

## THE JOHANNINE LITERATURE

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### THE JOHANNINE CORPUS

The Johannine literature consists of the Gospel of John, the Epistles of John and Revelation or the Apocalypse. While contemporary scholars generally recognize that the Gospel and Epistles came from the Johannine school, if not from the same author, few would set Revelation in the same context. For most Johannine scholars the views of Schüssler Fiorenza concerning the relationship of Revelation to the rest of the Johannine literature are to the point. Schüssler Fiorenza is of the view that Revelation is closer to Pauline than Johannine Christianity (Schüssler Fiorenza 1976–77). Revelation does not share the common language exhibited by the other Johannine books, which differ greatly from Revelation's apocalyptic genre. While Revelation combines the form of letters and prophecy, the apocalyptic genre is dominant. The element that is thought most to distinguish Revelation from the rest of the Johannine literature is its dominant imminent future eschatology. This eschatology is set in the context of a dualistic worldview, which portrays the present world as under the power of evil. The expectation in the hoped-for coming of the Lord is that he will overthrow the power of evil.

Differences in the Johannine literature should not be ignored, but connections often go unnoticed and differences are exaggerated because no allowance is made for the influence of genre in the construction of Gospel and Apocalypse. Revelation shares with the Gospel the concentration on the language of 'witness', the identification of Jesus as 'the Word of God', and the focus on the role of the Spirit and the theme of 'abiding'. Both authors quote Zech. 12:10 using ἐξεκέντησαν, which is not in the LXX. Both use the phrases 'to keep the word' or 'to keep the commandments', 'whoever thirsts let him come', and the term 'to overcome (conquer)'. The Christ of the Gospel and Apocalypse is a pre-existent being, a judge who knows the hearts and thoughts of people.

Further, the dualistic worldview of Revelation is not foreign to the Gospel and epistles, which refer to the prince of this world (John 12:31) and assert that the whole world lies in the power of the evil one



(1 John 5:19). While the main focus is on present fulfilment, the Gospel and epistles also maintain a future eschatological perspective (John 5:28-29; 6:39, 40, 44, 54; 11:24; 14:3; 1 John 2:18, 28; 3:2; 4:17). Revelation is oriented to the imminent future, but present fulfilment is assumed, though it is obscured by the symbolic mode of communication that is common to apocalypses.

Certainly there is a shift of balance to the present, especially in the Gospel, but this difference may not be as great as at first seems to be the case. The major difference is between the Gospel genre and letter genre as distinct from that of an apocalypse. We are not dealing with pure, hermetically-sealed genres, but apocalyptic dominates Revelation, while the narrative of the ministry of Jesus dominates the Gospel. 1 John is something of a cross between a letter and a tract. It lacks the address and signature of a letter, but is addressed to a more specific group of readers than is normally the case with a tract.

Showing that Revelation is not in conflict with the thought of the Gospel does not demonstrate common authorship. At most, it shows that the case against common authorship is not conclusive. But what is the case for common authorship? It is first the testimony of Irenaeus (c. 180 CE), who claims to have his information from the elders of Asia Minor of whom he names Polycarp of Smyrna and Papias of Hierapolis (*A.H.* 3:3:3; 5:33:3-4; *Ep. ad Flor.*). The validity of this evidence has been challenged, as much on the basis of contemporary criticism as on a presumed misunderstanding of the evidence by Irenaeus. He supposedly confused two Johns, one the apostle and the other the elder (Eusebius, *H.E.* 3:39:1-10). His conclusion concerning the common authorship of all five Johannine books and the identification of the author as John the son of Zebedee is far from secure. The reasons for recognizing the Johannine corpus are more certain and provide grounds for recognizing a Johannine school, if not a single author. Recognition that the Gospel and epistles share something of a common point of view is widely accepted, and recognition of Revelation as part of this corpus is not without its supporters (Barrett 1978; Bernard 1928: lxviii; Brown 1982: 56 n. 131).

## REVELATION

### A. Author

Only in Revelation does the author identify himself as John (1:1, 4,

9; 22:8). On the assumption that the same author wrote all five Johannine books, the author of all of them has been identified as John. Even if this is correct the question needs to be asked, 'Which John?'. Since the time of Irenaeus (c. 180 CE) it has commonly been accepted that John the son of Zebedee (*A.H.* 4:30:4; 5:26:1), identified as the beloved disciple, was the author of the Johannine corpus (*A.H.* 3:16:5), though there are early dissenting views (Dionysus of Alexandria) when it comes to Revelation. Certainly the John of Revelation makes no claim to be an apostle (see 1:1, 9) and when he writes of the apostles, he seems to distinguish himself from them (21:14). Once Revelation is separated from the other Johannine books, there is no internal evidence for the name of John in relation to the author of the Gospel and the epistles. The conclusion could be drawn on the assumption that all five books were by the same author, named as John in Revelation, but in Revelation there is no reason to think that this John was an apostle or was even intended to be thought as such. Hence, unlike many apocalyptic books, Revelation does not appear to be pseudonymous. Rather, the author John is identified simply as 'your brother', although he clearly held a position of some authority and is, by implication of writing a prophetic book, a prophet (1:3; 22:9).

### B. Date of Composition

The most likely time for the composition of Revelation is the reign of Domitian (81-96 CE). From the time of Melito of Sardis, Domitian was regarded as the next great persecutor after Nero and a date of c. 95 CE has thus been commonly accepted for Revelation. But this assumes that Domitian was a severe persecutor of the early Christians, a view found in the early Christian sources (Eusebius, *H.E.* 3:17-20), but not supported by Roman evidence or Roman historians. Nevertheless, the Christian evidence is probably to be accepted. Thus, while there has been some support for the composition of Revelation in the reign of Nero, a date around 95 CE seems much more likely. The persecution of Christians by Domitian need not mean that he was not considered a good emperor like the rest of the Flavians.

### C. Language

The Greek of the Apocalypse is unusual, and quite different from that of the Gospel. While both books have limited vocabularies, the vocabulary of Revelation is the more limited, using only 866 words of which only 441 words (just over half) are common to the Gospel. That means that more than half (478) of John's words are not used by



Revelation. Many of the differences in language can be explained in terms of the subject matter of the Gospel and the nature of the Apocalypse. But differences in the use of prepositions, adverbs, particles and syntax set the works quite widely apart. Charles (1920: I, pp. cxvii-clix) has demonstrated the Hebraic character of the grammar of the Apocalypse. The awkward use of Greek seems to indicate an author who instinctively thought in Aramaic or Hebrew. On the other hand, while the author of the Gospel betrays a Semitic mind-set, he was perfectly at home in the use of Greek, and displays a subtle and nuanced mastery of the language in the writing of his book.

#### D. Provenance and Situation

The author indicates that he was exiled to Patmos because of his witness to Jesus (1:9). The revelation was made to him and he was told to write down in a book what he saw (1:2-3, 11; 2:1, 8, 12, 18; 3:1, 7, 14; 22:18-19). What he writes is entitled 'The revelation (ἀποκάλυψις) of Jesus Christ which God gave to him to show to his servants...and he signified having sent by his messenger (ἄγγελου) to his servant John' (1:1). Exile on Patmos for the witness of Jesus suggests a time of persecution. The letters to the seven churches each conclude by reference 'to the one who conquers' (τῷ νικῶντι; 1:7, 11, 17, 25; 2:5, 12, 21). Those who conquered are later portrayed (in a vision) as a great multitude out of every nation, tribe, people and tongue dressed in white robes and standing before the throne of God (in heaven). When asked by one of the elders who they are, John replies, 'You know', and then is told, 'These are those coming out of great tribulation and who have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb' (7:13-14). These are the martyrs. Thus there is good reason to think that Revelation was written in a time of severe persecution and as a response to it. Another aspect of persecution is the attraction of avoiding it either by sheltering under the protection afforded to Jews or by submitting to the divine claims of the empire and the emperor. Indeed, both of these attractions appear to be confronted by the author of Revelation in the letters to the seven churches. Consequently the book as a whole and the letters in particular are a call to faithful witness where other options appear to be more enticing.

The letters to the seven churches of Asia Minor (Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea; 1:11; chs. 2-3) are said to be addressed to them by John from his exile on the isle of Patmos, close to the southwestern coast (1:9). There is no reason to

think that this locale is fictitious, hence the internal evidence of Revelation locates the book in Asia Minor. Nor is there any reason to doubt that the author was John: no extravagant claims are made about his identity.

#### E. Influences and Sources

Underlying Revelation is the apocalyptic discourse of Jesus, especially as it appears in Matthew 24. This discourse is associated with the Jewish war, the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple. The war began in the time of Nero, under whom there was severe persecution *in Rome* (see the evidence in Tacitus, *Annals* 15:44 and Suetonius, *Vita Neronis* 16:2), but there is no evidence that persecution of Christians was more widespread. Naturally, Jewish believers in Palestine would have been caught up in the events of the Jewish war. Thus Nero became the image of the anti-Christ, the number 666 is the equivalent of 'Nero Caesar' when the Greek characters are transliterated into Hebrew letters (*gematria*), and there was a recurring expectation of the return of Nero. Using various methods of calculation, the textual variants on the number of the beast confirm Nero's identification with it. Both the Jewish war and the expectations concerning Nero form a background to the writing of Revelation, but not the direct situation for which it was a response. It is possible that the tradition in Revelation was originally shaped around the time of the Jewish war, perhaps in Palestine, but was reworked into its present form in Asia Minor in the time of Domitian (Barrett 1978: 133-34).

Revelation, like apocalyptic literature in general, is a scribal production. That is, it is a self-conscious literary production in which the author is instructed to write the book as a means of conveying the message. As a scribal writing, it is produced with a self-conscious use of the Scriptures, especially Daniel, Ezekiel, Zechariah and Genesis. But it is a *reworking* of the sources, not a mere copy of them. It is a transformation of the images, the symbols of the tradition, which had already been taken up in the apocalyptic discourse of Jesus, especially in the form in which it appears in Matthew 24. That discourse is recycled over and again in the development of Revelation.

A convincing structure of Revelation is set out by John Sweet, and his outline is the basis of what follows (1990: 52-54).

#### F. Outline

Parallel verses from Matthew 24 are noted. Each of the four main divisions of Revelation is divided into seven sections: seven letters,



seven seals, seven trumpets, seven bowls. The characterization of the seven churches, set out in chs. 2–3, provides elements from two of the seven churches to be featured in each of the four sections, so that the seventh church (Laodicea) is featured twice. The two churches featured in each part are shown in brackets.

*Introduction and Opening Vision (Rev. 1:1-20)*

- 1:1-11 opening address  
1:12-20 vision of Son of Man

*The Seven Letters to the Seven Churches (Rev. 2:1-3:22)*

(Ephesus, Sardis)

State of churches: deception, lawlessness (Matt. 24:4-5, 9-12)

- 2:1-7 Ephesus—false apostles, Nicolaitans  
2:8-11 Smyrna—false Jews, tribulation  
2:12-17 Pergamum—witness, idolatry  
2:18-29 Thyatira—Jezebel, fornication  
3:1-6 Sardis—sleep, soiled garments  
3:7-13 Philadelphia—false and true Jews  
3:14-22 Laodicea—affluence, nakedness

*The Seven Seals (Rev. 4:1-8:1)*

(Smyrna, Philadelphia)

Assurance and endurance (Matt. 24:13)

*4:1-5:14 preface to the breaking of the seven seals*

- 4:1-11 vision of God the Lord of creation—rainbow and sea  
5:1-14 vision of God the redeemer—the Lamb slain in the midst of the throne  
worthy to break the seals and read the book

6:1-8 *first four seals: four horsemen—beginnings of birth pangs* (Matt. 24:6-8)

- 6:1-2 first seal—conquest  
6:3-4 second seal—war  
6:5-6 third seal—famine  
6:7-8 fourth seal—death (pestilence)  
6:9-8:1 *fifth, sixth and seventh seals*  
6:9-11 fifth seal—comfort for martyrs (Matt. 24:13-14)  
6:12-17 sixth seal—cosmic demolition ('wrath of the lamb') (Matt. 24:29-30)

- 7:1-8 sealing of true Israel (144,000)  
7:9-17 final ingathering from all nations (Matt. 24:31)  
8:1 seventh seal—silence (birth of the new age)

*The Seven Trumpets (Three Woes) (Rev. 8:2-14:20)*

(Pergamum, Laodicea)

Idolatry and witness (Matt. 24:14-15)

- 8:2-5 heavenly altar of incense  
8:6-12 *first four trumpets: destruction of nature* (Matt. 24:29)  
8:13-14:5 *eagle—three woes (fifth, sixth and seventh trumpets)*  
8:13 eagle—three woes  
9:1-12 *fifth trumpet—first woe: locust-scorpions*  
9:13-21 *sixth trumpet—second woe: lion-cavalry self-destruction of idolatry; impenitence*  
10:1-11 little scroll (symbol of the gospel)  
11:1-13 measuring of Temple; two witnesses (Matt. 24:14)  
Church's witness; penitence (Mark 13:9-13)  
11:14-13:18 *seventh trumpet—third woe (Rev. 12:12)*  
11:15-19 heavenly worship  
12:1-12 defeat of the dragon in heaven leads to—  
12:13-17 flight of the woman (symbol for the Church) (Matt. 24:16-20)  
13 kingdom of beasts on earth (Matt. 24:15)  
13:1-10 sea beast: war on the saints (Matt. 24:21-22)  
13:11-18 land beast: deception (Matt. 24:23-26)  
14:1-5 144,000—first fruits  
14:6-11 eternal gospel; consequence of refusal  
14:12-20 coming of Son of Man (Matt. 24:30-31)  
final ingathering: harvest and vintage

*The Seven Bowls (Rev. 15:1-22:5)*

(Thyatira, Laodicea)

Fornication and purity: Bridegroom comes (Matt. 24:30-31)

- 15:1-4 song of Moses and the Lamb  
15:5-8 heavenly Temple  
16:1-9 *first four bowls of wrath (cf. trumpets and seals)*  
16:10-11 *fifth bowl: beast's kingdom darkened* (Matt. 24:29)  
16:12-16 *sixth bowl: Armageddon*  
16:17-22:5 *seventh bowl: beast's city destroyed; the coming of the city of God*  
17 harlot destroyed by beast  
18 doom of harlot = Babylon = Rome (Matt. 24:37-40)  
19:1-10 marriage supper of the Lamb (Matt. 25:1-13)  
19:11-16 coming of Son of Man, as Word of God (Matt. 24:30)  
19:17-21 destruction of beasts  
20:1-6 binding of Satan, rule of saints (millennium = thousand years)  
20:7-10 release and final destruction of Satan  
20:11-15 last judgment



21:1-8	new creation expounded as:
21:9-21	adornment of bride—holy city
21:22–	
22:5	ingathering of the nations tree of life—paradise restored

*Final Attestation and Warning (22:6-21)*

This outline suggests four series of sevens set between a prologue (1:1-20) and an epilogue (22:6-21). Careful attention to this outline helps to make clear that Revelation does not provide a detailed prediction of the future. Repetition of the pattern of seven letters to seven churches, seven seals, seven trumpets, and seven bowls leads the reader fairly naturally to the conclusion that we are dealing with a recurrent theme of judgment and renewal or redemption. Recognition of the symbolism of numbers and strange beasts and living creatures is of a part with the awareness of this symbolism as a reworking of certain strands of Jewish tradition (Court 1979; Caird 1966). Stories about the end, like those of the beginning, were told because of their relevance for the present. Thus, although there is a recurring assertion about the imminence of the end (1:1, 3, 19; 22:6, 10, 20), this is not inconsistent with a recognition of an element of inaugurated eschatology. But this inaugurated eschatology is expressed in a way appropriate to the chosen medium of an apocalypse; thus the present reality is affirmed through the medium of the heavenly vision.

*G. Apocalyptic Ideology*

Revelation is immediately recognizable as an apocalyptic book by its opening words. By this means, writers in the ancient world gave *de facto* titles to their works, supplying the words by which the 'book' would be known. But the term ἀποκάλυψις had not yet become a technical term. It was through John's coining of it that it became the identifier of the apocalyptic genre. Consequently, there are other recognizable features of Revelation that draw attention to its similarity to other books. Yet writers of such books did not set out to conform to set criteria or to produce books belonging to a pure genre. Revelation is presented in terms of letters addressed to the seven churches of Asia, which are self-consciously described as part of a book John was commanded to write, a book of *prophecy* from which nothing was to be taken away and nothing was to be added (1:11; 22:7, 9-10, 18-19). The connection between prophecy (1:3; 22:7, 10, 18) and apocalyptic is important. Apocalypse should be seen as the continuation of

prophecy in a new form. Revelation defines 'the spirit of prophecy' as 'the witness to Jesus'. There is a discernible new depth to the term μαρτυρία so that the 'witness' (μάρτυς) is also perceived as a 'martyr' (11:1-14). Through his two witnesses, God addresses his prophetic word to the world, and Revelation embodies that prophetic word. It may be that Peter and Paul, who are believed to have given a good witness in Rome in the reign of Nero, are portrayed representatively of the witness of the Church.

While the message of the prophets was written down, it was ideally and generally oral in the first place. Apocalypse was essentially a written message. John was instructed to write down what he saw (1:11, 19; [cf. 2:1, 8, 12, 18; 3:1, 7, 14] 14:13; 19:9; 21:5). Unlike the direct prophetic proclamation of 'Thus says the Lord', apocalypses take the form of the *record* of visions and dreams. This is mainly a difference in the mode of communication. Further, the visions and dreams frequently needed to be interpreted, and this task was performed by heavenly messengers (ἄγγελοι) or angels (1:1; 7:13-17; 19:9-10; 22:6-11). The visions and dreams of the heavenly realm accentuate the *sense* of the absence of God from the world. This is reinforced by the role of intermediaries who interpret the visions. The *sense* of the absence of God is associated with the experience of evil, and the world dominated by the powers of evil. Apocalypse provided a means of acknowledging evil without giving up faith in God who reigns over all without compromising his goodness.

In a world where the powers of the empire were turned against the believers and those powers were seductively attractive, there was a *sense* of the absence of God. 'Eternal Rome' appeared to be divine, and the emperor was the personal embodiment of it. The problem was not simply one of severe persecution where believers were put to death for witness to the name of Jesus. Because Judaism was legal, a permitted religion in the empire, there was also an attraction for believers to be sheltered from persecution under the protective wing of Judaism. It is probable that the synagogue was a reluctant shelter for those who believed in Jesus, because the Jews were themselves seeking to redefine their own boundaries. There was also the seduction to the worship of the divine powers of the empire. But for John, the empire was the embodiment of evil. Thus the believers experienced the world as dominated by evil and only a vision of the heavenly realities could restore balance to the sense of reality and counteract the sinister attraction of the anti-Christ. The Apocalypse is



thus a direct response to the problem of theodicy.

#### *H. Compositional Techniques: Clues to Interpreting the Visions*

1. *The Opening Greeting from God (1:4, 8)*. The opening vision of ch. 1 is the key to much that follows. It describes the book as 'the revelation of Jesus Christ which God gave to him to show to his servants'. We are probably right in taking 'of Jesus Christ' as both an objective and a subjective genitive. Because the revelation was given to him by God, it is his. Thus, even in the work of revelation, which originates with God, God is distanced from those who receive the revelation. Indeed, the process of distancing is taken further because Jesus Christ sent his messenger (*ἀγγέλου*) to signify the revelation to John. But the revelation also has Jesus Christ as its subject. The things which must happen soon, because the time is near, concern the coming Son of Man (1:7, 13).

The sense, introduced in the opening verses, that Jesus is identified with God and yet God is distanced from him, continues in the initial address to the seven churches (1:4-8). The greeting addressed to the seven churches has God as its source, who is designated 'the one who is and who was and who is coming' (1:4, 8). It is also 'from the seven Spirits before his throne and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead and the ruler of the kings of the earth'. The formula of God, Spirits, Jesus Christ suggests that Spirits in the formula 'from the seven Spirits' should be given a capital indicating the divine side of reality. But this is an unconventional form of trinitarian formula. The emphasis on seven is consistent with the use of numbers in Revelation, stressing the perfection, in spite of appearances, of God's relationship with his creation through the seven Spirits. Further, in spite of appearances, Jesus Christ, the firstborn from the dead, is the ruler of the kings of the earth.

The greeting has its source in God, who is described in terms which introduce the vision of God in Revelation 4. He is the one who is, who was and is coming; and the seven Spirits are before his throne. This description is further elaborated in 1:8, where God announces 'I am the Alpha and Omega, the one who is and who was and is coming, the Almighty (*παντοκράτωρ*)'. This self-revelation should be compared with 1:17 where Christ is the subject, 21:6 where God is again subject, and 22:13 where Christ is again subject. In the first instance, the speaker is God, and this leads into the vision of the throne of God.

2. *The Vision of the Throne of God (4:1-11)*. Revelation 4 emphasizes that a heavenly vision is in view by stating that a door is opened in heaven and a voice calls John to 'Come up here and I will show you what must be after these things'. John travels in the spirit to heaven and what he sees is reminiscent of the visions of Dan. 7:9-14, Ezek. 1:4-28, especially at this point 1:26-27, and Isa. 6:1-13. John draws on a rich tradition concerning the transcendent almighty power of God on his throne, a tradition that maintains the mystery of God even in the context of the revealing vision. This vision provides an alternative to the perception of the world as it seems to be. There is an *epistemic* distance between God and the world. To the senses, God appears to be absent. The world appears to be out of control, at least beyond the control of God and in the control of the powers of evil. The vision opens up a view of another reality. In spite of appearances in the world, God is on his throne. The heavenly reality is rich in the worship of God. Around the throne are the twenty-four elders, the seven Spirits of God, the sea of glass-like crystal, and the four living creatures who ceaselessly cry out in praise to God, 'Holy, holy, holy Lord God almighty, who was and who is and who is coming'. All focus of attention is on the one on the throne, and the twenty-four elders cast their crowns before him saying, 'You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honour and power, because you created all things and by your will they were and were created'. The world as now experienced by John and his readers seems incompatible with the God of creation. Yet the vision of heaven is of God on the throne surrounded by heavenly worshippers confessing him as creator. This is, however, something of a mystery.

3. *The Opening Greeting from Jesus Christ (1:5, 6)*. Jesus Christ is first introduced as the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead and the ruler of the kings of the earth. Reference to the faithful witness draws attention to the martyr status of Jesus, which is reinforced by reference to him as the firstborn of the dead. Thus the call to faithful witness is based on the example of the one who was a faithful witness to death and had been raised to life. As the firstborn of the dead, he is the ruler of the kings of the earth.

Thus far, the role of Jesus is understood in relation to the world. Now the ascription, 'To the one who loves us and loosed us from our sins by his blood, and made us kings and priests to his God and father, to him be glory and might for ever and ever, amen', interprets his role directly in relation to those who believe in him. One such believer is



the spokesman who refers to Jesus as the one who *loves* us. The present tense is noticeable, as is the writer's inclusive language, 'us'. The understanding of the present situation is built on the act in the past when Jesus 'loosed us from our sins by his blood', that is, by his death. Because of what he is and has done, glory and might are his for ever and ever. This prepares the way for the continuing vision of God in ch. 5.

4. *The Vision of the Lamb in the Midst of the Throne (5:1-14)*. The vision of the throne of God comes to focus on the book which no one could be found who was worthy to open and read, until one of the elders announced that the lion of the tribe of Judah had conquered, and the root of David would open the book. The figure is then elaborated in terms of the vision, in the midst of the throne, in the midst of the elders, a lamb standing as having been slaughtered. Again the vision leads to the worship of heaven in which the lamb is praised as worthy to take the book and open the seals because 'you were slaughtered and you redeemed [saints] to God by your blood from every tribe and tongue and people and nation and made them kings and priests to our God and they shall reign upon earth'. The whole company of heaven then takes up the praise: 'Worthy is the lamb that was slain to receive power and riches and wisdom and strength and honour and glory and blessing'. Then the whole creation joins in, 'To him who sits upon the throne and to the lamb be blessing and honour and glory and might for ever and ever'. At this, the four living creatures say, 'Amen', and the elders fall down and worship.

As the faithful witness and as the firstborn from the dead, Jesus was ruler of the kings of the earth; now as the lamb who was slain he is worthy to take the book and open the seals. As the one who loves us and loosed us from our sins by his blood, he has redeemed to God saints from every tribe. Consequently, it seems that at the heart of the mystery of the world dominated by evil is the lamb who was slain. Only from this perspective could the vision of heaven with God on his throne remain credible. Thus chs. 4-5, building on the vision of ch. 1, provide the context in which the cycles of judgment must be understood.

With chs. 4-5, the reader is introduced to the worship of heaven which will be encountered again and again throughout the book. It is uncertain whether John has taken over the language of praise and worship from his communities, or whether the inspired language that

he has used has become the language of worship for succeeding generations of Christians.

5. *The Inaugural Vision and the Letters to the Seven Churches (1:7, 9-3:22)*. The latter part of the inaugural vision introduces the letters to the seven churches. In 1:7, the coming of one like a Son of Man is alluded to by reference to his coming with clouds (Dan. 7:13; Matt. 24:30; Mark 13:26; Luke 21:27; 1 Thess. 4:17). This has been combined with reference (drawn from Zech. 12:10, 12, 14; see Matt. 24:30; John 19:34, 37) to what is interpreted as the awareness of all people on earth to the coming in judgment of the one they had 'pierced', which John must take as an equivalent of 'slain'. It is his coming in judgment that produces mourning. Jesus as redeemer, who is a comforting figure to those who have suffered for his sake, is also, consequently, a threatening figure.

The inaugural vision then reveals *one like a Son of Man* moving in the midst of seven golden candle sticks. The description is clearly a reference to the figure of Dan. 7:13. But in the description of his hair as white as wool, John has described him in terms of the one who sits on the throne in Dan. 7:9. Other features are drawn from the throne chariot vision of God in Ezek. 1:24 and other parts of Ezekiel. That we are meant to understand him as a fearsome figure is confirmed by the response of John who, when he sees him, falls at his feet as one dead (1:17).

Aspects of the vision are explained: the seven golden candlesticks are the seven churches; the seven stars are the seven messengers (*ἄγγελοι*) of the seven churches, and are probably to be understood as the 'ministers' of the churches. In each of the letters to the seven churches that follow in chs. 2 and 3, some aspect of the inaugural vision of Jesus is featured. In these letters, there is an element of assurance and an element of threat; the balance varies from letter to letter. Overall, the situation of Christians in Asia is covered, and there is preparation for the following visions with their threats and promises.

#### THE FOURTH GOSPEL

##### A. Title and Author

The title, 'The Fourth Gospel', is not traditional. The traditional title is 'According to John' or 'Gospel according to John'. The variant titles show that they were not original, but there is no evidence that



the Gospel was attributed to any other author and the titles are no later than the early second century. Irenaeus, writing around 180 CE, asserts the authenticity of the title identifying the author as John the son of Zebedee, called the beloved disciple in the Gospel (A.H. 2:22:5; 3:1:1). But his view is questionable, not only because his testimony is quite late, but the *basis* for his view (especially the testimony of Papias now in Eusebius, H.E. 3:39:1-10) remains ambiguous, and he asserts more than his own understanding of the Papias testimony justifies. If Papias claims the *apostle* John wrote the Gospel, Irenaeus asserts he also wrote the three epistles and Revelation. It now seems more likely that these books were the product of a 'school' which we may, on the basis of the naming of the author of Revelation, call 'the Johannine school'. But if the Gospel emanates from the Johannine school, that is no reason to think that the author of the Gospel was John or that the John in question was the apostle.

The title, 'The Fourth Gospel', may well have reflected the view that John was the fourth Gospel to have been written ('Last of all John...', Irenaeus, A.H. 3:1:1). However, it is no longer possible to hold this view with any probability. Indeed, there is no reason to think that John is any later than Matthew. Many of the factors used in the dating of John are equally relevant to the dating of Matthew. Yet John remains the fourth Gospel in canonical order. In the absence of strong evidence of the identity of the author, the title 'The Fourth Gospel' remains the most useful.

The Fourth Gospel is strictly anonymous. Recognition that John 21:24 identifies the beloved disciple as author does nothing to lift the veil of anonymity, because there are no clear clues to his identity. The beloved disciple, literally 'the disciple whom Jesus loved', appears for the first time at the last supper shared by Jesus with his disciples. There he appears in a privileged position in a contrast with Peter (13:23-24), a contrast which probably continues in the account of Jesus before the high priest (18:15), certainly in the narrative of the empty tomb (20:1-10) and in the epilogue (21:7, 20-24). He was also present at the crucifixion (19:26-27, 35). It may be that he is to be identified with one of the two disciples of John 1:35ff., one of whom is identified as Andrew, the brother of Simon Peter. The other remains anonymous—to be revealed in due course as the beloved disciple? But who is the beloved disciple? While a case can be made for identifying him with John the son of Zebedee, there is no compelling reason for identifying him with any one of 'the Twelve'. Thus there are

advocates for identifying him with Lazarus (Mark Stibbe), John Mark (Pierson Parker), Paul (B.W. Bacon and Michael Goulder), Thomas (James Charlesworth), Matthias (Eric L. Titus), the rich young ruler (H.B. Swete), Benjamin (Paul Minear), the elder of 2 and 3 John (H. Thyen), while others suggest that he is an *ideal* rather than an actual disciple. Thus he is said to represent the Johannine Christians (Alv Kragerud) or Gentile Christianity, while the mother of Jesus, with whom he is associated at the crucifixion, represents Jewish Christianity (Rudolf Bultmann).

It is difficult to dismiss the case for recognizing that the beloved disciple is an ideal figure, though not straightforwardly representative of any particular ethnic group. He is, rather, representative of Johannine Christianity, which appears to have had a changing ethnic make-up. This need not mean that he is not also an historical figure or the characterization of an historical figure. 21:24 identifies the beloved disciple as the author of the Gospel. It is unlikely that any author would describe himself in these terms. The portrayal of the beloved disciple can be seen as an attempt to give ideal status to the Gospel by attributing authorship to him. There are broadly two ways in which this is thought to be done. One simply has the actual author 'create' the figure of the beloved disciple and attribute the Gospel to him. The other takes account of the probability that ch. 21 is an epilogue to the Gospel, added by hands other than those that wrote chs. 1-20. The figure of the beloved disciple was found in chs. 1-20, and those who added ch. 21 *mistakenly* attributed the Gospel to him. But if those who added ch. 21 did not know the identity of such a notable member as the one who wrote the Gospel, it would strain our understanding of the Johannine school.

A more likely alternative is that those who added ch. 21 (members of the Johannine school) correctly identified the beloved disciple as the author of the Gospel. They were responsible for introducing this characterization of the author into the body of the Gospel where the author had originally referred to himself in a way that preserved his anonymity such as in 1:35ff. and 18:15. Yet, given that he was well known at the time, knowing readers needed no prompting to identify his role in the Gospel story where he was identified simply as 'the other disciple'. Probably two developments changed this situation. First, the beloved disciple died and, secondly, it became necessary for the Johannine community to relate to wider groups of Christian communities where the beloved disciple was not well known. The



epilogue set out to make clear the outstanding (ideal) and distinctive role played by the author of the Gospel, and this was caught in the title which others had given to him in recognition of his special relation to Jesus. When using this title, he is first described as one of Jesus' disciples (13:23-24) and then, at his crucifixion, Jesus sets him in a special relationship with his mother as they are portrayed as ideal disciples. There is a bridging passage in 20:2 where he is called 'the other disciple' and the one whom Jesus loved, linking these two descriptions. The Johannine school was responsible for the introduction of this 'title' and the identification of the beloved disciple as author. Given that the Johannine school professes intimate knowledge of the author, we should suppose that the identification is correct. Yet the author of the Fourth Gospel remains anonymous to us, because the identity of the beloved disciple remains a secret.

This reading best takes account of the fact that those responsible for 21:24 add their stamp of approval to the truth of what the beloved disciple has written, 'and we know that his witness is true'. Given the role and status of the beloved disciple, we would not expect that his witness would need this attestation. Certainly those who corroborate his witness have provided no credentials to add any weight to his word. Their testimony is meaningful only in a context where they are known and the beloved disciple is no longer present—no longer alive—which seems to be the point of 21:20-23. Against this view, some think, is the use of the present participle in 21:24, 'This is the disciple *who bears witness* concerning these things and has written these things'. But the disciple need not still be alive because he continues to bear witness through what he has written.

If we accept that the hands that added ch. 21 were also responsible for introducing references to the beloved disciple into chs. 1-20, we have opened the way for recognizing other explanatory comments as additions made at the same time to prepare the Gospel for a wider and not necessarily Jewish audience. The explanations of Jewish terms and customs were probably introduced when the Gospel was prepared for this expanded audience and sent out with ch. 21 as an integral part. While it is not impossible that extensive changes were made to chs. 1-20 at the time, it now seems impossible to isolate them in detail. It is perhaps more likely that the integrity of the Gospel was respected, and only necessary changes were made for the adaptation of the Gospel to a broader group. The wider audience also stands at some little temporal distance from the work of the beloved disciple. This is likely

because it was necessary to introduce him and his role to the wider group of readers now envisaged in 21:24.

### B. Provenance and Date

Given that we have identified a two-stage production of the Gospel, it may be necessary to deal with the question of provenance also in two (or more) stages. Some scholars have long drawn attention to aspects of the Gospel which make best sense in a pre-70 CE Palestinian setting. Such features include the use of transliterated Hebrew terms, and the evidence of some aspects of topography now given support by archaeology such as the pool described in John 5 and the 'pavement' of 19:13. Perhaps more important are the close associations between the Gospel and some aspects of the Qumran texts. John's Gospel shares with some of the Qumran writings the attraction to the central symbolism found in the antithesis of light and darkness. While there are other antitheses, such as truth and falsehood, light and darkness provides the central symbol set for the Gospel and the sect of Qumran. Each sees themselves as belonging to the light while all others belong to the darkness. Thus, there is strong evidence for understanding the influences shaping the language and thought of the Gospel in the context of a form of Judaism not unlike that of the community of Qumran. Of course, in this context, Judaism means pre-70 CE Judaeen Judaism.

But it is unlikely that the Gospel reached even its *earliest* written form in that period and place. The Gospel was written in Greek and reflects a post-70 CE point of view, in that there is a tendency to dissolve the differences of pre-70 CE Judaism into the all-embracing category, 'the Jews'. The Pharisees sometimes appear as an alternative description for 'the Jews', and this seems to reflect the fact that the Pharisees survived the catastrophe of the Jewish war and emerged as the leaders responsible for shaping what was to become rabbinic Judaism. This concentration on them reflects the reality of a later time. The only other Jewish groups mentioned are the chief priests or high priest and rulers. Notably absent are the Sadducees, who were the dominant political and priestly group in the time of Jesus.

From John 5 onwards, the Gospel depicts Jesus and his followers in conflict with the Jewish leaders. From John 5:16-18 Jesus is persecuted, and there are attempts to kill him because of his failure to keep the sabbath, and because it is understood that he claimed to be equal with God. In John 9:22, we are told that the Jews had decided to 'excommunicate from the synagogue' (ἀποσυνάγωγος γένηται)



anyone who confessed Christ. This is extraordinary for a number of reasons. That Jesus is *the Christ* had not to this point been a particularly prominent or contentious issue in the Gospel. In terms of the story of Jesus, this decision seems to come from nowhere. It is notable too that the decision is directed not against Jesus but against his followers, and in the long run, the man healed of blindness by Jesus was cast out of the synagogue (9:34). In the process, he has become the model of true discipleship in the face of persecution. Such persecution emerges as the formidable context shaping the Gospel. Even many of the rulers who believed in Jesus feared the Pharisees and did not confess Jesus as the Christ lest they should become excommunicated from the synagogue (12:42). While this is expressed in terms of present realities, in the farewell discourses Jesus predicts what is coming upon those who believe in and follow him (16:2). There he says 'They will make you excommunicated from the synagogue' (ἀποσυναγωγούς ποιήσουσιν ὑμᾶς). Thus, what is described as happening to the disciple of Jesus in the narrative of the Gospel is spoken of in terms of warnings of the future in the farewell discourses. Here there is also the warning that those who kill his disciples will think of that as an act of serving God. While in the narrative of the Gospel none of Jesus' disciples is put to death, Jesus himself is put to death, and, from 5:17 onwards, there are continuing plots to arrest or execute/assassinate him. There is also a plot not only to kill Jesus but also to kill Lazarus (12:9-11). That Jesus warns his disciples in the farewell discourses of what the narrative already describes as happening to the disciple suggests that the narrative is a conflation of the story of Jesus with the story of the Johannine community, so that Jesus' own conflict has been interpreted in relation to the conflict experienced later by the community. Naturally, the terms of the conflict have changed. In the later period, focus is on the confession of Jesus as the Christ.

While we cannot locate precisely where and when the crisis of the Johannine community took place, J.L. Martyn's thesis (1979) concerning the way the conflict of the community has been caught up in the narrative of the conflict of Jesus and his disciples with the Jewish authorities is persuasive. The conflict is often described in terms more appropriate to the conflict of the community. What seems clear is that exclusion from the synagogue for the confession that Jesus is the Christ did not happen during his ministry and almost certainly belongs to the period subsequent to the Jewish war when

Judaism was drawing new lines of self-definition. Without Jerusalem and the Temple, there was less room for flexibility and diversity. In this period, Jewish believers in Jesus as the Messiah were ostracized. While no precise date can be put on this conflict, which is not at all concerned with the terms of the admission of Gentiles as Paul was, a time closer to the end of the first century than to the Jewish war is likely. Threats against Paul were not expressed in terms of excommunication.

Much of the Gospel has been shaped to deal with the trauma of exclusion from the synagogue, and to prepare believers for the crises it would cause. Part of this is concerned with timid or secret believers who sought to avoid confessing Jesus and to remain within the synagogue. For them, the Gospel is a call to a courageous confession. But the Gospel looks beyond the breach with the synagogue. Being written in Greek is not only an indication that the community was somewhere beyond Palestine, perhaps Asia Minor; it is also a signal of the wider readership brought about by the community finding itself cut loose from its Jewish roots. Thus, the Gospel has already begun to make some adjustment to this new environment by attempting to explain a Gospel with thoroughly Jewish roots in terms that would be meaningful for Hellenistic readers. While there is no way to be certain of the date, somewhere close to the end of the first century is probable, and an Asia Minor location in the region of Ephesus is certainly no less probable than any other situation.

### C. Purposes

Given that the Gospel was shaped over a lengthy period of time, probably coming to its canonical form only around 85–90 CE, it is likely that we should talk of purposes rather than a single purpose. The earliest purpose was to persuade Jews that Jesus was the Messiah, and it did this using the narratives of the signs of Jesus. Then, in the debate with the synagogue, which opposed Moses to Jesus, the Gospel sought to show that eternal life came through Jesus, not through Moses. Nevertheless, there were those who believed in Jesus, yet, by keeping their faith secret, they remained within the synagogue. The Gospel was then designed to persuade them to make a public confession of faith and to join the Johannine community 'in exile'. Essential to Johannine theology is a view of God who loves the world and wills that his love should be known by the world and that the world should believe (3:16; 17:20–26, especially 21 and 23).



Consequently, the Gospel provides a basis for a universal mission which, in principle, was a law-free mission.

#### D. Structure

The overall structure of the Gospel is fairly clear and is generally recognized. An outline can be set out as follows:

1. Prologue (1:1-18)
2. Public Ministry of Jesus (1:19-12:50)
  - a. the quest for the Messiah (1:19-4:54)
  - b. the rejection of the Messiah (5:1-12:50)
3. Farewell Discourses: The Farewell of the Messiah (13:1-17:26)
  - a. setting (13:1-30)
  - b. first discourse (13:31-14:31)
  - c. second discourse (15:1-16:4a)
  - d. third discourse (16:4b-33)
  - e. farewell prayer (17:1-26)
4. Passion and Resurrection Narratives (18:1-20:29)
  - a. betrayal, arrest, trial and condemnation of Jesus (18:1-19:16a)
  - b. crucifixion, death and burial of Jesus (19:16b-42)
  - c. resurrection appearances of Jesus and commissioning of disciples (20:1-29)
5. Concluding Statement of the Purpose of the Book (20:30-31)
6. Epilogue (21:1-25)
  - a. the appearance of Jesus to seven disciples on the Sea of Tiberius (21:1-14)
  - b. Jesus and Peter: the reinstatement of Peter (21:15-19)
  - c. Jesus and Peter: the role of the beloved disciple (21:20-23)
  - d. attestation of authorship: the truth of the witness (21:24)
  - e. relativizing the book in relation to the works of Jesus (21:25)

#### E. Language and Worldview

The Fourth Gospel is written in simple but correct Hellenistic Greek, using a limited and repetitive vocabulary so that the language is characteristic of the Gospel. The Gospel uses only 919 words, of which 84 are exclusive to the Gospel and epistles in the New Testament and, of these, 74 are used in the Gospel alone (Bernard 1928: I, p. lxxv). Many of these terms are used only once and in specific contexts so that they are not as important as Johannine markers as might be expected. Instead, words used elsewhere as well take on Johannine significance by their frequency and distinctiveness of use. John uses the verbs 'to believe' (98 times), 'to know' (γινώσκω 56 times; οἶδα 85 times), 'to love' (ἀγαπάω 37 times;

φιλέω 13 times and the noun 'love' 7 times), 'to bear witness' (33 times) and the noun 'witness' (14 times).

The Gospel is especially marked by certain characteristic sets of symbols, most notably the antithesis of light and darkness. This language unveils the worldview within which the Gospel story takes place. Underlying the Johannine dualism is the perception that, in spite of the creation of all things by God through his *logos*, the world is dominated by the powers of evil (12:31; 14:30; 16:11). This apocalyptic understanding is expressed in terms of Johannine dualism, which has three important aspects:

1. the spatial antithesis between above and below;
2. the temporal tension between this age and the age to come; and
3. the ethical conflict between good and evil, God and the devil, the children of God (of light) and children of the devil (the darkness).

The Fourth Gospel stands with those (apocalyptic) works that see a conflict between above and below, this age and the age to come; that see this world/age dominated by the forces of evil which would be overcome in the coming age. The coming of Jesus is portrayed as the divine approach to resolve the dualism. The coming of Jesus is marked by references to the coming hour (7:30; 8:20), which arrives at the end of his ministry in the triumphant 'Now...!' of 12:31-33. The complexity of the struggle between the light and darkness is clear from the beginning (1:5; 3:19-21), where the distinctive Johannine theme of the triumph of the revelation is stamped on traditional apocalyptic themes. John has modified the apocalyptic vision in that Jesus, as the emissary from above, has entered this present world or age as the revelation of the age to come. But he is more than this; he is already, in his coming and going, the decisive intervention of God in this world. This does not, however, exhaust or completely fulfil the purpose of God for this world. Because of this, John's eschatological views are complex, and the perspective of future fulfilment remains important (see Painter 1993a).

In the context of this worldview, the 'works' of Jesus are portrayed as 'signs' that reveal the presence of the light in the world of darkness. The light reveals the goal of the creation in the midst of the confusion that is caused by the power of darkness. Jesus also speaks in a distinctive way, revealing himself in solemn 'I am' sayings that echo the sayings of divine Wisdom or of *Yahweh* himself. Consequently, his words are the decisive clue revealing the meaning and purpose of his signs. His words are not empty or meaningless, but full of divine



power; his actions are not merely demonstrations of divine power but are also full of meaning (Bultmann 1971: 114, 452, 696).

#### F. Tradition and Sources

There are broadly three, perhaps four, hypotheses concerning the composition of the Gospel. These can be further reduced to two types when looked at in terms of the question of whether the distinctive character of the Gospel comes from the evangelist's interpretation or from sources that are quite different from the Synoptics. While Bultmann's overall source theory now has few supporters, variations based on his *semeia* or signs source continue to be supported as a basis for understanding the narrative of the Gospel. The most important proponent of this hypothesis is Robert Fortna, whose major works on this subject span 1970 to 1988. Fortna advocates the view that a Signs Gospel, which already included the passion narrative, was the basis of the evangelist's composition. Fortna expresses no views concerning the origin and development of the discourse material. Given the distinctive character and importance of the Johannine discourses, it must be said that failure to deal with this problem leaves the mystery of the Gospel largely unresolved. Fortna thinks that the narrative material is primary in the Gospel. A natural progression from this point is to assert that the evangelist himself was responsible for the distinctive character of the discourses. Fortna would then need to have argued that the evangelist worked differently (creatively) in the discourses while he remained faithful to his source when working with the narrative.

A second distinctive source theory attributes the Gospel, or its major source, to an eyewitness of the ministry of Jesus. The author himself is thought to be responsible for the transmission of a distinctive source, and stress falls on a distinctive tradition rather than the creative and interpretative role of the evangelist. Few authors today make this view basic to their understanding of the Gospel.

Two types of theory make the distinctive nature of the Gospel the work of the evangelist. First, there are those who think that John was dependent on the Synoptics. A long and important tradition of interpretation has adopted this position, which has the support of such important scholars as C.K. Barrett and F. Neirynck. Indeed, Neirynck has carried the Leuven school with him in a long advocacy of John's dependence on the Synoptics. The argument for dependence is based on two kinds of evidence: evidence from agreement in order and detailed evidence of agreement in wording. The evidence of the

agreement in order is all the more impressive in the light of overall radical differences in order. Barrett (1978: 43) sets out an impressive, though incomplete, list of the evidence.

	Mark	John
a. the work and witness of the Baptist	1:4-8	1:19-36
b. departure to Galilee	1:14-15	4:3
c. feeding of the multitude	6:34-44	6:1-13
d. walking on the Lake	6:45-52	6:16-21
e. Peter's confession	8:29	6:68-69
f. departure to Jerusalem	9:30-31	7:10-14
	10:1, 32, 46	
g. the entry (transposed in John) and the anointing	11:1-10 14:3-9	12:12-15 12:1-8
h. the last supper, with predictions of betrayal and denial	14:17-26	13:1-17:26
i. the arrest	14:43-52	18:1-11
j. the passion and resurrection	14:53-16.8	18:12-20:29

Barrett correctly notes that it is unlikely that Mark and John would both independently follow the sequence of the feeding miracle with the narrative of the walking on the lake. But this need not mean that John used Mark as the most important source for his Gospel, because it is likely that the sequence was already in the source used by Mark. This hypothesis helps to explain why Mark includes a second feeding miracle which is not tied to a following narrative of Jesus walking on the lake. The hypothesis of John's dependence on Mark makes full use of agreements between Mark and John, but it does not do justice to the differences in order, detailed content and language. For example, the so called 'cleansing of the Temple' occurs at the beginning of Jesus' ministry in John and at the end in Mark. The details of both the feeding miracle and the sea crossing are quite different in Mark and John. While it is true that *if we knew* that John had used Mark as his source we could find ways of explaining what John had done, this is not the only or the most persuasive hypothesis.

Following the lead of P. Gardner-Smith, C.H. Dodd (1963) argued that John made use of Synoptic-like tradition that was nevertheless independent of the Synoptic Gospels. His hypothesis does justice not only to the similarities to, but also to the differences from the Synoptics. It does not provide a basis for outlining in detail the full extent of the sources used by John. Rather, this approach brings to light Synoptic-like tradition as it surfaces from time to time. Contact with the Synoptics is one important criterion for recognition of the



evangelist's use of tradition. On this basis, the evangelist is perceived to be a profound and radical theological interpreter of the Gospel tradition.

### G. Exegetical Issues

The Gospel contains a variety of material. Recognition of this variety is important for the interpretation of the Gospels. The genre of stories and sayings functions specifically, providing clues for the interpretation of the Gospel as a whole.

1. *The Prologue (1:1-18)*. The Prologue is an unusual beginning, even for a Gospel, as can be seen from a comparison with the other Gospels. While John is different from them in many ways, the Prologue is not simply different in language, order or extent; it is altogether different from anything in the other Gospels. This should alert the reader to the special demands placed on the interpreter. Two related questions emerge as a guide to the reader: (1) To what genre does the Prologue belong? (2) What functions does the Prologue perform within the Gospel as a whole?

First, the opening words of the Prologue set up a resonance with the opening words of Genesis. Genesis provides the 'pre-understanding' that the implied reader brings to the text. But the skilful (expert) reader also needs to be ready for surprises in the text. At the beginning, recognition of the resonance with Genesis signals that what follows is language about God, language in dialogue with the foundational Jewish language about God. That is, the story of Jesus that follows is to be understood as the evangelist's way of talking about God. Surprises in the text that follows, however, make some modifications to Jewish language about God. Secondly, like Genesis 1, the Prologue provides a worldview, a basis for understanding the world in which the following story takes place. The evangelist uncompromisingly affirms that God is the creator of all things through his Word or *logos*. In spite of this, the world and human history are dominated by the darkness. The Prologue thus sets the Gospel in a context that confronts the problem of evil, and should be understood as a contribution to theodicy. The purpose of God cannot be 'read' from the world as it is, dominated by the darkness. In this world, the incarnation of the *logos* in Jesus of Nazareth is the key to the understanding of the *purpose* of God in the world. In the body of the Gospel, the *signs* provide the clearest indication of that purpose. The creation story of the Prologue does not provide a picture of an ideal world, but rather an understanding that enables the believer to

perceive the purpose of God in a world presently dominated by darkness.

The Prologue is not an unbiased description of the world. It is rather a *confession* of faith, a vision of the world from the perspective of faith arising from the manifestation of glory in the *logos* made flesh (1:14-18). Much of the Prologue appears to have been derived from an early Christian *hymn* in praise of Jesus as creator and revealer of God, a hymn that might have been developed on the basis of a Jewish hymn in praise of Wisdom (Law). In the Christian version, the revelation in Jesus is set over against the Law given through Moses. While there is conflict between Jesus and Moses, the resonance set up by the opening of the Prologue with Genesis 1 asserts a continuity between Jesus and God revealed in creation. Thus, already in the Prologue, the reader is alerted to the way the Law of Moses has been set against Jesus.

Three important clues are given to the reader, drawing attention to important aspects that should guide any significant reading of the Prologue. Resonance with the Genesis 1 creation story provides the first important clue. Secondly, in Genesis, God's creative acts are initiated by his speech, 'And God said...' This is either the basis or an expression of the tradition of the creative Word of God (Ps. 33:6), and is closely related to the tradition of Wisdom (Wis. 9:1-2, 10; 18:15; Sir. 24:1-3), where Wisdom and Word are understood as synonyms for the Law. It has long been recognized that what is said of the Word in the Prologue has been drawn from Jewish tradition about Wisdom (Harris 1917; Dodd 1953: 274-75; Painter 1993b: 145-52). Thirdly, the Prologue bears the marks of having been developed out of 'a hymn in praise of Christ as (a) God', such as was known to Pliny, Roman Governor of Bithynia in the early second century CE. Thus, the clues point to a confrontation between Jesus and the Jewish Law, a conflict that becomes explicit by the conclusion of the Prologue and is worked out in some detail in the body of the Gospel.

2. *The Quest for the Messiah: Act One (1:19-51)*. The first four chapters focus on the theme of the quest for the Messiah, which is introduced by the first act (1:19-51) of the public ministry of Jesus. A sequence of scenes makes up the first act. The first scene shows an embassy from the Jews of Jerusalem in search of the Messiah. Because of John the Baptist's activity, they inquire of him if perchance he is the Messiah. Rather, he asserts, his baptizing mission was commissioned to reveal the Messiah to Israel (1:19-28). In due



course (two days and two scenes later; 1:35-42), he reveals Jesus to two of his own disciples, who are in quest of the Messiah. In response to their initiative, Jesus inquires, 'What are you seeking?'. This language, which expresses quest, recurs in the Gospel. In this chapter, there is the important sequence of 'following', 'seeking' and 'finding'. The importance of this theme of 'seeking' is brought out by a number of observations. The first words spoken by Jesus (the first words of the incarnate Word) in this Gospel are, 'What are you seeking?'. Jesus himself draws attention to the initiative of the first disciples who attach themselves to him; thus the 'seeking' can hardly be a triviality. That this is a distinctively Johannine feature becomes apparent by a comparison with the other Gospels, where Jesus invariably takes the initiative, calling his disciple with his authoritative, 'Follow me'. In John, it is the first disciples who seek out Jesus and the nature and success of their quest is affirmed in a refrain, 'We have found the Messiah' (1:41), 'We have found the one of whom Moses wrote in the Law and the prophets' (1:45). They, like the embassy and John himself, were in quest of the Messiah.

There is continuity between the various scenes of the first act that are linked by the expression 'On the next day...' (1:29, 35, 43). The continuity carries over into the first scene of the next chapter (2:1-11), which happens 'On the third day' (2:1), probably counting the last day in the previous sequence as the first. The continuity in the sequence is reinforced by the way at least one character from each scene reappears in the following scene. In each case the focus moves—from the embassy to John, from John to Jesus, from Jesus to one of the two disciples, from that disciple to another. In the final scene of the sequence, Jesus and his disciples, who now constitute a group, are together and another important character, the mother of Jesus, is introduced. Continuity is also seen in the way the diverse messianic expectations of the embassy lead on to the revelation of Jesus as the one about whom they are unwittingly inquiring. John's revelation of Jesus as 'the lamb of God' is not final, any more than are the confessions of 'Jesus as Messiah' and the 'one of whom Moses wrote', made by the disciples. These developing confessions find their fulfilment in Jesus, though there is also a transformation that culminates, in the first act, in the self-revelation of Jesus in terms of the 'Son of Man' (1:51 and compare the developing confessions of the once blind man in John 9 that culminate in the self-revelation of Jesus to him as 'Son of Man' in 9:35). The transformation can be expressed

in terms of the relationship of messianic expectations to the development of Johannine Christology (Painter 1993b: 16-20).

If the first words of Jesus in *John* are 'What are you seeking?', the first words of the risen Jesus, spoken to Mary outside the empty tomb, are, 'Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?' (20:15). She is seeking Jesus, whom she thinks to be dead, and does not know him as the risen one. The quest for the Messiah continues, even when Jesus is found, because the reality of his messiahship remains a mystery to her. Thus also for the reader, the quest for the Messiah continues because the mystery of the Messiah is bound up with the mystery of God.

3. *The Signs of John 5 and 9*. In John, miracle stories are described as *signs* (see the section on Language and Worldview above). Three important narratives describe miracles of healing. Two of these are found in John 5 and 9. The other (4:46-54) is an expression of the quest for the Messiah and concerns the 'nobleman' who took the initiative in the quest to find healing for his ailing/dying son. But in John 5 and 9 a brief narrative describes the healing (5:1-9a; 9:1-12) in which Jesus takes the initiative, and after the healing narrative has been completed the reader is told that 'it was the sabbath on that day' (5:9b; 9:14). The marks that distinguish the healings of John 5 and 9 from John 4 are the conflict of Jesus with the Jews and their rejection of him and his followers.

Given the sabbath context, each incident (John 5 and 9) leads to conflict with 'the Jews', and is presented by the opponents of Jesus as a conflict between Jesus and Moses. In 5:16-18, Jesus himself is the object of persecution, and there is an attempt to kill him, the first of repeated descriptions of attempts to arrest or kill him. The remainder of John 5 contains Jesus' defense of his position in relation to God and as opposed by the Jews. In John 9, the sabbath conflict leads to a series of scenes culminating in the excommunication of the once-blind man from the synagogue because of his loyalty to Jesus (not Moses). The blind man is portrayed in such a way that he becomes the model disciple, one who comes to *see* and obey the truth, in a context of the *blindness* of Jewish persecution. The chapter concludes with Jesus' condemnation of those Pharisees who have rejected him, declaring them to be blind, in the darkness.

These two signs provide essential clues for the recognition of a two-level history, enabling the reader to better understand Johannine theology (see Martyn 1979). It is the history of the conflict of the



Johannine community with the synagogue that enables the reader to understand the way the Gospel presents the conflict of Jesus with the Jews. At the same time, the signs are presented as the means by which those who are willing to take account of them are enabled to see the truth about Jesus and the world, bringing out the continuity of creation and redemption *in the purpose of God*.

4. *The Farewell Discourses (John 13–17)*. The discourses in John are quite distinctive. Of these, the farewell discourses call for special attention. The style of the discourses is similar to the epistles, and there are grounds for suspecting that, even more than with the narratives, the evangelist has framed the teaching of Jesus in his own words, though there is evidence that he has built on fragments of the Jesus tradition. The discourses appear to be interpretative elaborations of key themes from the Jesus tradition. In John, these are understood in ways that make them relevant to the Johannine situation.

Recognition of the farewell scene is important for the interpretation of John 13–17. *The Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*, which is based on Genesis (especially 29:30–31:24; ch. 34; 35:16–26; and chs. 37–50), provides important clues for understanding John's farewell scene. In the genre of the farewell scene, on the eve of departure, the central character gives warnings and promises and prays for those who are to follow him, which is precisely the way Jesus is portrayed in John. Thus his farewell is portrayed in terms characteristic of the great figures from the past.

Recognition of the genre of the farewell scene alerts the reader to the interpretative role of the evangelist in developing chs. 13–17. This interpretative role is justified by the introduction of the teaching of the unique role of the Paraclete or Spirit of Truth. In this way, John justifies the distinctive language of the Gospel, and provides a rationale for the development of the Johannine Christology. Again, in the farewell discourses the focus is not on the situation of Jesus but on that of the disciples (Johannine community) in later periods.

#### THE JOHANNINE EPISTLES

Nothing in the Johannine Epistles provides clear evidence of their date of composition or authorship. Theories concerning these matters arise from conclusions drawn concerning the relation of the letters to each other, to the Gospel and to Revelation. Once the testimony of Irenaeus has been brought into question, these and many other

questions are left unanswered. There is nothing in the letters that *directly* links them to the Fourth Gospel or Revelation, though the Prologue of 1 John appears to be based on the Prologue of the Gospel. The language of 1 John shares the characteristic vocabulary of the Gospel.

#### A. Authorship

Nothing in the epistles *specifically* identifies the author(s). The author of 1 John presents himself as an authoritative bearer of the tradition that is from the beginning (1:1–5). In the second and third epistles, the author addresses himself to his readers as 'the elder' (2 John 1; 3 John 1), giving the impression that the same author is responsible for both letters. But this is little evidence to go on because we are dealing with very short works. 2 John consists of just 13 verses or 244 words, while 3 John has 15 verses or 219 words. If we were to conclude that these letters stood alone, it would be difficult to know how to read them. Most scholars conclude that, even if the three letters are not the work of a single author, they all derive from the same 'school' that produced the Fourth Gospel. Some scholars continue to maintain common authorship of these works, and many think it probable that at least the epistles had a single author.

The author's reference to himself as 'the elder' (ὁ πρεσβύτερος) in 2 and 3 John could be a reference to his age or, more likely, draws attention to his position of authority. He presents himself as an authoritative teacher in the letters and, in the first letter, he appears to be an authoritative bearer of tradition. This understanding is confirmed by the references to 'elders' in the Papias fragment concerning John (Eusebius, *H.E.* 3:39:1–10), and in Irenaeus's treatment of the elders of Asia Minor (*A.H.* 3:3:3; 5:33:3–4; *Ep. ad Flor.*). If these are by a common author, it is a puzzle that 1 John is not addressed in the same way as the other letters. 1 John is more like the Epistle to the Hebrews. It has no personal address at the beginning, though, like Hebrews, it has something of a personal closing, 'Little children, guard yourselves from idols'. The personal force is reduced by recognition that 'Little children' is a stylized form of address.

#### B. Provenance

1 John contains direct address to the readers, not by name, but in collective and general terms, as 'Children' (τεκνία; 2:1, 12, 28; 3:7; 5:21; παιδία; 2:14, 18), 'Beloved' (ἀγαπητοί; 2:7, 15; 3:21; 4:1, 7, 11), 'Fathers' (πατέρες; 2:13, 14), 'Young men' (νεανίσκοι; 2:13,



14). There are numerous appeals introduced by 'I write [wrote] to you' (plural) (2:1, 7, 12, 13, 14 [3 times], 26; 5:13). In the second letter, the addressees are identified as the 'elect lady and her children', while the third letter is addressed to 'Gaius, the beloved, whom I love in truth'. A possible way of understanding this is to see 2 and 3 John as covering letters sent with 1 John, which was a circular 'message' to a group of 'house churches'. The 'elect lady' (ἐλεκτῆ κυρία) might be some notable lady, though more likely it is a personification of the Church viewed collectively. Reference to the children takes account of the Church in terms of her individual members.

Just where such a circle of house churches might have been is not hinted at in the letters. Tradition places all of the Johannine writings in Asia Minor, and this is in harmony with the milieu portrayed by Revelation. It is reasonable to think that a circle of churches around Ephesus was the place of origin for the Johannine Epistles; there is no compelling evidence suggesting any other situation.

### C. Structure

There are considerable problems concerning the structure of 1 John. Brooke put this down to the 'aphoristic character of the writer's meditations' (1912: xxxii-xxxviii). Nevertheless, he recognized that Theodor Häring (1892) had made the most successful attempt to show the underlying sequence of thought in the epistle and followed his analysis generally in his own commentary. A summary of Häring's analysis follows:

- |  |           |
|--|-----------|
| 1. Introduction  | 1:1-4     |
| 2. First presentation of the two tests   | 1:5-2:27  |
| The two tests of fellowship with God (the ethical and christological theses)   |           |
| a. The ethical test: Walking in the light as the true sign of fellowship with God; Refutation of the first lie             | 1:5-2:17  |
| b. The christological test: Faith in Jesus Christ as the test of fellowship with God; Refutation of the second lie         | 2:18-27   |
| 3. Second presentation of the two tests  | 2:28-4:6  |
| Emphasizing the connection between the two tests   |           |
| a. The ethical test: Doing righteousness (= love of the brethren) as the sign by which we may know that we are born of God | 2:28-3:24 |
| b. The christological test: The Spirit from God confesses Jesus Christ has come in the flesh                               | 4:1-6     |
| 4. Third presentation of the two tests   | 4:7-5:12  |
| Stressing the inseparable relation between the two tests   |           |
| a. Love based on faith in the revelation of love is  |           |

- |  |         |
|--|---------|
| the proof of knowing God and being born of God | 4:7-21  |
| b. Faith is the foundation of love             | 5:1-12  |
| 5. Conclusion                                  | 5:13-21 |

Häring's analysis of 1892 is largely followed by Robert Law (1909) although he appears not to have known Häring's article at the time. There are three differences. First, Law refers to 'three cycles', whereas Häring refers to 'theses' though I have preferred the term 'tests', a term taken from Law's title, *The Tests of Life*. Secondly, Law has three tests—righteousness, love, belief—whereas Häring sees love as the expression of righteousness. Thirdly, Law fails to distinguish the 'Conclusion' or 'Epilogue' from the third cycle. On the substantial differences, Häring's analysis is to be preferred, though Law's work remains a stimulating interpretation.

This analysis of the letter emphasizes the controversial nature of the letter. The tests of life were necessary because the author of the letter perceived that counterfeit claims were abroad in the Church. Such claims needed to be tested so that the true ones may be recognized and the false ones rejected. Critical analysis of the epistle that emphasizes the way it is constructed, to refute false affirmations and to affirm what was falsely denied, implies that the epistle was written with a specific problem in mind that was confronting a church or circle of churches.

### D. Date and Context

Given the lack of specific evidence concerning authorship and provenance, it is not surprising that the letters lack clear indication of date. It would be helpful to know whether the letters were written at the same time, which would fit the theory that 2 and 3 John were written to accompany 1 John. But were they written before or after the Gospel? This is a key question. It has been argued that the epistles were written to affirm that Jesus is the Christ (Messiah) against objections that Jesus did not fulfil the messianic expectations. Thus, the epistles are seen in terms of Jewish and Jewish-Christian controversy and this is sometimes seen in relation to Cerinthus who is understood to be a Jewish Christian (see Hengel 1989; Lieu 1986; Okure 1988). This approach owes too much to reading the epistles in the light of the Gospel, on the assumption that they were written at the same time for the same situation.

Alternatively, it is noted that there are no quotations from the Old Testament in the epistles, and the final warning in 1 John, 'guard yourselves from idols', is more appropriately addressed to a



predominantly Gentile audience. While the Gospel was shaped in relation to Judaism, the epistles reflect Christianity adrift from Judaism.

Most of the evidence concerning the situation addressed comes from 1 John, where it is apparent that the letter concerns an internal problem that led to a schism (2:19). But is this evidence of the author's rhetoric, rather than a reflection on actual historical conflict? Reference to the schism makes the rhetoric option unlikely, and other evidence enables us to build up a cohesive picture of the author's opponents. The author refers to what his opponents affirmed (1:6, 8, 10; 2:4, 6, 9; 4:20), what they denied (4:1-6), and, in a series of antitheses expressed using different syntactical constructions, sets out the position opposed (2:29b; 3:3a, 4a, 6a, 6b, 9a, 10b, 15; 5:4, 18; also 3:7, 8, 10, 14-15; 4:8; 5:6, 10, 12, 19; 2:23). This conflict, evident in the text itself, should not be ignored. The cohesiveness of the position confirms that this deals with a single group of opponents who are described as anti-Christ(s) (2:18-19).

The interpreter needs to exercise caution in reading the author's unsympathetic treatment of his opponents. With caution, the following can be said: they were opposed to the affirmation that Jesus Christ had come in the flesh. Minimally, this means that they saw no revelatory or saving value in the humanity of Jesus. Rather, Jesus was the model of their own experience. As he is from above, has knowledge and is without sin, so are they. How could such a position emerge in the Johannine community? It was a result of one reading of tradition in the Fourth Gospel. Thus the author of the epistle(s) and his opponents were separated from each other by their differing interpretations of that tradition. What led to this was the author's participation in the conflict of the Johannine community with the synagogue, which provided one context of interpretation, while the opponents coming into the Johannine community, after the breach from Judaism, interpreted the tradition from the context of their own religious experience, which was influenced by the mystery cults.

While the Gospel is the canonical culmination of a developing tradition over more than half a century, the epistles represent a single response at a particular moment in time to one specific problem. It is likely that the problem had appeared before the Gospel was published. It has even been suggested that the schism of 1 John 2:19 is reflected in Jesus' reference to the many disciples who no longer followed him (6:60-66). This is unlikely, because the controversy there concerns the

bread from heaven, Jesus' heavenly origin. That schism concerned the divinity of Jesus, and reflects the controversy with the Jews. Those who no longer followed were the secret 'believers' for whom the Gospel's presentation of Jesus as the one from above and superior to Moses did not persuade them to confront the threat of exclusion from the synagogue as a consequence of their confession of faith.

The opponents confronted by the Johannine letters cannot be identified by name, though they have often been related to Cerinthus who apparently rejected the identity of Jesus with the Christ. Certainly what we know of him fits the teaching refuted in the letters. But that falls short of proving identity. Nevertheless we are not wrong to see the opponents as some form of docetists, who at least denied the significance of the humanity of Jesus. They also rejected the need to express their faith in terms of love for the brethren. It is not likely that this meant only a failure to love those recognized as brothers by 'the elder'. Rather, their religious experience made such ethical behaviour irrelevant.

#### *E. Purpose of the Letters*

The purpose of the *first letter* is to refute the position of the opponents by reaffirming that what the author asserts is the correct interpretation of the tradition in the Gospel. Naturally, we should not expect the opponents and their position to be treated sympathetically. On the other hand, the purpose of the letter is to persuade his adherents not to follow his opponents into schism; the position of the opponents would have been well known to them. Thus it is not likely to grossly distort the schismatics' views.

The *second letter* is addressed to 'the elect lady and her children', which is probably a symbolic reference to the Church. As a covering letter, it briefly summarizes the main teaching of the first letter: the correctness of the confession of faith in Jesus Christ come in the flesh and the outworking of faith in love for one another. This is the basis of the call for the readers to refuse hospitality to those who do not share the correct teaching (9-11).

The *third letter* is addressed to an individual named Gaius, whom the author says he loves and who is perhaps a 'disciple' of the author. This letter is also about hospitality in the mission. It opposes the work of Diotrophes, who may side with the opponents of the author and refuses hospitality to those who support him.

There is a good case for seeing 2 and 3 John as supporting covering letters sent with 1 John. 3 John appears to have been sent to one



particular person, while 2 John is a general covering letter accompanying 1 John. Its point is to crystallize the two main points of 1 John and to call on his supporters to refuse hospitality to the opponents. 3 John indicates that the opponents and their reporters have already withdrawn hospitality to our author and his supporters.

Exegetically, it is crucial that the nature and purpose of the letters be recognized. Only when the letters are read as the expression of a bitter internal controversy can they be adequately appreciated. The community that resulted as a consequence of being excluded from the synagogue was itself subjected to a schism in which a large and powerful group left the Johannine community. Those who left appear to have interpreted the Johannine tradition from the perspective of the experience of the mystery religions, and were on the road to what we have come to call Gnosticism.

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## NEW TESTAMENT EXEGESIS OF HEBREWS AND THE CATHOLIC EPISTLES

GEORGE H. GUTHRIE

Several years ago at a Society of Biblical Literature meeting in the United States, I arose one morning before sunrise to get an early start on the day. Since my colleagues were still sleeping, I dressed without turning on the lights, took my watch and glasses from the table, and turned to leave the room. Suddenly, the room took on a strange appearance, the furniture, pictures on the wall, and my colleagues shifting slightly out of focus. The effect was disorienting, but I attributed the phenomenon to the surreal aspect of the room, lit dimly as it was by artificial light filtering through the thick curtains on the window. I grabbed my attaché, made my way to the door, and, thankfully, entered a well-lit hallway leading to the elevators. I had taken only a few steps when the disorientation hit me again. As I approached the elevators I was contemplating the maladies which might be behind my blurred vision. Then I saw the problem in the mirrored image of the elevator door. Looking at the reflection, I realized I had picked up the wrong pair of glasses on the table. My roommate's pair was the same shape as mine, slightly different in color, but of course differing greatly in prescription. Having on the wrong glasses had a powerful, image-skewing effect.

Basic to the enterprise of exegesis is the dictum, 'There exists no presuppositionless exegesis' (Conzelmann and Lindemann 1985: 2). We all come with a set of 'glasses' which affect what we see in the text, and viewing the text through these lenses can be both distorting and disorienting. These glasses are made of our own histories of thinking (or lack of thinking) about the text, our traditions, be they critical or ecclesiastical, our communities, and our experiences—and should be acknowledged as one takes up the task of interpreting any passage. These presuppositions may or may not be valid, but they must be identified. Moreover, an understanding of this condition can infuse the process with both vigor and integrity, and raises the possibility that the exegete's presuppositions may be informed and modified in the process of study. Reminder of this need serves not