Confronting John's Shadows while Basking in Its Lights: A Theological Attempt to Deal with the Fourth Gospel's Ambivalence

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Abstract: The Gospel according to John has quite a lofty place not only within the Christian scriptures but in the whole of Christian tradition and history. It is difficult, therefore, to confront the fact that, if scrutinized at the historical, theological, and even spiritual levels, one cannot help but take notice of a number of problematic aspects within it. This paper will be an effort to deal with these shadow aspects of John in a constructive way but also point out how the Fourth Gospel is an indispensable and insightful work to understand the Christian tradition.

Keywords: Gospel of John • Problematic Aspects of John • Intuition and Inference • John and History • John and Anti-Jewish Attitudes • John and Conversion

Introduction: Some Basic Questions on John

Although commonly accepted by biblical scholarship as chronologically the last to have been written among the four canonical gospels, the Gospel according to John (also called "the Fourth Gospel" or simply "John") is the one that has most probably exerted the greatest influence on how Christians throughout history have thought about the central figure that lies at the heart of the Christian tradition—Jesus, believed by Christians to be "the Christ." In addition to that, it seems to be the favorite gospel of many (perhaps most?) Christians.[1] The major reason for that seems to be the fact that John is the

[1] New Testament scholar Candida Moss calls it "Everyone's Favorite Gospel." See "Everyone's Favorite Gospel is a Forgery," Candida Moss, last modified March 14, 2020, https://www.thedailybeast.com/everyones-favorite-gospel-the-gospel-of-john-is-a-forgery-according-to-new-research?fbclid=IwAR09UhPS9fPJd0xKbEZmQWGN_WjaWLKLitFfTV1_NGLdoy9fv1l42j-LhEo

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gospel which most clearly links Jesus as closely as possible with God, the Father (YHWH of the Hebrew Bible), arguably even to the point of explicitly ascribing divinity to Jesus. Thus, because the divine status of Jesus became Christianity's most important and character-giving belief, the gospel that proclaims this truth most clearly—namely, John—naturally became the most influential and important among the four canonical gospels.[2]

With such a lofty status, it is often quite difficult in pastoral and educational settings, or indeed, even in Christian academia, to broach the idea that this beloved gospel might contain some—dare we say— "shadows" in it. Unfortunately, the truth is: If we subject the Fourth Gospel to critical analysis, John—in which one major theme is ironically "light"—seems to have quite a few dark shadows indeed.

How do we confront and make sense of these shadow aspects of John, especially if we are in positions of teaching people in communities that honor and esteem the Gospel of John? If the exposure of John's shadow sides might be a big letdown, can we possibly "redeem" John, that is, draw lights from it and, as countless Christians have done through the ages, bask in them to nurture and deepen faith? This article will be an effort to do—shall I call it—a "theological balancing act" between dealing with John's shadows and basking in its lights.[3] As a main resource, it will draw on a number of theological insights put forward by the late systematic theologian Donald Gelpi SJ. Thus, this article is to be

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[2] Cf. Robert Fortna, "The Gospel of John and the Historical Jesus," in *Profiles of Jesus* ed. Roy W. Hoover (Santa Rosa, CA: Polebridge Press, 2002), 223.

[3] An excellent work that deals with the riddles ("mysteries") of John is Paul N. Anderson, *The Riddles of the Fourth Gospel: An Introduction to John* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011).

considered mainly a theological project geared towards pastoral and pedagogical purposes, rather than a strictly exegetical one.[4]

With the intention of framing our task in this article, let us pose three basic questions at the beginning of our quest. We will try our best to answer them by the end of this study.

> **Question #1**: Examine how Jesus is portrayed in the so-called Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) and contrast it with how Jesus is portrayed in John. Why is John's Jesus in certain aspects significantly different from the Synoptics' portrayal of him?
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> **Question #2**: How many times is the term "Jews" used in John? How is it concretely used in these occurrences? Do you not wonder why the "Jews" are often the villains ("bad guys") in John when Jesus, his family, and his earliest disciples were all first century CE Jews themselves?
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> **Question #3**: Last but certainly not least: Why did John, chronologically the last canonical gospel to be written, become arguably the most influential and important gospel for much of Christianity's 2000+ year history, surpassing even the earlier-to-be-written Synoptic Gospels?

Shadows in John?

As hinted to above, when one embarks upon a serious quest to read John honestly and critically *as scripture*,

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[4] Let me state clearly that this essay is intended primarily to inform those in educational and pastoral settings, particularly, to aid lecturers and instructors in dealing with the Gospel of John with their students. Moreover, it is also written in appreciation of and in dialogue with different facets of the late theologian Donald Gelpi's work.

namely, as a source of theological thinking or even as a guide for one's faith and spiritual life, it is not uncommon to reach a point where John's gospel seems to be ambivalent and ambiguous. Why? Because, despite John being one of the most profound, powerful, and influential depictions of the figure of Jesus Christ in Christian history, as mentioned above, if subjected to critical scrutiny at the historical, theological, and even spiritual levels, one will notice a number of seemingly problematic and troubling aspects in and about it. I will call these issues "shadows" here. To Christians, it might seem irreverent to even broach the idea that this beloved gospel might contain some shadows. Unfortunately, as I will show below, one cannot help but acknowledge that it does. How do we confront and make sense of these troubling aspects of John? In the first part of this article, we will try to deal with those shadows while attempting to answer the questions we posed at the beginning. In the second part, I will spell out what—for me—is John's undeniable value for the Christian tradition. Hopefully, that will enable us also to bask in John's brilliant light.

John and History

First and foremost, one must note that the figure of Jesus depicted in John's Gospel has been considered by a significant number of contemporary critical biblical scholars to be more theological than historical. That is to say, in significant ways, the Jesus that is portrayed in the storyline of the Fourth Gospel is more a product of theological reflection about Jesus Christ by an early Christian group probably toward the end of the first century (around the 90s and thereafter) of the Common Era, rather than a faithful historical reflection of the flesh-and-blood carpenter-turned-rabbi/healer from Nazareth who lived in the 20s CE. The Jesus Seminar,

for example, declares that "the second pillar of scholarly wisdom" in historical Jesus studies is "recognizing the synoptic gospels as much closer to the historical Jesus than the Fourth Gospel, which presented a 'spiritual' Jesus."[5]

For the sake of balance though, I will immediately offer two demurrers here about the above statement. First, a too sharply-drawn contrasting approach between John and the Synoptics (such as displayed by the Jesus Seminar in the quote above) should be nuanced with a knowledge of the whole range of scholarly opinions concerning the relation of the Fourth Gospel with the first three.[6] Second, a predominantly skeptical view of the relation between John and history should be complemented by the examination of other studies that probe this theme in a more thorough and critical way. The reason is simple. There are indeed different provable historical factors that are present in John's Gospel. Some examples are: the timeline of Jesus' ministry and some events that happened at the beginning of Jesus' public life, among others.[7]

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[5] Robert Funk, Roy Hoover & the Jesus Seminar, *The Five Gospels: What did Jesus Really Say?* (San Francisco: Harper, 1997), 3. See also Fortna, "The Gospel of John and the Historical Jesus," 223-30.

[6] See, for example, Paul Anderson, "Why the Gospel of John is Fundamental to Jesus Research," in *Jesus Research: the Gospel of John in Historical Inquiry*, edited by James H. Charlesworth and Jolyon Pruszinski (New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2019), 7-46. Also, Wendy North, *What John Knew and What John Wrote: A Study in John and the Synoptics* (Lanham, MA: Lexington Books/Fortress Academic, 2020), 1-16. An exhaustive study of various facets of the relation of John with the Synoptic Gospels is Adelbert Denaux, ed., *John and the Synoptics* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1992).

[7] Some good works for reference are the following: Anderson, "Why the Gospel of John is Fundamental to Jesus Research," as well as Paul Anderson, Felix Just and Tom Thatcher, eds., *John, Jesus, and History, Volume 1: Critical Appraisals of Critical Views* (Atlanta:

Perhaps a better way of expressing theologically the relation between John and history would be the following: Many aspects of the portrait of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel are probably more a reflection of Jesus as revealed to and/or perceived by some early Christ-followers later on in time (around the 90s CE onwards) *in light of their faith in Jesus' resurrection and other faith experiences*. Not to be forgotten as well is that the image of Jesus in John should be contextualized firmly in the different developments that occurred in Christological thinking that occurred toward the close of the first century and/or the beginning of the second century CE.

John's Retrojective Portrayal of Jesus: A Problem for Contemporary Readers

If we grant that the gospel's author-source (sometimes identified in the text as the "Beloved Disciple" and known conventionally as "John") acted with integrity in crafting a gospel in a manner that was acceptable in his milieu,[8] there can still be grave

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Society of Biblical Literature, 2007), and *John, Jesus, and History, Volume 2: Aspects of Historicity in the Fourth Gospel* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2009). Also, Richard Bauckham, *The Testimony of the Beloved Disciple: Narrative, History, and Theology in the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007). A good survey of Johannine scholarship until 2006 is Gerard S. Sloyan, *What are They Saying about John?,* revised ed. (New York/Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 2006). For a more recent survey of Johannine scholarship, confer Judith Lieu and Martinus C. de Boer, *The Oxford Handbook of Johannine Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

[8] One must not forget though that the notion that ancient Christian writers always acted with integrity (particularly with regard to claiming to speak with the authoritative voice of a past prominent Jesus-follower although in reality not being the person claimed to be) is *not* a universal scholarly consensus, but contested by some scholars. For example, Bart Ehrman, *Forged: Writing in the*

reservations as to whether his apparent trademark style (of projecting post-resurrectional themes back [technically called "retrojection"] to the figure of the pre-Easter Jesus in the storyline of the gospel) is a sound way of presenting Jesus to a contemporary audience characterized by historical consciousness. One cannot shake the feeling that John's literary and theological styles, in effect, confuses contemporary readers (who are, of course, not used to such styles) into believing that the pre-Easter Jesus enunciated teachings and acted in ways which in reality—we can argue—should be more properly attributed to the risen Christ or to the exalted 'Christ of faith' that early Christians came to believe in after the historical Jesus' life. This frequently results in making many Christians (who have been heavily influenced by the Johannine picture of Jesus without having a critical historical consciousness regarding the Gospels) semi-Docetists as it were; that is, people who tend to think that Jesus merely appeared human but was, in reality, predominantly divine.

In more technical language, Donald Gelpi accurately and eloquently identified crucial theological problems related to the Johannine literary style just mentioned when he said:

> The *anachronism* of having Jesus during His public ministry discourse on the issues which divided the community of the Beloved Disciple from the synagogue and from the Johannine dissidents *took narrative Christology about as far as it could go as a literary form and probably further than it ought to have gone;* for, what the resulting portrait of Jesus' public ministry gains in doctrinal depth through this literary strategy,

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Name of God—Why the Bible's Authors Are Not Who we Think They Are (New York: Oxford, 2012), 119-133.

> it loses proportionally in historical verisimilitude.[9]

In another place, Gelpi remarked:

> One may in this context also conclude that, when the Beloved Disciple chose to endow Jesus' mind with privileged knowledge of the goings on in heaven, he was experiencing the limitations of doing doctrinal theology in a narrative context rather than drawing an historical portrait of Jesus' personal religious experience.[10]

Those remarks from Gelpi and their significance will be clarified further below.

John and Ongoing Conversion

Another more serious theological problem to be addressed concerns the relationship of the Fourth Gospel to what the same Gelpi calls "Christological knowing."[11] In this context, "Christological knowing" refers to the process of being conformed to Jesus Christ in faith through the power of the Holy Spirit. It can, therefore, be another way of describing *the process of conversion* (both initial and ongoing), a task that is frequently presented as a lifelong goal of Christian discipleship. One must also add that conversion, following the theologian Bernard Lonergan's famous hermeneutical principle, should be considered the infallible mark of the authenticity of any

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[9] Donald Gelpi, *Encountering Jesus Christ: Rethinking Christological Faith and Commitment* (Berkeley, Spring Semester 2004), 322. This was a summarized form of Gelpi's Christological trilogy *The Firstborn of Many* made into a reader for use of students. Emphases in the original.

[10] Gelpi, *Encountering Jesus Christ,* 351.

[11] Donald Gelpi, *The Firstborn of Many: A Christology for Converting Christians*, (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2001), 3:23.

doctrine. In other words, any authentic Christian doctrine must necessarily lead to conversion. The evaluation of whether any given teaching enhances true conversion must therefore play a major role in any integral theological enterprise.[12]

If we apply that definition of Christological knowing to the Johannine gospel or—to make it more person-oriented—to the author (whether individual or corporate) of the Fourth Gospel, *we are sometimes left wondering as to how far John himself has really advanced in conversion* when his Gospel has unloving; actually, even shockingly hateful overtones towards the presumed adversaries of his community who are frequently and sweepingly termed simply as "the Jews" (see, for example, John 8:44).

For all the Johannine body of writings' (that is, the Gospel and letters of John) emphasis on love and loving others (see, for example, John 13:34 or 1 John 4:8 among many others), the—dare I suggest—scandalous thing about it is that the love that is frequently mentioned therein, upon deeper historical scrutiny, apparently refers primarily to insiders of the community.[13] To put it bluntly, it is as if John were saying, "Brothers and sisters, love your fellow Jesus-followers. You can dislike and disdain the enemies of our community though."

If that is true, is that not merely reflective of very human tendencies that—to use Donald Gelpi's expressions—"ordinarily leave out enemies, aliens, and

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[12] Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology,* 2nd ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990), 268.

[13] See, for example, Raymond E. Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple: The Life, Loves, and Hates of an Individual Church in New Testament Times* (New York, Mahwah: Paulist, 1979), 132, where he says, "For the author of the Epistles, 'brethren' were those members of the Johannine community who were in communion (*koinonia*) with him and who accepted his interpretation of the Johannine Gospel."

strangers?"[14] How can that conform, then, to a true conversion (or—as Gelpi expressed it—"Christological knowing"), a conversion that should foster "a universalized love which excludes no one in principle and which even includes one's enemies" in fidelity to Jesus' injunction to love [*even*] our enemies (Matt 5:44; Luke 6:27)?[15]

At this juncture, it is useful to include a lengthy quote from the late British New Testament scholar Maurice Casey found at the conclusion of a book intriguingly titled, *Is John's Gospel True?*. The points Casey makes, merit our careful attention because they contain practically all the issues which many find problematic about the Fourth Gospel at the level of history and ethical integrity.

Casey states:

> "Pilate said to him, What is Truth?" (John 19:38). The question Pilate never asked has reverberated down the centuries. For most of this time, the Gospel attributed to John has held an honored place in Christian scripture. This position must now be questioned, for two related reasons. One is that much of it is not historically true. The second reason is the more devastating. This Gospel is profoundly anti-Jewish. What is worse, these two points are closely related. The historically inaccurate information contained in this document is a product of the serious quarrel between the Johannine community and the Jewish community. Consequently, it gives an un-Jewish picture of Jesus, and a hostile picture of "the Jews." It follows that this document embodies a basic rejection of the Jewish identity of Jesus and his earliest followers. Consequently, its high Christology cannot be regarded as genuine insight into his real significance. Moreover,

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[14] Gelpi, *The Firstborn of Many*, 3:508.
[15] Gelpi, *The Firstborn of Many*, 3:503.

> this document's rejection of "the Jews" is not just an abstract error. Present in a sacred text, it is liable to fuel prejudice, and to be acted on. The history of Christian anti-Semitism shows how serious is the prejudice which it can fuel. The fourth Gospel's presentation of Jesus' ministry is therefore not merely inaccurate, but also morally dubious.[16]

This quote, and the general argument of the book from which it is taken, will make it clear that Casey operates on the notion that the Gospel of John should not have an honored status in scripture because it cannot be considered as offering a genuine insight into the true identity of Jesus. His reason? Simply put, the Fourth Gospel's presentation of Jesus is neither historically true nor ethically sound (because of its anti-Jewish character).

It must be noted though that Casey does not apparently subscribe to Jesus' divinity, as is made clear by a remark he makes in an earlier work where he says that if "the standard picture of Jesus as incarnate and divine is too much a part of the churches' identity to be shifted, official Christianity will become increasingly a matter of belief in the impossible."[17] Nevertheless, as mentioned above, the questions about John's gospel that Casey raises should be taken seriously because they are the very same issues that confront Christians whenever they read this Gospel.

The observations about John I have made up to this point, as well as Maurice Casey's remarks have hopefully made it clear that there are indeed "shadows" or problems in the Fourth Gospel for someone who seeks to

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[16] Maurice Casey, *Is John's Gospel True?* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 218.

[17] Maurice Casey, *From Jewish Prophet to Gentile God: The Origins and Development of New Testament Christology* (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co./Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991), 178.

read it theologically as scripture. To recap, I have cited three thus far: the problem of the historicity of the Johannine portrait of Jesus; the problem of the retrojection of post-Easter traits to the figure of the pre-Easter Jesus; and the problem of John's hostility towards adversaries vis-à-vis the themes of loving our enemies and continual conversion. With the aim of dealing better with those issues, let me mention two other factors that bring the nature of these problems into sharper focus.

John and the Christian Imagination

The first factor is what we already mentioned earlier as John's immense influence on the Christian imagination. The Fourth Gospel has been part of what Christians believe are divinely inspired writings for most of Christianity's history. Being in the canon does not necessarily mean exercising a dominant influence on the Christian psyche, as some canonical books have arguably exerted only a peripheral influence on the general Christian imagination. However, in the case of John's gospel, it has, without question, played a dominant role in shaping the average Christian's image of Jesus.

The experience of the late New Testament scholar Marcus Borg with the Gospel of John shows that clearly. In his book, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time,* Borg recounts that in the seminary, one of the things that he learned was that "the contrast between the synoptic and Johannine images of Jesus is so great that one of them must be nonhistorical." That discovery, however, shattered a world that Borg had previously believed in fervently:

> Indeed, the linkage between John's gospel and the popular image of Jesus was so strong that I remember becoming angry at John when I first became aware that its account was largely nonhistorical. I saw John as

> containing a distorted image of Jesus, an image I had spent years trying to believe in. I would have been happy to have John excised from the New Testament.[18]

From Borg's experience (which is not rare), we can see clearly to what extent the popular Christian image of Jesus has been and continues to be influenced by John's portrayal of Jesus. John's gospel is held in such reverence in the popular Christian imagination that learning for the first time about the nonhistorical aspects of John's portrayal of Jesus can be an experience akin to "losing one's (Christian) innocence" for many. This may be the reason why some church leaders/teachers feel that it is their duty to defend the overall historicity of John's depiction of Jesus, even though this goes against the opinion of a significant number of critical biblical scholars.

Besides, as scripture, the Gospel of John has been thought of as containing religious truth. "Truth" as a concept may have different shades of meaning, but because the general Western(ized) mentality has been dominated by historical consciousness since the Enlightenment, truth generally includes the notion of "historical truth" for contemporary Western(ized) minds. Consequently, when the historicity of something thought of as containing profound religious truth (for example, the Gospels) is disputed and declared as historically untrue in a public forum, it is not uncommon to have a backlash against such an opinion from more vocal but often uninformed and naïve believers. That is an indication that, to many contemporary believers, disputing historical facticity still generally means disputing the truthful character of something. It still

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[18] Marcus Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time: The Historical Jesus & the Heart of Contemporary Faith* (New York: Harper, 1994), 11.

takes some effort for us who have been raised with historical consciousness to wrap our minds around the fact that truth cannot always be equated with historical veracity.

The abovementioned Casey's rejection of John is likewise based largely on—what he considers—John's nonhistorical facets. He maintains that the nonhistorical character of John is proven in that the picture of Jesus therein—a Jesus constantly in conflict with "the Jews"—makes Jesus profoundly non-Jewish or even anti-Jewish. What can be farther from the truth than a non-Jewish Jesus? The simple fact is that Jesus, as well as his earliest disciples, were all *very* Jewish in the wide spectrum of what being Jewish meant in the first century of the Common Era.[19]

It is fair to say that a significant number of Christians reject the abovementioned critical views of John and cling to a more or less literal interpretation of the Fourth Gospel (as if it were a video recording of history). Note though that I am not referring here to what can be called "the fundamentalist mind" (in whatever form it is found), which presents an altogether different problem and must be dealt with first and foremost at the level of fundamental concepts of revelation.[20] Fundamentalists conceive of revelation as truth that can be immutably and eternally enshrined in propositional fixity. In other words, they think that anything considered divinely revealed should be treated as universally valid and has

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[19] On this matter, see John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Volume III Companions and Competitors* (New York: Doubleday, 2001). See also Amy-Jill Levine, *The Misunderstood Jew: The Church and the Scandal of the Jewish Jesus* (New York: HarperOne, 2006), especially chapter one on Jesus and Judaism.

[20] On this issue vis-à-vis a mainline Christian position on the Bible (Roman Catholicism), see, for example, Ronald D. Witherup, *Biblical Fundamentalism: What Every Catholic Should Know* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2001).

no need of interpretation. This author's position is that revelation must be located in the events of—what is commonly known as—salvation *history*; most of all, in the event and person of Jesus Christ. However, historical events and statements *always need interpretation*. Since the notion of revelation as propositional fixity admits of no need for interpretation, it must be treated as fallacious.

Harmonizing John and the Synoptic Gospels

Another factor that exacerbates the problematic character of the Fourth Gospel is the common Christian practice of "harmonizing" John with the Synoptics. Again, I refer to Marcus Borg's autobiographical observations, which illustrate how many Christians think about the four gospels:

> Before becoming aware of all of this (the difference between Jesus in John and Jesus in the synoptic gospels), I had quite unreflectively combined what I heard about the Christ of faith with my image of Jesus as a historical figure…. The picture of Jesus in John is clearly quite different from the picture of Jesus in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, which are collectively known as the synoptic gospels…. In John, Jesus speaks as a divine person…. In the synoptic gospels, Jesus speaks very differently; his message is not about himself or his identity. Like most Christians, *I had simply harmonized these two different images*, and indeed had not really been aware of how different they are. I had assumed that *Jesus talked both as he does in John and as he does in the synoptic gospels*.[21]

However, when one begins to read and compare John

[21] Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time,* 10-11. Emphases added.

and the Synoptics in a critical way, one discovers "the contrast between the Synoptic and Johannine images of Jesus is so great that one of them must be nonhistorical."[22] The common practice of harmonizing John with the Synoptics can, therefore, be quite problematic. Moreover, it can exacerbate the misunderstanding about Jesus' humanity and divinity in the common Christian mind.

Suggestions to Deal with John's Shadow Aspects

Dealing with the Problem of Historicity in John

Let us now deal more systematically with the problems mentioned above, the first of which is the question of John's historicity.

As mentioned, the highly developed Christology of the Fourth Gospel—seen above all in the portrayal of Jesus as somehow more of a divine figure—is an important clue to the common assessment that John's gospel is more concerned with conveying the Johannine community's faith about Jesus Christ, rather than stating historical reminiscences of him.[23] One of the Gospel's major concerns is the identity of Jesus and, concomitantly, we can say that John is deeply concerned about doctrinal matters, mainly, questions on whether readers accept Jesus *as the Son of God, as one with the Father, as "the Word made flesh,"* often interpreted in the historical Christian tradition as "God incarnate on earth." In line with that, one finds the Johannine Jesus constantly trying to clarify to the different people he encounters in the Gospel storyline who he is and what characterizes his

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[22] Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time,* 11.

[23] Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, 16. See also Marcus Borg, *Reading the Bible Again for the First Time* (New York: Harper, 2001), 202-4, 217-18.

relationship to the one referred to as YHWH in the tradition of Israel.

As Marcus Borg learned in seminary, a significant amount of critical scholarship has called this Johannine portrayal of Jesus into question from the historical point of view. It must be added that this is not a recent discovery but a notion (maybe more of a consensus among mainline biblical scholars) that has been around in academic circles for quite a long time now. It is safe to say that the Jesus who walked the roads of Palestine two thousand years ago simply *did not overly concern himself* (not as much as John leads us to believe at least) with *explaining explicitly* to his audiences' questions of who he was and what his relationship with the God of Israel consisted of. Practically all scholars are agreed that the historical Jesus' dominant concern was not so much himself as "the reign of God" (Gk., *basileia tou theou*), so much so that the theologian Karl Rahner could aver, "Jesus preached the Kingdom of God, not himself."[24]

I do not want to create a false dichotomy between the theme of "God's Kingdom" and its relationship with the identity of Jesus who proclaimed its coming. My own position is that, yes, the historical Jesus was also concerned about questions regarding the identity of the kingdom's proclaimer (namely, himself) and what role the proclaimer plays in the realization of the kingdom. However, the Synoptic Gospels are closer to history when they present Jesus as more nuanced and subtle in how he made reference to his own role in the kingdom. The Jesus of John, who does not even talk of the "kingdom of God" (there is one exception to this in John 3:3 where the "kingdom of God" is spiritualized) but engages in long discourses about his own identity, is simply wanting in historical verisimilitude. In other words, the flesh-and-

[24] Karl Rahner and W. Thüssin, *Christologie systematisch und exegetisch* (Freiburg: Herder, 1972), 34.

blood Jesus could not have spoken in exactly the way in which it is presented in the Fourth Gospel.

In John, Jesus is—to use Casey's description—"clearly God, pre-existent and incarnate, walking this earth expounding the relationship between himself, the Son, and the Father. Moreover, salvation is dependent on acceptance of himself as the Son – acceptance of the Father is not enough."[25] Such an image of Jesus, which is generally not found (at least not as explicitly as in John) in the Synoptic Gospels, is comprehensible only if one maintains that the portrayal of Jesus in John is mainly (albeit not completely) a secondary and later development. That is, it is an expression of the early Christian communities' developing theological thinking about their growing conviction of the lofty stature of Jesus Christ.

Since John's concern is to proclaim that Jesus should be identified as closely as possible with God, the Father, and divinity itself,[26] he "retrojects" things about Jesus (which were fully revealed to the disciples only in their experience of the resurrection of their rabbi-now-revealed more clearly-as-the-Christ) to the figure of Jesus (before his death) in the Gospel storyline. We can, therefore, say that the figure we find in John's Gospel *is by and large the risen Christ retrojected to the gospel character of Jesus ministering in Palestine before his death*.

Now, this is mind-boggling to contemporary people who have had a historically conscious way of looking at

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[25] Casey, *Is John's Gospel True?,* 30.

[26] "Divinity" here, it must be mentioned, has to be understood critically. John's concern with Jesus' divinity cannot be simply identified with how Jesus' divinity was defined later on in Christian history. A helpful work to consult on this matter through the lens of the theme "Worship of Jesus in Early Christianity" is James D.G. Dunn, *Did the First Christians Worship Jesus? The New Testament Evidence* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 141-51.

things inculcated in them from a very young age. As seen in Borg's experience mentioned above, John's style of retrojecting the Christ of the paschal mystery to the pre-Easter figure seems quite confusing to the historically conscious mind of the contemporary believer-reader. Let me propose some strategies to deal with this problem.

In the first place, the retrojective style of John's portrayal of Jesus must be thoroughly explained. At the same time, it must be maintained that Jesus, in his ministry, was not some docetic figure who only pretended or seemed to be human. No, he was fully human! Jesus must be presented first—in the words of Gelpi—as a "finite, developing human social experience" (a fully social human being) so as to avoid any docetic and, therefore, fallacious image of Jesus.[27] If we explain Jesus' humanity using, as dominant image, the idea that, in becoming human, God "self-emptied" (a notion that can be found in Phil 2:7 where the Greek word *kenosis* is used to describe Jesus: how although "in the form of God," [he] *self-emptied* to take the form of a "slave," that is, humanity). Using *kenosis* as image then, the Son's humanity could be explained thus: "The *kenosis* of the Son of God means that in everything which concerns Jesus of Nazareth, the Word of God *freely chose to act and suffer strictly within the limits of His finite, developing human experience*."[28]

One can then go on to explain the paschal mystery of the death and resurrection of Jesus and, in that context, one can now include a presentation of John's portrayal of Jesus *as how some early Christians experienced the resurrected Christ*. Thus, when one reads, for instance, in John's Gospel that Jesus says, "I am the bread of life" (John 6:35), or "I am the light of the world" (John 8:12), one can understand these statements as how some early

[27] Gelpi, *The Firstborn of Many*, 3:248.
[28] Gelpi, *The Firstborn of Many*, 3:314. Emphasis added.

Christians attributed these titles to Jesus and *put them in the mouth of the character of Jesus in John's Gospel* in order to express how they experienced him as giving them nourishment or leading them out of darkness into light although these words may not have been statements that go back to the historical Jesus himself. Using Paul Ricoeur's expression, Borg terms this attitude a "postcritical naiveté." In contrast to a precritical naiveté, which believes as literally true all that is written in the Gospels, a reading of the Gospel of John with a postcritical naiveté is aware of the rich symbolism in John's Gospel and does not concern itself so much with whether such an event happened in history or not, whether such words were spoken historically by Jesus or not, but is more intent on discovering what "intrinsic metaphorical meanings (meaningful for our lives today)" are embedded in the different accounts of John's gospel.[29]

John's Hostility towards His Community's Adversaries

The Fourth Gospel has been frequently cited as inimical to the group referred to as *hoi Ioudaioi* (still commonly translated as "the Jews") in this gospel.[30] To illustrate, the term "Jews" is used sixteen times in Mark,

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[29] Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, 17.

[30] *Ioudaioi*. This is a plural form in the Greek (the singular is *ioudaios*) and it is still commonly translated into English as "the Jews." There seems to be a growing movement to stop translating this term as "Jews" and use instead the term "Judeans" which refers to the people of the southern part of Palestine in Jesus's day. Thus, one can avoid a general anti-Jewish sentiment. For a more detailed explanation of the different nuances of *ioudaioi* and the various issues related with translating it, confer Joshua Garroway, "Ioudaios" in *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*. Second Edition, ed. by Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011, 2017) 596-599.

but a whopping seventy-one times in John, many of them with a negative, hostile meaning. In fact, "the Jews" in John are so identified with unbelieving hostility towards Jesus and his message that Early Christianity scholar Elaine Pagels can claim that John tells Jesus' story as a cosmic conflict between light and darkness, between Jesus' followers and the sinful opposition of the offspring of Satan, the latter being identified with "the Jews" (see John 8:44). In short, the Jews in John—according to the same Pagels—are a symbol of "all evil."[31]

As we have seen above, Casey actually makes John's anti-Jewish character the second major reason for rejecting it as a distortion of the nature of Jesus' person and message. Theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether states that in the Gospel of John, "the philosophical incorporation of anti-Judaic midrash reaches its highest development in the New Testament." According to her, *the proclamation of Jesus as divine demanded, as foil, a group that would reject the claim*. That group is what the Gospel of John calls "the Jews." Rejection of Jesus' messianic claims and his divinity by this group becomes, as it were, "the left hand of Christology."[32] We can understand from that the reason why James Carroll, in his popular history of the relationship of the Church with

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[31] Elaine Pagels, *The Origin of Satan* (New York: Vintage, 1996), 105. This statement has to be tempered by the acknowledgment that not all uses of the term "the Jews" are unilaterally negative in the Fourth Gospel. Indeed, in some cases, there is evidence of a more divided response to Jesus, not excluding an "initially positive response" (see for example, 8:31, 10:19-21, 11:45, 12:9.) as observed by Andrew Lincoln in his *The Gospel according to St. John* (Black's New Testament Commentaries) (New York: Continuum, 2005), 71. See also Paul Anderson, *The Riddles of the Fourth Gospel*, 38-39, to see the whole range of uses (positive, neutral, and negative) of the term "the Jews."

[32] Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Faith and Fratricide: The Theological Roots of Anti-Semitism* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1974), 111.

the Jews, has this sobering conclusion: "Christology itself is a source of Christian contempt for the Jews."[33]

Let us endeavor to put the Johannine gospel's relationship to the Jews in a better perspective. The first factor to note is that John's pejorative reference to the enemies of Jesus as "the Jews" *must be firmly set against the background of the Johannine community's difficult relationship with the synagogue*. In the history of Johannine scholarship, many scholars have explained it in the following way: The Johannine community seemed to have been estranged from the Jewish synagogue, its parent institution,[34] at some point in its history, apparently for placing Jesus, identified as "Logos," in a daringly close association with YHWH ("the Father" in John) to the extent that some form of "divinity" or equality with the Father could already be ascribed to him. This was a belief however that had, in the final analysis, put John's community outside of the acceptable parameters of Jewish monotheistic faith.[35] Regarding

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[33] James Carroll, *Constantine's Sword: The Church and the Jews* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co, 2001), 102.

[34] The term *aposunagōgos* (Gk., literally "excluded from the sacred assembly/synagogue" or, more commonly, "excommunicated") is found in John 9:22, 12:42, 16:2.

[35] See for example Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple,* 66-69. See also: Lincoln, *The Gospel according to St. John*, 82-89; and, more recently, Francis Moloney, "John," in *The Paulist Biblical Commentary,* ed. by José Enrique Aguilar Chiu and others (New York/Mawhah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2018), 1106; also Urban C. Von Wahlde, "John, in *The Jerome Biblical Commentary for the Twenty-First Century*, Third Fully Revised Edition, edited by John J. Collins and others (London: T&T Clark, 2022), 1382. This is traditionally called the "expulsion from the synagogue" theory. One must take note though that, more recently, an increasing number of scholars clarify that a simplistic iteration of this theory concerning the Johannine community *does not do justice* to the complexity of the problem of explaining the apparent anti-Jewish passages and sentiments in the Gospel of John. For a more sophisticated nuancing of this phenomenon, consult, for example, Ruth Sheridan, "Johannine

this matter, traditionally called the Johannine community's "expulsion from the synagogue" in Johannine scholarship, Jewish New Testament scholar Adele Reinhartz's balanced and nuanced way of describing it without using the traditional "expulsion from the synagogue" language is worth quoting in full.

> John's harsh statements about "the Jews" should be understood as part of the author's process of self-definition, which required the drawing of a boundary between the followers of Jesus and Jews and Judaism. This distancing may have been particularly important if the ethnic composition of the Johannine community included Jews, Samaritans, and Gentiles … This explanation does not excuse the Gospel's hostile rhetoric but it may make it possible for readers to understand the narrative's place in the process by which Christianity became a separate religion, to appreciate the beauty of its language, and to recognize the spiritual power that it continues to have in the lives of many of its Christian readers.[36]

In light of the discussions above, one can see that the term "the Jews" in John has both a historical and symbolic meaning. Historically, it refers to some hostile religious figures with authority within Palestinian Judaism who had a role in the condemnation and death of Jesus. We should keep in mind though that symbolically "the Jews" in John arguably *does not primarily refer to Jewishness but rather to unbelieving hostility* on the part of persons or groups who refuse to

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Sectarianism: A Category Now Defunct?" in *The Origins of John's Gospel*, ed. Stanley E. Porter and Hughson T. Ong (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 156. 159, 163.

[36] Adele Reinhartz, "John," in *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, 2nd fully revised and expanded edition, edited by Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011, 2017), 173.

believe in what the Johannine community proclaimed about Jesus.[37] Nevertheless, in Christian history, the term has unfortunately invited anti-Jewish sentiments and been the cause of countless terrible acts committed against Jews. *When the original context of its use is firmly kept in mind, it becomes clear that the term does not refer to all Jewish people*. One can even argue that John extends it to include Christian dissidents, as when mention is made, for example in John 8:31, of Jews "who had believed" in Jesus.[38]

Theologically speaking, however, when one attempts to situate this theme of "John and the Jews" in the context of knowing and following Christ and how such a discipleship should help Christians continually in conversion to love others in a more universal way, *one realizes keenly that the Fourth Gospel does seem to have problems in its attitude towards its adversaries*. This is a serious issue that has yet to be resolved in a satisfactory way.

To recap, it seems obvious that in the Johannine community, true faith in Jesus meant that one had also to accept certain doctrinal beliefs about Jesus (his being the "Logos", his being one with the Father, etc.) which were deemed to be correct (=orthodox) teaching. In Gelpi's more technical yet theologically elegant language, in John's community, heterodoxy (incorrect belief) forced the community to realize that "doctrinal beliefs give definite shape to religious practices," that "the deed of faith . . . encompasses not just Christian moral striving

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[37] See Gelpi, *The Firstborn of Many,* 3:49.

[38] NRSV translation. See also Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple*, 78-81. A more recent excellent exposition of this theme can be found in Adele Reinhartz, "The Jews of the Fourth Gospel," in *The Oxford Handbook of Johannine Studies*, edited by Judith Lieu and Martinus C. de Boer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 121-137. The bibliography of this article is particularly noteworthy.

but doctrinal assent as well" and that "Christian orthopraxis expands to include Christian orthodoxy."[39] Even so, the crucial question is: *Does that make hostility towards adversaries, who do not believe what the Johannine community believed, justifiable?* If we say "yes," then the next burning question is: *Is this attitude not the root of the pernicious principle, "Error has no rights"*?

Some Insights from the Social Sciences

These questions could very well be posing interrogatives anachronistically and, therefore, unfairly. Scholars have pointed out that in the Mediterranean world of the early Christians, vigorous debating between individuals or groups with opposing views (which might even appear to contemporary Western[ized] people as an extremely offensive process of insulting one another) was a fairly common cultural practice rooted in the concepts of honor and shame. Those debates/arguments between individuals or groups involved a challenge from a party and a corresponding response by the challenged one. These dynamics were necessary in order to preserve or enhance the honor of one's clan or to avoid shame for one's group of affiliation. The hostility that we find in the Fourth Gospel towards its adversaries might have been a part of such dynamics which seem so offensive to us now but were more acceptable in that world as part of the encounters of daily social life.[40]

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[39] Gelpi, *The Firstborn of Many*, 3:50-51.

[40] Joseph Plevnik, "Honor/Shame," in *Handbook of Biblical Social Values,* eds. John Pilch and Bruce Malina (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1998), 106-15. See also the sections on Challenge and Riposte in Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary on the Gospel of John* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 146-51.

Besides, the world of first century Judaism was immensely complex and diversified. There were many groups within Judaism and practically all of them were, as it were, jostling with each other as to which was the best way to live out the covenant with the one God of Israel.[41] The conflicts of the earliest Christian communities (among which can be traced the genesis of the Johannine community) with its opponents (whoever they were) must be seen in this background. Arguments between those who believed in Jesus as the Messiah sent from God and the larger Jewish community which rejected this claim, were, at the earliest stage, intra-Jewish affairs. Seen in the context of the wider Roman Empire, Judaism was a "licit" religion. Being a part of a recognized religion (although Judaism was also marginalized in some ways like the earliest Christian communities), therefore, gave one's group some measure of legitimacy in the empire's overall social structure. John's community should also be situated in this context so that its polemic against its adversaries may be understood better. As Gelpi explains, the harshness with which John addresses its adversaries somehow betrays its deep anxiety and fierce anger at being expelled from a "recognized" religion.[42] We can see then that the small Johannine community was fighting for its survival against the bigger and long recognized institution of the synagogue. In such a fight, harsh polemics on the part of

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[41] For further reading on this matter, I suggest Bruce Chilton and Jacob Neusner, *Judaism in the New Testament: Practices and Beliefs* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 1-18. Also, Hershel Shanks, ed., *Christianity and Rabbinic Judaism: A Parallel History of Their Origins and Early Development* (Washington, DC: Biblical Archeological Society, 1992), particularly, 1-39, 125-49, 305-325. A succinct survey can also be found in Stephen L. Harris, "The Diverse World of First-Century Judaism," in *The New Testament: A Student's Introduction,* 7th ed. (New York: McGraw Hill, 2012), 42-66.

[42] Gelpi, *The Firstborn of Many*, 3:107.

the weakling (originally the Johannine community) *would not have done much real damage* to its named opponents. All that changed, however, when Christianity became the official religion of the post-Constantinian Roman Empire in 380 CE. Words that were once uttered by a small insignificant community against a larger, more established one were now "canonized" as part of the sacred scriptures of a powerful imperial church. Ultimately, this development had deadly consequences for the named adversaries—the Jews.

At this point, I do not think that the theological problem we are treating here (that of John's hostility towards outsiders as being against true Christian discipleship and against Jesus' commandment to love one's enemies [e.g., Luke 6:27]) has been resolved in a satisfactory way. All we have done is put the problem in a better perspective by identifying factors that could help us to understand the existence of such a hostility in John towards his adversaries.

A Melioristic Morality of Ideals

It remains to be seen if this problem can ever be completely solved. No amount of contextualizing can change the fact that in John there is a harshness towards the community's enemies which, to be blunt, goes against true Christian discipleship and, ultimately, against what Jesus commanded to his disciples in Matt 5:44/Luke 6:27 when he says, "Love your enemies." The final card, as it were, that could be drawn from the pack to attempt a solution to this serious problem is what Gelpi terms "a melioristic morality of ideals."[43] That works in the following way.

Jesus makes absolute and ultimate claims that orient

[43] Gelpi, *The Firstborn of Many,* 2:553-68.

his disciples' consciences. These claims, since they are never perfectly realized in any given human reality, can be said to be "utopian" ideals. A melioristic morality of ideals seeks to mediate between reality and ideal. It refers to the fact that while Jesus never backpedaled with respect to the demanding ideals of the reign of God that he preached and lived himself, he was also constantly aware of and assumed his disciples' imperfections in his relationship with them. Therefore, he never demanded instant perfection either. On the contrary, Jesus dealt patiently and lovingly with human frailty and sinfulness, and he also spurred people on to move patiently and lovingly towards a greater realization (ongoing development) of the demanding ideals of God's reign.

If we apply that to John's gospel and to the problem of its hostility to adversaries, we can see that all the injunctions to love in John are, of course, valid and wonderful expressions of the utopian ideals of God's kingdom which Jesus preached and lived. On the other hand, John's community found itself in adversarial relationships with other groups and, in the process of clarifying its faith vis-à-vis such groups, had unfortunately taken some unloving attitudes towards them. *This was the reality of the Johannine community which fell short of Jesus' command to love even our enemies*. From what has been mentioned about the melioristic morality of ideals, we could read the Fourth Gospel as containing *both ideal and reality*. Christians can make the ideals their own; they should also, however, own the reality expressed in John not only as telling them about the Johannine community's adversarial situations but likewise about their very own present-day conflicts. They can then commit themselves to a *melioristic* achievement of the ideal of love of which the Gospel and letters of John so eloquently express.

"Intuition" and "Inference" Applied to the Gospels

The terms "ambivalence" and "ambiguity" are applied to John in this study because the Fourth Gospel clearly has both shadows and lights. Now that we've identified John's shadow sides, let us move to—what I consider—a bright light found therein.

We begin by describing a conceptual framework that could be useful for our purposes here. Donald Gelpi, who has been our guide in many ways thus far, insightfully reminds us to distinguish between "intuitive" and "inferential" ways of grasping reality. According to what he terms "the metaphysics of experience" (originally from the American philosopher Charles Peirce), the human mind grasps reality both intuitively and inferentially in that order.

Intuition is a kind of knowledge "mediated by perceptions and images." When realities have been grasped intuitively, humans sometimes also proceed to "endow it [the knowledge] with logical precision." That *further endowing of intuitively grasped realities* with logical exactness and rigor refers to inference. Most people, however, "live life largely at the level of intuition and intuitive deliberation and only rarely on the basis of logical inference alone." Whereas intuitive thinking gives us a broad picture of reality; inferential thinking makes us see details of the broad picture with enhanced precision.[44]

When we apply the distinction between intuition and inference to how Jesus Christ has been grasped by Christians from the dawn of Christianity and through its twenty-one centuries of history up to the present day, we realize that the earliest period of Christianity was marked more by an intuitive effort to grasp the person of

[44] Gelpi, *The Firstborn of Many*, 3:283-84.

Jesus. As time went on, however, a purely intuitive understanding of Jesus was felt to be wanting and various efforts were made for the purpose of endowing this intuitive perception with greater logical precision and clarity.

Intuition's preferred mode of communication can be said to be the narrative form; inference, on the other hand, prefers doctrinal discourse. Applied to the relation between the Synoptic Gospels and John, these "preferred modes" make us understand many key factors which, in turn, help us to explain the particular characteristics of the Synoptics and John. First of all, both the Synoptics and John are primarily narrative Christologies (i.e., they describe Jesus in story form). But the difference between them lies in different emphases which are *rooted in the distinction between intuitive and inferential*. In the Synoptic Gospels, one sees a portrayal of Jesus which is more intuitive in character because it appeals more to the imagination and other intuitive faculties of humans. In John, there is a marked effort *to deal inferentially* with whom Jesus was and what his relationship was with the being known as YHWH in the Jewish Scriptures. Although both the Synoptics and John have doctrinal concerns, the Synoptics focus on Christian practice, while John focuses on and switches the rhetorical emphasis (of the narrative) to the doctrinal context of the figure of Jesus.

John's Enduring Value: Light amidst the Shadows

These differences in focus, emphasis, and narrative strategy are rooted in the particular situations in which the different Christian communities that produced the gospels found themselves. To explain those particular situations is a major task of historical-critical and also social-science based biblical scholarship. In light of

Gelpi's points on intuition and inference applied to John, one can see with fascination a trajectory from the Synoptics (which were composed earlier) to John, which shows how the human mind moves from intuition to inference with regard to a figure who—with his life and message, but especially through the events that Christians refer to as the paschal mystery—made such a great impact on the people who encountered him, either physically or through the action of the divine presence called the Holy Spirit.

When someone has such an impact on others (and, therefore, becomes crucially important for the people impacted), an intense effort is born on the part of those who receive the impact to understand such a powerfully charismatic person—*first intuitively*. Inevitably though, that effort will *gradually be transformed into an inferential search to apprehend this person in a deeper and more precise way*. Therein lies one bright light to be found in John: The Fourth Gospel is an eloquent and powerful witness to the fact that the flesh-and-blood Jesus himself, his memory, and his continuous presence through the Holy Spirit, were all cumulatively such a life-transforming and life-giving event for the early Christians that *narrative/intuitive forms of portraying him were felt to be wanting* at a certain point in their history. Hence, we have the drive to understand this Jesus further in a doctrinal/inferential mode, the beginnings of which we can already see in the Fourth Gospel.

The Gospel of John is one strong proof of how significantly (both the historical and the revered/worshipped-in-faith) Jesus, the Christ, impacted people. Although the Fourth Gospel might not be the best source for information on the historical Jesus (despite having valuable historical nuggets as mentioned above), it is, however, an amazing mirror of the tremendous

significance that Jesus continued to have after his death on generations of people who experienced and believed that he was alive, present, and active among them. In effect, the early Christian communities came to believe that he was the unique way that led to God (John 14:6) and also the perfect embodiment of the Father, so much so that whoever saw Jesus also saw the Father himself (John 12:45).

In light of the above discussions, we have to note though that there are limits to narrative language. Recall that this is the kind of language that is used in the Synoptic Gospels. Narrative language is not enough to express the more profound doctrinal notions that early Christians came to believe about Jesus later on in Christianity's history. At this point we can also see that the Fourth Gospel lies *precisely on the border of intuitive and inferential modes of discourse*. The Fourth Gospel's focus is on doctrinal issues (to express profound *inferential convictions* about Jesus), yet *the medium it uses is still the one preferred by intuitive thinking—narrative*. There lies the rub! Gelpi reminds us, "Narrative Christology eschews logical thinking for intuitive thinking."[45] We have in John, therefore, an originally intuitive tool that he tried to use to convey inferential matters. John raises "a speculative question which narrative theology itself cannot solve."[46] For that reason, the problem of "the communication of traits" (*communicatio idiomatum*,[47] the predication of divine traits to the human Jesus and vice-versa) appear in John, a problem that would take Christianity centuries to resolve. Those are the problems that Gelpi mainly refers

[45] Gelpi, *The Firstborn of Many*, 3:221.

[46] Gelpi, *The Firstborn of Many*, 3:221. Emphasis added.

[47] J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (London: A & C Black, 1965), 143. See also Richard McBrien, ed., "*communicatio idiomatum*" in *Encyclopedia of Catholicism* (New York: Harper, 1995), 336-37.

to when he says that John took "narrative Christology further than it ought to have gone."[48]

There is a corollary to what has been referred to above as the need felt by early Christians to switch to inferential mode in describing Jesus: The content of this inferential mode in its primary stage was not only about Jesus himself. It also involved the one Jesus called "*Abba*" (an intimate Jewish way of addressing one's father), as well as the entity he referred to as "the Breath" (John 20:22, commonly known as "Holy Spirit"). It must be pointed out that the inferential mode of expressing who Jesus was necessarily involved an exposition, mainly through discourse, of Jesus' relationship with the Father and with the Spirit. This is a second major light that can be seen in John: It is a rich source of trinitarian reflection. It is, therefore, no accident that the Christian teaching on the Trinity relies heavily on the Fourth Gospel to provide its scriptural authority.

Concluding Assessment

Here, we are at the end of this study, and it is time to ask: Have we achieved the goals proposed at the outset? At this point, we can say that we are more aware of the different problematic facets of the Fourth Gospel. At the same time, we now have, it is hoped, a better ability to understand and contextualize them. We have also come up with several strategies that provide, if not a perfect resolution to the problems pointed out above, at least partial ones. Furthermore, we are also more appreciative of some lights to be found in John which are not in the Synoptic Gospels. With that new appreciation, we can better link the intuitive New Testament Christological insights with the more inferential Christological thinking

[48] Gelpi, *Encountering Jesus Christ,* 350-51.

that would more and more play a dominant role in post-New Testament times.

Let us recap by giving responses to the queries we posed at the very beginning.

Question #1: Why is John's Jesus in certain aspects significantly different from the Synoptics' portrayal of him?
Lessons Learned: John's Jesus is a radical interpretation of the figure of Jesus that is greatly influenced by things Christians came to believe because of their faith in the glorious, risen Jesus—a figure that, they believed, should be associated as closely as possible with God, the Father. This later, more divinized image of Jesus was "retrojected" to the figure of Jesus living his public life before his death in the Fourth Gospel's storyline.

Question #2: Why is it that the "Jews" are often the villains in John when Jesus, his family, and his earliest disciples were all first century CE Jews themselves?
Lessons Learned: John's community (for whom and probably by whom the gospel was ultimately written) found itself later on in an adversarial relationship with its Jewish compatriots and with the institution of the synagogue. This stormy relationship is the immediate context of the practice in John of identifying "the Jews" with what John's community came to consider one of the greatest sins—non-acceptance of/unbelief in the person of Jesus as the perfect embodiment of God on earth. Again, the Gospel of John retrojects its own conflicts to the figure of Jesus and his adversaries in the Gospel storyline.

Question #3: Why did John, chronologically the last canonical gospel to be written, become arguably the most influential and important gospel for much of Christianity's 2000+ year history, surpassing even the earlier-to-be-written Synoptic Gospels?
Lessons Learned: John's gospel shows us the immense impact Jesus continued to have on succeeding generations of

Christians. The proof is that by the late first century CE, Christians felt that a narrative and intuitive way of describing Jesus was no longer sufficient. A more inferential and doctrinal description of Jesus was also felt to be necessary. John's gospel is one such early expression of this experience. It excels in this quality far above the other canonical gospels. Since John identifies Jesus as closely as possible with God, it played a crucial role in the eventual declaration of Jesus as not only human but also divine, having the same essence as the Father (confer the Nicene Creed). Since this doctrine became the most important one in Christian history, John secured a place for itself as arguably the most important of the canonical gospels.

Acknowledgement

I have written this article in grateful remembrance of the late Donald Gelpi, S.J., who was my professor at the Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley, CA. Thank you, Don, for showing us, as a teacher and in your scholarly work, how putting the biblical text at the center of the theological task looks like.

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