work is his convincing suggestion and understanding—against conventional views of modern New Testament criticism—that “we should stop talking about ‘high’ and ‘low’ Christologies in the canonical Gospels” (p. xxi), since through drawing on Old Testament images, “all four Gospels portray the identity of Jesus as mysteriously fused with the identity of God” (p. 108).

Readers will also most certainly appreciate Richard Hays' impeccable literary style, his exploring creativity in reading both the Old Testament and New Testament, and what appears to be a touch of sarcasm/humour here and there (e.g., pp. 4, 5, 60, 97).