

BOOK REVIEWS

David F. Ford, *The Gospel of John: A Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2021), pp. 496. ISBN 9781540964083.
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From time to time we hear radio programmes in which guests are interviewed about the ten books that they would most want to have with them, should they find themselves wrecked on a desert island. The musical equivalent asks for a list of the ten most desirable desert-island-discs, and then probes reasons for the choice as an entrée into the heart and mind of the person being interviewed.

This kind of exercise naturally prompts some of us to wonder about which of the Gospels might be chosen as the most essential to have in one's survival kit on a desert island. In order of priority, which comes out on top?

I have to confess that up until now I have regularly signalled a personal preference for the Gospel of Mark. This is not just for the obvious reason that Mark initiated the synoptic tradition and (as far as we know) invented the literary form of a 'gospel', but because of the literary skill with which he was able to assemble traditional material around his basic themes so as to make his theological point about the specific nature of Jesus' messianic identity and what this entails for those who would be his disciples. The messiahship of Jesus is not conceived in the manner of the inherited messianic hope involving the exercise of coercive power, but in the form of the self-effacing humility of a servant, even to the extent of envisaging his mistreatment unto death on the Cross. Mark famously repeats Jesus' corrective of inherited messianic misconceptions in three sequences – first in relation to Peter, then James and John, followed by the disciples 'arguing on the way' about who would be greatest. Then comes Mark's understanding of Jesus' call to those who would be his 'true disciples' to see this clearly and to take up their cross and 'follow in the same way' (like Bartimaeus). By any reckoning this is a remarkably impressive literary and theological achievement.

David Ford has, however, thrown a spanner into the works, by producing what is in fact a thoroughly compelling case for ranking the Gospel of John as the 'must have' in our desert island rucksacks. Indeed, a case may be made for putting Ford's splendid new theological commentary itself at the top of the list, given that

before he proceeds with his wonderfully insightful and penetrating commentary he helpfully reproduces portions of the text of the Gospel in bold print at the beginning of each section (there are 22 of these). Indeed, Ford himself invites his readers to stand a little loosely to his commentary and to give priority to the actual texts of John which have to be read and re-read in order to tap into their rich and multi-layered content of meaning. Ford's commentary is simply an aid to the reading of them.

This is certainly a very remarkable commentary in terms of the depth of its insight into John and his purpose. Ford is convinced that John 'is both later than the Synoptic gospels and also written in conversation with them, and probably with the writings of Paul too' (p. 434).

As Ford puts it, the Gospel of John 'combines eye witness testimony, selective, reflective, and creative use of other writings and long matured thinking about key questions, the main two being: Who is Jesus? and What is essential for those who follow him?' (p. 434). This is in a sense not too far removed from Mark's initial questions, though far more is involved than Mark's point about the true nature of messiahship and its corresponding form of discipleship. In a way, John begins where Mark left off. Whereas Mark has the soldier at the foot of the Cross say: 'Truly this was the Son of God', John represents a mature reflection upon what these words might truly mean. John is certainly not just satisfied with the redefinition of messiahship in terms of lowly humility and even suffering. Rather, Ford makes the point that John's over-riding concern has to do with the revelation of the superabundance and generosity of the God of light and love in the Incarnate Word, which persistently prompts the question of an identity that is truly and ultimately divine.

As just one concrete example of this, Ford cites John's version of the feeding of the five thousand in John 6, and its parallels in Matthew, Mark and Luke, with the rider that John overlays the story of 'abundant provision' with an additional depth of meaning, not least through allusions to the liberation of the people of Israel from bondage in Egypt, the crossing of the sea led by Moses, the eating of manna in the wilderness and its eucharistic associations, and the parallel of Jesus' withdrawal from the crowd and Moses 'going up the mountain alone'. All this prompts Ford to remark that 'the book of Exodus should be read alongside John 6' (p. 142).

This commentary is also remarkable insofar as it does not spend a great deal of time discussing technical issues relating to alternative readings, or to debating points of the long and disputed history of the fourth Gospel's interpretation. As a general rule the painstaking technical work of the study of the tradition of the interpretation of the Gospel (which Ford has certainly done) is allowed to remain in the background. Ford instead declares his own preferential reading with his reasoning for it.

Nevertheless, where necessary he cites those from whom he has learned, and certainly brings his readers up to date with the consensus of current scholarly debate. One stunning example of this is to be found in the 'abide in me' section based on John 15, in which we learn that the historical tradition of the vine and the branches should more accurately be translated 'I am the vineyard and you are the vines.' Instead of the unproductive vine being 'pruned' (after all, if Jesus is the vine this makes no sense at all), the actual vines that bear no fruit are to be understood to be pulled up and cast aside. Much more graphic! But also conveying a much more

participative sense of 'abiding in' the inclusive embrace of Jesus – just as the vineyard contains its constituent vines.

This commentary is also remarkable as an intensely personal reflection on John. David Ford does not hold his cards close to his chest, but right from the start declares his hand in relation to what John's Gospel means *for him* in terms of its impact on his heart and mind and its implications for his faith. This is underlined in his Epilogue at the end. In this sense, as Ford himself says, this 'theological commentary' is not just a work of theological reflection but of self-reflection and spirituality, with which the reader is invited also to engage in an intensely personal way. As John lays out his implicit claim for Jesus as the source of abundance of life, John's Gospel thus becomes 'a source of meaning and truth for life today' (p. 433).

There is therefore a kind of 'existential' immediacy in all this. Indeed, Ford's commentary naturally invites comparison with the great twentieth-century commentary on John of Rudolf Bultmann. In a sense Ford has done for our generation what Bultmann did for European Christianity in the closing years of World War II and for English speakers exactly half a century ago (Bultmann's commentary appeared in English translation in 1971). The defining difference is that Ford's work is without the single-minded programmatic revisionism of Bultmann's 'existentialism' using the philosophical lens bequeathed to him by Martin Heidegger. He sees no need to de-objectify (or demythologize) the story so that it is heard only as 'a word of address', without objective content.

Ford will not allow us to read John, however, with a view to answering a question simply about an objective content in a historical sense relating to just how John thought of Jesus and his true identity 'back then'. Instead, his interest lies in how Jesus might be relevant as the source of light and love in the world of the present. This means that the objective question is not just about who Jesus *was* but who Jesus *is* – in the *now* of the present world – for Jesus 'is present as God is present'. As a consequence, as Ford himself admits, 'the result is as much a spirituality as a theology, both of them centered on the first question of the Gospel, Who are you' (Jn 1.19) (p. xii).

Of course, John did not intend for his Gospel to end up in the hands of isolated individuals unfortunately and traumatically separated from others on a desert island, but as the possession of a community of shared life and love of the same general kind as that of which John was himself a member. Hopefully none of us will actually face the fate of isolation from others; we will use this book together as we plumb the meaning of John for us in the community of abundant life today. Even so, if I were to find myself having to manage with only the text of John in David Ford's aid to the reading of it for the next ten years (or by the abundance of the grace of God even a shade longer) there will be no complaint.

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