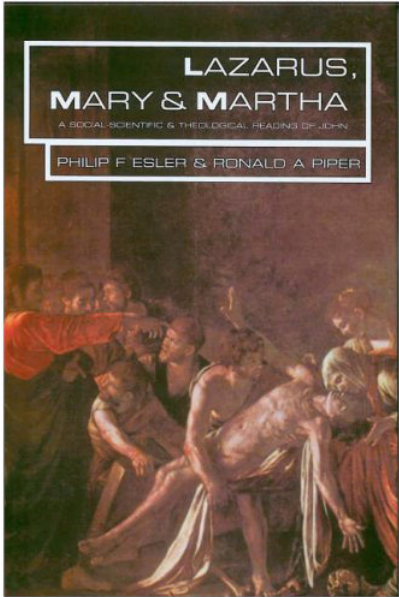


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**Esler, Philip F., and Ronald A. Piper**

***Lazarus, Mary and Martha: A Social-Scientific and Theological Reading of John***

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The authors point out that the Lazarus episode in the Gospel of John has exerted a potent force within Christian experience as a result of the long tradition of reflection it has enjoyed. It was one of the most popular themes in early Christian art, especially in Roman catacomb art, where sixty-six paintings featuring Lazarus are listed. Lazarus indeed intrigued scholars, as is apparent from the magnitude of publications on this theme in the Gospel of John. Herein lies the merit of this book. Often the wheel is discovered over and over again in Johannine research, and the reader must patiently read through 95 percent of familiar material to find the remaining 5 percent of novel ideas. However, this book presents the reader with a fresh and innovative approach to the Lazarus episode. Sound theory shapes the interpretative framework for analyzing and systematizing the material. This is coupled with a clear and well-formulated thesis that is presented in what I find to be a logical and interesting manner. In other words, even seasoned Johannine scholars who would usually expect a 95 percent recycling of known material could pick up this book and read it with great profit. They will find many more novel ideas and fresh insights in this book than what is commonly the case in books on John.

The authors indeed claim to “inaugurate a new approach to Lazarus, Mary and Martha in the Fourth Gospel—by exploring the way in which they serve a ‘representative’ function,

but only after using a social-scientific theory to develop a suitable model” (17). They opted for that part of social psychology known as “social identity theory, in particular the extent to which individuals can be prototypical or exemplary of the identity of a group” (17). Apart from this, they offer what they call a fresh interpretation of what the Lazarus episode meant to its original audience. The analysis does not end there; rather, the significance for present-day readers is also considered in one of the concluding chapters of the book.

The arguments in this book are systematically developed. In the first chapter the current discussion on Lazarus is reframed. Attention is given to some of the primary issues of interpretation (i.e., developmental theories and the significance of the Lazarus narrative) as well as current discussions of the Lazarus material in literature. The latter was interesting to read, but I must acknowledge that the treatment is a bit too sweeping and could have been much more thorough. This is a general problem in the book and perhaps my only real criticism. The engagement and interaction with available research was not always thorough or representative enough. The authors’ treatment of current research is also quite selective and often rather restricted, favoring an emphasis on the development of their fresh approach to the subject matter. On the other hand, it could be questioned whether it would have been wise to cloud their clear and logical arguments with long discussions on existing research. In the end, I tend to prefer the book as it is.

The description of their theory in the latter part of chapter 1 and in chapter 2 makes very interesting reading. The focus on group orientation (e.g., not seeing Lazarus, Mary, and Martha as individuals but as a family or group) and how prototypes influence the identity of a group indeed opens new avenues for reading the text. People in these group-oriented cultures live in accordance with group values and roles that society has prescribed in different ways. In this book, social-identity theory as developed by Tajfel and Turner in the 1970–1980s is extensively employed. The authors focused on the way in which the members of one group derived a sense of identity from that group in contrast to other groups. Stereotyping, group beliefs, and collective memory of figures from the past all play important roles in finding self-identity. Information about social categories is stored in the form of prototypes, which capture a “central tendency” based on an ideal person who embodies its character. In this way, the collective memory of a group is stored that will nourish the life of the community in the present and the future. The figures of Lazarus, Mary, and Martha are thus explored in this light.

Chapter 3 gives attention to the “Johannine processing of the past in relation to Lazarus, Mary and Martha.” The Synoptic material on Mary, Martha (Luke 10:38–42), Lazarus (16:19–31), and the anointing stories of Jesus (Mark 14:3–9; Luke 7:36–50) are compared with the Johannine material. The conclusion is that John did not work wholly

independently of the other traditions. They propose that there must have been common traditions behind the various Evangelists and that “they have influenced one another in some way or another” (55). It is nevertheless acknowledged that it cannot be proven that John has a direct dependence on the Synoptic material. In other words, John does not use any sources or traditions slavishly. In this vein, the authors note similarities, but also differences, and try to find reasons for John’s “changes,” such as why Bethany was made the village of Lazarus and his sisters or the substitution of Simon and the anointing story in Mark with Lazarus and the link between the anointing and the sisters. These changes are shown to be deliberate and point to a manipulation of the collective memory of the Johannine group that underlines the significance of this narrative. The anointing should be seen as a powerful expression of love that John could reuse for his own purposes. By not mentioning the anointing of the body of Lazarus, but that of Jesus by Mary at their home, John creates a framework in which he develops a powerful context in which he could develop this family as prototypes of the identity of the Christ movement. They further point out that the meal with Lazarus took place on the first day of the week (contrary to the Synoptics), which obviously has symbolic overtones. The anointing of Jesus’ feet is linked to the washing with water in John 13 and leads the authors to the conclusion that Mary thus becomes prototypical of the Johannine movement. The fact that they wipe Jesus’ feet with her hair implies that she is anointed by Jesus too. Even the fragrance that fills the house is symbolic of the Johannine community’s obtaining “a kind of air/spirit-borne anointing” (68). The remark that Mary’s myrrh was kept is interpreted literally, and it is argued that the myrrh that was left over was given to Nicodemus to anoint the body of Jesus at the burial, since the prominent family of Lazarus would not have been regarded as a “safe option” to hand the body to. Rather, the body was given to “safe” members of the Sanhedrin, and therefore Mary handed her myrrh to Nicodemus. In this way John wanted to form and mobilize the abiding collective memory of the community.

Obviously, there is a measure of hypothetical argumentation in this chapter. The point of departure is that John was sharing a common tradition or even sources with the Synoptics. The relation between the Synoptics and John is very complicated: If one says that there is a common tradition, as the authors do, where did it come from? Did John share it independently, or did he receive it through contacts with the Synoptics? The result is that one can carry on with these well-known questions when it comes to this issue. It is not an answer to say that we do not know exactly what happened, but it seems that there was at least some communality. This vagueness weakens any argumentation based on that assumption. It seems that the authors think that John received his exposure to the tradition in some way through the Synoptics, since they constantly compare John’s material with what the Synoptics offer and then point to the way in which John differs

from them. To go even further, real solutions to the problem of the relationship between John and the Synoptics can only be drawn if the Gospel of John is treated as a whole. In concrete narratives such as this one and other healing stories, there seem to be some links (although there are major differences here), but as soon as other issues such as language, the limited locality in John's Gospel of similarities, and the like are brought into the discussion, matters become considerably more complicated and less certain. Regardless, the authors go on to provide explanations from this "platform" and argue that John deliberately presents his material in a different way to draw specific attention to what he offers. This is not the place to argue the complexities of the relationship between John and the Synoptics, but it should be noted that the arguments and their value are relative to the validity of the way the relationship between John and the Synoptics is seen. This issue is by no means clear.

What follows next is a step-by-step argumentation of Lazarus, Mary, and Martha as prototypes of different aspects of the community. In chapter 4 they are shown to be prototypes for those whom Jesus loves. They are maximally representative of the shared social identity of the group. The authors find it significant that Lazarus and his sisters are the first people described as loved by Jesus. Moreover, they are the only ones who are named. The authors thus regard them as prototypes of Jesus' own people. Lazarus and his sisters are prototypes not only on an individual basis but also as a family who do not get their identity from their ancestors but from their love and association with Jesus. It is argued that in this way this family forms the earliest stage of the movement in its collective memory. They provided possible social identities for the original audience of John. They were personal models for believers of the relationship between Christ and the believer and what this relationship implied. They also offered a kinship model for house-based communities. "By writing about the family of Bethany in the way he did, John told his audience where they had come from, who they were and where they were going" (100).

In chapter 5 the emphasis shifts to Lazarus's raising from the dead as prototypical. The authors make the point that the Lazarus narrative is usually read from a christological perspective, but another perspective should be given some attention, namely, the question of insecurities caused by physical death in the community and how that is dealt with in the story of Lazarus. It is a question of the status and destiny of those who believe in Jesus. This includes physical death: "the main function of the account of the raising of Lazarus is to serve as prototype of the destiny awaiting group members who have died" (111). The vindication of believers in the end is not an escape from death; rather, the emphasis falls upon the subsequent resurrection of which Lazarus is prototypical. However, the group or family should also be seen as prototypical in the way in which they respond to the death of Lazarus. The authors argue logically and present a strong case that is worth reading. In the end, it must be recognized that the conclusion that Lazarus, Mary, and

Martha and were prototypes who were engraved in the collective memory of the original community both individually as well as collectively requires an “interpretative jump” from the textual material to prototypical figures that had significant and foundational influence on the original readers. The idea that the characters in John functioned as “examples” (the authors distinguish between examples as historical figures and prototypes that displayed more ideal qualities) are well-known and established in Johannine research. By applying social theories, this interpretation is broadened and linked to the formation and creation of the self-identity of the original author(s). Whether this was the case in reality cannot be claimed with 100 percent certainty for several reasons, however—after this book—it most certainly must be regarded as very plausible.

Two interesting additions are made. Chapter 6 deals with the raising of Lazarus in early Christian art. The authors claim that the emphasis on the Lazarus events in especially the Roman catacomb art, and the way Jesus and Lazarus are depicted therein, supports their argument that Lazarus was prototypical. A theological conclusion in chapter 7 elaborates on the relevance of the Lazarus narrative for present-day readers. A hermeneutical approach is used in which the meaning the narrative carried in the original setting is brought into “creative and critical confrontation with our modern experience in an overarching framework of intercultural communication and communion” (147). The book ends with two appendices: one on the translation of *Ioudaioi* in this Gospel; and the other on the spices used by Mary. Of course, the book also contains the usual indexes.

Whether one agrees with the theses of this book or not, it makes a good read and, I think, also makes an interesting and provocative addition to Johannine research. It will most certainly stimulate scholars to look at other sections of this Gospel from the same perspective.