

BOOK REVIEW

Craig R. Koester, *The Word of Life: A Theology of John's Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008). xiv + 245 pp. Pbk. US\$21.00/£11.99.

Koester has written a highly readable introduction to the theology of John's Gospel. Organized into categories based on the major figures in the Gospel narrative, the book brings together different aspects of what the Gospel says about God, the world, Jesus and the Holy Spirit, as well as themes like faith and discipleship. It is styled a 'careful theological work' written for 'a broad range of readers' (p. x). The book, however, is a concise survey of the theology of John that is more suited to the lay reader. This work is comparable to D. Moody Smith's *The Theology of the Gospel of John* (1995) in length and in content, but with more current sources.

The aim of the book is to think through major theological questions with an emphasis on drawing on the Gospel as a whole (p. ix). These questions are: Who is the God about whom Jesus speaks? Who does the Gospel say that Jesus is? How does the Gospel understand life, death, sin and faith? (p. ix). Furthermore, Koester focuses on what the Gospel presupposes and the key theological points the Gospel makes and their implications (p. 23). In Chapter 1, Koester defines theology as 'thinking about God, ourselves, and the world in which we live. To think theologically is to think relationally' (p. 1). He goes on to identify the Fourth Evangelist, traditionally called 'John', as the writer of the Gospel. But the real identity of the author is uncertain. The Gospel was written independent of the Synoptics, but most likely the author was familiar with one or more of them. It presupposes a spectrum of readers, and is not exclusively for a Jewish audience as some claim. The Gospel is divided into three main sections: The Prologue sets the ministry of Jesus in a cosmic framework; Part 1 (Jn 1–12) records Jesus public ministry; and finally, Part 2 (Jn 13–21) records Jesus' passion and resurrection. After the introductory chapter, the book covers four major topics: God and the world (Chapters 2 and 3),

Jesus and his death and resurrection (Chapters 4 and 5), the Holy Spirit (Chapter 6), and faith and discipleship (Chapters 7 and 8).

In Chapters 2 and 3, Koester shows that in John, God the Father of Jesus communicates with the world in order to bring about relationship. This is reflected in the theme of 'sending' throughout the entire Gospel. The world faces the problems of death, sin and evil, and consequently is alienated from God the Creator. In Chapters 4 and 5, he goes on to state that the reason for Jesus' coming is for the world—Jews and non-Jews alike (Jn 4:42; 18:20), followed by a discussion of christological titles including Teacher, the Prophet, Messiah and the Son of God. Through the crucifixion, Christ triumphed over death and evil and revealed God's glory (Jn 17:2, 4-5). Through his resurrection, Christ also brings faith and hope to those who believe. The Holy Spirit (Chapter 6) is the source of faith and life, the Spirit of truth who makes Jesus known. He is also a teacher and a witness, making the presence of God and Christ abide among the believers, as well as those who have not personally encountered Christ. Finally, on faith and discipleship (Chapters 7 and 8), Koester points out that faith in Jesus means life in Jesus. Such faith requires one to hear, to see, and to believe in him. The believers' hope is not characterized by a complete absence of struggle; it exists in the midst of real and ongoing conflicts in the present world. Discipleship, or following Jesus, is walking in the light, abiding in the vine, and keeping the unity among believers.

Overall this book is concise and readable. Each key point is well-supported by references to the biblical text. The arrangement of each section is also logical and easy to follow. Although the author claims that his intention is not to provide 'a systematic overview of the whole field of theology' (p. xi), I think he is to be commended for presenting an easy-to-understand theological survey of the Gospel. Moreover, Koester has raised some important theological questions; for example, is Jesus a human being trying to become God? Or has he come from God to manifest God's power and presence in a human life? (p. 97). The endnotes and the bibliography (pp. 232-41) are also helpful to those who want to pursue these issues and questions further.

Several matters in this book deserve some attention. While the writer cites mostly scriptural (Old Testament and New Testament) sources, there are a number of instances when non-biblical and Jewish sources are quoted, such as *m. Ta'anit*, *b. Ber.* (both on p. 87), *1 Enoch* (p. 93), *Pss. Sol.* (p. 95), *1 & 2 Macc.* (p. 105). These sources are neither listed

in the Abbreviations at the beginning of the book, nor are they explained in the text or in the endnotes. The non-specialist reader will find it difficult to understand how these sources are related to John and why they are important to its theology. It may also create an unintended impression of equating the status and authority of these writings to that of the canonical books. Similarly, the writer also supplies many Greek words (transliterations) throughout the book, such as *egeneto* (p. 30), *paroimiai* (p. 36), *airō* and *kathairō* (p. 39), *lēstēs* (p. 71), and *anthrōpos* (p. 84). With the exception of *logos* (pp. 26-27), these Greek transliterations are simply inserted without explanation of their Greek meanings or their significance in the original text.

Although the overall arrangement of the book is logical and flows well, some of the topics/sub-headings appear to be repetitious. For example, God of the Cross and Resurrection (pp. 41-47), Sin and the Crucifixion (70-72), and Crucifixion and Resurrection (pp. 108-32). Of course, the topics can be approached from various points of view, but it appears that some of these categories are either too generalized and therefore can fit any discussion, or they are loosely put together.

In at least two instances, I think Koester also extends the Johannine symbolism too far in his exegesis. In referring to Jn 19:28 ('I thirst'), he writes, 'The one who has invited the thirsty to come and drink is now thirsty himself. His gift is not costless but costly. He meets the thirst of others as he suffers thirst himself' (p. 146) The contexts show that the kind of connection Koester makes between the two kinds of 'thirsts' is rather subjective and tenuous. Similarly, in the following paragraph he writes, 'But whatever the character of the water, its theological significance comes from Jesus' promise that living water would flow from him. This underscores the central paradox of the Gospel. Piercing Jesus' side shows that he is truly dead; yet the water flowing from the wound reveals that even in death Jesus is a source of life for others. Here is where the human thirst for God is met' (p. 146). It seems to me that Koester over-interprets the Johannine symbol of 'water' beyond what may actually be warranted.

Finally, the value of the book would have been greater if the writer had not only quoted from sources and listed them in the footnotes but evaluated them as well. While the book is concise and explores key theological topics, it does not have a central thesis nor does it propose any hermeneutical key to the Gospel. Brief concluding summaries at the end of each chapter and a conclusion at the end of the book would

have been helpful. If these had been provided, the reader would be able to understand more clearly the key points of each chapter and would have a basis for evaluating whether the objectives of the book are accomplished.

Apart from these considerations, *The Word of Life: A Theology of John's Gospel* offers a concise and readable introduction to the topic and engages the reader in theological thinking.

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