

## Introduction

JOHN ASHTON OFTEN SPOKE to his close friends about the reinvigoration or new lease of life he experienced after his retirement in 1996, when he began working again on the Gospel of John. During this time—over the course of nearly twenty years—he wrote a number of essays on a range of Johannine topics; he also worked on a second edition of his landmark study, *Understanding the Fourth Gospel* (2007), and, two years before his death in 2016, he published his final book entitled *The Gospel of John and Christian Origins*. John also discussed with both of us his plans to publish in a single collection many of the essays he wrote during this period, as he had done with other essays several years earlier in *Studying John: Approaches to the Fourth Gospel* (1994).

In the last months of his life John asked Chris whether he would be his literary executor. He was especially concerned that the collection of essays that he had by now submitted for publication, but without success, should reach a wider public. The collection that he contemplated, which is substantially what is contained in this volume but with the addition of the tribute given at John's funeral, is distinctive. It was John's intention to preface his later essays on the Gospel of John with an autobiographical essay setting the evolution of his interest in and understanding of the Gospel of John in the context of his life. It is a remarkable testimony not only to the origins of John's thinking but it helps us to "discover John" and the long journey that led to him to teaching at the University of Oxford—a journey that continued many years after his retirement. His preface to what is essentially an exegetical volume is a welcome offering, as it offers significant glimpses of the ways in which life and intellectual engagement overlap and interact with each other.

Of particular interest is what John wrote about what he learned from French biblical scholars and the ways in which those ideas inform his writing, from *Understanding the Fourth Gospel* to *The Gospel of John and Christian Origins*. But, as Chris wrote in a foreword to the second edition of *Understanding the Fourth Gospel*, the climax of John Ashton's book is his exposition of the theme of revelation, identified by Bultmann as the key idea of John's Gospel yet here located within a thoroughly Jewish milieu. John Ashton's original, and substantial, exposition of John's Gospel in the light of the apocalyptic tradition is masterful in its economy and profound in its insight. The phrase he used to describe John, "an apocalypse in reverse," is so fitting in its allusiveness and also its applicability to a narrative of the revelation of God in human form. The Apocalypse and the Gospel of John are very different texts. Both texts, however, offer in narrative and visionary form words which seek to bring about an epistemological and ethical transformation in readers/hearers in preparation for the eschatological meeting "face to face" either in the New Jerusalem (Rev 22:4) or in heaven with the exalted Christ (John 17:24).

Nearly a decade ago the two of us had the privilege of gathering together a group of scholars to explore several aspects of "Intimations of Apocalyptic," as had been deftly articulated by John in his *Understanding the Fourth Gospel*. On this occasion we are grateful to Cascade Books for working with us to bring John Ashton's final collection of essays to publication, thus fulfilling the end-of-journey wishes of this truly remarkable Johannine scholar and dear friend.

We gratefully acknowledge the permission granted by the following publishers to reproduce John's essays, which are placed in a largely thematic rather than strictly chronological order: Mohr Siebeck; Cambridge University Press; Westminster John Knox Press; SBL Press; and Bloomsbury Publishing.

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- "John and the Johannine Literature: The Woman at the Well." In *The Cambridge Companion to Biblical Interpretation*, edited by John Barton, 259–75. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.

- “Riddles and Mysteries: The Way, the Truth, and the Life.” In *Jesus in Johannine Tradition*, edited by Robert T. Fortna and Tom Thatcher, 333–42. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001.
- “‘Mystery’ in the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Fourth Gospel.” In *John, Qumran, and the Dead Sea Scrolls: Sixty Years of Discovery and Debate*, edited by Mary L. Coloe and Tom Thatcher, 53–68. *Early Judaism and Its Literature* 32. Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2011.
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- “Browning on Feuerbach and Renan.” In *Sense and Sensitivity: Essays on Reading the Bible in Memory of Robert Carroll*, edited by Alastair G. Hunter and Phillip R. Davies, 374–94. *JSOTSup* 348. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002.

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