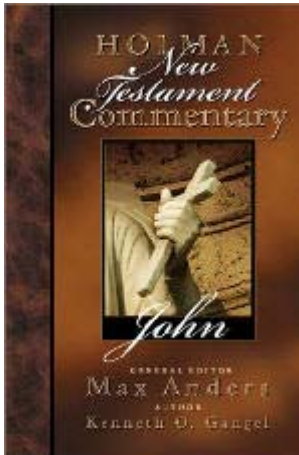


RBL 11/2002



Gangel, Kenneth O.

John

Holman New Testament Commentary 12

Series Editor: Max Anders. Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2000. Pp. 402 + xi, Cloth, \$16.99, ISBN 0805402047.

H. Stephen Brown
St. Francis College
Brooklyn Heights, NY 11201

Let us be absolutely clear at the outset by saying that this book will be of absolutely no use to the serious scholar of John—and be of only slightly more use to the lay reader seeking encouragement in her or his faith. It pains one to present such a direct and forthright statement but to do less would only open oneself to accusations of damning with faint praise, for one could be no more charitable than that in regards to this volume. Although this book purports to be for an adult Christian believer seeking information about her or his basic confessional documents, the gospels, it succeeds only in patronizing its audience with pabulum of quasi-pious platitudes, banal exegesis (if one may so praise this prose) and inane illustrations. In short, this volume is a condescending and, indeed, dishonest presentation of what the author purports to be the theological message of the Gospel of John, cut loose from the context of both academic scholarship of the gospel and the vast body of theological exegesis of the gospel. We can in no terms recommend this volume to the reader. In more detail, here is why:

This commentary is essentially de-contextualized, that is, it is cut loose from the world of scholarship, exegesis, and even the rest of the New Testament. One example comes from the introduction of the commentary where Gangel discusses basic issues on the provenance of the gospel, authorship and dating as well as purpose of the gospel and its style. On authorship, Gangel has no doubt that John the son of Zebedee was the author of the gospel, based primarily on the text and the fathers Theophilus, Irenaeus, Tertullian and Clement of Alexandria. However, he does not mention such basic data as that all the earliest manuscripts were anonymous. Further, he marginalizes any other opinion by stating that “[o]pponents of this view have usually come from theological camps outside mainline orthodoxy, such as the Gnostics” (p.1) without reference or

linkage to modern doubts as to Johannine authorship, and without remarking that Tertullian and Clement can hardly be thought of as “orthodox” and that Irenaeus had theological views that Gangel might consider heterodox at least. Moreover, the statement concerning “orthodoxy” is itself very concerning – to whose orthodoxy is he referring? Greek Orthodoxy? Russian? Baptist? On the dating of the text, Gangel seems to have recast evangelical Protestantism’s position. He states that “conservative scholars” consider 90 CE to be the likely date of composition though this was thought “radical” amongst the evangelicals at the beginning of the 20th century. He mentions that some scholars conclude an early to mid-second century composition, but dismisses these as those who wish to “...deny Johannine authorship” though on how this denial is accomplished he is silent. Interestingly, one of the reasons Gangel gives for John being composed later than the synoptics is that John occupies the fourth position in the New Testament because it was composed last of the gospels – he believes this is so because “...in the majority of manuscripts it is found in this position” (even though in some western manuscript traditions and among the Old Latin manuscripts John actually occupied the second position) and because, again, some Fathers state that John survived to the reign of Trajan. In none of these examples does Gangel use modern scholarship or theological exegesis to back up his assertions.

Indeed, there seems to have been almost no detailed research behind this commentary, for when we turn to the bibliography, we find very slim pickings. Most of the author’s research consisted of a series of commentaries geared toward the general Protestant church-goer rather than the serious student. Further, there are no Greek texts of the New Testament listed, let alone editions of the different Greek manuscripts of the gospel, no Fathers nor other ancient sources. Whatever references to the Greek text that are made, are only of single words scatter hither and yon in the text. Among secondary sources we find that the author chooses to orbit among a few similar, and very conservative, commentators who fit his own theological viewpoint. Otherwise, most of what is listed in the all too brief bibliography comes from evangelical protestant publishing houses, or are decades old and reflect the kind of hermeneutical outlook that was much more common in academia at the beginning of the twentieth century than at its end. This last observation leads us to the second deficit of this book:

This commentary is essentially blinded by its own kerygmatic worldview, meaning that the answers found in the author’s version of evangelical Protestantism supersede the text of the gospel itself. For example, on page 183, the author states that John the Baptizer was the first prophet in 400 years, though nothing in the text would support this, and other texts (such as Josephus) tell us that there were other prophets preaching to the people at the same time as Jesus. However, according to the dispensational theology of some evangelical groups, there had been a break in the work of the prophets between the re-founding of the Temple under Ezra and Nehemiah and John. Again, on page 213, the author states that “Death is not a natural extension of life...” This statement ties directly into dispensationalist theology that death was the result of original sin and ignores two thousand years of other Christian theology. Still further, on page 55 we read, “A person need not sin blatantly to perish. One may simply

fail to act positively in receiving God's gift." Again, this sits at the center of dispensationalist dogma, for in this theological view, one is saved by accepting the gift of the work of the cross – again ignoring the vast majority of Christian thinking that addresses this very idea, but in different ways.

This commentary is also condescending, patronizing, and even dishonest in that the commentator always talks down to the reader, feeding his own arguments irrespective of their purported logic, or lack thereof. For example, on page 48 (commenting on the dialogue between Nicodemus and Jesus), the author makes a statement that verges on the anti-Semitic: "The Pharisees were legalistically bound to every aspect of the law and had made ridiculous interpretations and applications (such as not traveling beyond a thousand yards on the Sabbath)." This is both a blatant disregarding of the honest search for meaning by Judaism over the last two millennia as well as an historical misstatement of who the Pharisees were. Similarly, on page 203 (regarding the dialogue on the Good Shepherd), the author asserts that, "Not all Jews were unbelievers. Not all followed the rejecting, murderous intentions of the Pharisees." Again, this characterizes the people of first century Judea in a way that is completely anachronistic and dishonest. Again, the statement regarding the Pharisees completely disregards what we now know of this group.

Similarly, on page 330, the author uses the statements of a grieving father of one of the victims of the Columbine school-shooting incident to draw attention to what he sees as the need for a spiritual awakening in the United States, disregarding (1) that America is in the midst of a spiritual awakening and (2) that the events at Columbine have roots in causes more deep and complex than simply a lack of God. Simply, the use of this statement is an inappropriate non sequitur. Again on page 346, the author uses the mistakes made on a postal stamp series in 1999 as illustrative of the "...careless handling of justice" in John 18 and 19, meaning the trial and execution of Jesus. The use of a trivial mistake made through the ignorance and/or sloppiness of a government employee as indicative of the deadly serious administration of the procurator Pontius Pilate is stunning. Other examples of this kind of exposition abound in the text, but we need not continue.

In the end all of these examples, and the many for which there was no room to repeat, lead us to the conclusion that we cannot recommend this book. In truth, it is painful to write a review such as this, for we can understand the basic theological standpoint of the author; indeed we share it. However, the essential nature of interpretation must be honesty to the source, that is the Bible itself. Whereas the theology of much of the evangelical and dispensationalist movement in America has much to offer, it is not well served by ignoring the depths of confessional belief, shared by other Christians and other religions, or by ignoring the honest and fruitful explorations into the text of the Gospel of John itself. Indeed, the willful ignoring of more than two centuries of scholarship on the history of the New Testament is symptomatic of the theological starting point for this commentary – that all thought, all scholarship must be subordinate to confession, even if it results in the suborning of knowledge to kerygma. Unfortunately, that is precisely what this commentary accomplishes, to its own detriment.