

RESPONSE

# Response to Sonderegger, Sileazar, Holmes and Fodor

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## Superabundant Meaning and Habitual Rereading

Reading and rereading these responses to my theological commentary on the Gospel of John has been a moving experience. There have been several elements.

One has been sheer gratitude for such attentive and perceptive reading of a work that took over twenty years to complete, and was the most fascinating and challenging task I have ever undertaken.

Another has been appreciation of the distinctiveness of each response. In the commentary I was trying to interweave scholarship, hermeneutics, theology, spirituality and relevance to the twenty-first century, and I was intrigued by the ways in which the four responses taken together engage with each of those aspects.

Yet another element has been the stimulus to go on rereading and rereading the Gospel of John. The overwhelming experience of working on the commentary was the astonishing superabundance of meaning in this text, its continual generativity in multiple and often surprising ways, its invitation to go further and further 'into all the truth' (Jn 16.13), and, above all, its centring of that truth in a particular, category-transcending person. Much of that experience sprang from face-to-face interaction with co-readers, intensively conversing together around John and its many intertexts (the Acknowledgements inadequately attempt to do justice to the hundreds of people and groups that contributed in the course of two decades); much of it was also fed by the long hours of slow, solitary study (the Bibliography is an incomplete attempt to do justice to the wider community of those who have responded to John's Gospel over the centuries and around the world).

The November 2022 session on the commentary at the Society for Biblical Literature in Denver was a sort of culmination<sup>1</sup> of both those processes: it was face to face with co-readers<sup>2</sup> who had diverse academic, church and societal

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<sup>1</sup>An earlier, similar one took place at the British New Testament Society Annual Meeting in August 2022 at the University of St Andrews, when Dr Andrew Byers led a panel on the commentary, with the main respondents being Professors Richard Bauckham, Andrew Lincoln and Catrin Williams.

<sup>2</sup>Though sadly Jim Fodor was unable to be present in person due to several feet of snow cancelling flights from Buffalo.



backgrounds; and each of them had also each spent innumerable hours engaged in studying the Gospel of John and the literature about it. The result for me has been yet another wave of rereadings, and a clearer realization of what had increasingly dawned on me: that the desired outcome of any commentary on this inexhaustibly rich text is that it encourages others to share in the experience that gave rise to it, by themselves becoming habitual rereaders of the Gospel of John.<sup>3</sup>

Now to consider each response in turn before some concluding thoughts on the Gospel of John in the twenty-first century.

### **Sonderegger: A New Genre of Commentary? – O’Siadhail; Patristics; Yale and Postliberalism; Lyric Poetry; Comedy; and Prayer**

Katherine Sonderegger is the North American systematic theologian from whom I have learned most in recent decades. It is a huge honour to have such a rich, deep and eloquent response to my commentary. We are both in our seventies now and, as I savour the gripping, God-intoxicated volumes of her Systematic Theology, I see her doing, in a very different genre, something analogous to what I was attempting in the commentary on John: pouring a lifetime of theological wisdom-seeking into one culminating work.

Her reflections on the genre of my commentary have led me to rethink a crisis I had in writing it. It happened in 2015. Earlier in that year I had given eight Bampton Lectures in Oxford University on the topic, ‘Daring Spirit: John’s Gospel Now’. They were for an academic audience. Then I retired from my chair in Cambridge, and sat down to reread all I had written for the commentary on John since I had begun the project in 2000. I realized with increasing conviction (and also, as you might imagine, with considerable reluctance) that it simply would not do, partly because it was meant for an audience that includes academics but is also far wider.

It was above all a matter of genre and related style, raising the sorts of issues regarding the interrelation of reading, writing and subject matter that both Professor Holmes and Professor Fodor also reflect upon so acutely in their responses. As Sonderegger suggests, it was partly a recognition that none of the available genres was really adequate to the superabundance of this Gospel. This overflowing abundance is headlined in the Prologue, ‘From his fullness [*plērōma*] we have all received, grace upon grace’, and then intensified chapter after chapter until that final image of the whole world not being able to contain the books that could be written on Jesus – I love Beverly Gaventa’s phrase, the ‘archive of excess’.<sup>4</sup> John is unique among the Gospels, and does not simply fit the genre of the Synoptics. How could my commentary begin to do justice to John, let alone to the way it has inspired

<sup>3</sup>This is powerfully advocated (with practical advice on how to become a habitual rereader) in the sadly neglected gem by the Anglican priest Alan Ecclestone, *The Scaffolding of Spirit: Reflections on the Gospel of John* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1987).

<sup>4</sup>Beverly Roberts Gaventa, ‘The Archive of Excess: John 21 and the Problem of Narrative Closure’ in R. Alan Culpepper and C. Clifton Black (eds.), *Exploring the Gospel of John: In Honor of D. Moody Smith* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), pp. 240–54.

further abundance of life, prayer, learning, creativity, service, politics and love down the centuries, and continues to do so around the world today?

I had already realized in my teaching how challenging it was, for students as well as myself, to try to learn from two millennia of commentaries – in courses on John I used to ask each student to be the class expert on one pre-modern and one modern commentary (Origen and Barrett; Augustine and Schnackenburg; Aquinas and Brant; Luther and Lincoln, Calvin and Daly-Denton, and so on), and it became clear how difficult it is to think them together, let alone write something that combines their strengths, in content and form. What I had written over fifteen years was certainly not achieving that, and it somehow felt bogged down in plodding through John, and conducting discussions with other commentators in copious footnotes. Above all, it lacked a sense of literary and theological ‘flow’, together with accessibility and depth, all of which I had found in John. So I decided to scrap it all and start again.

I tried out some experimental efforts on my wife, Deborah (she is a priest, a chaplain, a psychotherapist, and an author), and on Micheal O’Siadhail, who has already been quoted by Professor Sonderegger – he is a close friend, and a poet, and for over fifty years he has been first reader of all my theology, as I have been of all his poetry). When they both agreed that what I was sending them somehow worked, I tried to continue in that mode.

Professor Sonderegger judges that what has resulted is something distinctive and new, and that was certainly how it felt while writing. There was a large number of influences, and other commentaries were piled up around me, but there was no one paradigm or model for how to comment on John and to meet the criteria of being sure-footed in scholarship, hermeneutically and theologically alert to two millennia of interpretation, inspirational in spirituality, and resonant with twenty-first century questions and concerns. Professor Holmes raises some important questions about the resulting genre, and even suggests I should not have attempted a commentary at all. I will respond to her below, but for now offer some thoughts about what Sonderegger says.

Sonderegger’s presentation unfolds as a series of surprises, in finely calibrated rhetoric, and I mainly want to savour it by riffing on it. I do recognize that there are some gently posed (or even only implied), but very penetrating questions there, about issues such as: the relation of the ‘who’ to the ‘what’ of God; the two natures of Christ; the understanding of allegory; the theological assessment of Hans Frei and others in the Yale school (if there was one); and the parameters of surprise in Christian teaching and life, as the Holy Spirit guides into more and more truth and action. Space forbids trying to deal with them – each would require further rereading of John and its reception down the centuries. Yet I would suggest that there are often implicit answers in the commentary. The genre I arrived at reacted against long detours into such matters, rather favouring the attempt to summarize succinctly the wisdom about them that I have tried to distill during an academic career in which I have largely worked in Sonderegger’s own speciality of systematic theology.

But what a lot to savour! First comes the quotation from Micheal O’Siadhail’s *The Five Quintets*,<sup>5</sup> which, in an exquisite *inclusio*, appears again in the conclusion. In the commentary, *The Five Quintets* only appears on the very last two pages of the

<sup>5</sup>Micheal O’Siadhail, *The Five Quintets* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2018).

Epilogue. But in fact it is the true sibling of the commentary. Throughout the decade (2008–2018) in which O’Siadhail was writing his *magnum opus* (which might be described as a wisdom-seeking immersion in the development of the modern world in recent centuries, engaging with the arts, economics, politics, the sciences, philosophy and theology<sup>6</sup>), as I was receiving in my inbox canto after canto in quintet after quintet of his epic poem, he was also receiving and commenting on what I was writing on John’s Gospel. One way of conceiving *The Five Quintets* is as a twenty-first century worldview that resonates throughout with what the Gospel of John suggests are the essentials for a Christian understanding of reality. In the Prologue, for example, there is the interweaving of deep meaning (Jn 1.1–5), deep love (Jn 1.18), and the embodiment of these in God’s self-involvement in human life (Jn 1.14) and in the community of faith and trust that this generates (Jn 1.12, 13, 16). John does not prescribe a detailed worldview, but century after century has inspired wisdom-seeking around those essentials, together with intensive conversation and debate with those who do not share them. Sonderegger has not only noticed the resonances between *The Five Quintets* and the commentary, almost all of which are implicit; she has also, in her final suggestion about the commentary’s genre, made the crucial connection between it, O’Siadhail’s epic and Dante’s *Divine Comedy*.

After Sonderegger’s first mention of O’Siadhail comes her first suggestion about genre, ‘the rich lore of Patristic and Medieval commentaries on the Fourth Gospel’. I have already mentioned the challenge (which was especially clear in teaching many courses on John) of doing justice to these as well as to modern commentaries. My riff on this is about another close friend who accompanied the writing of the commentary, Frances Young. In the final years of writing I was regularly receiving from her new chapters of her forthcoming *magnum opus*<sup>7</sup> on Scripture and doctrine in the early Church, recapitulating and going beyond her substantial earlier work on this topic. For me, it was a thorough immersion in that formative period and its classics, for which the Gospel of John was crucial. I have recently had the task of writing a Foreword to the two volumes, in the course of which I realized just how important it was that that formative period of Christian thought had fed into the commentary. As with O’Siadhail, Young’s influence is almost entirely implicit; yet Sonderegger has again seen what is there beneath the surface.

But my commentary is also modern and in some respects postliberal, and, as Sonderegger notes, I have substantial debts to Yale, one of my *almae matres*, especially to Hans Frei, but also to George Lindbeck, David Kelsey and Henri Nouwen, with all of whom I took courses when I studied there. I can now set Sonderegger’s comments on Frei and Yale alongside the perceptive and provocative appreciation and critique of postliberal Christian theology by the Jewish philosopher, Peter Ochs, in his book, *Another Reformation? Postliberal Christianity and the Jews*.<sup>8</sup> He is another friend, a

<sup>6</sup>The distinguished American interpreter of Irish literature, Professor Richard Rankin Russell, gives a striking overall verdict: ‘I am increasingly convinced it is the most important poetic work published since Milton’s *Paradise Lost* because it magisterially, yet winsomely, teaches us who we are because of who we have been – and who we might yet become.’ Richard Rankin Russell, Review of *The Five Quintets* in *Irish Literary Supplement*, Fall 2020, p. 20.

<sup>7</sup>Forthcoming, as Frances M. Young, *Doctrine and Scripture in the Early Church* (2 vols.; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2023–24).

<sup>8</sup>Peter Ochs, *Another Reformation? Postliberal Christianity and the Jews* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2011).

co-founder of Scriptural Reasoning, who played a significant part in writing the commentary. Especially important were the three weeks in 2015, when he was staying in our home in Cambridge while delivering the University's Hulsean Lectures. I was wrestling with John 8 and the whole anguished question of 'the Jews' in this Gospel. Ochs and I did a very close reading of John 8, and had intensive discussion about the complex issues it raises, leading me to take a rather unusual approach to that chapter in the commentary.

There was one contribution by Hans Frei about which Sonderegger could not have known. It came in 1987 during another important three weeks, when Frei stayed in our home in Birmingham while delivering his Edward Cadbury Lectures, which provided some of the contents for his posthumous book, *Types of Christian Theology*. During those weeks we had some long conversational walks together. On one of them, I was reflecting on reading postmodern French philosophy (Levinas and Derrida were the main figures mentioned). He cut across what I was saying with what amounted to a sobering warning: 'Whatever your concern for fashionable high culture ideas, don't neglect what ordinary Christians can understand . . .'<sup>9</sup> That came to mind forcefully in the 2015 crisis when I reread the writing on John that I had done up to then: it was obviously not suited to the general readership I wanted, especially of 'ordinary Christians'. Frei's advice encouraged the fresh start.

But Professor Sonderegger sees so much not of Yale too, and writes, 'Once again, it seems to me, that the genre of Ford's commentary is difficult to name. But I will try a genre, in conclusion, all the same.' This is 'a form of lyric poetry'. Well, what a surprise! And, yes! And this seems to be a genre for our century. The author of one of my favourite commentaries on John, *John in the Company of the Poets: The Gospel in Literary Imagination*, the American professor of English, Thomas Gardner, has just published his *magnum opus*, called *Lyric Theology*; and I have just read another outstanding work, *The Lyric Voice in English Theology*, about to be published by the Anglican theologian Beth Dodd, who has also done groundbreaking work on Thomas Traherne. He is my favourite Anglican thinker before Coleridge and is, I think, the consummate lyric theologian of superabundance. Then there is a book that has been influential on my approach to John more profoundly than the occasional explicit references to it in the commentary might suggest. This is Alan Ecclestone's *The Scaffolding of Spirit*, already mentioned above. He sees the Gospel of John itself as a

work of art, a poem tooled by one of the supreme poets of the world . . . His poem could well carry the title that D. H. Lawrence would use, 'Song of a man that is loved' . . . I suggest that we read the Fourth Gospel therefore as the work of a supreme artist as well as a deeply religious man. What came to him of the words and work of Jesus must have come in many strange and often fragmented forms, infinitely precious yet tantalisingly disordered. He made of them one of the world's greatest poems in the vein of the Psalmist's 'delight in the Lord'. (pp. 3, 5, 16).

<sup>9</sup>There is considerable irony in Frei giving this advice: he himself for the most part wrote things that 'ordinary Christians' do not find accessible.

If John's text has such lyric quality, how can a commentary not seek to echo it?

But, like the Gospel of John, Sonderegger has more than one ending. The surprise beyond that first conclusion is the genre of Comedy, which, in Professor Sonderegger's lyric climax, somehow brings together people in my community of heart and mind who continue to be deeply formative for me: Micheal O'Siadhail and other poets, Dante, spiritual writers, political activists, those with whom I practise Scriptural Reasoning year after year, and, always utterly central (whether recognized or not), the incarnate, crucified and risen Jesus Christ. She is, I can confirm, right in her final surmise, in which she felicitously unites in prayer her two culminating genres of the dramatic and the lyric: 'This, I think, is Ford's prayer for this commentary, that it will spark our search for Jesus' identity, and in that dramatic search, we discover the song that is the life in Christ – a lyric that is distinctly our own, yet distinctly Christ's own.'

### **Siliezar: Multicultural Abundance and the Centrality of the Marginalized**

Professor Sosa Siliezar's response made me wish I knew Spanish. I know there is a whole world of Johannine commentary and wisdom in Spanish and many other languages around the world, besides much, in the languages I do know, that I have not read. My attitude to this intercultural and multicultural superabundance is not so much to feel that I have to know it all as an individual, or cram my footnotes and bibliography with references to it, as if I could have some sort of overview. The gaps in my knowledge are enormous. Rather, it is to long to read John live with Siliezar and many others. As all four respondents have noted, one of the main sources for my commentary is a great deal of shared study of John with others, some of which is mentioned in the Acknowledgements and Epilogue. Intensive conversation around rich, meaning-laden texts is one of the most generative practices I know, and Siliezar gives me a thirst for yet more.

I appreciate Siliezar's response to such elements in the commentary as the chapter headings (I found that deliberating on these, and opening each chapter of the commentary with an attempt to redescribe what it is about, was a journey of discovering the literary coherence and 'flow' of the text), the sidebars, the programmatic power of the Prologue, the 'waves' of meaning as a key to John's pedagogy (I like Siliezar's further improvisation on this in relation to Barabbas), and the character of the Johannine community. Above all there is our deep convergence on the desire of Jesus in his prayer in John 17 for unity in love with himself and his Father, and with each other in all our multicultural and multiethnic diversity, for the sake of the world God loves. The more I reread (and prayed) John, the more I found that the breadth, depth and prophetic potential of his theology were distilled into that prayer.<sup>10</sup> Siliezar's voice comes from a different context than mine, yet our shared vision in terms of that prayer is clear.

His response is also a radical challenge. He raises sharply the question of the relevance of John to our time and situation, in relation to the pandemic, economics and

<sup>10</sup>For some further, post-commentary reflections, see David F. Ford, 'Ultimate Desire: The Prayer of Jesus in John 17', in Ashley Cocksworth (ed.), *T&T Clark Handbook to Christian Prayer* (London: T&T Clark, 2021), and 'Mature Ecumenism's Daring Future: Learning from the Gospel of John for the Twenty-First Century', in Paul D. Murray, Paul Lakeland, and Gregory A. Ryan (eds.), *Receptive Ecumenism as Ecclesial Learning: Principles, Practices, and Perspectives* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022).



politics, and especially to those who are marginal, poor and oppressed. I have come to be more and more convinced of the deep and radical relevance of John today both for ordinary living and for our century's core concerns, and of the need for continual, daring improvisation on it in all spheres (the Prologue sets an unsurpassable horizon for our prayer and action – God and all reality). Each of us, and each family, household, community and institution needs to discern our particular vocations as we seek to breathe in the Spirit of Jesus through this Gospel ('The words that I have spoken to you are Spirit/spirit and life' – 6.63), and in many other ways.

I have been encouraged further in this by Siliezar's passionate dedication to the centrality of the marginalized in God's purposes for our world. In the commentary, that concern is especially intensified by two key events: the foot-washing in ch. 13, and, in ch. 19, the crucified Jesus bringing his mother and the disciple he loved together in a new household community. Both are connected explicitly with a marginalized group, people with learning disabilities, that has been one of my own main involvements over the years. The commentary's Epilogue says a little about Lyn's House, the mixed ability community of friendship that was co-founded ten years ago by my wife, Deborah. That is where I have learned most about Siliezar's core truth: in a community centred on those with learning disabilities everyone can feel at home and in relationship; in a community centred on the successful, the wealthy, the glamorous, the highly educated, the powerful, and so on, many people feel marginal and excluded; and, at the level of a whole society, the place of those with learning and other disabilities is one of the key indicators of its true health.

Yet the commentary's Epilogue also wrestles with the dilemma I had about whether to acknowledge the debt owed by my wife, myself and Lyn's House to Jean Vanier and the L'Arche communities, in the light of what has emerged since his death about Vanier's abuse of his power in his relations with women for whom he was a spiritual guide, and other disturbing discoveries. That wrestling is still going on, for us and many others, and is especially acute in relation to the Gospel of John, on which Vanier wrote an influential commentary. It has been a salutary reminder of what my doctoral supervisor, Donald MacKinnon, called the tragic dimension of John's Gospel: the light has come, but the darkness certainly continues, and the final use of the Gospel's key verb, 'glorify' is in Jesus telling Peter that he will be taken where he does not wish to go, and will glorify God by his martyrdom.

Two final reflections on Siliezar's response concern grace, and the politics and economics of our world.

He asks, 'how should the reader link God's grace to the references to the Paraclete in the farewell discourses?' It is striking that John does not use the term 'grace' after the Prologue's, 'From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace', and 'grace and truth came through Jesus Christ' (Jn 1.16, 17). I suspect he may be naming grace in these headline statements so as to show readers who know Paul's letters and theology that he is well aware of the importance of grace, even if he himself does not habitually use the term.<sup>11</sup> Part of the answer to Siliezar's question lies, I think, in

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<sup>11</sup>There may be a parallel here to John naming the 'kingdom of God' in the first two waves of the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus in John 3, but then in the third, culminating wave using his preferred terms such as eternal life, love and light. This may be to show readers of the Synoptic Gospels that he is well aware of the importance of the kingdom of God even if he generally uses other terminology.

John's verbs, especially 'receive', 'send' and 'give'. To follow those verbs through John's Gospel is to discover the embracing dynamic of giving, sending and receiving. This can be described in Paul's terms of receiving the superabundance of God's free gift of grace through Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. It can also be described in more typically Johannine terms: Jesus baptizing with the Holy Spirit (Jn 1.33); God loving the world and giving or sending his Son; the Holy Spirit being given 'without measure' (Jn 3.34); giving and receiving imagined as drinking the life-giving water of the Spirit that Jesus gives (Jn 7.37-39, cf. 4.13-15), or eating his flesh and drinking his blood (Jn 6.53-59); all the language of abundant life, love, truth, joy, peace; the giving and receiving of the Paraclete in the Farewell Discourses; and the climactic imperative invitation to the disciples, 'Receive the Holy Spirit!' (Jn 20.22). All of that, and more, can be understood as included in the Prologue's 'grace upon grace'.

On politics and economics, I have a counter-question to Sileazar. If he were to read *The Five Quintets*, would he agree with me that O'Siadhail's approach to economics and politics (and, indeed, also to the arts, the sciences and modern thought) is one that rings true with the Gospel of John?

### **Holmes: A Modern Genre, Indexing, Piecemeal Reading, History and Essays**

Professor Holmes raises sharp questions about the commentary's genre, and she writes with the authority of someone who has actually written a fine commentary on the first 12 chapters of John. She measures my commentary by the criteria she has herself followed. These are the modern academic guild's criteria for a good academic commentary. I have no dispute with them, and am most grateful to Holmes and all the others who have written commentaries according to such guidelines: they have filled many bookshelves in my study, and those that are most regularly consulted have been piled on the floor for convenient access. But, as Sonderegger has seen, and as my 2015 crisis, described above, partly explains, I did not find that genre adequate to the task of attempting to interweave scholarship, hermeneutics, theology, spirituality and twenty-first-century relevance, in a way that not only flowed in line with the way John's text flows, but also simultaneously was accessible to a wide range of readers (not just academics) and opened up some of the depth and breadth of meaning that it has inspired over the centuries, and continues to inspire. I cannot respond here to all of the points Holmes raises. The ones I have chosen to answer might, I hope, be sufficient to enable readers to answer the other points of Holmes for themselves if they also read the commentary.

First, there is the constriction to the commentary genre of the past couple of centuries. As I have just said, I have no dispute with the value of these, but Holmes gives little indication of finding much of value in the very different sorts of commentaries of the far longer pre-modern period, and does not stretch her criteria to embrace them. Sonderegger, on the other hand, makes this her first point about the unusual genre that resulted from my 2015 crisis. But I have to admit that I did not make it easy for readers to notice this dimension. Like so much else in the commentary, it is largely implicit. In my effort to ensure flow and accessibility I cut and cut and cut, and may have cut too much. But the alternative would have been a



book longer than the present 484 pages, which I feared might already be too long for the ordinary reader to attempt.

Holmes sees a commentary in line with her criteria being designed to be used as a reference work and consulted piecemeal, and needing to be a text in which things are easy to find, and passages easy to interrelate. I can see how mine does not obviously fit those criteria, but I would make a mitigating plea. Mine is primarily designed to be read and reread straight through, very slowly, and over quite a long period – because that is how I think John has always been best understood. Yet, of course I recognize that it will also be read piecemeal, and that is where the Scripture index and subject index are vital. I think most of Holmes' problems about ease of access and interrelation of passages can be met by using the indexes. At its best, a subject index is a way of helping readers to identify key terms and concepts, to follow them through the book, to interrelate them, and to see the coherence of the book from a number of angles. I hope mine does that to some extent. But in retrospect, and in the light of Holmes' comments, I do realize that, especially for a book that does not easily fit what any professional indexer would have met already, the author would have been the best person to do the subject index, and I should have done it myself rather than outsourcing it. If there is ever a second edition I would do so, and also try to tie up some of the 'loose ends' found by Holmes.

A further point, related to that, is Holmes' question as to what I expect of my readers. I think I do not so much expect as invite, and I do not see my readers as all of one sort or all at one stage in life, in understanding, or in faith. Just as John's Gospel is both accessible to beginners and also endlessly challenging to the more experienced, I want to invite readers into a journey of habitual rereading, by themselves and with others. I hope that I have given beginners enough to get started and to be attracted into the sort of habitual rereading that I and millions of others have found to be so fruitful. Yet, as I have said, I know some readers will also read it piecemeal, and for that to work well a good index is, I suggest, the best aid.

A very different point is Holmes' suggestion that, to quote her, 'Ford also generally dismisses historical arguments about the Gospel as unnecessary for interpretation'. That is quite a serious misunderstanding. I argue for a range of historical judgements that are essential to interpreting the Gospel, of which by far the most important is on the resurrection of Jesus. Yet I can see how the misunderstanding arises. I often refer to the historical arguments of others rather than rehearsing them myself (one form of cutting). I often remain agnostic about many historical points on which historians have conflicting conclusions, usually because I do not see them being theologically very significant. Professor Sonderegger's verdict is: 'Throughout the commentary, Ford acknowledges historical critical questions and the legion of positions higher critics hold on various matters within the Book of Signs. He does not pursue these at any length, and that very reserve may indicate his recognition of Frei's principle, all the while imitating Frei's luke warm response to the details of such historical inquiries.' I think she is right, but it would take many pages to explore and justify. My luke-warmness about wholeheartedly endorsing any particular set of historical conclusions among the dozens available on many issues should not at all be construed as luke-warmness about the importance of history, and reliable testimony to people and events. My overall position is that, in Rudolf Schnackenburg's neat

phrase, John is doing ‘theological history writing’, and that each of those three elements is essential: theology and God; history and reliable testimony; and the literary craft of writing.

Finally, there is Holmes’ closing thought, wondering ‘if the format of a commentary was more burden than blessing for this work’, and her suggestion that perhaps I should not have written a commentary at all, but essays instead. For me, the ideal is not an either/or but both commentary and essays together.

There is personal history behind this. In the 1980s I spent five stimulating and instructive years working with Frances Young, and co-teaching courses with her, on Paul’s Second Letter to the Corinthians.<sup>12</sup> It was an education in how to bring together our academic backgrounds (both of us having done degrees in Greek and Latin Classics) and our distinctive specialties (hers in New Testament and Early Church, mine in doctrinal, systematic and constructive theology) in order to interweave scholarship, hermeneutics, theology and spirituality with a concern for contemporary relevance. The result was a set of essays with a translation (on the latter, an unexpected discovery was how working together on Paul’s often difficult Greek generated some of our key hermeneutical and theological discussions). This is presumably the sort of genre Holmes has in mind. But I had no doubt, when I considered trying to fulfil my dream desire of tackling the Gospel of John as my culminating project, that it was right to attempt a commentary.

One practical reason was that only fellow academics tend to read volumes of essays (that has certainly been true of our book on 2 Corinthians); but commentaries (or at least some of them) can reach many more readers, and can also offer long-term accompaniments to the habitual rereading of Scripture by ordinary Christians. I value fellow-academics, such as the four I am responding to, as readers; but I also long to share with many others what I have learned from over two decades’ work on John, and from many more years as a theologian and as a Christian.

There are other reasons why the commentary genre is attractive, but I limit myself to one comprehensive consideration: from the early Christian centuries it has been a classic genre, constantly renewed and improvised upon, and it continues to be fruitful today. I have come to regard commentary on the Bible as ‘first theology’.<sup>13</sup> It is, I think, where theology needs to begin. It can incorporate many elements, or take off in many directions – historical, literary, doctrinal, liturgical, ecclesial, ascetic, philosophical, ethical, political, economic, aesthetic, apologetic, interfaith, and more. But, if theology is to heed the warning Hans Frei gave to me as a young theologian, not to ‘neglect what ordinary Christians can understand’, it needs always to return to the one text ordinary Christians, of all traditions, are most likely know best; and, ideally, whatever wisdom is gained through exploring in those other directions can be distilled in accessible, Bible-related terms.

Holmes may be right that it is impossible actually to achieve this in a commentary, but I have considered it worth trying. Yet she is certainly right that

<sup>12</sup>Frances M. Young and David F. Ford, *Meaning and Truth in 2 Corinthians* (London: SPCK, 1987; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988. Reprint, Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2008).

<sup>13</sup>For a discussion of this see David F. Ford, *The Future of Christian Theology* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011).

essays can also help, and I have found that several were generated in the course of writing the commentary (six are listed in its bibliography), and more have followed.<sup>14</sup> But commentary remains the classic, abiding genre.

### Fodor: Openings – The Poetics, Grammar and Theology of Superabundance

Professor Fodor's response has had the delightful effect of illuminating the commentary for me in such a way that I have understood better why certain approaches, images and concepts rang true for me; and by doing this he has further illuminated the Gospel of John. His combination of poetic metaphor and grammatical redescription (somewhat reminiscent of Paul Ricoeur, on whom he has written so perceptively) is an imaginatively and conceptually rich performance of his main points. The focus is especially on what for me is still, at every rereading, the unfailingly amazing, generative superabundance of meaning in John, which Fodor succeeds in both evoking and celebrating. I love his exploration of being inducted into fullness, his appreciation of daring and surprise in John, and the nuance of his analysis of what he felicitously names 'a distinctive mode of open reading'. This is not just commentary on my commentary; it is creative thinking deeply rooted in the whole of Scripture and in philosophy and theology down the centuries. It models for readers how they too might take part in the ongoing, God-centred drama of further adventurous improvisation in imagination, thought and action.

For me, as I write more of those essays on John that Professor Holmes has recommended, and also prepare two follow-up books, one called *Meeting God in John* and the other provisionally called *The Wonder of Living*, Fodor's response is already having a double effect.

On the one hand, it is giving me critical distance on my engagement with John so far, and providing helpful images, concepts and self-awareness as I consider how to go further in developing an approach that tries to draw readers deeper into this astonishingly fruitful text, which I think is more relevant than ever in the twenty-first century.

On the other hand, I am simply grateful and greatly encouraged by the generous and generative wisdom of someone who has made such an enormous, but mostly hidden, contribution, year after year, through his editing of *Modern Theology*. That is the journal that in my opinion has, during the whole of Fodor's decades-long tenure as editor, been more wisely and imaginatively formative of my own main academic field than any other journal.

But we rarely hear Jim Fodor doing theology in his own voice. What a voice! In Sonderegger's terms, his is a lyric voice. My commentary has been for him what

<sup>14</sup>For two, see n. 10 above. Others include: 'Reading Backwards, Reading Forwards, and Abiding: Reading John in the Spirit Now', *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 2.1 (2017), pp. 69-84; 'The Gospel of John and Contemporary Society: Three Major Theological Contributions', in Andrew Byers (ed.), *Religions*, forthcoming; "'Receive the Holy Spirit'", *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology*, 77.4 (October 2023); 'John', in Matthias Grebe and Johannes Grössl (eds.), *T&T Clark Companion to Suffering and the Problem of Evil* (London: T&T Clark, forthcoming); 'Reading the Gospel of John and Hans Frei's *The Identity of Jesus Christ Together*', in Drew Collins and Ben Fulford (eds.), *Generous Orthodoxy: Hans Frei and the Future of Theology*, forthcoming.

I have most wanted it to be for any reader: an invitation to stand with me and others in ‘expectant receptivity’ (just one of many felicitous phrases in his piece) before this text of superabundant meaning and truth. He performs both *parrhesia* – free, overflowing speech – and *paraklēsis* – advocacy and inspired encouragement. The invitation, in line with that imperative invitation of Jesus, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit!’ (Jn 20.22), is to be open, in all the forms of openness that Fodor describes so imaginatively, to more and more and more.

So, in a sense, my main written response to what Fodor says needs to be present (no doubt mostly implicitly) in future texts. For now, I offer just four further comments.

Fodor takes Frances Young’s image of the opening of a water lily, and eloquently improvises on it through the imagery of autumnal foliage in western New York. This recalled my sheer delight in discovering the cover illustration for the commentary, the painting ‘The Deeper you Go’ by Paul Hobbs, which is inspired by foliage. I have since got to know the artist, agreed with him that his multilayered paintings are an apt analogy of the ‘deep plain sense’ of John’s Gospel, and commissioned some paintings that now hang in our home as further improvisations on the one on the cover.

In addition, Fodor’s stimulating play with elements of language – active and passive verbs, adverbs, nouns and adjectives – has made me reconsider another way in which the poetry of Micheal O’Siadhail was in interplay with my commentary on John even before he began work on *The Five Quintets* in 2008. Since early in the century he had been working on *Tongues* (eventually published in 2010<sup>15</sup>), which meant that for several years I was receiving, often weekly, his poems on many aspects of language (moods, tenses, voices, persons, and much more) and on languages he speaks (English, Irish, Welsh, Catalan, Norwegian, Icelandic, German, French, Japanese), as he was receiving my early writings on John. He had been a professor of Celtic Languages and Linguistics until, in 1987, he took the daring decision to become a full-time poet. Before *Tongues* he had not made language and languages the central focus of a collection, and it was extraordinarily fruitful to be immersed in his love of language while repeatedly rereading a text whose opening is ‘In the beginning was the Word . . .’. *Tongues* closes with a *haiku* that suggests the connection, not only with John’s Gospel, but also, in its final line, with ‘Prayer’, a poem by one of our favourite poets, George Herbert<sup>16</sup>:

So

*In the beginning*

*The word. So too in the end.*

*Bird of paradise.*<sup>17</sup>

<sup>15</sup>Now available in Micheal O’Siadhail, *Collected Poems* (Tarsset: Bloodaxe Books, 2013; and Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2018).

<sup>16</sup>The deeply Johannine theology of Herbert is a theme in a study that has led me to ponder the desirability today of what it describes happening in early modern England: Paul Cefalu, *The Johannine Renaissance in Early Modern English Literature and Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

<sup>17</sup>O’Siadhail, *Collected Poems*, 705.

Frances Young, Paul Hobbs and Micheal O'Siadhail have all been part of my community of co-readers. Fodor's perceptive emphasis on what he calls 'communal modes of reading', that challenge and transform more individualist modes, echoes Holmes' comment that 'reading scripture is a transformative process, particularly when done with other people', Siliezar's recognition of 'twenty years of intense dialogue with Christians, scholars, and people from different religious backgrounds', and Sonderegger's description of the commentary as 'a conversation among the many interpreters of John, literary, spiritual, and historical . . . a crowded room . . . a kind of Scriptural Reasoning session with participants from every realm and every season, each speaking of what the close re-reading of this text has meant in their moral, political and spiritual lives.' The experience of writing the commentary was very much like that, with meanings somehow arising continually in that 'between' space among fellow readers. *estē eis to meson* (Jn 20.19, 26).

But, whether the reading is done alone or with others, the concluding point must be a repetition of the one that slowly dawned on me, during and after writing the commentary, as what my main hope for it is: to encourage its readers to join myself and countless others in the past two millennia and around the world today, including these four respondents, in being habitual rereaders of this Gospel, expectantly attentive to what Fodor describes as 'the magnificent, yet challenging opulence of John's Gospel'.