

1-2006

Donahue's "Life in Abundance: Studies in John's Gospel in Tribute to Raymond E. Brown" - Book Review

Paul N. Anderson

George Fox University, panderso@georgefox.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ccs>



Part of the [Biblical Studies Commons](#), and the [Christianity Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Previously published in *Review of Biblical Literature*, January 2006. http://www.bookreviews.org/pdf/4874_5078.pdf

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the School of Theology at Digital Commons @ George Fox University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications - George Fox School of Theology by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ George Fox University. For more information, please contact arolfe@georgefox.edu.

Donahue, John R., ed.

***Life in Abundance: Studies of John's Gospel in
Tribute to Raymond E. Brown***

Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2005. Pp. xiv +
313. Paper. \$29.95. ISBN 0814630111.

Paul N. Anderson
George Fox University
Newberg, OR 97132

The untimely death of Father Raymond Brown in 1998 was a tremendous loss to ecumenism, to New Testament studies, and especially to Johannine scholarship. A very small handful of biblical scholars in the modern era will have written as many the 47 books, 200 articles, and 108 substantive reviews that Brown wrote (as outlined helpfully in a complete bibliography prepared by Ronald Witherup and Michael L. Barré [259–89]), but I cannot think of a single American New Testament scholar whose work has been more helpful, measured, and significant than Brown's. Credit Brown's trail-blazing impact with other first-rate Catholic scholars joining the ranks of critical biblical scholarship, and a sober estimation of Brown's importance goes even higher. As if his 2,000-plus page Anchor Bible commentaries on the Gospel and Epistles of John were not enough, his 2,400-plus page treatments of the birth and death of the Messiah, his 900-page introduction to the New Testament, and his co-editing of the 2,000-plus page New Jerome Biblical Commentary and Bible Handbook bespeak the substantive character and scope of his contribution. For these reasons a conference in his honor is well deserved, and both the conference and the collected essays have well lived up to their billing.

Organized by Father John R. Donahue, the newly appointed Raymond E. Brown Distinguished Professor of New Testament Studies at St. Mary's Seminary in Baltimore, the conference drew together twenty biblical scholars, theologians, and religious leaders

who presented papers and responses, fifty other biblical scholars participating in round-table discussions, and two hundred and twenty others who were simply interested in the conference. The subjects ranged from hermeneutical issues to state-of-the-art Johannine presentations to personal tributes to the memory and contribution of Father Brown. The publication of the conference papers, also edited by John Donahue, makes an impressive contribution to every New Testament and Johannine collection—a fitting tribute also to the new Raymond Brown Center and Johannine Collection at the St. Mary's Knott Library.

Following a preface by John Donahue (v–viii), the keynote address by Terrence T. Pendergast (“The Church’s Great Challenge: Proclaiming God’s Word in the New Millennium” [1–15]) portrays the scope of Brown’s contribution in relation to the Church and how it engages the Bible. Brown was a leading figure in showing how rigorous biblical scholarship could enhance the life of faith, not simply be a threat to it, and by example and design he played a significant role in drawing first-rate Catholic scholars into the mainstream of biblical scholarship to the benefit of scholarship and the Church.

The book is divided into four parts with eight papers and responses to each, plus three personal tributes to Raymond Brown. In part 1, “Johannine Studies: Challenges and Prospects,” Francis J. Moloney (editor of Brown’s hot-off-the-press latest monograph at the time: *An Introduction to the Gospel of John* [New York: Doubleday, 2003]) fittingly reports on Brown’s contribution to studies of the Gospel of John. In general, he notes Brown’s contributions to the emergence of recognizing the Jewish background of the Fourth Gospel, the history of the Johannine community, John’s individuated relation to the Synoptics, sustained tradition analysis, the relation between the Jesus of history and Johannine Christology, and the creativity of the Evangelist. In terms of movement, Moloney notes Brown’s consolidation of his five-stage theory of John’s composition into three stages (two of which have two aspects to them), and he also notes Brown’s interpretive movement toward engaging the text personally and transformingly. In R. Alan Culpepper’s response (“The Gospel of John: The Legacy of Raymond E. Brown and Beyond” [19–39]), he agrees with most of Moloney’s points and further describes Brown’s contribution as consisting of a comprehensive composition theory maintaining an unnamed eyewitness as the Evangelist, who developed his tradition rooted in history but attending to the needs of developing Christianity and whose work was finalized by a conservative redactor who maintained continuity with his tradition rather than taking it in new directions. Such a schema therefore preserves the basic historicity of the Johannine tradition while still allowing for its contextual development. Whether Brown’s work represents “the pinnacle of the integration of confession and criticism” or “the last holdout of a bankrupt historicism,” says Culpepper, only time will tell.

D. Moody Smith's essay ("Future Directions of Johannine Studies" [52–62]) notes several connections between the Johannine presentation of Jesus' sayings with parallels in the Synoptics, pointing to the need to make sense of connections between literary and theological assessments of John. Parallel to Bultmann in taking the text seriously and critically, Brown's literary theory and historical methodology produced a more believable synthesis that will contribute to new literary readings well into the twenty-first century. Smith calls Brown "the most influential Protestant exegete in the latter part of the twentieth century," at least in America, and impressively *as a Catholic priest* (60)!

Part 2, "Historical Context and the Gospel of John," has three chapters to it, developing the history of the Johannine community, interactions with first-century Judaism, and influences from Qumran. Robert Kysar's essay ("The Whence and Whither of the Johannine Community" [65–81]) acknowledges the contributions of Brown, Martyn, Meeks, and Qumran discoveries in the inference of contextual aspects of "the Johannine community," but Kysar is not as optimistic about its destiny. The evidence for a Johannine community may be questionable, and postmodern challenges to historicism cause us to question what we claim to know. A response by Hans-Josef Klauck (82–90) challenges Kysar's claim that evidence is lacking by citing "we," "you," and "I" passages in the Johannine Epistles and by pointing to the fact of reports of schism and resulting exhortations toward unity. This undoubtedly suggests some sort of corporate situation, so while particulars may be debated, the basic inference of community life still stands. Klauck then cites connections with the Gospel of John that support such community-related tensions and points to further evidence of derivational communal Johannine situations and tensions reflected in the second-century *Acts of John*.

Burton L. Visotsky's essay ("Methodological Considerations in the Study of John's Interaction with First-Century Judaism" [91–107]) argues that a "four-level drama" is an improvement over a two-level analysis put forward by Martyn, including: (1) Jesus and his ministry, (2) the Johannine narration in dialogue with its Jewish neighbors, (3) interpretation of Johannine tradition within the canonized corpus leading to anti-Semitic readings, and (4) the levels on which we read the Johannine writings and play formative roles in the developing story as interpreters. Dating the persecution of Johannine Christians to the period of Trajan, wherein Jewish communities shunned Jesus adherents, reassesses level 2 interpretation in ways more conducive to adequate interpretations on levels 3 and 4. The response by Adele Reinhartz (108–16) suggests that the first two levels should actually be three: the story of Jesus, the story of the Johannine community, and the cosmological tale—"the story of God who sent his Son into the world and then called him back out again" (110–11). She finds Visotsky's thesis on the Trajanic persecution intriguing but would like more evidence before assenting to it.

In the essay by Joseph A. Fitzmyer (“Qumran Literature and the Johannine Writings” [117–33]), John’s parallels with Qumran include the employment of Jewish creation motifs, the development of ethical dualism, emphases upon “the Spirit of Truth,” and calling for community members to love one another. Other parallels include the citing of Elijah, Moses, and a coming Messiah as significant figures and such motifs as eternal life, living water, the works of God, and staying away from idols. The contact between John and Qumran is real, but indirect. The response by Daniel J. Harrington (134–37) argues for a closer appraisal of the contacts, perhaps taking the association with John the Baptist further. He suggests three further sets of thematic parallels, including the direct knowledge of God, community consciousness, and eschatology and ethics.

Part 3, “Johannine Theology” includes two essays and responses on the death and resurrection of Jesus. Craig R. Koester’s essay (“The Death of Jesus and the Human Condition: Exploring the Theology of John’s Gospel” [141–57]) develops a presentation of the love of God revealed through the paradoxical exaltation of Jesus on the cross. Not only is the love of the Father revealed in the death of Jesus, but anthropologically his death addresses existentially the condition of all humanity: reconciling those in need of love and friendship, redeeming sinners in need of atonement, liberating the oppressed from the powers of evil, and welcoming those who were created to know God. In the death of the Son the glory of the Father is revealed, and his love for the world is made known. Thus, “in telling the story of Jesus, the evangelist weaves together a number of perspectives so that readers may come to know something of the fullness of the crucified Word” (154). In what may be the most penetrating of all responses, Gail R. O’Day (158–67) turns Koester’s thesis toward its complement: in the *life* of Jesus is the love of the Father made known to humanity. (As with many features of Johannine Christology, I might add, the *conjunctive* element restores the dynamic tensions intrinsic to the Johannine text.) According to O’Day, the beholding of the Son’s glory is located in the incarnation of the flesh-becoming Word (1:14), and the “hour” of Jesus connecting the first sign in Cana with the proleptic word of the temple incident shows that in the revealing of his glory, “Jesus’ life and death are of a piece” (162). Further, in placing the temple incident at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry, and in locating the exhortation to eat and drink the flesh and blood of Jesus at the feeding rather than at the Last Supper, the centrality of the incarnation as the basis for redemption, atonement, and salvation are maintained. Thus, “John envisions the possibility of grace and new life that come from fullness, not emptiness and sacrifice, from an image of God that creates new possibilities out of the stuff of human flesh, from love that dwells incarnate” (167).

Sandra Schneiders’s essay, “The Resurrection (of the Body) in the Fourth Gospel” (168–98), combines analyses of narrative, dramatic, and theological-spiritual structures of John 20 to show that the “bodiliness of Jesus’ resurrection is crucial to Christian faith,

theology, and spirituality” (189.). Thus, he is the firstfruits of humanity’s incorporation into divinity; in his resurrected body his presence continues among his followers he self-symbolizes in bodily form—transcending time, space, and causality, and as a eucharistic manifestation of his real presence in his ecclesial body—the church. John 20:19–23 is central to the reality of the resurrected body of Jesus in that as the Father sent the Son with apostolic agency, so the Son sends his followers to be that bodily presence in the world. The response by Donald Senior (199–203) affirms her work and raises several questions. Is the Evangelist consistent in his differing uses of “flesh” and “body”? Are her distinctions between “physical” and “material” satisfactory? And should Christians who die in the flesh expect the same destiny as Jesus? These post-Enlightenment questions continue for interpreters of John’s presentation of the resurrection of the body in the Fourth Gospel.

Part 4, “Interpreting the Work of Raymond Brown,” includes two essays and one response. Robert F. Leavitt’s essay, “Raymond Brown and Paul Ricoeur on the Surplus of Meaning” (207–30), comments on Brown’s earlier treatment of the text’s *sensus plenior* as a means of getting at the fuller meaning of the text beyond its literal sense. In Brown’s later work, he moved beyond the modernist historical-critical method to include a wider set of meanings indebted to Paul Ricoeur and his language-based developments of the surplus of meaning. “For Raymond Brown and Paul Ricoeur the surplus meaning of a text finds its personal, social, and religious fulfillments in new justifiable readings and in the actual existence of believers.” (226) Francis Schüssler Fiorenza (231–37) agrees with Father Leavitt’s treatment of the *sensus plenior* in relation to Ricoeur’s and Brown’s works, although he suggests that Brown could have appropriated a Ricoeurian mediating position in negotiating the tensions between historical-critical methodologies and the church’s interpretation of Scripture. Drawing in Gadamer’s work, “explanatory method in exegesis” and “interpretation and normative experience” provide two ways forward in appreciating Brown’s hermeneutical work and in taking it further.

Ronald D. Witherup’s essay (“The Incarnate Word Revealed: The Pastoral Writings of Raymond E. Brown” [238–52]) develops a helpful analysis of Brown’s pastoral writings. Not only were they extensive, but they were historic in filling a place between the advances made by the Second Vatican Council and the need for interpreting the best of historical-critical methodology to persons of faith. The impact of Brown’s work allowed the Church to understand and welcome the most fruitful of hermeneutical methods, and it even contributed to Church vitality in considering the struggles faced by the churches the apostles left behind. This contributes, then, to ecumenical dialogue, as many of the New Testament issues are also faced by the Church in later generations. In his later book, *A Retreat with John the Evangelist*, Brown departs from his modernist historical-critical methodology and steps into a new world of creative and incarnational engagement with

the text. Such a reading promotes growth, leads to reform, and results in conversion (249).

The book is concluded by several appendices, including a “Biography and Bibliography of the Publications of Raymond E. Brown,” prepared by Ronald D. Witherup and Michael L. Barré (253–89), a sermon at the interreligious prayer service by Phyllis Tribble (“A Striving After Wind” [292–96]), and John Donahue’s homily at the closing liturgy (“A Whisper from the Grave” [297–300]). Father Donahue deserves to be commended for the first-rate conference and collection of essays honoring the historic contribution of Raymond E. Brown. As one of the highest-quality and widest-ranging collections of Johannine essays I have seen in recent years, this book not only honors Raymond Brown suitably—it admirably furthers the work to which he gave his life. On that score at least, his legacy continues.