

Episode 11: Conversations in the Gospel of John

Stan:

You are listening to conversations in the Gospel of John this is episode 11 this episode was recorded in the spring of 2024 at Friends University in Wichita, Kansas welcome to conversations in the Gospel of John where we want and hope to bridge the gap between current academic research and contemporary proclamation of this wonderful text/ my name is Stan Harstine and my co-host is Douglas Estes

Douglas:

hi I'm Douglas and I currently teach at Friends University

Stan:

and I'm also at Friends University Our Guest today is Alan Culpepper and just for full disclosure when I was studying at Baylor University Alan was one of my major professors if not the major Professor I've known him for a long time and we are blessed to have him here today we're also changing up the topic of our conversation because we're not to talk about a particular text but we're going to talk about his career and how his career has tried to bridge the gap between academic research and the pulpit so Alan how would you like to introduce yourself to our audience

Alan:

well thank you I'm delighted to be with you today and delighted to be with Stan and Douglas and be able to talk about the Gospel of John which has been really a a kind of lifelong Pursuit I am just in terms of personal identity missionary kid my parents

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were missionaries in South America and I lived there most of the first 10 years of my life my father then finished a degree in missions and taught missions and I went to Baylor University and Southern Baptist seminary in Kentucky and Duke University and then taught at the Southern Seminary four and a half years or so at Baylor University and then became the founding dean of the School of Theology At Mercer University in Atlanta the McAfee School of Theology so I have grown up really in the shadow of theological education and grew into that tradition where I found my own calling and identity I'm married have two wonderful children three grandchildren my wife is also an educator taught education at Mercer University while we were there and we retired in 2016 and moved to Lake Hartwell and live in the woods on the lake here so we get whenever we can some Lake time for fishing and sailing and look forward to times when we have the grandchildren here to enjoy it with us

Stan:

so one of the first questions we usually start with is what got you interested in studying the Gospel of John in the first place

Alan:

I originally felt like I was called to Ministry and have felt that all my life and I thought that would lead to pastoral Ministry I was a pastor briefly as a student but my first semester at Southern Seminary I had William E Hull, Bill Hull for a course on the Gospel of John and we used Raymond Brown anchor Bible commentary the first
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volume of it the second volume hadn't come out yet but we read all of the first volume for the first 12 chapters and then didn't have anything comparable to it really for the second half of the Gospel but between Hull is a very gifted Professor who was himself writing the Broadman Bible commentary on John at that point in his life and Raymond Brown as the textbook and the Gospel of John as the subject matter I was hooked here was something that was fascinating intriguing complicated spiritually uplifting theologically profound and the the blending of the intellectual and spiritual in the study as well as in the text itself really really drew me into it

Stan:

it's always wonderful to have good and instructors because they're often those who Peak our interest and I'm sure over your career you now would say you have figured out everything there is to know about the Gospel of John correct as he smiles and probably

Alan:

as you will know we work and work and work and keep discovering every time we come into it and dig into it and never feel like we've really gotten to the bottom of it

Stan:

a lot has changed in how people approached the Gospel of John through that time you did some original work on the Johannine school and there's always talks about you know where were the gospels written but then you kind of shifted focus and started

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an Avalanche we could call it of studies in looking at John as a text and what the text does so what were you feeling um way back there at the beginning of your career you had a newly minted PhD you were teaching at Southern the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary as it is referred to um officially entitled what caused you or what led you to kind of change methodology

Alan:

well I after graduating from Southern Seminary I went to Duke University really to study with WD Davies in Jewish materials Jewish background and Moody Smith, D Moody Smith an up and coming if not already well established figure in the in Johannine scholarship in working in that double connection of historical setting and Johannine studies I I became intrigued with the idea and really the significance of the Johannine school and kept seeing references here and so I I wrote a dissertation trying to establish if if there was a school what kind of of school what do we mean by Johannine school various authors use it in different ways and their various historical models and so while I was doing that J. Lewis Martyn had already published history and theology in the fourth gospel which took us in a very Vivid sort of intentionally dramatic way into the Johannine community and the way the Gospel of John tells both about what happened in the ministry of Jesus and a gives a reflection of what was happening at the time John was written in in that community and shortly thereafter of course Raymond Brown followed with the community of the Beloved disciple so there was a lot of interest at that

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time in the Johannine community and and my dissertation on the school I think fit into that that period but having written that several things began to happen there was a one of my friends at Duke and contemporaries there was David Rhodes and we would have coffee every morning and talk about the Johan school and he was writing on Israel in Revolution working with WD Davies he went on to Kenosha College in Wisconsin taught the gospel of Mark with an English professor and saw a new world of the Gospel of Mark as a literary text and how a professor of literature read and interpreted the gospel that led to his book Mark as Story and back in those days we didn't have email we didn't have cell phones but David and I ran up a quite a telephone bill with late night conversations talking about Mark and John literary approach which we decided we would call narrative criticism I had a a sabbatical there was already The Parables group in the SBL was with John Dominic Crossn and others looking at The Parables as stories and there was a a new literary aspects of the gospels and and acts group in the SBL they were working but nobody was doing that with John historically Innovations and new methodologies and new Testament begin in Mark and I thought good well I'll run over to John back to my home territory and see what it looks like so I had a sabbatical leave in Cambridge 1980-81 contacted Frank Kermode who has written had just re written a book on Mark the Genesis of Secrecy and he was very gracious in making time for conversation welcoming in me into his circle of Advanced students and guiding my work he would say well have you read this or this and this and I'd go over to this Cambridge

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library and look at everything within five feet of those titles and that was my introduction then to literary Theory

Stan:

I think it just shows the importance of connections that no one of us ever has the whole picture on what's happening no one of us has the whole methodology behind do and we are really inspired by the those people we interact with which I think is one of the reasons that we have to bridge the academic into what I would say the congregation because if we're not interacting with others of Interest we kind of become isolated and that's not always a positive thing so you you wrote a book which has been quoted quoted frequently so tell us about its reception and what kind of changes you saw happen in or lack of change happening

Alan:

having written the Johannine school I was nervous and dissatisfied frankly with using the text simply as a database to try to probe behind it so we were looking at the community we were looking at the history we were looking at how it was composed and I thought well before we do that we really ought to look at the gospel itself and see how it works how it's put together how it functions as a piece of literature narrative a coherent narrative and it was it was code then who guided me into that and I I wrote Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel Anatomy picking up both on the title of a book by Northrup Frye but anatomy of criticism but also Moody Smith the textbook College Transcript processed by YouTube services and provided for convenience purposes only

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textbook anatomy of the New Testament so they seemed to work but I was now looking at new categories as far as Johannine studies at least the narrator characters plot implicit commentary implied reader those those were not terms that had been used in Johannine studies previously

Stan:

right and those are all each their own kind of field of study at times now but you covered them all in the book and let it out and so how was the book received back in those early days because I will admit I was just graduating college in 1982 and um wasn't aware of it because I was a math major at that point in time

Alan:

we were David Rhodes and I and Norman Peterson and Elizabeth Malbon and just a number of others were we were The Young Turks at that point because historical criticism was not just a method it was the recognized method for scholarship on the New Testament and I was not and I think we were not challenging it to say it's inappropriate we were just saying that that method takes a particular angle of vision on the text and we're going to take a different one I think that they in fact both important and the text is obviously written in a given time and period for readers they have to be able to understand it it's set in the historical period but the effort is not to get behind the text as say well who was the historical Jesus or the Evangelist or the community but how does the Gospel of John work in communicating its message to us

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which I think is a much more compatible approach for the church than is historical criticism which inescapably has to be based on examination of text and bias and prejudice and historicity and those are not unimportant but they're just they're not the sort of natural natural raw material for sermons

Stan:

yeah and I think what that what you did really is reflected in the the Pastoral work that happens that each Pastor brings a particular um Viewpoint based on their own community's life the factors that they're engaged in shape the sermon there's not just one sermon that can be preached on John Chapter 2 there are a multitude and by saying there's only one way to view this scripture is to say there's only one valid way and there are so many different ones and so I think it's very important and I can't not mention that as you're talking about how John works that sitting across from me is a individual who has a book out called how John works it's it's important that we are always asking new questions and pursuing those and we don't get away from historical questions and when we find new things we have to understand them

Alan:

to Circle back a little bit one of the things that is distinctive about the Gospel of John and that drew me to it is that it is written really with a an emphasis or with attention to what Jesus means in the life of the church have to put it in those terms but think about this a minute Matthew Mark and Luke don't have a farewell discourse what they

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have is an eschatological discourse they have Jesus on the Mount of Olives talking about the destruction of Jerusalem and the coming of the son of man you go to the Gospel of John there's no eschatological discourse and in place of it on the night before he is before he's arrested you have a farewell discourse in which he talks to the disciples but often talks about the time of the church so that the time is sort of Blended and overlapped and interwoven and you get the connection between the historical setting and the life of the Church picking up on the the title I gave to the collection of my essays designs for the church in the Gospel of John I think especially the later chapters and the the crucifixion and the resurrection appearances are written not just to give historical narration but to reflect pretty directly and openly the significance of those events for the church Church and that's that is that John does that in a way that is unique among the Gospels

Stan:

it does it's very different in terms of just his perspective and that's why as you noted nobody had applied this material to John because at that point in time John was left out of most discussions because it was so different from the synoptics they couldn't find a place for it and now we we're finding that it's maybe have some of the most relevant historical information the most geographically accurate information about Jerusalem that 60 years ago wouldn't have crossed their mind yeah the designs for the church is 40 Years of your essays and a a well well- written volume because it was

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written over 40 years in the making for so as we talk about literary criticism and just its role during your time as a Dean you were in lots of churches in in and around the state of Georgia in Atlanta and other places in the southeast of the US how do you see literary criticism narrative criticism being utilized in churches by Pastors in the sermons that they're taking or even in the questions that they're asking what did you encounter in that regard while you were there

Alan:

well they parallels in the field of homiletics and particularly Fred Craddock who was here of course in Georgia and I had the distinct privilege of of getting to know and he taught some or gave gave lectures some at the School of Theology Fred moved away from the three points in a poem approach to preaching

Stan:

can I say hallelujah yeah

Alan:

and made the sermon often a story a narrative in which he would or or at least it had major narrative components people remember stories people enjoy stories and stories can be interwoven with one another and stories from today and stories from the Bible can be interwoven it makes a very creative preaching so I wouldn't I wouldn't take the apparatus of narrative criticism into the pulpit I didn't come in and talk about the narrate and the implied author and plot that that's a that's that's the stuff you do in the

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study that's not what you do in the Pulpit but appreciation for the story for suspense for
Intrigue for symbolism for climax resolution conflict when you pay attention to those
things you do see the the gospels in particular the gospel stories In a different light that
often opens up real possibilities for some creative preaching um

Stan:

Douglas I think you had a question you wanted to ask

Douglas:

yeah I had a couple we'll just we can do one or two let me start with a story in
good narrative style before I ask my question when I was doing my THM I was this
would be in the late 90s I was reading Alan's book I had read Adele Reinhartz article in
JBL that was just really Sensational and so I had decided to do my THM in a literary
approach to John and my adviser was David Beck who studied under D Moody Smith at
Duke and when I was in the process of looking to do my PhD for sure like I was really
committed to this to this route now I remember that I talked to a senior scholar and they
asked me what was I going to do with my PhD and I told him that I was going to do the
a literary focus on John probably temporality and they said to me oh that's a fad that's
such a bad idea it's a fad so I'm just curious Alan how much push back did you get
originally did you have people tell you that you were engaging in a fad or anything like
that I'm just curious that some of the negative comments that you may have gotten

Alan:

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absolutely and and that goes back to the question stand raised about reception this was a new thing and I wrote it in Cambridge and had the privilege of attending the Cambridge New Testament seminar a historical meeting that goes back over a century and they meet Fort nightly in the Divinity School but I was working with Frank Kermode over in the English Department at Kings college and they were not doing anything remotely related to what I was doing and I had to be a little circumspect even about telling them what I was doing because it was just off the chart it was oh you're one of those lit crit fellows aren't you and U so and then then in publication here it was it was seen either as non-critical or it was not not really good biblical scholarship because it was you know that literary stuff so those of us I mentioned earlier in the gospels and acts literary aspects of the gospels in Acts we were really a a small sort of group of young Turks battling for a a place to be heard a platform an approach a a way of dealing with the text what happened was that things changed quickly and very quickly so that in a sense before I thought before there is really a thorough exploration of the potential of narrative criticism we were off into post structuralism ideological criticism reader response criticism gender related criticisms once the Hegemony of historical criticism was cracked the field took off in many directions it just opened the floodgates for all kinds some of it been very helpful some less helpful I think and we're still in the process of sorting that out but I would also say that it's it left room for now some years

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later 40 years later to go back and pick up some of the potential of those early works that haven't thoroughly been explored

Douglas:

okay good let me ask one more question then since we've got a couple more minutes you were the pioneer of literary criticism in the Gospel of John and 40 or so years onward what is one area that hasn't really been developed or maybe an area of study that we could have gone down a road that we didn't take

Alan:

there have been specialized studies especially on symbolism it took several decades but then a wave of literature on characterization that I think is has been productive quickly work on irony and symbolism some work on the reader some work on plot and story so those those things and I don't know that I've got a crisp answer for you but I I do think that the ways in which history and literature intersect and it intersects in various ways narrative criticism is not antihistorical but it uses history or is pays attention to history for purposes and in ways that are different from historical criticism if you don't pay any attention to it then you're going to be reading it as sometimes we have been charged with doing an anachronistically viewing it as though it were a 20th century novel which it is not and so forth no it has it is a it is a piece of literature written in the first century and you have to read it in that context which means you have to pay attention to history but you're not doing history for the same purposes that the historical

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critics were but there's there's some room for overlap there I think that that whole area still has some fertile ground for exploration

Douglas:

okay great I agree you agree

Stan:

you're always so short short when you gets to the end of it

Douglas:

I want to be crisp no and that was I I thought that was a great answer Allan because it it's hard you know to I feel like this is this movement has not done and there and I agree there's a lot of nuance work that needs to go into how do we how do we meld the two concepts history and literature in a way that's you know it's not a 20th century novel but you know obviously it contains history how do we how do we communicate that well and that just takes a lot of time to nuance that correctly I

Alan:

I should add as as you all know I didn't I've never done a major commentary on John but I did on each of the synoptics most recently Matthew and this week I have a book coming out of the print shop or the printers at Westminster John Knox entitled the people of The People of the Parables Galilee in the time of Jesus which in a way takes me full circle back to historical material and there's certainly going to be room there for the what I did was to devote a chapter to each of the characters in Jesus Parables to to

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have his full a sense of fishermen Tax Collectors women seers Vineyard workers on and on because that's the kind of history and historical data that the hearers of Jesus as well as some of the readers at least would have been familiar with that was the world in which they lived and that could give us a richer context then for reading not only John but all the gospels

Stan:

right and I think what that illustrates is that um at the beginning of your career and even up through beginning of my career um the history we knew was that of the Elites in society and historical studies outside of the Bible have gone to trying to find out as much as they can about the common person and by doing the study that you've done on the parable and identifying all that information we can move away from a an elitist view of what's going on in the gospels and really get down to Earth um humble people and maybe change how we perceive those individuals that Jesus was interacting with which would then change how we view what he's saying to them that's a very valuable type of work is there anything you'd like to say in closing to our audience

Alan:

well I appreciate the conversation today and I have the greatest admiration for those who those of you who are in the pulpits week after week bringing pastoral care and preaching a strong word of the Gospel we need that kind of voice of witness we need theologians in the community we need people who are helping us make sense

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and not be misguided by the political turbulence and the cultural debates of our time
and I don't know a more important place for that to happen than in the pulpit

Stan:

well that's a very good word we have a lot of voices in our heads about what
should and shouldn't be and sometimes we just have to come back to what is and what
the Biblical teaching helps us understand so we can become a community of people we
can't be divided among ourselves and still be whole so we do want to thank you for
taking time to join us and for those who are listening we appreciate your time thank you
very much thank you for joining Douglas and I on conversations in the Gospel of John if
you have any comments you can email us at cgj@stanharstine.com our next guest will
be Craig Koester Emeritus professor of New Testament at Luther Seminary we hope
you'll join us bye now