The Cosmological Vision of John: The Evangelist as Observer and Interpreter

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Advances in science begin with rigorous observations, which are then interpreted within a living tradition of knowledge. Hypotheses are made; experiments are trialed and with further observations and testing the scientific academy may come to accept the hypothesis, which then becomes the basis for further observation and reflection. Within this process a type of “faith” is called for: faith in the accuracy of the data; faith in the logic of thought processes and equations. As Elizabeth Boyle comments, “Both scientists and theologians make acts of faith as they explore parallel paths in the land of mystery.”1

At times even scientists balk from such faith when their results appear to lead to impossibilities. Most famously, Einstein doubted his General Theory of Relativity as it would suggest a universe in a constant state of expansion from a singular point—something beyond even his imagination. Sixty years later his initial findings were confirmed by Arno Penzias and Robert Wilson, who “overheard” the cosmic radiation from this initial “big bang.” Sometimes science calls for faith in something not yet discovered but whose existence is required to make sense of available data. This was the case when the Higgs-Boson particle was proposed in the 1960s as a theoretical possibility to account for mass in sub-atomic particles where such mass was not expected. What was once only imagined was finally discovered in July 2012 using the large hadron collider at the European Organization for Nuclear Research (CERN).

Theology, known in the Middle Ages as the “queen of the sciences,” advances through similar processes of observation followed by interpretation within a living tradition of knowledge. Where science engages with the physical world in its materiality, theology engages with the world in its relationality and asks questions about the human person in relation to other persons, to the world and to an experience of a transcendent reality called in the Judeo-Christian tradition “God.” As in the case of science, interpretations are validated through time and continued coherent experience. Just as science continues to change and develop through new discoveries and better technological skills, so too theology changes in response to new situations, new archeological and manuscript discoveries, and new questions. As with science a certain “faith” is

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required, particularly faith in the validity of one’s experience of the transcendent that is then able to relate to a tradition wherein one’s experience can be recognized and validated.²

The Gospel of John did not develop in a vacuum;³ it emerged from the complex matrix of first-century Judaism, which in turn had its theological roots in the experience of the Babylonian exile and the unfulfilled hopes of the exiles on their return to the land of Israel/Palestine. Observation of their post-exilic socio-political reality called for a radical rethinking of Israel’s world view, giving rise to a new genre of biblical literature in response to the historical crisis of ongoing domination by world powers.⁴

1 The Crisis of Domination: How Can God Save Us?

When Babylonian power declined, the Persian Empire came to rule in the Middle East from 539 BCE for the next two centuries. Cyrus, the Persian emperor, allowed the exiles to return to their own lands, and some of the Jewish exiles returned to Jerusalem. The Prophets had spoken of this return with glowing images of a re-created Israel (Ezek 37), a rebuilt Temple (Ezek 47) within a world where God’s peace flourished (Isa 55:12–13). But the reality was far different. Although the Temple was rebuilt, probably by 500 BCE, it failed to express the splendor of Solomon’s sanctuary. While Persian rule allowed greater religious freedom, nevertheless Israel was no longer an independent nation. When Alexander’s armies overcame Persia in 331 BCE, Greek rule curtailed and at times suppressed religious freedom. The post-exilic time seemed a far-cry from the glorious hopes promised by Isaiah and Ezekiel. The long experience of oppression by the Greek and then the Roman Empires led to a new conceptual paradigm of this world and its history.⁵

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² A helpful discussion between the goals and methods of science in dialogue with the goals and methods of religion can be found in Fritjof Capra, David Steindl-Rast, with Thomas Matus Belonging to the Universe: New Thinking about God and Nature (London: Penguin, 1992).
⁴ In this paper I will focus on one movement in Second Temple Judaism—apocalyptic eschatology. Space will not allow exploration of the “Wisdom” movement discussed in Culpepper’s essay, “Children of God,” in this volume.
⁵ Foreign rule was only momentarily relieved by Maccabean success against the Greeks in Jerusalem (164 BCE) and the line of Hasmonean Jewish rulers (143–63 BCE).