

Fall 2016

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Recommended Citation

Koester, Craig R., "The Interplay of Word and World: Biblical and Experiential Reflections" (2016). *Faculty Publications*. 134.
http://digitalcommons.luthersem.edu/faculty_articles/134

Published Citation

Koester, Craig R. "The Interplay of Word and World: Biblical and Experiential Reflections." *Word & World* 36, no. 4 (September 2016): 337–45.



The Interplay of Word and World: Biblical and Experiential Reflections

CRAIG KOESTER

The essays by James Burtness and Fred Gaiser reflect a deeply held commitment to the value of words. From the journal's title, *Word & World*, to the contents of each issue, it has been clear that the selection of words matters because communication matters. The goal—shared by the journal's board, staff members, and writers—is that the words might be worth reading by people engaged in ministry. That effort continues a commitment that was formulated three and a half decades ago, and I value the opportunity to reflect on the way those inaugural perspectives have taken shape.

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

James Burtness published his essay, “The Word for the World,” in the first issue of the journal in 1981. At that time, he was teaching systematic theology at Luther Seminary. In his contribution we see him doing what he asked his students to do. He regularly taught a course in constructive theology, which was required for seniors. For the first assignment he asked each student to write a single sentence that made a theological assertion that was central for the student's thinking. Then below the sentence the student would add two or three more sentences elaborating

From his vantage as a New Testament scholar and seminary leader, Craig Koester reflects on the interchange between Word and World through the lens of biblical studies, especially through several examples. Koester is Vice President of Academic Affairs, Professor and Asher O. and Carrie Nasby Chair of New Testament at Luther Seminary.

that single sentence. The assignments that followed involved weighing the significance of each word, turning sentences into paragraphs, and paragraphs into a short essay in which every word had to count.

It was no simple matter for students to formulate a single, clear thesis sentence when they were caught up in the intense crosscurrents of discourse that make theological education so engaging. Compiling a laundry list of theological positions with accompanying pros and cons would have been far easier to do. But the exercise pressed for clarity. It challenged each student to ask what would be central to his or her communication of the gospel. Everyone had to ask: What is at the heart of the message you proclaim?

The challenge of formulating a single, clear statement is apparent in Burtness's own reflections on the title *Word and World*. He reviews the short list of alternative titles, which had their pros and cons, and he recounts the discussion that led to the selection of *Word and World* as the clearest expression of the kind of discourse the founders wanted to characterize as the journal's content.

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When recalling the process, Fred Gaiser underscores the crucial weight given to the value of communication developing the title. Words must mean things for someone. Therefore, the selection of words requires that writers have a sense of their audience. A title like *Simul* or “at the same time” presupposes a group of readers who savor theological discourse that is seasoned with Latin. For them, the Latin *simul* would probably evoke memories of the debates and formulations that were characteristic of the Lutheran Reformation of the sixteenth century. The Latin title could help ward off simplistic thinking about God, ourselves, and our world. *Simul* would underscore the value of theological depth and insist that complex ideas must be nuanced and held in tension. What is not to like?

The response, of course, is that by the late twentieth century Latin had become a language for insiders. Whatever its historic value as an international language, it had become the language of the few. A Latin word would probably be a barrier to communication by implying that theology is for academically trained insiders and not for the wider public. The same would be true of the Greek term *Martyria*. For all of its biblical and theological resonance, it appeals mainly to an audience of insiders. The mission of the journal, however, is the opposite. It was and is committed to fostering conversation among specialists and nonspecialists, between the academy, the church, and the wider society. The simple expression *Word and World* is an invitation to engagement.

When elaborating the nature of that engagement, Burtness notes that along with clarity the title *Word and World* carries “intriguing ambiguities.” The con-

junction “and” insists that God’s word and God’s world are related, but it does not specify how they are related. Rather, he says that the “relationships suggested in our *and* are, we believe, inexhaustible.”¹ The conjunction is an invitation to explore the various ways in which the relationship can be understood. Gaiser adds that the engagement is dynamic and in terms of the journal’s mission it involves both listening and writing. “Things flow both ways across an ‘and.’ Word is in conversation with world.”²

SCHOLARSHIP, CHURCH, AND WORLD

The initial essay by Burtness used a quotation from Dietrich Bonhoeffer to stimulate reflection on what the interplay of Word and World might look like. Bonhoeffer wrote, “I never experience the reality of God without the reality of the world or the reality of the world without the reality of God.”³ One thing that strikes me about the statement is that Bonhoeffer was a leading academic theologian, and what has made his work so important is his willingness to engage questions that extend beyond the academy to the church and the social contexts in which people live and serve. Bonhoeffer valued disciplined theological thinking and writing, but located it within the larger fabric of the lived experience of Christian faith in the changing contexts of the world.

My own field is biblical studies, and I have found that biblical interpretation is most interesting—and most valuable—when it arises from the interplay of careful attention to the words of Scripture along with attempts to understand the contexts of ancient readers and the questions we bring from our own current contexts. In the decades that preceded the launching of the journal, seminary education emphasized the importance of using the tools of historical criticism to interpret the Bible.

Historical criticism is based on the recognition that biblical texts were shaped by the ancient contexts in which they were composed. The historical approach emphasized the massive gap between the ancient writers’ world and our world, and cautioned against reading our own situations into the text. That sense of historical distance often made it difficult for people preparing to preach and teach in congregations, where the pressure was to show that Scripture was actually significant for them now.

Yet in the decades that followed the journal’s founding, scholars have also given renewed attention to the way in which the experience of the reader inevitably plays a role in the interpretive process. Where historical critics emphasized the biblical writers were shaped by the social contexts of their times, others began stressing that readers are also shaped by the social contexts of their own times. No one approaches the Bible from a position of neutrality or objectivity. Everyone brings

¹James Burtness, “The Word for the World,” *Word & World* 1/1 (1981) 3–6, esp. 4.

²Frederick J. Gaiser, “Word and World,” 321, above.

³Burtness, “The Word for the World,” 4.

assumptions and perspectives to their reading of the Scriptures. That in turn means that no one can deny that they see things from certain angles. Rather, it poses a creative challenge to think carefully about the effect of one's assumptions, questions, and perspectives and one's interpretation of the Bible. The Bible as Word is inevitably read from angles shaped by the World of the reader's experience. And that can make the process remarkably interesting.

SCRIPTURE AND CONTEMPORARY CONTEXT: THREE EXAMPLES

Let me offer three examples of ways in which the context of contemporary readers has shaped important lines of interpretation of biblical texts. They involve the situation of the church in a time of social crisis, the situations of death and grief that are part of life experience, and the critical attention now being given to the environment.

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Historical Criticism and Modern Social Crisis

Scholarship on the Epistle to the Hebrews has often taken up the question of the book's outline or structure. Hebrews begins with a celebration of God's Son being exalted to glory, then shifts to scenes of Israel sojourning in the wilderness, a discussion of Christ's priestly ministry, and an encomium on faith. What are the points that define the outline? At first glance the issue seems purely academic. Graduate students will work through arcane debates about how to divide the book into appropriate sections in order to determine the contours of the writer's thought. But beyond that the question of an outline seems to have little connection with the church, the world, or the practice of ministry.

Yet some of the most significant ways of seeing the epistle's flow of thought emerged out of the Confessing Church's struggles against German National Socialism in the 1930s. After Adolf Hitler came to power in 1933, the Nazi state embarked on a program of aligning social and political life with its racist policies. They found allies among the Deutsche Christen, a group of Protestants who advocated a racist understanding of Christianity and wanted to exclude Jewish influences from the church's theology and practice. The Confessing Church arose in response. It rejected state interference in the affairs of the church and insisted that ultimate loyalty was to be given to Christ.

A major study of Hebrews in that period was the commentary by Otto Michel, first published in 1936.⁴ He noted, "It was especially important to me that my work on the Epistle to the Hebrews accompanied the way of the Confessing

⁴Otto Michel, *Der Brief an die Hebräer* (1st ed.; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1936).

Church and the generation of students that was connected to it, who in all human shattering and death, also stand right under the promise of this epistle.”⁵ Michel emphasized that Hebrews calls itself a “word of exhortation” (Heb 13:22), and he understood that expression in light of the Lutheran emphasis on the proclamation of God’s Word and the centrality of that Word in theology. Michel read Hebrews as a sermon addressed to hearers in an actual situation, and his commentary was written in order that people might better “hear the Word of God in human words.”⁶

For Michel what defined Hebrews was its emphasis on the Word (Heb 1:1–4; 4:12–13) and its summons to hold fast to the confession (Heb 4:14; 10:23). That perspective on the outline of the book was actually a way of helping it more forcefully summon twentieth-century readers to hold fast to the confession in their own time. Engaging the world led to a renewed hearing of the biblical Word.

Similar dynamics are apparent in Ernst Käsemann’s *The Wandering People of God*, a study of Hebrews first published in 1939. The title gives primary importance to the image of the people of God on the move, being called to hold fast to the confession in the face of deeply discouraging circumstances. His study begins with the Word of God that is heard (4:2), which is both a summons to a journey and a message to which people must hold fast. People receive the Word in the form of a promise, which calls them to a future that can only be known by faith and not by sight (4:1; cf. 11:1).⁷

In one sense Käsemann’s work was historical, focused on the patterns of thought that shaped the text in antiquity. But he later explained:

[M]y religious-historical sketch more or less veiled the theological concern which was important to me. By describing the church as the new people of God on its wandering through the wilderness, following the Pioneer and Perfecter of faith, I of course had in mind that radical Confessing Church which resisted the tyranny in Germany, and which had to be summoned to patience so that it could continue its way through endless wastes.⁸

To appreciate the importance of that context, it is important to note that Käsemann drafted the book while he was in a Gestapo prison, after the Nazis arrested him for speaking against National Socialism and the Deutsche Christen.

⁵Otto Michel, *Der Brief an die Hebräer* (2nd ed.; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1949) iii.

⁶Michel, *Der Brief an die Hebräer*, preface. At the time Michel was writing his Hebrews commentary he also wrote an article about “The Effective Word,” which dealt with the way God’s Word achieved its purposes (“Das wirkende Wort,” *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 15 [1934], 33–46). Another article dealt with Biblical Confession and Witness (“Biblisches Bekennen und Bezeugen,” *Evangelische Theologie* 2 [1935] 231–245). It appeared along with articles by Karl Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer on the importance of a faith confession in the church and the world.

⁷Ernst Käsemann, *The Wandering People of God: An Investigation of the Letter to the Hebrews*, trans. Roy A. Harrisville and Irving L. Sandberg (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984) 17–56.

⁸Ernst Käsemann, *Kirchliche Konflikte* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1982) 17. The English translation is from *The Wandering People of God* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1984) 13.

Narrative Criticism and Life Experience

A second example of the interplay between text and worldly experience involves narrative criticism and its implications for pastoral ministry. Narrative criticism is, to some extent, a worldly discipline. It involves asking questions and framing perspectives that can be used for the study of any sort of narrative. An interpreter will ask about plotline, setting, character development, themes, and images. In antiquity, Aristotle used similar categories when studying Greek plays. Modern literary critics refined the categories when studying novels and short stories. For the past several decades, biblical interpreters have also found them useful when considering the narrative texts of Scripture.⁹ Our question here is how a narrative approach to a biblical passage might inform pastoral practice and, conversely, how pastoral experience might inform one's sense of the narrative.

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The story of the raising of Lazarus in John 11:1–44 works well with the usual narrative critical questions. The plotline begins with a crisis in which Jesus receives word that his good friend Lazarus is ill (11:3). That message sets in motion a plot that includes Lazarus's death and Jesus' journey to his tomb, where he calls the dead man back to life. The setting adds tension to the story. Initially Jesus has gone to the region east of the Jordan River because of mounting hostility in the Jerusalem area, and yet Lazarus lived in Bethany, just outside Jerusalem. So for Jesus to go there meant returning to a region where he could anticipate sharp opposition. The main characters include the disciples, who find Jesus' words and actions incomprehensible. Then there are Martha and Mary, the sisters of the dead man, who respond to Jesus' apparent delay in coming in different ways, and give voice to the experience of loss.

For people in ministry the situation of serious illness, followed by death and grief, is a familiar one. Their experiences, in turn, can be invaluable when reading the text. A key point of engagement is the message that introduces the story: "Lord, the one whom you love is ill" (11:3). From a literary point of view, it is striking that the writer does not say, "Lazarus is ill," in order to anchor the message more firmly in the story. Yet from the experiential point of view, the absence of the name actually invites readers to identify more closely with the people depicted here. Many readers would have experienced situations in which "the one whom you love" is

⁹David Rhoads and Donald Michie, *Mark as Story: An Introduction to the Narrative of a Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982); R. Alan Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel: A Study in Literary Design* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983). For recent work on characterization see Steven A. Hunt, D. Francois Tolmie, and Ruben Zimmermann, eds., *Character Studies in the Fourth Gospel: Narrative Approaches to Seventy Figures in John* (Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 314 [Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013]); Christopher Skinner, ed., *Characters and Characterization in John's Gospel* (London: T. & T. Clark, 2013).

seriously ill. That helps connect the situation described in the story with situations familiar to readers in other times and places.

Similarly, the literary setting is one in which the illness occurs when Jesus is not visibly on the scene. He is miles away and not there when the family faces the crisis. Moreover, when Jesus receives the message about the illness, he inexplicably delays in responding. So the setting, too, suggests connections with the contexts of the readers. Contemporary followers of Jesus also experience serious illness when Jesus is not visibly present, and they find that despite their pleas for help, Christ seems unresponsive. Such experiences call attention to those dimensions of the story, and those dimensions of the story draw readers more fully into the action.

That way of engaging the narrative also invites a deeper appreciation of the placement of Jesus' announcement that he is the resurrection and the life. That message does not occur where we might expect to find it, namely at the end, after Jesus has called Lazarus out of the tomb. Saving the message until the end would have been natural, since it would simply have stated the obvious: Jesus can call Lazarus out of the tomb, so we can clearly see that Jesus is the resurrection and the life.

But that is not where the message is placed. Instead, Jesus gives Martha that word in the middle of the story, when Lazarus is still stone cold dead. Jesus extends the promise of resurrection while the tomb is still closed. He speaks of life while the community is contending with grief. From a literary perspective, identifying Jesus as the resurrection in the middle of the story builds narrative tension. His words challenge the idea that the future is defined by the experience of loss in the present; they press the story forward to the climactic resolution in the plot.

But pastorally, placing the promise of resurrection in the context where death is palpable helps the word of the text engage the world of the readers. The context of grief is where the promise matters. The promise of resurrection does not deny the power of grief—and later Jesus too will weep (John 11:35). But the promise does challenge the power of grief with the hope that Jesus offers. The literary study of the text helps highlight the function of the promise, and the experiential perspectives readers bring underscore the significance of the promise in precisely those contexts where experience seems defined by death and loss.

Apocalyptic Perspectives and Care of Creation

A third example involves reading apocalyptic literature in connection with current environmental concerns. Initially bringing those two perspectives together would seem completely incongruous. In popular thinking, the book of Revelation and similar texts focus on the coming end of the world. The word “apocalypse” itself has come to mean destruction, annihilation, an end to the world as we know it. Many people assume that Revelation promotes a kind of fatalism in which the world is doomed and the most people can do is to hope that God will save true believers before the horrors of the end times begin.

Yet in recent decades there have been very promising developments in the reading of Revelation, which offer a very different perspective. To some extent the

shift has come about through renewed attention to the literary quality and social function of apocalypses. The main feature of apocalypses is not fatalism but the notion of disclosure. To reveal something is to make it known. Apocalypses do this through a narrative in which an angelic mediator offers insights to a human recipient about transcendent reality. Usually it involves the disclosure of a heavenly world and a message of eschatological salvation.¹⁰

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That transcendent perspective then informs the way people see the world in which they live. The author of Revelation was attuned to social, political, and economic currents in the Roman world. The vision of the beast from the sea offers a sharp critique of imperial domination (Rev 13:1–18). The depiction of Rome itself as Babylon challenges the idea that the empire was a source of prosperity for all. Instead, the book underscores how the seduction of wealth was a corrupting influence that ravaged the ancient world (Rev 17:1–18:24).

Current awareness of the social and economic factors that contribute to environmental degradation has called attention to the ways in which these elements appear in Revelation itself. There one can see how the writer uses satire to undermine the credibility of a society that turns everything into a commodity. He gives a remarkable list of the goods that fed the public's insatiable desire to consume. There was vast market for everything from luxury goods like gold and ivory to silk and spices (Rev 18:12–13). The list culminates with the pointed comment that in this empire even human life is a commodity. The writer depicts Babylon as the place where human beings are sold, body and soul (Rev 18:13). In the literary context, the vision warns that a society defined by brutality and insatiable consumption will eventually consume itself and fall victim to its own violent tendencies.¹¹

The counterpart to this critique is the writer's emphasis on God's role as Creator. When God is introduced in Rev 4, the heavenly entourage declares, "You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created" (Rev 4:11). As the scenes of worship continue, waves of praise spread outward through the whole created order until "every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea" gives glory to God and the Lamb (Rev 5:13). At the heart of Revelation is this vision of a rightly ordered creation, in which God is honored for giving life to all creatures.

¹⁰John J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to Jewish Apocalyptic Literature*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998) 5.

¹¹On the perspective on Revelation developed here see Craig R. Koester, *Revelation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014) 116–119, 697–725.

The opponents of the Creator are the destroyers, including Satan, the Beast, and Babylon (Rev 11:18; 12:3; 13:1; 17:1). God's goal in the conflict is not to destroy the earth but to deliver it from the forces that ruin it in order that life might thrive. The climactic vision of the book announces that the God who makes all things is committed to making all things new (Rev 21:5). The vision of salvation is not limited to raising individuals to everlasting life. The Creator is committed to the creation and has a future for creation. The power of resurrection encompasses earth and heaven.

By presenting such a perspective, Revelation seeks to draw people away from complicity in the destructive practices that destroy the creation and into renewed relationship with the God who gives life. It is an instance where the issues facing the contemporary world have contributed to a renewed hearing of Revelation as Word of God, and that renewed hearing of the Word in turn contributes to environmental engagement.¹²

Three and a half decades ago, this journal became a vehicle for exploring the dynamic interplay between God's Word and God's World. It has helped shape the way scholarship and ministry best flourish when kept in constant dialogue. May that vision for theological reflection continue to inspire creative thought and practice in the years to come. ⊕

¹²See Barbara R. Rossing, "For the Healing of the Nations: Reading Revelation Ecologically," in *Every People and Nation: The Book of Revelation in Intercultural Perspective*, ed. David Rhoads (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005) 165–182.