



Opening John's Gospel and Epistles

Pastoral Reflections on Love, Light, and Logos

Philip W. Comfort
Wendell C. Hawley



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**PRAISE FOR THE FIRST EDITION OF
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“The approach is unique—scholarly notes for the serious students, sermon thoughts for the preachers and teachers, and practical devotional truths for every believer. That’s the kind of balance I like!

I especially appreciate the way the authors have handled the symbolism in John’s Gospel. John was a poet-theologian-evangelist, and they’ve done a splendid job bringing out all three aspects of his writing. Commentators who approach John’s Gospel only as a theological treatise miss so many of the beautiful ‘asides’ that John has put there.

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James M. Boice, Th.D.[†]

***Former Pastor, Tenth Presbyterian Church,
Philadelphia, PA***

[†]Deceased

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DEDICATION

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encouragement and affirmation
never ceased.*

Preface

For six years, early on Wednesday mornings, we laid the Gospel of John open before us to study it verse by verse. We asked God to open our spiritual eyes to see Jesus afresh, and he was faithful time and again to reveal living truth to us. As the years went on, we decided to expand our studies to include John's epistles and to share our thoughts with others—especially those who teach and preach from them.

One of the authors, Philip Comfort, has taught this Gospel at various colleges and churches during the past twenty years. The other author, Wendell Hawley, has preached this Gospel in many churches and army services as a pastor and a chaplain. Our goal in writing this book was to combine our efforts in producing a book on John's writings that would provide the teacher and preacher with exegetical and homiletical insights. To this end, each section has an introduction and/or exposition, a preaching focus (not a fully developed sermon, but a “seed starter” or “pump primer” devotional suggestion), a section on key words and phrases, exegetical comments on every verse, and textual notes. It is our prayer that our readers will use this fresh resource, together with the text of the Bible itself, to strengthen the believers' living faith in Jesus Christ, the Son of God.



The Gospel of John

Introduction



THE AUTHORSHIP OF JOHN'S GOSPEL

In a day when John's authorship of the fourth Gospel is routinely challenged, it is important for teachers and preachers to know how to make a case for the well-founded premise that the fourth Gospel was written by John the son of Zebedee, for he was both an eyewitness of Jesus and an apostle. We must be able to affirm for our listeners and students that this Gospel is an eyewitness account with apostolic authority.

Though John's authorship is not explicitly stated anywhere in the Gospel, the text itself points to his authorship. The writer of this Gospel, one of Jesus' twelve disciples, calls himself "the one whom Jesus loved" (13:23; 19:26; 20:2; 21:7, 20). From the synoptic Gospels we realize that three disciples were especially close to Jesus: Peter, James, and John. Peter could not have been the author of this Gospel because the one who identified himself as "the one whom Jesus loved" communicated with Peter at the Last Supper (13:23-25), raced Peter to the empty tomb on the morning of the Resurrection (20:2-4), and walked with Jesus and Peter along the shore of Galilee after Jesus' resurrection (21:20-23). Thus, someone other than Peter authored this Gospel. And that someone could not have been James, for he was martyred many years before this Gospel was written (see Acts 12:2). That someone must have been John, who shared a deep friendship with Jesus. Most likely, it was also John who was "one of the two"—the one who, with Andrew (Peter's brother), was the first to follow Jesus (1:35-40). Furthermore it seems probable that he was the one whose acquaintance with the high priest later gained him access along with Peter into the courtyard of the place where Jesus was on trial (18:15-16). This eyewitness, "the disciple whom Jesus loved," stood by Jesus during his crucifixion (19:25-26) and walked with Jesus after his resurrection (21:20). This is that same disciple who wrote the Gospel that bears his name (21:24-25). (See Westcott, who follows a similar line of reasoning to prove John's authorship.)

The question remains, Why didn't John identify himself directly? Why, instead, would he call himself "the disciple whom Jesus loved" or "the/that other disciple"? The former expression seems a bit arrogant—after all, didn't Jesus love the other disciples? Of course. But John wanted his readers to know that he had a special

relationship with Jesus—not for the sake of boasting, but for the sake of affirming the trustworthiness of his testimony. As the Son “in the bosom of the Father” (1:18, NKJV) was the one qualified to explain the Father to mankind because of his special relationship with the Father, so John, who reclined on Jesus’ chest (13:23, see NLT mg), was qualified to explain Jesus and his message to readers because of his special relationship with Jesus. In this Gospel “the beloved disciple” or “the other disciple” is given a certain kind of preeminence: He is the first to follow Jesus (1:35-37); he is the closest to Jesus during the Last Supper (13:22-25); he follows Jesus to his trial (18:15); he alone of all the disciples goes to Jesus’ cross and is given a direct command from Jesus to care for Jesus’ mother (19:26-27); he outruns Peter to the empty tomb and is the first to believe in Jesus’ resurrection (20:1-8); and he is the first to recognize that it is Jesus appearing to them in his Galilean visitation (21:7). If John had named himself in all these instances, he would have appeared quite arrogant. Rather, he attempted to retain some humility by referring to himself in the third person; at the same time, he probably expected the immediate circle of readers to clearly identify him as the apostle John and to believe in the validity of his written account.

We also gather from early church history that this Gospel was attributed to John. Several of the early church fathers stated so with great conviction. Irenaeus, writing around AD 200, said, “John, the disciple of the Lord, he who had leaned on his breast, also published the Gospel, while living at Ephesus in Asia” (*Heresies* 3.1.1). Irenaeus indicated that he had obtained his information from Polycarp (c. 70–155), who was a disciple of John (and even quoted 1 John in his own epistle around 120). Furthermore, Irenaeus cited Papias, a contemporary of Polycarp, as giving witness to the fact that John was the author of the fourth Gospel (*ibid.*, 5.33.4). Other early (second- and early third-century) church fathers attributed the fourth Gospel to John: Heracleon (the first known commentator on John, repeatedly quoted by Origen), Theophilus, Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, Hippolytus, and Origen. And several second-century sources (whether orthodox, heterodox, or heretical) provide evidence for the existence of John’s Gospel: the Gnostic Basilides, *The Gospel of Truth* by Valentinus, Tatian’s *Diatessaron*, *The Apocryphon of John*, and *The Gospel of Thomas*. These sources show that John’s Gospel, written at the end of the first century, was prevalent throughout the Greco-Roman world in the early second century.

Since the time of Irenaeus, the church has given constant witness to the tradition that John wrote the Gospel while residing in Ephesus. Not until the past century or so has the apostle John’s authorship been challenged. The gravest problem with some of these challenges is that they undermine the eyewitness account found in the Gospel; for in declaring that someone other than John the apostle, the son of Zebedee, wrote this Gospel, they take away the apostolic testimony. The writer of the Gospel clearly claims to have seen the Word incarnate (1:14), to have witnessed the Crucifixion (19:35), and, in fact, to have witnessed all the events recorded in the Gospel (21:24). The apostle John’s eyewitness

account is what authenticates this Gospel and gives us ground for believing its testimony about Jesus Christ, the Son of God (see 20:31; cf. 1 Jn 1:1-4).

Some scholars affirm the eyewitness account of the Gospel writer, but then do not identify him as John the apostle. Who else could the eyewitness be? All attempts at naming another person are unconvincing. Therefore, many of the same scholars who reject the apostle John's authorship feel compelled to name him as the authority behind the Gospel but not the writer of it. (For more on this, see J. A. T. Robinson's *Redating the New Testament*, pp. 254–311, which aptly defends the apostle's authorship.)

John's eyewitness authorship of the fourth Gospel is repeatedly affirmed by the historical and geographical accuracy of the text. For example, archaeological and related historical studies have verified John's description of (1) the Samaritans—their theology, worship at Mount Gerizim, and the location of Jacob's well; (2) the pool of Bethesda and accompanying details; (3) the theological themes associated with the Jewish feasts and ceremonies current in Jesus' day; and (4) details about Jerusalem itself—the pool of Siloam, Solomon's portico (a shelter in winter), and the stone pavement of Pilate's praetorium. John's descriptions reflect an accurate knowledge of Jerusalem prior to its destruction in AD 70. The same reporting accuracy was at work when John provided an eyewitness account of Jesus' words, feelings, and miraculous signs.

PLACE OF WRITING

Readers and students of John's Gospel usually want to know the historical setting for its writing. In order to provide this background, one may look at the earliest accounts of church history. Eusebius, the first church historian (after Luke), wrote *Ecclesiastical History* around 325, and he gives us a great deal of information about the composition of the fourth Gospel.

Irenaeus said that John, the disciple associated with this Gospel, lived in Ephesus (*Heresies* 3.1.1). Polycrates (bishop of Ephesus around 190) also said that John had lived in Ephesus (Eusebius's *History* 3.31.3). Another tradition (provided by the Muratorian Canon) tells us that John wrote this Gospel at the request of some of his fellow disciples and the elders of the church residing with him in Ephesus. Clement of Alexandria affirmed the same: "Last of all John, . . . being urged by his friends, and inspired by the Spirit, composed a spiritual gospel" (*ibid.*, 6.14.7). Most likely these "elders" or "friends" at Ephesus were the men who, at the conclusion of the Gospel, bore witness to the authenticity of John's narrative. We read in John 21:24 (NRSV), "This is the disciple who is testifying to these things and has written them." To these words, the elders at Ephesus appended their testimony, "And we know that his testimony is true."

The final composition of John's Gospel—including the epilogue (ch 21) and other editorial adjustments—could have taken place anywhere between AD 80 and 100. Very likely the initial work—i.e., John's preaching about Jesus' life and

teachings—began as early as AD 70, followed sometime later by an initial draft of the Gospel.

THE WRITING AND PUBLICATION OF JOHN'S GOSPEL

According to Irenaeus, John “published” his Gospel, which most likely means he wrote it and had it reproduced into multiple copies for distribution to various churches. The Greek word *exedōke*, appearing in Irenaeus’s account (*Heresies* 3.1.1), was used in ancient times to mean this kind of publication. Many portions of the Gospel were probably first uttered by John through oral discourse, in homilies or teachings to the early believers about the life and sayings of Jesus Christ. In the first-century church, most of the Christians learned of the life and teachings of Jesus through oral transmission and catechisms; the written Gospels were a later development, created to affirm and/or clarify the oral tradition (Luke 1:1-4).

When the occasion arose for John to put his “sermons” into writing, he evidently composed a series of vignettes, each saturated with Jesus’ discourse, woven into a sequential narrative. The entire Gospel focuses on “the Word”—God’s expression to men, God’s explicator. First, Jesus, as the Word, came to explain God to men; then John expounded on this exposition and formed it into a series of teachings for the church. Thus, each passage in the Gospel of John is not only a historical narrative but a homily packed with spiritual instruction for the believers of John’s time, as well as for believers throughout all time. The author’s intention was to produce a document not of history, but of faith (see 20:30-31). Yet John is very historical—historical in the sense in which history is concerned not only with what happened but also with the deepest meaning of what happened (Brown 1966).

John must have also participated in publishing its final form. The anti-Marcionite prologue to John says, “According to Papias, the dear disciple of John, in his five exegetical books, his Gospel was published and sent to the churches by John himself during his lifetime.” In John’s day it was the customary practice for an author to dictate his words to a scribe and then read over the manuscript to make editorial adjustments.

At that time it was common for books to be published in multiple copies. Prior to the first century, most books were published in the form of a papyrus roll. From the first century onward, more and more books, especially those containing Scripture, were published in the form of a papyrus codex. (The term *codex* designates a book having a spine to which folded pages were stitched.) Christians used the codex almost exclusively for preparing copies of both Old and New Testament books. Very likely, John’s Gospel was first published in several codices. Perhaps John (or the Johannine community) employed the use of professional scribes in the great library at Pergamum (a city not far from Ephesus, where John wrote his Gospel) in making the publication. If he did not, then he would have relied on the church community to make the publication.

Very likely, John published a first edition of his Gospel and then another with an appended chapter at the end. Chapter 20 provides the first conclusion with an excellent colophon telling the reader why this book was written. Chapter 21 is clearly an addendum. It is possible that John added this chapter shortly after he wrote the Gospel and then published all twenty-one chapters in the first publication, but it is likely that John added chapter 21 some time after the first publication, in a second edition. There seems to be evidence that the Gospel of John circulated as a twenty-chapter Gospel and also as a twenty-one-chapter Gospel even as late as AD 200 because two early papyrus manuscripts, P⁵ and P⁷⁵, very likely had only twenty chapters (see discussion at the end of ch 20). If, in fact, P⁵ and P⁷⁵ originally contained a Gospel of only twenty chapters, this would confirm the view that the Gospel of John was first published and circulated without the epilogue. Sometime after the first publication, John added the epilogue and sent forth another publication. This publication superseded the first one—as is attested to by all other extant manuscripts. (See the appendix to Comfort's *Quest for the Original Text of the New Testament*.)

As was previously mentioned, tradition tells us that John wrote his Gospel at the request of some of the elders of the church residing with him in Ephesus. Most likely these are the men who, at the conclusion of the Gospel, bore witness to the authenticity of John's narrative.

THE CIRCULATION OF JOHN'S GOSPEL THROUGHOUT THE MEDITERRANEAN WORLD

As was noted earlier, John's written Gospel was probably reproduced into multiple copies by the Johannine community (perhaps with the help of professional scribes at Pergamum) and sent out to the churches in Asia Minor and beyond. This Gospel, as with the other three Gospels, usually circulated as a book of its own, unattached to any of the other Gospels. It wasn't until the third century that the four Gospels began to be collected into one volume.

The fourth Gospel had widespread distribution in the second century and was generally regarded as the work of John the apostle. The second-century church fathers who read this Gospel and referred to it were Papias, Polycarp, Irenaeus, and Theophilus (of Antioch); the third-century church fathers who read John's Gospel and quoted it were Origen, Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, Hippolytus, and Melito (bishop of Sardis).

The Gospel of John was also popular among those who professed the orthodox Christian faith. Braun (*Jean Theol I*) shows that John's Gospel was accepted in orthodox circles in Egypt, Rome, Syria, and Asia Minor from the early years of the second century. John was also popular among early Egyptian Gnostics. In the second century several Egyptian Gnostics, such as Basilides (who quoted John 1:9, according to Hippolytus), Valentinus (who wrote *The Gospel of Truth*), Ptolemaeus (who wrote a commentary on John's prologue), and Heracleon (who

is the first one known to write a commentary on John's Gospel), misused the Gospel of John to support their views. This misuse involved flawed exegesis and prooftexting, more than textual tampering.

The Gospel of John was also very popular in the second and third centuries among the Egyptian Christians. Several papyri containing portions of John have been discovered in Egypt, and many of these have been dated to the second or early third centuries. The John Rylands Papyri, P⁵², containing portions of John 18, has been dated from 110–125; Papyrus Edgerton 2, containing portions drawn from John, has been dated around 150; the Bodmer Papyrus II, P⁶⁶, preserving almost all of John, has been dated around 175; the Bodmer Papyrus XV, P⁷⁵, displaying John 1–15, has been dated around 200; the Oxyrhynchus Papyrus, P⁹⁰, containing portions of John 18 and 19, has also been dated around 200. Some other Oxyrhynchus Papyri, such as P⁵ and P²², are early-third-century manuscripts, as is the Chester Beatty Papyrus, P⁴⁵.

John's Gospel enjoyed widespread distribution because of its universal appeal. It seems directed to the universal church composed of Jewish and Gentile believers. John had served the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem for many years (AD 30–70) and then later in life (probably after AD 70) ministered to the Gentile churches in Asia Minor. Thus John ministered to both Jewish and Gentile churches and would have been well received by both. Unlike Paul, whose commission took him to the Gentiles and away from the Jews, John had served both communities. Furthermore, so far as we know, John had not taken sides during the Jew/Gentile controversies described in Acts 15. His Gospel manifests a Jewish orientation, for most scholars readily point out that this Gospel was written by a Palestinian Jew. Nonetheless, it retains a universal appeal. The Jewish Christians reading this Gospel would immediately see all the connections with the Old Testament; the Gentiles would read this Gospel and immediately recognize that Jesus had come to give life, light, and truth to the whole world.

JOHN'S PRIMARY PURPOSE FOR WRITING HIS GOSPEL

At the time John wrote this Gospel (anywhere from AD 70 to 100), the early Christians needed written documentation from Jesus' eyewitnesses to confirm and clarify what they had been taught orally. Most likely, the immediate recipients of John's Gospel were the churches in Asia Minor (seven of which are also addressed in the book of Revelation), because John labored among these churches in the latter part of his ministry. As with all the New Testament writings, the audience has extended far beyond those to whom the writings were originally directed. Nevertheless, it is important to put each book in its historical context.

When John wrote his Gospel narrative, his aim was for the readers to keep on believing in Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God, and to keep on having life in his name (20:31). His Gospel was written primarily to those who already believed yet needed their faith infused with a fresh breath of life and strengthened by a

clear presentation of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. (The verb tense for *believe*, a present subjunctive in the earliest manuscripts containing John 20:31, indicates that John wrote this Gospel to encourage ongoing faith, more than to produce initial faith, though it can certainly do the latter quite well. The other verbal expressions in John 20:31—“believing” and “have life”—are also in the present tense, emphasizing continual action.) John wrote his Gospel to encourage ongoing faith and ongoing participation in Christ’s life. As Raymond Brown put it, “The evangelist wants the believer to realize that he already possesses eternal life, that he is already a son of God, and has already met his judge. . . . The major purpose of the Gospel, then, is to make the believer see existentially what this Jesus in whom he believes means in terms of life” (lxxviii).

OTHER PURPOSES FOR WRITING

When John wrote this Gospel, he was attempting to meet several needs, some of which are introduced below:

1. *To provide a polemic against Docetism.* Early in church history, heresies plaguing the believers distorted the true presentation of Jesus, the God-man. Thus another Gospel account (in addition to the synoptic Gospels)—from the pen of an eyewitness—was needed to paint a clear picture of Jesus as the one who was fully God and fully man. In particular, John was doing battle with the heresy that later became known as Docetism (from the Greek word *dokeō*, which means “it seems to be so”). The Docetists taught that Jesus only seemed to be man; his humanity, they said, was actually just a guise. John confronted this heresy in its early stages by asserting that the Word, who was very much God, became flesh; God became a real man with flesh and bones. This was Jesus. However, it should be noted that it was John’s first and second epistles, more than his Gospel, that were aimed at confronting this heresy directly. In these epistles he made it very clear that anyone who would not confess that Jesus had come in the flesh was a person who did not belong to God and was united with the spirit of the antichrist (see 1 Jn 4:1-3; 2 Jn 1:7).

2. *To encourage Jewish Christians to leave Judaism.* Another reason John may have written this Gospel was to encourage believing Jews to leave Judaism and openly follow Jesus Christ. As was noted earlier, Jesus is presented as the spiritual fulfillment and reality of all the major themes in the Jewish economy. As with the book of Hebrews, John’s Gospel encourages the Jewish Christians to forsake Judaism and pursue a living relationship with Jesus. John presented the Jewish leaders (whom he often simply calls “the Jews”) as people who were opposed to Jesus and to the followers of Jesus—to the extent that all those who openly confessed Jesus as the Messiah were thrown out of the synagogues. His expression “be put out of the synagogue” (12:42; 16:2) literally means “become de-synagogued”—similar to our idea of excommunication.

According to Jewish regulations, there were two kinds of excommunication:

one that would last for thirty days until the offender was reconciled, and one that was a permanent ban accompanied by a curse. Many Jews in John's day had been "de-synagogued" or permanently banned because they confessed Jesus to be the Christ. (This was predicted by Jesus in 16:2.) An ancient document found in the Cairo Genizah (c. 80–90) contains a curse against the Nazarenes, banning them from participating in the synagogue. In Jesus' day there was also a kind of informal prohibition against any Jew who confessed Jesus to be the Christ.

"The Jews" in John's day were the Pharisees who still persecuted Jewish Christians after the destruction of Jerusalem. John wrote his Gospel to encourage true Jewish believers in the diaspora synagogues to suffer the excommunication and become part of Jesus' flock. His Gospel should have been a help to those Jews who became believers but were afraid to openly confess Jesus as their Messiah (see 12:42).

3. *To encourage unity among Jewish and Gentile believers.* Since John did not take sides during the Jew/Gentile and law/grace controversies that shook the church in its beginning days and that occupied Paul's energies, he was well received by all the church. His Gospel was aimed at promoting unity in the church. He alludes in John 10:16 to the Jewish and Gentile believers as two groups of sheep becoming one flock under the care of one shepherd, Jesus. (The imagery parallels Paul's analogy of Jewish and Gentile believers becoming one body under Christ's headship.) John 11:52 also speaks of the gathering together of all God's people into one entity, and John 17 is a plea for a unity among all the believers based upon their spiritual oneness with the triune God. Furthermore, this Gospel shows Jesus proclaiming the Good News to the Jews (Nicodemus), the Samaritans (the Samaritan woman and the others of Sychar), and Gentiles (the royal official in Cana and the Greeks in Jerusalem). These are the same groups to whom the gospel was proclaimed in successive order when the church first began (Acts 1:8). All believers—whether Jews, Samaritans, or Gentiles—would have seen in this Gospel that it was Jesus' intention to have one church (even though the word *church* doesn't appear in this Gospel) united to himself, just as many branches are united with one another by virtue of their union with the vine (John 15).

4. *To clarify the relationship between John the Baptist's followers and Jesus' followers.* The reader of John's Gospel will notice that John the Evangelist refers to John the Baptist and his followers on several occasions (see 1:6-8, 15, 19-37; 3:22-36; 4:1-2; 10:40). John had a special interest in John the Baptist and his disciples, as the apostle himself had originally been a disciple of the Baptist before becoming a disciple of Jesus. Thus John the Evangelist had the advantage of participating in both discipleships. It is clear from the Gospel that only some of the Baptist's disciples followed Jesus, while many stayed on with the Baptist and continued his ministry. Eventually, two baptisms were going on concurrently: John the Baptist's and Jesus' (3:22-23; 4:1-2). This led to a competitive spirit aroused by the jealousy of John's disciples over the success of Jesus' disciples (3:26). John the Baptist himself had no such spirit—as is clearly proven by his speech in 3:27-36. In fact, the Baptist pointed all men to Jesus Christ. However, even after his death,

John the Baptist still had a following. This sect perpetuated John's baptism and John's teachings. Among some of his early followers may have been Apollos and the group of men at Ephesus (Acts 18:24-25; 19:1-6).

John used the prologue, the remainder of the first chapter, the latter part of the third chapter, and the end of the fourth chapter to show the Baptist's role in introducing the Messiah and his own avowed inferiority to the Christ. The Gospel writer would hope that the words of the Baptist himself would convince his followers to go to the Bridegroom, for all the increase belongs to him (3:29-30). John the Gospel writer was among the first to make the move; his Gospel was written to motivate the others.

OPENING JOHN AS A PORTRAIT OF JESUS

The Gospel of John is not event-oriented; it is person-oriented. There are events, but the events function as a platform for exhibiting Jesus. While Gospel writers like Mark narrate action upon action, John mainly selects those stories that will manifest some specific aspect of Christ's person. The scene at the well in Samaria serves as a good backdrop for portraying Jesus as the fountain of living waters; the multiplication of the loaves gives a good setting for showing Jesus as the Bread of Life; and the raising of Lazarus from the dead is a marvelous stage for presenting Jesus as the resurrection and the life.

No other book of the New Testament reveals as much about Christ's person as does the Gospel of John. The prologue alone contains more descriptions about Jesus than any other passage in the Bible of equivalent size. Jesus is presented as the Word, the one who was face-to-face with God, God himself, the one in the beginning, the Creator, the life, the light of men, the rejected one, the received one, the incarnate Word, the tabernacle of God, the one and only Son of the Father, the one full of grace and truth, and God's interpreter. What a Christ!

John does not present Jesus in an objective way—as if he were providing a list or positing a creed. John's record is warm and personal, as one would find in a memoir. With fond recollection, John recounts the awe with which he (and the other disciples) gazed upon Jesus' special glory (1:14). The entire Gospel is delightfully enhanced by John's firsthand experience and personal interaction with Jesus. He had been with Jesus. John and Jesus shared a special love—so much so that John named himself “the disciple whom Jesus loved.” This is the disciple who gives us a penetrating look at Jesus as both God and man.

John wrote this Gospel to present Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God (20:31). If we miss Jesus as we read this Gospel, we miss the author's intent. The Gospel of John is not preeminently a theological treatise; it is a portrait (or a series of portraits), a biography containing narrative “snapshots” of Jesus' life and person. With each scene and each picture, John reveals another aspect of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. John told us that there were so many things that Jesus did that even the world itself could not contain the books that could be written about

them (21:25). John, therefore, selected certain events and put them in a kind of photo album. Scene after scene presents another view of Jesus. It is the preachers' and teachers' task to make these scenes come alive for the modern imagination. This book is dedicated to that task.

The structure of this book will basically follow this motif, as well as give special attention to the spiritual journey motif and to the unveiling of the triune God. The outline for this book (as seen in the table of contents) follows the "portrait of Jesus" approach.

MAPS TO OPENING JOHN

Word studies

In addition to looking for major thematic movements in John's Gospel, it is important to present the key words and phrases used in John's Gospel. These will be thoroughly explained for each passage in the commentary notes. Some of the terms that appear more frequently throughout the entire book are as follows:

Believe: This word indicates belief and trust. In John it is usually followed by the preposition *eis* with the accusative: *pisteuō eis auton* (I believe in him). Sometimes it is not followed by a prepositional phrase or an object; in such cases it usually means that the people believed that Jesus was the Christ. However, it should be noted that there are different levels of belief in the Gospel of John. Some believe Jesus is the Christ when he performs some miraculous sign and then don't believe him when he speaks of having come from heaven or of going to the cross. This kind of belief fluctuates. Others put their trust in Jesus, and their faith remains firm. When John speaks of believing in Jesus' name (see 1:12), he means that people have believed in Jesus' person completely—in all that he is. This constitutes true faith.

Eternal: This word is often used with "life" to indicate everlasting life. The expression is both quantitative (illimitable time) and qualitative (eternal in nature, as is the nature of God).

I am: This expression is often used by Jesus in identifying himself as deity and in describing his divine realities. This expression, without a predicate nominative, can mean "I am that I am" (see John 8:58) or "I am the one" (i.e., "I am the Christ"—see John 8:29; cf. 4:26). This expression, followed by a predicate nominative, is often used by Jesus to describe what he is—such as: "I am the bread of life" (6:48), "I am the light of the world" (8:12), "I am the resurrection and the life" (11:25), and "I am the way, the truth, and the life" (14:6, NRSV).

Life (zōē): The only word for "life" that is used with "eternal." The word *zōē* is used to describe the eternal life, the divine life—present in Jesus and available as a gift to all who believe in Jesus. To receive *zōē* is to have God's life now and to be guaranteed of eternal life in the future.

Light and darkness: These two words are often used to contrast the realm of God in Christ versus the realm of Satan in the world (i.e., fallen humanity). God through Christ gives light to a world in darkness.

Signs (*sēmeia*): John consistently uses this word to speak of the miraculous signs that Jesus performed. Every miracle is a sign pointing to the sign-giver, the Son of God, Jesus Christ. John has often been called the book of signs because the Gospel is structured around the giving of a sign followed by a discourse.

Truth: This means reality, veracity—especially spiritual reality as opposed to religious falsehood.

World: This is the world system in which every human being lives. The word is used to describe this system (as it stands in opposition to God) and the people in this system.

Narrative structure

Finally, the teacher and preacher should have a good handle on the narrative structure of John's Gospel. John's Gospel begins with a prologue and John the Baptist's testimony, as follows:

- 1:1-18 Prologue
- 1:19-28 John the Baptist's testimony—He provides a link between Jesus and Jesus' first followers, including John, the Gospel writer.

Then the narrative commences, in which there is a historical and geographical sequence, as follows:

- 1:29 The next day—after John the Baptist's initial testimony
- 1:35 The next day—the first day for John the Gospel writer (initially a disciple of John the Baptist) to follow Jesus
- 1:43 The next day—the second day in Galilee
- 2:1 The third day of the disciples' following Jesus
- 2:12 After this, Jesus went to Capernaum but didn't stay there long.
- 2:13 The first Passover—Jesus went to Jerusalem.
- 3:22 After these things (that occurred in Jerusalem), Jesus went to Judea, where Jesus' disciples baptized people.
- 4:1-3 Jesus left Judea to go to Galilee because the Pharisees heard about how many people were being baptized.
- 4:4 Jesus went through Samaria.
- 4:46 Jesus went to Cana of Galilee.
- 5:1 Jesus went to Jerusalem to participate in a Jewish feast (probably Pentecost).
- 6:1 After these things, Jesus went beyond the Sea of Galilee, near Capernaum (6:16-17, 24, 59).

- 6:4 It was near the time of Passover, but Jesus stayed in Galilee.
- 7:1 After these things, Jesus stayed in Galilee.
- 7:2, 14 The Feast of Tabernacles—Jesus went to Jerusalem during the middle of the feast.
- 8:12-59 Jesus spoke in the treasury area of the Temple in Jerusalem.
- 9:1–10:21 Jesus remained in Jerusalem.
- 10:22 There was a feast of dedication—referring to the Festival of Lights (Hanukkah)—and it was winter.
- 10:23 During this festival Jesus taught at Solomon’s court.
- 10:40 Jesus left Jerusalem and went beyond the Jordan to the place where John was first baptizing (cf. 1:28).
- 11:1, 17ff Jesus went to Bethany, where he raised Lazarus from the dead.
- 11:54 Jesus left Judea.
- 11:55 Passover was about to begin.
- 12:1 Six days before the Passover Jesus went to Bethany.
- 12:12 The next day—Jesus made his triumphal entry into Jerusalem.
- 13:1–14:31;
- 15:1–17:26 Before the Passover feast—Jesus celebrated the Last Supper with his disciples. (All that follows until 17:26 could have taken place during this time together. But according to 14:31 [“Rise, let us be on our way” (NRSV)], it is more likely that what follows [15:1–17:26] is a compilation of Jesus’ speeches between the time of the Passover meal [which, according to John, was not on the evening before his crucifixion] and his arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane.)
- 18:1 Jesus went to the Garden of Gethsemane.
- 18:13 After Jesus was arrested, he was taken to Annas, the high priest.
- 18:28 Jesus was taken to the praetorium to be interrogated by Pilate.
- 19:17 Jesus went to Golgotha, where he was crucified.
- 19:42 Jesus was buried in a garden cemetery near Golgotha.
- 20:1 Early on the first day of the week—Jesus rose from the dead.
- 20:19 Early evening that same day—Jesus appeared to his disciples in a room in Jerusalem. (Thomas was absent.)
- 20:26 After eight days—Jesus appeared to his disciples again in Jerusalem. (This time Thomas was present.)
- 21:1-25 Jesus appeared to some of his disciples as they were fishing on the Sea of Galilee.

The Prologue: Jesus, the Word Become Flesh



JOHN 1:1-18

INTRODUCTION

A prologue is an introduction to a literary work. Its purpose is to set the tone for the work, introduce major characters and significant themes that will be developed later in the narrative, and provide background information necessary to the narrative. Greek readers were familiar with prologues. Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, two very popular works in John's day, begin with well-crafted prologues.

John's prologue is a masterpiece in its own right. It is the first of two true prologues found in the New Testament. Hebrews 1 is the only other portion that could be called a true prologue, and it, too, is a masterpiece. Luke's small introduction (Luke 1:1-4) is more like a preface than a prologue in that it states why he wrote his Gospel but does not really introduce it. First John 1:1-4 and Revelation 1:1-8, both written by John, could also be called prologues, but neither one is as rich and full as the prologue John wrote for his Gospel.

When teaching or preaching the prologue, the teacher would do well to read the entire passage out loud—slowly and with feeling. Try doing this with the *New Jerusalem Bible*, the *New English Bible*, the *New American Standard Bible*, or the *New Living Translation* because they have the prologue set in poetic lines. Nearly everyone present will then recognize that the prologue is very poetic.

The prologue has been considered by many commentators to be a poem or at least rhythmical prose. Some commentators have thought that verses 1-5, 10-12, and 14-18 may have been parts of one or several early Christian hymns.¹ Others have thought that verses 14-18 may have come from a kind of church confessional or corporate testimonial.² Whatever John's sources, he crafted a beautiful poem—sublime in its simplicity, yet profound in its complexity. Readers and commentators have seen allusions to Old Testament passages and many associations with the rest of the Gospel. Verses 1-5 seem to have a great affinity with the Wisdom Literature, and verses 14-18 with the Old Testament books covering Israel's exodus and years in the wilderness.

Furthermore, the prologue is itself a kind of miniature Gospel of John. Almost every major item that one reads in the rest of the Gospel is found in the prologue. We are introduced to key terms—such as *the Word*, *God*, *life*, *light*, *darkness*, *witness*, *the world*, *rejection/reception*, *belief*, *regeneration* (becoming a child of God),

incarnation (the Word become flesh), *the one and only Son of the Father*, *glory*, *grace*, *truth*, and *fullness*—that are expanded upon and illustrated in the rest of the Gospel. Throughout the Gospel narrative Christ is presented as the one who expresses God (the Word); as God himself; as the giver of eternal life to those who believe; as the bringer of light into a dark world that rejected him against the witness of John the Baptist, the Old Testament Scriptures, and Jesus' miraculous signs; as the giver of grace to those who receive him; as the unique Son sharing an intimate relationship with his Father; as the bearer of heavenly truth; and as the expression of God's glory and fullness. It is important to grasp the significance of the key words and phrases in the prologue in order to unlock the rich meaning of the narrative that follows.

The structure of the prologue is fascinating. The first five verses form a kind of mini-prologue. Containing most of the key elements found in the rest of the prologue, these five verses span the time frame from eternity, to Creation, to Christ's ministry, to the present (note the present tense verb in 1:5—"the light shines"). The prologue begins and ends on the same theme; John 1:1 and 1:18, in effect, mirror each other. In both verses the Son is called God, the Son is depicted as the expression ("the Word") and explainer of God, and the Son is shown in intimate fellowship with the Father—face-to-face with God and "in the bosom of the Father." In the third verse of the prologue we read how the Word was the instrument of Creation but was rejected by his own creatures (1:10-11). The struggle between light and darkness is elaborated in the following verses. Those who reject Jesus are in darkness; those who receive him become children of God.

EXPOSITION

1:1-18/*The Uniqueness of Jesus*

Those preaching this passage should emphasize how unique Jesus Christ is. In a single sentence the personality, eternity, and deity of Christ are all affirmed: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (NRSV). John proclaims, right at the start, what the rest of the Scriptures teach: that the Son has always existed, even from eternity, and the Son has always lived in the closest possible fellowship and communion with the Father. This delightful relationship is more than we can adequately comprehend.

The Son left the glories of that eternal relationship with the Father to bring life and light to earth by becoming a man among men. What a pitiful commentary on this world that mankind was so engrossed in darkness that the Light was neither recognized nor received when he appeared. Who needs to be told the sun is shining? The blind! Light penetrates the darkness and accurately reveals man's fallen condition. Jesus alone illumines every man who hears the gospel. There is no other Light for man than Christ Jesus. The reception of that Light brings about

the new birth that comes not by heredity or inheritance, not by natural instinct, and not by human volition or desire. The new birth comes from God through his Son, who as the Word is the perfect revelation of God to men.

God's desire is to be known by people—by you and me. Apart from Christ, such knowledge would be impossible. Christ is the unique expression of God to us. In him and through him we can see God and know God personally and experientially. As we begin our journey through the rest of John's Gospel, let us look for him, and let us seek to know him. In this prologue we have been introduced to the most extraordinary person alive—Jesus Christ, who is God, the Word, Creator, life, light, grace, truth, the one and only Son, and God's explainer. In John's first epistle he declared that he (with the other disciples) had seen, heard, and touched the Word of life (who had been face-to-face with God and then was manifest in the flesh to them); and then John declared that he (with the other disciples) had entered into fellowship with the Son and the Father. But this fellowship is not exclusive; John extended an invitation for participation to all who believe in Jesus Christ (see 1 Jn 1:1-3). God the Father through his Son has opened the way for us to have fellowship with him. May we accept the invitation and enjoy this divine privilege.

KEY WORDS AND PHRASES

- » The Word (1:1-2, 14)
- » The Word was God (1:1, 18)
- » Life (1:4-5)
- » Light (1:4-5, 7-9)
- » Believe (1:7, 12)
- » Born of God (1:13)
- » The Word became flesh (1:14)
- » Full of grace and truth (1:14, 16)
- » He [Jesus] has explained God (1:18)

NOTES

1:1 In the beginning. When John speaks of the beginning, he might have been thinking of the beginning of creation. If so, his point is that the Word already existed at the time of creation (as is translated in the NEB). But it is more likely that John was thinking of a beginning before “the beginning” in Genesis 1:1, a kind of timeless beginning. Thus, we could translate the first part of the verse as “in eternity the Word existed,” or “the Word existed in perpetuity,” or “as to a beginning, the Word already was.” John takes us back as far as our minds can go, for our finite minds cannot conceive of eternity—only of beginnings and endings. And yet God never began; he always was and will be. He is eternal.

the Word. As the Word, the Son of God fully conveys and communicates God. The Greek term is *logos*; it was used in two ways by the Greeks. “The word might be thought of as remaining within a man, when it denoted his thought or reason. Or it might refer to the word going forth from the man, when it denoted the expression of his thought—i.e., his speech. The *Logos*, a philosophical term, depended on the former use” (Morris). As a philosophical term, the *logos* denoted the principle of the universe, even the creative energy that generated the universe. The term *logos* may also have some connection with the Old Testament presentation of wisdom as a personification or attribute of God (Prov 8). In both the Jewish conception and the Greek, the *logos* was associated with the idea of beginnings—the world began through the origination and instrumentality of the Word (Gen 1:3ff, where the expression “God said” is used again and again). John may have had these ideas in mind, but most likely he originated a new term to identify the Son of God as the divine expression. He is the image of the invisible God (Col 1:15), the express image of God’s substance (Heb 1:3). In the Godhead, the Son functions as the revealer of God and the reality of God. This is a central theme throughout the Gospel of John. How grateful we are that the Son of God has expressed the Father to us and made him real to us. Otherwise, we could not know God intimately and personally.

the Word was with God. This simply means that the Son knew the Father intimately from eternity, enjoying fellowship in the very richest sense. The preposition in Greek is *pros*, associated with the Greek expression *prosōpon pros prosōpon*, meaning “face-to-face with.” The expression was commonly used in Greek language to indicate a personal relationship (Matt 13:56; 26:18; Mark 6:3; 14:49; 1 Cor 16:10; 2 Cor 5:8; Gal 1:18). By using this expression, John was intimating that the Word (the Son) and God (the Father) enjoyed an intimate, personal relationship from the beginning. The last verse of the prologue (1:18) tells us that the Son was in the bosom of the Father, and in Jesus’ intercessory prayer of John 17 he revealed that the Father loved him before the foundation of the world. We cannot imagine the extent of their union and communion. Yet what is even more astounding is the truth that God has extended this fellowship to include us. What a blessed privilege!

the Word was God. Not only was the Son with God, he was himself God. This phrase suggests relationship. In the previous clause (“the Word was with God”), there is an article before God (*ton theon*)—pointing to God the Father. In this clause, there is no article before God. The distinction may indicate that John did not want the reader to think that the Son was the Father—but the same as the Father; that is, both are God (*theos*). The NEB reads, “And what God was, the Word was,” and TEV reads, “And he was the same as God.” John’s Gospel, more than most books in the New Testament, asserts Jesus’ deity. He is called God in 1:1, 18; 20:28. Jesus said that he existed before Abraham even came into being (8:58), and he asserted that he and the Father are one (10:30)—an assertion the Jews understood as a claim to deity (10:31-33).

1:2 He was in the beginning with God (NRSV). This underscores the truth that the Word coexisted with the Father from the beginning. A heresy developed in the days of the early church that stated the Son was created by the Father at some point in time, meaning that the Son is not eternal. This heresy, known as the Arian heresy, still exists today in several religious cults. The orthodox Christian position affirms the truth that the Son of God is coeternal with the Father; that is to say that he always existed.

1:3 Through him all things were made. The New Testament reveals that the Son of God was the agent of creation, for all things were created through him (see 1 Cor 8:6; Col 1:16; Heb 1:2). All the things created by God came into being through Christ's instrumentality.

1:4 In him was life. The word *zōē* in classical Greek was used for life in general. There are a few examples of this meaning in the New Testament (see Acts 17:25; Jas 4:14; Rev 16:3), but in all other instances the word was used to designate the divine, eternal life—the life of God (Eph 4:18). This life resided in Christ, and he made it available to all who believe in him. Human beings are born with natural life—called *psuchē* in Greek (translated “soul,” “personality,” or “life”); they do not possess eternal life. This life can be received only by believing in the one who possesses the *zōē* life, namely, Jesus Christ.

that life was the light of men. The divine life in Christ illuminates the inner lives of men. It reaches and penetrates people, illumining them to the divine truth and exposing them to their sin. Wherever Christ was present, he gave light—light to reveal his identity and light to expose sin (3:21; 8:12). No one can come into contact with Christ without being enlightened. His light either exposes or illumines or both. In his presence we see our sin and we see his glory. Of course, a person can refuse to come to the light and remain in darkness. But whoever comes to the light will receive Christ's enlightening. In the Gospel of John this enlightening is usually gradual rather than instantaneous. This was true for the disciples, Nicodemus, the Samaritan woman (ch 4), and the blind man whom Jesus healed (ch 9).³

1:5 The light shines in the darkness. Although John said that Jesus was the Light of the World, John thinks of him as still being the Light of the World, for John shifts to present tense: “the light is shining in darkness.” Christ's life and message are still effective even after his ministry on earth. First John 2:8 says that the darkness is passing away, and the true light is now shining. As the light shines, the darkness is expelled. And darkness is a metaphor for unregenerate humanity (12:40; Eph 5:8) blinded by the god of this world (2 Cor 4:4).

darkness has not understood it. Christ shone in the midst of a hardened, darkened humanity—and he continues to shine. The darkness did not grasp or comprehend the light, and yet it could not “extinguish it” (TLB). The NEB uses the word *mastered* to convey both ideas. This statement indicates that there has

been a struggle between the darkness and the light. The darkness—unregenerate humanity under the influence of Satan, the prince of darkness—has not accepted the light and even resists the light. But the light prevails!

1:6 *There came a man who was sent from God; his name was John.* The reader is now introduced to Jesus' forerunner and herald, John the Baptist. He was sent from God to prepare the way for the Messiah, and his ministry ushered in the long-awaited messianic age. No wonder he is given such a prominent position as this Gospel begins. He was instrumental in pointing the people to Jesus the Messiah. In fact, John the Gospel writer was a disciple of John the Baptist but then left him after John the Baptist pointed his disciples to the Lamb of God (1:36ff).

1:7-8 *he came as a witness to testify to the light* (NEB). John the Baptist's function was to bear testimony to Christ. The greatest man ever born (John the Baptist; see Matt 11:11) had the highest privilege: He was a witness to Christ, an emissary through whom people could come to belief in Christ. John himself was *not the light*, therefore no one should believe in him. In 5:35 (Greek text) John is called a lamp. Thus, Jesus was the light, and John was a lamp through which the light shined. Though we are not as great as John the Baptist, and our testimony will not be as profound, we also have the privilege of being witnesses to Christ. People can come to believe in Christ through us. According to Philipians 2:15, we are called upon to be luminaries in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation.

1:9 *coming into the world.* According to the Greek grammar, this phrase can modify "the light" (see RSV, NASB, NIV) or "every man" (KJV, TLB). According to the context, John was probably speaking about the light coming into the world, not every person coming into the world. Either way, the verse states that the light enlightened every person. This is a bold assertion. Has Christ enlightened everyone? And if so, in what ways? His presence and divinity are manifest in creation (1:3; Rom 1:19-20), and his truth should be operative in any conscience that has heard the gospel.

1:10 *the world did not recognize him.* This indeed is one of the greatest of all tragedies: The world—humankind—did not recognize its own Creator.

1:11 *He came to His own* (NKJV). Gr., "He came to his own things"—i.e., he came to that which belonged to him. This could refer to all the people of his creation or to his own native place, Israel.

His own did not receive Him (NKJV). According to the Greek, his own people did not receive him. The Greek word for "receive," *paralambanō*, means "to welcome," literally, "to receive alongside." The Jews did not welcome Jesus. This is one of the saddest statements in the Bible. How tragic that Jesus was neither recognized nor welcomed by his very own people. As a nation, they rejected their Messiah. This rejection is further described at the end of Jesus' ministry in 12:37-41.

1:12 all who received him. That is, accepted him into their lives. The Greek word for “receive” is used in 1:5 in the sense of grasping (*katalambanō*), in 1:11 in the sense of welcoming (*paralambanō*), and here (*lambanō*) in the sense of accepting.

to those who believed in his name. The new birth comes by believing in Jesus Christ. To believe in his name is to believe in his person—who he is and what he represents. Many believed in Jesus’ ability when they saw his miracles, but they did not believe in Jesus himself. They believed in him when he fulfilled their expectations of what the Messiah should be, but they did not believe in him when he defied their preconceived notions (see comments on 2:23-25). We must believe in Jesus as Jesus, the Son of God; we must be careful to believe in him according to the biblical presentation of his person, not according to our own concepts. Some today believe in Jesus as a great teacher, a great moralist, a great humanitarian, but not as the great reconciler to God.

right. Gr., “authority.” In this context, it speaks of God’s granting the right or giving the privilege for the new birth. No one can attain this new birth by his or her own power; it is granted by God.

children of God. The Greek word for “children” emphasizes the idea of birth: *tekna* from *tiktō* (to give birth).

1:13 natural descent. Lit., “bloods,” suggesting bloodline.

human decision. Or “human volition.”

a husband’s will. Or “a man’s decision.”

of God. God is the unique progenitor, the source of the new birth. The new birth is divinely given. It cannot be attained because one is a Jew by natural birth (or even born into a Christian family); it cannot be attained by an act of human will; and it has absolutely nothing to do with human planning. It is a gift of God.⁴

1:14 The Word. This continues the theme of the prologue; it is logically connected with 1:1ff, not with 1:13.

became flesh. Many modern translators have rendered this phrase “became a man.” Of course, this is what the text means. But John purposely used the word *flesh* because he was combating a heresy called Docetism, which denied the actuality of Jesus Christ’s human body. The Docetists claimed that the Son of God merely assumed the guise of humanity but was not truly human. In his first epistle, John said that any person who did not confess that Jesus Christ had come in flesh was a person who did not belong to God (1 Jn 4:3). God became what he never was before—a man, a human being. Yet when he became a man he did not cease being God. He was both God and man, the God-man. This is a mystery. How could God become a man? How could he limit himself to the human life process? He became a fetus, a child, a son, and a man. He became flesh the same way all men become flesh, and yet his flesh was without sin (2 Cor 5:1).

made his dwelling. The Greek word means “tabernacled” or “pitched [his] tent.” To the reader familiar with the Old Testament, this easily would have brought to mind the Old Testament Tabernacle. The next words (“We have seen

his glory”) would have especially emphasized this association, for the Tabernacle was filled with the shekinah glory of God (Exod 40:34). The Tabernacle in the wilderness was temporary and outwardly unattractive. It was nevertheless God’s dwelling place among men, where God met man and man met God. Jesus was God’s new Tabernacle among men. God in Jesus dwelt among men. What a thought! This man living with the disciples was God incarnate!

We have seen [gazed upon] **his glory**. John, speaking on behalf of the apostles, with fond recollection affirms that they had seen his glory. No doubt John was thinking of the time he and two other disciples saw Jesus’ transfiguration. (Peter spoke of it specifically in 2 Pet 1:16-18.) But John was also probably speaking of that glory they beheld in Jesus at any and all times. Within that veil of his flesh, underneath the appearance of an ordinary Jewish carpenter, was the indwelling glory of God. To the outsider, he was nobody special; to those in the inner circle, he was the unique Son of God filled with the shekinah glory. Although we have not been granted the privilege of seeing this, we have been given the testimony of those who did. Through their eyes and their testimony, we can imagine the one who was so glorious to gaze upon, and in spirit we can gaze upon him and see the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ (2 Cor 4:6).

the glory of the One and Only. The Greek word for “only begotten” (*monogenous*) suggests a one and only son; it does not necessarily convey the idea of a birth. For example, Isaac is called Abraham’s *monogenous* in the Septuagint (Gen 22:2, 12, 16), when actually Abraham had two begotten sons: Ishmael and Isaac. But Isaac was his one and only son (Heb 11:17). The Son of God was the Father’s one and only, his unique Son. Although the Father has begotten many sons (1:12-13), none of these sons are exactly like Jesus Christ, the unique Son of God. His sonship is from eternity. As the unique Son of God, he has had a special glory and an unrivaled place of honor.

who came from the Father. Lit., “came from a father.” The phrase could be connected with glory (i.e., the glory given to the Son came from the Father), or the phrase could simply indicate that the Son came to us from the Father. The second alternative is preferable.

full of grace and truth. This phrase should be connected with “the Word” who dwelt among men. The Greek word for “full” (*plērēs*) should probably be connected with “the Word,” not with “glory” or with “Father.” According to John, the Word was full of grace and truth. The Greek word for “grace” (*charis*) is probably equivalent to a Hebrew word meaning “loving-kindness” (see TLB, Exod 34:6, a verse that describes God in relationship to the declaration of the covenant on Mount Sinai); the word in Greek also means “that which gives joy” and “that which is a free gift.”

The Greek word for “truth” (*alētheia*) means “reality” and “verity”; in John it is usually connected with the idea of divine revelation (8:32; 17:17; 18:37). Those who have been enlightened by God realize that Christ is the divine reality (see comments on 14:6). Christ is full of loving-kindness and full of divine reality.

We might have loving-kindness and we might express truth, but none of us are continually full of grace toward others or are consistently true. With Christ, there is always grace and always verity. He is constantly full (see comments on 1:16).

1:15 This verse seems to interrupt the flow of the narrative because 1:16 naturally follows the end of 1:14 (“full of grace and truth . . . and of his fullness have we all received, and grace for grace” [NRSV]). Nevertheless, the writer must have had a reason for placing this testimony from John the Baptist here, a testimony which is repeated in its logical, chronological order in 1:30. John probably decided to insert the testimony here to underscore a major theme in the prologue: Christ’s eternal existence. John the Baptist declares that Christ *has surpassed me because he was before me*. Another way to render this is, “He takes precedence over me because he was prior to me.” Although Jesus was actually born three months after his cousin John the Baptist, Jesus existed from eternity. John the Baptist’s witness to Christ, here specified for the first time, is expanded upon in 1:19-36.

1:16 of His fullness (NKJV). Or “out from his plenitude.” The Greek word for “fullness” is *plērōma*; it indicates plenitude and totality. The Gnostics used the word to describe the totality of all deities. Both John and Paul used the word to describe Christ—he is the fullness, the plenitude of God, for all the fullness of the Godhead dwells in him bodily (Col 1:19; 2:9). Since all of God’s fullness dwells in Christ, every spiritual reality is found in Christ. In Christ, we lack nothing.

we have all received (NRSV). At this point, John includes all the believers, not just himself and the apostles. No single believer could receive all that Christ is; it takes the body of Christ to appropriate Christ’s fullness and to express it (Eph 1:23). Nevertheless, each believer receives in measure the same content of that fullness. Christ is continually full; he never is depleted—no matter how much the believers receive of him, he keeps on giving. Believers do not need to seek any other source but Christ. Paul said, “For in Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily; and you are complete [or *made full*] in Him” (Col 2:9-10a, NKJV).

grace upon grace (NRSV). The Greek text literally says, “grace instead of grace,” meaning “grace replenishing grace,” a continual supply of grace (unmerited favor). Just as one measure of grace is used up, another replaces it. This grace keeps on coming like a spring-fed well that never runs dry. Christ’s dispensation of grace to every believer can never be exhausted because he is full of grace. In our Christian life, we often get weary and discouraged, wondering if we can make it another day, another week, and so on. But just as we are about to give up, Christ gives us a fresh supply of grace to revive us and sustain us.

1:17 For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came [lit., “came into being”] **through Jesus Christ**. This statement presents a contrast between the law given through Moses and the grace and truth coming into being through Jesus Christ. According to the divine economy, the two dispensations (law via Moses and grace via Christ) are complementary and not contradictory. The

Law, as an expression of God's character, was intended to show humankind that they should live lives reflecting God's nature. Because of their fallen nature and indwelling sin, they cannot. But God incarnate—that is, Jesus Christ—lived a life fulfilling all the righteous requirements of the law. In addition, Christ provided something Moses could not provide: grace and truth.

Christ did not set himself in opposition to Moses; rather, he presented Moses as one who wrote about him (5:45-47) and as one who gave the moral law for men to keep (7:19-23). However, Jewish religionists were obsessed with keeping the minute legalities of the ceremonial laws. They opposed Jesus because he did not precisely keep the ceremonial laws (e.g., he broke their rules on how one should observe the Sabbath). The moral law—that which pertains to relationships between God and men and those between men and men (the Ten Commandments in Exod 20)—was upheld by Jesus, but not the ceremonial law (the law pertaining to conduct in worship and religious practice). The tension between Jesus and the Jews centered on their interpretation of the Mosaic law, which missed the purpose of the law (7:19-24).

1:18 No one has ever seen God. This statement recalls what God said to Moses in Exodus 33:20. Moses wanted to see God's glory, but he was not allowed to gaze directly upon God's glory—for God told him that no man could see God and live. This, therefore, continues the contrast between Moses and Jesus. Moses, a man, was among those mortals who could not see God. Jesus, God's Son—himself God—lived in the presence of the Father. In 6:46 Jesus said that no one has seen the Father except he who is of God—this one has seen the Father. Only the Son, who is himself God, has seen God and can communicate his glory to men.

God the One and Only. More precisely rendered, “an only one, God.” This reading is supported by all the earliest manuscripts; later manuscripts read, “the only begotten Son.” The first reading is clearly the preferred reading because it is the more difficult of the two and best explains the origin of the variation. Scribes would not be inclined to change a common wording (“only begotten Son”) to an uncommon wording (“an only begotten God”—which is a literal translation). Whatever the rendering, the reading in all the earliest manuscripts indicates that Jesus is here called “God,” as well as “the one and only.”⁵ This perfectly corresponds to the first verse of the prologue, where the Word is called God and is shown as the Son living in intimate fellowship with the Father.

who is at the Father's side. Lit., “who is in the bosom of the Father.” This picturesque language portrays the Son as a child in close dependence on his Father, enjoying comforting communion with him. It also reflects the image of two companions enjoying fellowship during a meal. According to an ancient custom, the one who reclined next to the master at a meal was the one dearest to him. (See Luke 16:22 for an example of a similar depiction, Lazarus in the bosom of Abraham, and see John 13:23 for a description of John reclining on the bosom of Jesus.) In short, the image depicts closeness, comfort, and intimate

companionship. As was said before, this recalls the expression “the Word was with [face-to-face with] God” in 1:1.

has made him known. The Greek reads, “he has explained [him].” We derive the English word *exegesis* from the Greek verb *exēgeomai*, meaning “to lead through,” “to narrate,” or “to draw out.” In context, this tells us that the Son is God’s explainer, God’s explicator, even God’s exegete. In a sense, we could say that Christ came to take us on a tour of God, to narrate God to us, and to explain God to us. No man can know God apart from Christ, God’s explainer. This mirrors 1:1, in which the Son is called the Word—i.e., the expression of God, the communicator of God.

The last verse of the prologue perfectly mirrors the first verse and artfully culminates the message of the entire prologue. In summary, John tells us that no man can see God—i.e., know God as God. But there is one who has come to explain him to us, not just in words but in his very person. This one is uniquely qualified to be God’s explainer because he is (1) the one and only Son, (2) God, and (3) the one in the bosom of the Father. As the one and only Son, he alone has a unique position with God the Father; he alone can communicate the Father’s message to mankind. And since he himself is also God, he is the very expression of God manifest in the flesh. Furthermore, his intimate relationship with the Father enables him to share with men the heart of God and the love of God. Throughout the rest of the Gospel of John, these three themes are reiterated and expanded upon.

ENDNOTES

¹Schnackenburg makes much of this—with some good insights—but his exegesis of the prologue contains too much conjecture about how he supposes John to have used a particular “Logos Hymn,” though such a hymn is not extant.

²See comments by Beasley-Murray listed in their introduction for a full discussion on the poetic structure of the prologue.

³Because 1:4 follows a verse pertaining to the Word’s role in creation, some commentators think that 1:4 belongs to the time period prior to Christ’s incarnation. This view is especially favored by those who prefer to punctuate 1:3-4 the way it appears in UBS³ and NA²⁶. They see the preincarnate Word, as God, giving life and light to men (see Ps 36:9). Although this interpretation is possible, it must be remembered that John did not maintain a strict chronology throughout this prologue. For example, 1:9-12 clearly identifies the time of Christ’s incarnation, and yet it is not until 1:14 that John says that “the Word became flesh.” Furthermore, it should be said again that 1:1-5 forms a kind of mini-prologue to and within the whole prologue (1:1-18). Thus, it is more likely that 1:4 pertains to the ministry of Jesus Christ begun in the flesh and now continued in the Spirit—for the light continues to shine (see comments on 1:5).

⁴In some Latin mss, this verse indicates that it was the Son of God who was born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. But such a reading is not present in any of the Greek mss, all of which preserve the text in the plural (with reference to the “children of God” in 1:12), not in the singular. Obviously, some Latin scribes were attempting to provide more description of Christ’s incarnation. The *Jerusalem Bible* adopted the singular reading, but this was changed to the plural in the *New Jerusalem Bible*.

⁵The manuscript evidence for the reading “God” is superior to the evidence for “Son.” The papyri (P66 and P75), the earliest uncials (X B C), and some early versions (Coptic and Syriac) support the first reading. Some of the earliest church fathers (Valentinus, Irenaeus, Clement, Origen, Eusebius, Serapion, Basil, Didymus, Gregory-Nyssa, and Epiphanius) knew of the first reading. Though later mss support the second reading, it was known by many early church fathers (Irenaeus, Clement, Hippolytus, Alexander, Eusebius, Eustathius, Serapion, Julian, Basil, and Gregory-Nazianus) and translated in some early versions (Old Latin and Syriac). Thus both readings have early witness, but the first reading has earlier documentary testimony and is more likely the reading to have been changed. In a volume called *Two Dissertations* (Cambridge: Macmillan, 1976), Hort argued extensively and convincingly for the reading “only begotten God.” He argued that Gnostics (such as the Valentinians) did not invent this phrase; rather, they simply quoted it. And he argued that this phrase is very suitable for the closing verse of the prologue, in which Christ has been called “God” (in 1:1), “an only One” (in 1:14), and finally “an only One, God,” which combines the two titles into one.

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General Appendix: Manuscripts



John's Gospel is extant in many early manuscripts—dating from the early second century to the seventh century and coming from several geographical locations. These manuscripts, therefore, provide textual critics an excellent resource for their work in recovering the original wording of John's Gospel. The following list displays all the manuscripts cited in this commentary. Note that * after a manuscript refers to an original hand, ^c after a manuscript refers to a corrector, and *vid* is Latin for "it appears [to read as such]." Manuscripts referring to John's epistles are also included as indicated.

Significant Papyri (P = Papyrus)

P2: 12:12-13

P5: 1:23-31, 33-40; 16:14-30; 20:11-17, 19-20, 22-25

P6: 10:1-2, 4-7, 9-10; 11:1-8, 45-52

P9: 1 Jn 4:11-12, 14-17

P22: 15:25-16:2, 21-32

P28: 6:8-12, 17-22

P36: 3:14-18, 31-32, 34-35

P39: 8:14-22

P44: 9:3-4; 10:8-14; 12:16-18

P45: 10:7-25; 10:30-11:10, 18-36, 42-57

P52: 18:31-34, 37-38

P55: 1:31-33, 35-38

P59: 1:26, 28, 51; 2:15-16; 11:40-52; 12:25, 29, 31, 35; 17:24-26; 18:1-2, 4-5, 7-16, 18-20, 23-29, 31-37, 39-40; 19:2-3, 5-8, 10-18, 20, 23-26

P60: 16:29-30; 16:32-17:6, 8-9, 11-15, 18-25; 18:1-2, 4-5, 7-16, 18-20, 23-29, 31-37, 39-40; 19:2-3, 5-8, 10-18, 20, 23-26

P63: 3:14-18; 4:9-10

P66: 1:1-6:11; 6:35-14:26, 29-30; 15:2-26; 16:2-4, 6-7; 16:10-20:20, 22-23; 20:25-21:9

P74: 1 Jn 1:1, 6; 2:1-2, 7, 13-14, 18-19, 25-26; 3:1-2, 8, 14, 19-20; 4:1, 6-7, 12, 16-17; 5:3-4, 9-10, 17; 2 Jn 1:1, 6-7, 13; 3 Jn 1:6, 12

P75: 1:1-11:45, 48-57; 12:3-13:1, 8-9; 14:8-30; 15:7-8

Ⲣ76: 4:9, 12 and John's epistles

Ⲣ80: 3:34

Ⲣ84: 5:5; 17:3, 7-8

Ⲣ90: 18:36-19:7

Ⲣ93: 13:15-17

Ⲣ95: 5:26-29, 36-38

Significant Uncials

Ⲛ (Codex Sinaiticus): all of John's Gospel

A (Codex Alexandrinus): all of John's Gospel

B (Codex Vaticanus): all of John's Gospel

C (Codex Ephraemi Rescriptus): 1:4-40; 3:34-5:16; 6:39-7:2; 8:35-9:10;
11:8-46; 13:8-14:7; 16:22-18:35; 20:26-21:25

D (Codex Bezae): all of John's Gospel except 1:16-3:26; 18:13-20

K (Codex Codex Cyprius): all of John's Gospel

L (Codex Regius): all of John's Gospel except 21:15-25

P (Codex Porphyrianus): 1 Jn 1:1-3:19; 5:2-21; 2 Jn; 3 Jn

Q (Codex Wolfenbuttel): 12:3-20; 14:3-22

T (Codex Borgianus): 1:24-32; 3:10-17; 4:52-5:7; 6:28-67; 7:6-8:31

W (Codex Washingtonianus): all of John (except 1:1-5:11 supplied by later
hand, and 14:26-16:7 is missing)

044

048

049

323

614

630

945

0162: 2:11-22

0212: 19:38

0216: 8:51-53; 9:5-8

0217: 11:57-12:7

0218: 12:2-6, 9-11, 14-16

0232

02450264: 8:19-20, 23-24

1505

Significant Miniscules

33 John's Gospel

69 John's Gospel and epistles

81 John's epistles

1739 John's epistles

Significant Ancient Versions

Syriac (syr)

syr^h

syr^{h**}

syr^p

Old Latin (it)

it^{t,w,z}

Coptic (cop)

cop^{bo}

cop^{sa}

Other Versions

arm (Armenian)

eth (Ethiopic)