In 2002, “John, Jesus, and History” appeared as a unit on the SBL Annual Meeting program for the first time, and sessions have been organized every year since then. The results of the initial years (2002–2004) were published in *John, Jesus, and History, Volume 1: Critical Appraisals of Critical Views* (SBLSymS 44; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007). Papers presented on the theme “Aspects of Historicity in the Fourth Gospel” during the next three years (2005–2007) form the body of the second volume. Currently (2008–2010), the topic under consideration is “Glimpses of Jesus through the Johannine Lens,” and the group intends to remain active beyond this ongoing third phase.

The present volume consists of three parts with a total of twenty-three articles. Each part is prefixed with an introduction authored by Paul Anderson and concludes by a response to the papers in that section, prepared by Craig Koester, Anderson, and Gail O’Day, respectively. In addition, there is an introduction to the book as a whole by Tom Thatcher, as well as a general conclusion by Anderson and an epilogue wherein Felix Just discusses both the progress made so far by the John, Jesus, and History Group and possible directions for its future activities.
The first part of the book considers aspects of historicity in John 1–4. Craig Keener, taking his point of departure in the programmatic claim “We beheld his glory” (John 1:14), underlines how the theology of John is rooted in a profound appreciation of historical events. This is a position that will in different ways be confirmed by a majority of the other contributors to the volume. In the light of archaeological discoveries, Mark Appold reflects on the distinctively Johannine mentions of Bethsaida (John 1:44; 12:21) as the home or workplace for some of Jesus’ disciples and concludes that these references are likely to be historical. He tentatively suggests that the multicultural atmosphere of Bethsaida may have prepared Andrew, Simon, and Philip for their later careers in the non-Jewish world. James McGrath argues that the account of Jesus’ temple action in John 2:13–22 at points preserves some historical information absent from the Synoptics and Thomas, while at other points it represents a more developed form of the tradition. According to McGrath, the Johannine wording of Jesus’ saying about the destruction of the temple reflects such a development, presupposed also by Paul’s allusions to the saying in 1 Cor 3:17 and 2 Cor 5:1–4, whereas the placement of the saying in conjunction with the temple action is historically plausible. Mary Coloe finds another passage that reflects a reworking of historical reminiscences in the Baptist’s self-designation as “the bridegroom’s friend” (John 3:29), which is rooted in the historical Jesus’ use of bridegroom imagery. Coloe draws attention to the prominent role played by the friend of the bridegroom in ancient Jewish marriage customs and points out that the friend also functioned as a “witness,” another epithet given to the Baptist in the Gospel of John. James Charlesworth argues that the Johannine Jesus identifies himself as “the serpent”—a cultural symbol of life and immortality—to be “lifted up,” not only onto the cross but all the way to heaven, in order to give life to all who believe (John 3:14). That the historical Jesus said something of this kind cannot be excluded, according to Charlesworth, especially since serpent imagery is also employed positively in Matt 10:16. Susan Miller similarly points to an overlap with a Synoptic passage, this time Luke 9:51–56, as an indication of the historicity of Jesus’ encounter with a Samaritan woman as narrated in John 4:4–42. Miller observes that Samaritan customs and beliefs, as well as the geographical location of Jacob’s well, are correctly described by John, whose narration is therefore historically plausible. Finally, Peter Judge analyzes the episode about Jesus’ healing of a Roman official’s son in John 4:46b–54 and discovers that it betrays influence from redactional elements in both Matthew’s and Luke’s episodes about the healing of the centurion’s son. Thus, Judge concludes, the Johannine version is a reflection on the Synoptic episodes that brings us not closer to the historical Jesus but deeper into a fuller understanding of his legacy.

The focus shifts to John 5–12 in the second part, although the opening essay by Brian Johnson actually transcends these limits. Johnson sees the Johannine depiction of Jewish feasts as fitting well in a historical trajectory begun in the scriptures of Israel and later
continued in rabbinic literature. As a result, not only is John’s narration historically plausible in this respect, but it also adds to our knowledge of first-century Judaism. Craig Evans considers the possibility that the conjunction between Jesus’ feeding miracle and the eucharistic discourse in John 6 may be more primitive than the Markan separation of the two. As both the feeding and the discourse exploit Moses typology, and thereby evince an identity akin to that of several other first-century prophets, Evans holds that Jesus himself may have interpreted the loaves as the eschatological, life-giving manna. Sean Freyne explores John 7 with special consideration of the accusation leveled against Jesus of belonging to the ‘am ha’aretz letorah. Such a charge Freyne finds plausible in Jesus’ lifetime, where it would reflect tensions between a Judean elite, on the one hand, and a Galilean popular movement, on the other, but also in the later experiences of Johannine Christians; as it stands, John 7 combines elements from various levels of history. Urban von Wahlde highlights recent excavations of the Pool of Siloam and discusses the implications of the discoveries for our understanding of the episode about Jesus and the man born blind in John 9. Before 70 C.E., the pool was an important miqveh with stairs leading up to the Temple Mount, so the healed man’s washing there would have had connotations of ritual purification. The same episode contains the reference to believers being expelled from the synagogue (John 9:22), which is the focal point of Edward Klink’s contribution. According to Klink, the dominant understanding of this as an overtly anachronistic reference to the separation between the Jewish synagogue and Johannine Christianity is misguided, and the expulsion mentioned is rather an intra-Jewish conflict that began already with the historical Jesus. The second part of the book rounds off with three articles discussing the portrayal of Lazarus, and to some extent Martha and Mary, in John 11–12. Richard Bauckham employs statistics of Palestinian Jewish names to show that Martha and Mary are likely to be identical with the two sisters by those names in the Gospel of Luke. John’s linking of the raising of Lazarus to the execution of Jesus is more plausible historically than the Synoptic silence over the resuscitation, and the Johannine identification of the woman who anointed Jesus as Mary fills out the Markan narration with a historical detail. Ben Witherington argues that the problem of the Beloved Disciple can be solved by identifying this figure as Lazarus, “the one whom you [Jesus] love” (John 11:3). Witherington suggests that Lazarus, who may have been the son of Simon the Leper, and who called himself the Elder, provided the bulk of eyewitness material for the Gospel of John, which was edited after Lazarus’s death by John of Patmos. Finally, Derek Tovey maintains that the episode about the raising of Lazarus is meant by the implied author to refer to an actual event in the life of the earthly Jesus. The presence of traditional material in this episode, and of personal names possibly indicating the existence of eyewitnesses, points to a historical core, although the present canons of historical criticism prevent the question of “what really happened” from being answered.
Various aspects of John 13–21 are discussed in the third part. Jamie Clark-Soles probes the plausibility of the foot washing in 13:1–20 and asks what such an action would have signified for Jesus. She concludes that it would most likely have carried connotations of purity, honor, friendship, and sacrificial love; possibly, it was set within a meal and signaled both humble service on the part of Jesus and a special status accorded to Peter. In a study of Jesus’ Last Supper in John 13–17, Bas van Os remarks that the discourses seem to have been paradigmatic for the genre of resurrection dialogue, which points to an origin subsequent to the resurrection for most of this speech. If this post-Easter material is deleted, we are left with a basic narration of the supper that is compatible with the Synoptics. Richard Burridge discusses the question of Johannine ethics in view of the often noted lack of explicit ethical teaching attributed to Jesus in the Gospel. Burridge finds the key in the characterization of the Gospel as a biography, which does not portray Jesus as a moral teacher but puts him forward as an example to be imitated. Thus, the ethics of the Gospel is congruent with that of the historical Jesus. Mark Matson sees an irreconcilable conflict between the dating of Jesus’ death in John and Mark, respectively, and decides that the Johannine chronology is historically plausible. Contrary to a widespread view that John depicts Jesus as the paschal lamb and thus could have synchronized the death of Jesus with the Passover slaughter, Matson argues that the evidence for such a theological tendency in the Gospel is slender. The relationship between history and theology is also the focal point of interest in Helen Bond’s essay on the interrogation of Jesus according to John 18:13–24. Whereas it has been suggested that this episode’s lack of theology speaks in favor of its historicity, Bond points out that the narration evinces clear theological concerns that make this argument less compelling; however, she also notes, the presence of theology does not by itself rule out a historical core. A more radical case against historicity is made by Jeffrey Paul Garcia, who, noting the lack of literary evidence for the use of nails in crucifixion in Jesus’ time, concludes that the references to nail wounds in John 20:24–29 reflect a setting after the First Jewish-Roman War. Garcia holds the Johannine episode to be a midrashic reworking of Luke 24:36–43 under influence from Zech 12:10. Michael Labahn reads the episode about Peter’s rehabilitation (John 21:15–19) as a *relecture* of John 1–20 that settles some of the unanswered questions prompted by that earlier story, and to do so it also avails itself of the memory of the historical Jesus adopting sinners. This, for Labahn, exemplifies how the Gospel of John preserves and transmits historical reminiscences through a process of renarration and reinterpretation. Alan Culpepper aptly brings the array of essays to a close with his study of John 21:24–25. Considering various possible designations for this statement of closure, Culpepper argues that it fits the category of literary “seal,” *sphragis*. He also criticizes Bauckham’s argument that both the first-person plural in 21:24 and the first-person singular in 21:25 refer to the Beloved Disciple, who is mentioned in the third person in this passage.
To the strengths of the present volume belong not only the freshness and high quality of several of the individual contributions all too briefly reviewed above, but also the broad understanding of historicity coming to expression in the book as a whole. While some of the essays take up the traditional challenge of authenticating specific episodes and sayings, others discuss, for example, the extent of a general correspondence between the Johannine Jesus and the historical Jesus, the cultural and historical context of John, or the relationship between history and theology according to the Gospel. This plurality of approaches takes seriously the complexity inherent in speaking of “history” generally and in relation to John specifically. Another virtue consists in the inclusion of contributions such as those of Judge and Garcia, which go against the dominant tendency of the group to rehabilitate John as a source of knowledge about the historical Jesus. The introductions, responses, and editorial conclusions—while at times resulting in a certain redundancy—serve to create a sort of self-critical atmosphere for the project.

Given this effort at critical discussion, it is surprising to find some questionable features at the level of detail go unchallenged in the responses. Charlesworth’s analysis of John 3:14 as an “obviously synonymous” parallelism (70) overlooks the crucial element of comparison (“as … thus”), which distinguishes it from true synonymous parallelism such as found in Ps 8:5. Johnson’s claim that Ant. 3.248–249 provides evidence for the notion of the paschal lamb as a sacrifice for sin is based on a misreading of Josephus (125–26). Culpepper’s definition of incipit is insufficient (353). A cluster of peculiar errors is found in Witherington’s article (specifically, 204–5). Here, not only is Irenaeus branded as “the great heresiarch” and Martin Hengel’s work appealed to in order to drive home a point almost diametrically opposed to what Hengel actually argued, but more fatally, the discussion of external evidence for the authorship of John’s Gospel fails to distinguish between Papias’s testimony, Eusebius’s commentary on it, and Bauckham’s hypothesis about the authorship. This results in inaccurate claims that “Papias ascribes this Gospel to one elder John” (205, also 212) and an uncritical acceptance of Eusebius’s—in fact rather hesitant—speculation about Papias’s John the Elder as the author of Revelation.

Another weakness, in view of the group’s ambitions, is the overall low rate of interaction with current historical Jesus research (although there are some laudable exceptions among the individual contributions). The editors make repeated assertions that the Gospel of John is being neglected by Jesus scholars, beginning with Thatcher’s claim that “recent Jesus research has aligned itself with Bultmann’s dictum that ‘the Gospel of John cannot be taken into account at all as a source for the teaching of Jesus’” (1) and culminating in Anderson’s prediction that “the addition of the Fourth Gospel to the database of material contributing to the historical quest for Jesus will be a shock to the system of all three quests over the last two centuries or so” (386). The hyperbolic nature
of such statements can be easily demonstrated by pointing, for example, to the fact that the plausibility of John’s dating of the crucifixion (well argued by Matson in the present volume) has already been accepted by scholars as John Meier, Gerd Theissen, and Annette Merz, and Scot McKnight. Nonetheless, the suggestion that the conventional authenticity criteria are somehow biased against the Gospel of John (3, 256–57) is intriguing. It would be useful if this criticism could be developed and substantiated in the future and a less prejudiced method of authentication be proposed. The present volume hardly provides such a method. Some of the authors explicitly invoke the criterion of contextual plausibility as formulated by Theissen and Dagmar Winter (121, 143–44), while others recognize it implicitly. In either case, whereas contextual plausibility opens up the possibility that the material preserves historical reminiscences, it cannot tell historicity apart from verisimilitude (see Koester’s comment, 100–101). Yes, the narrations about Jesus’ meeting with a Samaritan woman at Jacob’s well, his sending of a blind man to the Pool of Siloam, and his washing of the disciples’ feet are realistic, but do they go back to historical events? It could have happened, but did it happen?

The work of the SBL John, Jesus, and History Group has only just commenced. It is so far marked by commendable enthusiasm and originality. These qualities, together with a little more meticulous handling of the evidence and some methodological refinement, will make it a very promising project for the future.