

# Reviews

**STUDYING JOHN** by John Ashton, *Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1994*, xii + 227.

The contents of this volume are supplementary to the author's previous study *Understanding the Fourth Gospel* (1991) and have a coherence with that which they do not have directly with one another. This does not make for easy continuous reading, despite the distinction of the author's style, and the book is definitely not one to recommend as an introduction to Johannine studies even to the more sophisticated non-specialist. The chapters are best treated as self-contained essays, and viewed thus they will amply repay study by readers with some background knowledge.

The first two (both republished, with minor revisions, from journals) date from the time when the earlier book was taking shape, but were too detailed for inclusion in it as they stand; they remain the longest and the most demanding of the present collection. 'The Transformation of Wisdom' returns to the suggestion of a Logos-hymn incorporated in the Johannine prologue (perhaps at the gospel's second recension, for he concurs, as I do, with the late Barnabas Lindars' argument that an earlier version of John later underwent enlargement not only at the end but in the body of the book), and argues that the original hymn, whoever wrote it, is at once both a meditation on Wisdom as found in Hebrew tradition and a hymn to the incarnate Word, since 1.14a, despite the efforts of Käsemann (and many before him), cannot convincingly be excised from its content. It is thus 'resonating ... upon two registers' and in doing so 'asserting ... subtly and implicitly the identity of the Logos and the revealer'. A subtle text demands, and here finds, a subtle interpreter. I wonder, though, if the next step should not be a fresh attempt at the rhythmical analysis of the whole passage. I think that this could be shown to support his position.

The second extended piece, 'The Jews in John', is a systematic if finally inconclusive attempt to pin down what the evangelist meant (both *sense* and *reference* — a distinction adapted from Frege and crucial to his argument) by the expression that has given so much offence to one category of readers and so much embarrassment to another. Ashton does not allow himself to be intimidated by considerations of political correctness. As regards *sense*, he holds to Bultmann's statement of the symbolic function of 'the Jews' as 'the representatives of unbelief (and thereby ... of the unbelieving world in general)'. But has the group to which this devastating significance is attached an ethnic, geographical, sectarian or political reference? Ashton looks carefully at the alternatives; in particular he conducts a running dialogue with Malcolm Lowe's argument that the word should be consistently rendered 'Judeans'. But he finds that no single answer will do comprehensive justice to Johannine usage. He is himself inclined to a diachronic solution which distinguishes

layers of tradition deposited by the cumulative experience of the Johannine community over the long period in which the gospel was gestating. He suggests that most of the passages in which *loudaioi* denotes a hostile group unable to receive the revelation of Jesus belong to a relatively late stratum of it; though he is cautious about identifying this, as J.L. Martyn does, with the polarization that followed the proto-rabbinic revival of Judaism associated with Yavneh after A.D. 70.

The diachronic approach is not confined to this specially intractable problem; it informs his whole method. This is evident in the last three of the six remaining essays in which he confronts contemporary literary approaches as they have been applied to the gospels, and endeavours to clarify in what sense this one, the present form of which, in his view, is not the product of a single process or the creation of a single mind, can properly be called a literary work. He is not opposed in principle to the introduction of literary insights. He brings to his task a wide-ranging familiarity with the world's literatures (as well as with critical evaluations of them from Aristotle to Derrida) from which he can draw illuminating comparisons: thus the category that best fits the Fourth Gospel is not tragedy but romance (especially in its medieval form), and the most helpful Shakespearean analogies are to be found in the 'histories'. But he is resolutely opposed to those versions of narrative criticism which keep the literary study of a text in its present form and the historico-critical analysis of how it reached that form in watertight compartments, the latter having no bearing on the former. To say this is tantamount to claiming that Eliot's autograph of *The Waste Land* with the deletions suggested by Pound is irrelevant to the interpretation of the poem, and it reflects a phase in the history of literary criticism in this century which the mainstream has long outgrown. Historical criticism is thus both essential and prior to any profitable use that can be made of other disciplines; and it is better that the critical scholar should add these to his armoury, as Ashton (to say nothing of predecessors whom he names) clearly has, than that he should surrender the control that his own discipline makes possible to those who care nothing for it. The proposition has my vote.

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**AT THE START: GENESIS MADE NEW** translated by Mary Phil Korsak, New York: *Doubleday*, 1993, xliii & 237pp. \$22.00

The publishers' blurb for Mary Phil Korsak's new translation of Genesis is on the racy side. "Feminists will be delighted to learn that Genesis is not sexist" it crows. (Substitute "sceptical" in the name of all those who remember its casual depictions of the humiliation of barren wives, their being bartered for like livestock and a statistical imbalance of mentions of sons and mentions of daughters that would seem to leave reproductive possibilities under some considerable threat.) It promises us "the startling experience of a prehistoric tribe whose values and way of life are exotic and alien."

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