

BOOK REVIEW

Blomberg, Craig L., *The Historical Reliability of John's Gospel: Issues and Commentary* (repr., Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 2011). 346 pp. Pbk. \$32.00.

In his book, *The Historical Reliability of John's Gospel*, Craig L. Blomberg sought to carry on a project of reasserting the Gospel of John's (John) historical reliability against its detractors in his day. While published originally twenty years ago (2001), the book was re-released more recently as a reprint in paperback in 2011. Ten years later, this book will still be of interest to some, so I offer a summary of its content along with an evaluation of its usefulness.

The Historical Reliability of John's Gospel is presented as a New Testament commentary (even while it is not a commentary in the traditional sense of the genre), and so as one has come to expect from the genre, it offers an extended introduction on critical issues like authorship, date, sources, relation to the synoptics, genre, audience and purpose. In the introduction, Blomberg also touches on questions of a methodological nature in addressing the burden of proof and charting a way forward for the rest of the book (I discuss this below). Additionally, he sees the criteria of double dissimilarity (or historical plausibility; something novel at the time) and multiple attestation as useful for his project. And, as one might also expect from the commentary genre, the book proceeds on a unit-by-unit basis, but not commenting on the text and language per se. Instead, Blomberg asks two questions: (1) 'what positive evidence via [the criteria of authenticity] do we have that the actions or words of the characters in John's narratives are indeed historical?' and (2) 'is there anything in the text at hand that is implausible within the historical context to which it is attributed, particularly as we assume the general trustworthiness of the Synoptics?' (p. 66). Before highlighting some of the content in the commentary proper, I will briefly survey Blomberg's positions as found in his introductory material.

Blomberg essentially takes up the conservative/traditional standard on each major critical issue and seeks to re-establish those positions in light of recent (at the time of writing) attacks against them and some recent evidence seen as in support of them. For example, the author is John the Apostle, the son of Zebedee, and to make this case Blomberg relies heavily on B.F. Westcott but also references other work recent at the time of writing (e.g. D.A. Carson, Leon L. Morris and F.F. Bruce). He also responds to criticisms of this position made around the time of writing (e.g. by R. Alan Culpepper and James H. Charlesworth). In like fashion the rest of the introduction unfolds: it was likely written in the 80's–90's (i.e., pre-100 AD) (p. 44); John is an independent witness to Jesus traditions and bears numerous markers of historicity alongside the Synoptics (p. 49; pp. 56-57); the genre is something like historical biography (p. 57); the purpose of John was to address Christians evangelistically in a first-century environment and it is not anti-Jewish (pp. 62-63).

Since the book unfolds in a commentary-like structure, I will not summarize all the content, but highlight only two items of interest which should give some representation of the content and provide a basis for comment in the analysis below.

First, the Johannine temple cleansing and Blomberg's treatment of it will be of interest. Blomberg states what many would accept: 'here emerges one of the most difficult questions facing a study of the historicity of John' (p. 88). Blomberg's interrogation is likewise standard: do the differences between John and the Synoptics imply John moved the temple cleansing for 'thematic' reasons, or that two similar cleansings occurred (one early in Jesus' ministry [recorded in John], and one late [Synoptics]) (p. 88)? For Blomberg, the unit stands 'somewhat unconnected' to its immediate context and is 'theologically unmotivated' (p. 87). After dismissing some argumentation for its thematic replacement (i.e., for its non-facticity—the 'factually accurate' being Blomberg's overriding concern [p. 66]), Blomberg offers the following reasons to think it is a different event than the cleansing narrated in the Synoptics during passion week (while he remains somewhat non-committal, claiming that the debate cannot be settled [p. 91]): (1) 'the words the two accounts have in common are those one would expect in [similar incidents]' but on the other hand 'one is struck by the differences [in wording]' (p. 89); he gives some examples here; (2) a protest 'merely against corrupt trade', as Blomberg describes the Johannine cleansing (in distinction to the Synoptic accounts where Jesus' protest is against the entire

sacrificial system), fits better in Jesus' earthly ministry (p. 90); and he concludes (3) 'the entire account in John stands on its own ... as a plausible, authentic episode from the life of Jesus' (p. 91).

Secondly, the account between Jesus and the Samaritan woman is also instructive of Blomberg's approach. Blomberg makes the following introductory comment which gives a sense of the sort of historical information he deems relevant to suit his commentary: 'that Jesus would travel through Samaria to go from Judea to Galilee was natural enough [here he cites Josephus, *Ant.* 20.118]. Sychar probably corresponds to modern-day Askar, while Jacob's well is one of the best-attested archeological sites in Israel [here he cites Beasley-Murray, *John* (Waco: Word, 1987) 580]' (p. 99). After describing the passage, Blomberg notes that the woman's recognition of the surprising nature of the interaction between Jesus, a Jewish man, and her, a Samaritan woman, attests to the well-known hostility between Jews and Samaritans as recorded in Josephus, *War* 2.232 and *Life* 269 (p. 100). Noting David Daube's argument that the term *συγχρῶνται* (from *συγχράομαι*) in 4.9 might be taken to refer to the common use of dishes (David Daube, *The New Testament and Rabbinic Judaism* [The Jewish People; repr., Salem, NH: Ayer, 1984]), Blomberg wonders if this might not be more attractive since such a notion is attested in the Mishnah, citing *Šeb.* 8.10, therefore also apparently verifying the historicity of the account.

Blomberg also makes a number of other points intended to show the pericope to be of a reliable and historical nature: (1) Jesus echoes Jewish traditions in his comments about living water, but the Samaritan woman does not pick up his references: 'that Jesus would have been steeped in the Hebrew Scriptures, while the Samaritan woman would have had little occasion to study them, makes this give and take entirely plausible' (p. 100); (2) 4.22 is authentic because John's tendency is to criticize the Judaism of Jesus' day but in this verse Judaism is presented positively; (3) the negative particle *μή* (*μήτι*) in the question of 4.29 ('he cannot be the Christ, can he?') is taken to show the woman's hesitation and thus to show that this would not be a later free creation because such a creation would 'surely have omitted this hesitancy' (p. 102) and (4) the fact that the woman's testimony resulted in the widespread belief in Jesus verifies the account as such a thing would not be invented on account of the low status of women in the ancient world (apparently meeting the criterion of embarrassment while Blomberg does not explicitly state this) (p. 104).

I offer these two summaries in order to represent the kind of content one finds throughout Blomberg's commentary. Below, I will reference these and, along with other considerations, offer an evaluation of the book and its usefulness.

Criticism 1: the first criticism I offer concerns the subject of theoretical and/or methodological foundations. Blomberg addresses varied content throughout the commentary proper: citing extra-biblical material, at times referencing material culture and geography, making arguments on the basis of language and also using appeals to logic in various places to consistently seek to demonstrate the historicity of John's Gospel. However, as valuable as this information is, the reader unfortunately is not furnished with any theoretical or methodological basis for attributing relative historical value to what is referenced in one section, or passed over in another. In an applied sense, this concerns the lack of clear linguistic or historical methods and/or models. For example, as regards the Johannine temple cleansing Blomberg highlights the question of linguistic similarity and difference. He implies by his comments that some differences are non-trivial for the question of historicity but that other similarities are trivial (but does not use these words, which alone would have been helpful). But without theoretical or methodological framing in place it is difficult to chart out what linguistic descriptions will or could be suggestive for the question of historical reliability.

In other words, how can linguistic differences and similarities be seen as either trivial or non-trivial for specific questions such as the 'historicity' question? Again, Blomberg seems to indicate that not all linguistic similarities and differences are equal: some differences imply different events in the mind of the author while similarities need not imply the same events. However, elsewhere precisely the opposite might be the case: some similarities might imply the same event while the differences might be described as a kind of expected linguistic variation (for example, see his treatment of the Mark-John discrepancy of the anointing of Jesus at Bethany on pp. 175-79). How should such differences and similarities be framed to demonstrate relative harmony and/or disharmony given a certain hypothesis? Furthermore, should the implications of similarities and differences between accounts be on the basis of degree, or kind, or some critical combination of the two? That is to say, presumably more differences (i.e. less overlap of subject matter) would be evidence for separate events being portrayed. However, in theory if some differences are more substantial in kind than others, it is not clear if the amount of linguistic differences in comparing one set of events

is instructive for judging the value of the amount of differences in another case. The need for considering this question is evident, but twenty years on, it is clear the history of discussion regarding the so-called criterion of dissimilarity or double-dissimilarity does not solve the issues from a historical or linguistic perspective.

Along similar lines, there is also no clear methodological framing of a lexical nature. When and why do words matter for ‘historicity’? For example, Blomberg speculates above that *συγχρῶνται* may bear a meaning that seems etymologically dubious but supports what is again the somewhat vague notion of reliability (i.e. if as the Mishnah records, Jews and Samaritans did not use the same vessels, then that meaning in John 4 would be especially reliable; but the relative value of this is not a given). In any case, regarding *συγχρῶνται*, such an interpretation ‘is based upon etymological arguments for which there seems to be no certain justification in general Greek usage’ (L&N 1:445). Blomberg is free to entertain the arguments of Daube, but the impression is a more pick-and-choose kind of employment of lexical and linguistic content for historicity (when it is not clear exactly how that is being defined; see below).

Furthermore, regarding the question with the negative particle *μήτι* in Jn 4.29, Blomberg puts too much weight on it as a demonstration of historicity. Whether this should be read as clearly implying a negative answer as is the standard treatment of questions negated with *μή*, or perhaps as Blomberg supposed, suggesting doubt (perhaps in reference to Stanley Porter, *Idioms of the Greek New Testament* [SBG 2; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2nd ed, 1999]), the speculations here depend too much on psychologizing about counterfactual scenarios and then using them as pieces in a wider argument. In general, such speculation should be avoided as it opens one to the counter claim that someone making up this account would represent the Samaritan woman naturally as exhibiting a kind of hesitancy vis-à-vis Jesus’ identity. The same can be said in this section for the implicit appeal to the criterion of embarrassment regarding the people’s acceptance of the woman’s witness. It is an argument that should likely only be rarely employed and does not seem to have the effect Blomberg supposes it does here (furthermore, even at the time of writing, the criteriological approach was seriously being called into question, and Blomberg might have availed himself of some more of that criticism).

This all leads to a more fundamental methodological question for the project. How is historical reliability to be defined? It is not clear. Does it

mean a text can plausibly be seen as corroborating another independent source? And what should constitute plausible corroboration? And are there times when apparent corroboration is trivial for historicity? If so, when? To demonstrate this, historicity will need to be defined not only for the biblical documents, but for other documents brought into dialogue with it. Presumably, historicity in a work such as Blomberg's is a 'big-h' idea, having suggestive implications for belief formation about the trustworthiness of subject matter of the Gospel narratives (properly defined, it is one I wholeheartedly support). If this is the case, then it is also presumable that there is such a thing as trivial historicity (an example: that a text indicates there is a body of water in x place where everyone knows there is a body of water does not 'Historicity' make, even if [or perhaps because] other external sources also happen to mention this point). How are the two texts related? What anchors non-trivial historicity? (Blomberg does make a helpful point which I address below but I do not think it overcomes the questions here).

For example, when it is discussed that Jesus' encounter with the woman at the well reflects the well-known disputes between Jews and Samaritans, and here Josephus is cited, ostensibly verifying historicity, is that truly a non-trivial point? I do not think so. It seems then, as with linguistic considerations, there are some instances in which appeal to external sources has more relative weight than in others. For example, other sections of Josephus works have been appealed to concerning this pericope as providing background information which may suggest historicity in a less trivial way. It has been speculated that when Jesus says to the woman in 4.22, 'you worship what you know not, we worship what we know since salvation is from the Jews'—the pronouns are emphatic—this is a more subdued, implied reference to this history of the Jews and Samaritans (a history assumed by the comment in 4.9), and, when brought into reference with Josephus, might be suggestive for historicity (See, for example, Lydia McGrew, *The Eye of the Beholder: The Gospel of John as Historical Reportage* [Tampa: DeWard, 2021]) Blomberg offers no theoretical apparatus for making the kind of adjudications which will spell out the relative weight of appeals to extra-biblical literature in one instance over another, and because of this a likely trivial point for historicity is undetected. Such an apparatus/methodological framing would seem to be precisely what will make the case most strongly, and to the degree that thinking is hard, even what some might call common sense should be made explicit. An example of this in McGrew's already-cited work (*Eye of the Beholder*), she seeks to defend with more explicit

epistemological rigor the potential value of places where there may be an interlocking of information in a way that seems undesigned. Therefore, while the comment about Jesus' statement in 4.22 is speculative, one could see that due to its only loosely implicit nature, the fact that there is a potential explanatory history in outside sources might demonstrate to a

All of this is not to say that considerations of lexicography and linguistics, as well as external material for comparison, alongside other kinds of logical arguments, do not or cannot work together to build a case for reliability. Indeed, it seems such a case could not be built without them. It is to say, however, that for such a case to be made, theoretical and methodological framing must be clear so as to put such things in their proper place and relate them with explicitness. Such framing would also expose fundamental questions which could then be dealt with: need one overcome barriers of reference and access to the past? Most historians and philosophers of history today (and twenty years ago) agree that we do not access the past in an unmediated way, and the space of working out the nature and implications of that mediation alongside historical epistemology is the domain of the philosophy of history. To bring this into consonance with historical and linguistic methods and knowledge of the languages, texts and materials of the ancient world could well be a project for which the New Testament scholar is uniquely suited. Not all agree on solutions, but one hopes for enough theoretical and methodological explicitness so as to build in the kind of coherence that commends a project—even to those skeptical of its approach. It is not found in this volume.

My criticisms, however, should be taken as a reflection of esteem of the value of Blomberg's work and the value of the project he undertakes. My questions come as someone who admires the work and the scholar and finds great value in the project. Blomberg's book commends itself and will be useful for a variety of reasons: (1) Blomberg makes some crucial statements which bear keeping in mind against the common trend of the day. One of these trends includes thinking so-called authenticity should not be a compartmentalized project that operates case-by-case in an artificial and static fashion, but that epistemologically (Blomberg does not make it explicit), evidence accumulates in dynamic ways so as to build an overall picture that updates in accordance with the accumulation of that evidence. (2) Blomberg should be commended for not playing by the rules—so to speak—as to what must be tacitly accepted in a study of the reliability of John's Gospel, and his unabashed defense of a traditional standard (importantly, not in a

question-begging, merely deferential, way) will commend itself to those who (I think rightly) have the strong sense that there are serious theoretical myopathies in much consensus scholarship on this and related issues. (3) Blomberg highlights much interesting material, and while it does not form the kind of coherent web one might like to see, this does not mean it is not useful. The book will still serve as a repository of reference material for a host of different questions and purposes, and written as it is by an expert who is well-read and clear-thinking, there are few similar resources on John's Gospel which can match it for its potential usefulness in this regard.

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