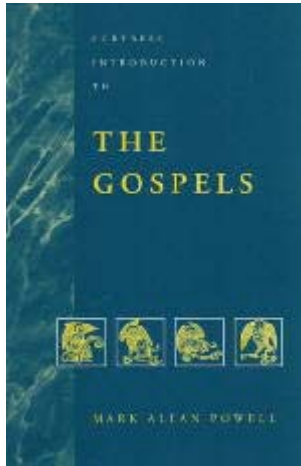


RBL 09/04/2000



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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Prof. Powell has written a marvelous book on the Four Gospels that is almost ideal as an introductory textbook for undergraduates, beginning graduate students, and the general public. This book is remarkably easy to read and well organized, with clear headings for the sections and subsections of each chapter. Although it is brief, it presents a fine overview of most of the material necessary for an introductory course on the Gospels. It is also very well balanced, fairly presenting a range of views on many of the basic questions still disputed among contemporary scholars (e.g., the meaning of “Son of Man,” pp. 52-54, or the place of John’s composition, pp. 125-26), rather than presenting only Powell’s own opinions. One of the book’s most helpful features is the inclusion of many “figures” (charts, lists, etc.) that not only provide good overviews of important points but also serve as excellent review and study aides for students. Since this book, part of the “Fortress Introduction” series, will almost certainly have a second edition, some suggestions for minor improvements are included below.

Powell’s introductory section (“Four Stories of Jesus”) briefly mentions some religious, political, and social aspects of “The World of the Gospels,” and then discusses the nature of the “Gospel” genre, concluding that they should be read as “Sermons in Story Form.” Teachers who wish to present their students with more details about the ancient world and/or about modern exegetical methods, however, will need to use a supplementary textbook or additional materials.

Chapter 1 (“From Jesus to Us”) contains an excellent overview of the complex process of transmission of the Gospel materials over the past 2000 years. Powell divides this process into six stages: 1) The Historical Jesus, 2) Early Tradition, 3) Redaction of the Gospels, 4) Preservation of the Manuscripts, 5) Translation, and 6) Reception. My only quibble here is that in the second section (pp. 15-23) Powell discusses the “Written Sources and Oral Tradition” in that order. Would it not be better and more accurate chronologically to mention the transmission of oral traditions first, *before* discussing the written sources and the Synoptic Problem?

The bulk of the book consists of four chapters, each devoted to one of the four canonical Gospels, and each containing a brief introduction, three main sections, and a list of books for further study. The chapter introductions discuss the sources used by the four evangelists. In each chapter’s first section, Powell mentions ten characteristics of the Gospel in question, focusing on literary features (e.g., urgency, action, rhetoric, secrecy, etc. in Mark) and on some of the special characters (e.g., Peter in Matthew, women in Luke, the “disciple whom Jesus loved” in John). The second section covers the historical context of the particular Gospel, answering a series of questions: who? (author and audience), where? (place of composition and community location), when? (date of original and of later additions), and why? (author's purpose and community's social circumstances). Finally, the third section discusses three major themes of the Gospel in greater detail. For Mark, Powell covers “The Reign of God,” the “Son of Man and Son of God,” and “Discipleship and the Cross.” For Matthew, he includes “The Abiding Presence of God,” the “Jewish Law and Christian Faith,” and “People of Little Faith.” For Luke (including some of Acts also), he presents “Models for Understanding Jesus,” “Salvation Happens Now,” and “Success, Growth, and Triumph.” The Johannine themes that he highlights are “Already and Not Yet,” “Knowing the Truth,” and “Community of Love.” Some of these themes overlap a bit with some of the “Characteristics” Powell had listed earlier in the respective chapters, and some teachers will obviously wish to present more or different themes. Yet overall, Powell has done a very fine job in introducing many of the most important aspects of the Gospels. Each chapter concludes with a short list of additional studies representing literary and feminist approaches to the Gospels, although Powell never explains why he focuses on these methodologies. One further suggestion here: to reinforce the fact that the Gospels are really anonymous, as Powell himself acknowledges (p. 1), would it not be more accurate to entitle these chapters “The Gospel *according to* ...” rather than simply “The Gospel *of* ...” (even if the longer title is somewhat cumbersome)?

Powell’s book concludes with an appendix, notes, a glossary and indices. The appendix (“The Other Gospels”) mentions some of the non-canonical writings, including four “Narrative Gospels” and four “Sayings Gospels.” This all-too-brief presentation might well be expanded into a full chapter, just as Powell’s “Introduction” might also be supplemented with slightly more material on the social world of the first century. The book also includes a very helpful glossary and comprehensive indices of scripture

passages and of scholars referenced in the text and the endnotes. There is no subject index, but the glossary could easily function as one if page numbers were added to indicate where each term is first mentioned or defined within the text.

After using this book in an undergraduate course recently, I asked my students for written evaluations. Their responses were overwhelmingly positive; frequent comments included “very helpful,” “clear and to the point,” and “extremely useful.” When asked if I should use this book again in future courses, most students said “yes,” “definitely,” or “of course.” Many mentioned the book’s clear organization and the twenty-six “figures” as this book’s most useful features. [There is actually one more, since the replication of the Greek text of Mark 1:1-8 is not numbered nor included in the list of figures (pp. vii, 31)]. Adding even more tables and charts, such as an overview of exegetical methods and/or a summary of Christological titles (as discussed within the text), would make this book even more valuable. All in all, Powell is to be commended for writing such a fine introductory textbook, a truly excellent “Introduction to the Gospels.”