

Gary M. Burge. *Interpreting the Gospel of John*. Guides to New Testament Exegesis 5. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992. 185 pp.*

Baker's *Guides to New Testament Exegesis* (ed. Scot McKnight) genuinely fill a void in a market where there is often too little bridge-building between abstract scholarly discourse and the interested Bible student. While these *Guides* assume a working knowledge of Greek, their focus is primarily on the practical application of sound hermeneutical methodology to the interpretation of the different genres or corpora represented in the NT. Thus there are volumes on *Introducing New Testament Interpretation* (vol. 1; ed. S. McKnight, 1989), *Interpreting the Synoptic Gospels* (vol. 2; ed. S. McKnight, 1988), *Interpreting the Gospel of John* (vol. 3; G. M. Burge, 1992), *Interpreting the Pauline Epistles* (vol. 5; T. R. Schreiner, 1990), and *Interpreting the Book of Revelation* (vol. 7; J. R. Michaels, 1992). Individual books on *Interpreting Acts* (vol. 4) and *Interpreting Hebrews* (vol. 6) are also projected.

The volumes that have appeared thus far are all written by capable younger scholars who are well aware of recent scholarship in their respective fields. At the same time, these authors show considerable skill in selecting the best resources available and in presenting their material in a clear, logical, and appealing fashion. Every Bible student who is serious about a systematic exploration of the various books of the NT will find these *Guides* an invaluable help in their own study of Scripture. A case in point is Burge's *Interpreting the Gospel of John*.

In only 185 pages, Burge covers a vast scope of material. He organizes his treatment into four parts: (Part 1) backgrounds to the fourth gospel; (Part 2) the gospel of John's literary characteristics; (Part 3) a strategy for the exegesis of John; and (Part 4) preaching and exegesis from the fourth gospel.

Part 1 (Backgrounds) begins with an excellent synopsis of the history of interpretation of John's gospel. This is followed by a treatment of the fourth gospel's authorship which is on the whole fair and remarkably thorough. One might, however, differ at least in degree with Burge's contention that John's "text was subsequently [after John's death] edited and reforged by disciples within the Johannine church" (p. 53; though on the whole, Burge is remarkably restrained in his support of the "Johannine community hypothesis"). Notably, Burge sides with D. A. Carson against the trend spearheaded in recent Johannine scholarship by R. Alan Culpepper of depreciating the gospel's historicity in favor of its literary design (pp. 32–33). What Burge does not mention is that Culpepper's study of the fourth gospel's literary design indirectly appears to lend support to a unified authorial plan, be it by the apostle John or a later editor (but see Burge's reference to the work by Eugen Ruckstuhl and Eduard Schweitzer on p. 60, and the brief mention of Culpepper on p. 68).

These kinds of literary questions are taken up in Part 2. Burge himself has done considerable work on John's parenthetical remarks and literary seams (*aporiae*) in the fourth gospel. After Burge's cautious assessment of source-critical studies of John's gospel (e.g., on p. 71), his conclusion on p. 82 comes somewhat as a surprise: "Clearly the text of John is made up of sources pieced together to form a unified narrative." Burge, too, fails to mention the possibility that John used his own sermonic material (see especially the work of B. Lindars and L. Morris). Also, at least some of the *aporiae* listed by Burge (pp. 63–66) may exist primarily in the eye of the beholder and can easily be explained (e.g., 3:22 as a reference to Jesus' travels not to Judea, but to the *Judean countryside*, or the numbering of Jesus' "signs" in 2:11 and 4:54 with reference to *Cana of Galilee* rather than Jesus' entire ministry of "signs"). For the most part, Burge chooses not to resolve these apparent "seams." Moreover, the practice of labeling certain passages as "seams" clearly begs the question. At least in this area, Burge may be less than a completely reliable "guide" to Johannine exegesis. But while the chapters on John's background and literary characteristics are significant, they are merely preliminary to Part 3, "A Strategy for Exegesis of the Fourth Gospel."

Burge's exegetical methodology in Part 3 focuses on three components: the study of the literary

and cultural contexts, and word study. After a brief treatment of textual criticism (for those who do or don't know Greek), Burge deals with the study of John's literary context (e.g., synoptic parallels where available; and the macro- and micro-context). Among the most helpful portions for the serious Bible student in the entire book is the section on "Building a Bibliography" (pp. 109–16). In a few brief pages, Burge surveys the territory of NT research, easily saving the reader the tuition for a course in *Research Methods*. Teachers (as this reviewer) who are frequently asked by their students for the recommendation of a good Bible dictionary are given help in Burge's chapter on the study of the cultural context of John. Of similar value is the section on "Word Searches with Personal Computers" (pp. 132–34). On the downside, Burge's two-part discussion of word studies is a bit too elementary. No reference is made to the recent *Greek-English Dictionary Based on Semantic Domains* by J. P. Louw and E. A. Nida and recent developments in semantic theory. However, as G. R. Osborne (*Hermeneutical Spiral*, 1991) and others have recently argued, studies of a concept's entire semantic field should supplement the study of individual biblical words. Another helpful set of tools missing in the bibliography on word studies is R. Winter's and G. Wigram's *Word Study New Testament* with its companion volume, *Word Study Concordance*.

Burge concludes *Interpreting the Gospel of John* with some comments on exegeting and preaching from the fourth gospel. The author briefly addresses the problem of horizons as well as the New Hermeneutic and the issue of contextualization and concludes with a preaching cycle from John. This final section adds a practical dimension to the book, once again underscoring that the purpose of the entire series is the equipping of serious Bible students for ministry. Also helpful are Burge's comments regarding the usefulness of reconstructed background data in preaching from the fourth gospel. Once again, however, perhaps more could have been done in showing how many proponents of the "Johannine community hypothesis" tend to marginalize the message of John's gospel to the extent that it becomes virtually impossible to preach from the fourth gospel with relevance and authority to today's hearers.

Burge's contribution and the *Guides to New Testament Exegesis* as a whole provide many vital helps for those interested in sharpening their skills in the study of the NT. And while one may at times wish that Burge had set his emphases a bit differently or while one detects certain omissions or an occasional selective use of evidence, contemporary students of John's gospel would certainly be poorer by far had this book not been written.

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