

The Gospel of John: A Commentary. 2 vols. By Craig S. Keener. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003. xlviii + 1636 pp., \$79.95.

The publication of a major new commentary on John's Gospel is always a significant event in NT studies. While somewhat different in orientation, the scope of Keener's two-volume work puts him in the league of the likes of Raymond Brown and Rudolf Schnackenburg, each of whom produced multi-volume commentaries on this Gospel. As the accolades on the dust jacket from a "Who's Who" of Johannine scholars attest, Keener's commentary is set to make a major contribution to the field for years to come. The following review will seek to provide a representative (though obviously not exhaustive) assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of this monumental achievement. Beyond this I will interact with Keener's specific interpretive positions in my forthcoming BECNT commentary on the Gospel of John.

The present work begins with 330 pages of introduction and concludes with 400 pages of bibliography and indexes (the scope of both of which is astounding, especially considering the small font size used for the entire volume). Between these lengthy sections are 900 pages of closely argued commentary, an estimated third of which is footnotes, which leaves about 600 pages of commentary text. Perhaps if the reader realizes that out of 1600 pages only about 600 pages are actual commentary, this will make the task of working through Keener's tome seem a bit less daunting. Even so, in my judgment this commentary is not for the general reader, but for the Johannine specialist, who will find in the pages of Keener's work a treasure trove of ancient references to consult and explore.

The primary contribution to Johannine studies envisioned by Keener himself is that of examining the Gospel in light of its social-historical context. While Keener's commentary was published at the end of 2003, the bulk of the commentary was completed in 1997, which, in light of the furious pace of Johannine scholarship, does date his work to a certain extent. In some cases, the material may be even more dated, as in the case of Morris's commentary, where Keener refers to the original 1971 edition rather than the 1995 revised edition. At the same time, however, it must be said that Keener's bibliographic control is on the whole magisterial (though

hardly anyone can claim to be fully abreast of all of Johannine scholarship in this day and age any more).

With regard to introductory matters, Keener suggests that John falls into the general genre category of biography, though he believes that John has taken “more sermonic liberties” (p. 51). According to Keener, John is both historian and theologian, presupposing a Jewish salvation-historical perspective in which God reveals his character by his acts in history (p. 46). Keener provides extensive discussions on genre-related matters, such as the nature of the Johannine discourses, with sections on oral cultures; note-taking; disciples, learning, and memorization; and John’s discourses in relation to ancient speech-writing. The historical reliability of John’s Gospel is not viewed as a foregone conclusion, but Keener is open to establish it upon close investigation (pp. 79–80).

The almost sixty-page long section on authorship came as a pleasant surprise to me as one who affirms the Gospel’s apostolic authorship. Keener states at the outset that the apostolic authorship of John’s Gospel has often been opposed out of dogmatism and contends that “traditional conservative scholars have made a better case for Johannine authorship of the Gospel . . . than other scholars have made against it.” Keener (who did not affirm Matthean authorship in his recent Matthew commentary) contends that the case for Johannine authorship is stronger than that for Matthean, Markan, and Lukan (!) authorship (p. 83) and that he leans toward the view that “John [the apostle] is the author of the Gospel as we have it” (p. 83). In the following pages Keener provides a strong critique and refutation of the view (held, among others, by Martin Hengel) that Papias distinguished between the apostle John and a “John the elder.” Keener contends that Eusebius (our source for Papias’s writings) had an agenda (namely, that of driving a wedge between the apostle John as author of the Gospel and John the elder as author of the Apocalypse) that rendered him anything but unbiased and skewed his interpretation of Papias.

The thesis that the apostle John was the source of a tradition later reworked by others, likewise, according to Keener, is “a workable compromise solution” that “is tenable but probably not necessary” (p. 100). After an insightful discussion of the plausibility of postulating apostolic

authorship in the face of John's advanced age at the time of writing (John was at least eighty years old), Keener assesses Brown's theory of the Johannine community's development and concludes that this theory is "at most *possible*" (p. 110, italics his). He also states that Culpepper's argument in his seminal 1983 monograph *The Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel* is "brilliant" but one with which he disagrees (p. 112). Sections on the relationships between John's Gospel and the epistles and Revelation respectively (pp. 123–39) are well worth reading as well.

The following unit on "Social Contexts" deals with the date (mid-AD 90s), the provenance and location of John's audience (Roman Asia, most likely Ephesus or Smyrna), the question of whether or not John's community was a sect (not in a narrow sense, though the answer to this question depends largely on what one means by "sect"), Eastern Mediterranean backgrounds, and John's Gospel and gnosticism. A separate section is devoted to the Jewish context, particularly the diaspora Jewish background. Regarding the "Johannine community's" alleged conflict with the synagogue at the time of writing, Keener judges that the conflict dialogues in John's Gospel seem to reflect Johannine polemic against the synagogue leadership. He thinks that the *birkat-ha-minim* probably antedate the Gospel but deems it improbable that this was the main catalyst for the synagogue expulsion experienced by the "Johannine community."

As to purpose, Keener thinks an evangelistic purpose is unlikely and strongly argues for an edificatory purpose instead (citing 8:31–32). Regarding John's use of the set phrase "the Jews," Keener makes the intriguing suggestion that the expression is ironic (in that John grants the authorities the title they covet while in fact undermining their claim, citing Rev. 2:9; 3:9) and ought to be placed in quotation marks in translation to preserve the irony. The final two sections of the introduction are devoted to the revelatory motifs of knowledge, vision, and signs (whereby Keener affirms the essentially positive function of signs in John's Gospel) as well as to Christology and other theology (including discussions of messianic expectations in Judaism and uses of the title "Son of God" in ancient Judaism).

With regard to the actual commentary, Keener affirms that both the prologue and the epilogue were written by the author (i.e. the apostle John). According to Keener, the prologue

was probably added by the author after completing a first draft of the Gospel (pp. 333–34). Concerning the epilogue, Keener makes a strong case for the literary unity of John 21 as a chapter and as an integral part of the entire Gospel (pp. 1219–22). Keener’s discussion of 21:24–25 (pp. 1240–42), too, seems to be open (if not favorable) toward the possibility that the author of the entire Gospel wrote the Gospel’s final two verses (though he maintains that at least the plural in 21:24 would seem to represent others, apparently discarding the possibility of an “authorial we”). Keener does not comment on the implications of the first person singular “I suppose” in 21:25.

At places where others may see symbolic overtones, Keener repeatedly (and to my mind, refreshingly) opts for more straightforward literal readings, such as the reference to Jesus seeing Nathanael under a fig tree (according to Keener, probably mentioned simply because a specific landmark was necessary for some reason, p. 486) or the miraculous catch of fish (where he says the number 153 “could simply stem from an accurate memory of a careful count on the occasion, because fish had to be counted to be divided among fishermen,” p. 1233). Regarding the latter issue, he maintains that the number 153 may be no more symbolic than the reference to Peter swimming about 100 yards in the immediate context (21:8).

One place where Keener may not have spoken the last word are his attempted resolutions of the familiar quandaries of the Johannine temple cleansing and of the Johannine Passover chronology as it relates to the date and time of Jesus’ crucifixion. With regard to the former issue, Keener states that two temple cleansings are unlikely and that a harmonization of John’s chronology with that of the Synoptics is impossible. His (not uncommon) solution is that John here adapts Synoptic tradition to make an important theological point. According to Keener, it is historically implausible that Jesus would challenge the temple system early on and yet continue in public ministry for another two or three years, sometimes even visiting Jerusalem (though he does note that Jesus faces considerable hostility there when he does, pp. 518–19). To the contrary, I would maintain that an early temple cleansing accounts well for Jewish hostility toward Jesus almost from the beginning (see esp. 5:18) and that Jesus’ continuing in ministry for two or

three more years is eminently plausible historically in light of Jesus' pattern of withdrawal (3:22; 6:15; 7:9–10; 8:59; 10:40) and his caution from the very inception of his ministry in light of the fact that his "time" has not yet come (2:4; 7:6).

Keener's opening affirmation of apostolic authorship is not always carried through in the actual commentary proper. Since Keener believes in apostolic authorship, why speak of "John's tradition" in, for example, accounts of the miraculous feeding and of Jesus' walking on the water in chapter 6 as "independent" (pp. 671–72) rather than mentioning the possibility of eyewitness recollection? In another example, Keener comments at 7:1 that "John may scatter the material simply because he has independent tradition of earlier visits to Jerusalem" (p. 703), again without making any mention of the possibility of eyewitness testimony on John's part. Keener's language here is one of Robinson's "new look" that deals in traditions but has largely jettisoned the possibility of apostolic authorship. If Keener actually holds to the latter, why not make this a more consistent part of the detailed exegesis in his commentary?

On a different note, I was surprised to find that someone as keenly interested in background as Keener makes no effort to fit the events narrated in John's Gospel into an overall chronological framework. Clearly, there are difficulties that must be navigated in doing so, and certainty is hard to come by, but at least in principle, it seems that this would be a worthwhile endeavor for someone affirming the historical reliability of the Johannine narrative. Also, Keener has the occasional tendency to read historical background into the text. A case in point is his contention that Gentile slaves entered into a Jewish slave holder's service by performing an act of menial service and his proposal on that basis that "perhaps Jesus demonstrates his servitude in such a manner here" (i.e. at 13:1–17; p. 907).

At other times Keener floats a (rather implausible) background proposal only to reject it, such as adducing the Roman custom "in which the nearest kin would receive in the mouth the dying person's final breath to ensure the survival of that person's spirit" as a possible background for Jesus' giving up his spirit in 19:30b while subsequently informing the reader that this custom seems to have been a local Italian one largely removed from John's eastern Mediter-

ranean audience (p. 1149). One may legitimately wonder what, in those instances, is the utility for the reader, and for interpreting the Johannine text, of including these types of suggestions if even the author thinks them to be of improbable relevance. In my opinion, including this material unnecessarily clutters the presentation and makes it more difficult for the reader to screen out the information that is genuinely helpful for interpreting a given passage in John's Gospel. The same can be said for the oversupply of background information provided by Keener at many points of his commentary, sometimes clearly irrelevant to the exegesis of John's Gospel, such as his reference at 10:1 to the large number of thieves in Egyptian villages requiring the setting up of volunteers to guard their threshing floors at night (p. 803).

Owing to this characteristic failure on Keener's part to screen out irrelevant background data and his practice of providing a large data base of potentially apropos information for interpretation, the task of sifting through the material and determining its relevance or lack thereof falls on the reader. This is why the more likely primary audience is not regular Bible students but Johannine specialists, because only the latter will know how to benefit from a work that is perhaps more accurately characterized as an extensive background reference resource on John's Gospel than as a commentary proper (another recent example of this kind of genre that comes to mind is Quinn and Wacker's encyclopedic ECC commentary on Paul's letters to Timothy).

To conclude, Keener's commentary clearly is a masterpiece of amazing erudition, amassing a wealth of potentially relevant background information that will be of invaluable benefit to the discerning reader. Using this reference tool requires considerable exegetical skill and powers of judgment, which is why Keener's commentary is no replacement for more accessible commentaries on John's Gospel such as those by Carson, Ridderbos, or Morris. To illustrate the envisioned usefulness of Keener's work, in my Greek exegesis class on John's Gospel this coming summer, I plan to use one or several of the just mentioned commentaries as course texts. Keener's volume will be put on reserve in the library, and students will be encouraged to peruse his commentary according to their ability and research interest.

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