

I. Introduction

A. For a student of the Gospels, one of the primary questions they must address concerns the difference between the Fourth Gospel and the previous three, which are entitled the Synoptic Gospels (i.e., Matthew, Mark and Luke). The distinctiveness of the Gospel of John when compared to the Synoptics, the vast amount of secondary literature that has been written on the subject, and the unique Christological message of the book has resulted in its isolation among specialized gospel scholars (hence, the Synoptics and John). Unfortunately, many NT critics often point to the Johannine variances and its distinct Christology as grounds for its unreliability.¹ To this end, our objective in this session will be two-fold: (1) address the biographical nature and reliability of John's Gospel and (2) highlight his unique portrayal of Jesus as the divine Son of God (cf. 1:34, 49; 3:18; 5:25; 9:35; 10:36; 11:4, 27; 19:7; 20:31).

II. Some Textual and Historical Considerations

A. With the Gospel of John, we essentially have three independent eyewitness testimonies concerning Jesus (alongside Matthew and Mark). This is almost unheard of for surviving sources from antiquity. Maybe for Socrates, and for centuries-old material about Alexander the Great.² There is far better attestation of John's reliability than many NT students and scholars typically assume. Not only is there coherence with John's "synoptic-like" material but there is also clear overlap between them.³ Furthermore, his understanding of geography,⁴ the biographical style in which it is written (guidelines allowed and even expected a degree of artistry),⁵ and the claim of eyewitness material (the beloved disciple; cf. 1:40; [11:36?]; 13:23; 19:26; 20:2; 21:7, 20) convey that John was very close to the events of Jesus's life.⁶

B. John is unequivocally an ancient biography, which was the dominant view held until the early twentieth century. It was during this time that scholars retrojected their modern understanding of 'biography' into the ancient definition of it. As the research of multiple scholars have shown, "the generic features of Graeco-Roman βιοι and the Synoptic gospels showed that these works exhibit a shared pattern or family resemblance."⁷ As the scholar James D. G. Dunn articulates, "Another striking fact is that the Fourth Evangelist obviously felt it necessary to retain the format of a Gospel. For all its differences from the Synoptics, John is far closer to them than to any other ancient writing... he chose, and chose deliberately, to retain the developed discourse material within the framework of a Gospel as laid down by Mark—traditions of Jesus's miracles and teaching building up all the while to the climax of the cross."⁸

III. Structure and Christology

A. Although one could arrange John's Gospel in different ways, most scholars agree on the following general structure:⁹

1. Prologue (1:1-1:18)

a. This introduces Jesus as the divine Word or Wisdom of God who is the agent of creation and revelation (1:1-3) and who is alone is the Provider of light and life (1:4-9), a theme that overshadows much of the Fourth Gospel (cf. 8:12; 9:5; 12:35-36, 46; 15:6). He is also far greater than Moses (Deut. 18:15), for He is Torah, Wisdom or Logos incarnate, sent to Israel so that people would "know," "believe," and "receive" Him as such (1:10-13). Like Moses, those who witnessed the ministry of Jesus were privy to beholding His glory (1:14). "Thus," as emphasized by Keener, "the whole Gospel becomes a theophany like Sinai, but in this case John the Baptist (1:6-8, 15) and disciples perform the function of witnesses like Moses."¹⁰

2. Body (1:19-20:31)

a. The body enriches and develops these themes while providing further clarity concerning the great consequence of Jesus's coming. For it is John the baptizer who prepares the way for Yahweh in the flesh (1:23, 30). Jesus is the Greater Moses (2:1-11) but His arrival is like that of divine Wisdom or bread from heaven (6:48). He possesses an eternally preexistent heritage (8:56-59; 10:33-39) and is the One who appeared to the prophet Isaiah (12:39-31; cf. Isa. 6:1-13).¹¹ He is the revealer of the Father's heart (14:8-10) and was with the Father before the world existed (17:5, 24). When He reveals Himself, it causes one to fall prostrate (18:6) and it is the confession of His divinity that becomes the ultimate standard of faith for discipleship (20:28-31). To this end, both the prologue and the and the epilogue speak to the divine nature of Jesus's identity (1:1, 18; 20:28-31).

Thomas answered Him, "My Lord and my God!"²⁹ Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen Me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."³⁰ Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book.³¹ But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in His name. John 20:28-31

- b. Jesus's greatness is portrayed as not only over Moses (9:28-29), Abraham (8:52-53) and Jacob (4:12) but also as superseding that which was given by Moses (3:14; 6:31); and even then, Moses should not receive too much credit because it was "given through" Him (1:17; 6:32; 7:22). Although Moses provided water from a rock, Jesus is the Rock—the One from whom all provision is given (7:37-39).

So they said to Him, "What sign are You going to give us then, so that we may see it and believe You? What work are You performing?"³¹Our ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, 'He gave them bread from heaven to eat.'³²Then Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is My Father who gives you the true bread from heaven.³³For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world."³⁴They said to Him, "Sir, give us this bread always."³⁵Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life." John 6:30-35

- c. There is also the motif of miracles that John calls "signs," which contributes to the book's high Christology (20:30-31; cf. 2:1-11; 4:46-54; 5:1-15; 6:5-14; 6:16-21; 9:1-7; 11:1-45). These are often connected to the ministries of Elijah and Elisha, but they are sometimes connected to Moses (e.g., water to wine instead of blood [2:1-11; cf. Rev. 8:8]; He gives manna in wilderness resulting in the crowds desiring to make Him king [6:15-32]; and like the serpent lifted up in the wilderness by Moses [Num. 21:9], those who see Him are healed [3:14]). So prominent is this theme that some scholars have referred to the Gospel of John as the Book of Signs.¹²
- d. Furthermore, John makes it clear that part of his purpose in writing was to foster faith and confidence in Jesus' identity as the Son of God.¹³ This is done not only through his "sign" material but also through the provocative "I AM" statements of Jesus.

- (1) To the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well near the town of Sychar:

Jesus said to her, "I who speak to you am (He) (lit. "I am, the one speaking with you.")" John 4:26

- (2) To His disciples in the boat while Jesus is walking on the Sea of Galilee:

But He said to them, "It is I (lit. "I Am"); do not be afraid." John 6:26

- (3) To "the Jews" in Jerusalem at the Feast of Tabernacles:

"I told you that you would die in your sins, for you will die in your sins unless you believe that I am (He)." John 8:24

So Jesus said, "When you have lifted up the Son of man, then you will know that I am (He), and that I do nothing on My own authority but speak thus as the Father taught Me." John 8:28

Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am." John 8:58

- (4) To His disciples at the Last Supper in Jerusalem:

"I tell you this now, before it takes place, that when it does take place you may believe that I am (He)." John 13:19

- (5) To the soldiers and guards who come to arrest Jesus in the Garden in the Kidron Valley (Gethsemane):

They answered Him, "Jesus of Nazareth." Jesus said to them, "I am (He)." Judas, who betrayed Him, was standing with them. John 18:5

When He said to them, "I am (He)," they drew back and fell to the ground. John 18:6

Jesus answered, "I told you that I am (He); so, if you seek Me, let these men go." John 18:8

3. Epilogue (21:1-25)

- a. It is in the epilogue that we see the general sending of the disciples in 20:21 ("As the Father has sent Me, so I send you") become a specific call regarding Peter. For it is the leader of the apostles who will die for Jesus as He promised in 13:37. It is structured in a way to show they still lack success in fishing (21:1-3),¹⁴ the Second Person of the Trinity alone is the provider (21:4-6; the miraculous catch of fish), resulting in their recognizing of Jesus (21:7-8). Around the coals of fire we then see Jesus feeding His sheep (21:9-14), His call to feed His sheep (21:15-17), and the price one must pay to do so (21:18-19).

1 The work that dramatically shifted the landscape of Gospel studies was Rudolf Bultmann's *The History of the Synoptic Tradition* (translated by John Marsh [Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1963]). By applying the form-critical method to the Gospels, which had become a prominent method of study among OT scholars, Bultmann concludes, "the kerygma of Christ is cultic legend and the Gospels are expanded cult legends" (370). It would be difficult to understate the impact this conclusion had on biblical scholarship. Nonetheless, as has been proven time after time, there were multiple errors made in his research, his anti-supernatural predispositions and lack of willingness to allow evidence to speak for itself is very apparent.

2 The earliest known source we have on the third-century B.C. conquests of Alexander the Great is Arrian's, *Anabasis of Alexander*, which was not written until the second-century A.D.—four hundred years after time in question. For us, that is over one hundred fifty years before the Declaration of Independence. Mark, most likely the earliest written gospel, was composed at the utmost forty years after Jesus's death (See Session 2: Introducing the Gospels for more information on Mark's date). John was probably written around 90–95 A.D., which is well within the confines of living memory. Furthermore, Socrates is the only other historical figurehead who received a written biography within living memory (by Xenophon). Jesus has four(!), as well as many other pieces of literature written within living memory that refer to Him in the NT.

3 E.g., Jesus comes from Nazareth in Galilee (Mark 1:9; John 1:45–46); Jesus is known as the son of Joseph (Matt. 1:16; Luke 1:27; John 1:45), although Joseph, unlike Jesus's mother, appears nowhere during the narratives of Jesus's ministry. John's proclamation: John shows that he is not the Messiah (Luke 3:15–16; John 1:20); John prepares the way for the Lord in the wilderness, in the language of Isaiah (Mark 1:3; John 1:23) (the same text also used by a Judean wilderness sect [the Essenes] to describe their identity; see 1QS 8.13–14); John proclaims the one coming after him, the strap of whose sandals John is not worthy to release (Mark 1:7; John 1:26–27); John baptizes merely in water, but that One will baptize in the Holy Spirit (Mark 1:8; John 1:26, 33; cf. Matt. 3:11//Luke 3:16); John recognizes that the Spirit descends on Jesus like a dove (Mark 1:10; John 1:32–33). In different settings, a heavenly voice attests Jesus (Mark 1:11; John 12:28); Jesus is thus shown to be God's Son (Mark 1:11; John 1:34).

4 Knows the topography of the Holy Land: Cana and Bethsaida near Capernaum (just like Chorazin in Matt. 11:21; Luke 10:13). Capernaum and Bethsaida were lakeside towns involved in fish industry. Tiberias was a major center on the sea of Galilee. Bethany about two miles from Jerusalem (John 11:18); Samaria's Sychar (4:5) and Jacob's well there (4:6). The author also knows sites not securely known to us today: Bethany beyond the Jordan (Perean Bethany; John 1:28) and Aenon near Salim (John 3:23). He knows the area of the area of Judea and city of Jerusalem particularly well.

5 The first-century Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria not only relocates the plagues of Moses for stylistic reasons but also adds four new speeches in his *Life of Moses*.

6 Cf. the discussion in Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 384–411.

7 Richard A. Burridge, *What are the Gospels?: A Comparison with Graeco-Roman Biography* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2018), 231. For his analysis on the synoptic gospels as biographies, cf. 185–211. Also see Crag S. Keener, *Christobiography: Memory, History, and the Reliability of the Gospels* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2019), who states, "John's Gospel may be less eccentric than we first suppose. Insofar as ancient biographies were not bound to chronology, John is not required to follow Mark that is followed by Matthew and Luke" (347).

8 James D. G. Dunn, "Let John Be John," 338–39.

9 Although there are many distinctives in the Gospel of John, the most frequently noted is his christological message. In fact, the speeches of Jesus in John (esp. John 14–17) from a classical perspective employ the techniques and formulae needed for rhetorical grandeur that is explicitly discussed and considered among classical rhetoricians. C. Clifton Black, "The Words That You Gave to Me I Have Given to Them: The Grandeur of Johannine Rhetoric" in *Exploring the Gospel of John: in Honor of D. Moody Smith*, R. Alan Culpepper and C. Clifton Black, eds. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996), 220–23.

10 Keener, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 281. He will continue to articulate the beauty of John's imagery as the "uniquely beloved son" can pictorially be seen as Israel, Torah, the Mosaic Law, etc. in the flesh as he is in awe of the majesty and beauty of resurrected Lord.

11 The two OT books most cited in the New Testament are Isaiah and the Book of Psalms. By one count there are some 250 NT citations of Isaiah. In part, this explains why Isaiah has been called the Fifth Gospel by some Church Fathers, especially Jerome (342-420) and Augustine of Hippo (354-430). Other early scholars include Isidore of Seville (560-636) and Hugh of Saint-Cher (1200-1263). If we add allusions and echoes to actual quotations the number of references to Isaiah in the NT increases significantly. There are only one or two quotations of Isaiah in the Book of Revelation, but there are at least fifty allusions. For example, consider the cosmological signs (Rev. 6:12–14; 8:18) in sun, moon and stars found in the passages such as Isa. 13:10 (they no longer give their light) and Isa. 34:4 (stars fall like figs from a tree; sky rolled up like a scroll).

12 E.g., T. C. Smith, "The Book of Signs, John 2-12," *Review and Expositor* 62 (1965): 441-57.

13 The meaning of the Son of God in the Greco-Roman world carried many meanings, but there was only one that carried the connotation of a divine human. Due to courage in warfare, or some other form of impeccable conduct, heroes were identified, like Dionysus or Hercules, as "children of Zeus." They were, in essence, demi-gods in Greek mythology. It would not be until the first Caesar of Rome, Octavian, came along that a man on the earth would take on the title "son of the deified" (later emperors would also carry this identification, which propagated the imperial cult and one's willingness to burn incense to Caesar as the mark of Roman citizenship and loyalty).

14 This is most likely not a reference to their apostasy from faith in Jesus. They were likely making use of their free time (cf. Keener, *John*, 1226). As George Beasley-Murray notes, "Even though Jesus be crucified and risen from the dead, the disciples must still eat!" (John, WBC [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999], 399).

