

BOOK REVIEW

Edwards, Ruth B., *Discovering John: Content, Interpretation, Reception*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015. xiv + 258 pp. Pbk. \$25.00.

The second edition of *Discovering John: Content, Interpretation, Reception* is described by the author, Ruth B. Edwards as an ‘update’ of the first edition published more than a decade ago. Edwards claims this update is necessitated by the ‘outflow of literature about John’ (p. ix) due to renewed scholarly interest in the Gospel in recent times. The book has thirteen chapters including an introduction, two illustrative tables, two excursuses and more than eighty pages of updated end-notes, bibliography and indexes.

As expected, Edwards maintains the structure and content of the first edition with additional information on existing discussions in some of the chapters. She appends an entirely new excursus titled ‘The Text of John’ and expands the discussion in the second excursus titled ‘The Problem of Eyewitness Testimony’. The entire book seeks to ascertain the message of the original author(s) with the hope that ‘a sense will emerge of the Gospel’s original aim of conveying a life-enhancing message, still relevant to the church and the contemporary world’ (pp. 22-23).

To prosecute her thesis, Edwards opts for the historical-critical method, which she considers to be adequate and effective for responding to the on-going debates about the continuing relevance of the Gospel of John in the quest for historical Jesus as well as other theological concerns in the contemporary church.

In the introductory chapter, Ruth identifies critical issues surrounding the major themes in Johannine scholarship. She raises pertinent questions that have aroused the curiosity of scholars over time, such as authorship and purpose of writing. She also asks ‘how does its author use character, and what literary devices are employed?’ (p. 2). Edwards, therefore, maps the entire gospel as having four main divisions. She sets the divisions of John’s gospel as follows: (1)

Proem-Prologue (1.1-18) and Testimony (1.19-51); (2) Jesus' Self-revelation (2-12); (3) Passion and Resurrection Narrative (13-17); and (4) Epilogue or Appendix (18-21). Some highlights of what she considers the 'distinctiveness of John' from the Synoptic Gospels are also given, and these include a portrayal of Jesus as being self-aware of his divinity. She claims, '[I]t is this picture of Jesus' own self-awareness that has most troubled scholars concerned with John's historical accuracy' (p. 9).

The second chapter reviews the history of reception and interpretation of the Fourth Gospel through several periods of time. These eras include the eras of: (1) the Church Fathers; (2) the Reformation; (3) the historical-critical analysis that defined the so-called Enlightenment period; (4) the dawn of what she terms the 'new look' of the second half of the twentieth century; and (5) the contemporary panoply of interpretive methods. She also discusses the key methods, citing their major proponents during these periods. For instance, she points out that the earliest two main 'schools' of biblical interpretation were: (1) the allegorical exegesis of the Alexandrian school led by church fathers like Origen, Augustine and Cyril; and (2) the literary interpretation of the Antiochene school led by John Chrysostom. After her taxonomy of these methods, Edwards commends the historical-critical method as having transformed scholarly understanding and being capable of guiding her readers through the numerous puzzles posed by the gospel.

From this perspective, Edwards delves into the question of the authorship of John in Chapter 3. Beginning with the traditional arguments for the identity of the 'beloved disciple', she summarizes the views of scholars on some possible identifications and arrives at the conclusion that readers of the gospel cannot reasonably be expected to identify the 'beloved disciple' with Lazarus, Judas or Thomas. She further rules out the possibility of either any of the twelve disciples of Jesus or a female figure as the author of John. She surmises that the author of John is 'deliberately left anonymous' (p. 32). Chapter 4 continues the search for John's origin through the quest for its source(s). The outcome of her examination is tailored towards proving the historical accuracy of John, and how that relates to the quest for the historical Jesus. She treats as 'doubtful' (p. 34) any notion of the Gospel as either an eyewitness account or a direct derivation from the Synoptics. She, however, opts for an inconclusive conclusion, to wit, that John

originates from oral or written sources which were ‘remodelled’ (p. 43) to serve the interests of the author’s theology and style. She argues that since the gospel is not an ‘archive’ about the historical Jesus, it cannot validate any historical details.

Having concluded that the purpose of John is basically theological, Edwards in Chapter 5 attempts to answer the questions of motive, audience, place and date of composition. She avers the Gospel was written to instill faith, not only to an already believing community. Considering both internal and external evidence, she concludes that though the place and date of John cannot be stated with certainty, a location outside of Palestine and a date before 70 CE or after 100 CE are improbable. In Chapters 6 and 7, Ruth not only adjudges the miracles stories as ‘narrative Christology’ but concludes that the titles conferred on Jesus were John’s faith confessions. In her opinion, the historicity of both the passion and the resurrection narratives (which she elaborately discusses in Chapter 8), are not essential for faith. In pursuance of the author’s resolve to keep the book simple, she endeavors to explain any term she thinks deserves explication (such as ‘mimetic’ on p. 129).

In Chapter 9, Edwards examines the distinctiveness of the Prologue of John. She not only affirms it as an ‘integral part of the text’ (p. 103) but describes it as offering a ‘dramatic and thought-provoking introduction to the Gospel’ (p. 114). She explores its form and provides profound explanations to some of the basic themes found therein and how these are used in the rest of the gospel. In Chapter 10, the author discusses the characters in John. She observes that the characters serve as ‘foils’ (p. 129) to Jesus’ actions or speeches with some playing stereotyped roles, and others serving in more functional capacities. Intriguingly, she points out that no woman is depicted in a bad light in John’s gospel, and warns of the danger in drawing an inference from the roles of characters in John for contemporary ecclesiastical roles or office.

Chapters 11 and 12 deal with the issues of Anti-Semitism/Anti-Judaism and Jesus’ divinity in relation to Jewish monotheism respectively. The crux of her argument rationalizes John’s style and choice of diction as consistent with the acceptable religious polemic his time. Although she admits that John 8 contains the ‘harshest’ (p. 137) words ever placed on the lips of Jesus against his Jewish contenders, Edwards surmises that these confrontational words should be read in

the context of the tirades of the Old Testament prophets against their obstinate countrymen and women. Such outbursts are not considered to be Anti-Semitic. She opines that the strong ideal of Jewish monotheism forecloses any intent of replacement theology by John because John's Jesus never claims to be God. Ruth believes Jewish Christians never think of Jesus as God, although non-Jews obviously did.

In the concluding chapter, Edwards appraises the Fourth Gospel in light of the divergent scholarly perspectives on its variegated themes. She submits that 'no single understanding of the Jesus can convey all the truth. John's portraits must be set beside the Synoptic portraits and insights of other Christian writers' (p. 168). In the first excursus, Ruth shows that the text of John constitutes part of the oldest New Testament papyrus of the second century and treats some peculiar textual issues like variant readings. In the second excursus, she asserts the difficulty of accepting John as eyewitness testimony by debunking Bauckham's arguments about the use of personal names, reliable memory and memorization of standardized Jesus tradition. She insists that even where eyewitness testimony is granted, its historical accuracy cannot be guaranteed.

Edwards lives up to her promise to write a simple, easy-to-read book. It can be rightly considered one of the best introductions to the Gospel of John. She skilfully and accessibly unpacks a great deal of research on the Johannine literature with numerous references to the views and arguments of a vast spectrum of scholars. She is very much abreast of the diversity of views on key issues of debate in John's gospel and exhibits considerable proficiency in analyzing the contours of their respective schools of thought.

An obvious credit to Edwards is in her conciliatory approach to controversial debates and conflicting postulations on some key themes in John's gospel. For example: on the authorship debate, while Ruth concludes, '[T]he "beloved disciple" cannot be convincingly identified with any specific individual', she, however, stresses that 'a book's value does not depend on knowing who wrote it, but on its intrinsic worth' (p. 32). Her flexible posture affords her the tact in giving fair treatments to diverse viewpoints in any given debate without overtly asserting her personal convictions. Thus, with an appreciable degree of success, she avails her readers of the views of other scholars, without disparaging those with whom she disagrees.

Edwards' ambivalent posture, as noted above, is capable of disappointing her readers (as she even acknowledges on p. 32) who expect clear-cut proposals on some issues like authorship. This is not to say she does not make any proposals at all. However, given her wealth of experience and publications, her voice ought to reflect a degree of authority on certain issues. A case in point is the manner in which she concludes a thorny issue like 'Anti-Semitism/Anti-Judaism' in John. She argues plausibly that John is not Anti-Semitic, yet she posits that John 'left a general impression that "the Jews" as a group are treated with hostility'. Her argument, which is based on the literary form and religious polemic prevalent in John's time, would have remained stronger if she had omitted her concluding statement: '[B]y today's standards John's depiction of the Jews is unacceptable and repulsive' (p. 141). This tends to counter her point that John is being misread. She doubtless knows that it is unfair to condemn a first-century author for misconceptions such as Luther's and others. Even her adopted style of writing 'the Jews' within inverted commas can equally 'distort John's meaning in the interest of "political correctness"' (p. 163). Given her convincing argument, it was expedient for Edwards to emphatically condemn any misreading of John as promoting Anti-Semitism/Anti-Judaism.

A couple of the arguments propounded in some sections of the book are not used consistently. Here are a few instances: First, if the 'testimony' attributed to Papias is not sufficient to support the hypothesis that favors an 'eyewitness' as an author, of what value will be Edwards' desire for her audience to accept Clement of Alexandria's explicit statement cited in Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 6.14 (p. 35)?

Secondly, Edwards stresses that 'John is not just a writing of history, theological and antiquarian interests, but a Gospel in the full sense of it' (p. 23). If the passion and resurrection narratives 'are not essential for faith' as she avers (p. 99), of what use will be almost a quarter of such a Gospel with strong evangelistic and hortatory aims devoted to these narratives? This is one of the negative effects of reading the gospel with a modern lens (historical-critical method), which she condemns in the case of Anti-Semitic reading.

Thirdly, the blanket concession she gives to the 'we' passages' (p. 24) as confirming the 'multiple author' theory weakens her very argument against a sole author. This is because the argument runs counter to a literal style of expression often adopted by a singular

author. In fact, our author herself fitfully deploys the same ‘we’ style of expression in this book (see pp. 10, 22, 25, 142, 179 etc.) and this is not evidence of multiple authors.

Finally, it is clumsy to combine two reference methods in one book. She fails to explain or justify why some references are given in-text and others are pushed to endnotes. Having preferred endnotes to footnotes, the author should have remained consistent throughout the book.

The above observations notwithstanding, *Discovering John* is highly recommended for students and scholars alike.

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