

John

Mark Edwards

JOHN

Blackwell Bible Commentaries

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John

Mark Edwards

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Series Editors' Preface

The Blackwell Bible Commentaries series, the first to be devoted primarily to the reception history of the Bible, is based on the premiss that how people have interpreted, and been influenced by, a sacred text like the Bible is often as interesting and historically important as what it originally meant. The series emphasizes the influence of the Bible on literature, art, music and film, its role in the evolution of religious beliefs and practices, and its impact on social and political developments. Drawing on work in a variety of disciplines, it is designed to provide a convenient and scholarly means of access to material until now hard to find, and a much-needed resource for all those interested in the influence of the Bible on Western culture.

Until quite recently this whole dimension was for the most part neglected by biblical scholars. The goal of a commentary was primarily, if not exclusively,

to get behind the centuries of accumulated Christian and Jewish tradition to one single meaning, normally identified with the author's original intention. The most important and distinctive feature of the Blackwell Commentaries is that they will present readers with many different interpretations of each text, in such a way as to heighten their awareness of what a text, especially a sacred text, can mean and what it can do, what it has meant and what it has done, in the many contexts in which it operates.

The Blackwell Bible Commentaries will consider patristic, rabbinic (where relevant) and medieval exegesis, as well as insights from various types of modern criticism, acquainting readers with a wide variety of interpretative techniques. As part of the history of interpretation, questions of source, date, authorship and other historical-critical and archaeological issues will be discussed; but since these are covered extensively in existing commentaries, such references will be brief, serving to point readers in the direction of readily accessible literature where they can be followed up.

Original to this series is the consideration of the reception history of specific biblical books, arranged in commentary format. The chapter-by-chapter arrangement ensures that the biblical text is always central to the discussion. Given the wide influence of the Bible and the richly varied appropriation of each biblical book, it is a difficult question which interpretations to include. While each volume will have its own distinctive point of view, the guiding principle for the series as a whole is that readers should be given a representative sampling of material from different ages, with emphasis on interpretations that have been especially influential or historically significant. Though authors will have their preferences among the different interpretations, the material will be presented in such a way that readers can make up their own minds on the value, morality and validity of particular interpretations.

The series encourages readers to consider how the biblical text has been interpreted down the ages, and seeks to open their eyes to different uses of the Bible in contemporary culture. The aim is a series of scholarly commentaries that draw on all the insights of modern research to illustrate the rich interpretative potential of each biblical book.

John Sawyer
Christopher Rowland
Judith Kovacs

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Publishing who have helped with the preparation of this text are Jean van Altena, Kelvin Matthews, Alison Dunnett, Rebecca Harkin and Lucy Judkins. Any inconsistencies or omissions that remain must of course be ascribed to me, though it will, I hope, be remembered that if this book is to be a mirror to the centuries, it cannot but reflect a great deal that seems to us tangential, false, misleading or bizarre.

Abbreviations

<i>A&M</i>	<i>Hymns Ancient and Modern</i>
AV	Authorized Version
DCB	<i>Dictionary of Christian Biography</i>
EE	<i>Elegant Extracts</i> (London, 1790)
HTR	<i>Harvard Theological Review</i>
JTS	<i>Journal of Theological Studies</i>
MCNT	<i>The Methodist Commentary on the New Testament</i> (London 1894, no pagination)
NEB	New English Bible
NEH	<i>New English Hymnal</i>
NIV	New International Version
NT	<i>Novum Testamentum</i>

NTA	<i>New Testament Apocrypha</i> , ed. W. Schneemelcher, tr. R. McL. Wilson, 2 vols (London, 1963–5)
NTS	<i>New Testament Studies</i>
RSV	Revised Standard Version

Introduction: The Gospel and its Interpreters

External Attestation of the Gospel

The subject of this commentary is the Fourth Gospel of our New Testament, ascribed by all tradition to the apostle John and symbolized in Christian iconography by the fourth cherub of Ezekiel and the Apocalypse, who wears the face of a man (Hamburger 2002). So much we learn from Bishop Irenaeus of Lyons between AD 180 and 190 (*Against Heresies* 3.11.8); around 170, Tatian of Edessa had already subsumed this narrative in his four- or five-fold *Harmony of the Gospels*. Before this time our Gospel is never named, but the disparity between this life of Jesus and the accounts of the Synoptic writers (Matthew, Mark and Luke) was perhaps already apparent to Papias (fl. 140), the earliest historian of the Gospels (Eusebius, *Church History* 3.39). What, if

not a text that he believed to be an apostolic record, would have emboldened him to write, before 140, that Mark's narrative had preserved the reminiscences of Peter but without regard to order? (Cp. Eusebius, *Church History* 3.24 with C. E. Hill 1998: 586–7.) Those who reject this inference do not deny that a fragment of our Gospel has survived on a papyrus dating from about 130, and its contents must be at least a decade older if the quotation from 1:5 ascribed to the Alexandrian heretic Basilides is authentic (Hippolytus, *Refutation* 7.10/22). Two cardinal premisses of the Fourth Evangelist – that Christ is the Word or Logos of the Father and that the workings of his Spirit are inscrutable – were already commonplaces to Ignatius, bishop of Antioch, whose martyrdom took place in 107 or 112.

No earlier testimonies could be hoped for if the Gospel was composed, as the ancients tell us, in the last years of a long life by the youngest of the disciples – perhaps as late as 95, the era of Domitian's persecution. All ancient sources agree that the author was John the son of Zebedee; whether he was the John who wrote the Apocalypse (or book of Revelation) they were not so sure, and Papias records that the tomb of another John, the Elder, was also pointed out in Ephesus, the putative resting-place of the last apostle. Although in the second century of the Christian era no book was more canonical than the Apocalypse, Eusebius in the fourth century includes it among the 'controverted writings'. No such doubts touched the Gospel in this period. Hippolytus defends its authenticity in the third century, perhaps against an otherwise unknown Gaius (*DCB* 2.386); but it seems likely that the *Alogoi*, or Word-deniers, assailed by Epiphanius in 376 are a product of the heresiologist's tendency to transform a single man into a sect (*Panarion* 51). Those whom we now call orthodox could not renounce this testament of the Word made flesh, for it served as an emetic to two great blasphemies: docetism, which taught that the Saviour's body was a phantom, and adoptionism, which recognized a descent of the heavenly Christ on the earthly Jesus but refused to cement them by an incarnation. The case against docetism was strengthened by the opening words of the First Epistle attributed to John; against adoptionism Irenaeus quotes an anecdote told by Polycarp of Smyrna, that the apostle had once fled from the public baths rather than share them with Cerinthus, the nominal founder of this widespread heresy (*Against Heresies* 3.3.4).

The First Commentators

Polycrates of Ephesus (fl. 170), another Asiatic who claims knowledge of John's biography, declares that he 'wore the mitre', which implies that – like the Baptist with whom he shared the rare name 'John' – he came from a family of priests

(Eusebius, *Church History* 5.24). Polycrates also says that it was John who bequeathed to the Asiatic church its date for the celebration of Easter. Nevertheless, while Asia took possession of the body and reputation of the apostle (J. B. Lightfoot 1904), it was not here that the so-called gospel of John became the favourite study of commentators, but in the younger church of Alexandria, and among teachers who inclined to a docetic interpretation of its contents. The pioneers were heretics, or became so in later eyes. Heracleon (fl. 170) appears to have commented only on specimen passages, deriving from each a proof of Christ's antipathy to the flesh, of the divorce between creation and the spirit, or of the elect soul's duty to conspire with Wisdom in the consummation of her redemptive plan. Heracleon's critic Origen – though his evidence is disputed by Wücherpfennig (2002) – taught posterity to regard him as a proponent of the Valentinian myth, according to which the human soul is enslaved in matter as a result of the primordial fall of Wisdom from the Godhead; release comes when it imitates her repentance, and the appearance of the fullness, or *pleroma*, of the Godhead in its robe of flesh is designed not to redeem the body but to redeem us from it. Such tenets could be extracted from the Gospel only by allegory; but could the Church deny this trope to its adversaries when Clement of Alexandria, Heracleon's contemporary, resolved the contradictions between the Gospels by pronouncing the Fourth a 'spiritual' record which conveys high truths in symbols under the guise of history (Eusebius, *Church History* 6.14.7)?

The great commentary by Origen (c.185–254), conceived in opposition to Heracleon at the beginning of the third century, reached 32 books without progressing beyond the thirteenth chapter. Little survives after this, and more than half of the preceding text has perished; the 500 extant pages, however, show that he domesticated the allegorical method by submitting it to a statement of belief which he believed to be held by all churches, and by taking the undisputed sense of one text as the key to the latent meaning of another. While he endorsed a number of Heracleon's speculations, he avoided caprice, as a scholar of our own day would, by taking account of history and topography, by examining the general structure and tenor of each passage, and by comparing the Johannine narrative with that of the Synoptics. His Christ is divine, yet also a man in body, soul and spirit; he assumes that the temporal ministry of Christ is recounted accurately in all four Gospels, and only when the Fourth conflicts with the others does he resort to Clement's expedient of a spiritual reading. Origen subordinates the literal to the figurative in commentary, the visible to the invisible in cosmology, body to soul in anthropology, and the speaking flesh of Christ to his concealed divinity; nevertheless, the body is redeemed by the Incarnation, and the written text would not be patient of allegory at all if it were not the chosen vehicle of the Word.

The steadfast ‘literalism’ of the Antiochenes in the fourth century is frequently contrasted with the Alexandrian predilection for allegory. More accurately, we might say that the Alexandrians strove to bring the text home to the reader, the Antiochenes to recover the situation of the writer and the pattern of events behind his text. Theodore (d. 428) and John Chrysostom (d. 428), the Antiochene interpreters of this Gospel, show their acumen by repairing apparent breaches in the narrative and ascribing probable motives to the actors. This we may call ‘historical criticism’, but they also share with Cyril of Alexandria a desire to vindicate the impassibility of the Logos, which leads all three into subterfuge and anachronistic pedantry. For Cyril (d. 444) the application of the text to his contemporaries was not his own device, but the extension of a historic miracle, Christ’s gift of the Paraclete, which itself completed the work that God began when he filled the nostrils of the first man with his spirit. A stronger concern with the sacraments is visible in his work than in that of Origen, but this concern – as his other works clearly show and his comment on 1:4 confirms – arises from his conviction that the incorporeal Logos has so joined himself to matter that if anything can be predicated of him in the course of his earthly ministry, and hence as man, we must also be ready to predicate the same thing of him eternally and as God.

The Middle Ages

Augustine (354–430) is perhaps the author most liberally represented in this volume, and with reason, since no other ancient critic – not even Chrysostom – has been quoted with such constant approbation during 1,500 years of biblical scholarship. That he owes his renown to his merits is apparent from his 124 *Homilies on John’s Gospel*, the method of which is at once Antiochene and Alexandrian, for he sees the text as a narrative, veridical, linear, free of inconcinnity or conflict with other Gospels, and yet pregnant in every line with some divine truth or instruction for the soul. He always has an allegory at hand, and makes more use of numerology than any of his precursors in theological exposition. These instruments are laid aside, however, in his *Harmony of the Four Gospels*, which retained its authority during the Middle Ages, though the *Diatessaron* was not forgotten. Augustine was no stranger to historical criticism, and his advocacy ensured that all Western versions of the Gospel would include the acquittal of the woman taken in adultery (7:53–8:12); with the resurrection of Lazarus, the trial before the Jews, and the appearance to Mary Magdalene, this became a favourite subject for art and drama in the later Middle Ages, though in primitive iconography the shepherd and the fish pre-

dominate. Among scholars, Eriugena (c.810–77), the last of the Neoplatonists, followed Origen in his methods and in his praise of the Fourth Evangelist as the theologian *par excellence*. Others were more concerned with the harmonization of the Gospels or with filling the lacunae in their narratives: Bede (c.673–735) worked out the chronology of the festivals in this Gospel with his customary acumen, but for the most part he exemplifies the homiletic and moralistic tendency which dominates the early Middle Ages. Such practical men as Gregory the Great (pope from 590 to 604) were seldom trammelled by past readings or the probable intentions of the Evangelist when they chiselled the texts and images of the Gospel into sermons for the day. This is not to say that all sense of history was lacking, but they were interested not so much in the circumstances of composition as in the divine plan to which the Gospels testified. It is only in the later twentieth century that commentators have shown themselves so conscious that the Old Testament is the yeast of the New, even where it has not risen to the surface. On this and other matters, the observations of Theophylact (fl. 1100), which he wove into an erudite collation from his forebears, were repeated with esteem by commentators up to the early years of the twentieth century.

Preachers of the second millennium also could be eloquent and perceptive, as my excerpts from Radulphus (c.1040–c.1100) indicate. The Gospel now became the food of mystics and contemplatives, and to the Franciscan Joachim of Fiore (c.1135–1202) Jesus' promise of the Paraclete foreshadowed a consummation in which the rule of the Spirit would supersede the Law imposed on Israel by the Father and the Church inaugurated by the Son. Yet mystics can be pedants too: it is not so much his 'negative theology' as his credulous addiction to Aristotelian nomenclature that mars the famous commentary of Eckhart (fl. 1300) on the prologue (1958: 221–49). If I seem to have drawn rather more frugally on this period than on others, I suspect that I am exercising a preference which will coincide with that of the majority of my readers. One reason, no doubt, is that the medievals lacked the apparatus of modern criticism, another that they were frequently excelled in imagination by the lyricists, the mystery plays and above all by such allegorizing poets as Dante (1264–1321) and Langland (d. 1387). The latter's account of the Crucifixion and Christ's encounter with Satan in the underworld (1987: *Passus* 18) is among the most noble and tragic things in English literature.

Renaissance and Reformation

The invention of printing widened the reading public, and, when coupled with the exodus from Byzantium which restored Greek to the West in the fifteenth

century, encouraged the diffusion of new translations, both in Latin and in the vernacular. Translation demands attention to the letter, and where this seemed to be ambiguous, the exegete might call upon the new disciplines to justify his choice of one equivalent or another. Erasmus (?1469–1536) showed what a distance there might be between the Greek and the Latin Vulgate derived from Jerome, not least in the rendering of the word *logos* in the prologue to this Gospel (1535: 218–20). The study of Hebrew literature, initiated by Reuchlin, culminated for English readers in J. Lightfoot's Talmudic commentary on the Gospels (1684) – an instrument of special value to readers of the Fourth Gospel because it gives evidence for the prohibitions attributed to the Pharisees and explains the significance of the Jewish festivals which punctuate the narrative. The Gospel itself was not, however, perceived as a text which stood apart from others in the canon, and might therefore require peculiar modes and tools of exegesis. Luther (1483–1546), for example, spoke of John and Paul as the two keys to the New Testament (1961: 18), but would not have been prepared to admit that one Gospel might be more spiritual than another. His sermons make it a tool of ecclesiastical reformation by transferring its reproaches to his enemies, and of moral reform by annexing an allegory to the literal exposition. Calvin (1509–64), who is less a man of the Middle Ages, follows him in the first respect, but scholarship consisted for him in rendering the Greek faithfully with an edifying paraphrase, or now and then a corroborative citation from Josephus. He shows himself conscious of the peculiar character of this Gospel by devoting a separate book to it in 1553 after digesting the other three into a harmony, but for him it was a true history like the others, and the same doctrine was contained in all the Scriptures. For a century after him, Protestant commentators held that the medicine of the soul was neither philology nor allegory, but devout exposition of the literal meaning, so that the Latin notes of J. A. Bengel's *Gnomon* (1740) were dwarfed by the orotund but largely uncritical *Exposition* of George Hutcheson. The late, and perhaps most popular, fruit of this tradition is Matthew Henry's *Commentary on the Whole Bible* (1706); but the spirit of evangelical simplicity (or 'puritanism') lives again, combined with scholarship of a much higher order, in the *Expository Thoughts* of Bishop John Ryle (1816–1900). Ryle, like not a few of his successors, found that he needed three volumes for John (1866, 1869, 1873) where one had sufficed for each of Matthew, Mark and Luke. As he can still be consulted with profit, I have cited more from him than from his predecessors of the Stuart period, though in the English eighteenth century I have taken account of the Wesleys and of the learned dissertations (Ibbot 1737, Kidder 1737, Berriman 1737) in which some of the most original exegesis was advanced.

In medieval and early modern times our Gospel was not the preserve of clerks, academic or ecclesiastical. The opening verse was used as an incantation in medieval times, while during the seventeenth century the devout bought copies of the whole text as a talisman against witchcraft (K. Thomas 1973: 34, 221, 296–7). The lance that pierced Christ's side at 19:34 was a regular concomitant of the Grail (Peebles 1911; Fisher 1917), which was supposed to be either the cup that caught his streaming blood or the chalice that he passed to his companions at the Last Supper (Matthews 1997: 174, 183). This chalice, of course, has no place in our Gospel, where the cup is a metaphor rather than a symbol, but the Johannine vocabulary of regeneration haunted the alchemist's crucible, in which the soul was figuratively dissolved and re-created through the baptism of sulphur in mercury. As mercury is the element of Hermes, the interpreter of divine mysteries, it coalesces readily with the Logos in the work of Jacob Boehme (1575–1624), perhaps the most widely read of Luther's followers before Kant. When astrology ousted alchemy as the key to all religions, Christ and his disciples were identified with the sun and the constellations of the zodiac. The Reverend Robert Taylor's erudite conjuring with the names of Thomas and Judas Iscariot (1831) illustrates the latitude of opinion that was reluctantly tolerated in the Hanoverian Church.

Beginnings of Modern Criticism

Among believers, the so-called Gospel of John was widely assumed to give the fullest account of Jesus' ministry, if only because it was easier to coax the 18 months of the Synoptics into its three-year span than it would have been to reverse the negotiation. Vivid scenes in the closing chapters lent themselves to the new techniques and interests of the painters – the flagellation, the *Ecce Homo*, Mary with the beloved disciple and, above all, the *noli me tangere*, which fed the prevailing taste for the erotic without transgressing the bounds of piety. Within the Roman Catholic Church, the Fathers remained the fountain-head of criticism, whether dogmatic, historical or moral; even those commentators whose works were thought to merit frequent republication – such as the Jesuits Cornelius a Lapide, Natalis Alexander and the so-called Maistre de Sacy – displayed their learning only in compilation and in the breaking of an occasional lance on a heresy put abroad by Protestant authors. Until the late eighteenth century, it was hardly necessary for the apologist to ward off an attack on the historical truth, antiquity or dogmatic authority of the sacred text. Even Reimarus, whose infamous fragments saw the light in 1774, did not contest the

authorship of the Gospels, though he argued that they had falsified Christ's teaching. There were others who suspected that the Fourth was not the work of an apostle, but they were silenced for a time by Friedrich Schleiermacher, the father (or at least the unwitting progenitor) of liberal theology. Perhaps the first to state plainly that the Fourth Gospel was of less use to the historian than the other three was D. F. Strauss, the first edition of whose *Life of Jesus* shocked the faithful and perplexed the learned in 1835.

Noting that almost every deed and utterance attributed to Jesus in the Gospels marks the fulfilment of some Messianic prophecy, Strauss inferred that they ought to be handled not as forensic depositions but as pregnant myths. Myth, on this hypothesis, is false when it mimics history, but true when it embodies the ideals, and hence the future, of the race. Strauss intended his thesis to be fatal to the 'naturalistic' explanation of miracles as anomalous events whose causes escaped their first observers; he himself may not have seen what a grave wound he had dealt to the 'liberal' project of extracting a thread of fact from the skein of fable. In England, as in Germany, the liberals remained in the ascendant, and when Strauss's work was noticed, it was seldom perceived that he had destroyed in order to construct: 'Matthew and Mark and Luke and holy John, / Evanished all and gone' (Clough 1974: 163).

Worse came in 1844, when F. C. Baur, one of Strauss's tutors at Tübingen, drew up a catena of errors in topography and history to justify his dating of the Gospel to the mid-second century. Like Strauss, he inferred that if the narrative was not history, it was allegory, in which places stood for different truths, and persons for different factions in the Church. Clough's friend Matthew Arnold spoke for common sense and poetic intuition against the two professors (1889: 136–40), and the theologian F. D. Maurice (1857) turned aside from his war with the Unitarians in his lectures on the Gospel to denounce their sceptical treatment of its date and authorship. The readiness of other German scholars to endorse this scepticism betokened victory not for Strauss but for the Gospel of Mark, the priority of which was generally thought to have been proved by Weise in 1838. Renan (1861) despised the artificial speeches of the Fourth Gospel, yet its authorship and veracity were defended at the end of the nineteenth century by the conservative Bishop Westcott (1903) and by Adolf von Harnack, the last great spokesman of German liberalism. William Sanday applauded both (1905: 14, 42), but to many it now appeared that neither the Gospel nor the liberals could withstand the concerted labours of Johannes Weiss, Albert Schweitzer (1875–1965) and Alfred Loisy (1857–1940), all of whom maintained that Christ himself was a supernaturalist, the prophet of a kingdom which was to come in his own generation, suddenly and from on high (Schweitzer 1954: 222–68, 348–99). These are the pioneers of biblical criticism in the twentieth century, and if they seem to be neglected in this volume, it is

because their intuitions have been refined in modern scholarship with the help of evidence hitherto unknown and with a hitherto unimaginable freedom of debate.

Twentieth-Century Trends

For Loisy at least, the Evangelist claims our interest in his own right, as a witness not to the life of Jesus but to the generous versatility with which the Church subsumed the pagan mysteries, thus transforming an erroneous prophecy into a lasting cult (1903). Yet authors of any kind, including John the putative apostle, were disenfranchised by the 'form-critics' of the early twentieth century, who maintained that almost every saying of Jesus in the Gospels was invented by the 'community' as a mandate for its own determination of some posthumous controversy. At the same time, the 'history of religions' school professed to have identified a community external to the Church which had inspired the Johannine prologue and left its traces in other portions of the Gospel even after the text had undergone a Christian redaction. The Mandaeans, who purport to be disciples of the Baptist, describe the descent of a man of light from the heavenly realms to the darkness of creation, where he opened a road to deliverance through baptism and abstinence from meat. Notwithstanding the lateness of the extant sources, Rudolph Bultmann treated them as relics of a widespread Gnostic movement which had preceded Christianity. The Gospel of John, he argued (1925, 1957), had inherited from this quarter its ascending and descending Son of Man, as well as its pervasive antitheses between light and darkness, vision and blindness, the aeon of God and the epoch of the devil. It was thus, as Strauss had divined, a tissue of symbols drawn from its own time and environment. The enterprise of 'demythologization' which he enjoined upon the interpreter entailed the removal of the ancient wrappings so that the substance of the Gospel – the kerygma, or proclamation – could be embalmed anew in the idiom of a scientific age. At the heart of the kerygma – and here is the contribution of Weiss – was eschatology, though in Bultmann's view the critical believer will not expect to survive his body or to witness the sudden inundation of earth by heaven on the latter day; instead, he will be aware at certain moments that he is faced by a vertiginous decision between the will of God and the counsels of the flesh. This decision takes the form of a world-view rather than a concrete action, and the Gnostics were therefore right to proclaim that knowledge is the criterion of salvation, while the Gospel of the Word is above all else the promulgation of a new, yet timeless and abiding truth.