

*The Most Important Words of Jesus*. By Gerhard Lohfink. Translated by Linda M. Maloney. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2023. xviii + 340 pages. \$34.95. doi:10.1017/hor.2024.14

In his preliminary remarks, Lohfink indicates, first, that he began to think about a book about the *logia* of Jesus while he was writing *The Forty Parables of Jesus* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2021). Indeed, at the end of this most recent book, he notes that a complete picture of Jesus comes not only from the many sayings of Jesus that are characterized by a “shapely and sharply honed form,” which are “meant to disturb, to urge, to tear off the masks behind which we hide ourselves,” but also from the mighty deeds of Jesus and, especially, his parables, which show a very different Jesus, “one who pursues the lost with mercy and an abundance of joy.” Secondly, Lohfink laments that he reduced a preliminary list of 150 authentic sayings of Jesus to 70, noting that even this process made tangible how incomparably great are the number of words of Jesus that have been reliably handed down. In a few cases, Lohfink has used reconstructed texts as a basis for understanding, but almost always he chooses to use those in the Gospels themselves. Careful analysis of the *logia* considers the object of address, the real-life situation (*Sitz im Leben*) of the *logia*, and the changes made by Matthew and Luke to Mark or the “Sayings Source.”

The book of seventy chapters—one chapter for each saying—is divided into seven parts, with each part a collection of sayings of Jesus related to a theme. “Part One: The Coming of the Reign of God” deals with the mission of the Twelve and their task of announcing the reign of God in Israel. All the sayings of Jesus in this part disclose, directly or indirectly, that the reign of God is already coming to be, the turn of the ages is here, and that it is already so close that it can be proclaimed. And more than that: it is made visible, for the miracles of the reign of God are already happening in the midst of Israel. “Part Two: The Mission of the Twelve” devotes more detailed attention to the mission of the Twelve, especially those sayings associated with Jesus’s instructions for mission. Essential to their mission is adherence to the “equipment rule,” whereby the Twelve move about defenselessly and vulnerably without even a staff, praying each day for “our daily bread,” and then eating whatever food was provided by those who offered hospitality to them on their journey.

“Part Three: A Disciple’s Existence” concentrates on the *logia* of Jesus that apply to all disciples, female and male, who comprise a much larger circle of disciples beyond the Twelvetwelve. The radicality of this call is embodied in the commands for the disciples “to lose their life for my sake” and “to take up their cross and follow me.” These commands are fundamentally a call to surrender one’s own life for God’s cause, for what Jesus preached and lived, in order to experience the freedom and joy of the “new family” that comes

into being in the reign of God. “Part Four: Living in Light of the Reign of God” focuses on the sayings of Jesus that has all Israel in view, and not just the Twelve or the disciples. Here, Jesus’s sayings about nonviolence, love of enemies, and the refusal to dominate call for Israel to live as an alternative society to every state in the world in order to change the world.

“Part Five: Jesus’ Exalted Claim” reveals the unfathomably high consciousness of the mission that lays behind Jesus’s sayings. Here, Lohfink skillfully treats the titles of “Messiah” and “Son of Man/Human One.” In the case of the title “Messiah,” Jesus does not consider it to be false, but he does not want the title to be used carelessly and before the right time. Only when he stands before Caiaphas, the highest religious authority in Israel at that time, does Jesus abandon all reticence and openly affirm “I am.” As for the title “Son of Man/Human One,” Lohfink turns to an exegesis of Daniel 7 as the background for expressing Jesus’s mission and his understanding of himself. This understanding includes a modification of the text from “all peoples, all nations, and languages shall serve him” (Dan 7:14) to “The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45). “Part Six: Israel’s Crisis” focuses on *logia* directed to Israel’s religious leaders, who did not recognize Jesus’s deeds as signs of the “new creation” and who perceived Jesus, not as God’s eschatological messenger who opened for them the innermost meaning of the Scriptures but instead as one who violated their traditional interpretations and was responsible for leading the people astray.

“Part Seven: In View of Death” collects sayings in which Jesus views his death through a variety of images. Lohfink maintains that the truth that Jesus is fully united with the will of God, indeed is “God’s Son,” does not mean that “he saw his life spread out before him like a map.” In turn, appreciating Jesus’s human nature does not mean that “Jesus traveled with his disciples to his last Passover in Jerusalem naively and unsuspecting.” The fate of John the Baptist and the sharp attacks of his opponents must have alerted Jesus to what awaited him in Jerusalem. Critical to this section is Lohfink’s uncovering of the post-Enlightenment predisposition to regard the *logia* in which Jesus gives a theological significance to his own death as nonauthentic. On his part, Lohfink explains how terms such as “representative substitution” and “atone-ment” are not only deeply biblical but provide a way to understand that forgiveness cannot be achieved without sacrifice. Indeed, Jesus’s sacrificial death begins a new chain of causality and is the catalyst and the enabling of a process of liberation that continues in the “new family” founded by Jesus.

At the end of the book, Lohfink notes that in writing not everything is pre-determined and that three insights powerfully came to the fore, surprising even him: (1) although we live in a time when violence is increasing, Jesus stands firmly and absolutely against violence, against any kind of lust for power, and

against every untruth; (2) although tempted “to be like other nations,” the contrast behaviors that Jesus demands are simply not normal, and are, in fact, humanly impossible to carry out without God’s grace, and (3) underlying every word that Jesus spoke is a majestic dignity. Recalling one example, Lohfink notes that when Jesus dares to say that it is he who gathers Israel (Luke 11:23, 13:34), “Jesus. . . attributes to himself a deed that in the Old Testament and early Judaism was reserved to God alone.” To these three insights, I would add a fourth. After reading this book, I am in awe of Lohfink’s ability to convey Jesus’s grasp of the Scriptures and Jesus’s unique way of unlocking the inner meaning of biblical texts that Jesus understood and loved so much. In *The Most Important Words of Jesus*, Lohfink combines his deep commitment to biblical scholarship, both through surveyed literature and in unique perspectives, with an ability to convey the power and beauty as well as the seriousness of the central sayings of Jesus. This is a great and generous service for all those who strive to know more about who Jesus was and what he wanted.

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*Synodality: A New Way of Proceeding in the Church.* By Rafael Luciani. Foreword by Peter Hünemann. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2022. xv + 188 pages. \$18.95 (paper).  
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This ten-chapter introduction to synodality was originally written in Spanish by Rafael Luciani, a lay theologian and professor at both Boston College and the Catholic University in Venezuela. The book offers more background to readers interested in understanding the changed format of the Synod of Bishops, as it has currently been organized from 2021 to 2024. During the first session of the synodal assembly, which met in Rome in October 2023 on the theme “For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, Mission,” for the first time in the history of the Catholic Church, a substantial delegation of laypeople had been appointed synod delegates with full voting rights.

The most important source of inspiration for the author is the current pope, not only at the moment when he explicitly started to invite the Catholic Church to become a synodal church, but already in foundational writings such as *Evangelii Gaudium*. Together with Pope Francis, Luciani also insists that synodality requires a particular interpretation of the ecclesiology of Vatican II in which all the faithful—and in first instance the hierarchy—are willing