



Introduction

FOR SIXTY YEARS, FROM 1935-1995, my home was in the Middle East. With a childhood in Egypt and forty years spent teaching New Testament in seminaries and institutes in Egypt, Lebanon, Jerusalem and Cyprus, my academic efforts have focused on trying to understand more adequately the stories of the Gospels in the light of Middle Eastern culture. This book is a part of that continuing endeavor.

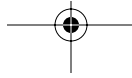
The written sources for such a quest are ancient, medieval and modern. As regards *ancient* literature (Aramaic, Hebrew, Syriac and Arabic), I am not solely interested in the Old Testament, the intertestamental literature, and the Dead Sea Scrolls. The post-New Testament Jewish literature (Mishnah, Midrash Rabbah and the two Talmuds) is also important. In addition to Judaica, there is the literature of the Eastern Semitic-speaking churches.

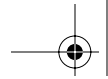
Writing about the importance of the Eastern Christian tradition, John Meyendorff says:

The idea that the early Christian tradition was limited to its Greek and Latin expressions is still widespread. This assumption distorts historical reality and weakens greatly our understanding of the roots of Christian theology and spirituality. In the third and fourth centuries Syriac was the third international language of the church. It served as the major means of communication in the Roman diocese of the "East," which included Syria, Palestine, and Mesopotamia.¹

Middle Eastern Christians have been called the forgotten faithful. The world knows that across the centuries there have been Jews and Muslims in the Middle East. For the most part, however, Middle Eastern Christians evaporated from Western consciousness after the Council of Chalcedon in A.D. 451. Few are aware of the existence today of more than ten million Arabic-speaking Christians who

¹John Meyendorff, preface to *Ephrem the Syrian, Hymns*, trans. Kathleen McVey (New York: Paulist, 1989), p. 1.





possess a rich heritage of ancient and modern literature. Speaking a Semitic language, these Christians are a people who live, breathe, think, act and participate in Middle Eastern culture; they are rooted in the traditional ways of the Middle East. Their voices, past and present, need to be heard in biblical studies.

In an attempt to listen to those voices, this set of essays makes use of early Syriac and Arabic Christian literature on the Gospels. Syriac is a sister language to the Aramaic of Jesus. Arabic-speaking Christianity began on the day of Pentecost when some of those present heard the preaching of Peter in Arabic. In the early centuries, Arabic-speaking Christianity is known to have been widespread in the Yemen, Bahrain, Qatar and elsewhere.² With the rise of Islam, Arabic gradually became the major theological language for all Eastern Christians. Centuries of high quality Arabic Christian literature remain, for the most part, unpublished and unknown.³ All of these sources, Syriac, Hebrew/Aramaic and Arabic, share the broader culture of the ancient Middle East, and all of them are ethnically closer to the Semitic world of Jesus than the Greek and Latin cultures of the West.

Out of that earliest period emerged the writings of Ephrem the Syrian and the three classical translations of the Gospel into Syriac: the Old Syriac, the Peshitta and the Harclean, all three of which have been consulted for this book.

Beginning in the eighth century, the early Arabic Christian tradition becomes important. Starting with the early medieval period, the most outstanding Middle Eastern New Testament scholar I have discovered thus far is Abu al-Faraj Abdallah Ibn al-Tayyib al-Mashriqi, most commonly known as Ibn al-Tayyib. This outstanding scholar of Baghdad died in A.D. 1043. Georg Graf describes him as "Philosoph, Arzt, Monch und Priester in einer Person."⁴ Indeed, he was a Renaissance man five hundred years before the Renaissance. Fully competent and widely read in Greek, Ibn al-Tayyib was also a trained medical doctor who taught medicine and authored medical texts. As a scholar he translated the New Testament from Syriac into Arabic, authored philosophical and theological works, edited an Arabic version of the Diatessaron and wrote commentaries on the Old and New Testaments.⁵ His work on the Gospels is quoted repeatedly in this book.

A second major voice from the medieval period is the Coptic scholar Hibat

²J. Spencer Trimingham, *Christianity Among the Arabs in Pre-Islamic Times* (London: Longmans, 1979).

³Georg Graf, *Geschichte der christlichen arabischen Literatur*, 5 vols. (Vatican City: Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, 1944-1953).

⁴Graf, *Geschichte der christlichen arabischen Literatur*, 2:160.

⁵Albert Abuna, *Adab al-Lugha al-Aramiyya* (Literature in the Aramaic Language) (Beirut: Starko Press, 1980), pp. 417-18.





Allah ibn al-'Assal, who in 1252 completed a critical edition of the four Gospels with a full apparatus. His work is an amazing compendium of how the text was translated from Greek, Coptic and Syriac into Arabic over the centuries before his day.⁶ Diyunisiyus Ja'qub ibn al-Salibi's (d. A.D. 1171) commentaries on the Gospels have also been consulted.

As regards the *modern period*, I have relied on Ibrahim Sa'id, a prominent Egyptian Protestant scholar who in the twentieth century produced able commentaries in Arabic on *Luke* and *John*. In addition, I have turned again and again to Matta al-Miskin, the Coptic Orthodox scholar who died in 2006. This learned monk, who nearly became the patriarch of his church, spent decades of his monastic life writing commentaries on the New Testament in Arabic. His six large volumes on the Gospels are stunning and unknown outside the Arabic-speaking Christian world.

Beyond the commentaries, ancient and modern, lie the versions. I am convinced that the Arabic Bible has the longest and most illustrious history of any language tradition. The ancient Christian traditions translated the New Testament into Latin, Coptic, Armenian and Syriac. But by the fifth century those translation efforts stopped.⁷ Arabic New Testaments have survived from perhaps the eighth and certainly the ninth century. They were translated from Syriac, Coptic and Greek, and continued to be refined and renewed up until modern times.⁸ Translation is always interpretation, and these versions preserve understandings of the text that were current in the churches that produced them. They are a gold mine for recovering Eastern exegesis of the Gospels.

These essays not only focus on culture but also on rhetoric. The peoples of the Middle East, ancient and modern, have for millennia constructed poetry and some prose using parallelisms. Known to the West as "Hebrew parallelisms" they are used widely in the Old Testament. But, early in the Hebrew literary tradition, these parallelisms were put together into what I have chosen to call "prophetic homilies." The building blocks of these homilies are various combinations of the Hebrew parallelisms. Sometimes ideas are presented in pairs that form a straight-line sequence and appear on the page in an AA BB CC pattern. At other times, ideas are presented and then repeated backward in an A B CC B A outline. These can be called "inverted parallelism" (they are also named "ring composition" and

⁶Kenneth E. Bailey, "Hibat Allah Ibn al-'Assal and His Arabic Thirteenth Century Critical Edition of the Gospels," *Theological Review* (Beirut) 1 (1978): 11-26.

⁷The one exception to this is the Harclean Syriac which was completed in A.D. 614.

⁸I. Guidi, "Le traduzione degle Evangelli in arabo e in ethopico," *Tipografia della Reale Accademia dei Lincei*, vol. CCLXXV (1888): pp. 5-37.





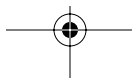
“chiasm”). A third rhetorical style I refer to as “step parallelism” because the parallelisms follow an ABC ABC pattern. Often these three basic styles are combined in a single homily. One finely crafted early example of such a combination of rhetorical styles appears in Isaiah 28, as seen in figure 0.1:

Therefore <i>hear the word of the LORD</i> , you scoffers, who <i>rule</i> this people <i>in Jerusalem!</i>		
Because you have said,		
1.	a. “We have made a <i>covenant with death</i> ,	
	b. and <i>with Sheol we have an agreement:</i>	COVENANT MADE WITH
	c. when the <i>overwhelming scourge passes through</i>	Death, Sheol
	d. it will <i>not come to us;</i>	
2.	a. for we have made <i>lies our refuge</i> ,	REFUGE
	b. and in <i>falsehood we have taken shelter;</i> ”	Shelter made
	therefore thus says the Lord God,	
3.	“Behold, I am laying in <i>Zion for a foundation</i>	BUILDING
	a <i>stone, a tested stone,</i>	Material
	a <i>precious cornerstone, a sure foundation:</i>	
4.	‘He who <i>believes</i> [in it—LXX]	INSCRIPTION
	will <i>not be shaken.</i> ’	
5.	And I will make <i>justice the line</i> ,	BUILDING
	and <i>righteousness the plummet;</i>	Tools
6.	a. and <i>hail will sweep away the refuge of lies</i> ,	REFUGE
	b. and <i>waters will overwhelm the shelter.</i> ”	Shelter destroyed
7.	a. Then <i>your covenant with death will be annulled</i> ,	
	b. and your <i>agreement with Sheol will not stand;</i>	COVENANT ANNULLED WITH
	c. when the <i>overwhelming scourge passes through</i>	Death, Sheol
	d. you will be <i>beaten down by it.</i>	

Figure 0.1. Isaiah’s parable of the two builders (Is 28:8-14)

A number of rhetorical features are prominent in this homily. Among them are:

- The homily has seven stanzas. Those stanzas are *inverted*, with stanza 1 matching 7, stanza 2 matching 6, and stanza 3 matching 5. The center (stanza 4) is the climax, where the prophet calls on the people to *believe* and *not be shaken*. This distinct rhetorical style, with its seven stanzas, is so early and so widely used that it deserves a name. I have chosen to call it the “prophetic rhetorical





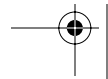
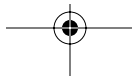
temple.” It appears in Psalm 23. Seventeen of these also appear in the Gospel of Mark. By New Testament times therefore, this style was at least a thousand years old.

- Stanza 1 relates to stanza 7 using “step parallelism.” When placed side by side these comparisons are evident:
 1. a. “We have made a *covenant with death*,
 - b. and *with Sheol we have an agreement*; COVENANT MADE WITH
 - c. when the *overwhelming scourge passes through* Death, Sheol
 - d. it will *not come to us*;
 7. a. Then *your covenant with death* will be *annulled*,
 - b. and your *agreement with Sheol* will *not stand*; COVENANT ANNULLED WITH
 - c. when the *overwhelming scourge passes through* Death, Sheol
 - d. you will be *beaten down by it*.

Clearly, the four statements in stanza 7 match and flatly contradict what is said in stanza 1. Stanzas 1c and 7c are identical.

- A quick glance at stanzas 2 and 6 exhibit the same kind of relationships. Only, in this case, Isaiah is using two ideas in each step of his step parallelism. These ideas have to do with the “refuge and the shelter.” In the first, the refuge and shelter are standing. In the second, they are destroyed.
- Stanzas 3 and 5 also match, but in a different way. The first lists the promised new foundation stone. The second describes the building tools to be used. The “line” (the horizontal) will be “justice,” and the “plummet” (the vertical) will be “righteousness.” To build a stone house the mason must have building materials (3) and the tools with which to build (5). These two stanzas are clearly a match.
- The climax in the center focuses on the promised blessing of faith. The building they have built (the refuge and shelter) will shake and fall. But with faith (in God) they *will not be shaken*. Furthermore, as is usual, the center relates to the beginning and the end. The rulers of Jerusalem have a “covenant with death” (1) that will not stand (7). The one who “believes” (4) will alone be unshaken. The center (4) is composed of two lines and 4a relates to 1 while 4b connects with 7. This can be seen as:
 4. a. He who *believes* (relates to 1 with its “covenant/agreement,” which by its very nature demands some level of “belief”)
 - b. Will *not be shaken* (relates to 7 where “not stand” and “beaten down” characterize the worthless covenant *that will be shaken*)

This kind of analysis may be seen by some as “interesting” and “artistically sat-





isfying,” but is it significant for interpretation? For centuries the church has generally seen most of the texts examined in this book as having a straight-line, “this after that” order. All the rhetorical patterns here displayed may or may not be convincing to you, but even if *some* are judged to be valid, what difference does it make? A few comments on this important question may be helpful.

1. If the author is presenting his or her case using an ABC CBA structure, then half of what he or she has to say about “A” will appear in the first line and the other half must be read in line six. The same is true of the second line (B) and the fifth line (B), which again form a pair. To miss this pairing of ideas is to miss an important part of how the speaker or author is presenting the case.
2. “Inverted parallelism” places the climax in the center, not at the end. As noted, this rhetorical style is often referred to as “ring composition” because the author’s mind moves in a circle and returns to the subject with which he or she began. A simple case of this phenomenon appears in Luke 16:13, which is composed in the following manner:

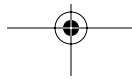
No man can serve *two masters*;
 Either he will *hate* the one
 and *love* the other,
 or be *devoted* to the one
 and *despise* the other.

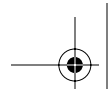
You cannot serve *God and mammon*.

By pairing the first and last lines it is clear that the two masters Jesus is discussing are *God* and *material possessions*. Each asserts authority over the life of the believer, and a fundamental choice about who will be allowed mastery must be made. In addition, the climax appears in the center where love and devotion to one master (God) is urged. Logically trained minds assume that the climax always occurs at the end. When this is not the case, the interpreter needs to know how to find it.

3. Where a particular narrative begins and ends can often be determined with much greater certainty when the rhetorical form is uncovered. Paul has a great hymn to the cross which is recorded in 1 Corinthians 1:17—2:2. The Western division for chapter two is in the wrong place. This hymn opens with reference to the preaching of Christ crucified. Christ crucified appears in the middle and again at the end.⁹ The rhetorical style identifies the beginning and the end of

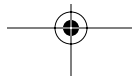
⁹Kenneth E. Bailey, “Recovering the Poetic Structure of I Corinthians i 17–ii 2: A Study in Text and Commentary,” *Novum Testamentum* 17 (October 1975): 265–96.





this masterpiece and allows us to reflect on it as a whole.

4. Rhetorical analysis exposes the smaller sections, which allows them to maintain their integrity rather than to be neglected or broken up into separate verses.
5. Rhetorical analysis delivers the reader from the tyranny of the number system. The text is permitted its own ordering of ideas. The numbers, however useful they are for finding one's place, subtly dictate to the reader, "you *Will* see these ideas or stories as a straight line sequence which follows the numbers." Rhetorical analysis frees us from 1,650 years of dominance by chapter headings and 450 years of subtle control by verse numbers.
6. At times the rhetorical order of the material is an important internal component to help make decisions regarding which Greek reading to select. External evidence regarding which texts are the oldest and most reliable is very important. Internal evidence of the rhetorical styles involved also deserves consideration.
7. The parallels between stanzas (straight line, inverted or step) often unlock important meanings otherwise lost. In Isaiah 28:14-18, Isaiah is discussing the national threat of the coming of the Assyrian army under the dreaded Sennacherib. The leaders who "rule . . . in Jerusalem" (v. 14) had made a covenant with Egypt and were telling the people that everyone was safe as a result. Isaiah was not convinced. The Egyptian world focused on a cult of the dead. Isaiah refers to the covenant with Egypt as a "covenant with death" (read: Egypt). The prophet presents the government's case in stanza 1 and then demolishes it line by line in stanza 7. We need to be able to observe him engaged in his devastating critique.
8. Occasionally in the Gospels there are carefully balanced sets of lines, to which some "footnotes" have been added. This is the case in Luke 12:35-38, where the phrase "in the second or third watch of the night" breaks the balance of the lines. A second "footnote" appears in the second half of Luke 4:25. These explanatory notes can be spotted when the basic rhetorical structure is identified. Such "footnotes" affirm the antiquity of the underlying text.
9. As noted, these rhetorical styles are Jewish and can be traced to the writing prophets and beyond. The reappearance of these same styles in the New Testament makes clear that the texts involved came out of a Jewish, not a Greek world. The case for the historical authenticity of the material is thereby strengthened.





10. All the intelligent people were not born in the twentieth century. When we observe these sophisticated, thoughtful and artistically balanced rhetorical styles, we form a high opinion of their authors.

Rhetorical analysis of biblical texts is like playing the saxophone: it is easy to do poorly.¹⁰ The rhetorical analysis here offered is a start and further refinement is inevitable.

In the West the inspiration of Scripture is rarely discussed as part of biblical studies. Paul Achtemeier observes that the doctrine of inspiration “within the past two or three decades, has been notable more by its absence than its presence. It has been honored by being ignored in many circles.”¹¹ Middle Eastern churches have lived as a minority within a sea of Islam for more than a thousand years. In such a world Scripture’s inspiration cannot be avoided. The world of Islam believes that the Qur’an was dictated by the angel Gabriel to the prophet Muhammad in seventh-century Bedouin Arabic, one chapter at a time over a ten year period. The material itself is affirmed to be both uncreated and eternal in the mind of God and cannot be translated. The phrase used to describe this event is “nuzul al-Qur’an” (the descent of the Qur’an). The same verb describes the “descent” of a mountain climber from a high peak. It is a preexistent whole that “comes down” from the heights.

Early illuminated manuscripts of the Gospels often contain a drawing on the first page of an angel dictating to the Gospel author.¹² On the popular level, in certain circles, there is an unspoken yearning for the certainty that comes with the Islamic understanding of inspiration.

But our Greek text does not allow for such a theory. Instead, we are obliged to consider four stages through which our canonical Gospels have passed. These are:

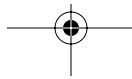
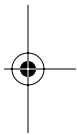
1. the *life and teaching* of Jesus of Nazareth in *Aramaic*
2. the *Aramaic eyewitness testimony* to that life and teaching¹³
3. the *translation* of that *testimony* into *Greek*
4. the selection, arrangement and editing of those *Greek texts* into *Gospels*

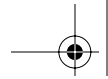
¹⁰For a list of eight “words of caution” in the practice of rhetorical analysis, see Kenneth E. Bailey, *Through Peasant Eyes*, in *Poet and Peasant and Through Peasant Eyes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), pp. xix-xx.

¹¹Paul J. Achtemeier, *The Inspiration of Scripture: Problems and Proposals* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1980), p. 14.

¹²This view is as old (2nd cent. B.C.) as the book of Jubilees 2:27; 2:1.

¹³See Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006).





With these stages in mind, it is necessary to discuss the inspiration of the Gospels as a *process* that took thirty to fifty-plus years to complete. If we are only interested in the first stage, we opt for “a canon within a canon.” For the last fifty years I have followed the Western debate over these matters with great care and interest.¹⁴ But to ignore the process and grant significance only to the first stage is to deny the way any significant history is remembered and recorded.

Kenneth Cragg, the distinguished Anglican Islamic scholar, discussed the nature of the Gospels in a sermon preached at All Saints Episcopal Cathedral, Cairo, Egypt, on January 16, 1977. On that occasion he said:

Much in current Western scientific mentality has been tempted to deny the status of ‘fact’ (and so of truth) to everything not demonstrable in test-tubes or provable by ‘verification’. This instinctive reductionism of many contemporary philosophers sadly prevents them from reckoning with the historical meaning of faith and the deep inter-relation of both event, and mystery.

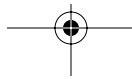
Let us take help from a parable. November 22 (Texas), 1963. Suppose I say: “A man with a rifle from a warehouse window shot and killed another man in a passing car.” Every word here is true (assuming we accept the Warren Commission). But how bleak and meager the facts are – so sparse as to be almost no facts at all. The event is not told at all. But suppose I go further and say: “The President of the United States was assassinated.” This is more deeply factual because it is more fully related. The victim is identified, the killing is told as political, and the perspective is truer. But we are still a long way from the meaning of the tragedy. Let us attempt a further statement: “Men everywhere felt that they had looked into the abyss of evil and people wept in the streets.”

That third statement tugs at the heart. It is true with a different sort of truth. It pre-supposes what the others state, but goes beyond into dimensions that begin to satisfy the nature of the fearful things that happened. Without something like that third story the event would remain concealed in a part-told obscurity so remote as to be, in measure, false.

Now let us set the Gospels, and the whole New Testament, in the light of this parable. Clearly they are the third kind of statement, deeply involving heart and mind in a confession of experienced meaning – meaning tied intimately to history and to event. That is the way it is with Jesus – not neutrality, bare record, empty chronology, but living participation and heart involvement. For Jesus’ story, like all significant history, cannot be told without belonging with the telling in mind and soul.

Christian faith is fact, but not bare fact; it is poetry, but not imagination. Like the arch which grows stronger precisely by dint of the weight you place upon it, so the

¹⁴See Achtemeier, *Inspiration of Scripture*.





story of the Gospels bears, with reassuring strength, the devotion of the centuries to Jesus as the Christ. What is music, asked Walt Whitman, but what awakens within you when you listen to the instrument? And Jesus is the music of the reality of God, and faith is what awakens when we hearken.¹⁵

In harmony with what Kenneth Cragg has written, and within the perspective of the understanding of inspiration outlined here, these studies will attempt to examine the texts “holistically.”

Perhaps the editors of television documentaries are the closest modern counterpart to the compilers/authors of the Gospels. The editor of a television documentary must select, arrange, edit and provide voice-over commentary for all that he or she presents. If that editor is “open minded,” there will be a serious attempt to present the subject fairly. The word *fairly* means “in harmony with the editor’s deepest perceptions as to the truth about the subject.”

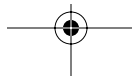
Many contemporary commentaries on the Gospels, understandable and rightly, expend enormous energies debating the “primary” or “secondary” nature of the material. Is this or that word or phrase traceable to Jesus or to his Jewish followers or the Greek church? I am convinced that the Gospels are history theologically interpreted. In harmony with what has previously been said about inspiration, I grant that the Spirit of God was given to Jesus (Mk 1:9-11) but also to the church (Acts 2:1-4) that remembered him. Separating, therefore, the exact words of Jesus from the careful editing of the Gospel authors is not the intent of these studies. The theological-historical drama of the text will be examined as a creative whole.

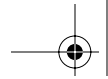
A full-fledged technical commentary is also not the goal of this book. I am aware of opinions other than my own and have followed and engaged in the various strands of debate in the Western New Testament guild over the last half century. This book, however, is not intended to interact with the great volume of current literature on the texts presented, a task that has already been ably accomplished by Joseph Fitzmyer, Arnold Hultgren, I. Howard Marshall and others.¹⁶

Hopefully, nontechnically trained readers will be able to follow the enclosed discussions with ease. With no presumptuous comparisons intended, the goal is to present a Middle Eastern cultural commentary somewhat patterned after *Read-*

¹⁵Kenneth Cragg, “Who is Jesus Christ?” An unpublished sermon preached by Bishop Cragg at All Saints Episcopal Cathedral, Cairo, Egypt on Sunday, January 16, 1977.

¹⁶Joseph Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke*, vol. 2 (New York: Doubleday, 1981); Arland J. Hultgren, *The Parables of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000); I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke* (Exeter, U.K.: Paternoster, 1978).





ings in St. John's Gospel by the former archbishop of Canterbury William Temple.¹⁷ The work of Lesslie Newbigin on John's Gospel also comes to mind.¹⁸

My intent is to contribute new perspectives from the Eastern tradition that have rarely, if ever, been considered outside the Arabic-speaking Christian world. It is my fond hope that these essays may help the reader to better understand the mind of Christ, and the mind of the Gospel author/editors as they recorded and interpreted the traditions available to them. The reader will decide if I have in any way succeeded.

All of the quotations from Arabic sources recorded in this book are my own translations. It seems pedantic to constantly repeat "my translation" at the end of each of them. I am alone responsible for any errors. However, I do identify where I have translated texts from Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek and Syriac. In the biblical texts quoted, I have worked with the Revised Standard Version and occasionally made my own translations from the Greek. Where I present the rhetorical structure of a text, I use the RSV, but I occasionally revise this translation on the basis of the Greek text.

The texts studied here are grand texts that have inspired the faithful for nearly two millennia. Surely, "fear and trembling" must overtake any interpreter who dares to enter sacred space where candles burn on the altar. May it be so for writer and reader alike.



¹⁷William Temple, *Readings in Saint John's Gospel*, 1st and 2nd ser. (London: Macmillan, 1955).

¹⁸Lesslie Newbigin, *The Light Has Come* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982).

