

INTRODUCTORY NOTES ON THE GOSPEL OF JOHN¹

AUTHORSHIP:

John the Apostle. “The writer of this Gospel is identified in the book only as ‘*the disciple whom Jesus loved*’ (21:20, 24). He obviously was a Palestinian Jew who was an eyewitness of the events of Christ’s life, for he displays knowledge of Jewish customs (7:37-39; 18:28) and was of the land of Palestine (1:44, 46; 5:2) and he includes details of an eyewitness (2:6; 13:26; 21:8, 11). Eliminating the other disciples that belonged to the ‘inner circle’ (because James had been martyred before this time, Acts 12:1-5, and because Peter is named in close association with the disciple whom Jesus loved (13:23-24; 20:2-10), one concludes that John was the author...John the apostle was the son of Zebedee and Salome and was the younger brother of James. He was a Galilean who apparently came from a fairly well-to-do home (Mark 15:40-41). **Though often painted centuries later as effeminate, his real character was such that he was known as a ‘son of thunder’ (Mark 3:17).** He played a leading role in the work of the early church in Jerusalem (Acts 3:1; 8:14; Gal. 2:9). Later he went to Ephesus and for an unknown reason was exiled to the island of Patmos (Rev. 1:9).”²

“His hometown was Bethsaida (1:44; Luke v. 10), and there was a family of four, the father and mother, Zebedee, and Salome, and two sons, James and John (Mark 1:19-20; xv. 40; iv. 21); Salome, the mother, was ambitious for her boys (Matt. xx. 20, 21; Mark x. 35-37). There is clear evidence that the family was prosperous, for they had hired servants, they ministered of their substance, and they were influential in official quarters (Mark 1:20; Matt. xxvii. 56; Luke viii. 3; John xviii. 15, 16; xix. 27). If, as is conjectured, Salome was the sister of Jesus’ mother, John would be Jesus’ cousin. John appears three times in the Acts: in the Temple (iii. 1); before the Council (iv. 13); and at Samaria (viii. 14). After the general reference to him in Acts 15:2, 22-23, our next contact with him is...in the Book of the Revelation (i. 1, 4, 9) and...in his Gospel, and the Epistles which bear his name.”³

Thomas & Gundry answer an alternative viewpoint regarding the authorship of the Gospel of John:

“Traditionally, John the apostle has been thought to be the author of the fourth gospel...Others have proposed that the John to whom early tradition ascribed authorship is John the Elder, referred to by Papias as quoted by Eusebius. Eusebius’s interpretation of Papias’ statement distinguishes between two persons in Ephesus by the name of John. Motivation for such a distinction is probably traceable to influential Christian leaders in Alexandria who questioned the millennial views of Revelation and therefore were seeking to dispense with the apostolic authorship of this last book of the Bible. By postulating another John in Ephesus at the time it was written, they thought they had grounds for doing this. However, it is not at all clear that Papias intended to distinguish John the Elder from John the apostle in his quoted statement. A good argument can be advanced that the two were one and the same person, so that no confusion in the traditional ascription of authorship to John results...Actually...**both external and internal evidence firmly support authorship by John the apostle.** Irenaeus (c. A.D. 180) is the first to clearly say that John the apostle wrote this gospel and that it was published by John at Ephesus where he resided. Other late second century evidence testifies to John the apostle’s residence in Ephesus late in the first century. **But Irenaeus’ testimony is especially important; he was a disciple of Polycarp, and Polycarp had known the apostle John personally.** Here then is a direct line between Irenaeus and John with only one connecting link—Polycarp. Writers after Irenaeus assume apostolic authorship of the fourth gospel without question.”⁴

DATE:

Probably A.D. 90-95. Ryrie feels that it was circulating between 89-90 A.D. Scroggie prefers a date of about A.D. 95. Thomas gives a broader range (A.D. 85-100).⁵ In the past, liberal critics used to late date this Gospel, but they really have no case for that now, since the discovery of “...**the Rylands papyrus fragment (a few verses from John 18, dated about A.D. 135 [125?])** forced an earlier date.”⁶ Thomas & Gundry expand on that story: “At one time, New Testament critics of the school following F.C. Baur argued that the fourth gospel was not written until about A.D. 160, so that John could not have been its author. However, the discovery of a papyrus

¹ Compiled by Mike Edwards, July 1999, Greenville, SC, Expanded and updated Dec, 2007, March, 2012 & April, 2013, St. Vincent & the Grenadines, West Indies. Note: Anything in parentheses () contained within quoted material appears as such in the original, that in brackets [], as well as all bolding, is by me.-mwe

² Charles C. Ryrie, “*The Ryrie Study Bible*”-KJV (Moody Press: Chicago, Illinois, 1994), p. 1582

³ W. Graham Scroggie, “*Guide to the Gospels*” (Kregel Publications: Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1995 edition), pp. 398-399

⁴ Robert L. Thomas & Stanley N. Gundry, “*A Harmony of the Gospels*” (HarperCollins Publishers: New York, NY, 1978), p. 299

⁵ Thomas & Gundry, p. 300

⁶ Ryrie, “*The Ryrie Study Bible*”-NASV (Moody Press: Chicago, Illinois, 1978), p. 1598

fragment of this gospel in the collection of the John Rylands Library demolished this view. Dated at least at A.D. 150 and perhaps as early as A.D. 130, the fragment (P 52) came from a community along the Nile River in the hinterland of Egypt. When one allows for the time necessary for the processes of copying and circulation in order for this fragment to reach a remote Egyptian community, the origins of this gospel are easily pushed back into at least the late first century when John was probably still alive.”⁷ Ryrie points out that on the basis of 5:2, some advocate a date prior to A.D. 70. However that is a minority viewpoint. Among the reasons for rejecting that idea are: (1) “There is an entire absence of any reference to the destruction of Jerusalem either anticipatively or reflectively, and this points to a date either long before or long after that event, and all the evidence is against its being before... (2) It is certain that this Gospel was written after the other three and that the writer was acquainted with the Synoptics (for support of this see Scroggie, pp. 401-ff)... (3) The Evangelist omits much which the Synoptists record, and records much which they omit. In addition...he is full where they are concise and concise where they are full. These facts give the impression that he intended to supplement the other Gospels...”⁸

PLACE OF WRITING:

Probably Ephesus. “It is practically certain [?] that John, who resided in Ephesus, wrote his Gospel there. Irenaeus expressly states that this was so, Jerome agrees, and early tradition generally, is unanimous on the point.”⁹

THEME:

Jesus Christ is God. Whereas the other three Synoptic Gospels highlight various facets of Christ relative to the major people groups extant at that time (e.g. Jews, Romans & Greeks), John presents very dissimilar material, and it is crystal clear from the key verse [20:31] that **his purpose was to show that Jesus was the Messiah, God in the flesh.** It is “...the most theological of the four Gospels...important themes in the book include the Holy Spirit (14:26; 15:26; 16:7-14), Satan and the world (8:44; 12:31; 17:15), the Word (1:1-14), and the new birth (3:1-12).”¹⁰

KEY VERSE:

John 20:31. Here he gives his whole purpose in writing this Gospel, “...*but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name.*” (NKJV)

ANTICIPATED AUDIENCE:

This Gospel, in contrast to the others, is general and theological in nature, and was written for the whole world, rather than one specific audience. “Obviously Matthew was written for Jews, as witness its references to prophecy fulfilled...Mark and Luke [just] as obviously were written for Gentiles; Mark especially for Romans, and Luke for Greeks, Mark emphasizing the ideal of power, and Luke, the ideal of perfection...If...John had the Synoptics before him... he, in the light of the situation at the close of the first century, would wish to put on record...those more spiritual aspects of Christ’s ministry which had not been recorded by the Synoptists...All early tradition confirms this view...”¹¹ **There are obviously great differences between John’s Gospel and the Synoptics.** Thomas & Gundry note some of the rather dramatic differences:

“**Differences in material content** are the most obvious. John does not record the virgin birth, the baptism, the temptation, the transfiguration, the institution of the Lord’s Supper, the agony in the garden of Gethsemane, or the ascension. Synoptic type parables and cures of demoniacs and lepers are notably absent...Just as critical is the fact that John includes much material that is unique to him. John’s prologue is without parallel (1:1-18). It is John who records the early Judean ministry (chaps. 2-3), including such notable events as the first miracle and the discussion with Nicodemus. It is John who details the journey through Samaria to Galilee, including the encounter with the Samaritan woman at Sychar. High points of the remaining material unique to John are the Sabbath healing of the lame man in Jerusalem, Jesus’ failure in Capernaum to conform to popular Messianic ideas, the healing of the blind man in Jerusalem, the Good Shepherd discourse, the raising of Lazarus, the washing of the disciples’ feet, the discourse in the upper room, Christ’s intercessory prayer, and the miraculous catch of fish. In sum, there is an obvious difference in material content between the synoptics and John...”

⁷ Thomas & Gundry, pp. 299-300

⁸ Scroggie, pp. 401-402

⁹ *ibid.*, p. 403

¹⁰ Ryrie, 1978 edition, p. 1598

¹¹ Scroggie, pp. 400-401

“... [also] **John’s manner of presentation is different**... John has less narrative and more discourse, in contrast to the short aphorisms and parables characteristic of the synoptics. He portrays Jesus more in the role of the Jewish rabbi. Jesus’ manner of teaching in the synoptics would be more appropriate to the common people of Galilee, that in John to the more educated populace in and around Jerusalem...

“... **Differences of chronology** between John and the synoptics are also found. There is the question of whether there was one or two cleansings of the Temple... more far-reaching... the synoptic accounts apparently require a ministry of only one year, although their chronological details are vague. But John’s requires nearly four years...

“Our discussion of **John’s relationship to the synoptics must also embrace their similarities**, although these are not so obvious... At least two of the synoptists and John include material on John the Baptist, the feeding of the five thousand, the storm at sea, the triumphal entry into Jerusalem, Mary’s anointing of Jesus, and parts of the Last Supper and passion narratives... similar material often occurs in the same order in John as in the synoptics. However, very little verbal similarity exists between John and the synoptics, except in some cases of the words spoken by Jesus or others.”¹²

KEY WORDS & PHRASES:

The Gospel of John is replete with verses affirming the deity of Christ. That is probably the most dominant theme of this Gospel. **Undoubtedly the most important and repetitive phrase in reference to that are the “I AM” statements, which occur approximately 15 times altogether.** The strongest ones are **4:26; 8:24, 28, 58; & 13:19**. In all of the above cases the “*he*” has been supplied by the translators. In each of them Jesus is clearly and deliberately appealing to the “*I AM*” of Exodus 3 [e.g. note the reaction of the religious leaders in 8:59]. Ryrie adds, “In [the] ‘*I am*’ statements Christ made implicit and explicit claim to be the I AM-Yahweh of the Old Testament... **these are the strongest claims to deity that Jesus could have made.**”¹³

In addition, Christ repeatedly says, “*I am*”, followed by various descriptive words [e.g. *the bread of life*-6:35; *the light of the world*-8:12; *the door* [of the sheep]-10:7, 9; *the good shepherd*-10:11, 14; *the resurrection and the life*-11:25; *the way, the truth and the life*-14:6; *the* [true] *vine*-15:1, 5]. For a list of key words by Scroggie, see “*Guide to the Gospels*” pp. 414-415.

The one key word that clearly dominates the Gospel of John is the word “believe” [“*believeth*,” “*believes*,” “*believed*,” “*did not believe*,” “*do not believe*,” etc.]. The word[s] occur an amazing number of times throughout John’s gospel, appearing in every chapter except chapters 15, 18 & 21! [e.g. 1:12, 50; 2:22, 23; 3:12, 15, 16, 18 [3 times], 36 [twice]; 4:21, 39, 41, 42, 48, 50, 53; 5:24, 44, 46 [twice], 47 [twice]; 6:29, 30, 35, 36, 40, 47, 64, 69; 7:5, 38, 39, 48; 8:24, 30, 31, 45; 9:18, 35, 36, 38; 10:25, 37, 38 [3 times], 42; 11:15, 26, 27, 40, 42, 45, 48; 12:11, 36, 39, 42, 44, 46, 47; 13:19; 14:1 [twice], 10, 11 [twice], 12, 29; 16:9, 27, 30, 31; 17:8, 20, 21; 19:35; 20:8, 25, 27, 29 [twice], 31 [twice].

GENERAL OUTLINE:

“The Gospel [of John] is sometimes called ‘*The book of the Seven Signs*,’¹⁴ since the author chose seven sign-miracles to reveal the person and missions of Jesus: (1) the turning of water into wine (2:1-11); (2) the cure of the nobleman’s son (4:46-54); (3) the cure of the paralytic (5:1-18); (4) the feeding of the multitude (6:6-13); (5) the walking on the water (6:16-21); (6) the giving of sight to the blind (9:1-7); and (7) the raising of Lazarus (11:1-45).”¹⁵

MISCELLANEOUS NOTES:

“The structure and style of the Gospel are different from those of the synoptics. **It contains no parables, only seven miracles** (five of which are not recorded elsewhere), **and many personal interviews**. The author emphasizes the physical actuality of Jesus’ hunger, thirst, weariness, pain, and death as a defense against the Gnostic denial of Jesus’ true human nature.”¹⁶ Along this same line of thought, Scroggie observes: “It is true, also, that within certain limits, a polemical aim is here; that is, that the writer has in mind certain errors which

¹² Thomas & Gundry, pp. 296-297

¹³ Ryrie, 1994 edition, p. 1582

¹⁴ Scroggie counts eight miracles, and thus finds six that are peculiar to John Gospel alone (Scroggie, pp. 418, 420).

¹⁵ Ryrie, *ibid*, 1994 edition, pp. 1582-1583

¹⁶ *ibid*, p. 1582

characterized his time, and which are combated by what he writes...Taylor speaks of John's 'reaction against Docetic tendencies...It is probably for this reason that he avoids nouns like 'knowledge,' 'wisdom,' and 'faith,' [words] beloved in Gnostic circles, and uses the corresponding verbal forms."¹⁷ He then adds a further perceptive comment: "Make a careful study of these miracles, and observe that, as not in the Synoptics, they are frequently made the text of discourses."¹⁸

John's Gospel alone enables us to realize that Jesus' ministry lasted longer than just one year! "From the Synoptic narratives the ministry of Jesus would appear to have lasted for one year only, but from John's, a duration of three years or more, is assigned. By this Gospel, and by it alone, can we establish the dates and reconstruct the external framework of Jesus' ministry."¹⁹

"None of the Evangelists has so limited a vocabulary as the Apostle John, but none of them makes better use of what he has. His style is unique in many respects; a thing to be felt rather than to be defined... **The language is Greek, but the thought is Hebrew.**...John's two most characteristic participles are '*that*' (Gk. *Hina*), and '*then*' (Gk. *Oun*). The first points to the belief that **nothing happens without a purpose**, and the second, to the belief that **nothing is without a cause**. In these senses '*that*' occurs over 60 times, and '*then*' over 190 times...Hebrew form is characterized by parallelism, and John, full of the spirit of Hebrew poetry, frequently employs this form (e.g. 13:16; 14:27)...a certain uniformity in John's style is very noticeable. An outstanding illustration of this is his habit of putting the verb first in his sentences (in the Greek)...Another characteristic of the Gospel is the frequent occurrence of intermediate sentences... (As well as)...explanatory sentences... Also, it is the Evangelist's habit to explain Hebrew words."²⁰

Refutation of apocryphal Gospels: John 2:11 – "Beginning of miracles. This statement refutes the apocryphal Gospels which report boyhood miracles by Jesus." (Charles Pfeiffer & Everett Harrison, *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* (Harrison - John) (Moody Press: Chicago, IL, 1962), p. 1076)

The signs/miracles: "The word for miracle, which John uses throughout, means sign, indicating that the outward act is intended to reveal the purpose behind it, throwing light on the person of Christ or his work." (Wycliffe Bible Commentary, Pfeiffer & Harrison (Everett Harrison - John), Moody Press: Chicago, IL, 1962, p. 1076)

"John builds his Gospel around seven public miracles, or 'signs.' Each is designed to show that Jesus is God: (1) Turning the water into wine at the wedding in Cana of Galilee (2:9). (2) Healing the nobleman's son (4:46-54). (3) Healing the crippled man at the pool of Bethesda (5:2-9). (4) Feeding the five thousand (6:1-14). (5) Jesus' walking on the Sea of Galilee to rescue His disciples from the storm (6:16-21). (6) Healing the man blind from birth (9:1-7). (7) Raising Lazarus from the dead (11:1-44). In addition to these seven performed in public, there is an eighty sign performed only for His disciples after the resurrection – the miraculous catch of fish (21:1-14). Charles R. Erdman says that the Fourth Gospel 'has induced more persons to follow Christ, it has inspired more believers to loyal service, it has presented to scholars more difficult problems, than any other book that could be named.'" (William McDonald, *Believer's Bible Commentary* (Thomas Nelson: Nashville, TN, 1995), pp. 1464-1465)

Numbers in John: "One marked feature of John is the occurrence of the number seven and its multiples. The ideas of perfection and completion attach to this number throughout Scripture (see Genesis 2:1-3). In this Gospel the Spirit of God perfects and completes the revelation of God in the Person of Jesus Christ, hence patterns based on the number seven are frequent.

"The seven 'I Am's' in John are familiar: 'The Bread of Life' (6:35, 41, 48, 51); 'The Light of the World' (8:12; 9:5); 'The door' (10:7, 9); 'The Good Shepherd' (10:11, 14); 'The Resurrection and the Life' (11:25); 'The Way, the Truth, and the Life' (14:6); and 'The vine' (15:1, 5). Not so familiar are the seven occurrences of 'I am' without a predicate, that is, the simple statement: 4:26; 6:20; 8:24, 28, 58; 13:19; 18:5, 8. The last one is a double one.

¹⁷ Scroggie, p. 408

¹⁸ *ibid*, p. 420

¹⁹ *ibid*, p. 40.

²⁰ *ibid*, pp. 411-413, 416-417

“In the sixth chapter, which has to do with the Bread of Life, the Greek word translated ‘bread’ and ‘loaves’ occurs twenty-one times, a multiple of seven. Also in the Bread of Life discourse the expression ‘bread from heaven’ occurs precisely seven times; a similar expression ‘comes down from heaven’ occurs seven times as well.” (William McDonald, *Believer’s Bible Commentary* (Thomas Nelson: Nashville, TN, 1995), p. 1465)

REGARDING THEORIES OF COMPOSITION:

Discounting the several speculative theories advanced by various liberals and critical scholars due to their a priori skeptical starting point [see T & G, p. 295], Thomas & Gundry note “all [such theories] are so speculative and lacking in substantial foundation that their significance to those interested in what tangible evidence dictates is small.”²¹ Instead they note “It would seem preferable to combine the theory accepting John’s essential literary independence with the supplemental view of John’s relationship to the synoptics. According to this view **John did not use the synoptics as sources, but he did apparently write with a knowledge of their contents.** He assumed his readers also knew their contents. Among his purposes seems to have been conscious supplementation of synoptic material; John filled in the gaps and avoided unnecessary duplication. Thus, John concentrated on the Judean, rather than on the Galilean, ministry of Jesus. By his mention of three, perhaps four, Passovers, he made clear that Jesus’ ministry lasted between three and four years...On the other hand, John’s omission of so much important synoptic material, such as Kingdom teaching and the institution of the ordinances, is extremely difficult to explain unless we assume that he knew the synoptics and saw no need to repeat their content. Thus, a view that accepts John’s literary independence but that also sees his purpose as that of supplementing the synoptics best accounts for both the similarities on the one hand and the many significant differences on the other. This seems to be the relationship of the fourth gospel to the first three.”²²

²¹ Thomas & Gundry, p. 295

²² *ibid.*, p. 298