Christopher McMahon

Reading the Gospels: Biblical Interpretation in the Catholic Tradition


Jean-François Racine
Santa Clara University and Graduate Theological Union
Berkeley, California

Christopher McMahon, associate professor of theology at Saint Vincent College, has written a fine introduction to the Gospels, with the goal of providing “not only a critical or academic reading of the Gospels but one that is also theological and life-forming” (vii). McMahon spells out further the latter goal in the introductory chapter: “the book is meant to develop an appreciation for the demands the Gospels place on those who would seek to enact the good news of Jesus in the world.” (17) I find this volume perfectly appropriate as a textbook for undergraduate students taking a course on the Gospels at a Roman Catholic college. The book is well-documented and conversant with current mainstream scholarship on the Gospels. Not only does the work engage Roman Catholic scholarship, but it is also in dialogue with scholarship that originates from other locations.

Excluding the introduction, the book comprises seven chapters. Chapter 1 provides an overview of the sociohistorical situation of first-century Palestine; chapter 2 summarizes the three quests for the historical Jesus; and chapter 3 explains the formation of the Gospel tradition. It is worth mentioning that this chapter is exemplary at explaining the christologies of the Gospels, a forte of the author. The four remaining chapters each deal with one Gospel, starting with Mark and ending with John. The volume concludes with a glossary and a combined index of authors and subjects. Each chapter contains sidebars. Some sidebars are termed “Scripture in Detail” and explain selected passages in some depth. Other sidebars are named “Alternative Approaches” and lay out approaches to a passage that do not necessarily focus on authorial intent. Chapters end with a section of questions for understanding, a section of questions for reflection, suggestions for further
reading, and endnotes. Each chapter that deals with a Gospel is organized in the same manner. For instance, the outline of the chapter on Mark deals with: (1) historical and theological background; (2) authorship and lived context; (3) structure and flow of the gospel; (4) theological themes; (5) Mark’s account of the gospel; (6) conclusion. This chapter includes sidebars on the physical settings in Mark, the basic elements of an exorcism story and a healing story, suffering and the Deuteronomistic tradition, Aramaic in the Gospels, an alternative exegesis of the Syrophenician woman in Mark 7:24–30, the transfiguration (Mark 9:2–8), gehenna, the “desolating abomination” (Mark 13:14), textual criticism, and the ending of Mark.

Curious about the subtitle of the book, *Biblical Interpretation in the Catholic Tradition*, I was eager to read the introduction to see what McMahon considers to be the specificity of biblical interpretation in the Catholic tradition. The chapter focuses on the historical-critical method, including its definition, controversial history, and eventual vindication in the official teaching of the Catholic Church. On the latter aspect, McMahon provides useful summaries of the salient features and significance of Church documents such as *Divino afflante spiritu* (1943), *Dei verbum* (1965), and *L’interprétation de la Bible dans l’Église* (1993) concerning the use of historical methods to interpret Scriptures. McMahon defines the historical-critical method as “the disciplinary attempt to place a given text into its appropriate historical, theological, and literary context” (2). This initial definition is not without problems. For instance, what is the theological context of a given text? It must be reconstructed from the text itself. Hence, a risk of circularity. Similarly, what is meant by literary context? Does it refer simply to the literary genres/forms in use during that time period, and/or does it include the role of a given passage in the organization of a gospel? If the latter, modern methods of literary analysis can be more useful than historical methods. A second definition of the historical-critical method found on the next page may be more descriptive: “[it] attempts to paint a picture of the world behind the text, including the intention and processes involved in the creation of the text” (3). Throughout the volume McMahon speaks of the historical-critical method in the singular, as does the 1993 document produced by the Biblical Commission. In my opinion, this use of the singular is unfortunate, for it gives the impression that it covers a single method while it rather describes one type of inquiry, that is, to map out “the world behind the text” as writes McMahon (see definition above). At some point McMahon mentions that the historical-critical method encompasses a variety of methodologies, but beyond this I suggest that the various methodologies express the diversity of questions asked by scholars of the Gospels. Not only does the diversity of questions reflect the plurality of standpoints when looking at these writings, but it is also often prompted by the realization of the limitations of some of these methods (or methodologies to use McMahon’s terminology). McMahon’s volume conveys well the opinion of the Biblical
Commission that the historical-critical method is indispensable for the scientific study of the meaning of ancient texts, but the 1993 document also discussed and acknowledged the relevance of a number of methods, some not necessarily driven by the agenda of reconstructing the world behind the text (e.g., narrative analysis, semiotics, history of reception, psychological approaches, and contextual approaches). The presence of these pages in the 1993 document, without negating the necessity of the investigation of the world behind the text with the appropriate tools, may indicate that there is a larger number of valid questions worth an exploration in a Catholic context than those surrounding the origins of the gospel texts. In addition, I am still uncertain that contemporary biblical interpretation done in a Catholic context is different from biblical interpretation done in several other church contexts. That was the case more than one hundred years ago, but today scholars from various denominations use the same methods of interpretation. This makes dialogue possible among them, as can be seen at any annual meeting of the Catholic Biblical Association of America, which is attended by scholars of several denominations.

The discussion of the Synoptic problem provides sufficient information if the volume is meant to be used in an undergraduate course, but the Augustinian hypothesis concerning the relationship among the Gospels is given disproportionate attention, while the Farrer-Goulder-Goodacre hypothesis, which may be the most serious competitor of the Two-Source hypothesis, is not mentioned. Much attention is also given to the Birkat Haminim in the chapter on Matthew (119–20). While McMahon rightly acknowledges that the historical relevance of this prayer to Matthew’s Gospel remains elusive, a point recently well made by Ruth Langer in *Cursing the Christians: A History of the Birkat HaMinim* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), the glossary at the end of the volume (204) gives the opposite impression.

Instructors who offer introductory courses on the Gospels in English-speaking institutions have many choices when it comes to selecting a textbook. Yet, instructors who teach such courses in Roman Catholic institutions have fewer choices if they wish to select a textbook that also includes some information about the history of biblical interpretation in the Roman Catholic tradition. MacMahon offers these instructors a volume that covers much ground. The information is rich, well-organized, clearly explained, up-to-date, and interesting to read.