

Williams, Peter J. *The Surprising Genius of Jesus: What the Gospels Reveal About the Greatest Teacher*. Wheaton: Crossway, 2023. 113pp. + 22pp. (front matter) + 17pp. (back matter).

The Surprising Genius of Jesus makes a compelling case for the genius (or “cleverness”) of Jesus as demonstrated through his biblical-theological technique, intertextual allusions, rhetorical brilliance, and storytelling savvy. It does so primarily through an extended case study centered on Jesus’ parable of the two sons (more commonly known as the parable of the prodigal son) presented in Luke 15.

In this book, Peter Williams (principal of Tyndale House, Cambridge, chair of the international Greek Testament Project, and member of the ESV translation oversight committee) leverages the combined strengths of an articulate apologetic and a strong grasp of NT Greek and Gospels studies. Williams’s central thesis is that “Jesus should be considered a genius . . . because of the cleverness and wisdom of his teaching” (2). Williams supports and develops this theme in five major moves, each move taking one chapter.

Chapter 1, “A Brilliant Story,” explores the genius of Jesus that is discernable even from a surface reading of the story of the two sons. Williams points out Jesus’ ability to address two different audiences simultaneously with different issues and needs. “It is a powerful story in any setting for what it conveys . . . even before we consider its wider scope in handling human relationships with God” (29). But Williams points out that “it is even more powerful when considered in the context in which it is reported, with tax collectors, sinners, Pharisees, and scribes all present” (29). Sinners and tax collectors are invited to repent and taste of the Father’s lavish forgiveness upon the son who was “lost away from home,” while Pharisees and scribes are challenged by the negative example of the older brother who was “lost at home.” By the end of this chapter, the reader is prepared to agree with the author that “to convey all this in under four hundred words is a work of great artistry of the kind that . . . displays genius” (30). But here the book points out that “beneath the surface there are layers of deeper meaning in the story which show it to be cleverer still” (30).

Chapter 2, “Connecting with Genesis,” arguably represents the heart of the book. This substantive chapter argues that “Jesus’ story echoes details from most of the major stories in Genesis” (34). Moving from more readily apparent allusions to more nuanced or even potentially debatable points of connection, Williams argues multiple points of intentional connection between Jesus’ parable and the accounts of Jacob and Esau, Jacob and Laban, Joseph, Judah, Abraham, and the account of Cain and Abel. In thirty-three pages, Williams presents an array of lexical and thematic connections Jesus’ 400-word story makes to these major episodes across the Book of Genesis. As Williams points out, one could easily imagine a careful scribe, practiced in copying the first book of the Torah, perking his ears up at some of the allusions this chapter presents as woven throughout Jesus’ parable.

A full recapitulation of chapter 2 is neither desirable nor possible. But sampling the treatment of the first of the five Genesis narratives covered will help the reader anticipate what to expect from this key chapter. In the Genesis accounts dealing with Jacob and Esau, Williams identifies eleven areas of striking correspondence to Jesus’ parable of the two sons: (1) “a man with two sons,” (2) “a younger brother going into a far country,” (3) “the younger brother herding animals in that far country,” (4) “someone saying he is dying of hunger,” (5) “a younger brother wearing the best robes given by a

parent,” (6) “an older brother coming in from a field,” (7) “the use of the word ‘draw near’ (Luke 15:25),” (8) “an older brother being angry,” (9) “concern about an older brother losing some inheritance to a younger one,” (10) “young goats as a meal,” and (11) the wording, occurring only in these two places in the entire Bible, “ran . . . and fell on his neck and kissed him” (Luke 15:20; Gen. 33:4).

Esau’s response alluded to in connection (11) above is, to the first-time reader of Genesis, quite surprising, just as the father’s reaction in Luke 15 is a surprising response for Jesus’ audience. While this seems to connect ungodly Esau awkwardly with a God-like figure in Luke 15, this is apparently exactly the way Jacob felt about the encounter himself, for as “a careful reader of Genesis” would know, “just six verses after Esau runs and falls on Jacob’s neck and kisses him, Jacob declares that encountering Esau is like seeing the face of God (33:10)” (40).

But why would Jesus care to draw the attention of scribes and Pharisees to the story of Jacob and Esau? “If even a person like Esau . . . could accept his returning brother, how much more should the older son accept his brother?” What conclusion should the “older-brother” portion of Jesus’ audience reach? “The Pharisees and scribes should not resent that Jesus, and therefore God, welcomes tax collectors and sinners. They should not resent God’s grace shown to the undeserving or react as if they stand to lose through God’s generosity” (42).

In addition to this kind of textual and thematic work across the five major connected episodes in Genesis, chapter 2 also explores wider OT connections, as well as arguably meaningful echoes of Rabbinic parables. According to Williams, “the deeper references are . . . both an invitation and a challenge to experts in Scripture to recognize the knowledge of the storyteller and heed what he says” (66).

Chapter 3, “More Stories Inspired by the Old Testament,” explores whether other of Jesus’ parables also show “a pattern of Old Testament allusions in other stories and parables of Jesus” (67). Williams overviews fifteen other stories from various Gospels to show how they also feature strong connection to the OT, backing up the claim that “such allusions are a common feature of Gospel parables, not merely of those found in Luke’s Gospel” (87). Foreshadowing chapter 4, Williams argues: “The most natural thing is to suppose that Old Testament references go back before the written Gospels to Jesus, the teacher whose words they claim to report” (87).

In chapter 4, “Was Jesus the Genius?” Williams tackles the potential objection that the extremely clever connections between Jesus’ stories and the OT (especially in Luke) could have come from the mind of the Gospel writer. Williams successfully demonstrates that the parables recorded in Luke show strong evidence of an author who was “deeply familiar with (1) Palestine, (2) the Old Testament and (3) rabbinic ways of talking” and argues that Jesus “fits just this profile” while Luke does not (94). Williams also identifies “Six Hallmarks of Jesus” that “show a common mind behind Luke 15 and what is attributed to Jesus elsewhere especially in Matthew’s gospel” (95).

Finally, Williams briefly addresses a remaining potential challenge—how were these stories passed on until recorded in the Gospels? Williams concludes: “The stories attributed to [Jesus] in the Gospels show numerous common features and . . . are not readily explained as creations by the Gospel writers

but are easily explained as the records of a brilliant teacher with a profile that closely matches what we know about Jesus” (107).

In chapter 5, “Much More Than a Storyteller,” Williams reviews the key points of the argument and lands with a focus on the identity of Jesus himself in unity with the entire record of Scripture. The book reaches a fitting conclusion in an apologetic, evangelistic challenge. “If the storyteller Jesus Christ is God himself [as the Gospels claim], who made the world, invented language, oversaw history, and then became human to tell us about God and to rescue us from our alienation to him, then his wisdom and genius make sense. And if he is that smart and if he also loved us enough to die to save us, the only sensible thing to do is to accept him unreservedly as our teacher, guide, and Savior” (113).

The Surprising Genius of Jesus is an enjoyable book to read. The accessible prose, clear and persuasive tone, fascinating argument, and engagement with the details of Luke and Genesis make it easy to keep turning the page. The style gives the impression of an author who knows more than he has space to say but who understands the need to carefully guide his readership to grasp and internalize an argument, even if it means strategic repetition and restatement.

This is the type of book a specialist might consider to be *popular* and that a non-specialist might consider *academic*. Some readers might wish for fewer original language references (although these are contained and no biblical language knowledge is necessary to appreciate even the details of this book). Another set of readers may wish for deeper engagement with scholarly sources. But one strength of the book lies in the way it integrates a substantive argument with accessible presentation. Busy pastors, professors, and serious lay readers will appreciate the combination.

A key strength of this book is that it makes the reader hungry to pick up the Gospels and take a closer look at the teachings of the genius, Jesus. It will also encourage the reader to read both the Gospels and the Pentateuch through a more canonically conscious lens. Seeing Jesus as “the genius” also invites the reader to see Jesus as the master interpreter teaching and modeling the interpretive approach behind the *other* OT/NT connections in apostolic teaching.

In case the “making of many books” about the use of the OT in the NT, filled with debates and differing models, has already made the reader weary in the flesh, it is worth pointing out that this is not one of those books. The nature of the case studies in this book entirely bypasses this well-trodden territory. The focus is on Jesus leveraging scriptural language, echoes, and allusions to strengthen his argument as he weaves OT narratives into his parable. The reader will look in vain for arguments that depend on a debated hermeneutical approach or systematic-theological viewpoint. Issues such as typology, levels of authorial intent, pattern-fulfillment, various versions of *sensus plenior*, etc., are not relied upon or even mentioned in the book. The material being treated and the nature of the connections being claimed simply do not call for or rely upon such concepts. While such issues have their place, it is refreshing and frankly relaxing to read a book so concerned with intertextuality yet so devoid of the knotty hermeneutical concerns that of necessity often permeate a fair bit of OT-in-the-NT literature.

This is not to say that there is nothing debatable in the book. At times the reader could be forgiven for suspecting Williams of some confirmation bias, and, in places, this reviewer scribbled “Stretch?” in the margin. For example, not all will be completely convinced by the suggestion that the collocation

of the words *goat*, *friend*, and *prostitute* in Luke 15 are designed to evoke the Judah narrative of Genesis 38 (although it is the only other place in Scripture the three words occur together). It is also possible to argue that the surface connections pointed out between Jesus' parable and Cain and Abel, though striking, could be coincidental. Other places may raise the eyebrows of skeptical readers as well. Williams seems to realize the vulnerability of some of the specific points and himself shows sensitivity to the fact that readers could legitimately quibble with some of the details without invalidating his larger argument: "Even if some of the connections explored above are explained away as common elements that occur in any story about family dynamics, many connections are striking and cluster together" (59). Elsewhere he admits the *possibility* that he may have "occasionally seen parallels that are merely coincidental" but points out that "this does not invalidate my central argument that Jesus' story contains allusions to stories right across Genesis" and argues that "it is still hard to credit all these parallels merely to hard searching" (60). This honesty makes it easier to follow and accept the general argument while marking certain "connections" for more thorough review.

In terms of evangelical commitment, the argument of the book is made possible by Williams's healthy conviction that the Gospel writers accurately transmit the teaching of Jesus. Williams argues and insists that we give Jesus credit for his faithfully transmitted teaching. And in the end, the reader's eyes are turned to Jesus Christ, the genius, the storyteller, and much more, the Savior and King who deserves our praise, trust, and devotion.

Timothy Hughes

Assistant Professor | School of Theology and Global Leadership, Bob Jones University