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Edwards, Mark

John

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This commentary by Mark Edwards on the Fourth Gospel is in the new Blackwell Bible Commentaries Series, which focuses on the reception history of the biblical text. Edwards, known for his previous work on Origen and Platonism, has assembled a wide range of interpretations from a variety of media (e.g., sermons, commentaries, hymns, art, poetry, music, drama, and film) to illustrate the ways in which Fourth Gospel has been interpreted in various contexts through the centuries.

Edwards begins the commentary with an introduction that sketches out major moments in the Fourth Gospel's history of interpretation, calling attention to the major interpreters and the issues with which they were occupied. Moving into the commentary proper, Edwards treats the Fourth Gospel in discrete sections and structures his treatment of each section in the same way. First there is a prologue, which sets up each section by calling attention to major theological points and critical issues that have been a concern to interpreters of the following material. For each verse or cluster of verses, Edwards assembles a variety of exegetical perspectives from different moments in the Fourth Gospel's reception history. In a manner somewhat like a medieval catena, the statements and perspectives of exegetes and artistic interpreters of the Fourth Gospel from these different moments are arranged side by side in the comment on a particular verse. Thus,

for example, in the comment on John 19:34b, one finds interpretive statements from Augustine, Romanus, Theophylact, Julian of Norwich, Lindars, and Hoskyns. Within the treatment of each section of the Fourth Gospel is an interlude that deals with “a text that has proved particularly seminal or obscure” (14). Each section of the commentary closes with an epilogue, which, according to Edwards, “takes a motif from the foregoing text and follows its metamorphoses in art and literature” (14).

A real strength of this commentary is the impressive and learned survey of comments from exegetes that Edwards assembles. This survey nicely shows some ways in which readers of the Fourth Gospel have dealt with textual issues and solved exegetical problems. For instance, in the comment on John 3:11–12, which deals with the presence of both the first-person singular and first-person plural pronouns in Jesus’ speech, Edwards cites Meeks’s functionalist analysis of this language from the angle of Johannine sectarianism and the medieval solution of taking Jesus’ use of the plural with reference to the Trinity (48). While Edwards at times offers his own comments on or assessment of the cited interpretations, he mostly keeps to listing the interpretations of other readers. Another strength of this commentary is that Edwards does not limit himself to biblical commentators but includes interpretations of the Fourth Gospel found in artistic media (e.g., painting, film, drama, poetry, literature, music). Within the pages of this commentary, one finds, for example, interpretations of Fourth Gospel material in the art of Rembrandt and Dürer, the poetry of Blake and Eliot, and the musical compositions of Handel, Bach, and Pärt; even Don McLean’s “American Pie” merits mention in Edwards’s interlude on the Mother of Jesus and the Beloved Disciple at the cross (183). Edwards also demonstrates awareness of how the Fourth Gospel and the issues that it raises have figured into larger doctrinal and theological debates over the centuries. His treatment of how John 1:1–18 and the Logos have been involved in discussions regarding the doctrine of God (especially in the patristic period) is succinct and informative (although it is somewhat surprising that not much attention is given to the place of the Fourth Gospel in the question of the *Filioque*, which has been quite significant in the history of Christianity).

While the commentary is a strong and helpful resource, there are a few areas in which it could be made even stronger. As stated above, Edwards states that the epilogue of each section would be given over to the text’s reception in art and literature, and there are some places in which he does this (e.g., 33–34). Yet there are a number of epilogues in which examples from art and literature do not appear (e.g., 60–61, 96, 144–45, 162–63). Also, the statement is made in the editors’ preface that this commentary series aims to show readers “what a text, especially a sacred text, can mean and what it can do, what it has meant and what it has done, in the many contexts in which it operates” (x). Through its impressive range, Edwards’s survey, in many respects, does this well, and in a

commentary of this sort decisions need to be made regarding which interpretations to include and which to omit. However, one area in which the Fourth Gospel has exercised significant formative influence, and which is under-represented in Edwards's survey, is liturgy. While one does find a some references to Orthodox liturgies, the *Book of Common Prayer*, and some sermons and hymns, the ways in which the Fourth Gospel has shaped the Christian mind through (Western) liturgy, and especially the lectionaries, are not addressed. Edwards also does well to include interpreters from the medieval period (e.g., Bede, Alcuin), but an important resource for appreciating medieval exegesis, the *Glossa Ordinaria*, is not included. When providing modern critical perspectives, Edwards gives the most space to British scholarship, especially Barrett and Dodd. Yet there are some important contemporary critical scholars (e.g., Haenchen, D. Moody Smith) and important critical works (e.g., Borgen's work on John 6) that do not appear at all in the survey.

These points of criticism notwithstanding, Edwards has provided New Testament scholars with a valuable resource for understanding and appreciating the history of interpretation of the Fourth Gospel. The commentary makes a persuasive case for taking seriously the richness and the value of premodern exegetical insight, artistic interpretation, and reception history for understanding the biblical text, and I look forward to other commentaries appearing in this series.