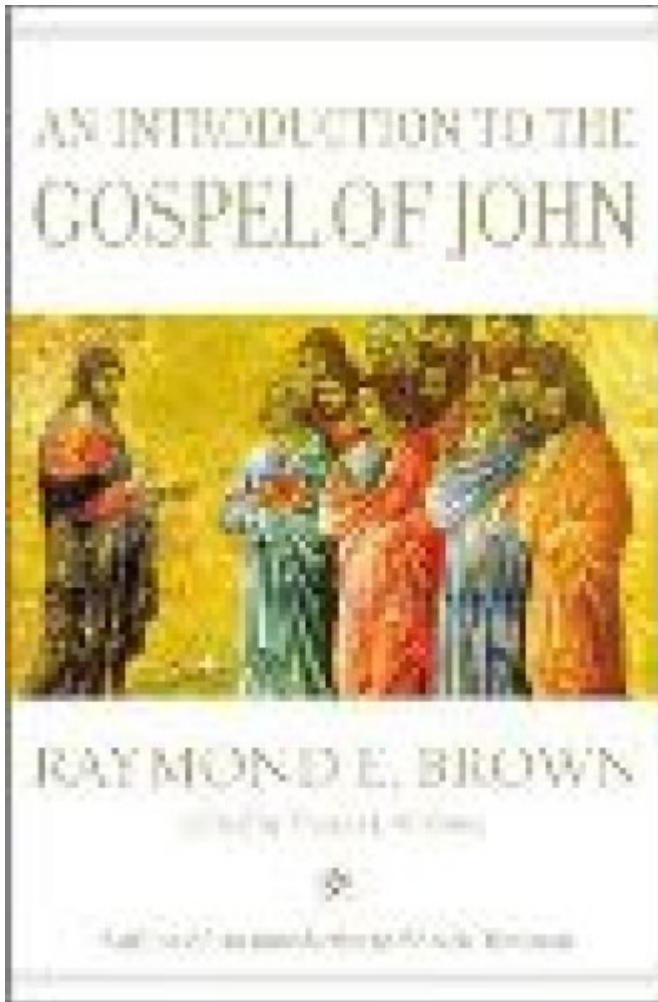


An Introduction to the Gospel of John

reviewed by [Pheme Perkins](#) in the [March 9, 2004](#) issue

In Review



An Introduction to the Gospel of John

Raymond E. Brown

Doubleday

News of Raymond Brown's death on August 8, 1998, swept through the scholarly community like a global blackout. A renowned scholar, teacher, churchman, mentor

and friend was gone. A source of popular insights, meditations, lectures, workshops and retreats was gone.

After completing distinguished works on the passion of Christ (*Death of the Messiah*, 1994) and the New Testament (*Introduction to the New Testament*, 1997), Brown had begun to revise his first major work, the two-volume *Anchor Bible Commentary on John's Gospel* (1966/1970). Francis J. Moloney, a distinguished Johannine scholar in his own right, took on the task of editing the work Brown left behind.

Brown's views on the story behind the Johannine writings had changed in the decades since the commentary was first published. He originally had developed a series of five stages through which Johannine Christianity evolved from its first-century composition through the secessionist crisis of the Epistles and the split between the "orthodox" and Gnostic use of John in the second century. As the result of his further work on John, he had reduced those stages to three (see *Community of the Beloved Disciple*, 1979, and *The Epistles of John*, 1982). Unfortunately, the section of his introduction to a revised commentary on John that would have laid out that development remained unwritten.

Moloney has done an admirable job of filling in the gaps with an excursus based on Brown's earlier writings. The editor also provides another excursus on the recent use of literary theories of narrative to interpret the Gospel—Moloney's own specialty. Brown remained cautious about suggestions that such methods could replace discriminating historical reconstruction. Readers should have no difficulty distinguishing the two points of view. Moloney lets Brown's critical remarks stand and identifies his own dissent over points of interpretation in footnotes marked "editor."

Because the introduction remained unfinished and the commentary to follow had not yet been written, this book has rough edges. Some debates remain framed by the scholarship of a previous generation, with only a few halting and incomplete treatments of what has gone on since. The whole discussion of how Gnostic texts found at Nag Hammadi and elsewhere can contribute to the understanding of Johannine Christianity has shifted considerably in the intervening years. Moloney notes that while Brown has changed his older use of "Palestinian Judaism" to "traditional Judaism," he still divides the world of conceptual influences into "traditional Judaism" and "Hellenism, philosophy, non-Jewish." The former counts as formative, the latter does not. Moloney rightly insists that first-century Judaism

mediated considerable assimilation of Hellenistic culture. In addition, the evangelist addresses his narrative to a religiously diverse audience in Ephesus that required non-Jewish symbols, metaphors and concepts.

How much had Brown's approach to the Fourth Gospel changed? Moloney poses the question by highlighting every shift or nuance in Brown's position. The list is not extensive: the Beloved Disciple is not John, the son of Zebedee; the remarkable storyteller who wrote the Gospel, and whom Brown calls the "evangelist," was a follower of the Beloved Disciple; a final edition was compiled by another disciple; the Book of Revelation does not come from the same Johannine circles as the Gospel and Epistles; the Gospel was composed in three stages, not five; some of the influence of synoptic traditions on the Johannine narrative may be due to secondary orality; literary criticism is important for exegesis, especially in sorting out how John's language about "the Jews" is to be understood.

Moloney concludes that had Brown lived to complete his work, he might have surprised his colleagues by moving in new directions. Having argued with Brown over the years, I doubt it. He never wavered in his firm commitment to the principle that historical-critical scholarship supports the founding theological insights of what came to be orthodox or mainstream Christianity.

Nor did his insistence on semantic distinctions weaken. He refused to look for an easy, one-size solution to the hostile uses of the expression "the Jews" in the Gospel. In John's Gospel we glimpse a period of communal division, of crisis and even polemic opposition to "the other." Despite the editor's protests, Brown might have retained his statements that the Gospel presents a Jesus who "replaced" Jewish institutions and religious customs. After all, Brown insists that legitimate religious disagreements made some Jewish religious leaders responsible for the death of Jesus, though not guilty of a crime against God. One wishes Brown were here to continue the argument!