

TESTAMENTS

Top Catholic scholar's end-of-life conclusions about the Gospel of John

Among Bible buffs, "Father Brown" doesn't refer to the amateur detective in the beloved G.K. Chesterton novels, but to the Rev. Raymond E. Brown, considered U.S. Roman Catholicism's most influential New Testament scholar during years when the church liberalized Scripture study.

He wrote the renowned blockbusters "The Birth of the Messiah" (1977, revised 1993) and "The Death of the Messiah" (1994), but first won notice with a two-volume commentary, "The Gospel According to John" (1966, 1970), which prodded many to reassess that biblical book.

Brown was revising the commentary when he died in 1998, and material he completed has been issued as a new and important book, "An Introduction to the Gospel of John" (Doubleday), edited by the Rev. Francis J. Moloney.

Brown didn't feel bound by past conclusions, so his work frequently vexed Catholic traditionalists. But he also challenged the easy assumptions of liberal Protestantism, even though he taught at one of that movement's citadels, Union Theological Seminary in New York.

John's Gospel has always intrigued and mystified serious readers. Its tone differs from that of Matthew, Mark and Luke, and it includes unusually long discourses and prayers from Jesus, yet it

lacks many teachings and incidents found in the other three Gospels. In John, Jesus is unusually emphatic in claiming identity with God.

Liberals who downplay Jesus' divinity typically say that John has little reliable data about the actual history of Jesus' lifetime.

Though no fundamentalist, Brown rejected that view: "John is based on a solid tradition of the words and works of Jesus, a tradition that

at times is very primitive. Indeed, I believe that often John gives us correct historical information about Jesus that no other Gospel has preserved."

Liberals emphasize what they see as contradictions in John. For instance, some of Jesus' words assert his equality with God the Father and others his subordination as the Son. Brown said these statements didn't appear contradictory to the Gospel's writer and weren't really irreconcilable but expressed the complexity of Jesus.

Some of Brown's other end-of-career conclusions:

■ **Dating:** A manuscript fragment from Chapter 18, discovered in 1935, is commonly dated at A.D. 135-150 or, more conservatively, at A.D. 125. (Such approximate dates could vary by plus or minus 25 years.) Since this copy was located in faraway Egypt, the original composition elsewhere would have occurred years before.



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Gospel of John (p. 2)

Brown figured A.D. 100-110 was the latest plausible date for the final version of John. He put the nearly final composition at around A.D. 90 and a preliminary version at around A.D. 70, both using some writings from A.D. 40-60. So the Gospel as we know it was akin to someone today compiling material about World War II.

(The Chapter 18 manuscript find and scholars' consensus that John was written in the first century are ignored in the current best seller "Beyond Belief" because author Elaine Pagels prefers to think John came later than the Gospel of Thomas, a Gnostic text early Christianity deemed spurious.)

■ **Authorship:** The Gospel text doesn't name John or any other author, but does mention an unnamed "beloved

disciple." Brown concluded this person was an eyewitness "responsible for the basic testimony" while someone else, an anonymous "genius" who was probably a follower of that disciple, wrote most of the Gospel.

Then an editor who respected and preserved that main writer's work produced

the final version, adding such material as Chapter 21, which appears to be tacked onto an earlier conclusion that ends Chapter 20.

But Brown emphasized that these were only theories and scholars should "deal with the Gospel of John as it now stands, for that is the only form that we are certain

has ever existed."

■ **Place of writing:** Ephesus (located in present-day Turkey) was Brown's best guess, based on internal evidence from the Gospel and early church tradition. However, the Ephesians drew upon traditions from Greek-speaking Christians in or near Palestine.