

---

Willard M. Swartley. *John*. The Believers Church Bible Commentary. Harrisonburg, VA; Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 2013.

Willard Swartley has made an outstanding contribution to the Believers Church Bible Commentary series with this volume on the Gospel of John. He plumbs the depths of the complex world of Johannine scholarship and chronicles it in a clear, accessible fashion. Swartley notes in his Introduction he utilizes “the narrative method” in analyzing the Gospel (37), and this has ramifications for the shape of the resulting commentary. It means he will be attentive to narrative dynamics in the text, and he does provide brief descriptions of five of them: irony, metaphors, misunderstandings, double entendre, and symbolism (37). However, the functioning of narrative dynamics in the Gospel is not afforded major attention in the work as a whole, though irony and symbolism do receive significant coverage in isolated instances.

The decision to use the narrative method is most noticeable in the constant attention to the narrative flow of the Gospel. The author uses the “Preview” sections of each chapter to tie the chapter’s content into the narrative flow to that point, and even dedicates space in some “Explanatory Notes” sections for this purpose as well. Utilizing the narrative method also necessitates focusing just on the canonical form of the Gospel, thus bracketing out all matters of compositional history.

The author provides a solid treatment of the other interpretive issues, offering an exceptional coverage of the research. For a volume of fewer than 600 pages, this commentary presents an inordinate amount of material, owing to an innovation on the publisher’s part. The original manuscript had to be shortened by almost one-third for print publication, but the excised portions are available as a Web supplement!

Given that this book is a commentary in the Believers Church tradition, it is not surprising that Swartley gives full attention to issues related to peace and peacemaking arising out of the Johannine text. For example, he characterizes Jesus’ “Action in the Temple” (2:14-17) as a protest against the money changers and sellers of sacrificial animals engaging in practices that oppressed the poor (99). He makes the astute observation that Jesus’ words in verse 16 are addressed to the sellers of doves, indicating these particular sellers were not driven out of the temple with the others; this is

significant because doves were the sacrifice of the poor (100). Swartley also notes that Jesus' actions here were consistently interpreted as nonviolent in the early centuries, with a shift to seeing them as violent beginning only with Augustine, and this text subsequently being employed to authorize the use of violence (100).

The author also exercises care to ensure readers do not see Jesus' vitriol against "the Jews" as justification for anti-Semitic sentiment. Throughout the commentary, he makes clear that the referents of this label are not Jews in general, but rather a particular group among them who were opposing Jesus, and he supplies cross-references to a lengthy treatment of this issue in the "Essays" section of the volume (520-25).

I do wish the social-scientific work on the Gospel—research into the components of Mediterranean culture (e.g. honor/shame, patronage, collectivist personality)—had been given more consideration, for it has been the source of significant interpretive insights into biblical texts. The bibliography does include works of Jerome Neyrey and John Pilch, leading proponents of this approach, but these works play only a small role in the commentary. Swartley's treatment of the Gospel would have been well served if he had utilized as a resource Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary on the Gospel of John* (Fortress Press, 1998) a work dedicated to providing readings of the passages of John informed by the Mediterranean culture underlying the text. For example, on an attempt by "the Jews" to arrest Jesus (10:39), Swartley simply addresses how Jesus manages to escape (265), whereas the *Social-Science Commentary* points out "the Jews" were motivated by a desire to defend God's honor.

Swartley work will appeal to pastors; he begins each chapter with an anecdote—mainly from his own life—and even offers "Sermon Starters" in some chapters. But this commentary would be a treasure for any serious students of the Bible, especially those interested in a Believers Church perspective on the Gospel of John.

Gary Yamasaki, Professor of Biblical Studies, Columbia Bible College, Abbotsford, British Columbia