

Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers

Volume 6 | Issue 4

Article 1

10-1-1989

Visits to the Sepulcher and Biblical Exegesis

Eleonore Stump

Follow this and additional works at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy>

Recommended Citation

Stump, Eleonore (1989) "Visits to the Sepulcher and Biblical Exegesis," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 6 : Iss. 4 , Article 1.

DOI: 10.5840/faithphil19896435

Available at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol6/iss4/1>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers by an authorized editor of ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange.

VISITS TO THE SEPULCHER AND BIBLICAL EXEGESIS

Eleonore Stump

In this paper I juxtapose a representative sample of contemporary historical biblical scholarship, namely, Raymond Brown's well-regarded interpretation of the empty tomb stories in the Gospel of John, with an example of biblical exegesis drawn from a typical medieval play, *Visitatio Sepulchri*. The point of the comparison is to consider the presuppositions on which these differing approaches to the biblical texts are based. The naive inattention to history shown by the play shows the importance of the work of historically oriented biblical critics. On the other hand, reflection on the methodology of the play provides some reason for doubting that the methodology employed by Brown is acceptable in every case.

Introduction

In a recent article describing an innovative interdisciplinary project of some magnitude now underway at the University of Chicago,¹ Francisca Cho Bantly and Frank E. Reynolds express a view rapidly gaining currency among both philosophers of religion and historians working in religious studies, namely, that "the traditionally rigid dichotomy in religious studies between philosophy of religion on the one hand and strictly 'empirical' studies on the other must be challenged" (p. 3). What philosophers of religion need to do, in the view of Bantly and Reynolds, is to pay more attention to the nature and the history of particular religions in order to learn "lessons drawn from the 'historicity of reason'" (p. 4). It is certainly true that philosophers of religion have sometimes tended to talk about "mere theism" and to ignore the rich and complicated details of individual religions and the history of their interpretation. Having granted this, however, I would like to suggest that, paradoxically enough, historians of religion can benefit from this very same prescription. In particular, the historical approach to biblical studies which until quite recently has held a virtual monopoly on studies of biblical texts in secular universities puts enormous emphasis on the importance of history in biblical studies, and yet it has generally been carried on in unreflective isolation from approaches to biblical exegesis in other periods.

In this paper I want to add to the incipient incursions into the isolation of the historical approach by juxtaposing a representative sample of contemporary historical biblical scholarship, namely, Raymond Brown's well-regarded interpretation of



the empty tomb stories in the Gospel of John, with an example of biblical exegesis drawn from the middle ages. The medieval period, of course, abounds in intellectually sophisticated biblical commentaries produced by philosophers and theologians, such as the work by Saadya Gaon or Gregory the Great on the book of Job. But for my purposes here, the salient features of medieval biblical exegesis can be shown most graphically not by considering the lengthy and detailed exposition of a medieval philosopher or theologian but rather by looking at the summary presentation of such exposition in a typical medieval play, the *Visitatio Sepulchri*, an Easter play from the twelfth century. Furthermore, in endorsing the prescription laid out by Bantly and Reynolds, I do not mean to subscribe to the cultural relativism (epistemological or ethical) sometimes associated with such prescriptions. From the fact that it is detrimental to understanding to be ignorant of the thought of other cultures or other periods of history, it doesn't follow that the epistemological or moral norms of any and every period are correct (for that period—or with whatever other qualifier relativism may find suitable), or that there is no objective standard of truth or moral goodness by which practices can be judged. So in this paper I want to do more than just compare approaches to biblical texts from two different cultures, the contemporary academic and the medieval religious. I want also to reflect philosophically on the presuppositions on which these approaches are based, to ask what they commit us to and whether they must or even can be acceptable to everyone.

Brown's interpretation of the empty tomb stories in the Gospel of John

It will help at the outset to have before us the story of the empty tomb from the Gospel of John. Here it is in Brown's translation:²

(1) Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb. She saw that the stone had been moved away from the tomb; (2) so she went running to Simon Peter and to the other disciple (the one whom Jesus loved) and told them, "They took the Lord from the tomb, and we do not know where they put him!" (3) Peter and the other disciple started out on their way to the tomb. (4) The two of them were running side by side; but the other disciple, being faster, outran Peter and reached the tomb first. (5) He bent down to peer in and saw the cloth wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. (6) Presently, Simon Peter came along behind him and went straight into the tomb. He observed the wrappings lying there, (7) and the piece of cloth that had covered the head, not lying with the wrappings, but rolled up in a place by itself. (8) Then, in turn, the other disciple who had reached the tomb first also entered. He saw and believed. ((9) Remember that as yet they did not understand the Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead.) (10) With this the disciples went back home. (11) Meanwhile, Mary was standing [outside] by the tomb, weeping.

Even as she wept, she bent down to peer into the tomb, (12) and observed two angels in white, one seated at the head and the other at the foot of the place where Jesus' body had lain. (13) "Woman," they asked her, "why are you weeping?" She told them, "Because they took my Lord away and I do not know where they put him." (14) She had just said this when she turned around and caught sight of Jesus standing there. She did not realize, however, that it was Jesus. (15) "Woman," he asked her, "why are you weeping? Who is it you are looking for?" Thinking that he was the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you are the one who carried him off, tell me where you have put him, and I will take him away." (16) Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned to him and said [in Hebrew], "Rabbuni!" (which means "Teacher"). (17) "Don't cling to me," Jesus told her, "for I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and tell them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God!'" (18) Mary Magdalene went to the disciples. "I have seen the Lord!" she announced, reporting what he had said to her.

Some people will, no doubt, be put off by the flatfootedness of this translation, evidently dead to the rhythm and nuances of English prose; and certainly comparison of the flowing King James version with the Greek makes clear that the original does not compel such awkward English. But I raise this sort of objection only to dismiss it. Brown's concern is not with the translation. He is not interested in the sort of issues which must occupy those whose main purpose is only to produce a translation, namely, what sort of English prose, what connotations and cadences, best capture the thought and manner of the original and at the same time preserve readability. Brown's manifest concern is rather with the history underlying the narrative in the story. For his purpose, he brings together an impressive battery of philological and historical skills as well as a thorough acquaintance with the secondary literature, so that his interpretation of the story is valuable not only because he presents his own historically informed judgments but also because he summarizes the secondary literature and so gives a general overview of the state of scholarly opinions about the text.

Brown begins by saying that the Gospels disagree about the visits to the empty tomb. (He summarizes the disagreements in a helpful chart on p. 974.) First, there is a disagreement, he says, about the time of the visits to the tomb. Mark claims it was very early and the sun had risen; Matthew describes it as growing light; Luke states that it was at first dawn; and John says that it was early and still dark. Next, there are disagreements over the women who went to the tomb. Mark says it was Mary Magdalene, Mary (the mother of James), and Salome; Matthew claims that it was Mary Magdalene and the other Mary; Luke says it was Mary Magdalene, Mary (the mother of James), Joanna, and others; and John mentions only Mary Magdalene. Then there is the question of what happened at the tomb. According to Mark, the stone covering the entrance to the tomb

was already rolled back, and a youth was sitting inside on the right. According to Matthew, there was an earthquake and an angel descended; he rolled back the stone and sat on it outside the tomb. According to Luke, the stone was rolled back and there were two men standing inside the tomb; and John says roughly the same thing but identifies the two in the tomb as angels. There are also corresponding discrepancies concerning the conversations that take place at the tomb between the women and the men or angels. Finally, there are disagreements about the actions of the women. Mark says that the women fled, trembling and astonished, and told no one. Matthew says that the women went away quickly with fear and great joy and told the disciples, and Luke maintains something roughly similar. John says that Mary ran to Peter and the Beloved Disciple and told them that the body had been taken away. There are also disagreements about the appearances of Jesus to the women, although Brown doesn't make as much of these. Luke says nothing about appearances to the women; Mark and John claim Jesus appeared first to Mary Magdalene. Matthew says that Jesus appeared to the women as they were going to tell the disciples he was risen and that they held him by the feet and worshipped him.

Besides the discrepancies between John's account and that of the other Gospels, Brown maintains that there are also inconsistencies within John's account itself. His list of such inconsistencies includes the following (1995). (1) Mary Magdalene comes to the tomb alone in v. 1 but uses the expression 'we' in v. 2. (2) She concludes that the body has been taken away in v. 2 but doesn't look into the tomb until v. 11. (3) There are confusions in the account of Peter and the Beloved Disciple. The most notable of these is that in v. 9 they are said not to understand the scripture prophesying Jesus' rising, but in v. 8 the Beloved Disciple is said to believe. (4) The belief of the Beloved Disciple has no effect on others, including Mary Magdalene. (5) It is not clear how Mary Magdalene got back to the tomb after going to alert Peter and the Beloved Disciple. (6) In v. 12 Mary Magdalene apparently doesn't see the burial clothes that Peter and the Beloved Disciple saw; the text speaks only of her seeing angels in the tomb. (7) Her conversation with the angels doesn't advance the action of the story. (8) She turns to Jesus in v. 14 and then again in v. 16. Finally, although it is not included in this list of Brown's, we may add a last point which concerns him at some length in the notes: (9) Jesus tells Mary Magdalene not to cling to him (or not to touch him, as the more traditional translation has it), because he has not yet ascended, but only slightly later in the narrative he encourages Thomas to probe his wounds.

In the face of what he sees as external and internal inconsistencies, Brown is concerned to trace the historical background of this story. He wants to use the inconsistencies as a means of discovering what the primitive versions of the story were like. He is motivated in this enterprise not by antiquarian interests

but by a conviction that earlier forms of the story are more likely to be historically accurate. In discussing details of the discrepancies, he makes clear what is apparently for him a general guiding assumption, namely, that developments of biblical narratives are often constructed wholesale, out of religious or political motivations. So, for example, asking about the details of a sort of narrative, Brown says, "Some of the additional material stems from the compositional efforts of the evangelist who has made an appearance serve as a vehicle for theological emphases" (973). In ruling out a certain interpretation of the statement in v. 8 that the Beloved Disciple believed, Brown says, "the evangelist certainly did not introduce the Beloved Disciple into the scene only to have him reach such a trite conclusion" (987). In discussing the appearance of Jesus to Mary Magdalene, he says "Perhaps the original story contained no significant words of Jesus, a fact that forced each evangelist to fill in as he thought best" (1004). And in general, Brown considers the options for passages in the text to be either ancient tradition or "the free composition" (997 and 1000) and "individual genius" of the evangelist (975).³ Given this view of his, it is understandable that he would try to discover ancient forms of the story lying behind the text as we now have it.

To find what he takes to be the underlying earlier stories, Brown employs a methodology of this sort. First, he examines the passages in which he finds inconsistencies and considers the efforts of modern historical critics to explain away the discrepancies. So, for example, in considering the apparent inconsistency of Mary's turning to Jesus twice, Brown cites (but rejects) the view of one scholar who supposes that Mary turned away, after the initial turning toward Jesus, because Jesus stood before her naked, having left his burial clothes in the tomb, and she was too modest to look at him. Similarly, in examining Jesus' perplexing injunction to Mary not to touch him, Brown mentions (but again rejects) two interpretations: that the point of the prohibition was to keep Mary from temptation since Jesus was naked, and that the prohibition is a signal to Mary letting her know that with his resurrection Jesus wants there to be an end to the intimate relationship they formerly had. On the whole, Brown shows good judgment in his review of the literature, generally rejecting the farfetched interpretations and siding with more sensible ones. He is, however, inclined to suppose that even the most acceptable interpretations leave the inconsistencies in place.

Although Brown objects to what he calls harmonistic approaches to these stories, because in his view they "do too much violence" to the text, (972) it seems clear that his own methodology is itself a sort of harmonization. He reconciles the inconsistencies he believes to be in the text by sorting the apparently inconsistent bits into different stories, each of which is internally harmonious and self-consistent. He then considers how these disparate stories might have been woven into the text as we now have it. It is not easy to discover his

methodological principles in this part of his project. On the one hand, he is willing to attribute to evangelists or editors both the alteration of individual details in the stories they received from earlier tradition and the wholesale construction of parts of the narrative. So, for example, he sides with the view that “the Lucan and Johannine dating of the Jerusalem appearances on Easter Sunday was probably dictated by theological interests” (972); and he holds that an evangelist “may have adapted the story [of an appearance of Jesus, which the evangelist received from tradition] and made it fit into a locale dictated by his purpose in writing” (971). While he acknowledges that it is possible the evangelist was correct in identifying Peter’s companion as the Beloved Disciple, he has no hesitation in supposing that the evangelist made up large parts of the account of Peter and John in this chapter: “the hypothetical companion of Peter in the original form of the Johannine story was unimportant But John has changed the story by identifying him as the Beloved Disciple and giving him a major role: he runs with Peter to the tomb; he reaches it first and looks in; ultimately the sight of the burial clothes leads him to believe” (1001).

On the other hand, Brown also apparently supposes that evangelists and editors had an attitude of deference, almost slavish deference, towards the accounts they received from tradition. So, for example, Brown points to what he takes as an inconsistency between vv. 1 and 2—“Magdalene comes to the tomb alone in vs. 1, but speaks as ‘we’ in 2”—and maintains that this instance should be added to the “extraordinary number of inconsistencies that betray the hand of an editor who has achieved organization by combining disparate material” (995). Although Brown doesn’t say so explicitly here, it seems reasonable to assume he means that if this apparent inconsistency, and others as well, “betray the hand of an editor,” it is because the inconsistency pointed to can be best explained as a result of the work of an editor. In other words, we are to imagine the editor or evangelist having available to him two accounts (whether written or oral) involving women at the empty tomb—either two already present in the tradition, or one received from tradition plus another version of the same story produced by the editor himself. He then combines these two accounts in some way, perhaps picking a piece from each and adding them together, with or without some new material added to effect the joining. But he does this joining in such a way as to leave an inconsistency. So in the apparent inconsistency between vv. 1 and 2 here, one of the accounts the editor used included a story of several women coming to the tomb and therefore had the appropriate phrase involving the plural pronoun; and the second account had Mary Magdalene coming to the tomb alone. The editor then produces his own—inconsistent—account by combining the account of Mary Magdalene’s coming to the tomb alone with the phrase involving the plural pronoun, thereby producing the inconsistency that enables Brown to infer that the hand of an editor has been at work.

Brown reasonably enough says nothing here about the psychological state of an editor which could explain his responsibility for such an inconsistency, but it seems to me plausible enough to assume there are really only two candidates: (1) the editor was stupid, to an uncommon degree, and didn't notice that he was introducing an obvious, even blatant, inconsistency; (2) the editor was aware of the inconsistency but had some reason for accepting it anyway. Since the adoption of the first hypothesis would be just an embarrassment for any scholar, the principle of charity requires that we attribute to Brown the second hypothesis instead. And if we then ask what possible reason there could be for an editor's permitting an inconsistency in his text as plain as the one supposed to appear in vv. 1 and 2, the most plausible answer would seem to be that the editor is deferential to the accounts he is working with, so deferential that he prefers slavish adherence even to the form of the words over the disrespect that would be shown to the account he is working with by changing a 'we' to an 'I.'⁴

Using this methodology Brown advances a theory of the following sort. He holds that "behind [John] xx 1-18 [are] the traces of three narratives: two narratives of visits to the empty tomb, and the narrative of an appearance of Jesus to Magdalene. Whether these were combined by the evangelist himself . . . or came to him in whole or partial combination . . . we are unable to say. However, the evangelist made his own contribution in any case, for he adapted these stories to serve as a vehicle for his theology about faith and about the meaning of the resurrection" (998).

The first of these narratives is the story that several women came to the tomb on Sunday morning, found it opened, and told the disciples. According to Brown, an angel interpreter was added later, and still later this expanded story was joined to a story of the appearance of Jesus. The primitive narrative is preserved in vv. 1-2 and 11-13. These verses are separated because the evangelist is combining two forms of that narrative. Vv. 1-2 is an early form, and vv. 11-13 is a later, truncated form of the same story. Along the way the evangelist or editor reduced the number of women in the original story to just Mary Magdalene; he also changed the story as regards the angels, and the conversation he attributes to Mary Magdalene and the angels is "merely a repetition of vs. 2" (999).

The second narrative Brown finds behind the text is the story that several disciples went to the tomb, found it empty, and went away puzzled. The evangelist has changed the story to assign a prominent role to the Beloved Disciple, thereby introducing some of the inconsistencies noted in the list above. The claim that the Beloved Disciple believed was not part of the original story but was introduced into the narrative for apologetic purposes (1002).

Finally, the third narrative underlying the text on Brown's view is the story of an appearance of Jesus to Mary Magdalene. According to Brown, the version of this story in vv. 14-18 is changed substantially from its ancient form. The

inconsistency of describing Mary Magdalene as turning to Jesus twice is a result of the fact that the editor needed to connect this story with what preceded it. Brown thinks the editor or evangelist joined this story to the preceding material simply by repeating a verse from within the story itself. To introduce the third narrative, the editor “borrowed from [verse] 16 where it belongs” (1003) the line that Mary turned to Jesus, thus producing the apparent inconsistency of having Mary turn to Jesus immediately after she has already turned to him.⁵ On the basis of this theory about the earlier narratives underlying the biblical text, Brown goes on to make some suggestions about the theological concerns of the evangelist and the religious significance of the story. Since my focus is on the approach Brown takes towards the text rather than the lessons he draws from that approach, I will omit his theological points from this summary.

Visit to the Sepulcher

Like many early medieval plays, this twelfth-century version of the *Visitatio Sepulchri* was embedded in the liturgy of the church and was performed as part of the church service on Easter morning. The exact provenance of the play is unknown, as is the playwright and composer, but the play came to be associated with the Abbey St. Benoit de Fleury in central France. The actors’ lines are largely taken from scripture; they are in Latin, and they are sung rather than spoken. (The music is clearly an integral part of the play, but I will unfortunately not be able to take account of it here.) Together with some stage directions and musical notation, the play is preserved in the *Fleury Playbook*, which is one of the largest collections of medieval plays still extant. The ahistorical character of the play is made dramatically evident from the outset by the appalling anti-Semitism in the opening speech of Mary Salome and the immediately succeeding speech of Mary Magdalene. The Marys express the sort of anger and contempt towards Jews that might have characterized some short-sighted, overzealous follower of Jesus at the events leading to his crucifixion, and they portray these emotions as suitable for all Christians of any period. And they take as the objects of their anger not some particular opponent among those playing a significant role in the crucifixion of Jesus, but rather all Jewish people of any time, with the reprehensible anti-Semitism which was typical of the middle ages, as the history of the Jews in Europe makes evident. (The text of the play is presented in Appendix I.)

The play is in effect both a harmony of the relevant portions of the Gospels and a commentary on them. Without trying to take account of every detail in the Gospel narratives, the playwright has arranged the major events of the disparate accounts into what he takes to be an ordered and plausible account.⁶ Furthermore, by filling in some of the sparse detail of the scriptural accounts, the

playwright has given a certain interpretation of the biblical story and shown how he understands its dramatic movement. In what follows, I will give an interpretation of the play in order to show the harmonization the play employs, and then I will go on to discuss the methodology of this sort of harmonization.

To begin with, unlike Brown's interpretation of the empty tomb stories, which has as its main concern the disciples' coming to faith and the theological predilections of the evangelist, the play clearly focuses on the women, and in particular on Mary Magdalene. The disciples remain at home grieving. They show no inclination to mourn at the tomb, to weep over the dead body of Jesus, or to anoint it with spices. Furthermore, their grief is assuaged by coming to believe that Jesus is risen, and so we might not unreasonably suppose that one important source of their sorrow is the wonder whether they were mistaken in believing that Jesus was sent by God or was the savior they had hoped he was. But the pain of the women is different, as their coming to the tomb at the crack of dawn suggests. It is a suffering connected more to the person of Jesus, the sort of suffering that can find some relief in caring for the battered, dead body of the one loved. The source of their grief is much less disappointment in a great theological hope and much more a personal loss, like the sorrow of a mother over her dead child. While it is no doubt some comfort to the mother to believe that the soul of her child is not dead but raised to be with God, the pain at the heart of her grief will continue unabated even in the face of such a belief because it has its source in the fact that she must continue to live in the absence of a person she was devoted to. The pain of her loss can be stemmed only to some extent by the thought that the person she loved now lives happily elsewhere.

While all three Marys come to the tomb in the grip of such a sorrow, the apparition of the angel removes two of the Marys from the scene, and only Mary Magdalene remains. The angel's announcement that Christ is risen makes no dent in her grief, precisely because her grief isn't rooted in worries about the nature of Jesus' mission or God's vindication of Jesus' claims. And her grief is so deep that not even a vision of a supernatural being at dawn in a graveyard will frighten her away. Somewhere in the canonical or apocryphal scriptures there may be another character whose reaction to the sight of an angel (even in less frightening circumstances) is indifference, but such characters are certainly not common.

Her one thought in this crisis is to enlist the help of competent males, not for the sake of provoking their sympathy or stimulating them to comfort her in some way, but for the sake of getting the body back. So she goes to the disciples to say that some unidentifiable villainous "they" have taken the body away and she doesn't know where "they" have put it. But perhaps the disciples will know or know how to find out or in some way exert themselves to get the body back. The disciples, however, are absorbed in their own kind of sorrow. At her news

they run as fast as they can to the tomb, leaving her behind. After seeing the tomb, they talk together wonderingly, focused altogether on the tremulous thought that Jesus might have risen and that their hopes of him as savior will after all be fulfilled. With their minds occupied by the excitement of this possibility, they go home, without evincing any further thought or care for Mary Magdalene. There is certainly no question of their longing for the dead body of Jesus or of their remaining at the tomb, grieving for its absence; and by the time Mary Magdalene makes her way back to the tomb, they have already gone home.

As she stands there, once again alone and weeping, she sees *two* angels in the tomb, and this time instead of the unheeded annunciation that Jesus is risen, they ask her a Socratic question: "Woman, why are you weeping?" The question is a good one, because there is something not quite rational about the intensity of her grief. If Jesus is an ordinary mortal, then she has to be prepared, at some time, to accept his death, but the depth of her sorrow suggests that such an acceptance will never be forthcoming in her. On the other hand, if the extremity of her grief is warranted, then perhaps Jesus is not an ordinary mortal; and in that case perhaps there are ways of being close to him, of coming into his presence, even if he is no longer possessed of a body. Reflection on the angels' question might thus give her pause in her pain and put her on the road to finding the kind of comfort of interest to her. But in the story the angels' question has no such salutary effect; it provokes only another repetition of her complaint: "they have taken my Lord away, and I do not know where they have put him." And the angels respond with the lame line the playwright gives them, the inept sort of line one might produce in the face of a woman's inconsolable weeping: "Don't cry!," together with another repetition of the point which has already proven futile, "He is risen."

Providence, which tried to relieve her grief first with one angel and then with two, now produces the only thing which it seems will ever comfort her, Jesus himself. The messengers having failed, the master himself enters the scene, but somehow unrecognizable, so that Mary at first takes him to be the gardener. (Why he does not bring it about that she knows at once who he is has to remain a matter of speculation. The story of the interaction between Jesus and Thomas (John 20:29) suggests that there is some benefit to the believer in believing in the resurrected Jesus without overwhelming physical evidence: "blessed are they that have not seen and have believed.")⁷ Still unrecognized, he asks her two Socratic questions, the first the question the angels asked her—"Why are you weeping?"—and then a follow-up question designed to prompt her in the right direction for an answer to the first question: "Whom are you looking for?" If the one you are looking for is an ordinary human being, this unwillingness to be comforted is too much; but if this inconsolable sorrow is appropriate, then the one you seek is the sort of being who can be with you always even if he is

not embodied. But like the preceding speeches of the angels, these questions of Jesus have no effect on her pained preoccupation: "Sir," she says, "if you are the one who has taken him, tell me where you have put him, and I myself will take him away."

Whether out of love for her and compassion for her pain or out of a recognition that even the creator has no right to betray her love by temporizing any longer, Jesus gives up and makes himself known to her in calling her by name. And her reaction to him is one of overflowing joy; she calls to him and reaches out for him. But he avoids her touch and warns her away, on the grounds that he is not yet ascended. What this line means is controversial (to medieval commentators as well as to us today). But in the play, very shortly after this, Jesus does not rebuff the women who hold him by the feet. The immediate inference the play suggests to us, then, is that when Jesus appears to Mary Magdalene, he is in the midst of some process and that until that process is completed, he cannot be touched. If this inference is correct, then it seems that Jesus' appearance to Mary Magdalene is somehow untimely, that it interrupts this process in which he is involved, that it disrupts the appropriate timetable for his appearance to his followers. As the play presents it, then, Jesus' overriding concern in the initial events of his resurrection is not to encourage the theological beliefs of the men who are his followers but to assuage the grief of a single sorrowing woman who loves him. And it is a concern so overwhelming, the play suggests, that he is willing to alter abruptly the appropriate or natural order of some theological or metaphysical process he is engaged in.

But with the first great staunching of Mary Magdalene's sorrow, Jesus disappears; whatever else is necessary to comfort her can apparently be safely entrusted to angels. The other women come back; and in the time-honored fashion for helping people recover from a traumatic sorrow, the angels give them all a job to do, a job of some importance and prestige, namely, to carry to the disciples the sort of news that will comfort *their* grief, a grief which can apparently wait for its comfort: Jesus is risen, and they are to go to Galilee to see him. The women are preparing joyfully to bring the message when Jesus reappears. The state in which he appears this time is apparently different from the one in which he appeared to Mary Magdalene, because this time he feels obliged to begin by urging the women not to be afraid; and the stage directions for the play indicate he is to appear in glory. Having completed whatever process the pain of Mary Magdalene convinced him to interrupt, he returns to repeat the commission the angels have just given the women. Jesus adds nothing to the injunctions the angels have given the women; but by bringing them into his presence and himself repeating those injunctions, he makes sure they are secure in their knowledge of his living love for them. Furthermore, by giving them this contact with himself, he enhances the authority of the pronouncement they are about to make to the

disciples, thereby adding to the prestige of the job he has given them and consequently adding to its ability to comfort them as well.

It is clear that the playwright's methodology rests on the principle that the Gospels must all be taken to be telling only the truth, but that they need not all be telling the whole truth. On the play's understanding of the biblical stories, each of the biblical accounts is incomplete but can be accommodated within the broader view of events provided by the sort of harmonization in the play. A first question to ask about this harmonization is how well it matches the textual data. Does it incorporate all the details in the biblical texts? Are the biblical texts compatible with the story as the harmonization of the play tells it? The answer to these two questions cannot be an unqualified affirmative. (For the details on the fit between the play and the Gospel accounts, see Appendix II.) Not all the particulars of the biblical stories are included; there is, for example, no representation of disbelief on the disciples' part on hearing from any of the women. Furthermore, there are apparent discrepancies between the play and the accounts in the Gospels. For example, there are more women mentioned in Luke's account than in the play. The angel who is outside the tomb sitting on the stone in Matthew has in the play the speech assigned to two angels (or men, depending on how one understands the description of these characters in Luke) in the tomb in Luke. And the message announced by one angel inside the tomb in Mark and outside it in Matthew is announced outside the tomb by two angels in the play.

It is important, however, to notice that nothing whatsoever hangs on these discrepancies between the play and the biblical accounts except our assessments of the playwright's cleverness (or our understanding of a particular tradition in medieval biblical exegesis). For, clearly, we could continue in the way the playwright began, adding episodes and weaving them into the whole story, and by that means accommodate all the biblical data in the play, though with less economy than the playwright has shown. We could, for example, get rid of a troublesome disparity between Matthew and the play simply by adding one more scene at the start of the play involving one angel seated on the stone outside the tomb.

Therefore, what is perhaps more worth asking than questions about the consistency between details in the play and in the biblical stories is whether the drama that the playwright has concocted by his method of interweaving the disparate biblical accounts has any sort of plausibility as a story, or whether it is simply a hash made of an ill-fitting assortment of episodes and motivated by a clumsy, literarily inept dogmatism. While this question obviously can't prove decisive for an evaluation of the playwright's method of dealing with the apparent discrepancies in the Gospels, it is pertinent to the issue. If the harmonization results in a narrative which is fantastically contrived or wildly disjointed, that is *some* reason for rejecting the methodology behind the harmonization. On the other

hand, if the harmonization yields a plausible and dramatically consistent story, then we have *some* reason for doubting the charge Brown levels against this methodology, namely, that such “harmonistic approaches” do violence to the text (972). This attitude towards the methodology of the play is based on the kind of intuitions we take for granted, for example, in reading detective novels. When the detective questions the witnesses to the murder, he tends to iron out the apparent discrepancies among their stories by conflating them, in the manner of this play, as long as he can do so without producing a story that is inconsistent or implausibly complex; and unless there are overriding reasons for rejecting his manner of investigation, we generally find it reasonable that he should proceed in this way. But whatever else can be said about the play’s harmonization of the Gospels, and there are undoubtedly many defects in it, it seems to me without question to constitute a story which is not only unified but in fact dramatically powerful and moving.

Methodology

The play’s obtuseness to any historical considerations is evident, most distressingly in the appalling anti-Semitism it manifests, and a clear view of the play’s deficiencies in this regard will help us to appreciate the impressive historical learning and historical sensitivity Brown and scholars like him bring to their work. While no right-minded person would want to return to the blind disregard for history evinced by the play, for which Brown’s sort of approach is an important corrective, I am more interested here in the kind of corrective to Brown’s approach which we get by reflecting on the methodology underlying the play.

The methodology underlying the play and the methodology used by Brown can be thought of conveniently and appropriately as mirror images of each other. Each begins with a subjective perception of discrepancies or tensions within the texts under consideration. Though Brown speaks of these discrepancies as inconsistencies⁸ and I adopt the terminology from him, what is at issue here is quite often not inconsistency in a philosopher’s sense, in which a set of claims is inconsistent only if it entails both a proposition and the contradictory of that proposition, but something much weaker. Furthermore, Brown’s belief that there is an inconsistency even of this weaker sort in the text is often entirely subjective, not based on either historical evidence or philosophical argument. Sometimes what he takes as an inconsistency is simply generated by his assumption that what a Gospel account doesn’t assert it implicitly denies.⁹ He sees an inconsistency among the biblical texts as regards the number of women at the tomb, for instance, because different accounts name different women. To see an inconsistency in this case is apparently to assume that because the Gospel of John, for

example, doesn't assert there were other women with Mary Magdalene, we must read the text as denying that other women accompanied Mary Magdalene. If this assumption were generalized, it would, of course, be not only subjective but also highly dubious. Reliance on it would obviously render the interpretation of most texts, from Shakespeare to the daily newspapers, impossible or absurd. And so, ordinarily, we reject Brown's sort of assumption. On other occasions, what Brown takes as inconsistencies are just tensions in the text. So, for example, Brown lists as an inconsistency the claim in the Gospel of John that the Beloved Disciple believed when he saw the graveclothes and the parenthetical statement in the next verse that the disciple did not as yet know (or understand) the scripture which predicted Jesus' resurrection. But, of course, we can also read these verses as complementary rather than as inconsistent. On such a reading the parenthetical remark is explaining why the Beloved Disciple believed on the basis of the graveclothes and not on the basis of the scriptures, as readers of the Gospel might perhaps expect.

Beginning with such subjective and no doubt differing perceptions of tensions within the texts, both Brown and the play try to harmonize the texts by removing the apparent discrepancies. But the harmonizations attempted are quite different and rely on significantly different presuppositions. The presupposition used in the methodology on which the play is based is simple: it takes all the biblical accounts to be true. On that presupposition, the play tries to weave all the disparate accounts into one coherent drama which reconciles the texts. Brown's presuppositions are considerably more complicated. He tries to remove the inconsistencies he believes are in the texts by sorting the inconsistent passages into different stories. Each story is then a self-consistent whole, and the inconsistencies are accounted for by attributing them to the combiner of the stories, the evangelist or editor. Brown thus presupposes (P1) that, unlike the stories found in the later tradition, the stories of the earlier tradition were all consistent, in his sense of 'consistent,' which seems equivalent to 'tension-free.' And he accounts for the current state of the text with a pair of presuppositions, (P2) that editors or evangelists freely changed details in the accounts that were passed down to them and even added wholesale construction of their own, and (P3) that editors were slavishly deferential to the accounts they received and so allowed obviously inconsistent details to remain when they combined accounts. (The alternative to (P3) is the embarrassingly implausible presupposition, namely, (P3') that the editors were so unusually stupid as not to notice the obvious inconsistencies they introduced in their combining of accounts.) Finally, the motivating presupposition for the whole enterprise is (P4) that earlier accounts are much more likely to be accurate witnesses than later accounts.

It is important to see that Brown's presuppositions are not themselves demonstrated by historical evidence. For some of these presuppositions, historical

considerations cannot provide conclusive evidence for the view expressed. So, for example, history cannot show us that all early accounts are consistent—that is, without tension—because, to begin with, history cannot demonstrate conclusively that we have found all the early accounts. Even if all the accounts we have are consistent and can be dated as early by some means which does not itself rely on (P1), there might be early accounts which we have not yet found or recognized as early and which are nonetheless not consistent or tension-free. More importantly, although history gives us examples of cases in which earlier accounts are more reliable than later ones, as (P4) claims, it also gives us examples in which later accounts are as reliable as earlier ones (as we currently believe to be the case in Muslim transmission of the Koran or oral transmission of poetry in certain nonliterate cultures), or even examples in which later accounts are more reliable than earlier ones, in virtue of having had access to better informants than the earlier accounts had (as a modern historian's account of a certain period in Roman history is more reliable than Suetonius's description of that same period).¹⁰ Though Brown in fact concedes as much when he admits that the tradition may be ancient even if the witnesses are late, this theoretical concession is not much in evidence in his practice here.¹¹ Finally, to have historical evidence for (P2) and (P3), we would have to uncover corresponding texts which could be dated by some means not based on these presuppositions themselves, and in the later of two corresponding accounts we would have to find discrepancies with the earlier text as well as sizable additions absent from the first text. But even then, unless the editor of the second document or some contemporary of his left us an account of how he proceeded in producing that document, it would remain more a matter of speculative inference than of historical data that the relation between the two texts is to be explained by supposing that the editor of the later text used the earlier text as his source and that in producing his own text he changed many details in the earlier text, added passages invented wholesale, and yet simultaneously clung to his source with great deference, refusing even to alter pronouns in the source text.

If historical considerations cannot warrant these presuppositions, suppose we look at them from a philosophical point of view. Considered philosophically, however, these presuppositions are not overwhelmingly plausible, taken individually, or even clearly a coherent whole, taken collectively. Consider, for example, the third presupposition. If we take it as (P3), the inconsistency between it and (P2) is much more jarring than many of the inconsistencies Brown lists for the Gospel of John; and if we take it as (P3'), we lose in plausibility whatever we gain in coherence. As for (P2), it is itself based on presuppositions which are worth trying to be clear about. To ordinary readers, Brown seems to be suggesting that the evangelists or editors were committed Christians and yet entirely easy about making up episodes involving the appearances of angels, details about

when, where, and to whom Jesus appeared, and even whole speeches of Jesus.¹² This is a practice which would be condemned by standards common in our time, as well as in times before and after the period of the Gospels, as knowingly telling untruths, and telling them, moreover, about the religious figure one is devoted to. Objectively considered, a person who would engage in such a practice seems to resemble the worst among the contemporary television evangelists: he is hypocritical and fraudulent, or else he is self-deceived in some unsavory way. Brown suggests that the evangelists themselves saw nothing wrong with this practice, but a suggestion of that sort is beside the point. Even if the television evangelists involved in recent scandals supposed that their activities were not morally objectionable, and their social and religious communities shared their view, their names would nonetheless have become bywords for moral sleaziness. Is it plausible to suppose that the persons responsible for the Gospels, whatever they may have thought about themselves, in fact had the same sort of character or the same moral habits as those particular television evangelists? Though no doubt some scholars will think it is, I find such a supposition not at all plausible and difficult to square with the moral tenor of the texts themselves.

It is, of course, customary to repudiate this sort of argument energetically. Sometimes we are told that the evangelists did not conceive of themselves as doing history at all, that our whole notion of doing history was unknown at this period, and that the evangelists were engaged in a special sort of practice found particularly in this period of history in which fabricating stories about the central figures of one's religion was morally acceptable. I find this claim very difficult to believe. We do not, however, need to consider it here because Brown's own view is not so extreme. He does take the evangelists to have understood what history consists in and to have had some concern with doing history, whatever else they meant to do as well. For example, in another context, Brown says "Matthew and Luke apparently accepted the virginal conception as historical."¹³ And he argues that we ought to reject the suggestion that the genealogy in the Gospels attributing Davidic descent to Jesus was a construction of Hellenistic Jewish Christianity, because, he says, we can't imagine that James, the brother of Jesus, would have acquiesced "in such a fictional affirmation about the family ancestry."¹⁴ Apparently, then, on Brown's own view the evangelists and other early Christians did have a sense of history, could distinguish history from fiction with regard to stories about Jesus, and would (at least sometimes) have been unwilling to countenance fiction about Jesus, even if they found it altogether acceptable to fabricate other sorts of accounts.¹⁵

Brown himself responds to the claim that his methodological presuppositions rest on an unpalatable view of the evangelists in this way: "Does this [the view that the evangelist Luke was wrong in claiming that the risen Jesus could eat or could be touched] imply that an inspired evangelist is employing a falsified

argument? . . . [No, rather] the terminology “true” and “false” should not be simplistically applied here for several reasons.”¹⁶ The list of his reasons includes some claims which seem inadequate to support a negative answer to the question whether “an inspired evangelist is employing a falsified argument.” For example, he says that some details about Jesus “may reflect the artistry of effective narration,” and that Luke “has a special tendency to objectivize the supernatural.” These reasons would be decisive for the issue in question only if Brown thought the evangelist meant to be writing fiction rather than history or was unable to distinguish history from fiction or was entirely willing to countenance fiction instead of history about Jesus. But since Brown himself apparently rejects such views, it is not immediately clear why the suggestion that the evangelist was engaged in artistic narration should count as a reason for rebutting the charge that the evangelist was “employing a falsified argument.” The most telling reason in Brown’s list is that in falsely describing Jesus the evangelist is relying on a prior tradition, which is the source of the falsehood. But, of course, this reason doesn’t address the issue of how we are to understand those cases in which the evangelist himself constructed his account of Jesus wholesale.

I don’t want to make too much of these objections to Brown’s methodology, however. Perhaps there is some way of reconciling (P2) with (P3), other than replacing (P3) with the improbable (P3’). Perhaps there is some credible and consistent explanation of the presuppositions underlying (P2) that does not imply an unpalatable and implausible evaluation of the evangelists. For that matter, perhaps there is some way of making sense of Brown’s practice without supposing that it rests on the presuppositions I have presented here. It is important to see that, even if we did not have to worry about the plausibility and coherence of Brown’s presuppositions, his methodology raises a different and substantial concern.

On Brown’s methodology, all the stories we are left with will necessarily be fairly simple and free from tension. Any tension in a narrative will constitute an apparent inconsistency, which will be resolved by segregating the conflicting parts of the narrative into different stories. And so it is hard to see how Brown’s methodology could ever leave us with a complicated story, with the sort of rich and complicated drama outlined by the play. Furthermore, in the style of exegesis Brown represents there is in general a perplexing deadness to the nuances of drama and narrative. Neurobiologists tell us that a patient with significant damage to certain areas of the right cerebral cortex is often unable to process contextual cues adequately, so that if such a patient is told by his boss at a construction site where a load of lumber has just been dumped, “Give me a hand, Joe,” he is likely to stare at his hands in confusion and say, “Which one?” Our conviction, which the brain-damaged patient does not share, that the question “which one?” is an inappropriate response in this context to the injunction “Give me a hand” is hard to explain, but nonetheless entirely right. No doubt it depends, at least

in part, on our being able to put together many bits of information about the context in which the injunction is uttered. Similarly, it may take some reflection to explain why most of us find ludicrous the suggestion Brown cites as one scholar's considered opinion, that what explains the Gospel's description of Mary as turning twice to Jesus is the fact that Jesus was naked and modesty made her turn away, at any rate initially. Perhaps this conviction of ours also has to do with the social context in which the episode takes place. In a society in which people are generally clothed in public, the public nakedness of a person is not likely to go unremarked;¹⁷ and so most of us would find incongruous the suggestion that Jesus was naked but that the text, or the tradition, failed to remark on that fact.

Brown himself is too sensible to approve such extreme interpretations, but even in his moderate approach there is a curious absence of sensitivity to the dramatic possibilities of the text. So, for example, Brown dismisses the episode between Mary Magdalene and the angels because he says her conversation with the angels doesn't advance the action at all (995). Or in discussing the appearance of Jesus in Matthew 28:10, he supposes that it must be an insertion into an already existing narrative because in the text Jesus simply repeats what the angels have already said (1002). But both these suggestions show a remarkable blindness to the dramatic possibilities of the episodes Brown is ready to dismiss, as reflection on the play makes clear. Whether this deadness to drama makes any difference to assessments of the historical accuracy of texts is, of course, another matter. It depends entirely on our subjective assessment of whether reality is more often like the simple, tension-free narratives Brown reconstructs as the early tradition underlying the evangelist's account, or more like the subtle, complicated dramatic story the play tells. My own experience has been unequivocally on the side of the view that the reality in which human lives are embedded is rarely simple.

But what about Brown's objections against the methodology underlying the play? Such harmonistic approaches, Brown says, go beyond the text and do violence to it (972). Brown recognizes, of course, that it is quite easy to reconcile many of the passages he takes as inconsistent. For example, the apparent differences of the time at which the visit to the tomb takes place can be readily reconciled by supposing that it was the time of day at which the sun is just beginning to rise. Such a time of day may be described with equal appropriateness as "early and still dark" (John) or "growing light" (Matthew) or "very early when the sun was rising" (Mark).¹⁸ (The grouchy early riser will describe the time as still dark, and the all-night reveller will say, with satisfaction or chagrin, that it is growing light or that the sun is rising.) But Brown maintains that such "harmonistic approaches" do "too much violence to the Gospel evidence" and "venture beyond the evidence" (972). It is, however, difficult for me to see why he thinks so. Why should a methodology which accepts its texts as true and tries to see how they might cohere be thought guilty of going beyond the texts or doing

violence to them? If any methodology is guilty of this charge, why shouldn't we rather judge that it is Brown's own methodology, which cuts out certain portions of the text as later fabrications and pastes together other portions to reconstruct hypothetical earlier, simpler accounts that allegedly underlie the text? At any rate, to take seriously Brown's objections against the methodology used by the play, we would need at least some definition, drawn from literary theory, of what it is for an interpretation to go beyond a text or do violence to a text. And then we would need an argument to show that this definition fits the methodology employed by the play but not the methodology Brown himself employs.

Conclusion

The juxtaposition of Brown's interpretation and the medieval play show us the importance of the prescription Bantly and Reynolds promote, that philosophers and historians need to talk to each other (philosophers and historians and literary theorists, we might add), and that these groups have a great deal to learn from each other. The naive inattention, even blithe obliviousness, to history shown by the play should render us all grateful for the learning made available to us through the researches of historically oriented biblical critics such as Brown. On the other hand, what reflection on harmonizations such as that of the play shows us is that historical critics also have something to learn from philosophers. It is important to recognize the difference between historical evidence, on the one hand, and philosophical presuppositions and methodological commitments, on the other; and once the difference is recognized, it is important to reflect on those presuppositions and commitments with philosophical sensitivity and skill. When we examine Brown's interpretation of the empty tomb story in the Gospel of John, it is clear that his conclusions are largely a construct of his methodology and presuppositions and that, in this case at least, his historical learning does not have much of a role in shaping his interpretation. Whatever the case may be in his other work, with regard to this text in the Gospel of John nothing which can be called unequivocally historical constitutes a better reason for accepting rather than rejecting either his methodological commitments and presuppositions or the conclusions which follow from them. And when we examine them from the vantage point of philosophy, they do not fare well.¹⁹

With regard to this text, then, I see no more reason, either historical or philosophical, for accepting Brown's methodology than for accepting that underlying the play. On the contrary, the problems with Brown's methodological commitments and presuppositions, on which his interpretation of this text largely rests, seem to me to constitute some reason to prefer the methodology underlying the play to Brown's in this case. At any rate, if we begin with the play's

methodology, we will not immediately resolve any interesting tension in the texts into simple, tension-free stories. And if it should turn out that in the end there is some good historical (really historical, and not covertly philosophical) reason for abandoning the play's methodology, by at least beginning with that methodology we will have done what we can to ensure that we are not blind to the literary qualities and dramatic possibilities of the texts.²⁰

Appendix I

Text of Visitatio Sepulchri

(The translation is mine; the Latin text and score can be found in Fletcher Collins, Jr., *Medieval Music-Drama: A Repertory of Complete Plays*, University Press of Virginia, 1976. I have not included stage directions.)

Mary Magdalene (MM): Alas, the godly shepherd is killed, although he was unstained by any guilt. How lamentable a thing!

Mary, [mother] of James (MJ): Alas, the true shepherd, who brought life to the dead, is perished. How mournful this death!

Mary Salome (MS): Alas, wretched race of Jews, what dreadful madness gripped you? How cursed a people!

MM: Why did you condemn that godly man to death, you fierce, envious, ungodly people? How sinful a wrath!

MJ: Did this just man deserve to be crucified? How damnable a race!

MS: What shall we do to commiserate, bereaved as we are of our sweet master? How lamentable a fate!

MM: Let us go then quickly and with a devoted mind do the only thing we can.

MJ: Let us anoint his most holy body with fragrant spices. What a priceless thing!

MS: This nard-oil mixture will keep his blessed flesh from decaying in the tomb.

All three Marys: But we cannot accomplish this without help. Who will roll away this stone from the entrance of the tomb?

Archangel (A): Whom do you seek in the sepulcher, you followers of Christ?

All three Marys: Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified, you citizen of heaven.

A: Why, you followers of Christ, do you seek the living among the dead? He is not here, but he has risen, as he foretold to the disciples. Remember what he said to you in Galilee, that Christ had to suffer and would rise again in glory on the third day.

MM: We come to the tomb of the Lord, mourning.

MJ: We see the angel of God sitting.

MS: And saying that he is risen from the dead.

MM: Alas! Oh, sorrow! Alas! How dreadful and sad this distress is! I am bereaved of the presence of the Master I loved. Alas! Who has taken that dearly beloved body away from the tomb? [to Peter and John] They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him. And the tomb is found empty. And the headcloth and the shroud are left inside.

John (J): [Coming out of the tomb] What astonishing things we see! Has the Lord been secretly taken away?

Peter (P): No, I believe the Lord has risen, as he foretold while alive.

J: But why are the headcloth and the linen left in the sepulcher?

P: Because he didn't need them when he had risen.

Peter and John: In fact, they remain here as a sign of the resurrection.

MM: Alas! Oh, sorrow! Alas! How dreadful and sad this distress is! I am bereaved of the presence of the Master I loved. Alas! Who has taken that dearly beloved body away from the tomb?

First and Second Angel (AA): Woman, why are you weeping?

MM: Because they have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.

AA: Do not weep, Mary. The Lord is risen!

Choir: Alleluia!

MM: My heart burns with desire to see my Lord. I seek but I do not find where they have laid him.

Choir: Alleluia!

Christ: Woman, why are you weeping? Whom do you seek?

MM: Sir, if you have taken him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.

Christ: Mary!

MM: Master!

Christ: Do not touch me! For I am not yet ascended to my Father and your Father, my God and your God.

MM: Wish me joy, all you who love the Lord, for he whom I sought has appeared to me; and while I wept at the tomb, I saw my Lord.

Choir: Alleluia!

First Angel: Come and see the place where the Lord lay.

Choir: Alleluia!

Second Angel: Don't be afraid, you [women]! Change your sad countenance now. Announce the news that Jesus lives. Go now to Galilee. Hurry, if you want to see him!

First Angel: Go quickly and tell the disciples that the Lord is risen.

Choir: Alleluia!

MJ: The Lord is risen from the sepulcher.

MS: Who for our sakes hung on the wood.

Choir: Alleluia!

MJ and MS [holding up the shroud]: See, friends, this belonged to his dear body, the shroud, which was dropped and left empty in the sepulcher.

MM: Today is risen the God of gods.

MJ: You seal the stone in vain, you Jewish people!

MS: Join now with the Christian people.

MM: Today is risen the King of angels.

MJ: The throng of the godly is brought out of darkness.

All three Marys: The entrance to the kingdom of heaven has been opened.

Christ: Do not be afraid, you [women]. Go, tell my brothers to go into Galilee.

There they will see me, as I foretold to them.

Choir: Alleluia!

Angels and Marys, or Choir: The Lord is risen today! Christ, the strong lion, the son of God.

Appendix II

The play and the Gospels

The play is related to the four accounts in the Gospels in the following ways, which have been numbered for ease of reference. (1) The play begins by accepting Mark's identification of the women who came to the tomb. It then conflates the biblical stories of the angels; whereas each biblical account has one appearance of angels, the play has three appearances of angels. (2) The first appearance involves one angel, who is outside the tomb and who appears to all the women. This appearance reflects Matthew 28:2, but (3) what the angel says reflects Luke 24:5-7: "Whom are you seeking, you followers of Christ? . . . Why, you followers of Christ, do you seek the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen, as he predicted to the disciples. Remember what he said to you in Galilee, that Christ had to suffer and rise again in glory on the third day." After the women address the audience, (4) all but Mary Magdalene leave the stage, perhaps reflecting Mark 16:8, where the women are said to leave the tomb frightened, telling no one what they saw. Left alone at the tomb and continuing to lament, (5) Mary decides to find Peter and the Beloved Disciple, and the action of the play then basically follows the story as told in John 20:2-8, though in the play unlike the biblical account, pre-eminence is given to Peter. The disciples leave before Mary manages to return; and so when she arrives at the tomb, she is once again alone and lamenting. As she weeps, (6) she looks into the tomb and sees two angels. "Why do you weep?," the angels ask her; and

when that question produces no real change in her state, they go on to say, "Don't cry, Mary; the Lord is risen." The angels' question stems from John 20:13; their comforting line is reminiscent of Matthew 28:5-7 and Mark 16:6-7. (7) There follow scenes in which Jesus appears to Mary, which are faithful to John 20:14-17. Jesus then leaves the scene; and after a short address to the audience by Mary Magdalene, (8) two angels appear (or perhaps the same two angels reappear). It is clear from their speeches that the other two women are meant to return to stage at this point also, because the speeches are addressed to the women as a group. "Come and see the place where the Lord lay," the first angel says; and the second adds, "Do not be afraid. Change your sad countenance. Announce that Jesus lives. Go forth to Galilee now, if you wish to see him. Hurry!" These speeches of the angels reflect the second half of the angel's speech in Matthew 28:5-7 and Mark 16:6-7. After (9) a series of speeches by the women to the audience, which proclaim the resurrection with great joy and which are perhaps meant to reflect Matthew 28:8, (10) Christ appears again, saying to the women, "Do not be afraid. Go, announce to my brothers that they should go to Galilee; there they will see me, as I predicted to them." This appearance and speech of Jesus reflects Matthew 28:9-10, and on this note, with a last line from the women and angels or from the choir, the play ends. Presumably, after this point the women continue on their way to tell the disciples; perhaps we can add this point as (11), as the implied ending to the play.

If we look at the relation between the play and the Gospels the other way around, the empty tomb stories in the Gospels can be accommodated within the story of the play in the following way. Matthew can be contained in elements (1), (2), (8), (9), and (10) of the play. Apart from worries about the angels, Luke can be included in elements (1), (2), (3) and (11), if we take Luke 24:12 as a part of the story out of sequence in Luke. John is the most readily accommodated of the biblical accounts; it is contained in (1), (5), (6), (7), and (11). On the other hand, Mark is the most difficult of the biblical accounts to square with the play. The playwright assigns the same characters to the scene as Mark does, and Mark's description of the angels seems to fit the play's (8); but what follows in Mark's account is a scene which the playwright puts much earlier, (4) in the play. Since most of the discrepancies between the play and the biblical account are generated by my interpretation of the scene involving angels in Mark, it may be that I have simply failed to understand the way in which the playwright wanted to incorporate Mark in his play.

NOTES

1. "Hedgehogs and Foxes: Rethinking the Philosophy and History of Religions," *Criterion* (1988), 2-6. I am grateful to Philip Quinn for calling this article to my attention.

2. Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel according to John* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Co., 1970), pp. 978-79. Subsequent references to this work will be given by page numbers in parentheses in the text.

3. In the context, on p. 997, Brown is disagreeing with another scholar and denying that a portion of text *is* the free composition of the editor, not, however, because he thinks the editor eschews free composition but because he supposes that this particular portion of text can't be accounted for with such an explanation. On p. 975, Brown is considering whether a certain narrative is the product of "long recitation" or of the evangelist's individual genius, and he tentatively sides with the former hypothesis—thereby indicating that in his view the latter hypothesis is an acceptable sort of explanation for certain portions of the text.

4. Whether this presupposition about the editor or evangelist coheres with the other one Brown relies on, namely, that the editor is perfectly willing to change many details in the account he received or even to add wholesale constructions of his own to the account received, is an issue that I will consider further in the last section of this paper.

5. Interpretations such as this one, which are not uncommon in Brown's work, make it unclear whether it is an appropriate use of the principle of charity to prohibit attributing to Brown the view that the editors and evangelists involved in the production of the biblical text were at least sometimes unusually stupid. Otherwise, how is one to account for Brown's proposal that an editor who, according to Brown, introduced new characters and invented dialogue for them nonetheless could find no way of joining two narratives other than by borrowing a verse from within one narrative and repeating it in a way that produces what Brown considers to be an obvious inconsistency?

6. I do not mean to suggest that the playwright is singlehandedly responsible for the harmony of the Gospels which his play constitutes; harmonies of the Gospels, of course, stem from as far back as the Patristic period. By speaking of the playwright's harmonization here, I mean nothing more than the harmonization the playwright accepts and weaves into his play.

7. For some philosophical discussion of this general point, see my "Faith and Goodness," forthcoming.

8. See, for example, p. 995.

9. I am indebted to Alvin Plantinga for this way of putting the point.

10. I am indebted to Joel Kramer for this point.

11. See p. 1003; see also 1001 where he says that a late addition need not be legendary.

12. See, for example, Raymond Brown, *The Virginal Conception and Bodily Resurrection of Jesus* (New York: Paulist Press, 1973), pp. 17-18.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 31.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 55.

15. Brown claims that the evangelists were aware that in introducing angels they were dealing only with "imaginative description" and not with "historical facts" (*ibid.*, p. 123.) It would be worthwhile, I think, to take a closer look at the arguments available in the literature for this claim to see to what extent they rest on historical data and to what extent they are the result of ideological presupposition.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 88.

17. See, for example, Mk. 14:51-52.

18. Commentators sometimes make much of the fact that the verb for rising in Mark's description of the time of the visit to the tomb is in the aorist, indicating past tense. But since the verb itself can mean 'appear above the horizon' as well as 'rise,' the tense of the verb itself will not support the claim that on Mark's account the time of the visit was after, rather than during, sunrise. (If we take the variant 'anatellontos,' found in some manuscripts, the point is only strengthened.) Even the Anchor Bible commentator on Mark, who maintains that on this score Mark is in explicit opposition to the other Gospels, nonetheless acknowledges that this expression in Mark can be taken as "just after (or at) sunrise"; see C. S. Mann, *Mark* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Co., 1986), p. 664.

19. Someone might object that Brown's interpretation is historical in a way the play is not just in virtue of being unwilling to take episodes involving angels as historical. (See note 15.) But this objection is just confused. Whether accounts without angels are more historical than accounts giving a role to angels depends on whether reality includes angels or not. And the resolution of that issue depends on whether or not there is an omnipotent, omniscient deity who wills to create not just human beings but angels as well. But, of course, this question is without any doubt a philosophical or theological one, not a historical one. At any rate, one cannot simply suppose that demythologized accounts are more historical, unless one has a philosophical or theological argument to show either that there is no omnipotent, omniscient God, or that any God of that sort wouldn't create angels.

20. I am grateful for helpful suggestions to William Alston and to the Notre Dame Philosophy of Religion reading group, including William Anglin, David Burrell, Terry Christlieb, Robin Collins, Fred Crosson, Thomas Flint, Alfred Freddoso, Paul Griffiths, Avak Albert Howsepian, William Mann, Philip Quinn, Alvin Plantinga, and John Strand. I am also particularly indebted to Norman Kretzmann for many useful comments and questions on an earlier draft of this paper.