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John 1–4 covers the beginning of Jesus’ ministry, including his being pointed out by John the Baptist in the Transjordan region and his being joined by five disciples (John 1), Jesus’ first sign performed at the wedding feast in Cana of Galilee and his prophetic demonstration in the temple (John 2), Jesus’ dialogue with Nicodemus and further testimony about his being the anticipated Messiah by John the Baptist (John 3), and Jesus’ dialogue with the woman at the well, her effective mission to the Samaritans, and his second sign performed in Galilee, the healing of a royal official’s son from afar (John 4). While space will not allow all the historical questions in the Fourth Gospel to be mentioned, let alone addressed, several major issues in each of its three parts will be introduced in service to the contributions made by the essays in each part. As such, distinctive features of the Johannine presentation of the beginning of Jesus’ ministry raise questions—both for and against—aspects of historicity in John 1–4.

First, the Fourth Gospel begins with a christological hymn—a communal confession of Jesus as the divine agency of God, who as logos, light, and the only-begotten Son of the Father has made it possible for those who receive him to receive life and inclusion into the family of God (John 1:1–18). This, of course, is a cosmic itinerary rather than a mundane one, so historians have often dismissed the rest of the narrative as a theological construct rather than a historical one. Given its similarities to the hymnic confession in 1 John 1:1–4, however, the Johannine Prologue appears to reflect a corporate response to content of the narrative, and it was likely added to the Johannine Gospel as a later introduction, rather than being the touchstone from which the original narrative flowed. Even so, emphases upon the incarnation of the Word (John 1:14), which has been seen, touched, and heard (1 John 1:1–3), show an interest in the physical and mundane ministry of Jesus, and appeals to firsthand encounter function to substantiate the Johannine witness in the Prologue and elsewhere (John 19:35; 21:24).

Second, the calling of the disciples is considerably different from presentations in the Synoptic Gospels. Instead of featuring a programmatic singling out of twelve
men to be his followers matching the symbolic number of the twelve tribes of Israel, a handful of John the Baptist's followers in the Fourth Gospel leave him and follow Jesus as a factor of John's witness and their discovery. Here, issues of theology and rhetorical interests engage Synoptic and Johannine studies alike, requiring historical inquiry in more than one direction. While the Jesus of history probably did call twelve disciples (described simply as "the twelve" in John 6:67), the programmatic feature of the twelve is portrayed as playing organizational functions within the early church (Acts 1:15–26), making the less formal presentation in John a plausible alternative to the more institutional view of the disciples in the Synoptics. On the other hand, if the Johannine Gospel were indeed written by a member of the twelve or their associates, as John 21 claims, why is there not a fuller presentation of their calling within it, and why are only half of the disciples mentioned by name?

Third, the sign performed by Jesus at the wedding feast (John 2:1–11) is presented as "the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee," whereupon his disciples believe (2:11). While turning water into wine is found in folkloric accounts of the time (Apollonius of Tyana), this miracle is not found in the Synoptics. It shows Jesus as beginning his ministry with a "party miracle," seeming to render a portrait of Jesus as "God walking on the face of the earth" (Käsemann 1968, 73; see also 9) rather than the historical Jesus of dusty Palestine. Indeed, the declaration of the steward that the best is saved for last (2:10) heralds both the culminating sign of the raising of Lazarus and, finally, the resurrection of Jesus, so theology seems to trump history on this account. Then again, the mundane character of the details in this sign is also striking: the purification jars are made of stone, and their capacity (twenty or thirty gallons, 2:6) is explicitly emphasized. If the emphasis is upon the first of Jesus' signs—certainly a contrast to the exorcism of Mark 1:23–28—it may imply an independent source or even an alternative beginning of Jesus' ministry from a Johannine perspective.

Fourth, the temple incident is presented at the beginning of Jesus' ministry in John, whereas in the Synoptics it serves as the culminating offense of Jesus' ministry leading to his arrest, trials, and death. The primary way scholars have approached this difference in recent decades is to consign John's presentation to the canons of theology and spiritualization and the Synoptic presentation to chronology and history. This approach, however, creates new problems. Later references to the signs and things Jesus had done in Jerusalem at the feast (2:23; 3:2; 4:45) and the increasing opposition in Jerusalem (John 5; 7–10) suggest a sequential understanding of the events portrayed in John 2:13–23; further, since Matthew and Luke followed Mark's single visit to Jerusalem, the dissonance is not three-against-one but a John-versus-Mark contrast. Given the fact that Mark locates all the Jerusalem events and debates together, between Mark 11 and 16, Mark's "chronology" must be seen as a narrative construct rather than a strictly historical one. So, was John's location of the temple incident a factor of theology instead of history, or was Mark's? Harmonizing here does not work; one must choose between the Synoptics and John.
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The twelve tribes of Israel, after the Baptist's imprisonment, both John the Baptist and Jesus are presented as ministering simultaneously in John 1 and 3—perhaps even correcting the sequential reference in Mark 1:14 (John 3:24). This raises questions, of course, about the ministries of John and Jesus, particularly how their ministries should be seen as similar and/or distinctive. An intriguing contrast between the Synoptic and Johannine presentations of the prophetic typologies of Elijah and Moses is that in the Synoptics John the Baptist is presented as fulfilling the roles of Elijah and “the Prophet,” whereas in John 1:20–21 he denies being either the Christ, Elijah, or the Prophet. These typologies are fulfilled instead by the Johannine Jesus; might such an interest explain this particular Synoptic-Johannine contrast? Clearly, the Baptist's role in the Fourth Gospel is to point to Jesus as the Messiah, and while that witness would have played well among the developing tradition's audience, might it also reflect a primitive traditional memory?

Fifth, in contrast to the Synoptics, where Jesus' ministry is presented as beginning after the Baptist's imprisonment, both John the Baptist and Jesus are presented as ministering simultaneously in John 1 and 3—perhaps even correcting the sequential reference in Mark 1:14 (John 3:24). This raises questions, of course, about the ministries of John and Jesus, particularly how their ministries should be seen as similar and/or distinctive. An intriguing contrast between the Synoptic and Johannine presentations of the prophetic typologies of Elijah and Moses is that in the Synoptics John the Baptist is presented as fulfilling the roles of Elijah and “the Prophet,” whereas in John 1:20–21 he denies being either the Christ, Elijah, or the Prophet. These typologies are fulfilled instead by the Johannine Jesus; might such an interest explain this particular Synoptic-Johannine contrast? Clearly, the Baptist's role in the Fourth Gospel is to point to Jesus as the Messiah, and while that witness would have played well among the developing tradition's audience, might it also reflect a primitive traditional memory?

Sixth, Jesus' dialogues with Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman are distinctive to John, and they clearly reflect the constructive work of the Johannine narrator. Does this mean, however, that their origin was fictive rather than historical? In addition, the dialogues with Jesus in other parts of John (with the crowd, the Jews, the disciples, and Peter in John 6; with the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem in John 5 and 7–10; with the blind man and others in John 9; with Peter and other disciples in John 13–16; with Pilate in John 18–19; with Mary Magdalene and Thomas in John 20; and with Peter and the Beloved Disciple in John 21) show a distinctive Johannine pattern of construction. Misunderstanding discussants often serve a rhetorical function, whereby Jesus corrects their flawed notions and presents them (and the reader) with a more enlightened view coinciding with the perspective of the Evangelist. Like the dialogues of Plato, the historical question regarding the Johannine dialogues centers on the question as to whether the teachings of the master or the teachings of the narrator are here primarily reflected.

Seventh, several distinctive images in John show a strikingly Jewish character rather than a Hellenistic one. While the symbol of the serpent lifted up on a pole would have played well among Hellenistic audiences familiar with the healing claims of the Asclepius cult in Asia Minor and elsewhere in the Greco-Roman world, Jesus' reference to Moses' action in John 3:14–15 shows a clear connection with Num 21:8–9, suggesting a Jewish origin of the metaphor. Further, while Jesus' engagement with the Samaritans is minimal in the Synoptics (with some exceptions in Luke), John's presentation of Jesus' traveling through Samaria on his way to and from Jerusalem is a geographical likelihood, and John's presentation of the tensions between Jews and Samaritans reflects historical knowledge of socioreligious realities. Archaeologically, the site of Jacob's well at Sychar and the worship site upon Mount Gerizim also confirm the topographical realism of the events, but the fact of these narratives' omission from the Synoptics makes historical questions understandable.
Eighth, the “second sign that Jesus did after coming from Judea to Galilee” (4:46–54) involves a healing quite similar to the healing of the centurion’s servant in the Q tradition (Matt 8:5–13; Luke 7:1–10). In both cases, the official is from Capernaum, the healing of his son/servant is performed from afar, and the role of faith is significant. Was this the same event presented in different ways? If so, which presentation is more a factor of historical knowledge and/or traditional development: the Synoptic account or the Johannine? Within Johannine studies, the numeration of the “second sign” has been taken as a reference to a hypothetical signs source, but what if the numeration reflects a dialogue with Mark? Rather than seeing the healing of Simon Peter’s mother-in-law as the first healing performed by Jesus, might the Johannine reference to the second sign imply an earlier healing miracle so as to present the earlier ministry of Jesus before the events narrated in Mark 1:30–31? Indeed, Matthew also locates the healing from afar just prior to the healing of Peter’s mother-in-law (Matt 8:14–15), so if sequential intentionality was a factor in the Johannine ordering, it was not alone.

While not all of these historical issues are addressed directly by the contributors to part 1, many of them are. Craig S. Keener launches our investigation of aspects of historicity in John 1–4 with an analysis of the Johannine Prologue. Rather than focus on the poetic and cultic features of this poetic composition, Keener notes the emphases upon firsthand encounter and connectedness to what has been seen and heard in the ministry of Jesus. Given that the first Johannine Epistle expands upon the firsthand encounters with the fleshly Jesus in whom the glory of God is beheld, Johannine rootedness in experience extends from encounters with the Jesus of history to connectedness with the Christ of faith (see Keener 2007). In that sense, the Johannine narrative intentionally bridges the gap between the historical ministry of Jesus and other audiences separated by time and space.

Mark Appold then contributes an important historical analysis of Bethsaida, the hometown of three of Jesus’ followers. Not only does Bethsaida figure prominently in the Markan tradition around the feeding narratives (see Appold 2007), but even more so is it featured in the Johannine story as an important location in relation to Jesus’ followers. As a result of archaeological finds over the last several decades, we see now that Bethsaida was more than a fishing village. It was the locus of a Hellenistic and Jewish nexus, explaining the outreach of Philip to the Greek visitors to Jerusalem (John 12:20–21) and later stories of his missionary outreach in Asia Minor (Eusebius, Hist. eccl. 3.31). Even Peter’s role as a bridge between later Jewish Christians and Greek Christians would have been impacted by his having come from a culturally blended town, and personal knowledge of Andrew’s, Peter’s, and Philip’s place of origin bears intriguing historical implications.

Taking up the issue of Johannine chronology, James F. McGrath casts valuable light on the distinctively Johannine contribution to our understanding of the temple incident in Jerusalem. Indeed, John, Mark, and tersely in Thomas
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From Judea to Galilee, the centurion’s servant cases, the official is from afar, and the role in different ways? If so, led by and/or traditional within Johannine studies, a reference to a hypothesis is a dialogue with Mark’s in-law as the first healing he second sign imply an ministry of Jesus before the locates the healing from Matt 8:14–15, so if sequenc it was not alone.

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...ter and Thomas, the Johannine account of the temple incident deserves a second look in terms of its historicity.

Mary Coloe then plies her exegetical skills to the Johannine presentation of John the Baptist. Her analysis not only challenges the Synoptic-derived view that Jesus’ ministry got going only after John’s arrest, but she shows how Johannine and Synoptic presentations alike show John as the friend of the bridegroom, who came to make Jesus known. In her judgment, the Baptist’s ceding the Elijah typology in favor of Jesus’ fulfilling that role—as presented in the Fourth Gospel over and against the Synoptics—is a warranted move, while his plausible embracing of the role of the voice of one crying in the wilderness and preparing the way of the Lord (Isa 40:3) is most lucidly presented in the Johannine rendering. Coloe shows how the artistic presentation of John’s witness to Jesus nonetheless contributes significantly to historical understandings of his work, as well as its relation to the historical ministry of Jesus.

In his essay, James H. Charlesworth brings to bear the fruit of his major treatment of the religious backdrop of the serpent typology employed in John 3 (2010) with a special focus on challenging prevalent interpretations with his own set of theses. Because this symbol occurs only in the Fourth Gospel and is highly theological, some claim that its origin lay in the theologizing interest of the Evangelist rather than a traditional Jesus memory. Because the serpent is often associated with temptation and death, some overlook its redemptive associations in John 3. Because the uplifting action refers to the cross, some deny any association with Jesus’ resurrection. Finally, because the serpent motif was associated with the Asclepius cult, some assume it had a Hellenistic origin rather than a Palestinian one. In Charlesworth’s argument, each of these views is flawed. The serpent typology of John 3 connects the life-giving work of Jesus with the action of Moses in Num 21 and the promise of life availed through Jesus for later audiences. Might it even have originated within the teaching of Jesus himself?

Susan Miller then walks us into the Johannine presentation of Jesus’ interaction with the woman at the well and the Samaritans as a historically plausible scenario. If Jesus traveled to and from Jerusalem, as most observant Galileans...
would have done, he inevitably would have traveled through Samaria (see Luke 17:11). This being the case, what is surprising is not that such an engagement with Samaritans is present in John; the oddity is that such encounters are absent from Mark and Matthew (Luke does feature Samaritans more favorably: 11:30–37; 17:16). Miller also notes similarities of religious ethos between Samaritans and the Fourth Gospel, especially in their attitude toward the temple and a geography-transcending understanding of authentic worship. Regarding Synoptic parallels, if Jesus would have engaged in conversation a Syrophoenician woman in Mark 7, it is not at all unlikely that he would have engaged in conversation a Samaritan woman in John 4—even if these narratives functioned to motivate later cross-cultural outreach. Not only do the archaeological facts support John’s rendering of Mount Gerizim as a place that Samaritans worshiped, and Jacob’s well as a revered site in Palestinian culture, but might the accusation of Jesus’ being “a Samaritan” in John 8:48 suggest a back-handed attestation to the historicity of Jesus’ Samaritan mission?

In comparing and contrasting the Johannine presentation of the healing of the royal official’s son in John 4:46–54 with Jesus’ healing of the centurion’s servant in Matthew and Luke, Peter J. Judge builds on his earlier analysis of Luke 7:1–10 (1989). Posing an alternative approach to Moody Smith’s advocacy of an independent Johannine tradition (Smith 2001), Judge builds upon the platform of the Leuven school, arguing for John’s dependence upon Synoptic traditions. Historical tradition in John is thus seen as a factor of Synoptic dependence and incorporation into the Johannine narrative. In making use of redaction-critical analyses, Judge seeks to distinguish between traditional and editorial features of the Johannine presentation of this scenario, building upon inferences of what the Q tradition might have looked like and how it was also used by Matthew and Luke. In so doing, Judge argues that in John we have a profound reflection upon the Jesus presented in Synoptic traditions, not simply a fabrication of a story to suit the Evangelist’s interests. He also builds on the work of John Painter (in Anderson, Thatcher, Just 2007), seeking to show how the transformed memory of the Fourth Evangelist contributed to the theological way in which he performed his historical work.

The essays in part 1 are responded to by Craig R. Koester, who has long emphasized that symbolism alone does not imply ahistoricity, but he also warns us that the lack of symbolizing features does not ensure historical accuracy (Koester 2003). By analyzing connections between the Johannine post-Easter memory and pre-Easter events, Koester suggests how the Johannine narrative both preserves and interprets tradition and thus aspects of historicity. His responses to each of the seven essays in part 1 tease out the strengths and weaknesses of each of the arguments, while also suggesting degrees of plausibility along the way.