



Reviews

THE GOSPEL OF JOHN : A THEOLOGICAL COMMENTARY by David F. Ford,
Baker Academic, Grand Rapids, 2021, pp. xii+484, \$52.99, hbk

David Ford, Regius Professor Emeritus of Divinity at Cambridge, is one of the English-speaking world's foremost exponents of modern theology. His book, *The Modern Theologians*, now in its third edition, is an essential text for anyone wishing to engage with the thought of the significant theologians of the twentieth century. But, while he excels at the sympathetic explanation of the thought of others, he is in addition a creative theologian in his own right and in particular one who seeks to bring the message of the Gospel to bear on the everyday difficulties and situations of ordinary people.

He is also, as this volume makes abundantly clear, a lover of the scriptures. That this is not, but should be, something that follows inevitably from the fact that someone is a noteworthy theologian, is a situation I have bemoaned in previous contributions to *New Blackfriars*, and I shall not rehearse again now my distress at the cleavage that continues to exist between biblical studies and systematic theology. Let it suffice, rather, to rejoice that David Ford is one of those seeking to overcome that divide, and in this commentary on the 'theological Gospel' he succeeds superbly, and apparently almost effortlessly.

In fact, Ford presents this work as the fruit of twenty years of study; the Epilogue details interestingly the story of his directed engagement with the Fourth Gospel. He and I have similar stories to relate of coming to the Greek text of John, and being pleasantly surprised by its simplicity after the experience of reading Classical Greek. Setting aside the question of language, John has a seeming simple story to tell that is readily grasped in its essentials by any reader; and yet the depths of the text are such as to invite – for many of us, to *demand* – continued and ever-more intense engagement.

For some, this has meant closer and closer examination of historical-critical issues, whether they pertain to the historicity of the text, or what it might reveal about (some part of) early Christianity, or how it interacts with the thought-world of Hellenistic Judaism into which it emerged, or whatever. Ford is not lightly dismissive of these questions: he does not by any means intend the subtitle of his book to suggest that his own study of John is more profound or more valuable than the work of what one

might call the ‘professional’ biblical scholar. But his vision of John recognises that the fundamental purpose of the Gospel – and this is surely true whether or not one claims to discern the historical intentions of the Evangelist – is to offer its audience an encounter with Jesus Christ. More specifically, as Ford write, ‘the reader is invited to begin to think about Jesus imaginatively in relation to light and darkness ... to be open to the possibility of being part of a family who believe and trust in his name and to recognise that ... a human person has come in whom there is the full meaning and reality of God in relation to us’ (p. 5).

Since this living encounter with Christ is the purpose of the Gospel, it is natural that – as Ford observes – the presence of the Holy Spirit in the life, ministry, and teaching of Jesus should be especially highlighted in John. This is closely related to the fact that the Fourth Gospel most explicitly interests itself in the continued life of the body of Christ’s disciples after Jesus’s earthly ministry is completed. This is to be ‘an ongoing drama of inspired love’ (p. 9). This drama is to be played out by those who have entrusted themselves to Jesus, played out not simply for their own benefit but for the sake of the whole of humanity and the whole of creation, as the Gospel ‘nurtures in readers a global horizon that can unite them with the desire of Jesus for an ultimate unity of all people and all creation in love and peace’ (p. 11).

Ford goes on to assert, and indeed to demonstrate convincingly throughout his commentary, that the principles I have enunciated so far on which he bases his work make John especially relevant now, and it is one of the great marks of this book that the author continually makes connections between the Fourth Gospel and the present reality of readers and indeed of all humanity. He does this not in the rather trite manner of many commentaries that offer a paragraph of ‘application’ at the end of each section so that the preacher knows what to say in his sermon. To be blunt, many such paragraphs plumb such depths of banality that they almost beg to be satirised. Ford’s reading of John is the very antithesis of this: the challenge and consolation that John’s Gospel offers in woven through every paragraph of this book.

Ford’s commentary is indeed a seamless garment. Just as the continued relevance of the Gospel is found, explicit or implicit, in every paragraph, so throughout is the author’s engagement with the *Wirkungsgeschichte* of John – that is, with readings of and reactions to the Gospel stretching back from those of writers (especially poets) that Ford admires all the way to the earliest Christian writers. Neither does he overlook the negative or problematic responses to the Gospel, notably its part in the history of antisemitism in the Church and among Christians. Again, this is not a matter of a separate ‘reception history’ section in each chapter, because Ford’s style is much less clunky, much more discursive. The book reads like a meditation, almost, more than a commentary, except that we are left in no doubt that the author has brought to bear on every page the best of every kind of scholarship.

If you are looking for another commentary on John that will help you to think of a sermon during Eastertide, this may not be the book for you. Undergraduates with an essay to write may also find that there are easier places to look for the details they need. But Christians hoping to deepen, or perhaps to re-ignite, their love of St John's Gospel could not find a better place to start. This is a labour of love, and it truly merits a response of love.

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WISDOM IN CHRISTIAN TRADITION: THE PATRISTIC ROOTS OF MODERN RUSSIAN SOPHIOLOGY by Marcus Plested, *Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2022, pp.288, £75.00, hbk*

Wisdom is marked by her general absence from political, economic, and cultural leadership, according to Marcus Plested, but she is enjoying a remarkable revival in theology. Also, one might add, among those across the belief spectrum who are tired of tribalism and religious fundamentalism but are also seeing the inadequacy of secular liberalism and its associate, religious liberalism. Wisdom is a human quality universally admired. Wisdom is sought, received, and lived more than deduced and grasped. As such Wisdom may be seen as a bridge between unknowing and knowing, between spirituality and dogma, between arts and sciences, between thought and life, and, in one rather beautiful Christian conception noted by Plested, Wisdom is 'the "and" in God and the world'.

But that immediately raises the problem of Wisdom within Christian theology. Exactly who or what is Wisdom? God, a created spirit, a virtue, a metaphor...? The Russian Sophiologists – Vladimir Solov'ev, Pavel Florensky, and above all Sergei Bulgakov, retrieved wisdom in order to construct religious philosophies which were intended radically to challenge secular modernity – but immediately posed profound theological problems. The Sophiologists' Sophia was far too redolent of the Sophia of the Gnostics and their endless cosmic layers, who are drawn on quite openly by Solov'ev, it seems, to make sense of his visions (rather like the Lutheran sophiologist Jakob Boehme using Paracelsus). Also, as Aidan Nichols has recognised, German Idealism, especially Friedrich Schelling's heavily Sophianic attempt at a Christian philosophy, was especially influential during Solov'ev's student years in 1860s Moscow. So for the anti-Western Vladimir Lossky, Sophiology is really just a western import, thus foreign to Orthodoxy.