

## Introduction: Jesus and Jesus Stories

WHEN THE EVANGELIST OF the Gospel of John penned the last words of what would become the last canonical gospel, he most likely did not realize how truly prophetic his words were. At that point, the landslide of writings detailing and often inventing those “other things which Jesus did” was just beginning.<sup>1</sup> Starting as a trickle with the non-canonical gospels, they developed over time to include the present deluge of Jesus novels.

In the last century alone, more than four hundred novels and novellas have been written about the life and deeds of Jesus.<sup>2</sup> The list of authors who have tried their hands at creating a literary Lord include such notable names as D. H. Lawrence, Norman Mailer, José Saramago, Gore Vidal, Jeffrey Archer, Anne Rice, and most recently Philip Pullman. Although their writing styles and philosophical agendas vary drastically, they all share a fascination with the man from Galilee, and they are not unique in this interest either. The modern world cannot seem to get enough of stories about Jesus, and if the current publishing trajectory remains steady, then soon it may not be able to contain all of the books being written.

In this book, we will examine the Jesus novel phenomenon and encounter some of the fictional Jesuses that inhabit their narrative worlds. While we will discuss some of the motivations propelling authors to compose Jesus novels, central to our discussion will be the interpretative relationship between the first biographies of Jesus’ life—the canonical Gospels—and these modern rewritten tales. In essence, this work will be an examination of the hermeneutical circle created by those intertextual relationships. Our interest

1. In Bruce Metzger’s work on canonization, he suggests that the encouragement to write subsequent gospels may have come from John’s ending statement (*The Canon of the New Testament*, 166). Marjorie Holmes in the foreword to her novel *Three From Galilee* also includes this verse as legitimation for her fictionalization of Jesus’ life.

2. This number comes from the combined efforts of Zeba Crook and myself. Crook maintains a list of the novels on his website: <http://http-server.carleton.ca/~zcrook/JesusNovels.htm>.

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in the novels, however, pertains not only to how modern authors have taken the canonical Gospel material and supplemented and transformed it within these new tales of Jesus' life but also to how interaction with those stories has the potential to alter readers' perspectives of the canonical Gospels once they return to them. This duality of purpose is reflected in the structure of this monograph that after the initial prolegomenon divides into two distinctive halves.

The first half will explore the practice of rewriting as seen in four representative Jesus novels.<sup>3</sup> These texts serve as case studies for two major categories of Jesus novels—those that offer rewrites intent on competing with the Gospels in some manner and those that hope to complement the canonized versions of Jesus' life. By examining individual novels, we will be able to see some standard techniques as well as some unique devices used by authors to either “complement” or “compete” with the canonical Gospels, and through analyzing the novels' overall Christological portraits, we will be better equipped to judge whether the novels themselves are successful in producing complementing or competing portraits through, or sometimes in spite of, the techniques they have employed.

Reading these novels in light of their relationships with the canonical Gospels is only half of the hermeneutical circle though. Part of the intention of rewrites is to reconfigure the way in which readers view the original sources. When the reading pact, which will be explored below, of these textual relations is fully actualized, readers are propelled to return to the Gospels themselves, usually with an altered perspective and often with new insights or questions.

In order to illustrate how Jesus novels can send readers back to the Gospel sources and stimulate “novel” rereadings of them, the second half of the thesis will offer a different type of case study from the first in which we will focus on one particular event in Jesus' life—the Temptation. After analyzing the portrayals of the Temptation in both a complementing rewrite and a competing one, we will return to the Matthean source to see how the ideas and issues raised in the novels inform an exegesis of Matthew 4:1–11.

One purpose of this work is to serve as an introduction to the important contributions that the study of Jesus novels can make to scholarship. The novels in their own right deserve a place in any discussion of reception history of the Gospels. The first half of this monograph focuses more on this contribution and explores not only the manner in which the canonical Gospels are received and rewritten but also the new Christological portraits

3. In fact, one of the novels—Saramago's *Gospel*—has even been dubbed “an example of prototypical rewriting” (Ben-Porat, “Introduction,” 5).

that the novels offer to popular culture. Yet critical engagement with the novels can also serve even the more traditional field of biblical studies. By using Mieke Bal's theory of "preposterous" interpretation, which will be explained in the following chapter, we will discover how the novels themselves can have a voice in exegesis of the biblical text and can alert us to "novel" questions to ask and new insights to explore.

Before embarking on our quest, however, we first must begin by addressing some basic questions related to this endeavour, such as what a Jesus novel is and how it interacts with other texts and portraits of Jesus, particularly those found in the canonical Gospels. Therefore, we will begin by offering a prolegomenon to the fictionalization of Jesus before turning to our case studies.

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