

chapters, and in other places too, Ford unflinchingly draws attention to the shameful history that has resulted from anti-Semitic and anti-Judaic readings of these episodes, and emphasizes the need to create a new history, after the Holocaust and building on the transformation in Christian–Jewish relations in the last sixty years. He diagnoses two steps as necessary for Christians to take in response to this history of darkness: first, a clear rejection of what is variously known as ‘supersessionism’ or ‘replacement theology’; and, second, a commitment by Christians to re-read their Scriptures (including John) together with Jews.

For this reviewer at least, it was at this point that the format of the single-authored commentary proved inadequate to accommodate the breadth, depth and contested character of the responses the Gospel calls out. David Ford has been an outstanding pioneer and practitioner of ‘Scriptural Reasoning’, in which Jews, Christians and Muslims, and sometimes people of other faiths, too, sit together to read and reflect on their Scriptures in openness, collegiality and – sometimes – disagreement. In his epilogue, Ford acknowledges a covert influence of Scriptural Reasoning on the content and style of his commentary; in the passages on John 2 and John 8 in particular, I was left thinking how much richer the text could have been had some of the immediacy and vitality of those conversations been included in this volume, rather than mediated through the reflections of one writer – even a writer as learned, gentle and wise as David Ford.

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David F. Ford, *The Gospel of John: A Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2021), pp. 496. ISBN 9781540964083.
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It seems I have been asked to write one of a selection of reviews of this commentary because I’m a bishop. That is a point worth pondering, because it is a rather unusual event. Reviews are usually commissioned from people particularly qualified to assess the text in question, and I certainly can’t claim to have given enough scholarly attention to the Fourth Gospel and the secondary literature about it myself to comment with any authority on the quality of David Ford’s commentary. But I am being asked to review the commentary *as a bishop*, which is to say as someone who, were I still in post and one of those attending the 2022 Lambeth Conference, would have been presented with a copy. Should I not simply avoid looking a gift horse in the mouth – or in this case a gift commentary in the text?

Maybe. But this is a very generous gift. Several hundred copies of a major commentary represents no small outlay on someone’s part, and I hope that even had I been one of the episcopal recipients I would have allowed myself, alongside gratitude for what would undoubtedly be a resource for my thinking and my prayers, at least a few moments of slightly suspicious reflection on what might be the motives of the donor or, to be less personal, the expectation that came with the gift.



But that suspicion cannot be confirmed or dismissed without some reference to the kind of commentary that this is. It represents most of an academic lifetime's work on the part of a theologian of enormous global repute, in whose faith commitment large numbers of people will already have confidence. The bibliography is immense (with a note that there are numerous other sources that are too many to record!), the formatting and presentation beautiful. There is ample evidence of the enrichment Ford has gained from various dialogue partners: particular examples are those with whom he has engaged in the process of scriptural reasoning, the poetry of Micheal O'Siadhail and the wide range of Ford's international engagements.

The commentary is, alongside its scholarship, evidence of just how empowering *John* has been for the author, a person of the widest range of commitments and initiatives; the Epilogue displays all the characteristics of a person who has immersed himself in this gospel and been encouraged and empowered by what he has found there to engage in what can only be called an expansive exercise of discipleship and outreach. Ford does not shield himself, or his readers, from the pain that can be involved in such engagement: towards the end of the intellectual and spiritual journey represented by this work Ford is shaken, as were so many others, by the discovery that Jean Vanier, from whose thinking he had profited so much, and with whose work as founder of l'Arche he had been glad to associate himself, had a previously unknown history of sexual exploitation.

So this work of a lifetime brings those who use it in touch with scholarship and devotion in equal measure, and by the same token daunting in what it suggests is required to understand *John*. What then is there not to like? And why raise the question of the *purpose* of this immensely costly donation to the bishops of the Anglican Communion and the expectations that come with it?

The simple answer to that question is that it is *as a bishop* that I have been asked to consider this gift, and it is as a bishop of the Anglican Communion that I am being asked 'what might be the expectation of those who made this gift and authorized the distribution of this majestic commentary?' And, to answer that question I have found it best to place myself imaginatively, though now in retirement, among the recipients of this gift. What would I look for in it? What would I imagine is the message of this gift to me and my fellow bishops?

The book and its author are certainly to be described as devout and as reassuring. The author examines a wide range of scholarly opinion, generally arriving at conclusions which Anglicans of all theological traditions will identify as what they had always thought or at least hoped to be the case. To read the accounts, for instance, of the intense controversies in ch. 7 or the final denouement in Jesus' encounter with the High Priest and with Pilate is to encounter an upright hero whose religious ideas were uncongenial to those in authority; but speaking for myself the encounters as presented do not challenge me as hard as I think I need challenging about my compliance and complacency.

It so happened that at the same time as I received this review request, I was asked to review a very different book, David Lloyd Dusenbury's *I Judge No One: A Political Life of Jesus* (Hurst, 2022). Much of it is about Jesus' encounters with the 'temple states' of Jerusalem and Rome, with the self-understanding of the High Priest and the Governor. It is a book so different as not really to be compared with a detailed and devout commentary.

But even if the books are not in a sense comparable, they raise the question of what *bishops*, in particular, might need for widening their perspectives and challenging their compliance. That is particularly so since we have to do here with the bishops of a communion that has come to span a wide range of jurisdictions and embodying very varied ecclesial polities. What are the dilemmas which they navigate, often without noticing them? As a British Anglican Bishop, what am I to see in Jesus of ways of confronting empire and its legacy with integrity? And if I had done that adequately would I even be a bishop?

Admiring as I am of David Ford's achievement, and (still I hope after writing this) being within his circle of friends and conversation partners, I would nonetheless have preferred my fellow bishops to have been given something that was rather more of a challenge and rather less of a reassurance. But then maybe such a gift would never be on the cards, the donor perhaps sensing that it might cause too much trouble for the money.

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Ford's work inhabits the well-populated contemporary category of the 'theological commentary'. Thereby it occupies a space between the theological and devotional. Adjectives such as 'formational', even 'mystagogical', come to mind. He would help us hear the Gospel directly as an aid to our lives as disciples. To this end Ford intends the commentary to share with the Gospel itself what he calls John's 'deep plain sense', with its commonplace signs inviting us to a deeper level of meaning. Much of the commentary is Ford engaging in a close reading of the details of each passage. He would have us hear its stories in a matrix of allusions to the Old Testament, common human experience and the Synoptics (which he assumes John knew). The resonances therein are part of what the stories mean.

In addition, Ford discerns a common pattern whereby each passage discloses its meaning successively, in what he calls 'three waves', requiring of us the patience to listen, listen and listen again, so as to come to see Jesus in the greater light the Gospel provides. Who Jesus is, how the stories unfold, and what the shape of the disciple's life is, are all connected. The stories must be heard against the wide horizon of 'God and the world'. By this means we come to be invited by Jesus by hearing the Gospel into the 'abundant life', which is itself an important theme of the Gospel.

The most famous example of a Johannine commentary of a different sort is William Temple's *Readings in St. John's Gospel*, which puts Ford in none-too-shabby company. It, too, sought to come alongside the disciple on the way. Ford's method and circumstances are of course different. But I do wonder if there isn't a kind of family resemblance, perhaps unintended, a certain inherited Anglican