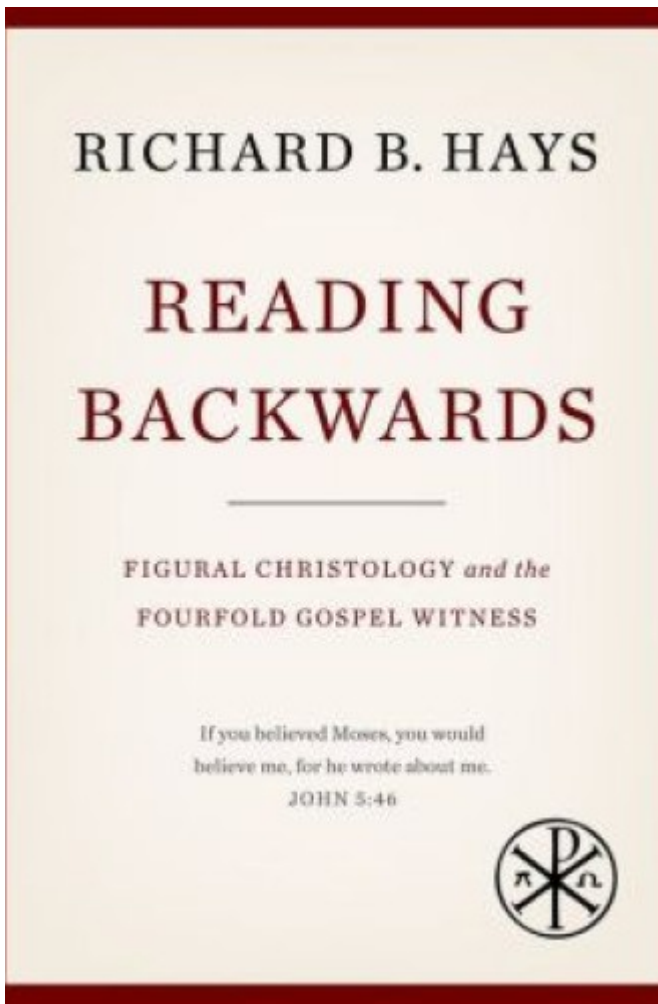


Reading Backwards, by Richard B. Hays

reviewed by [Jason Byassee](#) in the [April 29, 2015](#) issue

In Review



Reading Backwards

By Richard B. Hays
Baylor University Press

I remember arguing a historical point with a visiting New Testament scholar while I was in graduate school at Duke. The question was whether the resurrection can be said to have happened historically. This guest speaker felt that on the grounds of

what counts as history we cannot say yeah or nay. Richard Hays countered that the gospel should lead us to rethink our notions of history. The visitor shook his head and protested out of earshot, “Richard is really a literary guy.”

His reference was to Hays’s early landmark work, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul*, which argued, contrary to convention, that Paul’s references to Israel’s scripture are not mere clumsy proof texts, but rather carefully considered figural readings. When Paul quoted a Psalm or a passage from Isaiah, he assumed that the reader would know its original narrative context and that the meaning would echo between that context and Paul’s words to his readers. *Echoes* is shot through with literary terms like *intertextuality* and *metalepsis*.

This may seem like scholarly intramurals, but the upshot is significant. If Paul can reread Israel’s scripture christologically, then why can’t we? Think of the constant refrain in introductions to historical criticism: that we have to read the scriptures in their “original” (that is, historically reconstructed) context. Hays’s work points out that Paul didn’t do so. He read them in light of Christ’s work of gathering a church of Jews and gentiles, here at the end of the age. Hays isn’t just trying to nudge the dial on Pauline scholarship. He wants us to rethink how we teach and study and preach the Bible.

Hays has said for some years that he has been working on something like “echoes of scripture in the Gospels.” But life intervened: he is now dean of Duke Divinity School, where he is trying to implement the “conversion of the imagination” about which he has long written. He has produced this slim volume as an appetizer for that ultimate scholarly feast.

Reading Backwards is a clear and tidy volume, the fruit of half a dozen lectures delivered in the United Kingdom, with a lucid introduction, a dramatic conclusion, and a chapter on each of the four Gospels examining how it tends to read Israel’s scripture in light of Christ. The book’s thinness belies its ambition. Hays is not content to be “a literary guy.” If he can show how the evangelists read the Bible as they wrote more of the Bible, the payoff will be historical as well as literary—and it will change how we read and teach scripture.

The book is to be recommended for its numinous individual readings of scripture alone. Think of the odd episode in Mark where Jesus walks on water and intends to pass his disciples by. Hays has already told us that Mark’s allusions to scripture are

subtle, understated, and easy to miss. One allusion left untrumpeted in Mark 6:45–52 might be to Job 9, where God is described in Exodus language as the one who “walks upon the sea as upon dry ground,” and later Job says, “he passes by me, and I do not see him.” Mark is relaying more than a miracle with an extraneous detail. He is saying that the God of Israel is embodied in Jesus—if we have ears to hear.

Luke’s christological hermeneutic is also understated in places—so understated that scholars often say that the evangelist has a “low Christology.” Hays uses the road to Emmaus story in Luke 24 to set the stage for Luke’s whole Gospel and wonderfully points out that the scholars who claim that Luke has a low Christology accuse the evangelist of being like the inconsolable travelers. For them, Jesus was a prophet for whom death was the end. But the risen Christ taught the disciples “from all the scriptures” about himself. They had heard others claim that he had been raised. But that wasn’t enough. They didn’t yet know how to reread the scriptures with reference to Jesus’ death and resurrection.

Hays’s scholarly point is clear: neither do we. We should stop talking about high and low Christology. No Gospel writer thinks that Jesus is anything other than the embodiment of the God of Israel. But a broader point is also being made: we cannot understand who the Gospels claim Jesus is without attending to their readings of the Old Testament. The Gospels teach us how to read Israel’s scripture and vice versa.

Hays is willing to argue with the plain sense of the biblical text. He notes dangers in each of the evangelists’ approach to Israel’s scripture. John’s readings are luminous—bright instances set against dark backgrounds, like Rembrandt’s paintings. Yet they can lead to the sort of inside-outside dichotomies that come to terrible fruition in John 8, where Jesus accuses his Jewish interlocutors of being from their father the devil. Hays likes Mark’s hints and whispers but realizes that many (in fact, most) interpreters can miss the point, and communities in on Mark’s secret can become self-congratulatory and insular.

My favorite line in the book is Hays’s frank admission that he is “still trying to puzzle out what I think about Matthew.” Rare is the scholar who will make such an admission. Rarer still is the New Testament scholar who will make use of a theologian as often as Hays does of Rowan Williams or who will appeal to Martin Luther for more than the odd bombastic quote. The disciplinary boundaries between Bible, theology, and church history fall away.

This book is such a gem that it may prove more widely influential than anything Hays has done yet. And if the appetizer is this good, imagine the coming feast.