

Herold Weiss and Kendra Haloviak Valentine on the Fourth Gospel: *A Review* | BY NORMAN H. YOUNG



Signs to Life: Reading and Responding to John's Gospel

by Kendra Haloviak Valentine
(Warburton, Australia: Signs, 2013)



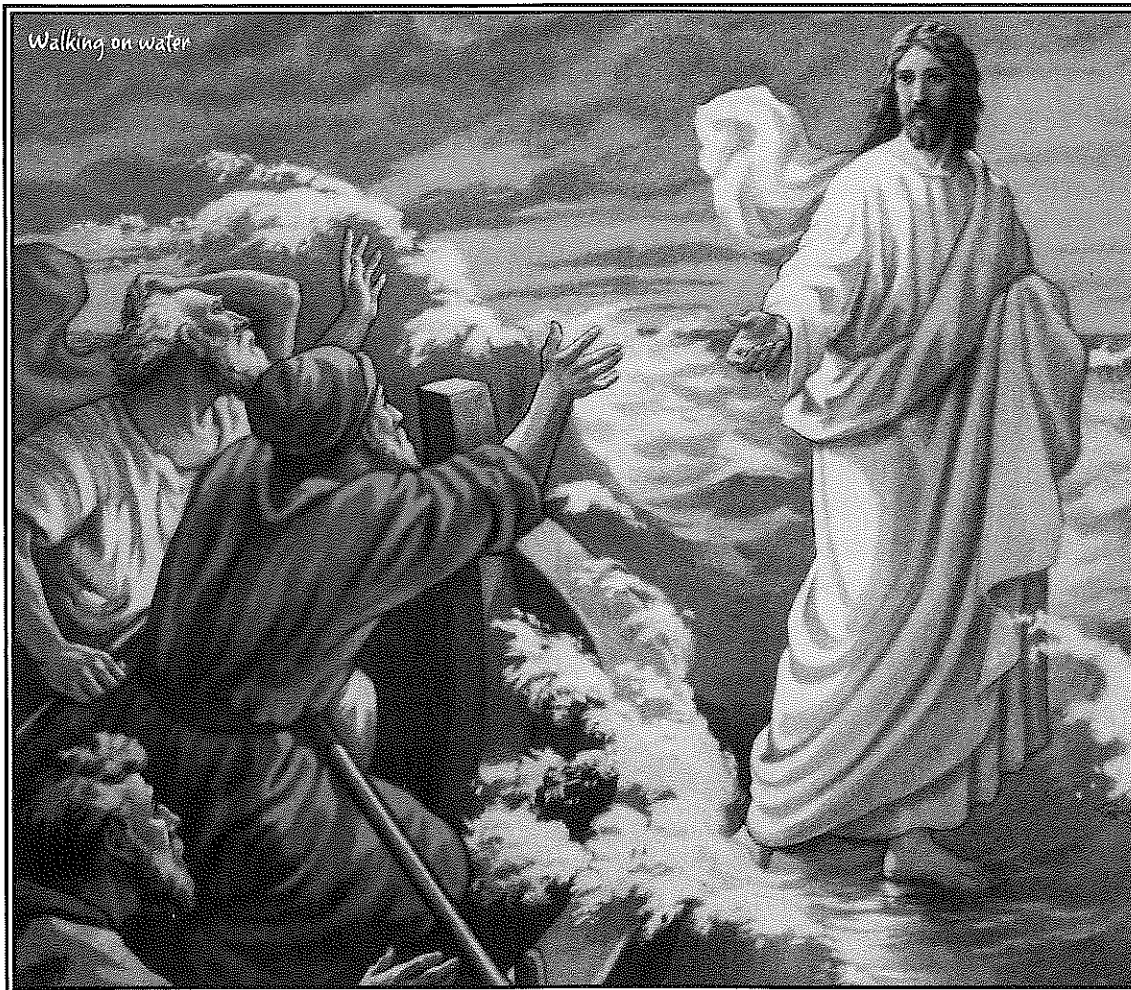
Meditations on According to John: Exercises in Biblical Theology

by Herold Weiss
(Gonzalez, FL: Energion, 2014)

Kendra Haloviak Valentine and Herold Weiss have drunk long at the spring of John's living water, and they have feasted on its spiritual ambrosia. No parched soul will read either or both of these books without being refreshed. Valentine is an especially gifted communicator, both as a writer and as a speaker (the included CD with her book is ideal for the car's audio system). Weiss is an engaging

**Most
commentators**

**recognize
seven "signs,"
but the lists
do vary.**



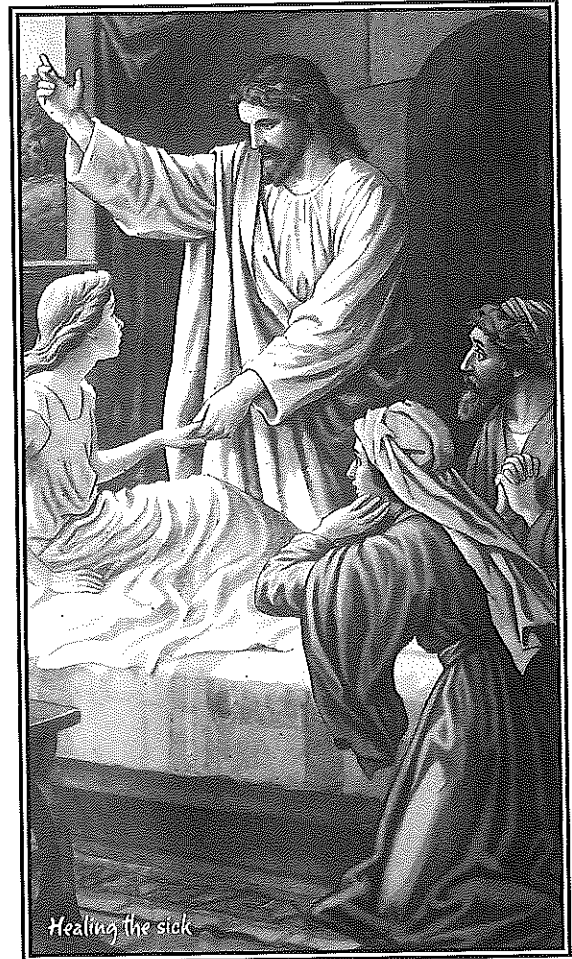
**The Fourth
Gospel lacks
any true
parables along
the lines
of the Sower,
the Ten
Maidens,
the Good
Samaritan,
or the
Prodigal Son.**

scholar, who both stimulates the mind and inspires the heart. Valentine provides a bibliography, so the reader is well informed regarding her research range. Although Weiss does not provide a bibliography, one hears echoes of Raymond Brown, Paul Duke, and C. K. Barrett as one reads. He is obviously well read in the literature of Johannine studies.

Admittedly, some will stop reading Weiss when they discover early in the book that he thinks the author of the Fourth Gospel (FG) is unknown; indeed there was no single author, according to him, but a series of contributors, editors, and narrators over a fifty-year period. If such data is too much for any reader, I'd suggest skipping the introduction and jumping straight into the exposition, as Weiss has great respect for the FG's text (however it came about) and interprets it with creative insight, extensive learning, and spiritual sensitivity. Indeed, though he gives the FG such a piecemeal process of composition, he admits that "the text displays amazing stylistic, verbal and theological integrity," and, we should also add, frequent *aporias* (perplexing literary and logical jumps in the text).

Both these books have similar origins: Valentine's began in 2004 as a series of worships delivered to an audience of denominational leaders at the Adventist church's world headquarters, while Weiss's chapters were originally written as a monthly column for the online *Spectrum* (www.spectrummagazine.org). Consequently, both books are very audience-focused and very readable for that. However, the audiences were very different, and no doubt that influenced the two presentations. Both writers approach the text using reader-response methods. The fact that Weiss's chapters began as regular columns does cause some occasional repetition in his book, but Valentine largely escapes this because she follows set passages of Scripture rather than themes. She concentrates on the "signs" found in the first half of the FG.

Most commentators recognize seven

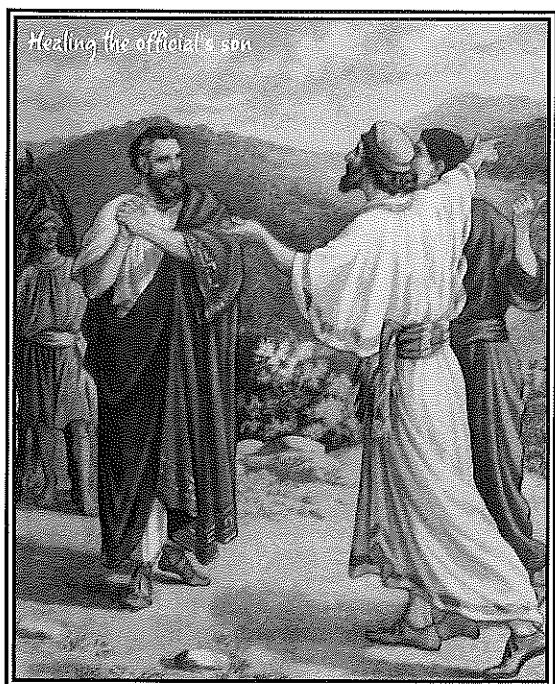


"signs," but the lists do vary. The most common list is as follows: the water into wine (2:1–11), the healing of the official's son (4:46–54), the healing of the lame man (5:1–18), the feeding of the five thousand (6:1–15), the walking on water (6:16–24), the healing of the blind man (9:1–41), and the raising of Lazarus (11:1–57). Sometimes the miraculous catch of fish (21:1–11) either replaces the walking on water or becomes an eighth "sign." Weiss helpfully concludes that all "the signs point to THE SIGN. The crucifixion and the resurrection"; "their function," he says, "is to bring about the recognition of the crucified as the glorified." Valentine agrees ("Jesus will transform the agony of the crucifixion into an event that glorifies God") and very persuasively parallels the setting of Jesus' turning the water into wine with the scene surrounding the cross.

Weiss's thematic approach allows him to

cover the whole narrative of the FG, whereas Valentine basically restricts herself to John's "signs." The "signs," she informs us, are miracles that are largely unique to the FG, and more than this, they are the means of revealing Jesus' identity. Rather oddly she includes "A Wedding at the Well" (John 4:7-42) as one of her seven chapters even though it hardly qualifies as a miracle and is certainly not one of the FG's "signs," as she is fully aware (she combines "signs" four and five into her chapter 5, which allows her to have only seven chapters despite the inclusion of a non-sign). She justifies the inclusion of the story of the Samaritan woman by rather adroitly integrating its theme of "living water" with the miracle of turning the water into wine and the final great "sign" when Jesus cried, "I'm thirsty" (19:28-30) and when blood and water issued from his side (v. 34). I am glad she did incorporate John 4 into her study of the "signs," as it is one of the FG's most brilliant exchanges, and Valentine skillfully helps us to appreciate its treasures.

Both authors pick up on the significance for the early Christians of the words "on the third day" that commence the narrative about the wedding at Cana, and they both relate it to a



post-resurrection Christian community. To quote Valentine: "On the third day, there was new life at Cana. It was the first of Jesus' signs. His glory was revealed and his disciples believed. And on another third day, the crucified One would have new life. It would be the most amazing sign of all." I assume Weiss is uniting the crucifixion and the resurrection when he says, "Jesus' work was consummated when he was lifted up, on the third day, on the cross."

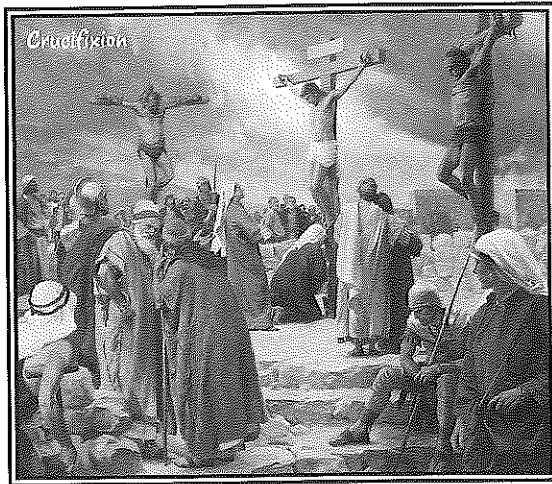
Weiss goes even further than Valentine when he tells us that it was the community that produced the Gospel According to John (as he consistently refers to the FG throughout his monograph). Following Louis J. Martyn, Weiss argues that the FG tells the story of Jesus with the community's experiences and its disputes with Judaism in mind. The tension with Judaism he finds in the references to believers being expelled from the synagogues (9:22; 12:42-43; 16:2). This does not mean that the Jesus-remembered was a complete creation of the community, and Weiss does not say it was.

As J. A. T. Robinson observed long ago, "John is concerned primarily with theological verity rather than with historical verisimilitude. Yet once again, it is the truth of the history that he claims to present, not of a fictitious tale"; and again, "John seems to be giving the truth, as he sees it, of the history, rather than creating *ex nihilo*." With this Weiss agrees when he says that the FG is "the result of theological reflection on what took place by a community that 'remembers' the past in the light of the Scriptures and the 'teaching' of the Comforter (14:26)."

Weiss interprets the "best wine" being served last almost allegorically, but not unhelpfully. Clearly the custom was to use the best wine first while guests could appreciate its quality. The cheaper wine was produced when the guests were less discerning. "What is this narrative about?" Weiss rhetorically asks. It's about Moses, the efficient steward, who

**Weiss has
great respect
for the Fourth
Gospel's text
(however it
came about)
and interprets
it with creative
insight,
extensive
learning, and
spiritual
sensitivity.**

Weiss
 beautifully
 juxtaposes
 the different
 ways the
 Pharisees,
 the parents,
 and the
 blind man
 know.



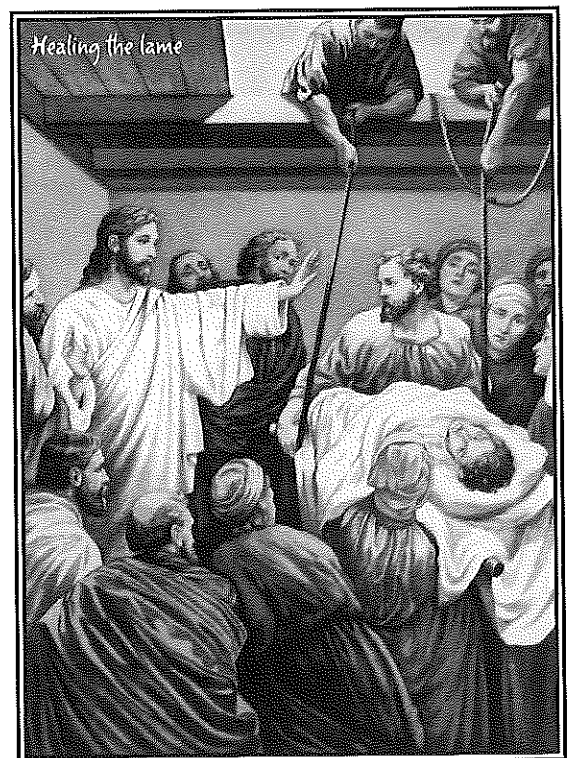
“served the best wine first, when he gave the law. The Christians insist, to the contrary, that the good wine is to be served ‘on the third day.’” “The religion of ritual purifications, the religion of ‘your law’ (10:34; 15:10; 18:31; 19:7), has run out of wine. It has been refurbished with the best wine that is life and truth.” Weiss’s application of this “sign” to the Johannine community’s situation seems reasonable, but is it any less relevant to Jesus’ own disputes with his Jewish contemporaries? Mark 2:21–22 may indicate that it is not.

The authors share an Adventist heritage, so we should analyze how each of them handles the two “signs” involving the Sabbath—the healing of the lame man (5:1–18) and the healing of the man born blind (9:1–41). The earliest Christians, Weiss notes, were Jews, and as Christians they were still as exercised about what works were excluded during the Sabbath as were the Jews themselves. However, the Christian Jews not only cited Scripture, they also appealed to the conduct of Jesus. Picking up on the “until now” (5:17), Weiss concludes that it refers not to the future but to the present as the culmination of a process. Since the Father works continuously, so the Son does the works of the Father while it is day, even on the Sabbath. Christians, too, as with the Father and the Son, work on the Sabbath, that is, “they live in a perennial Sabbath,” constantly bringing “more life to the world.” What this means in the actual worship life of the early

church is not altogether made clear.

Valentine sees the Sabbath as itself a “sign.” She contrasts a zeal for Sabbath observance that allowed persecution (5:16) and plotting to kill on the Sabbath (v. 18) with One who employed the Sabbath as a day for healing and the restoring to life (v. 21). The essence of Valentine’s study leaves the reader with a question, the answer to which she makes inescapable. The Father works on the Sabbath, as both Jesus and his opponents agreed, but who in Jerusalem was doing his work on the Sabbath? The ones plotting homicide or the One performing healings?

The FG lacks any true parables along the lines of the Sower, the Ten Maidens, the Good Samaritan, or the Prodigal Son. What the FG has are dialogical stories, and one of the most powerful, in my opinion, is the healing of the man born blind (John 9:1–41). One of Valentine’s longest chapters is given to this dramatic narrative. The genius of this account is that Jesus is absent for most of it, featuring only at the commencement and at the conclusion. Yet he’s the one on trial, *in absentia*. His defense is left in the hands of an illiterate and formerly



blind beggar. Some advocate, one might wonder. Well, in fact he was as harmless as a dove and as sharp as a serpent. How did our authors deal with this magnificent story?

First up, Valentine disabuses us of any thought that John 9:2 teaches that calamities are a divine punishment for a crime committed by either the parents or the newborn: "Suffering was not an occasion for a *debate*. Rather it was a call to *act* faithfully and to see with new eyes" (italics added). Surprisingly, Weiss found "quite inadequate the notion that sickness is caused by sin." Valentine argues (and I agree) that this is the very notion that Jesus, in John 9:2, dismisses. In John 16:21 Jesus uses the birth process to illustrate how pain is soon replaced with joy once the baby is in the mother's arms. Again, I find it surprising that Weiss interprets this as teaching "the notion that a woman's purpose in life is primarily to bear children."

Weiss sees the issue over the Sabbath in the healing of the man born blind as reflecting the debate between the Johannine community and their Jewish neighbors. He beautifully juxtaposes the different ways the Pharisees, the parents, and the blind man *know*. The Pharisees *know* Jesus is a sinner (he broke the Sabbath) (9:24); they *know* God spoke through Moses (v. 29a), but they do not *know* where Jesus comes from (vv. 29b, 30). The parents *know* the healed man is their son (v. 20a), but they do not *know* how he sees or who healed him (v. 21). The blind man does not *know* where Jesus is (v. 12), or whether he's a sinner (v. 25a), or who the Son of man is (v. 36), but one thing he does *know* that though born blind, he now sees (v. 25b). With us, too, smug knowledge can hinder the experience of seeing the light of the world, or, as Valentine puts it, "And then 'the light of the world' encounters people who are crippled [John 5], blind [John 9] and mourning [John 11]—suddenly Jesus changes their lives forever."

Many of Jesus' followers found it hard to accept the words that unless they ate the flesh

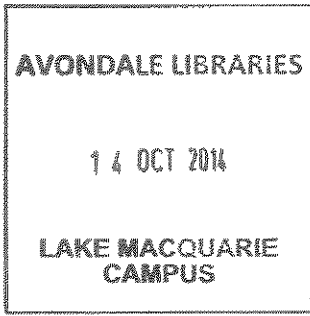
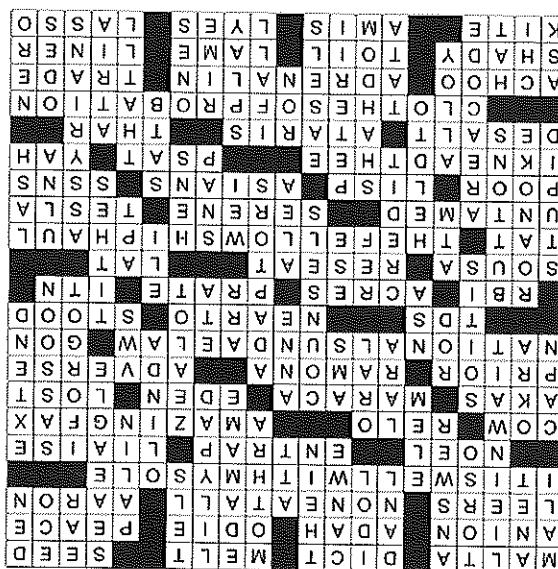
of Jesus and drank his blood they'd have no life in them. Eternal life was only for those who ate his flesh and drank his blood (John 6:53–54). The metaphor becomes less offensive when Weiss informs us that "to eat" in the FG means "to believe." And things become even clearer when Valentine helps us to see this language in the context of the celebration of the Lord's Supper in the small house-churches in which the early Christians gathered.

There is much more in these two books worthy of mention: the place of women in the theology of the FG, Weiss's superb chapter on the "truth" in the FG, the four readers' response to the FG at the end of Valentine's book, and the way both writers helpfully segue from the first to the twenty-first century. No reader will leave these books without understanding the Fourth Gospel better. ■

Norman H. Young is a research fellow at Avondale College of Higher Education in Cooranbong, Australia, where he taught as Senior Lecturer from 1973 to 2004. He earned his PhD under F. F. Bruce at Manchester University in the UK and is still trying to understand the Bible better.



Solution to crossword puzzle on back cover



**The Christian
Jews not
only cited
Scripture,
they also
appealed to
the conduct
of Jesus.**