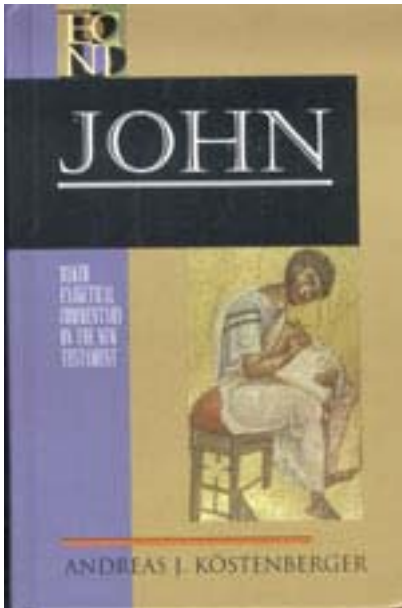


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Köstenberger, Andreas J.

John

Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament

Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004. Pp. xx + 700. Hardcover.
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The Gospel according to John is certainly a well commented Gospel with good commentaries like that of Bultmann, Brown, Schnackenburg, Barrett, Morris, Lindars, Haenchen, Moloney, Carson, Keener, and Wengst, to name a few. This wealth of commentaries begs the question of what a new commentary on John can contribute to those already available.

This question is addressed in the series preface by the two editors: “The chief concern . . . is to provide, within the framework of informed evangelical thought, commentaries that blend scholarly depth with readability, exegetical detail with sensitivity to the whole, and attention to critical problems with theological awareness” (ix). A major purpose is thus to “address the needs of pastors and others involved in the preaching and exposition of the Scriptures” (ix), which means that problems relating to the meaning of the text are the object of focus. However, the current state of scholarly research must be reflected, irrespective of the source of such information. The commentary presupposes a canonical framework based on the trustworthiness and essential unity of Scripture. What matters in the end “is whether the series succeeds in representing the original text accurately, clearly, and meaningfully to the contemporary reader” (x).

Köstenberger positions himself well within the purpose and intended framework of the series. He points out that he sees John as historically reliable and acknowledges that this Gospel is a careful literary composition and that the ultimate concern of this Gospel is theological. Although the Gospel is an inspired document and the Word of God (xii), he approaches it with the relevant historical and literary awareness.

This is a typical commentary: it has an introduction dealing with the traditional introductory questions (approximately eighteen pages) followed by a systematic discussion of the text of this Gospel. The analysis is not verse by verse but focuses on pericopes. The commentary ends with thorough indexes of subjects, authors, Greek words, and Scripture and other ancient writings.

In the introduction, where the different issues are briefly touched upon, the decisions taken are normally on the “conservative side” in line with the intention of the series, such as, for instance, that John the apostle, the son of Zebedee, is the author. Köstenberger also presents a structure of this Gospel based on the seven signs of Jesus, although the structuring role of the seven signs does not come out clearly in what is presented and is not mentioned after chapter 12.

The commentary itself is indeed not for specialists but for pastors. Extensive use is made of other commentaries, with the result that in many cases a summary-like presentation of material is found. This is not necessarily bad, since a pastor preparing a sermon (see above) cannot read all the commentaries. Here the pastor has the benefit of gaining some form of access to that material. Another point should, however, be noted: on page xi note 1, a remark is made explaining that, due to the intended audience, interaction is limited to works available in English. Only where essential will other languages be considered. Some English translations of commentaries such as Bultmann or Schnackenburg are used. There are a few references to German and French sources, but in many cases the “essentialness” of these references was not clear to me. Therefore, I do find that the explicit concentration on English sources reflects negatively on the commentary.

The commentary in general is useful. Background material is surveyed, references are made to certain Greek words (although this is not overdone), and in general the commentary flows smoothly. Attention is also given to theological perspectives. The influence of Köstenberger’s book on mission in John’s Gospel is clearly evident. However, the lack of proper (concluding) summaries systematizing the material makes the book less reader-friendly.

The discussions of specific problems in this Gospel often lack depth. For instance, different positions are taken in literature on the exact meaning of the foot washing in

John 13. One position, for instance, focuses on humble service (of love) and the other on the loving commitment of one person to the other (which could include service). Theologically, a choice is significant and therefore should be voiced. Köstenberger, however, does not succeed in doing this. It would serve little purpose to multiply the examples, but the treatment of freedom in John 8:31ff. may serve as another example. This is a crucial and difficult text to interpret, and in cases such as this the reader would like a commentary to provide in-depth material. Mention is made of Jewish slaves who only remain slaves for six years, and brief remarks are made about slavery in general. The matter is, however, much more complex, and giving attention to the wider spectrum of available and relevant material would have enriched the analysis considerably. To go even further, this remark forms part of a larger and important argument in John 8. Little effort was made to integrate this theme into the larger discussion of this chapter. This is indeed a weak point of the commentary in general. It does not give enough attention to structural integration or developments in different sections.

Unfortunately, this leads to a feeling of “shallowness” in many cases and does not underscore the remark on the back of the book that this is “the best and most thorough commentary on the Greek text of John in recent years.” In spite of the material in the numerous footnotes, such a view will be difficult to sustain. By this I do not imply that the commentary is not useful for pastors. I only try to measure it against the claims made. However, if the editors’ envisaged purpose for the series, as mentioned above, is taken as a guideline, I think the commentary is successful. For students and pastors it will be useful, but I do not think this commentary will find a place among the commentaries used by Johannine scholars.

Let me now return to my initial question. What does this commentary contribute to the many commentaries already available? This commentary gathers material from different commentaries and integrates them; it does not however develop a significantly unique position. It is therefore helpful as an overview of the Gospel (I should imagine that preachers would require such a tool). However, there are numerous commentaries already on the market that fulfill just this role, although I would place Köstenberger’s among the better ones. On the other hand, I am not convinced that Johannine literature does in fact need another commentary like this. Extenuating circumstances are such that this is a commentary in a series with a specific purpose, which determined the nature of the commentary. Obviously, the available materials on the different books of the Bible differ—and the Gospel according to John is privileged to be one of the best-commented books in the Bible.

The late Professor Schnackenburg used to compare Johannine research with a Chinese rice field, which people dug up for ages. The question is: Can one find a spot that has not

yet been cultivated? If so, one must work hard to cultivate it. If one cannot find such a spot, one must keep on digging and looking. However, simply turning over the same soil over and over again will make any research, including Johannine research, sterile. Schnackenburg clearly did not mean that we should only and always publish novel material—his own work showed that. What he warned against was simply continuing to play with the same blocks by just shifting them around over and over again.