

What is History? Reading John 1 as Historical Representation

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Abstract

As Pontius Pilate nearly asked, What is history? This article draws upon memory and media studies to question the notion that we find history *within* the text of the Fourth Gospel. Rather than trying to identify and isolate history within John's Gospel, our discussion aims to recover *how the Gospel works as a set of historical claims*, joining with or competing against other historical claims within the social sphere of its author, redactor, and/or audience. After a *précis* of memory's and media's significance for our question (What is history?), we will localize these abstract issues by turning to the Johannine portrayal of John the Baptist and his testimony for Jesus. This approach respects the Fourth Gospel as a written text that developed and was compiled/redacted in the late first century without imposing a rigidly atemporal conception of Johannine theology onto John's claims about events six or seven decades earlier.

Keywords

Fourth Gospel – Gospel of John – historical Jesus – John the Baptist – social memory – tradition

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[W]hat John knew in his bones was that to go forward, schooled by the Spirit to interpret Jesus' meaning for a new day, was also to turn back to the historical reality, the σάρξ ("flesh") that was Jesus' earthly life. It was on this understanding that he wrote his Gospel.¹

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What is History? The Gospels as Historical Sources

Questing after the historical Jesus among the Synoptic Gospels has proven to be quite a challenge in its own right. Even among those who agree on the value, feasibility, and possibility of knowing something about Jesus as a historical figure, serious questions have been raised about *how* we might come to this knowledge. In the twentieth century the dominant approach to historical Jesus research focused on developing and refining criteria of authenticity, by which historians could authenticate (or *dis*-authenticate; we're not entirely sure which) individual traditions about Jesus. This model of historical Jesus research assumes—not unreasonably—that the surviving sources about Jesus are hybrid entities, amalgamations of early, historical (and Palestinian) wheat and later, redactional (and Hellenistic) chaff. Bob Miller provides as standard an expression of this approach as one could hope for: "All critical scholars agree that the gospels contain both historically reliable material based on memories about Jesus, and historically unreliable material based on his followers' interpretations of his life, death, and teaching."²

If this is the condition of our evidence—principally the Synoptic Gospels—then the task of historical Jesus research is to differentiate "what should be attributed to the historical Jesus and what should be attributed either to progressive elaboration by the rank and file of early Christians who passed on the stories about him, or to the focused creativity of the individual gospel

1 Wendy E. S. North, "Response: Why Should Historical Criticism Continue to Have a Place in Johannine Studies?" in *What We Have Heard from the Beginning: The Past, Present and Future of Johannine Studies*, ed. Tom Thatcher (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2007), 19–21 (21).

2 Robert J. Miller, "Introduction," in *The Apocalyptic Jesus: A Debate*, ed. Robert J. Miller (Santa Rosa, CA: Polebridge, 2001), 2.

writers.”³ The criteriological approach is most ably and impressively (and most sustainably!) exhibited in John Meier’s multivolume project, *A Marginal Jew*.⁴

Chris Keith has demonstrated the indebtedness of the criteriological approach to the form critics.⁵ Not everyone, however, agrees that form criticism offers us the most helpful approach to asking historical questions, let alone to answering them. Indeed, doubts about the entire form-critical conception of historical Jesus research are decades old.⁶ Despite the vintage of these doubts, historians nevertheless continue to slice at the Gospels, thinking they can pare the traditional fat off the historical meat to reveal the lean, sinewy figure of Jesus *as he was* before he fell into the hands of his followers. Paul Foster is a persistent example. In his critique of discussions of memory—and especially *social* memory—in historical Jesus research, he complains that “the current application of memory studies to the Jesus tradition most frequently remains embedded in the theoretical domain, with little attempt to show how the category of memory actually allows for specific traditions to be traced back to the Jesus of history.”⁷ In other words, Foster doesn’t see how appeals to memory studies help historians of Jesus do what they are already doing. Indeed, at the 2013 SBL Annual Meeting in Baltimore, Foster explicitly acknowledged the value of memory studies for NT scholarship (“memory studies may assist in understanding some general aspects concerning the transmission of gospel

3 Miller, “Introduction,” 2.

4 John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, 5 vols. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991–2016).

5 Chris Keith, “The Indebtedness of the Criteria Approach to Form Criticism and Recent Attempts to Rehabilitate the Search for an Authentic Jesus,” in *Jesus, Criteria, and the Demise of Authenticity*, ed. Chris Keith and Anthony Le Donne (London: T&T Clark, 2012), 25–48 (esp. 30–40); see also idem, *Jesus’ Literacy: Scribal Culture and the Teacher from Galilee*, LNTS 413 (New York: T&T Clark, 2011), 27–41.

6 See Morna D. Hooker, “Christology and Methodology,” *NTS* 17 (1971): 480–87; eadem, “On Using the Wrong Tool,” *Theology* 75 (1972): 570–81; see also Dale C. Allison Jr., *Jesus of Nazareth: Millenarian Prophet* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998), 1–58. Allison’s skepticism has not abated but has, instead, sharpened; see idem, “How to Marginalize the Traditional Criteria of Authenticity,” in *Handbook for the Study of the Historical Jesus*, ed. Tom Holmén and Stanley E. Porter, vol. 1 of 4 (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 3–30; idem, *Constructing Jesus: Memory, Imagination, and History* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), 1–30.

7 Paul Foster, “Memory, Orality, and the Fourth Gospel: Three Dead-Ends in Historical Jesus Research,” *JSHJ* 10 (2012): 191–227 (198). Foster’s complaint is certainly apropos in certain cases (he takes to task in particular Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006]). Unfortunately, however, his phrase “most frequently” ignores more scholarship than it includes.

traditions”), but he does not accept that people like Chris Keith or Anthony Le Donne, or myself are actually doing historical Jesus research.⁸ Historians like Keith and Le Donne, unlike traditional Jesus historians, do not break the Gospels into individual traditions, reconstruct tradition-histories and earliest recoverable forms of sayings, and authenticate those sayings via accepted tools of the trade. For Foster, this can only mean they are not doing historical Jesus research.

This, however, is exactly the point. The form-critical perspective on the task of historical Jesus scholarship is fundamentally wrong-headed, and the contribution of social memory studies is not to provide new answers to old questions. Instead, memory studies re-orient us toward our sources, helping us appreciate more precisely what they are *as sources of historical information* and clarifying how those sources mediate between past and present in their specific contexts. In other words, memory studies provide us an opportunity to ask anew the question, “What is history?”

This opportunity is especially propitious for Johannine scholars, since the old rules of historical Jesus research were so disadvantageous to the Fourth Gospel.⁹ When the rules of the game were to identify and neutralize any sign of the early Christians’ interpretive activity among their presentations of Jesus, John was always going to come in last place. The Fourth Gospel was subjected to the same analytical processes as the Synoptic Gospels,¹⁰ but John was found to have undergone more of what historians were looking to remove, and so less of John remained when it came time to put Jesus back together.¹¹ In this sense, we can speak not only of the “de-Johannification of Jesus”;¹² historians of Jesus are explicitly engaged in the de-Markification, de-Matthewification, and de-Lukification of Jesus!

8 Paul Foster, “Memory: Help or Hindrance in Historical Jesus Research?” (presented at the SBL Annual Meeting, Baltimore, 2013).

9 Craig Blomberg (“The Historical Reliability of John: Rushing in Where Angels Fear to Tread?” in *Jesus in Johannine Tradition*, ed. Robert T. Fortna and Tom Thatcher [Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001], 71–82 [79–80]) attempts to argue for the Fourth Gospel’s historical reliability solely within traditional (= form-critical) historical methods. His discussion of John, therefore, inherits all the problems that attend the same approach to the Synoptic materials. See also idem, *The Historical Reliability of John’s Gospel: Issues and Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011), 63–66.

10 Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, 1:44, 45.

11 Meier explicitly formulates the historical Jesus scholar’s task in these terms; see *A Marginal Jew*, 2:14n. 6.

12 Paul N. Anderson, *The Riddles of the Fourth Gospel: An Introduction to John* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2011), 45.

Memory studies, however, provoke historians of Jesus to re-evaluate the extant sources as coherent, autonomous portrayals of Jesus and his significance in specific contexts. The Gospels are commemorative texts—whatever their literary or historical relationship—that actualize potentials afforded by previous expressions and evocations of the Jesus tradition. The ways that Jesus had been remembered and recalled constrained and enabled future acts of remembering Jesus. The Gospels, each in their own way, embody potentials and constraints afforded by the Jesus tradition and bring the history of Jesus and his memory to bear on the situations in which and for which they were written. In this perspective, the Evangelists' interpretive activities are *the vehicles conveying the historical Jesus to new situations and audiences* rather than obstacles to and obfuscations of the historical Jesus. The Fourth Gospel may very well be the most self-conscious when it comes to mediating the past ("what we have heard from the beginning")¹³ in an ever-shifting present.

How, then, might the Johannine community of scholars go about identifying and analyzing historical information in the Fourth Gospel in light of discussions of social or collective memory and consequent modifications in our understanding of what is "history"? The remainder of this essay contrasts some of the dominant underlying assumptions of historical Jesus research with alternative understandings of history, the past, and the mediation of the past in the present. This essay is not proposing new and improved *criteria* for historical Jesus research. Instead, it focuses on the epistemological underpinnings of our work on the historical Jesus. Toward that end, we will attempt to read the Fourth Gospel as an autonomous historical text that negotiates the possibilities and constraints afforded by the Jesus tradition.¹⁴

The Autonomy of the Fourth Gospel and the Johannine Jesus

Perhaps the most challenging aspect of glimpsing the historical Jesus in the Gospel of John is John's relationship to the Synoptic Gospels. Just as Jupiter's

13 This phrase evokes one of the Johannine epistles rather than the Fourth Gospel itself (see 1 John 1.1), though the idea is certainly consonant with the Fourth Gospel's attitude toward the past, historically or mythically conceived, for example in the Johannine Prologue (John 1.1–18).

14 Despite superficial similarities (e.g., use of the word "autonomous"), this approach to "reading the Gospel of John as a historical text" differs substantially from that of Paul Anderson (e.g., see *The Riddles of the Fourth Gospel*, esp. pp. 125–55), who reads Johannine and Markan traditions in terms of their alleged "interfluentiality."

gravitational pull protects the inner planets from threats of cometary impacts, so also the Synoptic Gospels pull the discussion of Jesus as a figure in history toward themselves.¹⁵ If the Johannine Jesus hopes to accrue to himself any historical credibility, that credibility will first have to escape the influence of his Jovian Synoptic competitors.¹⁶ Thus the question of the Fourth Gospel's literary relationship becomes relevant, though space prevents us from adequately addressing the question here. If John was familiar with and/or dependent on any or all of the Synoptic Gospels, then the Johannine Jesus may be in some sense legitimately derivative or epiphenomenal of the Synoptic Jesuses.¹⁷ If John was independent of the Synoptic Gospels and Johannine tradition developed without influence from Synoptic tradition, then the sense in which the Synoptics offer any sort of controls for recovering the historical Jesus from the Fourth Gospel becomes enormously complex.

Differences between John and the Synoptics can be handled in a number of ways. On the one hand, an aspect of the Synoptics' portrayal of Jesus may be accepted as the standard by which to judge the Johannine Jesus. To the extent that John's Jesus contradicts the Jesus of the Synoptics—for example, he does not teach in parables or perform exorcisms, or he offers lengthy self-referential discourses—John has altered his portrayal away from Jesus in the direction of Johannine Christology.¹⁸ On the other hand, an aspect of the Johannine Jesus may challenge the Synoptics and so open the possibility that John *rather than* the Synoptics preserves something of the historical Jesus (e.g., the Synoptics' portrayal of Jesus' last meal with the disciples as a Passover meal).¹⁹ Not every

- 15 See Marianne Meye Thompson, "The Historical Jesus and the Johannine Christ," in *Exploring the Gospel of John: In Honor of D. Moody Smith*, ed. R. Alan Culpepper and C. Clifton Black (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996), 21–42; Robert Kysar, "The Dehistoricizing of the Gospel of John," in *John, Jesus, and History, Volume 1: Critical Appraisals of Critical Views*, ed. Paul N. Anderson, Felix Just, and Tom Thatcher (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007), 75–101 (81).
- 16 See Mark Allan Powell, "The De-Johannification of Jesus: The Twentieth Century and Beyond," in *John, Jesus, and History, Volume 1: Critical Appraisals of Critical Views*, ed. Paul N. Anderson, Felix Just, and Tom Thatcher (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007), 121–32 (121).
- 17 See, for example, Richard Bauckham, "John for Readers of Mark," in *The Gospels for All Christians: Rethinking the Gospel Audiences*, ed. Richard Bauckham (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 147–71. For critical evaluation, see Wendy Sproston North, "John for Readers of Mark? A Response to Richard Bauckham's Proposal," *JSNT* 25 (2003): 449–68.
- 18 This is the refrain of Maurice Casey, *Is John's Gospel True?* (London: Routledge, 1996).
- 19 See Mary Coloe, "John as Witness and Friend," in *John, Jesus, and History, Volume 2: Aspects of Historicity in the Fourth Gospel*, ed. Paul N. Anderson, Felix Just, and Tom Thatcher (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2009), 45–61.

difference is a contradiction, however, so we are not always confronted with a choice: *either* John *or* the Synoptics. To the extent that John's Jesus says or does something that can be accommodated to the Synoptic Jesus, perhaps John preserves some information the other sources have not (e.g., Jesus' multiple trips to Judea and Jerusalem).²⁰ These, of course, are not mutually exclusive responses. A historian may reject John in favor of the Synoptics in one place, harmonize him with the Synoptics in another, and prefer him over the Synoptics in yet another.

Each of these responses pays too much attention to the historical Jesus that emerges from analysis of the Synoptic Gospels.²¹ The logic that sustains them is both reasonable and straightforward: Historical Jesus research examines the Synoptic Gospels in order to peel back elements of Synoptic interpretation and restore the singular, original Jesus of history. To the extent that this project has been successful, the reconstructed historical Jesus ought to approximate the real thing, and certainly "the real thing"—here, the actual Jesus of history—provides the standard against which historians ought to evaluate and interpret the Johannine Jesus.

The problem, of course, is that the reconstructed historical Jesus is not the real thing, any more than the Synoptic Jesuses are the real thing.²² Even in those instances when our reconstructions are (surely!) correct—for example, that the historical Jesus taught in parables or was baptized by John—they remain, nevertheless, incomplete. Forcing the Johannine Jesus to pass Synoptic muster, therefore, evaluates the former against a standard he was never intended to meet. Perhaps the historical-critical process inevitably involves applying a foreign standard to John's Gospel; the Fourth Evangelist, after all, could not have imagined his text would fall into the hands of academic historians. But before we pry answers from John to questions he did not raise, we have to appreciate John's responses to questions he *does* address. In this regard, historians of Jesus at least have not been willing to let John be John. Instead, they evaluate John

20 Blomberg, "Historical Reliability," 77–79; idem, *Historical Reliability of John's Gospel*, esp. pp. 53–54.

21 See, for example, J. Louis Martyn, *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel*, NTL (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003), 31–32.

22 In actual fact, "the baseline against which John is measured is the Synoptic Gospels" more directly rather than the historical Jesus reconstructed from the Synoptics (Thompson, "Historical Jesus," 26). While this is everywhere in evidence, see John Painter, "Memory Holds the Key: The Transformation of Memory in the Interface of History and Theology in John," in *John, Jesus, and History, Volume 1: Critical Appraisals of Critical Views*, ed. Paul N. Anderson, Felix Just, and Tom Thatcher (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007), 229–45, for one example.

against Synoptic standards.²³ To be sure, scholars acknowledge and, in some quarters—but not in others²⁴—celebrate Johannine *theology* and its distinctive contribution to early Christianity. But it seems that we need also to recover and appreciate the distinctive *historical* claims of the Fourth Gospel, to recover the Fourth Evangelist's "commitment to that 'other time,' that historical time that stands at a distance from him, that time whose story must be recalled and interpreted with the aid of the Spirit."²⁵ Whatever we make of John's historical positions and the interference wreaked upon them by his theological commitments, he roots his Christology in the time and place of Jesus of Nazareth.

Is it possible, however, that John's theological and Christological commitments result in a representation of Jesus that differs so markedly from the earliest perceptions and commemorations of Jesus that the Fourth Gospel loses all historical utility? The answer is, of course: Yes, development over time may look very different from earlier recollections. We might profitably propose the analogy of portrayals of Abraham Lincoln as a civil rights icon. In the wake of Lincoln's assassination in April 1865, no one would have hailed the slain president as a civil rights hero; the category did not yet exist. That, however, did not stop Representative Fred Schwengel, a Republican from Iowa, from appealing to Lincoln to express and motivate pro-civil rights sentiment during his commencement address at Lincoln Memorial University in June 1963.²⁶ Schwengel distorted the historical Lincoln, "a Whig who believed in emancipation followed by colonization (deportation) of all former slaves and free blacks."²⁷ But Lincoln's significance for the struggle for racial reconciliation and equality in mid-twentieth-century America is not useless for historians. That significance, as Schwartz argues, is itself a product of the historical Lincoln, an expression of the *reception* of the authentic history of Lincoln in the unfolding drama of American history.²⁸ Besides "embellishing the historical record,"

23 For a similar complaint *vis-à-vis* the Synoptic Gospels on behalf of non-canonical gospels (esp. the Gospel of Thomas), see Charles W. Hedrick, "The Tyranny of the Synoptic Jesus," *Semeia* 44 (1988): 1–8; Tom Thatcher, "Early Christianities and the Synoptic Eclipse: Problems in Situating the Gospel of Thomas," *BibInt* 7 (1999): 323–39.

24 See Casey, *Is John's Gospel True?*

25 Gary M. Burge, "Situating John's Gospel in History," in *Jesus in Johannine Tradition*, ed. Robert T. Fortna and Tom Thatcher (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 35–46 (37).

26 Barry Schwartz, *Abraham Lincoln and the Forge of National Memory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 1–25, esp. pp. 1–6.

27 Schwartz, *Forge of National Memory*, 2.

28 See the discussion of collective memory as the synthesis of historical evidence and commemorative symbol in Barry Schwartz, "Collective Memory and History: How Abraham Lincoln Became a Symbol of Racial Equality," *Sociological Quarterly* 38 (1997): 469–96.

commemoration also “articulat[es], independently of that record, images of the past that never existed before.”²⁹ Commemorative images may be historically false (or, less cynically, historically imprecise), but historical veracity is not their only function. Commemorative images invest history with cultural, social, psychological, and especially *moral* significance. As historians, we can hardly claim to have come into more authentic connection with the past by means of stripping it of that significance.

Neither should we jump too quickly to conceptualize the Johannine Jesus as a rupture of the Jesus tradition or a radical reinvention of Jesus in early Christian memory. Theories of social constructionism—with which I am largely sympathetic—and the concomitant interest in the invention of tradition are perennial topics of scholarly discussion.³⁰ Despite the creative output of this discussion, social memory theorists suggest that, in the real world of human interaction and social ordering, “the absolutely new is inconceivable.”³¹ Even in times of turbulent, violent revolution,³² social actors and commemorative entrepreneurs are involved in recollection and the transmission of a tradition.³³ Perceiving an object—even in the wake of a purported break with the past!—involves both “transient encounters with the details” of that object and locating that object with respect to the “whole cluster of meanings” against which that object makes sense.³⁴ To offer one example from the Fourth Gospel, the Johannine innovation of attributing the death of Jesus to the chief priests’ and Pharisees’ envy in the aftermath of the raising of Lazarus (John 11:46–57) displaces the Synoptic Gospels’ appeal to the temple incident as the explanation for Jesus’ arrest. Even this rupture, however, preserves indications of the connection between the temple and Jesus’ execution.³⁵ If, then, we only

29 Schwartz, “Collective Memory and History,” 471.

30 The classic study is Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983). For a responsible discussion of constructionism (and its limitations), see Gary Alan Fine, *Difficult Reputations: Collective Memories of the Evil, Inept, and Controversial* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), esp. pp. 14–17.

31 Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember*, Themes in the Social Sciences (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 6–13 (p. 6 quoted).

32 Paul Connerton discusses the quintessential example of social upheaval: the French Revolution.

33 See Michael Schudson’s discussion (“The Present in the Past versus the Past in the Present,” *Communication* 11 [1989]: 105–13) of the persistence of the past in[to] the present.

34 Connerton, *How Societies Remember*, 12.

35 See John 11:48. John’s transposed account of the temple incident in John 2:13–25 also preserves connections with Jesus’ death; see 2:17, 21–22.

had John's Gospel to go by, historians might not have been able to locate the temple incident at the end of Jesus' life (a datum I accept). We would, however, still know quite a bit about Jesus, including his opposition to the current temple regime, his disruption in the temple, the antagonism between him and the temple authorities, and the role of those authorities in Jesus' arrest. Many of the details would shift, yes. But we would maintain connection with the "framework of outlines" against which the Johannine Jesus' actions in the temple made sense, which framework included previous commemorations of those actions.³⁶

Anthropologist and oral historian Elizabeth Tonkin argues that historians have to account for the representational contexts in which our historical data are embedded and that, to remove them from that context in order to replant them in our own historical narratives is itself a form of dehistoricization.

[P]rofessional historians who use the recollections of others cannot just scan them for useful facts to pick out, like currants from a cake. Any such facts are so embedded in the representation that it directs an interpretation of them, and its very ordering, its plotting and its metaphors bear meaning too. However, if you share the author's conventions of interpretation, your own matching skills are deployed so automatically that no gap is recognized between yourself and the text. The meaning seems transparent.³⁷

We do not, of course, share the Johannine tradition's "conventions of interpretation,"³⁸ so our attempt to read the Gospel of John as a historical text has to take stock of John's interpretive ordering and how he has plotted inherited features of the tradition and of the past itself in order to present Jesus anew. But rather than avail ourselves of John's historical representation, we have too often used "Johannine theology" or the history of the "Johannine community" as an excuse to dehistoricize John, to read him as if he were narrating events in his here and now rather than his there and then.

36 The phrase "framework of outlines" comes from Connerton, *How Societies Remember*, 6.

37 Elizabeth Tonkin, *Narrating Our Pasts: The Social Construction of Oral History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 6.

38 See Marianne Meye Thompson, "The 'Spiritual Gospel': How John the Theologian Writes History," in *John, Jesus, and History, Volume 1: Critical Appraisals of Critical Views*, ed. Paul N. Anderson, Felix Just, and Tom Thatcher (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007), 103–7: "John and its early interpreters apparently thought that interpretation disclosed rather than veiled the meaning of history. We take just the opposite viewpoint today, and in that difference lies much of the reason for the 'dehistoricization of John'" (104).

I can't help but wonder if the inadequate appraisal of John's historical intentions vis-à-vis the Synoptics is a product of the enormous influence of Rudolf Bultmann's thesis of a pre-Christian Gnosticism. Bultmann was able to provide a historical ground for John's distinctive theology in its relation to pre-Christian Gnosticism and the redeemer myth that provided the lens through which the Fourth Evangelist—so the claim goes—interpreted the Jesus tradition. In the wake of the collapse of that thesis, the historical ground for reconstructions of Johannine theology has disappeared. John's Christology is invoked as the explanation for so very much of the Fourth Gospel's portrait of Jesus, but that Christology itself is de-historicized, unmoored from any plausible historical circumstances that might account for its salient features.³⁹ So, for example, Louis Martyn roots the Fourth Evangelist's theology in "certain historical developments transpiring in the city in which he lived."⁴⁰ Those "historical developments" center on the expulsion of Christians from the synagogue under the influence of the "Jamnia Academy" after the reformulation of the *Birkath ha-Minim* sometime between 80 and 115 C.E.⁴¹ In this way Martyn appears to anchor Johannine Christology in history, but that history is the present experience of the Johannine community.⁴² In other words, Martyn has anchored John's theology to itself; no wonder the Johannine Jesus appears adrift! The Jesus of John's Gospel has been mostly, if not fully, severed from the past—including past commemorations of Jesus—in which John and his community were embedded and which framed their understandings of and responses to their present. Barry Schwartz's critique of political theories of memory applies also to Martyn's seminal work: "Conceiving the past as a political fact, made and remade in the service of new power arrangements, leads to an atemporal

39 Similarly, see Kysar, "Dehistoricizing of the Gospel of John:" "efforts to reconstruct the history of the community behind the Fourth Gospel have actually both historicized and dehistoricized the Gospel, depending on *which history* one seeks" (76; original italics).

40 Martyn, *History and Theology*; p. xi quoted.

41 Martyn, *History and Theology*, 56–66; see also Wayne A. Meeks, "The Man from Heaven in Johannine Sectarianism," *JBL* 91 (1972): 44–72.

42 Barry Schwartz has levelled a similar critique against constructionist discussions of history and memory in the Humanities: "To conceive of collective memory as a mirror of reality is to conceive a fiction, for if, independently of historical evidence, our changing understanding of the past uniquely parallels changes in our society, then the only relevant reality would be present, and the very concept of collective memory would be meaningless" (Schwartz, *Forge of National Memory*, 7). D. Moody Smith ("The Problem of History in John," in *What We Have Heard from the Beginning: The Past, Present and Future of Johannine Studies*, ed. Tom Thatcher [Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2007], 311–20) provides a more satisfying perspective.

concept of collective memory, one that makes the past precarious, its contents hostage to the political conditions of the present.”⁴³ This is the Johannine Jesus: a “hostage to the political conditions of [John’s] present.”

I would suggest that John’s Christology does not provide an adequate historical explanation for the distinctive Johannine Jesus for one basic reason: To the same extent that we might appeal to John’s Christology in order to explain his distinctive presentation of Jesus’ life and teaching, we must also explain the rise and acceptance of that Christology *as a phenomenon in history*. John’s Christology is itself a product of historical development, and its development and evolution were constrained by previous expressions and commemorations of the Jesus tradition as well as of Hebrew biblical tradition.⁴⁴ When historians point to John’s distinctive Christology in order to explain Johannine departures from the portrayal of Jesus in the Synoptics, they beg important questions about the sources of and influences on John’s theology, especially “its causes and consequences,” and “[h]ow the past is symbolized and how it functions as a mediator of meaning.”⁴⁵ The greater the chasm between the historical Jesus and the Johannine Christ, the more pressing it becomes to explain in historical terms the rise of Johannine theology and its impulse to remake Jesus in its image. Efforts to find the historical Jesus in the Gospel of John cannot get underway until we have wrestled with the historical causes and constitution of John’s theological vision. This is the first and fundamental task at the heart of reading the Gospel of John as a historical text.

The Voice of John Crying Out in the Wilderness

On its surface, John 1 seems the least likely place to go searching for history in the Fourth Gospel.⁴⁶ This chapter has a number of parallels with Synoptic tradition—I count seven—so that the cosmological introduction of Jesus, the Word made flesh, in John 1 bears some relation to broader patterns of speaking and/or writing about Jesus in early Christianity.⁴⁷ Even so, John’s distinctive

43 Schwartz, *Forge of National Memory*, 16.

44 For helpful comments along similar lines, see Craig Koester’s opening comments in “Aspects of Historicity in John 1–4: A Response,” in *John, Jesus, and History, Volume 2: Aspects of Historicity in the Fourth Gospel*, ed. Paul N. Anderson, Felix Just, and Tom Thatcher (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2009), 93–103 (93).

45 The issues in quotation marks are raised in Schwartz, *Forge of National Memory*, 17.

46 Though see Coloe, “John as Witness and Friend,” for one defiant perspective.

47 See Rafael Rodríguez, *Oral Tradition and the New Testament: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: T&T Clark, 2014), 94–100; Tom Thatcher, “The Riddle of the Baptist and the Genesis of the Prologue: John 1.1–18 in Oral/Aural Media Culture,” in *The Fourth Gospel*

Christology is nowhere imprinted on the Johannine narrative as starkly as in John 1. Under the old rules of historical Jesus scholarship, this imprint would disqualify John 1 from the store of data from which we reconstruct the historical Jesus.⁴⁸ Or, more optimistically, it would result in an impasse between so-called “critical” and “confessional” scholars, who would offer different evaluations of the significance of the parallels to the Synoptic tradition amidst such thoroughly Johannine material. And this is the optimistic scenario! There must be a better way to approach John as set of historical claims about the Jesus of history.

We have already suggested one such better way. Social memory research opens up for historians the possibility of grasping how the Evangelists’ interpretive activities—in other words, their theological interests—function as *the vehicles conveying the historical Jesus to new situations and audiences* rather than obstacles to and obfuscations of the historical Jesus. We needn’t deny the obviously interpretive tenor of John 1 in order to recognize that even this text is rooted in and embodies the potentialities and constraints of previous and contemporary ways of narrating the stories about Jesus.⁴⁹ In another venue,

in First-Century Media Culture, ed. Anthony Le Donne and Tom Thatcher, LNTS 426 (London: T&T Clark, 2011), 29–48. The parallels between John 1 and the Synoptic tradition, all of which occur in the triple tradition, are as follows: (i) the quotation from Isaiah 40 (John 1.23; cp. Mark 1.3 parr.); (ii) John baptizes with water (John 1.26; cp. Mark 1.8 parr.); (iii) John’s unworthiness (John 1.27; cp. Mark 1.7 parr.); (iv) the Spirit’s descent as a dove (John 1.32; cp. Mark 1.10 parr.); (v) he will baptize with the Holy Spirit (John 1.33; cp. Mark 1.8 parr.; cf. Acts 1.5); (vi) Jesus is God’s son (John 1.34; Mark 1.11 parr.); and (vii) Jesus renames Simon (John 1.42; cp. Mark 3.16 parr.).

48 The most traditional contribution, from the perspective of historical Jesus scholarship, in *John, Jesus, and History, Volume 1*, is Paula Fredriksen’s (“The Historical Jesus, the Scene in the Temple, and the Gospel of John,” in *John, Jesus, and History, Volume 1: Critical Appraisals of Critical Views*, ed. Paul N. Anderson, Felix Just, and Tom Thatcher [Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007], 249–76). Fredriksen discounts both Markan and Johannine theology and excludes both from knowing anything of or bearing any connection to the Jesus of history (e.g., pp. 275–76; see also n. 53). Marianne Meye Thompson complained about this approach to history in the Gospels twenty years ago: “Despite frequent arguments that to set history and theology against each other will do violence to the character of the Gospels and especially the Fourth Gospel, such a schema continues to inform much discussion about the differences between John and the other Gospels, and John’s theological agenda continues to count against its historical value” (Thompson, “Historical Jesus,” 26).

49 “People’s ability to reconstruct the past just as they wish is limited by the crucial social fact that other people within their awareness are trying to do the same thing” (Schudson, “Present in the Past” [112]).

Paula Fredriksen asserts that both “the apostle Paul and our four canonical evangelists ... us[ed] the Septuagint as a quarry for episodes in the life of the historical Jesus.”⁵⁰ We would be foolish to deny the formative role of the Septuagint in early Christian memory of Jesus;⁵¹ they recalled the past, perceived the present, and hoped for the future in terms and images provided by the Septuagint. We would be equally foolish, however, to embrace an atemporal conception of the Jesus tradition, according to which the early Christians mined the Scriptures for sayings and events of the historical Jesus. If the Evangelists could paint Jesus in scriptural hues, it is because his life and teachings already evoked, for them, themes and scenes from Israel’s biblical traditions. If he didn’t, no one would have thought to connect Jesus to the stories of Abraham, Moses, David, Isaiah, and other figures from the biblical past.⁵²

As Alan Kirk and Tom Thatcher explain, “social memory theorists generally hold that the meaning of landmark events is articulated through emplotment within narrative scripts that have achieved archetypal, symbolic status within a particular culture,” so that the landmark events and narrative scripts become mutually interpreting.⁵³ The point here, however, is that the event being remembered takes “the *irreducible shape* of the commemorating community’s social and cultural frameworks.”⁵⁴ Those frameworks, as we have said, are not

50 Paula Fredriksen, “Are You a Virgin? Biblical Exegesis and the Invention of Tradition,” in *Jesus and Brian: Exploring the Historical Jesus and His Times via Monty Python’s Life of Brian*, ed. Joan E. Taylor (London: T&T Clark, 2015), 151–65 (151).

51 For a discussion of these issues in the Fourth Gospel specifically, see Peder Borgen, “The Scriptures and the Words and Works of Jesus,” in *What We Have Heard from the Beginning: The Past, Present and Future of Johannine Studies*, ed. Tom Thatcher (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2007), 39–58.

52 Paula Fredriksen’s examination of the role of Hos. 11.1 and Isa. 7.14 (“Are You a Virgin?” 158–59) not only as motivation but also as *source* for Matthew’s birth narrative forces an extreme atemporalism onto early Christianity. She observes that “[n]either scriptural passage, Hosea or Isaiah, refers to a Messiah. *Each becomes a messianic prophecy only through the narrative alchemy of Matthew’s birth story*” (159; emphasis added). Perhaps. But Fredriksen has sawed off the branch on which she stands. *Ex hypothesi*, neither Jesus nor Matthew’s prooftexts had any genuine messianic significance. Matthew, wanting to prove that Jesus was in fact Israel’s messiah, turns to non-messianic traditions in order to transform the non-messianic Jesus into the scripturally prefigured messiah. The messianic Jesus emerges from this entire scenario—standard among historians of Jesus, to be sure—like Melchizedek in Hebrews: without father, without mother, without genealogy.

53 Alan Kirk and Tom Thatcher, “Jesus Tradition as Social Memory,” in *Memory, Tradition, and Text: Uses of the Past in Early Christianity*, ed. Alan Kirk and Tom Thatcher, SemeiaSt 52 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2005), 25–42 (37).

54 Kirk and Thatcher, “Jesus Tradition,” 37, emphasis added.

obstacles to viewing the historical Jesus—either in the Fourth Gospel or in the Synoptics—but rather are the vehicles that bring us in contact with him: Without the interpretive activities of Jesus' followers, we wouldn't even know there *was* a historical Jesus, just as we know nothing of his mohel.⁵⁵

So what of John 1? The entire chapter is steeped in John the Baptist's subordination to and testimony on behalf of Jesus, the Word made flesh. Paula Fredriksen, as we have seen, concludes that any purported preservation of historical reality has been effaced by the thoroughly theological portrayal of John as Jesus' forerunner. "Historians tend in the face of these evangelical efforts to suspect that the opposite was true: that in their lifetimes John was the more popular leader."⁵⁶ Such an approach to John, Jesus, and history reads the Gospel of John as a historical text by rejecting its historical representation. While it clarifies the distortion of the past wrought by John's distinctive Christology, it nevertheless obscures that Christology by severing it from its sources and making it stand on its own. Where did the Fourth Evangelist get the idea that John was Jesus' forerunner? And why were others apparently open to being persuaded by his presentation of John as such?⁵⁷

The simplest response to these questions is: The Johannine portrayal of John bearing witness to Jesus is consonant with the reputations of both men in other sources, despite the obviously distinctive emphasis on John's testimony and his role as witness (μαρτυρία; μαρτυρέω).⁵⁸ John proclaimed the imminent

55 We would be fairly confident, even apart from Luke 2:21, of the *fact* of Jesus' circumcision and so, consequently, of the *existence* of his mohel. But beyond his existence, we know absolutely nothing about him: whether he was young or old, short or tall, hairy or bald, fat or skinny, well-liked or shunned, etc.

56 Paula Fredriksen, *From Jesus to Christ: The Origins of the New Testament Images of Christ*, 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 98.

57 In his discussion of ancient biography, Andrew Lincoln ("We Know That His Testimony Is True': Johannine Truth Claims and Historicity," in *John, Jesus, and History, Volume 1: Critical Appraisals of Critical Views*, ed. Paul N. Anderson, Felix Just, and Tom Thatcher [Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007], 179–97) also points to the question of a narrative's reception by its hearers/readers, who (says Lincoln) "would have been satisfied if the resultant portrait was plausible and in continuity with what they knew from elsewhere" (185).

58 John mentions the Baptist's testimony (μαρτυρία) twice, at 1.7, 19; he uses μαρτυρέω with the Baptist as the subject (explicit or implied) five times, at 1.7, 8, 15, 32, and 34. Johannine usage provides a striking contrast from the Synoptic Gospels, which never use the μαρτυρ—stem in relation to John. For discussion, see Robert L. Webb, "Jesus in Relation to John 'the Testifier' and Not 'the Baptizer': The Fourth Gospel's Portrayal of John the Baptist and Its Historical Possibilities," in *John, Jesus, and History, Volume 3: Glimpses of*

return of Israel's God (κύριος) to Zion;⁵⁹ the Synoptic Gospels, famously, preserve this element of John's preaching but imbue it with new significance when they identify the κύριος of John's preaching with Jesus. The Fourth Gospel sharpens this reframing of John's message by portraying him as being sent *from* God (παρὰ θεοῦ; 1.6) rather than *ahead of* him.⁶⁰ By the time John the Baptist identifies himself as the voice crying out in the wilderness, "Prepare the way of the Lord," John the Evangelist has already specified the content of John's witness as "the light" (περὶ τοῦ φωτός; 1.7, 8) and the Word that became flesh (περὶ αὐτοῦ [= ὁ λόγος that σὰρξ ἐγένετο]; 1.14–15). Nevertheless, the Fourth Gospel preserves the ambiguity about the John's expected "coming one" (ὁ ὀπίσω μου ἐρχόμενος; 1.15; see also 1.30) in the twice-repeated admission, "And I myself did not recognize him (καγὼ οὐκ ᾔδειν αὐτόν), but for this reason I came baptizing in water: so that he would be revealed to Israel" (1.31; see also v. 33).⁶¹ Even here, in a text so thoroughly stamped with its author's theological stamp, the identification of Jesus as the stronger one who comes after John is a post hoc insight. At some point after being baptized by John, Jesus came to see himself as the coming, stronger one whom John announced.⁶² At some other point

Jesus through the Johannine Lens, ed. Paul N. Anderson, Felix Just, and Tom Thatcher (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2016), 216–19.

- 59 Robert L. Webb, "Jesus' Baptism by John: Its Historicity and Significance," in *Key Events in the Life of the Historical Jesus: A Collaborative Exploration of Context and Coherence*, ed. Darrell L. Bock and Robert L. Webb, WUNT 247 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009), 95–150 (121–26). According to Webb, "John's expected figure primarily manifests the characteristics of God himself because this was evidently John's focus—that is, on what God was going to do, rather than on who was going to accomplish it or how it would happen in historical/earthly terms. Yet, the other features that point to a figure other than God indicate that John expected God to work through an agent" (124). The language of "features that point to a figure other than God" is too strong; rather, all the features point to God himself, but John's expectation was sufficiently ambiguous to allow that God's return to Zion and its accompanying events would be fulfilled through an agent (whether human or divine). See Rafael Rodríguez, *Structuring Early Christian Memory: Jesus in Tradition, Performance, and Text*, European Studies on Christian Origins, LNTS 407 (London: T&T Clark, 2010), 123–27.
- 60 Compare Mark 1:2: "Behold, I am sending my messenger ahead of you (πρὸ προσώπου σου), who will prepare your way."
- 61 Webb, "Jesus in Relation to John," 218–19, 221.
- 62 See Allison, *Constructing Jesus*, 274–78. Pace Robert Webb, who argues that "the identification of Jesus as John's announced figure is more likely due to early Christian theological reflection" ("Jesus' Baptism," 108). The early Christian view of John as Jesus' forerunner stems not from "early Christian theological reflection" but rather from Jesus himself, who "believed himself to be the object of John's expectation, believed himself to be the stronger one who would baptize with fire" (Allison, *Constructing Jesus*, 275). Coloe finds

(probably after Jesus came to the view just noted), John himself came to entertain the possibility that Jesus was the coming one, and he sent disciples to ask Jesus this very question (Matt. 11.3; Luke 7.19–20).

The Fourth Gospel does not preserve precisely this narrative of Jesus and his relation to John; instead, John comes as Jesus' witness, bearing testimony that this man is "the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (1.29, see also v. 36). Even so, this innovative portrayal of the Baptist in the first chapter of John is not free from the constraints of the past, whether the actual past of the relation between John and Jesus or the previous history of commemorating that relation in the tradition.

We might ask, in closing: Could we arrive at a historically realistic or authentic representation of Jesus solely on the basis of the Fourth Gospel (say, if we never had the Synoptic Gospels or their traditions)? Certainly much of our knowledge about Jesus would be lost without Mark, Matthew, and Luke. Just as certainly, much of our knowledge of the Fourth Gospel would change if its reception were no longer influenced by its inclusion in the four-fold gospel canon. But this is the main point of the present essay: "Reading John as historical representation" means appreciating the extent to which John's Gospel is itself a realistic representation of Jesus, even if only some of that portrait's details are realistic, while others are expressionistic and yet others are impressionistic. The Fourth Gospel aims to introduce its readers to Jesus and to orient them toward him in certain ways.⁶³ When historians of Jesus dismiss the Fourth Gospel's portrayal(s) of Jesus, they do not move closer to the historical figure who was active in the 20s of the first century. Instead, they jettison the late-first-century Johannine reception of the Jesus tradition in favor of Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment receptions of the Synoptic Gospels.

It remains for historians to read the Fourth Gospel as historical representation, to account for the Johannine reception of the Jesus tradition, and to

it "highly questionable" that John ever "clearly identified Jesus as this coming one" ("John as Witness and Friend," 53). I agree that John likely did not recognize or reveal Jesus at his baptism, but the account of John's question to Jesus (which Coloe does not discuss in any detail) does indeed suggest that John came to entertain, at least, the possibility that Jesus was the one who comes after him. Andreas Köstenberger ("Who Were the First Disciples of Jesus? An Assessment of the Historicity of the Johannine Call Narrative (John 1:35–51)," in *John, Jesus, and History, Volume 3: Glimpses of Jesus through the Johannine Lens*, ed. Paul N. Anderson, Felix Just, and Tom Thatcher [Atlanta: SBL Press, 2016], 189–99 [197]) is remarkably simplistic.

63 See Tom Thatcher, *Why John Wrote a Gospel: Jesus, Memory, History* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006), though I take very different stances on questions of media, memory, and tradition than does Thatcher.

clarify the historical forces at work in the production and reception of distinctive Johannine theological perspectives. The Fourth Gospel is a thoroughly theological text; of course it is. Reading the Gospel of John as a historical text does not require us to pretend that it isn't. But historians cannot recover history simply by discounting the ideological interests of our sources. Our sources' interests and prejudices also require historical explanation.⁶⁴ Indeed, as we see in John 1, our sources' interests and prejudices provide the very vehicles that put us in touch with the past they seek to remember in their own times and places.

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64 See Powell, "De-Johannification of Jesus," 131.

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