

Did the Author of the Fourth Gospel Intend to Write History?

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Identifying the literary genre of any writing is critical to understanding what the author intends to convey and how they have conveyed it. Genre provides a literary context for the reader to better understand the material in front of them and how they should read it. We do not read poetry the same way we read the business section of the Wall Street Journal (WSJ). While both genres are equally legitimate, they are very different in the style in which they communicate and how they employ language. If we read the WSJ as if it was poetry, or we read a poem as if it was the WSJ, the chances are excellent that we will misunderstand and misinterpret the writing.

Regarding the Fourth Gospel (FG),¹ the issue of genre is especially serious, given the wide spectrum of reading strategies that have been adopted as a basis for interpreting its contents. Unfortunately, the relationship between the literary genre of a text and the potential historicity of its contents has been severely neglected in FG scholarship.² But evaluation of the FG's historical reliability cannot ignore its literary genre. Is the literary genre of the FG one that emphasizes history, or not, and what kind? Is the FG something akin to a biography of Jesus (which, on the surface, it appears to be), or is it about the later Johannine community, where a sectarian³ or allegorical 'two-level'

¹ Larry Hurtado objects to labeling the Gospel of John as the 'Fourth Gospel'. He rightly notes that John was not always fourth in order in the early church codices (e.g. it is the 2nd Gospel in Codex W). I continue to use the term to reflect its modern ordering in the canon, as well as to reflect the likely chronological order of original composition.

² In surveying the many 'recent' commentaries on the FG, one will labor to find any sustained discussion of genre, which strikes some of us as a rather breathtaking omission in developing a good interpretive framework. Thankfully, the tide at last seems to be turning. See especially the discussion on genre in Craig Keener, *The Gospel of John* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2003), 1:3-51.

³ Among the many works that take this posture, see Wayne Meeks, "The Man from Heaven in Johannine Sectarianism," *JBL* 91 (1972) 44-72; David Rensberger, *Johannine Faith and Liberating Community* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1988); Norman Petersen, *The Gospel of John and the Sociology of Light: Language and Characterization in the Fourth Gospel* (Valley Forge: Trinity Press International, 1993); John Painter, *The Quest for the Messiah* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1993); Bruce Malina and Richard Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary on the Gospel of John*

reading⁴ becomes more plausible? Put simply, did the FG's author,⁵ by virtue of the literary genre he chose to employ, intend to convey history in describing the actual events surrounding the historical Jesus, and would his original readers have expected to find history within the FG? Identifying the FG's genre will greatly help in answering this question.

We must concede that even if the literary genre of the FG indicates that the author *intended* to write history, this does not necessarily mean he did in fact accurately *record* history. Intentions and actualities can be different as we all know. But answering the genre question enables us to responsibly critique alternative readings that make the FG less about the historical Jesus and more about a late 1st century community of believers. It will also inform our own interpretive grid for reading the FG. If we know the FG's literary genre, it will better enable us to read the FG as the author intended it to be read. This is critical to proper interpretation and understanding.⁶

What's at Stake?

In 1968, J. Louis Martyn authored a book that set a dominant trajectory for FG interpretation among scholars that continues to this day.⁷ Martyn made an extensive case for a 'two-level' reading of the John 9 account of Jesus healing a blind man. As is, the story is about Jesus healing a blind man on the Sabbath, which resulted in the religious leaders interrogating this man and eventually tossing him out of the synagogue

(Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998); and Jerome Neyrey, *The Gospel of John* NCBC (Cambridge: Cambridge, 2007).

⁴ This reading was first proposed in earnest in the landmark work of J. Louis Martyn, *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1968). Raymond Brown largely came to sympathize with several key aspects of Martyn's approach and further solidified this reading's dominance in his *The Community of the Beloved Disciple* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979). All of the sectarian readings cited above draw in part upon Martyn's work as an assumed baseline for their own proposals.

⁵ I consider the Apostle John to be the author of the FG. While the relationship of genre to history in the FG does not require the Apostle John to be the author in order for the argument of this paper to be valid, the issue of eyewitness testimony in particular, which will be discussed below, strengthens the case for St. John's authorship of the FG.

⁶ In saying this, I am not oblivious to the massive hermeneutical shift ushered in by postmodern thought which has shifted the determining of authoritative meaning in a text away from the author and towards the reader. But neither the Bible nor the God who inspired it is the reader's peer. While there should and must be genuine interaction with the text by the reader, it remains the case that the original intent of the divinely-inspired author in communicating the original meaning in his text is foundational not only to proper interpretation, but in establishing the right relationship between the ultimate author (God), text ('infallible' – WCFI.5) and reader (fallible). For more on this, see Richard Pratt, *He Gave Us Stories* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1993), 32-37.

⁷ The previously mentioned *History and Theology*.

because the man would not deny the authenticity of the miracle. This seems fairly straightforward.

However, Martyn argued the story was really about the later Johannine community's painful and bitter interactions with, and ultimate separation from, the synagogue *in the late 1st century*. The story, in effect, was an allegory written by the community, for the community, about the community, which utilized and heavily manipulated a pre-existing but mostly non-historical Jesus tradition (1st level reading) as the gateway through which to tell its own contemporary story (2nd level and primary reading). For Martyn, the Jesus of this story allegorically represented a late 1st century charismatic teacher/leader of the Johannine community. The blind man represented a Jewish believer in Jesus and now member of the community with a continuing connection to the synagogue. The religious leaders represented the post-Temple (destroyed in 70AD) synagogue that was persecuting the Christian minority. And the pivotal verses that describe the man's expulsion from the synagogue (9.22, 34) relate to a late 1st century Jewish liturgical curse against the Christians which allegedly mandated that anyone confessing Jesus as the Christ was a heretic to be thrown out of the synagogue.⁸ For Martyn, the FG was mainly an allegorical history of the late 1st century Johannine community, rather than a historical narrative about the historical Jesus.

Martyn's theory set off a tsunami of FG interpretation that just assumed that the FG's story of Jesus was really a story about something else entirely that lied below the surface, behind the text. Such assumptions fundamentally influence the trajectory of how one reads and interprets the FG.⁹ In the vein of allegory, whatever true history about the real Jesus that may be contained in the FG is almost accidental and unimportant to the main purpose of the writing. In other words, readers who knew the FG was an allegory would not look to it to find an accurate historical account of the historical Jesus, because that's not the purpose of the allegory genre. In this vein, figures like Nicodemus (ch 3) and the Samaritan woman (ch 4) are non-historical representatives of other late 1st century groups that the alleged Johannine community had interactions with.¹⁰

⁸ This would be the much trumpeted *Birkat ha-Minim*. But this aspect of Martyn's theory has fallen on hard times of late, even among non-evangelicals. For a sample of works successfully challenging Martyn, see R. Kimmelman, *Birkat Ha-Minim and the Lack of Evidence for an Anti-Christian Jewish Prayer in Late Antiquity* in Vol. 2 of *Jewish and Christian Self Definition* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981), 226-244; S.T. Katz, "Issues in the Separation of Judaism and Christianity After 70 C.E.: A Reconsideration," *JBL* 103 (1984): 44-76; P.W. Van der Horst, "The *Birkat Ha-Minim* in Recent Research," *ET* 105 (1994): 367-368; and Robert Kysar, *Voyages with John* (Waco: Baylor, 2005), 237-245.

⁹ In the words of E.D. Hirsch, "An interpreter's preliminary generic conception of a text is constitutive of everything that he subsequently understands."

¹⁰ On Nicodemus representing 'secret believers' as a group as well as the 'worldly community', see especially Rensberger, *Johannine Faith*, 41-55, 148. Regarding the Samaritan woman representing gentiles, women, and 'shameless people' as a group(s), see Neyrey, *Gospel of John*, 95.

What has been largely missing amidst all the allegorical speculation is asking whether the FG is in fact an allegory in terms of literary genre. Did the original readers know they were reading an allegory rather than a straight-forward historical narrative, and would they have interpreted it accordingly? Would the original Johannine community for whom and about whom the FG was supposedly written¹¹ have seen more of themselves and their own experiences and hardships within its pages and less of Jesus? That's the question that's gone largely unanswered. Yet, it is the most important question in establishing a proper interpretive reading posture toward the FG, particularly in regards to its historicity about Jesus or lack thereof.

So Did the Author Intend to Write History¹²

The FG as Biography

A recent scholarly consensus is emerging that concludes what might have already been obvious to most lay readers of the FG. Namely, the FG is a biography of Jesus.¹³ It had long been thought that the genre of 'gospel' was novel and very innovative, and was a literary genre that could be adapted at will by the author to arrive at almost any kind of end product. Such extreme fluidity in the 'rules' of this genre provided convenient cover for scholars to adopt all kinds of interpretive grids for the FG, since the genre itself was so supposedly unconstrained. But this view has now given way to the more responsible view that the FG stands within the genre stream of biography.

To be clear, biographies of the time weren't necessarily constrained in terms of historical accuracy the way most reputable biographies are today. The biography genre of the time was flexible to some degree, with some biographies exhibiting meticulous care in historical details, while others were less careful. The issue is whether the FG is characteristic of either the more or less historically inclined biographies of its time.

¹¹ I join the increasing chorus of those who have real doubts about the axiomatic position held by most scholars that the FG (and the Synoptics as well) were written for specific, particular, and often isolated communities rather than a broader audience. For more on this question in general, see Bauckham (ed.), *The Gospels for All Christians: Rethinking the Gospel Audiences* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998). For a more focused treatment on the FG in particular, see Edward Klink, *The Sheep of the Fold: The Audience and Origin of the Gospel of John* (Cambridge: Cambridge, 2007). As an aside, I regard this issue as pivotal in current debates about 'canon'.

¹² A good deal of what follows draws on the work of Richard Bauckham, *The Testimony of the Beloved Disciple* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 93-112.

¹³ On this, see especially Richard Burridge, *What Are the Gospels? A Comparison with Graeco-Roman Biography* (Dearborn: Dove, 2004). Burridge's work has proven quite decisive on this score.

Topography

A good historian was expected to convey accurate information about where events took place. Readers of the FG quickly discover that topographical details are aplenty. So, is the FG sloppy and cavalier in its treatment of topographical data, or can we discern an authorial concern for accuracy? In several ways, the latter is the case. Archaeologists have discovered both the pool of Bethesda (5.2) and the Pool of Siloam (9.7). Jacob's well exists to this day (4.6). That the sea of Galilee was also called the sea of Tiberias (6.1, 21.1) has been independently confirmed.¹⁴ While not every place mentioned in the FG has been discovered in modern times, to date, none of the topographical details of the FG have been proven incorrect. And as we've seen, a number of such details have been shown to be reliable. It would seem that the FG's author was indeed interested in reliably recording historical places that really existed and existed where he said they existed, which would have led his audience to have an expectation of reading history.

But there is more. What is often overlooked in discussions about topography is the level of precision with which such details are recorded. I will not join much of scholarship in pitting the FG against the Synoptics. But on this specific issue, it is fair to say that the FG is actually superior to the Synoptics.¹⁵ A number of topographical details recorded in the Synoptics are somewhat vague. Many events in the Synoptics are placed no more specifically than in 'Galilee' or 'Samaria'. A number of settings are also vague; 'a certain village/place' (Luke 10.38; 11.1), 'a village of the Samaritans' (Luke 9.52), in 'the grainfields' (Matt. 12.1; Mark 2.23; Luke 6.1), and a non-descript synagogue (Luke 6.6; Mt 12.9). Many mountains and hills are unnamed (Matt. 5.1; 8.1; 15.29; 17.1-9; 28.16; Mark 3.13; 9.2; Luke 6.12; 9.28-37). This is not to say that the Synoptic topography is unreliable; not at all. It's just that a number of data points are less than precise.

In contrast, the FG exhibits great precision in its topographical data. Events are not merely located in Galilee, but in Cana (2.1-10; 4.46) or Capernaum (2.12; 6.17-24). Jesus did not merely teach in 'a synagogue' but in the synagogue at Capernaum (6.59). Jesus did not merely do something somewhere in Jerusalem, but at the pool of Bethesda near the sheep gate (5.2). Jesus was not just in the temple, but at Solomon's Portico (10.23). Jesus did not go to some olive grove in Judea, but the grove across from the Kidron Valley (18.1). Pilate did not just sit down on the judge's seat, but the judge's seat at the Stone Pavement (19.13). A reader following the story would feel like she always knew where things were occurring, usually with great precision. This is a telltale characteristic of a biography that intends to present history. There is no literary hint of allegory or purely non-historical symbolism here.

¹⁴ As one example among many, see Josephus, *Antiquities*, 18.2.3.

¹⁵ This challenges conventional scholarly wisdom that has long held that the Synoptics are more historically reliable than the FG. By saying the FG is superior to the Synoptics on the issue of topographical precision is not to say that the Synoptics are historically unreliable. It is to point out that on this issue, it is the FG that is more historically *verifiable* because of the specificity of its contents regarding times, dates, places, and people.

It also needs to be pointed out that many of these precise topographical details were wiped out in 70AD when the Romans destroyed Jerusalem and the Temple. This makes it highly unlikely that a next generation, post-70AD author would have even known about such details, much less where they were, and in the frequency with which the FG discusses them. This increases the historical value of eyewitness testimony, which is covered in more detail below.

Chronology

Because a great deal of the FG revolves around activities that occurred at named festivals (2.13; 6.4; 7.2; 10.22; 12.55), a large part of the FG can be precisely dated. Most other events recorded in the FG can be placed within 6 months of one of the three recorded Passovers. In addition, one can hardly argue that the FG was unconcerned about dates and chronology when it alone notes that it took 46 years to build the temple (2.20). Further, the FG dates the events recorded with greater precision than do the Synoptics. The FG is almost obsessive about noting the exact hour when things occurred (1.39; 4.6; 4.52; 19.14).

Such chronological detail would evoke an expectation that the reader was reading history, not fiction. In point of fact, it is very unclear what purpose details like times and dates ascribed to Jesus' activities would have in an allegory about some later community. But such details serve a clear and vital purpose in a historical narrative about Jesus. The practice of documenting such details reflects the concerns of an author-historian who had Jesus as his subject matter.

Understated Presentation of Miracles

A historian was concerned with accurately portraying the events recorded in his biography, and to resist the urge to embellish. Two things can be said about the FG's treatment of miracles.

First, the FG, like the Synoptics, is very selective in what it records (20.30; 21.25). (As an aside, selectivity was also a telltale characteristic of the ancient biography genre in general, and strongly historical biographies in particular.) This is especially so when it comes to miracles. Mark and Luke both record 18 miracles, while Matthew records 20. In contrast, the FG records only 8. This is not because the author considers Jesus' miracles unimportant, but to allow room to soberly explain their impact and significance. It should also be noted that despite only recording 8 miracles, these miracles are arguably more diverse in nature than those recorded in the Synoptics, where exorcisms and healings are quite numerous. Variety is an additional characteristic of the historical biography genre of the time.¹⁶

¹⁶ Historical biographies of the time did not merely record history in a dry and detached way. Historians took great care to make their biographies interesting and to excite the reader's attention. Variety and diversity in the contents of the biography was a key way

Second, the FG accounts of miracles are decidedly reserved. While the miracles themselves are tremendous, the author judiciously describes them in a rather low-key manner with no obvious over-the-top language indicative of embellishment.¹⁷ This is a clear dividing line between historically-oriented texts and texts designed to advance non-historical legends.

All of this would have communicated to the reader that the author intended to write history, not fantasy or allegory.

Eyewitness Testimony

It is hard to overstate the significance of this. In the ancient world, vital importance was attached to the firsthand testimony of eyewitness participants in the events described. Put simply, the ideal author to record 'history' was not a detached person uninvolved with the events described, but someone who was very involved and could testify firsthand about what he witnessed.¹⁸ The best kind of recorded 'history' was 'contemporary history', rather than history written centuries later. In the view of the ancients, good history was history that was still within living memory; and ideally, the historian would have been an active participant in that history.

The FG emphatically exhibits this characteristic. It claims to have been written by an eyewitness (1.14; 19.35; 20.30-31; 21.24-25) who was a contemporary of Jesus and was explicitly present at many critical events described.¹⁹ This claim is clearly intended to advance both a theological and historiographical agenda.²⁰ It is made plain by virtue of his intimate knowledge of the thoughts of the Twelve that he was not only a reliable eyewitness, but had access to other knowledgeable eyewitnesses to rely upon for information if necessary. From the standpoint of eyewitness testimony, the FG emphatically presents itself as historical biography, written by the ideal historian. Readers of the 1st century would have immediately recognized this, and would have had

historians achieved this goal when recording factual and unembellished history. The level of diversity the FG achieves in its recording of only 8 miracles is astonishing, from water into wine, to walking on water, to multiplying the loaves and fishes, to healing, to resurrection.

¹⁷ Contrast this with the over-the-top language of the *Gospel of the Egyptians* 43.9-44.9.

¹⁸ On this, see especially Samuel Byrskog, *Story as History-History as Story: The Gospel Tradition in the Context of Ancient Oral History* (Leiden: Brill, 2002).

¹⁹ The eyewitness *inclusio* of John 1.35-42 and John 21.20-24 makes clear that the main narrative and Epilogue of the FG are based primarily on the Beloved Disciple's witness and testimony.

²⁰ This is one of many reasons to wholeheartedly reject Lessing's 1700s-era 'ugly, broad ditch' between history and theology. Lessing's view, while quite popular in scholarly circles even today, was and is an unwarranted philosophical position, not an evidential one. In the FG, history and theology are working together, and necessarily so. One does not militate or undermine the other at all.

an expectation that the FG's contents were historical and that they would be reading history.

Conclusion and Critique

Did the FG's author intend to write history? Yes. This provides a very good precedent for believing that 1st century readers would have expected to read biographical history when reading the FG, and that the author intended to record accurate history in his biography of Jesus. The biography literary genre of the FG is especially critical here. After all, works of fiction can and often do incorporate accurate topographical and even chronological material as part of telling a fictional story. But the genre of such works of fiction is not historical biography. The characteristics of historiography in the FG discussed in this paper, coupled with its biography genre, strongly resemble the historical biographies of politicians and military leaders of the time that are widely regarded to be reputable on matters of history.

Interpretive approaches that stress allegory are not taking the FG's genre seriously. Proponents of this view consistently fail to ask how the original readers of the FG would have been able to discern and recognize its 'two-level' allegory character from literary cues in the text. How exactly would readers have known that a FG which rigorously tells a story about Jesus was instead telling a story about something other than Jesus? Such literary and even historical cues (ironically) are not to be found.²¹ As a result, their grid of interpretation starts from a flawed vantage point, which renders many of their conclusions highly suspect, including negative conclusions about the FG's historical reliability.

As one example, the Gnostic and non-canonical Gospel of Thomas is believed by many critical scholars to rival or even surpass the four canonical gospels in offering a historically accurate picture of Jesus. But unlike all four canonical Gospels, this gospel is bereft of historical references or markers. One would not even know that Jesus was a

²¹ Some scholars continue to lean heavily on Clement of Alexandria's statement (preserved by Eusebius, *HE*, 6.14.7) that John wrote a 'spiritual gospel', and taking this to mean 'non-historical'. But first, it is not at all clear that Clement's statement has anything to do with historical reliability or mysticism. The statement offers an explanation for why the FG is different than the Synoptics when it comes to the material recorded and the style of writing, without impugning the historicity of any of the four Gospels' contents. Second, many early church writings drew upon specific events uniquely recorded in the FG (John 19.34 being an especially popular one) to anchor theological points in historical events. This tells us not only that the early church believed the FG was theologically orthodox, but also that it was historically reliable in its depiction of Jesus. In other words, the early church recognized the FG as a historical biography of Jesus, not an allegory. On the extensive positive use of the FG in 2nd century orthodox writings, see Charles Hill, *The Johannine Corpus in the Early Church* (Oxford: Oxford, 2004).

Jew from reading Thomas! When it comes to the literary earmarks of historiography, there is simply no contest between the four canonical Gospels and the Gospel of Thomas. Yet, respected scholars like Koester insist that the Gospel of Thomas is the place to look to find the real Jesus.

In contrast, the literary characteristics of the FG we've examined here all point to an author who intended to record a historical biography of the One whom he had come to believe had risen from the dead (20.8). He clearly states that his purpose for writing this historical account was so that through his eyewitness testimony, his readers might join him in believing that Jesus is the Son of God (20.31). This purpose statement makes little sense if it was written as part of an allegory that was really about the next generation Johannine community rather than the historical Jesus. How would an account of an allegorized Jesus be persuasive in convincing its readers that the non-allegorized Jesus of history was the Son of God? In knowing how a document is intended to be read, literary genre matters.

It is hoped that this discussion reinforces our confidence that when we read the FG, we can share in the expectation of its original readers that accurate history about the historical Jesus can be found within its pages. That was the author's intent, and nothing has yet been offered to suggest that this intention fell short in terms of the accuracy of what he recorded. Modern reader-response theory aside, if our goal is to better understand the contents of the FG on its own terms, the historical biography genre of the writing must guide the interpretive orientation we bring to the text. It is most ironic that scholars who claim to be passionate about locating the correct social context of the FG in order to read it correctly are among the first to jettison the very issues of genre that establish the correct interpretive context. This leads to the kind of rabbit-trail interpretational approaches that have come to dominate much of recent Johannine scholarship.

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