



Haenchen, Ernst.

John: A Commentary on the Gospel of John. 2 vols.

Translated by Robert W. Funk

Hermeneia

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Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth

New Jersey

Ernst Haenchen died in 1975 before he could complete this commentary but the work was taken up and completed by Ulrich Busse, a friend and former student. These two volumes are classic examples of German historical-criticism in action. On nearly every page we're met with source-, form-, and redaction-critical readings of John's Gospel. The introductory material covers all the basics like authorship, composition, and language, but has the added feature of a survey of critical scholarship up until that point. Unsurprisingly, the list consisted of mostly Germans.

The positive features of this commentary, from my cursory reading, are the attention to text critical research and the bibliographies, which are now dated. But that's about it. As I see it, Haenchen was more of a skeptical scholar than a critical scholar. Truly critical scholars will take what they read with a grain of salt and do all the historical, philological, and exegetical work necessary to get to the heart of the matter, even if it results in affirming church tradition and the tenets of orthodoxy (Craig Keener's two-volume *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* is an ideal example of this). Haenchen on the other hand seems genuinely perturbed by traditional readings.

For example, he rails against the attribution of authorship to John the son of Zebedee, almost as if it really bothers him that the suggestion was ever made. He later suggests that the author's source material meant for Jesus' miracles to be pointers to his divinity, while the author himself meant to use them in exactly the opposite way. This sets the stage for his interaction with the text, with which I found myself less than thrilled, not because it goes against my conservative sensibilities, but because it seems so forced. In the Prologue he finds a muted "christology of

subordination” (1:111) but then argues that the Logos is divine (his understanding of the anarthrous *theos* in 1:1c) and that first century Jewish and Christian monotheism could “speak of divine beings that existed alongside and under God but were not identical with him” (1:109). So we have what seems to be an Arian reading of the text. In 1:18 he opts for “the only Son” as opposed to “the only God” based on the weaker textual evidence. This allows him to say that Jesus is never called God except in John 20:28, which he later explains to mean that “the Father is visible in Jesus for those who believe” (2:211)

There’s also the less than ideal layout of these volumes. The text appears in a double-column format, which leaves large amounts of blank space on the sides of various pages. This could be beneficial for note taking but there’s no real rhyme or reason to it. In terms of the format of the commentary itself, it’s fine. Every section begins with a bibliography, followed by a (quirky) translation, verse-by-verse commentary, and finally an overview section. This will definitely not be the commentary on John I recommend to others, nor will it be my first stop when studying the Gospel. Those interested in older German scholarship will do well to consult Haenchen.