



Making the Focal Map of Johannine Studies: A Survey of Modern Scholarship

Yuhanna Çalışmalarının Odak Haritasını Çıkarmak: Modern Araştırmalar Üzerine Bir İnceleme

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Abstract

The most studied text of the four gospels is the Gospel of John, which is also known as the Fourth Gospel. Academics have been prolific in their study of it, using many different methods and coming up with numerous questions and answers related to the text. From the beginning of the 20th century alone, over 1000 individual works on this gospel have been published. Moreover, twenty percent of these belong to the last 25 years. Surveying the literature over the last two centuries, one notices studies on the Gospel of John in different fields such as history, psychology, sociology, literature, and palaeography. It is particularly of note to observe that, apart from theology, the history of religions constitutes a very productive literature on this gospel. Such a multidisciplinary research spectrum as this has brought with it methodological diversity. It might easily be expected that in the near future Johannine studies will maintain and even increase their importance. Looking back from the point reached, one can already observe the rather colourful panorama that these studies display. The aim of this article is to analyse this panoramic picture by tracing the changes in the methodology and research focus of Johannine studies over the past century. Accordingly, we will try to show the methodological line of Johannine studies from historical to literary criticism through the foci of research, which are the evangelist, the Johannine community, and the text of John.

Keywords: Johannine studies, Fourth Gospel, Historical criticism, Literary criticism, Evangelist, Johannine community

Öz

Dört İncil arasında en çok çalışılan metin Dördüncü İncil olarak da bilinen Yuhanna İncil'i'dir. Yuhanna çalışmaları farklı metotlar, sorular ve cevaplarla oldukça üretken bir akademik alandır. Yirminci yüzyılın başından itibaren 1000'in üzerinde müstakil eser yayınlanmıştır. Üstelik bu eserlerin yüzde yirmisi son 25 yıla aittir. Kabaca son iki yüzyıla bakıldığında Yuhanna İncil'i üzerine teoloji dışında başta dinler tarihi olmak üzere tarih, psikoloji, sosyoloji, edebiyat ve paleografi gibi farklı alanlarda yapılan çalışmaların oldukça verimli bir literatür oluşturduğu fark edilmektedir. Alanın sahip olduğu çok disiplinli araştırma yelpazesi metodolojik çeşitliliği de beraberinde getirmiştir. Yakın gelecekte Yuhanna çalışmalarının önemini koruyacağı ve hatta artıracığı rahatlıkla söylenebilir. Geriye doğru bakıldığında ise Yuhanna çalışmalarının oldukça renkli bir panoramaya sahip olduğu görülmektedir. Bu makalenin amacı, geçtiğimiz yüzyılda Yuhanna çalışmalarının yöntem ve araştırma odaklarındaki değişimin izini sürerek bu panoramik fotoğrafın analizini yapmaktır. Bu doğrultuda, Dördüncü İncil özelinde yapılan çalışmaların tarihsel eleştiriden edebi eleştiriye uzanan metodolojik çizgisini, araştırma odakları olan evanjelist/İncil yazarı, Yuhanna cemaati ve İncil metni üzerinden göstermeye çalışacağız.

Anahtar kelimeler: Yuhanna çalışmaları, Dördüncü İncil, Tarihsel kritik, Edebi kritik, İncil yazarı, Yuhanna cemaati

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To cite this article: Pataci, Bilal. "Making the Focal Map of Johannine Studies: A Survey of Modern Scholarship." *darulfunun ilahiyat* 34, 2 (2023): 471–490. <https://doi.org/10.26650/di.2023.34.2.1291812>



Introduction

The Gospel of John has been the subject of Christian exegetical tradition for a very long time. Although the Fourth Gospel was not circulated as early as the Synoptics, it was commented on as early as in the second half of the 2nd century. This first commentary of the gospel belonged to Heracleon, a Gnostic writer and disciple of Valentinus. This is also the earliest known commentary on Christian scriptures. However, being written by a Gnostic writer was sufficient to exclude the commentary from the literary network within the safe borders of the Christian tradition. Undoubtedly, its bad reputation played a role in the commentary not surviving in its entirety until today. However, its importance for Gnostic theology cannot be denied. Moreover, since it was the first exegesis, it became the source that most theologians after Heracleon carefully read. Among them, we must not neglect to mention Origen and Cyril of Alexandria. We owe all our knowledge of this commentary to Origen because large portions of the book have been preserved through his commentary on John.¹

The exegetical tradition of the Gospel of John, which started with Heracleon, was continued by many church fathers and writers, together with Origen and Cyril. Many writers, including Theodore of Heraclea, Jerome, Theodore of Mopsuestia, Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, and Jean Calvin, continued this tradition of Johannine commentary. Similar studies of this kind can be found even today. However, a new breath has come to Johannine studies with research carried out in the context of Biblical criticism, which questions the traditional acceptance and interpretations to a great extent.

Biblical Criticism, initiated in modern times by Baruch Spinoza at the earliest, was first applied to Jewish holy scriptures. Later, researchers turned to Christian scriptures and applied the historical-critical methods to the New Testament texts, and studies in this perspective continued until the first half of the 20th century. Therefore, the dominant method of 19th-century studies was historical criticism. The main issues were the probable date of composition of the Gospels, their literary relationship with each other, and the authenticity of Jesus' words and deeds. Thus, *source criticism* and *the quest for the historical Jesus* were the predominant methods of the century. These methods would continue to be used in the following century, but more importantly, they triggered the use of two further methods: *form criticism*, which focused on the background and forms of oral transmission of the

1 See, Origen, 'Origen's Commentary on the Gospel of John,' in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325*, ed. Allan Menzies (New York: The Christian Literature Company, 1896); E. H. Pagels, *The Johannine Gospel in Gnostic Exegesis: Heracleon's Commentary on John* (Scholars Press, 1989).

Gospel narratives before they became a written text, and *redaction criticism*, which investigated the editions and additions made by the evangelists during the process of their written compilation.²

These studies were dominated by German researchers and developed through the influence of German philosophers. In particular, the “Tübingen School”, which peaked in the mid-19th century and declined at the end of the same century, approached the texts under the influence of German idealism. F. C. Baur, a famous representative of the school, analysed the Christian scriptures using Hegelian dialectics. To him, second-century Christianity emerged from the synthesis of Jewish Christianity and Gentile Christianity - sometimes referred to as the Petrine party and the Pauline party, respectively.³ At the beginning of the 20th century, the *Religionswissenschaftliche Schule* (The History of Religions School) of German origin began to show its influence on Biblical Studies. Researchers such as R. Reitzenstein, W. Bousset, W. Heitmüller, R. Otto, and R. Bultmann studied under the tutelage of existentialist philosophers. Theses put forward by founding researchers such as Reitzenstein, positing that there are different religious traditions for the background of the New Testament, also influenced other scholars of the school.

I. Evangelist: An Historical Impasse

We have no reason not to recognize that the Johannine studies in the first half of the 20th century continued the trend of the previous century. If one had to choose a name to understand the spirit of this period, it would undoubtedly be Rudolf Bultmann. His *Das Evangelium des Johannes* is certainly a milestone and the pinnacle of modern critical interpretations of the Fourth Gospel.⁴ This is not a personal preference, but a conviction supported by most Johannine scholars. John Ashton divides Johannine studies into three parts: before Bultmann, Bultmann, and after Bultmann.⁵ Again, D. Moody Smith states that no researcher has been as influential as Bultmann in the last century.⁶ It is almost impossible for any researcher working on John in the 20th century or later to conduct research without coming across his magisterial work.

2 John Ashton, *Studying John: Approaches to the Fourth Gospel* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 141.

3 Anders Gerdmar, *Roots of Theological Anti-Semitism: German Biblical Interpretation and the Jews, from Herder and Semler to Kittel and Bultmann* (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2009), 106-109.

4 Paul N. Anderson, ‘Beyond the Shade of the Oak Tree: The Recent Growth of Johannine Studies,’ *The Expository Times* 119, no. 8 (2008): 365.

5 John Ashton, *Understanding the Fourth Gospel* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1991), 3-117.

6 D. Moody Smith, ‘Johannine Studies since Bultmann,’ *Word & World* 21, no. 4 (2001): 343.

Like other members of *the School of the History of Religions*, Bultmann sought ways to make the New Testament texts accessible to the modern reader. However, he softened the school's harsh approach through demythologisation. Others believed that mythical elements that the modern reader could not accept and understand should be removed from the texts. Bultmann, however, argued that instead of myths being discarded or erased from sacred texts, they should be interpreted existentially in a way that modern man could understand.

Demythologisation is not Bultmann's only contribution to Johannine studies; he also researched the background of Johannine literature, contrary to the traditional acceptance, out of Jewish-Christian culture. As he claimed, the Fourth Gospel depends on an independent tradition/source, not on a written form of Synoptics. However, he also accepts that John may use oral tradition which is behind all the gospels. But besides this, he pointed out three sources for some parts of the Fourth Gospel: the *sign source* for the miracles of Jesus, the *revelatory source* for Jesus's discourses, and a *Gnostic source* for the prologue.

Bultmann's commentary can surely be regarded as a milestone, but in addition to that, it is appropriate to see it as reflecting the academic trend of his time. What distinguishes Bultmann from his contemporaries are his conclusions. Like other scholars, he used historical-critical methods and focused his attention on the background of the evangelist and on the socio-historical setting (*Sitz im Leben*) of the Gospel. Almost all the works of that time put an emphasis on the historical worth of John's Gospel. They unpicked the historical riddle of Johannine literature and emphasised this as a focal point. Thus, the author's identity, his background, his eyewitness, and his relationship with the Synoptic evangelists were the most important issues of Johannine scholarship of that time. In the conference "The four Gospels in 1957" John A. T. Robinson summed up the main theses on Johannine literature before the 50s in his paper, classifying them as five presuppositions and calling them "critical orthodoxy". To him, since the turn of the twentieth century, most Johannine studies supported the presuppositions listed below, which he also called the "old look":

- "The fourth evangelist is dependent on sources, including one or more synoptic gospels.
- His own background is other than that of the events and teaching he is purporting to record.
- He is not to be regarded, seriously, as a witness to the Jesus of history, but simply to the Christ of faith.

- He represented the end-term of theological development in the first-century Christianity.
- He is not himself the apostle John nor a direct eyewitness.”⁷

In his paper, Robinson “sought to demonstrate that these five pillars of ‘critical orthodoxy’ were crumbling.”⁸ He had foreseen a new look that would be dominant on the same historical riddles and, unlike the old look, would support the issues of (i) John’s independence from the Synoptics, (ii) his Jewish background, (iii) the historical reliability of its content, (iv) priority of the gospel composition, and (v) apostolic eyewitness of the Beloved disciple. Thus, he had foreseen a future shift for each of the five presuppositions and this new look would be dominant in Johannine studies.

Most of Robinson’s prediction concerning the future of the old presuppositions was mainly based on British scholars and Butmann’s critics, but even he was not entirely sure whether a new look would come.⁹ He saw himself between timidity and conviction. However, he said he felt something changed. So the “new look” was a prediction by Robinson about the future of Johannine studies, based on some opposition to the assumptions expressed as critical orthodoxy. He proved to be the most important representative of the “new look” with his works *The Priority of John* (1984) and *Redating the New Testament* (1976). In the light of this one might ask how Robinson’s prediction of future studies came to an end. In other words, was the “new look” embraced by Johannine scholars? What changed from the old look to Robinson’s new look?

In the 1930s, Kirsopp Lake declared that John might contain a few fragments of true tradition, but that it was mainly fiction.¹⁰ In 1963, Dodd concluded that the Fourth Gospel was the product of an independent tradition, distinct from the Synoptics, which could contribute significantly to our knowledge of the historical Jesus.¹¹ While C. F. Burney defended the view that “John was written in Aramaic

7 John A. T. Robinson, ‘The New Look,’ in *Twelve New Testament Studies* (SCM Press, 1962), 95.

8 Tom Thatcher, ‘The New Current through John: The Old “New Look” and the New Critical Orthodoxy,’ in *New Current Through John*, ed. Francisco Lozada and Tom Thatcher (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2006), 1.

9 Robinson, ‘The New Look,’ 94.

10 Kirsopp Lake, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (London: Christophers, 1938), 51.

11 See, Charles H. Dodd, *Historical Tradition in the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963).

then translated to Greek”¹², 42 years later in 1967, Matthew Black posited that John was written in Greek by an author whose mother tongue was Aramaic.¹³ In 1935, P⁵² was published which is thought to have belonged to the first half of the second century. Later, the discovery of P⁶⁶ and P⁷⁵ modified the thesis concerning the late date of John’s composition and also supported the view that the present form of the gospel is original.

In the era of the old look, most scholars claimed that John had no accurate knowledge of the terrain in which his gospel account was located, and thus his details of the locality were not to be trusted, but with the help of archaeological excavation around Jerusalem, John’s geographical knowledge was supported.¹⁴ At the beginning of the 20th century, the tendency of scholars had been to accept the Gnostic or Hellenistic tradition as the Johannine background, but this changed with the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls and caused later scholars to ascribe to the Jewishness of John.¹⁵ Despite all this, it is difficult to narrow down the religious and cultural world of the Fourth Gospel.¹⁶ Finally, in 1925, there was a general consensus among the critics that John not only knew Mark (and probably also Luke) but also used his writings. G. Smith had been alone in his view when he had said that John had an independent tradition, but by 1968 most scholars had begun to support his view.¹⁷

The above comparison shows that the change Robinson predicted for Johannine studies has begun to take place. He himself, in *Redating the New Testament* and *The Priority of John*, tried to justify his convictions that confirmed the change he

12 See, C. F. Burney, *The Aramaic Origin of the Fourth Gospel* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1922).

13 See, Matthew Black, *An Aramaic Approach to the Gospel and Acts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967).

14 Urban C. von Wahlde, ‘The Road Ahead—Three Aspects of Johannine Scholarship,’ in *What We Have Heard from the Beginning: The Past, Present, and Future of Johannine Studies*, ed. Tom Thatcher (Texas: Baylor University Press, 2007), 343-54; Felix Just, S. J., ‘Combining Key Methodologies in 355 Johannine Studies,’ in *What We Have Heard from the Beginning: The Past, Present, and Future of Johannine Studies*, ed. Tom Thatcher (Texas: Baylor University Press, 2007), 358.

15 Barnabas Lindars, *Behind the Fourth Gospel*, Studies in Creative Criticism (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2010), 12.

16 Barnabas Lindars, *The Gospel of John*, New Century Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publ. Co., 1995), 35; D. M. Smith, *Johannine Christianity: Essays on Its Setting, Sources and Theology* (London-New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2006), 9.

17 P. Gardner-Smith, *Saint John and the Synoptic Gospels* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1938), vii; see also Smith, *Johannine Christianity: Essays on Its Setting, Sources and Theology*.

foresaw, especially with regard to the identity of the author of the Fourth Gospel and the date of its composition. In this respect, it can be accepted that works written after 1950 triggered a new era for the Gospel of John.¹⁸ However, this “new look”, also referred to by Robinson as “critical orthodoxy”, heralds new studies that differ from previous studies in terms of their results rather than a methodological innovation. In other words, Robinson did not criticise “critical orthodoxy”, he just looked at old questions from a wider perspective. The focus was the same. Both the old look and Robinson’s new look paid attention to the evangelist more than to the other components of the fourth gospel such as the “text”, “community” or “reader”. Thus, the historical settings of the evangelist and the tradition behind the text were accepted as the most important factors to understand Johannine theology. Moreover, the hesitations of some important scholars of Robinson’s “new look”, especially regarding the authorship of the apostle John, showed that the assumptions of the “old look” were still on the Johannine table.¹⁹ Robinson is right to foresee a shift, but the real shift lies beyond his horizon. This change gave Johannine scholarship a new focus: the Johannine community.

II. Johannine Community: The First Audience

It has already been noted that most pre-1950 research addressed the background of the Gospel of John to traditions other than Judaism. However, the academic tendency to focus on first-century Judaism and Jewish-Christian relations brought the “Judaism” option strongly to the fore in terms of possible background scenarios. Moreover, this time not only Palestinian Judaism but also different branches of Jewish tradition attracted the attention of researchers. The discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls around the same time also supports this thesis. The similarities between the Gospel and the Qumran manuscripts highlighted the possibility of interaction between the two texts or the possibility of a common ground that nourished both. It is noteworthy that during this period (1955-1979), which many called “the Qumran

18 Thatcher, ‘The New Current through John: The Old “New Look” and the New Critical Orthodoxy,’ 16.

19 Writers such as Brown and Schnackenburg, for example, later abandoned the view that John the Apostle was the author of the Fourth Gospel. See, Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John* (New York: Doubleday, 1966), I:xcviii; *The Community of the Beloved Disciple* (London: Geoffrey Chapman Book, 1979), 31-35; *An Introduction to the Gospel of John*, ed. F. J. Moloney (New York: Doubleday, 2003), 191; Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Gospel According to St. John*, trans. David and Smith and G. A. Kon, vol. 3 (London: Burns & Oates, 1982), 381-383.

fever”,²⁰ scholars focused on these intertextual studies. Although these kinds of works had reached the stage of producing *paralellomania*,²¹ they paved the way for a new focus in Johannine studies to gain momentum. The idea that the Gospel of John, like the Dead Sea Scrolls, is a text belonging to a distinct community rather than to an author shifted the focus of Johannine studies from the author to the first addressees of the Gospel, namely the Johannine Community. It was the process of this that led social-scientific methods to be added into biblical studies.²²

It was J. Louis Martyn who brought the Johannine community paradigm to the agenda in a comprehensive and systematic way. His proposed structural model of the Johannine community became a reference point for subsequent studies. Martyn, who thinks that the Fourth Gospel was compiled in a three-stage process, believes that this process is also the social and theological history of the group he calls the Johannine community.

In the first period of this three-stage process, the Johannine community was a group within the synagogue - possibly in the diaspora - that embraced a Messianic theology. The Fourth Gospel’s portrayal of Jesus as the “expected Jewish Messiah” reflects the belief of the group in that first period. However, the synagogue does not share this belief and considers it dangerous. In the second period, the Johannine group experienced two traumas. The first was expulsion from the synagogue, and the second was persecution up to martyrdom. Martyn believes that the “expulsion from the synagogue” passages in the gospel and the legal ban known as “*birkat ha minim*” are indicators of this new situation. Both traumas led to a decline in the number of followers of Johannine Christology. In this period, however, the group began to take on with increasing intensity the characteristics of Jesus. Similar to Jesus’ out-worldly being, the Johannine group now found its identity in a new community outside the synagogue of which it had once been a part. The typical Johannine portrayal in the Gospel, which differs from the Synoptic Jesus, is a product of this final stage. Eventually, expulsion from the synagogue and

20 Jörg Frey, ‘The Impact of the Dead Sea Scrolls on New Testament Interpretation: Proposals, Problems, and Further Perspectives,’ in *The Bible and the Dead Sea Scrolls: The Princeton Symposium on the Dead Sea Scrolls*, ed. James H. Charlesworth (Texas: Baylor University Press, 2006), 411.

21 Paul N. Anderson, ‘John and Qumran: Discovery and Interpretation over Sixty Years,’ in *John, Qumran, and the Dead Sea Scrolls: Sixty Years of Discovery and Debate*, ed. Mary L. Coloe and Tom Thatcher (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2011), 26.

22 Here we only have to mention a few landmark studies on the subject. But for more detailed studies examining the models of the Johannine community, see, Wally V. Cirafesi, ‘The Johannine Community Hypothesis (1968–Present): Past and Present Approaches and a New Way Forward,’ *Currents in Biblical Research* 12, no. 2 (2014): 173–93; Bilal Patacı, *Sembolizm ve Kristoloji: Yuhanna İncili’nde İsa Tasviri* (İstanbul: MilelNihal Yayınları, 2022), 44-58.

persecution to the point of death led to tightening ties among those who embraced this new Christology, and the Johannine community became structurally closed and isolated.²³

Martyn's paradigm of the Johannine community provided an important ground for discussion in subsequent studies. Many Johannine community models have been put forward, especially those that take into account the relationship between the Fourth Gospel and Judaism and those that consider the biblical text to have been shaped in a process.²⁴ Among these works, R. Brown's *The Community of the Beloved Disciple*²⁵ has attracted much attention.²⁶

Acknowledging the existence of a Christological shift within the Gospel, Brown argued that the reason for this was not a community-synagogue conflict, as in Martyn's model, but a tension caused by demographic change within the community. Envisioning a four-stage process, Brown considers the years of 50-90 CE to be the first period in the four-stage process, a period in which the Gospel had not yet taken a written form and was in oral circulation among a Jewish-Christian community living in Palestine. In this period, the followers of John the Baptist and the Samaritan converts were also part of the Johannine community.²⁷ Around 90 CE, the community was present in the diaspora outside Palestine. It was in this period that the Son of God Christology gained weight due to the increasing number of gentile conversions, and there was also tension within the community due to the anti-Semitic tone of the Fourth Gospel.²⁸ In the third period (100 CE), the Johannine community came closer to apostolic Christianity. At that time, there was much debate between a secessionist group, who argued that Jesus was fully God and without a body, and a conservative group who emphasized the human nature of Jesus.²⁹ In the final period, the secessionists, who made up a large part of the community, joined the Gnostic, Docetist, and Montanist churches, while the remaining conservative group melted into mainstream Christianity.³⁰

23 J. Louis Martyn, *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel* (Louisville-London: Westminster John Knox Press, 3rd ed., 2003), 147-167.

24 See, James F. McGrath, 'Johannine Christianity: Jewish Christianity?,' *Koinonia* 8, no. 1 (1996): 1.

25 Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple*, 22.

26 In fact, before Martyn's work, Raymond Brown proposed a simple model for Johannine community. However, his work *The Community of the Beloved Disciple* gave this simple model a systematized view. See, Brown, *The Gospel According to John*.

27 Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple*, 25-55.

28 Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple*, 59-91.

29 Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple*, 93-144.

30 Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple*, 145-164.

G. Richter is the author of another model of a four-stage Johannine community. In his view, the first stage consisted of a community that had a low Christology and which recognized Jesus as a leader, just like Moses, and as a Messiah. The records reflecting this low Christology are the *Grundschrift* of the Fourth Gospel. In the second stage, there was tension within the community between those who saw Jesus as a heavenly being and the Son of God and those who held to the lower Christological image. It is assumed that some expressions reflecting this new Christological image were added to the text, while others that were seen as contrary to it were removed from the text. In the third stage, it is thought that the Gospels attracted the attention of the Docetists because of the emergence of a belief in a high Christological approach that was not interested in the humanity of Jesus, but rather believed that his human appearance was an illusion. It is in the final stage that the doctrine of the incarnation appears and offers a clear solution to the problem of Jesus' humanity. As can be seen, Richter's model focuses on the periodisation of the Johannine community. In this model, the Johannine community and the Fourth Gospel do not follow a theological developmental line from simple to complex or from primitive to advanced. Through a dialectical interaction, groups with different theologies were eliminated and the community settled on a theological synthesis.³¹

Instead of focusing on the developmental process of the Gospel in the paradigm of the Johannine community, some studies have focused on the motivation for writing the Gospel of John, the purpose for which it was written, and the sociological analysis of the community that produced the Gospel. Such studies have taken a different approach to the Gospel and its theology. Among these, Meeks' work has a privileged place as a reference for subsequent literature.³² Meeks argues that the

31 G. Richter, 'Präsentische Und Futurische Eschatologie Im 4. Evangelium,' in *Gegenwart Und Kommendes Reich: Schülergabe Anton Vögtle Zum 65*, ed. Peter Fiedler und Dieter Zeller (Stuttgart: Verlag Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1975), 117-152; G. Richter, 'Präsentische Und Futurische Eschatologie Im 4. Evangelium,' in *Studien Zum Johannesevangelium* (1977), 346-382; A. J. Matill, 'Johannine Communities Behind the Fourth Gospel: Georg Richter's Analysis,' *Theological Studies* 38, no. 2 (1977): 294-315; Cirafesi, 'The Johannine Community Hypothesis (1968–Present): Past and Present Approaches and a New Way Forward,' 177.

32 Wayne Meeks, 'The Man from Heaven in Johannine Sectarianism' *Journal of Biblical Literature* 91, no. 1 (1972): 44–72. Apart from Meeks' work, the models of Bruce Malina, who argues that the Johannine community constructs its reality through a "counter-language" to Judaism, and Jerome Neyrey, who sees the Johannine community as a structure that factionalizes within Jewish tradition, then substitutes its own theology as an alternative to Judaism, and finally rebels against the group from which it emerged by stating that its theology is the only truth, stand out among social-scientific studies. See, Bruce Malina, 'The Gospel of John in Sociolinguistic Perspective,' in *Protocol of the 48th Colloquy* (Berkeley: Center for Hermeneutical Studies in Hellenistic and Modern Culture, 1984); Jerome Neyrey, *An Ideology of Revolt* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988).

Gospel narrative focusing on Jesus as an ascending and descending figure from heaven to earth reflects not only the identity of Jesus but also the structure of the community. The medium of this reflection is Johannine symbolism, and what is reflected is the symbolic universe of the community. His research treats the Fourth Gospel against the backdrop of this symbolic universe, and this universe does not include the age of Jesus, but the age of the Johannine community. For Meeks, the Fourth Gospel is etioloical, not ecclesiastic.

Meeks argues that there is a dialectical continuity between the historical experience of John's community and the symbolic universe of the Gospel, and that this dialectical relationship differentiated the community from early apostolic Christology. Thus, the Johannine community became isolated from other Christian communities and its social structure changed. Moreover, the theological discourse that emerged around the descending-ascending figure of Jesus was not able to be grasped, especially by the Jews, due to its symbolic language and was misunderstood by the apostolic groups. This is because the symbolism in question was comprehensible only to the members of the Johannine community and was ambiguous to those who were outside the community. According to Meeks, then, the Gospel has a didactic rather than a missiological purpose.³³ This purpose was to ensure that Johannine Christology, expressed in a highly symbolic style, was easily understood by the members of the sect. For this reason, Meeks claims that the Johannine community radically distanced itself from other churches by taking on a closed social structure and that this social structure can be called a *sect* rather than a *community*.³⁴

Apart from these examples, it is possible to find dozens of other studies proposing various models of the Johannine community. However, there are also some studies, albeit few, which argue that such hypothetical models do not correspond to historical realities.³⁵ Among those who put forward that the Fourth Gospel was not written for a marginal minority, but rather for early Christian communities with a very strong network of communication among themselves, R. Bauckham deserves to be mentioned. He criticises the issue of the Johannine community from a different angle, arguing that the Fourth Gospel was not written in process, but all at once

33 Meeks, 'The Man from Heaven in Johannine Sectarianism,' 69.

34 Meeks, 'The Man from Heaven in Johannine Sectarianism,' 50-64.

35 See, Donald A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Michigan: Apollos, 1971), 81; Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John* (Michigan: Eerdmans, 1971), 28; Robert Kysar, 'Community and Gospel: Vectors in Fourth Gospel Criticism,' *Interpretation*, no. 31 (1977), 366; Martin Hengel, *Johannine Question* (London-New York: SCM Press, Trinity Press International, 1989), 205.

and for churches that did not have an oral culture.³⁶ His claim was also expressed by some researchers after him.

The popularity of literary criticism and the corresponding decline of historical criticism made the paradigm of the Johannine community controversial on the basis of the models presented. However, even as the *models of the Johannine community* have been criticised, the *reality of the Johannine community* has maintained its prominence in scholarship. Moreover, the focus on the community has simultaneously increased the interest in the text itself. Through the synchronic reading model and literary critical methods, most studies chose the text of the Fourth Gospel as their new focus.

III. The Text: From History to Story

Studies that focus on the authorial and socio-historical contexts of the Fourth Gospel seek to find certain answers to questions such as the identity of the author, the character of the Beloved Disciple, the date, place, and sources of the compilation of the Gospel and its relation to the Synoptic tradition, the background of the Johannine narratives, and the relation of Johannine theology to the religious traditions of that time. These studies, all of which take historical criticism into account, mostly use a diachronic reading model. Diachronic reading assumes that the Fourth Gospel was written over a period of time by the compilation of oral and written sources and some additions to this compilation at a later stage. Undoubtedly, this model has contributed to Johannine studies by addressing the history and historical facts behind the text. However, the lack of scholarly consensus about the answers to the questions it poses and the fact that it is increasingly seen as a less convincing method has led scholars to use a synchronic reading model and methods that take this model into account. In Adam's words, for those "who are suspicious of the ideology or rhetoric of historiography, it is not necessary to employ historical investigation as the final arbiter of interpretation."³⁷ In this respect, it can be said that literary critical methods have broken the monopoly of historical criticism. So, the place of meaning has now shifted from history and author to text and

36 Richard Bauckham, 'For Whom Were the Gospels Written?,' in *The Gospels for All Christians: Rethinking the Gospel Audiences*, ed. Richard Bauckham (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 9-30. Nevertheless, Bauckham does not reject the idea of Johannine community altogether. In a recent study, he generally accepts that the Gospels were written within a particular community, but he also states that this does not imply any hermeneutical value. See, Richard Bauckham, *The Christian World Around the New Testament: Collected Essays II* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017), 79-80.

37 A. K. M. Adam, *Making Sense of New Testament Theology: 'Modern' Problems and Prospects*, Studies in American Biblical Hermeneutics (Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2005).

reader. The final quarter of the last century witnessed an explosion of different methodologies and approaches in the context of Johannine studies. Under the umbrella of literary criticism, new methods such as narrative criticism, cultural criticism, feminist criticism, and social scientific criticism have breathed new life into Johannine studies.³⁸

The synchronic model shifted the focus from outside the text to the text itself, preferring to consider the implied author and implied reader rather than the historical author and historical reader of the diachronic model. It sought to decipher the world constructed in the text rather than the realities of the world outside it.³⁹ Within the boundaries of this new approach, the Fourth Gospel is seen primarily as a *story* rather than a *history*.⁴⁰ This new way of reading has brought to the Johannine table a number of monographs that focus on literary components such as characters, concepts, linguistic devices, etc., as well as lengthy commentaries that try to understand the narrative of the entire Gospel. Among these monographs, R. Alan Culpepper's *The Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel* was the first to successfully apply narrative criticism.

According to Culpepper, previous Johannine scholars used the Gospel as a “window” to grasp the Johannine community’s historicity. The meaning is on the other side of the window. Through this window, the reader can access the historical level of Jesus and the Johannine community. As exciting as this approach is, it neglects the fundamental integrity of the Gospel and the relationship between the text and the reader. However, seeing the text as a “mirror” rather than as a “window” will enable the reader to better grasp the components of the Johannine narrative. For here meaning is between the mirror and the observer, between the text and the reader. The activity of comprehension is seen as the convergence of the world of the narrative and the real world of the reader, and the establishment of a satisfactory relationship between them. Hence the gospel is not a window into the history of Jesus or the evangelist, but rather a mirror that allows the reader to see the world as the evangelist sees it.⁴¹

Culpepper argues that the Johannine narrative is consciously and holistically constructed, relying on the claim that each chapter or passage, or even each concept

38 Urban C. von Wahlde, ‘The Road Ahead—Three Aspects of Johannine Scholarship,’ 346.

39 Helga Kjar Nielsen, ‘Johannine Researches,’ in *New Readings on John*, ed. Johannes Nissen and Sigfred Pedersen (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 12.

40 Gerard S. Sloyan, *What Are They Saying About John* (New York: Paulist Press, 1991), 50.

41 R. Alan Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel: A Study in Literary Design* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), 6-7.

or theme, in the Gospel is compatible with the text as a whole.⁴² In doing so, he does not deny that the Fourth Gospel was shaped over a period of time and that the historical contexts of its regulations over time are important. However, according to him, the sub-narratives in the Fourth Gospel are now part of the main narrative, which has integrity. Therefore, instead of focusing on a part and analysing it separately, it is more appropriate to interpret the part according to the whole.⁴³ His pupil Paul Duke, on the other hand, turns to patterns of irony in the Fourth Gospel. He sees irony as a Hellenistic technique by which the evangelist offers a literary choice to the first audience of the Gospel. In this way, the first audience of John reaches the Christological truth that transcends the surface level of meaning.⁴⁴

M. Stibbe is said to be the first to effectively apply narrative criticism to the *commentary* of the Fourth Gospel. He approaches the Johannine narrative as a unified whole. Stibbe identifies each part of the whole narrative in the shadow of the whole text, analyses its structure and genre, and seeks to explain literary devices such as characters, symbols, plot, time and place of narrative construction, and the relationship between these components.⁴⁵ Udo Schnelle, for his part, believes that each of the sub-narratives that make up the text may have a different historical context, but once they are assembled into a narrative with a specific theological purpose, the interpreter must take into account that unity. Although Andrew Lincoln applies narrative criticism to the Fourth Gospel, he also considers historically important issues such as its relationship with the Synoptics and focuses his attention on the impact of the narrative on the reader. His approach does not neglect the historical aspect of the text. Thus, for example, Lincoln sees the Johannine Christology as a retrospective reading back to Jesus' time in such a way as to allow

42 Ashton has serious concerns and criticisms about the value of narrative criticism because it neglects the fact that the Fourth Gospel, like the other Gospels, has a history. See, Ashton, *Studying John: Approaches to the Fourth Gospel*, 165.

43 See, Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel: A Study in Literary Design*. The *Anatomy* is considered by most scholars to be the first seminal work of literary criticism in the history of the Johannine studies. However, according to M. Stibbe, the history of literary criticism dates back to the beginning of the 20th century. See, Mark W. G. Stibbe, *The Gospel of John as Literature: An Anthology of Twentieth-Century Perspectives* (Leiden: EJ Brill, 1993), 2-4. F. R. M. Hitchcock's work on John (1911) deals with the character designs and artistic structure of the Fourth Gospel through a synchronic reading. See, F. R. M. Hitchcock, *A Fresh Study of the Fourth Gospel* (Eugene, OR: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1911).

44 See, Paul D. Duke, *Irony in the Fourth Gospel*, (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1985).

45 Udo Schnelle, *Das Evangelium Nach Johannes*, Theologischer Handkommentar Zum Neuen Testament 4 (Leipzig: Evangelischer Verlagsanstalt, 1998).

for a fiction that would clarify controversial issues in the evangelist's own time.⁴⁶

Studies in which the focus was on both the evangelist and the community saw the Gospel as a work that conveyed one or more limited meanings. The work was not independent of the mind that produced it; therefore, it was necessary to look closer at that mind with a particular lens in order to reach the right meaning. Naturally, the lens available to researchers was that of historical-critical methods. However, literary criticism recognizes the Fourth Gospel as a text that evokes meanings in the reader's mind rather than as a historical author's work. Since meaning here is a product of the relationship between the reader and the text, the effort to know the authorial context loses its importance. Naturally, the prevalence of literary critical methods has led to the relegation of historical criticism to a secondary position. In fact, commentators or scholars using literary critical methods did not deny that the Fourth Gospel was ultimately written in a specific historical period and under historical conditions. In this respect, it cannot be said that the tendency toward literary critical methods eliminated historical criticism. Both commentaries and monographs have continued to apply historical-critical methods. Although there has been an increase in studies that focus on the Gospel text, it is important to note that studies that take into account the authorial and social-historical contexts of the Gospels have also continued.⁴⁷ W. Carter's *John and Empire* brought a new perspective to the paradigm of the Johannine community. While most models of the Johannine community read the tension in the text as a sign of community-synagogue or intra-community strife, Carter tries to understand it in the geopolitical matrix as a rhetorical attempt by the Johannine community to become an alternative community, less compatible with Rome's imperial ideology.⁴⁸ Keener's voluminous exegetical work, on the other hand, succeeds in treating the Gospel as a product of the historical, religious, cultural, social, political and literary atmosphere of the Mediterranean region in which it was written.⁴⁹ Compiling

46 Andrew T. Lincoln, *The Gospel According to Saint John*, Black's New Testament Commentary (London: Continuum, 2005).

47 C. K. Barrett and Frans Neiryck, for example, argue that the Fourth Gospel is based on the Synoptics, while Moody Smith takes a middle-of-the-road approach, arguing that the author of the Fourth Gospel knew the early forms of the Synoptics, if not the final version. See, Frans Neiryck, 'John and the Synoptics,' in *L'évangile de Jean* (Leuven: Leuven University, 1977), 106; C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St John: An Introduction with Commentary and Notes on the Greek Text* (London: SPCK, 1978), 42-54; D. Moody Smith, 'John and the Synoptics: Some Dimensions of the Problem,' *New Testament Studies*, no. 26 (1980), 444.

48 W. Carter, *John and Empire: Initial Explorations* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2008), 82.

49 Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 2003).

innovative methodological approaches including sectarian, feminist, sociological, psycho-literary, autobiographical, intercultural, political, ethnographic, and social scientific readings of the Fourth Gospel, Segovia's editorial work is evidence of a methodological explosion in Johannine studies.⁵⁰ For his part, F. Lozada argues that the goal of studies for the New Testament in general and for the Gospel of John, in particular, is not limited to discovering the world behind the text, but it is also crucial to know the world "in front of the text", which points to the complex structure of identities (ethnicity, religion, colour, class, gender, etc.) held by the contemporary reader.⁵¹ The focus of literary criticism has thus broadened to include the researcher's own world.

Conclusion

As a result of this research on the landmark texts of Johannine studies in the last century, we can state that a methodological shift and diversity has taken place. Undoubtedly there has been a transition from a period in which historical-critical methods were almost monopolized to another period in which social-scientific and literary-critical methods were applied, respectively. However, it would be correct to present the picture reflecting this transition as the result of a methodologically diverse research spectrum. In other words, it is necessary to say that historical criticism still retains its effectiveness, and it has even been revised with new approaches. There is now a common ground of approach among researchers, where the aforementioned methodological diversity cannot be ignored.

While this is the methodological panorama, it is evident that the graph traced through the research foci of the Fourth Gospel is not much different. It is easy to notice that the scholarly effort to examine the evangelist and his *Sitz im Leben* through certain lenses has focused on the historical and social conditions of the first audience of the Gospel known as the Johannine community. The second stop of this shift in focus was the text of the Fourth Gospel itself. This approach, which sees the Gospel as a narrative or a text rather than as a sacred book with a limited meaning, tried to reveal the meaning of the text it focuses on through a synchronic reading strategy. Consequently, the "text" and the "reader" are now the focus. It is academically useful to periodise Johannine studies based on the intensity of

50 F. F. Segovia, ed., *What Is John?: Readers and Readings of the Fourth Gospel*, vol. 1, SBL Symposium Series (Scholars Press, 1996); Segovia, ed., *What Is John?: Literary and Social Readings of the Fourth Gospel*, vol. 2, SBL Symposium Series (Scholars Press, 1996).

51 Francisco Lozada, 'Social Location and Johannine Scholarship: Looking Ahead,' in *New Currents Through John: A Global Perspective*, ed. Francisco Lozada and Tom Thatcher (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2006), 184.

interest in the aforementioned foci, but it should not be neglected that even in the last quarter of the last century when the focus was on the text and the reader, the problems of the evangelist and the Johannine community continued to be addressed.

The legacy of this whole process on the table of Johannine studies is a methodological diversity and a global scale that transcends the boundaries of the Eurocentric Christian academy. The Gospel of John is no longer just an element of the Christian world or the theological cluster; it is now located at the intersection of non-Christian scholarship and interdisciplinary studies. The methodological diversity, interdisciplinary perspectives, and network of researchers with quite different identities can be recognized as academic richness. Ultimately, however, the Gospel of John is one of the most important documents of Christian history and theology. This is why historical and theological attempts at understanding will always be important. Undisputedly, new approaches and studies that consider different disciplines and their concepts will appear. We can also foresee that new foci will be added to the picture we have presented of the shifting focus of Johannine studies through different themes, such as the shift we chose in the last century. This study has dwelt on the course of this shift but has not examined the reasons for it in detail. A need is obvious for studies that address this issue separately. Although the focal shift has reasons specific to Johannine studies, it has a common ground with biblical studies and also scriptural studies from a broader perspective.

To explain the conclusion through Culpepper's metaphors of "window" and "mirror", it is not difficult to see that the methodological shift from window to mirror is temporary rather than permanent. It is now recognized that both are inevitable tools of Johannine studies, so much so that researchers who want to look at the Gospel and its world through a window whose surface is semi-reflective inevitably see themselves. At this point, any research that can be considered within the scope of Johannine studies is expected to act with the awareness of the methodological diversity bequeathed by the methodological and focal changes of the last century. Undoubtedly, the subject of the research, its academic intention, and its limitations will guide the researcher as to which method from the pool to use. However, it is conceivable that the proximity between methods will produce more qualified perspectives. Although the issue of which of the synchronic or diachronic reading models is better is controversial, they can be used together, assuming that they are complementary to each other. For it is no longer enough to know the history of the Fourth Gospel, its author, or the community to which it was addressed, or conversely to discover the relationship between the literary components of the biblical narrative for a qualified evaluation. Moreover, the historical, social, political, and even economic background and context of the researcher as a reader become equally important.

Peer-review: Externally peer-reviewed.

Conflict of Interest: The author has no conflict of interest to declare.

Grant Support: The author declared that this study has received no grant support.

Hakem Değerlendirmesi: Dış bağımsız.

Çıkar Çatışması: Yazar çıkar çatışması bildirmemiştir.

Finansal Destek: Yazar bu çalışma için finansal destek almadığını beyan etmiştir.

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