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REVIEW OF DAVID JOHNSON,
*JESUS, CHRIST AND SERVANT OF
GOD: MEDITATIONS ON THE GOSPEL
ACCORDING TO JOHN*, (SAN
FRANCISCO: INNER LIGHT BOOKS,
2017)

LORRAINE WATSON

The Gospel of John is often referred to as the Quaker Gospel. So it is with no surprise that David Johnson, a Quaker from Australia, chose to spend time with this particular book. Prior to writing, or even doing serious study on the Gospel of John, David Johnson meditated on the Gospel over an eight-month period, spending time with the text and allowing it to speak directly to his spirit. He writes about the deeper meaning opened to him, “This experience convinced me that the gospel is not just a record of Jesus’ ministry; it is also a consummate guide to the spiritual life. The reader starts at the beginning and progressively enters more and more deeply into a relationship of holy faithfulness with Jesus” (p. vii).

The preface is helpful as he clearly lays out his intentions in writing *Jesus, Christ and Servant of God*. The book is not written as a scholarly work, nor is it meant to be comprehensive. Rather the book consists of his reflections after spending months sitting with the Gospel of John. He recommends reading the gospel for one’s self, rather than just reading about it. Ultimately he is “mainly interested in the lessons these gospel writings have for the individual spiritual journey” (p. viii). I found that to be the main thrust of his writing. Johnson identifies strongly with the human journey as one learns to follow God, and he directs insights from the Gospel of John into this journey. In reflecting on a passage, he will draw parallels to his own personal experience and then extrapolates the parallel to a larger understanding of the spiritual journey. Throughout the book, Johnson invites us to see ourselves in the story.

As I read the book, I thought to myself, “Johnson writes like I preach.” As a pastor of a Friends Church, I’m asked to bring a

message most Sundays. My greatest interest is in the spiritual journey, and in understanding how to follow the Light of Christ. I often relate Scripture to my Meeting's spiritual journey. I see parallels between the story or teaching and the way in which we can find ourselves drawn into an encounter with Christ, our Present Teacher. I enjoyed reading Johnson's insights into various passages and seeing it from another person's perspective.

Another connection is his emphasis on the portions of the passage that resonate more deeply, with little attention given to other sections. In Johnson's discussion of Peter denying Christ three times before the cock crows, he says "I was tempted to bypass this text," as if to imply that he has bypassed others (p. 131). However, in this case, he finds personal application and decides to include the text.

Johnson includes much of the text of the Gospel of John in his book, but leaves out particular verses with no mention of the reason for the omissions. It seems like it would be better to include all verses, if for no other reason than maintaining continuity, especially since he does not comment on every verse. At first glance, it appears that the verses left out are often connector verses. I found myself looking up the missing verses to see what was left out.

While Johnson's intention is to reflect on the application to the spiritual journey and he does not intend to write a scholarly book, there is a fair bit of scholarly work included, which is evident at a glance by scanning the appendices and footnotes. He frequently sets the background of what is happening in the passage before discussing it and drawing out the spiritual application.

In the Preface on page viii, he talks about not addressing the meanings of "logos" and "light" because others have done so quite thoroughly. In this particular case, I think a discussion of the meanings of those words would be helpful because they have a significant impact upon the message of the Gospel. The original readers of the Gospel would have understood these words in a particular way, which was John's intention when he connected both Hebrew and Greek thought together with use of a word known to both people. Johnson sets the context well for life settings and cultural understandings, but he has chosen not to do that with "meaning in linguistics and philosophy."

Throughout the book, he makes frequent use of allegory as a means of drawing out meaning for the spiritual journey. Sometimes it is well done and other times it seems a bit of a stretch. For instance,

he references the very large volume of water changed into wine, suggesting “that to enter the Presence of God, a correspondingly large change is required inwardly of each of us.” For some that is true, while for others the changes seem incremental and only over time is the significant change apparent.

It is notable that Johnson does not try to explain the miracles, e.g. the feeding of the multitude or Jesus walking on water (p. 61-65). He apparently accepts the miracles as true or does not feel that this book needs to delve into the questions about historicity that might arise. Instead, he draws spiritual implications from the miracles.

I was surprised at the lack of discussion around Mary anointing Jesus’ feet in John 12 (p. 114). Johnson focuses on the disciples and their state of mind at this point in their journey, reflecting on their struggles to understand what is happening, while they had come to accept as truth that Jesus is the Christ. Following the resurrection of Lazarus, they may have anticipated a greater miracle that would restore the country to Jewish rule. The next passage is the triumphant entry into Jerusalem and again I’m surprised at the short mention of this event.

For one who was raised as an evangelical Quaker, I didn’t think he would omit John 3:16 in his discussion of Nicodemus in chapter 4 of his book. This scripture is understood by evangelicals as central to why Jesus came. However, Johnson did mention it much later in the book when he states that the gospel doesn’t say “Jesus was sent to die for our sins,” but that his “surrender to death is love,” which I have come to believe is true. He concludes the paragraph by saying, “John is clear that God sent Jesus, teacher and healer, to heal and lead souls to salvation” (p. 165).

Johnson does a credible job of handling the death and resurrection of Jesus in chapters 19-21. I was pleased with his thorough treatment of the Biblical events themselves, as well as its application to our spiritual journey. I was particularly drawn to the discussion of suffering and sacrifice in the spiritual journey, which he admits is necessary to growth.

For most of the book, Johnson moves steadily through the Gospel of John, one passage at a time, generally devoting a chapter of the book to a chapter in John. The last two chapters step back and look at the Gospel of John as a whole. In chapter 22, he summarizes the spiritual movement throughout the gospel and delineates our

spiritual journey as we move through the stages of change, struggle, forgiveness, union with God, and love. In chapter 23, he discusses the I AM passages which are found throughout the gospel and serve as a major theme for John.

Throughout the book, Johnson expands insights into the text by quoting a number of other authors, many of whom are Quaker. He also pulls in authors outside of the Christian tradition. It serves to broaden the perspective. The appendices at the end of the book provide additional information and background.

Ultimately I liked the book and felt it was well done, accomplishing the author's stated purpose. It is best read slowly so that one can reflect upon the spiritual insights and take them deeply into one's spirit. In addition, as Johnson says, it is wise to read through the Gospel of John for oneself as it has much to teach us without any commentary. Reading *Jesus, Christ and Servant of God: Meditations on the Gospel According to John* should always be done as a companion to the text of the gospel itself.