

# Boekbesprekings / Book Reviews

**Callahan, A D 2005 – *A love supreme: A history of Johannine tradition***

Publisher: Augsburg Fortress. 128 Pages. Price: \$20.00

**Reviewer: Prof Dirk van der Merwe (University of South Africa)**

Allen Dwight Callahan is visiting professor of Religion and Society at Harvard Divinity School and Professor of New Testament at Seminário Teológico Batista do Nordeste (Brazil). He is also the author of *Embassy of Onesimus: The letter of Paul to Philemon* (1997).

In *A love supreme: A history of the Johannine tradition*, Callahan suggests that scholars have incorrectly established/determined the sequence and thus also the importance of the works collectively known as the Johannine tradition – the Gospel of John and the Johannine Epistles. His suggestion includes literary, theological, and historical analyses as he argues for the re-evaluation of this significant part of the biblical canon. Callahan offers a reconstruction of the Johannine tradition. In the Prologue he acknowledges his intellectual indebtedness to the works of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Obery M Hendricks (jr) and Daniel Boyarin. According to him, their insights are foundational. Therefore, in his construct of the Johannine tradition, these insights are presupposed throughout the book (p ix).

This book studies the Johannine literature in the order Callahan believes they were written: 3 John, 2 John, 1 John, Gospel of John. This sequence is of course not a problem *per se*, as Callahan is not the first to have proposed this sequence. The credit for this goes to François Marie Braun. A recently published commentary by Christopher Thomas (2004, *1 John, 2 John, 3 John*) holds the same opinion, while Bultmann suggested that the third letter was composed before the second, but after the first. Since the epistles themselves offer no indicators about when they were written, Callahan cannot with any degree of certainty claim to assign priority to any of them. His motivation is unconvincing. According to him, the Elder first addressed the *ekklēsia* (3 John) and then turned towards groups (2 Jn, 1 Jn) with whom he “has the promise of wielding influence”. Following the occasions of 3 and 2 John, the Elder writes the occasional discourses destined to become the raw material for 1 John 2-5. Influenced by Foucault, Callahan distinguishes between writer and author, and thenceforth the Elder became the Writer of the Beloved Community. An anonymous editorial board of disciples collected and synthesized these episodic and elliptic summaries. “These disciples composed 1 John 1, redolent with his themes and vocabulary, as a prologue for the Elder’s writings” (p 3). These themes and vocabulary then come to mark what we now call the Gospel of John, a narrative representation of Jesus.

The title “*A Love Supreme*” raises great expectations. It is a book about love, the love theme that is so overwhelming, especially in 1 John and which also occurs in the Gospel of John. According to Callahan “In the Epistles of John and the Gospel of John, we learn that the greatest love is to live for one’s friends. Love is how one lives, not how one dies, and one may only die in love as one lives in love. No one has greater love than to put one’s life at the disposal of those one loves.” Then disappointingly, the message of love as the Elder and the author of the Fourth Gospel tried to communicate it, although excellently described, only features on a couple of pages when Callahan discusses 1 John and Chs 13-17 of the Gospel. Another title would probably have done more justice to the content of the book.

This book briefly explicates the literary text of the Johannine tradition. The author in an excellent way explains it intertextually, from the perspective of the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament, Dead Sea Scrolls, Writings of the Early Church, Greco-Roman writings and Rabbinic writings. This explanation differs completely from another recently published

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commentary on the Johannine epistles by Christopher Thomas (2005, *1 John, 2 John, 3 John*). The latter tries to explicate the content of the three epistles primarily from the perspective of the Gospel of John. In his explanation Callahan works chronologically and systematically through each document dealing with pericopes (1 Jn 2:18-27), chapters (Jn 10), sections (Jn 13-17) or themes (Love and Justice).

Throughout the book, Callahan tries to come up with fresh and enriching information, but unfortunately he sometimes goes too far (e.g., pp 27, 32, 50, 52, 59, 72, 87, 91, 96, and 97). On page 27 Callahan tries to understand the meaning of “*eschaton*” as “extreme,” “utmost,” “worse”, “meanest.” According to Brown (1976:55, vol 2, *DNTT*; cf also Danker 2000:397, *Dict*), the meaning “extreme” only occurs in classical Greek. This is certainly not its meaning in 1 John. On page 32 Callahan sees the problem of hatred, of violence and of murder as one only found between brothers, and not between sisters. This statement he substantiates by reasoning that “violence in the world has always been primarily violence between men ...”

The value of *A Love Supreme* lies in Callahan’s excellent practical explanation of what love entails in the sections where it is discussed. It can furthermore be found in the intertextual references he made to make the Johannine literature more comprehensible.

