

**REVIEW**

Gerry Wheaton

*The Role of Jewish Feasts in John's Gospel*

(SNTS.MS 162, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), hardcover, ix + 223 pp.

Luc Devillers, University of Fribourg

According to Gerry Wheaton, a New Testament scholar who teaches in Costa Rica and Massachusetts, the Jewish feasts in the Fourth Gospel have not attracted much scholarly attention. Many scholars devote a few pages to them, but only two have devoted an entire book to them: Gale A. Yee (*Jewish Feasts and the Gospel of John*. Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1989) and Michael A. Daise (*Feasts in John: Jewish Festivals and the Jesus' "Hour" in the Fourth Gospel*. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007). There is still much to say about the Jewish feasts in John, and the study by Wheaton provides some valuable new insights. Having read this book with interest, I can recommend it.

Wheaton focuses on *the role* of the Jewish feasts in John: the three Passover festivals (2:12; 6:4; 11:55); Tabernacles (7:2), and the Dedication (10:22). John is the only Gospel to mention the last two. After reviewing the previous scholarship in his introduction, Wheaton devotes a long chapter to hot-button issues, such as the Johannine vision of Judaism and the "Jews," considering (quite originally) John 2-4 (pp. 13-82). He asserts convincingly that "Jesus nowhere manifests a negative or judgmental attitude toward any facet of Jewish religion," and that "Granted the symbolism ascribed to many events and institutions of Israel in the Fourth Gospel, nothing in the text represents this symbolism as imperfect, still less as having failed in any way" (p. 32). For John, Jesus is "the goal and fulfillment of the great salvation of God expected by [the] Scriptures" (p. 34). The role of John 2-4 is of great value and

should not be undermined. These chapters present the relationship between Jesus and Judaism, already summarized in John 1:16-17 by “The ‘grace instead of grace’ conceptual framework” (p. 79): “For John, the institutions of contemporary Judaism represented *living prophecies that Jesus entered into and brought to consummation ...* [T]he language of ‘fulfillment’ more precisely represents the relationship between Judaism and Jesus” (pp. 80, 82; Wheaton’s italics).

Wheaton analyzes the three festivals in the same perspective, even if he knows that the Dedication was not a pilgrimage feast, as Passover and Tabernacles were. He clearly gives the priority to Passover, to which he devotes 40 pages, compared with 30 for Tabernacles and 20 for the Dedication. For John, he says, the sacrifice of the paschal lamb is not atonement for sin but a condition for access to the eschatological meal. As a paschal lamb is eaten by all of Israel in the Jewish Passover, the feeding by Jesus of the Galilean crowd, the *gathering* of the remains of the meal, and Jesus’ self-designation as the true Bread of Life (John 6), have an eschatological insight. This is an interesting new approach. As he did for Passover, John makes Tabernacles a preparatory step toward the fulfillment of Israel’s hope; once more, “Jesus does not set aside the various ceremonies associated with the feast” but reveals “their eschatological enactment in his very person and work” (p. 158). The Dedication shows the unicity of the true God, and John affirms that Jesus is not blasphemous but shares in the identity of Israel’s God (pp. 181-82). After a study of each festival, Wheaton briefly summarizes his findings (pp. 183-88). Convincingly, he argues that the destruction of the Temple had a great influence “on the shape and goals of the Gospel of John” (p. 188).

This book is very stimulating, but there are flaws as well. Typographically, French and German quotations are often misspelled, as well as those in Greek and Hebrew. More important, some exegetical aspects of the “Jews” in John, and of the role of Tabernacles, need discussion. Wheaton quotes my book *La Saga de Siloé* (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 2005) but

apparently without noticing that it was the popularized version of a large study on Tabernacles in John, *La Fête de l'Envoyé* (Paris: Gabalda, 2002), where I devoted 150 pages to the issue of the Johannine “Jews” and emphasized the role of Tabernacles in John. For example, Wheaton limits the influence of Tabernacles to John 7-8, instead of reading John 9:1-10:21 in the same liturgical context. This large “Tabernacles section” gives more sense to the reminder by Jesus (John 9:5) of his own words on the Light of the World (John 8:12). It creates also a link between the ritual of the sprinkling of the altar evoked by John 7:38—as Wheaton stresses it quite conclusively—and the mention of the pool of Siloam in John 9:7, 11, since the water poured upon the altar was drawn at Siloam. Wheaton underestimates the weight of Tabernacles, the most joyful and popular festival in Jesus’ time according to Josephus. Moreover, he does not note that the liturgy of the Dedication was duplicated in that of Tabernacles (see 2 Maccabees 10:6), so that the new feast was sometimes called “The feast of the Tabernacles of the month of Chislev” (2 Maccabees 1:9). The pericope of Dedication (John 10:22-39) and the section on Tabernacles share in the same discussion between the “Jews”—i.e., the Jewish authorities—and Jesus. Further, Wheaton mentions in his bibliography the book by J. L. Martyn, *History and Theology of the Fourth Gospel* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), but never quotes it. Even if Martyn’s thesis about reading John at two levels—the times of the historical Jesus and of the Johannine communities—is to be nuanced, it remains stimulating and should have been included in Wheaton’s discussions.

Despite some weakness, Wheaton’s book is a welcome contribution to an important but largely neglected area of research.