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## Gospel of Life: Theology in the Fourth Gospel – Book Review

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*Gospel of Life: Theology in the Fourth Gospel*, by G. R. Beasley-Murray. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991. Pp. xii+131. \$7.95 (paper).

As a further example of the fact that it is nearly impossible to write an extensive commentary on John without having a lot more to say—albeit in a different configuration—G. R. Beasley-Murray has produced a fine companion volume to his Word Biblical Commentary on *John* (WBC 36; Waco, TX: Word, 1987). Joining the likes of such notable commentators as C. K. Barrett, B. Lindars, R. E. Brown, L. Morris, and even R. Bultmann (if one considers the Johannine section of his *Theology of the New Testament* [vol. 2; New York: Scribners, 1955] in this category [ed. note: cf. Bultmann's *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1971) which Beasley-Murray tr. and ed.]), Beasley-Murray's *Gospel of Life* explores central theological motifs in John. Rising at times to the level of some of the excursions in Schnackenburg's commentary, Beasley-Murray's six chapters operate in independent, and yet connected, ways. Building on the Gospel's own statement of purpose (20:31), Beasley-Murray develops a lucid portrayal of how John leads the reader to experience the "saving sovereignty of God"—in other words, "life in his name."

Representing an expanded form of the 1990 Payton Lectures at Fuller Theological Seminary, this text will do well as assigned reading for upper division undergraduate and graduate courses on John and as supplementary reading for courses in NT theology. It ranks on a par with R. Kysar's *John, the Maverick Gospel* (Rev. ed.; Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1993), and it should be read alongside it. It also provides a fitting theological complement to Beasley-Murray's critical introduction to his commentary, which devotes only seven of its ninety-two pages to explicitly theological interests.

Lest, however, it be concluded that this clear and readable text is serviceable only for the student population, it should be noted that Beasley-Murray makes his judgments after having considered the best and most recent scholarship in Britain, Continental Europe, and America. He also makes some original connections between Johannine motifs and ancient Jewish writings, which further the inquiry of the guild valuably. His work synthesizes some of the best of Westcott, Dodd, and Hoskyns into a workable whole, and it resists the tendency to resolve theological tensions by means of speculative history-of-the-text hypotheses. It is not afraid to let theological problems be such, and its treatment of critical issues is informed and fair. This is not to say, of course, that all will agree at all points.

Highlights of the book include the following: (1) In his treatment of eschatology, Beasley-Murray questions whether the juxtaposition of present and future eschatologies in John is irreconcilable enough to demand multiple literary source theories. Instead, he resonates with F. Mussner and argues that the concept of "life" in John embodies salvation as revealed in Jesus, as experienced by the believer, and as an inspiring hope in the afterlife. The Johannine concept of "life" is identified with the "saving sovereignty of God" and, thus, "the privileged fellowship of the believer with the Father and the Son is a *foretaste* of the consummate reality of which 14:3 speaks, not an identification with it" (pp. 10-11). A question exists, however, as to whether it is the sovereignty of God that effects salvation in John, or whether it is more

appropriately the saving revelation of God through the Son which calls for a believing response to the divine initiative.

(2) One of the book's main highlights is Beasley-Murray's excellent treatment of the mission of the Son of God. Central to this section, and appropriately so, is his incorporation of J. Bühner's monograph, *Der Gesandte und sein Weg im 4. Evangelium*. . . (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1977), into his work (although one misses the contribution of P. Borgen here regarding the agency motif in *Merkabah* mysticism). Indeed, the sending motif is one of the most helpful schemas for understanding John's christology, and Beasley-Murray does well to identify the giving of news by the sender, the obedient carrying out of the task, and the return of the messenger to the sender within John's presentation of Jesus' mission. Connected with the *shaliach* principle, "One sent is as he who sends him," is the relation between the Son and the Father in John, the "I am" sayings of John, the Johannine Son of Man sayings, the "I am" sayings, and even the Logos concept. The Son and the Father are one precisely because the Son represents the Father authentically. Differing with Kysar's view, however, that as far as humans are concerned the Son is to be regarded as functionally equivalent to the Father, Beasley-Murray reminds us that the function and person of Christ are inseparable for John. He thus infers the priority of the ontological relationship of the Son to the Father—from which function derives its efficacy. On these matters, one would like to see a bit more clarification regarding what is meant in John by "the Son" (especially, regarding his relation to the Father) in contrast to the more confessional "Son of God." Nonetheless, Beasley-Murray offers a provocative portrayal of Jesus' mission that deserves consideration and engagement.

(3) Also instructive is Beasley-Murray's treatment of the paradoxical "lifting up" of the Son of Man in John. While he draws helpful connections between the "Lamb of God," the Shepherd of the sheep, the "hour" of Jesus, and the lifting up and glorification of the Son of Man in John, one is not convinced that John's pervasive approach to Jesus' death is all that close to a more Pauline sacrificial atonement model. One also misses commentary on the work of F. Moloney and comparison/contrasts with the synoptic Son of Man treatments. Still, one is helped by Beasley-Murray's exposition of the Johannine kerygma. By means of the death and resurrection of the suffering Son of Man, believers participate in the victory of the cross and share in the hope of the resurrection.

(4) One of the most interesting aspects of his book is Beasley-Murray's treatment of theological/ecclesiological interests particular to Johannine Christianity (pp. 59-124). In these three chapters on the ministry of the Holy Spirit, sacraments, and church ministry in the Fourth Gospel one finds the theology of John worked out in terms of the *praxis* of the church. According to Beasley-Murray, the "saving sovereignty of God" revealed through the sending of the Son in John is manifested through the post-resurrection sending of the Spirit. In this sense, the dynamic reign of God becomes actual within the community of faith. The Paraclete thus becomes the "successor to Jesus" and continues his revelational witness in the world.

Regarding sacraments in the Fourth Gospel, Beasley-Murray disagrees with antisacramental, a-sacramental and ultra-sacramental appraisals of John. He believes that the evangelist has introduced baptism and communion indirectly ". . . in such a fashion as to highlight their significance for the understanding of Jesus as Redeemer and the believer's total dependence on him for the obtaining

of the life to which they bear witness" (p. 97). While this makes good sense for present-day hermeneutics, Beasley-Murray leaves unaddressed such sacramental problems as why the institution of the eucharist is omitted from the last supper in John, why John 4:2 emphatically denies that Jesus himself ever baptized, and why spiritual baptism is emphasized as the necessary accompaniment to water baptism (John 3:5—the emphatic *kai*). These and other passages in John suggest at least a sacramental corrective in the late first century, and Beasley-Murray leaves that possibility unexplored.

Beasley-Murray's concluding treatment of John's ecclesiology does well to explore such themes as "vine" and "flock," but even more penetrating is his development of what it means to participate in the fellowship of those who receive and keep the word of Christ. These are called to demonstrate the kind of love they have received from Christ and to further his redemptive ministry in the world. While one detects more of a corrective misunderstanding dialogue between Jesus and Peter in John 21:15-17 than Beasley-Murray does, he rightly points out that John 20:21-23 extends representative authority to all of Jesus' disciples. As to Peter in John 21, the Johannine Jesus addresses the would-be disciple of every generation: "*You follow me.*"

Overall, Beasley-Murray does an enlightening job of examining many of the Fourth Gospel's theological tensions, offering synchronic solutions to issues Bultmann, Kysar, and others have addressed by means of diachronic ones. In doing so, however, he may overly-harmonize the text, inasmuch as John's theological unity and disunity may also provide one of the most rewarding venues for coming to grips with some of its most salient and provocative content. Nonetheless, the book is worth considering for all serious students of the Fourth Gospel—advanced and otherwise.

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