

John Behr and Interpretations of the Fourth Gospel, Ancient and Modern: A Review Essay

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John Behr, *John the Theologian and His Paschal Gospel: A Prologue to Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), xv + 338 pp.

It is no small challenge to respond to this new book by one of the most prolific and renowned Orthodox theologians of this generation. In time it will, I daresay, come to be regarded as the *magnum opus* of Fr. John Behr, the erstwhile dean of St. Vladimir’s Orthodox Seminary, and currently the Fr. George Florovsky Distinguished Professor of Patristics at the same institution. Prospective readers should be warned that the text will require their full concentration, and that having followed its itinerary through to the end, they may well concur with the conclusion reached by this reviewer: namely, that it was time to circle back and retrace my steps from the beginning, if now with some sense of my destination. The panoramas through which Fr. John guides the reader are vast and variegated, incorporating historical criticism, patristic exegesis, and phenomenological reflection. No doubt he has already had others subject him to the following conceit: just as the author of the Johannine corpus – the “Beloved Disciple” alternatively reckoned as one of the Sons of Thunder or John the Elder (of Ephesus) – is presented by Behr as the privileged hermeneut of the Gospel itself, so our own “John the Younger,” in unveiling for us that same corpus today, is to be welcomed as an *angelus interpres* par excellence.

The ultimate goal of this ambitious volume is methodological: Behr seeks to demonstrate how theology might proceed by analyzing the turns by which the “spiritual Gospel” reveals the Word and by examining how those attentive to the Evangelist have in turn clarified and crystallized his legacy. Such disciples turn out to be an eclectic set of figures both ancient and modern; as a result, the book contains something for everyone. From the outset, Fr. John indicates his intent to eschew what historian Quentin Skinner terms the “mythology of doctrine,” i.e., the idea that later readers, such as ourselves, are in a position to know what ancient writers *really* meant, thereby unwittingly reifying our own concerns and context. On the contrary, to avoid co-opting the past into the systems of the present requires a particularly conscious effort at respecting the *otherness* of the other; those who have preceded us may not have answers to our questions, but may indeed put questions, as it were, to our answers.

Behr’s lengthy “discourse on method” is built up over successive chapters through meditations on the Gospel’s ambiguous authorship (ch. 1); its peculiar genre, which Behr regards as apocalyptic (ch. 2); its root metaphors, especially “temple” (ch. 3), “living human being” and “ascending/descending” (ch. 4); and the representation in miniature – what one might call a “pre-capitulation” – of its message in the Prologue (ch. 5). The concluding two chapters are perhaps the most original, offering fare unlikely to appear on the table of standard biblical scholars. Here Fr. John engages French novelist and philosopher Michel Henry (1922–2002), whose own quasi-mystical engagement with the figure of Christ and the enigma of the Incarnation evinces the perennial appeal of the Johannine text.

If there is a consistent message in *John the Theologian*, it is that we are *not* to conceive of the Incarnation as “an episode in the biography of the Word” – a phrase coined by former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams that recurs like a leitmotif throughout the book. Rather, we are to take the Passion (and Resurrection) – that Paschal Mystery – as the singular lens through which all of the Gospel and, indeed, all of Scripture, may be brought into focus: history is to be interpreted such that “B.C.” and “A.D.” divide from the watershed

of the Cross, rather than the conventional starting point of the nativity. Here our author resumes a refrain persuasively intoned in his acclaimed *The Mystery of Christ: Life in Death* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2006), "intoning" being apposite inasmuch as there, as here, Behr both presumes and proposes a liturgical *Sitz im Leben* for this Gospelcum-Apocalypse, one shared, in his estimation, by its first and foremost interpreters (the so-called "school of John").

Amid its plethora of insights, Behr's text also raises a number of restive questions – symptomatic, perhaps, of how challenging it is to negotiate the claims of modern biblical scholarship while also articulating a theology faithful to the patristic tradition. In what follows, I will summarize those which occurred to me. Firstly, Behr notes that "[i]t is hard even to understand what 'pre-existent' might mean," in regard to the "problematic ascription of temporality to a divine subject" (27). Here he is critiquing the common and, to his mind, naïve conception of Christ as not only "eternally begotten of the Father before all ages" (as per the Nicene Creed), but in some measure knowable and known prior to the Incarnation. Yet is this not often the very force of the scriptural commentary, hymnography and iconography of the Byzantine tradition, with respect to the presence and activity of Christ in the stories of the Old Testament? Behr surely is aware, for example, that St. Irenaeus – on whose thought he is an acknowledged expert – sounds at times as though he might happily affirm the Incarnation as "an episode in the biography of the Word," a characterization which our author is at pains to discredit. A well-known passage of the second-century father reads thus:

"For if ye had believed Moses, ye would also have believed Me; for he wrote of Me," (John 5:46) [saying this,] no doubt, because the Son of God is implanted everywhere throughout his writings: at one time, indeed, speaking with Abraham, when about to eat with him; at another time with Noah, giving to him the dimensions [of the ark]; at another, inquiring after Adam; at another, bringing down judgment upon the Sodomites; and again, when He becomes visible, and