

BOOK REVIEW

Porter, Stanley E., *John, His Gospel and Jesus: In Pursuit of the Johannine Voice* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015). xii + 297 pp. Pbk. \$30.00.

Porter, an erudite scholar, sets out to accomplish two main tasks in this book: (1) Exploring the multifaceted dimensions of the Gospel of John with the intention of finding its distinctive voice; and (2) understanding Jesus, who he claims, 'stands tall within this Gospel' (p. 2). In pursuit of these goals, Porter advocates the restoration of John's Gospel as one of the authentic sources for the study of the historical Jesus.

In Chapter 1, Porter describes the close relationship between John's Gospel and the Synoptic Gospels and submits that the same Jesus is being depicted in all four Gospels. He uses two major papyrological manuscripts (P. Egerton 2 and P. Rylands [P⁵²]) to counter the arguments that posit a late date for John based on the separation of the church from Judaism and the rise of Gnosticism. He insists the dates of P. Egerton 2 and P. Rylands (P⁵²) must be sought separately, as the two documents are less closely related than some scholars have believed. Thus, he dates P. Rylands (P⁵²) between the close of the first century and early second century (90–120 CE), and P. Egerton 2 around the mid-second century. He adduces further evidence from 'comparative paleography' (p. 21) and the use of 'nomina sacra' (p. 27). Porter asserts that only scholars who wrote before the publication of C.H. Robert's analysis of P. Rylands postulate a later date for John's Gospel. He believes that a 'plausible case can be made that the determination of the timeline of copying of these gospel-like documents not only helps to account for their development but allows us to examine more closely the possible date of composition of John's Gospel' (p. 36).

In the second chapter, he uses three concepts found in the prologue, word, light and world, to promote his view that John was not a sectarian (Christian) document but a public proclamation of who Jesus was. He discusses at length the structure of the narrative, the choice

and use of vocabulary, the character introduced and developed and the obvious declaration of the identity of Jesus. He sees the opening four verses as overt public declarations of the incarnate Jesus as ‘the en-fleshed word who brings light to the whole world’ (pp. 4, 42-43). He also observes that the sphere in which John sets Jesus to function is a broad (see 1.9, 29; 3.16, 17; 4.42) and inclusive one (Galileans, Jews, Samaritans, the infirmed and political/religious leaders), with the intention of creating public awareness of who Jesus is. Porter submits that the audience of John’s gospel is not sectarian but wider than many scholars would like to admit. Also, our author notes that the *son of God* language (1.29, 49 and 20.31) has both Jewish (intimacy with or king appointed by God) and Greco-Roman (an emperor as god or near-god) contexts. Jesus is not only the son of God but the King of Israel (1.49). This way, both the Jews and the Romans alike saw Jesus’ title as confrontational. Therefore, the Gospel was addressed to everyone who will read it.

Dealing with the possible sources of John, Porter in Chapter 3 argues that John retells most of the same stories in the Synoptics, though sometimes from an independent source (or sources) of related or shared traditions. For instance, that only John referred to Peter as Cephas may attest to a source known and shared by Paul as well (see Gal. 1.18; 2.9; 1 Cor. 1.12; 3.22). He postulates some criteria ranging from multiple attestation, coherence or consistency, embarrassment and rejection and execution to establish that John’s Gospel can stand the test of historical authenticity at a number of points, including the passion narrative, where John has unique information that may lend credence to historical Jesus research.

Porter aligns with those who see the prologue as a hymn. In Chapter 4, he faults two common approaches to the study of the prologue—form and source criticisms—and prefers musical-liturgical criticism and what he calls functional criticism. With these latter two, he demonstrates how the *logos* becoming Jesus plays out in the rest of the Gospel. Porter rejects Eduard Norden’s *Agnostos Theos*, the idea of using the form-critical approach in the examination of the prologue as a hymn because of its emphasis on *Sitz im Leben*. He observes that the form (poetic quality of the prologue) and source (its origin) demand more investigation. After a detailed discussion of four critical methods (form, source, musical and functional criticism), Porter submits that analyzing the prologue from different perspectives may clarify its

formal features and how these features serve as an introduction to the Gospel, ‘especially as it focuses on the ministry of Jesus Christ’ (p. 118).

Our author in Chapter 5 explores John’s Christology. He scrutinizes the thirty-five occurrences of ‘I am’ sayings in John, classifying its grammatical constructions into the classes of the *absolute* (‘Before Abraham, I am’), the *predicate* (‘I am the bread of life’) or the *locative* (‘I am from above’). He opines that John uses the ‘I am’ statements to develop an ‘overt Christological trajectory’ of his view of Jesus as Messiah (p. 148). In Chapter 6, Porter lends his voice to the debate about John’s Gospel and Anti-Semitism. He submits that though ‘the Jews’ certainly includes the Jewish ethno-religious group, this, if further modulated, refers specifically to Jews that belong to a specific category, namely those who often are opposed to Jesus, such as the chief priests, etc.

The notion of truth is discussed in Chapter 7. Porter opines *truth* in John can be categorized as: (1) relational—i.e. between the Triune God and extended to humanity. He makes the point that truth originates from God (the Father) but can only be transmitted to humankind through the mediation of Jesus (the son) and his surrogate, the Holy Spirit; and (2) propositional—i.e. an abstract concept that can be declared and known. He discusses the theme of the Passover in Chapter 8 where he argues that John regards Jesus as the sacrificial lamb. He develops this notion from seven particular passages. He asserts that there is a ‘sustained and consistent use of recognizable Passover language throughout’ (p. 223).

Chapter 9 deals with the literary unity of Chapter 21 of John. Porter defends the authenticity and integrity of the last chapter and that it was originally written with the rest of John’s Gospel. He debunks the arguments by Bultmann and others by advancing the views of other scholars who have provided favorable appraisals of its authenticity. In the concluding chapter, Porter evaluates his contributions as having raised the bar to the next level, from where he admonishes future researchers on the Gospel to begin. The rest of the book is well over fifty pages of bibliography and indices of modern and ancient sources.

In this book, the author critiques what he tags as ‘subtle currents’ and ‘revisionist developments’ (pp. 13-14) in Johannine studies. Without claiming to have the last word, Porter seeks to reopen many of the issues in Johannine studies that some scholars gloss over as being

settled. These issues include the dating, the audience, the sources, the prologue and the characters of John's Gospel. He does so by providing a substantial history of research of the themes he discusses. By exploring the views expressed by a wide range of scholars on each theme—showing their strengths and weakness and their implications for the discussion—this book gives a synopsis of key discussions in Johannine studies.

Porter's tendency to argue in defense of some traditional views of the church (especially Evangelicals) on Biblical issues rather than those of his 'primary' constituency—academia—may limit his readership. He writes as a church-based theologian. This posture has both advantages and disadvantages. The commendable side includes simplicity of language and little or no obfuscations in his argumentation. He provides non-expert readers the rare privilege of understanding and following the trends of otherwise complicated scholarship in the study of John's Gospel. The low side includes the tendency to water-down or carefully avoid strong theological positions which may not be in tandem with traditional viewpoints. This can leave his readers in the dark on such points.

Porter's penchant for digging deeper than simply accepting and building on the presumed status quo is displayed in this book. He investigates the source(s) from which other scholars derive or base their arguments. An example is his take on the concept of the 'standard theory of John sources'. Porter observes that many of these accounts 'are not entirely accurate, and in fact run the risk of being misleading' (p. 65). One case that stands out is the impression held by many scholars that Bultmann in his 1941 commentary on John's Gospel initiated the hypothetical source(s) theory, especially the notorious 'signs/miracles' source. Porter shows that 'a rudimentary identification of the same types of sources' precedes Bultmann's commentary in the 1917 work of R.H. Strachan (p. 65-66). Through this practice of thorough research, Porter opens fresh vistas that are capable of unsettling prevalent conclusions.

On the supposed anti-Jewish tendencies of the author of John's Gospel, Porter rejects the view that John's Gospel is anti-Semitic. He, however, does not address a question that I consider pertinent: does the definition of anti-Semitism exclude the nationality of the perpetrator? In other words, can Jews like Moses and the Old Testament prophets be accused of anti-Semitism because of their harsh language against

stubborn Israel? If it is granted that John's Jesus is himself a Jew (4.22), does he too become culpable based on his rebuttals? If this is the case, does it affect how we appraise John's Gospel as anti-Semitic, especially if the author(s) turns out to be Jewish?

Granted that no single book can possibly cover every theme in the Gospel of John, the omission of love as a major theme in the Johannine literature will be disappointing to many traditionalists whose choice verses in John center around love, such as John 3.16; 11.36; 13.1; 15.9-10, 21:15-19. For some, love runs like a thread that joins the whole of the Gospel together. Or does Porter share the view of some scholars that the love theme is a sectarian tool inserted by redactors at some point in the development of the Gospel? (See Ernst Käsemann, *The Testament of Jesus: A Study of the Gospel of John in the Light of Chapter 17* [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1968], pp. 59-60 and the fuller discussion by Urban C. von Wahlde in *The Johannine Commandments: 1 John and the Struggle for the Johannine Tradition* [New York: Paulist Press, 1990]).

Given his expertise on papyrology and ancient manuscripts, it is surprising that Porter does not mention the fact that the earliest witnesses have no such divisions as chapters. He tends to assume that the original manuscript had a delineated section for what is referred to today as 'Chapter 21'. What impact could it make if the study of John is done devoid of artificial, later divisions?

Lastly, although Porter generally keeps his language simple, a few technical terms (relating to Greek grammar and linguistics) require further explication for the uninitiated reader (e.g. 'recto' p. 32, 'hypostatization' p. 106, 'lucanose', 'punctiliar', p. 241 etc.). Also, on p. 55, the biblical reference to 9.39 is misquoted. The negation 'not' is not in the Bible text, so it should read: '... but that those who see might be blind'. These observations notwithstanding, I commend this book to every student of the Bible in general and John's Gospel in particular especially pastors and teachers in or outside academia.

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