

BOOK REVIEW

Urban C. von Wahlde, *The Gospel and Letters of John* (3 vols.; Eerdmans Critical Commentary; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010). lii + 705 pp.; xvii + 929 pp.; xii + 441 pp. Pbk. US\$180.

For over twenty years, Urban von Wahlde has devoted much of his scholarly work to addressing the question of the source and compositional history of the Johannine Gospel and Letters. The publication of his massive three-volume commentary represents the pinnacle of this work. In view of the commentary's size, I am unable to take all, or even most, of the issues into consideration. Rather, I will focus on von Wahlde's primary contentions and offer several points of critique concerning the foundations of his approach to John's Gospel and Letters.

The overarching theory that binds the commentary together is that the Gospel of John 'contains an account of the words and deeds of Jesus as preserved in, and understood by, the Johannine community', and so is 'not the work of a single individual but has gone through a series of three editions at the hands of three different individuals' (I, p. 1). For von Wahlde, the Gospel as it stands is essentially incoherent and lacks linguistic, ideological and theological unity; thus, his fundamental goal is to construct a model of redaction that adequately explains the inconsistencies and contradictions in the text, and that accurately tracks the historical and theological development of the Johannine community as a whole.

In Volume 1 (*Introduction, Analysis and Reference*), which has five Parts, von Wahlde puts forth a very complex method that attempts to divide John's Gospel into three distinct editions (labeled 1E, 2E and 3E). According to von Wahlde, 1E was written c. 55–65 CE and was entirely composed of the basic narrative of Jesus' ministry, including the Passion Narrative and miracle stories. This edition is characterized by its use of broad terms for religious authorities such as 'Pharisees', 'chief priests' and 'rulers', and has an essentially low Christology that

focuses on Jewish themes (e.g. Jesus as greater than Moses). The theology of this edition is Jewish and its community was Jewish–Christian. It was likely written and produced in Judea before the destruction of the temple in 70 CE. An example of this material is found in Jn 2.1-12. Here von Wahlde attributes most of the passage to 1E, except for the temporal reference of v. 1 (‘On the third day’), which is 2E material, and Jesus’ response to his mother in v. 4 (‘And Jesus said to her, “Woman, how does this concern you and me? My hour has not yet arrived”’), which is 3E material.

According to von Wahlde, the content of the second edition (c. 60–65 CE) is characterized historically by the community’s conflict with the Jewish synagogue and with the ‘official Judaism’ of the day, though von Wahlde never nuances or ventures to define this so-called ‘official Judaism’. Theologically, 2E revolves around Jesus’ claims about himself (e.g. being sent from the Father, being the Son of God) and the notion that Jesus inaugurated the eschatological coming of God’s Spirit. In this way, 2E is much more theologically developed than 1E—a development structured around the Gospel’s various ‘witnesses’ to Jesus (i.e. John the Baptist, the ‘works’ of Jesus, the Father and the Scriptures). While 1E was ‘remarkably accurate historically’, 2E possesses several characteristics that are anachronistic to the ministry of Jesus, and so represents the theology and circumstances of the Johannine community in the latter third of the first century. A prime example of material belonging to 2E is Jn 9.18-41, which recounts the escalating conflict between Jesus and ‘the Jews’ who had been putting out of the synagogue any person confessing Jesus as Messiah.

Crucial to von Wahlde’s reconstruction of the evolution of the Johannine tradition is his proposal regarding the Gospel’s relationship to the Johannine Letters. Von Wahlde suggests that during the time between the productions of 2E and 3E (i.e. c. 65–70 CE) an internal crisis arose within the community concerning the understanding of its own tradition. The Letters (especially 1 John), penned by ‘the Elder’ (an eyewitness to the ministry of Jesus and main founder of the Johannine tradition), constitute a clarification of the tradition, with a particular focus on explicating the role-relationship of Jesus and the Spirit. Von Wahlde believes that soon after the death of ‘the Elder’ (c. 80–90 CE) the third and final edition of the Gospel was composed.

In von Wahlde's model, material belonging to 3E (written c. 90–95 CE) represents the tradition reflected in 1 John as understood by 'the Elder', who was known in the community as 'the Beloved Disciple'. The content of this edition solidified certain beliefs and rituals that were under debate within the community (e.g. the bodily resurrection of the dead, baptism, eucharist), and it clarified the relationship between the Johannine Gospel tradition and the tradition found in the Synoptic Gospels. While the worldview of 3E (like 1 John) is apocalyptic, resembling the language of the Qumran documents and the *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*, by this point in the Gospel's development the make-up of the community is difficult to identify. According to von Wahlde, much of John 13–17 is 3E material.

In order to identify the literary seams that indicate editing has taken place, von Wahlde, like many scholars before him, focuses on three components. The first is the so-called 'aporias'—inconsistencies and contradictions within the text of the Gospel—on which von Wahlde places the most value for determining an editorial hand. Aporias are the accidental result of editing, since at times a certain level of 'incoherence' is left in the text once editing has taken place. However, it is difficult for von Wahlde to provide evidence for what actually counts as textual 'incoherence' and, subsequently, for how one is to identify supposed aporia with any level of certainty. That is, identifying a portion of 'incoherent' text is a subjective judgment in von Wahlde's scheme. Though he tries to anticipate this criticism, his arguments are ultimately weak and unconvincing. The second component is the *Wiederaufnahmen*, or 'repetitive resumptives' (e.g. ὡς οὖν or ὅτε οὖν), which von Wahlde believes determine breaks in original sequences. Authors use this device (in all its variations) to resume the material from before an editorial insertion. The third component von Wahlde highlights—which functions essentially the same as the *Wiederaufnahmen*—is the phrase ταῦτα εἰπὼν. Von Wahlde says the phrase is 'an indicator that an author is either adding material or resuming the sequence of an earlier edition' (I, p. 25). However, as von Wahlde admits, the problem with this assertion (as is the case with the *Wiederaufnahmen*) is that not in every instance of use do these devices indicate editing. Though von Wahlde seems to have no problem with this inconsistency, the apparent fact that these phrases are not sure indicators of editing is certainly enough to call the validity of their use as criteria into question.

Parts 1–3 form the heart of Volume 1 (and the analytical basis for Volumes 2 and 3). Here von Wahlde puts forth a plethora of criteria for identifying the distinguishing characteristics of each of the three editions of John's Gospel (28 criteria for 1E, 34 for 2E and 57 for 3E). These criteria fall under three types: (1) characteristic terminology (linguistic features), (2) narrative orientation (ideological features) and (3) theology (theological features). Thus, as an example, while the use of the term 'signs' is characteristic of 1E, 2E is characterized by the use of the term 'works' and 3E by its use of the phrase 'signs and wonders'.

Despite von Wahlde's attempt to preempt criticism, the reader is left with at least three questions regarding the proposed criteria. First, why do terminological, ideological and theological tensions within the Gospel create the need for seeing different authors and multiple editions? At least some scholars (e.g. Paul Anderson) have argued that such tensions are in fact internal to a singular author, perhaps reflecting characteristics of a dialectical thinker. Secondly, can the present Gospel of John really be segmented clearly into three distinct editions based on the three types of criteria von Wahlde proposes? For example, even he admits that certain terms (criterion 1 above) in the Gospel are used in multiple strata. Therefore, it follows to ask, how can such terms identify one particular edition when they are also used in others? And if this sort of mixing among strata is true of terminology, is it also true of the Gospel's ideology and theology? In view of this, it becomes evident that the lines separating the three editions are quite blurry, perhaps so much so that it is impossible to empirically discern three distinct editions. Thirdly, are von Wahlde's 119 criteria rightly called 'criteria' in the first place? I suggest they are not. That is, they are not criteria in the sense that they are 'standards' held to the Gospel to determine the existence of an edition or whether a portion of text should be identified as 1E, 2E or 3E. Rather, they seem more rightly regarded as 'descriptions' of the three editions. There are two reasons for this. First, the criteria themselves presuppose the existence of three distinct editions of the Gospel. They also presuppose a kind of historical development that makes certain terms, ideology and theology characteristic of a chronologically ordered first, second or third edition of the Gospel. So, for example, it could be asked, what determines that 1E's use of 'signs' ought to be seen as chronologically prior to 2E's use of 'works' in referring to the miracles of Jesus? Secondly, von Wahlde is explicit that he wishes to

discern ‘characteristics’ of each edition, and this is precisely what his lists of ‘criteria’ are—descriptions of what he deems are characteristics of the three editions.

Nevertheless, based on the criteria put forth in Parts 1–3, von Wahlde proceeds in Part 4 to offer his ‘History of the Development of Johannine Theology’. Here he focuses on 11 theological features found in John and traces their process of growth and maturation throughout the three editions (Christology, Belief, Pneumatology, Eternal Life, Eschatology, Knowing God, Soteriology, Ethics, Anthropology, Ecclesiology and the Religious Significance of Material Reality). Thus, for example, the Christology of 1E is considered ‘low’, while 2E and 3E evince a progressively developed and elevated Christology. While this Part of Volume 1 suffers from the same difficulties that plague the Introduction and Parts 1–3, von Wahlde’s attempt to trace the theological contours of the Gospel is a helpful contribution (although it could be argued that ‘Ecclesiology’ is a theological category altogether absent from John’s Gospel).

Any reader will find Part 5 of the first volume very useful. It comprises a reference section that gives the full (English) text of the Gospel and Letters as well as a 58-page bibliography. The inclusion of the full biblical text provides a helpful visual of von Wahlde’s scheme, as the material of the three editions is set in three different kinds of type (normal, italics and bold).

Volume 2 represents von Wahlde’s commentary on the Gospel of John, which is fundamentally based on his model of composition given in Volume 1. The volume is structured around smaller sections of the Gospel (being anywhere from 10 to 20 verses) and offers comments on these sections (usually) in four stages: (1) Notes, which typically offer rather basic word-by-word or phrase-by-phrase comments on the text; (2) Composition, which allows for application of his model of composition to individual passages; (3) Interpretation, which often includes more comments on issues of editing and composition, but also includes remarks on issues such as a passage’s Old Testament background, symbolism and theology; and (4) Role, which explains the role of a section within the Gospel as a whole. As an exception, von Wahlde does not include comment on the role of 1.1-18 within the Gospel. This is because, for him, the Johannine Prologue is ‘certainly the worst place to begin in order to understand the composition of the Gospel as a whole’

(II, p. 17), since it belongs to none of the three editions of the Gospel. Thus, it is ‘best treated by itself, as a unique composition and literarily independent of the remainder of the Gospel’ (II, p. 17). Readers will notice and perhaps be somewhat encumbered by the fact that von Wahlde devotes most of his attention to the second stage (Composition). This is evidenced in that, more often than not, his comments in Composition are far more heavily researched and documented than those in Notes, Interpretation and Role. This imbalance in von Wahlde’s commentary frequently leads to meager or repetitive exegesis that lacks any sort of fresh or profound analysis of the text itself.

While von Wahlde retains his attention to detail regarding his model of composition, this sort of attention is seriously lacking in other ways. This is most notable in his comments on the Gospel’s use of the Greek language. Two examples of this are (1) von Wahlde’s unbridled theological approach to word meaning, especially in his analysis of the Prologue (see II, pp. 18-19), and (2) his neglect (or unawareness) of recent advances in Greek verbal aspect theory, which may have something to say particularly about the πιστεύσητε/πιστεύητε text-critical debate in Jn 20.31.

Volume 3 comprises von Wahlde’s commentary on the Johannine Letters. It is largely different from the two prior volumes, if only because, in his model, the Letters are treated as whole documents rather than heavily redacted texts. (The possibility that the Letters may have undergone editing by the community is never addressed.) One may reject the role the Letters play in von Wahlde’s historical reconstruction yet still find this volume quite useful. Comments on the text are also divided into four stages: (1) Notes, (2) Overview, (3) Structure and (4) Interpretation. The Notes are more substantive than in Volume 2, and his insights on the structure of the Letters are valuable. However, von Wahlde can be faulted again for lacking awareness of modern linguistic research related to the Greek of the New Testament, some of which has been done directly on the Johannine Letters (e.g. J.P. Louw, ‘Verbal Aspect in the First Letter of John’, *Neot* 9 [1975], pp. 98-104; M.B. O’Donnell and C. Smith, ‘A Discourse Analysis of 3 John’, in Stanley E. Porter and Matthew Brook O’Donnell [eds.], *The Linguist as Pedagogue: Trends in the Teaching and Linguistic Analysis of the Greek New Testament* [NTM, 11; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2009], pp. 127-45).

The significance of von Wahlde's work lies narrowly in its contribution to studies in the compositional history of John's Gospel and Letters. While scholars working on this issue may find these volumes valuable, von Wahlde himself admits that the commentary as a whole is not user friendly and will not appeal to general readers. Its contribution to areas such as the Greek language, exegesis and literary analysis is marginal. But above all, my concern is that von Wahlde is overly committed to the preservation of his model of composition, which is evidenced in the weakness of the model's criteria and the complexity of the model itself.

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