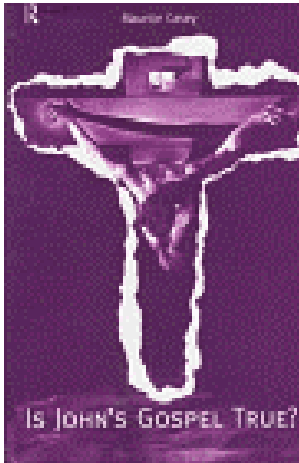


RBL 02/15/1999



Casey, Maurice

Is John's Gospel True?

London: Routledge, 1996. Pp. xii + 268, Cloth, \$74.95,
ISBN 0415146305.

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Casey's remarkably detailed and thorough work seeks to prove that the Fourth Gospel, in contrast to the Synoptics, is not true. In most chapters he first analyzes primary evidence from the Gospels and other ancient sources to support his positions, then engages in extensive point-by-point refutations of many other scholars' arguments. Throughout, Casey explains how and why the Johannine community's views were secondarily but falsely attributed to Jesus himself, that is, its theological rewriting was due to late-first-century religious conflicts. Unfortunately, however, Casey never adequately discusses what "truth" is, but simply equates it with historical facticity.

In a brief introductory chapter, Casey states that he is mainly opposing the fundamentalist views of evangelical Christian scholars (especially L. Morris and D. A. Carson) who maintain "that John's Gospel is literally and historically true in every detail," and others (especially J. A. T. Robinson) who defend its "essential historicity" (p. 1). Moreover, against the majority of critical scholars who agree that the Fourth Gospel is not historically accurate but still value it for its theological truth or spiritual insight, Casey argues that it is "vigorously anti-Jewish" and has "fostered Christian anti-Semitism," thereby making it "unsuitable for too much veneration" (p. 3). Thus, he anticipates his main conclusion: "The Gospel attributed to John does not give a truthful account of Jesus of Nazareth, nor of his ministry, nor of the Jewish people" (p. 3).

In chapter 2 Casey discusses some chronological discrepancies between John and Mark, especially the placement of the cleansing of the temple and the date of the Last Supper. In

both cases, Casey argues that Mark's account is historically true and the Johannine alterations are wrong (contra C. Blomberg). Also, we cannot know the length of Jesus' ministry, but even if the longer Johannine ministry is plausible, it is not therefore true. Chapter 3 details how most elements of Johannine Christology, especially the full deity of Jesus as Son of God and Messiah, are radically different from anything the historical Jesus, as a Jew ministering among Jews, could have said about himself. Because they are so anti-Jewish, Casey asserts, the Johannine claims cannot even be "a possible insight into Jesus' real significance" (p. 40), but rather, "this Gospel's presentation of Jesus is seriously false" (p. 62). Next, he explains how this Gospel's presentation of John the Baptist was so radically rewritten that almost no historical facts remain (chapter 4, contra C. H. Dodd and J. Murphy-O'Connor). Casey's Aramaic expertise shows that Johannine vocabulary and style are substantially different from the Synoptics, and that the Fourth Gospel is not a Greek translation of an Aramaic original, despite the occurrence of some Aramaisms (chapter 5, contra C. F. Burney, C. C. Torrey, and R. A. Martin).

In the following chapters, Casey analyzes the social situation of the Johannine community, first providing a carefully nuanced discussion of the link between the expulsion of Johannine Jews from the synagogues and the well-known Benediction of the heretics (chapter 6, contra R. Kimelman). The most significant contribution of this work is in Casey's detailed explanation of what he calls the Johannine community's "Gentile self-identification" (chapter 7). In this Gospel, he claims, *Ioudaioi* does not mean "Judeans" (contra M. Lowe), nor "Jewish authorities" (contra U. C. Von Wahlde and J. D. G. Dunn), but really means "Jews." Thus, even if the authors may have been Jewish originally, they were in such great conflict with "the Jews" who had ostracized them that they no longer applied this label to themselves. Casey briefly also summarizes the evidence that this community was located in Ephesus (contra K. Wengst).

Casey next discusses the Fourth Gospel's authorship (chapter 8), beginning with a helpful summary of the differences between ancient Jewish practices (pseudepigraphic or anonymous collective authorship) and Greco-Roman standards (personal individual authorship). Since this Gospel is influenced by both cultures, what began as an anonymous document written by several people was soon attributed to a particular individual, initially the "beloved disciple" and later John, son of Zebedee, although both attributions are false (contra Morris). Jewish and Hellenistic conventions of "rewritten history" also help explain how so much secondary Johannine theology could be attributed to Jesus himself.

In chapter 9 Casey analyzes the differences between the Johannine passion narrative and the Synoptic accounts, again asserting that most non-Synoptic details in John are historically false. Chapter 10 contains detailed refutations of Robinson's claims for the historical "priority" of John overall and of J. F. Coakley's arguments for the historicity of the Johannine version of the anointing at Bethany. Finally, chapter 11 (entitled "What is

Truth?") first summarizes the main points from the previous chapters, and then gives samples of how Christian writers, from John Chrysostom to Martin Luther, based their own harsh anti-Semitic polemics on the Fourth Gospel's anti-Jewish rhetoric. Thus Casey concludes: "It is in this area that inaccuracy moves from being regrettable in its own right to being morally wrong" (p. 228).

Casey's overall positions are readily seen in brief summaries concluding each chapter, but the major strength of this book lies in its details, especially in Casey's careful analyses of primary texts and his methodological rigor. Yet would not the same rigorous approach also show that much of the Synoptic material is not literally, historically "true"? Also, while his own arguments are strong, Casey's comments against other scholars are sometimes unnecessarily harsh. He even asserts that the religious commitments of others have unduly influenced their views, labeling them "fundamentalists" (p. 20), "evangelicals" (p. 199) or even "gentile Christian men" (p. 121), while calling himself "an independent academic" (p. 229).

The book's greatest weakness, however, is that Casey never adequately discusses the question he briefly raises ("What is Truth?"), nor does he analyze the specifically Johannine usage of the words "true," "truth," or "truly," so prominent in this Gospel. Although he is sometimes explicit about disputing the *historical* accuracy of this Gospel (pp. 11, 61, etc.), most of his claims that it is wrong are stated so absolutely as to indicate that Casey believes historical truth is the only kind there is. For example, of the Johannine passion narrative he says, "it is not trivially inaccurate, but has been rewritten to avoid serious problems and to affirm serious falsehoods. . . . The resulting stories are untrue from beginning to end. . . . We must conclude that [the evangelist's] work is a presentation of falsehood" (pp. 197-98). In this respect, Casey falls into the same trap as the fundamentalists against whom he is arguing. A more philosophically nuanced recognition that there are *different categories* of truth (historical, scientific, mathematical, theological, etc.), just as there are *different genres* of literature (history, story, metaphor, poetry, etc.), would not diminish the force of his detailed arguments (that the Fourth Gospel is not literal history), but would lead to a different conclusion. Rather than expelling John from the Christian canon, as he implicitly recommends (p. 229), scholars should continually and strongly resist anti-Semitic appropriations of this Gospel, which is after all Casey's explicit, primary, and laudable goal.