

The last three centuries have witnessed significant changes in the interpretation of the Gospel of John. Prior to the modern period, in the period of confessional orthodoxy and Pietism, most commentators on the Gospel of John saw it as a first century refutation of Christological heresy. The Puritan John Owen (1616-1683) and Matthew Poole (1624-1679), for instance, both regarded the fourth gospel as a direct response to specific doctrinal aberrations and, accordingly, as an assertion of orthodox Christology. Such a reading may have been in response to Socinian writers and the Racovian Catechism (first published in 1605 with subsequent revisions), which offered an interpretation of Johannine Christology quite at odds with the tradition of orthodox interpretation. At the same time, there were occasional voices, notably Richard Simon (1638-1712), questioning apostolic authorship of the fourth gospel.

At the dawn of the modern era, Albrecht Bengel's (1687–1752) understanding of the fourth gospel was continuous with the previous era's interpretation: The Gospel of John had been written by an apostle and eyewitness, who reliably reported Jesus' words and deeds. The purpose of this gospel was to supplement the Synoptic Gospels by emphasizing and defending the divinity of Jesus Christ. This understanding of the gospel's author and purpose expressed mainstream of

Christian thought and found few challengers until the late 18th century.

Karl Gottlieb Bretschneider (1776–1848) was a representative and important challenger to the mainstream view. In 1820 he published a substantial book, *Probabilia de Evangelii et Epistolarum Joannis, Apostoli, Indole et Origine Eruditorum Judiciis Modeste Subject*, arguing that the differences between the Johannine and Synoptic portraits of Jesus rule out apostolic and eyewitness authorship. Defenses of Johannine authorship were forthcoming by scholars such as J. B. Lightfoot, B. F. Westcott.

These debates about authorship correlate with a philosophical issue much discussed in this period, namely the relation of universal truth (the "absolute" in 19th century talk) to historical fact. Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729–1781) had given impetus to this issue by positing an "ugly, wide ditch" between accidental truths of history and universal truths of reason ("On the Proof of the Spirit and of Power," 55). For Christian theologians, concern about this dichotomy would inevitably circle around the doctrine of the incarnation, with its assertion that the historical Jesus is universal truth. Just as inevitably, John's gospel, the gospel that most expressly identifies Jesus with universal truth, would be the focus on discussion. For theologians of a conservative bent, apostolic, eyewitness authorship of the gospel seemed to be an indispensable support for affirming the identity of the historical Jesus and truth. Rejection of Johannine authorship seemed to imperil this traditional affirmation.

One of the first to deal with these issues systematically was Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834). In his lectures on the "Life of Jesus," he argued (contrary to much subsequent scholarship) that John's gospel, to a far greater extent than the Synoptic Gospels, reliably reports to us the contents of Jesus' self-consciousness. In reading the Fourth Gospel we receive rather directly Jesus' own teaching about his person and his relation to God the Father. Characteristically, Schleiermacher employed the notion of consciousness to describe Jesus' person: The Gospel's assertion that Jesus had been sent by God and had received his teaching from God meant that his consciousness of God was unique and absolute. Within the framework of his own conceptuality, then, Schleiermacher supported the traditional affirmation that the historical Jesus is the absolute (expressed with the

language of God-consciousness) and tied this affirmation to Johannine authorship of the Fourth Gospel.

Few found Schleiermacher's approach to John's gospel persuasive. David Friedrich Strauss (1808–1874) wrote a book length refutation of Schleiermacher's lectures on the life of Jesus, arguing that the author was not an eyewitness, that the author did in fact impose his own thoughts on the narrative, and that consequently the Fourth Gospel was no more historically reliable than the Synoptic Gospels. Moreover, he asserted that Schleiermacher had bent his interpretation of John's gospel to fit his own theological system; instead of finding (in John's gospel) the historical Jesus, he had naively projected his own concept of the absolute onto the gospel portrait of Jesus. Finally, Strauss' view of the relation between the absolute and the historical differed completely from Schleiermacher's. Whereas for Schleiermacher it was vital to identify the historical Jesus with the absolute, Strauss rejected the possibility of the absolute being actualized in any historical individual. For him, the incarnational union of the absolute and the historical came to realization in the totality of human nature – in the human species, not in one member of it.

Ferdinand Christian Baur (1792–1860) dated John's Gospel to the post-apostolic 2nd century, but argued that the question of authorship was subordinate to the question of the relation of the absolute to the historical; the importance of this gospel lay not in its eyewitness character but in its expression of absolute truth. For Baur, this relation was paramount; the Fourth Gospel represented the pinnacle of NT theology precisely because its prolog declares the unity of the absolute and the historically particular when it identified the logos with the historical Jesus. The logos (according to Baur) designates the self-revelation of God and the impartation of eternal life, which are theological expressions for the realization of the absolute. At the same time, Baur agreed with Strauss (against Schleiermacher) that the absolute could not be fully actualized in a historical individual. For him, full actuality required the reconciliation of the totality of humanity and was thus an eschatological reality, capable of fulfillment only with the consummation of history.

Arguments about authorship and dating have continued down to the present. A portion of the scholarly community still maintains apostolic, eyewitness authorship, tying it to an affirmation of Christianity's traditional Christology; others deny apostolic authorship, with varying consequences for Christology. Meanwhile, the 19th century's preoccupation with the absolute and history was a function, in part, of philosophical currents that had become passé by the 20th century. Idealist concerns gave way, in the theology of Rudolf Bultmann, to existentialist concerns. The issue for Bultmann was not the incarnational relation between the absolute and the historical, but was instead the way in which the gospel presents two possible modes of being: In one we acknowledge our origin, as creatures, from God; in the other we rebel against God in self-sovereignty. Bultmann systematically interpreted the language of John's Gospel in existentialist, not metaphysical terms. For instance, the Fourth Gospel's dualism of light and darkness refers not to metaphysical realities, as in Gnostic theology, but to the alternative modes of human being.

More recent 20th century interpreters have developed other themes. The 19th century confidence that the Fourth Gospel reflects a hellenistic milieu has increasingly been replaced by affirmations of the Gospel's Palestinian origins. C. H. Dodd's *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel*, led the way on this point. Meanwhile, interest grew in using the Gospel of John to reconstruct the history and dynamics of the late first century community that seems to be reflected in the Gospel. Raymond E. Brown's commentary on John was notable for developing this perspective. More recently, Alan R

Culpepper and Hartwig Thyen have directed scholarly focus away from historical issues and toward a literary and rhetorical analysis of the Gospel.

In summary: Modern interpretation of the fourth gospel has been driven by methodological issues (especially those related to the various quests of the historical Jesus) and by philosophical discourse (for instance, idealist philosophies and existentialism). The future of Johannine study will almost certainly continue these trends, with fresh methods and trends in philosophy creating an extended horizon for interpretation.

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