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Peter and the Beloved Disciple: Figures for a Community in Crisis -- Book Review

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In what may be considered one of the most extended and thoughtful treatments of his topic, Michael Quast has made a significant contribution for interpreters of the Fourth Gospel. Observing correctly that “a proper understanding of Peter and the Beloved Disciple is crucial to a proper understanding of the whole Gospel of John” (p. 7), Quast’s thorough exegesis and measured treatment of secondary literature provide a solid basis for his judgments. While various scholars will take exception to some of his views, for the most part his argument is convincing, especially the central thesis that for a community in crisis in the late first century CE, both Peter and the Beloved Disciple have come to serve as exemplary and prototypical figures, each of which bolsters the faith of Christians. The Beloved Disciple serves as the prototype of discipleship which is based on an intimate relationship with Jesus, while Peter’s treatment during the last stages of the Gospel’s composition (especially chap. 21) serves to bolster the community’s confidence by recalling his “apostolic” authority.

Quast constructs his argument upon a thoroughgoing exegesis of all the texts which couple Peter with the Beloved Disciple or another unnamed disciple (which he takes, with Brown and others, to be possibly a reference to the same individual), as well as a few passages which focus primarily on Peter (cf. 1:35-42; 6:60-71; 13:21-30, 36-38; 18:15-18, 25-27; 19:25-27; 20:1-10; chap. 21). At least part of Quast’s goal is to challenge the views of such scholars as G. F. Snyder, S. Agourides, J. Neirynck, and A. H. Maynard, who detect clear strains of anti-Petrinism in John, by which Peter is juxtaposed to, and even superseded by, the Beloved Disciple. In doing so, Quast sides more closely with R. K. Mahoney, R. Schnackenburg, F. M. Braun, and O. Cullmann, who identify no explicit rivalry between Peter and the Beloved Disciple in John. Quast does well to point out that, far from being one of explicit rivalry, the relationship between Peter and the Beloved Disciple in John is more complex and subtle than that. It represents the evolving attitude of Johannine Christians toward “apostolic” Christians, and thus one may infer a kaleidoscopic shift in perspective between chaps. 13—20 and chap. 21.

To what extent such a shift may be attributed to the differences between the contributions of the evangelist and the final editor, Quast does not say. According to Quast, while John 1—12 treats Peter rather neutrally, chaps. 13—20 reflect a condescending attitude toward “apostolic” Christians, as held by Johannine Christians. The former do not possess the intimacy and spiritual insight of the latter and, unlike Johannine Christians, are overly dependent upon empirical evidence for their limited insight and faith. With chap. 21, however, comes the reflection of a clear shift of attitude. Not only is the image of Peter restored by his threefold reinstatement as shepherd of the flock (vv. 15-17), but his “primacy” over the Beloved Disciple is suggested by the latter’s following Peter and Jesus from afar and other evidence.

On the other hand, Quast works very hard to show that Peter is not actually denigrated anywhere in John. He still serves as the spokesman of the Twelve, and in comparison to his somewhat ambiguous presentation in the Synoptics, Quast believes (along with R. E. Brown, K. P. Donfried, and J. H. P. Reumann,
eds, *Peter in the New Testament* [Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 1973]) that he fares quite well in John. Nonetheless, Quast detects a definite shift that seeks to rectify the image of Peter in chap. 21 and is designed to offset the losses incurred by the Johannine schisms suggested implicitly in 6:66; 10:16; and 17:21 and explicitly in the epistles. Not only is the evangelist/editor concerned with unifying a community fractured by enthusiastic tendencies, but he also desires to rebuild the ties between Johannine and mainline Christianity. This accounts for what Quast interprets as John’s dual elevation of the figures of Peter and the Beloved Disciple. Apostolic Christianity needs intimate relationship with Jesus, and Johannine Christianity needs the stability of ecclesiastical authority.

As appealing as these insights are, and certainly some such transition must have occurred by the early second century at the latest, the foundation upon which Quast builds his case may be questioned with respect to at least two tendencies: First, despite Quast’s acknowledgement that in certain sections of John, Peter does indeed serve as a “foil” for the Beloved Disciple; he seems overly reluctant to admit any slighting of Peter and only does so after exhausting all alternative explanations. This inclination may affect the integrity of some of Quast’s exegetical findings, as well argued as they are. For instance, (1) scholars may rightfully take exception to Quast’s view that Peter is treated neutrally in John 1—12. The denial of Peter’s primacy in the calling narrative (1:40-49), when contrasted to Mark 1:16-20, may be more significant than Quast allows. When contrasted with Matthew 15:17-19, Peter’s confession in John 6:68-69 portrays Peter as pointing to Jesus as the sole source of life-giving authority by Jesus. These are by no means insignificant differences. (2) Far from seeing an exaltation of Peter in chaps. 13 and 21, one may also infer the opposite. While scholars rightly debate the significance of the change from *agapan* to *philein* in 21:15-17, Peter’s dialogue with Jesus is clearly set in the literary form of a misunderstanding dialogue, which for John has definite corrective, if not polemical, overtones. The same is true for Peter’s total incomprehension of Jesus’ enactment of servant leadership in 13:3-10. As with Nicodemus, the Jews, and Pilate, Peter is here cast in the role of a non-comprehending discussant, whose notions are corrected by the Johannine Jesus. Thus, while chap. 21 may restore the memory of Peter to at least some degree of positional authority, it is done with ambivalence, pointing incisively to an equal degree of *agapeic* responsibility. Given the pejorative treatment of “hireling” shepherds in chap. 10 and Peter’s absence from the crucifixion, the threefold admonition to feed and care for the sheep appears to be more of a corrective chastening of the episcopal/pastoral system than a straightforward blessing of it.

A second set of questions arises from Quast’s undertreatment of a significant strand of interpretation which seeks to understand the symbolic/ecclesiastical function of Peter’s memory in the late first century church (pp. 10-11). While Quast gives some consideration to the views of A. Kragerud, B. Lindars, R. Brown, and R. Collins on this topic, he completely ignores the contributions of E. Käsemann, J. Lieu, W. Meeks, and others who identify clear tensions between pneumatic/prophetic forms of church government (Johannine) and institutional/monarchic (Petrine) ones throughout the Fourth Gospel. Evidence for these tensions includes the denial of Peter’s primacy in the
calling narrative (1:35-51), the apparent competition between the *apostolos* and his Master (13:16—Quast may have undervalued the ecclesiological significance of Snyder’s work here), the central emphasis on the *parakletos* in John 14—16, the entrustment of Jesus’ mother to the Beloved Disciple (19:25-27), the expanded definition of apostolicity in 20:21-24, and Peter’s apparent envy of the Beloved Disciple (21:21).

While Quast is correct to insist that the relationship between Peter and the Beloved disciple is not personally adversarial, the ecclesiastical bias of the evangelist seems more pervasive and one-sided than he is willing to admit. The acknowledgement of Peter as the leader of the Twelve by no means implies that the evangelist approves of all that was being done in his wake. One would like to see Quast engage the contribution of Terrence V. Smith (*Petrine Controversies in Early Christianity*; WUNT 15; Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1985), for instance, who identifies John’s leveling portrayal of Peter as a counteractive attempt to deal with elitist claims and authoritarian actions effected in the name of Peter by other segments of the church. This is where Quast’s dichotomizing of “apostolic” and Johannine Christianity is infelicitous. A major thrust of Johannine theology is to expand the nature of the Apostolic Mission to all who encounter the Lord and are sent by him as witnesses, and the editor attributes these motifs to Jesus himself (eyewitness, i.e., apostolic tradition). Nonetheless, Quast does address the ecclesiastical context of Johannine Christianity (pp. 13-16, 125-33 and 167-70), and yet, one would like to see the first century ecclesiological implications of his findings developed further.

Quast’s monograph makes a significant contribution to Johannine studies and deserves a broad readership. While some scholars will disagree with several of his exegetical findings and his interpretive inclination, all of what he says is worth considering. Especially significant is his thesis that, for a Christian community undergoing schismatic crises in the late first century, both Peter and the Beloved Disciple had become prototypes for encouragement and reconciliation—intramurally and beyond.

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