

## WEST's Johannine Expert: The Fourth Gospel is Partially Fiction

[Peter Nicholson](#)

The history of the lying prophet of Bethel recorded in 1 Kings 13 ranks among the most tragic in the infallible narrative. Tragic, because the old prophet deceived the sincere and zealous man of God who came out of Judah, an act which led directly to *the younger man's loss of usefulness to the Lord*. Tragic, because the wicked king Jeroboam was leading an entire kingdom – *one might say denomination* – into idolatry and disobedience from which *it never recovered*. Tragic, too, because of the prophet himself. What were the circumstances which led him to tell that treacherous lie? Was he “only” severely backslidden, or had he been lured into more deliberate forms of disobedience by the offers of financial gain or personal advance which corrupt leaders have ever been wont to make (1 Kings 13.7; Judges 17.10-13)? Was he a true prophet of the Lord at all? Even if he was, the fact that he was not himself present at the idolatrous ceremony that day serves only to remind us of Saul, who said “Yea, I have obeyed the voice of the Lord”, and of the lawyer who asked the Lord a further question in a vain attempt to justify himself. His absence also provides the backdrop to another aspect of the tragedy: *the man's own sons had become idolaters*.

Jeroboam, *determined to protect his own status*, had made the two calves of gold to prevent the people from going – in obedience to the revealed Word of God – to Jerusalem to worship. Building an house of high places and making priests of the lowest of the people would have required a period of several months in the build-up to the feast day in Bethel on the fifteenth day of the eighth month. During this time, while the old prophet consistently failed in his duty, a remarkable event took place, which we find recorded in 2 Chronicles 11.13: *the Levites separated from Jeroboam*. Some would add that in so doing they also separated from the old prophet.

Not intending to provide an exhaustive exposition of this history, we move to the matter in hand. We would like to draw attention to a book entitled *The Power of Saving Wisdom: An Investigation of Spirit and Wisdom in Relation to the Soteriology of the Fourth Gospel*.<sup>1</sup> The author of this book is Cornelis Bennema, who is Senior Lecturer in New Testament at Wales Evangelical School of Theology.<sup>2</sup> The book weaves a depressing and poisoned tapestry of liberal and neo-liberal comment,

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<sup>1</sup> Full text (25.5 MB) available at: <http://tinyurl.com/pp3zrmw>.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.west.org.uk/cor-bennema/1826/>

and we do not propose to write a detailed critique of it here. We intend only to draw attention to the following remarks made by the author:

Whether it is necessary (in order to accept the truth claim of John 3) that Nicodemus existed, or whether it is necessary that his conversation with Jesus took place exactly as has been recorded is perhaps more ambivalent. Nevertheless, even if historical facts cannot be reconstructed any more, we still require a kind of narrative plausibility: for example, we prefer to see some historical reality behind the Nicodemus story, in that it must be plausible that such a conversation could have taken place. In our understanding, the Fourth Gospel moves along a spectrum of a mixture of (what we would call) 'history' and 'fiction', in which the stories about Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman, for example, perhaps contain more fiction than the passion narrative in John 18-19 [p 16]. ... it does not necessarily need to be historically accurate in all its detail; it may be a mixture of historical accuracy and fictional imagination in its witness to the T/truth. This is not to deny a historical substratum to the Fourth Gospel, but the question of how much is historical need not dominate the debate concerning to what extent the Fourth Gospel is true [p 106].<sup>3</sup>

This is, of course, unadulterated Bultmannism. Some readers may not be fully familiar with the thought of Rudolf Bultmann or the destructive power of the heresies on which it was founded. We feel sure, however, that many will remember former Bishop of Durham David Jenkins, who achieved notoriety by calling into question whether the Resurrection was "literally physical", comparing such an event to "a conjuring trick with bones".<sup>4</sup> Jenkins' ideas came from the same foul source as Bennema's. The difference this time – thirty years on – is that these ideas are now coming from *inside* the WEST/Affinity consortium.

Previous articles<sup>5</sup> have drawn attention to a statement issued by WEST giving the impression that there is "no evidence of false teaching by the WEST lecturers".<sup>6</sup> Are we to understand that this claim

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<sup>3</sup> These pages (389 KB) may be accessed at: <http://www.strateias.org/fiction.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup> <http://tinyurl.com/p25xcjp>

<sup>5</sup> Peter Nicholson and Charles Soper, *WEST's Shameful Contribution to Mission In Poland*, 22 March 2013, <http://www.strateias.org/west.pdf>; Peter Nicholson and Charles Soper, *WEST: Expanding the Boundaries of Inspiration*, 2 April 2013, <http://www.strateias.org/Expanding.pdf>; Peter Nicholson, *WEST: Further Failure to Separate from Ecumenists in Poland*, 10 April 2013, <http://www.strateias.org/westecumenism.pdf>, also published in *Bible League Quarterly*, 454, July–September 2013, 402–405; Peter Nicholson and Charles Soper, *WEST: Still Not Coming Clean*, 1 July 2013, <http://www.strateias.org/clean.pdf>; Charles Soper and Peter Nicholson, *Wales Ecumenical School of Theology: WEST theological monograph promotes interfaith dialogue*, 20 July 2013, <http://www.strateias.org/westinterfaith.pdf>; Charles Soper, *Heterodox sympathies of WEST's new theologian-at-large*, <http://www.strateias.org/reeves.htm>.

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.west.org.uk/negative-publicity/2378/>

extends also to WEST's expert on the Johannine literature? After all, the selection committee appointed him precisely because of the work he has published in this area. We feel justified in asking which members of the committee read and approved this material, and equally so in pointing out that Bennema enjoys the enthusiastic and unqualified support of the principal.<sup>7</sup>

The last twenty years and more have seen a massive corrupting of Polish evangelicalism through, amongst others, the significant support for the Evangelical School of Theology in Wrocław which has come both from WEST itself and from individual British Reformed churches such as Carey Baptist Church, Reading (FIEC/Affinity) and Immanuel Presbyterian Church, Cardiff (EPCEW/Affinity). Now the chickens have come home to roost, and it is imperative to ask if there is anyone at the top of any of the various branches of this coalition who has the strength of conviction necessary to bring about the profound repentance which is now so urgently required.

We would urge the sincere and zealous preachers of tomorrow, if they are attracted by the golden calf of WEST's supposed academic prowess or its assertions of faithfulness to the Evangelical and Reformed tradition,<sup>8</sup> to give careful consideration to the final words of 1 Kings 13.18 and to their tragic outcome. And we would urge all who love the Word of God to remember the Levites who abandoned Jeroboam's kingdom, as well as to recall the incident which led to the Levites originally being accorded their privileged position in the Lord's service – a day when another great separation took place, and the Levites responded to Moses' famous call: "Who is on the Lord's side?"

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<sup>7</sup> [https://twitter.com/WEST\\_Principal/statuses/276640785246588928](https://twitter.com/WEST_Principal/statuses/276640785246588928)

[https://twitter.com/WEST\\_Principal/statuses/307837621638397952](https://twitter.com/WEST_Principal/statuses/307837621638397952)

<sup>8</sup> [https://twitter.com/WEST\\_Principal/statuses/375017239814340608](https://twitter.com/WEST_Principal/statuses/375017239814340608)