

PANEL RESPONSE

## Panel Response: Society for Biblical Literature, Denver 2022

Katherine Sonderegger

Virginia Theological Seminary, Alexandria, Virginia, USA  
Email: [Ksonderegger@vts.edu](mailto:Ksonderegger@vts.edu)

(Received 25 June 2023; accepted 25 June 2023)

In *The Five Quintets*, the poet Micheal O'Siadhail concludes his work in a series of stanzas in Dantean *terza rima*, a fitting opening to our session. He writes:

I'm walking an arcade of trees, a dome/of branches thickly leaved and of a piece/as though I'm moving in parentheses where there is both excitement and release/from any inattention or unease/which could distract me from the arch's eye,/where flooding light and rumours of a breeze/round off a blazing horizontal sky/which beckons me onward and I respond.

And yet for all this tunnel vision I/am certain still that this is not some fond/farewell and that I've never been so close to all I love as, moving now beyond/the time and place of two-dimensioned prose,/I hunger for the eye that beckons me along a funnelled path between two rows/of slightly tilted boles where every tree/is interwoven with its counterpart,/convexing such a leafy canopy/where opposites can meet and then depart/in curves of paradox which shape the light;/I can't yet understand but know by heart/that nothing but desire can underwrite/my passage through this vaulted light-led zone, that in this arch's eye all things unite.

O'Siadhail's vision of an illumined wood is distinctly Dante-like yet distinctly his own. And, in a lovely collaborative way, I think this distinctive vision mirrors the themes of David Ford's rich and richly spiritual reading of the Gospel of John. This vision of 'excitement and release', of 'desire' and of 'unity and love' will guide the dynamic movement of both the *Five Quintets* and the Gospel of John; they have much in common. But O'Siadhail's voice is distinctly his own, I say, and this is all the more so with David Ford's interpretation of John. I underscore this point, as it is a quality that must have struck all of you who have had the chance to read Ford's remarkable work: it is extraordinarily difficult to name the genre to which Ford's book belongs. There is really nothing like it, and Ford seems to have no kin in this endeavor. No literature in the field duplicates or rivals Ford's work; this commentary seems to have originated its

own form – and that trait we might consider another mark of its achievement. Of course there will be parallels and sources of influence – though a classicist, Ford and his commentary emerge not full blown from the head of Zeus. I will name some that have struck me as generative, as I have with O'Siadhail's work, though once again I will have to note how the genre cannot truly identify Ford's work as its own.

In prime place for a source of influence, I think we might consider the rich lore of Patristic and Medieval commentaries on the Fourth Gospel. In Greek and in Latin, these premodern exegetes took up the Fourth Gospel with bold confidence, and considered the riddle of the Son's eternal relation to the Father to be unriddled in this Gospel, most especially in the great Supper Discourses that commence the Book of Glory. The Patristic commentaries, like Ford's, are theological and spiritual readings of the Gospel of John, and they too aim to uncover in that text the foundation for Christian doctrine and for the Christian life of self-giving and self-giving in prayer. There is much in Ford's commentary that might tempt one to consider him a modern Patrologist. Yet, Ford's commentary is not simply a repristination or extension of these premodern forms.

Ford does not see in the Fourth Gospel, for example, the cardinal texts for Two Nature Christologies. The red letter logions – the Father is greater than I; and I and the Father are one – do not receive the christological analysis we find, for example, in Augustine or in Athanasius (not to say in Thomas or Luther), where discussion of human and Divine nature, or readings according to theology or to economy, take precedence. Striking also in its absence is the allegorical reading central to Patristic and monastic interpretations of John. In their place, Ford offers distinctly modern theological and exegetical reflections, centering on notions of personal identity and of the 'deep plain sense' of Scripture, both reflections of the visceral impact the work of Hans Frei has made on Ford's doctrinal imagination.

All this might lead one to think of Ford's commentary as a kind of postliberal reading of the Fourth Gospel, especially if one were to highlight the terms favored by some postliberal scriptural interpreters – the plain sense of Scripture, and identity as enacted literary character – both a kind of third-rail for dedicated Yale School interpreters. Ford has paid lavish tribute to Hans Frei in several publications, including the introduction and scholarly apparatus for this commentary, and it might be tempting indeed to see this commentary as an enactment of the kind of exegesis Frei would have written were he to have taken up direct biblical interpretation. This is an entirely natural assumption, as Ford mirrors so many of Frei's postliberal instincts: here are literature and Holy Scripture drawn together as mutually illuminated pairs, as we find in *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*; here the very idea of 'who Jesus is' outstrips the question, 'what He is', as in *The Identity of Jesus Christ*; here the horizon of Jesus' salvific work is universal, as is Frei's reading of Barth's fourth volume of the Church Dogmatics; and most compellingly, here the very notion of identity entails presence – uniquely, to think Jesus is to think resurrection – which stands at the heart of Frei's meditation on the *Identity of Jesus Christ*. The striking claim, resonant throughout the commentary, that John the Evangelist holds both pre- and post-resurrection perspectives together, can be seen as an extended reflection on creaturely temporality under the Lordship of the Risen Christ, a reading Frei attributes to Barth's magisterial Doctrine of Time in Church Dogmatics III. What's more, Ford appears to consent to Frei's admonition that

modern theologians find a way to honor both Divine and creaturely, historical forms of knowledge together, a position Frei signalled through the rather mystifying term, the danger of ‘Epistemological monophysitism’. Throughout the commentary, Ford acknowledges historical critical questions and the legion of positions higher critics hold on various matters within the Book of Signs. He does not pursue these at any length, and that very reserve may indicate his recognition of Frei’s principle, all the while imitating Frei’s luke-warm response to the details of such historical inquiries. Perhaps the one historical claim Ford makes freely here is that the Evangelist had before him the Synoptic Gospels and perhaps, more daringly, the Epistles of the Apostle Paul. This claim, while controverted, is marginal to the commentary as a whole – he holds it but does not think much rides on it – and might be better taken as a matter of authorial identity and shaping rather than a historical analysis of the Dominical record. The slim compilation of historical findings in the commentary, present but not foregrounded, might incline us to name Ford’s work, once again, as a citizen of the postliberal world. Indeed, the very delicacy of historical claims in the midst of a programmatic insistence that meaning derives from the biblical narratives alone is a marker of unresolved theoretical matters in Frei’s work, and in just this way, in all the postliberalism that appears to stem from him, yet exhibits fractures all along the line. Perhaps, as some critics have said, there really is no Yale School at all, for the differences are far too great in the founding generation, and *a fortiori*, in the descendants, for anything like a school to be constituted under a single banner. Whatever we might say about these secondary matters, an attentive reader of Ford’s commentary might well look at these commonalities and call Ford’s *Gospel of John* the exegetical arm of postliberal Protestant theology. But it seems to me that it is easy here to overstate the case.

The Gospel of John is far too intent on the spiritual force of reading and re-reading to make it an easy ally of postliberal dogmatics. Ford does not demonstrate here the proper regard for the methodological or second-order grammatical structures that characterize so much work done in Frei’s shadow. We are not confronted – I might almost say, weighed down – by the notions of ‘history-like narrative’ or of ‘figura’ that have become terms of art in postliberal theology. Ford writes as one directly addressed by the living Lord, Jesus Christ, as He emerges, abjected yet victorious, abandoned yet loving, from the pages of the Fourth Gospel. Ford writes movingly of his deepening spiritual life before and within the life of the Risen Christ; the imperative to follow the One who stooped to wash another’s feet has become more insistent and vital to him as he worked over the years on this commentary. This is Biblical Realism, certainly, and one thinks of the Blumhardts here, and their distinctive influence on the young Liberal Barth. But Ford remains a Pietist of a distinct order all the same. He has his own apostolate, one that does not sound from the gates of most postliberalism: he considers the Johannine Christ to call the disciple into abundant life. This is the focus of the blazing heart of the Gospel of John, John 17, which holds primacy in Ford’s exegesis. Abundant life stems from a teaching and a gift that wells up from the loving glory and glorious love that courses through the Father and the Son; it is the seal of unity that the Son desires to stamp upon His own, that they may be one, even as the Father and the Son are One. Ford’s Gospel of John evokes ‘waves of teaching’ that sweep over the reader, enkindling a love that just is abundance, and marks the discipleship of those

who have not seen, yet believe. Ford offers direct, spiritual counsel here – it is a refreshing appeal to frank religious *askesis* – and carries little of the detached theoretical tones of much postliberalism. Though I might say that the Yale School, should such there be, is a strong contender for genre membership, it is at once too theory-laden and too intellectualist to provide a permanent home. Once again, it seems to me, that genre of Ford's commentary is difficult to name.

But I will try a genre, in conclusion, all the same. I'd like to suggest that this commentary might best be considered a form of lyric poetry. Like the lyric, this commentary is distinctly personal. It is a genus that undoes itself, relying on singularity and distinctiveness as markers of the poetic voice. Again and again, Ford addresses us, the reader, in his own voice. He exhorts and consoles; he meditates out loud on resonant themes; he adverts to strong, evocative language. Like the lyric, Ford sings. The commentary, as if to announce its affiliation, cites poetry throughout. Not only O'Siadhail, but Dante, directly, Denise Levertov, Thomas Traherne, George Herbert and Richard Wilbur are set out in side-bars to keep the reader alert to the rich poetic legacy of this Gospel. Repetition is friend to the lyric, and Ford makes use of this idiom to underscore central spiritual teachings in the Gospel. We are not presented with argument here, nor with historical accounts of the development of doctrine, nor even less with the history of scholarly debate on the *crux interpreta* of the Gospel, but rather with the musical motifs that ring through the text. Abiding, mutual indwelling, astonishment, abundance, love and desire, glory, as of the Only-begotten, a patterned life, as I have done, so you will do, self-giving and generosity, teaching in the Spirit, the water of life, the water of prayer, rising up and spilling over, again and again: these are leit-motifs of a lyric commentary. (As if to underscore this membership, Ford includes long lists of just the kind I mention here.)

But even here I must register my own dis-ease with this last candidate for membership of Ford's commentary. For the dramatic narrative of Dante's Divine Comedy cannot be overlooked. O'Siadhail's evocation of Dante is too close, too redolent of the shape and impulse of this commentary, to be further delayed. In some ways, perhaps the genre that captures best Ford's singular work is Comedy: this is a commentary that leads to the glorious vision of the Spiritual Oneness of the God of love. It is a happy ending, indeed the only true, everlasting happy ending in this cosmos of ours. The focus of Ford's commentary, as of Dante's *Commedia*, is the dramatic narrative of the Divine Love, entering now into the hellish refusal and rebellion against love, moving through the purgation of disordered desire and ignorance under Christ's power as Judge, through to the joyous intimacy of abiding in the Risen Logos, who brings healing in His wings. This drama is eschatological: it drives toward the End who is God. Considered in this light, Ford's reading of the Gospel's 'realized eschatology' – as it is often styled in homage to Bultmann – makes for poetic coherence. Not apocalyptic, not explosive and irruptive, but gentle, illuminating, elevating – this is the consummation of the Divine drama, Ford suggests, in the last, haunting chapters of John. It makes sense, too, of a singular motif in Ford's reading of the Risen Christ: He is the One who continues to surprise us. The comedic life of the victorious Christ continues the drama of creatures in their pilgrimage into the Triune intimacy of love. Christ cannot be contained or constrained; He cannot be anticipated or domesticated; He will impell a fresh

discipleship at every age, and He will remain the loving and gracious Lord of the whole. (We may, as prompt to discussion, wonder just what are the perimeters of this surprise: can Christ be other than the One who is narrated in this Gospel? Can His identity change and can He in His eschatological session do other than He has done in His Incarnate life?) Finally, notice how Ford's commentary incorporates the *dramatis personae* of a long narrative poem. This commentary is not so much a report on the state of the question, nor a survey of the literature, as it is a conversation among the many interpreters of John, literary, spiritual and historical. Ford speaks to us, his readers, but always within a crowded room. We hear from other poets, from Virgil-like guides, from actors who inhabit the dark wood, from spiritual writers who have tasted first-hand the purgation and illumination of the Divine drama, and political activists who live out the pattern of sacrificial love that is Christ's identity among us. The Gospel of John, in Ford's telling, is a kind of Scriptural Reasoning session with participants from every realm and every season, each speaking of what the close re-reading of this text has meant in their moral, political and spiritual lives.

In the end, I suppose that the commentary Ford has written can be narrowed – or is broadened the proper term? – to a conversation between the reader and the Risen Christ, as clothed with His Gospel. The commentary is poetic, certainly, but also clearly textual: this is a Book who is a Word, the Word who presents Himself as Judge and Lover of the creature He addresses. As in any intimate conversation, the refulgence of such talk cannot be anticipated or denied. It consumes and drives one's life, and one leaves it changed. This I think is Ford's prayer for this commentary – that it will spark our search for Jesus' identity, and in that dramatic search we discover the song that is the life in Christ, a lyric that is distinctly our own yet distinctly Christ's own. Or to express this in O'Siadhail's captivating words, 'I can't yet understand but know by heart/that nothing but desire can underwrite/my passage through this vaulted light-led zone, that in this arch's eye all things unite.'

Readers of the sublime Gospel of John stand in David Ford's debt: he has shown us what a Johannine shaped life will look like.