

The Johannine Exegesis of God: An Exploration into the Johannine Understanding of God. By Daniel Rathnakara Sadananda. Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft 121. Berlin/New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2004.

The present exploration of the Johannine understanding of God is a slightly revised and updated version of the author's dissertation completed under Andreas Lindemann at the Kirchliche Hochschule, Bethel, Bielefeld, Germany, in 1997. The Indian author, whose first experience with the topic was the Word Council of Churches Vancouver Assembly, sets out to investigate the following questions: (1) How does the Fourth Evangelist characterize God? (2) What is the relationship between John's God-language and his pluralistic environment? (3) Is the Fourth Gospel theocentric or Christocentric? (4) What are the implications of theology for the community's identity?

In Chapter 2, "Is Jesus God?" the author covers Thomas' confession of Jesus, Jesus' composure and sovereignty at his arrest, Jesus as the paschal lamb, the trial of Jesus, and "mission completed"—Jesus' victory in death, and the Johannine purpose statement. Somewhat puzzlingly, the author interprets Thomas' confession of Jesus as "my Lord and my God" as indicating "that the blessed are not those who confess Jesus as God, but those who believe the sign of resurrection without seeing" on the basis of the understanding that a "theocentric Jesus cannot himself become God!" (p. 44). However, this unduly pits Christology against theology and presupposes the supremacy of the latter over the former.

Chapter 3 takes up the question, "Is Jesus Equal to God?" with special reference to John 5:17–30. In his discussion, the author, in my view illegitimately, assumes Martyn's version of the "Johannine community hypothesis" (i.e. John's Gospel is a reflection of its struggle with the "Johannine community's" Jewish parent synagogue) and adopts his "two-level reading" hermeneutic (i.e. John's Gospel is primarily about the community's experience rather than Jesus' earthly ministry, p. 51). According to the author, the passage does not involve ditheism, "or make Jesus God" (p. 79), but rather unfolds the Father-Son relationship through a phenomenon he calls "God's emptying reciprocated by the Son's obedience and dependence" (p. 80; see further below).

Chapter 4 addresses the question of Jesus' pre-existence by analyzing John 8:12–59, which culminates in Jesus' statement, "Before Abraham was, I am." The author asks, "Is then the statement an assertion that Jesus is God?" (p. 113). He never clearly answers his own question, conceding only that "the community seems to be making the claim that Jesus is God" (p. 115), which, he contends, is the likely reason "for the tension and theological crisis between the Johannine community and the synagogue" (p. 115). According to the author, the "I am" of Jesus is not an act of self-propagation but of obedient revelation. The "I am" conveys the "salvific, relational intention of God" in Jesus, which has precedence over all other previous divine revelations in salvation history (p. 116).

Chapter 5 proceeds to discuss Jesus' statement in John 10:30, "The Father and I are one." Again, the author sees this in the context of "the self-emptying phenomenon" that enables the fourth evangelist "to balance both the Father's greatness and the Son's dependence" (p. 130). Chapter 6 takes up the question of "The God of the Johannine Jesus" in the final prayer of John 17, a "strikingly theo-centric text" (p. 149). Chapter 7 treats the "Incarnate Logos as Historical Theophany" (John 1:1–18). The Logos is viewed as "the relational face of God" that lends human existence genuineness and authenticity by way of "mythological personification" (p. 216,

touches of Bultmannian existentialism). The unique Son, Jesus, through his historical existence provides an exegesis of God.

Additional chapters focus on “Theology in Dialogue,” with Jews (John 3:1–21) as well as Samaritans (4:1–42; Chapters 8 and 9) and the person of the Paraclete in the Farewell Discourse (Chapter 10; a “source of creativity in the community” issuing “a call to embrace God,” pp. 272–73). Chapter 11 summarizes what the author terms the “Johannine Exegesis of God.” Under the rubric of “Johannine Theo-centric Christology,” one finds discussions of Agent Christology, Mediator Christology, “I am” Christology, and Oneness Christology. Drawing on 1 John, the author diagnoses that “the Johannine community provides a canonical example as to how theological hermetic [*sic*] could become too rigid and curb the creative theological faculty, thereby bringing destruction” (p. 190).

As the above sample quotes illustrate, this is a fresh effort at grasping John’s theological and Christological language. There are many loose ends, and many questionable inferences and dubious assertions (one example being that of viewing Jesus’ deity in terms of divine self-emptying). A major omission is the author’s failure to relate his own study to the historic theological and Christological formulations of the Church, for which John’s Gospel provided one of the major sources. This omission creates a vacuum in which one frequently finds formulations that are reminiscent of Bultmannian existentialism, neo-orthodoxy, or other questionable theological movements. Thus, while the author asks many of the right questions, he often does not have the right answers.

With a subject as significant as Scripture’s characterization of God and Christ, great care must be taken not to distort the data. The cumulative insights of twenty years of Church history are not to be jettisoned lightly. Also, the author’s lack of a confessional, doctrinal framework is evidenced in a less than high view of Scripture, such as when in closing he chastises 1 John as “too rigid,” “bland with polemical overtones,” and so on. Nevertheless, the author’s exegesis repays careful reading, and his iconoclastic approach to Johannine theology and Christology opens some new avenues of inquiry that may lead to a refinement of a more conventional understanding of John’s presentation of God and Christ. Overall, I would not recommend this book for the general reading public but only for the well-versed theologian who is able to plow through a fairly convoluted and at times confused mode of presentation.

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