
ENCOUNTERING JOHN

THE GOSPEL IN HISTORICAL, LITERARY,
AND THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

SECOND EDITION

Andreas J. Köstenberger



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*For my children
Lauren, Tahlia, David, and Timothy
With prayer and thanksgiving*

Like arrows in the hands of a warrior
are the children born in one's youth.
Blessed is the man
whose quiver is full of them.

Psalm 127:4–5

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To the Student

The Underlying Purpose of This Book

This book has been written with you, the student, in mind from beginning to end. The one question that guided the inclusion of material in this volume was: What would I want my students to know about the Gospel of John? In this I have sought to pursue a twofold purpose: to nurture you spiritually and to increase your knowledge by providing you with helpful information on John's gospel. In writing this book, I emphasized primarily the text of the gospel itself. Where appropriate, I have included references to helpful secondary literature.

The goal of a book such as the present one must be to understand the history and story of Jesus as it was written by John himself. This involves carefully attending to repeated key words as well as to major themes such as "Jesus as the Christ," "believing," or "eternal life." At the same time, I have tried to relate John's teaching to the rest of Scripture. For John did not write in a vacuum. He consciously built on Old Testament revelation, and he seems to have presupposed his readers' familiarity with the gospel tradition.

Didactic Features of This Book

At the beginning of each chapter, you will find a chapter outline, providing a road map of the chapter's contents. The chapter objectives are designed to structure your learning. Note them before you read the chapter. Then return to them when you've worked through the material. See whether you are able to accomplish the stated objectives.

At the end of each chapter, you will also find study questions that will reinforce the chapter's major content. Try to answer each question from memory. Then check yourself by looking through the relevant section in that chapter.

Finally, I've gathered several resources at the end of the book. First, a glossary defines important theological terms used throughout this book. If you are not sure about the meaning of a particular word as you read through a given chapter, check the listing in the glossary. Then go back and see whether this helps you understand the statement made in the text.

Second, an annotated select bibliography suggests further reading. This includes the most helpful commentaries as well as other

important studies on various aspects of John's gospel.

Third, "Tools for Study" includes the following headings: (1) "Proper Names in John's Gospel," (2) "Place Names in John's Gospel," and (3) "Important Theological Terms in John's Gospel." To my knowledge, this kind of material has never before been published in such a format. It is, however, extremely useful for studying important geographical features, key characters, and significant themes in John's gospel. Professors may want to assign one character study (e.g., Peter) and one theme study (e.g., the "world") as major assignments in a course on Johannine theology.

Fourth, I have gathered ten substantive excursuses on Johannine themes at the end of the book. Professors could have their students read one excursus when they read each chapter (e.g., chaps. 5–14).

Special Instructions Pertaining to "Tools for Study"

While the listings in "Tools for Study" are all in English (with the transliteration of each original Greek term in brackets, as well as the number of occurrences in John's gospel and in the New Testament as a whole), they are based on the actual use of a given Greek word. Knowing this will greatly enhance the accuracy of your findings. For example, *mimnēskomai* ("to remember") occurs three times in John's gospel, but the NIV renders it three different ways: "remembered" in 2:17; "recalled" in 2:22; and "did realize" in 12:16. Only a Greek-based tool such as the one provided in this book will enable you to trace *John's* use of words, not just the translation equivalents in a given contemporary English version. And that, of course, is what we're after—to grow in our understanding of what *John himself* has written.

A word of caution: for completeness' sake, I have chosen to provide exhaustive listings of all the included terms. Not all instances of a given word may, however, be equally relevant in the study of that word. Consider, for instance, the varied use of the word *menō* ("remain," "stay") in your study of discipleship. Also, keep in mind that not every listing under a given proper name may refer to the same person. Thus "Judas (not Iscariot)" is listed under "Judas" together *with* Judas Iscariot. Or, three different Josephs are included under the heading "Joseph." The same observation applies to "Mary," with the additional caution that the one person not included is the most famous of them all, Jesus's mother, for the simple reason that she is not called "Mary" in John's gospel! By the way, John, the author of the present gospel, likewise does not identify himself by the name of John; the simple designation "John" belongs, in the present gospel, to John the Baptist. The author's favorite self-reference, "the disciple Jesus loved," can be traced by looking at the listings of "disciple" (*mathētēs*) or "to love" (*agapaō* as well as *phileō*).

Finally, I encourage you to look up as many of the references listed in "Tools for Study" in the gospel itself as possible. Needless to say, the gloss provided for a given occurrence of a term is partial. What is more, if taken by itself and thus out of context, it may be positively misleading. I don't want anyone to accuse me of heresy, just because the listing of John 3:17 under "God" reads "For God did not send his Son" or the listing of John 3:3 under "kingdom" has "no one can see the kingdom of God"! In sum, I have provided the tools, but you must make sure that you use them properly, which includes studying a given word in context.

Enough said. May the present volume acquaint you better with an exciting portion of God's revealed Word, and may you enjoy the ride!

Author's Preface

Thank you to the many professors and students who have contacted me with encouraging words and suggestions for improvement after the publication of the first edition. I have been encouraged to have so many join me in the study of John's wonderful gospel and to share in my love for the profound truths it contains. In light of the overwhelmingly positive reaction to the first edition, I have touched the main text only slightly. I focused my energies primarily on updating the scholarly references in the endnotes and the bibliography, as well as going through the entire manuscript carefully and improving minor inaccuracies in style and (in a few cases) substance.

Thirteen years after the first edition, I am even more deeply grateful for my wife, Marny, who is my partner in ministry and in raising four children (three of whom are currently teenagers!). I am so blessed to be married to such a spiritual, wise, and godly woman as her. I also continue to be grateful for Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary for supporting my writing ministry and for awarding me the honor of being appointed the first research professor in the history of the institution. Thanks are also due Jim Kinney of Baker Academic for his gracious invitation to extend the usefulness of this volume for another generation of students.

Since the first publication of this book in 1999, I have written several works on John's gospel that you may want to consult. The most important are a background commentary in the *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002); an exegetical commentary in the Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament series (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004); and a Johannine theology in the Biblical Theology of the New Testament series, *A Theology of John's Gospel and Letters: The Word, the Christ, the Son of God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009). I have incorporated relevant references to these and other works in the second edition of this book.

To express my wish for the reception of this volume, I can do no better than repeat John's own words: "I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth" (3 John 4). By Christ's mercy, may this be true for our children, Lauren, Tahlia, David, and Timothy, to whom I affectionately dedicate the book. I love being your dad! And may it be true for everyone who takes Jesus at his word when he says: "Anyone who chooses to do the will of God will find out whether my teaching comes from God or whether I speak on my own" (John 7:17). For "whoever comes to me I will never drive away" (John 6:37).

Before You Begin . . .

It's not a good idea to embark on a journey without a good map of the area. Likewise, we had better not plunge into our exploration of John's gospel without some brief words of orientation. This is why the opening chapters of this book are so important. In part 1, "Encountering the Gospel of John: Come On In!" we will discuss the triad governing the study of John's gospel: history, literature, and theology. (For a full-fledged presentation of this triad, see Andreas J. Kostenberger and Richard D. Patterson, *Invitation to Biblical Interpretation: Exploring the Hermeneutical Triad of History, Literature, and Theology* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2011). How did John's gospel come to be? How does the evangelist's message unfold? And what are the major themes addressed in this remarkable work? Different answers have been given to these crucial questions, and this has led to vastly differing interpretations of John's gospel.

Regarding history, in recent years belief in the traditional view that the apostle John wrote the gospel named after him has eroded significantly. An alternative hypothesis holds that the gospel is the product of a "Johannine school," "circle," or "community," which traced its origins back to the apostle but

which in the Fourth Gospel provided a history of its own existential struggles in terms of the history of Jesus. But what about ancient church tradition? And does this view not alter radically the way in which John's gospel has traditionally been understood? Of course it does! That's why it's so important to consider carefully at the outset which approach to the Fourth Gospel does most justice to the text as it reflects the intention(s) of its author(s).

Regarding literature, we must first ask what kind of writing we have in John's gospel. What is a gospel? What kind of gospel is John's gospel? These are questions of literary genre that will have crucial implications for interpretation. The rise of narrative criticism in the secular arena has greatly impacted scholarship on John as well. As a result, numerous studies on John's literary artistry have appeared in recent years. However, while these works have doubtless refined our understanding of certain surface phenomena of the Fourth Gospel, it is troubling that many of these studies show little interest in historical or theological concerns. Some of those embarking on literary investigations of John's gospel may hope thus to find a way out of the impasse caused by a highly skeptical use

of the so-called historical-critical method. Others may not share evangelical presuppositions regarding the nature of Scripture, the deity of Christ, or the substitutionary atonement, but nonetheless consider John's gospel to be a work of literature deserving of study. My problem with this kind of reductionism is simply this: since John is at the core a *religious* book with a *spiritual* message, and since Christianity is at the core a *historical* religion, an investigation of John's gospel in mere literary terms can never expect to arrive at a full-orbed understanding of its true character and message.

While historical setting and literary aspects of John are thus important, these are merely the vehicles for John's theological message. And this message is bound up inextricably with who Jesus is and what we are to

do about him. John's explicitly stated purpose is quite clear: "Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that the Christ, the Son of God, is Jesus, and that by believing you may have life in his name" (20:30–31; AT). John's stated purpose must set the agenda for our study of this gospel. We must therefore trace out Jesus's signs that were selected by the evangelist in order to instill faith in his readers. In particular, we must determine how these signs show that Jesus is in fact the Christ, the Son of God. And we must celebrate and proclaim anew John's revolutionary claim that believing in Jesus, and in him alone, for salvation imparts eternal life, not merely in some future life, but already in the here and now.

Abbreviations

Old Testament

Gen.	Genesis	Eccles.	Ecclesiastes
Exod.	Exodus	Song(s)	Song of Songs
Lev.	Leviticus	Isa.	Isaiah
Num.	Numbers	Jer.	Jeremiah
Deut.	Deuteronomy	Lam.	Lamentations
Josh.	Joshua	Ezek.	Ezekiel
Judg.	Judges	Dan.	Daniel
Ruth	Ruth	Hosea	Hosea
1 Sam.	1 Samuel	Joel	Joel
2 Sam.	2 Samuel	Amos	Amos
1 Kings	1 Kings	Obad.	Obadiah
2 Kings	2 Kings	Jon.	Jonah
1 Chron.	1 Chronicles	Mic.	Micah
2 Chron.	2 Chronicles	Nahum	Nahum
Ezra	Ezra	Hab.	Habakkuk
Neh.	Nehemiah	Zeph.	Zephaniah
Esther	Esther	Hag.	Haggai
Job	Job	Zech.	Zechariah
P(s).	Psalms	Mal.	Malachi
Prov.	Proverbs		

New Testament

Matt.	Matthew	John	John
Mark	Mark	Acts	Acts of the Apostles
Luke	Luke	Rom.	Romans

1 Cor.	1 Corinthians	Philem.	Philemon
2 Cor.	2 Corinthians	Heb.	Hebrews
Gal.	Galatians	James	James
Eph.	Ephesians	1 Pet.	1 Peter
Phil.	Philippians	2 Pet.	2 Peter
Col.	Colossians	1 John	1 John
1 Thess.	1 Thessalonians	2 John	2 John
2 Thess.	2 Thessalonians	3 John	3 John
1 Tim.	1 Timothy	Jude	Jude
2 Tim.	2 Timothy	Rev.	Revelation
Titus	Titus		

Old Testament Apocrypha

Sir.	Sirach	Wis.	Wisdom of Solomon
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General

AD	Anno Domini (the period after the birth of Christ)	Grk.	Greek
<i>Adv. Haer.</i>	Irenaeus, <i>Adversus Haereses</i> (<i>Against Heresies</i>)	HCSB	Holman Christian Standard Bible
AnBib	Analecta biblica	<i>H.E.</i>	Eusebius, <i>Historia ecclesiastica</i> (<i>Ecclesiastical History</i>)
<i>Ant.</i>	Josephus, <i>Jewish Antiquities</i>	Heb.	Hebrew
<i>1 Apol.</i>	Justin Martyr, <i>Apology i</i>	<i>J.W.</i>	Josephus, <i>Jewish War</i>
Aram.	Aramaic	Lat.	Latin
AT	author's translation	LCL	Loeb Classical Library
<i>b. Ketub.</i>	Babylonian Talmud <i>Ketubbot</i>	lit.	literally
BC	Before Christ	LXX	Septuagint
BECNT	Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament	<i>m. Šabb.</i>	Mishnah <i>Šabbat</i>
BTNT	Biblical Theology of the New Testament	NASB	New American Standard Bible
ca.	circa, about	NET	New English Translation
cent.	century	NIV	New International Version
cf.	compare	NKJV	New King James Version
chap(s).	chapter(s)	NLT	New Living Translation
<i>Dial.</i>	<i>Dialogue with Trypho</i>	NSBT	New Studies in Biblical Theology
esp.	especially	par.	parallel
ET	English translation	PNTC	Pillar New Testament Commentary
GNTE	Guides to New Testament Exegesis	RSV	Revised Standard Version
		SNTSMS	Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series

StBL	Studies in Biblical Literature	TENT	Texts and Editions for New Testament Study
TDNT	<i>Theological Dictionary of the New Testament</i> . Edited by G. Kittel and G. Friedrich. Translated by G. W. Bromiley. 10 vols. Grand Rapids, 1964–1976	WUNT	Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament

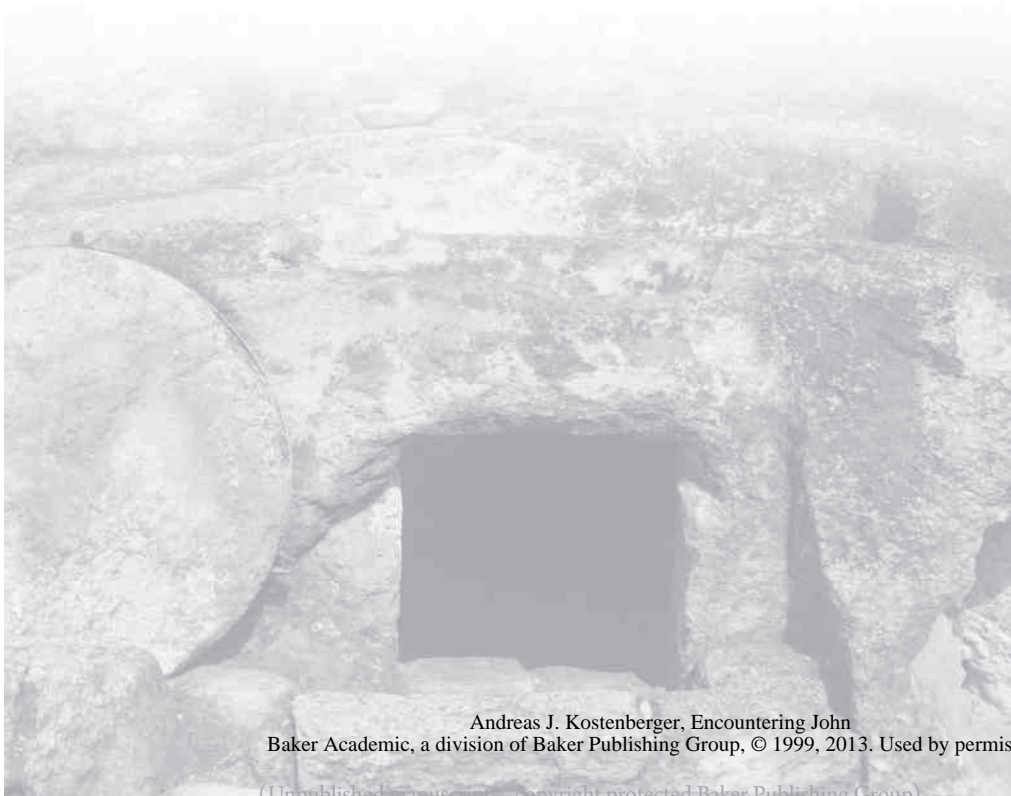
PART
1

Encountering the Gospel of John

Come On In!

John's gospel is deep enough for an elephant to swim
and shallow enough for a child not to drown.

Attributed to Augustine



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History

How John's Gospel Came to Be

The man who saw it has given testimony, and his testimony is true. He knows that he tells the truth, and he testifies so that you also may believe.

John 19:35

Outline

- **Authorship**
 - Internal Evidence
 - External Evidence
- **Place and Date of Writing, Audience, Occasion, and Purpose**

Objectives

After reading this chapter, you should be able to

1. Analyze internal and external evidence for the Johannine authorship of John's gospel.
2. Identify the place and date of writing of John's gospel.
3. Provide an integrated discussion of John's audience, occasion, and purpose.

external evidence

internal evidence

What is the life setting of John's gospel, the historical matrix out of which the message of the Fourth Gospel was born? The first question that arises is that of authorship. Two kinds of evidence can aid us in answering this crucial question: **external evidence** (information provided outside the gospel, such as comments by the ancient fathers) and **internal evidence** (data supplied by the text of John's gospel itself). Traditionally, conservative interpreters have begun with a discussion of the external evidence. But some have objected to this procedure, arguing that proceeding in this way causes us to have our minds already made up when we finally come to the gospel. It is, of course, naive to believe that anyone can approach John's gospel free from presuppositions. But the objection is still valid to some extent. We will therefore begin by discussing the internal evidence from John's gospel and only then look at the external evidence.

Authorship

Internal Evidence

"The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth" (1:14): this is the opening testimony of John's gospel. Who are the "we" who have seen Jesus's glory? We are given the answer on the heels of John's narration of Jesus's first sign: "What Jesus did here in Cana of Galilee was the first of the signs through which he revealed his glory; and his disciples believed

in him" (2:11). At the very outset, John's gospel claims to represent apostolic eyewitness testimony regarding Jesus's earthly ministry.

But which apostle was responsible for writing this account? Here we are helped by information provided at the very end of the gospel. There Jesus, after dealing with Peter, is shown to converse with the so-called disciple whom Jesus loved (cf. 21:20). And then we are told: "This is the disciple who testifies to these things and who wrote them down. We know that his testimony is true" (21:24). Thus we know that the man who wrote the gospel was none other than the "disciple whom Jesus loved"—but who is he? He is first mentioned as such in 13:23 at the Last Supper in the upper room, reclining next to Jesus. For this reason he must be one of the Twelve (cf. Matt. 26:20; Mark 14:17; Luke 22:14). At the same time, he cannot be any of the disciples named in chapters 13–16, that is, Peter, Philip, Thomas, Judas Iscariot, or Judas the son of James.

The "disciple whom Jesus loved" meets us again in the high priest's courtyard at Jesus's arrest (18:15: "another disciple"), and then at the foot of the cross, where he is given charge of Jesus's mother (19:26–27). He thus becomes a firsthand witness of the crucifixion, asserting in language closely resembling that of 21:24, "The man who saw it has given testimony, and his testimony is true. He knows that he tells the truth, and he testifies so that you also may believe" (19:35). Finally, the "disciple whom Jesus loved" is found at the empty tomb in chapter 20 (vv. 1–8). All that is said about his reaction when he went inside the tomb is that he "saw and believed" (20:8). As in the upper room and throughout the en-

tire second half of John's gospel, the "disciple whom Jesus loved" is here associated closely with the apostle Peter. This is also the case in the final chapter of John's gospel, where the "disciple whom Jesus loved" alerts Peter that the figure on the other side of the shore is "the Lord" (21:7).

Since Peter and the "disciple whom Jesus loved" are here mentioned as part of a group of only seven disciples who go fishing by the Sea of Galilee, the "disciple whom Jesus loved" must be one of the following mentioned in 21:2: "Simon Peter, Thomas (also known as Didymus), Nathanael from Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two other disciples." Since it is part of this gospel's characterization of the "disciple whom Jesus loved" that he is not named, he cannot be Simon Peter, Thomas (see already above), or Nathanael (= Bartholomew?), but must be either one of the two sons of Zebedee or one of the two "other disciples." If he is one of the two sons of Zebedee, he can hardly be James, since according to 21:23 there was a rumor in the early church that the "disciple whom Jesus loved" would not die, but James was martyred already in AD 42 according to Acts 12:2 ("He [Herod Agrippa I] had James, the brother of John, put to death with the sword").

We may recapitulate: the author is

- an apostle
- the "disciple whom Jesus loved"
- one of the Twelve but not Peter, Philip, Thomas, Judas Iscariot, or Judas the son of James
- one of the seven in John 21:2, but not Peter, Thomas, or Nathanael
- either John the son of Zebedee (but not James his brother) or one of the two "other disciples" mentioned in 21:2

This means that, from the apostolic lists found in the **Synoptics** and Acts, only the following apostles remain (Andrew, Peter's

brother, is an unlikely candidate owing to 1:40; see below):

- Matthew (Levi)
- Simon the Zealot
- James the son of Alphaeus
- John the son of Zebedee

Of these candidates, Matthew is highly unlikely, because he is credited with writing another gospel. Equally implausible are the obscure figures Simon the Zealot and James the son of Alphaeus, whom, to my knowledge, no one has ever suggested as possible authors of John's gospel. Which leaves John the son of Zebedee.

This conclusion from the internal evidence of the Fourth Gospel is corroborated also by data supplied by the Synoptic Gospels as well as Paul. We have already seen that Peter and the "disciple whom Jesus loved" are regularly featured side by side in John's gospel. The question is obvious: which is the disciple whom the other New Testament writings show to be closely associated with Peter in ministry in the early years of the church? The answer could not be more unambiguous: it is John the son of Zebedee (Luke 22:8; Acts 3–4; 8:14–25; Gal. 2:9). Thus we can conclude that the internal evidence of John's gospel, corroborated by evidence from the rest of the New Testament, points unequivocally to John the son of Zebedee as the author of John's gospel. Apparently, this also was the conclusion of the early fathers, who unanimously support Johannine authorship (see the discussion of external evidence below).

But if this is the case, why did John not identify himself *explicitly* as the gospel's author? Here we can only speculate. To begin with, we should remember that while John's gospel is formally anonymous, so are the other canonical gospels. Thus the only difference between the Synoptics and John, in

this respect, is that the author of John's gospel features himself also in a prominent position in the narrative (see esp. 21:24). Why does he do this? One obvious answer is: historical fact. If John the son of Zebedee was the author of John's gospel, he was not only one of the Twelve, but even one of three apostles who constituted Jesus's "inner circle": Peter, James, and John. Consider the following evidence:

- Peter, James, and John are amazed by the miraculous catch of fish recorded in Luke 5:8–10; there James and John are identified as Peter's "partners" or "associates" (*koinōnoi*) in fishing.
- Peter, James, and John are mentioned first in the apostolic lists in Mark 3:16–17 and Matthew 10:2 = Luke 6:14 (where Andrew's name is mentioned together with Simon Peter's), and again in Acts 1:13.
- Peter, James, and John alone are witnesses of Jesus's raising of Jairus's daughter from the dead, one of only three raisings from the dead in all four gospels combined (Mark 5:37; Luke 8:51).
- Peter, James, and John alone are witnesses of Jesus's transfiguration (Matt. 17:1–2; Mark 9:2; Luke 9:28–29).
- Peter, James, and John, together with Andrew, ask Jesus privately about the end times in Mark 13:3–4 and are given an extensive response by Jesus.
- Peter, James, and John alone accompany Jesus as he withdraws to pray in the Garden of Gethsemane (Mark 14:32–33).

Interestingly, John's gospel is silent regarding this "inner circle." There is no apostolic list, and there are no accounts of the transfiguration, the raising of Jairus's daughter, Jesus's end-time discourse, or Gethsemane. The most pertinent information is found in 1:35–42, the account of Jesus's calling of

his first disciples. These two disciples, both followers of John the Baptist, are called to follow Jesus: one is Andrew, Simon Peter's brother; the other is unnamed. In light of the close association in the Synoptics between Peter and Andrew, on the one hand, and the sons of Zebedee, on the other (cf., e.g., Luke 5:8–10), it is likely that this unnamed disciple vis-à-vis Andrew was one of the sons of Zebedee, and he could very possibly have been John.

Thus historical evidence shows that John the son of Zebedee, the author of John's gospel, was one of only three disciples in Jesus's "inner circle." This would certainly explain why the author of John's gospel, John, features himself in a prominent role in his gospel: it was required by historical fact. At the same time, it is not surprising that John would seek to avoid doing anything that would steal the spotlight from Jesus. Thus he invented the self-designation "the disciple whom Jesus loved," an epithet of authorial modesty.¹ While this reconstruction has been challenged in recent years, it has not been refuted and remains the most plausible explanation of the available data.²

But what does it matter? Is it not possible to accept John's gospel regardless of who wrote it and to benefit from its lofty portrayal of Christ and its manifold lessons on what it means to follow him? Clearly, this is possible. And it must be acknowledged that affirming John the son of Zebedee as the author of John's gospel is not an issue of biblical inerrancy or inspiration, since the Fourth Evangelist falls short of making such identification explicit. Nevertheless, affirming John the son of Zebedee as the author of John's gospel matters a great deal. For Johannine authorship safeguards this gospel's character as apostolic eyewitness testimony (which, as has been shown, is clearly suggested by the gospel's internal evidence).³

This, in turn, is highly significant in light of the unique, foundational, and authoritative function awarded apostolic teaching in the early church (cf. Acts 2:42; Eph. 2:20; cf. also John 14:26; 15:27; 16:13). Therefore it does matter whether the author of John's gospel was an apostolic eyewitness or an anonymous member of a late-first-century sect (as is proposed by the **Johannine community hypothesis**), whether John's gospel is a mainstream apostolic writing or a sectarian fringe document (for a brief critique of the "Johannine community hypothesis," see appendix 1). Therefore it was necessary to present a thorough account of the gospel's internal evidence, which turned out to be decidedly in favor of apostolic authorship.

External Evidence

Owing to its philosophical nature and universal language, John's gospel was a favorite among the gnostics (on which see chap. 2 below). This is already borne out by the fact that the first known commentary written on John's gospel was penned by a gnostic, Heraclion. But when the church father Irenaeus used John's gospel to *refute* gnostic teaching in the second half of the second century AD, the gospel's place in the church's canon had been cemented once and for all.⁴ Claiming as his informant none other than Polycarp, himself a disciple of the late apostle John, Irenaeus writes, "John the disciple of the Lord, who leaned back on his breast, published the Gospel while he was resident at Ephesus in Asia" (*Adv. Haer.* 3.1.2). This early father thus identified the author of John's gospel unambiguously with John the apostle, who is called "the disciple whom Jesus loved" in John 13:23 and later passages.

Echoing these sentiments, Clement of Alexandria remarks that "John, last of all, . . . composed a spiritual Gospel" (quoted by Eusebius, *H.E.* 6.14.7). From the end of

the second century on, the church is virtually unanimous in attributing the Fourth Gospel's authorship to John, the son of Zebedee.

Those who question this attribution usually take their point of departure from Papias, quoted by Eusebius (*H.E.* 3.39.4–5), who is alleged to have referred to a second John other than the apostle, one "John the elder," whom they suggest as possible author of John's gospel. But Papias may simply refer to John "the aforementioned elder" when distinguishing between deceased eyewitnesses of Jesus's ministry and those still alive.⁵ Moreover, it strains credulity to believe that John's gospel was written by a virtual unknown in the early church. Matthew was an apostle, Mark the associate of Peter (and Paul), and Luke the associate of Paul. Should we reject authorship of John's gospel by the apostle John in favor of authorship by a "John the elder" of whom nothing is known apart from an obscure and dubious reference in Eusebius's rendition of Papias? This can hardly be considered to be the preferable alternative.

Thus we conclude that internal and external evidence cohere in suggesting John, the son of Zebedee, to be the author of the gospel that bears his name.

Place and Date of Writing, Audience, Occasion, and Purpose

Now that we have established the apostolic character of John's gospel, we must investigate the book's presumed provenance (place of writing), date, audience, occasion, and purpose. Since these questions are interrelated, they will be discussed jointly.

Regarding the place of writing, I have already mentioned the church father Irenaeus's assertion that "John . . . published the Gospel while he was resident at Ephesus in Asia." No

other location has the support of the early fathers. But just because John *wrote* his gospel in Ephesus does not mean that he wrote it to a church (or communities of believers) *in* Ephesus, or, even if this was his primary audience, that he wrote his gospel *exclusively* to the Ephesian churches. We will explore this issue more fully below in our discussion of the gospel's audience.

It seems likely this gospel was written after the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem. As will be argued in greater detail below, John's purpose in emphasizing Jesus's replacement of the temple and Jewish festivals was probably to exploit the temple's destruction evangelistically in order to reach **Diaspora** Jews and gentiles attracted to Judaism (**proselytes**).⁶ If so, a date after AD 70, but not *immediately* in the aftermath of the traumatic events in Jerusalem, seems

most likely.⁷ Also, the reference to Peter's martyrdom in 21:18–19 seems to indicate that this event had already taken place at the time of writing. Since Peter was martyred around AD 65, this, too, points to a date toward the last decades of the first century AD. This would place the time of composition in the reign of the Roman emperor Domitian (AD 81–96). Most fascinating is the fact that coins of that time period have been found that identify Domitian as ***Dominus et Deus*** (Lord and God), the precise Latin equivalent of Thomas's confession of Jesus in the Greek of 20:28: "My Lord and my God!" Thus 20:28 may represent a not-so-thinly veiled allusion to Christians' confession vis-à-vis that required by the Roman emperor of John's day. For these reasons a date in the AD 80s seems most likely.

Given the book's universal character and the emphasis of its first half on the Jews' rejection of Jesus, John probably envisioned an audience composed of Diaspora Jews and of gentiles attracted to Judaism in the larger Greco-Roman world of the end of the first century AD. Richard Bauckham has argued persuasively that all four canonical gospels were "Gospels for all Christians."⁸ John thus was written, not merely to the Ephesian churches, even less merely to segments of the "Johannine community" or a Jewish parent synagogue from which the sectarians had been expelled, but to the church at large. After all, John's gospel is a *gospel*, heralding the universal good news of salvation in Christ.

John probably wrote his gospel, then, in the AD 80s in Ephesus, primarily to Diaspora Jews and to gentiles attracted to the Jewish faith, but ultimately to the church at large. But what was the occasion for his writing,

The Arch of Titus near the Colosseum commemorates this Roman general's triumph at the occasion of the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70.



Dominus et Deus

Diaspora
proselytes

Is John's Gospel an Anonymous Work?

The author of an important essay on rhetoric in John's gospel assesses the nature of this work as follows: "With regard to the Gospel, it is possible that the allusions to the 'beloved disciple' in the Gospel of John are a literary device to refer obliquely to the author, with the further possibility that the 'beloved disciple' is the Johannine reference to the apostle John, the son of Zebedee, so named in the synoptic tradition. This scenario would correspond to the early external attestation that the Gospel is written by the apostle John. In the end, however, the Gospel of John must be regarded as an anonymous text" (Dennis L. Stamps, "The Johannine Writings," in *Handbook of Classical Rhetoric in the Hellenistic Period, 330 BC–AD 400*, ed. Stanley E. Porter [Leiden: Brill, 1997], 611).

David R. Beck, the author of *The Discipleship Paradigm: Readers and Anonymous Characters in the Fourth Gospel* (Leiden: Brill, 1997), takes a similar approach, following R. Alan Culpepper's highly influential *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel: A Study in Literary Design* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983). Are these authors correct? Is it really adequate to classify John's gospel simply as an anonymous text (and nothing more) and then to explore the literary features of this work in a somewhat detached fashion? This certainly does seem to follow the "aesthetic turn" in biblical studies so ably chronicled by Kevin J. Vanhoozer in his perceptive essay "A Lamp in the Labyrinth: The Hermeneutics of 'Aesthetic' Theology," *Trinity Journal* 8 (1987): 25–56.

The place to start in assessing this question is at an understanding of the gospel **genre**. It appears that while the author of such a work did not explicitly iden-

tify himself—perceiving himself as the servant of the larger Christian community in writing his gospel—this does not make the document he produced "anonymous" in the way the term would be understood in modern parlance. For, literally, the term means "without a name," which may imply not merely that no name is attached to a given work, but also that the author of the work is genuinely unknown to its recipients or others. While "anonymous" may be a fitting label in the first sense, it is hardly adequate in the second sense. In fact, as the label "Gospel according to John," attached early in the second century, clearly attests, the author (or at least the person on whose authority the work rested) was not an unknown among the early Christians.

Should we then read John's gospel as an "anonymous" work? What about statements such as the one in John 1:14 that "we have seen his glory"? What about the assurance given to the readers of this gospel that "the man who saw it [i.e., Jesus's crucifixion] has given testimony, and his testimony is true. He knows that he tells the truth, and he testifies so that you also may believe" (19:35; cf. 21:24)? A depersonalized, "literarily correct" reading of John's gospel hardly does justice to such intensely personal, experiential appeals. No, the sheer absence of a name attached to John's gospel does not by itself render this work "anonymous." Rather, we should read this work as an apostolic account of a close eyewitness of the events surrounding Jesus's earthly ministry. This kind of reading alone can truly claim to use this gospel as it was intended to be used by the one who wrote it.

genre

and what purpose did he pursue by authoring the gospel?

We already hinted that the destruction of the Jerusalem temple left a gaping void in Jewish life, especially in Palestine, but also in the diaspora. Judaism without a temple meant Judaism without a fully operational sacrificial system, including the priesthood. This situation was similar to that of the Babylonian exile (starting in 606/605 BC), which led to the development of

local cells of instruction and worship, that is, synagogues. How would Judaism cope with the destruction of the temple this time? As it turns out, the major development was that of rabbinic Judaism led by the Pharisees. But it took decades, if not centuries, for rabbinic Judaism to become the dominant force in Judaism. Certainly at the time John wrote his gospel, the recent traumatic events in Palestine provided a window of opportunity.⁹

Study Questions

1. Set forth the various pieces of internal evidence for Johannine authorship from John's gospel in consecutive logical order.
2. Briefly sketch the external evidence for the Johannine authorship of John's gospel.
3. Discuss the place and date of writing of John's gospel as well as its audience, occasion, and purpose.

Key Words

external evidence	Diaspora
internal evidence	proselytes
Synoptics	<i>Dominus et Deus</i>
Johannine community hypothesis	genre

The question of what would now become of Judaism was in everyone's mind. John's answer is clear: he hopes to encourage diaspora Jews and proselytes to turn to Jesus, the Messiah who fulfilled the symbolism embodied in the temple and the Jewish festivals.¹⁰ For John, the temple's destruction thus becomes an opportunity for Jewish evangelism.¹¹ He invites his countrymen to take another look at Jesus, the crucified and risen Messiah, the Son of God. This, of course, would have been true to Paul's motto: "first to the Jew, then to the Gentile" (Rom. 1:16; Acts 1:8; 28:23–28). This does not mean that John's gospel was an evangelistic document written *directly* to unbelievers.¹² Rather, John probably wrote in order to equip believers to proclaim the message of Jesus the Messiah among their unbelieving audiences.

Also, the fact that John may have written primarily to nonmessianic Jews and proselytes does not mean that the gospel was limited to such. By its universal character, John makes the unmistakable point that Christianity is, and has become, a universal religion, and that salvation is by faith, not by joining Jews in *their* worship and religious practice. The implication for interested Jews

is that they are invited to join the new messianic community made up of Jews and gentiles, but that they must do so not on Jewish terms but on universal terms, that is, faith in Jesus as "the way and the truth and the life" (14:6).

We conclude, therefore, that John's occasion for writing was most likely the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem, an event that he considered an opportunity to present Jesus as filling the void left by the loss of the Jewish central sanctuary. John's purpose for writing his gospel was (indirect) Jewish evangelism. One last point: some may cite the increasingly strained relations between Christians and Jews after AD 70 as evidence that it is unlikely that John, a Christian, sought to evangelize Jews. But to the contrary, it is unthinkable that John, himself a Jew, would ever have given up seeking to convert his fellow Jews to his unshakable conviction that Jesus was in fact the Messiah and that "no one comes to the Father except through [him]" (14:6).

But does this mean that this gospel is not directly relevant for us? Not at all. We must first, however, learn to appreciate John's gospel in its original context in order to understand its message authentically and appropriately. In God's providence, then, the gospel's audience is not *limited* to its first readers and intended recipients; it also extends to us. And in God's providence, we may benefit from John's gospel by deriving spiritual insights from it not even envisioned by John himself. This is entirely legitimate, yet these insights must still be informed and constrained by the

gospel John actually wrote. We, too, should use John's gospel for evangelism rather than merely for our own edification. And now as in John's day, it is crucial that Jesus, and Jesus

alone, is the universal Savior, the one and only way provided by God for us to have our sins forgiven, to be saved, and to experience eternal life.