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# Moving the Conversation Forward: Open Questions and New Directions (Chapter in Communities in Dispute : Current Scholarship on the Johannine Epistles)

Paul N. Anderson

George Fox University, [panderso@georgefox.edu](mailto:panderso@georgefox.edu)

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## Moving the Conversation Forward: Open Questions and New Directions

*Paul N. Anderson*

Given that R. Alan Culpepper has fittingly summarized the essays in the introduction to the present collection, such an overview will not be necessary in this concluding essay. Rather, my charge is to comment on how the above essays move critical conversations forward as well as noting new directions and open questions regarding state-of-the-art understandings of the Johannine Epistles. As such, this essay will progress through the developments achieved in the three parts of this collection, but then return in reverse order, from the third part to the first, considering the open questions and new directions that emerge.

Urban von Wahlde is correct. No part of New Testament studies (and I would extend it to biblical studies in general) is as fraught with differences of opinion—among top critical scholars—as the Johannine writings. And, pivotal within those debates are the origin, character, and meaning of the three Johannine Epistles. A generation or two ago, the conventional understanding among scholars, with some exceptions, might have included the following judgments: the Epistles of John (1) were written either before or after the Gospel of John; (2) reflect Hellenistic Christianity with no connection to Judaism and are out of the mainstream of the developing Christian movement; (3) were written in the light of emerging Gnosticism, where claims of having achieved perfection caused enthusiasts to be incorrigible; (4) reflect primarily theological issues at stake, such as a devaluing of the atonement or aspects of Christology; (5) expose secessionists in every closet; and (6) reflect sectarian idiosyncrasies and are thus devoid of meaningful ethical content or instruction.

In the light of the present collection, however, none of these views are compelling. Rather, (1) it could be that the Epistles of John were written within the process of the Gospel's being finalized, bearing connections with its earlier and later material. (2) Engagement with Jewish neighbors and other partners in dialogue, within a Hellenistic

setting, is a more plausible inference for all five of the Johannine writings (cf. the letters of Ignatius), and the presence of Hellenistic Christians does not preclude Jewish or other partners in dialogue. (3) Docetizing tendencies do not imply Gnosticism; the Gospel and Epistles of John may have influenced mid-second-century Gnosticism, but not all docetists were gnostics. Spirit references are also rhetorical and do not imply pneumatism as the source of divisions. (4) Many of the concerns faced were practical rather than theological; an emphasis on the atoning work of Christ does not imply that adversaries devalued it, and christological stances and assertions may have bolstered approaches to more mundane concerns. (5) Secession was one problem, but it was not the only issue faced within the Johannine situation; far more acute were the teachings of false prophets—traveling ministers, with whose doctrines on matters of faith and praxis the Johannine leadership disagreed. (6) Indeed, many of the most intense disagreements appear to have revolved around different stances regarding moral and ethical issues and how to approach them; thus, considering the content of the Epistles themselves is instructive for inferring their contextual situation. Therefore, convergences among the essays above move the conversation forward on several levels.

#### *Literary and Composition Aspects of the Johannine Epistles*

On the writing of the Johannine Epistles and their relation to the Gospel, some interesting convergences emerge, reflecting on the composition theories of von Wahlde, myself, and Culpepper.

(1) Rather than seeing the Johannine Epistles as written before or after the Johannine Gospel, a convergence of opinion sees the Epistles as plausibly being written within the process of the Gospel's being produced, sometime between its first and final editions. This makes sense for a number of reasons, as the Gospel itself seems to have undergone an earlier and later set of developments. Thus, some of the material in the Gospel seems to have been developed in 1 and 2 John especially (the love commandments, Jesus's being the Christ, what has been seen and heard from the beginning, tensions with the world, etc.), while some issues engaged in the Epistles (church unity, the fleshly suffering of Jesus as the Christ, issues related to church governance, receiving light and life from the Logos, etc.) seem to have been developed in the later Johannine material. Raymond Brown was moving in this direction, but others have carried out their own approaches further, beyond his.

(2) Rather than seeing the Gospel as depending on alien sources or the Synoptics, the paradigms put forward by these scholars see the Johannine tradition as an autonomous and individuated tradition, developing alongside others but not derivative from them. In that sense Brown's approach to the origin and formation of the Johannine tradition has largely won the day, although the Leuven School and the Barrett trajectory among some British scholars continue to infer varying levels of Synoptic derivation upon it. For a

consideration of two leading examples of John's composition in multiple editions, the reader should follow von Wahlde's advice and review the first volume of his three-volume commentary (2010), where he lays out the bases for a three-edition theory of composition, each having distinctive views on eleven different issues. Even if one might not concur with all aspects of his theory, appreciating the theological tensions he sets in sharp relief will be an aid for interpreting the theology of the Johannine Gospel and the Epistles. Following Lindars and Brown, though, seems simpler: a basic first edition followed later material that could have been added at the same time or at different times, with judgments based primarily on literary perplexities rather than theological tendencies. Such a theory is laid out clearly in a variety of places, especially in my introduction to John (2011). However John's composition may have come together, Culpepper's (1983, 1998) insistence on the final coherence of the text and the need to interpret it as a unity stands. On an overly synchronic view of the composition (not the reading) of the Gospel, the facts that John's final chapter and Logos-hymn prologue encapsulate and introduce its material exceptionally well might not indicate their being written at the same time as the first edition of the narrative (indeed, John 1:1-18 can also be seen as a response to the Gospel's narrative—similar to 1 John 1:1-4, and John 21 affirms what has been said before, even if it was added later), but the emphasis on interpreting the completed Gospel and Epistles as they stand is affirmed by all three paradigms.

(3) An interesting set of convergences here surfaces, as the authors of these paradigms infer a plurality of hands in the production of the Johannine Gospel and Epistles, albeit in differing ways. Von Wahlde sees three different authors involved in the writing of each of the three editions of the Gospel, and while the author of the Epistles concurs with its dominant themes, he also seeks to correct things here and there in a nuanced way. Therefore, the author of the Epistles operates in a "yes ... but" sort of way, affirming the revelatory work of the Spirit of Christ, but also insisting on faithfulness to the teachings of Jesus and the command to love one another. As such, the dialectical critique of John's Gospel by 1 John opens one to corrective secondary dialectic also in the finalized Gospel. My approach, however, works with these tensions differently. I see the work of the final editor as conservative and not adding theological tension to the evangelist's work (with Brown, here, versus Rudolf Bultmann). Rather, John's theological tensions emerge from other factors: (1) the evangelist was himself a dialectical thinker (with C. K. Barrett and Judith Lieu) looking at things from one side and then another; (2) we have here a highly dialectical situation in which the evangelist engages his audiences according to their needs, which vary; (3) the main thrust of John's Christology is a prophet-like-Moses agency schema (with Peder Borgen and also von Wahlde), featuring the agency of the Son, the Spirit, and believers; (4) the dialogical function of narrative engages audiences by means of irony, double meanings, and rhetorical devices. Culpepper questions my inferring that the author of the Epistles is plausibly the final compiler (with Bultmann) on the basis of

stylistic differences (although he may have added the evangelist's work as well as his own, and the characteristic use of οὖν in John's narrative, while absent from the Epistles, is not found in the Gospel's prologue and only three times in John 15–17). Nonetheless, all three of us infer a plurality of hands in the Johannine composition process, although Andreas Köstenberger sees John the apostle as author of the Johannine Gospel and Epistles.

(4) Considerable advances are also made in the present collection in considering the differences in literary function between the three Johannine Epistles, and especially Lieu's work on this subject continues to be strong. As 1 John contains no overt epistolary features, such as a greeting to an audience, asides to individuals, or personal comments at the beginning or the end of the writing, it most likely represents a circular letter that was read in a multiplicity of settings rather than being intended for a particular audience. Second John, however, is written to a particular community from another, and 3 John is written to an individual by an individual. That being the case, considerable advantages follow from understanding the more general message of 1 John after considering the more contextual concerns reflected in the second and third Johannine Epistles. And, the Point is well taken that larger inferences as to what might have been going on within a community, emerging from larger theories and interpretations of the other Johannine writings, may even corrupt one's understanding of what is being said in 2 or 3 John, since especially in 3 John, the Elder's experience alone is implied as a factor in his writing. Then again, the connections between 1 and 2 John are close enough that each of these two texts cannot ignore the other. Therefore, in Lieu's work we see the value of focusing on a text by itself without being swayed unduly by inferences of a community and its features, although such connections and their implications inevitably follow.

#### *Historical and Situational Aspects of the Johannine Epistles*

On the historical situation of the Johannine Epistles, Brown's influence still remains, although its influence has varied in terms of reception and development.

(1) First, and continuing with Brown over and against J. Louis Martyn's approach, a multiplicity of crises is apparent within the historical Johannine situation, arguing for the Elder's addressing of not just one issue but several over a decade or two. In addition to Brown's paradigm, which sees Johannine Christians being engaged dialectically with several crises in the second and third phases of the Johannine situation, other targeted concerns surface within the present collection, which are not incompatible with his inferences. These include: (1) dialogues with the local Jewish presence in a Hellenistic setting—apparently involving defections back into the synagogue; (2) somewhat stressed engagements with the Roman presence during the reign of Domitian (81–96 CE) plausibly over the reassertion of the imperial cult and associated issues; (3) challenges regarding assimilative teachings of gentile-Christian traveling ministers—bolstered by a nonsuffering (docetizing) presentation of Jesus as the divine Son; and (4) dialectical

engagements with Diotrephes and his kin—proto-Ignatian hierarchical approaches to discipline and order. Here especially, Köstenberger’s noting of God’s eschatological work challenging worldly powers (Rome’s hegemony as outlined in Revelation) and William Loader’s inference of sexual and libertine issues as factors of “worldly” concern would fit into several of these dialogical issues. At this point, one might add at least two more crises: (5) tensions with those appealing to pneumatism (as Von Wahlde and Gary Burge might argue)—calling for right action and loving consideration as key; as well as (6) the simple command to love one another (as Lieu, Peter Rhea Jones, and J. G. van der Watt argue) in the face of impending penalties for adhering to Christ and his way.

(2) A second point follows: incipient Gnosticism is no longer seen to be a primary issue in the Johannine situation—either on the part of the evangelist or the author of the Epistles, and likewise not on behalf of the adversaries. With von Wahlde, the agency of the Son in the Johannine Gospel and Epistles is thoroughly Jewish—rooting in the Mosaic agency motif of Deut 18:15–22 and confirmed in the Son’s word coming true and returning to the Father who sent him. Therefore, the Johannine Gospel and Epistles (especially 1 John) advocate Jesus’s being the Jewish Messiah/Christ, calling for audiences to believe in him as the Son of God. The seceding persons (labeled “antichrists” in 1 John 2:18–25) refuse to acknowledge Jesus as the Messiah/Christ in holding to the Father, and yet, because the Son is sent by the Father, they will thereby forfeit their desired monotheistic goal if they reject the one the Father has sent. The second and third antichristic passages refer a different crisis: those who deny Jesus’s having come in the flesh (1 John 4:1–3; 2 John 7), but these are docetizing gentile-Christian ministers rather than mid-second-century gnostics. David Rensberger’s devastating analysis of flawed inferences of perfectionism within the Johannine situation makes this all the more clear. Further, if Loader’s treatment of sexual mores’ being at stake in late first century Jewish engagements with Greco-Roman culture is any indicator of the sorts of issues Jesus-adherents faced having been distanced from synagogue participation, worldly assimilation is far more of an issue than recent scholars have allowed.

(3) A third thing to note is that more mundane factors within the Johannine situation are helpful for noting what the Johannine Elder was addressing, rather than sketching speculative portraiture as to what imagined adversaries must have been like—such as Cerinthus and his followers or inferred Samaritan Christology (versus Brown’s speculation). Lieu’s and Jones’s contributions help us consider such mundane plausibilities as traveling ministers creating friction by the ways they imposed upon their hosts and abused their hospitality, especially if their ventures might have been missional in their character. Less compelling is Jones’s view that secessionists departed for missional reasons, despite the fact that Jesus’s followers in the Gospels departed on missional ventures. The Elder clearly labels their departure as an abandonment of the community, thus questioning also their sincerity from the beginning. Jones’s insight that the Elder’s

counsel in 2 John appears to be walking and talking like the episcopal leadership he is criticizing in 3 John, however, is important to consider. Indeed, a good deal of overlap is likely between the positional leadership the Elder and Diotrephes seem to be exercising, and territoriality is normally most acute between members of like species (especially of the same gender), so tensions might not be suggestive of differences alone. And, the works of van der Watt, Loader, and Rensberger remind us that sometimes community tensions are factors of real social needs (caring for the hungry and the economically needy), so these factors must be appreciated, as well as larger missional concerns.

(4) The contributions of Köstenberger and Craig Koester bring into clear focus perhaps the most egregiously overlooked situational factor within the paradigms of scholars several decades ago (including Brown and Bultmann), as imperial factors played major roles in the mix within the later periods of the Johannine situation. From Koester, we are helped to face the textual facts that the words ἀντίχριστος and ἀντίχριστοι never occur in Revelation; they appear only in 1 and 2 John. And, the references are not futuristic; they imply recent and impending threats, identifying the “antichrists” as fellow believers who either left the Johannine community refusing to believe Jesus was the Messiah/Christ or were threatening to visit Johannine communities teaching doctrines supported by a nonsuffering/fleshly Jesus. Therefore, the apocalyptic speculations of Papias, Irenaeus, and Hippolytus have distorted the prophetic message of the Johannine Epistles, which is to challenge believers to authentic faithfulness in their Greco-Roman settings. With Koester, beware; we have seen the antichrist, ... and he is us! Likewise, Köstenberger’s essay shows how, within the cosmic court case against the nations, God’s love, truth, and light will finally win the day, calling believers to rest fully in the work of Christ as the Son of God, thus embracing the promise of life in his name. God wins, and such is the message of the Johannine Epistles and Apocalypse, and likewise the Johannine Gospel.

#### *Theological and Ethical Features of the Johannine Epistles*

Appreciating contextual aspects of the Johannine Epistles informs understandings of their content, and one of the greatest values of the present collection is the advances made by the six treatments of their theological and ethical thrusts.

(1) With von Wahlde, Culpepper, Köstenberger, and others, the central theological and rhetorical thrust of the Johannine Gospel continues in the Epistles—seeking to convince audiences to believe in Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God—and yet, the Epistles expand more fully on the implications of such a faith commitment. Whereas the Gospel demonstrates the Son’s agency from the Father in Jewish terms, 1 John 1:1–4 unpacks those implications in Hellenistic-friendly terms, perhaps shedding light on how the Gospel’s prologue also originated in cross-cultural perspective. Interestingly, by considering the situation of the Johannine Epistles, the character and implications of the tensions within the Christology of the Johannine Gospel also become clear. As a means of

convincing Jewish and gentile audiences that Jesus is indeed the Christ, the Son of God, the evangelist and the Elder are keen to show Jesus's missional connection and identification with the Father as a factor of his agency (with Jones). This accounts for high christological claims and confession in the Gospel and Epistles alike. Conversely, in emphasizing that Jesus really did suffer and die on the cross (attested by the water and the blood and the Spirit), emphases upon the suffering humanity of Jesus also are asserted (with van der Watt). Therefore, rather than reflecting disparate sources with varying christological emphases, the Johannine Gospel and Epistles reflect the tandem efforts of Johannine leaders to address differing needs within the Johannine situation, contributing to John's theologically polyvalent gospel narrative and the highly dialogical engagement design of the Epistles. In that sense, the situation-informed content of the Epistles provides a key to understanding the theology of the Johannine Gospel.

(2) Second, because faith implies faithfulness, the Johannine call to believe is also a call to abide—to remain with Jesus and his community of followers over and against the challenges of the world. With van der Watt, Loader, and Koester, those challenges thus involved ethical issues, perhaps even more than theological ones, and there was clearly a good deal of disagreement within the early Christian movement over what faithfulness to Christ required and what it did not. This would have especially been the case between believers with Jewish backgrounds versus those with gentile ones. As such, claiming to be “without sin” more likely than not (with Rensberger's pivotal essay on being completed in love—versus perfectionism proper) related to differences of opinion about right and wrong actions within the second and third generations of the Jesus movement. Just as Paul's earlier mission to the gentiles involved calling Jewish believers in Jesus to distinguish between matters of convictional essence and their symbolization (see Acts 15) and for gentile believers in Jesus to not abuse the liberties of grace (1 Cor 6:12), the Johannine leadership sought to advocate the covenant promise of Abraham and Moses to the nations while still calling for adherence to central features of Jewish faith and practice. If the last word is the first word in 1 John (5:21)—little children, stay away from idols—far from representing a throw-away add-on, this admonition may indeed clarify the cluster of issues being faced within the later Johannine situation. As the imperial cult under Domitian (81–96 CE) endorsed local and regional pagan worship cults and their festivities (as long as they also referenced Caesar and added Roman festivals to their customary ones), these festivals yoked human appetites and social institutions to supporting the governing presence of empire, rewarding public loyalty and disloyalty accordingly. Therefore, with Rensberger, Loader, van der Watt, Koester, and Köstenberger, to love God and the community implies saying “no” to “the world” and its appeals—even if the way of the cross implies costly discipleship. This is likely what traveling ministers, diminishing the implications of a suffering Lord come in the flesh, sought to avoid.

(3) When viewed from this perspective, reflecting ethical debates about what is sinful and what might not be—especially between believers of Jewish and gentile origins—the appeals to sinlessness and spiritual guidance are clarified in their character and implications. With von Wahlde, the Jewishness of Spirit-led guidance is here strikingly apparent. Such a thrust thus leads into second-century Gnosticism rather than requiring a gnostic origin for its comprehension. However, if Burge is correct in his sketching the sociology of spirit-communities and their means of legitimation, it is less likely that pneumatism is the root cause of disagreement—substantiating structural approaches to ecclesial leadership over and against pneumatism. Rather, spirit-authorization seems rhetorical in its origin as well as its design. Indeed, the Johannine Elder challenges structural and episcopal leadership, but this is done in the name of apostolic memory, not against it, so Brown's inference of pneumatism as an affront to apostolic (and thus structural) leadership here receives again a needed corrective. Put otherwise, Spirit-led legitimation is just as easily claimed in advocating conservative, Jewish values on behalf of the Elder as it is would be in bolstering the liberal, assimilative teachings of the antichristic prophets, whose reluctance to embrace the way of the cross is furthered by a docetizing Christology. Again, Rensberger's emphasis on the completed and mature character of Johannine love sheds light on how that love becomes operative within community. As van der Watt has argued, loving one another in community is a direct extension of Jesus's love commands in all four of the Gospels (the commands to love God, one's neighbor, one's enemies, and even—shock!—one another). Therefore, the call to matured love becomes a general rubric for addressing a multiplicity of issues within the Johannine situation: unity rather than defection, consideration rather than selfishness, spiritual fidelity rather than idolatry, sexual integrity rather than licentiousness, and equality of status rather than hierarchical differentiation. Thus, within a cosmopolitan setting, Jewish and gentile followers of Jesus are here seen to be struggling to understand what it means to receive grace by faith, but also to remain faithful by grace. These are the dual features of receiving and witnessing to the transformative gift of divine love.

(4) In light of these contextual issues and crises, the Johannine Elder upholds discernment-oriented leadership as the key to the way forward, involving several features. First, he grounds his teaching in historic tradition—what has been seen and heard from the beginning—he is not making this up but is furthering what eyewitnesses and others have taught and preached. Second, he calls for a faithful response to the Son's agency from the Father, whose will is also disclosed through the Holy Spirit, which is then embraced by believers and witnessed to in the world. That continuity of agency draws believers into partnership with the redemptive work of Christ as his witnesses in truth and love. Third, the Elder holds later preachers of Christ accountable to the memory of Jesus of Nazareth—come in the flesh—who suffered and died as the paradoxically glorious center of his mission. Later followers must thus commit themselves to solidarity with Jesus and his community even if hardships are implied; such is the way of the cross and the promise of

the resurrection. Fourth, the Elder appeals to the love of God as the goal and measure of human endeavors and actions. Because God has first loved us, we must respond to that love in faithful gratitude; but if we claim to love God, we also ought to be willing to love one another (1 John 4:19). Echoing the Gospel (13:35), believers' love for one another is the surest sign of having received and embraced the love of God in Christ. Fifth, because truth and its discernment are the keys to effective Christian leadership, both traveling ministers and ecclesial leaders must abide in the truth, helping others to do the same, rather than resorting to societal assimilation or positional leverage. If the Spirit can indeed be trusted to lead the faithful into truth, authentic Christian leadership is a factor of authenticity and conviction rather than enticement or coercion.

### *Open Questions and New Directions*

In addition to moving the conversation forward with a number of advances in the scholarship of the Johannine Epistles, new questions and directions are also opened in so doing. Beginning, now, with the advances made in the theological and ethical treatments of the Johannine Epistles, new questions emerge regarding understandings of the Johannine situation and the composition of the Johannine writings.

(1) Building on the advances made in understanding the meaning of completeness in love (Rensberger, van der Watt, Lieu, von Wahlde), what difference would it make for interpreting the Johannine writings if we saw their acute concerns as addressing the physical and social needs of their audiences rather than gnostic perfectionism or incorrigible pneumatism (1 John 3:17–18)? Indeed, the Elder himself can just as easily be charged with claiming that one who is in Christ cannot sin, but that does not mean that he was a gnostic or that he felt that he had attained perfection. Rather, the Jewish conviction that the Holy Spirit can and does guide the faithful (with von Wahlde) provides ample basis for his conviction, as well as his appeal to the Spirit's guidance as a means of helping his audience not to sin. Questions, therefore, that follow from such considerations involve seeking to understand what sorts of issues Jesus-adherents were dealing with in their Diaspora setting, especially regarding issues believers of Jewish and gentile origins might have debated in second and third generation Christianity. Such knowledge might also help one understand more fully what was at stake in the Elder's challenging of the assimilative teachings of the docetizing prophets, whom he labels "antichrists" in 1 John 4:1–3 and 2 John 7. That knowledge would then provide a more informed basis for understanding the original meaning of Johannine invective (with Koester) versus its distortive interpretations.

(2) A second question follows: if the sorts of issues debated by the Johannine Elder and his audiences related to calling for more Jewish-compliant approaches to aspects of faith and praxis, versus more assimilative tendencies of believers with gentile backgrounds, such a stance would challenge severely recent inferences of Johannine sectarianism. With Loader and Köstenberger, if the Elder's admonition to not love the world (including its

fleshly desires and material investments) related to particular moral issues, such concerns suggest believers' extensive engagements with Greco-Roman culture and social settings rather than seeking to escape the world. Put otherwise, Johannine Christianity reflects tensions related to seeking to retain Jewish values within a cosmopolitan setting, not antiworld sectarianism such as a monastic Qumranic setting in the wilderness. Therefore, rather than seeing Johannine Christianity as an incestuous sectarian group, cut off from the world and other Christian groups, concerned only with loving one another rather than loving neighbors and enemies—as the Jesus of Nazareth taught—what if we see the Johannine leadership as continuing the love-ethic of Jesus missionally (with van der Watt and Jones) in ways that testified meaningfully to God's love in the world? Might such approaches to the Johannine writings overall (including the Gospel and Apocalypse) help us see Johannine Christianity as a central player within the larger mission to the gentiles—perhaps even within the heart of the later Pauline mission? If so, the Johannine Epistles deserve consideration for understanding the heart of the emerging Christian movement rather than its periphery.

(3) A third set of questions extends beyond the papers in the present volume, exploring implications for the history of interpretation and implications for Christian theology overall. Between the two horizons of biblical exegesis and Christian theology, a more sustained set of engagements is absolutely necessary. All too easily, theologians assume that they are in touch with state-of-the-art exegesis, expounding upon understandings decades or even centuries old, while exegetes perform their tasks with little theological sensitivity. The two disciplines are strongest if engaged dialogically, and this is especially needed regarding the interpretation of the Johannine Epistles. As one who is completing the Two Horizon Commentary on the Johannine Epistles (anticipated 2015), this is an acute concern of mine, but I am not alone. Koester, for instance, gets us back on the right track by challenging as biblically inadequate the age-old conflation of the Johannine “antichrists” with “the beasts” of Revelation and “the man of lawlessness” of 2 Thessalonians. These texts literally were not futuristic in their meaning, but contemporary to the first-century situation. Further, they did not relate to the same crisis or persons. Therefore, gaining a clearer understanding of the contextual and exegetical meanings of biblical invective will go some distance toward alleviating wrongheaded inferences among interpreters, as well as yielding more existentially profitable and convicting understandings for believers of later generations. Further, if the three Johannine antichristic passages referenced two distinctive threats (one a secession of community members and the other an advent of false teachers), the central issues being addressed then is clarified for later interpreters. The first antichristic threat involved the appeals of religious certainty; the second involved the ease of cultural assimilation. In both cases, faithfulness to Christ poses the existential way forward. Other issues needing to be addressed include the discerning of death-producing sins over and against venial sins; if aspects of the imperial cult were at stake in the late first-century situation under Domitian's reign, extensive implications

follow for living faithfully in contexts of imperial domination in later generations. Likewise, if the Johannine Elder was challenging the adverse effects of abrupt institutionalism as carried out by Diotrephes and his kin, such becomes a corrective to structural approaches to Christian leadership in addition to correctives to pneumatic excesses.

(4) A final set of questions then relates to the place of the Johannine corpus with relation to the other writings of the New Testament. While the present essays advance our understandings of the Johannine writings in relation to each other, what about the relations of the Johannine Gospel to other gospel narratives, and what about the relations of the Johannine Epistles to other Christian correspondence of the first-century Christian Movement? While Brown stopped short of filling out a larger approach to these issues, one wonders if the early Johannine material intends to augment Mark, and likewise whether the later Johannine material appears to harmonize John's narrative with the Synoptics (with Bultmann). And, might the Johannine tradition have contributed in formative ways to Luke and Q, as well as being engaged dialectically with the early Markan and later Matthean traditions? If even some of these intertraditional features might have occupied some degree of consciousness within the Johannine tradition, might this explain the Elder's beginning his first Epistle with hearkening back to what has been seen and heard from the beginning, concerning the word of life? If such is the case, while the Johannine tradition is highly theological, it also is rife with historical consciousness, bearing implications for the historical quests for Jesus as well as the movement that developed in his memory. Likewise conspicuous are apparent contacts between the Johannine Epistles and the Pauline Epistles as well as the Petrine Epistles and the Letter to the Hebrews. As a result, the history of early Christianity cannot be fully appreciated without understanding the contexts and the content of the Johannine Epistles, as they provide an indispensable set of keys to understanding its character and complexion in the late-first-century situation.

Building on the overall theory of Brown, this collection engages his contribution by leading Johannine scholars who also lay out their overall Johannine theories in terse but robust ways. Therefore, the reader is availed a variety of lenses through which to glimpse the formation, character, and meaning of the Johannine Epistles, while also being helped to focus on their message in their own right—without the aid (or encumbrance?) of an overall-theory approach. From there, theological and ethical treatments of their content help readers appreciate what the texts might be saying, as well as what they might not be saying—in service to more adequate readings of the seven chapters of these three intriguing letters. In addition to larger paradigms facilitating closer interpretations of the text, the reverse is also true. More adequate understandings of textual issues improve our paradigms and overall theories—especially clarifying what might and might not be an actual impasse. As disputes raged in the late-first-century situation known as Johannine Christianity, they also rage among top scholars today. If the present collection points the way forward,

though, here we see a number of convergences and new sets of questions emerging. As readers add their knowledge and perspectives to these contributions, the conversation continues. And, if the previous two millennia are any indication as to the disputes and questions these provocative writings evoke, the intrigue and inquiry has only just begun!