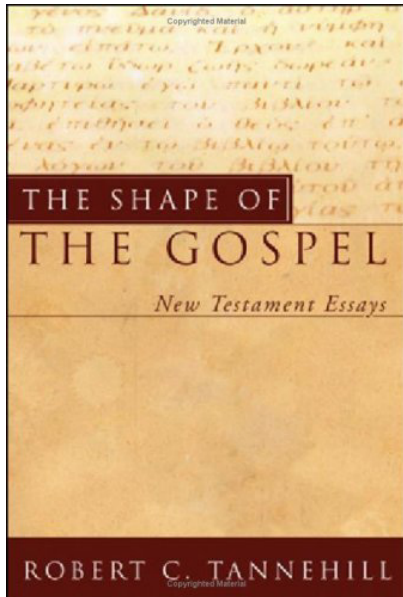


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Tannehill, Robert C.

The Shape of the Gospel: New Testament Essays

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New Testament scholar Robert Tannehill is most widely known for his narrative studies in Luke-Acts. *The Shape of the Gospel*, however, is a collection of previously published essays (except for the last chapter on Pauline soteriology) that for the most part represents his earlier research in Gospel literary forms and the Gospel of Mark; the bulk of the essays were originally published between 1977 and 1984. The “datedness” of these essays, however, should not deter one from recognizing their (re)contribution to New Testament studies. The publication of this volume is a worthy endeavor.

The Shape of the Gospel is organized into three parts. Part 1 investigates the literary form and function of Gospel materials, particularly pronouncement stories; part 2 widens this focus on literary forms to the Gospel narratives as a whole, particularly the Gospel of Mark; and part 3 touches upon Pauline studies. Although the book is a collection of essays, a discernible logic and progression does exist between most of the chapters and between parts 1 and 2. This coherence is facilitated by introductory paragraphs that orient the reader both to the content of the chapter and to the significance of its inclusion. Part 3, however, lacks this correlation and is something of an anomaly in the book; even the two chapters that comprise part 3 are not related in focus. One should note that an unfortunate consequence of publishing these previous, stand-alone essays with an aim for

coherence is a considerable repetition of material, especially in relation to pronouncement stories (chs. 2–5) and the narrative of Mark’s Gospel (chs. 5, 7–9).

Chapter 1 serves as an introduction to the subsequent chapters, not only the chapters of part 1 but also of part 2. Here Tannehill sets forth his understanding of the communicative, as opposed to informational, nature of the Gospel texts. The Gospels were written to engage, challenge, and change the assumptions, interests, and attitudes of their readers, and the rhetorical dimension of this function is reflected in what Tannehill calls “tensive language,” that is, “language that embodies a tension and expresses a conflict with ordinary ways of thinking and acting” (5). The interpreter should be attentive to the literary strategies utilized by the Evangelists to effect this “tensive language” in their narratives. Tannehill then briefly illustrates this interpretive task by considering three kinds of Gospel materials: sayings attributed to Jesus (e.g., Matt 6:25–33; 5:39; 5:23–24), pronouncement stories, and the Gospel of Mark as a unitary narrative.

Chapters 2–4 provide a substantive study on pronouncement stories. A pronouncement story “is a brief narrative in which the climatic element is a pronouncement that is presented as a person’s particular response to something said or observed on a particular occasion of the past” (20). Thus, the pronouncement story has two essential elements: the response and the circumstance that provoked the response. Based on the various interrelations that occur between the response and the circumstance, Tannehill develops a typology of pronouncement stories: correction, commendation, objection, quest, inquiry, and description. The interaction between these two principal parts also generates the function of the pronouncement story. The relation between the climatic response (the pronouncement) and the provoking circumstance is one of contrast, most often a difference in perception, values, and commitments. As Tannehill states, “The various forms of contrast enable the story to express an attitudinal shift. The reader or hearer is being invited to follow this shift, rejecting one attitude and embracing another” (23). Thus, pronouncement stories are rhetorically shaped to generate a particular response from the reader. Although there is much overlap between these chapters, each one has its own purpose. Chapter 2 introduces the literary form of pronouncement stories by providing a definition and typology; chapter 3 classifies the Synoptic pronouncement stories according to the typology developed in the previous chapter; and chapter 4 provides more in-depth discussion on individual synoptic pronouncement stories. A nice feature of chapters 2 and 4 is the inclusion of illustrative pronouncement stories from Greco-Roman sources. This feature implicitly informs the reader that the Gospel writers participated in the literary conventions of their time.

Although pronouncement stories are (again) included, chapter 5 expands the discussion of literary types by treating other Gospel forms: parables, wonder (miracle) stories, and

promise and commission epiphanies. Tannehill discusses these literary forms with attention to their formal elements and functions, as well as a classification of the literary type if one exists. With the parable Tannehill emphasizes its figurative or metaphorical quality and how the rhetorical force of the parable is found in its use of stereotypical associations: “The parable can set the traditional associations in motion, in part by reinserting them into the human sphere from which they were drawn and using fresh human experience to reimagine” (108) what the kingdom of God is like. Wonder stories relate those occasions on which Jesus does an extraordinary deed that manifests God’s power in the midst of normal human experience, usually an experience of suffering or trouble. These amazement tales are classified as exorcism stories, healing stories, provision stories, controversy wonders, rescue wonders, and epiphany wonders. The function of these stories can be manifold, including to elicit praise of God, to engender faith in Jesus, and to “call people out of resigned acceptance of their physical and social limits by providing examples of liberation from evil powers and models of daring faith—a faith that goes beyond the expected behavior in order to reach out to the power that saves” (115). Promise and commission epiphanies are literary accounts that describe an appearance of God or God’s messenger (an angel or the risen Christ) who communicates a promise and/or command. Recognizing the episodic character of these literary forms, in this chapter Tannehill also surveys how longer narrative sequences and the entire Gospels can be read with attention to narrative features.

Chapter 6 is a “brief textual note” (127) that examines the meaning of “Be perfect” in the Gospel of Matthew’s so-called Sermon on the Mount (5:48). Tannehill reads this verse as the conclusion of the last antithesis in the Sermon as opposed to the concluding statement of the entire antitheses section. Tannehill also prefers the translation of τέλειος as “complete” instead of “perfect.” Thus, the meaning of this verse concerns the “completeness of a love that excludes no one” (128). This chapter is only four and a half pages in length and is unrelated to the previous chapters, which raises the question of its inclusion in this volume.

Chapters 7–9 (part 3) demonstrate how the Gospel of Mark as a whole can be read as a continuous narrative, although each chapter approaches Mark’s narrative from a different perspective. Chapter 7 examines the narrative role of the disciples. An awareness of plot development, implied author and reader, and other narrative features (repetition and dialogue) reveal the role of the disciples moving from one of concord with Jesus to one of conflict. The Evangelist has shaped the narrative of his Gospel in such a way that his intended readers will identify with the disciples, “so that what he reveals about the disciples may become a revelation about the readers and so enable them to change” (159). It should be noted that this chapter also serves as an appropriate beginning to part 3 because of its helpful introduction to Tannehill’s method, narrative criticism. Chapter 8

analyzes Jesus as the central character of Mark's narrative, noting the fundamental role of Jesus' "commission" as the overarching purpose to the sequences and episodes of Mark's story. In tracing this unifying plot, Tannehill observes narrative techniques such as delayed disclosure of Jesus' commission, irony, and paradox, which contribute to the particular shaping of Mark's narrative composition. Chapter 9 demonstrates how the whole of Mark's narrative becomes the interpretive context for two of Jesus' sayings (8:34–35). Not only does Tannehill attend to the rhetorical function of the sayings as antithetical aphorisms, but he also interprets the sayings in terms of their narrative function in Mark's contrasting story of the faithfulness of Jesus and the failure of the disciples.

As stated at the beginning of this review, chapters 10–11 (part 3) shift to Pauline studies, although each chapter deals with completely different issues. In chapter 10, Tannehill seeks to demonstrate how different scholarly reconstructions of the Corinthian situation, which are themselves influenced by ideological interests, can result in quite contrasting interpretations of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. This is illustrated by surveying a feminist interpretation (represented by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and Antoinette Clark Wire) and a "political" interpretation (represented by Richard A. Horsley and Neil Elliott) of 1 Corinthians. In short, a feminist interpretation of 1 Corinthians results in Paul as oppressor, while a political interpretation (anti-Roman Empire) depicts Paul as liberator. Tannehill does not clearly demonstrate how the two ideological approaches actually address the same issues or passages, so the chapter seems to be a comparison of the proverbial apples and oranges. Chapter 11 argues that participation in Christ is the center of Pauline soteriology, a center that encompasses not only the phrase "in Christ" but also the themes of dying and rising with Christ, being baptized into Christ, being one body in Christ, putting on Christ, and "Christ in you." Tannehill also stresses the importance of interpreting Paul's justification by faith and Christ's death "for us" in relation to participation soteriology.

Regrettably, *The Shape of the Gospel* lacks a concluding chapter, which could have provided Tannehill an opportunity to articulate, perhaps even to defend, the significance of his approaches for New Testament studies today. Such an articulation from a veteran interpreter such as Tannehill would be most welcomed, especially given that the methods (form criticism and narrative criticism) promoted in this book are deemed by some to have run their course in New Testament studies. My own assessment of Tannehill's contribution is threefold. First, Tannehill advances the study of literary forms beyond Rudolf Bultmann's and Martin Dibelius's *Formgeschichte*, an advancement that Tannehill himself wants to stress (23–24, 59–60). Whereas Bultmann and Dibelius were interested in the pre-Gospel history of literary forms and their function in the life of the early church (*Sitz im Leben*), Tannehill is concerned with the literary-rhetorical function of

these forms in the context of the Gospel narratives. For anyone who thinks that the study of literary forms is equivalent to *Formgeschichte* and hence obsolete for interpreting the Gospels, Tannehill's *The Shape of the Gospel* should cause reconsideration. Second, Tannehill's attention to the rhetorical function of Gospel forms and language merges nicely with current studies of ethics and the New Testament. For example, Charles H. Talbert's *Reading the Sermon on the Mount* (University of South Carolina, 2004) utilizes Tannehill's "pioneering work" (31 n. 12) in interpreting the Sermon on the Mount as character formation. As Tannehill himself states, the Gospel stories have been shaped to "produce significant shifts in basic attitudes of hearers and readers" (viii). Any appropriation of the Gospels for ethical reflection should be informed by the rhetorical and literary issues addressed by Tannehill in these essays. Third, I can imagine using *The Shape of the Gospel* in a seminary class (New Testament or homiletics) in order to facilitate the pedagogy of preaching. (The homiletical benefit of Tannehill's approach is tangentially suggested in chapter 9.) Interpreting Gospel texts with an understanding of their rhetoric and narrative context would provide (1) parameters and/or direction about the issues to be addressed in a sermon and (2) the rhetorical basis for the sermon itself, a much-needed corrective for preachers who read the Gospels simply in terms of morality and/or doctrine.