

BOOK REVIEWS

THE GOSPEL OF JOHN IN CULTURAL AND RHETORICAL PERSPECTIVE. By Jerome H. Neyrey, S.J. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2009. Pp. xx + 489. \$37.

These 18 previously published studies focus on themes and passages in the Fourth Gospel were chosen for inclusion because they interpret John “in terms of classical rhetoric or through the lenses of cultural anthropology” (viii). The results are rich and rewarding, presented under three headings: “Major Perspectives,” “Narrative Episodes in Focus,” and “Jesus vis-à-vis God: Agent or Equal?” The dates of their original publication range from 1979 to 2007.

The first three chapters, discussing major perspectives, introduce the methods and topics pursued throughout the volume. Chapter 1 treats the role of encomium in the Fourth Gospel. Neyrey says the Evangelist well understands the components of this genre, which examines a figure’s upbringing, skills, accomplishments, and noble death, showing how Jesus, in the eyes of those who truly know him, fulfills all, but in the eyes of “outsiders” fails to fulfill these expectations. N.’s analysis of this genre represents an important contribution to the interpretation of the drama that unfolds in the Gospel. Chapter 2 focuses on key players, including Lazarus and his sisters, the Beloved Disciple, Peter, the Samaritan woman, and the man born blind. N. here measures the “status,” not the roles, of these figures: the higher the status, the deeper one’s knowledge of who Jesus really is. Chapter 3 applies the anthropological model of “territoriality” to the Gospel. Here N. classifies five types of space that “contain binary opposites which set certain spaces apart” (60). These include spaces characterized as public and private, sacred and profane, honor and shame, pure and polluted, and a fixed-fluid space (which refers to a group in which there is loyalty, love, service, and the like). N.’s spatial approach attempts to come to terms with the surrealism and symbolism of the Gospel.

The 13 chapters of part 2 contribute substantively to our understanding of important Gospel passages and themes, such as Jesus and the patriarch Jacob, Jesus as the noble shepherd, Jesus and divine authority equal to God, and Jesus and worship. The final section explores the divinity of Jesus. Chapter 17 probes the significance of the confession of Thomas: “My Lord and my God!” (20:28). Here N. convincingly articulates the Evangelist’s clarification and defense of the divinity of Jesus. Chapter 18 shows how the image of Jesus as the “door” (Jn 10) casts him into the role of “broker” who acts on behalf of humanity. To pass through Jesus is to gain entry into the presence of God.

This collection is important. Yet I was disappointed that N. did not explore more fully the Evangelist’s stated purpose for writing the Gospel: “these (things) are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name” (20:31).

Of course, N.'s studies shed much light on *what* the Evangelist expects his readers to believe and why they should believe it, but more discussion of the Evangelist's idea of faith in the context of a synagogue that has rejected Jesus as the Messiah and as the divine Savior from heaven would have deepened our understanding of the dynamics of the Gospel. This brings me to one more point: N. hardly touches on the theme of expulsion from the synagogue, explicitly referenced three times (9:22; 12:42; 16:2). These passages receive some attention (see esp. 66, 69–70), but their explanatory power for much of what is going on in the Fourth Gospel seems underrated. Indeed, the scriptural apologetic, clearly oriented toward a skeptical synagogue, has not been developed.

Whatever the merit of these complaints, they hardly detract from the value of the book. It is rare that a collection of previously published essays exhibits such balance and coherence. N. is to be commended for his excellent contribution to Johannine scholarship.

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REVISITING THE EMPTY TOMB: THE EARLY HISTORY OF EASTER. By Daniel A. Smith. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010. Pp. xi + 267. \$29.

Smith limits himself to (1) exploring both the tradition of Jesus's empty tomb (as he reconstructs its religious background) and the tradition of the postresurrection appearances, and (2) accounting for the differences of perspective between the two traditions. He accounts for the differences by arguing that the empty-tomb tradition did not originate as a way of stating that Jesus had been raised from the dead, but as a "disappearance" tradition or as a way of expressing that Jesus had been assumed from the tomb into heaven and would be seen again at the parousia. He associates the earliest form of the disappearance tradition as he finds it in Mark 16:1–8 with the disappearance of Elijah in 2 Kings 2, even though Elijah, unlike Jesus, had not died and been buried before being assumed.

S. has studied assiduously many ancient texts and modern authors relevant to his argument. He notes significant differences between Jewish accounts of assumption (through which Elijah and others escape from death by being "taken up" with a view to their eschatological functions to come) and Greco-Roman stories. The latter usually involved an apotheosis in which some hero was taken alive into the presence of the gods, or else his spirit ascended while his dead body was buried.

S. recognizes that we have something unique in the case of Jesus: Christian belief involved both resurrection and assumption/ascension. But S. never acknowledges a key difficulty thrown up by the cases he cites of Herakles, Romulus, and other such heroes and heroines. Unlike Jesus (who lived and died shortly before the NT came into existence), they were understood to have lived in a very distant past, and—one can reasonably maintain—most probably never existed at all. A similar