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A Fourth Quest for Jesus: So What, and How So?

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In May, Marcus Borg and I engaged in a set of public dialogues on the Gospels and Jesus in Bi-Optic Perspective,¹ and Marcus asked me a question I will be thinking about for a long time. At the end of our first session on *the development of the gospel traditions* he asked, “Okay, Paul, so *what?* What’s the significance of drawing the Gospel of John into Jesus studies? Is it simply a matter of imagining that Jesus took several trips to Jerusalem instead of one, or might it lead to something really significant in terms of how we understand the Jesus of history?” That is a really great set of questions, which I am still pondering!

My response at the time went along two lines. First, I said, the quest for Jesus of Nazareth through the Johannine lens is demanded by critical concerns, regardless of what the outcome might be. Critical appraisals of critical quests show that the dehistoricization of John and the de-Johannification of Jesus are critically flawed platforms on which to base either gospel analyses or Jesus research. In that sense, the John, Jesus and History Project—as well as my own work on the Fourth Gospel and the quest for Jesus—is driven by the judgment that the first three quests for Jesus have overlooked an extremely important resource: the Gospel of John as an independent Jesus tradition, which, though highly theological, also has its own worthy claims to historicity.²

Think of it! What would happen if the National Geographic Channel ran a special on a recently discovered gospel text from the late first century, which was different from the Synoptics but also developed an alternative rendering of Jesus and his ministry? If the third-century Gospel of Judas created a stir, with virtually no historical-Jesus tradition within it, imagine what sort of a ruckus would emerge if John were taken seriously as an independent Jesus tradition, differing from the Markan gospels with at least some knowing intentionality.

That's what I believe will happen if the Fourth Gospel's historical features come out from being eclipsed by its theological ones.

The second part of my response emerged within our second dialogue on *Jesus in Synoptic and Johannine perspective*, but it still requires further reflection; and, I invite others to join me in that inquiry. In essence, yes. Including the Fourth Gospel could make a significant difference in our understanding of Jesus of Nazareth in several ways, although the main question will be whether a particular feature is really "significant" or not. At first blush, a Jesus who includes women in leadership around himself, who teaches that every person has access to God's presence and direction, who declares that authentic worship is limited neither by form nor place but wherever people worship in spirit and in truth, who challenges religious and political establishments with the authority of truth, who emphasizes relationships centrally—with God and with one another, and who shows that sacrificial love is central to God's sending his saving/revealing witnesses in the world is *highly significant*, I believe!

Of course, other features will emerge as being of greater or lesser significance, but even these cause me to think more about the impact John's presentation of Jesus might have upon our understandings of the prophet from Galilee as portrayed in the one gospel claiming to have direct contact with Jesus as a basis for its content. Such a venture, however, will not be easy. Indeed, the very tools for determining historicity within the first three quests for Jesus have been forged on a Synoptic-favoring set of programs, often at John's expense. Therefore, this leads to a second question regarding how to conduct Jesus research making use of all viable resources—including the Gospel of John: *how so?*

While standard criteria for determining historicity within Jesus research are still of use, they must be modified to include the Fourth Gospel as a potential resource for Jesus research instead of functioning as grids for excluding Johannine features from gospel analysis. This is especially the case if the Fourth Gospel reflects a self-standing Jesus tradition, though theologically engaged, and if the Johannine narrative was crafted as a complement and alternative to Mark. Therefore, given the *dialogical autonomy of the Fourth Gospel* and a *Bi-Optic Hypothesis* regarding John's composition and distinctive relations to other traditions, present criteria must be revised.

Primitivity versus Dissimilarity. While the criterion of dissimilarity might keep a scholar from wrongly attributing later Christian impressions to the Jesus of history, it also fails the

test of serviceability because it eliminates everything that is standard Jewish and/or Christian from the gospel accounts of Jesus. What if Jesus really did teach or do conventional Jewish things? What if some of his followers really did follow his teachings and example authentically so that they became a real part of the movement? When a hermeneutic of suspicion is applied to itself, it withers under its own weight. What is needed is a way of distinguishing primitivity from later developments within the Jesus movement, and the Fourth Gospel has a good deal of primitive material in addition to developed tradition. Palestinian features, Hebraisms and Aramaisms within the text, Jewish thought forms and customs, and pre-formal (less developed) presentations of the Jesus movement provide a more serviceable way forward on this account. Also, a later presentation of an earlier memory still may have a historical root, even if development has evolved, so being able to sort through such issues is also important.

Corroborative Impression versus Multiple Attestation. If multiple attestation is used as a tool for selecting features of Jesus' portraiture, any time the Fourth Gospel differs from the others, it automatically becomes the loser; likewise Matthew and Luke. If the Johannine narrator was seeking to build around Mark, however, John's distinctive material may have been intended as a historical augmentation of (and to some degree a corrective to) Mark. Therefore, rather than excluding material because it is a lone testimony, historical analysis should focus on how this presentation corroborates and is corroborated by other perspectives on Jesus. While a distinctive narrative might reflect a theologized addition, it might also reflect a traditional report unknown to other narrators, included precisely because the narrator held it to be important historically. The question is how it might contribute a corroborative impression of Jesus' ministry, even if reflecting a minority report. If such is intended as a complement or challenge to Mark, it should be evaluated on that basis. Then again, I noted at least 31 incidents and features of Jesus' ministry that are attested in all four canonical gospels and 44 similar sayings in John and Mark alone.³ So, John's distinctive corroboration of Synoptic reports should be noted as well as the Fourth Evangelist's distinctive contributions.

Critical Realism versus Dogmatic Naturalism or Supranaturalism. Gone are the days when biblical scholars argued for the historicity of all supranatural reports in the Bible dogmatically, but equally problematic is the dogmatic arguing of a strict naturalism as the only grid for inferring biblical historicity. Critical theory on historiography is needed as much now as ever! Jesus may indeed have done some things that were interpreted as wondrous by

his contemporaries, even if some accounts became embellished in their narration. So, straining out every bit of the wondrous from gospel narratives is easily overdone. While the adding of the Johannine Prologue to an earlier edition of the narrative prepares the reader to receive the story, it should not be seen as the basis for the narrator's original work. Like Mark, the Johannine narrative began with a commentary on John the Baptist and the launching of Jesus' ministry as a Galilean prophet. Critical realism therefore allows one to deal with the problems that wondrous reports pose to historical analysis, while at the same time allowing the political, religious, archaeological, and topographical realism of the text to speak for itself.

Open Coherence versus Closed Portraiture. While the criterion of "coherence" is essentially circular in its implementation, it is still valuable. As an alternative to closed portraits of Jesus in recent Jesus quests, the portraiture should remain open and in process. Here, dichotomies should be avoided unless they are genuinely irresolvable. Because Jesus taught love of enemies and neighbor, does that mean he never asserted that his followers should love one another? Because Jesus resisted popular and nationalistic designs on his ministry, does this mean he did not assert mention directly his sense of divine commission? Because Jesus taught in parables about the Kingdom of God, does this mean he did not employ other metaphors and teach about how God actually leads humanity in spirit-based terms? The point here is that attempts to assert some features of Jesus' portraiture at the direct exclusion of others may involve false dichotomies leading to distorted portraiture. If Jesus was indeed understood in the company of other first-century Jewish prophetic leaders or other contemporary figures, might he also have contrasted his work to theirs as opposed to fitting into any conventional mold? To say Jesus was "just like" a contemporary model may itself be a mistake.

So how do we proceed with the two-century quest for the Jesus of history while including the Gospel of John? It is fair to say that we need to grind new lenses through with to view the Jesus of Nazareth through all gospel traditions, including John. In response to the question, "so what?" only time will tell. For now, however, a *fourth quest for Jesus* is underway, as making sense of Johannine historicity is every bit as needed as making sense of Johannine theology.⁴

Notes

- 1 These sessions were held at Reedwood Friends Church in Portland, Oregon May 19 and 22, 2010, sponsored by the Center for Christian Studies. JohnDave Medina has provided a helpful report of the first session on his website: <http://nearemmaus.wordpress.com/2010/05/25/the-origin-and-development-of-the-fourth-gospel-paul-anderson/>.
- 2 See the overview of these two programs of research in my February 2010 *Bible and Interpretation* essay, "The John, Jesus, and History Project—New Glimpses of Jesus and a Bi-Optic Hypothesis," <http://www.bibleinterp.com/articles/john1357917.shtml>.
- 3 Paul N. Anderson, *The Fourth Gospel and the Quest for Jesus; Modern Foundations Reconsidered* (London: T&T Clark, 2006) 129-32.
- 4 We will be holding a Summer School graduate course at the University of Mainz, August 2-5. All are welcome; more information is on the website: <http://www.ev.theologie.uni-mainz.de/Dateien/Flyer.Summerschool.pdf>.