

reading backwards figural christology and the fourfold gospel witness by richard b hays

Reading Backwards Figural Christology and the Fourfold Gospel Witness by Richard B. Hays is a profound exploration into the ways the New Testament, particularly the Gospels, reframes the Old Testament narratives through the lens of Christ. Richard B. Hays, a prominent New Testament scholar, argues that understanding the life and mission of Jesus can only be fully appreciated when we consider the figural connections that exist between the two Testaments. This article will delve into Hays' concept of figural Christology, its implications for interpreting the Gospels, and how this approach reveals the interconnectedness of Scripture.

Understanding Figural Christology

Figural Christology is a hermeneutical approach that emphasizes the ways in which the Old Testament figures prefigure the person and work of Jesus Christ. Hays argues that the stories, characters, and events in the Hebrew Scriptures are not merely to be understood in their own right but are instead to be read in light of Christ. This creates a dynamic interplay between the Testaments, demonstrating how the Old Testament finds its fulfillment in the New.

The Basis of Figural Reading

The idea of reading backwards refers to approaching the Old Testament with the knowledge of Christ's life, death, and resurrection. Here are key components that underpin Hays' figural Christology:

1. **Intertextuality:** The New Testament authors frequently quote or allude to the Old Testament, suggesting that their writings are deeply rooted in earlier texts. This intertextual relationship is essential

for understanding how the New Testament interprets the Old.

2. **Typology:** Certain figures and events in the Old Testament serve as types or foreshadowing of Jesus. For example, Adam, Moses, and David are seen as prefigurations of Christ, each embodying aspects of his identity and mission.

3. **Narrative Continuity:** The stories of the Old Testament are not isolated but form a continuous narrative that leads to the revelation of Christ. This narrative continuity emphasizes that the Old Testament is integral to the understanding of the New Testament.

4. **Covenantal Themes:** Hays highlights the significance of covenant in both Testaments. The covenants made with figures like Abraham and David find their ultimate expression in Jesus, who establishes a new covenant through his blood.

The Fourfold Gospel Witness

Hays' examination of the Gospels reveals how each Gospel writer uniquely contributes to the understanding of Jesus through their distinctive perspectives. Although they present different aspects of Jesus' life and ministry, they collectively provide a comprehensive portrayal of Christ.

Distinctive Contributions of Each Gospel

1. **Matthew:** Emphasizes Jesus as the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy, presenting him as the new Moses who brings a new law. Matthew frequently cites the Hebrew Scriptures to reinforce this connection.

2. **Mark:** Focuses on the suffering servant motif, portraying Jesus as a figure who must suffer to fulfill God's redemptive purposes. Mark's Gospel is characterized by a sense of urgency and immediacy, leading readers to ponder the implications of Jesus' suffering.

3. Luke: Highlights the inclusive nature of Jesus' ministry, portraying him as the Savior for all people, including the marginalized. Luke's Gospel draws attention to social justice themes and the necessity of compassion.

4. John: Presents a more theological and mystical view of Jesus, emphasizing his divine nature and pre-existence. John's Gospel invites readers to grasp the depth of who Jesus is, as the Word made flesh.

Interpreting the Gospels through a Figural Lens

The figural approach encourages readers to interpret the Gospels not only in their historical context but as part of a larger narrative that finds its roots in the Old Testament. Here are several ways this can be achieved:

1. Identifying Tropes and Themes

Readers should pay attention to recurring themes and tropes that bridge the Old and New Testaments. For example, the themes of sacrifice and redemption are present in both the Passover lamb and Jesus' crucifixion. Recognizing these connections deepens the understanding of Christ's mission and identity.

2. Exploring Character Parallels

Identifying parallels between Old Testament figures and Jesus can enrich one's comprehension of the Gospels. For instance, the leadership qualities of Moses can be seen in Jesus' role as a teacher and guide. Such comparisons can illuminate the significance of Jesus' actions and teachings.

3. Contextualizing Miracles and Parables

Many of Jesus' miracles and parables can be understood as fulfilling or transforming Old Testament expectations. Hays encourages readers to consider how these acts resonate with the larger narrative of salvation history.

Theological Implications of Hays' Approach

Hays' reading backwards figural Christology holds several theological implications that can enhance Christian understanding and faith.

1. A Unified Narrative of Salvation

By connecting the Testaments, Hays illustrates that the Bible presents a coherent narrative of God's redemptive work through history. This unified narrative invites believers to see themselves as part of that ongoing story.

2. Deepening Faith in Christ

Understanding Jesus within the context of the Old Testament can deepen one's faith. Recognizing the intentionality of God's plan throughout history fosters a greater appreciation for the significance of Jesus' life and work.

3. Encouraging Biblical Literacy

Hays' approach encourages a more profound engagement with Scripture. By reading the Old Testament with Christ in mind, individuals are motivated to explore the richness of the biblical text, leading to greater biblical literacy and understanding.

Conclusion

Reading Backwards Figural Christology and the Fourfold Gospel Witness by Richard B. Hays offers a transformative perspective on biblical interpretation. By viewing the Old Testament through the lens of Christ, readers are invited to explore the interconnectedness of Scripture and the depth of God's redemptive plan. Hays' insights challenge believers to embrace a holistic understanding of the Bible that transcends mere historical reading, encouraging a faithful engagement with the living Word of God. As we delve deeper into this figural reading, we discover the richness of our faith and the profound truths that lie within the pages of Scripture.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the primary focus of Richard B. Hays' 'Reading Backwards'?

The primary focus of Hays' 'Reading Backwards' is to explore how the New Testament writers, particularly the Gospel authors, interpret the Old Testament scriptures in a way that reveals a deeper understanding of Christ's identity and mission.

How does Hays argue that the fourfold Gospel witness contributes to our understanding of Jesus?

Hays argues that the fourfold Gospel witness provides a rich and multifaceted portrayal of Jesus, allowing readers to see different aspects of his character and mission through the distinct perspectives of each Gospel writer.

What does Hays mean by 'figural Christology'?

'Figural Christology' refers to the interpretive approach that views Old Testament figures and events as prefigurations or types that point to the life and work of Jesus Christ.

In what way does Hays suggest reading the Gospels backwards enhances biblical interpretation?

Hays suggests that reading the Gospels backwards, by starting with the New Testament and then looking at the Old Testament, allows readers to see how the New Testament reshapes and fulfills the earlier texts in light of Christ.

What role does narrative play in Hays' analysis of the Gospels?

Narrative plays a crucial role in Hays' analysis as he emphasizes that the stories told in the Gospels are not just historical accounts but also theological statements that shape our understanding of Jesus.

How does Hays connect the themes of suffering and resurrection in his reading of the Gospels?

Hays connects the themes of suffering and resurrection by highlighting how the Gospels portray Jesus' suffering as integral to his redemptive work, culminating in the resurrection, which is the ultimate vindication of his mission.

What method does Hays employ to analyze the intertextual relationships between the Old and New Testaments?

Hays employs a method that involves close reading of the texts, paying attention to allusions, quotations, and thematic parallels between the Old and New Testaments to reveal how the Gospels reinterpret earlier scriptures.

How does the concept of 'the fourfold Gospel' challenge traditional views of the Gospel accounts?

The concept of 'the fourfold Gospel' challenges traditional views by suggesting that each Gospel is not merely a standalone account but rather a part of a larger, cohesive witness that enhances the understanding of Jesus' life and mission.

What implications does Hays' work have for contemporary Christian theology?

Hays' work has significant implications for contemporary Christian theology by encouraging a deeper engagement with biblical texts, promoting an understanding of Jesus as the fulfillment of scriptural promises, and fostering a more integrated view of the Old and New Testaments.

In what ways does Hays address the historical context of the Gospels in his work?

Hays addresses the historical context of the Gospels by examining how the socio-political and religious circumstances of the time influenced the Gospel writers and their portrayal of Jesus, highlighting the relevance of context in interpretation.

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