

INTRODUCTION

Trials of Truth: Then and Now

Truth in matters of religion and meaning has always been in dispute. Yet there are some times and some places in which claims about truth are more intensely debated, are indeed put on trial. In the first century C.E. the rapid spread of the early Christians with their claims about Jesus produced considerable ferment, but of all the documents in the NT reflecting this missionary expansion and the tensions and disputes it generated between the Christian groups and their surrounding society, only one explicitly and consistently formulates such conflict in terms of a dispute about truth. Probably late in the first century and from a locality that it is impossible to determine with certainty, a Gospel was produced that depicts its protagonist, Jesus, claiming not only to witness to the truth but also to be the truth, that presents his conflict with his opponents in terms of fiercely polemical disputes about who is speaking the truth, and that has the Roman official at his trial asking, "What is truth?" For the author of the Gospel of John and the Christian community of which he was a part, belief in Jesus had resulted in a crisis of truth with profound religious, personal, and social consequences.

At the end of the twentieth century in the Western world, pluralism and postmodernism have radically called into question traditional notions of truth. Whether there is any such thing as truth outside the formal logical structure of propositions and whether, even if there is, humans can have any knowledge of such truth would be disputed by many. Christian truth claims, which already appear to be relativized by the competing claims of other world religions, are dismissed altogether

by many who share the postmodern perspective on the collapse of confidence in either rationality or the imagination to gain access to truth and therefore its “incredulity toward metanarratives.”¹ Truth is again on trial, with renewed intensity and critical consequences.²

To link reflection on contemporary issues of fundamental concern with a study of the Fourth Gospel may well seem to some not only an overly bold but also a foolish move, one that transgresses the proper boundaries of NT study and confuses categories by mixing historical, theological, and philosophical questions. Feminist and political readings of the NT have already and rightly called into question the validity of the conception of NT study as a purely historical enterprise, but it is still not common to find among the variety of reader responses those willing to concede they have explicit Christian theological interests at work in their reading.³ In some circles, to admit such interests opens one to the charge of being “uncritical.” To be critical is defined in terms of operating from outside the ideology of a text, and thus to be committed in any way to the claims of a sacred text is said to preclude one from the proper detachment required of critical scholarship. In this view, therefore, to study the Bible in a university or academic setting committed to critical ideals means a willingness to exclude from one’s study any influence of prior confessional commitments.

Needless to say, this is a view that I do not share and that appears to me to be entangled in confusion. On the one hand, it appears still to be operating with the modern concept of the autonomy of critical reason, stemming from the Enlightenment, which many hold now to be discredited;⁴ on the other, it frequently concedes in practice, with postmodernism, that criticism of texts cannot be in the business of discovering single meanings and that a plurality of meanings and approaches is inevitable. Marxist, feminist, and liberal humanist stances

¹J.-F. Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (trans. G. Bennington and B. Massumi; Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), xxiv.

²For an insightful Christian attempt to address this situation, see J. R. Middleton and B. J. Walsh, *Truth Is Stranger Than It Used to Be: Biblical Faith in a Postmodern Age* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1995).

³But see esp. F. Watson’s major attempts to show the validity of an explicitly Christian theological approach as part of biblical studies in *Text, Church, and World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994); and *Text and Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997).

⁴Cf., e.g., A. MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988).

are acceptable contributors to this plurality because they operate from a standpoint outside the text, but the major approach this critical pluralism frequently cannot tolerate is a self-consciously Christian theological one. This view also tends to tar all Christian interest in the truth claims of the Bible with the brush of fundamentalism, recognizing neither the variety in Christian theological approaches to the Bible nor the fact that it is perfectly possible for Christians to distance themselves from some aspects of a text's ideology while affirming others, to wish to engage both in criticism and in appropriation. When insisted upon, this view would lead to the extremely strange situation that the one person to be excluded from critical study of the Bible in the academy is the person who still thinks the Bible is worth studying because it has something to say and who wishes to relate this conviction to his or her actual practice of criticism. Contemporary biblical scholarship may, then, provide one arena in which the trial of truth is being played out.

Even if one is not prepared to exclude theological reflection upon texts on these sorts of grounds, one might still think at least that the tasks of exegesis and theology are better kept separate. While these tasks might, in the traditional model of biblical interpretation, be distinguished—the former aimed at explaining, as best one can, the likely communication the text represented for its original readers, the latter aimed at interacting with the text's message for the sake of insight into God, the human condition, and life in the world—it is also clear that, even in this construal of their division, the two tasks are by no means totally separable. The methods employed, and therefore the results produced, in the attempt to treat the text as far as possible in its own terms still derive not simply from the text itself or its ancient context but from the very different and constantly changing world of present-day scholarship. They are not value-neutral but themselves influenced by a variety of worldviews with theological implications. Any attempted reading of an ancient text cannot be complete. Its selective focus and its mode of presentation reflect conscious and unconscious choices on the part of the interpreter, and not a few of these will be shaped by theological interests in the broadest sense of the term *theological*.

From within the discipline of NT studies, it may be thought that study of the Fourth Gospel is unpromising territory for relating the concerns of the text to much broader theological concerns. Although the latter may have been an earlier fashion in treatments of John's Gospel, more recent historical-critical treatments, it might be suggested, have rendered such an approach problematic. After all, although the text, on the surface, deals with issues of truth, it does so on its own terms, and

these terms have increasingly been thought to be those of a sectarian group on the edges of developments in the early Christian movement.⁵ In other words, it is held that the results of the attempt to read John in its original context have made it very difficult to see its message as transferable beyond that specific and limited context. This is indeed an important issue for any theological interpretation of John that also wishes to take seriously its historical setting and impact.⁶ Whether it constitutes an insuperable obstacle is another matter and will be the subject of part of our later discussion.

So far I have mentioned a number of possible objections to the sort of study I propose. These have been primarily methodological, though involving deeper hermeneutical issues. A simpler objection to a study of the trial motif in the Fourth Gospel might be the impression on the part of some students of this Gospel that its forensic aspects have already been well worked over. So before sketching what I would like to explore, it is well to ask what exactly has already been undertaken in this area.

The Trial Motif in Scholarship on the Fourth Gospel

It has long been recognized that the themes of witness, judgment, and trial play a significant role in the Fourth Gospel. Commentaries on the Gospel frequently draw attention to these themes in passing, and from time to time articles have appeared that deal with particular passages in relation to one or other aspect. Interest in the themes seems to have been at its height in the sixties and early seventies and is reflected in the appearance of a number of monographs written largely independently of each other.

In "Justification in Johannine Thought," first published in French in 1946 and appearing in English in 1957, Théo Preiss drew attention to what he believed to be the strangely neglected juridical aspect of Johannine thought.⁷ This neglect was soon remedied. In *Krisis*, published in 1964, the German scholar Josef Blank related the theme of

⁵ An article by W. Meeks has been particularly influential in this regard: "The Man from Heaven in Johannine Sectarianism," *JBL* 91 (1972): 44–72; repr. in *The Interpretation of John* (ed. J. Ashton; London: SPCK, 1986), 141–73.

⁶ D. Rensberger, *Johannine Faith and Liberating Community* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1988), 135–52, grapples with this issue.

⁷ T. Preiss, in *Hommage et reconnaissance à K. Barth* (Neuchâtel: Delachaux & Niestle, 1946), 100–118; ET "Justification in Johannine Thought," in T. Preiss, *Life in Christ* (London: SCM, 1957), 9–31.

judgment to the Gospel's eschatology and Christology.⁸ James Montgomery Boice completed a doctoral dissertation in 1966 at the University of Basel on the idea of witness in John, relating the idea particularly to the Gospel's theology of revelation, and in 1970 a revised form of his study, which shows no awareness of Blank's work, appeared as *Witness and Revelation in the Gospel of John*.⁹ The year 1972 saw the publication in Germany of *Martyria*, a tradition-historical investigation by Johannes Beutler of the witness theme in both the Gospel and the First Epistle of John.¹⁰ Beutler interacts very briefly with both Blank and Boice.

Severino Pancaro's comprehensive study, *The Law in the Fourth Gospel*, published in 1975, acknowledges the work of Blank but deals with an aspect omitted by him, focusing on the law's role in the Jews' judgment of Jesus.¹¹ Anthony Harvey's monograph on the Fourth Gospel, *Jesus on Trial*, appeared in 1976 and, with the exception of a couple of passing mentions of Beutler's work, appears to have been written without reference to any previous studies of the topic.¹² In 1977 Allison Trites produced a broader work, the revision of an earlier doctoral dissertation completed in 1968 at the University of Oxford, *The New Testament Concept of Witness*, the longest chapter of which is "The Concept of Witness in the Fourth Gospel."¹³ Not surprisingly, Trites was unaware of Pancaro's or Harvey's work, but he makes no mention of Blank and notes, significantly, that Beutler's study appeared too late for his consideration.¹⁴ Seven years later came an interesting book by Paul Minear, *John: The Martyr's Gospel*, which reads a number of passages in the Gospel as messages from Jesus the victorious martyr through a prophet to potential martyrs among first the charismatic leaders and then the ordinary believers who constituted its original readers.¹⁵ Although some of his main assumptions depend on the case to be made in this study, he does not make the case but rather intuitively it,¹⁶ and again shows no awareness of any of the scholarship on the theme of witness. Most recently,

⁸ J. Blank, *Krisis: Untersuchungen zur johanneischen Christologie und Eschatologie* (Freiburg: Lambertus, 1964).

⁹ J. M. Boice, *Witness and Revelation in the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970).

¹⁰ J. Beutler, *Martyria* (Frankfurt: J. Knecht, 1972).

¹¹ S. Pancaro, *The Law in the Fourth Gospel* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1975).

¹² A. E. Harvey, *Jesus on Trial* (London: SPCK, 1976).

¹³ A. A. Trites, *The New Testament Concept of Witness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 126, n. 2.

¹⁵ P. Minear, *John: The Martyr's Gospel* (New York: Pilgrim, 1984).

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, xii–xiii.

Robert Maccini in the published version of a dissertation completed at the University of Aberdeen in 1994, *Her Testimony Is True*, reviews some of the material on the trial motif in his first main chapter, looking mainly at the forensic vocabulary, before pursuing in the bulk of his work an investigation of the primarily historical question of how the testimonies of women, as presented in the Fourth Gospel, would have been perceived by a first-century Jewish readership.¹⁷

Taking Another Look

With all these previous studies, not to mention the articles and essays listed in the bibliography, what is the justification for another monograph dealing with the trial motif? One answer is that these studies have, for the most part, dealt in a detailed fashion with only some aspects of the overall motif and from a particular angle of interest. Blank and Harvey, for example, have no discussion of Jesus' Roman trial, although Blank earlier wrote an article on this section of the Gospel.¹⁸ Beutler's concern is more with the underlying tradition history of the language and concept of witness than with their function in the theology of the Gospel as we now have it. Blank and Boice, on the other hand, are mainly interested in how the concepts of judgment and witness serve what they consider to be the larger theological ideas of eschatology, Christology, and revelation. Pancaro's specific interest is the function of the law in the trial settings. Harvey recognizes that the motif is a literary one, but his primary interest is to exploit it for its potential illumination of the historical Jesus' setting within the Judaism of the time. Maccini is primarily interested in the role of women's testimony in the Gospel and the first century. There is certainly room, therefore, for a work that wishes to highlight and make accessible to general readers of the Fourth Gospel what is still for many a neglected major theme, and that attempts in the process to draw together and build on some of the findings of these earlier studies, done mostly in isolation from each other.

But a much more compelling justification, and one of the primary motivations for this monograph, is that since these earlier works (with the exception of Maccini's) were written, study of the NT, and therefore also of the Fourth Gospel, has undergone radical changes. In particular,

¹⁷ R. G. Maccini, *Her Testimony Is True: Women as Witnesses according to John* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), esp. 32–62.

¹⁸ J. Blank, "Die Verhandlung vor Pilatus: Joh 18,28–19,16 im Lichte johanneischer Theologie," *BZ* 3 (1959): 60–81.

literary and sociological investigations have come into their own and shed new light on the NT texts. In regard to John, Meeks in “The Man from Heaven in Johannine Sectarianism,”¹⁹ Martyn in *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel*,²⁰ and Brown in *The Community of the Beloved Disciple*²¹ sparked new interest in what could be discovered about the history and social setting of the community from which the Gospel emerged, while studies such as Culpepper’s *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel*²² and Stibbe’s *John as Storyteller*²³ mark the more literary approach. I am convinced both that these recent approaches can be fruitfully brought to bear on the trial motif and that study of this motif can contribute to the issues surrounding the application of such approaches to the Fourth Gospel. If the three main types of investigation of the NT can be said to be the literary, the historical (including the sociological), and the ideological or theological, then in regard to the Fourth Gospel, the trial motif is peculiarly appropriate as a meeting place of all three. Indeed, the other major justification and motivation for a fresh study is the attempt to incorporate a critical appropriation of the trial motif for contemporary concerns, a project that does not constitute part of the earlier studies. The goal, then, is to produce a more wide-ranging exploration of the trial motif than has previously been undertaken and to employ a variety of perspectives. I am not claiming that this amounts to a more integrated approach. Such a position might suggest that there is some necessary unity among the perspectives. Instead I propose to look at the topic from a number of different angles and claim only that these are by no means incompatible and may indeed be mutually illuminating.

Although literary approaches to the Bible have moved beyond narrative and reader-response criticisms to poststructuralist, deconstructive, and ideological criticisms, the resources of these earlier approaches, which I shall be primarily employing, for illumination of the text have not yet been exhausted.²⁴ Of the literary, historical, and theological, the

¹⁹ Meeks, “The Man from Heaven.”

²⁰ J. L. Martyn, *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968; 2d ed. Nashville: Abingdon, 1979).

²¹ R. E. Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple* (New York: Paulist, 1979).

²² R. A. Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983).

²³ M. W. G. Stibbe, *John as Storyteller* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

²⁴ See, for a recent example of further exploration in this area, D. Tovey, *Narrative Art and Act in the Fourth Gospel* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997).

literary task is primary, as the investigation of what the text says and how it works both within itself and in relation to its readers is essential for questions of the text's meaning. Only when conclusions have been formed at this level, however tentative they may be, is it possible to employ the text properly as a resource for enquiries into the world behind the text; then the text will provide historical evidence, first and foremost, for the time of its writer and readers, and conclusions are likely to be even more tentative.²⁵ The literary task is also crucial for entering what has become known as the world in front of the text, for engaging in critical theological appropriation of the text's message.

These observations set the agenda for the present study. Its initial focus, that of the first four chapters, will be on providing and explaining a literary reading of John in the light of the trial motif, employing mainly narrative critical and reader-response approaches and exploring the interplay between this text and previous texts of Scripture. After chapter 1's introduction to the overall narrative and to the lawsuit motif, chapter 2 tackles the broader literary question of the relation of this motif to the Jewish Scriptures. Some have taken to calling such a treatment "intertextuality," but this term, with its roots in poststructuralism, is not really appropriate for my interests. I look not just to exploit the interplay between texts regardless of their chronological relations or of whether the texts involved would have been known to first-century readers; rather, my aim is to take account also of genetic relationships and evidence of influence and dependence between the Gospel of John and earlier texts. It is insufficient simply to work with an overall analysis of the narrative and a discussion of isolated aspects of the lawsuit motif. So, after investigation of the scriptural background, chapter 3 provides some close readings of passages that reflect the main stages of the development of the motif in the light of this background. This gives a more detailed exegetical base from which to pursue further literary questions in chapter 4 and then to explore in chapter 5 the theological point of view that informs the trial motif. Although the various aspects of John's theology have been well worked over by others, viewing them through the lens of

²⁵ I disagree therefore with, e.g., Maccini, *Her Testimony Is True*, 17, who wishes to treat the Gospel's narrative as, first of all, a window onto the events in the life of Jesus. I do not hold that the Gospel cannot be treated in this way. But this is not the first historical setting for which the narrative provides evidence, and conclusions about the life of Jesus cannot be read off the surface of the narrative but can only be reached after rigorous historical analysis of the traditions that it incorporates.

the lawsuit motif not only provides a different angle of vision but also sheds fresh light and, particularly in some cases, makes an appreciable difference to the way in which one formulates the Gospel's theology.

Having come this far, we will now be in a better position to ask more directly historical and social questions about other catalysts for the evangelist's employment of the overarching trial motif. Chapter 6 therefore asks what factors, in the experience of the community from which the Gospel emerged, might shed light on why the trial metaphor was found appropriate; what social implications of such experience might help to explain, and be reflected in, the prominence (in addition to such notions as truth and judgment) of the value of glory or honor in the lawsuit; and which earlier Christian traditions relating to the trial motif may have been known, taken up, and reworked in the Fourth Gospel.

Any attempt to hold a conversation with this Gospel, in which our topic is appropriated for contemporary interests, raises a variety of issues. The final part of this volume addresses a number of these. Chapter 7 sketches how the trial as a metaphor for life still resonates in a number of ways in Western culture and literature, and points up the deeply disturbing irony that the major example of witness literature in our time comes from a group of twentieth-century Jews, survivors of the Holocaust and others, testifying to an event in which Christians and, in some measure, the history of Christians' interpretation of this Gospel are implicated. Given the way in which this Gospel's extensive reworking of traditions in order to tell the story of Jesus in terms of a cosmic lawsuit served the needs of the, at one time, marginalized group of Christians from which it emerged, and given that later, when the power ratio was reversed, the formulations of its truth claims were capable of serving as violent weapons against a marginalized Judaism, clearly a hermeneutic of suspicion, as well as one of retrieval, is required. This terminology derives from the work of Paul Ricoeur, who is also significant for this project because of his reflections on the biblical lawsuit motif in "The Hermeneutics of Testimony."²⁶ An exposition and critique of this essay, indicating its potential for facilitating contemporary appropriation of the lawsuit motif, forms the second part of chapter 7.

Chapter 8 raises some further matters that need to be addressed as part of this appropriation. First, there is a basic question: In the context of contemporary views of human freedom and knowledge, is it possible to repeat this Gospel's call for an acceptance of its perspective simply on

²⁶ Paul Ricoeur, "The Hermeneutics of Testimony," in P. Ricoeur, *Essays on Biblical Interpretation* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980), 119–54.

the basis of its own testimony? What is the relation between believing a testimony and exercising critical and indeed suspicious judgment? Three more specific questions are then explored: Having observed the evangelist's extensive reworking of the tradition in order to provide the emplotment of a cosmic trial, in what sense can one claim this sort of narrative to be true? What can be said about the truth of a narrative that can be charged with anti-Judaism in its depiction of the opposition in the trial? Finally, are this aspect of the cosmic trial and its history of interpretation consequences of the motif, with its grand claims to truth constituting a metanarrative that is inescapably marginalizing, oppressive, and violent; or are there elements in this narrative that are meant to subvert any such function?

Chapter 9 offers reflections on what it might mean to take seriously in our world just a few of the major elements of John's version of the cosmic trial, granted that those who wish to do so are shaped both by their religious texts and by their particular ecclesial and cultural locations. What might be the value of the theological retrieval of this metaphor about a trial that is meant to produce life and the conditions for human well-being, and in which the ultimate Judge undergoes judgment, and the authoritative Witness becomes the martyred victim, in order to accomplish this outcome? If Christian truth claims are inevitably disputed and therefore entail witness as advocacy, is there a role in a pluralistic academic context for biblical interpretation as a form of witness or advocacy? When the relation between truth and power depicted in the narrative is inserted into the networks of power in our worlds, what does it suggest about witness to the truth as service of the other and about witness as suffering? In the light of such considerations, what might it mean to bear faithful witness to the truth of this narrative, with all the perils associated with its notion of supersessionism in the context of dialogue with Judaism?

Although I have chosen to deal first with more literary issues, then to provide a description of the narrative's theological themes and raise historical questions before moving on to the issue of critical appropriation, this is not the only way to proceed, nor does it reflect exactly how my own reading has advanced. It has not been a matter of first coming at the narrative by means of an objective critical description, then moving on to the application of the findings. Rather, my experience as a reader was that of being caught up in the narrative and intuiting that the lawsuit motif made sense of its world as a whole and resonated with issues of truth and belief and uses of the trial metaphor in my own world. Literary and historical criticism then came into play in order to test and confirm

this initial construal, and similarly, theological and hermeneutical reflection began to probe the experience of being addressed by such a construal of the narrative's world. My presentation is only one possible avenue into the fascinating and complex world of the Fourth Gospel. Clearly it is a reading shaped by my own particular interests and commitments, which will become apparent. Nevertheless, my hope is that what has proved exciting for one reader will also be sufficiently fruitful and suggestive to stimulate others in their engagement with the text of the Fourth Gospel.

I have attempted to integrate some of the results of earlier work on the trial theme into this new study. But besides interacting with the work of other scholars, I have tried to achieve the more difficult goal of writing at a level that can be appreciated by general students of the NT. My footnoting of others' work is therefore neither comprehensive nor exhaustive. A fuller listing can be found in the bibliography.