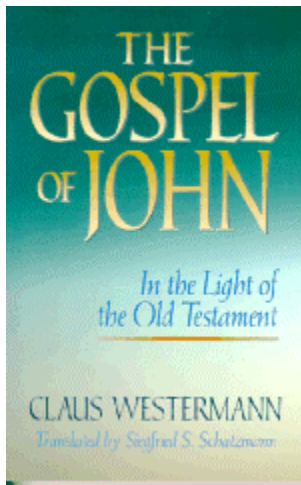


RBL 12/09/1999



Westermann, Claus

The Gospel of John: In the light of the Old Testament

Translated by Siegfried Schatzmann

Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1998. Pp. vi + 106,
Paperback, \$9.95, ISBN 1565632370.

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The focus of this brief monograph, by noted Old Testament scholar Claus Westermann, is much narrower than the title seems to indicate. The book is not a comprehensive study of the influence of the Hebrew Bible on the Gospel as a whole, nor on such Johannine characters and themes as Abraham, Moses, Logos, Law, etc. Rather, Westermann mainly presents a form- and redaction-critical study of the "Controversy Dialogues," which he believes are later additions to the Gospel. He divides these between an earlier layer (compatible with the thought of the OT and the original Gospel) and a later layer (gnostic additions incompatible with the rest of John).

The book consists of five brief chapters and an extended epilogue. In order to understand Westermann's main thesis more easily and completely, I would recommend reading the Epilogue first. Here Westermann discusses some contributions by six other German scholars, contrasting his own approach with theirs. Overall, he applauds those who recognize gnostic elements in the Fourth Gospel, but disagrees with those who see the Gospel as a uniform whole. He agrees with Bultmann that there are multiple layers in the Gospel, but disputes Bultmann's proposal about a prior collection of discourses. Westermann argues that the gnostic elements stem from later redactional activity rather than from an older gnostic source. Westermann agrees with Bornkamm that the Johannine Jesus is mainly presented as an historical human character, rather than a gnostic redeemer figure, but he disagrees with Bornkamm's assertion that faith only began at the moment of Jesus' farewell, since this would make the historical Jesus irrelevant for salvation. Westermann faults Käsemann and Schottroff for considering

John as gnostic in its entirety, thereby failing to see the inconsistencies within the Gospel and overemphasizing the presentation of Jesus as a divine redeemer figure. In contrast, he argues that gnostic elements are found only in a few late additions to John, namely some of the controversy dialogues, and that the bulk of the Gospel reflects the historical reality of the human Jesus. Since Wengst mainly attempts to locate the time and place of John's composition, rather than the question of its gnostic character, one wonders why Westermann included him in his brief discussion of other scholars' works. Finally, Westermann strongly opposes Thyen and others who read this Gospel as a literary narrative whole. He argues that such synchronic readings fail to account for the contrasts within the Fourth Gospel, which can only be explained by recognizing the diachronic processes of redaction.

If one understands how Westermann differs from these other scholars, then his book is fairly easy to comprehend. In a brief introductory chapter, he asserts that "it is no longer possible to conduct Old and New Testament exegesis in isolation from one another" (p. 1), especially since the life and history of Jesus of Nazareth "cannot be understood except against the backdrop of the Old Testament" (p. 2). His primary methodology, therefore, is to distinguish those parts of the Gospel that he considers older, since they are similar to the Old Testament, from later additions to the Gospel, which he deems incompatible with Old Testament thought. Thus for the Johannine Prologue he distinguishes between the original text (vv. 1, 3-4, 10-12ac, 14, 16, and 18 only), the gnostic revisions (vv. 2, 5, 9, 12b, and 13), and some later additions about John the Baptist and Moses (vv. 6-8, 15, 17). He also emphasizes that John 1:14 ("the Word became flesh") tells of an historical "event" rather than a theological concept.

In Chapter 2, Westermann first suggests a four-part structure for John, encapsulated in 1:11-12 and played out in chaps. 1-6, 7-12, 13-17, and 18-21, respectively. He then very briefly discusses the actions and speeches of Jesus, arguing that apart from the controversy dialogues of chaps. 5-8 and 10, the Gospel forms a unified whole that contains "only scant traces of gnostic expansions and derivations" (p. 22). He also frequently reiterates that it is an "account" or historical report, rather than a "narrative" or literary composition.

The third and longest chapter provides a more detailed analysis of the "Controversy Dialogues" (John 5:17-47; 6:25-65; 7:14-36; 8:12-59; and 10:22-39), which Westermann calls "a foreign element in the Gospel of John" (p. 24). He then subdivides these additions into two groups. The "earlier layer" (most of chaps. 5, 7, 10) still corresponds closely with the original Gospel, presenting Jesus as a prophet sent by God, whose words and actions are just like the OT prophets. On the other hand, the "later layer" (most of chaps. 6, 8) is purely dualistic and gnostic in its language and Christology, emphasizing the contrasts and conflicts between "Jesus" and "the Jews," neither of which are historical characters any longer. In the earlier layer, Jesus "invites to salvation," while in the later layer, Jesus "repels and excludes." This later layer Westermann considers compatible

neither with the Old Testament nor with the words of the historical Jesus of Nazareth ; rather, it must come from later gnostic interpretations of Jesus' life.

Westermann's fourth chapter briefly discusses ten points of contrast between the OT and John, concluding once again that "the contrast with the Old Testament is the decisive criterion in distinguishing between gnostic motifs and those of the Gospel" (p. 69). In a final chapter of "Conclusions," Westermann all too briefly asserts that the gnostic additions to John are similar to Pauline thought (cf. 2 Cor 5:15-16), since they devalue the words and actions of the earthly Jesus. In his "Closing Remarks," Westermann again stresses the historical character of most of John's Gospel, asserting that it is not a literary "narrative" but rather an historical "account" (pp. 73-77).

The English translation, by Siegfried Schatzmann, is done very well. The few passages that are awkward in English are already somewhat awkward in Westermann's original German text. The book contains no footnotes or endnotes, and only a few bibliographic references in the Epilogue. Hendrickson Publishers are to be thanked for adding a comprehensive "Scripture Index," which was not included in the original German edition.