

THE RELIABILITY OF HISTORY IN JOHN'S GOSPEL

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A "new look" has emerged in the study of John's gospel. Its advent has been celebrated and welcomed by no less a critical scholar than J. A. T. Robinson, whose scholarly viewpoints have sometimes provided a theological shock to the Christian world. Robinson¹ lists five presuppositions of critical orthodoxy about John that have come under heavy suspicion: (1) Earlier scholars insisted that all four evangelists used sources including one or more synoptics. Robinson points out that present studies on John emphasize that John's material shows signs of independence in its sources with the firm stamp of the author on its content. (2) In recent generations it has been popular to suggest that the background of the author of the fourth gospel is other than the events he records. Robinson suggests that the "new look" urges that the author was from southern Palestine in an era between the crucifixion of Jesus and the fall of Jerusalem. (3) Earlier scholars emphasized that the writer of the fourth gospel was a witness to the Christ of faith. Robinson suggests that the present emphasis is that the author is a witness not only to the Christ of faith but also to the Jesus of history. (4) Recent generations of scholars have suggested that the fourth evangelist appeared at the end of theological development in first-century Christianity. Robinson suggests that the author represented the alpha of the tradition as much as the omega. (5) Previous generations of scholars suggested that the author of the fourth gospel was not the apostle nor a direct eyewitness. The "new look" emphasizes that the tradition in John has contact with a developing community that enjoyed links to the earliest days of Christianity.

Robinson's position does not represent a complete trust in the reliability of all of the historical material in the fourth gospel. Nevertheless his evaluation of the trustworthiness of the material is much more positive than that of many of his colleagues in the scholarly community.² His position stands in contrast, for example, with the views of the influential C. K. Barrett, who says, "It is hardly possible to use the Gospel for a direct

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¹ J. A. T. Robinson, "The New Look on the Fourth Gospel," *SE I* (TU 73 [1959]) 338-350.

² A more complete presentation of Robinson's views on the independence and general trustworthiness of the material in the fourth gospel appears in *The Priority of John* (London: SCM, 1985).

reconstruction of the words and deeds of Jesus.”³ Somewhat less skeptical, but still hesitant to express full confidence in the historical reliability of John’s writings, is Raymond Brown: “Although we think that the Fourth Gospel reflects historical memories of Jesus, the greater extent of the theological reshaping of those memories makes Johannine material much harder to use in the quest of the historical Jesus than most Synoptic material.”⁴ Speaking more positively, Brown supports an existential purpose for the fourth gospel with these words: “We believe that the evangelist rooted this existential goal in a picture of Jesus that had not only historic but also historical value.”⁵

Another scholar who has written cogently in this field is Oscar Cullmann, who feels that “behind both, the transmission of facts and sayings on the one hand, and the communication of their interpretation on the other hand, stands the exalted Lord as the real instigator of the whole apostolic tradition.”⁶ Cullmann accepts the report of history in John’s gospel as trustworthy, and he feels that John attempted to link the life of Christ to past actions in salvation history, the present life of the Church, and history in the end time.

I will seek to move beyond the directions toward which Robinson points. His interest is in probing evidence for the general reliability of historical reporting in John’s gospel. Our probe will follow three steps. (1) I will present my understanding of the meaning of history in the fourth gospel and will define my use of the term “reliable.” (2) I will survey three influential approaches to the material of the fourth gospel and will investigate how they look at history in that gospel. (3) I will examine evidence for the reliability of the history in the fourth gospel. My conclusion will not lead me to a position of firmness about historical matters comparable to the mathematical trustworthiness of the multiplication tables or to the chronological verifiability of an event in history. Nevertheless I will point out that solid evidence exists for the assertion that the historical material in the fourth gospel is reliable, trustworthy, deserving of our confidence, and inviting to our faith.

In this paper I will frequently refer to the writer of the fourth gospel as the evangelist. I identify the evangelist with the beloved disciple or John the apostle.

I. “HISTORY” AND “RELIABILITY” IN THE FOURTH GOSPEL

Much of the material in the fourth gospel is unique to the NT. In the rest of the NT, Jesus does not claim to be the “bread of life” (John 6:35), the “light of the world” (8:12), “the way, the truth, and the life” (14:6) or the

³ C. K. Barrett, “History,” *Essays on John* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1982) 117. Barrett insists that John’s records are impressionistic and not photographic. He feels that John has adapted traditional material to another historical setting (p. 131).

⁴ R. E. Brown, *The Gospel according to John, I–XII* (AB; Garden City: Doubleday, 1966) XLIX.

⁵ *Ibid.* LXXIX.

⁶ O. Cullmann, “The Gospel of John and Salvation History,” *Salvation in History* (New York: Harper, 1967) 273.

“true vine” (15:1). Further, some of Jesus’ most notable miracles are recorded only in the fourth gospel. His changing of the water into wine (2:1–11), healing the lame man at the Pool of Bethesda (5:1–9), giving sight to the man born blind (9:1–7) and above all his raising of Lazarus (11:1–46) are impressive displays of divine power recorded only in this gospel. Some of Jesus’ memorable encounters with inquirers appear only in the fourth gospel. Among these are his dialogue with Nicodemus (3:1–21), his discussion with the Samaritan woman (4:3–30) and his instructions to Peter about service and humility (13:4–17). Can we assume that John has given an accurate report of these statements and events? Is there evidence that would compel us to look to them as convincing accounts of what Jesus actually said and did?

Questions of this nature concern John’s work as an historian and his reliability in reporting what Jesus said and did. What do we mean by “history” in the fourth gospel? What is the significance of asserting that the fourth gospel is “reliable”?

When we look at history in the gospel of John in this sense, we are seeking to determine if John reports what actually happened. Stephen Smalley puts the question this way: “Can we be sure that John’s traditional material . . . takes us back to the real origins of Christianity?”⁷ We will examine evidence to determine if John actually reports the events and speeches of the gospel in the manner in which they occurred. To use the German term, has John actually reported *Historie*?

F. F. Bruce has employed the term “reliable” in his description of the NT documents. He uses it to refer to historical records that are worthy of our trust. Bruce believes that the NT documents are reliable, and he states “that the grounds for accepting the New Testament as trustworthy compared very favourably with the grounds on which classical students accepted the authenticity and credibility of many ancient documents.”⁸ He admits that his approach to assembling historical evidence for the reliability of the NT documents has its limitations. His approach, for example, cannot establish that the NT completes the divine revelation made in Jesus Christ. His hope is that those who have confidence in the historical reliability of the NT will more easily respond to its theological claims.

In our examination of the reliability of history in the fourth gospel, we will view history as a record of what actually happened and will ask whether the fourth gospel’s account of what actually happened in Jesus’ life is worthy of our trust.

⁷ S. S. Smalley, *John: Evangelist and Interpreter* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1978) 162. Smalley discusses this question at some length on pp. 162–190. He presents evidence for accepting John’s account as generally reliable, but he feels that it includes some redactional activity. The result is that the narrative account is not literally a report of what actually happened. For an observation of Smalley’s method notice how he handles the incident of changing water into wine at the marriage feast in Cana (pp. 174–178).

⁸ F. F. Bruce, *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?* (5th ed.; London: InterVarsity, 1960) 5. In contending for the reliability of the NT documents Bruce presents evidence for the early existence of the documents, the multiple literary sources for the texts, the trustworthiness of the historical records in the materials, and the evidence from archeology.

As we begin this approach, it will be important to observe two warnings given by I. Howard Marshall. Although accepting the historical reliability of the NT documents, Marshall points out that the NT accounts are not intended to provide detailed historical information and may only give a brief summary of an incident or speech. The NT may be historically reliable without providing a comprehensive account of an event. For example, most of us would regard the sermons in Acts as summaries or brief accounts of the message rather than as verbatim reports. We would not fault Luke for presenting an accurate summary rather than a verbatim report. Marshall also warns that we must consider the form or genre of a narrative in determining if it was intended to present historical truth. Jesus presented his parables as if they were actual happenings, but we would not claim that there must have been an historical good Samaritan or a prodigal son in order for these stories to be trustworthy. The parabolic form does not demand the presence of history in the account.⁹ As we study the reliability of history in the fourth gospel, we must consider the nature of the history John presented.

II. APPROACHES TO HISTORY IN THE FOURTH GOSPEL

Many eminent scholars have made the study of the fourth gospel their preeminent lifework. Among those of the present and previous generations who have contributed to scholarly opinion on John are B. F. Westcott, C. H. Dodd, J. H. Bernard, B. W. Bacon and Leon Morris. Contemporary studies of the fourth gospel are being heavily influenced by the insights of Raymond E. Brown, J. Louis Martyn and R. Alan Culpepper.¹⁰ We will study the approaches of these latter three men and their view of history in the fourth gospel.

The approaches of Brown and Martyn to history in the fourth gospel share a diachronic framework. Both study the development of the gospel over a period of time. Culpepper's approach does not consider questions of actual historicity although he raises no serious question about the historicity of events in the gospel. His approach is labeled as synchronic because it accepts the text of John as it is and applies categories of the modern novel to the fourth gospel in order to obtain insights about the method of writing used by the author. A diachronic approach to a document examines that document

⁹ I. H. Marshall, "Historical Criticism," *New Testament Interpretation* (ed. I. H. Marshall; Exeter: Paternoster, 1977) 131.

¹⁰ C. Koester spotlights the important contributions of Brown and Martyn in "R. E. Brown and J. L. Martyn: Johannine Studies in Retrospect," *BTB* 21 (Summer 1991) 51-55. He sees their impact as most important in contemporary Johannine studies because they have both influenced the agenda of Johannine discussion for twenty-five years. D. A. Carson indicates the importance of Culpepper's role in an observation Carson makes about Culpepper's book, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel*: "In short, Culpepper's work is important, not because it has all the answers, but because it is the most comprehensive treatment of the Fourth Gospel from the perspective of the new criticism, and will set much of the agenda for years to come." See D. A. Carson, *The Gospel according to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991) 68.

over a period of time. A synchronic approach minimizes these types of questions and asks questions about the given text of the document.

In this brief overview of evidence for the reliability of John's gospel I will make little reference to the Qumran finds. The scrolls provide evidence that "the milieu of the Johannine writings was Palestinian Judaism, at least in origin."¹¹ Before the discovery of the Dead Sea scrolls students of the fourth gospel questioned whether its dualism was a creation of the author. When it was seen that the Qumran scrolls expressed a contrast between light and darkness, truth and falsehood, and life and death just as did the fourth gospel, scholars recognized that the writer of that gospel had only been expressing views typical of a segment of Palestinian Judaism. The discovery of the scrolls provided information that corroborates the reliability of the portrait of Jesus in the fourth gospel.

III. DIACHRONIC APPROACHES TO THE FOURTH GOSPEL

1. *The approach of Raymond Brown.* Brown's two most significant books on the fourth gospel are his two-volume commentary on John in the Anchor Bible series¹² and a later publication, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple*.¹³ Brown's commentary on John is basically a form- or source-critical approach to the gospel. He feels that the fourth gospel passed through two editions at the hands of the evangelist and received a final editing from a redactor, who is someone other than the evangelist.¹⁴ He notes that John made the Lazarus miracle the root cause of the decision to put Jesus to death (John 11:46–53). He feels that in John's gospel the resurrection of Lazarus assumes its importance because it provides an ideal transition from the presentation of signs in Jesus' life to the passion experience. He sees the causal connection between the raising of Lazarus and the death of Jesus as more a question of Johannine pedagogical and theological purpose than of historical reminiscence.¹⁵

Brown's diachronic approach to the fourth gospel is more evident in *The Community of the Beloved Disciple* than in his commentary. He pursues a two-level reading of the gospel and sees the writing as presenting a key to Church life for thirty to sixty years after Jesus.¹⁶ By describing his approach as carried out on two levels, we mean that Brown views the Johannine writings as presenting information both about Jesus' lifetime and also about the later development of disciples who were loyal to the beloved disciple. In practice Brown feels that the Johannine materials offer only limited means for reconstructing the ministry and message of the historical Jesus. His primary

¹¹ J. Painter, *John: Witness and Theologian* (London: SPCK, 1975) 6.

¹² R. E. Brown, *The Gospel according to John* (AB; Garden City: Doubleday, 1966–70).

¹³ R. E. Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1979).

¹⁴ Brown, *Gospel* 1.xxxiv–xxxix.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* 1.430.

¹⁶ Brown, *Community* 7. Brown not only examines the fourth gospel for evidence of the practices of the community but also carries his studies into the epistles of John.

emphasis is on what they show about the community of disciples who clustered around the beloved disciple.

Brown sees four phases to the development of the community of the beloved disciple. (1) He finds the origins of the Johannine community in the time before the fourth gospel was written. The group in the community consisted largely of Jewish believers with a low Christology. (2) He discusses the period for writing the fourth gospel. During this period of time Brown sees the Johannine community as relating to two groups of nonbelievers and to two groups of believers. (3) He sees the Johannine community experiencing internal struggles as the epistles are being written. (4) He notes the Johannine community being swallowed up by the larger Church and by gnostics after the epistles had been written.

We will look at a brief example of how Brown proceeds with his task. In locating those passages that provide information about the Johannine community, Brown emphasizes the ones that differ from the emphasis of the synoptic gospels. He says, "A passage where John is clearly modifying the historical picture of Jesus' ministry is probably a passage where Johannine theological interests have come to the fore."¹⁷ Brown's statement means that wherever the Johannine account differs from the synoptics he will be prone to feel that theological purpose and not accurate assessment of history has prompted the change. Brown uses this principle to suggest that the report of Samaritan conversions in John 4:4–42 must reflect a postresurrection experience and not an event during Jesus' lifetime. Since Jesus forbade his disciples even to enter a Samaritan city (Matt 10:5) it is unlikely in Brown's thinking that Jesus' preaching led to the conversion of many Samaritans. Nevertheless Brown does use the story in John 4:4–42 as a basis for suggesting that one of the groups of the Johannine community during the pre-gospel period of its existence consisted of "Jews of peculiar anti-Temple views who converted Samaritans and picked up some elements of Samaritan thought."¹⁸ Brown admits that his suggestions for the reconstruction of the fourth gospel present only probabilities. He adds that "if sixty percent of my detective work is accepted, I shall be happy indeed."¹⁹

It is important to make observations about Brown's method. (1) Brown assumes too easily that he can read from a text that claims to present information about Jesus the story of the life and circumstances of the community that produced the fourth gospel.²⁰ Brown's entire procedure utilizes a very subjective methodology. He is aware of the danger of subjectivity, but after he acknowledges the difficulty of finding the history of the Johannine community in John's gospel he proceeds to find it more confidently than his protestations allow. (2) It appears to demonstrate a wrong methodology to use the fourth gospel primarily as a source of information about the Johannine community. The author of the fourth gospel has suggested that a pri-

¹⁷ Ibid. 21.

¹⁸ Ibid. 38.

¹⁹ Ibid. 7.

²⁰ Carson voices this criticism in *Gospel* 43.

mary purpose of the document is to present information that will lead to a belief in Jesus (20:30–31). It does not seem to be his purpose to provide material for a sociological study of the community that clustered around the beloved disciple.

2. *The approach of J. Louis Martyn.* Martyn's most significant contributions to Johannine study have appeared in his *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel*. His first edition appeared in 1968, and a revised edition came out in 1979.²¹ Martyn's work has influenced Brown in his contention for a two-level reading of the fourth gospel. Although Martyn did not originate the practice of a two-level reading approach to John, he has popularized it and given it a coherent application to the fourth gospel.

Martyn suggests that John's gospel was written by a Christian theologian who wrote in "response to contemporary events and issues which concern, or should concern, all members of the Christian community in which he lives."²² The clearest example of Martyn's use of the two-level approach appears in his discussion of John 9. There he suggests that the text first witnesses to an event occurring during Jesus' earthly lifetime (9:1–7). This original healing story was the major locus of the action in which Jesus was involved. But the text also witnesses to the powerful presence of Jesus in events experienced by the Johannine church. He feels that the bulk of the dramatic expansion from vv. 8–41 contains this type of witness. How can Martyn place such an emphasis on finding the experience of the Johannine community in the fourth gospel?

First, he notes that beginning in John 9:8 Jesus is no longer present in the story. He understands the absence of Jesus to represent a period in the life of the community when Jesus is no longer with them. We should note that the statement is somewhat questionable because Jesus does return to the story at 9:35. Second, he feels that from 9:8 on the evangelist shows how the risen Lord continues his earthly ministry in the work of a Christian preacher. He sees this activity of the Christian preacher as taking place in the life of the Johannine community. He relies on the statement of 14:12 as evidence of the continued presence of Jesus through the ministry of a Christian preacher. Third, he feels that some Christian members of the synagogue have experienced formal exclusion from the synagogue because of their Christian profession. He feels that the statement of the evangelist in 9:22 presupposes a time after the destruction of the temple in AD 70 when unbelieving Jews had expelled Christian Jews from their synagogues. Martyn concludes his chapter:

Thus the Fourth Gospel affords us a picture of a Jewish community at a point not far removed from the end of the first century. As we get a glimpse of it, this community has been shaken by the introduction of a newly formulated means for detecting those Jews who want to hold a dual allegiance to Moses

²¹ J. L. Martyn, *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel* (2d rev. ed.; Nashville: Abingdon, 1979).

²² *Ibid.* 18.

and to Jesus as Messiah. . . . In the two-level drama of John 9, the man born blind plays not only the part of a Jew in Jerusalem healed by Jesus of Nazareth, but also the part of Jews known to John who have become members of the separated church.²³

Martyn's practices in his book call for several comments. First, his historical skepticism is unwarranted. His approach to the fourth gospel is to regard the history in it as the history of the Johannine community. He does not emphasize that the gospel presents reliable information about the history of Jesus.²⁴ It is unacceptable to take a writing professing to present reliable information about Jesus of Nazareth and turn it into a sourcebook for a history of the Johannine community.²⁵ One feature of the fourth gospel that works against Martyn's thesis is John's ability to distinguish between what happened in the days of Jesus and what happened only after Jesus' resurrection. Such references as 2:22; 12:16 suggest that John made a clear distinction between what had occurred during Jesus' ministry and what developed later after the resurrection. The fact that John demonstrated this practice should make us cautious against following Martyn's method too closely.

Second, it is important to contrast Martyn's statement of the purpose of the fourth gospel with that of the gospel itself. He says that the major concern of the evangelist "was to bear witness to the essential *integrity* of the *einmalig* [a term that Martyn uses in the sense of "back there" in reference to events in Jesus' earthly life] drama of Jesus' earthly life and the contemporary drama in which the Risen Lord acts through his servants."²⁶ The fourth gospel itself claims to present information that will encourage and sustain a belief that Jesus is God's Messiah and Son (John 20:30–31). Martyn's emphasis seems to be misplaced.

We have access to a source of information to assist us in evaluating Martyn's method. He views the fourth gospel as containing information on two levels. (1) He sees the gospel as giving information about the historical Jesus. (2) More importantly to him, he sees the gospel as providing information about the Christian community that produced the gospel. He admits that John does not overtly indicate to his reader a distinction between the two stages, and he suggests that only the reflective scholar can discover the seams the evangelist has deftly tied together.²⁷ Admittedly, Jewish apocalyptic works often contain dramatic presentations on two levels. But it seems improper to take a feature of the apocalyptic genre and apply it to the fourth gospel. What justifies applying the two-level scenario to a

²³ Ibid. 61–62.

²⁴ This is Carson's criticism in *Gospel* 38.

²⁵ F. P. Cotterell gives evidence that a simple discourse analysis of the Nicodemus pericope provides a sensible understanding of the presumed historical context of the incident. It is not necessary to adopt Martyn's two-level analysis in order to arrive at a coherent understanding of John's narrative. See "The Nicodemus Conversation: A Fresh Appraisal," *ExpTim* 96 (May 1985) 237–242.

²⁶ Martyn, *History* 89.

²⁷ Ibid. 137.

gospel? In my judgment it is totally indefensible. One source of support for this statement can be found in the NT use of OT passages from narrative or historical literature. Generally when the NT writers deal with OT narrative or historical literature they first accept the events mentioned in the narrative literature as historical occurrences and then they make application of them. Jesus' reference to Noah in Matt 24:37–39 appears to suggest that he accepted the OT account as a record of historical fact. Jesus' reference to Moses' lifting up of the serpent in the wilderness implied an acceptance that the event took place (John 3:14). In responding to the request of the Pharisees for a sign Jesus accepted the historicity of Jonah's encounter with the fish (Jonah 1:17–2:10) and used the incident as an illustration of his coming resurrection. This pattern of viewing the OT accounts as reliable and accurate provides instruction for us today. Our primary efforts in understanding the incidents in a book such as the fourth gospel must begin with an effort to understand the incidents as reliable historical accounts. Once we have accepted the reliability of the history in the accounts, we can provide application and additional insight.²⁸

The evangelist of the fourth gospel indicated that he knew many other events from Jesus' life, but he had been guided in his selection of incidents to include those events that would lead the readers to faith in Jesus as Messiah and Son of God. The needs and interests of the community to which the evangelist wrote dictated his choices of incidents in the fourth gospel, but it does not follow that the evangelist created tradition that would mirror his own theological interests.

IV. A SYNCHRONIC APPROACH TO THE FOURTH GOSPEL

Alan Culpepper has presented a profoundly original analysis of the fourth gospel.²⁹ He suggests that many contemporary approaches to the gospels view the writings as a window through which readers can catch glimpses of the history of the Johannine community. The actual meaning of the text lies on the other side of the window in the world of the evangelist. By contrast Culpepper wants to offer an approach to the fourth gospel that serves as a mirror:

This model assumes that the meaning of the text lies on this side of it, between mirror and observer, text and reader. Meaning is produced in the experience of reading the text as a whole and making the mental moves the text calls for its reader to make. . . . As one reads the gospel, the voice of the nar-

²⁸ It is of course possible that the NT writers could use legends and allegories to illustrate spiritual truth. The mere reference to these incidents by either Jesus or the NT writers does not guarantee a belief in their historicity. But as J. Wenham has pointed out, in many instances "the historical truth of the saying seems to be essential to its validity" (*Jesus' View of the Old Testament* [Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1972] 14). It is difficult to avoid the view that Jesus and the NT writers intended their readers to take the historical references to the OT seriously.

²⁹ R. A. Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel: A Study in Literary Design* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983).

rator introduces the narrative world of the text, its characters, values, norms, conflicts, and the events which constitute the plot of the story.³⁰

Culpepper's analysis of the fourth gospel is synchronic. He deals with the text as he finds it without analyzing how it came to be that way. He also uses modern theories developed in the poetics of the novel and applies them to his study of the fourth gospel. For example, he uses and defines terms such as "real author," "implied author," "real reader," "implied reader." He studies time, plot and characters using theory derived from the study of the modern novel. His study of irony and symbolism in the fourth gospel presents many helpful insights on the evangelist's use of imagery, but it is not necessary fully to adopt Culpepper's use of the theory of novels in order to carry out that aspect of his study.

Culpepper's work deals almost entirely with the adaptation of the modern theory of study of novels to the study of the fourth gospel. He recognizes that his study is only preliminary and that "once the effort has been made to understand the narrative character of the gospels, some rapprochement with the traditional, historical issues will be necessary."³¹

How shall we evaluate what Culpepper has done? First, we must question his adaptation of the categories from the study of novels to the study of the fourth gospel. Obviously a comparison of the writing style of the evangelist to that of writers of modern novels will produce insightful information, but does this comparison of novels to the gospel allow the gospel message clearly to be heard? My own fear is that in scurrying about to detect evidences of real and implied authors and real and implied readers the modern reader will gain much less insight into Jesus, whose story the gospel professes to narrate.

Second, Culpepper remains agnostic in his answer to most questions about historicity. Readers need an assurance that the events narrated in the fourth gospel actually occurred in order to derive spiritual benefits from them. That type of assurance will not be developed in the approach Culpepper has taken. Moisés Silva suggests that Culpepper "treats the material as though it had no historical significance and leaves the impression that the real value of the Gospel is the artistry with which the author communicates his message, whether or not there is any factual basis for that message."³² In a review of Culpepper's work D. A. Carson has said, "There is everywhere a deep desire to preserve some sort of genuinely pious attachment to Christianity, while working on historical-critical levels with such powerful post-Enlightenment impulses that no epistemologically responsible grounding for the piety is possible."³³

While this is the opposite of Culpepper's stated intention, I fear that it is the logical outcome of his methodology.

³⁰ Ibid. 4.

³¹ Ibid. 11.

³² M. Silva, "Approaching the Fourth Gospel," *Criswell Theological Review* 3 (1988) 26.

³³ D. A. Carson, "Review of *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel*," *Trinity Journal* 4 (Autumn 1983) 126.

V. EVIDENCES FOR THE RELIABILITY OF THE FOURTH GOSPEL

What are the evidences for the reliability of the materials of the fourth gospel? Can contemporary readers of the gospel rely on the accuracy and trustworthiness of its historical portraits and descriptions? Evidence to answer this question comes from several categories. First, we will examine internal evidence from the fourth gospel to discover any features corroborating the reliability of the gospel. Second, we will observe theological emphases of the fourth gospel to see if this method of approach will yield insightful information. Third, we will look at some information of a general nature that answers questions about the reliability of the fourth gospel.

1. *The internal evidence of the fourth gospel.* Classical form criticism in the 1920s suggested that the gospels present more information about the beliefs of the early Church than facts about the life of Jesus. Redaction critics point out that the gospels present more information about the theology of the writer than facts about Jesus. Do we find evidence in the gospels, particularly the fourth gospel, to sustain these negative evaluations of history in the gospels?

The writer of the fourth gospel showed serious concern about history by his use of topographical and chronological information. With reference to topography we can state that the author of the fourth gospel knew quite well the Palestine in which the scenes of gospel action moved. The reference to "Bethany beyond Jordan" (John 1:28) distinguishes this town from the Bethany that was the home of Mary and Martha (11:1). It is interesting also to contrast the vague reference to the location of Bethany in Luke 10:38 with its more precise location in John 11:18. The geographical references of John 4 to Samaria, Sychar, and Jacob's well show that the writer was familiar with Samaria and its geography. The description of the place of Jesus' crucifixion as Golgotha, the place of the skull, and the location of it with respect to the wall of the city (19:17, 20) show a familiarity with local geography in Jerusalem. Topography was of concern to the writer of the fourth gospel. He knew the location well enough to explain the role of geography in the incidents he narrated.³⁴ The author not only knew the geography of Palestine but also showed a knowledge of specific locations in which incidents of Jesus' life occurred. Such passages as 8:20 ("in the treasury"), 10:23 ("in Solomon's porch") and 21:1 ("at the Sea of Tiberias") suggest that the writer had detailed knowledge of the locations in which the various gospel pericopes occurred. The reference in 10:40 ("the place where John was first baptizing") claims knowledge of the location of the baptismal activities of the Baptist.

The writer of the fourth gospel also displayed an interest in chronology. In John 1 the term "the next day" appears frequently (1:29, 35, 43) in order to relate events of the gospel to one another. John 2 contains the statement

³⁴ For additional discussion of the geographical knowledge of the writer of the fourth gospel see R. D. Potter, "Topography and Archaeology in the Fourth Gospel," *SE I* (TU 73 [1959]) 329-337.

“on the third day” (2:1), and the phrase “after this” (2:12) suggests an event that chronologically follows the incident in 2:1–11. The incident of healing the son of the royal leader is preceded by an indicator of chronology in the reference to “two days” (4:43) and contains a chronological reference to “one o’clock” (4:52) as the hour when the healing occurred. John also contains vague or general references to time such as “after this” (5:1) and “after that” (7:1), but even these more general references function in the same manner as the reference in 2:12. They introduce an incident that chronologically follows a preceding event. The references to time are not without their difficulty, and they require interpretation to be understood fully. But they show the interest of the writer in issues of chronology. He was not indifferent to this feature.

A second internal feature that suggests interest in a reliable historical report is the frequent reference in the fourth gospel to the concept of witness. The fourth gospel uses the verb *martyreō* thirty-three times and the noun *martyria* fourteen times. This word pair appears far more often in the fourth gospel than in any other writing of the NT. In many instances the discussion about witness appears on the lips of Jesus, but in two instances (19:35; 21:24) the evangelist uses the words to contend for the reliability of the information that is being reported. In 19:35 there is debate concerning the identity of the witness. The writer may be referring either to himself or to someone else, but we need not establish the identity of the witness in order to accept the significance of the statement. Leon Morris says, “What is plain is that John is placing some emphasis on the fact that this incident may be relied on.”³⁵ The statements insist that the narrated incidents are not mere romantic elaborations.

The emphasis on the concept of witness moves naturally into the assertion that the statements of an eyewitness appear to lie behind the incidents in the fourth gospel.³⁶ An eyewitness would be able to attest to the essential accuracy of the accounts in the gospel of John. Eyewitness information may lie beyond the mentioning of such matters as the time of day when an event occurred (1:39; 4:6), the connection of an event to the annual religious calendar (2:13; 6:4; 7:2; 10:22) and the presence of specific names for participants in events (3:1; 11:2; 18:10; 20:1–2). The writer introduces the reader to the fragrant aroma that filled the house when Mary anointed Jesus’ feet with a costly perfume (12:3). This collection of information helps to convince us that the writer knew the facts from personal acquaintance and could be relied upon to present a true portrait.

One might question the logic of drawing the conclusion from the statement of 19:35 that every incident of the fourth gospel is supported by eyewitness testimony. In 21:24, however, the evangelist is likely claiming that the testimony of an eyewitness stands behind the entire narrative account

³⁵ L. Morris, *The Gospel according to John* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971) 822.

³⁶ L. Morris explores this issue at greater length in an intriguing article, “Was the Author of the Fourth Gospel an ‘Eyewitness?’”, *Studies in the Fourth Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969) 139–214.

of the fourth gospel.³⁷ Since reliable testimony lay beneath the gospel accounts, we have a firm foundation for trusting its content.

A third source of evidence that leads us to accept the fourth gospel as a reliable historical statement is derived from the knowledge the author possesses about beliefs and practices of Palestinian residents. He knew of the hostility between Jews and Samaritans (4:9), and he understood the generally low view of women held by Jews (4:27). He understood Sabbath regulations and their effects on Jewish life (5:10), but he also understood that some needs overrode Sabbath regulations (7:22–23). He perceived the contempt the Pharisees had for ordinary people (7:49). His awareness of these customs, practices and beliefs gives us greater confidence for relying on the accuracy of his report.³⁸

A fourth feature from within the fourth gospel that encourages us to accept it as a reliable statement is its declaration of purpose in 20:30–31. Debate exists as to whether John's purpose was to establish the faith of Christians or to bring non-Christians to faith. It is not necessary to settle this debate in order to observe that John claims to be presenting accurate facts. It would require reliable information to strengthen the faith of Christians or to enlighten the understanding of unbelievers. D. A. Carson states his understanding in these words: "John's purpose is not academic. He writes in order that men and women may believe certain propositional truth, the truth that the Christ, the Son of God, is Jesus, the Jesus whose portrait is drawn in this Gospel."³⁹ John selected events from the life of Jesus that would lead the readers to such faith in Jesus. Reliable historical reporting lay at the foundation of this faith.

2. *Theological emphases of the fourth gospel.* The evangelist of the fourth gospel probably penned his views against a strain of docetic Christianity. Morris accepts this as evident from the statement in 1:14,⁴⁰ and Brown, while not as certain that the evangelist was opposing docetism, nevertheless says of 1:14a: "Certainly its theology would not have been compatible to Gnostic or Docetic strains of thought."⁴¹

Docetics denied the reality of the incarnation of Christ. They insisted that Jesus only appeared to eat and drink and live on earth. In order to counter the influence of their teaching the evangelist asserted that Jesus was a real man. The statement in 1:14 that "the Word became flesh" is a

³⁷ The issues of interpretation are complex, and it is possible that "these things" may refer only to the content of the previous incident in the final chapter. Morris says, "It is much more probable that 'these things' refers to the whole book" (*Gospel* 880–881). Another problem is the identity of the "we" in the verse. In a work from another generation E. H. Askwith has concluded "that the Evangelist is indeed writing from personal experience," and he compares and contrasts incidents from the fourth gospel with comparable events from the synoptics to sustain his favorable historical verdict (*The Historical Value of the Fourth Gospel* [London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1910] 20–21).

³⁸ Morris discusses additional information of this type in *Gospel* 12–13.

³⁹ Carson, *Gospel* 663.

⁴⁰ Morris, *Gospel* 102.

⁴¹ Brown, *Gospel* 1.31.

strong manner of describing human nature. Quite bluntly John stated that at a point in time the eternal Word of God took upon himself the entirety of human nature. He entered truly into human history. John's statement in 1:14 is a clear affirmation of the genuineness of Jesus' humanity.

The boldness of this statement in 1:14 suggests that John is not speaking parabolically. He is not saying, "God's truth appears as if it were true that the Word became flesh." John instead stated that God had actually entered into human history.

Followers of docetic Christianity would have been content to allow the evangelist to state that an analogy existed between incidents in Jesus' life and the illustration of the incarnation. They would have been quite happy with an "incarnation" that only appeared to be real. They would have been repulsed by an incarnation in which the eternal Son of God became a man. Unless John's statement of Jesus' incarnation were accurate, the docetic challengers to Christianity would poke around and find vulnerability. The likelihood that John wrote against docetic Christians increases the importance for his presenting a reliable account of the event. Morris has said,

The early Christians differed from the Gnostics and from the writers of the apocryphal gospels . . . in their insistence on the importance of what happened. They saw men as saved, not by their faith, nor by any ideas they held, but by what God did in Jesus. This preoccupation with the historical must never be overlooked as we study the Gospels.⁴²

One theme in the fourth gospel that increases the likelihood of its presentation is its emphasis on truth. John uses *alētheia* twenty-five times, considerably more than any other gospel and more than any other NT book. For John, truth is something believers are to do (3:21). A knowledge of the truth sets one free from spiritual bondage (8:32). David Hawkin has emphasized that the Johannine concept of truth is primarily moral. He affirms: "Thus ἀληθεια in the Fourth Gospel is not 'an object of intellectual research, but the essential principle of the moral life, of sanctity; for it is the thought of God on man, perceived and heard in faith.'"⁴³ It is thus not proper to emphasize that truth in the fourth gospel is primarily historical or factual truth. But as Leon Morris has said, "It would be strange in the extreme if a writer who placed unusual stress on the truth were to sit loose to the truth in a book written about Jesus as the truth."⁴⁴ It might be possible for John to have used simulated incidents that dramatically brought out the moral and spiritual truth he saw in Jesus. It seems quite unlikely, however, that he would adjust the historical facts about Jesus merely for the purpose of achieving edification. It would seem difficult for a writer to make moral or spiritual truth a central concept in a production such as this gospel if he knew that the historical facts were different from what he

⁴² Morris, *Studies* 97.

⁴³ D. J. Hawkin, "The Johannine Concept of Truth and Its Implications for a Technological Society," *EvQ* 59 (January 1987) 10.

⁴⁴ Morris, *Studies* 119.

reported. The evangelist who wrote about the truth must surely have had a concern for accurate reporting.

3. *General considerations on the reliability of the fourth gospel.* H. Riesenfeld has pointed out that the manner in which the tradition of the fourth gospel was transmitted had an important influence on the reliability of its contents.⁴⁵ Riesenfeld suggests that the gospel tradition began with Jesus himself. It was not merely improvised, nor freely narrated, but it was handed down in a fixed, rigid form taught by Jesus. Riesenfeld points out that in Judaism the ideal pupil was one who did not lose "one iota of tradition."⁴⁶

Riesenfeld finds evidence for the presence of tradition reaching back to Jesus in the preservation of certain Aramaic words (e.g. Mark 5:41) in the gospel records. He explains the uniqueness of the Johannine tradition in that it consisted of meditations and discourses of Jesus given in the circle of his disciples.

Riesenfeld has presented a strong case for his opinions. His suggestions would counter the emphasis in some types of critical approaches to the gospel that mission preaching or the edification of the community provided the source for development of gospel tradition. If memory is as important as he has suggested, we have a firm foundation for accepting the historical reliability of the reports of Jesus' words and deeds in the fourth gospel.

Logic compels one final assertion of a basis for the historical reliability of the fourth gospel. Those who feel that the evangelist had greater interest in theology than in history frequently hold in common a skepticism concerning the trustworthiness of the reporting of events in the fourth gospel. Their skepticism is uneven. Some would jettison most of the redemptive events of the gospel. Others would refuse some but accept others. The evangelist of the fourth gospel seems to regard all the events he reports as important. Some events have a more obvious apologetic purpose, and others are more clearly major features in God's plan of redemption. We must ask, however, the question, "What is the spiritual value of an event that has never occurred? What is the redemptive benefit of redemptive happenings that did not take place?" As Morris has said, "The very idea of bringing out theological significance seems to imply respect for the facts. What did not happen can scarcely be called redemptive."⁴⁷ All the events narrated in the fourth gospel contributed in some way to the progress of God's redemptive purpose through Christ. It seems important that the gospel must provide a reliable account of their occurrence.

VI. CONCLUSION

Two students of the fourth gospel underscore the importance of the theme we have been pursuing in our study. First, Smalley underscores the

⁴⁵ H. Riesenfeld, "The Gospel Tradition and Its Beginnings," *SE I* (TU 73 [1959]) 43-65.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.* 55.

⁴⁷ Morris, *Studies* 124.

significance of an accurate report of the events of Jesus' life by saying, "The theological interpretation of the Jesus tradition given by the fourth evangelist must have had some factual background; for if there were initially no historical facts in the Jesus tradition to which a meaning could be given, there would be no meaning."⁴⁸ Second, Bruce emphasizes that

John himself attached the utmost importance to eternal truth, which he identified with the divine self-expression, the Word that existed in the beginning with God. But he insisted that eternal truth was uniquely manifested in time and place—in Palestine, during the governorship of Pontius Pilate—when the Word appeared on earth in the human life of Jesus of Nazareth. Far from depreciating the material order, John affirms that the Word became *flesh*.⁴⁹

History is important to the gospel writers. Their report of history in Jesus' life required accuracy. Their accuracy provides us with a sure foundation for our trust in the redeeming message of the gospel.

⁴⁸ Smalley, *John* 172–173.

⁴⁹ F. F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983) 13.