

BOOK REVIEW

Bruner, Frederick Dale, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012). xxx + 1281 pp. Hbk. \$75 USD.

Frederick Dale Bruner is scholar in residence at Fuller Theological Seminary, Professor Emeritus at Whitworth University and a former missionary who has taught in the Philippines. His recent commentary on the Gospel of John is a massive work that is born out of many years of teaching this Gospel in many different contexts. The commentary is not technical and is consciously not geared toward scholars. He begins his preface by stating that it 'is written for serious students of the Gospel according to John, particularly pastors, teachers, lay churchmen and churchwomen, but also for inquirers into the Christian faith, whom this Gospel has served so well' (p. xiii). This is a broad audience and while the commentary is not technical it is not merely devotional reading; it is a substantial volume with learned theological discussion.

In place of an extended introduction, which normally includes consideration of authorship, date, *Sitz im Leben*, etc., Bruner has included a preface wherein he outlines his approach to the commentary and then moves directly into the text. He has opted to incorporate any discussion of introductory matters into the commentary itself and only where relevant. As such, this commentary is not a one-stop shop for introductory issues and the reader will have to look elsewhere for systematic treatments.

Bruner divides the Gospel into three broad sections: (1) Jesus' Public Ministry (Chapters 1–12); (2) Jesus' Discipleship Sermons and Prayers (Chapters 13–17); and (3) Jesus' Passion and Resurrection (Chapters 18–21). Within the three movements each traditional chapter of the Gospel is further subdivided and these smaller subdivisions (pericopae) are each treated under the following four categories: (1) Translation; (2) Introduction; (3) Interpretation; and (4) Historical Interpretation.

The translation is meant to provide initial commentary on a passage; that is, Bruner has translated in such a way as to help a reader see the meaning through an expanded contemporary rendering. So, for instance, 1.13 is rendered thus: ‘They were born (children of God)—not by a confluence of bloods (biologically), nor by the willpower of the flesh (psychologically), nor by the willpower of a strong person (spiritually)—but by (the sole power of) God’ (p. 4). Or, 3.16 is translated, ‘You see, God loved the world so much that he gave his One and Only Son, so that every single individual, whoever! who is (simply) entrusting oneself to him would never be destroyed, oh no! but would have (even now) a deep, lasting life!’ (p. 157). Frequently, commentaries that provide their own translations give wooden renderings, so Bruner’s approach cuts against the grain. For readers without a knowledge of Greek, the translations lack the (perhaps limited) benefit of wooden renderings in seeing some syntactical connections. At the same time, it is not clear that wooden renderings without a knowledge of the Greek text are all that helpful. Bruner’s more contemporary expanded renderings provide readers with better help in understanding any passage, at least as far as Bruner has understood it. Readers seeking different sorts of translation have options elsewhere. Justification for his rendering is found in the interpretation section. There are, however, some awkward renderings as Bruner occasionally uses improper English tenses in the translation betraying dated views of the verbal tense-forms (on which, see below) (e.g. 11.20: ‘So when Martha heard that Jesus *is coming*, she went out to meet him’ p. 664, italics mine).

The introduction sections provide ‘mottos’ or ‘pithy comments’ that are found from interpreters throughout the ages of the church. These are meant to capture the meaning of the passages ‘succinctly and memorably’ (p. xiv). Short quotations (one sentence to short paragraphs) are found from Augustine, Chrysostom, Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, etc., including interpreters of the modern critical period such as Barrett, Brown, Bultmann, Hoskyns and Schnackenburg. This section does in brief what the Ancient Christian Commentary Series does more fully with the patristics but with the added benefit of including medieval and modern commentators. Those whose task is preaching and teaching will find some excellent quotations to draw from for their own use.

The interpretation sections contain what is normally the bread and butter of any commentary. Here Bruner goes through the passage verse by verse and approaches the text with a basic grammatical-historical

hermeneutic steeped in theological reflection and contemporary application. More is said below on the handling of the Greek text itself but a few of his distinctive positions that may be of interest to readers are as follows. Bruner handles the *pericope adulterae* in his four-fold treatment and therefore considers its meaning in the context of the Gospel. Rather than engaging in any lengthy discussion of his decision for its inclusion or exclusion on the basis of a text-critical methodology, he looks at the history of this passage's reception in the church. His conclusion is that it is a late addition, not from John, but that it does at least appear authentic, i.e. it has internal consistency. Also distinctive (though not original) is his view that the High Priestly Prayer (John 17) paraphrases and expands on the Lord's Prayer from the Sermon on the Mount. Bruner is agnostic toward the possibility of the Gospel's author being John of Zebedee due to the lack of an explicit statement in the Gospel to that effect. At the same time it appears to be where the clues (e.g. the unnamed disciple in 1.40, the Beloved Disciple of ch. 21, etc.) are leading.

The final section treated in this commentary for any given passage is its historical interpretation. This is where Bruner most consciously ties his own understanding of the passage to that of the historic church to provide what he calls 'an "apostolic succession" of the church's major John interpretations' (p. xiv). This section is rather unusual in modern commentaries and is its most helpful feature. In a time when so many commentaries are mere summaries of other modern commentaries, it is refreshing to see one that seeks to interact with interpreters of John that predate the Enlightenment. Bruner has provided a mini history of the interpretation of John for each passage.

Having discussed a number of the features of this commentary under their appropriate headings, including detailing some of the commentary's strengths, I turn now to the state of its handling of the Greek text, which is where its great weaknesses are found. Bruner advises in his preface that he has 'mined the Greek text as deeply as possibly [himself], first of all and continually' (p. xv). Throughout the pages of the commentary he interacts with the Greek text (cited in transliteration) and discusses language features such as verbal tense-forms to justify his readings.

The first place to turn in assessing the commentary's use of Greek is to the bibliography (which shows up as an abbreviations and sources section after the preface). There are many primary Greek sources listed

(NA27, LXX, Codex Sinaiticus, Codex Alexandrinus, etc.) but these texts do not themselves produce self-evident readings. That is, the interpreter always brings his or her own understanding of the Greek language and linguistic methodology to the text in order to understand and interpret it. This is why it is striking that no Greek grammatical work is cited beyond 1961 (BDR/BDF) apart from updated lexicons (e.g. BDAG). The presence of recent lexicons, however, says almost nothing of how a scholar understands lexicography and linguistics more broadly and how he or she will therefore use the glosses and definitions. Often relied upon in the interpretation sections are the dated and now linguistically suspect Abbott's *Johannine Vocabulary* (1905), BDR (1961)/BDF (1961) and *TWNT* (1932–79)/*TDNT* (1964–76). Louw and Nida's semantic domains lexicon (1988, 2nd ed. 1996) is not found nor are any recent grammars such as Porter's *Idioms of the Greek New Testament* (1994), to say nothing of linguistically informed essays found in books and journals.

Turning to the interpretation sections, the lack of interaction with Greek grammatical and linguistic work beyond 1961 is apparent. In the first place, Bruner shows no awareness of the discussions that have been going on for over 20 years on verbal aspect, perhaps the most important recent development in Greek language scholarship. The likes of Porter, Fanning and Campbell, for instance, are not found in the bibliography or index of names. Bruner instead relies on *Aktionsart*, or "kind of action," an outdated understanding that considers that tense-forms convey the objective nature of the process communicated. So, for example, in discussing John 11.5, referring to the Imperfect *ēgapa* (in what appears to be an error he uses *ēgapeis*), Bruner says that it indicates 'the love's *ongoing, continuing* character', which is why he uses the adverb *really* in his translation: 'Now Jesus really did love [these three]' (p. 660, italics his). The interpretations offered make clear that he is not viewing the tense-form in relation to aspect, the author's subjective portrayal of the perspective on the process, but rather the objective nature of the action as ongoing or continuing. Another example (among others; see the long and misleading discussion on 2.23-25, p. 163) where outdated understandings of the tense-forms affect interpretation is in John's purpose statement in 20.31. Scholars of John will be familiar with the text-critical issue where the Aorist *pisteusēte* and Present *pisteuēte* are both attested in early manuscripts, which makes a clear judgment between them on text-critical grounds difficult. With an

Aktionsart understanding of the tense-forms the former is taken to indicate first-time belief and the latter to indicate ongoing belief in the sense of ‘keep believing’. So, who is the audience? Unbelievers or believers? Bruner takes a sort of mediating position by stating that he ‘prefer[s] the present-tense continual reading and so the translation: “that you may be believers,” seeing John’s audience as *both* outsiders and insiders, all of whom are invited to be *ongoing believers*’ (p. 1198, italics his). While Bruner is not alone in his dated understanding of the tense-forms and though the conclusion of who the first readers of the Gospel were *may* be correct, it is achieved on spurious grounds. Carson, who deals with this passage (*The Gospel according to John* [PNTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991], p. 662) with a recognition of aspect and not *Aktionsart* as the tense-form’s semantic component, is not engaged with here. Unfortunately, notions of tense-forms communicating absolute time are incorporated as well, as is seen not only in the above interpretations but also in many of the translations offered (as also shown above), and in places such as 21.24 where Bruner makes a connection between the use of the present tense-form and objective present time that will make many Greek scholars nervous:

And he [the Beloved Disciple] is bearing this witness, the author’s *present-tense* idiom tells us clearly, *presently*, suggesting that perhaps this person is not only alive as this sentence is being written but that he is conscious of a present witness into perpetuity—into the unforeseeable future, wherever and whenever readers read him *now* (p. 1246, italics his).

Further, Bruner commits exegetical fallacies related to words that have been brought to attention by the likes of Barr in the 1960s and Silva and Carson in the 1980s, all three of whom significantly predate the publishing of this commentary. For example, in 11.29 Bruner notes the use of *ēgerthē* for Mary’s ‘getting up’ and then makes a direct connection to how the same verb is used for Jesus’ resurrection in Mt. 28.6, Mk 16.6 and Lk. 24.6. (He notes in parenthesis that these three v. 6’s form ‘a blessed “666”!’ though I have trouble seeing what is meant and how it is helpful, p. 675). The consequence of this connection is his considering Mary’s ‘getting up’ to be one of being *raised* from depression. He says:

There is more than one kind of resurrection in the apostolic Gospels, and resurrection from depression is not the least. The gracious inviting word of Jesus can conquer the death and paralysis of depression and despair,

too, and raise to new life—and, as here, to a fresh encounter with Jesus (p. 675).

To base this interpretation on the use of a word that is used differently elsewhere is to infuse too much of the meaning of the co-text and context found in other places into this one, thereby committing illegitimate totality transfer. The word's contribution to this clause does little more than indicate that Mary went from some postural position that was either sitting or lying down to one of standing and the rest of the clause indicates that it was followed by going to see Jesus. The text itself provides no justification for Bruner's interpretation and proper argumentation on linguistic and theological grounds is lacking. Any discussion of a change of Mary's grief to joy would need to come from later in the passage and especially not on the basis of a single word.

As the author has spent decades of study in conversation with past interpreters of John from throughout the entire church age many of the comments are insightful. The historical interpretations culled in this commentary may be the best part of the work. As well, Bruner's writing, content aside, is largely clear and it reads well for its intended audience. There are, however, better handlers of the Greek text of John and an otherwise excellent commentary has been hampered by ignoring fifty years of Greek scholarship and major advances in linguistics. Readers who are not equipped with a strong knowledge of Greek and linguistics will need to exercise caution in their use of the commentary and may be best advised to use it only for its compilation of historical interpretations.

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