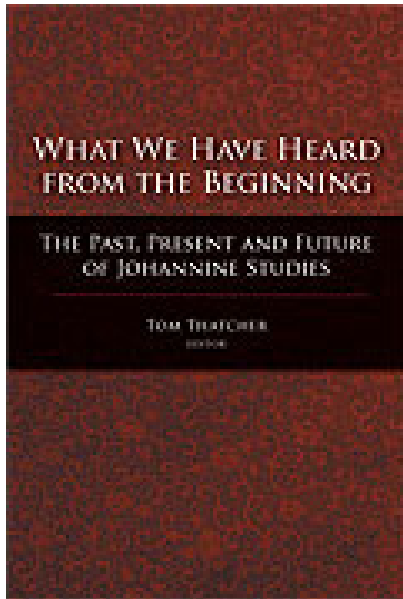


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**Thatcher, Tom, ed.**

***What We Have Heard from the Beginning: The Past, Present, and Future of Johannine Studies***

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This book contains a collection of eighteen essays and matching responses reflecting on the past fifty years of Johannine studies—an era that saw a proliferation of new approaches and findings. The book’s uniqueness lies in its format: in a conversational tone, senior scholars describe their Johannine journey, and younger scholars respond. The essays range from scholars’ reflections on their careers to evaluations of the current state of research to clues for future study. The book thus aims to create a virtual conversation between the older and younger generations of Johannine scholars, surveying the past, present, and future of Johannine studies. The book contains essays by John Ashton, Johannes Beutler, Peder Borgen, Thomas Brodie, Don Carson, Alan Culpepper, Marinus de Jonge, Robert Fortna, Robert Kysar, Louis Martyn, Francis Moloney, John O’Grady, John Painter, Sandra Schneiders, Fernando Segovia, D. Moody Smith, Gilbert van Belle, and Urban von Wahlde. The respective responses come from Wendy North, Carsten Claussen, Michael Labahn, Catrin Williams, Andreas Köstenberger, Stan Harstine, Peter Kirchsclaeger, Tom Thatcher, David Rensberger, Adele Reinhartz, Mary Coloe, Dorothy Lee, Paul Anderson, Colleen Conway, Francisco Lozada, Craig Keener, Peter Judge, and Felix Just.

It would be impossible to reflect meaningfully on every essay and response, so I will first make a few general observations and then select those contributions that stimulated me most. The first observation is that the issue of method recurs frequently. How do we approach the Gospel of John and determine meaning? Many essays contain a discussion of diachronic (historical criticism) versus synchronic (literary criticism) method. Although this debate appears far from settled, it is clear that most Johannine scholars contend that historical criticism will continue to occupy an important place, albeit alongside (and sometimes in competition with) more recent forms of literary and ideology criticism. Second, although the subtitle suggests that the Johannine Letters are included, the sole focus is on the Gospel of John. Third, the book closes with a helpful bibliography and author/subject index but misses a final section with concluding remarks. Finally, it is telling that the ratio of female contributors in the older generation to those in the younger generation is 1:6.

I now turn to some contributions that particularly stirred me, without denying the importance of other essays. Carson's essay was enlightening. Perhaps his being "a jack of all trades" rather than a Johannine specialist *pur sang* (his own admission) gives him the advantage of having a bird's-eye view. First, he notes that the "advances" in biblical studies are rather different from those in sciences in that the former discipline rarely produces "hard" or verifiable data. Rather, "progress" in biblical research is often debatable, since "[t]he combination of relatively 'soft' data ... can be configured in multiple ways" (90). Different scholars using different methods to examine the same evidence may reach quite different conclusions. In this regard, Carson also observes that most scholars form their views early in their careers and change little with new publications. He goes as far as to say that many publications are not seriously considered (including his own 1982 article on Johannine misunderstandings in *Tyndale Bulletin*). I would go further. Often scholars appear to interact with the works of those they know, while publications of "unknown" scholars hardly get attention. Second, Carson questions "open-ended," postmodern thought, which with "boundless creativity ... uses the Johannine corpus as a springboard for nothing more than the projection of contemporary ideas" (103). He advocates a "confessional" approach in which doctrine and churchmanship play a role. In his response, Köstenberger continues on the note of "progress" in biblical scholarship, citing the significant erosion of Martyn's Johannine community hypothesis, which only a short while ago appeared the secure consensus. He also suggests that the overturning of many traditional views by newer theories may amount to regression if the latter cannot demonstrate "how they are superior to conventional ways of conceiving of the nature of John's Gospel" (106).

Marinus de Jonge retraces his steps in Johannine research, highlighting what is still important today. Interestingly, although Culpepper's *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel*

(1983) is often referred to as the work that introduced narrative criticism to John's Gospel, the impetus for such an approach was given by de Jonge—a historical critic—in his *Jesus: Stranger from Heaven and Son of God* (1977). De Jonge draws attention to the hermeneutical terms *relecture* (“rereading”) and *réécriture* (“rewriting”), prominent in the recent works of European scholars such as Jean Zumstein (2004), Klaus Scholtissek (1999–2004), and Thomas Popp (2001; these terms also figure in the essays of Ashton, Beutler, and Coloe in this volume). *Relecture* is used in diachronic analysis to indicate a process whereby an initial text (e.g., John 14:31) leads to the composition of a later text (e.g., John 15–17), which “rereads” the earlier text (John 13–14) for a new context. *Réécriture* is an analogous process used in synchronic analysis to denote how a theme is taken up, varied, and expressed differently by the same author. However, de Jonge asks the important question, “How is one able to distinguish between *relecture* and *réécriture*?” Indeed, why would John 15–17 be a *relecture* rather than *réécriture*? Or, would it not be possible that John 13–17 comes from one author in which the aporia 14:31 indicates a real departure, whereby John 15–17 are taught *along* the way—whether or not expanding the teaching of John 13–14? Besides, how does *relecture*, for instance, improve our understanding of the composition history of John's Gospel over “ancient” source criticism? Is *relecture* simply another term for redaction, and does *réécriture* merely refer to the author's creative, versatile style?

Kysar, in his essay, is refreshingly frank about his own journey. He certainly escapes Carson's criticism mentioned above that scholars rarely change their views. Nevertheless, his transformations may have made him the maverick among Johannine scholars—in keeping with his own description of John (*John the Maverick Gospel* [Westminster John Knox, 1993]). Kysar's journey has been a quest for meaning in three major stages. With no alternative models available, he was trained in the historical-critical method but became increasingly uncomfortable with a model that determines meaning by means of history. No longer believing that meaning was “behind” the text, he jumped on the literary-critical bandwagon when it came along in the 1980s. Migrating into reader-response criticism, Kysar contended that meaning was determined by the reader “in front of” the text. Finally, Kysar joined the school of postmodernism, in which truth is relative, advocating that texts have polyvalent readings that are equally valid. In his response, Rensberger, just as frank, does not buy Kysar's arguments. One problem he has with postmodern rejection of historical criticism is that “it confuses what is possible with what ought to be attempted” (180). According to Rensberger, to read ancient texts without any reference to the past (so Kysar) is “sheer self-deception” (180). Besides, I would contend that, although postmodernity teaches us that “truth” cannot be objectively known, this does not mean there is no underlying absolute reality or grand narrative (contra Kysar). In fact, the claim of the Johannine Jesus that he is the truth is a claim of an underlying

divine reality that is ultimately bound to a person. Granted that we cannot objectively know all this reality, sufficient aspects of this reality are nevertheless revealed to us by Jesus the dispenser of truth (see John 1:18; 8:31–32; 18:37b) and explained to us by the Spirit of truth (15:26; 16:13) in order to participate in this divine reality.

Finally, the essay of Fernando Segovia draws attention to a neglected aspect in Johannine studies, namely, the role of the geopolitical. Segovia points out that this is changing with the recent development of postcolonial criticism—a particular form of ideology criticism that focuses on geopolitics and, more specifically, on the different relations of power within imperial-colonial frameworks (N.B. Colleen Conway is currently working on the imperial context of the Gospel writers [278]). Segovia’s essay is essentially a critical review of a collection of essays edited by Musa Dube and Jeffrey Staley, titled *John and Postcolonialism* (Sheffield Academic Press, 2002). In this volume, Reinhartz, for instance, contends that a postcolonial approach to the New Testament is justified because these texts were composed under the imperial-colonial framework of Rome. Dube characterizes imperialism as an “ancient institution, with a lineage traced from the ancient near eastern empires through the Greeks and the Romans to the modern European empires and the contemporary imperialism of globalization” (291). At the heart of imperialism is the ideology of expansion—a quest to impose control. Segovia himself views the postcolonial as a social-psychological category that can be applied to imperial-colonial situations across history and culture. Although living in India makes me sympathetic to such an approach, I also wonder whether John’s Gospel is being used as a springboard to launch contemporary ideas (see Carson’s criticism on 103). Are we trying to discover how John (or the Johannine Jesus) addressed the imperial-colonial structures of his time (and how this applies today)? Do we presume that John had these matters in mind (or that they are part of the deep structure of the text) because his document was written in imperial-colonial circumstances? Besides, we must bear in mind that, according to the Second Temple literature, the imperial-colonial conflict was not so much between Palestine and Rome but between the righteous and the wicked—whether the latter were Romans or Jewish oppressive aristocracy, collaborators or apostate high-priestly rulers (see my article in *Biblica* [2005]: 35–58).

To sum up, this book seeks to pass on the insights and experience of some great Johannine scholars, while inviting a younger generation to listen to, participate in, and shape the ongoing conversation. As such, the book would serve as a fine collector’s item for those who are part of the Johannine guild or as an excellent introduction to the varied Johannine landscape for the scholar/student starting out. If the most influential works in the twentieth century have been those of Rudolf Bultmann, Louis Martyn, and Alan Culpepper, whose will take that honor in the present century?