

'The Gospel Accounts as Creation Stories': a Conversation

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- would you say there is a limited range of responses to those writings we call the gospels?
- maybe it's always been that way
- we've got a collection of gospel writings, and no one knows quite what to do with it
- so there's a fair amount of floundering around
- God knows, we've done our share, trying to re-imagine these gospel writings as fully fledged performances
- but for all our floundering, we have arrived at a new beginning
- call them gospel myth-takes
- which is to say, they're mythic stories about the origin and identity of very early Christian minorities, but they're not mythic, or stories, in any straightforward way
- so they're not biographies of Jesus?
- try telling that to all those who say they are
- and then there's a minor industry of people writing their own gospels or biographies
- DIY
- Jesus the...
- man
- magician
- rebel
- insert your own epithet!
- well you only really sense the shortcomings of this life cum news story approach when you see attempts to put Jesus on stage

- Jesus wept, what a fright!
- even his mother wouldn't recognize him!
- all these impersonations are based on an unshakeable belief in our ability to strip away the mythic, which, like magic, is anything we find unbelievable or fake, and expose some original, pre-Christian Jesus
- effectively driving a wedge between Jesus and Christians
- which, in turn, guts the gospel writings, because they're based in surprising symbiosis of Jesus and Christians
- and our attention is limited to some life-as-lived story of Jesus, with the gospel writings as 4 possible versions of this bitty life, with so many missing years
- but a richer perspective sees a fourfold gospel, 4 written accounts of the one gospel, with each account opening up another dimension of this gospel
- so that instead of a one-dimensional take on the gospel, we have a multi-dimensional take, and that's what we are attempting to show in performance
- now the question is, just what is this gospel?
- well, there are many ways to get at the heart of the gospel, for example, there was a chirpy little song that people used to sing, which went
- *eat his body, drink his blood*
- a Christian version of, *come and get it!*
- the *it* in question being Jesus
- now if you wrestle with that for a moment or two, you'll realize you are in very unfamiliar territory
- territory the manhunt for the keep-it-real Jesus has cordoned off as a no-go zone
- the eating and drinking, you see, are the fusion of groups of Christians and the risen Jesus in one body
- we're a case of, you are who you eat

- and so the body of Christ isn't a *he*, it's a *he-we*
- you know, there's an old joke about Easter being called off because they've found the body, but in fact, there's no Easter if the body's missing!
- now with our modern, hard-boiled myths of individualism, all this can seem a little too much to stomach
- partly because it's communal to the core
- the basic building blocks of this mystic body are not individuals but Christian cells
- which means you've got a Jesus who's a network of cells
- and at the same time, the quintessential expression of that brand of love we call God
- and there's the gospel in a nutshell
- or something like it
- God is love and Jesus is love's body
- and the good news is, we can become mixed up in that dynamic union of love
- as enriching ingredients in the growth of the body
- with the Spirit as the binding agent
- of course, put baldly like that it sounds somewhat abstract
- and maybe a trifle sci-fi
- and that's where the 4 accounts of the gospel come in
- they trace the development of this living, breathing gospel
- and one of the challenges for performance is to show how each of the 4 accounts is distinct
- and how the 4 resonate together

- a breakthrough came when we started to ask what kind of story can you make out of each account of the gospel?
- and you do have to *make* a story of each account, you don't just find it, unearth it like a fossil
- that means we're not simply retelling *the* story
- and we're not just making it up either, as though it's a matter of whatever takes our fancy
- though any deviation from the familiar will almost inevitably be seen by some as deviant
- what we tried to find was a frame for each gospel account that would bring into focus its distinctive character
- for example, a frame that works for the Mark gospel is taking it as a war story, a guerrilla struggle to liberate people from the grip of evil
- and you have to test that framework, to ensure that it's not reductive but productive for our hold on the material and the gospel
- bearing in mind, you don't have to include everything that's in the account
- you know, there's a stubborn, totalitarian literalism that insists on following the letter of the law
- where the written account has the force of law
- and it killeth stone dead any attempt to shape a performance within a story-frame
- but perhaps a greater obstacle to reimagining our 4 accounts of the gospel is their mythic cast
- you see, all 4, in one way or another, evoke recognizably human landscapes
- but other beings are also called up like demons, angels, God, Spirit and the Devil
- along with strange happenings like miracles, exorcisms, possessions and metamorphosis
- and peculiar ways of talking

- and you find different kinds of reactions to these elements - some want to sensationalize them, others want to explain them away
- it's all in the mind, you know!
- and some simply want to white-out the embarrassing bits
- but these elements, that can seem so foreign to us, are so much part of the gospel wordscapes, that any attempt to deny or degrade them destroys the mythic ecology of the accounts
- and in performance we've tried to bring them to life, before our senses, without resorting to cliches, as vital parts of our story framework
- and this is at odds with the story-of-Jesus approach, as usually understood, because that story stops at death
- but for Christians, the "story" of Jesus is being continued in them
- sure, he died, but just as surely, he was recreated, he didn't stay dead
- his death was a necessary part of a sea change
- and he was destroyed so that we could become part of him
- and everything in the gospel accounts is viewed from this new-fashioned identification
- so in many ways, you can see the gospel accounts as creation stories
- that's why we say they all have a mythic cast
- and that's what we are trying to respond to through performance, because performance may offer different and full-bodied ways of understanding such a mystery