

The Gospel of John

The Red-Headed Stepchild of Gospels Scholarship

1. The devaluation of John

Of the four canonical Gospels, none has received more negative scholarly attention than the Gospel of John. To say that mainstream New Testament scholars over the past hundred and fifty years have been skeptical of its historical value is an understatement. A measure of this skepticism is the fact that current mainstream scholarly views on John's historicity range from the proposition that it is historically quite worthless to the proposition that it has *some* historical material in it, but that we find the historical bits only by painstaking sifting to separate them from the large amount of unhistorical embellishment.

Here the gap between pastoral and lay practice, on the one hand, and scholarly opinion, on the other, is perhaps at its widest for any New Testament book. While the Gospel of John is one of the most beloved books of the Bible, ardently memorized, quoted, and even reprinted separately for distribution, a wide array of biblical scholars treat it as historically dubious. It should go without saying that a missionary, pastor, or Christian layman who relies on the fact that Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life" (John 14.6) would not be satisfied to be told that this saying of Jesus is, at most, theologically true "in light of the Easter event" but not something Jesus uttered in any recognizable form. And the same goes for the comforting words, "I am the resurrection and the life" (John 11.25). A Christian who responds to the Jehovah's Witnesses at the door by pointing out that Jesus said, "I and the Father are one" (John 10.30) and "Before Abraham was, I am" (John 8.58) assumes that, if you had been there and had known the relevant language, you could have recognized these claims and their historical contexts. To tell him that these scenes and sayings did not occur in a recognizable fashion but

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were the theologically “true” extrapolations of the Johannine community based upon entirely different actions and teachings of Jesus in entirely different contexts would make a significant difference to his use of these verses, as indeed it should.

Most Christians think of the Fourth Gospel as a great treasury; its shelves are stocked with rare gems of Jesus’ teaching and ministry that we find nowhere else—Jesus’ interaction with the woman at the well, the raising of Lazarus, unique, overt claims to deity, his teaching about dwelling places that he is going to prepare in heaven, and many more. They memorize them, love them, use them in preaching, in song, and in reaching out to unbelievers; they simply would not do so if they did not believe them to be historical in a straightforward sense. Meanwhile, scholars express doubt among themselves, to a greater or lesser extent, about the provenance and genuineness of the supposed treasure trove.

Many conservative Christians may be unaware of the special scholarly skepticism about John. If they become aware of it, they may assume that it is entirely confined to those whom they would designate as liberal or even non-Christian scholars and teachers. It is easy to see doubts about John’s historicity as merely a product of the conservative/liberal divide, involving an anti-supernatural bias on the liberal side, and hence to assume that scholars deemed conservative or (especially) evangelical accept John’s robust historicity unless cogent argument forces them to think otherwise.

But matters are by no means so simple. While it is true that the most dismissive views of John’s historical reliability come from biblical scholars who would be horrified to be thought conservative, once we move to views that scholars themselves deem moderate, the field is far more mixed. The very fact that mainstream scholars often reject John’s historicity in such extreme terms means that the pressure is intense on anyone who enters the field to concede something to the view that John, more than Matthew, Mark, or Luke, has taken historical liberties. The view that John is just as good a source of information about the historical Jesus as the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) and that all four are sober reportage by knowledgeable authors close to the facts appears so extremely conservative on the scholarly spectrum as to be thought fundamentalist, the position of only a tiny, religiously committed minority. Hence, evangelical pastors and laymen are often uninformed about the fact that views they would normally deem quite “liberal” are in fact held by scholars they have mentally labeled “conservative,” while those scholars think of themselves as reasonable moderates holding the line against yet more radical dismissal of John’s historicity.

That is one reason why this book is needed. There are many books on John's Gospel, including books that defend its historicity, and I will be relying on several of these at multiple points.¹ What I am doing here, however, is unusual in that I am applying these insights about John specifically to positions that have been taken not just by those labeled scholarly liberals but by those deemed by many to be closer to the conservative end of the spectrum. My goal in this chapter is to show that significant skepticism about John's historicity, while it finds its most extreme manifestations in the liberal camp, is by no means confined to that camp. That fact, in turn, sets up the need to respond yet again to the assertions and arguments about John that have moved some scholars whom Christian pastors, apologists, and laymen are likely to trust. In the course of this study it will become clear both that evangelicals are not immune from the poor habits of reasoning that beset the discipline of New Testament studies and that their reasons for doubting John's fully historical genre are no better than anyone else's. Indeed, they are the same arguments that have already been refuted many times. Moreover, as subsequent chapters will show, there is a wealth of *positive* evidence both for John's fully historical intention and for his historical success in reporting the life and teachings of Jesus.

2. Mainstream dismissal of John

As an example of the strong view that John is unhistorical, it would be hard to beat liberal New Testament scholar Maurice Casey's comments. In Casey's view, not only is John historically false, it is inherently anti-Semitic because it teaches that Jesus is God:

The fourth Gospel is profoundly untrue. It consists to a large extent of inaccurate stories and words wrongly attributed to people. It is anti-Jewish, and as holy scripture it has been used to legitimate outbreaks of Christian anti-Semitism. ... What we have seen in this document...is that the deity of Jesus infringes Jewish monotheism. Even as this Gospel's discussions of Jesus' deity are historically inaccurate, they are culturally correct. Exposition of the deity of Jesus entails charges of blasphemy [against the Jews]. ... I have demonstrated what critical scholars have said

¹Just a few of the works that I have found particularly helpful are Craig L. Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of John's Gospel: Issues and Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: 2001), D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John (Pillar New Testament Commentary)* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), D. A. Carson "Historical Tradition in the Fourth Gospel: After Dodd, What?" in R. T. France & David Wenham, eds., *Gospel Perspectives*, Vol. 2: *Studies of History and Tradition in the Four Gospels* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1981), pp. 83–145, available at https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/gp/gp2_tradition_carson.pdf, Leon Morris, *Studies in the Fourth Gospel* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1969), A. H. N. Green-Armytage, *John Who Saw* (London: Faber and Faber, 1952).

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quietly for years, that this Gospel is not literally true. ... It follows that this Gospel is a standing contradiction of the Jewish identity of Jesus and the first apostles. It is not a source of truth.²

Casey wants to discredit John not only historically but morally, but even setting aside the eyebrow-raising moral evaluation of fundamental Christian doctrine (the deity of Jesus) as inherently wicked, Casey's historical evaluation of John is entirely dismissive and (unfortunately) broadly shared.

A. T. Hanson similarly tells us,

This is indeed the stone on which all defenders of the historical reliability of the Gospel ultimately stumble. The evidence is decisive that the historical Jesus did not claim pre-existence, co-eternity and consubstantiality with God, which the Johannine Jesus certainly does. ... To sum up our entire chapter: John...has his own historical tradition, which appears to be inferior to that of the Synoptists, though not without some value. But he allows himself a very wide licence indeed in altering, enriching, transposing and adding to his own tradition from his own resources. ... He has therefore not provided us with a reliable historical account of Jesus.³

In speaking of the dialogue with Nicodemus, Hanson dogmatically declares,

If there was originally behind it any genuine teaching of Jesus it has been completely absorbed in John's exposition. ... It is absurd to suggest that the historical Jesus could possibly have conducted this dialogue-monologue. We are not here dealing with material that can tell us anything about the historical Jesus. Whatever other intentions John may have had in writing this passage, conveying reliable information about the historical Jesus was not one of them.⁴

Skeptical scholar Bart Ehrman, perhaps surprisingly, would disagree with Hanson about John's *intentions*. Ehrman thinks that John probably did intend to convey historical information about Jesus and may well have believed what he wrote. But this provides little comfort to orthodox Christians on the score of John's reliability, since Ehrman thinks that John was writing late and mistakenly accepted many embellishments that had grown up over the years. Evaluating the work of John Shelby Spong, Ehrman discusses Spong's proposition that "not one of the signs...recorded in this book was, in all probability, something that actu-

²Maurice Casey, *Is John's Gospel True?* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 229.

³Anthony T. Hanson, *The Prophetic Gospel: A Study of John and the Old Testament* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1991), pp. 317–18.

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 50.

ally happened.” Says Ehrman, “I completely agree.” Regarding the historicity of Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman, Ehrman thinks that John may well have thought that they were historical people and spoke with Jesus; in reality, though, these conversations never took place:

I don't see any reason to think that [John] wanted his reading audience to think that he was producing fiction. ... It's not clear to me that these figures [Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman] are inventions of the author of the Gospel; he may well have inherited these stories (and so, these narrative figures) from the traditions he had heard. If so, why wouldn't he think they were historical? And even if he did make them up himself..., I don't see any indications in the text to suggest that he wanted his readers to think that they were make-believe rather than figures that actually interacted with Jesus. In short, the fact (which I take to be a fact) that they were *not* historical figures who interacted with Jesus has no bearing, in my mind, on the question of what the author's intentions were in narrating his stories.⁵

While one may find this statement refreshingly frank by comparison with the foggy writing in much New Testament scholarship, and while Ehrman is surely right (as I shall argue at length) that John believed and intended his readers to believe that he was writing factual history, it is impossible to miss the fact that Ehrman is dismissing John's historicity wholesale.

A famous and influential work by C. H. Dodd, *Historical Tradition in the Fourth Gospel*, defends a somewhat more moderate perspective. On Dodd's view, John sometimes contains historical material, even when he is not covering the same ground as the Synoptics. But those bits of historical information that we can have any confidence about are limited in number, and we must quarry them out of John by cautious conjecture. Thus, even when Dodd compliments the Gospel of John (at least by contrast with other scholars), he does so in a backhanded and gingerly manner:

Passages which we should have no hesitation in recognizing as Johannine in doctrine, with no Synoptic parallel, are sometimes framed in purely traditional forms. There seems no reason to doubt that in such cases John did find in tradition a direct starting point for the development of his distinctive theology. Such, for example, are the parable of the Grain of Wheat and the parabolic saying about the wind. There may well be other cases where the original form has been disguised beyond recognition, and where nevertheless there was a traditional basis. Such examples allow of no positive inference, but they may rightly serve as warning against a hasty

⁵Bart Ehrman, “Spong's New Book on John,” *The Bart Ehrman Blog*, June 13, 2013, <https://chrmanblog.org/spongs-new-book-on-john-for-members/>.

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assumption that nothing in the Fourth Gospel which cannot be corroborated from the Synoptics has any claim to be regarded as part of the early tradition of the sayings of Jesus. That tradition was probably more manifold than we are apt to suppose, and the fact that a substantial element in the Johannine report of the teaching can be traced with great probability to traditional sources suggests that he was more dependent on information received than might appear, although he has developed it in new and original ways. But I do not at present see any way of identifying further traditional material in the Fourth Gospel, where comparison with the other Gospels fails us, without giving undue weight to subjective impressions.⁶

It says much about the low opinion of John's historicity that Dodd's deprecating approach, couched in obscure scholarly language, has been regarded as almost revolutionary in a "conservative" direction. Stripped of its verbiage, it does little more than recommend a judicious and mildly hopeful agnosticism about the historicity of unique Johannine information.⁷ The only alternative, apparently, is dismissal.

3. Evangelical echoes

In an academic atmosphere where such tentatively positive conclusions as Dodd's push the limits of what can be "respectably" said in favor of John as an historian, it is perhaps no surprise to find evangelical scholars who have doubts about John's full historicity. In a set of unequivocal comments in the course of a 2012 debate with skeptical scholar Bart Ehrman, evangelical scholar Craig A. Evans repeatedly stated that John is significantly less historical than the Synoptic Gospels. Ehrman, as he frequently does, chose to challenge the Gospels by attacking the high Christology in John's Gospel:

In the Gospel of John, Jesus says a lot of "I am" sayings, very famous sayings, "Before Abraham was, I am," "I am the way, the truth and the life; no one comes to the father but by me," "I am the bread of life, I am the light of the world," etc. These "I am" sayings, and, at one point, of course, he says, "The father and I are one." So, my question to you is, do you think the historical Jesus really said these things?⁸

⁶ C. H. Dodd, *Historical Tradition in the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963), p. 431.

⁷ D. A. Carson's discussion of this point is useful. See "Historical Tradition in the Fourth Gospel: After Dodd, What?" pp. 92ff. I note in passing that the quotation from F. W. Beare on pp. 92–94 of Carson's article gives the impression that Dodd believes that John the Baptist definitely did not call Jesus the Lamb of God. It appears that Dodd (*Historical Tradition*, pp. 269ff) is cautiously optimistic about the historicity of this bit of John's Gospel.

⁸ Craig A. Evans vs. Bart Ehrman, "Does the New Testament Present a Historically Reliable Portrait of the Historical Jesus?" Acadia University, January 19, 2012, beginning at 1:34:00, <https://youtu.be/ueRIdrIZsvs?t=1h33m58s>.

While Ehrman mentions some of what are known as the “I am” sayings with predicates, such as “I am the bread of life” (John 6.35), that is not really where his emphasis lies. Nor, in this question, does he even mention longer discourses in John. Rather, Ehrman is specifically questioning the historicity of Jesus’ briefly stated claims to deity in the Gospel of John.

Evans immediately replies by agreeing with Ehrman and even offering more than Ehrman asked:

I think most of these things were not uttered as we find them by the historical Jesus. So I suspect we don’t have too much difference on John. My view is the gospel of John is a horse of another color altogether. It’s a different genre. John is often compared to the wisdom literature. It’s like Wisdom is personified. Chokhmah, lady Wisdom, or in Greek, Sophia. She wanders the streets. She calls out to people, she does things. Well, nobody would read that and think, “Oh, did you see Wisdom going down the street the other day.” Nobody would think that is a literal person. What is mysterious to me about John is that once you say that and say, “Okay, perhaps we should interpret the ‘I am’ statements as ‘He is’ confessions – ‘He is the light of the world,’ ‘He is the way, truth, and the life,’ ‘He is the bread of life,’” a confession of the Johannine community that likely generated that version of the Gospel. About the time you think John is a gigantic parable, then along comes a scholar who says, “Y’know, it’s loaded with historical details, also.” And so that’s what makes John so tricky. There is a Society of Biblical Literature section devoted to John and the historical Jesus chaired by a scholar named Paul Anderson. So that’s probably more [of an] answer than you want. So, I don’t disagree with you too much on that point. I think John is studded with historical details. Maybe you called them nuggets. That’s not a bad way of describing John. But I think the Synoptics are more than just some nuggets.⁹

Evans’s answer ranges far more widely than Ehrman’s original question and shows a strikingly low view (for an evangelical) of John’s historicity. To begin with, he appears to agree wholeheartedly with Ehrman that Jesus did not recognizably make the clear, high claims for himself that Ehrman has just cited from the Gospel of John. Next, he implies that John’s genre *in general* is quite different from that of the Synoptics and is closely akin to allegory, with Jesus standing in the place of the allegorical figure of Lady Wisdom in the Old Testament. John, he says, is a “horse of another color altogether” from the Synoptics. Next, he expressly mentions the “I am” sayings with predicates and strongly implies that they are the creations of the Johannine community that generated the version of John’s Gospel that we

⁹Ibid.

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possess rather than being utterances of the historical Jesus. (He reiterates this claim about the “I am” sayings with predicates in the question and answer period of the same debate. See below.) He qualifies the negative portrayal of John very slightly by acknowledging that it is also “loaded with historical details” and that it is therefore “tricky”; perhaps, he implies, we should not go quite so far as to take John to be *merely* a “gigantic parable.” But he then turns back and takes away any implication that John is generally historical. He instead expressly adopts the term “nuggets” from Ehrman, stating that such accurate details in John are no more than “nuggets” and contrasting John with the Synoptics on precisely this point.¹⁰

When Ehrman (accurately) characterizes what Evans has just said as a denial that John’s Gospel is historically accurate, Evans protests:

I object to saying it’s not historically accurate. Well, if something... isn’t exactly historical, how is it not historically accurate? It’d be like saying “You mean the parable, the parable was a fiction Jesus told? It’s not historically accurate?”¹¹

This rejection of Ehrman’s comment is not an endorsement of John’s historical accuracy but rather the opposite. It is a “defense” against the claim that John is

¹⁰In 2018 Evans incorrectly stated that in 2012 he had merely questioned whether so-called “I am’ discourses” were *verbatim transcripts* of Jesus’ words. Obviously, that is not an accurate summary of his lengthy, videotaped comments in 2012. See Craig A. Evans vs. Lydia McGrew, “Is John’s Gospel Historically Accurate?” *Unbelievable*, May 18, 2018, minute 17 and minute 21, <http://unbelievable.podbean.com/e/is-john%E2%80%99s-gospel-historically-accurate-lydia-mcgrew-craig-evans-debate/>; see also the debate transcript, <https://www.premierchristianradio.com/Shows/Saturday/Unbelievable/Unbelievable-blog/Lydia-McGrew-vs.-Craig-Evans-on-the-Historical-Reliability-of-John-s-Gospel-Full-Transcript>. See my discussion of this historical revision in “Dancing With the Distinguished Professor—Post I,” *What’s Wrong With the World*, May 21, 2018, http://whatswrongwiththeworld.net/2018/05/dancing_with_the_distinguished.html; archived URL, <http://lydiaswebpage.blogspot.com/2020/06/dancing-with-distinguished-professor.html>. Later in the 2018 exchange on *Unbelievable* (beginning at about 1:01:17) Evans said more openly that there is “virtually nothing” in the Synoptics that “sounds like and looks like Jesus in the Gospel of John,” so that if we took John’s portrayal of Jesus in a straightforwardly historical way, we would have to ask ourselves, “Is it just some other Jesus we didn’t know about?” Evans went so far as to say that he’s “counting votes” and that it’s “three to one” against the straightforward historical accuracy of John’s portrayal of Jesus. When I affirmed (around 1:07:50) that “the nature and personality of Jesus are the same in all four Gospels,” a point I will return to in Chapter XII, Evans demurred, “Well, I think that’s not a very realistic understanding of John, and that’s the reason why probably the vast majority of scholars don’t see it that way.” He also called into question again the historicity of the “I am” sayings with predicates. For further discussion see Lydia McGrew, “Dancing With the Distinguished Professor—Post II,” *What’s Wrong With the World*, May 24, 2018, http://whatswrongwiththeworld.net/2018/05/dancing_with_the_distinguished_1.html; archived URL http://lydiaswebpage.blogspot.com/2020/06/dancing-with-distinguished-professor_1.html.

¹¹Craig A. Evans vs. Bart Ehrman, “Does the New Testament Present a Historically Reliable Portrait of the Historical Jesus?” beginning at 1:36:57, <https://youtu.be/ueRIrdlZsvs?t=5817>.

historically inaccurate by way of saying that the category of historical accuracy is inapplicable to John! When Ehrman then summarizes Evans's view by saying, "You are not going to use John as a blueprint for writing the historical life of Jesus, because you think it's metaphorical," Evans replies, "Fair enough."

Later in the evening, in reply to a question from the audience about John's historical reliability, Evans says,

I have already answered that, but let me re-state. On a historical level let us suppose we could go back into time with a camera team and audio and video record the historical Jesus and we followed him about throughout his ministry. I would be very surprised if we caught him uttering, "I am this" and "I am that" and one of these big long speeches that we find in John. Okay, so I'm just taking a different tack, but I'm saying the same thing I said before. This aspect of the Gospel of John I would not put in the category of historical. It's a genre question. The real question then would be, do these from a theological point of view reflect an accurate theological understanding of Jesus's person, his accomplishment, what he's achieved, what he brings to his believers. Is he the light of the world? Is he the way, the truth, the life? Is he the bread of life? See? And that's what Christians can affirm. . . . So you could say, theologically, these affirmations of who Jesus is in fact do derive from Jesus. Not because he walked around and said them. But because of what he did, what he said, what he did, and because of his resurrection. And so this community that comes together in the aftermath of Easter says, "You know what? This Jesus who said these various things, whose teaching we cling to and interpret and present and adapt and so on, he is for us the way, the truth, the life, the true vine. He is the bread of life," and so on. And so that gets presented in a very creative, dramatic, and metaphorical way, in what we now call the Gospel of John. So I'm urging people here, traditional Christians or conservative Christians, to take a new look at John and not fret over how you can make it harmonize with the synoptic Jesus. That's the way scholars usually talk. But to look at John as doing something else. It's not a fourth synoptic Gospel, but it really is a different genre and has a different purpose and is going about the task in a very different way.¹²

Evans's comments here, again, are unequivocal and emphatic, and, as he points out, consistent with what he has said earlier in the evening. He here states that the "I am" sayings with predicates were not uttered historically by Jesus. They are instead the result of the Christian community's theological musings and creativity. The community concluded that Jesus is "for us" the way, the truth, and the life, etc., and wrote the "dramatic" presentations in the Gospel as if Jesus said these things

¹² Ibid., minute 2:02:30, <https://youtu.be/ueRIdrIZsvs?t=2h2m29s>.

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himself. Evans therefore urges conservative Christians *not to try to harmonize* the presentation of Jesus in John with that in the Synoptics but rather to recognize the ahistorical genre of John's Gospel and to stop trying to use its unique material as an historical source for Jesus' life and teachings.

Although these are Evans's longest recorded comments to this effect, he has made shorter, similar statements elsewhere. Ehrman and Evans had two debates on successive nights in 2012. Further promoting this perspective in the next evening's debate, Evans spontaneously called into question John's relevance as an historical source for the life of Jesus in his opening statement:

The principal source for material from which we may derive a portrait of the historical Jesus are the three Synoptic gospels—Matthew, Mark and Luke. They are called Synoptic because they overlap a lot, and we can see them together, which is what the Greek word means, see them together in parallel columns. John's Gospel is another matter. What genre is it? It's not another Synoptic Gospel, as some would like to think. All agree that there is *some* history in John, but is it primarily history, or is it something else?¹³

As Evans presents it here, only the Synoptic Gospels can be unequivocally regarded as principal sources for Jesus' life. John contains "some history" but, because we should be so uncertain of its genre, we cannot rely upon it as an historical source as we can upon the Synoptics. Note, too, the dismissive implication that anyone who considers John to be an historical document, just as much as Matthew, Mark, and Luke, is ignorant of the reasons that cause those Gospels to be called "Synoptic" and "would like to think" of John as "another Synoptic Gospel."

In a book on the archaeological evidence for Jesus published in the same year, Evans makes a brief, matter-of-fact comment that calls into question John's reliability as an historical source for the life of Jesus:

Even if we set aside John because of its lateness and its obvious metaphorical portrait of Jesus, we have in Matthew, Mark and Luke, known as the Synoptic Gospels, three accounts written at the end of the first generation of the Jesus movement, when some eyewitnesses were still living.¹⁴

Evans may consider John's portrait of Jesus "obviously metaphorical" and hence

¹³ Craig A. Evans vs. Bart Ehrman, "Does the New Testament Present a Historically Reliable Portrait of the Historical Jesus?" January 20, 2012, Acadia University, minute 4:50, <https://youtu.be/UvCVnlHoFow?t=290>.

¹⁴ Craig A. Evans, *Jesus and His World: The Archaeological Evidence* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), p. 7.

shaky as an historical source for Jesus' life, but why should we agree with him? In his book, Evans is allegedly defending the historical picture of Jesus in the Gospels. Yet he casually calls its picture of Jesus "obviously metaphorical" and seems to consider it quite reasonable to set it aside as an historical source.

While Evans's oral remarks questioning John's historicity may be the longest and most explicit of their kind from a scholar widely regarded as an evangelical, they are not unique. Evangelical apologist and scholar Michael Licona has not only defended Evans's 2012 remarks at some length (while saying vaguely that he "wouldn't go as far" as Evans),¹⁵ he has also made statements himself that indicate a low view of John's historicity. In his 2017 book on differences in the Gospels, Licona says,

John often chose to sacrifice accuracy on the ground level of precise reporting, preferring to provide his readers with an accurate, higher-level view of the person of Jesus and his mission.¹⁶

By "precise reporting," Licona means not hyper-precision but ordinary historical reporting without deliberately changing the facts. This is what, on Licona's view, John "often chose to sacrifice." This perspective is evident in his treatment of John throughout the book. Licona treats it as quite plausible that John invented both the interaction between Jesus and Mary Magdalene at the tomb and the incident where Jesus breathes on his disciples after his resurrection.¹⁷ Following evangelical scholar Daniel B. Wallace, Licona says that John invented the words, "I thirst" and "It is finished" to replace (respectively) the entirely different sayings, "My God, why have you forsaken me?" and "Into your hands I commit my spirit."¹⁸ He argues that John changed the day of the crucifixion and even went out of his way to give his readers the impression that the Last Supper was not a Passover meal, though it really was a Passover meal.¹⁹ He says that it is impossible to know whether John invented John the Baptist's claim that he was the voice of one crying in the wilderness; the only argument he gives for questioning this saying is that Mark

¹⁵Michael Licona, "Are We Reading an Adapted Form of Jesus' Teachings in John's Gospel?" *Risen Jesus*, Sept. 29, 2017, <https://www.risenjesus.com/reading-adapted-form-jesus-teachings-johns-gospel>.

¹⁶Michael Licona, *Why Are There Differences in the Gospels? What We Can Learn from Ancient Biography* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2017), p. 115.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, pp. 176, 180,

¹⁸*Ibid.*, p. 166; Daniel B. Wallace, "Ipsissima Vox and the Seven Words From the Cross," unpublished paper presented to the Society for Biblical Literature Southwest Regional meeting, March 5, 2000, pp. 4–11.

¹⁹Licona, *Why Are There Differences*, pp. 156, 163.

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quotes the verse from Isaiah as the narrator and does not report that John the Baptist applied it to himself.²⁰ And Licona suggests quite seriously that John may have invented the entire Doubting Thomas sequence “as a rebuke” to those who do not accept the resurrection, though he narrowly (and without any good argument, given his own other statements) decides instead that Luke deliberately conflated two different appearances to the disciples.²¹

Licona has indicated deep ambivalence about the recognizable historicity of Jesus’ claims to deity recorded in John and has said that if he were forced to a choice, he would say that these are only “loose paraphrases” of what Jesus actually said.²² His full explanation elsewhere makes it clear that “loose paraphrase” is a misleading phrase and that instead the theory in question is that these were historically unrecognizable Johannine inventions based upon entirely different scenes in which Jesus only implicitly claims the prerogatives of deity.²³ In the next chapter I will discuss at length the misleading use of the term “paraphrase” by scholars.

Eminent evangelical scholar Craig Keener has also made negative comments about John’s historicity as compared with the other Gospels:

A close examination of the Fourth Gospel reveals that John has rearranged many details, apparently in the service of his symbolic message. This is especially clear in the Passion Narrative, where direct conflicts with the presumably widely known passion tradition... fulfill symbolic narrative functions.²⁴

John takes significant liberties with the way he reports his events, especially in several symbolic adaptations in the passion narrative, whereas Luke follows, where we can test him..., the procedures of a good Hellenistic historian.²⁵

It is unfortunate that Keener feels that he must praise Luke’s historical veracity by deprecating John’s, stating that John takes “significant liberties.”²⁶

²⁰ Ibid., p. 121.

²¹ Ibid., p. 177.

²² “Bonus Episode 15: Mike Licona Answers More Questions on the Gospels,” May 2, 2018, *The Freethinking Podcast*, minute 9:20 and following, <http://freethinkingministries.com/bonus-ep-15-mike-licona-answers-more-questions-on-the-gospels/>.

²³ Michael Licona, “Are We Reading an Adapted Form of Jesus’ Teachings in John’s Gospel?”

²⁴ Craig Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), pp. 42–43.

²⁵ Craig Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012), p. 793.

²⁶ Despite his positive comments about Luke, even Keener’s view of Luke’s historicity is curiously qualified. For example, he argues that Luke probably invented the allusion to Theudas in the speech of Gamaliel in Acts 5, not caring that Theudas had not yet led his rebellion by the time when Gamaliel

Although classicist and New Testament scholar Richard Burridge would likely not claim the label “evangelical,” he has been highly influential in the evangelical world through his advocacy of the thesis that the Gospels are Greco-Roman biographies (βίοι).²⁷ Burridge’s comments dismissing John’s historical intention are particularly clear and fit quite well with Licona’s claim that John was more interested in a “higher-level” view of Jesus than in historical accuracy on the ground level. In fact, Licona cites Burridge in support of that very statement.²⁸ Says Burridge,

We must not transfer these modern concepts to ancient texts without considering their understandings of truth and myth, lies and fiction. To modern minds, ‘myth’ means something untrue, a ‘fairy-story’; in the ancient world, myth was the medium whereby profound truth, more truly true than mere facts could ever be, was communicated. The opposite of truth is not fiction, but lies and deception; yet even history can be used to deceive, while stories can bring truth. This issue of truth and fiction in the ancient world is too complex to cover in detail here. However, the most important point to remember is that the ancients were more interested in the moral worth and philosophical value of statements than their logical status, in truth more than facts. . . . Unfortunately, the debate between so-called ‘conservatives’ and ‘liberals’ about authenticity is often conducted in twenty-first-century terms. As one student asked me, ‘Why does John keep fabricating material about Jesus despite his expressed concern for the “truth”?’ However, the negative connotation of ‘fabrication’ is modern.²⁹

Thus, John’s stress on ‘truth’ is not about ‘documented fact’, but the ‘higher truth’ of who Jesus is—which is why he writes in a biographical format. For him, Jesus is ‘the way, the truth and the life’, so his Jesus says these words (Jn. 14:6) . . .³⁰

Popular as such sweeping generalizations may be about ancient views of truth, they are historically quite wrong, as I have shown at length in *The Mirror or the Mask*.³¹ What I note for the moment is Burridge’s dismissal of the idea that John is

would have been speaking. Keener, *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), pp. 1233–35.

²⁷ See Lydia McGrew, *The Mirror or the Mask: Liberating the Gospels From Literary Devices* (Tampa, FL: DeWard Publishing, 2019), Chapter V, for a detailed refutation of Burridge and Licona on the subject of the Gospels’ genre.

²⁸ Licona, *Why Are There Differences*, p. 239, n. 11.

²⁹ Richard Burridge, *Four Gospels, One Jesus: A Symbolic Reading* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2005), pp. 169–170.

³⁰ Burridge, *Four Gospels, One Jesus*, pp. 170–171.

³¹ McGrew, *The Mirror or the Mask*, Chapter VI.

attempting to convey historical facts and the extent to which a view like Burridge's has influenced even evangelical scholarship.

4. Credentialism and Agnosticism: The Wrong Approach

Two questions immediately come to mind when we realize how little scholars, including some evangelical scholars, think of John's literal historical truthfulness: First, why do they take the position that they do? And second, are they right? This book is an attempt to answer those questions.

There is a certain wrong approach to these questions that we should not permit to haunt our investigation. Someone might be tempted to think that, in view of the scholarly disparagement of John's historicity and the fact that even some scholars deemed conservative share this skepticism, the epistemically careful, responsible approach is to be agnostic about John's historical truthfulness, at least when he is not reporting a fact also found in the Synoptic Gospels. How dare we who are not professional Johannine scholars go beyond what some scholars who are serious Christians think about these issues? If they are not moved by an anti-supernatural bias, should we not assume that their hesitations are the result of their lengthy, profound investigation of cogent evidence? Is it not epistemically safer to act as if John's historicity is at least somewhat dubious in order to avoid being too bold and being mistaken?³²

But this will not do. To treat John as historically dubious *is* to take a position—namely, that trusting John is not rationally supportable. It is not neutrality or caution. On the contrary, it is a kind of boldness in the opposite direction. It is throwing out reliance upon John's serious historicity merely on the basis of an argument from authority. To treat it as entirely plausible that John has invented scenes and sayings of Jesus, to defer to the view that John is more concerned about “higher-level” theology than about mere facts, has substantive implications. If we adopt this stance toward this view, we could be far wrong, to our great loss.

Credentialism by itself does not excuse agnosticism about John's historicity in any event. For one thing, credentialed scholars who are serious Christians (if that is our preferred set of experts) are not all in agreement. Based on their treatment of alleged discrepancies and their use of harmonization, it is clear that Craig Blomberg, D. A. Carson, and Leon Morris (to pick three) take a far higher view of John's historicity than that reflected in Craig Evans's 2012 comments or

³²I have personally witnessed someone making this argument in personal communication. It is not my own invention.

Licona's many suggestions of factual change.³³ So does Andreas Köstenberger.³⁴ Which Christian scholarly opinion should non-specialists adopt? Shall we choose a scholar at random and accept his views? Again, to treat John as if his unique material is historically suspect is to make a choice, and a more skeptical scholarly position is not *per se* epistemically preferable. For another thing, we can see in general that the field of New Testament studies harbors serious epistemic pathologies that influence evangelical scholars as well as others, so an appeal to pure authority here is on shaky ground.³⁵

The skeptical scholar, even the moderately skeptical Christian scholar, cannot get an automatic win for treating John as dubious by appealing to caution and credentialism. If we are concerned about the questions that scholars raise about John's historicity, the only responsible approach is to investigate them rather than default to agnosticism.

5. Abandoning the treasure

I suspect that many among my readers will not need to be convinced of the importance of this issue. These are the aforementioned Christian laymen and pastors who habitually quote and use John's Gospel, treating it as historical as a matter of course. Those readers are likely to recognize immediately that they would suffer a great loss—in their spiritual lives, in their evangelism, and in their preaching—if they developed serious doubts about the historicity of John.

But there is another group of readers who may wonder if it's worthwhile to look into these matters in any detail rather than just setting John aside. For some time now a substantial contingent of Christian apologists has adopted a surprisingly minimalist approach to defending Christianity. The idea here is that we can "get" all of the most important doctrines of Christianity by using no more of the Gospels than what is accepted by a majority of scholars, including non-Christian and liberal scholars. In this method we do not use New Testament epistles that more liberal

³³ See footnote 10.

³⁴ Andreas J. Köstenberger, *John (Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament)* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004). I am aware of the concerns, raised by Köstenberger himself, about material in this commentary that was insufficiently documented from D. A. Carson's commentary, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991). Here I am pointing out Köstenberger's general approach to the historicity of the Fourth Gospel. Köstenberger's commentary will be cited in this book as a source of specific information only when the information in question is not also contained in Carson's commentary.

³⁵ The entirety of the companion volume, *The Mirror or the Mask*, attests to these problems. See also Lydia McGrew, "Six Bad Habits of New Testament Scholars and How to Avoid Them," *Apologetics Academy*, January 8, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_9fUKdp16k.

scholars do not deem authentically written by their traditional authors. We do not rely on the content of any sayings of Jesus unless we can argue that that content is “multiply attested” by sources that some sufficiently large group of liberal scholars think go back to the historical Jesus. And so forth. We are supposed to use these widely accepted passages to try to induce unbelievers to accept Christianity by various arguments, such as an argument for the resurrection of Jesus based only upon facts admitted by a large majority of scholars. At that point (for no very apparent reason), these hypothetical converts are expected to accept the rest of Scripture as true and even inspired. Then we hope to develop a richer theology for them using the rest of the Bible.³⁶ Based upon these strategic principles, we are not supposed to use John’s unique material very much, because it is controversial among mainstream scholars and skeptics.³⁷ If, for example, we want to argue that Jesus thought of himself and presented himself as God, we must argue either from the Synoptics or, at most, from types of statements such as Jesus’ “Son of Man” language found in both the Synoptics and John, but not from Jesus’ unique sayings in John.

The byword of the minimalist approach is, “We don’t need...” Michael Licona has said that it is “irrelevant” to the case for the deity of Jesus whether or not Jesus’ shocking claims as recorded in the Gospel of John occurred in a recognizable fashion, because he made so many implicit claims to deity in the Synoptic Gospels.³⁸ Licona states that the implicit claims of Jesus recorded in the Synoptic Gospels “came to the same thing” as the scenes and sayings that are found only in John; this is why he regards the historicity of the Johannine passages as irrelevant.

William Lane Craig has argued that we don’t need the high reliability of the Gospels in order to make a cogent argument for “Jesus’ radical self-understanding

³⁶ For an outline of this approach, see William Lane Craig, “Scriptural Inerrancy and the Apologetic Task,” *Reasonable Faith*, Dec. 27, 2015, <https://www.reasonablefaith.org/question-answer/P110/scriptural-inerrancy-and-the-apologetic-task/>. It is highly unfortunate that Craig casts the issue in terms of inerrancy, since inerrancy is not all that he suggests abandoning in carrying out the apologetic task. He goes so far as to say that he would “concede for the sake of argument virtually all the errors and inconsistencies in the Old and New Testaments that [the unbeliever] wants to bring up.” That is considerably more than conceding that the Bible may not be inerrant. For further analysis, see Lydia McGrew, “When Minimal is Minimizing,” *What’s Wrong With the World*, Mar. 1, 2018, http://whatswrongwiththeworld.net/2018/03/when_minimal_is_minimizing.html; archived URL, http://lydiaswebpage.blogspot.com/2020/05/when-minimal-is-minimizing-updated-by_75.html.

³⁷ For an explicit evangelical statement of this strategic principle concerning John and Jesus’ deity, see “Did the Historical Jesus Claim to be Divine,” Dallas Theological Seminary, March 13, 2018, minute 44, <https://voice.dts.edu/tablepodcast/historical-jesus-divine/>.

³⁸ “Bart Ehrman vs. Mike Licona: Are The Gospels Historically Reliable,” February 21, 2018, beginning at minute 2:07:19, <https://youtu.be/qP7RrCfDkO4?t=7639>.

and resurrection” and his “radical personal claims.”³⁹ Conspicuous by its absence from Craig’s list of Jesus’ “radical personal claims” is the claim to be God as recounted in John. In fact, in an entire chapter on “Jesus’ self-understanding,” Craig never cites the unique claims in John such as, “Before Abraham was, I am” in John 8.58 and does not explain why they are absent. Instead, he says that we can argue from widely accepted material that Jesus considered himself to be “the Messiah, the unique Son of God, and the Danielic Son of Man.”⁴⁰ It is difficult to doubt that a desire to avoid making use of the supposedly controversial Johannine information, to use only what is accepted by a wide array of scholars, lies behind such carefully worded statements of Jesus’ claims for himself.

There are two dangers in such an approach. First of all, by reducing our epistemic basis, we do weaken our case. The statement that the historicity or ahistoricity of unique Johannine scenes and sayings is evidentially irrelevant is obviously, blatantly false. It would be foolish to deny that John’s Gospel contains important, theologically rich data. The Gospel purports to tell us what Jesus did and said. If we are unwilling to make theological, apologetic, and historical use of the data it adds to the Synoptics, we weaken the case we make for our conclusions. This should go without saying, but apparently it needs to be said.

Second, we functionally teach an entire generation of aspiring apologists and scholars that John’s Gospel—or indeed, anything that is not widely accepted by scholars across the ideological spectrum—is in an important sense dispensable. This is likely to lead them not to examine and push back against claims that cast serious doubt upon the historical veracity of John, especially if those claims are made by fellow evangelicals. Why bother challenging the historical depreciation of a Gospel we weren’t doing much with anyway in our most earnest apologetic and evangelistic efforts? This, in turn, has the highly unfortunate effect of allowing such claims to pass unchallenged. How, then, would we know if they were wrong?

Craig Blomberg makes a similar point concerning the “conservative” approach to historical Jesus research:

It comes, then, as little surprise that contemporary historical Jesus research pays scant attention to John. Definitive tomes have been produced by focusing almost entirely on the Synoptics’ portraits. ... Evangelical counterparts have hardly differed from the critical consensus at this point. ...⁴¹

³⁹William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, 3rd edition (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2008), p. 11.

⁴⁰Ibid., Chapter 7, pp. 287–332. Craig, “Scriptural Inerrancy and the Apologetic Task.”

⁴¹Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of John’s Gospel*, p. 20.

Conservatives, too, seem to be part of this consensus at times, at least by their silence—that is, in relying almost wholly on the Synoptics and leaving John to one side in doing their own historical Jesus research.⁴²

I challenge anyone who has been taught a minimalist or concessive approach not to think that John's robust historicity is unimportant. If you accept that conclusion you will divest yourself of a portion of Scripture that you ought to claim, cherish, and use without apology. This is not to say that you ought to accept John's historicity on the basis of nothing but *a priori* theological considerations, nor that you should cling to it out of theological fear. It is, however, to say that you should not abandon John's full historicity without careful investigation of the claims against it and for it. Certainly you should not abandon it just because you are warned that experts will disagree with you if you continue to maintain that John does not make up or alter facts. Everyone has a right to stand up to attempted brow-beating by way of mere references to scholarly consensus. John's historicity is important enough that it is worthwhile at least to look into the arguments before tamely submitting and downgrading it.

Imagine a young man, heir to a fortune, who has been told for years that certain portions of that fortune must not be used, claimed, or relied upon. Some of his most beautiful and pleasant properties, some of the loveliest treasures left to him by his ancestors, must never be treated as if they are really his. He may appreciate them aesthetically from a distance, but he may not live on the estates or handle the precious objects, and he is not free to spend any of those treasures for his most serious needs. His earnest advisors tell him (at least initially) that this is not because they *themselves* think that there is anything questionable about his right to these properties. But, they say, there are learned geographers who doubt that most of the lands even exist. Some lawyers question whether the heir has proper title to the lands; his advisors therefore worry that he will be evicted should he take up residence. Others, eminent financiers, believe that the property in question will disappear in some complex financial fashion if he should attempt to claim it. So the young heir learns to live on a far more modest inheritance and to act in practice as though he does not even possess some of his own property. Even some beautiful places and things that his father particularly wanted him to have do not come into his hands, for he has been taught not to claim them.

Now, suppose that some of his own advisors one day begin to say that they, too, have decided that he does not really own this great portion of his patrimony,

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 292.

that it is a chimera, or that it has disappeared in a financial crash. Will the man be likely to check out their statements? Is he not more likely to conclude that nothing much is at stake? After all, he has lived without this property for many years. He has had to behave as if he did not own it. Why should he bother to find out whether his current advisors are wrong or right, now that some of them also question this property?

In just such a way deference to credentialism and the persistent practical refusal to rely upon John's Gospel create psychological indifference to its historicity and a passive willingness to let it be taken from us by scholarly skepticism. Yet if John's Gospel is historically reliable, it is a very great treasure, far dearer than mere houses or lands or any earthly gold or silver. It tells us much that the other Gospels do not relate about the teachings and doings of Jesus Christ, and, if it belongs in the canon of Scripture with all of its overt claims to be the product of witness testimony, then these unique historical stories are gifts that our heavenly Father wanted us to have for our spiritual needs. They cannot truly satisfy those needs if they are merely pious fictions.⁴³ Should we not then rouse ourselves to investigate the question of whether or not we can rely upon John?

⁴³ As I have discussed in *The Mirror or the Mask*, Chapter X, sections 3 and 4, fake points don't make points. The narrative of the Gospels and the teachings of Jesus recorded there are meant to be religiously significant because they are historical, not in the way that fiction can carry significance.

Summary

The Gospel of John: The Red-Headed Stepchild of Gospels Scholarship

- Though the Gospel of John is the one laymen love most, it is the Gospel whose historicity the largest number of scholars call into question.
- Skeptical scholars dismiss the historicity of John. A number of influential evangelical scholars seriously doubt that it is primarily historical reportage.
- It is not prudent or neutral to set John aside and treat it as if it is historically dubious just because many credentialed scholars question it.
- Treating John as unnecessary for Christian apologetics and doctrine has led too many even among conservatives to shy away from defending its strong historicity. The Fourth Gospel is a great treasure both historically and theologically. Therefore, we should investigate the evidence for its historicity and see if the arguments scholars have brought against it can be answered.