

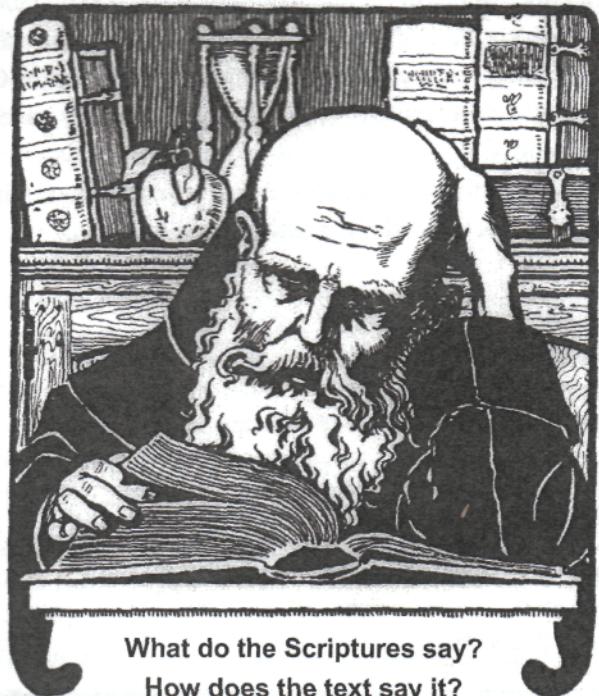
Narrative Analysis: Respecting the Integrity of the Biblical Story

by Patrick M. McGuire

In his book *Four Times Peter*, Fr. Richard J. Cassidy introduced me to the concept of narrative analysis as it can be applied to Scripture. It begins with a recognition of the fact that the Evangelists had a great deal of material at their disposal when they sat down to write. Their inspiration necessarily entailed how they arranged this material, that is, how they told the story. So it is not only what they wrote, but how they wrote it. The entire process was in cooperation with the Holy Spirit. Thus, Fr. Cassidy examines a portrait of Peter painted from what we find in the narratives of each of the four Gospels.

I highly recommend the book, but the power of narrative analysis did not truly strike me until I realized that I am not an Evangelist. This is obvious. But, it was truly a moment of enlightenment for me when I recognized it. I came to realize that there were times when I had come perilously close to treating the Scriptures as my own private source material. I had mentally taken verses and cut and pasted them with other verses to write my own "Gospel of Patrick." When I looked around I saw many others doing the same thing.

One notorious example is the so-called Jefferson Bible, formally entitled *The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth*. Thomas Jefferson literally did cut and paste his own Bible. It was his personal effort to extract a more palatable doctrine of Jesus. Using a razor, Jefferson cut and arranged selected verses from the books of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John in chronological order, mingling excerpts from one text with those of another in order to create a single narrative. But he excised the supernatural aspects and eliminated what he perceived as the misinterpretations of the Four Evangelists. So for instance, he began with Luke 2 and 3, then followed with Mark 1 and Matthew 3, providing a record of which verses he selected and the order in which he arranged them in his "Table of the Texts." Needless to say, the resultant picture is not the Christ of the Scriptures, but a truncated and reedited one.



What do the Scriptures say?

How does the text say it?

Jefferson may have been a Founding Father and a great man in other respects, but we can say with confidence that he was not an Evangelist. Jefferson attempted to use his razor to replace the story inspired by the Holy Spirit with his own version. Even though all the verses were still from Scripture, he had done real violence to the Holy Story. To borrow a metaphor from St. Irenaeus, Jefferson had rearranged the received mosaic, discarding all that was distasteful to him, and he thereby came up with a distorted and alien picture (*Haer 1.8.1*). Jefferson was not unique in this. Do we not see others even today attempting to cut and paste Scripture to match their own gospel?

One of God's great gifts to me is that late in life he has given me a heart for Scripture. Another great gift is to have teachers like Scott Hahn, Jeff Cavins, and David Higbee. They faithfully teach that our first task as students is to understand more accurately and authentically the sense of Scripture. We must understand and respect what can be demonstrated of the intent of the original human author within the context of his circumstances. As Thomas Merton wrote: "A mystery that is drawn forth from what the letter (of Scripture) does **not** say cannot be regarded as Divine Revelation. This is not from God, but rather from the exegete's own imagination."

