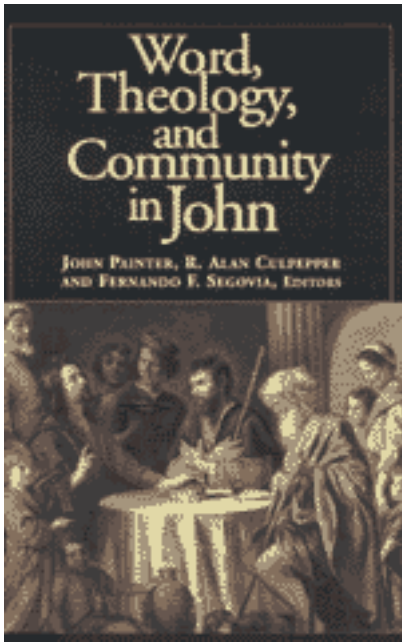


RBL 05/2004



**Painter, John, R. Alan Culpepper, and Fernando F. Segovia, eds.**

*Word, Theology, and Community in John*

St. Louis: Chalice, 2002. Pp. xii + 244. Paper. \$32.99.  
ISBN 0827242468.

Steven A. Hunt  
Gordon College  
Barrington, NH 03825

*Word, Theology, and Community in John* offers a compilation of essays by an international team of scholars, many of whom seemingly have devoted their entire careers to the study of John's Gospel. It is therefore a fitting tribute to their honoree, Robert Kysar.

In chapter 1, John Painter first introduces the reader to the life and work of Robert Kysar (a *Cursus Vitae* concludes the chapter). He then introduces the volume itself with a fairly thorough summary of each essay contained therein.

Johannes Beutler's essay, "Faith and Confession: The Purpose of John," basically assumes the present subjunctive πιστεύητε for the critical textual variant in 20:31 and then uses that understanding of the purpose statement as a jumping-off point "to show by examples how the narrative strategy of John is used to present characters who show increasing courage in confessing Christ even with the danger of losing their lives" (20). To that end he investigates the confessions of a number of different characters who show up in the narrative (whether repeatedly, such as Nicodemus, Peter, and the Beloved Disciple, or only once, such as the Samaritan woman, the man born blind, and Joseph of Arimathea). Unfortunately, this part of the study is only six pages long, and one gets the

sense that he is only scratching the surface of his subject. His conclusion, however, may prove prescient for Christians: “in a moment of history in which Christianity has ceased to be the leading culture of the leading nations, and where hostility toward Christian faith and its adherents has increased in many countries, this message of the Fourth Gospel merits reconsideration” (30).

In his refreshingly provocative article, “John 1:1–18 as Entrée into Johannine Reality: Representation and Ramifications,” Fernando Segovia offers an intriguing look at this “privileged introduction” and “key summary of the narrative” (34). Segovia understands the Gospel as a life of Jesus in the broader Greco-Roman tradition and therefore sees 1:1–18 as the account of Jesus’ origins common in such biographies. He understands the prologue to be setting the stage also for the motif of Jesus “cosmic journey” that pervades the Gospel (34). The prologue “reveals from the start the proper identity and unique role of the protagonist: Jesus as the embodiment of the Word of God in the human world, a result of the Word of God’s journey from the other-world into the this-world. . . . therefore, these verses present a divine-human figure: the Word of God away from its home—the world of glory—and in the diaspora, as it were—the world of flesh” (34–35).

Employing “intercultural criticism,” in the rest of the essay Segovia engages in a critical analysis of the prologue as “a literary, strategic, and ideological product” (35). As a literary product, Segovia advances a threefold division of the text: 1:1–2 and 1:18 address the world “above,” whereas the middle section, 1:3–17, addresses the world “below” (37). Over the next fourteen pages Segovia produces a truly remarkable literary exegesis of the text (a helpful structural outline appears in an appendix [60–61]). He next turns his attention to the prologue as an ideological product and focuses on the religious dimension of the unit insofar as it describes the other-world, the this-world, and the relationship between these two worlds. Building on these prior investigations, Segovia then looks at the text’s strategy. The prologue seeks *didactically* to give the narratees a new vision of reality and *polemically* to call on them to deconstruct competing visions while internalizing and effecting the new alternative. Three auxiliary functions exist as well: to warn implied readers to “expect rejection as well as opposition in and from the this-world” (58); to offer solace by assuring the “children of God” of their ultimate victory; and, finally, to exhort implied readers to “make known to the world what was made known to them by the Word, regardless of rejection and opposition” (58).

John Painter’s essay, “Earth Made Whole: John’s Rereading of Genesis,” argues at the outset two main points: (1) John’s Gospel affirms the goodness of creation by virtue of the fact that it is the direct result of the Logos of God; (2) John’s Gospel ties all of the negative references to the world to the “world of humanity.” Therefore, one need not read into John a negative view of creation. Those points set the stage for his thesis: “All

things, without exception, are the creation of the Logos of God and thus are of intrinsic value” (66). John’s Gospel, however, focuses on the human predicament because no environmental crisis existed in the first century. (Painter draws a rough outline of that crisis today.) But the idea that God, through the Logos, was making people whole in the first century and that there remains yet a promise of future redemption implies that God’s creative work continues (Painter returns to John 5:17 repeatedly). For John, it is the creation story of Genesis that is incomplete, and “God, through the incarnate Logos, is bringing the creation to its goal” (66). The rest of the essay explores the links between that story and John’s rereading of it. So, for example, Painter investigates the themes of light and darkness in Genesis and the dualism surrounding those themes in John. He notes the obvious similarities between the openings of Genesis and John but discusses their important differences as well. Quite perceptively, Painter points out that ancient cosmologies intended to validate the status quo, whereas Hellenistic cosmologies, such as John’s, were dynamic and oriented toward future fulfillment. Thus, while the author of Genesis intended to anchor Torah (specifically Sabbath observance) in the creation story, John intended his cosmology (particularly the discussions of Sabbath observance) to point forward to “the completion of the creation, the world made whole” (74).

In “Inclusivism and Exclusivism in the Fourth Gospel,” R. Alan Culpepper forthrightly admits to the contemporaneity of his issue but hopes, nevertheless, to remain faithful to the ancient text of John. He seeks to answer two puzzling modern sociological and theological questions: “Socially, does the gospel serve to break down barriers, relativize class distinctions, and include the marginalized, or does the gospel establish distinctions, defend privileges, and exclude all but the favored? Theologically, does the gospel maintain that truth may be revealed in various forms and religious traditions or does it present truth as revealed exclusively in and through Jesus Christ?” (85–86). After briefly reviewing the data, Culpepper maintains that socially the Johannine community was exclusive—but it was an exclusiveness based solely on one’s acceptance or rejection of Jesus. All other reasons for social exclusion (e.g., social, ethnic, economic) are swept away by the Gospel. Culpepper’s conclusions regarding the Gospel’s theological inclusivism and/or exclusivism follow very much from his view of John’s thought as ultimately paradoxical. Arguing first for Johannine exclusivism, he points to God’s overarching sovereignty in soteriological matters, to the Gospel’s christological exclusivism (as found, for example, in 14:6), and finally, to the Gospel’s emphasis on faith (or “fideistic exclusivism”). Still, a properly nuanced theology should reckon also with the Gospel’s theological inclusivity, which manifests itself in its emphasis on universal election, its declaration that “true worshipers” are those who “worship in spirit and in truth” (4:23), and its Logos Christology, which emphasizes Jesus’ preexistence especially in the form of divine Wisdom—a Wisdom at work throughout the world.

(Regrettably, Culpepper never really fleshes out this pregnant point.) Putting the two together, Culpepper argues that John holds to universal free will so that everyone is forced to make their own decision with regard to Christ (i.e., the Gospel is inclusive) but that simultaneously an individual's faith in Christ is never the result of one's own doing—it is God's action in the life of the believer (i.e., the Gospel is exclusive). John leaves the tension unresolved, and to offer one over against the other as the focal point of Johannine thought is to misrepresent his complicated picture of reality.

After an insightful essay by D. Moody Smith entitled, "Ethics and Interpretation," which among other things compares and contrasts the Methodism of George W. Bush with that of Hillary Rodham Clinton, Craig Koester offers an essay entitled, "Comedy, Humor, and the Gospel of John." He intends to make explicit the otherwise implicit humor in John and to "consider how the humorous elements function and how they relate to the gospel's message" (124). After distinguishing between comedies and tragedies, he points out that John's Gospel follows the general format of a comedy. Then, having briefly discussed the Gospel's humorous incongruities, wordplays, misunderstandings, and ironies, Koester investigates the humorous portrayal of the disciples (e.g., Philip, Nathanael, the Samaritan woman, and Thomas) and then of those opposed to Jesus (i.e., "the Jews" and "the Pharisees") and finally of those in a supporting role (i.e., "the crowds"). In sum, "John's gospel . . . uses humor to promote faith by showing that what appears to be ridiculous may actually prove to be true" (139).

The next two essays work well together. The first, by Gail R. O'Day, basically questions, as her subtitle puts it, "The Unsettled Place of Jesus' Discourses in Literary Approaches to the Fourth Gospel." Literary scholars clearly give priority to the "story" itself, so they routinely investigate the story of the Samaritan woman or the healing of the man born blind but pay little attention to the function of the discourses in terms of the overall "story." In the rest of her brief essay, O'Day explores "the Fourth Gospel with the assumption that the discourse units are essential elements in the unfolding of the story of Jesus in John, and not separable units that provide the gospel with its theological and/or doctrinal content" (146). Succinctly stated: "Jesus' talking is as much a part of the story line of John as Jesus' acting" (146). The next essay, by Francis J. Moloney, S.B.D., takes up O'Day's challenge when he cogently and more thoroughly investigates "Narrative and Discourse at the Feast of the Tabernacles: John 7:1–8:59."

David Rensberger's fine essay, "Spirituality and Christology in Johannine Sectarianism," attempts to answer the question, "What is 'spirituality' for a gospel that insists that the Logos became flesh?" (175). His answer moves the reader through a number of key Johannine themes: knowledge of God, faith, persistence, and mutual love.

The final two essays are “To See or Not to See: John 9 as a Synthesis of the Theology and Spirituality of Discipleship,” by Sandra M. Schneiders, and “The Johannine Jesus in Africa?” by Jan A. du Rand. Both are insightful and, like the rest of this fine volume, well worth reading.