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Antidocetic Christology in the Gospel of John: An Investigation of the Place of the Fourth Gospel in the Johannine School – Book Review

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Antidocetic Christology in the Gospel of John: An Investigation of the Place of the Fourth Gospel in the Johannine School, by Udo Schnelle. Trans. Linda Maloney. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992. Pp. xii + 275. N.P.

This clear and readable translation of Schnelle's technical and significant 1987 monograph (*Antidoketische Christologie im Johannesevangelium* [Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht]), is a must for every theological library and will be of interest to most Johannine scholars and serious students. Schnelle's work is provocative because he challenges, in his thoroughgoing and analytical way, many of the commonly accepted conclusions—or at least points of departure—of current Johannine scholarship. It is valuable, especially to an English-reading audience, because Schnelle engages the most notable of European scholars, first representing their views and then interacting with them vigorously.

Schnelle's central thesis is that John's primary christological thrust is to counter Docetic threats within Johannine Christianity. This emphasis is illustrated by the physical effect of the miracles, the fleshly thrust of Johannine sacramentology, and the incarnational fulcrum of the Prologue. Schnelle establishes connections between the socio-religious context(s) of the Johannine Gospel and Epistles, as well as parallels between these and the situation of the churches in Asia Minor addressed by Ignatius. In doing so, he sketches a portrayal of the Johannine school facing intramural tensions with antichristic schismatics, who Schnelle believes advocate a truncated view of the crucified Jesus and the resurrected Lord. He labels their position (a bit anachronistically) a form of Monophysite christology which denied the soteriological significance of Jesus' suffering and death. Indeed, Ignatius faced parallel Docetic threats shortly thereafter, and just as these schismatics refused to participate in the community's eucharistic services, Schnelle believes such passages as John 3:5; 6:51c-58; and 19:34-35 function as a counter to docetizing schismatic tendencies precisely by emphasizing the indispensability of sacramental participation if one wishes to share in the resurrection. Helpfully, Schnelle distinguishes Johannine Docetism from later Gnosticism and argues the Gospel may have been written after the Johannine Epistles, not necessarily before them.

In order to interpret John's christology in this way, Schnelle first establishes his own methodology, having dismantled several diachronic ones. In particular, he marshalls significant criticisms against theories that John is based on a "semeia source," that John's order was disrupted and re-ordered (incorrectly), and that John's redaction reflects ideological tensions between the redactor's and the evangelist's theologies. According to Schnelle, within the Johannine school there was a plurality of authors drawing from a multiplicity of traditions. Thus,

theological tensions in John reflect the pre-history of the text, not ideological tensions between sources, the evangelist and the redactor. Having challenged various trends in the classic literary criticism of John, Schnelle constructs his own redaction-critical model by which he distinguishes traditional units of material, from later, interpretive commentary. In doing so, he adheres to John 20:31 as the organizing locus of the evangelist's interest and believes redaction and tradition are to be seen as interdependent," not in corrective tension with each other.

Particular strengths of this work include the following:

1. Schnelle contributes to the theory that a Johannine "school" existed in Asia Minor and had its own leaders, traditions, and writings. This was not a backwater cul-de-sac, but a cluster of several communities which countered internal schismatic tendencies variously. 1 John sought to correct docetizing members directly, while the Gospel was written (by another author, the evangelist) as a theological corrective in the form of a *vita Jesu*.

2. Schnelle's comparison/contrast between John 6 and Mark 6 and 8 is very significant. Regarding the feeding narratives (and discussions/confession of Peter), he identifies twelve verbal parallels, 6 content parallels, 4 structural parallels and 5 parallels in arrangement of the material, but also 14 significant differences. Likewise, between the sea crossing narratives, he identifies 7 verbal parallels and 5 content parallels, but he again finds 6 significant differences in content between John 6 and Mark 6. From these facts, Schnelle concludes John's tradition is not dependent upon the Marcan one, although the evangelist was probably familiar with it.

3. Perhaps Schnelle's most provocative contribution is his negative evaluation of the evidence for a "semeia source." He approaches the hypothesis with the same critical rigor its advocates have applied to traditional theories of John's composition and origin, and he poses equally suitable explanations for many of the same perplexities. Central to his argument is the tenable point that Johannine signs are intrinsic to the Johannine witness. Furthermore, Schnelle sees the Johannine miracles as antidocetic, in that the doxa of the Incarnate One is revealed precisely through the materiality of the signs. They also serve to convey the evangelist's *theologia crucis* as "this-worldly demonstrations of Jesus' majesty" (p. 175).

As well as these strengths, significant questions confront Schnelle's work:

1. While he mentions tensions in Johannine theology and even attributes some of them to the pre-history of the Johannine tradition, Schnelle understates their existence. He discusses the evangelist's embellishment of Jesus' signs but fails to assign due weight to the evangelist's antimony towards the seeking of signs and faith based upon them. Schnelle is aware of these passages; he simply discounts the gravity of

the tension, assigning much of it to the Johannine tradition without explicating its origin.

A more serious devaluation of Johannine christological tension is the failure to treat adequately John's exalted christology. This is the stuff of which Käsemann and others have posed a naively docetic view of John's christology, not an antidocetic one. John's Jesus also is portrayed as "God striding over the earth"—one who knows the hearts of humans and who knows what will befall him *aforehand*. Were these exalted motifs simply units selected by the evangelist from the heterogeneous traditions within the Johannine school (to be used alongside antidocetic ones) or did they represent the theology of the evangelist himself? Whatever the answer, Schnelle must do more with identifying the epistemological origin(s) of the tensions inherent to Johannine christology or his antidocetic argument to find a more adequate contextual home.

2. While Schnelle correctly identifies docetizing tendencies among hellenistic members of the Johannine school, this does not mean the community fought only on one theological (and schismatic) front. The Johannine situation must have been far more dialectical than that. His criticisms of theories based on Jamnia and the *Birkat ha-Minim* are well-taken, but this does not rule out all tensions with local Jewish populations. It is interesting to note, for instance, that David Rensberger constructs a scenario parallel to Schnelle's regarding the inclusive function of Johannine sacramentology, but he identifies the opposing group as magogue leaders, not Docetic schismatics.

3. A third weakness in Schnelle's work involves his treatment of Johannine sacramentology. While he resists the tendency to assume an extremist position (such as Cullmann's), he assumes a too-developed state of sacramental practice within Johannine Christianity. Oddly, he accepts the sacramental motif of John 6:23 (*eucharistēsantos*) as authentically Johannine despite early textual omissions, while he excludes John 2 as non-Johannine, where the textual evidence is strong. Even John 5 seems to demonstrate a point opposite to that which Schnelle infers. Water alone cannot suffice. It must be accompanied by a spiritual baptism for it to be efficacious, according to the Fourth Evangelist. Neither does Schnelle comment long on John's problematic omission of the institution of the eucharist at the Lord's supper.

Most problematic in Schnelle's treatment of Johannine sacramentology is his assumption that John's clearly christocentric soteriology can be easily harmonized with his view of the former. Schnelle follows recent trend assuming that saving belief in Jesus Christ is the central thrust of the Fourth Gospel (John 20:31) and that saving belief is simply simulated by cultic participation in the sacraments of the church. Cullmann's judgment regarding the problematic, and even irreconcilable, joining of these two soteriologies deserves more consideration than Schnelle allows. It might be more possible to harmonize these if

John 6:53 did not declare that unless people eat the flesh and drink the blood of the Son of Man, "you *have no life in yourselves*." If John 6:51c-58 indeed regards cultic participation in the eucharist as indispensable for salvation, this seems a radical departure from the evangelist's pervasively christocentric soteriology. More probably, this passage uses eucharistic imagery to call for embracing the cross (suffering in the face of persecution, whether Jewish or Roman), if one wishes to participate in the Christian hope in the resurrection. Parallels with Ignatius actually work better in this vein.

All in all, Schnelle's work is a good one, and it makes a valuable contribution. While it does not convince that the central pivot of John's Christology was antidocetic, it certainly shows ways in which John's fleshly portrayals of Jesus' ministry were probably aimed at correcting docetizing views of Jesus' humanity and suffering in that first century context. While he does not account satisfactorily for the existence and origin of Johannine theological tensions, he is nonetheless on the right track in identifying them as being intrinsic to the Johannine tradition itself. Whether or not one agrees with his findings, Schnelle's vigorous arguments are always engaging and worth considering.

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