

Item #71 (The Ending of John's Gospel Revisited)

In my book-length discussion of various aspects of John's Gospel given above (Item #1), I wrote the following about the Gospel's ending:

7.3 Peter and John

With his death prophesied by Jesus, Peter is curious about the fate of John. Jesus says that John is to remain in life "until I come". The reference seems to be to Jesus as divine and His coming at the destruction of Jerusalem. His will is that John remain in life to take care of the mother of Jesus, a task given him by Jesus on the cross as symbol of all believers. Thus the subordinate role of Peter to John, important as it is in itself, is re-affirmed.

7.4 John and His Disciples

The Gospel concludes with a reference by John to himself as author of the Gospel and to himself as a symbol of the special group of followers of Jesus as Disciples witnessing as a group to what John as an individual has written and his goal in writing it (John 20,30-31). Thus John's role is witnessed to by John himself. The final verse is a comment by John on the difficulty of choosing for his Gospel that which was relevant to the task assigned him by Jesus. He states that not all that Jesus said and did has been witnessed to by his Gospel, but he thereby implies that what was necessary for what Jesus assigned to him has.

In the above interpretation I took the phrase of Jesus "until I come" as referring to the future,, and interpreted it as a reference to Jesus' "coming" at the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in 70 A.D. with the implication that Jesus, by destroying the Temple by means of the Romans, was avenging the failure of the Judeans to maintain the Temple's legitimacy. But one day during the Paschal Season of 2021, as I was reading the ending of John's Gospel at Mass, a whole new interpretation occurred to me which, on reflection, seems more plausible: In John 21,19 Jesus tells Peter "Follow me". Jesus had just described how Peter would die by crucifixion (John 21,18-19). Thus, by implication, Jesus is emphasizing to Peter that his ministry has to do with the humanity of Jesus. Peter accepts this judgment of Jesus, and then, looking at John, asks "What about him?" (John 21,21). Jesus replies: "If I want him to remain until I come, what has that to do with you? You, follow me" (John 21,22). Jesus is referring to a past event in the context of John 21,22., not a future event. In the Gospel of John Jesus is described as "one who comes" (see, for example, John 1,9.11.15). In the context of Jesus telling Peter in veiled language that he is to be concerned with the humanity of Jesus, Jesus is telling John in veiled language that his identity is concerned with the divinity of Jesus. For the divinity of Jesus is revealed in John's Gospel through Jesus' handing on His Spirit to His mother, with John as witness and participant, as described in Chapter 2 of Item #1 of my website. This is a past event as regards John 21,22. John says that this statement of Jesus was misinterpreted by some disciples of Jesus to mean that John was not to die, but John corrects them (John 21,23). The mistaken interpretation was correct in that the disciples who held it were aware that Jesus wanted to contrast the functions of Peter and John in some sense. They were mistaken in not seeing that the contrast was between the humanity of their Master and His divinity. (**James Swetnam, S.J., May 26, 2021**)

