

[MJTM 15 (2013–2014)]

#### BOOK REVIEW

Jonathan T. Pennington. *Reading the Gospels Wisely: A Narrative and Theological Introduction*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012. xiv + 268 pp. Pbk. ISBN 1441238700.

Jonathan T. Pennington is Associate Professor of New Testament Interpretation at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. In this contribution, Pennington gives readers a valuable tool for engaging, understanding, and reading the Gospels. He invites them to approach the biblical text with humility, sensitivity, and a desire to be transformed by the risen Christ. More than being another dry introduction to New Testament studies, this book engages the whole venture of scholarship from the perspective that the ultimate goal is personal transformation. Pennington delves into hermeneutics, literary and narrative criticism, genre, and historical transmission of texts, but at all times subjects these discussions to the primary aim of personal transformation. It would appear that Pennington is at home, at least in some respects, within the broader “Theological Interpretation of Scripture” (often shorted to TIS) camp. In this, Pennington should be applauded for actually applying the TIS approach, rather than offering up yet another discussion on the need for TIS or a prolegomena to the movement. This review will begin with a summary, point out the notable contributions of the work, offer a few concerns, and conclude with some suggestions on how the book could be used by pastors and teachers.

The book is divided into three sections. Section One is the largest and examines the genre of the Gospels and their relationship to the Pauline corpus, as well as both the tension and benefit that arises from having four Gospels. Section One also features a chapter on the shortcomings of a historical-critical approach to the Gospels. In it, Pennington offers a rather lengthy critique of

N. T. Wright's historically premised, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, with most of the critique being an endorsement of Richard Hays's interaction with Wright. (The interaction is in lectures originally presented as part of the annual Wheaton Theology Conference [2010] and then published as *Jesus, Paul and the People of God: A Theological Dialogue with N.T. Wright*, edited by Nicholas Perrin and Richard Hays, IVP 2011.) In this chapter, Pennington surveys the different understandings of history through the ages. He draws special attention to the oft-occurring divide between history and theology—highlighting the work of the major players in this field. He attempts to demonstrate the bankruptcy of a strictly historical-critical approach to the Gospels. In the end, he builds on his introductory chapter on the genre of the Gospels, and agrees with Richard Bauckham, (his PhD supervisor at St. Andrews) that the most appropriate genre with which to identify the Gospels is that of "Testimony." He argues that this approach relieves the modern reader from the need to "peel back" the text in order to reconstruct the historical situation from which it arose. In the end, he summarizes his proposal this way, "*We must not lose history in doing theology, and we must not lose theology in doing history*" (103; italics original). Although most evangelical scholars would agree in theory, Pennington should be applauded for actually offering a framework and basis from which to enter into this kind of delicate investigation.

The final chapter in Section One is entitled, "Reading Holy Scripture Well." Pennington offers a three-pronged hermeneutical foundation for reading the Gospels: 1) "Behind the Text" (Historical); 2) "In the Text" (Literary); and 3) "In Front of the Text" (Canonical/Theological). His explanations of the three foundations are clear, fairly concise, and informative. He also gives attention to the human and divine aspects of authorship and discusses the concept of authorial intent.

Section Two begins with a chapter on the merits of Narrative Analysis over and against the WSM hermeneutic (the "whatever strikes me" hermeneutic). In doing this, Pennington offers an example of narrative analysis by examining Luke 7:1–10 in detail. Chapter 10 argues for a greater interest on the part of the reader

in the broad range of contexts (from the individual story, to the Gospel itself, to the canonical story). To illustrate this, Pennington turns again to Luke 7:1–10.

Section Three functions as the proverbial “icing on the cake.” Pennington—who argues for the importance of the transformational aspect of Holy Scripture—certainly practices what he preaches in Chapter 11. Here he deals with applying and teaching the Gospels. He draws from the works of noted homileticians and scholars such as Daniel Doriani, Bryan Chapell, J. I. Packer, and Augustine. In this section, Pennington argues persuasively that theocentric application of the Gospels is not an afterthought to exegesis, but is in fact indispensable. His point is that one does not truly understand the meaning of the text unless one can apply and be changed by it. The final chapter sets forward the primacy and centrality of the Gospels within the canon of Scripture.

A few points of appreciation are warranted for Pennington’s work. First of all, the book strikes that rare balance between scholarly and pastoral. The chapter on application is not an *afterthought*, but instead is a theme found throughout the book. Second, although written from a pastoral standpoint, the work is well documented and features a host of references from those across the theological and chronological spectrum. Pennington is as comfortable interacting with Augustine as he is with Bultmann. Third, his writing style is engaging. Pennington is clear and not overly verbose. He uses the benefit of repetition for memorization (his definition of Gospel being an example, appearing nearly half a dozen times throughout the book). Additionally, Pennington seeks to keep his writing interesting by offering a number of far-fetched, though effective analogies (involving everything from Bible-reading extraterrestrials, to watching the Kentucky Derby in slow motion). In the book, Pennington is pastoral in his approach, even broaching the nightmare situation of a seminarian returning home to find his mother-in-law misusing the infamous verse from Jeremiah about God’s great plans for her life. His answers to this and other tough questions about how one should respond to bad exegesis are consistently filled with grace.

A few minor concerns may also be noted. Chapter 5, the

chapter on history, methodology, and their relationship to theology, is a bit too long and detailed for an introductory book. The lengthy discussion of various scholarly views of history (e.g., Troeltsch, Bultmann, Barth, etc.) is interesting, but may be a bit overwhelming for a first- or second-year seminarian—or even a pastor who has been out of the academic world for a few years. Another small concern I would note is Pennington’s interaction with Wright’s work. He seems to fault Wright’s *Jesus and the Victory of God* for conceding too much to the historical-critical and naturalistic worldview. Wright contributed to a TIS publication in the past (*Theological Interpretation of the New Testament*, edited by Vanhoozer, Treier, and Wright, Baker, 2008). The criticism Pennington offers of Wright could likely be explained by looking more carefully at the audience Wright had in mind for his work on Jesus.

Other than these two minor concerns, there is little else with which to find fault. *Reading the Gospels Wisely* is both specific and broad, and that is what makes it so strong. It is specific in that it is well sourced and offers a number of concrete examples to flesh out its proposals. And it is broad in that it offers a comprehensive approach to the Gospels—one that does not blindly embrace the historical-critical hermeneutic but seeks to apply a consistent, distinctly Christian view of Scripture. Because it covers the important introductory-type questions such as genre, transmission, and narrative analysis, it would serve well as a textbook for a course on the Gospels. Because it also strongly embraces the importance of personal spiritual transformation, it would be beneficial for a seminary context where future pastors and evangelical scholars are being trained. Assuming the book would be paired in a classroom setting with a standard introductory New Testament textbook (covering the important topics of form, source, and redaction criticism), *Reading the Gospels Wisely* is an excellent resource and will no doubt continue to be used for this purpose. Pastors and church leaders desiring a deeper understanding of the Gospels, what exactly they are, and how they relate to Paul’s writings, will find this book very useful.

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Review: PENNINGTON *Reading the Gospels Wisely* R5

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