“Has Not God Made Foolish the Wisdom of the World?”

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The most common Latin phrase indicating the nature of our species is *homo sapiens*. Let’s just forget about the part of the phrase that excludes half the species, that is to say *homo* rather than *femina*, and move on. *Homo sapiens* might be good as a start, but for me it immediately leads to the question if we are people who know, how do we know? I would submit that it might be useful to amend the familiar *homo sapiens* to *feminoma narrans*: the human as a storyteller or narrative-maker. My Latinist friend reminds me that *narrans*, while literally meaning “storyteller” or “narrative-maker,” also includes the possibility of “liar.”

More perhaps than any other religion, Christianity knows itself, or perhaps put more clearly, Christians know themselves through a single story. A single story centered around a single character, who was born and died, these facts making him recognizably similar to other characters in other stories. More unusual, this character rose from the dead, marking him as different from most other characters in stories, particularly the stories of the post-Enlightenment. Unlike other religious traditions, Christianity emphasizes specific details of a specific character’s life, details which are repeated and repeated so that they become instantly familiar to believers and one might add, to anyone who comes into the force field of these believers. But if Christianity is centered in the story, what might the nature of this story be and what may be the nature of its apprehension by those who read or hear it?

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It is one of the easiest things in the world to find a text of the gospels. They are a book within a book, or four books within a larger book. A book, the Bible, that is a book and not a book, or a book unlike any kind of book in that more than any other book in the history of humankind, it is impossible to give it an innocent reading. One comes to it laden with, not only publically cultural, but privately emotional responses. The great literary critic Erich Auerbach in his book *Mimesis* tells us that cultures produce the stories that they need for their understanding of themselves and their values, and that the stories in turn create the cultures. So what does the story of Jesus tell us about what we, as a culture, need? This question becomes more pressing because we understand the story of this character's life as a blueprint for how we must live ours. Perhaps uniquely in the history of a narrative, this one has been connected with the word “salvation.” Even if we reject the connection, or have no idea what the word “salvation” might mean, the connection has been made, strongly, by others, both those who have come before us and those whom we live beside, a connection shimmering overhead like a light one has to work not to acknowledge. And so the story has a unique connection to a lived life. If someone told us she was willing to die for Anna Karenina, we would call her insane. We don’t believe that we read *King Lear* or the *Odyssey* or even a biography of Gandhi or Martin Luther King as if our lives, either our temporal ethical lives or our eternal lives if we believe in them, were at stake. So what is the nature of this story of Jesus?

On one level, this is not a difficult question to answer. Jesus was born of Mary in Bethlehem, he died in Jerusalem, a death by crucifixion. After three days, he rose from the dead. These would seem to be things we can hold on to: they originate from the world of events. But we look to stories not just for events—a story is not synonymous with a chronicle. The events are acted by people whom we apprehend clearly and deeply. So if we can speak with a certain kind of clarity about events, can we speak with the same clarity about the nature of the performer of these actions? Jesus the character. The character of Jesus.

Let’s back up a minute. The story of Jesus was not, like modern stories, written by one person for an audience she could not identify. They were written by many hands for specific audiences. And so if the story of Jesus is both like and unlike other stories, the gospels are a book unlike what we commonly call a book.

Is it possible to explain or describe the kind of book they might be? Why are there four gospels, and four authors, all recounting the
story of one person’s life? All creating a character with the same name: Jesus. Why is there not just one gospel, one version of this life, credited to a single author, or with no author named, like the book of Judges or the book of Kings? Or why not a hundred gospels? Who decided, and how did this canonized text come to be? I have no idea.

Apparently I’m not the only one. No one really knows. The New Testament scholar Bruce Metzger says, “Nothing is more amazing in the annals of the Christian church than the absence of detailed accounts of so significant a process.”

The final canonization of the twenty-seven books of the New Testament was not completed until A.D. 367, three centuries after the first gospel (Mark’s) was written, around the year 65. Matthew’s and Luke’s gospels are thought to have been composed around 70 or 80; John’s is the latest, probably around the year 90.

The editorial decisions that resulted in the gospels as we know them were the result of the labor of many hands whose work went on for centuries. The decisions were made on grounds of doctrinal orthodoxy; many gospels, prominent among which are those known as the Gnostic Gospels, were rejected on these grounds. The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke (called the synoptic gospels because they contain quite similar material) and that of John were authorized on the grounds that these authors alone were either apostles (Matthew and John) or the companions of apostles (Mark, who supposedly accompanied Peter, and Luke, supposedly a kind of secretary to Paul). One of the most influential editors, Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyons, insisted in the year 180 that there were four and only four gospels because there are four zones of the world, four principal winds, and that the cherubim have four faces.

Perhaps it is true to say: all Christians are bowdlerizers. When we come to something we cannot or will not accept, we skip over it, hoping to find something we are happy to hold on to in the next chapter, the next verse, the next page, the next evangelist.

Perhaps the most famous and audacious bowdlerizer of the New Testament is Thomas Jefferson. He simply took out all the parts of the New Testament he didn’t like and put together his own. As a recreation from the pressures of the presidency, he took a pair of scissors to the

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2 Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*, 3.11.8–9.
editions of the New Testament in the four languages he knew—English, French, Latin, and Greek—reconstituting the gospels so they would be a force for good. And not just generalized good: he was particular in his intentions. The original title of his compilation was “The Philosophy of Jesus of Nazareth, extracted from the account of his life and doctrines, as given by Matthew, Mark, Luke and John; being an Abridgement of the New Testament for use of the Indians, unembarrassed with matters of faith or fact beyond the level of their comprehension.”

He had the enviable certainty of an Enlightenment thinker. He knew which were really the words of Jesus and which were not. How could he tell? Well, it was obvious. He could tell. After all, wasn’t he the author of the words “we hold these truths to be self-evident”? With the same faith, he wrote to John Adams,

We must reduce our volume to the simple evangelists, select, even from them, the very words only of Jesus, paring off the amphiboligisms into which they have been led, by forgetting often, or not understanding what had fallen from him, by giving their own misconceptions of his dicta, and expressing unintelligibly for others what they had not understood themselves. There will be found remaining the most sublime and benevolent code of morals which has ever been offered to man. I have performed this operation for my own use, by cutting verse by verse out of the printed book, and by arranging the matter which is evidently his, and which is as distinguishable as diamonds in a dunghill.3

At an opposite extreme from Thomas Jefferson, with his belief in reason, are readers who go to the text with a desire for a world that is simultaneously more clear and more miraculous than what they perceive as the chaotic smallness of their ordinary lives. A literalist reading of Scripture, which has no time for metaphor or imagistic language, and no patience with historic contextualization or tonal nuance, would be a reading as different from my reading of the story of Jesus as my reading is from Thomas Jefferson’s. How, then, do we determine what we would call a misreading, when we confront a rich text and a richly various character? How especially when our reading is so determined

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by our needs, both personal and emotional and public and political, including needs for mastery, power, and domination? Needs that would have to include a need for meaning, but that would for some include a personal connection to God and that suffering is not an absurd appetite for law and judgment, and strict do’s and don’ts. The greatness and problem with the character and story of Jesus can be found in the words of Dostoyevsky’s Grand Inquisitor. Speaking in an accusatory, even enraged tone, he rails at Jesus: “Instead of giving a firm foundation for setting the conscience of man at rest forever, Thou didst choose all that is exceptional, vague and enigmatic.”

The exceptional, vague, and enigmatic allows for the fullness of human freedom and human imagination, and this very freedom enables a variety of responses that make consensus or even agreement a challenge. And so the Gospel of Prosperity folks find justification in the parable of the talents; an anarchist might believe that Jesus’ instructions to his disciples to reject hierarchical leadership is the inspiration for their understanding of right governance and living. Those who want to be easy on adultery can take their cue from Jesus’ encounter with the woman whom he saves from stoning; those who are hard on divorce can find what they need in Jesus’ words, “What God has joined together let no man put asunder.” And just as there is not really one gospel but four, there is not one story of Jesus, as there might be one story of Abraham Lincoln or Queen Elizabeth I. The gospels follow the three years of Jesus’ public life. But, interestingly for me as a creator of character, the editors of the gospel allow for a character who is large to the point of contradictoriness. When people consult their “What Would Jesus Do?” bracelets, they might have a harder time than they think. They might need a bigger bracelet. There is the Jesus who is patient with the rich and violently angry at the sellers in the temple. He is the Lamb of God who says he comes not to bring peace but the sword. He takes children on his lap and tells a young man to forget about burying his father. He says that at the last judgment, those who neglected the needs of the poor will be liable to hellfire and then chastises his disciples for forgetting that “the poor you always have with you,” so there’s no point selling the delicious perfume.

But to say that the narrative of the gospels is fluid is not to say that it is without boundaries. What, then, are the boundaries? What can

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we say of the gospels that we can be confident is not a misreading? Or is this a vain, or an impossible question?

If as postmodernists we must understand that there is no such thing as an innocent reading, we have to come to terms with the fact that this is true of the story of Jesus in spades. This opens, of course, the possibility of misreading.

Are there any things to be said about the story of Jesus, the character of Jesus, that are misreading-proof, that can resonate with Auerbach’s idea that a culture tells the stories it needs and is in turn created by them? Anything that can cross the lines of history and geography and create something that seems like a continuity, a consistency?

I would suggest that there are three—what to call them?—themes or elements that pervade the gospels as texts and the character of Jesus. That is to say, it can be truly said of Jesus that he had an intimate relationship with God, his father, his Abba, who articulated his delight in his beloved son in whom he was well pleased, and who engendered a sense of despairing abandonment in this very son. The terms, that is to say, deny a remote God, insist upon a near one. Secondly, in Jesus we see someone who was actively engaged with other human beings of all kinds: centurions, tax collectors, fishermen, adulterers, even his mother, however ambivalent his feelings about family. A character who had intensely personal and individual relationships with clearly drawn individuals: the sick whom he heals, the friends whom he accompanies, the scribes and Pharisees he chastises. Once again, remoteness is denied.

But perhaps the most crucial element in the story and character of Jesus can be traced to its most central symbol: the symbol of the cross. The story of Jesus is the story of a man who suffered grotesquely and died shamefully. It is a story, on the one hand, of defeat. But the defeat is not final: it culminates in resurrection. And so embedded necessarily in the story and character of Jesus is the conviction that suffering is meaningful, is not absurd. Jesus’ embodiment as a character who suffered allows suffering humans a sense not only of identification, but accompaniment. In the words of Simone Weil, “The extreme greatness of Christianity lies in the fact that it does not seek a supernatural cure for suffering, but a supernatural use of it.”

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I would go further. The genius of Christianity is that it offers the image of an incarnate God. What does it say about a people, a culture, that such an idea might have an appeal? It springs, it would seem to me, from a Western valuing of the individual living her life in relationship. It creates the possibility of an identification, the kind of identification that has fired the Western imagination in private prayer, in public action, and in the creation of art, as in John Donne’s *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions*, during which he identifies with the sufferings of Jesus in the midst of his own grave illness and impending death.

Thy Son himself had a sadness in his soul to death, and he had a reluctance, a deprecation of death, in the approaches thereof; but he had his cordial too, *Yet not my will, but thine be done*. . . . When thy blessed Son cried out to thee, *My God, my God, why has thou forsaken me?* thou didst reach out thy hand to him; but not to deliver his sad soul, but to receive his holy soul. . . .

An identification such as this allows for a very special kind of antipode to a sense ofaloneness, the cure for Pascal’s fear of spinning endlessly among the freezing stars.

If we can say that the story of Jesus is a story of one who has an intimate relationship with God, who lives in relationship with individuals that is personal and that honors the individuality of each person, and that the example of the suffering of Jesus denies the meaninglessness of human life and suffering, we might say that misreading can be judged by examining the results of human behavior acted upon as a result of these readings, acted upon in Jesus’ name. That we cannot uncouple the reading of the gospels from the actions it produces, and that any reading might be called a misreading that produces actions that deny the possibility of a relationship with God, the value of each individual as she exists in relationship, and that renders human suffering meaningless by engendering it in the name of an abstraction, such as an institution or an idea.

If we can speak meaningfully of the culture of Christianity—in Auerbach’s terms, the stories that this culture needs, treasures, ingests, and lives by—these are the stories that convey the possibility of

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a personal and intimate relationship with both God and other hu-
mans, and an experience of suffering that is meaningful and not ab-
surd. In this we can find reflections of our hunger for God, our
treasuring of individuality and individual experience, our ideas of the
importance of human connection and human responsibility, and the
possibility of finding meaning. Exceptional, vague, enigmatic, this
story creates a world and interprets it; it requires that we use our
imaginations to make it our own and allow it to tell us who we are.