

Review of
Markus Bockmuehl, *Seeing the Word: Refocusing New Testament Study*
(Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006. Pp. 297. \$21.99, paper)

Lee Irons

Markus Bockmuehl is a New Testament professor, formerly at Cambridge University, but as of 2006 at the University of St. Andrews. In *Seeing the Word: Refocusing New Testament Study*, he issues a challenge to his fellow New Testament scholars to refocus their discipline in a more theological direction. The theological thrust of the book is fitting as the first in the new series, *Studies in Theological Interpretation*, edited by Craig Bartholomew, Joel Green, and Christopher Seitz.

In his introduction, Bockmuehl begins the book by discussing Simon Marmion's 15th century painting, "St. Luke Painting the Virgin and Child," which is reproduced on the front cover of the book. The interesting thing about the painting is that it shows both the Virgin and Child sitting for the painting, and the image of them that Luke is painting. In other words, it is a painting within a painting. Bockmuehl uses this as an analogy for New Testament scholarship. The New Testament scholar is like Simon Marmion in that he or she creates pictures containing other pictures. There are three mimetic levels: the original person/event described in the New Testament (e.g., Jesus), the New Testament author's depiction or interpretation of that person/event (e.g., the Gospel of Luke), and the scholar's interpretation of the New Testament author's depiction (e.g., a commentary on the Gospel of Luke). Bockmuehl uses this analogy to raise a very postmodern hermeneutical concern: How can the scholar do justice to the original person/event when his or her work is an interpretation of an interpretation? If all the New Testament scholar has access to is a series of historically contingent interpretations of Jesus (e.g., the four Gospels), shouldn't we just dispense with the claim that we can know Jesus himself?

However, Bockmuehl points out that Marmion's picture-within-a-picture makes "the daring assumption" (p. 21) that Luke's icon of the Virgin and Child does in fact provide the viewer with a true picture of that which is its central subject. To be sure, it is mediated at two removes – it is not the Virgin and Child that we behold directly, or even Luke's painting of the Virgin and Child, but Marmion's depiction of Luke's painting of the Virgin and Child. Yet, the links in the chain not only invite the viewer into the mind of Marmion and Luke, but into the very reality to which these icons point, the Christ Child himself. This is why Bockmuehl titles his book "Seeing the Word." He wants to argue that the New Testament writings, as well as the New Testament scholar's interpretation of those writings, are icons that can truly mediate to us a meaningful vision of the person who is the central subject of the New Testament writings – Jesus, the incarnate Word.

In chapter one, "The Troubled Fortunes of New Testament Scholarship," Bockmuehl takes stock of the present state of New Testament scholarship. His overall assessment is fairly negative. In Bockmuehl's view, the field is currently characterized by an ever-expanding mountain of publications ("the Library of Babel"), increasing specialization and sub-specialization, isolation of methods and their practitioners, and lack of interdisciplinary dialogue. But Bockmuehl's greatest concern is what he calls "the disappearing subject matter" (p. 38). The primary object of New Testament study is no longer what the New Testament texts themselves say and the person they claim to be about (Jesus), but any number of secondary issues that lie behind the text, whether the Jewish and Greco-Roman cultural contexts of the New Testament, or the alleged power-struggles out of which the texts arose. To use the Marmion analogy again, New

Testament scholars have so lost themselves in detailed studies of medieval paint pigmentation and brush technique, or in speculations about the socio-political context and motivations behind Marmion's work, that they have forgotten what (or who) the painting was about in the first place.

Next Bockmuehl addresses some of the “rescue attempts” that have been proposed to restore order to New Testament studies. The two efforts that Bockmuehl seems to have the most sympathy for are (1) renewed efforts at historical-critical study (e.g., Martin Hengel), and (2) final-form canonical criticism (e.g., Brevard Childs). However, Bockmuehl thinks these efforts fall short. Though necessary and helpful, they do not help to bridge the chasm from history to theology, from fact to meaning. At the end of chapter one, Bockmuehl sketches two ideas that he thinks can help move us forward: (1) the study of effective history (*Wirkungsgeschichte*), and (2) the concept of the implied reader. By effective history, Bockmuehl means the history of the church's response to and interpretation of the New Testament. We tend to think that the meaning of the texts of the New Testament is determined primarily by the history that led to their production. But Bockmuehl suggests that the meaning of the New Testament cannot be fully apprehended apart from the study of the ways in which the New Testament has been read, heard, and lived out over time within the believing community. This logically leads to the second concept, that of the implied reader. Bockmuehl argues that the implied reader of the New Testament documents is not the rational self of the Enlightenment but a follower of Jesus, that is, a person who confesses that Jesus is Lord, who is being converted to the way of life implied by that confession, and who is situated in a worshipping community of Jesus followers. These two concepts – effective history and

the implied reader – are interconnected. The effective history of the New Testament is the history of the various ways in which the New Testament’s implied readership has confessed (and lived out) its faith in the Jesus proclaimed in its pages.

The remaining chapters of the book are an attempt to flesh out these two concepts in greater detail. In chapter two, “The Wisdom of the Implied Exegete,” Bockmuehl argues that the implied reader (or exegete) is a disciple who reads the New Testament in the company of the saints. Here Bockmuehl takes a courageous stand against the assumption that reigns in professional academic circles that the scholar’s own theological and ecclesial commitments have no place in scholarly study of the Bible. To attempt to interpret Scripture without reference to historic Christianity is like “restricting the study of a Stradivari to the alpine softwood industry of Trentino,” an endeavor that may be intellectually respectable but which has “little light to shed on the instruments actually played by a violinist like Itzhak Perlman or a cellist like Yo-Yo Ma” (p. 77). The analogy is helpful because it points in the direction of what an implied reader is expected to do with Scripture – not merely analyze but perform it, that is, to be not a hearer only but a doer of the word. The New Testament presupposes a readership that is committed to following Christ and being transformed by the gospel. This does not mean that implied readers must abandon all historical-critical and rational tools necessary for exegesis. But it does mean that they must use reason as a tool in the service of faith. Here Bockmuehl appeals to the Scripture’s rejection of autonomous human reason in favor of faith-infused wisdom. “The gospel neither affirms nor denies human reason as such, but stresses the need for a Christ-shaped *transformation* of our minds if we are to discern and embrace the will of God (Rom. 12:1-2; Eph. 4:17-24)” (p. 79).

Bockmuehl concludes this chapter with a section on Thomas Aquinas as an ideal interpreter. He is a model of one who used “renewed human reason” in the task of exegesis. Bockmuehl tells the story of how Thomas wrestled over a certain passage in Isaiah for three days of prayer and fasting and was finally given the key to unlocking the text by the supernatural appearance of the apostles Peter and Paul (and on other occasions, the Virgin Mary). Thomas thus understood the communal dimension of biblical interpretation. He did his work as an exegete “not in splendid detachment but as a disciple in the company of the saints who preceded him” (p. 99).

In chapter three, “Humpty Dumpty and the Range of Implied Readings,” Bockmuehl takes up the question, “In view of the diversity of the New Testament writings, is a unified New Testament theology possible?” Bockmuehl begins by sketching the classic view of Johann Philipp Gabler (1753-1826) and William Wrede (1859-1906) that a unified New Testament theology is impossible, and that all scholarship can do is compile the diverse theologies of the various New Testament authors. Postmodern scholars take an even more aggressive stance when they dismiss all attempts at bringing unity to the New Testament as nothing more than the “metanarratives” of a long discredited modernity. In other words, the Humpty Dumpty of New Testament theology has had a great fall and is now broken into a thousand fragments. Can Humpty Dumpty be put back together again? Bockmuehl argues that it can, and he appeals to the canonical shape of the New Testament as a clue to recovering the theological coherence of the New Testament. He argues that the New Testament itself “begs to be read systematically” (p. 108). Here is some of the evidence that Bockmuehl marshals:

(1) The traditional titles of the four Gospels are not the Gospel “of” Matthew or Mark or Luke, but the Gospel “according to” Matthew, etc., thus proclaiming the church’s belief that there is only one gospel in fourfold form.

(2) The opening statement of Matthew’s Gospel, “the book of the beginning” (Matt. 1:1), is a fitting opening for the four Gospels. The four Gospels are also fittingly brought to a close with the statement of John 21:25.

(3) The letters of Paul were clearly chosen and brought together as a collection because of their apostolic content and authority. Even within the New Testament itself, the existence of a corpus of Pauline writings is recognized (2 Pet. 3:16).

(4) The conclusion of Revelation (22:18-21), together with Matt. 1:1, constitute a “suggestive canonical fastener around the New Testament as a whole” (p. 111).

(5) The New Testament recognizes the existence of various apostolic voices in the primitive church but affirms that the apostles were united in proclaiming one gospel of Jesus Christ (e.g., Luke 1:1-4; 1 Cor. 15:1-11; Gal. 2:7-9; Jude 3).

Thus, both the individual authors of the various New Testament documents, as well as the framers of the New Testament canon, intended the individual texts to be understood in a unified way. “New Testament interpretation can disregard the *integrating vision* in the texts only on the explicit assumption that the apostolic project has in fact failed” (p. 113).

Bockmuehl connects this canonical reading to his theme by positing that the “implied reader” of the New Testament comes with a corresponding “implied reading” that arises from reading the New Testament as a canonical whole, as well as from reading the New Testament in light of its *Wirkungsgeschichte*, specifically “the Christian

mainstream's emerging *regula fidei* and indeed in documents like the Nicene Creed" (p. 117). It is both startling and encouraging to have a major New Testament scholar say that we ought to read the New Testament in light of the Nicene Creed.

But what about the genuine diversity in the New Testament's witness to Jesus Christ? Bockmuehl does not deny this diversity and appeals to the "apostolic conference" model of G. B. Caird, which "might provide for an honest and imaginative dialogical negotiation of differences" (p. 116).

I particularly enjoyed Bockmuehl's call at the end of this chapter for New Testament scholars to address the traditional loci of systematic theology from the frame of reference of New Testament theology. This call fits in with Bockmuehl's complaint that modern systematic theology and biblical scholarship have evolved into rigidly distinct disciplines. Something is wrong when systematic theologians seem to get along just fine without doing much exegesis, or when biblical scholars can produce mountains of historical research barren of any theological insights useful to systematicians. "New Testament interpreters could be kept profitably busy by returning to exegetically neglected Christian theological and ethical loci like the Trinity, sanctification, judgment, the inspiration of Scripture, and the doctrine of heaven" (p. 118).

Chapter four, "The Icon of Peter and Paul between History and Reception," continues the theme of the preceding chapter, focusing on a specific problem that a New Testament theology would need to address, namely, the apparent conflict between Peter and Paul. Contra the conflictual reading championed by F. C. Baur, Bockmuehl suggests that Peter and Paul should be viewed as "poles of unity" (p. 135).

Chapter five is a case study devoted to E. C. Hoskyns (d. 1937), a British New Testament scholar of the early 20th century. Bockmuehl puts Hoskyns forward as a model of how New Testament study ought to be done. He praises Hoskyns for his emphasis on the kerygmatic unity of the New Testament, focused on Christ. This fits in with Bockmuehl's call to refocus New Testament scholarship on the central object of the New Testament, Jesus of Nazareth.

In chapter six, "Living Memory and Apostolic Memory," the concept of effective history is again taken up, but at its earliest stage – "*Wirkungsgeschichte* on the human scale – the scale of personal living memory" (p. 169). Bockmuehl is focusing here on the first two centuries of the New Testament's effective history, as symbolically summarized by the three generations of memory from John to Polycarp to Irenaeus. Bockmuehl also employs the helpful concept of "social memory," and its relationship to "individual memory." Social memory has to do with the way in which social groups preserve concepts and ideas, not just memories of specific historical events (p. 177). If the ancient church's individual and social memory of Jesus is essentially trustworthy, then it must be taken into account when seeking to understand the New Testament writings. Thus, exegetes must not ignore the earliest stage of the New Testament's effective history.

In chapter seven, "Seeing the Son of David," he offers a sketch of the historical Jesus, a Jesus who comes off in Bockmuehl's reconstruction as intensely Jewish and Israel-centered. Bockmuehl's main point in this chapter is that the church needs to recover the Jewishness of Jesus, thus undergoing "theological 'gene therapy'" (p. 221) to rid itself of its historic sins of supersessionism and anti-Semitism.

In Bockmuehl's view, Jesus did not abolish the Torah but only engaged in halakic debates with his contemporaries about the right interpretation and application of Torah (pp. 204, 208-9). Jesus lived as a Torah-observant Jew, paid the temple tax, used Jewish forms of prayer, and wore the traditional Jewish tassels on his garments. He was even executed as "King of the Jews." The symbolism of calling twelve disciples means that Jesus was engaging in the reconstitution or restoration of Israel under twelve patriarchs. Jesus said that in the eschaton the disciples would sit on twelve thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel (Matt. 19:28 || Lk. 22:30).

After briefly surveying this evidence for the Israel-centered ministry of Jesus, Bockmuehl then engages in a more detailed exegesis of the parable of the wicked tenants (Mk. 12:1-12 || Matt. 21:33-46 || Lk. 20:9-19). To avoid the apparent supersessionist implications of this parable, Bockmuehl argues that the tenants stand for the religious and political leadership of Israel. How does Bockmuehl deal with Matthew's additional statement that "the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people (*ethnos*) producing the fruit of it" (21:44)? Doesn't this seem to imply that the kingdom will be taken away from the Jews and be given to a new people of God composed of Jews and Gentiles who believe in Jesus? Predictably, Bockmuehl says no, since the term *ethnos* consistently refers to Israel. Thus, Bockmuehl thinks that the vineyard will be taken away from the chief priests and Pharisees and be given to a reconstituted Israel within Israel (pp. 218-19). The focus of the parable is God's love for the vineyard (Israel). Thus, in Bockmuehl's hands, the parable actually becomes "deeply antisupersessionist in relation to Israel" (p. 218), since the Son gives himself sacrificially in order to save the vineyard from its unlawful oppressors (p. 220).

Aside from his questionable exegesis of the parable of the wicked tenants, Bockmuehl's focus on the Israel-centered mission of Jesus misses the note of newness in the ministry of Jesus. He did not come merely to reform or reconstitute Israel, but to inaugurate the eschatological kingdom of God, thus bringing the Old Testament promises to their climactic fulfillment and creating a new people of God gathered around Jesus. Nor did Jesus merely dispute the halakic applications of the Law by the Pharisees. He came, rather, to "fulfill" the Law (Matt. 5:17). He spoke in terms of the definitive revelation of God's will which surpassed and in some areas even overturned the Mosaic Law (e.g., divorce and the *lex talionis*), while maintaining that those who follow his teaching in fact embody the righteousness that the Mosaic Law was aiming at all along.

Another problem with this chapter is that I found it hard to connect to the preceding argument, since the twin themes of effective history and implied reader/reading seemed to have been lost sight of. Bockmuehl makes a brief attempt to connect the dots by stating that his reading of Jesus' Israel-centered mission is in fact the "implied reading" demanded by the New Testament, as opposed to the historically supersessionist and anti-Semitic readings of the pre-Holocaust church. After all, according to the New Testament, "the Word became *Jewish* flesh" (p. 221). A provocative statement, to be sure, but it is not at all clear how this reading is "the" reading that the New Testament itself demands in some canonical or objective sense, as opposed to being merely another proposed interpretation. In other words, Bockmuehl merely puts forth his Israel-centered interpretation of Jesus, and then slaps the label "implied reading" on it, without doing the spadework of showing how this reading arises from his twin hermeneutical presuppositions of implied reader and effective history. In fact, the latter would seem to

undermine his interpretation, since, as Bockmuehl admits, the historic position of the church has been supersessionist at least in some sense, i.e., at least in the sense of claiming that Jews must believe that Jesus is the Messiah in order to be saved and reckoned as part of the people of God. I was unable to tell whether Bockmuehl affirmed the two-covenant theory that the Jews can be saved by following the Torah, even if they reject the apostolic claim that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God. If he does affirm this unorthodox view, can he seriously be claiming that this is the New Testament's implied reading? The New Testament is fairly relentless in teaching that there is only one way of salvation, for Jew and Gentile alike, namely, faith in Jesus Christ. If he does not affirm the two-covenant theory (or something like it), then he would be accused by many mainline Christians, all non-Christian Jews, and even some Messianic Jews (e.g., Mark Kinzer and the Hashivenu movement) of being a supersessionist – the very sin he claims the church needs to repent of by adopting his view of the Jewishness of Jesus! In sum, chapter seven would have better been left out of this book. It was a jarring disconnect with the rest of his otherwise helpful case for theological interpretation.

The problem of losing the thread of the argument wasn't only a problem at the end. The first five chapters of the book are revisions of previously published articles (published between 1998 and 2004). Although it would appear that Bockmuehl edited the articles in order to fashion them into a coherent argument, the piecemeal origin of the book still shows through at times. The book is extremely dense and portions must be read more than once to get the big picture. I found that it was helpful, after the first read, to go back and re-read the introduction and the first three chapters, which are more central to Bockmuehl's thesis. Bockmuehl could have addressed other important topics that he

touched on in the opening chapters. I can think of two examples: (1) the relationship between exegesis and systematic theology; and (2) the hermeneutical problem of the New Testament's authority (specifically Jesus and Paul) vis-à-vis various ethical debates that are troubling many churches today (e.g., homosexuality, gender equality, etc.).

To conclude, I want to go back to the beginning of the book where Bockmuehl laments the current fragmentation and malaise of New Testament scholarship. Do Bockmuehl's proposals – effective history and implied readers – have the potential to revitalize New Testament study by focusing our attention on the object of the New Testament, Jesus himself? I think that they do.

First, Bockmuehl's concept of the implied reader is very useful, since the New Testament clearly is addressed to those who confess the Lordship of Jesus Christ. Thus, it is not only reasonable but in a sense necessary to read the New Testament in keeping with its intention, and that means reading the New Testament not primarily in order to understand the history that led to its production, but in order to know and follow Jesus better. Bockmuehl is right when he says: "To understand how the New Testament 'works' requires one to take seriously where it resides, whom it addresses, and of what it speaks" (p. 90). This is a helpful way of putting the matter. Bockmuehl's point isn't merely that these things (where the New Testament resides, whom it addresses, and of what it speaks) are additional areas that New Testament scholars could profitably address. His point, as I take it, is that these are essential if one is to understand the New Testament documents not in isolation but as the canonical whole, "the New Testament," with all that this implies as the authoritative word of God given for disciples who are being discipled in the kingdom of God. It is not merely the case that those who wish to

view the New Testament in this manner may choose to do so. Rather, those who do not do so, are failing to grasp something vital about the very nature and function of the New Testament itself. It is as if they are trying to dissect an animal that they think is dead but is in fact alive.

Second, I think the concept of effective history also has potential to help overcome the hermeneutical hurdles of “seeing the Word.” It can do so by giving us examples of how past implied readers have read the New Testament from a believing standpoint, as opposed to the supposedly neutral approach of Enlightenment critics. However, it is at this point that I would like to register a slight criticism. I wish that Bockmuehl had made a clearer distinction between *Wirkungsgeschichte* in the broad sense and in the narrow sense. *Wirkungsgeschichte* more broadly conceived is simply the effective history of the text – in whatever communities and in whatever ways it has been received and interpreted throughout time, presumably until the end of history. But *Wirkungsgeschichte* in the narrow sense, and as Bockmuehl defines it in chapter six, is more narrowly concerned with the immediate effects of the New Testament in the first two centuries of the church when the reception and interpretation of the New Testament were taking place in a community that still cherished the living memory of its founding events and persons. This concept of *Wirkungsgeschichte* explicated in terms of living memory should be distinguished from the broader concept of *Wirkungsgeschichte* which deals with any reception at any point in history, however loosely connected with the original intent of Jesus and the apostles. Presumably, this broader definition could include the study of the effective history of the New Testament in religious communities that are not even historically recognized as Christian, e.g., Gnosticism, Mormonism, or even in

political movements that were influenced by the New Testament, such as Martin Luther King Jr. and the civil rights movement.

Even *Wirkungsgeschichte* in the narrow sense must be carefully employed. My sense is that it works best when employed in the service of big issues like Christology and the canon – in other words, issues that make or break the church’s claim to be, in some meaningful sense, the community that Jesus and the apostles intended to found. This is simply another way of saying that if we approach the New Testament as the scripture of the church, then we are assuming that the apostolic project has not failed (p. 113). Accordingly, we ought not read the New Testament with the assumption that the church fundamentally misinterpreted the meaning of Jesus. But with regard to any number of secondary issues (secondary, that is, to Christology and canon), I believe it would be a mistake to use *Wirkungsgeschichte* as a criterion for exegesis. It is simply a fact that the church fathers’ exegesis wasn’t always right. For example, their exegesis of Paul’s teaching on justification leaves much to be desired. Judging by his passionate critique of the church’s historic attitude toward Jews and Judaism in the final chapter, I suspect that even Bockmuehl would agree that *Wirkungsgeschichte* has its limits.

In spite of my concerns with various aspects of this book, Bockmuehl has done us a great service by moving the somewhat abstract and philosophical discussion of theological interpretation forward by describing a Christocentric hermeneutical vision that has potential to refocus New Testament study, at least for those who approach it from the standpoint of faith in communion with the historic church. One need not agree with all of his proposals to find many stimulating insights in this engaging and thoughtful book.