

Abbreviations used

CBQ *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*
 Exp.T *Expository Times*
 Int. *Interpretation*
 JSNT *Journal for the Study of the New Testament*

RTP *Revue de Théologie et de Philosophie*
 TLZ *Theologische Literaturzeitung*
 TR nf *Theologische Rundschau (neue Folge)*
 Tyn.B *Tyndale Bulletin*

Selected recent studies of the fourth gospel

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A bare five years ago I prepared for this journal a rather lengthy article reviewing recent literature on the Gospel of John.¹ Doubtless it was characterized rather more by breadth than depth: it surveyed about one hundred books and articles. The invitation to update my evaluation of recent scholarship on the fourth gospel therefore evoked a rather plaintive cry: I am happy to oblige, but in order both to avoid 'vain repetition' and to adopt a fresh approach, it seems best to mention but a few works, and to subject most of these to more sustained assessment. The editor kindly agreed. Readers who want a more comprehensive survey of (reasonably) recent work on John should therefore refer to the earlier article.

Commentaries

No major NT book has been better served by commentaries in the last twenty-five or thirty years than the Gospel of John. That means the latest commentaries are inevitably weighed by higher (or at least more plentiful) standards than can usefully be applied to commentaries on some other books. Five commentaries deserve mention.

At the light end, Robert Kysar² has contributed a fairly brief (330 pp.) commentary in a series 'written for laypeople, students, and pastors'. Those familiar with his earlier, major work surveying Johannine scholarship³ will anticipate the easy grace of his style, the considerable erudition masked by self-imposed restrictions on the amount of literature to which he refers, the balance of many of his judgments. That turns out to be both the strength and weakness of the volume. For those who want an easy survey of the mainstream of current scholarly thought on John, unencumbered by notes and details, this is the book to buy. On only two major points does he part company with the mainstream. (1) He thinks the community's conflict with the synagogue occurred in the 70s, and the gospel itself was published around AD 80. (2) He adopts a rather minimalist stance in his interpretation of the so-called eucharist passage (Jn. 6). On both of these points I

am rather inclined to agree with him, though partly for different reasons. But if on a score of other points one thinks that mainstream Johannine scholarship has gone seriously astray, this book proves rather predictable and insufficiently detailed to challenge those whose evaluation of the evidence takes them outside the common herd. The six Johannine themes that Kysar emphasizes (who Jesus is, Spirit, eschatology, faith, the cross, and dualism) are handled competently, and distinctively literary concerns, such as irony and symbolism, receive their due. But Kysar is far too easily convinced of the ease with which the Johannine community can be reconstructed from the text of this gospel.

Also at the light end of the scale is the *Good News Commentary* by J. Ramsey Michaels⁴ (i.e. it belongs to the series of commentaries on the *Good News Bible*): The commentary is aimed at the mythical 'general reader'; judging by the most miserable binding I have had the misfortune to use in the past decade, the publishers do not think anybody will actually read the book. In form this is a running commentary with occasional pauses for 'additional notes' that pick up a few more technical points. Michaels has written in a flowing style that is easy to read and understand. He is considerably more conservative in his judgments than Kysar. He suggests that the author is John the apostle, inasmuch as he 'put together the Gospel pretty much as we have it', and largely wrote himself out of it; but his associates in Ephesus, or wherever it might have been written, although they respected their mentor's desire for anonymity, nevertheless added not only the last couple of verses to attest to the author's identity and reliability, but also some brief snippets about the 'beloved disciple'. The date of composition is 'any time in the latter half of the first century', though 21:22f. suggests that the time of writing 'was probably nearer the end of that period than the beginning'. Most of Michaels's comments seek to explain the text. Although he focuses little attention on speculations regarding the nature of the Johannine community, informed readers will observe numerous asides that attest his wide reading. Sometimes one might wish the commentary were more theological, more openly committed to nurturing its reader.

At the other end of the scale stand two technical works, both significant but both of limited value to many readers of

this journal. The first is a fourth volume, available only in German, of Rudolf Schnackenburg's justly famous commentary.⁵ The three principal volumes, available in both English and German, have been published long enough for most students of John to become familiar with them. This fourth volume is slimmer (236 pp.), and is made up of four parts. The first surveys the course of Johannine scholarship since 1955, as reflected in a rather selective list of monographs and commentaries; articles are virtually ignored. The second is made up of five excursuses: 'The Johannine Community and its Experience of the Spirit [or Spiritual Experience: *Geisterfahrung*]', 'The Mission Outlook of John's Gospel in Contemporary Perspective', 'Tradition and Interpretation in the Aphoristic Material of John's Gospel', 'On the Redaction Criticism of John's Gospel', and 'Pauline and Johannine Christology: A Comparison'. The third offers longer, more detailed exegeses and expositions of six passages than the normal constraints of the commentary allow (*viz.* Jn. 6; 10:1-18; 12:39-41; 15; 17:22-24; 19:37). The final section offers four lengthy 'postscripts' made up of several hundred notes to be added to the appropriate spots in the other three volumes.

The second technical work is the English translation of the German commentary by Ernst Haenchen.⁶ The German original was briefly described in the earlier review article. Despite the best editorial efforts of Ulrich Busse, Haenchen's student who put the German work together from Haenchen's notes and manuscripts, and of Robert Funk, the translator and English editor who has added a certain amount of bibliography, the two volumes of the English translation (and why two, when the German original managed to fit into one, unless it is to make more money?) constitute a major disappointment. The scholarship is terribly dated, not only in sources consulted but also in outlook. Haenchen not only stands within the trailing edge of the history-of-religions school, but his approach to source and redaction criticism, though frequently interesting because it is so independent in its judgments, has learned nothing from the massive critiques and cautions levelled against arbitrary practitioners of these disciplines.

The only comparable treatment of John is the commentary by Bultmann. Unlike Bultmann, however, whose source criticism seeks to delineate sources right down to the half-verse, Haenchen argues that even the existence of a signs source is not all that clear: probably the understanding of signs as convincing miracles was common enough at the time, and stories about them circulated widely. Thus Haenchen appeals to unspecified 'traditions' on which the evangelist draws, rather than to concrete 'sources'. Bultmann's 'ecclesiastical redactor' has disappeared. But suddenly he reappears as a 'supplementor' who composed a much larger portion of the fourth gospel than Bultmann assumed; and at this point the source criticism becomes surgically precise once again (*e.g.* in Jn. 9, everything except vv. 4-5, 39-41 is from an earlier tradition). Thus Haenchen is interested in the development of various Johannine traditions. His understanding of 'Johannine theology' takes its shape from the contours of the trajectory or school that he reconstructs — quite unlike Bultmann's work, which (especially in his *Theology of the New Testament*) limits Johannine theology to that of the 'evangelist'.

Haenchen insists that Qumran has virtually nothing to do with John. The closest parallels are drawn between John and three Gnostic works, *The Gospel of Truth*, *The Gospel of Thomas* and *The Gospel of Philip*. Mercifully, the trove from Nag Hammadi appeared too late for him to generate anachronistic parallels there.

Worse yet, although there are useful insights in the first third or so of the work, the commentary becomes thinner and thinner as one progresses through the gospel. In the latter half, entire pericopae are summed up in a few lines of comment. The kindest thing to say about these two volumes is that they are an interesting insight into Haenchen's mind and scholarship in the closing years of his life, and a remarkable testimony to the devotion of Busse and Funk. But to make this the *Hermeneia* commentary on John depreciates the prestige of the series almost as badly as allotting Bultmann's thin and idiosyncratic commentary on the Johannine Epistles to the series,⁷ especially when far more significant work has yet to be translated.⁸ In short, Haenchen's work is not useful *as a commentary*. It is a dated and unfinished manuscript whose admirers would have been wiser and finally kinder to their mentor had they published his work in a monograph series.

The last commentary that deserves mention in these notes stands midway along the spectrum, perhaps tilting somewhat to the technical side. The *Word* format is now well known, and Beasley-Murray's commentary on John⁹ conforms to it. Compared with one or two volumes in this series that have become the definitive works on the parts of Scripture they treat, this relatively short commentary (441 pp. of comments, about 60 pp. of introduction) might be viewed as a disappointment. However, in an engaging Preface, Beasley-Murray himself draws attention to the plethora of commentaries on John, and asks what possible justification there might be for his. He testifies that he 'knows well that average ministers are far too busily engaged in their diverse responsibilities to attempt to cope with Hoskyns and Bultmann, with Barrett and Dodd, with Schnackenburg and Haenchen, *etc.* — still less to examine the endless stream of articles and monographs on varied aspects of the Fourth Gospel. It seemed that there was room for an attempt to pass on some of the treasures of modern study of this Gospel and with them to combine one's own findings and convictions.'

That is the standard, then, by which the author wants us to judge his book. I fear that if ministers find themselves unable to read Hoskyns and Barrett, they will have no more time for Beasley-Murray. They will miss a lot of succinct exposition. Here there is neat encapsulation and evaluation of many positions, wonderful clarity of style, a certain independence of judgment, and numerous useful insights.

If hesitations must also be voiced, they must not detract from the solid accomplishments in the volume. First, although at certain critical junctions Beasley-Murray's discussion is satisfyingly full, the relative brevity of the volume means that some parts are skipped over rather quickly. Second, the 'Explanation' sections are often disappointingly thin. That is where much more could be done to build *theology*, to link John's themes to broader biblical themes in a way that is both historically responsible and reflective of a unitary vision. Third, owing perhaps to the

compression of the 'Comment' sections (most of which are really quite excellent), some may find the commentary a trifle drier than it needs to be. Finally, on almost every conceivable issue Beasley-Murray adopts what might be considered a fairly conservative version of the mainstream of critical thought. At first this projects a certain sweet reasonableness. There is a good deal of 'on the one hand' and 'on the other hand' argumentation. Closer inspection prompts the reader to wonder if the stance is radical enough, in the etymological sense of going to the *radix* ('root') of some questions.

Introductory matters

Of course, the commentaries mentioned above adopt a variety of views on critical matters. In addition, however, a number of recent publications treat these subjects without offering full commentary. D. Moody Smith has put us in his debt by publishing in book form a collection of ten of the essays he has written on John over the years.¹⁰ The first surveys the status of Johannine scholarship a dozen years ago. The next three focus on source-critical matters (a reflection, no doubt, of Smith's continuing interest in such questions, pressing on from the days when his doctoral dissertation offered a perceptive critique of Bultmann's source theories).¹¹ The ensuing four essays study various aspects of the relation between John and the synoptics, while the last two are theological treatments of 'The Presentation of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel' and 'Theology and Ministry in John' respectively. The essays span twenty-five years, and they have not been brought up to date. This helps the reader to discern just what changes have taken place, and they are striking. Smith himself has become more open, for instance, to the possibility that John knew one or more of the synoptic gospels, a view he would not have considered viable twenty years ago. As a moderate guide and contributor to the drift of the discussion, Smith is really quite excellent. Along the way he interacts with some positions not shared by many people (e.g. Neiryck's view that John knew all three synoptics), and betrays a wide reading of the technical sources (though he refers very little or not at all to Becker, Richter, de Jonge, Thyen and some others). But not much new ground is broken.

Quite a different approach is found in the recent work by Craig Blomberg.¹² There is only one lengthy essay (36 pp.) on John, but it is well worth reading by students who are being exposed to nothing but the mainstream of critical thought and who want to read a contemporary evaluation of these developments prepared by someone who self-consciously stands under the authority of the Word but who has not abandoned critical thought. The essay does not claim to chart a new course, and it is not as fresh or as comprehensive as some sections of the book which deal, for instance, with Luke, to which Blomberg has devoted most of his scholarly energy. But the essay should be read by all students, the more so since the old standby, Morris's *Studies*,¹³ is not only desperately dated but also out of print. What we need, of course, is a new, more comprehensive 'Morris'.

Much more idiosyncratic are two recent works that offer exceedingly independent interpretations of the authorship or the purpose of the fourth gospel. Minear's¹⁴ book argues that John was written before the war with Rome (AD 66-70), when tensions were high between, on the one hand, the churches in

Judea and Jerusalem, and on the other, the Jewish and Roman officials. The evangelist writes as a Christian prophet to the charismatic leaders of the Christian churches and their congregations, exhorting them to faithfulness and a proper experience of the presence of God in the midst of dangers that included martyrdom. That Minear can make any sort of plausible case for this hypothesis shows how fragile is the edifice upon which the more standard synthesis is built. On the other hand, the easy assumption that Christian prophets were prepared not only to speak in Jesus' name but to project back onto the historical Jesus whatever messages they brought has received telling criticism in recent years. In John's case, the possibility of such anachronistic projection is even less plausible when one remembers how often the evangelist very carefully distinguishes between what was understood in Jesus' day and what was understood only much later.¹⁵ Minear has not been given a very sympathetic reading by reviewers. The one area where they are unlikely to fault him — the view that the fourth gospel was written for Christians — I have increasingly come to doubt.

The second book is idiosyncratic not only in its conclusions, but also in its approach. Eller¹⁶ sets out to identify the 'beloved disciple', but presents the problem more or less as a 'whodunnit', complete with references to Sherlock Holmes and a chatty style (e.g. 'Goodness gracious, the Beloved Disciple turns out to be not as original a thinker as we had thought'; 'chomping the flesh' [Does τρώγει really mean that?]). In the last third of the book (pp. 75-124), the author outlines 'the beloved disciple's thought', which turns out to be quite insistent on the bodily resurrection of Jesus, and not at all interested in sacramentarianism. The book is great fun to read, wonderfully dogmatic where it shouldn't be, and cheeky enough that one wonders occasionally if Eller is having us on. It is very hard to decide whether it would be kosher to tell you Eller's conclusion about the identity of the beloved disciple. Aren't reviewers of whodunnits supposed to keep that a secret? If you don't want to know, don't look at the next footnote!¹⁷ From my perspective, his solution is bizarre, and I had almost as much pleasure identifying all the flaws I found in Eller's arguments, all the evidence not presented or presented in strikingly slanted ways, as I did watching Eller poke holes in other theories.

In a class by itself, idiosyncratic but immensely erudite, is the posthumously published work by John A. T. Robinson, *The Priority of John*.¹⁸ Prepared as a 'heavy' version of the Bampton Lectures, the work was touched up by Prof. C. F. D. Moule and lightly edited by J. F. Coakley. Whether one agrees with all of his conclusions or not, we are immensely indebted to Robinson for his massive marshalling of information, his great clarity of style, and for the forcefulness of his presentation that nonetheless keeps clear of cheap polemics.

By the 'priority' of John, Robinson does not mean that the fourth gospel was necessarily written first, but that we must begin 'with what he has to tell us on its own merits and ask how the others fit, historically and theologically, into that, are illumined by it, and in turn illumine it'. He wants to correct the view that sees John as a derivative gospel, a corrective gospel. John, he claims, is theologically closest to the source, while betraying the deepest reflection on the part of the evangelist. The second chapter surveys the primary sources

of our knowledge of the setting and authorship of the fourth gospel. Geniuses, he warns, are not to be multiplied beyond what is necessary: the apostle John wrote the book, and probably he was a first cousin of Jesus. Whatever one makes of such points, Robinson is superb in handling alleged anachronisms (not least *ἁποσυνάγωγος* in 9:22). Chapter 3 is devoted to the chronology of Jesus' ministry, which then sets out the agenda for chapters 4–6. Robinson argues for a two-year ministry, and seeks to fit the synoptic gospels into this structure. Not a little of the argumentation is parallel to Morris's *Studies*, to which reference has already been made, though Robinson rarely mentions the book. Robinson argues, frequently convincingly, that many details in the synoptic gospels make more sense when information from John's gospel is kept in mind. Picking up on a suggestion made by Ernst Bammel, he argues that the *real* trial of Jesus took place forty days or more before passion week, and is reflected in John 11. The alleged illegalities of Mark 14 and John 18–19 then all fall away, because there was no *legal* trial at that point. The seventh chapter is devoted to the teaching of Jesus. Here Robinson stresses the points of similarity between John and the synoptists, and insists that the discourses themselves, however stamped by Johannine style, are not so much discourses as dialogues with real interlocutors, dialogues that have the ring of truth.

With much of this many evangelicals will be quite happy, even if some of us might demur on a number of details. The present reviewer, for instance, remains quite unrepentant in his view that the fourth gospel was written after AD 70. But the blockbuster comes in chapter 8. If you ever wanted to know how the former Bishop of Woolwich could simultaneously be the author of *Honest to God* and *Redating the New Testament*, here is your opportunity to find out. Robinson powerfully argues that dating techniques that depend on plugging a document into a predetermined trajectory of christology are deeply flawed; 'high' christology developed remarkably early, so the high christology of the fourth gospel is no impediment to either a pre-70 date or to apostolic authorship. But it turns out that Robinson's 'high' christology is a repetition of his book *The Human Face of God*,¹⁹ in which all of theology is constructed 'from below'. Jesus in John's gospel, Robinson argues, often calls himself the Son, but only once does he refer to himself as the Son of God. Jesus is above all else the prophet, the man of God. In 1:18, the reading *μονογενῆς θεός* is probably original, but was a slip for *μονογενῆς υἱός* that John himself would have gladly corrected. As for 1:1,14, although the *λόγος* becomes flesh/person, before this 'incarnation' the *λόγος* was not personal. In briefly commenting on 20:28, Robinson acknowledges that Thomas applies 'my God' to Jesus, but he writes: 'For in this human friend and companion . . . [Thomas] recognizes the one in whom the lordship of God meets him and claims him, though not as a heavenly being but as a wounded yet transfigured man of flesh and blood, whose glorification lay in making himself nothing so that in him God might be everything.' In short, if Dunn²⁰ argues that the doctrine of the pre-existence of Christ did not arise until the fourth gospel, Robinson argues that it cannot be found even there. In my judgment, sober exegesis insists they are both wrong.

It would take a very long chapter to evaluate this book fairly. Much of it is very refreshing, partly because it dares to

attack the theological and especially the historical shibboleths of the day. Robinson brings to light all kinds of arguments that were commonplace in an earlier generation of scholars, and casts them in a new and modern light at the very time when they were almost lost from view, buried under a consensus built up of increasingly speculative redaction-critical reconstructions. But I fear that few scholars will adopt Robinson's critical positions. Ironically, this will be primarily because they do not accept his reading of John's christology. Once genuinely 'high' christology is acknowledged to lie thick on the ground in the fourth gospel, the effect of Robinson's *historical* argumentation is to drive the reader to a rather conservative *historical and theological* construct (which of course Robinson would disavow).

The new criticism

Under this heading fall a number of recent books that make use of some aspect of rhetorical criticism. The commonality in this highly diverse group of methods is the primacy of a rigidly synchronic approach to the text. Of course, older studies that focused on, say, the Greek idioms of the fourth gospel, could adopt the same stance. Halfway between this older approach and more recent concerns is the technical monograph by van Belle,²¹ who seeks to identify all the 'parentheses' in the Gospel of John. Focusing on one literary technique, Duke²² examines every passage where one might argue that John is using irony. This work is neither highly technical nor very long, and, because it is well written, it should be inviting to students. One of its strengths is that it carefully distinguishes irony, double meaning, misunderstanding and metaphor. Its weakness is that it adopts without thoughtful interaction many kinds of historical and theological stances that are incidental to the thesis. In other words, it gives the impression of being so narrowly focused that the author never took the time to come to grips with John and with much of the secondary literature. But despite the caveat, this is a good book.

Lona²³ adopts a quite different approach. He runs through his chosen passage, John 8:33–56, twice. The first time though he deploys more or less standard redaction-critical techniques, while the second time through he follows the models of 'literary semiotics'. By this he means that he approaches the text synchronically, using communication models and structuralist theory, to establish a convergence of interpretations regarding the significance of Abraham.

But by far the most important work in this category is that of Culpepper.²⁴ This is the first book to apply the insights and methods of the new 'rhetorical criticism' in a full-length monograph to the Gospel of John. Culpepper's primary indebtedness is perhaps to Seymour Chatman²⁵ and Gérard Genett,²⁶ but he has read widely in the area of literary criticism, especially the literary criticism of the novel. His aim is to analyse the fourth gospel as a whole, as a complete literary work, using the categories of such criticism. Committing himself not only to a synchronic approach but to the interplay between text and reader, Culpepper avows that meaning 'is produced in the mental moves the text calls for its reader to make, quite apart from questions concerning its sources and origin'. In successive chapters, then, Culpepper takes us through considerations of 'Narrator and Point of View', 'Narrative Time', 'Plot', 'Characters', 'Implicit Commentary', and 'The Implied Reader'. These elements are

tied together in a comprehensive diagram (a slight revision of Chatman's work).

How these topics are developed by Culpepper can best be conveyed by a couple of examples. In the second chapter, 'Narrator and Point of View', he begins by distinguishing three terms. The *real author* refers to the person or persons who actually wrote the fourth gospel. The *implied author* 'is always distinct from the real author and is always evoked by a narrative. The Gospel of John, therefore, has an implied author simply by virtue of its being a narrative'. The *implied author* is an ideal or literary figure who may be inferred from the sum of the choices that constitute the narrative. He or she is a created version of the real author, and sometimes a subset of the real. The *narrator* is a rhetorical device, the voice that actually tells the story. The narrator *may* be dramatized as a character in the story; alternatively, the narrator may be undramatized, in which case the line between the narrator and the implied author becomes thin, though never entirely obliterated. The narrator actually tells the story, addresses the reader and resorts to explanatory asides — in short, the narrator is *intrusive* in the narrative.

The narrator of the fourth gospel, Culpepper argues, adopts omniscience as his psychological point of view. In literary criticism, this does not mean that the narrator is, like God, literally omniscient, but that he adopts a stance that enables him to provide inside information and views on what the characters are thinking, feeling, intending, believing, and so forth. Culpepper finds evidence for this in passages like this: 'But Jesus, knowing in himself that his disciples murmured at it . . .' (6:61); 'No one at the table knew why he said this to him' (13:28); 'When Pilate heard these words, he was the more afraid' (19:8); and much more of the same. Similarly, there is a kind of 'omnipresence' to the narrator; he is 'present' in some sense as an unseen observer at the interview between the Samaritan woman and Jesus, because he is able to record what went on, to tell 'what no historical person could know'. Moreover, this narrator clearly writes retrospectively (e.g. 2:20-21; 7:39).

Based on this analysis, Culpepper proceeds to examine relationships between the narrator and Jesus (e.g. he finds both 'omniscient', and notes how the narrator so determines the language and idiom that both persons speak with exactly the same voice), and between the narrator and the implied author (here Culpepper embarks on a rather important study of 21:24-25).

Subsequent chapters are no less significant, and cumulatively prove interesting and thought-provoking. But careful reading of the work raises a number of questions and reservations.

The first concerns the unqualified transfer of categories developed in the poetics of the *novel* to gospel literature. Culpepper is not entirely insensitive to the problem, of course; but his defence of his methods is not very convincing. The heart of his answer is essentially twofold. First, although he concedes that '[the] danger of distortion must be faced constantly when techniques developed for the study of one genre are applied to another', nevertheless he insists that 'in principle the question of whether there can be a separate set of hermeneutical principles for the study of Scripture should have been settled as long ago as Schleiermacher'.²⁷ In one sense, this is entirely correct; but in no sense is it relevant to

the problem posed. The question at stake is not whether or not we may examine the literary conventions of Scripture in the light of the literary conventions of other literature, but whether the modern novel is the best parallel to first-century gospels. True, as Culpepper points out, there are indeed parallels between the Gospel of John and 'novelistic, realistic narrative', but Culpepper makes no attempt whatever to isolate the *discontinuities*. To take one easy example, Culpepper subsumes discussion of the eyewitness themes in John under the narrative categories of *narrator* and *implied author*, without seriously considering that if the witness themes are given force within some narrative framework other than the novel, the shape of the discussion *inevitably* swings to *some* consideration of the kind and quality of the *history* purportedly being told, and therefore to truth claims — and not just to the shape of the *story* being narrated.

Culpepper's second line of defence is the argument of Hans Frei in his important work, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*.²⁸ Frei argues that the Enlightenment drove western thought to assess the truthfulness of narratives in exclusively *historical* terms. This 'crisis of historical narrative', Frei argues, led the Germans to develop higher criticism and thus to question the *truthfulness* of the gospel narratives; but it led the English to invent the novel, which conveys its own kind of 'truth' — not truth *qua* historical facts or chronicle, but some deep insight into reality, constructed in historically more or less specific contexts. Therefore the way forward, Culpepper argues, in an age when many thoughtful people 'cannot accept as historically plausible (the gospel's) characterization of Jesus as a miracle worker with full recollection of his pre-existence and knowledge of his life after death',²⁹ is not to restrict truth to *historical* truth and therefore the truth claims of the gospel, but to recognize the peculiar nature of *narrative* truth. Culpepper is not saying that the fourth gospel's narratives convey *nothing* of history; rather, he wants to preserve some sort of blend: 'The future of the gospel in the life of the church will depend on the church's ability to relate both story and history to truth in such a way that neither has an exclusive claim to truth and one is not incompatible with the other.'³⁰ Yet not only does his example of miracles in the life of Jesus fail to inspire confidence (Could the resurrection be thrown into the list of negotiables? If not, why not?), but he gives no criteria to guide us, as if the division were immaterial.

His favourite analogy is more uncontrolled yet. He does not want the Gospel of John to be thought of as a window on the ministry of Jesus, enabling us to see *through* the text to that life and ministry, but as a mirror in which we see not only ourselves but also the meaning of the text that lies somewhere *between* the text and ourselves, 'and belief in the gospel can mean openness to the ways it calls readers to interact with it, with life, and with their own world. It can mean believing that the narrative is not only reliable but right and that Jesus' life and our response mean for us what the story has led us to believe they mean'.³¹ But 'reliable' and 'right' in what sense? If in *some* historical sense, we have been returned to our window — *i.e.* the narrator 'reliably' tells us some things about Jesus' ministry; but if purely in the sense of the 'reliability' of the novelist, we have sacrificed the gospel's claims to certain historical specificity, and set sail on the shoreless sea of existential subjectivity, all on the grounds that we may legitimately treat John as a novel — the very point

that remains to be proved. In that case the meaning may be in the story, the story that *we* perceive, the story that stands on *our* side of the text; but it tells us nothing of the ministry of Jesus on the *other* side.

This is not of course to argue for the view of history associated with von Ranke ('wie es eigentlich gewesen ist'); but it is certainly to argue that 'the eclipse of biblical narrative' cannot be overcome by appealing to the novel. In any case, not a few historians are persuaded Frei's analysis of the rise of biblical criticism is *historically* mistaken.³² Indeed, if his view prevailed in its strongest form, what would be communicated to the reader would not be the gospel at all, for the gospel is irretrievably bound up with God's self-disclosure and redemptive sacrifice in the person of his Son within the space-time continuum that constitutes history. The 'narrative truth' that a novel conveys is judged in terms of its universality (e.g. the depiction of *universal* human foibles, tensions, fears, loves, hates, relationships, etc., found in every age and society). The historically specific contexts of such literature establish frameworks of more or less verisimilitude but do not constitute the 'universal' element for which the writing is praised. By contrast, the gospels are universally applicable to human beings, *not* because they portray a central figure who is just like the rest of us, but precisely the reverse: they depict a unique figure who alone can save us, and who scandalously invades humanity's existence at a specific point in the space-time continuum. Doubtless he is continuous with us in many ways, but to say only this is to say too little. To have faith in the gospel message is not the same thing as responding positively to the story of Superman, who is also said to invade our turf from beyond. Although biblical faith has a major 'subjective' or 'personal' or 'existential' component, it depends also on its object — on the other side of the 'window'. Biblical Christianity cannot outlive the 'scandal of historical particularity'. By contrast, the novel thrives on the universals of human existence.

The dominant influence of the poetics of the novel on Culpepper's thinking and the consequent clouding of his exegetical judgment can be traced at scores of points. For instance, the treatment of the so-called 'omniscience' of the writer is slanted to fit the patterns generated by fiction writers; but on the face of it, any responsible observer could draw reasonable conclusions about what Jesus knew, or his disciples did not, or what Pilate feared, from the actions they took and/or the words they said. To cite another modern literary genre, many modern biographies do not hesitate, on responsible grounds, to tell us what their subjects feared, thought, loved, supposed. And if the narrator of the fourth gospel was not historically privy to the conversation between Jesus and the Samaritan woman, this scarcely means he should be classed as an 'omnipresent' narrator in a fiction story; for after all, there are other ways of learning about a conversation between two people besides being there — the more so in this case where we are specifically told how freely the woman talked about the entire episode (4:29,39,42). Certainly the fourth evangelist is far more reserved in these matters than, say, a nineteenth-century Victorian *novelist*, most of whom were given to the most minute probing of their subject's psyche. Or again, although Culpepper says some very insightful things about John 21:24-25, some of his judgments spring from his adoption of fiction poetics as a Procrustean bed in which every scrap of evidence must be

forced to lie. Maintaining the distinction between the real author (the evangelist) and the implied author (who is the 'superior version' of the real author), Culpepper takes 21:24 to mean that the evangelist (the real author) also identifies this superior self (the implied author) with the beloved disciple. 'When the narrator dramatically pulls the curtain on the implied author in the closing verses of the gospel, the reader recognizes that the Beloved Disciple fits the image the gospel projects of the implied author as one who knows Jesus intimately . . .'³³ Note how this sort of analysis forgets that distinctions among 'real author', 'implied author' and 'narrator' are to some extent artifices to enable us to perform certain types of closer analysis, within the analysis of the poetics of the novel. Now, however, the three are almost hypostatized. More important, if the Gospel of John is not *a priori* condemned to the poetics of fiction, the same evidence and arguments might be used to forge the conclusion that the evangelist *actually* was the beloved disciple.

All this is a further painful reminder of the epistemological impasse into which a substantial proportion of modern critical biblical scholarship has got itself. There is everywhere a deep desire to preserve some sort of genuinely pious attachment to Christianity, while working on historical-critical levels with such powerful post-Enlightenment impulses that no epistemologically responsible grounding for the piety is possible. The result is two-tier thinking — epistemological bankruptcy.

But there is an unforeseen benefit that flows from Culpepper's work. Any approach, like his, that treats the text *as a finished literary product* and analyses it on that basis calls in question the legitimacy of the claim that layers of tradition can be peeled off the gospel in order to lay bare the history of the community. If aporias, say, can be integrated into the source-critical approach of R. T. Fortna, they can also be integrated into the literary unity of R. A. Culpepper. If aporias may be literary devices they are not *necessary* evidence of seams. In other words, Fortna and Culpepper in one sense represent divergent streams of contemporary biblical scholarship — so divergent, in fact, that a debate has begun about which approach to the text should take precedence. Culpepper has no doubts: 'Once the effort has been made to understand the narrative character of the gospels, some rapprochement with the traditional, historical issues will be necessary.'³⁴ But the problem is deeper than mere precedence. If the material can be responsibly integrated into the unity Culpepper envisages, or something like it, what right do we have to say the same evidence testifies to *dis*unity, seams, disparate sources and the like? Conversely, if the latter are justified, should we not conclude Culpepper's discovery of unity *must* be artificially imposed? The unforeseen benefit from this debate, then, is that it may free up the rather rigid critical orthodoxy of the day and open up possibilities that have illegitimately been ruled out of court.

In short, this is an important book, not because it has all the answers, but because it is the most comprehensive treatment of the fourth gospel from the perspective of the new criticism, and will set much of the agenda for years to come.

Other studies

Space forbids detailed discussion of the many works that treat some Johannine theme of restricted passage in some depth.

Many of these are doctoral dissertations, re-worked for the press or otherwise; most of them utilize a variety of exegetical and redactional techniques, and focus rather more attention on the delineation of the Johannine community than on wrestling with the person, teaching and works of the historical Jesus. But these generalizations must not mask the considerable diversity of opinion that can be found on most critical matters.

A few sample works may be noted. In the published form of his dissertation at Vanderbilt, Nicholson³⁵ examines all the passages that deal with Jesus ascending or descending, and relates them to the theme of Jesus' 'going away' through death. Nicholson attempts to delineate the entire plot in terms of this motif, and argues that because Jesus is identified to the readers at the beginning of the gospel, the descent-ascend motif functions as a literary device to create or reinforce proper community belief as to who Jesus is.

More technical and detailed than Nicholson's work is the University of Notre Dame dissertation by Segovia.³⁶ Segovia undertakes to examine all the passages in 1 John where *ἀγάπη/ἀγαπᾶν* appear, and compare them with John 13:34-35; 15:1-17; 15:18-16:15 to test the thesis of Jürgen Becker — to the effect that the author of 1 John, or someone else from the same *Sitz im Leben*, was amongst the final redactors of the fourth gospel, and decisively shaped the three passages just listed. Segovia concludes that Becker's thesis is correct in the case of the first two, but not the last, of these three passages, and in consequence offers his own reconstruction of the history of the Johannine community. Although his work abounds in insightful comments, it is characterized by so many instances of the rawest form of disjunctive thought, and by so many speculations piled on speculations, that the book, though admired by many, will prove convincing to few.

The major study by Kremer³⁷ on the resurrection of Lazarus (Jn. 11) is structurally very different from the two studies just mentioned. The first part of the book (pp. 11-109) is given over to a synchronic and diachronic study of the text. At first, more or less traditional conclusions are drawn: John sees this as the greatest of the signs he records, and as the one that points most decisively to the resurrection of Jesus. At the end of this section, Kremer argues that the historical Jesus must stand at the origin of the narrative in some respect, but he cannot decide whether Jesus performed some work of healing which has been narrated as a resurrection and thus taken over by the evangelist, or a work by Jesus which his contemporaries actually saw as a resurrection. A more obvious possibility is not even discussed. To his credit, Kremer thinks it unlikely this account is a historicizing of the parable in Luke 16.

The next section of the book, and by far the largest (pp. 111-328), traces the way this account has influenced Western culture from Christian antiquity through the Middle Ages, the Reformation and the Enlightenment to modern times. Kremer acknowledges that the historicity of the narrative was not questioned until the Enlightenment. Interpretative variations turned on theological, allegorical and symbolic approaches to the narrative. Since the Enlightenment, however, almost all attention has been devoted to the question of historicity, whether affirming or denying, apart from a small body of nihilist and existentialist literature that

uses Lazarus as a tragic symbol of the futility and meaninglessness of life and of the annihilation that takes place at death.

In the final section of his book (pp. 329-375), Kremer attempts to lay out the way this text should be appropriated today. What he advocates is a form of faith completely uninterested in the question of historicity. The Word of God is not to be confused with the events described, nor with the text describing them, but with the self-revelation of God communicated through the evangelist's literary skill. Kremer wants us to preach the power of Jesus over sin and death in what he judges to be an existential sense. It is not 'existential' merely in the sense that it has an impact on our existence; it turns out to be 'existential' in the way that Bultmann's faith in the resurrection of Jesus is existential: the event is entirely swallowed up in the proclamation, leaving no real object of faith at all. The best thing that can be said about this is that theologians who follow Kremer's advice will probably not be understood by most of their flock, who will therefore understand the message in more traditional ways.

I shall pass by the treatment of the Paraclete by Franck,³⁸ since I recently reviewed it elsewhere,³⁹ and turn to another book on the Spirit. The published form of Burge's Aberdeen dissertation⁴⁰ examines the passages in John, and to some extent in the Johannine Epistles, that deal with the Holy Spirit. The scholarly net is cast fairly widely over the secondary literature, and the book is therefore a mine of useful information. Its principal weakness is that much of its exposition turns rather more on the balancing of secondary opinions than on the cut and thrust of detailed exegesis of the text itself. In common with other studies of this type, Burge devotes considerable attention to hypothesizing about the community circumstances that called forth the peculiar emphases he detects in this gospel. Most of these are sensible enough, even when other reconstructions are equally possible.

Concluding reflections

It may be a bit of a cheek to offer any concluding reflections as to the state of Johannine studies when this review has focused on so few of them. But at the risk of distorting the picture, a few judgments may not be entirely misplaced.

(1) In common with much of the field of NT scholarship, contemporary studies on John betray considerable diversity. This diversity goes beyond the diversity of individual judgments made upon an agreed base of method. As modern scholarship has stretched out to embrace more and more 'tools' for the study of the text, some of them mutually incompatible, the disarray has deepened.

(2) Contributing to the sense of disarray, though rather different from it, is the tendency in all of us to see our particular focus of inquiry as the 'key' to resolving the Johannine 'enigma'. It is argued, or assumed, that a particular method is or ought to be primary; that one particular motif controls the plot of the narrative; that one chapter, interpreted in a new way, offers the grid that makes sense of the whole. Part of this, of course, is nothing more than the spin-off of proving that one's doctoral dissertation is 'original'. Experts in the field take such claims in their stride —

that is to say, they largely discount them. But students must read quite a number of such studies before the relative weight of any particular study in the entire field can be properly assessed.

(3) If there is any point of growing consensus, it is that John the Evangelist was writing at two levels, one dealing with the historical Jesus, the other with his own community. This consensus is more diverse than first meets the eye. Some interpreters use the two-level drama of Martyn; others prefer the symbolism of Léon-Dufour; still others depend heavily on traditional source- and redaction-critical distinctions; and others have opted for the new literary criticism. It is often far too little appreciated, however, how much of the reconstruction of the Johannine community depends on rather doubtful speculation. The question is not whether a particular reconstruction makes sense, but whether there may not be several others that make equal or better sense. Once a particular reconstruction becomes encrusted with the footnotes of critical orthodoxy, however, it is exceedingly difficult to dislodge, however fragile its real supports may be. To betray for a moment my own quirks, increasingly I find myself unpersuaded by many features in the dominant trajectories of the Johannine community. In any case, the devotion of so much energy to the relatively speculative has contributed to a feeling of unreality amongst many students when they examine these studies. The reconstructions are far removed from what the text actually *says*. Such connections as exist are largely inferential, often extended over a rather lengthy chain. To the busy pastor, or to the theological student deeply committed to preaching the Word of God, the law of diminishing returns sets in rather early in the study of some of these works. In short, there is a considerable lacuna in first-class exegetical and theological studies of the text as it stands.

(4) The relation of the fourth gospel to the synoptics is ripe for a fresh examination, based especially on contributions by Barrett and Neiryck. Since so many reconstructions have depended on the assumption of a Johannine tradition hermetically sealed off from the rest of the church, the potential for reshaping Johannine scholarship is considerable.

(5) Although the focus on books in this review article precluded discussion of a number of important essays, it is worth mentioning that there is once again amongst the latter a rising interest in the OT background to many Johannine themes, verbal expressions, and even structures of thought.

(6) Finally, it would surely be a wonderful thing if more of us who write on this book from time to time would discipline ourselves to write *coram Deo*. The modern mood tends to set such a devotional stance over against genuine scholarship. From the perspective of Christian discipleship, from the perspective of the Gospel of John itself, that antithesis increasingly calls out to be rejected, at least in some technical writing, as a pagan superstition.

¹ D. A. Carson, 'Recent literature on the fourth gospel: some reflections', *Themelios* 9/1 (September, 1983), pp. 8-18.

² Robert Kysar, *John* (Augsburg Commentary on the New Testament; Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1986).

³ *Idem*, *The Fourth Evangelist and His Gospel: An examination of contemporary scholarship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1975).

⁴ J. Ramsey Michaels, *John* (GNC; San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1983).

⁵ Rudolf Schnackenburg, *Das Johannesevangelium: Ergänzende Auslegungen und Exkurse* (HKNT IV.4; Freiburg: Herder, 1984).

⁶ Ernst Haenchen, *John*, 2 vols. (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984).

⁷ Rudolf Bultmann, *The Johannine Epistles* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, ET 1973).

⁸ Rudolf Schnackenburg, *Die Johannesbriefe* (HKNT XIII.3; Freiburg: Herder, 1975).

⁹ George R. Beasley-Murray, *John* (WBC 36; Waco: Word, 1987).

¹⁰ D. Moody Smith, *Johannine Christianity: Essays on Its Setting, Sources, and Theology* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1984).

¹¹ *Idem*, *The Composition and Order of the Fourth Gospel: Bultmann's Literary Theory* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965).

¹² Craig Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels* (Leicester: IVP, 1987).

¹³ Leon Morris, *Studies in the Fourth Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969).

¹⁴ Paul S. Minear, *John: The Martyr's Gospel* (New York: Pilgrim, 1984).

¹⁵ D. A. Carson, 'Understanding Misunderstandings in the Fourth Gospel', *Tyndale Bulletin* 33 (1982), pp. 59-91.

¹⁶ Vernard Eller, *The Beloved Disciple: His Name, His Story, His Thought* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987).

¹⁷ Lazarus.

¹⁸ London: SCM, 1985/Oak Park, IL: Meyer-Stone, 1987.

¹⁹ London: SCM, 1973.

²⁰ J. D. G. Dunn, *Christology in the Making: A New Testament Inquiry into the Origins of the Doctrine of the Incarnation* (London: SCM, 1980).

²¹ Gilbert van Belle, *Les parenthèses dans l'évangile de Jean: Aperçu historique et classification; texte grec de Jean* (Leuven: University Press, 1985).

²² Paul D. Duke, *Irony in the Fourth Gospel* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1985).

²³ H. E. Lona, *Abraham in Johannes 8: Ein Beitrag zur Methodenfrage* (Bern: Herbert Lang, 1976).

²⁴ R. Alan Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel: A Study in Literary Design* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983). Much of what I now say about this book first appeared in a review in *Trinity Journal* 4 (1983), pp. 122-126.

²⁵ Seymour Chatman, *Story and discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1978).

²⁶ Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method* (tr. Jane E. Lewin; Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1980).

²⁷ Culpepper, *op. cit.*, pp. 9-10.

²⁸ New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974.

²⁹ Culpepper, *op. cit.*, p. 236.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 237.

³² Cf. especially John D. Woodbridge, *Biblical Authority: A Critique of the Rogers/McKim Proposal* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982). For a compelling study of the relationship between truth and genres found in the Bible, cf. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, 'The Semantics of Biblical Literature: Truth and Scripture's Diverse Literary Forms', in D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge, *Hermeneutics, Authority, and Canon* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), pp. 51-104, 374-383.

³³ Culpepper, *op. cit.*, p. 47.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

³⁵ Godfrey C. Nicholson, *Death as Departure: The Johannine Descent-Ascent Schema* (SBLDS 63; Chico: SP, 1983).

³⁶ Fernando F. Segovia, *Love Relationships in the Johannine Tradition* (SBLDS 58; Chico: SP, 1982).

³⁷ Jacob Kremer, *Lazarus: Die Geschichte einer Auferstehung. Text, Wirkungsgeschichte und Botschaft von Joh 11.1-46* (Stuttgart: Verlag Katholisches Bibelwerk GmbH, 1985).

³⁸ Eskil Franck, *Revelation Taught: The Paraclete in the Gospel of John* (ConBNT 14; Lund: Gleerup, 1985).

³⁹ *JBL* 106 (1987), pp. 549-551.

⁴⁰ Gary M. Burge, *The Anointed Community: The Holy Spirit in the Johannine Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987).