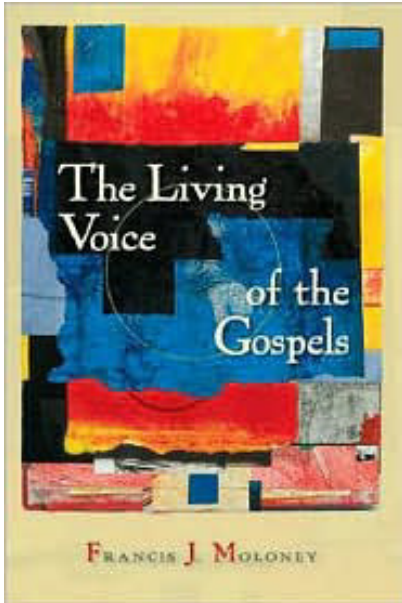


RBL 01/2009



Moloney, Francis J.

The Living Voice of the Gospels

Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2006. Pp. x + 344. Paper.
\$19.95. ISBN 1598560654.

Stephan Witetschek
University of Cambridge
Cambridge, United Kingdom

This volume is characterized by its author as an “introduction to a contemporary reading of the four Gospels” (vii). This is indeed the most appropriate description, for it is not exactly what one would expect as an introductory manual in the technical sense (which would discuss at length, e.g., the date, place, and authorship of certain writings) but rather a kind of companion volume that introduces its reader to a number of ways of reading the Gospels: each Gospel is treated in two chapters; one offers a rather general survey of the content, structure, and theology of the Gospel in question, the other a detailed reading of a key passage.

These “readings” are preceded by a basic chapter about “Reading a Gospel Today” (13–42), in which Moloney introduces the reader to what a Gospel is and is not meant to be: the Gospels are not to be understood as historical accounts of what really happened but as “*theologically motivated narratives*” (15). These are to be taken seriously with their differences and to be appreciated as literary works in their own right (in this context we also find a brief outline of the Two-Source Theory). Moloney specifies this with two examples: the settings of the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5–7) and of the Sermon on the Plain (Luke 6) cannot be harmonized but spell out their authors’ respective theological concerns. Equally, the narrative of Mark 8 is not to be seen as a word-process of events

but as “A Story Formed from Stories” (29). This chapter concludes with some reflections on “Four Stories Read in the Church” (34–35). Here Moloney, writing from a Roman Catholic perspective, refers to the relevant document of Vatican II, *Dei Verbum*, and generally to the significance of the canon: “The documents that eventually emerged as the New Testament emerged from the many Christian documents that circulated in the early centuries because they continued to address the fundamental questions raised by the Christian tradition. They ‘spoke’ to the faithful, and thus were read, and re-read until they became part of the Church’s collection of inspired books” (35).

In the following chapters, Moloney gives a general survey and an exemplary reading of each of the four canonical Gospels, followed by a short bibliography of smaller commentaries. Each of these is introduced by the stereotypical remark (or disclaimer): “The following list of single-volume commentaries on the Gospel of [X] is not exhaustive. An interested reader will find any of the below commentaries useful” (88) or “could consult any one of them with profit” (162, 233, 306). As this book is obviously designed for a nonspecialist audience, for example, undergraduate students or “the general reader” (329), one might have desired a few further remarks about these commentaries, such as their respective methodological approaches. It might also have been helpful to mention not just commentaries but also some thematic studies that otherwise tend to get lost in the notes.

According to the widely established view that Mark is the oldest of the Synoptic Gospels, Moloney starts with a reading of this Gospel (43–89). The general survey (45–70) puts strong emphasis on the structure of this Gospel and makes the reader aware of characteristic structural markers such as summaries. The same emphasis is found in the detailed reading of Mark 1:1–13 (71–87). However, Moloney is not only concerned with structures but also reads the Gospel of Mark as a communication between author and readers—first of all ancient readers but, by extension, present-day readers as well.

The reading of the Gospel of Matthew (93–162) is less concerned with the Gospel’s literary structure, but Moloney presents this Gospel primarily as a document of the author’s own time, particularly of the process of separation between Christian and non-Christian Jews, with Matthew’s community struggling to define its identity. This approach also informs the detailed reading of Matt 1–2 (127–61), which, as the prologue, provides an interpretative key to the entire Gospel narrative. The wise men are thus exemplary for Gentiles who find their way to Jesus through the Jewish Scriptures, while Jesus is rejected by the Jewish leaders.

For the Gospel of Luke (163–233), Moloney again takes a somewhat different approach. The motif of the journey is the key to understanding this Gospel: Jesus’ journeys during

the infancy narrative and his public ministry, as well as the many journeys mentioned in Luke's second volume, Acts. This connection between Luke and Acts could have received even more emphasis. For Moloney, the stress on journeys is "a thorn in the side to all who look back nostalgically to the comfortable securities of the past" (193). To learn from Luke, thus, means to understand the Christian faith as a movement, a journey. The text under closer scrutiny is, this time, not the prologue but the passion and resurrection narrative (Luke 22–24) with its quite peculiar image of Jesus and his disciples—and with special emphasis on the ascension, which marks the transition from Jesus' journey to the journeys of the disciples (and the gospel with them).

Moloney then gives a reading of the Gospel of John (235–306). In the rather general part (238–75), in contrast to the preceding chapters, Moloney discusses the classical "introductory matters" (238–41) of authorship, place, and date (Ephesus around 100 C.E.). The way he takes John's independence from the Synoptics for granted seems to betray some strong influence by his late teacher R. E. Brown. In the further course of this chapter Moloney strongly points out how this Gospel is not just an account of the past but contains a moment of *krisis*; it calls the reader to make a decision for or against Jesus and his claims (e.g., 247: "It [the Gospel of John] calls the readers of the Gospel into *krisis*: where do you stand in your response to the revelation of God which takes place in and through this story of Jesus?"). This important insight also informs the detailed reading of John 6, the eucharistic discourse (276–305), in which Moloney otherwise stresses the references to Passover and the exodus narrative: Christians who were already cut off from their Jewish roots struggled to define their own identity and develop their own ritual, the Eucharist, which surpasses the gift of the manna in the wilderness (esp. 292–93). Again, the Gospel is seen not so much as a historical source for "what really happened" in the life of Jesus but for the beliefs and struggles of early Christian communities.

The final chapter is about "The Gospels Today" (307–42). Here Moloney gives a concise and easily readable survey of the major epochs in Gospel research during the twentieth century—source criticism, form criticism, redaction criticism, and narrative criticism—together with their respective intellectual backgrounds. In close connection with this, he outlines the major stages of research on the historical Jesus—indeed one can only understand the development of both areas of research in their connection. Based on this, Moloney concludes his book with some systematic reflections on Jesus as "Son of God" and "Son of Man," which are notably inspired by K. Rahner, a brief hint at the desirable interaction of responsible exegesis and systematic theology.

This volume is clearly not an "introduction" in the technical sense. It may not be entirely suitable for autodidactic study, but it will certainly be a very useful complementary reading to an undergraduate lecture or course on the Gospels, especially since Moloney

approaches each Gospel in a slightly different way and at times goes beyond the level of mere academic discourse and encourages his readers to let the Gospels touch them personally and ecclesially. There are a few weaknesses, to be sure, but on the whole one can with a good conscience recommend this book to undergraduates.