

CHAPTER TWO

EARLY DOUBTS OF THE APOSTOLIC AUTHORSHIP OF THE FOURTH GOSPEL IN THE HISTORY OF MODERN BIBLICAL CRITICISM*

When did doubts regarding the apostolic authorship of the Fourth Gospel first arise in the history of modern biblical criticism? The question of the authorship of the Gospels is a knotty one. As Stephen Neill points out, the Gospels belong to a class of writings that share the following characteristics: "No one of them [the Gospels] gives, in its text, the name of the author; the titles which we find in the ancient Greek manuscripts form no part of the original text. No one of them gives any indication as to the date and place of writing."¹ He asks, "If an ancient writing is of this anonymous and homeless character, by what means, if any, is it possible to fix it in time, and to establish with some probability the name of the writer?"²

Traditionally, the answer to Neill's question has been that a combination of internal and external evidence points to the Gospels' origin. In the case of the Fourth Gospel, the Gospel's own claims to have been written

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¹Stephen C. Neill and Tom Wright, *The Interpretation of the New Testament 1861-1986* (2d ed.; Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 41. This was already noted with regard to the Fourth Gospel by Dionysius of Alexandria, a pupil of Origen. Cf. Werner Georg Kümmel, *The New Testament: The History of the Investigation of its Problems* (trans. S. McLean Gilmour and Howard C. Kee; Nashville: Abingdon, 1972), 16.

²Ibid.

by one of Jesus' own disciples and patristic attribution to the apostle John held the day, with very few exceptions, until the rise of historical criticism in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. As Neill observes, "Up to the middle of the eighteenth century, an arid theory of verbal inspiration made any scientific progress in Biblical studies almost impossible."³ While one may differ with Neill's assessment, it must be granted that dogmatic considerations had frequently precluded a fresh assessment of the evidence in many areas of studies.

From the standpoint of contemporary scholarship, which has largely abandoned the traditional view of the apostolic authorship of the Fourth Gospel, the question arises what sparked this "paradigm shift," and how it came about. Following Kümmel's treatment, we learn that "After a few voices had been hesitantly raised against the authenticity of John's gospel as early as the last decade of the eighteenth century, several scholars at the beginning of the nineteenth questioned the Johannine authorship of the Fourth Gospel with less equivocation."⁴ Kümmel names the less well known Erhard Friedrich Vogel (1750-?), Georg Konrad Horst (1767-1838), Hermann Heimart Cludius (1754-1821), and, most significantly, Karl Gottlieb Bretschneider (1776-1848), who wrote in 1820.⁵

³Ibid., 359.

⁴Kümmel, *History of Investigation*, 85. The translations from the Latin, French, and German in the following footnotes are the present author's unless noted otherwise.

⁵Ibid., and notes 109-12 on pp. 419-20. Vogel, writing anonymously in 1801-1804, contended that John's Gospel could have been written only after the apostle's death (*Der Evangelist Johannes und seine Ausleger von dem jüngsten Gericht*, 2 vols.). Horst speculated that the christological contradictions in the Fourth Gospel go back to the author's use of different sources, and that both the late attestation of the Gospel and its Alexandrian ideas make it impossible to assume that its author was one of Jesus' disciples ("Über einige Widersprüche in dem Evangelium des Johannis in Absicht auf den Logos, oder das Höhere in Christo," and "Lässt sich die Echtheit des johanneischen Evangeliums aus hinlänglichen Gründen bezweifeln, und welches ist der wahrscheinliche Ursprung dieser Schrift?" *Museum für Religionswissenschaft in ihrem ganzen Umfange*, ed. H. Ph. K. Henke, Vol. I, Magdeburg, 1804). Cludius challenged the apostolic authorship of the Fourth Gospel on the basis of its divergence from the Synoptic Gospels (*Ursichten des Christenthums nebst Untersuchungen über einige Bücher des neuen Testaments* [Altona, 1808]). He was followed by Christoph Friedrich Ammon in 1811 (Erlanger Osterprogramm, "quo docetur Johannem Evangelii auctorem ab editore huius libri fuisse diversum") who claimed that the author of the Gospel of John was someone other than the editor of the book. Another author is Johann Ernst Christian Schmidt ("Versuch über Entstehung der Katholischen Kirche," in *Bibliothek für Kritik und Exegese* [Herborn & Hadamar, 1798], 1-35; and *Kritische Geschichte der neutestamentlichen Schriften* [1804-1805]). Bretschneider's book was entitled

Another writer mentioned in connection with the the criticism of the authorship of the Fourth Gospel is Heinrich C. Ballenstedt.⁶

Luthardt provides further information on the last decade of the eighteenth century only mentioned in passing by Kümmel. He names Evanson, who in 1792 attributed the Fourth Gospel to a Platonist,⁷ as well as providing an extensive annotated bibliography at the end of his work, starting with Evanson.⁸ However, the editor prefaces Luthardt's bibliography with the remark that one unacquainted with the history of biblical criticism might "suppose that the book of Evanson fell like a thunderbolt from a clear sky, a sky that had been cloudless since the days of the Alogi [one of the few to question the Gospel's apostolic authorship in early church history]."⁹ Reference is then made to "some of the English Deists

Probabilia de evangelii et epistolarum Joannis, Apostoli, indole et origine eruditorum Judicis (Leipzig, 1820). He concluded "that the Fourth Gospel could neither have been written by a Jew nor by another of the apostles, nor by a Jewish Christian but was rather put together by a Gentile Christian who wrote after John's death under John's name" (*conclusionem, evangelium quartum neque a Joanne, neque ab alio apostolorum, neque a christiano e Judaeis scribi potuisse, sed potius a christiano e gentilibus, post Joannis mortem, qui se pro Joanne probaret, confictum esse*; 114). Bretschneider claimed that "The author of the gospel . . . fell into geographical and historical errors which a native Jew would never have committed . . . and erred gravely in narrating the Passover meal" (*Scriptis auctor evangelii . . . in errores geographicos et historicos lapsus est, quos judaeus natur nullo modo commisisset, . . . eaque de causa in narranda coena paschali graviter erravit*; 113–14). Though opposed by Schleiermacher, Bretschneider's radical views were taken up by none less than David Friedrich Strauss in his *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined* (London: SCM, 1973 [1935]), who thereby inaugurated the practice of setting John aside for life of Jesus research. Cf. Kümmel, *History of Investigation*, 124–26; Christoph Ernst Luthardt, *St. John the Author of the Fourth Gospel* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1875), 17–20. In 1847, F. C. Baur argued for a late second-century date for John (*Kritische Untersuchungen über die kanonischen Evangelien* [Tübingen]). Cf. David Friedrich Strauss, *The Christ of Faith and the Jesus of History—A Critique of Schleiermacher's The Life of Jesus* (ed. Leander E. Keck [Philadelphia, 1977]), 40, especially n. 50; and pp. 38–47; Kümmel, *History of Investigation*, 124–26; Luthardt, *St. John the Author of the Fourth Gospel*, 20–25.

⁶Cf. Luthardt, *St. John the Author of the Fourth Gospel*, 15; Howard M. Teeple, *The Literary Origins of the Gospel of John* (Evanston: Religion and Ethics Institute, 1974), 8. Teeple's work is seriously limited by its failure to engage primary sources. Cf. notes 4 and 5, p. 261, and note 3, p. 265.

⁷Luthardt, *St. John the Author of the Fourth Gospel*, 15.

⁸Ibid., 283–360; cf. also idem, *St. John's Gospel* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1878), ix–xvii.

⁹Luthardt, *St. John the Author of the Fourth Gospel*, 283.

in the early part of the eighteenth century, and some of the German Rationalists towards its close” who “seem to have gone so far as to deny to the gospel of John, no less than to the other gospels, all value as original records.”¹⁰

Using the above references as a starting point for further investigation, we will focus especially on the last decade of the eighteenth century when doubts regarding the Fourth Gospel’s authorship crystallized that would cast their early shadows on the debate which has continued until this day. Our hope is that, by studying the genesis of those early doubts, we may gain a better understanding of both early historical criticism and contemporary scholarship, especially with regard to the Fourth Gospel’s authorship.

¹⁰Ibid. Cf. also the helpful synopsis of early doubts of the apostolic authorship of the Fourth Gospel in Adolf Hilgenfeld, “Die Evangelienforschung nach ihrem Verlauf und gegenwärtigen Stand,” *ZWT* 4 (1861): 39–40. Hilgenfeld starts with Johann Gottfried Eichhorn (1752–1827), who in his *Einleitung in das Neue Testament* defended the apostolic authorship of the Fourth Gospel (Leipzig: Weidmannsche Buchhandlung, 1810). Eichhorn finds both church tradition and internal evidence to support apostolic authorship. He views the absence of John’s name in the Fourth Gospel as actually supporting the notion of Johannine authorship and calls John’s practice of writing of himself in the third person “schriftstellerische Bescheidenheit” [authorial modesty; *Einleitung*, 99, 102]. Hilgenfeld then surveys Evanson in England and Eckermann in Germany and notes the opposition both of those scholars encountered (Evanson from Priestley and Simpson, Eckermann especially from Gottlob Christian Storr [1746–1805], *Ueber den Zweck der evangelischen Geschichte und der Briefe Johannis* [Tübingen, 1786] and Süsskind; see the discussion below). Hilgenfeld notes that both Eckermann and Johann Ernst Christian Schmidt (“Versuch über Entstehung der Katholischen Kirche,” in *Bibliothek für Kritik und Exegese*, Vol. II, Pt. 1 [Herborn and Hadamar, 1798]) eventually retracted their doubts (Eckermann in *Erklärung aller dunklen Stellen des N. T.*, Vol. II [Kiel, 1807]; Schmidt in *Kritische Geschichte der neutestamentlichen Schriften: Historisch-kritische Einleitung in’s Neue Testament*, Vol. II [Giessen, 1805], 133–60). Hilgenfeld also mentions H. Vogel, G. K. Horst, and H. H. Cludius. His survey closes with the remark that, in Eichhorn’s view, Wegscheider in his *Versuch einer vollständigen Einleitung in das Evangelium des Johannes* (Göttingen, 1806) had defended the apostolic authorship of the Fourth Gospel so successfully that a further thorough refutation of doubts seemed superfluous. Another helpful summary can be found in Carl Wilhelm Stein, *Authentia Evangelii Johannis, contra S. V. Bretschneideri dubia vindicata* (Brandenburg: J. J. Wiesike, 1822), 1–21.

*Early Doubts of the Apostolic Authorship of the Fourth Gospel**A Pioneer in France: Richard Simon (1638–1712)*

Bacon and especially Descartes had already made doubt a central tenet of seventeenth-century scholarship. Hobbes in his *Leviathan* had disputed the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch. Spinoza had contended that the Bible ought to be studied like any other book. In 1695, the French critic Richard Simon, who had replaced the notion of the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch with his hypothesis of “public scribes” (i.e. redactors), commented regarding the apostolic authorship of the Fourth Gospel:

La maniere dont le même Origene parle dans son Commentaire sur l’Evangile de S. Jean . . . me fait juger qu’il y avoit des doutes parmi les anciens Docteurs de l’Eglise sur la verité de ces Livres attribués aux Apôtres. Bien que le sentiment commun fût qu’ils n’en étoient point les auteurs, mais qu’ils avoient été seulement publiés sous leurs noms comme contenant leur doctrine . . .¹¹

Simon was ahead of his time in expressing reservations regarding the apostolic authorship of the Gospels.¹² As Kümmel notes, Simon also pointed out that the superscriptions of the Gospels, with their specifications of authorship, do not come from the Evangelists themselves.¹³

Cotoni refers to further doubts among French New Testament scholars in the eighteenth century:

¹¹Richard Simon, *Nouvelles Observations sur le Texte et les Versions du Nouveau Testament* (Paris, 1695), 3: “The manner in which Origen speaks in his commentary on the Gospel of John . . . leads me to believe that there were doubts among the ancient Church Fathers regarding the veracity of the books attributed to the apostles. While there was a consensus that they [the apostles] were not the authors, yet they [the Gospels] had only been published under their names as containing their teaching . . .”

¹²Cf. Barnabas Lindars, “Part III: The New Testament,” in *The Study and Use of the Bible*, John Rogerson, Christopher Rowland, and Barnabas Lindars (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 324.

¹³Kümmel, *History of Investigation*, 43–45, quoting Simon, *Histoire critique du texte*, 14–15 (note 35). For important treatments of Simon see also John D. Woodbridge, “Richard Simon, le père de la critique biblique,” in *Le Grand Siècle et la Bible*, Bible du tous les temps 6 (trans. Jean-Robert Armogathe; Paris: Beauchesne, 1989), 193–206; and id., “German Reactions to Richard Simon,” in *Historische Kritik und biblischer Kanon in der deutschen Aufklärung*, Wolfsbütteler Forschungen 41 (ed. Henning Graf Reventlow, Walter Sparr, and John Woodbridge; Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1988), 65–87. For an important treatment of eighteenth-century French New Testament scholarship, cf. Marie-Hélène Cotoni, *L’exégèse du Nouveau Testament dans la philosophie française du dix-huitième siècle* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation at the Taylor Institution, 1984).

Dans *La Religion chrétienne analysée* on émet des doutes sur Jean "l'évangéliste" . . . *Les Notes* . . . indiquent les dates de . . . 97 pour Jean . . . ; et les *Réflexions sur la religion* répètent encore que les faits des évangiles ne sont pas assurés par des témoins oculaires et contemporains. L'auteur de la *Dissertation sur la résurrection* réserve pour sa part sa critique à l'évangile de Jean, "écrit mystique que, pour de bonnes raisons, on croit très postérieur à celui dont il porte le nom" (Ms Mazarine 1168, p. 13), et à son auteur, "fourbe qui a écrit sous le nom de Saint Jean [. . .] plus de soixante ans après la mort du Christ" (p. 98). L'auteur des *Notes d'Hobbes* estime que l'évangile de Jean, d'après ses dogmes et son style, serait postérieur de trois siècles à la mort de Jésus . . .

D'autres, comme Du Laurens, sont imprégnés d'un scepticisme général . . . : "Qui nous assurera que les évangélistes ont assisté à tout ce qu'ils ont écrit?" . . . madame Du Châtelet affirme que Matthieu et Jean ne sont probablement pas les auteurs des évangiles qui portent leurs noms . . . De même, . . . en supposant le philosophe platonicien qui écrivit l' "évangile de Jean" à l'apôtre Jean, fils de pêcheur, qui ne savait peut-être pas lire, Raby veut démystifier ses lecteurs: la tradition chrétienne est non seulement incertaine mais mensongère.¹⁴

Eighteenth-century England

Anthony Collins vs. William Whiston (1667–1752). In the England of the early eighteenth century, *An Help for the more Easy and Clear Understanding of the Holy Scriptures: Being the Gospel of St. John* begins as follows:

¹⁴Cf. Cotoni, *L'Exegèse*, 139. "In *The Christian Religion Analyzed* one expresses doubts about John "the evangelist" . . . The *Notes* . . . indicate the dates of . . . 97 for John . . . ; and the *Reflections about Religion* repeat again that the facts of the Gospels are not assured by contemporary eye-witnesses. The author of the *Dissertation about the Resurrection* saves up for himself the critique of the Gospel of John, "written mysteriously for good reasons, one believes, much later than by him whose name it bears," and regarding its author, "pseudepigraphically writing under the name of St. John [. . .] more than sixty years after the death of Christ" (p. 98). The author of the *Notes by Hobbes* estimates that the Gospel of John, according to its teachings and style, was written three centuries after the death of Jesus . . . Others, like Du Laurens, are infected by a general scepticism . . . : "Who assures us that the evangelists had a part in all that was written? . . . Ms Du Châtelet affirms that Matthew and John are probably not the authors of the Gospels that bear their names . . . Similarly, . . . by opposing the Platonic philosopher who wrote 'the Gospel of John' to the apostle John, son of a fisherman who could not possibly know how to read, Raby wants to enlighten his readers: the Christian tradition is not only uncertain but false."

As is attested by the Ancients of Best Authority, so it is generally agreed on by the more Learned among the Moderns, that St John writ this Gospel at Ephesus in Asia; namely when he was return'd thither, after his Banishment in the Isle of Patmos. And consequently it is agreed among the Learned, that He writ it A. D. 97 or 98 or thereabout. And as it was the Last of St John's Writings; so it was the Last written of All the Books, that make up the New Testament.

The End or Design of St John in writing this Gospel was this: to put a Stop to the Heresy of Those who deny the Divinity of Christ, or that He had an Existence before his Incarnation and from all Eternity; and to supply those Passages or Parts of the Gospel History, which were omitted by the three former Evangelists.¹⁵

This calm consensus, however, would soon erode and make way to controversy. In 1724, Anthony Collins published his *The Grounds and Reasons of the Christian Religion*, in which he referred to the writings of William Whiston. This writer, in an "Essay on the Apostolic Constitutions wherein is proved that they are the most sacred of the canonical books of the New Testament,"¹⁶ had argued that the books of the New Testament were all occasional books. Collins contended that Jesus or his apostles should have clearly settled the question which writings were canonical rather than leaving it up to later councils to dispute with one another "about the genuineness of all books bearing the names of the Apostles."¹⁷ To remedy this perceived difficulty, Whiston postulated the genuineness of a document called "Apostolic Constitutions," which, he alleged, provided the kind of early support Collins demanded. However, Whiston also included other early writings such as Clement's two epistles to the Corinthians in the canon.¹⁸ Thus, as Collins observed, Whiston in effect denied divine inspiration, since he contended that the New Testament writings had been altered and changed and were contradicting each other, and that the authors themselves might have been mistaken.¹⁹

With all his peculiarities, the writers of the *Cambridge History of the Bible* can still call Whiston "a traditional harmonist . . . perhaps the last

¹⁵Edw. Wells, *An Help For the more Easy and Clear Understanding of the Holy Scriptures: Being the Gospel of John* (London, 1719), 1.

¹⁶In *Primitive Christianity Reviv'd*, Vol. III (London, 1711).

¹⁷Collins, *Grounds and Reasons*, 17.

¹⁸Whiston, *Apostolic Constitutions*, 67–68.

¹⁹Cf. Collins, *Grounds and Reasons*, 18–19. Cf. Whiston, *Apostolic Constitutions*, 4: ". . . to examin whether this Book, when purg'd from a few Corruptions of later date, from which neither these, nor the other inspired Books of the New Testament are intirely clear, be not really deriv'd from our blessed Lord himself by the Body of his Holy Apostles . . ."

wholehearted supporter of the Chillingworth thesis in his day.”²⁰ Notably, Whiston takes a very conservative position on the authorship of the Gospel of John, dating it in CE 63. He writes,

That this Gospel was Written so early, appears highly probable to me on the Accounts following. (1) The frequent Citation of it, and the Number of the Citations in the *Constitutions*, ne fewer than Fifty Five, plainly infer this degree of Antiquity. (2) Many of the Antient MSS, and Versions affirm that it was Written about the 30th, 31st, or 32nd Year after our Saviours Ascension: Which agrees exactly to the Time here assign'd. (3) Almost all the Commentators since Theophylact agree to the same Time. (4) John's speaking of the Pool of Bethesday, in the present Tense . . . , better agrees to the Time here assign'd, before the Destruction of Jerusalem, when that Pool and Porch were certainly in being, than to the Time afterward, when probably both were destroyed. (5) That Occasion of John's Writing his Gospel mention'd by the Antients, viz. the bringing the other Three Gospels to him, and his observing their Deficiency as to the Acts of Christ, before the Baptist's Imprisonment, does much better agree with this Time, just after the Publication of those Gospels, than with that above Thirty Years later, to which its Writing is now ordinarily ascrib'd. (6) That other occasion, of its Writing mention'd by the Antients viz. in opposition to the Heresies of Cerinthus and Ebion, which deny'd the Pre-existence and Divinity of our Savior, does also better agree with the former Time, when those Heresies first sprang up, than to that so much later, just before the end of the Century, which is usually assign'd to it. (7) No Original Writings of our Religion, which quote the other Three Gospels with any frequency, do omit this: Nay I believe no such Time of their Writing as is usually suppos'd: Which yet must in all probability have been the case, had the other Three Gospels been Publish'd between Thirty and Forty Years earlier than this before us. (8) After all, what some very Ancient Testimonies speak of, that this Gospel was Written with the Apocalypse in Patmus, a little before the Death of John, A. D. 96, is a plain mistake, since the Apocalypse itself, which was seen in Patmus, was Written not there but at Ephesus. And if that be suppos'd a mistake as to place only, but not as in time, yet will this be easily accounted for on our Hypothesis, wherein the first Twenty Chapters are suppos'd Written, A. d. 63, but the last is freely own'd to be later, and not long before the Death of John. Which indeed its Nature and Circumstances plainly imply: But so, that it appears as an evident Appendix, added after the compiling the main part of the Book: Which indeed seems to be the case, as to the greatest part of the last Chapter of Mark also. And that this is not a meer Hypothesis, made upon an emergent difficulty, in way of Evasion only, is evident, because these very *Constitutions*, which have no fewer than Fifty Five Citations or References to this Gospel, have yet not one Citation from, or Reference to that last Chapter, as will easily be observ'd on a particular Exam-

²⁰*Cambridge History of the Bible—The West from the Reformation to the Present Day*, Vol. III (ed. S. L. Greenslade; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983 [1963]), 242–43, referring to William Chillingworth, *The Religion of Protestants: a Safe Way to Salvation* (Oxford, 1638), who had coined the maxim, “The Bible, I say, the Bible only, is the religion of Protestants” (ibid., 175).

ination . . . All those Hypotheses or Solutions of difficulties, which depend on the late Writing the main of John's Gospel, after the Destruction of Jerusalem, are without Foundation, and must be laid aside unless we suppose, that when he wrote his last Chapter long afterward, he alter'd any of his former Expressions, and so suited them to those later Circumstances. Which indeed is not impossible to be suppos'd. Yet, because such an Opinion, without some Proof, must be very weak, all those Hypotheses and Solutions, will in the meantime deserve to be esteem'd very weak also.²¹

Whiston assigned great weight to the attestation of the Fourth Gospel by the *Apostolic Constitutions*. His opinions that John 21 was a later addition and that the evangelist may at the occasion of adding chap. 21 also have altered other parts of the Gospel are worthy of note as well. Whiston indicates that the common view of his day was that the Fourth Gospel was written by John at around CE 90. Interestingly, he believes that not only the Gospel of John, but also the Apocalypse, was written in Ephesus.

Another Deist of the first half of the eighteenth century, Thomas Chubb, writing in 1738, also assumed the apostolic authorship of the Fourth Gospel:

These propositions, for any thing that appears to the contrary, are only the private opinion of St John, who wrote history of Christ's life and ministry . . . And therefore whether Christ was the Logos or Word, whether he was with God, and was God, or whether he made all things in the sense in which St John uses those terms, or not, is of no consequence to us . . . Besides, we do not know what was the ground and foundation of St John's opinion with respect to those points, and therefore we cannot possibly form a judgment . . .²²

Generally, the British Deists of the eighteenth century were more concerned with general philosophical and theological arguments than their detailed application to biblical studies. As Kümmel notes, "All these ideas of the Deists were the result, not of a historical approach to the New Testament, but of a rationalistic critique of traditional Christianity."²³ Yet, the spirit of "free investigation" unleashed by Descartes and embraced by Locke, Hume, and Spinoza spread irresistibly. In 1776, a volume appears in London with the title *A Liberal and Minute Inspection of the Holy Gospel*, quoting John Locke's maxim that

²¹Whiston, *Apostolic Constitutions*, 38–41.

²²Thomas Chubb, *The true gospel of Jesus Christ asserted* (London, 1738), 47.

²³Kümmel, *History of Investigation*, 57–58.

We should keep a perfect Indifferency for all Opinions; so as not to with any of them true, in Preference to others; but (being indifferent) receive and embrace them according as evidence—and that alone; gives the Attestation of Truth.

First Frontal Challenge: Edward Evanson (1731–1805). Edward Evanson, a writer already mentioned above, saw himself as operating within this scope of scientific freedom and objectivity. In 1792, he authored a work challenging the traditional view of the apostolic authorship of the Fourth Gospel entitled *The Dissonance of the Four generally received Evangelists and the Evidence of their Authenticity examined*.²⁴ Evanson notes at the outset the “striking difference” between the language of the Apocalypse and of the Fourth Gospel.²⁵

Erasmus, in his *Libri duo de autoritate libri apocalypsis beati Ioannis apostoli* (Antwerp, 1530), had already expressed doubts that the same man had written the Gospel of John, the Epistles of John, and the Apocalypse of John, in light of the striking differences in style exhibited in these works.²⁶ Frans Tittelmanns, his opponent, immediately retorted that John the Evangelist wrote all these works, but accommodated his style to his various messages, circumstances, and audiences.²⁷ In 1532, Erasmus agreed that, if the church pronounced John the Evangelist the author of the Apocalypse, he would drop his criticism and accept the traditional teaching regarding its authorship.²⁸ The Gospel of John, however, Erasmus attributed without hesitation to John the unimpeachably orthodox evangelist.²⁹

²⁴Ipswich, 1792. References are to the 2d ed., Gloucester, 1805, 267–304.

²⁵Ibid., 267.

²⁶Cf. Jerry H. Bentley, *Humanists and Holy Writ—New Testament Scholarship in the Renaissance* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983), 203.

²⁷Ibid. Cf. also id., “New Testament Scholarship at Louvain in the Early Sixteenth Century,” in *Studies in Medieval and Renaissance History*, n.s. 2 (1979): 51–79, esp. 69–79.

²⁸Bentley, *Humanists and Holy Writ*, 205, referring to LB, 9:863 D–868 B.

²⁹Cf. ibid., 160. In the dedicatory letter of his *Paraphrasis in Evangelium secundum Joannem* (1523), Erasmus summarizes his views on the authorship of the Gospel of John as follows: “When our Lord Jesus Christ’s life and teaching had already been spread widely through the world by the preaching of the apostles and the writing of this Gospel, not so much to put together a gospel-history as to supply certain things that the other evangelists had passed over, since they seemed not unworthy of record. But the chief reason for his writing this Gospel is thought to be the desire to assert the divinity of Christ against the

Dionysius of Alexandria (bishop c. 247–265), a student of Origen, had already stressed the linguistic and stylistic differences between the Revelation and the other Johannine writings. He concluded that the Revelation could not have been written by the author of the Gospel and the Epistles of John, and that the Revelation, unlike the Gospel and the Epistles, was not apostolic in origin.³⁰

But let us return to Evanson. We have seen that his observation of stylistic differences between John's Gospel and the Apocalypse is hardly original. Evanson's resolution of the perceived difficulty, however, is rather interesting. He first states that,

To remove so obvious a difficulty in the way of attributing these two works to the same writer, commentators are accustomed to insinuate, (but without any proof of the fact) that, as John wrote his Gospel many years after he had written the Apocalypse, he had acquired . . . a much better knowledge of the Greek . . . and, on that account, the style of his later work is quite unlike that of his first.³¹

Evanson immediately proceeds to state his own thesis:

The same critics might, with equal reason . . . have remarked also, that the same superior advantage of time and experience had given him a knowledge of the Platonic philosophy, of which, in his earlier days, he was entirely ignorant; for whoever the writer of this Gospel really was, it must be evident to every competent, unprejudiced judge, who reads it in the original . . . that he was well acquainted with the writings of Plato.³²

Evanson's contention that "it must be evident to every competent, unprejudiced judge," intermingles an unconscious dogmatism with an appeal to reasonable, scientific judgment. Like Simon, who aspired to be "sans préjugé," like Spinoza, who "determined to examine the Bible afresh in a careful, impartial, and unfettered spirit, making no assump-

heresies which were already like evil tares sprouting up in the good crop; in particular those of the Cerinthians and the Ebionites, who apart from other errors taught that Christ had been nothing more than a man and had not existed at all before he was born of Mary . . ." (in *Collected Works of Erasmus*, Vol. 46; ed. Robert D. Sider, trans. Jane E. Phillips [Toronto/London: Toronto University Press, 1991], 11).

³⁰Cf. Kümmel, *History of Investigation*, 15–18, quoting Dionysius' view from Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 7.25.

³¹Ibid., 267–68.

³²Ibid., 268.

tions concerning it,"³³ Evanson basks in his supposed impartiality. While no one follows him today in seeing Platonic philosophy in the Fourth Gospel, the avenue through which Evanson came to develop his thesis should be noted. It was the observation of stylistic differences between two works traditionally attributed to the same author, the apostle John, in Revelation and the Fourth Gospel.

Evanson doubts that any writer would speak of himself as John allegedly did in John 21:24: "This is the disciple who testifies of these things and wrote these things, and we know that his testimony is true." Those who answer by contending that chap. 21 was a later addition by the church of Ephesus, Evanson challenges by noting the stylistic unity of the twenty-first with all the other chapters, so that "the whole seems to merit to be accounted equally spurious, or equally genuine and authentic."³⁴

Evanson then proceeds to investigate perceived contradictions between the Synoptic Gospels and the Gospel of John. He observes "a gross contradiction" between John and "the pretended Matthew" (thus questioning the apostle Matthew's authorship of the Gospel traditionally attributed to him as well) in John's claim "that John the Baptist declared he did not know Jesus to be the destined Messiah, till he saw the Holy Spirit descending on him; whereas the Gospel of Matthew, c. iii. v. 14, informs us that he knew him as soon as he came to him . . ."³⁵

Later Evanson calls the resurrection of Lazarus as narrated in John 11 "a legend which, as far as I am capable of judging, has many strong marks upon it of fictitious falsehood; but not one single feature of probability belonging to it."³⁶ Evanson finds it especially difficult to see why, if Lazarus was such a beloved friend of Jesus', "his miraculous restoration to life, should not have been repeatedly mentioned by Luke, in both his histories."³⁷ Evanson fails to see any "purpose whatsoever" for this miracle.³⁸ It is noteworthy that Evanson strongly prefers Luke's Gospel for its historical veracity, setting aside the Gospel of John, while decades later Schleiermacher in Germany still upholds the primacy of the Fourth Gos-

³³Baruch Spinoza, *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (New York: Dover, 1951), 8.

³⁴*Ibid.*, 269.

³⁵*Ibid.*

³⁶*Ibid.*, 295.

³⁷*Ibid.*

³⁸*Ibid.*, 298.

pel.³⁹ Moreover, Evanson objects to the historicity of the Lazarus miracle, since

. . . the very relation of the circumstances of this pretended miracle asserts an absolute impossibility; for it tells us, that, at our Lord's command, Lazarus came forth from from [*sic*] the sepulchre, though he was bound hand and foot, with grave clothes, and his face was bound about with a napkin, and that, after he was come forth, Jesus bid them loose him and let him go.⁴⁰

Evanson exclaims, "Such, and so very different from those recorded by Luke, are the miracles of what the orthodox receive for the Gospel according to the Apostle John!"⁴¹ Lastly, Evanson finds the Fourth Gospel falling short of "the grand internal testimony of authenticity, indispensably necessary in every scripture, which contains the history of a supernatural revelation, predictions of future events, verified by their actual completion."⁴²

Thus Evanson did not only question the apostolic authorship of the Fourth Gospel but also its historical veracity. He began by observing stylistic differences between the book of Revelation and the Gospel of John, and apparent contradictions between the Synoptic Gospels and the Fourth Gospel. His solution is to attribute the Fourth Gospel's authorship to a later Platonic writer, and to give preference especially to Luke among the Synoptists with regard to historical veracity.

Evanson's theses did not go unchallenged. A brief interchange ensued, in which Joseph Priestley and David Simpson defended the apostolic authorship of the Fourth Gospel (both in 1793), and Evanson responded to both writers in the following year (1794).⁴³ The prestigious Bampton lectures in 1810 were devoted to a critique of Evanson as well.⁴⁴

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³⁹See footnote 5 above.

⁴⁰Ibid., 298–99.

⁴¹Ibid., 299.

⁴²Ibid.

⁴³Priestley, "Letters to a Young Man" (1793); Evanson, "A Letter to Dr. Priestley's Young Man" (1794). Cf. Luthardt, *St. John the Author of the Fourth Gospel*, 283–84.

⁴⁴Thomas Falconer, *Certain Principles in Evanson's "Dissonance of the Four generally received Evangelists," &c. examined in eight discourses delivered before the University of Oxford* (Oxford: University Press, 1811).

⁴⁵The separate treatments of eighteenth-century France, England, and Germany should not be taken as an acknowledgment that scholars in these three countries operated in isolation from one another. It seems that the lines of

German scholarship at the middle of the 18th century still held firmly to the apostolic origin and the historical reliability of John's Gospel.

Johann Albrecht Bengel (1687–1752). The Swabian pietist and prolific textual critic Johann Albrecht Bengel considered John to be the major evangelist, whose Gospel was the most indispensable. According to Bengel (writing in 1742), "His Evangelistarum princeps est, quo omnium minime queamus carere; sed permulta, a tribus prioribus exhibita, praesupponens . . . Stilo moderno Johannis librum Supplementum dixeris historiae evangeliae per Matthaeum, Marcum et Lucam descriptae."⁴⁶ Bengel also sought to maintain a proper balance between the historical and theological aspects of Scripture:

The historical matters of Scripture . . . constitute as it were the bones of the system; whereas the spiritual matters are its muscles, blood-vessels, and nerves. As the bones are necessary to the human system, so Scripture must have its historical matters. The expositor who nullifies the historical ground-work of Scripture for the sake of finding only spiritual truths everywhere, brings death on all correct interpretation. Those expositions are the safest which keep closest to the text.⁴⁷

Siegmund Jacob Baumgarten (1706–1757). Baumgarten's lecture notes on the Fourth Gospel were posthumously published by his foremost student Johann Salomo Semler.⁴⁸ Baumgarten begins his discussion of the

influence went more from England and France to Germany than *vice versa*, to some extent due to the few number of British scholars who were able to read German. Cf. Henning Graf Reventlow, *The Authority of the Bible and the Rise of the Modern World* (trans. John Bowden; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 410–14. Cf. also the brief summaries in Lindars, *Study and Use*, 326–29, and F. F. Bruce, "The History of New Testament Study," in *New Testament Interpretation* (ed. I. H. Marshall; Exeter: Paternoster, 1977), 37.

⁴⁶Johannes Albrecht Bengel, *Gnomon Novi Testamenti, in quo ex nativa verborum vi simplicitas, profunditas, concinnitas salubritas sensuum caelestium indicatur* (3d ed.; Stuttgart: Steinkopf, 1860 [Tübingen, 1742]), 300. "He is the chief of the Evangelists, whom we could least afford to be without; he takes for granted very much that is recorded in the three former Gospels . . . In modern expression, one may call John's Book a Supplement to the Gospel History, as set forth by Matthew, Mark, and Luke."

⁴⁷Quoted in Bengel, *Gnomon*, Vol. V (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1860), xvii.

⁴⁸Siegmund Jacob Baumgarten, *Auslegung des Evangelii St. Johannis* (Halle, 1762).

Fourth Gospel with the categorical assertion, “Der Verfasser ist Johannes.”⁴⁹ Later Baumgarten discusses the “Göttlichkeit” (“divine character”) of the book. He gives as the first demonstration of the Fourth Gospel’s “divine character” the credibility of the author:

Die Erzählungen haben die größte Glaubwürdigkeit für sich a. Auf Seiten der erzählenden Person. Johannes befand sich in dem wirklichen Stande, die erzählten Dinge zu wissen, indem er theils ein Augenzeuge dessen, was er erzählt, gewesen, Joh. 1,14, 19,35, 21,24, 1 Joh 1, 1,2.3; theils aber auch die göttliche Eingebung erhalten, die, als an die Apostel verheissen, Johannes ausdrücklich Joh. 16,13, 14,26, 15,26–27 und an andern Orten erwänt. Ueberdem so kan er keine Unwarheiten haben vortragen wollen, indem gar kein Grund zur Mutmassung angegeben werden kan, weil Johannes nicht den geringsten Vortheil davon hätte erwarten können zur Zeit der überhand nemenden heidnischen Verfolgung. Ja es ist nicht einmal möglich, daß Johannes Unwarheiten schreiben können, da er nach den andern drey Evangelisten geschrieben, und zu einer Zeit, da noch viele lebten, die unstreitig von Christo gehöret hatten.⁵⁰

This indeed is a very strong statement in support of the integrity and apostolic authorship of the Fourth Gospel.

Johann Salomo Semler (1725–1791). Baumgarten’s student Johann Salomo Semler published his *Treatise on the Free Investigation of the Canon* in 1771–75. In it Semler distinguishes between the Word of God and Holy Scripture, and contends that not all parts of the canon are inspired or authoritative.⁵¹ Semler also wrote a *Paraphrasis on the Fourth Gospel*.⁵² Semler believed that the Gospel of John was actually the first

⁴⁹Ibid., 1. “The author is John.”

⁵⁰Ibid., 6. “The narrations can claim highest credibility: a. Regarding the narrating person. John was in the real position to know the things he told, since he was partly an eye-witness (John 1:14; 19:35; 21:24; 1 John 1:1–3), but partly also since he had received divine inspiration which John explicitly mentions as having been promised to the apostles (John 16:13; 14:26; 15:26–27). Moreover, he cannot have wanted to perpetrate untruths since no motivation can be cited, since John could not have expected the slightest advantage at the time of escalating pagan persecution. Yes, it is not even possible that John could have written untruths, since he wrote after the three evangelists, and at a time when still many were alive who had undoubtedly heard of Christ.”

⁵¹Kümmel, *History of Investigation*, 63.

⁵²Johann Salomo Semler, *Paraphrasis Evangelii Johannis* (Halle, 1771). Cf. also Gottfried Hornig, *Die Anfänge der historisch-kritischen Theologie: Johann Salomo Semlers Schriftverständnis und seine Stellung zu Luther* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1961).

Gospel.⁵³

Hermann Samuel Reimarus (1694–1768). Prior to his death in 1768, Hermann Reimarus expressed a preference for the Synoptic Gospels by relying primarily on them in his effort to reconstruct Jesus' life. Reimarus urged the interpreter to distinguish between the teaching of the apostles and the teaching of Jesus himself. He writes:

I find ample cause, however, to separate completely that which the apostles set forth in their own writing from that which Jesus himself really spoke and taught in the course of his own life. For the apostles were themselves teachers and had therefore set forth their own teachings and never claimed that Jesus, their Master, had himself said and taught everything they had written. The four evangelists, in contrast, present themselves only as historians reporting that which was most important of Jesus' sayings and actions. Now if we want to know what the teaching of Jesus actually was, what he said and preached . . . we are asking for something that happened in history, and therefore this information has to be taken from the reports of the historical writers . . .⁵⁴

Reimarus concludes,

Because the apostles themselves do not claim to be historians of the teaching of their master, but wanted to be teachers themselves; consequently, after we have discovered from the four sources of the historians what the genuine teaching and purpose of Jesus was, only then is it possible to judge accurately whether the apostles really have taught the same teaching and purpose as their master.⁵⁵

However, it is noteworthy that despite his overall skeptical stance Reimarus held on to the notion of the apostolic authorship of the Gospels (including John).⁵⁶

Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803). In 1780, Johann Gottfried Herder went on record as asserting the incompatibility of the Synoptics and the Fourth Gospel. He asserted the priority of Mark and the interpretive

⁵³Cf. Lange, *Schriften Johannis*, 24–25: “. . . die semlerische Hypothese, dass es das erste von allen Evangelien gewesen sey, ist mir auch nicht wahrscheinlich” (“Semler's hypothesis that it was the first of the Gospels, does not seem probable to me”).

⁵⁴Hermann Samuel Reimarus, *The Goal of Jesus and his Disciples* (ed. George Wesley Buchanan; Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1970), 37.

⁵⁵*Ibid.*

⁵⁶Cf. *ibid.*, 36–37, 41.

character of the Fourth Gospel.⁵⁷ Herder was a precursor of form criticism, and his comments on the authorship of the Gospels seem astonishingly modern:

The whole idea of our evangelists as scribes assembling, enlarging, improving, collating, and comparing tracts is strange to, and remote from, that of all ancient writings that speak of their activities, and even more foreign to conclusions drawn from observing them themselves, and most of all to their situation, their motivation, and the purpose of their Gospels . . .

Furthermore, their whole appearance belies the notion that they drew from one so-called Primal Gospel. Neither apostolic nor church history knows of any such Primal Gospel; no church father in combating the false gospels appeals to such a Primal Gospel as to the fount of truth.

However, it was inevitable that in the course of their instruction these oral evangelists should acquire a circle of followers within which their message was preserved, and this circle was that which the apostles themselves possessed from the beginning of their proclamation of the Gospels.⁵⁸

Johann David Michaelis (1717–1791). Johann David Michaelis wrote a very influential *Einleitung in die göttlichen Schriften des Neuen Bundes* in 1750, based entirely on Simon.⁵⁹ Still, Kümmel credits Michaelis with having “inaugurated the science of New Testament introduction.”⁶⁰ In his *Einleitung* Michaelis was concerned with the origin of individual writings of the New Testament. He poses the question regarding the “divine character” of individual Scriptures in connection with the question of their apostolic authorship.⁶¹ Michaelis presupposes that only those writings of the New Testament that stem from apostles are canonical and thus inspired. This question of apostolic origin is to be clarified by historical research.⁶² In his *Anmerkungen zum Evangelio Johannis*, Michaelis com-

⁵⁷In *Briefe das Studium der Theologie betreffend* (1st ed.; 1780–81; 2d ed., 1785–86). Cf. Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus—A Critical Study of Its Progress from Reimarus to Wrede* (trans. W. Montgomery; New York: Macmillan, 1968 [1906]), 34–37; *Cambridge History of the Bible* II, 272.

⁵⁸Johann Gottfried Herder, in *Herder's Collected Works* (ed. B. Suphan; Vol. XIX, Berlin: Weidmannsche Buchhandlung, 1880 [1796–97]), quoted in Kümmel, *History of Investigation*, 81 (cf. notes 97–99, 418).

⁵⁹Cf. Kümmel, *History of Investigation*, n. 63, 415–16, and n. 79, 417.

⁶⁰*Ibid.*, 69.

⁶¹Cf. also *id.*, “‘Einleitung in das Neue Testament’ als theologische Aufgabe,” *EvT* 19 (1959): 4–16.

⁶²Cf. Kümmel, *History of Investigation*, 69–70. Cf. also n. 81, 417, where Kümmel quotes Michaelis from the fourth edition of his *Introduction* (Göttingen, 1788), 277ff: “. . . the collecting of the writings that we now call the New Testament for the most part took place after the death of the apostles and

ments on John 19:33–35, affirming John to be an eye-witness:

Für uns ist das, was Johannes hier und im Folgenden als Augenzeuge erzählt, deshalb wichtig . . . Johannes selbst macht diese Anmerkung nicht, und hat bey seiner Erzählung vielleicht gar nicht den Zweck, einem solchen Zweifel oder Einwurf gegen die Wahrheit des Todes Jesu zu begegnen: ihm wird das, was er sahe, deshalb merkwürdig, weil er darin zwey Stellen des Alten Testaments an Christo buchstäblich erfüllet findet, und darum zeichnet er es auch seinern Lesern auf.⁶³

Later Michaelis writes, commenting on John 21:24–25,

Dis halten einige für eine Nachschrift der Aeltesten zu Ephesus, die uns das Evangelium Johannis übergeben, und mit ihrem Zeugniß als wahrhaftig und glaubwürdig bestätigt haben. Ich glaube es nicht. Die Worte sind ganz in Johannis Schreibart: und wenn die Aeltesten zu Ephesus, oder was für Leute es sonst seyn mochten, (denn das könnte man kaum errathen) dem Evangelio ein Zeugniß seiner Aechtheit, und dem Evangelisten selbst ein Zeugniß daß er die Wahrheit schreibe, hätten geben wollen, so hätten sie wenigstens darunter schreiben sollen, wer sie wären, denn auf ein solch Zeugnis von einem Ungenannten unterschreibenden würde doch wol kein nur halb vernünftiger sich verlassen, sondern erst fragen, wer bist du denn selbst?

Ich trete also denen bey, die es für Johannis eigene Worte halten, und denn ist, wir wissen, so viel als, ich hoffe, daß alle wissen, es ist unter uns allen bekannt, daß dieser Jünger glaubwürdig sey.⁶⁴

Similarly, in his *Syntagma Commentationum* Michaelis calls John “der einzige Augenzeuge des Leidens Christi unter den Evangelisten” (“the

must be very old, so that for this reason, it is concealed in the dark of unhistorical times.”

⁶³Johann David Michaelis, *Anmerkungen zum Evangelio Johannis: Anmerkungen für Ungelehrte zu seiner Uebersetzung des Neuen Testaments*, Vol. II (Göttingen, 1790), 203. “What John narrates here and subsequently as an eye-witness is important to us because . . . John himself does not note this, and he perhaps does not have the purpose in his narration to refute the objection against the truth of Jesus’ death: he deems what he saw noteworthy because he finds two passages of the Old Testament literally fulfilled in Christ, and therefore records it for his readers.”

⁶⁴*Ibid.*, 229. “Some consider this to be an epilogue by the elders at Ephesus who transmit the Gospel of John and confirmed it as true and faithful by their witness. I do not believe this. The words are wholly in John’s style: and if the elders at Ephesus, or whoever it might be, (for one could hardly guess it) had wanted to attest to the genuineness of the Gospel, and to the evangelist’s truthfulness, they should at least have added who they were, for no somewhat reasonable person would rely on the testimony of an unnamed, but first ask, who are you yourself? Thus I join those who take these to be John’s own words, and I hope we all know that it is widely known that this disciple is trustworthy.”

only eye-witness of Christ's passion among the evangelists").⁶⁵ In discussing the different data regarding the hour of Christ's death in the Gospels, Michaelis remarks,

Die Schwürigkeit ist desto erheblicher, weil sie den wichtigsten Theil der Geschichte unseres Heilandes, nemlich seinen Tod, welchen zu leiden er eben in die Welt gesandt war, betrifft. Wozu noch dieses kommt, daß dieser Zeitfehler dem glaubwürdigsten und grösten Zeugen des Leidens Christ selbst, und nicht sowol dem Evangelisten Marco bezumessen seyn würde, als Johanni.⁶⁶

Kümmel is therefore correct when he summarizes that "the very pioneer of the ground-breaking attempts to give a historical explanation of the origin of the Gospels [i.e., Michaelis] had regarded John's Gospel as an especially valuable historical work and as apostolic in authorship."⁶⁷ However, even as ardent a supporter of the apostolic authorship of the Fourth Gospel as Schleiermacher could insist that in apostolic times very probably anyone conscious of being in essential agreement with what an apostle had taught "was able to regard the publication of his writing under the apostle's name as a wholly acceptable fiction" and that Greek literature proves that such pseudepigraphy was common.⁶⁸

Thus, while Evanson in England cast severe doubts on the apostolic authorship of the Gospel of John, scholarship in Germany was generally more conservative. As late as 1797, Samuel Gottlieb Lange (1767–1823) could write, "Daß Johannes der Verfasser dieser Schrift sey, leidet keinen Zweifel."⁶⁹ But Germany, too, had "its Evanson."

The First Doubts in Late Eighteenth-Century Germany

⁶⁵Johann David Michaelis, *Syntagma Commentationum* (Göttingen, 1759–67), 44.

⁶⁶Ibid., 45. "The difficulty is all the greater since it concerns the most important part of our Savior's story, i.e. his death which to suffer he was sent into the world. To which has to be added that this error of time would have been committed by John, the most trustworthy and the greatest witness of Christ's passion himself, rather than by the evangelist Mark." Note Michaelis' great hesitation to charge John with error, and his effort to find an explanation that reconciles the different ways of reckoning time by John and Mark.

⁶⁷Kümmel, *History of Investigation*, 85.

⁶⁸Cf. *ibid.*, 84, and n. 106. Kümmel also notes that as early as 1811 Schleiermacher contended that it was more important to decide if a book was canonical or not than to settle questions of authorship since the book could regardless still be canonical (*ibid.*).

⁶⁹"There is no doubt that John the Evangelist is the author of this work . . ." *Die Schriften Johannis des vertrauten Schülers Jesu* (Weimar: Verlag des Industrie-Comptoirs, 1797), 2:23–24.

As in England, it was the closing years of the eighteenth century that saw the emergence of doubts regarding the apostolic authorship of John's Gospel.

Jacob Christoph Rudolf Eckermann (1754–1837). In 1796 Jacob Christoph Rudolf Eckermann writes "Ueber die eigentlich sichern Gründe des Glaubens an die Hauptthatsachen der Geschichte Jesu, und über die wahrscheinliche Entstehung der Evangelien und der Apostelgeschichte."⁷⁰ We will trace Eckermann's argumentation in detail, since his work will exercise significant influence on later studies on the authorship of the Fourth Gospel.

Eckermann begins by asserting that the "Hauptthatsachen der Geschichte Jesu einen so hohen Grad der historischen Gewißheit haben, als nur wenige Begebenheiten aus einer so entfernten Zeit ihrer Natur nach haben können."⁷¹ Eckermann then discusses the question of the assessment of the credibility of witnesses. He argues that the testing of an author's trustworthiness is not an outgrowth of general historical scepticism ("einer allgemeinen historischen Zweifelsucht") but a reasonable obligation ("Weg der Vernunft").⁷² Eckermann believes especially these four "Hauptthatsachen" to be beyond reasonable doubt: certain historical information regarding the setting of Jesus' life (Tiberius, Pontius Pilate, etc.); Jesus' virtue and moral life; his conducting his life according to his teachings; and that Jesus founded the Christian Church.⁷³ When the Church selected the four Gospels as canonical in the middle of the second century CE, it used the criterion of tradition: it required the contents of the Gospels to be in conformity with the historical and dogmatic tradition of orthodox churches.⁷⁴

Thus, Eckermann contends, it is impossible to think of a "vorsätzliche und wissentliche Verfälschung der Wahrheit und Abweichung von der Lehre Jesu . . . bis auf die Mitte des zweiten

⁷⁰"About the actually secure foundations of the faith in the major facts of the story of Jesus, and about the probably origin of the Gospels and Acts." In *Theologische Beyträge*, Vol. V, Pt. 2 (Altona, 1796), 106–256.

⁷¹*Ibid.*, 111. "The major facts of Jesus' history have such a high proportion of historical certitude as only few events from such a remote period can have by their nature."

⁷²*Ibid.*, 116.

⁷³*Ibid.*, 120.

⁷⁴*Ibid.*, 126.

Jahrhunderts.”⁷⁵ To sum up, the Gospels were found to be in accordance with tradition at the middle of the second century CE; before that time, an adulteration of Jesus’ teachings is unthinkable; thus, the Gospels deserve to be trusted.⁷⁶ So far, Ecker-mann’s treatment is far from controversial. But, as it turns out, everything said so far is just preliminary to Eckermann’s major argument which he states as follows: “Die Gewißheit der Hauptthatsachen der Geschichte Jesu in den Evangelien hängt keinesweges von dem Beweise ab, daß Matthäus, Markus, Lukas und Johannes, diese nach ihnen genannten Evangelien wirklich und vollständig so geschrieben haben, wie wir sie jetzt besitzen!”⁷⁷ Eckermann is quick to assure the reader that

... derjenige, welcher zweifelt, ob Matthäus, Markus, Lukas und Johannes, die ihnen beygelegten Evangelien so geschrieben haben, wie wir jetzt sie lesen, nicht etwa das Zeugniß eines Apostels, sondern bloß das Zeugniß derjenigen Lehrer der Kirche bezweifelt, die bald nach der Mitte des zweyten Jahrhunderts auf ihren Konzilien diese vier Evangelien, als Evangelien des Matthäus, Markus, Lukas und Johannes, bestätigt und allen übrigen vorgezogen haben.⁷⁸

Eckermann makes much of a passage in Eusebius’ *Ecclesiastical History* 3.37, which he takes to support his claim that the Gospels in their permanent form are a later product from Trajan’s time. He holds to the view of a “gemeinschaftliche Quelle” (“common source”) for the first three Gospels from which they draw in part (cf. Eichhorn). Eckermann doubts that any of the apostles except Matthew could write.⁷⁹ He envi-

⁷⁵Ibid., 137. “It is impossible to think of a deliberate and knowing falsification of the truth and a deviation from Jesus’ teaching . . . until the middle of the second century.”

⁷⁶Cf. ibid., 138 and 114–45. At this point Eckermann concurs with Johann Salomo Semler, *Beantwortung der Fragmente eines Ungenannten, insbesondere vom Zweck Jesu und seiner Jünger* (Halle, 1779), 22–23, who contended, against Reimarus, that it was preposterous to think that the disciples would distort Jesus’ teachings.

⁷⁷Ibid., 145. “The certitude of the major facts of Jesus’ story in the Gospels does in no way depend on the testimony that Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John did in fact write the Gospels as we have them today!”

⁷⁸Ibid., 148. “. . . the one who doubts that Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John wrote the Gospels bearing their names as we read them [the Gospels] now, does not doubt apostolic testimony but only the testimony of those teachers of the Church that soon after the middle of the second century CE confirmed those four Gospels to be the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John and preferred them to all the other Gospels.”

⁷⁹Ibid., 152.

sions a scenario where the apostles are all dead, and only a few very old survivors of the apostolic era had “schriftliche Aufsätze” (“written essays”) by the original apostles. The term “the Gospels according to” Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, then, refers to the Gospels as they were written on the basis of the reminiscences and instruction of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John by later redactors.

“. . . und weil sie dem Hauptinhalt nach aus dem Zeugnisse dieser Männer entstanden waren: so betrachtete man sie in der Folge als Evangelien des Matthäus, Markus, Lukas und Johannes,” Eckermann concludes.⁸⁰ He points to Papias’ reference to *biblia* (“schriftliche Aufsätze”), and his comment that oral tradition is to be preferred over written material.⁸¹ Eckermann notes that only Irenaeus testifies to the apostolic authorship of John, and that it is only since then that the Fourth Gospel is established as canonical.⁸² Eckermann adds to these objections the one that Paul does not mention the Gospels. He further notes that apostolic instruction was oral—why would the apostles have seen a need to write down their material during their own life time? And finally, in the light of the trauma of the Jews’ displacement by the Romans in CE 70, it seems likely that some time passed before the Church found time to write down the Gospel records: in the time of Trajan’s reign.⁸³ Eckermann envisions the genesis of the Gospel of John as follows:

Dem Evangelium Johannes lagen viele eigenhändige sehr wichtige Aufsätze des Apostels Johannes zum Grunde, worin er die ihm besonders merkwürdigen Reden Jesu sich aufgezeichnet hatte. Diese wurden von einem seiner Freunde, der auch die Geschichte der Leiden Jesu aus seinem Munde gehört hatte, Joh. 19,35 oder sich wenigstens bey andern Augenzeugen nach derselben erkundigt hatte, mit andern theils aus seinem Munde, theils von Freunden der Apostel gesammelten Nachrichten in Verbindung gesetzt.⁸⁴

⁸⁰Ibid., 156. “. . . and since they were construed in their main part after the testimony of those men [the original apostles], they were considered to be the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.”

⁸¹Ibid., 159.

⁸²Cf. *ibid.*, 167, 184, and 198–99.

⁸³Ibid., 209.

⁸⁴Ibid., 213. “The Gospel of John was based on many very important essays of the apostle John where he had recorded particularly memorable discourses by Jesus. Those were connected by one of his friends who had also heard the story of Jesus’ passion from his own mouth (Jn. 19:35) or who at least had inquired from other eye-witnesses about it, with other material, partially his own, partially from material collected by friends of the apostles.”

Eckermann arrives at the closing criteria for authentic apostolic material in the Gospels:

Je höher diese in den Evangelien enthaltenen Belehrungen sich über die ältern jüdischen und spätern christlichen Vorstellungen erheben, um desto gewisser kannst du seyn, daß sie nicht eine Meinung und Vorstellung gart anderer Menschen, sondern ächte unmittelbare Lehren Jesu und seiner unmittelbaren ersten Schüler seyn.⁸⁵

Eckermann continues,

Denn irren konnten sich freylich die redlichen Sammler und Verfasser der Evangelien, indem sie für ächte apostolische Wahrheit hielten, was doch nur die Meinung andrer Christen, und ihre Vorstellung von den Thatsachen war, die sie von andern, oder von den Aposteln gehört hatten. Irren konnten sie ferner in der Wahl der eignen Art der Erzählung und Darstellung. Was ihnen die lehrreichste und würdigste Art der Erzählung und Darstellung schien, das ist sie darum noch nicht nothwendig für einen jeden und für alle Zeiten.⁸⁶

Thus, Eckermann exhorts his readers to discern carefully between outmoded ways of thought and helpful permanent teaching. In the latter, they will hear the voice of truth. Eckermann asserts in closing that, in his opinion, the proper use of the Gospels is actually enhanced by considering them not to be the direct works of the apostles. Otherwise one is guilty of bibliolatry. Rather than crippling one's reason, one is to sharpen one's discernment. The preacher will no longer be able to preach without careful selection of authentic material.⁸⁷ So Eckermann closes his plea for a rejection of the apostolic authorship of the Gospels.⁸⁸

⁸⁵Ibid., 251. "The farther these instructions included in the Gospels rise above the more ancient Jewish and the later Christian concepts, the more certain can you be that they do not represent an opinion and conception of other men but genuine direct teachings of Jesus and his first disciples."

⁸⁶Ibid., 251–52. "For err could of course the good collectors and redactors of the Gospels, in that they considered as genuine apostolic truth what was only the opinion of other Christians, and their conception of the facts, which they had heard from others or from the apostles. Err they could further in the choice of their own way of narration and presentation. What they considered to be the most instructive and most worthy method of narration and presentation, is therefore not necessarily for everyone and for all times."

⁸⁷Ibid., 254–55.

⁸⁸Note that Eckermann later modified his views, apparently toward a more conservative position. Cf. Jacob Christoph Rudolf Eckermann, *Erklärung aller dunkeln Stellen des Neuen Testaments*, Vol. II (Kiel, 1807). To date I have not been able to obtain this work.

Contra Eckermann: Carl Friedrich Stäudlin (1761–1826). Like Erasmus, Reimarus, Evanson, and others before him, Eckermann did not escape severe criticism. One of the most resolute opponents was Carl Friedrich Stäudlin who wrote his “Bemerkungen über den Ursprung der vier Evangelien und der Apostelgeschichte in Beziehung auf die Untersuchungen des Herrn Doctors Eckermann, in seinen theologischen Beiträgen” in 1799.⁸⁹ After summarizing Eckermann’s theory, Stäudlin sets out to investigate the internal and external evidence to test Eckermann’s hypothesis.⁹⁰

Stäudlin especially singles out the following contentions by Eckermann: first, that Jesus’ disciples probably could not write, with the exception of Matthew; second, that the need to write the Gospels could only have arisen at the end of the first or the beginning of the second century, and Paul’s silence about the Gospels; third, the negative portrayal of the disciples, which Eckermann had taken to be a sign of late composition; fourth, that the Gospels are not written in the spirit of Jesus and his immediate disciples, and that their content itself betrays a later hand.⁹¹

Stäudlin responds to Eckermann’s arguments point by point. We will, however, focus on his conclusion in which he discusses Eckermann’s contention that his theory of second-century redactors actually promotes accurate teaching and preaching.⁹² Essentially, Stäudlin argues that Eckermann’s theory opens the door to historical scepticism regarding both the accuracy of the Gospel records and our ability to know the historical Jesus and to distinguish his teaching from that of the apostles:

Haben wir die Berichte der Begleiter und der Zeitgenossen Jesu vor uns; so sind diese freylich zuverlässige Hülfsmittel, um ihn und seine Lehre kenne zu lernen. Sind aber diese Berichte von später lebenden ganz unbekanntten Männern, die ihre Erzählung aus mancherley ungleichen Quellen, aus ältern Nachrichten und ungewissen Sagen zusammenrafften, und auch wohl hier und

⁸⁹In *Beiträge zur Philosophie und Geschichte der Religion und Sittenlehre* (Vol. V, Pt. 2; Lübeck, 1799), 147–207. Other writers opposing aspects of Eckermann’s writings are Gottlob Christian Storr (1798) and Friedrich Gottlieb Sueskind (1800). Cf. Luthardt, *St. John the Author of the Fourth Gospel*, 285–86.

⁹⁰*Ibid.*, 156.

⁹¹Eckermann had contended that while Jesus had minimized his miracles, later writers had emphasized them, thus betraying their distance to the historical Jesus’ intentions; here Stäudlin refers to Storr’s rebuttal mentioned above.

⁹²*Ibid.*, 202–207.

da ihre eignen Einfälle einmischten; so ist es äusserst schwer auszumachen, was und wieviel wir ihnen glauben sollen.⁹³

Who guarantees, Stäudlin asks, that in the hundred or so years between Jesus and the alleged composition of the Gospels the traditions were not altered? He refers to the "Fragmentisten" (Reimarus) who claimed that Jesus sought to establish an earthly kingdom and that his disciples, when Jesus' effort had failed, began talking about a spiritual kingdom. These kinds of claims are harder to sustain if one holds that the Gospels were written by close associates of Jesus within a few decades of his own lifetime.⁹⁴ Stäudlin adds that he finds everywhere in the Gospels scattered details about Jesus' teachings and character which turn suspect very quickly when one departs from the understanding of the apostolic authorship of the Gospels.⁹⁵

Stäudlin concedes that Eckermann seeks to avoid these implications by postulating "written essays" by the apostles upon which the later documents are supposedly based, and by urging interpreters to distinguish between later additions and genuine information about Jesus' life and teachings. But by what criteria should one make those distinctions? "Wenn man auch alles dieses zugibt, so läst sich doch nicht leugnen, daß die Versuche zu der empfohlenen Scheidung höchst willkürlich ausfallen müssen . . . Dieser Kanon kann durchaus nicht anders als unsicher und willkürlich seyn."⁹⁶

Lastly, Stäudlin is concerned that Eckermann's theories will weaken the appeal of the Christian faith:

Wir wollen einmal annehmen, daß ein denkender Gegner des Christenthums sich über die von Herrn Eckermann vorgeschlagene Absonderung erklären sollte, wie würde etwa sein Urtheil ausfallen? Er wird sagen: Ich sehe wohl, daß man durch künstliche Bemühungen von der Lehre Jesu das abscheiden kann,

⁹³Ibid., 203. "If we have the reports of the companions and contemporaries of Jesus, these are indeed reliable means of getting to know his teaching. If, however, these reports are by later totally unknown men who compiled the story from various sources, from older reports and uncertain fables, and even there probably added their own ideas, it is extremely difficult to decide what and how much we should believe them."

⁹⁴Ibid., 204.

⁹⁵Ibid.

⁹⁶Ibid., 205. "Even if one were to admit all this, it cannot be denied that the attempts at the recommended separation [of genuine source material from later additions] must end up being extremely arbitrary . . . This canon can be nothing but uncertain and arbitrary."

was mir bedenklich und unrichtig vorkommt, und daß man dadurch dieser Lehre eine Gestalt geben kann, gegen die meine Vernunft nichts einzuwenden findet. Man wählt aus ihr heraus, was mit unsern Grundsätzen übereinstimmend ist; man läßt das weg, was anstößig und irrig ist. Allein wie kann man ein solches Verfahren für eine Rettung der Lehre Jesu ansehen? Ist man berechtigt, bey den Nachrichten von der Lehre Jesu nur das als wahr anzunehmen, was sich leicht vertheidigen läßt, und das als unächtigen Zusatz wegzuwerfen, wobey das nicht geschehen kann? Anstatt mich an eine Religion zu halten, deren Inhalt durch ein so willkührliches und zugleich unsichres Verfahren bestimmt werden soll, will ich lieber bloß bey der natürlichen Religion stehen bleiben. Da man mir zugibt, daß die Quellen der christlichen Geschichte nicht rein sind, so scheint es mir jetzt nach verflossenen Jahrhunderten unmöglich, das Reine von dem Getrübten abzusondern. Sollte man es unter diesen Umständen nicht lieber unter die unauflöselichen Probleme rechnen, was Jesus gelehrt hat, als daß man es ohne feste historische Kriterien aus den fremdartigen Zusätzen heraussuchen will?⁹⁷

In his critique of Eckermann's position, Stäudlin drew attention to several issues that occupy New Testament scholarship to this very day: the rootedness of the radical dichotomization between the teaching of Jesus and the theology of the apostles in rationalism; the question regarding valid criteria for the determination of the authenticity of various Gospel traditions; and the lessening of confidence in the Gospels as reliable sources for the Christian faith.

Further Controversy in Germany between 1800 and 1820. While the debate between Eckermann and Stäudlin addressed most of the major issues regarding the authorship of John's Gospel, the first two decades of the nineteenth century witnessed a series of additional controversies on this topic.⁹⁸

⁹⁷Ibid., 206–207. “Let us suppose that a thinking opponent of Christianity should consider the separation suggested by Mr. Eckermann, what would his verdict be? He will say: I understand that it is possible to abstract by artificial means from Jesus' teaching what seems questionable and incorrect, and that one can shape this teaching in a way that reason can no longer object. One chooses what is compatible with our principles; one leaves out what is offensive or false. Only how can one consider such a procedure to be the rescue of Jesus' teaching? Does one have the right to accept as true of Jesus' teaching only what can easily be defended, and to eliminate as inauthentic addition what cannot happen? Rather than embrace a religion whose content is determined by such an arbitrary and at the same time uncertain procedure, I would rather prefer natural religion. Since one admits that the sources of the Christian story are not pure, it seems to me impossible after all those centuries to distinguish the pure from the adulterated. Under such conditions, should one not consider the question of what Jesus taught as an insoluble problem rather than seeking to isolate Jesus' teachings from foreign accretions without sure historical criteria?”

⁹⁸For full bibliographic data on the following two paragraphs, see notes 5 and 10 above.

On the one hand, the rationalists Erhard Friedrich Vogel (1801) and Georg Konrad Horst (1804) registered doubts concerning the Johannine authorship of the Fourth Gospel. Vogel postulated a late date for the Gospel subsequent to the apostle's death, while Horst sought to attribute the christological "contradictions" in John to the evangelist's use of a variety of sources, noting also the relatively late references to John's Gospel in the patristic period. Hermann Heimart Cludius (1808) found in the differences between the Synoptic Gospels and the Gospel of John reason to doubt the latter's apostolic authorship. Christoph Friedrich Ammon (1811) believed he was able to distinguish between the original author and the redactor of John's Gospel (1811).

On the other hand, Johann Gottfried Eichhorn (1810) maintained that Julius Wegscheider had defended the apostolic authorship of John's Gospel so successfully that further proof had been rendered unnecessary. Eichhorn contended that both church tradition and internal evidence supported Johannine authorship. He believed that the absence of the author's name in John was indirect evidence for apostolic authorship, calling this phenomenon "authorial modesty."

By way of summary, we provide the following survey of the debate.

Table 1: Early Doubts of the Apostolic Authorship of the Fourth Gospel in the History of Modern Biblical Criticism

<i>Scholar</i>	<i>Date</i>	<i>Major Theories regarding Fourth Gospel</i>
Dionysius of Alexandria	247–265	Stylistic differences with Rev; FG by John
Desiderius Erasmus	1530	Stylistic differences with Rev; FG by John
Richard Simon	1695	Published under John's name; vs. superscripts
William Whiston	1711	John in Eph. AD 63; ch. 21, redaction later
Edw. Wells	1719	John in Eph AD 97 vs. heresy, add to Syn.s
Johann Albrecht Bengel	1742	Chief of evangelists; supplement to Syn.s
Hermann Samuel Reimarus	17??	Prefers Syn.s; distinction Jesus/ evangelists
Siegmund J. Baumgarten	1762	FG by John
Johann Salomo Semler	1771	FG the first Gospel
Johann Gottfried Herder	1780	Interpretive char. of FG; "apostolic circle"
Johann David Michaelis	1790	Apostolicity & canonicity; FG by John
Edward Evanson	1792	Stylistic differences with Rev.; Platonist
Joseph Priestley	1793	Vs. Evanson, FG by John
David Simpson	1793	Vs. Evanson, FG by John
Jacob Chr. R. Eckermann	1796	Mid-2d-cent. composition based on apostolic essays
Samuel Gottlieb Lange	1797	FG by John; church tradition

Gottlob Christian Storr	1798	Vs. Eckermann, FG by John
Johann E. Chr. Schmidt	1798	Doubts; no mention of FG by Papias, Justin
Carl Friedr. Stäudlin	1799	Vs. Eckermann, FG by John
Friedr. Gottl. Sueskind	1800	Vs. Eckermann, FG by John
Erhard Friedrich Vogel	1801	Written after apostles' death
Georg Konrad Horst	1804	Use of different sources; late attestation
Johann E. Chr. Schmidt	1805	Recants earlier position (see above, 1798)
Julius A. L. Wegscheider	1806	FG by John; Eichhorn: W.'s refutation decisive
Jacob Chr. R. Eckermann	1807	Recants earlier position (see above, 1796)
Hermann Heimart Cludius	1808	Vs. Syn.; writer gnostic; Jewish Christian redactor
Johann Gottfr. Eichhorn	1810	FG by John; "authorial modesty": 3d person
Christoph Friedr. Ammon	1811	Author of FG other than editor
Heinrich C. Ballenstedt	1812	Comparison with Philo
Karl Gottlieb Bretschneider	1820	Different from Synoptics; late attestation
Friedrich Schleiermacher	1832	Pseudepigraphy; FG by John
David Friedrich Strauss	1835	Myth, not history—John set aside; vs. Synoptics
Ferdinand Christian Baur	1844	Late 2nd-cent. date

Evaluation and Conclusion

The late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were characterized by increasing challenges to traditional paradigms. The issue of the apostolic authorship of the Gospels was no exception. While old paradigms still reigned, critical scholars advanced reasons why traditional views should be overturned. Interestingly but not surprisingly, more than one, after advancing a radical position, retreated to a more conservative stance after vehement attacks were mounted by defenders of the traditional view. The time had not yet come for an open challenge. New theories must be brought forward with great caution. Still, those thinly disguised critical hypotheses were easily recognized as "unorthodox" and rigorously exposed and countered. Not always was it "reason" that obtained the upper hand. Much argumentation was little more than mere assertion of dogmatic positions. In the clash of dogmatic traditionalism with awakening and maturing critical scholarship, genuine dialogue was rare. Power, rhetorical strategy, and demagoguery were relied on all too often. Yet the fault did not always lie with the defenders of the traditional view. Some of them, like Stäudlin, were quite able "critics' critics," sensing the writing on the wall in form of speculative departures from well-attested traditions. In the early adolescence of biblical criticism, the critical mind sought to emancipate itself all too often by reacting against all impositions of authority and tradition, failing to recognize the value of much of what had been handed down through the centuries.

In the case of the apostolic authorship of the Fourth Gospel, the traditional paradigm seemed especially strong and difficult to overturn. Scholarship until Richard Simon (1695) was almost unanimous that the apostle John was the author of the Gospel bearing his name. All the more remarkable is the fact that within about seventy years, from Reimarus (d. 1768) over Eckermann (1796), Bretschneider (1820), and Strauss (1835), the Fourth Gospel had been stripped of its authority and historical trustworthiness. While modern scholars such as Leon Morris, D. A. Carson, and John A. T. Robinson sought to stem the tide, the consensus view regarding the authorship of the Fourth Gospel is in essence a further development of the Reimarus/Eckermann/Bretschneider/Strauss trajectory. Why were even able defenders of the apostolic authorship of the Fourth Gospel such as Johann Albrecht Bengel (1742), Johann David Michaelis (1790), Carl Friedrich Stäudlin (1799), and Friedrich Schleiermacher (1832), to name but a few, unable to prevent the “paradigm shift” that overtook Johannine studies within a few decades? More importantly, what role did “reason” and sound argumentation play, and how well-founded on evidence was the change of consensus and direction?

After Gadamer and others, it is not hard to notice a major weakness of this era’s scholarship: the prevalent illusion of scientific neutrality and objectivity. This form of self-deceit often fostered pride in one’s—after all still fairly subjective—judgment and a degree of dogmatism that precluded meaningful dialogue with tradition or new findings respectively. The modern insight that every “interpretive community” as well as every individual interpreter is part of history and tradition had not yet been sufficiently recognized.⁹⁹

More specifically, the question remains: What is the evidence for and against the apostolic authorship of the Fourth Gospel, and how can reasonable, sound judgments under the constraints of orthodox beliefs regarding the nature of Scripture be formed? Was the author of the Fourth Gospel the apostle John, a second-century Platonist, a circle of followers using various sources, possibly including the apostle’s own “written essays”? What does it matter? Does it matter?

Our investigation has come full circle. In light of the opening statement by Stephen Neill, and Richard Simon’s observation regarding the superscriptions to the Gospels, it seems important to be prepared to dis-

⁹⁹Cf. Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1991), esp. the two appendices.

cuss the issue of the apostolic authorship of the Fourth Gospel with genuine openness. The fact that external and internal evidences have been evaluated in ways leading to diametrically opposed conclusions appears puzzling, yet should caution the interpreter and direct our attention to the presuppositions at work in scholarly methodology. Without impugning any one writer's motives, the recognition of the inevitable element of subjectivity in the interpretive process makes it necessary to examine what interests and consequences may be behind various conclusions regarding the authorship of the Fourth Gospel.

Here Stäudlin's cautions, expressed almost two hundred years ago, seem quite prophetic. The farther the actual composition of the Fourth Gospel is removed from its proximity to the life and person of the historical Jesus, the greater the possibility for embellishment and shifts in understanding. If the apostle John, Jesus' closest follower and an eye-witness of Jesus' life and ministry, wrote the Gospel bearing his name himself, there is a much closer connection between the source (Jesus) and the witness (John). If, on the other hand, a circle of later followers functioned as redactors, or if second-century Jewish Christians, Gnostics, or Platonists wrote or edited the Gospel, the reader's confidence in the accuracy of the Gospel would be justly diminished.

One must also acknowledge the considerable amount of tension between the apostolic authorship of the Fourth Gospel on the one hand and questions of biblical inspiration, inerrancy, and canonicity on the other. Writers in the time period under consideration were keenly aware of this connection.¹⁰⁰ It would do modern scholars well to recover a sense of the relationship between historical-critical theories and biblical background studies and their implications for the questions of canon, inspiration, and inerrancy.

We conclude that, while it is appropriate to draw attention to the interpretive element in all the Gospels, and especially the Fourth Gospel, it is still possible to see an essential harmony between Jesus' life and teachings and their presentation in the Gospels. The differences between the Synoptic Gospels and the Fourth Gospel, while significant, should not be exaggerated.¹⁰¹ Some ideas have amazing staying power. Refuted

¹⁰⁰Cf., e.g., Schmidt, *Kritische Geschichte*, 6–8. The term used for the genuineness of a writing by German scholars of this time period is "Aechtheit." The word seems to comprise a whole cluster of concepts, such as genuineness, integrity, veracity, vs. spuriousness, and errancy.

¹⁰¹Cf. the work of scholars such as Leon Morris, *Studies in the Fourth Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969) and D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991) in this regard.

decisively long ago, the conclusions to which these ideas led often still persist. An example of this phenomenon is David Friedrich Strauss' idea of "myth," taken up by Rudolf Bultmann in this century. While the history-of-religions school has seen a significant decline, the view of the Fourth Gospel popularized by Strauss, i.e. that of a secondary, unhistorical document, still prevails in many circles today.¹⁰² Even after the *Leben Jesu* approach to the Gospels turned out to be a "blind alley," few lessons have been learned from the history of Gospels research and Johannine scholarship. It is to these lessons from history that we now turn in closing.

There is a need for greater openness, more dialogue, and an awareness of scholars' own presuppositions. It appears that there are still good reasons to hold to the apostolic authorship of the Fourth Gospel. No decisive evidence has been set forth that render impossible an evaluation of both external and internal evidence with the result that the Johannine authorship of the Fourth Gospel is more probable than its alternatives. It would be an advance if scholars unpersuaded by such arguments were willing to concede that to hold to Johannine authorship is a reasonable alternative. On the other hand, it should be possible for those holding to Johannine authorship to concede that evidence allows for different conclusions, however probable (or improbable) they may seem.

It is not likely that a consensus regarding the authorship of the Fourth Gospel will be achieved in the near future, or even before our Lord returns. It is beyond the scope of this essay to launch a fresh investigation of the evidence for or against the Johannine authorship of the Fourth Gospel. If the above whirlwind tour of late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century scholarship has deepened the consciousness of standing in a centuries-old tradition of scholarly discourse and thus helped foster greater humility and openness to dialogue, our efforts will have been well rewarded.

¹⁰²Cf. the work of J. Louis Martyn, and even that of C. H. Dodd.