

## ○ REVIEW OF ANDREW P. WILSON, *TRANSFIGURED: A DERRIDEAN REREADING OF THE MARKAN TRANSFIGURATION*

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If there ever was a passage that exudes metaphysical presence, it is the transfiguration. Mark's version is different from the other two, its gaps and contradictions ripe for postmodern analysis. From these, Wilson reveals instances of non-presence, evidence of the 'other'. Wilson's book is an interesting attempt to blaze a new trail in biblical studies. Others have, of course, applied deconstruction to various biblical texts, but Wilson is different in that he draws more on the latter works of Derrida and doesn't limit himself to deconstruction. Wilson, the biblical scholar, waxes theologian, offering a negative theological reading of the Markan transfiguration. He offers a balanced approach that, on the one hand, avoids the excesses of the writing style of Stephen Moore that traditional scholarship hasn't accepted, and, on the other hand, refuses to tame Derrida, as is often the case with many scholars who have attempted Derridean readings of the New Testament.

In chapter one, 'Introducing Derrida and Deconstruction', Wilson does a good job explaining Derrida to New Testament scholars not conversant with him. He carefully defines Derrida's trademark word *différance*, a non-word that expresses how a word has meaning only in relation to other words, and, thus, has no essential identity of its own, no presence, i.e., no self-referential identity but rather absence. With this insight, Derrida shows how language and meaning are inherently unstable. Derrida uses this 'concept' to assault Western metaphysics with its 'logocentrism,' a fondness for things seemingly immediate and present, not absent. Wilson claims he will move beyond deconstructing Mark's transfiguration and draw on, chiefly, Derrida's latter works. Wilson distances himself from the deconstructive movement (Paul De Man) a bit, describing himself as embracing, more broadly, Derridean theory. He also shows how, though Derrida is unconventional, he should be understood as firmly within the philosophical tradition.

In chapter two, 'The Critical "Other": Derridean Theory within Biblical Studies', Wilson reviews the engagement of Derrida by biblical scholars. He criticises several biblical scholars (David Clines, Edward Greenstein, David Seely, Wallace Bubar) who, though attempting deconstructive readings, fail to move beyond traditional biblical criticism. For example, Clines fails to recognise the importance of his role as reader in the production of meaning. Wilson applauds the work of Stephen Moore, whose style of writing and content reflect the playfulness of Derrida. However, he also understands how Moore's idiosyncratic approach turns many scholars off. Wilson wants his own position to stand midway between Clines and Moore. He applauds the work of several scholars (Terrence Keegan, Yvonne Sherwood, Patrick Counet, Stephen Moore, Gary Phillips) who go beyond deconstruction in their Derridean readings of the biblical text. His favorite is the work of Francis Landry, who strikes that happy balance he hopes to achieve: a traditional biblical scholar who is playful, yet responsible, in his interpretation of the text.

In chapter three, 'The Markan Transfiguration in Biblical Studies', Wilson reviews traditional New Testament scholars' interpretations of Mark's transfiguration. Many scholars see the story

as having a clarifying function within the gospel and see the event as ‘a certain conception of God's glory’ (60). Wilson proceeds unit by unit, showing how traditional scholars have interpreted them. In his discussion, he hints at moments of ‘otherness’ at contradictory or ambiguous places in the text. For example, scholars have pondered the awkwardness and embarrassment of Mark's comparison (9:3) of the transfiguration with the work of a bleacher/fuller, who whitens clothing. It just doesn't seem to do justice to the glory of the transfiguration.

In chapter four, ‘Rereading the Markan Transfiguration’, Wilson demonstrates his keen ability as biblical scholar and postmodern interpreter. He draws on the latter Derrida to illuminate several facets of the Markan transfiguration. Wilson references Derrida's criticism of Western philosophers (originally Aristotle) who have used the sun as a metaphor for illumination. However, the sun isn't always available (present). And metaphors are inherently unstable; they refer to other metaphors, which, in turn refer to others. Their meaning is difficult to pin down. Wilson applies this to the transfiguration. The robes of Jesus shine brighter than a bleacher (‘white mythology’) could accomplish, another metaphor. This reveals something quite beyond the experience itself: an ‘otherness’. Wilson argues that the distinction between inside and outside gets blurred in the transfiguration. Was Jesus himself transfigured or only his robes? Were his outer garments or inner ones affected? Wilson points out that in this glorious event, Jesus' face is never described – an absence. Thus, the disciples are revealed ‘only a trace of its presence’ (105). Wilson says that the cloud that appears reveals both a presence (God's) and a mysterious absence. ‘Where Jesus glows but does not speak, the cloud speaks but does not glow’ (107). Wilson maintains that Peter's response to the event in terrifying fear points to the *mysterium tremendum*, an ‘otherness’ that chills us to the bone (*The Gift of Death*). Peter's fear represents a responsibility to the ‘other’, here in his unresponsiveness. Wilson shows how the abrupt ending of Mark reveals a significant absence, as does the empty tomb.

In chapter five, ‘New Figurations: Implications and Future Directions’, Wilson becomes theologian. He practices what he calls ‘allegoresis’: exegesis with a postmodern flare. Wilson argues that poetry, which is more unstable than prose and overflows in meaning, is intricately connected with the sacred (Maurice Blanchot). He quotes and analyzes a poem also called ‘Transfiguration’ by E. D. Blodgett and Jacques Brault, which is dense in meaning. He uses the poem to help produce a theology in connection with Mark's transfiguration. Wilson discusses the relationship between theology and literary theory. He argues that a secular method (literary theory) can lead to the sacred and, thus, serve theological interests. He draws on negative theology (Kevin Hart) to help imagine a way to capture the ‘otherness’ of Scripture. Deconstruction doesn't necessarily imply atheism. Wilson contemplates the possibility of going beyond the canon (George Aichele), as he does with the poem, for developing a theology.

I heartily recommend this book to any biblical scholars who have already embraced postmodern theory or have an interest in it. The only criticism I have is in reference to the current debate about whether negative theology is compatible with Derridean theory or not (is it a sneaky way to posit ‘presence’ again?), which might threaten some of Wilson's theological underpinnings.