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# Addressing the Johannine Riddles—A New Introduction to John

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The *riddles of the Fourth Gospel* are among the most notable—and notorious—of the leading perplexities of biblical studies. Theologically, tensions abound at every turn and regarding nearly every subject. Historically, the mundane and the transcendent are conjoined throughout, and John's differences with the Synoptics frustrate a coherent portraiture of the historical Jesus. Literarily, rough transitions, variations, and repetitions present their own sets of perplexities. John's riddles are indeed puzzling; the question is how to understand their character and how to address them exegetically. Having just written a book on the subject, I appreciate the invitation to say a thing or two about how I tried to address the riddles of the Fourth Gospel within what I hope is a serviceable introduction to John—for students and scholars alike.<sup>1</sup>

### **Recent Scholars' Approaches to the Johannine Riddles**

First, however, let me comment on the Johannine riddles themselves and their role within modern biblical scholarship. While tensions internal to the Gospel of John played pivotal roles on both sides of theological debates in the patristic era, differences between John and the Synoptics have provoked some of the most heated debates in the modern era. The questions are *how so* and *why*?

As the 19<sup>th</sup> century quest for the Jesus of history gathered steam, David Strauss drove a wedge between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith. As a result, John was banished from the former category and consigned to the latter.<sup>2</sup> Over a century ago, Eduard Schwartz published four major essays on the "aporias" (perplexities) of the Fourth Gospel, pivotally setting the stage for diachronic approaches to John's composition. Rough transitions in John thus supposedly reflect editorial seams and disparate literary sources.<sup>3</sup> As a result of different approaches to the Johannine riddles, world-class scholars have come to disagree more on the origin, character, and development of the Fourth Gospel than just about any other biblical text.<sup>4</sup> Hence, the momentous effect of the Johannine riddles!

For instance, in Rudolf Bultmann's masterful synthesis of recent scholarship in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century,<sup>5</sup> John is thought to consist of an evangelist's gathering of three major disparate sources (and several minor ones) into a narrative whole, which fell apart and was revised (in the wrong order, and added to) by an "ecclesiastical redactor." In postulating a multiplicity of disparate sources, Bultmann accounted for several of John's theological tensions (high and low Christology, embellished and existentialized signs, pro- and anti-sacramentality, future and realized eschatology, etc.). He also explained John's pervasive differences from the Synoptics (a semeia source accounts for John's distinctive signs, a Revelation-Sayings source accounts for John's poetic prologue and I-am sayings, a Passion source accounts for John's distinctive Passion narrative) and John's literary perplexities (rough transitions and problematic orderings reflect rearrangement and editorial seams) on the basis of inferred sources and editions. In so doing, John's theological tensions are seen to reflect distinctive theological tendencies of different literary sources, and the Johannine riddles are thus addressed diachronically—by means of inferring a multiplicity of sources and origins.

Rejecting source-critical approaches to the Johannine tradition, however, C.K. Barrett rightly argues that we must interpret the Fourth Gospel as it stands—synchronically as a unity.<sup>6</sup> It made sense to *someone* as a finalized document, and it behooves the interpreter to engage this ancient text on its own terms, not those of the modern scholar. Because the evangelist was a dialectical thinker who held truth together in tension, rather than reflecting a literary dialogue between disparate sources, John's theological discrepancies betray a reflective dialogue within the thinking of the evangelist. As Plato would say, thinking is "the soul's dialogue with herself," in considering an issue from one side and then another, until she achieves her opinion (*doxa*, or glory, *Theatetus*189). Barrett thus sees the Johannine Gospel as a work of theology more so than an independent Jesus tradition, and given the similarities with Mark, he sees most of John's reports and themes as developments of what is adumbrated in embryonic form in Mark.

While the priority of Mark as a written gospel seems clear, however, this is not to say that *everything* in John had its origin in Mark instead of representing an independent—and even parallel—memory of Jesus. Further, if familiarity with at least Mark is granted, the Johannine evangelist may have been in dialogue with Mark's tradition rather than dependent on it. That's the sort of thing a dialectical thinker would indeed have done. Of the 20% in John that has parallels in Mark, *none* of the material is identical—making strict literary

dependence implausible, even in Barrett's judgment. From the 80% of John that has *no direct parallels* with Mark or other gospel traditions, however, a new problem emerges with derivative views of John: where did John's *distinctive* material come from? Further, John has more mundane and topographical detail than all the other gospels combined. So, a view of John as a Synoptic-dependent composition also falls short when subjected to sustained critical analysis.

Developing an overall theory of the Fourth Gospel as an independent Jesus tradition, in dialogue with other traditions but not dependent on them, is the paradigm of Raymond Brown, who sees John's tradition developing over three main phases.<sup>7</sup> First, we have an autonomous oral rendering of Jesus tradition in Palestine, contributed by an eyewitness who was not one of the twelve apostles. Because of the preponderance of Jerusalem-related reports distinctive to John, Brown later came to infer that the Johannine evangelist hailed not from Galilee but from Judea, and that he had experienced contact with Samaritan converts to the Jesus movement. This evoked a high Christology and influenced a Prophet-like-Moses understanding of Jesus as the Messiah over and against Davidic representations. The evangelist eventually moved to Asia Minor, where his preaching addressed issues related to tensions with leaders in the local Jewish Synagogue. There, in Ephesus, the main part of the Johannine Gospel was composed in written form. After the evangelist's death and the writing of the Johannine Epistles, the final editor completed the narrative and sent it along among the churches as the testimony of the Beloved Disciple, whose "testimony is true."

Sidestepping the impasses of John's composition and authorship, Alan Culpepper applied the works of Frank Kermode and other literary-critical scholars to biblical studies in a discipline-changing way.<sup>8</sup> If the Fourth Gospel is seen as a narrative (*whoever* wrote it and *however* it came together), does it have a plot, and how are the characters and the narrative crafted rhetorically? Given that the Gospel of John presents itself as a completed unity, it must be interpreted as such, and features of irony, symbolization, and characterization must be analyzed rhetorically within new-literary approaches to gospel narratives. While more than one leader in the Johannine situation may have played a role in the transmission, recording, and editing of the Johannine writings, the most important aspect of critical analysis is appreciating the literary character and operation of the text. Understanding *how* something says what it does helps one appreciate the content and meaning of *what* is being said. It is fair to say that over the last couple of decades, new-literary analyses of John have surpassed historical-critical studies and theological studies in

terms of recent scholarly interests.

Arguably, the books reflected in each of the above paradigms may be considered among the most important New Testament books over the last half century or so (not simply Johannine studies), and yet each of them poses an entirely different approach to the Johannine riddles—each with its own strengths and weaknesses. And, literally hundreds of books and articles have built upon (or alongside) each of these models within international biblical scholarship. Indeed, other approaches to John's many riddles also abound, but these four leading approaches have set the backbones of most Johannine critical studies over the last century or so, leaving the question as to how John's riddles might effectively be addressed.

### **The Origin and Character of the Johannine Riddles—A New Introduction**

Rather than simply lay out “what the scholars think” regarding John's riddles, however, an introduction to the Fourth Gospel deserves to identify the origin and character of the riddles themselves, so that scholars and students of John alike can get “on the same page” when it comes to understanding the issues being addressed. This is central to an understanding of *why* each scholar does what he or she does in addressing John's riddles, helping one also evaluate how well some riddles are addressed, and perhaps just as importantly, how some are left unaddressed. This is what I've sought to do, walking into the classic Johannine discussions inductively—seeking to pose a lively sense of what John's riddles are and also how they might be addressed. Therefore, I have first endeavored to *outline* John's riddles clearly—thrusting textual issues in sharp relief (Part 1), followed by *addressing* them effectively (Part 2) and *interpreting* them meaningfully (Part 3). A look at the table of contents will suggest the progression of the book, but here's an overview as a service to readers, potential and actual.

#### **Part 1: Outlining the Johannine Riddles**

As a means of preparing the ground for understanding John's riddles, **Chapter 1** poses an outline of its narrative structure, followed by a listing of its distinctive features. These include outlining the eight signs of Jesus in John, over a dozen distinctive dialogues with Jesus, I-am sayings (both absolute and with a predicate nominative), the distinctive presentation of women, the love commands of Jesus, and the promise of the Holy Spirit. These subjects will be studied more closely in greater depth in the third part of the book, but

noting John's distinctive content and features provides a good place to begin. Passages outlining what may be considered the "central structure" of John's message (borrowing Bill Loader's language) include John 20:30-31; 17:1-26; 3:31-36 and 12:44-50; 1:19-51; and 1:1-18. Christological titles in John's first chapter are especially rife with meaning, and these themes are also developed later in the book.

After this overview, **Chapter 2** outlines *the theological riddles* of the Fourth Gospel. With brief introductions to and reflections upon the sets of biblical texts that are in striking theological tension, a dozen of John's theological tensions are outlined as follows:

- Jesus Christ: Human or Divine?
- The Father-Son Relationship: Equal or Subordinate?
- Does the Son Judge: Yes or No?
- The Holy Spirit: Proceeding from the Father or the Son?
- The Signs of Jesus: If Embellished, Why Existentialized?
- Eschatology in John: Present or Future?
- The Saving/Revealing Work of Christ: Universal or Particular?
- Salvation and the Believer: Determinism or Free Will?
- Dualism in John: Prescriptive or Reflective?
- John and Judaism: Anti-Semitic or Pro-Jewish?
- Sacraments in John: Embellished or Deconstructive?
- The Church in John: Petrified or Dynamic?

As these themes suggest, one can understand why the Fourth Gospel has been a hotbed of theological debate within the Christian movement and beyond! Note especially, that nearly every major subject in John is presented in terms of striking polarities, calling for fitting approaches to its interpretation. To some degree, several of the issues the church fathers addressed in terms of metaphysical speculation have been addressed by some modern scholars by means of their critical approaches to John's composition.

**Chapter 3** then outlines a dozen of John's *historical problems*, especially when compared with the Synoptic Gospels:

- John's Narrative: Historical or Theological?
- The Source of John's Tradition: An Eyewitness or Not?
- John and the Synoptics: Why Such Different Introductions and Conclusions?

- John and the Synoptics: Why Such Differences in Order and Chronology?
- John and the Synoptics: Why Such Differences of Inclusion?
- John and the Synoptics: Why Such Differences in Detail and Theological Emphasis?
- John and the Synoptics: Why Such Distinctive Presentations of Jesus' Ministry?
- John and the Synoptics: Why Such Distinctive Presentations of Jesus' Teachings and Intentions?
- John and the Synoptics: Why Such Distinctive Presentations of Jesus' Miracles?
- The Origin of the Johannine Signs: A Religion of History or the History of Religions?
- Cross-Cultural Elements in John: A Diachronicity of Situation?
- Johannine Narrative: Rooted in History or the Historical Johannine Situation?

Note how striking problems exist regarding John's similarities and differences with the Synoptics. How could the same Jesus be represented by both traditions? Note also the tensions between the mundane and the elevated material in John. John is the only canonical gospel claiming direct familiarity with the historical ministry of Jesus; that being the case, why has it been effectively banned within modern historical-Jesus research? Are theology and history within religious narratives categorically incompatible or simply a challenge for interpreters? John's historical riddles are problematic indeed!

**Chapter 4** lays out John's *literary perplexities*, including brief comments on how differing theories of composition have sought to address these and others of John's riddles:

- The Johannine Prologue: An Original Introduction or a Later Add-On?
- The Johannine Epilogue: A Fresh Start or a Second Ending?
- John 7:53—8:11: A Text Caught in Adultery (and Other Textual Indiscretions)?
- Odd Progressions and Contextual Perplexities in John: Reflecting on the Future?
- "Play It Again, Sam" (But in a Different Key): Whence the Repetitions and Variations in John's Narrative?
- The Johannine Gospel, Epistles, and Apocalypse: Close Relations or Distant Cousins?
- Intratraditional and Intertraditional Dialogues in John: Reflective or Corrective?
- The Johannine Collection of Materials: Leftover Fragments or a Seamless Robe?
- Comprehension and Miscomprehension in John: They Just Don't Get It . . . Do You?
- Scripture Fulfillment in John: Implicit or Explicit?
- The Purpose of the Fourth Gospel: Apologetic or Pastoral?
- The Beloved Disciple: A Dead Author or a Literary Device?

While the Fourth Gospel was called by Stauss “a seamless robe,” diachronic scholars have seized upon its rough transitions and form-features as though it were a cut-and-paste collection of “leftover fragments.” And, one can see how Johannine- Synoptic relationships are also a field of interest—let alone discerning relations between the Johannine Gospel, Epistles, and Apocalypse. So, John’s composition, literary unity, and rhetorical design compel a good deal of literary interest in and of themselves.

While these thirty-six sets of tensions, anomalies, and perplexities are not the only ones in the Fourth Gospel, they certainly comprise the leading ones. In the book, both sides of each riddle are highlighted by multiple references to relevant biblical texts, and interested readers are encouraged to read the passages for themselves in order to get a sense of their phenomenology. While no theory of composition addresses all of these issues, let alone equally well, many of them are indeed cited as bases for why a scholar devises the approach taken in seeking to address the Johannine riddles. Given their daunting number and distinctive character, one can readily appreciate *why* leading scholars might therefore disagree with each other in their approaches to John. In most cases, differing scholars seek to address different issues, which at least partially accounts for a good number of the differences among critical approaches to John—the focus of the next part of the book.

## **Part 2: Addressing the Riddles of the Fourth Gospel**

The central part of the book features leading theories regarding the origin and composition of the Fourth Gospel, making particular references to how each of them addresses any number of the Johannine riddles. After a strengths-weaknesses analysis of each theory, a new overall theory is put forward building upon the strongest elements of the various approaches as well as other research. I call this new synthesis the “dialogical autonomy of the Fourth Gospel,” and here I summarize what I’ve been publishing in greater detail in several books and over two dozen critical essays.<sup>9</sup> This leads, then, to noting the origin and character of each of John’s riddles.

**Chapter 5** outlines *a dozen scholarly approaches to the Johannine riddles*, considering also the strengths and weaknesses of each approach. Brief connections are made between a scholarly approach to John and the particular riddles being addressed, noting also disparities between approaches. Nonetheless, one of the insights emerging from this study is that the issue of Johannine authorship often has played a key role in setting the course for a scholar’s theory of composition. This is clearly the case when assuming whom the author *must have*



*been*, but it is even more determinative among scholars claiming to know whom the author *cannot have been*. For instance, if it is believed that the author cannot possibly have been an eyewitness (or one of the twelve, or a Galilean, or the son of Zebedee, etc.), then alternative explanations of the origins of the Fourth Gospel's witness must be devised on the basis of such a judgment (i.e. the evangelist must have used alien sources, or he must have depended upon Mark or other Synoptic traditions) despite additional problematic features of the new theory being devised. While the limitations of the first approach are commonly acknowledged, new critical problems with alternative approaches are seldom as engaged within modern critical discussions. This is a puzzling phenomenon, in and of itself.

### 1. *The Author as the Source of the Johannine Tradition*

- The "Traditional" View—John the Son of Zebedee as the Beloved Disciple (Westcott and others)
- The "Elder" John as Compiler and Finalizer of the Gospel and Epistles (Hengel and others)
- The Johannine Evangelist as an Alternative Member of the Twelve (Charlesworth, and others)
- A First-Generation Source, But Not a Member of the Twelve (Brown, Witherington and others)

### 2. *Composition Theories Distinguishing the Author from an Eyewitness and from John Son of Zebedee*

- The "Concocted" Gospel (Bretschneider and others)
- John, the Diachronic Gospel (Bultmann and others)
- John as a Spiritualization of Mark and the Synoptics (Barrett and others)
- John as a Historicized Drama (Funk and others)

### 3. *Composition Theories Regardless of Authorship Distinguishing the Author from an Eyewitness and from John Son of Zebedee*

- An Independent Tradition Developing in Two or More Editions (Lindars and others)
- The Two-Level Gospel (Martyn and others)
- The Literary Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel (Culpepper and others)
- The Priority of John (Robinson and others)

While the post-script essay at the end of the following chapter introduces overlooked

first-century evidence connecting John the apostle with the Johannine tradition on critical grounds, the safest way to proceed is with the third option: developing an overall theory of Johannine composition and development whoever the author and/or final editor might have been. This is the approach taken by the best of recent Johannine scholars, including D. Moody Smith, Barnabas Lindars, Raymond Brown, Alan Culpepper, and many others. I too build on this approach in **Chapter 6**, wherein I outline my overall theory regarding the origin and development of the Johannine tradition. As an overall synthesis of the most plausible ways (in my judgment) to address the most pressing of the Johannine riddles, I envision *the dialogical autonomy of the Fourth Gospel* to be the best way to address its riddles—critically and meaningfully.

Because evidence for John's tradition being derivative upon alien sources or the Synoptics is critically insufficient, it deserves to be regarded as an autonomous Jesus tradition despite being highly developed theologically. That being the case, the Johannine tradition is highly dialogical, and in several ways. As a tradition emerging parallel to Mark's, John and Mark deserve to be called "the Bi-Optic Gospels," with independent perspectives on Jesus from the earliest stages of their traditions. If the evangelist was aware of Mark (with Bauckham and Mackay), differences with Mark may imply both augmentation and modest correction. Because the evangelist was clearly a dialectical thinker (with C.K. Barrett), he viewed most subjects from both sides, not just one. Rather than reflecting a Gnostic Redeemer-Myth (versus Bultmann), John's agency motif is thoroughly Jewish, rooted in Deut. 18:15- 22. A plausible theory of John's composition and literary features thus likely includes the following elements:

- *An Autonomous Tradition Developing Alongside Mark—The Other "Bi-Optic Gospel"*(John and Mark— "the Bi-Optic Gospels"—evidence individuated perspectives on Jesus' ministry from the earliest stages of their traditions; the first edition of John is thus the "second gospel" written as an augmentation of and modest corrective to Mark. John is different on purpose.)
- *The Dialectical Thinking of the Evangelist* (Because the Fourth Evangelist was a dialectical thinker—with Barrett—he held truth together in tension, conjunctively and intentionally.)
- *The History-of-Religions Origins of John's Divine-Human Dialectic* (Rather than rooting in a Gnostic Redeemer- Myth—versus Bultmann but with Wayne Meeks—the Father-Son relationship is Jewish in its origin, rooting in a Prophet- Like-Moses agency schema based on Deut. 18:15-22.)

- *Dialogical Engagements within the Johannine Situation: Seven Crises over Seven Decades* (These include: 1) north-south dialogues in Palestine, 2) debates with followers of John the Baptist, 3) engagements with leaders of the local Synagogue after moving to Asia Minor, 4) adversity faced by requirements of Emperor worship under the reign of Domitian, 5) disagreements with docetizing Gentile-Christian teachers over assimilation and the way of the cross, 6) challenges by Diotrephes and emerging hierarchical approaches to leadership in the early church, and 7) dialogues with other gospel traditions—a set of engagements spanning the other six engagements altogether.)
- *A Two-Edition Theory of Composition* (Based most squarely on the composition theory of Barnabas Lindars— independently confirmed by John Ashton—a first edition of John around 80-85 CE was followed by the continued preaching of the evangelist and the Elder's writing of the Epistles; after the death of the Beloved Disciple the Elder finalized the Fourth Gospel around 100 CE and circulated it among the churches.)
- *Aspects of Interfluentiality between John and Other Traditions* (Some "interfluence" is likely between the early Johannine and the pre-Markan traditions, as some common language shared by different preachers is a plausible inference; the Johannine tradition is a likely source for Luke and a plausible source for Q; some dialogue between the later Matthean and Johannine traditions over governance issues is likely.)
- *Revelation and Rhetoric: Two Dialogical Modes in the Johannine Narrative* (The central thrust of the Fourth Gospel is revelational—the divine initiative and God's agents call for a response of faith, and when people get it right their example should be followed; when the initiative shifts to discussants in the narrative the thrust is often rhetorical—characters get it wrong, and their misconceptions pose negative examples to be avoided by later audiences.)
- *Post-Script: Acts 4:19–20—An Overlooked First-Century Clue to Johannine Authorship?* (The earliest clear connecting of the Johannine tradition with John the apostle is not Irenaeus around 180 CE, but Luke-Acts a full century earlier; professing to speak about "what we have seen and heard" is echoed by John the apostle in Acts 4:20 and by the Johannine Elder in 1 John 1:3, demanding critical consideration.)

As a two-edition theory of composition solves most of the Fourth Gospel's main literary problems, it may even be that some development is observable between the first and final editions of John, with the Epistles being composed between them. And, as distinctive relations between the Johannine and each of the Synoptic traditions is more plausible than assuming identical relations between John and all other traditions together, a larger theory of

gospel relations based on the most plausible of inferences regarding particular intertraditional relations offers a viable way forward in understanding the place of John among the Gospels. Again, while this overall theory does not hinge upon a particular view of authorship, an overlooked Johannine detail associated with John the disciple in the above postscript gives one pause before accepting of “the one assured result of biblical critical scholarship”—that John the son of Zebedee *had nothing whatsoever to do* with the Johannine tradition. In addition to the critical implausibility of recent diachronic theories of composition, an independent first-hand familiarity with the ministry of Jesus more plausibly accounts for at least some of John’s distinctive presentation of the ministry of Jesus, despite being highly developed theologically.

Given a realistic overall theory of John’s composition and development, plausible inferences can be made in **Chapter 7** as to *the character and origin* of each of John’s riddles as described in Part 1 of the book.

- *The origin and character of John’s theological tensions* are largely accounted for as factors of: a) the dialectical thinking of the evangelist, b) the Prophet-like-Moses agency schema, c) the dialectical Johannine situation, and d) the rhetorical features of the Johannine narrative’s design.
- *The origin and character of John’s historical conundrums* are largely accounted for as factors of: a) an intentionally distinctive presentation of Jesus’ ministry as a complement to Mark, b) intratraditional dialogue between the earlier memory and later reflections of the evangelist, c) addressing the emerging needs of the Johannine dialectical situation, and d) accommodating the rhetorical interests of the evangelist.
- *The origin and character of John’s literary perplexities* are largely accounted for as factors of: a) movement from orality to literacy in the Johannine tradition, b) a modest two-edition theory of John’s composition, c) distinctive contacts with other gospel traditions (interfluentiality with the early Markan and later Matthean traditions and John’s formative influence upon the Lukan and Q traditions), and d) the rhetorical designs of the evangelist and the final compiler.

By considering the ways John’s distinctive riddles have influenced a dozen leading theories regarding John’s composition and development, one’s appreciation for reasons behind differing approaches to John is enhanced. At the same time, not all of John’s riddles are addressed with equal effectiveness, so critical theories must themselves be dealt with critically by later interpreters. In the light of such strength-weakness analyses, a summarized

overall theory of John's *dialogical autonomy* provides the most suitable way to navigate John's perplexing features and riddles. In the light of a realistic overall theory of John's composition and development, the origin and character of John's theological, historical, and literary riddles are better understood—leading also to a more suitable interpretation of John's content. Such is the focus of Part 3.

### **Part 3: Interpreting the Johannine Riddles**

Given that the origin and character of John's theological tensions and historical features are accounted for within a plausible overall theory, interpreting the Johannine riddles effectively is more readily accessible. Three main domains thus deserve an interpretive focus: the Christ of faith and John's theology, the Jesus of history in the light of the historical tradition underlying the Fourth Gospel, and implications of Johannine ecclesiology for the life of the church in later generations.

*The Christ of faith and Johannine theology* are now the special focus of **Chapter 8**. Among the leading themes in John's theology, when interpreted in the light of its dialogical autonomy, many of its riddles and tensions are more authentically understood.

- *Johannine Christology: Is Jesus Human, Divine, or Both?* (High and low christological themes are evident in earlier and later phases of the Johannine tradition—reflecting both developing memory and apologetic interests.)
- *The Father-Son Relationship: Egalitarian, Subordinate, or Neither?* (The Son's equality with and subordination to the Father involve flip-sides of the same coin—an agency schema rooted in Deut. 18:15-22.)
- *Signs Faith versus Blessed Faith?* (A dialectical stance toward signs shows both their valuation and their existentialization—a factor of the dialogue between perception and experience in the developing Johannine tradition.)
- *The Way to Salvation in John: Particular or Universal?* (No one can come to God except being drawn by the Father— that eschatological agency which Jesus performs and is—available to all as the Light of the world, but requiring also receptivity and responsiveness to the divine initiative.)
- *Johannine Dualism: Jewish or Greek?* (Both categories fit; John's dualism is both motivational—inviting authentic responses to the Revealer over their lesser alternatives, and reflective—explaining the uneven reception of the gospel within the Johannine situation and its unfolding history.)

- *The Ioudaioi in John: Pro-Semitism, Anti-Semitism, or Neither?* (John's presentation of "the Jews" or "the Judeans" is both positive and negative, but nearly everyone in the story is Jewish, including Jesus as the Jewish Messiah and his Semitic followers; the tension is between the Revealer and the religious—scandalizing all that is of human initiative, including Christian religion as well as Jewish and Roman political investments.)

*The Jesus of history* is the focus of **Chapter 9**, which raises the question as to whether a "fourth Quest for Jesus" is needed in today's biblical scholarship.<sup>10</sup> Despite the fact that the first three quests for Jesus over the last two centuries have programmatically omitted John from Jesus- research sources, this judgment is itself understandable but flawed. In the light of John's dialogical autonomy, we have in the Fourth Gospel an independent Jesus tradition—though highly developed theologically—which deserves to be taken into consideration alongside the Synoptics and other sources. If this happens on a more extensive scale, it would indeed require a *fourth Quest for Jesus*, and the inquiry would likely involve noting the following features:

- *The Historical Realism of the Fourth Gospel* (Despite John's highly theological motifs, John's political and religious realism is striking; motivations of leaders and crowds reflect familiarity with Jewish nationalism and the political impact of Roman occupation.)
- *Time and Space in the Ministry of Jesus* (John's chronology appears at times to be intentional—perhaps even as a corrective to Mark where it differs; John's topography and geographic features betray first-hand knowledge of Palestine and pre-70 Jerusalem, offering more details confirmed by archaeological research than all the other gospels combined.)
- *The Passion of Jesus* (John's independent narrative shows the last supper as a table-fellowship meal rather than an occasion for instituting a cultic rite; the stone pavement and praetorium are known; the crucifixion is outside the city; nails are used in the crucifixion of Jesus; an eyewitness testifies to the piercing of his side; the tomb is unused.)
- *The Works of Jesus* (The five signs unique to John are a part of the first edition, suggesting a chronological and geographical augmentation of Mark; the works of Jesus are presented as an attraction to the crowds and a threat to the religious leaders; Jesus travels to and from Jerusalem several times and over three Passovers, not just one.)
- *The Words of Jesus* (Short, pithy aphorisms are present in John, though often embedded in longer discourses; kingdom sayings are few but still present; I-am sayings and all of

the Johannine I-am metaphors and themes are present in the Synoptics, so they are distinctive in John but not unique; Jesus' primary emphasis affirms his having been sent from the Father as the prophet Moses predicted in Deuteronomy 18.)

- *The Revelatory Prophet* (As the revelatory prophet, the Johannine Jesus teaches that God's saving presence and love are radically accessible by faith, inviting people to respond to the divine initiative; the Johannine Jesus was a threat because he taught about the ongoing revealing work of the Father, through the Holy Spirit, who would teach and guide the faithful; revelation is always a scandal to religion, which is why Jesus was a threat.)

*Johannine ecclesiology* is the focus of **Chapter 10**, and in addition to the Christ of faith and the Jesus of history, the Fourth Gospel has a lot to say about the life of the church. With a strong emphasis on love and relationality, John poses a corrective to rising institutionalism in the late first-century Christian movement. It asserts more primitive views of ministry, worship, sacramentology, and leadership against hierarchical and institutionalizing innovations in the third Christian generation, impacting renewal movements throughout the history of Christianity. As such, the dialogical autonomy of the Fourth Gospel connects an individuated memory of Jesus' teachings with emerging issues in the third generation of the Christian movement, demonstrating proximity to the teaching and ministry of the prophet from Nazareth despite being the last gospel to be finalized.

- *A Vision of Relational Connectedness to Jesus* (John's assertions of intimacy with the earthly Jesus are expanded into an invitation for all believers to enjoy a spiritual relationship with the risen Christ by means of abiding faith.)
- *Fluid and Dynamic Images of the Church* (In contrast to more "petrified" models of the church, Johannine imagery features the connectedness of vines and branches and the pastoral work of shepherds and their sheep; Jesus gathers "sheep not of this fold" as an inclusive approach to fellowship.)
- *Gospel Ministry: Compassionate, Empowered, Inclusive* (Gospel ministry is rooted in love and is thus compassionate in its character; its authority rests upon the transformative work of the Spirit in its empowerment; its scope is inclusive in that women minister to and alongside Jesus as well as men, and even Samaritans extend the gospel effectively across ethnic and racial divides.)
- *On Worshiping in Spirit and in Truth* (Authentic worship extends beyond the confines of place and form; it must be in spirit and in truth—it is after such people that the Father

seeks to draw into transformative experiences of worship.)

- *An Incarnational Sacramentology* (Given that Jesus himself did not baptize, but only his disciples did, and that Jesus is not presented as instituting a rite of commemoration at the last supper, John's presentation of how the divine and the spiritual are communicated through physical media involves incarnational means—living, breathing, acting persons—including the works of Jesus and those of his followers.)
- *Peter, the Beloved Disciple, and the Ongoing Leadership of Christ through the Holy Spirit* (The juxtaposition of Peter and the Beloved Disciple does not reflect a conflict of personalities but of ecclesiologies; Peter affirms the words of eternal life that alone come from the Lord, and these are made known through the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit, who even after the deaths of the apostles will abide with and in Jesus' followers forever.)

In the light of John's dialogical autonomy, the interest in interpreting effectively the Fourth Gospel and its riddles is advanced. When considering John's theological features, both sides of an issue must be noted *and* held together in tension. Failing to do so will make one's interpretation something less than Johannine theology. Despite John's distinctive and theological character, however, it still renders an independent memory of Jesus of Nazareth deserving full consideration in any effectively critical quest for the historical Jesus. The question is how do to so adequately, given the unique origin and development of the Johannine tradition. If John represents a self-standing Jesus tradition with its own points to make, however, differences with Mark and the Synoptics might contribute to a sense of history rather than diminishing it. This is especially the case when considering John's ecclesiology, which appears more primitive and undeveloped than other New Testament perspectives, despite being finalized rather late. And, holding John's distinctive vision for the church in tension with other gospel perspectives, as well as other writings in the New Testament, becomes, perhaps, the greatest riddle of all.

### **Navigating the Living Waters of the Gospel of John**

So, how do students and scholars alike navigate the "living waters" of the Gospel of John?<sup>11</sup> The **Introduction** to the book raises the question as to *why* the Gospel of John has been called "a stream in which a child can wade and an elephant can swim." On one hand, this text serves newcomers to Christianity as an entrée to faith; it helps readers feel included among believers, assuring them of the certainties of their belief. On the other hand, as described above, this text is contested critically for strong reasons indeed! Whether one is a



wader or a swimmer, the reader is invited first to “jump in” and to read the biblical text for oneself—again or for the first time—welcoming further inductive immersions in the texts surrounding John’s many riddles.

The **Conclusion** then raises questions as to how contemporary readers of the Fourth Gospel might feel included without becoming exclusive, and how they might respond to the divine initiative in faith without becoming dogmatic. Here again, the way forward is an experiential one. If John’s is a theology of encounter, arising from such and evoking the same in the experience of its audiences, today’s readers are also invited into what Abraham Heschel calls the human-divine dialogue. Within that dialogue, the only authentic stance is that of faith, which across the boundaries of time and space ever involves a receptive response to the divine initiative. Because revelation is always a scandal to religion, and because the wonder of grace exposes the bankruptcy of human initiative, an authentic reading of John produces the antithesis of dogmatism and exclusiveness.

As the riddles of the Fourth Gospel are finally factors of mystery, their reflective contemplation leads to a humbled veneration of liberating truth—acknowledging an ever-deepening sense of how little we do know—among students and scholars alike.

## Notes

- 1 Appearing in April 2011, *The Riddles of the Fourth Gospel; An Introduction to John* (Minneapolis: Fortress) features some five dozen sets of biblical texts in offset boxes, questions for discussion at the end of each chapter, a glossary concisely explained terms, and an annotated bibliography. I am using it for the first time this semester, and I’d appreciate knowing how others are making use of it, as well.
- 2 David Strauss, *The Jesus of History and the Christ of Faith; A Critique of Schleiermacher’s The Life of Jesus* (Leander Keck, ed., trans., and intro.; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977; 4th German edn, 1865).
- 3 Eduard Schwartz, “Aporien im vierten Evangelium,” *Nachrichten von der Königlichen Gesellschaft der Wissenschaften zu Göttingen* I (1907, pp. 342-372), II (1908, pp. 115-148), III (1908, pp. 149-188), IV (1908, pp. 497-560). I think it is fair to say that this may be the most comprehensive outlining of the Johannine riddles and aporias since Schwartz’s works over a century ago.
- 4 More extended analyses of modern Johannine scholarship may be found in Paul N.

- Anderson, *The Christology of the Fourth Gospel* (third printing, Eugene, OR: Cascade Books 2010); and "Beyond the Shade of the Oak Tree: The Recent Growth of Johannine Studies," *Expository Times* 119:8 (2008) 365-373.
- 5 Rudolf Bultmann, *The Gospel of John* (G.R. Beasley-Murray, R.W.N. Hoare and J.K. Riches, trans. and ed.; Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1971).
  - 6 C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John* (2nd edn; London: SPCK; Philadelphia: Westminster 1978).
  - 7 In addition to his two-volume Anchor Bible commentary on John (1966-1970), see Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the Gospel of John* (ed., Francis Moloney; New York: Doubleday 2003).
  - 8 R. Alan Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel: A Study in Literary Design* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press 1983).
  - 9 See especially the new introduction, outlines, and bibliography in *Christology* (Cascade Books 2010), pp. xxxv-lxxxix.
  - 10 Some of the groundwork for this quest is laid out in Paul N. Anderson, *The Fourth Gospel and the Quest for Jesus: Modern Foundations Reconsidered*; Library of New Testament Studies Series 321 (London: T. & T. Clark 2006). See also the first two volumes of the John, Jesus, and History Project (SBL Press 2007, 2009).
  - 11 For a full-length treatment of this subject, see Paul N. Anderson, *Navigating the Living Waters of the Gospel of John*, Pendle Hill Pamphlet 352 (Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill Press 2000).