

[MJTM 13 (2011–2012)]

#### BOOK REVIEW

Andreas J. Köstenberger. *A Theology of John's Gospel and Letters: The Word, the Christ, the Son of God*. Biblical Theology of the New Testament. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009. 652 pp. Hdbk. ISBN 0310269865.

Andreas Köstenberger, whose recent major works on John's Gospel include *Father, Son and Spirit: The Trinity and John's Gospel* (2008) and *John* (2004), has written this inaugural volume for the Biblical Theology of the New Testament series, which is aimed at upper college and seminary-level students of New Testament theology, interpretation, and exegesis. The series' aim is "to make a significant contribution to the study of the major interrelated themes of Scripture in a holistic, context-sensitive, and spiritually nurturing manner" (p. 26) through a five-step process; namely, (1) a survey of recent scholarship, (2) a treatment of introductory issues, (3) a thematic commentary following the narrative flow of the document(s), (4) a treatment of individual themes, and (5) discussion of the relationship between a particular writing and the rest of the New Testament and the Bible.

The book consists of four major parts: Part 1 "The Historical Framework for Johannine Theology" (chapter 1); Part 2 "Literary Foundations for Johannine Theology" (chapters 2 to 5); Part 3 "Major Themes in Johannine Theology" (chapters 6 to 15); and finally, Part 4 "Johannine Theology and the Canon of Scripture" (chapter 16). This work represents a full-fledged Johannine theology, including an extensive forty-seven page bibliography and indices for Scripture, extra-biblical literature, subject, and author. It is also "a kind of sequel" to Köstenberger's own exegetical commentary on John.

According to Köstenberger, biblical theology can be

represented by two simple diagrams: the Hermeneutical Triad, and a two-level working model. The former consists of “History,” “Language/Literature,” and “Theology” (as the apex of the triangle). As to the latter, “underlying convictions” (historical setting and exegesis of individual passages) represents the lower level, and “biblical theology” (literary-theological reading and theological reflection) represents the upper level. The theology of a particular author based on a given text is derived through (1) repeated careful reading, and (2) special attention given to programmatic sections, such as the introduction, purpose statement, and other sections by which an author shows theological emphasis.

As the inaugural volume of a series, this book represents a bold and purposeful attempt to interpret John’s Gospel and Letters from a theological perspective. Köstenberger has amassed and interacted with a wide range of sources to present a theological interpretative approach to biblical studies. In the fourth chapter, (literary-theological reading of the Gospel) he succinctly highlights and weaves together significant Johannine theological themes such as the old and the new creation and temple, revelation, and Jesus’ fulfillment of the Jewish festal symbolism. In my opinion, this is one of the most well-written chapters of the book. Moreover, in spite of the rather scholarly target audience, Köstenberger writes in a very accessible style and includes many lists and charts.

This book, however, shows unevenness in terms of its treatment of the Gospel and the Letters and in terms of the section/chapter lengths. The literary-theological reading of John’s Gospel contains 88 pages and 166 footnotes, but its counterpart for John’s Letters is only 10 pages long and contains 11 mostly brief footnotes. Understandably, this imbalance may reflect the state of Johannine research, but it also reflects a choice of emphasis made by the author. Moreover, “Major Themes in Johannine Theology” (part 3) is structured around the *Gospel’s* purpose (John 20:30–31), introduction (John 1:1–18), and “preamble” to part two (John 13:1–3). The attention given to John’s letters is inadequate and does not do justice to the title and the purpose of the book. Furthermore, Parts 1 and 2 (Historical framework and

literary foundations) and Part 3 (major themes), each take up approximately 250 pages. But Part 4 (Johannine theology and the canon of Scripture), which contains only chapter 16 (Theology of John and other New Testament voices), has merely nineteen pages. One would expect that, as the chapter title indicates, the rest of the New Testament writings would occupy a more central and sustained treatment. Although the author refers to Old Testament themes in parts of the book, including John's use of the Old Testament, even there the topic is presented mostly in diagrammatic form. Moreover, the final section (the canon of Scripture) does not contain any discussion related to the Old Testament. Instead, such topics are scattered sporadically in related discussions, such as with the temple and the Jewish festivals in Part 3.

Although chapter 3 is entitled "Linguistic and Literary Dimensions of John's Gospel and Letters," it overwhelmingly favors the *literary* dimension (e.g., style, literary devices, and structure). The only explicit reference to "linguistics" is found in the author's claim that the "theme clusters" lay "the linguistic and conceptual groundwork for the discussion of many of the major Johannine themes" (p. 129). However, other than the word or word group's relative frequencies, he does not provide further justification for the choice of these theme clusters. His assumption that the higher the relative frequency is, the more significant is the word or word group remains open to debate. References to linguistic schools or theories and major linguistic works are not provided in the bibliography.

Some questions remain. For example, what are the relationships between John's Gospel and Letters, and the book of Revelation? This issue is raised in the Preface, but not followed up on in the rest of the book. In addition, what is the central biblical theological theme of John's Gospel, if there indeed is one? What about the main theme of John's Epistles? But the most important question is, what is biblical theology? How does one carry out such task? The author's assertions, such as that deriving theology from a text is done "through repeated careful reading and through special attention to programmatic sections," and "[m]ethodologically, Biblical Theology is inextricably

wedded to a study of the writings in question in their historical and literary settings” (p. 176) are helpful, but such method lacks a more systematic and descriptive apparatus. For example, it is yet to be seen if the same method of finding the “purpose statement” and “programmatic sections” can be equally applied to other New Testament writings which may not have a clearly stated purpose statement or easily identifiable programmatic sections.

Despite some of the points mentioned above, this book is a helpful resource for those who are interested in a new trend in Johannine and New Testament studies. Köstenberger has creatively adopted a combination of historical, literary, and exegetical approaches to the theological interpretation of the Johannine literature. In particular, his literary-theological synthesis of John’s Gospel is succinct, up-to-date, and informative.

Rocky Fong  
McMaster Divinity College