

David F. Ford, *The Gospel of John: A Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2021), pp. 496. ISBN 9781540964083.

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In his ‘epilogue’ to this engrossing commentary, David Ford describes how its writing has occupied twenty years of his life: it was at the beginning of the new millennium that he became convinced he should produce a commentary on the Fourth Gospel. He also describes the other writing and thinking with which he was engaged during these two decades, tracing their links to the present volume. This is not mere self-indulgence on his part, but rather an illuminating perspective on his working method, which could be described as cumulative, multivocal and relational.

Ford subtitles his book ‘*A Theological Commentary*’, and one senses that he regards this as particularly appropriate for the work of an author who in the East is known simply as ‘The Theologian’. He spends little time discussing the controverted questions of John’s date and sources, while making clear that he regards this Gospel as later than the Synoptics – and, indeed, as constituting a reflection on them, as on other Scriptures. Moreover, he explains the theological method he is adopting when he remarks that he is presenting ‘as much a spirituality as a theology’. One is reminded of Clement of Alexandria’s description of John as ‘The Spiritual Gospel’, and indeed there is perhaps something rather Alexandrine about Ford’s wide-ranging and expansive approach – though he is generally keen also to draw from the text the guidance for living which the community of Jesus’ disciples need.

Ford convincingly makes the case that the Fourth Gospel is particularly suited to his kind of theological commentary both because it is itself an exercise in intertextuality and because one of its persistent themes is that of abundance. Ford points out that, from the Prologue onwards, John is re-reading and reflecting on the Hebrew Scriptures (or rather, in his view, the Septuagint), and he describes him as ‘improvising on’ the Synoptic Gospels. He maintains that John was consciously writing ‘Scripture’, and he suggests that the best way for contemporary readers to engage with the text is to go through a similar process of re-reading and reflection. The gospel’s emphasis on abundance is an invitation to open up that reading process – which Ford describes as ideally marked by ‘slowness’ – to a wide diversity of participants.

It is perhaps this extensive hinterland carried by the author in his mind that makes the text of his volume so rich, so inviting, and – unlike more technical commentaries – so capable of being read continuously as one narrative. At the same time, this quality of seamlessness has its flip side, in that it can at times feel difficult to extract specific points from the ongoing flow – as indeed it can be in the gospel itself, for example in the warmly and wonderfully spiralling passages in the Farewell Discourses, the despair of many a preacher seeking to identity one incisive message for his or her hearers.

The Gospel of John, of course, is not simply a benign text, either in its formative context or in its subsequent reception and application. In particular, its presentation of ‘the Jews’ has passages which emerge from controversy and which subsequently in Christian history have been deployed to hateful and deadly effect – notably, though not exclusively, in John 8, with its account of bitterly contested identities, and in John 2, with the argument over the Temple. In his commentary on both

chapters, and in other places too, Ford unflinchingly draws attention to the shameful history that has resulted from anti-Semitic and anti-Judaic readings of these episodes, and emphasizes the need to create a new history, after the Holocaust and building on the transformation in Christian–Jewish relations in the last sixty years. He diagnoses two steps as necessary for Christians to take in response to this history of darkness: first, a clear rejection of what is variously known as ‘supersessionism’ or ‘replacement theology’; and, second, a commitment by Christians to re-read their Scriptures (including John) together with Jews.

For this reviewer at least, it was at this point that the format of the single-authored commentary proved inadequate to accommodate the breadth, depth and contested character of the responses the Gospel calls out. David Ford has been an outstanding pioneer and practitioner of ‘Scriptural Reasoning’, in which Jews, Christians and Muslims, and sometimes people of other faiths, too, sit together to read and reflect on their Scriptures in openness, collegiality and – sometimes – disagreement. In his epilogue, Ford acknowledges a covert influence of Scriptural Reasoning on the content and style of his commentary; in the passages on John 2 and John 8 in particular, I was left thinking how much richer the text could have been had some of the immediacy and vitality of those conversations been included in this volume, rather than mediated through the reflections of one writer – even a writer as learned, gentle and wise as David Ford.

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It seems I have been asked to write one of a selection of reviews of this commentary because I’m a bishop. That is a point worth pondering, because it is a rather unusual event. Reviews are usually commissioned from people particularly qualified to assess the text in question, and I certainly can’t claim to have given enough scholarly attention to the Fourth Gospel and the secondary literature about it myself to comment with any authority on the quality of David Ford’s commentary. But I am being asked to review the commentary *as a bishop*, which is to say as someone who, were I still in post and one of those attending the 2022 Lambeth Conference, would have been presented with a copy. Should I not simply avoid looking a gift horse in the mouth – or in this case a gift commentary in the text?

Maybe. But this is a very generous gift. Several hundred copies of a major commentary represents no small outlay on someone’s part, and I hope that even had I been one of the episcopal recipients I would have allowed myself, alongside gratitude for what would undoubtedly be a resource for my thinking and my prayers, at least a few moments of slightly suspicious reflection on what might be the motives of the donor or, to be less personal, the expectation that came with the gift.