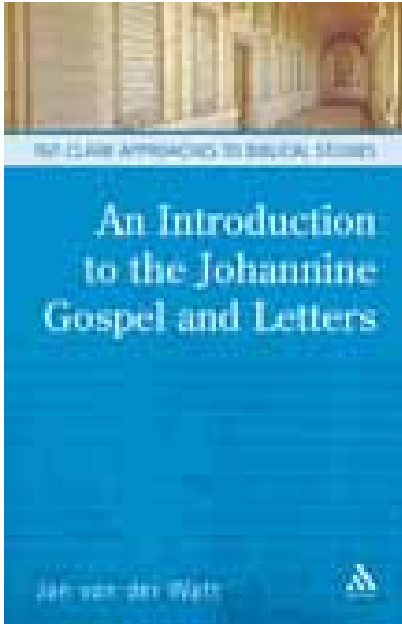


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Watt, Jan G. van der

An Introduction to the Johannine Gospel and Letters

T&T Clark Approaches to Biblical Studies

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Written for the student just beginning to work on John and the Johannine Letters, this book is crammed with useful information, attractively set out by a scholar who has given much of his life to matters Johannine. If there is a running theme through the diverse chapters, it is that the decisions a reader makes in one domain of Johannine studies invariably affect decisions one makes in other domains. The point is obvious to those working in the field, of course, but here it is set forth very convincingly for new students.

There are many ways a book like this could be organized. One could begin with the history of interpretation, for instance, or with a synchronic scan of current options. By and large, van der Watt sets the stage by working out of the text, especially in the first half of his book, which takes up the first two chapters, before turning to synchronic scans of the options in the second half. The first chapter helpfully outlines and summarizes what is in these documents; the second, by far the longest, provides a “Theological Analysis of the Johannine Literature” (26–77). In much briefer compass, chapters 3–6 sketch the relation of these documents to the Synoptic Gospels and to the Old Testament, the composition of the Gospel (“Multiple Sources or a Seamless Document?”), where the Gospel “comes from” (authorship, date, Johannine community or communities, possibility of a two-level drama, geographical provenance), and what van der Watt persists in calling the “ecology”

of the document (i.e., “Where Did the Author[s] of the Johannine Literature Get Their Ideas From?”). These four chapters tend to survey contemporary options and then gently sidle up to what van der Watt himself prefers by giving some light interaction with the biblical texts. The conclusion is a two-page summary. There are no indices, but van der Watt provides a four-page bibliography: a half-page of commentaries and “other literature” for the rest (books, no articles). A biblical index would have been helpful because at times, just as the reader thinks that the author has overlooked some important texts on the topic at hand, van der Watt helpfully treats the missing passages in some other location. Scattered through the book are excursuses, ranging in length from a few lines to about a page and a half, summarizing debate on such matters as Jesus as God, the role of the cross in salvation in John’s Gospel over against what is found in the Letters, adoption of the documents into the canon, and so forth. The first diagram I came across (34) I thought was useless and unhelpful, but van der Watt keeps adapting it and enhancing it as his discussion proceeds, and the sequence of these diagrams (43, 65, 74, 77) proves to be surprisingly effective and helpful.

Johannine scholarship today is so divided (see Paul N. Anderson, Felix Just, and Tom Thatcher, eds., *John, Jesus, and History, Volume 1: Critical Appraisals of Critical Views* [Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007]) that any introductory volume on John’s Gospel and Letters inevitably adopts some stances with which other scholars will disagree. Before I list a smattering of my own niggles, I want to reiterate that this book abounds in insight and many helpful ways of putting things. It is sufficiently comprehensive that it surveys many positions from which van der Watt himself demurs, but sufficiently a reflection of van der Watt’s own views that the book avoids the temptation to be ridiculously bland.

Nevertheless, my own partial list of complaints, in no particular order and of varying degrees of seriousness, must include the following. (1) The degree to which van der Watt interacts with secondary literature seems arbitrary. He can go for pages without mentioning any names—scholars will know what positions are being discussed, but students new to the field will not—and then elsewhere provide quite specific help. The choice seems to depend on nothing more than whimsy; certainly I could not discern a reason. (2) In a select bibliography, much must be left out. Nevertheless, I am surprised by no mention of Georg Strecker or Craig Blomberg and, on the mission theme (to which van der Watt devotes considerable attention), Andreas Koestenberger. Perhaps the manuscript was completed too long ago to include some of the highly competent recent material by Richard Bauckham (only *The Gospels for All Christians* gets a look in). Strangely, Leon Morris’s commentary is placed in the “other literature” section rather than with the commentaries; D. Moody Smith appears as “Moody Smith, D.” (3) On several fronts van der Watt exaggerates the degree of difference between John and 1 John.

He repeatedly insists that the Fourth Gospel is essentially a document characterized by realized eschatology, while 1 John embraces futurist eschatology: he asserts that 1 John 3:2 is the most futurist statement in this literature. This really will not do. John's Gospel preserves not only promise of resurrection at the last day (John 5; 6), but promise of Jesus' return (John 14). Again, while 1 John can talk about the blood of Jesus and speak of expiation/propitiation, John's Gospel steers clear of such terminology, so his understanding of the death of Christ is tied, according to van der Watt, not to some notion of atonement but to such themes as revelation. This, of course, is commonly received wisdom, but it depends far too narrowly on the presence or absence of a couple of words. Caiaphas certainly wants a substitutionary death—it is better for Jesus to die *instead* of the nation, so that the nation will not—while John sees a much more profound substitutionary death lurking behind his words. In John 10, the good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep. Jesus' being "lifted up" like the snake in the wilderness is precisely what enables those who believe in him to escape the wrath of God (note how John 3 ends). I have argued that in an agrarian culture the bread of life discourse would carry an overtone that sometimes escapes us: people reared in such culture know that virtually all the food we eat is at one time alive, and it dies so that we might live: either it dies or we do. If we do not eat the bread, we have no life in us. These—eschatology and atonement—are only two of several polarities van der Watt tries to establish that are simply too finely drawn. (4) The treatment of the Spirit-Paraclete is thin and unhelpful. (5) Not infrequently, van der Watt speaks of some problem or other as "not yet resolved." Embedded in this and similar expressions is the assumption that we are in a massive movement of advancing scientific research, but the model of advancing scientific research springs from the "hard" sciences. I doubt that such terminology is either accurate or helpful in most forms of literary or historical research. (6) On page 79 van der Watt asserts that the acceptance of the Gospel of John by gnostics in the second century led to skepticism about its status in some Christian circles. By the end of the century, however, Irenaeus used this Gospel to confute the gnostics. "This restored the status of the Gospel." This, of course, is historical nonsense. See now especially the work of Charles E. Hill, *The Johannine Corpus in the Early Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004). (7) I confess I am surprised that so much space is devoted to Rudolf Bultmann. (8) Now and then van der Watt lays out a possible position, taking considerable care to acknowledge the problems with it while quite fairly considering the pros and cons of alternatives, then suddenly treats his own preference as firmly established. For instance, considering the brevity of his discussion, he evenhandedly sets out the arguments for a single author, apostolic or otherwise, and for multiple authors/layers over an extended period of time. The issue is not resolved. Then we read, "The insight that the *Gospel* was constructed over a period of (many) years changed the way questions of date or place of origin are dealt with. Since not one person but many were involved over a longer period of time..." (121). (9) Considering the

technical literature on the subject, it is more than a little surprising that van der Watt takes *aposynagōgos* (9:22) as a reference to late first-century division between church and synagogue and thus evidence for a late date of the book. (10) Similarly, he acknowledges that J. Louis Martyn's two-level drama does not stand up to the evidence very well, but then, in common with many voices, he nevertheless takes this as a great insight. (11) Chapter 6, devoted to the "ecology" of the Fourth Gospel, explores where John gets his ideas from, and van der Watt explores Hellenism, Gnosticism, and diverse forms of Judaism. The discussion is competent and evenhanded, but why can there not be some discussion of the possibility that John received at least a few ideas from Jesus? (12) If I may utter one grumpy criticism, if only to bring the number of criticisms up to apostolic fullness, as interesting and challenging as reading Johannine documents may doubtless be, isn't it the sign of a singularly sheltered life that keeps referring to such reading as "an exciting adventure"?

Grumpiness satisfied, I happily affirm that this is a very useful book.