
John, Jesus, and History,
Volume I
Critical Appraisals of Critical Views

Edited by

PAUL N. ANDERSON,
FELIX JUST, S.J.,
& TOM THATCHER

BRILL

JOHN, JESUS, AND HISTORY, VOLUME 1:
CRITICAL APPRAISALS OF CRITICAL VIEWS

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THE DE-JOHANNIFICATION OF JESUS: THE TWENTIETH CENTURY AND BEYOND

Mark Allan Powell

Jack Verheyden's survey of nineteenth-century scholarship describes a decline of traditional positions regarding the authorship and historical reliability of John's Gospel and an ascendancy of revisionist postures that would ultimately represent the new orthodoxy for critical biblical scholarship. I will now attempt to describe how these tendencies played out in the twentieth century, and on to the present day.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, the distinctive portraits of Jesus offered by John and the Synoptic Gospels had come to be regarded as largely irreconcilable, and a clear preference for the historicity of the Synoptic portrait had emerged. This preference appears to have been informed by at least three factors. (1) The Synoptic portrait had three Gospels in its favor, while the Johannine portrait had only one. Where there were discrepancies, John almost always appeared to be the odd one out. (2) John was generally regarded as the latest of the four Gospels. Written at least a decade, and possibly several decades, after Matthew, Mark, and Luke, its witness was the easiest to dismiss on grounds of temporal distance. (3) John's Gospel was the most blatantly theological of the four. It appeared to be the most inclined toward inculcating faith (20:31) and, consequently, the least concerned with reporting facts.

At the risk of getting ahead of ourselves, we should note that the force of each of these rationales for the demotion of John in Jesus studies would be curtailed somewhat in the twentieth century. First, source criticism would lead biblical scholars to regard the close agreements between Matthew, Mark, and Luke as a consequence of literary dependence rather than as evidence of independent multiple attestation. Once the options became John versus Mark, John versus Q, John versus M, or John versus L, the conflicts were no longer perceived as one-against-three but one against-one; the *quantitative* advantage of the Synoptic tradition was revealed to be a canonical illusion. Second, even though most scholars would continue to regard John's Gospel as the last of the four to be completed, most prominent reconstructions of the book's composition history would allow for

some of its content to come from a much earlier time, such as a Signs Gospel or eyewitness accounts of the Beloved Disciple; the *temporal* advantage of the Synoptic tradition was not lost, but it was relativized somewhat by this recognition. Finally, redactional studies would expose the theological tendencies of all four Gospels to an extent that John would no longer appear unique as a book that intentionally promotes a particular version of the faith. Most scholars would still say that John was the most indulgent or “developed” in this regard, but the distinction seemed now to be more a matter of degree than of basic character; the supposedly *objective* advantage of the Synoptic tradition was diminished.

In short, the primary reasons for preferring the Synoptic Gospels to John in historical Jesus studies would lose some of their force as the twentieth century progressed. Still, as we will see, the Fourth Gospel continued to be relegated to a position of relative (and often intentional) neglect. I suspect that this was largely due to the extreme caution that characterized the “new quest” and to strong reliance on a “criterion of dissimilarity” intended to insure the minimally secure results that such caution could allow. But now we really are getting ahead of ourselves. Let us start at the beginning.

Much twentieth-century scholarship on the historical Jesus may be understood as a response to the one-two punch of Albert Schweitzer and Rudolf Bultmann. Schweitzer’s incredibly influential book *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* made a number of contributions to the field, but its most obvious immediate effect was to call into question the possibility of the enterprise.¹ Schweitzer demonstrated the subjectivity of historical Jesus scholarship to a greater extent than had been previously recognized, exposing the degree to which even the most reputable scholars inevitably tended to perceive the object of their inquiry in line with their own interests and inclinations. In seeking to avoid such bias himself, Schweitzer discovered a Jesus whom he declared to be “a stranger and an enigma” to our time, a flawed and ultimately irrelevant figure he had little interest in following (2001, 478). In retrospect, Schweitzer’s work seems to have initiated what we might now call a catch-22 in historical Jesus studies: The mark of unbiased scholarship was that it did not try to establish Jesus as relevant for the modern day, but if the historical figure of Jesus is not relevant for today, why bother studying him in the first place? The field was at an impasse and entered a dry spell: the next fifty years were characterized by a notable disinterest in historical reconstructions of Jesus based on either the Synoptic or Johannine traditions.

Rudolf Bultmann aided this disinterest by enabling biblical theology to move in a decidedly different direction. If Schweitzer had questioned the *possibility* of learning anything relevant about the historical Jesus, Bultmann challenged the *necessity* of doing so. In a number of important papers published two decades

1. Originally published in 1906, the best edition in English is now the full translation of the 1913 edition by John Bowden (Schweitzer 2001).

after Schweitzer's tome, Bultmann averred that Christian faith is an engagement with the existential truth imbedded in the stories and traditions about Jesus; what the historical person named Jesus actually said and did is inconsequential (Bultmann 1969a; 1969b; see also 1958). It is no accident that Bultmann would later publish a quintessential commentary on the Gospel of John (1971; German ed. in 1941). Schweitzer's strange and enigmatic Jesus had been an apocalyptic prophet based largely on the Synoptic tradition. Bultmann's existentialist Jesus embodied the here-and-now orientation of the Fourth Gospel. It is only a minor oversimplification to say that Schweitzer offered the world an irrelevant-but-historical Synoptic Jesus, while Bultmann offered a relevant-but-nonhistorical Johannine Jesus.

What would come to be called the "new quest" for the historical Jesus began, oddly enough, with Bultmann's own students. Ernst Käsemann gets credit for proposing it in 1953 and James M. Robinson for officially launching it in 1959 (see Käsemann 1964; Robinson 1959). The basic idea was to conduct a fresh investigation into the life and teachings of Jesus that could benefit from advances in source criticism and avoid mistakes of the past. In essence, then, this new quest was a chastened quest and, accordingly, a cautious one. Norman Perrin established their motto as "when in doubt, discard": a great deal of the Gospel material might be authentic, but the historian's task is to identify an "irreducible minimum" of material that can be verified in accord with the strictest canons of historical research (Perrin 1967, 39). To accomplish this, Perrin proposed that the fundamental criterion of the quest be "dissimilarity": material in the Gospel tradition can be reliably attributed to Jesus only when it is (1) sufficiently distinct from the Jewish world in which he lived not to have originated there and been falsely attributed to him; and (2) sufficiently distinct from the concerns of the early church not to have been attributed to him by Christians wishing to make him the promoter of their own interests. Perrin studied the teachings of Jesus in light of this criterion and came up with a list of thirty-five sayings (or complexes of sayings) that could confidently be attributed to Jesus. None of these came from the Gospel of John.²

The new quest initially avoided the pre-Schweitzer penchant for biographies. The closest thing to a "life of Jesus" was *Jesus of Nazareth* by Günther Bornkamm, who actually opened his book with the sentence: "No one is any longer in the position to write a life of Jesus" (1995, 13). Schweitzer, Bornkamm maintained, had delivered the "funeral oration" on such attempts. Thus Bornkamm dis-

2. Norman Perrin 1976, 41. A surprising amount of unparalleled material from Matthew and Luke met Perrin's standards, due perhaps to the comparative weight he gave to his "criterion of dissimilarity" as opposed to "multiple attestation." Unquestionably authentic material found only in Matthew included 13:44-46; 18:23-35; 20:1-16; 21:28-32; unquestionably authentic material found only in Luke included 9:62; 10:29-37; 14:28-32; 15:3-32; 16:1-9; 18:1-8, 9-14.

played very little interest in chronology of events or in Jesus' motives, goals, or self-understanding. He concentrated, rather, on developing a list of historically indisputable facts about Jesus (e.g., he was a Jew from Nazareth; his father was a carpenter; he spoke Aramaic; he was baptized by John) and on outlining the major foci of his teaching (e.g., the presence of the kingdom; radical interpretations of the law). Notably, Bornkamm cites the Gospel of John only four times as a source for information about Jesus not found in the Synoptics, and even then he does not find any "indisputable facts."³ He cites John only once as a source in which information that *conflicts* with what is found in the Synoptics is deemed worthy of consideration, and even then he decides that the Synoptic account is to be preferred.⁴

This was the paradigm for most of what was to come, though the discipline of Jesus studies lapsed into another spell of relative inactivity following the work of Bultmann's students until the last decade of the millennium. The veritable explosion of work in the 1990s was distinctive in many respects but not, for the most part, in its treatment of John. This may be seen most obviously in the work of the Jesus Seminar, whose major publications would scrutinize the sayings and deeds of Jesus in a manner similar to (though more intense than) the examinations undertaken by Perrin and Bornkamm (Funk, Hoover, and the Jesus Seminar 1993; Funk and the Jesus Seminar 1998). Like Perrin, the Seminar considered which sayings of Jesus could be deemed authentic according to strict historical criteria for verification, but they expanded the project to include consideration of *all* sayings attributed to Jesus in early sources, and they assigned those sayings to four color-coded tiers that designated *levels* of acceptability. Just as Perrin did not include anything from John in his "irreducible minimum" of authentic sayings, so the Jesus Seminar found no "red" sayings (= definitely authentic) in John. Indeed, they found only one "pink" saying (= possibly authentic), and that was in a verse that is paralleled in Mark (John 4:44; Mark 6:4). Further, of 139 inauthentic sayings, only five earned the milder "grey" rating, the rest being placed in the harshest category ("black"), reserved for material considered to be completely spurious (Funk, Hoover, and the Jesus Seminar 1993, 401–70). As for the deeds of Jesus, the Seminar found only eight statements about Jesus derived from John

3. Bornkamm 1995, 80, 96, 145, 165 (with reference to John 9:1ff.; 7:15; 1:35ff.; 19:19–21, respectively).

4. Bornkamm 1995, 160. The issue is the date of the crucifixion (John 18:28). These statistics are based on references listed in the book's scripture index. Bornkamm also cites John twenty-one times in reference to the Gospel's theological claims, which he regards as blatantly nonhistorical, twice to provide information about the ancient world (specifically, Samaritan religion), and fourteen times as a cross-reference on matters where the Synoptic account is the primary material under discussion.

that might be designated red or pink (definitely or possibly accurate), and only two of these concern information that is not also provided in the Synoptics.⁵

The Jesus Seminar's publications offered a more blatant denigration of John than had been presented previously. Perrin, Bornkamm, and others had for the most part set the book aside out of a cautious concern to focus on the material that was widely considered to be the most reliable. The Jesus Seminar did *not* set the book aside but, to the contrary, paid greater attention to the Gospel of John than anyone in the field of historical Jesus studies ever had before. They analyzed every verse and pericope of the Fourth Gospel, scrutinizing each passage for any scintilla of possibly authentic or verifiable material. Still, the results of their investigation turned out to be in line with what others had intuited. They ended up taking some flak for this. In a sense, the Seminar was only making explicit what had been previously implied, but the outward effect was to expose the Fourth Gospel's inadequacies in a very public and (for many) disconcerting manner. Other scholars had treated John like a student who lacked prerequisites for upper-division study, excluding the Gospel from consideration on matters for which it seemed unqualified. The Jesus Seminar allowed the Fourth Gospel to have its chance at last, placing it in competition alongside the others—but with predictably disastrous results. A groundswell of sympathy for John arose, though the specific results of the study were rarely contested.

This last point is striking when one reviews the conservative and evangelical critiques of the Jesus Seminar that appeared at this time.⁶ Complaints were offered about many matters, but the group's evaluation of John's Gospel was almost never an issue. Ben Witherington III (1995a), for instance, wrote specifically about the Seminar's assessment of source material, concluding with three critical allegations: (1) they make inappropriate use of apocryphal Gospels, particularly Thomas; (2) they display too much confidence in the ability of modern

5. The eight accepted facts about Jesus are: (1) Jesus was a disciple of John the Baptist (1:35, by inference); (2) some of John's disciples became followers of Jesus (1:35–42); (3) Jewish leaders regarded Jesus as uneducated (7:15); (4) Jesus was arrested (18:12); (5) Jesus was taken to Pilate's residence (18:28); (6) Pilate had Jesus beaten (19:1); (7) Pilate turned Jesus over to be crucified (19:16); (8) Jesus was crucified (19:18). Numbers 2 and 3 provide information not stated in the Synoptics. Of these eight statements, the first six are rated "pink" and the last two "red." The Jesus Seminar also accorded red type to the innocuous fact that "Annas was the father-in-law of Caiaphas" (18:1). See Funk and the Jesus Seminar 1998, 365–440.

6. See, for instance, the several essays in Wilkens and Moreland 1995. Various attacks on the Jesus Seminar can be found on pages 2–5, 18–27, 74–94, 102, 126–29, 142–46, 181–82, but the group's assessment of John is never critiqued. Indeed, the alternative projections for authentic sayings and deeds of Jesus offered in key chapters by Darrell L. Bock (1995) and Craig A. Evans (1995) restrict themselves almost entirely to Synoptic material. See also Luke Timothy Johnson 1996, 14 and 198. Johnson does mention what he seems to regard as an excessively skeptical view of John on the part of the Jesus Seminar, but he does not make this a major part of his critique or offer anything in the way of substantive refutation.

scholarship to reconstruct Q; and (3) they devalue the primacy of Mark (relative to Q and Thomas). Noticeable by absence is any reference to their treatment of John. The 1990s was a fractious decade for Jesus studies, but virtually everyone seemed to agree that the controversies had to be resolved without bringing John into the mix.

The work of E. P. Sanders was often located at the opposite end of a continuum from that of the Jesus Seminar: his Schweitzeresque presentation of Jesus as an eschatological prophet of Jewish restoration theology is regarded as the antithetical alternative to the Seminar's portrait of a peasant sage who had perhaps been influenced by Cynic philosophy (Sanders 1993; see also Sanders 1985). Sanders's work differs drastically from that of Bornkamm as well, but, like Bornkamm, Sanders develops lists of statements about Jesus that are "almost beyond dispute," and, like both Bornkamm and the Jesus Seminar, his understanding of Jesus owes practically nothing to the Gospel of John. Of the fifteen almost indisputable facts that Sanders lists in *The Historical Figure of Jesus*, seven are points found in the Synoptics alone, and eight are points found in all four Gospels, such that John might, at best, be understood to confirm what is stated elsewhere.⁷ One searches in vain to find anything in Sanders's view of Jesus that would derive from Johannine testimony alone. In this regard, his discussion of the trial of Jesus is particularly interesting: he allows that certain aspects of the Johannine account have greater "intrinsic probability" than what is offered by the Synoptics; he is sorely tempted to prefer John to the Synoptics at these points but ultimately decides that it would be arbitrary to do so, given the general unreliability of the Fourth Gospel everywhere else (Sanders 1993, 66–73).

Gerd Theissen was one of the most significant German scholars working on the historical Jesus during this period, and his portrait of Jesus as an eschatological prophet is similar in many respects to that of Sanders (see Theissen and Merz 1998). Theissen deems the Johannine material "not worthless," faint praise earned only by virtue of it being (in his estimation) independent of the Synoptic tradition (Theissen and Merz 1998, 36). He finds a couple of details in the material that are probably acceptable: Jesus' first disciples had formerly followed John the Baptist (1:35–40), and three of them came from Bethsaida (1:44). He also thinks that there are a few matters on which the Johannine passion account should be allowed to correct the Synoptic version: the Jewish leaders had political motivations for seeking Jesus' death (11:47–53; 19:12); the so-called Jewish trial was actually just a hearing before the Sanhedrin (18:19–24); and the date of the crucifixion was probably 14 Nisan (18:28; 19:35). These (five) points, Theissen

7. Sanders 1993, 10–11. In his earlier work (1985) Sanders presented somewhat different categorized lists; nothing was recognized as "virtually certain," "highly probable" or even "probable" on the basis of Johannine testimony alone. See his summary (1985, 326–27).

thinks, represent “old traditions” (Theissen and Merz, 1998, 36–37). Still, this is not much in terms of an overall portrait.

When reviewing the work of Sanders, Theissen, and scholars with similar ideas,⁸ one might suspect a connection between “eschatological portraits of Jesus” and “primacy of the Synoptic tradition” (and be tempted to raise chicken-or-the-egg questions accordingly). But the 1990s were also a heyday for the *noneschatological* Jesus, and the studies that promoted *that* image did not rely on John’s Gospel either. Notable here are the individual projects of Marcus Borg, John Dominic Crossan, and Robert Funk (all members of the Jesus Seminar).⁹ All of these scholars found John’s eschatology (though not necessarily its Christology) more appealing than that of the Synoptics: the idea of a Jesus who proclaims liberating truth (8:32) and who speaks of present-day life enhancement (10:10) rather than postmortem, other-worldly bliss would have fit rather nicely with their conception of Jesus as a sort of Jewish philosopher who challenged conventional wisdom and value systems. Still, what is appealing is not necessarily historical, and these scholars do not in fact appeal to the Johannine tradition to support their idea of a noneschatological Jesus (or, as they might prefer to say, a Jesus whose eschatology was “ethical” rather than “apocalyptic”).¹⁰

N. T. Wright would classify the types of studies that we have been discussing into two broad categories (Wright 1996, 83–84). He coined the term “third quest” to refer to those scholars (like Sanders and Theissen) who hearken back to Schweitzer by (1) regarding Jesus as an eschatological prophet with a strong apocalyptic perspective and (2) seeking to locate him completely within the world of relatively non-Hellenized Palestinian Judaism (Wright 1992b, 796–802). According to Wright, other scholars (especially the Jesus Seminar) were merely continuing the “new quest” initiated by Bultmann’s students. Wright placed himself securely in line with the third quest scholars, and he would soon become their most prolific and high-profile advocate.

Whatever we make of Wright’s categories,¹¹ assessment of the Johannine tradition was not a factor in the classification. Thus, Wright begins his own study of the historical Jesus by indicating that “this book is based on the synoptic gospels”

8. See especially Dale C. Allison Jr. 1999; Bart D. Ehrman 1999. Both Allison and Ehrman regard Jesus as an apocalyptic herald of the end times. Neither presents a portrait of him that owes much to the Johannine tradition.

9. See especially Marcus J. Borg 1988; John Dominic Crossan 1991; Robert W. Funk 1996.

10. Paul Anderson (2006b, 85–88) notes the compatibility of Johannine material with many emerging portraits of Jesus, especially those proposed by Marcus Borg.

11. They are criticized as artificial and as implying some evolutionary development that characterizes much current work as outmoded, while presenting his own work as part of “the real leading edge of contemporary Jesus scholarship” (Wright 1996, 84). Crossan (1993, 10–11) says that Wright’s attempts at categorization fall “somewhere between the tendentious and the hilarious.”

(Wright 1996, xvi). At first, this appears to be just one more illustration of what we have been saying: that the avoidance of Johannine material was characteristic of historical Jesus studies of all stripes. But now we see a subtle difference. The *reason* Wright gives for limiting his research to the Synoptic Gospels is because “the debate ... has been conducted almost entirely in terms of the synoptic tradition” (xvi). He also allows that he is less acquainted with the field of Johannine studies, although he hopes to expand his expertise more in that direction in the future. Persons touring the Himalayas, he jokes, should not have to rely on a guide who has studied the Alps: let’s stick with the Alps for now; perhaps we’ll have time to visit the Himalayas later (xvi).

We should notice what Wright does *not* say. The Jesus Seminar rejected Johannine testimony because “whatever the compositional history, the Fourth Gospel is not thought to provide independent historical attestation to the events in the life of the historical Jesus” (Funk and the Jesus Seminar 1998, 19). Theissen (and many others) *do* think that John’s account is independent, but it represents a “deviation” from the broadly attested Synoptic tradition, with “Gnostic colouring,” such that “the historical value of the Synoptics is clearly to be rated higher” (Theissen and Merz 1998, 97). For Sanders, the key point is degree of theological development: “the synoptic authors revised traditional material much less thoroughly than did John” (Sanders 1993, 73). Bart Ehrman agrees but pays even more attention to dating: the rule with sources is “the earlier the better,” which means “our best source of all would be Paul (who regrettably doesn’t tell us very much), and then Q and Mark, followed by M and L, and so on” (Ehrman 1999, 88). Note that (for Ehrman) John is not even on the list: the Fourth Gospel is relegated to generic inclusion in a vague etcetera, along with various apocryphal and patristic writings. That judgment is made explicit by Crossan, who (somewhat idiosyncratically) dates the completion of John’s Gospel to 120–150, grouping it with the Apocryphon of James and the Gospel of Peter as part of what he considers to be the fourth (and worst) stratum of material for learning about Jesus.¹² But Wright says nothing (here) about date or independence or Gnosticism or extent of theological development. The point seems to be, “I know how this game is played, and if I must make my case on the basis of the Synoptic tradition, so be it. For now.”

Before moving on, we should note that throughout the entire period we have been discussing there were numerous scholars who did not share the skeptical appraisal of John characteristic of the mainstream: Craig Blomberg, D. A. Carson, Leon Morris, and others have strenuously and persistently argued for the historical authenticity of Johannine materials.¹³ Paramount among their claims is that John alone of the four canonical Gospels appears to have been authored (at least

12. Crossan 1991, 432. An earlier edition of John is placed (along with Matthew and Luke) in the third stratum, an extremely broad period extending from 80–120 C.E.

13. See Craig L. Blomberg 2002; D. A. Carson 1991; 1981; Leon Morris 1995; 1969.

in part) by an eyewitness (21:24), specifically by an eyewitness to the crucifixion (19:35). Their arguments on this and other points have not carried the day for many persons involved in historical Jesus studies, although, to my observation, their work has not been reviewed (much less refuted) with the same care accorded to other contributors. The apparent reason for this is that these scholars are all known to harbor ideological prejudices that treat the historical reliability of biblical writings as a confessional concern. Thus, they run afoul of a common assumption within the academic guild, namely, that ideologically motivated arguments are intrinsically less sound than those formulated from positions of relative neutrality. I note, with some irony, that this is the same post-Enlightenment presupposition that causes the credibility of John's Gospel to be questioned in the first place: work that is willfully and admittedly evangelical (20:31) is immediately suspect. Carson says, "To set theological commitment and historical reliability against each other as *necessarily* mutually incompatible is unrealistic" (1991, 40). He intends this comment as an apology for the Fourth Gospel, although he might just as well have offered it as a defense of scholars (like him) who write about that Gospel from a defiantly confessional position.

In any case, the primary exception to the twentieth century's marginalization of John in historical Jesus scholarship is found in the work of John Meier. Unlike Wright (on this point), Meier does not seem to care about respecting the rules of the game when he thinks those rules do not make sense. In the first portion of his multivolume magnum opus, *A Marginal Jew*, Meier declares, "The 'tyranny of the synoptic Jesus' should be consigned to the dustbin of the post-Bultmannians."¹⁴ As his study progresses, he determines that a number of matters from John ought to be regarded as historically authentic. He decides that John is right in portraying Jesus' ministry as lasting longer than one year and involving multiple trips to Jerusalem (the Synoptic Gospels present a shorter ministry, with only one trip to Jerusalem at the end; Meier 1991, 403–6). He believes that Jesus himself baptized people (John 3:22, 26), a fact never mentioned in the Synoptics (Meier 1994, 121–23). He regards the accounts of Jesus healing the paralyzed man by the pool of Bethesda (John 5:1–9) and the blind man who washes in the pool of Siloam (9:1–7) as "stories that have a good chance of going back to some event in the life of the historical Jesus," and he likewise finds an historical core behind the narrative of the raising of Lazarus (John 11).¹⁵

Meier insists that the four canonical Gospels are the primary (although not exclusive) sources for historical Jesus reconstruction and that "our survey of the

14. John P. Meier 1991, 45. The phrase he cites in this quote is derived from an article by Charles W. Hedrick (1989, 1–8). Meier's use of the phrase, however, is deliberately ironic, since Hedrick had meant it was time for scholarship to consider the historical testimony of *apocryphal* Gospels (which Meier for the most part rejects).

15. Meier 1994, 680–81, 694–98, 798–832; quotation from 726.

Four Gospels gives us three separate major sources to work with: Mark, Q, and John” (Meier 1991, 44). In itself, such a claim is not terribly controversial. Many Gospel scholars working in historical Jesus studies would hold that the Fourth Gospel is largely independent of the others (in keeping with Theissen, above, but not with the Jesus Seminar).¹⁶ Many would also claim that it preserves more early testimony than any of the apocryphal Gospels, including the Gospel of Thomas, the Secret Gospel of Mark, the Gospel of Peter, or Crossan’s so-called Cross Gospel.¹⁷ The real problem, even for those who grant these matters, is that the level of integration and homogenization in John appears to be greater.¹⁸ In John, the strands of primitive material appear to have been so thoroughly woven into the fabric of the community’s theology that it is difficult to distinguish them, much less to determine what they looked like prior to this incorporation. Meier is, of course, aware of this problem: “the re-writing of narratives for symbolic purposes and the reformulation of sayings for theological programs reach their high point in John” (Meier 1991, 45). But for him “reformulation” is not an insurmountable obstacle. The goal is not to recover *ipsissima verba* (actual words Jesus spoke) but *ipsissima vox* (the kinds of things Jesus typically said; Meier 1991, 174). Likewise, narratives that have been reworked to bring out their symbolic meaning may still reveal something about the sort of things that Jesus typically did.

The real issue, perhaps, is that virtually nothing in John’s Gospel passes muster in light of Perrin’s “criterion of dissimilarity.” A major implication of that principle was that the authenticity of supposedly historical material contained in blatantly biased documents can only be affirmed with confidence when it does not reflect the bias of the document in which it is found. The greater integration and homogeneity of John’s Gospel means that virtually nothing can be found here that does not reflect the book’s bias. Indeed, the author and/or final editor admits as much in the book’s twin codas (20:30–31; 21:25): many things have been left out, and everything included is intended to serve a particular purpose.

The legitimacy of this criterion of dissimilarity, however, came to be sharply challenged by many scholars in the last decade of the twentieth century. Meier, who is actually mild in his critique of the principle, notes that it is useful in

16. The question of whether John is independent of the Synoptic Gospels remains unsettled. Scholars advocating dependence on Mark include C. K. Barrett, Franz Neirynck, and Thomas L. Brodie. The latter’s work provides the most recent and comprehensive treatment (Brodie 1993). Prominent advocates of independence (the majority view) include Raymond Brown and D. Moody Smith (esp. Smith 2001, 195–241).

17. These apocryphal writings are notoriously difficult to date, but many Jesus scholars still place the earliest of them in the second century. Among scholars mentioned in this article, Allison, Anderson, Blomberg, Evans, Johnson, Meier, Sanders, Theissen, Witherington, and Wright seem fairly confident that John is earlier than these writings.

18. So Sanders 1993, 73: “The synoptic authors did not homogenize their material as John did. The joints and seams are visible.”

uncovering what may have been Jesus' idiosyncrasies (such as his total prohibition of all oaths; Matt 5:34, 37), but he says that its application tends to highlight what was probably peripheral. And insofar as it embodies an *a priori* assumption that Jesus was unique, it effectively "places him outside of history" (Meier 1991, 172, also 171–74). Theissen proposes that the criterion of dissimilarity be replaced by a "criterion of historical plausibility," according to which "whatever helps to explain the influence of Jesus (on early Christianity) and at the same time can only have come into being in a Jewish context" is to be judged historical (see Theissen and Merz 1998, 116). Likewise, Wright suggests a "criterion of double similarity and double dissimilarity": when something is "decisively similar to both the Jewish context and the early Christian world and, at the same time, importantly dissimilar," we are likely to be dealing with historically authentic material that accounts for the move (via Jesus) from the one context to the other (Wright 1996, 131–33, 489).

The notion that the criterion of dissimilarity should be the *fundamental* principle in historical Jesus research had been put forward in an era where any attempt at reconstruction was controversial. In setting out to do what guild-orthodoxy claimed could not be done, the pioneers of the new quest had set understandably minimalist goals. They wanted to concentrate only on what was *most* certain. By the 1990s, however, the field had moved beyond compiling lists of indisputably assured facts or sayings. A reaction against such "piecemeal" approaches to Jesus set in, accompanied by the desire to construct overall portraits of Jesus that would make sense of more data. Thus, Wright would argue for a method of research he calls "critical realism," by which scholars advance hypotheses that account for the traditions we have.¹⁹ According to this model, the most convincing reconstruction of the historical Jesus will be the one that remains inherently consistent while accounting for as much of the data as possible (Wright 1992a, 98–109; 1996, 133). In a different but analogous vein, James D. G. Dunn has argued for a model of research that appreciates the full implications of oral tradition: the Gospel traditions are different from one another because of "performance variations," but the historian should be most attentive to stable elements that are found across the board (Dunn 2003b).

This is a long way from "when in doubt, discard." The different approaches suggested by Meier, Theissen, Wright, and Dunn all view the beliefs of early Christianity not as a problem to be overcome (in order to get back to the pre-Christian, authentic Jesus) but as part of the phenomenon to be explained. Such proposals bear directly on assessments of the Fourth Gospel as a source for Jesus studies. Meier may have been the first to implement this, but others would follow suit. Wright's *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (2003) broke with his earlier (reluctant?) commitment to stick with the Synoptic tradition. He now offers

19. N. T. Wright 1992a, 81–120. This view is indebted to Ben F. Meyer 1979.

detailed consideration of the Johannine narratives (Wright 2003, 662–82), which he maintains, are to “be understood realistically and literally”; whatever non-historical echoes and resonances they contain are “set off by a literal description of a concrete set of events” (675). We might reasonably conclude that if *these* Johannine narratives can be read this way on *this* subject, then surely much more of John’s Gospel might have been utilized in the earlier project on Jesus’ pre-Easter life and teaching. The twentieth-century Wright seemed to confine himself to the Synoptic tradition out of some sense of obligation to the guild—it was just what Jesus scholars did. The twenty-first-century Wright is bolder, carrying out what now appear to be obvious implications of the methodological approach (“critical realism”) he outlined previously. If one is to utilize all of the data and try to account for as much of it as possible, then it hardly seems justifiable to stick with the Synoptic tradition just because that is where the debate has been or because that is where one has the most confidence or expertise.

Where does this leave us? We are not even close to an “emerging consensus,” but we may at least say that there is a “growing trend” in Jesus studies toward recognition of the Fourth Gospel as a “dissonant tradition” that not only *can* be utilized but *must* be, if the Synoptic tradition is not to be accorded free rein in a manner that increasingly seems uncritical. If John’s Gospel had not made it into the canon, if it had been lost to history only to be discovered now, the impact on historical Jesus studies would be revolutionary. Imagine! A book on the life and teachings of Jesus that is almost as early as the Synoptic Gospels, that claims to be based in part on eyewitness testimony, that contains some material that is almost certainly very primitive, that may very well be independent of the other Gospels while corroborating what they say at many points, and that offers what is ultimately a rather different (although not wholly incompatible) spin on the Jesus story. The implications of such a discovery would be *phenomenal*: every work previously written on the historical Jesus would be deemed obsolete and the full attention of scholarship would turn toward discovering what this alternative tradition had to offer. Of course, nothing like this has occurred, but many scholars seem to be saying, “we *do* have such a book; perhaps we should not ignore it.”

The work of the scholars associated with the Society of Biblical Literature’s Jesus, John, and History Group and the contributions of the scholars published in this volume are a part of this ongoing discussion.