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DISCOVERING JOHN

Content, interpretation, reception

Second edition

RUTH B. EDWARDS



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*To my husband, Patrick,
and to all who have 'discovered' John with me,
at Aberdeen, Cuddesdon and Oxford*

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Preface to the second edition

It is over ten years since the first edition of *Discovering John* was written. During this interval more than 15 commentaries have appeared in English, some very substantial, as well as several in German. There has also been a remarkable outflow of literature about John, in both journal articles and monographs.

The focus of this fresh scholarly output has been very varied. Questions relating to authorship, background and composition continue to intrigue, with considerable interest in the matter of sources. More scholars are now attracted to the idea of John's dependence on Mark and possibly also Luke and Matthew; but others still maintain John's independence, or influence from the Synoptics only at a later stage in John's composition. In a massive work von Wahlde (2010) has subjected both Gospel and Epistles of John to a thoroughgoing source-critical analysis, arguing for three editions of the Gospel. Others prefer to think in terms of two editions (plus minor glosses), while a minority continue to maintain unity of composition. There has also been significant work on John's textual tradition under the auspices of the International Greek New Testament Project, and a new edition of the standard Greek text (Nestle–Aland, 2012).

Interest has been renewed in the possibility of John's Gospel incorporating historical tradition, including eyewitness testimony, as argued by Bauckham (2006). The 'John, Jesus, and History Group' of the Society for Biblical Literature has been particularly active in this respect. Other scholars remain sceptical. The Gospel's social background and 'community' continue to stimulate scholarship, particularly among those with a social-scientific approach, though I confess I find the emphasis on 'patron–client' relationships excessive.

In recent years attention has also focused on the history of interpretation of New Testament texts, their patristic exegesis, and their influence in literature and art. For John's Gospel, works by Hamburger (2002), M. Edwards (2004), Elowsky (2006, 2007), Bruner (2012) and Wheeler (2012) have been especially helpful. Other areas of interest include John's Jewish context (particularly the relation of the Gospel to the Targums) and the problem of John's attitude to 'the Jews'. There has been a burgeoning of fresh literature on the Gospel's literary qualities, especially its depiction of characters. John's theology continues to rouse great interest, with the inevitable focus on Christology (including the question of whether this

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evolved partly in response to the Roman emperor cult). The Gospel also continues to be used devotionally, with some insightful work.

The sheer volume of newly published work has made preparing this revised edition a more formidable task than I had anticipated. The pressure on academics to publish, combined with the comparative ease of word-processing, and the development of computer-aided research and electronic publication, has led to the creation of what has been dubbed 'the infinite library' (Bockmuehl, 2006, p. 33). It is now virtually impossible to keep up with all the scholarly literature over more than a tiny subject – and John's Gospel is not one of these! I have tried to access as much as I reasonably can, and where I have had to rely on secondary citation, I have sought to make this clear.

This second edition includes two new Excursuses, respectively on John's textual tradition, not covered in the first edition (Excursus 1) and on the problem of eyewitness testimony, previously discussed only briefly (Excursus 2). Fuller attention is paid to *Wirkungsgeschichte* – the reception history and the influence of John – not just in the expanded Chapter 2, but also at other places in the work. I have assessed afresh the potential role of oral tradition and the value of John as a source for the 'historical Jesus', though I am well aware of the problems facing anyone attempting this. The Bibliography and Indexes have been updated.

I should like to express my thanks to Philip Law of SPCK Publishing for the invitation to update this work and for his enthusiasm for the 'Discovering' series, and, as always, to my husband, Patrick Edwards, for his unfailing support. It is my hope that this revised edition will be of increased usefulness both to students and to more experienced scholars, and that it will stimulate further interest in this intriguing and creative writing, which has shaped Christian doctrine and inspired readers since early times.

Ruth B. Edwards
Aberdeen

Preface to the first edition

John's Gospel has been loved, interpreted and reinterpreted by Christian believers since it was first composed. It has also been the subject of intense academic study by scholars from within and outside the Church. This book seeks to make available to academics, students, clergy, teachers and a wider public insights from this scholarship and my own reflections, resulting from some 25 years of New Testament teaching and research. It is written as far as possible in simple language, with technical terms explained and Greek and Hebrew transliterated; at the same time, it regularly interacts with professional scholarship and the unending stream of new publications in danger of engulfing the would-be writer on John.

A. T. Hanson once suggested that older scholars who attempt to write anything substantial on John take their lives into their hands. From Origen in the fourth century to Ernst Haenchen in the twentieth, Johannine experts have died before completing their books. The commentaries of Bernard, Hoskyns, Sanders and Haenchen were all published posthumously, as was Robinson's *The Priority of John*. Raymond Brown died while revising his great commentary. This untoward 'mortality' may perhaps be caused by a tendency among scholars to wait until their later years before writing on John – a task often seen as the crown of their endeavours. But a further factor must surely be the complexity and range of Johannine scholarship and the sheer depth of John's theology.

My own interest in John goes back to school days and early years as a professional Greek scholar. I am immensely grateful to Robin Barbour, then Professor of New Testament Exegesis at Aberdeen University, for first inviting me, in the late 1970s, to lecture to second-year theological students on John, and for the impetus this gave me to pursue Johannine studies in greater depth. Under Howard Marshall, his successor in the Aberdeen chair, further courses followed at honours level and beyond. Later, when I was working at Ripon College, Cuddesdon, Professor Christopher Rowland invited me to give lectures on John's Gospel at the University of Oxford. To these colleagues, to my former doctoral and master's students, and to all whom I taught at undergraduate level and in summer schools, I extend my sincere thanks for their enthusiasm for John, and their indirect contribution to this book through shared thoughts and questions. The book is dedicated to them.

I should also like to express appreciation for all the scholars whose works are discussed in this volume, and the many others too numerous to cite

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who have helped form its thought. Although I may differ from them in places, this book is the richer for the stimulus of their contributions. Special thanks go to those colleagues who have discussed John with me at the Johannine Seminar of the British New Testament Society and other scholarly gatherings.

In these days of reader-response criticism we are particularly conscious of ways in which personal and social background influences interpretation of texts. I have written this book as a critical scholar who is also a committed Christian and a priest in the Scottish Episcopal Church. The Bible and the life of the Church have shaped my faith, as has the process of intellectual enquiry, including the study of other cultures and faiths. From my first study of John's Gospel I have admired it and been inspired by it; but over the years I have become increasingly aware of the problems it poses for Jewish readers and others who see the New Testament as responsible for fostering anti-Semitism, intolerance and bigotry. I have tried to face these difficulties honestly while continuing to recognize the immense potential for good within the Bible and this Gospel in particular.

In interpreting John I have striven to be as conciliatory as possible towards those of other faiths, while remaining faithful to the text. To this end, the expressions 'Hebrew Bible' and 'Jewish Scriptures' have been used in preference to 'Old Testament', and 'BCE' (before the Common Era) and 'CE' (of the Common Era) instead of 'BC' (before Christ) and 'AD' (*anno Domini*). I am well aware that a fully objective analysis is impossible; but truth has been the first priority, even if this means challenging some traditional understandings. I have worked primarily from the Greek and Hebrew texts, although I have regularly consulted the standard translations. Unless otherwise stated, all biblical renderings are my own; they make no attempt at elegance or 'dynamic equivalence', but are designed to bring out the text's structure and basic meaning.

I should like to thank the staff of SPCK for their patience and courtesy, and Ruth McCurry, the commissioning editor, for her enthusiasm for the project. Most of all I want to thank my husband, Patrick Edwards – *vir optimus et eruditus* – for his unfailing support and help from the book's first inception to the final stages. He has read every chapter, in more than one draft, and devoted untold hours to checking and indexing biblical references. I am deeply grateful to him for his comments, constructive criticisms and encouragement.

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Abbreviations

Abbreviations of journals and series are those used regularly in the scholarly literature. For details please see *The SBL Handbook of Style*, ed. P. H. Alexander *et al.* (Peabody, MA, Hendrickson, 1999), pp. 121–52. Help can also be found in the lists printed annually in the *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* (end of pt 4) and *New Testament Abstracts* (start of pt 1).

| | |
|---------------|---|
| ANF | <i>Ante-Nicene Christian Library</i> , ed. A. Roberts and J. Donaldson |
| AV | Authorized Version (King James Version) |
| Bib. Inst. | Biblical Institute Press (Pontificio Istituto Biblico, Rome) |
| ESV | English Standard Version |
| ET | English translation |
| <i>et al.</i> | <i>et alibi</i> (and other places), <i>et alii</i> (and others) |
| f. | and page/verse/etc. immediately following |
| GNB | Good News Bible |
| ICC | International Critical Commentary |
| ISBE | <i>International Standard Bible Encyclopedia</i> (rev. edn), ed. G. W. Bromiley |
| JB | Jerusalem Bible |
| JSHJ | <i>Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus</i> |
| LNTS | Library of New Testament Studies |
| LSJ | Liddell and Scott, <i>Greek-English Lexicon</i> (rev. edn), ed. H. S. Jones and R. McKenzie |
| LXX | Septuagint (Old Testament in Greek) |
| NEB | New English Bible |
| NIV | New International Version |
| NJB | New Jerusalem Bible |
| NPNF | <i>Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers</i> , ed. P. Schaff |
| NRSV | New Revised Standard Version |
| par. | and parallel(s) |
| REB | Revised English Bible |
| RGG | <i>Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart</i> , ed. K. Galling |
| RSV | Revised Standard Version |
| SBL | Society for Biblical Literature |

Abbreviations

| | |
|------|--|
| TDNT | <i>Theological Dictionary of the New Testament</i> , ed. G. Kittel (tr. and ed. G. W. Bromiley) |
| TSAJ | Texts and Studies in Ancient Judaism |
| UBS | United Bible Societies |

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Introduction

For many centuries John's Gospel¹ has been treated as the crown of the Gospels. Its author, identified with the seer of Revelation, the 'elder' and author of the Johannine Epistles, and the apostle John, was seen as the New Testament 'theologian' par excellence, *Ioannēs ho theologos*, St John the Divine. Evidence for his especially close relationship to Jesus was found in the allusions to 'the disciple whom Jesus loved', who lay on Jesus' breast at the Last Supper, said to have written 'these things' (John 21.24). The 'mystical' theology of his Prologue was interpreted as revealing John's closeness to God himself. John's very name, derived from the Hebrew word for 'grace', was seen as disclosing his true character, as one who revealed in an unparalleled way the grace of God. It is no wonder that the Gospel has inspired artists and musicians, theologians, poets and thinkers, and countless ordinary Christians. It has sustained faith, aroused love and encouraged heroism, and profoundly shaped Christian doctrine. In patristic and medieval times John was symbolized as an eagle, 'the spiritual bird, fast-flying, God-seeing' (Eriugena),² an image still used in church art. He was so much revered that artists often depicted him as Christlike and enthroned; sometimes he was spoken of as 'angelic' or 'deified' (Hamburger, 2002, with illustrations).

J. B. Lightfoot called John's Gospel the 'most divine of all divine books' (1893, p. 122). It has been seen as speaking tellingly to the simple believer, as well as soaring to the heights or plumbing the depths of the Christian faith for the sophisticated (cf. Marsh, 1968, p. 81). Jean Vanier (2004, p. 15) speaks of the 'music' he hears behind John's words; Martin Hengel calls him 'a towering theologian', a 'great teacher to whom the church owes a good part of its foundation' (1989, pp. ix, 135). But John has also been criticized as 'world-denying' and 'sectarian', 'androcentric', and 'anti-Jewish' – 'a Gospel of Christian love and Jew hatred' (Kohler, 1905, p. 251). While in the past it was seen as painting 'a perfect portrait of Jesus' (Temple, 1939, p. xvi), today some view it as historically inaccurate, 'a presentation of falsehood', and responsible for stimulating and supporting the vilest anti-Semitism (Casey, 1996, esp. pp. 198, 218–29).

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What is this writing that has provoked such diverse responses? Who wrote it, and why was it written? Can a study of its context and circumstances of composition help us understand it? It has been said that the questions asked of a text are as important as the answers given (Malbon, 2000, p. 1). Readers with a historical bent may be stimulated by the questions just posed; those with more literary interests may be intrigued by the Gospel as ‘story’. How does its ‘plot’ work? How does its author use characters, and what literary devices are employed? Their questions and motivation for study will be different from those of the first set of readers. Others will be more interested in John’s theology. How does John relate to the religious thought of its day? What is distinctive about its message? Christians (and others) study biblical texts to deepen their personal faith, or find guidance for living. Many are inspired by John; for others, it raises problems. Does its message need to be reinterpreted for today’s world? How should Christians respond to recent criticisms of it? Does John still have meaning for the Church and contemporary society?

This book is intended for those interested in any of these aspects of John. It will not answer all their questions, but it is hoped that it may help them to think out for themselves where they stand. Chapters 1–2 outline the shape of the Gospel and review its interpretation over the centuries and different ways it may be read. Chapters 3–5 investigate authorship and composition, including the questions of John’s sources, historical accuracy, purpose in writing and intended audience. Chapters 6–9 focus more sharply on theology, especially John’s Christology (understanding of Christ). They explore the various methods by which he seeks to convey Jesus’ identity through miracles, faith confessions, and Jesus’ words and actions, death and Resurrection. Chapter 10 discusses John’s use of characters, both from a literary angle, and to see how they illuminate John’s understanding of faith in Jesus. Chapters 11–12 tackle different facets of the question whether John’s Gospel is ‘anti-Jewish’ (or ‘anti-Semitic’),³ and how John’s belief in Jesus’ divinity relates to Jewish monotheism. Chapter 13 draws together the threads of this study, centring on whether John’s Gospel has any abiding value for today. Excursus 1 discusses John’s textual tradition, and Excursus 2 explores the question of eyewitness testimony in John.

Reading John’s story

At this point you are invited to read John’s Gospel for yourself in the same way as you would read any book, following its storyline and enjoying its

shape. As you read, you may like to refer to Table 1 (pp. 170f.), which summarizes the themes of the following discussion.

I. Proem: Prologue and Testimony

The Gospel opens with a proem (Greek *prooimion*, ‘opening’), consisting of an elevated ‘Prologue’ followed by a plain prose narrative, sometimes called the ‘Testimony’ (Dodd, 1953, p. 292). The Prologue (1.1–18) is mysterious, not readily grasped on a quick reading, or even on several readings, conveying its message through images of light, darkness, life, birth, grace, truth and glory. It meditates on Jesus as the divine, pre-existent Word, who became flesh to make God known to humankind. Apart from Jesus, only one historical personage is mentioned: John (the Baptist), sent by God as a witness (1.6, 15).

The Testimony (1.19–51) takes us from eternity to time: different characters are shown who testify to Jesus through christological confessions. He is acknowledged in turn as God’s ‘lamb’, ‘son’, ‘messiah’ and ‘Israel’s king’. But although the Testimony seems to be historical narrative, being marked off by clear indications of time (e.g. 1.29), it too is preparatory for the main story. Its purpose, like that of the Prologue, is to herald themes which will be important for John – not just ‘titles’ for Jesus, but also motifs like ‘water’ (1.26), ‘Spirit’ (1.32) and ‘witness’ (1.7f., 34). It also anticipates future events, e.g. the recognition of Jesus as ‘messiah’ (1.41), placed much later by the other Gospels (cf. Mark 8.29 par.).

II. Jesus’ self-revelation and ministry

The main narrative is generally divided into two sections, with further subdivisions (cf. Table 1). John 2—12, sometimes called ‘the Book of Signs’,⁴ reflects on Jesus’ disclosure of himself and his ministry. Interest centres on his miracles and teaching, and controversies arising from them. Only a few miracles are related, but those chosen have a significant role. Beginning with that at Cana (2.1–11), they are called ‘signs’ (Greek *sēmeia*) and function as pointers to Jesus’ identity. Their climax is the raising of Lazarus (11.1–44), demonstrating Jesus’ control over death and looking forward to his own Resurrection. These miracles are often associated with dialogues bringing out their meaning. Jesus also discloses his identity through his actions in the Temple (2.13–22), in his dialogue with Nicodemus (3.1–15) and in his meeting with the Samaritan woman (4.4–42). Particularly intriguing are the references forward to Jesus’ Passion, e.g. ‘Destroy this Temple and in three days I will raise it up’ (2.19), ‘As Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert, so must the Son

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of Man be lifted up' (3.14). These grow in frequency and intensity as the narrative advances.

Another prominent theme of these chapters is Jesus' relationship to Moses, flagged in 1.17 and 1.45. By his miracles and teaching, Jesus shows himself to be like Moses, and yet as greater than Moses (6.4–59, esp. 41–51; cf. Boismard, 1993). Jesus is also presented as greater than Jacob (4.12) and greater than Abraham (8.53–58). This interest in Moses and the patriarchs, together with numerous allusions to the Jewish Scriptures, raises questions about how John saw Christianity's relation to Judaism. Some (e.g. Moloney, 1996; Brown, 1997, p. 334) have suggested that by giving prominence to Jewish religious feasts – Sabbath, Passover, Dedication, Tabernacles – John depicts Jesus as superseding (for Christians) many aspects of Judaism, including both Temple and festivals.

By his words and actions Jesus antagonizes 'the Jews', and their leaders 'the Pharisees' and 'High Priests'. These are represented as misunderstanding Jesus, 'persecuting' him and seeking to kill him. Some scholars (e.g. Harvey, 1976) see John as presenting Jesus 'on trial', or as the focus of a juridical controversy (Asiedu-Peprah, 2001). 'The Jews' make charges, and Jesus defends himself and makes counter-accusations. The Baptist, the disciples and the crowd all bear witness to him, as do the Scriptures and, most importantly, the Father (8.18). Readers find themselves drawn into the process and having to make up their own minds about Jesus. There is also a deep irony about all this: although Jesus appears to be 'on trial', he is in fact serving as judge over, and witness against, those who accuse him (this element is brought out very fully by Lincoln, 2000). This stylized presentation, though dramatic, presents problems: by using 'the Jews' to stand for opposition to Jesus, John lays himself open to 'anti-Jewish' readings of his text, with dire consequences.

Another feature of this section is Jesus' 'elusiveness' (Stibbe, 1991). The Pharisees send officers to arrest him (7.32), but they are so impressed by his words they fail to do so (7.45f.). After Jesus' statement that he existed before Abraham, 'the Jews' try to stone him, but he hides himself (8.59). Again they attempt to stone him, or arrest him, but he escapes (10.31, 39). Jesus is also 'elusive' in the sense that he speaks enigmatically, and is often misunderstood (see further Hamid-Khani, 2000). This 'elusiveness' is also part of the pattern of John's plot.

In John 2—12 Jesus appears as both life-giver (e.g. 4.13f., 50; 6.68; 11.25f.) and judge. By coming as a 'light' to the world, Jesus shows up the darkness (3.19–21): by speaking the truth, he makes people come to a decision

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between truth and falsehood, 'light' and 'darkness', himself and 'the world'. His coming separates people into those who accept him and those who reject him. This recurring dichotomy climaxes in John 11, where Jesus raises Lazarus after Martha has confessed him as the Christ. 'The Jews' are divided into those who put their faith in Jesus and those who inform on him to the Pharisees, leading to the plot to kill him (11.45f.). Chapter 12 acts as a transition between Jesus' public ministry and his Passion. Mary anoints his feet, and a crowd acclaims him 'Israel's king'. He speaks allusively of his death, agonizing over his 'hour' (12.23–33), and tells of the casting out of 'the ruler of this world' (12.31). This section ends with a sombre quotation from Isaiah about God blinding eyes and hardening hearts, and an appeal from Jesus to believe, with both a warning of judgement and promise of eternal life (12.37–50).

III. Passion and Resurrection Narrative

This part is sometimes called 'the Book of Glory',⁵ because John sees Jesus' suffering and death not as his humiliation, but rather as his 'lifting up' or 'glorification'. Jesus' death, Resurrection and return to the Father are presented as part of a single movement. Thus the 'hour' of his death is also the 'hour' of his glory (13.31f.; 17.1, etc.). Chapter 13 both introduces the Passion and provides a key to its understanding. At his last meal, on the eve of the Passover, Jesus washes his disciples' feet as an example of love and humble service; by this act he foreshadows his loving 'to the end' (cf. Edwards, 1994). The emotional tension grows as he gives Judas a morsel from the common dish, and Satan enters him. Judas leaves to betray Jesus, 'and it was night' (13.30).

Jesus' tender farewell to his disciples and his 'High-Priestly Prayer'⁶ occupy John 14—17. The pace is slow and reflective, as the Evangelist mingles reassurances for the future, promises of the Paraclete (Holy Spirit, seen as advocate and guide) and injunctions to love. He calls the disciples his 'friends', warns them that 'the world' will hate them, speaks of his 'departure', and promises to return. But there is also a note of triumph: Jesus' farewell ends with the words, 'Be encouraged; I have defeated the world' (16.33). He has fulfilled his mission: he has made God known to those given him. He now consecrates himself and his disciples, praying that they may be one. His closeness to the Father is intensely expressed as he prays that the disciples may know the love with which God loves him.

The pace quickens with the narrative of Jesus' trial and death. Roman soldiers and Jewish officers arrest him. In a series of dramatic scenes Jesus

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evolved partly in response to the Roman emperor cult). The Gospel also continues to be used devotionally, with some insightful work.

The sheer volume of newly published work has made preparing this revised edition a more formidable task than I had anticipated. The pressure on academics to publish, combined with the comparative ease of word-processing, and the development of computer-aided research and electronic publication, has led to the creation of what has been dubbed 'the infinite library' (Bockmuehl, 2006, p. 33). It is now virtually impossible to keep up with all the scholarly literature over more than a tiny subject – and John's Gospel is not one of these! I have tried to access as much as I reasonably can, and where I have had to rely on secondary citation, I have sought to make this clear.

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