

John's Wisdom: A Commentary on the Fourth Gospel. By Ben Witherington. Louisville: John Knox, 1995, ix + 411 pp., \$34.99 paper.*

As participants in the Johannine literature section of the Society of Biblical Literature can attest, the work of Johannine scholarship has taken a marked turn toward the absurd. In this climate it is soothing to hear the sane voice of one like Ben Witherington, Professor of New Testament Interpretation at Asbury Theological Seminary. Having written extensively on Jesus, Paul, the Synoptics and gender issues, Witherington here gives us the benefit of his considerable learning as applied to John's gospel. In an age when much scholarship gravitates toward one of two extremes, stale rewrites or daring yet improbable conjectures, Witherington provides us with an original and independent treatment. And while not everyone will agree with the author's proposals, Witherington's clear and persuasive mode of presentation will lead many to give serious consideration to his views.

The author's thesis is this: The gospel of John reflects a notable similarity to wisdom literature (such as Wisdom of Solomon 10–19, Proverbs 8, Sirach 24 or 1 Enoch 24, 70–72), especially in (1) the Logos hymn, (2) the "V-shaped" plot of the gospel (that is, from pre-existence to earth and back to heaven), (3) the "I am" sayings and discourses, (4) the signs, (5) the use of "Father" and "teacher-learner" language and (6) various aspects of John's Christology, soteriology and pneumatology, and John intended for his gospel to be read in light of sapiential literature.

Witherington's commentary proceeds section by section rather than verse by verse, which is helpful in grasping the message of larger units of John's gospel but at times results in loss of exegetical detail. Each section is divided into comments on "the historical horizon" (that is, exegesis of the text) and "bridging the horizons" (that is, contemporary application). Unfortunately, the outlines given in the introduction (p. 43) and in the actual commentary do not coincide. Also, Witherington frequently refers to his previous book *Jesus the Sage* for substantiation of his views, which makes it difficult for readers to follow who are not familiar with this work.

The author classifies the fourth gospel's genre as *bios*, that is, ancient biography, written in the mode of *drama*, to be used by Christians for evangelistic purposes. He contends that the "subject matter of the Fourth Gospel is *not* the contemporary experience of Johannine Christians, or even the history of the Johannine community, . . . but rather the story of Jesus Christ as . . . interpreted by the Beloved Disciple" (p. 4), disagreeing with much of contemporary Johannine scholarship. Also, Witherington maintains that the fourth gospel is not analogous to the modern novel, taking issue with Culpepper's famous study *The Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel*.

Still, the author advocates a form of the "Johannine community" hypothesis, drawing primarily on passages from the Johannine epistles that Witherington considers to be the earliest Johannine documents. Witherington distinguishes between the beloved disciple, eyewitness of at least some of Jesus' ministry, and the fourth evangelist, "an anonymous member of the Johannine community, likely a close friend and disciple of the Beloved Disciple" (p. 11). According to Witherington, the fourth evangelist occasionally appended his own commentary but otherwise developed the fourth gospel out of material the beloved disciple passed on. Some of this material, in turn, it is suggested, "probably ultimately goes back to Jesus himself" (p. 37).

Significantly, Witherington does not believe that the fourth gospel was written to address a current social crisis between the synagogue and the Johannine community. Rather, the Johannine community in Asia was from the very beginning an essentially separate entity from the synagogue, but at least in its early stages felt compelled to witness to the synagogue since it was made up partly of Jewish converts. Taking issue with both Rensberger and Neyrey, who tend to cast the fourth gospel in terms of dualistic sectarianism, Witherington detects in the gospel evidence of a pervasive

missionary orientation.

This is not the place to engage in detailed interaction with the author's densely argued, often intriguing proposals. A few comments must suffice here. First, the scenario Witherington suggests (John the sage casting Jesus as wisdom-be come-flesh) is certainly *possible*; it is unclear whether it is the most *plausible* reading of John's gospel. To my mind, Witherington does not adequately account for the complete absence of the term "wisdom" (σοφία) in both gospel and epistles. Witherington's discussion is frequently speculative, such as when he states that "the relationship of Jesus and the Word, or Jesus and Wisdom, was a matter of significant discussion in the Johannine community and thus the evangelist felt it necessary to provide parameters for that discussion" (p. 369, n. 55). Perhaps this is so, but how does the author know?

Second, Witherington argues strenuously that the beloved disciple is not John, the son of Zebedee. But which other close historical follower of Jesus known to us from the other gospels fits the fourth gospel's portrayal of the beloved disciple? Who was closely associated with Peter during Jesus' ministry and in the history of the early church? And is it merely a coincidence that almost everything Witherington postulates regarding the identity of the beloved disciple fits John, the son of Zebedee (even though Witherington himself disavows this conclusion and seems to be unaware of these striking similarities)? Who else is, in Witherington's own terms, (1) "a Judean disciple who was an eyewitness of at least some of the ministry of Jesus," (2) "originally follower of John the Baptist" and (3) "may have been called, or called himself, John, John the elder, or perhaps John the old man" (pp. 16–17)?

Still, there remains much to learn from this thought-provoking book. Witherington's skepticism regarding J. L. Martyn's "Johannine community hypothesis," his proposed genre of John as dramatic biography, and his emphasis on the fourth gospel's missionary orientation reflect sound independent judgment that runs counter to much of contemporary Johannine scholarship yet coheres better with the character of John's gospel than alternative proposals. Here is a commentary on John that merits careful consideration by scholars and serious students of Scripture alike. While remaining to be persuaded by its central thesis, I commend it to those who enjoy being stimulated by fresh, invigorating scholarship on one of the most fascinating books of Scripture.

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