
As increased attention has been paid to the literary strategies of the Fourth Gospel, and also to the many levels of its use of the Scriptures, so there has been a renewed appreciation of its use of echoes of the biblical themes of betrothal and marriage; ‘renewed’ because, as McWhirter observes, such insights are already found in Origen and Hippolytus, although their recovery goes beyond the current interest in Patristic exegesis. Although McWhirter is not innovating in detecting such themes, this is probably the most systematic attempt to trace their development through the Gospel and to integrate them with the confession of Jesus as Messiah and with an ecclesiology. The book is a revision of a 2001 doctoral dissertation at Princeton Theological Seminary, but, although it follows the familiar format of the genre, its style is both confident and lucid. Inevitably, since much of the argument depends on linguistic echoes, it makes frequent reference to the Greek of both the Gospel and the Septuagintal texts, and on occasion to Hebrew, but the gist of the argument is probably accessible to those without access to either language. McWhirter also is very conscious of the contemporary reader, whom she envisages within the church, acknowledging that many of the scriptural echoes are lost due to widespread lack of familiarity with the key texts, particularly the Song of Songs. Nonetheless, she argues that valuable insights remain, even if the argument for Jesus as Messiah is no longer a central concern for many today. Although this is not a feminist analysis she also acknowledges the ambivalence that the Johannine portrayal of women and the representation of the church as bride carry for some readers, and endeavours to address this positively.

The foundations of the argument in the opening two chapters are previous scholarship on the topic, as well as, in particular, Richard Hays’ programme for the detection of scriptural allusions which she largely adopts, together with Donald Juel’s concept of ‘messianic exegesis’ which proves to be a key element in her argument (see below). There follows a careful and thorough exegetical analysis of the introduction of Jesus as bridegroom, in the provision of an abundance of wine at Cana (2:1-11) and in John’s words in 3:28-30 drawing on a range of scriptural texts, most notably Jeremiah 33:10-11. It is, however, the encounter between Jesus and the Samaritan woman (ch. 4) that anchors these allusions, with its echoes of earlier encounters at a well (Genesis 29 and also 24; Exodus 2:15-22). The second significant textual unit comes in John 12 and 20, where the strongest allusions are to the Song of Songs, particularly
1:12; 3:1-4. In both studies McWhirter’s analysis combines specific verbal echoes with parallel narrative patterns, and the frequent use of ‘alludes to’ and ‘evokes’. The final stage of the argument is to justify the identification of this as a specifically messianic theme; here McWhirter presents Psalm 45 as the sort of ‘inter-text’ that, following Juel, allowed the early Christians to interpret non-messianic passages as messianic. Because it shares themes and vocabulary with the Song of Songs, its messianic significance could be transferred to the latter.

It is at this point that the weaknesses in the argument become most apparent: Psalm 45 is nowhere quoted by John, and so McWhirter has both to explain why not – because a crucified Messiah hardly matched a victorious King – and to assume that early believers took for granted the messianic reference of the Psalm. In practice the sources to support this are equivocal, and to argue from the messianic interpretation in Justin’s Dialogue and in the Aramaic targum that ‘the fact that messianic interpretation of Ps. 45 survives in both Jewish and Christian documents indicates that it probably predates Jesus’ (p. 109) is extraordinary, suggesting little awareness of recent work on the long-continuing cross-fertilization of exegetical practice. Similarly, that Origen and Hippolytus in the third century trace links between the Song of Songs and Psalm 45 is hardly grounds for stating that ‘it is not unreasonable to conclude that he [i.e. the Fourth Evangelist] might have initiated or inherited’ the nine connections she detects between the two writings (p. 114). Not only is the argument weak, it begins to demand the historical critical certainties that earlier have been side-lined – although this continues when McWhirter proposes that these allusions might be detected by the audience through a ‘Johannine community’ hypothesis that includes Palestinian (hence Hebrew-reading) and diaspora (Greek-reading) Jews as well as Samaritans.

There are other points at which readers may feel that the argument is over-stretched: as do most interpreters who recognise the biblical allusions in an encounter at a well, McWhirter has to explain why this one (in ch. 4) does not result in betrothal or marriage. Her solution is that just as Jacob’s meeting with Rebekah ‘eventually lead(s) to the births of the twelve patriarchs … so also Jesus’ meeting with a woman at the well … produce(s) a family of faith’ (p. 65; cf. p. 131, ‘The Samaritan woman, whose encounter with Jesus and ensuing witness elicits belief among her people, becomes a sort of spiritual mother.’) To say that they ‘experience the birth that Jesus describes to Nicodemus (3:3-7)’ (p. 76), is too dismissive of the challenges of that latter passage.

Finally, always a problem with a study of one theme in the Fourth Gospel, there is little exploration of how this might intersect with others; hence the