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Popkes, Enno Edzard

Die Theologie der Liebe Gottes in den johanneischen Schriften: Zur Semantik der Liebe und zum Motivkreis des Dualismus

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In this book it is argued that a key to understanding the theology of the Gospel and Letters of John lies in the network of expressions and remarks that are linked to the concept of love as it is developed within Johannine literature. Part of Popkes's motivation for this study is the fact that issues such as love and dualism are normally discussed separately from one another in scholarship, while they are actually integrated in Johannine literature. Love that has its origin in God forms the framework within which the mission, life, and death of Jesus are interpreted from a post-Easter perspective. The dynamics of this mission, motivated by the love of God, are theologically expressed in dualistic terms.

The Johannine writings are characterized by a unique theology of God's love that is developed in rich detail in the Letters (chiefly 1 John 4:7–5:4) and in a slightly different but equally intensive manner in the Gospel. Within the flow of the Gospel, the theology of love is developed in a sequence of different love expressions that are embedded in a variety of scenes and contexts. Different love relations are established through a coherent network that is identified as one reads the narrative as a whole.

Popkes carefully relates the concept of love and the dualistic elements in John. Although he clearly points to the interrelatedness of these concepts, he notes a certain tension. The

dualistic elements in John do not form the coherent interpretative framework within which all the other themes could be interpreted. For instance, if the idea of God's inclusive love for the world is taken seriously, one could no longer speak of a strict dualism within this Gospel.

The structure of the book is clear and uncomplicated. The introduction deals with issues such as the approach that is followed, the methods applied, the relationship between the Letters and the Gospel, key terminology, and statistical matters. Popkes's treatment of these issues is thorough and touches upon the most important points that have influenced the interpretation of the theme of love in some way or another. In the second part of the book, the respective themes of love and dualism are dealt with as they manifest themselves in the Letters of John. A third section focuses on the development of these themes in the Gospel of John. In both sections 2 and 4, the approach is very much text-oriented. The majority of the book consists of exegesis of the major texts that deal with the themes of love and dualism. These discussions are enriched by a number of tables and excursions on various topics, while good summaries help to bind the detailed exegetical material together.

Although the structure of the book is uncomplicated, it is rich in content. What characterizes the book is the thorough way in which the different texts are exegetically discussed and, not only that, also the way the thematic and theological consequences of the exegesis are worked out. Popkes focuses on the Johannine texts and develops his thematic and theological conclusions from this perspective. He does this systematically, and his use of headings and a detailed table of contents make his meticulous arguments transparent.

Popkes is also aware of the danger of becoming ahistorical in his approach. This is a common danger when the focus falls largely on the thematic and theological developments of themes. The logical interrelatedness of the theological themes can become so dominant that their historical embeddedness is lost. This would make the Johannine literature more of a theological-philosophical treatise than a Gospel or Letters with their original concrete historical situations. Popkes constantly considers the possible historical scenarios that could have had an effect on the theological development of the material he is dealing with. His approach is to "enter" the document he is dealing with by focusing on a central passage in the document and then to move on to other relevant and related texts from there. This helps him not only to keep a proper focus on the central issues but also not to overemphasize, or underemphasize, particular themes or issues. The "framework" within which the rest of the text is interpreted is thus developed from such a key passage in the document itself. The results from the analysis of the key passage then guide his further analysis of related passages and themes. This, of course, implies that key

passages need to be identified. In the case of the Letters, Popkes identifies 1 John 4:7–5:4 as a key passage and calls it the “johanneische Hohelied der Liebe Gottes.” Obviously, he focuses strongly on the thematic dynamics within this particular section of the letter.

In the Gospel, John 17 offers him an “entrance” into the material he is dealing with, while sections such as John 3 and 13 are obviously equally important and are also discussed in similar detail. In his analysis of these texts, he employs multiple exegetical methods. His approach reflects a good “dialogue” with the most recent conventions in scholarship. It is a pity that, although his bibliography gives evidence of wide consultation, the overwhelming number of books are German in origin. German research into the Johannine literature is of an extremely high standard, and as such the quality of his work did not suffer much from this bias. Although he does make some use of English, there are some sources that could and should have been consulted. This seems to be a recurring feature in many books—one so often finds books from the Anglo-American side that show little interest in the dynamic and thorough German scholarship, and of course the converse is also true (although, as I pointed out, this is not totally but only partly true of Popkes’s book). New Testament scholarship can only be enriched if the different dominant “worlds” of research (also including French and Spanish publications) are integrated and brought into cross-fertilization.

But, back to the content: Popkes considers two important angles in the theological development of John: the dualism with the cohesive role love plays in the presentation of the dualism by John; and the life and death of Jesus that should be understood within the more universal perspective of love. As he puts it: “Aus der umfassenden Liebe ergibt sich folgerichtig auch die umfassende Gemeinschaft im Offenbarungs—und Heilshandeln des Sohnes” (182–83). On the basis of the motifs of love, described by him as the “dramaturgische Christologie der Liebe Gottes,” the theological lines of development can flow together. In dealing with love in this way, Popkes immediately recognizes the inherent tension, namely, that God’s love (John 3:16) is intended for the world (i.e., for everybody) and that he is a God of love (in general), but when it comes to love among people, the focus shifts to a more restricted form of love, brotherly love. Popkes finds the reason in the possible sectarian nature of the Gospel. In such a context, predestination is functional in explaining the difference as well as the reason for this difference between those in darkness and those in light.

Popkes also views the reciprocal network of love that exists between God, the Son, and believers as a binding factor in the Gospel. He illustrates how this motif of love is integrated into the rest of the themes in the Gospel and Letters and consequently offers an explanation of its origin. In the Letters (especially 1 John), love goes back to the central commandment of God. This love influences the love among believers (“brothers”): it is

based on the essence of God and is a reaction on the mission of Jesus, resulting in an integration with themes such as knowledge of God or eschatology. The love of the Father forms the framework within which believers may experience love and are, in love, bound together in communion and unity. In this loving community, believers may also come to a better understanding of who Jesus is. Popkes explains that the original readers had to reposition themselves in a world where they experienced schisms and strong opposition from the surrounding society. This had a decisive influence on the way in which they formulated their theology. He is, however, not overconfident in reconstructing the historical framework of this Johannine group and acknowledges that in some cases the material is lacking to make definite decisions. That is why the motifs are not just taken over from elsewhere. Rather, they are modified and adapted in an innovative and creative way by the author. He reworked these motifs on the basis of, and within, his “Grundintention.”

The emphasis on the integrated nature of the theology of John that is further developed in this book should be welcomed, as is the—to my mind successful—effort to read the Letters in combination with the Gospel. However, after reading this detailed book, I wondered what this study offered that should be regarded as fundamentally new, apart from the emphasis on the integrated nature of the theology of John (which is in any case well-known and described). In other words, what is the creative edge of the book? Here I am a bit at of a loss. This should not be seen in too critical of a light, since the book is a gold mine of rich information. It is difficult to critique Popkes on the work he has done, in spite of the fact that it is not all that original. It is nevertheless solid, logically developed, and reflecting maturity of judgment. He brings material together that is thoroughly discussed in the Johannine debate but not interpreted in such detail as far as the relation between these themes are concerned.

This work reflects thorough German scholarship and will most certainly play a role in future studies on the issue of love as well as dualism in the Gospel and Letters of John.