



How to Read a Gospel Text

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I like to think of different approaches to biblical study as analogous to a set of keys on a ring.¹ The various keys open different doors and grant access to different types of insight. Thus, the question of how to read a text depends not only on what type of text is under consideration but also on what type of insight is sought.

For the purposes of this article, I consider how to read passages from the New Testament Gospels, though much of what I say would apply to many other texts as well. I also admit that there would be many other ways to read Gospel texts and to do so legitimately, because those texts can be and often are read by people with diverse interests. For example, some people may wish to analyze the Gospels in order to extract reliable biographical information regarding the life and teachings of the historical Jesus. Other people may wish to read the Gospels devotionally, as words from God addressed directly to them. Still others might read them with a specific focus, looking for something that has apparent potential for homiletical application, liturgical appropriation, or theological reflection. And some readers approach Gospel texts with discrimination, intending to evaluate their worth in light of a particular ideology. These are all legitimate enterprises, but the approach I outline in this article would be of little service in accomplishing such goals.

¹ Mark Allan Powell, *What Is Narrative Criticism?* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), 101. The analogy was suggested to me by Ron Hals.

What do we expect to find when we read the Bible? We bring many different ideas, preconceptions, and desired outcomes, but these may lead us away from the message of the text. An important way to read the text and understand its meanings is to try to encounter the text the way its original audience might have done.

My intention is to describe an approach to Gospel texts that allows us to determine as closely as possible how the implied readers or intended audience of the work would be expected to understand it, be affected by it, or, indeed, respond to it.² The process is deceptively simple: it involves taking a Gospel on its own terms, basically reading it the same way that we intuitively read many other works of literature. To do this, however, actually involves advanced skills, knowledge, and insight, as well as an active imagination. Some of the difficulties arise from the Gospels being so foreign—older than most literature we read, and deriving from a culture so unlike our own. Difficulty also arises from their acknowledged status as Scripture, which may seem to suggest they ought *not* be read like other literature. In any case, the approach I suggest runs counter to a history of interpretation and does not always seem easy or natural to people who are heirs to the tradition that comprises that history.

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Let us begin with this simple exercise: Suppose we wanted to read the Gospel of Mark and be affected by it the way its intended audience was expected to be affected by it. Would that be possible? I think that in order to come close, we would have to do three things: (1) we would have to receive the book in the manner that the author assumed his audience would receive it; (2) we would have to know everything that the author assumed his audience would know—but no more than this; and (3) we would have to think the way the author assumed his audience would think. If we were able to do all three of those things, we might be able to guess at how that intended audience would have been expected to respond to the Gospel of Mark—or to any individual passage that Gospel contains.³

Now let us consider each of the three “requirements” in turn.

RECEIVING THE TEXT IN THE MANNER EXPECTED OF US

Most of us who read books know we are expected to start at the beginning and read through to the end. We do not just open the book in the middle, read a selected

² Implied readers (a literary construct) and intended audience (a historical reality) are not the same thing, but the approach I outline in this article assists us in identifying an expected response on the part of either of those entities.

³ I have elsewhere described these steps as essential to a reading strategy called “narrative criticism,” and as definitive of what distinguishes that strategy from other approaches that are also grounded in reader-oriented literary criticism (reader-response criticism, rhetorical criticism, *Wirkungsgeschichte*, ideological criticism, and postmodern criticism). See Mark Allan Powell, “Literary Approaches and the Gospel of Matthew,” in *Methods for Matthew*, ed. Mark Allan Powell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), esp. 60–61.

paragraph, and then talk about what we think it means. With the New Testament Gospels, however, the latter practice is common.

If we want to know how we are expected to respond to a Gospel text, we must ask how its implied readers or intended audience would be expected to encounter that text. The author probably assumed that people would be hearing his Gospel read out loud in Greek from beginning to end at a single sitting (or standing).⁴ Of course, most of us will probably never actually receive a Gospel text in exactly that fashion, but a good commentary can alert us to what we might notice if we were to do so. Without belaboring the point, let me offer a couple of examples.

First, a good commentary should alert us to instances in which hearing the text aloud in Greek might offer a different experience than we are likely to have when reading an English translation. For instance, readers of Matthew 25:31–46 (NRSV) will hear Jesus say that at the final judgment the sheep who welcomed strangers will be blessed for having welcomed him, and the goats who did not welcome strangers will be condemned for not having welcomed him. But Matthew’s readers are expected to be hearing this text in Greek, where the word translated “stranger” in 25:35, 43 (*zenos*) has the much more precise meaning of “foreigner” or “non-citizen.” Other New Testament uses include Matthew 27:7; Acts 17:21; Ephesians 2:12, 19; Hebrews 11:13; and 3 John 1:5; in the Septuagint, it is used in Ruth 2:10; 2 Samuel 12:4; 15:19; and Job 31:32. A brief survey of those passages will reveal that the term does not simply mean “a person unknown to us,” but “a person in a foreign land who lacks the legal rights and protections of citizenship.” Matthew’s readers are expected to hear Jesus’s promises of blessing and threats of condemnation as related to how such people are treated.

Second, a good commentary should alert us to instances in which our reception of a text would be different if we were encountering the passage as an episode in an unfolding narrative with connections to what has gone before and what will come after. To illustrate, we can consider Matthew 18:15–20, which is often treated as an isolated pericope not only in lectionaries but also in constitutions and other ecclesiastical documents dealing with disciplinary procedures. As such, the text might seem to provide a checklist to be followed when a believing community wants to remove someone from its membership. But Matthew’s readers would be expected to hear the words in context, such that the passage is prefaced with the words “it is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost” (18:14); it is then followed by stories that emphasize how the church’s response to persistent sin must always be persistent forgiveness (18:21–35). No reader hearing Matthew 18:15–20 as part of an unfolding story would ever be expected to think Jesus was outlining a procedure for excommunication. Rather, they would hear him describing a process for identifying possible lost sheep who

⁴ Mark Allan Powell, *Chasing the Eastern Star: Adventures in Biblical Reader-Response Criticism* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 77–82.

(like Gentiles and tax-collectors, 18:17) need to be afforded greater mercy than most and marked as needing extra care in matters of discipleship.⁵

KNOWING WHAT WE ARE EXPECTED TO KNOW

Common sense suggests that comprehending a work of literature implies certain types of knowledge on the part of the reader: (1) readers are expected to know things that are related or revealed within the narrative (that is, they are expected to remember things that the author or narrator tells them); (2) readers are also expected to know things that were regarded as “common knowledge” at the time the book was written (that is, they are expected to know things that the author simply assumed all readers would know).⁶ Thus, when readers of Luke’s Gospel hear of “Herod” in Luke 13:31, they are expected to know that this is the ruler who beheaded John the Baptist, since that information was given previously in Luke 9:9. And they are also expected to know that this is a different Herod than the person referred to by that name in Luke 1:5 and 3:1, since it was common knowledge that “Herod the Great” and “Herod Antipas” were different individuals who lived a generation apart.

The latter type of knowledge (not provided in the text but assumed by the narrative) is requisite for understanding almost any Gospel text: when Matthew’s Gospel says that Jesus enters “the holy city” (27:53), the reader is assumed to know that this is Jerusalem; when it says that Jesus “fell on his face” in Gethsemane (26:39 KJV), the reader is not expected to think him clumsy but to realize he has assumed a posture appropriate for prayer. Again, commentaries—as well as Bible dictionaries and encyclopedias—are invaluable resources for helping modern readers to obtain the knowledge that is expected of them if they want to read the text in the manner of its implied readers or intended audience.

By the same token, however, readers of any one of the New Testament Gospels are probably not expected to know information contained in the other Gospels. Luke’s readers are not expected to associate the Herod mentioned in 1:5 and 3:1 with the massacre of Bethlehem infants described in Matthew 2:1–18, and if we read Luke’s narrative in light of that information, we may respond to it in a manner different from what would be expected of us. Similarly, Gospel readers are not expected to know doctrinal propositions that arose in later Christianity or to know anything about the world that has come to light as a result of scientific research or intellectual study in the years since the Gospels were written. Modern

⁵ Matthew’s audience is expected to notice that elsewhere in the Gospel Jesus is willing to bear social approbation for including “tax-collectors” in his community (9:11-12; 11:19) and that Gentiles are specified as the prime example of those whose inclusion the community is to seek (28:19; Greek *ethnoi* is rendered “nations” in NRSV). Thus, to regard someone as a Gentile or “tax-collector” (18:17) could mean to realize the individual has not completed his or her necessary discipleship training, but no careful reader or listener would ever take it to imply banishment from the community or exclusion from its fellowship.

⁶ I devote a full chapter to these two points in *Chasing the Eastern Star*, 83–106, with extensive case studies provided on 138–43 and 150–52.

readers need to “bracket out” that sort of information if they want to understand the text and be affected by it in a manner consistent with what would be expected of them.

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I can now identify one way in which the process I am outlining differs from the traditional methodology of redaction criticism. For decades, exegetes of Matthew and Luke have been taught to pay special attention to all of the alterations that the authors of those Gospels made when they incorporated material from the Gospel of Mark into their respective books. Supposedly, this was to be an aid to determining authorial intent, but in one sense, it might have actually worked against that goal. Attention to emendation analysis (as redaction critics call this part of their method) does indeed give us insight into the mind of the biblical author, but that does not automatically transfer into an understanding of the author’s intentions—and may even run counter to those intentions if what is revealed is insight the author did not expect his readers to have. For example, readers of Matthew’s Gospel are probably not expected to know that the scribe who tries to test Jesus in 22:34–40 was actually presented as a sincere inquisitor and potential ally of Jesus in Mark 12:28–34. We may find it interesting and illuminating that Matthew would make such a change (revealing of his bias against the religious leaders of Israel), but if we want to determine how Matthew’s readers are expected to respond to the story he tells, we may need to pretend we do not notice the change.

THINKING THE WAY WE ARE EXPECTED TO THINK

If we want to understand a text in the manner that its implied readers or assumed audience would be expected to understand it, we may have to suspend some of our own beliefs and values and pretend that we think the way we are expected to think.⁷ This is difficult for many to do, and indeed quite a few interpreters have suggested it is ethically problematic even to suggest that someone attempt such a

⁷ I devote a full chapter to this difficult point in *Chasing the Eastern Star*, 107–30, with extensive case studies provided on 143–45 and 153–54.

thing. I don't want to dismiss those concerns, but let us at least determine what sort of "suspension of belief" we are talking about.⁸

Let us imagine a vegan who says he is deeply offended by Jesus's parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11–32) because at the end of the tale, the father kills a fatted calf. I would want to ask: Do you at least realize that you are responding to the story in an unexpected manner? Do you recognize that it never occurred to the author of Luke's Gospel that anyone would think the way you think? And is it possible that the meaning Luke did expect readers to derive from the story might have merit that even you would appreciate if your beliefs about meat consumption were not being assaulted? Without critiquing the legitimacy of the vegan's value system, I might encourage him to imagine that he does not think that way long enough to determine the intended meaning or anticipated effect of the parable. Having done so, he can then go back to believing as he wishes.⁹

This is a standard literary principle that most of us apply intuitively with regard to other literature. No one who reads *Animal Farm* or *The Chronicles of Narnia* gets distracted and disturbed over the question of whether animals can really talk. In those stories, they can—and we all realize that if we want to experience the stories the way the author intended, we have to accept that premise as long as we are reading.

So readers of the book of Acts (part two of Luke's Gospel) are expected to believe that fantastic miracles often occur, that God speaks directly to people to give them specific directions (e.g., street addresses, 9:11), that the world has been populated with evil spirits who often take possession of people, that angels are actively involved in human affairs, that some of God's people are so empowered that they can heal the sick and raise the dead—indeed, that sick persons might be healed through simple contact with such a person's handkerchief (19:12) or by having such a person's shadow fall upon them (5:15). When we read the book of Acts, we need to pretend that we believe all of these things; that is, we need to regard them as accurate depictions of the world of the story we are reading. Imagination allows us to do this, regardless of what we believe about the world outside the story in which we actually live.

Sometimes the significance of such comprehension is more effective than cognitive. Mark 9:14–29 relates a story that in the modern church is often called "The Healing of an Epileptic Boy." But the text does not mention epilepsy—it indicates that the fits or seizures the boy suffers are caused by a spirit. At a purely intellectual level, we might attribute this to first-century superstition and we might

⁸ I intend a bit of wordplay here on Coleridge's famous observation that a willful suspension of disbelief is necessary for the enjoyment or appreciation of speculative literature (*Biographia Literaria*). Following Coleridge, atheists have to suspend their disbelief in gods if they want to appreciate Greek mythology, and some modern Christians might have to suspend their disbelief in Satan if they want to appreciate the New Testament.

⁹ As an alternative to this example of veganism, I sometimes suggest a scenario in which a member of the Hadzabe people of Tanzania is offended by Mark 15:46, since she and her community regard it as shameful to entomb a corpse rather than leaving it on the ground to be consumed by animals. Similar questions could be put to this person with a similar suggestion that temporary suspension of her belief (without prejudice) may allow for a meritorious understanding of the story that could otherwise be missed.

assume that it makes no difference what the cause of the infirmity was, so long as Jesus was able to remove it. But the cause *does* make a difference if we want to determine how we are expected to respond to the story emotionally. As readers, we are invited to empathize with the boy's father and to feel what he feels: is it not significant whether he thinks his son has an unfortunate but diagnosable medical condition or whether he thinks the boy has been possessed by an evil supernatural being that wants to kill him? Temporarily aligning our beliefs and values with those expected of the text's implied readers or intended audience allows us to appreciate the emotional impact of the story and to determine how we are expected to be affected by it.

None of this, I suspect, is too controversial. But it gets worse. Accepting the assumed value system for any one of the New Testament Gospels may require us to pretend we believe slavery is an acceptable social institution. We may have to adopt an extreme patriarchal mindset that regards the social superiority of men over women as something that is grounded in the orders of creation and should not be challenged. And, of course, we will have to bracket out of our belief system any notion that democracy is a preferred form of government, that capitalism is a desirable economic system, and that romantic love is a necessary or even desirable feature of marriage.

Obviously, this can be difficult, but note that we are only pretending—and that this is only a first step. Eventually, we may want to evaluate what we have determined to be “an expected response to the text” in light of broader canonical witnesses, confessional and theological commitments, scientific knowledge, philosophical wisdom, diverse perspectives, and modern ideologies. But I think the first step is important, out of fairness to the text and, indeed, fairness to ourselves.

Sometimes, at least, a Gospel text may actually seek to *challenge* an anticipated value system—and it is easy to miss this if the values to be challenged are not ones we are inclined to harbor. Jesus's words to Peter regarding forgiveness (Matt 18:22) will only be shocking to a reader who believes Peter's offer to forgive someone seven times is extraordinarily generous (Matt 18:21). Or, to take a more difficult text, many modern readers may be inclined to think the Canaanite woman in Matthew 15:21–29 is assertive or bold when she shouts after Jesus in public, but I suspect that readers are expected to regard her as obnoxious.¹⁰ The question then becomes, how would a reader who thinks this woman is obnoxious be affected by what follows, when Jesus praises the “obnoxious” woman for her great

¹⁰ First, Matthew's readers are not expected to have a very high opinion of Canaanites; they are expected to believe (on the basis of Scripture), that such people would not even exist if God's will had been done (see Josh 3:9–10; 12:7–8; 17:17–18; Judg 1:1–10, 27–33; 3:1–4). But even apart from that, Matthew depicts the woman as behaving in a way that shows complete disdain for what readers would be expected to regard as the proper way for a woman to address a man (much less, a “holy man”) in public. For a “good example” of such an address, see the mother of James and John in 20:20–21: she comes to Jesus, prostrates herself before him, and refrains from speaking until he asks, “What do you want?” (and she is accompanied by her sons—his disciples—at the time!). In the story of the Canaanite woman, Matthew's readers are expected to sympathize with the disciples who plead with Jesus, “Send her away!” But then Jesus praises her and accedes to her demand. See Powell, *Matthew*, Interpretation Commentary Series (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, forthcoming in 2023).

faith? Appreciating the narrative's rhetorical moves demands that we (temporarily) adopt the perspective of the narrative's implied readers or assumed audience.

A subtle but very important part of reading a Gospel in the manner I have described entails realizing that readers are often expected to recognize that beliefs and knowledge pertinent to the story would not necessarily apply to the world outside the story. The Gospels often employ the narrative rhetoric of fiction even though they are relating stories that readers are expected to regard as basically factual. For example, the Gospel stories are populated with numerous "flat characters" who embody only one or two basic traits. Readers are expected to accept this as a convention of storytelling without drawing conclusions about the real flesh-and-blood people upon whom the characters might be based. So, the Pharisees who are characters in Matthew's Gospel are evil hypocrites—and almost nothing else. This is a troubling feature of the narrative, but we can at least say that while Matthew's readers are expected to regard the Pharisees in the story as evil hypocrites, they would not be expected to attribute that status to actual Pharisees who once lived or still live in the real world. In literary terms, Matthew uses the Pharisees to personify a characteristic that he wants to explore. Hypocrisy essentially becomes a character in the story. As a result, if we read Matthew in order to learn about first-century Pharisees, we may be misled or disappointed, but if we read Matthew to learn about hypocrisy, we may be treated to some rewarding insights. We will only gain those insights, however, if we can suspend our (legitimate) critique of Matthew's characterization as unjust and unfair long enough to get out of the story what we were expected to get out of it.

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NEXT STEPS

I have tried to outline a process (or at least an orientation) for determining how implied readers or intended audiences might be expected to understand a Gospel text or be affected by it. I have also indicated that this sometimes may be only a "first step."

What follows?¹¹

I suggest that the next step is to identify disparity between the identified expected response to the text and actual responses on the part of real readers

¹¹ The steps outlined here are discussed in Powell, *Chasing the Eastern Star*, 7–9, with an extended case study of the latter steps provided on pages 172–84.

either in history or in our world today: someone might say, “Throughout history, churches have thought Matthew 18:15–20 grants license for excommunicating unrepentant sinners from the community, even though Matthew’s readers would not have been expected to interpret the text in that way.”

Further, we should identify our own natural response and compare it with what we think may have been expected of us: someone might say, “I personally think Jesus was rude, if not abusive, to the Canaanite woman in Matthew 15:21–29, even though I realize that readers are not expected to think that way.”

Then, we might proceed to evaluate the expected reading of the text, the unexpected readings that may be attributed to actual readers throughout history and in the modern world, and our own personal response to the text. Such evaluation will always be done in light of one’s acknowledged or unacknowledged hermeneutical system (for me, evangelical Lutheranism), and it is both honest and helpful to admit this. ⊕

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