

A Response to Mark Randall James

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It is a rare pleasure to be asked to respond to a review like this, from a reader who is sympathetic with the overall intent of what one has written but who launches careful and challenging criticisms on that very ground. The problems that Mark Randall James has identified in my portions of *The Text in Play* are not simply accidents that more careful proof-reading would have eliminated; they are problematic currents that run quite deep in my thinking, and that are therefore much more interesting to diagnose and repair.

In our introduction, Rachel Muers and I say that our intention is to advocate for “a renewed practice of *spiritual* reading that is not divorced from, but is rather animated by, *literal* reading and *critical* reading,” and that the book is therefore a “roughly coherent examination of what it means to read the Bible with serious playfulness, in the midst of communities already formed and being formed by scripture and already in possession of some kind of rule of faith to guide reading” (2). Such serious playfulness, we say, “does not *end* anywhere satisfactory, but sets up and leaves open a process of disputation, wrestling with problems that do not go away. Play is not a form of exegesis primarily concerned with finding *answers*” (3).

For his first major criticism, James notes that there is “something oddly stable about all this destabilization” and that the book offers “few explicit clues about how to move from playful reading to decisive action.” After all, communities of scriptural readers do face situations in which decisions are demanded of them – acts of interpretation in which they are required to go beyond play, however serious. One response to this critique is simply to point again to the limitation of our ambition in the book. We were not trying to set out a rounded description of the ways in which our Christian communities should use Scripture, but to describe one specific strand of such use. We were exploring a form of ruminative dwelling with texts, especially with difficult texts, and presenting that ruminative dwelling as a form of spiritual discipline, pursued in the trust that these texts will go on yielding insights, questions, and challenges and that they will feed the purification of our desires.

There is another answer, however. The pieces that make up the book were written for a variety of contexts, mostly academic. Several of them, for instance, were written for randomly accreted audiences of international scholars, gathered by chance, fate, or the misleading wording of the program book, in anonymous hotel meeting rooms at the American Academy of Religion. The pieces are, therefore, mostly detached to a significant degree from any functioning community of scriptural readers involved in concrete situations that might demand decisions. The various pieces that we have collected do explore some elements of the processes of rumination that might influence such communities’ decision-making, but they don’t attempt the work of showing how that influence could or should function in practice. To overcome this, it might have been possible to offer a supplement to the book’s theoretical reflection, trying to explain in general how play and decision might connect. A more fruitful strategy, however, would have been to connect our reflections more explicitly to some of the particular processes of communal reading and deciding that prompted them. One chapter might have appeared as offering to a specific interpretive community, in the context of its general practices and tendencies of reading, a way to live

(and go on living) with a specific text that it otherwise does not know how to handle. Another chapter might have appeared as challenging a different interpretive community to undo the settlement it has reached with a particular text, because that settlement had turned out to be implicated in specific problems that have arisen in that community's life. Another might have appeared as a deliberate attempt to slow down a community that, in relation to some specific question facing its life, rushes rather too easily from reading to decisive action. And so on. Had we in this way attended more explicitly to the specific contexts that make sense of our proposals, their limited scope and their connection to determinate forms of life might have been clearer – though perhaps that would have been at the expense of the audibility of those proposals to the deracinated academic communities for which we were writing.

James' second criticism is sharper, and focused more narrowly on one of the chapters that I contributed to the book: Chapter 16, "Reading Within and Between Traditions II: Tradition, Invention, Recognition." James argues that the chapter reaches its account of Scriptural Reasoning as a form of engagement between traditions by way of a purportedly general or universal account of the nature of tradition, but that this account turns out on closer inspection to be anything but general or universal. Unfortunately, the chapter does allow that reading – and, in fact, almost demands it in its context in the book. I say "unfortunately" because I am entirely in agreement with James that the chapter becomes deeply problematic on this reading, a betrayal of the kind of attention to particularity that (I hope) the book otherwise promotes.

By way of response, I will explain in a moment how the possibility of this reading was created by the inadequate way in which the chapter was transferred from one context to another. I don't offer this narrative by way of excuse or rebuttal: the transfer involved *was* inadequate, and James' reading of it in its present context *is* fair. However, it will allow me to explain how the chapter might be supplemented, and some of its ambiguous elements specified, in ways that I think might overcome the error that James has identified.

The piece originated as an address to a particular group of Christian theologians. In that context, speaking in a neck of the Christian woods quite familiar to me, I could assume that a familiar set of assumptions about tradition and innovation, continuity and change, were in play. Even if many of the theologians whom I was addressing work with these concepts in subtle and sophisticated ways, I could be confident that they would all aware of the fairly blunt and oppositional ways in which they are deployed in arguments in our various churches.

My piece was originally an attempt to challenge the patterns of such intra-Christian arguments. It does indeed go by way of some general claims about the relationship of present action to the past, but that detour is only meaningful because those generalities connect to, and make possible disruptions within, the specific Christian language games I had in mind. It made sense to make free with bold aphoristic statements about what tradition "always" means, because I was attempting a thorough reordering of the concepts in use in this Christian context, rather than simply recommending an exceptional use in one specific case.

My general claims were tools employed to achieve this particular effect – to create the *possibility* of this reordering of categories. However, that possibility is only shown to make full sense for the audience that I took myself to be addressing, when I turn to more explicitly theological re-description and explain that I am proposing a particular vision of how gift and reception, or prophecy and discernment, work in the Body of Christ.

When I use these reordered concepts to talk about Jesus' preaching in the synagogue in the Gospel of Mark, I say (as James notes) that the prophetic forth-telling of new construals of the past is "what always happens in the synagogue." I was not there using "synagogue" as a metonym for Judaism. I was, rather, offering a theological commentary on that specific story of Jesus in the synagogue, in the context of the wider pattern of Christian Scripture in the Old Testament and New Testament. I was saying that, to the extent that they have accepted my re-ordering of concepts, Christian readers will no longer be able to construe Jesus as new over and against the synagogue as old, or Jesus as innovation over and against the synagogue as tradition. Rather, they will see Jesus, precisely in the powerful newness of his teaching, as faithfully continuing the life of the people of God found in the synagogue. And if, in the original context in which I delivered this paper, I had been challenged by James' complaint that I was making Jesus an exemplification of the general category of newness, I would have been able to respond that the very opposite was the case. What is remarkable about the teaching of Jesus in the synagogue *can't* be captured by the general category of newness or innovation (because, if you like, there is nothing new about newness), but only by the specific substance of Jesus' message – the precise way in which, in his context, he re-construes and re-presents the whole history of God's work with his people. The Gospel of Mark does not give that specific content in its presentation of Jesus' teaching in the synagogue because the whole narrative that he gives of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection is that content.

However, in *The Text in Play*, I have taken this address to Christian theologians and made it part of a general account of Scriptural Reasoning. As James rightly (and painfully!) indicates, when making that transfer I have not paid attention to the way in which the word "tradition" is in play not just in my neck of the Christian woods, but in multiple distinctive ways for all of the participants in Scriptural Reasoning. I have not even paid attention to the way in which "synagogue" is a term with (to say the least) a life outside of the Gospel of Mark, and "prophecy" a term with a life outside of 1 Corinthians. In this new context, the piece reads exactly as James suggests: as an inappropriate attempt at generalizing across traditions. The piece as it now stands claims ownership of terms that are not mine for the taking. Either the content that I give these term is specifically Christian and I have imposed that Christian content as an apparent logical necessity on my Jewish and Islamic interlocutors, or the Jewish, Christian, and Islamic instances of these terms are all regional specifications of the abstract and universal definitions I have offered and I have allowed myself the position of neutral arbitrator over all three religions. Neither of these approaches is consistent with the practice of Scriptural Reasoning.

As the piece now stands, therefore, the note of humility that I offer as I reach Aphorism 17 is too muted, and it appears too late. I finally acknowledge others' interests in these terms there, but the damage is already done: I have already claimed them as my own. Yet this brief nod towards greater humility, as James' review rightly urges me to acknowledge, is precisely a message that ought to have been sounded loud and early, and it ought to have been allowed to color the whole language of the piece. What I lay out in this piece is nothing more than one particular Christian way of thinking about the nature of tradition. It will not make sense to all Christians, let alone to those from other religious communities, and it cannot therefore serve as the foundation of a tradition-neutral apology for Scriptural Reasoning. Rather than declaring that this is the way that all tradition everywhere must be construed, I can only offer this pattern of thought tentatively to my

friends from other contexts (and those from elsewhere in my own context), and ask whether they might be able to say something similar.

I am very grateful, therefore, to Mark Randall James for his review and for his attempt – profoundly in the spirit of Scriptural Reasoning, it seems to me – to open up by careful attention to particulars an avenue for conversation that I, by inappropriate generalization, was in danger of closing down.

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