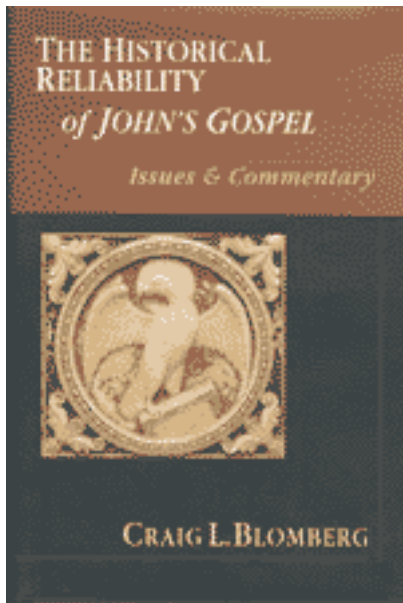


RBL 08/2003



Blomberg, Craig L.

The Historical Reliability of John's Gospel: Issues and Commentary

Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2001.
Pp. 346. Cloth. \$26.00. ISBN 0830826858.

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Following in the tradition he began in 1987 in his *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels*, Craig Blomberg applies his expertise in the Gospels to their most precarious member, the Gospel of John. The book claims to be a “reinvestigation and reassessment” of the historical questions, as well as a “full-length commentary singularly focused on the historicity of the Fourth Gospel.” According to Blomberg, “The time seems ripe . . . for a study that discusses many of the standard introductory and background considerations, but which goes on to examine in some detail every passage in John, in order, with a view to assessing historicity” (22). As the subtitle reveals, the book is divided into two parts: the first dealing with the introductory issues involved in the historical discussion; the second is a commentary that highlights and analyzes the historical nature of each passage in the Fourth Gospel.

In the first part of the book, entitled “Introductory Considerations,” Blomberg discusses several of the primary areas of introductory issues, each focusing on the historical issues involved and their relation to the Fourth Gospel’s historicity as a whole. In a sense, Blomberg’s discussion of introductory considerations is itself a historical survey, looking at the questions asked throughout scholarship

and tracing through the normal secondary questions that have been posed. After a brief survey of John's frequently doubted historical nature and the reasons normally given by current scholarship, Blomberg spends twenty pages on the important historical question of John's authorship. After giving both internal and external evidence concerning the Gospel's authorship, Blomberg argues that, despite widespread assumption to the contrary, the overwhelming external and internal evidence in favor of John, the son of Zebedee, as well as what Blomberg calls "remarkably weak" (35) evidence to the contrary, "a strong case can be mounted for the son of Zebedee as the author of the Fourth Gospel" (40).

Following the extensive treatment on authorship, Blomberg links three other areas related to the historical origin of John: date and provenance, sources, and John's relationship to the Synoptics. Concerning John's date and provenance, Blomberg presumes trustworthy the dominant early church tradition that John wrote his Gospel near the end of the first century to churches in and around Ephesus in western Asia Minor (41). The church's traditional position should be accepted concerning date, placing the writing of the Fourth Gospel in the late 80s or to the 90s (44). However, although an earlier date would be appealing, according to Blomberg, the date is also related to the sources used by John. Although various hypothetical sources have been postulated, the evidence is too slight for us to do so with any confidence (46). Of course, as Blomberg reveals, the sources most questioned as standing behind John's Gospel have always been the Synoptic Gospels. This is where Blomberg's argument is most important. Although John's Gospel can be read and understood fully on its own and no convincing argument for a literary dependence between the other Gospels has been raised, "numerous features of his narrative read as if he is trying to allude to events in Mark for those who are familiar with them" (48). This argument is based on more recent research that argues that it is probable that all four of the Gospels would have circulated widely quite quickly and may even have been written with a broad or general audience in mind and not only for specific communities standing behind the Gospels (R. Bauckham, ed., *The Gospels for All Christians*, 1998). While Blomberg would argue for a modified view of Bauckham's thesis (the Gospels expected their writings to be copied, passed on, and eventually to be read widely but were still initially written for specific communities) based upon the many redactional distinctives in each of the Gospels that allude to situations in individual communities, the intended wide readership of each of the Gospels and the occurrences cited by Blomberg that seem to allude to a familiarity that John's readers had with the Gospel of Mark (48-49) gives evidence that John utilized a knowledge of Mark but had his own

independent and potentially supplementary material. Thus, according to Blomberg, “combining our hypothesis about apostolic authorship ... and his lack of literary dependence on the written form of the Synoptics, we can fairly speak of John as an important, independent witness to the words and works of the historical Jesus” (49).

Blomberg concludes his discussion of introductory considerations by looking at ways John, and some of the other Gospels, reveal historical aspects. Concerning John’s omissions (e.g., parables, exorcisms), Blomberg argues that John has definitely written a document with distinctive and characteristic linguistic style and vocabulary, but “none of these practices necessarily calls into question their accuracy according to the historiographical standards of the first century” (52). Concerning what he calls the interlocking between John and the Synoptics, which understands the Gospels as coming from independent and yet interrelated traditions where earlier Gospels (Mark) would have likely been known by those later, a consistent historical tradition is represented in John’s Gospel. This interlocking of the Gospels allows Blomberg to state that “we may not be able to guess the reason for every omission in a given gospel, but enough examples are clear that such omissions cannot be used to argue that a given evangelist did not know of an event he omits, much less that it is not historical” (55–56). Concerning literary genre, Blomberg surveys the modern research concerning “Gospel” as a literary type and argues that the current consensus holds John and the other Gospels as bearers of historical tradition and as trustworthy. Finally, Blomberg discusses other indications of the historical trustworthiness of John’s Gospel and argues that the potential unique nature of the Fourth Gospel’s purpose is dependent upon the particular audience to which John is writing and is not a lack of interest in historical facts or occurrences.

In part 2 of the book Blomberg goes through each passage in John and deals with its historical nature. For Blomberg, the introductory considerations discussed in the first part of the book “create a climate favorable to John’s historical trustworthiness,” but one must still “credibly defend historicity passage by passage as one proceeds through the Gospel, carefully analyzing its contents” (63). In order to deal with the historicity of John passage by passage, Blomberg makes explicit two questions he asks of the text: What positive evidence via the recently nuanced criteria of authenticity do we have that the actions or words of the characters in John’s narratives are indeed historical (i.e., factually accurate within the range of literary and historiographical freedom recognized in the ancient Mediterranean world)? Is there anything in the text at hand that is implausible within the historical context to which it is attributed, particularly if

we assume the general historical trustworthiness of the Synoptics (66)? Throughout the next two hundred pages Blomberg progresses through each pericope in the Gospel of John, discussing the issues of historical debate in the text and reassessing its historical nature.

At the conclusion of the book Blomberg draws a summary of findings taken from the passage-by-passage analysis. Blomberg returns once again to the judgments assumed in the past about John concerning its lack of historical trustworthiness. Concerning this he states, "One looks long and hard to find careful, convincing documentation of what in many circles has become more a presupposition than the conclusion of a sustained argument" (283). In summary, Blomberg can state that "a surprisingly powerful case for overall historicity and general trustworthiness of the document can be mounted" (283).

The Historical Reliability of John's Gospel by Craig Blomberg represents a thorough challenge to all who doubt the historical trustworthiness of the Gospel of John. The most valuable part of the book is the extensive commentary that discusses every passage in the Gospel and its historical nature. Although Blomberg himself admits that other issues in the passages could have most certainly been discussed (290), the overall stress in the historical value of the cumulative parts of the Gospel was most successful. Blomberg lays out his presuppositions of analysis in a helpful manner, allowing us both to judge and to utilize his research in a more accessible way. Blomberg also helpfully explains that such an enterprise is not based upon historiographic techniques of the modern day but of the first-century Mediterranean world. This is what John's Gospel must be based upon and has been deemed historical. The obvious usefulness of the book lies in its accessible commentary layout that allows a student of John to have pertinent historical information for any particular passage discussed and analyzed.

For all the worth of the book, there are a few areas that could have been addressed to improve its overall value. First, although the purpose of the book is not to survey the history of the Fourth Gospel's assumed historical value, a discussion beyond merely a topical one would have been useful. This would have allowed the beginning student to enter the scholarly dialogue more easily. Second, it would have assisted Blomberg's argument substantially if he had dealt more with the seminal work of J. Louis Martyn in his section "John's Unique Audience and Purposes." Although Blomberg states that his verdict on Martyn's two-level reading of John can only be argued against after an examination of the texts (62), he never returns to the issue. Even where he does mention Martyn's work in the commentary on John 9 (153–54), he only shows where work has gone

against Martyn's view of the *birkat ha-mînîm* and not the two-level reading itself, which seems to be a much more potent historical challenge to John's Gospel. Third, although Blomberg's work was done so from a historical-critical perspective, it might have been useful for him to discuss how a pure historical approach has its flaws, is biased by certain presuppositions, and how other approaches to the text, most notably a canonical approach, utilize a different and often preferred historical understanding in light of the church and biblical theology. Nevertheless, this book is a successful and key work on the historicity of the Gospel of John and is a valuable addition for any student of John or the Synoptic Gospels.