To Kenneth E. Bailey

Teacher, friend, and colleague
whose lectures in Beirut in 1973
inspired my commitment
to the New Testament
and the people of the Middle East
Contents

Preface to the Second Edition     ix
Preface to the First Edition     xi
Abbreviations       xiv

Part 1 Before You Begin     1

1. History of Interpretation     5
   The Early Period
   The Jewish Background of John
   Historical Traditions in John
   The New Look on the Fourth Gospel
   The Significance of the New Look
   Current Trends
   Conclusion
   Bibliography

2. Who Wrote the Gospel of John?     34
   Internal Evidence
   External Evidence
   Conclusion
   Bibliography

3. How the Fourth Gospel Was Built     57
   Literary Seams in the Fourth Gospel
   Contextual Evidence in John
Contents

The Aporias in the Fourth Gospel
Assessment
Discourses and Miracles
   A Case Study from John 5:1–6:2
   Brown’s Solution: Stages of Composition
The Form of the Final Story
The Book of Signs (John 1–12)
The Book of Glory (John 13–21)
Conclusion
Bibliography

4. Johannine Style  87
   Misunderstanding
   Irony
   Asides
   Hierarchies of Meaning
   Hidden Glimpses of Christ
   Conclusion
   Bibliography

Part 2 Strategies for Interpretation  101

5. The Text  107
   If You Know Greek
   If You Don’t Know Greek
   Determining Types of Manuscript Variants
   Bibliography

6. The Literary Context  118
   Synoptic Parallels
   The Macro-Context
   The Micro-Context
   Conclusion

7. Building a Bibliography  127
   Bibliographical Books
   Bibliographical Indexes
      Elenchus of Biblica
      American Theological Library Association (ATLA)
      New Testament Abstracts (NTAb)
      Religious and Theological Abstracts (RTA)
      Google Scholar
   How to Do a Bibliographic Search

8. The Cultural Context 140
   Commentaries
   Biblical Dictionaries and Encyclopedias
   Specialized Studies
   A Sample Investigation

   Fundamental Rules of Word Study
   Grammatical Analysis: Examining Original Sentences
   Word Searches in Greek
   Word Searches with Reference Volumes
   Word Searches with Personal Computers
      Apple Macintosh Users
      PC-Windows Users
   Word Searches Online
   English-Language Searches
   Thesaurus Linguae Graecae (TLG) for the Advanced Student
   Conclusion

   Four Reference Tools
      A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early
      Christian Literature (BDAG)
      Theological Dictionary of the New Testament (TDNT)
      The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology
      (NIDNTT)
      Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament (EDNT)
   Special Tools
   Common Johannine Word Study Errors
      The Root Error
      The Anachronism Error
      The Prescriptive Error
      Johannine Variation
      Respecting the Johannine Context
   Conclusion

Part 3 Preaching and Teaching from the Fourth Gospel 183

11. The Problem of Horizons 187
   The Problem of Theological Education
   A New Hermeneutic
   Assessment
Contextualization
  Understanding the Original Context
  Grasping the Essential Message
  Bearing the Message Home
Conclusion

12. Preaching from John  199
  Stifling John’s Power
  Wearing Exegesis on Your Sleeve
  Pursuing Ancient Arguments
  Taking Texts Out of Context
  Holding John from the Outside
  A Preaching Cycle through John

13. Commentaries  208
  Technical Commentaries
  General Commentaries

Scripture Index  213
Subject Index  216
Author Index  221
Preface to the Second Edition

It has been gratifying to see the ongoing use of this small book since 1992 in colleges and seminaries. I originally envisioned the book as a simple primer to Johannine studies for beginning students or as a supplement to a class that was about to launch a study of the Fourth Gospel. Too often faculty members assume a far greater understanding of their discipline among their students than they should. This short primer explains matters at the most basic level. In my own courses students work through the first four chapters for a week or more before exegeting the text of John directly. And in each case they are better prepared to engage the technical and scholarly questions that inevitably arise from the Gospel. Therefore I have intentionally kept the book short, simple, and clear.

The book is divided into three sections for convenient classroom use. The first part (chaps. 1–4) discusses all of the introductory material needed for beginning study. The second part (chaps. 5–10) discusses exegetical strategies that generally students simply do not understand. They may hold a unit of the Gospel that they want to study (for a paper, a presentation, or a sermon), but they have no idea how to begin. They do not know what books to use or what online resources to trust. This section is their guide. In my own experience, no one ever explained what lexicon to buy or what TDNT stood for. Today students need to know how to use ATLA. I explain how to do it. The third part (chaps. 11–13) is practical. These chapters talk
about hermeneutics and how we may bring this wonderful Gospel to our modern world. I discuss hermeneutical pitfalls and strategies that may make this effort successful. The book ends (chap. 13) with a recommended list of commentaries. I have learned that when students head into the library to find commentaries to guide their study, they are overwhelmed. Old books of little use are still on the shelves; modern books that are too technical only frustrate them. If I am assigning a paper, I tell students to find the books listed here first (or I place this list on reserve in the library). This gives them far more confidence when they enter the world of biblical studies for the first time.

Another reason why guidance is needed is because interest in the Fourth Gospel has virtually exploded in scholarly circles in the last twenty years. The field is congested with studies. Our unofficial archivist for Johannine studies (Felix Just, SJ [http://catholic-resources.org /John]) records that since 1900 about one thousand books have been written on John, two hundred of these having been penned since 2000.¹ In fact, since 2000 thirty-nine commentaries have been published on the text of John, an average of about three commentaries every year. In the same period 151 specialized monographs have been released.

This means that Johannine research is a dynamic environment. The Gospel itself presents us with a tantalizing puzzle. Its literary form, cultural setting, and historical trustworthiness present just a few of the major questions that scholars have continued to explore over the decades.

This thorough revision will bring the discussion of the book up to date. However, in order to avoid writing a detailed monograph on Johannine research, this overview will necessarily be selective. The goal is for the student to see the major contours of the landscape, not to identify every plant species along the way. If, for example, we understand the importance of Qumran’s dualistic language (and, of course, know what the Dead Sea Scrolls are), then we have a head start in locating much of the Johannine language inside the best cultural context in first-century Judaism.

Gary M. Burge, 2013
Wheaton College and Graduate School

T
de Gospel of John unceasingly inspires and fascinates students and scholars. Each year hundreds of journal articles and books contribute to the accumulation of interpretive thought. At first, reading John’s message seems simple and straightforward, yet its simplicity is deceptive. The number of Johannine interpretive riddles is extensive. Even if we agree on the meaning of the text, we must explain how this literature fits into the history of the early church. Who wrote it? What community nurtured and venerated it? How does its theology compare with that of Paul and of the other Gospel writers, Matthew, Mark, and Luke?

While these issues will continue to arouse academic debate, the indisputable value of John’s Gospel, and the Johannine Epistles, to the devout Christian reader must not be obscured.1 Already in the second century Clement of Alexandria labeled John “the spiritual gospel.” Within its pages lie penetrating insights into the life and teaching of Jesus Christ. The lofty heights gained by the prologue (1:1–18) alone provide reason enough to symbolize this book, as the early church did, with an eagle. In fact, medieval Christians so venerated these verses

1. While this volume is devoted exclusively to a study of the Fourth Gospel, nevertheless, frequent reference will be made to the Epistles of John, which share much in common with the Fourth Gospel.
that they were read over baptized children and the seriously ill, and copies were placed in amulets worn around the neck to ward off evil.

John’s Gospel has endowed the theological formulations of major church councils and the devotional lives of thoughtful disciples. Where else can one find the magisterial clarity with which John describes God’s love for the world, the world’s incongruous unbelief, and Christ’s nurture of his flock as a witness of faith? The rich soil of Johannine literature stimulates the growth of clear declarations about Christ’s preexistence, divinity, and humanity. John stands shoulder to shoulder with Paul in importance and influence.

This volume is written with the beginning student in mind. New Testament scholars will at once recognize its breathtaking generalizations and omissions. Nevertheless, students who are opening the pages of the Fourth Gospel for the first time deserve a guide through the maze of academic discussion. Commentaries often presuppose and contribute to these debates, leaving the novice reader in despair. Some surveys are likewise so technical that they assist only the scholar or advanced student.

Unfortunately, those of us who are professors sometimes fail to appreciate how little of this scholarly background our students possess or will ever grasp. An outstanding student came to me one day and said, “Why doesn’t someone just show us how to do a basic literary study of a Gospel? Or how to use a Greek concordance? Or how to get the most from Kittel’s theological dictionary?” He confided that, after graduation from a major evangelical seminary, most of his sermon preparation comes from William Barclay’s commentaries for laypersons.

This book is my answer to that student. It should serve as a coach and confidant for the student just breaking in. Practical and written in an informal style, it guides to resources that primarily use the English text of the Bible for students who lack confidence in their Greek-language abilities. It also shows the advanced student who has mastered Greek what research tools and techniques are best. If students find that this little book opens new insights into the exciting world of the Fourth Gospel, I will be satisfied.

Preface to the First Edition

I have taught courses on the Johannine literature for a number of years and each time find myself compelled to give an “introduction and overview” to the scholarly landscape. This volume presents such a prologue, followed by a rigorous exegetical study of the texts themselves. Each chapter includes bibliographical references—to studies in John or to more-general reference works—so that serious students will be able to take their interests further.

Above all, I hope that this effort will uncomplicate matters for students as a map through the terrain. Maps are not always easy to read, but without them the peril of travel can be serious. Once the map is mastered, the joy of travel can be rich.

At this book’s second printing (1998), the editors at Baker Book House kindly invited me to make limited changes, particularly in areas where there have been important developments that would affect students and research. In the past six years biblical research using computers and the internet has changed dramatically. The book has thus been updated accordingly on this topic and a few others.

Wheaton College and Graduate School
Abbreviations

General

c. circa ibid. in the same source
cf. compare i.e. that is
chap(s.) chapter(s) Lat. Latin
e.g. for example n note
esp. especially p(p). page(s)
ET English translation repr. reprint
Gk. Greek vol(s.) volume(s)

Modern Versions

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<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Name</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ESV</td>
<td>English Standard Version</td>
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<tr>
<td>JB</td>
<td>Jerusalem Bible</td>
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<tr>
<td>NASB</td>
<td>New American Standard Bible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NIV</td>
<td>New International Version</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NRSV</td>
<td>New Revised Standard Version</td>
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<td>RSV</td>
<td>Revised Standard Version</td>
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Apostolic Fathers

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pol. Phil.</td>
<td>Polycarp, To the Philippians</td>
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Greek and Latin Works

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<th>Latin Author</th>
<th>Latin Title</th>
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<tr>
<td>Eusebius</td>
<td>Hist. eccl. Historia ecclesiastica (Ecclesiastical History)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Irenaeus</td>
<td>Haer. Adversus haereses (Against Heresies)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jerome</td>
<td>Vir. ill. De viris illustribus (On Illustrious Men)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tertullian</td>
<td>Praescr. De praelectione haereticorum (Prescription against Heretics)</td>
</tr>
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Gary M. Burge. Interpreting the Gospel of John

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## Abbreviations

**Secondary Sources**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AB</td>
<td>Anchor Bible</td>
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<tr>
<td>ABRL</td>
<td>Anchor Bible Reference Library</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABS</td>
<td>Approaches to Biblical Studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AnBib</td>
<td>Analecta biblica</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ATbr</td>
<td>Anglican Theological Review</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BECNT</td>
<td>Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BETL</td>
<td>Bibliotheca ephemeridum theologicarum lovaniensium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BNTC</td>
<td>Black’s New Testament Commentaries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BT</td>
<td>The Bible Translator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BTB</td>
<td>Biblical Theology Bulletin</td>
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<tr>
<td>BTNT</td>
<td>Biblical Theology of the New Testament</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CBQ</td>
<td>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CBQMS</td>
<td>Catholic Biblical Quarterly Monograph Series</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ConBNT</td>
<td>Coniectanea biblica: New Testament Series</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CovQ</td>
<td>Covenant Quarterly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CRINT</td>
<td>Compendia rerum iudaicarum ad Novum Testamentum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ECC</td>
<td>Eerdmans Critical Commentary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ExpTim</td>
<td>Expository Times</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FCI</td>
<td>Foundations of Contemporary Interpretation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FRLANT</td>
<td>Forschungen zur Religion und Literatur des Alten und Neuen Testaments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HTR</td>
<td>Harvard Theological Review</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IBC</td>
<td>Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IBR</td>
<td>IBR Bibliographies</td>
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<tr>
<td>ICC</td>
<td>International Critical Commentary</td>
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<tr>
<td>Int</td>
<td>Interpretation</td>
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<tr>
<td>IVPNTC</td>
<td>IVP New Testament Commentary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JBL</td>
<td>Journal of Biblical Literature</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JETS</td>
<td>Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JSNTSup</td>
<td>Journal for the Study of the New Testament: Supplement Series</td>
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<tr>
<td>JTS</td>
<td>Journal of Theological Studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LNTS</td>
<td>Library of New Testament Studies</td>
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<tr>
<td>MBPS</td>
<td>Mellen Biblical Press Series</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NCB</td>
<td>New Century Bible</td>
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<tr>
<td>NICNT</td>
<td>New International Commentary on the New Testament</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NIVAC</td>
<td>NIV Application Commentary</td>
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<tr>
<td>NTL</td>
<td>New Testament Library</td>
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<tr>
<td>NTOA</td>
<td>Novum Testamentum et Orbis Antiquus</td>
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<td>NTS</td>
<td>New Testament Studies</td>
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### Abbreviations

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<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
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<tr>
<td>NTSR</td>
<td>New Testament for Spiritual Reading</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NTTS</td>
<td>New Testament Tools and Studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PBTM</td>
<td>Paternoster Biblical and Theological Monographs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PC</td>
<td>Proclamation Commentaries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PTMS</td>
<td>Pittsburgh Theological Monograph Series</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SBLRBS</td>
<td>Society of Biblical Literature Resources for Biblical Study</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SF</td>
<td>Studia friburgensia</td>
</tr>
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<td>SNTSMS</td>
<td>Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SP</td>
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<td>SubBi</td>
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<td>TBR</td>
<td>Theological and Biblical Resources</td>
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<tr>
<td>TBT</td>
<td>The Bible Today</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TD</td>
<td>Theologische Dissertationen</td>
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<td>TUGAL</td>
<td>Texte und Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der Altchristlichen Literatur</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TynBu</td>
<td><em>Tyndale Bulletin</em></td>
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<td>WBC</td>
<td>Word Biblical Commentary</td>
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<tr>
<td>WUNT</td>
<td>Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>YPR</td>
<td>Yale Publications in Religion</td>
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</table>
I enjoy museums. How easy it is to wander through them wondering if you’ve missed some great exhibit hidden down a long hallway or barely understood what’s behind the display case. One of my favorites is the British Museum in London (on Great Russell Street). Here are housed some of the greatest treasures of the world, from the famed Rosetta Stone to the astounding Assyrian Lion Hunt frieze, which was removed from Ashurbanipal’s palace at Nineveh (in modern Iraq). One year I went to see the Elgin Marbles—sculpted marble reliefs taken from the fifth-century-BC Greek Parthenon from 1802 to 1812 by British adventurer Thomas Bruce, Lord Elgin. (This deft “borrowing” took place while Bruce was Britain’s ambassador to Greece and while Athens was under the heel of the Turkish Ottomans.) They are magnificent (and I might add that the Greeks would like them returned). Just to look at their beauty is alone worth a visit.

But that year I happened on a unique opportunity. A specialist in ancient Greek history was giving a tour. He worked at the museum, was clearly a scholar, and he was very skilled at taking groups through the exhibit. I joined his small entourage of followers and discovered something that I didn’t want to admit. For all these years, I really didn’t
know what I was looking at when I saw these priceless reliefs. But now, here was a scholar who could provide background and context to these walls of ancient art. And this information was inaccessible to the average person.

This is true of any academic discipline that we might explore for the first time. Simply having some background and context for it can make all the difference in our understanding. So I’ve learned my lesson. This year I visited the wonderful Getty Villa in Malibu, California. J. Paul Getty inherited millions of oil dollars by the time he was nineteen, and he spent a great deal of his life collecting Roman and Greek artifacts. About seventy-five years ago he decided to have architects and archaeologists build a reconstruction of a first-century Roman villa (modeled on one found at Herculaneum) on hills overlooking the Pacific so that he might display his collection of forty-four thousand objects. Today visiting the villa is free, and it has become an internationally recognized center for the study of classical civilization. While there, you’re free to wander about the villa and its gardens, or you can take a tour. I always take the tours.

Background and context—this is precisely what we need when we examine a piece of literature from the ancient world. And this is no less true when we study the Fourth Gospel. This is an ancient document, some two thousand years old. It comes to us in an ancient language, in some places its manuscript has seen alternations that show up in the many papyrus copies that we possess, and it describes events and scenes that are truly foreign to us. For generations, scholars have worked to interpret this Gospel—there is an entire “history of research” on it—and we have made solid progress in deciphering many of its mysteries.

The first task here is to establish some background and context for the Gospel of John. We’ll begin with a discussion of the scholarly conversations that have followed this Gospel (chap. 1). Then follows an inquiry about its authorship and possible origins among the followers of Jesus (chap. 2). Next comes an analysis of its literary forms so that we might understand how it is organized and how its stories interact with each other (chap. 3). Finally, we’ll explore some of its stylistic features (chap. 4) so that our reading of it will be more sophisticated and insightful. In the end, we want to be accurate and
thoughtful interpreters of this beautiful Gospel—not unlike a visitor to the British Museum who sees the Elgin Marbles for the first time. If we don’t understand the meaning of a centaur, it will be hard to appreciate why one appeared on the walls of the Parthenon. Similarly, if we don’t understand the contextual nuances of the Gospel of John, much of its more refined meanings will be lost to us.
History of Interpretation

My first exposure to Johannine studies came in the autumn of 1972 at the American University of Beirut in Lebanon. As an undergraduate exchange student, I was taking a course on the Gospels with a French Jesuit scholar. At one point he remarked that the New Testament nowhere gives evidence that Jesus went to Samaria. I eagerly offered the story of the Samaritan woman in John 4, whereupon he said, “Ah, yes, but that account appears in the Fourth Gospel, and as everyone knows, John is not historically trustworthy.” Confronted by what seemed an irrefutable scholarly argument, I retreated.

Today those same arguments are routinely put forward in colleges and seminaries. For example, in 1996 Maurice Casey published *Is John’s Gospel True?* and asserted the same thing, that the Fourth Gospel holds virtually no historical information that can contribute to a “life of Christ.” This point of view is common and appears frequently in scholarly circles.

1. “Johannine” is scholarly shorthand for “things related to John.” So, for example, we may refer to the “Johannine Christology” or a “Johannine perspective.” Likewise, we employ “Matthean,” “Markan,” and “Lukan” for the other Gospels.
When scholars reconstruct the life of Jesus, they constantly measure the quality of their sources. Is the Fourth Gospel a reliable source for the life of Jesus? On the one hand, we could answer with a statement of faith (“It’s in the Scriptures, isn’t it?”), but such confession means little in the wider arenas of academic discussion, where faith has limited weight. On the other hand, knowing what has been said about this Gospel—the history of its interpretation—equips us to address these academic challenges head on. Had I done so in 1972, I would have learned that my professor was completely out of step with current Johannine scholarship.

A considerable body of New Testament literature is traditionally attributed to John: a Gospel, three letters, and the book of Revelation. A host of noncanonical writings also lays claim to his name. The legend-filled Acts of John provides a fictional biography of the apostle, written in the early third century. The Syriac History of John portrays the apostle as a magic-working evangelist. Gnostic sources such as the Gospel of Philip quote fragments of Johannine-style sayings, while others provide accounts of John’s contact with Jesus, missions, and martyrdom. This apocryphal literature may be set aside with ease; the biblical Johannine material has aroused more debate.

The Early Period

In the early church the Fourth Gospel held the highest place of honor. Since it was thought to originate with the “Beloved Disciple,” who was one of the closest to Jesus, it was esteemed to be the most valuable Gospel. Further, John’s Gospel offered a depth of insight unparalleled in the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke).

3. The terms “gnostic” and “gnosticism” (from the Gk. gnōsis, “knowledge”) refer to a complex religious movement that, in its Christian form, came into clear prominence by the second century. Sects quickly formed around prominent leaders whose teaching directly opposed that of the orthodox church.


5. The term “Synoptic” (from Gk. syn + opsis, “a viewing together”) is applied to Matthew, Mark, and Luke because they narrate a large amount of the same material,
Unfortunately, the heretics loved this Gospel as well. A second-century gnostic writing from Egypt, the *Gospel of Truth*, shows extensive Johannine parallels. The first commentary on John’s Gospel of which we are aware was written by Heracleon (c. 170–80), the most famous disciple of Valentinus, who founded the Valentinian gnostic sect. In fact, all of the earliest commentaries on John were gnostic. The charismatic leader Montanus even went so far as to claim to be the promised Paraclete or Comforter described in John 14–16! For many years, scholars believed that the Fourth Gospel was only cautiously received by orthodox leaders because of this gnostic interest. Some have argued that many leaders openly opposed it. But today this view has been successfully challenged by Charles Hill in two important recent monographs. From the mid-second century right through the third century, compelling evidence shows that the Fourth Gospel was known and used as a part of the church’s authoritative roster of Gospels.

Irenaeus (c. 175) and some other early church leaders saw that John’s incarnational theology could be used to devise the sort of heresies being spawned in gnostic circles. When Arians depicted Jesus as a created being who was fully subordinate to the Father, and therefore much like humans, Athanasius and the Council of Nicaea (325) looked to the Fourth Gospel’s doctrine of Christ (or Christology) as an uncompromising affirmation of Jesus’s divinity.
This high respect continued through medieval Christendom. From Augustine (354–430) to Aquinas (1224–74) and beyond, John provided the portrait of a Jesus who directly revealed the Father. Mysticism and sacramentalism likewise found in John the language and symbolic images that they enjoyed. Commentaries from this period abound.

All of this came to an abrupt end during the Enlightenment of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In this period all of the Gospels came under skeptical scrutiny as European universities rejected supernatural religion. In 1778 the lecture notes of the German scholar Hermann Samuel Reimarus (1694–1768) were published. These notes denied Jesus’s claim to messiahship, argued that the Gospels were later fabrications, and urged the implausibility of the resurrection. Scholars launched a brave quest to find the real Jesus of history, a rationalistic history dictated by Enlightenment standards.

Three questions were continually at issue for over 150 years after Reimarus:

1. Is the supernatural admissible as genuine history?
2. What are the relative merits of the Gospels?
3. What is the essence of Jesus’s message?

This third question was laden with nuances. Did Jesus preach about an ultimate crisis or catastrophe for Judaism and the world, with himself at the center (eschatology)? Did Jesus anticipate, understand, and interpret his own death? Indeed, did Jesus even claim to be the Son of God or the Messiah?

John’s Gospel again enjoyed some favor among those who rejected orthodoxy because it contained fewer miracles and reported that Jesus gave lengthy, Socratic-like discourses. Karl Hase (1800–1890) argued that the Johannine miracle stories seemed more authentic and less prone to embellishment. Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834) embraced John fully in lectures given in 1832 and published in 1864. John is an eyewitness, Schleiermacher maintained, who gives us a Jesus of depth and substance. John offered something that resonated in the nineteenth-century liberal soul. John was sublime and offered a religious feeling that fit the era well.
But critical objections were soon to follow. In 1835 David Friedrich Strauss (1808–74) forced the Johannine question in his influential *The Life of Christ*. Strauss believed that each Gospel writer promoted a preconceived theological portrait of Jesus, rendering the Gospel presentations unhistorical. He believed this to be especially true of John. This Gospel was inferior because it served a literary schema and was influenced by second-century dogmas. Strauss pointed to John’s baptismal narrative (1:29–34), the calling of the first disciples (1:35–51), and especially the absence of any mention of Jesus’s “Gethsemane struggle” to show that the Fourth Gospel was the conscious result of “devotional, but unhistorical embellishment.”

He even showed how the language of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel was John’s own language by comparing it with the Johannine Epistles! Strauss compelled New Testament scholars to choose between John and the Synoptics on the grounds that their differences were utterly irreconcilable.

At Germany’s Tübingen University Strauss had studied with Ferdinand Christian Baur (1792–1860). It was Baur who propelled Strauss into biblical criticism, and it was Baur who sealed the fate of John among scholars for years to come. Baur and what came to be known as the Tübingen school drew deeply from the well of Hegelian philosophy.

Georg Hegel (1770–1831) asserted that the dialectic of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis fueled all of history. In this process, major movements (thesis) are often met with opposition (antithesis), and their conflict eventually results in a synthesis. For better or worse, Baur applied this sweeping framework to early Christianity. Judaism and Hellenism had intermingled to produce Christianity. Baur went to exaggerated lengths to emphasize how Jewish elements in the


9. See Stephen C. Neill, *The Interpretation of the New Testament, 1861–1986*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 20–29. Baur was viewed as a colossal scholar by his German peers. He was at his desk at four o’clock every morning. During his lifetime his published works amounted to ten thousand pages. After his death another six thousand pages were published from lectures and notes. This is the same as writing a four-hundred-page book every year for forty years!
church (symbolized by Peter) opposed Greek interests (symbolized by Paul), resulting in a consensus—what he called “early Catholicism” (which referred to a uniform, organized Christian order). He elaborately organized the New Testament documents around this process: Romans, 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians, and Galatians were Paul’s Gentile Christian salvos; Matthew and the book of Revelation were the Jewish Christian responses; Acts and the Pastoral Epistles were documents of reconciliation and consensus.

What about the Fourth Gospel? Baur believed that John issued from a Greek community (thus its Hellenistic accent) that had been permeated by Jewish interests. For Baur, John was a later writing, dated possibly 150–70, and represented the reconciliation of early Christianity with its diversity. It reflected neither the world of the apostles nor the Palestinian Judaism of Jesus’s day.

For the balance of the nineteenth century, criticism of the Fourth Gospel along the lines of Strauss and Baur continued unabated. Refinements to the thesis surfaced, but the broad contours remained. Many objected, especially outside of Germany. At Trinity College of Cambridge University J. B. Lightfoot (1828–89) dismantled Baur’s reconstruction of early Christian history through an exhaustive study of the church fathers.\(^{10}\) His colleague B. F. Westcott (1825–1901), in an 1882 commentary, defended the Gospel’s apostolic origins.\(^{11}\) In Germany Adolf Schlatter (1852–1938) dissented from Baur in \textit{Die Sprache und Heimat des vierten Evangelisten} (The language and province of the Fourth Evangelist) (1902) and \textit{Der Evangelist Johannes: Wie er spricht, denkt, und glaubt} (The Fourth Evangelist: His speech, thought, and belief) (1930). Nevertheless, for many, the Fourth Gospel never survived the nineteenth century as a trustworthy source for the life of Jesus.

Two important conclusions from that period still have influence. First, the Synoptics, rather than John, are typically viewed as the primary evidence for the life of Jesus. John, it is argued, is committed to

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writing a theological portrait, not a true historical narrative—theology, not history. The Fourth Gospel presents an “idea” of Jesus (a “myth,” Strauss called it) and cannot be seen as a historical account. Second, the cultural setting of John is Hellenistic rather than Jewish, as it was penned by a second-century Christian community far removed from the Jesus of ancient Judea. It is, quite simply, an attempt to express the gospel in the terms of Greek philosophy.

In 1905 William Sanday of Oxford University chronicled this severe and skeptical trend in biblical studies in his book *The Criticism of the Fourth Gospel.* Sanday uncovered serious prejudice against John and summed up the period as “an uncompromising rejection” of the Fourth Gospel. He reported that the trend among scholars was to conceive of John as an intermediate step between Paul and gnosticism, a purer expression of Paul’s gospel, freed from any link to Judaism and the historical events in the life and death of Jesus.

**The Jewish Background of John**

Sometimes a persistent academic thesis is broadsided from an utterly unexpected direction. In 1924 Israel Abrahams, a rabbinics scholar at Cambridge and an Orthodox Jew, addressed stunning news to the university’s theological society: “To us Jews, the Fourth Gospel is the most Jewish of the four!”

Even a cursory reading of John reveals what Abrahams saw clearly. Doesn’t the Gospel contain numerous allusions to the Old Testament? Don’t Semitic hints abound? Abrahams argued that when you write to a community that may not understand your allusions, these allusions need to be explained. (This happens every time someone in their twenties uses a metaphor from a movie that no one over fifty has seen.) However, when author and audience share a broad range of understood metaphors, the allusions may take on a subtlety and sophistication that is surprising. John is filled, Abrahams contended, with subtle allusions to the Old Testament and Jewish tradition. In John 2:6, for example,

12. This book published Sanday’s 1904 Morse Foundation lectures, delivered at Union Theological Seminary in New York.
John refers to “stone” water pots for Jesus’s Cana miracle. Only a Jew who understood ritual purity would appreciate such a detail.

But if Abrahams was right, the consequences for Baur and the Tübingen thesis are enormous. John’s Gospel was no longer the product of the second-century Greek Christian church. Its date and setting must be Jewish and much earlier.

Lightfoot and Schlatter had suggested that John’s most cogent interpretation develops through rabbinic literature and the Old Testament. John uses numerous references to the Old Testament, many of which are dissimilar to, say, Matthew’s citations. Further, these Old Testament allusions seem to assume that readers know the references (compare John 10 with Ezek. 34, and John 3:14 with Num. 21:9). Similarly, the discourses of Jesus presuppose knowledge of the theological symbolism behind the Jewish festivals (Passover [John 6:25–59]; Tabernacles [John 7]; Dedication or Hanukkah [John 10:22–39]). In John 5:31–47 Jesus employs rabbinic arguments in debating opponents. John 6:26–59 is a midrash (or Jewish commentary) on the “bread from heaven” promised in Exodus 16:4, while John 10:34–38 is a midrash on Psalm 82:6.

This is hardly the sort of literature one would expect from a Greek community. But detractors who disagreed with these trends pushed back. They argued that Jews simply didn’t write using the Johannine language of dualism (e.g., “light/darkness,” “above/below”) and abstraction (e.g., “truth,” “faith,” “spirit”). And besides, this Johannine community might have been living in a Jewish world that was deeply hellenized. Alexandria and Ephesus were frequent suggestions.

But this debate shifted again in the 1940s with a discovery that is still being interpreted today. In the early months of 1947 an Arab shepherd discovered pottery jars in a desolate ruin, Qumran, northwest of the Dead Sea. The jars held ancient scrolls, and by March of that year


Gary M. Burge. Interpreting the Gospel of John

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many of them were in the hands of Kando, a Christian antiquities dealer in Bethlehem (in whose shop visitors can still see one of the original jars). Soon scholars were poring over them, and quickly the news spread: here we had a library or collection of religious writings penned by Jews living in the desert who hid these scrolls away before the Roman war of AD 70. Since the discovery, eleven caves and over eight hundred manuscripts have been found in varying stages of decay.\textsuperscript{16}

The impact on Johannine studies was immediate and decisive because here, at Qumran, we had a community of Jews who were using dualistic language similar to that found in John. By the mid-1950s New Testament scholars began to speculate that the cultural setting of Qumran was closer to the Johannine world than the proposed Hellenistic world so often offered to explain John’s Gospel.

Then, more voices began to point to other evidences that perhaps John is deeply embedded in Jewish culture.

In 1922 C. F. Burney of Oxford University had advanced the thesis that not only was John influenced by Semitic concepts, but also the text had originally been written in Aramaic (a Semitic language similar to Hebrew).\textsuperscript{17} Its language, argued Burney, betrays an Aramaic original that had been translated into Greek. This explains the simple, often wooden, Greek usage. Similarly, in 1946 Matthew Black of St. Andrews University suggested that the Fourth Gospel’s language is evidence of an author writing in Greek whose native tongue is Aramaic.\textsuperscript{18}

John also seems to intimately understand the customs, culture, and land of first-century Palestine. The geography of the land is accurately set out, as are Jewish festivals. John even describes incidental details of the temple (e.g., the treasury of the temple [8:20]), although the temple structure was destroyed by the Romans in AD 70. Note how in 4:4–26 he casually describes Samaria and its outlook. In 5:1–2 he mentions the five-porch Pool of Bethesda. For a long time this reference was used to discredit John’s Gospel because no such pool had

\textsuperscript{16} For the complete story of the scrolls, see James C. VanderKam, \textit{The Dead Sea Scrolls Today}, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010).


been found. But then it was. Near the Church of Saint Anne in Jerusalem (along the famed Via Dolorosa) archaeologists in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries continued to unearth the remains of a large double-pool system, and today scholars are convinced that its “double porch” configuration matches John’s description. John also refers to another pool, called “Siloam” (9:7). In 2004 the Siloam pool was discovered, and this confirmed John’s treatment in his Gospel. Simply put, confidence in John’s geographical descriptions was increasing, thanks to new discoveries.

Finally, Greek papyrus fragments have come to light, providing very early portions of the New Testament. In fact, we possess seventeen papyrus fragments of John, more than have been found for any other New Testament book. An Egyptian fragment (20) of about five verses from John 18 was discovered in 1920 and published in 1935. This piece of papyrus, measuring 3.5 inches by 2.3 inches, is the oldest New Testament fragment so far uncovered and usually is dated to 125. Allowing time for its circulation throughout the church as far as Egypt pushes the date of John into the first century and provides a latest possible date for the autograph of perhaps AD 80 to 95.

Despite this growing scholarly conversation, no consensus was reached. Other scholars were pursuing different avenues of investigation, still convinced that John was a by-product of pagan mysticism and Hellenistic gnosticism. In 1903 Alfred Loisy (1857–1940) published a commentary along these lines. At Tübingen University


21. Papyrus is a reed that grows in the Egyptian wetlands of the Nile Delta. It was flattened, pressed, woven, and smoothed into a “parchment” for writing.


Gary M. Burge. Interpreting the Gospel of John

researchers sought to discover a “history of religions” that defined how one faith evolved into newer forms. Scholars such as Richard Reitzenstein (1861–1931) popularized a theory that Christianity grew from Hellenistic mystery religions and the writings of the Mandeans, then recently discovered. A myth of a “descending redeemer” had been popular in the Near East; John integrated Jesus into its drama. It was only left for Rudolf Bultmann (1884–1972), the great Marburg professor, to make compelling use of these sources in his magisterial commentary on John in 1941 (ET, 1971). Bultmann’s influence on Johannine studies is still significant. In 1980 (ET, 1984) Ernst Haenchen relied on Bultmann’s outlook in his commentary on John.

For some scholars in the mid-twentieth century the question of John’s Jewish roots remained unanswered. But it is an essential question as we seek the Gospel’s date and origin. A Jewish background moves the Fourth Gospel away from Hellenistic religion and back into the world of first-century Judaism. This may have been a Judaism significantly influenced by Hellenistic thinking. It was, nevertheless, the world of Jesus and his apostles.

**Historical Traditions in John**

John’s cultural setting has been a vexing issue throughout the twentieth century, but possibly more important are other questions: Did John’s

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24. Richard Reitzenstein, *Die hellenistischen Mysterienreligionen: Ihre Grundgedanken und Wirkungen* (Leipzig: Teubner, 1910); ET, *Hellenistic Mystery Religions: Their Basic Ideas and Significance*, trans. John E. Steely; PTMS 15 (Pittsburg: Pickwick, 1978). The Mandeans (or Mandaeans) are a people of rural Iraq and Iran who claim that John the Baptist was the Messiah and are highly critical of orthodox Christianity. This sect is the only form of ancient gnosticism that survives.


account of the life of Jesus contain any historical data? If so, what was the relation of this data to the Synoptic Gospels?

Scholars had determined that the accounts of Matthew, Mark, and Luke were dependent on one another. This resulted in a complex literary puzzle that even today attracts considerable attention. At the turn of the century most assumed that since John was the last Gospel written, its author knew and used the Synoptics. Implicit in this hypothesis was the rule that when a story in John paralleled, say, Mark, the account was deemed trustworthy. When it diverged from the Synoptics, its historical value plummeted.

We need to look closely at this subject to gain some perspective of its importance. In the late nineteenth century B. F. Westcott estimated that 93 percent of Mark could be found hidden in Matthew and Luke. But John was different. Only 8 percent of John’s content paralleled the Synoptics; 92 percent was unique to the Johanne story. For instance, the cleansing of the temple is found in John 2:14–22; Matthew 21:12–13; Mark 11:15–17; Luke 19:45–46. The feeding of the five thousand (John 6:1–14) appears in all four. But major Johanne accounts such as the dialogue with Nicodemus (3:1–21), the dialogue with the Samaritan woman (4:4–26), the raising of Lazarus (11:1–44), and Jesus’s “upper room” discourses (13:31–16:33) are absent from the Synoptics. Does this mean that John invented this material? And when we look closely at the parallel material, discrepancies appear. John records the cleansing of the temple at the beginning of Jesus’s ministry, whereas the Synoptics put it at the end. Even the feeding miracle is ended in John with a lengthy monologue about Jesus as the “bread of life” (6:25–59). When John used the Synoptics, did he freely embellish their narratives? If this was his tendency, then stories found only in John, such as Jesus’s private discussion with Pilate (18:28–19:16), also must fall by the wayside.


Gary M. Burge. Interpreting the Gospel of John

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The thesis deserves restating: if John knew and used the Synoptics, then his divergences make him suspect. Such was the view of John until 1938, when Percival Gardner-Smith wrote a critique of the evidence that John even knew about the Synoptics. Gardner-Smith demonstrated the fragility of the arguments for dependency, and his criticisms have not been convincingly refuted. Indeed, scholars began to ask whether John’s accounts stemmed from independent traditions that predated the Synoptics. In 1953 C. H. Dodd concluded his book *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* with an appendix rejecting the “symbolic” use of place names in John. He concluded that the Gospel might contain original traditional narratives associated with southern Palestine. Place names such as “Bethsaida” are indeed geographical locations. He wrote, “The *prima facie* impression is that John is, in large measure at any rate, working independently of other written gospels.”

In 1963 C. H. Dodd offered a full-fledged study, boldly entitling it *Historical Tradition in the Fourth Gospel*. In this volume, which was a watershed in Johannine studies, Dodd concluded, “Behind the Fourth Gospel lies an ancient tradition independent of the other gospels, and meriting serious consideration as a contribution to our knowledge of the historical facts concerning Jesus Christ.” Dodd began with a thorough study of the Passion Narrative and concluded that, rather than being a reshuffling of the Synoptics, John’s story was ancient, Jewish, possibly dated before AD 70, and “in some respects seems to be better informed than the tradition behind the Synoptics.”

It goes without saying that scholars have not reached unanimity on this subject either. In 1978 C. K. Barrett published the second edition of his 1955 commentary, still defending—even defensively—his


view that John was familiar with Mark (and possibly even Luke) and had minimal historical value.  

33. R. H. Lightfoot (1883–1953), in his commentary published in 1956, claimed that John knew all three Synoptic Gospels. But these views are not winning the day. Writers are now inclined to say that John records ancient traditions from the same wellspring as that of the Synoptics. Occasionally, he shares these primitive traditions with the Synoptics, but he does not employ the Synoptics themselves.  

35. As we will see below, some scholars are even convinced that John presupposes his readers to have read a Gospel like Mark, but that is quite a different matter from saying that John is supplementing or commenting on a prior Gospel.

The importance of this shift cannot be missed. As Gardner-Smith wrote in 1938, “If in the Fourth Gospel we have a survival of the type of first century Christianity which owed nothing to synoptic developments, and which originated in quite a different intellectual atmosphere, its historical value may be very great indeed.”  

Indeed, impressive new light has been shed on the Fourth Gospel, making it an independent, authoritative witness to the traditions about Jesus on a par with any historical claims found in the Synoptics.

The New Look on the Fourth Gospel

Many writers have chronicled these developments, but none so famous as John A. T. Robinson (1919–83) of Trinity College, Cambridge. In 1957 Robinson announced a new look on the Fourth Gospel in a paper read at Oxford University. In it he described an old look on John that was under siege. The old look consisted of five major propositions:


1. John is dependent on sources, in particular the Synoptics.
2. John’s background is different from that of its subjects. The author was a Greek, writing with significant gnostic influence.
3. John is not a serious witness to the Jesus of history.
4. John shows evidence of a late first-century theological development.
5. The author of the Fourth Gospel is not the apostle John or even an eyewitness.

Robinson went on to outline the demise of these views, illustrating how all of them interlock. Not only does the new look overturn these propositions, but also it affirms a genuine connection between the Fourth Evangelist and historical traditions about Jesus. Those embracing the new look must debate questions about date, cultural background, and authorship within the locale of early first-century Jewish Christianity. In sum, the new look earnestly affirms the value of the Johannine tradition. The presumption no longer holds that John fails to merit the historical trustworthiness of its Synoptic peers.

The new look’s insistence on John’s independence from the Synoptics and on John’s Jewish orientation has been well received. But the proposal that John offers genuine history has resulted from a more realistic appraisal of all four Gospels. Each evangelist presents theology along with history and “interprets” Jesus for readers. For example, Luke shapes the portrait of Jesus in unique ways (such as his emphasis on Jesus praying), as does John (such as his emphasis on Jesus’s discourses). But this in no way disparages the historical value of Luke or any other canonical Gospel.

In the 1970s Robinson’s interest in John led him to reread Dodd’s *Historical Tradition in the Fourth Gospel*. He was forced to rethink the date not of John only, but of the entire New Testament, publishing *Redating the New Testament* in 1976. He even suggested that John could have been penned during the 60s. Why? John is conspicuously silent about the doom of Jerusalem, which the Romans...
razed in AD 70, and he presupposes a pre-70 outlook (see 2:19–20; 11:47–52). John employs details of the city as if it were still standing (see 5:2). Added to this is the widespread evidence, defended also by Dodd, that John is aware of the “psychological divisions of Palestine before the war.” This “would be ‘barely intelligible’ outside a purely Jewish context in the earliest period.”38 Robinson poured the last years of his life into Johannine scholarship. His final volume, The Priority of John (1985), is a massive compilation of his conservative, unconventional views. This exhaustive defense of John’s antiquity, authority, and Jewish orientation argues what its title suggests. It epitomized the new look that Robinson had signaled thirty years earlier.39

I quickly add that not all scholars have agreed with these results. The Priority of John has been given scant attention in those academic circles that remain convinced that John is a significantly late Gospel whose heritage is Hellenistic.40

The Significance of the New Look

The issues that I have been discussing are important because they directly affect the way we value and interpret the Gospel of John. We are forced to make decisions. On the one hand, if we conclude that the cultural background is Hellenistic, as do Bultmann, Haenchen, and, to a degree, Barrett, the miracle at Cana whereby Jesus turns water into wine may reflect a Christianizing of the Greek Dionysus myth. On the other hand, if it arises from early Palestinian Judaism, we need to look to Old Testament and Jewish antecedents, as do Raymond Brown, Leon Morris, George R. Beasley-Murray, Urban von Wahlde, and Craig Keener.

40. See, for example, Gerard S. Sloyan, What Are They Saying about John?, rev. ed. (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2006).
The same is true for the value of the Johannine traditions. It is not enough to accept merely those accounts that parallel the Synoptics. As Stephen Smalley urges, “We can now reckon seriously with the possibility that the Fourth Gospel, including John’s special material, is grounded in historical tradition when it departs from the synoptics as well as when it overlaps them.”

Hence, exclusively Johannine stories, such as those involving Nicodemus, the Samaritan woman, and Lazarus, must no longer be viewed as fictional. They bear important historical worth.

Sometimes it is helpful to illustrate the conscious choice before us. The new look urges that we view John’s Gospel as Jewish and historically reliable. This view has not always carried the day and is vigorously disputed, but it has many credible adherents, whose views are not to be dismissed lightly and whose numbers are growing steadily.

In the illustration, note the significant connections. The old look on John finds its sources either within the Synoptic tradition directly (perhaps John was using Mark) or within Hellenism, where Greek stories were adapted for Christian use. The new look points either to sources shared with the Synoptic tradition or to authentic independent

traditions stemming from Jesus himself (called the “Jesus Tradition”). For example, one box might represent the story of the feeding of the five thousand used by both Mark and John. Another box might represent the story of Nicodemus, a narrative unused by Mark but included in John. The issue is this: When John tells a “Synoptic story,” is he using one of the Synoptic Gospels, or is he reaching back to an earlier stratum? And when he is using a “non-Synoptic” story, is his treatment of this story reliable? To be sure, this simplifies matters considerably. One may find, without difficulty, scholars who defend sources for John that come from a variety of places.

Current Trends

Every academic discipline experiences growth and development. And today this is true for the study of the Fourth Gospel. For example, the premier academic community for biblical scholars is the Society of Biblical Literature (SBL). At the SBL’s annual meeting, participants attend “sections,” or subdivisions, devoted to specialties within the various disciplines. For decades, the Johannine Literature section was the leading venue for current trends. However, about ten years ago (2002), a new generation of scholars launched a new section called “John, Jesus, and History,” and its popularity has been enormous. Here were Johannine scholars (before large audiences) testing the historical value of narratives and sayings in the Gospel of John. It marked a trend. Old assumptions about this Gospel were being re-evaluated, and new work was underway.

Three important Johannine scholars, Tom Thatcher, Felix Just, and Paul Anderson, have been helping us see the way forward. Together they published an assessment of where we have been and where we are going from papers given within the section: John, Jesus, and History, volume 1, Critical Appraisals of Critical Views (2007). Additional volumes appeared in 2008 and 2011. Also in 2007 Tom Thatcher


(1) One trend we have already seen. The discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls sparked a renewed interest in the Jewish background of the Fourth Gospel. But this presupposes a sophisticated understanding of what we mean by “Judaism.” In the first century Hellenistic thinking permeated much of the Jewish worldview. Consider, for instance, that the Gospels themselves were written in Greek. Jesus and his followers were living in a dual-culture world in which Judaism and Hellenism dwelled closely together. Some Jewish leaders in this era even sent their children to be educated in Rome. Nevertheless, these developments in Johannine studies have now rejected the trend that sees Greek mythological stories as the backdrop for this Gospel. And they question whether the chief conceptual framework for the Gospel is Hellenistic. Anderson writes, “As a result, nearly all interpretations of John over the past three or four decades have interpreted John against a pervasively Jewish backdrop.” Craig Keener’s massive two-volume commentary, published in 2003, is a testimony to this new interest.

(2) The second area of development has to do with historical location. If it is true that we may locate the Fourth Gospel in a Jewish context—and considering that this context experienced sharp disruption in the Jewish war of AD 70—scholars have expressed genuine openness to an early setting for this Gospel. Perhaps many of its stories stem from a period before this war when Judea was devastated. In other words, the achievements of the new look have held. The fact that John has an intentionally theological portrait of Jesus does not invalidate the possibility that John is also historically reliable. John provides more contextual detail (names, places, cultural references) than do any of the Synoptics. It is John, for example, who says that the Baptist was working at “Bethany beyond the Jordan” (1:28) and later at “Aenon near Salim” (3:23). John knows of the rivalry between

the Samaritan and Jewish temples (4:20). He even names the great purification pools of Jerusalem (5:7; 9:2). John’s situational awareness is significant and suggests that he is alert to historical details and interested in getting them right.

For over 150 years Gospel scholars have debated the historical merits of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Various eras have pursued so-called quests that today are even assigned numbers. (We’re on the Third Quest today.) Now Johannine scholars want to join the conversation. If a paradigm shift is happening, Johannine scholars wish to see the Johannine Jesus contribute to the developing portrait of Jesus. Is this a Fourth Quest? Some would like to think so, but the jury is still out. Nevertheless, no scholar working to reconstruct the profile of Jesus today can dismiss the Fourth Gospel. To do so is to be out of touch with the current conversation.

(3) A compelling interest among many Johannine scholars today is the quest to unravel the literary structure of the Fourth Gospel and its sources. The Gospel has left us some evidence showing traces of its own history. For instance, 2:11 and 4:54 record a numbered sequence for the signs performed by Jesus, but these numbers do not always seem consistent. Throughout the first half of the Gospel, discourses seem related to these signs according to a pattern. Evidence further suggests that John’s Gospel is irregularly stitched together, sometimes interrupting the flow of narrative. Consider Jesus’s movements as he bounces between Galilee and Judea in chapters 3–7.

In the 1970s Robert Fortna took the lead in seeking the literary seams in the Gospel, thus distinguishing John’s sources. And today virtually every study of John has expanded or developed what Fortna began. I will devote chapter 3 to the suggestions of this important area of research. But we must be careful to ask critical questions about the presuppositions of this work. There is room for critical evaluation. For


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example, this so-called source criticism seeks to gather evidences of trustworthy historical data that lie behind the text. The conclusion so far has been that the source for narratives of Jesus’s signs is the more ancient and hence the more reliable. Yet, such a view must deal with a serious problem. What are we to make of Jesus’s lengthy teachings (called “discourses”)? If sign narratives and discourses arise from separate sources, they are intricately interwoven, and their language is quite uniform. It may not be possible to parse out the sources of this Gospel as some think.

Raymond Brown has done similar work. He believes that we can detect multiple layers of tradition in John’s Gospel, each from a separate point in the history of the book’s composition. Although not many have rushed to endorse these reconstructions, a near consensus seems at hand that a community of Christians did collaborate in the development and preservation of the Johannine traditions. Debate continues about the degree to which this community preserved, shaped, and reinvented traditional materials. But scholars basically agree: John’s Gospel reflects its own literary history. A process led to the publication of the Gospel, and it remains to be seen how confident we can be in reconstructing that process.

(4) If there was a “Johannine history” or process within which the Fourth Gospel evolved, there is also an interest today in reconstructing the social realities presupposed by the Gospel. For a long time scholars have tried to see the Gospels as windows into the life and times of the communities that wrote them. It is no different from studying music or films that might come from one decade. We might be able to reconstruct the subjects that concerned those who lived in that era.

This is an interdisciplinary effort that involves sociology, history, exegesis, and even anthropology. And it points to a fascination in the late twentieth century with the diversity and complexity of social organizations. For instance, Bruce Malina examines life and values in the New Testament world by employing the categories of cultural

And today scholars sift the Gospels for signs of community values and concern. For instance, note that John’s Gospel has many unique stories devoted to the identity and limitations of John the Baptist (1:19–42; 3:22–4:6; 10:40–41). Does this mean that the community that followed John was having contact with followers of John the Baptist?

Another theme that draws interest is John’s treatment of “the Jews.” This word “Jew” (Gk. Ioudaioi) occurs seventy-one times in John’s Gospel. For comparison, Luke and Matthew each use the word five times. And within this Gospel we encounter some of the harshest language toward “the Jews” found anywhere in the New Testament. Oddly, the opponents of Jesus are “the Jews,” and yet Jesus himself was Jewish. The chief theory originally belonged to J. Louis Martyn, whose book *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel* (1968) suggested that a breach between the followers of John and the Jewish community came around AD 90 with a creed called “curse of the heretics” (*birkat ha-minim*). John’s community had been expelled, and so the story of the expelled man in John 9 is less an episode about Jesus than it is a window into what these early Christians experienced.

Scholarship has since then questioned the validity of using the *birkat ha-minim*. But the notion of reconstructing the “Johannine community” persists today. Scholars believe that they can identify this community’s distinctive vocabulary, emphases, and even its history from within the pages of the Fourth Gospel.

One problem with studying the New Testament communities in this manner is that little direct evidence tells us about the character of early Christian life. The only access possible is to view the Gospels as windows, not on the life of Jesus but rather on the communities that produced them. And such reconstructions are extremely hypothetical. Scholars have tried to reconstruct the “community of Matthew” (the


“Matthean community”) and others. So likewise, scholars refer to the Johannine community: the circle of believers sharing traditions and beliefs that were ultimately collected in the Fourth Gospel.

Johannine sociological analysis simply attempts to reconstruct the value system, community characteristics, and worldview of the Christians who produced the Fourth Gospel. David Rensberger’s *Johannine Faith and Liberating Community* attempts this in a consistent and thoroughgoing fashion. And numerous other studies do the same. Thus, the argument goes, John 3 and John 9 are communal symbols showing the inner tensions of the community and the severe choices that each member had to make. The trial sequence in the Gospel (along with John 5) tells us about the Johannine worldview of hostility and suspicion.

Perhaps the most troubling problem with such reconstructions is that the interpreter can find in the Gospel whatever he or she is looking for. The sociological grid may be made to fit, even when the ancient evidence is not appropriate to the study at hand. For example, Rensberger employs the liberation theology categories of José Miranda to prove that the Johannine church was an “oppressed community” seeking liberation from powerful authorities. This struggle becomes the meaning of the Johannine Christology: Jesus’s conflict with the Jews is simply the church’s conflict with the world. In the Nicodemus narrative Nicodemus is challenged “to be born into a people”—to undertake “deliberate downward mobility” and to take a stand with the “oppressed community.” “Good works” in John translates into “the eschatological transformation of the world and its social systems on the basis of love and justice.”

I have found Richard Bauckham’s critique of these theories helpful. Bauckham wonders if we should see John not as a Gospel written for a community, but instead as a document written from a particular community to all churches outside its own world. By saying this, he


50. Ibid., 114.

51. Ibid., 127.

is questioning the insularity of these community theories. And here he draws in the worldview of the Epistles of John as well. We should expect that this writer and his community would have unique perspectives and vocabularies. But this does not mean that they were living in isolation, drafting stories that simply explained their own world to them.

(5) Many scholars in this field “do not ask questions, at least primarily, about the history of the text, the state of the Johannine community, John’s historical trustworthiness, or sources. Rather they ask how to make sense of the text as it stands.” Above all, the “sense of the text” is determined as a reader interacts with the story. For some, this is known as rhetorical analysis of the Gospel.

The key used by these interpreters to unlock the Gospel’s message is a set of communication theories—universal structures found in virtually any composition. John is viewed as a writing to which we react, which forces us to make a response as the story of Jesus unfolds.

One of the earliest comprehensive treatments of John from this vantage belongs to R. Alan Culpepper, in Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel. Culpepper set out to make a thorough rhetorical examination of the Fourth Gospel, using the interdisciplinary tools of modern literary criticism. For instance, he studied the plot, the relation between the narrator and the assumed reader, narrative time, the characters (and their relation to the narrator), and the real author (who stands behind the narration itself). We as readers are carried through the story, which unfolds as the narrator gives us hints of what is really happening. For example, in 2:11 the narrator explains the signs and glory of Jesus. He has inside information so that we can see what the characters are thinking and feeling. Later, in 21:24, we are suddenly told that, indeed, this narrator is the Beloved Disciple, who all along has been evidencing an intimacy with Jesus in the story.

A shift is at work here in our understanding of the relation of truth to historical narrative. Biblical study for centuries has understood truth to be a value that is central to the historical facts given in the text. That is why heated debates have always raged around the historicity

and Jewishness of the narratives. But here we find that truth comes in other ways as well. A novel, for instance, conveys truth about the realities of life, even if it is entirely fictional. Thus, truth does not have to be necessarily tied to historicity.\textsuperscript{55} Truth claims can still be made through a narrative that provides poor history or no history at all. In fact, it is the drama itself, the literary world that the author creates, that ushers new truth to the reader.

The scholars mentioned earlier would balk at the community reconstructions above. For them, the Gospel should be seen not as a window into the life of Jesus or his followers but rather as a mirror in which we see ourselves reacting, learning, and discovering what the narrative gives us. Don Carson has been particularly harsh with this view. He says that when we look through Culpepper’s window, “we have sacrificed the Gospel’s claims to certain historical specificity, to eyewitness credibility, to the truth claims of this Gospel, and set sail on the shoreless sea of existential subjectivity.”\textsuperscript{56}

This is a reasonable concern, but it fails to raise one question that scholars still probe: Is the Gospel of John aware that we are readers, and is it trying to affect us as we read? John’s use of irony is one example of his audience awareness.\textsuperscript{57} We might also refer to John’s many asides (e.g., 1:38, 41, 42; 9:7; 11:16), where readers are helped, or to literary devices such as misunderstanding, where we as readers know more than the characters in the story (e.g., 2:20; 3:4, 9; 8:31–39). John even seems to reveal the deeper mysteries of Christ in his narrative as he coaches us along chapter by chapter.\textsuperscript{58}

(6) For about ten years the discipline of biblical studies has been looking at the relationship of the New Testament to the \textit{ideological


\textsuperscript{56} Carson, \textit{John}, 65.


aims of the Roman Empire. That is, to what extent is the New Testament in debate with the ultimate claims of Roman culture in its time? This takes the Roman context of the first century and elevates it so that it becomes the interpretive lens through which we read a Gospel. What if, for instance, the polemical arguments of Paul in, say, Colossians were really aimed at Roman imperial claims and how Jesus upends them? And what if the portrait of Jesus in one of the Gospels is actually a counter-portrait to the imperial claims being made throughout the Roman world? Warren Carter, for instance, has argued that when in AD 40 the emperor Caligula demanded to install his statue of Zeus/Jupiter in the Jerusalem temple, it presented a formative, critical experience for Jews and Christians alike. Jesus’s high christological claims in John then are counter-claims to Caligula. The Fourth Gospel is thus a polemical theological essay.\(^59\) When Jesus claims to be the “savior” of the world (4:42) or the “Son of God” (e.g., 1:39, 49; 3:10), we are hearing words that directly echo claims that belong to Caesar. Indeed, Tom Thatcher believes that “imperial terms were foundational to John’s Christology, and that his thinking about Christ was always informed by the premise that Jesus is greater than Caesar.”\(^60\)

(7) This question of the fundamental historicality in the Fourth Gospel will never disappear, and discussions are ongoing. Scholars agree that John has an intentional theological commitment, but now, unlike in past generations, this position does not exclude the possibility of genuine historicity. The Jewish cultural context and the many accurate descriptions of places (often confirmed by archaeology) suggest that John is making a contribution to the historical Jesus that cannot be neglected. Craig Blomberg has served as a premier guide to this commitment. His Historical Reliability of John’s Gospel is a testimony to how this conversation has changed. We refer to the “historical realism” of this Gospel and wonder why it was


\(^60\). Thatcher, Greater Than Caesar, 11 (italics removed).
discredited by so many. John underscores the value of eyewitness accounting (19:35; 21:24), knows Jerusalem before AD 70, has an intimate acquaintance with Jewish customs and tradition, and reflects the social and political tensions of this early first-century world. He wants us to know that what he knows about Jesus is certain, and he uses all five senses to convey it: things are seen, touched, tasted, smelled, and heard. Johannine scholar Paul Anderson sums it up well: “In addition to being highly theological, the Johannine narrative makes considerable contributions to our understanding of the Jesus of history.” These are words critical scholars would not have written twenty-five years ago.

Conclusion

The beginning student must be aware of these academic conversations even though at times they may seem obscure. But imagine exploring any subject in any discipline and failing to know the most recent advances. This would not do for medicine, engineering, or sociology any more than it would do for biblical studies. Positions confidently held in the 1960s may have to be abandoned today.

I see this problem with marked regularity when my students wander into the library to locate books on the Fourth Gospel. There they are confronted with shelf upon shelf of books but lack the discernment to sift them. A major volume published in 1955 may have less value than a slim paperback published in 2003. But when we see the perspective that an author brings, then suddenly we know how to use that author’s work successfully.

Bibliography


63. Ibid., 219.

Before You Begin


