

REVIEW–DISCUSSION

JOHN, JESUS AND THE RENEWAL OF ISRAEL

Richard Horsley and Tom Thatcher, *John, Jesus and the Renewal of Israel*. Grand Rapids, Michigan and Cambridge: Wm B. Eerdmans, 2013. Pp. 207. Paper, \$20.00. ISBN 978-0-8028-6872-5.

Introduction

In this book two scholars combine their forces to develop what began as ‘a conversation about the potential value of the Gospel of John as a source for the historical Jesus’ (p. 1). This is an especially interesting subject to pursue, swimming against the widespread consensus that John has little to offer historians of Jesus. For example, as recently as 2010, Maurice Casey in what turned to be his final major work on Jesus, relegated John to an appendix entitled ‘Other Gospels’.¹ According to Casey, it ‘does not contain any significant material about the ministry of the historical Jesus, other than that which is available in more accurate form in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke’.² In similar vein, the late Geza Vermes dubbed John as ‘the odd-man-out among the evangelists’³ because John’s Jesus is both the Jewish Messiah and also a ‘stranger from heaven’.⁴ He argued that John used Jewish traditional material ‘to supply a background against which he can bring into relief his theologically more developed ideas’⁵ with the result that ‘the chances of hearing the genuine voice of the Galilean Master are minimal’.⁶ Perspectives like those of Casey and Vermes are ‘normal’ within the field of biblical studies and could easily be multiplied. Against such a background, this book by Horsley and Thatcher could be regarded as both heroic in terms of having the temerity to challenge the consensus, and also foolhardy and headstrong. In what follows, I will offer a summary of the key theses of the book before presenting a perspective on the success or otherwise of this enterprise.

¹ Casey (2010) 511–25.

² Ibid. 525.

³ Vermes (2000) 6–21.

⁴ Ibid. 22–58.

⁵ Ibid. 37.

⁶ Ibid. 38.

Overview and Initial Engagement with *John, Jesus and the Renewal of Israel*

The authors present their investigation as one that follows four steps:

Step One: ‘sketch the fundamental political, economic-religious structure and dynamics of Roman Palestine’ (chapters 1 and 2).

Step Two: make the case for the ‘recognition’ of the Gospels as ‘historical stories’, not as ‘individual sayings’, that need to be approached as ‘whole stories’ produced by different communications media compared with the modern post-printing world (chapters 3 and 4).

Step Three: ‘focus on the Gospel of John as a story about Jesus’ mission’ and assess how this ‘fits the historical context’ noted in step one (chapters 5 and 6).

Step Four: ‘explore the fuller portrayal of Jesus in John’s story, presenting Jesus’ mission as the generation of a renewal of Israel’ (chapter 7) ‘in opposition to and by the rulers of Israel’ (chapter 8).

(See pages 7–8)

As we shall see, this tidy plan enables them to postpone tackling the more difficult material for their hypothesis, namely the texts in which John presents a high Christology (the ‘I am’ sayings and the like) until the very last section of the epilogue (pp. 178–81)—when they can do least damage to the main hypothesis being explored!

The foundation of this book is their reconstruction of the political, economic and religious structure of first-century Roman Palestine. Here they claim to draw *inter alia* upon the primary evidence of Josephus’ historical writings to present an ‘Israel’ which is characterised by regional differences (Judea, Samaria and Galilee), and divided on cultural grounds between the ruling elite (temple priests and scribal retainers) and the ordinary people (pp. 29–33, 131–4). There were Judeans, Samaritans and Galileans (pp. 39–41, 126–30). While these were all regarded as ‘insiders’, that is as ‘Israel’, there was, they aver, ‘considerable tension between these regions rooted in their different histories and particularly in the takeover of the Samaritans and Galileans by the rulers of the Judeans’ (p. 41). Here they have in mind the expansion of Judean rule during the Hasmonean and the Herodian periods. This brought to an end the ‘long period of Galilean and Samaritan independence from Jerusalem rule’ and ‘complicated and compounded the basic division between rulers and ruled, between the priestly aristocracy of Jerusa-

lem appointed by the Romans and (particularly) the Galilean and Samaritan as well as the Judean villagers' (p. 47). In chapter 6, 'Verisimilitude vs. Verification', Horsley and Thatcher go on to argue that there is a good fit between this reconstruction and the world as envisaged in John.

The Gospel 'not only tells a historical story. It also has historical credibility in the broad sense that it fits the historical situation in which it is set as that situation can be known from other sources. While the Gospel is by no means a critical history book, it does have considerable historical verisimilitude' (p. 120).

Crucially, they argue that *hoi Ioudaioi* in John should be understood as 'Judeans' and not as 'Jews' (pp. 39–40, 106). While 'the term' does not always refer to the same people, 'in the conflictual debates of the Gospel, and in Jesus' arrest, his hearing before Pilate, and the crucifixion scene, "the Judeans" are clearly synonymous with "the high priests and the Pharisees"', i.e. those who are 'opposed by and opposed to Jesus in the story's dominant conflict' (p. 106). Of this matter, I shall say more below.

Step two of this study makes much of the observation that the gospels were written in a period before printing changed the production of texts. The following citation bears being quoted in full:

In the context of modern print-culture we have imagined the Gospels to be 'written' by 'authors', such as 'Matthew', 'Mark', and 'John,' and then perhaps after some 'editing', being 'read'. But given the predominance of oral communication and the lack of literacy among ordinary people, it now appears that the Gospels, which are popular stories about a popular leader and his movement, were composed in an ongoing process of repeated performance of the Gospel stories in community gatherings. (p. 85)

Here Horsley and Thatcher refer to the insights of 'leading text critics' (Kim Haines-Fitzen, Eldon J. Epp and David Parker), and note that 'the early manuscripts of the Gospels exhibit the kinds of variations one would typically expect between multiple oral performances of a traditional oral story', probably 'over many generations' (pp. 90–1).⁷ Against this background, they assert that the study of the Gospels has been skewed by the urge to find or identify an original text (p. 90) and to treat them as 'collections of sayings and miracle and pronouncement stories strung end to end' rather than as 'sustained stories (with speeches) with a dominant plot and subordinate plots' (p. 91). The task for the exegete today should be to attempt 'to hear

⁷ However, Bart Ehrman is singled out as a text critic who continues 'to project print-critical assumptions onto the manuscript tradition' (p. 91 n. 27).

the *text* of each Gospel’, ‘taking the whole story into account’ in the context of the historical setting insofar as we can reconstruct it (p. 93). If we do this, they aver, we will avoid the dissolution of the Gospel of John into its theological themes. C. H. Dodd is here singled out for criticism. His great work, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge, 1953), is said to have set a trend that is followed by the commentaries of Raymond Brown, Robert Kysar, D. Moody Smith and Urban von Wahlde (pp. 99–100). To my mind this criticism of Dodd is ironic and unwarranted. Dodd followed up his 1953 work ten years later with an important study entitled *Historical Tradition in the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge, 1963), which, while very much more measured, has a kindred spirit with Thatcher and Horsley on this question of oral and print-based cultures. Dodd wrote:⁸

The early Church was not such a bookish community as it has been represented. It did its business in the world primarily through the medium of the living voice, in worship, teaching and missionary preaching, and out of these forms of activity—liturgy, *didache*, *kerygma*—a tradition was built up, and this tradition lies behind all literary production of the early period, including our written gospels.

However, Dodd used this insight to justify a more cautious, tradition-historical study of the Gospels, more akin to the ‘pearls on a string approach’ of the form-critical scholars, as opposed to the holistic hearing/reading advocated by Thatcher and Horsley. Even if the Gospels were once performed as a whole, this does not rule out the use of smaller units in the life of the churches of the first and second centuries, both before and after inscription.

Thus in step two, Thatcher and Horsley dip their toes in the water (or should I say, ‘jump in with both feet?’) of the recent debate among New Testament specialists about orality, aurality and literacy in relation to early Christianity. Here I would point readers to Francis Watson’s illuminating discussion, ‘Modelling Reception’.⁹ He refers to the impact of ‘inscription’, that is, ‘the moment when a prior tradition is articulated and stabilized as it is put into writing’.¹⁰ Prior to inscription, Jesus’ sayings and actions (*datum*) were preserved as ‘social memory’,¹¹ and recollected ‘above all’ by ‘the leaders of the earliest community’ in some kind of ‘informal, nonliterary form’

⁸ Dodd (1963) 9.

⁹ Watson (2013) 342–55.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* 344.

¹¹ *Ibid.* 346.

such as a sayings collection.¹² Inscription obviously could ‘occur at any point between the life of Jesus and the composition of the gospels’. However, Watson considers the theory that the Gospels represent transcripts of performances of the oral tradition to be ‘hypothetical’.¹³ Here he is critical of James D. G. Dunn, who makes a similar proposal to Horsley and Thatcher.¹⁴ Watson considers the thesis that the stories in the Gospels were performed orally before they were put into writing to be ‘supposition’. Clearly this is a complex matter on which the jury is still very much out. I would also point readers to the recent article by Larry Hurtado entitled ‘Oral Fixation and New Testament Studies? “Orality”, “Performance” and Reading Texts in Early Christianity’, *NTS* 60/3 (2014), 321–40. His conclusions about Mark’s Gospel, and which presumably would also apply to John, are pertinent to this discussion:¹⁵

To repeat the point for emphasis, there is no Roman-era example of such an extended prose literary text composed in ‘performance’, and no basis for positing that Mark was so composed. As was the case for other Roman-era authors, NT writers often (typically?) composed their texts with a view to them being read aloud to groups and experienced aurally. But NT texts are the products of authors who wrote for readers and for those who would hear their texts read out.

Whatever we make of this debate about what is called ‘performance criticism’, I would suggest that the case for reading the Gospel of John holistically is not dependent on the theory that it was composed in ‘an ongoing process of repeated performance of the Gospel stories in community gatherings’. Whether we adopt a purely literary theory of a Gospel’s composition or whether we perceive the author to work with a mixture of literary and oral sources, I would suggest that it is still desirable to engage with it as a whole along similar lines to narrative critical studies.

The emphasis on a holistic approach leads Horsley and Thatcher to include some reference to the contribution of narrative critical studies to our understanding of John. In particular they point to Alan Culpepper’s seminal work, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel* (Philadelphia, 1983), before they outline how the story is told in John (setting, characters, plot, portrayal of Jesus). Strangely, they fail to mention many other studies that have built upon Cul-

¹² Ibid. 347.

¹³ Ibid. 345, n. 3.

¹⁴ See Dunn (2003) 222.

¹⁵ Hurtado (2014) 340.

pepper's insights,¹⁶ such as Mark W. G. Stibbe's various insightful books,¹⁷ Margaret Davies,¹⁸ and the recent work of Warren Carter.¹⁹ This lack of engagement with other narrative critics may be related to their insistence that 'the plot of the Gospel can be appreciated only by reading the story in its ancient historical context' (p. 137), and in their aim of deriving from the gospel a historical account of the mission of Jesus. Narrative critics generally do not get bogged down with historical questions, primarily because they are not confident that we can go behind the text to the actual world of historical events. In other words, they are willing to work with the story, even if it fails the tests of 'verisimilitude' and 'verification', and to study it as a source for theology or Christology which may still speak to its readers. For Horsley and Thatcher, this is inadequate. In their perspective, John's Jesus is not 'just a revealer of teaching that forms the basis of a new religion, "(early) Christianity", in opposition to "(early) Judaism"'. Rather Jesus is, as he is in Mark, Q, and Matthew, 'portrayed in John as engaged in the renewal of Israel' (p. 138).

With this in mind, let us now turn to Horsley and Thatcher's analysis of John's portrait of Jesus. He is represented, as 'accompanied and assisted by his disciples, as generating a *movement* of people' who become loyal to him. There is success in the countryside of Judea (3:22, 26; 4:1). The movement expands in Samaria (4:39, 41), and then dramatically in Galilee, to the point when 'the people acclaim as the prophet and prepare to make him king (6:1–15)' (p. 139). There are even references to expansion across the Jordan (10:40–2).

Jesus works and generates a movement of renewal in all the regions of Israelite heritage. ... John ... shows Jesus regularly moving back and forth between Galilee, Judea and Samaria, and the region across the Jordan, building a following among the villagers of each region. By having Jesus active in all the regions where Israelite villagers were located, John signals that the purpose of Jesus' mission was a renewal of Israel and not simply a declaration of transcendent truths symbolized by miraculous signs. (p. 142)

¹⁶ They do note narrative criticism as leading to a more balanced approach to John on page 62 footnote and the collection of essayists in Thatcher (2007).

¹⁷ Stibbe (1993a), (1993b), and (1994).

¹⁸ Davies (1992).

¹⁹ Carter (2006).

Furthermore, ‘the people who become loyal to Jesus’ are said to cease from being loyal to the high priestly rulers and the imperial Roman rule. This is the background to the expulsion of Jesus’ followers from the synagogues (9:22) and Caiaphas’ recognition that ‘if Jesus is allowed to continue his work, then “everyone will become loyal to him and the Romans will come and destroy our holy place and our people” (11:47–8)’ (p. 141). Seen in this light, the placing of the temple incident at the start of the story of Jesus’ public ministry (2:12–22) is not to be ruled out as unlikely, as compared with the Synoptic tradition. Instead, it is consistent with the general picture of a Jesus who confronts ‘the temple and Judean rulers in Jerusalem’ throughout the story (p. 172).

Horsley and Thatcher argue that if we look at John’s Jesus in this way, then it becomes clear that he cannot be viewed as ‘aloof’ or ‘distant’, ‘the “man from heaven” who makes abstract theological declarations about the various ways that he embodies salvation’ (e.g. John 14:6). They note that the characters close to Jesus in John ‘identify Jesus as “messiah” and/or “prophet” in response to his actions and words that impact their lives’ (p. 154). Horsley and Thatcher find that John has a more consistent understanding of Jesus as Messiah than the Synoptic gospels, and they go so far as to argue that the high Christological material in John for Jesus should be understood not as ‘assertions about the nature of Christ in himself’, but as ‘thoroughly relational declarations that focus prominent symbols from Israelite tradition (social memory) in Jesus’ actions so that they become life-giving for those who trust in him’ (p. 181).

Critical Reflections

Enough has been said to give a flavour of the main theses of this book by Horsley and Thatcher. I turn now to offer some critical reflections. Anyone cognizant with the Gospel of John and its reception history will recognise that this small book has set many hares running, and that it will be impossible within the scope of a review of this nature to chase them all down! It is incumbent upon me therefore to be selective.

First, I would commend Horsley and Thatcher for challenging what often seems to be a Synoptic monopoly of the subject, and would applaud their attempts to locate the story within the realities of first century Roman Palestine. The picture they paint of an area marked by regionalism (Judeans, Samaritans and Galileans) and fractured by complex political tensions comes across at first sight as plausible. However, there are some significant weaknesses in their reconstruction, not least the argument that John’s *hoi Ioudaioi* should be understood as ‘Judeans’ and not ‘Jews’ (pp. 39–

40, 106). Here they are following a proposal first made by Malcolm Lowe.²⁰ The alleged anti-Jewishness of the Gospel of John has been and remains a major stumbling block to historians when they work with John. This is one of the reasons why Casey relegates John to the appendix of his historical account of Jesus.²¹ Indeed, so troubling to the scholarly community has been the subject of how ‘the Jews’ are presented by John that a whole conference was devoted to the subject in Leuven in 2000.²² While Thatcher and Horsley’s work potentially may free up this log jam, they present insufficient evidence in this work to support their thesis. For example, they argue that Josephus confirms their perspective both on the regional differentiation and also on the narrower use of *hoi Ioudaioi* for Judeans (pp. 39–44). However, the evidence gathered in a number of studies by Sean Freyne shows that Josephus’ evidence is complex. Freyne focused his study on Josephus’ *Life*, in which the ancient historian described both how he was commissioned by the leadership in Jerusalem to lead the Galileans during the first Jewish war with Rome (66–73 CE), and the subsequent campaign. Freyne’s interest was to elucidate the relationship between the two regions and the particular identity of the Galileans:²³

Our question remains therefore, as to how we are to characterise the prevalent form(s) of Judaism in Galilee on the basis of this text. ... Josephus is at pains throughout the work to present himself as a meticulously observant Jew, sensitive to the religious feelings of the native Galileans. He does not wish them to be disturbed on the Sabbath (*Life* 159, 161), and he carefully observes the prohibition of either killing or injuring a fellow-Jew (*Life* 27, 128, 171, 377).

In other words the religious practices that Josephus, a Judean Jew, found among Galileans were somewhat similar to his own. In respect of relations between Galilee and Jerusalem, Freyne concluded as follows:²⁴

²⁰ Lowe (1976) 101–30; (1981) 56–90. Nowhere do they acknowledge Lowe’s work.

²¹ Casey (2010) 512. Casey describes how he ‘became more and more perturbed by how anti-Jewish this Gospel is, and by the role that it played in Christian persecutions of the Jews’, to such an extent that he wrote an earlier study with the provocative title *Is John’s Gospel True?* (1996).

²² Bieringer, Pollefeyt, and Vanneuville (2001).

²³ Freyne (1987) 605–6.

²⁴ Freyne (1987) 607.

In confining the discussion to Josephus' *Life* it has been possible both to describe the relationship that the narrator assumes and to test at various points the plausibility of that picture. The relationship was reciprocal, it was argued. The Jerusalem council could claim authority over Galilee and Galileans as part of the *ἔθνος τῶν Ἰουδαίων* in the land of Israel. In doing so it could point to its privileged position as the temple city with the pivotal role of the priestly aristocracy supported by Pentateuchal law. The Galileans, for their part, remained attached to that city as the symbolic centre of their beliefs, even when such loyalty was sorely tested by an uncaring, even venal aristocracy.

More recently, Freyne undertook a study of what Josephus might have to say about the interface between Judeans, Samaritans and Galileans:

Unlike what he calls Samaritans, Josephus can call the inhabitants of Galilee *Ioudaioi*, even though, as is well known, his frequent designation, especially in *Life*, is *Galilairoi*. One very clear instance of particular importance ... is *J.W.* 2.232, the episode in which the Samaritans attacked the Galilean pilgrims on their way up to Jerusalem: 'a Galilean, one of a large company of *Ioudaioi* on their way up to the festival, was murdered.' This is precisely the extended meaning of the name already discussed here: Galileans, insofar as they share in the customs—especially the religious ones—relating to worship in the single Temple in Jerusalem, are naturally designated *Ioudaioi*.²⁵

Thus, the evidence of Josephus is held by Freyne to support the view that in the first century in the eyes of the Samaritans, the Galileans were 'Jews' in much the same way as their southern cousins.

If the evidence of Josephus undermines Horsley and Thatcher's thesis about the *hoi Ioudaioi* in John, so also does the Gospel itself. Here I would point readers to an article by John Ashton, 'The Identity and Function of the *Ἰουδαῖοι* in the Fourth Gospel', in which he undertook a sympathetic and careful analysis of Lowe's original hypothesis.²⁶ 'The root difficulty', Ashton says, is that in translation, 'one is forced to choose between alternative readings', on the one hand between a member of a race or religion and on the other a 'native or inhabitant of Judea'. In the first century the noun could clearly carry both connotations. However, in Ashton's view only three instances (7:1, 11:7–8 and 11:54) might best be translated by 'Judeans'. How-

²⁵ Freyne (1999) 39–55; the quotation is from page 54.

²⁶ Ashton (1985) 41–75.

ever, he adds that ‘it would seem odd to reserve the rendering “Judeans” for these three instances alone, when the Gospel employs the same word throughout’.²⁷ In a more recent discussion entitled ““Anti-Semitism” / “Anti-Judaism” in John’s Gospel?”,²⁸ Ruth B. Edwards says that she would be willing to extend this use of the term to delineate geographical location to ‘more than half the examples’ of the 67 occurrences of *hoi Ioudaioi* in the Gospel as a whole. However, she goes on to note that 27 uses still remain in which the words appear ‘to be a shorthand way of describing Jesus’ opponents’,²⁹ and in addition to these, the translation would be misleading in 6:41 and 52 as ‘the Jews’ describes a Galilean crowd. Here I would also add John 2:6, where there is a reference to six stone water jars *κατὰ τὸν καθαρισμόν τῶν Ἰουδαίων*. If this were to refer only to a Judean purity rite, then it is odd that it is found in a story set in Cana, Galilee.

In fact John confirms the picture noted above from Freyne’s studies of Josephus’ *Life*—that Galileans saw themselves as *Ioudaioi* and were seen as such by the Samaritans. This is made clear in the two references to ‘Jews’ in John 4 in the story of the encounter of Jesus and the Samaritan woman. She asks Jesus, *πὼς σὺ Ἰουδαῖος ὢν παρ’ ἐμοῦ πεῖν αἰτεῖς γυναικὸς Σαμαρίτιδος οὔσης;* (4:9). As we would expect, Jesus is regarded by her as a Jew. This would have been the case, whether she thought he had come up from Judea, or whether she knew that his *patris* was Galilee. As the story unfolds, Jesus responds to her questions about the appropriate location for worship with the statement, *ὕμεις προσκυνεῖτε ὃ οὐκ οἶδατε· ἡμεῖς προσκυνοῦμεν ὃ οἶδαμεν, ὅτι ἡ σωτηρία ἐκ τῶν Ἰουδαίων ἐστίν*(4:22). Ashton notes that:³⁰

Jesus’ uncompromising assertion, to the Samaritan woman, that “Salvation is from the Ἰουδαῖοι” (Jn. 4:22)—incidentally one of the passages Lowe finds hardest to fit in with his own thesis—constitutes a challenge as well as a crux. In fact there can be few phrases in the Gospel more capable of laying bare an exegete’s basic presuppositions than this one: it sends the commentators flying in all directions.

This is also the case for Horsley and Thatcher, who say that the woman mistakes Jesus for a Judean, and go on to argue that in saying that ‘salvation is from the Judeans’, Jesus was simply playing along with her assumption until she sees him as the Messiah (p. 144)—then he can proceed to make clear

²⁷ Ibid. 43.

²⁸ Edwards (2014) 131–41.

²⁹ Ibid. 132.

³⁰ Ashton (1985) 49.

‘that “salvation” is actually ‘through him, not through the Judeans or the temple in Jerusalem’ (p. 127). Certainly the passage is shot through with typical Johannine irony and misunderstanding; however, the phrase ‘salvation is of the Jews’ does not readily come across as ironic in the light of the whole story that John tells. The Gospel envisages a future in which neither Mount Gerizim nor the Temple Mount will be loci for encountering God, but this lies beyond the glorification of Jesus in his crucifixion and resurrection. In the meantime, the temple in Jerusalem is still for John’s Jesus ‘my Father’s house’ and of sufficient concern for him as to require him to engage in the activity of protest described in 2:13–16. Here I think it is clear that Horsley and Thatcher’s reading accentuates the Galilean identity of John’s Jesus to the detriment of his Jewishness, whereas both are important. In John 4:44, while in Galilee, Jesus speaks of how a prophet is not without honour, except in his own country (ἐν τῇ ἰδίᾳ πατρίδι), whereas in the Prologue, the Logos who becomes flesh ‘came to his own and they did not receive him (εἰς τὰ ἴδια ἦλθεν, καὶ οἱ ἴδιοι οὐ παρέλαβον)’ (1:11). The latter includes both Judeans and Galileans. And of course it is the rejection by his own, both Galilean and Judean Jews, that is fully described in the Gospel (N.B. the rejection of Jesus by Galileans Jews in Capernaum—John 6:41–66), and which forms the backcloth to the emergence of his body as a new temple (2:16–22) which will stand for the father’s house in this new era of which the Johannine Jesus speaks to the woman of Samaria.

This is an apt moment to consider the difficult question of whether the historical Jesus did engage in a mission to the Samaritans, as Horsley and Thatcher suggest. The gulf here between John and the Synoptic tradition, followed by Acts, is enormous. This chasm exercised David Strauss long ago in his monumental work, *Das Leben Jesu, kritisch bearbeitet*. This was first published in 1835³¹ and did much damage to the future use of John as a source for historical studies of Jesus.³² With typical lucidity, Strauss assembled the evidence,³³ which ‘must excite surprise’.³⁴

Matthew has no occasion on which Jesus comes in contact with the Samaritans, or even mentions them, except in the prohibition above quoted; Mark is more neutral than Matthew, and has not even that

³¹ The citations are from the ET of the 4th edition by Marian Evans, *The Life of Jesus, Critically Examined* (London, 1846).

³² In my opinion, those who find John to be a problematic source for the historian are adding footnotes to arguments so clearly expressed by him.

³³ The key texts are Matthew 10:5; Luke 9:52; 10:30; 17:11, 16.

³⁴ Strauss (1846) 320–1.

prohibition; Luke has two instances of contact, one of them unfavourable, the other favourable, together with the parable in which Jesus presents a Samaritan as a model, and his approving notice of the gratitude of one whom he had healed; John, finally, has a narrative in which Jesus appears in a very intimate and highly favourable relation to the Samaritans.

Strauss found himself addressing a tantalising question, ‘how could Jesus at one time prohibit his disciples from including the Samaritans in the messianic plan, and at another time, himself receive them without hesitation?’ Weighing this all up amounted, he thought, to two exclusive points of view—either Matthew or John, as ‘the two extreme narratives’, must be followed: ‘we must either doubt the authenticity of the exclusive command of Jesus, or of his connexion with the inhabitants of Samaria’.³⁵ In order to determine which alternative is most likely, Strauss turned his attention to the Book of Acts ‘as an umpire’. Reviewing the commission in Acts 1:8, the account of Philip’s work among the Samaritans in Acts 8, and the response of the church in Jerusalem to his success which contrasts with the more cautious reaction to the conversion of gentiles in Acts 10, Strauss noted that:³⁶

... while the first admission of the Gentiles makes a highly unfavourable impression on the mother church at Jerusalem, the report that Samaria had received the word of God meets with so warm an approval there, that the two most distinguished apostles are commissioned to confirm and consummate the work begun by Philip. The tenor of this proceeding makes it not improbable that there was a precedent for it in the conduct of Jesus, or at least a sanction in his expressions.

This led to his own careful analysis of the encounter with the woman of Sychar which culminates in Jesus enjoying a rich harvest among the Samaritans:³⁷

Jesus foresees that the woman, who is hastening towards the city, will procure him an opportunity of sowing the seed of the gospel in Samaria, and he promises the disciples that they at a future time shall reap the fruits of his labours.

³⁵ *Ibid.* 321.

³⁶ *Ibid.* 320–1.

³⁷ *Ibid.* 325.

The story in Acts 8 immediately springs to mind. However, Strauss rightly asked why the apostles did not immediately appeal to the example of Jesus as it is recounted in John 4. Thus he concluded as follows:³⁸

How natural the tendency to perfect the agency of Jesus, by representing him to have sown the heavenly seed in Samaria, thus extending his ministry through all parts of Palestine; to limit the glory of the apostles and other teachers to that of being the mere reapers of the harvest in Samaria; and to put this distinction, on a suitable occasion, into the mouth of Jesus!

The result, then, of our examination of John's Samaritan narrative is, that we cannot receive it as a real history: and the impression which it leaves as a whole tends to the same conclusion.

As far as I can see, this still neatly sums up the state of the debate. The story in John 4 is a wonderful story. It is carefully crafted and is a fecund source for theological reflection on how to engage with intractable polarised positions.³⁹ It has verisimilitude at the level of reflecting attitudes between Jew and Samaritan, and presenting the common ground in relation to messianic expectations and also the key points of dispute.⁴⁰ However, it cannot be used to provide historical evidence for Jesus being the originator of the Samaritan mission prior to the resurrection.⁴¹

The above considerations lead me to conclude that Horsley and Thatcher have seriously confused John's story world with the real world of first century Roman Palestine. Here I should add that I have serious doubts about the picture painted in John 9:22, 12:42 and 16:2 that followers of Jesus were put out of the synagogue (*ἄποσυνάγωγοι*) in Jerusalem during his lifetime. While there is plenty of evidence that there were synagogues in Israel before the destruction of the temple in 70 CE, this does sound anachronistic and much more likely to be a feature of life afterwards when the synagogue took centre stage even more in Jewish life.⁴²

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ See my discussion: Bryan (2013) 97–100.

⁴⁰ On the Samaritan hope for the *Taheb*, the 'one who is to come', see Macdonald (1964) 362. On the Samaritans more generally, see Plummer (1987).

⁴¹ See also my discussion on the likelihood that Galilean pilgrims travelled through Samaria: Bryan (2013) 32–7.

⁴² On the synagogue, see the discussion by Meyers and Chancey (2012) 203–38. On the debate about whether *ἄποσυνάγωγοι* shows that John postdates circa 85 CE on the

I turn finally, and briefly, to that which is most problematic in their account, namely their description of how the plot in John develops (see pp. 107–10). For them, John's Jesus is portrayed as 'the agent provocateur' who 'carries out a series of sustained confrontations of the rulers of the Judeans and what they represent in the Jerusalem temple-state, who finally succeed in arresting him and hand him over to the Roman governor, who executes him' (p. 108). John's placement of the temple incident at the beginning of the story rather than the end as in Mark and the other Synoptic accounts highlights the dominant conflict between Jesus and the Judean leaders of the temple. In the Synoptic accounts, the temple incident clearly plays a pivotal role in bringing about Jesus' execution. Of course historians are bound to ask how likely is it that Jesus could have performed such a radical act and then lived for a further two years at least, returning frequently to Jerusalem and engaging in further provocative activity? Again it is worthwhile to look at David Strauss' study of this incident:⁴³

... it is no inconsiderable argument against John's position of the event, that Jesus, with his prudence and tact, would hardly have ventured thus early on so violent an exercise of his messianic authority. For in that first period of his ministry he had not given himself out as the Messiah, and under any other than messianic authority, such a step could than scarcely have been hazarded; moreover, he in the beginning rather chose to meet his cotemporaries (*sic*) on friendly ground, and it is therefore hardly credible that he should at once, without trying milder means, have adopted an appearance so antagonistic. But to the last week of his life such a scene is perfectly suited. Then, after his messianic entrance into Jerusalem, it was his direct aim in all that he did and said, to assert his messiahship, in defiance of the contradiction of his enemies; then, all lay so entirely at stake, that nothing more was to be lost by such a step.

This logic seems to me to be very persuasive, and most scholars agree that it is John who moved the event forwards, earlier into the ministry of Jesus, for theological reasons. In fact, John's separation of the incident from the passion narratives does not completely disguise the connection between the event and his death—'His disciples remembered that it was written, "Zeal for your house will consume me"' (John 2:17). As is clear from verse 22, the

grounds that it presumes a situation in which the synagogues used the liturgy in which Christians were cursed (the 12th Benediction), see the brief discussion in Edwards (2014) 56–7.

⁴³ Strauss (1846) 437.

psalm was remembered as referring to his death. This was noted by Dodd in his study of this passage:⁴⁴

... there are sound reasons for the conclusion that in his account of the Cleansing of the Temple John followed an independent strain of tradition, which probably contained both the narrative and a brief controversial dialogue ... but ... he has yet clearly betrayed a consciousness that the Cleansing was intimately connected with the death of Jesus.

This observation lends weight to Dodd's suggestion that John separated the event from the Passion because he wanted to make the Lazarus story the event that brings about the hostile action of the authorities against Jesus. In respect of John 11, Dodd wrote:⁴⁵

... the narrative before us is not only the story of dead Lazarus raised to life; it is also the story of Jesus going to face death in order to conquer death. In the previous episode we were told that the Good Shepherd comes to give life to His flock, and that in doing so he lays down His life for the sheep (x.10–11). The episode we are now considering conforms exactly to that pattern.

But Horsley and Thatcher's work, in approaching the plot and the conflict in primarily political and regional terms, woefully neglects the role played by misunderstanding and theological disputes in the developing conflict between Jesus and his Jewish contemporaries and antagonists. John's Jesus is to be identified with the divine Logos or Word through whom the cosmos was made (1:1–14). Aware of his divine origin (6:33–58), he expects to return to his father (6:62). Jesus claims equality with God the father (5:18) and even to be one with God (10:30). The blunt expression of such claims is described by John as primary causes of the conflict between Jesus and the leaders of the Jewish community (see especially 5:17–18; 8:57–9; 10:33). Their neglect of the higher Christology is also seen in the simplistic picture they paint of John's Jesus gathering loyal followers from the regions of 'all Israel'. They fail to comment on Jesus' reluctance to trust those who claim to believe in him because of the signs (2:23–5). They overlook the part played by misunderstanding in the circles of people closest to Jesus and that for John seeing Jesus as the Messiah is just the start of the journey. They too must come to see in him the one who comes to reveal the father's glory (1:14), to make the father

⁴⁴ Dodd (1963) 161–2.

⁴⁵ Dodd (1953) 366–7.

known (14:8–9), and who is finally to be worshipped as ‘Lord and God’ (20:28).

Conclusion

Horsley and Thatcher have made a fascinating contribution to the study of John. Certainly, their willingness to challenge the consensus about John as a source of historical tradition is to be welcomed. However, I find this work to be unpersuasive. They have tried to make the story world of John’s Gospel conform to a reconstruction of the first century world of Jesus that is itself to be disputed. They have neglected the literary and theological aspects of the story that John tells. In so doing they have reminded of the wise words of John Ashton on the vexed question of the ‘Jews’ in John:⁴⁶

Of course the gospels furnish evidence—of a kind—for a historian asking general questions about the reference of various terms (Scribes, Pharisees, chief-priests, Ἰουδαῖοι) at the time of their composition. But here history and interpretation must be allowed to go their separate ways. The wilful obduracy of the Ἰουδαῖοι of the Fourth Gospel does not prove that this is how the real Ἰουδαῖοι actually behaved, any more than the portrayal of Richard III in Shakespeare’s play of that name is reliable evidence for the character of the historical Richard. Certainly the historian has a right to stake a claim in this territory and his claim must be respected; but with this proviso the exegete too must be permitted to work his own lode. In a work of literature, especially one with as urgent a rhetoric as that of the Fourth Gospel, the important question concerns the role or function of the various characters: this is what I have called sense.

Ashton’s remarks about the presentation of the Jews apply equally to the presentation of Jesus and his followers. More attention is needed to the sense of what John communicates about Jesus.

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⁴⁶ Ashton (1985) 59.

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Richard Horsley's latest volume, *The Prophet Jesus and the Renewal of Israel: Moving Beyond a Diversionary Debate*, responds to what the author understands to be two major problems in the field of historical Jesus research. According to Horsley, the first problem is the debate about whether or not (and to what degree) the historical Jesus derived his perspective and message from the so-called apocalypticism of the Second Temple period. Horsley diagnoses the second pressing problem in the methodology widespread in historical Jesus research of focusing on individual sayings of Jesus in isolation from Jesus' choice of twelve apostles because his plan included the full renewal of Israel. The 12 heads of the tribes of Israel were to be replaced by the 12 Jewish apostles who would lead Israel into the renewed future defined by redemption. Just read this description of the New Jerusalem: "It had a large, high wall with twelve gates. Twelve angels were at the gates, and the names of the twelve tribes of Israel were written on the gates. There were three gates on the east, three gates on the north, three gates on the south, and three gates on the west. The wall of the city had twelve foundations, and the