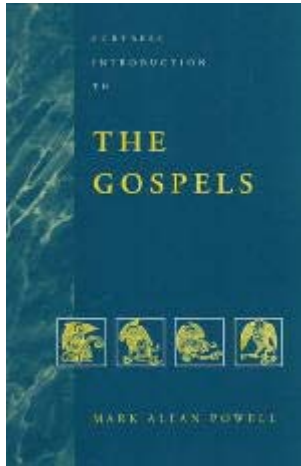


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Powell, Mark Allan

Fortress Introduction to the Gospels

Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1998. Pp. vii + 184, Paperback, \$14.00, ISBN 0800630750.

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In this small volume, Mark Allan Powell presents the academic study of the gospels to readers previously uninitiated in biblical scholarship. A brief introduction to the nature of the gospels and their world is followed first by a chapter delineating the transmission of material "From Jesus to Us" and then by chapters on each of the four canonical gospels. Each chapter on the canonical gospels begins with some introductory remarks followed by sub-chapters on the gospel's (literary) "Characteristics," its "Historical Context," and its "Major (theological) Themes." A five-page appendix covers eight of the more significant "Other Gospels" (the *Protevangelium of James*, the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*, the *Gospel of Peter*, the *Gospel of the Hebrews* [the discussion of which mentions the *Gospel of the Ebionites* and the *Gospel of the Nazareans*], the *Gospel of Thomas*, the *Gospel of Mary*, the *Apocryphon of James*, and the *Dialogue of the Savior*). The ample endnotes are followed by a five-page glossary of terms used in New Testament study and a map of Palestine and its environs in the time of Jesus.

Giving careful consideration to the question of how best to introduce biblical studies to newcomers to the discipline, Powell uses an innovative approach to the methodologies that scholars use to study the gospels. Instead of outlining a linear, historical development of biblical research, Powell divides the transmission of biblical material "from Jesus to us" into six stages: the historical Jesus, early tradition (written sources and oral materials), redaction of the gospels, preservation of the manuscripts, translation of the text, and reception of the text, and then discusses the methods appropriate to the study of the tradition at each of these stages. This immediately allows the beginning student to ask

the question, "How can *I* understand this problem in the text?" rather than forcing him/her to wade first through the history of two centuries of scholarship.

Summary boxes give outlines or overviews of the material under discussion and are similarly written with the novice in mind, although they have the disadvantage of interrupting the flow of the text. The summary box that lists the various perspectives of the so-called "third quest" of the historical Jesus is particularly useful. Endnote apparatus is not initially overwhelming but allows an entry point for those who wish to pursue further study of a particular issue. One questions, however, the utility of works in German and French for the beginner. On the other hand, Powell never forgets to explain potentially strange terms. The discussion of each gospel gives the current view of the majority of scholars as well as significant minority opinions on each of the points raised. By presenting the material in this way, Powell not only gives the student essential data for further investigation, but vividly displays the wide panorama of academic debate to the uninitiated.

As must be expected in a brief book that covers such a broad range of material, many points of scholarly debate are glossed over and there are notable deficiencies in format. In his efforts to show how each of the evangelists *used* the traditional material that was available to them, he steers students away from the possibility that the evangelists may have *created* that very material. He opens up the possibility that the "we-passages" in Acts are a literary device created to "invite us, the readers, to experience Paul's story as though 'we' were there" (p. 96), but, he appears to support the possibility that the author of Luke-Acts was indeed Luke the physician, the traveling companion of Paul. Although he does tell his readers that the character of Luke appears in Col. 4:14; Phlm 24; and 2 Tim. 4:11 (p. 95), he neglects to mention that the argument that the "we" of the "we-passages" includes Luke rests ultimately on 2 Tim. 4:11 and fails to point out the historical problem raised by the likelihood that that letter is late and pseudepigraphic.

Although well-meaning, Powell seems uncomfortable with the handling of rabbinic material and conflicts with Jews and Judaism. The implication, for example, that attitudes manifested in "the Talmud" are equivalent to those of Pharisaic Judaism four hundred years earlier (p. 78) or reference to Hillel as "Rabbi Hillel" (p. 81) are anachronistic. Moreover, although the term "Jew" in modern usage is neither pejorative nor an epithet, he frequently and unnecessarily circumlocutes the word "Jew" with the phrase "Jewish people" (not "the Jewish people" which, in appropriate places, he also uses). Furthermore, his defense of John against the charge of anti-Semitism assumes that the Johannine community identified all non-Jewish Semitic groups as Semites in a racial or ethnic sense and that the term "anti-Semitism" applies to Semitic groups other than Jews (pp. 134-135).

Content problems also include those of omission. Save for his discussion of the Gospel and, appropriately, the Epistles of John, there is little or no discussion of the communities that might have produced and used the gospels. The book also would be well-served by the inclusion of a summary chapter explaining in greater detail why these and only these four gospels have come down to us in the canon. Only briefly, in an endnote to the appendix (pp. 166-167 n. 2), does Powell discuss the canonization of the gospels. Most disappointing, Powell shows us very little of his own literary-critical work. This is unfortunate because as he has shown in his *What is Narrative Criticism?* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1990), Powell is extremely effective in explaining the intricacies of literary criticism to the beginner.

Critical for the beginner but also absent is a general bibliography. For the chapters on the nature of the gospels and their transmission, there is no bibliography at all. Each chapter on the gospels offers a bibliography of four titles (six for Mark) on literary criticism and two on feminist hermeneutics. To be sure, other titles are supplied in the endnotes, but finding them in this matter is cumbersome, especially for the beginner.

One problem for which the publisher must be blamed (and one that I might not have noticed ten years ago) is that the print, although clear, is quite small (approximately the same size of that in this review) and that of the appendices and notes is even smaller. This is inappropriate for a work whose potential audience includes church adult study groups.

In spite of these criticisms, the book is quite useful for church groups and even undergraduate courses on the gospels but will require a guide to fill in the gaps.