

11-1-1999

# The Gospel of John in the light of the Old Testament

Martin E. Malina

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus>

---

### Recommended Citation

Malina, Martin E. (1999) "The Gospel of John in the light of the Old Testament," *Consensus*: Vol. 25 : Iss. 2 , Article 13.  
Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol25/iss2/13>

This Book Reviews is brought to you for free and open access by Scholars Commons @ Laurier. It has been accepted for inclusion in Consensus by an authorized editor of Scholars Commons @ Laurier. For more information, please contact [scholarscommons@wlu.ca](mailto:scholarscommons@wlu.ca).

However, one wishes the author would have spent some time and space spelling out what a truly “Palestinian” history of the area – freed from the confining restraints of biblical, Israelite, and Israeli self-congratulations – would actually look like. The present volume is strong on the critique of the past and the present but not very strong on what the future should be. As such the work is more a prolegomenon and strident call to stop what we are doing to “Palestinians” than a how to go about doing the new and more correct thing. Hopefully such a second volume is not too far off, although its production may not be as easy as one might think in view of the nature of the evidence and resources available for it.

In conclusion, this review will have accomplished its objective should you the reader be encouraged to read this paperback. Although this study gives focus to particular voices silenced in a specific part of the world, the broader methodological questions raised might inspire us to revisit the histories of other marginalized, possibly misrepresented, or even unrepresented peoples much closer to us.

Roger W. Uitti  
Lutheran Theological Seminary

## **The Gospel of John in the Light of the Old Testament**

Claus Westermann

Translated by Siegfried Schatzmann

Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 1998

103 pages, \$15.99 Softcover

When reading this short commentary on the Gospel of John, I felt that I was wading into a large and complex debate among New Testament scholars. This debate centres on the degree of Gnostic influence on the Gospel. Westermann, an Old Testament scholar, takes a brief but deep plunge into the sterile yet potent waters of redaction and form criticism. He implies false dichotomy in the question: Do we interpret the Gospel as Gnostic writing, or as a Christian writing, “in which Gnostic elements are not meant in a Gnostic sense?”

Instead, one criterion that explains the contrast between Gnostic and non-Gnostic elements in the Gospel, asserts Westermann, “is how the Gnostic and the non-Gnostic motifs relate to the Old Testament.” His argument is built on the understanding that the Gospel is divided into two layers of redaction: a later layer and an earlier layer.

According to Westermann, there is only one component of the Gospel that

is in contrast with the Old Testament: the motifs of Gnostic and spiritual dualism, the roots of which are *not* found in the Old Testament. Gnostic dualism is restricted to the later layer, found mostly in the controversy dialogues (5:17-47; 6:25-67; 7:14-36; 8:12-59 and 10:22-39); these dialogues are a “foreign element” in the Gospel of John. They are governed by motifs such as establishing contrasts between separate realms and people (8:23f “You are from below, I am from above; you are of this world, I am not of this world”), between spirit and matter (6:63 “It is the spirit that gives life, the flesh is of no avail”) and judgement (5:30 “as I hear, I judge; and my judgement is just”). Westermann argues that the statements of the later layer stand in opposition to the language and thinking of the Old Testament.

In contrast, the earlier layer reflects motifs speaking of historical events (“That God sent Jesus was an event in time, just as he had sent the prophets at a specific point in time”) and personal relationships, such as the relationship between Father and Son (“The Father entrusts something to him and supports him in it; the Son trusts in him”). Westermann suggests that the relationship of trust between Jesus and God has its parallel in the relationship of one praying to God in the Psalms: “from God, direction and protection: from the human, trust and obedience” (5:30, 36; 6:38, 56f; 7:16, 18, 28, 29; 8:29, 38). For Westermann, every presentation of the motif of the Father-Son relationship is shaped by language and thinking rooted in the Old Testament.

I found the Epilogue a helpful summary and annotation of various recent (mostly German) exegetes on the Gospel of John. However, I was impeded in my study by the lack of footnotes in the body of the text, where Westermann makes infrequent reference only to his works on the subject. Moreover, one need not read the book cover to discover that the English text is a translation from the original German edition published in 1994. At times the phrasing is wooden, stilted and awkward (i.e., “He is the Christ who helps, heals, and blesses, for whom precisely this kind of ministry brought on his suffering”).

Notwithstanding these minor drawbacks, this text is a quick-read, and a good read in a day when biblical studies are seeking to integrate and interpret from a more holistic point of view. Westermann assumes that “in the present phase of biblical interpretations, it is no longer possible to conduct Old and New Testament exegesis in isolation from one another.” Westermann exhorts interpreters that in the case of Jesus, or the Gospel of John, “it is not appropriate to treat the extract as the totality.” Only from the perspective of the Bible as a whole does the Gospel take on importance and meaning. Westermann creates confidence in interpreting the Bible as a many-layered tradition whose depths and courses, when plumbed regularly and intentionally, reveal an inherent interconnectedness. In this study, Westermann teaches us that the degree of Gnostic influence on the Gospel can be better understood when contrasted with the deep waters of the Hebrew tradition from whence the tradition of Jesus has

its true and enduring source.

Martin Malina

St. Peter's Lutheran Church

Brodhagen, Ontario

## **Life in the Face of Death: The Resurrection Message of the New Testament**

Richard N. Longenecker, Editor

Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1998

322 pages, \$35.50 Softcover

Excellent! – scholarly and accessible, biblical and pastoral, homiletical and theological, educational and devotional. These adjectives aptly describe the latest book edited by Richard Longenecker in the McMaster New Testament Studies Series. For the last three years McMaster Divinity College (Hamilton, Ontario) has convened a New Testament Symposium by inviting prominent scholars from around the world to present papers on a New Testament theme. These papers are responded to and revised as necessary before being collected into the published book form. This current volume on death and resurrection in the New Testament contains twelve essays from such authors as Richard Bauckham, Joel B. Green, Murray J. Harris, William L. Lane, Andrew T. Lincoln, and Allison A. Trites.

The overall tone and theological emphasis of the book would be classified as evangelical. It doesn't seek to advance new, controversial theories for New Testament scholarship as much as it tries to validate the Gospel message ("Jesus rose from the dead and offers eternal life") as central to the New Testament and our lives today. The book is full of solid scholarship with plenty of footnotes, bibliographies, and indexes for those who want to study issues further. Pastors will be interested to know that all the research is used in the service of affirming and deepening the faith of readers. A key question looming behind each essay is, "how can this help readers to embrace resurrection life in the face of death?"

Section one contains four essays which survey the views of death and afterlife according to ancient cultures (Ugaritic, Egyptian, Persian, Greek, Roman), the major world religions (Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism) and prominent contemporary worldviews (Humanism, Reincarnation, Platonism, Christianity). This is the most informative section of the book as it gives readers a historical, international and holistic backdrop to see how the New Testament's message of bodily resurrection is unique. This first section asserts that across most cultures