

*Eschatology and Ethics
in the Teaching
of Jesus*

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R E V I S E D E D I T I O N

AMOS N. WILDER

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TO MY FATHER

AMOS PARKER WILDER

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 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 98th 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

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Preface

THERE is increasingly general consent among biblical scholars today that when Jesus announced the coming of the Kingdom of God he envisaged an imminent divine intervention in the world or dramatic judgment and world-renewal similar in nature to the phenomena of the end-time pictured in the Jewish apocalyptic writings. This at least was the implication of the terms and imagery which he used. The reign of God in this future aspect meant to his hearers, as George Foot Moore has defined it, "the undisputed supremacy of God throughout his creation." This was "at hand," a consummation involving both catastrophic judgment and the inauguration of the new age through the agency of the heavenly Son of Man. Jesus used these and cognate terms and images familiar to the men of his time without feeling the need to define them anew, though he may have wished to correct certain misunderstandings bearing especially on their moral implications.

Recognition of this eschatological outlook of Jesus has disturbed men in their estimate of him. At this point particularly the results of modern scholarship have not passed over into the churches but have rather met a continuing resistance. It has not been realized that the gain is greater than the loss. For Jesus' message so understood not only fits more satisfactorily into its context in the Old Testament and Jewish background and in the New Testament sequel so that it is illuminated by its background and illuminates the beginnings of the church. More significant still, the intensity of the hope and its universality and ultimacy are better grasped when the good news is seen as couched in these transcendental symbols.

But special difficulty arises here also in connection with the authority of Jesus as a moral teacher for modern times. A bewildering

diversity of views exists in any case as to his ethic. Tolstoy is only the most notable of those who have held that his imperatives should be taken as obligatory in the most literal sense. Nietzsche saw in the requirements of love and meekness a slave-morality incompatible with the heroic temper. Many Christians have been honestly puzzled as to the relevance of his moral attitudes to the problems of organized social and political institutions. Lutheran moral theology has often held that the demands of Jesus represented an impossible counsel of perfection, so framed as to drive the despairing conscience back upon grace. Modern liberal interpreters have tended to accommodate the requirements to the secular code of the day. Yet the resulting confusion has not undermined the authority of the teaching to any such degree as the conclusion that Jesus' ethical demands were intended alone for an emergency situation, an interim, with which our historical outlook and situation have little or nothing in common. Such a conclusion has tempted men to surrender up in despair the question of the historical Jesus, his significance, his authority.

Such a despair is by no means justified. It would be above all regrettable if the great and revolutionary advances of New Testament studies should lead to disillusionment when, on the contrary, they are achieving great positive results. We may have had to abandon jealously guarded dogmatic preconceptions as to Jesus. We may have had to recognize the cultural and psychological conditioning of his outlook. This only means, perhaps, that we accept in a more thoroughgoing way the implications of the doctrine of the Incarnation. Or, to put it in other terms, it means that we situate the founder of Christianity more persuasively in his own actual circumstance without thereby denying his uniqueness but rather bringing it more clearly into focus. Moreover there is clearly one advantage in recognizing the eschatological conditioning of Jesus' ethic. As far as the content of the ethic is concerned a great simplification results: we no longer strain to apply literally in new generations those things spoken in the terms of a particular situation. Yet the relevance can be defined and without evasion.

In what concerns admission of the eschatological outlook of Jesus,

and the sway in his thought of this strain so alien to us, we are only going one step further along the way we have already gone in recognizing that Jesus shared in his own way the ideas of his time. We have already applied a process of historically sympathetic appreciation to the phenomena of demonology in the gospels and no longer find a scandal in Jesus' acquiescence in the views of his time at this point. We need to do the same now as regards his use of the apocalyptic ideas of his day. "The inference is clear. If not today then in the easily foreseeable future Christianity will be constrained for its very life to apply a similar process of historically sympathetic appreciation to the whole domain of New Testament eschatology."¹

The first step, certainly, towards understanding the ethical teaching of Jesus in its general bearing or in its present application is to understand it in its relation to its original occasion. More than one element went to make up the original antecedents and circumstances of this teaching, of which the most important were the standing ethical norms of the time, the Torah and the tradition and their practice. Strains of ethical teaching cognate with one or other element in Jesus' own can be found in the ethics of the prophets, of the wisdom teachers, of the apocalyptists and of the rabbis. All study of the teaching of Jesus must have these relationships in mind. Any other factors bearing on the sayings must be held in mind, particularly the immediate circumstances under which they were spoken, if such can be established. When all such matters are noted it still remains that a most significant factor in the presentation, if not in the content, of the ethical teaching was the eschatological expectation. It is difficult to deny that Jesus' whole call to repentance and his urgent summons to the righteousness he preached were set against a background of vivid eschatological rewards and punishments which he saw as imminent. And it is difficult to deny that some of his demands, certainly as laid on certain individuals, were extraordinary demands conditioned by an extraordinary situation.

The task of stating what the original teaching of Jesus himself was, either as regards eschatology or ethics, not to mention their mutual relation, is one beset with immense obstacles. Scholarship

¹ B. W. Bacon, *Studies in Matthew* (New York, 1930), p. 429.

is ever more aware of the difficulty of drawing a line between the *ipsissima verba* and the sayings ascribed to Jesus in the gospels but bearing the stamp of later formulation. The Jesus of the synoptic gospels, even the Jesus of our oldest sources, is a figure whose outline has already been modified unconsciously in the thinking of the church. In any case an effort must be made and has been made with good results to distinguish some of the clearer modifications which the tradition has undergone, by the use of all the criteria open to us. On the basis of these a working hypothesis as to the historical Jesus and his teaching can be presented. Such a hypothesis must underlie a study of this kind. While the detailed argument of this hypothesis is not included in the present form of this inquiry, its main points will appear.

But for the central issues we are here concerned with, we have one great advantage. Even supposing we err in some degree in confusing the Jesus of the gospels with the Jesus of history we may well, none the less, in our final findings reach conclusions of real value. For one thing we may have some confidence that our discriminations in the tradition will have eliminated from the picture all really late and flagrant distortions. And in the second place our findings will in any case throw light on the central problem in the thinking of the earliest Christian community. For it is our firm conviction that at bottom, in its essential meaning, the relation of eschatology to ethics was much the same for this community as it was for Jesus himself. The distortion has affected not the essence of the matter but the externals. Even supposing that our best hypothesis only presents us with a Jesus created by the tradition, the value of the study of the topic still remains for the light it throws on the motivation of the primitive church. Bultmann has this to say with regard to the view of some that the eschatological features were added to the teaching of Jesus by the Christian community: "Even so, the meaning of the eschatological announcement would at bottom remain the same, and the question would still remain, whether or how this announcement was related to the preaching of the will of God in the community. Instead of the message of Jesus, it would be the message of the community that needed exposition, and since

it finally comes down to the substance, meaning and claim of the evangelical tradition, the question as to how much the historical Jesus and how much others contributed thereto would be a secondary matter.”²

In presenting this revised edition of the book it is timely to note the changing situation of studies in this field with special reference to the interrelation of scholarship and the general influences of our time, especially the changing theological outlook. Each generation has its own special needs and orientation and these affect the approach made to our subject matter and the questions asked of it. Nineteenth century liberal Christianity from Ritschl to Harnack envisaged the meaning of the Kingdom of God in a certain way and its historical study of the matter received both incentive and limitations from the theological outlook and cultural assumptions of the period. The rise of the social gospel in this country carried with it a powerful motive to new historical study. Together with the contemporaneous development of social historical method, it opened the eyes of the historian to a better understanding of Jesus’ message. At the same time there was in this phase of scholarship a degree of modernization which subsequent investigation has sought to obviate. The emergence of the theology of crisis and kindred emphases on the transcendent aspects of the primitive gospel have motivated in their turn an intensive study of the idea of the Kingdom, again not without its own unconscious modernization. Reaction to this movement characterizes the present situation.

But concern with the topic does not arise alone today out of scholarly pursuits and changing theological views. Pressing problems of social ethics and public order, and of the proper message of the church with regard to them, create a responsibility for biblical scholarship in this field. The best evidence for this is found in the particular topics set for world-wide examination by the Study Department of the World Council of Churches. These topics, brought specifically before the Amsterdam Assembly but subject to con-

² Rudolf Bultmann, *Jesus*, (Berlin, 1929), p. 114; English translation: *Jesus and the Word*, translated by Louise Petibone Smith and Erminie Huntress (New York, 1934), p. 123 and cf. pp. 12-14.

tinuing discussion, concern the church's message for the social and political problems of our time. Underlying these inquiries is the basic question of "The Biblical Authority for the Church's Social and Political Message Today." In preparation for a volume dealing with this question a series of ecumenical study conferences have been held and participation of scholars in various countries has been enlisted. Examination of the preliminary reports of these consultations indicates how significant a place is taken by the questions with which the present book is concerned.³

From many sides, therefore, we observe that the concerns of the church and of scholarship today lead to the study of the early Christian message and in particular to the study of Jesus' message of the Kingdom. It is not surprising that college curricula in religion, seminary courses and seminars, as well as programs in religious education and lay study constantly return to this subject matter.

On the other hand, the continued work in technical scholarship has been a contributing factor in keeping the eschatological question to the fore in theological circles. The labors of Johannes Weiss, Loisy and Albert Schweitzer provided an essential base for and played into the hands of dialectical or neo-orthodox interpretations of the gospel, though this development was entirely uncongenial to the scholars named. Their thoroughgoing eschatological interpretation of Jesus' message and work implied an otherworldly outlook and a transcendental view of the Kingdom which could easily find a place in the theology of crisis. Again, the work of Bultmann and Dibelius in form criticism had theological implications. The radical criticism of Bultmann and his historical skepticism are commonly felt to have an immediate relation to his form of dialectical theology. Some similar relation no doubt exists between Dibelius' *Die Formgeschichte des Evangeliums* (1919) and his *Geschichtliche und übergeschichtliche Religion im Christentum* (1925). Contrariwise, religious-historical investigation, especially that of Rudolf Otto, has contributed to the reaction against dialectical views of Jesus' mes-

³ See *From the Bible to the Modern World: Two Conference Reports*. Edited by The Study Department of the World Council of Churches; 17 route de Malagnou, Geneva, 1947.

sage. More considered views with regard to form criticism and tradition criticism and more judicious conclusions as to the apocalyptic literature and outlook have had their repercussions in biblical theology, though they have by no means led to agreement on the eschatological question among scholars today.

Thus historical-exegetical study must continue and with it consideration of the larger question of the relevance of New Testament eschatology to the modern world. In English, we have, among others, comparatively recent works on these matters by C. H. Dodd, T. W. Manson, C. J. Cadoux, F. C. Grant, J. W. Bowman, and translations of volumes by Bultmann, Dibelius and Otto. In this country of late attempts at synthesis are unfortunately largely confined to single chapters in general studies of the career of Jesus or in works on biblical theology. Several of our best treatments of any length available in English are written from a rather special viewpoint, such as Dodd's *Parables of the Kingdom*, Bultmann's *Jesus the Word*, and F. C. Grant's *Gospel of the Kingdom*. In general, moreover, the eschatology or the ethics are treated alone rather than in relation to each other, at least in any systematic way. In these circumstances it appears worth while to bring the present work up to date and to republish it with revisions.

The chief revisions in the present edition are the following: The second chapter dealing with the eschatological teaching of Jesus has been enlarged and brought up to date. To the summary there of the contributions of Schweitzer, Dodd and Otto has been added a review of the work of other and more recent scholars both as regards their critical findings and the theological implications of their results. The discussion in the third chapter of the historical and transcendental elements in Jesus' view of the future has likewise been enlarged with special reference to the issue today as to their bearing on the Christian understanding of history. In Part I changes are not made in the text apart from minor corrections and clarifications. In Part II, however, numerous modifications have been made in the text and in the approach, especially in what concerns the relation of Jesus' person to the formulation of his demands. A chapter has been added at the end of the book supplementing the conclu-

sions of the whole discussion and entitled, "The Kingdom of God and the Moral Life." Here we venture to broaden somewhat the area considered and to relate our conclusions to certain contemporary issues, especially to the dangers of moralism in the interpretation of the Christian faith. The bibliography has been greatly expanded and brought up to date. In view of this bibliography abbreviated titles are given in the references except in the first citation of a work. We wish again to acknowledge our debt to the International Council of Religious Education for permission to cite as we do in almost all cases from the American Standard Edition of the Revised Bible.

We are indebted to certain reviewers for suggestions. Part II connects certain of the most drastic of Jesus' ethical demands with the critical situation that arose in his ministry. Is this interpretation, then, a return to "interim ethics" which is earlier rejected? It would not seem so. It does indeed constitute an emergency ethic, but the emergency is not that of Schweitzer's interim, rather it is that of Jesus' mission. This does occasion a particular kind of demand, but it is shown that no double standard of conduct is involved, and that such emergency ethics or "mission ethics" are often relevant on later occasions.

A more difficult issue raised in the same part is the question of Jesus' person and its relation to the ethics. If it be granted that the ethics of Jesus can be characterized as ethics of the messianic age or new covenant ethics, can we speak of it also as "discipleship ethics"? We believe that it can be so presented in view of the fact that Jesus and the cause of the Kingdom are so inseparable. Nevertheless, we have modified our position on this matter. What is said on this point is admittedly problematic since the whole question of the messianic claim of Jesus is involved. But at least a thesis is proposed to the reader.

It will be noted that the distinction between the eschatology of the individual and the eschatology of the world is referred to at various points. Quite apart from the message of the imminent new age, the Jews envisaged rewards and penalties for the individual after death. Jesus sometimes speaks in this vein; the Dives' and

Lazarus' saying if authentic would be an example. But in Jesus' preaching such compensations usually merge with the compensations at the Judgment. A further matter of terminology may also be noted. Eschatology is understood as the teaching with regard to last things and there are various forms of it in the Bible, not to mention non-biblical writings. Apocalyptic eschatology is one kind of eschatology and refers to the more dualistic and transcendental kind usually found in the apocalyptic literature. The adjective "eschatological," however, is very commonly used in the latter more restricted sense (i.e., for "apocalyptic eschatological") and this is admissible if the context safeguards the distinction.

AMOS N. WILDER

*Chicago Theological Seminary and
Federated Theological Faculty
of the University of Chicago
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