

BOOK REVIEW

Jo-Ann Brant, *John* (Paideia Commentaries on the New Testament; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic Press, 2011). vii + 330 pp. Pbk. US\$29.99.

Brant adds to the Paideia Commentary Series with this volume on the Gospel of John. Whenever her students comment on the inability of scholars to agree on a meaning of Scripture, she responds by saying that, ‘when people cease to discuss and debate its meaning, Scripture will have become a dead rather than a living tradition’ (p. xiii). And so, this commentary comes as a result of such discussion and debate in her classroom.

Brant suggests that John was written a decade or so after 70 CE because, though not referencing the destruction of the temple explicitly, the Gospel seems to focus on a means of worship without a temple in the dialogues and actions. This focus may also contain elements of an ‘Antilanguage’. This term was first coined by linguist M.A.K. Halliday (1975) and denotes a specialized meaning given to common language that is meant to exclude outsiders from understanding a particular group’s discourse. Brant notes the language of John as being at times polemical, emphatic and fraught with metaphor. These things may provide enough evidence to suggest that the Gospel was written for a sectarian group of believers. Such evidence may dissociate the Gospel from the Synoptics or Synoptic groups, as has been popular opinion since the mid-twentieth century, but Brant thinks that John may have been aware of the Synoptic tradition. If this is so, the only major difference between John and the Synoptics is their style. While the Synoptics string together brief anecdotes that report Jesus saying or doing something, John’s narrative flows more cohesively while developing different themes. The Synoptics are shaped by ethical teachings informed by the proclamation of the Kingdom of Heaven, while John tells us about Jesus’ proclamations as the Son of God.

Of critical importance to her study is Brant’s warning that certain interpretations of John’s Gospel may have been informed more by creeds

and doctrines created *after* the Gospel was written. One must be careful to separate these interpretations from what can be read *in* the Gospel. Because of this, Brant has constructed her work to facilitate the reader's own dialogue with the text.

Brant separates her commentary into four parts. The first (1.1–2.12) she titles 'In the Beginning' and discusses the prologue and the early aspects of Jesus' relationship to his disciples. The second (2.13–12.11) is titled 'Jesus' Itinerant Ministry' and discusses Jesus' interaction with Jewish culture and tradition. The third (12.12–19.42) is titled 'Jesus' Triumphant Hour' and discusses the events leading up to and surrounding Jesus' death and resurrection. The fourth (20.1–21.25) is titled 'Jesus' Resurrection: Endings and Epilogues' and discusses Jesus' appearances to his disciples and followers after his resurrection.

Brant begins part one with a few comments on the prologue of John. Previous opinions hold that the prologue was a hymn from the early church that was added to a pre-existing Gospel. This idea has given way to a confidence that the prologue was written as an original introduction to John's Gospel. Brant notes that the earliest manuscripts all contain the prologue, giving no evidence for a Gospel without the prologue, not to mention that second-century interpreters refer to the prologue in their commentaries. It would seem that the prologue functions similarly to what Cicero would prescribe as a proper introduction.

One cannot talk about the prologue without some mention of the diversity of scholarly opinion surrounding the *logos*. Brant gives equal attention to the possibilities that John's use of *logos* may be derived from a Jewish understanding of God's spoken word or from a Greek (Stoic or Philonic) understanding of a facet of God's character that governs the world. Brant points out that the Greek word *skēnē*, from which we get the word *scene*, is semantically related to the term *etheasametha* used in Jn 1.14, and she suggests that this may give us some indication as to how John stylized his Gospel. As viewers witnessing a play on stage, they witness the glory of the *logos* and its dwelling amongst humanity. Scholars have equated *skēnē* with the Hebrew *miskan*, which refers to God's portable residence; however, the Greek word may be better translated as something referring to a building or platform on which plays would be acted out.

The prologue serves as a basis for the dialogues that take place throughout the rest of the narrative. Presumably, the characters engaged with Jesus do not recognize him as the audience knows him (1.10). This

makes the dialogues of central importance to the Gospel as they center around a 'give-and-take' style of rhetoric. This style is meant to portray an honor and shame system characteristic of Second Temple Judaism. An excellent example of how this plays out can be found in the story of Nicodemus in ch. 3. John uses several identity markers to signify Nicodemus's position in society: 'there was a person from among the Pharisees and his name was Nicodemus'. Next, the mention of his position indicates that he had a high ranking, signaled by the title 'official'. His identity is unique amongst other characters in the story as shown by the giving of his name. The prologue is referred to by Nicodemus coming at night (1.5), this being perhaps even a literary cue pointing to his inability to recognizing Jesus (1.10). The 'duel' that takes place is common to John, and creates a point of perspective for the audience known in the Greco-Roman world as *ekphrasis*. Most of the dialogues, and especially the story of Nicodemus, are centered around honor and shame, and a game of riposte characterizes each of them. Thus, Brant suggests that we interpret the dialogues with this in mind.

This commentary incorporates a breadth of scholarly voices and takes into consideration a variety of literary sources that may have contributed to the composition of John. The strength of the book lies in Brant's ability to take into consideration the ethos of the ancient reader. By this I mean that Brant considers a breadth of cultural influences that may have been informing the ancient reader's hermeneutic. It is possible that John was writing to an audience of Jews, but Jews who had been in dialogue with a Greco-Roman culture for some time. All too often, it seems that scholars are unprepared to consider this important and monumental influence.

Along a similar vein, Brant seems to want to compare John with Greco-Roman drama. This is in line with her earlier work on John, *Dialogue and Drama: Elements of Greek Tragedy in the Fourth Gospel* (2004). I find the comparison to be extremely helpful for students, especially since she introduces a variety of terms revolving around Greek drama, but not to the exclusion of the obvious Jewish 'stage' on which the players act. The nice thing about how Brant does this is that a student need not have a degree in Classics to understand what she is saying since she writes with clarity.

I also appreciate the discussion of recognition. It seems from the prologue that *recognition* is introduced as an important theme. In addition to this, *reversal* is added to make John a complex plot. According to Ar-

istotle, both *reversal* and *recognition* are essential ingredients to the creation of the *telos* or ending. *Recognition* is defined as moving from ‘not knowing’ to ‘knowing’, and *reversal* signifies a sudden reversal in the circumstances of the main character. Brant notes two key *recognition* scenes in which Mary Magdalene (20.11-18) and the disciples (20.19-23) discover the risen Christ. These two scenes set the stage for perhaps the most famous recognition scene in the Bible: Thomas’s recognition. Following a similar sequence to that found in Homer’s *Odyssey*, these scenes include the display of a *token*, in this case Jesus’ wounds from his crucifixion. These are meant to reveal the true identity of the character that was unrecognizable. The clearest example of *recognition* comes with Thomas: Thomas is invited to place his hands on the wounds to verify Jesus’ identity.

I recommend this book to anyone wishing to gain a rudimentary knowledge of Greco-Roman terminology concerning drama and tragedy. Provision of several helpful definitions on the side-bar of various pages helps the reader place the terms into a greater context. This book is also helpful for categorizing Jesus’ speeches, which aids in learning how those are dissected. Brant’s commentary is a well-written and helpful addition to the discussion on the Gospel of John. This book should be considered by any professor teaching courses on John at the undergraduate or graduate level.

Adam Z. Wright  
McMaster Divinity College