

A BOOK REPORT  
"READING *with the* GRAIN of SCRIPTURE

Title of Book: "Reading *with the* Grain of Scripture" (Note: To refer to this "Book" as a "Book" is misleading as it is actually a compilation of a number of Essays and Presentations which were made by the Author over his professional life.)

Author: Richard B. Hays, PhD, Professor Emeritus of New Testament Studies and former Dean at Duke Divinity School, who is internationally recognized for his work on the letters of Paul and New Testament Ethics. His book, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament* was selected by *Christianity Today* as one of the 100 most important religious books of the twentieth century.

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First Impressions: I have been asked to provide book reports on a number of books, but not this one. However, I feel compelled to write this Report for my own sake, if for no other purpose and for no other reader because I have found that I am deeply challenged by the profound, scholarly, dramatically well written essays of Professor Hays which are assembled in this book. Yet, that said I find that this book, Professor Hays's book, represents a difficult if not impossible challenge when it comes to preparing a proper book report. That challenge comes from the fact that this book is really not a "book" at all, as one would think of a book. It is actually a compilation of a number of essays and presentations which were written and made by Professor Hays over an extended, and renowned professional academic life.

So how does one prepare a book report on a compilation of essays and presentations? What even compels me to attempt to do so? In response to this last question I would state, without any equivocation whatsoever, that every theological student, every pastor, and every church leader should acquire this book, and should then slowly, carefully, and with meditation, read each of the essays contained therein over a period of time. Each essay should be read, re-read and contemplated as what it is, a stand alone document which deals with a separate theological issue. So each essay needs to be studied, by itself. However, as each essay is separately considered one will eventually find that the essays, taken together, will challenge the reader's conceptions of Scripture and his or her manner or methods of reading, absorbing and using Scripture. Later in this Report I will try to provide a brief outline of some of the topics of the book's essays, but, at the outset, I urge the reader to go to the conclusion of the book, its *Epilogue* and read it. That *Epilogue*, which is an emotionally compelling speech given by Professor Hays upon his retirement, will in and of itself, both convict the reader of his or her own theological, hermeneutical deficits and lack of humility, and compel the reader to go back and read each of Professor Hays's individual essays. Not only that, this *Epilogue* will convince the reader that Professor Hays is one of the most talented, gifted theological writers of our time, if not of all times. This man is one of the best writers whose work I have been privileged to read. Furthermore, and I cannot say enough about this *Epilogue*, I commend it to every preacher who is struggling to find a topic or theme for his or her Sabbath Messages. One can preach on the topics raised by this *Epilogue* for a year! It is a stand alone dynamic piece of theological literature. It



contains numerous statements which are worthy of being quoted in a pastor's Sabbath messages. In practical fact, each individual essay contains numerous such quotable statements.

So what are my first impressions of Professor Hays's book? In the first place, it humbles me. It has exposed huge gaps and deficiencies in my Biblical hermeneutics and in what I have been teaching about Biblical hermeneutics. I urge every reader of this Report to find a way to have access to this book for an extended period of time. It will enrich him or her and his or her preaching, biblical exegesis and theological reflections, and, most certainly it will teach him or her to be deeply humbled by the complex task which any theologian must encounter in seeking to find God's true revelations which are provided by His magnificent Christian Bible. But I want caution the reader. You cannot do justice to the essays and presentations which you will find in this book by quick or skimming reads. You have to slow read and contemplate each essay and presentation. You have to take time in reading and contemplating each essay before you eventually, probably with the same regrets which I have had, return this book to the library or to your book shelf, where it can be held for future reference.

To What Audience Is This Book Directed?: I think that Professor Hays would concede or perhaps urge that this book is directed to the academy of biblical, theological scholars. It is obviously so directed. However, stating that this book is directed to the academy of scholars denigrates its role and its importance. Yes its essays are very scholarly works, which were initially presented in scholarly settings. However, the essays are so well written as to be clearly understandable by those of us who are not members of the academy. Furthermore, if we are pastors, preachers, church leaders or engaged in the teaching of Christians, particularly in the fields of biblical hermeneutics, the essays of this book will provide us with valuable information and insights which will enrich our preaching, our Christian leadership and most certainly our Christian teaching. So, yes, theological scholars, you need this book, but, yes, so do the rest of us who have any roles in Christian education or in preaching. Pastors, preachers, if nothing else this book will help you in your struggles to find topics for your Sabbath messages. Any Christian pastor, teacher or leader is going to be presented with questions raising some of the issues which are confronted by the essays in this book. Such questions can be better, and more clearly and confidently answered by consulting the appropriate essay on the question which appears in this book. I am also going to take the liberty of raising a point which is made by one of the essays in this book. There the author refers to the Apostle Paul, and the question of whether or not Paul had reference to some passage contained in the then existing Scriptures, primarily what we call the Old Testament, when he made some statement in an Epistle that seems to have come from such passage but makes no specific reference to such passage. Did Paul have that passage in mind when he made his declaration or statement, or did he not have such passage in mind? The author, Professor Hays, states that Paul had what Professor Hays calls, an "*encyclopedia of presentation*" or an "*encyclopedia of production*", a body of knowledge upon which he would draw in preparing his writings and statements. By such an "*encyclopedia of presentation or production*" our author, Professor Hays, was referring to a knowledge base which Paul had (and which each of us has) upon which he would draw (and upon which each of us draws) in making a statements or coming to conclusions, possibly without even acknowledging or thinking about the

source upon which he was drawing or referring. Each of us has such a knowledge base, an "*encyclopedia of presentation*" or an "*encyclopedia of production*", a knowledge base upon which we draw, without any conscious thought or attribution when we form our thoughts or statements. We know many things and we use that knowledge in forming our thoughts and in



about or maybe even remembering from whence such knowledge comes. The reader cannot remember the source of everything he or she learns from the essays of Professor Hays which appear in this book, but I guarantee that the knowledge he or she gathers from such essays will forever form a part of his or her "*encyclopedia of presentation/production/information/knowledge base*" which will enrich his or her future theological, hermeneutical work and certainly his or her teaching.

Overview of the Book's Contents/What is the Author Doing with what the Author is Saying/What does the Author Seek to Accomplish With this Book?:

1) Overall Themes: Since this book contains a number of individual essays, each of which deals with an individual theological issue or problem, it is difficult to confidently find an overarching theme which ties its essays together. However, the title for the book, "*Reading with the Grain of Scripture*" is somewhat revelatory of an overall theme for Professor Hays's essays. A grossly inadequate summary of what is meant by this theme is that the Bible, Christian Scripture, presents through its divinely inspired numerous and diverse writings a unified witness, a unified narrative of the One True God, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and the God and Father of Jesus Christ, a narrative of which God is the ultimate author, with Scripture's numerous characters, and even the human authors of its individual Biblical writings being taken up in a complex dramatic design of the One True God from whom are all things and for whom we all exist. This description, as far as it goes, challenges us to become more complex and interesting readers, alert to the Bible's literary nuances and complexity, with our Biblical readings and interpretations to made: 1) through eyes of complete confidence and faith in the truth of what Scripture reveals, 2) within and for the Church and each Christian Community and with respect for the Traditions, Creeds and Experiences of the Church and of that Community, and 3) with knowledge that the reader or interpreter can make sense of each Biblical text only if it is taken in the context of the overall, larger narrative of Scripture. So, in many respects, our author, Professor Hays, outlines for us, in each of his essays, support for the oft repeated statement of the men of the *Bible Project* that "the Bible presents a unified story which leads to Jesus", a statement which is given specific support by Professor Hays's essays.

2) Coherence of Thought: Quoting Professor Hays in his introduction to his book: "...I believe that the essays in this collection, though disparate in origin, reflect an underlying coherence of thought...(for which)...I would identify at least six recurrent themes that are woven throughout these essays:

- 1) The importance of narrative as the 'glue' that holds the Bible together,
- 2) The retrospectively discerned figural coherence between the Old Testament and the New.
- 3) The centrality of the resurrection of Jesus.

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4) The hope for new creation and God's eschatological transformation of the world.

5) The importance of standing in trusting humility before the text.

6) The importance of reading Scripture within and for the community of faith..."

3) Four Parts of the Book, With a Conclusion and Epilogue: Following this train of thought, Professor Hays divides his essays into four parts, with each of such four parts containing a number of individual essay. He then follows with a Conclusion and a powerful *Epilogue*. Such parts, Conclusion and *Epilogue* are briefly described in the book's Table of Contents, which briefly addresses the overall subject matter of each part and of its included essays. If the reader will simply review the "Contents" for the book, he or she



with the title for and subject matter to be covered by each of the essays contained in such part. A very brief and inadequate summary statement of the "Contents" and of the essays included therein is as follows:

1) Part 1, Interpretation: Part 1 contains Four Essays emphasizing: 1) The need for Narrative Interpretation as being essential to the Quest for Theological Unity, in the face of its obvious diversity of authors, topics, language and writing styles 2) The essential requirement to read Scripture through eyes of complete trusting faith, rejecting biblical criticism and the apparently "all knowing" statements of biblical skeptics, 3) The absolute need to read Scripture in Light of the Resurrection, since, without the Resurrection most of Scripture, particularly the New Testament, makes little sense, and 4) The need to recognize the Figural Interpretive of Israel's story (as revealed through the Holy Spirit's inspiration of the Gospel Writers, and what was disclosed to them by Jesus, which caused them, in their Gospels, to go back to the Old Testament, particularly the Prophets, and to understand parts of the Old Testament as figuratively describing Jesus and His ministry, His non-violent, non-military kingship, and His death and resurrection, and the essence and power of His teachings.) (Note: This "figurative interpretation" almost "backward reading" of the Bible has caused me, your Reviewer, to reconsider some of the Biblical Hermeneutics which he has previously taught.)

2) Part 2, Historical Jesus: The essays in this Part emphasize the dangers of efforts on the part of some theologians and biblical critics to re-brand Jesus, and to create a new "historical Jesus", and to identify statements which were attributed to Jesus by the Gospel writers but were allegedly not actually made by Him or were probably not made by Him, thereby presenting a "picture of Jesus" and of His teachings which diverges, substantially, from the depictions of Jesus and of His teachings as presented by the Gospels and the New Testament writings. Professor Hays finds that the "true Jesus", if you will, is the Jesus described in the Gospels and in many of Paul's Epistles, who, is accurately described in the Gospels and New Testament, and who, in fact, made the statements attributed to Him in the Gospels, and that such "true Jesus" is not some Jesus who is recreated through some purportedly historical study, such as the one of the "Jesus Project", which Professor Hays strongly criticizes. (Note: The essays in this Part 2 are consistent with and supportive of Professor Hays's belief that Scripture must be read through eyes of trust and faith, as opposed to being read through the eyes of a skeptic.)

3) Part 3, Paul: The academic theory that Paul's Epistles do not contain elements of narrative, and that they do not fit into the overall meta narrative of Scripture, and do not

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further contribute to the narrative portrait of Jesus and who He was and is is strongly refuted by Professor Hays. Professor Hays also analyses and interprets Paul's strongly important Epistle to the Galatians, and finds strong marks of apocalyptic theology in Galatians. He also analyses Paul's views of the Holy Spirit, as the Holy Spirit is referred to, sometimes in a somewhat tangential or cryptic manner, in Paul's Epistles. Lastly, Professor Hays confronts and seeks to interpret Paul's rephrasing of Isaiah's prophecy about the ultimate saving of the Jewish people and nation, as that prophecy appears in Isaiah 59:20-21 and as it is somewhat "tweaked" by Paul in Romans 11:26-27. Questions about the "hardening" of Israel or Part of Israel and about the ultimate fate of the Jewish people at the end of historical time are raised and argued and dealt with. For example has "hardening come upon a *part* of Israel", or has "hardening come *for a while* upon Israel" with the Jewish people to ultimately, at the end to become believers in Christ to be "grafted" into the body of Christ? If one has questions or concerns about the ultimate fate of the Jewish people a careful reading of Chapter 14 (*Hope for What We Do Not Yet See*) is warranted.

4) Part 4, New Testament Theology: Keep in mind that



N.T. Wright are both eminent New Testament Scholars. They have been fast friends and have co-edited each other's books. That said they have had their disagreements, some of which are described, in detail, in this book. Chapters 16 through 21 of this book are all worthy of study by anyone who has a strong interest in the overall interpretation and application of the New Testament. Of particular interest to me, your Reviewer, is Chapter 21 on "*Eschatology: 'Why Do You Stand Up Looking Into Heaven'*", where Professor Hays makes strong arguments that an Eschatological view is absolutely essential to the Church, and that, without such view little that the Church teaches makes any sense. Also worthy of particular note, in the eyes of your Reviewer is Chapter 17, *Covenant, New Covenantalism in Hebrews*. *Hebrews* is often cited by those who argue for the doctrine of so called "supersessionism" in their "supersessionist hermeneutic." The positions of those who so cite *Hebrews* is strongly refuted by Professor Hays in his essay which appears in this Chapter. A careful reading of this Chapter is recommended for those who are confronted with issues, doubts or concerns about the relationships between the Church, the Church Universal and Judaism. Has the Church replaced Judaism? Are the Jews left behind?

Conclusion: A Hermeneutic of Trust: In his Concluding Essay Professor Hays makes a strong declaration and argument for his overall belief that we must look to Scripture with eyes of faith and trust, faithfully and trustingly believing that all of Scripture, in all of its diversity, truly represents the inspired Word of God and provides a true revelation of God, which is true for today and for all times. We must approach the Bible with faith, trust and confidence, and while we might struggle with our interpretations and understandings and applications of it we can do so with complete confidence that we are, in fact, working with the inspired Word of God, all skeptical arguments and Biblical criticism notwithstanding.

Epilogue Dark Fruition-Waiting in Hope: As has been stated above, and as shall be stated again, this *Epilogue*, in and of itself, is worth reading. If it is properly read and absorbed it will provide a strong dose of humility for all Biblical Scholars and Academics, who include Professor Hays among their most esteemed ranks. In this respect I want to go back and

quote a statement of N.T. Wright which is quoted by Professor Hays in his essay, *Story, History, and the Quest for Jesus*, which appears, not in the *Epilogue*, but in Chapter 6 of the book. While this statement does not appear in the *Epilogue* it seems to be particularly applicable to the theme of humility which is so eloquently stated in such *Epilogue*. It is a statement which should serve to provide each of us who seeks to interpret Scripture and to teach others to do so with the required spirit of humility with which we should espouse our "strongly held views" of an issue of Scripture. N.T. Wright's (and he is a towering New Testament Scholar) statement, which he is reputed to have made to all of his students, is as follows: "*I frequently tell my students that quite a high proportion of what I say is probably wrong, or at least flawed or skewed in some way which I do not at the moment realize. The only problem is that I do not know which bits are wrong; if I did I might do something about it....Serious debate and confrontation is the stuff of academic life, and I look forward, not of course without some trepidation, to more of it as a result of this project.*" These are words which should be taken to heart by each of us who considers himself or herself to be a theologian.

In summary, I cannot begin to do justice to this book in a few pages. I can, however, state with complete confidence that if you read it, slowly and with deep meditation, it will have a huge impact on the way in which you read and seek to interpret and apply Scripture. Its essays are true masterpieces which are written by a man of towering Biblical intellect and wonderful writing skills.



"book" in the true sense of the word "book", but is, rather, a collection of individual essays and presentations, you cannot declare, as you can with many books, that you can approach this book by first reading the Introduction, and then reading the final Conclusion, with one to then review the book's Table of Contents, before he or she then skims each Chapter (particularly the Conclusions for each Chapter). The essays in this book must be individually read and studied. That said, perhaps, if one does not have the time or desire or need to read each essay, the recommendation would be that the *Epilogue* be read first, and that the *Introduction* (which does accurately summarize the overall contents of the book's essays) should then be read. The reader can then peruse the Table of Contents and determine which essays are of then immediate interest to the reader, and will also advise the reader of the general theme, subject matter and contents of each essay, so that the reader can then return to the book if an issue dealt with by one of the essays is to be later confronted. Most of the essays also contain Conclusions, which are quite helpful if one does not want to read the entire essay.

How Can This Book Be Used In Classes Such As Those Offered by

TEI/ECLI: Truthfully, I don't think that it can be so used. It is not a book that is readily adaptable to being used in a class setting. It is certainly not a book to be assigned to students in an entry level class on hermeneutics or on most theological topics. It is, however, a book which can be of tremendous use for a teacher, who is teaching in an TEI/ECLI setting or in any Christian Education setting,

as it will provide materials which can be included in that individual's "*encyclopedia of presentation or production*" which has been referred to above. The materials in this book will help the teacher to expand his or her knowledge base which will enable him or her to better teach his or her students, although the book is likely not one for "assigned reading" for the individual students.