

Where We Go Next—Big Questions for the Big Picture

A Response to Burton Mack, and Reflections on the Future of the Christianity Seminar

Maia Kotrosits

Burton Mack's place in the work of the Christianity Seminar is both massive and implicit. So many of his fundamental contributions are or have become our pre-suppositions, not the least of which is an approach to NT and affiliated literature that reads those texts as responses to their messy and regularly disorienting social world, as responses to social ideals and the collapse of those ideals. In fact, some of the Christianity Seminar's most basic goals are indebted on some level to Mack: to rethink the first–third centuries without highly romantic notions of origins or the great acts of men; to focus our attention more creatively and critically on the relationship of “early Christian” literature to the social forces and cultural histories of the ancient Mediterranean; to make each element of what we call “early Christianity” historically explicable without recourse to theological exceptionalism.

On an even deeper level, the fact that we gather under the blustery presumption of re-thinking the entirety of the first–third centuries reveals us to be swept up in the promises of what we have been calling the “big picture” narrative of that period, a task which has been thoroughly defined—or re-defined—by Mack. (What the promises of the big picture seem to be, and whether we can deliver on them, is a question I will entertain further on.)

Given the ways in which we take Mack's influence on our goals and frameworks for granted, I thought this might be a good occasion for re-centering us. That is, I want to use the occasion not just to honor the efficacy and impact of Mack's work, nor even to heed the shadow Mack casts over us. Instead, I want to leverage Mack's repeated themes and his specific historical and ideological commitments to clarify what it is we think we might be doing here and what we anticipate the effects of our work to be. That is to say that I hope Mack's very distinct and unabashed perspective on the work of history—how to do it, why it matters—will nudge us into being just as distinct and unabashed about our historical modes and motivations.

In what follows, I will focus us on five defining aspects of Mack's work: (1) myth-making, demythologization, and the social; (2) relationships between texts and social phenomena; (3) culture collision, critique, and creativity in the

mess; (4) the U.S. political landscape; and, (5) sweeping conceptualities and provocative gestures.

Myth-making, Demythologization, and the Social

The term “myth” and the social production and circulation of mythologies are perhaps the most defining characteristics of Mack’s work. In his *Myth of Innocence*, he suggests that the Gospel of Mark provides a myth of origins for Christianity, one founded (defensively) on a sense of singular irreproachability and innocence.¹ Paul constructs/builds upon a “Christ myth” as illustrated in the kerygma.² Ben Sira’s hymn is a myth that lends divine intention to social structures.³ Biblical scholars and U.S. culture are not only captivated by the “myth of the Bible,” but recapitulate Christian myth-making in myriad ways.⁴ The task of the historian then is demystification, offering a material context for such mythic imaginations, and doing so with a clear-eyed empiricism and fully secular set of investments.

The Seminar has not often engaged the language of myth-making explicitly, in part because many of us question the presumptions of unity and essence implied by Mack’s models—“the Christian myth,” “the myth of the Bible,” or even a distinctive notion of Christian/Christianity at all. But we might observe that the primary object of our own demythologizing has been the “master story” of early Christianity as a distinct phenomenon with a single trajectory from Jesus through the apostles, on to orthodoxy and then Constantine. On the heels of the Acts seminar, which not only places Acts well into the second century but also reads it as a myth of origins unfortunately naturalized by NT scholarship, the Christianity Seminar has repeatedly sought ways to intervene in theological assumptions about Christian history that support exceptionalist or even simply teleological historical narratives. Two of our primary historical myths have been martyrdom and Gnosticism, for example, which are at heart narratives of persecution/righteousness and orthodoxy/coherence respectively.

Despite the fact that “empirical” historical data has been repeatedly “instrumentalized” to extend the “Christian myth,”⁵ Mack still holds that there is a difference between history and myth, and he sees his work as fully part of the former. But I would like to call attention to the fact that any project of demythologization with Bultmann in its direct lineage will need to reckon with the ways that demystifying project was still a thoroughly theological one, one

1. Mack *A Myth of Innocence*.

2. Mack, *Who Wrote the New Testament*, chapters 3 and 4. Mack, “Re-reading the Christ Myth: Paul’s Gospel and the Christ Cult Question,” in *Redescribing Paul and the Corinthians*.

3. Mack, *Wisdom and the Hebrew Epic*.

4. See *A Myth of Innocence*, Introduction and Conclusion; Mack, *The Lost Gospel*; Mack, *The Christian Myth*.

5. *A Myth of Innocence*, Introduction.

which sought to translate NT discourses and symbols into immanently meaningful ones for people of a different age.⁶ So, to what extent do we still see ourselves as part of the imperative toward a secularized history, and how does that intersect with the work of those of us in the Seminar that seek a (deconstructed, modest) set of theological possibilities? I use “theological” here not necessarily to indicate waxing on the existence of a god, but rather to indicate a set of tools or results that actively engage making sense of the present, whether that sense-making makes recourse to a god or not. God regularly acts as a stand-in for all kinds of narrative impulses around history and questions of meaning anyway. God’s main function, I would dare to say, has been as a narrative device: giving significance, telos, and coherence to the vast and variegated space, the chaos, of experience.

Considering god’s narrative functions and the implicit theological impulses of even histories that use secular/empirical methodologies and tools might push us to ask some questions about the past and future of Westar itself. Should we understand Westar’s legacy within biblical scholarship as a secularized one, and if so, to what extent do we need to be loyal to that legacy? Again, and just to put all my cards on the table, as so much recent scholarship on the invention of the secular has shown⁷ and as Mack’s own work has demonstrated, the secular has consistently been the language in which not just cultural but theological and/or existential assumptions naturalize themselves anyway. Mack’s “Christian myth,” for all the Christian fantasies of coherence, inventiveness, and distinctness it extends, is a prime example of the ways that attempting to divest ourselves from theological narratives does not mean we are not also used by them. History itself is myth-making, and so how might we *scrutinize as well as constructively engage* the inevitability of our mythological enterprise? In this we might also ask to what extent the parallel processes of the God Seminar and the Christianity Seminar might speak to each other, even while respecting their separate modes of expression and horizons of possibility.

I want to push us to find ways to honor the tools and methods of the discipline, and perhaps even increase the rigor of our investment in them, without any kind of deep faith in empirical disinterestedness or bowing to the presumption of secularism. That is, if history is myth-making, the goal is not necessarily to reconstruct the most impartial picture of the ancient world, but rather to make one that helps us name this moment most precisely and effectively and—not insignificantly—to relativize ourselves most thoroughly. That is, we have to resist the urge to collapse the present and the past, even while they cannot be reliably differentiated. Thus historical “relativization” does not simply mean increasing the rigor of our investment in the tools of the discipline, but doing

6. See, e.g., Bultmann, “Neues Testament und Mythologie. Das Problem der Entmythologisierung der neutestamentlichen Verkündigung (1941).”

7. See especially Asad, *Formations of the Secular*, and Pellegrini and Jakobsen, *Secularisms*.

so in order to be in almost devastatingly close touch with our desires for what we want, and cannot have, out of history.

Relationships between Texts and Social Phenomena

Mack's recasting of "early Christian" literature as fully explicable in social terms is packaged in schemas in which texts are associated with distinct groups with contrasting ideals and responses to basically the same broader social factors in the ancient Mediterranean. For Mack then, this literature presents us with a picture of a "diverse" Christian constituency, and each individual text gives us a portrait of a community with distinct, often incongruous positions and socio-theological takes on the same set of Judean and Hellenistic traditions. Mack also continually highlights the social creativity or innovation of texts, even if that innovation had ominous implications. He often uses the words "genius," "inventive," or "novel," when describing ancient Christian notions or practices. These texts represent collective social experiments, collective rationalizations for social practices, and/or an articulation of social ideals.

The implication is that while the landscape of "early Christian" literature is full of variety, texts often come to represent coherent sets of communities with shared positions—a collective caught in a miniature *Zeitgeist*.⁸ We might ask to what extent this has been our default assumption. But more than that, we might engage the question of on what planes we are seeking/expecting similarity and difference. One question I have been preoccupied with is how do we capture the rich textural difference between texts without assuming deep ideological differentiation is what is at stake in those differences? While I do not think we should be naïve about competition between groups or figures, treating them as positions is already inherently an orthodoxy/heresy model.⁹ This model is limited by being a time specific development (and not a universal one at that), but I would caution us from taking that model at face value even when it does operate. How does the rhetoric of groups or figures at odds with each other cover over—or even assume—close, collaborative/elaborative, overlapping relationships between texts or people? Do differences need to presume friction (and negative friction at that)? To paraphrase something Karen King has said, what differences make a difference—and to whom? Importantly, how can we characterize close, overlapping, and elaborative relationships between texts and/or figures *without defaulting back into a picture of a unitary or coherent single phenomenon*? I propose that this will require us not just to break down our categories, but to pay attention to textual and social affiliations that do not fit our

8. See Stanley Stowers' critique of this assumption in "Kinds of Myth, Meals, and Power: Paul's Gospel and the Christ Cult Question," in *Redescribing Paul and the Corinthians*.

9. As Stowers suggests, albeit with respect to the over-reading of "internal" community differences between Paul and the Corinthians. Stowers, "Kinds of Myth," 107.

stereotypical categorizations, to see those affiliations as standard practices and yet not indicative of some sort of essential or elemental affinity.

Culture Collision, Critique, and Creativity in the Mess

One of the aspects of Mack's work that I find not only most fruitful but, frankly, most poignant, is the picture he paints of ancient people in the crosshairs of various cultural forces, brokering between fragments of histories and traditions they call their own and doing so in surprising ways in the motley mix of the Mediterranean.¹⁰ What if we gave this sensibility more due?

While Mack generally considers the advent of the Roman empire as a clunky development with mainly structural (and not quite formative) implications, I do think that a sophisticated understanding of politics, agency, and constraint emerges between the lines, and we might take some cues from it. While the ancient Mediterranean may or may not have been qualitatively more confusing or fragmented or messy than any other historical moment, the very attention to the ways people are enamored with ideals and haunted by the failure of those ideals—the ways they are driven by a need to make sense of the forces coursing through them, forces for which the people themselves are ultimately only minor or incidental subjects—is for me one of the most finely-gauged, and experientially true, implications of Mack's "big picture."

Mack's ancient people have bombastic fantasies, deep disappointments, ridiculous expectations, and invigorating encounters. They thus cut through those persistent (and ultimately unhelpful) binaries of assimilation and resistance to which so much of the discipline is currently attached. Assimilation and resistance are not only nonsensical as oppositions but represent worry and fantasy more than material practices and lived experience. Pure resistance is a romance, and assimilation of dominant cultural elements (admitted or not) is simply a fact, and one that does not preclude critique or disillusionment. The whole breadth of postcolonial literature, even at its most sanguine, treats subjectivity and agency as deeply ironic—sovereignty only occurs with recognition, agency is forever tied into dominant frameworks.¹¹ We might occasionally be befuddled by the contradictory social or political signals emanating from a text, but that has more to do with the general impossibility of ever fully distinguishing between the powers one might support and those one might oppose (to paraphrase Judith Butler). We need simply to ask different questions about power and its implications. Mack's emphasis on creative cultural productions accommodates ambivalence and volatile political potentialities, but focuses

10. See especially his first vivid chapter of *Who Wrote the New Testament?*

11. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*; Hall, "Who Needs Identity?" or Mannur and Braziel, eds., "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," in *Theorizing Diaspora*; Hall, "Gramsci's Relevance for the Study of Race and Ethnicity"; Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*.

more on how ancient people are trying to live caught between pressures, how they are trying to live in their world — and, perhaps surprisingly, how they feel about it.

While we do not need to (and should not) straightforwardly assume Mack's model of Hellenism and Judean traditions as separable and antagonistic elements more/less simply housed under a Roman umbrella, we might ask whether recent biblical scholarship has (or we have) been so fixated on the question of Roman imperial domination that we do not attend enough to the older slivers of histories or traditions that strangely persist or travel through time, ones that take on complex new lives and get integrated, sometimes awkwardly, into later cultural moments. It might be that we need a more diachronic approach (to resuscitate that old language) to the first–third centuries themselves. Indeed, thinking of any given historical “moment” as composed of many other concurrent moments, as containing ghosts and shells and footprints of pasts, might help us be a little less generalizing about the extent to which Rome is the implicit target or even most significant determinant for a given text or set of social ideals. But again, how might we do this without collapsing into the naivety of some former NT scholarship in which Rome figures as benign presence at most? To pull all of these considerations together: how do we incorporate the empire-critical and postcolonial insights of the last decades of biblical scholarship into a wider set of critical and historical considerations so as to do justice not only to the complexity of lives under empire or colonialism, but also to the thick and multi-textured topography of the first–third centuries?

The U.S. Political Landscape

We must observe that by now Mack has turned his attention away from ancient historical description and towards the legacies of Christianity in U.S. politics and culture. In his paper for this session, he ups the ante for us and proposes that the primary and explicit intervention of biblical scholarship should be to “come to speech about the Bible as the myth that underlies Western culture, the culture that is now in trouble. Biblical scholarship should be able to extract and analyze the Bible's epic mythology for description as a social logic.”

Mack is right to notice “Western culture,” or more specifically American culture, is in trouble. And I share his sense of urgency and desire to shape public discourse. We are of course a scholarly institution for the public, and one in the U.S., and I have suggested above that we take making sense of the present in substantive and rigorous ways as central to our work. That includes being conscious again and again about the ways capitalism, modern histories of land usurpation and enslavement, police violence and the disciplinary state, sexual violence and rape culture, among other things, might offer us analogues or otherwise inform our work. But do we, should we, think of ourselves on a mission to save? Would not a failure of Western culture, according to Mack's logic, be

the rightful failure of the Christian or biblical myth? Evangelizing implications of this notion to save aside, I want to say that however explicitly or implicitly we end up trying to intervene in U.S. cultural self-understanding, we take as our basic assumption that the U.S. and Western culture as we know it is going down, and probably not as quickly as we hope or fear. Given the place of the Bible and Christianity in U.S. nation-building, though, it would be ironic not only to try to save the U.S. from the mess it has created, but to make a history of Christianity, however deconstructed or *avant garde*, as part of the redress. In other words, let us not take ourselves to be heroes.

I would also like to suggest that, even as we critique biblical discourses and biblical culture as problematic and as instruments of more than occasional destruction, a re-written history of the first–third centuries might be useful for getting perspective—for taking stock of the moment in all its fullness and destruction. It could possibly help diagnose what is wrong and what to do about it, but I suspect we already know a lot of the things that are wrong and already have a lot of ideas about what to do about it. Perhaps the portraits or stories we produce, in their very historical specificity, might instead be ground for considering how people live when they are, for example, expecting things to end, or for considering how people gauge their own significance when things around them keep falling apart, or for considering how people manage to cultivate connection, pleasure, and joy even when they know things have gone terribly awry. I think you probably get my drift.

Sweeping Conceptualities and Provocative Gestures

Finally, I want to address the bigness of Mack’s big picture—a bigness that materializes in its temporal sweep, the ostentatiousness of its tone, and the sheer amount of intellectual labor poured into it. In the paper for this seminar, Mack proposes that scholars of the Bible and early Christianity are at a juncture in which we are endangered by our own lack of a sense of relevance, and the only redress is through getting outside of the usual scholarly comfort zones:

Discourse at the public level is, of course, quite different from talking to ourselves inside the boundaries of an academic club. But since the guild is in the process of losing its traditional audiences in the churches and academies, anyway, its attempts at finding a responsible and reasonable role for its investments and labor is not much different than all of the other social interests and traditional intellectual projects that now find themselves at the limits of their orders wondering what to do next. So why not put our learning out there in the intellectual marketplace where social unrest and cultural criticism are now providing the topics for public discourse? We might have to learn a few new rhetorical ruses to get the attention of intellectuals in other fields.¹²

12. Mack, “The Quest for Christian Origins,” xxx (see in this issue of the *Forum*).

Sweeping conceptualities and provocative gestures are native to the institute that housed the Jesus Seminar—a group whose work managed to catch wide public and scholarly attention and whose work still manages to live on in public and scholarly consciousness with some ambivalence, perhaps even over-determining to some extent this Seminar's work. In fact, in the cases of both Mack and the work of the Jesus Seminar, those sweeping conceptualities and provocative gestures have indelibly altered the landscape of thought regarding "early Christianity," have made an almost unprecedented number of historical and historiographical contributions. But one might also note that the biggest, most provocative gestures—the red-lettered voice of the historical Jesus, the diagnosis of a "Christian myth"—have also drawn the most critique, and not simply because they upset people's delicate constitutions or break taboos (which they of course did). It is also that they are not quite right. They are indeed "ruses," coarse concepts and too-easy captures of complex historical and historiographical knots, ones that are dead-on diagnoses of *something* (collective dissatisfaction, desire for the real), but that something is not the truth of history, even though that is the currency in which both of these projects trade. And, importantly, both the historical Jesus project and the unveiling of the Christian myth at the heart of Western culture aim themselves at certain over-simple forms of piety. This is a huge part of their success and their power, but also a very specific framework in which to operate.

These are the risks of sweeping concepts and provocative gestures. These risks are not small, and we will have to decide how necessary they are—or at least when they are necessary. And as we entertain the question of how we address "the public" in our work, I would suggest that there is no such thing as "the public," there are only many kinds of publics, and we are going to have to decide *which* publics we want to engage, because if that choice remains implicit, our work will very likely follow a trajectory already carved out by market-research assumptions and Pew Research Center polls, limited paradigms for understanding collectives to say the least.

But I also want to underline Mack's provocation that we "get interdisciplinary," so to speak, in our own "big picture" and to be savvy about the intellectual marketplace. What will be our ruse? I am not sure we need to be a lot more specific than a "re-writing of the history of early Christianity," but that is because the writing of a history of "early Christianity" was always a ruse itself—a forceful, encapsulating rhetorical device that did not show itself to be one. Indeed, it is the excessive damage of this very sweeping conceptuality and provocative gesture—this myth—to which we are addressing ourselves now. I hope that chastens us a bit, not to prevent us from making sweeping conceptualities or provocative gestures at all, obviously, but to remind us that the stakes are high, that spectacular wrongness is inevitable, and that the mode in which we execute this larger project of ours on a public stage matters immensely. Perhaps, I hope most that it reminds us that the real value of the very big, very wrong picture

lies elsewhere than in what it proclaims to be, and it will have to trade on something more than historical veracity.

Works Cited

- Asad, Talal. *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*. Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 2003.
- Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. New York: Routledge, 1984.
- Bultmann, Rudolf. "Neues Testament und Mythologie. Das Problem der Entmythologisierung der neutestamentlichen Verkündigung (1941)." Pp. 15–48 in *Kerygma und Mythos*. Hamburg: Reich, 1960.
- Cameron, Ron, and Merrill P. Miller, eds. *Redescribing Paul and the Corinthians*. Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2011.
- Hall, Stuart. "Gramsci's Relevance for the Study of Race and Ethnicity." *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 10,5 (1986) 5–27.
- _____. "Who Needs Identity?" Introduction in *Questions of Cultural Identity*. Ed. Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay. London: Sage, 1996.
- Mack, Burton. *Wisdom and the Hebrew Epic: Ben Sira's Hymn in Praise of the Fathers*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985.
- _____. *The Lost Gospel: the Book of Q and Christian Origins*. New York: HarperOne, 1994.
- _____. *Who Wrote the New Testament: the Making of the Christian Myth*. New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995.
- _____. *A Myth of Innocence: Mark and Christian Origins*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1998.
- _____. *The Christian Myth: Origins, Logic, Legacy*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2003.
- Mannur, Anita, and Jana Evans Braziel, eds. *Theorizing Diaspora*. Malden MA: Blackwell, 2003.
- Pellegrini, Ann, and Janet Jakobsen, eds. *Secularisms*. Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2008.
- Spivak, Gayatri. *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1999.