Introduction

There have been many commentaries on the Gospel of John since 125 CE, when the Valentinian gnostic leader Heracleon first wrote one. Commentators, particularly after the Reformation, have usually taken an exegetical and sociohistorical approach. Some scholars have used rhetorical criticism, a social-scientific approach, narrative criticism, and/or a sociorhetorical perspective based on literary/rhetorical and cultural perspectives for interpreting John.[1]

Any writing of the first century needs to be set in its historical, religious, and social contexts for a proper understanding of its complexity. Previous studies have located John's Gospel in a context of purported conflict between Jewish Christians and the unbelieving Jews in the late first century.[2] By observing the literary and rhetorical texture of John's Gospel, Keener attempts to reconstruct the social contexts in which John was written.[3] The events recorded in the Gospel and the writings of the late first century and early second century help us to reconstruct the historical situation in which John's Gospel was probably written.

In this commentary I attempt to set the Fourth Gospel in its historical setting and then to show that the vision of Jesus for the world, according to John, goes beyond his sacrificial death, resurrection, and appearance to the constitution and function of a new humanity, called "God's new community," that is bound to God by the new covenant made in Jesus.[4]

Who Wrote John's Gospel and Where?

John's Gospel declares that it was written by "the disciple whom Jesus loved," who "has seen" the crucified Jesus and has borne witness (19:35),

1. E.g., Culpepper 1989; Stibbe 1993; Malina and Rohrbaugh 1998; and Neyrey 2007.

2. Cf. Brown 1978: 1.lxxii–lxxv; *idem* 1979: 166–67; Martyn 2003: 37–62; Dunn 1983: 318–25.

3. Keener 2005: 1.xxv, 140–70.

4. Pryor calls this community "the covenant community" (Pryor 1992: 157–80).

not merely by verbal proclamation, but also by putting the Jesus tradition in writing. What this disciple spoke and wrote is categorically attested by a community as "true" (21:24).

The epithet "The Gospel According to John" appears in the papyri manuscripts P^{66} (second century CE) and P^{72} (ca. third century CE). Who is this John? Is he "the disciple whom Jesus loved," who is traditionally identified as John the Son of Zebedee? Was he one of the Twelve or a disciple outside the Twelve? Was he a historical figure or a symbolic figure created by the writer? Why does he appear only in the later part of the Gospel (13:23; 19:26–27; 20:2–5, 8; 21:7, 20–24)? Some accept "the disciple whom Jesus loved" as both a historical and symbolic figure from Judea and as one of Jesus' disciples, but not as one of the Twelve.[5] There is little doubt about the Beloved Disciple as an eyewitness who wrote the Gospel. But scholars are not sure of the identity of this disciple.

The fact that this unnamed disciple was lying close to the breast of Jesus during the Passover meal (13:23) gives us the clue that he must have been one of the twelve disciples of Jesus. Otherwise, John's use of the phrase "having loved *his own*" in the context of Jesus' supper with them (13:1–2); the presence of Judas Iscariot (13:2, 27), Simon Peter (13:6, 24, 36, 37), Thomas (14:5), Philip (14:8–9), and Judas (not Iscariot; 14:22); Jesus' exemplary act before those who called him "Teacher and Lord" (13:13–15); the whole "farewell discourse" after the Supper (13:31–16:33); and Jesus' subsequent prayer for the men whom God had given to him (17:1–26) would all be inexplicable. The Synoptic tradition shows that the Twelve alone were eating the Passover with Jesus (Matt 26:20; Mark 14:17–18; cf. Luke 22:11, 14). The intimate relationship between the Beloved Disciple and Peter and their complementary roles in the community, as drawn from John (e.g., 13:23; 20:1–10), show that the Beloved Disciple is likely John the Son of Zebedee (cf. Acts 1:13; 3:1, 3, 4, 11; 4:13, 19; 8:14; see also comment on 13:23). The arguments against the view that the Beloved Disciple is John the Son of Zebedee[6] depend mainly on the fact that John's name is plainly mentioned in the Synoptic Gospels but not in John's Gospel. This observation ignores the fact that John uses the Synoptic tradition freely in combination with his own tradition.[7]

5. Quast 1989: 16–25; Culpepper 2000: 84; Bauckham 2006: 127–29, 402–16.

6. See Culpepper 2000: 75–76.

7. Both Brown (1979: 33–34) and Schnackenburg (1982: 3.385) changed their view that the beloved disciple was John, the Son of Zebedee, by arguing that the disciple whom

The statement "This is the disciple who . . . has written these things" (21:24) does not necessarily imply that he wrote the Gospel as we have it today. The assumption that John the Son of Zebedee, a Galilean Jew, wrote the whole of John ignores the numerous Judean elements that the Gospel contains, including the correct geographical references to the events that took place in Judea.[8] True, John, being a leader in Jerusalem church, would have known well the places and practices in Judea. However, the numerous parallels between John and the Qumran documents, the underlying rabbinic and targumic traditions, John's christological apologetic rooted in the OT, and the reinterpreted Jewish mysticism, etc. presented in John far exceed the possible intellectual knowledge of a Galilean fisherman.

Hengel contends that the author of the Fourth Gospel, John the Elder, being a Jew from Jerusalem, migrated at the verge of the fall of Jerusalem in 66–70 CE to Asia Minor, most probably to Ephesus, where he started a school, normally known as the Johannine School.[9] However, we have evidence for the migration of John the Son of Zebedee to Ephesus. The apocryphal *Acts of John* (ca. 150–60 CE) shows that John was widely involved in evangelistic and pastoral ministry in Asia, including Ephesus.[10] Irenaeus (ca. 130–200 CE) had heard Polycarp (ca. 70 CE–160 CE), who received information about the works and words of the Lord from the eyewitnesses, including John (*Eccl. Hist.* 5.20.4). Irenaeus writes that John the disciple of the Lord ministered in the church in Ephesus, founded by Paul, until the time of Trajan (98–117 CE; *Eccl. Hist.* 3.23.3–4; cf. 5.8.4).

Dionysius of Alexandria (the third century CE) indicates that there are in Ephesus tombs of two Johns (see *Eccl. Hist.* 3.23.6; 7.25.16; cf. 3.31.3; 3.39.6; 5.24.3 for Polycrates' confirmation that the resting place of John was in Ephesus). The *Apostolic Constitutions* (third century CE) mentions that the apostle John installed another John in Ephesus as his successor. Papias refers to two Johns in his writing (125–35 CE), in the context of his enquiry with those who had contacts with some of the disciples of Jesus about "what John and Matthew said" and about "the things which Aristion and John the elder, the disciples of the Lord, say" (*Eccl. Hist.* 3.39.4).

Jesus loved is an anonymous, but historical, figure who was not one of the twelve, but who was probably a man from Jerusalem. However, their arguments for later position are not as convincing as their original arguments for the beloved disciple as the son of Zebedee.

8. Cf. Brown 2010: 200–202.

9. Hengel 1989: 80–83, 109–10.

10. Barrett 1978: 103.

The above-mentioned writings enable us to infer that there were two Johns: John the Son of Zebedee, who was the apostle John, and John the Elder. Both of them were Jesus' disciples who were ministering in Ephesus, though John the Elder was not one of the Twelve. Hengel, who finds a close parallel between the order in which Papias gives the names of disciples (*Eccl. Hist.* 3.39.4) and that in John's Gospel, identifies Aristion and John the Elder with the "two others of his disciples" of John 21:2.[11]

John the Son of Zebedee, who may be the "disciple whom Jesus loved," must have moved with a group of his followers, among whom was also the presbyter John, from Palestine to Asia Minor around 66–70 CE and perhaps joined the church in Ephesus founded by Paul.[12] This community eventually accepted the authority and leadership of the Beloved Disciple and hence is known as the "Johannine community." John the Elder (cf. 2 John 1; 3 John 1), who was ordained by the apostle John to be his successor in Ephesus, could have been a Jew, possibly from a priestly family in Jerusalem.[13] He might have founded a learning center in Ephesus on behalf of the Johannine community for studying, learning, teaching, and writing.[14]

By reconstructing the available information, we may say that John the Elder composed the Fourth Gospel in Ephesus by using the sources written and orally communicated by John the Son of Zebedee, an eyewitness of the life and ministry of Jesus, when the apostle had died (ca. 98–117 or 98–101 CE).[15] The experience of John the Elder, who himself was a disciple of Jesus, and the sharing he had in the community of Jesus' life and ministry, would have been an added source to compose the Gospel with his own theology.

We may also see the hand of an editor in the final stage of the writing the Gospel in the glosses, comments, and explanations, including the translations of Hebrew/Aramaic words into Greek. The addition of chapter 21 after a proper conclusion in 20:30–31, with a final conclusion in 21:24–25, confirms the additional work of an editor. While the phrase "I suppose" (21:25) implies the editor as an individual, the phrase "we know" (21:24)

11. Hengel 1989: 17–21; Culpepper 2000: 111–12.

12. Cf. Anderson 2011: 135.

13. Hengel 1989: 7, 125, 144 n. 29; Barrett 1978: 101–2. However, Polycrates, the bishop of Ephesus (189–98 CE), identifies John, who leaned back on the Lord's breast, as a priest (*Eccl. Hist.* 3.31.3; 5.24.3). This indicates the confusions prevailing in the "John tradition."

14. Hengel (1989: 22, 159 n. 122) gives evidence of several fragments that show a direct connection existed between Papias and the presbyter John.

15. Köstenberger 2009: 7–8.

refers to a community on whose behalf the editor gave final shape to the Gospel.

The authorship of John's Gospel, then, needs to be placed in at least three stages of development: in the Johannine community at Ephesus[16] with the real author (John the Elder of Judea, who actually wrote the Gospel), the implied/ideal author (the Beloved Disciple, who could probably be John the Son of Zebedee) whose writings were used, and finally an editor from Johannine community who added explanatory notes and the epilogue.[17]

When Was John's Gospel Composed and Published?

Some have argued that John's Gospel must have been written in the mid second century. In fact, the first commentary, at least partly, was written by a gnostic in 125 CE, and by 173 CE it came to be well established and highly regarded by, for example, Tatian, as found in his fourfold Gospel harmony, the *Diatessaron*.[18] The presence of a part of the passion narrative of John in the second-century CE papyri manuscripts (P^{52}, P^{90}, P^{66})[19] speaks in favor of the Gospel as in circulation in the early or mid second century CE. However, the Gospel must have existed some time before it came to be written in papyrus scrolls after being circulated in Asia Minor and then in Palestine and other Christian centers before it came to be known in Egypt. So Barrett argues that a date around 110 CE may be placed as the extreme limit for the *composition* of the Gospel, while 140 CE may be considered as the extreme limit for its *publication*.[20] P^{52}, dated about 130 CE, makes us hesitant to conclude that John was written after 110 CE.[21]

Dodd detected the earliest tradition (the Synoptic tradition) in John's Gospel,[22] while Robinson argued for the procedural priority of John's Gospel.[23] The Fourth Gospel contains precise topography, precise chronology,

16. Alexandria, Antioch, and Transjordan are proposed as other possible places for the composition of John's Gospel; cf. Brown 2010: 202–6.

17. For the three-person theory see Culpepper 1989: 3–49.

18. Perrin 2010: 301–18, esp. 315.

19. See von Wahlde 2010: 1.7 n. 6.

20. Barrett 1978: 110, 128.

21. So Hengel 1989: 81. More recently Czachesz (Czachesz 2010: 69 n. 75) has rejected that P^{52} necessitates a first-century date for John by uncritically following Nongbri's.

22. Dodd 1965.

23. Robinson (1985: 3–5) argues for a "procedural" priority of John rather than for a temporal priority; for him John's Gospel is the nearest to the source because it is believed

selectivity of narratives, discourses, and dialogues, narrative asides, and the firsthand testimony of the eyewitnesses—all being distinctive features of Greco-Roman historiography.[24] Dunn detects in John the Jesus tradition (or the "earlier oral tradition") remembered and retold in a different way from the Jesus tradition used by the Synoptic writers.[25] These studies point to a date in reasonable proximity to the eyewitnesses and the Jesus tradition from which the composition of John derives.

The references to Christians being excommunicated from the synagogue (9:22; 12:42; 16:2) bring us close to 85 CE, when the chart of "Eighteen Benedictions" was prepared to curse Christians as heretics in the synagogue services. It is justifiable, then, to suggest that John was written ca. 85–90 CE[26] and published ca. 100 CE.

What Is the Historical Setting in Which John's Gospel Emerged?

(i) If our contention for John as the late-first-century document is correct, then the persecution and threat of death faced by Christians from "the Jews" at that time is the milieu in which John might have been written (9:22; 12:42; 16:2). The Jewish authorities could not accept Jesus as the Christ because Jesus, for them, made himself equal to God (5:18; 10:33, 36) but was eventually crucified as a criminal. This religio-historical situation explains why John emphasizes the present availability of the life of the age to come for those who believe in the crucified Jesus as the Christ.

(ii) After the fall of Jerusalem with its temple in 70 CE, the rabbis attempted intensively to revive Judaism. Rabbis like Yohanan ben Zakkai (1–84 CE) and other religious Jews meditated on the Law with the aim of bringing the presence of God down to earth in the absence of the temple. Belief in angels as mediators between the transcendent God and human beings became common. At this point, interest on "Merkabah mysticism," an experience of ascending to heaven in a trance by means of meditation on the Scripture (e.g., Ezekiel 1, Isaiah

to have come from the inner circle of the Twelve; cf. Robinson 1976: 307–8 n. 218.

24. Bauckham 2007: 17–36.

25. Dunn 2011: 157–85.

26. Keener 2005: 1.140–42 suggests a date around 90 CE as a working hypothesis.

6, and Daniel 7) to see God's glory as seated on the throne in human form, was developing. John addresses this trend by emphasizing that God's kingly glory is to be seen in Jesus here on earth itself (1:14, 18, 50b–51; 3:13; 12:41; 14:9–11).

(iii) "The Jews" perceived the Christians' worship of Jesus as a threat to Jewish monotheistic faith because of the Christian claim of divine revelation in Jesus Christ. Christians were accused of believing in two divine powers in heaven. In this context, one should understand the monotheistic faith of Christians reflected in John's Gospel (e.g., 5:18; 8:28, 29; 10:15, 30; 12:44–45; 14:8–11).

(iv) The Johannine community at this time faced several problems:

a. At the end of the first century, the apostolic eyewitnesses, particularly the Beloved Disciple, had died. This situation possibly could have led the Johannine community into confusion, insecurity, and a sharp leadership crisis. John 10:1–18 and 13:1–20 seem to address the problem of leadership.

b. Because of the delay in Jesus' second coming, the community was losing hope, for some were expecting the return of Jesus within the lifetime of the Beloved Disciple himself (cf. 21:23). This situation may explain why John focuses more on the present experience of eternal life and on the indwelling of Jesus and the Father within the believers (e.g., 5:24; 6:40; 20:31; 15:4; 17:21–23) without diminishing the hope of future possession of eternal life.

c. The heretical groups, which questioned either the divinity of Jesus or his humanity, were influencing Christians, particularly the members of Johannine community. A group in Ephesus seems to have claimed John the Baptist as the Light from heaven and as the Messiah himself (cf. Acts 19:1–7).

Some believed that Jesus was the son of Joseph while Christ was a celestial aeon who descended on Jesus at the time of his baptism and left him before he was crucified. They did not accept the *divinity* of Jesus. This belief resembles that of Cerinthus, who possibly lived in the late first century (cf. Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* 3.3.4; 3.11.1).

The Docetists, on the other hand, claimed that Jesus Christ did not truly come in the flesh, and that his flesh was only an appearance. For them Christ only seemed to be a man. Thus the Docetists refused to accept the *humanity* of Jesus.

In the late first century there seems to have been followers of Gnosticism in its embryonic stage. Gnosticism claimed that people became ignorant by the influence of evil forces and that God sent his messenger to cast away their ignorance and give them salvation in terms of the knowledge (*gnōsis*) that they belong to the other world. Their dualistic thought led the Gnostics to reject Christ who came in flesh, presuming that a holy God cannot take up human flesh, which is evil. John argues against such teachings, saying that eternal life is possible in "knowing" the only true God who was manifested in Jesus (17:3).

d. The influence of these heresies began to threaten the love and unity that existed in the Johannine church and led the members into perplexity about the person Jesus and his teachings, particularly his teaching on end-time events. While John's Gospel foresees a threat to the unity in the church (cf. 17:21–23), 1 John indicates that the split has already taken place (cf. 1 John 2:19).

(v) In the late first century there was an intermingling of religious and philosophical ideas; cults and philosophies influenced one another. It does not seem that John was "influenced" by Hellenistic and Gnostic ideas as such, but he uses language and ideas familiar in the religious and philosophical environment.[27] John thus seems to have been written in a pluralistic context quite similar to our own time.

Why Was the Gospel of John Written?

We may now pose the question as to why John was written when the other three canonical Gospels were already in circulation.

Some suggest that John was written to supplement the Synoptic Gospels in content, chronology, and interpretation and to produce what Clement of Alexandria (ca. 150–215 CE) called "a spiritual Gospel," as it was believed that the other three Gospels contain only the earthly aspects of

27. Kanagaraj 2002: 47–60.

Jesus' story.[28] If so, then it is difficult to explain some of the outward differences found between the Synoptic Gospels and the Fourth Gospel.

Another view is that John's primary purpose was to replace the Synoptic Gospels by producing a Gospel *par excellence* that would render the others superfluous and would eventually drive them out of circulation. This idea appears dimly in the Muratorian Canon (ca. 200 CE).[29] However, John widely uses the Gospel tradition, some of which appears in the Synoptic Gospels, in his writing and there is no clue that he wished to supersede the already existing Gospels. If he had planned so, then his omission of such key passages as the birth of Jesus, the Sermon on the Mount/Plain, the Synoptic parables, etc. becomes inexplicable.

Another theory supports the polemical purpose of John. Irenaeus argued that John's Gospel was written to refute the rising heresies of the Nicolaitans and Cerinthians.[30] One can feel the polemical purpose of John when he emphasizes that the pre-existent Word became "flesh," without using the word "man" or "body" (1:14; cf. 6:51–56), and that John the Baptist was neither the Light (1:8) nor the Christ (1:20), but was only a "lamp" (5:35) who came to bear witness to the Light. John's teaching on Jesus' oneness with the Father (5:18; 10:30; 12:44–45; 14:9–11; 17:21–23; 20:28) and equally on his subordination to the Father (5:19–23; 8:16, 28–29; 12:49; 14:28) can better be understood as a polemic against the prevailing heresies about the person Jesus. It seems, however, that John goes beyond this polemic purpose.

John himself categorically states his purpose: "But these things have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that as you believe, you may have life in his name" (20:31). The primary purpose of John, then, is to proclaim the gospel that in Jesus one can experience divine life and to persuade his readers to believe in Jesus as the Christ.

However, the question is: Was the Gospel written to unbelievers or to those who believed in Jesus? The word "to believe" has two different readings, which have equal support in Greek manuscripts (see comment on 20:31). If *pisteuēte* ("to continue believing") is read, then John could have written the Gospel with a didactic purpose to teach young believers to be steadfast in faith in the wake of increasing heretical teachings and persecution. Actually the polemic and the didactic purposes go together, for the

28. *Eccl. Hist.* 6.14.5–7.

29. Santram 1975: 108, 111–12.

30. Cf. Brown 2010: 153–80.

believers could withstand the heresies without proper teaching. If *pisteusēte* ("to start believing") is read, then the primary purpose of John would be to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ to those who have not yet come to faith, whether they be Jews or proselytes or Gentiles or Samaritans. He persuades them to believe Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God, so that they might receive divine life through him.

John's concern for evangelizing all people becomes very obvious, for example, in his use of the term "world" (*kosmos*)—seventy-eight times in the Gospel, whereas it is used only fourteen times in the Synoptics. In the prologue and in 3:16–21 the author of the Gospel shows great concern for the salvation of the "world" (cf. 1:5, 9–11; 3:19–21). The universal outlook is reflected in the Gospel by oft-repeated words such as "as many as," "everyone," "all people," etc.[31] However, proclamation would be impossible unless God's new community becomes active by being equipped and guided by the Holy Spirit to share its faith (15:26–27; 17:20–21, 23).[32] The purpose of John, then, was mainly twofold: (i) to proclaim Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God, to the world; and (ii) to confirm the faith of the believers who will witness to Jesus in the world.

In course of reading this commentary, readers will understand how a new community was formed around Jesus in a covenantal relationship with God and how it drew into itself a diverse range of people, including those who live in our own day (cf. 17:20). One may perceive that the community envisioned by Jesus is rooted in and shaped by the cross. The new life given by the risen Jesus will lead them eventually to continue his mission in the world in the power of the Holy Spirit (20:21–23). The community motif found in John has led many scholars to read the Gospel as "embodying the history of Johannine community."[33] However, the inclusive nature of the Gospel leads us to look into John's community as a universal and inclusive movement.

31. Bauckham (1998: 9–48) argues that the Gospels were written for a wider circulation rather than to a particular audience; cf. Evans 2008: 112.

32. Cf. Brown 2010: 180–83.

33. Bauckham 2007: 21; cf. Pryor 1992: 157–80; Brown 1979.