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A Catholic novelist's look at Jesus

by Raymond A. Schroth

Mary Gordon on the Gospels as narrative

READING JESUS: A WRITER'S ENCOUNTER WITH THE GOSPELS

By Mary Gordon

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Late in writers' careers, they often feel compelled to take on a special challenge, one that demands both the novelist's skill as a reader of hearts, and, despite the occasional disarray in their own personal lives, the instincts of a moralist.

In my lifetime, writers as different as François Mauriac, Shusaku Endo, Norman Mailer and Anne Rice have taken on Jesus. Rice, who usually writes about vampires, is producing a multivolume 'autobiography' of the young Jesus. Now Mary Gordon, whose *Final Payments* (1978) and subsequent memoirs have established her as a leading American writer, has joined their ranks with *Reading Jesus*, a personal reflection on the texts of the Gospels.



In her childhood she experienced the Gospels not as texts, but in fragments, read

in church. So now, almost 60, she realizes she does not know them whole, the way a writer should. So she plunged in and reread all four in five different translations, took notes, typed out passages on her

computer screen, Googled commentary on problem passages, and consulted Raymond Brown's *An Introduction to the New Testament*. Mostly she has relied on her own instincts, as if while the epistles were "theology," the Gospels were a "narrative," where the central character, Jesus, who, as God, knows all things, tells us how to live.

She structures her commentary not chronologically, but by issues -- stories that inspire or raise questions, like the prodigal son, the sinful woman who washes Jesus' feet, the agony in the garden, and the woman taken in adultery; then problem passages, like miracles, and teachings that make unreasonable demands or contradict one another. Finally she excoriates the Gospels' perceived anti-Semitism, asks whether Jesus is God, and contemplates his last words.

Because I have heard, read and studied the Gospels to either pray, teach or preach them every day for the last 52 years, I welcome Gordon's contribution. She is an amateur in the best sense, a lover of literature and an intelligent critic who can delight the reader with insights the scholar might miss. The woman taken in adultery was caught "in the very act" by her accusers and dragged before Jesus in disgrace. When they caught her, asks Gordon, did they yank her naked from her bed of sin and ogle her nude body as they dragged her away?

The story of the prodigal son, she says, "is one of the most important reasons that I can think of myself as a follower of Jesus, despite the good reasons not to be." It is the story of the "terrible blow of loss." When the loss seems final -- reprieve, resurrection. The rich man who ignores poor Lazarus starving at his gate, and who then ends in Hades while Lazarus goes to Abraham's bosom, is about the rich man's failure of attention; the essential genius of Christian charity is that it must be personal, not prompted by duty or philanthropy, which allows the giver to keep the recipient at a distance.

While the fresh viewpoint of the novelist's, rather than the scholar's, eye is Gordon's strength, it is also the book's limitation. The Gospels are not a unified narrative but four separate theological tracts, each with its own emphasis, written for a different audience -- the church in Rome, gentiles, Jews in conflict with other Jews -- and compiled from multiple, now lost, sources. Only John emphasizes Jesus' divinity. And if Jesus' complete humanity is to be taken seriously, we have to admit there were things he did not know or understand.

Above all, while Jesus' teachings are extremely relevant to us today, to penetrate the Gospels we have to read them in the context of the first-century Palestinian language and culture, not a 21st-century literal mindset.

Gordon and her 18-year-old son are put off by Jesus' demand that we "be perfect," as the heavenly Father is perfect. But, read in context, "perfect" does not refer to today's perfect body or a perfect score, but to the Father's universal love, which makes the sun and rain fall equally on good and bad people. He does not exclude, neither should we.

In the beatitudes Jesus says, "Blessed are the peacemakers," and in the Sermon on the Mount, "Love your enemies." But later Jesus says, "I bring not peace but the sword." Asks Gordon, which is it? But the passages where Jesus tells his disciples that families will be split up and "hate" one another reflect the experience of the early church, where persecution and inner conflict did divide families. This is the early church reminding itself that Jesus warned them this would happen. The word "sword" is a metaphor for division.

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Furthermore, Jesus, his disciples and the early Christians were Jews. One of the problems for the early Jewish Christians was the refusal of their fellow Jews to listen to Jesus; where "the Jews" is used in the pejorative sense it refers to the Jewish authorities who opposed Jesus and plotted against him, and, in John, to those who expelled John's community from the synagogue. The challenge to today's teachers and readers is to learn to read the Gospels in context, not to blame the evangelists for the Holocaust.

As Jesus dies, Gordon considers his seven last words each as a one-sentence poem that could stand alone. But while the Passion narrative forces us to "confront the worse things to happen to a human being," she remains alert to the comic element in the apostles' Keystone Cops bumbling through these tragic hours. One cuts off the ear of the high priest's servant in Gethsemane and Jesus puts it back on.

Two of Luke's three quotes are about forgiveness, but "Into thy hands I commend my spirit" is "the peace that forgiveness brings." These seven sentences, she says, "are the basis and the foundation of my religious life." Sentences like "I thirst" and "It is finished" sum up the death of Jesus, "whose death either has no meaning or creates a meaning unique in the history of the world." The point of the Resurrection is "the reality of the presence of the beloved dead." Does she believe in a literal resurrection? "I believe in the presence of the beloved after death, a presence that death does not obviate."

Next month the students in my intro theology course will read Gordon's *Final Payments*. Next year, if it is in paperback, they will read *Reading Jesus*.

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