Gospel Reading and Reception in Early Christian Literature

Before the early Christian evangelists were Gospel writers, they were Gospel readers. Their composition process was more complex than simply compiling existing traditions about Jesus, then ordering them into a narrative frame. Rather, these writers were engaged in a creative and dynamic act of theological reception. "Gospel reading" refers to this innovative and often artistic use of source materials – from Israel's Scriptures to preexisting narratives of Jesus – to produce updated, expanded, or even alternative renditions. This volume explores that process. The common thread running through each chapter is the conviction that the early Christian practice of writing "gospel" and the "Gospels" was one of the most hermeneutically creative exercises in ancient literary culture, one that was prompted by the perceived theological significance of Jesus. The contributors seek to demonstrate the intricate dynamics of this controversial figure's theological and textual reception through foundational essays on specific texts and themes.

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To Francis:
Colleague, Mentor, Friend

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Foreword: We Are All Gospel Readers

KEVIN J. VANHOOZER

Reading is fundamental to a good education and to good citizenship in a constitutional (or parliamentary) state. The gospel is fundamental to Christianity, and knowing how to read it well is essential for biblical scholarship and for gospel citizenship. The Bern Council in 1537 appointed John Calvin to the office of "reader in Holy Scripture," and indeed, it is an apt description of the theologian's task. Christian theology is arguably the project of reading the Scripture with and for understanding of the God of the gospel and the gospel of God (Mark 1:4; Rom. 1:1).

Francis Watson has been thinking about what it means to read and receive Scripture well for around four decades. He has also been reading the literature beyond the canonical divide in exemplary fashion. His searching questions have opened up new directions in biblical studies, and so it is only fitting that we dedicate this collection of essays on reading the gospels to him.

I owe a personal debt of gratitude to Francis. As a newly appointed theologian at the University of Edinburgh with a fixation on what it means to be biblical, I searched in vain for others with a similar interest. The dividing wall of hostility, or at least indifference, separating biblical studies from theology was firmly in disciplinary place. Hence, the conference Francis organized at King's College in 1992 on the Bible and theology was a cup of cold water in the desert of criticism. Francis wanted to free or open up the text from its Berliner captivity to the usual academic approaches. I particularly resonated with Francis's claim in the introduction to the published version of the conference papers: "It is no longer

plausible to identify the products of historical-critical discovery and hypothesis with the full reality of the biblical texts."[1] Here, at last, was biblical bone of my bone and interpretive flesh of my flesh! Little did I know at the time that Francis was an early pioneer or retriever of what has come to be known as the theological interpretation of Scripture.[2]

In a series of seminal texts, Watson has charted his own way as a New Testament scholar through the Bermuda Triangle of hermeneutics, theology, and history. The 1990s saw the publication of *Text, Church, and World: Biblical Interpretation in Theological Perspective*[3] and *Text and Truth: Redefining Biblical Theology*.[4] The 2000s saw three publications on Paul; the next decade four books on the gospels. All of these works attest a consistent focus on questions concerning the interrelation of texts, contexts, and communities. In particular, Watson has sought a distinct *via media* in the debate between the "theological interpretation of Scripture" and the so-called historical-critical method. He describes his *Gospel Writing: A Canonical Perspective* as "an exercise in *historically informed theological hermeneutics*."[5]

Paul and the evangelists are not the only readers of the gospel that have attracted Watson's interest. He wrote the chapter on "The Bible" for *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth*. He there claims that "Barth's biblical interpretation is not a particular item, but the foundation and principles of coherence of his entire

1 Francis Watson, ed., *The Open Text: New Directions for Biblical Studies?* (London: SCM Press, 1993), 2.

2 Years later, in a work describing five types of biblical theology, Klink and Lockett chose Francis Watson to represent "biblical theology as theological construction," the type most closely associated with theological interpretation of Scripture (Edward W. Klink III and Darian R.Lockett, *Understanding Biblical Theology: A Comparison of Theory and Practice* [Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012], chap. 10, 169–82).

3 Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994.

4 Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997.

5 Watson, *Gospel Writing: A Canonical Perspective* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2013), 9.

project."[6] One might say something similar of Watson's own work. In both, the aim of biblical interpretation is not simply to reconstruct the world behind the text, or even to say what the words mean, but to read the biblical texts "as articulating not simply an authorial intention but above all a single, infinitely rich theological subject-matter."[7]

In separate essays written fifteen years apart, Watson has examined Barth's theological exegesis in his *Philippians* and *Ephesians* commentaries, respectively. Clearly, Watson sees Barth as a gospel and Scripture reader to reckon with, primarily because his commentaries tell us something important not only about Paul and his texts but also about God's definitive saving action in Jesus: the gospel. Watson also notes that in the *Philippians* commentary, unlike Barth's earlier, infamous *Romans*, "the disjunction between then and now has been largely abandoned."[8] Paul, Barth, and readers today find themselves caught up "in the communicative dynamic that first gave rise to this text and that continues to secure a hearing for Paul's words as embodying the Word of God."[9]

Fifteen years later, Watson again attempts to sort out the way Barth relates history, hermeneutics, and theology, noting again that Barth is less interested in Paul and his historical situation than is typical of most modern commentaries. The watchword, which Barth ascribes to Bengel, is: "Do not ask about who wrote but about what is written." Watson finds this puzzling because "the relationship between author and addressees is an explicit feature of the text itself."[10] Nevertheless, he finds Barth much more attentive

6 Watson, "The Bible," in *Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth*, ed. John Webster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 57.

7 Watson, "The Bible," 58.

8 Watson, "*Philippians* as Theological Exegesis," in Karl Barth, *Epistle to the Philippians: 40th Anniversary Edition* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2002), xxx.

9 Watson, "*Philippians* as Theological Exegesis," li.

10 Watson, "Barth, *Ephesians*, and the Practice of Theological Exegesis," in Karl Barth , *The Epistle to the Ephesians*, ed. R. David Nelson (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2017), 17.

to the particulars of the biblical text, arriving at its subject matter precisely by following the way the words go: "More successfully perhaps than in the Romans commentary, Barth is able to show that key theological commitments have been read *out of* the Pauline text and not simply imposed on it."[11] Barth's lectures on *Ephesians* show that he is able to practice exegesis and theology simultaneously. Nevertheless, in Watson's judgment, "Barth's relation to the traditions and conventions of biblical scholarship is complex."[12] Again, something similar could be said of Watson in view of his persistent efforts to, in his words, "dismantle the barriers that at present separate biblical scholarship from Christian theology."[13]

It was my privilege to work with Francis, along with Stephen Fowl and A. K. M. Adam, on a project that sought to put into practice his call to desegregate biblical studies and theology. After years of formal and informal debate and discussion, the four of us coauthored *Reading Scripture with the Church: Toward a Hermeneutic for Theological Interpretation.*[14] To the best of my knowledge, this was the first time Francis broached the question of the significance of the Fourfold Gospel canon. He was already aware of what is at stake in judging some but not other gospels canonical: "If replaced by other texts, the outcome would be not only another Jesus but also another community."[15]

Among his recent work, Watson's *The Fourfold Gospel* is a fitting reflection of his lifelong interest in reading the Bible theologically. The key ingredients in his earlier work – history, hermeneutics, exegesis, theology – all appear here too. Of the many noteworthy issues Watson here raises, two in particular have an important

11 Watson, "Barth, *Ephesians*, and the Practice of Theological Exegesis," 26.
12 Watson, "Barth, *Ephesians*, and the Practice of Theological Exegesis," 30.
13 Watson, *Text and Truth*, vii.
14 Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006.
15 Watson, "Are There Still Four Gospels? A Study in Theological Hermeneutics," in *Reading Scripture with the Church*, 96.

bearing on theological exegesis: the concept of the canon and the notion of truth as both singular and plural.

In speaking of both gospel writing and gospel reading, Watson suggests that the term "canonical" embraces three dimensions that he has been juggling for years: historical, hermeneutical, and theological.[16] It is the canon, for instance, that exposes the inadequacy of reading the Bible "like any other book." It is the canon, therefore, that exposes the inadequacy of reading the Fourfold Gospel "like any other gospel."[17] Stated simply: the Fourfold Gospel is a unique historical, hermeneutical, and theological phenomenon. So, too, is the canon, of which it forms a crucial part.

There are only a handful of references to Brevard Childs (and none to Christopher Seitz) in *Gospel Writing* and *The Fourfold Gospel*, though an earlier discussion makes it clear where Watson departs from Childs's understanding of canon. Watson appreciates Childs's insistence that the canon is not something that gets imposed upon texts later, but rather a textual phenomenon to be described. "Canonicity" includes the "extended history of effects" that the biblical text has on the church as a reading community, and "it is *this* descriptive task that Childs undertakes in his emphasis on the text's final form."[18] Yet he criticizes Childs for his formalist assumption that the final form is self-sufficient and self-explanatory. Although the canon presents us with a set of normative texts, it does not tell us how they should be read to rule the church's faith and life.[19]

Watson's use of the canon as a fulcrum with which to coordinate historical, hermeneutical, and theological concerns may be his signal contribution and signature move. Without *this* canon, we

16 *Gospel Writing*, 9.

17 See Watson, "Are There Still Four Gospels?," 97–98.

18 Watson, *Text and World*, 33.

19 *Text and World*, 43. Watson charges Childs with operating with a concept of an *ideal* community of readers that "is oblivious to the function of the canonical text as a site of ideological conflict" (44).

would have a *different* gospel, a *different* Jesus, a *different* church (cf. Gal. 1:6–7). Watson criticizes the conventional account of gospel origins for focusing on the first century only, thus undervaluing the phenomenon of reception. He also dismisses the idea that the canon is an arbitrary textual collection: "The church can perhaps decree a certain writing to be canonical and authoritative, but it can hardly decree that God should speak in it, if it is not already the case that God speaks in it."[20]

What is needed to make sense of the canon – the Scripture of the Christian church – is a thick, theological description of the process of its composition and reception. Accordingly, Watson rightly insists that the event of God's self-revelation in Jesus is an event that includes its own reception: "believing reception of the event of Jesus as the Christ belongs to the story that is told, and the telling of the story therefore reflects both the event and its reception; for event itself includes its own reception."[21] To put this in my own terms: rightly to describe the canon, and its Fourfold Gospel, requires theological categories that situate church decisions about what is and is not canonical in the context of the triune economy of self-communication, categories such as the Spirit guiding the church into all the truth (John 16:13).

The Fourfold Gospel is of more than mere literary significance. What is ultimately at stake, as Watson is well aware, is Christology: how do we say who Jesus is, and how can we say it on the basis of texts that often differ from one another? The Fourfold Gospel presents modern biblical critics with the challenge of searching for the "authentic" historical Jesus *behind* the texts. Things would be simpler if there were one authorized version only. It is here that Watson proposes a paradigm change, a veritable revolution in Gospel Studies: "The plurality is a unity and the unity remains a

20 Watson, "Hermeneutics and the Doctrine of Scripture: Why They Need Each Other," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 12 (2010), 132.

21 *Text and Truth*, 165.

plurality."[22] Watson wants those who are already acquainted with the God who is one being in three persons to meet the one gospel in four Gospels, each a version of the one, yet each with its own independent status and significance.

Paradigm change is often threatening. Some will resist the notion that the Fourfold Gospel is the work of readers rather than inspired authors. Others will resent the implication that the Fourfold Gospel means that the truth of Jesus Christ is "not to be found at the literal-historical level"[23] because it is "on a different plane to that of sheer factuality."[24] Watson is not here bending the knee to historical skepticism. He is rather saying that Christ is so infinitely rich "that he must necessarily break free of the confines of purely historical narration."[25]

Some may suppose that a systematic theologian such as myself would find the notion of a Fourfold Gospel to be inimical to conceptual clarity and doctrinal truth. In fact, the opposite is the case. My mentor Robert Gundry convinced me long ago that there are distinct pastoral benefits to the diversity of the New Testament: "The very fact that our biblical canon is a collection of different books [read: *gospels*], each written for a different occasion, not a single book [read: *gospel*] written for all occasions, argues that in general the exposition and application of biblical hermeneutics should highlight diversity."[26]

The good news is that there is more light yet to emerge from reading the Fourfold Gospel. The historian of mission Andrew Walls has argued that each time a new culture received the gospel, there was a growth in understanding: "It is as though Christ himself

22 *The Fourfold Gospel*, vii.
23 Watson, *Gospel Writing*, 550.
24 Watson, *Gospel Writing*, 14.
25 Watson, *Gospel Writing*, 541.
26 Robert H. Gundry, "Hermeneutic Liberty, Theological Diversity, and Historical Occasionalism," in *The Old Is Better: New Testament Essays in Support of Traditional Interpretations* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), 9.

actually grows through the work of mission."[27] Watson says something similar as concerns the Fourfold Gospel itself. And his more recent gospel readings of that which is noncanonical hold promise for fresh understandings of the canonical (for more on this, see Simon Gathercole's Afterword to this volume).

We are all – evangelists, church fathers, biblical scholars, systematic theologians – gospel readers. We have read the gospel readers, and *they are us*. C. S. Lewis's *Experiment in Criticism* is, admittedly, not about biblical criticism, but its main point applies here. Lewis proposes that we judge a book's quality by the kind of reading it invites. The best literary works permit and invite good reading – and rereading. A good author's writing "deserves, because it rewards, alert and disciplined reading."[28] According to this criterion, the Fourfold Gospel is not only good news but also good writing. The same criterion applies to Watson's corpus, canonical or not. He has proven himself a good reader both of the gospels and of those, like Barth, who read the gospels. For engaging in historically informed theological hermeneutics that receives the gospel and generates gospel readings, thus enriching our understanding of the significance of Jesus, Francis deserves our attention, and our thanks.

27 Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996), xvii.

28 C. S. Lewis, *An Experiment in Criticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961), 114.