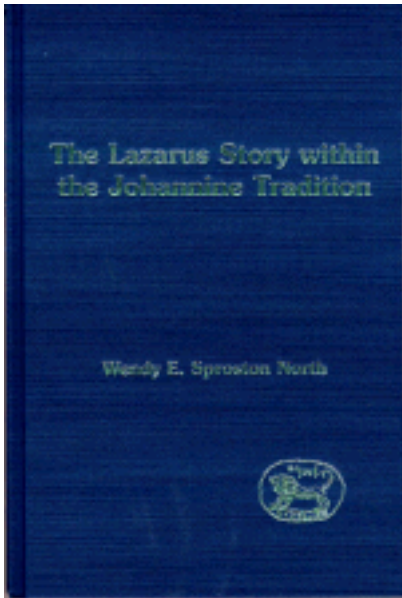


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North, Wendy E. Sproston

The Lazarus Story within the Johannine Tradition

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The “Acknowledgements” page in this book explains that it began as a doctoral thesis under the supervision of Professor Max Wilcox through the University of Wales, Bangor. This page is the only one where the reader detects any sign of a thesis, as this book exhibits the writing style and maturity of scholarship associated with many years of academic publications. By the second page of her work, Sproston North has challenged Raymond Brown, among others, describing his work on the Johannine Epistles as “methodologically unsound and completely unrepresentative of the Epistle writer’s actual position (13).” Bold words indeed! The introductory chapter sets out briefly Sproston North’s own understanding of the chronology and relationship between 1 John and the Gospel. She describes the Epistle as a document reassuring the writer’s own community, rather than a polemic against those who have left due to a different christological position. While assuming that the Epistle was written after the Gospel, Sproston North argues that the author of 1 John shows no direct dependence on the Gospel for establishing his authority as an authentic witness to and interpreter of the tradition. The author of 1 John makes an appeal to a broader Johannine tradition, a more ancient tradition predating the Gospel.

The purpose for clarifying the relationship between Gospel and Epistle is explained in chapter 1. Sproston North tackles the issue of trying to locate the earlier Johannine

tradition that the Evangelist used as the basis for his Gospel. The theory is that, if the earlier tradition can be discovered, the way this tradition is recorded will provide insight into the theological mind that produced the Gospel. In other words, Sproston North is drawing a sharp distinction between an original tradition and its creative interpretation in the Gospel. She is not suggesting looking for a pre-Johannine *Grundschrift* along the lines of R. Fortna but of seeking to find such a pre-Gospel tradition by using an external “control,” that is, another document that could provide insight into the original tradition. The control she proposes is 1 John. She rightly points to its affinity to the Gospel in vocabulary, style, and theology.

As the above synopsis suggests, this is a highly creative and potentially illuminating method in the search to find pre-Johannine source material. Chapter 1 describes this method in more detail and gives some examples of its operation. She describes the relationship between Gospel and Epistle in these words:

We are dealing with two documents which belong to different literary types and which have been addressed to the Johannine church at different stages in its fortunes. Thus, in terms of genre and orientation to particular circumstances they are not alike. Nevertheless, they can be compared in certain fundamental respects as follows: in both cases the author responsible has had access to community tradition, and in both cases the procedure of citing tradition and interpreting it to meet present needs has been adopted. (37)

Chapters 2, 3, and 4 apply this method to John 11, the raising of Lazarus. Chapter 2 examines the background to the description of Lazarus as *the one whom Jesus loves* (John 11:3). Using Gospel and Epistle Sproston North establishes a Johannine tradition of a command to love where love is described as a readiness to lay down one’s life for the beloved. The Gospel narrative retains this tradition in a quite literal sense (15:3), while the Epistle, drawing on the same tradition, interprets it metaphorically as expending one’s life for the needs of one’s brother or sister in the community (1 John 3:16–18). The two different approaches to interpreting an original tradition she explains as indicating the different circumstances facing the community. The Gospel author is conscious that faith in Jesus could cost one’s life at a time when relationships with Judaism are deteriorating, whereas in the Epistle the tradition shapes an ethic of intracommunal relationships. The tradition of the love command, best expressed in John 15:3, is given narrative form in the story of Lazarus as Jesus returns to the threatening location of Judea because of his love for Lazarus. Thomas’s words, understood in this perspective, are words spoken to a Christian community under threat to be ready to “go and die” with Jesus.

I have spent time on these first chapters because I found them quite gripping in their insight and argumentation as well as delightful in their expression. In this application to the text I found chapter 2 more convincing than chapters 3 and 4, which looked beyond the Epistle to the Synoptic Gospels in order to find an original tradition. Chapters 3 and 4 therefore demand more complex associations of Gospel and Epistle to reach back to an original Johannine tradition. While I found these chapters less convincing in their method, the various insights raised are most worthwhile, particularly on Johannine eschatology.

The fifth chapter is a very brave hypothesis about the actual making of the Lazarus story. Having identified the likely traditional material, using the Epistle as a control document, Sproston North postulates the theological thinking of the Evangelist as he gave a narrative shape to this tradition. While I found myself doubtful at times over her reconstruction, I commend this thoughtful and methodical approach, and even if “John” did not follow Sproston North’s exact line of thought, he certainly followed something very much like it in the making of this dense theological narrative. One criticism I make of what is otherwise a very readable text is the occasional use of colloquial expressions that may not be clear for all English-speaking readers, such as “play gooseberry” (145).

Overall I recommend this text for scholars interested in thinking through the methodological and theological processes that went into the making of John’s Gospel. Sproston North has not only developed new understandings of John 11, but, in addition, her methodology, using the Epistle as a control, could well be used on other Gospel passages.