

BOOK REVIEW

Watson, Francis, *Gospel Writing: A Canonical Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013). xiii + 665 pp. Pbk. \$48.00.

In this book, Francis Watson, a professor in the Department of Theology and Religion at Durham University, makes his first book-length contribution to the origins of the Gospels. Given that his other monographs cover topics in biblical theology and Paul, this monograph charts a new kind of contribution from Watson for the theological enterprise. His interest in biblical theology and his emphasis on considering the entire canon have undoubtedly affected the canonical perspective taken in this book.

At the end of the prologue, Watson explains his canonical approach: 'If the book is to be characterized as a whole, it might be seen as an exercise in *historically informed theological hermeneutics*' (p. 9). The description 'historically informed' refers to his intention 'to account for the genesis of the canonical gospel within the context of early Christian gospel production as a whole' (p. 7). This part of his method involves a survey of how the Gospels came to be included in the New Testament canon, and it also involves a helpful consideration and evaluation of the underlying interpretive principles theologians have used for this task.

The term 'theological hermeneutics' is a potentially misleading description of the approach of this book given the popular movement of theological interpretation. Watson's work differs from how scholars, such as A.C. Thiselton, usually explain and model theological hermeneutics. Although the definitions of what this term means vary among theological interpreters, Watson's book does not readily conform to any of them. Watson uses the term 'hermeneutics' in the sense of 'interpretation'. Watson clarifies: 'the primary concern here is with the implications of the fourfold canonical form for interpretive practice' (p. 8). This explanation is clear enough; however, given that scholars have differentiated between hermeneutics and interpretation (see S.E. Porter and J.C. Robinson, *Hermeneutics* [Eerdmans, 2011]),

Watson should have chosen the description, ‘theological interpretation’, given his intended meaning and his affinity with the theological interpretation of Scripture movement.

Watson describes his choice of the term ‘theological’ in his approach in the following way: ‘The position developed here serves to underline the mediated character of all knowledge of Jesus—over against the claim that we can have access to an uninterpreted “historical” figure by abstracting him from his own reception’ (p. 8). This point echoes Watson’s second thesis in this book: ‘Jesus is known only through the mediation of his own reception. There is no access to the singular, uninterpreted reality of a “historical Jesus” behind the reception process’ (p. 606). This point piggy-backs on J.D.G. Dunn’s thesis in *Jesus Remembered* (Eerdmans, 2003), which was originally developed by N.A. Dahl’s ‘The Problem of the Historical Jesus’ (*Jesus the Christ* [Fortress, 1991]) and *Jesus in the Memory of the Early Church* (Augsburg Fortress, 1976). Although Watson is not claiming to embark on a third quest as Dunn did, Watson’s incorporation of Dunn’s work is promising because it avoids many of the errors of the first two quests for the historical Jesus.

This book consists of three sections. The first section is entitled, ‘The Eclipse of the Fourfold Gospel’. In this section, Watson traces the historical development of the fourfold Gospel from Augustine to Lessing/Reimarus. Watson demonstrates well that, although Augustine would disagree with the first quest for the historical Jesus that Reimarus led, Augustine could not object to the presuppositions that drove that quest because he held precisely the same presuppositions. This section demonstrates that Watson has not only surveyed the various positions to demonstrate that he knows the literature but that he also has evaluated those positions. Watson’s approach is exemplary, because, too often, many scholars merely survey and do not critically assess the proposals and views of those they survey.

The second section is entitled, ‘Reframing Gospel Origins’. In this section, Watson advances several points that scholars will undoubtedly challenge. He questions the coincidences between various Gospel sources as originating from the hypothesized Q source, claims that Luke interpreted Matthew, compares the *Gospel of Thomas* with Q, considers a so-called Johannine source in the ‘Unknown Gospel’ (*P. Eger. 2*) and reinterprets a parallelism between John, the *Gospel of Thomas* and the *Gospel of Peter*. Although I will challenge one of these

points below, I commend Watson for presenting new arguments rather than repeating the arguments of others and, thus, making an actual contribution to scholarship. Even if someone disagrees with what he writes, one can at least appreciate this aspect of this book.

The third section covers the canonical construct. The canonical construct refers to the ways in which different segments of Christendom have responded to the fact that there are other Gospels beyond those included in Scripture. Watson claims that the eastern Church limits the plurality of the Gospels, while the western Church moves towards a consensus. He also considers Origen's canonical hermeneutics and discusses imagery, symbolism and liturgy relating to the Gospels.

Watson's concluding chapter, which he titles, 'In Lieu of a Conclusion: Seven Theses on Jesus and the Canonical Gospel', comprises the central arguments of this book. Each of these theses follows logically, at least in Watson's argument, from the one preceding it. He should be commended for crafting his argument in such a way that it is easy to follow him from one thesis to the next.

His first thesis is that the 'early church's reception of the figure of Jesus is a dynamic interpretative process' (p. 604). With this thesis, Watson argues that the Gospel writers formed their understanding of the person of Jesus by means of a procedure that is pulled out from all the literature available.

Watson's second thesis is that 'Jesus is only known through the mediation of his own reception'. Thus, 'there is no access to the singular, uninterpreted reality of a "historical Jesus" behind the reception process' (p. 606).

Watson's third thesis is that the 'early reception of Jesus is marked by the interaction of the oral and the textual' (p. 608). This thesis speaks to the debate concerning the sources of the Gospels, particularly the theory of Q and oral tradition. Watson takes a synthetic approach by claiming that the oral and textual traditions worked together. This approach is perhaps a more productive approach than arguing for one against the other.

Watson's fourth thesis is that the 'differentiation between canonical and noncanonical gospels is not based on identifiable criteria inherent to the texts' (p. 609). This thesis emphasizes that scholars need to consider the other available Gospels in conjunction with the canonical Gospels when trying to understand the canonical perspective of the Gospels—an approach that Watson himself has modeled well in this

book. This point has implications for further research on the issue of canon formation.

Watson's fifth thesis is that the 'definition of "canonical status" presupposes both an ongoing production of gospel literature and divergent communal usage' (p. 611). This means that the mere fact that some Gospels have canonical status presupposes that others do not. Thus, there should be a stage when a Gospel is deemed canonical.

Watson's sixth thesis is that 'early gospel literature is retrospectively divided by the formalizing of canonical and noncanonical status. It is therefore necessary to differentiate pre- and postcanonical stages in the reception of this literature' (p. 613). This point is a straightforward one following from the fifth thesis, but its significance remains to be seen—that is, even if scholars agree on this distinction and differentiation in the history of reception, it seems that this difference will make little interpretive difference for exegetes because we do not have access to those precanonical stages. Watson, however, uses an example that I will comment on below that might suggest otherwise.

Watson's seventh thesis is that 'A "canonical perspective" models a convergence of historical, theological, and hermeneutical discourses, rejecting the assumption that these are necessarily opposed to one another' (p. 616). This thesis provides a helpful way forward in this discussion. That is, throughout the history of interpretation of the doctrine of the canon, scholars have pitted the historical, theological and hermeneutical discourses against one another (cf. M.J. Kruger, *Canon Revisited* [Crossway, 2012]). Although Watson is not the first to suggest that this approach is flawed, he is among the first who has showcased a more integrative approach.

On a positive note, this book merits further scholarly consideration given its contribution to a number of discussions. In fact, scholars have begun to do just that at the 2015 annual meetings of the ETS and SBL.

Watson's claim that the Egerton Papyrus (abbreviated *GEger* in his book) is a Johannine source requires further clarification. Although he titles this chapter, 'Interpreting a Johannine Source', which clearly indicates his position on these documents, he waffles on the direction of dependence when he writes, 'Whatever the direction of the dependence, the two texts deploy the parallel material in very different ways' (p. 298). However, later in the chapter he more clearly states, 'The parallels between *GEger* and John are best explained on the hypothesis that the Johannine versions are dependent on those attested in *GEger*'

(p. 325). This inconsistent way of speaking of dependence creates confusion—that is, when Watson claims at the beginning of the chapter that the dependency can go either way, but then states more specifically that John is dependent on *GEger*, the argument appears questionable or, at the very least, weak. Watson clearly thinks that John used *GEger*; there is no mistaking that by the end of the chapter. This argument, however, remains unpersuasive; just because there are linguistic and topical agreements between two ancient texts—the two pieces of Watson’s argument—that are thought to be from the same time period does not prove *ipso facto* that there is any relationship of dependency. Simply because the oldest copies of these texts that scholars have found to date place these two documents within roughly 50 years of each other does not mean that these documents have any relationship whatsoever. In fact, they could be entirely independent documents, or they could be based on a similar oral source. There seems to be too many unconsidered variables in the equation to claim that John’s Gospel depends on *GEger* or vice-versa. This point, however, supports Watson’s argument that early Christian Gospel production was an interpretive rewriting of other sources. However, the evidence for this point needs to be stronger than this or, at the very least, needs to demonstrate a consideration of these other factors.

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