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**The Gospel and Letters of John** by R. Alan Culpepper. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998; 327 Pages.

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The present commentary is considered the third voluminous book of R. A. Culpepper after his *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel* (1983) and *John, the Son of Zebedee: The Life of a Legend* (1994). This commentary cannot be compared with those classically known as verse by verse proceeding encyclopedic treasures written by Bultmann, Barrett, Schnackenburg and Brown. As a matter of fact Thomas Brodie's literary and theological commentary on John (1993) comes close to Culpepper's recent monography. Furthermore, Culpepper's book offers the reader an overview of the Johannine literature leaving only the Apocalypse untouched.

As the by-product of Culpepper's teaching activities on the theme over twenty years, this reader-centered commentary has references to history, theology, ethics and literary science. In the introduction the author reveals one of his methodological ways of thinking by saying that John is paradoxically both the most and the least historical of the four Gospels. In the interest of historical accuracy of John's gospel, geographical references and chronology are stressed. On the other hand, the style of Jesus' speeches is far from being considered as historical (p. 15). Excursions to the history of Hellenistic era in Palestine occur throughout the whole commentary and are illuminating for the reader.

Whereas Culpepper's *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel* introduced the reader to the literary enigmas of the Gospel of John and his *John, the Son of Zebedee* concentrated on historical issues, the present book adds to them theological considerations and blends all these issues to a unity. The outcome is that the book is a bit superficial, but at the same time interesting to read. Actually, this is consonant with the reader-centered attitude of Culpepper. The focus of his book is not on the world behind the texts as on the world created by the texts in their association with readers. Culpepper has succeeded in inviting the reader to enter the worlds of meaning created by his text on the Gospel of John and he holds the reader's interest until the last page.

Culpepper tries to solve the question of the origin and sources of the Fourth Gospel by simultaneously admitting and denying the dependence of the Fourth

Gospel upon the Synoptics. On the one hand, if Mark, Matthew, Luke and John all are Gospels and there were no Gospels before these, then if Mark was the first written Gospel, John as well as Matthew and Luke must have known Mark in order to be able to write a narrative so similar in form. On the other hand, the differences are so great that John can hardly have drawn on the Synoptics as a major source for his material. Culpepper attributes the general independence of the Johannine tradition to the Beloved Disciple and develops in a certain way further the theory of R. Brown (1979), who constructed a history of composition of the Fourth Gospel with several stages and writers. According to Culpepper, the authorship question prompts us to inquire about the sources of the Fourth Gospel. He is convinced that if it could be shown that the author used sources, then it could be argued that he was not an eyewitness or an apostle (p. 37). Culpepper admits that there is no consensus about the possible written sources (p. 39). And even if the existence of sources were well-founded, I from my own point of view think that to be an eyewitness and still to use sources are not mutually exclusive. No eyewitness can have been present everywhere and every time. Furthermore, every eyewitness is always free to use whatever sources if he wants to do so.

Culpepper explains the similarities and some of the differences between the Gospel and the Letters with the help of the theory of developing community. For example, if unbelief was the main sin (John 16:8–9), then because the opponents of the author of 1 John believed too, they thought they could not be guilty of sin. (1 John 1:8, 10) While supporting the same tradition, the author argues that those who reason this way are badly deceived. Actually, they do not believe, since they do not love their neighbor. Furthermore, refusal to believe in Jesus as the Christ come in flesh (1 John 4:2) leads to sin “unto death” (p. 274). However, Culpepper is aware of the danger of “mirror-reading” in his effort to piece together some of the concerns of the Johannine community by assuming that we can reconstruct the kind of situation that led to the expression of these concerns in the Gospel.

Culpepper comments treat the Gospel of John as history, literature and theology. The history of the Johannine community helps to explain the origin of the Johannine literature and he describes the Gospel and the Letters as the literature of that community. The story of the Johannine tradition begins with an eyewitness of the ministry of Jesus, one known from the Gospel as the Beloved Disciple. When the earliest Johannine Christians were forced to leave Judea, they may have gone to Antioch, or directly to Ephesus. The second period is the formation of the community. The teachings of the Beloved Disciple became the normative guide to the interpretation of Scripture and the words of Jesus. The community, shaken by the death of the Beloved Disciple, reflected further on the role of the Spirit in the community. This reflection resulted in an affirmation of the role of the Paraclete, who would be with them always. The last period is characterized by the emergence of a group advocating a “higher” Christology by minimizing the humanity of Jesus and by teaching that believers had been delivered from sin. Dissension resulted in the schism. The letters became written in order to warn the community.



The relationship between the final reduction of the Gospel and the composition of the Letters remains open. The letters presuppose at least the same tradition. The prologue to the Gospel, the references to the Beloved Disciple, and chapter 21 were probably added during this period. As a kind of conclusion Culpepper writes that the Gospel, by its own admission, is not an account of what the eyewitness saw and heard (cf. 12:16), but a later, post-Easter reflection on the significance of Jesus' ministry in the light of his resurrection (p. 133). In his view the Letters helped the Gospel to become accepted by the mainstream Church. Moreover, according to Culpepper the Muratorian Canon (A.D. 180–200) can be seen as a defense of the Gospel of John in a social context in which it had been called into question (p. 289).

At the end of his book, Culpepper describes the Fourth Gospel as a document of faith and its history of influence, among them the ethical challenge called into being by the application of some of the Gospel's sayings in anti-Jewish practices. Likewise he describes its theological exclusiveness and calls the interpreters to a new quest called *hermeneutics of ethical accountability* (pp. 302–305) That kind of work requires us to seek interpretations that are both faithful to the text and ethically responsible.

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