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Experiments in the Analytical Study of the Bible: Burton Mack as Pioneer¹

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The analytical study of religion is gaining in influence and importance. The work of Russell McCutcheon, William Arnal, and Hector Avalos, to name but a few is generating a number of discussions within the discipline. In biblical studies the issue has also generated some confusion, as biblical scholars are often on the forefront of method in the discipline of religion. From literary methods in the 1960s to structuralist methods in the 1970s and 1980s to postmodernist approaches in the 1980s and 1990s, biblical scholarship has often been ahead of the curve in trying these new methods. And yet the question is whether such methodological advances constitute truly analytical work in biblical studies. The scholars I have mentioned above would argue it does not, and that the parameters of analytical study of the Bible in particular are still in the process of definition.

If, then, we seek to define an analytical approach to the study of the Bible, there are many names that have made tremendous contributions. In New Testament studies, one name, however, is mentioned more frequently because of the length and persistence of his work: Burton Mack. In this article I want to try to map the boundaries of the analytical study of the Bible. To do this, I will look backward instead of forward and examine what we have learned from the work of Burton Mack.

If one looks at Mack from the beginning of his career, that his name should be mentioned in the same breath as analytical methodologies would come as a surprise. A student of Hans Conzlemann and an ordained Presbyterian minister, one might expect him to take the same well-worn path as the other academic children and grandchildren of Rudolf Bultmann—solid, often brilliant New Testament work, but always with an eye towards making the text relevant to the Christianity of modernity. But Burton Mack broke out from the pack and forged a new direction.

One can see this in his early work. In his dissertation *Logos und Sophia* (1973) and in the English article which is based on it, "Wisdom, Myth and Mythology," (1970) Mack sets out to make historical sense of the wisdom tradition in Hellenistic Judaism. The contemporary reader of Mack's work might register some surprise reading these early works. Mack uses the term "theology" (a term rarely used in his later work) and sees the wisdom tradition as wrestling with theodicy. But even here what comes through, in nascent form, is a developmental understanding of religious tradition (the wisdom tradition here) and a grounding in historical events as the catalyst for such development. The wisdom tradition then does not develop through spiritual reflection or divine inspiration for Mack; rather it is an attempt to make sense

of real-life events using categories that are available. One can see already points of connection with J.Z. Smith's 1975 article "Wisdom and Apocalyptic" in which the same sort of intellectual labor in light of historical events is now traced between wisdom and apocalyptic. What we should not pass over too quickly is the first point—the developmental understanding of religious tradition. The history of religions school had taught Mack one thing: traditions were in dialog with each other. The Hellenistic Jewish Wisdom school borrowed from the Egyptian Wisdom school and in the process used their categories to make sense of the world. True, the resultant mythology of Jewish Wisdom looked different than Egyptian, and yet the reality that Mack shows is that there was a clearly definable course by which ideas moved from one to the other. The steps could be imagined and traced.

But perhaps if there were to be a published moment when one could see a transition from the Bultmannian path to the iconoclast that Mack has since become, it is to be found in his 1983 conference call paper later published as the introduction to *Violent Origins* in 1987. In that paper he wrestles with three theorists of religion: René Girard, Walter Burkett, and J.Z. Smith. It is clear that Mack finds Smith's work most attractive, but more importantly for my purposes, Mack finds that the study of religion is in need of a theoretical underpinning that is not based on the theological convictions that ultimately supported and constrained Bultmann's (and his students') analysis. The challenge for Mack was to engage the New Testament in such a way that one did not end up replacing one set of theological conceptions with another and calling it a theory. Unfortunately, in the end this seems to be what Girard and Burkett both do. It is only Smith, with his rigid adherence to comparison and his clear commitment to theoretical rigor, who is able to avoid this trap. Mack comes away from this encounter with two clear convictions: 1) the necessity of an analytical approach to religion as the only way of establishing real knowledge, and 2) the prerequisite of a theory as a starting point in explaining religion.

Mack's article (1985) on René Girard, published in *Semeia* 33, makes the same point in the form of a kind of case study. Girard was generating a good deal of interest at that point in the late 1980s, his works were translated into English (his most influential being *Violence and the Sacred* [1986]), and Girard himself was lecturing at Stanford part of the year. Girardians had even started a meeting of like-minded scholars at AAR/SBL. Mack's article in *Semeia* showed two things: while giving Girard his due for producing a theory of religion founded on social needs, he rightly calls Girard out for failing to follow his own theory through to its logical conclusion. For the fact of the matter was that even Girard, for all his theoretical insights, could not carry out his own program when it came to Christianity. Christianity in the Girardian scheme, was privileged. It was valorized as that revelatory moment in which the mimetic cycle of scapegoating was finally unveiled. But this was only possible, Mack argued, by moving the discussion of the Christian texts out of the realm of social history and into the realm of the history of ideas. That unmooring of the texts from their social foundations ultimately allowed Girard to elide the historical distance between the texts and the historical situations that they professed to report. In the end then, Mack shows that the Christian texts do not represent an exception, but rather prove the rule of the Girardian schema, that all religion, even Christianity, is ultimately based on scapegoating of victims by the victors.

Yet what Mack saw was that biblical scholars were not prepared to engage someone like Girard, despite his problems. There was in the end too much reliance on theological categories, too little understanding of the social causes of religion. Girard fell prey to this in his own analysis as well. In a sense he tried to defend Christianity from his own analysis, unwilling to follow it to its logical extreme. But the key issue that Girard raises requires examination, argues Mack, and that key issue is a theory of social formation.

Mack is chillingly succinct in his appraisal of biblical studies' own theory of social formation, "We have none," and he concludes, "Clearly we have work to do." (1985, 164) Thus Girard's work, while wholly inadequate as a theory of religion, exposed the fact that biblical scholars were even in worse shape. Girard had a bad theory to explain religion, biblical scholarship had none.

And one can see that Mack has taken his own challenge seriously. Even in this brief article on Girard we start to see hints of what will eventually flower in to a bona fide theory of early Christian social formation: the Cynic-like early Jesus movement, the application of the Jewish martyrdom tradition to the Jesus story, the justification of social and ethnic mixing, the eventual development of christologies. But what is clear here is the application of a strictly analytical approach to the text. When Mack was working on Philo and Ben Sirah, such an approach was taken for granted. Now, applied to early Christianity, the notion was groundbreaking.

The problem was made most clear in the introduction to *A Myth of Innocence: Mark and Christian Origins* (1988). Mack begins by noting that for more than two hundred years biblical scholars have been in quest of an originary moment of Christianity. And yet in all that time, no such moment has been found. Mack comments,

To the historian who has no theological proclivity, such persistence in the quest for a singular genesis of Christianity is curious. The very notion of an origin within history is strange [and]... it has never been taken up for examination by those who posit it as the goal. (3)

Of course the obvious candidate for such a notion is the resurrection, but Mack notes that "resurrection" along with terms like "Easter," "appearance," and "spirit," "mark the point beyond which the scholar chooses not to proceed with investigation, indeed the point at which reasoned argument must cease" (7). These terms constitute the black box in which the origin of Christianity is safely laid, inaccessible to the historian's gaze.

The problem of course is that such an attempt to hide the origins of Christianity behind the veil of an inaccessible point of origin was that it rendered it inexplicable. No reason could be given for the formation of the Christian mythos. Rather, it was grounded in the attestation of the experience of original followers. Such an experience, however, could not be interrogated, not to mention explained. And this, for Mack, started to look very much like theology and not history. The historian could not be satisfied by "revelation" that concealed rather than revealed. A new tact was necessary.

And so Mack pushed further asking,

What if the notion of a single, miraculous point of origin was acknowledged for what it was, not a category of critical scholarship at all, but an article of faith derived from Christian mythology? Then the quest would have to be turned around. Not the mythic events at the beginning, but the social and intellectual occasions of their being imagined would be the thing to understand. (8)

And there it is in a nutshell, the translation from categories of theology to categories of history, the re-imagining of the quest for Christian origins in entirely secular categories. No appeal to miracle or

Christ-event or resurrection or visions would be allowed. Those notions were not answers, they were in fact data that called for analysis. They were the product of strictly human processes and imaginings, and it was now those which were the subject of a biblical scholar's examination.

This was a dramatic shift from the other Bultmannians and most importantly from Bultmann himself. Bultmann had always put theology into the service of his historical study. His program of demythologization was ultimately about saving Christianity from itself. The modern mind could never accept the prescientific world view that was part of the warp and woof of the New Testament (1984). So demythologization aided by making the mythic theologically palatable. But for Mack, this is still to privilege theology and to abandon the quest for a historical explanation that was founded in social formation. The theoretical struggle that Mack had engaged in with Girard, Burkett, and most importantly Smith exposed the tenuous theological underbelly at the heart of New Testament Studies. A reading of early Christianity starting with the communities from which it arose could address the need for an actual explanation of the various movements formed around the name of Jesus.

Mack, then, reconstructs in *Innocence* the various communities who populate the early Jesus movements' landscape. He sees a multiplicity of reconceptions of Jesus, each dependent on pre-existing ideas, and marshals them in an attempt to address social issues. The brilliance of Mack's book is that in its details there is nothing new. Mack builds his vision of Christianity's early cacophony based on established, reputable, and widely accepted studies. And yet it is not the details that have thrown his critics off, but his conclusions. For Mack shows that there is a way to imagine the road to Mark without appeal to the supernatural, the miraculous, the revelatory. The general understanding was that the claims of Mark and those that came after him were so audacious that they could only be explained by some supernatural origin. Mack shows that is in fact not the case. Step-by-step, the social needs of the communities that linked themselves to Jesus grew in to these claims, they did not start with them. Were we to start with Mark, perhaps, just perhaps, the kerygmatic reading of Christianity would have a chance. But that is not the case: in those forty-plus intervening years Mack shows us how these notions slowly developed, bit by bit, piece by piece, mixing previous conceptions and mythologies to create new conceptions and mythologies to address the social needs of the moment.

In fact, what becomes clear is the ad hoc nature of Christianity. It clearly was evident in Paul's rambling attempts to maintain control of his communities, now eschewing the law, now embracing it. But Paul was not alone. As Mack draws the lines, we see how those early Jesus movements and Christ congregations were likewise flying by the seat of their pants, putting out the fires of the social conflict of the moment, with little concern about logical coherence or sustainability. When Mark gets these various strains in his hands, he imposes an order that is narrative but no less replete with problems, but it is an attempt to try mythmaking in a new key and it changes the playing field.

But as important as where Mack ends is where he begins. What is required is a theory of social formation. Girard has taught him well, though at this point I think the real teacher was J.Z. Smith whose ever increasing influence can be readily seen. These two influences together however have moved Mack towards a conviction that much of his most recent work has focused on: the need for theory.

We see Mack's first explicit attempt at formulating such a theory in *The Christian Myth: Origins, Logic and Legacy* (2003). It is here that he begins to detail a theory of religion based on social interests. But in his 1996 article "On Redescribing Christian Origins" he reaffirms the basic need for theory:

If we want to account for Christian origins as a thoughtful human construction, instead of as the overwhelming activity of a god, we need a theory of religion that gives the people their due. We need a theory of religion firmly anchored in a social and cultural anthropology, capable of sustaining a conversation with the humanities. (254)

Mack at this point is not about producing such a theory in analytical detail; rather, he set up a mode of inquiry that is theoretically informed. His essay here is really a call to arms to biblical scholars to be willing to take a new look at the texts and try to engage them through a new set of lenses not dependent on the old model of Christ-event (kerygma) church. But likewise it is a recognition that while theology was once called "the queen of the sciences," it is precisely theology which has reduced biblical studies to the bastard child of the humanities—engaging in tactics and arguments that would be laughable in any other department in the university.

And here, I think, what we learn from Mack is that even with the best intentions, even with a commitment to analytical study, without theory we can only produce a clanging gong or a noisy cymbal. It is not enough just to take the supernatural out of the picture. Explanation requires theory, either implicit or explicit. And without explicit theory, in the discipline of biblical studies, theology is quick to substitute.

We see this most clearly in Mack's 1991 article length response to his critics called "Myth of Innocence at Sea." In this article, replete with sailing metaphors, Mack rounds on his reviewers, who have been legion. One can sense the ever-so-slight smile that its author had as he writes. But his conclusion is perhaps most telling.

Omigod, I thought for the third time. [Here he quotes his reviewers] "That originative movement"; "Mark responsible"; "blamed for all the ills." Do they really think that I read Mark in the same way that I think they must think about Jesus? Have they read me on their own terms, as if I merely substituted Mark for Jesus as the powerful moment of "origination" that "created" Western Christian culture and "caused" its history to unfold as it has?(155)

The answer is clearly yes, and his diagnosis is insightful, for his critics have substituted hermeneutics for theory, a loyalty to the gospel for a quest for explanation. It is their lack of a theoretical underpinning that means they ultimately have nothing to fall back on except theology. In this article Mack talks about this as a need for a "shift to a social anthropology," but I think I do not take him too far to talk about this as social and cultural theoretical apparatus.

It is perhaps informative that after a ten-year hiatus while working in the Ancient Myth and Modern Theories of Christian Origins Seminar—a group whose work has started to revolutionize New Testament Studies (Cameron and Miller 2004, Cameron and Miller 2011)—Mack's latest work has returned to explicitly addressing the issue of theory. This is no accident, for a close reading of the work of the aforementioned seminar shows that theoretical concerns were constantly being raised. When Mack returns to his lonely writer's garret once again, it is to try to formulate a full-fledged theory of religion.

That theory Mack presents in *Myth and the Christian Nation: A Social Theory of Religion* (2008) and it is in many ways the working out of the program that J.Z. Smith had inaugurated in his work, supplemented with the work of other social theorists like Emile Durkheim, Louis Althusser, and Pierre Bourdieu, to

name a few. For Mack, the root of the creation of social structures, particularly those that are in play in the formation of religion, is social interests. Social interests are the motivators that cause human beings to engage in thinking about and constructing their social world. Myth and ritual then provide a space in which aspects of the social interests are conceived, explored, and reconceptualized. Thus myths do not "reflect" the social world; they are more like "reflections upon" the social world. They are a way of "thinking" the social world, displaying the way that social interests interact.

The myths and rituals of a culture create a "mentality" for Mack. Drawing upon a linguistic analogy, the mentality is essentially a cultural grammar. In the same way that linguistic grammar circumscribes what can be said, separating effective speech from nonsense, the mentality operates similarly in terms of the thinking of a group. Certain thoughts are "unthinkable" largely because the mentality puts the thoughts outside the bounds of the possible or at least the intelligible.

Take, for example, the notion of the United States as a "Christian nation," which Mack explores both in *Christian Nation* and its follow-up *Christian Mentality: The Entanglements of Power, Violence and Fear* (2011). The idea of the United States as a "Christian nation" is a mythological construction, in Mack's sense, an imaginary world. Whether one can marshal historical evidence for this conception at the country's foundation or not, it exists today only in the group imagination of those who espouse it. But as a myth it is founded upon social interests invested in a notion of a religious homogeneity that is seen as the core of the national identity. There are with this idea a concomitant set of notions from a steadfast support of Israel to a traditionalist family structure, which are seen as likewise part of the cornerstone upon which the nation was established. Multicultural and pluralistic challenges to the myth of a "Christian nation," then, are not just attacks on certain cultural practices or conceptions, but rather are an attack on the nation itself and the very things that "make America, America." Mack's theory then connects myth and ritual with social interests and the creation of a "Christian mentality" that leads to certain ideas being embraced by the wider populace as both inherent to the national identity and to a Christian calling.

Mack's theory is extremely provocative and has generated several SBL and AAR sessions devoted exclusively to this latest work. But more than the merits of his own theory, I think Mack serves as an example for those of us committed to an analytical approach to religion. If we are to make a constructive contribution to the study of religion then we must start and end with theory.

We have learned much from Mack's work. He has pointed us in new directions and urged us towards a new understanding of Christian origins. But as important as what he's done is how he has done it. I would argue that we in the religion academy need to learn from Mack that the quest for theory must never be an afterthought. Rather theory is precisely how we escape the hermeneutical noose (which has become the destiny of the hermeneutical circle). Those of us who have heard Mack's call in the past would do well to follow him again on this issue as well.

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Notes

1. A version of the paper was delivered at the Secular Study of the Bible Consultation at the Society of Biblical Literature Annual Meeting in San Francisco, November 22, 2011.