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Bennema, Cornelis

***The Power of Saving Wisdom: An Investigation of Spirit and Wisdom
in Relation to the Soteriology of the Fourth Gospel***

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Jan van der Watt
University of Pretoria
Pretoria, South Africa 0081

There has not been a major monograph on the soteriology of John for quite a while. The tendency seems to be that it is mentioned in publications and is never treated in depth as a separate topic. Bennema set out to investigate the relationship between soteriology and pneumatology along the lines of W/wisdom. He examines the interrelationship between the Johannine conceptions of Spirit, salvation, and W/wisdom, which results in what he calls “Johannine Pneumatic Wisdom Soteriology.”

Bennema starts with an overview of contemporary Johannine scholarship on soteriology. It is remarkable that the available research is not all that new, as was already mentioned. Nevertheless, Bennema’s overview is helpful, especially because it is systematic, and he tries to distinguish between different approaches.

Following this overview of the available research he presents the material in three main sections. He first gives attention to the conceptual background of John’s pneumatic wisdom soteriology and then moves on to describing the pneumatic wisdom soteriology itself. In a short part 3 he reaches some conclusions and makes recommendations.

Bennema’s book is well-researched. In his introduction he provides a good and helpful overview over the positions on soteriology found in research. He then states his thesis. The focus falls on the soteriological function of the Spirit. The relationship between the believer and God is not only created but also sustained by the Spirit; both these actions of the Spirit are directly related to wisdom. The relationship between Spirit, W/wisdom, and salvation is described as such: Jesus’ saving messages contains saving wisdom that leads to eternal life. He is indeed the source of salvation. The Spirit, however, is the agent of

salvation, since the Spirit discloses and interprets the wisdom Jesus offered. As such, the Spirit mediates it to people and gives them a new or deeper understanding of God/Jesus. The Spirit not only functions as a life-giving cognitive agent but also as an affective agent.

Bennema maintains that the soteriological functions of the Spirit in this Gospel should be understood against the background of the concept of the Spirit in Jewish wisdom literature. Chapter 2 presents the reader with a detailed discussion of Spirit, W/wisdom, and salvation in sapiential Judaism. Bennema argues that this point of view provides a conceptual background for aspects of Johannine soteriology that were previously not explained and that might serve as a key to unlock the mechanism of the relation between the pneumatology and soteriology of the Fourth Gospel.

In part 2, which includes chapters 3–5, the emphasis falls on “John’s pneumatic wisdom soteriology.” Bennema’s focus first falls on a “model of Johannine soteriology,” and then he discusses soteriology according to this “model” in John 1–12 and 13–21, respectively. Bennema concludes that all but one of John’s soteriological themes find a parallel in the Jewish wisdom traditions. The Spirit has a primary role in the soteriological process in which the soteriological figure of Wisdom is used to present Jesus and his mission. Cognitive perception and knowing the Father and Son depicts the salvific relationship. The Spirit plays a central role in facilitating and sustaining this cognitive perception and understanding.

Bennema then moves systematically through the Gospel analyzing the available material. Obviously there can be disagreement about some of his interpretations. He obviously reads the material in the light of the model that he has formulated in chapter 3. He indicates how Jesus brings the revelation and how the Spirit mediates this knowledge and enlightens people. Thus the “living water” becomes “Jesus’ Spirit-imbued revelatory wisdom teaching that cleanses and purifies and leads to eternal life” (185). The Spirit is the facilitator of cognitive perception and understanding: the Spirit not only endows Jesus with revelatory wisdom but also facilitates cognitive perception with regard to believers. The Spirit as cognitive agent is therefore the common denominator between Jesus and believers. It is also the Spirit that ensures a life-giving relationship between the Father, the Son, and believers. Apart from that the Spirit also functions as affective agent, influencing people’s wills, attitudes, and motivations. According to Bennema, John propagates a relational cognitive belief. A relationship between God and the believer exists on the basis of a proper understanding of the Father and the Son. The Spirit facilitates this relationship.

The strength of Bennema's approach is that he tries to read the text in a consistent way according to his "model." This indeed leads to new or at least different light being shed on certain sections. He illustrates that neither knowledge nor the influence of the Spirit should be underestimated when describing soteriology according to the Gospel of John.

However, this also leads to forced interpretations here and there. His underlying presupposition is that John consistently thinks along the lines of sapiential wisdom, which inevitably downplays other possible influences. The Spirit becomes the major force in salvation as continuing process, although Bennema also refers to the role of Jesus. One cannot escape the feeling that Bennema focuses so strongly on the Spirit and the Spirit's actions in relation to mediating and activating knowledge that everything else is absorbed into the domain of the Spirit. In the beginning of the book he mentions that he wants to investigate the influence of the Spirit on the soteriology of this Gospel, but in the end soteriology becomes to a large extent pneumatology. One should indeed ask whether this is in balance with the emphases placed in this Gospel as a whole. It can very easily happen—and indeed happens in Johannine research—that the focus falls so strongly on one aspect in this Gospel that others are overlooked or unconsciously downplayed. Bennema shows how important the Spirit is, especially if this Gospel is read in the light of sapiential Judaism. However, if the focus falls on Christology or even theology much the same happens—often it seems that in the descriptions of the material everything is absorbed in that particular focus. That is, for instance, why the Christology of John is often called its theology. It seems as if an accurate reading of John should always tend to seek balance. This is one of the reasons why formulating the theology of John is so challenging.

It would also have been interesting to investigate similar patterns in Greek literature, where knowledge also plays a central role in changing and guiding the individual person, especially on an ethical level. Should sapiential Judaism be the only and exclusive framework against which the soteriology of John should be understood, or would it be possible to allow for other influences also? It seems to me that Bennema has a strong case, especially in light of the relation between Spirit and knowledge, but comparing it with other available "models," to use his term, would have been interesting and could have contributed to strengthening his argument.

To draw the attention to the importance of the Spirit in relation to salvific knowledge is indeed an important contribution and makes Bennema's effort a worthwhile exercise. He is a good researcher who is able to present both his material and his arguments in a logical and consistent way. If one wants to disagree with him, one will have to engage in his well-motivated arguments. I regard Bennema's book as one of the better doctoral studies on Johannine theology to appear during the last decade. It therefore demands

attention from Johannine scholars. Bennema's thesis indeed forces research to take cognizance of the role of the Spirit as well as a possible way in which the message of Jesus could be integrated as an affective force in the lives of the Christian community.