



Johannine Studies since Bultmann

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WHEN RUDOLF BULTMANN DIED A QUARTER OF A CENTURY AGO HE HAD ESTABLISHED himself as the leading New Testament exegete and theologian of the twentieth century. No New Testament scholar had as significant an impact on theology and ethics as Bultmann. His most important and influential works are *The History of the Synoptic Tradition*, the monumental commentary on John, and his crowning achievement, the *Theology of the New Testament*.¹ But perhaps nothing he wrote attracted broader attention than his famous essay, “New Testament and Mythology,” which launched his demythologizing project and its attendant controversy.² Outside the New Testament field Bultmann was best known for this undertaking, which in many circles made him notorious for denying miracle and the supernatural.

Actually, Bultmann proceeded on the premise that people no longer believe in miracles as supernatural interventions, whether or not they have come to terms with that fact. Moreover, he insisted that Christian faith was an orientation of exist-

¹Rudolf Bultmann, *The History of the Synoptic Tradition*, trans. John Marsh (New York: Harper & Row, 1963); *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, trans. G. R. Beasley-Murray, R. W. N. Hoare, and J. K. Riches (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1971); *Theology of the New Testament*, trans. Kendrick Grobel, 2 vols. (New York: Scribner's, 1951, 1955).

²This initial and definitive essay was first published in English translation in *Kerygma and Myth: A Theological Debate*, ed. Hans Werner Bartsch and trans. Reginald H. Fuller (London: S.P.C.K., 1957) 1-44.

This year marks the twenty-fifth anniversary of the death of Rudolf Bultmann (1976), the sixtieth anniversary of the original publication of his commentary on John (1941), and the eightieth anniversary of the original edition of Die Geschichte der synoptischen Tradition (1921)—altogether an auspicious time to review the impact on Johannine studies of this most influential scholar.

tence on the basis of faith in God and not belief in miracles. God's transcendence is to be expressed in temporal rather than spatial and physical categories. Thus, for Bultmann, God's futurity, and therefore eschatology, were crucially important in the New Testament, and thus also for theology and faith. The eschatology of the New Testament begins, with Jesus, as apocalyptic eschatology. The transformation of this eschatology from future to present from Jesus through Paul to John is usually seen as a historical process that took place in light of the non-occurrence of the parousia, that is, Jesus' return. But in Bultmann's view this was not simply an accommodation to circumstances. Rather, the transformation of apocalyptic into present eschatology allowed the emergence of the true meaning of the inbreaking future as the present moment of decision and realization. To have seen the theological significance of this moment was the contribution, to some degree, of Paul, but particularly of John.

Thus, Bultmann's greatest exegetical-theological work was the John commentary, and the Gospel and Epistles of John were the apex and crown of theological development in the New Testament, according to his *Theology of the New Testament*. Not only was Bultmann's work as a New Testament exegete focused primarily on the Gospel of John, but his theological perspective and demythologizing, the key to his hermeneutic, took inspiration and found their justification in the Fourth Gospel. His achievement and influence in Johannine studies were immense. In his magisterial *Understanding the Fourth Gospel*, John Ashton divides the opening review of Johannine research into three parts: "Before Bultmann," "Bultmann," and "After Bultmann."³

I. HISTORY-OF-RELIGIONS BACKGROUND OF JOHN

Because the Gospel of John embodies a distinct, and in Bultmann's view distinctly Christian, understanding of human existence, it is important that one understand its background, which provides the language and conceptuality of the gospel. That background is an early oriental gnosticism, already under the influence of Old Testament belief in God as Creator, which, like the Gospel of John, exhibits a pronounced dualism.⁴ Thus, John uses gnostic language and conceptuality, in which above and below are crucial cosmological dimensions related to human origin or destiny, but John already demythologizes that language so that the dualism really expresses not determinism but the possibility of human choice and destiny based on present, existential decision. Your origin does not determine your destiny, but your decision (for or against God's revelation in Jesus) determines both. Not cosmological dualism, but a dualism of decision.

Likewise, John employs an already formed gnostic redeemer myth and fits Jesus into the role of the descending and ascending redeemer figure. Even before John, Paul had employed such a myth in his christology. Was the supposedly

³John Ashton, *Understanding the Fourth Gospel* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991) 3-117, esp. 9-111.

⁴Bultmann, *Gospel of John*, 24-31, esp. 29-31.

Christian doctrine of incarnation then an originally gnostic idea? Not quite. For the gnostic redeemer was never truly human, as Jesus was. In fact, against his student Ernst Käsemann, Bultmann was careful to insist on the full humanity of the Johannine Jesus.⁵ In favor of Bultmann's redeemer myth proposal was the fact that the Messiah of Judaism was never a descending/ascending quasi-divine figure. Where then did the concept of descent and ascent originate? A legitimate question.

On the other hand, as Bultmann himself knew, historically identifiable sources for a pre-Christian gnosticism such as he proposed are all, in their present form at least, more recent than the origin of Christianity. In fact, Bultmann's early oriental gnosticism was itself a reconstruction based on no one source or set of sources. The *Odes of Solomon*, already Christian, provided the closest parallels other than the Gospel of John itself. With the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, close parallels to Johannine dualism and language turned up in documents from a Jewish community in Palestine that clearly pre-dated the rise of Christianity. Such characteristics of John could no longer be thought of as Hellenistic and not Jewish, or even as Hellenistic-Jewish. So, many scholars declared that Bultmann's search for the Johannine milieu in a pre-Christian gnosticism had been misguided. Bultmann himself, on the other hand, felt confirmed in his view: "While a pre-Christian gnosticizing Judaism could hitherto only be deduced out of later sources, the existence of such is now testified by the manuscripts recently discovered in Palestine."⁶ What was missing from them, and from other relevant sources, was the redeemer myth. Although gods came down from heaven in Greek mythology, nothing like a pattern foreshadowing Christian claims and christology can be found there.

II. A SPECIFICALLY JEWISH MILIEU

After Bultmann and the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, exegetes increasingly looked to a Jewish and biblical background for John's Gospel. Doubtless, the scrolls had something to do with this, although the search for a Jewish milieu went in different directions, inspired in large part by language and statements of the gospel itself.

For one thing, the gospel consistently characterizes the opponents of Jesus as the Jews or, often, Pharisees. This is strange, since Jesus is acknowledged to be a Jew (4:9), as are his disciples and, obviously, John the Baptist, whose mission is the revelation of Jesus to Israel (1:31). Moreover, Jesus' disciples, or would-be disciples, are threatened with expulsion from the synagogue (9:22; 12:42; 16:2). Why should they fear that unless they wanted to remain Jewish? Bultmann had characterized "the Jews" as symbolic of the world's rejection of Jesus. That is not entirely wrong, although his judgment has been altered or qualified in two directions. First,

⁵For a full discussion of this and related issues, with relevant bibliography, see Marianne Meye Thompson, *The Incarnate Word: Perspectives on Jesus in the Fourth Gospel* (Peabody: MA, n.d.) passim, esp. 1-6. (Originally published as *The Humanity of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel* by Fortress Press in 1988.)

⁶Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, 2:19.

not all Jewish people are portrayed as opposed to Jesus, much less seeking his destruction.⁷ Second, the identity of “the Jews” was to be sought in a specific group opposed to Christians, and specifically Johannine Christians.

J. Louis Martyn, in a brief but ground-breaking work, *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel*, found in threatened expulsion from the synagogue (i.e., from Judaism: 9:22; 12:42; 16:2) the key to the life setting of John.⁸ His views were paralleled and largely shared by Raymond Brown, whose commentary in the Anchor Bible series became a standard work in North America and the English-speaking world generally.⁹ Martyn saw in the condemnation of *notzrim* and *minim* in an ancient version of the Twelfth Benediction (of the Eighteen Benedictions of the synagogue service) Jewish evidence for the expulsion from the synagogue of Nazarenes and heretics who confessed Jesus as the Messiah. While the dating of this version of the Twelfth Benediction (i.e., whether it is early enough for the Fourth Gospel) continues to be a matter of debate, Martyn’s position has attracted a large following because it offers a specific setting of, and explanation for, striking and distinctive features of the gospel.¹⁰ In addition, the tendency to equate Jews and Pharisees (no other Jewish group is mentioned) corresponds to the dominance of the Pharisees through their rabbinic heirs after the Jewish-Roman war and the destruction of the temple (A.D. 70), in which the chief priests and the Sadducees had their seat of authority.

Bultmann had proposed a history-of-religions background that was quite general, namely, an early oriental gnosticism. This proposal also fit his hermeneutical-exegetical task, which was to understand the gospel, and this gospel particularly, as addressed to a specific analysis of human existence. This was not the gnostic understanding, however, but a radical revision of it, in which the dualistic and related language found its significance not in cosmology but in existential self-understanding. John Ashton notes that Bultmann did not actually situate the Gospel of John historically,¹¹ that is, in a specific historical setting (in the way, for example, that he sought to situate the Synoptic Gospels and tradition). In fact, it really did not suit Bultmann’s exegetical and hermeneutical goals to do so. Bultmann had indeed recognized that “so far as the situation of the Church is reflected in the Gospel of John, its problem is the conflict with Judaism, and its theme is faith in Jesus as the Son of God.”¹² He went on to note that the Christian congregation had already been excluded from the synagogue, but he construed this as put-

⁷See my article “John,” in *Early Christian Thought in Its Jewish Context*, ed. John Barclay and John Sweet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) 96-111.

⁸J. Louis Martyn, *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel*, rev. ed. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1979). The first edition appeared in 1968; Martyn does not essentially alter his position.

⁹Raymond Brown, *The Gospel according to John*, Anchor Bible 29-29A, 2 vols. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966, 1970), esp. LXXIII-LXXV, LXXXIII-LXXXV.

¹⁰See, for example, Ashton, *Understanding the Fourth Gospel*, esp. 107-109.

¹¹Ibid, esp. 101-103. Ashton writes (102): “Accordingly, his [Bultmann’s] solution to Lessing’s fundamental dilemma (contingent truths of history can never serve as the demonstration of eternal truths of reason) was to lop off one of its horns: history does not count.”

¹²Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, 2:5 (cf. Bultmann, *Gospel of John*, 335, n. 5).

ting more distance between John and Judaism in the Fourth Gospel than in the Synoptics. Since Bultmann, investigations of John's origins have tended to locate them much more specifically in time and space, as well as much more importantly within Judaism. But, whether right or wrong, such a specific situation of the gospel was not crucial for Bultmann's hermeneutical agenda.

III. HISTORY AND SOURCES

The identification of John's historical setting within Judaism raises the question of John's historical basis in the ministry of Jesus. Martyn's *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel* refers to the historical setting and origins of the gospel in the Johannine community, not in Jesus' ministry. During the past century, in fact, since Strauss, Baur, and Schweitzer, John came to be regarded as the theological rather than historical gospel, as distinguished from the Synoptics. On the other hand, there has, at the same time, been an increasing awareness of the theological character of those gospels as well. Nevertheless, until quite recently, Jesus research paid little or no attention to the Fourth Gospel.

Apparently, Bultmann was in this sense simply a child of his era. If he is occasionally blamed for discounting the historical credibility of John, he gets more credit than he deserves. Although Bultmann left the door open for an early, Palestinian origin of the Johannine tradition, he never developed this possibility. Yet Bultmann was in the vanguard of those who came to believe that John's Gospel developed independently of the others.¹³ In his commentary, Bultmann argues exegetically in each relevant case, where John is parallel to the Synoptics, that the Johannine account has a different, i.e., independent, origin. Whether John is more accurate historically in instances where they differ is of little interest to him. Only at the latest, redactional, level can direct synoptic influences be traced. After Bultmann, by mid-twentieth century, the position that John was independent of the Synoptics seemed to have become a majority consensus, although there were prominent dissenters such as C. K. Barrett. Among those representing the independence position, which had been set out most convincingly by P. Gardner-Smith (*Saint John and the Synoptic Gospels*, 1938), C. H. Dodd advocated close attention to the Johannine tradition as standing on the same level of historical value as the synoptic (*Historical Tradition in the Fourth Gospel*, 1963). His advocacy gave strong impetus to a resurgence of support for the historicity of John, perhaps ironically, among scholars more conservative than he.¹⁴ As the contrast between Bultmann and Dodd shows, belief in John's independence was itself independent of judgments or dispositions about its possible historicity.

¹³In his review of Hans Windisch's *Johannes und die Synoptiker* (1926), Bultmann argued for John's independence. See *Theologische Literaturzeitung* 52 (1927), esp. 198.

¹⁴For full bibliography and discussion, see D. Moody Smith, *John among the Gospels: The Relationship in Twentieth-Century Research* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992). An augmented edition is forthcoming from University of South Carolina Press.

As to the sources of John, Bultmann was little disposed to credit the validity of claims for the (historical) truthfulness of the beloved disciple's witness (21:24). That concluding statement was the work of a later redactor, who misidentified him as an historical figure. In fact, the evangelist intended him as a purely symbolic figure. Since Bultmann, however, there is an increasing tendency to see in this disciple a historical person.

Although John was independent of the Synoptics, and the Fourth Evangelist was a major theological thinker, John did not, in Bultmann's view, compose freely but relied on written sources: a signs (miracle) source, a passion source, and a sayings source, which Bultmann called the revelation-discourse source (*Offenbarungsredenquelle*). Of the three, the last has fared least well in subsequent discussion. In fact, much of the typically Johannine language of the discourses was attributed by Bultmann to this source, which was non-Christian and gnostic. Subsequent stylistic studies showed that there was no substantial stylistic basis for isolating such a source. In fact, the evangelist's de-gnosticizing of the source amounted to theological demythologization, as he interpreted the source's cosmic dualism in existentialist terms. This looks like Bultmann's way of putting distance between the gospel's mythology and its theology.

The other sources have fared better, particularly among scholars convinced of John's independence of the Synoptics. Robert Fortna in effect linked the signs and passion sources together in a Gospel of Signs, whose existence he has defended throughout his career.¹⁵ Although relatively few scholars have lined up behind his exact proposals, the plausibility of the general thesis of an earlier version of the Johannine narrative is obvious to scholars unconvinced of John's use of the other canonical gospels. In fact, it is often said to be obvious that canonical John is not the first edition of this gospel, which has obviously been subjected to some augmentation, editing, and perhaps rearrangement in the course of its literary history.

As we have already hinted, the historical status and value of such an original gospel has been variously estimated. Yet it is significant that in some recent Jesus research, the Gospel of John has begun to play a major role. Thus Paula Fredriksen, in her recent *Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews* (virtually the Johannine version of the sign on the cross), uses John to good effect, arguing that since in their narrative plans Matthew and Luke depend on Mark, one should remember it is really Mark against John, not three against one.¹⁶ Already John P. Meier had taken seriously the historical value of John's Gospel in *A Marginal Jew*, of which only the first two of four projected volumes have yet appeared.¹⁷

¹⁵Robert T. Fortna has most recently set forth his view in *The Fourth Gospel and Its Predecessor* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988).

¹⁶Paula Fredriksen, *Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews* (New York: Knopf, 2000) 28-34, esp. 34: "The decision gets down to an even split: Mark or John."

¹⁷John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, 2 vols. to date (New York: Doubleday, 1991, 1994).

IV. LITERARY PROBLEMS AND THEOLOGY

The Gospel of John seems to end with a colophon at 20:30-31; yet there is an additional episode and chapter (21). This state of affairs remains before and after Bultmann the foundation of all redactional theories. In addition, the farewell discourses seem to end at 14:31, yet Jesus continues to address his disciples (chaps. 15-16) and then to pray (chap. 17). A better narrative order would be achieved if chapter 6 could be placed before chapter 5, since then Jesus would still be in Galilee (after 4:46-54), before going again to Jerusalem (chap. 5).

Bultmann was by no means the first to observe these data, but he developed a complex redaction history on their basis, which culminated in a restoration of the putative original order and content of the gospel. His commentary is based on this purified and rearranged text.¹⁸ Few, if any, even of Bultmann's own students, subscribed to this restoration in detail, although its more important theological aspects attracted both support and sharp rejection. Along with John 6:51b-58, Bultmann assigned all references to the sacraments and to an apocalyptically conceived resurrection on the last day to what came to be called the Ecclesiastical Redactor (although Bultmann referred more often to *Redaktion*, emphasizing the process rather than the person). This redaction, also responsible for the addition of chapter 21, with its historicizing of the beloved disciple and other elements aimed at reconciling John with the Synoptics, made this very different gospel acceptable to an emerging church orthodoxy, in which, for example, sacraments were becoming important, and paved the way for its inclusion in the four-gospel canon.

Bultmann's view of the theology of John was not confined to the elimination of apocalyptic eschatology and sacramentalism, however, important as that may be. He viewed the evangelist as a consummate theologian, using and demythologizing his narrative and discourse sources to present a distinct and sophisticated concept of revelation, namely, Jesus as the revelation of God. Bultmann became notorious for maintaining that in John's Gospel Jesus is the revealer who reveals only that he is the revealer—apparently a contentless revelation: “Thus it turns out in the end that Jesus as the Revealer of God *reveals nothing but that he is the Revealer*” (italics Bultmann's).¹⁹

In saying this, Bultmann wished to make clear that Jesus as revealer does not bring a secret teaching as in some gnostic or similar speculation. Nor is the revela-

¹⁸On Bultmann's literary theory, see *The Gospel of John*, passim. I presented his theory, abstracted from the German original of the commentary, in Dwight Moody Smith, Jr., *The Composition and Order of the Fourth Gospel: Bultmann's Literary Theory* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965). The net effect of my work was, first of all, to show in the English-speaking world that previous investigations by Eduard Schweizer and Eugen Ruckstuhl had already called into question the style-critical basis of Bultmann's hypothetical sources. Moreover, simply to lay out Bultmann's complex rearrangement of the text rendered it scarcely credible, as some of his own disciples had suspected already. Also, the huge revelation-discourse source could not be convincingly disentangled from the work of the evangelist. Furthermore, as a putative pre-Christian gnostic source, its existence was on the face of it doubtful. Bultmann's sign (or miracle) and passion sources were more credible proposals. His attribution of some parts of the canonical text (e.g., chap. 21) to a later redaction was not entirely original and has found support before and since.

¹⁹Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, 2:66.

tion to be identified with the teaching of the synoptic, or the historical, Jesus. Nor is it Christian doctrine. Revelation is the event of encounter with Jesus the Word, and believing is trusting acceptance that in Jesus one encounters “the saving will of God.”²⁰ But how would one know to expect such a revelation of God’s saving will? Here Bultmann’s understanding of revelation and his analysis of the structure of existence run parallel. Integral to the concept of revelation is the expectation of revelation as a given of human consciousness. If that were not so, revelation would be, quite literally, inconceivable and therefore inappropriable. One might ask Bultmann, however, whether his understanding of this framework of anticipation and realization does not owe more to the biblical categories of promise and fulfillment than he seems willing to grant. That is, the Johannine concept of revelation requires a traditional, historical, or biblical context to be comprehensible. Understandably, such a context repeatedly awakens a consciousness of the anticipation or need of revelation. But the context needs to be brought to light. More exactly, the context is a narrative, a story that requires telling. Bultmann seems actually to know this, but the structure or nature of his existentialist preunderstanding causes him to resist acknowledging it. God’s word encounters this world (as the title of this journal suggests!), but neither word nor world, on John’s terms, is conceivable apart from the traditional, biblical story. That story is not present to existentialist self-consciousness, but has to be told.

Thus in more recent exegesis a renewed emphasis on that story, whether Old Testament or New, has emerged. Since Bultmann, commentaries on the Fourth Gospel have taken much greater account of its roots in Scripture, the Old Testament. In writing a commentary myself, I became ever more aware of this rootage in Scripture, which is truly its substructure.²¹ The prologue’s “in the beginning” obviously evokes the creation scene of Genesis quite deliberately and offers an explicit key to the importance of the scriptural story for John. Also, recognition of the gospel’s biblical context makes sense of the recurring Jewish festivals and the paralleling of Jesus with the fathers of Israel and with Moses. Jesus is greater than any or all of them but not comprehensible apart from them. These things are not peripheral, but lie at the heart of John’s concept of revelation: “He came to his own home, and his own people received him not” (1:11 RSV). (Significantly, Bultmann took that statement as a reference to humanity generally rather than to empirical Israel.)

By the same token, the recurring interest in John’s relation to the Synoptics likely embodies a recognition that this gospel is quite incomprehensible apart from the Jesus story, which, as the narrator states, is only partly represented in the text (20:30; 21:24). Does John presuppose the Synoptics? The definite answer to this question is more difficult to come by than some proponents on either side may suppose. What is less difficult to discern, however, is that John presupposes some

²⁰Bultmann, *Gospel of John*, 35.

²¹D. Moody Smith, *John*, Abingdon New Testament Commentaries (Nashville: Abingdon, 1999). In my own conclusion, however, I take a parting look at Bultmann’s view of the resurrection of Jesus and compare and contrast it with John Ashton’s as well as the Fourth Evangelist’s own (404-406).

familiarity with Jesus and the Jesus story on the part of the reader.²² For example, the reader presumably knows that Jesus has been crucified and raised from the dead (2:22). The narrator also makes clear to the reader that the disciples, not to mention John the Baptist (cf. 1:32-34), have looked back to and reflected upon Jesus' ministry (cf. 12:16).

What we already know about that ministry, if we have read the New Testament from the beginning, we know from the Synoptics. It is natural to assume they are also John's source, but there are other possibilities, one of which is the traditional one: an author or eyewitness stands behind this gospel (1:14; 21:24; 19:35). Such a witness may be the origin of its distinctive narrative.

In any event, John's story points to Jesus' story as its basis, whatever the source. With the fourfold-gospel canon one is lured into intertextual comparisons, but such comparisons are not just literary or source-critical exercises. Wherever one comes down on the latter issues, the perdurance of this discussion reflects the importance of the story for an understanding of Christian claims of revelation. I think that is the case even if the exegete engaging in such intertextual exercises is not interested in the texts' revelatory claims. It belongs to the nature of reading narratives about the same protagonist to want to interlock the stories.

All this is by way of saying that exegesis since Bultmann has paid more attention to John's narrative character,²³ as well as to the evangelist's apparent assumption that the Jesus narrative belongs to a broader narrative of God and humanity. In concentrating on the moment of revelation, when Word encounters world, Bultmann does justice to the crisis (*krisis*) character of revelation, but pays insufficient attention to its historical, and therefore narrative, context. If this seems obvious, it is not as if we are accusing Bultmann of ignoring the obvious. Rather this deficiency, if it be such, results from his appropriation of an existentialist perspective. But it is just that perspective that has made Bultmann's exegesis so interesting, for one cannot discuss exegesis with Bultmann without entertaining theological issues. Certainly that is what Bultmann himself intended. ⊕

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²²See R. Alan Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel: A Study in Literary Design* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983) 222-223.

²³Of fundamental importance for the analysis of Johannine narrative is Culpepper's *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel*.