

**What Can a Postmodern Approach to the Fourth Gospel Add to Contemporary
Debates About its Historical Situation?**

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Reappraising the redactional history of the Fourth Gospel

To most critical readers, it is obvious that the text of the Fourth Gospel has undergone a number of editings or redactions prior to attaining its present canonical form. Beyond the notable additions of John 5:4 and 7:53-8:11, which are textual variants reflected in actual manuscript traditions and are clearly late, non-Johannine textual interpolations, John 21 also appears to be a late addition to the book. Chapter 21 is viewed by many scholars as an “appendix” for a number of reasons, not the least of which is that the book seems to have reached its natural conclusion with John 20:30-31. Furthermore, John 21 uses words not found elsewhere in the Gospel, and seems to answer some of the unresolved questions of chapters 13-20 regarding the relationship of the Beloved Disciple to Peter. Finally, most scholars are willing to accept the possibility that the prologue (1:1-18)—in whole or in part—and perhaps John 5-7 and 15-17 also betray evidence of major editorial work.

However, beyond these generally agreed upon editorial additions or rewritings there is little agreement. For example, was the order of John 5 and 6 reversed at an early stage of writing? Was Jesus’s symbolic destruction of the temple (2:13-22) pushed back into Jesus’s early ministry in order to make the raising of Lazarus the event precipitating Jesus’s arrest and death? Was an independent collection of miracle stories (the “Signs

Source”) a major component of the book? And was chapter 12 introduced as a bridge between this “book of signs” and a “book of glory?”

Today, scholars are not nearly as willing to take dogmatic stands on such redactional issues as they were fifty or more years ago. On the one hand, the mid-twentieth century discoveries of the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Nag Hammadi library, and more recent archaeological excavations in Jerusalem and Galilee, have made for much more interesting hypotheses regarding the different possible social contexts of the Johannine editors. But on the other hand, these discoveries have also made it increasingly difficult to reconstruct the “Judaisms” of the first century CE, and to place the history of the Fourth Gospel’s community within this complex milieu. One cannot simply say the book is Jewish or Greek, Palestinian or non-Palestinian in origin.

Furthermore, a wide variety of studies in the social sciences, orality, feminism, and literary theory have raised serious questions about the very nature of historical criticism as it is usually practiced by New Testament scholars, with their hypothetical editors, sources, and social contexts. In our postmodern era, issues related to the status of the interpreter and “his” ideological commitments have challenged the historical positivism of past reconstructions of the Johannine community and its texts, and pointed out the tenuous nature of those theories.

This is not to say that Johannine scholars—even postmodern ones like myself—have lost their zest and appetite for historical questions. Indeed, it is precisely the unchallenged assumptions of North American historical Jesus research (e.g. “The Fourth Gospel tells us virtually nothing about the pre-Easter Jesus”) and narrative-critical interpretations of the book (e.g. “the focus of our attention will be on the text as it now

stands”), that have brought back to the forefront of Johannine research questions regarding the connection between the Fourth Gospel, its author/s, its sources, and the historical Jesus. But as Gary Phillips and Danna Fewell have recently pointed out,

we might frame source criticism of the New Testament . . . as an ethical concern. The face of Jesus within the folds of the text speaks and calls on us to speak, to uncode all the names surrounding it, evoking it, touching on it, making it appear. The quest for “original” sources and the “historical” Jesus would draw its first breath not from its status foremost as a distanced historical exercise that uncovers layers and facts of textual history, as important as that may be, but from the desire to preserve the face of Jesus, to keep it from becoming a metaphor or, better, a mere mirror of our own particular, religious, ideological, or cultural interests.”

(Phillips, Gary A. and Danna Nolan Fewell. “Ethics, Bible, Reading as If” Semeia 77 [1997] 1-21).

So the larger question is, having once isolated and exposed the “face of Jesus” in the editorial layers of the Fourth Gospel, what do we do with that face? Does this mean that the Fourth Gospel suddenly could reclaim its place in the Christian canon as a viable witness to Jesus once scholars successfully kept its “face of Jesus” from just “becoming a metaphor?” Would the Fourth Gospel’s authoritative claim to an apostolic vision of Jesus’s mission somehow be reconfirmed once historians took pains to separate their research from the “mere mirror of [their] own particular, religious, ideological, or cultural interests?” Or would historians simply affirm that like the Synoptics, John, too, is somehow rooted in events related to the life of Jesus? And that it is important to say

“rooted in events related to the life of Jesus,” and “somehow,” without defining either term too narrowly?

Reappraising the significance of historical origins

Having identified a few editorial stitches in the Fourth Gospel (e.g. John 1:1-18; 21) does not mean that scholars are agreed on the issue of how to attach significance to such sutures. For example, narrative critics may “see” evidence of editorial work in the text but be uninterested in tying to it any primordial, historical, or communal event. Here, postmodern hermeneutical and philosophical issues begin to intrude upon contemporary biblical interpretation: Does the quest for origins, or exposing a process of evolution in the formation of the Johannine text exhaust its significance and meaning?

Modern science—indeed all aspects of critical thinking—share at their core certain presuppositions about the relationship of objects to one another. For example, when John 3:22, 26, and 4:1-2 are read together, they seem to contradict each other. This is an obvious point of contrast. But is the contradiction “solved” by a hypothesis that proposes multiple editings of the text, or by a theory of literary genius or authorial stupidity, or by a theory of rhetorical effect? Now I can imagine a “premodern” seeing an individual who is having difficulty walking and noticing that the person is in pain. The “premodern” may even be able to see that one leg of the person is significantly larger than the other. One leg contrasts with the other. It is similar enough to the person’s other leg to be recognized as the typical, human, ambulatory appendage. But why is the one leg different from the other? Although the “premodern” may not think in such terms, he or she may “theorize” about the historical origin of the difference, much as source critics see differences in the texture of John 3:22, 26 and 4:1-2, and theorize that the difference

has its roots in an editorial prehistory. The “premodern” may suspect that the person with the swollen leg fell down and twisted it. Or perhaps the person was bitten by a poisonous animal. Perhaps an evil spirit attacked the person because of some irresponsible act on their part.

My point is that many of the observed similarities and differences between objects of our world are really rooted in their shared prehistory and can be explained by delineating that prehistory. Modern medicine, with its understanding of symptoms; the biological sciences, with their analyses of fossil records; geology, with its theories of sedimentary rocks; and cosmology, with its theories of the universe’s origins all share this common historical orientation. Alike things might be related to each other. Their differences might have their origins in events of the past. In all these situations, whether we are talking about the “premodern” or the “modern” person, ordinary human experiences or scientific theories, the observed differences are rooted in events of the past. And delineating that past (no matter how theoretical) establishes an authority and a “reason” for why things have come to be the way they now are.

So also differences in the Johannine text—its aporiae, its disjunctions and apparent narrative breaks—may represent a prehistory and an evolution of the text as it moves toward its final canonical form. But a postmodern sense of contrast and difference is not nearly as tied to historical questions of origins as are source or redaction criticism. For example, a contemporary, postmodern skyscraper in downtown Seattle, Atlanta, or New York City may have adapted architectural elements from modernist, rococo, and neo-classical styles, without having been built in three different architectural eras or by three different architectural firms. Here, the juxtapositioning of styles and motifs, the

jarring, clashing textures and design reflect difference without presupposing any historical priority. In other words, the “rhetorical effect” of the building is more important than the precise historical origin of any one of its peculiarities.

Now it is entirely possible to view the text of the Fourth Gospel in the same way as one might look at the postmodern skyscraper in Seattle, Atlanta, or New York City. That is, one may grant the historian the point that the Johannine text has a prehistory, without granting the peculiarities of that history any particular authority—even if we could be sure what that history was. Here, as in the example of the postmodern skyscraper, the rhetorical effect of the Johannine aporiae and disjunctions, the editorial seams, becomes the central focus of the postmodern interpreter’s attention and the locus of “authority” rather than the history of the text’s origins.

Let me be perfectly clear about this latter point. As a postmodern interpreter of the Fourth Gospel I do not wish to deny the importance of the historical questions raised by the past one hundred and fifty years of Johannine scholarship. But the twenty-first century New Testament scholar with a postmodern sense of texts can and must challenge the traditional historicism of Johannine scholarship. It is especially important to do so when traditional reconstructions of the Gospel’s origins and its community are so tenuous that their elaboration stretches historical credibility to the breaking point, or when the prehistory of the text and its “origins” function as a rhetorical ploy to absolutize and authorize particular meanings.

As the reader can probably tell by now, I am quite skeptical of scholarly attempts to develop a hypothetical trajectory of the Johannine community—its loves and hates, its geographical movements, and its social formation—from the Fourth Gospel and the three

“letters.” And texts outside the canon—whether “Gnostic” or otherwise—are even more difficult to connect with a particular “Johannine” community. So while it is quite reasonable to assume that the Fourth Gospel has undergone a process of development and expansion—and perhaps even a shortening (how could we know the latter?)—one is on surer historical grounds when investigating questions related to the type of audience the Fourth Gospel creates for itself. Here, I think, we can make some historical and rhetorical judgments that are open to verification. So in what follows, I will simply lay out some of the key places where the Fourth Gospel seems to be grounded in pre-Easter Jesus traditions, and then move on to discuss the sort of audience the Gospel constructs from these—that is, the rhetorical effect of the book—to see if that audience could actually match one of those proposed by Johannine historical critics.

Pre-Easter Jesus traditions in the Fourth Gospel

There are a number of elements in the Gospel of John that strike me as reflecting pre-Easter Jesus traditions, ones which I think are widely recognized as such by most New Testament scholars today. Some of these Johannine traditions are validated by multiple attestation (Mark, Q, or Paul’s letters), while others fit the criteria of difficulty. We can divide these traditions into two general categories: traditions about Jesus’s followers, and traditions about Jesus. With respect to the Johannine traditions about Jesus’s followers, the following have a high likelihood of being pre-Easter in origin: some of Jesus’s followers had first been followers of John the baptizer; Jesus selected twelve of these (males?) perhaps as a symbolic gesture of something; Judas, one of “the Twelve” was probably a “Iestes” (an anti-Roman terrorist); Peter, Thomas, Andrew,

Philip, Nathaniel, and the other Judas were some of Jesus's followers; Mary Magdalene was the first follower to have a post-Easter revelation of Jesus.

Among the Johannine traditions about Jesus that have a high likelihood of being pre-Easter in origin are the following: Jesus and John's prophetic activities overlapped and were in competition with each other; Jesus was from Nazareth, had brothers, and a father named Joseph. Jesus was a charismatic healer who would heal on the Sabbath; he traveled through Samaria at least once in his lifetime; he understood himself to be "sent from God"; he spoke of God as his "father," and himself as "a son"; he may have been to Jerusalem more than once, and his public activity may have lasted more than one year. Jesus disrupted temple activities around the year 27 CE; was accused of being demon possessed and of misleading the masses (he was a "false prophet"); did not have a trial before the Sanhedrin; and was crucified before Passover, during Pontius Pilate's prefecture in Judea.

This list, of course, is not complete, and assumes that much of John's portrait of Jesus is either historically doubtful or simply inaccurate. But since some of the Johannine inaccuracies are also found in the Synoptics, they do not particularly undermine the Fourth Gospel's historicity. For example, I doubt that Jesus actually walked on water, multiplied loaves and fishes, turned water into wine, or raised Lazarus from the dead. I doubt that Jesus met one-on-one with Pilate, the Samaritan woman, or Nicodemus, and had the memorable conversations with these people as recorded in the Fourth Gospel. I doubt that Jesus's disciples were, in Jesus's lifetime, excluded from synagogues for affirming him to be the Christ. I do believe, however, that Jesus could have said things like "the father and I are one" in a spirit trance—an altered state of

consciousness—which is a common cross-cultural phenomenon. What this doesn't mean, of course, is that Jesus had an absolutely unique relationship to God—an ontological unity of “substance” with the Father.

So where does this leave us? What are the sources of the authentic Jesus traditions found in John? If most of the book does not reflect historical reminiscence from the era of the pre-Easter Jesus, then what historical situation does it reflect? Like the Synoptic Gospels, the Gospel of John reflects the historical situation/s of the author/s writing. But what are the clues to that situation? Being cast out of synagogues, or being cast out of the Johannine community, or the death of the Beloved Disciple? Can any of these differing circumstances be correlated with specific historical situations in “Judaism” of the first century? If the former can be related to a specific historical situation in formative Judaism, then what was a synagogue in the first century, and could “being cast out” reflect the “Birkhath ha-Minim” of the later rabbinical world? Again, what kind of “Judaism” existed in the late first century (was there a difference between Judean, Galilean, and Samaritan Israelites?), such that one could be “excluded” from it? Could these be elite, Pharisaic synagogue members who were banished for being part of the Johannine community? Exclusion from the Johannine community or the death of the Beloved Disciple are even more difficult to chart historically, since the only data we have to work from are the “Johannine” documents themselves, and they are notoriously lacking in explicit historical references.

And what about Jesus's famous “I am” sayings in the Gospel of John? Do they reflect a debate within Judaism over a Torah-centered vs. a messiah-centered community, or do they represent the voice of a spirit-filled prophet? These questions, in my

estimation, are largely unanswerable given our present meager resources from the first century. However, I believe that we can make some helpful observations regarding the book's probable rhetorical audience, without waiting for some new manuscript cache or archaeological discovery to confirm our proposals.

A two-tiered witness motif and its historical implications

One of the most unusual features of the opening scene in the Fourth Gospel is the manner in which Jesus gathers his first disciples. Not only do some of these followers come from the circle of John the baptizer—most likely a pre-Easter tradition, since it implies Jesus's subordination to John's witness—but they also meet Jesus through the agency of some other person. This peculiarly Johannine motif (cf. 1:35-51; 4:39-42; 12:20-23; 21:7) is not found in the Synoptic gospels. More importantly, it is a motif found in segments of the Johannine text that are often viewed as coming from three major redactional periods of the community. For example, many scholars think John 1:35-51 was the original opening of the narrative and that it reflects traditions from the originating community of Johannine Christians whose roots lay with John the baptizer's group. The middle period of the community is represented by its Samaritan and Gentile mission, and is seen in John 4:39-42 and 12:20-23. Finally, the latest period of the community is evident in the role of the Beloved Disciple who becomes crucial to the survival of the community as it faces internal conflicts (13:23-30; 17:20; 21:7).

If redaction critics are right in arguing that the Johannine text reflects forty to fifty years of editing, what is remarkable is that the text nevertheless reflects an unusual rhetorical unity on the theme of authority and witness in the community. That is to say, Jesus's earliest disciples follow him, not because he calls them, but rather because John

the baptizer himself says “Behold the Lamb of God.” The next two pairs of followers come to Jesus in the same way: through the agency of some other person—either Andrew or Philip. Moreover, the same idiosyncratic motif occurs later with the Samaritan mission and the Gentile mission. In the former case, the men of Sychar “believed in him because of the woman’s word” (4:39). In the latter case the Greeks come to Philip, who then goes and tells Andrew, both of whom then go and tell Jesus that there are Greeks who want to meet him (12:20-22).

Finally, when the Beloved Disciple appears on the scene, Peter can get to Jesus only through first talking to the one “reclining on Jesus’s breast” (13:23-25). Similarly in John 21:7, it is the Beloved Disciple’s words “It is the Lord,” that lead to Peter’s early morning plunge in the Sea of Galilee. The historical, christological, and ecclesiological importance of this rhetorical strategy is confirmed by Jesus’s prayer, “I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you sent me” (17:20-21). Thus, a two-tiered motif of witnessing is reflected in at least three redactional periods of the Johannine community isolated by previous scholarship, and corresponds to the (final?) redactor’s estimation of Jesus’s earthly purpose.

Interestingly, the independent Signs Source—if there ever was such a document—evinces a similar rhetorical strategy as the two-tiered witness motif described above. For example, the first three signs exhibit a uniquely Johannine strategy for portraying how the reader/hearer comes to know that a miracle has taken place.

In the first sign, the wedding at Cana (2:1-11), the reader discovers that the water has turned into wine through the chief steward's experience of tasting a surprisingly good vintage. Here, a third party becomes the unsuspecting witness who confirms for the reader the powerful deed of Jesus. In the second sign, the healing of the royal official's son (4:46-54), it is the slaves, who know nothing of Jesus's previous words to their master, who tell their master that his son is well. Here again, a third party has become an unsuspecting witness who confirms Jesus's powerful deed to the reader.

The third sign, the healing of the paralytic (5:1-17) is told in the more traditional manner of Synoptic miracle stories. This time the narrator functions as the primary witness by simply stating "At once the man was made well, and he took up his mat and began to walk" (5:9). There is no immediate third party through which the miraculous event is filtered. However, "the Jews" do function later on as inadvertent witnesses to Jesus' powerful deed by their remark, "It is the Sabbath: it is not lawful for you to carry your mat" (5:10). Like the chief steward and the royal official's slaves before them, "the Jews" have no idea that a sign has been performed, yet their words function as a testimony to Jesus's miraculous deed.

There are, however, some interesting differences between the secondary witness motif as it is found in the Signs Source and the two-tiered witness motif as it is found in John 1:35-51; 4:39-42; 12:20-23; and 21:7 (the three "formative redactional periods" of the Johannine community). In the Signs Source, all the secondary witnesses apparently have had no previous encounter with Jesus. They are thus ignorant of their roles as witnesses to Jesus's power. They witness certain events without knowing the peculiar circumstances surrounding them. But in John 1:35-51; 4:39-42; 12:20-23; and 21:7, all

the secondary witnesses have previously met Jesus. They are witnesses for Jesus, and in at least the first two instances (Jn 1:35-51; 4:39-42), the characters have not witnessed any powerful deeds of Jesus.

The manner in which the reader (ancient or modern) comes to know that these three signs have taken place, and the manner in which the first disciples come to Jesus, both correlate nicely with Jesus's final words to Thomas: "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe" (20:29). "Believing without seeing" has been the reader's experience on a number of occasions throughout the book, since the reader, in at least the first two signs, "sees" nothing of the miracles themselves. It is only through the words of the unsuspecting bystanders that the reader knows anything unusual has happened. My point here is to show that the "Signs Source" (or its subsequent editing) exhibits a strategy remarkably similar to the one isolated earlier in the three "formative redactional periods" of the Johannine community. Readers are invited to play a role like that of Peter and Nathaniel, or the Samaritan men and the Greeks: to believe and follow even though their experience of Jesus is mediated through other—sometimes questionable—witnesses.

I would like to think that the two-tiered witness motif described above reflects a unified rhetorical strategy on the part of the author/final redactor. That is to say, whatever the sources and prior history of the Johannine traditions, one person was able to mold them together into a cohesive whole that reflected "his" unique relationship to the Jesus traditions and the apostolic community. Furthermore, the "cohesive whole" reflected in the Johannine text seems to suggest a certain historical point of origin: a community that is at least two generations removed from its founding events (e.g. the

generation of Jesus and the Beloved Disciple, and the generation of “those who believe having not seen”).

The two-tiered witness motif and its cultural implications

Others, however, might construe my two-tiered witness motif quite differently. For those biblical scholars with a bent toward cultural anthropology, my two-tiered witness motif might not appear to be unusual or unique at all. It could simply reflect the patronage system that pervaded the ancient Mediterranean world, a system that made exchanges of power and authority possible when inequality and difference were the norm in interpersonal relationships. From this perspective, the two-tiered witness motif I isolated earlier simply should not be construed as a peculiar characteristic of the Johannine community. For just as Jesus is a “client” or “broker” for his patron father who “sends” him (7:28-29; 12:44; 17:25) to “do his will” (4:34; 5:30), so also the disciples function as brokers or clients for their patron, Jesus. Jesus sends them to do his will (13:16, 20; 17:18; 20:21). And just as Jesus introduces God, his “father” to his disciples and friends, the disciples introduce their friends and interested strangers to Jesus.

In a more overt, political way, Pilate is also a broker (“friend”) for his patron, Caesar (19:12), as are the chief priests for Pilate (11:47-50; 18:3, 12-14, 28). Finally, on a different level, characters in the Signs Source sometimes function as unsuspecting witnesses, mediators, or brokers for the readers who are forced to trust the characters’ limited experiences in order to “see the signs” within what otherwise would appear to be ordinary events.

From a Mediterranean cultural context, then, most characters in the Fourth Gospel simply do not have direct access to Jesus unless they somehow first have recognized, either positively or negatively, the authority of Jesus. The two-tiered witness motif is not evidence of a unique missionary strategy in the Johannine community. Nor does it reflect a peculiarly Johannine Christology. Rather, it is evidence of a widespread Mediterranean patronage system that can be found in other texts inside and outside the New Testament canon. In support of the ancient Mediterranean cultural interpretation, one could note that many characters in the Fourth Gospel are quite sensitive to the inequality of power relations. For example, the social elite, “royal official” (4:46-47) pointedly asks Jesus to come and heal his son. And while the socially inferior Samaritan woman makes a similar demand (4:15), her request only comes after Jesus has already broken other social barriers with her (4:7-9). No other Johannine characters make the kinds of straightforward requests that these two characters do. Jesus’s mother does not (2:3), nor does the lame man (5:7), or Jesus’s female friends, Mary and Martha (11:3).

One could argue, then, that the two-tiered witness motif I would so like to attach to historical developments in the Johannine community, could simply be part of a more deeply imbedded cultural phenomenon. This is the ancient Mediterranean patronage system, and it mediated exchanges of power and authority (like those associated with Jesus, the royal official, the chief priests, and Pilate) when inequality and difference were the norm in interpersonal relationships (cf. 18:19-23; 19:9-10). So again: does this two-tiered motif reflect a specific historical situation related to the time of the book’s writing, or is the motif just part of a broader, social phenomenon of Mediterranean culture? Can

we develop the tools needed to distinguish between specific historical events and broader social phenomena when the data related to this ancient community is so meager?

A postmodern reassessment of the Johannine historical situation

What is clear from this discussion is that the final shape of the Johannine narrative, which most scholars date from the end of the first century, shows a remarkable rhetorical unity for a text which purportedly reflects a transmission history of fifty years or more. Either the rhetorical unity of the text reflects a single authorial voice, or its sources and traditions were so heavily reworked over the years that it is now virtually impossible to detect behind the text the historical progression of a community. However, if the Fourth Gospel's historical situation or authorial unity is impossible to establish, its rhetorical situation seems much easier to analyze. Here, a postmodern sense of text and rhetoric can make the strong argument that, regardless of the text's prehistory or origin, its rhetorical structure forms an audience whose trust is predicated on the authority of go-betweens, clients, mediatory figures—whatever one wants to call them. But whether this rhetorical effect reflects a particular historical experience in the life of the Johannine community is beyond the pale of historical investigation. In fact, while it may be interesting to speculate about this issue, a postmodern sense of history will not attach any undue burden of authority to that hypothetical point of origin. For “origins” always presume that power relations are at work; power relations which suppress other possible origins in their very act of explication. Issues of origins—whether they are from the “hard” sciences or the “soft” sciences—always reflect elements of their own ideological construction. All theories of origin are historically conditioned and rhetorically produced. So when all is said and done, the postmodern historical critic will look at the

various constructions of the Johannine community, its portrayal of Jesus, “the Jews,” and other characters, and ask: Whose interests are being served by these historical reconstructions? Why have the points of origin been set at these junctures and not those?

I have argued that a careful reading of the Fourth Gospel reveals a two-tiered witness motif that pervades all its supposed levels of sources and redactions. Historically this could imply that the book was written at a time when the community was wrestling in some way with the loss of an authoritative connection (a broker, or client) to the historical Jesus. But I am enough of a postmodern critic to pose the additional questions to myself: What ideological constraints make me push for this reading of the Fourth Gospel over all others? Why should my quest for Fourth Gospel origins focus on such a narrow reading of the two-tiered witness motif when anthropological studies of the ancient Mediterranean world could show that the motif might simply reflect a widespread ancient Mediterranean cultural phenomenon?

My goal in this essay has been to show that a postmodern approach to questions of the Johannine historical situation is not necessarily ahistorical or uninterested in issues of the community’s origins and development. As I have sought to argue above, the literary motif of “two-tiered witnessing” may in fact have its origins in a specific historical moment within the community. However, what a postmodern approach does bring to the conversation is a healthy respect for the ways in which ideological concerns get translated into historical hypotheses (like my own) and sometimes get marked as consensus views. In this light, the history of Johannine scholarship is as much in need of critical analysis as is the history of the Johannine community or its links to the historical Jesus.