The Cambridge Companion series is fast becoming a major scholarly reference tool that enables scholars and students alike to “come up to speed” in areas that may not be their primary fields of research. However, these books are far more than mere primers for nonspecialists. In their own right, many of these volumes make major contributions to advancing the discussion of the topic under consideration. The present volume is no exception.

In the introduction Barton makes clear that the primary focus of the volume is not on the Gospels as historical sources or as exemplary literature. Rather, the treatment seeks to approach the Gospels as “texts which form part of a canon believed by Christians to be revelatory—the canon of Christian scripture which helps to sustain the faith, life and worship of the church” (1–2). It is suggested that failure to realize this dimension in the function of these texts explains the split between the interpretation of the Gospels in universities and in communities of believers. The volume is divided into three sections. The first addresses various methodological and hermeneutical questions, including the almost perennial issue of the genre of the Gospels. Part 2, entitled “The Gospels as Witnesses to Christ: Content and Interpretation,” devotes a chapter to each of the four canonical Gospels. In many respects these chapters most closely approximate what would
be seen as a traditional introductory treatment of the Gospel texts. They map out the contents of the four Gospels in order to see the Gospels as “overlapping testimonies to the truth about Jesus” (5). The final section, “The Afterlife of the Gospels: Impact on Church and Society,” contain four chapters that are not simply explorations of reception history. Rather, they are seen as case studies of the use and appropriation of the Gospels at different historical points. As a whole, the volume seeks both to represent the current state of scholarship and to generate recognition of the Gospels as texts that shape the “lived-out” faith of believers down through the generations of Christianity.

In the opening chapter Loveday Alexander reopens the question of the genre of the Gospels. Interestingly, the discussion commences with a quotation from the noncanonical Gospel of Thomas, where Thomas declares that Jesus cannot be compared to any other thing, since he defies the human capacity of definition. This is taken as an analogy to the problems that attend the generic categorization of the Gospels. Certain similarities are recognized with oral folkloric traditions, also with the Greek bios form, aretalogies, and martyrologies. Yet in the end these are rejected as inadequate genres for the Gospels. Alexander, however, is also unwilling to say the Gospels are sui generis; instead, she suggests that the very question is where the problem lies. She rejects the quest for some preexistent genre to explain the Gospels. Instead, it is argued that the Gospels “came into being at a time of profound cultural transformation, and were themselves active agents in that transformation. That may be one reason why it is so hard to pin them down” (30). Thus the Gospels are seen are emerging in a period of dynamic creativity and cultural shifts, and this accounts for the emergence of a form that both partially resembles existing forms but also emerges as a fresh way literary vehicle for its style of writing.

Next, Francis Watson turns his attention to tracing the evolution of the fourfold Gospel canon. Strikingly, Watson quotes the same saying from the Gospel of Thomas as Alexander (saying 13) but discusses it in relation to the corpus of Gospels. It is argued that “the intention is to define the status of the Gospel of Thomas in relation to the other known apostolic writings ascribed to Peter and Matthew” (38). Dating Thomas to around the time of Papias, Watson argues that it demonstrates a period when various Gospels were in circulation but that there existed ongoing debates concerning the value of written witness in comparison to oral testimony. The decision of Marcion to opt for a single Gospel is also discussed. Watson sees Tertullian’s comments in response to Marcion’s program as demonstrating that the fourfold Gospel canon was already established in Rome by the mid-second century (40). This assessment may go slightly beyond the evidence, since Tertullian simply refers to Marcion rejecting certain authentic Gospels that circulated under the names of apostles (Matthew and John?) but does not formally enumerate these as being three in opposition to the Gospel of Luke that he preserves. Watson does make the plausible suggestion that many of the narrative-type noncanonical
Gospels were written as “gap-fillers” to supply information absent from the canonical accounts concerning things such as the birth or resurrection of Jesus. Perhaps the most significant comment made by Watson is to note that the tendency in modern scholarship to absolutize the difference between Gospels stands in opposition to the harmonizing practice of many writers in the early church.

Richard Hays discusses a topic that has previously occupied much of his research. He investigates “the canonical matrix of the Gospels,” by which he denotes the Old Testament writings as the key theological and symbolic resource exploited by Gospel writers in formulating their respective accounts of Jesus. His thesis has proved controversial, especially in relation to some of the supposed echoes of the Old Testament that have been detected in the Gospels. In an endnote Hays concedes that the “new exodus” theme is problematic. “When the ‘new exodus’ theme is set alongside the actual events narrated in Mark’s gospel, however, severe hermeneutical tensions arise, tensions that must be interpreted in light to Mark’s other allusions to scripture and in light to his open-ended future eschatology” (73). Hays sees a key task of the interpretation of the Gospels as being the recognition of intertextual echoes. While these obviously exist, most explicitly in direct citations (sometimes with introductory formulae), some of these alleged echoes appear so faint that many would question their actual existence. Although Hays has discussed the methodology of identifying such putative echoes, that methodology is simply assumed in this discussion as though it were “a given” of biblical scholarship.

Stephen Fowl’s chapter on the historical Jesus in the Gospels is an extremely stimulating and engaging discussion. In seeking to account for the rise of historical quests in the post-Enlightenment period, he helpfully notes that “[w]ithout repristinating the past, I want to make clear that premodern Gospel interpreters were not credulous bumpkins” (76). After giving a short account of the rise of historical approaches, he suggests that the philosophical and epistemological assumptions of modernity now lack conviction. Consequently, it is suggested that “Christians reading the gospels may be in a position to reassert the priority of theological concerns over historical ones” (77). This raises perhaps one of the most important questions in the interpretation of scriptural texts. In what sense can a scientific, evidence-based, historically aware society set aside the objectivity of the Enlightenment and subsequent centuries? Fowl may be entirely correct that what is produced by historical Jesus research “is not yet a very satisfying picture. It is a minimalist chronicle” (83). While such findings may be less the one may have hoped for, other approaches should not be embraced simply because they offer a sop to such disappointments. Instead, it is only if the historico-critical method can be shown to be invalid that it should be modified or abandoned. Here Fowl seeks to argue that it is not an unproblematic method. Drawing on the work of Luke Timothy Johnson, which questions the priority of history over theology, it is argued that “it is no longer self-evident that
history should be treated as an autonomous realm with a privileged place when it comes to ordering and accounting for reality” (92). While many will still want to disagree with the direction Fowl wishes to take, he argues his case articulately and with great clarity; more importantly, he raises one of the most fundamental methodological questions that needs to be considered by all who would attempt to interpret the Gospels.

The final chapter of part 1, written by Sandra Schneiders, looks at the shift toward reader-centered approaches in reading the Gospels. It is argued that such approaches recognize the text more as an object in its own right than simply being a window through which to view the Jesus of history. Although Schneiders characterizes scholars as believing the text was a “clear window” (97–98), this seems a little unfair and fails to recognize the way in which previous generations of scholars discussed the historical value of various texts that they employed as source documents. Like the previous chapter, Schneiders engages in a high-level discussion of hermeneutics conceived as a “global theoretical enterprise” (99). She demonstrates that different readers read the text for different reasons. She concludes her discussion by asserting that “spirituality as the lived experience of the faith is the ultimate goal and final fruit of the engagement of the reader with the gospel message which is mediated by the gospel texts” (116). This very bold statement both encapsulates and helpfully clarifies Schneiders’s argument. It may, however, be open to question whether her proposed “ultimate goal” in reading the Gospel texts would indeed command widespread assent.

The four chapters that comprise the second part of the book are overviews of the four canonical Gospels. Taking up the work of Graham Stanton, Stephen Barton portrays Matthew’s account as “a new gospel for a new people” (121). However, this Gospel is not too new, since Matthew “seeks to bring together and hold together the old and the new” (122). Barton argues that for Matthew the “old” is not just Jewish scriptures and traditions but also primitive Christian thought as reflected in both Matthew and Q. He argues, in some tension with Loveday Alexander’s discussion, that the Gospel is “closest in literary genre to an ancient biography (or bios)” (123). Next follows a discussion of key passages from the Gospel. Barton concludes by suggesting that Matthew is an open-ended document that “constitutes something of an invitation: to make the ending of the gospel a point of new departure” (136). Similarly, Joel Green’s discussion of Mark characterizes this text as an open-ended text that calls readers to reexamine their own discipleship. Thus the claim “he is risen” becomes “the point of departure” for readers of this text. There is a striking similarity between the reading of Matthew proposed by Barton and the reading of Mark by Green. Squires has written a wonderfully clear and illuminating discussion of the Gospel of Luke. The major themes he highlights provide rich insight into the text, and in his concluding comments he emphasizes the contemporary place of Luke’s Gospel in Christian communities. Finally, Marianne Meye Thompson tackles
John’s Gospel. Her discussion skillfully interacts with the major debates concerning John during the twentieth century. She discusses the relationship to the Synoptic accounts, the distinctiveness of Johannine Christology, the symbolism used in the text, and the dualism that shapes the worldview. She concludes by stating: “More than any other Gospel-writer, John wishes his reader to see that what Jesus is for believers in the present, he was for his disciples during his own lifetime, the life and light of God for the world” (p. 199).

The four chapters that comprise the final section tackle the reception history of the Gospels at a number of different moments. Frances Young investigates the way that doctrines of the church were developed from the narratives of the Gospels. Her initial discussion covers much of the same ground mapped out by Francis Watson. However, her major point is that a “doctrinal reading” of the Gospels is a legitimate strategy and can be seen as a “non-reductive reading” of these texts (220). David Matzko McCarthy’s essay, entitled “The Gospels Embodied: The Lives of the Saints and Martyrs,” offers what may fairly be characterized as a Roman Catholic perspective on the appropriation of the Gospels, although the discussion does not explicitly acknowledge that this interpretation is tied to such a strand of Christian thought. It is argued that, “according to the nature of scripture as canon, people of faith expect saints to be named where the Bible is read and the Gospel proclaimed. From scripture flows a canon of saints” (224). These statements are taken as being self-evident, and no attempt is made to justify these claims. A key figure in this discussion is Ignatius of Loyola, “whose important work The Spiritual Exercises has made him the saint of ‘living in’ the Gospels” (p. 224). McCarthy may accurately represent how the Gospels are appropriated in one strand of Christianity. However, his claim that “the practice of naming saints suggests that our interpretations of the gospels are not finished until we put the texts into practice as well” (242) will not resonate with all readers. This is because many Christian traditions do not share this practice of “naming the saints.” Gordon Mursell is not constrained by a narrow perspective on Christianity. His chapter, “Praying the Gospels: Spirituality and Worship,” embraces a wide range of expressions of spirituality. It is the ability to interact with such diversity that allows for meaningful overarching conclusions to be drawn. His appreciation of the manner in which prayer draws people into the realm of participation in the Gospel helpfully emphasizes the transformative interface between prayer and Gospel. The final chapter, by Scott Bader-Saye, looks at the interplay between the Gospels and the spheres of morality and politics. Key dialogue partners include Augustine, Kant, and Niebuhr. The discussion ends with a reflection on the pattern of the cross and the events of 9/11. It is helpfully suggested that, “because the pattern of the cross was taken up into God’s work of making peace with the world, the suffering of 9/11 can be taken up into a human project of reconciliation” (281).
This volume brings together a wide-ranging set of essays that raise key issues surrounding the interpretation and appropriation of the Gospels. Like most collections of this type, some of the essay provide real pearls of insight, others stimulate helpful discussion, a number advance the debate, and others are less helpful. The four essays in part 2 provide sure-footed guides to major themes in the Gospels. The essay by Fowl raises a fundamental question in the practice of hermeneutics, and although one may wish to disagree with his conclusions, it is an extremely challenging and stimulating discussion. Perhaps the most problematic aspect of the volume is the way in which it presents the interpretation of the Gospels as having moved largely away from the historico-critical method. In fact, this method still remains the dominant paradigm among scholars, and perhaps this should have been emphasized somewhat more strongly. This criticism aside, the volume is a helpful and rich collection that offers multiple perspectives on the interpretation of the Gospels.