

Introduction

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Throughout the history of Christianity, the four canonical gospels have proven to be vital resources for Christian reflection and practice, as well as an inspiration for humanistic culture generally. Whether it be in theology, philosophy, the sciences, ethics, worship, architecture or the creative arts, the gospels and their interpretation have contributed significantly. The second-century bishop of Lyons, Irenaeus, spoke of the four canonical gospels as the pillars of the church, 'breathing out immortality on every side, and vivifying humanity afresh'.¹ This vivifying impact derives not just from the literary skills of the respective evangelists, but also from the particular nature of their subject matter: the birth, life, teaching, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth seen in the light of faith.

Building on the strengths of the first edition, this new edition seeks to display something of the dynamism of the gospels through an analysis of the texts themselves and an exploration of their past and present effects. The traditional questions of authorship and dating or the purposes for which they were originally written remain significant: but such questions do not exhaust the possibilities of enquiry. Historical understanding is vital and informative but not determinative. The appreciation of the gospels as texts which form part of a scriptural canon believed within communities of faith to be revelatory deserves to be taken with full seriousness.

More than a decade after the first edition, the research displayed in the original essays has since moved forward in new directions. Interest has grown in the milieu in which the gospels were read, copied and circulated alongside non-canonical gospels. Theories about the sources of the gospels and their interrelations are again a matter of vigorous debate. Historical Jesus scholarship has been re-imagined in ways

¹ *Against Heresies*, 3.11.8. Quotations from the Bible and other ancient texts are translated by the contributors except where stated otherwise.

2 *Stephen C. Barton and Todd Brewer*

inconceivable a couple of decades ago. There is a renewed recognition that due attention be given to the central subject matter of the gospels and to how important gospel themes are illuminated by a variety of critical approaches and theological readings. Recognition of the plurality of interpretations has been enriched by exploring how the gospels have been received historically in various media, including the fine arts and music. Additionally, further attention has been given to modern readers of the gospels and the questions they ask, including how the gospels speak into the human situation. This second edition reflects the advances of recent scholarship and its current debates by updating previous contributions and adding new ones, increasing the number of chapters from thirteen to eighteen. All are written by experts in their respective fields.

The *Companion* is divided into three parts. Part I examines the various methodological and hermeneutical issues of gospels research. Loveday Alexander's essay, 'What Is a Gospel?', identifies some of the defining characteristics of the gospel genre by comparing them with other genres such as folk tales, memoirs, biographies, scriptural narratives and martyrologies. Her analysis leads to the significant conclusion that the gospels are in some sense *sui generis* – written versions of early Christian teaching and preaching about Jesus.

Francis Watson's essay, 'The Fourfold Gospel', investigates the proliferating texts and traditions about Jesus in the early church and the decision in favour of the canonical four. By examining the competing options, the decision in favour of a fourfold gospel is seen as a decision for 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.

In 'Gospel Sources and Interrelations', Todd Brewer provides an overview of current hypotheses about the sources used in the creation of the gospels and the implications that source-critical theories have for gospels interpretation. After a discussion of the relation of the Gospel of John to the synoptics, attention is given to relations between the synoptics, and an account is given of the ongoing scholarly debate surrounding the 'Q hypothesis' and its rivals.

'The Scriptural Matrix of the Gospels' by Richard Hays and Christopher Blumhofer places the four gospels in the scriptural environment of Israel's story. Taking each gospel in turn, Hays and Blumhofer show that the scriptures constitute the gospels' 'generative milieu'. The stories about Jesus gain their full intelligibility within the context of the textual tradition and the larger scriptural story of God's dealings with Israel.

In 'The Gospels and "the Historical Jesus"', Stephen Fowl provides an analysis of historical Jesus studies and the key interpretative issues that scholars seek to address. Surveying scholarship from the eighteenth century on, Fowl disentangles the guiding assumptions of historical Jesus research in its quest for a dispassionate assessment of historical 'facts' and interpretative frameworks. As case studies, Fowl compares the major accounts of Jesus offered by John Dominic Crossan, N. T. Wright and Luke Timothy Johnson.

Parallel to developments in historical approaches to the gospels is the larger hermeneutical question of how the gospels should or could be read today. So Part I concludes with Sandra Schneiders's essay 'The Gospels and the Reader', which narrates a shift in reading methods from notions of objectivity and authorial intent to a reader-oriented approach which emphasizes the reader as the subject who interprets the text. Drawing upon the philosophical hermeneutics of Paul Ricoeur and Hans-Georg Gadamer, Schneiders argues that reading scripture is an event with the potential to transform the reader through the transcendent reality mediated by the text.

Part II of the *Companion* turns to the gospel texts themselves and their witness to Jesus in the light of resurrection faith. The essays follow the canonical order of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, with an additional chapter surveying the testimony to Jesus of non-canonical gospels. Though by no means exhaustive, the essays display the shape and content of each gospel as well as key insights from recent scholarship.

In Roland Deines's essay on the Gospel of Matthew the main focus is on reading the text for its content and themes. Deines shows how the gospel reveals Jesus' universal significance by means of his Jewish particularity, signalled by his reformulation of Davidic messiahship and Abrahamic heritage. In this light, Matthew is interpreted as a gospel for all Christians, a new scripture for a new time and a new people whose life is shaped by Jesus' life and teaching.

According to Elizabeth Shively, the Gospel of Mark unites ideas of christology and discipleship within a hermeneutical framework of Jewish apocalyptic. Mark's story of Jesus, characterized by urgency, action and conflict, tells of the anointed warrior king who comes to establish his kingdom and liberate the oppressed from powers imperial and satanic. He does so, paradoxically, by submitting to death on a Roman cross, a death interpreted in the light of the scriptures as a ransom for many.

In contrast to Mark, the author of the Gospel of Luke writes his story of Jesus against the widest possible backdrop. As John T. Squires

4 *Stephen C. Barton and Todd Brewer*

shows, it is the story of the salvation of Israel and the nations in fulfilment of the promises of God in the scriptures. The new kingdom community which Jesus inaugurates by word and deed is one which challenges his contemporaries by transforming values and offering forgiveness and welcome to people of every condition and status.

The universal breadth of Luke's gospel compares favourably with that of the Gospel of John. While noting John's several differences from the synoptics, Christopher Skinner shows how John is particularly interested in narrating the life of Jesus within the eternal life of God. It is Jesus' unique relationship with God which shapes John's distinctive portrayal of Jesus as the one through whom the hidden God is known.

Simon Gathercole surveys the various non-canonical gospels and their respective christologies. He first orients the reader to the field of research, noting the competitive positioning of non-canonical gospels relative to the four canonical gospels. He then shows how more recent scholarship has sought either to blur the canonical boundary or to compare and contrast the canonical gospels with their non-canonical counterparts in respect of history, theology and ethics.

Since, as has been famously said, God is 'the neglected factor' in New Testament theology, the final essay in Part II, is entitled 'God and the knowledge of God in the gospels'. Here, Stephen Barton shows that controversial claims about God are implied at every point in the gospel stories of Jesus, shaped as they are by an apocalyptic worldview and by the parting of the ways between the synagogue and the church.

Part III of the *Companion*, on the 'afterlife of the gospels', offers a number of essays on what might be called 'gospel effects' in church and society down the ages. The essays are case studies in how the gospels have been received and appropriated in times past and present: how as scripture they have been heard as speaking beyond their originating time and place.

In 'The Gospels and Doctrine', Frances Young explores the changing relationship in the history of the early church between the gospel texts and the determination of true doctrine. She shows that, even when the four gospels had been accepted as canonical, what shaped doctrine most was the overarching sense of what scripture as a whole was about, epitomized in the 'rule of faith' and the creeds.

Just as the creeds offer one kind of window onto the gospels, so also does the history of the reception of the gospels, of their 'effects' in particular times and places. This is the subject of the contribution by Christine Joynes. Here, the first part gives an account of reception history as a relatively new discipline in gospel studies, while the second

part offers as a case study some of the ways the synoptic stories of the women who visit the tomb of Jesus have been represented in the visual arts.

Closely related to the preceding is Gordon Mursell's wide-ranging essay 'Praying the Gospels: Spirituality and Worship'. Here, the role of Christian worship and devotional practices in making the gospels come alive in ever-changing historical circumstances and across ecclesial traditions is explored. And among the arts, attention is paid to the signal contribution of music (J. S. Bach, black gospel music and hymns) to the appreciation and appropriation of gospel texts.

A further case study in the 'afterlife' of the gospels is David Matzko McCarthy's essay 'The Gospels Embodied: The Lives of Saints and Martyrs'. McCarthy builds on a trend in the theology of scripture according to which the truth of the text is discovered in the 'performance' of the text in the lives of individuals and communities. On this basis, he offers a series of cameos in which the 'exegesis' of a gospel text takes biographical form, and the lives of saints and martyrs become a kind of extension of the scriptural canon.

Scott Bader-Saye's essay brings 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 realm of the personal. Rather, the gospels are a summons to a moral life expressive of shared 'deep themes' of liberation, dispossession and love. He elaborates on this through a critical appreciation of the way these gospel themes have been taken up in modern discussions of ethics and politics from Immanuel Kant to Romand Coles.

A fitting final contribution is the reflection by Ben Quash, 'The Gospels for the Life of the World'. Quash draws Christian doctrine, the hermeneutics of gospels interpretation and the Christian iconic tradition into lively conversation. His central claim is that the Spirit of God mediates the life of Christ risen and ascended to the church and the world, and that this happens through the reading and hearing of the gospels and their ongoing representation in such works as Graham Sutherland's *Christ in Glory*.