

The Historical Jesus and the Johannine Christ

Countless portraits of Jesus have been painted over the centuries, and there seems to be no end in sight to the creativity and productivity of the artists wishing to display their work. In the academic wing of the gallery, the portraits have routinely differed from one another in texture, point of view, expression, and pose. But the materials used have been markedly the same, for most of the portraits of Jesus here have used the palette of the Synoptic Gospels.¹ Although John is sometimes used, the portraits painted from the vantage point and in the style of the Fourth Gospel are usually hung off to one side of the gallery of academic scholarship, isolated as idiosyncratic or unreliable interpretations of the one who sat for the portrait. Ironically, for centuries prior to the rise of critical scholarship, this was not the case. In earlier ages the doctors of the church used and mixed the colors of the four Gospels indiscriminately, without conscious attention to the source of their pigments.

Because scholars depend on the Synoptics for the materials used to reconstruct their portraits of Jesus, "the historical Jesus" is nowadays almost synonymous with "the Synoptic Jesus." John's portrait seems to be painted in such an innovative style and with such unusual technique that critics have wondered whether the portrait better captures the subject or the artist.² So, whereas one studies the canvases of the Synoptic Gospels to catch a glimpse of "the historical Jesus," in the distinctive rendering of the Fourth Evangelist we have "the Johannine Christ"—almost a different subject, and certainly a unique interpretation of him. More interested in mimetic representation, the Synoptics allegedly approximate Jesus "as he really was." But John, not so interested in art imitating life, gives us "the Christ as the church confessed him."

The purpose of this chapter is to explore some dimensions of the relationship between "the historical Jesus" and "the Johannine Christ."³ We begin, first, with a review of the substantial similarities and considerable differences between the Johannine and Synoptic traditions. Endeavors to explain this mixed evidence have produced a number of theories about John's historicity, and it will be worthwhile, second, to consider briefly the definition of "historical" operative in discussions

about the Gospel of John. Following these introductory sections, we will survey, third, the attempts to uncover historical traditions in John.

There are places in which John has not interpreted the tradition in ways that we might have expected or predicted even when the opportunity seemed at hand, and other instances where the details of the Gospel strike one as historically plausible. Some elements of the Gospel's presentation of Jesus seem at once to be the stuff and substance of Johannine interpretation and yet accurately capture the conditions of first-century Palestine and the lineaments of Jesus' ministry. In fact, there are some features of John's portrayal of Jesus that are remarkably in keeping with recent scholarly reconstructions of the aims and intentions of Jesus. Thus, in light of the alleged theological and interpretive stance of the Gospel, it will be worthwhile to explore some of the "primitive" features of the Gospel of John, instances where John seems less theological, "spiritual," or interpretive than do the Synoptics.

In the light of all these observations, we will conclude with some reflections about the nature of the interpretation that we have in John, noting what distinguishes not just the content of the Gospel but the kind of interpretation of Jesus' ministry that John offers. But we begin with a comparison of the portraits of Jesus in John and the other canonical gospels.

THE PORTRAITS OF JESUS IN JOHN AND IN THE SYNOPTIC GOSPELS

In all the Gospels, Jesus preaches and teaches, gathers disciples, performs extraordinary deeds, enters into debate and conflict with Jewish authorities, and is put to death by Roman crucifixion. Moreover, the broad outlines of the narratives are similar. Jesus' public ministry begins with the baptizing activity of John; roughly in the middle of the narrative comes a miraculous feeding and Peter's confession; there is a decisive entry into Jerusalem, a last meal with his followers, a trial, crucifixion, and burial, accounts of an empty tomb, and appearances of the risen Jesus. And yet at almost every point John's portrayal of these events stands out from the corresponding Synoptic accounts.⁴

While Jesus figures prominently as a teacher in all the Gospels, there are striking differences between John and the Synoptics in style and content. In a nutshell, the most characteristic aspect of Jesus' teaching in the Synoptic Gospels is lacking in John, and what typifies John's presentation of Jesus' teaching is absent in the Synoptics. Specifically, whereas in the Synoptic Gospels Jesus proclaims the kingdom of God in parables and aphorisms (see Mark 1:38; Luke 4:43), in the Gospel of John "kingdom of God" occurs only in 3:3 and 3:5, and none of the classic kingdom parables (the sower, the wheat and the tares, pearl of great price) or the great story parables (the good Samaritan, the prodigal son, the great banquet) are to be found. Again, in the Synoptic Gospels, Jesus is the herald of the kingdom of God, but in John he is the agent of God's gift of eternal life.⁵ Finally,

John's most frequent designation for Jesus is "Son," and for God, "Father." Although both images are found in the Synoptics, again we find that what is central in John is merely alluded to or implied in the other Gospels.⁶

Rather than speaking in parables and aphorisms, the Johannine Jesus either engages in extended dialogue (chaps. 3, 4, 5, 9, 11) or speaks in long discourses (chaps. 6, 7, 8), in which are embedded the renowned "I am" sayings.⁷ Thus the public discourses of Jesus become occasions in which he speaks pointedly and repeatedly of his own role and relationship to God. Disclosure and discussion of his identity are found in the Synoptic accounts, but generally in scenes set in private (Mark 8:27-31; Matt. 10:32-33, 37-39, 40), in implicit or veiled statements, and never in terms of the revelatory "I am" pronouncements.⁸ Other features that characterize Jesus' speech in John are the dualism of light and darkness and of above and below, including the requirement of "birth from above"; the summons to "believe in" Jesus (John 3:16) rather than to follow (Mark 10:21), receive (Mark 9:38; 10:37 par. Matt. 10:40-41), or hear (Luke 10:16) Jesus; the characterization of Jesus' opponents as "the Jews" and "the world"; and the theme of the unity of Father and Son, and of their unity with believers. Finally, one is hard put to find statements on the lips of Jesus in the Synoptics such as "Before Abraham was I am" (8:58; cf. 17:5, 24).

In short, the Gospel of John contains such a sustained presentation of the centrality of Jesus in mediating the presence and knowledge of God and the gift of eternal life that it would be difficult to derive from John the portrait of Jesus as merely or primarily a great ethical teacher, or as a prophet of God in the tradition of the great Hebrew prophets. Such a portrait can more easily be painted using the materials of the Synoptic Gospels, where Jesus teaches regularly about the establishment of the kingdom and the human conduct that God requires, covering such matters as prayer, almsgiving, wealth, mission, forgiveness, paying taxes, retaliation, anxiety, speech, love, and discipleship. The question remains, of course: Which emphases were characteristic of the teachings of Jesus? And, if both the Johannine and Synoptic records are reliable digests of Jesus' proclamation, why is there not greater overlap between them?

The miracle tradition of John also differs from that of the other Gospels, and in two chief ways: The deeds recorded are, on the whole, found only in John, and their accompanying interpretation is not only unique to John but generally serves as the primary vehicle for John's theology and distinctive viewpoint. Although many of Jesus' deeds are of the same kind in John and the Synoptics (healing the lame, the blind, the ill) except for the feeding of the five thousand, no Johannine miracle can clearly be identified with any of the Synoptic miracles.⁹ Demon exorcisms figure prominently in the Synoptics, bearing witness to Jesus' authority and the presence of God's spirit through his exorcistic activity (Mark 3:23-27; Luke 11:17-20/Matt. 12:25-28), but no exorcisms are found in John. There are no cures of those with leprosy (Mark 1:40-45; Luke 17:11-19). Although women play particularly important roles in John, both as exemplars of faith and recipients of revelation, no women are healed or cured. Even the miracles with which John

frames the account of Jesus' public ministry—the changing of the water to wine, and the raising of Lazarus—are found only in John.

John interprets the miracles by labeling them "signs." That is, they are tokens of Jesus' own identity as the agent of God's salvation, whereas the Synoptic miracles are linked to the fulfillment of the messianic age (Matt. 11:4; Luke 7:22) and to the manifestation of God's kingdom.¹⁰ Once again, the Synoptic tradition heralds Jesus as the mediator of God's kingdom, whereas the Johannine miracles acclaim him as the agent through whom God brings life to the world.

Finally, in John as in the other Gospels, Jesus is brought to trial and put to death by crucifixion. Here, too, there are differences among the various Gospel narratives. In John, and only in John, Jesus washes his disciples' feet as a model of his selfless love and sacrificial death on the cross (13:1–18), which the disciples are to imitate.¹¹ And in contrast with the Synoptic Gospels, at this last meal the Johannine Jesus does not institute the "Lord's Supper."¹² Additionally, the last supper becomes the occasion at which Jesus delivers a lengthy parting address, the well-known "farewell discourses." Like the eschatological discourses of the Synoptics, they warn of coming persecutions and promise the aid of the Spirit; but they also, unlike the Synoptic Gospels, include lengthy discussions of Jesus' return to God and to the preexistent heavenly glory, a return that takes place through the crucifixion, the "lifting up" on the cross.¹³ John reports that a Roman cohort was sent to seize Jesus, and when he acknowledged—with a mysterious "I am he" (18:5)—that he was the one they were seeking, the arresting soldiers fell to the ground (18:6). With Pilate, Jesus carried on a lengthy discussion about kingship and power (18:33–38; 19:7–15), whereas the Synoptics report that after an initial terse response to the question, "Are you the King of the Jews?" Jesus remained silent (Mark 14:5 part.). Jesus' mother and the beloved disciple are to be found at the foot of the cross (19:25–27); no Synoptic Gospel mentions a male disciple present at the cross. As he died, Jesus proclaimed the accomplishment of his work with the announcement, "It is finished!" (19:30), rather than quoting the words of the lament, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" A soldier thrust a spear into Jesus' side to verify that he was dead and, in so doing, released the flow of blood and water (19:34–37), emblematic of the gift of life and the Spirit. These features of the passion narrative are unique to John. They also stand in service of that Gospel's presentation of Jesus, who acted with sovereign authority and foreknowledge, willingly and deliberately laying down his life to bring life to the world.¹⁴

There is other material unique to John (e.g., the encounters with Nicodemus, the Samaritan woman, the man at the pool in Jerusalem, and the man born blind). If it were merely that the individuals healed, the persons encountered, or the occasions of Jesus' discourses were different from those found in the other Gospels, one might be able to account for the discrepancies as stemming from different traditions or sources. It is, however, not simply the fact of the differences but rather the consistent recasting of the material in an idiom not characteristic of the other

Gospels that raises the question of the value of the testimony to Jesus found only in John. In other words, precisely that which makes John John—the great christological claims and discourses and the distinctive idiom in which the Johannine Jesus speaks—also raises the question of whether and in what way John's distinctive portrait of Jesus may be used in getting back to "the historical Jesus." Before investigating this quest a bit more closely, it will be useful to review what the phrase "the historical Jesus" connotes by the standards of critical scholarship.

THE "HISTORICAL" JESUS

By the conventions of academic idiom, "the historical Jesus" is a shorthand way of designating the picture of Jesus constructed by scholarly explanations of the aims, intentions, words and deeds of Jesus in the Gospels in the context of other ancient documents. The purpose of such reconstructions is to provide as good an approximation as one can of the "Jesus of history" or "Jesus as he really was." Implicit in this quest is the conviction that the Gospels give us information that can be used in getting at "the Jesus of history," but that they themselves do not give the kinds of explanations that are desirable in historical reporting. "The historical Jesus"—and sometimes simply "Jesus"—remains a cipher for the results of the scholar's reconstruction of him. The historical Jesus is the historian's Jesus. But the historian's Jesus is not the Johannine Jesus.

At issue is not whether Jesus actually lived, for that is disputed by no reputable historian. Rather, the question is whether John can be considered "historical" in the sense that it reports what "really happened," something like what we would have been able to capture on videotape had we been there.¹⁵ To be sure, many scholars would grant that John gives us history in the sense that it contains some events that really happened or some sayings that approximate what Jesus actually said, as well as information that accurately explains customs and geography of ancient Palestine.¹⁶ Some have gone even further in advocating the historical value of the Gospel of John, suggesting that it is to be preferred as an account for information about the historical Jesus.¹⁷

But on the whole, fewer scholars would be willing to label John's overall presentation of Jesus' words and deeds as "historical" in the sense that the entire presentation of Jesus could be analyzed by historical methods of study and shown to regularly provide narratives of what Jesus actually said and did and so serve as a useful source in reconstructing the historical Jesus. By this definition John's account is not accepted as historical, because its interpretation of events has overshadowed any particular interest in reporting history (what actually happened). So while many scholars would affirm that John includes historical information and that John intends to provide a meaningful narration of the significance of the events of Jesus' life and is in this sense historical and not fictional, it is also true that many, if not most, New Testament scholars find John only an occasionally

useful source for developing a picture of the historical Jesus. Instead, John gives us his own distinctive portrait of Jesus, and it is a portrait heavily colored and decisively shaped by the historical circumstances of the Johannine community and later church confessions of Jesus as Messiah and Son of God. In other words, John gives us "the Christ," not the Jesus of history.

From the way that scholars have addressed the problem of John's historicity, two observations emerge. First, "history" and "theology" continue to be juxtaposed as opposing categories. 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.¹⁸ Second, it is obvious that the baseline against which John is measured is the Synoptic Gospels. While the question of the literary relationship of the Gospels is not identical with, and cannot alone settle, the problem of the historicity of John, it does have implications for the historical value of the Fourth Gospel. For if the Synoptics provide reliable information about Jesus' ministry, words, and deeds, and if John differs from them at every point, can one nevertheless detect materials in John that are not only traditional but equally as useful as those in the Synoptic Gospels? The question of John's relationship to the other Gospels thus continues to play an important role in considerations of the historicity of John.

THE QUESTION OF HISTORICAL TRADITION IN JOHN

One of the earliest explanations of the relationship of John to the other Gospels was offered in Clement of Alexandria's account of the writing of John: "Last of all, aware that the physical facts [τὰ σωματικά] had been recorded in the Gospels, encouraged by his pupils and irresistibly moved by the Spirit, John wrote a spiritual Gospel."¹⁹ Though Clement undoubtedly did not intend to impugn the historical value of the Fourth Gospel, his statement points to an awareness of the differences between it and the other Gospels. Since these differences could be attributed to the inspired testimony of the apostle, the disparities were no cause for alarm. Such a model was useful and accepted in one form or another for many years in the church.²⁰ But with the rise of historical criticism, basic assumptions about John and, indeed, all the Gospels began to be called into question. Historical criticism challenged the Johannine authorship of the Gospel and its historical value because of its obvious differences from the other Gospels and its intensely "spiritual" theologizing. Eventually it was concluded that, given the significant differences, both John and the Synoptics could not be taken as equally historical accounts of Jesus' life, and one would have to choose between them.²¹ Although there were those who wished to give John preference or at least equal voice, the balance tilted decisively towards the Synoptic accounts.

The Historical Jesus and the Johannine Christ

But in the twentieth century, two developments provoked a reconsideration of John's historical value. The discoveries of the Dead Sea Scrolls prompted a reassessment of the Gospel of John, since in the eyes of many they allowed for a first-century Jewish Palestinian context for the idiom of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel, discounting the necessity of a late "hellenizing" influence.²² John no longer needed, it was argued, a late date or a non-Palestinian provenance, since a first-century Palestinian Jew could have spoken as the Johannine Jesus did.²³

The unquestionably more significant trend developing in Johannine studies, however, was the inclination to regard John as literarily independent of the other Gospels. Two names figure most prominently in this discussion: P. Gardner-Smith and C. H. Dodd. Both Gardner-Smith, in a slim but suggestive volume, and Dodd, in a lengthy and detailed tome, contended that John's distinctiveness vis-à-vis the Synoptics could be explained more plausibly on the assumption that the Fourth Gospel was independent of, rather than dependent on, the other three.²⁴ This raised the question of the historical value of the tradition found only in John.²⁵ For as long as John was viewed as dependent upon the other Gospels, it was also frequently understood as a theological reflection upon them. In other words, John's dependence counted against its historical value. But if the Gospel of John could not be explained as the product of the Evangelist's ruminations and reflections on the Synoptic Gospels, then what was the source of the Gospel's peculiar material and distinctive vantage point? Dodd's investigations were a powerful argument for rooting the materials of John in historical tradition independent of the Synoptic tradition. While the independent origins of John's traditions do not necessarily imply the historicity of the events they purport to record, it was no longer so simple to assign to the Evangelist's creativity or theologizing all elements distinctive to John.

In an article on the development of the oral tradition in John, James D. G. Dunn provides a helpful and schematic overview of the data, sifted by Dodd and others, with positive implications for the historical value of John.²⁶ The resulting list includes geographical and narrative details, many of the events of Jesus' ministry, and quite a few sayings, including some material most typical of John (e.g., cf. John 3:8 with Mark 4:27; John 3:35 and 5:19–20a with Matt. 11:27; John 5:23 with Matt. 10:40; John 12:47 with Luke 9:56; John 13:13–16 with Matt. 10:24–25 par.; and John 16:2 with Matt. 24:9).

Furthermore, there are items of Jesus' self-presentation in the Gospel, including some of the most characteristically Johannine features, that can plausibly be said to have a historical base in the earliest memories of Jesus' ministry. The Father-Son imagery that dominates John is paralleled in the Synoptics; "Son of Man" remains a designation used only by Jesus; Jesus acknowledges the title "Messiah," but only in private and never overtly; arguments about Jesus' authority are raised in the Synoptic accounts. Even the Johannine "I am" statements ("I am the bread of life," 6:35; or "I am the light of the world," 8:12; 9:5) have some likeness to

the "I" statements of the Synoptic Gospels insofar as they focus attention on Jesus and his role ("I have come to call not the righteous but sinners," Matt. 9:13/Luke 5:32; "If it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you," Matt. 12:28/Luke 11:20).

Some material found only in John has a parallel in the Synoptics, even though it is found in different settings. There is the charge of demon possession, made in the Synoptics with respect to his exorcisms (Mark 3:22) but in John with reference to his teaching (John 7:20; 8:48; 10:21). In both John and the Synoptics, Jesus consistently distances himself from his family (Mark 3:31–35; John 2:4), and they fail to understand him (Mark 3:21; John 7:5). The table fellowship with "sinners and tax collectors," so well known from the other Gospels, has no parallel in John, but there is extended discussion about whether Jesus is a sinner (John 9:16, 24–34), and Jesus pronounces forgiveness of sins (John 5:14). Jesus twice heals on the Sabbath (John 5; 9), which raises the question of his authority and relationship to God, even as do different Sabbath violations in the Synoptics. Mary and Martha (Luke 10:38–42) appear in a completely different story in John 11, here with their brother Lazarus, who is raised from the dead (cf. Luke 16:19–31). Implicit and explicit analogies are made to Jesus as shepherd (Luke 15:4–7; John 10:1–18).

Additionally, there are items only in John that are likely to be historical and ought to be given due weight. Jesus' first disciples may once have been followers of the Baptist (cf. John 1:35–42). There is no *a priori* reason to reject the report of Jesus and his disciples' conducting a ministry of baptism for a time (3:22–26). That Jesus regularly visited Jerusalem, rather than merely at the time of his death, is often accepted as more realistic for a pious, first-century Jewish male (and is hinted at in the other Gospels as well: Mark 11:2; Luke 13:34; 22:8–13, 53). Martin Hengel thinks it historically likely that Annas was the figure pulling the strings behind the scenes at Jesus' arrest and trial.²⁷ Even John's placement of the Last Supper before Passover has struck some as likely.

Finally, the degree of verisimilitude or realism that attends John's Gospel has also been noted.²⁸ Thus, for example, it is precisely the extended discourses and debates of John's Gospel, rather than the brief encounters of the Synoptics, that seem to represent more plausibly the kind of interaction and debate that Jesus had with his opponents.²⁹

It is difficult to doubt, in the face of such data, that the Fourth Gospel depends on traditions which are in some respects quite similar to and even identical with those of the Synoptic Gospels. Therefore, it is worth asking why more scholars have not been persuaded to admit John as a reliable witness to the historical Jesus. Probably the main issue is that it is difficult to find elements of the distinctively Johannine portrait of Jesus in the other Gospels, and this deficit is difficult to explain if John intended to chronicle the events of Jesus' life. For example, it certainly gives one pause that none of the oft-quoted "I am" sayings with predicate ("I am the bread of life"; "I am the resurrection and the life"; "I am the way, the

truth, and the life") can be found in the Synoptics. It is equally odd that no true parables are found in John, especially since the parables come from multiple sources (Mark, Q, L, M). Again, if the Father-Son relationship was as central to Jesus' teaching as it is in John, why have the Synoptic traditions boiled this theme down to one or two pithy but enigmatic sayings? In short, it has generally been judged easier to explain why and how John has shaped his material into its present form if the Synoptics reflect the themes of Jesus' preaching and teaching, than to account for the Synoptic rendering of Jesus' teachings if John's rendition is deemed more literal. Thus, the historical information indisputably to be found in John and the fact that John's theological reflections and unique material often have parallels and overlap in Synoptic tradition do not, taken together, serve to convince most scholars that the preference for the Synoptics as a source for information about Jesus' life and teaching ought to be put aside in favor of the Gospel of John. Yet the picture is more complicated than it first appears.

THE PORTRAIT OF JESUS IN THE GOSPEL OF JOHN

It is widely (although sometimes rather uncritically) accepted that John's portrait is more developed towards a "higher" Christology. But a curious feature of John is that there are a number of items that strike one as more "primitive" or perhaps less theologically exploited or useful than comparable details of tradition in the Synoptic Gospels. Eugene Lencio, for example, argues that the Synoptic Gospels, particularly Mark, portray Jesus as acting more independently of God than does John.³⁰ Whereas in Mark the emphasis falls on the astonishing authority and independence by which Jesus acts, in John the accent falls on the dependence and obedience to God from whom Jesus derives his authority. Similarly, although the "amen" formula, which in Mark introduces authoritative pronouncements, is solemnly doubled in John, even so the Johannine "amen" sayings seem to point to Jesus as the bearer of the Father's authority, rather than to his own independence. Finally, the mutual love of Father and Son, a cornerstone of John's presentation of Jesus, contributes to the emphasis on Jesus' dependence on God. It is, of course, debatable whether the Johannine stress on the obedience and dependence of Jesus is more or less developed than the Markan emphasis on Jesus' independent action and authority. But in a Gospel that is often understood to stress the divinity and exalted status of its central figure, such an emphasis at least causes one to reconsider what precisely is the best way to formulate Jesus' status in John and to question whether every item in the Johannine presentation of Jesus is more highly "developed."

John's Christological Witness

A similarly and surprisingly undeveloped feature of the Gospel is its decided restraint in applying to Jesus the full range of christological titles and designations. In the prologue the Word of God is explicitly spoken of as preexistent and

as God, attributes that Thomas echoes in the confession "My Lord and my God!" (20:28). But the explicit confession of Jesus as God happens first and only after the resurrection. None of Jesus' disciples is portrayed as making this confession during his lifetime, nor does Jesus himself ask for it or state it explicitly. This is striking, since several of John's narratives seem to begin with confessions that are deemed inadequate (e.g., prophet) and progress to more satisfactory designations of Jesus (e.g., Savior of the world; Son of Man).³¹ But in these narratives no one arrives at the confession "You are God!"

Instead, the arguments about Jesus' identity still have to do with questions of Messiahship (4:25–26; 7:26–27, 31, 40–44; 10:24; 12:34) and other messianic roles of the first century (e.g., the Prophet; 4:19; 6:14–15; 7:40).³² Indeed, the Johannine Jesus shows a certain reserve towards using and accepting the title "Messiah." Where there is recognition of Jesus as Messiah (John 4:25–26; cf. Mark 8:27–31), the scene is set in private, and Jesus himself is portrayed as reluctant to make explicitly royal claims. Certainly Peter's confession that Jesus is "the Holy One of God" (John 6:69) strikes one as decidedly less confessional than the acknowledgment found in the Synoptic accounts, "You are the Messiah." And even as the Synoptic Jesus deflects Caiaphas's question, "Are you the Messiah?" so the Johannine Jesus parries Pilate's query, "Are you the King of the Jews?" with a counterthrust: "Do you say this of your own accord?" (18:34). While John's avowed purpose is to elicit faith in Jesus as the Christ (20:30–31), oddly enough the "Johannine Christ" does not broadcast his messianic status any more than does the "Synoptic Jesus."³³

The case is similar with the enigmatic designation, "Son of Man." As in the Synoptic Gospels, "Son of Man" remains a self-designation on the lips of Jesus.³⁴ In the catalog of titles adduced in the first chapter (Lamb of God; Son of God; Rabbi; Messiah; King of Israel), the disciples do not venture to call Jesus "Son of Man" (or "Word" or "God," for that matter). When the blind man of chapter 9 is asked, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" he does confess his faith in him, but with the assertion "Lord [or, 'Sir'], I believe." John apparently opts for the puzzling "Son of Man" as a vehicle for his interpretation of Jesus, in part because Jesus himself, and only Jesus, used the title, and so it becomes a central feature of his self-revelation. John has pressed the title into service particularly to speak of the Son of Man who must be "lifted up" (ascend) even as he has "come down from heaven" (descended). So, while John uses "Son of Man" with a different accent, he does prefer it to a designation foreign to the historical Jesus, such as "Logos."

John's reserve in applying to the earthly Jesus the full range of later christological titles indicates that there are limits beyond which he does not venture.³⁵ His theological creativity is not unbridled but shaped by that which comes to him in his traditions, in which the question of the messianic status of Jesus no doubt loomed large. It may well be that even John's preferred designation of Jesus simply as "Son" has not lost its messianic overtones. Nathanael's initial confession—

The Historical Jesus and the Johannine Christ

"Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!"—not only suggests the near equivalence of these terms with each other and with Messiah, but puts them in apparently ascending order, so that the climactic confession is that Jesus is "King of Israel."³⁶ Here there are similarities to Jesus' trial before Pilate, where the issue of Jesus' kingship is understood to be particularly a Jewish concern (18:33–39). Indeed, in the Johannine passion narrative the royal claim and status of Jesus dominate—even as the proclamation of the kingdom of God dominates in the Synoptics, and as the question "Are you the Messiah, the Son of God?" becomes central in their trial scenes before the high priest. Finally, the possible equivalence of "Son of God" and "Messiah" is also suggested by John's statement of express purpose in 20:30–31. The designation of Jesus as "Son" in John may well be a development of and reflection on the ideal of the Messiah as the chosen and anointed King, the righteous "Son" of God.³⁷

The Account of Jesus' Death

As this survey of John's titles shows, at one and the same time John has some of the most primitive as well as the most developed elements of the Gospel tradition. The same may be said of John's portrayal of Jesus' death. One of the striking features of John's account is the way in which he presents Jesus as deliberately advancing towards his death with the full knowledge that it accomplished God's salvation of the world. In no other Gospel does Jesus speak so plainly of the result of his death: "If I be lifted up, I will draw all people to myself" (John 12:32). Indeed, the theme of the gathering together of God's people becomes a hallmark of John's interpretation of Jesus' death: The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep so that there may be one shepherd and one flock (10:10–18); a seed remains alone unless it falls into the ground and dies, in which case it bears much fruit (12:23); and one must give his life for the nation, to gather the scattered children of God together (11:45–52). Such repeated statements develop at length the idea found only tersely in Mark, "The Son of Man came to give his life a ransom for many" (10:45). The authenticity of this saying has been disputed by those who think it smacks too much of later language of atonement. But Mark and John share the (somewhat undeveloped) idea that the death of the one serves to gather many, and in neither Gospel is this gathering linked specifically to the expiation or bearing of sin. Their similarity is all the more interesting in view of one currently popular conception of Jesus as the leader of an eschatological renewal movement in Judaism, whose purpose it was to gather the faithful to enjoy the blessings of God's kingdom.³⁸ John insists that Jesus ultimately thought that the promise that "many shall come from east and west and sit at table in the kingdom of God" (cf. Luke 13:29) would be brought to fulfillment only through his death. Interestingly, one event that has figured prominently in recent reconstructions of Jesus' life is the "cleansing of the Temple," which is understood to trigger Jesus' arrest and so lead to his death.³⁹ This incident is reported in John, but at the outset

rather than at the end of Jesus' public ministry. But despite its new placement, the link between it and Jesus' death is not lost. First, the threatened destruction of the Temple prefigures Jesus' death and resurrection, and perhaps even hints at the causal link between the prophetic act against the Temple and Jesus' own death. Furthermore, only in John does the quotation of Ps. 69:9 serve to interpret Jesus' act in the Temple: "Zeal for thy house will consume me." John has substituted a future tense ("will consume") for the past tense ("consumed").⁴⁰ By moving the Temple cleansing forward and introducing the altered quotation from the Psalms, John has assigned to that act the prominent role that it has assumed in some recent hypotheses about the events that may well have triggered Jesus' arrest.⁴¹

John's Gospel also provides a motivation for Jesus' crucifixion—namely, political expediency—that seems credible and is more accessible historically than recourse to the theory of Jewish "jealousy." The theory that the problem facing the Jewish leaders was not merely "religious" (that is, how to deal with an idiosyncratic and upstart prophet and teacher) but political (how to explain the popularity of Jesus to their Roman overlords) seems quite likely, given the history of abortive revolts and Roman intervention in the first century.⁴² Even the placement of Roman soldiers at Jesus' arrest, while perhaps exaggerated in number, does not seem inherently impossible. In short, John makes clearer than any of the other Gospels what the Roman stake in Jesus' death was and on what charges the Romans might have been persuaded to eliminate him. In thus emphasizing the political implications of Jesus' ministry and the way in which he might have been perceived or portrayed as endangering the peace, John provides a historically credible reason for Jesus' death at the hand of the Romans.⁴³

What is particularly striking is that all these elements of the Johannine account of Jesus' death are both characteristic of or even unique to John, and yet they seem to embody primitive tradition, or at least tradition that has not developed along lines that are familiar from elsewhere in the New Testament. In spite of passages such as John 1:29 ("Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!"), the Fourth Gospel does not interpret Jesus' death primarily as an atonement for sin, as is characteristic of the Pauline understanding of the cross. Even if we want to label John's interpretation as "developed" or "Christian" or "confessional," we must admit that the interpretation has run along its own trajectory. Such passages might provide for us a window into other, perhaps early traditions about Jesus, and so ultimately aid us in reconstructions of the historical Jesus as well.

INTERPRETATION IN THE GOSPEL OF JOHN

It is time to draw together the threads of our discussion. It seems difficult to dispute the view that John gives us a more thoroughgoing, theological reworking of traditional material. This does not mean that (unlike the Synoptics) John reworks and reflects on the material that has come to him in the tradition. Rather, his inter-

pretation takes him more decidedly in a certain direction. The tradition is, as it were, funneled through a narrower spout. So the vocabulary becomes distinctively Johannine, and the themes on which Jesus discourses are fewer. Perhaps, then, John might better be termed more "paraphrastic" than the other Gospels. The idiom of the Johannine Jesus is not the idiom characteristic of the Synoptic Jesus. The Gospel of John is also less determined by certain prominent traditions of Jesus' ministry, such as the proclamation of the kingdom of God, the exorcism of demonic forces, the primarily Galilean setting of the ministry, and so on.

The issue is not so much whether John is *more* interpretive than the other Gospels. It is whether the trajectory of John's interpretation runs counter to, parallel with, or in direct continuity from the trajectories established by the Synoptic Gospels and their various sources. I would argue that the trajectories of John and the Synoptics run parallel to each other, but John's parallel trajectory is located on a different conceptual plane than that of the Synoptics. Just how widely separated those planes are is open to debate. But it is not the question of whether Jesus was a faithful or unfaithful servant of God, a true or false prophet, the Messiah or merely a pretender, that divides John and the Synoptics. Rather, the differences between John and the Synoptics reflect different approaches to the best way to express the reality and significance of Jesus' person for those who believe. John has chosen to shape the story of Jesus in a way quite different from that of the other Evangelists.

John shapes his material in several ways. First, certain traditional motifs, such as the occasional address to God as Father or Jesus' self-designation as "Son," have become central and thematic. Such motifs or ideas are elements from the historical tradition, which, we may say with some confidence, come from Jesus' own words or actions. They would provide the stuff of a good documentary. But the total effect is more like a docudrama, a creative and dramatic interpretation of the historical material.

Second, John highlights what he regards as the major issues between Jesus and his contemporaries. On the one hand, he leaves out quite a lot of material (parables; teaching about the kingdom of God; table fellowship; demon exorcisms) otherwise key to the Synoptic accounts. On the other hand, he reorients the remaining material. Thus, for example, in controversies triggered by Sabbath healings (chaps. 5 and 9) the propriety of Jesus' violation of Sabbath law becomes transmuted to a question of Jesus' relationship to God. Whereas in the other Gospels Jesus rebuts—with arguments from the scriptures and common practice—accusations that he has violated the Sabbath, in John it is Jesus' relationship to God that is invoked as the justification for his practice.⁴⁴

Similarly, although the discussions about purity laws (foods, washing, table fellowship) and the great commandment are missing in John, questions about the proper interpretation of the law are quite important. But again, the issue is not what the law says about eating certain food, or passing judgments about which

commandment ranks above the rest. Instead, the law is about Jesus. Moses, properly understood, points to Jesus and bears testimony to him (5:39). As A. E. Harvey puts it, given that Jesus was condemned to death by men fully competent in the Law of Moses, who was right: he or they?⁴⁵ The focus is intensely personal, and the Jesus of John's Gospel does not so much refute arguments about interpretation of the law as assert his own claims. John's interest is not so much in what the arguments were about, but in Jesus' own right and authority to speak and act as he did, because of his relationship to and mission from God. E. P. Sanders' characterization of the bottom line of Jesus' ministry aptly captures what is at stake especially and explicitly in the Gospel of John: "Exegesis indicates that there were *specific issues* at stake between Jesus and the Jewish hierarchy, and that the specific issues revolved around a *basic question*: who spoke for God?"⁴⁶

A third feature of John's interpretation of the life of Jesus is his provision for a framework that shapes a revealing portrait of Jesus, in John's estimation. And the framework that he provides can be found in Jewish traditions about agency and wisdom.⁴⁷ The wisdom category, in particular, helps to account both for the "I am" sayings and for the "descent" of the Word of God, analogous to the descent of Wisdom to the world (cf. Sir. 24; Wisd. Sol. 7:22–30; 9:16–17). Wisdom was understood as a manifestation of God's own presence; with Jesus as God's Wisdom incarnate, John understood him as "God in his self-manifestation," since Wisdom itself is "the self-expression of God."⁴⁸ The traditions of agency, with the practical identity of the one who is sent with the sender, are foundational in portraying the unity of the Father and Son. Both the categories of "agency" and "wisdom" can plausibly be traced back to Jesus himself, and each plays a role in the Synoptic traditions.⁴⁹ Neither becomes central, however, in accounting for Jesus' person and mission as they do in the Gospel of John, nor is either pressed, as in John, to betoken the heavenly origin, divine status, and preexistence of God's chosen agent.

Is the presentation of Jesus as the incarnation of God's wisdom "historical"? A. T. Hanson, among others, comments that the Jesus of the Fourth Gospel "can not possibly be a historical representation" since he is "a divine figure, the eternal Word appearing as a man."⁵⁰ Hanson's comment—"The only way of defending the historicity of the figure is to claim that a God-man is a unique phenomenon and therefore we have no criteria by which to judge whether it could have occurred as it did or not"—shows that the issue, for him, is verifiability by historical criteria. To be sure, on those grounds it will be impossible to label John's account as historical, for how could one "verify" that Jesus was, indeed, the Word of God incarnate? But John's placement of his account of Jesus' life within a cosmological framework does not therefore render that account "unhistorical," particularly when one can sort out traditional and historical items and distinguish the contributions of that framework to the overall portrait.

John means to tell the reader what, in his view, was really going on in what went on in the life of Jesus of Nazareth.⁵¹ John's interpretation derives from re-

The Historical Jesus and the Johannine Christ

flection upon Jesus' action and words. Perhaps it is not, by modern measures, historical reporting, but much will depend on how one defines "historical." It is too simplistic to be left only with the options of historical or unhistorical. Instead, one must specify in what way the Gospel is (or is not) historical, and what definition is at work in such assessments. Not surprisingly, many judgments about historicity will turn out to be in the eye of the beholder. But the Gospel is a meaningful narration of historical events, clearly committed to the truth of the interpretive framework in which the events are placed. In the end, perhaps, the framework—the confession of Jesus as the incarnate Word and Wisdom of God, and thus God's uniquely commissioned and supreme agent—upstages the events within them. But without the events, the frame would collapse.

George Johnston speaks of John's portrait of Jesus as an icon. An icon is not a literal representation, but a stylized depiction, with some features highlighted to bring out the true spiritual significance of its subject.⁵² In John's iconic representation of Jesus, the historical Jesus is the portrait, and the confessional level, the frame. To hang the bare frame on the wall would be ludicrous. No one displays an empty frame. On the other hand, no artist paints a portrait merely to complement a previously chosen frame. But in John's case, the subject and the frame seem to have been in view from the beginning in the production of the finished product. With one eye on the frame and one eye on his subject, the evangelist produced a portrait that has struck many as the most daring of the Gospel portraits. While many will continue to dispute whether John's is a "good" likeness, this dispute may finally be as futile and irresolvable as arguing that photography is superior to Impressionism.

NOTES

1. Although each of the Synoptic Gospels has its own emphases and unique material as well, there is such a degree of commonality in their portraits of Jesus that we may speak of them together as "the Synoptic witness to Jesus." Moreover, it is precisely their similarity of outlook that makes the contrast with the Gospel of John all the more striking.

2. Of course this observation is neither peculiar nor limited to opinions about the Gospel of John. In *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, Albert Schweitzer wrote, "There is no historical task which so reveals a man's true self as the writing of a Life of Jesus" ([New York: Macmillan, 1910], 4). More recently, John Dominic Crossan writes, perhaps a bit cynically, "It is impossible to avoid the suspicion that historical Jesus research is a very safe place . . . to do autobiography and call it biography" (*The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* [San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991], xxviii).

3. Professor Smith's writings have tackled, directly and indirectly, many of the issues that are raised by a consideration of the topic of this chapter. See the collection of essays in *Johannine Christianity: Essays on Its Setting, Sources, and Theology*

(Columbia, South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 1984); and idem, "Historical Issues and the Problem of John and the Synoptics," in *From Jesus to John: Essays on Jesus and New Testament Christology in Honour of Martinus de Jonge*, ed. Martinus C. de Boer, JSNTSup 84 (Sheffield: JSOT, 1994), 252–67. It is gratifying to offer this chapter to his *Festschrift* inasmuch as it addresses issues that have regularly occupied his mind and pen.

4. See particularly Smith's discussion in "The Presentation of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel," reprinted in *Johannine Christianity*, 175–89.

5. There are references in the Synoptics to life and eternal life, but the motif figures thematically in John as it does not in the other Gospels. See Marianne Meye Thompson, "Eternal Life in the Gospel of John," *Ex Auditu* 5 (1989): 35–55.

6. The *locus classicus* in the Synoptics is Matt. 11:27 par. Luke 10:22. Not surprisingly, this passage has been called "the bolt from the Johannine blue."

7. In Dominic Crossan's reconstruction of Jesus (in *The Historical Jesus*) as a wisdom teacher and purveyor of aphorisms and parables, there is not one reference in the scripture index to the Gospel of John. In *The Five Gospels*, the version of the Gospels produced by the Jesus Seminar with the likely authentic sayings of Jesus printed in red type, not one saying of Jesus in the Gospel of John is so designated (Robert W. Funk, Roy W. Hoover, and the Jesus Seminar, *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus: New Translation and Commentary* [New York and Toronto: Macmillan/Macmillan Canada, 1993]).

8. It was particularly characteristic of proponents of the so-called "New Quest of the Historical Jesus" in the 1950s and 1960s to argue that while Jesus made few if any explicit messianic claims, there were implicit claims to authority in Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom of God and his interpretation of the law. Thus see the classic work by Günther Bornkamm, *Jesus of Nazareth* (New York: Harper & Row, 1960). Therefore a shadow falls over the historical character of the Gospel of John precisely because Jesus' proclamation in it is marked by overt claims about his status and person. This difference between John and the other Gospels continues to be identified as the heart of the problem in accepting the historicity of the Fourth Gospel, even when Jesus' claims are understood to be more offensive and explicit than previously allowed. See, for example, the comment of E. P. Sanders, who speaks of Jesus "extraordinary self-claim" (*Jesus and Judaism* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985], 305).

9. A possible exception is the healing of the official's son at Capernaum, John 4:48–52, see Matt. 8:5–13 and Luke 7:1–10.

10. However, it is also true that Mark lacks the explicit link between the demon exorcisms and the arrival of the kingdom of God (Luke 11:20/Matt. 12:28), as well as the link to the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy (Luke 7:22/Matt. 11:4–5). In both Mark and John the miracles focus attention on Jesus. But in Mark they call attention to Jesus' authority; in John, they call attention to Jesus' obedience to God. See Eugene Lemcio's discussion of this difference in "Father and Son in the Synoptics and John: A Canonical Reading," in Robert W. Wall and Eugene E. Lemcio, *The New Testament as Canon: A Reader in Canonical Criticism*, JSNTSup 76 (Sheffield: JSOT, 1992), 78–108.

11. In Mark 10:35–45 and Luke 22:27 there are traditions in which Jesus speaks of his service and love, holds these up as a model for his disciples, and locates the supreme example of such love in Jesus' own death.

12. John 6:51–58 speaks of the necessity of "eating the flesh" and "drinking the

blood of Jesus," language which certainly echoes the traditions of the institution of the Lord's Supper as found in Paul (1 Cor. 11:23–26) and the Synoptics (Matt. 26:26–29; Mark 14:22–25; Luke 22:17–20).

13. For the parallels between the eschatological discourse of Mark 13 and the farewell discourses of John, compare the following passages: Mark 13:9 and John 15:18–27; 16:2; Mark 13:10 and John 14:10–14; 15:1–8, 12–16; Mark 13:11 and John 14:15–26; Mark 13:12 and John 15:18–27; 16:1–2. John's account has surely elaborated the themes of the eschatological discourse found in Mark and the other Gospels. But one wonders whether Anthony Tyrrell Hanson does not overstate the case when he suggests that in John 14–18 "we find ourselves very . . . far removed from the sort of teaching that could ever be plausibly attributed to the earthly Jesus" (*The Prophetic Gospel: A Study of John and the Old Testament* [Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1991], 263).

14. For a discussion of the Johannine passion narrative, see particularly Donald Senior, *The Passion of Jesus in Gospel of John* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1991), and Marianne Meye Thompson, *The Incarnate Word: Perspectives on Jesus in the Fourth Gospel* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1993), 105–15. For detailed analysis and commentary, consult Raymond E. Brown, *The Death of the Messiah: From Gethsemane to the Grave: A Commentary on the Passion Narratives* (2 vols.: New York: Doubleday, 1994).

15. There is a whole body of literature that deals with questions about the philosophy of history, treating such problems as the nature, method, and purpose of historical inquiry. It is my intention here not to engage this discussion, but only to show what definitions of "historical" have been operative in discussions of the historical Jesus and of the historicity of John. The nineteenth-century German historian, Leopold von Ranke, spoke of the aim of history as laying out "what actually happened" (*wie es eigentlich gewesen ist*), a statement that has subsequently come under attack for ignoring the inevitably subjective judgments of the historian in offering explanations of limited and incomplete historical data. (For a helpful discussion of von Ranke's view, see Colin Brown, *History and Faith: A Personal Exploration* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987], 52.) But in spite of objections, it has been a foundational, if not primary, goal of studies of the historical Jesus to describe "what actually happened," what Jesus actually said and did. Scholars have attempted not only to recount what Jesus said and did, but also to suggest what degree of certainty may be attached to a particular judgment. But the Fourth Gospel is not taken as reporting the words of Jesus as he first uttered them, and in this sense it is not an account of "what Jesus actually said." There are differing judgments on the degree to which some of the deeds of Jesus in John represent "what actually happened."

16. See, for example, Raymond E. Brown, "The Problem of Historicity in John," *New Testament Essays* (London and Dublin: Geoffrey Chapman, 1965), 143–67; A. J. B. Higgins, *The Historicity of the Fourth Gospel* (London: Lutterworth, 1960); A. M. Hunter, *According to John: The New Look at the Fourth Gospel* (London: SCM, 1968); John A. T. Robinson, "The New Look on the Fourth Gospel," *Twelve New Testament Studies*, SBT 34 (London: SCM, 1962), 94–106, and idem, *The Priority of John*, ed. J. F. Coakley (London: SCM Press, 1985); Smith, "Historical Issues and the Problem of John and the Synoptics" (see above, n. 3).

17. Especially noteworthy in this regard is the monograph by J. A. T. Robinson, *The Priority of John*. In *Jesus and His Story*, Ethebert Stauffer argued that while the

Synoptics on the whole adhered most faithfully to the language of Jesus, the Fourth Evangelist "clarified the chronology in the story of Jesus" ([New York: Alfred Knopf, 1959], 4). But Stauffer concludes that many of the accounts of John, including accounts of Jesus' speeches, represent "what actually happened." Swimming against the tide, Stauffer even argued that the "I am" statements, modeled on the Old Testament theophanic formula, represent what Jesus "actually said."

18. The commentary by Edwyn Clement Hoskyns stands out as perhaps the most consistent attempt to wed history and theology: *The Fourth Gospel*, ed. Francis Noel Davy (London: Faber & Faber, 1940).

19. According to Eusebius, *H.E.*, 6.14.7. Here Clement presupposes that the Gospel was written by the apostle John, that it was the last of the four canonical Gospels to be written, and that John was well aware of the existence of the other Gospels and their contents. There is also an acknowledged difference in the tenor of the accounts: the Synoptics reported the "outward facts," but John wrote *τὰ πνευματικά*, the "spiritual matters."

20. Hans Windisch offered four models to explain the relationship of John to the Synoptic Gospels: the supplementation, interpretation, independence, and displacement theories. The views that John tended to interpret or to supplement the other Gospels could be linked to the apostolic authorship of the Gospel. Either John offered his own reflections on the meaning of Jesus' life, or he added additional information that the other Evangelists had omitted for various reasons (*Johannes und die Synoptiker: Wollte der vierte Evangelist die anderen Evangelien ergänzen oder ersetzen?* UNT 12 [Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs'sche Buchhandlung, 1926]).

21. David Friedrich Strauss, *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1972 [4th German ed., 1840]), is often credited with forcing the issue of the unhistorical character of the Fourth Gospel. See Ben F. Meyer, *The Aims of Jesus* (London: SCM, 1979), 35, 259 n. 39; John Ashton, *Understanding the Fourth Gospel* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1991), 36–38.

22. An early comment on the implications of the Scrolls for the historical value of John was offered by W. F. Albright, "Recent Discoveries in Palestine and the Gospel of John," in *The Background of the New Testament and Its Eschatology: Studies in Honour of C. H. Dodd*, ed. W. D. Davies and David Daube (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1956), 153–71. See also Raymond E. Brown, "The Qumran bridge and the Johannine Gospel and Epistles," in *New Testament Essays*, 102–31; and Leon Morris, "The Dead Sea Scrolls and St. John's Gospel," in *Studies in the Fourth Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969), 321–58, which includes an extensive bibliography.

23. This, of course, establishes only a possibility, and a possibility that could apply equally to the author of the Gospel as to Jesus himself.

24. Percival Gardner-Smith, *Saint John and the Synoptic Gospels* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1938); C. H. Dodd, *Historical Tradition in the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963). The history of scholarship on this issue can be read in D. Moody Smith, *John among the Gospels: The Relationship in Twentieth-Century Research* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1992); for discussions therein of Gardner-Smith and Dodd, see 37–62.

25. The title of Dodd's book, *Historical Tradition in the Fourth Gospel*, already intimates how John's independence could be pressed into the service of an argument for its historicity. As Donald A. Carson comments, "The vast majority of the book is

The Historical Jesus and the Johannine Christ

given over to the minute defence of John's literary independence from the synoptic gospels" ("Historical Tradition in the Fourth Gospel: After Dodd, What?" in *Gospel Perspectives*, vol. 2: *Studies of History and Tradition in the Four Gospels*, ed. R. T. France and David Wenham [Sheffield: JSOT, 1981], 89). In other words, although Dodd proceeds by endeavoring to establish the literary independence of John from the other Gospels, the purpose in doing so is to suggest that there is indeed "historical tradition in the fourth gospel." But literary independence does not necessarily either imply or impugn the historical value of the Gospel of John.

26. See James D. G. Dunn, "John and the Oral Gospel Tradition," in *Jesus and the Oral Gospel Tradition*, ed. Henry Wansbrough, JSNTSup 64 (Sheffield: JSOT, 1991), 351–79.

27. Martin Hengel, *The Johannine Question* (London and Philadelphia: SCM/Trinity Press International, 1989), 132.

28. When Hengel calls particular features "more realistic," he seems to mean "more likely historical" (thus *The Johannine Question*, 132). N. T. Wright suggests that protracted and rambling discourses of John (such as one finds in the sixth chapter) are more likely to represent the debates of Jesus with his opponents than are the highly condensed controversy stories of the Synoptic Gospels (*The New Testament and the People of God*, vol. 1: *Christian Origins and the Question of God* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992], 431). Smith, in "The Presentation of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel," speaks of John as having created a Gospel "in which Jesus as the representative of the world above visits and really lives in this world without depriving it of its verisimilitude" (*Johannine Christianity*, 187–88).

29. At first it seems the ultimate scholarly perversity to argue that, while the style of Jesus' discourses and debates in John's Gospel is more likely to reflect Jesus' own historical style, nevertheless the Synoptic sayings material has greater claims to historicity. But long discourses, such as Jesus taught in public in John, are not easily memorized and passed on to subsequent generations, whereas the forms of the material in the Synoptics are good examples of material that can more easily be memorized and transmitted, and square with what we know of ancient methods of teaching. See the articles by Dunn, "John and the Oral Gospel Tradition" (352–79) and Rainer Riesner, "Jesus as Preacher and Teacher" (185–210), both in *Jesus and the Oral Gospel Tradition* (above, n. 26).

30. See "Father and Son in the Synoptics and John," in Wall and Lemcio, *The New Testament as Canon* (above, n. 10).

31. See, for example, the progression of titles in chapter 4, from prophet (4:19), to Messiah (4:25), to Savior of the world (4:42); and in chapter 9, from prophet (9:17) to Son of man (9:35), to Lord (9:38).

32. John A. T. Robinson's contention that Messiah "is the category which controls [John's] Christology in the body of the Gospel," has much to commend it ("The Descent and Purpose of St. John's Gospel," in *New Testament Issues*, ed. Richard A. Batey [London: SCM, 1970], 198). See also Ashton, *Understanding the Fourth Gospel*, 104–6.

33. Here the ninth chapter of John is an interesting study, for the issues center on the question of whether Jesus is "a sinner" or "from God." The charge is not that some are confessing that Jesus is "divine," "equal to God," or "God," but that they acknowledge him as Messiah. This is presented as the heart of the problem, the confession that some are unwilling to make (9:22–23). As Ashton (*Understanding the*

Fourth Gospel, 180) asserts, "It is important to recognize that the distinctively Johannine (high) christology is absent from this debate."

34. Only in John 12:34 do others speak of the Son of Man, and there it is simply to query Jesus about who this mysterious figure might be.

35. John's restraint in this matter is particularly striking since, in the final analysis, he does not regard titles such as "prophet," "king," or even "Messiah" as in and of themselves fully sufficient designations of Jesus. They are not wrong, but neither are they fully adequate to express the reality of his being. See also Marinus de Jonge, "Jewish Expectations about the 'Messiah' in the Fourth Gospel," in idem, *Jesus, Stranger from Heaven and Son of God: Jesus Christ and the Christians in Johannine Perspective*, SBLMS 11 (Missoula, Mont.: Scholars Press, 1977), 83.

36. Robinson ("The Destination and Purpose of St. John's Gospel," 198) alleges that Son of God is epeexegetic of "the Christ." He continues, "I believe there is no other New Testament document more important for studying the Jewish sources of the term 'Son of God' than the fourth Gospel."

37. The roots of the identification of the Messiah with the Son of God are found particularly in Nathan's oracle in 2 Sam. 7:10–14, and in the Psalms, esp. 2:7 and 89:26–27. 4QFlor 1:10–13 joins together 2 Sam. 7:10–14 and Psalms 1 and 2 in a running commentary on the promised Messiah. For arguments that "Son of God" can be construed as messianic language, see Richard N. Longenecker, *The Christology of Early Jewish Christianity* (London: SCM Press, 1970; reprinted, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 93–99; C.F.D. Moule, *The Origin of Christology* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 22–31; Martin Hengel, *The Son of God: The Origin of Christology and the History of Jewish-Hellenistic Religion* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976); Donald Juell, *Messianic Exegesis: Christological Interpretation of the Old Testament in Early Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), 59–88. For hesitation in reading the so-called "Son of God" text (4Q246) from Qumran messianically, see Joseph A. Fitzmyer, "The Contribution of Qumran Aramaic to the Study of the New Testament," in *A Wandering Aramean: Collected Aramaic Essays*, SBLMS 25 (Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press, 1979), 90–93; and Edward M. Cook, "4Q246," *Bulletin of Biblical Research* 5 (1995): 43–66.

38. So, particularly, in the works of E. P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*, and Ben F. Meyer, *The Aims of Jesus*.

39. See Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*, 61–76. For the argument that John's early dating of the cleansing is probably correct, see Robinson, *The Priority of John*, 127–31, 185–86.

40. The MT (69:10) has a perfect and the LXX (68:10) has an aorist for the verb that John's quotation renders with the future.

41. Raymond E. Brown notes, "John interprets the Psalm to mean that zeal for the Temple will destroy Jesus and bring his death. Thus . . . his account still preserves the memory that the action led to his death" (*The Gospel according to John* [i–xii], AB 29 [New York: Doubleday, 1966], 124). Similarly, Rudolf Schnackenburg writes, "According to the evangelist, the disciples grasp the dangerous consequences of Jesus' action: his zeal for the house of God 'will cost him his life'" (*The Gospel according to St. John*, vol. 1 [New York: Seabury, 1980], 347).

42. See, for example, the accounts in Josephus about various movements of revolt and resistance and the Roman response to them: on the treatment of terrorists and false prophets by Felix and Festus, see *J.W.* 2.253–65, 271; on Pilate's treatment of a

The Historical Jesus and the Johannine Christ

Samaritan messianic figure, see *Ant.* 18.85–87; on Fadus's dealings with Theudas, *Ant.* 20.97–99. Josephus claims that the majority of Jews were peace-loving, while some were misguided rebels who acted inappropriately, even though understandably provoked by incompetent or intolerant Roman governors. Roman intervention restored order and preserved the peace. In *J.W.* 2.234–37 "the magistrates of Jerusalem" try to prevent reprisals for the Samaritan murder of a Galilean. They implore their fellow Jews who had rushed to avenge the death "not to bring down the wrath of the Romans on Jerusalem, but to take pity on their country and sanctuary."

43. In a fictionalized but historically responsible account, Gerd Theissen suggests that the Romans had precisely such an interest in Jesus. Theissen also cleverly suggests that it was not just the Jewish leaders but the Romans themselves who shrewdly calculated that Jesus would be the "one" sacrificed for the "many" (*The Shadow of the Galilean: The Quest of the Historical Jesus in Narrative Form* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987]).

44. In this regard there are particular affinities between the discourse in John 5 and the Synoptic assertion that "the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath" (Mark 2:28 and par.).

45. A. E. Harvey, *Jesus on Trial: A Study in the Fourth Gospel* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1976), 14–15.

46. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*, 281.

47. For a discussion of agency and its applicability to the Gospel of John, see especially Peder Borgen, "God's Agent in the Fourth Gospel," in *Religions in Antiquity: Essays in Memory of Erwin Ramsdell Goodenough*, ed. Jacob Neusner, Studies in the History of Religions 14 (Leiden: Brill, 1968), 137–48, reprinted in *The Interpretation of John*, ed. John Ashton, IRT 9 (Philadelphia and London: Fortress/SPCK, 1986), 67–78; Jan-Adolf Bühner, *Der Gesandte und sein Weg im 4. Evangelium*, WUNT 2 (Tübingen: Mohr, 1977); A. E. Harvey, *Jesus and the Constraints of History* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1982), 161–73, and idem, "Christ as Agent," in *The Glory of Christ in the New Testament: Studies in Christology in Memory of George Bradford Caird*, ed. L. D. Hurst and N. T. Wright (Oxford and New York: Clarendon/Oxford University Press, 1987), 239–50; Wayne A. Meeks, "The Divine Agent and His Counterfeit in Philo and the Fourth Gospel," in *Aspects of Religious Propaganda in Judaism and Early Christianity*, ed. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1976), 43–67; James D. G. Dunn, "Let John Be John: A Gospel for Its Time," in *The Gospel and the Gospels*, ed. Peter Stuhlmacher (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 293–322. For a more general, historical discussion that includes treatment of themes of agency and wisdom, see Larry Hurtado, *One God, One Lord, Early Christian Devotion and Ancient Jewish Monotheism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988).

48. See Dunn, "Let John Be John," 332–33, and idem, *Christology in the Making: A New Testament Inquiry into the Origins of the Doctrine of the Incarnation*, 2d ed. (London: SCM, 1989), 163–212, for a vigorous argument that wisdom is to be considered as a way of speaking of God's own activity, rather than of the activity of another heavenly being. See also Hurtado, *One God, One Lord*, 42–50, and Martin Scott, *Sophia and the Johannine Jesus*, JSNTSup 71 (Sheffield: JSOT, 1992).

49. On tracing wisdom back to Jesus, see now Craig A. Evans, *Word and Glory: On the Exegetical and Theological Background of John's Prologue*, JSNTSup 89 (Sheffield: JSOT, 1993), 195–98.

50. Hanson, *The Prophetic Gospel*, 269.

51. Or, as John Ashton puts it, John's point is that "what Jesus is to the faith of the true Christian believer, he was in the flesh" (Ashton, *Understanding the Fourth Gospel*, 42). C. K. Barrett suggests that John sought to "draw out the true meaning of the life and death of one whom he believed to be the Son of God" (*The Gospel according to St. John: An Introduction with Commentary and Notes on the Greek Text*, 2d ed. [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975], 54). Contrast Hanson, who asserts, "John is not just bringing out into the open what was always implicit. He is creating his own christology" (*The Prophetic Gospel*, 259). Hanson continues, "How did John convince himself that he was justified in putting forward a christology that he knew was more exalted than that of the early tradition?" Hanson's own answer is that, as a Christian prophet, John wrote his Gospel under the conviction that it was his duty to expound the scriptures in such a way as to show their fulfillment in Jesus (*ibid.*, 324). However, we might well ask Hanson (1) whether John would have thought of his Christology as "more exalted" than that of the early tradition, and (2) whether he would have had to "convince himself" that putting forward such a portrait was justified.

52. "Ecce Homo! Irony in the Christology of the Fourth Evangelist," in *The Glory of Christ in the New Testament*, 125–38 (see above, n. 47).

W. D. Davies

3

Reflections on Aspects of the Jewish Background of the Gospel of John

At the time when Rudolf Bultmann was finding connections between the Fourth Gospel and Gnosticism, C. H. Dodd also turned both to Hellenistic sources, especially the *Hermetica*, and to Jewish sources, publishing his great work *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* in 1953.¹ This volume can be regarded as the full flowering of the emphasis on Hellenism in New Testament study. In this sense it marks the end of an era. But *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* also shows "the encroachment of the Semitic on New Testament scholarship—an encroachment that has grown ever stronger—so that it also reflects new beginnings. [Dodd's writings] are a mirror of the transition which has marked our time from a predominantly Hellenistic to a more Semitic approach to the New Testament. In him one world was already dying and another struggling to be born."² I now connect this transition with a young B.D. student who, in meticulous, scrupulous and comprehensive contributions, was to share in that transition—the honoree of this volume, who was among the members of my earliest classes at Duke University in the 1950s and later became for many years my colleague there. Only my personal connection with him has induced me, very tentatively, to contribute to this volume of Johannine studies in his honor. In doing so, I conjoin him with his lifelong helpmeet.

The subject assigned to me is the Jewish background of the Fourth Gospel. To be dealt with at all adequately, this theme needs to be divided into three sections. There is, first, the world of Jewish belief and practice, which formed part of the general background—that is, the cultural and religious hinterland of the author of the Fourth Gospel (henceforth called John): the inherited furniture of John's mind, the unexpressed religious and other assumptions that governed him consciously and unconsciously, the "Common Judaism" described by E. P. Sanders. Secondly, there is the immediate foreground of John's mind—the specific conditions and developments within Judaism at the time when he wrote, which we conveniently call the period of "Jannian Judaism." This has proved to be particularly important for the understanding of the Fourth Gospel. We are justified in making this clear distinction between background and foreground because, with most scholars, we