

PANEL RESPONSE

Panel Response: Society for Biblical Literature, Denver 2022

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I want to begin by expressing my gratitude to Steve Fowl and the steering committee of the Theological Interpretation of Scripture session for hosting this review panel and for the invitation to be part of it. David Ford's commentary on the Gospel of John touches on two of my interests – the Gospel of John, and theological commentaries – and I'm excited to talk about both of those this morning.

As one trained in the discipline of biblical studies, a teacher and student of the Gospels, and as an author of a commentary on John 1–12, I know what it means to struggle with the text of the Gospel of John, to be inspired by the revelation in it, and to be taken on journeys never expected through it and through reading it with others.

I appreciate how David Ford's commentary captures some of the mysteries and delights of this process as he narrates his experience of reading and re-reading the Gospel of John over decades. He says, 'repeated rereadings of this Gospel have inspired passionate searching, and in the process have offered an education of desire. So the result is as much a spirituality as a theology, both of them centered on the first question of the Gospel, "Who are you?" (1:19)' (p. xii).¹ Ford's emphasis in this commentary is on an encounter between Jesus and the reader, mediated by the text of the Gospel, hence, 'as much a spirituality as a theology'.

This overarching perspective produces other assets that I could describe in detail in this review. For example, Ford uses two metaphors to describe John's language and style throughout the Gospel. The first is what he calls, 'deep plain sense'. For him, this refers to John's use of common words with both everyday meanings as well as deeper meanings – light, life, water, bread and more – an interplay of meanings enriched by 'ambiguity and double meanings' (p. 1). The second metaphor that Ford develops is the way John uses 'waves' of meaning to present and re-present ideas, images and insights for readers (pp. 4, 84). Both of these metaphors are useful ways

¹I completely agree with the sentiment behind this question; Jesus' person and identity are central concerns for John's Gospel. At the same time, in the context of the Gospel of John, this particular question in 1.19 is actually directed to John the baptizer.

to explain how John's language is unique and valuable for spiritually formative readings. Ford's description of John's post-resurrection perspective was also illuminating and serves as a throughline for the way that he reads the Gospel.² The next time I teach a course on John, I will be introducing my students to John's language with the help of these metaphors.

I could also discuss specifics that I found provocative, curious, or disagreed with, at least on an initial reading. For example, Ford sees a clearly non-sectarian Gospel and community within that Gospel; he says, 'the community envisaged here is no more sectarian than is Jesus' (p. 42). How then can we explain the reception history of the Gospel where this text was apparently cherished by sectarian communities? We could talk about how Ford describes John's metaphor of darkness (Jn 1.5) as continuing, 'not least in the church' (p. 18) and how this assessment coheres with some scholars who see one of John's contributions as a persistent claim, supported by John's language of the Spirit, of the availability of eternal life here and now. We could talk about Ford's assessment not only of John's knowledge of the Synoptics (all of them), but also his use of them, and how Ford adjudicates passages shared across the Gospel tradition. But if we talked about all these things, we'd be here all day and my co-panelists would not get to speak.

Instead, my review takes its cues from Ford's title, or more precisely, his subtitle: *A Theological Commentary*. Now, I don't know if Ford or Baker chose this subtitle, but to me it creates an interesting set of expectations for the reader. I found it to be useful to reflect on how Ford's extensive and thoughtful work on the Gospel of John fit the expectations I had for a commentary, first, and then second, how or in what ways it is theological. I am assuming that it is a gift and a challenge whenever a theologian embarks on a project in the form of a genre staple of biblical studies scholarship; hopefully I am preaching to the choir in this session when I say that we need more of this, and the church is benefited by it. Yet, there are still genre challenges to be worked out. My hope is that this response illuminates the strengths of Ford's work and the challenges that I'm seeing with this current category of work described as 'theological commentary' to allow us to take advantage of those strengths without leaving readers at loose ends.

One: A Commentary

If we think about what a biblical commentary is, or what makes a commentary different from other monographs on Scripture, some of the following might come to mind.

A commentary often proceeds through a text in (canonical) order, usually applying a prescribed interpretive format to each section. It provides readers with an orientation of how smaller sections of text fit into the whole work in light of various contexts (historical, literary, reception history, and more). It is designed to be used

²John's 'passionate desire is for us, his readers, to encounter the living Jesus to whom he is testifying. This is the main reason he combines pre-resurrection and post-resurrection perspectives: he wants us to understand who Jesus is and that even as we read about what he did and said, we are in the presence of this crucified and risen one who says, "I am," who loves us incomparably, and who longs above all for us to trust, love, and follow him now' (p. 9).

more as a reference work, so information on isolated passages should be easy to find. And its traditional genre focus is to provide an in-depth engagement with the biblical text.³ These ideas are meant to be a starting point, not an exhaustive definition. Given that Ford's work is described as a commentary, how does it fit this general definition?

We should first note, as Ford does, that this work was formerly part of Westminster John Knox's *Belief* series, but now stands alone. In many ways, I think the freedom this shift provided Ford was put to good use: He was not constrained by the expectations of a series about what to cover in each section of his commentary and could follow his own interpretive sense. At the same time, the lack of any pattern or constraints on each chapter left me uncertain of what kinds of questions or interpretations would be raised, both of John and also of me as a reader. The lack of guidance left me unmoored and required more of me as a reader to make sense of the whole. I would have benefited from more direct comment by Ford about the types of interpretive questions that he might ask in the sections of the commentary, thereby constructing what he thinks the structure of a commentary is – especially a theological one.

That said, as most commentaries do, Ford's introduction offers guidance for the types of themes that he finds throughout the Gospel of John. Those themes include the importance of answering the question of who Jesus is, raised at the beginning and ending of the Gospel itself, as well as an invitation into one of Ford's favorite phrases to describe the Christian life, the 'ongoing drama of loving'. Ford is also concerned that we see the scope of the Gospel of John as non-sectarian, reaching out to the world God loves. These themes recur regularly through Ford's comments on the Gospel, so in that sense, Ford is doing the work of a commentator. However, Ford's interest or strength is in making connection to these larger themes rather than the more detailed literary concern of orienting readers to how smaller portions of the text fit within larger sections.

Furthermore, Ford also generally dismisses arguments about the historical reconstruction of the Gospel as unnecessary for interpretation. Yet, on key concerns, he is excellent in navigating complex issues in the reception history of John, particularly in how modern readers could read difficult chapters like John 8 not naively but productively. That said, I struggled to find an overarching idea of what types of contexts of interpretation were most important or meaningful for Ford. If the literary and historical contexts aren't essential for understanding John, then is reception history? Or something else entirely? This stands out as different from most commentaries, as their interpretive concerns are often highlighted by their format and organization.

³Definitions compiled from Eckhard J. Schnabel, 'On Commentary Writing' (pp. 3-32) and Kevin J. Vanhoozer, 'Theological Commentary and "The Voice from Heaven": Exegesis, Ontology, and the Travail of Biblical Interpretation' (pp. 269-98) both in Stanley E. Porter and Eckhard J. Schnabel (eds.), *On the Writing of the New Testament Commentaries: Festschrift for Grant R. Osborne on the Occasion of his 70th Birthday* (Texts and Editions for New Testament Study, 8; Leiden: Brill, 2013); and from Brevard S. Childs, 'The Genre of Biblical Commentary as Problem and Challenge', in Mordechai Cogan, Jeffrey Tigay and Barry Eichler (eds.), *Tehillah le-Moshe: Biblical and Judaic studies in Honor of Moshe Greenberg* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1997), 185-192.

Speaking of organization, the organization of a commentary matters in two different ways, as noted above – a commentary shows how texts fit together, and it is easy to use to find what the author thinks about specific texts. One self-conscious way in which Ford says that he’s writing a commentary is that this book includes a chapter on each chapter of John. Nevertheless, some chapters reorganize the material in John (especially the prologue) in the service of themes Ford wants to highlight. The organization of a commentary also matters for its ease of use, particularly by pastors and teachers (and sometimes scholars) who use commentaries for isolated comments on particular texts. For these readers, organization is paramount: things must be easy to find. This raises a difficult and perennial question of how repetitive a commentary should be, given its typical usage, knowing that readers are not going to read it straight through. Nevertheless, the organization and presentation of material in this commentary did not match my exegetical expectations. For example, Ford highlights John’s use of *σκηνοῶ* (lived, dwelt) not in Jn 1.14, where it occurs, but in John 2. The result of this is that readers who are only reading Ford on the prologue never benefit from this insight, and that the insight itself is not directed towards what Jn 1.14 means in the prologue, but rather how the tabernacle and temple connect in John 2. This type of engagement is where I found Ford the most challenging to use as a commentary. Ford’s work is easier to read straight through than most commentaries, mine included! But since most readers likely aren’t going to read a *commentary* straight through, the problem is that Ford’s good comments may never be found by these readers.⁴

So, Ford’s work is a commentary primarily in its attention to every chapter of the Gospel of John, as well as its interest in interpreting John with a variety of horizons in mind (reception history, theology, and so on), but it is different from many other commentaries in terms of its format, order, and attention. How does this focus change if we take into account that this commentary is *theological*?

Two: Theological

While there have been many debates about this over the past 10–15 years, it seems that a *theological* commentary might refer to the disciplinary or spiritual commitments of the author, or the assumed commitments of the reader, perhaps including a set of shared presuppositions about God and God’s work in the world. Alternately or additionally, *theological* could refer to the discipline of theology or a signal of the type of questions or conversation partners engaged by the work. Lastly, a theological work might refer to the work’s assumed purpose, as in directed towards the spiritual formation of the author or reader.

Ford engages in these assumptions in different ways. Some, of course, are self-evident, but I was curious about Ford’s ideas about his readers. Ford’s stated purpose

⁴For example, if you look up Jesus’ final words on the cross in Jn 19.30, you would not find any comment about how those words are different than what Jesus says in other gospels. To learn what Ford thinks about that – and you should, it is quite interesting – you have to go back about twelve pages, in his comments on Jn 19.23–25a, which requires you to know that Jn 19.24 quotes Psalm 22 and that the Synoptics also quote Psalm 22. That’s presuming a lot of knowledge of the commentary reader, or simply presuming that the reader will be reading more than isolated sections.

for what he wants this commentary to do for his readers fits this theological emphasis well. He says, 'I have read the whole Gospel as an invitation to enter into a relationship of trusting Jesus with continuing "life in his name," involving an ongoing drama of desiring, learning, and loving in community, for the sake of God's love for the world' (p. 337). He repeatedly exhorts his readers to respond to Jesus' initial question in the Gospel, 'What are you looking for?' (Jn 1.38). Ford concludes his introduction by saying that his 'chief desire is to help [the reader] accept that invitation', being 'invited deeper, broader, higher, and forever into an abundance of meaning, life, and love' (p. 24). In this way, Ford highlights his focus on reflection and spiritual formation for his readers – this is what he wants *for* his readers.

But what does he expect *from* his readers? What types of knowledge or experiences will readers bring to this commentary? This part of the author/reader relationship seems less clear to me.

Sometimes this commentary is obviously directed at readers with little knowledge or experience of John or the church. This is clear when Ford defines 'Eucharist', and directly quotes many of the Scripture passages to which he refers (in the NRSV translation). These actions seem aimed at readers who are new to specific terms used in some Christian worship contexts or unfamiliar with navigating the Bible. Furthermore, there seems to be a sense that Ford expects his readers to not have the desire or patience to be acquainted with scholarly debates about difficult interpretive issues.⁵ The lack of citations is consistent with this assumption.

At the same time, in other contexts, statements that Ford makes seem to presuppose that his readers have significant knowledge of John, scholarship on John, the Synoptics, or the biblical tradition more broadly. This happens at a variety of points – whether about the interpretive history of Jesus' remarks in John 8, or the sufficiency of Martha's confession (Jn 11:27) – but let me offer a specific example. In commenting on why John locates Jesus' clearing the temple early in the narrative of Jesus' ministry, Ford notes the importance of Jewish feasts in this Gospel. He says, 'This headline scene tells us: read all those scenes in light of this one; they can lead us deeper into who God is and who Jesus is, by thinking of the temple and the festivals in terms of Jesus and Jesus in terms of the temple and the festivals.' I agree! However, Ford does not tell the reader what other feasts are important in John and where they emerge in the narrative. A reader without much knowledge of John's narrative or Jewish feasts is not going to be able to do much with this idea.

Ultimately, Ford is strongest in those parts of this work where he speaks directly to the spiritual formation of his readers. It is clear that he has found the reading and re-reading of the Gospel of John to be spiritually formative for him over the years, and he very much wants his readers to have this experience too. He reproduces

⁵This emerges particularly in the context of things like comments on Martha's confession (Jn 11:27), where Ford says, 'her (and any other believer's) understanding of [these titles for Jesus] could no doubt be further enriched, expanded, and deepened, but in John's terms she has the basic template right' (p. 221). The problem with this is that the reader needs some information for why Martha's confession would need this kind of caveat, while Peter's (Jn 6:69) or Thomas's (Jn 20:28) would not. The answer could either be a connection to Martha's later comment about the odor at Lazarus's tomb (Jn 11:39) or an allusion to Moloney's argument that does the same (Francis Moloney, 'Can Everyone Be Wrong? A Reading of John 11:1–12:8', *NTS* 49 [2003], pp. 505–27). Without one or both of these, it stands out as an unfortunate and inexplicable jab against Martha.

many Scripture passages within the commentary, and it is in the exposure to Scripture itself that Ford seems to believe readers will be shaped as participants in this 'ongoing drama of loving' to which he appeals. In this way, he serves as a kind of spiritual director, calling his readers to attend to Jesus in different ways.⁶

One Plus Two: Commentary and Theological

I think that putting other Scripture passages – or other texts in general – alongside his reading of John is one of the major ways in which Ford is reading John theologically, and thereby writing a theological commentary. Ford calls this, 'reading intertexts'.

Ford defines intertexts as places in the Gospel 'which invite the reader to interrelate what John writes with another text' (p. 2). In John, these intertexts are primarily other Scripture passages, either the Septuagint or other New Testament texts, especially the Synoptics. For Ford, intertexts that he reads alongside John are often those Scripture passages, either quoted by John or more often thought of by Ford, or other texts outside of Scripture. In this way, the term 'intertext' covers a variety of material with myriad contexts. These intertexts are often windows into Ford's own reading of John, or of the Christian life in general. His discussions of them continue to reflect on these questions of content and purpose.

Ford seems to be interested in these intertexts for two reasons: he is curious about the harmonies heard in reading texts together, and he implies that the ways in which John reads Scripture can be instructive for his audience (the church? The academy?) in how 'we' should read Scripture.⁷

However, he seems to take a more inductive approach to helping the reader see both of these points. Often, intertexts are presented or alluded to without context or guidance for what Ford sees in them. I understand the dangers of being too prescriptive in these situations; I trust that Ford is trying not to tell readers what they should see. But at the same time, there's a risk of readers having no idea why they should read passages together.

More importantly, in the majority of the intertexts that Ford describes, the connection to John is often an idea rather than a specific word. This can be very illuminating and a helpful way to see new things in familiar passages (again implying a familiarity with John). For example, Jn 1.29 reads, 'Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!' Ford follows what he calls 'the image of the lamb' through 'many biblical resonances', listing the Passover lamb, 'the "sacrifice" of Isaac in Genesis and the songs of the suffering servant in Isaiah' (p. 46). Unfortunately, however, the reader is not given any information about the precision of these 'biblical resonances'.⁸ How do these three images of ovine creatures (two lambs and a ram) relate to one another and relate to John's proclamation? Are they

⁶This was quite apparent in his reading of Jesus at the wedding at Cana. Ford summarizes, 'It is as if our usual concept of the ordinary simply needs to be enlarged to take account of the reality of God and God's creativity, freedom, and generosity' (pp. 64-65).

⁷This seems to be connected to the idea that John was self-consciously written as Scripture, an idea that could have benefited from explanation and development (p. 27).

⁸A similar process happens with John 10, though there the imagery is that of shepherd/sheep and not of lamb, specifically (p. 210).

connected by their relationships to sin? To Jesus' identity, and if so, what aspect? In other words, how closely do these biblical passages resonate? What frequencies are they operating on? Most importantly, how do they help readers understand John better? Or is that not the question that Ford is asking – and if it isn't, what is?

These intertexts are fruitful ways of encountering Scripture, and perhaps therefore God, in new and meaningful ways. Traversing these ways without guidance makes it difficult, especially for some of the non-specialist readers that Ford seems to have in mind. These intertexts serve as both the process of Ford's theological commentary and also the tension within it, as they are presented in the form of commentary, but their content is theological impressions. Ford says they 'encourage further imaginative improvisation', which to me feels again like the work of reading Scripture with a spiritual director, akin to something like imaginative Ignatian prayer with scriptural narratives (p. 210). This could work well, if the process were explained or developed in detail, especially if Ford considers John to be a model scriptural interpreter for us. Given the audience I think Ford has in mind for this work, more guidance, focus and direction would have been welcome.

Conclusion

Ford's commentary is the developed work of decades of reading and re-reading John in light of the life and interests of a productive theologian and scholar. It is also constrained by and reveals the challenges inherent in writing a genre of work that is still developing. The theological convictions that emerge throughout this work are that reading Scripture is a transformative process, particularly when done with other people, and that regular contact to the Gospel of John is spiritually formative. This direction by a thoughtful spiritual mentor guides readers who benefit from his reflections as they try to make sense of the darkness of the world and the presence of God in their own lives.

At the same time, I can't help but wonder if the format of a commentary was more burden than blessing for this work. Would a series of essays – even essays on every chapter of John! – have looked different from this volume? What was attractive about the idea of the genre of commentary, and what about writing a commentary proved more difficult than anticipated? Whatever comes of this subgenre of 'theological commentary', I think it will be helpful for us to think through what is essential to the idea of commentary and how to communicate those expectations best to readers. I hope that with more clarity of genre, works that are described as 'theological commentaries' can prove to be even more useful for their readers.