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Kysar's "Voyages with John: Charting the Fourth Gospel" - Book Review

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pagan creation myths of Moses’s day in favor of a “God-centered view of creation.” An analysis of John 1:1-18 reveals an emphasis on Jesus’ pre-existent divinity to combat “heretical notions of the person and work of the Messiah.” Finally, Lioy seeks to demonstrate how intertextuality functioned between these two prologues in ways that helped readers understand and appropriate meaningfully five central features of Johannine Christology. While the goal of this book is commendable, not all of it holds together equally well. In addition to Babylonian creation mythologies, Lioy sees the primary target as Egyptian cosmology during the time of Moses, inferring Mosaic authorship. While the Jewish and Hellenistic backgrounds of the Johannine prologue are suitable, Lioy’s Reformed tendency to cast John’s Christology in Trinitarian and dual-nature terms comes across as anachronistic. In seeking to combine precritical views of authorship with history of religions and new literary-critical theories, the book’s approach does not fit into standard categories of interpretation. That is its strength and also its weakness.

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This new commentary seeks to make sense of the Fourth Gospel’s enigmas on the basis of analyzing its points of view from the perspective of its first edition and its final edition. On text-critical grounds, Waetjen plausibly infers that the first edition of John (chapters one through twenty) appears to have had an evangelistic function, while the final edition had a community maintenance function. Less plausible is his inference that the first edition must have been produced in Alexandria, with Lazarus serving as the Beloved Disciple. Building on J. L. Martyn’s two-level reading of the Johannine text, Waetjen infers a similar set of Jewish-Christian dialogues that may have been the case in a cosmopolitan city such as Alexandria. While the Logos connection does not require an Alexandrian context, the Philonic references are interesting and profitable, as are many of Waetjen’s theological interpretations. Waetjen, however, apparently fails to consider seriously other additions to an earlier edition, such as the Prologue, John 6, and chapters fifteen through seventeen, as argued by Lindars and Ashton. Having done so would have improved his approach.

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For the authors, the death and raising of Lazarus in John forms a quintessential image of resurrection for Christians. The prevalence of the episode in early Christian art affirms this judgment. The situation recalls the household life of family relationship and friendship revealed in the solicitude of Martha and Mary for their ill, and then dead, brother. This solicitude is intended to form a model for the Christian community, where members are expected to act as brothers and sisters in their dealings with one another. The episode furnishes no picture of an “intermediate state” where Lazarus would have passed the interval between his death and resurrection. The nature of resurrected life is likewise omitted. Lazarus simply returns to this present existence. Elsewhere in John, Jesus does speak of his Father’s house, with its rooms prepared for the disciples. This may be a reference to the house-churches of early Christianity, or simply to the fact that Christians should live a familial life, reflecting virtues of harmony and peace. The authors state as an opinion that the return of house-churches may become a viable option, given the persecution undergone by the Church today in many lands. The book ends with a quote from K. Rahner to the effect that even for modern believers in life after death, there unfortunately is no real communication between the living and dead. The Lazarus episode acts as an antidote to such a notion. In short, this is an engaging treatise that presents possible meanings of a familiar Gospel narrative that deserve to be considered both for their systematic as well as their moral implications.

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In this new collection of sixteen essays, Kysar, arguably the leading analyst of secondary Johannine literature, treats the reader to some of his most incisive work. Divided into four parts (historical criticism, theological criticism, literary criticism, and postmodern criticism), this collection of both published and unpublished essays displays the progression of his thought from his engagement with Dodd and Bultmann to his questioning the certainties of the historical-critical method. In all the essays, we have a fair and thoughtful appraisal of the issues. Especially significant is an updated format of Kysar’s impressive research report on the Fourth Gospel published over two decades ago, which is itself worth the price of the book. In addition to treating important subjects, such as the Ioudaioi in John, Kysar treats issues related to postmodern analyses of John. As Kysar looks over his shoulder at a half century of Johannine interpretation, he properly notes the place of the interpreter and the limitations of hermeneutical models in Johannine interpretation. He not only informs us of the most significant voyages in Johannine studies in the past, but he reminds us that new interpretive voyages are yet to begin. This book is a must for Johannine studies at all levels.

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