

## CHAPTER ONE

# INTRODUCTION TO JOHN'S GOSPEL\*

John's Gospel, together with the Book of Romans, can justifiably be called "the Mount Everest of New Testament theology." From its peaks it is possible to survey much of the territory of biblical revelation, including the Old Testament, the Synoptics, and other portions of the New Testament. The following essay surveys: 1. the Fourth Gospel's historical setting; 2. its literary features; 3. its theological emphases; 4. its place in the canon; and 5. its contemporary relevance.

### *Historical Setting*

The Gospel's internal evidence suggests that the author is an apostle (1:14 cf. 2:11; 19:35); one of the Twelve ("the disciple whom Jesus loved": 13:23 cf. 19:26–27; 20:2–9; 21, esp. vv. 24–25); John, the son of Zebedee ("the disciple Jesus loved" is associated with Peter in 13:23–24; 18:15–16; 20:2–9; 21; cf. Luke 22:8; Acts 1:13; 3–4; 8:14–25; Gal 2:9). External evidence supports this identification (Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* 3.1.2). The Gospel was probably written in Ephesus and aimed (like the other Gospels) at a universal readership.<sup>1</sup> John's original audience appears to have been made up primarily of diaspora Jews and proselytes.

The purpose statement in 20:30–31 indicates that John wrote with an (indirect) evangelistic purpose, probably expecting to reach his unbelieving audience via Christian readers.<sup>2</sup> The most probable occasion for writ-

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<sup>1</sup>Richard Bauckham, "For Whom Were the Gospels Written?" in *The Gospels for All Christians: Rethinking the Gospel Audiences* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 9–48.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, 10.

ing is the destruction of the Jerusalem temple in 70 CE, a traumatic event that left Judaism in a national and religious void and caused Jews to look for ways to continue their ritual and worship. Seizing the opportunity for Jewish evangelism, John presents Jesus as the temple's replacement (2:18–22) and the fulfillment of the symbolism inherent in Jewish feasts (esp. chaps. 5–12). If this hypothesis is correct, the Gospel could have been written any time after CE 70. If Thomas' confession of Jesus as "my Lord and my God" is intended to evoke associations with emperor worship under Domitian (CE 81–96), a date after 81 CE would appear most likely.

#### *Literary Features*

John demonstrates that the Christ, the Son of God, is Jesus (20:30–31)<sup>3</sup> by weaving together several narrative strands. The prologue places the entire Gospel into the framework of the eternal, pre-existent Word who became flesh in Jesus (1:1–18). The first half of John's narrative sets forth evidence for Jesus' messiahship by way of seven selected signs (1:19–12:50; cf. 20:30–31).<sup>4</sup> John also includes Jesus' seven "I am" sayings (6:25–59; 8:12=9:5; 10:7=9,11; 11:25; 14:6; 15:1) and calls numerous witnesses in support of Jesus' claims (including Moses and the Scriptures; the Baptist; the Father; Jesus and his own works; the Spirit and the disciples; and the fourth evangelist himself). Representative questions concerning Jesus' messiahship serve to lead the Gospel's readers to the author's own conclusion (i.e. that Jesus is the Christ; e.g. 1:41; 4:25; 7:27, 31, 52; 10:24; 11:27; 12:34).

The second half of John's Gospel shows how the Christ ensures the continuance of his mission by preparing his new messianic community for its mission. The section opens with Jesus' farewell discourse (13–17); the new messianic community is cleansed (by the footwashing and Judas' departure; ch. 13), prepared (by instructions regarding the coming Paraclete and his ministry to the disciples; 14–16), and prayed for (ch. 17); the disciples are made partners in the proclamation of salvation in Christ (15:15–16) and taken into the life of the Godhead which is characterized by perfect love and unity (17:20–26). The Johannine passion nar-

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<sup>3</sup>Cf. D. A. Carson, "The Purpose of the Fourth Gospel: In 20:31 Reconsidered," *JBL* 106 (1987): 639–51.

<sup>4</sup>Cf. Andreas J. Köstenberger, "The Seventh Johannine Sign: A Study in John's Christology," *BBR* 5 (1995): 87–103.

rative (18–19) presents Jesus' death both as an atonement for sin (cf. 1:29, 36; 6:48–58; 10:15, 17–18), though without the Synoptic emphasis on shame and humiliation, and as a stage in Jesus' return to the Father (e.g. 13:1; 16:28). The resurrection appearances and the disciples' commissioning by their risen Lord constitute the focal point of the penultimate chapter (20), where Jesus is cast as the paradigmatic Sent One (cf. 9:7), who has now become the sender of his new messianic community (20:21–23). The purpose statement of 20:30–31 reiterates the major motifs of the Gospel: the "signs"; believing; (eternal) life; and the identity of Jesus as Christ and Son of God. The epilogue portrays the relationship between Peter and "the disciple whom Jesus loved" in terms of differing yet equally legitimate roles of service within the believing community.

### *Theological Emphases*

#### *The Christ and His Mission*

In keeping with its Gospel genre, John's narrative focuses on Jesus and his messianic mission. At the very outset, John's account is based on Old Testament theology. The Gospel's opening phrase, "In the beginning," recalls the beginning of Genesis, which recounts the world's creation (1:1; cf. 1:3). According to John, the Word's coming into this world and becoming flesh in Jesus constitutes an event of comparable magnitude (1:1, 14). Jesus is presented as the Word sent from heaven to accomplish a mission and, once the mission has been accomplished, to return to the place from which he came (cf. Isa 55:11). John's use of the term *logos* ("Word") with reference to Jesus also serves to contextualize the Christian message in the evangelist's culture.

Another Old Testament concept taken up in John's prologue is that of light and darkness (1:4–5, 8–9; cf. 3:19–21; Gen 1:3–4). There is a superficial parallel here with the Qumran literature. But there this contrast is set within the framework of an eschatological dualism, while in John Jesus is presented as the Word, active in creation, who has now brought final revelation from God. This revelation, in turn, is compared and contrasted with the revelation received by and mediated through Moses (1:17–18; cf. Exod 33–34). Jesus brought "grace instead of grace" (1:16): while the law given through Moses also constituted a gracious gift from God, truth—final, eschatological truth—came only through Jesus (1:17). And no one, not even Moses, truly saw God (1:18; cf. Exod 33:20, 23; 34:6–7); but now Jesus, already with God at the beginning (1:1), and

always, even during his earthly ministry, at the Father's side, has "exegeted" (explained) him (1:18).

The Jewish milieu of John's Gospel and the firm grounding of its theology in Old Testament antecedents are also borne out by the various component parts of the Fourth Gospel's christological teaching. John's favorite designation for Jesus is that of the Son sent by the Father (3:17, 35-36; 5:19-26; 6:40; 8:35-36; 14:13; 17:1). This metaphor is taken from Jewish life and the halakhic concept of the *šāliah*, according to which the sent one is like the sender himself, a faithful representative of his interests (cf. 13:16, 20). The image of the descending bread from heaven develops Old Testament teaching on God's provision of manna in the wilderness (cf. Jesus as the antitype of the serpent in the wilderness, 3:14); the figure of the descending and ascending Son of Man (cf. the "lifted up" sayings in 3:14; 8:28; 12:34) probably derives from apocalyptic passages featuring "one like a son of man" (Dan 7:13). Jesus is also shown to fulfill the symbolism of the Jewish feast of Tabernacles (chs. 7-9) and the Passover (ch. 19), as well as that of Jewish institutions such as the Jerusalem temple (2:14-22; see "Historical Setting" above, and further below).

Central to John's presentation of Jesus' work (esp. in chaps. 1-12; see "Literary features" above) is the concept of signs.<sup>5</sup> The trajectory of antecedent Old Testament theology reaches back as far as the "signs and wonders" performed by Moses at the exodus; Jesus' signs point to a new exodus (cf. Luke 9:31). In John, however, the miraculous character of Jesus' work is blended with, and even superseded by, their prophetic symbolism (cf. Isa 20:3). As with those of Moses and later prophets, the signs' function is primarily to authenticate the one who performs them as God's true representative. People are severely criticized for demanding spectacular evidence of Jesus' authority (4:48); yet signs are offered as an aid to faith (10:38). And while blessing is pronounced on those who "have not seen and yet have believed" (20:29), Jesus' signs are clearly designed to elicit faith among his audience, and when they fail to do so, the people are held responsible.

Another crucial motif in John's theology is Jesus' fulfillment of the symbolism inherent in Jewish feasts and institutions. By pronouncing himself to be the "light of the world" (8:12; 9:5) and the source of "living water" (4:10-14; 7:38), Jesus claims to fulfill the torch-lighting and water-pouring ceremonies which formed part of the feast of Tabernacles. By dying during Passover week, Jesus is revealed as the prototype of the

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<sup>5</sup>See Köstenberger, "Seventh Johannine Sign," 87-103.

Jewish passover (19:14). By pointing to his own crucified and resurrected body as the true embodiment and replacement of the Jerusalem temple (2:14–22), Jesus indicated that Judaism was merely preparatory, anticipating the coming of God's Messiah. True worship must be rendered, not in any particular physical location, but in spirit and truth (4:23–24).

One final striking feature deserving comment is John's inclusion of seven "I am" sayings of Jesus. According to John, Jesus is: 1. the bread from heaven (6:25–29); 2. the light of the world (8:12=9:5); 3. the door for the sheep and 4. the good shepherd (10:7, 9, 11); 5. the resurrection and the life (11:25); 6. the way, the truth, and the life (14:6); and 7. the vine (15:1). This terminology recalls God's self-identification to Moses at the outset of the exodus: "I AM WHO I AM . . . I AM has sent me to you" (Exod 3:14). It is also reminiscent of Isaiah's consistent portrayal of the sovereign Lord God (e.g. Isa 43:10–13, 25; 45:18; 48:12; 51:12; 52:6). In places "I am sayings" and signs are linked (6:35; 11:25). Like the background to the Johannine "signs," the background to Jesus' self-designation as the "I am" is therefore to be found in a trajectory ranging from Moses and the exodus to the Old Testament prophets, particularly Isaiah (cf. also 12:38–41).

#### *The New Messianic Community and Its Mission*

Like his portrait of Jesus, John's presentation of the new messianic community follows a salvation-historical pattern.<sup>6</sup> In keeping with Old Testament typology, believers are described as a "flock" (ch. 10) and as "branches" of the vine (ch. 15). Yet John does not teach that the church replaces Israel. Rather, he identifies Jesus as Israel's replacement: he is God's "vine" taking the place of God's Old Testament "vineyard," Israel (Isa 5). John acknowledges that "salvation comes from the Jews" (4:22). Yet he portrays Israel as part of the unbelieving world which rejects Jesus. Jesus' "own" (i.e. "the Jews") did not receive him (1:11). In their place, the Twelve, who are now "his own," become the recipients of his love (13:1; cf. ch. 17). The Jewish leaders, on the other hand, are said not even to belong to Jesus' flock (10:26).

Another instance of John's drawing on Old Testament antecedents is Jesus' parting preparation of his followers in terms reminiscent of Moses' deuteronomic farewell discourse ("love," "obey," "keep . . . commandments," etc.; 13–17; cf. 1:17). However, at this salvation-historical juncture

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<sup>6</sup>John W. Pryor, *John: Evangelist of the Covenant People* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1992).

it is not Israel but believers in Jesus who represent the core group through which he will pursue his redemptive purposes. The community is formally constituted in the commissioning narrative, where Jesus' breathing upon his gathered disciples marks a "new creation," recalling the creation of the first human being, Adam (20:22; Gen 2:7). Jesus' dependent and obedient relationship to his sender, the Father, is made the paradigm for the disciples' relationship with their sender, Jesus.<sup>7</sup>

In John's treatment of individual disciples, particular attention is given to two of Jesus' followers: Peter and "the disciple whom Jesus loved." These two characters are regularly featured together (see "Historical Setting" above):<sup>8</sup> in the upper room (13:23–24); in the courtyard of the high priest (18:15–16); at the empty tomb (20:2–9); and at the Sea of Tiberias subsequent to Jesus' resurrection (ch. 21). While Peter is considered to be the leader of the Twelve (cf. 6:67–79), he is presented as second to "the disciple whom Jesus loved" in terms of access to revelation (13:23) and faith (20:8). In the end, the ministry of "the disciple Jesus loved" is shown to be equally legitimate to that of Peter. The ministries of both Peter and John are portrayed by the fourth evangelist in terms which recall Jesus' ministry: in Peter's case, the analogy is found in the death by which he would glorify God (21:19; cf. 12:33); in the case of "the disciple whom Jesus loved," the parallel consists in his position "at the breast of Jesus," which qualified him supremely to "narrate" the story of his Lord (13:23; author's translations; cf. 1:18). Thus the role of (eye)witness to Jesus' ministry may take forms as different as martyrdom and writing a Gospel, but witness must be borne, according to each person's calling (15:26–27).

#### *Place in the Canon*

##### *Relationship with the Synoptic Gospels*

The relationship between John's Gospel and the Synoptics has been described in terms of mutual independence or varying degrees of literary interdependence. Historically, it seems difficult to believe that John had not at least heard of the existence of the Synoptics and read at least some portions of them. But whether or not John knew these Gospels, he clearly

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<sup>7</sup>Andreas J. Köstenberger, *The Missions of Jesus and the Disciples According to the Fourth Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 190–98.

<sup>8</sup>See Kevin Quast, *Peter and the Beloved Disciple* (JSNTSS 32; Sheffield: JSOT, 1989).

did not make extensive use of them in composing his own narrative. Apart from the feeding of the five thousand, the anointing and the passion narrative, and a few other thematic congruences, John has little in common with the Synoptic Gospels.<sup>9</sup>

Moreover, unlike the Synoptics, John has no birth narrative, no Sermon on the Mount or Lord's Prayer (but neither has Mark), no accounts of Jesus' transfiguration or the Lord's Supper, no narrative parables, and no eschatological discourse. Clearly, John has written his own book. This, however, does not make his a sectarian work apart from the mainstream of apostolic Christianity.<sup>10</sup> Rather, John frequently transposes elements of the Gospel tradition into a different key. The synoptic teaching on the kingdom of God corresponds to the Johannine theme of "eternal life"; narrative parables are replaced by extended discourses on the symbolism of Jesus' signs. Moreover, all four Gospels present Jesus as the Messiah fulfilling Old Testament predictions and typology. Thus the differences between the Synoptics and John must not be exaggerated.

#### *Relationship with the Other Johannine Writings*

John's first epistle is directed to defuse an early gnostic threat to the message of John's gospel by showing that Jesus has come in the flesh. John's Gospel portrays Jesus along similar lines, albeit without specific references to proto-Gnosticism. The striking similarities between John's Gospel and his first epistle include the following: the contrast between light and darkness (John 1:4–9; 3:9–21; 12:35–36; 1 John 1:5–7; 2:8–11) and the negative view of "the world" (cf. esp. 1 John 2:15–17), which must be "overcome" (John 16:33; 1 John 5:4–5); the use of the term *paraklētos* (for the Spirit, in John 14:16, 26; 16:26; 16:7; for Jesus, in 1 John 2:1); the emphasis on truth (John 1:14, 17; 3:21; 4:23, 24; 5:33; etc.; 1 John 1:6, 8; 2:4, 21; etc.); "eternal life" (John 3:15–16, 36; 4:14, 36; etc.; 1 John 1:2; 2:25; 3:15; 5:11, 13, 20) and references to believers' having already passed from death into life (John 5:24=1 John 3:14); the description of Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God (John 20:30–31; 1 John 2:22; 4:15; 5:1, 5); God's sending of his Son into the world in order that those who believe in him may have life (John 3:16–17; 1 John 4:7); and the frequent

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<sup>9</sup>But note the "interlocking traditions" enumerated in D. A. Carson, Douglas J. Moo, and Leon Morris, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 161–62.

<sup>10</sup>David Wenham, "The enigma of the Fourth Gospel: another look," *TynBul* 48 (1997): 149–78.

use of substantival participles (“the one who”), “just as” comparisons, and of important terms such as “know,” “keep the commandments,” “abide,” “love,” and the designations “born of God” and “children of God.”

The book of Revelation is addressed to seven churches in Asia Minor (Rev 2–3), and is intended to strengthen believers in the face of suffering at the end of the first century. Common features of John’s Gospel and the Apocalypse include: the christological titles “Lamb” (John 1:29, 36; twenty-eight times in Rev.) and Logos (John 1:1, 14; Rev 19:13); the eschatological images of shepherding (John 10:1–16; 21:15–17; Rev 2:27; 7:17; 12:5; 19:15) and living water (John 4:14; 6:35; 7:37–38; Rev 7:17; 21:6; 22:1, 17); statements regarding God’s dwelling with humans (John 1:14; Rev 7:15; 21:3) and the absence of the temple (John 2:19, 21; 4:20–26; Rev 21:22); the importance assigned to the number seven (in John, signs and “I am” sayings; in Rev., seals, trumpets and bowls); the identification of Satan as the chief protagonist of Jesus (John 6:70; 8:44; 13:2, 27; Rev 2:9–10, 13, 24; 3:9; 12:9, 12; 20:2, 7, 10); the contrast between believers and the world in John and between those with God’s seal and those with the mark of the beast in Revelation; the quotation of Zech 12:10 in John 19:36–37 and Rev 1:7; the terminology of “witness” and “glory”; and both the necessity of perseverance and the sovereignty and predestinating counsel of God (theodicy).

#### *Relationship with Pauline Writings*

John’s Gospel and Paul’s epistles reflect different but not contradictory perspectives. Both emphasize love (John 13:13–14; 1 Cor 13), consider the world to be in darkness and its wisdom futile, and use the phrase “in Christ” or “in him.” They also depict Israel’s destiny using similar imagery, whether branches of a vine (John in ch. 15) or of an olive tree (Paul in Romans 11). Both subordinate the Law to faith in Jesus (John 1:17; Rom and Gal), and both depict God as “the Father,” with John stressing the Father’s role in believers’ conception (“born of God”) and Paul emphasizing his role in adoption. For both writers the gospel is centered on Jesus Christ crucified, buried, and risen (John 18–20; 1 Cor 15:1–4), and they both teach divine sovereignty and predestination in the context of theodicy (John 12:37–40; Rom 9–11).

But John and Paul differ in many respects. Unlike Paul, John nowhere elaborates the relationship between sin and the law; thus John lacks an equivalent to the Pauline antithesis between works and faith. The Pauline term “flesh” in contrast to the Spirit is without parallel in John (John 3:6 is no real exception). Likewise, John has no explicit doctrine of

justification;<sup>11</sup> neither does he feature full-fledged versions of the Pauline corollaries to justification, such as reconciliation, calling, election,<sup>12</sup> adoption into sonship, and sanctification.

#### *Relationship with Other New Testament Writings*

John shares with Hebrews a high christology, particularly in the prologues. Both books stress that Jesus is the locus of God's final revelation (John 1:18; Heb 1:2), and both set God's redemptive work through Christ in parallel to his work of creation (John 1:1; Heb 1:3). Both also stress that Jesus is the last in a long series of divine emissaries and bearers of revelation (John 4:34; Heb 1:2). Both emphasize faith (John throughout; Heb 11) and portray Jesus as exalted subsequent to his suffering. But John's eschatology is mostly realized while Hebrews accentuates hope; Johannine "in Christ" language is absent from Hebrews; and Hebrews portrays the Christian life more in terms of struggle, owing to the readers' weariness and reluctance to suffer.

John and Peter are associated in ministry in the early portions of the book of Acts. It is therefore not surprising that they have similar perspectives on a number of issues. Both emphasize that the fall of Judaism is part of God's plan (John 12:37; 1 Pet 2:8). Both present Jesus simultaneously as Lamb and as shepherd (John 1:29, 36; 10:12; 21:15–19; 1 Pet 1:19; 2:25; 5:24). Both portray believers as those who are "in Christ" (1 John 2:5–6; 1 Pet 5:14) and who believe in Jesus although they do not now see him (John 20:29; 1 Pet 1:8). Both emphasize mutual love (John 13:34; 15:9, 12, 17; 17:26; 1 Pet 1:22; 2:17; 4:8), regard Jesus' death as the norm for Christian conduct (John 15:13; 1 Pet 2:21–25; 3:17–18), challenge the church to suffer joyfully for Christ (John 15:18:25; 1 Pet 2:13–4:2), and acknowledge the Spirit as the witness to Jesus (John 15:26; 1 Pet 1:11–12) and the life-giver (John 6:63; 1 Pet 3:18). Finally, neither discusses the law or the constitution of the church.

#### *Relevance*

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<sup>11</sup>Though see Andrew H. Trotter, "Justification in the Gospel of John," in *Right with God: Justification in the Bible and the world* (ed. D. A. Carson; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), 126–45.

<sup>12</sup>Though see Robert W. Yarbrough, "Divine Election in the Gospel of John," in *The Grace of God, the Bondage of the Will*, Vol. 1 (ed. Thomas R. Schreiner and Bruce A. Ware; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), 47–62.

John's Gospel accentuates Jesus' divinity more strongly than do the other Gospels (cf. esp. 1:1, 18; 20:28-29), thereby expanding the horizons of Jewish monotheism. As in John's day, his emphasis on Jesus' exclusive claims and unique person and work (cf. esp. 1:18; 14:6) confronts alternative claims to (religious) truth. John's Christology, particularly regarding Jesus' deity and his human and divine natures, has profoundly influenced the way Christians think about their Lord, particularly through the early church councils and creeds.

By contextualizing the good news about Jesus, John shows Christianity to be a world religion, transcending its Jewish roots. Faith in Jesus as Messiah and Son of God is presented as entrance into a personal relationship with God the Father in Christ and as into the messianic community, which is no longer defined by ethnic boundaries. The most well-known verse of the Gospel, John 3:16, tells of God's love for the (sinful) world which led him to send his Son, so that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

According to the commissioning passage in 20:21-23, the church has entered into Christ's mission and is charged to proclaim the message of forgiveness in Jesus' name to a dark and hostile world. But as Christ has overcome the world, believers in the exalted Christ, after having borne testimony to the world regarding Jesus' messiahship, are certain to join their Lord in his eternal glory (17:24).