

## ***OTHERWORLDLINESS AND THE NEW TESTAMENT***



AMOS N. WILDER

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## *SERIES FOREWORD TO THE AMOS N. WILDER LIBRARY*

GIVEN THE SUPERFLUITY OF books in the world, there has to be a compelling reason to reissue those that have gone out of print. Most often a curious reader can rely successfully on interlibrary loan or Google Books to gain access to what the publishing world has otherwise let drop. But this piecemeal retrieval is not sufficient when an author, rather than a single volume, warrants being brought back into circulation; when there is a whole body of work deserving of a fresh audience. Such is the case with Amos Niven Wilder (1895–1993), whose prodigious writing, spanning the better part of a century, claims our attention with its extraordinary variety of genres (poetry, essay, and memoir) and disciplines (biblical study, literary criticism, theology).

First, the man behind the publications. A gift for writing and a passion for literature were very much in the family's DNA. Named for his newspaper-publisher father, Amos was the eldest of five, four of whom distinguished them as writers. Most famous of them was his only brother, the playwright and novelist Thornton Wilder, about whom he wrote "Thornton

novelist Thornton Wilder, about whom he wrote “Thornton Wilder and His Public” in 1980. Educated at Yale University, from which he eventually received four degrees, he also undertook biblical and theological studies in France and Belgium but most importantly at Mansfield College, Oxford, where he encountered the likes of Albert Schweitzer (*The Quest of the Historical Jesus*) and C.H. Dodd (renown for the notion of “realized eschatology,” wherein the end is not near but now). These years of schooling launched his career as a distinguished New Testament scholar at Andover-Newton Theological Seminary, the Chicago Theological Seminary and the University of Chicago, and finally at Harvard Divinity School. Yet perhaps more crucial to his personal development than this academic training was his service in World War I, during which time he served as a volunteer ambulance driver in France and Macedonia (receiving the *Croix de guerre*) and later saw significant action as a corporal with the U.S. Army field artillery in France. That the “Great War” shaped his life and career is suggested by the works that bracket his publications: his first book, a collection of poems, *Battle Retrospect* (1923), and his very last, *Armageddon Revisited: A World War I Journal* (1994). Both bear witness to a traumatic wartime experience that neither destroyed him nor ever let him go.

For many, the trenches marked the end of faith, but not for Wilder. Upon his discharge he went to Yale Divinity School, was ordained in the Congregational Church, and served briefly as a parish minister in New Hampshire. By the end of the 1920s,

however, he was back at Yale to do doctoral work in the New Testament. Impelled by a fascination with eschatology, that branch of theology concerned with “last things,” he focused research and imagination on traditional themes: death, the end of the world, and the ultimate destiny of humanity. But this was no antiquarian theological interest; it was his way into a deeper understanding of the Gospel and the times in which he lived. It is not difficult to connect the academic study that culminated in *Eschatology and Ethics in the Teaching of Jesus* (1939, 1950, 1978) with the trauma of World War I; it is even easier to understand why throughout his career he was drawn to the apocalyptic literature of both Jews and Christians. In France he had been inside an apocalypse, had felt the earth reel and rock, had seen the foundations of the world laid bare (2 Sam. 22: 8, 16). It would not do to dismiss these biblical visions, as many did at the time, as surreal and grotesque fantasy; they were, he would argue, grounded in an actual Armageddon he had witnessed firsthand. “Reality” as it had been known before the world had been torn open for judgment. It was time for revelation.

The correspondence Wilder saw between ancient apocalyptic and the experience of his own generation—between notions of biblical crisis and the revolutions of the twentieth century—inspired an already established biblical scholar to become a literary critic as well. Turning to texts sacred and secular, ancient and modern, he discovered in them a common situation, what in a 1971 essay he called “nakedness to Being,” an “immediacy to the dynamics of existence.” When you live

in a ruined world, you must study the ruins. Literature was a place to begin.

He began, in fact, with the particular literature of biblical writers: parable, myth, apocalypse, and Christian rhetoric in all its forms. Moreover, rather than travel the well-worn, dusty paths of the New Testament academy, Wilder invested himself in an exploration of biblical imagination at a time (unlike the present day) when few were doing so. What precisely was the world the Scriptures asked us to enter, and how did language bring it to life? Parable and apocalyptic were especially compelling to him as they emerged, he argued, from “a crucible where the world is made and unmade.”

Wilder did not approach the Bible “as literature,” but rather as the Word of God articulated in a variety of literary forms. He welcomed the new attention being paid by literary scholars to the Scriptures—Northrop Frye, Robert Alter, Frank Kermode—and was grateful that windows had been opened “in an ancient library long obscured by stained glass and cobwebs” (as he wrote in an endorsement of Alter and Kermode’s *Literary Guide to the Bible*). Yet he was not uncritical of what they found on the sacred page, nor did his interest in literary theory prevent him from arguing against the Deconstructionist notion that biblical narrative (*pace* Kermode’s *The Genesis of Secrecy*) was finally indeterminate and open-ended. For Wilder, the Gospel of Mark, for instance, was “too urgent for puzzles



and mystification”; it was not a cryptogram but an “opening and crowning disclosure” of glory.

In a daring move for a “guild” scholar, even one long drawn to questions of biblical interpretation, Wilder also opened his readers to the poetry, fiction, and drama of the twentieth century. An early foray into this career-long exploration was *The Spiritual Aspects of Modern Poetry* in 1940; a decade later came the decennial Bross Prize-winning *Modern Poetry and the Christian Tradition* (1952), *Theology and Modern Literature* (1958), and then *The New Voice: Religion, Literature, and Hermeneutics* (1969), where he touches on novelists (Proust, Gide, Sartre) and poets (Eliot, Robert Lowell, David Jones). These books invite the theological reader to be at once nourished and challenged by twentieth-century literature. However, they were written not only to expand the horizons of biblical scholars, but also to develop an interest in religion among those not inclined to seek it out. Still more ambitious is Wilder’s 1976 book, *Theopoetic*, with its call for a renewal of biblical religion itself through the cultivation of the imagination. This required the risk of the new, stepping beyond the safety of the familiar and time-worn to explore deeper waters: “Old words do not reach across the new gulfs, and it is only in vision and oracle that we can chart the unknown and new-name the creatures.” Before the message, came the vision; before the sermon, the hymn; before the prose, the poem. (He began his life as a writer in 1923, after all, as a Yale Younger Poet.)

Wilder's *The Bible and the Literary Critic*, published in 1991—just two years before his death in his 98<sup>th</sup> year—offers his own retrospection on a life's work spent on a border between Scripture and literature, proclamation and critique, God's Word and the poet's new account of everything old. Thanks to Wipf & Stock's republication of his works in "The Amos N. Wilder Library," we now have a chance not merely to look back on an extraordinarily varied creative life but to realize anew what it stands to offer our future explorations of the Bible and its literary afterlife.

Peter S. Hawkins  
Professor of Religion and Literature  
Yale Divinity School  
New Haven, CT  
October 2013

## **F O R E W O R D**

The incentive to the writing of the present volume was afforded by invitations to lecture on two similar foundations: that of the Jackson Lectureship at the Perkins School of Theology and that of the John C. Shaffer Lectureship at the Yale Divinity School. In the lectures at Dallas in February, 1954, the first and the last two of the chapters that follow were presented (together with a lecture not here included) under the topic: "Commending the Gospel in Our Time." I wish to record here my appreciation of the many kindnesses shown me during my visit by Dean Merrimon Cuniggin and the Faculty of the Perkins School of Theology, and again to make my acknowledgment to Mrs. Lizzie Jackson Davenport and Mr. Mims J. Jackson, representing the donors, who were present. The Shaffer Lectures, comprising the four chapters that follow, were given at the Yale Divinity School in April, 1954. I take this occasion to express my warm thanks to Dean Liston Pope and the Faculty of the School for their generous hospitality in connection with the Convocation and the Lectures.

The one great and telling charge made against the Christian religion in the modern period is that it is otherworldly, escapist and irrelevant to the problems of this life. With this accusation can be associated the names of Karl Marx, Nietzsche and Sir James Frazer, but it recurs in many forms among modern writers and conditions the attitudes of multitudes. It must be admitted that many expressions of Christianity are vulnerable at this point. Even where they do not lay excessive stress on the world to come, they are falsely spiritualistic, or they identify the Gospel with noble but ineffectual ideas and ideals, or they confine the life of the faithful to private exercises whether refined or orgiastic.

It is true that our antagonists and critics are often ill-qualified to pass judgment on the faith. They may be amiable Philistines who confuse the simple order of enjoyments of which they are capable with the proper depth and altitude of human experience. They may be modern Graeculi or diminished heirs of a classical tradition who still identify Hebraism with barbarism, or cultists of a pagan vitality who similarly shrink when the Scripture speaks of "justice, and self-control and future judgment." They may count themselves among the emancipated who repudiate as "fictions" most of what the world has esteemed precious, whether it has come from Palestine or Greece, from East or West. They may be converts

to Marxism or to scientific humanism who in place of the otherworldly faith which they scorn as "compensatory" accept a this-worldly mythology and Utopianism far more naïve.

Yet even when we make allowance for all such erroneous views, we must take seriously the widespread indictment made against the church and the faith. Christians themselves have a bad conscience in this matter. The everrecurrent plea of the layman today that religion should be made relevant to his problems is an index of the situation.

The present volume seeks to come to terms with this issue. The crux of the whole matter lies in the New Testament itself. Heretical forms of otherworldliness have appeared in the church through all the centuries and have always appealed to the Scriptures. Contemporary forms of escapism and false spirituality rest upon a misunderstanding of the Gospels and the other writings of the New Testament. There is no question but that the evangelists and the apostles used pictorial otherworldly categories, interpreted the crisis in which they lived in dualistic terms, and directed their attention toward an imminent consummation of the divine plan. The circumstances of the earliest believers inevitably conditioned their outlook and help to account for certain features of asceticism in their attitudes. Yet we can easily misunderstand the New Testament and the whole character of Chris-