

NARRATIVE MODE AND THEOLOGICAL
CLAIM IN JOHANNINE LITERATURE

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NARRATIVE MODE AND
THEOLOGICAL CLAIM IN
JOHANNINE LITERATURE

Essays in Honor of Gail R. O'Day

Edited by

Lynn R. Huber, Susan E. Hulen, and William M. Wright IV

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Abbreviations

AB	Anchor Bible
ABRL	Anchor Bible Reference Library
A.J.	Josephus, <i>Antiquitates judaicae</i>
Anom.	Chrysostom, <i>Contra Anomoeos</i>
ANTC	Abingdon New Testament Commentaries
Apoc. Mos.	Apocalypse of Moses
AYB	Anchor Yale Bible
BETL	Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium
<i>Bib</i>	<i>Biblica</i>
<i>BibInt</i>	<i>Biblical Interpretation</i>
BibInt	Biblical Interpretation Series
B.J.	Josephus, <i>Bellum judaicum</i>
BZNW	Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft
CBQ	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
CBQMS	Catholic Biblical Quarterly Monograph Series
Civ.	Augustine, <i>De civitate Dei</i>
ECF	Early Christian Fathers
<i>Ep. Tra.</i>	Pliny, <i>Epistulae ad Trajanum</i>
ESEC	Emory Studies in Early Christianity
<i>EstBib</i>	<i>Estudios biblicos</i>
ETL	<i>Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses</i>
FC	Fathers of the Church
<i>Hesperia</i>	<i>Hesperia: The Journal of the American School of Classical Studies at Athens</i>
<i>Hist. eccl.</i>	Eusebius, <i>Historia ecclesiastica</i>
<i>Hom. Gen.</i>	Chrysostom, <i>Homiliae in Genesim</i>
<i>Hom. Jer.</i>	Origen, <i>Homiliae in Jeremiam</i>

<i>Hom. Jo.</i>	Chrysostom, <i>Homiliae in Joannem</i>
<i>Hom. Matt. 26:39</i>	Chrysostom, <i>In illud: Pater, si possibile est, transeat</i>
IBC	Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching
ICC	International Critical Commentary
<i>Inc.</i>	Athanasius, <i>De incarnatione</i>
<i>Inst.</i>	Quintillian, <i>Institutio oratoria</i>
<i>Int</i>	<i>Interpretation</i>
<i>ITQ</i>	<i>Irish Theological Quarterly</i>
<i>JBL</i>	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
<i>JFSR</i>	<i>Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion</i>
<i>JTS</i>	<i>Journal of Theological Studies</i>
LCL	Loeb Classical Library
<i>Legat.</i>	Philo, <i>Legatio ad Gaium</i>
LNTS	The Library of New Testament Studies
LSJ	Liddell, Henry George, Robert Scott, Henry Stuart Jones. <i>A Greek-English Lexicon</i> . 9th ed. with revised supplement. Oxford: Clarendon, 1996.
NCB	New Century Bible
NCBC	New Cambridge Bible Commentary
<i>NIB</i>	<i>The New Interpreter's Bible</i>
NIGTC	New International Greek Testament Commentary
<i>NovT</i>	<i>Novum Testamentum</i>
<i>NPNF</i>	<i>A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church</i> . Edited by Philip Schaff and Henry Wace. 28 vols. in 2 series. 1886–1889.
NTL	New Testament Library
PG	Patrologia Graeca
<i>RB</i>	<i>Revue biblique</i>
RBS	Resources for Biblical Studies
SBLDS	Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series
<i>SJT</i>	<i>Scottish Journal of Theology</i>
SNTSMS	Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series
SP	Sacra Pagina
StBibLit	Studies in Biblical Literature
SymS	Symposium Series
VC	<i>Vigiliae Christianae</i>
<i>Vit. Apoll.</i>	Apollonius, <i>Vita Apollonii</i>
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary

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Introduction: The Role of History in Narrative Studies

Susan E. Hulen

Attention to biblical texts as literature emerged in the 1970s and 1980s as a field of study. Although earlier historical-critical scholars also discussed literary elements of the text, they used these details to clarify the historical context in which the text was produced. By contrast, newer studies engaged a wider variety of literary techniques, such as irony, metaphor, and plot, toward a different goal of describing the meaning produced by these elements.

Gail O'Day's early work was part of this shift in method. In her revised dissertation, *Revelation in the Fourth Gospel: Narrative Mode and Theological Claim*, she argued that a fuller understanding of the gospel's perspective must include attention to its literary style. "The substantive claims of revelation and the mode of disclosure are intrinsically related to each other."¹ O'Day sought to intervene in an ongoing argument in Johannine studies over "whether revelation lies in the bare fact of Jesus as revealer or in the content of his revelation."² In his well-known work, Rudolf Bultmann had emphasized *das Dass* ("the bare fact") of revelation: the gospel reveals Jesus as the revealer. In conversation with Bultmann, Ernst Käsemann argued for the importance of the content (*was*) of that revelation—in particular, Jesus's relationship to God the Father.³

Against this background, O'Day argued for attention to the *wie*, the "how" of revelation. *Revelation in the Fourth Gospel* asserted that

1. Gail R. O'Day, *Revelation in the Fourth Gospel: Narrative Mode and Theological Claim* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), 2.

2. O'Day, *Revelation in the Fourth Gospel*, 44.

3. Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, 2 vols. (New York: Scribner, 1955), 66; Ernst Käsemann, *The Testament of Jesus: A Study of the Gospel of John in the Light of Chapter 17* (London: SCM, 1968), 24–25.

the content of the revelation of Jesus cannot be understood independently from the narrative of the gospel. “The Fourth Evangelist shapes and communicates revelation through the particular literary characteristics of the Johannine narrative.”⁴ Therefore, study of the literary modes of communication would further understanding of the message of John’s Gospel.

Revelation in the Fourth Gospel addressed irony as a literary device that conveys the gospel’s meaning. O’Day pointed to a number of places in John 4 where readers perceive a double layer of meaning. For example, O’Day argued that the Samaritan woman perceives her conversation with Jesus on a literal level, while the reader understands Jesus to be speaking on a figurative level. “The ironic ‘double exposure’ of Jesus’ statements and the woman’s responses allows for reader participation in the revelation process in a way that declarative statements could not.”⁵ The *wie* of the narrative points to the gospel’s function as a revealer to its readers. In perceiving this added meaning, the reader experiences the revelation of Jesus that is at the heart of the gospel’s message.

In emphasizing the *how* of revelation, O’Day and other scholars shifted away from a number of the specific methodological approaches that were conventional at the time. For example, interpreters of John 4 had commonly divided the story into multiple sources, seeing significant breaks at verses 8 and 27.⁶ O’Day saw the passage as a literary whole, and because of this, she could make observations about the text as literature that were invisible to historical critics. For example, reading John 4:27–30 as connected to the previous story rather than a separate source tradition, O’Day noticed how the questions the disciples refrain from asking Jesus in verse 27 (“no one said, ‘What do you want?’ or ‘Why are you speaking with her?’”⁷) are questions readers can already answer. They have seen these ideas already in John 4:7, 10. Thus, “for the moment, the reader is more involved with Jesus’ revela-

4. O’Day, *Revelation in the Fourth Gospel*, 45–46.

5. O’Day, *Revelation in the Fourth Gospel*, 73.

6. O’Day, *Revelation in the Fourth Gospel*, 50. See also Robert T. Fortna, *The Gospel of Signs: A Reconstruction of the Narrative Source Underlying the Fourth Gospel*, SNTSMS 11 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 189–90. Fortna and other interpreters saw the core of the story in John 4 as part of the signs source, to which the evangelist added dialogue.

7. All biblical quotations are from the NRSV.

tion than his disciples are.”⁸ The perception of irony engages the reader and affects the interpretation of the conversations Jesus is having in the narrative.

Another distinctive contribution of O’Day’s literary approach was her argument that readers of the gospel need not choose between two apparent meanings in the story. For example, interpreters have argued about whether the indication that Jesus “had to go through Samaria” (John 4:4) pointed to a practical or theological necessity. Rudolf Bultmann suggested it was merely the shortest route, while others argued for a divine impetus.⁹ O’Day suggested that the discussion with the disciples in 4:27–38 clarifies that *both* literal and theological necessity were in view. The exchange between Jesus and his disciples underscores that “geographical and theological necessity are inseparable—the necessity to pass through Samaria is part of doing God’s will.”¹⁰ Again, this kind of insight arises from treating the passage as a whole rather than unrelated component parts.

These methodological shifts met some criticism by scholars who suggest that the search for literary meaning is insufficiently historical. For example, when Jörg Frey outlined various methodological approaches, he criticized literary readings of John because “the historical dimension [is] bracketed out.”¹¹ Here Frey narrowly defined “the historical dimension” in terms of the classical historical-critical questions of the prehistory of the text or the identification of the situation in which the gospel was composed. Without these elements, Frey argued, literary interpretation “draws near again to the approach of the

8. O’Day, *Revelation in the Fourth Gospel*, 75.

9. Bultmann and others agreed that this was practical necessity: Rudolf Bultmann, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, trans. G. R. Beasley-Murray, R. W. N. Hoare, and J. K. Riches (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1971), 176. See also Edwyn Clement Hoskyns, *The Fourth Gospel*, ed. F. N. Davey (London: Faber & Faber, 1947), 232; C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel according to St. John: An Introduction with Commentary and Notes on the Greek Text*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978), 193. Others argued for divine necessity. See, e.g., Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel according to John*, 2 vols., AB 29–29A (New York: Doubleday, 1966–1970), 1:169; and Francis J. Moloney, *The Gospel of John*, SP 4 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1988), 116.

10. O’Day, *Revelation in the Fourth Gospel*, 80.

11. Jörg Frey, *The Glory of the Crucified One: Christology and Theology in the Gospel of John*, trans. Wayne Coppins and Christoph Heilig (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2018), 22.

theological reading” of premodern interpreters who simply sought the “spiritual sense” of the gospel.¹²

Instead, I argue in this introductory essay that literary methods like O’Day’s are historically sound even as they lend themselves to unpacking theological meaning. Literary study that uses historical evidence to explore the variety of ways John’s language might have been received by its earliest readers is more rigorous historically than traditional historical-critical methods. And because literary approaches assume that the gospel is literature that conveys theological content, they more easily yield theological insights. This essay is structured in four sections. First, I describe the historical nature of literary research. Second, I argue that the pursuit of the goals of historical criticism often fails, methodologically speaking, to be sufficiently historical. Third, I explain how literary methods lend themselves to theological exploration. And last, I outline how the essays of this book contribute to this argument.

Literary Criticism Is Historical Research

Literary criticism combines perceptive literary observations with historical contextualization. In this sense, it shares a good deal in common with its historical-critical predecessors. Indeed, what I am calling *literary criticism* occurs with some regularity even among scholars who do not identify as literary critics. After all, much of New Testament scholarship involves various forms of historical exploration: from philological study to history of religions background to an analysis of cultural expectations that the gospel might evoke for early readers. Many of the features of this exploration are shared by literary critics.

Literary studies often use the same ancient comparative sources as historical critics, but they are used for a different purpose. In the hands of historical critics, the goal was often to situate John in a chronological order with all of these sources to form a smooth historical trajectory or to suggest a direct dependence on a single source or idea as a way of identifying the meaning of a passage in the gospel. For literary critics, however, the same sources are historical data points that can help scholars think about the kinds of cultural cues that readers of John would have been familiar with. Whether the author knew the sources or drew on them directly is impossible to say,

12. Frey, *Glory of the Crucified One*, 22; see also 4–5.

but it is also beside the point. Literary sources can inform our understanding of how people of the time made meaning, explained concepts, or employed rhetorical techniques.¹³ Understanding how readers of the gospel may have apprehended its language can give a better sense of the range of interpretive options that are historically plausible.

Framed as a literary task, interpreters can compare features of the New Testament to other ancient literature. *Revelation in the Fourth Gospel* discussed irony as a historical topic in ancient philosophy. Many other examples could be named, but since I have cited Frey as a critic of literary approaches, I want also to cite him as a scholar engaging in the work I am calling literary criticism. One recent study by Frey attends to the various forms of dualism in ancient literature. Frey identifies a number of different kinds of dualism found in the historical period. He looks at other literature with dualistic language and compares both the subject matter and the function of the contrasting language in each literary work. As a result, he concludes that John's dualism is unlike other examples of the period and should not be seen as a development from these sources.¹⁴ This is a careful, historical argument. What is more, it seems to advance the conversation about John's Gospel, which has often proceeded as if all dualistic imagery was alike in every way. This kind of research adds depth to the understanding of the ancient sources in order to situate John within that context.

This basic impulse to situate the language of the gospel in its historical context extends to many aspects of the text. Scholars explore the historical context of not only literary devices, like irony and dualism, but also the cultural understanding of time, death, or Roman imperial power. John's unique portrait of the death of Jesus, for example, is conveyed through specific literary cues. The language John uses raises questions about how ancient readers understood death, and should rightly lead to historical investigation of how John's language would have been perceived by readers steeped in the cultural cues of their time.

As literary criticism developed, critics became less interested in the search for the author's intended meaning and instead sought a meaning early readers of the gospel would identify.¹⁵ Although the author's thoughts

13. O'Day's treatment of irony explored discussions of the use of irony in Aristotle, Plato, Cicero, and Quintilian; see O'Day, *Revelation in the Fourth Gospel*, 12–18.

14. Frey, *Glory of the Crucified One*, ch. 4.

15. On the use of the phrase *intended meaning* in O'Day's early work, see, e.g., O'Day, *Revelation in the Fourth Gospel*, 136.

and motivations are lost to us, interpreters think historically about the use of the language, theological concepts, allusions to Scripture, and so forth, based on other literary evidence from the period. By situating the gospel in its historical context, modern readers can begin to imagine what early readers of the gospel may have understood or how they made sense of the gospel's various images.

I would take this line of thinking a step further, however, to suggest that the gospel's meaning for its early readers was never singular but was always plural. Scholars should explore not a single meaning but *meanings* early readers were likely to recognize. This decision that the gospel's meaning is plural is both a literary and a historical judgment.

On the literary side, John's language lends itself to multiple meanings. As many scholars have noted, the gospel's many metaphors seem likely to give rise to a variety of possible ways of understanding Jesus.¹⁶ In addition to the number of metaphorical expressions, however, the implicit nature of many of these metaphors suggests that some readers would miss entirely some of the gospel's signals about Jesus. For example, John never explicitly stated an association of Jesus's crucifixion with the Passover, but this connection is implied through time markers and allusions. The nature of John's metaphorical language thus suggests that more than one meaning was always possible.¹⁷

But historical evidence also reinforces the notion that readers of the gospel always interpreted it a variety of ways. Our earliest interpreters suggest there were different interpretations and disputes over questions of meaning. Origen's commentary took issue with an earlier work by Heracleon and disagreed on a number of points (see, e.g., *Comm. Jo.* 2.100–104). Irenaeus refuted interpretations of John that he attributed to Valentinian readers (*Haer.* 1.8.5). Later Christians also turned to the

16. E.g., R. Alan Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel: A Study in Literary Design* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), 180–99; Craig R. Koester, *Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel: Meaning, Mystery, Community*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 24–32; Susan E. Hylan, *Imperfect Believers: Ambiguous Characters in the Gospel of John* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009). For a discussion of metaphor in Revelation, see also Lynn R. Huber, *Thinking and Seeing with Women in Revelation* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 4–5, 23–33.

17. See the discussion by Hylan, *Imperfect Believers*, 138–48; Karoline M. Lewis, *Rereading the "Shepherd Discourse": Restoring the Integrity of John 9:39–10:21*, ed. Hemchand Gossai, *StBibLit* 113 (New York: Lang, 2008), 145–57; Culpepper, *Anatomy*, ch. 6. See also the essay by Lynn Huber in this volume.

Gospel of John for evidence to describe the nature of Christ or the Trinity, no matter which of the many sides of those debates they took up. Granted, even these sources are not the very earliest readers of the gospel. Yet the wide variety of ways of being Christian and theological viewpoints in the earliest churches may give us reason to question why interpreters assume that the gospel was written for a community with one viewpoint, facing a single question or problem, and who therefore understood the gospel's language in a unified way. From a historical perspective, this degree of unity seems unlikely.

Historical Criticism Can Be Less Historical

The goals of what I am calling literary criticism differ from classic historical-critical approaches to the New Testament. Literary critics seek to illumine the potential meaning that ancient readers encountered in the biblical texts. Historical criticism seeks to specify the historical location of the author, the author's community, and the sources used in writing. Yet while historical criticism has a goal of telling history, its method is not more historical than literary criticism.

The problems historical criticism addresses are interesting questions, and it is easy to see how they came to be topics of scholarly exploration. It would be useful to know where the gospel came from, who composed it, and so forth. The problem is that the possibility of answering these questions remains limited, because doing so would require sources outside of the gospel itself that could be used to verify historical claims. There is simply not adequate historical evidence to answer these questions. The pursuit of these questions inevitably leads to speculation, because it takes the reader beyond the limits of the evidence available.¹⁸

Scholars have largely agreed to lay aside some of these traditional topics, like the identification of the gospel's author. There is wide but not unanimous agreement that further pursuit of the gospel's author is not fruitful. On this subject, there is actually some historical evidence to interact with—more than is available, for example, on the question of the gospel's sources. There are a number of early Christian texts that shed light on the question of authorship. The problem is that the evidence does not

18. Some historical critics also express skepticism about the possibility of answering the traditional questions. See, e.g., Frey, *Glory of the Crucified One*, 34–35.

agree. Although second-century sources identify the author of the gospel as John, the internal evidence points in quite a different direction. The gospel is anonymous, attributing its writings to a plural “we,” which traces its source to an anonymous disciple, the one Jesus loved (e.g., John 21:24). Early commentators noted that there were disputes over the authorship of the gospel, with a variety of claims being made. Because of this discrepancy, it seems a wise historical judgment to say that the author of the gospel is unknown. But at this point, the more responsible thing one can do is to leave the question aside. In the absence of new evidence, continuing to press for a specific answer to the question of authorship is likely to remain speculative.

The same problem holds for the other questions of the gospel’s sources and audience. Questions of the gospel’s sources and redactors often dominated scholarship of the twentieth century. Take, for example, the question of sources in John 4, mentioned above. Robert Fortna explained that the core of the Samaritan story was from a pre-Johannine tradition, expanded by the gospel writer’s insertion of dialogues. John 4:8 was the author’s insertion, which prepared the way for the addition of 4:31–38. This kind of analysis attended to the literary nature of the gospel in one sense. Fortna and others perceived that 4:8 was a literary aside, making sense of the disciples’ absence: “His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.” In addition, this comment by the narrator prepares readers for the return of the disciples in 4:27: “Just then his disciples came.” But for these interpreters, the goal of these observations was to identify layers of sources that could be ordered historically. For this task, the interpreter must rely on his own perceptions, creativity, and logic, because there is not an existing manuscript tradition or other ancient source material that can contribute evidence to the question of layers of redaction and sources.

Absence of historical evidence is also an important consideration with the intractable problem of John’s relationship to Judaism. The question whether John’s community was thrown out of the synagogue is an interesting question that could have consequences for interpretation. It is possible that John’s wording (for example, *aposynagōgos* in John 9:22), came about because his community was cast out of their local synagogue. However, other possibilities also exist. Other New Testament and early Christian writings offer evidence that Christians maintained a variety of relationships to Jewish beliefs and practices. Unfortunately, no historical evidence remains that can be used to verify the specific situation of John’s community.

The interpretation of *aposynagōgos* is an example of how historical-critical readers experience a gap in the text and respond by explaining the discrepancy as part of the history of the text's production. In the case of *aposynagōgos*, the gap is a mismatch between the word and its setting as a reference to events during Jesus's ministry. Scholars imagine that expulsion from the synagogue was unlikely during Jesus's lifetime and occurred only later. Thus, they assert that this language in the gospel points to the later context of the author's community.

By contrast, literary scholars instead ask what the gap we perceive in the text means or what possible meanings it might produce for an early reader of the gospel. Acknowledging that there is no historical evidence that directly addresses the issue turns our attention to another question: What meaning(s) was the language likely to create for early readers? This is historical research, because assessing which questions are likely to be answered in a responsibly historical manner is part of the historian's task. In the end, a literary approach can have a stronger historical method than that of its historical-critical forebears.

A downside to historical-critical interpretation can be that it separates aspects of a single literary work into discrete categories. Scholars often note that John's Gospel intertwines the narrative of events that occurred during Jesus's life with references to followers later on, and that it highlights a process of reflecting back on the meaning of events of Jesus's life and death. But for historical-critical readers, the search for the community's identity requires interpreters to tease apart references to the author's historical period and the narrative framework of Jesus's life. To decide how to connect John's language to a particular historical setting, interpreters have to fix the meaning of the text around certain literary details, and in doing so, other aspects slide into the background.

For example, deciding that becoming *aposynagōgos* was a historical feature of John's community is a response to one aspect of the literary shape of the gospel (especially the wording of John 9:22 and 16:2). But reading those features of the gospel in this way comes at the expense of other aspects of John. In this case, one aspect that gets lost is the potential contrast John may be developing between responses of well-meaning humans, which result in people being *aposynagōgos*, and the result of Jesus's death, which is to gather into one, *synagagē eis hen*, the dispersed children of God (11:52). The contrast suggests the possibility of a theological agenda rather than a historical one. John creates an expectation of being separated, and also an expectation of being gathered together. Not surprisingly, the differ-

ence in being separated or gathered hinges on one's relationship to Jesus. Explaining *apospynagōgos* as a historical experience of the Johannine community is compelling because it fits with a number of other signals in the gospel. However, it is not the only way the pieces could fit together. In addition, it requires that all Christians had the same experience and would have understood the gospel in one way. Our attempts to determine this lost historical context lead us to narrow the possible options for how early readers encountered the gospel.

The tendency to narrow meaning possibilities is a common problem in historical-critical methods. In order to determine the historical context that gave rise to a passage of Scripture, historical critics specify a single meaning of the text. Many of the elements of historical-critical inquiry either assumed that determining a single meaning was possible or explicitly took this as their primary goal. The idea was that by situating the gospel in time and space, modern interpreters could approach the author's intended meaning. That historically grounded meaning could be used as a basis for situating the text in early Christian history.

Instead, literary critics acknowledge that multiple meanings can exist at the same time. O'Day's early work pointed in this direction. Interpreters of John 4:38 had argued over whom the word *others* referred to: "others have labored, and you have entered into their labor." Some asserted *others* pointed to the Samaritan woman; some suggested the early church. Instead, O'Day argued, "it seems best to accept the indefiniteness of the very expression 'others' as part of its intended meaning."¹⁹ The idea that meaning could be open-ended went against the grain of much of historical criticism, for which pinpointing a single meaning aided the process of identifying the specific historical audience or context.

The emphasis on multiple meanings stems from both literary and historical concerns. Ideally, literary methods convey a sense of the historical variety that was available. Ancient readers had many literary and cultural cues to draw from in interpreting texts. Taken as a whole, the historical-critical research of the twentieth century often points to the variety that was available to readers in piecing together a sense of meaning from John's Gospel. Scholars have provided glimpses of multiple communities and philosophical perspectives that might have shaped ancient readers'

19. O'Day, *Revelation in the Fourth Gospel*, 135–36. As I noted above, interpreters (including O'Day) have subsequently moved away from the idea of the "intended meaning."

understandings: Gnosticism, philosophy, Jewish Scripture, and so forth. However, individual scholars often select only a single means of understanding John's language, and in doing so, they set limits on what the text could mean. For example, there were multiple ways of thinking about death for or on behalf of another. Some are expressed in stories of individuals, and others in sacrificial practices, or in interpretations of those practices and the stories associated with them. Modern scholars often focus on only a single means of understanding death to illumine John's Gospel, or they lump many together under one umbrella term, like *atonement*. These practices obscure the variety of options that were available to early readers. Doing so often seems to propel a theological agenda rather than to serve historical inquiry.

Theological Claims

In addition to being a historically rigorous method, literary criticism lends itself to expression of theological meaning of the text. For some interpreters, this is not an advantage. As I quoted above, Frey criticized literary methods for being coopted by theological aims. In this section, I argue instead that literary methods also form a solid foundation for readers whose interests lie in the modern world rather than in ancient history.

The problem Frey identifies has a long history. A primary reason scholars moved toward historical approaches was the need to insulate New Testament study from the concerns of dogmatic theology. In 1787, Johann Gabler set out a program for discerning the religious content of the biblical texts in their own historical context. After that task was complete, Gabler argued that theologians could build a systematic theology on the basis of these historical explorations.²⁰ Many of the important works of the *religionsgeschichtliche Schule* developed from the trajectory Gabler laid out. Over a century later, William Wrede sought a historical method for New Testament theology, a subject that in Wrede's hands became "the history of early Christian religion and theology."²¹ In turning to history, these

20. Gabler's essay is translated and printed in John Sandys-Wunsch and Laurence Eldredge, "J. P. Gabler and the Distinction between Biblical and Dogmatic Theology: Translation, Commentary, and Discussion of His Originality," *SJT* 33 (1980): 134–44.

21. William Wrede, "The Task and Methods of 'New Testament Theology,'" in *The Nature of New Testament Theology*, ed. Robert Morgan (London: SCM, 1973), 116.

scholars sought to open up space for inquiry that was not dominated by contemporary theological beliefs.

Over time, however, scholars realized that these ideals had overstated the possibility of bracketing theological or other belief systems from historical research. Recent scholars largely agree that all interpretations are shaped by the social position and beliefs of the interpreter. The interpretation of historical data requires judgment, and the interpreter's perspective will always shape the outcome of that process. Yet, while neutrality is not possible, interpreters can become aware that their readings are shaped by their own views and, through this awareness, understand that other observations and interpretations are also possible. Acknowledging that other readers see different elements of a passage and make sense of them in different ways can help scholars to acknowledge that more than one reading of a text is possible, and to step back from communicating that there is only one meaning.

In light of this history, literary methods provide a better link to the theological meanings of New Testament texts than historical-critical methods have. The interpreter's job is not to find the single historically correct meaning in order to piece together a dogmatic theology. Instead, the interpreter considers how the biblical text may have communicated its message to readers steeped in that culture. The narrative modes of a text give readers a number of starting points to think about its theological meanings.

Such literary exploration lends itself to elaborating theological content. For example, Jesus's words in John 14:31 have been a perennial question for historical-critical interpreters. Many saw the Greek words, Ἐγείρεσθε ἄγωμεν ἐντεῦθεν, "Rise, let us be on our way," as a break in the text, because Jesus and the group he speaks to do not seem to move until three chapters later (John 18:1). For many historical critics, 14:31 marked the original ending of the discourse after the Lord's Supper, and chapters 15–17 were added at another layer of composition or redaction. In contrast, O'Day noted the weak historical basis for this argument and went on to ask what the gap perceived by the modern reader might mean on the narrative level. She read the language metaphorically, situating it in its literary and theological context:

From Jesus' opening words in 14:2, spatial language has doubled for relational language throughout this chapter (see, e.g., 14:6–7). It is consonant, therefore, with the language about place in John 14 to interpret the words "on our way" (ἐντεῦθεν, *enteuthen*) as being about relation-

ship with Jesus at his hour, as much as they are about physical location. The first-person plural pronouns of 14:31d include the disciples in the eschatological moment of Jesus' departure and mark the ushering in of the promise of 14:3—Jesus will take his disciples to himself, and thus to their place and home with God. John 14:31d thus ends this first unit of the discourse on a note of eschatological triumph quite in keeping with the rest of vv. 30–31. The impotence of the ruler of this world is a reality; the disciples' home and full relationship with God beckons. Indeed, this note of eschatological triumph provides the theological foundation for the continuation of the discourse in John 15–16.²²

Instead of focusing on the source history of this verse, O'Day connected the meaning of the words to the language of the chapter and the trajectory of the Farewell Discourse. The words and their meaning are expressed as part of the theological message unfolding in this part of the gospel. Considering the literary function of the passage leads to an expression of meaning, which in John's case is likely to be theological.

For O'Day, these theological meanings were important both as historical artifacts and as meanings that contemporary Christians could contemplate. O'Day was a professor and scholar of both New Testament and homiletics, and she understood exegetical skills as necessary to both subjects. When literary criticism is undertaken as a historically grounded task, it is a method that also offers preachers a way to proclaim a message of good news in the present. Preachers/exegetes do not discover ancient doctrine that can somehow endure over time and space. Instead, their literary study can connect listeners to the revelatory message of the biblical text. The message preachers experience as revealed through the literary modes of Scripture becomes a message they communicate to others in preaching.

The Organization of This Book

The essays in part 1 of this book are examples of the fruitfulness of literary approaches for Johannine literature. Each of the essays involves both historical contextualization and literary analysis. The identification of rhetorical features of the text becomes more compelling when they are aspects ancient readers might also have apprehended. The essays offer new insight

22. Gail R. O'Day, "The Gospel of John: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections," *NIB* 9:753.

into potential meanings (and varieties of meanings) that ancient readers may have encountered.

Vernon K. Robbins's exploration of characters in John 11 focuses in part on the ironic character of "the Judeans." Although John's language creates some expectation that the Judeans will reject Jesus, Robbins brings out the positive nature—and thus the irony—of the Judeans' character. These positive elements of the text are often ignored or downplayed by other scholars. Reading John in this way creates opportunities to see how Christians of the period—whether Jewish or not—may have understood aspects of John's Gospel.

Gilberto Ruiz takes up the difficult question of Pilate's fear following the Jews' assertion that Jesus claimed to be the Son of God (John 19:8). Ruiz argues that Pilate's fear does not render him less of a tyrant, and that readers of the time would likely have expected Pilate to be portrayed in a negative light. Instead, Ruiz asserts that Pilate comes to be less concerned that Jesus seeks political power and more aware that Jesus possesses divine power. Readers who understood Pilate's fear in this way would have understood Jesus's power to surpass that of the Roman Empire.

Yoshimi Azuma reads John 20–21 as a literary unity and in doing so draws attention to the way the gospel conveys meaning regarding Jesus's resurrected life. In contrast to scholars who have focused only on the fact of Jesus's departure as part of the gospel's message, Azuma argues that these concluding chapters of the gospel point to the continuity between Jesus's life and the ongoing life of the church. She argues that the narrative asides of John 20:8–9, 20:30–31, and 21:24–25 point to the revelatory function of the gospel itself.

Patrick Gray draws attention to the connection between the layers of meaning in Rev 14 and the function of the text. The possibilities in meaning cause readers to choose a perspective with which to interpret the text. John used the ambiguity in imagery as a strategy to persuade readers to commit to his point of view.

Lynn R. Huber also writes about the *how* of Revelation's revealing. She describes the shifts in imagery of Christ as instances of irony, because the shifts create disparity between the text and the reader's expectations. She addresses the change in Christ, first from Lion to Lamb in Rev 5 and then from Lamb to warrior in Rev 19. As in the Gospel of John, the irony of Revelation involves the reader in the production of meaning.

In part 2, the essays move toward questions of the use of literary approaches for interpreters, including ancient and modern preachers.

William M. Wright IV's essay on John Chrysostom argues that Chrysostom communicated a message of divine accommodation based in part on his understanding of the literary modes of Scripture. The character of Nicodemus reflects the human need for accommodation, and Jesus's responses to him were a reflection of divine mercy. Like O'Day, Chrysostom drew on literary modes of the narrative to make a theological claim.

Karoline M. Lewis argues that preachers who approach John from a historical-critical angle often have difficulty preaching it. Literary methods, however, can connect an appropriate historical meaning of the gospel with the experience of the preachers' communities. Lewis argues that greater attention should be given to the potential for the function of the sermon to mirror the literary mode of the gospel.

Part 2 closes with a series of sermons, each of which exhibits in its own way how attention to the literary shape of the text can inform preaching. In their attention to the narrative modes of the text, these preachers use the biblical story as a revealer. They capture elements of the literary nature of the text and its message and communicate that message as good news for the listening audience.

Thomas G. Long's sermon, "Learning How to Tell Time," draws attention to the way John's language brings together human chronology and eschatological time. Present, past, and future times overlap at times in the Fourth Gospel. In John 2, it both is and is not already Jesus's hour, and Long builds on this tension by drawing parallels that bring out the same dimension of the listener's own experience.

"Stop Waiting, It's Time for an Attitude Adjustment," by Teresa Fry Brown, follows the narrative shape of John 5:5-9. Fry Brown brings out details of the story by describing them in modern terms. These contemporary comparisons fit the narrative logic of the passage. Fry Brown's sermon has a consistent message yet does not reduce the story to a single point, something O'Day also encouraged in her writing on preaching: "We need to take a close look at the text itself, to linger with the text, to ask not only what the biblical story says but how it says it."²³ Without naming literary devices as such, Fry Brown brings the listener's life experience alongside the biblical story, shaping their perception of reality according to what she

23. Gail O'Day, *The Word Disclosed: Preaching the Gospel of John* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2002), 3.

sees in the text. In doing so, the passage of the gospel functions as revealer for the listener.

Veronice Miles's sermon, "Disciple, Will You Let Me Wash Your Feet?" also puts the listener into the biblical story. Miles draws on the literary context of the footwashing story to remind listeners of all that they have witnessed in the gospel story and to place them, like disciples, as those whose feet Jesus washes. Drawing on historical background of footwashing as a slave's chore, she creates tension in Jesus's offer that parallels that of the passage.

"The Time of Revelation," a sermon by Ted A. Smith, relates the verb tenses of Rev 21:1–6 to theological claims about God's action in the past, present, and future. He compares the historical context of Revelation to elements of the context of preaching, in the sense that both are "fearful times." In doing so, Smith prepares listeners to hear the promises of Revelation for their own context.

Conclusion

The essays in part 1 situate literary modes of the gospel historically to suggest meanings that early readers of the gospel could identify. The authors in this section often suggest more than one possible meaning or point to the ways readers with different perspectives may have found different meanings. Attention to the narrative modes of the text as they took shape within their historical context opens up various possibilities for reading.

The essays in part 2 understand that elaborating the theological meaning of the gospel is also situated historically, in the sense that preachers speak to and are shaped by their own contexts. These authors do not understand preachers' task to be to assert doctrinal claims that originate in the gospel or Revelation. Instead, preachers perceive theological meaning in the text of John or Revelation that is relevant for their context. They demonstrate how attention to the narrative modes of the text is useful for making this kind of theological claim.

All of the authors in this collection of essays and sermons dedicate their work to the memory of Gail O'Day. She was variously our friend, colleague, and mentor. She taught and advocated a method of reading Scripture that bears fruit both in academic study and in preaching. We hope that this volume testifies to her academic and pastoral contributions and to the fruitfulness of integrating historical, literary, theological, and homiletic interests.