

# Some recent literature on John: a review article<sup>1</sup>

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For even the most serious student, the secondary literature on the fourth gospel is so vast that it is difficult to know where to begin. Here, perhaps more than anywhere, the wisdom of Solomon has not been heeded (Ecclesiastes 12:12). Rather than dealing with the whole of Johannine scholarship, this article simply reviews eight recently published books. In conclusion, a few observations are made about how the reviewed books relate to current trends in the study of the gospel and a few suggestions are made about where such trends may be leading.

## **B. Lindars, *John, New Testament Guides* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1991)**

For the newcomer to Johannine studies, Lindars' contribution to the New Testament Guides series offers valuable insights on the gospel from one of its most lucid and influential scholars. As an introductory work to the gospel, this book is both concise and readable and is likely to become one of the first books that a student of John will encounter. Written just before his untimely death, Lindars' work aims to give the student a basic grounding in the gospel itself as well as a balanced survey of the scholarship surrounding it. However, it needs to be approached with a certain amount of caution as Lindars' style sometimes suggests that there is only one way of looking at issues. This is particularly true of historical matters. While Lindars accepts that John contains historical material, he is dismissive of those who maintain that John is based on eye witness accounts. Furthermore, his discussion of Johannine authorship is not as conclusive as he would have his readers believe. His suggestion that the beloved disciple is simply a literary device to teach the true meaning of discipleship neither reflects Johannine scholarship as a whole, nor seems to account for the gospel's own emphasis on the beloved disciple as an eye witness of events. In addition, Lindars too easily dismisses the external evidence for apostolic authorship as an attempt by the church to validate the gospel's authority. While such a conclusion is a possibility, it is by no means a certainty and there are other interpretations which account for the evidence just as adequately.

In his chapter on the readers of the gospel, Lindars gives a lucid overview of the way scholarship has approached the question of the gospel's audience. For this purpose, he conveniently divides scholarship into two basic approaches: those who have studied the parallels to John in other religions and those who think that John's audience can be determined from within the text of the gospel. Beginning with the former group, he shows how scholarship has moved from the belief that the gospel's closest parallels are Gnostic to the current belief that the gospel is essentially Jewish. However, when he turns to the second group, Lindars seems again to present a one-sided case in his acceptance of the arguments of Brown (1979) and Martyn (1979). It is true that much (perhaps the majority) of Johannine scholarship has been persuaded that it is possible to read the gospel not only as the history of Jesus but also as the history of John's own community. It is also true that many Johannine scholars have been persuaded that this community was an isolated sect. However, to present these ideas as if there is no other interpretation of the material in John is surely not the place of an introduction to the gospel, especially when it claims to offer a 'balanced survey of the important critical issues' (back cover).

The best part of Lindars' book for me is his chapter entitled 'Understanding John'. Here he succinctly addresses the key theological issues of the gospel, simultaneously showing his

excellent and balanced grasp of those issues and of the gospel's message. In his final chapter, Lindars also makes the significant point that, after all our critical studies of the gospel, its message must still be applied. This is surely a point that we all need to learn. While many of his conclusions differ from my own, it is surely the wisdom of a great scholar who is not concerned simply with head knowledge but also with its application. While this book is a useful window on Lindars' own views on the gospel, it is perhaps not as helpful as an introduction to the world of Johannine studies. However, when read with a certain hermeneutical suspicion, Lindars' book has several useful things to say.

## **G.R. Beasley-Murray, *The Gospel of Life: Theology in the Fourth Gospel* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1991)**

For those who were slightly disappointed by Beasley-Murray's contribution to the Word Biblical Commentary series (1987),<sup>2</sup> the set of theological studies of John by the same author provides something of an antidote. These studies originally formed the 1990 Payton Lectures and the lecture form makes them pleasant to read. Furthermore, the studies do not require a great knowledge of Johannine scholarship and are therefore accessible to both undergraduates and ministers. Beginning with an essay that shares the title of the book, Beasley-Murray leads his reader through six studies on various aspects of Johannine theology. The author is concerned with the overriding message of the gospel, which he sees as the message of God's saving sovereignty in the person of Jesus, summed up in the offer of life.

It is refreshing to read a book on John that firmly believes the gospel's portrayal of Jesus is relevant today and refrains from hypothetical reconstructions of either the gospel or its community. Furthermore, Beasley-Murray draws on modern studies of John's Christology while at the same time challenging many long-held views on the gospel. His discussion of the mission of the Son of God thus applies recent research of the messenger concept to help elucidate the gospel's view of Jesus' relationship with God. His discussion of the gospel's Son of Man sayings is critical of those who see no theological importance for the resurrection of John, as well as those who see no place for the forgiveness of sins in John's view of the cross.

Beasley-Murray's discussion of the Holy Spirit wisely begins with the role of the Spirit in Jesus' own ministry before developing John's view of the ongoing role of the Spirit amongst believers. Beasley-Murray emphasizes the Spirit's role as 'prosecuting attorney' against the world. This explains the use of the term Paraclete and provides a direct parallel with the application of the same term to Jesus in 1 John. Finally, Beasley-Murray addresses the role of the sacraments, the church and ministry in the gospel. His discussion of these hotly contested subjects is again both balanced and critical. The discussion of the role of the church within the gospel is a sound attempt to deal with the theology of the gospel. For Beasley-Murray, this theology suggests the establishment of a new community based on the Jesus whom the evangelist portrays.

Although this book does not provide much new material for those familiar with John, it will be of benefit to those who want to get to grips with the distinctive aspects of Johannine theology. The pastoral concern of the author often shows through, for these studies are not simply academic. Beasley-Murray wishes to show how the Gospel of John may speak to today's church. Here is both the strength and the limitation of this book. For an undergraduate who is looking for a book that may directly address issues in a

secular course, this book may not be the most helpful. However, the significance of this book is that it goes beyond the academic study of John to challenge its readers with the gospel's message of life.

L. Morris, **Jesus is the Christ: Studies in the Theology of John** (Leicester/Grand Rapids: IVP/Eerdmans, 1989)

Morris takes a similar approach to that of Beasley-Murray. As an adaptation of Morris' own teaching on John, it is likewise accessible to student and pastor alike. Those who are familiar with Morris' previous work on John will not find much new here. Furthermore, Morris' work more closely reflects the state of Johannine scholarship in the mid-70s when he taught the class on which his book is based. The apparently dated views of Morris, along with his strongly evangelical approach to the gospel, mean that this book will probably not find its way onto many booklists in secular departments. This is a shame since it is a very careful discussion of many issues critical to the study of John.

Morris sees John 20:30-31 as a summary of the gospel's theological purpose. The diverse theological themes of the gospel are held together by this overriding purpose which displays itself in the signs and discourses as well as in the characterization of Jesus. This book addresses the major Johannine themes such as belief, life and the 'I am' sayings. It also discusses more directly Christological aspects such as the Johannine view of Christ, the Son of God, the Spirit and the Father. One particularly important subject in Morris' book is his discussion of the humanity of Jesus in John. This is an area that has often been neglected, as scholarship still tends to hold to Käsemann's docetic view of Jesus.

As a clear introduction to the principal themes of Johannine theology, this book will be of immense help to undergraduates. Furthermore, since Morris concerns himself with the gospel itself, the themes he addresses will continue to be of importance in the study of the gospel long after some of the current trends in scholarship have passed on.

John W. Pryor, **John: Evangelist of the Covenant People: The Narrative and Themes of the Fourth Gospel** (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1992)

Here is a book that is eminently readable, displays a fresh approach and presents a convincing argument. Pryor sees, and in the first part of his book ably satisfies, a need for 'a study of John's Gospel which begins with and concentrates on a sequential reading of the text, not verse by verse but in the longer units which make up the book' (p. 1). While this may sound like a 'literary approach' in that it deals with the meaning of the final text of the gospel, it is in fact more indebted to traditional forms of criticism.

Pryor's main argument is that John presents Jesus as the fulfilment of Judaism and that the new community takes the place of Israel as the covenant people. In his sequential reading, he briskly takes us through the whole gospel, interacting with scholarly opinion as he goes. Pryor's 'narrative' approach is distinctive because it deals with longer units of the gospel. As a result, the message of the whole gospel always remains in view. Critical problems that may interrupt the flow of this reading are either dealt with in endnotes or in excurses at the end of the first main section.

The second part of Pryor's book pursues his thesis in three theological studies. The first of these argues that Jesus is portrayed as a prophet like Moses and that it is Jesus and not Israel who is God's true Son. It follows that the divine covenant of sonship is found in Jesus and not in Israel. In the second of his studies, Pryor argues that the application of the title 'Lord' to Jesus by John is but one demonstration that John's community was not sectarian but stood in the mainstream of Christian belief. For John, Jesus is the covenant Lord of the community in much the same way as Yahweh was in the OT. It is a pity that Pryor does not work out the Christological implications of such a parallel. Instead, he affirms that the Lord continues to be present in the community through the presence of the Spirit. Pryor then turns to John's view of the church, in which Jesus is both the founder and the representative of the new community. As a result, Johannine believers are under the obligation to 'remain in' Jesus and to love one another. This love for each other, however, is not to exclude the world, but contains an obligation to it. Pryor also asserts that the cross is essential as a foundation for John's community (against Bultmann, 1955, p. 54), and suggests that this includes the idea of sacrifice (against

Forestell, 1974). The community is gathered both by Jesus' revelatory word and by the cleansing effects of the cross. This is in accordance with the covenant faith of Israel. However, birth into the covenant people now occurs through new birth by the Spirit and not through the natural birth into Judaism.

Pryor stands against the mainstream of Johannine scholarship in his belief that John knew the synoptics. Against much modern scholarship, he also thinks that a 'two-level reading of John's Gospel' such as that proposed by Martyn lacks enough controls to be properly established. At the same time Pryor believes that much can be learned about the setting of the Johannine community through a careful study of the gospel and background material. While I agree that this method is preferable to that of Martyn, what worries me is Pryor's view of the role of the Holy Spirit in the formation of the gospel. For the ongoing teaching role of the Paraclete all too easily leads Pryor to the common conclusion that this role involves a significant re-shaping of history. Thus the gospel does not reproduce the words of Jesus, but consists of 'a Spirit-inspired shaping of the traditions to bring out their true meaning for the community in the situation of their present experiences' (p. 147). If we are to believe Pryor's earlier 'reading' of the gospel, this 'Spirit-inspired shaping' often cares more about the 'present experiences' of the readers than the situation of Jesus' own day. However, this is an excellent book, which deals with the fundamental question of Jesus' relationship to the OT. It deserves a wide readership for a clear and persuasive argument.

D.A. Carson, **The Gospel According to John** (Leicester/Grand Rapids: IVP/Eerdmans, 1991)

Since last writing about John for *Themelios* (14.2), Carson's own commentary on John has been published. This is intended to provide the student of the Bible with a handy, up-to-date commentary, with the primary emphasis on exegesis. Characteristically, Carson shows much independence of thought, which challenges the current state of scholarship at many points.

The introduction contains a survey of the state of Johannine scholarship. Here Carson further develops some of the criticisms he made of that scholarship in his last article for *Themelios* (Carson, 1989, pp. 60-62). Here, Carson expounds his belief that the gospel is primarily an evangelistic document. He argues that the place to begin a discussion of the gospel's purpose is with the evangelist's statement of purpose in 20:30-31. Contrasting this with the similar statement in 1 John 5:13 that is clearly written for believers, Carson argues that the statement in the gospel appears to be evangelistic. Although I am not sure that 'evangelistic' is the right word ('missionary' may be better), Carson has drawn attention to the fact that there are places within the gospel that seem to assume a non-believing audience. As a result he challenges the widely held belief that the Gospel of John is written for a (rather inward-looking) Christian community. It has to be said that Carson's major emphasis on the evangelistic nature of the gospel will probably fall on deaf ears in scholarly circles, unless a better account is made of the material in the gospel that appears to have believers in mind. Neither is the majority of scholarship likely to adopt the belief that John closely represents the teaching of the historical Jesus, nor the conviction that internal and external evidence is best accounted for by apostolic authorship, though Carson makes a cogent case for his views.

When it comes to the actual commentary, Carson usually prefers the 'plain meaning of the text' rather than symbolic or sacramental interpretations. Thus, Jesus' claim in John 6:54 that 'he who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life' does not suggest that 'there is no allusion to the Lord's table. But such allusions as exist prompt the thoughtful reader to look behind the eucharist, to that to which the eucharist itself points', i.e., to the work of the cross (p. 297). Carson clearly sees the OT and Judaism as John's primary conceptual background. In all this, I broadly agree and have found his commentary both thought-provoking and helpful.

This commentary is an invaluable aid to (but not a substitute for) a detailed reading of the gospel. It offers a credible and scholarly exegesis from an evangelical standpoint. As such it will benefit those whose courses may exclude such works. It will also be of great use for those who wish to explain God's word to others. For such people, Carson provides a helpful (if brief) section in his introduction on preaching from the fourth gospel. This commentary has already taken its place on my shelf next to Morris (1971) and Barrett (1978) as a clear one-volume exegetical commentary on John.

J. Ashton, *Understanding the Fourth Gospel* (Oxford: OUP, 1990)

Most of the previous books can hardly be said to represent the mainstream of Johannine scholarships. Ashton, however, stands firmly in the historical-critical tradition of scholars such as Bultmann and Dodd. The title itself seems to echo Dodd's work (1953), and Ashton clearly sees Bultmann as the single most important influence on understanding the gospel this century. Ashton's work begins with a survey of Johannine scholarship before Bultmann, then reflects on Bultmann's influence, before discussing the direction of study since Bultmann. Those wishing to know how Johannine scholarship has developed this century need look no further, for this is a clear and well-reasoned survey. At the same time the difficulty of writing a concise review of Johannine scholarship is amply shown in the fact that it takes Ashton over 100 pages. As a representative of the mainstream of Johannine scholarship, it is hardly surprising that Ashton sees Martyn's work as the most significant step since the work of Bultmann.

After his detailed survey, Ashton looks at the gospel under two main headings: Genesis and Revelation. In a series of studies, the first of these seeks to discover the origins of the gospel. Following on from his belief that John is sectarian in nature, Ashton looks at the idea of 'Religious dissent' before addressing the question of 'The Community and its book'. From there he takes up some of the themes of dualism, the Messiah, Son of God and Son of Man. Each of these chapters is detailed enough to be a separate study in itself and will provide useful material for anyone studying these aspects of the gospel. However, as part of Ashton's overall argument, they lead him to the conclusion that the origins of the gospel are found in Jewish thought and so he believes that contemporary Jewish thought is the means by which the gospel will be correctly understood. Here Ashton is in agreement with modern scholarship over against Bultmann, who believed that the gospel's origins were to be found in Gnostic thought.

In the second major section, Ashton develops Bultmann's belief that revelation is the main theological motif in John. Starting with the question of the gospel's genre, Ashton finds many parallels with what has come to be known as 'Apocalyptic literature'. These parallels lead him to believe, following Martyn, that like apocalyptic writings the gospel assumes two levels of understanding. The first level is what the gospel ostensibly portrays: the ministry of Jesus. The second stage of understanding is the post-resurrection era, in which the Paraclete takes on the revelatory role of Jesus:

During Jesus' life time ... the significance of his words and deeds remains opaque: they assume the character of a mystery, one whose meaning cannot be grasped until the dawn of a new age, when in a second stage, it will at last receive its authoritative interpretation (p. 405).

Quoting the work of Martyn, Ashton suggests that John diverges from the apocalyptic model in the fact that the 'initial stage is not the scene of "things to come" in heaven. It is the scene of Jesus' life and teaching. John's two stages are past and present, not future and present' (p. 412; Martyn, 1978, pp. 136ff.). Ashton goes further than Martyn in his belief that 'John was "analytically conscious" of the two levels of understanding with which he worked' (p. 435). He likens the gospel to the artist who purports to represent one era of history, while actually commenting on his own. By this means the evangelist's 'religious genius impelled him to disclose more and more of what he called "the truth", that is to say the revelation of Jesus' (p. 434).

Although Ashton acknowledges some sacrificial language concerning the death of Jesus in the Gospel of John, he sees the crucifixion primarily in terms of revelation. He further points out that it is not in the crucifixion itself that God's glory is revealed but in its significance. Thus 'the Christian believer is not expected to see the crucifixion as a kind of exaltation or glorification but to see *past* the physical reality of Jesus' death to its true significance' (p. 496). Since he thinks that Jesus' glory has been manifest from the start, he does not regard the resurrection stories as highlighting this glory. Rather, he sees them in terms of faith (20:1-10), recognition (20:1, 11-18) and mission (20:19-23).

This book is not only significant because of its great length. It represents a well-argued and detailed study of the gospel by a respected scholar. The first half of this book shows its indebtedness to scholarship since Bultmann. Here Ashton is correct in rejecting Gnosticism as the background to the thought

of the gospel. The second part is remarkable in that it combines many of the interpretations of Bultmann with the 'two-level' theories of Johannine genre espoused by Martyn. Here Ashton should certainly be credited for highlighting some similarities between John and apocalyptic literature. However, his 'two-level' apocalyptic reading of John has two major problems.

The first problem is the question of how we are to determine the legitimacy of a 'two-level' reading of the gospel and will be addressed below (see 'Concluding observations'). The second problem concerns the genre of the fourth gospel. It is one thing to say that there are similarities between John and apocalyptic literature but it is quite another thing to say that John consciously thought of his work as apocalyptic. Ashton dismisses the more obvious similarities between John and biography or history on what I think is a rather spurious definition of history. He thinks that 'a Gospel is more of a creed than a biography: it is a proclamation of faith' (p. 432). Thus for Ashton, 'the evangelists were not writing history at all' (p. 432).<sup>5</sup> It seems to me that this is a false distinction between history and creed. This also appears to be a classic case of importing 20th-century rationalist ideals about the objectiveness of historians onto first-century texts. Furthermore, it is questionable whether the writing down of events can ever be as objective as idealists once thought (see Stibbe, below). Ashton's definitions ultimately lead him to the sad conclusion that 'Neither the resurrection itself nor the stories told to illustrate its significance are historical in any meaningful sense of the word' (p. 611). Although the gospel may display certain similarities with apocalyptic literature, to my mind it displays greater similarities with ancient forms of biography (Hengel, 1985, pp. 32f.). Furthermore, I am more persuaded by the arguments of Robinson (1985) that John's gospel is based on reliable history than the proposition that it is not history at all.

Neither the size nor the price of this book will endear it to any but the most ardent of students. My problems with Ashton's work stem from the fact that we share neither the same optimism in some of the results of modern scholarship nor the same pessimism about the historical reliability of the gospel. It seems a shame to me that such a scholarly work does not question some of the presuppositions of the scholarship on which it builds. For all that, this book represents the standpoint of many and is finely written. It will therefore probably prove to be very influential in the development of Johannine studies.

J.C. Thomas, *Footwashing in John 13 and the Johannine Community* (JSNTS 61) (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1991)

All the previous books have been general studies on John's gospel, ranging from the introductory work of Lindars to the scholarly tome of Ashton. The final two books are both revisions of PhD theses and therefore address specific issues of Johannine scholarship in great detail.

Thomas' work is basically an exegetical study of the significance of the footwashing in John 13. It is straightforward in its form. After an introduction, he argues the case for including the words *ἐκτὸς τοῦ πόδους* ('except for the feet') in the text of 13:10. He proceeds to look at historical parallels to the footwashing episode in both Jewish and Graeco-Roman material. From such a survey, he concludes that in the ancient world there was such a close connection between the idea of footwashing and the concept of preparation that the idiom 'with unwashed feet' came to mean 'without adequate preparation' (p. 59). The action of footwashing is also closely tied to the role of a servant. The footwashing in John 13 is distinct because it is motivated by love and because it violates the standards of status in which the inferior washes the feet of the superior. Thomas observes that the footwashing in John 13 is not a simple expression of hospitality but is used as a sign of cleansing and is specifically linked to Jesus' death. He also observes that 1 Timothy 5:9-10 suggests that footwashing was practised by widows in some early Christian churches.

The core of Thomas' book contains a detailed literary and exegetical analysis of John 13:1-20. Here Thomas emphasizes the highly significant position of the footwashing episode. Not only does it come at the beginning of the farewell discourses, it is also introduced as the first episode after Jesus' hour has arrived (v. 1). Thomas sees the farewell discourses in the light of similar farewell discourses in the OT and other Jewish literature. As such, they prepare for the departure of Jesus and are presented as the final teaching of Jesus to his disciples and all subsequent followers. As a preparation for this teaching and also for Jesus' death, the

footwashing takes on even greater significance. After studying the literary themes of the farewell discourses and the role of the disciples in the gospel as a whole, Thomas begins a detailed verse by verse exegesis. From this he concludes that the footwashing is inextricably bound to the passion of Jesus and its implications for the disciples. It is Jesus' love that leads him to take upon himself the role of the slave, in defiance of normal social practice. Jesus makes clear that the footwashing is not optional for the disciples but is necessary for them to share in his identity (v. 8). In three distinct commands (vv. 14,15,17), Jesus tells his disciples not only to follow his example of humble service but to wash one another's feet. Thomas sees this footwashing as an ongoing command which may be seen as a 'sign of preparation for mission . . . made possible by continual cleansing' (p. 16). Thomas also suggests that in the light of his observations scholars may have been too hasty in suggesting that two (contradictory) sources lie behind the footwashing of John 13.

In the light of the many historical reconstructions of John's audience that have been built on somewhat shaky foundations, the mention of historical reconstruction and the Johannine community in the title of Thomas' last chapter filled me with dread. However, this is an excellent example of how to engage in a study of the possible practices of the Johannine community. Thomas begins with early Christian texts that almost certainly imply a knowledge of Jesus' command in John 13 that the disciples should wash one another's feet. From these texts, Thomas shows that early readers of John's gospel appear to have taken Jesus' words literally and actually to have washed each other's feet. Then Thomas moves to other texts that suggest the practice of footwashing but may not be based on John 13. Among these he includes the verses in 1 Timothy 5. From actual examples of footwashings, he concludes that it is likely that the first readers of the gospel took the command of Jesus literally.<sup>6</sup> In fact he thinks that the burden of proof is on those who believe that the first readers of the gospel would take Jesus' words metaphorically, for all the evidence he presents points in the other direction. Having surmised that the community practised footwashing, Thomas suggests that its significance concerns the cleansing of post-baptismal sin and that it was probably observed in the context of a meal.

Although Thomas' book is basically a PhD thesis, those with a basic knowledge of Greek will find it readable and compelling. It will hopefully also set a trend by the fact that it has been published in both hardback and paperback form and so is more accessible to those with a restricted budget. Throughout it is also evident that Thomas has an underlying agenda: the theological and practical relevance of his findings for contemporary Christian worship. Has the church lost something of the significance of Jesus' death in supposing that the footwashing is merely an example of humble service? Thomas rightly concludes: 'There is clearly more direct biblical support for the practice of footwashing than for several later practices of the church . . . in the light of the evidence here presented, the issue of the relevance of footwashing for the contemporary church may well need reassessment' (p. 189). This is an excellent thesis, and one with a message: 'She who has ears, let her hear.'

M.W.G. Stibbe, *John as Storyteller: Narrative Criticism and the Fourth Gospel* (SNTS 73) (Cambridge: CUP, 1992)<sup>7</sup>

Stibbe's book requires more than a passing acquaintance with both literary and theological theory. As such it will probably not feature on many undergraduate reading lists. Yet this is an important book, for it argues that narrative criticism, especially when redefined in the light of the gospel genre, has much to offer traditional scholarship on John. It thus goes some way to answering the criticisms that have been levelled at 'narrative' or 'literary' approaches to the study of the gospel.<sup>8</sup>

Stibbe devotes the first part of his book to creating his own narrative theory. He criticizes previous narrative critical studies of John for treating the fourth gospel as if it were a 20th-century novel and for ignoring questions of genre, social setting and history. His own approach therefore determines to treat all these questions seriously as well as the literary aspects of the gospel. He suggests structuralism as a model for determining genre and sociological studies as a means of identifying the social setting of the Johannine community. Stibbe expresses significant reservations about the soundness of the two-level approach of Martyn and Brown in determining the community. He thinks that a shift is needed away

from these hypothetical reconstructions 'towards the more sociological approaches of Wayne Meeks and Bruce Malina' (p. 61; Meeks, 1972; Malina, 1985). The final part of Stibbe's narrative theory involves the question of history as narrative. In a very suggestive chapter he argues that the distinction scholarship has placed between history and narrative is in fact a false one. In order for history to make sense, it has to be given a narrative (story) form. This means that John's gospel can for the first time be studied scientifically both as story and as history.

The second half of Stibbe's work takes up each aspect of his new method and applies them one by one to the trial narrative of John 18-19. A practical narrative criticism of the trial argues that John is an artful storyteller. A genre criticism follows, which, somewhat surprisingly, finds close parallels with Dionysian mythology. Stibbe, however, emphasizes that John was not consciously alluding to the myth of Dionysus; instead, he thinks that the allusions to Dionysus are unconscious and come about because John unconsciously chose the genre of tragedy to rewrite his tradition about Jesus. Stibbe further suggests that a new family of faith is created at the cross, when Jesus calls the beloved disciple to take home his mother (19:25-27). Stibbe sees this episode in the life of Jesus as a legitimization of the Johannine community. Thus, an episode from the life of Jesus sheds light on the setting of the gospel. Stibbe's final chapter develops the idea that John can be both story and history at the same time. He stresses the basic historicity of the passion narrative, but suggests that the storyteller has used much imagination in the creation of the final story.

Although Stibbe's book comes to some surprising and somewhat questionable conclusions,<sup>9</sup> its overriding belief that the future of the 'narrative criticism' of the gospel is an integrated approach is surely correct. Stibbe's book is certainly a significant step in the right direction. However, it is Stibbe's discussion of history that promises to be the biggest step forward. He certainly appears to be on the right lines in suggesting that John can at the same time be both story and history. In the light of Ashton's work (see above), I would want to take this observation one stage further and suggest that John can at one and the same time be theology (or creed) and history. However, Stibbe's observations could lead to the danger of thinking that, because history requires a narrative form for it to make sense, all narratives can be seen as history. It is one thing to say that the evangelist has chosen details according to his own purpose, that history requires a narrative form in order to be understood, and that the evangelist has emphasized and explained things that may not have been obvious to the narrative audience. It seems to me that it is quite another thing to say that the evangelist was willing to 'embroider' or even to invent events in order to explain the true meaning of Jesus. On Stibbe's definition of history, I still wonder how far the author is allowed to use his imagination before what is written would better be described as fiction than history.

## Some concluding observations

What follows is a brief attempt to show how the above works fit into Johannine studies as a whole and to highlight some significant changes within the study of the gospel.

### *John and the synoptics*

Since the work of Dodd (1963, *e.g.* p. 387) on the importance of historical data within the Gospel of John, the vast majority of Johannine scholarship has worked with the supposition that John did not know the synoptics. Even the conservative voice of Morris (1969, pp. 15-63) concurred with this view.<sup>10</sup> The major exception to this point of view has been the voice of Barrett (1978, pp. 42-54), who contended that John knew Mark. It can hardly be said that there has been a wholesale shift in opinion on this matter. However, certain recent studies, including those of Pryor (*esp.* pp. 100-102), Carson (pp. 49-58) and Thomas (p. 83 n. 1)<sup>11</sup> have again raised the possibility that John knew the synoptics. The fact that Lazarus is presented to the reader as the brother of Mary 'who anointed the Lord with ointment and wiped his feet with her hair' (11:2) (even though this anointing does not take place until ch. 12), the fact that the evangelist seems to assume a knowledge of the Last Supper (13:4), and the similarity between the accounts of the walking on the water and the feeding of the five thousand (Jn. 6) and the passion narrative (Jn. 18-20) with those of the synoptics, suggest to me that scholarship has been too hasty in its wholesale abandonment of some sort of link with the synoptic accounts. It appears that the tide of scholarship just may have begun to turn in this area. However, unless we are to return to the idea that John was

written simply to counter (e.g. Windisch, 1926, pp. 8-11) or complement<sup>22</sup> the synoptics, a great deal more work needs to be done on exactly what such a relationship may be.

### **John and Judaism**

Scholarship has correctly noticed that John's thoughtworld is essentially Jewish. All the books reviewed above confirm this. However, the precise relationship with Judaism is far from settled. One major question in this discussion which needs further attention concerns how much John knew, and is indebted to, Jewish traditions that are preserved within the Targums and Rabbinic Judaism. It is often forgotten that in their final forms the Targums and many Rabbinic traditions date from a time long after the composition of the gospel. Now that the Jewish nature of John has been widely acknowledged, there is the danger that scholars will seek for every sort of parallel within Judaism and assume that John was aware of such traditions. While a case can be made for John knowing certain traditions within Judaism, such as the knowledge of the Jewish lectionary system (Guilding, 1960), each parallel needs to be weighed according to its own merits. This is an area of Johannine scholarship where much caution is necessary and many more scholarly controls are needed to avoid the danger of reading into John Rabbinic traditions that are neither implied nor needed for a correct understanding of the text.

### **Traditional versus literary criticism**

There will probably continue to be a methodological divide between the 'historical-critical' school and the 'literary' school of thought for a good few years to come. Furthermore, we are probably seeing only the beginning of a vast flood of 'literary' readings of the gospel, including 'literary' commentaries (e.g. Talbert, 1992). However, it seems that the gap is beginning to lessen and the number of scholars who are willing to place a foot in each camp is increasing. This is not only seen in the ambitious work of Stibbe, that deliberately tries to narrow the divide. It is also seen in Pryor's 'sequential' reading of the text and in Thomas' determination to deal with 'the final form of the text' alongside more traditional issues. It seems that many are beginning to realize that there are benefits to be found in both approaches to the text. Following Stibbe's excellent beginning, there is a further need to develop a truly integrated approach that is both holistic and exegetical.

### **The Johannine community: a way forward?**

Over the last few years, the study of the Johannine community in John's gospel has been dominated by the theories of Martyn and Brown. As the review above has shown, this involves a two-level reading of the text of the gospel. At one level the gospel speaks of the life of the historical Jesus. However, while the gospel may purport to be about the earthly ministry of Jesus, this level has been transformed in the light of the events in the life of the Johannine community, so that the scholar can detect specific episodes which find their origin in the time of the community rather than in the time of Jesus. With Carson (1984, p. 14), I find it hard to believe in the detailed reconstructions of John's community that scholars such as Brown and Martyn (and Ashton) deduce from the gospel. I agree with Pryor that 'controls for this kind of approach to the text seem to me too difficult to establish' (p. 2). In other words, it is almost impossible to prove or disprove whether the story of healing of the man born blind originated with the healing within the Johannine community or whether it originated in the ministry of Jesus himself, as the story seems to suggest. I have to add that there is more 'historical' evidence that such healings occurred during the lifetime of Jesus (cf. e.g. Mk. 8:22-26; 10:46-52) than within John's community. Furthermore, the validity of some of the building blocks upon which Brown and Martyn's community is based has recently come in for a great deal of criticism.<sup>11</sup>

A theological approach to the question of John's community may provide a more fruitful way in to this difficult debate. For example, Beasley-Murray begins with the concept of the *true* vine and suggests that such an image assumes the establishment of a new community. From the theology of the gospel, he deduces that the church is rooted in Christ the Redeemer (p. 105): it is the fellowship of those who receive and keep the word of Christ (p. 107), of those who in Christ have the life of the saving sovereignty of God and hope in its fulfilment (p. 109), and of those united to Christ and therefore to one another (p. 111). Furthermore, the church is a fellowship created from all nations by the Redeemer of all nations

(p. 114) and is the fellowship which is entrusted with the mission of Christ to the world (p. 115). It may be argued that such a theological discussion of the church within John has no bearing on its 'original' audience and is therefore irrelevant in the current discussions of community. However, while this approach does not address specific practices and beliefs within the Johannine audience, it must be acknowledged that it expresses the evangelist's 'vision' for the community for which he wrote. If his gospel had any effect upon its first hearers, it may be that this theology has a bearing on what may or may not have been believed by the community.

Pryor, Stibbe and Thomas provide another approach to this thorny issue. They think that practices and beliefs expressed in the gospel may throw light on the practices and beliefs of John's community. Such an approach must be evaluated according to the merits of each case. While it should be acknowledged that the gospel sheds light on the world of its audience as well as its author, it is difficult to know how far the audience of the gospel really did share the thoughtworld of its author. There seem to be very few controls to verify whether the incident at the cross (Jn. 19:25-27) is meant both to represent the creation of a new family of faith as well as to depict an episode from the life of Jesus (Stibbe, pp. 161-167). On the other hand, Thomas has made a very good case for the practice of footwashing within the early church. It follows that there is a high possibility that John's original audience adopted this practice (or at least that the evangelist intended them to).

In conclusion, it must be remembered that questions of John's audience are closely linked to questions of purpose. Thus, if Carson is correct to believe that John's primary purpose was evangelistic, we must ask ourselves whether searching after the practices of the Johannine community is no more than a scholarly wild goose chase.

<sup>11</sup>In recent years *Themelios* has been excellently served by two articles on the state of the literature associated with John's gospel. The first article (Carson, 1984) surveyed about 100 books and articles on the gospel. The second (Carson, 1989) drew on a similar selection of studies in order to focus on some important aspects of Johannine scholarship.

<sup>12</sup>For a brief discussion of Beasley-Murray's commentary, see Carson, 1989, pp. 58-59.

<sup>13</sup>For a fuller discussion of this work, see my review in *Anvil* 7.3 (1990), pp. 258-259. *Anvil*, an Anglican evangelical journal for theology and mission, has kindly given me permission to use material from reviews originally commissioned and published in *Anvil* (see reviews of Stibbe and Pryor).

<sup>14</sup>For a fuller discussion of this work, see my forthcoming review in *Anvil*.

<sup>15</sup>It is true that John is not history in the sense that a modern 'life of Jesus' may be regarded as history. It is also true that the gospel is a 'proclamation of faith' (Ashton, p. 432). However, it must be questioned whether the fact that the gospel is a proclamation of faith rules out any discussion of the gospel as history.

<sup>16</sup>Since there is no precedent for a superior washing the feet of an inferior, Thomas implies that this practice may go back to the person of Jesus himself (p. 169, n. 1).

<sup>17</sup>For a fuller discussion of this work, see my forthcoming review in *Anvil*.

<sup>18</sup>E.g. see Carson's criticisms of new criticism (1989), pp. 60-62.

<sup>19</sup>E.g. he is certain that the gospel portrays Lazarus as the beloved disciple (pp. 156-157) and he thinks that the genre of John's passion is closest to that of Greek tragedy (pp. 129-147).

<sup>20</sup>Although Morris denies a literary dependence between John and the synoptics, he acknowledges that John had a knowledge of some things that are recorded in the synoptics.

<sup>21</sup>Thomas (p. 83 n. 1) refers his readers to Goppelt (1981, pp. 16-17), de Solages (1979) and Smith (1979-80) for a similar view of the relationship between John and the synoptics.

<sup>22</sup>The idea that John complements the synoptics is much more acceptable as a theory and may even find backing in the statement by Clement of Alexandria that 'Last of all John perceiving that the bodily (or external) facts had been set forth in the [other] Gospels, at the instance of his disciples and with the inspiration of the Spirit composed a spiritual Gospel' (cited in Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiae* (H.E.), vi. 14.7). However, although we may legitimately use John to complement the synoptics, especially in matters of faith and doctrine, it has to be doubted whether that was the original purpose of the gospel. Against this, see Barrett (1978, p. 64).

<sup>23</sup>It is impossible in the scope of this article to do justice to what is a complex issue. I refer those who are interested to the arguments of Stibbe (pp. 56-61), Robinson (1985, pp. 80ff.) and Hengel (1989, pp. 114-117).

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