

Beyond History: How the Fourth Gospel Transcends Ancient Historiography

*Eve-Marie Becker**

1. John and ancient history-writing

In a similar way to how Mark and Luke can be seen in the broader framework of ancient historiographical literature,¹ the Fourth Gospel also follows basic patterns of history-writing: John provides a prose narrative that contains a story line (1:19ff.), told mainly in past tense(s); the story consists of a more or less cohesive sequence of narrative units, which are – at least on the level of the macro-structure – put in a chronological and causal order; in arranging his narrative and dialogic materials, John keeps the crucial structure of Mark and Luke’s plot: during Jesus’ powerful ministry of teaching and performing signs, the Son of God critically interferes with the Jewish authorities of his time so that he is finally sentenced to death (esp. 11:47ff.). Thus, in several ways, John follows the narrative concept of how to write an *event*-based and *person*-centered account of history – as found in Mark and Luke – which serves the memorizing of the past and the orientation in present and future time(s).

It is only reasonable then that in more recent years the scholarly interest in relating John to the synoptic gospels and ancient *historiography* has significantly grown – after a period of time where the Fourth Gospel was treated rather differently: either in a conceptual distance to the synoptic gospels (Rudolf Bultmann), or – even because of its huge affinity to Mark –

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¹ See Becker, *Birth*: In this monograph I show how the concept of early Christian history-writing evolved especially from Mark to Luke – Matthew, as a recipient of Mark and a contemporary of Luke, is mainly considered as a narrative outline whose conceptual interests are less historiography-oriented, and herein differ from Luke-Acts (e.g., Becker, *Birth*, 83-85).

as a piece of rather fictitious literature (William Wrede).² The contemporary, more explicit interest in relating John to the synoptic gospels³ and to the field of ancient historiography⁴ also profits from the narrative and the linguistic turn in that it helps us to overcome simple distinctions between ancient (fictitious) literature on the one side and historiography on the other. We have learned to see how even in the field of ancient historiography fact and fiction interfere (G.W. Bowersock et al.).⁵ According to Jean Zumstein the tension between history and fiction in the Fourth Gospel is caused by the concept of a “*nachösterliche(r) Anamnese*”, where three types of story-lines – Jesus-story, story about the pre-existent *logos*, and history of the addressees – are conflated.⁶ While the conflation of various narrative perspectives might in general be a typical element of ancient historiography, the programmatic concept of “melting the temporal horizons” (“*Verschmelzung der Zeithorizonte zwischen vorösterlicher und nachösterlicher Zeit*”)⁷ of the narrative outline has to be seen as a rather specific Johannine feature. It seems, thus, as if John draws on historiography-like conceptual features – which he possibly knew from earlier synoptic gospel accounts – by “fissuring” the concept of history-writing at the same time.

² In earlier scholarship, John was mostly separated from the Synoptic Gospels (Rudolf Bultmann), and thus from historiography; and even when it was related closely to the synoptics, especially to Mark, scholars basically wanted to reveal the fictitious character of both gospel writings (William Wrede): “Man betrachte Markus durch ein starkes Vergrößerungsglas, und man hat etwa eine Schriftstellerei, wie sie Johannes zeigt”: Wrede, *Messiasgeheimnis*, 145. „Natürlich denke ich nicht daran, den Unterschied zwischen ihm [= Markus] und Johannes zu verwischen... er steht, was den realen Boden der Geschichte Jesu... betrifft, ganz anders da, er hat ein wesentlich anderes Verhältnis zur Tradition als Johannes“ (144). The results for reading John in light of ancient history-writing were pretty much the same: John was either – because of its conceptual distance to the synoptics (R. Bultmann) – distinguished generically from the early Christian concept of historiography; or – because of its literary affinity to Mark, understood as a piece of rather fictitious literature (W. Wrede) – it was likewise treated as fictitious literature, in any case not as a piece of historiography.

³ Cf., e.g.: Labahn / Lang, *Johannes*, 434-515.

⁴ Cf. also: Becker, *John*, 269-281.

⁵ Bowersock, *Fiction*. – Cf. Zumstein, *Johannesevangelium*, 37: “Eine historische Darstellung, die immer ein Konstrukt ist, kommt nicht umhin, Geschichte und Fiktion miteinander zu verflechten. Im Gebiet der Geschichtsschreibung entstammt die Fiktion also nicht primär der Phantasie, sondern gehört in den Bereich der Interpretation.“

⁶ Zumstein, *Johannesevangelium*, 37.

⁷ Zumstein, *Johannesevangelium*, 37.

As it becomes evident from these preliminary remarks, the multi-faceted scholarly discourse about “John and history”⁸ is still a complex one – especially when discussed from the point of view of synoptic gospel studies: it can neither be resolved by strictly separating the Fourth Gospel from Mark and Luke, nor by reading it as a continuation of the synoptic gospel outline. In this paper, I shall explore how John, by basically upholding the gospel concept, transforms it at the same time, and how and why this re-shaping challenges the concept of ancient historiography. We shall see *how* and *why* John 11 in particular provides a perception of time and history which transcends the narrative concept of gospel writing as historiography and notions of time as implemented herein.

2. John 11 as a turning point of the narrative

John 11:1-44/57 is to be understood as one of the most important passages in the Fourth Gospel since it has a crucial function for the overall gospel outline:⁹ accordingly, scholars describe the passage as “der Höhepunkt des öffentlichen Wirkens Jesu und zugleich der Anlaß des endgültigen Todesbeschlusses der Juden (Joh. 11,53). Bewußt wurde das größte Wunder im Neuen Testament von Johannes an diesen Ort gestellt”.¹⁰ John 11 builds many interconnections, or *narrative links*, to the rest of the gospel narrative: (1) in terms of its macro-context, John 11 can be seen as the climax of Jesus’ public ministry, and hereby, it basically sums up chapters 1-10; (2) in John 11, v.4, 8, 16, 25, 40 refer to the passion story,¹¹ and thus prepare the reader for chapters 18-19; (3) John 11:25f. appears to be the climax of *ego eimi*-words in John; and together with (4) the miracle story, more specifically: the topic of resurrection in John 11 points to the Easter stories in John 20; (5) the resurrection of Lazarus refers back to discourses about resurrection in John 5f.;¹² (6) especially a verse like John 11:2 – if it is not simply understood as a “späte Leserglosse..., die erst durch Abschreiber-tätigkeit in den Text geriet”,¹³ – calls for special attention: John obviously

⁸ The “John and history“-discourse entails questions about the historicity of the Fourth Gospel and / or the image of the historical Jesus as provided herein (e.g., Charlesworth, *Jesus*, 3-46; Foster, *Memory*, 165-183) or quests about John’s literary outline and genre (e.g., Bauckham, *Characteristics*, 17-36).

⁹ Cf. Wengst, *Johannesevangelium*, 11: „Kap.11 hat einen wichtigen Platz in der Gesamtkonzeption des Evangeliums“.

¹⁰ Schnelle, *Evangelium*, 208.

¹¹ Cf. Schnelle, *Evangelium*, 208.

¹² Cf. Azuma, *John*.

¹³ Becker, *Evangelium*, 345.

writes from the retrospective;¹⁴ in chapter 11 he anticipates the narrative of chapter 12 by either presupposing the knowledge of the tradition among his readers (Mk 14:3-9; Mt 26:6-13) or simply by preparing his audience already for the later reading of chapter 12.¹⁵

Despite envisioning the variety of narrative links in John 11 to the rest of the gospel narrative, the textual interpretation soon uncovers many obstacles. We have to deal with a comparatively long textual unit in which – basically – three types of literary forms are mixed up: a miracle story (11:38-44), revelatory words (esp. v.25f.; 40) or dialogic scenes (esp. v.20-27), and various narrative elements (e.g., v.1-2; 19). The complexity of the overall narrative, which is mirrored by various literary tensions,¹⁶ therefore has inspired various theories on *Literar- und Quellenkritik*¹⁷ which aim to reconstruct the tentative *initial tradition* behind the textual unit.¹⁸ Even though scholars do not necessarily stick any longer to earlier source theories in which the miracle story is placed within the *semeia*-source (SQ), there still seems to be a tendency of considering the resurrection story as the initial part – the nucleus – of the tradition behind John 11.¹⁹

However, chapter 11 does not only provide interconnection to the rest of the gospel narrative, and it does not only give reason to engage in source criticism. The chapter also raises literary issues of intertextuality since it alludes most evidently to the synoptic gospels in multiple ways. Hartwig Thyen suggests John 11 should be read as a “Palimpsest über synoptischen Texten“.²⁰ In other words: John 11 is composed by making a variety of

¹⁴ Cf. Wengst, *Johannesevangelium*, 14.

¹⁵ Cf. Wengst, *Johannesevangelium*, 14.

¹⁶ According to Jürgen Becker, there are three types of tensions: (a) tension between v.25f. and the general topic of resurrection stories; (b) breaks within the narrative: v.2, 4, 16, 24-26, 40; (c) divergent information, e.g., about Lazarus (v.1 versus v.2, 19, 21, 23, 32, 39); references to Mary and Marta (v.1 versus v.20-27, 5, 19); v.17 versus v.30, 38; Becker, *Evangelium*, 344.

¹⁷ Cf. on this, e.g.: Labahn, *Jesus*, 395ff.

¹⁸ Jürgen Becker tries to distinguish between different layers behind the textual composition: Cf. Becker, *Evangelium*, 344-346. Becker reconstructs a miracle story as the “*Basistext*“: v.1, 3, 17, 38f., 41, 43f. (345). He works with a model of a “dreifachen Schichtung des Textes...: der Vorlage für die SQ aus der mündlichen Tradition, der Stufe der SQ und der Ebene von E” (344). Udo Schnelle separates tradition and redaction throughout the chapter: Cf. Schnelle, *Evangelium*, 208-210. He distinguishes in detail between tradition (e.g., v.1, 2, 3), and redaction (e.g., in v.4).

¹⁹ Cf. Becker, *Evangelium*, 345; Labahn, *Jesus*, 434ff.

²⁰ Cf. Thyen, *Erzählung*, 182-212.

intertextual relations, especially to Mark and Luke. I will only mention the most important four of those relations:

(a) By referring to concretely named figures – Lazarus, Mary and Marta – John 11 is reminiscent of two different kinds of stories which the evangelist knew from the Lukan Gospel (Lk 16:19-31; 10:38-42).

(b) The special character of the miracle story in John 11 – the resurrection of the dead Lazarus – reminds us of similar stories which we find in Mk 5:21parr. (Mt 9:18ff.; Lk 8:40ff.), Lk 7:11-17 and Acts 9:36-42; 20:7-12.²¹ However, we will see in a short while that John 11 by far exceeds the revivification stories told in the synoptic gospels and Acts. John in fact intends to allude to those stories by outreaching them.

(c) If we take into account that John 11 closely interrelates to chapter 12, we have to name further recourses to the synoptic gospels: the anointing story (John 12:3ff.) then can be seen as overlapping with Mk 14:3-9par.Mt 26:6-13 or Lk 7:36-50.

(d) On a more abstract level, we can finally see how John in chapter 11 further develops the motif of incomprehension or misunderstanding (cf. Mary and Marta figures) which we find already in Mark in various ways (e.g., Mk 8:32f.).

What do we conclude from these observations?

(1) The narrative complexity of John 11 obviously reflects the wide ranged narrative function of this chapter for the overall gospel outline (John 1-20).

(2) The variety of textual interrelations and interlinkages to the so-called synoptic gospels²² shows how John wants to palimpsest Mark and Luke. Having said this, we have to go one step further:

(3) We have to expose the narrative characteristics of John 11 in order to see how far John's composition follows the synoptic molding of historiography. The motif of delay in John 11 will be of specific significance since it reflects John's particular notion of time and history.

²¹ Cf. Labahn, *Jesus*, 437ff. – Cf. more comprehensively: Fischbach, *Totenerweckungen*.

²² From here further questions arise: In which way does John compile various motifs or traditions, or allude to them? How does he stick to the general narrative outline he might have found especially in Mark and Luke? How much does his way of perceiving and transforming the gospel concept lead to its re-shape which consequently means a transcendence of the historiography oriented gospel outline as defined by Mark and further developed by Luke?

3. The motif of delay in John 11

In narrative terms, the story about the resurrection of Lazarus in John 11 is not presented stringently. Jesus accomplishes the *semeion* of a supposed healing with a huge delay (11:4, 14; cf. also 11:21, 32). Meanwhile his friend Lazarus who was mortally ill has died. Instead of healing Lazarus, Jesus has to resurrect him. What role does the motif of delay thus play? Some scholars offer an explanation based on narratology with its impacts on the conceptual interrelation of narrative and narrated time: Jesus' delay then appears to be a tactic ("Verzögerungstaktik"), reflecting an intentional narrative strategy of John,²³ probably created by the evangelist himself. Other scholars tackle the question about the motif of delay on the basis of form criticism: by separating the Lazarus story from healing accounts ("Heilungsgeschichte"), John 11 is defined more specifically as a resurrection story ("Auferweckungswunder").²⁴ When assuming the latter, the so-called "Verzögerungsmotiv" is seen as an initial part of the miracle story²⁵ which can supposedly even be traced back to Mark (Mk 5:21-43). It is argued then that already Mark would operate with the motif of delay since the request to heal Jairus' daughter (5:23) likewise becomes an issue of resurrection: because Jesus is kept on his way (5:25ff.) he will find the girl already deceased (5:35).

However, the form critical based interpretation of the motif of delay in John 11 falls much too short for two reasons:

First, form criticism assumes that there existed a specific type of resurrection miracles in ancient literature. But if we look at all texts usually related to such a type of a miracle narrative, we will see that these texts only tell *revivification* stories, not resurrection stories. This demarcation applies to the Hebrew Bible / Septuagint and early Jewish stories (1Kgs 17:17-24; 2 Kgs 4:18-37; 2Kgs 13:20f.; 4Esr 9:38-10:4) as much to *revivification* narratives in the Greco-Roman literature (Iamblichus, *Bab* 2:700; Philostratus, *vit* 4:45; Apuleius, *Flor* 19; *met* 2:21-30)²⁶ and in early Christian texts (see

²³ It is understood as a "bewusste Erzählstrategie..., bei der Erzählzeit und erzählte Zeit in ein spezifisches Verhältnis gebracht werden": Zimmermann, *Ethik*, 133-170.159-160: „Während der sensationslustige... Leser nur auf das Ziel, auf das Nachher... ausgerichtet ist, zwingt die retardierende Erzählweise immer mehr im Augenblick zu verharren“ (160).

²⁴ Cf. discussion in Labahn, *Jesus*, 441-442.

²⁵ So Labahn, *Jesus*, 442.

²⁶ *PGM* IV 155-285 does not contain a story at all, but gives instruction for an evocation ritual.

above),²⁷ including Mk 5:35ff.²⁸ In contrast to all these stories, John 11 tells an actual *resurrection* narrative, since Lazarus already was in the tomb for four days (John 11:17, 39). Therefore, we cannot understand the motif of delay in John 11 against the background of revivification stories: we must relate it to a different discourse area.

Secondly, the motif of delay itself is not at all an issue in Mk 5:21ff. The claim that Jesus would have come “too late” is not explicated; the fact that he is kept on his way to Jairus’ house is basically caused by Mark’s technique of “sandwiching”: Mark includes the healing of the woman suffering from hemorrhages (5:25) as an interruption of the previous narrative. In terms of literary techniques John might have been stimulated by Mark’s narrative style without finding the motif of delay as such in the Markan story.

To sum up: the motif of delay in John 11 can neither be traced back to an inventory of motifs inherited by ancient resurrection miracles – since such a group of a narrative / text-type does not exist; nor is this motif shaped by Mark 5. Rather, John creates this motif himself in order to refer to another area of discourse: Mary and Marta’s explicit statement about Jesus’ delay – “if you had been here, my brother would not have died” (John 11:21, 32) – can be seen not only as John’s attempt to deal with Jesus’ absence,²⁹ but rather as his reply to the famous early Christian debate about the delay of the *parousia* (e.g., 1Thess 4:13; Mk 13:13ff.; 2Pet 3:8f.; 1John 2:28).³⁰

In the frame of discussing the fortune of those Christ-believers who (will) have died *before* Christ returns, John argues that already the earthly Jesus – as the incarnated *logos* – has conquered death by resurrecting Lazarus. In order to do so, Jesus needed to intentionally delay his arrival. Otherwise he could not have accomplished the *semeion* of raising the dead. In consequence, speculations about time and the coming of the *parousia* (Thess 5:2; Mk 13:33) are useless. By only having faith in Christ (John 11:25f.), the Christ-believer will instead fully participate in the eschatological gift of eternal life.

John’s narrative about the miracle of resurrecting Lazarus from the dead – a miracle accomplished in the past – provides no less than eschatological

²⁷ *GMk* frgm. 1-2 might be an exception.

²⁸ Accordingly, in classical contributions to New Testament form history (Klaus Berger; Gerd Theißen) John 11 is typically not considered when it comes to miracle stories – the chapter is rather left out.

²⁹ Cf. North, Lord, 39-52.

³⁰ See more comprehensively on the motif of delay in the frame of the early Christian discourse about *parousia*: Becker, Jesus.

salvation to present readers (see also John 20:30f.). John 11 thus is reaching beyond the aim of providing consolation of present readers.³¹ the story is a good, if not the best, example of how the Fourth Gospel – by merging past, present and future time – denies the concept of a history oriented gospel narrative according to Mark and Luke. The story about Jesus’ ministry (past) is conflated with the current need of making sense of the delay of the *parousia* (present) in order not to give up faith in Jesus’ life-giving eschatological ministry (future).

John 11 and the transcendence of history and time

In many ways the Fourth Gospel continues the narrative gospel outline as defined by Mark and further developed by Luke (and Acts).³² Hereby, John confirms the idea that the gospel story – as an account of Jesus’ earthly ministry – has to be put in a historical framing that is re-told in historiography-like terms. Comparable to Mark and Luke, a miracle story also functions for John as a historiographical element of an event-based and person-centred narrative about Jesus’ ministry. Evidently, John is persuaded by the basic narrative outline he finds in Mark and Luke. In John 11 he even goes so far to palimpsest both gospels much beyond simply adopting a single narrative like Mk 5:21ff. (see above).

However, in many ways John also fissures the Markan and Lukan gospel concept as a history-oriented account. This becomes clear not only in John 13, but also in chapters 14-16: elsewhere I have argued how John – according to Foucault³³ – in the story about the foot washing “applies a paradigm of counter-memory” to a historiographical narrative (cf. John 13 in difference to Mk 14par.Lk 22). Later, especially in the farewell speeches (John 14-16), we even “encounter a dissolution of temporality”: the speeches are “illustrative in that the temporal setting oscillates between ‘now-then-again’” (e.g., John 16:16). In chapters 14-16, John basically “abrogates a perception of time based on linearity and causality... he replaces history with Christology – John may in fact deploy a revelatory concept of Christology as a counter-memorial attack on Lukan historiography”.³⁴

As this paper has aimed to demonstrate, what can be said about John 13 and 14-16 is also advocated by a more detailed analysis of John 11. Even though John in chapter 11 deliberately alludes to the synoptic gospels in

³¹ So North, *Lord*, 39-43.

³² On Matthew see note 1.

³³ Cf. Foucault, *Counter-Memory*, 113-196.

³⁴ All quotations taken from: Becker, *Birth*, 145-146.

multiple ways (see above), he outreaches and, as a consequence, counteracts the synoptic concept of a historiography oriented gospel account: in that John presents a *resurrection* story as an event that happened in the past, he predates the eschatological time the Christ-believers are awaiting to Jesus' earthly ministry; in that John proposes belief (*πιστεύειν*) to be the sufficient and ultimate attitude of anticipating God's salvation in Christ, he envisions full participation in eschatological existence already now to the readers of his book. Consequently, time, temporality and history are once again dissolved. By dismantling the narrative principles of linearity and causality in and beyond chapter 11, John in fact counteracts the Markan and Lukan gospel concept and develops a counter-concept of early Christian memory.³⁵

It might well be that Mark, Luke and John are as much challenged by the early Christian eschatological discourse about the delay of the *parousia* and the fortune of the dead (cf. also Mk 9:1par.Lk 9:27). Nevertheless, all three authors differ significantly in how they respond to these questions: while Mark is primarily eager to narrate the past by perceiving the acceleration of time (e.g., Mk 1:14f.), Luke intends to map the gospel story as a certain period of a *historia continua*. John is the sole author to discuss the issue of delay explicitly. Jesus' delay is shown as a prospect of faith rather than a contestation: it allows for a miracle story (John 11) in which the *future* eschatological expectation of the resurrection of the dead – a question most urgently relevant to *present* readers – becomes a story about the *past*.

At first sight, it may seem that by doing so, John enriches the narrative patterns of a historiography-like gospel account: future hope is transformed to a past tense miracle story. What the evangelist finally reaches, however, is quite the opposite: by merging past, future and present time(s) as he does in chapter 11, he in fact once more fissures the concept of the gospel writing as historiography which proceeds linearly *within* time and history. In chapter 11 John instead gives up linearity as a basic principle of historiography and leaves the synoptic track of gospel writing. As a result, the Fourth Gospel paves the way for writing out the genre of "revelatory literature".

Summary

The Gospel of John uses some elementary narrative patterns that characterize the synoptic approach to history-writing. However, at various crucial points John intentionally leaves – as the paper will argue – the history-oriented view of the gospel story. Primarily for reasons of re-conceptualizing time and history, John thus aims to "transcend" the model of ancient history-writing.

³⁵ On counter-memory cf. in general: Becker, *Birth*, 19-20.

Zusammenfassung

Das Johannesevangelium verwendet grundlegende erzählerische Elemente, die auch für den synoptischen Zugriff auf Geschichtsschreibung charakteristisch sind. Gleichwohl verlässt der vierte Evangelist an entscheidenden Punkten seiner Erzählung die geschichtsbezogene Perspektive des synoptischen Evangelienkonzepts. Johannes tut dies in erster Linie, um so die Dimensionen von „Zeit“ und „Geschichte“ neu zu entwerfen. Im Ergebnis zielt der vierte Evangelist darauf, das Konzept antiker Geschichtsschreibung nicht nur weiter zu entwickeln, sondern auch zu „transzendieren“.

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Prof. Dr. Eve-Marie Becker
Westfälische Wilhelms-Universität Münster
Universitätsstrasse 13-17
48143 Münster
Deutschland
E-mail: beckerev@uni-muenster.de