3

John and the Johannine Literature

The Woman at the Well

Introduction

Of all the writings of the Bible none is more obviously an integrated whole than the Gospel of John. The first-time reader lionized by reader-response critics is sure to find it, as David Friedrich Strauss famously did, a "seamless garment." Its themes (judgment, mission, revelation, truth) and symbols (light, water, bread, healing, life) are skillfully interwoven into the familiar gospel story of Jesus's brief career as a teacher and wonder-worker, with its dramatic ending of death and resurrection. In this, the fourth version of the story, the parts are more than usually representative of the whole. Besides the sustained self-allusiveness consequential upon the evangelist's interpenetrative technique, the reason for this is that once under way the story is dominated throughout by the powerful presence of Jesus, who keeps introducing fresh variations on the single theme of life-giving revelation. This is what justifies the synecdochic approach of the present essay. In John 4 the Samaritan woman, passing from incredulity to belief, invites a similar response from the readers of the Gospel. Those acquainted with the whole Gospel know that the same invitation is issued on almost every page: any episode of comparable length could be used, as this one is here, to illustrate models of interpretation.[1]

1. The same cannot be said, unfortunately, of the Johannine Epistles, whose precise relationship with the Gospel is still disputed by scholars. Judith Lieu discusses this

All the writers whose work is assessed here are responding to the same text. Almost all have decided upon its meaning after reading it carefully over and over again. Most have made careful appraisals of their predecessors' opinions. Many have pondered the same evidence and the same arguments. Yet each has his or her own point of view: a point of view implies an angle; an angle implies a slant. In one or two cases, not more, the slant might reasonably be ascribed to blinkered vision; but if this is true of only a few, how are we to account for the remarkable divergences of the rest?

Part of the reason is the sheer complexity of the text itself, the rich ambiguities that make the very idea of a definitive exegesis palpably absurd. But if we are to get beyond a helpless shrug of the shoulders we must begin by outlining a number of interpretative options that no student of the Gospel can entirely evade. Some of these permeate the whole of biblical criticism; others are especially relevant to John. Even the most particular elements (a tiny example is the meaning of the verb συγχράομαι in verse 9)[2] indicate the *kind* of choice that faces us wherever we look.

Rough Versus Smooth

The most significant of all the issues on which Johannine scholarship continues to be split involves what has come to be known, after the great linguistician Ferdinand de Saussure, as the distinction between synchronic and diachronic approaches to the Gospel. Those who adopt a synchronic or "smooth" approach insist upon reading the text as it has been transmitted, without delving into its prehistory. A diachronic or "rough" approach, on the other hand, demands both a recognition of the presence of successive layers in the text (usually attributed to source, author, and redactor) and some attempt to prise these apart. These two approaches are rarely combined, though why this should be so is something of a mystery, since the possibilities of dialectic enrichment are, one would have thought, fairly obvious. Commentators occasionally make some grudging acknowledgement of the justification of source and redaction

question with fairness and lucidity in *The Theology of the Johannine Epistles*.

2. David Daube has suggested an alternative meaning to the usual "have dealings with," that is, "use the same utensils as" ("Jesus and the Samaritan Woman," 137–47). In my view this would not significantly affect the interpretation of the episode as a whole.

theories, but the vast majority, when they get down to business, prefer the smooth approach. As for articles and monographs, I know of only two "rough" studies of John 4:1–42, the first by Luise Schottroff,[3] a pupil of Bultmann, the second, much more recent, a doctoral thesis by Andrea Link.[4] A first-time reader of the other books, articles, and extracts discussed below would certainly conclude that there is nothing at all to be said for a diachronic analysis of the text.

History Versus Exegesis

Are we to approach this passage as exegetes, simply asking what it means, or as historians, more interested in what it can tell us about the origins and growth of the community for which it was composed? Here too, although in theory the alternatives are not mutually exclusive, they are rarely combined in practice. Yet we should at least remain alert to the possibility that a purely historical insight might open a window on to a fresh interpretation.

Background

Introducing his commentary on John (subtitled "how he speaks, thinks, and believes") Adolf Schlatter observes that he has been variously regarded: "as a Greek, a Paulinist, a philosopher of religion, a poet, a mystic, and a gnostic."[5] His own work is suffused with his perception of John as a Palestinian. An abyss yawns between him and Rudolf Bultmann,[6] for whom the evangelist is a converted gnostic with a redeeming message for all mankind; and an even deeper chasm separates him from C. H. Dodd,[7] convinced that John is a Greek whose work was intended in the first place for the perusal of well-educated Hellenistic pagans. Our views on this matter cannot but affect our own understanding of the Gospel text. These days, thanks largely to the pioneering efforts of Raymond Brown[8] (for Schlatter's work had little impact), the Jewish provenance of

3. Schottroff, "Johannes 4,5–15," 199–214.
4. Link, "*Was redest du mit ihr?*"
5. Schlatter, *Der Evangelist Johannes*, vii.
6. Bultmann, *Gospel of John.*
7. Dodd, *Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel.*
8. Brown, *Gospel According to John.*

John is mostly taken for granted; but we should not forget that this too is an interpretative choice.

Readership

John's intended readership may have changed more than once during the composition of the Gospel, and in any case its nature is hard to determine with any precision. This is nevertheless the kind of problem that historical critics take in their stride: it causes them no discomfort. On the other hand, they are likely to bristle at the sound of the term "ideal reader" as this comes ringing down from the citadel of narrative criticism. Whatever our point of view, whether it be old-fashioned and traditional, modern or postmodern, we are living at a time when the notion of the reader has become no less problematic than that of the author. In the present context the question is further complicated by the fact that individual interpreters may themselves have different readerships in mind—expert or lay, critical or uncritical, committed or uncommitted. All of which prompts a warning: *caveat lector.*

Genre

One of the drawbacks of selective exegesis, the isolation of a single passage for close scrutiny, is that it may cause the reader to forget the relevance for interpretation of the genre of the whole work. John's Gospel is a proclamation of faith in narrative form, paradoxically recounting Jesus's earthly career in order to persuade its readers to accept him as their Risen Lord. This means that it has to be read on two levels, first the story level and secondly the level of spiritual understanding.[9] The riddles of the Gospel, its symbols, and its ironies are all aimed at reinforcing this purposeful ambivalence. That is why the most helpful studies are generally those that highlight one or more of these features, those for instance of G. R. O'Day,[10] emphasizing the irony of the gospel, or D. A. Lee,[11] focusing on its symbolism.

9. For a full defense of this view of the Gospel, see chapter 11 ("The Gospel Genre") of Ashton, *Understanding the Fourth Gospel,* 1st edition, 407–42.

10. O'Day, *Revelation in the Fourth Gospel*, 49–92.

11. Lee, *Symbolic Narratives of the Fourth Gospel*, 64–97.

Context

A second possible disadvantage of selective exegesis in the sense in which I am using this term is the risk of neglecting the many links, both structural and thematic, that tie the various episodes of the Gospel together. A small example is Jesus's assertion, in John 4:34, that his "food" is "to accomplish the work" of the one who sent him. The singular "work" is also used in this strong sense in 17:4, where Jesus speaks of "having accomplished" the work that he had been given to do (see too 6:29). A very teasing question of a different kind is posed by the statement, in John 4:22, that "salvation comes from the Jews." How could the Fourth Evangelist, elsewhere so hostile to those he portrays as Jesus's adversaries, have written that? It is all too easy to miss internal allusions and contextual difficulties if you are preoccupied with the interpretation of a single chapter.

Of more immediate significance (and indeed noticed by many interpreters) are all the binary oppositions that set this passage off against the Nicodemus episode in chapter 3—Pharisee/Samaritan, named/unnamed, man/woman, night/day, secret/open, indoors/outdoors; but the resemblances are important too, especially John's use in both chapters of his favorite device of the riddle. In each case the riddle is contained in a single expression, ἄνωθεν in chapter 3, ὕδωρ ζῶν in chapter 4. English has no word that does justice to the double meaning of ἄνωθεν (from above/a second time), so the ambiguity is always in evidence. Yet when it comes to chapter 4 all translations without exception render ὕδωρ ζῶν, even where it first occurs, as "living water," thus missing the deliberate ambiguity of the Greek (where the first meaning of the term is simply fresh or running water) and making it impossible for the Greekless reader to sympathize with the woman's initial confusion.

Weighting

We now come to yet another choice that confronts anyone seriously attempting to understand a text from which he or she is separated by a temporal or cultural gap (which is what makes interpretation necessary in the first place). This is what may be called the problem of weighting, felt here most acutely in the problem of how to deal with Jacob's well. That the location of the encounter between Jesus and the woman has some bearing on the meaning cannot be doubted. But when we ask *how* it should be brought into the interpretation opinions differ widely; and there is no

way of arbitrating between them that would satisfy all the contestants. Yet we must suppose that the allusion would have been picked up quickly, almost instinctively, by John's first readers. Nineteen centuries later it is impossible, surely, to state with any confidence just what significance they may have attached to it.

This kind of apparently trivial problem crops up everywhere. It is as if, planning a journey to a distant country, we were to depend on a compass reading that we could only glimpse with blurred vision from a long way off. The slightest mistake will lead us far astray; and the same is true for any other traveler. Tiny differences in perception may have great consequences.

Literal Versus Symbolic

Here is another sort of problem on which it is impossible to reach any agreement. "You have had five husbands," Jesus tells the woman (verse 18), and there is nothing else in the Gospel to advise us whether we should take this information literally or symbolically. All are agreed that the preceding dialogue concerning living water must be interpreted symbolically. What then are we to make of the five husbands? Some favor an allegorical reading: the five gods of the Samaritans, the five books of the Pentateuch, even the five senses—though in that case, as A. Loisy dryly enquires, how are we to identify the woman's present partner (a sixth sense, perhaps?).[12] Feeling that none of these suggestions fits in very easily with the preceding dialogue, we may opt instead for a literal reading. But in that case how do we explain the abrupt shift from the symbolic to the literal mode? We shall see that there are various ways of tackling this problem.

Many other questions may come into our minds as we dig deeper into the story, but these are the ones best capable, in my judgment, of dividing "soul from spirit, joints from marrow."

Method

There are probably as many methods of biblical criticism as there are kinds of music, and as many new methods as there are kinds of pop music. The champions of the new methods are likely to dismiss the censures

12. Loisy, *Le quatrième évangile*, 354n1.

of old-fashioned historical critics just as abruptly as admirers of, say, heavy metal are likely to brush aside the remonstrances of those who prefer the classical tradition. The result is a *dialogue de sourds*, with each side convinced of the deafness of the other. How in such circumstances can an unreconstructed and (so far) undeconstructed historical critic hope to give a reasonably impartial account of modern approaches?

Analysis

The interpreter's task is threefold: analysis, application, and explanation. Though distinguishable, the three tasks are not always distinct. Usually, though not always, analysis is absorbed into explanation, and very often application is too. Even where a writer is chiefly interested in analysis on the one hand or application on the other, some explanation is always felt to be indispensable.

To analyze a text is to spell out one's understanding of its structure and meaning. Analysis used to be carried out without tools: all one needed was a good eye and a sensitive nose. The modern form of analysis, text-linguistics, is a much more complex affair, but its aims are the same. Here too analysis does its utmost to rely exclusively upon information provided by the text itself. Hendrikus Boers states quite frankly: "If the analysis were to suggest something which cannot be recognized by a sensitive reader *without* the analysis . . . I would consider the analysis to have introduced alien material into the text."[13] After this candid admission he justifies and explains the elaborate procedures of the first part of his book (backed up by nearly eighty diagrams, some of a truly daunting complexity) by comparing them to the laborious business of reading a foreign language with the aid of a grammar. First he offers a quite simple preliminary analysis. Thereafter, appealing to the semiotics of A. J. Greimas and J. Courtés, he discusses what he calls the textual syntax of the episode, clarifying it on the three levels of its surface narrative, syntactic deep structure, and discursive syntax. A comprehensive analysis of the deep structure leads him to the conclusion that "contrary to an analysis of only the surface by traditional means, John 4 is a syntactically tightly cohesive text."[14] He then tackles the semantic component of the chapter, starting with "the concrete figures" and moving on to "the more abstract level

13. Boers, *Neither on This Mountain*, 148.

14. Boers, *Neither on This Mountain*, 77.

of the values expressed by these figures,"[15] the values of sustenance, life, obedience, human solidarity, and salvation. He explains in great detail how these are interrelated within the story. The second part of the book attempts to flesh out the preceding analyses in a full interpretation,[16] and the concluding pages summarize the meaning of the passage as "the process of revelation of Jesus as the savior of the world."

Employing rather different procedures, but equally dependent upon a synchronic reading and equally committed to the use of text-oriented techniques, Birger Olsson[17] and J. Eugene Botha[18] have arrived at rather different results. Although each of the three is offering an "objective" analysis of the same text, they all find it impossible in the long run to detach analysis cleanly from explanation.

Application

All texts carry meaning; many, including the Bible, also carry a meaning for their readers. "Meaning for"—significance in the strong sense—is traditionally covered by the Latin term *applicatio.* In pre-critical days the application was generally caught up in the interpretation. Historical critics are for the most part anxious to exclude it. Raymond Brown, for instance, prefaces his remarkable two-volume commentary by confessing a "stubborn refusal to make a biblical text say more than its author meant to say." He can do this because of his sense of "the clear difference between the thoughts of the various biblical authors (which are the concern of the biblical scholar) and the subsequent use and development of those thoughts in divergent theologies (which are the concern of the theologian)."[19] Since then, however, the legitimacy of separating explanation and application has increasingly come under question.[20] Whoever is right on this contentious issue, all agree on what application means in a hermeneutical context: it is the appropriation of a biblical text in

15. Boers, *Neither on This Mountain*, 79.

16. Boers, *Neither on This Mountain*, 144–200.

17. Olsson, *Structure and Meaning in the Fourth Gospel.*

18. Botha, *Jesus and the Samaritan Woman.*

19. Brown, *Gospel According to John,* vi.

20. Notably by Christopher Rowland in his inaugural lecture as Dean Ireland Professor of the Exegesis of Holy Scripture, University of Oxford: "Open thy Mouth for the Dumb," 228–45.

such a way that it speaks to its readers directly in their own situation and demands from them an active response. We may distinguish two main kinds of application in the interpretation of John 4:1–42: the psychologizing and the feminist.

Psychology

The first of the psychologizing explanations, that of François Roustang,[21] now nearly half a century old, draws its inspiration more from Hegel than from Freud or Jung. It uses the "woman at the well" episode as a model of the transition from indifference to faith, and its tone is in some respects less psychological than philosophical or theological. Yet Roustang's brilliant analysis of the woman's progress from appearance to reality and from falsehood to truth depends, like many of Hegel's ostensibly "logical" moves, upon enduringly valid psychological insights into the difficulties human beings encounter when trying to confront and acknowledge the truth. This is a bold study, elaborating upon John's text much as a skilful composer develops the potential of a single melodic line; and it may well, as Roustang fears, offend the purists: "professional exegetes are unlikely to follow us here."[22] Yet it does less violence to the text than many other interpretations, and merits respect for its religious sensitivity.

Unlike Roustang, who directs a polite nod towards those he calls "les exegetes de métier" before boarding his own train, Eugen Drewermann has no time for traditional biblical scholarship. Towards the beginning of his huge two-volume work, *Tiefenpsychologie und Exegese*, he launches a fierce attack on the historical-critical method as generally practised. Viewed hermeneutically, he says, it is extremely limited; viewed theologically it is downright wrong (*geradezu falsch*). He goes on to accuse professional exegetes of hiding behind the so-called objectivity of their theoretical reconstructions.[23]

In Roustang's interpretation the conclusion of the story (verses 35–38) provides an effective counterpart to the preceding section by outlining the conditions of the possibility of an act of faith. Drewermann breaks off before this conclusion, but like Roustang he follows what he calls a *Zerdehnungsregel*: this allows him to stretch out and slow down the

21. Roustang, "Les moments de l'acte de foi," 344–78.
22. Roustang, "Les moments de l'acte de foi," 344.
23. Drewermann, *Tiefenpsychologie und Exegese*, 1:23–25.

very rapid movement of the text itself and to read from it the story of a gradual coming-to-faith in the Messiah that he sees as equivalent to the step-by-step process of Jungian individuation (which is what, for him, genuine religion is all about). The term "spirit" in the phrase "spirit and truth" (verse 23) he takes to mean personal conviction (as opposed to tradition) and "truth" to mean personal integrity. Jesus acts as a kind of Jungian analyst, enabling the woman to find her true self.[24] Drewermann ends by asserting that theological exegesis cannot get by ("nicht auskommen kann") without the help of depth psychology.

Where Roustang turns for help to Hegel (though without naming him) and Drewermann to Jung, Stephen Moore[25] appeals to Lacan and Derrida. In his Lacanian reading of the episode he goes beyond all other interpreters by placing the emphasis not on the woman's thirst but on that of Jesus himself. The interchange between the two is driven, Moore insists, by *Jesus's* longing to instil in the woman a desire for the living water he has come to bring: "Only thus can his own deeper thirst be assuaged, his own lack be filled."[26] With Lacan's assistance Moore is able to plunge much deeper into the well, theologically speaking, than the rest of us, still clinging to the ropes of traditional exegetical methods, can possibly manage. He then calls upon Derrida's deconstructions to help him highlight the change of register in the crucifixion scene. Two levels of meaning of the water symbol (physical and spiritual) that had been quite properly held apart in the dialogue suddenly collapse into one.[27] The newly discovered meaning, however, cannot hold, and the result is the deconstruction of the text and the disorientation of the reader.

Feminism

Certain readers (who may, as we have seen, be psychologists but are more often theologians) approach the Bible brandishing an axe. When applied to the passage which concerns us here this is generally a feminist axe, and it is wielded in three ways. First, by a proceeding analogous to what is generously called positive discrimination, it is possible to hew a meaning out of the text in the service of a higher cause. A second tactic is to point

24. Drewermann, *Tiefenpsychologie und Exegese*, 2:686–97.
25. Moore, "Are There Impurities in the Living Water?," 207–27.
26. Moore, "Are There Impurities in the Living Water?," 208.
27. Moore, "Are There Impurities in the Living Water?," 222.

out the underlying androcentrism of the biblical authors themselves, a characteristic that men, in the nature of the case, are less likely to notice than women. Sometimes the claim is made that the reading now being proposed is the right one and that only the prejudices of earlier scholars blinded by phallocentrism or misogyny have prevented them from seeing it.

The little interchange between Jesus and the woman beginning "Go and call your husband" (verse 16) is an excellent example. Some scholars attach a symbolic significance to the five husbands; even so it is arguable that the text itself exhibits a misogynistic bias. Others, mostly male, opt for a literal reading: the woman's marital life is in total disarray. This exposes them to the charge that their unconscious bias has led them to shift the interpretation from the symbolic to the literal without first trying to give a coherent reading of the whole episode by remaining on the symbolic level appropriate, as all agree, to the dialogue concerning living water. Stephen Moore, feminist as well as deconstructionist, has some fun citing a series of commentators thundering moral disapproval of the woman's behavior ("profligacy and unbridled passions," "a tramp," "an illicit affair," "bawdy past," "immoral life," etc.).[28] He then points out that the commentators in question, only too ready to underline the woman's failure to grasp the symbolic import of "living water," "effectively trade places with her by opting to take Jesus' statement in 4:18 at face-value."[29]

Sandra Schneiders, equally dismissive of literal readings of the five husbands, writes of the episode as "a textbook case of the trivialization, marginalization, and even sexual demonization of biblical women."[30] But whereas Moore signally fails to follow up his own criticisms of literal readings with a symbolic interpretation of his own, Schneiders is braver. "The entire dialogue between Jesus and the woman," she urges, "is the 'wooing' of Samaria to full covenant fidelity in the New Israel by Jesus, the New Bridegroom."[31] Like many other interpreters she stresses the symbolic significance of the meeting by the well (we shall return to this theme), but goes further than some by asserting that "Jesus has already been identified at Cana as the true Bridegroom who supplied the good wine for the wedding feast (John 2:9–11) and by John the Baptist

28. Raymond Brown is less censorious, finding the woman "mincing and coy, with a certain light grace" (*Gospel According to John*, 175).

29. Moore, "Are There Impurities," 212.

30. Schneiders, "Case Study," 188.

31. Schneiders, "Case Study," 191.

as the true Bridegroom to whom God has given the New Israel as Bride (John 3:27–30)."[32] (A much cruder reading, drawing on some of the same evidence, is Lyle Eslinger's suggestion that the woman was employing a series of *double entendres* whilst making "sexual advances" to the attractive stranger in an attempt to seduce him.)[33]

In her seminal work *In Memory of Her* Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza makes a brief but important contribution to the debate. "The dramatic dialogue," she observes, "is probably based on a missionary tradition that ascribed a primary role to a woman in the conversion of the Samaritans"[34]—an exceptionally interesting comment because the Samaritan woman now takes on historical significance as the leader of an early Christian mission to the Samaritans (who took their name from the capital city of ancient Israel). The evangelist, reluctant to leave her in the center of the stage for too long, is quick to add that true faith consists in listening to Jesus himself (verse 42); but in underlining the plain statement that many of her fellow-citizens "believed on the strength of her word" (verse 39), Schüssler Fiorenza performs the service of reminding us that the Gospel is available to the historian as well as to the exegete.

Explanation

The business of exegetes is to use all the information at their disposal to explain the text in question. To illustrate the explanation of the "woman at the well" episode I have chosen three works published within the last decade: a doctoral thesis by a Nigerian sister, an extract from a grandly conceived "reading" of the whole Gospel by the veteran French scholar, Xavier Léon-Dufour, and a thesis from within the German tradition by Andrea Link.

Teresa Okure, alone among present-day exegetes, regards the evangelist as an eyewitness of the events he records.[35] Having selected an episode in Jesus's own life that corresponds to the situation of the audience he is addressing, he goes on to portray him in the exercise of the mission given him by God.[36] The readers John has in mind may be insiders, but

32. Schneiders, "Case Study," 187.
33. Eslinger, "Wooing of the Woman at the Well," 167–83.
34. Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, 327.
35. Okure, *Johannine Approach to Mission*, 272–73.
36. Okure, *Johannine Approach to Mission*, 292.

they too, Okure insists, fall within the sphere of the evangelist's own missionary endeavor, standing as they do "in special need of being reminded of Jesus' uniqueness as God's eschatological agent of salvation . . . and of the resulting need for their total dependence on him."[37] As her title suggests, she concentrates entirely on the theme of mission. By the end of her book this theme, which started as a leitmotif of the gospel,[38] has become *the* leitmotif.[39]

Léon-Dufour, a past master in the French art of *haute vulgarisation*, offers a discursive (and synchronic) reading of the Gospel that manages to integrate a wide range of reference, especially to the Old Testament, into a searching exegesis.[40] He explains this episode, which he sees as "a symbolic narrative," with the aid of his own theory of two levels of understanding, of Jesus and of the church. On the first level the living water symbolizes the revelation that Jesus has come to bring, on the second level, the spirit, that has to wait upon his going. He refuses to choose between a literal and a symbolic reading of the five husbands: certainly the woman is the symbolic representative of her people as they move from idolatry to the service of the true God; but at the same time she has her own importance as an individual standing in urgent need of the life and salvation brought by Jesus. Major biblical references are inserted into the discussion rather than being crammed into footnotes: here is unobtrusive scholarship directed to an uncomplicated reading of the text.

Andrea Link is the only commentator in recent times to take a diachronic approach. In the first half of her book, she summarizes and criticizes earlier views. Then, after a long verse-by-verse study of the redactional history of the episode,[41] she devotes a shorter, concluding section to what she calls *Theologiegeschichte*.[42] This focuses on the theological differences between the three levels of redaction: first the source or *Grundschrift*, and then the work, successively, of evangelist and redactor. The source is a missionary document in which "the woman from Sychar" figures as a dialogue partner of Jesus, a disciple of Moses and an active

37. Okure, *Johannine Approach to Mission*, 287.

38. Okure, *Johannine Approach to Mission*, 2.

39. Okure, *Johannine Approach to Mission*, 291.

40. Léon-Dufour, *Lecture de l'Évangile selon Jean*, 339–95. For other examples of "discursive readings," see O'Day, *Revelation in the Fourth Gospel*; Lee, *Symbolic Narratives*.

41. Link, *Was redest du mit ihr?*, 178–324.

42. Link, *Was redest du mit ihr?*, 325–71.

missionary eager to promote faith in Jesus.[43] It also portrays Jesus as a prophet closely resembling Elijah (verse 19) and as Messiah (verse 25). The evangelist goes beyond the source in seeing Jesus as revealer (verses 10–15) and savior of the world (verse 42). Although Link's redactor has some affinities with Bultmann's ecclesiastical redactor (he is interested in sacramentalism [verse 2] and futuristic eschatology [verse 14]), his most important obsession, anti-docetism, was first ascribed to him by Georg Richter.[44] Link also detects his interfering hand in the transformation of the woman into a Samaritan (verses 7, 9) and above all in the assertion that "salvation is from the Jews" (verse 22). Ultimately, however, she agrees with Okure about the missionary thrust of the story, as it insists that the goal of all missionary endeavor is "to lead humans to the direct experience of God in Jesus Christ."[45]

Conclusion

Of all the methodological options that dominate present-day exegesis of the gospels, the most deplorable, it seems to me, is the almost unanimous rejection by English-speaking scholars of a diachronic approach to the text. Leaving aside all the other "aporias" that keep rearing up from beneath John's deceptively smooth surface text, the startlingly abrupt transition in 4:16 should be enough to arouse the suspicions of any alert reader that some cutting and pasting has been going on. "Go and fetch your husband" is a decidedly odd response to a request for water. Many commentators ignore the difficulty. Some have idiosyncratic explanations of their own. C. M. Carmichael,[46] for instance, judges that "the switch in conversation would be inexplicable if it were not for the underlying marital theme," a suggestion that fits in with an unusually lavish treatment of that particular motif. Dorothy Lee, after acknowledging the apparent abruptness, takes the opposite view that "the image of the second scene is dependent on the primary image of water/the well in the first scene."[47] M.-J. Lagrange[48] engagingly proposes that the woman's incredulity must

43. Link, *Was redest du mit ihr?*, 352.
44. Richter, *Studien zum Johannesevangelium.*
45. Link, *Was redest du mit ihr?,* 365.
46. Carmichael, "Marriage and the Samaritan Woman," 332–46.
47. Lee, *Symbolic Narratives*, 74–75.
48. Lagrange, *Évangile selon saint Jean*, 109.

have shown in her face and prompted Jesus to change tack ("prendre un autre ton"). J. E. Botha[49] credits Jesus with a particularly subtle strategy: having failed thus far to coax the woman on to his own wavelength, he determines to flout three key maxims generally observed in two-way conversations, those of relevancy, manner, and sequencing: "this 'break' created by the flouting of maxims indicates to the other character that the current line of discussion should be terminated, and it gives Jesus the opportunity of continuing the conversation and introducing a new program or topic."[50] Thus Botha cleverly justifies the apparent dislocation in terms of his speech-act theory, paradoxically underlining the extent of the difficulty as he does so. Boers disagrees: only a naive reader would be bothered by the apparent inconsequence: "at the deeper level Jesus' command prepares for the revelation of his miraculous ability which the woman mockingly denied him by challenging him with Jacob's miracle."[51] This may indeed be the right solution *on the level of the final redaction*, but not, I think, otherwise. Jürgen Becker[52] proposes that in the source what is now verse 16 followed verse 9; so too Link. This suggestion has much to be said for it, as long as we see that in the text as we have it the dialogue on living water (verses 10–15) helps to account for the woman's amazed admiration: "I perceive that you are a prophet" (verse 19).

To adopt this solution is also to dodge Stephen Moore's strictures on those who, on reaching the five husbands, slide unreflectingly from the symbolic to the literal mode. Yet none of the suggested symbolisms is very impressive. By far the most popular of them, the false gods of the Samaritans, is open to the objection that according to 2 Kings 17 the Samaritans had seven false gods, not five, and not all male. Where arguments are inconclusive exegetes will continue to wrangle. I myself am inclined to accept Andrea Link's suggestion that the number five (which she speaks of as "ein Annäherungswort"—an approximation) simply serves to reinforce the reader's sense of the urgency of the woman's need for the salvation proffered by Jesus.[53] This conversion story provided John with a framework for his own symbolic dialogue concerning living water.

49. Botha, "John 4:16a," 183–92.
50. Botha, "John 4:16a," 188–89.
51. Boers, *Neither on This Mountain*, 170.
52. Becker, *Das Evangelium des Johannes*, 165.
53. Link, *Was redest du mit ihr?*, 269.

The weakness of Link's work lies not in her approach or her method but in her failure to invest her redactor with the slightest verisimilitude: how could any wholehearted anti-docetist have made such a botched job of the Gospel as a whole? The conclusion of verse 9 ("Jews have no truck with Samaritans") may, it is true, be the work of a glossator, but the remainder of the narrative is much better explained as the combination by the evangelist of two stories, one his own, one taken from a source. The best account of the problem posed by verse 22, I persist in thinking, is that of Klaus Haacker (known seemingly to only a few later commentators).[54] Haacker argues that it reflects the kind of controversy between Jews and Samaritans that is seen in Ecclesiasticus 50:25–26 and *Testament of Levi* 7. But this need not have prevented it from figuring in a document used by missionaries who were carrying the gospel from Judaea, already recognized as Jesus's native-land, into Samaria.

What then of Jacob's well? The most informative discussion of this topic, with abundant references to Jewish sources, is Jerome Neyrey's "Jacob Traditions."[55] Neyrey is one of the first among an increasing number of modern scholars[56] to take the view that the story in John is a variant of the classical Jewish betrothal scene, as found in Genesis and Exodus. But although this suggestion cannot be ruled out, a simpler explanation is ready to hand. Jacob is mentioned because he is the father of both Judah, from whom the Jews took their name, and Joseph (cf. v. 5), the greatly revered ancestor (through Ephraim and Manasseh) of the Samaritans. Jacob's dying blessing embraced both Judah and Joseph, describing the latter as "a fruitful bough by a spring" (Gen 49:9–10, 22; cf. Deut 33:13–17). No doubt this view reduces the significance of the well by making it serve simply as a natural backdrop for a dialogue about water; but, as Haacker saw, it also furnishes a plausible setting for the opposition between the two sacred mountains, Gerizim and Zion.

54. Haacker, "Gottesdienst ohne Gotteserkenntnis," 110–26. For a full discussion of the significance of the phrase in the context of the whole gospel, see Ashton, *Studying John*, 44–49.

55. Neyrey, "Jacob Traditions and the Interpretation of John 4:10–26," 419–37. The fullest information on the various ideas associated with water is to be found in Odeberg, *Fourth Gospel*, 149–70.

56. Bligh, "Jesus in Samaria"; Carmichael, "Marriage and the Samaritan Woman"; Eslinger, "Wooing of the Woman"; Schneiders, "Case Study."

A Note on Commentaries

Boers artlessly informs his readers that from the vast array of commentaries at his disposal he limited himself to "35 of the most promising." Time, he adds resignedly, "can be better spent."[57] Truly much perusal of commentaries is a weariness of the flesh.

Publishers approve of commentaries, especially those that belong to a series. It is easy to see why. They sell well, especially to libraries. Occupying as they do so much space on the shelves, no interpreter of interpretations can afford to neglect them entirely.

Writing nearly a century ago, in 1904, the great Hermann Gunkel[58] made some trenchant remarks about biblical commentaries of his own day. He was struck by the vast array of information that they provide, in an almost limitless profusion ("eine fast unübersehbare Fülle") that can only bewilder beginners and is hardly likely to satisfy more experienced readers. He gloomily concluded that despite the extraordinary variety of the fare on offer one thing is in danger of being left behind, and that is the text!

Gunkel was writing primarily of the exegesis of the Old Testament, but said himself that most of his comments apply equally well to the New. In the case of John's Gospel there is only one commentary that escapes the pitfalls he so ruthlessly reveals, and that is Rudolf Bultmann's magisterial *Das Evangelium des Johannes*,[59] which did not appear in English until three decades after its publication in Germany during the war (1941). Despite the many criticisms that can be made of this work, Bultmann penetrates to the heart of John's message with extraordinary insight, focusing unerringly on the evangelist's special interest in revelation, not least in the passage under discussion. Convinced as he is of the abiding relevance of Jesus's life-giving message, he conveys it to his own readers, if they allow themselves to be led by him, with great urgency and power. This is probably the greatest commentary on any New Testament writing in the second millennium, and leaves one wondering what may be expected from the third.

57. Boers, *Neither on This Mountain*, 144n1.

58. Gunkel, "Ziele und Methoden," 11–29.

59. Bultmann, *Gospel of John.* For a critical appreciation of Bultmann's work on John, see chapter 2 of Ashton, *Understanding the Fourth Gospel*, 1st edition, 44–66.