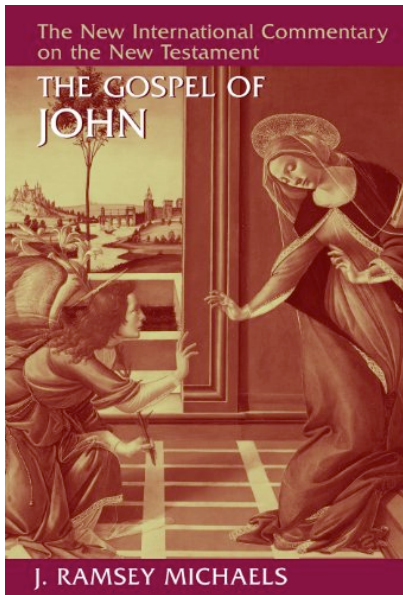


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Michaels, J. Ramsey

The Gospel of John

New International Commentary on the New Testament

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When my students ask if we really need yet another commentary on such-and-such a biblical book, I sometimes tell them that, even if we do not need another commentary, we can always do with more commentary writers. What I mean is that we must constantly produce people who wrestle with the biblical texts, or pretty soon no one will be able to do it very well. Normally great commentators arise out of a plethora of people writing commentaries. This is, of course, a polite way of conceding that many commentaries are not all that memorable. They contribute little by way of freshness, genuine insight, or mature scholarship. They are simply the price to pay for major contributions.

This commentary by Michaels is one of the major contributions. It is beautifully written and reflects decades of study and meditation and almost two decades of writing. A fair assessment requires that we know what priorities Michaels sets himself. His introduction is short (forty-two pages). He devotes relatively little space to discussion of possible “backgrounds” (Judaism, Gnosticism, Qumran, Hellenistic Judaism, and so forth), and when he deals with them he treats them as they come up in individual passages rather than in the introduction. The “most useful” commentary on which he depends is that of Bultmann. Bultmann, Michaels protests, is “admired for all the wrong reasons.... Bultmann’s theories of source, redaction, and displacement have not survived and should

not, yet his eye for detail is unsurpassed, and his close reading of the text as it stands—even when he discards it—perceptive and illuminating.” In short, “Bultmann interprets the Gospel correctly (more or less), finds it unacceptable, and then rewrites it. His greatness lies in the first of those three things, not the second or third.” As for his general approach to the text, Michaels labels it synchronic rather than diachronic. If he is asked, “Does the Gospel of John put words in Jesus’ mouth?” his reply, evident in the commentary, is, “Perhaps so, though not as often as some might think, and when I conclude that it does, my job as a commentator is to leave them there.” That answer will doubtless be less than satisfying to scholars of many stripes, but it enables Michaels to focus on the text as we have it.

As for the authorship of the Fourth Gospel, Michaels dismisses a second John allegedly supported by Papias (that position misreads Papias, Michaels insists), but when he works through other options, from the apostle to an unnamed brother of Jesus, he finally concludes that we cannot possibly know. The date of writing could be anywhere in the second half of the first century, though 21:23 suggests closer to the end of that period than the beginning, and 11:48 becomes more poignant if the book were written after the fall of Jerusalem. The section of the introduction that examines the truth claims of this Gospel asserts that the Evangelist makes no distinction between historical truth and theological truth but relies on “testimony” in both cases. As for the relation between this book and the Synoptics, Michaels leans toward John’s independence but holds that John was “familiar with many of the unwritten traditions” behind the Synoptics.

None of this is ground-breaking. The great strength of the commentary is its exegetical freshness, even when Michaels is not saying something entirely new. For instance, when he addresses the futurist eschatology of 5:28–29, Michaels argues that the tension modern readers perceive is tied up with our overly rigorous bifurcation of eschatology into present and future. By contrast, the Fourth Evangelist holds that the best argument for present eschatology is future eschatology: “If Jesus is going to raise the dead literally at the last day, why should we be surprised that he does so figuratively or spiritually even now?” Similarly, his handling of new birth (John 3) is subtle and convincing. His treatment of 6:51–59 acknowledges that “the Eucharistic interpretation makes some sense for even the earliest readers of the Gospel (who may have known and practiced the Lord’s Supper),” but, Michaels insists, “it makes no sense at all in the literary setting of the discourse at Capernaum.” The clear reference of flesh and blood is to Jesus’ death—but perhaps also to the sufferings of believers: eating Jesus’ flesh and drinking Jesus’ blood may conjure up not only benefiting from Jesus’ death, “but to some degree sharing or participating in that death” (Michaels adduces as parallels Matt 10:38–39; 16:24–25; Mark 8:34–35; Luke 9:23–24; 14:27; 17:33).

One should not expect Michaels to address questions he has already in principle set aside. Sometimes, however, one is surprised by what he does *not* consider. Two examples will suffice. In his excursus on the *pericope adulterae*, Michaels concludes, “When the story is read as part of the Gospel of John, regardless of when it may have been added to the Gospel, it becomes a kind of subtext to Jesus’ temple discourse at the Tent festival.” That is certainly an insightful observation, but what is lacking is a substantive discussion of the text-critical evidence, which discloses how late in history is the placement of this pericope at this position in the Gospel. Second, Michaels makes observations on the syntax of the Greek as if there have been no linguistic developments in the last half-century. Writing on 20:29, Michaels renders the aorists “Blessed are those who *did not see* and *believed*.” Then, of course, he has to explain why John chose verbal forms that are past-referring when the context leads us to expect something like “Blessed are those who *will believe* ... without having seen.” The solution he offers is unconvincing. Convincing or not, however, the application of aspect theory provides a more plausible explanation of the aorist. The same problem erupts in John 2:20 and elsewhere.

Yet one of the highest tributes to any commentary is this: Certainly when I am studying passages in John’s Gospel in the future, I will judge my study to be incomplete until I have pulled Michaels off the shelf and read him carefully.