

Herman Ridderbos. *The Gospel of John: A Theological Commentary*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997. xiv + 721 pp. \$42.00 paper.*

In a day when Johannine scholarship either marginalizes the gospel theologically or engages in exercises of appreciation of its literary art, this freshly translated commentary on the gospel of John, with its emphasis on theological exposition, comes as a breath of fresh air. Originally published in two volumes in 1987 and 1992 in Dutch, this excellent translation of Ridderbos's work takes its place as one of the best commentaries on John's gospel written in recent decades. Owing to its selective rather than comprehensive interaction with secondary literature, the present volume does not replace the standard commentaries on John such as Barrett, Brown, or Schnackenburg, but it helpfully supplements such works in its combination of sound exegesis and nurturing theological synthesis. What is more, Ridderbos's refusal to get sidetracked by issues irrelevant to the exegesis of a given passage in John's gospel, as well as the fact that his exegetical conclusions are generally sane and well-founded, renders his commentary on the whole more useful than works featuring more extensive discussion.

The major conversation partners of Ridderbos, who thus far has been known primarily for his contribution to Pauline theology, are Calvin, Schlatter, Bultmann, Brown, and Schnackenburg. Also, the author is conversant with a large spectrum of scholarship in many different languages. Even though the publication date of Ridderbos's work in English translation is 1997, the fact that the first volume of the Dutch original appeared in 1987 means that scholarship of the last ten to fifteen years could not be considered. Thus there is no interaction with the more recent works by Carson (1991), Pryor (1992), or Witherington (1996), to name but a few. But since Ridderbos's primary point of reference is the text rather than recent trends in interpretation, this turns out to be no significant liability.

One of the major hallmarks of Ridderbos's commentary is its sound methodology. The author displays considerable competence in his use of the entire spectrum of exegetical tools. His judicious use of textual criticism, Greek grammar and syntax, and background information, and his persistent focus on the task of elucidating John's theological message, make this work a model of exegetical method. Another strength of Ridderbos's work is its advocacy of a salvation-historical approach to John's gospel, recently argued persuasively by scholars such as John Pryor. This procedure places the gospel squarely within the historical, theological, and canonical flow of the biblical message rather than marginalizing it as proponents of various forms of the "Johannine community hypothesis" have done. Likewise helpful is Ridderbos's rejection of artificial attempts — much en vogue in recent, and not so recent, Johannine scholarship — to drive a wedge between John's gospel and the synoptics (e.g. p. 278, n. 71). With regard to word meanings, the author displays considerable sensitivity to background as well as literary context, appropriately affirming the priority of synchronic over diachronic analysis (p. 235, n. 133).

Ridderbos also shows himself to be a very capable exegete with regard to the gospel's literary flow, albeit without succumbing to many of the recent fads in narrative criticism. With a firm eye to historical matters, particularly in the life of Jesus, the author gives helpful attention to the unfolding of the Johannine narrative, yet always in relation to the larger theological purpose in John's gospel which the fourth evangelist pursues by literary means. Especially helpful, and exemplary in its methodology, is Ridderbos's discussion of the Johannine signs, which includes an important section on hermeneutical and exegetical considerations pertaining to signs and miracles in John (pp. 99–102). But where the author excels perhaps the most is in his discussions of the structural links between the component parts of the gospel, such as the relationship between chaps. 3 and 4, 5 and 6, or 5 and 9. In his synthetic grasp of John's gospel, Ridderbos has few if any peers.

As mentioned, Ridderbos consistently affirms the historical character of John's gospel. He contends that the concept of the incarnation of the Word is an eminently historical notion, so that

history and theology in John's gospel must not be separated, Regarding authorship, Ridderbos therefore stresses the "beloved disciple's" role as apostolic eyewitness (pp. 673–4), pointing also to the explicit and pointed identification of this disciple with the gospel's author in John 21:24 (p. 675). The "disciple whom Jesus loved," according to Ridderbos, is emphatically not merely a symbolic figure or an ideal, post-Easter disciple, After all, as Ridderbos is careful to note, this disciple is first introduced in the fourth gospel simply as "one of the disciples" (13:23) — who are presented in John's gospel as neither symbolic nor ideal. Moreover, what makes his witness so important is not merely his identity as an ideal, symbolic figure but precisely "his intimate relationship with the *earthly* Jesus, whose glory in *the flesh* he observed and experienced" first-hand (p. 472; emphasis Ridderbos's).

As might be expected in light of these observations, Ridderbos is skeptical regarding the various forms of a "Johannine community hypothesis" (pp. 677–80). In this he anticipates the rising groundswell of dissenting voices, recently joined by no lesser scholars than Martin Hengel (*Die johanneische Frage*, 1993) and Richard Bauckham (*The Gospels for All Christians*, 1997). The following extended quote, in interaction with two major proponents of such a view, Raymond Brown and J. Louis Martyn, may serve as a representative sample of Ridderbos's assessment of this approach that has achieved near-paradigmatic status in Johannine scholarship in the last twenty years. In an excursus on Nicodemus, the author comments,

One must guard against inferring from the fact that Nicodemus went to Jesus by night that he represents a certain type of faith, namely that of the "secret believers," a typology that is supposed to govern unfavorably his conduct from one end of the Gospel to the other. In the "two-level" theory the "figure" of Nicodemus even develops into an entire class of secret believers in the later synagogue with a "midrashic" christology of their own. Against this view we must advance the objection raised earlier [referring to his discussion of 5:1ff] that in this way the historical background against which the gospel story is staged and the horizon within which it is interpreted is progressively transposed from the first "level" (that of the historical Jesus) to the second (that of the Johannine community). The result is that all the people and dialogues in the Gospel increasingly lose not only their distinctiveness but also their historical character and become symbolic figures and symbolic dialogues that are then joined with great resourcefulness and imagination into a new historical structure, to which, by studying the Gospel from this perspective, scholars then skillfully add ever new features and details. (p. 283)

At another place, Ridderbos takes exception to Martyn's allegorical reading of John 10:16, lamenting that "the Fourth Gospel becomes one great cryptogram if one regards it as above all a reflection of conditions in the 'Johannine community' " (p. 364).

Such healthy skepticism, overall wise restraint with regard to trendy methodologies, and attention focused foremost on the theological message of the fourth Evangelist ensure the abiding value of this commentary. On this sound methodological base, Ridderbos proceeds to deal with the exegesis of various passages in John's gospel. Space permits but a few examples of Ridderbos's interpretive skill.

To begin with, Ridderbos, contrary to some recent proposals, rejects a wisdom background for the Prologue (pp. 31–6), maintaining that "there is not the slightest indication that the Evangelist

would want what he has to say about the Logos understood in light of the figure of Wisdom" (p. 34). Despite some surface similarities between passages such as Proverbs 8 and John's Prologue, the author notes that none of these stand up under closer scrutiny. For while in Proverbs, a concept (wisdom) is personified, John's Prologue follows precisely the opposite procedure: a person (Jesus) is presented in conceptual terms. Also, while wisdom belongs to the created world (Prov 8:22–23), the Logos is God and participates himself in creation (John 1:1–3). And while personifications of wisdom may best be classed as poetical or even "mythical," the presentation of Logos in John's Prologue hinges on its historical existence and incarnation (John 1:1, 14). Ridderbos's careful, nuanced treatment of the alleged wisdom background of John's Prologue constitutes one of many examples of what might be termed his "interpretive realism." Exegetical proof requires more than suggestive parallels, imaginative inferences, and conjectures concocted by the contemporary commentator.

Ridderbos's limited trust in the conventional procedures of the historical-critical method comes to the fore when dealing with the reference to a "second sign" in John 4:54. Unlike many recent interpreters, the author does not resort to source-critical explanations (on which see also his comments on p. 630, n. 4 and pp. 650–1) but interprets the sign in terms of an "encore" in the same place, Cana of Galilee. According to Ridderbos, rather than numbering off Jesus' signs — in which case, what are we to do with the references to intervening signs in the Johannine narrative in 2:23 and 3:2? — the reference is intended to ground Jesus' ministry in his home region of Galilee. By way of literary inclusion (cf. 2:11: "first sign" and 4:54: "second sign" in Cana of Galilee), John lays a geographical foundation for the rest of the gospel, which features repeated visits on the part of Jesus to Jerusalem at the occasion of Jewish feasts, all the way up to his death.

With regard to the "Bread of Life" discourse in chap. 6, Ridderbos strongly advocates a non-sacramental interpretation, offering a decisive refutation of Roman Catholic interpreters such as Brown or Schnackenburg. According to Ridderbos, the background for the "Bread of Life" discourse is not the Eucharist but Jesus' incarnation, issuing in his substitutionary, sacrificial death. What is linked in Jesus' statements is not *body* and blood (as in the Eucharist), but *flesh* and blood (as in references to Jesus' humanity resulting from the incarnation); hence the phrase "the flesh [and blood] of the Son of Man" (6:53). Thus the "Bread of Life" discourse does not refer to the church's eucharistic practice but to Jesus' historical assumption of humanity and his substitutionary cross-death.

Many more examples of this author's careful, nuanced interpretive skill and powerful synthetic grasp could be given. One thinks especially of Ridderbos's excursus on the alleged "anti-Semitism" of the fourth gospel (pp. 324–30) or his treatment of the "Paraclete" in the Johannine Farewell Discourse (pp. 499–504). Within Ridderbos's self-imposed restraints, this work has very few weaknesses. Of course, no one will agree with all of his interpretive conclusions — some, for example, may question whether it is quite as self-evident as Ridderbos claims that 20:30–31 refers to an edificatory rather than evangelistic purpose for John's gospel (p. 652), or chide the author for his reluctance to clearly identify John the son of Zebedee as the fourth Evangelist — but his views are always well-argued and presented persuasively. Occasionally, Ridderbos cites others' views in footnotes without indicating his own position, as in the case of the relationship between John's "dualism" of light and darkness and the Qumran literature (which has recently been challenged decisively by Richard Bauckham in a presentation at the 1997 Annual Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature; p. 293, n. 122). At these points, more explicit guidance of the reader would be desirable. Finally, on the trivial side, there are occasional problems with umlauts, such as in "johanneisch" (e.g. p. 20, n. 9; should be "johanneisch") or "Bornhäuser" (p. 187, n. 12; should be "Bornhäuser").

It takes a creative, synthetic, and spiritually astute mind to understand a work such as John's gospel and to aid others in coming to terms with its message. Ridderbos admirably displays his

interpretive mastery and theological grasp in this remarkable commentary. It is a pleasure to recommend it to scholars, pastors, seminarians, and interested students of Scripture alike for their own edification and use in proclamation.

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