“Never judge a book by its cover”. Not a problem for the book under review, which is attractively presented and attractively written. But should one judge a book by its “Media release”? The Australian Catholic University Media Release (11.9.96) hails the work of its foundation Professor of Theology as a “radical theory on the relationship between Judaism and Christianity”. It goes on to explain that the book shows that “the writer of the Fourth Gospel . . . believed Christianity did not replace Judaism. The Fourth Evangelist actually presents Christianity as continuing and bringing to perfection the promise of Israel.” Is this book the promising alternative its Media Release proposes? It deserves a careful reading if for that reason alone.

**Signs and Shadows. Reading John 5-12** (hereafter: SS) is the second part of a trilogy. Part one was *Belief in the Word. Reading John 1-4*, Fortress, Minneapolis, 1993 (hereafter: BW). Part three, due early in 1998: *Glory not Dishonour. Reading John 13-21*. Together they will constitute a narrative commentary on the whole of the Gospel of John. As a narrative commentary the focus is on the way John is understood by a first reader and owes much to Reader-Response theory. The focus is not on looking through the text to the history which may lie behind it, but on looking at what the text itself presents. I would prefer to speak of first hearers than first readers, because that accords better with context in which people would have first encountered the gospel.

Moloney’s “presentation of a virginal experience of the narrative,” as he calls it acknowledges that a reader may be credited with some knowledge of the story, but does not have knowledge of the Johannine version (BW 10). This, nevertheless, does not prevent Moloney from exploiting the drama of the prologue in his first volume, suggesting that the virginal reader would be waiting until 1:17 before identifying the Word with Jesus: “The naming of the Logos as Jesus Christ is a climactic moment for the reader of the prologue” (BW 47). This strains historical credibility. It seems too much like an exercise in estimating what a person with no familiarity with Christianity might make of the passage at a first reading rather than what the first historical hearers (or John’s implied hearers) would have understood. Otherwise Moloney is careful to tell us that these first readers could be “credited with a good knowledge of Jewish traditions” (BW 43). This is more realistic.

Before passing to the second volume it is worth noting, in relation to the focus of the Media Release, the exposition of the key passage: “The Law was given through
Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ” (John 1:17). “There can be no lessening of the importance of the former gift. It was from God and it was fundamental for the people of God. Moses was its mediator; however, it was the former gift. There is now another gift which has taken its place (v.16)” (BW 47). A few lines earlier Moloney writes: “As v. 16 closed, the narrator told the reader that from the Word’s fullness the believing community received a gift that replaced a gift.” The prologue is essential reading for understanding the rest of the gospel, not least when approaching it as a whole to be read sequentially. In it God’s gift of the Law is affirmed as belonging to an era that is past. The Logos, the Word, is Jesus Christ, who has replaced the Law. Apparently in agreement with O. Hofius, Moloney writes in a footnote: “Verses 17-18 polemically deny both saving value and preexistence to the Law (BW 47).

What, then, are we to make of the claims of the Media Release that “the writer of the Fourth Gospel . . . believed Christianity did not replace Judaism. The Fourth Evangelist actually presents Christianity as continuing and bringing to perfection the promise of Israel”? It will depend on our perspective. How can replacing the Law (see the previous paragraph) be anything other than replacing Judaism? Are we not still talking about one religion superseding another? Yet Moloney’s point is that the fourth gospel is not anti-Jewish, but deeply Jewish. It represents a perspective within a predominantly Jewish community in which a group is claiming a special version of the Jewish heritage, indeed, its perfection.

It has been so easy to read the fourth gospel as anti-semitic. First readers frequently do! How can John’s Jesus say to “the Jews”: “You are of your father, the devil” (John 8:44)? If this represents Jesus (and the Christians) damning Jews by race or Jews by religion, then we are in the depths of shame and signs and shadows of our worst nightmares. But Moloney’s exposition shows that to read John like this is a massive distortion. Rather, from the beginning and throughout both published volumes he shows that the author and implied readers share and assume Jewish presuppositions and value Jewish heritage. These are, themselves, Jews, or predominantly Jews, talking to Jews. There is nothing of anti-semitism here. Most scholars of the fourth gospel would agree. Hence, as the author explains: throughout the commentaries “the Jews” appears “in quotation marks to indicate that they are not the Jewish people. ‘The Jews’ are one side of a christological debate” (SS 1).

There are, however, finer distinctions. Moloney’s position has already been outlined briefly in the discussion of the gospel prologue. It is also signalled in the title of the second volume. Judaism’s feasts are “signs and shadows” of their perfection which has come in Christ (although Moloney also speaks of Jesus’ deeds as signs and shadows). The language of “perfection” is scattered throughout the
second volume. It is there in the opening words: “The Prologue (1:1-18) affirms that God’s former gift through the Law of Moses is perfected by the fullness of the gift of the truth in Jesus Christ (1:16-17). There is no conflict between the two gifts; one leads to the other, but the latter gift of the truth through Jesus Christ surpasses the gift of the Law through Moses” (SS 1). There is, of course, a conflict for any who would not agree that the revelation through Jesus Christ “perfects” and replaces the Law. But this was not the perspective of the author or his implied readers. Rather the author is engaged in the rethinking of Judaism’s liturgical celebrations.

It has long been noted that chapters 5-12 contain reference to major Jewish feasts. The treatment of John 5 demonstrates that for the fourth evangelist Jesus brings what the Sabbath brought, namely, “God’s creative, life-giving, and judging presence to his people. In Jesus Christ the Sabbath traditions have become enfleshed, not destroyed” (p. 28; a variant of the second sentence comes as a refrain in the conclusions of the first five chapters of the book). The gospel wards off the misunderstanding that Jesus replaces the Sabbath God. He is however beyond keeping Sabbath Law. Moloney interprets the entire chapter in relation to the Sabbath motif, even though it disappears after 5:18. He may well be right, although the subject matter of what follows goes far beyond it. I found myself wondering whether Moloney sees the author still affirming Sabbath law or whether its perfection in Christ also meant its replacement. Is only Jesus beyond it or also his community? “Jesus was the perfection of the Mosaic tradition on the Sabbath God and the Sabbath Law” (p. 28). “Jesus perfects the signs and shadows of the feasts of traditional Israel” (p. 29).

In John 6 Moloney shows how the gospel extrapolates Passover traditions to present Jesus as “an alternative nourishment as the source of eternal life” (p. 44). “The former access to ‘doing the works of God’ by means of the Law has been surpassed. Access to God is only through the Son who makes God known (see 1:18)” (p. 45). “No longer will Moses, the manna, Wisdom, or Torah provide for the deepest needs of humankind, but Jesus will satisfy all hunger and thirst” (p. 48). There are two elements here: the nourishment is no longer restricted to Israel; and the Law did in one sense provide for such needs. The historical question is to what extent the fourth gospel believes the latter was the case. I do not find Moloney’s explanations which follow (pp. 49-50) to be sufficiently clear on this point.

The key texts appear to be 6:32 (“Moses did not give you the bread from heaven, but my Father gives you the true bread from heaven”) and 6:47-48 where the author declares that the fathers who ate Moses’ bread died in the desert. The point seems to be that the former bread, identified with the Law, did not bring life; not that it now no longer gives life or gave life only to Israel and is now more widely available. It
is otherwise difficult to make sense of the constant references to perfecting and surpassing. The issue was, for the evangelist, both quality and quantity. Moloney’s interpretation suggests that John did see the Law as a way of coming to know God, which the revelation in Jesus now transcends and replaces (p. 60). All such language calls for an explanation of why the need for replacement. In what was it deficient? Why did it need perfecting/replacing?

In his discussion of John 7-8 Moloney follows a similar pattern. Here the image is the Feast of the Tabernacles which also serves as the background for John 9:1-10:21. The water libation and light ceremonies form the background for the image of Jesus as offering the water of life and being the light of the world. I find the attempt to trace influence from the daily sunrise ritual of turning away and then towards the temple less convincing. God’s second gift, the water of life, replaces the need for lustrations. Jesus, the light of the world, replaces the Law (p. 94). “The Law has been superseded by a completely new reality: the person of God in the person and message of the one he sent” (p. 96). “Jesus fulfills, universalizes, and transcends all the symbols and expectations of Tabernacles because of his union with God (8:28-29)” (102).

Moloney’s treatment of John 8 notes that rabbinic tradition claims that study of the Law makes a person free and that Jesus confronts such claims (p. 104), but does not go on to explore the consequences for his hypothesis. In John 10:22-42 we find a similar reworking of the traditions of the Feast of Dedication. Moloney concludes: “The account of Jesus’ presence at the great feasts of Israel - Sabbath, Passover, tabernacles, and Dedication - affirms that the former order has been perfected, not destroyed” (p. 152).

My review has focused on the hypothesis highlighted by the Media Release and found it to be capable of misinterpretation, if not, itself, misleading. For Moloney rightly expounds the stance of the gospel as one which combines both a belief that God gave the Law and the conviction that in Christ it has been superseded/replaced/perfected (all words used in this sense in the two volumes of his work). It is better to tell it as it is than to suggest a greater degree of harmony than the text will allow. Moloney has told it as it is in his commentary, but left a number of unanswered questions. I would have thought that more could have been made of the witness function of the Law according to John and of its place in John’s dualism. He sees the Law operating at the earthly level (like Nicodemus) so that it functioned primarily as God given witness (indeed “sign and shadow”) of the real which was to come in Christ. I have explored some of these issues in my chapter on John in Jesus’ Attitude towards the Law. A study of the Gospels WUNT 2:97, Mohr Siebeck, Tübingen, 1997, pp. 432-491.
Nevertheless Moloney has done us the great service of presenting a convincing account of the way the fourth gospel belongs within a strongly Jewish context and represents Jews reflecting predominantly with Jews on how to appreciate God’s gift of the Law in the light of God’s gift of Christ. It is some advance not to have John understood as anti-semitic, although it will not remove the offence that many will feel in being told their Law is to be perfected and replaced.

In focusing on the issue of Law I have passed over much else in the commentary. It must stand as eminently readable, solidly documented, and rich in insight. I found myself using the word “neat” to describe the analysis of structure and thought. I still want to argue over the emphasis on revelation which the author gives to Son of Man sayings and his maverick interpretations of 3:13 and 6:61, but I find the commentary overall to be a convincing exposition. It has less of the reference work feel to it that makes many commentaries hard to read. It is a testimony both to its author’s scholarship and to his skills as a teacher communicator and deserves high acclaim.

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