

SYNCHRONIC WITH CAVEATS: A FOURTH WAVE OF INTERPRETATION FOR THE FOURTH GOSPEL

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Abstract: *Against the historical backdrop of two prominent approaches to the Gospel of John, this article argues for an interpretive methodology consistent with evangelical convictions such as divine inspiration and inerrancy. Building on Thomas Brodie's "three waves" classification of Johannine interpretive history and incorporating Andreas Köstenberger's hermeneutical triad, this study offers a methodology for reading the Fourth Gospel that falls within synchronic approaches to John but includes caveats that give due weight to the Gospel's historical and theological veracity.*

Key words: *Gospel of John, Fourth Gospel, hermeneutics, synchronic, diachronic, evangelical, presuppositions*

In his 1993 critical study of the Fourth Gospel (FG), Thomas Brodie succinctly describes three “ages of interpretation” that had characterized Johannine studies up to his time. Though he acknowledges that theology, history, and literature were all involved in each era’s methodological approaches, he finds that interpretation of the FG emphasized the theological up through the eighteenth century, the historical in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and the literary as the twentieth century progressed.¹ His accurate and well-outlined historical study of the interpretation of the FG provides a helpful taxonomy to initiate the present article.

Brodie’s taxonomy, however, involves at least two shortcomings. The first is that, given the date of writing, his survey stops short of twenty-first-century Johannine scholarship. Second, Brodie largely ignores evangelical contributions, focusing on movements within wider Johannine scholarship. The resulting imbalance gives undue authority to critical Johannine scholarship over more confessional scholarly models.

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¹ Thomas L. Brodie, *The Gospel according to John: A Literary and Theological Commentary* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 3–9. He concludes by acknowledging the value of integrating the three emphases. By “historical,” Brodie specifically means the diachronic approaches of historical criticism, not history as reported in the FG (4–5). Brodie devotes little attention to the latter, accepting the validity of certain historical-critical conclusions, such as Martyn’s two-level reading, over viewing the reported history in John as factual and sufficient (cf. 11–13, 31–33). His understanding of the FG’s historical development by an unnamed “Evangelist” is drawn out in Thomas L. Brodie, *The Quest for the Origin of John’s Gospel: A Source-Oriented Approach* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

This article champions a more robust way of reading the FG than that allowed by any single one of the emphases in Brodie's three ages. It argues for an interpretive approach that maintains the self-attesting history, literary beauty, and theological message of the Gospel of John as an inspired, inerrant, and authoritative document.

I. A "FOURTH-WAVE" SYNCHRONIC APPROACH

Over against the synchronic literary-critical approaches that have recently dominated Johannine scholarship and earlier diachronic historical-critical approaches, this article advocates an interpretive strategy that is "synchronic with caveats." Because this strategy addresses the FG in its canonical form, it is best categorized as synchronic, but it does not overweight the literary as recent synchronic approaches have tended to do. Instead, it involves assigning equal value, alongside the literary aspects of the FG, to its history and theology.

This assigning of equal value should not be understood, of course, in terms of quantifying the amount of exegetical effort devoted to each of the three contexts. Rather, it involves attributing equal importance to each of the three without unduly eclipsing any of them. The approach demands that the FG in its canonical form be understood as standing with the intention of its human and divine authors. Thus, finding the intended meaning of a Johannine passage presupposes that the FG's reported *history* is entirely accurate, expressed through trustworthy apostolic *written testimony*, for the purpose of declaring a *theological* message (see John 21:21–25; cf. 20:31)—with each of the three contexts shedding interpretive light on the others.

Such a modified synchronic approach represents a genuinely evangelical reading of the FG. As this article will show, finding equal value in the Gospel of John's historical reliability, literary beauty, and theological truths enforces methodological assumptions that most consistently reflect evangelical convictions, such as Scripture's divine inspiration, inerrancy, and authority. This approach to interpreting the FG will not attempt to reconstruct its history nor will it reduce John's narrative to mere literature, as was customary in Brodie's second and third ages of Johannine interpretation. Rather, the method argued here represents a consistent evangelical reading by refusing reductionistic tendencies that abandon or lessen any one of the triadic points of interpretation in favor of another.²

A decision should not have to be forced between the FG's history and theology, as in previous scholarship. Instead, they should be viewed as working in tandem in the narrative, underscoring John's unique account of Jesus and his interlocutors. Such a hermeneutic recognizes the FG's refusal to be pigeonholed, and in this sense, reflects Robert Kysar's immortal description of John as a "maverick

² There have always been scholars who have assumed the integrity of the FG's history, literature, and theology, contra historical criticism and literary criticism. Examples of such scholars are surveyed below.

Gospel.”³ Dualisms abound within its pages, whether light and dark, love and hate, truth and falsehood, faith and unbelief—all presented through a cast of characters that are either purposely named or purposely anonymous.⁴ The nature of the FG, however, does not mean that its interpretation requires fragmented or “maverick” methods. It does mean that the entirety of John’s intentions—whether historical, literary, or theological—must be given their due weight.

Thus, a consistent evangelical reading of John understands the book as purposely intertwining and holding in balance a *splendid narrative* crafted with *historical veracity* as its intended way of expressing its *theological truth*—history, literature, and theology together. Recalling the literary dominance of Brodie’s third age that tended to reduce the FG’s historical integrity and theological majesty by elevating its narrative above all elements, the approach offered here finds grounding in two broad modern interpretative streams—the diachronic and the synchronic—but proposes corrective caveats. It is to these two streams of interpretation that we now turn.

II. A MODERN HISTORY OF JOHANNINE APPROACHES: DIACHRONIC VS. SYNCHRONIC

The past one hundred fifty years of Johannine scholarship on the FG can be classified under two broad categories: diachronic approaches and synchronic readings.⁵ Diachronic approaches, or better, reconstructions, have focused mainly on historical-critical issues, most notably attempting to reconstruct the origin, authorship, and development of the FG as related to its community of readers. By approaching the FG looking for aporias, or what are believed to be inconsistencies in the text, diachronic advocates rely on standard critical methods that are assumed to provide windows through which to view the Gospel’s historical development.⁶ By contrast, synchronic approaches choose to focus on the text of the FG as it stands in its final form, and are often expressed in narrative-critical terms such as dramatized literature or story.⁷ Within synchronic approaches, inquiries of history are

³ Kysar famously used this phrase to describe the FG’s uniqueness compared with the Synoptic tradition. Ironically, Kysar himself reflects maverick tendencies in much of his understanding of the FG, and, as such, the descriptor may be better suited for himself rather than John. Robert Kysar, *John, the Maverick Gospel*, 3rd ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2007), 2.

⁴ See Christopher W. Skinner, *Reading John*, Cascade Companions (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2015), 96–122, for an accessible treatment of the FG’s unique character development and rhetoric.

⁵ See Alicia D. Meyers, “The Gospel of John,” in *The State of New Testament Studies: A Survey of Recent Research*, ed. Scot McKnight and Nijay K. Gupta (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019), 334–49. Meyers’s survey is excellent, though it focuses virtually exclusively on critical scholars, thus leaving an imbalanced presentation.

⁶ The metaphor of a window is borrowed from Murray Krieger, *A Window to Criticism: Shakespeare’s Sonnets and Modern Poetics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016).

⁷ Perhaps the best and most comprehensive survey underscoring the recent dominance of narrative readings of the FG is Tom Thatcher, ed., *What We Have Heard from the Beginning: The Past, Present and Future of Johannine Studies* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2007).

suspended for a focus on John's literary value, or the Gospel's historical veracity is assumed on a unique but even keel with the Synoptics.

From the outset, the clear demarcation dividing the two approaches concerns the problem of history.⁸ Diachronic approaches have generally supposed a posture of independence between John and the Synoptic tradition, the latter believed to be more historically trustworthy in what they report. Synchronic approaches, by contrast, generally allow for more interdependence among all four canonical Gospels.⁹ The most conservative of synchronic proponents view the Gospels as purposefully overlapping with one another and John deepening the theological significance of historical events contained in the Synoptics.¹⁰ What follows is a brief survey of notable Johannine scholars exemplifying diachronic and synchronic approaches.

1. *Diachronic approaches.* If scholars can represent the progress of both categories, one might start with C. H. Dodd as the fountainhead initiating diachronic Johannine studies in the English-speaking world.¹¹ Too sharp a distinction should be avoided, of course, as Dodd's net was cast widely enough to influence synchronic approaches and later narrative criticism as well.¹² He was best known for his "realized eschatology," the idea that all eschatological implications of the Gospel concerning social and political elements are entirely fulfilled in Christ. He advanced a form-critical method, in part influenced by P. Gardner-Smith,¹³ that sought to re-

⁸ Helpful discussions on the history and results surrounding historical-critical interpretations are Stanley E. Porter, "The History of Biblical Interpretation: An Integrated Conspectus," in *Pillars in the History of Biblical Interpretation, Volume 1: Prevailing Methods before 1980*, ed. Stanley E. Porter and Sean A. Adams, McMaster Biblical Studies Series (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2016), 1–55; and Stephen Neil and Tom Wright, *The Interpretation of the New Testament, 1861–1986* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), esp. chapters 7–9.

⁹ Paul Anderson is a fine example of a critical scholar who adopts *both* diachronic and synchronic approaches in a quest to establish the historical veracity of the FG, arguing that John does indeed interact with the Synoptics at various points in what Anderson calls a "bi-optic perspective." Paul N. Anderson, *The Fourth Gospel and the Quest for Jesus: Modern Foundations Reconsidered*, LNTS 321 (London: T&T Clark, 2006).

¹⁰ E.g., Andreas J. Köstenberger, *The Jesus of the Gospels: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2020), 363.

¹¹ O'Day presents Dodd along with Barrett, Brown, and Martyn as pioneers in modern historical-critical studies. Gail R. O'Day, "Toward a Narrative-Critical Study of John," *Int* 49.4 (1995): 341–45. A well-balanced essay on Dodd's scholarship and influence is Beth M. Stovell, "C. H. Dodd and Johannine Scholarship," in *The Gospel of John in Modern Interpretation*, ed. Stanley E. Porter and Ron C. Fay, Milestones in NT Scholarship (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2018), 101–17.

¹² Ashton provides an interesting history on diachronic and synchronic approaches to the FG, presenting Dodd as a representative of the latter. John Ashton, *Understanding the Fourth Gospel*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 11–22. For a lively debate highlighting Dodd's more diachronic and critical approaches, namely inconsistency in his quest to rediscover the historical Jesus as reflected in the canonical Gospels, see the exchanges between J. S. King and D. A. Carson: J. S. King, "Has D. A. Carson Been Fair to C. H. Dodd?," *JSNT* 17 (1983): 97–102; and D. A. Carson, "Historical Tradition in the Fourth Gospel: A Response to J. S. King," *JSNT* 23 (1985): 73–81.

¹³ Percival Gardner-Smith, *Saint John and the Synoptic Gospels* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1938). See the perceptive commentary in Stanley E. Porter and Ron C. Fay, "Introduction to *The Gospel of John in Modern Interpretation*," in Porter and Fay, *The Gospel of John in Modern Interpretation*, 15–43.

construct a blended oral tradition behind the text in order to get to the historical Jesus.¹⁴

Another influencing factor on Dodd's historical reconstructions in Britain came by way of Germany and the *Formgeschichte* ("form criticism") advocated by its most dominating Johannine scholar in the early-mid-twentieth century, Rudolf Bultmann.¹⁵ Bultmann was a conflicted proponent of the *religionsgeschichtliche Schule* whose commentary on John may be the colossus of early-twentieth-century Johannine scholarship. He approached the FG from radical form-critical and source-critical perspectives that thought attempts to discover the true historical Jesus were in vain.¹⁶ Bultmann (in)famously divided the FG according to hypothesized Gnostic sources: one for Jesus's signs, one for Jesus's discourses, and a third for Jesus's passion. Scholars such as C. K. Barrett, Raymond Brown, and J. Louis Martyn followed Dodd and Bultmann, tempering and refining their ideas into different hypotheses regarding the FG's authorship and development.¹⁷ The fruit of their scholarly labors included concepts such as the redactional hypothesis, the Gnostic redeemer myth, dual-horizon reading, and the Johannine School and Johannine Community hypotheses.¹⁸

¹⁴ For two notable and later works that betray Dodd's developing insistence that the true Jesus of history can be retrieved see C. H. Dodd, *Historical Tradition in the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963); Dodd, *The Founder of Christianity* (New York: MacMillan, 1970).

¹⁵ Beth M. Stovell, "C. H. Dodd as New Testament Interpreter and Theologian," in Porter and Adams, *Pillars in the History of Biblical Interpretation, Volume 1: Prevailing Methods before 1980*, 348–52. Stovell notes Martin Dibelius as a major influence on Dodd. She also highlights the main difference between British and German form criticism: the former emphasized history, while the latter emphasized idealism.

¹⁶ Rudolf Bultmann, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, trans., G. R. Beasley-Murray, R. W. N. Hoare, and J. K. Riches (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976; translation of *Das Evangelium des Johannes* [Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1941]). Porter and Fay describe Bultmann's John commentary as "magisterial" and having a "meteoric impact." After likening him to Alexander the Great, they divide Johannine studies in relation to Bultmann's work: "BB = Before Bultmann; AB = After Bultmann." Stanley E. Porter and Ron C. Fay, "Conclusion to *The Gospel of John in Modern Interpretation*," in Porter and Fay, *The Gospel of John in Modern Interpretation*, 238–40. Bultmann remained largely sympathetic to the history-of-religions school, though at points he was critical of their "failure to recognize the intent of theological utterances." Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, trans. Kendrick Grobel, 2 vols. (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1951–1955), 2:250–51. His approval of their "contributions" is outlined in Rudolf Bultmann, "New Testament and Mythology: The Problem of Demythologizing the New Testament Proclamation," in *New Testament and Mythology and Other Basic Writings*, trans. Schubert M. Ogden (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 13–14.

¹⁷ C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel according to St. John: An Introduction with Commentary and Notes on the Greek Text* (London: SPCK, 1956); J. Louis Martyn, *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1968); Raymond Brown, *Community of the Beloved Disciple: The Life, Loves, and Hates of an Individual Church in New Testament Times* (New York: Paulist, 1979). An influential and critical engagement of Bultmann's historical reconstructions of the FG is D. Moody Smith, *The Composition and Order of the Fourth Gospel: Bultmann's Literary Theory*, Johannine Monograph Series (1965; repr., Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2015). Advancing the legacy of Martyn and Brown most ably into the latter end of the twentieth century is Robert T. Fortna, *The Fourth Gospel and Its Predecessor: From Narrative Source to Present Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980). More recent is Fortna's essay, "The Gospel of John and the Signs Gospel," in Thatcher, *What We Have Heard*, 149–58.

¹⁸ E.g., Wayne Meeks, "The Man from Heaven in Johannine Sectarianism," *JBL* 91.1 (1972): 44–72. By emphasizing a supposed sectarian nature of the FG, Meeks influenced Johannine scholarship by advancing a community hypothesis, that is, that the FG was written for a specific type of community.

Martyn and Brown, for instance, advocated a “two-level” reading of the FG, a hermeneutical approach dividing implied author(s) and audience from actual author(s) and audience.¹⁹ By this, they meant that the interpreter of John should discern between two horizons: the surface level of the text that reports on Jesus and his ministry and calls for a global response to him, and the pressing situation and needs of the community that the author(s) were cryptically addressing. Advocates of this approach most often appealed to John’s threefold use of ἀποσυνάγωγος, or synagogue expulsion (John 9:22; 12:42; 16:2), as evidence of a later Johannine community in crisis.²⁰ Such expulsions of persecuted believers within this alleged Johannine community were believed to result from a late-first-century or early-second-century rabbinic “benediction of the heretics” (*Birkath ha-Minim*) thought to address and condemn Jewish followers of Jesus.²¹ “The Benediction Against Heretics,” suggested Martyn, “was employed for detecting such Jews, and they were promptly excommunicated. What had been an inner-synagogue *group of Christian Jews* now became—against its will—a separated *community of Jewish Christians*.”²²

An earlier and related critical theory is the concept of a “Johannine School,” whose genesis may be found in Strauss, if not Schleiermacher.²³ This theory held that the FG was developed by members of a cultic community or network of churches that had either direct or indirect interpersonal links to one another. The notion of a Johannine School held sway in Johannine scholarship well into the twentieth century, casting a shadow still hovering over the field today.²⁴

Ultimately, the longevity of the Johannine School and Community hypotheses may be due to critical scholars believing them to offer a *via media* for the provenance of the FG, that is, between “defenders of apostolic authorship and critics who maintained that the Gospel was written at a later date (and not by the Apostle John).”²⁵ Whether such theories really do pacify both traditionalists and critics of the FG in the name of “progress” is anyone’s guess. In fact, some would suggest

¹⁹ See J. Louis Martyn, “The Johannine Community among Jewish and Other Early Christian Communities,” in Thatcher, *What We Have Heard*, 183–190. Martyn’s legacy is perhaps best advanced by D. Moody Smith, *The Fourth Gospel in Four Dimensions: Judaism and Jesus, the Gospels and Scripture* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2008).

²⁰ For an informative critical response to the dual-horizon approaches of Martyn, Brown, and Smith that incorporates insights from D. A. Carson and Richard Bauckham, see Andreas J. Köstenberger, *A Theology of John’s Gospel and Letters: The Word, the Christ, the Son of God*, Biblical Theology of the NT (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 159–61.

²¹ The exact date as to when the eighteen “benedictions” were composed is debated. Most trace them to a supposed late-first-century council of Jamnia, the historical existence of which is itself debated.

²² J. Louis Martyn, *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel*, 3rd ed., NTL (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003), 70, italics his.

²³ See David Friedrich Strauss, *The Life of Jesus: Critically Examined*, 4th ed., trans. George Eliot (London: Swan Sonnenschein, 1902), 105, 212–13, 330. Culpepper traces the origin of the Johannine school term solely to 19th-century David F. Strauss. R. Alan Culpepper, “Pursuing the Elusive,” in Thatcher, *What We Have Heard from the Beginning*, 110. Yet from Strauss’s own writings it seems he may have borrowed and refined the concept from Schleiermacher, who had previously applied a similar theory to the FG’s record of John the Baptist.

²⁴ Meyers, “The Gospel of John,” 341–43.

²⁵ Culpepper, “Pursuing the Elusive,” 110.

that any interpretive approach to John guided by “dogmatic anticonfessionalism” should not be deemed as progress, but rather “regress.”²⁶

Though abandoned by many of today’s scholars, Johannine School and Community theories still loom large over critical scholarship, such that, ironically, overcorrections are now made by those following in the diachronic tradition.²⁷ A recent example is Hugo Méndez, who, in an attempt to reconcile the clear similarities among all the canonical Johannine literature, still presupposes that apostolic authorship is impossible, while simultaneously denying that a Johannine community existed.²⁸ Rather than accepting a single, apostolic authorship for the FG and John’s other writings, he argues that similarities in words and style between them are better accounted for by a “chain of literary forgeries.”²⁹ Taking critical assumptions to an extreme, Méndez deems the FG and John’s epistles as pseudepigraphal literature composed by multiple unknown authors masquerading as a single eyewitness to Jesus’s life.³⁰ Though his conclusions may seem novel, Méndez’s radical theory of the FG’s compositional history represents the logical trajectory of diachronic approaches traced back to Dodd, Bultmann, Martyn, and others. Such historical reconstructions prove that, while the turn of the twenty-first century witnessed a steady decline in diachronic Johannine studies, a remnant of practitioners exists—despite predictions to the contrary.³¹

2. *Synchronic readings.* While diachronic, or historical-critical, approaches dominated the landscape in twentieth-century Johannine scholarship, a watershed occurred with Alan Culpepper’s landmark 1983 literary study, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel*.³² Shifting from his earlier diachronic work,³³ Culpepper refocused his efforts toward exploring the “literary design” of the Gospel of John as it stands in the New Testament canon.³⁴ He concerned himself “with the text as text, in terms of

²⁶ D. A. Carson, “Reflections upon a Johannine Pilgrimage,” in Thatcher, *What We Have Heard from the Beginning*, 87–104; Andreas J. Köstenberger, “Progress and Regress in Recent Johannine Scholarship: Reflections upon the Road Ahead,” in Thatcher, *What We Have Heard from the Beginning*, 105–7.

²⁷ Bauckham demonstrates that the idea of a “Johannine Community” has been a misleading figment of scholarly imagination leaving a legacy of fruitless results. Richard Bauckham, *The Testimony of the Beloved Disciple: Narrative, History, and Theology in the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 21–22; 113–23.

²⁸ Hugo Méndez, “Did the Johannine Community Exist?,” *JSNT* 42.3 (2020): 350–74.

²⁹ Méndez, “Did the Johannine Community Exist?,” 350; cf. 369n39.

³⁰ Méndez, “Did the Johannine Community Exist?,” 369.

³¹ E.g., Kysar, who forecast Johannine interpretation into the year 2020, predicting that the results of postmodern convictions over the FG will be “the abandonment of any effort to reconstruct the historical setting of the Gospel, the identity of its author, and the history of its composition.” Kysar, *John: The Maverick Gospel*, 161.

³² R. Alan Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel: A Study in Literary Design*, Foundations and Facets (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983).

³³ Culpepper’s diachronic work is best captured in his first monograph on the Johannine School, a work reflecting the influence of his mentor at Duke, Moody Smith. See R. Alan Culpepper, *The Johannine School: An Evaluation of the Johannine-School Hypothesis Based on an Investigation of the Nature of Ancient Schools*, SBLDS 26 (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1975), esp. 258–59, where he develops nine common features shared by ancient Jewish and Greco-Roman schools that he thought may be reflected in the FG.

³⁴ Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel*, 5.

its major constituents, such as plot, character, and the like, and with the reader of the text, both within and outside the text.”³⁵ Any historical development that lay behind the FG was no longer the scholarly focus; instead, attention turned to the story of the FG and its effect on the reader.

As a precursor to later reader-response criticism, Culpepper argued that the text’s “meaning is produced in the experience of reading the gospel and lies on this side of the text, between reader and the text.”³⁶ Culpepper and others developed a new line of study for the FG called “narrative criticism,” meant to be distinct from outdated forms of “literary criticism” looking to determine sources by dissecting variegated language forms without respect to differing contexts.³⁷ It is no overstatement, therefore, to claim Culpepper as the father of modern synchronic approaches to John.³⁸

With Culpepper’s groundbreaking work enshrined as narrative criticism, Johannine scholarship obtained a new wave of researchers who viewed any attempt at reconstructing a history of the FG “behind the text” as nothing more than erudite subjectivity, exerting wasted efforts on unprovable hypotheses.³⁹ Paul Anderson rightly argued that any attempted historical reconstruction of the FG guided by “diachronic theories of composition” was misplaced and that it offered no improvements in relieving the FG of any tension.⁴⁰

Theological and literary tensions certainly existed in the FG, but they were intentional and not demanding to be solved like a puzzle. Indeed, one area of focus used to demonstrate John’s intentionality involves the more than four hundred explanatory asides permeating the FG. Wendy North describes these as occurring “to the point of pedantry,” clearly suggesting that John intended his readers to understand his Gospel.⁴¹ The FG could stand on its own, therefore, comprehensible

³⁵ Stanley E. Porter and Jason C. Robinson, *Hermeneutics: An Introduction to Interpretive Theory* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 20.

³⁶ Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel*, 5.

³⁷ A good analysis with critiques of such approaches is Leland Ryken, “Literary Criticism and the Bible: Some Fallacies,” in *Literary Interpretations of Biblical Narratives*, ed. Kenneth R. R. Gros Louis, James S. Ackerman, and Thayer S. Warshaw (Nashville: Abingdon, 1974), 24–40.

³⁸ D. A. Carson called Culpepper’s monograph “extraordinarily important” and observed that “it belongs to a rare breed, the breed that breaks new ground in biblical studies,” concluding that “it will set much of the agenda for years to come.” D. A. Carson, review of *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel: A Study in Literary Design*, by R. Alan Culpepper, *TrinJ* 4.2 (1983): 122–26. This is not to suggest that the veracity of the FG’s historicity remained unquestioned by literary scholars of John; rather, for most of these scholars, the FG’s history was merely held in abeyance. Culpepper himself has continued work on authorial and community hypotheses over the years, toggling between differing authors (including the apostle John himself) as the FG’s author. See, e.g., R. Alan Culpepper, “Pursuing the Elusive,” 117–21.

³⁹ So Edward W. Klink III, *The Sheep of the Fold: The Audience and Origin of the Gospel of John*, SNTSMS 141 (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2007). He has produced a subsequent edited collection of scholarly essays that more directly address questions of progress in Johannine studies left unanswered by his original monograph: Edward W. Klink III, ed., *The Audience of the Gospels: Further Conversations about the Origin and Function of the Gospels in Early Christianity*, LNTS 353 (London: T&T Clark, 2010).

⁴⁰ Paul N. Anderson, *The Christology of the Fourth Gospel: Its Unity and Disunity in Light of John 6* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2010), 151.

⁴¹ Wendy S. North, “Why Should Historical Criticism Continue to Have a Place in Johannine Studies?,” in Thatcher, *What We Have Heard from the Beginning*, 20. Ironically, North attributes to the historical-

in its final form. Forcing the FG to harmonize with the Synoptics or other literature only flattened John's "dialogical autonomy."⁴²

In contrast to the previously dominant diachronic approach, this new crop of Johannine scholars saw more potential in accepting the historicity of the canonical text as it stands, or at least refraining from reconstructing it. Instead, they choose to explore literary features in the Gospel itself. Terms familiar to storyboards and novels, such as *plot*, *story*, and *style*, became the new norm in Johannine scholarship.

Culpepper cast the net wide for further synchronic studies, ably advanced by scholars such as Paul N. Anderson and Stanley E. Porter. Anderson and Porter, however, would go beyond Culpepper's suspension of historical inquiry into the FG, instead giving "full credit to the historical plausibility of John's Gospel,"⁴³ adding considerable weight to more conservative approaches to Johannine studies. Anderson forthrightly declared: "*All* of John is theological, and *all* of John is historical."⁴⁴ Moreover, synchronic approaches have been recently refreshed by those who prefer theological readings of the text as their starting point.⁴⁵ This latter group will be discussed in greater detail below.

Since Culpepper's *Anatomy*, which examined the FG from a purely literary perspective, developments within the synchronic tradition have emerged that likewise view the FG as a literary whole but give more weight to its historical reporting and theological purposes. Especially germane to evangelical scholarship, confessional Johannine scholars have risen from the ranks of synchronic advocacy, including Richard Bauckham, D. A. Carson, Andreas J. Köstenberger, and Robert W. Yarbrough.⁴⁶ They have progressed past both the early-to-mid-twentieth-century obsession with reconstructing the history and development of the FG and latter-twentieth-century efforts to analyze the FG from a purely literary perspective. Ra-

critical enterprise the traditional position of single apostolic authorship of the FG and its resulting authorial intent for meaning.

⁴² Anderson, *The Christology of the Fourth Gospel*, li–lvii, 137–69. Anderson masterfully examines John's "dialectical" thinking using John 6 as a case study and shows that John purposefully held tensions in balance, perhaps stemming from a "conjunctive-level faith" informed by dialoguing with multiple voices.

⁴³ Stanley E. Porter, *John, His Gospel, and Jesus: In Pursuit of the Johannine Voice* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 63. It should be noted that Porter does not mean "Johannine voice" to be understood as a creative literary device but as a memorable way to refer to the FG's unique portrayal of Jesus.

⁴⁴ Anderson, *Christology of the Fourth Gospel*, lix, emphasis his. Using John 6 as John's "grand central station" of Johannine historical, literary, and theological concerns, Anderson convincingly demonstrates the flawed multi-source approach of Bultmann and argues for a "conjunctive" level of faith for the Evangelist, allowing for intentional ambiguities in the text that are not anti-historical but ahistorical.

⁴⁵ E.g., the various articles in Kevin J. Vanhoozer, ed., *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005). Porter and Robinson suggest Anthony Thiselton as the fountainhead for theological hermeneutics. Porter and Robinson, *Hermeneutics*, 18.

⁴⁶ While each of these scholars has contributed extensively to Johannine scholarship, their pertinent seminal works include the following: D. A. Carson, *The Gospel according to John*, PNTC (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1990); Andreas J. Köstenberger, *The Missions of Jesus and the Disciples according to the Fourth Gospel: With Implications for the Fourth Gospel's Purpose and the Mission of the Contemporary Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998); Richard Bauckham, *The Testimony of the Beloved Disciple: Narrative, History, and Theology in the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007); Robert W. Yarbrough, *John: With a New Preface and Bibliography* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2011).

ther, they accept John as a factual document supported by reliable eyewitness testimony.⁴⁷ Whereas previous scholars saw more independence between the FG and what they considered to be the more historically reliable Synoptics, these newer Johannine scholars viewed all the canonical Gospels as enjoying more interdependence—with the FG deepening the theological significance of the previous three.⁴⁸

Because they believed the Christian religion has its grounds in history, these scholars, though differing in various respects, all held that a correct biblical-theological method depends on the historical trustworthiness of all the Gospel accounts.⁴⁹ Moreover, the “meaning” of a given pericope was not to be found in the reader’s experience of that text (as in Culpepper and other narrative critics), but was instead tied directly to authorial intent.⁵⁰ These scholars defended the single authorship of the FG as important for its historical veracity.

Yet, rather than forcing the contrived literary genre of the “Gospel harmony” to quell the diversity among four Gospels, these confessional scholars argued that their differences should remain, especially in the FG, driving the reader to ponder the living Christ who transcends the pages of Scripture.⁵¹ Such an understanding of the FG and its relation to the Synoptics refuses to reduce the Johannine Jesus or the FG’s narrative of real-life events to mere literary devices, a reading more customary to flatlined synchronic approaches.⁵² As Bauckham explains:

⁴⁷ See especially Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitness Testimony: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006). This is not meant to suggest that no conservative Johannine scholars practiced traditional exegesis and defended evangelical positions before Culpepper’s work. They were, however, rare and marginalized within academic scholarship. Leon Morris is the best-known example of a conservative who operated within the milieu of Johannine scholars such as Brown, Martyn, and Schnackenburg. See his *Studies in the Fourth Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969) and his influential commentary *The Gospel according to John*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971). Köstenberger commends Morris as a “pioneer who exhibited a high standard of scholarly excellence in the midst of the larger academy without denying his indebtedness to Jesus’s death for him on the cross, his love for the church, and his high view of Scripture.” Andreas J. Köstenberger, “Leon Morris on John’s Gospel: An Assessment and Critical Reflection of His Scholarship,” in Porter and Fay, *The Gospel of John in Modern Interpretation*, 207–8.

⁴⁸ Porter, *John, His Gospel, and Jesus*, 5, 63–88, rejects the two extreme views that the FG is either entirely dependent upon or entirely independent of the Synoptics. He prefers instead a *via media* of “flexible dependence” that allows some overlap between them. On the one hand, he seems to posit an independent source or tradition that accounts for the similarities between the FG and the Synoptics, not the same divine Author who brought to memory all the details in their accounts (John 14:26; cf. 16:14). Elsewhere, however, he attributes all the FG’s content to God through human mediation (51n35).

⁴⁹ Carson declares: “A proper emphasis on history is essential to NT theology.” D. A. Carson, “New Testament Theology,” *DLNT*, 807.

⁵⁰ Literary theorist E. D. Hirsch produced the classic defense of authorial intended meaning (“intentionalism”) to which conservative scholars often refer. E. D. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967).

⁵¹ Tatian’s *Diatessaron* in the mid-to-late second century is generally considered the first attempt at a harmonization of the four Gospels. That such an early effort at a harmony took place before the convening of church councils strongly suggests that the earliest Christians understood the now-canonical Gospels to be the only genuine Gospels.

⁵² For example, Culpepper suggests over and again the “probability” that the author(s) of the FG intentionally altered and manipulated traditional material for the narrative purposes of shaping a plot sequence. Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel*, 77–98, esp. 86–89.

By presenting us with four portrayals that are not harmonized already for us, the texts keep us seeking the Jesus to whom all four portrayals are reliable but not exhaustive witnesses. Seeking “the real Jesus” to whom all four Gospels point us, we cannot rest content with Jesus as a literary character in any of these texts but must seek the living Jesus, who transcends his literary portrayals.⁵³

Further, rather than dichotomizing the FG into either history or theology, a more conservative approach was now maintained that viewed history and literature working “in tandem as vehicles of divine revelation” yielding rich theological insights as the pinnacle of NT studies.⁵⁴

Even in Germany, where diachronic approaches had dominated the Johannine landscape since the late nineteenth century, there arose scholars who, though influenced to some extent by critical methods, defended the history and theology of the FG. Martin Hengel, for example, published a collection of essays that critiqued critical approaches to demonstrate the coherence of the FG. Hengel showed that the FG was written in the late first century and accepted shortly thereafter as a trustworthy document regarding the historical Jesus.⁵⁵ Especially in America, conservative hermeneutical paradigms were applied to all areas of biblical studies—including the Fourth Gospel—that sought to respect the canonical text’s historical background, literary dimensions, and theological message. Coining the geometric term “hermeneutical triad,” Köstenberger and Patterson offered what they felt was a genuinely evangelical hermeneutical approach to the canon of Scripture:

The historical dimension of the biblical text can never be relegated to the sidelines since Christianity is by its very nature a historical religion whose truthfulness depends on the historical nature of events such as the incarnation or Jesus’ bodily resurrection from the dead....The literary study of Scripture, while a legitimate part of biblical interpretation, must be grounded in historical study and Scripture be seen not merely as a human witness or as an autonomous entity but as inspired, historically-grounded divine revelation. Thus we have argued that history, language, and theology form a hermeneutical triad with theology at the apex.⁵⁶

This article’s proposal of a “synchronic with caveats” approach to the FG appropriates Köstenberger’s triadic method of interpretation for the FG, recognizing the text first and foremost as “historically grounded revelation” from God (not a document constructed by sectarian redactors and needing to be reconstructed by later scholars), as well as being a masterpiece of human literature, yielding theologi-

⁵³ Richard Bauckham, *Gospel of Glory: Major Themes in Johannine Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015), 187.

⁵⁴ Köstenberger, *The Jesus of the Gospels*, 23.

⁵⁵ Martin Hengel, *Die johanneische Frage: Ein Lösungsversuch*, WUNT 67 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1993). A precursor to Bauckham, Hengel shows that the FG was later accepted in the second century as authentic and proposes that the authorship and unity of the Gospel can be traced to its sole author, “John the Elder” (not the son of Zebedee).

⁵⁶ Andreas J. Köstenberger with Richard D. Patterson, *Invitation to Biblical Interpretation: Exploring the Hermeneutical Triad of History, Literature, and Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2020), 561.

cal insights at its crest. While these three elements may inevitably overlap, a specific *order* is what the model encourages in actual exegesis. This order grounds the text's meaning first in its historical context, followed by its literary expression, before drawing a theological point. Indeed, this robust hermeneutic, which gives equal value to the three corners of the hermeneutical triad *while following a certain progression*, offers an attractive evangelical approach to the Gospel of John.⁵⁷

Not all conservative interpreters of the FG, however, agree that the hermeneutical triad's first stop of "history" is the best starting point. Mentioned earlier were proponents who advocate *theology* as the primary hermeneutical paradigm by which to interpret the FG. The hermeneutical movement referred to as "theological interpretation of Scripture" (TIS) is still emerging and must be nuanced according to its practitioners.⁵⁸ Some, such as Daniel J. Treier and Kevin J. Vanhoozer, propose interpreting Scripture, including the FG, through the helpful lenses of ancient theological creeds and confessions.⁵⁹ Others, like Steven E. Fowl, advocate the reading of Scripture meditatively with the guides of spiritual reflections offered throughout church history by theological mystics.⁶⁰ While advocates of TIS define and prioritize theology differently, each seeks to redress the dispassionate methods of historical critics seeking to correct the "problem" of Scripture's textual history, an approach influential since Brodie's second age.⁶¹ TIS proponents prioritize theological concerns in reading any canonical writing, a method reminiscent of Brodie's first age.⁶²

Johannine scholar Edward W. Klink III is influenced by TIS, yet argues for more methodological balance, specifically, a confessionally evangelical method that grounds meaning primarily in the FG's own theological message. This approach differs slightly from Köstenberger's hermeneutical triad, which privileges the text's

⁵⁷ Köstenberger applies the same progression of the triadic model to break down the "parts" in *A Theology of John's Gospel and Letters*.

⁵⁸ The difficulty in defining TIS is not lost on biblical and theological scholarship. For a recent article that provides a helpful survey of the movement while highlighting the nuances of various TIS practitioners, see Elizabeth Mehlman and Russell L. Meek, "Sputtering at the Start Line? Examining Trends in Theological Interpretation of Scripture through Three Theological Commentaries on Ecclesiastes," *BBR* 31.1 (2021): 16–38. Mehlman and Meek challenge the notion that the movement is oriented toward exclusively evangelical aims, contending, "In reality, TIS is inclusive across denominations with varying degrees of comfort or discomfort with traditional systematic theology and pluralistic worldviews" (16).

⁵⁹ See Daniel J. Treier, *Introducing Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Recovering a Christian Practice* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008). For a formidable scholarly defense of TIS, see Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "Theological Commentary and 'The Voice from Heaven': Exegesis, Ontology, and the Travail of Biblical Interpretation," in *On the Writing of New Testament Commentaries: Festschrift for Grant R. Osborne on the Occasion of His 70th Birthday*, ed. Stanley E. Porter and Eckhard J. Schnabel, *TENTS* 8 (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 268–98.

⁶⁰ See Stephen E. Fowl, *Engaging Scripture: A Model for Theological Interpretation* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2008); Fowl, *Theological Interpretation of Scripture* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2009).

⁶¹ These are, of course, only basic summaries of TIS approaches that deserve further nuance. A worthwhile essay interacting with TIS both critically and respectfully is D. A. Carson, "Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Yes, But..." in *Theological Commentary: Evangelical Perspectives*, ed. R. Michael Allen (London: T&T Clark, 2011), 187–207.

⁶² Cf. Mehlman and Meek, "Sputtering at the Start Line?," 21.

historical context (to include its historical author) as the starting point for the text's meaning, with theology serving as its "apex."⁶³ For Klink, theology is the inevitable starting point for an evangelical approach to the FG: "The nature of Scripture requires the *foundation of doctrine* in order to rightly interpret this unique text. To make historical analyses the foundation limits from the start what the interpreter sees and does with the text."⁶⁴ Though definitions and practitioners of TIS continue to differ, Klink may represent its most tempered form as applied to the FG, since he contends for a presupposed (evangelical) doctrine of Scripture as the essential element that must govern all interpretations of John. This is not done, however, at the expense of its history: "The answer ... is balance according to the nature (ontology) of Scripture: *to qualify the interpretation/exegesis of Scripture as either historical or theological is to make a false dichotomy from the start.*"⁶⁵

Proponents of TIS are generally synchronic in method, accepting the canon of Scripture as it stands. As well, most are conservative enough to believe that Scripture, including the FG, is an authoritative document inspired by God—a presupposition that drives their interpretations.

III. DEVELOPMENT OR RELIC?

Though conservative synchronic approaches to the FG have enjoyed a resurgence among Johannine scholars in recent decades, they should by no means be considered a recent innovation. Of special note is the premier early-twentieth-century conservative German scholar Adolf Schlatter, a colleague to Adolf von Harnack and peer to the younger Rudolf Bultmann, who swam virtually alone in a sea of liberal reconstructionists.⁶⁶ When Bultmann convinced the scholarly world that the FG was birthed from Hellenistic Gnosticism and heavily redacted by later

⁶³ Köstenberger contends, "In essence, therefore, the interpretive task consists of considering each of the three major dimensions of the hermeneutical triad—history, literature, and theology—in proper balance, with the first two elements—history and literature—being foundational and with theology at the apex." Köstenberger, *Invitation to Biblical Interpretation*, 57.

⁶⁴ Edward W. Klink III, *John*, ZECNT (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016), 32, emphasis mine.

⁶⁵ Klink, *John*, 33, emphasis his. Admittedly, Köstenberger likewise acknowledges the importance of an evangelical doctrine of Scripture that, in a sense, serves as an inevitable starting point in Christian hermeneutics. Their differences become more pronounced in their exegetical method. Köstenberger insists that history and literature are the foundation for Scripture's meaning, thus setting the chronological pattern of the triad: history, *then* literature, *then* theology. For him, the text of John is not autonomous (i.e., detached from its human author), and texts in themselves do not have a theology—people and authors do. Cf. Köstenberger, *A Theology of John's Gospel and Letters*, 44.

⁶⁶ Köstenberger and Yarbrough have done more than others to introduce modern English readers to Schlatter. See Adolf Schlatter, *The History of the Christ: The Foundation of New Testament Theology*, trans. Andreas J. Köstenberger (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997); Schlatter, *The Theology of the Apostles: The Development of New Testament Theology*, trans. Andreas J. Köstenberger (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999); Schlatter, *Do We Know Jesus? Daily Insights for the Mind and Soul*, trans. Andreas J. Köstenberger and Robert W. Yarbrough (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2005); Werner Neuer, *Adolf Schlatter: A Biography of Germany's Premier Biblical Theologian*, trans. Robert W. Yarbrough (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996). Unfortunately, Schlatter's own commentary on John has never been translated into English: Adolf Schlatter, *Der Evangelist Johannes. Wie er spricht, denkt und glaubt: Ein Kommentar zum vierten Evangelium*, 2nd ed. (1900; repr., Stuttgart: Calwer, 1948).

sectarian groups, Schlatter maintained the Jewishness of the FG, its dependence on the OT, its apostolic integrity, and its reliability as an authentic Jewish-Christian document.⁶⁷

In his critical assessment of the conservative Schlatter against the backdrop of the liberal Bultmann, Peter Stuhlmacher insightfully pointed out, “Schlatter correctly understood Jesus and the apostles as naturally born Jews and refused to separate the Palestinian and Hellenistic communities in the style of Bultmann and his students—interpreting the message of the New Testament witnesses in the light of the Jewish sources known at the time.”⁶⁸ Schlatter’s conclusions are all the more impressive in that they were drawn before the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, which shifted the scholarly consensus from a Hellenized Gnostic provenance for the FG to a Palestinian-Jewish one.⁶⁹

Contrary to Bultmann, there was no reason to postulate a Johannine Christology dependent on a Gnostic redeemer/revealer myth taught from a community school specializing in ancient mystery societies.⁷⁰ Schlatter, therefore, provides solid evidence that modern synchronic advocacy is not so much a development as it is a relic of traditional interpretation, one that was there all along.

IV. FOUNDATIONAL AXIOMS OF A “SYNCHRONIC WITH CAVEATS” APPROACH

A consistent evangelical approach to the FG is most influenced by synchronic approaches to its interpretation but does not reduce the FG to mere literature. Such a “synchronic with caveats” approach is contrary to Culpepper, who interpreted the FG “with the same methods that are applied to the study of ‘secular’ literature.”⁷¹ Instead, it recognizes that though the FG shares obvious features with general literature, it is infinitely more special than the world’s stories (cf. Heb 4:12). Additionally, and contrary to the historical skepticism presupposed by diachronic

⁶⁷ For Schlatter’s conservative interpretive methods, see Robert W. Yarbrough, “Adolf Schlatter’s Contribution to the Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel,” in Porter and Fay, *The Gospel of John in Modern Interpretation*, 81–99; Yarbrough, “The Significance of Method for Theological Work: Translation and Commentary,” *SBJT* 1.2 (1997): 64–76; Andreas J. Köstenberger, “Theodor Zahn, Adolf Harnack, and Adolf Schlatter,” in Porter and Adams, *Pillars in the History of Biblical Interpretation, Volume 1: Prevailing Methods before 1980*, 163–88.

⁶⁸ Peter Stuhlmacher, “Adolf Schlatters Theologie des Neuen Testaments,” *ZTK* 100.3 (2003): 274–75. English translation mine.

⁶⁹ Among the most prominent to make connections between the Qumran documents and the FG were Raymond E. Brown, “The Qumran Scrolls and the Johannine Gospel and Epistles,” in *New Testament Essays* (New York: Paulist, 1965), 102–31; and James H. Charlesworth, “A Critical Comparison of the Dualism in IQS 3:13–4:26 and the ‘Dualism’ Contained in the Gospel of John,” in *John and the Dead Sea Scrolls*, ed. James H. Charlesworth, Christian Origins Library (New York: Crossroad, 1990), 76–106.

⁷⁰ See Rudolf Bultmann, “Die Bedeutung der neuerschlossenen mandäischen und manichäischen Quellen für das Verständnis des Johannesevangeliums,” *ZNW* 24 (1925): 100–146. Bultmann posited that all (supposed) independent sources used for John originated from Mandaean and Manichean Gnosticism, including a signs/miracle source, a sayings/discourse source, and a passion source.

⁷¹ Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel*, 10. Culpepper’s “secular” approach to Scripture is no doubt influenced by the legacy of Aristotle’s *Poetics*, a term now applied by literary critics vis-à-vis any formal analysis of literature (cf. 80–82).

approaches, this approach begins with a focus on the factual history expressed in the text of the FG. This is not to dismiss the efforts of diachronic practitioners, who may illuminate the text by asking questions evangelicals often overlook.⁷² It is, however, to reject the epistemological grounding of such practitioners when it clashes with evangelical convictions, such as the text's divine inspiration, authority, and inerrancy. A "synchronic with caveats" approach to the FG maintains belief in a single apostolic eyewitness who was historically present with Jesus, and who was promised that the Holy Spirit would guide him in recalling Jesus's teachings, miracles, and overall ministry (John 14:26; 20:22; 21:24–25).

Such an approach will take all three points in Köstenberger's hermeneutical triad in their prescribed order and will ascribe equal value to the FG's history, literature, and theology.⁷³ This approach is consistent with the traditional evangelical conviction of viewing Scripture as "God-breathed" (θεόπνευστος, 2 Tim 3:16), necessitating its inerrancy (cf. John 17:17). This means traditional, grammatical-historical exegesis will be applied to the Johannine text, supplemented by scholarly research that may help illumine literary subtleties, resulting in theological conclusions.⁷⁴

The order of these points notwithstanding, it does seem necessary that in some sense, theology—namely, as Klink argued, a doctrine of Scripture—must be the foundational axiom in what directs any evangelical project.⁷⁵ However, a consistent evangelical or "synchronic with caveats" approach to the FG will recognize that theology originates in the mind of the text's historical author(s), not in the texts themselves. Only a historical mind can think theologically—texts merely express that thinking.⁷⁶ Therefore, history will be the starting point for discerning meaning in this approach, since theology or literature do not exist in themselves but are sourced in a historical mind.

As the above historical survey demonstrated, no interpreter of Scripture is exempt from certain epistemological or theological axioms assumed in their theological work.⁷⁷ However, such presuppositions should be checked and refined—even abandoned if necessary—in light of exegesis of the sacred text.

⁷² Thatcher provides an excellent example of an illuminating study that asks "why" the FG was written in a largely illiterate culture, tying its production to social memory theory. See Tom Thatcher, *Why John Wrote a Gospel: Jesus–Memory–History* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2006).

⁷³ Köstenberger with Patterson, *Invitation to Biblical Interpretation*, 49–66.

⁷⁴ For an important and often overlooked study on the grammatical-historical method, see H. Wayne House and Forrest S. Weiland, *The Theory and Practice of Biblical Hermeneutics: Essays in Honor of Elliot E. Johnson* (Silverton: Lampion, 2015).

⁷⁵ Klink, *John*, 31–36. See also David H. Kelsey, *Proving Doctrine: The Uses of Scripture in Modern Theology* (Norcross, GA: Trinity, 1999), 14–30, who demonstrates that mere appeals to "sola Scriptura" do not settle matters of interpretation, but rather how a theologian understands the meaning of Scripture and resulting doctrine, which in turn sheds light on interpretations drawn.

⁷⁶ As stated earlier, this article assumes dual authorship for the FG—both divine and human. Hence, "author(s)."

⁷⁷ See Edward J. Herrelko III, "The Role of Presuppositions and Their Impact on the Process of Biblical Theology: A Case Study of the Pauline Theologies of James Dunn and Thomas Schreiner" (PhD diss., Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2016).

1. *History and literature.* Approaches to the FG that assume the truth of its divine inspiration and inerrancy will not elevate historical-critical matters as do diachronic approaches dedicated to reconstructing the text. The historical veracity of John should be presupposed and considered trustworthy as well as vital for an accurate theology. So, a consistent evangelical or “synchronic with caveats” approach demands that the interpreter keep historical and literary contexts at the fore, assuming the FG’s full inspiration and ultimate origin from God. These presuppositions will yield abundant theological truths that illumine the character of God and man’s relation to him—all of which originated in factual history and serve its readers throughout history.⁷⁸

Indeed, evangelical Johannine scholars have traced themes that reinforce the FG’s coherence and assume a single author (or at least, a single compiler). Bauckham has singled out “glory” as a central topic that unites all of John, while Köstenberger has offered “mission” as a central theme.⁷⁹ Both recognize theological coherence and suggest a single, unified authorial perspective. This means narratives within John were not patched together by unknown individuals forming a later community; rather, a single author moved by the Spirit wrote them (2 Peter 1:21). A consistent evangelical or “synchronic with caveats” reading of John understands, therefore, that the FG present in today’s canon accurately and sufficiently represents John’s intended text. Thus, the basis of interpretation for any evangelical reading should be the FG in its final or canonical form, not diachronic reconstructions.

Consequently, a consistent evangelical or “synchronic with caveats” approach best aligns with literary or canonical criticism derivative of synchronic readings of the FG in the twentieth century with the added caveats of simultaneously viewing it as equally historical and theological. It refuses to reduce John’s presentation to mere literature.⁸⁰ The FG is as *literary* as it is *historically* grounded with an authoritative *theological* message. All three are simultaneously presented in the text and sourced in dual historical minds (divine and human).

2. *Theology.* As a consequence to the above historical and literary assumptions, a consistent evangelical or “synchronic with caveats” approach takes as presuppositional several features of the FG: the FG as it stands in the canon is the inspired text of God, revealed through John the Apostle, an authoritative member of the

⁷⁸ For two classic defenses of the FG’s historicity and Johannine authorship that still remain virtually unchallenged, see Brooke Foss Westcott, *The Gospel according to St. John: The Greek Text with Introduction and Notes*, 2 vols. (London: John Murray, 1908), 1:ix–lxvi; J. B. Lightfoot, *The Gospel of St. John: A Newly Discovered Commentary*, 2 vols., ed. Ben Witherington III and Todd D. Still (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2015), 1:41–78.

⁷⁹ See Bauckham, *The Gospel of God’s Glory*, 43–62; Köstenberger, *The Mission of Jesus and the Disciples*, 43–44.

⁸⁰ Köstenberger states the problem of *mere* literary criticism forthrightly: “My problem with this kind of reductionism is simply this: John is at the core a *religious* book with a *spiritual* message, and since Christianity is at the core a *historical* religion, an investigation of John’s gospel in mere literary terms can never expect to arrive at a full-orbed understanding of its true character and message.” Andreas J. Köstenberger, *Encountering John: The Gospel in Historical, Literary, and Theological Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), xiv, emphasis his.

original twelve disciples, who communicates multiple strands of theology, to which its reader must respond and either come to or grow in faith in Jesus Christ for eternal life. Contrary to diachronic methods of historical reconstruction, the “synchronic with caveats” approach to the FG accepts the traditional doctrines of inspiration and inerrancy, while understanding that John’s Gospel contains numerous theological messages, calling its reader to respond in obedience and faith (3:36; 20:31). With its assumption of the equal value of the text’s history, literature, and theology, the “synchronic with caveats” approach ultimately views the FG as carrying God’s authority over the Christian’s life.

V. CONCLUSION

One neglects to one’s own peril the FG’s richly diverse history of interpretive traditions in any proposed study of John, for no such study arises from an empty chasm. By narrowing the enormous history of Johannine scholarship to that of the last century and a half, this study has focused upon two broad interpretive approaches to the FG, the diachronic and the synchronic. It has championed a synchronic approach with the stated caveats of granting equal value to the text’s history and theology to discern its full, intended meaning.

The relevance of the historical survey is evident in that John has long been considered a source for both Christian theology and controversy, most accentuated in the historical-critical and literary-critical emphases of Brodie’s second and third ages. Lines in the sand have been drawn, with theology and history pitted against one another. At the center of the debate are underlying presuppositions controlling one’s approach to the text. Now in the twenty-first century, such a dichotomy has been legitimately questioned—even abandoned—for something more robust and truer to John’s intentions.

Instead of forcing a choice between historical and theological concerns, this article has argued that a consistent evangelical reading of the FG views its history, literature, and theology as a reliable three-pronged witness serving to underscore John’s unique account. A consistent evangelical reading does not merely agree to the FG’s inspiration and inerrancy, it applies such convictions in its exegesis. It views the FG as having divine origin, being expressed through human communication, and yielding theological lessons grounded in history for Christians throughout history. This “synchronic with caveats” hermeneutic falls broadly within the stream of synchronic readings and has been furthered by those of a more confessional background.

Building on Brodie’s “three ages” classification and affirming Köstenberger’s hermeneutical triad, this article has argued that a “synchronic with caveats” approach that gives equal weight to John’s history, literature, and theology represents a “fourth wave” of Johannine interpretation. This consistent evangelical approach is fueled by the belief that when held in balance, John’s marvelous narrative, crafted with historical and theological veracity, yields a wonderfully helpful theology that presses the reader to stronger belief in Christ (John 20:31).