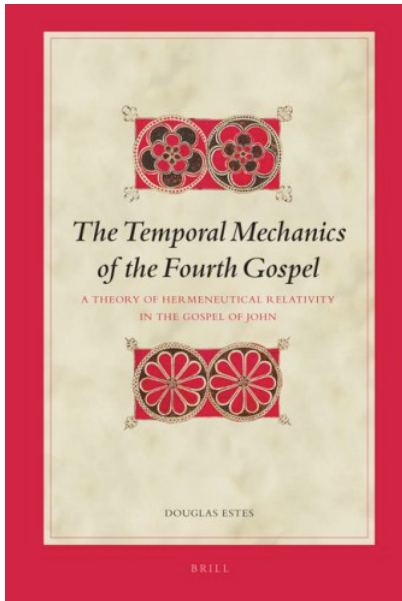


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Estes, Douglas

The Temporal Mechanics of the Fourth Gospel: A Theory of Hermeneutical Relativity in the Gospel of John

Biblical Interpretation Series 92

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In *The Temporal Mechanics of the Fourth Gospel*, Douglas Estes argues that scholars and other readers of the Fourth Gospel have done the text a disservice by approaching its narrative chronology with a flat, somewhat wooden conception of time. In place of the temporal lens that modern readers are used to using, Estes grinds a new lens, based on scientific theorizing about the nature of time. While admitting that twentieth-century physics is a different world from that of the early Christians, Estes argues that many aspects of more recent understandings of time can help the reader better understand the Fourth Gospel's sense of time.

Estes wrote this book as a dissertation at the University of Nottingham. It is (I must say) a truly unique book. Probably no other serious study tries to apply theorizing about the nature of time to biblical hermeneutics. Of course, there have been a number of attempts to apply things such as relativity and quantum theory to general hermeneutics, but they have all been aimed at grounding truth or meaning in one or another subjective moment (e.g., Arkady Plotnitsky, *Complementarity: Anti-epistemology after Bohr and Derrida* [Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1994]), and they are all, for one reason or another, difficult to take seriously. Estes's book differs in that it seeks specifically to illuminate the narrative dimension of time—a more modest and credible use of scientific theorizing. It is

clear that Estes is fascinated by the study of the nature of time, and he is excited by its potential for reading a sophisticated narrative like that of the Fourth Gospel. He conveys the thrill of discovery throughout the study.

The book essentially falls into two parts. The first part presents an overview of some of the more interesting aspects of the study of time, including changes in the way time has been understood throughout history (e.g., Is time ontological? Do the past and future exist?) and the impact of twentieth-century developments in physics on our understanding of time as a physical moment. The second part of the book takes a look at the Fourth Gospel through a hermeneutical lens ground from these insights into the nature of time, applying them to the time dimension of the Gospel's narrative. For example, where quantum theory introduces the idea of the dilation of time, Estes finds an analogous dilation of the *narrative* time in the Fourth Gospel. Time can be warped, and so then can *narrative* time. The analogies obviously work, and they appear helpful for plotting the movement of time within a narrative.

In the preface, Estes assures us that his book is “*not* directly relating the Theory of Relativity (or any other scientific theory) to the Gospel of John” (xi, emphasis original). Instead, his book is about applying temporal theories to narrative hermeneutics by way of analogy. Such an assurance should bring a sigh of relief from the reader. Reading this book, however, it is often difficult to accept that assurance. Estes many times appears to be doing exactly what he promises he is *not* doing, as he often writes as if the nature of time is somehow related to hermeneutics in a way stronger than mere analogy. Sometimes the language of analogy reenters at the last moment, but usually it does not, and one can hardly blame the reader if he or she understands Estes to making a direct link between quantum-theoretical and hermeneutical insights. (Such a link also seems to be implied by the term “hermeneutical relativity,” which appears in the book's subtitle.) In fact, Estes's assurance not to be fashioning a hermeneutic from quantum theory looks like an afterthought—perhaps a grudging concession to objections against language found in an earlier version. (One also worries about those poor readers who are in the habit of skipping the preface. In this case, they will have missed out on a valuable bit of information for understanding the book's argument.) In the end, Estes appears to believe that a proper hermeneutic of a narrative text must somehow line up with the most up-to-date thoughts about time as a physical moment.

Although the book deals with topics that fall well outside the biblical scholar's training, the language is accessible throughout. For the most part, Estes succeeds in making the ideas surrounding the concept of time understandable. He also succeeds in conveying what makes it so fascinating for him. Sometimes, however, these efforts come at the price of a truly correct understanding. At one place, Estes illustrates how the simultaneity (or not)

of events can be relative to the viewer's vantage point (a spectacular corollary of Einstein's theorizing) by appealing to how the modern world has been divided into time zones (71–72). A footnote admits that this analogy does not really fit the facts of special relativity, but the reader who knows better might have preferred a more accurate illustration. The true concept is hardly too difficult for readers to understand, and the time-zone analogy conveys nothing of its curiousness.

The biblical studies component of this book revolves around the Fourth Gospel, as well it should, given that that is arguably the most intriguing and perplexing New Testament book with respect to matters of narrative chronology. Unfortunately, Estes seems driven to defend the accuracy of the Fourth Evangelist's representation at every point and to avoid any historical disagreements with Matthew, Mark, or Luke. This leads him to use "temporal mechanics" as a sort of universal solvent for chronological problems. Strictly speaking, the notions of "dilated" or "warped" narrative time make good sense. At the least, Estes has supplied some useful analogies for understanding the sudden speeding up and slowing down of the Gospel narrative—especially in the Fourth Gospel. But at certain points in his discussion, Estes tries to apply these insights in a way that is more than they can handle. His tendency to soft-pedal the Fourth Gospel's narrative inconcinnities shows most clearly when he discusses the passage of the festival cycle—especially the multiple references to Passover. Although he does not discuss the Synoptic chronology in this connection, one cannot help but suspect that Estes distances himself from a three-year chronological scheme so as not to have the Fourth Gospel's chronology conflict with that of the Synoptic tradition. Unfortunately, that is a trick that no "temporal-mechanical" hermeneutic can pull off. No matter how much one applies the notion of "warped" time to the Fourth Gospel's "temporal geodesic," there is little hope of reconciling the Johannine and Synoptic chronologies.

On the terms of what it *claims* to be doing, this book represents a much more responsible use of science and philosophy than the works of Plotnitsky et al. (see above). There are, however, a number of similarities between Estes's and Plotnitsky's projects. To be sure, Estes appears to accept a tempered postmodernist view of things, but it is not always clear when his acceptance of such a view determines his reasoning. At a number of places, for example, Estes appears to equate time itself with the (psychological) *experience* of time. A postmodernist, of course, might do that as a matter of principle. On the other hand, such a move might simply be a matter of conceptual confusion. In this instance, it is not clear which of these better represents what is going on.

Students of narratology will want to read this book. The concepts it introduces will help to fashion a nuanced vocabulary for describing narrative time. As a contribution to Johannine studies, however, it is somewhat less promising.