



Köstenberger, Andreas J.

A Theology of John's Gospel and Letters: the Word, the Christ, the Son of God

Biblical Theology of the New Testament

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Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth

New Jersey

What do you get when you take an introduction & survey to John's Gospel and Letters, an in-depth literary examination of the material, and a theological commentary on the corpus, while situating the writings within the broader canon of Scripture? The answer is Andreas Köstenberger's *A Theology of John's Gospel and Letters: The Word, the Christ, the Son of God*, which is the inaugural volume in Zondervan's Biblical Theology of the New Testament series, of which Köstenberger serves as general editor.

Köstenberger is well known for his voluminous contributions to New Testament studies and theology over the past 15-20 years, having edited, authored, or co-authored more than 20 books in this time, many of which have focused on the Fourth Gospel. *TJGL* represents something of a companion volume to his 2004 commentary on John in the Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament series, while broadening its scope to cover the Johannine letters, although unfortunately, not the Apocalypse (which will be covered in a subsequent volume in the BTNT series [565]).

The present volume is divided into 4 disproportionate parts in which Köstenberger employs his "hermeneutical triad" (which can be seen fully explained and practiced in the recently published *Invitation to Biblical Interpretation: Exploring the Hermeneutical Triad of History, Literature, and Theology* co-authored with Richard D. Patterson) for engaging the text. This triad seeks to

balance the history, language/literature, and theology of the Gospel. History stands at one corner of the foundation while language/literature stands at the other, with theology at the apex (see 42). In approaching the text in this manner Köstenberger wants to rid interpreters of the “undue emphasis on history at the expense of the Bible’s linguistic, literary, and theological dimensions” (43) as is exemplified in the historical-critical method. He also wants to guard against unduly neglecting the historical moorings of Scripture that come from over-emphasizing various types of literary criticism.

Part 1 (chapter 1), consisting of 62 pages, addresses the historical issues such as authorship, date, provenance, etc. Unsurprising to anyone who is familiar with Köstenberger’s previous works, he argues in favor of the apostolic authorship (i.e., John the son of Zebedee); sets the Gospel’s date at some time in the mid- to late-80s and the epistles in the 90s; and believes John to have written from Ephesus to Diaspora Jews (for the Gospel) and Gentile believers in and around Ephesus (for the Letters) with the intention that the material would be circulated and used evangelistically. In other words, Köstenberger maintains very traditional views on these matters, and he does so with generally convincing arguments, although his insistence on John the son of Zebedee as author leaves something to be desired.

For example, he seems much too confident in his conclusion when he says things like, “Although this disciple’s identity is elusive, he leaves sufficient clues in the narrative to ascertain it beyond reasonable doubt” (72). The meat of his argument (as well as his ultimate dismissal of Richard Bauckham’s counter-proposal of John the Elder as author) comes down to an appeal to tradition. The reception history of the Gospel argues most strongly in favor of apostolic authorship. This line of argument will be persuasive to many but those seeking something a bit more inductive will probably be unsatisfied. Readers interested in a sketch of the various proposals and arguments for Johannine authorship will do well to consult Paul N. Anderson’s *The Riddles of the Fourth Gospel: An Introduction to John* (pp. 97-104).

Part 2 (chapters 2-5), consisting of 169 pages, turns its attention to the language/literature leg of the hermeneutical triad. In chapter 2 Köstenberger mounts a strong case for John’s Gospel as a historical narrative like that found in the Old Testament and other Second Temple Jewish literature rather than Greco-Roman biography. The similarities with Greco-Roman biography can be explained by a desire to contextualize the material for a Gentile audience. He unsurprisingly concludes that John’s letters are in fact letters, even though 1 John lacks a customary salutation and benediction. Chapter 3 examines the various literary features of the

Johannine corpus such as narrative asides, Johannine irony, and symbolism, as well as the structure of the Gospel and Letters.

Chapters 4 and 5 offer literary-theological readings, by which Köstenberger means a “careful reading of the gospel narrative with attention to its literary features and its various sustained and interrelated theological themes” (175), of John’s Gospel and Letters respectively. These two chapters form something of a running commentary that follows the structure outlined in the concluding section of chapter 3. The reader is also armed with knowledge of the various literary features of the material so Köstenberger is able to seamlessly flow into examples and discussion of such features throughout his reading. It should be noted that this section is relatively light on exegesis and interested readers should consult Köstenberger’s commentary on John for the exegetical underpinnings of much of his literary-theological reading.

Part 3 (chapters 6-15), consisting of 271 pages, focuses on the major themes in John’s Gospel and Letters. Even a brief summary of each chapter would require more time and space than I have to devote to this review so a listing of the chapters will have to suffice:

6. John’s Worldview and Use of Scripture
7. The Messiah and His Signs
8. The Word: Creation and New Creation
9. God: Father, Son, and Spirit
10. Salvation History: Jesus’ Fulfillment of Festal Symbolism
11. The Cosmic Trial Motif: The World, the Jews, and the Witnesses to Jesus
12. The New Messianic Community: Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility
13. The Johannine Love Ethic
14. John’s Theology of the Cross
15. John’s Trinitarian Mission Theology

Much of the material throughout these chapters has been adapted from Köstenberger’s previously published work. For example, chapter 6 draws from Köstenberger’s commentary on John as well as his contribution to the *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*. Chapter 9 reprints and builds upon portions of Köstenberger’s *Father, Son, and Spirit: The Trinity and John’s Gospel*, which he co-authored with Scott R. Swain. Chapter 15 also draws from this work as well as Köstenberger and Peter T. O’Brien’s *Salvation to the Ends of the Earth: A Biblical Theology of Mission*. Parts of chapter 11 are adapted from one of Köstenberger’s *JETS* articles that has been reprinted in *Whatever Happened to Truth?*, a volume that

Köstenberger edited. The upshot to reusing material in such a manner is that readers now have access to Köstenberger's collective wisdom in one handy volume.

Part 4 (chapter 16 & conclusion), consisting of 18 pages, seeks to compare the theology of John's Gospel (the Letters are not at all the focus of the final chapter) with the theology of the other New Testament writings. Köstenberger finds that John offers a compatible reading of Jesus' story with the Synoptics while advancing beyond them with his sophisticated theological effort. As regards Pauline theology, John's is different, yet still compatible. John and Hebrews share a high Christology; there's limited affinity between John and James; and John and Peter "have similar perspectives on a number of issues" (565). The book is rounded out with a detailed bibliography, a number of helpful indices (Scripture, Extrabiblical, Subject, and Author).

There are many things to commend Köstenberger's *A Theology of John's Gospel and Letters*. To start, Köstenberger is well versed in the primary and secondary literature. The bibliographies (both at the beginning of each chapter and in the back matter) reveal that Köstenberger is conversant with scholarship of all sorts from the 19th to 21st centuries. There are no glaring omissions from his bibliography so far as I can tell. But past having simply read all of the important and relevant literature, the copious footnotes tell the tale of extended interaction with it. One thing that I've come to appreciate about so-called conservative scholarship is that it pays attention to and takes seriously its less conservative counterpart. The opposite is rarely the case. Köstenberger is a shining example of what responsible scholarship looks like.

A nod to the publisher should be given in terms of the book's layout and presentation. This is a large volume that takes up quite a bit of room on the bookshelf, but much of its size is due to the roomy margins provided for note taking. This is a volume that invites the reader to fill its white space with bullet points, summaries, cross-references, and doodling of all sorts. And this is to say nothing of the attractive hardcover that we've come to expect from Zondervan in recent years. Köstenberger and his editor are also to be commended on the way in which the book is structured. Each section flows logically into the next and provides the reader with the requisite knowledge and information to prepare them for what follows.

In terms of criticism I have only one major gripe, which is the paltry fourth and final section. When I think of Biblical Theology I think of how the two testaments relate on a macro level and how each individual book relates to the others on a micro level. Köstenberger's summary statements were extremely disappointing in this regard. After wading through such an impressive volume, one can't help but be underwhelmed by simplistic statements noting rather obvious

similarities and differences between John's Gospel, to the near exclusion of his Letters, to the other New Testament writings. Nothing was said of its relationship to the entire Christian canon, which was unfortunate since the Old Testament comprises more than two-thirds of our Bible.

Minor gripes would include interpretive differences, e.g., the cleansing of the temple in John 2:13-22. Köstenberger (along with D. A. Carson and a handful of others) argues for two temple cleansings since John places the event at the beginning of Jesus' ministry and the Synoptics place it towards the end (193-94). Craig Keener on the other hand believes John to have moved the incident to the beginning of Jesus' ministry in his narrative for theological reasons saying, "Now Jesus entire ministry is the Passion Week, overshadowed by his impending 'hour'" (*The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, 1:519). I find Keener's literary-theological reading to be persuasive, and his historical reasoning, i.e., Jesus wouldn't have plausibly been able to continue in ministry for an additional 2-3 years, is also convincing.

Köstenberger remarks that he "remain[s] to be persuaded, however, that this is a legitimate option for evangelicals with an inerrant view of Scripture" (193, n. 44), but this seems to be placing the cart before the horse. Shouldn't the text and its subsequent interpretation, especially according to Köstenberger's hermeneutical triad, inform our views on Scripture's inerrancy rather than the other way around? Also, as Keener has noted, "biographers were more interested in anecdotes than chronology" (*The Historical Jesus of the Gospels*, 224). This, of course, is predicated on his study of Greco-Roman biography, which he views as the Gospels' genre; a view that Köstenberger successfully challenges, but does not entirely refute. It's possible that one feature of contextualization that John adopts is a fluid chronology. This would make this a legitimate option for the evangelical inerrantist.

But these and a handful of other interpretive disagreements do not detract from the overall usefulness of this volume. Köstenberger has written what is perhaps his finest book to date and he has set the bar extremely high for the other volumes in this series. Time will tell if they attain to such heights but I'm confident that under Köstenberger's general editorship they will. Every student of New Testament, Biblical, or Johannine theology will want this volume in their library. Every teacher of these subjects will do well to assign it. I enthusiastically recommend this volume to one and all.