Love in the Gospel of John: An Exegetical, Theological and Literary Study

Francis J. Moloney, SDB.


Hailing from the Catholic University of Leuven, I am no stranger to the stature of Francis Moloney within the canon of required reading on studies of the Fourth Gospel. Reviewing this book in fact brought back memories of a conference paper (delivered by Jörg Frey in Leuven) on the semantic network of love relations in Gospel of John. It is with some relief that Moloney’s book is not similarly technical or philological in approach. For, while fully respecting the close linguistic and historical-critical reading of texts, the Preface helpfully sets out the hermeneutical question (and option) that frames the entire book: “This book starts from an interpretative principle rooted in the human experience of love” (x). That is to say, if one were to pose the question of what came first, “words for love or actions that made love visible and thus known?”, then Moloney’s answer is to clearly opt for the latter: it is the action of God’s loving that preoccupies the Fourth Evangelist. Moloney immediately acknowledges that, statistically, the number of passages describing or mentioning the act of God’s love in John’s Gospel is not many. “The words for love may not abound in John’s descriptions of these actions, but perhaps one must look in those descriptions to see what the Johannine words about love mean” (xi). The book then becomes an extended testing of this hypothesis and it is carried out in seven chapters.

There is a persistent logic to the ordering of the chapters that can only be admired. The first chapter (1–35) introduces the reader to the world of John’s Gospel, both in terms of contemporary approaches in Johannine studies as well as the literary and theological themes of the Gospel proper. This is no small achievement since it encapsulates in one chapter what a commentary on the Gospel would normally do in the length of a book. The second chapter (37–69) examines the mission of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel and understands it to be that of making God known. “The Fourth Gospel makes clear that God has a relationship with the Son, and that he has sent the Son so that others may enter that same relationship and continue the mission of Jesus” (68).

The third chapter (71–98) develops what is perhaps Moloney’s crucial point about love in the Gospel of John. Moloney hints at it already in his Preface: “Scholars have assessed the uniqueness of the Johannine use of the theme of love variously; there is little unanimity among them. They seldom focus upon the cross of Jesus as the revelation of love” (x). In his third chapter Moloney fleshes out how unique John’s presentation of the cross is. “The comparison of these Johannine predictions with the Markan and the Pauline descriptions of Jesus’ death by crucifixion illuminate the Johannine preparation of the reader and listener for a unique understanding of Jesus’ cross. If one were to use a parabola, the Markan and Pauline descriptions would be located at the lowest point of the downward
sweep. ... The location of the Johannine understanding of the cross calls for the inversion of the parabola. John’s presentation of Jesus’ cross is that the very summit of an inverted parabola, at its greatest height” (81). For the Fourth Evangelist, the cross is the “hour” when, at the death of Jesus, the glory of God is fully revealed. The Johannine presentation of the life and ministry of Jesus, then, are a mere preamble to the moment when God’s love is made fully known on the cross.

Moloney continues to parse the full significance of the Johannine Passion in the remaining four chapters (99–210) of his book. Stylistically, these four chapters follow the major divisions of John’s Gospel from the foot washing and the command to love one another (Jn 13) to the end of the Gospel. Moloney discerns a two-step pedagogy in the Gospel of John: just as Jesus concretely manifests the love of God in his life, but especially—and most crucially—on the cross, so too the disciples are called upon to manifest the love their Master has shown them. “The cross tells the story of the love of Jesus ‘to the end’ (13:1), and Jesus calls the disciples to love as he loved—to the end, with both meanings that expression entailed: to the chronological end of life and consummately” (192). But the dangers of sectarianism that may have plagued the Johannine community historically are a reminder that this more easily said than done. “Words about love can come easily enough; lives that demonstrate love are harder to come by” (210). While Moloney rejects that the Johannine community were in fact sectarian, the preservation of John’s Gospel in the Christian canon ultimately demonstrates that it bore a transcendent message that no community could restrict to itself even if it did have sectarian leanings.

A short epilogue (211–214) closes the book. In it Moloney briefly engages Werner Jeanrond’s *Theology of Love* (2010) and states that whereas Jeanrond’s canvas of the Christian history and social locations of love arguably paints a much larger portrait, the portrayal of love in the Gospel of John should then be seen as only a small piece of that larger portrait. Yet it is one that contemporary society may be at risk of overlooking. “The relentless search for a lifestyle that is free of anxiety and pain, and even free from a commitment to values, to our nearest and dearest, to society in general, and to the betterment of the world in all its manifestations, is a frustrating search and can produce a wasted life. Our daily acceptance of anxiety and pain and of commitment to values, to our nearest and dearest, to society in general, and to the betterment of the world in all its manifestations—cost what it may—is the ‘stuff’ of love” (213).

It is clear that Moloney is a master of his craft. There is no disputing his scholarship or his ability to communicate ideas lucidly and coherently. The book more than answers its subtitle’s promise to deliver an exegetical, theological and literary study. In that sense it does resemble a rather classical structure of a university course on the Gospel of John. Nonetheless, the many years of teaching in Professor Moloney’s own illustrious academic career guarantee that the reader enjoys only the best syllabus for anyone interested in a deeper appreciation of the Fourth Gospel’s major themes. Graduating from this course, the reader will then be better equipped to tackle some of the knottier hermeneutical and theological questions that Moloney’s largely compliant and sympathetic reading of John undoubtedly throws open.

**Reviewer:** Emmanuel Nathan is a Lecturer in Biblical Studies at the Faculty of Theology and Philosophy of the Australian Catholic University in Sydney. He has recently arrived from Belgium where he was a Post-Doctoral Research Fellow at the Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies of the Catholic University of Leuven.

**Email:** Emmanuel.nathan@acu.edu.au