Golden Gate: The east gate of the temple complex in Jerusalem, associated in tradition with the east gate of Ezekiel's eschatological temple vision, and a important geographical location for expanded biblical traditions and mystical interpretation in both Judaism and Christianity.

CONSTRUCTING NARRATIVES

Christianity as Poetics: Constructing the Gospel in Story and Liturgy

Timothy Clark

When I was in elementary school, I had a favorite illustrated book of stories from around the world, which I spent a couple of years of my youth reading the cover off of. Most of the yarns in it were what you would expect from such a children's collection: various fantastical narratives about quests that pitted the heroes against sorcerers, monsters, great natural challenges, etc., with a few myths of gods, goddesses, and creation stories interspersed with them. But one particular tale (I think the book's editors attributed it to Spain) compelled some special attention from me. It related the story of a man who is visited in his house by Jesus and twelve very hungry disciples. Although he has little to eat, he offers to share with them all that he has in his larder, which, in a very loaves-and-fishes kind of way, he is surprised to find miraculously stuffed full of bread, butter, and meats to serve his guests. As

Jesus departs, his disciples encourage the man to go and petition Jesus to grant him three wishes. To the shock and dismay of the disciples—who thought that the man should perhaps request something more obviously useful or noble—he asks that no one who sits in the chair by his fireplace, or who climbs into the cherry tree in the back of his house, should be able to leave them without his permission, and also that he should never lose at card games.

The man's wishes go unused until the end of his life, when Death (personified, of course) comes to call, and the man asks him to sit in the fireplace chair while he prepares to go with him; the price he exacts from Death for allowing him to get up again is three hundred more years of life. Naturally, when Death returns centuries later, he climbs into the man's tree to eat some ripe cherries and is forced to grant him another three hundred years of life before he can go about collecting more souls. When the man finally goes away with Death at the end of this time (since at last Death has learned not to enter the man's house at all), he passes by the gates of Hell on his way to see St. Peter and challenges the Devil to a game of cards, staking his soul against one of the souls in Hell. After winning so many games that he has nearly emptied Hell (the Devil, apparently, has a gambling problem), he proceeds to Heaven, leading his new congregation of souls. When they arrive, Peter tells the man that he is free to enter, but that Heaven cannot accept all of these other souls that were previously denied admission. Undeterred, the man rebukes Peter, reminding him that, when the hungry apostles had visited him in life, he had freely offered them everything he had to give, with no expectation of reward; thus he cannot now abandon the ones who, because of Jesus's gifts to him, are now in his care. Trapped by the man's words, Peter has no choice but to open the gates of Paradise to him and all of his charges.

While I remember few of the details of the other stories in this book (I doubt that I have read any of them again since I was eight or nine), after thirty years I still have a detailed recollection of this one tale. (I've actually had to significantly condense my memory of it so as not to test my readers' attention more than I already have.) Perhaps I was so enamored of it because it was the only place that I had ever encountered biblical characters in a nonbiblical story, so it had a special resonance. (I was not raised in anything resembling a biblical fundamentalist tradition, but still, in my world, one didn't simply make up stuff about biblical people, and especially Jesus, in this way.) It was only as I became more aware of the deeper Christian tradition that I understood that, far from being a simple fairy tale, this story was powerfully re-presenting many of the basic elements that make up the Christian narrative. A person who freely offers what he has is unexpectedly rewarded with great material abundance. Simple, apparently foolish gifts—gifts that even Jesus's disciples cannot understand—allow the man to overcome Death. The Devil, expecting another easy victim, is instead defeated, and Hell ransacked, by the inscrutable power of a man who stakes his own life in return for others'. (Of course, in this story, that man is not divine, but he is using divinely granted powers. And the fact

that the epic contest against the Devil is waged with such mundane and even disreputable means—cards, really?—adds another delicious twist to the tale.) A great multitude is freed from the depths of Hell and then admitted to Heaven, not by any deed of their own, but through the mercy (and stubbornness) of another who takes pity on them.

The Christian Mythos

This light story offers its readers and hearers an appropriation and representation of the basic Christian mythos. On the one hand, it is a simple fairy tale that has managed to delight at least one child over the course of its (hopefully many) tellings. On the other, it inculcates and investigates nuances of the Gospel's claims and its essential mythic structure for a community that then retells that story in its own environment, with reference to its own literary and cultural impulses. Being able to explore and understand this mythos through textual engagement and artistic representations that expand the foundational story—from this brief children's story to church art and architecture and continuing through contemporary extra-ecclesial cultural phenomena such as the Lord of the Rings and Harry Potter juggernauts—is a truly vital task, as it is this poetic investigation that ensures a continual active engagement with the depth, mystery, and paradox of the Christian Gospel.

As the history and nuances of the concept of mythos are too involved to explore fully here, I will simply note that it is not, as is commonly assumed in regular parlance today, a description of nonhistorical, fictional, unreal items, as contrasted to quantifiable, documented, tangible things. The mythos itself is the powerful organizing statement that organizes and subsumes the "factual" information of the world into a comprehensible pattern. Conceptualizing the Gospel as mythos allows one to understand the claims made for Jesus Christ not as a recounting of historical verities that are themselves subject to shifting standards of evidence and proof, but rather as a statement about reality that is able to adapt to and assimilate all manner of human cultural changes. This statement bears an authority that is self-contained, since it relies only on its own self-referential nature for verification. Because the argument makes its claims on the basis of the postulates of a preexisting literary foundation, it need present its case only on that basis. It may highlight some elements of the tradition, downplay others, and weave together its evidence in order to create an authoritative statement about the meaning of the literary deposit on which it is built. The result may not be the only possible argument that one could make from the source materials, but that is not at issue here; all that is required is that the argument be coherently made from the available evidence.

In light of this process, we can see that the Jesus Christ who is celebrated and worshipped in the Church is a product not of a rigorous fact-check, but of the creative interpretation and organization that results from poetics. Christ is "according to Scripture," as the formulation goes, but only insofar as Christians have selected and organized the scriptural characteristics that they apply to him, and

then have integrated and applied these characteristics to respond to their own cultural understandings. The categories that are thereby created are not predetermined; Jesus is not identified as the Christ because he checks a list of self-evident boxes that were simply waiting around to be marked by the first person who could fulfill all of the requirements. Just as the children's story above represents the Gospel by appropriating and rearranging an already extant deposit of literature and tradition (while at the same time making no pretense that the story itself is actually "true"), the Christian tradition itself has discerned its central figure and theological concept through a continuing sifting of the textual and cultural traditions available to it.

This idea that Jesus Christ, and the Gospel that describes and reveals him, proceed only from such a profoundly subjective discernment and sorting of the scriptural tradition is difficult to grasp. It might seem easier to place at the center of worship someone who is more historically solid, who can be (or could have been) touched and handled and objectively evaluated, and who can be clinically compared to a set of objective criteria. Constructing Christ from such a human discernment of the scriptural tradition seems to make the resulting figure a product of human imagination—a significant concern particularly in an era when rapid cultural change and global awareness makes ever more evident how temporally fleeting and geographically local Christian practices and conceptions can be. Recognizing the sorting of the tradition that is involved in constructing Christ might make it seem that he is simply another deity created in humanity's own image, rather than the ultimate and unshakable source of salvation. Yet this overlooks the importance of

Palm Sunday procession at the Orthodox Church of the Dormition in the village of Abud in the West Bank.

Jesus Christ not as a god or system who is externally imposed on humanity, but who arrives in its midst, functioning among us at all times and in all places.

That is why it is necessary that this Jesus Christ should be a product of communal engagement with the scriptures, of our collective attempts to understand—from the scriptural sources, melded with previous traditions and integrated with specific cultural knowledge—what God looks like. The real touchstone of this discernment is in liturgical engagement, liturgy being the only occasion when the congregation as a congregation formally encounters the Word of God and is confronted with the implications of that encounter (pithily summed up in the communicant's prayer that participation in the Eucharistic meal may be "neither for judgment nor condemnation, but for the healing of soul and body"). The congregational encounter, because it is a communal and public event, requires the engagement of all of the faculties that humans possess; it is not an accident that, certainly in the Orthodox Church, the space that contains the liturgical ritual is designed to interact with all five senses. Furthermore, because it is in this place that the congregation gathers, as the Body of Christ and in order to receive the same, it is also here that the truth of the Gospel can be both ritually distilled into its utter simplicity and also greatly expanded upon in order to explore its most profound implications Liturgy is the place in which the Christian mythos achieves its most powerful qualities, where it transcends for the congregation the possibility of being just another debatable statement and becomes a concrete *res* for its adherents. And it is this communal engagement—the artistry of the ritual proceeding from an application of texts that then leads to the literal interpenetration of the congregation with the Word of God in the Eucharistic mystery—that most clearly exemplifies the expression of Christianity as poetics.

The New Israel: Communally and Poetically

The heart of Orthodox liturgical experience lies, of course, in the Eucharistic celebration proper. It is not simply metaphorical to claim that the congregation is constituted—fully brought into being—in the course of the Eucharistic mystery, through the mechanism of its communal engagement with the liturgical texts that define it; it is a long-established trope that Christ may be fully recognized only in the gathered community. The Christian congregation that discerns the qualities of Christ "according to Scripture" also discerns its own qualities as the New Israel—and the Body of Christ—and does so also "according to Scripture." In categories ranging from the orders of the ecclesial hierarchy to the structure of the liturgical year to the architectural and artistic appearance of physical church structures, Christian churches refract, through their very organization and appearance and in the texts that they create and replicate in their worship, their comprehension of the Gospel, and they also telegraph to themselves how they believe themselves to fit into it.

One of the most significant ways in which Christianity—and the biblical Israelite community on which it ty-

pologically models itself—has constituted itself is through the festal cycle. The expansion of these feasts is a classic example of the poetics at work within the evolving Christian mythos. The feasts of the Orthodox Christian tradition expand the conception of the Christian community well beyond its biblical foundations, while simultaneously ensuring that the theological insights that they transmit are nevertheless infused with the scriptural impulses that first gave rise to them. They showcase the ongoing discourse of the community with its textual traditions as part of a process that fashions both texts and community into conversation partners that continue a colloquy that spans many generations.

The biblical texts themselves offer a witness to the flowering of festal models and examples of the commentary that they provide on their own tradition. It is clear in the earlier-composed biblical texts that the entire festival calendar is based on the simple three-feast agricultural cycle of Palestine (marking the major harvest periods), a system that was expanded upon and modified to incorporate notions of the New Year festivals encountered by Judahite exiles in Babylon after Nebuchadnezzar's destruction of Jerusalem and its temple. Just as the biblical feasts celebrated by biblical Israel multiplied and then fused various traditions in order to encompass the congregation in a theologically comprehensive journey through the year, Orthodox Church feasts have also expanded beyond strict biblical confines in order to embrace and comment on the deepening insights of its theological tradition. The great feasts of the Orthodox liturgical calendar serve to enlarge the conception of the Christian universe beyond the textual universe of the Bible, but in a way that not only retains theological fidelity to it, but that also sharpens and further expounds its theological insights. The feasts demonstrate how the implications of the central Gospel proclamation may (and even must) be expanded to encompass a wide variety of scenarios.

This is especially and most obviously evident in Marian feasts, which are clearly designed not to celebrate important scriptural moments (especially since three of the feasts involving Mary do not involve biblical events at all), but to encompass the congregation in a comprehensive Christian cosmology. Mary's role in the Gospels and the rest of the New Testament is generally limited; certainly these documents evince no interest at all in her history prior to Gabriel's announcement of her conception of Jesus or after Jesus's ascension. Yet from a relatively early period, as evidenced by apocryphal texts such as the Protoevangelium of James, Mary's expanded biography was of interest to at least some audiences. Such speculation blossomed and became more formally incorporated into the Church's liturgical structure as her theological role in relation to Jesus became a prominent topic of discussion in the early fifth century and as the popular devotion centered on her person continued to increase. These twin developments led to the inclusion of expanded traditions about Mary directly into the Church's liturgical celebrations, and the liturgical recalibration of canonical scriptural texts that were fashioned to comment on the theological significance of this inclusion.

The Old Testament readings for the Marian feasts in particular show the vast possibilities of rereading scriptural documents against subsequent traditions, and the evolution of new glosses on ancient traditions that nevertheless demonstrate fidelity to their original intentions. Ezekiel 43:27–44:4, the only Old Testament reading that is common to all three of the nonbiblical Marian feasts, is mainly just an architectural rendering of the east gate of Ezekiel's eschatological temple and an ordering of the people who gather there, outlining its role as the mediating point between the divine and human worlds (a role played elsewhere in Old Testament temple literature by the curtain dividing the Holy of Holies from the rest of the sanctuary). But reassessed in the context of the festival, it becomes an entry into a cosmology that has both transformed architectural realities into incarnate human ones, and also recategorized the role of human characters who function very differently than in their original textual environment. The enactment of the Old Testament, New Testament, and noncanonical Marian texts with each other in a liturgical context creates a new theological structure that would not be possible on the basis of any one original tradition. Yet this new reading, experienced in a liturgical setting, proffers a method of comprehending the Christian theological mystery and the role of the congregation as worshippers around God's holy place that none of its antecedents were able to provide on their own.

Much like the tale of Jesus's encounter with the poor but generous host in the tale I recounted above, the nonbiblical stories of Mary's early life and death recapitulate important elements of Christian theology through alternate means. They take seriously a specifically Marian piety that is not generally evident in canonical biblical texts while simultaneously directing that impulse toward elucidating central theological precepts in a way would not be possible simply on the basis of considering the biblical documents alone. In so doing, they demonstrate the distillation of theology not through a series of dry, logical propositions, but by a necessary engagement with poetics. The depths of the Christian mystery are plumbed, and new avenues for exploration are opened, by examining disparate traditions through the synoptic liturgical experience. ❋

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