

Review of Van der Watt, *An Introduction to the Johannine Gospel and Letters*¹

by Annang Asumang²

Van der Watt J 2007. *An Introduction to the Johannine Gospel and Letters*. London: T&T Clark, 160 pages.

Prof J G van der Watt of the New Testament Department of the University of Pretoria begins his introduction by describing the Gospel of John as “straightforward to understand only to surprise the reader with its depth and finesse of expression and ideas” (p. 1). The same can also be said of his textbook aimed at professional students of the Bible and yet written with such clarity of language and ideas that it would also be of immense help to the non-professional.

Aware that the present state of Johannine research is like an overworked “Chinese rice field” (p. 146) and that scholarly interpretation of these documents is like a constantly swinging “pendulum” (p. 145), van der Watt begins by patiently engaging the texts themselves before moving on to discuss the various scholarly approaches and perspectives on the introductory matters. This is one of the major strengths of the book.

The first chapter describes the structure and purpose of the gospel of John and its relationship with the Letters. Van der Watt notes that the narrative flow of the gospel is such that the chronological account is not as important as the thematic account—“It is the message and not the events that dominate the narrative” (p. 12). Thus the emphasis in this introductory book is clearly on John’s theology. After a brief examination of the conceptual overlaps between

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the Gospel and the Letters of John, van der Watt concludes that the "Letters are examples of how the Gospel was interpreted in latter situations, which makes the Letters, the 'first commentaries' on the Gospel" (p. 23).

The second chapter focuses on the theological themes of the Gospel and Letters. Though simply presented, the discussion is wide-ranging, thorough and effective. John's Christology, Soteriology, Ecclesiology and Eschatology are carefully examined with deftness and lucidity. In addition, he provides a number of helpful conceptual diagrams to illustrate the theological themes of the gospel. This is very much appreciated by this reviewer.

The rest of the book examines several of the introductory issues related to the interpretation of the Gospel and Letters of John. Here, van der Watt presents a fair account of the different and often conflicting scholarly views on some of these matters. The fourth chapter deals with the relationship between the Johannine literature and other biblical documents. With regard to John and the Synoptics, the author advises students to be "clear about their reasons for taking different positions" (p. 81) and so proceeds to supply these various options and the reasons behind each one of them. Van der Watt himself opts for an older view of the John-Synoptic relationship that is increasingly reasserting itself, that "John was written independently, but with some form of contact with synoptic material" (p. 90).

The fifth chapter deals with form, source and redaction critical issues related to the gospel. The author notes that these older approaches were aimed at resolving a feature of the Gospel whereby there appear to be "tensions" and "sudden breaks" in the narrative (p. 96). Again, van der Watt examines the different viewpoints in a fair manner and proceeds to note the problems inherent in the methods. He also observes the current scholarly trend to consider the gospel as a narrative whole while cautioning the student to also take seriously the "history" of the composition of the text as framework in interpreting the gospel (p. 105).

The sixth chapter deals with the questions of authorship, date and origin of the gospel and the debated issue of the Johannine community. Though no new grounds are broken here, the discussion surveys several stances. The author expresses concern on how the "two-level drama" hypothesis has resulted in an

unhelpful situation in which “Many players took to the field and played complicated speculative games in order to reconstruct the history of the Johannine community” (p. 115). This indeed is a salutary admonition regarding the speculative nature of the method of reading the Gospel of John from a purely hypothetical standpoint of a ‘Johannine community’. The sixth chapter discusses the religious backgrounds of the Johannine Literature.

Van der Watt concludes the book by drawing the attention of scholars to the intrinsic dangers of going round in circles, such that “the same known material or knowledge is repeated in each article after the next” (p. 145). If his aim is to call for a renewed effort to re-engage the text itself, then indeed his book serves as one of the key opening salvos in that direction.

This reviewer cannot think of any criticism of the book. A tiny quibble about the lack of discussion on the implications of the genre of John as a gospel may however be made. If John’s aim was to write a *gospel*, then perhaps the current understanding of the genre of the gospels as “theological and kerygmatic biographies” is one swing to the pendulum that needed some emphasis. For, it is likely that John’s contribution to understanding the ‘historical Jesus’ may well become an important aspect of Johannine scholarship in the coming decades. However, this small quibble only applies to the reviewer’s ‘vested’ interest and cannot detract from this regal introductory work by Professor van der Watt.