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Moloney's "The Gospel of John: Text and Context"

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Recommended Citation
As one of the premier Johannine authorities of our day, Frank Moloney draws together fifteen first-rate thematic and exegetical essays representing what he calls his “mature reflection upon this fascinating Gospel text” (ix). Nearly all of these essays have been published within the last decade or so, and each advances a particular thesis or set of points that will be of interest to other Johannine interpreters. Whereas some collections suffer from unevenness or lack of coherence, this one does not. With the volume divided into two complementary parts, “History and Theology” and “Exegetical Studies,” the reader is treated to what may be considered some of Moloney’s most incisive and clearly argued exegetical work yet. Sounding a five-word aphorism at the outset, “text without context is pretext” (x), Moloney exemplifies that exegetical concern as thoughtful interpretations are advanced in the light of the literary and socioreligious contexts out of which particular Johannine texts emerged. He also declares his hermeneutical investments in laying out his questions but invariably sides with exegetical evidence in outlining his conclusions.

Moloney leads off part 1 with two essays dealing with subjects of prime interpretive importance. In “The Gospel of John and Evangelization” (3–19) Moloney advances the thesis of Raymond Brown that the purpose of the Johannine Gospel as declared in
20:30–31 is not concerned with leading people to initial faith commitments but rather “presupposes that those who are reading or listening to this story already believe that Jesus is the Christ, but demands that they go further in their commitment to what God has done for humankind in and through the life and teaching, death and resurrection of Jesus” (4). In arguing his thesis, Moloney surveys the ways major sections and leading characters feature the exhortation to keep on believing. Indeed, the Samaritan woman, the man born blind, Mary and Martha, and Mary Magdalene and Thomas might all exemplify abiding faith, but they all demonstrate pivotal crises involving coming to faith as well. While continuing in faith is indeed a clear rhetorical emphasis, one questions whether it can be inferred to the total exclusion of any emphasis upon initial decisions of faith. Perhaps a dialectical approach would be more consonant with the textual evidence. Interestingly, Moloney nuances the claims of his first essay with the thesis of his second, “‘The Jews’ in the Fourth Gospel: Another Perspective” (20–44). The Johannine negative presentation of the Ioudaioi should not be interpreted as anti-Semitism or as Christian exclusivism but should be understood in the light of an idealized “Israel” that embodies “a universal call: that Jew and Gentile might believe in Jesus as the unique and saving revelation of God (see 20:31)” (43). This is a worthy consideration, but it also sounds to me a bit like the “evangelism” Moloney eschews in his previous essay—despite the fact that the work of some televangelists would certainly be improved by its consideration. The point here is that a both-and approach is here preferable to either-or ones, as is the case in many other aspects of Fourth Evangelist’s dialectical approach to many a weighty issue. The failure to appreciate fully the Johannine operational dialectic is a factor of many a flawed Johannine interpretation, and this may also apply to understanding adequately the purpose(s) of the Fourth Gospel.

In his next three essays Moloney advances important theses convincingly. In “The Fourth Gospel and the Jesus of History” (45–65) Moloney rightly challenges the prevalent inclination of modern scholars who diminish John’s historicity without having seriously engaged the seminal works of Dodd, Robinson, Hoskyns, and others. Here Moloney argues that the first four chapters of John pose a “skeleton framework” for the early ministry of Jesus, including a dozen features surrounding the relation of Jesus to John the Baptist. While one questions whether Jesus’ first visit to Jerusalem was necessarily occasioned by the death of John the Baptist, on many of these accounts the Johannine presentation may be considered preferable to Synoptic ones in terms of historical plausibility. Against the grain of prevalent interpretive trends, Moloney on this matter may well be right. In “The Johannine Son of Man Revisited” (66–92), Moloney engages the most significant of scholars’ responses to his monograph of thirty years ago, The Johannine Son of Man. While reading the text more synchronically now, in contrast to earlier diachronic readings, Moloney still maintains his original thesis. The Son of Man is
paradoxically lifted up on the cross, glorifying God and thereby receiving his own glorification through his faithful suffering and death. Moloney’s next essay, “Telling God’s Story: The Fourth Gospel” (93–111), presents a narrative analysis of the Fourth Gospel as a means of revealing the God represented by the Johannine Jesus, whose love for the world is disclosed in his laying down his life for his friends. Therein Johannine theology and narrative converge.

Moloney’s next two essays review and analyze significant trends in Johannine studies. “The Gospel of John: The Legacy of Raymond E. Brown” (112–36) was first presented at the Life in Abundance Conference commemorating the contribution of Raymond Brown at St. Mary’s Seminary in Baltimore in 2003, an event celebrating the publication of Brown’s *A New Introduction to the Gospel of John*, so ably edited and introduced by Moloney himself. In this essay Moloney outlines Brown’s profound contributions to Johannine studies, showing also Brown’s role in the integration of first-rate Catholic biblical scholarship and historical-critical methodology, the latter of which need not be a challenge to faith where it is authentically verified. This being the case, the development of the Johannine tradition, John’s composition history, and the history of Johannine Christianity all contribute to confessional Christianity if undertaken with truth-seeking integrity.

Then “Where Does One Look? Reflections on Some Recent Johannine Scholarship” (137–66) catches the reader up on some of the most interesting of recent Johannine studies. While many others could have been included, Moloney engages the contributions of Adeline Fehribach, Manfred Lang, and Michael Labahn as recent worthy ones. Fehribach’s work elevates the place of women within many of the Johannine narratives; Labahn elucidates the relations between Johannine and Synoptic traditions as being factors of secondary orality; and Lang attempts (unsuccessfully, according to Moloney) to establish Johannine dependence on Markan and Lukan traditions with reference to the passion narrative. The result is a set of theories confirming Johannine familiarity with—but independence from—Synoptic traditions, bolstering Dodd’s view of Johannine autonomy, developing in its own distinctive way. New issues emerging, however, include the importance of considering a broader understanding of the Gospel’s religious background, a fresh consideration of the histories of Gospel forms and their functions, the rhetorical functions of characters within the narrative, and the ideological stance of readers over and against the text.

In part 2, “Exegetical Studies,” Moloney gathers seven exegetical essays that also cohere in reinforcing ways. In “The Function of Prolepsis for the Interpretation of John 6” (169–92) Moloney connects several proleptic sayings of Jesus in John 6 (vv. 12–13, 27, 35, 51c, 53–54) with believers’ assimilation of God’s saving-revealing work in the bread-breaking,
word-delivering, and cross-embracing work of Jesus. Rather than a formalistic ceremony, this eucharistic set of associations celebrates the memory of the cross for the Johannine community and its implications for faithful discipleship. That vein is indeed a worthy approach to John 6, which advocates centrally the importance of choosing the life-producing food that Jesus gives and is (vv. 27, 35) over its alternatives. The next essay, “Narrative and Discourse at the Feast of Tabernacles: John 7:1–8:59” (193–213), interprets John 7 and 8 as a unity read in the light of the Feast of Tabernacles. Connecting these chapters also with John 4 and 5 and with John 9 and 10, Moloney identifies many unifying themes despite disunitive features in these passages. With Tabernacles as the backdrop, the uneven reception of Jesus would have been existentially meaningful to Johannine Christians, who themselves had likewise been unevenly received by their Jewish contemporaries. “Can Everyone be Wrong? A Reading of John 11:1–12:8” (214–40) shows the corrective function of misunderstanding in John 11:1–12:8, where everyone gets it wrong except for one. Mary alone, in anointing the Lord (12:7), gets it right.

“The Gospel of John: A Story of Two Paracletes” (241–59) shows how community members caught in between the former ministry of Jesus and his present absence are ministered to by the second paraclete, nourished by the story about the first one. Moloney, in “The Function of John 13–17 within the Johannine Narrative” (260-83), interprets John 13–17 together as a unity, identifying a chiastic structure with 15:12–17 at the center, surrounded by 15:1–11/15:18–16:3; 14:1–31/16:4–33; and 13:1–38/17:1–26. Within this treatment Moloney chooses not to deal with the rough transition following 14:31 (which appears to have originally been followed by 18:1) as a clue to its composition history, and one wonders how seeing chapters 15–17 as later material added to an earlier edition might affect his inference of chiastic symmetry. Determining the beginning of one chiastic unit hinges, of course, upon determining where the previous one ended. Another problem with chiastic readings is that the main emphasis is often a and a’ rather than the center. Nonetheless, whatever the literary history, these four chapters present themselves as a coherent unit within Moloney’s interpretation, encouraging believers facing struggles in a hostile world with a reminder of the self-giving love of Jesus. The priestly prayer of Jesus, however, hangs together in its own special, unitive way, and one wonders whether it should be taken as completing the great discourse or the entire Gospel narrative. In “To Make God Known: A Reading of John 17:1–26” (284–312) Moloney highlights the progression of the prayer. Verses 1–8 feature Jesus’ prayer for God to be made known, verses 9–19 feature Jesus’ prayer that his followers will be kept and made holy, and verses 20–26 feature Jesus’ prayer again to make God known. As participants in the narrative, hearers and readers are invited into relationship with Jesus, and therefore God, in the rendering of this prayer within the Johannine situation.
In “John 18:15–27: A Johannine View of the Church” (313–29) Moloney develops the ecclesial implications of the passage narrating the threefold denial of Peter and the faithfulness of the other disciple. While Peter’s threefold confession in John 21 affirms his loyalty, this parallel passage displays his fearfulness while at the same time showing that the church will go on despite human failures of faith. Moloney concludes his book, then, with “The Gospel of John as Scripture,” which serves as its “conclusion” (333–47). Here Moloney builds upon Moody Smith’s 1999 SBL presidential address, inquiring as to the emergence of the Johannine text being regarded as “Scripture.” As readers and hearers of the book are called to believe on behalf of the written story without ever having seen Jesus, they are blessed with a book of Scripture as an intermediary bridge. In that sense, the author probably intended to write his narrative as “Scripture” in order to further such a venture. Moloney expresses his surprise at his own conclusion, but from a literary-critical standpoint—despite appearing to bolster traditional authority—his judgment seems a sound one.

The overall impression of this collection is of a remarkably coherent and well-balanced set of essays that reinforce each other helpfully. Throughout the collection Moloney interprets his themes and texts under the following approaches: (1) first he operates synchronically, interpreting the text in its final form; (2) he interprets the Johannine text as an autonomous tradition connecting earlier and later phases of its development; (3) he interprets passages with special sensitivity to how texts would address the concerns of original audiences; and (4) he invariably brings interpretations to bear on present readers, connecting themes with meaningful readings for today. Perhaps engaging each of these features briefly might serve the interests of other Johannine scholars; it certainly is of interest to this reviewer.

On synchronicity, Moloney’s commitment to interpreting the completed text as it stands is the final responsibility of every interpreter. Moloney’s refusal to infer hypothetical sources such as a signs source or a sayings source is also well founded, as interpreters over the last decade or two have found such theories to be evidentiarily lacking. Still, even with a synchronicity of tradition there appears to have nonetheless been something of a diachronicity of composition. Some consideration of differences in situation between the audiences of John’s earlier and later material (with supplementary material including at least the prologue and chapters 6, 15–17, and 21) would actually sharpen some of Moloney’s good insights. For instance, most of the exhortations to abide with Jesus and his community appear primarily in the supplementary material (using Lindars’s view of a two-edition theory). That being the case, the tension between Moloney’s first two essays might be explained on the basis that the first edition of John was written to invite Jewish and Gentile members of the audience to believe in Jesus as the Jewish Messiah (involving evangelism [20:31]), whereas the supplementary material (following some of the divisions...
represented by the Johannine Epistles) contains most of the emphases to maintain solidarity within the community. It also could be that the Evangelist was operating dialectically on the evangelistic-pastoral continuum, but this tension also appears to reflect somewhat different literary purposes between the first and final editions of the Johannine evangel.

On Johannine autonomy and relation to the Synoptic traditions, Moloney wisely sides with Gardner-Smith but also allows for engagement between traditions in their oral stages. His citing of Labahn’s work with secondary orality is also on the right track, in that Johannine familiarity with Markan traditions might explain some of the contacts without implying dependence. That being the case, one wonders whether Moloney’s essay on historicity might imply a Johannine interest in augmenting Mark. Likewise, Moloney’s essays on ecclesiology and the second paraclete might be understood to be in dialogue with Matthean presentations of Petrine leadership, posing a Johannine pneumatic alternative to more structural approaches to leadership. Given Raymond Brown’s description of “cross-influence” between Johannine and Synoptic traditions, a larger theory of Gospel-tradition “interfluentiality” might pose a way forward, although such is beyond the scope of the present work. Of value for consideration, however, is what one makes of particular Johannine-Synoptic similarities and differences, given Johannine autonomy-and-yet-familiarity with other traditions—at least the Markan.

With regard to sensitivity to the concerns of Johannine audiences, Moloney shows special thoughtfulness on the sorts of issues they would have been facing, including a multiplicity of concerns instead of a singular one. Especially thoughtful is his essay on John 6, which shows evidence of addressing several sets of issues faced by Johannine audiences over time. The emphasis upon the gathering up of the broken fragments has an impressive resonance with the bread Jesus offers (6:51), which is his flesh given for the life of the world on the cross. Embracing the suffering of Jesus as the basis of eucharistic fellowship is at the heart of John’s incarnational sacramentology rather than a formalistic requisite, and the comforting work of the Holy Spirit in the essays on John 13–17 bears special relevance for later audiences also enduring hardship. Likewise, his work with the Feast of Tabernacles and treatments of Johannine engagements of Jewish and Gentile audiences demonstrate judicious incorporations of latest scholarly approaches to the Johannine situation in ways that are also profitable for interpretation today.

Finally, Moloney’s work has considerable implications for meaningful interpretation among contemporary readers. His outlining of Raymond Brown’s major contributions to Johannine scholarship serves as a fitting overview of the most important work of arguably the most significant biblical scholar during the second half of the twentieth century. I would likewise consider Brown the most important American biblical scholar ever, so
Moloney’s contribution here is by no means insignificant. The rhetorical function of misunderstanding also has impressive implications for meaningful interpretation, and Moloney’s treatment of the Gospel of John as Scripture poses an intriguing contribution to appreciating the authoritative function and impact of the Johannine text originally, as well as eventually. In sum, Frank Moloney here offers readers a book that is faithful to his own interpretive stance and context, while at the same time being faithful to the literary and socioreligious contexts of the Johannine text. Johannine interpreters are helped by this collection, and Patrick Alexander and Alan Culpepper are to be commended for including this fine book within the Biblical Interpretation Series.