

PROGRESS AND REGRESS IN RECENT JOHANNINE SCHOLARSHIP: REFLECTIONS UPON THE ROAD AHEAD

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It is an entirely undeserved privilege to be allowed to add a few reflections of my own to those of my esteemed mentor, D. A. Carson. Most of what I know about matters Johannine I have learned from him, so I can hardly hope to add anything substantive to his highly perceptive observations. My brief comments will revolve around the following two questions, raised in Carson's essay: (1) Why do so many probe the historical Jesus with scarcely a glance at John?, and (2) What constitutes "progress" in biblical scholarship, in general, and in Johannine studies, in particular?

The answer to the first question is, of course, that John is very different from the Synoptics, so that many feel they have to choose between the two. Most opt for the Synoptics and hold that John is interested in theology, not history. This conventional wisdom, however, has recently been challenged by a remarkable phalanx of scholars (M. Thompson 1996; Hengel 1999; Blomberg 2002; Köstenberger 2002). The establishment of the John, Jesus, and History Group in the Society of Biblical Literature is also indicative of the dissatisfaction felt by many regarding this simplistic way of construing the relationship between the Synoptics and John. The reassessment, if not rehabilitation, of the historical reliability of John's Gospel—call it the "second look"—is one of the most heartening recent developments in Johannine scholarship.

The other fascinating question raised by Don Carson's essay is that of "progress" in biblical scholarship. As recently as 1990, D. Moody Smith could state without fear of contradiction that J. Louis Martyn's version of the "Johannine community hypothesis" constituted one of the assured paradigms in Johannine study on which others could confidently build their own theories (1990: 293 n. 30). A decade and a half later, this consensus has significantly eroded. In fact, some former proponents of the hypothesis have publicly renounced it (e.g., Kysar 2005; cf. Köstenberger 2004, 1–3), while others have severely criticized it as inadequately taking into account the testimony of the early church (Hengel 1993) and as being at odds with first-century Christianity (Bauckham 1998), not to mention the difficulty the Johannine mission theme presents for radically sectarian readings of John's Gospel (Köstenberger 1998).

What only a short while ago seemed to be a common foundation of Johannine scholarship has thus given way to a state of things in which "the center does not hold." The Johannine literature section of the Society of Biblical Literature has turned increasingly to an exploration of diverse readings in the spirit of postmodernism. Don Carson speaks of the "balkanization" of Johannine Studies and notes the absence of widely accepted paradigms. In fact, it appears that, efforts at integration notwithstanding, the discipline is in considerable ferment if not disintegration (cf. Guthrie 1999). This state of affairs, in my view, is tied to the just-mentioned notion of "progress" in biblical scholarship. Too often, traditional views in Johannine scholarship have been overturned not on the basis of new, better evidence, but rather on the basis of different philosophical presuppositions that have led scholars to abandon long-held views in favor of those more in keeping with their larger perspectives on Scripture (Köstenberger 2001). At the end of his article, Don Carson suggests that there may be certain benefits to what he calls "confessional" Johannine scholarship (as well as perils to "dogmatic anticonfessionalism"). I think he has put his finger on a key question, namely whether rejecting various doctrinal

commitments as out of bounds for biblical scholarship has really advanced the discipline and led to discernible progress.

In fact, I would go even further than Carson. If much of recent Johannine scholarship turned out to be a blind alley, if not a step in the wrong direction, I submit we should not politely compliment such scholars for their valuable contribution to the field; we should, rather, refuse to call this “progress.” “Progress” in Johannine scholarship should not be conceived in evolutionary terms, as if “more recent” necessarily means “more accurate.” Rather, the burden of proof should be placed on newer theories to show how they are superior to conventional ways of conceiving of the nature of John’s Gospel. Can it be that at least in certain ways precritical exegesis may be superior to recent scholarship (Steinmetz 1980)? Can doctrine and historical research coexist? Is it possible that what is viewed by some as progress may in fact be regress? In this postmodern world, paradigms are increasingly rare. Most likely, the future will witness increasing atomization and polarization between “confessional” and “critical” scholarship. Ideally, the text of John’s Gospel and the available evidence could serve as common points of reference and as a proving ground for the hypotheses of scholars from a variety of viewpoints and faith commitments. Time will tell whether this is a realistic possibility. I must confess I am not too optimistic in this regard.

I close with a brief *desideratum* for further research. In short, I think it would be a mistake to divorce the study of John’s Gospel from historical questions. The literary turn of biblical scholarship, including Johannine studies, has yielded some interesting readings and genuine advances in understanding the Fourth Gospel’s narrative. Yet these insights must be grounded in a proper understanding of the place of John’s Gospel in the first-century world and Christianity, including such considerations as the matrix of the Gentile mission, the emergence of Gnosticism, and the destruction of the temple (Westcott 1971, xxxvii–xxxviii; cf. Köstenberger 2005, 207 n. 4). If the “Johannine community hypothesis” in its various permutations were found wanting, the solution, I submit, is not a turn toward postmodernism but a search for more plausible alternative paradigms and historical settings for John’s Gospel. I am thinking here, among other things, of the Johannine temple theme (an internal datum) in relation to the destruction of the temple (an external datum) as part of the milieu in which John’s Gospel took shape (Köstenberger 2005 and literature cited). Perhaps it is in avenues such as these that there lies a certain measure of hope and promise for future Johannine research.

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