

4-2016

The Scribe Who Has Become a Disciple: Identifying and Becoming the Ideal Reader of the Biblical Canon

Ched E. Spellman

Cedarville University, cspellman@cedarville.edu

Follow this and additional works at: [http://digitalcommons.cedarville.edu/
biblical_and_ministry_studies_publications](http://digitalcommons.cedarville.edu/biblical_and_ministry_studies_publications)



Part of the [Biblical Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Spellman, Ched E., "The Scribe Who Has Become a Disciple: Identifying and Becoming the Ideal Reader of the Biblical Canon" (2016). *Biblical and Theological Studies Faculty Publications*. 336.

http://digitalcommons.cedarville.edu/biblical_and_ministry_studies_publications/336

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@Cedarville, a service of the Centennial Library. It has been accepted for inclusion in Biblical and Theological Studies Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Cedarville. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@cedarville.edu.

The Scribe Who Has Become a Disciple: Identifying and Becoming the Ideal Reader of the Biblical Canon

— Ched Spellman —

*Ched Spellman is assistant professor of biblical and theological studies at
Cedarville University in Cedarville, Ohio.*

Abstract: The literary notion of “implied reader” invokes a series of hermeneutically significant questions: What is it? Who produces it? and How can it be identified? These questions naturally lead to a further query: What is the relationship between this *implied* reader of a text and an *actual* reader of a text? This type of study is often associated primarily with reader-response theory and purely literary approaches. However, the concept can help uncover an often-neglected aspect of biblical interpretation, namely, the role of the reader. If biblical authors envision certain types of readers, then identifying the nature of this “implied audience” is an important part of the interpretive task. Further, because Christians read the biblical writings within the context of a canonical collection, this concept can be pursued in light of the Christian canon as a whole. Through this literary and theological study, I seek to demonstrate that strategic biblical texts envision an “ideal reader,” namely, an actual reader who seeks to identify *with* the implied reader.

The demand that I make of my reader is that he should devote his whole life to reading
my works.¹

We expect a great man to be a good reader.²

Read in order to live.³

¹James Joyce from an interview with Max Eastman in “Poets Talking to Themselves,” *Harper’s Magazine* (October 1931), reprinted in *James Joyce: Volume 2, 1928–41*, ed. Robert H. Deming (London: Routledge, 1970), 417.

²Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Quotation and Originality,” in *Letters and Social Aims* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1886), 170.

³Gustave Flaubert, “Letter to Mademoiselle Leroyer de Chantepie,” in *Letters* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1951), 115.

Blessed is the one who reads.⁴

“What should I expect of this text?” is a common question a typical reader might ask when encountering a work of literature. The corollary of this query is just as important but often neglected, namely, “What does this text expect of me?”

The question of the “original” or intended audience is a perennial issue in the interpretation of any ancient text. In biblical studies, the historical-critical pursuit of the original audience of a biblical text is standard fare. One alternative to this historical-critical task is to attempt a description of the intended audience that is implied by the text itself. This type of investigation asks whether the author envisions only a certain group of readers (an “original audience”) or also a certain type of reader (an “implied audience”). Determining the original audience of a text is often primarily a *historical* task, whereas identifying the implied audience of a text involves a *literary* task. A textual approach is not necessarily incompatible with a historical approach; however, the aims and resources used to attain the objective are different.

In the following analysis, I briefly consider the observations of literary studies on the role of the reader and ask whether the fruit of these studies can yield any insight into interpreting the texts in the biblical canon. Further, I examine whether these insights can function alongside a communication model of meaning that focuses on an author’s textual intention rather than just a reader’s response. This interdisciplinary dialogue is helpful because the questions and issues addressed by literary scholars regarding language, texts, and the act of reading are central to the task of textual interpretation in general and biblical interpretation in particular. A high view of Scripture entails at least a minimal commitment to consider carefully the role of authors, texts, and readers. As a people of the book, evangelicals should always be ready to ask and answer the question, “Do you understand what you are reading?”

The notion of “implied reader” invokes a series of hermeneutically significant questions: What is it? Who produces it? and How can it be identified? These questions naturally lead to a further query: What is the relationship between this *implied* reader of a text and an *actual* reader of a text? More to the point, what implications does this line of inquiry have for readers of biblical writings and the Christian canon as a whole? Through this literary and theological study, I seek to demonstrate that strategic biblical texts envision an “ideal reader,” namely, an actual reader who seeks to identify *with* the implied reader.⁵

1. Identifying the Implied Reader of a Literary Text

There are a number of ways to express the notion of an intended readership of a particular text. In his study of the function of the novel genre form, Wolfgang Iser utilizes the category of the “implied reader.”⁶ Iser is concerned with the “literary effects and responses” that attend to the reading of novels.

⁴Revelation 1:3.

⁵Portions of this article are adapted from chapter five of my book, *Toward a Canon-Conscious Reading of the Bible: Exploring the History and Hermeneutics of the Canon*, NTM 34 (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2014). Used with permission.

⁶See Wolfgang Iser, *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974). Iser works out a theoretical framework for the notion of “implied reader” in *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980). For a recent critical interaction with Iser, see Zoltán Schwáb, “Mind the Gap: The Impact of Wolfgang

Iser observes that the novel is a unique genre “in which reader involvement coincides with meaning production.”⁷ Because novels subtly critique social and historical norms by projecting narrative worlds that require conceptual interaction, “readers of the novel, are then forced to take an active part in the composition of the novel’s meaning.”⁸ For Iser, “this active participation is fundamental to the novel.”⁹

Iser uses the term “implied reader” to describe the nature of this active participation. He understands the term to incorporate “both the prestructuring of the potential meaning by the text” and also “the reader’s actualization of this potential through the reading process.”¹⁰ Texts do not overtly expound on every detail of every object presented in a story or a discourse. There are gaps in every verbal presentation that are “filled in” by the reader.¹¹ The implied reader goes through a process of meaningful discovery that is guided but not overtly dictated by the author. “In order for this complex process to be put into operation,” Iser contends, the author uses “a variety of cunning stratagems to nudge the reader unknowingly into making the ‘right’ discoveries.”¹² For Iser, then, the category of “implied reader” is a helpful window into “the fascinating process of reading and reacting.”¹³

Literary theorist Umberto Eco has also examined this important role of the reader.¹⁴ Eco asserts that readers are active participants in the production of meaning, and in fact, are a constitutive element in the meaning-making process.¹⁵ Eco characterizes the notion of the implied reader as the “model reader.” For Eco, all authors have at least a minimal mental construct of the type of individual that they

Iser’s Reader-Response Criticism on Biblical Studies—A Critical Assessment,” *Literature and Theology* 17 (2003): 170–81.

⁷ Iser, *Implied Reader*, xi.

⁸ *Ibid.*, xii.

⁹ *Ibid.*, xii. Cf. Wolfgang Iser, “Indeterminacy and the Reader’s Response in Prose Fiction,” in *Aspects of Narrative: Selected Papers from the English Institute*, ed. J. Hillis Miller (New York: Columbia University Press, 1971), 1–45.

¹⁰ Iser, *Implied Reader*, xii.

¹¹ See Iser, *Act of Reading*, 20–52, 107–34. Anthony Thiselton observes that “the text often does not specify whether an object has certain properties (for example whether a table is wooden or plastic, or has three or four legs) but we regularly ‘fill in’ what we *presuppose* and *construe*. The notion of the reader’s activity in ‘filling in blanks’ in the text becomes a central theme in Iser’s theory” (*New Horizons in Hermeneutics* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992], 517).

¹² Iser, *Implied Reader*, xiv. Cf. Iser, *Act of Reading*, 33: “The intended reader, then, marks certain positions and attitudes in the text, but these are not yet identical to the reader’s role, for many of these positions are conceived ironically . . . so that the reader is not expected to accept the attitude offered him, but rather to react to it.”

¹³ Iser, *Implied Reader*, xiv.

¹⁴ See especially Umberto Eco, *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979); and *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984). On the relationship between Eco’s model reader and Iser’s implied reader, see Umberto Eco, *Six Walks in the Fictional Woods* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), 15–16.

¹⁵ For instance, Eco begins his study on the role of the reader with the heading, “How to produce texts by reading them” (*Role*, 3). Though Eco is clearly interested in the pervasive “role of the reader,” he is also convinced that the “model reader” is wrapped up in the “sinews” of the text and its “genetic imprinting” (*Six Walks*, 16).

envison reading or encountering their work. In order to communicate, an author has “to assume that the ensemble of codes he relies upon is the same as that shared by his possible reader.”¹⁶

These shareable “codes” could be complex elements that the author assumes, or they could simply be the particular language being used to construct the text.¹⁷ To communicate successfully, the author must “foresee a model of the possible reader ... supposedly able to deal interpretatively with the expressions in the same way as the author deals generatively with them.”¹⁸ Through these basic choices, all authors generate at least an implicit “model reader.” By reading the text and noting the nature of its network of expectations, a reader can discern the minimal makeup of the model reader of that text. If an author uses technical jargon without explanation or makes literary allusions to certain texts, then one can assume that the author’s “model reader” is one that understands or at least knows how to process that information. In other words, the model reader is the type of reader the author has in mind.

Though there are some unhelpful aspects of Iser’s understanding of the “implied reader” and Eco’s articulation of the “model reader,” the basic insight that all texts project certain expectations of their intended audience is instructive.¹⁹ A circumscribed notion of these concepts can maintain the central insights from this area of literary study. Especially if an interpreter recognizes that the meaning of a text is directly connected to the author’s textual intention, the concept of an implied reader can help recover an important but often neglected element of biblical interpretation.

For example, New Testament scholar Jeannine Brown utilizes the notion of an implied reader to elucidate the function of narrative texts and to examine the way they organically invite a reader’s participation. Brown defines the implied reader as “the textually constructed reader presupposed by the narrative text.”²⁰ She explains that the implied reader “reflects the intended response the author envisions for the text.”²¹ In this way, the implied reader “functions as the embodiment of the right

¹⁶Eco, *Role*, 7. Thiselton summarizes Eco, stating that “every text envisages, or ‘selects’ by its nature, a ‘model reader.’ This is the construct-reader who shares the ensemble of codes presupposed by the author” (*New Horizons*, 526).

¹⁷Eco, *Role*, 7, explains that “to organize a text, its author has to rely upon a series of codes that assign given contents to the expressions he uses.”

¹⁸Ibid., 7. In *Six Walks*, Eco describes the model reader as “a sort of ideal type whom the text not only foresees as a collaborator but also tries to create. If a text begins with ‘Once upon a time,’ it sends out a signal that immediately enables it to select its own model reader, who must be a child, or at least somebody willing to accept something that goes beyond the commonsensical and reasonable” (9).

¹⁹Some aspects of Eco’s and Iser’s approach that I find problematic include the way they tend to locate meaning in a reader’s response rather than an author’s textual intention, their thoroughgoing semiotic understanding of language, and their related commitment to an unlimited view of textuality. For a more pointed engagement with and critique of these positions, see Spellman, *Toward a Canon-Conscious Reading*, 184–94.

²⁰Jeannine K. Brown, *Scripture as Communication: Introducing Biblical Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 40. For R. Alan Culpepper, the implied reader “embodies all those predispositions necessary for a literary work to exercise its effect” (*Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel: A Study in Literary Design* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983], 209).

²¹Brown, *Scripture as Communication*, 40. She also adds that “while actual readers may respond in all sorts of ways to a text, the implied reader responds only as the author intends.” Cf. Richard Briggs’s definition: “The implied reader is a literary-critical category relating to the notion of how a text ‘expects’ to be read” (*The Virtuous Reader: Old Testament Narrative and Interpretive Virtue* [Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010], 36). Briggs’s stripped down definition of an implied reader as a “reader appropriate to a text” is also helpful (37–38).

response at every turn to the author's communicative intention."²² This reader "does exactly what the author wants the reader to do" and is thus "an approximation of the fulfillment" of the author's intended effect.²³ One of the reasons Brown's articulation of this literary phenomenon is particularly instructive is because it is set within a communication model of meaning. In this approach, the implied reader is not merely a part of the reader's response but rather an important feature of the author's textual intent and compositional strategy.

Brown's study of the disciples in the Gospel of Matthew examines the narrative with a focus on the function of the implied reader. The first task for Brown is to trace Matthew's portrayal of the disciples in his narrative.²⁴ She concludes that in Matthew, "the disciples are consistently portrayed as misunderstanding Jesus' mission and message, as exhibiting inadequate faith, and as falling short of the significant role intended for them as Jesus' disciples."²⁵ The disciples sometimes demonstrate positive signs of belief, but they also exhibit a consistent pattern of "little faith." This characterization of the disciples continues throughout Matthew's account, as the disciples are "consistently portrayed as prone to misunderstand and as wavering in their faith."²⁶

Brown then asks about the effect that this narrative presentation of the disciples has on the implied readers of the Gospel. One of her primary points is that "the way Matthew's implied author characterizes the disciples directly impacts the creation of a reader who fulfills the goals of the text."²⁷ In other words, "understanding the impact of the disciples upon the implied reader is one step toward illuminating the goals of the implied author."²⁸ Initially, for readers of Matthew's Gospel, "the disciples' positive response to Jesus engenders identification because the reader has been predisposed by the preceding narrative to respond positively to Jesus."²⁹ At points in the narrative when the disciples are portrayed positively, the reader is encouraged to identify with them. However, Matthew's presentation also invokes a contrasting response. As Brown notes, "the reader is soon confronted with a number of negative characterizations of the disciples (e.g., their 'little faith')."³⁰ In this sense, the negative portrayal "works as a foil in the narrative, challenging the reader to follow Jesus more faithfully than the disciples do."³¹

²² Brown, *Scripture as Communication*, 40. For Brown, the concept of implied reader "can help us flesh out what active reception of a text is meant to look like." Cf. her definitional discussion in *The Disciples in Narrative Perspective: The Portrayal and Function of the Matthean Disciples*, SBLAB 9 (Atlanta: SBL, 2002), 123–28.

²³ Brown, *Scripture as Communication*, 129. Brown notes also that Wayne Booth uses the complementary phrase "postulated reader" in *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 177. Cf. Eco, *Role*, 10: "It will be only the text itself—such as it is made—that tells us which kind of reader it postulates."

²⁴ See Brown, *Disciples*, 39–58. Brown uses Matthew 16:21–20:28 as a paradigm for how Matthew portrays the disciples in the Gospel as a whole.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 119. Brown notes also that this conclusion about the function of the disciples in Matthew contrasts with the typical results of redaction and historical-critical approaches.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 120. Brown comments that "the disciples do not progress [in] their understanding (or move toward greater faith) as the narrative comes to a conclusion" (119–20).

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 128.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 129.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*, 130.

Ultimately, Brown utilizes the concept of the implied reader to describe the effect of Matthew's narrative (in this case the narrative portrayal of the disciples) on potential readers. The way that Matthew has compositionally shaped his narrative has a meaningful effect on the way its readers understand his message regarding the nature and content of discipleship.³² In some scenarios in the narrative, readers are endeared to the disciples, and in others they are repelled. This cycle of identification with and distancing from the disciples is part of the effect of Matthew's narrative. Brown's work highlights the exegetical payoff of taking the literary category of "implied reader" into account when attempting to read a narrative closely and carefully with an eye toward the textual intention of the author.

The notion of an implied reader can also help connect the literary and theological horizons of biblical texts. In a programmatic work, Markus Bockmuehl takes up the notion of the implied reader in order to "derive from this a range of criteria for appropriate spiritual and theological engagement with the text."³³ His understanding of the implied reader draws initially on literary studies (e.g., Iser and Eco), but he moves quickly to the theological and historical implications that this type of hermeneutical construct can have for an interpreter of the New Testament.

Bockmuehl's sketch of the implied reader highlights five basic theological commitments that the New Testament authors seem to expect of their readers. These convictions form a composite core theological profile of the projected reader of biblical texts. First, the implied reader of the New Testament "has a personal stake in the truth reference of what it asserts."³⁴ This reader understands the New Testament documents as a witness to the revelation and saving work of God in Christ.³⁵ Second, the implied reader has "undergone a religious, moral, and intellectual *conversion* to the gospel of which the documents speak."³⁶ The New Testament authors "assume that the readers share a stance of Christian faith, that they look to the Christian gospel as both formative and normative in their lives."³⁷

Third, the implied reader also views the New Testament documents as authoritative. On this point, Bockmuehl argues that "the stance of the texts themselves already presupposes a kind of canonical momentum."³⁸ Because implied readers come to the texts as part of a canonical whole, they see unity in the diversity and hold these closely aligned texts to be authoritative in (perhaps in spite of) that

³² See *ibid.*, 133. Cf. also Jeannine K. Brown, "Direct Engagement of the Reader in Matthew's Discourses: Rhetorical Techniques and Scholarly Consensus," *NTS* 51 (2005), 19–35. In this article, Brown traces the way "Matthew's five great discourses move from addressing the story's audience to direct engagement with the reader" (p. 19).

³³ Markus Bockmuehl, *Seeing the Word: Refocusing New Testament Study*, Studies in Theological Interpretation (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 68.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 69.

³⁵ Bockmuehl cites Luke 1:4 and 1 Peter 1:8 to illustrate the concern for believing "the certainty of the things" about Jesus even though these readers are those who "have not seen him." He writes, "it matters that these things are true—and at least to that (admittedly limited) extent it matters that they are true to history" (*ibid.*, 69).

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 70.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.* For this concept of "canonical momentum," Bockmuehl draws on Thomas Söding, "Inmitten der Theologie des Neuen Testaments: Zu den Voraussetzungen Und Zielen Neutestamentlicher Exegese," *NTS* 42 (1996): 161–84, esp. 165. He mentions the concept of canonical momentum again in a later section, also with reference to Söding (see 112).

interrelationship.³⁹ Fourth, the implied readers are “ecclesially situated.” Rather than isolated individuals, the implied readers are “assumed to be related to the (or a) body of Christian believers, either as full members or at least as sympathizers and hangers-on.”⁴⁰ Finally, the implied reader is “evidently assumed to be ‘inspired,’ in the sense of Spirit filled.”⁴¹ For Bockmuehl, “the documents appear to take for granted that their envisaged reader will in the act of reading be empowered to receive the saving divine reality of which the text speaks.”⁴² The “present-tense perspective of the texts themselves” confirms this important trait expected of the reader.⁴³

2. Identifying with the Implied Readers of the Biblical Text

After discussing the notion of an “implied reader” and also sketching a few examples of the expectations that biblical authors have for their projected readers, the issue of the relationship between the implied reader and the actual (or, “real”) reader comes to the forefront.⁴⁴ As Briggs memorably states, “No blood flows in the veins of implied readers.”⁴⁵ By its nature, the “implied reader” of a text is a compositional construct and remains distinct from the individual actually reading that text. However, there is an inevitable and mutually informing interconnection between the horizon of the implied reader and that of the real reader. To understand a work that has an embedded expectation for its readers, the individual reading that work must necessarily perceive at least elements of the hermeneutical profile expected of him or her. When a reader perceives the expectations generated by the reading of a text, that reader has a significant decision to make: *To be or not to be* the implied reader. While reading a text, “the real reader needs to judge the desirability of occupying the space of the implied reader.”⁴⁶ In this manner, readers might “aspire to imitate the implied reader, but the two categories remain distinct.”⁴⁷

If readers are reading seeking understanding, they will be invariably confronted with the implied reader. For biblical texts, recognizing the character and content of the implied reader is not a neutral experience. Because of the communicative nature of the biblical text as a medium of encounter, the

³⁹ Bockmuehl, *Seeing the Word*, 70–71.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 71.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 72.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ *Ibid.* To illustrate this concept, Bockmuehl cites Revelation 2:7, 1 Thessalonians 2:13, and Matthew 28:20. He argues that “in these three cases and many others, the implied reader is drawn into an act of reading that involves an active part on stage rather than the discreet view from the upper balcony” (72).

⁴⁴ In studies of the implied readers, the individuals who tangibly access the work are variously called “actual” readers, “real” readers, or “empirical” readers. In *Role*, Eco prefers to contrast the model reader with the empirical reader (e.g., 4–11). For a brief delineation of these terms from the perspective of narrative criticism, see Mark A. Powell, *What is Narrative Criticism?* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), 27–31.

⁴⁵ Briggs, *Virtuous Reader*, 206.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 206. Briggs notes that real readers “can say that while they understand the ‘offer’ of the text (assuming that some exercise of interpretive empathy has allowed them to see it for what it is), they are not themselves interested in aspiring to be the kind of person such an implied reader models” (207–8).

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 207.

real reader is forced to either accept or reject the intended effect of transformation.⁴⁸ In order for a real reader to become the implied reader (and the texts overwhelmingly encourage a reader to do so), then he or she must submit to the restraints of the implied reader. This interpretive tension is part of the “drama of reading Scripture.”⁴⁹ As Bockmuehl articulates, “There may well be a sense in which one cannot long pursue the question of how the text’s implied reader relates to its truth before one stumbles over the more delicate issue of how the modern interpreter for his or her part relates to it.”⁵⁰ He adds that the act of “bracketing this issue temporarily may well be an illuminating exercise,” but that “sidestepping it over the long term requires increasingly taxing and implausible amounts of fancy footwork.”⁵¹ In the terms developed above, the ideal reader of the biblical writings is an actual reader who seeks to identify *with* the implied reader generated by the biblical writings.

By way of summary, the primary characteristics of the implied reader of the Christian canon can be grouped under two main headings, one theological and the other hermeneutical. At a strategic moment in Matthew’s Gospel, these two strands are woven into an integrally related whole. In Matthew’s Gospel, there is an interplay between blocks of discourse and blocks of narrative. At the end of one of these discourse sections, Jesus asks his disciples, “Have you understood all these things?” (Matt 13:51). In the preceding chapters, Matthew recounts Jesus’s teaching on the kingdom (often in parables) and on the nature of discipleship. After the disciples answer in the affirmative to Jesus’s query, Jesus makes an important comment. He says, “Therefore, every scribe who has become a disciple of the kingdom of heaven is like a head of a household, who brings out of his treasure things new and old” (Matt 13:52). Jesus’s words here are a fitting representation of two of the expectations that the biblical authors have for their readers. First, the implied reader of the Christian canon is a believing disciple, a “disciple of the kingdom.” As Bockmuehl argues, “Both Testaments of Scripture clearly presuppose such an interpreter. The implied interpreter of the Christian Scripture is a *disciple*, just as that disciple’s implied reading of the text is its witness to Christ.”⁵²

In addition to this theological characteristic, there is also a complementary hermeneutical one. The implied reader of the biblical text is one whose eye has been trained to recognize the contours of those very texts. Jesus tells his followers that a *scribe* (one trained in the interpretation of texts) who has become a disciple (one trained to know God) can produce great things for the kingdom of heaven. At this place in Matthew’s narrative, the issue of interpretation is prominent. In fact, the immediately

⁴⁸ Gerhard Maier describes the Bible as a “medium of encounter” in *Biblical Hermeneutics*, trans. Robert W. Yarbrough (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1994), 25. For Maier, this revelatory and theological feature of the Bible is a central motivation and justification for a “special hermeneutic” (a *hermeneutica sacra*). Similarly, Brown encourages “a more interpersonal model of reading and interpreting, one that lives up to the implicitly relational idea of the biblical text as communication—and therefore one that does justice to the dialogical nature of interpretation and contextualization” (*Scripture as Communication*, 15). Vanhoozer characterizes the “macrogenre of Scripture” as “divine address” (*The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* [Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005], 224).

⁴⁹ See Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*, 19: “The drama of reading Scripture ultimately involves the fate of text and reader alike: Will the text succeed in establishing its worldview? Will the reader be decisively shaped through the process? There is potential for dramatic conflict not merely within the story but in the very process of reading in which the reader struggles, sometimes spiritually, with the text.”

⁵⁰ Bockmuehl, *Seeing the Word*, 74.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² *Ibid.*, 92.

preceding section of discourse focuses on the presentation and right interpretation of Jesus's words (e.g., his sayings and parables).⁵³ Accordingly, Jesus's query to his disciples encompasses the broader discourse context and is loaded with hermeneutical freight: "Have you *understood* all these things?" (Matt 13:51, Συνήκατε ταῦτα πάντα).⁵⁴ Further, Jesus now highlights the importance of the personal involvement of his followers in the "kingdom of heaven," a concept that he has been filling with meaning.⁵⁵ Jesus here envisions a certain type of "scribe" (πᾶς γραμματεὺς), in other words, a certain type of reader/interpreter.⁵⁶ The scribal figure that Jesus envisions ("implies") is one who "has been discipled in the ways of the kingdom" (μαθητευθεὶς τῇ βασιλείᾳ. 13:52) through grappling with Jesus's own words and the Hebrew Scriptures that are so often invoked by those words.

Jesus likens this individual to a "head of a household" who "brings out of his treasure things new and old" (13:52). The word picture that Jesus paints here suggests that the task of "bringing out" things from the treasure or storehouse is not a simplistic one but rather involves a strategic selection. As a complex entity, the content of the "treasure" must be gathered and stored together in some sort of structure. The head of the household then brings out of that storehouse what is needed at the appropriate or "fitting" time. There is also an implicit hermeneutical task involved in the process. The presentation of goods involves selecting elements from a diverse store. Both new and old things must be ordered and presented. What is more, they are presented in a dialectic, mutually defining relationship.⁵⁷ In striking fashion, Jesus's words resonate with the burning issue of the relationship of the authority of the Scriptures (the Law and the Prophets) and the authority of Jesus himself (the Lord and the apostles). This is both a theological and a literary question, as the authority of both the old covenant and the new covenant is quickly bound up with sacred texts that share that authority. By stressing the new and the old, Jesus simultaneously affirms both the unity/interrelatedness and the diversity/distinctiveness of the two elements involved (i.e., the man "brings out" both new *and* old).

⁵³ Matthew 13 presents Jesus's words/teaching in the form of parabolic discourse. Matthew recounts that Jesus "spoke many things to them in parables" (13:2). In the middle of this discourse section, Matthew recounts, "All these things Jesus spoke to the crowds in parables, and He did not speak to them without a parable" (13:34). The presentation and interpretation of the parabolic words of Jesus, then, serve as the thematic content and structural markers of the discourse recounted in Matthew 13.

⁵⁴ The verb συνήημι conveys the sense of having "an intelligent grasp of something that challenges one's thinking or practice" (BDAG, s.v. "συνήημι"). In the immediate context of Matthew 13, the issue of "understanding" or "comprehending" what Jesus is saying is paramount.

⁵⁵ The string of parables that precedes Jesus's comment about the "scribe who has become a disciple" emphasizes the identity of the kingdom of heaven (i.e., "the kingdom of heaven is like . . ."). In this verse there is a shift to the identity of a citizen of that kingdom (i.e., "every scribe . . . is like"). In light of the repeated refrains of the preceding parables, this shift makes Jesus's point about this scribal kingdom activity emphatic.

⁵⁶ The word translated "scribe" (γραμματεὺς) generally refers to someone "who has special functions in connection with documents" (see BDAG, s.v. "γραμματεὺς"). The typical sense of γραμματεὺς in the New Testament relates to an individual who had expertise "in matters relating to divine revelation," and more specifically to "experts" or "scholars versed in the law." Scribes are often mentioned in association with the Jewish leaders (e.g., Matt 2:4; 16:21; 20:18; 21:15; and 27:41). The usage in Matthew 13:52 is likely an extension of this sense, applied to the interpretation of the words of Jesus.

⁵⁷ In other words, the elements are defined in relationship to one another (καινὰ καὶ μαλαιά). The oldness of the "old" (μαλαιά) is perceived because of the presence of the new, and the newness of the "new" (καινὰ) is seen in relation to the old.

In this regard, Jesus's description of the scribe who has become a disciple can serve as an analogy to readers seeking to read individual parts of Scripture in light of the whole canonical context.⁵⁸ Just as Jesus exhorts his original followers to view his own words in light of the Scriptures, *Matthew's readers* are likewise encouraged to view the import of this passage (i.e., the part) within the broader context of the surrounding discourse—the book of Matthew, the Gospel-corpus, the New Testament, and the Two-Testament Christian canon (i.e., the whole). Part of Matthew's compositional strategy is to present a carefully crafted selection of Jesus's words so that readers (both ancient and contemporary) can still hear his voice. In this sense, as author of a Gospel narrative, Mathew himself represents a scribe who has become a disciple.⁵⁹ Through Matthew's compositional work, he has enabled subsequent generations to see, hear, and understand the words of Jesus. This textual feature enables a careful and sympathetic reader of Matthew's Gospel to answer Jesus's query, "Yes, I do understand these things." Moreover, the canonical context (OT and NT) within which readers encounter Matthew's narrative includes the texts that are most germane to the interpretation of Jesus's words.

In other words, the implied reader of the Christian Scriptures is one that has a robust canon-consciousness. The canonical context has a number of hermeneutically significant features. The implied reader of the biblical collection skillfully takes note of this multifaceted matrix of canonical features. Taking the shape of the biblical material into account allows biblical readers to identify and voluntarily associate with the expectations generated by a closed authoritative canon. The canon as a whole guides its readers through the biblical material by limiting and generating meaning. In turn, the ideal reader of the canon is one who accepts this guidance. This type of real reader, in effect, exemplifies "the wisdom of the implied exegete."⁶⁰ Accordingly, the implied reader affirms the *authority* of the canonical documents (the theological dimension of canon) and also accepts the *guidance* of the canonical framework (the literary dimension of canon). The *believing* community is also to be a *reading* community. In this sense, the implied audience is the community that notes, *this* is the framework provided by the canonical collection, and *we know* that its testimony is true.

Accordingly, one way to move toward being transformed into the implied reader projected by the biblical authors is to move toward a canon-conscious reading of Scripture.⁶¹ In this sense, the ideal reader is a Christian, but more specifically he or she is one who reads particular Christian *texts* in a particular way. These texts have a shape that has contributed to the formation of that reader's understanding of what it means to be the ideal reader of those texts. Thus, the notion of the ideal reader can form a crucial

⁵⁸ The notion of scribe implies the literary realm and so the image of the householder bringing out new and old things from his treasure already bears an analogous connection to textual activity.

⁵⁹ Cf. Ezra's characterization as a "scribe skilled in the law of Moses, which the Lord God of Israel had given" (Ezra 7:6) and as one who "had set his heart to study the law of the Lord and to practice it, and to teach his statutes and ordinances" (7:10). This strategic training and devotion in turn allowed Ezra to lead the people in reading, understanding, and responding to the "book of the Law of Moses." See Nehemiah 8:1–12.

⁶⁰ Bockmeuhl, *Seeing the Word*, 99, makes this comment with reference to an artistic portrayal of Thomas Aquinas in the role of scriptural interpreter.

⁶¹ At this juncture, the discerning reader might rightly ask, "Which canon?" For the point being made here (and in the context of Matthew 13), we can broadly conceive of the "Christian canon" to be the two-Testament collection that includes the Old Testament (sometimes called the Hebrew Bible) and the New Testament writings. In other words, a "canon-conscious" reading strategy would be one that reads and understands a given writing within the context of these two collections. For a discussion of the question of canonical ordering and its impact on reading, see Spellman, *Toward a Canon-Conscious Reading*, 101–41.

part of the foundation for a confessional view of the doctrine of Scripture, and it can also function as an integrated element of one's hermeneutical approach to reading those authoritative texts. The ideal reader of the Christian canon, then, is a *disciple* (one who follows Jesus) who is also a *scribe* (one who skillfully reads texts). In this vision of discipleship, the ones who can pick up these texts and follow the author's intention are the same ones who have picked up their own cross and followed Jesus.

3. Identifying and Becoming the Ideal Readers of the Biblical Canon

In light of the discussion above, we might finally ask, "Does the canon as a whole *reveal* the expectations it has for its readers?" A sometimes neglected feature of the book of Revelation is its relevance to this particular question. Indeed, the book as a whole equips readers both to *identify* and *become* the ideal reader of the biblical canon. To this end, a central element of John's compositional strategy is to focus deliberately on the activity of reading and writing, to encourage his readers to view his work as a "book," and to exhort them to become certain types of readers. The overall framework of the book of Revelation contains textual clues that help guide readers in their understanding of its literary meaning, its theological message, and its expectation for those reading this "book."

A running theme throughout John's Apocalypse is the compositional emphasis on *writing* a *book*. At the beginning of John's vision, he hears behind him "a loud voice like the sound of a trumpet" (1:10). From the context, the voice belongs to the risen Christ, the living one who was dead but is "alive forevermore" (1:18). His first words to his bondservant John come in the form of a compositional mandate. Jesus commands John to write what he sees in a book (ὁ βλέπεις γράψον εἰς βιβλίον) and to send it to the seven churches (1:11). After describing the appearance of Jesus, John recounts that he "fell at his feet like a dead man" (1:17). After Jesus tells him not to be afraid and comforts him with the truth that he is the "first and the last" and has dominion even over death and Hades (1:18), Jesus gives a further command to write. He tells John, "Write the things which you have seen, and the things which are, and the things which will take place after these things" (1:19).⁶² These commands to write affirm the literary context of the book as a whole and provide a framework for the narrative and discourse that follows. The next two chapters echo these verses, as Jesus tells John to compose prophetic messages for each of the seven churches.⁶³ Thus, the compositional command to "write" is a consistent refrain in the first few chapters of the book.⁶⁴ What John sees, he is to write down.⁶⁵

⁶² See BDAG, s.v. "γράφω". Forms of γράφω occur frequently throughout the New Testament, but the imperative is found almost exclusively in Revelation.

⁶³ For example, to the first church, Jesus commands, Τῷ ἀγγέλῳ τῆς ἐν Ἐφέσῳ ἐκκλησίας γράψον (2:1). The same phrasing is used in Jesus's comments to Smyrna (2:8), Pergamum (2:12), Thyatira (2:18), Sardis (3:1), Philadelphia (3:7), and Laodicea (2:14).

⁶⁴ Of the twelve instances of the imperative γράψον in the book, nine of them occur in chaps. 1–3 (1:11, 19; 2:1, 8, 12, 18; 3:1, 7, and 14). The other instances are in Rev 14:13, 19:9, and 21:5. This imperative is only found elsewhere in the New Testament in Luke 16:6–7, where it is used in a legal context.

⁶⁵ The compositional mandate itself is an echo of a well-established pattern in the prophetic literature of the Old Testament (e.g., Isa 8:1; 30:8; Jer 30:2; 36:2; Hab 2:2).

More specifically, John is to write these things down εἰς βιβλίον, “in a book” (ESV) or “on a scroll” (NIV). The word βιβλίον here has the sense of a complex, intentional composition.⁶⁶ Thus, the command from Jesus is not a generic directive. John is to behold divinely inspired visions and recount them in a specific book that he is carefully to compose. He is tasked with the active role of author as well as the relatively passive role of viewer. Here the fact that the general verb to write is connected to the concept of a written composition is significant. The prophecy that will be handed down consists of “the things which are written” (1:3, τὰ ἐν αὐτῇ γεγραμμένα). Those who read “the Apocalypse of John” are encountering the fruit of his obedience to this command to write what he sees in a book.⁶⁷ After occurring once in the first chapter, the word “book” (βιβλίον) does not occur again in the same sense until the final chapters.⁶⁸ After the books and the “Lamb’s book of life” are mentioned as part of the eschatological vision (20:11–15), there is a significant concentration of occurrences in 22:6–21. In this section, βιβλίον occurs seven times. Four of these uses occur in the important phrase, “the words of the prophecy of this book” (τοὺς λόγους τῆς προφητείας τοῦ βιβλίου τούτου).⁶⁹ From beginning to end, then, John’s Apocalypse presents itself as a specific type of communicative entity, a “book.”

Parallel to these commands regarding the *writing* of this book, there are also complementary guidelines given regarding the *reading* of this book. In the introduction, before the epistolary greeting, a blessing is pronounced for those who read and hear these words: “Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of the prophecy, and heed the things which are written in it” (Rev 1:3). This striking statement ends the prologue and builds a high expectation for the content that follows. This strong comment is matched by an almost verbatim expression at the end of the book. In 22:7, the words of Jesus appear for the first time since the end of chap. 3, the end of the last prophetic message to the churches. Jesus urgently and emphatically states, “Behold, I am coming quickly.”⁷⁰ He then pronounces a blessing that echoes the introduction: “Blessed is he who heeds the words of the prophecy of this book” (Rev 22:7). In this form, the recipient of the blessing is specified as one who “heeds” the words of the prophecy of this book. These two statements are important in demonstrating the compositional shape of the book of Revelation. In 22:7, the reader discovers that the strong word of commendation to the readers of this book ultimately derives from the risen Christ himself. The introductory statement expands on Jesus’s concluding words by emphasizing the three actions of reading, hearing, and heeding. Jesus himself is the one who blesses the reading and heeding of the revelation that centers on him.

After this promise of *blessing* to the reader, there follows a promise of *curses* to any individual who alters the words of this book. Jesus again issues a stern warning to “everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book” (22:18a). For the one who adds to these words, “God will add to him the

⁶⁶ See BDAG, s.v. “βιβλίον”. The word can mean either a “brief written message” in general (e.g., a certificate of divorce in Matt 19:7) or a “long written composition.”

⁶⁷ Drawn from the words of Revelation 1:1, “The Apocalypse of John” is the title this book bears in most of the Greek manuscripts. See David Trobisch, *The First Edition of the New Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 40–41.

⁶⁸ The word βιβλίον is used nine times to signify a “scroll” that can be “opened” and “rolled up” (5:1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 8, 9, 6:14, and 10:8). In the latter parts of John’s vision, βιβλίον is used to indicate the Lamb’s “book of life” that records the names of God’s people (13:8; 17:8; 20:12; 21:27).

⁶⁹ This phrase occurs in 22:7, 10; 22:18, and, 19. The other three uses refer to things written in “this book” (22:9, 18, and 19).

⁷⁰ All three elements of this statement (ἰδοὺ ἔρχομαι ταχύ) heighten the immediacy of Jesus’s assertion.

plagues which are written in this book” (22:18b). Conversely, for the one who takes away words from this book, “God will take away his part from the tree of life and from the holy city, which are written in this book” (22:19).⁷¹ One who adds or takes away from these words is in essence doing the exact opposite of heeding and guarding them. This type of reader reverses and distorts the intended purpose of the prophetic book. Rather than guard these words, this reader *disregards* them and seeks to construct his own meaning. The result of this reading strategy is not illumination of the text but rather *indictment* of the interpreter.

These strong words allude to the “canonical formula” of Old Testament prophetic literature that goes all the way back to the Pentateuch. Toward the beginning and end of the book of Deuteronomy, Moses gives a warning concerning the people’s reception of the Law of the Lord. He commands, “You shall not add to the word which I am commanding you, nor take away from it, that you may keep the commandments of the Lord your God which I command you” (Deut 4:2). Toward the end of Deuteronomy, Moses gives a similar set of warnings (Deut 29:21; 30:10). Thus, in Deuteronomy, there is a close connection between “adding” and “taking away” from the words of the book of covenant and failing to heed and obey those words.⁷² Revelation 22:18–19 envisions a similar relationship between the people of God and the “book” that claims to convey his word to them.

This passage puts an authoritative stamp on the content of Revelation and effectively seals the book and the message it contains from further addition or subtraction. The closing formula also emphasizes the divine authority and origin of the book. The “words of the prophecy of this book” of Revelation are to be treated with as much respect and submission as was attributed to the Law. By his use of intertextual allusions to the book of Deuteronomy, John makes the bold claim that the authority of the book of Revelation parallels and exceeds that of the Torah. Within the textual world of the Hebrew Scriptures, there is no higher claim. Because it contains the “revelation of Jesus Christ” and accords with the Scriptures, the book should be guarded as a treasured word from the highest authority.

Along with the blessing to the reader in 22:7, the warning of 22:18–19 functions as a fitting conclusion to the book and helps solidify its overall structure. Rather than a disordered array of divergent symbols, images, and fragmentary pericopes, the abovementioned features suggest that the book of Revelation is a carefully constructed composition that generates a complex but coherent narrative and interpretation of the end of days.⁷³ Moreover, through the way he composes his text, John encourages readers to take note of the book’s structural framework and to read and locate it within a broader canonical horizon. The “ideal reader” of the book, in turn, is the reader who takes note of these expectations and seeks to embody them (i.e., he or she not only *reads*, but also *heeds*).

⁷¹ In this short passage, there is an emphasis by verbal repetition of the things that are “written in this book” (γεγραμμένων ἐν τῷ βιβλίῳ τούτῳ).

⁷² For a helpful analysis of the use of Deuteronomy in this passage, see G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 1150–54. Beale observes that these verses “summarize the Apocalypse” and view it as “a new law code for a new Israel, modeled on the old law code directed to the nation of Israel” (1150). Beale relates the warning of Rev 22:18–19 back to the prophetic messages to the churches in Revelation 2–3 and also to the broader exhortation context of Deuteronomy. Both books provide strong warnings to God’s people about idolatry and false teaching. Further, these strongly worded exhortations regarding the authority of written revelation are directly vouchsafed by God. As Beale concludes, “Uppermost in John’s mind is that the book [of Revelation] represents the words of Christ himself” (1154).

⁷³ Cf. David L. Barr, “The Apocalypse as a Symbolic Transformation of the World: A Literary Analysis,” *Int* 38 (1984): 43: “Whereas our concern is to divide the book, John’s concern was to bind it together.”

The final narrative sequence of the book in Revelation 22:8–9 is particularly significant in this regard. John confesses that he is the one “who heard and saw these things” and then he describes what his reaction to this staggering vision entailed. He recounts, “When I heard and saw, I fell down to worship at the feet of the angel who showed me these things” (22:8).⁷⁴ The angel acts quickly and decisively to rectify this inappropriate action, commanding John, “Do not do that.” The angel then provides the reason why John’s act of deference was inappropriate, saying, “I am a fellow servant of yours and of your brethren the prophets and of those who heed the words of this book” (22:9).

In his statement to John, the angel makes a series of associations. First, the angel associates himself with John. By identifying with John, the angel makes clear that he does not share divine status. As the readers know, the angel is only the messenger of this vision (cf. Rev 1:1–3) and is not worthy of John’s worship. Second, the angel associates both of them with “your brethren the prophets.” These associations come as no surprise to those familiar with the biblical storyline. The prophets and apostles are grouped together and serve a function similar to the angels, who are God’s messengers. The phrase “prophets and apostles” is also sometimes used in relation to God’s revelation through Scripture. For instance, in 2 Peter 3:2, Peter tells his readers that they “should remember the words spoken beforehand by the holy prophets and the commandment of the Lord and Savior spoken by your apostles.” Similarly, Paul describes believers as part of a household that has been “built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the corner stone” (Eph 2:20). In Hebrews 1:14, the angels are described as “ministering spirits, sent out to render service for the sake of those who will inherit salvation.” These descriptions complement the associations made in Revelation 22:9. These figures are fellow bondservants who serve a common Lord, Christ himself.

What is stunning about the angel’s words is who comes next in this list, namely, *biblical readers*. The angel asserts that “those who heed the words of this book” are “fellow servants” (σύνδουλος) along with angels, prophets, and apostles. The noun σύνδουλος identifies “one who, along with others, is in a relationship of total obedience to one master.”⁷⁵ None of the types of individuals in this list deserve this type of service and worship. Only one merits that honor, as the angel commands with his next words, “Worship God” (22:9).

The implied corollary of this sequence is that one of the ways an individual might worship God is by heeding these words. In Revelation 1:3, there is a similar blessing promised for the one who “heeds” or “keeps” what is written in this book. This task involves preserving the text but also treasuring and submitting to its contents. The book of Revelation presents the culmination of the biblical metanarrative. The blessing is for one who accepts and preserves the book that generates this comprehensive worldview. *Following Jesus now also means reading his book and heeding its message*. Seen within the context of the Christian canon, Revelation 22 serves an exceedingly fitting role in providing closure to the grand storyline of the Bible and also the canonical collection in which that story is told. In this sense, the hermeneutically loaded exhortation to the reader of the book of Revelation in Rev 22:18–19 can serve both a local and a global function.

⁷⁴ Compare with Rev 19:10, where an analogous exchange between John and the angel occurs. Cf. also the similar scenes in Acts involving Peter (10:25–26) and Paul (14:14–15).

⁷⁵ BDAG, s.v. “σύνδουλος.” The editors of BDAG comment regarding the use of σύνδουλος in relation to God that “since it is a truism that one can be a slave to only one master, such self-identification, far from being a declaration of mean servility, served notice that ultimate allegiance was owed to God or Christ alone.”

The emphasis on the reading of this book parallels the shared sentiment at work in strategic texts of the Old Testament. As in Joshua 1:7–8, Psalm 1:1–3, and Malachi 4:4, readers are overtly encouraged to meditate day and night on the “Law of the Lord.”⁷⁶ These texts function as “macrocompositional seams” and connect “the quest for wisdom and understanding to an individual daily reading and meditation on Scripture.”⁷⁷ These texts are “strategic” because they appear at the major divisions of the Hebrew Bible. An implication of the claim made in Revelation is that this book of Moses should now be read within the context of the entire Christian canon. In Psalm 1, the “blessed” man is the one whose “delight is in the law of the Lord,” on which he “meditates day and night” (1:2). Just as those who meditate on the first book of the Bible (the Law) are blessed, so too are the readers of the last book of the Bible (μακάριος ὁ ἀναγινώσκων, “blessed is the one who reads”). The ideal readers of the Christian canon are the ones who devote themselves to diligent reading and re-reading of these biblical “books.” In this sense, the ideal reader of the canon as a whole is one who consistently engages its contents.

The ending of the historical phase of the composition of biblical writings, then, does not mean that God no longer speaks or that the Spirit was chased into a book. Rather, the biblical writings imply that he now speaks in *just this book*, in *just these words*. The book of Revelation is an example of the way God “continues to confront the church through the pages of Scripture.”⁷⁸ The conclusion of the canon points its readers forward and demands of them a posture of anticipation. John’s Apocalypse assumes that God’s written revelation is completed and sufficient, *until he comes* (Rev 22:20). As the final book of the Christian canon, Revelation contains the last words of the Risen Lord to the churches. Jesus himself is the one who testifies to these things, and he says, “Yes, I am coming quickly” (22:20). The ideal readers of the book of Revelation and thus the entire Christian canon are identified as the ones who reply to these words, “Amen. Come, Lord Jesus” (22:20).

Let the reader understand!

⁷⁶ Cf. Michael B. Shepherd, *The Textual World of the Bible*, StBL 156 (New York: Peter Lang, 2013), 90: “At every major juncture in the composition of the Hebrew Bible (Moses-Prophets, Prophets-Pss, Dan-Chr) the message is the same: read Scripture to find revelation of the future work of God in Christ.”

⁷⁷ John H. Sailhamer, *The Meaning of the Pentateuch: Revelation, Composition and Interpretation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 574. Stephen Chapman, “What Are We Reading? Canonicity and the Old Testament,” *WW* 29 (2009): 343, calls them “editorial framing notices.” See also Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Prophecy and Canon: A Contribution to the Study of Jewish Origins* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1977), 120–23.

⁷⁸ Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970), 100.