



Recent Views of John's Gospel

UDO SCHNELLE

I.

THE STUDY OF THE FOURTH GOSPEL STANDS AT A POINT OF FUNDAMENTAL transition. Everything is in flux, not only the methodological presuppositions of Johannine exegesis but all the central issues of the gospel itself (gnosticism, theology of incarnation and cross, eschatology, sacraments, pneumatology, relation to the Synoptics, pre-Johannine sources). People are increasingly convinced that previously generally accepted models will no longer suffice to explain the literary form, history-of-religions standpoint, and theology of John's Gospel.¹

The newer methodological approaches take place, above all, over against the work of Rudolf Bultmann,² whose interpretation of John stands in an exegetical tradition that was strongly oriented toward the kind of literary criticism practiced around 1900. Bultmann's goal was to explain the present text of the gospel by means of an exhaustive analysis of its prehistory and subsequent development. Bultmann's interpretation does not center on the present form of John's Gospel it-

¹ See the recent commentaries by Ulrich Wilkens, *Das Evangelium nach Johannes* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1998); Francis J. Moloney, *The Gospel of John* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1998); Ludger Schenke, *Johannes Kommentar* (Düsseldorf: Patmos, 1998); Udo Schnelle, *Das Evangelium nach Johannes*, 2d ed. (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2000). On the Johannine writings in general, see Udo Schnelle, *The History and Theology of the New Testament Writings*, trans. M. Eugene Boring (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998) 434-516.

² Rudolf Bultmann, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, trans. G. R. Beasley-Murray, R. W. N. Hoare, and J. K. Riches (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1971); German original, 1941.

The carefully reflective structure of the Fourth Gospel, both literary and theological, no longer permits us to make secondary phenomena, such as speculation about sources or redaction, the key to its understanding. Johannine theology is marked throughout by its concentration on christology.

self but rather on the creative power of the exegete, who can sort out the problems of the text by explaining the gospel's diachronic and synchronic structure, placing it properly in the history of religions and history of theology (e.g., gnostic redeemer myth, church redaction), and finally subordinating it to his own preferred interpretive method (demythologizing, existential interpretation).

The difficulties of this approach have been clear for at least two decades.³ The concentration on the prehistory of the text leads to a disregard of the macrostructure of the gospel's present form. The claim that one can find a better sense of the text and that tensions within the text lend themselves to literary critical intervention does not justify a reconstruction of the "original" form of the gospel on the basis of textual rearrangement and the exclusion of supposed secondary passages. The literary or theological peculiarities of alleged "sources" have not been convincingly demonstrated;⁴ moreover, that attempt gives uncontrollable weight to the subjective evaluation of the exegete. As a result, a new methodological principle has gained in significance, namely, that a reordering of the text can be justified only when the given shape of the text is demonstrably impossible—syntactically, semantically, or pragmatically. No such convincing argument has been offered for John's Gospel, which means that the exegete must begin by interpreting the gospel in its present form.

In current Johannine exegesis, two methodological premises accompany this fundamental insight: (1) The Gospel of John is perceived as a coherent text, one that has, in fact, a high level of literary sophistication. All parts of the text, down to its individual sentences, must be understood from the perspective of the whole and as constituent parts thereof.⁵ The meaning of a Johannine passage is not determined by a possible prehistory or subsequent reworking; rather, the key to understanding particular texts lies in the intratextual world of the entire Fourth Gospel.⁶ (2) A synchronic reading of the gospel and the integration of a literary approach redirect attention from the author and his intention to the readers or hearers, to the conditions of their understanding, and to their reception of the text. A perspective that centers on the author or the text itself is replaced by a functional understanding of the gospel, one that considers it as a literary work within the framework of a particular structure of communication. With that, the act of reading is given special significance, because the way in which the reader interacts with an author

³For criticism of Bultmann, see, most recently, Jörg Frey, *Die johanneische Eschatologie*, vol. 1 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1997) 119-150.

⁴On the literary structure of the gospel, see Eugen Ruckstuhl, *Die literarische Einheit des Johannesevangeliums* (Freiburg, Switzerland: Universitätsverlag; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1987); Eugen Ruckstuhl and Peter Dschulnigg, *Stilkritik und Verfasserfrage im Johannesevangelium* (Freiburg, Switzerland: Universitätsverlag; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1991).

⁵Of particular importance for the incorporation of literary questions in Johannine exegesis was R. Alan Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel: A Study in Literary Design* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983).

⁶See Moloney, *Gospel of John*, 13: "It is possible to identify a strong narrative unity across the Fourth Gospel. In assessing that narrative unity, however, we must never lose sight of the world behind the text....However, I will concentrate on the world in the text, attempting to show how the story has been designed and told in order to influence the world in front of the text."

through the author's text largely determines the understanding of that text. The use of insights by the literary scholar Wolfgang Iser has led to the conviction that a work achieves its effect only in being read, that the process of reading is what first provides meaning to a text. "Thus, the meaning of a literary text is not a definable entity but, if anything, a dynamic happening."⁷ Therefore, there is no fixed meaning behind a text that can be discovered by the art of interpretation; rather, meaning occurs first in the interaction between text and reader. Iser does not thereby want to open the door to purely subjective interpretations, but rather proceeds from the notion that guiding elements within the text, such as characters, objects, norms, traditions, quotations, narrative points of view, etc., significantly determine the reader's perception. Still, this does not constitute an "objective" meaning; rather, the text's guiding elements situate the reader in position where he "can assemble the meaning toward which the perspectives of the text have guided him....[T]he structure of the text sets off a sequence of mental images which lead to the text translating itself into the reader's consciousness."⁸ The relevance of this concept for exegesis is self-evident, affecting equally both the practical work on texts and the hermeneutical presuppositions that inform it. It becomes possible to read and interpret texts in a more sophisticated manner and thus to arrive at a more comprehensive understanding. That Johannine exegesis has come to prefer readings oriented toward reception and aesthetic understandings of the text is no accident,⁹ since the Fourth Gospel, like no other, contains guiding elements like explanatory comments,¹⁰ symbolic terms,¹¹ various levels of discourse, references forward and backward, irony,¹² intensive personal description,¹³ and surprising text sequences and changes in perspective.

II.

We can, however, not fully appreciate the theological and literary achievement of the Fourth Evangelist if we remain at the synchronic level. Like the other New Testament authors, John the Evangelist stood in relation to tradition, so that the intention and reception of his work must be understood by considering how it both continues and differs from the prevailing traditions that provided its horizon of meaning. We cannot presuppose for the hearers or readers of the Fourth Gospel

⁷Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978) 22.

⁸Ibid., 38.

⁹See Mark W. G. Stibbe, *John as Storyteller* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), and *John* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993); also, Fernando F. Segovia, ed., "What Is John?" *Readers and Readings of the Fourth Gospel* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1996).

¹⁰Carl J. Bjerkelund, *Tauta Egeneto: Die Präzisierungssätze im Johannesevangelium* (Tübingen, 1987).

¹¹On this, see Craig Koester, *Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995); Otto Schwankl, *Licht und Finsternis: Ein metaphorisches Paradigma in den johanneischen Schriften* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1995).

¹²See Paul D. Duke, *Irony in the Fourth Gospel* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1985).

¹³See Peter Dschulnigg, *Jesus begegnen: Personen und ihre Bedeutung im Johannesevangelium* (Münster: Lit, 2000).

the kind of individual and reproducible reception of the text that marks contemporary reading habits. If, using the genre of gospel, John recasts nineteen quotations from the Old Testament, each with characteristic introductory formulas and alterations,¹⁴ a Logos hymn, and a variety of miracle stories¹⁵ and sayings of Jesus; if he includes variations of synoptic texts¹⁶ and takes up Pauline thoughts; then our reading of John's Gospel can only be fully productive when done with an appropriate comprehension of its prehistory. Then we see that the literary achievement of the Fourth Evangelist is precisely the way he arranges heterogeneous material—some of which has its own lengthy prehistory—into a new text. Particularly with John, it is clear that the present text cannot be appropriately interpreted apart from an appreciation of its prehistory.¹⁷

The inclusion of the tradition that informs the evangelist and his hearers or readers is also essential for a second reason: the reality to which New Testament texts refer is not first constituted in their reception by the hearer or reader; these texts point to a reality outside of themselves. The Johannine texts in particular consistently exhibit this character of referring beyond themselves. This in no way excludes the meaning found by the individual hearer or reader, but it does make clear that this must always relate to a meaning already constituted by God in Jesus Christ. These considerations plead for a combination of diachronic and synchronic textual interpretation that considers not only the text's original situation and intended message but also the ways in which the present author intends to go beyond these. The interpretation of every text requires both an appropriate understanding of the text itself and a suitable model of communication that takes into consideration the author, the work, and the recipients.¹⁸

John told his story of Jesus for his community. This means that there are two fundamental levels in the communication process sought by the evangelist: (1) the level internal to the text, which portrays the ongoing periods of the narration from

¹⁴On John's use of Old Testament citations, see especially Maarten J. J. Menken, *Old Testament Quotations in the Fourth Gospel* (Kampen, Netherlands: Kok Pharos, 1996).

¹⁵On this, see Udo Schnelle, *Antidocetic Christology in the Gospel of John*, trans. Linda M. Maloney (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992); Michael Labahn, *Jesus als Lebensspender: Untersuchungen zu einer Geschichte der johanneischen Tradition anhand ihrer Wundergeschichten* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1999).

¹⁶See Manfred Lang, *Johannes und die Synoptiker* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1999).

¹⁷Remaining at the synchronic level are, for example, the previously cited commentaries by Moloney and Stibbe. These take up the narrator of the gospel, his narrated world, and the implied and/or historical hearer/reader. They examine the plot and author's point of view (i.e., the way in which he presents his story). They investigate the narration in the third person, the omniscience of the author, issues of time and place, the appearance of persons, settings, and events, literary links and scene composition, psychological elements, and comprehensive narrative structures. Nevertheless, the great contribution of this methodological approach is considerably diminished by the omission of the diachronic level.

¹⁸The individual and reproducible reception of the text that marks contemporary reading habits cannot be presupposed for readers or hearers of the Fourth Gospel. The definitive process of perception and understanding in antiquity was hearing; thus, reading was done aloud or by one to another (see Peter Müller, "Verstehst du auch, was du liest?" *Lesen und Verstehen im Neuen Testament* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1994) 18ff. Like the letters of Paul (see 1 Thess 5:27; further, Col 4:16), so also the gospels were read aloud in congregational assemblies or worship services (see John 20:30-31; Justin, *1. Apol.* 67:3; further, Rev 1:3; 1 Tim 4:13; 2 Clem. 19:1).

the preexistence to the post-existence of Jesus Christ; (2) the level of the Johannine community, external to the text, for which John conceived his story of Jesus in order to lead them to the knowledge and understanding of the saving work of God in Jesus Christ. The interpreter must always keep both levels in mind, since John intends his story of Jesus for the community but at the same time binds the community to the story of Jesus.

III.

A series of recent studies connect the perception of the Fourth Gospel as a coherent text and the interest in its readers with a hermeneutical perspective that is also significant for the methodology of Johannine exegesis. The Christ event in the Gospel of John is seen to unfold as a post-Easter remembering (anamnesis) that is brought about by the power of the Spirit (see John 2:17, 22; 12:16; 13:7; 20:9).¹⁹ The presence of the Paraclete (John 14:26) enables first a deepened understanding of the incarnation, earthly work, suffering, lifting up, and glorification of Jesus Christ. At the same time, the Paraclete permits the remembering of the works and words of Jesus that are now recorded in the Gospel of John. The Paraclete leads the community as supporter, interpreter, teacher, intercessor, advocate, and representative of and witness to Jesus (see John 14:15-17, 26; 15:26; 16:7-11, 13-15), thereby actualizing the unique saving event. In this way, John's writing brings about a productive and continuing appropriation of the revelation of Jesus. In the evangelist's own understanding, however, none of this is done on his own authority; rather, in a certain sense, Jesus interprets himself in John's Gospel through the Paraclete. The retrospective post-Easter viewpoint is for John both a theological scheme and a narrative perspective; it allows the Fourth Evangelist to translate theological insights into narrated history.²⁰ This specific perspective of thought and narration is also the key that enables us to understand the literary form of the gospel. In comparison to the Synoptics, John clothes the story of Jesus for his hearers and readers in new concepts, symbols, and stories (see, e.g., John 2:1-11; 3:1-11; 4:4-42; 10:1-18; 13:1-20; 15:1-8; 20:11-18). He introduces new people, names, and groups into the Jesus story (the Beloved Disciple: 1:35-42; 13:23-26a; 18:15-18; 19:25-27, 34b-35; 20:1-8; Nathanael: 1:45-49; Nicodemus: 3:1, 4, 9; 7:50; 19:39; the "Greeks": 12:20-21; Malchus: 18:10, 26; Annas: 18:13, 24); creates surprising sequences of events (see, e.g., 2:12-13; 5-6; 7:9-10; 14:31-15:1); draws toward the front central events in the life of Jesus (cleansing of the temple: 2:14-22; plot to kill Jesus: 11:46-54; anointing at Bethany: 12:1-8; entry into Jerusalem: 12:12-19; Gethsemane: 12:27-36); expands individual scenes into narrative blocks (e.g., expanding the farewell scene at the last supper into the farewell discourses); and provides the story

¹⁹On this, see Franz Mussner, *Die johanneische Sehweise und die Frage nach dem historischen Jesus* (Freiburg: Herder, 1965) 45ff.; Christina Hoegen-Rohls, *Der nachösterliche Johannes* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1996); Udo Schnelle, "Johannes als Geisttheologe," *Novum Testamentum* 40 (1998) 17-31.

²⁰See Udo Schnelle, *The Human Condition: Anthropology in the Teachings of Jesus, Paul and John*, trans. O. C. Dean, Jr. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996).

of Jesus with an unexpected dramatic sense (see, e.g., John 7 and 8)—all done to make the tradition fruitful for a new time and a new situation. The literary structure of the Fourth Gospel is discovered not simply through the application of criteria external to the work itself (e.g., contemporary logic, theories of literature and narration), but first and foremost through incorporation of what is both the theological and literary approach of the Fourth Evangelist, namely, the post-Easter remembering effected by the Spirit.

IV.

The new perception of the Fourth Gospel as a harmonious literary structure, within which all things relate to each other (intratextuality) and which itself constantly relates to other textual structures (intertextuality), has also had lasting effects on the determination of the content of Johannine theology. Not accidentally, christologies of incarnation, cross, and being sent by the Father stand at the center of the present debate, since these are the focus of fundamental decisions that will determine one's assessment of the Fourth Gospel. Many Johannine texts point emphatically to an orientation of the Fourth Gospel around a theology of the cross (see 1:29, 36; 2:14-22; 3:14-16; 10:15, 17-18; 11:51-52; 12:27-32; 19:30). Above all the placement of the cleansing of the temple early in the gospel, the orientation of the foot washing toward a theology of the cross (13:1-3, 18-19), and Jesus' last words on the cross in John 19:30 demonstrate that the revelation of Jesus reaches its goal precisely at the cross. The cross is not only a transitory stage in the framework of a dominant sending christology, but in John it is precisely the goal of the sending and thereby the place of salvation. At the cross Jesus receives the dignity of being raised up and glorified (see 12:27-33).²¹ The cross, especially for John, is the fundamental datum and abiding location of salvation; only from the perspective of the cross can Jesus' going to the Father be appropriately viewed. When Johannine dualism is seen not statically, but as a dynamic event resulting from the movement into the world of the one who reveals God, then incarnation and cross are no longer out of place but the center of Johannine christology.

The eschatological declarations of the Fourth Gospel—and thereby John's understanding of time—provide another focal point of present Johannine research. In the face of the external and internal tribulation occasioned by the world's unbelief, the Fourth Evangelist makes clear that Jesus' departure is in reality his salvific return to the Father. Jesus' being lifted up and glorified at the cross is what makes possible the sending of the Spirit/Paraclete, who now leads the community and opens the understanding of the Christ event that is developed in John's Gospel. The repeated references to the parousia (14:2-3, 18-20; 16:16-22, 23-28; 17:24) also serve to provide assurance of salvation, since the parousia defines the horizon toward which the Johannine community is moving. The common practice of relating

²¹See Schnelle, *Antidocetic Christology*, 170-173; Thomas Knöppler, *Die theologia crucis des Johannesevangeliums* (Neukirchen: Neukirchener, 1994).

many Johannine time references to the events of Easter stops too soon, for it obscures a decisive question: How can the post-Easter community, external to the text, understand the gospel's futuristic affirmations about an early reunion with Jesus? The community stands already on the other side of Easter, and one must ask whether a renewed reference to Easter appearances that, for them, now lie in the past will be sufficient to overcome the community's troubled situation. Obviously, serious doubts arose in the Johannine community even though the message of Easter had been proclaimed! Since the temporal references in the text intend to overcome sorrow, a pragmatic reading requires that, for the hearers and readers of the gospel, the time of reunion refers not to the Easter appearances but to the parousia. Precisely the parousia's delay makes the question of its arrival all the more urgent! The parousia is the basic eschatological notion behind the farewell discourses,²² for only this temporal horizon corresponds to the pragmatic function of John 13:31-16:33, namely, to bolster the faith of the afflicted. The post-Easter perspective of the farewell discourses is also decisive for the interpretation of the classic eschatological passages of the Fourth Gospel. John thinks bi-temporally. The time of a particular word of Jesus, internal to the text, and the possibility of that word's realization for the community of hearers and readers external to the text cannot lie in the same temporal moment but obviously require a continuum across time. This is made clear in John 5:25, where present and future are intertwined, yet the future is not eliminated. The expansion of the eschatological statement of 5:25 in 5:28-29 is by no means to be seen as a post-Johannine addition. Rather, it represents a significant expansion of the eschatological perspective, needed by the community external to the text in two ways: (1) At the time of the writing of the gospel, there were certainly Christians in the Johannine community who had already died. Thus, the question about the resurrection of the dead was relevant and theologically necessary to the community's situation. (2) The Johannine Christians had, in faith, already passed from death into life; the decision about the future was already made in the present. However, faith does not yet effect the resurrection of the dead. Nowhere in the Johannine writings is it claimed that believers are already raised.²³ The Johannine concept of life does not exclude physical death! That humans exist in history made the question of the resurrection of Christians who had died unavoidable. For the community external to the text Jesus had already gone to the Father long ago, and believers will meet him only at the parousia. With his return Jesus will accomplish that which is already decided for believers in the present but which is not yet a reality: the resurrection of the dead. Present and future eschatology do not stand in opposition for John²⁴ but rather are complementary. A conscious correlation of the different temporal levels is found also in John 3:36; 6:54,

²²See Udo Schnelle, "Die Abschiedsreden im Johannesevangelium," *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 80 (1989) 64-79.

²³See Schnelle, *The Human Condition*, 130-133; also, Jörg Frey, *Die johanneische Eschatologie*, vol. 2 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1998).

²⁴As parallels to the merging of present and future eschatology, see Rom 6:3-11; 1 John 2:28-3:3; 4:17; 5:11.

57-58; 11:24-27; 12:48; 14:2-6, 15-24; 16:16-33. We see here an example of genuine Johannine thought, not a phenomenon produced by a reworking of the material: that which has been established in the present also has stock in the future. The affirmations of John 5:25 are neither corrected nor revoked in vv. 28-29; rather, the evangelist takes them up again, expanding the future aspects, which already exist, in light of a situation that already affects some members of the community and will eventually affect all. The narration's deliberate post-Easter perspective in the farewell discourses and the careful correlation of present and future in the classic eschatological texts emphasize the evangelist's sustained reflection on the situation of the community in his own time. His goal is not a faith removed from history but an understanding of the various factual, spatial, and temporal levels of the Christ event.

V.

Questions about the literary structure and theological center of John's Gospel will continue to remain controversial. Nevertheless, a review of the discussion over the past twenty years reveals a fundamental change: the present text of the gospel is now appreciated and taken with great seriousness. The carefully reflective structure of the Fourth Gospel, both literary and theological, no longer permits us to make secondary phenomena, such as supposed sources or postulated redactions, the key to its understanding. Johannine theology is marked throughout by its concentration on christology, making incarnation, cross, and lifting up the appropriate answer to the question of its theological center. This christological concentration does not suspend the various levels in time and content, but provides the bond that unites Johannine theology. Past, present, and future are united in Jesus Christ without being nullified. Death was defeated at the cross; life has now appeared in Jesus Christ. ⊕

UDO SCHNELLE is professor of New Testament in the theological faculty of Martin-Luther-Universität Halle-Wittenberg. He is the author of many monographs and articles on Paul and John as well as an introduction to the New Testament. He is the editor of Neuer Wettstein: Texte zum Neuen Testament aus Griechentum und Hellenismus. This article was translated for publication by Frederick J. Gaiser.