Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility in the Fourth Gospel

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One of the perennial issues in assessing the theology of the Fourth Gospel is its understanding of the relationship between divine sovereignty and human responsibility. Some readers find that the gospel displays a rigidly determinist scheme; others find that it creates a space for human responsibility. Others are content to affirm that the gospel, perhaps like other Jewish sources, holds that the two principles are compatible, although it is unclear how that compatibility works. Yet others relate the tensive principles to the gospel’s social circumstances. This paper argues that the evangelist affirms both principles, but not in a haphazard or incoherent way. The Gospel leads the attentive reader through a meditation on a framework within which the two principles can be maintained. Comparison with roughly contemporary treatments of the issue will clarify the Johannine position.

Basic Data

Some passages in the Gospel suggest that a divine plan governs the activity of Jesus. The notion is most clearly expressed in passages referring to Jesus’ “hour,” which is still in the future in the first half of the gospel (John 2:4; 7:30; 8:20). The hour has come when Jesus arrives for the last time in Jerusalem (John 12:23, 27), but it lasts through the Passion (13:1; 17:1). Expectation of an ordained sequence of events also appears in the reference to the anticipated outpouring of the Spirit (7:37–38), which was not available until after Jesus’ glorification (7:39), in the condition of the man born blind (9:3), the death of Lazarus, (11:4) or the betrayal of Judas (17:12), all of which serve a divine purpose.

The appointed schedule, especially the time designated for Jesus to confront the forces of darkness (dramatically identified in 12:30), evokes apocalyptic scenarios and sapiential affirmations that God controls times and seasons.

1 It is a pleasure to contribute this essay to honour Christopher Rowland, whose insights have made such significant contributions to New Testament scholarship.
Yet the belief that God *determines* a plan does not entail that God *predestines* the fate of individuals within that plan.³

There is more in John than the gesture toward an overall divine plan. A thematic thread runs through the first half of the gospel that involves issues of divine sovereignty and human responsibility.⁴ This kind of sequencing is a familiar element of the Gospel, which is laced with interwoven thematic strands, a subject of recent scholarly attention.⁵ Such thematic strands might be thought of as parts of an intricately interwoven arabesque, where the interconnections are significant.

Key points in the development of the theme are:

1. The dialogue with Nicodemus, John 3:3–5:
2. The later comment by the narrator, John 3:19–21.
3. The Bread of Life Discourse, John 6:29; 37–39, 44–45:
4. The pointed polemics of chapter 8, John 8:43–47:
5. The final part of the Good Shepherd discourse, John 10:25–29:

The sequence has convinced many commentators of the Johannine commitment to a predestinarian scheme.⁶ The resistance of others is driven largely by the Gospel’s general narrative, which portrays Jesus inviting and trying to

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