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Spotlight: The Spirituality of Jesus as a Calling, Part II

AUGUST 5, 2017 by PAUL ANDERSON, PROFESSOR OF BIBLICAL AND QUAKER STUDIES, GEORGE FOX UNIVERSITY

Note: This article spotlights the work of Paul Anderson, an [individual faculty partner](#) in the Oikonomia Network. [Part I](#) appeared in last month's newsletter.

An inclusive quest for Jesus that embraces his calling in all of life seeks to recover a sense of Jesus and his ministry in ways that [extend beyond organized religion](#) and its reach. However, it is also a quest to include all resources that might meaningfully inform such a calling. On this point, the glories and foibles of modern biblical scholarship are thrown into sharp relief.

The worst of these failures is many modern scholars' exclusion of the one gospel claiming first-hand knowledge of Jesus from the repository of historical resources: the Gospel of John. After all, the Gospel of John is not simply about the life hereafter; it also deals centrally with authentic discipleship, the vocation to follow Jesus with our whole lives, and serving the world sacrificially – all of which lead to abundant and flourishing life in the here and now (John 10:10).

The influence of this modern skepticism toward John affects many seminary-trained pastors. Some feel intimidated when making use of the fourth gospel in their sermons and in their approaches to Christian discipleship. When I was using the second edition of *The Christology of the Fourth Gospel*, Hal Rast, editor of Trinity Press International, made this striking comment: “I’m really glad you’re working on the Gospel of John; I’ve stayed away from preaching on it since becoming aware of its difficulties in my seminary training.”

Nonetheless, in the new millennium significant advances have been made in exploring the Jesus of history, the Christ of faith, and the Gospel of John. The dichotomy drawn over 150 years ago by the notorious Tübingen critic, David F. Strauss, was wrong. Something being theological does *not* mean it is not historical. The quest for Jesus cannot privilege the synoptics while excluding the Gospel of John. Such has been the stance of the “three quests for Jesus” described by N.T. Wright and others (the “Original Quest” in 19th-century Germany, the “New Quest” beginning in the 1950s, and the “Third Quest” beginning in the 1970s, making use of social-science methodologies).

But the approach is invariably flawed. Yes, John is different and theologically imbued. However, John also has more mundane and archaeologically attested details than the other three gospels combined. And the synoptics are also theological as well as historical. More nuanced approaches to gospel historiography are thus required of critical scholars, as well as pastors.

Beginning in the 1980s, the Jesus Seminar sought to produce historical portraits of Jesus devoid of John’s “potentially distortive” influence. Rather than signaling the wave of the future, soon that project will likely be seen as codifying a modernistic past. Yet in their making use of non-canonical sources and pseudepigraphical gospels – while excluding John – the critical pushback among Johannine scholars is understandable. Along these lines, at least three major international research projects have approached the historicity of the fourth gospel since the turn of the new millennium, including: the John, Jesus, and History Project, the Princeton-Prague Symposium, and the Enoch Seminar. If an inclusive quest for the Jesus of history is to be undertaken, all worthy resources must be consulted, not just synoptic and Gnostic ones.

Here's where John's dialogical autonomy comes into play. John reflects an autonomous Jesus tradition, engaged dialogically with other traditions, with audiences in the evolving Johannine situation, and finally with today's readers. It invites us into imaginary dialogues with Jesus, its subject. Thus, when making use of the gospel of John in the quest for Jesus, the following points are instructive.

- John represents an independent (autonomous) memory of Jesus, although it is developed in terms of the narrator's own language, interests, and evolving situation – probably finalized after the death of the beloved disciple around 100 AD – likely within at least two editions.
- While the three synoptic traditions reflect a more unitive presentation of Jesus, Matthew and Luke built upon Mark (and possibly an unknown source, called “Q” – from the German word *Quelle*, meaning “source” or “fountain” – or Luke might have had access to Matthew as well as Mark).
- While not dependent on Mark, John's early material plausibly reflects an augmentation of Mark, both chronologically and geographically; John's later material (1:1-18, chs. 6, 15-17, 21) reflects a bit of harmonization with the other gospels.
- Put otherwise, Matthew and Luke built *upon* Mark; John built *around* Mark; John is different *on purpose*. That is why we see John clarifying the record here and there, and that John's interests are non-duplicative, as suggested by John 20:30-31 and 21:25.
- As a result, new criteria for determining gospel historicity must be put into play, including: corroborative impression versus multiple attestation, primitivity versus dissimilarity, critical realism versus dogmatic naturalism or supranaturalism, and open-impressionist coherence versus closed-portraiture coherence.

When the Gospel of John is put into play within the historical quest for Jesus, this requires a Fourth Quest for Jesus. This quest tempers parsimonious inquiry with a more inclusive approach. Even if the gospel of John reflects the evangelist's paraphrase in his presentation of Jesus, this only qualifies its historical contribution; it does not disqualify it. After all, when teachers ask their students to put things in their own words, this does not negate their historical comprehension; it demonstrates it.

Why does the witness of John matter so much to the quest for Jesus as a calling? When John is put into play, alongside other traditions, the following subjects invite

consideration:

- The political context of Jesus' mission – the man sent from God
- The baptism of John and the baptism of Jesus – immersion in the Spirit
- Temptation in the wilderness *and* in the city – faithfulness versus power
- Empowerment in solitude – the spiritual life and practices of Jesus
- Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom of God – within you and among you
- Jesus' acts of spiritual deliverance – inward liberation and healing
- Jesus' demonstrations of spiritual power – over nature and human needs
- Jesus' teachings on the spirituality of the kingdom – transvaluation and paradox
- Spirituality challenges religious authority – teaching with authority
- The way of the cross – counting the cost, obeying the truth
- The power of the resurrection – God's power and the impotence of death
- The spiritual presence of Christ – a transformative possibility

As pastoral leaders seek to help believers and others discern who Jesus was and what he came to do, including the Gospel of John within the quest for Jesus allows its distinctive spiritual vision to come through with renewed clarity. Therefore, in addition to welcoming audiences beyond institutional Christianity, an inclusive quest for Jesus must make use of all worthy sources, in particular, the one resource programmatically excluded over the first three quests: the Gospel of John. That is why, in addition to my [previous works on these controversies](#), I am now working on *Jesus in Johannine Perspective: A Fourth Quest for Jesus* (forthcoming from Eerdmans in 2018).

The final measure of a testimony's value will be related to the truth itself. After all, as Jesus reminds us in John 8:32: "You shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free."