



## Reading Backwards: Figural Christology and the Fourfold Gospel Witness

*Richard B. Hays*

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In *Reading Backwards* Richard B. Hays maps the shocking ways the four Gospel writers interpreted Israel's Scripture to craft their literary witnesses to the Church's one Christ. The Gospels' scriptural imagination discovered inside the long tradition of a resilient Jewish monotheism a novel and revolutionary Christology.

Modernity's incredulity toward the Christian faith partly rests upon the characterization of early Christian preaching as a tendentious misreading of the Hebrew Scriptures. Christianity, modernity claims, twisted the Bible they inherited to fit its message about a mythological divine Savior. The Gospels, for many modern critics, are thus more about Christian doctrine in the second and third century than they are about Jesus in the first.

Such Christian "misreadings" are not late or politically motivated developments within Christian thought. As Hays demonstrates, the claim that the events of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection took place "according to the Scriptures" stands at the very heart of the New Testament's earliest message. All four canonical Gospels declare that the Torah and the Prophets and the Psalms mysteriously prefigure Jesus. The author of the Fourth Gospel puts the claim succinctly: "If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me" (John 5:46).

Hays thus traces the reading strategies the Gospel writers employ to "read backwards" and to discover how the Old Testament figuratively discloses the astonishing paradoxical truth about Jesus' identity. Attention to Jewish and Old Testament roots of the Gospel narratives reveals that each of the four Evangelists, in their diverse portrayals, identify Jesus as the embodiment of the God of Israel. Hays also explores the hermeneutical challenges posed by attempting to follow the Evangelists as readers of Israel's Scripture--can the Evangelists teach us to read backwards along with them and to discern the same mystery they discovered in Israel's story?

In *Reading Backwards* Hays demonstrates that it was Israel's Scripture itself that taught the Gospel writers how to understand Jesus as the embodied presence of God, that this conversion of imagination occurred early in the development of Christian theology, and that the Gospel writers' revisionary figural readings of their Bible stand at the very center of Christianity.

## Reading Backwards: Figural Christology and the Fourfold Gospel Witness Details

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**Witness Richard B. Hays**

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# From Reader Review Reading Backwards: Figural Christology and the Fourfold Gospel Witness for online ebook

## Nathaniel Spencer says

"The Gospel writers are trying to teach us to be more interesting people-- by teaching us to be more interesting readers."

This short book may only be a taste of what Hays offers in his other works, but it's a good one. His thesis here is that the four canonical Evangelists are teaching us not only about Jesus, but how to read: that the reader's imagination is being retrained, so to speak, to hear allusions from the OT, and to let those allusions (figurations) lend even more depth to the the Gospel text, and then vice versa. So we "read backwards." This is a learned skill, but with huge payoff for those exercising patience.

Hays unearths a number of such figural allusions to the OT that are obscure or easily missed, and shows pretty sufficiently that the Evangelists were working solidly within an ancient Jewish tradition to display Jesus as not only Messiah, but the embodiment of Israel's God. If one needs an answer to the conclusions of people like Ehrman, Hays is solidly dishing it out here, but he's doing much more as well.

4 stars only because it's so short. I'm treating this like an intro into Hays' Echoes of Scripture books and it's really left me wanting more.

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## Daniel Supimpa says

Hays proposes an analysis of the narrative presentation of Jesus Christ in the four Gospels, trying to expose the hermeneutical mentality that guides the evangelists in their endeavor. Hays' overall argument is that the fourfold witness of the Gospels conveys a high Christology by the use of a figural interpretation of Israel's Scriptures. For Hays, the Evangelists' hermeneutical strategy is a dialectical movement in which "the intertextual semantic effects can flow both directions: an earlier text can illuminate a later one, and vice versa" (p.93). Thus, by reading the OT through the Evangelists' eyes, one learns to read backwards from a postresurrection standpoint, while also reading the OT forwards – the way it is taken in its own contextual meaning by the NT authors.

A rich approach to the intertextual links between the NT and the OT. Well-written, clear and beautifully packed.

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## Chad says

A brilliant exploration of the diverse ways the Evangelists read the OT with a Christological lens. I found especially helpful his many examples of metalepsis, that is, "the practice of citing a fragment that beckons readers to recover more of the original subtext in order to grasp the full force of the intertextual link." Highly recommended.

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### **Scott says**

An excellent study of the Gospel writers literary sensitivities in identifying Jesus as the God of Israel. Besides some odd remarks in the conclusion and some other quibbles, this is great stuff and an encouragement to live inside the world of the Bible in one's reading of Scripture.

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### **Laura Robinson says**

This is a really excellent introduction to the subject of the use of the OT in the Gospels. Hays takes on passages that are less commonly discussed in the Gospels, which makes this book feel refreshing and new. Would have liked to see a bit more on Luke, but I trust this is in the later book. Looking forward to reading Echoes of Scripture in the Gospels.

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### **Andrew says**

When I have taught the Gospel of Mark to college students over the last ten years, the "Aha" reaction consistently comes when I ask them to look up Old Testament passages related to a puzzling verse.

Why does Mark describe what John the Baptist eats and wears but not anyone else? Not Peter. Not Pilate. Not even Jesus.

When Jesus is walking on the water, why does Mark say Jesus intends to pass by the disciples struggling to row against the wind? Doesn't he see them? Doesn't he care?

The answer to these and other odd passages in Mark are often found by going back to the Old Testament. Richard B. Hays explores the foundational importance of the Old Testament in his striking new book, *Reading Backwards*. For all four gospel writers, their "symbolic world was shaped by the Old Testament," and unless we see that, we fail to see what they are talking about.

After a preface and introductory chapter which explain what he calls figural reading, Hays looks at how each gospel writer makes use of the Old Testament. Rather than trying to survey the whole of each gospel, Hays focuses on one particular aspect--how each, in different ways, utilizes the Old Testament to express how they see Jesus being identified with the God of Israel.

Mark, says Hays, is not interested in prooftexting predictions of Jesus from the Old Testament. He emphasizes the veiled, half-hidden suggestions that Jesus is the Lord who forgives sins, who controls the seas and shepherds Israel.

In Matthew Jesus is the divine presence taking the place of Temple and Torah who is to be worshiped. Luke offers a thick, textual narrative world which welcomes the arrival of the Lord of the new exodus who redeems Israel.

Hays thus exposes the false dichotomy between the low Christology of three synoptic gospels and the high

Christology of John who presents Jesus as the eternal Word (and Wisdom), the Good Shepherd and Bread from Heaven.

The Old Testament unfortunately remains a closed book for many Christians. Hays helps us see that without the Old Testament, the New also remains closed.

(Disclosure: The publisher gave me a copy of the book with no expectation or requirement that I review it.)

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### **Joshua says**

Tremendous. Hays is consistently stellar. Well worth the read, and this book will be consulted again and again.

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### **Alan Fuller says**

The heart of the NT's message is that Jesus' life, death, and resurrection took place according to scripture. The Gospel writers used OT allusions to show Jesus' identity as God and Messiah. He is the continuance of Israel's narrative and the new Moses.

(Isa 40:3) The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. (Cf. Mat\_3:1-3; Mar\_1:2-5; Luk\_3:2-6; Joh\_1:23)

These allusions to identity with God tend to defeat theories of high and low Christology by historical-critical scholars. The figural method of the Gospel writers may be called metalepsis.

"metalepsis: the practice of citing a fragment that beckons readers to recover more of the original subtext in order to grasp the full force of the intertextual link."

Hays, Richard B.. *Reading Backwards: Figural Christology and the Fourfold Gospel Witness* (Kindle Locations 1120-1121). Baylor University Press. Kindle Edition.

Hays does a great job of explaining how this all works.

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### **Spencer says**

The purpose of this book is a simple one: It shows how Jesus interpreted himself and how the Gospel-writers narrated his life, using the figures of the Old Testament. In doing so, we see that, far from the myth that modern scholarship presents, Christ is portrayed as fully divine.

For instance, Mark 6:45-52 is the narrative of Jesus walking on water. Mark has often been interpreted as having a "low" Christology where Jesus is portrayed as not quite divine. Some have argued that Mark portrays Jesus as the messiah, the Son of Man, and as a powerful wonder-worker and teacher, but not explicitly divine like John does. However, in Mk. 6, a story merely thought to showcase Jesus as a wonder-worker, Jesus is embodying Job 9, where God himself is portrayed as walking on the walker as if dry ground.

By paying attention to the subtle typological allusions, a better understanding of these passages is made possible.

Following this paradigm, Hays goes Gospel to Gospel debunking ideas about that book that modern scholarship has proposed out of neglect for typology. The overall thesis is well demonstrated: Jesus, in what he said and did as portrayed in the narrative, is the embodiment of Israel's God.

Hays writes with a simplicity that only a master is capable of. He is able to argue a point with precision and brevity that makes the book a good read for both scholars and lay-people. His conclusion states that he implicitly means his work as a rebuttal to guys like Bart Ehrman, who have argued Jesus' divinity is a later mythological reinterpretation. Frankly, the simplicity of Hays argument almost makes such theories, while they appeal to our modern suspicions, a bit silly sounding. Also, Hays recommends the recovery of typological reading of Scripture as the way Jesus and the Apostles interpreted the Bible. In a church setting of fundamentalist selective literalism and liberal obfuscation, reading Scripture through Christ as the way Christ recommend sounds like good advice.

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### **Ken Peters says**

This is a book like no other book I've ever read. Hays is enthusiastically endorsing a hermeneutic that is brazenly contrary to principles of hermeneutics that I've long considered to be inviolable. And yet he does so with such scholarly persuasiveness that he's won me over. It's probably because in his meticulousness, it's also clear that he has a love for God's Word that recognizes its poetic artistry and its strong sense of story. This is a book about recognizing the "story, metaphor, prefiguration, allusion, echo, reversal, and irony" in our reading of Scripture. I doubt I'll ever read God's Word in quite the same way again.

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### **Timothy Decker says**

I so badly wanted to give Hays 5 stars. The material overall was good. Especially the first 3 chapters. But I found his work in Luke and John lacking a bit. The main problem was that this book was sooooooooo expensive to be a 110 page read. Baylor Press, what are you doing?

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### **Trey Benfield says**

Biblical hermeneutics is of course a difficult topic. For those who view scripture as authoritative, a grammatico-historical method is frequently the method of choice. The problem with grammatico-historical interpretations is it is demonstrably not the way the apostles or the Gospels interpret the Old Testament. Therefore, in an attempt to be "biblical," most conservative interpreters are being unbiblical.

Hays' "Reading Backwards" is an attempt to discern the biblical hermeneutic of the Gospel writers. He uses the term "figural interpretation" which he borrows from Erich Auerbach. It is unclear how this differs from typology. Perhaps the two are equivalent. In any event, Hays sees the gospel writers viewing the Old Testament as a narrative and performing what he calls a "conversion of the imagination" to read backwards into the Old Testament the story of Jesus' death and resurrection. This preserves the integrity of the Old Testament without disrupting the continuity of the Old Testament with a supersessionist reading. It also

means that the interpreter of scripture should take seriously literary devices and read the scripture with a complex poetic sensibility.

There is much that is commendable in this work, which is essentially a reworked series of lectures. My only criticism is that I wish there was more. I would love to see Hays write an in depth commentary about one of the Gospels. Its not a bad problem, but I feel he just started scratching the surface and that there was still so much more I could learn from such a skilled and careful exegete.

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## **Theron says**

I usually hate book jackets. I've never given much time to pondering why I despise them, but I have and still do. Except for the one for Richard B. Hays' book "Reading Backwards: Figural Christology and the Fourfold Gospel". The whole book, content and form, is right. The right size, length, typeset, paper, argument and conclusion. I'm a bibliophile, usually for the content. This book falls under that as well as for the form. It's a beautiful burnt red, little hard-back-book. It was a good read.

One problem before I enter into brief, big picture ideas in his book. Blurs for books in theology and biblical studies can be off putting. Joel B. Green says the work is "ground-shifting" and N.T. Wright says "Hays opens new and striking vistas on texts we thought we knew". Well maybe-kind-of-sorta. If you're approaching from the liberal side of biblical studies sure. If you're approaching from the conservative side (read: TEDS, SBTS) no. I've grown up within the conservative side of biblical studies and heard exegetical preaching Sunday-by-Sunday that is reminiscent of Hays' thesis. It is, however, one thing to read and proclaim the Bible those ways and another to make a judicious, justifying account as to why that way is apt. I'm thankful for Hays' book because he provides good arguments for why reading the Bible in those to be explained ways makes good sense.

### **The Manger in which Christ Lies: Figural Readings of Israel's Scriptures**

The title of this chapter is drawn from Martin Luther, who acknowledged that Christians have a hard time figuring out what they call the Old Testament. Marcion eradicated the whole thing and any allusion to it in the New Testament. Others find Jesus in every word. How do Christians make sense of it? Hays focuses in on the four evangelists to see how they made sense of it. Figural interpretation is the hermeneutic all the evangelists utilized to make sense of the Old Testament. What is figural interpretation? Hays cites Erich Auerbach's definition, "Figural interpretation establishes a connection between two events or persons in such a way that the first signifies not only itself but also the second, while the second involves or fulfills the first. The two poles of a figure are separated in time, but both, being real events or persons, are within temporarily. They are both contained in the flowing stream which is historical life, and only the comprehension, the intellectus spiritualis, of their interdependence is a spiritual act" (1) This type of reading (as different from e.g., philosophical & historical) depicts and interprets the identity of Jesus through creating imaginative links with the swaddling clothes of Christ, namely, the Old Testament. It isn't tendentious to say the Old Testament unfolds the significance of Jesus of Nazareth, what is though is that Jesus of Nazareth unfolds the Old Testament. That is Hays' thesis. Not only does the Old Testament teach us how to read the New Testament, but also the New Testament teaches us to read the Old Testament. Both are enfolded in one another and unfold one another. The evangelists present us with such a procedure of reading. Funny enough, in David Foster Wallace's 'The Pale King' a character in the novel make this quip on procedures: "The point of a procedure is to process and reduce the information in your life to just the information that has value" (section 27). Who is valuable to the evangelists to make sense of the "information" in the Old Testament?

## Figuring the Mystery: Reading Scripture with Mark

Hays says you cannot understand Mark without the Old Testament. Bold claim. It's a good thing Christ gave us teachers. The meaning(s) of Mark's narrative appear only within an intertextual matrix which the Old Testament provides the background, Jesus the foreground. Those with ears to hear and eyes to read will catch these indirect and allusive references. I'll choose my favorite Mark 6:45-52. What's up with Jesus passing by the disciples on the lake during the storm? It says something like he intended to pass them by. Clever responses have been given to this (2). Mark is alluding to Job 9, specifically the Septuagint's version. Job 9 includes both the imagery of God walking upon the sea as if dry ground and the cryptic phrase "he intended to pass them by". In Job 9 alone, Job is painting with words about the power of God (walking on water) and mystery of God (Look, he passes by me, and I do not see him; he moves on, but I do not perceive him). God is strong and beyond human comprehension. Mark brings this background into the account of Jesus passing by the disciples. Like a good joke, once enough background is given and when the punchline comes, people laugh. Once we have Jesus and the Old Testament in relation, Jesus is identified. Mark identifies Jesus with the one spoken of in Job 9. Miss Job 9 and you miss the story. This is the mystery of Mark's gospel: just who is Jesus? And the scandalous content is matched by the presentation, form of Mark. Mark's mystery cannot just be bluntly stated, that's too simple, easy to misunderstanding, unprofitable. Consider this example. Here is one way to argue that murder is wrong. Murder is wrong. If Sally murders Bob, then Sally did something wrong. Sally murdered Bob viciously. Therefore, Sally did something wrong. Consider this example, read Dostoevsky's 'Crime and Punishment'. Which one has a deeper, richer thrust? Which is more persuasive?(3) Changing things where necessary, the same is being said about Mark. We're so use to easy identification. We're like a parrot that "knows" Greek. The only person who proclaims Jesus' identity correctly is the centurion only after seeing Jesus' horrific death. What is Mark telling us? Many things of course, but here are some. Listen and read more closely, and then re-listen and reread. Embrace and wrestle with the mystery, namely, Jesus is the embodiment of the God of Israel.(4)

Hays does the same type of stuff with Matthew, Luke and John. I chose to write about Mark mainly because it was first and I got the most out of that chapter. Hays does great stuff with the three other evangelists. He concludes his book with the chapter Retrospective Readings: The Challenge of Gospel Shaped Hermeneutics. He highlights that he is not precluding the modern-historical-critical reading of the gospels, but rather that figural interpretation acts as a correction and enhancement in reading the gospels. He provides ten suggestions on how to read scripture from the gospels:

1. Israel's scriptures are understood retrospectively, reading backwards Jesus into their religious life.
2. The cross and resurrection enable this ability to read backwards (think the story on the Emmaus road).
3. The imagination is in need of a conversion. The gospels are a complex poetic genre, full of story, metaphor, prefiguration, allusion, echo, reversal, and irony. We need to become better readers.
4. Pay attention to the large narrative arcs in the Old Testament. There is a story here.
5. The gospels are not a form of supersessionism.
6. The gospels focus on certain books and chunks of Scripture which give us a way to approach others parts.
7. The gospels betray their use of the Septuagint (LXX, Greek translation of Old Testament). What are the implications for us?
8. The gospels use a literary technique called metalepsis. This funny word just means bringing in the fuller context of an allusion to shed light on the portion of a text at hand.
9. Here Hays says, "The more deeply we prove the Jewish and Old Testament roots of the gospel narratives, the more clearly we see that each of the four evangelists, in their diverse portrayals, identifies Jesus as the embodiment of the God of Israel." "The gospels narrate the story of how the God of Israel was embodied in Jesus."
10. Again I quote Hays, "Finally, the evangelists consistently approach Scripture with the presupposition that the God found in the stories of the Old Testament is living and active. It is for that reason- and only for that

reason- that the hermeneutic I have been describing can be embraced as truthful. It is not an exercise in literary fantasy lie, say, trying to live inside the imaginative world of the Lord of the Rings trilogy or the Star Wars films. Rather, all of the hermeneutical recommendations I have enumerated here make sense only because God is the primary agent at work in and through the biblical story- and, indeed, only because God is in some ultimate sense the author of Israel's story. The one Lord confessed in Israel's Shema is the same God actively at work in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ."

(1)2

- (2) It is absent in Matthew and Augustine makes it about the disciples crying out for help.
- (3)The argument against murder comes through the narrative, not singularly in one sentence.
- (4) Mark would have scoffed at that sentence. My apologies, Mark.

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### **Josh Wilhelm says**

In understanding the cohesiveness of the biblical narrative—spanning from Genesis to Revelation—few matters are of greater importance than grasping the way in which the New Testament authors cite, allude to, and echo Israel's Scriptures. And yet, the multitude of references on which the two testaments hinge serve to divide interpreters from all theological backgrounds. Recent biblical scholarship has stressed the sole application of the grammatical-historical method in an earnest effort to safeguard against haphazard interpretation. Yet is this the same method that the gospel writers practiced themselves? In "Reading Backwards: Figural Christology and the Fourfold Gospel Witness," Richard B. Hays takes a careful look at each of the four gospel narratives, in an attempt to discover the underlying hermeneutical approach that informs and shapes these texts.

Originally delivered as the Hulsean lectures at Cambridge in 2013/14, the six chapters that make up Reading Backwards serve as a teaser to his recently released larger work entitled "Echoes of Scripture in the Gospels." What one finds in Reading Backwards is a distillation of Hays's key insights pertaining to early high Christology in the Gospels. Of the six chapters in this shorter work, Hays begins with a chapter on his methodology, devoting the next four chapters to the application of his methodology to each Gospel writer. In the final chapter, Hays offers some closing remarks directed towards the reader for further application of his method.

Key to Hays's methodology is Erich Auerbach's classic definition of figural interpretation. Following Auerbach, Hays argues that a proper interpretation of each Gospel requires an awareness towards figural interpretation, in which a correspondence is noted between earlier and later persons or events. In contrast to allegorizing, which overlooks the historical in favour of a deeper, spiritual interpretation, figural readings take both poles of the figural correspondence seriously, yet, according to Hays, also serve to produce a deeper significance beyond the grasp of the original author or audience. Due to their temporal nature, figural readings can only be detected retrospectively—looking back from the later figure to the former.

To consider the possibility of figural readings in Scripture, one must hold to a belief in Yahweh's lordship over history, as well as his role as the ultimate author standing behind these texts. Hays shares both of these convictions, and in his analysis of the figural readings employed by the four evangelists, insights abound. Pulling from the freshest NT scholarship, Hays demonstrates clearly how the four unique Gospel portraits reveal a unifying message: Jesus as the embodiment of the God of Israel.

With the same careful attention that he shows to the particular narrative shape of each Gospel, Hays argues that the crisis of later christological controversies was a tension already held in suspension in Mark's Gospel (pg. 27). Commenting on Matthew's narrative, he points out that once Jesus has reinforced worship of Israel's God alone (through his response to Satan citing Dt 6:13 in the temptation), any following worship of Jesus by characters in the story must be recognized as a recognition of Jesus's divine identity (pg. 45).

With regards to the famous Emmaus road passage (Lk 24:13—32), Hays effectively demonstrates that Jesus's comments here are carefully framed by Luke, serving to produce a literary challenge to his audience. Hays argues that Luke's pithy summary of the Emmaus account serves to produce a desire in the reader to go back and reread both the gospel narrative as well as Israel's Scriptures in an attempt to find Jesus prefigured there. Interestingly, Hays devotes the least attention to John's Gospel (a mere seventeen pages), despite its famed status for its high Christology.

Behind Hays's work stands the simple recognition that while redemptive history gradually builds throughout the biblical story, following the crucifixion, the earliest disciples did not grasp Yahweh's latest, definitive work in history. Because of this failure to perceive, this community required an admonition to go back to their Scriptures and re-read them in light of the resurrection, a charge both prompted and initially directed by Christ himself. Summarizing the need to 'read backwards' for a full apprehension of the biblical story, Hays writes, "the Gospels teach us how to read the OT, and – at the same time – the OT teaches us how to read the Gospels"(pg 4).

In his work, Hays has correctly noted the crucial task of grasping the complex intertextuality contained in each of the four gospels in order to build a fully informed Christology. Through his careful attention to the unique way each Gospel writer engages in the practice of figural interpretation, Hays highlights their common purpose: demonstrating Jesus as the embodiment of the God of Israel. In sharp contrast to those who believe that the Gospels writers (and the NT authors in general) twist Israel's Scriptures to fit their own agendas, Hays argues that these authors are reading Israel's Scripture figuratively, thus teaching contemporary readers to do the same.

The two "figural poles" of which Hays writes sound very similar to the well known concepts of "type" and "antitype" used in typological interpretation. Indeed, at times, Hays seems to use the terms "figural" and "typological" almost interchangeably. He writes, "the figural reading that John practices does not deny the literal sense but completes it by linking it typologically with the narrative of Jesus and disclosing a deeper prefigurative truth within the literal historical sense" (pg. 102). In discussing figural interpretation within the realm of hermeneutics, it appears that Hays is attempting to salvage the somewhat unpopular practice of typological reading, repackaging it for a contemporary audience.

Borrowing the title of his last chapter, what Hays has presented in *Reading Backwards* can effectively be labelled as "Gospel-shaped hermeneutics." Incorporating the best of recent early-high-Christology scholarship, Hays has demonstrated the fourfold gospel witness to the divine identity of Jesus. He has accomplished this task masterly, demonstrating a pervasive knowledge of each Gospel, with particular interest given to the shaping role of Israel's Scripture in each unique narrative. What emerges from Hays's study is a profound literary and theological awareness on the part of each of the four gospel writers in their respective documents. In his short work, Hays has presented a strong challenge to the rationalist reaction, which argues that the search for "grammatical-historical" meaning is the only viable hermeneutical option. By taking his approach from the NT authors themselves, Hays's short work will serve to prompt a wide audience to read backwards.

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### **Brian says**

Essentially an academic, non-Evangelical defense of the Nicene Creed. Jesus is God, and all the Old Testament allusions prove it. A really nice complement to N.T. Wright and in a lot of ways refreshing considering the defensiveness we sometimes exhibit toward the Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormons. No need to be to dour about it. Weaknesses yes; Hays is ready to criticize the gospel writers, but he's definitely an author I want to read more.

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