Introduction

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There can be no doubt that the four gospels of the Christian Bible are of fundamental significance for Christian life and thought. The gospel stories about Jesus' birth, life, death and resurrection, about his teaching, miracle-working and care for the poor, are read and recounted in churches throughout the world every Sunday. They shape Christian worship and sacramental practice, inspire Christian art, architecture and aesthetics, and inform Christian morality at both the individual and social levels. It could even be said that Christian life in all its aspects is an ongoing 'performance' of the gospels.[1] And, of course, to the extent that the Christian community is a part of the wider human community, the performance of the gospels contributes to the shaping of the moral, spiritual and aesthetic traditions of people worldwide whether Christian or not. It is fitting, therefore, that the *Cambridge Companion* series should include a *Companion to the Gospels*.

Of course, there are many fine introductions to the gospels, the New Testament, and the Bible as a whole, already available.[2] Most of these are written with a view to explaining the meaning and significance of the texts by means of the best tools of historical understanding currently available. They address, for example, questions about authorship and dating, about the historical context of the work, its author and audience, about the formation and transmission of the text in its various versions, and, more recently, questions about the history of the reception of the text.

Other introductions, equally valuable, have a stronger literary and aesthetic interest. Whereas the former approach the gospels more as *sources* of historical information and reconstruction, the latter approach them more from a 'readerly' point of view as *texts* to be appreciated, not only for what they communicate, but also for the way they communicate. For this kind of approach, the tools of literary criticism, in all their variety, come into their own.

What is sometimes lacking, however, is an adequate appreciation of the gospels as texts which form part of a *canon believed by Christians to*

be revelatory – the canon of Christian scripture which helps to sustain the faith, life and worship of the church. It is the absence of an adequate appreciation of this kind that helps to explain the often damaging split that takes place between approaches to the gospels in academic institutions such as universities (approaches which might be characterized as 'standing *over* the text') and approaches to the gospels in the churches and in the lives of individual Christians (which might be characterized as 'standing *under* the text').

The essays in this volume have been written against this backdrop. They exemplify the best in current historical understandings of the gospels, in full recognition that the gospels are texts from the past and have, therefore, to be interpreted historically. They also exemplify the best in literary appreciation of the gospels, in recognition of the fact that the gospels are rhetorically powerful texts skilfully composed with a view to instruction and persuasion. They seek to show at the same time, however, that the gospels can be read in historically and aesthetically responsible ways that seek nevertheless to do greater justice to their theological and christological subject-matter and to their fundamental role as Christian scripture.[3]

There are three main parts. Part I is entitled 'Approaching the gospels', and deals with hermeneutical and methodological questions. In the opening essay, 'What is a gospel?', Loveday Alexander addresses the question of the genre of the gospels. She shows how much is to be gained by an awareness of a wide range of historical analogies to the gospels at various stages in their development, especially in the transition from oral tradition to written gospel. Among the analogies she explores are: oral traditional literature like the folk-tale, with its distinctive episodic character; historical reminiscence of an essentially anecdotal kind shaped and passed down in oral and written form in various ancient school settings; and the 'lives' (*bioi*) of famous men (including martyrologies) written by Greek, Roman and Jewish authors, the latter drawing strongly on narrative precedents in Hebrew scripture. But Alexander concludes that such analogies are just that, for in certain respects the gospels are *sui generis* – not least in their self-representation as 'good news', written versions of early Christian witness in teaching and preaching to the life-giving message about Jesus.

The second essay focuses on the very distinctive phenomenon of the fourfold gospel of the Christian canon. Francis Watson here points out that the concept of a fourfold gospel was unknown both to the earliest, first-century Christians and to the evangelists themselves; rather, it was a development of the second half of the second century whereby church leaders sought to stabilize oral and written testimony about Jesus and to

discriminate between competing claims to represent the truth about him. Thus, the fourfold gospel canon is the result of a choice between competing options. It meant a rejection of a number of possibilities: first, the primacy of (potentially uncontrollable) oral traditions about Jesus in favour of the written gospel; second, the privileging of one gospel over others, especially a gospel (like the *Gospel of Thomas*) claiming special authority as the revelation of an esoteric Jesus; third, the offer of a 'purified' gospel in which, as with Marcion, Jesus is stripped of both his material setting in Judaism and his scriptural setting in the line of the patriarchs and prophets; fourth, the offer of supplementary gospels which seek to fill in the gaps about Jesus by expanding the tradition with material of an apocryphal kind; and fifth, a harmonization of the gospels with the contradictions ironed out (as in Tatian's *Diatessaron*) and the fourfold gospel reduced to one. The decision in favour of a fourfold gospel is a decision in favour of a plurality within limits: the limits sustaining the coherence of the apostolic testimony to Jesus, and the plurality allowing the richness and complexity of the truth about Jesus to be displayed.

A wise interpretation of the canonical gospels draws upon an understanding of the genre of the gospels and a recognition of their fourfold plurality. Richard Hays's essay on 'the canonical matrix of the gospels' shows that another dimension of the interpretative task is important also: close attention to the profound ways in which the gospel stories of Jesus are indebted to and shaped by the scriptures. Focusing on the Gospel of Mark in particular, but with illustrations from Matthew, Luke and John also, Hays shows that the scriptures constitute what he calls the gospels' 'generative milieu'. The question here is not the old-style question common in certain kinds of Christian apologetic about 'Jesus' use of the Old Testament'; it is, rather, a question about the literary phenomenon of intertextuality – how the gospels tell their respective stories of Jesus as part of the larger scriptural story of God's self-revelation in creation and redemption, played out especially in the story of Israel, and, conversely, how the story of Jesus allows the scriptural story to be read in new and previously unforeseen ways.

It is one thing to interpret the gospels and the Jesus of the gospels by attending to their scriptural matrix; but is it not important to try to 'get behind' the gospels to find out about who Jesus *really* was? As Stephen Fowl explains in his essay, this latter concern became the dominant scholarly question in the modern period. Based upon the presupposition that the 'real' Jesus is not the Jesus of scriptural revelation and that this real Jesus can be discovered only by the independent, 'value-free' exercise of human

reason, tools of criticism of both literary and historical kinds were applied to the gospels in order to allow the real Jesus – now referred to as 'the historical Jesus' – to surface. But, argues Fowl, so-called value-laden theology and value-free history cannot be disentangled so easily, and the gospels themselves resist dichotomies of this kind; and he demonstrates this by looking critically at two recent, and significantly different, accounts of the historical Jesus: by John Dominic Crossan and by N. T. Wright. For Fowl, however, following Luke Timothy Johnson, what is important in reading the gospels is, not bringing the world (in the form of historical criticism) to the gospels, but bringing the gospels (in the form of scriptural witness to God's love revealed in Christ) to the world. In making this suggestion, Fowl is arguing for a move beyond modernity and its preoccupation with (historical-critical) method to ways of reading more characteristic of classic Christianity in the pre-modern period, ways of reading to which, interestingly enough, the ethos of postmodernity is, in some respects, more hospitable.

Ways of reading are also the concern of the final essay in Part I, on 'The gospels and the reader', by Sandra Schneiders. Here, important questions of theological and philosophical hermeneutics – relevant not just to interpreting the gospels but also to biblical interpretation as a whole – are addressed. Where the previous essays focus primarily on the text as the object of interpretation, Schneiders focuses on the reader as *the subject who interprets the text* in the process of reading. First, she surveys what she terms 'pragmatic' approaches to the text, where the situation and concerns of the reader (as subject) constitute the starting-point and the text is read for its potential to change that situation for the better. As examples, she discusses liberationist and feminist hermeneutics, along with readings which have a strong ethical commitment, as well as 'spiritual readings' which promote personal transformation. Then she offers an account of hermeneutics as a global philosophical theory of interpretation, and therefore a grounding for particular ways of reading. This she does with special reference to Paul Ricoeur and Hans-Georg Gadamer, two of the most important hermeneutical theorists of the twentieth century. Finally, she turns to questions about the text, the reader, and reading which arise from a reader-oriented approach to interpretation. Sensitive to approaches which are totalizing and potentially abusive when worked out in practice, Schneiders advocates an approach to validity in interpretation which is hospitable to a plurality of possibilities – possibilities that commend themselves in relation both to inherited tradition critically received and to their transformative potential in the world.

Attention to hermeneutical and methodological considerations in approaching the gospels gives way in Part II of the *Companion* to the subject-matter of the gospels themselves. The intention of this part is to give a taste of the contents of each of the gospels, taken in canonical order, in a way that makes clear their distinctive and overlapping testimonies to the truth about Jesus. Where appropriate, attention is drawn also to significant breakthroughs in their interpretation.

The editor's contribution comes at this point with an account of the Gospel of Matthew. Drawing on the fruit of a generation of scholarly study, this essay seeks to display the dynamic way in which Matthew, in his carefully constructed story of Jesus, brings together traditions old and new in such a way as to present Jesus as Son of God and Israel's Messiah, the hope of salvation for Israel and the nations. Matthew's christology, soteriology and eschatology have not taken shape in a vacuum, however. In all likelihood, his story of Jesus reflects tensions between church and synagogue in the period after Easter – more specifically, the period after the destruction of Jerusalem in the war of 66–70. Thus, Matthew's gospel speaks from the past to the present and addresses in its own way the profound and complex question of the relation between emergent Christianity and formative Judaism. And, as an essentially open-ended text, Matthew speaks beyond itself to other situations of communities in conflict. Into such situations it speaks words of reassurance – in the 'I am with you always' of the risen Christ.

In ways which reinforce what Loveday Alexander says about the gospels as 'biography' and what Richard Hays says about intertextuality, Joel Green shows how important, in recent interpretation of the Gospel of Mark, has been the attention given to its quality as narrative. What is particularly remarkable is the subtle way in which the story of Jesus – focusing above all as it does on his passion – is set within a larger story about God, a story conveyed in considerable measure by means of intertextual links with Isaiah and other texts of scripture. These post-exilic texts speak of God's act of salvation of Israel in the event of the exodus, an act of salvation which offers a basis for hope for Israel in exile. They allow Mark to announce as 'good news' that the coming of Messiah Jesus is the beginning of a new act of liberation by God and inaugurates a new exodus. At the heart of the 'good news', however, is a disturbing paradox: the power of God at work in Jesus his 'Son' does not exempt Jesus from misunderstanding, opposition and suffering. Indeed, accepting the way of the cross is the mark of Jesus' obedience to the will of God. That is the way that leads to resurrection – not only for Jesus, but also for his followers.

What of the Gospel of Luke? According to John Squires, Luke employs the techniques of history-writing familiar at the time to give his fellow believers a comprehensive account of Jesus and the beginnings of the Christian movement as the basis for a well-grounded faith and for sacrificial witness in the ongoing circumstances of daily life. Luke sets the story of Jesus in continuity both with the scriptures and the story of Israel in the past, as their eschatological fulfilment, and with the story of the apostles and Christian mission which follows, and which Luke, alone of the four evangelists, narrates in a second volume. In writing thus, Luke displays his underlying conviction that the plan of God for the salvation of humankind and the whole of creation – a plan in which Israel, Jesus and the apostolic church play leading roles – is coming to fruition. Particularly expressive of this conviction is his account of the way Jesus as Messiah, Lord and Saviour manifests the kingdom of God in his teaching, healing and table fellowship, and welcomes the poor and the marginalized into the company of God's people. Implicit in the carrying over of these themes into Luke's story of the Spirit-inspired apostles in Acts is a summons to the church to carry on Christ's work as God's agent of salvation in all the world.

The revelation of the salvation of the world through Christ is at the heart of the message of the Gospel of John also. But as Marianne Meye Thompson shows, by comparison with the synoptic gospels, John's account is distinctive. Thus, for example, it is characteristic of John that themes and images with counterparts in the synoptics are explored and elaborated in much greater breadth and depth; witness the great revelatory 'I AM' sayings, for instance. Alternatively, some themes and images central to the synoptics are relegated to the margins apparently to be replaced by others: thus, 'kingdom of God' in the synoptics gives way to 'eternal life' in John. At stake throughout is the truth or otherwise of the claim that Jesus is the embodiment of God's presence in the world, the Son from the Father, who uniquely reveals the way to the Father and imparts life and light. Explanations for John's distinctiveness are suggested: John offers a theologically creative reworking of synoptic tradition; he draws on tradition independent of synoptic tradition; he is seeking to communicate the meaning and significance of Jesus to a wider audience and so uses imagery that has a universal appeal; the christological intensity of John results from conflict between synagogue and church over the truth of Jesus' claim to messiahship; and so on. Whatever the explanation – and it is likely that a range of factors played a part – the Gospel of John makes an irreducible contribution to the Christian understanding of who Jesus is.

Part III of the *Companion*, on the 'afterlife' of the gospels, offers four essays on what might be called 'gospel effects' in church and society down the ages. The essays are particular case-studies in how the gospels have been received and appropriated in times past and present – how as scripture (or scripture in the making) they have been heard as speaking beyond their own time and place.

First in this group is Frances Young's study of the impact the gospels had on the development of doctrine in the early church. The story is not a straightforward one. It begins with the contested status of the fourfold gospel in the first two centuries (which Francis Watson explores in more detail, in chapter 2), raising the question whether, for the early period, emerging doctrine determined which gospels were acceptable, or whether acceptable doctrine was derived from the gospels regarded as most reliable. More important than the written gospels, at this stage, was the gospel in the form of confessional summaries, of the kind found in Rom 1.1–4. Even when the four gospels had been accepted as canonical, what shaped doctrine most was the overarching sense – epitomized in the 'rule of faith' and summed up in the creeds – of what scripture *as a whole* was about. Thus, in the very significant christological debates of the fourth and fifth centuries, where exegesis played a major part, the focus of the exegesis was not exclusively on the gospels, but on scripture as a whole interpreted in light of the creeds. In other words, the gospels were read *doctrinally*; and in a concluding section, Young suggests that doctrinal reading and liturgical reading – that is, readings informed by an understanding of the overarching story of God in Christ received and celebrated in worship – remain fundamental if engagement with the fourfold gospel is to make accessible the reality of the incarnation.

Interpretation of the gospels is reflected not only in *thought* – the development of doctrine, for example. It is seen also in *action*: not least, in the lives of the saints and martyrs of the church. This is the subject of David Matzko McCarthy's essay on 'The gospels embodied'. Drawing in the first instance upon the life story of Ignatius of Loyola, author of the seminal *Spiritual Exercises*, McCarthy shows how the meaning of a gospel text can be both discerned and displayed in very profound ways by men and women who respond to scripture as making a direct, existential call on their lives. There are four gospel-text case-studies. The meaning of the renunciation for which Jesus calls in Matt 19.21 is explored through the lives of Antony of Egypt, Francis of Assisi, his near-contemporary Clare of Assisi, and Charles de Foucauld. The nature of true kinship spoken of in Matt 12.50 (also 10.37) is elaborated by attention to Augustine in the Late Roman period, Catherine

of Siena from the fourteenth century, and Franz Jägerstätter, in his opposition to Nazism in the early 1940s. The understanding of what it means to engage in the practice of works of mercy of the kind spoken of in Matt 25.40 is displayed through the life stories of Martin of Tours and Dorothy Day. Finally, the meaning of forgiveness and reconciliation as exemplified in Christ's prayer from the cross for the forgiveness of his enemies, in Lk 23.34, is explored in the martyrdom stories of Stephen and Polycarp in the early period and of Maximilian Kolb and Martin Luther King Jr in the modern period. Taken together, the lives of saints and martyrs are a kind of extension of the scriptural canon. The canon of scripture produces a canon of saints.

That the gospels are more than historical sources or literary artefacts is seen, not only in their embodiment in the lives of saints and martyrs, but also in their formative role in the practices of Christian prayer and worship. This is the issue explored in Gordon Mursell's wide-ranging essay. He points out that for the entire pre-modern period, exposure to the gospels for the great majority of Christians took place when the gospels were read in the context of worship. Reminiscent of David McCarthy's essay, his chapter also points to the profound influence, especially in early and medieval spirituality, of reading the gospels for the guidance they gave for the *imitatio Christi* ('imitation of Christ'), even – drawing on the imagery of the Gospel of John – for mystical union with Christ. Particular strategies for engaging with the subject-matter of the gospels developed over time and in various places. One was the practice of *lectio divina* ('spiritual reading'); another was the discipline of the rosary with its concentration on various 'mysteries' in the life of Christ and his mother Mary; another, increasingly popular with the invention of printing and the availability of Bibles in the vernacular, was individual meditation; yet another, and of huge significance throughout Christian history, has been engagement with the gospels through music and the singing of hymns. In all this, Mursell shows that the field of influence was not just one-way – from the gospels to prayer and worship. Rather, practices of prayer, worship and Christian life ('spirituality') allowed the gospels themselves to be seen and interpreted in new and often fruitful ways.

The final essay, by Scott Bader-Saye, brings the question of the 'afterlife' of the gospels into the public realm – the realm of morality and politics. According to Bader-Saye, the gospels are misunderstood if they are confined to the service of privatized religion and personal ethics. Rather, set within a narrative horizon of creation, covenant, redemption and resurrection, the gospels are a summons to a moral life shaped in community by practices

of *dispossession* after the pattern of Christ, with a view to participation in a world being made new. Against this backdrop, Bader-Saye offers a selective history of moral and political interpretations of Jesus' ethic of dispossession, taking Augustine, Immanuel Kant, Reinhold Niebuhr and John Paul II as examples. Augustine represents the attempt – normal in the pre-modern period but falling into disrepute in modernity – to 'read' the world in terms of the eschatological reality of heaven and the City of God. With Kant, by contrast, the life of Jesus offers, not the *standard* of the good, but *examples* of the good, now judged in accordance with the light of universal reason. Like Kant, Niebuhr understood Jesus as pointing to a moral ideal but, unlike Kant, he concluded that attainment of the ideal was impossible in the real world of human history. All that is possible is to live 'in the shadow' of the ideal of love and self-dispossession that Jesus taught. With John Paul II, however, we witness (in the encyclical *Veritatis Splendor*) a recovery of a reading of the gospels as themselves reality-defining and reality-shaping. Here, freedom is not the autonomy of Kantian modernity: rather, shaped by the gospel story of Christ, true freedom takes the form of self-giving in love. It is this alternative way of seeing the world and defining 'the real' that makes reconciliation and new community possible.

Taken as a whole, the essays demonstrate the vitality of current scholarly engagement with the gospels. Even more, they show the vitality of the gospels themselves as texts of Christian scripture. When read for their witness to Christ, and 'performed' in daily life in church and society, the gospels, like Christ himself, are for many a fount and wellspring of life.

Notes

1. For an elaboration of the metaphor of performance, see Nicholas Lash, 'Performing the Scriptures', in his collection of essays, *Theology on the Way to Emmaus* (London: SCM Press, 1986), 37–46; also Stephen C. Barton, 'New Testament Interpretation as Performance', in his *Life Together: Family, Sexuality and Community in the New Testament and Today* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 2001), 223–50.
2. An excellent, balanced account of the various ways of reading the biblical text can be found in Robert Morgan with John Barton, *Biblical Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).
3. Exemplary in this respect are such works as Stephen E. Fowl and L. Gregory Jones, *Reading in Communion: Scripture and Ethics in Christian Life* (London: SPCK, 1991); and, recently, Ellen F. Davis and Richard B. Hays, eds., *The Art of Reading Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003).

Part I

Approaching the gospels: context and method