

The Gospel of John

Francis Martin and
William M. Wright IV



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Editors' Preface

The Church has always venerated the divine Scriptures just as she venerates the body of the Lord. . . . All the preaching of the Church should be nourished and governed by Sacred Scripture. For in the sacred books, the Father who is in heaven meets His children with great love and speaks with them; and the power and goodness in the word of God is so great that it stands as the support and energy of the Church, the strength of faith for her sons and daughters, the food of the soul, a pure and perennial fountain of spiritual life.

Second Vatican Council, *Dei Verbum* 21

Were not our hearts burning [within us] while he spoke to us on the way and opened the scriptures to us?

Luke 24:32

The Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture aims to serve the ministry of the Word of God in the life and mission of the Church. Since Vatican Council II, there has been an increasing hunger among Catholics to study Scripture in depth and in a way that reveals its relationship to liturgy, evangelization, catechesis, theology, and personal and communal life. This series responds to that desire by providing accessible yet substantive commentary on each book of the New Testament, drawn from the best of contemporary biblical scholarship as well as the rich treasury of the Church's tradition. These volumes seek to offer scholarship illumined by faith, in the conviction that the ultimate aim of biblical interpretation is to discover what God has revealed and is still speaking

through the sacred text. Central to our approach are the principles taught by Vatican II: first, the use of historical and literary methods to discern what the biblical authors intended to express; second, prayerful theological reflection to understand the sacred text “in accord with the same Spirit by whom it was written”—that is, in light of the content and unity of the whole Scripture, the living tradition of the Church, and the analogy of faith (*Dei Verbum* 12).

The Catholic Commentary on Sacred Scripture is written for those engaged in or training for pastoral ministry and others interested in studying Scripture to understand their faith more deeply, to nourish their spiritual life, or to share the good news with others. With this in mind, the authors focus on the meaning of the text for faith and life rather than on the technical questions that occupy scholars, and they explain the Bible in ordinary language that does not require translation for preaching and catechesis. Although this series is written from the perspective of Catholic faith, its authors draw on the interpretation of Protestant and Orthodox scholars and hope these volumes will serve Christians of other traditions as well.

A variety of features are designed to make the commentary as useful as possible. Each volume includes the biblical text of the New American Bible, Revised Edition (NABRE), the translation approved for liturgical use in the United States. In order to serve readers who use other translations, the most important differences between the NABRE and other widely used translations (RSV, NRSV, JB, NJB, and NIV) are noted and explained. Each unit of the biblical text is followed by a list of references to relevant Scripture passages, Catechism sections, and uses in the Roman Lectionary. The exegesis that follows aims to explain in a clear and engaging way the meaning of the text in its original historical context as well as its perennial meaning for Christians. Reflection and Application sections help readers apply Scripture to Christian life today by responding to questions that the text raises, offering spiritual interpretations drawn from Christian tradition or providing suggestions for the use of the biblical text in catechesis, preaching, or other forms of pastoral ministry.

Interspersed throughout the commentary are Biblical Background sidebars that present historical, literary, or theological information and Living Tradition sidebars that offer pertinent material from the postbiblical Christian tradition, including quotations from Church documents and from the writings of saints and Church Fathers. The Biblical Background sidebars are indicated by a photo of urns that were excavated in Jerusalem, signifying the importance of historical study in understanding the sacred text. The Living Tradition sidebars are indicated by an image of Eadwine, a twelfth-century monk and scribe, signifying

the growth in the Church's understanding that comes by the grace of the Holy Spirit as believers study and ponder the word of God in their hearts (see *Dei Verbum* 8).

Maps and a glossary are located in the back of each volume for easy reference. The glossary explains key terms from the biblical text as well as theological or exegetical terms, which are marked in the commentary with a cross (†). A list of suggested resources, an index of pastoral topics, and an index of sidebars are included to enhance the usefulness of these volumes. Further resources, including questions for reflection or discussion, can be found at the series website, www.CatholicScriptureCommentary.com.

It is our desire and prayer that these volumes be of service so that more and more “the word of the Lord may speed forward and be glorified” (2 Thess 3:1) in the Church and throughout the world.

Peter S. Williamson
Mary Healy
Kevin Perrotta

Note to Readers

The New American Bible, Revised Edition differs slightly from most English translations in its verse numbering of the Psalms and certain other parts of the Old Testament. For instance, Ps 51:4 in the NABRE is Ps 51:2 in other translations; Mal 3:19 in the NABRE is Mal 4:1 in other translations. Readers who use different translations are advised to keep this in mind when looking up Old Testament cross-references given in the commentary.

Abbreviations

†	indicates that the definition of a term appears in the glossary
AB	Anchor Bible
ABD	<i>Anchor Bible Dictionary</i> . 6 vols. Edited by David Noel Freedman. New York and New Haven: Doubleday and Yale University Press, 1992
ABRL	Anchor Bible Reference Library
ACCS	Elowsky, Joel C., ed. <i>John</i> . Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: New Testament 4a–b. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2006–7
b.	Babylonian Talmud
BDAG	Bauer, W., F. W. Danker, W. F. Arndt, and F. W. Gingrich. <i>A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature</i> . 3rd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000
Catechism	<i>Catechism of the Catholic Church</i> (2nd ed.)
Denzinger	Denzinger, Heinrich. <i>Compendium of Creeds, Definitions, and Declarations on Matters of Faith and Morals</i> . 43rd ed. Edited by Peter Hünermann. Latin-English. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2012
DS	Denzinger, Heinrich. <i>Enchiridion symbolorum, definitionum et declarationum de rebus fidei et morum</i> . Edited by Adolf Schönmetzer. 1965
FC	Fathers of the Church
LCL	Loeb Classical Library
Lectionary	<i>The Lectionary for Mass</i> (1998/2002 USA ed.)
LXX	†Septuagint
NABRE	New American Bible, Revised Edition
NIV	New International Version
NJB	New Jerusalem Bible
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
NT	New Testament
OT	Old Testament
PG	Patrologia Graeca. Edited by J. P. Migne. 162 Vols. Paris, 1857–86
PL	Patrologia Latina. Edited by J. P. Migne. 217 Vols. Paris, 1844–64
1QS	<i>Rule of the Community</i> (of the †Dead Sea Scrolls)
11Q19	<i>Temple Scroll</i> (of the Dead Sea Scrolls)
RSV	Revised Standard Version
SBLSymS	Society of Biblical Literature: Symposium Series

Books of the Old Testament

Gen	Genesis	Tob	Tobit	Ezek	Ezekiel
Exod	Exodus	Jdt	Judith	Dan	Daniel
Lev	Leviticus	Esther	Esther	Hosea	Hosea
Num	Numbers	1 Macc	1 Maccabees	Joel	Joel
Deut	Deuteronomy	2 Macc	2 Maccabees	Amos	Amos
Josh	Joshua	Job	Job	Obad	Obadiah
Judg	Judges	Ps	Psalms/Psalms	Jon	Jonah
Ruth	Ruth	Prov	Proverbs	Mic	Micah
1 Sam	1 Samuel	Eccles	Ecclesiastes	Nah	Nahum
2 Sam	2 Samuel	Song	Song of Songs	Hab	Habakkuk
1 Kings	1 Kings	Wis	Wisdom	Zeph	Zephaniah
2 Kings	2 Kings	Sir	Sirach	Hag	Haggai
1 Chron	1 Chronicles	Isa	Isaiah	Zech	Zechariah
2 Chron	2 Chronicles	Jer	Jeremiah	Mal	Malachi
Ezra	Ezra	Lam	Lamentations		
Neh	Nehemiah	Bar	Baruch		

Books of the New Testament

Matt	Matthew	1 Tim	1 Timothy
Mark	Mark	2 Tim	2 Timothy
Luke	Luke	Titus	Titus
John	John	Philem	Philemon
Acts	Acts	Heb	Hebrews
Rom	Romans	James	James
1 Cor	1 Corinthians	1 Pet	1 Peter
2 Cor	2 Corinthians	2 Pet	2 Peter
Gal	Galatians	1 John	1 John
Eph	Ephesians	2 John	2 John
Phil	Philippians	3 John	3 John
Col	Colossians	Jude	Jude
1 Thess	1 Thessalonians	Rev	Revelation
2 Thess	2 Thessalonians		

Introduction

Pope St. Gregory the Great compared Scripture to a “smooth, deep river in which a lamb may walk and an elephant may swim.”¹ These words certainly apply to the Gospel of John. Within its pages are found divine teachings articulated with simple images such as water and light, memorable stories composed with literary and dramatic skill, and glimpses into the very mystery of God, proceeding from the most profound mystical illumination. Like the loaves and fishes multiplied by Jesus, the Gospel of John provides a superabundance of spiritual teaching, edification, and challenges to all its readers, whether beginners or experienced.

Before embarking on this study of John, it will be helpful to consider some introductory matters. We will, therefore, examine the Gospel’s authorship, historical context, and literary genre. We will then discuss the Gospel’s literary structure and characteristics, its relationship with other biblical writings, and its major theological teachings. We will conclude with some remarks about reading John’s Gospel today.

Authorship

The Gospel does not explicitly name its author, and so it is necessary to engage in guesswork based upon evidence from the Gospel itself and from early Christian tradition.

All discussions of this Gospel’s authorship involve the anonymous figure called “the disciple whom Jesus loved” (21:7), usually referred to as the Beloved Disciple. The Gospel says that he was an eyewitness to Jesus’ life (19:26, 35),

1. Gregory the Great, *Moralia* 1.4 (PL 75:515).

and his testimony has been preserved in the Gospel (21:24–25) by himself or a secretary. He first appears at the Last Supper, as the one reclining next to Jesus (13:23), and is then depicted in three other scenes: with Jesus’ mother at the foot of the cross (19:25–27), with Peter at the empty tomb (20:2–10), and at Jesus’ resurrection appearance in Galilee (21:1–23). He could be “the other disciple” with Peter at Anna’s house after Jesus’ arrest (18:15–16; if so, he has ties to the Jerusalem priesthood). Some have argued that he is the unnamed disciple who first comes to Jesus with Andrew after having followed John the Baptist (1:35, 40). The Gospel contains evidence that its author knew the geography of the Holy Land, especially Jerusalem, before the Roman destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70 (4:3–6; 5:2; 8:20; 9:7; 10:23) and was very familiar with Jewish religious practices, liturgies, and traditions of biblical interpretation (2:6; 7:37–39; 8:12).

There are two major theories about this disciple’s identity.² The major opinion from Christian antiquity until the nineteenth century was that the Beloved Disciple was John the Apostle, son of Zebedee.³ This well-known member of the Twelve is named in the [†]Synoptics (e.g., Mark 1:19–20; 3:16–17; 9:2), Acts (3–4), and Paul (Gal 2:9), but he is never mentioned explicitly in the Fourth Gospel, although there is a mention of “Zebedee’s sons” in 21:2. Strong evidence for identifying the Beloved Disciple with John the Apostle is the agreement on this point among second-century Christians. For instance, St. Irenaeus, who wrote in the 180s, stated that John, “the Lord’s disciple who had also *rested on* [Jesus’] *breast*, issued the Gospel while living at Ephesus of Asia.”⁴ Irenaeus learned about John from St. Polycarp, a bishop who knew and was taught by John the Apostle.⁵ Recent scholarship has located the attribution of the Fourth Gospel with John the Apostle in the “traditions of the presbyters,” or elders, which date to the late first or early second century.⁶

Many scholars today are not inclined to assign much historical weight to second-century traditions about Gospel authorship. The major scholarly opinion today is that the Beloved Disciple was not a member of the Twelve Apostles. In this view, the author was another disciple of Jesus during his ministry, likely a

2. See R. Alan Culpepper, *John, the Son of Zebedee: The Life of a Legend* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000 [1994]).

3. For argumentation, see Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003), 1:82–115.

4. Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies* 3.1.1, in *St. Irenaeus of Lyons: Against the Heresies*, trans. Dominic J. Unger, OFMCap, Ancient Christian Writers 64 (New York: Paulist Press, 2012), 30.

5. Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies* 3.3.4.

6. See Charles E. Hill, *The Johannine Corpus in the Early Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004). Hill’s fresh reconsideration of the second-century evidence renews the identification of the Beloved Disciple as John the Apostle as a very intriguing possibility.

former follower of John the Baptist (the anonymous disciple in 1:35, 40), and who may also be John the Elder, the author of 2–3 John (on the relation of the Gospel to the Letters of John, see below).⁷ Those who take this position point out that the Gospel does not record any of the Synoptic stories that feature John the Apostle, such as the transfiguration. The Gospel also sets the Beloved Disciple alongside Peter in order to showcase his special status: only the Beloved Disciple knows the identity of Jesus' betrayer (13:24–26); he is present at the cross whereas Peter denied Jesus (18:17, 25–27; 19:25–27); he outruns Peter to the empty tomb and first arrives at some degree of Easter faith (20:2–8); he first recognizes the risen Jesus speaking to the disciples from the seashore (21:7). If he is the other disciple in 18:15–16, he obtains access to the high priest's house and then has Peter admitted. This highlighting of the Beloved Disciple's role leads some scholars to infer that he was an outsider to the Twelve.⁸ This theory, however, requires an explanation as to why this Gospel would have been wrongly associated with John the Apostle at such an early date and by people who claim to have known him personally (e.g., Polycarp). Whoever the Beloved Disciple was, he may not have been the only person involved in the composition of this Gospel. Internal tensions in the text suggest that the Gospel may have been composed over time, with multiple hands involved in the process. John 3:22 says that Jesus and his disciples were involved in baptizing, but 4:2 says that Jesus himself was not doing the baptizing. In John 16:5, Jesus says, "Not one of you asks me, 'Where are you going?'" Yet Peter asked this very question in 13:36. Moreover, John 21:22–23 refutes a mistaken belief, circulating among some Christians, that the Beloved Disciple would survive to see the [†]Parousia, and the need to refute such a belief may have been occasioned by the fact that the Beloved Disciple had died by the time of the Gospel's final editing. Like other ancient writers, New Testament authors sometimes employed secretaries who did the actual writing of a composition (see Rom 16:22; 1 Pet 5:12). It is possible that the Beloved Disciple was the authoritative teacher, whose testimony has been recorded in the Gospel by one or more of his disciples.

The ancient evidence is complex and ambiguous, and it prevents us from arriving at definitive conclusions about the Beloved Disciple's identity or the Gospel's authorship. An intriguing possibility, proposed by C. K. Barrett and

7. See Oscar Cullman, *The Johannine Circle*, trans. John Bowman (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976). On the association of this disciple with John the Elder (or Presbyter), see Martin Hengel, *The Johannine Question*, trans. John Bowden (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1989); Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006).

8. One could also derive the very opposite conclusion from the same evidence: his prominence and constant association with Peter suggests that the Beloved Disciple is to be counted among the Twelve (Acts 3:3; Gal 2:9).

developed by John Painter, is that the Beloved Disciple is John the Apostle, the son of Zebedee, whose traditions and work were shaped into the Fourth Gospel by one of his disciples.⁹ This hypothesis accounts for the ancient traditions about authorship while also accounting for the evidence that the Gospel underwent some editing in its composition history. For the Gospel's author, "John," what is ultimately important is not his own personality but the risen Lord to whom he bears witness through his Gospel, and "his testimony is true" (21:24).

Historical Context

Various indications in the Gospel suggest that it was written for Christians in a Greco-Roman setting, perhaps in Ephesus, where Irenaeus and others say that John resided.¹⁰ Early Christian tradition identifies John as the last of the four Gospels written, and scholars usually date it to the 90s AD.

The Gospel of John is steeped in the Jewish world of the first century. The author was almost certainly a Jew from the Holy Land, for, as mentioned above, he knows its geography, including details about places before their destruction in AD 70, as well as many Jewish liturgical and biblical traditions. Some aspects of its theological style, such as symbolism of light and dark, resemble the Jewish theological thinking found in the [†]Dead Sea Scrolls. But the Gospel also implies that its intended readers were Gentiles or at least Jews not from the Holy Land. John often provides the translation of Semitic terms (e.g., Rabbi, 1:38; [†]Messiah, 1:41; Cephas, 1:42) and the meaning of cultural details (4:9), which Jews who lived in the Holy Land would have known but Gentiles and perhaps Jews outside the land would not. Moreover, the Gospel often categorizes participants in the account as "the Jews," which, as Richard Bauckham has noted, is a label by which [†]Jews were spoken about to Gentiles.¹¹ If we draw on the letters of John, 3 John gives evidence that some members of the Johannine churches were converts from Gentile paganism, for the names mentioned in 3 John—Gaius (1), Diotrephes (9), and Demetrius (12)—are Greco-Roman, not Jewish.

Much discussion of the Gospel's historical setting involves speculation about the history of the Johannine community, that is, the church or network of churches in which the Beloved Disciple was the authoritative teacher and in which the

9. C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel according to St. John*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978), 133–34; John Painter, *The Quest for the Messiah: The History, Literature and Theology of the Johannine Community* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991), 72–73.

10. Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies* 3.1.1.

11. Richard Bauckham, *Testimony of the Beloved Disciple: Narrative, History, and Theology in the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 230n96.

Gospel was composed. The starting point for much of this speculation is the odd Greek word *aposynagōgos* (literally, “one out of the [†]synagogue”), a term that in all early Christian literature appears only in John (9:22; 12:42; 16:2). In the account of the man born blind, John says, “The Jews had already agreed that if anyone acknowledged [Jesus] as the Messiah, he would be expelled from the synagogue [*aposynagōgos*]” (9:22), and during the Farewell Discourse, Jesus predicts that this will happen to his disciples (16:2). It is difficult to determine what historical realities *aposynagōgos* might reflect. In the view of many scholars, the term reflects the situation of some Jewish followers of Jesus in relation to their local synagogue, not in the time of Jesus but later in the first century. If so, the appearance of the term only in this Gospel may suggest that some among John’s readers had had a tumultuous separation from their local [†]synagogue as a result of their confession of Jesus’ messiahship. Such a separation would help explain the negative nuance of the term “the [†]Jews” in some passages in the Gospel, for these experiences in the later first-century would have shaped the Gospel’s account of the animosity between Jesus and some of his fellow Jews in the time of his public ministry. On the issues related to John’s way of speaking of “the Jews,” see the sidebar on p. 101.

Genre

Like the other Gospels, John is best categorized within the genre of Greco-Roman biography or “Life” (*bios*).¹² The first-century Greek author Plutarch wrote many such biographies, and in his *Life of Alexander the Great* he explains some features of this genre:

I do not tell of all the famous actions of these men, nor even speak exhaustively at all in each particular case, but in epitome. . . . For it is not Histories that I am writing, but Lives; and in the most illustrious deeds there is not always a manifestation of virtue or vice, nay, a slight thing like a phrase or a jest often makes a greater revelation of character. . . . I must be permitted to devote myself rather to the signs of the soul in men, and by means of these to portray the life of each.¹³

Several things in Plutarch’s description of a “Life” resemble features of John’s Gospel. First, a “Life” is *selective* in what it narrates about a person. It is not intended to give a comprehensive account of a person’s words and deeds. John

12. See Richard A. Burridge, *What Are the Gospels? A Comparison with Greco-Roman Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

13. Plutarch, *Alexander 1*, in *Lives*, vol. 7, trans. Bernadotte Perrin, LCL 99 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1919); see Paul J. Achtemeier, Joel B. Green, and Marianne Meye Thompson, *Introducing the New Testament: Its Literature and Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 65.

likewise affirms that Jesus did much more than what the Gospel reports: “There are also many other things that Jesus did, but if these were to be described individually, I do not think the whole world would contain the books that would be written” (21:25). Second, Plutarch talks about how he, as an author, *shapes the material*. He writes “in epitome,” or summary, and aims “to portray the life” of his subject. Similarly, John, like the other Gospels, has a deliberate literary arrangement. The rationale for this arrangement is theological rather than merely chronological. Thus, for theological purposes, John deliberately locates Jesus’ clearing of the merchants from the temple as the first event of his public ministry, an event that likely occurred near the end of his public ministry, where the [†]Synoptics place it. Third, a “Life” is written for the *formation of its audience*. By reading the account of the subject’s words and deeds, a reader should learn moral lessons about virtues to be imitated and vices to be avoided. Similarly, John says that his purpose in recounting the actions of the risen Jesus is for his audience’s faith and spiritual formation: “These are written that you may [come to] believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through this belief you may have life in his name” (20:31).

Yet this purpose of drawing the reader to faith in Jesus highlights a major difference between the Gospels and Greco-Roman “Lives.” The subjects of Plutarch’s Lives are dead figures from the past. For John and the other New Testament writers, Jesus is not a dead figure from the past. On the contrary, Jesus has been resurrected to glorified life. He is the living and eternal Son of God, who is present spiritually to his Church and active in his disciples’ lives. The Gospel does not simply recount the words and deeds of a historical figure but is also the means of a genuine encounter with this risen Lord, whose words and deeds are “living and effective” (Heb 4:12) in the present.

When we read John, we should be mindful that we are reading a theological interpretation of Jesus’ life. The Gospel itself indicates that it views the life of Jesus in retrospect, with the illumination provided by the Holy Spirit after Jesus’ resurrection (2:22; 12:16). For John, history and theology are deeply entwined, and people can understand the meaning of Jesus only through the interior action of the Holy Spirit (16:13). John has composed his account of Jesus’ life so that its spiritual significance can be handed on to his audience.

Structure and Literary Features

The Gospel begins with a Prologue (1:1–18), which is possibly an early Christian hymn or homily. The Prologue provides the key for understanding the entire

Gospel by framing it in terms of the eternal relationship between the Father and the Son and in terms of the Son's mission of salvation.

The body of the Gospel can be divided into two major sections.¹⁴ John 1:19–12:50 comprises what is often called the Book of Signs. These chapters narrate a three-year ministry of Jesus, which centers on his public revelation of the Father and himself as the Son. John's account of Jesus' ministry features lengthy discourses, miraculous [†]signs, and controversies. These chapters are called the Book of *Signs* because of their emphasis on revelation. John calls Jesus' miracles "signs" because they point to and reveal spiritual realities and truths about Jesus. To see the signs properly is to be led to the reality of Jesus that they reveal. The second major section, often termed the Book of Glory (13:1–21:25), narrates, among other events, the Last Supper, in which Jesus delivers his farewell address to his disciples, and then his death and resurrection. These chapters are called the Book of *Glory* because they center on the events of Jesus' passion, death, and resurrection, through which he supremely reveals the glory of God: the infinite exchange of love between the Father and the Son.

The Gospel's theological content is closely related to its literary form. As Gail O'Day writes, "In order to understand *what* John says about Jesus and God, then, one must attend carefully to *how* he tells his story."¹⁵ These are some of the Gospel's more prominent literary features through which the Evangelist articulates his theology:

- Pairs of opposites: John often uses pairs of opposites that have theological meaning, such as light and dark, faith and unbelief, life and death.
- Special vocabulary: John sometimes invests seemingly ordinary words with deep theological meaning, such as "remain," "the world," "receive."
- [†]Irony: this is a literary device in which one thing seems to be the case, but another thing, often its exact opposite, is actually the case. A great example is John's presentation of the cross. On the surface, Jesus' death on the cross seems to be his ultimate defeat and humiliation. But in fact, the cross is God's victory, in which Jesus accomplishes the Father's saving work.
- Misunderstanding: throughout the Gospel, people fail to understand Jesus, and this prompts him to elaborate on his teaching, as in his dialogue with Nicodemus (3:1–15).

14. See Raymond E. Brown, SS, *The Gospel according to John*, AB 29 (New York: Doubleday, 1966), 1:cxviii–cxliv.

15. Gail R. O'Day, "The Word Become Flesh: Story and Theology in the Gospel of John," in *What Is John?*, vol. 2, *Literary and Social Readings of the Fourth Gospel*, ed. Fernando F. Segovia, SBLSymS 7 (Atlanta: Scholars, 1998), 69.

- Words with double meanings: John sometimes uses Greek words that have multiple meanings, with more than one meaning in mind. For example, the Greek adverb *anōthen* (3:3) can mean both “from above” and “again.” Jesus’ pronouncement that one must be born *anōthen* plays on both meanings: one must be born *again* (a second birth) in a manner that is of heavenly, not earthly, origin (*from above*).
- Symbolic characterization: John leaves some individuals unnamed to invest them with a theological or symbolic meaning (e.g., Jesus’ mother, the Beloved Disciple).

Relationship to Other Biblical Writings

The Gospel of John is closest in theology and literary style to the three Letters of John. Like the Gospel, 1 John does not name its author, but 2 and 3 John claim to be written by “the Presbyter,” or Elder. The Gospel and Letters of John are stylistically similar in their special theological vocabulary and pairs of opposites. The Letters were likely written after the Gospel, and they elaborate on topics found in the Gospel (e.g., the love command in 1 John 5:1–5).

Also included among John’s writings is the Book of Revelation, whose vision-ary is named “John” (Rev 1:9). Revelation’s theology, literary style, and genre are significantly different from the Gospel and Letters of John. Revelation is an [†]apocalypse, a literary genre centered on the revelation of heavenly mysteries, which are expressed in vivid symbolism, set against the Roman persecution of Christians in the late first century, and this persecution does not appear as a concern in the Gospel or Letters. Yet there are some curious similarities between the Gospel and Revelation. For instance, these are the only two New Testament writings to call Jesus “the Lamb” (John 1:29; Rev 5:6) and “the Word of God” (John 1:1; Rev 19:13). These are also the only two New Testament writings to cite clearly the oracle in Zech 12:10: “They will look upon him whom they have pierced” (John 19:37; Rev 1:7).

Also significant is the relationship between John and the [†]Synoptic Gospels: Matthew, Mark, and Luke. On the one hand, John and the Synoptics have much in common. They give the same basic account of Jesus’ life: a public ministry of itinerant teaching in Galilee and Judea, miracles, and controversies, ending in his crucifixion and resurrection. All four Gospels feature many of the same individuals: Jesus’ mother, John the Baptist, Peter, the Twelve, Mary Magdalene, Caiaphas, Pilate. In addition to the passion and resurrection narratives, John and the Synoptics have some stories in common (e.g., the multiplication of the loaves followed by Jesus’ walking on water in Mark 6:34–52; John 6:1–21).

On the other hand, there are also some noticeable differences between John and the Synoptics. In the Synoptics, Jesus often teaches in parables and short pithy sayings. But in John, Jesus teaches in long enigmatic discourses and does not tell any Synoptic-like parables. The Synoptics imply that Jesus' ministry lasted one year, but John's mention of three Passovers suggests a ministry of three years. In the Synoptics, most of Jesus' ministry takes place in Galilee, whereas John narrates much of Jesus' ministry in Judea.

The critical question is how to explain these similarities and the differences. Does John know and use the Synoptic Gospels in his writing? At the minimum, John knows many of the same traditions about Jesus that are found in the Synoptics. For instance, John does not narrate the call of the twelve apostles (e.g., Luke 6:12–16), but he first mentions the Twelve rather abruptly with the expectation that the Gospel's audience already knows who they are (6:67, 70–71). If John knows any of the Synoptic Gospels, he does not use them in the same way that Matthew and Luke use Mark. Of the three Synoptics, Luke is the most likely candidate that John might have known (or perhaps Luke knew a version of John), for there are some points of contact unique to John and Luke: an individual named Lazarus (Luke 16:19–31; John 11:1–44), the family of Martha and Mary (Luke 10:38–42; John 11:1–44), the possession of Judas by Satan (Luke 22:3; John 13:27), Pilate's threefold acquittal of Jesus (Luke 23:4, 14, 22; John 18:38; 19:4, 6), Peter's visit to the empty tomb (Luke 24:12; John 20:2–10), and the risen Jesus' appearance to the disciples on Easter Sunday night in Jerusalem (Luke 24:36–43; John 20:19–25).

As for theology, we could say with Luke Timothy Johnson, "What is left implicit in the synoptic Gospels is made explicit in [John]."¹⁶ In the Synoptics, Jesus often calls God "my Father" (Matt 7:21; 10:32–33; 20:23), but only occasionally does he call himself "Son" (Matt 11:27; 24:36; see also 21:37). In John, however, Jesus often refers to himself as "the Son." John presents Jesus as using the title "Son" with greater frequency in order to set forth more directly and dramatically the mystery of his relationship with God, whom he called "Abba, Father" (Mark 14:36).

Major Theological Teachings

John's Gospel is centered on God. From the very first verse, we are given a glimpse of the inner life of God as an eternal communion of life and love between God the Father and his Son, who is also his Word (1:1). The world, which God

16. Luke Timothy Johnson, *Writings of the New Testament*, 3rd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010), 471.

created through his Word, has become a place of spiritual darkness and sin, enslaved by Satan, who is called “the ruler of this world” (12:31). Out of love for sinful humanity and his desire to save them from sin and reconcile them to himself, God, through his Word, forms Israel as his special people and teaches them about himself and his will (1:9–11; 12:41). The divine Word’s work in the world takes on a previously unimaginable form when he becomes [†]incarnate, united to a human nature, in Jesus of Nazareth.

Jesus’ whole life and mission is grounded in his relationship with the Father. Jesus is the Son, the one sent by the Father, to reveal him and accomplish his saving work. All that Jesus says, he has heard from the Father (8:38, 40; 18:37), and he does only that which the Father has given him to do (5:19; 10:37–38; 14:11). Jesus’ whole life—his person, words, and deeds—is a revelation of the Father, of himself as the Son, and of the infinite love between them.

Jesus’ mission to reveal the Father and accomplish his saving work culminates in his perfect gift of self on the cross. For John, the cross of Jesus reveals that “God is love” (1 John 4:8). The Father gives his all, his Son, out of love for the world and for its salvation (3:16–17). The Son, incarnate in Jesus, in turn gives his all back to the Father. He is perfectly obedient to the Father, seeking to do only his will (4:34), and in a supreme act of love and obedience, he lays down his life on the cross for the world’s salvation (10:17–18; 14:31). In Jesus’ cross, the eyes of faith are able to see the glory of God: the Father gives his all in the Son, and the Son gives his all in return to the Father. In this eternal exchange of perfect and total self-sacrificial giving, we catch a glimpse that “God is love.”

As the Word made flesh, Jesus offers to draw human beings to share in this eternal exchange of life and love, the divine communion. People either accept or reject this offer of salvation and eternal life through their acceptance or rejection of Jesus. The incarnation is thus an occasion of judgment (3:19–21; 9:39). Those who reject Jesus also refuse his offer of salvation and eternal life with the Father. This is a choice to remain in sin, leading to future condemnation (8:24; 12:47–48). However, to those who receive the divine Word in faith and discipleship, Jesus gives the “power to become children of God” (1:12). He enables his disciples to become the Father’s children by giving them a share in his own life and relationship with the Father as the Son.

This participation of Jesus’ disciples in the divine communion is fully realized only in eternity, but it is genuinely, though imperfectly, enjoyed by the disciples in the present. By drawing his disciples into communion with himself and the Father, Jesus also draws them into communion with each other. In this

way, the divine communion becomes the spiritual foundation of the Church. What binds the disciples to Jesus and to the Father and to each other is the Holy Spirit, whom the risen Jesus sends to dwell within his disciples (14:16–17; 20:22). As God dwelling in Jesus’ disciples, the Holy Spirit impresses the reality of the risen Jesus onto their hearts and empowers them to be witnesses of his love. The disciples are to love and obey Jesus as he loves and obeys the Father (15:10). As the Father sent Jesus into the world, so Jesus sends his disciples into the world (15:26–27; 17:18, 21, 23). Through their love, faithful obedience, and unity, Jesus’ disciples bear witness to an unbelieving world about the Father’s love, revealed in the death and resurrection of his Son and made present and transformative by his Holy Spirit.

Reading the Gospel of John Today

At the end of the Gospel, the risen Jesus appears to the doubting Thomas, who demanded tangible proof of his resurrection. The scene concludes with the risen Jesus declaring, “Blessed are those who have not seen and have believed” (20:29). Like every generation of Christian believers after the first one, we are included in Jesus’ beatitude: we have not seen the risen Jesus as Thomas did, and yet we believe.

The evangelist goes on to say about his accounts of the resurrection appearances: “These are written that you may [come to] believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through this belief you may have life in his name” (20:31). For John, only a personal encounter with the risen Jesus brings about faith in him as the risen Lord. Since 20:31 states that the Gospel has been written to cultivate such faith in its readers, it implies that readers can truly encounter the risen Jesus by reading the Gospel in faith. The Gospel is a way that later generations of Christians, who have not seen Jesus physically, can nevertheless truly encounter him and so believe in him.

As we approach the Gospel with an eye to encountering the risen Lord through it, we do well to imitate those habits that the Gospel teaches are appropriate to receiving the Lord. Like the disciples in the narrative, the Gospel invites its readers to approach its content with faith and humble receptivity to the Word (1:12; 8:31–32). Just as the disciples, who did not truly understand Jesus without the Holy Spirit (12:16; 16:12–15), we too are we invited to open ourselves to the Spirit’s action within us. Let us, therefore, approach the Gospel with faith, receptivity, and docility before the “Spirit of Truth,” who, as Jesus promised, “will guide you to all truth” (16:13).

This commentary follows the interpretive approach prescribed by the Second Vatican Council in its Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (*Dei Verbum*) and reiterated by Pope Benedict XVI in *Verbum Domini*. Our goal is a theological interpretation of John's Gospel that integrates its historical and literary dimensions as well as its reception and interpretation in the Church's tradition and faith. We hope that this exposition of John's Gospel will help readers come to know and love the risen Lord more deeply and allow the Holy Spirit to impress his reality upon their hearts. While we write from the perspective of Catholic faith and for a general Catholic readership, we also know very well the treasure to be found in studying Scripture with and learning from our non-Catholic friends. We hope that all our non-Catholic readers might find in these pages much that is valuable and edifying.

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The Prologue

John 1:1–18

There is a special power in the words with which John begins his Gospel. What makes this hymnlike Prologue to the Fourth Gospel so profound is John's vision of the Word of God, in relation to whom all creation and history exist and have meaning (see Col 1:15–17). The divine Word was with God the Father from all eternity, was at work in creation and in the history of Israel, and then became [†]incarnate in Jesus. The Prologue is thus a summary of God's dealings with the world before and in the incarnation of the Word, Jesus.

The Prologue begins with the eternity of God (1:1–2) and moves to the creation of the world (1:3–5). John then recounts the divine Word's activity in the world and particularly in the history of his people Israel (1:6–13). We are then given to contemplate the incarnation: the Word of God becomes a human being in Jesus without loss of his divinity. The incarnate Word completes the Father's plan of salvation when, through his cross and resurrection, he fully reveals the Father and opens the way for humanity to enter eternal life with God (1:14–18). The rest of the Gospel plays out these themes introduced in the Prologue.

The Eternity of God (1:1–2)

¹In the beginning was the Word,
and the Word was with God,
and the Word was God.
²He was in the beginning with God.

OT: Gen 1:1–5; Wis 9:1–9; Isa 55:10–11

NT: 1 Cor 8:6; Col 1:15–20; Heb 1:1–4

Catechism: knowing God, 36–38; the Trinity, 252–56

Lectionary: Christmas during the Day; Second Sunday after Christmas; Christian Initiation apart from Easter Vigil

Francis Martin and William M. Wright IV, The Gospel of John
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1:1–2 The opening lines of the Gospel present the ineffable mystery of God: **In the beginning was the Word.** Throughout the Old Testament, we find many passages about God’s word. In the book of Isaiah, the Lord says,

Just as from the heavens
the rain and snow come down
And do not return there
till they have watered the earth, . . .
So shall my word be
that goes forth from my mouth;
It shall not return to me empty,
but shall do what pleases me,
achieving the end for which I sent it. (Isa 55:10–11)

The prophet Jeremiah speaks of his call: “The word of the LORD came to me: / Before I formed you in the womb I knew you” (Jer 1:4–5). In Genesis, God creates the world by speaking (Gen 1:1–5), and other texts present God as creating through his word: “By the LORD’s word the heavens were made; / by the breath of his mouth all their host” (Ps 33:6).

The Word also came to be identified with God’s wisdom: “Lord of mercy, / you who have made all things by your word / And in your wisdom have established humankind” (Wis 9:1–2). Some biblical texts personify God’s wisdom as a heavenly figure who was present when God created (Prov 8:27–31; Wis 9:4). John invites us to have creation in mind by beginning his Gospel with the same words that opened the creation account in Gen 1: “In the beginning.”

Shortly before Jesus’ birth, many Jewish holy people and mystics reflected on the Lord in light of his creating and governing the world, actions that can be regarded as “the footprints” God leaves in the world.¹ The Jews knew the Lord (†YHWH) as God, the creator and ruler of all, and they fiercely defended his uniqueness as the only one worthy of worship. Biblical texts cited above also display thinking about God’s Word: the divine Word can instruct a prophet, be sent on a mission, or be involved in creation. And yet, God’s Word is not a creature, like an angel or servant. In the Old Testament, the Word is greater than these, but not a separate deity. We could say that the word shares God’s unique identity (who God is) in such a way that God’s unity is not compromised.²

1. See Catechism 32, 36–38.

2. Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the God of Israel: God Crucified and Other Studies on the New Testament’s Christology of Divine Identity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 1–59. Throughout the commentary, we will at times employ this notion of “sharing God’s identity” set forth by Bauckham.

When the full reality of Jesus' identity is revealed, first through his own claims and then definitively through his resurrection and outpouring of the Holy Spirit, all becomes clear. What was variously attributed to God's Word, wisdom, or [†]Torah (law) in the Old Testament and Jewish thought now comes to be seen as attributable to the divine Word, who is one with and yet also distinct from God the Father.

While John is certainly thinking of God's Word in the Jewish tradition, his Greek word for "Word," *logos*, had an established history in Greek philosophical thinking.³ Plato and Aristotle used the term *logos* for thought and speech that was rational.⁴ For the Stoics, *logos* was the part of the universe that made it reasonable and thus understandable by humans. Combining elements from Greek philosophy and Jewish religion, the Jewish theologian Philo of Alexandria, a contemporary of the New Testament authors, wrote of God's *Logos* as an intermediary between the material world and God, who is absolutely beyond the world.

Evoking creation in Gen 1, John tells us that the Word already **was**. In effect, John is saying, "No matter when the beginning of all creation was, at that point the Word already was. He is eternal like God. He existed before all created things."⁵ John expresses the relationship between God and the Word as one of distinction and unity.⁶ On the one hand, **the Word was with God**; literally, the Word was "toward God." In the beginning, there was this relationship, an unimaginable fire of love, between God and his Word: the Word was turned "toward" God's face, and this turning toward was reciprocated. So there are two. On the other hand, there is a unity: **the Word was God**. Everything that God is, the Word is: they are one—and yet they are two. Once again displaying the mystery of the divine communion, John concludes, the Word **was in the beginning with God**.

The Word's Activity in Creating (1:3–5)

³All things came to be through him,
and without him nothing came to be.
What came to be ⁴through him was life,
and this life was the light of the human race;
⁵the light shines in the darkness,
and the darkness has not overcome it.

3. Thomas H. Tobin, "Logos," *ABD* 4:348–56.

4. *Ibid.*, 348.

5. See 1 Cor 8:6; Col 1:15–20; Heb 1:1–4.

6. Catechism 252.

OT: Gen 1:26–31

NT: 1 Cor 8:6; Col 1:15–20; Heb 1:1–4

Catechism: creation as a work of the Trinity, 290–92; image of God, 362–68

Lectionary: Christmas during the Day; Second Sunday after Christmas; Christian Initiation apart from Easter Vigil

1:3 The divine Word is the agent by which God created everything: **All things came to be through him, and without him nothing came to be** (Wis 9:1; 1 Cor 8:6; Col 1:16; Heb 1:2). The expression “through him” suggests cooperation in the act of creation.⁷ God the Father gazes on his Word, who is his perfect expression, “the image of the invisible God” (Col 1:15), “the refulgence of his glory, the very imprint of his being” (Heb 1:3). The Word perfectly reflects all that the Father is, expressing all that can ever be created. God the Father creates what he sees imaged in his Word, and thus nothing came to be without the Word.

1:3c–4 **What came to be through him was life.** There are different levels of life in the world: plants, animals, humans, and angels. While human life has some things in common with animals, we are created “in the image of God” (Gen 1:27). Human beings are animated by the light of the *Logos*, so that we have a soul with the capacity to be in relationship with God by knowing and loving him: **this life was the light of the human race.**⁸ The imagery of light appears throughout Scripture to refer to God’s radiant splendor (Exod 13:21; Ps 4:7; 36:10; Isa 60:19–20) and his instructions for living (Ps 119:105, 130). John’s Gospel employs light symbolism to present Jesus as “the light of the world” (8:12; 9:5), who reveals the Father and his will and offers the gift of eternal life.

1:5 John continues, **The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.** In the Fourth Gospel, darkness is a symbol for sin, understood broadly as the spiritual condition of alienation from God (see sidebar on p. 163). This darkness, or evil, is not an eternal force or “stuff” opposite God, as in the heresy called Manichaeism (see Catechism 285). Rather, we can think of evil as a corruption in something originally good or as the absence of some good that ought to be present.⁹ Moreover, the verb translated “overcome” can also mean “comprehend.” The spiritual darkness can neither overpower the light nor understand the light and its ways.¹⁰

7. Catechism 291–92.

8. Catechism 362–65, 367.

9. St. Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (New York: Oxford University, 1998), 7.12.18. All citations of this work are taken from this translation.

10. Consider the inability of the fictional demon Screwtape (“Letter 19”) to understand that love is God’s genuine motive in his dealings with humanity; C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (1942, repr., New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 99–103.

The Word's Activity in the World and in Israel (1:6–13)

⁶A man named John was sent from God. ⁷He came for testimony, to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. ⁸He was not the light, but came to testify to the light. ⁹The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

¹⁰He was in the world,
and the world came to be through him,
but the world did not know him.

¹¹He came to what was his own,
but his own people did not accept him.

¹²But to those who did accept him he gave power to become children of God, to those who believe in his name, ¹³who were born not by natural generation nor by human choice nor by a man's decision but of God.

OT: Exod 19:3–8; Hosea 11:1–4; Isa 43:1–8

NT: Rom 1:18–32

Catechism: Old Covenant, 121; Word in Israel, 707–16; human reason and will, 1701–9

Lectionary: Christmas during the Day; 2nd Sunday after Christmas; Christian Initiation apart from Easter Vigil

The Evangelist introduces the last and greatest of the prophets: **John** the Baptist, who **was sent from God**. The Baptist's primary role in the Fourth Gospel is to be a witness to Jesus: the Baptist **was not the light, but came to testify to the light**. The purpose of his testimony **to the light** is **so that all might believe through him**. The Gospel later declares that Moses and the whole of Scripture bear witness to Jesus (1:45; 2:22; 5:39). The Baptist appears here as a representative of all who "testify to the light," meaning the whole prophetic tradition. Israel's prophets, to whom "the word of God came" (1 Chron 17:3), spoke his will and announced his coming. The Baptist completes this prophetic witness to the light: he came so that the light "might be made known to Israel" (1:31).

The Evangelist traces the active presence of the Light, or Word, in creation and especially in Israel. He first speaks of creation at large: **the true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world**. All human beings are illumined by the divine Light in our capacity to reason, to know the truth.¹¹ As St. Thomas Aquinas teaches, "The light of natural reason itself is a participation of the divine light."¹² Our natural ability to know the truth "whereby we

1:6–8

1:9–10

11. Catechism 1701–9.

12. St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* 1, q. 12, a. 11, reply obj. 3, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1947–48). All quotations of his *Summa theologiae* will be taken from this translation.

discern what is good and what is evil . . . is nothing else than an imprint on us of the divine light.”¹³ Human beings can know the truth and discern good from evil by our own natural abilities, which are themselves gifts from God. Wherever there is truth or goodness in the world, there is a trace of the divine Word. As St. Justin Martyr writes, “Everything that the [pagan] philosophers and legislators discovered and expressed well, they accomplished through their discovery and contemplation of some part of the Logos [i.e., God’s Word].”¹⁴ The Light, which **was in the world**, is the divine Word **through** whom the world was made.

However, the world preferred to ignore the Light: **the world did not know him**. As St. Paul writes in Rom 1:18, human beings, despite the witness to God in creation, “in their wickedness suppress the truth.”¹⁵ Although the Fourth Gospel does not have an explicit account of original sin, it affirms that the world, which God created good (see Gen 1:31), has fallen into sin, spiritual darkness, for refusing to acknowledge and receive the divine Light.

1:11–13

Among the nations of the world, God chose a special people as his own: the people Israel. God entered into a [†]covenant with them (Exod 19:3–8) that “has never been revoked” (Catechism 121), because “the gifts and the call of God are irrevocable” (Rom 11:29). The divine Word was close to them in a particular way, and many drew close to him.¹⁶ But many of **his own people did not accept him**. The word “accept” means to receive in faith, to receive the Word into one’s self and allow him to transform one’s life. As evidenced in the Old Testament, many Israelites refused to hear the Word that was spoken through the prophets. They persisted in sinning and “forgot” the Lord (Hosea 2:15). As a consequence, the Lord meted out the covenantal punishment of exile and scattering (Deut 28:63–64), breaking up the people, the twelve tribes of Israel, and scattering them among the Gentile nations (2 Kings 17:6–7, 12, 23; 25:8–11). However, the ever-faithful Lord promised through the prophets that he would redeem his people from their sin and punishment in a great, future act of salvation—a new exodus (Isa 43:1–8; Jer 16:14–15).

While many did not accept the divine Word, some Israelites **did accept him**. John combines the faithful in Israel’s past with those who accept the Word in his own day, the new Israel (John 1:47). He then specifies the gift that the Word gives to those who accept him: **he gave power to become children of God, to**

13. St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* 1–2, q. 91, a. 2.

14. Justin Martyr, *Second Apology* 10, in *Writings of Saint Justin Martyr*, trans. Thomas B. Falls, FC 6 (New York: Christian Heritage, 1948), 129.

15. Our translation; compare NABRE, “suppress the truth by their wickedness.”

16. Catechism 707–16.

“The World” and Dualism in John

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BACKGROUND

The Fourth Gospel uses the expression “the world” in a variety of senses. “The world” can mean creation. God created the world through his Word (1:3, 10), and in light of Gen 1, the world is essentially good. God’s unimaginable love for the world is the reason he sent his Son into the world to save it (3:16–17). But the very fact that the world needs to be saved points to a deeper theological sense in which John uses the term “the world” to designate human beings and their world as they reject and rebel against God by sin. This second use of “the world” illustrates a stylistic feature of John’s writings, known as dualism. Dualism is the way in which John often frames matters in pairs of opposites, such as light and darkness, life and death, truth and lies. John often uses the category “the world” in a dualistic way, contrasting it with the Father, Jesus, and his disciples. When “the world” is used in this dualist way, it is a fundamentally a spiritual category—that is, John is not primarily talking about creation as such. Donatien Mollat puts it this way:

At the heart of this world [used in a negative sense], the author of the Gospel uncovers an irreducible core of resistance to God. He has the intuition of a formidable power of negation and refusal, which exceeds human limits and plunges its roots into a dark center of hatred and lies (8:44; 1 John 3:12). His gaze discovers a pit of “darkness” to which man is moving and in which he is plunged by his sin ([see] 13:30).

The dualistic context is not for John a cosmic or metaphysical context. It is a spiritual structure which sets forth a reality of the moral order and which demonstrates at what depth salvation intervenes, what struggles it must face, what an abyss of pride and rebellion it must overcome. Johannine dualism is inscribed within a world of liberty and choice. The notion of “world” serves to unmask the demonic universe of refusal and rejection.^a

a. Donatien Mollat, “Jean L’Évangéliste (Saint),” *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, vol. 8 (Paris: Beauchesne, 1974), 200; and *St. Jean: Maître Spirituel* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1976), 26, our translation.

those who believe in his name. The people of Israel were already considered God’s children: “Thus says the LORD: Israel is my son, my firstborn” (Exod 4:22).¹⁷ Their privileged identity as God’s chosen people was bound up with physical generation, creating kinship, and with [†]Torah observance. But John speaks of a new kind of generation, a spiritual generation, which comes about through faith in the Word and by a unique, direct action of God himself. Such people are **born not by natural generation nor by human choice nor by a**

17. There are many texts in which Israel calls God our/your “father” (Deut 32:6; Isa 63:16; 64:7, etc.) and where the people of Israel are called God’s children or “son” (Wis 2:13–18; 5:5; Hosea 11:1–4).

man’s decision but of God. The reason for this new development appears in the next verse.

The Incarnation of the Word (1:14–18)

¹⁴And the Word became flesh
and made his dwelling among us,
and we saw his glory,
the glory as of the Father’s only Son,
full of grace and truth.

¹⁵John testified to him and cried out, saying, “This was he of whom I said,
‘The one who is coming after me ranks ahead of me because he existed be-
fore me.’” ¹⁶From his fullness we have all received, grace in place of grace,
¹⁷because while the law was given through Moses, grace and truth came
through Jesus Christ. ¹⁸No one has ever seen God. The only Son, God, who
is at the Father’s side, has revealed him.

OT: Exod 33:18–23; 40:34–38

NT: Phil 2:6–11; Heb 1:1–4

Catechism: incarnation, 456–63, 470

Lectionary: Christmas during the Day; Second Sunday after Christmas; Christian Initiation apart from Easter Vigil

1:14 John presents the heart of the Christian mystery and the cause of our be-coming “children of God”: **the Word became flesh**. It is the mystery of the [†]incarnation: the divine Word, who from all eternity is turned toward God and is himself God, has become completely human in Jesus.¹⁸ God, the creator and ruler of all things, has now become part of creation. The divine Word, who was “in the form of God, . . . emptied himself, taking the form of a slave” (Phil 2:6–7).

In the incarnation, the divine Word **made his dwelling among us**. The phrase “made his dwelling” (Greek *skēnoō*) evokes the language used to designate God’s “dwelling” among his people in the Old Testament ([†]LXX *skēnē*). God dwelt with his people in the wilderness tabernacle (Exod 25:8–9) and in the first Jerusalem temple, built by King Solomon (1 Kings 8:10–13). God’s wisdom made a home in Israel (Sir 24:8), and Ezekiel spoke of a future temple to be established in connection with God’s end-time, or [†]eschatological, act of salvation (Ezek 37:27–28; 48:10). Thus God dwelt among his people in earlier

18. Catechism 461–63.

The Glory of the Lord

Scripture often speaks of “the glory of the LORD,” a perceptible and utterly awesome manifestation of God. The glory is “God himself insofar as he is revealed in His majesty, His power, the glow of His holiness, the dynamism of His being.”^a The “glory” was an overpowering spectacle; the Hebrew word for “glory” (*kabod*) is related to the verb for heaping weight on something (*kabad*). The glory of the Lord often appeared in the form of fire and cloud at places of God’s dwelling. The glory was manifested at Mount Sinai (Exod 24:17), and when the wilderness tabernacle was finished, “the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle” (40:34). When King Solomon built the Jerusalem temple, “the glory of the LORD had filled” it (1 Kings 8:11). Ezekiel had a vision of the glory of the Lord leaving Solomon’s temple before it was destroyed (Ezek 10:18–19; 11:22–23) and a vision of the Lord’s glory returning to dwell in a new temple in the end times (Ezek 43:1–5).

a. Donatien Mollat, “Glory,” in *Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. Xavier Léon–Dufour, 2nd ed. (Gaithersburg, MD: Word Among Us; Boston: St. Paul’s Books and Media, 1995), 202.

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times, but now he does so in a previously unimaginable way: he dwells among us as a man, Jesus of Nazareth.

As the new, unparalleled place of God’s dwelling, the incarnate Word is the fullness of God’s revelation. John makes this claim with his statement, **We saw his glory**. The Scripture speaks of the Lord’s “glory” as a perceptible manifestation of his awesome presence. By seeing **his glory**, John refers to a sensible revelation of God himself in Jesus, the incarnate Word.

What John previously articulated in terms of God and the Word, he now expresses more deeply in the intimate, family language of **Father** and **Son**. The Father’s **only** Son is **full of grace and truth**, the Lord’s “loving-kindness and faithfulness” for which he is praised throughout the Scripture (Ps 25:10, “mercy and truth”; 117:2, “mercy” and “faithfulness”). Recall that in 1:12 the divine Word enables those who receive him in faith “to become children of God.” The family language of Father and Son sheds more light on this reality: Jesus is the Son, and to become a child of God means to share in Jesus’ own divine life as the Son.

The Baptist, who was previously mentioned as the summit of prophetic witness (1:6–8), now gives explicit witness to the Son: **This was he of whom I said, “The one who is coming after me ranks ahead of me because he existed before me”** (see v. 30).

1:15

Saint Teresa of Avila on Devotion to Christ's Humanity

Saint Teresa recounts reading some books claiming that “corporeal images, even when referring to the humanity of Christ, are an obstacle or impediment to the most perfect contemplation.” These books were arguing that real growth in the spiritual life can happen only when a person is totally separated from any kind of material image of God. However, Teresa came to learn that the humanity of Christ, expressed in images of him, is not an obstacle but a great help for growth in holiness:

I thought the humanity was an impediment [to prayer]. . . . I had been so devoted all my life to Christ, . . . and thus I always returned to my custom of rejoicing in this Lord, especially when I received Communion. I wanted to keep ever before my eyes a painting or image of Him since I was unable to keep Him as engraved in my soul as I desired. Is it possible, my Lord, that it entered my mind even for an hour that You would be an impediment to my greater good? Where have all my blessings come from but from You? . . . [You sent someone to correct my thinking and You let] me see You so many times [in mystical visions] . . . so that I would understand more clearly how great the error is, and tell many persons what I just said, and put it in writing here.^a

a. St. Teresa of Avila, *The Book of Her Life* 22.1–4, in *The Collected Works of St. Teresa of Avila*, trans. K. Kavanaugh, OCD, and O. Rodriguez, OCD (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1987), 1:191–93.



1:16–17

The Evangelist then begins his own witness to the incarnate Word as the fulfillment of God's saving plan. The **fullness** of the Son is his being everything the Father is (“the Word was God”) except that he is distinct from the Father (he “was with God,” 1:1). **From** this divine relationship **we have all received, grace in place of grace**. John sees salvation history as marked by two great gifts from God. The first is God's gift of the [†]Torah to Israel: **the law was given through Moses**. As the psalmist prays, “How I love your law, Lord! / I study it all day long” (Ps 119:97). The second and even greater gift is **grace and truth**, the fullness of divine revelation **through Jesus Christ** (Heb 1:1–2). The relationship between Torah and Jesus is not to be understood as bad followed by good, but as good followed by better. The “better” is a direct, living encounter with the Word incarnate through the Holy Spirit; the “good” was a real but partial encounter with the Word through the Torah—an anticipated participation.

1:18

No one has ever seen God, “who dwells in unapproachable light, and whom no human being has seen or can see” (1 Tim 6:16). Even Moses, after he prayed

that he might be allowed to see God (Exod 33:18), was granted only a fleeting glimpse of his “back” (33:23), for God declared, “You cannot see my face, for no one can see me and live” (33:20). God is so awesome and magnificent that the direct sight of him would so overwhelm us that we would die. But now, **the only Son, God, who is at the Father’s side, has revealed him.** The Son, who is God’s Word and Wisdom, has become a human being in Jesus of Nazareth without any loss of his divinity. In Jesus, people can see, hear, and touch God himself directly. As Pope St. John Paul II taught, in Jesus we see “the human face of God.”¹⁹ By receiving his revelation, we can begin to know the truth of Jesus’ words: “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (14:9).

Reflection and Application (1:1–18)

John’s Prologue presents the mystery of the incarnation: God became human in Jesus. This mystery infinitely surpasses human comprehension. The history of Christianity offers many instances of intellectual and spiritual shipwrecks that occurred when the mystery was not respected. In the early Church, on the one hand, some were so taken with the divinity of the Word that they minimized or denied the genuineness of Jesus’ humanity. These gnostics (who have modern New Age successors) attempted to spiritualize Jesus and make of him some sort of benign force in the universe, thus denying his real humanity. On the other hand, some have not accepted Jesus’ divinity but considered him a good man, a great religious teacher among many others.

In order to hold on to both the divinity and the humanity of Jesus, we need to become better acquainted with his living reality as he is present in our everyday lives. We can strengthen our grasp of his incarnation and deepen the experiential dimension of our faith by taking a few simple steps. First, we can spend time in prayer every day and during that time read the Bible (praying John’s Prologue is a great place to start). Second, we can guard our minds from the busyness and anxiety that distract us by making time for silence in our day. Reducing our consumption of mass media helps us to avoid the excess of information that only confuses the mind and paralyzes the will. Third, we can open ourselves up to the will of God, for as St. Paul declares, “This is the will of God, your holiness” (1 Thess 4:3). Fourth, we can live a life that takes the incarnation of our God seriously by attending Mass, frequenting the sacraments, and finding a way to care for the poor, for they are Christ among us in a special way: “Amen, I say to you, whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me” (Matt 25:40).

19. John Paul II, “Angelus: Feast of the Baptism of the Lord,” January 11, 2004.