

Introduction

Defining Gospel Reading

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Mark opens his account of Jesus with “the beginning of the gospel of Jesus the Christ” (Ἀρχὴ τοῦ εὐαγγελίου Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ). Although modern readers often associate the term “gospel” here with the now long-established genre by the same name, Mark clearly elaborates what he means (at least in part) in what follows:

As it is written in Isaiah the prophet,
 “See I will send my messenger before you,
 who will prepare your way,
 a voice crying in the wilderness,
 ‘Prepare the way of the Lord,
 make straight paths for him.’”

In the ancient Mediterranean milieu, the term “gospel” articulated the idea of *rescue*. Mark’s reference to “Isaiah the prophet” denotes that the rescue enacted by Jesus is divine, anticipated in the ancient writ of the Jews, and sponsored by their singular God (Isa. 40:9; 52:7; 60:6; 61:1).¹ The use of “gospel” to express a decisive deliverance is

¹ Aside from the use of εὐαγγέλιον in 2 Sam 4:10, it is the verbal form of εὐαγγελίζω that appears throughout Deutero-Isaiah and the rest of the LXX – e.g., Pss. 40:9 [39:10, LXX], 68:11 [67:12, LXX] Pss. 96:2 [95:2, LXX]; Joel 3:5 [LXX]; and Nah 1:15 [2:1, LXX]. For early Jewish uses in which some form of victory or rescue is in mind, see Pss. Sol 11:1, Josephus, *J.W.* 4.10.6 §618; 4.11.5 §§656–57. For similar instances in Hellenistic literature, see Lucian, [*Asin.*], 26; Plutarch, *Ages.*, 33; *Demetr.*, 18; *Pomp.* 66.3; Philostratus, *Vit. Apoll.*, 5.8; Appian, *Bell. civ.* 3.93, 4.20; 4.113.

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certainly taken up in confessional circles today, though those using it in this way are often unaware of the term's etymological bearings. It has become more common in the modern era to speak of the "Gospels," especially (though not exclusively) with reference to the four canonical Jesus narratives, or to speak of the "gospel" with reference to a concise set of beliefs about the saving work of Jesus (see, e.g., 1 Cor. 15:3). The semantic range of "Gospel/gospel" is thus extensive and complex.

Polysemy also attends the term "reading," which may express a precise exercise of following the lines of a text or the broader act of interpreting an event or discussion (as in "she read that situation well"). This book utilizes the ambiguity of both terms to explore "gospel reading" as early Christianity's theological interpretation of the ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus in textual form.

Gospel writing is not the Promethean act of gospel production – writing always follows *reading*.² This is true even for the earliest evangelist. Mark explicitly indicates that his "gospel of Jesus Christ" is drawn, at least in part, from a reading of Exodus, Malachi, and Deutero-Isaiah. Matthew wrote his Gospel out of his readings of Moses, the Prophets, and also Mark. Gospel writing therefore arises out of gospel reading, an early Christian practice that continues with Luke, John, and others whose compositions embody theologically robust appropriations of both the Jewish Scriptures and early Christian testimony about Jesus. Luke is quite clear that his reading of other gospel materials served as a primary impetus for writing his own (Luke 1:1–4), and John seems to envision an audience comprising experienced readers of other gospel-related texts (John 20:30; 21:25). The Gospel of Mark, the *Protevangelium of James*, the *Epistula Apostolorum*, and the Diatessaron are thus all products of reading "gospel" or "Gospels." No gospel was penned in

² Though we acknowledge oral transmission and memory as integral components in the process of gospel composition, "gospel reading" (rather than "gospel hearing" or "gospel remembering") expresses our focus on the *textual* renderings of the Jesus tradition.

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hermeneutical isolation or as a purely historical chronicle of an uninterpreted series of events. These early writers were interpreters engaging with the texts of Jewish Scripture, antecedent gospel material, and other early Christian literature. “Gospel reading” is our phrase denoting this innovative and often artistic use of precursory material to discern the significance of Jesus in the first centuries of the church.

The study of Christian origins has yielded important findings on the production and redaction of gospel material. Our broad construal of gospel reading, however, highlights interpretive dynamics that the disciplines of source and redaction criticism presuppose but often leave untreated. Gospel writing is more complex than the mere compilation of existing oral testimonies and textual fragments about Jesus that are then ordered into a narrative frame; the process of composition presupposes a creative and dynamic act of theological *reception*.³ And in a reception-oriented approach, the direction of inquiry does not trace a linear regression through the tradition to an unadulterated historical *Anfangspunkt*; the direction may be backwards, but the lines are rarely straight. In gospel reading, there persists a “plurality of coordinates.”⁴

³ Other studies often make inquiries along similar lines. See, e.g., Jens Schröter, Tobias Niklas, and Joseph Verheyden, eds., *Gospels and Gospel Traditions in the Second Century: Experiments in Reception* (BZBW 235; Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2019); Francis Watson and Sarah Parkhouse, eds., *Connecting Gospels: Beyond the Canonical/Non-Canonical Divide* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018); Michael Kok, *The Gospel on the Margins: The Reception of Mark in the Second Century* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2015); Lorne R. Zelyck, *John among the Other Gospels: The Reception of the Fourth Gospel in the Extra-Canonical Gospels* (WUNT 2/347; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013); Tuomas Rasimus, ed., *The Legacy of John: Second-Century Reception of the Fourth Gospel* (NovTSup 132; Leiden: Brill, 2010); Paul Foster, “The Reception of the Canonical Gospels in the Non-Canonical Gospels,” *Early Christianity* 4 (3) (2013), 281–309.

⁴ Francis Watson, “On the Miracle Catena in *Epistula Apostolorum* 4–5,” in Jens Schröter, Tobias Niklas, and Joseph Verheyden, eds., *Gospels and Gospel Traditions in the Second Century: Experiments in Reception* (BZBW 235; Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2019), 107–28; 128.

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The lacuna this volume seeks to address derives from the scholarly tendency to focus on the historical dimensions of gospel production without robust attention to the theological and interpretive dimensions of reception, the complex phenomenon we have termed “gospel reading.”⁵ Our collection considers the reception of the Jesus tradition through a variety of critical methods, pushing against the constrictive disciplinary borders of the historical-critical approach that has dominated gospel studies over the last century, yet resisting a purely “theological” approach that ignores historical contingency. The common thread running through each chapter is the conviction that gospel writing derives from the interpretive act of gospel reading, whether the reading of “gospel” as the announcement of divine rescue in Israel’s Scriptures or the reading of preexisting gospel and gospel-like material to produce updated, expanded, or even alternative renditions. The purpose is not to provide a systematic and comprehensive account of Jesus’s reception. The aim, rather, is to demonstrate from varying angles the intricate dynamics of his theological and textual presentation in early Christianity (and beyond) through foundational essays offering studies on specific texts and themes.

In the first part, “Reading the Gospel in Israel’s Scriptures,” contributors consider how early Christian writers used the sacred literature of the Jewish tradition as the framework for their understanding of the gospel events. Ian A. McFarland’s essay offers a comprehensive reflection on Christological readings of what we regularly refer to as the Old Testament. In a conscious exercise in theological interpretation, McFarland offers Trinitarian reasoning for moving beyond

⁵ Attention to reception dynamics is a central feature of Francis Watson’s proposed paradigm of Gospel origins in *Gospel Writing: A Canonical Perspective* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2013). See the reflections on Watson’s emphasis on reception in Catherine Sider Hamilton, “Introduction: Francis Watson’s *Gospel Writing* and *The Fourfold Gospel*: Engaging a ‘New Paradigm,’” in *Writing the Gospels: A Dialogue with Francis Watson* ed. Catherine Sider Hamilton with Joel Willits (LNTS 606; London: T & T Clark / Bloomsbury), 1–14.

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correlating Jesus to predictive prophesy or to unearthing his Old Testament presence by identifying Christophanies. To read the Gospel in Israel's sacred texts is to attend to the revealed character of the divinity Jesus embodies. This broader theological treatment narrows in focus as Beverly Roberts Gaventa turns to Paul, the earliest canonical gospel reader. With Jesus as his hermeneutical lodestar, the Apostle's language of God is just as interesting in what he does not say as in what he does say. In spite of its increased frequency in Pauline studies, the phrase "God of Israel" (or similar nomenclature such as "God of Abraham" or "God of our fathers") is entirely absent from his corpus. How does Paul's gospel reading shape his articulation of the divine identity in light of Jesus? Turning to Luke-Acts, Madison N. Pierce presents Luke as a "gospel" reader who identifies Jesus as a character within scripture. By identifying Jesus as the servant and messiah in Isaiah, Luke draws upon the scriptural traditions of his interpretive community. These readings are not unique to Luke, but have precursors in other early Jewish and Christian traditions.

The following part, "Gospel Writers as Gospel Readers: Evangelists as Theological Interpreters," offers studies of gospel reading as the basis for gospel writing, asking how evangelists may have read one another. But who read whom? This question underlies the chapters by Mark Goodacre and Dale C. Allison, Jr. Though Matthean posteriority has gained prominence in recent discussions on gospel origins, Goodacre provides new insights to affirm Luke as a reader of Matthew, rather than the other way around. For Allison, the relationship between Luke and Matthew is best explained by recourse to a sayings source. In spite of recent challenges to the existence of Q, Allison mounts a detailed case arguing that Matthew's Sermon on the Mount could not have been a source for Luke's Sermon on the Plain. Either both read Q, or Matthew is reading Luke. Attention turns to Mark and John in Wendy E. S. North's chapter. A detailed exegetical comparison of the Feeding of the 5,000 shows that the Fourth Evangelist may well have been a reader of Mark. Though John's portrait of Jesus differs markedly from that of the Synoptics, he was

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still a gospel reader. Did he also read what is referred to as the Egerton Gospel? Troels Engberg-Pedersen takes up this question and in doing so presents a number of methodological cautions in the study of gospel reception. The tendency to leap from reception (of one gospel by another) to reconstruction (of *Sitze im Leben*) must be resisted to avoid the concretizing of a hermeneutical circle that emboldens unfounded judgments.

The final part, “Gospel Reading as Ecclesial Tradition,” features intersections between gospel readings and church tradition from the first century and into later ecclesial contexts. John M. G. Barclay considers the early Christian exhortations to extend beneficence to enemies and to give beyond the conventional boundaries of reciprocity. Because such paraenetic material proliferates throughout the literature of the first two centuries of Christian origins (and beyond), an active reception history attends these themes of enemy-love and superabundant generosity. Gospel reading thus involves the active appropriation and rearticulation of certain ideas and practices inseparably linked to Jesus in Christian tradition. Andrew J. Byers analyzes the reception theology and practices evident in the Johannine literature. If the Epistles of John presuppose John’s Gospel (even if in an earlier form), then their interrelation glimpses the practice of gospel reading not by a distanced community eager to produce an alternative account of Jesus but by the very social network from which the Gospel emerged. Johannine gospel reading is shown to be a creative and dynamic enterprise encouraged by the inexhaustible significance and activity of Jesus.

Though the form of gospel reading examined by Barclay and Byers is more informal and perhaps to a degree a subconscious act, the Eusebian canon tables offered a detailed exegetical guide for formal gospel reading that is active and comparative. Though little evidence has been available for understanding how these tables were used by Greek writers, Matthew R. Crawford presents his discovery of a letter by Severus of Antioch who used Eusebius’s complicated system to help a colleague understand a Matthean

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variant of the piercing of Jesus's side. Severus's exegetical instructions are significant in demonstrating how gospel reading became a formal ecclesial practice aided by sophisticated tools and assumptions about the Fourfold Gospel in the Christian canon.

To close our volume, Simon Gathercole's Afterword provides brief reflections on the contributions made and suggests ways forward for future studies, highlighting the significance of gospel reading as a helpful means of engaging noncanonical literature. Though the canonical Gospels enjoy a centerstage presence in this book because of scope and space, we are eager to see an increased awareness of the theological and hermeneutical dynamics in the historical act of gospel reception. No one has inspired us more in that endeavor than Francis Watson, the friend, mentor, and colleague to whom this work is dedicated.