

## A REVIEW ARTICLE COMMENTING ON COMMENTARIES ON THE BOOK OF JOHN

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The Fourth Gospel will soon be the object of Bible study in many churches. The purpose of this article is to give some hints about the study of the Gospel

In addition to the direct study of the Gospel's text and the use of commentaries, there are other considerations in preparing to teach the Fourth Gospel. The theology of this Gospel emphasizes the importance of signs and the predominance of glory. Robert Cook's *Theology of John* and W. F. Howard's *Christianity According to St. John* will assist the student in the theological content of the book.

A number of themes could be profitably studied in this Gospel, such as its Jewish background, omissions in the book, the role of John the Baptist, the Second Exodus theme--and Jesus as the "new Moses," controversy with the Jews, the Graeco-Roman background of John (e.g., logos, cosmos), the Upper Room Discourse, worship patterns, apologetic patterns, Jesus' Sonship and related personal titles, witness in the Fourth Gospel, and truth in this Gospel.

There are a number of volumes and articles which will assist in the literary study of the Fourth Gospel. Literary communication takes notice of the three aspects of the message: the author's literary intention, the written "signals" and the mindset of the original receivers of this message. It should not be overlooked that the text of Scripture may have a range of secondary purposes. Three books which will introduce the student to the literary study of John are R. A. Culpepper's *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel*, P. D. Duke's *Irony in the Fourth Gospel*, and L. Ryken's *How to Read the Bible as Literature*. A more advanced study in this vein is B. Olsson's *Structure and Meaning in the Fourth Gospel*. A helpful general introduction to literary study--will be found in *Literary Approaches to Biblical Interpretation* by T. Longman III.

For the student who has no facility with the Greek of the NT, a number of helps are available. There are word study helps like A. T. Robertson's *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, H. Alford's *New Testament*, M. Vincent's *Word Studies*, and the emphasis on word meanings in Barclay's well

known set of commentaries. Those who are adventuresome enough to read between the lines of Greek and benefit from the English explanations will greatly profit from the use of such recent commentaries as C. K. Barrett's masterful *The Gospel According to St. John* or well known standards like B. F. Wescott's *The Gospel According to St. John*. If you can find your way through theological divergences, you may wish to consult Brown's two volumes in the Anchor bible or Schnakenburg's three-volume set; both sets are by Roman Catholic authors. The two-volume commentary by Haenchen provides, in addition to textual study, an excellent and nearly exhaustive bibliography at the close of each section. The works of E. C. Hoskyns and C. H. Dodd still exert great influence.

A more exhaustive study of key words can be made by using a concordance such as Young's or Strong's, and then consultation of G. W. Bromiley's translation of *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, edited by Kittel and Friedrich (either the one-volume abridgement or the full ten-volume set). Brown's *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (3 volumes) can be utilized in thematic study when used with the Scripture Index to the *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* by D. Townsley and R. Bjork. It has over 1,250 references to locations in the three-volume set. Concerning the Fourth Gospel, additional help may be had from Trench's *Synonyms of the New Testament* and Earle's *Word Meanings in the New Testament*. A model of such doctrinal study can be found in M. Tenney's volume *Galatians, the Charter of Christian Liberty* where he employs several methods of Bible study.

Whenever the student looks for background studies on John, articles in the *Zondervan Pictorial Bible Dictionary* and the more recent *International Bible Encyclopedia* (vol. 2) will give a thorough grasp of the development of this Gospel, its characteristics, authorship, date, relationship to the other Gospels, and purpose. Alternative solutions to critical questions are proposed in both works. Seminal studies in this Gospel may be found in W. Graham Scroggie's *Guide to the Gospels* and in Morris' *Studies in the Fourth Gospel*. An example of a detailed study is to be found in Barger's *Bread from Heaven*, an exegetical study of the concept of Manna in this Gospel. A recent doctrinal study of interest is Gruenler's *The Trinity in the Gospel of John*. Even if one does not share all the author's conclusions, this study points one in the direction of how John can be studied doctrinally.

When looking for devotional studies in this Gospel, the reprint of J. C. Macaulay's *Expository Commentary* provides a homiletical outline in each of its 57 chapters and includes helpful illustrations. M. Boice has a multi-volumed expositional set on John. The material is largely homiletical and often evangelistic; the reader is challenged spiritually in each chapter. A helpful example of the devotional-expositional method is presented in the reprint of Rainsford's work on John 17, *Our Lord Prays for His Own*. This book of 476 pages is profitable for study and private meditation.

Of course, it is best to study any book of the Bible by direct study of the text, with appeal to reference works whenever necessary. Concordances, Bible dictionaries, word study helps, volumes dealing with geography, his-

torical background, and biblical customs will greatly enhance the first-hand study of the Word of God. Once these resources have been used, it is time to open up new lines of study and to provide confirmation through the employment of commentaries and periodical articles selected from an Index to Religious Periodical Literature. At times, a study guide like those on John by Jensen or Kysar will reinforce the unity of the book studied.

The following four commentaries have been specifically chosen for discussion because they are usable by everyone, their cost is not prohibitive, they have verse-by-verse exposition of the Greek text, and they are not conditioned by severe and unsympathetic methodologies that are destructive to confidence in the Bible. It needs to be emphasized that there are many books and commentaries that are useful to a certain readership, some of them are extremely technical, others, purposefully simplistic in their treatment of the Gospel of John. These four selected books have extensive bibliographies which will guide the advanced student for further study.

G. R. Beasley-Murray, *John*. Word Bible Commentary. Vol. 3. Waco: Word, 1987.

The academic exposure under which the author grew (Dodd, Gardner-Smith), his reading sources (Hoskyns, Schlatter, Brown, Bultmann and Barrett), and the range of his preparation (attested by the tables of abbreviations) give promise of a most useful commentary.

His introduction of 60 pages deal with the usual matters related to the nature of this Gospel, its origin in literature, tradition and religion, authorship, date and place of writing, its theology, purpose and structure. The author gives us the benefit of his study of a wide range of writers. His observations regarding the relation of the terms "sign" and "work" are informative (p. xi) as is his discussion of sources surrounding this Gospel and its preaching (p. xlii) by the whole church (p. xliv).

The authorship of the Gospel is in Beasley-Murray's mind anonymous, the uncertainty of identity not affecting the authority of the message. He refers to the unknown Beloved Disciple as the messenger of a tradition which began in Jerusalem and gradually took shape in other geographic areas.

Beasley-Murray's position that in addition to Christology, the theology of the book features soteriology and eschatology is well taken and ably demonstrated, including a suggestive list of 22 ways in which Jesus is confessed and described in John's Gospel. Beasley-Murray's interest centers more on the eschatological contents of John's Gospel than its soteriology. His treatment of the structure lacks theological cohesion, being built around three features: the Prologue, the Public Ministry of Jesus, and the Passion and Resurrection of Jesus. Each sub-segment of the outline carries a well-chosen special bibliography.

There are 25 sections in the commentary. Each section begins with a specific, detailed bibliography and is followed by a fresh translation of the verses in that segment. The reader will not always agree with certain points in translation. It would be best to compare any verse in question with other translations and other commentaries. A case in point is John 1:4 where Beasley-Murray's translation is, "What has come into being had its life in

him." The explanation in a footnote does not address the first clause. One might question the translation in v 5 by the word "grasp" and the rendering of the participle "by coming" in v 9. The word "children" is still a better rendering of the Greek idea than "son" (v 12). So, though the translation is quite adequate, it needs to be compared with well-accepted translations for the sake of certainty.

The author's treatment of the literary structure of the Prologue is very helpful, especially his comparison of the Greek and Hebrew terms for "word." It is apparent throughout the commentary that he has come to grips with the significant literature on the Fourth Gospel. An illustration of this concerns his treatment of the Cana miracle and though more should be said about the meaning and use of the word "sign," Beasley-Murray's comments are very informative. His treatment of the Temple Cleansing is a case in point. The student may not sympathize with the author's conclusions regarding source criticism (see p. 71) or his judgment about 7:53-8:11 but the comments will familiarize the reader with problems and prepared solutions. An example of this is found in the comments of chap 11, especially in connection with 11:25-26. His handling of the problems of chap 12, and especially his translation of the early part of chap 13, is indicative of the author's range of ability. The same helpfulness is exhibited in his handling of the word "abide" in chap 15. Though Beasley-Murray does not deal with the theological problems that most readers will encounter in this chapter, he does supply information that can help one refocus on the interpretation of the text. Likewise, he provides a helpful treatment of the trial of Jesus and an interesting sidelight on Pilate's character (pp. 332-34). There is a helpful chronology of the events of Jesus' arrest, examination, trials, passion and burial (p. 321); his comments on "It is finished" are well taken (19:30).

Beasley-Murray provides close to 50 pages on the resurrection and post-resurrection ministry of Jesus. The reader will wish that even more space could have been given to this section of the book which often is treated too briefly by commentators.

This up-to-date commentary will stimulate your imagination in Bible study. As in others of his books, he has given us a work that will be indispensable in the study of the Fourth Gospel.

Tenney, Merrill C. "The Gospel of John" in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*. Vol. 9. Ed. F. E. Gaebelin. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981.

This commentary series has replaced many other sets for a large segment of Bible students. It combines general exposition with notes for further study. Each book has an introduction, bibliography, and at least one map, following an outline. The translation found at the head of each portion of the outline is the NIV. The author has been Professor of Bible and Theology at Wheaton College and is now Emeritus.

The pages given to the study of John are about one-half of the number in Beasley-Murray's volume. The approach in the introduction is more general than that of the previous commentary. Although the bibliography is quite brief, the author has utilized a broader scope of Johannine literature than he quotes. Some distinctly evangelical authors are listed in the bibliography;

these are absent from the *Word* series. Because of the book's size, most comments are less extensive; this is also true of the treatment of critical problems, a number of which are not mentioned in this work. Foreign words are transliterated for the reader; there are occasional notes referring to Greek grammar (p. 30) and syntax (p. 34). Contact with the literature of other religions is mentioned, though not extensively, nor in depth.

The treatment of the Prologue, given the size of the commentary, is quite brief. Perhaps the author was pledged to accept the NIV translation; at any rate, he comes to no conclusion about the textual problem, which, based on the two most recent Greek editions, should read (at 1:18) "only or uniquely begotten God." Tenney has an interesting comparison between the days of the last part of chap 1, and the days of Jesus' last earthly week are worthy of further study.

There should be a full treatment of the word "miraculous sign" at 2:11 but there is not even a footnote, let alone linguistic observations about the terminology of miracle in the Gospels. There could also be a listing of the "signs" and their individual significance (p. 68 provides no indication of significance).

Tenney's corrective note on the NIV's "again" (3:3) is well taken. His definition of "born again" is helpful. The discussion of 3:5 is far from adequate, especially in view of the theological ramifications involved.

The author's conclusion about the account of the adulterous woman is basically the same as Beasley-Murray's. Tenney's footnote gives the teacher an adequate listing of text-critical evidence. There is no discussion of rabbinic teaching; such would enhance the information one needs to teach this passage. The connection between John 11:25 and the Pauline statement (1 Thess 4:16-17) is helpful. It does not seem to be important that Jesus' anger could be directed against unbelief-or even against the revelation of sin's consequences (11:33-35). The student will be interested in the comparison of the three words signifying Jesus' feelings in this passage.

Tenney's comments on the chronological problems of chap 13 are a good summary, though many will want a more extensive marshalling of the information. Mention is made of the significance of the lateness of Jesus' intrusion into the course of the Passover meal to wash the disciples' feet (13:2). His observation that Peter may have been speaking for the disciples in his protestation is interesting. Also useful is the alternate meaning of the word "cut off," but he does not explain it in relation to the statement that God, ". . . removes the dead wood from his church. . ." in 15:2. There is no chronological pattern provided for the arrest and trials of Jesus, though there is a brief discussion and a note emphasizing the "word" from the cross, "It is finished."

The comments on chaps 20 and 21 occupy 17 pages. There are notes on only nine of the verses of these two chapters. The notes on vv five and six and the note on angels in v 12 provide a few helps not found in the similar works. There is assistance in the note on page 19 that will qualify as one of the most informative in the entire volume. It would have been helpful to provide information about the fish beyond their approximate weight. There is a very

brief but suggestive indication of how to render the verb usually translated "we know."

Tenney's volume is not meant to be in the direction of a full commentary, but it is one that will render assistance to the Bible student who is not looking for an in-depth treatment of the text and its problems. This overview of the Gospel of John will provide a vantage point for those whose needs do not require a great deal of detailed information, but it may be consulted with profit by pastors as well as other Bible students.

Bruce, F. F. *The Gospel of John, Introduction, Exposition and Notes*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983.

The name of the author is well known to students of Pauline and Lukan studies. This commentary came out of his early retirement years; it is the outcome of 30 years of study.

Although the book is nearly 450 pages in length, it makes no attempt to be exhaustive. Its introduction to this Gospel is only 17 pages in length. Its emphasis is on the Evangelist, his gospel, and the message in the context of the early church. The outline consists of six major points. Bruce, in his preface, states he has written for the general Christian reader engaged in serious Bible study. Since it is not targeted for the professional or specialist, critical questions are only casually treated. There is a five-page bibliography of English language works from Westcott to Beasley-Murray. There are 56 notes concerning the introduction alone.

Chap 1 occupies pp. 28-65, with five and one-half pages of notes for further study. Each verse segment studied is grouped in clusters of one to five verses. Explanations are brief but provide a responsible, continuous exposition. Statements are substituted for explanations because of the intended scope but are a distillation of extensive study of the Johannine literature. An example of this procedure is illustrated in the study of such ideas as "word" (p. 29), third day (p. 30) and sign (p. 72).

Having declined to identify Nicodemus with a person named in the Talmud, Bruce regards Nicodemus an exception to most Pharisees. He bases this on grammatical considerations as well as the Pharisee's actions. He states there is no difference between being born from above and born of water and Spirit. The latter expression is used to remind Jesus' inquirer of OT phraseology. (Ezek 36:27).

The story of the adulterous woman is considered at the close of the commentary. As is the case with other authors, Bruce considers the account "a fragment of authentic gospel material not originally included in any of the four gospels." It is found interspersed in five locations in Luke and John. His comment that adultery is not committed by one person in solitude (p. 414) highlights the injustice of this attempt to trap Jesus. Bruce rejects the identification of this incident with the one cited in the Gospel according to the Hebrews. The author specifies Judas as the branch among his disciples which must be removed; he says in a related connection " . . . it may be implied that his word is the means used by the Father to perform his work of pruning" (p. 309) or cleansing.

Bruce distinguishes between the sour wine drunk by the soldiers guarding the crosses and the myrrh mixed wine which was a sedative (p. 373). He makes a knowledgeable comment about the hyssop sponge impaled on a Roman soldier's weapon. A connection is made between Jesus' cry of accomplishment and his anticipation of it in 17:4, and there is a concise, illuminating paragraph about the process of Christ's physical death (p. 375).

The author makes a significant connection between the Spirit imparted by Jesus (p. 392) and the verb employed in the LXX of Gen 2:7, where, as a consequence of the impartation, man became a living being, as well as the reference in Ezek 37:9. Bruce is correct in noting that there is more in the incident of the great fish catch, "than meets the eye" (p. 402). He calls it a parable of "their missionary activity." The author correctly recognizes the four pairs of synonyms in 21:15-17.

This volume is worth much more than its weight as a model of exegetically-based exposition. No student or professional should consider by-passing this splendid work.

Morris, Leon. *The Gospel According to John*. NICNT. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971.

The Principal of Ridley College, Melbourne, Australia, has given us an extensive commentary on the Fourth Gospel. After a few pages of contents, editor's forward and a one-page author's preface with acknowledgements, there is a commentary of 930 pages, including 41 pages of indices. There is a table of abbreviations that doubles as a bibliography.

The introduction to the book is composed of nine sections of three to five pages each, except for the discussion of authorship which is 22 pages. Of the four commentaries examined, only this one calls John the Apostle the author of this Gospel. He posits a pre-A.D. 70 date after a long oral tradition, with 20:31 as the Apostle's statement of purpose—a theological purpose without distortion of fact or discount of history. His observation about ancient historians and their writing is worth noticing (p. 48). His evaluation of the evidences for Johannine dependence must be considered; he sees no evidence of written connection with the Synoptics.

Morris cites an important catalog of those who reject displacement theories. He also surveys the theories of source criticism applied to John. He reminds us that the style of this Gospel is uniform, not denying that John made use of sources at Ephesus. The Apostle is aware of Judaism in the Hellenistic world of thought, and he is acquainted with the same Christ as Paul without trace of Paulinism or Gnosticism.

The history of the understanding of 1:7 sheds light on a long-standing problem of how to deal with the fact that "nothing is outside the range of his activity in creation and proto-Gnostic claims." Life is one of John's frequently used terms (36 times). He refers to the recipients of life as "children" of God, rather than "sons" (1:12). Another correction he makes is at 1:18, where "only begotten God" is the preferable translation on the basis of impressive textual evidence.

In Appendix G (p. 684ff), Morris discusses at length the word "sign" and sign-structure of John, but he reminds us that signs are purposed to display

glory. The interpretations of John 3:5, he reminds us, may be classified in three main groupings: Purification, Procreation and Water Baptism. His preference is for the second category. He reminds us that John enjoys using expressions that can be taken in more than one way.

His consideration of 7:53-8:11 comes in an appendix at the close of this book (p. 882ff). He does not understand this section as an authentic part of the Gospel. He reminds us that there are textual variations in addition to the question of its placement. He concedes that the story is ". . . true to the character of Jesus" (p. 983) and quite ancient. He recognizes the Pharisees aim at entrapment first of the woman, then of Jesus.

Jesus gives more than the promise of resurrection and life. He gives Himself, and He is both resurrection and life. With personal trust in Jesus, a man will live even though he dies. The life of the age to come may be experienced now. Morris is the only one of the four commentators to explain (in the reviewer's mind) the reason for Jesus' weeping. The other instance of His weeping is also in a context of Jewish unbelief. The verb "to weep" is only here in the NT, though the cognate noun occurs ten times.

The first footnote in chap 13 reminds us that there are many allusions in Jesus' Farewell Discourse to Moses's Farewell Discourse in Deuteronomy. Morris rejects the idea of Judas' heart being entered, preferring with some others to mean, "the devil made up his mind that Judas. . . ." There is, however, an altered reading of the text concerning the event that transpired "during supper."

Morris reminds us of the widespread background of the vine motif in the OT. He connects the true vine idea to that of the believer in Christ; the connection is that of vitality between Christ and His own. He is the only one of the four commentators who directly addresses the theological difficulties in 15:2. The point is that left to itself "a vine will produce a good deal of unproductive growth, thus pruning is an essential work of the Father."

Attention should be called to an entire series of added notes and appendices sprinkled through the book. One is at the end of his extensive treatment of the Roman trial of Jesus--a note on the Last Supper and the Passover. It explores several of the problems of this subject. His conclusions about chronology are some of the best features of the book. He concludes the note by offering some special bibliography.

Morris has an extensive footnote concerning "hyssop." He explains its connection with the Passover and with the Cross. In chap 19 he refuses a drink that would have dulled his mind but accepts a different kind that will moisten his dry throat. Amid suffering there is the thought of Jesus' peaceful death. His trust in His Father is indicated by the bowing of his head (only in John); the same expression is used for "going to bed."

The "forgiving" and retaining of sins (20:23) is explained, together with objections to understanding this as the power of forgiveness of sins of individual men. He notes also the importance of the perfect verb tense. The intention of the text is to remind the entire church that under the leadership of the Spirit they will express what has already been determined in heaven.



Even under Peter's expert organization, the net was too heavy with fish to be moved. Morris rejects any symbolic meaning to the number of fish caught, believing there is no actual evidence to support the view. It remains, however, the only other place (besides the feeding of the multitude) when the count of fish is provided. The differing views of Jesus' words about Peter's love is discussed in both text and in footnotes. The author's intent is to show Peter's restoration has been accomplished.

Certainly this is the best extended treatment of the Fourth Gospel, just as Bruce's work is the best shorter commentary.

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