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Review of *Reading the Gospels Wisely: A Narrative and Theological Introduction*

Submitted to Dr. Craig Price for the course BISR9302 NT Genre

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Pennington, Jonathan T. *Reading the Gospels Wisely: A Narrative and Theological Introduction*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012.

Author Information¹

Jonathan T. Pennington is currently Associate Professor of New Testament Interpretation at Southern Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky (USA). He has also been a visiting professor at Southeastern Seminary, and IBS in Orlando, FL and Melbourne, Australia. He earned a B.A. in History as well as a Teaching Certificate from Northern Illinois University. He received the Master of Divinity degree from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School (Chicago), where he also taught Greek for two years as a NT Fellow. During his time at TEDS he also served for five years as the Associate Pastor at the Evangelical Free Church of Mt. Morris in northern Illinois.

He holds the PhD in New Testament Studies from the University of St. Andrews, Scotland (in St. Mary's College), where he wrote a thesis entitled "Heaven and Earth in the Gospel of Matthew" under the supervision of Professors Richard Bauckham and Philip Esler. He attended St. Andrews as a Rotary International Ambassadorial Scholar and while there he also served as a lecturer in Greek. Dr. Pennington is a member of the Society of Biblical Literature, the Tyndale Fellowship (Cambridge), the Institute for Biblical Research, and the International Organization for Septuagint and Cognate Studies. He has published a variety of articles, reviews, and Greek and Hebrew language tools and the books, *Heaven and Earth in the Gospel of Matthew* (Brill), now also in paperback *Heaven and Earth in the Gospel of Matthew*, and *Cosmology and New Testament Theology* (T&T Clark). His most recent book is *Reading the Gospels Wisely: A Narrative and Theological Introduction* (Baker Academic). He is currently writing the revised Pillar Commentary (PNTC) volume on Matthew.

Thesis/Purpose

According to page xii, "this book is a proposed blueprint for building a wise Gospel-reading house and thereby life." The reference to a "Gospel-reading house" comes from the metaphor that Pennington uses to structure the book into three parts. The author wants the reader to envision the work of interpreting and applying the Gospels as comparable to the work of building house. From the first phase of clearing the ground for a foundation to the last phase of living in the newly constructed home, the author intends to provide the reader with a holistic process for interpreting the Gospels.

¹ Biographical information taken in full from "Jonathan Pennington's Personal Website," n.d., n.p. [cited 27 January 2015]. Online: <http://jonathanpennington.com/about/>.

Summary

In the first part of the book, which consists of eight chapters, Pennington begins by defining “gospel.” Surveying the use of the term “gospel” in different settings, forms, and sources, the author concludes that the “gospel” can be defined as “Jesus’s effecting the long-awaited return of God himself as King, in the power of the Spirit bringing his people back from exile and into the true promised land of a new creation, forgiving their sins, and fulfilling all the promises of God and the hopes of his people” (18). From this point the author moves on to discuss why we need the Gospels (see chapter 3). Pennington writes, “Why is Saint Paul not enough? In many ways the goal of this whole book is to answer this question. My desire is to ignite a flame of interest in studying and preaching from the Gospels and reading them well as Holy Scripture” (38). In answer to this question, the author spends the rest of the chapter presenting nine reasons why Christians need the Gospels.

Chapter 4, entitled “The Joy and Angst of Having Four Gospels,” the reader finds excellent details regarding the practice of harmonization, the itinerant nature of Jesus’ ministry, and the difference between ancient and modern historiography. In chapter 5, Pennington surveys the work of other scholars in the field of the study of the Gospels. Naturally, this survey leads to a concise but thorough engagement with those of the historical Jesus movement. The major premise behind this chapter is that Jesus is not merely a historical person but a theological person with profound religious significance (107) that must be interpreted as such. The naturalistic tendencies of the historical-critical method do not attract Pennington. Furthermore, Pennington dares to challenge the approach of not only the “Jesus of History” proponents and the “Christ of Faith” proponents but even the “Third Way” proponents like N.T. Wright that seem to elevate “critical realism” to an uncomfortably high level in the exegetical process. Pennington concludes the chapter stating, “As a healthy alternative (Craig) Evans suggest what I have argued above: basing beliefs not on historical-critical findings but rather on the hearing and believing testimony of the apostles, as well as the testimony of the Spirit and the church” (107).

In chapter 6, 7, and 8, Pennington attempts to deal with fundamental issues related to hermeneutics in a “concise and yet substantial way” (108). This endeavor entails proposing what he calls “three avenues of reading” from “behind the text, in the text, and in front of the text” (112). Respectively, these avenues refer to a historical, a literary, and a canonical/theological reading of the text. The graph included on page 112 is exceedingly helpful for understanding this proposal. Pennington concludes chapter 6 by stating, “A wise reader will concentrate not merely on one or even two of the approaches but will seek to learn from and appropriate insights from all three, developing skills and artistic sensibilities to grow in becoming a competent reader” (120). Chapter 7, which bears the same title as chapter 6, discusses the matter of authorial intent, meaning and application, and the reader's posture to the text. In this chapter, Pennington makes some of his most challenging statements especially regarding meaning. In chapter 8, which concludes the first part of the book, Pennington revisits some of the details from earlier chapters and summarizes their significance in five “overlapping implications” for reading the Gospels well (148-152). He concludes the chapter by summing up the goal of reading the Gospels as revelation and identification with the first aspect referring to how the Gospels reveal “who God is in Jesus Christ” (159) and the second being related to “the central Christ-revelation function of the Gospels” (160).

In Chapter 9, Pennington introduces narrative analysis into his hermeneutical method for reading the Gospels. This chapter details basic aspects of narrative analysis with an illustration of how it works from Luke 7:1-10. Chapter 10 continues the introduction of narrative analysis by expanding the work into a greater range of context (see figure 4 on page 184). The point is to show how the at the episodic stories of the gospel accounts fit into not only the overarching narrative of the whole gospel but also fit within the macroplot of the entire Bible. This study concludes the Part Two of the book.

With Chapter 11, the reader now moves into the gospel-reading house that has been constructed over the course of the past ten chapters. It begins with a summary of the preceding material and concludes with a helpful outline of Pennington's hermeneutical method. He then advances the argument that there is more to his process than mere interpretation. It is his conviction that the Gospels must be applied and taught particularly in the context of the Christian church. The chapter concludes with a considerable amount of helpful information for preachers and teachers.

In the final chapter of the book, which is entitled, "The Gospels as the Archway of the Canon," Pennington makes his most provocative arguments regarding "the central role of the Gospels in the church's life" (213). He begins by introducing the concept of "a canon within a canon," which typically refers to the practice of "not letting the whole of Scripture's data inform one's understanding" (229). While acknowledging the critiques that some have raised concerning this concept, Pennington believes that there is "an unavoidable and harmless way in which we all do and should operate with a 'canon within a canon'" (230). Pennington continues saying, "We should have a conscious canon within the canon, that is, a group of text that guide and direct our overall reading of Scripture" (230). As one can imagine, for Pennington, these guiding text are the Gospels, "the archway of the canon" (231). This concluding chapter is his argument for such a position. The first part of his argument is rooted in history. On pages 232 through 244, Pennington surveys the role that the Gospels played in the early church. The second part of Pennington's argument is found on pages 244 through 250. The chapter concludes with implications that derive from Pennington's argument. At the end of the chapter, recognizing "the boldness of the arguments" therein, Pennington pulls back a bit in order to make sure that readers do not miss his "greater point." He states, "my desire for this book is that readers will be invited into the joy of setting the Gospels more deeply and more often" (258).

Critique

There are so many commendable things about this book. While being thoroughly academic, the book is full of rich theological reflection. It is written for a wide audience and has a clear purpose, which is to reintroduce people to the joy of studying the Gospels as those documents that reveal who God is in Jesus Christ and identify the work of Christ in that revelation. In terms of the commendable aspects of the book, this review will highlight a few of the chapters and several quotes that might assist others in their evaluation of the book. First, chapter 5 is an incredibly helpful resource for anyone looking to better understand the historical Jesus movement and its key figures. Compared to other writers like N.T. Wright, Pennington adequately summarizes the movement without bogging the reader down with unnecessary details. Second, in chapter 11, the reader will find many helpful aids for the preacher that wants to go

deeper in his proclamation of the gospels. In particular, Pennington's modification of Bryan Chappell's "fallen condition focus" is incredibly helpful (221).

As for some of the excellent quotes found in the book, the following were among this reviewer's favorites. On page 138, Pennington states, "A person who is deficient in skills – and who is not? – but seeks to read with an openness to learn from the otherness of the text (and the god behind it) can be a better reader than a methodologically skilled exegete who reads without a posture and disposition of humble teachability, the greatest of the intellectual virtues." This statement is full of hope for the student of the Bible who has not had the privilege of a formal education, but is willing to humbly study the Scriptures. On page 142, Pennington writes, "Good exegetical skills, reading for the authorial/Authorial intent, are important guidelines for reading now and in the future, and thus they should be learned and taught to others. But we must never mistake these means for the real end--developing a posture and practice of love for God and neighbor." If the enterprise of Biblical interpretation is focused primarily upon correct methodology instead upon fostering a vibrant theology, then the enterprise has failed. Students of the Bible should be thankful that men like Pennington understand the primary goal of studying scripture. Another quote that illustrates this is found on page 159, where the author writes, "Our hermeneutical approach and methods must be more than excavational; they must be personal and application driven." A final example of Pennington's understanding of the interpretation is found on page 219, where the reader finds, "Proclamation is always the goal of hermeneutics; otherwise we have missed the point of holy Scripture and have failed to read it with the direction of its purpose." These chapters and quotes, along with a host of others, made this book a real delight to read and study.

With that stated, though, there were several things in the book that were troubling. For this reviewer, these issues first became apparent on page 118, where Pennington writes, "As Augustine said when reflecting on his own experience of reading Scripture: 'the surface meaning lies open before us in charms beginners. Yet the depth is amazing, my God, the depth is amazing. To concentrate on it is to experience all.'" Admittedly, while this reviewer is thankful for the contributions that Augustine made the Christianity, he's not exactly someone that should be regarded as a model exegete. The Alexandrian school of interpretation heavily influenced him, which can be seen in his use of allegorical interpretation. From this point forward in Pennington's book, it became clearer that he is sympathetic to such interpretive approaches.

On page 130, Pennington writes, "The artifact of the text – and, I would add, the authorial intent – is a guiding factor in the pluriform readings that any text creates in the innumerable environments in which it is read and interpreted. In this way we can retain an authoritative and even normative role for the original text in its author, including providing some criteria and guidance for adjudicating between assorted readings." Initially, this sounds like Pennington is willing to grant the author a certain degree of guidance in the determination of the text meaning. However, at least from the perspective of this reviewer, there is never a clear line drawn by Pennington regarding how to determine at what point a "reading or application of a text" has departed enough from the "thrust" of a text that it should be abandoned.

Other concerns could certainly be raised, not the least of them being Pennington's argument for the Gospels functioning as a "canon within in a canon." There are multiple issues

to be taken with his proposal, especially his canonical and theological arguments. On page 246, Pennington argues for the providential placement of the Gospels at the head of the canon. However, this argument only works if one accepts his idea of an archway. A considerable problem here is that he seems to ignore the place of the Old Testament in the life of the New Testament church. The story of creation, often considered a pre-history to the covenantal history of the Old Testament, was often the “entry point” into macroplot of the whole scripture. When the apostle Paul encounters the pagans at the Areopagus in Acts 17, he does not start with the Gospels, he starts with creation. Pennington seems to overstate his argument here, but ultimately, it does not undo all of the good that he has done throughout his book. With these complaints registered, this book truly is valuable and accomplishes its purpose. It is certainly worth the read and the effort.

Synopsis of Reviews

Brandon D. Crowe’s review of *Reading the Gospels Wisely: A Narrative and Theological Introduction*, which can be found in the Westminster Theological Journal (Volume 75.1, 173-75), begins with a helpful summary of the book. Crowe writes that only a “few statements give him pause.” The issues that he addresses is Pennington’s discussion of the “restoration of God’s reign” and whether or not such a description does “justice to the newness of the eschatological inbreaking of the kingdom that was inaugurated with the incarnate work of Christ.” The other issues that causes him to “hesitate” is what seems to be Pennington’s insistence for the superiority of narrative text like the Gospels to the “non-narrative genre of the Epistles.” In the end, though, Crowe finds the book deserving of a “wide reading.”

J. Andrew Cowan’s review of *Reading the Gospels Wisely: A Narrative and Theological Introduction*, which can be found in the Trinity Journal (Volume 34.2, 298-300), begins with a comment on the uniqueness of the book and then proceeds to summarize its contents. For Cowan, two main problems exist. The first “is Pennington’s argument for the primacy of the Gospels within the canon of scripture.” The second is “Pennington’s treatment of authorial intent.” Two issues that this reviewer wholeheartedly agrees are problematic for Pennington’s work. However, these issues do not disqualify the book from being helpful in fulfilling the purpose of stirring passion and interest in the study of the Gospels.

Matthew Y. Emerson’s review of *Reading the Gospels Wisely: A Narrative and Theological Introduction*, which can be found in the journal, *Presbyterion: Covenant Seminary Review* (Volume 39.2. 119-21), begins by commenting on Pennington’s approach that “notes the Gospels’ narrative, theological, aretological (ethical), and canonical character.” From here, Emerson summarizes the content of the book, then concludes with a note of commendation for the work. He concludes, stating “This approach to hermeneutics allows Pennington to argue for a reading of the Gospels that is much more full-orbed than most in the last two centuries, and one that reflects the Gospel writers’ intentions: to show us who Jesus is and what that means for how we ought to live.”