

## **BOOK REVIEW**

**Michael F. BIRD, *The Gospel of the Lord: How the Early Church Wrote the Story of Jesus* (Grand Rapids and Cambridge: Wm B. Eerdmans, 2014) pp. xiv + 394. Pb. \$ 30.**

Australian biblical scholar Michael F. Bird, who hails from the Reformed Tradition, is known for his studies on Jesus and the Gospels. We may think of his *Jesus and the Origins of the Gentile Mission* (2006), *Are You the One who is to Come? The Historical Jesus and the Messianic Question* (2009), and *Jesus is the Christ: The Messianic Testimony of the Gospels* (2012). Besides these, he has authored other helpful books such as *Evangelical Theology: A Biblical and Systematic Introduction* (2013) and (with J. Crossley) *How did Christianity Begin? A Believer and Non-believer Examine the Evidence* (2008). The present work – *The Gospel of the Lord* – is an excellent and highly recommendable introduction to the four canonical Gospels.

The book is focused *not* on an exhaustive survey of *the content* of the Gospels, *but on the origins and development* of these writings in the context of the early Church. As its subtitle indicates, it deals primarily with “the questions of how the Gospels came to be, what kinds of literature they are, and how they relate to Christian discourse about God” (p. viii). Some of the book’s contents have previously appeared in the form of journal articles. However, here one reads earlier material plus further insights in a more comprehensive and very refreshing setting.

Chapter 1 (pp. 1-20), properly the introduction, sets before us the questions and challenges that must be addressed in a study of the Gospels such as this. Here, there is a good excursus on the transition from the Oral Gospel to the Written Gospel (pp. 5-20).

Chapter 2 is about “The Purpose and Preservation of the Jesus Tradition” (pp. 21-73). Bird examines here the early Church’s preoccupation to preserve the Jesus tradition, motivated as she was by the compelling memory of Jesus. Of particular importance is what the author says about eyewitnesses as authenticators of the traditions concerning Jesus, about teachers as custodians of these traditions, and about the role of the community in preserving such precious traditions. The excursus “An Evangelical and Critical Approach to the Gospels” (pp. 67-73) is enlightening. Bird touches on a very practical dimension of the Word when he says that in reading the Gospels as a community of believers, “we are striving to let the story of Jesus gradually shape our lives, enrich our worship, inspire us to mission, draw our community together, and impact our ministries, so that the evangelical vision of Jesus given to us in the Gospels becomes an evangelical project to make the story of Jesus known in all the world” (p. 73).

In Chapter 3 we are introduced to “The Formation of the Jesus Tradition” (pp. 74-124). Here, as he explores the process from Jesus tradition to the written text, Bird presents a helpful critical summary of the different models of oral tradition scholars have put forward. He feels that no single model sufficiently explains the shape of the Gospels (p. 112). Nonetheless, much importance is given to the social memory theory

(Jesus in social memory), in critical dialogue with significant scholars in the field, particularly J. D. G. Dunn. Bird says, "Though many will quibble over the details of Dunn's paradigm (especially its failure to engage actual social memory theory), it remains a heuristically valuable approach to the formation of the Jesus tradition and a profitable model for explaining the development of the Gospels" (p. 98). Our author is rightly convinced that there are conspicuous indications in the Gospels "that the impetus to remember Jesus began during his own lifetime" (p. 99). His exploration of the dynamics of this memory during and after Jesus' lifetime convinces us that "a key task of the early church was to faithfully recall the words and deeds of Jesus" (p. 105). If so, the goal of source criticism and tradition criticism may have to "be conceived as tracing the impact of a memory in the formation of early Christianity. The historical event of Jesus cannot be safely stripped from the subsequent narrative representations of Jesus given in the Gospels. ... the Jesus tradition is the contingent recollection of the memory of Jesus which shaped the early church" (pp. 105-106). Further, "The memory of Jesus was cultivated in a community context where key individuals and the group consensus determined the veracity and continuity of the memory against prior acts of remembering and in comparison with other memories of Jesus. ... The Jesus tradition may accordingly be conceived as the artifact of memory, a continual negotiation and semantic engagement between a memorialized past and a dynamic present" (pp. 106-107). The fusion of diverse memories of Jesus contributed to the formation of "a single communally validated remembrance of Jesus" (p. 107).

Readers will do well to welcome Bird's call for "something more fundamental like a mnemonic hermeneutic for explaining how oral history is transmitted through oral tradition along with a fluid exchange between orality and textuality" (p. 112). They must not forget this important point: "What the Gospels produce is not the Christ of faith superimposed onto the historical Jesus. Rather, the Gospels offer a striking representation, much like a docu-drama, of Jesus' actions in the past and his voice for the present available through the corporate memory of Jesus. ... The Gospels intend to narrate a back-then story and to evoke the right-now significance of one called Jesus, Israel's messiah, and the world's rightful Lord" (p. 113).

There is an enlightening 11-page excursus in this chapter on "The Failure of Form Criticism" (pp. 113-124).

Chapter 4 is long yet engaging: "The Literary Genetics of the Gospels: The Synoptic Problem and [the] Johannine Question" (pp. 125-220). By literary genetics, Bird means "the interior relationships among the Gospels" (p. 212). Here we get a good survey of scholarly positions on the interrelationship between the Gospels (the final textualization of the Jesus tradition). As regards the so-called Synoptic Problem, Bird leans favourably towards the Holtzmann-Gundry Hypothesis (the so-called Three-source Theory). Note especially his conclusion on p. 187! As far as the Johannine Question is concerned, he suggests "that we envisage the spasmodic interpenetration of Synoptic and Johannine tradition across each other in pre-literary stages, recognize the independent nature of many of John's sources, and imagine also John's exposure to the Synoptic tradition through either a prior reading or from observing an oral performance of a Synoptic text, probably Mark and perhaps also

Luke. This accounts for the Fourth Gospel's overall differentiation from the Synoptics in conjunction with its conscious adoption of the Marcan framework, the presence of interlocking traditions, and John's deliberate transposition of Synoptic units" (p. 212). Bird invites us to enter wholeheartedly into the narrative world of the Gospels and to perceive how stories shape meaning through characterizations, plots, tensions, moods, themes, etc. Thus he leads us to the next chapter, which looks at the Gospels as literary works. Before that, he gives us another informative excursus: "Patristic Quotations on the Order of the Gospels" (pp. 214-220).

Chapter 5 considers at length a tough topic that preoccupied many a scholar in the recent past: "The Genre and Goal of the Gospels: What is a Gospel and Why Write One?" (pp. 221-298). We also have here a good excursus on the 'other gospels' (pp. 281-298). Various proposals regarding the Gospel genre are carefully weighed. Students and teachers will find in this chapter a very useful synthesis of critical scholarship. While in many ways *unique*, "the Gospels are most identifiable against the Greco-Roman literary type of ancient biography" (p. 280). Here we naturally recall the significant work of Richard Burridge (*What are the Gospels?* 2004), which Bird takes seriously enough. Ultimately, the Gospels may be considered a type of *biographical kerygma*, intended to tell us the story of Jesus in ways similar to Greco-Roman biography. They have a wide range of purposes - "apologetics, instruction, social legitimation, worship, and evangelism" (p. 280). [There is a small printer's devil in the way the word *kerygma* is spelt on p. 280.]

In Chapter 6 we find a clear perspective on "The Fourfold Gospel of Jesus Christ". We are told why there are four Gospels well received by *the proto-orthodox Church* (pp. 299-335). The excursus in this chapter is on "The Text of the Gospels in the Second Century" (pp. 330-335). In tune with the views of Irenaeus and Origen, Bird makes much sense of "the fourfold Gospel at the head of the canon" (p. 330). The Gospels provide readers "a transition point" between the old and the new economies, immerse them "in an evangelical ethos", and provide them with "a christocentric focus", telling them that ultimately the Bible is "about the gospel of the Lord" (p. 330). The Gospels clearly demonstrate that "Christianity is about following Jesus the Christ. [They are] ... reminders that the words and deeds of Jesus must be uppermost in the minds, hearts, prayers, thoughts, and devotion of the church" (p. 330). They urge Christians to believe in and follow Christ right into his suffering and death, into his resurrection, and finally into the Kingdom he pointed to.

Bird's 34-page bibliography (pp. 336-369) is remarkable indeed. There are two indexes (one of Names and Subjects and another of Scripture and other Ancient Texts; pp. 370-394).

With its comprehensiveness and readability, this book has an inherent appeal to hungry background-hunters.

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**Published in *Mission Today* XVII/2 (April-June 2015) 168-172.**