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The Gospel of John: A Commentary (2 Volume Set)
by Craig S. Keener
Hendrickson, Peabody, 2003. 1636 pp. $79.95 (cloth).

IN THIS IMPRESSIVE TWO-VOLUME commentary on John, Craig Keener sets a new standard for examining John in the light of its social-historical context. At 1600+ pages, this magnificent work deserves a place among the great commentaries of Brown, Schnackenburg, Barrett, Bultmann, and Haenchen, despite advancing few truly original answers to the Johannine riddles. Its primary distinction is that it borrows in unsurpassed ways from ancient Jewish and Greco-Roman sources, casting fresh and compelling light on the primary interests of Johannine Gospel studies. While Keener acknowledges a less extensive engagement with the secondary literature, his work nonetheless provides valuable bibliographic helps and engages important scholarly contributions with deftness and sober judgment. The most significant contribution of this commentary is that in the light of an exhaustive treatment of ancient literature, the traditional views of John’s authorship and composition appear to be confirmed rather than disconfirmed.

Keener begins with a seven-page preface in which he acknowledges the contribution of his doctoral advisor, D. Moody Smith, and others. His impressive 330-page introduction includes the following major headings: General Historical Considerations; The Discourses of the Fourth Gospel; Authorship; Social Contexts; A Jewish Context; Revelatory Motifs: Knowledge, Visions, Signs; and Christology and Other Theology. Within the introduction 190 subtopics are discussed, and within the commentary section, approximately 143 topical discussions are undertaken and 442 passages analyzed. The bibliographies include nine pages of ancient sources and 158 pages of modern sources, averaging thirty sources per page. Footnotes are invariably helpful, pointing the way toward further explorations of issues in both primary and secondary literature.

In terms of authorship, composition, and the Johannine situation, Keener finds internal and external evidence to support the traditional view that John the Son of Zebedee was the Beloved Disciple, whose witness and memory stands behind the basic content of the narrative. He also holds open the possibility that another hand has finalized the Gospel, although he argues for treating the final text as a unity. He attributes the Johannine Gospel
and first Epistle at least to the same author, although he accepts the plausibility of a different author of Revelation, given the fact of stylistic differences. He dates the Johannine Gospel as being finalized some time in the 90's of the first century C.E., and he regards the Johannine social context as that of early Jewish Christianity: "In short, John confronts his audience's continuity with their Jewish heritage, while summoning them to retain their commitment to Christ as their first theological priority" (p. 232).

In his analysis of ancient Greco–Roman biographical and historiographic genres, Keener points out that moral lessons were commonly transferred through historical narrative and hero stories, so John's theological character cannot exclude it from biographic and historiographic genres on the basis of contemporary parallels. He also shows that the manner in which history was written in Greco–Roman settings often involved expansion and abridgement, as well as the use of poetry and the insertion of sayings-collections into a narrative. Likewise, Jewish biographical conventions show evidence of novelistic embellishment without apology, so all four canonical Gospels deserve to be considered within the genre of ancient historical biography. Keener agrees with Moody Smith that there is insufficient critical evidence to support inferences regarding sources, and given John's independence from the Synoptics, he concludes that the Johannine tradition had its own connection to the ministry of Jesus and thus is deserving of historical consideration. In many ways, the historicity of the Johannine tradition is preferable to comparable ones, and first-hand acquaintance with Galilee and Judea are evident in the content and manner of the Johannine narration. In terms of historicity and tradition, Keener asserts:

The Fourth Gospel is closer in form and substance to the Synoptic Gospels than to the apocryphal and gnostic gospels, but its divergence from dependence on Synoptic tradition makes most of its contents impossible to verify (or falsify) on purely historical grounds. That John falls into the general category of biography, however, at least shifts the burden of proof on the matter of reported events (albeit not the particular ways of describing them) onto those who deny John's use of tradition for the events he describes, although the historical method cannot check the accuracy of most of his individual details. The different portrait of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel suggests that John has taken more sermonic liberties in his portrayal of Jesus, but this does not demonstrate that he lacks historical tradition on which the portrayal is based. (p. 51)

A notable feature of Keener's work is that the major and minor units of the text are divided and given appropriate names in thoughtful and graphic ways. Larger units are outlined helpfully, but so are smaller ones—sometimes set off as paragraphs, sentences, or phrases—and this sensitivity to the text and relevant issues is especially valuable. For instance, while the Prologue is outlined as "The Preexistent Word" (1:1–2), "The Word and Creation" (1:3), "The Word as Life and Light" (1:4–5), "John Only a Witness" (1:6–8), "The World Rejects the Light" (1:9–11), "Those Who Receive Him" (1:12–13), and "The New Sinai" (1:14–18), it also is divided further. Verse 14, for example, is described as "The Revelation," and is further separated into its five phrases: "The Word's Incarnation," "The Word Tabernacled among Us," "We Beheld His Glory," "The Monogenes Son," and "Full of Grace and Truth." Even in the naming of the units, the commentator has made thoughtful exegetical judgments.

A second feature of Keener's work is probably the most important one. It represents
the first extensive application of Richard Burridge's comparison of Gospel narratives to Hellenic *Bioi*, Greek historical narratives with many similarities to John. Keener also exploits the literary parallels between John and Greco–Roman literature, setting the text of John within its contemporaneous literary context far more extensively than even the great History of Religions challenges to John in the modern era—even those by Strauss, Baur, and Bultmann. However, rather than seeing the contacts as indicators of John's fictive character or historical implausibility, Keener affirms the historicity of tradition where plausible and challenges dismissive criticisms as an historical-critical scholar. In doing so, he finds John's archaeological and topographical presentations largely reliable and sides with Brown, Dodd, Morris, and Carson in favor of the essential historicity of many of John's presentations.

Keener approaches the discourses and christological content of the Fourth Gospel in much the same way. He first compares the revelatory motifs—knowledge, vision, and signs—with Hellenistic and Jewish literature, proceeding then to comparison and contrast with other Gospel traditions. He finds John's presentation of material much closer in character to those of the Synoptics than to gnostic or mystery religion sources, and both the revelatory and christological motifs in John function to emphasize Jesus' representative agency from the Father. While few of John's themes are unique, they are certainly developed distinctively, especially emphasizing both poles of Jesus' humanity and divinity. Faith involves a response to the revelation, which leads to life and the forsaking of the world. This being the case, the purpose of the Gospel (20:31) is "to address believers at a lesser stage of discipleship and to invite them to persevere as true disciples" (p. 1216).

Finally, a comment must be made as to the theological and interpretive value of Keener's insights along the way. A first-rate critical treatment of the Johannine text, this commentary also elucidates meaningful and applicable theological points at every turn. Keener contributes insights regarding social and anthropological associations with particular themes and details, and identifies ways in which John's material is either consonant or contrasts with parallel understandings, thereby providing a great service to the interpreter. While a work of this magnitude undoubtedly has its weaknesses, none worth mentioning are apparent to me. This work will be a challenge to critical and traditional scholars alike, but for different reasons. It will challenge the traditionalist scholar by providing an avalanche of Greco–Roman and contemporary Jewish information sure to provoke new insights and understandings. It will challenge the critical scholar by pointing out the ways in which John is both divergent from and similar to ancient parallels, contesting deconstructions on the basis of ancient contemporaraneous literature. All readers, though, will be helped by Keener's massive commentary. Every serious collection of Johannine commentaries must include a spot for this important work.

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