

Introduction

Navigating a Stream in which a Child Can Wade and an Elephant Can Swim

The Gospel according to John has been described as a stream in which a child can wade and an elephant can swim.¹ This imagery highlights an impressive fact: while the Fourth Gospel is widely considered the most reader friendly and accessible of nearly all biblical writings, it also continues to be one of the most perplexing of texts among serious interpreters. Why is that so?

Consider this: We see Christians flash “John 3:16” (“For God so loved the world . . .”) at baseball games and on highway billboards, in a sincere effort to share the gospel. Mystics, within Christianity and beyond, have cited other Johannine (meaning “pertaining to John”) passages as descriptive of people who have been drawn into a relationship with the divine in life-changing ways. The Gospel of John is often given to new Christians at evangelistic crusades and is used for discipleship training around the world. John is often called the “Gospel of Belief,” the “Gospel of Life,” and the “Gospel of Love.” All of these are fitting titles to describe John’s purpose and operation.²

On the other hand, there are few biblical subjects on which top scholars around the world disagree with each other more sharply, often diametrically, than those regarding matters Johannine. While the Fourth Gospel is the only Gospel claiming

direct eyewitness origins, most scholars assume it is primarily theological rather than historical in its character. Given that scholars continue to debate John's origin and composition, its relation to the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke, so called because they are similar to one another in ways they all differ from John), proximity to Jesus, historical setting, and theological meanings, these controversies make it hard to imagine any sort of scholarly consensus emerging about what is also called the "Enigmatic Gospel," the "Maverick Gospel," and the "Spiritual Gospel" (in contrast to the Synoptics).³

But *why* do different readers of John hold such differing perspectives about its origin and meaning? Is it like a Rorschach test, revealing more about the observer than the subject? I suppose any piece of classic literature can function that way—especially a religious one. A text becomes a classic because it speaks on many levels and in many directions. Then again, if the merits of any particular approach to John can be assessed, some agreement may yet be found—even among the experts. The goal of this book is thus to help both waders and swimmers navigate the living waters of this lively text more adequately.

Some readers of this book will know the Fourth Gospel well; others will be coming to the text for the first time. Whatever the case, I want to help all readers come to grips with some of John's enduring riddles, aided by understanding some of the most compelling ways of making sense of its glories and foibles. While the reader will be spared detailed bibliographic analyses of scholarly opinion on particular issues, some scholarly views must be noted in order to engage well the topic at hand. References to relevant passages in biblical texts, however, will be laid out clearly and generously so that readers can look things up for themselves and come to their own conclusions on important subjects.⁴ Therefore, the reader is *encouraged actually to read the texts under discussion*; stimulating personal engagement with the Fourth Gospel is the most important purpose this book can serve.

We are not the first, however, to read the Gospel of John; others have found it meaningful and provocative for the last nineteen centuries as well. In the early church, the most enduring of theological debates over three centuries or more were largely caused by John's distinctive material—focusing in particular on John's Christology (theology about the person, nature, and role of Christ) and the relationships between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit (the Trinity). In the modern era, some of the most pressing of historical-critical and literary-critical debates have focused upon John's origin, development, and relation to the Jesus of history. How, then, does one navigate such a stream, filled with many more rivulets and currents than are first noticed? This book suggests a variety of ways in which learning to swim and remembering how to wade might be linked—for novices and experts alike!

■ On Wading with Children: The Gospel of John as an Entrée to Faith

Most readers approach a text interested in how it might speak to them. “Does the writer understand me and my situation?” the reader might ask. If so, the next question might be, “Does the content speak to my situation?” These questions are asked of editorials, technical manuals, philosophic treatises, and even poetry, but they are especially asked of narratives and stories. The Gospel of John is first and foremost a story, but it is a story with a set of theological claims. This means that the reader is drawn into the theological world of the writer and that the reader is invited to respond in faith to claims about Jesus within the text (see John 20:30-31). Put bluntly, the reader is invited into the realm of experience. As Robert Kysar has put so well, most religions emphasize seeking to replicate the experience of the founder, but not the Fourth Gospel; it advocates *experiencing the founder!*

Might this explain why the Johannine Gospel has had such a personal impact upon so many readers over the years? Rather than simply making claims *about* Jesus as the Jewish Messiah (anointed savior or deliverer), it invites people into a transformative encounter *with* the love of God as revealed in the mission and message of the prophet from Nazareth. The narrative begins, though, not just with a story set in history; it sets the stage within the cosmic origin of the universe. Even before time began, says the Prologue (1:1-18), God’s creating-enlightening and saving-revealing actions were at work in the *Logos* (the divine Word; *logos* also has connotations of principle, thought, act), who became flesh in the ministry of Jesus. While some rejected him from the beginning—even his own—any who receive him, including, the Gospel suggests, present readers, receive the power to become the children of God, not born of creaturely origins, but born of God. Now *that* invitation is a powerfully inclusive one! It is also highly personal. It engages readers on the level of experience, and it invites them into a relationship with the divine, leading to transformative encounter and the promise of eternal life. In John’s perspective, however, this life does not simply begin after we die; it involves abundant life, in the present, as well. The reader is not left on her own, however, as an individual in isolation. She is also drawn into community along with others who “have beheld his glory” (1:14). The characters in the story become exemplary patterns for later readers—showing the way forward, as well as exposing dead ends. Their positive responses to God’s agents and witnesses (Moses, the Scriptures, John the Baptist, Jesus, the disciples) show readers the right ways to act and to be. Their negative responses, or lack of understanding, however, become warnings of pitfalls to avoid. In that sense, the narrative challenges readers not simply to come to faith for the first time, but also to abide in the faith and to remain in community instead of breaking fellowship with other believers. (As we shall see, different readings of John 20:31 in the earliest manuscripts allow both purposes.) Of course, matters of literary analysis move us already from wading with children to swimming with elephants.

■ On Swimming with Elephants: The Fourth Gospel as a Puzzlement to Scholars

If scholars seek elaborate theories to explain the Fourth Gospel, it is because the Gospel confronts us with puzzles. Who wrote John, and what was he trying to accomplish? (Throughout the book, I will refer to the Fourth Gospel as “John,” without presuming to identify its author or the author of the related Epistles of John. Issues of authorship will be addressed below.) Did the author have one goal only, or did he have multiple purposes? Why is John so different from the other Gospels? What do we do with the fact that the Gospel claims explicitly to have been authored by an eyewitness (21:23-24), while that claim appears to be made by another person apparently after the purported author’s death? Further, the claim is that “*we* know his testimony is true,” so who are “*we*”? Was John written by a committee? If the earliest manuscripts of John do not contain 7:53—8:11 (the woman caught in adultery), have other passages also been added to an earlier text?

How about questions of sequence? Mary is identified in John 11:2 as “the one who *anointed* the Lord with perfume and *wiped* his feet with her hair” (in the past tense), but that anointing does not take place until 12:1-8. In 16:5, Jesus claims that none of his disciples had been asking where he was going, but Peter had just asked a similar question in 13:36, echoed by Thomas in 14:5. Why does Jesus say “let us depart” in 14:31 and then continue speaking for three chapters before arriving at the garden in 18:1? Was this a sermon “in the alley” or a portrayal of Jesus giving one encore speech after another, with his hand fixed on the doorknob, delivering one lecture after another until his disciples could bear it no longer (16:12)? While John’s text is largely a stylistic unity, these *aporias* (perplexities) weigh more heavily the more one reads it. These are just a few of John’s *literary riddles*.

How about John’s *historical riddles*? If the Jesus of history really spoke in parables, why is John the only Gospel without them? Likewise, if Jesus of Nazareth was involved in the casting out of demons, why does John’s Jesus perform no exorcisms? If John’s long I-am sayings were really spoken by Jesus, and if such miracles as the water-into-wine wonder and the raising of Lazarus from the dead really happened, why are they *not* included in the other Gospels?

Again, did Jesus minister for only a part of one year, or did his ministry span two or three years? John alone presents a multiyear ministry of Jesus in mentioning three Passovers (2:13; 6:4; 11:55). Did Jesus visit Jerusalem only once during his ministry (as portrayed in all three Synoptic Gospels), or do the four visits presented in John seem more plausible historically? John has more topographical detail and archaeologically attested data than all the Synoptic Gospels combined. Further, how should we adjudicate differences between John and the other Gospels? Is it really a matter of a three-against-one majority? Or if, as most biblical scholars

rightly assume, Matthew and Luke built their texts upon Mark, is it largely a John-versus-Mark contest?

What about John's *theological riddles*? How could the eternal *Logos*, who was in the beginning with God and who was God, become flesh, weep at Lazarus's tomb, groan on the cross, and finally die a brutal physical death? John's presentation of Jesus as the Christ is both the most human and the most divine of any presentations in the entire Bible. What of the Son's relation to the Father? In John, Jesus declares, "I and the Father are one" (10:30), but he also declares that "the Father is greater than I" (14:28). Was Jesus equal to the Father or subordinate to him? Was the Holy Spirit sent by the Father (14:26) or the Son (15:26)? What should we make of the valuation of miracles in John? Jesus performs signs leading to belief (2:11; 20:31), but then he criticizes people for depending upon signs and for failing to see the "sign"-ificance of a miracle (4:48; 6:26). Jesus invites Thomas to touch his wounds, and then he declares the blessedness of those who have *not seen* and yet believe (20:27-29). Making sense of John's theological content has been a perennial challenge, but how should we approach that formidable task?

Simply pondering these and other issues forces the wader to become a swimmer! In truth, the issues scholars seek to address are most often the very things that waders also notice; they just seek to provide a fuller explanation for how the tensions came into being, laying out a road map for how to cover the territory. However, the road map is not the territory. Therefore, the best way forward is to move back and forth, between wading and swimming, grasping fuller understandings while returning to familiar meanings with fresh awareness and deeper levels of insight. If this book helps the reader to do that, it will have been well worth writing, and reading. At the outset, however, the reader is forewarned that a good deal of repetition will be employed with intentionality in this book (after all, it is *the Gospel of John* we're considering), hopefully without being redundant. Therefore, the above issues and others will be laid out several times within this book, attempting to bring new discussions to bear on familiar ground introduced earlier. The goal is serving the reader in a growing understanding of the issues, even if a bit of repetition is involved.



The outline of the book is as follows. Part 1 introduces the reader to the most perplexing of the Johannine riddles: theological, historical, and literary. Specific biblical texts are grouped together within each section, and the reader is invited to look up the texts in order to get a firsthand sense of the issues at stake and why differing approaches to John operate as they do. Part 2 engages approaches to the Johannine riddles, analyzing the strengths and weaknesses of traditional and

critical approaches alike, finally suggesting a plausible way forward in navigating these issues. Part 3 leads the reader into an interpretation of John's content and theology, seeking to explore meanings that are both biblically sound and experientially adequate. Each chapter will conclude with a review of findings, leading into the next inquiry.

Questions at the end of each chapter help the reader go deeper into the material covered. New terms are defined briefly in the glossary at the end of the book. A select annotated bibliography is also included, suggesting the particular value of these works for those interested in further reading. A listing of my own relevant works points the reader to places where I develop more fully the components of the larger set of my theories that are presented more briefly or only summarized here. I have intended this book to operate on several levels, as an accessible introduction for the student while also proving instructive to the scholar. That may be an impossible task, but I have considered it worth the attempt.

Before continuing with Part 1, the reader is encouraged to read the entire Gospel of John in a translation that serves well the meaning of the Greek text (I will be quoting throughout from the New Revised Standard Version).⁵ Whether a wader or a swimmer, the first task is to *jump in!*