

PART 1

Outlining the Johannine Riddles

The cover of this book features an artist's depiction of the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus, a religious expert and a leader among the Jews. He declares what he knows: Jesus could not perform the signs he does unless he were sent from God (John 3:2). And yet he fails to understand what it means to be born "from above." The ways of the Spirit are like the uncontrollable wind—neither seen nor heard, but its effects are indeed felt (3:8). So it is with the mysterious ways of God, and those who claim to see often get it wrong (9:41). Did Nicodemus come around, though, later in the story? While he came to Jesus "by night" and initially failed to understand, he eventually stood up for Jesus in the face of opposition (7:50-51) and supplied the spices for Jesus' burial at the end of the story (19:39). Maybe he caught on after all; and, so might readers of the Fourth Gospel who may initially fail to understand its riddles. After all, the Gospel holds out the promise of being guided "into all the truth" (16:12) and holds that the truth is *always* liberating (8:32).

If you've now read John, either again or for the first time, you may wish to list or discuss the sorts of things you noticed. How did it speak to you personally—or did it? How did you feel? What did you think? In responding to these questions you are already becoming an interpreter.

Let's take these impressions further by raising more specific questions. How might this Gospel have spoken to its first audiences, individually and corporately,

and how might they have responded to its message? Was it aimed primarily at Jewish audiences, or might Gentiles have also felt included in its address? What sort of literature is the Fourth Gospel, and does it have a plot? If so, how would one discern it? Or is John primarily a theological treatise upon which a narrative outline has been imposed? If it is historical, on the other hand, why is John so different from the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke?

What is the Johannine Gospel's relation to the three Johannine epistles? Were they written by the same author and in the same setting, or should they be kept apart for purposes of interpretation? Do you note any connections between the Fourth Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles, the writings of Paul, the letter to the Hebrews, or the book of Revelation? If any of these questions seem interesting to you, or if you've begun to raise a few of your own, you've already started to engage the riddles of the Fourth Gospel, and that's what Part 1 of this book does in greater detail.

In outlining the riddles of the Fourth Gospel, it is important to consider them together, including all three categories instead of only one or two of them. If one looks only at the theological riddles without taking literary and compositional matters into account, the contexts behind theological meanings will be missed. If one works on historical issues alone without appreciating the theological interests of the Gospel writer—often called the Evangelist—and his targeted audience, understanding the reasons for the Gospel of John's distinctive presentations of Jesus as the Christ will be lost in the analysis. Further, to really appreciate *why* traditional and critical scholars have approached John in the ways that they have, a basic appreciation of the issues they have sought to address is essential. Only after the theological, historical, and literary riddles of the Fourth Gospel are outlined can they be engaged, addressed, and interpreted meaningfully. So, that is the goal of Part 1.

The four chapters of Part 1 begin with an overview of the Gospel of John, advancing then with a chapter each on John's theological, historical, and literary riddles. Nicodemus apparently grew in his understanding as a result of his dialogue with Jesus; perhaps the same will happen for thoughtful readers of the Johannine text and their in-depth consideration of its riddles. So, let's begin with an overview of John's distinctive presentation of Jesus and his ministry.

An Overview of the Fourth Gospel

In posing an overview of the Fourth Gospel, discerning the lay of the land will help. As the most distinctive among the four canonical Gospels, noting John's particular characteristics helps us focus on its contents in their own right. Therefore, the outline and flow of John's narrative, its material's distinctive features, and its intended purpose provides a fitting place to begin.

■ **Outlining John's Narrative**

John's Gospel may be divided into four unequal parts: a shorter Prologue (1:1-18) and an Epilogue (21:1-25) and, between them, a more substantive "Book of Signs" (chaps. 1-12) and "Book of Glory" (chaps. 13-20). (These terms will be explained below.)

In contrast to the Gospel of Mark, which begins with the ministry of John the Baptist, or to Matthew and Luke, which begin with different wondrous birth narratives, John's Prologue features a worship hymn to the cosmic Word of God made flesh. Similar to other christological hymns (Phil. 2:5-11; Col. 1:15-20; Heb. 1:1-4), the Prologue of the Fourth Gospel exalts Jesus as the preexistent *Logos*, who was with God and was God from the beginning of time. God has now spoken through God's Son Jesus Christ, and the narrative tells how that came about.

The "Book of Signs," so called because it features the seven signs of Jesus,¹ then leads off with the witness of John the Baptist to Jesus and the calling of four disciples and Nathanael (1:19-51). The next eleven chapters (2-12) feature seven signs of Jesus (see Box 1.2, below), only two of which are also found in the Synoptics.

John's Jesus travels to and from Jerusalem at least four times. His prophetic sign in the Temple is presented at the beginning of his ministry, not at the end (as in the Synoptics), and he becomes involved in long, drawn-out debates with Jerusalem leaders in chapters 5 and 7–10. His culminative sign, the raising of Lazarus from the dead, becomes the occasion for Jewish leaders to seek to put him to death and to do away with Lazarus as well. The public ministry of Jesus closes with his prophecy-fulfilling entry to Jerusalem on a donkey's colt, Greeks coming to see Jesus, an affirming voice from heaven, Jesus' prediction about his death, and a final summary of his mission (12:12-50).

The "Book of Glory" (13:1—20:31), so called because it features the glorification of Jesus during the last week of his ministry (Brown 1970, 541–42), begins with the fulfillment of Jesus' "hour" and his imparting his last will and testament to his followers. In this section, the focus of the book changes radically from an apologetic endeavor to convince audiences to believe that Jesus is the Messiah/Christ to affirming their solidarity within community. Jesus washes his disciples' feet, beginning with Peter, and calls for them to follow his example and to serve one another. Jesus predicts both his denial by Peter and his betrayal by Judas. By contrast, "the disciple whom Jesus loved" is presented as leaning against the breast of Jesus, modeling the ideal relationship to the Lord (13:23-24). Jesus' commandment to love one another becomes the measure by which his followers will be known in the world, and his promise to send the Holy Spirit to be with and in his followers is declared with emphasis. The striking I-am sayings featured in the Book of Signs continue in the Book of Glory, as Jesus presents himself as the Way, the Truth, and the Life (14:6) and invites his followers to abide in him as the living branch abides in the true Vine (15:1-8). After his programmatic prayer, Jesus is arrested, tried, and crucified (chaps. 18–19). On the first day of the week, he appears to Mary Magdalene and other disciples (20:1-25). Jesus then appears to Thomas, who, despite not believing earlier, now climactically believes, confessing Jesus as "My Lord and my God!" (20:28). The closing words of this section actually seem like the closing words of the Gospel narrative, and they may originally have played such a role:

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. 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. (20:30-31)

Chapter 21 serves as an Epilogue, showing the disciples back at home in Galilee, having gone back to the familiar: fishing. They had not caught anything all night, but Jesus appears and instructs them to cast their net on the right side of the boat. When they haul it in, the great catch of fish numbers 153, counting only the big

ones (21:1-11). There they enjoy breakfast with Jesus on the seashore, and Peter is interrogated by Jesus. Upon his threefold questioning, Jesus instructs Peter (and, by extension, all Christian leaders) to care for and feed the sheep (21:15-17). The deaths of Peter and the Beloved Disciple are foretold, and the final sentence of the Gospel echoes the final sentence of the Book of Glory: “But there are also many other things that Jesus did; if every one of them were written down, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written.”

Box 1.1 provides an outline of the Fourth Gospel in greater detail.

Box 1.1: The Gospel of John: An Outline

- I. The Prologue (1:1-18)
 - A. The Word, the Light, and the Darkness (1:1-4)
 - B. The Advent of the Light and Its Reception (1:5-13)
(Clarification: John Was Not the Light but a Witness to It; vv. 6-8)
 - C. The Flesh-Becoming Word Making Manifest the Father (1:14-18)
(John’s Testimony to the Priority of the Word; v. 15)
- II. The Book of Signs (1:19—12:50)
 - A. The Testimony of the Baptist (1:19-34)
 - B. The Calling of the Disciples (1:35-51)
 - C. The First Sign in Galilee—the Wedding Feast (2:1-11)
 - D. The Inaugural Demonstration in the Temple (2:12-25)
 - E. Jesus’ Dialogue with Nicodemus (3:1-21)
 - F. The Interview with John the Baptist (3:22-36)
 - G. Jesus and the Samaritan Woman—an Apostle to the Samaritans (4:1-45)
 - H. The Second Sign in Galilee—the Healing from Afar (4:46-54)
 - I. Jesus’ First Sign in Jerusalem—the Healing of the Invalid; Controversy Ensues (5:1-47)
 - J. The Feeding of the Multitude (6:1-15)
 - K. The Sea-Crossing Wonder (6:16-21)
 - L. The Discussion of the Feeding and Jesus as the Bread of Life (6:22-66)
 - M. Peter’s Confession (6:67-71)
 - N. Jesus’ Return to Jerusalem (7:1-13)
 - O. Jesus’ Address in the Temple and Ensuing Discussion (7:14—8:59)
(Text insertion: The Woman Caught in Adultery; 7:53—8:11)
 - P. Jesus’ Second Sign in Judea—the Healing of the Man Born Blind (9:1-41)
 - Q. Jesus as the Good Shepherd and the Gate to the Sheepfold—Controversy Continues (10:1-42)
 - R. Jesus’ Third Judean Sign—the Raising of Lazarus from the Dead (11:1-45)
 - S. The Prophecy of Caiaphas the High Priest (11:46-57)
 - T. The Anointing of Jesus’ Feet by Mary of Bethany (12:1-8)
 - U. Jesus’ Entry of Jerusalem, Fulfilling Zachariah (12:9-19)
 - V. The Visit of the Greeks and the Voice from Heaven (12:20-31)
 - W. Jesus’ Prediction of his Death and Description of His Missional Agency (12:32-50)

- III. The Book of Glory (13:1—20:31)
 - A. Jesus Washes His Disciples' Feet (13:1-17)
 - B. Jesus' Prediction of His Betrayal and Peter's Denial (13:18-38)
 - C. Jesus' First Farewell Discourse and the Promise of the Spirit (14:1-31)
 - D. Jesus' Second Farewell Discourse and the Promise of Persecution (15:1-27)
 - E. Jesus' Third Farewell Discourse and Promise of Joy and Peace (16:1-33)
 - F. Jesus' Prayer for His Followers (17:1-26)
 - G. The Arrest and Trials of Jesus (18:1—19:15)
 - H. The Crucifixion, Death, and Burial of Jesus (19:16-42)
 - I. Visits to the Tomb and Jesus' Appearances to His Followers (20:1-25)
 - J. Jesus' Second Appearance to His Followers and the Belief of Thomas (20:26-29)
 - K. The First Conclusion of the Gospel (20:30-31)
 - IV. The Epilogue (21:1-25)
 - A. Jesus' Appearance to his Followers in Galilee and the Great Catch of Fish (21:1-14)
 - B. Jesus' Dialogue with Peter and the Beloved Disciple (21:15-22)
 - C. The Authorship of the Gospel and Its Final Conclusion (21:23-25)
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■ Distinctive Features of the Fourth Gospel

In scanning the outline of the Gospel of John, several things become apparent. First, the introduction is presented in the form of a community worship confession: “We beheld his glory!” (1:14). This implies reflection on the impact of Jesus’ ministry, and it suggests their attributing cosmic theological significance to the words and works of Jesus. A similar community confession introduces the first Johannine epistle, as one community seeks to draw others into that same experience and confession of faith which had been “seen and heard” from the beginning (1 John 1:1-3). The Prologue to the Gospel seeks to engage hearers and readers experientially in the story that follows.

While less distinctive in its literary form, chapter 21 provides a concluding testimony. It documents the third appearance of Jesus to his disciples after the resurrection, and it emphasizes the authentic witness of the author, attested by a group: “We know his testimony is true!” (21:24). Both the Prologue and the Epilogue reflect a corporate set of claims, introducing and affirming the core of the Gospel narrative.

A second thing to note is that the “Book of Signs” contains a very different presentation of Jesus’ ministry over and against the largely unitary view presented in the Synoptics. Only two of Jesus’ seven signs in this section (those found in John 6) are found in any of the other Gospels, and the first two signs are numbered. Further, the other three distinctive signs are all performed in Judea—in the South, whereas the miracles of the Synoptic Jesus take place almost entirely in the North. Most characteristic of this material in the Fourth Gospel is its combination of dramatic signs and ensuing developments of their meaning. Interestingly, the great catch of fish in chapter 21 is also found in Luke 5.

Box 1.2: The Signs of Jesus in John

- The first sign in Galilee: The water into wine (2:1-11)
 - The second sign in Galilee: The healing of the royal official's son (4:46-54)
 - The healing of the invalid by the pool (5:1-15)
 - The feeding of the five thousand (6:1-15; also in Matt. 14:14-21; Mark 6:32-44; Luke 9:12-17)
 - The sea crossing (6:16-21; also in Matt. 14:22-33 and Mark 6:45-53; not in Luke, although see Luke 8:22-25)
 - The healing of the man born blind (9:1-41)
 - The raising of Lazarus (11:1-45)
 - The great catch of fish (21:1-11; also in Luke 5:1-11)
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A third thing to notice is the way the signs in John lead directly into discussions about their significance, which then lead into discourses by Jesus about his identity and mission. The first two are the exceptions—people simply believe on the basis of Jesus' first and second signs. Jesus' two healings in Jerusalem, however, are performed on the Sabbath, resulting in belabored debates over his authority and relation to the Father. It even seems as though the extended debates in chapters 7 and 8 are over the same Sabbath healing narrated in chapter 5 (7:21-23). Most fascinating about these dialogues with Jesus in the Gospel of John is the way that those who hold authority as societal figures, or religious leaders, or imperial officials expose their ignorance as the discussions develop. Time and again, what starts out innocently enough as an inquiry about a simple detail (the significance of signs, drawing water from a well, Sabbath observance, the washing of feet, the authority of a governor) becomes a platform for launching an assault on false understandings of the ways of God, or, simply, of the truth. Irony is heavy in John, and as is often the case in narrative, lack of comprehension on the part of characters is in John always rhetorical. Consider these extended dialogues in John.

Box 1.3: Dialogues with Jesus in John

- Jesus and his first disciples (1:35-51; 4:27, 31-38; 9:1-7; 11:1-16; 14:1-31; 16:17-33)
- Jesus and Nicodemus (a leader among the Jews, 3:1-21)
- Jesus and the Samaritan woman (an apostle to the Samaritans, 4:1-42)
- Jesus and the royal official (4:46-54)
- Jesus and the invalid (5:5-15)
- Jesus and the religious leaders in Jerusalem I (5:16-47; 7:14—8:59)
- Jesus and the crowd, the Jewish leaders, the disciples and Peter (6:25-70)
- Jesus and the seeing blind man (9:35-41)
- Jesus and the sisters of Lazarus (11:17-45)

- Jesus and the Greeks and the Jerusalem crowd (12:20-36)
 - Jesus and Peter (13:1-20; 21:15-23)
 - Jesus and the high priest and the guard (18:19-24)
 - Jesus and Pilate (18:28—19:16)
 - Jesus and Mary Magdalene (20:11-18)
 - Jesus and Thomas (20:24-29)
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A fourth thing to notice is that following directly upon many of these dialogues, the narrator presents Jesus as launching into a discourse about his identity and/or his mission. If, in a dialogue, a character's misunderstanding exposes the "wrong answer" to a given issue, Jesus' discourses set the record straight. From the narrator's perspective, they lay out the "right answer" for an audience to heed. In Jesus' I-am sayings we have the most distinctive features of John's presentation of Jesus. Rather than speaking in short, pithy statements about the kingdom, John's Jesus speaks in long, drawn-out discourses about himself and his mission. Further, the Johannine Jesus sounds a lot like the Johannine narrator, so we must ask whether we really have the words of the historical Jesus here, or do we have more of a paraphrase, or a construction, crafted by the Evangelist? Addressing that question will come later, but note for now the *absolute* presentations of the I-am sayings of Jesus. Some of them seem to present Jesus as the appearance of God before the burning bush (Exod. 3:14), but some of them also function simply as a means of identification: "It is I."

Box 1.4: Absolute I-Am Sayings of Jesus in John

- "I am he!" (the Messiah—Jesus to the Samaritan woman, 4:26)
 - "I am—fear not!" (during the sea crossing, 6:20)
 - "Where I am you cannot come." (7:34, 36; 8:21)
 - "You will die in your sins unless you believe that I am he [that is, he that is from above]." (8:24)
 - "When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will realize that I am he [that is, the one declaring to the world what I have seen and heard from the Father who sent me]." (8:28)
 - "Before Abraham was, I am!" (8:58)
 - "I tell you this now, before it occurs, so that when it does occur, you may believe that I am he" (that is, your teacher and lord). (13:19)
 - "I desire that they be with me, where I am." (17:24)
 - "I am he!" (in response to the guards' statement that they are seeking Jesus of Nazareth; or is this a more absolute use of "I am"? 18:5, 6, 8)
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The most weighty question emerging from Jesus' absolute I-am sayings in John is whether all of them, some of them, or none of them present him as the *theophany* (appearance of God) comparable to God's appearance to Moses in the burning bush in Exodus 3:14. The Greek words of the Septuagint translation of the Hebrew text are similar (in John, *egō eimi*; in Exodus, *egō eimi ho ōn*, "I am the one who is"). But these two words together can signify any number of meanings: the evoking of God's self-disclosure to Moses (translated in the King James Version as "I AM THAT I AM"—a theophany); "I am *he*" (the person being spoken of—an identification); "It is *I*" (announcing one's presence—a presentation); or "I *am from* here or there" (describing one's origin or place—location). At stake here is which of these statements might reflect an associating of Jesus with God (6:20 and 8:58 seem most clearly to do this), and whether any of these divine associations might in some way go back to Jesus instead of simply reflecting John's teachings about Jesus.

Interestingly, Mark's Jesus also declares "I am—fear not!" at the sea crossing (Mark 6:50); makes reference to God's "I-am" words to Moses before the burning bush, in disputation with the Sadducees (Mark 12:26); warns of false prophets who claim "I am [the Christ]" (Mark 13:6); and in response to the High Priest's question, "Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?" Mark's Jesus declares, "*I am!* And you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of the Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven" (Mark 14:62). The point here is that while John's presentation of Jesus' absolute I-am sayings is distinctive, it is not unique. It is also found in similar, though different, forms in Mark.

The other uses of the I-am formula in John relate to the use of the predicate nominative: "I am *this* or *that*," declares the Johannine Jesus. From a theological perspective, Jesus is presented as fulfilling a typology; he is not simply *a* piece of bread, or *a* glimmer of light; he is *the* Bread of Life and *the* Light of the World. In that sense, each of these metaphors also serves a way of speaking about Jesus as the embodiment of the true Israel. John's Jesus is thus radically Jewish, in that he fulfills that of which Moses and the Prophets wrote (5:46). While there is nothing quite like these I-am sayings in the Synoptics, it cannot be claimed that the Jesus of the Synoptics never used such imagery in his speaking. Perhaps they represent a paraphrase of how the purveyors of this particular tradition told their story in their own terms.

Box 1.5: John's I-Am Sayings with the Predicate Nominative

- I am *the bread of life* (6:35, 41, 48, 51).
- I am *the light of the world* (8:12; see also 9:5).
- I am *the gate of the sheepfold* (10:7, 9).
- I am *the good shepherd* (10:11, 14).

- I am *the resurrection* and the *life* (11:25).
 - I am *the way, the truth, and the life* (14:6).
 - I am *the true vine* (15:1, 5).
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A fifth thing to notice involves the presentation of women in John. While women are present in the other Gospels, they are especially featured in the Johannine narrative as being close to Jesus and participating in leadership roles. The mother of Jesus launches his public ministry, but she is also present at the cross. The woman at the well, Mary and Martha (sisters of Lazarus), and Mary Magdalene all play pivotal roles in the narrative. While the male disciples are nowhere to be found at the crucifixion, three women are present (all by the name of “Mary”), and the mother of Jesus becomes entrusted to the Beloved Disciple as a sign of ecclesial authority—a far different image than Jesus’ words to Peter in Matthew about the “keys to the kingdom” (Matt 16:19). Martha makes a climactic christological confession in John (11:27), and Mary Magdalene is the first to recognize Jesus after the resurrection and announces to the disciples that she has “seen the Lord” (20:17-18). These are not minor roles; they are major, apostolic ones in so far as the women are “sent forth” with a commission.²

Box 1.6: Women in the Fourth Gospel

- The mother of Jesus is present at his first sign (2:1-11) and at the cross (19:25-26).
 - The woman at the well becomes the apostle to the Samaritans (4:4-44).
 - Mary and Martha feature centrally in the Lazarus narrative and the anointing of Jesus (11:1-45; 12:1-11).
 - A woman in labor becomes an image of eschatological travail (16:20-21).
 - A woman in the courtyard recognizes Peter (18:15-17).
 - Women are present at the cross, and Jesus entrusts his mother to the Beloved Disciple (19:25-26).
 - Mary Magdalene encounters first the risen Christ and becomes an apostle to the apostles (20:1-18).
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A sixth thing to notice focuses on the Book of Glory (chaps. 13–20) and Jesus’ last words with his disciples. Here we have the sense that Jesus’ most important teachings to his followers are preserved as a pattern for them to follow in community life and in the world following his departure. Rather than instituting a rite of remembrance, Jesus in John 13 sets an example of servanthood by washing his disciples’ feet. The *new commandment* given by Jesus to his followers is that they

should love one another as he has loved them (13:34; 15:12). By the time 1 and 2 John were written (the first two Johannine Epistles), the injunction to love one another was regarded as “an old commandment” that they had heard from the beginning (1 John 2:7; 2 John 5-6).

Box 1.7: Love and the Commandments of Jesus

- “My new commandment is that you should love one another as I have loved you (13:34; 15:12).
 - “By your love for one another will the world know that you are my disciples” (13:35).
 - To love Jesus is to keep his commandments/word (14:15, 21, 23).
 - Those who do not love Jesus do not keep his word (14:24).
 - Those who love Jesus will be loved by the Father and the Son (14:21, 23).
 - Jesus’ following the Father’s commandments reflects his love for the Father (14:31) and abiding in his love (15:10).
 - Believers are invited to abide in Jesus’ love (15:9).
 - To keep Jesus’ commandments is to abide in his love (15:10).
 - No greater love is possible than laying down one’s life for one’s friends (15:13).
 - Jesus’ commandments are given that his followers might love one another (15:18).
 - Jesus has made the name of the Father known to his followers in order that his love might be in them (17:26).
 - To love Jesus is to feed his sheep (21:15-17).
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A striking feature of Jesus’ love command in the Johannine tradition is that it emphasizes loving one another as an expression of one’s love for Jesus. First John takes this further and uses the love command as a means of restoring order to community life. How can one claim to love the unseen God if one does not love one’s brothers and sisters within community (1 John 4:20)? The commandment of Jesus has now become the community rule: “Beloved, let us love one another.”

Continuing with a focus on community life, the promise of the Holy Spirit—a seventh noteworthy feature—is central to this section (chaps. 14–16), and Jesus promises to lead his community through another Advocate or Comforter (both are possible translations of the Greek term *Paraklētos*, which is unique to John’s Gospel and first Epistle), the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Truth, who brings to remembrance his words and leads believers into all truth. This pouring out of the Holy Spirit is promised by Jesus in John 7:39. It will take place at his glorification, which is now impending. Within the narrative, the risen Lord speaks peace to his disciples, breathes on them, and declares, “Receive the Holy Spirit” (20:19-22). Here are the particular references that describe the Holy Spirit’s work in John.

Box 1.8: The Promise of the *Paraklētos*—the Holy Spirit—in John

- Jesus promises to ask the Father for another *Paraklētos*, who will be with and in his followers for ever (14:16; cf. 1 John 2:1).
 - The *Paraklētos* is the Spirit of Truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him; but believers know him, because he abides with them and will be in them (14:17).
 - The *Paraklētos*, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in Jesus' name, will teach believers everything, and remind them of all that Jesus has said to them (14:26).
 - When the *Paraklētos* comes, whom Jesus will send from the Father, the Spirit of Truth who comes from the Father, he will testify on Jesus' behalf (15:26).
 - Jesus must depart; otherwise the *Paraklētos* will not come; but if he goes, Jesus will send him to believers (16:7).
 - When the Spirit of Truth comes, he will guide believers into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare the things that are to come (16:13).
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Jesus then closes this section with a programmatic prayer in John 17. Jesus prays that his followers will be protected in the world and that they will be one as a witness to the world. Knowing the Father is the source of life; this is what Jesus has come to effect. Other distinctive features of the Fourth Gospel abound, but these are some of the most significant ones worth considering at the outset.

■ The Central Structure of the Fourth Gospel

In thinking about the central structure of the Fourth Gospel, several passages have been favorites for discerning its core meaning. As well as considering the overall flow of the story, if there is a unit of material that describes the purpose and destination of John's narrative, reading the Gospel through that lens may contribute insights for interpretation. From the back to the front, here are some of the primary passages through which John's central thrust has been interpreted.

John 20:30-31—A Clear Statement of Purpose

As mentioned above, the Fourth Gospel concludes with one of the clearest statements of purpose anywhere in the Bible: these things are written in order that hearers and readers might believe that Jesus is "the Christ, the Son of God," and believing, have life in his name. This is a clearly apologetic function, and that will be reflected in the sort of narrative this is. The Fourth Gospel is not a math equation, nor a poem, nor a political history; it is a religious appeal to its audience, crafting the story in such a way as to evoke a response of faith on their part. It is

a narrative designed to engage people in the story, aiming to convince them of its message.

Therefore, to believe in Jesus, according to the Fourth Gospel, involves coming to believe that he is sent from the Father and that he conveys God's message of love to the world authentically. In addition, to believe *in* Jesus is to participate with him relationally—to abide in him and to be indwelt by him through the Holy Spirit. This raises a question, however. Is coming to faith for the first time (one way of understanding what “believe” means in John) the same as abiding in Jesus and remaining in his community? Both of these themes, the apologetic and the pastoral, are present in John, and more will be said on these aspects of the Fourth Gospel's purpose later.

John 17:1-26—The Last Will and Testament of Jesus for the Church

The priestly prayer of Jesus in John 17 is the least original chapter in the entire Gospel of John. Put otherwise, many of its themes are also found in other parts of the Gospel; in that sense, it offers a fitting overview of some of John's leading themes and concerns. While God is the explicit audience of the prayer, hearers and readers in the audience are also drawn into the content by being given a sense of Jesus' central concerns. This is why Ernst Käsemann has called John 17 “the last will and testament” of Jesus for the church.³

First, Jesus speaks of the Father's and the Son's mutual *glorification*, praying, “Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you” (John 17:1). The Father has given the Son authority to give them eternal life, and true life is rooted in relationship—knowing the Father and the one he has sent. Jesus has come that people might *know the Father*, and thereby *have life* through the work that Jesus came to do. Second, Jesus prays for the *protection* of his followers in the world—that they will be in the world, but not of the world. Third, Jesus prays that his followers will be *sanctified*—*set apart in the truth* and kept in the power of his word. Fourth, Jesus prays that his followers *may be one* in order that the world may believe that he has been sent from the Father. Believers are invited into that same unity which the Son enjoyed with the Father since the beginning of time, and this unity is the love that constitutes the foundation of the earth.

John 3:31-36; 12:44-50—The Central Structure of John's Christology

According to William Loader, two paragraphs conveying the “central structure” of John's Christology⁴ especially well are John 3:31-36 and 12:44-50. These passages are very similar in terms of content, but the first appears to follow on the witness of John the Baptist, while the latter features Jesus' closing words as he concludes his public ministry. While the question of whose voice is speaking here is interesting, either way the Fourth Evangelist's convictions come through clearly. These passages

together thus pose a compelling outline of the Evangelist's understanding of Jesus' mission, providing also a sense of the thrust of the overall narrative. The following elements are clear in these passages.

Box 1.9: The Central Structure of John's Christology

- The One who comes from above testifies to what he has seen and heard from the Father; he does not speak his own words, only God's, yet the world does not receive his testimony.
 - He came as a light into the world so that everyone who believes in him should not remain in darkness.
 - Whoever believes in him believes not only in him but in the One who sent him, for he speaks the words of God authentically.
 - Whoever accepts his testimony certifies that God is true; that one receives eternal life, but to reject him is to receive judgment on the last day, and that one must endure God's wrath.
 - The One whom God has sent gives the Spirit without measure, and the Father loves the Son and has placed all things into his hands; his commandment is eternal life.
-

Within this central structure of John's Christology, Jesus' mission as the apostolic agent of the Father comes through clearly: the Son is sent from the Father as his representative ambassador. The Son does not do his own bidding, but only what he has seen and heard from the Father. As Peder Borgen has demonstrated,⁵ this means that the agent is in all ways like the one who sent him, and to respond to the agent is to respond to the one who sent him. Therefore, while the Son conveys the Father's love, refusal to receive the Light is to incur judgment on oneself. The love of the Father also comes through clearly as the heart of Jesus' commissioned work, and this is the work the Spirit also furthers.

John 1:19-51—An Opening with a Purpose

No reader of John can ignore the ways that the first chapter captivates the reader's attention, conveying the evangelist's purpose and design. However, the opening to the Gospel actually comes to us in two sections: the Prologue (1:1-18), as a communal expression of worship to Christ, and the calling narrative (1:19-51), where disciples receive the invitation to "come and see"—extending that invitation also to the reader. Both sections are highly christological, and this sets the tone for the rest of the narrative to follow.

As in Mark 1:2-3, the Johannine Gospel narrative begins with John the Baptist heralding the ministry of Jesus as the voice of one crying in the wilderness, "Prepare the way of the Lord!" (Isa. 40:3; John 1:23). Very different from the Synoptic presentation, however, John here clearly denies that he is either the Christ, or Elijah, or

“the prophet” (that is, Moses, John 1:20-21). Rather, John’s witness in the Fourth Gospel is to emphasize that Jesus alone is the Messiah/Christ, and his whole reason for coming is to testify to Jesus’ identity and mission. What John professes about Jesus’ being “before” him in terms of status (1:30) the Prologue expands into cosmology (1:15→1:1-2; note, here and elsewhere I use an arrow to indicate the direction of influence). John (interestingly, he is not called “the Baptist” in this Gospel) therefore witnesses to Jesus in a striking way, declaring: “Behold, the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world!” (1:29, 36).

Another interesting difference between John and the Synoptics is that in John, Jesus is not presented as programmatically calling twelve disciples and naming them all; rather, two disciples who were followers of the Baptist are reported to have left him to become followers of Jesus. One of them, Andrew, went back and brought his brother Peter to Jesus, and the three are invited to “come and see”—an experiential invitation to encounter (1:39) as the basis for discipleship. They see where Jesus is staying and “abide” with him. Philip then finds Nathanael and brings him to Jesus (1:45-51), and with five followers (Nathanael is not listed among the twelve disciples in the Synoptics), now the story of Jesus’ ministry gets a firm launching.

Significant here are the messianic references to Jesus in the opening narrative. Jesus is referred to as *Messias* (the Hebrew word for “anointed one”; the Greek word is *Christos*); Jesus is referred to as “the Lord,” “the Lamb of God,” and “the Son of God”; disciples call him *Rabbi* (meaning “teacher” or “master” in Hebrew); he is called “the one of whom Moses and the prophets wrote,” “Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth,” “Son of God,” and “King of Israel”; Jesus refers to himself as “the Son of Man.” Scholars have called these references *christological titles*, and each of them is packed with rich theological meaning. The reader is thus invited to “come and see,” like the first disciples, and also to “abide” with Jesus.

Box 1.10: Titles for Jesus in John 1:19-51

- One whom you do not know (1:26)
 - The Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world (1:29, 36)
 - The One who baptizes in the Holy Spirit (1:33)
 - The Son of God (1:34, 49)
 - *Rabbi*, which means “teacher” (1:38, 49)
 - The *Messias*, which means “Christ” (1:41)
 - Him of whom Moses and the prophets wrote (1:45)
 - Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth (1:45)
 - The King of Israel (1:49)
 - The Son of Man (1:51)
-

While christological references to Jesus are developed elsewhere within the Johannine narrative, nowhere are so many different terms used within such a limited space as the opening chapter of the Fourth Gospel. The Prologue also has its own set of titles, and it likewise draws the reader into the meaning of the text experientially.

John 1:1-18—The Believers’ Hymn to the Divine Logos

By far the most common text for assessing the destination and purpose of the Fourth Gospel, however, is the Prologue. If indeed John 1:1-18 reflects an intended introduction to what is to follow in the narrative text, getting a sense of the central thrust of the Prologue will rightly suggest the thrust of the Johannine Gospel.

If this is so, how do we assess the central thrust and meaning of the Prologue? One way is to consider literary and thematic clues. Rudolf Bultmann argued that the pivotal fulcrum of the Prologue is John 1:14a, “And the Word became *flesh*”—a reference to the incarnation. Bultmann’s student, Ernst Käsemann, however, argued that the central pivot of the Prologue is 1:14c, “and we beheld his *glory*”—a reference to the supra-human divinity of Jesus.⁶ Of course, both cases are arguable, and that is what contributes to the riddle of Jesus’ humanity and divinity among John’s theological tensions.

Then again, perhaps the thrust of the Prologue is not about Christology at all; perhaps it is about humanity’s *response* to Jesus Christ as the Light, being welcomed to becoming children of God—a gift offered to all who believe in his name. This case was argued compellingly by Alan Culpepper, who used a *chiastic* literary analysis of the Prologue’s structure as a means of getting at its central meaning.⁷ By noting parallels between the beginning and end (A and A₁), the second and next-to-last feature (B and B₁), and so forth, one finally gets to the center—the pivotal fulcrum of the composition.

Box 1.11 The Chiastic Structure of John’s Prologue

A	vv. 1-2		18 The word with God	A'
B	3		17 What came through the Word	B'
C	4-5		16 What was received from the Word	C'
D	6-8		15 John announces the Word	D'
E	9-10		14 The Word enters the world	E'
F	11		13 The Word and his own people	F'
G	12a	12c	The Word is accepted	G'
H		12b	The Word’s gift to those who accepted him	

In this case, Culpepper argues that the chiastic center of the Prologue is verse 12: “But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God.” From that standpoint, the whole emphasis of the Prologue is the

response of faith to Jesus as the Word and Light, to which all are invited as prospective children of God. This actually makes a good deal of sense, in that it resonates with John 20:31, chapter 17, and also 12:44-50 and 3:31-36. Even the christological imagery and action within the Johannine Prologue serves this missional purpose.

Box 1.12: Christological Titles and References in the Johannine Prologue

- The in-the-beginning Word (1:1, 14)
 - God (1:1)
 - The Light that overcomes darkness (1:4)
 - The true Light that enlightens everyone (1:9)
 - The flesh-becoming Word (1:14)
 - The Father's only begotten Son (1:14), 18 in later manuscripts
 - The only-begotten God who is at the Father's side (1:14, 18, earlier manuscripts)
-

In both the Prologue and the rest of John 1, Jesus' agency as the One who is sent from the Father comes through clearly. The central structure of the Fourth Gospel features the divine-human dialogue in which God speaks to humanity through his Word, which is actually a person, Jesus, inviting the world to respond in faith to God's saving/revealing initiative. Those responding in faith are promised the gift of life, welcomed into the fellowship of God's children as members of the divine family. Nonetheless, the Evangelist attempts to explain the unbelieving world's rejecting of the Revealer as a factor of human self-confidence and of being closed off from the workings of God (3:13-21). Within that cosmic story, the audiences of the Fourth Gospel are engaged, and such is the rhetorical interest of John's story of Jesus.

■ Conclusion

In considering the central features of the Fourth Gospel, John's differences with the Synoptic Gospels become apparent. Beginning with a confessional *Logos* hymn, the Johannine Gospel sets a cosmic stage and then quickly brings the focus down to earth on the dusty roads of Palestine. Distinctive within the narrative are John's signs, five of which are unique to John, and also its I-am sayings and dialogues with Jesus. The central thrust of the Fourth Gospel calls its audiences to respond in faith to Jesus as the agency of God's saving/revealing love, promising eternal life for those who believe. Nonetheless, reports of inadequate responses to the Revealer are also noted, and explanations of such disappointments are also offered. Therefore,

we find conjoined in this narrative a variety of literary, historical, and theological features, which we shall learn more about as we consider the Johannine riddles.

■ Questions to Consider

1. How do the distinctive signs in John further its purpose as described in John 20:31?
2. How do the presentations of women and the Holy Spirit in the Fourth Gospel affect an understanding of leadership—in the early church and today?
3. In considering various approaches to the central structure of the Fourth Gospel, is there a single common theme that comes through as the center of John's theological thrust? If so, how would you describe that—in John's terms and in your own terms?

■ Terms to Understand

- Book of Glory
- Book of Signs
- chiasmic structure
- I-am sayings (absolute; with the predicate nominative)
- *Paraklētos*
- theophany