

THEOLOGICAL TRENDS

Some recent trends in the study of John

IN A LECTURE AT THE BRITISH New Testament Conference, held at Bristol in September 1989, Mark Stibbe drew attention to several monographs and a healthy list of articles in academic journals, but was able to point to only four major books on the Fourth Gospel which have appeared in the past decade.¹ Moreover, out of these four works, the two which stand in the great tradition of massive scholarship are judged in each case to mark the end of an era rather than the opening of a new way forward. But we should not for this reason jump to the conclusion that Johannine study has reached its limit, as if there were nothing new to say on the subject. Promising lines are being laid down for the future. The last ten years have produced the groundwork for what may well prove to be a great synthesis in the next decade. It is certain that John will emerge with enhanced authority as a profound interpreter of the primitive Christian tradition, as I hope the following pages will show.

Commentaries

One of the four major works is the commentary of E. Haenchen, published posthumously in Germany in 1980, and in an English translation in the *Hermeneia* series in 1984. Though, as an unfinished work, it has many gaps and the treatment of the Gospel is inevitably uneven, it is notable for the attention given to theological issues in John. R. Kysar in a review article praises it for the theological force of the exposition of the Gospel and for the recognition of the 'dynamism of tradition' which lies behind it. But Stibbe points out that it may well be the last survivor of a 'disappearing approach' to John. The influence of Bultmann and the history-of-religions school still predominates. Though Haenchen is emphatic that John is not Gnostic in the strict sense, he sees John's concept of salvation as consisting in 'having Jesus, who is the divine emissary from an eternal home', whereas the world 'does not want to know anything of the Logos, but remains enclosed within itself'. It is a world of philosophical theology rather than the real world of John.

The last few years have also seen the publication of another substantial commentary, though it is not included in Stibbe's four major works. This is the commentary of G. R. Beasley-Murray in the *Word* series (1987). It has many virtues, so that its success as a well-informed and mainly fair exposition of the Gospel is assured. However, it is open to criticism on account of the ambiguous attitude to the problem of history throughout the commentary. Modern studies of the Johannine community are used

to suggest a channel of special tradition behind the Gospel, and the work of Dodd (1963) on the independence of much Synoptic-type material in John is also pressed into service. Though the very great element of rewriting of sources in John is recognized, Beasley-Murray feels able in the light of these factors to be vague about the extent of the historical tradition at any given point. The reader is given the comfortable impression of general historical reliability without worrying too much about details. On this basis the exposition is treated more or less as if everything happened or was said as John describes it, and little attention is paid to the effects which John wishes to produce in the readers by his methods of presentation.

The question of sources

Such a positive attitude to the historicity of John is of course a British characteristic, unlike the tradition of German scholarship, which gives it secondary importance. The second major volume which may mark the end of an era is also a posthumous work, J. A. T. Robinson's *The priority of John* (1985). The priority here means the greater antiquity, and therefore superior reliability, of the sources which lie behind John. Robinson does not suggest that John was the first Gospel to be written, but that it has the best information. The book is remarkable for the sheer power of a long sustained argument, which certainly makes it stand out as a major work. But it is also remarkable for the total neglect of literary factors which point to a far greater degree of creative handling of the traditions than Robinson is willing to allow. He is impressed by the accuracy of Jewish matters in the Gospel and the links with ideas in the Dead Sea Scrolls. In fact the book has little new to say, as it is an expansion of the appropriate section in his book of 1976, which in its turn is based on the lecture delivered in 1957. From that time onwards he never really changed his views. The editor of *The priority*, J. F. Coakley, is one of the few scholars who are convinced by it, and has published a study of the Anointing at Bethany on the assumption that John preserves the oldest tradition (1988).

Most work on the sources of John in recent years, however, starts from the position of Bultmann, whose commentary, originally published in 1941, became available in English translation in 1971. He took up the idea that the miracle stories in John were derived from a Signs Source, which in presenting Jesus as a 'divine man' was entirely inadequate by the standards of John's own christology. This was one facet of a complex source theory, which has been critically examined by D. Moody Smith, whose recent collection on *Johannine Christianity* (1984) touches on this and related issues in a way that is unusually readable and accessible to the general reader. Various scholars pursued the Signs Source theory, notably R. T. Fortna, who attempted to reconstruct it from John's text, and

included with it a brief form of the Passion Narrative, making it a complete gospel (1970). Since then Fortna has modified his reconstruction in the light of criticisms, and also conceded that the source is no more likely to have a 'divine man' christology than the miracle stories in the Synoptic Gospels. On this basis he has analysed the relationship between source and finished gospel afresh in *The Fourth Gospel and its predecessor* (1989). This is the third of Stibbe's selection of four major books. The aim is to compare the theology of the source with that of the Gospel. The delineation of the latter is quite excellent, but the theology of the source is an unconvincing construction entirely dependent on the credibility of the source. However a number of scholars have been persuaded by it, and the recent essay of Lamar Cope (1987) suggests that it may be moving into the position of a generally accepted theory. If so, it would have the unfortunate effect of turning attention away from the real issue in research on the sources of John, and that is the question of establishing the right criteria. John's Gospel has far greater stylistic unity and consistency of diction than the Synoptic Gospels, so that it is generally recognized that the overwriting of sources is far more pervasive and far-reaching. There are, however, many points where John has clear links with material also found in the Synoptic tradition. It is at these points that fruitful comparisons can be made. Even if John is not directly dependent on any of the Synoptic Gospels (and this question still remains open), the words which he has in common with them give a first criterion for distinguishing source-words from the evangelist's own composition, if they differ from his normal vocabulary. This was recognized in Dodd's *Historical tradition*, and followed up in my commentary (1972) and various subsequent articles, and my new analysis of the Lazarus story shows that reconstruction of the source needs to be far more radical than Fortna is willing to allow. The value of this approach is that it gives a much clearer idea of John's techniques in handling his sources, which were similar to the Synoptic sources, and like them based on the general stock of oral traditions. The idea of a special channel of tradition thus begins to give way before recognition of John's achievement in making a radically fresh presentation of the available material. Criticism of the Signs Source has also been voiced in the recent monographs of Heekerens (1984) and Bittner (1987).

History and theology

Johannine theology continues to be the object of attention in specialized studies. If John's use of sources involves much rewriting and recasting, it is an indication of the care needed to present the gospel afresh in a new situation. Hence the study of John's theology is scarcely separable from the question of the social setting of the evangelist and the readers. Here we may begin with the very useful collection of representative

articles on John edited by John Ashton (1986). The editor's own introductory essay is itself a valuable picture of current trends. The articles (some appearing in English for the first time) have proved to be seminal treatments of their themes. The relationship between theology and social setting was recognized by Dahl on 'The Johannine church and history' (1962), and given more professional sociological treatment in Meeks, 'The Man from heaven in Johannine sectarianism' (1972), which closes the collection. This puts into very sharp focus the relationship between the christology of Jesus as the revealer of the heavenly truth and the situation of the Johannine church as a beleaguered community, driven in on itself, and so making totalistic and exclusive claims. However it is obvious from John 4 (Jesus and the Samaritans) and such passages as 11,52 (the Gentile mission) that the *aim* of the Johannine church is universal (cf Black, 1990), and Dietzfelbinger (1989) has suggested that the 'greater works' promised in 14,12f refer to the need for new and more far-reaching teaching than the primitive church had ever supposed would be necessary.

To put this in perspective we need to see John's 'world'. Here the work of Martyn on *History and theology in the fourth gospel* (1979) is fundamental. He at last brought Johannine scholars to recognize that the issues between Jesus and the Jews in John are the actual issues in debate between Christians and unbelieving Jews late in the first century. These were not just any Christians and Jews, but the Johannine Christians with their advanced christology and Hellenistic Jews who have something in common with Philo in their spiritual interests, as has been shown by Borgen (1965, 1977). The crucial factor is in fact an aspect of universalism. These Jews regard the Law as the highest expression of the divine Wisdom, and Philo's work is a sustained exposition of the Law in relation to Greek philosophy from this point of view. The possibility of dissolving Judaism in Greek philosophy had been a real issue in the Ptolemaic period, but could never arise again after the Maccabean Revolt. Instead Jewish universalism regarded itself as the centre, and hoped to draw others, either by proselytism, which was more vigorously pursued at this time than at any other period, or by inclusion in the eschatological age. But even before Paul it seems that Hellenist Jewish converts had drawn the conclusion that the sacrifice of Christ was an eschatological act inaugurating the new covenant, so that the atonement sacrifices according to the Law were superseded. This shifted the focus away from the Law to God's act in Jesus, making faith in Jesus the central affirmation rather than adherence to the Law. This is what made possible the opening of the church to the Gentiles. This is not the issue in John, but the christology is the same. For the Jews in John the Christian position has unforgivable consequences. It 'leads the people astray' (7,12) in repudiating the Law, and by identifying Jesus with the divine Wisdom it

'makes him equal with God' (5,18), and so amounts to 'blasphemy' (10,33). Both of these are standard Jewish objections to Christianity.

Thus the christology of the Fourth Gospel is constantly conducted in contrast to a Jewish claim, based on such precedents as Ecclesiasticus 24, that the Law is the embodiment of Wisdom, either explicit (1,17) or implicit (6,45). This is a far more extensive theme than appears at first sight, as has been shown in the massive study of Pancaro (1975). Interesting extra detail in this connection has recently been traced by Brooke (1988).

The Prologue of John (1,1-18) obviously has special importance in connection with christology, and is the subject of a never-ending stream of studies. The old idea that it was derived from Gnostic models (Bultmann) was eclipsed by the emphasis on the Jewish background to John, but has had something of a revival as a result of the publication of the *Trimorphic protenoia* among the Gnostic texts from Nag Hammadi. However it is far more likely that this, if not directly dependent on John, is a further development of Jewish Wisdom traditions in line with John's Prologue, but going far beyond it in a Gnostic direction, as Evans (1981) has shown. Ashton (*NTS*, 1986) has made a valuable assessment of the mythological element in the Jewish Wisdom tradition, which is transformed by John. Two recent monographs strain credulity by their bold proposals. Hofrichter (1986) claims that a shortened form of the Prologue is the foundation of *all* New Testament christology, and bifurcated into the opposed positions of Gnosticism and Catholic Christianity. Miller (1989) finds a complete christological hymn, including incarnation, in 1,1-5 (omitting v. 1c-2).

The Johannine sect

The sociological approach pioneered by Meeks also continues to bear fruit. R. E. Brown suggested in his very influential book on *The community of the beloved disciple* (1979) that the Johannine church split into two factions which *both* claimed to be true to the Fourth Gospel, one moving in a speculative direction towards Gnosticism, with which it ultimately merged, the other tending towards the Catholic mainstream, into which it was absorbed. Whitacre (1982) recognizes that the split is due to theology in the strict sense, i.e. the understanding of God. In the Gospel the appeal is to the Old Testament and other sources accepted by Jews, but the opponents of Jesus refuse to accept that these point to him as the final revelation of God. In 1 John the appeal is to the tradition within the community, and the dissidents opt for a false view of the way Jesus relates to God. Painter (1981) relates the discourses of John 14-16 to successive crises in the Johannine church, and Woll (1981) analyses the Paraclete teaching in this connection. Finally Rensberger (1989) has shown that the sociological approach to John has finally disposed of the individualist

pietism which has so long characterized the popular understanding of John. He thus joins forces with those who see that John has a universalist aim, against the tendency to exaggerate the importance of the sectarian outlook.

Literary techniques

In all these studies there has been a growing awareness of the ways in which John achieves his theological aims. At this point we at last reach the fourth of the major works singled out by Stibbe, Culpepper's *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel* (1983). This very readable book analyses John from the point of view of audience criticism, showing how the evangelist relates to the reader. John draws the reader to take Jesus' side, and so to identify with the christological aim of the Gospel. Of course many aspects of John's technique have long been recognized. The use of misunderstanding as a ploy in dialogue was the subject of the special study of Leroy (1968). Duke's study of *Irony in the Fourth Gospel* (1985) advances understanding by pointing to the social factors required for irony to be an effective device, because it depends on a shared understanding between author and readers to achieve its object.

The proper conclusions that may be drawn from literary criticism of this kind need to be watched. Cotterell's article on the Nicodemus discourse (1984) uses linguistic analysis in a seemingly professional manner to *deny* the artificial character of the dialogue, claiming that it appears natural in the light of modern studies of repartee and personal interactions. The hidden agenda here is a new defence of fundamentalism. On the other hand Giblin (1984), dealing with another tremendous example of repartee, does just the opposite, and insists that what must be looked for is the relationship between the composition and John's manifest christological and ecclesial concerns, so that the evangelist's intentions in the passage may be properly deduced. He pleads that the aim of exegesis of John should be to expose 'the way he tells his own story about Jesus', allowing him the freedom which he felt to be necessary in retelling what must have been a familiar story. This plea chimes in with Dunn's fine article, 'Let John be John' (1983), which can be highly recommended as a survey of a whole range of Johannine problems.

On a more specific point, Bjerkelund (1987) has drawn attention to a hitherto unrecognized literary characteristic in the shape of passages beginning 'These things were done' or similar words, which appear to be haphazard in the Gospel, but actually alert the reader to the necessity of the cross, and so relate to a central aspect of John's theology. Within the Passion Narrative itself this device is replaced by fulfilment texts from the Old Testament.

Finally, the titles of the book by Miakuzhyil (*The christocentric literary structure of the Fourth Gospel*, 1987) and the articles by Pamment ('Focus in

the Fourth Gospel', 1985) and Kermode ('St John as poet', 1986) adequately suggest their contributions to understanding the literary achievement of the Fourth Evangelist.

Women in John

Not surprisingly the current interest in women's issues has had its place in the study of John. Käsemann (1968) anticipated later developments when he asserted that women 'are presented quite emphatically' in John, having roles in discipleship and mission, and claimed that 'The candour and frankness with which John in this instance swims against the stream characterizes his historical position' (p 31). These roles of women have been examined by Raymond Brown (1975) in a cautious treatment of the subject, and taken further by Schneiders (1982), who concludes that throughout the Gospel the attitude to women really does represent a liberated attitude, unaffected by the barriers of convention.

Another aspect is presented briefly by Collins (1982), who draws attention to feminine elements in the presentation of Jesus in view of the Wisdom background of the christology. She argues that these should not be dismissed in the wake of the masculine reinterpretation of the tradition, but related to the universalism of the Prologue, so that feminine aspects are not discarded but integrated into the whole.

Structural analysis

The article of Sandra Schneiders also relates to another aspect of the study of John, because she is interested not only in what John says and means, but also in legitimating ideas of liberation for women today. She quotes Gadamer to the effect that 'the question of the contemporary meaning of the text . . . is integral to the interpretative process'. This at least means that we have only now become aware of this issue and put the appropriate questions to John because of the current interest in women's roles.

Other work on John seeks to expose the actual impact of the Gospel on the reader by contrast with the evangelist's literary technique, though the two things cannot be altogether kept apart. Thus von Wahlde (1984) finds a pattern in passages dealing with belief and unbelief which has the effect of making the challenge of the Gospel more insistent. Liebert (1984) analyses the challenge to faith in terms of structural development psychology, especially the point that cognitive dissonance produces maturity by forcing the person to face unpleasant realities. The fact that John's presentation fits these observations so well is one reason for the Gospel's continuing impact. It is so true to experience. Allied to this is the jargon-laden attempt of Phillips (1983) to expose the element of 'discoursivization', whereby under the surface dialogue there is a dialogue between the evangelist and the implied reader, who is 'created' at the

same time. Bartholomew (1987) points out that intellectual appreciation on the part of the reader is not enough, and the Gospel needs to be read orally for its emotional impact to be conveyed. He has a cassette tape available for those who want to follow this up in practice.

Even this may fail, however, if the reader is not alert to 'the relationship between the present reality of the Spirit and the times past of Jesus of Nazareth', which is the object of Léon-Dufour's programmatic article 'Towards a symbolic reading of the Fourth Gospel' (1981). It is one aspect of John's consummate skill as a communicator that this work continues to speak to the reader so effectively. From this point of view we await with interest Stibbe's own forthcoming monograph on *The artistry of John*.

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NOTES

¹ 'The Gospel of John: Major contributions and trends in the 1980s and a prospect for the 1990's'.

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