

The Gospel According to John: A Literary and Theological Commentary. By Thomas L. Brodie. New York/Oxford: Oxford University, 1993, xv + 625 pp., \$55.00.

The subtitle identifies what the author holds to be original in his approach. Arguing that Johannine studies have in recent years split into two branches, those

focused on historical questions and those concerned with literary questions, Brodie for the most part opts for the latter course and links it to a theme that has been gathering increasing attention: spirituality. In some ways his subtitle would be more accurate if it read *A Literary and Spiritual Commentary*—assuming that “spiritual” is assigned contemporary and ill-defined content, rather than, say, Johannine or Pauline content.

The foundational structure Brodie works out is defined by “the most basic elements of human reality,” *viz.* “time,” “space,” and “the stages of life, particularly the stages of believing.” As for time, Brodie divides the book into three parts, defined by Passover feasts: part 1, from the beginning to the first Passover (1:1–2:22); part 2, from one Passover to the next (2:23 to chap. 6); part 3, the third year, subdivided into two sections, *viz.* toward death and the final Passover (chaps. 7–12), and the final Passover and epilogue (chaps. 13–21)—which means, of course, that mention of the Passover is the climax of the first two sections but not of the third. As for “the complementary role of space or geography,” Brodie draws attention to the “striking” fact that in John’s gospel Jesus goes up to Jerusalem not once but several times. The first such journey takes place during the feast of part 1, the second (“the feast of the Jews,” 5:1) is set in part 2, and the third (“the feast of tents,” 7:1–14) during part 3. All of these references are “highly schematic and symbolic,” which “does not necessarily mean they are unhistorical, but it highlights a dimension other than history.” This schematic movement depicts a move away from “Jerusalem” and toward “Galilee”—away from the Jews and the cultic to the Gentiles and the spiritual.

Thematically the “central focus” of the fourth gospel is “a portrayal of the diverse processes through which one embraces life.” Christology, as important as it is in John, serves soteriology. Each stage, corresponding to the three parts, marks spiritual advance. The first year, reported in part 1, is “the youthful stage in which life seems positive, and believing is relatively easy.” The second “reflects a middle-aged stage in which the awareness of sin and dividedness makes believing more difficult.” The third “reflects a more advanced stage in which the shadow of death threatens to destroy both life and belief.” This schema is worked out in conjunction with fairly predictable treatments of community/church, eucharist, believing, and so forth. A complementary aspect to the design of the book is that “life in general, the whole experience of a believer, is a process of descent and ascent. The life one received from God is gradually poured out until the final descent into death, but at the same time there can be an increasing ascent to God.”

The commentary works its way through the text with these priorities constantly constraining the discussion. Brodie interacts briefly with many of the major Johannine scholars from Westcott to Beasley-Murray (though some of the omissions are surprising). On the whole, he cites authors in order to buttress his position. Only rarely does he attempt an evaluation that evenhandedly weighs one of his proposals for structure and theme with those of other scholars.

The result is a well-written commentary notable for the consistency and clarity of its viewpoint. Scholars whose primary field is the Johannine corpus cannot afford to ignore this work. Nevertheless I must draw attention to two weaknesses, one relatively minor and the other very major indeed.

The relatively minor weakness is that in my view most of the major structural and thematic choices do not stand up to close scrutiny. The gospel of John is so interwoven that simple structures almost always break down under criticism. Is it likely that a first-century book that openly advertises itself as being a witness to Jesus and an exhortation to belief in him should be read primarily as a handbook of spiritual progression? How do “time” and “space” relate to the substantial numbers of literary structures Brodie largely ignores? And when the “essence of John’s theol-

ogy” is summarized as yet one more popular twentieth-century theme—“Jesus as the Spirit-giving healer of human dividedness”—all my antennae start sensing peculiar combinations of reductionism and anachronism.

But the more serious problem is that this book, despite its numerous suggestive insights, is a stellar example of much that is wrong with contemporary exegesis. It focuses so minutely on a peculiarly narrow and well-defined “reading” of a text that it leaves the text behind. I worry about “rhetorical” or “reader-response” or “structural” or “historical” readings of this or that Biblical text—not because I do not learn from them, but because the focus chosen is so narrow that the text is always in some measure distorted. The best and richest exegesis habitually looks at a text from many perspectives, even if it does not always deploy the contemporary and sometimes heavy-handed literary jargon. Long before the rise of literary criticism, the best exegesis looked for structures, themes, transitions, layering, and so forth—along with history, theology, relation to other Biblical books, and much more. But a commentary that selects one or two perspectives and rigidly restricts the view of the text by these perspectives always obfuscates more than it clarifies. One appreciates the clarifications but wishes they could have been embedded in a more helpful publication. Such works win a generous proportion of positive reviews, but the biggest block of commentary purchasers—namely, pastors—soon sense there is something amiss and go back to standard commentaries. The novel approach has its fifteen minutes in the sun and is soon out of print.

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