

THE JOHANNINE WRITINGS

Substantial and independent articles on the contribution made to biblical theology by the three (or five) elements of the Johannine corpus (viz. the Gospel of John, the three letters of John, and the Revelation of John) appear elsewhere in this Dictionary. This article is focused on what may be gleaned from the corpus as a whole. The special contribution of this corpus can be usefully considered under two headings: the biblical-theological significance of the Johannine writings construed as a corpus; and a selection of themes that are found in two or more books of the corpus and that have some importance for biblical theology.

The Biblical-Theological Significance of the Johannine Corpus

The Johannine corpus provides us with something unique in the NT. Like the Pauline corpus, it includes letters; like the Luke-Acts corpus, it includes a Gospel. Unlike any other, however, it is made up of a Gospel, three letters (two short and in line with common epistolary form, and one apparently a tractate letter), and an apocalypse.

The significance of this diversity turns on several highly contested matters. If there is only diversity among the documents, then the label 'Johannine writings' is nothing more than a flag of convenience imposed by erroneous patristic tradition, and the significance of the documents must be evaluated separately, one by one. But if there is some measure of deep unity or commonality shared by the five documents, then the tension between this unity and their transparent diversity provides invaluable insight into several matters (as we shall see). The extent and nature of this unity, however, are precisely what is contested. There are three overlapping disputes.

1. *Authorship*. If all five of the Johannine documents were written by separate individuals with minimal connection, or by at least three authors (the three letters sharing one author), then the degree of unity is considerably weakened. More energy will then be spent isolating what is theologically distinctive in each document, than in trying to treat the documents as part of a corpus defined by authorship.

2. *Johannine community*. Many who deny that the same person wrote the Fourth Gospel, the three letters of John and the book of Revelation, nevertheless argue that all the authors emerged from one 'Johannine school' or 'community'. This is probably the majority view today. It provides a different sort of continuity. It does not so much encourage the integration of 'Johannine theology' grounded in the documents, as an exploration of the diversity from document to document, so that the scholar can attempt to isolate different strands of thought

within the ostensible community, and perhaps even reconstruct something of the community's history.

3. *History*. Apart from the usual debates regarding the dating of each document, not a few scholars insist that the Fourth Gospel tells us little of what happened in the days of Jesus. Rather, it deploys a theological narrative to deal with problems in the church or community or school that 'John' is addressing towards the end of the 1st century. It may convey some useful pieces of information about the historical Jesus (shards of historical flotsam accidentally cast up, as it were), but its focus is on the church of the ninth or tenth decade. If this view is correct, then the time span ostensibly covered by the Johannine corpus is seriously diminished. Conversely, if the Fourth Gospel, however stylized its presentation and however interested its author may be in addressing readers at the end of the 1st century, is nevertheless a faithful witness to what happened 'back then' in Jesus' time, then the Johannine corpus as a whole spans the first six or seven decades of the church's life.

It is impossible to argue each disputed point here. For the record, in line with the majority view among Christian students during the past two thousand years (though out of step with today's majority), I think it highly probable that John the apostle wrote the Fourth Gospel and the three letters that traditionally bear his name. That he is also the 'John' of Revelation (Rev. 1:4) is plausible but much less certain, though there is cer- [p. 133] tainly some sort of personal connection between this book and the other documents of the Johannine corpus. Even if John hoped for very wide readership of his Gospel (*cf. R. Bauckham, *The Gospels for All Christians*), he had certain kinds of readers in mind, and his approach was shaped by those readers. Similarly, the three letters presuppose particular pastoral situations in concrete churches; moreover, however disputed the precise historical context of Revelation may be, few doubt that John is dealing with particular churches (Rev. 2–3) towards the end of the 1st century, as those churches find themselves in various spiritual, doctrinal and moral conditions but on the verge of systematic Roman persecution.

What we have, then, is a single corpus which takes us from sketches of the very beginning of the ministry of Jesus and the inauguration of the new covenant, through doctrinal and moral conflicts in defined churches, to the last document of what became the New Testament canon, a document that depicts Christianity's growing conflict with the wider world, and in apocalyptic imagery anticipates its ultimate resolution. God himself reigns, and through the triumph of the Lamb introduces the new heaven and the new earth, the home of righteousness.

Thus the Johannine writings constitute a microcosm of early Christianity, and a microcosm of the final defining documents of biblical theology. This is not to say that the Johannine writings are so complete that the rest of the NT is scarcely needed. Indeed, in some ways the themes defined by the Johannine writings are rather restricted; John is given to focusing on a small number of themes in their interplay and complexity, rather than to casting a wide net. In that sense, the Johannine contribution to biblical theology tends to be deep rather than broad. Nevertheless, as the next section shows, themes treated in various ways in the Johannine writings are often connected with emphases in the rest of the canon. Not only are there thematic

connections with other NT books, but there are many linkages with the OT that suggest how inner-canonical connections should be drawn.

A Selection of Themes Found in Two or More Books of the Johannine Writings

Among the themes in which the Johannine writings are especially rich is Christology. Only John directly assigns the title ‘the Word’ to Jesus (John 1:1; Rev. 19:13; possibly 1 John 1:1), though very similar theology is found elsewhere (*e.g. Heb. 1:1–4). Many NT writers find ways of bearing witness to Jesus’ uniqueness as a person: he is to be worshipped as God; he is a perfect human being, the historical man who is the product of miraculous incarnation (see e.g. Phil. 2:5–11). Yet perhaps the Johannine writings are the most insistent on this point. Jesus is directly described or addressed as God (John 1:1; 20:31); he shares the throne of God (Rev. *passim*). Yet he is the Word, God’s self-expression, who becomes flesh (John 1:14); he is the life that was manifested in such a way that people could hear him and see him and touch him (1 John 1:1–4). Moreover, this corpus that so strongly affirms his deity is also the corpus that most strenuously insists on his functional subordination to the Father (*e.g. John 5:16–30; 8:29; 14:31; Rev. 5), as part of its rich treatment of the ‘Son of God’ title. Other NT documents insist on the uniqueness of Jesus and his exclusive ability to save lost men and women (Acts 4:12), but the Johannine writings are especially emphatic about this (*e.g. John 14:6; 1 John *passim*; Rev. 5).

In all five of the Johannine writings there is a formal dualism that sets out fundamental issues with stark clarity. The polarities of this dualism (light and darkness, truth and lie, from above and from below, faith/obedience and unbelief/disobedience) are unambiguously present in the Fourth Gospel, become tied to crucial pastoral and ecclesiastical issues in the Johannine letters, and then take on apocalyptic overtones in Revelation. In the latter book, the contest between good and evil includes new polarities: Babylon and the new Jerusalem; the whore and the bride of the Lamb; the mark of the beast and the mark of the Lamb. In no case does the dualism of the Johannine writings jeopardize the sovereignty of the one God; Johannine dualism never becomes ontological dualism. But its stark antitheses convey one supreme benefit. Though they cannot deal very adequately with the shadings of good and evil and with the confusion of ambiguity, they absolutely forbid the fuzzy thinking and relativism that are characteristic of our age. In short, they identify and highlight the content of the fundamental issues. [p. 134]

Among those who study the NT it is a commonplace that there is a running, complementary tension between rejoicing in what God has already done through Christ (realized eschatology) and anticipating what God will finally do through Christ (futurist eschatology). The subtleties and shadings of the various emphases found in the NT are reflected, in various ways, within the Johannine writings. With its emphasis on eternal life secured *now* by faith, the Fourth Gospel falls on the side of realized eschatology. Nevertheless, it looks forward to the time when the Son of God will raise the dead on the last day (5:21, 25; 6:39–40). While not denying that there is an ultimate antichrist, 1 John insists that many antichrists have already gone out into the world, a fact which proves that it is already the ‘last hour’ (2:18). On the other hand, even though

the Revelation of John teaches the whole church to look to God's final triumph and to cry in anticipation, 'Come, Lord Jesus' (Rev. 22:20), that futurist eschatological stance is intended to teach believers to be faithful and persevering now.

Especially strong in the Gospel and first letter of John, though not absent elsewhere, is the emphasis on faith. More precisely, John's emphasis is on believing rather than faith; he avoids the noun, and uses the verb lavishly. Despite blunt antitheses (**e.g.* John 3:36; 1 John 5:1–5), John is not naïve; he is fully aware of the dangers of spurious faith, and does his best to warn against them, as he is also aware of the dangers of spurious love (1 John 3:16–20). In such passages he reminds us of James. Nevertheless, John 5:24 ('I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life', NIV) has strong connections with the Pauline formulation of justification by grace through faith.

John's teaching regarding the Holy Spirit, while it frequently overlaps with emphases found elsewhere in the NT, embraces several noteworthy features. Some of these have more to do with the distinctiveness of the formulation than with the uniqueness of the thought. Only John refers to the Holy Spirit as the 'Paraclete' (John 14–16, 'Counsellor'), whose task it is to call to mind and unfold all that Jesus taught, along with its significance; to convict the world of sin and righteousness and judgment; to be with and in the disciples, substituting for Jesus after his departure. Implicitly, of course, this latter point suggests that Jesus is the first 'Paraclete', which is explicitly affirmed in 1 John 2:1–2. 1 John makes a further contribution by insisting that all believers have received an 'anointing' (2:24–27), almost certainly a reference to the Holy Spirit. Some have linked this 'anointing' with what Paul regards as the witness of the Spirit (Rom. 8:15–16), though arguably in the context of the Johannine letters the anointing of the Holy Spirit is not some quasi-independent 'witness' but is manifest precisely in the teaching and conduct which (John insists) invariably attend true believers. References to the Spirit in Revelation are sparser. Either they are rather casual (**e.g.* Rev. 1:10), or they abound in subtle symbolism. For instance, at least some of the 'seven spirits' references may in fact refer to the Holy Spirit (**e.g.* Rev. 1:4), though admittedly the point is disputed.

The Johannine writings are rich in the theme of persecution, *i.e.* in picturing the people of God as necessarily facing some opposition from a world that does not know God, not least because this is the way the Master went. Although the treatments of the theme in the Fourth Gospel have their own flavour (**e.g.* John 15:18–25), they have their Synoptic counterparts (**e.g.* Matt. 10). In 1 and 2 John, the dominant opposition springs from a group that had once belonged to the church but had abandoned it, apparently in favour of some proto-gnostic heresy. Such a stance aligns the seceders with 'the world', about which nothing good can be said (1 John 2:15–17). Of course, John recognizes that the very vigilance he commends with respect to dangerous heresies and unchristian conduct may become an excuse in the hands of some to build little exclusivistic ecclesiastical empires, and this he roundly condemns and seeks to expose (3 John). But the Johannine writing that devotes most sustained thought to the status of the people of God as targets for the wrath of the dragon and of his associated beasts is Revelation. However

the book is interpreted, it is recognized to be a sustained encouragement to believers to be faithful to the end, in the assurance that God is in control, not Rome or any other pagan or satanic empire.

The two largest books of the Johannine corpus make important contributions to the biblical-theological theme of worship. When [p. 135] they cross over from the pages of the OT to the pages of the NT, worship terminology and emphases shift, on the whole, from a focus on the tabernacle/temple, the sacrificial system, priestly mediation, and prescribed feasts and fasts, to the uniqueness and finality of Jesus' sacrifice, and with it a corresponding enlargement of horizons. Worship is no longer bound up with the ancient temple cultus and priestly system, still less with an activity restricted to Sunday mornings; rather, it embraces all of life, as Christians learn to offer themselves to God as a continuing living sacrifice, so that everything they do is done to the glory of God. The Fourth Gospel contributes substantially to this development. Jesus insists that the true worshippers whom the Father seeks, in this new 'hour', are no longer tied to Jerusalem and its temple (or to any other geographical site), but worship him 'in spirit and in truth'. This expression means much more than 'sincerely'. Not only is the locus no longer constrained by the requirements of the Mosaic covenant, but true worship will be bound up with the 'truth', the truth of the revelation that has come exclusively through Jesus, through him who is 'the truth' (14:6). The worship theme in Revelation is sometimes subtle and sometimes explicit. Certainly John is implicitly inviting his readers to participate in the worship songs of heaven (**e.g.* 1:7; 4:11; 5:9–10, 12, 13; 11:15, 17–18; 12:10–12; 15:3–4; 19:1–3, 5, 6–8), singing that becomes for them not only God-centred adoration but a confession of God's sovereignty and of eschatological confidence. It is not for nothing that from Revelation 5 these hymns are devoted 'to him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb'.

Although some have argued that the Fourth Gospel depicts the death of Jesus solely in revelatory terms and with little grasp of such central NT themes as substitution and expiation, this view is clearly mistaken, as many have recognized. The presentation of Jesus Christ as substitutionary sacrifice in the Fourth Gospel is necessarily set forth in symbol-laden categories, as befits the pre-resurrection setting, but it is no less compelling for that. For instance, in John 6 Jesus is the bread of life. In the first century, bread was one of two staple foods: one either ate bread, or one died. Moreover, in an agrarian society everyone knew that virtually everything that human beings eat is the husk of what has died, whether meat or fish or barley or corn. So when Jesus says that he is the true bread from heaven who gives his life for the life of the world (6:51), he means that either he dies or we do, and unless he dies and we 'eat' him we will never have eternal life. Here, then, is substitution of the most rigorous kind. In John 10 Jesus is the good shepherd who gives his life for the sheep. In John 11, God providentially talks through Caiaphas so that the high priest speaks better than he knows; it is indeed better 'that one man die for the people' (11:50–51). However flexible the background of 'lamb of God' language (1:29), the Fourth Gospel as a whole surely indicates that Jesus is a sacrificial lamb. Small wonder, then, that in Revelation the vision of Revelation 4–5 figures so prominently. The only person who is capable of bringing about God's purposes for blessing and judgment (symbolized by the scroll in

his right hand) is the lion who is also the lamb, who emerges from the very throne of God. The symbolism depicts him as simultaneously a warrior-lamb (the seven horns, indicating perfection of kingly authority) and a slaughtered sacrifice, brutally slain yet now alive. The whole of Revelation could be titled ‘The Triumph of the Lamb’. 1 John shows that Christian assurance (5:13) is tied at least in part to transformed conduct and belief, but here too the fundamental *ground* of human acceptability before God is never human conduct, but ‘Jesus Christ, the Righteous One’, who is the propitiation for our sins (1 John 2:1–2).

Finally, something must be said of the use of the OT Scriptures in the Johannine corpus. John’s Gospel cites the OT much less frequently than does Matthew. The Johannine letters never quote the OT, and refer to only one OT figure (viz. Cain, 1 John 3:12). The book of Revelation is almost as sparing of direct quotations. Yet to say only this is to say far too little. Although the word ‘covenant’ occurs only once in the entire Johannine corpus, it has been shown that its thought (especially that of the Gospel) is profoundly covenantal (J. Pryor, *John*). Moreover, whether or not John’s Gospel quotes the OT on each point, it takes enormous pains to portray Jesus as the antitype of the temple, the manna, the great feasts of Israel, and more. 1 John makes telling use of Jeremiah 31 and related passages (for details, see Johannine Letters). And Revelation, for all that it is reluctant to quote the OT extensively, is [p. 136] saturated with the OT. Scarcely a verse is free from OT allusions or echoes. Sometimes merely the OT language is picked up; sometimes John constructs his argument to show that what he sees in visionary form is the fulfilment of OT anticipation. In short, scrupulous study of the use of antecedent Scripture in the Johannine writings contributes to a grasp not only of Johannine theology, but also of the ways in which the biblical documents cohere and depend on one another, and thus of genuinely *biblical* (*i.e. ‘whole bible’) theology.

Bibliography

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