



Reviews

WHO WAS JOHN?: THE FOURTH GOSPEL DEBATE AFTER BENEDICT XVI'S JESUS OF NAZARETH by John Redford, *St Paul's*, London, 2008, Pp. 319, £16.95, pbk

Canon John Redford, Reader in Biblical Hermeneutics at the Maryvale Institute, here presents an uncompromising defence of the traditional view that the Gospel of John is, historically speaking, precisely that: it was composed, more or less in its entirety and as it now stands, by John the son of Zebedee, brother of James, the 'Beloved Disciple' of its own narrative.

It would be fairer to say that this book is not so much a defence as an attack upon the historical scepticism of biblical critics since Kant, with Rudolf Bultmann being cast as the villain of the piece and Benedict XVI as the hero, championing a return to the belief in the possibility of revelation in and through history with his *Jesus of Nazareth*. Not that Redford rejects historical criticism as such: 'the Pope... is not even going beyond the bounds of legitimate historical Jesus research, provided that we abandon the anti-incarnational and anti-miraculous presuppositions of so much historical Jesus research' (p.49). The book begins with three brief chapters which set Pope Benedict's life of Jesus in the context of the shifting trends of biblical criticism, and while these are occasionally a little sycophantic in tone for a scholarly work, they offer a very clear and fair assessment of the difference in stance between himself and those for whom historical study begins with the bracketing out of the supernatural. Whether Redford will convince these latter that they should abandon their suppositions I very much doubt, and it is easy to imagine a great many biblical scholars getting no further than the first two dozen or so pages of this before throwing it aside as hopelessly uncritical or even fundamentalist.

But the tide is changing: more and more scripture scholars are showing themselves unwilling to pretend not to believe what they say in the creed, or to put those beliefs aside in an exercise in academic schizophrenia. Furthermore, quite apart from these hermeneutical starting points, it is no longer considered impossible that the Fourth Gospel contains substantial elements of tradition that go back to Christ himself – in particular, the ever-growing strength of the 'early high Christology' movement means it can no longer be taken for granted that the explicitly incarnational presentation of Jesus proves that this Gospel bears witness not to the historical Jesus but to the Christology of some hypothetical 'Johannine Community'. Redford himself argued in a previous work (*Bad, Mad or God?*, 2004) that the 'I AM' sayings in John are historically authentic, comprehensible of Jesus in his particular place and time, and clearly demonstrating his claim to be identified with the God of Israel. Only if we cannot believe that Jesus *was* the incarnation of the God of Israel and knew himself to be so do we have reason to reject these sayings, and more broadly to reject the Fourth Gospel's presentation of Jesus as authentically historical rather than theological myth-making.

So what Benedict has done for the historical Jesus, Redford seeks to do, *mutatis mutandis*, for the author of John's Gospel. He begins by noting that chapter 20 of John makes it quite explicit that the Gospel purports, at least, to be substantially an eyewitness account, testimony to the life of Jesus but

especially to the way in which he spoke of his mission and his relationship with the Father. One of the problems he must address – which has often led to rejection of the historicity of the Gospel – is its difference from the synoptics, but Redford argues that this is explicable simply in terms of different strategies for selecting material, because of different purposes. He does not quite address satisfactorily that, while we can understand John's Gospel as carefully selecting and ordering material without rejecting its substantial historicity, it is more difficult to explain why so much of this christological material was omitted by the other evangelists. He proposes briefly that 'It is quite possible that the early Christians were *embarrassed* by the full divinity of Christ... In the process of the selection of the tradition, the Synoptics simply do not wish to overstate the incarnation' (p.75, emphasis original). This is a bold suggestion, and needs a lot more justification if it is to hold the chain of argument together.

Since Redford is rightly critical of a common tendency in biblical scholarship to glide from 'it is plausible' to 'it may be taken as established' in forming arguments, it is surely fair to criticise him for the same mistake, and alas it is not infrequent. The next chapter is a typical example, in which he seeks to establish the early date of the Fourth Gospel. It is a sadly brief chapter, and does little more than summarise JAT Robinson's arguments; these, however, only show that arguments that John *must* be late do not hold water, not that it must be early enough to be written by an eyewitness.

After an interesting excursus on possible influences on John – Jewish, Greek, Persian, etc. – which again shows that the Gospel is *plausibly* the product of a writer situated within a solidly Jewish context, Redford moves on to look at patristic evidence for the authorship of the Gospel. Here he engages at last with Richard Bauckham's controversial *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses* (2006), and he demonstrates that 'it remains a genuine possibility' that the author of John is who tradition claims him to be. Bauckham, though conservative, differs – he considers the author indeed to be identified with the Beloved Disciple, but this one is 'John the Elder' and not John the son of Zebedee. Redford is evidently somewhat uncomfortable with the fact that the Pope concurs with this, and I note that elsewhere Bauckham has accused Redford of mis-representing his argument (*The Tablet*, 31/1/09, p. 24).

What ought to be the last substantive chapter in the book goes on to argue from exegesis of the Gospel text for the identity of the author, the Beloved Disciple, and John son of Zebedee. Again, the argument is plausible, and if, as Redford claims, the tradition should be given the benefit of the doubt, then his case is made. The sceptical historical critic will not be convinced, but Redford makes a fascinating and a fairly strong case, and I think the sceptic will be forced to admit that his refusal to concur with the tradition results from his presuppositions rather than being the necessary outcome of an objective study.

The chapter that follows, one of the most enjoyable and convincing, is a fairly devastating critique of 'theories of composition' of the Gospel, such as the work of the much-revered Raymond Brown. The only flaw in this chapter is that it should be much earlier: it is surely one of the building blocks of Redford's argument to show that the text is properly to be read as a unity rather than seen as the result of multiple layers of redaction. On the other hand, there are those who would argue for reading it as a unity prescinding entirely from questions of history: 'I don't care how the text emerged, it is canonical, it is as it is, and I shall read it so.' But Redford, perhaps wisely, gives more or less the last word to the riposte to this offered by Markus Bockmuehl: 'In dealing with the New Testament's inalienably theological subject matter there can be no neutral history nor a neutral historian' (Bockmuehl: *To Be Or Not To Be*, 1998, cited p. 281).

Redford has not tried to be a neutral historian, and his work is much the better for it.

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EARLY IRISH MONASTICISM: AN UNDERSTANDING OF ITS CULTURAL ROOTS by Catherine Thom T. & T. Clark London 2007, Pp. xxix+226, pbk., n.p.g.

One of the ways that Christianity renews itself is by reflection on aspects of its past, its experience, and its variety over the centuries. For Christians the past is not simply prologue, but a treasure trove of memory from which we formulate and reformulate our identities. One striking area where this process has been occurring in recent years has been the so-called area of 'Celtic spirituality' which, leaving aside the question as to whether it has genuine historical credentials – and clearly many authors in the field have little more than a taste for illuminated manuscripts and a fertile imagination – demonstrates some of those areas where contemporary Christians believe they need to recover insights from the past. It is within this perspective – a work seeking to recover parts of the Christian memory – of studies on the early Irish church that I approach this book.

The monasticism found in Ireland in the early middle ages is apparently well-known: one cannot open a book on Christian art but one sees fabulous images from illuminated manuscripts described as the work of 'Celtic Monks', the Irish tourist industry produces images of round towers in spectacular scenery, while the shelves in religious bookshops bend under the number of books on 'Celtic spirituality.' By contrast, among scholarly works one has to go back to 1931 for the last serious study of Irish monasticism, by John Ryan, a trained historian properly equipped with the auxiliary and, most importantly, the linguistic skills. There have, of course been many scholars since who have approached parts of the monastic legacy, but these have been either specialist investigations (e.g. Rumsey on the Liturgy of the Hours) or studies in related areas which used monastic evidence (e.g. Etchingham on religious organization), rather than surveys of the monasticism as such. This absence of competent work on the monastic legacy is felt in this book. The author frequently resorts to early studies whose underlying assumptions are dated or whose command of the evidence leaves much to be desired. Old translations and editions are used – sometimes even reproduced in facsimile as on p. 187 – without awareness of how the history of liturgy has developed in the intervening period; and, overall, there is an over reliance on secondary materials and translations by others. However, to an extent this is inevitable in any work that wants to survey the whole scene. If nothing else this book should remind us that there is a pressing need for young researchers to open up this field who are competent both in the historical and linguistic skills needed for any study in the early middle ages, but who are also willing to become competent in the twin fields of historical theology and liturgy before they set out to write their dissertations. Monasticism in early Christian Ireland is still a *terra incognita*, and this book unwittingly highlights that fact.

However, no book is written in a cultural vacuum, and Thom's book is written against the continuing fascination among contemporary Christians with the Christianity of the insular region in the first millennium. This fascination – it can be found as early as Renan – has many aspects. The period seems simpler, the Church was not riven into denominations, disputes did not seem to turn on obscure points in academic theology, and Christianity appears as being embraced willingly and joyfully. In these desires we have some of the deepest longings of Christians – and when they can be, or it is imagined that they can be, projected