

The Labors of Burton Mack

Scholarship That's Made a Difference

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I wish to sing a song of praise
as a crown to his labors.

—Euripides, *Heracles* 355–56

Observe that I have not labored for myself alone,
but for all who seek *paideia*.

—Sirach 24:34; 33:18

“To be born woman is to know —
Although they do not talk of it at school —
That we must labour to be beautiful.”

I said, “It’s certain there is no fine thing
Since Adam’s fall but needs much labouring.”

—W. B. Yeats, “Adam’s Curse”

I

Burton L. Mack introduces his magisterial *A Myth of Innocence: Mark and Christian Origins* with a clarion call and a challenge to make sense—social sense—of the beginnings of the Christian religion:

Since Foucault published his *Archaeology of Knowledge*, New Testament scholars have thought of their work as digging. . . . The image is attractive in some respects and disconcerting in others. An aura of archeology is gratifying mainly because it seems to bless the labor as worthwhile. . . . It is disconcerting nonetheless to see what happens when the metaphor is pressed too far. One catches sight of a very messy dig and of diggers in disagreement about what they are looking for. Not only is there confusion about what counts as an artifact, there is no clarity about what a firm foundation might be were one ever to be found. . . . What if one acknowledged that the gospel story was Christianity’s charter document and regarded its formation as an essential moment in the “laying of the foundations”? . . . If the social circumstances of that later time were regarded as the “foundational” stratum, and the composition of the gospel taken as the “originary” moment of significance for Christian origins, the fantastic events depicted in the gospel might actually begin to make sense. . . . Supposing that the gospels were myths of origin for social formations in need of a charter, the scholar’s quest would have to be to understand the mo-

ment when the gospel was designed. Foucault's archeology refers, after all, not to a quest for extraordinary events of generation prior to social formation, but to critical moments of social interest within a given discourse.¹

Four features of Mack's argument are intimated here: (1) a critique of the discipline of NT scholarship, with its quest for a singular genesis of Christianity; (2) a proposal for a shift in perspective on the social history and imaginative labor documented by the texts; (3) a call for the need for a serious engagement with critical theory; and, (4) a recognition of authorial creativity in Mark's composing his myth of origins, the first Christian narrative gospel.

Mack's critique of biblical scholarship, with its quest for Christian origins, is particularly trenchant and worth the price of the book:

Some event, it is thought, or moment, or impulse, needs to be discovered as the source for the novelty Christianity introduced into the world. . . . The fundamental persuasion is that Christianity appeared unexpectedly in human history, that it was (is) at core a brand new vision of human existence, and that, since this is so, only a startling moment could account for its emergence. The code word serving as sign for the novelty that appeared is the term unique (meaning singular, incomparable, without analogue). For the originary event the word is transformation (rupture, breakthrough, inversion, reversal, eschatological). For the cognitive effect of this moment the language of paradox is preferred (irony, parable, enigma, the irrational). It is this startling moment that seems to have mesmerized the discipline and determined the applications of its critical methods. All of the enormous labor devoted to the preparation of texts, the honing of linguistic instruments, and the devisement of methods has been organized just in order to approach as closely as possible that moment of mystery even if, in the last analysis, some leap of the imagination will be required to posit its presence. Where to locate the mystery has been the unacknowledged question guiding the twists and turns of the scholarship. . . . 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.²

This critique is concerned chiefly with the notion of "uniqueness," conceived in terms of "origins."³ But since "New Testament scholarship can be described as an archeology of early traditions about Jesus and the Christ," Mack's criticism

1. Mack, *A Myth of Innocence*, xi, xii; cf. 23–24, citing Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*.

2. Mack, *Myth of Innocence*, 3, 4, 8.

3. Mack, *Myth of Innocence*, 368. See Smith, *Drudgery Divine*, 36–46.

is leveled at the quest of the historical Jesus⁴ and the quest for the earliest christology,⁵ the “two main tracks along which the quest for Christian origins has traveled.”⁶

Mack’s proposal for a “single shift in perspective on texts” to be taken up for analysis in his book places special emphasis on the way in which “texts will be read in relation to their social settings,” in particular, on “social experience as the occasion for imaginative activity and literary production”:⁷

The shift in perspective is required as soon as it is realized that the creative replication of the memory of Jesus took place in the interest of articulating not only how it was at the beginning, but how it was or should be at the several junctures of social history through which a memory tradition traveled. . . . What if the social circumstances were regarded as the generative matrix for a recasting of the memory tradition? What if novelties that enter the memory tradition were to be viewed as creating as well as interpreting the imagined origins of the move-

4. For a pointed critique of the quest of the historical Jesus, see the subsequent argument of Mack, who observes that “the quest has not produced any agreement about a textual data base from which to work. The textual units used for this or that profile change from scholar to scholar without any agreed-upon theoretical framework to adjudicate the differences among them. This is a serious indictment of the guild of New Testament scholarship . . . [which] resists the pursuit of a theoretical framework and the accompanying rules of argumentation necessary for coming to agreements about matters of data, method, explanation, and replication of experiments or research projects. These are foundational matters for an academic discipline. . . . If there is no agreement about what texts count and how to turn them into data for historical reconstructions, it means that the quest [of the historical Jesus] cannot be thought of as an academic discourse within a scholarly discipline. . . . This means that we need to start over with the quest for Christian origins. And the place to start is with the observation that the New Testament texts are not only inadequate for a Jesus quest, they are data for an entirely different phenomenon. They are . . . the myths of origin imagined by early Christians seriously engaged in their social experiments. They are data for early Christian mythmaking” (Mack, “The Historical Jesus Hoopla,” 34, 35, 40).

5. For a critique of the “Christ event,” a theological term that encodes the death and resurrection of Jesus, see Mack, who observes that “all scholars seem to agree . . . on the importance of the resurrection. Three terms are frequently used, each encoded by custom within the discourse of the discipline, to refer euphemistically to the resurrection of Jesus from the dead: Easter, appearance, and spirit. . . . These coded signs, usually capitalized, do not enlighten because they mark the point beyond which the scholar chooses not to proceed with investigation, indeed, the point beyond which reasoned argument must cease. They serve as ciphers to hold the space for the unimaginable miracle that must have happened prior to any and all interpretation. They have become an all too convenient rhetorical device for evoking the myth of Christian origins without [ever] having to explain it. . . . Appeal to ‘the resurrection’ is the most mystifying of all the ciphers used to protect the myth of Christian origins from critical investigation. The notion is used regularly . . . as if the resurrection were a datable piece of evidence. By allowing the mystery of Easter and the [resurrection] appearances to mark the point from which the Spirit effected the new age of Christian experience and mission, everything else can be examined rigorously without threatening the notion of originary uniqueness. . . . A point of origin has been established that is fundamentally inaccessible to further probing or clarification. It guarantees the uniqueness of early Christianity by locating its novelty beyond data and debate” (Mack, *Myth of Innocence*, 7, 7–8 n. 3).

6. Mack, *Myth of Innocence*, 5; cf. 6 n. 2.

7. Mack, *Myth of Innocence*, 15.

ments? What if the really interesting question were given its due, why and how his early followers came to create the aura of divine originality for Jesus in the first place? What if the several diverse pictures of Jesus contained in the New Testament were less hermeneutical with regard to the historical Jesus and more the creation of myths of origin for movements in need of rationalization?⁸

Mack's book is thus "an investigation of the relation between imaginative composition and social experience in early Christian circles"; his goal is to bring "social histories together with what is known of textual traditions and seek to understand each in the light of the other."⁹

Mack's efforts "to redescribe" the "entangled textual and social histories of importance for the composition of the Gospel of Mark," in terms of mythmaking, social formation, and intertextuality,¹⁰ call for an engagement with critical theory, with rhetorical criticism, cultural anthropology, and religious studies:

The attempt will be made at every turn to position a text or a set of texts at some intersection of social and intellectual history. Viewed as a thoughtful composition at a particular juncture of human experience, a text becomes (temporarily) the center around which many other textual and social moments are organized. . . . To position a text at its approximate intersection of multiple textual and social articulations would be not only to understand it, for meaning is (1) a function of intertextual translation, but to discern its intention, for meaning is (2) a display of interest or desire. Knowing that discourse occurs at a remove from both the accidental nature of human experience and the social structures that order practice, discrepancy between the way things were said to be and the way they actually went must always be kept in mind. In the case of the gospel traditions this factor of incongruity is exaggerated and compounded by the fact that social issues were reflected and addressed not by discourse directly related to the contemporary situations of concern, but by means of repeated reference to

8. Mack, *Myth of Innocence*, 16, adding: "The picture of Jesus presented by the Gospel of Mark . . . is the product of two generations of vigorous social activity and energetic, imaginative labor."

9. Mack, *Myth of Innocence*, 19 n. 8, 19. In his efforts "to chart different textual and social histories" of sayings and stories attributed to Jesus, Mack argues that "the place to begin is with the texts where the sayings [and stories] are now located. Literary context does provide a measure of control. . . . If a literature can be placed somewhere within a social history, moreover, a second context of great significance comes into play. . . . Emphasizing [textual] placement at some juncture of social history increases control in the investigation. [For] where sayings reflect upon particular configurations of social situation or concern, one may be close to the [actual] circumstance of composition" (Mack, "The Kingdom Sayings in Mark," 19).

10. Mack, *Myth of Innocence*, 20; cf. 16–23 with nn. 6–10, 321–24 with nn. 3–4. "Jonathan Z. Smith's constructive theory of religion, more than any other," Mack notes, "informs the position taken in this book" (p. 20 n. 9). For a programmatic application of Smith's method and theory in Mack's book, see *Myth of Innocence*, 19–20 with nn. 8–9, 22–23 n. 10, 27–28 n. 1, 40 n. 10, 50 n. 17, 76 n. 18, 362 n. 4.

Jesus at the beginning. . . . Nevertheless, precisely because something is known about the phenomena of discrepancy and lag at the level of the intellectual labor that supports social construction, it will be possible to identify a variety of discrete intersections where particular texts and specific social configurations kept company for a time. . . . This history can be used, then, to control the investigation of Mark's particular achievement.¹¹

Mack's recognition of authorial creativity in Mark's composition of the gospel means that "the gospel was indeed Mark's creation." Mark wrote "a narrative that brought together two distinctively different types of written material representative of two major types of early sectarian formation":

One stream was that of movements in Palestine and southern Syria that cultivated the memory of Jesus as a founder-teacher. The other was that of congregations in northern Syria, Asia Minor and Greece wherein the death and resurrection of the Christ were regarded as the founding events. Neither of these movements had produced a gospel before Mark, nor would they have done so independently of one another. That is because each had remembered Jesus (Christ) differently, so differently in fact, that Mark's combination of their disparate memory traditions has to be seen as a very daring and experimental moment. Mark stood, apparently, at the intersection of these two streams of social history at a very auspicious and troubling time, drew some conclusions about what to think and do under the circumstances, then made his proposal by writing the story he did. . . . If one wants to understand the origins of the Christian gospel of origins, one must study the way in which Mark fabricated his story, and determine why he wrote it the way he did.¹²

II

A Myth of Innocence is Mack's first substantial publication that has to do with the NT. He had previously written a critique of the scholarly quest for Christian origins, addressed to members of the Jesus Seminar,¹³ an important review and critical assessment of René Girard's reading of the gospels,¹⁴ and an essay on

11. Mack, *Myth of Innocence*, 21, 22.

12. Mack, *Myth of Innocence*, 11–12, adding: "The early Jesus movements did not bequeath the social origins of Christianity to the church. They bequeathed their myth of the historical Jesus as the account of a divine origination" (p. 24).

13. Mack, "Gilgamesh and the Wizard of Oz." For subsequent reviews and critiques of the work of scholars who study the Bible and religion, see Mack, review of Habermas and Flew, ed. Miethé, *Did Jesus Rise from the Dead?*; Mack, "All the Extra Jesuses"; Mack, "Staal's Gauntlet and the Queen"; Mack, "Persuasive Pronouncements"; Mack, "Many Movements, Many Myths"; Mack, "Caretakers and Critics"; Mack, "A Secular Bible?"

14. Mack, "The Innocent Transgressor," citing (here, in English translation) Girard, *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*; Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*; Girard, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*; Girard, *The Scapegoat*.

the kingdom-of-God sayings in the Gospel of Mark, which was issued shortly before Mack's book appeared in print.¹⁵ But prior to all of this, Mack's work was concerned principally with wisdom literature and mythology in Hellenistic Judaism,¹⁶ which he explicated in a series of programmatic essays on exegetical and rhetorical traditions in Philo of Alexandria,¹⁷ and elaborated in major studies of authorial composition and epic imagination in Ben Sira and other Jewish wisdom texts.¹⁸

Three theoretical findings contribute to the coherence of these projects and make of them a set. The first is the recognition of the centrality of rhetoric in the discourse and cultural formation of Greco-Roman religious traditions.¹⁹ "Rhetoric," Mack argues, "is to a society and its discourse what grammar is to a culture and its language." The Greeks "took a fancy to the game of public debate, noticed the skill required to participate in public forum, worked out the rules, and called it the art of speaking. . . . They produced handbooks for teaching this technology . . . cultivated occasions for playing the game of repartee, developed a satire capable of bringing critique to rhetorical performance, and created a culture thoroughly at ease with its knowledge that all discourse was rhetorical."²⁰ The second is a theory of "intertextuality," of "the way in which a

15. Mack, "Kingdom Sayings in Mark," who observes that the term "kingdom of God" appears only three times, outside the Jesus tradition, exclusively in sapiential—not apocalyptic—literature (Wis 10:10; cf. 6:17–20; Philo, *Spec. leg.* 4.164; *Sent. Sextus* 311).

16. Mack, "Wisdom Myth and Mythology"; Mack, *Logos und Sophia*; Mack and Murphy, "Wisdom Literature."

17. Mack, "Imitatio Mosis"; Mack, "Exegetical Traditions in Alexandrian Judaism"; Mack, response to Pearson, "Philo and the Gnostics on Man and Salvation"; Mack, "Weisheit und Allegorie bei Philo von Alexandrien"; Mack, "Decoding the Scripture"; Mack, "Philo Judaeus and Exegetical Traditions in Alexandria"; Mack, "Wisdom and Apocalyptic in Philo"; Mack, "Moses on the Mountain Top"; Mack, "Argumentation in Philo's *De sacrificiis*."

18. Mack, "Under the Shadow of Moses"; Mack, *Wisdom and the Hebrew Epic*; Mack, "Wisdom Makes a Difference"; Mack, "Sirach (Ecclesiasticus)"; Mack, "The Christ and Jewish Wisdom"; Mack, introduction and annotations to "Ecclesiasticus, or the Wisdom of Jesus Son of Sirach."

19. See, in addition to the rhetorical analyses of Philo cited in n. 17, Mack and O'Neil, "The Chreia Discussion of Hermogenes of Tarsus"; Mack, "Anecdotes and Arguments"; Mack, "Elaboration of the Chreia in the Hellenistic School."

20. Mack, *Rhetoric and the New Testament*, 16, adding: "Rhetoric refers to the rules of the language games agreed upon as acceptable within a given society. . . . Interest in such a rhetoric is grounded in the observation that the way we talk to each other is very serious business. Rhetorical theory defines the stakes as nothing less than the negotiation of our lives together. A criticism based upon such a theory of rhetoric might hope to get to the heart of the human matter. . . . Insofar as the development of a theory of rhetoric indicates a society conscious of its culture, an amazing opportunity does present itself to catch Jews, Greeks, and early Christians thinking out loud. The name for this new historiography, an approach to texts with an eye to social histories, is not yet firmly established among scholars. But some are content to call it 'rhetorical criticism.' . . . Rhetorical criticism can place a writing at a juncture of social history and read it as a record of some moment of exchange that may have contributed to the social formations we seek better to understand. Rhetorical criticism may be in fact that most promising form of literary criticism for the task of reconstructing Christian origins with social issues in view" (pp. 16, 17).

given text relates to its contexts as systems of meaning already in place."²¹ Such a notion is worked out in detail in Mack's efforts to chart the "intersection of cultures, Jewish and Hellenic," by means of texts that render the intellectual tradition and mythologies of Jewish wisdom literature as intelligible modes of social thought—exemplified quintessentially by Ben Sira's "mythic reading" of, and "meditation" on, "his own cultural history" and "social system" as an "etiology of Second Temple Judaism."²² The third is Mack's increasing engagement with social and cultural theory, nurtured, especially, through ongoing conversations and a sustained academic tryst with the imaginative discourse and intellectual anthropology of Jonathan Z. Smith.²³

Mack's engagement with Smith's work is first attested in print in the symposium on religion, ritual killing, and cultural formation that he convened as a conversation among Smith, Girard, and Walter Burkert.²⁴ In the context of explicating the arguments of the principals of the debate,²⁵ Mack published under separate cover his critique of Girard's theory of violence and reading of the gospels as "unique," "historically accurate," and "revelatory" texts that take up the age-old plot of "sacrificial crisis" and "collective murder" but cast Jesus as "innocent," not guilty—the "resolution" of the "sacrificial crisis" in "the collective killing of a surrogate victim" that stands, for Girard, as "a mechanism basic for all human social formation and the generator of religion and culture."²⁶ However, in presenting Jesus as a "victim" whose "innocence is such that his death may be taken as a founding event for a new social order as early Christian literature has it," and in "accepting the gospels as accounts which disclose the

21. Mack, "Wisdom Makes a Difference," 15, adding: "Differences among exemplary texts are highlighted as of significance for understanding any particular configuration." This means that, to understand a text, we need "to see each text as a creative product of the imagination," on the one hand, and "to see that product placed in some context within which its particularity can be assessed," on the other. "There are two con-texts [here] with which scholarly discourse is familiar—the social history that provides the setting for a text's composition and address, and the literary-cultural tradition within which a text takes its place. [The] challenge is to work out an [analytical] approach to texts that can position them at the intersection of these two contexts. . . . The significance of the text itself will be some kind of reflection on the relationship between the two contexts."

22. Mack, *Wisdom and the Hebrew Epic*, xi, xii–xiii, 6.

23. For a review and assessment of Smith's scholarship, see Smith, "When the Chips are Down"; Smith, "Conjectures on Conjectures," 55–73; Mack, "Introduction: Religion and Ritual," 32–51; Mack, "After *Drudgery Divine*"; Mack, "On Redescribing Christian Origins," 256–59, repr., with revisions, in *The Christian Myth*, 70–74; Mack, "Social Locations"; Mack, "Sacred Persistence?"; Masuzawa, "Reader as Producer"; Cameron, "An Occasion for Thought," 100–104; Cameron and Miller, "Introduction: Ancient Myths and Modern Theories of Christian Origins," 8–15, 22–25.

24. See, in addition to the studies cited in n. 14, Burkert, *Homo Necans*; Burkert, "The Problem of Ritual Killing"; Smith, "A Pearl of Great Price and a Cargo of Yams"; Smith, "Sacred Persistence"; Smith, "The Bare Facts of Ritual"; Smith, "The Domestication of Sacrifice"; Girard, "Generative Scapegoating."

25. Mack, "Religion and Ritual."

26. Mack, "Innocent Transgressor," 145, 142, 137.

reality of the event of Jesus' crucifixion instead of as myths which conceal the social conflict in early Christianity," Girard has given "a reading of the gospels as the church has understood them"—a modern version of "the myth of innocence,"²⁷ read "at the level of the history of ideas," divorced from social-historical context, and indicative, in Mack's terms, of a "Christian mythic mentality."²⁸

Mack's work on religion and rhetoric, intertextuality and critical theory, Hellenistic Judaism and the Greco-Roman world, taken together, supplied the tools and provided the basis of what might be termed Mack's own "preparation for the gospel" of Mark.

A Myth of Innocence is surely one of the most important studies of the origins of Christianity since Schweitzer's *Quest*.²⁹ Brilliant exegetical arguments are made at every turn of detail.³⁰ Here it will have to suffice to mention some major conclusions of significance. First, there's Mack's "characterization of the mytholog[ies] of the various Jesus . . . movements," his "correlation" of "myth[making]" and "processes of social formation," and his "careful reconfiguring of the Gospel of Mark."³¹ The materials Mark used to compose the

27. Mack, "Innocent Transgressor," 150, 160, 161.

28. Mack, "Innocent Transgressor," 163, 161, adding: "The gospels are written from the point of view of early Christians. Jesus is portrayed as an innocent victim, but this is false as an historical assertion. It is true only for those who have inverted the valencies from unrighteous to righteous, violence to vicarious gift, in the interest of justifying a social rupture. And those cast as the ones who killed Jesus? They are now the Jews instead of the Romans, thus reflecting the actual rivalries forced by the new social formation. By casting their myth of the vindicated martyr as a history of those events which founded the new social order, early Christians kept their distance from those events and erased the signs of their own responsibility for thinking the daring thoughts which could transform another's violence into their own grace. This erasure is none other than the concealment of the truth about the innocence of the victim which Girard has documented for his persecution texts. So who are the persecutors writing the gospels? They are Christians. And who are the victims? They are the Jews. And what is unique about the Gospels? That the victims are cast as persecutors of an innocent victim. . . . The gospels are documents of Christians seeking justification at the expense of the Jews. . . . Not only is peace between Christians and Jews made impossible by construing the crucifixion mythically as a sacrifice, a sacrifice in which the Jews by definition must be imagined to have performed the deed which determines Christian freedom. Inside the Christian circle as well the mythic mentality which conceals the truth about the arbitrariness of the victimization is compounded now by the claim of one's own innocence of justification. That is salvation at some cost" (pp. 156, 157; cf. 158–59; and see Mack, *Myth of Innocence*, 354–55 n. 1, 372, 375).

29. Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*; trans. of Von Reimarus zu Wrede.

30. Kelber has called Mack's book "the most penetrating historical work on the origins of Christianity written by an American scholar in this century" (review of *A Myth of Innocence*, 162). Smith has described the work as the "first study of 'Christian origins' which may be taken up, with profit, by the general student of religion" (*Drudgery Divine*, 110 n. 43, emphasis original).

31. Smith, *Drudgery Divine*, 134, adding: Mack's work "constitutes a radical and thorough-going revision of Christian materials." Note that in his discussion of Mack's book, Smith distinguishes between, and among, these three issues.

gospel—parables,³² pronouncement stories, miracle stories—are studied both as building blocks of the narrative and as “remnants of pre-Markan traditions . . . each with its own particular configuration of Jesus and peculiar social history.”³³ In assessing the patterns of group formation, Mack intends to emphasize not only “the plurality of social formations and their rationales” but also “the relationship between social histories and the myths that emerged about Jesus.”³⁴ For our purposes, four different groups can be reconstructed on the basis of textual traditions distinctive to them:

1. The earliest written record we have from the Jesus schools is preserved in the Sayings Gospel Q.³⁵ Mack suggests that Mark knew some version or variant of Q,³⁶ though Mark preferred, for his own apocalyptic reasons, the announcement of judgment given in the second literary layer of the text to the aphoristic, instructional wisdom that makes up the formative stratum of Q.³⁷
2. The “synagogue reform” movement was largely responsible for the pronouncement stories, or elaborated *chreiai*, that make up a substantial part of the narrative material in the first twelve chapters of Mark and constitute a major source for the composition of the gospel.³⁸ Mack argues, importantly, that Mark himself is to be located within this par-

32. See Mack, *Myth of Innocence*, 60–61, 135–71. For additional redescriptions of the parables attributed to Jesus, see Cameron, “Mythmaking and Intertextuality in Early Christianity”; Cameron, “Occasion for Thought.”

33. Mack, *Myth of Innocence*, 14, adding: “In actuality the situation may have been a bit more fluid, with some overlapping of people, ideas, activities, and the production of texts. . . . But each memory tradition does stem from distinctive social experience and determined intellectual response localized somewhere” (p. 96).

34. Mack, *Myth of Innocence*, 84. Note that Mack’s “reconstruction of several ‘groups’ mainly by paying attention to a single genre and its characterization of Jesus” was, he now realizes, “too tight, insular, and cell-like” (preface to the 2006 publication of *A Myth of Innocence*, xii).

35. Mack, *Myth of Innocence*, 57–60, 84–87.

36. Mack, *Myth of Innocence*, 56, 59, 84, 170–71, 197–98, 204–5, 319–20, 323–24; see Mack, “Q and the Gospel of Mark,” 22–30.

37. As I have argued elsewhere, “Although some try to deny the composite character of the Sayings Gospel, frequently through specious appeals to the hypothetical nature of the reconstructed text, such attempts fundamentally misunderstand how theory works, and thus seek—whether consciously or not—to bypass the results of scholarship and the actual evidence of the gospel texts. For if Q did not exist, we would have to reconstruct it. Theory would demand it. And once the synoptic problem is resolved theoretically by the positing of Q and Q is accorded a documentary status, there is no reason not to examine the text for evidence of possible layers of its literary history. It is necessary to be insistent at this point. We do have a text of Q; what we do not have is a manuscript” (Cameron, “The Sayings Gospel Q and the Quest of the Historical Jesus,” 352). See, in particular, the definitive studies of Kloppenborg, *The Formation of Q*; Kloppenborg, “The Sayings Gospel Q”; Kloppenborg, *Excavating Q*.

38. Mack, *Myth of Innocence*, 61–62, 94–96, 172–207; cf. 379–84.

- ticular group.³⁹ Not only did this group imagine Jesus as the founder-teacher of a school that “worked out its self-definition in debate with Pharisaic teachings” about ritual purity; it also crafted a number of stories that emphasized Jesus’ authority, and combined such stories with the miracle story tradition to emphasize Jesus’ power in conflict with the Pharisees.⁴⁰ Since the conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees “was portrayed as the reason for a plot against Jesus,” and “the plot to kill Jesus was hatched in the synagogue” (cf. Mark 2:1–3:6), the “conflict of the synagogue reform movement with the synagogue was read back into the myth of origins and presented as the cause for Jesus’ crucifixion.”⁴¹
3. The “congregation of Israel” was largely responsible for the early collection of miracle stories that were arranged in two catenae of five stories each.⁴² These two sets, Mack argues, were composed “on the model of epic prototypes” and “replicat[ed] in miniature the story of the Exodus from the crossing of the sea to the formation of the congregation in the wilderness,” presenting Jesus as “the founder and leader of the new movement,” like Moses and Elijah, thereby serving as this group’s “myth of origins.”⁴³
 4. The “congregations of the Christ” were a Jesus movement that had developed into a “Christ cult”⁴⁴ and that “differed from the [other] Jesus movements in two major respects. One was a focus upon the significance of Jesus’ death and destiny. . . . [This] had the result of shifting attention away from the teachings of Jesus,” engendering instead “an elaborate preoccupation with notions of martyrdom, resurrection, and the transformation of Jesus into a divine, spiritual presence. The other major difference was the forming of a cult oriented to that spiritual

39. Mack, *Myth of Innocence*, 178, 192–93, 197, 199–200, 205, 244, 318–21.

40. Mack, *Who Wrote the New Testament?* 59; see Mack, *Myth of Innocence*, 195–99, 204–7, 233–45.

41. Mack, *Myth of Innocence*, 206, 207. On Mack’s infelicitous use, and subsequent retraction, of the category “synagogue reform movement,” see *Myth of Innocence*, 94–96, 192–207; cf. 101, 107, 125–26, 166, 226–27, 239, 244, 280–81, 316–21, 326–27, 355; Mack, “A Myth of Innocence at Sea,” 147–51; Mack, preface to the 2006 publication of *A Myth of Innocence*, xiii. Note that Mack does not use this term in his description of the Jesus people who produced the pronouncement stories in *Who Wrote the New Testament*, 54–60, 155, 158–60; cf. 314–16. See, most recently, Mack, “Cartwheels,” 138; Mack, “The Spyglass and the Kaleidoscope,” 194.

42. Mack, *Myth of Innocence*, 91–93, 208–45, following the important source-critical analysis of Achtemeier, “Toward the Isolation of Pre-Markan Miracle Catenae.”

43. Mack, *Myth of Innocence*, 219, 222, 223; cf. 230, adding: “The earliest miracle stories were not reports of the miracle-working activity of Jesus. They were carefully composed sets of stories about Jesus as the founder of the ‘congregation of Israel.’ Miracle stories served some Jesus movement as its myth of origins” (p. 215).

44. Mack, *Myth of Innocence*, 98–123.

presence."⁴⁵ Although "the usual view of the beginnings of Christianity derives from the Christ cults," Mack argues, "the sequence should be reversed."⁴⁶ "Instead of reading the material from the Jesus movements through the eyes of Paul, we need to read Paul as a remarkable moment in the history of some Jesus movement."⁴⁷

Second, there's Mack's detailed analysis of Mark's authorial, intellectual labor and his argument, in particular, that Mark is responsible for composing the passion narrative. Since the logic of the kerygma (i.e., creedal formulae about the "death and resurrection" of Christ, constructed as a myth to rationalize a social formation already under way) required that it need not be narrated—indeed, that it resist historicization⁴⁸—Mack argues, Mark had to find a way to "transpose the Christ myth into historical narrative." By "translating the Christ myth into a story of Jesus' martyrdom,"⁴⁹ Mark turned "the kerygma of Christ's death and resurrection into a formulaic prediction of the persecution plot" (cf. Mark 8:31; 9:31; 10:33–34).⁵⁰ In order to craft "a plausible narrative of

45. Mack, *Who Wrote the New Testament*, 75–76.

46. Mack, *Myth of Innocence*, 96.

47. Mack, *Who Wrote the New Testament*, 99. For a rethinking of the category "Christ cult" to refer to "a religious community that formed soon after the 'Christ event' (i.e., the 'death and resurrection' of Jesus understood as that event that changed the course of history and inaugurated the new Christian time) and that gathered for prayers, rituals, and instructions on the model of later Christian churches," see Mack, "Rereading the Christ Myth," 38, 65–71. Note, especially, that in this essay Mack has made a major revision of his initial discussions of the "congregations of the Christ," arguing now that "both the 'Christ myth' [1 Cor 15:3–5] and the 'ritual meal' text [1 Cor 11:23–25] can be traced to mythmaking within the Jesus schools at some point where the thought of Jesus as a martyr for their cause was entertained" (p. 37). See, most recently, Mack, "Cartwheels," 138; Mack, "Spyglass and Kaleidoscope," 198.

48. Mack, *Myth of Innocence*, 254–55: "The kerygma was a mythic formulation without need of further narrative embellishment. It contained no flaw needing further adjustment, no gaps that still had to be filled. . . . The kerygma worked just because questions arising from historical placement and motivation had been bracketed. Thus the kerygmatic interpretation of Jesus' death actually resisted historicizing" (cf. 109–11, 120 n. 15, 278–80, 354–55 with n. 1).

49. Mack, *Who Wrote the New Testament*, 157, adding: "There would have to be a provocation, an arrest, a charge, an ideological confrontation, some stories that made the executioners look both reasonable and wrong at the same time, some stories that revealed both Jesus' innocence and his willingness to die, some stories that showed how the disciples and the crowds responded to these last public events, an account of the execution, and some way to end the story after the crucifixion."

50. Mack, *Myth of Innocence*, 280, adding: "The intention of the rewriting was not innocent. . . . The predictions of the passion changed the kerygma into a script for writing an account of Jesus' death as a geopolitical event. Read in the light of the predictions, the passion plot unfolds exactly according to its prescription. . . . Time, place, agents, and consequences are all spelled out in the predictions and identifiable in the passion account. They purport to be the ingredients of a historical event, but this story does not derive from history. History was written according to the script of the persecution story."

Jesus' martyrdom," the "most important feature of Mark's strategy . . . was the use of the old [Jewish] wisdom tale of the wrongly accused righteous man as a pattern for the sequence of episodes leading up to the trials and crucifixion of Jesus."⁵¹ Mark "used the pattern of the wisdom story to conjoin myths of origin stemming from the Jesus movements on the one hand, with the myth of origin stemming from the Christ cult on the other. . . . The wisdom tale was the narrative device used to merge them. The gospel is the product of that accommodation."⁵² Therefore, Mack concludes:

It is now possible to emphasize that Mark's accomplishment was an authorial, intellectual achievement. In modern critical parlance, Mark's Gospel is a very richly textured story. Its most distinctive feature is the complexity of what critics call intertextuality, the domestication and integration of diverse texts, genres, and patterns of perception in the formation of a novel literary performance. Mark's Gospel stands at the intersection of many streams of cultural, literary, and social history. It was created by effort, intellectual effort, and it is marked by conscious authorial intention. Mark was a scholar. A reader of texts and a writer of texts. He was a scribe in the Jesus tradition of the synagogue reform movement. Mark's Gospel was not the product of divine revelation. It was not a pious transmission of revered tradition. It was composed at a desk in a scholar's study lined with texts and open to discourse with other intellectuals. . . . One "text" he did not have was a copy of the passion narrative because there was none until he wrote it. . . . The passion narrative is simply the climax of the new story line. The story was a new myth of origins. A brilliant appearance of the man of power, destroyed by those in league against God, pointed nonetheless to a final victory when those who knew the secret of his kingdom would finally be vindicated for accepting his authority.⁵³

"Viewed in retrospect . . . Mark's Gospel was the most important mythology constructed during the early period of Christian beginnings. . . . That is because it was Mark's plot that Christians settled upon when contemplating those events foundational to Christianity."⁵⁴ In writing his gospel, "a literary

51. Mack, *Who Wrote the New Testament*, 157–58, building on the analyses of Nickelsburg, *Resurrection, Immortality, and Eternal Life*; Nickelsburg, "The Genre and Function of the Markan Passion Narrative."

52. Mack, *Myth of Innocence*, 276, adding: "The passion narrative was conceived as a possibility by the discovery of the martyrological substrata of the Christ myth and ritual. . . . As soon as the narrative possibilities suggested by the term *paradidonai* ['to hand over'] were seen, the passion narrative was as good as written. Mark's passion narrative is essentially an elaboration of the etiological myth of the Hellenistic cult meal through combination with the wisdom story of the persecuted Righteous One as martyr" (pp. 303–4; cf. 268, 269, 299).

53. Mack, *Myth of Innocence*, 321–23; cf. 321–24 nn. 3–4. Arnal says this passage reflects the "central thesis" of Mack's book, demonstrating that "the only evidence we have for the first followers of Jesus is, precisely, *literary* evidence, and that therefore it attests to a literate, actively creative, intellectual, and therefore mediated . . . engagement with the world . . . a product of human labor" (review of *A Myth of Innocence*, 837, 840, emphasis original).

54. Mack, *Myth of Innocence*, 356, 357.

achievement of incomparable historical significance," Mark "laid the mythic foundation for the Christian religion. . . . Without this story . . . the emergence of Christianity as we know it would not have happened."⁵⁵

III

A Myth of Innocence is an intellectual achievement that put Mack's work forever firmly on the map. His subsequent studies of the NT and Christian origins, especially his analyses of the Gospel of Mark⁵⁶ and the Sayings Gospel Q,⁵⁷ were destined to be read in the light of this book, a work of scholarship that's made a difference. Accordingly, in order to assess the evidence and argumentation, conclusions and implications of Mack's book, a group of scholars launched, under the auspices of the Society of Biblical Literature, a Consultation (1995–1997) and subsequent Seminar (1998–2003) on Ancient Myths and Modern Theories of Christian Origins, designed, in part, to test Mack's findings and devoted to the task of redescribing the beginnings of Christianity as religion. In his call paper for our first Consultation, Mack presented a critique of the canonical (gospel) myth of Christian origins:

For almost two thousand years, the Christian imagination of Christian origins has echoed the gospel stories contained in the New Testament. That is not surprising. The gospel accounts erased the pre-gospel histories; their inclusion within the church's New Testament consigned other accounts to oblivion; and during the long reach of Christian history, from the formation of the New Testament in the fourth century to the Enlightenment in the eighteenth, there was no other story. . . . According to Christian imagination, Christianity began when Jesus entered the world, performed miracles, called disciples, taught them about the kingdom of God, challenged the Jewish establishment, was crucified as the Christ and Son of God, appeared after his resurrection, overwhelmed his disciples with his holy spirit, established the first church in Jerusalem, and sent the apostles out on a mission to tell the world what they had seen and heard. Telling what they had seen was enough to convince the Jews and convert the gentiles into thinking that God had planned the whole thing in order to start a new religion. The new religion was about sin and redemption. What it took to start the new religion was all there as a kind of divine implantation in the life of Jesus, needing only to germinate and develop as early Christians heard about it, believed it, and came to understand its import. We might call this scenario the big bang concept of Christian origins. . . . Allowing the gospel paradigm to define Christian origins is quite understandable. It is the only scenario that everyone automatically shares, thus providing a comprehensive frame of reference

55. Mack, *Who Wrote the New Testament*, 151, 161.

56. Mack, "Cartwheels"; Mack, "Spyglass and Kaleidoscope."

57. Mack, "The Kingdom That Didn't Come"; Mack, "Lord of the Logia"; Mack, "Q and a Cynic-like Jesus"; Mack, *The Lost Gospel*.

for scholarly research and discourse. It serves as a kind of map within which we try to place our various, detailed labours. It also protects a set of assumptions about the way Christianity began, forming as it does the basis for what has been imagined as an otherwise inexplicable emergence of a brand new religion of unique conviction and singular faith. Something overwhelming must have possessed those early Christians, so the thinking has been, or they would not have converted to the new religion with its extraordinary claims. It is the gospel story that feeds that suspicion of an overwhelming something at the very beginning of the Christian time.⁵⁸

Arguing that “a redescription of Christian origins would ultimately have to account for the emergence of the gospels themselves, turning them into interesting products of early Christian thinking instead of letting them determine the parameters within which all of our data must find a place to rest,” Mack cautioned that the most “serious obstacle to a redescription project,” to “setting the gospel account aside,” is “the theory of religion implicit in our scholarship and naively assumed as natural”:

The historian of religion would say that New Testament scholars work with a concept of religion that is thoroughly and distinctly Christian in its derivation and definition. . . . Familiarity with the Christian religion has taken the place of theoretical discussion, and Christianity has provided us with the categories we use to name and explain early Christian phenomena. The problem is that the understanding of religion implicit in our discipline is inadequate for the task of redescribing Christian origins. . . . [Accordingly,] if we want to account for the emergence of Christianity, including the formation of groups and congregations, the development of their various practices and rituals, the production of their mythologies, and the writing of their literature . . . if we want to discover the reasons for and the motivations involved in their many investments in their

58. Mack, “Redescribing Christian Origins,” 247, 250, adding: “However, since the Enlightenment, the effort to understand Christian origins has been pursued by scholars as a matter of historical and literary criticism, and the New Testament account has slowly been dismantled. The New Testament is no longer seen by critical scholars as a coherent set of apostolic texts that document a single set of dramatic events and their monolinear history of subsequent influence and theological development. Instead of one gospel story, we have four different accounts within the New Testament and several other gospels that were not included. Instead of one picture of the historical Jesus that all early Christians must have had in view, we now have several competing views. We now know that there were many groups from the beginning, creating disparate traditions, responding to other groups differently, and developing various rituals and patterns of social congregation. Plural theologies and conflicting ideologies, as well as competing authorities and leaders, were the order of the day. So factors other than the marvels portrayed in the gospel account must have been at work. And yet, the older picture of Christian origins according to the gospel story, largely Lukan, is still in everyone’s mind. It is as if the emergence of Christianity cannot be accounted for any other way. It is as if the accumulation of critical information within the discipline of New Testament studies cannot compete with the gospel’s mystique” (pp. 247–48; repr. in *Christian Myth*, 59, 63, 60).

new associations . . . if we want to account for Christian origins as a thoughtful human construction . . . 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.⁵⁹

Mack's proposal for a redescription of Christian origins situates the study of Christian beginnings, and their social processes of mythmaking, within the context of the human sciences.⁶⁰ Arguing for a comparative method and an intellectualist approach to matters of theory, Mack suggests that a different perspective needs to be entertained as "a kind of lens . . . working hypothesis . . . [or] framework" to guide the task of redescription, a theory of religion that he presents in the form of five theses:

1. Religion is a social construct. . . . The myths, rituals, symbols, beliefs and patterns of thinking that are *shared* by a people . . . [are] cultural constructs [which] can be experienced and manipulated in a variety of ways by individuals, but it is their self-evident status as common cultural coin that marks them as the religion of a people.
2. Social formation defines the human enterprise. Constructing societies large and small is what people do. It is a fragile, collective craft requiring enormous amounts of negotiation, experimentation, living together, and talking . . . result[ing] in very complex arrangements of relationships, agreements reached on better and less better ways to do things, and practices established to pass on the knowledge and skills accumulated in the process. . . . [If] ask[ed] about the reasons for and the processes whereby early Christian myths and rituals were first conceived and agreed upon . . . [the answer would be that] the Jesus movements and the congregations of the Christ were attractive as intentional experiments in social formation and mythmaking.
3. Myths acknowledge the collective gifts and constraints of the past and create a foil or gap for thinking critically about the present state of a group's life together. . . . Early Christians entertained fantastic mythologies, not because they were overwhelmed by encounters with a god or a son of God, but because they wanted to comprehend and justify their investments in a movement that made social sense to them.
4. Rituals are the way humans have of concentrating attention on some activity or event of some significance to a group, and observing its performance apart from normal practice. . . . Rituals are social occasions,

59. Mack, "Redescribing Christian Origins," 248, 251, 252, 254; repr. in *Christian Myth*, 60–61, 64, 63, 65, 67–68.

60. Mack, "The Christian Origins Project."

require roles, invite attendance, display skills, confirm loyalties, trigger commitments, evoke thoughtfulness, and reconstitute the structure of a group without having to engineer it any other way.

5. Mythmaking and social formation go together. . . . Experimentation and bricolage mark the ways in which myths get rearranged and groups reform. . . . Even the most daring social experiments and the most fantastic mythic constructs turn out to be thoughtful and constructive attempts to regain sanity in a social situation that threatens human well-being. In the case of early Christians . . . the making of their myths and the processes of forming social groups were constructive and thoughtful human activities. And [so,] whenever we have the chance to catch sight of both mythmaking and social formation happening at the same time in the same place, we need to explore the relationship of the one to the other.⁶¹

The theory of religion which Mack proposes here takes mythmaking to be a correlate to social formation. "By noting the way in which a group had formed and the role it saw itself playing in the larger scheme of things," Mack writes, "we can place each of our texts at a particular moment in the history of early Christian groups and see how each was responding to its times."⁶² Mack's thesis—the identification of a nexus, or correlation, between mythmaking and social formation, which regards their intersection or juncture as "a moment of social and discursive activity that is generative"⁶³—gave rise to a serious theoretical debate among members of the Seminar.⁶⁴ It was clear that more work needed to be done, to see whether, and how, we can "specify the nexus between mythmaking and social formation without assuming a relationship of conformity, causality, or reciprocity," and how in our "concept of intersections

61. Mack, "Redescribing Christian Origins," 254, 255–56, emphasis original; repr. in *Christian Myth*, 68, 69, 70.

62. Mack, *Who Wrote the New Testament*, 11, adding: "The scholarly terms for these activities, one behavioral, the other intellectual, are *social formation* and *mythmaking*. Social formation and mythmaking are group activities that go together, each stimulating the other in a kind of dynamic feedback system. Both speed up when new groups form in times of social disintegration and cultural change. Both are important indicators of the personal and intellectual energies invested in experimental movements. . . . Social formation and mythmaking must therefore be given a prominent place in our redescription of early Christian history. In every early Christian community from which we still have any evidence, social formation and mythmaking fit together like hand in glove" (emphasis original; cf. 11–15).

63. Mack, "Remarkable," 472.

64. See Arnal and Braun, "Social Formation and Mythmaking," 460–62; cf. 459–67; Mack, "Backbay Jazz and Blues," 422–23, 427–28; Mack, "Remarkable," 472–73; Martin, "History, Historiography, and Christian Origins," 271–72; Martin, "Redescribing Christian Origins," 476–77; Smith, "*Dayyeinu*," 486; Cameron and Miller, "Ancient Myths and Modern Theories of Christian Origins," 17–18, 20–22; Cameron and Miller, "Issues and Commentary," 454–56; Cameron and Miller, "Conclusion: Redescribing Christian Origins," 511–16; cf. 497–516.

or junctures of mythmaking and social formation," we can "include situations of incongruity or discrepancy, ways to describe gaps between myths and social circumstances."⁶⁵

Mack's efforts to make sense of the logic and historical legacy of the gospel story as the origin of the myth of Christian origins mean that he had to work out, more systematically, the theoretical underpinnings of his argument, not just in terms of mythmaking and social formation but also in terms of social interests (as a way to talk about collective motivations) and social logic (our category for the relationship of a given myth to the processes of social formation). Noting the way that the term "interest" is used by Jonathan Z. Smith for the features of an exemplary myth or ritual that Smith finds intellectually "interesting" or is "interested" in, Mack suggests that *interest*, a term that combines "connotations of curiosity about, and investment in, a matter," while also delineating "a complex, purposive process,"⁶⁶ can be used to construct a social theory of religion. "Interest" (1) captures "the sense we have that a social system both limits and directs the use of power, persuasion or force," thus giving "the impression of purpose, objective, and motivation"; (2) it does not have "any distinctively religious connotations, but can be used in regard to any system of signs, practices, or social structures, including religion"; (3) it bears "the connotation of inquisitiveness, thus making it possible to include intellectual activity and cognitive functions within the cluster of activities that produce a social system"; (4) it carries "the connotation of reward due an investment," a "motivational nuance for the intellectual labor required to produce a religion"; and, (5) it is also "thoroughly constructive . . . as a general term for collective motivation," for taking interest, and being invested, in the human enterprise.⁶⁷ And so, building on his initial discussions of a possible Jesus school in Jerusalem, having some connection to the Jesus movements—not the congregations of the Christ—and interest in Jewish identity,⁶⁸ and of the social situation and underlying social interests that can be inferred when the term *christos* first took hold as a designation for Jesus,⁶⁹ Mack began work on a series of studies in quest of a "social theory of

65. Cameron and Miller, "Redescribing Christian Origins," 515; see, in addition, Cameron and Miller, "Introducing Paul and the Corinthians," 8, 15; Cameron and Miller, "Redescribing Paul and the Corinthians," 290, 302. The most recent publication of the Seminar has addressed this issue in detail. See Crawford, "Introduction," 3–6, 14; cf. 8–10; Smith, "Conjectures on Conjunctions," 30–32, 59–62, 67–72 with nn. 118–20; Smith, "The Markan Site," 99–104, 112, 118, 120 with n. 36; Mack, "Cartwheels," 127–32, 142–43; Mack, "Spyglass and Kaleidoscope," 202–5; Arnal, "On Smith, On Myth, on Mark," 153–62; Matthews, "Markan Grapplings," 170–77; Miller, "The Social Logic of the Gospel of Mark," 222–23 n. 34, 228–30, 256–57, 379; cf. 394–96, 398; Crawford and Miller, "Ancient Myths and Modern Theories of Christian Origins," 543, 547–48, 550–51.

66. Mack, "Religion and Ritual," 69. See, for example, Smith's own remarks in the "Discussion" of his paper on "The Domestication of Sacrifice," 206–7, 209–11, 215, 222–24.

67. Mack, "A Radically Social Theory of Religion," 131–32.

68. Mack, "A Jewish Jesus School in Jerusalem?"

69. Mack, "Why *Christos*?"

religion," a "theory of religion that can explain Christian origins," a theory of "religion as social interest."⁷⁰

*Myth and the Christian Nation*⁷¹ is the book that presents Mack's social theory of religion in a programmatic way, and that develops the initial critique he made of the logic and legacy of Mark's Gospel,⁷² and then elaborated in critical assessments of innocence and power in the Gospel of Mark⁷³ and of the legacy of the Bible as Christian myth in the mentality of contemporary American culture.⁷⁴ Mack's "thesis," that "religion is a mode of thinking about social constructions," and his "theory," of "religion as social interest" — "religion as a human construction in the interest of the human enterprise of social formation" — mean that this book is a "study of religion as a human investment in social interests."⁷⁵ *Social interest* is the category Mack uses to refer to collective motivations, to describe the "collective investments" humans take "in the construction of society."⁷⁶ Observing "some obvious links between social structures and practices on the one hand, and themes common to myths and rituals on the other," and noticing "the ways in which [myths and rituals] relate to social practices, interests,

70. Mack, "Explaining Religion," 83, 91, adding: "The concept of *religion as social interest*" means that "religion is generated by social interests, and that it functions to maintain and manipulate social interest just as the other systems of signs and patterns of practices that structure human societies" (p. 84, emphasis original). See Mack, "Explaining Christian Mythmaking"; Mack, "Social Formation."

71. Mack, *Myth and the Christian Nation*.

72. Not only is "the Christian gospel . . . the lens through which Western culture has viewed the world," Mack writes. "The Christian gospel continues to function as the lens by which the world is viewed, ordered, and interpreted" (*Myth of Innocence*, 368, 369; cf. 353–76, esp. 368–76).

73. "Mark set Jesus in opposition to the Pharisaic laws of purity and the sacrificial system of the temple cult," Mack writes. "In Mark's depiction, Jesus represented power, sheer power, the power of God in confrontation with the power of the Jewish high priest, the power of the Jewish king, and the power of the Roman empire. Jesus' power was pure, but it was a kind of purity other than [that] assumed by the temple system. Jesus was pure, not because he resided at the pinnacle of priestly activity, but because he was the (royal) Son of God by virtue of an anointing with the holy Spirit from God. The holy spirit in Jesus was out to rout the unclean spirits in control of the worldly kingdoms. This was a new notion of purity, a union of sovereign sacrality and priestly holiness. . . . Mark's gospel introduced the notion of innocence to the characterization of Jesus as the man of power and purity. . . . Jesus became the Christian symbol of a social anthropology in which power, purity, and innocence implode in the moment of [crucified] violence. . . . Power, purity, and innocence had been collapsed in the single figure of Jesus as the Son of God who, from Mark's perspective, had every right to violate the temple and challenge the sovereignty of the Second Temple state. . . . It is the concentration of power, purity and innocence in a single anthropological figure . . . that marks [America's] mythological mentality" (Mack, "Power, Purity, and Innocence," 253, 254, 255, 260; cf. 258, repr., with revisions, in *Christian Myth*, 142–43, 145, 150; cf. 148–49).

74. See Mack, "Scriptures, Myths, and Power"; Mack, *Christian Mentality*; Mack, *The Rise and Fall of the Christian Myth*.

75. Mack, *Myth and the Christian Nation*, xi, 72, 11, xii; cf. 274–75.

76. Mack, *Myth and the Christian Nation*, 75; cf. 52, 72–76, 78, 255.

and situations," Mack illustrates "the thematic links between myths and rituals and . . . social interests" with a "short list . . . of social interests that can then be studied in relation to the structures of particular societies." The list includes territory, the people, rites of passage, food production (both agrarian and pastoral), ancestors, memorial festivals, systems of tuition, kinship, classification, and exchange.⁷⁷ "When the interests derived from the other systems that structure human societies are transposed into the imaginary worlds of myth and ritual," Mack notes, "their transposition . . . in mythic mode . . . triggers a transformation of the theme." Thus, for example:

Interest in kinship as a system may shift to interest in ancestral legends, genealogy, and descent. Mapping one's territory is often transfigured as an account of creation. Technologies of production are imagined as discoveries, inventions, or first-time stories. Tuition takes the form of example stories set in a fantastic world or past. The alreadiness of social arrangements is often accounted for in terms of origin stories in which precedence is established by patriarchs, powers, and authorities not accessible for questioning.⁷⁸

"When compared with the other systems of signs and patterns of practices that structure human societies," Mack writes, "systems of myth and ritual manifest three distinctive characteristics":

(1) they focus attention upon figures and actions in orders of time and space at a distance from the everyday world of activity; (2) they exaggerate the descriptions of the figures and activities that inhabit those imaginary worlds in ways that mark them as different from their counterparts in the world of actual experience; and (3) they may include the attributes of intention and performance of the frequently powerful agents located in those imaginary worlds. In sum: imaginary world; fantastic features; powerful agents.⁷⁹

"Myths and rituals enlarge the empirical world of a society to include a world of the imagination that encompasses the past and future of a people," as well as "the forces of nature that impinge upon the practices of the people." They also "mark moments of social interests, social practices, and the cultivation of customary habits of thought."⁸⁰ This means, Mack argues, that "myths and rituals should not be thought of as practices that cultivate 'religious' interests in contrast to social interests and practical interests. They are the ways in which the expanded *habitus* of human societies is acknowledged, memorialized, manipulated, and contested. Religion thus explained is not only part and parcel of the systems that structure human societies; its distinctive functions appear to be essential extensions of the other systems of signs and patterns of practices.

77. Mack, *Myth and the Christian Nation*, 52; cf. 42–44, 52–76.

78. Mack, *Myth and the Christian Nation*, 78.

79. Mack, *Myth and the Christian Nation*, 76.

80. Mack, *Myth and the Christian Nation*, 76, 84.

Myths and rituals are not only generated by social interests, they are the ways in which social interests continue to be shaped, criticized, thought about, and argued over in the ongoing maintenance of a society.⁸¹ Accordingly, inasmuch as “myths take the form of narratives in which deities are protagonists of actions that take place at a juncture where the human world and the natural environment are imagined to meet in dynamic relations,” myths and rituals provide “our data for developing a social theory of ‘religion’ that can then be used to analyze the social logic of the Christian myth and ritual system” as “a grammar that supports Christian mentality” and as “a legacy that is still at work among us.”⁸²

Having developed a set of categories to explain the social interests and intellectual investments at work in myths and rituals, Mack turns to early Christian mythmaking and applies these categories to a redescription of Christianity as a religion, tracing a three-hundred year history from its beginnings to the time of Constantine and the establishment of Christendom as the official religion of the empire, with the church’s Bible, creed, and rituals, basilicas, patterns of pilgrimage, and systems of patronage.⁸³ The momentous changes that resulted from the conversion of Constantine in the fourth century transformed Mark’s myth of origins into the primary myth and ritual text for the Christian church, the mythic foundation and charter for Christendom. Therefore, Mack concludes his remarkable study of Mark and Christian origins with a redescriptive definition of Christianity as religion:

And so it is that a single event, composite and complex, has haunted the Christian imagination for nearly two thousand years. That event is the manifestation of divine authority and power breaking into human history, coming to a violent climax in the crucifixion of God’s Son. His vindication by resurrection . . . envisages the radical transformation of human society intended, and guarantees the eventual actualization of the perfectly just and peaceable kingdom. . . . The history of the Christian religion can be told as the history of re-imagining the event of the Christ. [Since] the Christ event is a symbol of

81. Mack, *Myth and the Christian Nation*, 81, emphasis original.

82. Mack, *Myth and the Christian Nation*, 87, 44, 12, 13. For a discussion of “the myth and ritual systems of Christianity as structures of an imagined world,” and of the “mentality” of a Christian culture and the “mythic grammar” that “underlies certain ways of thinking” about the world (p. 183), see pp. 193–99 (describing the “imagined world” where agents, personified as gods, and events can be located), pp. 199–209 (describing the “mentality” taken for granted and characteristic of a people), pp. 200–203 (describing the mythic “structure” of the imagined world of Christendom, given with the myth-ritual system), pp. 203–9 (describing the “grammar” for thinking about the real world and all that happens within it, and for making judgments about situations and circumstances that arise); see also Mack, “Christ and the Creation of a Monocratic Culture,” 166–70; Mack, “Scriptures, Myths, and Power,” 44–51.

83. See Mack, *Myth and the Christian Nation*, 146–99, citing Smith, *To Take Place*, 74–95, 154–70; see also Mack, “Scriptures, Myths, and Power,” 38–41; Mack, *Myth of Innocence*, 357, 361–64.

radical transformation . . . the history of Christianity can be told as the history of the representation of the Christ event as the vision and vehicle of what the world must become. . . . To imagine the Christ event is to imagine the originary event that generates personal faith even as it generates the history of the church. . . . The church is [thus] a social historical institution that defines itself in the act of replicating its origination by means of the symbols of its origin.⁸⁴

Thus it was that “Mark’s fiction of the passion, contrary to his own intentions, provided inadvertently the text for a marvelous ritual system designed to enact in the present those events at the beginning that marked the origination of the church.”⁸⁵

IV

Mack’s efforts to make sense—“social sense”—of the beginnings of the Christian religion entail not only his critique of “the scholarly quest for the origins of Christianity” as an undertaking that “has, in effect, been driven by the Christian imagination,” and his argument that “if one wants to understand the origins of the Christian gospel of origins, one must study the way in which Mark fabricated his story, and determine why he wrote it the way he did.”⁸⁶ The “structure and function of the gospel thus created” are also always in view. Mack’s book is thus “about the plotting of [Mark’s] myth of origins and its designs upon the social histories, both of those who first produced it, and of those who still accept its charter.”⁸⁷ Accordingly, Mack is at pains to “trace out the circumstances and reflections that led to the formation of such a dramatic myth of origins” and to “assess [Mark’s] accomplishment and its legacy,” a “legacy of almost two thousand years’ duration,” indeed, “a legacy for the most part unrecognized by those influenced by it as the story of modern scholarship, Christian mission, and Western imperialism demonstrates.”⁸⁸ By concluding his study of the Gospel of Mark and Christian origins with a critical appraisal of the “narrative logic”⁸⁹ and “legacy”⁹⁰ of the Markan myth, and of the Christian “mentality”⁹¹ that takes it all for granted—as self-evident gospel truth—Mack

84. Mack, *Myth of Innocence*, 365, 366; cf. 364–68.

85. Mack, *Myth of Innocence*, 363.

86. Mack, *Myth of Innocence*, 23, 24, 8, 12, adding: “It was Mark’s fiction of a fantastic infringement on human history that created Christianity’s charter. . . . By locating the Christ myth precisely as an originary event complete with social historical motivation and consequence, Mark created the story that was to give to Christian imagination its sense of a radical and dramatic origin in time. . . . Because Mark’s plot provided the narrative logic for the other gospels . . . Mark’s Gospel must be seen as the origin for the Christian view of Christian origins” (pp. 353, 355, 357; cf. xii, 3–4, 9, 16).

87. Mack, *Myth of Innocence*, 24.

88. Mack, *Myth of Innocence*, 12, 14; cf. 353–76, esp. 368–76.

89. Mack, *Myth of Innocence*, 357, 367, 375; cf. 349, 376.

90. Mack, *Myth of Innocence*, 368, 372, 374.

91. Mack, *Myth of Innocence*, 370, 372–73, 376.

shows that he intends his work to be understood as a contribution to the study of religion as cultural critique.⁹²

Mack's subsequent analyses of the social logic and legacy of the Christian myth and mentality in Western (American) culture constitute, collectively, an ongoing research project on the cultural influence of the Christian myth and on the state of the Christian nation. Mack would present an outline of the project in an essay on the "origins, logic, and legacy" of *The Christian Myth* in American society, culture, and politics,⁹³ which he has pursued in a series of comparative studies of religion in culture.⁹⁴ But he already began to explore the implications of a critique of the Christian myth and a Christian mythic "mentality" in the conclusions to his earlier, book-length studies of the NT and Christian origins.⁹⁵ In his book on the Sayings Gospel Q, Mack noted the crucial difference that Q makes for redescribing Christian beginnings, arguing that, as a sayings gospel,⁹⁶ Q issues a "challenge [that] strikes to the heart of the traditional understanding of Christian origins." It's not just that "Q effectively challenges the privilege granted the narrative gospels as depictions of the historical Jesus." The "discovery of Q makes it possible to have another look at Christian origins, recognize common human strategies in the construction of myths and rituals, and study the process by which an attractive alternative to traditional social identities produced a new religion based on a new social anthropology." Q therefore "shifts the focus of conversation about Christian origins away from fascination with the many myths condensed in the New Testament and on to the people

92. See Mack, "Caretakers and Critics," whose essay constitutes "a meditation on the social role of the scholar [of] religion" (p. 32): a challenge to "think of our task as critics of cultures" (p. 38), and a call to engage in "cultural critique" (p. 37) and use "our critical tools to contribute to the task of working out a theory of religion in society" (p. 36).

93. Mack, "The Christian Myth and the Christian Nation," 191.

94. Mack, *Myth and the Christian Nation*, 217–75, who notes that "this book is not only a study about religions and social interests as they have been seen and created throughout human history. It is also [his] attempt to render a cultural critique of the Christian mentality at work in the United States at the beginning of the twenty-first century" (p. 275); Mack, *Christian Mentality*; Mack, *Rise and Fall of the Christian Myth*.

95. See Mack, *Lost Gospel*, 238, 250–53; Mack, *Who Wrote the New Testament*, 288–89, 292, 298, 302–4; cf. 96.

96. For a discussion and critical assessment of the historiographical consequences and cognitive advantage of taking sayings gospels—Q and the *Gospel of Thomas*—seriously as alternate beginnings that do not support the dominant (gospel) paradigm of Christian origins, as, collectively, a set of texts that constitute alternative points of departure to the typical assumption of the apocalyptic and kerygmatic orientation of the first followers of Jesus, see Cameron, "The *Gospel of Thomas* and Christian Origins"; Cameron, "Alternate Beginnings—Different Ends"; Cameron, "Ancient Myths and Modern Theories of the *Gospel of Thomas* and Christian Origins"; Cameron, "Redescribing Christian Origins," 39–40, 50–54; Cameron and Miller, "Issues and Commentary," 444–45; Cameron and Miller, "Redescribing Christian Origins," 497–503; Miller, "Introduction to the Papers from the Third Year of the Consultation," 33, 37–39; Miller, "Discussion and Reflections," 136–38.

who produced them," people "struggling with a social vision." As such, "Q's challenge is absolute and critical. It drives a wedge between the story as told in the narrative gospels [of the New Testament] and the history they are thought to record. . . . The story of Q demonstrates that the narrative gospels have no claim as historical accounts. The gospels are imaginative creations whose textual resources and social occasions can be identified. The reasons for their compositions can be explained. They are documents of intellectual labor normal for people in the process of experimental group formation." This means that "Q's challenge to the conventional picture of Christian origins is more far-reaching than the making of a little room for yet another early Christian movement." On the one hand, "the Jesus movement documented by Q cannot be understood as a variant form of the Christian persuasion basic to the conventional picture of Christian origins." For "with Q in view the entire landscape of early Christian history and literature has to be revised." On the other, "Q forces the issue of rethinking Christian origins as no other document from the earliest times has done." Q invites us "to see ourselves with myths on our hands" and "find it possible to make some contribution to the urgent task of cultural critique where it seems to matter most—understanding the social consequences of Christian mythology." For "if we take Q seriously, it will turn the quest for Christian origins into a question about our willingness to seriously engage in cultural critique."⁹⁷

Mack extends these findings in his introduction to the NT, in order to explain the making of the Christian myth and the formation of the Christian

97. Mack, *Lost Gospel*, 245, 250, 248, 256, 247, 7, 5, 257–58, 11, adding: "Myths, mentalities, and cultures go together. Myths are celebrated publicly in story and song. Mentalities are nurtured just beneath the surface of social conventions by means of unexpressed agreements. Myths, mentalities, and cultural agreements function at a level of acceptance that might be called sanctioned and therefore restricted from critical thought. Myths are difficult to criticize because mentalities turn them into truths held to be self-evident, and the analysis of such cultural assumptions is seldom heard as good news." Although "we do not know how to talk about the mentalities that underlie a culture's system of meanings, values, and attitudes . . . in order to get to the heart of the matter, we need to break the taboo against talking about our myths. Cultural critique without exposing the myths that support the truths held to be self-evident is merely interesting, not telling. . . . Q should help with this analysis by breaking the taboo that now grants privilege to the Christian myth. That is because the story of Q gives us an account of Christian origins that is not dependent upon the narrative gospels. That is a great advantage. Christian mythology can now be placed among the many mythologies and ideologies of the religions and cultures of the world. The Christian myth can be studied as any other myth is studied. It can be evaluated for its proposal of ways to solve social problems, construct sane societies, and symbolize human values. The gospel can be discussed as an enculturating mythology, and the question of its influence in American culture can be pursued without the constant interruption of questions and claims about the historical truth of unique events. . . . The question now is whether the discovery of Q has any chance of making a difference in the way in which Christianity and its gospel are viewed in modern times" (pp. 251, 253, 254, 247).

Bible, which was “created when Christianity became the religion of the Roman Empire” in the fourth century.⁹⁸ Addressing the ways in which the Bible is invested with “mystique” as “sacred scripture,” “taken for granted as a special book,” and treated deferentially “as if it spoke with a single voice,” as a book “with a single message,” Mack analyzes how the Bible functions as the foundational myth for Western (Christian) civilization, “works its magic in our [own] culture,” and “influences our collective sense of values and patterns of thinking” as Americans, as if we “take our place in history by unreflected reference to the Bible.” In course, Mack examines “the logic that resulted in the Bible”⁹⁹ as a selection and collection of texts, arranged in just a certain order according to “centrist” theological purposes,¹⁰⁰ that, taken together, serve as a kind of “constitution” or “charter” that historians of religion would call “myth.” As myth, Mack argues, “the Christian myth”—the “myth of origin for the Christian religion”¹⁰¹—the Bible functions in three basic ways: as (1) “epic” for “the American dream,” as (2) the “myth and ritual text” for the Christian religion, and as (3) an “oracle” in “popular parlance and practice.”¹⁰²

Epic, Mack writes, “is a rehearsal of the past that puts the present in its light. Setting the present in the light of an illustrious past makes it honorable, legitimate, right, and reasonable. The present institution is then worth celebrating. Naturally, both the past and the present may be highly romanticized or idealized, for epic is myth in the genre of history.”¹⁰³ *Epic* has been a central analytical category for Mack since his initial studies of Ben Sira’s interpretation of the Torah as “the epic history of Israel,” read “on the model of Hellenistic historiography.”¹⁰⁴ In his scholarship on Christian beginnings, Mack has elaborated upon his use of epic as a critical, comparative category.¹⁰⁵ In *Who Wrote the New Testament*, for example, Mack uses “epic” to (re)describe (1) the history of Israel as the Jewish epic, “aimed at the establishment of a temple-state in Jerusalem”;¹⁰⁶ (2) the Jesus movement’s efforts, eventually, to align Jesus with the story of Israel as “its destined agent of change,” a form of “mythmaking” that can be called “epic revision”;¹⁰⁷ (3) the ways in which Paul attempted a

98. Mack, *Who Wrote the New Testament*, 293; cf. 287.

99. Mack, *Who Wrote the New Testament*, 1, 2, 3, 15.

100. “It was centrist Christianity,” Mack writes, “that became the religion of empire under Constantine, collected together the texts we now know as the New Testament, and joined them to the Jewish scriptures to form the Christian Bible” (*Who Wrote the New Testament*, 6; cf. 6–8, 199–206, 225–28, 252, 259, 267–68).

101. Mack, *Who Wrote the New Testament*, 7, 8, 15; cf. 13, 275–76.

102. Mack, *Who Wrote the New Testament*, 296, 297; cf. 15–16.

103. Mack, *Who Wrote the New Testament*, 14.

104. Mack, “Under the Shadow of Moses,” 313, 314; see also Mack, *Wisdom and the Hebrew Epic*, 114–16; Mack, “Sirach (Ecclesiasticus),” 75–77, 80–83.

105. See Mack, *Myth of Innocence*, 30, 33–35, 38–39, 46–49, 54, 64, 76, 78, 92–93, 101, 108, 120–22, 128–29, 135–37, 149, 160, 168–69, 196, 215, 217–19, 224, 238, 318, 320, 359.

106. Mack, *Who Wrote the New Testament*, 14, 15; cf. 35–37, 278–79.

107. Mack, *Who Wrote the New Testament*, 161, 71, 73; cf. 283.

major "revision" of Israel's epic, reinterpreting the Christ myth and redefining "the constitution of Israel" to argue that gentiles could "belong to the family of God without being Jewish";¹⁰⁸ (4) Luke's fiction of an "apostolic" myth in the book of Acts, to construct an "epic history" of Christian origination;¹⁰⁹ (5) the central contribution of Justin Martyr to the creation of the "Christian epic," specifically, to "reading . . . the epic of Israel in order to make it end with the Christ," in support of "the claim . . . that Christians were the legitimate heirs of the epic of Israel, that the Jews had never understood the intentions of their God, and that the story of Israel, if one read it rightly, was 'really' about the coming of Christ";¹¹⁰ and, in general, (6) early Christians' appropriation of the Hebrew Bible as essential to the creation of the Christian Bible, a revision of the Jewish epic that combines "the Jewish scriptures and the apostolic writings" in a single book, which "could be used to claim antiquity for the Christian religion and serve as the Christian epic," provide an authoritative "charter for being a legitimate religion," and thus enable the church to "claim a firm foundation for its system of myth and ritual."¹¹¹ As epic, "our myth of God's designs upon both our past and our promise,"¹¹² the Bible "provides a worldview for Christians and their culture" that "defines [their] place . . . in the world and makes that place seem legitimate,"¹¹³ and that includes "an implicit claim to know the truth about God, history, and the human situation that other people do not know."¹¹⁴ As our epic, the Bible has become the "mythic template" for a "Christian mentality" that's "rooted in the Judeo-Christian tradition."¹¹⁵

108. Mack, *Who Wrote the New Testament*, 115, 117; cf. 121, 135, 137, 142–43, 284.

109. Mack, *Who Wrote the New Testament*, 233, 234, 236; cf. 225–26, 238.

110. Mack, *Who Wrote the New Testament*, 252, adding: "[Here] we are at the point where the beginnings of Christian theology and the construction of the Christian epic were the same enterprise" (cf. 259–73, esp. 262, 267–68).

111. Mack, *Who Wrote the New Testament*, 290–91, adding: "The Old Testament cast light on the antiquity of the church's theology and creed. The gospels rendered an account of the church's origin and mission in the light of the Old Testament. The gospels and the letters centered on the singular events of the last supper and the death of the Christ, thus providing the scripts for Christian myth and ritual. And the apostolic literature provided a mandate for the mission of the church in the world and for the succession of its bishops in charge of its social institutions" (p. 291; cf. 300–301).

112. Mack, *Who Wrote the New Testament*, 15.

113. Mack, "Scriptures, Myths, and Power," 32.

114. Mack, *Who Wrote the New Testament*, 302, adding: "The biblical epic is based on a worldview that is universalist in scope, monolinear in historical imagination, a singular system in organic conception, hierarchical in the location of power, dualistic in anthropology, and which has to have miracles, breakthroughs, and other dramatic or divine moments of rectification to imagine the adjustments that humans have to make when life and social circumstances change or get out of hand" (p. 306).

115. Mack, *Who Wrote the New Testament*, 292, 303, adding: "Without the Bible the Christian myth would evaporate. . . . Without the epic framework provided by the Bible, all the other myths, rituals, and notions of salvation that have become traditional to the Christian religion would disintegrate or mutate. . . . The fundamental reason for the Bible's importance" lies in the claim that "it is the story of God's purposes for humankind. The Bible is where the Christian notions of God and history are intertwined, the paradigms of salvation are

As the myth and ritual text for the Christian church, the Bible serves as “the script for Christian worship.” Merging archaic patterns of gathering for “covenant renewal” from the Ancient Near East and the Greek religious practice of gathering for festival (sacrificial) meals, Christians created their own forms of ritual congregation to celebrate such occasions for “memorial” and “epic rehearsal.” In Christian worship, “the readings from the Old Testament function as epic rehearsal” and “the readings from the New Testament function as . . . a call to covenant renewal.” In “the merger of myth and ritual in Christian practice . . . the Christian myth became a script for ritual reenactment in the medieval church, and the Christian ritual became a reenactment of the mythic script.”¹¹⁶

And as an oracle, the Bible is thought to “produce insights and instructions that address human circumstances of our time.” Such an impression is “an accidental by-product of the way the Bible combines two different collections of writings, the Old and the New Testaments. The way these two collections are connected forms a kind of equation for solving theoretical problems and produces a kind of grammar for thinking about human situations. The uncanny aspect of this equation is that it automatically activates cognitive functions that are basic for any and all human thought. Ultimately, it is the way this equation stimulates thought that gives the Bible its fascination as a book of sacred oracles and teases the reader into thinking that it holds the secret to profound understanding.”¹¹⁷ Nevertheless, Mack argues:

The Bible’s intrigue as a heady cognitive grammar is hardly ever consciously recognized by those who read it as the Word of God. It is [simply] taken for granted that the two collections of texts are different because history actually went that way, and that each collection has to be read at two levels of signification in order to understand the significance of that history. One of these collections, the Old Testament, automatically invites layered meanings and must be allegorized in order to understand the need for Christianity. The other, the New Testament, requires an imaginary replication of events in order to produce Christian experience. It is not recognized that allegorizing the Old Testament is a setup for

set, the thrust toward the future is generated, and the charter for Christianity to expand throughout the world is given. . . . The Bible is the Christian myth. The Christian myth is the Bible . . . a complete and closed book of sacred scripture, a book to be consulted, but not to be explained” (p. 276).

116. Mack, *Who Wrote the New Testament*, 300, 301, adding: “Thus the ‘then’ of the Christian myth is made present in the ‘here’ and ‘now’ of ritual; and entering the ‘here’ of ritual becomes the occasion for being transported into the imaginary world of the myth. . . . This means that Christian worship is designed to (con)fuse the imagination of the biblical times and places with their present reenactment in ritual in the interest of accentuating the sense of contrast between the mythic world that the church represents and the world as it is experienced in the host society” (p. 301; cf. 290–91, citing Smith, *To Take Place*, 109–14, 175–76).

117. Mack, *Who Wrote the New Testament*, 297; cf. 15–16, 297–300, citing Smith, “In Comparison a Magic Dwells”; Smith, *To Take Place*, 42–46, 142–46.

the significance with which the New Testament is loaded. . . . With such an equation of two such laden texts, however, the possibilities for using the Bible to analyze any human problem are endless. That is because the equation activates basic cognitive functions of comparison and contrast, offers a very rich reservoir of narrative imagery, and provides a lens for both the ironic and paradigmatic interpretation of all human events, both then and now, simultaneously.¹¹⁸

In his most recent work Mack has continued his efforts to redescribe the beginnings of Christianity, refine his social theory of religion, and explore the implications of both for a critical assessment of the social logic and cultural influence of the Christian myth. He has, in particular, substantially expanded his concept of "social interests"¹¹⁹ and engaged in detail the research project of Vincent L. Wimbush in the Institute for Signifying Scriptures,¹²⁰ a project that investigates "the ways in which African Americans and other peoples oppressed by Euro-American societies registered a critique of the dominant culture by appropriating the stories of the Bible in their own interests."¹²¹ Since

118. Mack, *Who Wrote the New Testament*, 298–99, adding: "In the Old Testament a word or event has to refer to two different orders of discourse synchronically." Thus, for example, "the paschal lamb is first the Jewish paschal lamb, but it 'really' refers to Jesus Christ as God's eternal intention. The double meaning of the words and events in the New Testament, on the other hand, is found in their application to a then and a now," diachronically, except that in this instance "it is a matter of the same event taking place at two different times in Christian history. Every Christian knows, however, that the events recorded in the New Testament were 'unique' and that they happened 'once for all.' Nevertheless, it is just these events that are reenacted regularly in Christian ritual and recalled vividly to the Christian imagination whenever the New Testament is read. . . . Recreating these New Testament events by reading, recall, and response is an operation of memory and imagination fundamental for Christian thought and mentality. That vital contact with the originary past is what the church must repeatedly make available to Christians in order to live up to its charter as the vehicle of human transformation. This means that the marvelous intermingling of the unique event and its replication"—a "contradiction in terms," to be sure—"or the sense of the incomparable Christ event as paradigmatic of the 'novel' and the 'new' in every Christian's own experience, is also a product of the Bible's cognitive equation" (p. 298; cf. 297).

119. See Mack, "Scriptures, Myths, and Power," 7, 11, 26, 52, 56–58, 60, 62–63, 65–67, 70, 83, 89, 91, 108, 113; Mack, *Rise and Fall of the Christian Myth*, 12, 37–38, 41, 46–50, 57–59, 66, 69, 71, 76, 78, 81, 85–88, 90–91, 93, 95, 100–101, 116, 118, 120–25, 129, 145, 148–50, 167, 174–75, 183–89, 194–201, 226, 241, 243, 248, 252–53, 265–66, 269–71, 276, 281; Mack, "Cartwheels," 133–34.

120. Mack, "Scriptures, Myths, and Power," citing Wimbush, "Biblical Historical Study as Liberation"; Wimbush, ed., *The Bible and the American Myth*; Wimbush, "Introduction: Reading Darkness, Reading Scriptures"; Wimbush, *The Bible and African Americans*; Wimbush, "Introduction: TEXTureS, Gestures, Power." See, in addition, Wimbush's 2010 Presidential Address to the Society of Biblical Literature, "Interpreters—Enslaving/Enslaved/Runagate."

121. Mack, "Scriptures, Myths, and Power," 5. As Wimbush puts it, "How might putting African Americans at the center of the study of the Bible affect the study of the Bible? . . . What if the reading of and thinking about the Bible—that third rail of almost all discursive and ideological formations that have led to the constitution of the West—

“the African American intellectual tradition and its resignification of the Bible [are] cultural critique (of the dominant culture) and cultural confirmation (of the African American culture) at one and the same time,” Wimbush is engaged in what Mack would call “the intellectual labor involved in resignifying the Bible as cultural myth in our time,” in a “rereading on the part of oppressed peoples” that’s both “a critique of the dominant society and its traditional reading of the Bible” and “a reimagination of the biblical stories to reflect the histories of an oppressed people’s social situation and cultural ‘texture.’” The “intellectual labor” of “signifying” biblical stories as “scripture” refers to “the way in which a people heard, understood, and retold their own histories by seeing themselves in reflexive relation to the stories of the Bible.” Signifying scriptures is thus a “dynamic process of imaginative activity critical for the collective discourse of a people,”¹²² which issues in their “empowerment”—“freedom from the control of the dominant culture”—“the ‘empowerment’ that results from the practice of signifying upon the Bible as scripture” and that “has to do with cultural identity as that which is discovered, created, and celebrated in the signifying conversa-

were read through African American experience? . . . Centering the study of the Bible upon African Americans would be a defiant intellectual and political act. . . . The African American engagement of the Bible is too much a rupture, a disruption, a disturbance or explosion of the Europeanized and white Protestant North American spin on the Bible and its traditions not to begin with the fundamental and open questions that can inspire the most nuanced intellectual work. How could one, having taken seriously the foregrounding of the African American engagement of the Bible, not begin with *the fundamental question, which is not about the meaning of any text but about the whole quest for meaning (in relationship to a [sacred] text)?* . . . I [therefore] propose that African American experience, or what African American experience can come to represent, be placed at the center of the serious study of the Bible, including academic study of the Bible. Rather than [be] seen as an attempt simply to force a different dominant center in place, this ‘centering’ of African American experience should actually represent an attempt at the *de*-centering and explosion of all prevailing interpretive paradigms; it should represent the call to make room for and to take seriously what the study of the Bible should be about as a type of cultural practice, why it should perdure, and on what terms. . . . [Such a] project presents to academic biblical studies the most defiant challenge: it argues that the point of departure for and even the crux of interpretation not be texts but worlds, [namely,] society and culture and the complex textu(r)alizations of society and culture. Further, it argues that this point of departure should begin in a different time—not with the (‘biblical’) past but with the present, that is, with the effort to understand how the present is being shaped by the Bible (which then provides warrant for forays into the past)” (“Reading Darkness, Reading Scriptures,” 2, 8, 9, 12, 19, emphasis original).

122. Mack, “Scriptures, Myths, and Power,” 14, 7, 6, 21; cf. 9, 11, 13–14, 20–25, 30, 102–12, 115–16, 124–27. Wimbush’s choice of “the term *scripture*,” Mack notes, “makes it possible to escape the connotations of the Bible that Christians have loaded upon it even while allowing it to take its place as one among many other texts produced by our and other cultures. . . . *Scripture* becomes a cipher to hold the place for all of the ‘texts’ written by people from out of their lives together and whose careful reading and writing, given this insight about human social formation, can be called ‘signifying’” (p. 20, emphasis original). The technical term *signifying* is taken, in part, from Mitchell-Kernan, “Signifying”; Long, *Significations*; Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*.

tions" of a people.¹²³ By putting not the texts, but the practices of subaltern people front and center in the study of the Bible as scripture—"by describing their ways of reading their scriptures"—Wimbush's project of "signifying on the Bible as scripture" opens up "the possibility of overhearing a people's *work* with the Scripture as precious evidence for understanding the textures of their cultures."¹²⁴

Wimbush uses the term *text* to identify the articulate public manifestation of some cultural construction made available for others to experience. Songs, sermons, novels, rituals, dances, postures, gestures, speeches, proposals—all are "texts" that can be "read" to "explore" the "texture" of a people's social cohesion and culture. . . . "All peoples have texts. All peoples signify." This means that texts are not add-ons to a people's social structures and practical productions. They are not ornamental, nor are they merely secondary attempts to explain this or that feature of a people's culture. They are part and parcel of the structure itself. They are a fundamental ingredient of a dynamic process in the work of living together. Texts belong to the texture of a people. They generate structures and are generated by structures. Their importance . . . is that they partake of the magic of human discourse, the public articulation of a people's self-understanding as a society, their texture publicly expressed as a text. Without texts to register discourse we would not be able to think together about any common project or understand those of others. By calling the Bible "scriptures" and scriptures "texts," and by characterizing the work of discourse as signifying texts, Wimbush has proposed a theory of cultural formation.¹²⁵

Mack's assessment of the Institute's project of signifying (on) scriptures may serve as a fitting conclusion to his own scholarly labors. Mack has been working primarily with Christian origins, with "different moments of social situation and mythmaking" from Wimbush. Mack's analysis of "the making of the Bible as the foundational myth for Western Christian culture," he writes, has resulted in a "critique of the standard imagination of Christian beginnings, one that views Christian origins as miraculous, exceptional, and incomparable instead of as a product of human invention and social interests." His own "project" has therefore "required a redescription of Christian beginnings as human mythmaking in the interest of social formations that were understandable responses to the social histories and circumstances of the time." Underlying

123. Mack, "Scriptures, Myths, and Power," 107–8, 116, 126–27, adding: "For Wimbush, empowerment . . . refers to an awareness of an African American culture, that this culture is profoundly humanizing, that it has a distinctive history of critical intellectual activity, that it has cultivated a human ideal of remarkable character and ethic, and that it has the potential to dismantle the walls of separation and discrimination that keep us from laying the foundations for a common good society" (p. 117; cf. 14, 123, 130–31, 135–36).

124. Mack, "Scriptures, Myths, and Power," 115, 116, emphasis original.

125. Mack, "Scriptures, Myths, and Power," 22, emphasis original.

Mack's project are two basic concerns. First, "to discover the human reasons and social logics involved in the early Christian mythmaking of the gospels and the Bible." Second, "to analyze those reasons and that social logic from the perspective of our current world of many nations and [to] register a critique of the culture of Christian myth and mentality that has always left others out of the Christian world." Mack's "method" of analysis has been "to explore the 'mythic grammar' of Christian mentality in order to describe its limitations for dealing with other peoples in our modern world."¹²⁶ And so, in affirming the significance of the Institute's work, with its potential to contribute to a critique of culture,¹²⁷ and in translating the concept of "signifying" and "scriptures" into his own categories (of *myth* and *mythmaking*),¹²⁸ Mack continues his lifelong commitment to the academy: situating the social-historical study of the NT and Christian beginnings within the academic enterprise of religion; challenging the study of religion to contribute to public discourse and debate, as a participant in comparative cultural criticism; and producing scholarship that recognizes and embraces the principle of difference, celebrates the human labor of sense- and mythmaking, and challenges our best efforts to understand our changing world and dare to imagine a future—together.¹²⁹

126. Mack, "Scriptures, Myths, and Power," 7–8, adding: Wimbush, on the other hand, recognizes "the way the Bible actually works in the modern world among peoples viewed by the dominant culture as inferior. This involves a reading of the Bible that is different both from the standard Christian practices and from [Mack's] own description of Christian cultural mentality. From the perspective of oppressed peoples, the traditional interpretation of the Bible by Euro-American Christians in support of their dominant culture, as well as the underlying social logic of the overarching Christian myth, has been seen as problematic by peoples marginalized by that culture." Wimbush understands that "African Americans [have] not accepted the Euro-American reading of the Bible because they were fully aware of the disparities between the Bible stories and the Christian interpretations of those stories, as well as the dissimulations involved when those stories were used to sanction social patterns of behavior that subjugated other peoples. In [Mack's] project, the mythic grammar of the Bible could no longer be accepted without a revision of the myth if we wanted to address the social imbalances created by that grammar. Wimbush's project reveals that such revisions are actually being produced all the time at the popular level of lived experience and cultural discourse among oppressed peoples. This means that an African American intellectual tradition has been at work on the construction of a new (biblical) 'text' or (cultural) 'script' in keeping with the texture of the people's own ethnic identity" (p. 8).

127. For Mack, this means "delv[ing] into the myths and mentalities at work in different cultures in order to analyze their social logics and explain their mythic grammars" ("Scriptures, Myths, and Power," 135).

128. Mack, "Scriptures, Myths, and Power," 13, 14, 31, 136. "Signifying is not meaningless," Mack writes, "but accepts that, in life, meaning is always to be sought somewhere between truth and understanding" (p. 105).

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