

The Fourth Gospel and the Apostolic Mission: John's Common Evangelical Theology

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Abstract

This article seeks to redress the imbalance of seeing John's theology as distinctive and dissimilar to the other Gospels and New Testament documents by observing the essential consistency between the theology of the Fourth Gospel and the apostolic mission described by Paul in Galatians 2:1-10. First, it considers the origin of the New Testament documents in the mission of the apostles described in Galatians 2:1-10 and locates the apostles' commonly agreed-on gospel message in 1 Corinthians 15:3-5. Second, the article examines the Fourth Gospel, paying close attention to the intrusive narrator's comments about the purpose (John 20:30-31) and explicit use of the Old Testament (12:38, 39-40; 19:24, 28, 36-37) to demonstrate that John's theology and epistemology was fundamentally the same as that of the other apostles.

The discussion of the relationship between John and the other Gospels is as least as old as Clement of Alexandria, who famously proposed one very early solution: "John, last of all, conscious that the outward facts had been set forth in the Gospels, urged on by his disciples, and, divinely moved by the Spirit, composed a

spiritual Gospel.”¹ Many other explanations of the relationship between the Gospels and John’s contribution as a Gospel have been proposed over the course of the last two thousand years. A recent review of the secondary literature has found nine different proposals as to the relationship between the synoptic Gospels and John: supplement, complement, displacement, dependence, aural influence, mutual influence, interlocking tradition, synoptic-like sources, and independence.² This article will not enter into a discussion of the relative merits of each proposal. Rather, it will argue that the Fourth Gospel shares the same theological perspective and epistemological method found elsewhere in the apostolic mission.³

In order to do this, the article has two main parts. The briefer first part discusses the mission of the earliest church and its message. It aims to show the necessity of such an approach and to sketch out in broad terms the categories of thought that would be expected in the theology of John as a member of the mission. The longer second part then examines the content of the Fourth Gospel, paying particular attention to the author’s metacomments that inform the reader about the purpose, content and/or meaning of the text.⁴

I. The Mission of the Early Church

The collection of documents that we call the New Testament arose as a direct result of the apostolic mission.⁵ The resurrected Jesus appeared to the Twelve (Matt 28:18–20; Luke 24:47–48; Acts 1:8) and to Paul (Acts 26:15–18), commanding them to testify to his life, death, resurrection, and universal lordship. As a consequence of their obedience to Jesus’s command, the apostles and their respective circles wrote the Gospels, letters, and Revelation to disseminate the message about Jesus and to encourage believers in the face of their circumstances.

The earliest firsthand description of this mission occurs in Galatians 2:1–10 in the context of Paul defending his apostleship.⁶ Paul relates his

¹ Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 6.14.7 (Oulton, LCL).

² Michael F. Bird, *The Gospel of the Lord: How the Early Church Wrote the Story of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 194–211.

³ I am treating John’s Gospel as a finished whole and not following the more radical approaches that identify different editors or strata of composition of John’s text. One of these more imaginative approaches is Urban C. von Wahlde, *The Gospel and Letters of John*, ECC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010).

⁴ The term “metacomment” is borrowed from Steven E. Runge, *Discourse Grammar of the Greek New Testament: A Practical Introduction for Teaching and Exegesis* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2010), 101–6, although it will be slightly modified below with regard to narrative texts.

⁵ E. Earle Ellis, *The Making of the New Testament Documents* (Leiden: Brill, 1999).

⁶ Paul W. Barnett, *Jesus and the Rise of Early Christianity* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity

meeting with the “pillar” apostles James, Peter, and John, and in doing so states that they all shared the same gospel message yet had different target audiences. James, Peter, and John would go to the circumcised while Paul would go to the nations (Gal 2:7–9). Since this background gave rise to the New Testament documents, it is important that the documents themselves be understood in this historical and theological context.⁷

So when approaching John there are two points that need to be taken into consideration:⁸ first, John’s audience is primarily Jewish; second, John shares the same gospel message as Paul and the other apostles. The first of these requires little explanation but may require modification as the Gospel is read because Paul’s statement may be historically conditioned. That is, John may have changed his audience after this meeting. He appears to have continued the mission for another fifty years post the events described in Galatians 2:1–10.⁹ On the other hand, given John’s distinctive vocabulary and writing style, the second statement requires some unpacking. What is the gospel message that the apostles agreed on?

Paul reports in 1 Corinthians 15:3–5 a summary of the gospel message that he received prior to his visit to Corinth in 50 A.D. and then passed on to them in his preaching. Its style and vocabulary are not readily evident elsewhere in Paul outside other possible creeds, and the highly structured fragment allows for easy memorization. So it seems fair to conclude that Paul is here quoting (or at the very least using) a traditional saying, one that was probably a common summary employed in the earliest church.¹⁰ Given the historical sequence of the events recounted in Galatians 1–2, Paul would have had this summary when he visited the pillar apostles.¹¹ Thus this

Press, 1999), 300, states that this “passage, more than any other in the New Testament, explains the subsequent actual history of the apostolic age” (emphasis original).

⁷ For a fuller explanation and defense of this method, see Matthew D. Jensen, “The Gospel and the New Testament: Understanding the New Testament in Light of the Gospel Mission,” in *Let the Word Do the Work*, ed. Peter G. Bolt (Camperdown: Australian Church Record, 2015), 85–91.

⁸ This assumes that John wrote the Gospel that bears his name. For a defense of this assumption, see Paul A. Rainbow, *Johannine Theology: The Gospel, the Epistles and the Apocalypse* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2014), 39–51.

⁹ For a brief discussion of the dating of John and the issues involved, see Andreas J. Köstenberger, *A Theology of John’s Gospel and Letters: Biblical Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 82–83.

¹⁰ Roy E. Ciampa and Brian S. Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians*, PTNC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 745–46.

¹¹ The dating of Paul’s second visit to Jerusalem according to Galatians is difficult. The sequence “then after three years I went up to Jerusalem” (Gal 1:18) ... “then after fourteen years I again went up to Jerusalem” (Gal 2:1) could be read either consecutively as 17 years (see C. K. Barrett, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*, ICC

summary reflects the gospel that Paul put before them (Gal 2:2) and that was the commonly accepted gospel message (Gal 2:6–7)—or, maybe better, it was the agreed-on theology of the apostles. Therefore, the gospel message that the apostles had in common was this:

1. That Christ died on behalf of our sins according to the Scriptures
2. and that he was buried
3. and that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures
4. and that he appeared to Cephas then to the Twelve.¹²

Since this was the shared gospel message, a close examination of this summary should reveal the theological content and the mode of reasoning that we should expect to see reflected in the Fourth Gospel as one of the missionary documents.

First, John should be drawn to the historical events in this gospel statement—the death, burial, resurrection, and appearances of Jesus. Second, the historical events are not an end in themselves, but each has significance. The parallelism of the first and third lines indicates that the second and fourth events are the proof of the first and third. That is, the evidence for the death of Jesus is his burial, just as the evidence for the resurrection of Jesus was his appearances. The historical events in the first and third lines are also described in terms of their theological significance. Jesus’s death is understood to be on behalf of our sin, just as his resurrection happened on the third day.¹³ Third, the epistemological basis for understanding the events of Jesus’s death and resurrection is the Old Testament Scriptures.¹⁴

So understanding the historical situation of the earliest Christian mission in this way enables some working assumptions about the theology that should be evident in the Fourth Gospel, since it is one of the mission documents. First, John wrote for a Jewish audience, because this was the mission

[Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998], 2:711), or concurrently as 14 years (see Richard J. Bauckham, “James and the Jerusalem Church,” in *The Book of Acts in Its First Century Setting, Volume 4: Palestinian Setting*, ed. Richard J. Bauckham [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995], 469–70). Since Paul’s Damascus Road meeting of Jesus seems to have occurred in 34 A.D., it is most likely that the meeting with the “pillar” apostles occurred in 48 A.D. (i.e., the concurrent option). So the gospel summary would have been fresh in Paul’s mind when he entered Corinth in 50 A.D.

¹² Author’s translation.

¹³ For the significance of Jesus’s resurrection on the third day, see Michael Russell, “On the Third Day, According to the Scriptures,” *Reformed Theological Review* 67.1 (2008): 1–17.

¹⁴ “According to” (*κατά*) can refer to both the fulfillment of the Scriptures (that is, they happened as the Scriptures foretold) and as the basis for understanding the significance of the events (that is, Jesus’s death was for sin as revealed in the Scriptures). See further Richard B. Gaffin, *By Faith, Not by Sight: Paul and the Order of Salvation* (London: Paternoster, 2006), 22–24.

field that he and the other apostles agreed on. Second, John should share the same basic gospel message as the other apostles. In particular, his theology should move from the historical events of Jesus's death, burial, resurrection, and appearances to their implications for sin and his lordship. Further, there should be an epistemological appeal to the Old Testament to justify these implications. Even though John should share this message in common with other apostles, we should also expect to see him as an individual expressing it in unique terms.

That John's theology is generally the same as that of the other apostles finds some external support in Irenaeus. Little is said explicitly about the content of John's teaching other than that it was consistent with that of the other apostles (*Against Heresies* 2.22.5), is contained in John's writings, is about the plan of salvation, and declares that there is one God, who created heaven and earth and spoke by the law and the prophets, and that there is one Christ, the Son of God (*Against Heresies* 3.1.1–2; 3.11.1–2).

With all this in mind, this article will now turn to the Fourth Gospel in order to ascertain something of John's theology.

II. *John's Gospel*

The second part of this article has four sections. After defining metacomments and discussing their value in ascertaining the meaning of a text, the article examines two sets of these comments in John: the purpose statement in John 20:30–31 and the narrative intrusions that introduce quotes of the Old Testament (John 12:38, 39–40; 19:24, 28, 36–37). Finally, the article considers some of the possible objections to the understanding of John's theology established in this manner.

1. *Metacomments and Meaning*

One of the difficulties in moving from a text to theology is ascertaining the meaning of the text within its historical situation. John alleviates this difficulty more than the other biblical writers because he makes a number of metacomments. Steven Runge defines a metacomment as “when speakers stop saying what they are saying in order to comment on what is going to be said, speaking abstractly about it.”¹⁵ In terms of a narrative, this is where the narrator intrudes into the story to explain the story itself.¹⁶

¹⁵ Runge, *Discourse Grammar*, 100.

¹⁶ On the intrusive narrator in John, see Merrill C. Tenney, “The Footnotes of John's Gospel,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 117 (1960): 350–64; John J. O'Rourke, “Asides in the Gospel of John,” *Novum Testamentum* 21.3 (1979): 210–19; Tom Thatcher, “A New Look at Asides in the Fourth

These types of comments provide parameters for establishing the intended meaning of the text. So in John, the narrator intrudes into the narrative and provides a purpose statement for the gospel (John 20:30–31), an explanation of textual details (e.g., John 2:21–22), and some justification for the interpretation of events (e.g., John 12:37–41).¹⁷ Each of these indicates how the text should be understood, thus limiting possible misinterpretation. Sometimes these statements cover the whole text (20:30–31), and on other occasions they refer only to the immediate context.

As such, these metacomments anchor the meaning of the text in the text itself, ensuring that its theology is heard. Thus particular attention to these metacomments will ensure that the theology of the apostle John, generated from the mission context above, is not read into the Fourth Gospel but rather found within the text of John's Gospel itself.¹⁸

2. The Purpose Statement (John 20:30–31)

Following the climax of Jesus's death and physical resurrection, the narrator intrudes into the text with a metacomment that describes to the reader the contents, purpose, audience, and result of the Gospel as a whole:¹⁹

Then Jesus also did many other signs before his disciples that are not written in this book. But these have been written so that you might believe that the Christ, the Son of God, is Jesus and in order that, by believing, you might have life in his name. (John 20:30–31)²⁰

John describes the contents of his writing as signs (σημεῖα). Other metacomments in John also contain this same description (John 2:11, 23; 4:54;

Gospel," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 151 (1994): 428–39. There is disagreement among these scholars as to the number and purpose of the intrusions. It is beyond the scope of this essay to enter into this debate in any meaningful way other than to note that the scholars agree that the intrusions indicate the author's intended meaning when taken at face value.

¹⁷ This is not confined to John's Gospel but appears to be a feature of his writing style. So in 1 John he makes a number of statements about not only the purpose for writing (e.g., 1 John 2:1) but also the reason for the letter (e.g., 1 John 2:12) and the content of the letter (e.g., 1 John 2:26). On this see further Matthew D. Jensen, *Affirming the Resurrection of the Incarnate Christ: A Reading of 1 John*, SNTSMS 153 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 34–36.

¹⁸ Since Tenney, "The Footnotes of John's Gospel," O'Rourke, "Asides in the Gospel of John," and Thatcher, "A New Look at Asides in the Fourth Gospel," fail to agree on the exact number of narrator's intrusions, this article limits itself to the purpose statement and the Old Testament quotes. A fuller study identifying each intrusion and then examining it is beyond the scope of this essay. It is sufficient for the argument of this article to observe the intrusive narrator's purpose (John 20:30–31) and use of the Old Testament, to see the similarity of John's theology to the apostolic mission.

¹⁹ Since this purpose statement covers the whole of the work, it is dealt with first.

²⁰ Author's translation.

6:2, 14; 12:18, 37), and even the characters in the narrative understand Jesus's actions to be signs (2:18; 3:2; 6:30; 7:31; 9:16; 11:47). The signs display Jesus's glory (2:11), lead to false belief (2:23; 4:48), and result in Jesus being identified as "the Prophet" (6:14) and "the Christ" (7:31). They cause division between the people and the Pharisees (9:16; 12:37). The greatest sign in the Gospel is the death and physical resurrection of Jesus's himself.²¹ Although the noun *σημεῖον* (sign) is not explicitly used in describing Jesus's death and resurrection, there are two reasons why Jesus's death and resurrection should be understood as the ultimate sign in John's Gospel. First, the location of this purpose statement points to John having achieved his overall goal at this point in the Gospel. The opening chapter identifies the divinity of Jesus as the Word who was God (John 1:1) and who became flesh (1:14), a point that the readers see the disciples realize in John 20:28 when Thomas confesses Jesus to be Lord and God because of the physical resurrection. That is, the disciples only achieve the same knowledge as the reader after Jesus's death and resurrection. Second, the intrusive narrator presents the death and resurrection of Christ as the key events that give meaning to the signs. So in John 2:22 it is only after the resurrection that the disciples understand that Jesus was talking about his body when discussing the temple with the Jews.²² These observations about the contents of the Gospel fit neatly with the working gospel outlines above. The key events are the death and resurrection of Jesus—the common elements with the other apostles in their mission.

John 20:30–31 also indicates the purpose of the Gospel: so that the reader might believe that the Christ, the Son of God, is Jesus. That is, John wrote to present a depiction of Jesus's signs so that the reader would identify the anticipated Christ, the Son of God, with the human Jesus. This purpose shaped John's choice of material to include in the Gospel (cf. John 21:25), so it should shape how the events in the Gospel are read. Sometimes this is obvious, as in John 7:31, where Jesus's signs lead many of the people to ask if the Christ would do more signs than Jesus. This poses the question to the

²¹ Köstenberger (*A Theology of John's Gospel and Letters*, 328–32) does not think that Jesus's death and resurrection should be understood as a sign due to his definition of "sign" as "a symbol-laden, but not necessarily 'miraculous' public work of Jesus selected and explicitly identified as such by John for the reason that it displays God's glory in Jesus who is thus shown to be God's true representative" (p. 328). On the other hand, D. A. Carson (*Gospel According to John*, PNTC [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991], 661) states that "the greatest sign of them all is the death, resurrection and exaltation of the incarnate Word."

²² See also John 7:39; 12:16; 16:7. Carson (*The Gospel According to John*, 434) argues that the term "glorification" that occurs in this references incorporates both Jesus's death and resurrection.

reader of the Gospel about what they make of Jesus and his signs with regards to his identity—is he the Christ of Old Testament expectation? On other occasions the question of Jesus’s identity revealed in his signs is used to prompt the reader to consider their personal confidence in Jesus. For example, are they willing to make the identification that may lead to them being put out of the synagogue (John 9:16–22; 12:37–43)? On still other occasions the exact impact of the events is not obvious, but rather the cumulative effect of the signs is mounting up to achieve the purpose.

This discussion of the purpose also confirms the mission audience of the Gospel—that John wrote his Gospel to Jews. The syntax of the purpose statement indicates that the identification it desires the reader to make is that the Christ, the Son of God is Jesus.²³ That is, the question that is being answered in the Gospel is, who is the Christ? This is a Jewish question because this is a Jewish title, as is the question, who is the Son of God?—the second part of this desired identification. In the Old Testament, the title “Son of God” was a way of speaking about the king of Israel (2 Sam 7:14; Pss 2:7, 12; 80:15; 89:26–27).²⁴ These two titles are grammatically in apposition and thus synonymous. That John understands these two titles as synonymous is evident in John 1:49, where Nathanael confesses Jesus to be “the Son of God ... the king of Israel,” putting the titles in apposition, thus indicating that they have the same meaning. This indicates that the intended audience of the Fourth Gospel are Jews who are trying to answer the question, who is the Christ, the Son of God? John’s answer is Jesus, as demonstrated in the signs, the greatest of which is Jesus’s death and resurrection.

John 20:31 also reveals the intended result of reading John—that the identification of the Christ, the Son of God as Jesus would lead to life. This statement presupposes that the audience is in a state of death and needs life. The Fourth Gospel teaches this elsewhere, either as the words of Jesus and John the Baptist or as comments of the intrusive narrator.²⁵ So, for instance, John 3:16 understands that people are perishing without God’s Son being sent into the world. Or again in John 3:36 it is stated that without obedience to the Son, God’s wrath remains on individuals.²⁶ This indicates that the

²³ D. A. Carson, “Syntactical and Text-Critical Observations on John 20:30–21: One More Round on the Purpose of the Fourth Gospel,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 124 (2005): 693–714; Matthew D. Jensen, “John Is No Exception: Identifying the Subject of *εἰμὶ* and Its Implications,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 135.2 (2016): 341–53.

²⁴ The title “Son of God” as it occurs in John and elsewhere in the New Testament is sadly beyond the scope of this article. It is an area of my current research in which I hope to publish in the future.

²⁵ For discussion about the limits of the speeches in John 3, see Carson, *Gospel According to John*, 203–4; Andreas J. Köstenberger, *John*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 113–14.

²⁶ See also 5:24.

Gospel itself has at least some evangelistic intent. Much is made of the text critical issues involved in John 20:31, whether the verb “believe” is in the aorist (πιστεύητε) or the present (πιστεύετε), as though from the tense one can determine whether the Gospel was written for evangelistic (aorist) or edificatory (present) purposes.²⁷ Putting aside this false dichotomy, the desired result of “life” indicates that at the very least the Gospel is evangelistic in purpose because it aims to convince the reader to believe that the Christ, the Son of God is Jesus and as a result gain life.

So from the metacomment of John 20:30–31 it becomes evident that John’s Gospel was written to Jews about some of the historical events in the life of Jesus, the chief of which was his death and resurrection. It was written in order that the readers would believe that the Christ, the Son of God, was Jesus and so have life. This understanding correlates with some of Paul’s descriptions of the apostle’s theology. It does not explicitly indicate the theological significance of the events of Jesus’s death and resurrection beyond giving life, nor does it rely explicitly on an epistemological appeal to the Old Testament to justify its interpretation of the events (although the titles “Christ” and “Son of God” both implicitly require that the reader be familiar with the Old Testament, as both are meaningless without an understanding of its categories).

3. Old Testament Quotations

That the Old Testament is the epistemological basis for the theological understanding of the historical events in John is widely acknowledged in scholarship. For example, Judith Lieu states,

More than in any of the other Gospels, Scripture provides the indispensable reference point and scaffolding for the argument and the thought of John. From apparently inconsequential allusions through to John’s distinctive Christology, it is Scripture that makes the Gospel ‘work.’²⁸

²⁷ See Gordon D. Fee, “On the Text and Meaning of John 20:30–31,” in *The Four Gospels*, ed. F. V. Segbroeck et al. (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1992), 3:2193–205; Carson, “Syntactical and Text-Critical,” 693–714.

²⁸ Judith Lieu, “Narrative Analysis and Scripture in John,” in *The Old Testament in the New Testament: Essays in Honour of J. L. North*, JSNTSup 189, ed. S. Moyise (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 144. Other scholars who also express this position include C. K. Barrett, “The Old Testament in the Fourth Gospel,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 48 (1947): 155–69; D. A. Carson, “John and the Johannine Epistles,” in *It Is Written: Scripture Citing Scripture: Essays in Honour of Barnabas Lindars*, ed. D. A. Carson and H. G. M. Williamson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 245–64; and Johannes Beutler, “The Use of ‘Scripture’ in the Gospel of John,” in *Exploring John: In Honor of D. Moody Smith*, ed. R. Alan Culpepper and C. Clifton Black (Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox, 1996), 147–62.

There are seventeen explicitly acknowledged quotes from Scripture in John. They come from the mouths of the narrator (John 1:23; 2:17; 12:14–15), the crowd (6:31; 7:42), Jesus (6:45; 7:38; 10:34; 13:18; 15:25; 17:12), and the intrusive narrator (12:38, 39–40; 19:24, 28, 36, 37). The intrusive narrator's Old Testament quotes further demonstrate the Gospel writer's understanding of the gospel as being the same as the one outlined in Paul's summary.

There are two sets of metacomments in John where the narrator intrudes into the narrative in order to explain the reason for an event happening by explicit appeal to the Old Testament and thus to indicate its theological significance.

First, there are four quotes in the passion narrative where the intrusive narrator appeals to the Old Testament for the significance of Jesus's death. The casting of lots to determine who got Jesus's clothes (John 19:24) was in fulfillment of Psalm 22:18. Further, Jesus's calling out about his thirst (John 19:28) was likewise in fulfillment of Psalm 22:15. That is, the narrator understands and explicitly presents Jesus's death as fulfilling the expectations of Psalm 22, a psalm where David cries out to God to be with him and rescue him from the many enemies around him who are causing his pain and demise. Hence the intrusive narrator, via his explicit appeal to Psalm 22, presents the event of Jesus's death as fulfilling the persecution of David at the hands of others. Jesus's death is at the hands of the people in the same way David spoke of his persecutions.²⁹

The intrusive narrator also states that Jesus bones were not broken, fulfilling the expectations associated with the Passover lamb of Exodus 12:46 (see also Num 9:12).³⁰ That is, John presents Jesus as the Passover lamb whose death causes God to pass over the people and not count their sins against them. Finally, John records the piercing of Jesus's side (John 19:37) as fulfilling Zechariah 12:10, where the king of Israel was pierced for the people leading to the mourning of the nation and their cleansing from sin (Zech 13:1). That is, the narrator understands that Jesus was the king of Israel (John 18:33, 39; 19:3, 14–15, 19, 21) whose death would result in both Israel's mourning (20:11, 13) and the forgiveness of her sin (20:23).

So from the intrusive narrator's comments in the passion narrative the reader should understand that the event of Jesus's death fulfilled the

²⁹ It should also be noted at this point that both Matthew (27:46) and Mark (15:34) have Jesus quoting Ps 22:1 on the cross as he is dying, thus revealing the consistency of the apostolic gospel message and its understanding of events.

³⁰ The Old Testament text quoted could be Ps 34:20 instead of Exod 12:46. However, given the context of Jesus's death happening at Passover (John 18:28, 39) and the identifications of Jesus made by John the Baptist in John 1:29 and 36 as the "lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world," it seems more likely that Exod 12:46 is in view here.

expectations of Scripture that the people would reject the Davidic King, persecuting him to the point of death. This death was as the Passover lamb for the sin of the people, and it resulted in forgiveness. This seems in accord with the gospel summary of 1 Corinthians 15:3–5, where Jesus's death was for sin in accordance with the Old Testament Scriptures.

Second, the intrusive narrator explains the reason for the Jewish rejection of Jesus (John 12:38, 39–40) with two explicit quotes from Isaiah. Jesus performed many signs, but the people did not believe in him, and so the words of Isaiah 53:1 and 6:10 were fulfilled. That is, just as the people of Isaiah's day rejected the suffering servant of God, Jesus was also rejected. Here John presents Jesus as the suffering servant, and so at this turning point in the Gospel, where Jesus has just spoken about his death (John 12:32–33), the quote from Isaiah 53:1 generates expectations that Jesus would die for the sin of the people (Isa 53:6–9)—the very thing that the rest of John describes. The rejection of Jesus was also because the people were hardened to the message about Jesus, just as were the people of Isaiah's day (Isa 6:10). As in Isaiah's day, this hardening was required in order that judgment be brought on the nation of Israel so that they would turn and be comforted with the words of forgiveness. Jesus needed to be rejected by the people so that God's judgment for sin would fall on him at his death, with the consequence that some of Israel would receive the comfort of forgiveness (John 21:15–19). So the second set of explicit Old Testament quotes in John reveals that Jesus was the suffering servant whose death was for sin and whose rejection by Israel fulfilled Isaianic expectation.

Thus the intrusive narrator appeals to the Old Testament as the basis for the understanding of the significance of the events surrounding Jesus's death. His death is presented as being for sin as the suffering servant and the Passover lamb. This death as the Davidic King of Israel results in forgiveness of sin for the people of Israel, who are under the judgment of God because of their hardened hearts. This significance and its epistemological basis in the Old Testament Scriptures accords with the gospel summary agreed on when the pillar apostles met to discuss the global mission they were undertaking in response to Jesus's command. Thus John's Gospel is an evangelistic book written to Jews presenting the events of Jesus's death and resurrection and explaining their significance for sin and Jesus's lordship on the basis of the Old Testament Scriptures.

4. Possible Objections

There are three possible objections to this mission understanding of John's theology just outlined: the notion that the audience was Jewish, the negative

depiction of “the Jews” if indeed it was written for a Jewish audience, and the theological emphasis of the atoning work of Jesus in John rather than the more traditional understanding that John’s theology affirms the incarnation.

There are a number of features in John that have led some scholars to understand John’s audience as including Gentiles. For instance, John translates key Jewish terms for the readers as if they would not have known them, specifically *Rabbi* (John 1:38), *Messiah* (1:41), *the pool of Siloam* (9:7), and *Rabboni* (20:16). Further, he also discusses the tension between Jews and Samaritans (4:9), Jewish practices (stone water jars, 2:6; purity at Passover, 18:28; burial, 19:40) and geography (Bethany was two miles from Jerusalem, 11:18). However, this does not prove that the audience were Gentiles, only that the readers required some explanations in order to understand the text. They could have been diaspora Jews who had not visited Jerusalem and fallen out of the Jewish practices. Further, John explains some terms by putting them into Aramaic, a strange thing to do if he were writing for Gentiles (the Jerusalem pool by the Sheep Gate, which in Aramaic is Bethesda, 5:2; the stone pavement, which in Aramaic is Gabbatha, 19:13; the place of the skull, which in Aramaic is Golgotha, 19:17). It makes better sense that these were known to a Jewish audience and he was making sure that the place names used were easily understood to Jews who may only have known them by their Aramaic names.

This leads to the next objection: if John was written for an evangelistic purpose for Jews, why characterize some of the opponents of Jesus so negatively as “the Jews” (John 9:22)? This is a simplistic objection that fails to note that the phrase “the Jews” is also used positively (4:22) and in a neutral manner (11:45–46). The “negative” uses seem to occur as part of John’s irony or even sarcasm.³¹ These opponents claim to know Moses (5:39–47) and be children of Abraham (8:31–58) and so reject Jesus. The irony is that both Moses and Abraham were preparatory for Jesus, so Moses will be the accuser of these opponents (5:45–47). These “Jews” want to have a version of Judaism without the fulfilling figure—Jesus. In this way, this “negative” characterization is a warning to the Jewish audience that the authentic version of Judaism is belief in Jesus and not some aberrant denial that was doing the rounds in the first century.

It is interesting to note that three of the remaining explicit Old Testament quotes in John stand out because the narrator intrudes to explain their significance from the situation post Jesus’s death and resurrection. So Jesus’s zeal

³¹ Martinus C. de Boer, “The Depiction of ‘the Jews’ in John’s Gospel: Matters of Behavior and Identity,” in *Anti Judaism and the Fourth Gospel*, ed. R. Bierenger, D. Pollefeyt, and F. Vandecasteele-Vanneuville (Assen: Royal Van Gorcum, 2001), 271–80.

for the temple (John 2:17, quoting Ps 69:9) is followed with the statement in John 2:22 that it was only after Jesus's resurrection from the dead that the disciples believed the Scripture and understood that Jesus's discussion of the destruction and rebuilding of the temple referred to his body. In John 7:38 Jesus's quote is followed with the explanation of the Scripture being fulfilled with the gift of the Spirit post Jesus's glorification (7:39), and Jesus's triumphal entry on a donkey (John 12:14–15, quoting Zech 9:9) is again only understood after Jesus's glorification (John 12:16). Not only is the Old Testament used to make sense of the events of Jesus's death and resurrection, the death and resurrection are a vital piece of information needed to understand the Old Testament. There is a recursive relationship between the two, which means John presents them as being understood only in relationship to each other. The Jewish opponents of Jesus appeal to the Old Testament (Abraham and Moses) but fail to see Jesus in it, resulting in a misunderstanding of the very texts they cite. This leads to their ironic description as "the Jews."

Finally, it could be objected that this understanding of John's Gospel focuses too much on the death and resurrection of Jesus instead of the incarnation. After all, the prologue starts with an affirmation of the incarnation (John 1:1, 14), the Gospel discusses Jesus's Sonship, and the church fathers looked to John (in particular the title "Son of God") in formulating the doctrine of the incarnation reflected in the Nicene and Athanasian Creeds. Each of these objections has problems. First, even though the prologue affirms Jesus's divinity, the vocabulary of "the Word" does not occur again in John. This should temper understanding the prologue as containing a complete summary of the Gospel. It could just as easily be giving the background information that is needed to understand the Gospel rather than outlining its key themes. Further, it is a false dichotomy to stress the incarnation as the theological theme in John as opposed to the death and resurrection, because it is the crucified and resurrected incarnate Christ who appears to Thomas, resulting in the declaration of Jesus's divinity at the end of John (John 20:28). The event that moves the disciples to confess the divinity of Jesus is the resurrection. Second, the language related to "son" in John needs to be read very carefully. "Son" occurs on its own, in relationship to "Father," and in the titles "Son of God" and "Son of Man." To confuse these or import the meaning of one into the other is problematic. The title "Son of God" is clearly not the same as "Son of Man," so caution should be exercised when understanding "Son of God" in the context of the Father-Son passages. Finally, it is anachronistic to read the church fathers' use of titles into John. When writing the creeds, the fathers were not strictly exegeting the text of the Fourth Gospel, but rather formulating a statement of belief to combat

particular heresies. Understanding “Son of God” as a divine title in John seems to owe more to Chalcedon than to the Old Testament background. This same problem is evident in some theological works that understand Christology as the doctrine of the incarnation rather than the study of the title “Christ.”³² This is not to say that the creeds do not express the theological content of the Scriptures, but rather to sound the warning that the titles used in the creeds may not match New Testament usage.

Summary

It is evident from examination of some of the metacomments and narrative intrusions that John’s Gospel is a record of the events of Jesus (climaxing in his death and resurrection) that are given theological significance (death for sin as the suffering servant and Passover lamb) and justified by appeal to the Old Testament. This sits squarely in accordance with the gospel summary that the pillar apostles agreed on. Further, the Gospel of John was written to Jews with the evangelistic purpose of convincing them that the Christ, the Son of God, was the man Jesus. This again agrees with what is known of the mission of the earliest church.³³

Conclusion

John’s theology is in accord with that of the other apostles. He takes the events of Jesus’s death and resurrection, views them through the lens of the Old Testament Scriptures, and concludes that Jesus’s death was for sin.³⁴ Although there is much in the Fourth Gospel that marks it as different from the Synoptics, the same fundamental theology of the apostolic mission found in the Synoptics is not only evident but explicitly recorded in the metacomments for the reader to see and understand. Thus any discussion of the relationship between the Gospels should start on this basis and with this assumption before the value of the unique presentation of each Gospel can be appreciated.

³² An example of this is James D. G. Dunn’s book *Christology in the Making* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1980), where the book’s subtitle is “A New Testament Inquiry into the Origins of the Doctrine of the Incarnation.”

³³ I have applied this same methodology to 1 John to show that it shares the same mission theology and epistemology. First John was not written to deal with a denial of the incarnation by some Docetic, (proto-)Gnostic, or Cerinthian teachers, but rather to affirm the resurrection leading to the identification of the Christ, the Son of God with the person Jesus. See Matthew D. Jensen, “‘Jesus Is the Christ’: A New Paradigm for Understanding 1 John,” *Reformed Theological Review* 75.1 (2016): 1–20.

³⁴ He does not explicitly do this for the resurrection, but the grounds are laid for such an activity in his use of the glorification language. See John 7:39; 12:16.