

PANEL RESPONSE

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Of the several promotional endorsements appearing on the dust jacket of David Ford's *The Gospel of John: A Theological Commentary*, the one that best captures the spirit and fundamental insight of the work, in my judgement, comes from Frances Young:

The Gospel is opened up. Scripture overall is opened up. Last but not least, the reader is opened up. It's a bit like the gradual opening of a water lily as the sunlight plays on its petals and its depths are fathomed. Old profundities seem refreshed with new insights, old problems appear with new twists, as we are drawn into a learning community that is progressively led into the truth by the Holy Spirit, discovers anew the identity of Jesus Christ, and is drawn into the mutual love of Father and Son. This is no ordinary commentary.

Young offers the intriguing image of a water lily, whose beauty and rich detail are drawn out and disclosed by the sunlight playing upon its petals. The capacity of this tender plant to attract and hold our attention is not only a function of its intrinsic beauty but of the light that plays upon its surfaces, that draws it to itself and gives it life. The lily and the sunlight together produce in the beholder a sense of fascination, wonder, joy and praise.

I would venture to add another image, also botanical, to Young's: the Autumn foliage. In western New York (where I live) we annually witness the splendor of 'peak fall colors' – the brilliance of red maples set against a background of evergreens, accented by the yellow, orange and golden-brown hues of larch, sweetgum, hickories and oaks. Sunlight dancing down from a blue, cloudless sky 'opens up' the scene, drawing the eye to the brilliant textures, surfaces and shapes of the dazzling display of leaves. With the shake of the wind, leaves are persuaded to let go and drift to the ground – endlessly, profusely, abundantly! If an analogy is permitted, what one experiences in an Autumn scene of peak color, what one delights in the opening of a water lily, is something akin to what one experiences when engaging Ford's commentary on John's Gospel: a kind of exfoliation, an

unfolding, an endlessly prolific profusion of splendor issuing forth from an abundant source.

'Abundance' is not only the opening note of Ford's commentary, but it resounds continuously on almost every page of the commentary: John is 'a Gospel of abundance' (p. 418). Not only are we *told* this, but we are *shown* it, magnificent depths, overflowing riches beyond counting. And yet, surprisingly, access to the depths of the Gospel, Ford tells us, is through plain, humble words – common words, everyday, mundane expressions. Ford introduces the reader to what he dubs 'the deep plain sense' of the text:

the way John uses carefully chosen ordinary words that turn out to have unfathomable depths, both within the Gospel and through resonating with intertexts and the surrounding culture. . . . John generously encourages readers to engage again and again with other texts too, and with meaning and truth wherever it is found. (p. 434)

The *pleroma* (fullness) of John's Gospel – its subject matter – is only ever approached asymptotically and never definitively and exhaustively. As Ford puts it, 'once one is gripped by [John's Gospel], every rereading draws one deeper, further, wider, and higher' (p. 435). The Gospel is therefore open-ended and in an important way necessarily incomplete or, better, 'incompletable' by any person or community at any time or place – not only because we can have no overview (pp. 13, 19, 21, 22), but also because we are told that Jesus' followers will continue the work that Jesus does: 'Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do because I go to the Father' (Jn 14.12).

How might one become acquainted with, inducted into, the fullness of John's Gospel? Ford gives some clues. Readers become learners/disciples of Jesus in the same way as the first disciples did: by opening themselves to John's words of testimony, and, in particular, by attending carefully and consciously to the way John reads his own Bible (the LXX, but also the Synoptics), adopting his way of reading as a model of our own (p. 2). This raises a fascinating question about the relation between reading and writing. How one reads is inseparable from the subject matter being read. That, it seems to me, is a profound but often overlooked theological insight that is on display in this commentary.

What, then, is the relation between writing and reading the Gospel? There seems to be a kind of affinity – or perhaps better – a mutuality between Scripture reading and Scripture writing. According to Ford, the character of that mutuality resides in a capacity to 'sound' or 'sound out' the depths of the text in all its manifold variety and breadth. One cannot help noticing just how prominent and pervasive are metaphors of 'hearing' in Ford's text: at one point I stopped counting the number of times the words 'echo(es)', 'resonate' and 'resonance(s)' appeared throughout the 400-plus pages of the commentary. The unmistakable impression is that readers of John's Gospel are first and foremost 'hearers of the word'. But to give a sense of the impossibly enormous task that is entailed in such continuous hearing and re-hearing, reading and rereading, Ford points us to the ways in which the text is 'opened up' – exponentially, if you will – on many levels, according to different modalities, over and over again, such that abundance not merely adds to abundance,

but one level of abundance ramifies and multiplies another and another, endlessly. As Ford puts it:

The commentator on John is faced not only with the superabundance of meaning generated by his rich text and its intertexts but also with the nearly two thousand years of other people responding to this Gospel and to one another's readings. The responses are by no means only in the form of commentary, but also include hymns, songs, music, and poetry; prayer and spirituality; liturgy and ritual; art and architecture; drama and film; theology and philosophy; accounts of reception history; ethics and politics; and (perhaps most fitting of all) the lives of people and their communities. (pp. 2-3)

The ever-expanding horizon of the subject matter of what opens itself to being read is aptly summarized here. I would like to return to this theme at the end of my reflections to take up Ford's insight on how best to meet this challenge. At present, however, I wish to dwell on the manifold modes of 'reading' that Ford describes, which are startling in both number and variety. Ford reminds us of how the Scripture in general, and John's Gospel in particular, insinuates itself across the entire range of Christian life and practice. Hence, to separate out one specific form of performative appropriation of the text – for example, a mode of 'reading' in a modern, scholarly, academic and individualistic sense of that term – would not do justice to the countless variety and immense range of activities through which the Living Word is present in the world.

Here I see Ford pushing back – gently but insistently – against forms of individualistic, egocentric modes of reading that are so frequently taken as a given, and therefore normative, in the academy, particularly the humanities. Instead, Ford refocuses our attention on communal modes of reading that are so integrally part of Christian reading regimes. His contribution is not limited, however, to the work of retrieval and *ressourcement*; indeed, Ford expands, stretches and challenges communities of Christian readers to engage with different modes and methods of *interreligious* scriptural reading as well as *intrareligious* and ecumenical communities of readers.

Ecumenical and Interreligious Engagements: Reading across Borders

One of the notable features of Ford's commentary is the emphasis on 'openness across boundaries' (pp. 10, 11, 18, etc.). A chief insight informing Ford's work is the importance of nurturing disciples adept in reading regimes which have as their aim a truly 'global horizon' (p. 11) tempered by the recognition that there can be no comprehensive overview (pp. 21-22). Moreover, Ford reminds us that while the church is a key part of the unfolding drama of God's kingdom, the scope of God's kingdom is nevertheless not limited to the church. While God's purposes clearly encompass the church, they also exceed it (p. 19). Ford's decades-long history of reading the Gospel of John and other Scriptures with Jews and Muslims – but also Confucian, Daoist and Buddhist scriptures – (p. 436) as part of a movement known as Scriptural Reasoning is but one example of what it means to 'read across

boundaries'. Modes of reading that challenge dividing walls and question borders (p. 80) are part of the expanding, stretching and reimagining on display here. John's Gospel, more than any of the other gospels, reminds its readers of the 'many other signs' (20.30) and the 'many other things' (21.25) that Jesus did and continues to do through the Spirit as part of ongoing drama of God's self-disclosure.

Equally central to Ford's agenda are his engagements with ecumenical initiatives where reading Scriptures with fellow Christians of different denominational allegiances 'opens' readers to new, trusting but risky ways of knowing and following Jesus together with a view to healing some of the splits, divisions and conflicts that have regrettably characterized the church's fractured and fractious history (p. 348).

Both modes of Scripture reading – interreligious and intrareligious – comprise Ford's 'living laboratories' in which he has helped cultivate, over many years, a distinctive mode of 'open' reading that is evident (implicitly and explicitly) on virtually every page of his commentary. For Ford, the church is one prime exemplar of a community of listeners and learners to which has been given the words of testimony and eye-witness accounts to God's self-revelation in Jesus through the Spirit as John recorded them in his Gospel. And the church is clearly charged in its mission to share this superabundant gift with others. But equally important for Ford is the church's openness to discovering further dimensions of meaning and truth in and through its engagement with other traditions, religious and non-religious alike. 'Openness to meaning and truth wherever they are found' requires, for Ford, a commitment 'to learn the truth, belong to it, witness to it, and be in solidarity with others (often surprising others) who also witness to the truth' (p. 20). Convinced that the 'boundary between the disciples and the world is . . . crossed by the love of God' (p. 351), Ford models a practice of reading that is capacious and expansive, open and receptive, hospitable and generous – and above all daring. Part of this boldness is expressed in Ford's aspiration to reach 'far beyond the circle of the committed followers of Jesus in order to take seriously the vision of the God of love, light, and all reality that this Gospel opens up' (p. 10).

Abundance Displayed through Multiple 'Openings'

That John's Gospel is a gospel of abundance is correlated, in Ford's understanding, with its astonishing capacity to 'open up' multiple dimensions and qualities of its revelatory richness (cf. pp. 3-4). As noted at the outset, something of how these multivalent 'openings' happen is intimated in Frances Young's characterization: 'The Gospel is opened up. Scripture overall is opened up. Last but not least, the reader is opened up.' Taking Francis Young's depiction as a lead, I would like to explore something of the rich grammar of 'opening' – a grammar that reveals a set of diverse and distinct apertures through which the bountiful brilliance of God's self-revelation shines through.

To accord Ford's commentary the kind of attentive reading it deserves, then, is to embark upon a captivating journey, a distinctive feature of which is Ford's ability to alert the reader to, and draw them further into, the multiple 'openings' at play in the fertile and fascinating text of John's Gospel. In what follows, I will describe a few of the ways in which openings on to God's abundance – an abundance which 'stretches

the thought and imagination of readers' (p. 1) – are present in various registers in Ford's commentary: verbal (active and passive), adverbial, nominal and adjectival. While this is by no means an exhaustive account, it does serve to highlight something of the magnificent, yet challenging opulence of John's Gospel as refracted through the lens of Ford's commentary.

1. *Verbal sense: active and passive: 'to open' the text and 'to be opened by' the text*

(a) *Active sense* – often used with prepositions: 'to open *up*' or 'to open *out*' or 'to open *into*' or 'to open *toward*' or 'to open *beyond*' or, simply, 'to open'.

- 'to begin', 'to commence', 'to start'. This use of 'open' is quite common in the commentary. A couple of examples will suffice: 'John chose to open his Gospel with a focus on *logos*, "word"' (p. 84, n. 3); 'This amazing multiple promise opens with a basic statement about the sort of truth Jesus is and gives' (p. 314).
- *to reveal what is previously unknown, concealed, closed or not immediately apparent.*
- One of Ford's uses of the phrase 'open *up*' (i.e., explicate or reveal further aspects, qualities or dimensions) conveys the importance of what happens when one participates in specific practices and rituals of faith. Thus, for example, Jesus's identity is disclosed not only through words and teaching, but through his actions and behavior. 'This theme [of Jesus's identity] is opened up through the footwashing, fundamental statements such as 'I am the way, and the truth and the life' (14.6), Jesus as the friend who lays down his life, Jesus as the vine (or vineyard), the inseparability of love in action from prayer in the name of Jesus, and, deepest of all, the revelation of who Jesus is in his definitive relationship to his Father in his prayer in John 17' (p. 6).
- *to challenge the reader to expand, stretch and extend their boundaries of understanding, living and relating.*
- As Ford puts it, 'with every rereading opening further depths, inviting us to stretch our minds and imaginations further and further' (p. 40); 'Within the story [of John 4 where Jesus encounters the woman at the well], Jesus is opening up the woman's imagination to something beyond her own Scriptures, as well as to himself' (p. 112); Jesus speaking with insight into the woman's marital life 'opens up many questions' (p. 113). 'One striking feature of the ongoing drama as taught by John is its daring openness to more truth and to innovative loving and serving . . . that challenges individuals and whole communities to stretch their thinking, imagining, and praying to do justice to the Word of God, through whom all things were created, and who continues to relate to them all' (pp. 17-18).
- *to explicate, expound, demonstrate, exhibit by ever greater degrees of fullness.*
- Here Ford points to Scripture's multifaceted intertextual connections, both within John's Gospel but also between John's Gospel and his primary intertexts. Another method of 'opening up' the text is John's habit of repeating key points with variation (pp. 2, 4 n. 5). Appreciation of these interconnections is achieved through reading and rereading, moving the reader toward an ever-greater maturity of understanding, living and loving. For example, leading themes are introduced early in John's Gospel which

- prepare the reader for later developments: 'Like believing and life, love will be explored as it occurs through the story. For now, just two issues will be opened up: God giving his Son, and how God's love and the danger of perishing can go together' (p. 96). What does 'the vital little phrase "in God" . . . mean? Later chapters will fill out the meaning . . .' 'So if the mention of "in God" in 3:21 is reread in light of the rest of the Gospel, the meaning of this verse is opened up further' (p. 100).
- *to fill out or fill up such that meaning gathers and cumulatively builds or deepens.*
 - This is a repeated theme in Ford's analysis of the structure of John's Gospel: for example, the way in which 'the themes already headlined in chapter 1 . . . knowing, testifying, seeing, receiving, believing, trust, ascending and descending . . . each of which gathers more meaning as the Gospel proceeds' (p. 91). 'Key themes and imagery of the Gospel, that will continue to have their meaning filled out in later chapters . . .' (p. 102). Ford here invokes the image of 'waves' of meaning (pp. 44ff.) to illustrate how the text gradually builds in both intensity and volume as it unfolds, drawing readers gradually into the immensity of the Gospel. As overwhelming as this experience of being 'opened up' by the text may be, Ford is convinced that one of the striking features of John's Gospel is its ability to adjust to the status and station of its readers. In other words, it is a text 'open' to accommodation. 'This Gospel is a text that has proved to be both accessible to those meeting it for the first time and increasingly challenging the more it is reread. . . . Beginners can find something comprehensible and attractive, but the more they take this to heart . . . the more dimensions of the abundance of this Gospel open up' (p. 3, cf. pp. xii, 40).
 - *to initiate, activate or stimulate a desire, longing and hope for more* – more meaning, more loving, more life, and so on. 'The first words of Jesus in John's Gospel, "What are you looking for?" (1:38), had shown him, from the beginning, opening up in those he meets this area of desire, longing, motivation, and hope' (p. 125).
 - *to open out, open into, open toward* – implying a kind of open-endedness, intimating a continuous, boundless process which, by definition, instills a kind of resistance to any premature closure. Thus, for example, 'there can be no end to telling the story of Jesus. So, after all these endings, the final one opens into endless further testimony, truth, and writings in abundance: "I suppose the world itself could not contain the books that would be written" (21:25)' (p. 212). This kind of opening suggests an ever-greater reach or expansion through a developmental sequence: 'first, there is the glorifying between Father and Son . . . then there is a focus on the community of disciples . . . and finally the horizon opens out to the purpose of the community . . .' (p. 246). The kind of openness is not punctiliar and episodic, but sustained and continuous. '*Openness to Jesus and the Spirit he breathes involves openness to meaning and truth wherever they are found, and therefore values sustained openness to fresh understanding, to new ways of seeing things, to changing our minds, and to rethinking and reimagining both ourselves and reality*' (p. 20, emphasis original).

(b) Passive sense

- *to be opened out, to, or toward* – to be the recipient of some action initiated by another and, in that sense, to be stretched and challenged, but also liberated.
- “Opening” is a good description of what Jesus does here [20.19-23]. The disciples are locked in and afraid. Jesus opens them up to himself . . . He opens them out toward the future and toward the whole world . . . He opens his mouth to speak and to breathe into them as God breathed life into Adam . . . He gives authority to open up the past to a new future through forgiveness’ (p. 403). This kind of opening is consonant with liberation and release from fear, anxiety and self-doubt but also freeing in the sense of being emboldened and empowered by the Spirit of God to venture forth into unknown territory. As Ford himself testifies to his own decades-long sojourn with John’s Gospel, ‘The liberation [from pursuing the specialist historical-critical literature on the Gospel, some of which he has pursued elsewhere – cf. p. 13, n. 8] has been to be able to pursue the deep, life-shaping questions raised by the Gospel of John, not only with reference to biblical studies and a range of theologies, but also through poetry, history, Christian living, interfaith engagement, involvements in secular settings and thought-worlds, and more’ (p. xii).
- *implicit in this ‘being opened up’ is a purpose and a directionality.*
- ‘The final part vv. 20-26 [John 17] opens toward the unsurpassable vision of union with God in love and participation with others in the glorious intensity of this love. . . . to be opened up for wholehearted, trusting participation through the ongoing drama of being loved and loving’ (p. 329). ‘. . . reading, understanding, and trusting [John’s Gospel] opens readers toward knowing and following Jesus together’ (p. 347).

2. Adverbial sense: various ways the text opens up/challenges its readers

- *to be daringly open, to allow oneself to be more fully opened up.* The emphasis here seems to be on taking risks, making oneself vulnerable, giving up a penchant for control, all of which involves radical self-divestment and a willingness to be transformed. For Ford it begins with being open to the truth, allowing oneself to be guided into all truth by the Spirit. For example, in a paradoxical way, Nicodemus is ‘daringly open to Jesus as a teacher who has come from God’ (p. 83) even though he is hesitant of being openly, publicly seen with Jesus. Nicodemus comes to Jesus by night. Similarly, as Ford puts it, ‘the basic requirement for learners who are open to Jesus’ is a willingness ‘to undergo a reorientation and deepening of desire’, a readiness for ‘a permanent commitment’ (p. 149). Engaging with John’s Gospel invariably involves ongoing personal risk and exposure: ‘Opening ourselves to the love and light of God is an ongoing daily challenge’ (pp. 99-100). What makes the challenge so demanding, it seems, arises in direct proportion to one’s awareness of the multiple depths of meaning, the manifold ‘openings’ of John’s Gospel. Hence, in discussing the notion of ‘abiding’ or ‘dwelling’ in John 1, Ford reminds his readers of how vital it is to cultivate a sensitivity ‘to a deeper plain sense’ (p. 55) of the text – a kind of expectant receptivity and vigilance to ‘more’, an attentiveness and an attunement to the way

in which the text opens out onto greater and greater depths. Deepening and daring go hand in hand (cf. p. 283).

- *to be daringly open is to anticipate surprises.*
- Part of what it means to be ‘daringly open’, then, is the readiness to deal with surprises of all kinds: ‘dangerous’ surprises (p. 144); ‘terrifying’ surprises (p. 147); but also ‘promising’ and hope-generating surprises (p. 155), ‘divine surprises’ (p. 272). Perhaps this receptive openness is at once a gift given and a disposition or attitude cultivated by a practice of continuously opening oneself to the Gospel. The experience, no doubt, will at times be exhilarating, ‘mind-blowing’ and at other times terribly exacting, difficult and painfully hard. After all, to hear the Word of God is to be ‘open to judgment’. It is – to borrow Ford’s language – to enter a school of re-education of desire where tough lessons are learned. For example, the episode of Jesus healing the man blind from birth (Jn 9) is ‘a transformative discipleship course in a tough school, with the most painful lessons’ (p. 194). The challenge of being continuously open to the Gospel is summed up in Ford’s rhetorical question: ‘Can we be open to wave after wave of reeducation of our desires, imaginations, minds, and habits?’ (p. 187). Is this what it means to enter the way of the Lord?

3. *Nominal sense: text as an ‘opening’ – a way, a path, a road, an avenue*

To be a disciple is to be a learner, a listener. Rightly hearing the Word of God is to follow, to embark upon a route, a pathway, a course of life. For John’s Gospel, Jesus is preeminently ‘the Way’, the truth and the life (Jn 14.6). Here, then, is yet another of the many ‘openings’ that Ford investigates in his commentary. There is a sense in which Jesus is, in a paramount way, ‘in the beginning’ (see Prologue); he is the Word that was in the beginning with God, and the Word was God. The opening scene of John’s Gospel thus marks a commencement, an inauguration invoking simultaneously the idea of source or origin and telos or final goal. The movement from one to the other – displayed in the unfolding drama of Jesus’s life, death and resurrection – marks out a way.

Of course, readers who have been schooled to be alert to the possibilities of deeper levels of meaning do not stop here at this first sense of ‘opening as beginning’ but they push on and explore further. They listen attentively for resonances that take them deeper into related and fuller senses, attuned to various ways of being drawn to an unfathomable reality. As Ford summarizes it:

The New Testament also has many uses of ‘way,’ and John 14:6 reads like a reflective summary of the significance suggested by John the Baptist’s opening cry that identifies Jesus with ‘the way of the Lord.’ A similar distilled summary of how Jesus in person is inseparable from the way he opens up is given in the Letter to the Hebrews’ description of ‘the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain (that is, through his flesh)’ (p. 275).

Always ready for surprises, careful readers of John’s Gospel will anticipate novel insights. Allowing themselves to be ‘opened up’ by the Gospel means an eagerness to

cultivate a receptive disposition, an attitude of curiosity, inquiry and expectation for what is 'more', what is 'other', what is 'strange'. As Ford puts it, 'What John's Gospel gives is not answers to all the questions . . . but a clear pointer to how to seek answers: be part of a community within which you can think through the issues with others by rereading Scripture and engaging afresh with the drama of Jesus, living, thinking, and praying in the spirit of that drama; and abiding in him, open to being led further into truth' (pp. 51-52).

4. *Adjectival sense: the kinds or modes of 'opening' displayed in John's Gospel*

- 'open communication' that is evident in terms of frank, candid and direct speech.
- 'The openness (*parrhēsia* – public availability, frankness, confident and free communication) to the world of Jesus and his teaching is in line with the open horizon of this Gospel' (p. 360). 'This *parrhēsia* is speech corresponding to the Spirit that is given 'without measure' (3:34) and that "will guide you into all the truth" (16:13)' (p. 323).
- 'open secret'.
- While the meaning of John's words is clear and evident, the meaning of these words is also in some sense concealed, as conveyed by the expression, 'open secret'. 'Here is the open secret of this Gospel, the heart of reality, headlined at the end of the prologue: "the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart"' (p. 209). 'These events, and their central character, hold the open secret of the ongoing drama. It seems a strange way, hidden from most people . . . ' (p. 285). The open secret that is Jesus leaves the reader with 'open questions'.
- 'open duration' – a temporal openness, often but not exclusively toward the future.
- 'The first "hour" was one of open duration, a "day" filled with a sustained life of believing, praying, understanding and loving' (p. 323). 'He looks ahead to the giving of the Spirit, opening up the horizon of an ongoing dynamic of superabundant, generously shared life' (p. 167).
- 'open horizon' – a spatial openness.
- The idea of a non-circumscribable space of possibilities that is in principle limitless, yet always apprehended from a specific location or perspective. 'All the drama between Jesus and others in John's Gospel is framed by a wider, postresurrection perspective. . . . From this vantage point . . . Jesus speaks . . . ' (p. 159). 'Later, in the pivotal verses 61-63, the full horizon of meaning will be laid out' (p. 157). ' . . . both his death and his family life open an unlimited horizon of love' (p. 426).

Conclusion

I end by returning to Frances Young's endorsement: in particular, her closing line: 'This is no ordinary commentary.' To this I would agree, and yet what I have tried to show – following her lead – are the ways in which this is no ordinary commentary by laying out some of its multiple 'openings'.

Ford's commentary on John's Gospel is extraordinary in the sense that he is able to exhibit how the plain, common, everyday words of John at once conceal and

reveal amazing, unimaginable depths – ‘the deep plain sense’ of the text – depths that challenge, correct and expand our understanding, our living, loving and relating, but which also, finally, excite, stretch and confound our imagination as we glimpse something of its unfathomable depths. Søren Kierkegaard’s unnerving image of God leading us ‘out upon the deep, over seventy thousand fathoms of water’ comes to mind here – an overwhelmingly daunting and challenging prospect indeed! However, it is a prospect accompanied by uncontainable joy and astonishment, which does not erase or ease the terror and excitement, but holds that terrifying excitement, preserves it, and transmutes it in ways that elude any final description. The elusiveness of any final description is but one further sign of the thoroughgoingly theological character of Ford’s commentary, as his reflections on ‘God’s Life and Self’ bear witness.

Who can fathom that ‘self’ of the Father? The attempt to do so never ends, leading through Israel’s Scriptures, the Synoptic Gospels, this Gospel, and then through centuries of prayer and worship, theology, philosophy, poetry and other arts, and experience. That need not be an overwhelming and intimidatingly difficult prospect or project, but rather an endlessly attractive one, trusting that little by little (and occasionally in great leaps) understanding can grow and that no one ever finishes fathoming and being amazed and delighted by who God is’ (pp. 130-31).