

Markus N. A. Bockmuehl, *Seeing the Word: Refocusing New Testament Study*. Studies in Theological Interpretation. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006. Pp. 297. \$21.99, paper.

Bockmuehl has served as professor at the University of Cambridge (where he earned his Ph.D. in 1987), the University of St. Andrews (where he taught while writing this book), and the University of Oxford (where he moved in September 2007). *Seeing the Word* is the inaugural volume in the Studies in Theological Interpretation series, whose editorial advisory board includes Bockmuehl, Richard Hays, Anthony Thiselton, Kevin Vanhoozer, and John Webster. The series preface notes, "As a discipline, formal biblical

studies is in a period of reassessment and upheaval,” replacing historical and exegetical studies with “an emphasis on the reader and the meaning supplied by present contexts and communities” (p. 7). This series aims to help correct this drift by publishing “brief, focused, and closely argued studies that evaluate the hermeneutical, historical, and theological dimensions of scriptural reading and interpretation for our times” (p. 8).

*Seeing the Word* challenges NT scholars to refocus their discipline exegetically, historically, and theologically. Bockmuehl aims to encourage NT scholars to view the biblical authors the same way that Simon Marmion (c. 1425–1489) did in his portrait of *St. Luke Painting the Virgin and Child*, namely, to recognize both their historical and theological significance even though presentations of the two may be diverse and distinctive (p. 231). Marmion’s painting, printed on the book’s cover and page 14, depicts Luke painting Mary holding the baby Jesus. Marmion’s two depictions differ strikingly: (1) Mary and Jesus posing for Luke are more human, and (2) Mary and Jesus on Luke’s canvas painting are more glorified. Thus, there are three levels of painting: (1) Mary holding Jesus in real life, (2) Luke’s interpretive painting of Mary holding Jesus, and (3) Marmion’s interpretive painting of Luke’s painting Mary holding Jesus. Bockmuehl parallels this to three levels in NT scholarship: (1) the original person or event (e.g., Jesus of Nazareth), (2) the NT author’s depiction (e.g., Luke’s writings), and (3) the NT scholar’s interpretation of the NT author’s depiction. The question Bockmuehl raises is whether level 3 adequately represents level 1, and he argues that NT scholars must view level 2 with both historical and theological perspectives (pp. 13-21). Modern biblical interpreters must avoid two temptations: (1) assuming “that the two images must appear identical, or nearly so as makes no difference” and (2) declaring “one of them vitally important and the other largely irrelevant” (p. 20). “For all their differences, the two images make sense only in relation to each other and only because they both denote the same reality. They perform different functions, but each interprets and validates the other. In a sense, each is the other” (p. 20). A NT scholar’s “interpretation creates not a photocopy but pictures (of a biblical subject or event) containing other pictures (the biblical authors’ diverse interpretations of that same subject)” (p. 20). This painting metaphor governs the appropriately titled *Seeing the Word*, which proceeds in three stages.

Stage 1 assesses NT scholarship’s current predicaments (ch. 1, pp. 27-74). In 1936, C. H. Dodd suggested five critical, successive tasks for NT studies: textual criticism, higher criticism, exegesis, comparative studies, and biblical theology (pp. 27-30). If Dodd could survey the current state of NT studies—perhaps by browsing back issues of *New Testament Abstracts*—he would notice drastic changes: (1) agreed methods and criteria have disappeared; (2) it is impossible to keep up with “the infinite library” of isolated and fragmented studies; (3) scholars work with an “increasingly restricted field of reference and linguistic competence”; (4) works as old as thirty years—including Dodd’s—are largely ignored as *passé*; (5) “aging monster theories” or “dragons” have persistently plagued the field; and (6) NT scholarship does not even have a clearly identifiable field of study (pp. 30-39). After considering five proposed solutions as inadequate in themselves (pp. 39-61), Bockmuehl suggests that the way forward is to explore the NT’s (1) diverse effects in the postapostolic period (i.e., *Wirkungsgeschichte* or “effective history”) and (2) implied readers and readings (pp. 61-74). *Wirkungsgeschichte* results in “a more historically embedded understanding of not just the background but also the foreground (so to

speak) of the New Testament, including its reception and understanding in the patristic period and beyond” (p. 65). It focuses “in front of the text” rather than “perpetually going behind the text,” and it builds integrative bridges with other theological disciplines and methods (pp. 65-66).

Stage 2 explores the exegetical and historical links between implied readers and readings (chs. 2-5, pp. 75-160). Chapter 2 focuses on the hermeneutical approach of the NT’s implied readers, namely, Christians (rather than, e.g., the Enlightenment’s rationalist scholars) who combined exegesis and theology both individually and corporately. The chapter is entitled “The Wisdom of the Implied Exegete,” not “The Wisdom of Modern Biblical Scholars.” For the latter group, “it still remains de rigueur to assert . . . that Christian confessional and theological convictions have no place in serious study of the Bible” (p. 76). Operating “wholly without reference to the historic Christian ecclesial context,” however, is a category mistake that results in skewed interpretations that “misapprehend the nature and purpose” of Scripture itself (pp. 76-77). Chapter 3 focuses on the NT’s implied readings, namely, a systematic, harmonic, coherent diversity—“whether as a canonical whole or in its constituent parts” (p. 108). Chapters 4-5 are case studies. Chapter 4 examines the Tübingen school’s tension between the theology of Peter and Paul, concluding “that the only exegetically coherent New Testament study is in the end in some sense systematic—just as the only theologically viable systematic theology is in the end exegetical” (p. 136). Chapter 5 reflects on Sir Edwyn Clement Hoskyns (1884-1937), who organically linked implied readers and readings.

Stage 3 dwells on the living memory of Jesus that carried into the apostolic age (chs. 6-7, pp. 161-228). Chapter 6 argues that good history “requires both proximity and distance” (p. 168) and that the human scale of NT history is “the scale of personal living memory,” which extends “up to 150 years” beyond the NT writings (pp. 169-70). Chapter 7 is a case study on the early church’s memory of Jesus’ Jewishness.

From my limited perspective, *Seeing the Word* has at least seven shortcomings.

(1) Some conservative evangelical readers will find it strange that the book on the one hand appears to address professional NT scholars who do not necessarily believe the NT, identify as Jesus’ disciples, or share a passionate commitment to Jesus’ church. On the other hand, if he is actually addressing an evangelical audience then Bockmuehl is preaching to the choir since a vast amount of this readership is already convinced of his arguments. In another sense, this book may be like overhearing an academic conversation that is fascinating but out of one’s field. Bockmuehl cites problems and raises questions that would otherwise never cross many of the readers’ minds, and he does so without them directly in view. Such readers who do not interact with Bockmuehl’s conversation partners may find this book challenging and at times somewhat mystifying.

(2) It could be shorter in length without detracting from its thesis. Some books present an outstanding idea that does not require the length of a book—or at least does not require the same level of detailed reading throughout the book. After expressing the main point, the rest of such a book is filled with material that is less crucial and riveting. *Seeing the Word* likewise has sections that are significantly less important than others. The most important sections of the book are the introduction and chapters 1-3 (pp. 13-119).

(3) It has a disjointed feel at times, which is not surprising since portions of chapters 1-5 are revisions of articles that Bockmuehl published between 1998 and 2004 (p. 10).

(4) Its proposals do not go far enough. Bockmuehl refreshingly highlights the importance of patristic exegesis, but he neither qualifies that patristic exegesis is not necessarily a sure guide nor goes so far as to suggest reversing other negative effects of Germanic higher criticism.

(5) It questionably focuses on Hoskyns as a positive example of what NT scholarship should look like. Hoskyns's work demonstrates the heavy influence of both modernism and Barthianism. See, for example, Ned B. Stonehouse's critical review of Hoskyns's commentary *The Fourth Gospel* (*WTJ* 3 [1940]: 74-82).

(6) It is uncomfortably generous to viewpoints with which conservative readers may have concerns. For example, Bockmuehl speaks glowingly about John Webster's *Holy Scripture: A Dogmatic Sketch* (pp. 81-82, 88-89, 92), which D. A. Carson reviewed with significant reservations ("Three Books on the Bible: A Critical Review," *TJ* 27 [2006]: 2-18).

(7) It disparages viewpoints with which conservative readers may have sympathies. For example, Bockmuehl dismisses "fundamentalism" without warrant (pp. 20, 84, 147-48). Bockmuehl's pejorative use of the term seems to lack both nuance and charity. Also, he asserts that NT scholarship requires "a quantum leap beyond the tired clichés of the 'unity and diversity' problem as it was handled in the past. Advocates of easy harmonies of tension and contradiction, like those of relentlessly conflict-driven polarizations, routinely underrate their epistemologically sinister potential" (p. 232). His sweeping condemnation of previous NT studies causes one to wonder what he thinks of thoughtful works that have wrestled with this subject using that terminology (e.g., D. A. Carson, "Unity and Diversity in the New Testament: The Possibility of Systematic Theology," in *Scripture and Truth* [ed. D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983], pp. 65-95, 368-75; Frank Thielman, "The Theological Unity of the New Testament," ch. 34 in *Theology of the New Testament: A Canonical and Synthetic Approach* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005], pp. 681-725).

These concerns notwithstanding, *Seeing the Word* is a valuable work that is a delight to read. Bockmuehl's writing style is engaging. For example, his use of Dodd in chapter 1 is clever (e.g., p. 33), and he sprinkles his work with witty one-liners: "putting 'Des-Cartes' before 'De-Rida'" (p. 78); "the rest, as they say, is salvation history" (p. 94); "Perhaps it is the case that the complexity of the historical onion is better understood by slicing than by separately peeling away each of the skins" (p. 162). Bockmuehl incisively analyzes the assumptions and methods of critical scholarship, and he demonstrates that despite its failures, NT scholarship continues stubbornly to forge ahead as though nothing were wrong. For example, mainstream NT scholarship still assumes theories that polarize Paul and Peter or Hellenistic and Jewish Christianity.

*Seeing the Word* is an important contribution to NT studies that deserves serious consideration from NT scholars. Bockmuehl's basic argument is sound, namely, that NT scholars must interpret the NT with sensitivity to the way the early church read it and an awareness of its coherent diversity.

ANDREW DAVID NASELLI

Trinity Evangelical Divinity School