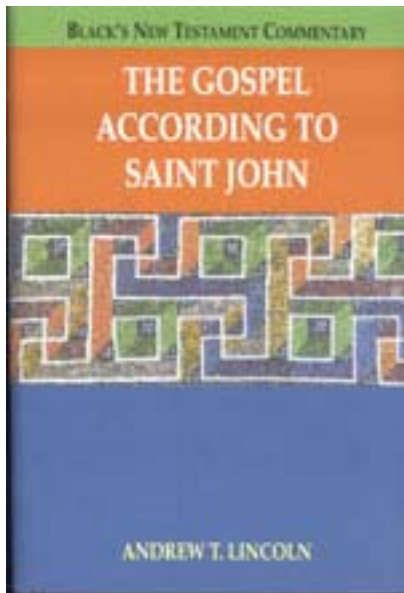


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Lincoln, Andrew T.

The Gospel according to Saint John

Black's New Testament Commentary

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Craig S. Keener
Palmer Theological Seminary
Wynnewood, PA 19096

This new commentary on the Fourth Gospel provides both a worthy addition to the respected Black's New Testament Commentary series and a serious replacement for its widely cited predecessor in that series, by J. N. Sanders and B. A. Mastin, still useful but dated (1968). In this work, Lincoln both draws on a wide range of Johannine scholarship and bravely forges new paths at times, respecting consensus but seeking to break new ground.

After an extensive introduction of the major issues debated in Johannine studies today, Lincoln's work turns to commentary on passages followed by theological summary. The work is extremely well-written and readable. No reader of commentaries, even at a lay level, will have trouble understanding the prose. Most of his exegetical and literary judgments are sound and well-researched.

At the same time, those expecting thorough scholarly interaction with secondary literature and vast citation of primary sources, as in Lincoln's masterful two-volume Ephesians commentary or his earlier *Paradise Now, Not Yet*, will be disappointed; this work belongs to a different genre of commentary. The series as a rule seeks to be accessible to students, requiring some limitation of details. The very rare footnotes are reserved for the translation, where they address textual variants and translation issues.

The bibliography reflects a range of views, though in keeping with the commentary's target audience appears limited to works available in English. Lincoln interacts with only a small number of authors explicitly (although these represent a broad range of perspectives) but does presuppose knowledge of the issues, and those knowledgeable in Johannine studies can often reconstruct Lincoln's conversation partners. He rightly warns that scholarship is very culturally conditioned by the era in which it is written; scholarly theories rise and fall like popular fashions. Noting that theories "have waxed and waned in popularity" (vii–viii), he tries to communicate the useful insights that have stood the test of time. "The best tests of their validity remain how well they explain the evidence and how much light they shed" on the text (viii).

Among the ways that this commentary draws on recent scholarship not available to its predecessor in the series, Lincoln mentions such approaches as literary, feminist, rhetorical, and social-scientific. He also defines his own primary focus, however, as "the literary, historical and theological dimensions of the text" (1); he claims that he especially focuses on literary matters but needs enough social and historical information to read the Gospel "as a communication between its final author and readers in a particular first-century CE context" (1).

Not all readers will agree on the extent to which the commentary follows the promised focus. For example, those for whom "literary" discussions focus on current literary theories may be disappointed that after his basic plot analysis (esp. 11) he does not devote much of his limited space to current literary theories or readings from different social locations. His primary example for the literary approach is Alan Culpepper's insightful *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel*, which remains the standard but was published in 1983. By "literary," however, Lincoln means not so much explicitly interacting with contemporary literary approaches but focus on explaining the text (a focus particularly appropriate to commentaries) as a cohesive narrative. This he does ably.

With most, he does believe that the work shows signs of editing (e.g., at 14:31; the epilogue of 21:1–25) and sometimes even seeks to identify stages of composition and what they included. But he approaches the narrative as a whole in the first form in which it probably circulated. Thus he treats John 21 as part of the text, whenever it was written, noting that "there is no evidence that the Gospel ever circulated without it" (1), but does not treat John 7:53–8:11 the same way, since it does not belong to the earliest known forms of the Gospel.

He indicates that he sometimes examines questions of historicity, where data remains sufficient for addressing them. Although focusing on meaning rather than historicity, he does not duck the latter, more controversial questions. He warns that he will not focus on

historicity issues but rightly points out that the nature of John's story does raise questions about its relation to history. Actual examination of his commentary suggests that he devotes more attention to questions of historical reliability than the introduction implies—and that for Lincoln, as for most commentators on John, these questions prove more space-consuming and often intractable than we commentators would prefer.

Bucking what seems to be a four-decade trend in some of Johannine scholarship, he tends to be skeptical of historical tradition in John not also available for verification in the Synoptics. He doubts (probably rightly) that John's chronology should be preferred to that of the Synoptics and prefers (again probably rightly) Mark's chronology of the Last Supper and Passover; the Synoptics surely place (for example) the temple cleansing more accurately historically. Likewise, he doubts John's picture of the Baptist's arrest before Jesus' ministry. Yet at virtually every point he regards John as derivative and the Synoptics as the standard. While scholarship in general prefers the Synoptic line of tradition, sometimes I believe he strains plausibility by pushing this thesis too far: for example, he suggests that John added the local topographic details in John 5 for verisimilitude. Yet one wonders how widely this verisimilitude would be recognized over two decades after Jerusalem's destruction, when he (as most scholars) dates this Gospel.

Perhaps because of the commentary's target audience, his explicit use of social-scientific and rhetorical approaches (mentioned in his introduction on page 1) is minimal, but Lincoln does make judicious use of background, more sensitive than most to the dates and nature of the primary sources on which he depends. He recognizes John's thought world as Jewish and draws from a range of sources, including the Qumran scrolls, Philo, and various wisdom texts; Philo and John probably independently developed their Logos concept from available wisdom traditions. (Sometimes his primary references appear to derive from earlier commentaries [e.g., p. 406] but probably no more often than is now common practice. A number of his references may be new, given his earlier explorations of ancient sources.)

Most of his theological and exegetical conclusions are mainstream, and even more are balanced and well-supported; I provide a few samples here. Thus Lincoln notes the centrality of Jesus' identity in the Fourth Gospel (*vis-à-vis* the Synoptics). In light of his prior work (*Truth on Trial*, 2000) he naturally emphasizes the Gospel's trial motif quite often. He notes that this Gospel emphasizes realized eschatology, though it contains some future eschatology (rightly, I think, though I would demur on 14:2–3 being future). He highlights distinctive elements of Johannine Christology, including divine agency, the “unique” Son, and the “I am” sayings. Because Wisdom was not understood as violating monotheism, John portrays Jesus as the true God's immanence. He suggests that John merges the Passover lamb with the lamb of Isa 53, to take away sin (John 1:29, 36). He

treats “water” in John 3:5 as a symbol of the Spirit (as in Ezek 36:25–27; 1QS; and John 7:38–39). He treats Jesus’ encounter with the Samaritan woman as a subversion of a betrothal type-scene. He treats different terms for “love” as stylistic variations. Avoiding domesticating John’s historical theology to modern sensitivities, he grapples honestly with the scandal of the Fourth Gospel’s particularity in relation to world religions today.

He argues that the Gospel, although later exploited by anti-Semites, is not itself anti-Semitic but reflects intra-Jewish polemic. He contends that external evidence for an excommunication (the Birkat Haminim) fits internal evidence; there is probably a more radical, local expulsion, but this reflects the same tendencies as in the Birkat Haminim. (Relevantly here, his approach to John 8:44 draws on ancient usage and is insightful.) Following some recent studies, he suggests that the synagogue authorities rejected the Judaism of those they excommunicated, so that John sometimes grants them the disputed title “Jews” in his negative (as opposed to his positive) uses of the term. (The negative uses also blend them into “the world.”) The clash thus centers on the issue of the Torah; 1:17 contrasts the Torah with Jesus, who revealed grace and truth more fully than the law. Jesus not only fulfills the festivals, but the claims made for the Torah are made for Jesus as the Word, especially in the prologue.

Because the question of biographic genre is a more recent one in Johannine studies and also requires some familiarity with ancient biography, I digress to address this one at greater length. Following the now widely accepted argument of Richard Burridge, Lincoln views John’s genre (rightly, in my view) as ancient biography, a flexible genre “within a continuum that stretched from ancient history writing on the one side to encomium on the other” (15). He rightly criticizes the polarization of modern approaches that either regard every detail as historical in the modern sense or the entire story as a fiction unrelated to the historical Jesus (15); many, and perhaps most, scholars would agree on this point. He notes that even historians composed discourses, and biographers composed more freely still. Thus this Gospel “contained a substratum of core events from the tradition with substantial correspondence to what happened in the past but which was now shaped by an interpretive superstructure with varying amounts of embellishment” (17).

Although this approach is nuanced and should command wide assent in its general form, its particular implementation hinges on how we define the range of ancient biographies. Lincoln suggests that some of Plutarch’s biographies were closer to history than many other biographies were but that Xenophon used more legends. In fact, most biographers (including Plutarch), as well as historians, used legends for figures of many centuries past and sometimes tell us so explicitly, but their reporting is more accurate for recent subjects. Tacitus’s biography of his father-in-law and Suetonius’s lives of Caesars tend to

be more reliable (for all the gossip Suetonius includes) than Plutarch; even Josephus's autobiography reports mostly true information, although it is heavily shaped by Josephus's apologetic bias.

Thus in creative embellishment Lincoln includes not only details, as we expect regularly in ancient biographies, but also entire events, such as water being turned to wine or Lazarus's raising. (He does not deny that earlier Jesus tradition did recount Jesus' miracles, including resuscitations.) He bases this, for example, on the first sign's Jewish and Dionysiac symbolism and partly on it transforming an element, but is it so far from Jesus multiplying bread in the Synoptics, which John interprets in light of Passover symbolism? (Moreover, the Jewish wine miracles he relates to Dionysiac symbolism could draw on Old Testament images of miraculous provision and eschatological abundance, which he also mentions. Of course, a mixed Diaspora audience may well have drawn connections with Dionysus in any case.)

He bases this approach partly on his understanding of the biographic genre. Yet while Xenophon's story of Cyrus or Pseudo-Callisthenes' story of Alexander blended tradition with creativity in such a way, their works differ substantially from mainstream biographies of the early Empire and are much further from their subjects in time than John is from Jesus. Authors who fall closer to the normal range of ancient biography (the sort of works on which Burrige built his case) tended to report traditions rather than invent events wholesale. This is not to deny that John is much further toward the creative end of the biographic spectrum than Mark or Luke, only to question whether tighter limits might better serve our quest. (Many Jewish traditions about sages tended to show more freedom, which would fit John's world, although other Jewish works would not portray sages in terms of Johannine Christology.)

Even Lincoln's suggestion that ancient readers would not have cared as much as modern ones about distinguishing history from interpretive embellishment, while true in the main, dare not be pressed too far; critics of the Gospels, like Celsus and Porphyry, were more than happy to assail any apparent fictions or inconsistencies. Lincoln's claim that ancient audiences did not care to separate fact from legend (39), though common, needs much more nuance; Pliny the Younger, for example, claims that, while history ought to be interesting, it must stick to the facts (*Ep.* 8.4.1; cf. 7.17.3), a criterion he would not have required for epic poetry or novels. Historians could invent speeches, but their peers frowned on them inventing events (cf. Lucian, *Hist.* 12, 24–25).

While at some points Lincoln accepts some mild allegorizing (with the Samaritan woman in John 4), he is elsewhere more restrained (e.g., the fig tree of John 1). Although the issue does not arise often in this work, many commentators appear to lack a coherent

approach for discerning the degree of narrative symbolism in John. Perhaps one Diaspora Jewish source may offer us all a line of inquiry (which I, tending against allegorizing approaches altogether, failed to consider adequately in my own work). Although Philo follows the biblical record of patriarchs, his allegorizing approach to those stories could render plausible an appreciation for symbolic interpretations of traditional elements in some Jewish biographies. (Of course, we would need to make such comparisons cautiously, Philo writing on a much higher Hellenistic academic plane than John.)

Most of Lincoln's conclusions about Johannine introductory issues are mainstream, for example, on the Gospel's date, the basic outline fitting the Synoptics, and the author being unknown. His skepticism about the beloved disciple representing an eyewitness tradition may prove more controversial.

Although Lincoln allows that the beloved disciple was probably a real person (in view of 21:20–25) and perhaps even “a minor follower of Jesus during his Jerusalem ministry” afterward “idealized” (22), he argues that this disciple's narrated activity in the Gospel was added to the historical core. He argues this because the Synoptics do not report him; he has privileged knowledge; and, apart from 21:7, he appears outside the story line. Thus John does not explicitly report this disciple's response to Peter's request for information (13:24). Yet I would argue that this infers too much from silence, especially when the disciple's response to Peter is as easily inferred as not and the disciple in fact drives the action that follows (13:25–26). Nor should we argue from the silence of the Synoptics, which are also brief and selective, unless our goal is the minimum that is surely accurate, in contrast to, say, a maximum that is not surely inaccurate.

Lincoln takes even the eyewitness claims of 19:35 and 20:8 as simply a literary device to add verisimilitude. He argues that this device was widely accepted, citing for this pseudepigraphic works such as *I Enoch*. But none of the apocalypses or testaments he cites were biographies (nor, for that matter, were such pseudepigraphic works *anonymous*); in history and biography, such claims were normally intended as true, and ancients would more likely view false eyewitness claims as errors, lies, or indicators of a different genre (fiction or, as often in Lucian, parody).

Some will also find controversial Lincoln's view (shared today with many others) that John depends on the Synoptics. The controversial character of the question must be nuanced, however, by definitions of dependence. Many would agree that John knew the Synoptics but did not have them open in front of him. (Lincoln argues, in fact, that he could not physically have had them open in front of him.) It does seem intrinsically likely that they were (or at the least Mark was) widely enough circulated that John was aware of

them. (Without arguing for dependence in general, I have argued that John symbolically plays on elements found in the form of the passion narrative preserved in the Synoptics.)

Lincoln allows for other sources (including oral tradition) but notes that it is difficult to isolate them, given the work's stylistic unity. Because only the Synoptics can be isolated, however, he works from them rather than supposing independent tradition. Thus, rather than the Q saying in Matt 11:27/Luke 10:22 supporting a historical basis for some Johannine language by the criterion of coherence, it is the source of that language. Some discourses may contain or be developed from "a reformulated synoptic saying" (40); others may reflect oral tradition not extant elsewhere; but most of Jesus' wording reflects a postresurrection perspective.

For example, John 15:26–27 resembles Mark 13:9–11 (a plausible connection). Scholars will continue to debate, however, whether such similarities generally betray dependence or simply ultimate coherence with the same Jesus tradition. Lincoln also offers intriguing suggestions in narratives, for example proposing that Luke's report of the ruler asking about eternal life (Luke 18:15–30) provides the primary background for Nicodemus; with many others he regards 4:43–54 as dependent on the Synoptic (or Q) account of the centurion's servant.

Where Lincoln ventures into disputed waters, he demonstrates willingness to think critically and independently. At some points (such as John's genre) his approach represents necessary exploration of fairly recent ground. At some other points, such as the relation between John and the Synoptics, he offers arguments that must be considered seriously by those working on the question of historical tradition in this Gospel.

All told, this work is a significant one. Although its format is aimed more for students than for scholars, the distinctive elements in its approach and the arguments advanced for them will also make this commentary important for scholarly consideration.