



Jesus and John: The Fourth Gospel and the Quest for the Historical Jesus

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Abstract

The Gospel of John has long been dismissed as a purely theological text whose contents contribute little to nothing to the Quest for the Historical Jesus. While John places theological developments within the gospel narrative that differ strikingly from the Synoptics, Dr. Keith argues that the Gospel of John's historicity has long been downplayed by historical Jesus scholars. Further, a central aspect of Dr. Keith's argument is establishing the fact that each gospel has a theological lens; although John's may be the most obvious, each gospel (even Mark, the gospel previously deemed "most historical") is equipped with a lens that shapes the gospel narrative within its bounds. As a result, historical Jesus studies should implement the Gospel of John as a historically reliable document and move forward by addressing each gospel's "lens" through which each evangelist writes.

Objectives

The objective of the summer was to find the most effective way to argue for the historicity of John's gospel. There are two avenues that we explored this summer. The first involved focusing on the Gospel of John's historical and theological elements and how the two are often intermingled. The other involved a discussion of the methodology of historical Jesus studies. If one can effectively argue that each gospel is equipped with a theological lens through which the story is narrated, then John's more obvious theological lens should not disqualify it from consideration in historical Jesus studies.

Methods

The first method included translating passages from the Greek text of the Gospel of John that included "distance" between the author and the narrative. For example, in John 2:17, the author stops the narrative to include a retrospective that most likely represents a post-Passion reflection ("his disciples remembered that which is written...") and feels no need to explain his reasoning behind this. Instances of "distance" and "reflection" like the one above are taken as evidence by those who argue against the historicity of the Fourth Gospel. After that, I examined commentaries on the verses in question and provided these discussion items to Dr. Keith.

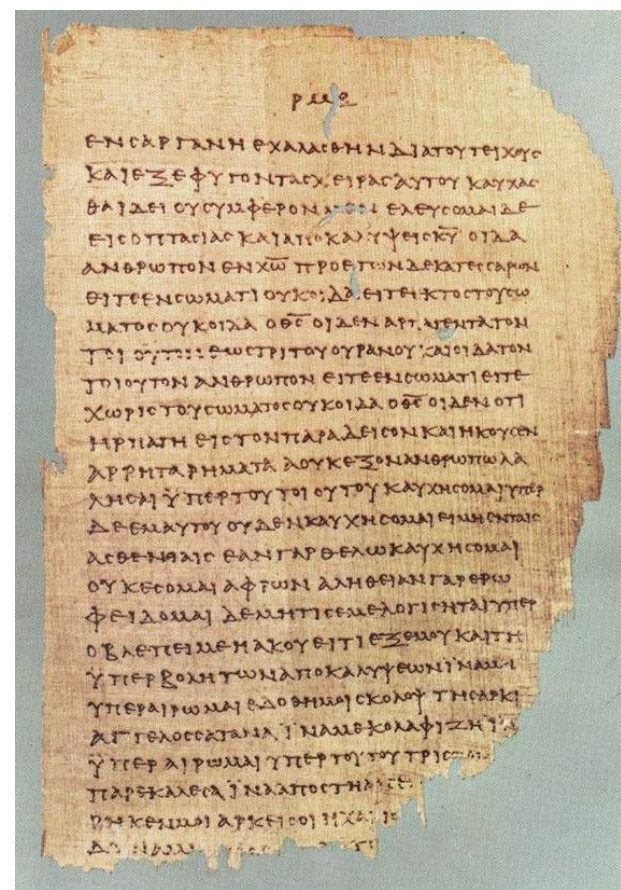
The second method included examining in detail the arguments put forth by Jörg Frey in *Theology and History in the Fourth Gospel*. This is a very recent discussion regarding the historicity of the Fourth Gospel and contains numerous discussions pertinent to Dr. Keith's work.

Results

This summer revolved around analysis of Jörg Frey's *Theology and History in the Fourth Gospel*. A granular reading of the text yields many favorable results, which I will summarize below.

The relation of John to the Synoptics is an important discussion to have prior to determining John's historicity. If we consider, for example, Mark to be mainly historical, then conclude that John knew and used Mark as a source, how does this factor into the discussion of John's historicity? Considering John's relationship to the Synoptics only becomes helpful if you consider his similarities and differences equally. Frey states "therefore, a responsible interpretation cannot neglect historical questions. It must confront John with the different views of Mark... and it must ask about the source value of John's narrative and about the historical traditions behind the Fourth Gospel" (77).

In order to "rehistoricize" the Gospel of John, we must acknowledge the lens through which John applies theological developments to his text. However, we cannot go as far to neglect the author's perspective, as Frey notes (81). Thus, an effective analysis of the Fourth Gospel would include an examination of the verses that exhibit "distance" between the author's perspective and the narrative at hand (as mentioned in "Methods") and a consideration of these verses in terms of John's perspective in writing them and their effect on the historical aspects of the narrative.



Thus, in any consideration of the canonical gospels, it is effective to find instances where the evangelists implement their own theology in less obvious ways as compared to John. Once we take note of these instances, it becomes increasingly clear that the Synoptics have their own "theological lens," just like John.

Significance → Honor's Thesis

The summer gave me experience within a professor's research process. My goal after graduation is to continue my study of the New Testament through the doctoral level with aspirations to enter academia. This summer provided me with a firsthand account of the research process of a highly-respected scholar. I learned more effective research methods that will serve me well in my research moving forward. This summer also provided inspiration for the topic of my honor's thesis.

My honor's thesis topic was inspired by a discussion with Dr. Keith regarding the lenses through which the evangelists write. A pertinent discussion in the study of the Gospel of Luke revolves around the idea of a "gospel" genre and how it compares to other ancient historical writings. In my project, I will argue that any genre-based discussion of the Gospel of Luke must serve due respect to Luke's careful treatment of Hebrew Bible scriptures and prophecies. Further, one must consider Luke's ascription of authority to Hebrew Bible texts to be critical for a true understanding of the gospel genre. However, these factors do not necessitate the need for a change from the scholarly majority that argues for an understanding of the gospels as ancient biographies (Grk. *Bioi*). Thus, I advocate for the creation of a sub-genre, the purpose of which is to draw attention to the careful use of Hebrew Bible scripture and prophecy, through careful consideration of Luke's use of scripture.

This summer drastically changed the way I view the field of New Testament studies. Discussions with Professor Keith dramatically shifted my understanding of scholarly work in the 21st century and my role within it. In short, a takeaway from this summer is that, even though the postmodernist theory that one can conduct historical research in a vacuum is alive and well in most scholarly settings, I, as a 21st-century scholar view history through a lens that shapes my understanding, just as the evangelists do.

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