

## Review of Paul Anderson, *The Fourth Gospel and the Quest for Jesus*<sup>1</sup>

by Annang Asumang<sup>2</sup>

**Anderson PN 2007. *The Fourth Gospel and the Quest for Jesus: Modern Foundations Reconsidered*. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 226 pages.**

Paul Anderson is Professor of Biblical and Quaker Studies at the George Fox University, USA. As co-chair of the ‘John, Jesus, and History’ group of the Society of Biblical Literature meetings, he has been involved in the efforts to correct the increasing marginalization of the Gospel of John in scholarly discussions on the life and ministry of the ‘historical’ Jesus. As the subtitle indicates, this book aims to examine critically several of the foundational assumptions that have led to this modern “de-historicization of John and its direct implication: the de-Johannification of Jesus” (p. 2). To some extent, Anderson successfully lays good grounds for questioning some of these assumptions. This is the main strength of the book.

Anderson sets his stall out in the introductory chapter by arguing that there is a widening gap between ‘traditional’ and ‘critical’ scholars in approaches to the historical questions in John’s gospel. The “relegation of John to the canons of Christology and theology” by critical scholars, he argues, has resulted in the state of affairs in which “Synoptic investigations of the Jesus of history can therefore be carried out unencumbered by the idiosyncrasies of John, ‘the maverick gospel’, and the history of John’s material may be ascribed to . . . the theological imagination of the Fourth Evangelist” (p. 2).

---

<sup>1</sup> The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the beliefs of the South African Theological Seminary.

<sup>2</sup> Annang Asumang is a medical doctor practising medicine in England. He holds an MTh in Biblical Studies from the South African Theological Seminary, and is currently doing his DTh.

This situation is unacceptable to Anderson, since all four evangelists were theologians equally motivated by the same agenda to present the good news of Jesus Christ. However, Anderson warns that his aim is not to generate a 'critical' versus 'traditional' scholarship conflict but rather to engender an "intentionally synthetic and integrative" (p. 4) approach between the two camps. His point is that there is no need to force a "dichotomous choice between John and the Synoptics" (p. 5).

With this background in mind, Anderson aims the rest of the book at putting the various assumptions underpinning the modernists' approach to John, which is by far the dominant perspective in Johannine scholarship, under scrutiny. In Part I, he examines the historical background to the marginalization of John's gospel. He notes that the historicity of John was not questioned until the eighteenth century when comparisons between John and the Synoptics became a serious scholarly endeavour. From then on, an assumption of 'three against one' resulted in John being categorized as a minority, and hence, a dissonant voice. He notes however, that "with the eventual emergence of Markan priority, the 3-against-1 denigration of John falls flat" (p. 17). John ought to have been re-installed as a conversation partner with Mark, rather than being isolated.

Anderson then examines the immense influence of Bultmann's 1971 commentary in this historical trajectory of John's marginalization. Bultmann, he argues, was "willing to ascribe the bulk of gospel narrative to contemporary mythological origins" (p. 19). This mythological interpretation essentially undermined the historicity of the fourth gospel. John's archaeological and topographical details, which to Anderson are remarkably more detailed and beneficial for historical Jesus research, have been largely ignored. Efforts by Käsemann, Dodd, Robinson, Morris, Carson and Blomberg to 'rehabilitate' John are noted; but these attempts have not led to any significant revision of the dominant marginalization of John's gospel.

Next, the various proposed hypotheses for explaining the John-Synoptic relationship—Markan Dependence, Midrashic Development, Historicized Drama and Two Editions theory, are all examined by Anderson and found wanting. Instead, he proposes that John was written from an independent tradition but not in isolation and seclusion from the synoptics. Both at the oral

and written phases of the gospels, John's gospel developed in a dialogical conversation with all the other gospels and with Mark in particular. "John's relationship with Mark was interfluent, augmentative and corrective; John's relationship with Q was formative, and perhaps interfluent; John's relation with Luke was formative, orderly and theological; and John's relationship with Matthew was reinforcing, dialectical and correcting" (p. 40). This last sentence perhaps summarizes, not only the major message of this book, but also serves as the gist of what is expanded in the rest of the book.

In Part II, Anderson further assesses some of the similarities and differences between John and the synoptics and examines the various approaches in dealing with them. He then employs the interinfluential approach to propose a number of explanations of the differences. Basically, John is a deeply reflective theologian who has also had more time to reshape and re-evaluate his understanding of Jesus. He notes that "some aspects of John's witness show signs of being crafted for readers and hearers of Mark" (p. 75). Anderson provides several balanced evaluations of the differences, such as how the ministry of John the Baptist is handled by Mark and the fourth gospel, and the "Messianic secret" in Mark against Jesus' self-declarations in John. This is very helpful; for it turns out in this book that John can be understood as in conversation and not in conflict with Mark.

In Part III, Anderson applies his proposal of interfluentiality to further explain the relationships between John and the Synoptics. In many ways, this part repeats several of the points which have already been made. However, a conceptual diagram (p. 126) helps to effectively summarize Anderson's view of the complex relationships between the gospels. In Part IV, Anderson argues that since to a large extent, Matthew and Luke depend on and develop Mark, and John is independent in conversation with Mark, the concept of the 'synoptic' gospels should be replaced by a new concept of the 'bi-optic' gospels, that is, we essentially have two traditions reflecting on the historical Jesus; with some additional material from Q.

Though this is not the first time Anderson has made such a proposal (see for example, Anderson 2001:175-88), it remains to be seen what other scholarly partners may view this approach. Clearly, Matthew and Luke were not insignificant theologians, a point that Anderson himself also admits. In any

case, one may not be too far from being right to suspect that John would rather wish to be admitted to the table of four instead of elbowing away Matthew and Luke from the table.

The final Part V brings Anderson's findings together and suggests some implications. He warns against the rejection of John based on, among other things, the "overstated claims regarding John's presentation of Jesus' pre-existent divinity" (p. 177). On the other hand, "denigration of John's historicity is fraught with insurmountable problems" (p. 180). What is needed is "a more adequate stance to consider the distinctive contribution of John in terms of its autonomous origin and development" (p. 181). This modest aim of Anderson is perhaps one of the main achievements of this book.

I can muster only two minor criticisms against such an excellent book. Firstly, the organization of the material results in several repetitions. The author has clearly set the material in such a way as to generate dialogue and conversation, certainly with 'critical' scholars. Yet, the discussions on various issues lead to a number of distracting duplications.

A second and more trivial criticism may yet be relevant, since another reviewer has also made a similar point (see Painter 2008). Though Anderson aims to generate dialogue, parts of the book are polemical. Statements such as "a scholar's livelihood and career may hinge upon distinguishing oneself as a hard-minded scientific scholar rather than a soft-hearted traditionalist one" and "no scholar wants to come across as embracing a naively traditionalistic view" (2007:45) may well be an accurate assessment of the state of affairs in Biblical Studies. However, in this reviewer's opinion, such labelling of dialogical partners could well entrench views rather than bring camps together. There is no doubt that the author feels strongly about the subject and aims to question certain accepted and strongly held norms in scholarly circles. Or perhaps the harsh tones in one or two of the book's pages may serve to bring to the fore the problem of uncritical acceptance of 'critical' assumptions. One hopes the later is the case.

These trivial objections notwithstanding, Anderson's book may prove to be one of the major publications which may contribute to the 'restoration' of

John's gospel to its rightful place as an equal partner with the synoptics in scholarly discussions of the 'historical' Jesus.

### **Works Cited**

---

Anderson, Paul N. 2001. "John and Mark—the Bi-Optic Gospels" in Robert Fortna and Tom Thatcher (eds.), *Jesus in Johannine Tradition* (Philadelphia: Westminster / John Knox Press); 175-88.

Painter, John. 2008. Review of Paul N. Anderson, *The Fourth Gospel and the Quest for Jesus: Modern Foundations Reconsidered*, *Review of Biblical Literature* [http://www.bookreviews.org/pdf/5879\\_6329.pdf](http://www.bookreviews.org/pdf/5879_6329.pdf) (05/2008).