The Testimony of the Beloved Disciple
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Narrative, History, and Theology in the Gospel of John

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To Martin Hengel
with gratitude
for his immense contribution
to New Testament research
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The essays collected in this volume cover a wide variety of aspects of the study
of the Gospel of John, but they cohere within an approach to the Gospel that
diffs very significantly from the approach that has been dominant in Johannine
scholarship since the late 1970s, though there are signs that this dominant ap-
proach is now being undermined or at least considerably modified by very recent
trends in Johannine scholarship. The purpose of this introductory chapter is to
relate my essays in this volume to current and recent Johannine scholarship, and
also to explain their relationships and coherence within the alternative approach
to John that they exemplify.

The Dominant Approach

In the last three decades of the twentieth century, Johannine scholarship was
characterized by a dominant approach to questions about the origin and character

1. A major transition in Johannine scholarship is widely acknowledged, following John Ashton,
Understanding the Fourth Gospel (Oxford: Clarendon, 1991), 107–9, to have been effected by J. Louis
ed., Nashville: Abingdon, 1979). The dominant approach could also be said to have come of age when
Raymond Brown, who had laid some of its foundations in his major commentary (1966, 1970), came
fully on board with the publication of his The Community of the Beloved Disciple (New York: Paulist Press,
1979), which John Painter, The Quest for the Messiah: The History, Literature and Theology of the Johannine
of the Gospel of John. This is certainly not to say that all Johannine scholarship adopted this approach, but, to say the least, the dominant approach could not be ignored by any Johannine scholar. The main elements of the dominant approach are:

1. Little if any credit is given to the traditions of the early church about the origins and authorship of the Gospel, since they are held to be incompatible with the internal evidence of the Gospel itself. The external evidence is assumed to attribute the Gospel to the apostle John the son of Zebedee, but the dominant approach, though it usually presumes that the figure of the Beloved Disciple in the Gospel is based on a historical figure who played a part in the history of the Gospel’s community and traditions, considers the Beloved Disciple neither John the son of Zebedee nor the author of the Gospel. The early Christian tradition’s location of the Gospel’s origin in Ephesus is usually thought to be merely a corollary of the erroneous attribution of the Gospel to John the son of Zebedee. For most exponents of the dominant approach the community behind the Gospel was far too marginal a Christian group to be located in a city such as Ephesus, with its well-known Christian community, associated with Paul, and its position at the hub of many channels of communications.

2. As an account of the history of Jesus this Gospel is far less reliable than the Synoptics, since its traditions have been so thoroughly shaped by the history of the highly distinctive Christian community in which they evolved. The dominant approach takes up the much older (nineteenth-century) scholarly judgment that this Gospel is theology rather than history, but gives it a much more sociohistorical or sociological character. The dominant approach, since it generally regards this Gospel as independent of the Synoptics, is actually more ready than its nineteenth-century precursors to admit that the Gospel may preserve genuinely historical traditions about Jesus that are not to be found in the Synoptics. They would seem, however, to have been preserved in spite of, rather than because of, the character of this Gospel.

3. The Gospel of John is the product of a complex history of literary composition which has left the marks of its various stages on the text as we have it, making it possible to reconstruct its literary prehistory. This confidence in source criticism as a key to understanding the Gospel has Bultmann’s commentary as its most influential forebear, even though Bultmann’s specific theories have not survived.
In the face of more synchronic, literary-critical approaches to reading the Gospel, the dominant approach continues to appeal to the well-known “aporias,” the repetitions and incoherences in the literary sequence of the text, as well as to the inconsistencies in its ideology, that require diachronic explanation.

4. The Gospel is the product of and written for the so-called Johannine community, a small and idiosyncratic branch of early Christianity, sectarian in character, isolated from the rest of the early Christian movement, and formed by its own particular history and conflicts. This aspect of the dominant approach corresponds to the importance given in the same period to the community of each Gospel (understood as both the context of origin and the audience of that Gospel) in study of the Synoptic Gospels. But for several reasons, including the existence of the Johannine letters, reconstruction of the Johannine community has flourished even more than those of the Matthean, Markan, and Lukan communities.

5. Elements 3 and 4 coalesce in that the various stages of the composition of the Gospel are held to reflect developments in the history of the Johannine community. In the dominant approach, the reconstructed history of the text and the reconstructed history of the community are inseparable. This is where the dominant approach of the last three decades of the twentieth century differs from the older (and numerous) theories of multiple sources, authors and redactions. Such theories go back to the nineteenth century, but only from the late 1960s have they been closely connected with the notion of a special Johannine community and the reconstruction of its history.

6. The reconstruction of the history of the community is partly based on the so-called “two-level” reading of the Gospel narrative, which assumes that the Gospel's story of Jesus is also to be understood as the story of the Johannine community. The paradigm example, with which J. Louis Martyn initiated the enterprise of reconstructing the community's history from the Gospel, is the story of the healing of the blind man in chapter 9. Here Jesus stands for a Christian prophet in the community's present, the blind man is a Christian convert, and “the Jews” are the authorities of the synagogue to which the Johannine community had belonged until it had been expelled, like the blind man in the story. That the traumatic event in the community's history that accounts for much of the character of the Gospel as we have it was expulsion from its local synagogue is concluded from this episode in the Gospel (along with 16:2). Similarly the story of Jesus in Samaria in chapter 4 reflects an earlier stage in the community's history that included successful mission to Samaritans.

7. Reconstructions of the history of the Johannine community are many and diverse, but there is broad agreement that this history focuses on the community's history and composition history are inseparable. The communal history is reflected in the composition history of the Gospel and Epistles while the composition history documents, both directly and indirectly, the communal history of those for and by whom this literature came to be.

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4. Martinus C. de Boer, *Johannine Perspectives on the Death of Jesus*, Contributions to Biblical Exegesis and Theology 17 (Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1996), 44: “communal history and composition history are inseparable. The communal history is reflected in the composition history of the Gospel and Epistles while the composition history documents, both directly and indirectly, the communal history of those for and by whom this literature came to be.”
relationship to the Jewish matrix in which it arose and from which it later painfully separated. The character of the Gospel is intimately related to the origin of the community within the synagogue, its attempts to persuade other members of the synagogue of the messiahship of Jesus, its expulsion from the synagogue and its increasingly bitter and polemical attitude to the parent body from which it had separated. On most accounts, the background, context and membership of the Johannine community are Jewish, though Gentiles play a minor part in some reconstructions. In this respect, the dominant approach is indebted to the effect the publication of the Dead Sea Scrolls had in highlighting the Jewishness of the Fourth Gospel in place of the Hellenistic character regularly attributed to it in most earlier scholarship.

Something Completely Different

Over the two decades during which I have pursued serious work on the Gospel, I have found myself abandoning one by one all of these elements of the dominant approach. In my view, the Gospel is an integral whole, including both the prologue and the epilogue, and was designed as such by a single author. I have returned to the traditional view that the distinctiveness of this Gospel, which I certainly do not wish to minimize, is due not to a distinctive community from which it emerged and to which it was addressed, but primarily to a theologically creative and literarily skilled author who produced this distinctive version of the story of Jesus. This author was a personal disciple of Jesus, though not one of the Twelve, who has depicted himself within the narrative as the "disciple Jesus loved." This seems to me the best interpretation of both the internal evidence of the Gospel and the external evidence, the most reliable of which, properly understood, attributes the Gospel to a John who was not the son of Zebedee but a disciple of Jesus who died in Ephesus, having survived longer than most of Jesus’ disciples.

This Beloved Disciple, from his own memories of Jesus, together with those of the circle of Jesus’ disciples to whom he was closest, and drawing on the resources of the Jewish traditions he knew well, developed a distinctive interpretation of Jesus and his story. This interpretation he embodied in a Gospel on which he must have worked for many years before releasing it to a Christian audience that was certainly not confined to the community in which he lived. My view of both this Gospel and the Synoptics is that they were written for general circulation around all the churches, and that they did quite soon circulate widely. As the author’s lifework, the permanent embodiment of his personal calling to testify to Jesus, the Gospel of John was not occasioned by fluctuating local circumstances but by the author’s convictions about the universal significance of Jesus and his story.

Indeed, I think it likely that, as well as addressing Christians, the author deliberately made his work accessible enough to outsiders for it to be read with profit by nonbelievers, Jewish or Gentile, who might be introduced to it by Christian friends. There is nothing esoteric about this Gospel, though it is a work of richly packed meaning available to further study by readers who studied it in the way the author and other Jewish exegetes studied the Hebrew Bible.

Generically, like the Synoptic Gospels, this Gospel is a biography of Jesus—not, of course, a biography in the modern sense, but a Greco-Roman bios. John has adapted the genre to his purpose in somewhat different ways from those adopted by the Synoptic evangelists, but readers would have taken it to be a life of Jesus. They would have read it to find out about Jesus, not in order to find in it an allegorized version of their own community history. Doubtless the author, like all authors, was influenced by the contexts in which he lived and worked, but those contexts are largely unknown to us and, as in the case of most creative works, their influence on the author is not predictable and cannot be reconstructed, except in the most general terms. Reconstructions of the Johannine community from the Gospel are largely fantasy, and even the evidence of the Johannine letters must be used cautiously in interpreting a work that was not, like them, occasioned by specific community concerns, but its author’s gift to all the churches for however long there might be before the coming of the Lord.

Recent scholarship, skeptical of any attempt to reconstruct the historical Jesus from this Gospel, has instead poured its energies and its desire for historical specificity into reconstructing the historical Johannine community. Like the quest of the historical Jesus, the quest of the historical Johannine community has produced a wide variety of results, but, unlike the former quest, that of the Johannine community has yet to produce criteria of authenticity and critical methodological reflection. The undisciplined way in which it treats the Gospel as evidence of the history of the community, along with the complexity of possible combinations of different analyses of sources and redactions with different views of the community, make its results unfalsifiable and infinitely variable. Since the Johannine community is understood to be isolated from the rest of the early Christian movement and since it has left no mark either on the non-Johannine literature in the New Testament or on other early Christian sources, there is no external evidence that can act as a control on imaginative reconstruction. Even Martyn’s appeal to one

6. See chapter 5 below.
7. For similarly harsh judgments, cf. Ruth Edwards, Discovering John (London: SPCK, 2003), 102: “The idea of the Johannine ‘community’ at loggerheads with other Christians is a scholarly construct arising from a surfeit of sociological speculation” (cf. also 41–44); Thomas L. Brodie, The Quest for the Origin of John’s Gospel (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993) 21: “When one looks at these various reconstructions [of the history of the Johannine community], these intriguing buildings, the question is not how many bricks in this or that wall are solid but whether there is any solidity to the foundation of the entire house” (cf. 15–21).
8. Even so, 1 John may well be addressed to quite a wide range of churches, a compendium of its author’s teaching rather than an occasional letter like 2 and 3 John.
piece of external evidence—the supposed promulgation of the *Birkat ha-Minim* (a liturgical curse against heretics to be recited in synagogues) by the rabbis at Jamnia—as a key to the history of the Johannine community has been very largely abandoned by proponents of the dominant approach.

The widely prevalent assumption that the Gospel is primarily a source for the history of the community and only secondarily a source for the history of Jesus is misconceived. At least we have overwhelming evidence that there was a historical Jesus, and we have other sources with which to compare the Gospel of John. The genre of the work also requires us to read it as a book about Jesus. But what most Johannine scholars have notably failed to take seriously is that the Gospel’s theology itself requires a concern for history. The theological claim of the prologue that “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (1:14) presupposes that Jesus was a real human person in real history. This is not negated by the degree of reflective interpretation that the author incorporates—certainly a greater degree than in the Synoptic Gospels—because the interpretation is in search of the profoundest meaning of what Jesus said and did. We should not expect the history to have been lost behind the interpretation but rather to have been highlighted by the interpretation.

The present collection of essays is not a systematic presentation or demonstration of this approach to the Gospel of John in all its interconnected aspects. It devotes far more attention to some aspects than others. But the rest of this introductory chapter will place the essays within the context of the overall approach that has just been sketched.

**Authorship**

Chapters 2 and 3 deal, respectively, with external and internal evidence of the authorship of the Gospel. The external evidence has usually (despite some dissenters with whom I agree) been held to be unanimous in identifying the author as John the son of Zebedee, one of Jesus’ twelve apostles. I present the case for a