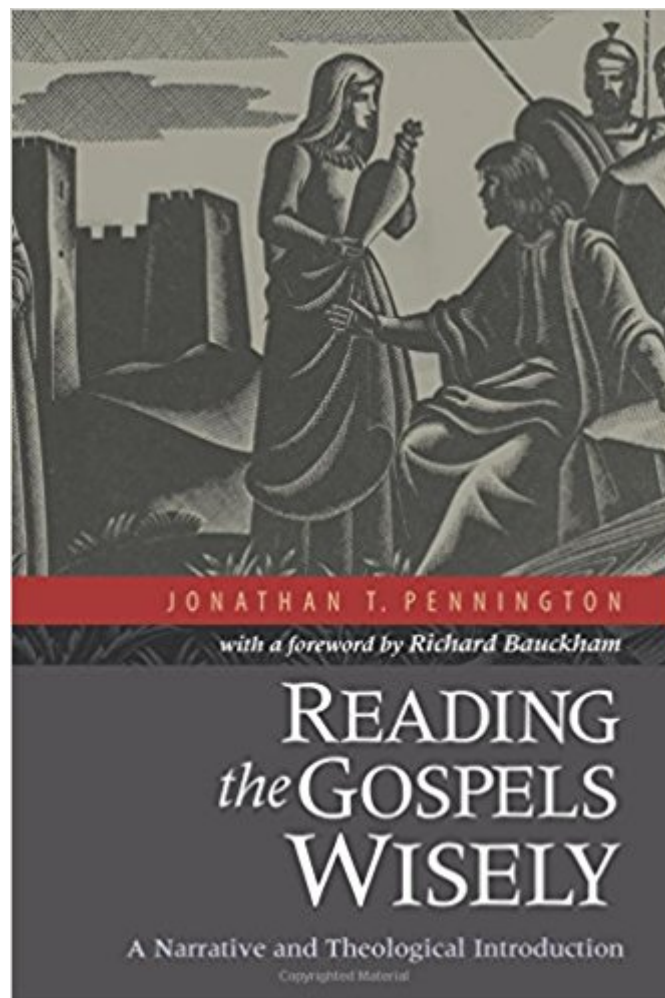




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# Reading The Gospels Wisely: A Narrative And Theological Introduction



## Synopsis

Shows how the gospels, read as scripture within the framework of the whole New Testament, yield material for theological reflection and faithful practice.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"This is a book that could transform many people's reading of the Gospels. Jonathan Pennington has a wide knowledge of the specialist literature, and he skillfully distills what matters most for the task of reading the Gospels wisely. He is especially concerned that we read the Gospels in ways that are appropriate to the sort of texts they are. What comes across is a powerful sense that the Gospels are not only historical but also life-changing."--Richard Bauckham, University of St. Andrews; Ridley Hall, Cambridge "Reading the Gospels can be tricky, but it is important to read them with a full appreciation of their theology. Jonathan Pennington's study helps you get there--and get there well, as well as wisely."--Darrell Bock, Dallas Theological Seminary "Many books on the Gospels slog through source criticism, form criticism, and redaction criticism--important topics to be sure. How refreshing it is, however, to find a book with a new approach, one that reads the Gospels as literature and sees their importance theologically. This book is like a cool drink of water in what is too often the desert of Gospel studies. While I don't agree with everything Pennington says, his arguments must be reckoned with, and they further the conversation in productive and stimulating ways. I believe this is the best introductory book on the Gospels. Both students and professors will find it to be invaluable."--Thomas R. Schreiner, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary "Few

academic enterprises of recent generations have been as chaotic and contradictory as the study of Jesus and the Gospels. Bultmann, Bornkamm, Borg, Burridge, Blomberg, Bauckham--and those are just some Bs--whom to believe? This learned yet lively volume attempts to transcend past miscues and cash in on lasting insights going back to patristic times. Pennington shows how the fourfold canonical Gospel ought to be read: as the proper entrance to becoming Jesus's disciple for the sake of loving God by the work of the Spirit. Few works explain more."--Robert W. Yarbrough, Covenant Theological Seminary, St. Louis, Missouri

Jonathan T. Pennington (PhD, University of St. Andrews) is associate professor of New Testament interpretation and director of research doctoral studies at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky. He is the author of *Heaven and Earth*.

For those interested in studying the Gospels, Jonathan Pennington's book *Reading the Gospels Wisely* can be added to a number of helpful works published in recent years by the likes of George Eldon Ladd, D.A. Carson, Klyne Snodgrass, Richard Bauckman and Thomas Schreiner. Pennington's objective is to convince us to not only read the Gospels as narrative, but as stories that are at the climax of canon, tying together the Old and New Testaments. In so doing, the Gospels also present a clear theology that runs throughout Scripture: Jesus' life and teaching focus on the long-awaited return of God himself as King. Jesus is the fulfillment of the story of Israel. Pennington begins by defining the genre of Gospel. He argues that they are most like Greek bioi, yet they go beyond that genre because they are theological documents based on history. He explores both the need for the Gospels and the need for four books (which he argues are in essence one). He teaches the reader how to read individual periscopes as stories within the greater story. Pennington's view is that it is time to get away from the historical approach of the last century, and that a theological reading of the Gospels is the best way to gain meaning. It seems to matter little to him whether or not Matthew used *Q* as a source. Most helpful are two chapters that demonstrate the hermeneutical principles he proposes by describing how to wisely read Luke 7:1-10, the healing of the Centurion's servant. Pennington's book is both well-written and well-researched. His words are well chosen, and his sentences are well crafted. However, I would argue that this book is not for the average reader. It is more suited to the classroom or for more serious students of the Scriptures.

Pennington's book is divided into three parts: "Clearing Ground, Digging Deep, and Laying a Good Foundation," "Building the House through Wise Reading," and "Living in the Gospels House." The first part, by far the longest, discusses gospel studies on a general hermeneutical level as well as engaging with the current conversation in academia. Pennington's communication of the current state of gospel studies is cogent and coherent, especially his discussion of history-as-theology and theology-as-history (and finding the proper balance between these two extremes). The part of this discussion that involved a brief history of interpretation and mild critique of N.T. Wright's approach was especially insightful. Moreover, Pennington's priority of the right "posture" of interpretation was a highlight of the book for me. The second part covers the actual "nuts and bolts" of the hermeneutics of the Four-Fold Gospel. He makes a strong case for the validity of Narrative Analysis while providing some helpful guidelines for increased proficiency in gospel-reading. Pennington continues to focus on the "posture" of interpretation of the gospels by advocating for a strong emphasis on application in preaching and teaching after the hard work of narrative analysis is done. The third part ties together all loose ends and makes a case for seeing the gospels as the "keystone" of the canon, meaning the "interpretive lens" for all other canonical reading. While I am not sure I agree with all of his conclusions, Pennington's work has certainly been a paradigm shifting work for me. After reading this work I can say that, by God's grace, I will read the gospels more wisely, especially in regard to posture in reading and application in preaching and teaching. I highly recommend this book for any seminarian or series student of the gospels.

This is a thick read and took me quite a while to work my way through it. Pennington is a helpful resource for reading and preaching the Gospels. A key insight is in the idea of posture as we approach the text. As exegetes, preachers can get so focused on the text that we forget to speak the text into the lives of our congregations. His refrigerator magnet story about his mother-in-law appropriating Jeremiah 29.11 to her diet was particularly meaningful. My instinct is to correct her exegesis and put the text back into context. This can be arrogant, and certainly creates distance between myself and the congregation. It also can put distance between me and the text as I focus on "understanding" and miss the actual significance of the text in the lives of God's people. Interestingly, I thought that Pennington got a little lost in some of the early chapters as he discussed epistemology and the nature of history. Maybe he should have applied the refrigerator magnet to some of that! In the history section, I benefited from his discussion of testimonial as a valid historical tool. Of course the Gospels are written with an unashamed evangelistic purpose, but that does not invalidate the testimony of the witnesses.

Testimony is irreducible. There is nothing to use to confirm or invalidate it. Any competing claims are also testimony. I had not thought about this before, but I can see it bringing richness to preaching as I approach these stories as reading the account of a witness giving testimony: "I saw this, and I'm telling you about it because it is important!" He did a good job of holding on to the good from modernistic approaches and informing them with the good from post-modern critique to arrive at a more balanced perspective. I enjoyed his discussion of hermeneutics and found his questioning of "the holy grail of authorial intent" challenging. I believe he is right to some degree in that I have put too much emphasis on authorial intent, which I can never really know, and perhaps been too quick to dismiss other readings. I also appreciate Pennington's definition of Gospels, although it is a bit wordy. Acknowledging the virtue-formation purpose of the writers is insightful. These are not just stories about Jesus, but stories about Jesus designed to bring change in the listeners and to restore the reign of God's kingdom. I found Pennington's method to be helpful, but a bit burdensome. I suppose this is where "unconscious competence" comes in: getting so comfortable with the method that I do it without thinking. I suspect that to some degree we all already do much of this unconsciously. Some of the steps were pretty commonsense; for example, identify the pericope, read it multiple times, identify the characters and setting, and summarize the story. I am not sure how helpful his narrative analysis is. I do agree that it is important to see the individual pericope in the context of the immediate location, the book, the whole Gospel, and the whole canon. The acts and cycles may be over-complicating the process, breaking it down into more parts than there actually are. I do not think he hit the target on this. We are writing sermons and lessons, not papers for a literature class. I am also not sure if he intended for us to seek rising tension and resolution in each pericope. The Gospel contains more than stories. How would this be applied, for example, to the genealogy? His method was lacking in the grammatical-historical area. He may have assumed that we all do that already, but if so, he was mistaken. In my opinion, this would mean adding even more to an already bloated method. He needs to simplify, which is not easy to do. Pennington's method of forming a message (FC, RS, VF) is fascinating and helpful. Looking at the Fallen Condition identified in the text, determining the Redemptive Solution offered in Christ, and expressing the Virtue Formation is a pretty good recipe for crafting a lesson that is textual, points to Christ, and has application for my congregation. This method clearly connects to the aretological nature of the Gospels as defined by Pennington, which allows my lesson to imitate the purpose of the Gospel.

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