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THE LAZARUS STORY WITHIN THE JOHANNINE TRADITION

WENDY E. SPROSTON NORTH





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Wendy E. Sproston North

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Wendy E. Sproston North

ABBREVIATIONS

AB	Anchor Bible
AnBib	Analecta biblica
BAGD	Walter Bauer, William F. Arndt, F. William Gingrich and Frederick W. Danker, <i>A Greek–English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature</i> (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2nd edn, 1979)
BETL	Bibliotheca ephemeridum theologicarum lovaniensium
<i>BJRL</i>	<i>Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester</i>
BNTC	Black’s New Testament Commentaries
BS	The Biblical Seminar
<i>CBQ</i>	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
EBib	Etudes bibliques
<i>ExpTim</i>	<i>Expository Times</i>
<i>HeyJ</i>	<i>Heythrop Journal</i>
HTKNT	Herders theologischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament
ICC	International Critical Commentary
<i>JBL</i>	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
<i>JJS</i>	<i>Journal of Jewish Studies</i>
<i>JSNT</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the New Testament</i>
JSNTSup	<i>Journal for the Study of the New Testament, Supplement Series</i>
<i>JTS</i>	<i>Journal of Theological Studies</i>
LD	Lectio divina
MNTC	Moffat New Testament Commentary
NA ²⁷	<i>Novum Testamentum Graece</i> (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 27th edn, 1993 [1898])
NCB	New Century Bible
<i>Neot</i>	<i>Neotestamentica</i>
NICNT	New International Commentary on the New Testament
<i>NIDNTT</i>	Colin Brown (ed.), <i>The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology</i> (4 vols.; Grand Rapids: Zondervon, rev. edn. 1986–92)
<i>NovT</i>	<i>Novum Testamentum</i>
NovTSup	<i>Novum Testamentum, Supplements</i>
NTG	New Testament Guides
NTOA	Novum Testamentum et orbis antiquus

<i>NTS</i>	<i>New Testament Studies</i>
NTT	New Testament Theology
NTTS	New Testament Tools and Studies
<i>RevQ</i>	<i>Revue de Qumran</i>
SBLDS	Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series
SBLBS	Society of Biblical Literature Sources for Biblical Study
SCC	Studies in Creative Criticism
SHR	Studies in the History of Religions
<i>SJT</i>	<i>Scottish Journal of Theology</i>
SNTA	Studiorum Novi Testamenti Auxilia
SNTSMS	Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series
STDJ	Studies on the Texts of the Desert of Judah
<i>TDNT</i>	Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich (eds.), <i>Theological Dictionary of the New Testament</i> (trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley; 10 vols.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964–76)
<i>TZ</i>	<i>Theologische Zeitschrift</i>
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
WUNT	Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament
<i>ZNW</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>

INTRODUCTION

Such is the multiplicity of levels at which the fourth Gospel can be appreciated, it has been likened to a magic pool in which children can paddle and elephants can swim.¹ On this analogy, 1 John probably rates somewhere near a bird-bath. With a theology at once shallower and muddier than the Gospel's, a prologue which resembles an obstacle course, and an argument which is often a triumph of imprecision, the epistle writer's work offers no competition to that of the evangelist.² As the lesser Johannine piece in all possible senses, the epistle is usually regarded as relating to the Gospel in some satellite or ancillary fashion. For example, it has been proposed that the relative crudity of the epistle indicates that it antedates the Gospel as a 'trial run' for the great work.³ An alternative view is that it was designed as a 'companion piece' to the bigger volume, perhaps to introduce and recommend it.⁴ A third position, which is by far the most commonly held, is that the epistle came after the Gospel and was written in direct support and defence of its theology in a newly developed situation of schism. Undoubtedly the most influential proponent of this third approach is Raymond Brown

1. See M.W.G. Stibbe, 'The Elusive Christ: A New Reading of the Fourth Gospel', *JSNT* 44 (1991), pp. 19-37 (37), now reprinted in *idem* (ed.), *The Gospel of John as Literature: An Anthology of Twentieth-Century Perspectives* (NTTS, 17; Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1993), pp. 231-47.

2. For these and further disparaging remarks, see, e.g., J.L. Houlden, *A Commentary on the Johannine Epistles* (BNTC; London: A. & C. Black, rev. edn, 1994), pp. 45-47; R.E. Brown, *The Epistles of John* (AB, 30; London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1983), pp. 24, 174. As implied here, it will be assumed in what follows that Gospel and epistle were not by the same author.

3. See K. Grayston, *The Johannine Epistles* (NCB; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1984), pp. 12-14.

4. See T. Okure, *The Johannine Approach to Mission: A Contextual Study of John 4:1-42* (WUNT, 31; Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1988), pp. 240, 254-56, 262. See further Brown, *Epistles*, p. 90 n. 207; J.M. Lieu, *The Theology of the Johannine Epistles* (NTT; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 7.

who, in his massive Anchor Bible commentary on the epistles, has argued the case in considerable detail. Thus, Brown's proposal is important not only because it typifies the general view of the epistle's dependency on the Gospel but also because it represents the most significant attempt to come to terms with the complexity of the evidence. It is in our interest, therefore, to take careful note of his argument.⁵

Brown assumes that the epistle was written about a decade after the Gospel, by which time, he judges, the conflict over Johannine values within the community had reached the state of schism referred to in 1 Jn 2.19. He also assumes that the Gospel was regarded by all concerned in the fray as the community's foundational document. By carefully noting and categorizing those attitudes that the epistle writer appears to reject, Brown reconstructs the theological stance of 1 John's opponents, identifying them as Johannine Christians with an exaggeratedly high Christology and a distinct leaning in a gnosticizing direction. Thus, 1 John's text betrays evidence of two opposing groups: one represented by the author and his adherents and the other by the 'secessionists' who have recently left. Each group is interpreting the Johannine tradition according to its own lights and each group is justifying its position by appeal to that tradition as encapsulated in the Gospel. In the epistle writer's message to his readers, therefore, we encounter only the arguments of one side in this conflict buttressed by exposition of the Gospel text. However, Brown sees no reason why the same reliance on Gospel teaching cannot also have been characteristic of the opposite camp. In the case of the Johannine version of the love command, for example, there was nothing to prevent members of either group from practising the commandment to love one another while, at the same time, engaging in vehement opposition to others perceived to be outside that charmed circle. Brown observes that this much, at least, is true of 1 John's own response to the situation.

These views on the affiliation and polemical character of the epistle are worked through in Brown's detailed exegesis of the text. This is tackled from a double perspective. First, because he holds that 1 John has deliberately assumed the mantle of the evangelist, Brown systematically interprets the epistle's teaching against the wider background of the Gospel. He takes it for granted that where the epistle comes into agreement with the Gospel, a direct reference to the evangelist's text is

5. For the argument in full, see Brown, *Epistles*, pp. 49-115.

intended.⁶ Even where Gospel terminology is used in the epistle with undeniable differences in meaning, Brown holds his course, explaining such changes as instances of reinterpretation.⁷ He even claims that the structure of 1 John, which is notoriously difficult to determine, is deliberately modelled on that of the Gospel.⁸ Second, because Brown also holds that the epistle writer's argument is framed with direct reference to the teachings of those who have 'gone out', those points where the epistle is at variance with the Gospel can also be explained along these lines. Thus, if 1 John appears to avoid Gospel terminology or to prefer a non-Gospel word, this is because of his determination to stress his own position against the theology of his opponents as Brown has reconstructed it.⁹

Brown's thesis is argued with characteristic thoroughness and attention to detail and is entirely logical within its own terms. Unfortunately, however, it is also methodologically unsound and completely unrepresentative of the epistle writer's actual position. It is methodologically unsound because it involves reconstructing the beliefs of 1 John's adversaries from the epistle writer's text and then using the reconstruction to interpret the epistle writer's text. This is to argue in a circle, surely the least convincing means of interpreting a text and not to be contemplated unless all else fails.¹⁰ To add to the difficulty, it appears that there is insufficient evidence in 1 John's text to justify such a procedure in any case. As Judith Lieu has successfully shown, the epistle writer's message is primarily concerned with reassuring his own group in the wake of the schism and not with polemizing against its past members.¹¹ A second failure on Brown's part to come to terms

6. See, e.g., on 1 Jn 3.12 (= Jn 8.39-44; 13.2, 27) and on 1 Jn 3.16 (= Jn 15.12-13) (Brown, *Epistles*, pp. 468, 474).

7. Note, e.g., his position on 'the word of life' in 1 Jn 1.1 (Brown, *Epistles*, p. 182).

8. See Brown, *Epistles*, pp. 91-92, 124-28.

9. For example, Brown conjectures that 1 John's choice of the non-Gospel κοινῶν (1 Jn 1.3, 6, 7) shows a deliberate preference for an expression the 'secessionists' would not have used (*Epistles*, pp. 186-87).

10. For this point, see Lieu, *Theology*, pp. 15-16. For the same method of reconstructing the opposition's 'boasts', see J. Painter, 'The "Opponents" in 1 John', *NTS* 32 (1986), pp. 48-71.

11. J.M. Lieu, 'Authority to Become Children of God: A Study of 1 John', *NovT* 23 (1981), pp. 210-28. See also Ruth Edwards's support of Lieu's position against

with the epistle is to ignore the fact that its author conveys not the slightest impression that he is conscious of the weight of the evangelist's mantle on his shoulders. 1 John does not refer to the Gospel, nor does he appear to derive his authority from the evangelist's text. On the contrary, he makes it abundantly clear that his qualification to speak to the matter in hand consists in his link with the tradition 'from the beginning' (1.1-3). We recognize, of course, that of the two authors he is by far the less able, but that is beside the point: 1 John's confidence in his capacity to meet his community's needs in a time of crisis, and to do so on the basis of the claims in his prologue, remains a factor to be reckoned with. This attitude need not automatically imply that the epistle writer could not have known the evangelist's text. Given that on other grounds it is entirely likely that the Gospel came first, such an argument would be unrealistic. However, it does seriously call into question Brown's assumption that 1 John's work was written with direct reference to that of his predecessor and was intended to be interpreted in that light. What finally undoes Brown's neat scheme is the fact that the epistle writer is perfectly capable of referring to tradition which the Gospel does not contain. Brown does his best with this, explaining that at points the epistle writer seeks to circumvent his opponents' claims by going back beyond the Gospel to more ancient Johannine tradition.¹² However, as we have seen, there is no guarantee that 1 John's every move was a knee-jerk response to the opinions of his adversaries. Moreover, as we have also seen, 1 John's first message to his readers is to lay claim to a knowledge of the Johannine tradition from its inception. Yet again, Brown has failed to take the epistle writer at his word. The fact that 1 John appeals to tradition not in the Gospel is consistent with his stand in the prologue and requires no special pleading; what is inconsistent in this context is Brown's assumption that he would appeal to tradition only if, for some reason, the Gospel text were unavailable to him.

Thus, for all Brown's careful scholarship, it appears that the case for the epistle's direct dependence on the Gospel is not proven. The purpose of this book is to propose and explore an alternative view. What now follows is a historical-critical study in which John and 1 John both figure. In Chapter 1 I attempt to establish that Gospel and epistle relate

Brown's in her book, *The Johannine Epistles* (NTG; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), pp. 64-65.

12. See Brown, *Epistles*, pp. 97-100 and p. 336 on ἀντίχριστος.

to one another indirectly by virtue of their common reliance on the Johannine Christian tradition. On that basis, I claim that 1 John can provide a secure and effective means of isolating tradition in the evangelist's text and thus significantly improve our chances of understanding the creative processes that went into the making of the fourth Gospel.¹³ In the remaining four chapters, that claim is put to the test in the case of John's account of the raising of Lazarus. Chapters 2 to 4 deal with three separate aspects of the narrative in John 11, in which appeal to 1 John serves in each case to identify the tradition which is being expounded. In the final chapter, I attempt a description of the making of the Lazarus story in its entirety by combining the findings of the three studies using 1 John with what can be deduced by comparison with other resources of a narrative type in the Synoptics and elsewhere in John's Gospel. The book concludes with a brief discussion of the results of the research and some indication of other areas of study of the Gospel in which the tradition links with 1 John could be used to effect.

13. This chapter is an adaptation of my article 'Witnesses to What was ἀπ' ἀρχῆς: 1 John's Contribution to Our Knowledge of Tradition in the Fourth Gospel', published in *JSNT* 48 (1992) pp. 43-65 (repr. in S.E. Porter and C.A. Evans [eds.], *The Johannine Writings: A Sheffield Reader* [BS, 32; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995] pp. 138-60).

Chapter 1

JOINT WITNESSES TO WHAT WAS FROM THE BEGINNING

The distance from the Synoptics to John's Gospel often seems not so much a step as a quantum leap, for while John also records the life of the historical Jesus he seems to have conceived of its significance independently and on a vastly different scale. As a result the final overall effect is one of transformation and change, and perhaps no more strikingly so than in his presentation of Jesus himself. According to John, Jesus' story begins not in earthly time but with God before all time, and his entry into Palestinian society is the entry of the divine Word into human history. As the Word become flesh Jesus wields the power of God with conscious majesty, seemingly oblivious to human doubt. No intriguing 'messianic secret' keeps the reader guessing about Jesus' identity. On the contrary, his identity, origin and destiny are here openly proclaimed and attention is focused instead on human response to him. For all who encounter Jesus in John a final choice has to be made between stark alternatives—life or death, salvation or condemnation—because by virtue of his very presence in the world the conditions of judgment day have come into force. This is powerful and arresting imagery, but in fact what we see here probably has little to do with the historical Jesus; rather, it is the construct of a remarkable mind which has taken Jesus' story and set it within the framework of God's own confrontation with the world he created, loves and wishes to save. Even in these few brief remarks the distinctiveness of John's approach becomes apparent and we are easily persuaded that this fourth Gospel has been executed by a highly original and adventurous exponent of the genre. And yet, eccentric though John's contribution may seem in this context, the mere fact that he has undertaken to produce a Gospel, rather than a dogmatic treatise, has important implications for our attempts to understand his thinking. Specifically, it suggests that John's originality does not consist in inventing *de novo*, but that he has

created his Gospel by a process of expanding and expounding on a tradition already known to him as a Christian before he took up his pen.

This view of John as a receiver and interpreter of tradition finds confirmation in certain editorial comments and attitudes in the Gospel itself. As regards his awareness of tradition, it should not be missed that John himself records that the disciples not only witnessed Jesus' words and deeds but also *remembered* them after the event, a remembrance which would subsequently be informed by greater understanding (2.22; 12.16).¹ Furthermore, John's comments in 20.30-31 leave us in little doubt that he knew a number of miracle stories before he began writing, those recorded in the Gospel apparently being the result of the selection of such material as he deemed suitable to his purpose. However, there are other texts where John's self-perception as an interpreter of tradition is given prominence. The presentation of the so-called 'beloved disciple' is a good example of this attitude. This disciple is evidently intended as a key identity figure for Johannine Christianity and is frequently portrayed as the only one of Jesus' followers with the capacity to understand him and grasp his meaning. It is no accident, for example, that in 13.23 this disciple alone lies in Jesus' lap just as in 1.18 Jesus himself is described as in the lap of the Father whom he is uniquely able to interpret.² No doubt also the detail on the function of the Spirit-Paraclete in imparting to the faithful a new and hitherto unavailable insight into Jesus' words and deeds would be pointless if John had not thought of himself as a beneficiary of the Spirit's exegetical guidance.³

From our point of view this evidence is valuable because it provides an insight into what has gone into the making of the fourth Gospel. On

1. Compare also the injunction to remember Jesus' word in 15.20.

2. Note also the beloved disciple's access to 'inside information' in 13.25-26, his intuitive grasp of the meaning of the discarded graveclothes in 20.8-9 and his quick recognition of the risen Jesus in 21.7. As Mary's adopted son (19.26-27) he is to be seen as Jesus' *Doppelgänger* who faithfully reflects his character and intentions. The overall intention here seems to be to promote the Johannine ideal. See further, K.B. Quast, *Peter and the Beloved Disciple: Figures for a Community in Crisis* (JSNTSup, 32; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1989), esp. pp. 159-62.

3. For descriptions of the Spirit's exegetical functions see 14.26; 15.26; 16.12-15. R.E. Brown's comment on this captures the implications well: 'The Fourth Evangelist must have regarded himself as an instrument of the Paraclete when in G John he reported what Jesus said and did but at the same time completely reinterpreted it' (*Epistles*, p. 287).