

P 53 2. *THE DISCOURSES OF THE FOURTH GOSPEL*

THAT THE SPEECH OF JESUS in the Fourth Gospel is usually quite different from that of Jesus in the Synoptics goes without saying. John certainly made no attempt to conceal his own pervasive idiom in this discourse material.¹ In fact, if we omit Jesus' discourses, John's basic accounts about Jesus often resemble the traditions behind the Synoptics. It is Jesus' "teaching and self-presentation" which are most distinctive.² Could these distinctive parts of John's Gospel function as theological commentary, analogous to the function of speeches in many ancient histories (especially among John's contemporaries, but even in some earlier biblical histories)?³ If so, to what extent do they reflect John's sources about Jesus, and to what extent do they simply reflect his interpretation of Jesus? To the extent that they reflect John's interpretation, to what degree would it have been consistent with the historical Jesus' perspectives, perhaps not emphasized or developed in the Markan stream of tradition?

These questions require careful examination. The Gospel assumes that the Paraclete develops but does not obliterate the historical source of Johannine Jesus tradition (14:26), but modern students may be dissatisfied with this claim. We return to some of these questions in the chapters on authorship (addressing eyewitness tradition) and Christology, but we must first investigate standard means of transmitting authoritative sayings as well as the function of speeches in Greco-Roman antiquity.

That even the contents and structure of the discourses diverge significantly from the Synoptics could indicate that John received his tradition through a different means of transmission. In this case, the Synoptics would reflect the more common forms used in transmission of teachers' deeds and sayings (shorter anecdotes rather than long discourses, except in whole epics), and John transmitted longer units of speech.⁴

But this solution appears problematic because students far more often transmitted sayings than the sort of discourses that appear in the Fourth Gospel (we will note exceptions below). John's apparent lack of dependence on prior tradition could imply that he was an eyewitness dependent on his own memory. Yet even eyewitnesses rarely transcribed entire speeches, although in some cases disciples' notes or trained memories may have p 54 preserved the main points. Rather than implying that John used tradition or remembered discourses in an unusual manner, the Fourth Gospel's discourses may imply that he developed his tradition or memories in a manner different from that of the Synoptics. Guided by the Paraclete (see pp. 115–22 on [inspiration](#)), John may have developed his material as would Jewish haggadists or targumists, or Greco-Roman authors practicing the rhetorical technique of elaboration. In this way he would remain faithful to his tradition while expounding its meaning for his own generation.

In this chapter we investigate how sayings traditions were usually preserved and speeches were usually composed, because writers derived these distinct forms of speech from different sources. Sayings of famous teachers were memorized and circulated, and often gathered into collections. Whole speeches, however, were usually preserved only

¹ Often noted, e.g., Goppelt, *Theology*, 1:15.

² Smith, *John* (1999), 30; Culpepper, *John*, 21–22.

³ The speeches in Acts borrow considerable language from the LXX (Soards, *Speeches*, 160) and function similarly to interpretive speeches in Deuteronomy, Joshua, and Samuel-Kings (Soards, *Speeches*, 12–13, 156–57). The same may well be true of John's discourses.

⁴ Some have suggested that Mark drew on complexes of tradition rather than merely individual sayings and stories (Jeremias, *Theology*, 37–38; Taylor, *Mark*, 90; cf. Dodd, *Preaching*, 46–51; idem, *Studies*, 10); while some general arrangements may have become traditional, however, it remains unclear that Mark drew on connected oral narratives, except perhaps on Q at points.

in their general sense, hence redeveloped by historical writers according to basic rules of rhetoric and historical verisimilitude. Speeches could have a historical kernel, and John could have developed such a kernel, based on sayings, controversy-dialogues, or eyewitness notes or memories, without violating its basic sense. As in the case of John's narratives, his trustworthiness regarding the dialogues and discourses rests partly on his claim to eyewitness tradition, which we will address in the following chapter. Here we survey only the cultural possibilities for speech transmission.

Oral Traditions, Notes, and Memory

It has often been argued that oral tradition accounts for the preservation of many of Jesus' sayings in the Synoptics before they reached the written stage. To what degree is oral tradition an acceptable explanation for the preservation of Jesus tradition?

1. Oral Cultures

Oral traditioning is a highly developed art in many cultures, and can be very accurate:

In some parts of Africa the chants sung by the tribes at the annual round-up of the cattle record the history of the tribe for many generations, sometimes extending as far back as three centuries. While the chronology of such recollections is inevitably vague, the points on which they can be checked by some outside evidence—the testimony of some Portuguese or Arab traveller or the like—has shown them to be remarkably accurate in essentials.⁵

In the circles of trained storytellers and sages, memories may preserve information accurately from one generation to the next. Indeed, oral traditioning might invite less redaction than written sources would.⁶ Folklorists have shown that some communities transmit traditions faithfully, with minimal modifications; storytellers create and vary within the constraints of community tradition. Some suggest that writers were far more likely to introduce p 55 substantial changes; thus the written gospels may have introduced more redaction than the relatively few decades of tradition behind them had.⁷

Not all cultures are equally careful about the substance of their oral traditions, although oral history can supplement written records both in orally skilled and orally unskilled societies.⁸ Some modern scholars, citing transmitters of folk ballads in the Balkans, have wrongly concluded that the gospel tradition censored much of Jesus' teaching. But this approach is wrong for several reasons: first, it fails to account for the earliest relevant sources (the

⁵ Lewis, *History*, 43; on a more popular level, cf. the accuracy of the griot's basic information in Alex Haley's popular work *Roots* (New York: Dell, 1976), 717–25.

⁶ Anthologists and others felt free to redact sacred cultural texts (e.g., Cicero *Nat. d.* 3.16.42 [concerning Homer *Od.* 11.600ff.; see esp. Cicero *LCL* 19:324–25 n. a]; Diogenes Laertius 1.48: Solon into Homer *Il.* 2.557), philosophical works (e.g., possibly Hierocles in Stobaeus; Malherbe, *Exhortation*, 85), although Jewish scribes were quite restrained in practicing this with Scripture (despite an occasional fourth-century Palestinian Amora who reportedly attempted some redaction criticism on Scripture: cf. *Lev. Rab.* 6:6; 15:2).

⁷ See Gundry, "Genre," 102; Witherington, *Christology*, 22; contrast the older approach of Dibelius, *Tradition*, 3. Those who transmitted traditions would have preserved sayings with greater detail, allowing greater variation in recounting narratives (Pesch, "Jerusalem," 107; cf. Culpepper, *John*, 21–22).

⁸ Cf., e.g., Hoeree and Hoogbergen, "History"; Aron-Schnapper and Hanet, "Archives"; on rote memorization in traditional Quranic education, cf. Wagner and Lotfi, "Learning." Limitations do, however, exist, especially over time (e.g., Iglesias, "Reflexoes"; Harms, "Tradition"; Raphael, "Travail").

Jesus tradition's often harsh demands show that the church did not censor many of Jesus' teachings that it found uncomfortable); second, it may underestimate Balkan tradition, which includes a measure of fixity as well as flexibility;⁹ finally, the accuracy of transmission varies from one oral culture to another, but sufficient evidence remains to comment more directly on the milieu in which Jesus taught.¹⁰

Centuries before John, the best professional reciters could recite all of Homer by heart (Xenophon *Symp.* 3.5–6). In the ancient Greek world, some writers felt free to add information from centuries-old oral traditions that did not appear in their written sources.¹¹ Such oral tradition is difficult to guarantee;¹² but within the first generation, while eyewitnesses lived, as in the case of Mark and Q, one would expect most of the widely circulated oral sources to remain accurate.

2. Note-Taking

We shall return to the question of disciples' memory, but should note at the outset that early Christians need not have depended solely on oral tradition, even at the beginning. Disciples of Greek teachers often took notes during their teachers' lectures,¹³ and from an early period they sometimes published them. For instance, the notes (*hypomnemata*) of rhetorical lectures by the fifth-century B.C.E. teachers Corax and Tisias, made by themselves or by their students, were published.¹⁴ The practice is attested far closer to the NT era by Arrian, disciple of Epictetus; his accounts of Epictetus's teaching in Koine [p 56](#) Greek are so different from his own Atticizing diction in his other writings¹⁵ that he feels it necessary to apologize for the rough style of the *Discourses*:

But whatever I heard him say I used to write down, word for word, as best I could, endeavouring to preserve it as a memorial, for my own future use, of his way of thinking and the frankness of his speech. They are, accordingly, as you might expect, such remarks as one man might make offhand to another, not such as he would compose for men to read in after time.¹⁶

The potential accuracy of such a practice is inadvertently attested by Quintilian, the famous Roman teacher of rhetoric. He attests that the notes of his students were fairly accurate, though he clearly wished that he had had the opportunity to edit them:

... two books on the art of rhetoric are at present circulating under my name, although never published by me or composed

⁹ Though exact words are fixed only at the written stage, the basic *story* is already stable at the oral stage (Lord, *Singer*, 138).

¹⁰ See below; also Witherington, *Christology*, 8, 17–19, critiquing Kelber. Lampe and Luz, "Overview," 404, provide one humorous example of an oral tradition transmitted probably accurately for over 140 years in the *modern* academy.

¹¹ E.g., Pausanias 1.23.2; cf. also Maclean and Aitken, *Heroikos*, xc–xci. Some claim such centuries-long accuracy for rabbinic tradition (Hilton and Marshall, *Gospels and Judaism*, 15). While I suspect many customs and story lines were thus preserved, attributions might be more difficult.

¹² Eunapius *Lives* 453 (writing it down fixed it and prevented further changes). Even first-century writers recognized that centuries of oral transmission could produce variations in ancient documents (Josephus *Ag. Ap.* 1.12).

¹³ Cf. Seneca *Ep. Lucil.* 108.6; also Stowers, "Diatribē," 74, on Arrian's notes on Epictetus; Lutz, "Musonius," 7, 10, on notes from Musonius's pupils. Cf. the brief discussion of Plutarch's notebooks in the Loeb introduction to *Stoic Contradictions* (LCL 13:369–603, pp. 398–99).

¹⁴ Kennedy, *Classical Rhetoric*, 19.

¹⁵ Loeb introduction to Epictetus, xii–xiii. Even in the *Enchiridion*, where Arrian organizes and summarizes his master's teaching, Epictetus's character dominates.

¹⁶ Epictetus *Diatr.* 1.pref. (LCL 1:4–5).

for such a purpose. One is a two days' lecture which was taken down by the boys who were my audience. The other consists of such notes as my good pupils succeeded in taking down from a course of lectures on a somewhat more extensive scale: I appreciate their kindness, but they showed an excess of enthusiasm and a certain lack of discretion in doing my utterances the honour of publication. Consequently in the present work although some passages remain the same, you will find many alterations and still more additions, while the whole theme will be treated with greater system and with as great perfection as lies within my power.¹⁷

Hearers of speeches sometimes took notes to capture the gist of the speeches,¹⁸ although some speakers wanted their hearers too spellbound to be able to take notes.¹⁹ Full records of speeches from their authors are also possible in some cases: speakers sometimes prepared their own notes or even wrote out the entire speech in advance (Seneca *Controv.* 3. *pref.* 6); more often, they wrote out and improved their full speech after its delivery (Cicero *Brutus* 24.91). While Jewish disciples may have taken fewer notes and emphasized orality much more highly, they also were able to take notes and use them as initial mnemonic devices to recall larger blocs of material.²⁰

One could also take notes from which one would later arrange one's material for a composition, again guarding memory (cf. Cicero *Fin.* 3.3.10; 5.5.12). Thus Aulus Gellius (*pref.* 2) notes that whenever he came across information worth remembering he jotted down notes as an aid to memory; he was very selective, though working through innumerable scrolls (*pref.* 11–12), and ended up with twenty books of notes (*pref.* 22). It is possible that some of Jesus' early hearers may have made notes, as some scholars have argued;²¹ at the very least, it is difficult to doubt that some would have made notes from their memories in the years following.²²

p 57 3. *Disciples, Learning, and Memorization*

But written transmission was often secondary to oral transmission, which played an essential role in Greek circles and the primary role in later rabbinic circles.²³ One philosopher reportedly reproved a friend who lamented losing his notes: “You should have inscribed them . . . on your mind instead of on paper.”²⁴ Disciples had to be attentive; thus the philosopher Peregrinus rebuked an equestrian who seemed inattentive and yawning.²⁵ Sayings attributed to founders of Greek schools were transmitted by members of each school from one generation to the next.²⁶ The practice seems to have been encouraged by the founders of the schools themselves.²⁷ As in the rest of Greco-Roman education,²⁸

¹⁷ Quintilian 1.*pref.* 7–8 (LCL 1:8–9). Other teachers also had problems with people pirating their books and publishing them before they could nuance them properly (Diodorus Siculus 40.8.1).

¹⁸ Gempf, “Speaking,” 299, citing especially Quintilian 11.2.2. Cf. also the less formal school setting of declamations (Seneca *Suasoriae* 3.2).

¹⁹ Zeno in Diogenes Laertius 7.1.20.

²⁰ Gerhardsson, *Memory*, 160–62; cf. Safrai, “Education,” 966. Orality and literacy coexisted in Mediterranean school settings; see Gamble, “Literacy,” 646.

²¹ E.g., Blomberg, *Reliability*, 41, following Millard, *Reading*, 197–211, 223–29.

²² Cf. this practice alleged even among the far more secretive Pythagoreans (Iamblichus *V.P.* 23.104), whose initial reticence seems unusual (32.226).

²³ Some early second-century fathers even preferred oral tradition, though cf. the preference in Eunapius *Lives* 459–460 for written sources when an event seemed incredible.

²⁴ Antisthenes in Diogenes Laertius 6.1.5 (LCL).

²⁵ Aulus Gellius 8.3.

²⁶ Culpepper, *School*, 193; Aulus Gellius 7.10.1; Socrates *Ep.* 20.

²⁷ Diogenes Laertius 10.1.12, on Epicurus, according to Diocles; on followers of Pythagoras, cf. Culpepper, *School*, 50.

memorization was a paramount focus.²⁹ (Whether the emphasis was on memorizing texts or the teacher's words depended on the particular ancient school.)³⁰ Some schools were known for practicing diligent training of their memories; the Pythagoreans reportedly would not rise from bed in the mornings until they had recited their previous days' works.³¹ Difficult as it may seem to most readers today,³² the elder Seneca testifies that in his younger days he could repeat 2000 names in exactly the sequence in which he had just heard them, or recite up to 200 verses given to him, in reverse (Seneca *Controv.* 1.pref.2). Even if his recollections of youthful prowess are exaggerated, they testify to an emphasis on memory that far exceeds standard expectations today. Seneca also reports that another man, hearing a poem recited by its author, recited it back to the author verbatim (facetiously claiming the poem to be his own); and that the famous Hortensius listed every purchaser and price at the end of a day-long auction, his accuracy attested by the bankers (Seneca *Controv.* 1.pref.19).

p 58 Although the emphasis lay on memorizing teachings, students also studied and emulated teachers' behavior.³³ They also transmitted it. Thus, for example, Eunapius learned a story about Iamblichus from Eunapius's teacher Chrysanthius, who learned it from Aedesius the disciple of Iamblichus himself (*Eunapius Lives* 458). Philostratus has oral information about a teacher two generations earlier through an expert from the previous generation (Philostratus *Vit. soph.* 1.22.524). Jews also learned from the behavior of their ancestors, that is, from lessons drawn from narratives (Josephus *Ag. Ap.* 2.204), as students must also imitate their teachers (*Life* 11).³⁴ (This reflects a broader practice; Greek disciples also often learned by imitating teachers' moral behavior.)³⁵

Josephus likewise stressed memorization and understanding, though his focus was the law rather than earlier Greek authors.³⁶ This method of learning was hardly limited to the circle of later rabbis; it was part of regular Jewish

²⁸ Quintilian 1.3.1; Plutarch *Educ.* 13, *Mor.* 9E; Musonius Rufus frg. 51, p. 144.3–7; Diogenes Laertius 6.2.31; Koester, *Introduction*, 1:93; Ferguson, *Backgrounds*, 84; Heath, *Hermogenes*, 11; Watson, "Education," 310, 312; examples were also memorized (Theon *Progymn.* 2.5–8). The youngest learned by pure memorization (Quintilian 2.4.15; Jeffers, *World*, 256), and higher education (after about age sixteen) included memorizing many speeches and passages useful for speeches (Jeffers, *World*, 256). But the ultimate goal was both understanding and remembering (Isocrates *Demon.* 18, *Or.* 1). Ancient theories on how memory worked varied (see Aristotle *Mem.*; Plato *Meno* 81CD; Philostratus *Vit. soph.* 1.22.523).

²⁹ Gerhardsson, *Memory*, 124–25. Cf., e.g., *Eunapius Lives* 481.

³⁰ Culpepper, *School*, 177. The effectiveness of long-term memorization by a certain amount of repetition (beyond a certain point it is unnecessary) has been studied, e.g., by Thompson, Wenger, and Bartling, "Recall," 210 (this source was supplied to me by M. Bradley, then a student at Duke University); for memorization by repetition, see Iamblichus *V.P.* 31.188.

³¹ Diodorus Siculus 10.5.1; Iamblichus *V.P.* 29.165; on their memories, see further *ibid.*, 20.94; 29.164; 35.256. On memorization techniques, cf. *Rhet. ad Herenn.* 3.22.35. See further Kennedy, *Classical Rhetoric*, 98.

³² Some mnemonic claims from much earlier periods (Valerius Maximus 8.7.ext.16: Cyrus's knowledge of all his troops' names, or Mithridates' of the twenty-two languages of his subjects) are less credible.

³³ See, e.g., Philostratus *Vit. Apoll.* 5.21; Liefeld, "Preacher," 223; Robbins, *Jesus*, 64. Some writers emphasized that an internal inclination to virtue was superior to imitation (Philo *Abraham* 6, 38).

³⁴ Amoraim underlined this principle with stories of rabbis who imitated even their masters' toilet habits and home life (*b. Ber.* 62a). Rabbis' behavior later established legal precedent (*t. Piska* 2:15–16; *Sipre Deut.* 221.1.1; *p. B. Meši'a* 2:11, §1; *Demai* 1:4 [22b]; *Nid.* 1:4, §2; *Sanh.* 7:2, §4; *Yebam.* 4:11, §8).

³⁵ E.g., Xenophon *Mem.* 1.2.3; Seneca *Ep. Lucil.* 108.4. Writers cared about both the words and "deeds" of characters (e.g., Xenophon *Cyr.* 5.1.1; *Mem.* 1.5.6; 4.4.10; on this pairing see further Keener, *Matthew*, 255, 540; the apparently contrary statement of Eunapius *Vit. soph.* intro. 452–453 refers in context to casual activities only—cf. Xenophon *Symp.* 1.1).

³⁶ Josephus *Life* 8; *Ag. Ap.* 1.60; 2.171–173, 204. Josephus's statements on Jewish literacy, like that in *m. 'Abot* 5:21, may

education in the home and basic school education all Jewish youths were to receive.³⁷ But the most easily documented example, where the process was taken to its fullest extent and where we have the greatest volume of extant material, is among disciples of rabbis.

Rabbis lectured to their pupils and expected them to memorize their teachings by laborious repetition.³⁸ There is also evidence that Jewish teachers sometimes spoke in easily memorizable forms, as did Jesus.³⁹ There is much emphasis in both Tannaitic and Amoraic literature on careful traditioning.⁴⁰ Because this traditioning in practice tended toward “net transmission” rather than “chain transmission” (i.e., the sayings became the property of the rabbinic community, and not just of a single disciple of a teacher), transmission [p 59] could be guarded more carefully in the first generation or two.⁴¹ At the same time, teachings could be condensed and abridged, as in Greek schools,⁴² and the very emphasis on careful attention to the tradition could lead a young rabbi to present his view as an amplification rather than a contradiction of his master’s teaching,⁴³ or could lead Amoraim to try to harmonize earlier contradictory opinions attributed to a given rabbi.⁴⁴ As noted earlier, standard rhetorical practice included paraphrasing sayings, as evidenced by the rhetorical exercises in which it features prominently.⁴⁵ (It is therefore not surprising that a writer would praise a sophist who both “received” disciple-instruction accurately and “passed it on” eloquently; Philostratus *Vit. soph.* 2.29.621.) Thus both faithfulness to and adaptation of oral sources characterize early rabbinic use of earlier tradition,⁴⁶ just as the exact wording of Jesus’ sayings could vary, for instance, from

reflect the literate elite, with much of the population learning Torah orally (Horsley, *Galilee*, 246–47); but there were undoubtedly reasons others considered Judeans a “nation of philosophers” (Stern, *Authors*, 1:8–11, 46–50; Gager, *Anti-Semitism*, 39), and “the synagogue was a comparatively intellectual milieu” (Riesner, “Synagogues,” 209). Philo (Boccaccini, *Judaism*, 192–94) and Pseudo-Aristeas (Boccaccini, *Judaism*, 194–98) also stress memory, blending Greek language with Jewish memorial traditions concerning God’s historic acts.

³⁷ See Riesner, “Education élémentaire”; idem, *Jesus*.

³⁸ *Sipre Deut.* 48.1.1–4; Goodman, *State*, 79; cf. *Sipre Deut.* 4.2.1; 306.19.1–3; *b. Ber.* 38b; *p. Meg.* 4:1, §4; Gerhardsson, *Memory*, 113–21, 127–29, 168–70; Zlotnick, “Memory.”

³⁹ See documentation in Keener, *Matthew*, 25–29. Greek and Roman philosophers also could do the same (Philostratus *Vit. soph.* 1.22.523), even using poetry to reinforce their teaching for early students (Seneca *Ep. Lucil.* 108.9–10), though not advanced ones (ibid. 108.12; poetry and song involved memorization, Apollodorus 1.3.1; Seneca *Controv.* 1.pref.2, 19).

⁴⁰ E.g., *t. Yebam.* 3:1; *Mek. Pisha* 1.135–136; *Sipre Deut.* 48.2.6; *’Abot R. Nat.* 24 A; *Pesiq. Rab Kah.* 21:5; *b. Sukkah* 28a; *p. Šeqal.* 2:5; cf. *m. ’Ed.* 1:4–6; *Sipra Behuq. pq.* 13.277.1.12; see further Moore, *Judaism*, 1:99; Urbach, *Sages*, 1:68; Gerhardsson, *Memory*, 122–70; idem, *Origins*, 19–24; Riesenfeld, *Tradition*, 14–17. When the proper attribution was unknown, this was sometimes stated (*p. Ter.* 8:5).

⁴¹ This distinction between “net” and “chain” transmission (D. C. Rubin, “Transmission,” Chap. T, 1989) was pointed out to me by Margaret Bradley, a Duke student researching memory from a psychological perspective.

⁴² Gerhardsson, *Memory*, 136–48, 173; Goulder, *Midrash*, 64–65. Similar sayings thus could appear in different words (*m. Šabb.* 9:1; *’Abod. Zar.* 3:6).

⁴³ Simeon ben Azzai in *Sipra VDDen. pq.* 2.2.3.1, 3.

⁴⁴ *P. Soṭah* 5:6, §1; cf. *p. Ketub.* 3:1, §4. Of course, the rabbi may have issued several different opinions on a subject in his lifetime; cf. *p. B. Qam.* 2:6, §3. Sometimes rabbis also seem to have told stories as fictitious homiletic illustrations rather than wishing to be understood as drawing on previous traditions (cf., e.g., *Sipre Deut.* 40.7.1).

⁴⁵ *Theon Progymn.* 1.93–171; cf., e.g., Epictetus *Diatr.* 1.9.23–25 with the Loeb note referring to Plato *Apol.* 29C, 28E (LCL 1:70–71). *Diodorus Siculus* 20.1–2 allowed limited “rhetorical embellishment” in composing speeches for historical works (Aune, *Environment*, 93).

Matthew to Luke to the *Didache*.⁴⁷ E. P. Sanders concludes that “The gospel writers did not wildly invent material,” though “they developed it, shaped it and directed it in the ways they wished.”⁴⁸

Disciples of Jesus undoubtedly learned and transmitted his teachings no less carefully than most ancient disciples transmitted the wisdom of their mentors.⁴⁹ The views of radical form critics, which seem to presume that the church created rather than submitted to the substance of his teaching, contrasts with the results of our limited evidence about ancient Jewish traditioning. Gerhardsson overstated his case,⁵⁰ but his severest critics have done the same.⁵¹ As we have noted, memorization and transmission of famous teachers’ sayings was not only a later rabbinic practice; it characterized elementary education throughout the Mediterranean world! Further, most of the forms of traditions passed on [p 60](#) in the Synoptic Gospels are the sort that would be passed on in circles less formal than Gerhardsson suggested but more controlled than Bultmann suggested.⁵²

Examining the early Christian data supports this likelihood that Jesus’ teachings would have been transmitted substantially accurately. Paul attests many of the purportedly “latest” developments of first-century Christian thought (such as wisdom Christology) within the first generation. He attests even some elements of the Jesus sayings tradition in occasional letters like 1 Corinthians and 1 Thessalonians (though this was not his purpose),⁵³ and his language suggests that he was passing on to his many readers what he had received.⁵⁴ Paul seems to have known and expected his disciples to recognize that he knew the Jesus tradition; he explicitly distinguishes his teaching from that of Jesus (1 Cor 7:10, 12, 25).⁵⁵ Indeed, to assume that Paul did not know the Jesus tradition, because he does not cite

⁴⁶ Davies, “Aboth,” 156.

⁴⁷ Draper, “Didache.”

⁴⁸ Sanders, *Figure*, 193.

⁴⁹ Witherington, *Christology*, 181, argues that if any historical tradition stands behind the sending of the Twelve, Jesus’ disciples were already communicating his teaching during his lifetime.

⁵⁰ Others before him, such as Dibelius, *Tradition*, 39, had, however, already drawn less sustained comparisons between rabbinic and gospel traditioning.

⁵¹ Smith, “Tradition,” critiques Gerhardsson’s reading of later rabbinic traditioning into the Jesus tradition from three main angles: third-century rabbinic literature cannot represent pre-70 Pharisaism’s transmission techniques; Pharisaism would not represent all of first-century Judaism anyway; and the NT data simply do not fit this kind of traditioning. He is right on all these points, but characteristically overstates his case. Gerhardsson’s own case is overstated, but he does provide more useful evidence than Smith allows (Neusner, “Foreword,” has retracted his earlier severe critique of Gerhardsson, blaming it on Morton Smith’s influence). As many observe (e.g., Hagner, *Matthew*, 1:xlix; Boyd, *Sage*, 121), the later rabbinic method hardly arose *ex nihilo* after 70 C.E.

⁵² Bailey, “Tradition.” Cf., e.g., Xenophon *Cyr.* 1.2.1 for an example of long informal traditioning by storytelling and song.

⁵³ His primary basis for ethics was union with the risen Christ rather than the tradition (cf. Pfitzner, “School”), so such attestation was incidental.

⁵⁴ 1 Cor 9:14; 11:2, 23, 15:3; 1 Thess 4:1–2; cf. 1 Cor 7:10–12; 1 Thess 4:15; 2 Thess 2:15; cf. perhaps Rom 6:17 (Writers used terms like “receiving” and “passing on” for both teachings [e.g., Philostratus *Vit. soph.* 2.29.621; Iamblichus *V.P.* 28.148; 32.226] and customs [e.g., Thucydides 1.85.1; Iamblichus *V.P.* 28.149].) That these were generated by Christian prophecy is extremely unlikely; see our treatment of prophecy and the Johannine sayings tradition. Many also find Jesus tradition in Rom 12–14 (e.g., Thompson, *Clothed*; Riesenfeld, *Tradition*, 13), although many of these paraenetic themes were more widespread (Gerhardsson, “Path,” 81, argues that paraenesis was probably not the dominant reason for preserving the Jesus tradition).

⁵⁵ Stanton, *Gospel Truth*, 97.

it more explicitly and often, would be analogous to assuming that the writer of 1 John was unaware of the Johannine Jesus tradition because it presupposes rather than cites that tradition.⁵⁶ The writer of a probably post-70 gospel also attests the abundance of sources already in writing (Luke 1:1–4). The exclusively oral stage of the Jesus tradition could not have been more than three decades,⁵⁷ and occurred while the eyewitnesses maintained a dominant position in early Christianity.⁵⁸ Had Gospel writers indulged in the sort of creativity some modern scholars have supposed, we would hardly have “Synoptic” Gospels today!⁵⁹ It is thus when a scholar disputes a particular saying, rather than when he or she contends for its authenticity, that he or she must normally assume the burden of proof.⁶⁰ But is this general rule applicable to the Fourth Gospel?

4. Memorization of Speeches

Like the Synoptics, John follows a broad chronological outline with major insertions of topically arranged material.⁶¹ But the sort of sayings, anecdotes, and collections of sayings p 61 one encounters in the Synoptics are quite different from the sustained discourses of the Fourth Gospel.⁶² This difference does not modify John’s basic genre; ancient biographies could also include long speeches, especially in the case of biographies of philosophers.⁶³ John’s purpose, rather than his basic genre, requires the difference in specific forms; the centrality of John’s exalted Christology naturally expands the encomiastic focus of his biography, hence the importance of the christologically interpretive discourses.⁶⁴

In comparison with the Synoptic sayings traditions, how accurate are John’s discourses likely to be? While orators would memorize their speeches—even speeches of several hours’ duration⁶⁵—it is difficult to attest disciples memorizing long speeches by their teachers. One exceptional rhetor memorized his speech as he was writing it out, never needing to read it again (Seneca *Controv.* 1.pref.17); he could remember every declamation he had ever delivered, word for word, making books unnecessary (Seneca *Controv.* 1.pref.18). (Some teachers may have left their

⁵⁶ Theissen, *Gospels*, 3–4. Given the differing genres of “lives” and letters, it is not surprising that we lack more Jesus traditions in the letters (see Stuhlmacher, “Theme,” 16–19; Gerhardsson, “Path”).

⁵⁷ Pace Koester, *Gospels*; idem, “Gospels.” Oral traditions of Jesus’ sayings continued to circulate even after the written gospels were in existence, however; see John 21:25; Papias’s collection; Hengel, “Problems,” 213; Hagner, “Sayings.”

⁵⁸ Davids, “Tradition,” 89–90.

⁵⁹ Gundry, *Use*, 191, also emphasizing the lack of “Pauline terminology in the gospels” and Paul distinguishing his teaching from that of Jesus.

⁶⁰ Cf. Stein, “Criteria,” 225–28; Goetz and Blomberg, “Burden of Proof”; Bartnicki, “Zapowiedzi.”

⁶¹ Burridge, *Gospels*, 226.

⁶² This is not to deny that some individual sayings in John preserve an earlier form; but even most individual sayings appear more developed by Johannine idiom (cf. Ingelaere, “Tradition”).

⁶³ Burridge, *Gospels*, 225, 227, citing Philostratus *Vit. Apoll.*; Satyrus *Euripides*; and Socratic literature; cf. the sayings section in Iamblichus *V.P.* 8–11.

⁶⁴ Black, “Words,” 221–23, argues that Jesus’ speech employs conventions of rhetorical grandeur appropriate to discussing the divine.

⁶⁵ Quintilian 11.2.1–51. In first-century B.C.E. Roman courts, each defense speaker had “only” three hours (Cicero *Brutus* 93.324). Satterthwaite, “Acts,” 344, notes that one of the orator’s five main tasks was memory, “(*memoria*), learning the speech by heart in preparation for delivery”; Olbricht, “Delivery and Memory” (esp. 159, 163, citing *Rhet. ad Herenn.* 1.3–5; Cicero *De or.* 2.351); Heath, *Hermogenes*, 7; cf. Eunapius *Lives* 502; ancient rhetoricians praised memory (Aeschines *False Embassy* 48, 112).

own written speeches, as we have mentioned. But it is unlikely that Jesus, a Galilean sage, would have done so.) Students could memorize epics with their long speech sections because these works became part of the course of literary study, but epics were transmitted differently from the sayings of famous teachers.⁶⁶ Long discourses by teachers are closer to the sort of dialogues Plato wrote for his master Socrates, blending Socrates' ideas with his own.⁶⁷ It should be noted, however, that Plato did not simply invent this literary form for Socrates: Xenophon's *Memorabilia* also includes lengthy dialogues for Socrates rather than the short scenes which characterize works such as the Synoptic Gospels.⁶⁸ Xenophon likewise reports that all who write about Socrates reproduce his same lofty style (*Apol.* 1). Xenophon's Socrates (*Symp.* passim) reasons with and interrogates people, as in Plato, though the latter (an eyewitness to more of the Socrates tradition) is probably more expansive and free.⁶⁹ They do share some common topics, such as love by the soul greater [p 62](#) than that of the body (Xenophon *Symp.* 8.12), and it is likely that Xenophon (as usually held regarding John in relation to the Synoptics) does not depend directly on Plato, but both independently go back to the historical Socrates and the first reports.⁷⁰ Both interpret the spirit of Socrates somewhat differently. But the analogy should not be pushed too closely, given higher standards established by Polybius and others for biographies and histories. Xenophon elsewhere (in a historical romance) sometimes creates lengthy dialogues (e.g., *Cyr.* 1.3.2–18, even if anecdotes stand behind it), often to force readers to contemplate various values or ideas of virtue (e.g., 5.1.9–12). Dialogues became a standard convention for philosophic investigation.⁷¹ This evidence points where most other evidence points: that John may have had access to substantial, reliable tradition but also could feel the freedom to develop and shape it under the Paraclete's guidance.

5. Sayings Traditions

Before returning to historians' composition of speeches in John's day, we should survey the sort of sayings traditions that could have provided some tradition behind his discourses. One writer cites twenty-six Synoptic

⁶⁶ Educated Greeks often delighted in rehearsing these stories; cf., e.g., Theon (a reliable character) in Plutarch *Pleasant Life Impossible* 10, *Mor.* 1093C; storytelling within stories (e.g., Apuleius *Metam.* 8.22; frequent as early as Homer) and literary fragments scattered throughout the papyri (cf. Avi-Yonah, *Hellenism*, 248) indicate the commonness of such transmission.

⁶⁷ See similarly Streeter, *Gospels*, 370; though John differs from Plato and likely has "a tradition of events independent of the Synoptics" that presumably includes sayings (371–72), he charismatically interprets Jesus (372–73). Streeter mistakenly, however, contrasts collections of wise sayings (which he takes as Jewish) with speeches (which he takes as Greek); one may contrast Plato's dialogues with the equally Greek short, pithy sayings and anecdotes in *Diogenes Laertius* 2.18–47. But while Xenophon seems to have known Socrates less well than Plato, some later claimed that he took notes (*Diogenes Laertius* 2.48).

⁶⁸ Robbins, *Teacher*, 63.

⁶⁹ Dionysius of Halicarnassus *Demosth.* 23 rightly notes that Plato's *Apology* is not actually Socrates' defense; though a forensic speech, it is not really what Socrates delivered.

⁷⁰ Marchant, "Introduction," ix–xv (who suggests that Plato retained much of the historical Socrates, yet presents him differently in different works). That Xenophon has a *Symposium* and an *Apology* like Plato could suggest that he deliberately offers a variant perspective, or that the speeches of these occasions had become well known.

⁷¹ See esp. Schenkeveld, "Prose," 213–30. Cicero testifies that some of his friends wanted him to use their names as characters in his (probably mostly fictitious) dialogues (*Cicero Att.* 12.12; for other dialogues that likely are fictitious or at least contain considerable embellishment, see his *Brutus* 3.10–96.330; *Fin.* passim). But none of this is in a genre even resembling biography. Later writers also understood Xenophon's *Cyropedia* (like Plato's *Dialogues*) as a pedagogic device, not primarily historical or biographic (*Cicero Quint. frat.* 1.1.8.23). By the middle of the first century C.E., even a Stoic such as Musonius Rufus adapted some Socratic methods (see Lutz, "Musonius," 27).

parallels to sayings of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel, despite the probably independent lines of tradition.⁷² The long discourses of the Fourth Gospel cannot be explained simply by recourse to a prior collection of sayings upon which John draws, but he may draw on some sayings from such a collection.

Jewish sayings-collections like Proverbs and Pirke Aboth consist primarily of short, pithy sayings, and some of Jesus' sayings were no doubt remembered and circulated in such a form.⁷³ Greco-Roman sayings-collections likewise included sayings and brief contexts for them when necessary, but not whole discourses.⁷⁴ Outside such collections, sayings were often transmitted separately,⁷⁵ which would take one still farther from a [p 63](#) background for the Johannine discourses as a whole. Sayings for which context was necessary, as in a brief narrative climaxing in the protagonist's quip (a kind of *chreia* today sometimes classified as pronouncement story),⁷⁶ were often transmitted with narrative contexts; but these are not large continuous discourses.⁷⁷ (We use the term *chreia* in the modern sense of a particular rhetorical model identifiable from classroom exercises, rather than in the more precise ancient sense of those exercises themselves.) Pronouncement stories may have been more common in some streams of the Greek tradition⁷⁸ than in most Jewish works,⁷⁹ but they do appear in the latter, including rabbinic sources.⁸⁰

Sayings traditions also may have grown, although in most cases this expansion became significant over a period of generations or centuries.⁸¹ Similar sayings could be attributed to different rabbis; sometimes this simply indicated that

⁷² Watkins, *John*, 437. As Moody Smith rightly points out, however, the sayings are rarely in the same context, except where necessary to the story (Smith, *John* [1999], 122).

⁷³ Cf. Vermes, *Jesus the Jew*, 27, who thinks (certainly rightly) that Jesus as a Jewish teacher undoubtedly taught in such forms.

⁷⁴ E.g., Plutarch *Sayings of Kings and Commanders*, *Mor.* 172B–194E. Many of these sayings also occur in other sources, as the Loeb footnotes indicate (LCL 3:8–153). Such compilations of maxims were used in the *progymnasmata*, school rhetorical exercises in which the sayings were adapted (Malherbe, *Exhortation*, 109, 117) and in the process their sense was learned (for the importance of learning maxims, cf. Isocrates *Demon.* 12, *Or.* 1; Aristotle *Rhet.* 2.21.15, 1395b; Petronius *Sat.* 4; *Sir* 18:29; Plutarch *Poetry* 14, *Mor.* 35EF; also Epicharmus *Gnomai* C.1–15 in *Sel. Pap.* 3:440–43); often they upheld aristocratic social values (Sinclair, “*Sententia*”).

⁷⁵ E.g., Seneca *Ep. Lucil.* 94.27–28; also Aune, *Environment*, 34, on Plato's sayings, gathered into *Gnomologia* (maxim collections) only in the fifth century C.E. Some also professed to know during what incidents various sayings were uttered, however (e.g., Plutarch *Themistocles* 11.2).

⁷⁶ E.g., Diogenes Laertius 2.72, 6.2.51; Plutarch *Agessilaus* 21.4–5.

⁷⁷ Not all *chreiai* were as brief as the most basic form (cf. Robbins, “*Chreia*,” 3), however, and the examples in the Gospels are the elaborated rather than basic form usually used in rhetorical exercises (see Mack and Robbins, *Patterns*, 196–97). One should not infer too much from Hellenistic forms in the gospel tradition (Mack, *Myth*, 179; cf. Guenther, “Greek”); Palestine was hellenized, and others besides Cynics employed such forms (see Boyd, *Sage*, 160; Wright, *People of God*, 427–35; Theissen, *Gospels*, 120).

⁷⁸ See Robbins, “Pronouncement Stories” (around 200 in Plutarch's *Lives*); Alsup, “Pronouncement Story” (in Plutarch's *Moralia*); Poulos, “Pronouncement Story” (close to 500 in Diogenes Laertius).

⁷⁹ These seem to have been substantially rarer in strictly Jewish works; cf. VanderKam, “Pronouncement Stories” (finding only nineteen “intertestamental” examples, mainly in *T. Job* and Ahiqar); Porton, “Pronouncement Story” (few in the tannaitic stratum, though Porton may limit them too much, as Theissen, *Gospels*, 120 n. 143 also observes); Greenspoon, “Pronouncement Story” (Philo and Josephus did not add these to biblical narratives, and used them only rarely).

⁸⁰ See Avery-Peck, “Argumentation.”

⁸¹ Bultmann, *Tradition*, 88–89, may, however, be too optimistic at how quickly it may have grown in a relatively short span of time; his evidence (e.g., *Sir* 29:1–6) does not adequately support his conclusions. His evidence on 194 presupposes a longer

both had uttered the same idea,⁸² but in other cases sayings or even entire tales may have been transferred, deliberately (as common property cited by various teachers) or through mistake, from one teacher to another, as in Greek tradition.⁸³

Sayings of teachers could be transferred and in rabbinic literature perhaps created, but the relevance of this practice to study of the Synoptic sayings traditions is limited.⁸⁴ Such transfer and composition began to happen regularly only long after the teachers' death, usually a number of generations or even centuries later. By contrast, from the first generation the basic framework of the Jesus tradition was already established in the entire community that revered him, and was quickly fixed in various written texts.

p 64 Ignoring these limitations, many early form critics applied to the Gospel tradition the principles of form criticism that were culled from studies of OT traditions preserved for many centuries and from folk traditions similarly developed over centuries.⁸⁵ Yet as Davies notes, probably only a single (long) lifespan

separates Jesus from the last New Testament document. And the tradition in the Gospels is not strictly a folk tradition, derived from long stretches of time, but a tradition preserved by believing communities who were guided by responsible leaders, many of whom were eyewitnesses of the ministry of Jesus. The Gospels contain materials remembered recently, at least as compared with other traditional literatures, so that the rules which governed the transmission of folk tradition do not always apply to the tradition found in the Gospels.⁸⁶

Benoit similarly protests that many rabbinic apophthegms preserve some genuine reminiscences, but that beyond this, recollections no more than thirty to forty years old cannot be compared with the rabbis' "oral tradition stretching over several centuries which only very late in its life received a fixed form."⁸⁷ Jesus taught publicly as well as privately, and a "radical amnesia" that allowed his followers to forget even the substance of his teachings is historically improbable.⁸⁸

Further, early Christians did not indulge the temptation to create answers for their own situations in the Jesus tradition preserved in the Synoptics; "several of the major problems that the early church encountered" (such as conflict over circumcision) "never show up in the gospel materials."⁸⁹ Meanwhile, many sayings imply a Palestinian setting more relevant to Jesus than to the later church.⁹⁰

period of time than is likely in the transmission and then redaction of gospel traditions.

⁸² *'Abot R. Nat.* 22, §46 B, on R. Akiba and Ben Azzai; *m. 'Abot* 3:9, 17 (R. Hanina ben Dosa and R. Elazar ben Azariah).

⁸³ Cf. *Diogenes Laertius* 2.60; Ariston 1 in Plutarch *Sayings of Spartans, Mor.* 218A; *Themistocles* 2 in Plutarch *Sayings of Kings and Commanders, Mor.* 185A, and Alexander in Dio Chrysostom *Or.* 2; *Alcibiades* 1 in Plutarch *Sayings of Kings and Commanders, Mor.* 186D, and a Spartan in *Mor.* 234E; Plutarch *Marcus Cato* 2.4; the story in Philostratus *Vit. soph.* 1.485; Athenaeus *Deipn.* 550; and *Diogenes Laertius* 4.37 (Philostratus LCL 14–15 n.2); note also Musonius Rufus *fig.* 51, p. 144.3–7, 10–19. See Aune, *Environment*, 35, on the transference of Greek *chreiai*, because "they tended to represent what was useful rather than unique" (Malherbe, *Exhortation*, 100). Sometimes one teacher reused his own speeches; cf. Crosby's Loeb introduction to Dio Chrysostom *Or.* 66 (LCL 5:86–87).

⁸⁴ Pace Funk, *Gospels*, 22–23.

⁸⁵ Still, some of them, such as Taylor, *Formation*, passim; and Dibelius, *Tradition*, 62, saw much of the tradition as essentially historical; Bultmann, *Tradition*, passim, was more radical.

⁸⁶ Davies, *Invitation*, 115–16; cf. similarly Sanders, *Tendencies*, 28.

⁸⁷ Benoit, *Jesus*, 1:33.

⁸⁸ Witherington, *Christology*, 14, citing also Müller, *Traditionsprozess*.

⁸⁹ Stein, "Criteria," 225–28; see also Stanton, *Gospel Truth*, 60–61; Wright, *People of God*, 421.

⁹⁰ Theissen, *Gospels*, 25–29. Cf. also the presence of Semitisms (e.g., Jeremias, *Theology*, passim; Witherington, *Christology*,

Yet neither the accurate preservation of individual sayings nor the hypothesis of their transfer and composition explains large discourses like those found in the Fourth Gospel. Perhaps more relevant, sayings of Jewish teachers could sometimes be expounded midrashically.⁹¹ This was less common with recent teachers than with Scripture, of course, and a difference between Scripture and tradition did exist. Although in time the body of earlier rabbinic opinion could be treated as “oral law,”⁹² the support for this perspective in our p 65 earliest sources concerning Pharisaic and rabbinic tradition has been questioned,⁹³ despite the importance of tradition in ancient Pharisaism.⁹⁴ But if John treats Jesus’ words (2:22) and works (20:31) as tantamount to Scripture, it is not impossible that he would have midrashically developed traditions available to him.⁹⁵ This would have especially been true with regard to the discourses, since early midrash took special (though not exclusive) interest in teaching and, more importantly, ancient literature encouraged creativity in reporting discourse (see below).

But other factors must also be considered in the composition of large discourses in the Fourth Gospel, which constitute its most characteristic “form.”⁹⁶ Because these discourses include both controversies and extended speech, we must briefly examine the characteristics of, and potential for, redaction in controversy narratives and extended speeches in Mediterranean antiquity.

11), though the earliest traditioning community also spoke Aramaic (Meier, *Marginal Jew*, 1:178–80). Translation could be very literal (Young, *Parables*, 180), but Josephus’s claim to have “translated” the Bible (*Ag. Ap.* 1.1) includes considerable interpretation.

⁹¹ Ben Zoma’s words in *Pirke Aboth* are expounded by biblical prooftexts in *’Abot R. Nat.* 23.

⁹² This image appears in Tannaitic sources (*Sipra Behuq. pq.* 8.269.2.14 [anonymous and R. Akiba]; *Sipre Deut.* 306.25.1 [perhaps an Amoraic gloss]; 313.2.4; 351.1.2–3 [anonymous and R. Gamaliel]; *’Abot R. Nat.* 15 A and 29, §§61–62 B [attributed to Shammai and Hillel]) as well as later Amoraic ones (*b. Ber.* 5a; *Meg.* 19b; *Pesiq. Rab Kah.* 4:7; 10:5; 15:5; *Pesiq. Rab.* 3:1; *Num. Rab.* 13:15–16; 14:4; *Lam. Rab.* proem 2; *Song Rab.* 1:2, §5; 1:3, §2; cf. Neusner, *Sat.* 73–74; Patte, *Hermeneutic*, 23, 87–92). Because it completes it, oral law takes precedence over and is more precious than Scripture in later sources (e.g., *b. ’Abod. Zar.* 35a; *’Erub.* 21b; *Menah.* 29b; *p. ’Abod. Zar.* 2:7, §3; *Hor.* 3:5, §3; *Sanh.* 11:4, §1; *Song Rab.* 1.2, §2; *Pesiq. Rab.* 3:2; cf. *Sipra Behuq. par.* 2.264.1.1; *Sipre Deut.* 115.1.1–2; 161.1.3; *’Abot R. Nat.* 2–3A; *p. Meg.* 1:5, §3; Urbach, *Sages*, 1:305), but rarely in the earliest rabbinic sources (Sanders, *Jesus to Mishnah*, 115–125), and never in Josephus or early Christian comments (Bonsirven, *Judaism*, 85). “Oral law” may have developed the Pharisaic fence of tradition to counter Jewish Christian and gnostic use of Scripture; cf. Chernick, “Responses”; Montefiore and Loewe, *Anthology*, 159.

⁹³ Sanders, *Jesus to Mishnah*, 97–130; idem, *Judaism*, 424. The idea does appear in *m. ’Abot* 1–2; this structure cannot be dated before the time of the last disciples mentioned, i.e., to end of the first century C.E. or later, but may derive support from earlier purported esoteric revelations to Moses on Sinai (cf. Charles, *Jubilees*, p. L, on *Jubilees*; cf. *4 Ezra* 14:6). Sanders (*Jesus to Mishnah*, 126–27; *Judaism*, 424) thinks that the Essenes were closer to regarding their own tradition as law (11QT) than the Pharisees were (though Essene halakah, in contrast to Pharisaic halakah, was primarily written; see Baumgarten, “Unwritten Law”). Some groups, like Sadducees and Samaritans, pretended to reject postbiblical halakah (cf. Bowman, *Documents*, v–vi).

⁹⁴ Josephus *Ant.* 13.297, 408. Beyond Pharisaism, cf. *Sir* 8:9; *Jub.* 7:38–39; 10:14; 45:15 (testamentary); CD 3.3 (using the same Hebrew term as in the chain of tradition in *m. ’Abot* 1:1); cf. the commonalities between Qumran and rabbinic scribes in Siegal, “Scribes,” 1–28; cf. Kugel and Greer, *Interpretation*, 69. Various teachers in the early second century seem to have differed in their evaluation of the role of tradition (Landman, “Aspects”).

⁹⁵ Tradition naturally guided exegesis; see *m. ’Abot* 3:11–13; cf. *p. Meg.* 1:5, §3; *Gen. Rab.* 56:6; Moore, *Judaism*, 1:428; Bonsirven, *Judaism*, 87; Strack, *Introduction*, 6–7.

⁹⁶ Dodd, *More Studies*, 41; cf. Conzelmann, *Theology*, 324.

Controversy Forms

Much of the speech material of the Fourth Gospel appears in controversy narratives. This form is much briefer in the Jesus tradition reported in the Synoptics, where it resembles other ancient controversy-*chreiai*—that is, short stories of conflict generally concluding with the protagonist’s wise quip, the “pronouncement-stories” mentioned above.⁹⁷ Because John’s material has been transposed into his distinctive idiom it is “less amenable to form-critical analysis” than that of the Synoptics,⁹⁸ shorter controversy traditions could stand behind his Gospel, but it is no longer possible to identify them on objective grounds.⁹⁹

Greek dialectic was reportedly at least as old as Protagoras (c. 481–411 B.C.E.),¹⁰⁰ and Plato’s dialogues undoubtedly shaped the Greek convention of developing one’s case by [p 66](#) refuting a counterposition.¹⁰¹ (Plato may well have been the first to develop a case by question and answer, as some ancient writers thought.)¹⁰² The skill of witty repartee and success in debates came to be highly valued among Greek philosophers and statesmen.¹⁰³ The best rhetoricians perfected the witty insults and sarcastic jests that drew laughter at their object’s expense (though sometimes also injuring relations with the person insulted; Plutarch *Cicero* 38.2–6; 39.1; 40.3). Thus traditional stories praising specific characters often employed interlocutors’ questions or objections as a literary foil for the protagonist’s witty answer.¹⁰⁴ The interlocutor’s response, being irrelevant to the purpose of the account, was omitted or (rarely) used as an occasion for confirming the protagonist’s rhetorical triumph.¹⁰⁵ This rhetorical situation was ultimately simulated by the diatribe’s¹⁰⁶ use of rhetorical interlocutors as foils to develop the speaker’s case.¹⁰⁷ Literary

⁹⁷ See above; on *chreiai*, e.g., Aphthonius 23.3R–4R; Nicolaus 4.17–18. On the social function of such stories in a Mediterranean honor-based context, see Malina and Neyrey, “Honor and Shame,” 30.

⁹⁸ Aune, *Environment*, 51.

⁹⁹ Cf. the criticism on stylistic grounds from Conzelmann, *Theology*, 324, against Bultmann’s hypothesis of a pre-Christian gnostic discourse source.

¹⁰⁰ [Diogenes Laertius 9.8.51](#).

¹⁰¹ Plato’s *Apol.* (e.g., 27C) shows that dialogue could be adapted into a speaker both representing and refuting his opponents. Although Plato’s interlocutors are often reduced to the absurd, he allows them some intelligence; cf. Lodge, *Theory*, 12–13.

¹⁰² [Diogenes Laertius 3.24](#) (following Favorinus): Plato “was the first to introduce argument by means of question and answer” (LCL 1:299). Kennedy, *Classical Rhetoric*, 41, notes that this style distinguished Socrates from the sophists. On Plato’s dialectic see Sinaiko, *Love*.

¹⁰³ Passim in sayings traditions (which constitute much of [Diogenes Laertius](#); also, e.g., Plutarch *Sayings of Spartan Women*): e.g., [Diogenes Laertius 6.2.33, 74–75](#) (Diogenes the Cynic); Plutarch *Statecraft 7, Mor.* 803CD; see Dibelius, *Tradition*, 157; Maclean and Aitken, *Heroikos*, xlvi (citing Philostratus *Hrk.* 33.5–12; 44–46; 48.20–22).

¹⁰⁴ E.g., [Diogenes Laertius 1.35](#) (Thales); [6.2.51](#) (Diogenes the Cynic); Philostratus *Vit. soph.* 1.25.540–542 (Polemo).

¹⁰⁵ E.g., [Diogenes Laertius 2.72](#).

¹⁰⁶ We speak of diatribe as a classroom style rather than a coherent genre (in contrast to Bultmann’s early work), though in the first century it appears in letters and transcriptions of lectures (Stowers, *Diatribes*, 175; idem, “Diatribes,” 73; Malherbe, *Exhortation*, 129; Kennedy, *Interpretation*, 155). The style was designed to hold the reader’s attention (cf. Kustas, “Diatribes”).

¹⁰⁷ Cf., e.g., Stowers, *Diatribes*, 86–93, 122–33. They function thus in both diatribe and other forms of literature: e.g., Cicero *Tusc.* 3.23.55; Macrobius *Sat.* 1:15.22 (Van der Horst, “Macrobius,” 227); Seneca *Dial.* 3.6.1; Epictetus *Diatr.* 1.1.23–25; 1.2.19–24; 1.28; *Rhet. ad Herenn.* 4.16.23–24; Dio Chrysostom *Or.* 21, *On Beauty* passim; *Or.* 61, *Chryseis* passim; *Or.* 67, *On Popular Opinion* passim; *Mek. Pisha* 1.35; *p. Sanh.* 6:1, §1. Both within and outside diatribe, rhetorical questions (e.g., Seneca *Ep. Lucil.* 42.2; Epictetus *Diatr.* 1.6; 1.19.2–6; *Pesiq. Rab.* 13:7; cf. Safrai, “Education,” 966) may reflect this form’s influence as well. Diatribe had employed interlocution even more in its early period (Malherbe, *Exhortation*, 129).

dialogues also continued to be composed in the imperial period (Plutarch, Lucian, and Hermetic dialogues);¹⁰⁸ “conversation” did not need to involve conflict,¹⁰⁹ but Greco-Roman rhetoric showed little interest in most kinds of verbal exchanges, which remained the domain of comedy and philosophy.¹¹⁰

Diaspora Jewish works often argue that the Greeks borrowed their philosophy’s best ideas from Moses and Jewish tradition.¹¹¹ Some such works, like the *Letter of Aristeas*, portray p 67 Jewish sages presenting their wisdom to an approving Hellenistic monarch, or impressing or besting Hellenistic philosophers.¹¹² Whether such works were intended to convert Greeks, or more likely, to impress Greeks with Judaism’s abilities and to educate less hellenized Jews, remains disputed.¹¹³ But these samples rarely include sustained debates or interlocution, wishing to harmonize Judaism and Greek thought. The only corpus of Jewish literature containing numerous examples of controversy dialogues and other controversy settings is rabbinic literature.¹¹⁴

In rabbinic controversy dialogues,¹¹⁵ the rabbis debate pagan interlocutors in general,¹¹⁶ pagan philosophers,¹¹⁷ including “Epicureans”¹¹⁸ (possibly used in the general denigrating sense of those who denied divine providence and judgment),¹¹⁹ Sadducees¹²⁰ Samaritans,¹²¹ and *minim* (schismatics) in general.¹²² (Rabbinic controversy with the

¹⁰⁸ Dodd, *Tradition*, 319; cf. Plutarch *Oracles at Delphi, Mor.* 394D–409D; Epictetus *Diatr.* 1.11, where Epictetus’s frequent imaginary interlocutor is replaced by a “real” one in a Platonic-like dialogue. This mode of discourse probably also affected discourse traditions peripheral to those of sages (see Aune, *Prophecy*, 64–65, for some evidence for “oracular dialogue”).

¹⁰⁹ Lévy, “Conversation.”

¹¹⁰ Pernot, “Rendez-Vous.” Rhetoricians were, however, trained to argue both sides of an issue eloquently (e.g., Cicero *Or. Brut.* 14.46).

¹¹¹ Aristobulus *frg.* 3, 4 (Eusebius *Praep. ev.* 13.12.1–2; 13.13.3–8); *Let. Aris.* 312–316; the various citations in Stern, *Authors*, 1:8–11, 46, 50, 93–95; cf. 4 *Macc* 7:7, 9; Charlesworth, “JudeoHellenistic Works,” 775; Gager, *Anti-Semitism*, 39. Christians subsequently claimed Plato: Clement of Alexandria *Stromata* 1.22.150 and Eusebius *Praep. ev.* 9.10.14, on Numenius (Whittaker, *Jews and Christians*, 59–60); Justin *I Apol.* 59; Armstrong, “Platonism”; cf. Wright, “Faith,” 86), and appeared as a philosophical school (Wilken, “Interpretation,” 444–48; idem, “Christians,” 107–10; idem, “Collegia,” 277).

¹¹² *Let. Aris.* 200–201, 235, 296; cf. also, e.g., *Acts* 17:18–34; *b. ’Abod. Zar.* 54b, bar.; the late tradition in *Lam. Rab.* 1.1.12–13. For the portrayal of Abraham as a philosopher in early Jewish texts, cf. Mayer, “Aspekte,” 125–26.

¹¹³ E.g., Sabugal, “Exégesis,” on Aristeas and Aristobulus; Tcherikover, “Ideology.”

¹¹⁴ Barrett, “Anecdotes,” helpfully assembles the accounts into five basic categories.

¹¹⁵ Cf. the similar forms in which angels discuss matters with God, e.g., *b. Roš Haš.* 32b.

¹¹⁶ *B. Sanh.* 39a (the emperor and late first-century R. Gamaliel II); *Bek.* 8b (emperor Hadrian and second-century rabbi); *p. Meg.* 1:11, §3 (concerning a second-century Tanna); 3:2, §3 (ditto); *Pesiq. Rab Kah.* 1:2 (R. Gamaliel); 4:7 (concerning a Tanna, Johanan ben Zakkai, who then gives the correct answer privately to his disciples); *Num. Rab.* 4:9 (Johanan ben Zakkai); 9:48 (R. Eliezer, late first/early second century); *Eccl. Rab.* 2.8, §2 (Hadrian and second-century rabbi). By observing that these reports concern Tannaim, we do not thereby claim their authenticity; many (such as debates with emperors) are demonstrably untrue.

¹¹⁷ *t. ’Abod. Zar.* 6:7 (in Rome); *b. ’Abod. Zar.* 54b, bar. (Rome); *Bek.* 8b–9a (Athens); cf. *b. Sanh.* 39a (Zoroastrian *magus*).

¹¹⁸ *T. Sanh.* 13:5; *p. Sanh.* 10:1, §7; cf. *m. ’Abot* 2:14 (R. Eleazar ben Arach, disciple of Johanan ben Zakkai), expounded in *b. Sanh.* 38b.

¹¹⁹ Cf. Geiger, “‘pyqwrws.” Malherbe, *Exhortation*, 12, points out that other philosophers stereotypically accused Epicureans (and different competing schools) of “atheism, hedonism, and hatred of humanity” (some of which charges were also applied to Jews and Christians).

¹²⁰ *B. ’Erub.* 101a.

minim will be discussed in ch. 5, below.)

The existence of other controversy forms helps explain the Johannine form's appeal and function but neither confirms nor calls into question the likelihood that John's dialogues depend on traditional material. The rabbinic accounts are probably more formally stylized than the Synoptic accounts,¹²³ but less developed (or at least shorter) than the Johannine forms. The Synoptic forms probably depict historical reality,¹²⁴ which is less likely in the case of many of the rabbinic accounts, and not easily testable in the Fourth [p 68](#) Gospel. It can only be suggested that the great length of the Johannine controversies implies that, if John employs prior tradition, he has expanded it freely, perhaps as the Targum provided interpretive expansions of OT teaching.¹²⁵

John's controversy narratives often utilize argumentation similar to that of the rabbis¹²⁶ and similarly employ the opponents as a foil to the protagonist's case. But John's accounts are much longer than rabbinic, Synoptic, or other stereotypical accounts. Dodd suggests that "The Johannine dialogue is an original literary creation, having in some respects more affinity with Hellenistic models than with the dialogues of the Synoptic Gospels or their rabbinic analogues."¹²⁷ Given the hellenization of Palestinian as well as Diaspora Judaism,¹²⁸ this dichotomy may be artificial, for Greco-Roman speech-writing conventions influenced Josephus and other educated Jews, and we cannot suppose that John, writing in Greek and probably addressing a Diaspora community, is isolated from their influence.¹²⁹ But Dodd's point is well taken: John's discourses do not resemble the speech conventions of the Synoptic Jesus tradition, and we must ultimately look elsewhere for their final form.

John's Discourses and Ancient Speech-writing

Jesus' discourses in the Fourth Gospel fit a relatively uniform pattern. As Dodd and others have noted, John develops most of his discourses the same way: Jesus' statement, then the objection or question of a misunderstanding interlocutor, and finally a discourse (either complete in itself or including other interlocutions).¹³⁰ John usually limits

¹²¹ *P. Ma'as.* 4:6, §5; *Yebam.* 1:6, §1.

¹²² *B. Sanh.* 38b, 39a; *Hul.* 84a; perhaps *b. Yoma* 56b–57a (if the Soncino note is correct concerning the possible corruption of *min* to Sadducee here); Herford, *Christianity*, 226–27, also lists *Eccl. Rab.* 30:9, 53cd; *b. Hul.* 87a (sic?); *Šabb.* 152b; *Sukkah* 48b; cf. Bagatti, *Church*, 98ff. The *baraita* in *b. Sanh.* 43a is based on fanciful wordplays.

¹²³ Bultmann, *Tradition*, 41–42.

¹²⁴ Vermes, *Jesus and Judaism*, 31, follows many form critics' skepticism here, possibly to maintain his role for Jesus as a charismatic teacher rather than a proto-rabbinic halakist or debater; but in this period the two need not have been mutually exclusive.

¹²⁵ Howard, *Gospel*, 229; Taylor, *Formation*, 116. Chilton, "Transmission"; idem, "Synoptic Development," suggests that many Gospel traditions were transmitted and developed in ways similar to targumic traditions.

¹²⁶ Cf. Manns, "Exégèse."

¹²⁷ Dodd, *More Studies*, 41.

¹²⁸ Although much has been written, a few references will suffice: Marcus, "Names"; Albright, *Stone Age*, 256–75; Lieberman, *Hellenism*; Tcherikover, *Civilization*; Hengel, *Judaism*; Avi-Yonah, *Hellenism*; cf. Goldstein, "Acceptance"; Simon, "Synkretismus"; Davies, "Aboth," 138–51. Although some scholars above may have overdrawn their case—some regions were more hellenized than others (cf. Feldman, "Hellenism"; Vermes, *Jesus and Judaism*, 26), most scholars today concur that substantial hellenization had occurred in Jewish Palestine.

¹²⁹ Some scholars see even the speeches in Acts as an especially Jewish and Christian form of rhetoric (Wills, "Form"; Kennedy, *Classical Rhetoric*, 129), but these forms fit broader Greco-Roman rhetorical conventions (Black, "Form"). John includes more specifically Jewish features; Luke's are determined mainly by the kerygma's content.

speaking characters to two (a unified group counting as a single chorus) in his major discourse sections, as in Greek drama.¹³¹ Repetitious patterns might provide analogy and unity of presentation, as in the speeches in Acts.¹³² Thus Ben Witherington suggests that, while there is likely some authentic material in the discourses, John took artistic liberties in expressing them, given the dramatic mode of biography in which he wrote.¹³³ D. A. Carson suggests that John provided the substance rather than verbatim reports; the Fourth Evangelist used his material in his sermons before revising it for his Gospel.¹³⁴ [p 69](#) Thus virtually all scholars concur that Jesus' discourses in the Fourth Gospel reflect Johannine editing or composition.

1. Speeches as Interpretive Events

Nor is structure the only indication of Johannine editing; the function of the discourses in their context supports such a probability. Although one would also expect the historical Jesus to address issues raised by the occasion, it is significant that John's discourses often interpret the events they accompany (e.g., 6:26–58 with 6:1–21). By doing so, they function as speeches in ancient narratives often did: to provide the writer's clues to the meaning of the historical narrative,¹³⁵ as well as the writer's best reconstruction or, when sources were lacking, guess, of what the speaker would have said.¹³⁶ (As in the Gospel of John, speeches could also constitute a large body of the narrative.)¹³⁷ As in Greco-Roman historiography, some Palestinian Jewish haggadic works used the speech of reliable characters to illumine the narrative's significance. For example, speeches in *Jubilees* often interpret the events they accompany.¹³⁸

Such stylistic adaptation and interpretive amplification did not violate the protocols of ancient historical writing. Those who expanded the historical kernel of a speech rather than composed it wholesale from probability were the more conservative historians. Cadbury, Foakes-Jackson, and Lake observe that one could not publish one's history before putting the whole work into proper rhetorical style.¹³⁹ Although we will use ancient rhetorical conventions to examine some of John's argumentation, none of his speeches follow standard rhetorical structures or display firsthand knowledge of rhetoric.¹⁴⁰ Yet while John's style may not be that of a skilled rhetorician, it does reflect rhetorical consistency in both the narratives and the discourses.¹⁴¹ John makes abundant use of parallelism, probably because of

¹³⁰ Cf. Dodd, *Interpretation*, 409; Ellis, *Genius*, 7.

¹³¹ Ellis, *Genius*, 8.

¹³² Soards, *Speeches*, 12–13, comparing also those of Joshua, Samuel, and others in the OT.

¹³³ Witherington, *Wisdom*, 35–37.

¹³⁴ Carson, *John*, 46. Cf. Feuillet, *Studies*, 146.

¹³⁵ Lindner, "Geschichtsauffassung"; Attridge, "Historiography," 326. Israelite historical works, like Acts, often used speeches to summarize a unit or move the narrative forward to the following unit (Rosner, "History," 76).

¹³⁶ Speeches also could function to show off the writer's polished rhetoric (Cadbury, *Making*, 184), but this is clearly not John's purpose (his sermons lack the rhetorical flourish of trained writers).

¹³⁷ Aune, *Environment*, 124–25, estimates a frequent 20–35 percent for Greek historical works, 25 percent of Acts (74 percent if one includes their narrative frameworks).

¹³⁸ Endres, *Interpretation*, 198–99.

¹³⁹ Cadbury, Foakes Jackson, and Lake, "Traditions," 13. For Josephus's use of rhetorical techniques in speech composition, see, e.g., Bünker, "Disposition."

¹⁴⁰ See Stamps, "Johannine Writings," 618–19. We need not even look for it in dialogues, where rhetorical rules forbade displays of stylistic prowess (Schenkeveld, "Prose," 230).

¹⁴¹ Kennedy, *Interpretation*, 115, praises Luke's speech composition skills, but observes that he rarely achieves the eloquence of the Fourth Gospel.

Semitic linguistic patterns but relevant also in Greek rhetoric.¹⁴² As noted in our discussion of John's distinctive traits among the Gospels, many rhetors preferred a style that was simple and avoided what was enigmatic (e.g., Dionysius of Halicarnassus *Lysias* 2, 4), while John's language is simple but sometimes enigmatic because of its levels of meaning.¹⁴³ This represents a different kind of mystery from that in Revelation, perhaps [p 70](#) developing instead the kind of obscurity found in Jesus' Synoptic parables (which John clarifies for disciples in chs. 13–17).¹⁴⁴ John is perfectly clear in other ways, however. Some earlier rhetors preferred using suspense to build to a climax (e.g., Cicero *Verr.* 2.5.5.10–11), as perhaps in the unveiling of the Messianic Secret in Mark; by contrast, John shows his christological hand more forthrightly from the beginning.

For this ultimate stage of composition it made little difference whether the historian was using the real documents and memoranda of research or merely the finished work of some predecessor. In either case he must make a new work, recasting all in his own style by the method of paraphrase. Verbatim copying of sources was not tolerated, for no matter how slavishly one followed the substance of his predecessor's narrative one must recast his own style.¹⁴⁵

This stylistic unity normally obscures all signs of the redactional process, in which historical writers often added speeches at the final stage of composition;¹⁴⁶ likewise, narrative and discourse are all of one literary cloth in the Fourth Gospel.

Nor was interpretive amplification forbidden to historians; bound to the events they narrated, they had to fill out what they knew or could reasonably suppose about speeches on the basis of probability and proper rhetorical style. Scholars point out that writers were expected to compose the speeches they reported: Livy derives his narrative's events directly from Polybius, but adapts the speeches (though he does not create them *ex nihilo*); the portrayals of Otho in Tacitus and Plutarch agree closely but diverge entirely in his final speech; perhaps to avoid repetition when his *Antiquities* covers the same ground as the *Jewish War*, Josephus composes for his second work an entirely different speech for Herod on the same occasion; and so forth.¹⁴⁷ Other scholars point to similar examples. For instance, Herodotus sometimes provides various accounts of events, but never of speeches, which he composed freely.¹⁴⁸ Thus Cadbury can assert that “the ancient writers and their readers considered the speeches more as editorial and dramatic comment than as historical tradition.”¹⁴⁹

Ancient historians could omit their discourse sources, a practice that was “(usually unthinkable)”; they could “faithfully transcribe them (almost unthinkable),” or they could “modify them,” the most common practice.¹⁵⁰ Where no report of a speech's contents were available, historians could compose what they thought the speaker would have said, aiming for verisimilitude, following the standard rhetorical exercise of *prosōpopoia*, composing speeches “in

¹⁴² On balanced clauses, see Anderson, *Glossary*, 90–91; while not rhetorically profound, parataxis was also recognizable in Greek (see comments in Anderson, *Glossary*, 39).

¹⁴³ Smith, *John* (1999), 23, speaks of both John's simple vocabulary and his “grandeur”; compare the lofty style attributed to Socrates in Xenophon *Apol.* 1

¹⁴⁴ For riddles and obscure speech used by sages, see Keener, *Matthew*, 372–73, 378–79; in apocalyptic “mysteries,” e.g., 4Q300 1 2.1–4; 4Q301 fig. 1, line 2 (though others used them for pleasure, e.g., Athenaeus *Deipn.* 10.459b).

¹⁴⁵ Cadbury, Foakes Jackson and Lake, “Traditions,” 13.

¹⁴⁶ Cf. Aune, *Environment*, 127.

¹⁴⁷ Cadbury, Foakes-Jackson, and Lake, “Traditions,” 13–14, with other examples and full documentation. Cf. Toynbee, *Thought*, 179–80; Whittaker, “Introduction,” lix.

¹⁴⁸ Aune, *Environment*, 91. On Herodotus's special liberties, see Kennedy, *Classical Rhetoric*, 110.

¹⁴⁹ Cadbury, *Making*, 185.

¹⁵⁰ Aune, *Environment*, 125.

character.”¹⁵¹ (This exercise could also refer to speaking as if another p 71 merely to underline the point, for example, calling hearers to imagine that their ancestors addressed and reproached them; *Demetrius* 5.265–266.) Speeches should be appropriate to the local setting (*Quintilian* 3.7.24); thus rhetoricians criticized dramatists who used bombast in character’s speeches, because it failed to resemble genuine speech (*Longinus Subl.* 3.1–2).¹⁵²

2. One Jewish Historian’s Speeches

Historians’ use of speeches ranged from careful to careless, and some earned others’ censure.¹⁵³ Diodorus Siculus complains about some historians who take their liberties too far in an attempt to show off their rhetorical skills. Those who want to display their skills may do so, he says, by composing “public discourses and speeches for ambassadors, likewise orations of praise and blame and the like.”¹⁵⁴ Many, however, fail to stay relevant to the occasions for which the speeches are written;¹⁵⁵ he would not ban speeches from historical works,¹⁵⁶ but demands that they be suitable.¹⁵⁷

Josephus’s speeches in his *Antiquities of the Jews* can provide a test case, because we can compare his speeches with his primary source, the Bible, which he expands at points either by other traditions or by his own creativity. Josephus considerably expands God’s words of reproof to Adam in Genesis,¹⁵⁸ and even invents speeches for biblical characters which alter the perspective of the biblical speech.¹⁵⁹ As a good Hellenistic historian he must include such speeches. Thus he adds a speech for Moses in response to Korah’s challenge (*Ant.* 4.25–34) because Moses was skillful in rhetoric (*Ant.* 4.25). He invents a seductive speech for the Midianite women (*Ant.* 4.134–138). Samuel the prophet sounds like a rhetorician in a Hellenistic history (*Ant.* 6.20–21). Josephus also adapts speeches in 1 Maccabees, though he tends to adapt more than create.¹⁶⁰ (Pseudo-Philo similarly composes speech material freely and interweaves it with the biblical narrative.)¹⁶¹

All 109 speeches in Josephus’s *Jewish War* reflect his own style and communicate his own perspective.¹⁶² Josephus is more emotionally committed to much of his material than most other historians, because he has a personal stake in the matters about which he writes. Thus he includes three of his own orations, and others by his allies, all of which advance his own position and denounce his critics among the rebels.¹⁶³ Josephus has Titus exhort his soldiers by

¹⁵¹ Cf. *ibid.*, 93, 125; Johnson, *Acts*, 53 (though Witherington, *Acts*, 455, argues that wholesale creation of speeches was contrary to convention for historians). For the exercise, see esp. *Theon Progymn.* 8; for (fictitious, nonbiographic) examples, see, e.g., Alciphron *Letters of Fishermen; Letters of Courtesans; Aelian Letters of Farmers*; cf. Maclean and Aitken, *Heroikos*, xlix. Historians should make the language fit the character (*Lucian Hist.* 58). Mack, *Lost Gospel*, 198, wrongly applies this rhetorical exercise of speeches in character to the composition of individual sayings in the Jesus tradition.

¹⁵² Diversity was helpful: ideally, a rhetor should be able to address different kinds of assemblies differently (Dionysius of Halicarnassus *Lysias* 9), and one might praise a rhetor who used a more diverse array of arguments, ideas, and presentation, though many failed in this (Dionysius of Halicarnassus *Lysias* 17; *Isaeus* 3).

¹⁵³ E.g., in *Diodorus Siculus* 20.1.1.

¹⁵⁴ *Diodorus Siculus* 20.1.2 (LCL 10:145).

¹⁵⁵ *Diodorus Siculus* 20.1.3–4. History must be written in a way that is consistent and unified (*Diodorus Siculus* 20.1.5).

¹⁵⁶ *Diodorus Siculus* 20.2.1.

¹⁵⁷ *Diodorus Siculus* 20.2.2.

¹⁵⁸ Josephus *Ant.* 1.46.

¹⁵⁹ Mosley, “Reporting,” 24.

¹⁶⁰ See Gafni, “Josephus,” esp. 126–27.

¹⁶¹ Bauckham, “‘Midrash,’” 68.

¹⁶² Aune, *Environment*, 107; Rajak, *Josephus*, 81; cf. Mason, *Josephus and NT*, 192–94.

talking about the Jewish God in the *War* (6.39–41). The speech given [p 72](#) on the same occasion in the *Antiquities* (15.126ff.) is completely different. Few historians “would have praised or endorsed” Josephus’s clumsiness.¹⁶⁴

One of Josephus’s speeches, that of Eleazar at Masada, fits a standard rhetorical tradition¹⁶⁵ but is historically implausible: a Zealot’s eloquent Hellenistic discourse on the soul’s immortality probably heard by no surviving witnesses, it is nothing more than an opportunity for Josephus to show off his rhetoric, and no ancient reader would have assumed that it was a genuine speech.¹⁶⁶ To be sure, the two surviving women (if not invented by Josephus for this purpose) must have heard something about the men’s decision, and perhaps some speech given by Eleazar, before hiding themselves (*War* 7.399). Josephus says they supplied the information to the Romans (*War* 7.404). To have supplied anything like the extant speech, however, they would have needed a Hellenistic education, which is improbable! Archaeology confirms much of Josephus’s report about Masada, but Eleazar’s speech adds more drama than realism.¹⁶⁷

Because Josephus composed a speech where he had no record does not mean that he lacked all genuine knowledge of speeches given on other occasions. For instance, it is likely that Agrippa spoke on the occasions when Josephus attributes public speeches to him, and Josephus’s reconstructions of such speeches are plausible, even if he has made no attempt to give Agrippa’s exact sense.¹⁶⁸

3. More Accurate Speeches

John’s stylistic continuity, like that of Josephus, need not indicate that the contents of all their speeches were fabricated; nor is the comparison with Josephus necessarily adequate by itself. Josephus was more liberal in such composition than many of his peers. Historians varied in their accuracy, both in narratives (where Josephus and Herodotus tend to be more accurate than in their speeches) and in speeches.¹⁶⁹ Some historians could be more accurate, and probably even Josephus sought to represent the substance of a speech when he knew what it was. Ancient texts attest that some hearers of speeches even took notes to capture the gist of those speeches.¹⁷⁰ Provided they retained the gist, historians retained the freedom to fill out speeches plausibly and to recount them in their own words (often, in fact, they had no choice but to do so, given literary expectations for readable works).¹⁷¹

[p 73](#) While some writers, like Isocrates and Josephus, displayed less concern for replicating the content of

¹⁶³ Rajak, *Josephus*, 80–82, 180.

¹⁶⁴ Gempf, “Speaking,” 290. Josephus is often untrustworthy in names, numbers, and speeches (Gempf, “Speaking,” 289–90) though, as noted in our previous chapter, he can often provide accurate information. Some rhetoricians may have allowed more liberty with speeches than with narrative (Lucian *Hist.*; Gempf, “Speaking,” 290); by contrast, individual sayings of sages like Jesus were probably transmitted more carefully than narratives (see Theissen, *Gospels*, 60; Witherington, *Christology*, 28–29).

¹⁶⁵ It fits the ancient tradition (e.g., Tacitus) “of putting stirring and even anti-Roman words into the mouths of defeated enemies” (Rajak, *Josephus*, 80–81).

¹⁶⁶ Luz, “Speech”; Cohen, “Masada”; Sanders, *Judaism*, 6. Contrast Bauernfeind and Michel, “Eleazarreden.” Cf. Paetus’s poetic, dying lamentations—to which there were obviously no witnesses—in *Propertius Eleg.* 3.7.57–64.

¹⁶⁷ See Cohen, “Masada.”

¹⁶⁸ Cf. Josephus *War* 2.345–401.

¹⁶⁹ Mosley, “Reporting,” 11–22.

¹⁷⁰ Gempf, “Speaking,” 299, citing especially *Quintilian* 11.2.2.

¹⁷¹ Fornara, *Nature of History*, 143–54; Judge, “Rhetoric of Inscriptions,” 819. This should trouble us only if we evaluate such works by the standards of modern historiography; ancient historical speeches were a different genre (cf. Fornara, *Nature of History*, 142).

speeches, historians like Thucydides and Polybius sought to report the substance of speeches faithfully.¹⁷² Free invention of speeches seems to have been a last resort rather than a normal practice; Polybius expects his readers to be outraged, as he is, that Timaeus invents speeches.¹⁷³ (This can hardly mean that Polybius himself never made up speech material, only that he was as accurate as possible, filling in with verisimilitude where he lacked sources for what was said.) Ancient historians recognized that the majority of their colleagues did retain speeches in their sources;¹⁷⁴ even Livy, a rhetorical historian, retains the gist of speeches we find in Polybius.¹⁷⁵

┌ The fifth-century B.C.E. historian Thucydides, whose work became the formal model for speech composition in subsequent centuries,¹⁷⁶ claims that he meticulously gathered data on all the facts of the war to offer a precise account (Thucydides 1.22.2). He contrasts this precision with his best efforts at accuracy or verisimilitude in his speeches; in an often quoted paragraph he notes (1.22.1; LCL):

As to the speeches that were made by different men, either when they were about to begin the war or when they were already engaged therein, it has been difficult to recall with strict accuracy the words actually spoken, both for me as regards that which I myself heard, and for those who from various other sources have brought me reports. Therefore the speeches are given in the language in which, as it seemed to me, the several speakers would express, on the subjects under consideration, the sentiments most befitting the occasion, though at the same time I have adhered as closely as possible to the general sense of what was actually said.

That is, he strives to give the basic sense of his sources where he has them and otherwise offers what he thinks was probably said, based on what he does know. Of no less interest to the Fourth Gospel's dialogues (in which conflict sometimes escalates), Thucydides could also include lengthy dialogues (the alternating partners in the debate noted by abbreviations, 5.87–5.111.4), with increasing conflict culminating in a threat of war (5.112–113). Gellius seems to report Favorinus's speeches more precisely than Thucydides, "either verbatim or in indirect speech."¹⁷⁷ Gempf writes that "Livy treats the speeches in his sources with some respect, reproducing the content while changing the form, and almost always adding to the length of the speech considerably, without thereby adding fictitious topics, and what additions are there can often be chalked up to the attempt to give a convincing character study."¹⁷⁸ An inscription of Claudius indicates that Tacitus provides Claudius's "general sense," even retaining elements of his style, while condensing greatly.¹⁷⁹ Authors adapted the substance of historical speech-events to their own audiences; "A p⁷⁴ recorded speech is not a transcript, but woe betide the historian if the speech is not *faithful* to the alleged situation and speaker." The author might not reproduce the exact words, but the basic lines of thought and results of a speech were essential.¹⁸⁰

¹⁷² Gempf "Speaking," ch. 10.

¹⁷³ Ibid., 272; Hemer, *Acts*, 75.

¹⁷⁴ Fornara, *Nature of History*, 154–68.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., *Nature of History*, 160–61 (also claiming that even Pompeius Trogus, the worst offender, avoids "free fiction").

Problems arose only when Romans tried to write "ancient" history for which they no longer had oral sources (pp. 166–67).

¹⁷⁶ Other writers such as Sallust imitated Thucydides' use of speeches, but sometimes with less historical caution (Cary and Haarhoff, *Life*, 263). On the general sense of, and debate surrounding, the quotation, see, e.g., Kennedy, "Survey of Rhetoric," 15; Porter, *Paul in Acts*, 110–12; idem, "Thucydidean View?"

¹⁷⁷ Hillard, Nobbs, and Winter, "Acts," 212.

¹⁷⁸ Gempf, "Speaking," 283. Also Witherington, *Acts*, 40, who sees Livy as one of the more expansive writers (because he wished to demonstrate his rhetorical artistry).

¹⁷⁹ Gempf, "Speaking," 284.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., 264; see more fully the nuanced discussion in Fornara, *Nature of History*, 142–68, esp. 167–68.

Writers may have had sources from which to reconstruct the content of many speeches. Because rhetoric was central in ancient Mediterranean culture, people were more apt to recall central elements of speeches on critical occasions, and historians were more apt to regard them as decisive events. Thus one might testify that he remembered elements of even some speeches he considered inferior, using a memory that could be strong enough even to quote or (in this case more likely) to supplement written sources (*Eunapius Lives* 494). If one's source could not recall many details of a speech, but only its essence, a biographer might merely summarize it (*Eunapius Lives* 484). Seneca the Elder, in his *Controversiae* (passim), claims to recall many long dialogues many decades after first hearing them and committing them to his memory. Though his memory may be exceptional, it testifies to skills cultivated in the period of the early empire. A deceased teacher's former disciples might also collectively remember bits and pieces of speeches, sewing them together (Philostratus *Vit. soph.* 1.22.524). Further, just as many rhetors wrote out their basic speeches after the event (so Cicero *Brutus* 24.91), disciples could have taken notes after some events (also attested, above). An eyewitness tradition could thus include some historical substance, even in the speeches.

4. Stylistic Freedom

As noted above, however, accuracy in reporting the substance does not suggest anything in the nature of a verbatim transcript. Greek and Roman writers generally demand accuracy of content (where possible) but allow liberties in wording. Where we can check historians, apart from Josephus, they seem to have followed this principle.¹⁸¹ Ancients relied on their memory to retrieve and arrange information because the standard for accuracy was the “gist.”¹⁸² Like Josephus's speeches, those of Thucydides are stylistically uniform,¹⁸³ and Thucydides plainly acknowledges that he provides speeches at points in his narrative where he knows that they occurred, thereby expounding critical issues.¹⁸⁴ Indeed, from ancient drama through epics through most ancient historical writing, the characters' style rarely varied from that of the author.¹⁸⁵

New Testament scholars have most often raised similar questions concerning the accuracy of speeches in the early Christian history called Acts, a work whose narration of events seems to be based on reliable sources.¹⁸⁶ Scholars who have rightly noted the stylistic unity of the speeches in Acts¹⁸⁷ have sometimes drawn from this unity the unnecessary [p 75](#) conclusion that Luke freely composed all the speeches without sources.¹⁸⁸ Yet Luke's style is relatively uniform in his narrative as well,¹⁸⁹ and confirmations of Luke's historiographic restraint elsewhere suggest that his speeches may reflect a more accurate basis than has sometimes been supposed, like those of Thucydides.¹⁹⁰

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 299.

¹⁸² See Small, “Memory.”

¹⁸³ Aune, *Environment*, 91–92, 126.

¹⁸⁴ *Thucydides* 1.22.1; Satterthwaite, “Acts,” 355–56. Public speeches, like battles, were viewed as crucial historical events (Gempf, “Speaking,” 261).

¹⁸⁵ Aune, *Environment*, 91 (though rhetorical handbooks lead us to doubt this was ever the ideal).

¹⁸⁶ Cf., e.g., the positions of Cadbury, *Acts in History*, 40–41; Hengel, *Acts*, 60; Blaiklock, “Acts.” For various views, see the summaries and evaluations in Gasque, *History*, esp. 306–9; Wilson, *Gentiles*, 255–57, 267.

¹⁸⁷ Cf. consistent use of devices such as interruption (Horsley, “Speeches”) and common structural patterns (cf., e.g., Goulder, *Acts*, 83; Zehle, *Discourse*, 19–23). Such patterns need not indicate wholesale secondary composition, however (Ridderbos, “Speeches,” 9, compares Jesus' Matthean discourses). Robinson, *Studies*, 139–53, pointed to theological divergences in some speeches (*Acts* 3 reflecting very primitive features), suggesting prior tradition.

¹⁸⁸ E.g., Townsend, “Speeches”; Schweizer, “Speeches”; Dibelius, *Studies*, 138–85; *idem*, *Paul*, 11; *idem*, *Tradition*, 16–18.

¹⁸⁹ Cf. Dibelius, *Studies*, 2, 184–85, 201; Dupont, *Sources*, 166.

Luke does not use the speeches merely to show off his rhetorical skills, for some of them do appear more awkward—perhaps due to Semitisms—than his customary style.¹⁹¹ Of course, those who have drawn attention to the possible Semitisms¹⁹² and apparent reminiscences of the actual speakers in specific speeches¹⁹³ may fail to take into account adequately the ancient practice of *prosōpopoiia* (composing speeches according with the purported speaker’s known style and character).¹⁹⁴ That Luke would know anything of the style of the speakers, however, suggests some historical tradition or eyewitness experience; and the attempt “to give an appropriate characterization of individual speakers ... is the procedure which Lucian requires of the true historian: the words of the speaker should match his person and his concern.”¹⁹⁵

A modern demand for verbatim accuracy in ancient speech reports would be historically naive; ancient readers never expected it.¹⁹⁶ As Aune points out,

If public inscriptions of official documents conveyed only the general substance, why should historians aim at slavish imitation? The speech of Claudius reported by Tacitus (*Annals* 11.23–25) is half the length of the inscribed version. Similarly, when Josephus copied the text of a treaty from 1 Macc. 8:23–32, he boiled the Greek text down from 154 to 81 words (*Antiquities* 12.417f.).¹⁹⁷

Luke himself similarly notes that he has abbreviated Peter’s speech (*Acts* 2:40).

Speeches could be freely composed, or they could be based on historical data, or they could fall somewhere between these two poles. Because John regards Jesus’ teaching as [p 76](#) authoritative, and does not merely use it for rhetorical practice, it is likely that he would preserve this teaching where possible. That he has access to and uses some of Jesus’ teaching is confirmed by his occasional overlap with Synoptic material and his apparent dependence on an independent tradition. As Bauckham notes, freedom in speech composition probably “applied less readily to historical figures who were remembered as authoritative teachers and whose teaching was preserved.”¹⁹⁸ The extent to which one thinks John has accurate tradition will again depend on the question of his sources, a question we again

¹⁹⁰ Dudley, “Speeches.”

¹⁹¹ Gasque, “Speeches,” 248–49; Bruce, *Acts: Greek*, 18.

¹⁹² Cf. Dodd, *Preaching*, 17–19; Martin, “Evidence,” 59; Payne, “Semitisms”; Ehrhardt, *Acts*, 1. Torrey, *Composition*, first argued for Aramaic sources throughout the first half of the book, especially in the speeches, but he may have underestimated the extent to which Koine, Semitic or “Jewish Greek,” and translation Greek overlap (cf. LXX; *Jos. Asen.*; “Jewish Greek” in Turner, “Thoughts,” 46; Nock, “Vocabulary,” 138–39; though for Rome contrast Leon, *Jews*, 92); further, an intentional Septuagintalizing (Hengel, *Acts*, 62; De Zwaan, “Language”) or Semitizing to fit the character of his speakers, and perhaps the character of *Acts* 1–12 as a whole, is plausible. (Aune, *Environment*, 117, regards it as equivalent to Luke’s contemporaries’ Atticizing style; by contrast, Most, “Luke,” protests that this form of translation Greek differs from the LXX and reflects Luke following Hebrew sources.)

¹⁹³ Selwyn, *Peter*, 33–36; Munck, *Acts*, xliii–xliv; Doeve, *Hermeneutics*, 176.

¹⁹⁴ Cf. *Theon Progymn.* chap. 8.

¹⁹⁵ Hengel, *Acts*, 61. With regard to Paul’s speeches, an interested traveling companion could have learned from Paul’s recollections the gist of those speeches he missed (Robertson, *Luke*, 228).

¹⁹⁶ Nor do even most conservative biblical apologists today, including in the words of the Johannine Jesus; cf. Wenham, *Bible*, 92–95; Feinberg, “Meaning,” 299–301 (the exact voice, but not words, of Jesus); Bock, “Words,” 75–77; cf. Edersheim, *Life*, 203.

¹⁹⁷ Aune, *Environment*, 82.

¹⁹⁸ Bauckham, “‘Midrash,’” 68; thus *L.A.B.*’s careful treatment of the Decalogue may provide a closer analogy than his composition of speeches.

defer until our discussion of authorship.

Special Factors in Johannine Discourse

If we bracket for the moment the question of transmission, it is possible that Jesus spoke in different ways on different occasions. The location and setting of most of John's discourses differ from those in which the Synoptics take interest. The action of most of the Fourth Gospel takes place in Judea rather than in Galilee. Such factors cannot explain all the differences, but they may have exercised more effect than we often assume. Thus F. F. Bruce points out that some variation in style may occur because in the Synoptics Jesus converses especially "with the country people of Galilee," whereas "in the Fourth Gospel he disputes with the religious leaders of Jerusalem or talks intimately to the inner circle of His disciples."¹⁹⁹

Further, although only John reports lengthy interchanges between Jesus and Jerusalem leaders, there can be no question that interchanges occurred, especially during the Passion Week, and they were undoubtedly longer than the Synoptics report. Luke provides insight into Jesus' Perea and Judean ministries, and the Synoptists concur that Jesus vigorously debated the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem. Although most of the Synoptic records of Jesus' clashes with the authorities there fit the smaller units of tradition through which they came to the Gospels, it is intrinsically likely that some of Jesus' debates would have continued at more length.²⁰⁰

Some of Jesus' teachings in the Fourth Gospel are also directed especially to the disciples, including a form of the Messianic Secret. This, too, matches the record of the other gospels, perhaps independently confirming their tradition while providing fuller details concerning it.²⁰¹ (In John, the secret does not affect Samaritans—4:25–26—as in Mark it does not affect Gentiles—Mark 5:19; it also involves divine hardening of the unbelieving [p 77 in both—John 12:37–43; Mark 4:10–12.²⁰² But John the Baptist's confession of Jesus becomes more explicit in the Fourth Gospel—1:29; similarly, Peter is no longer the first disciple to confess Jesus' messiahship—1:41, 49.) An eyewitness tradition might diverge particularly with respect to private teachings, providing a much fuller exposition of Jesus' teachings originally circulated only among his disciples. Nor is such private instruction intrinsically unlikely historically. Rabbis passed on different kinds of teachings in different settings; for instance, esoteric teachings might be circulated only privately among their disciples for fear of being misunderstood.²⁰³

¹⁹⁹ Bruce, *Documents*, 57; cf. Carson, *John*, 22, though qualifying the argument.

²⁰⁰ Ridderbos, *John*, 382–83, cites Luke 19:37 as implying that the Synoptics also recognize a fuller ministry outside Galilee, but the verse may refer simply to Galilean pilgrims present for the festival.

²⁰¹ As plain as Mark's Messianic Secret has been since Wrede, its interpretation is no more obvious today than John's. Wrede, *Secret*, 228, explains it as a Markan cover for the fact that Jesus did not claim messiahship before the resurrection. Burkill, *Light*, 1–38, argues that it is pre-Markan and may go back to Jesus (Ellis, "Composition," shows that Q also contained the motif). Longenecker, *Christology*, 70–73, argues that messiahship could be publicly confirmed only at the resurrection. Cullmann, *State*, 26, thinks Jesus avoided the title because of its political overtones. Theissen, *Stories*, 64, 68–69, 141–42, compares the secrecy commands to prohibitions against revealing formulas in magical texts. Hooker, *Message of Mark*, 61, explains the secret as hiding Jesus' identity from those who will not believe. Jesus' danger from the authorities (see Rhoads and Michie, *Mark*, 87) could also explain the secret on a literary level. The Johannine version of the theme is addressed in more detail on John 3:4, below.

²⁰² In both, the Isaiah text indicates that Jesus' word hardens the stubborn. On the text in Mark, cf. Evans, "Note."

²⁰³ For esoteric teachings, cf., e.g., 4 Ezra 14:45–47; *t. Hag.* 2:1; *b. Hag.* 13a–14b; *Pesah.* 119a; *Šabb.* 80b; *p. Hag.* 2:1, §§3–4; for other private teachings or those understood only within wisdom circles, cf., e.g., *Ps.-Phoc.* 89–90; various Qumran texts (1QpHab 7.4–5; 1QH 2.13–14; 9.23–24; 11.9–10, 16–17; 12.11–13; 13.13–14; 1QS 8.12; 9.17–19; cf. 1QS 8.1–2; 11.5; 1QM

It could also be pointed out that the same rhythmic patterns stand behind the Jesus of both John and the Synoptics,²⁰⁴ that some speech patterns such as “Amen, I say to you,”²⁰⁵ occur in both (though doubled in John),²⁰⁶ probably implying a special authority in both,²⁰⁷ and that Jesus occasionally speaks in so-called “Johannine idiom” even in the Synoptics (e.g., [Mark 10:37](#); [Matt. 11:27](#)).²⁰⁸

Further, the geographical differences between the Synoptics and John mentioned above could account for linguistic differences as well. Although sages often practiced Hebrew among themselves (so the Mishnah and many Qumran scrolls), colloquial proverbs and burial inscriptions suggest that the Galilean peasants and artisans Jesus usually addresses in the Gospels spoke Aramaic more often than other languages. Aramaic was the lingua franca of the East before the advance of Hellenism in the second century B.C.E. (and among the less hellenized long after).²⁰⁹ Most scholars hold that Jesus used mainly [p 78](#) Aramaic when he conducted his ministry in the rural parts of Galilee.²¹⁰ But at times he probably taught in Greek, the regional trade language and language of the urban centers. He lived in a multilingual society,²¹¹ even if most people were not equally proficient in both Greek and Aramaic.²¹² More than

17.9); *Gen. Rab.* 8:9; *Num. Rab.* 9:48; 19:8 (purportedly from ben Zakkai); *Pesiq. Rab.* 21:2/3; 22:2; perhaps *Wis* 2:21–22; 7:21; *2 Bar.* 48:3; *b. Sukkah* 49b. In Pythagoreanism, cf. *Diogenes Laertius* 8.1.15; perhaps Plato in *Diogenes Laertius* 3.63; others in *Eunapius Lives* 456. Cf. also the passing on of esoteric books from Moses to Joshua in *T. Mos.* 1:16 (possibly early first century C.E.).

²⁰⁴ Bruce, *Documents*, 57. Cf. Stein, *Method*, 27–32. By itself this would not demand authenticity. Goulder, *Midrash*, 89–92, thinks that Jesus gave some teaching in poetry but Matthew created it in many additional sayings.

²⁰⁵ “Amen” normally confirmed prayers, oaths, curses, or blessings. The Gospel usage in confirming Jesus’ words as he speaks them is rare (against Jeremias, *Theology*, 35, 79, it is not unique; see Aune, *Prophecy*, 165; Hill, *Prophecy*, 64–66); it is almost certainly authentic (with Aune; Hill; Burkitt, *Sources*, 18). (Boring, *Sayings*, 132–33, thinks it continued in early Christian prophetic usage, but even *Rev* 2–3 avoids it). Cf. *Gen* 18:13.

²⁰⁶ Bruce, *Documents*, 57–58. The introductory “amen” appears about 30 times in Matthew, 13 in Mark, 6 in Luke, and 50 in John (Smith, *Parallels*, 6). The double form appears rarely, e.g., in the current text of *L.A.B.* 22:6 (the answer of the people to Joshua’s words); 26:5 (response to Kenaz’s curse invocation); *PGM* 22b.21, 25 (closing an invocation); and as an oath formula in *p. Qidd.* 1:5, §8. Culpepper, “Sayings,” argues that the double *amen* sayings in John frequently (though not always) reflect historical material, often “core sayings that generate the dialogue or discourse material that follows” (100).

²⁰⁷ It may ground authority in Jesus himself, in contrast to a prophetic, “Thus says the Lord” (cf. the latter formula applied to Jesus in *Rev* 2–3); see Aune, *Prophecy*, 164–65; Witherington, *Christology*, 186–88; Marshall, *Origins*, 43–44.

²⁰⁸ Bruce, *Documents*, 58.

²⁰⁹ Horsley, *Galilee*, 247–49. Some hold that Aramaic prevailed in Upper Galilee, Greek in Lower Galilee (Goodman, *State*, 66–67; cf. also Meyers, “Judaism and Christianity,” 74); some others that Aramaic remained predominant throughout Palestine (Mussies, “Greek in Palestine,” 1060–64). Cf. the Targumim, and the Aramaic Qumran texts; even Josephus claims Aramaic, not Greek, as his tongue in *War* 1.3; cf. *Ant.* 1.7; 20.263–264.

²¹⁰ Most (e.g., Dalman, *Jesus-Jeshua*; Black, *Approach*; idem, “Recovery”; Deissmann, *Light*, 64; Draper, “Greek”; Jeremias, *Theology*, 4; Sevenster, *Greek*, 37; Dibelius, *Jesus*, 25; Meier, *Marginal Jew*, 1:255–68) have supported Jesus’ use of Aramaic (some contending that he spoke Aramaic exclusively, others that it was his common language in rural Galilee), even using it as a criterion of authenticity (e.g., Barrett, *Jesus*, 6; Burkitt, *Sources*, 20; contrast Dibelius, *Tradition*, 34–35). Some “Semitisms” may stem from an Aramaized Greek in the eastern Mediterranean, though note the case against “Jewish Greek” in Horsley, *Documents*, 5:5–40.

²¹¹ E.g., Porter, “Greek.”

²¹² Horsley, *Documents*, 5:23–24.

likely, he spoke some Greek in urban Jerusalem; most Palestinian Jews were bilingual,²¹³ and at least the upper classes in the urban areas seem to have used Greek more.²¹⁴ (Some have argued for a widespread use of spoken Hebrew in Jesus' Jerusalem,²¹⁵ which might make most sense in Jesus' debates with teachers of the law;²¹⁶ but this has so far commanded limited support.) Thus the Synoptists could record mainly translation Greek from Jesus' Aramaic words in Galilee, whereas John's Greek in Jerusalem could be more authentic Greek.

But none of these objections is ultimately persuasive for all the discourses. The Synoptic Jesus also debates in Jerusalem (*Mark* 11:27–12:37 par.), and the Johannine Jesus debates with a crowd in Galilee (*John* 6:22–59). Jesus privately provides secret teachings to his disciples in both streams of tradition (*Mark* 4:11). Although the Synoptic Jesus occasionally speaks in “Johannine idiom” (Q material in *Matt* 11:27/*Luke* 10:21),²¹⁷ that style of speech is so titled because it is characteristic of and permeates the Fourth Gospel;²¹⁸ in the Fourth Gospel, one is often scarce able to discern whether Jesus or the narrator is p 79 speaking²¹⁹ (and perhaps for good reason, since the narrator believes himself inspired by the Paraclete who continues Jesus' mission). John's revelation of Jesus may not contradict the Synoptics, but the emphasis is quite different. Even where we have clear proof that John depends on earlier tradition (e.g., 6:1–21), John goes his own way, writing in his own idiom and connecting the events and teachings to theological motifs that run throughout his Gospel.²²⁰

As F. F. Bruce notes, the Synoptics present what Jesus did and said; John, while also relying on historical tradition, is more concerned to tell us who Jesus was and what he meant. The Fourth Gospel is more than a mere eyewitness account; it also represents many decades of deep meditation on the meaning of what was witnessed, a meaning John hopes to share with his readers in his own historical situation.²²¹ If the early Christian writer Origen exaggerated the differences between John and the Synoptics when he viewed John as a “spiritual gospel” (a diagnosis which Origen

²¹³ Argyle, “Semitism”; idem, “Greek”; Mussies, “Vehicle”; Freyne, *Galilee*, 171–72; Stauffer, *Jesus*, 60. Especially the better off and educated knew Greek (educated Romans also sought fluency in both: e.g., *Quintilian* 1.1.12, 14), but others were undoubtedly acquainted with it, especially in urban areas.

²¹⁴ Cf. Goodman, *State*, 64; Sevenster, *Greek*, passim; Dalman, *Jesus-Jeshua*, 3–4; in a later period, cf. *p. Soṭah* 7:1, §4; Goodenough, *Symbols*, 12:185; Cohen, *Maccabees*, 40; the evidence of Schwank, “Grabungen,” applies only to an urban area. Palestinian Jewish burial inscriptions, which are the safest indicators of the common language, are often in Greek (Leon, *Jews*, 75), though for the poorer majority of Jerusalem Aramaic probably remained the dominant language (cf. Levine, *Hellenism*, 80–84).

²¹⁵ Rabin, “Hebrew”; Carmon, *Inscriptions*, 73; cf. *Let. Aris.* 11, 30, 38; *Jub.* 12:25–27. Lindsey, *Jesus*, argues that Matthew and Luke depend substantially on Hebrew originals.

²¹⁶ Hebrew was used in Torah memorization (e.g., *Sipre Deut.* 46.1.2) and early rabbinic discussions (the Mishnah is in Hebrew), though Aramaic as a popular language is at least as early as Daniel and Ezra. That rabbinic arguments continue in Hebrew through the second century does not suggest that public debates in Jerusalem need have been in Hebrew or Aramaic, especially not if the Diaspora components of festal crowds were to understand the thrust of such conversations.

²¹⁷ Pryor, “Thanksgiving,” thinks Johannine idiom developed the language of the Q saying.

²¹⁸ Indeed, Bousset, *Kyrios Christos*, 83–84, suggests that the Johannine parallel brings the authenticity of this Q passage into question; but cf. Gundry, *Matthew*, 218; Manson, *Sayings*, 79; Jeremias, *Prayers*, 45–48. Both this Q saying and John reflect a pervasive Wisdom Christology (cf. Tuckett, *History*, 209–82, on Q's Christology in general).

²¹⁹ This is also conceded by Bruce, *Documents*, 57.

²²⁰ John's tradition here is probably independent of the Synoptics (cf. Johnston, “Version,” 154; Higgins, *Historicity*, 30, 38), though correspondences indicate a common source, probably in Jesus' life.

²²¹ Bruce, *Documents*, 61.

used to justify his extensive allegorization), he at least noticed a legitimate difference, which most readers of the Fourth Gospel since him have likewise recognized. John's Gospel is history; but it is a much more theological and homiletical history than the Synoptics. John seeks to be faithful to his historical tradition by articulating its implications afresh for his own generation.

Conclusion

Many studies have failed to take adequate account of the relevance of ancient speech-writing practices or the exceptional memories of many disciples (especially for teachers' sayings but also for the substance of their teachings and encounters on given occasions). Ancient sources were far more apt to recall and report the substance of speeches than modern memories do; they were also far more apt to adapt and develop them than modern historians would. On most readings, John's discourses contain some historical tradition, but are in John's style and expand on that tradition to expound the point. John may write biography, but it is a somewhat different kind of biography from that of the Synoptics (though closer to them than to proposed alternatives), and much less focused on Greek standards of historiography than, say, Luke. Because John includes some sayings confirmed from the Synoptics, he probably also includes many sayings of Jesus no longer extant from other sources. These are, however, so woven into the fabric of John's composition that it is difficult or impossible for critics to disentangle them by traditional methods. The historical method does suggest that historical tradition stands behind the narratives and discourses of the Fourth Gospel. Literary analysis, however, confirms that, whatever traditions are there have been subordinated to the author's overall portrait of Jesus that they comprise.

In the end, then, we can make only a general statement that, given a reliable tradition (see chs. 1 and 3 of our introduction), the Fourth Gospel preserves genuine historical reminiscences of Jesus and an accurate portrait of events and essential teaching. By itself, however, this general conviction affects only the burden of proof and does not enable us to [p 80](#) evaluate the historical worth of most smaller details in the narratives or discourses; disentangling history and theology in the Fourth Gospel's discourses by traditional critical methodologies is a particularly difficult task and one that is in most cases unhelpfully speculative. Although we will explore John's tradition where possible (usually where he overlaps with the Synoptics), attention to John's message to his own readers' situation is a more historically feasible task, one more in line with the author's purpose, and hence a more fruitful invitation for our inquiry in most of this commentary. Having raised the matter of historical tradition, however, we must examine the question of authorship and tradition.

[P 81](#) 3. AUTHORSHIP

IN THIS CHAPTER WE WILL EXAMINE briefly some issues concerning the authorship of the Johannine literature. Although the commentary proper does not depend on views of authorship, the question may prove relevant for questions of historical reliability (hence to some extent also the question of where in the range of the biographical genre the work falls). Unfortunately, for some critics, views of authorship remain a litmus test of either ecclesiastical or academic orthodoxy. Although my Matthew commentary treated authorship in three pages and arrived at only tentative conclusions (with no effect on the commentary proper),¹ a few reviewers expended more ink discussing my

¹ Keener, *Matthew*, 38–41.

view of authorship than the social-historical work on which the commentary proper focused. For better or worse, my conclusions on John are less tentative, less concise, and less in keeping with the scholarly consensus. They are, nevertheless, no more essential to the substance of the commentary proper, and I hope the commentary's value will not be evaluated primarily on whether it concurs with current scholarly consensus on this issue.

Common authorship for much of the Johannine literature and apostolic authorship for the Fourth Gospel are minority opinions in scholarly circles, sometimes associated with discredited dependence on church tradition. Yet forced-choice logic that automatically dismisses the value of our earliest extant traditions is no more academically sound than a mindset that accepts all of them uncritically. The extant historical evidence for the Fourth Gospel's authorship is hardly certain, but the evidence is more than adequate to question the dogmatism with which many scholars have opposed it.

Communities of interpretation do affect the plausibility structures one accepts, including those in matters of literary approaches. Thus nineteenth-century critics often denied any influence of Homer in the *Iliad*, whereas in the wake of declining skepticism a subsequent generation of scholars viewed the objections to Homeric influence as weak.² Similarly, where nineteenth-century scholarship often doubted Homer's existence and denied the internal unity of both the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, much of early-twentieth-century scholarship changed its views.³

Conservative circles in biblical studies are more apt to accept early church tradition (external attestation), whereas in some academic circles the mere acceptance of views which can be denigrated as "conservative" brings into question one's academic integrity.⁴ Because most [p 82](#) scholars write academic works for the latter community, scholarly consensus exerts a pressure of tradition no less coercive than its analogues in more conservative church circles. For this commentary I might therefore have preferred to arrive at conclusions more amenable to the scholarly consensus; but after weighing the evidence, I believe that traditional conservative scholars have made a better case for Johannine authorship of the Gospel (at least at some stage in the process) than other scholars have made against it. On many points, such as views concerning the Gospel's milieu or some other traditional ascriptions of authorship for canonical books, I find the most common conservative arguments less convincing and early church tradition (e.g., on the Gospel's antignostic purpose) less likely;⁵ but a view ought not to be ruled out in all cases merely because it coincides with traditional opinions or differs from a consensus widespread in academic circles.

Although the question of authorship is not essential to the commentary which follows (I usually employ the language of "traditions" familiar to Johannine scholarship), it is important in completing our questions raised by the issue of genre. If the author or the author's direct source is, as the implied author seems to claim, an eyewitness, his interpretation of the historical Jesus rests on a tradition no farther removed from the historical Jesus than the Synoptics (except in the liberties of theological interpretation permitted by his style). This conclusion follows whether the Fourth Gospel was authored by, or rests on tradition from, an eyewitness or eyewitnesses (whether John the Apostle, John the Elder, or another), independent from the Synoptics.⁶

² See, e.g., Murray, "Introduction," viii–xv.

³ Dimock, "Introduction," 1–2.

⁴ Some critical circles disparage and ignore all scholarship attentive to ancient tradition or open to faith claims, whether from a Jewish, ecumenical Protestant, evangelical, Roman Catholic, or Orthodox perspective; some other circles ignore these voices more selectively. But such unwillingness to engage dissenting views may be as fundamentalistic (in the popular, pejorative sense of that designation) when practiced by secular or the more extreme liberal scholars as when practiced by conservative scholars.

⁵ Cf., e.g., Doriani, "Review," critiquing my "grave reservations" concerning Matthean authorship (although I believe the adjective considerably overstates the degree of my skepticism).

Who Wrote the Fourth Gospel?

The question of authorship is not decisive for substantial historical reliability; even an eyewitness could have adapted information considerably, whereas a secondhand source (like Luke) could have accurately preserved earlier tradition.⁷ Thus, Dodd rightly points out, Plato exercised considerable freedom with the teachings of his master Socrates.⁸ But an author who was an eyewitness could at least validate his claim to know the substance of Jesus' ministry and teaching firsthand, as the author does in fact claim (19:35; cf. 1 John 1:1–4; for the identity of the author with the beloved disciple, see below). Further, even if an eyewitness employed an existing stream of tradition (which could be based on collective recollections, e.g., Philostratus *Vit. soph.* 1.22.524),⁹ he could supplement it independently (Thucydides 1.22.1).¹⁰

p 83 As J. Ramsey Michaels has observed, many scholars who refer to the other extant canonical gospels as “Matthew,” “Mark,” and “Luke,” without regard to their authorship, speak of John simply as the “Fourth Gospel,” as if the evidence for Johannine authorship is weaker than the evidence for Synoptic authorship. But, if anything, the evidence for Johannine authorship is stronger.¹¹

John the Apostle

Despite the reticence with which such a proposal is often greeted in some circles of the larger academy, many scholars today continue to hold that John authored the Fourth Gospel.¹² Others hold that the beloved disciple on whose tradition the Gospel is based was John the apostle, regardless of who edited and arranged that tradition for the written Gospel.¹³ (The latter view is common enough that one commentator in the mid-60s could still claim that the usual modern view is that the author is a disciple of the apostle “who based his work largely upon the testimony and teaching of his venerated master.”)¹⁴ Together these positions maintain considerable support; in Charlesworth's

⁶ Many scholars accept an eyewitness tradition of some sort (e.g., Kysar, *John*, 12; O'Day, “John,” 500; Witherington, *Wisdom*, 15–17; Smith, *John* [1999], 400; Ridderbos, *John*, 3; Beck, *Paradigm*, 6); but if an eyewitness, why *not* John (Bruce, *John*, 4–5)? Even in fiction, eyewitnesses carry more weight in the story world (Euripides *Iph. aul.* 1607), but modern historians can ignore such claims in novels; yet in the historical genre, eyewitness claims must be taken more seriously (Carson, *John*, 63–64).

⁷ Plutarch *Demosthenes* 11.1 regards Demetrius as a reliable source because he learned the information from Demosthenes himself in his old age.

⁸ Dodd, *Tradition*, 17.

⁹ Streeter, *Gospels*, 425–26, doubts that John was an eyewitness because John depends on Mark and Luke (a thesis often disputed; see our discussion of the relation between John and the Synoptics).

¹⁰ Xenophon *Hell.* 3.1.2 cites an account of the Greek mercenaries' escape from Persia, but, though aware of this source, later composed his own account (*Anabasis*).

¹¹ Michaels, *John*, xv.

¹² Especially, though not exclusively, among many conservative and moderate scholars (some allowing for degrees of subsequent redaction), e.g., Carson, *John*; Bruce, *John*; Ellis, “Christology,” 1–6; Blomberg, “Reliable,” 30–37; Milne, *Message*, 17–19; Munn, “Introduction”; Silva Santos, “Autoria”; Watkins, *John*, 8–18; Wenham, “View”; tentatively, Temple, *Core*, viii.

¹³ E.g., Braun, *Jean*, 301–30; Muñoz León, “Discipulo.” Barrett, *John*, 133, attributes all the canonical Johannine literature to disciples of the apostle; Schnackenburg also suggests dependence on Johannine tradition, while allowing that the “spokesperson who transmitted” and interpreted the tradition need not have been the apostle himself (*John*, 1:102).

¹⁴ Evans, *John*, 1.

list of views concerning the identity of the beloved disciple they in fact hold the longest list of defenders.¹⁵ The traditional view of Johannine authorship still seems to many the position best favored by the evidence, as articulated in the earlier work of Raymond Brown and some other commentators like D. A. Carson.

I believe that Gerald Borchert is correct in noting that, whereas John the disciple ultimately “stands behind” the Gospel, others may have developed his tradition into the finished Gospel.¹⁶ Yet the precise degree of freedom implied in the designation “developed” is debatable, and the evidence is not clear in either direction. After examining the evidence put forth to distinguish John from those who helped him write the Gospel, I find no evidence that John must have been deceased or lacked substantial control over what went into the Gospel (though evidence to the contrary is also difficult to find). Preferring the simplest solution (following the logic of Ockham’s Razor), I would therefore lean toward the view that John is the author of the Gospel as we have it, to whatever degree he might have permitted his scribe or scribes freedom in drafting his sermonic material. While I am prepared to change my mind (as Raymond Brown did after his own defense of Johannine authorship), this is where I honestly believe the evidence surveyed below points.

The authorship of the Fourth Gospel has been vigorously debated,¹⁷ although the traditional consensus from early Christian centuries that the Apostle John wrote it has now given way to a majority scholarly skepticism toward that claim. But this [p 84](#) consensus has been ably challenged by some recent conservative commentators, most notably Leon Morris, D. A. Carson, and Craig Blomberg, and it has been challenged with good reason.

1. *Internal Evidence*

The traditional position does make sense of the internal evidence. The “beloved disciple” purports to be an eyewitness (19:35; cf. 1:14; 1 John 1:1–3), on whose direct claims the Gospel is based. The author also purports that this disciple followed Jesus closely, in a role that could not have easily belonged to someone outside Jesus’ inner circle of disciples. Of the Twelve known from early Christian tradition, only John son of Zebedee could fill the role of the beloved disciple. A number of scholars recognize that John fits the evidence in the Fourth Gospel for this beloved disciple.¹⁸ Before examining the internal evidence for Johannine authorship, we must examine some questions that have been raised concerning the beloved disciple’s identity.

It should be noted that many distinguish the question of the beloved disciple’s identity from the question of the author’s identity because many (probably most) scholars distinguish the beloved disciple from the author. We will deal with that frequent distinction in our discussion of the Johannine school below, but at this point mention by way of introduction that we do not conclude that the evidence for such a distinction is compelling, hence we do not presuppose it in our examination below.

1A. The Identity of the Beloved Disciple

There remains no consensus in Johannine scholarship concerning the identity of the beloved disciple.¹⁹ Some have proposed that he was a disciple of Jesus but not one of the Twelve.²⁰ One could argue that the beloved disciple is not

¹⁵ Charlesworth, *Disciple*, 197–211, lists 29 scholars.

¹⁶ Borchert, *John*, 89–90.

¹⁷ Cf., e.g., the summary of views in Nicol, “Research,” 8–10.

¹⁸ So Malatesta, *Interiority*, 83; Ellis, *World*, 13–17; Köstenberger, *John*, 22–24; Blomberg, *Reliability*, 26–31; cf. Smalley, *John*, 77; Nunn, *Authorship*, 99ff.

¹⁹ For the fullest survey of views, see Charlesworth, *Disciple*, 127–224.

²⁰ E.g., Ellis, *Genius*, 2–3.

one of the Twelve because he is not mentioned by the “beloved disciple” title until the last discourse and Passion Narrative²¹ (one could also use this to separate sections of the Gospel into sources). But Judas is first mentioned in 6:71 and plays no role until 12:4; the other Judas appears only in 14:22; Thomas first appears in 11:16. Did the author want us to think that these disciples entered Jesus’ circle in the narrative world only at their first mention in the narrative? Conversely Nathanael, who plays a major role in 1:45–49, does not appear again until 21:2. Xenophon mentions his own presence only after he assumes a role of leadership in the retreating Greek army, but hardly appeared only then in the midst of Persia! Further, if the beloved disciple is a newly acquired Judean disciple, how did he so quickly achieve a position of special honor (13:23)?

Beasley-Murray argues that if the beloved disciple were one of the Twelve, he would have been sufficiently well known outside the Johannine circle of churches for the author to have named him.²² This argument, however, assumes that the only reason for anonymity was lack of renown, when in fact a wide variety of other possible reasons have been p 85 offered (see below). Indeed, might the author not have more freedom to leave him unnamed if he was known (especially if he were the author)? Another scholar suggests that the author was a priest because Polycrates, an early bishop of Ephesus, claimed that the beloved disciple was a prominent priest (Eusebius *Hist. eccl.* 3.31.3; 5.24.3).²³ But Polycrates in the same texts also calls that disciple “John,” and may have intended “priest” figuratively in accordance with a common early Christian usage (1 Pet 2:5, 9; Rev 1:6; 5:10; 20:6; cf. Rom 12:1; 15:16; Phil 2:17).²⁴ Given the honorable status this tradition claims for “John,” its isolation militates against its likelihood in any literal sense.²⁵

More plausibly, commentators argue that the Gospel cannot be from one of the Twelve because it is too different from the Synoptics, which do rest on tradition from the Twelve, to derive from the same source.²⁶ But this objection assumes that the Twelve promulgated tradition as a unified group in a unified style with a unified perspective. In a period still dominated by apostolic tradition (before the second century), who but a remaining apostle might have the status to diverge from the Synoptics? Most commentators recognize that John’s abundant information not found in the Synoptics represents an independent source or tradition of some sort, but if this independence points in either direction, would it not point somewhat better to an eyewitness than to someone dependent only on tradition?²⁷ Second-century pseudepigraphic works claim apostolic authorship precisely because such validation was necessary for acceptance. John’s use among the orthodox was delayed (perhaps in part due to divergence from the Synoptics), but on the authority of Papias Irenaeus embraced it while rejecting the decades-later gnostic works with pseudonymous claims (see discussion below). Our counterargument is no stronger than the argument we answer here, but will prove helpful in view of positive arguments favoring apostolic authorship (below).

Brown’s argument that the beloved disciple was not one of the Twelve because of his competition with Peter²⁸ cuts

²¹ Cf. Kysar, “Gospel,” 919.

²² Beasley-Murray, *John*, lxxiii. One wonders how immediately the author intended the Gospel to circulate outside the Johannine circle of churches, but this is irrelevant to our case.

²³ Rigato, “Apostolo,” and Winandy, “Disciple,” both even allowing that the priest of Acts 4:6 may be in view.

²⁴ Admittedly *πέρων* could bear a specifically priestly sense (in Exod 28:36; 29:6; 39:3, 30; Lev 8:9, five of its seven LXX uses), but its usage was much broader in Greek and probably simply contributes to the metaphor. It is also not impossible, though it is very unlikely, that Zebedee was of Levitic descent; similar names appear among Levites (Neh 11:17; 1 Chr 26:2; 2 Chr 17:8; Ezra 10:20), but were hardly limited to them (Josh 7:1, 17–18; 1 Chr 8:19; 27:27).

²⁵ Blomberg, *Reliability*, 26.

²⁶ Marsh, *John*, 22; Eller, *Disciple*, 46.

²⁷ See the argument in Ridderbos, *John*, 4–6 (cf. *ibid.* 382), though he leaves the question unanswered.

in the opposite direction equally well or better. How could the beloved disciple be exceptionally close to the Lord, and *able* to be viewed as competition for Peter, were he *not* one of the Twelve? The comparison in any case elevates the beloved disciple without necessarily diminishing Peter. A standard technique of epideictic rhetoric was comparison; one would compare the main character favorably with another person to praise the former.²⁹ Bruns similarly is convinced that the author of the Gospel and Epistles could not have been an apostle since he was challenged (3 John 9),³⁰ but other [p 86](#) early Christians were not afraid to challenge apostles, especially if the challengers ascribed apostolic status to themselves or their tradition (2 Cor 11:5, 13–15;³¹ Gal 2:6–8; Rev 2:2).

Of specific candidates outside the circle of the Twelve, the most entertaining suggestion is probably Paul (whom the Gospel’s author allegedly thought to be one of the Twelve).³² But one of the more commonly proposed and most defensible candidates is Lazarus, “whom Jesus loved” (11:3).³³ This makes sense of the phrase, though it makes less sense of the frequency with which, and locations in which, the disciple appears in the narrative, if an earlier case of anonymous disciples (1:37–40) includes him (which is uncertain). One might propose that Lazarus of Bethany would have readier access to the high priest’s house in 18:15–16 than a Galilean disciple (if the disciple of 18:15–16 is the beloved disciple, which is uncertain); the Synoptics might also have omitted Lazarus to protect him because of his location.³⁴

Yet the case for Lazarus suffers from the primary objection to anyone outside the Twelve—the beloved disciple’s prominence in Jesus’ circle (13:23). Unless the beloved disciple’s tradition is either originally deliberately false or a literary device (on the latter see below), he assumes a role that the Synoptic tradition would allow only for one of the Twelve, and probably for one of the three (Peter, James and John). Certainly 21:24 assumes his prominence. One could argue that the Synoptic tradition is biased in favor of the Twelve—despite Peter’s repeated failures in Mark—but it is difficult to dispute the reliability of the tradition that Jesus had a group of twelve special disciples who were closest to him.³⁵ Other arguments against identification with the Twelve falter on similar grounds.

Of the Twelve, the best specific candidate besides John son of Zebedee would be Thomas.³⁶ Although Charlesworth’s case for Thomas is novel, it is brilliant. Yet it poses problems that Johannine authorship does not. Since Thomas is explicitly named in the Gospel, why is the beloved disciple sometimes anonymous and sometimes

²⁸ Brown, *Community*, 82–84; cf. Hengel, *Mark*, 52, who argues that the comparison exalts the guarantor of the Johannine tradition over “the guarantor of the Markan-Synoptic tradition.” Gunther, “Relation,” suggests that the disciple was Jesus’ physical brother.

²⁹ Cf. Shuler, *Genre*, 50; see further comment on 13:23.

³⁰ Bruns, *Art*, 102.

³¹ The false apostles of 11:13–15 may have claimed the backing of the Jerusalem apostles; opinions are divided whether he addresses the false apostles or genuine apostles in 11:5, although direct authorization of the false apostles by Jerusalem is unlikely. For various sides of the issue, see Georgi, *Opponents*, 32; Bultmann, *Corinthians*, 215; Thrall, “Super-apostles”; McClelland, “‘Super-apostles’”; Bruce, *Corinthians*, 236; Carson, *Triumphalism*, 25–26.

³² See Goulder, “Friend.”

³³ Brownlee, “Whence,” 192–93; Sanders, “Who,” 82; Léonard, “Notule”; Sanders, *John*, 31ff.; Nepper-Christensen, “Disciple”; Garcia, “Lazare.” Sanders, “Patmos,” 84, thinks that the basis of John’s work was the possibly Aramaic work of Lazarus. See a survey of views in Charlesworth, *Disciple*, 185–92.

³⁴ Vicent Cernuda, “Desvaído,” suggesting that Lazarus worked for Annas (but cf. 12:10), and that Lazarus was the beloved disciple at the cross, but John son of Zebedee in 13:23.

³⁵ For detailed argument, see Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*, 11, 98–101; Witherington, *Christology*, 126–27.

³⁶ See Charlesworth, *Disciple*; Palatty, “Disciple and Thomas.”

not? Arguments to the contrary notwithstanding,³⁷ the first audience would likely not assume that the beloved disciple was Thomas unless they already knew this to be the case, which we cannot. In favor of Thomas is his demand to touch Jesus' side in 20:25, though only the beloved disciple saw the wounds at the cross (19:34–35).³⁸ But that Thomas announces this demand to his fellow disciples probably presupposes that they *all* knew about the wounded side, which is plausible in the story world if the beloved disciple was one of [p 87](#) the Twelve and could have informed them. It would be literary genius if Thomas verified both the cross and the physicality of the resurrection,³⁹ but it is hardly necessary. Thomas is not the only witness of the resurrection that balances John's witness in 1:19–36; he is merely the climactic one.

Granted, Charlesworth finds external evidence that can support his case, including connections between the Fourth Gospel and the school of Thomas in the East, and his command of the sources is exemplary.⁴⁰ He notes a minor rivalry between East (as exemplified in the beloved disciple's tradition) and West (as exemplified by Peter),⁴¹ and compares the earliest Thomas traditions with this Gospel.⁴² Yet for all the evidence he marshalls, it remains the case that the bulk of available external evidence points instead toward the son of Zebedee as apostolic guarantor of the tradition (see below).

Others have proposed that the beloved disciple functions as an anonymous symbolic representative for a larger group, for example, Gentile Christians,⁴³ or, more likely, the Johannine community.⁴⁴ Perhaps the disciple remains anonymous to challenge the excessive honor accorded Peter in church tradition,⁴⁵ or to subtly increase his stature.⁴⁶ More importantly and probably, anonymity can allow him to stand in an idealized way for disciples in general, hence as a model for the implied audience (cf. 13:35; 15:8–10).⁴⁷ Many other models for faith in the Gospel are likewise anonymous,⁴⁸ though the list of models of faith is not entirely coextensive with anonymous characters (cf. 1:6–7, 49; 5:14–15).⁴⁹ At the same time, the beloved disciple functions as an ideal witness, hence as an ideal author;⁵⁰ indeed, in the early centuries the claim that the implied author is the “beloved disciple” was regarded as “part of the guarantee of his utter reliability.”⁵¹ As an inspired teacher of the Jesus tradition, the beloved disciple also parallels the Paraclete.⁵²

³⁷ Charlesworth, *Disciple*, 291–324, thoroughly responds to possible objections to Thomas as the beloved disciple.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 226–33.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 302–3. For Thomas's role as spokesman for the disciples in this Gospel, see Xavier, “Thomas.” For a very different view of the Gospel with Thomas traditions, see DeConick, *Mystics*.

⁴⁰ Charlesworth, *Disciple*, 360–89.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 390–413.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 414–21.

⁴³ Pamment, “Disciple.”

⁴⁴ Brown, *Community*, 89. For a full survey of views that the disciple is a symbolic figure, see Charlesworth, *Disciple*, 134–41.

⁴⁵ Watty, “Anonymity.”

⁴⁶ Whitacre, *Polemic*, 18, compares Jesus, who does not advertise himself in the Gospel.

⁴⁷ Cf. Watty, “Anonymity”; Kurz, “Disciple”; Collins, *Written*, 42–45; Hill, *Prophecy*, 147, also sees the symbol's referent as disciples in general. As David Beck argues at fullest length, central characters are rarely anonymous in Greco-Roman literature (Beck, *Paradigm*, 17–26), but in the Fourth Gospel anonymous characters may facilitate reader identification, especially in the case of the beloved disciple (132–36); all disciples become “beloved” (John 17:23, 26).

⁴⁸ See Beck, “Anonymity.”

⁴⁹ This is my only serious disagreement with Beck's excellent work. See Keener, “Review of Beck,” 119, and the appropriate passages in this commentary.

⁵⁰ See Bauckham, “Author,” who suggests that the anonymity functions merely to distinguish him from other characters.

While the disciple undoubtedly does function this way on the literary level, his referent in the text is to an eyewitness who claims to address the community. (Although Brown denies that the beloved disciple was one of the Twelve, he concurs that he was a companion of Jesus.)⁵³ There is no reason that this Gospel cannot use a real historical figure as an [p 88](#) ideal.⁵⁴ As Hill suggests, “Mary and Peter also possess a symbolic dimension, but that does not reduce their characters to pure symbols.”⁵⁵ Analogously, Qumran’s “Teacher” performed a symbolic function in the Qumran scrolls, but was also a real person.⁵⁶ The beloved disciple is thus also a historical figure, the source of the community’s distinctive Jesus tradition.⁵⁷ The beloved disciple’s identity, like that of Jesus’ “anonymous” mother in this Gospel, was probably already known to the audience; omission of the name is probably deliberate for such literary reasons as proposed above.⁵⁸ The first audience presumably recognized the disciple’s identity in 21:20–25 if not before.⁵⁹ If omission of the name is deliberate yet not intended to conceal the author’s identity, we probably have enough information from the Synoptic tradition to identify the beloved disciple with John, who is prominent in the Synoptics yet unnamed in the Fourth Gospel (and to whom other evidence does not assign an earlier death as with James and Peter). (That he is the author supported by church tradition only strengthens the proposal.)

If internal evidence leads us to conclude that this disciple was most likely the Apostle John of Synoptic tradition, this suggests that John is either the author in some sense or the book is pseudepigraphic in some sense. Ancients recognized that forgery (e.g., of letters and legal documents) occurred and sometimes suspected it,⁶⁰ but literary pseudepigraphy was more common than forgery for literary works; pseudonymity was an established and acceptable literary practice of the day, both in broader Greco-Roman⁶¹ and in some Jewish circles.⁶² Ancient literary critics sometimes sought to distinguish genuine and spurious works attributed to an author (e.g., [Aulus Gellius 3.3](#), on plays of Plautus), or at least make note of which works were disputed.⁶³ Sometimes even declamations could be “forged” (*falsi*) within a generation (Seneca *Controv. 1.pref.11*); thus later rhetoricians would, when other evidence (such as coherence with the period they depict) was lacking, use stylistic criteria to evaluate the authenticity of a speech (Dionysius of Halicarnassus *Lysias 11–12*; *Demosth. 50*).⁶⁴ When rejecting speeches’ authenticity (e.g., Dionysius of

⁵¹ Wiles, *Gospel*, 9.

⁵² Culpepper, *School*, 267; Whitacre, *Polemic*, 18.

⁵³ Brown, *Community*, 31.

⁵⁴ See, e.g., O’Grady, “Disciple”; Whitacre, *John*, 15.

⁵⁵ Hill, *Prophecy*, 147.

⁵⁶ Charlesworth, *Disciple*, 12.

⁵⁷ Many regard the beloved disciple as a real person whose identity is today unknown; see Charlesworth, *Disciple*, 141–54.

Schneiders, “Testimony,” considers the disciple a composite of several disciples’ testimony preserved by the Johannine School.

⁵⁸ Cf. Bruce, *John*, 3.

⁵⁹ Bauckham, “Author”; Charlesworth, *Disciple*, 13; Whitacre, *John*, 15.

⁶⁰ E.g., Arrian *Alex. 6.12.3*; Livy 40.55.1; Quintilian 5.5.1; Josephus *Life 356*; cf. 2 Thess 2:2; 3:17.

⁶¹ E.g., most of the “Cynic epistles”; cf. Maloney, “Authorship.” Sometimes its function (as perhaps in some secondary works of Plato) was mere stylistic imitation for rhetorical practice. In the Byzantine period and later, see, e.g., Cook, *Dogma*, 51.

⁶² E.g., 1 Enoch; 4 Ezra; 2 Baruch. The *Temple Scroll* (11QT 48) may have sought to imply its Mosaic authorship (Brin, “Scroll”).

⁶³ E.g., Arrian *Alex. 5.6.5*; Josephus *Ag. Ap. 1.221*; Dionysius of Halicarnassus *Demosth. 23, 57*; Seneca *Ep. Lucil. 88.40*.

⁶⁴ Others proved less skeptical than Dionysius of Halicarnassus (*Lysias 12*), and in some cases probably rightly so; he always held a speech to the rhetor’s highest standards, but the rhetor may have fallen short of that standard, especially in his early development. For coherence with the purported author’s time and life, see also Dionysius of Halicarnassus *Dinarchus 11*.

Halicarnassus *Dinarchus* 13), however, one offered more reasons than when accepting them (*Dinarchus* 12).⁶⁵

⌈ p 89 Yet the Gospel lacks a major feature characteristic of most pseudepigraphic works: a *direct* claim to authorship. In other words, pseudonymity is unlikely for the Fourth Gospel, unless we wish to propose “implicit” pseudonymity,⁶⁶ a literary category for which other examples are conspicuously lacking. (Despite the diplomatic language of some modern interpreters, which allows us to call an author a “great theologian” while denying that he or his source was an eyewitness, the author hardly seems a great theologian if, in conflict with his claim, he or his source was not an eyewitness. In a narrative document purporting to be history or biography in the Greco-Roman sense, a false claim to have been present would make the claimant a liar open to charges of distorting the historical enterprise.)⁶⁷

1B. Westcott’s Process of Elimination

The approach used by Westcott in ⌈ the nineteenth century, which narrows down evidence for authorship to the Apostle John, is often dismissed as unduly traditional today. Nevertheless, his arguments remain valuable⁶⁸ and marshal more significant internal evidence than do any of the competing hypotheses.⁶⁹ As Craig Blomberg notes, although Westcott wrote long ago and his position requires nuancing, “No full-scale refutation of Westcott has ever appeared.”⁷⁰ Rather, in ⌈ the nineteenth-century aftermath of historical skepticism’s successes, many scholars abandoned Johannine authorship more on the basis of the shift in outlook than of any appeal to previously overlooked evidence.⁷¹

As Westcott argued, internal evidence clearly points to a Jewish author,⁷² and knowledge of local geography indicates a specifically Palestinian Jew.⁷³ (These two introductory points are generally, though not universally, accepted today.) That the Fourth Gospel fiercely favors Galilee over Judea could also suggest that the author was Galilean rather than Judean in origin, although he knew Jerusalem well. John’s style also contains significant Semitic elements;⁷⁴ some have argued from this Aramaic flavor that this was his native language.⁷⁵ Since Galilee appears to

⁶⁵ One also had to beware of inauthenticity claims motivated by malice (Dionysius of Halicarnassus *Isoc.* 18). Usher, “Introduction to *Dinarchus*,” 246–49, notes that librarians at Alexandria and Pergamon had been most interested in distinguishing authentic from spurious works until Dionysius of Halicarnassus’s time in the first century B.C.E.

⁶⁶ Interestingly, Barth, *Witness*, 14, thinks the author wished to be called John, thus blending with the witness of the Baptist in the Gospel’s opening.

⁶⁷ Cf. also, e.g., Barnett, *Reliable*, 78. Todd, “Introduction to *Symposium*,” 376, doubts Xenophon’s claim to be present in *Symp.* 1.1, but the genre of dialogues differs from later biography; he admits some historical setting to the account (376–78); and his reason for skepticism (which is less than secure) is that Xenophon nowhere places himself in the narrative—a situation which does not obtain with the beloved disciple (19:35).

⁶⁸ Nicol, “Research,” 9, thinks that “Westcott’s commentary is still one of the best” (commenting on his attention to the Greek).

⁶⁹ Often noted by conservative writers, who are more apt to attend to Westcott, e.g., Tenney, *John*, 297–303.

⁷⁰ Blomberg, *Reliability*, 27–28.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 23, following Köstenberger, “Frühe Zweifel.”

⁷² Westcott, *John*, vi; Bernard, *John*, 1:lxvii.

⁷³ Westcott, *John*, x–xviii; less persuasive are his appeals to Palestinian text types, etc. On his knowledge of Jerusalem topography, see also Bernard, *John*, 1:lxviii; Smalley, *John*, 37.

⁷⁴ Westcott, *John*, vii; Brown, “Burney,” 339; Smalley, *John*, 62; Meeks, “Jew,” 164–67; Dodd, *Interpretation*, 74–75; Schnackenburg, *John*, 1:110.

⁷⁵ Cf. Burney, *Origin*, 133; Bruns, *Art*, 28.

have been bilingual, this is a [p 90](#) much more reasonable thesis than the proposal that he originally wrote the whole Gospel in Aramaic.⁷⁶

The internal evidence also claims that the author was an eyewitness, a claim that should not be lightly dismissed or reinterpreted to suit more ambiguous evidence.⁷⁷ Westcott argues further that the eyewitness must have been one of the Twelve, given the scenes to which he was an eyewitness, including the scene parallel to the synoptic Last Supper (Mark 14:17).⁷⁸ These scenes and the disciple's role further narrow him down to the innermost circle of Jesus. The Synoptics list as the three closest disciples to Jesus: Peter, James, and John. Since Peter is contrasted with the beloved disciple, and James died early in the century (Acts 12:2), this leaves John for the special role of the "disciple whom Jesus loved."

One could respond that episodes where John is present in Mark are absent in this Gospel; would Zebedee's son omit events where he was present?⁷⁹ But this argument cuts better the other direction; if the beloved disciple was present for most of Jesus' public ministry (as he would have been if he were the son of Zebedee), he would hardly be limited to the stories where Mark declares his presence (unless he needs to return to Mark to jog his memory of when he was specifically mentioned). He has other criteria for selection (20:30–31), and other events take precedence over the transfiguration (Jesus' entire ministry functions thus, 1:14), the raising of Jairus's daughter (the raising of Lazarus), and Jesus' agony in Gethsemane (cf. our comment on 12:27). A stronger argument against narrowing this disciple down to John is his presence at the cross (19:26), whereas Mark claims that all the disciples fled (Mark 14:50). But Mark consistently emphasizes the disciples' failures, and a summary that all fled would not preclude one showing up quietly at the cross any more than it precluded Peter more courageously following into the high priest's house (Mark 14:54). Mark excludes *all* male followers in any case; to press him against this Gospel, we would have to regard the beloved disciple's most fervent eyewitness claim (19:35) as fictitious or regard this disciple as a woman (*pace* 19:26).

The process of elimination also helps; while the Fourth Gospel gives voice to disciples who never speak in the Synoptics, the sons of Zebedee are only once mentioned, and then together without separate names (21:2).⁸⁰ Thus John knows of Zebedee's sons (assuming, as we argue on that passage, that John 21 is by the author of the Gospel or, as most hold, at least reflects the same community), the audience of the Gospel knows of them, yet John [p](#)

⁷⁶ Cf. Torrey, "Origin." Very little literature was being written in Aramaic in this period (Albright, "Discoveries," 155); cf. Manson, *Paul and John*, 86, who finds Aramaisms clustered almost entirely in John 1:1–34; 3:22–4:42; 5:1–47; 6:22–71; 7:14–10:39; 12:20–18:40.

⁷⁷ Westcott, *John*, xxv–xxviii (examining 1:14, 19:35, 21:24). Besides the explicit claims of the writer, Westcott also appeals to details (xviii–xxi) concerning time (xix), number (xix), place (xix–xx) and manner (xx). This line of argument is weaker than one based on the writer's claims, but helpful as a support. See the fuller argument in Morris, *Studies*, 139–214.

⁷⁸ Westcott, *John*, xxi; cf. also Bruce, *John*, 3; Carson, *John*, 71.

⁷⁹ Culpepper, *John*, 31; and Smith, *John* (1999), 26, who also objects to an appeal to Synoptic tradition here (presumably because John's audience may not have known it; but John does know the Twelve, 6:13, 67–71; 20:24). But presumably John's first audience already knew John's identity; my appeal to Synoptic tradition is for us who do not, and depends only on the Synoptics' accurate portrayal of the Twelve and three as Jesus' most intimate disciples.

⁸⁰ Michaels, *John*, xvii; Carson, *John*, 72; Whitacre, *John*, 21. Surprisingly, Culpepper, *John*, 31, counts James's lack of explicit mention as an argument *against* Johannine authorship, perhaps because one might expect John to mention his brother. But such mention might be difficult without mentioning himself (James never appears independently from John in the Synoptics). Boismard, "Disciple," argues that the disciple remains one of the anonymous ones of 21:2, hence cannot be a son of Zebedee. But even in that verse, not every anonymous disciple may be the beloved disciple!

[91] apparently wishes not to name them—just as the beloved disciple remains anonymous. That John is not mentioned by name⁸¹ can hardly count against Johannine authorship, if anonymity is deliberate and John knew, as he must have, of Zebedee’s sons. If John’s record is at all compatible with that of the Synoptics, then the internal evidence suggests none other than John son of Zebedee.⁸²

2. Church Tradition

After [9] the early second century, the Fourth Gospel came into wide use over a broad geographical range.⁸³ Consonant with what we find from the internal evidence, church tradition identifies the author of the Fourth Gospel with the Apostle John.⁸⁴ As Raymond Brown put it in his commentary, before he changed his view to the one later expressed in *Community of the Beloved Disciple*: “... the only ancient tradition about the authorship of the Fourth Gospel for which any considerable body of evidence can be adduced is that it is the work of John son of Zebedee. There are some valid points in the objections raised to this tradition, but Irenaeus’s statement is far from having been disproved.”⁸⁵ Likewise, C. H. Dodd, who rejected Johannine authorship, nevertheless conceded that the external evidence for John son of Zebedee was “relatively strong,”⁸⁶ and that “Of any external evidence to the contrary that could be called cogent I am not aware.”⁸⁷

Some scholars object to starting with external evidence,⁸⁸ but as with ancient documents in general it seems better to begin with attributed authorship and then evaluate it, rather than beginning with the data that can point in any number of directions. Nunn rightly complains that ruling out external evidence would lead us astray with many other works; external evidence is at least objective.⁸⁹ External evidence is allowed to weigh more heavily in classical studies than it is in NT studies, where the burden of proof is sometimes stacked so securely against the authorship of some documents that no amount of evidence seems adequate to challenge it. If the external tradition is strong, the burden of proof should remain on those challenging the traditional authorship. Most NT scholars reject Johannine authorship; but this “requires their virtual dismissal of the external evidence,” as Carson argues, though

Most scholars of antiquity, were they assessing the authorship of some other document, could not so easily set aside evidence as plentiful, consistent and plainly tied to the source as is the external evidence that supports Johannine authorship. The majority of contemporary biblical scholars do not rest nearly as much weight on external evidence as do their colleagues in classical scholarship.⁹⁰

[p 92] But while I believe the external evidence for Johannine authorship is nearly unanimous and is sufficient, it is not complete. Many arguments against John’s authorship are weak, but one does wonder why a work by one of the

⁸¹ Cf. Kysar, “Gospel,” 919.

⁸² Westcott, *John*, xxi–xxv; see Brown, *John*, 1:xcii–xcviii.

⁸³ For Egypt, see Braun, *Jean*, 69–133 (including Basilides, Clement of Alexandria, Diognetus, and the Bodmer Papyri); for Rome, 135–80; for Asia Minor, 181–289.

⁸⁴ Westcott, *John*, xxviii–xxxii; Köstenberger, *John*, 24–25; Blomberg, *Reliability*, 23–26.

⁸⁵ Brown, *John*, 1:xcii.

⁸⁶ Dodd, *Tradition*, 11.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁸⁸ Witherington, *Wisdom*, 12.

⁸⁹ Nunn, *Authorship*, 3–4. His point stands for ancient works even if his example from history, from Shakespeare, is not itself beyond dispute.

⁹⁰ Carson, *John*, 69, following Kennedy, “Criticism”; cf. Carson, Moo, and Morris, *Introduction*, 141.

most prominent apostles does not appear for decades in quotations by other early Christian writers. While we argue for Johannine authorship, therefore, we must acknowledge that the external evidence is incomplete, and we need the internal evidence as well as external evidence to make a strong case.

2A. The Gnostic and Orthodox Consensus

It was not uncommon for ancient readers, like modern ones, to dispute the authorship of particular works.⁹¹ Nevertheless, the evidence from Christian tradition is consistent and crosses sectarian boundaries.⁹² Gnostic writers claim Johannine authorship even before “orthodox” writers comment on the subject.⁹³ “The external evidence, including that of the gnostics and the tradition stemming from Irenaeus, attests Johannine authorship.”⁹⁴ It could be argued that some of the orthodox accepted the claim of John’s authorship to prove its authenticity to other orthodox circles despite its use by the gnostics.⁹⁵ But if the authorial claim were mediated only through the gnostics (and the Gospel as we have it is certainly not a gnostic document), it is doubtful that many of the orthodox (and certainly not Irenaeus!) would have come to its rescue. Irenaeus undoubtedly tells the truth when he claims to depend on early orthodox reports and not merely those of gnostics.

Certain accounts of this authorship are fanciful, even if they may accurately preserve some tradition about it. The Muratorian Canon, for instance, which may derive from as late as the fourth century, reports that after the apostles prayed, God revealed that John, an eyewitness, should write the Gospel down.⁹⁶ Modern scholars are naturally skeptical of the account, whether or not they are committed to antisupernaturalism!⁹⁷

Yet other sources are more dependable. The titles of the four gospels all seem to preserve earlier tradition, being themselves early enough and accepted enough to have been unanimous and unchallenged throughout the ancient church.⁹⁸ Since all four titles were probably bestowed simultaneously, given their identical form, they were probably composed to circulate with the collection of four gospels, presumably some time before Tatian’s late second-century *Diatessaron* and definitely before the late second-century superscription of \mathfrak{P}^{66} . Codex B and *Aleph*, though later than \mathfrak{P}^{75} , reflect a simpler title for this Gospel, though all three attribute it to John; this suggests that John was already widely accepted as the author before \mathfrak{P}^{75} .⁹⁹ Some have doubted that the titles themselves predate the \mathfrak{P}^{93} 180 C.E.,¹⁰⁰ but if this is the case the unanimity across a wide geographic range is difficult to explain. Others favor a period much earlier in the second century.¹⁰¹ In the latter half of the second century Irenaeus, who was

⁹¹ E.g., Aulus Gellius 3.3; Josephus *Ag. Ap.* 1.221.

⁹² There is little firm “orthodox” attestation before Irenaeus, as Smalley, *John*, 72, points out, but what evidence we do have (early gnostic, some reportedly earlier and more subsequent attestation) is fully consistent with Johannine authorship.

⁹³ E.g., Ptolemy, ca. 130–140 C.E. (*Irenaeus Haer.* 1.8.5); also Heracleon (Origen *Comm. Jo.* 6.3; Wiles, *Gospel*, 7).

⁹⁴ Painter, *John*, 4; see further Nunn, *Authorship*, 20ff.

⁹⁵ Witherington, *Wisdom*, 14–15.

⁹⁶ Murat. Canon 9–34, esp. 9–16 (Hennecke, *NT Apocrypha*, 1:43).

⁹⁷ E.g., Carson, *John*, 28. For the fourth-century date, see Gamble, “Canonical Formation,” 189; others have dated it to the late second or third century.

⁹⁸ Hengel, *Mark*, 81–82; cf. Aune, *Environment*, 18.

⁹⁹ Daniel B. Wallace brought this to my attention in a communication of March 7, 2000 (citing Porter, “Variation,” who argues that \mathfrak{P}^{75} and Vaticanus attest the same text type as early as 200).

¹⁰⁰ Sanders, *Figure*, 64–66. He also thinks anonymous works claimed greater authority (66); this thesis is, however, doubtful (cf. the plethora of pseudepigraphic works).

¹⁰¹ Aune, *Environment*, 18; and Witherington, *Wisdom*, 11, suggest ca. 125 C.E. Some follow Hengel in suggesting an even

never one to agree with gnostics when he did not have to, declares that John lived on in Ephesus until the very end of the first century.¹⁰² By the time of Irenaeus, Johannine authorship of the Fourth Gospel was already established and apparently unchallenged. Theophilus of Antioch quotes the Gospel and attributes it to John by 181 C.E. (Theophilus 2.22); Tatian, Claudius Apollinaris, and Athenagoras had earlier used it as an authoritative source.¹⁰³

2B. Second-Century Orthodoxy and the Fourth Gospel

It is not likely that such an important work as the Fourth Gospel circulated anonymously; while it does not explicitly identify its own author, the recipients seem to have known the identity of at least the beloved disciple (21:23–24). In a much earlier period, travelers regularly networked the Pauline churches (e.g., 1 Cor 1:11; 11:16; 14:33; 16:12, 19; 2 Cor 9:2), and any Pauline scholar approaching Gospels research will be astounded at the lack of networking that Gospels scholars sometimes assume among the early churches. Pauline scholars in this case work with a much more solid base of explicit data than Gospels scholars do (see our comments on networking of early churches in our discussion of John and the Synoptics in ch. 1 of our introduction).

Earliest Christian tradition seems to have exercised some ambivalence toward this Gospel, however; it is not recognized in the Roman fathers until the late second century.¹⁰⁴ Ignatius, bishop of Antioch, neglects this Gospel in his epistles although the focused ethical material of Q and Paul was undoubtedly more useful for his largely hortatory purpose.¹⁰⁵ Although allusions to Johannine language probably appear in the early second century (especially in Polycarp), our earliest complete “orthodox” citation is from Justin Martyr in the mid-second century,¹⁰⁶ but since he cites the Fourth Gospel (3:3) only once (in contrast to his Synoptic citations), it is possible that he cites instead an agraphon from pre-Johannine tradition or a subsequent tradition based on John. Osborne notes that the statement could derive from a baptismal liturgy, but counters that there are “many [other] coincidences of thought and expression” between John and Justin that suggest the latter’s knowledge of the former;¹⁰⁷ some other scholars concur.¹⁰⁸

Some suspect that Justin knows the Gospel but argue that he does not cite it like the Synoptics or regard it as among the memoirs of the apostles.¹⁰⁹ Clearly, early Christians [p 94] cited some gospels (especially Matthew) more than others (such as Mark), but such preferences do not necessarily connote disapproval of the works they cite less.¹¹⁰ Further, Justin, like most other of the earliest Christian authors, does not name the authors of the Synoptics any more than he cites the Fourth Gospel directly. But the argument is one of probability, and the support it adds to our case is helpful but limited.¹¹¹ Justin does not name his source, and use of the Fourth Gospel does not identify its author.

earlier date, e.g., Carson, *John*, 24.

¹⁰² Irenaeus *Haer.* 3.3.4; Irenaeus’s portrayal of the Gospel as antignostic may be part of his ploy to seize it from the gnostics’ hands.

¹⁰³ Carson, *John*, 26.

¹⁰⁴ Bauer, *Orthodoxy*, 208–12; cf. Dubois, “Postérité.”

¹⁰⁵ Blomberg, *Reliability*, 23. Compensation in the longer text of Ignatius suggests how keenly later scribes felt this omission.

¹⁰⁶ *1 Apol.* 61.

¹⁰⁷ Osborn, *Justin*, 137; but some examples, like the Logos, were too widespread to carry his case.

¹⁰⁸ Barnard, *Justin*, 60–62; see esp. Braun, *Jean*, 136–44 (though some of his parallels are clearer than others, he regards dependence as “certain”).

¹⁰⁹ Pryor, “Justin Martyr”; Dodd, *Tradition*, 13.

¹¹⁰ Although the analogy carries little weight, my first book cited Matthew over 150 times, Luke 13 times, 1 Peter 9 times, and John twice, though John was my dissertation area.

Some of the “orthodox” ambivalence expressed toward this Gospel may be due to its early reception by the gnostics, some of whom may have split from the Johannine community, as Brown and other have argued.¹¹² Perhaps the Synoptics had already established themselves in widespread circulation and provided a much smaller foothold to the enemies of 2nd-century “orthodoxy.” John’s very divergence from the Synoptics probably led to its relatively slower reception in the broader church until it could be explained in relation to them.¹¹³

Another factor in the relatively late appearance of Johannine material in 2nd-century Christian texts may have been that John was meant to be published locally, only for the Johannine circle of churches in Asia, rather than widely circulated like the other gospels. Our 2nd-century papyrus fragment P⁵², discovered in Egypt, probably limits the value of this second proposal, however. Although the “orthodoxy” of the community using it cannot be substantiated (the theological orientation of the community that preserved it is unclear, so there is certainly no evidence that the community that originally copied and circulated it was “orthodox”), it is significant that John was being used in 2nd-century the first half of the second century “in a provincial town along the Nile, far removed from its traditional place of composition.”¹¹⁴ However much the Fourth Gospel may have been directed toward a specific historical situation, it was only a matter of time before it began to circulate beyond its originally intended readership.

Other reasons may have delayed its widespread use among the mainstream churches. Matthew, which had already been in circulation for some time and provided a ready-made discipling manual, was a favorite of early Christianity. As a very different Gospel, John would not readily supplant it. This objection, too, however, fails to explain fully the absence of widespread quotations before Justin; even if the work were not the prevailing “favorite” of 2nd-century Mediterranean Christianity, and even if it got a late start in circulation, one might expect more citations than appear. Its delayed citation from writers in communion with the growing eastern Mediterranean network of 2nd-century bishops may have been (as noted above) a reaction to its being co-opted by gnostics.

Some argue that by 2nd-century, apostolic authorship had become a criterion for acceptance, so that originally anonymous documents may have had names attached.¹¹⁵ The profusion of pseudonymous early Christian works in 2nd-century (in the early period especially among the gnostics) supports this claim, but one should note that being in the apostolic circle (like Mark or Luke) was sufficient without claiming p 95 that an author was an apostle. We should also note that literary works the length of the Gospels rarely circulated in antiquity without an attribution of authorship from the start, whether the attribution was genuine or pseudepigraphic.

Because 2nd-century thinking sought to reduce the source of all major traditions to the Twelve, Brown questions the tradition about John (the Elder) in Papias. He points out that Papias’s witness concerning Matthew’s “Hebrew” Gospel appears to be mistaken.¹¹⁶ Brown is certainly correct to criticize the view, attributed to Papias, that our present First Gospel translates a Semitic original; but it is possible that Papias confused an Aramaic sayings source by Matthew with the Gospel subsequently circulating under his name, which had incorporated much of that material.¹¹⁷ Papias’ (or his interpreters’) error need not discredit all the tradition behind Papias’ comments on other gospels, or even on Matthew; it is unlikely that the entire tradition on which the report of Papias’ words is based was

¹¹¹ Chadwick, “Defence,” 275–97, 296.

¹¹² See esp. Brown, *Community*, 145–64; Blomberg, *Reliability*, 24 (citing Hippolytus *Haer.* 7.10 for Basilides’ use of John 1:9; Origen’s frequent citations of Heracleon’s commentary on John).

¹¹³ Smith, “Prolegomena,” 179–80.

¹¹⁴ Metzger, *Text*, 39.

¹¹⁵ Lindars, *John*, 21; Brown, *Community*, 33–34; Witherington, *Wisdom*, 14–15.

¹¹⁶ Brown, *Community*, 34 n. 46.

¹¹⁷ Cf., e.g., Bruce, *Documents*, 38–40; Filson, *History*, 83.

mistaken or a later invention.

Brown's skeptical evaluation of Papias' report on Mark¹¹⁸ could be either reversed or upheld, depending on one's inclination.¹¹⁹ Mark's negative presentation of Peter has been used by critical scholars to argue for an anti-Petrine *Tendenz*,¹²⁰ despite the problems with this position;¹²¹ in contrast, the humble role for Peter in Mark (in contrast to Matthew) has been used by some conservatives to argue for Petrine influence (supposing that only Peter would dare have presented himself in such a self-effacing light), a position not much more problematic.¹²² In the absence of evidence to the contrary, Papias's evidence should probably be allowed to figure in the argument. Although its reliability remains less than certain, it is more probable than purely modern hypotheses that have little possible recourse to alternative early tradition or other concrete data.

Despite the preponderance of existing traditions in favor of Johannine authorship, some have found in the tradition evidence for an author different from John son of Zebedee.

2C. Papias and John the Elder

If the Apostle John did not write the Fourth Gospel, who did?¹²³ One of the strongest proposals, which would account for the confusion of the author with the Apostle in early Christian tradition, is "another John," who just took his tradition from John son of p 96 Zebedee.¹²⁴ (Others think that the Elder himself was an eyewitness.)¹²⁵ Thus Brownlee suggested that the Apostle John may have written an Aramaic signs source in Alexandria, which John the Elder then translated and completed in Ephesus.¹²⁶ More recently, Martin Hengel holds that the Gospel, Epistles, and probably an early form of Revelation were composed by John the Elder.¹²⁷ Such a position is arguable, but remains open to challenge.¹²⁸ Thus, for example, Barrett accepts the probability of a John the Elder, but finds no evidence that this Elder lived in Ephesus or was connected in any way with the Fourth Gospel.¹²⁹ But a more serious challenge can

¹¹⁸ Brown, *Community* 34 n. 46.

¹¹⁹ Contrast, e.g., Hengel, *Mark*, 50–53; Goulder, *Matthew*, 32; cf. [1 Pet 5:13](#).

¹²⁰ Kelber, *Story*, 89–91; Weeden, *Mark*, 23–26.

¹²¹ The disciples are not the most positive characters in the book (see Rhoads and Michie, *Mark*, 122–34), but they are still "for" him (*ibid.*, 67). The problem is not with the disciples but with the preresurrection understanding (Wrede, *Secret*, 106) or discipleship as a whole. Cf. the agraphon critiquing Peter and his colleagues in apocryphal *Acts of Peter* ch. 11 (Jeremias, *Sayings*, 91); and Mark's disciples are also special recipients of revelation (cf. Freyne, "Disciples"), destined to recover (Petersen, *Criticism*, 68).

¹²² [Gal 2:6, 9, 11–13](#), brings this argument into question (even though Lyons, *Autobiography*, 163, is right that Paul chose Peter for the rhetorical contrast "because he is so important"), but the conservative logic here is internally no worse than the argument against Markan authorship on the basis of Peter's bad standing.

¹²³ For a summary of various proposals, some only rarely offered, see, e.g., Guthrie, *Introduction*, 275–81 (he addresses John "the Elder" on 278–81).

¹²⁴ Bernard, *John*, [1:xxxiv–lix](#); Hunter, *John*, 13.

¹²⁵ E.g., Burney, *Origin*, 133–34; Bruns, *Art*, 103; Bauckham, "Papias"; Witherington, *Wisdom*, 15–17; cf. Streeter, *Gospels*, 444, 456. For a survey of those accepting John the Elder, see Charlesworth, *Disciple*, 213–15; on John the Elder blended with John the Apostle (including Streeter and Hengel), pp. 215–17.

¹²⁶ Brownlee, "Whence," 189; apart from an Aramaic source written in Alexandria, the thesis is not inherently implausible, though it is speculative.

¹²⁷ Hengel, *Question*. See likewise Streeter, *Gospels*, 427–61.

¹²⁸ Cf., e.g., Muñoz León, "Juan."

be offered.

By the time of Eusebius, the tradition does indeed contain two Johns, but the reliability of Eusebius's interpretation of Papias, a source nearly two centuries before him, is open to question. According to Eusebius, Papias handed down "traditions from John the elder;"¹³⁰ "the elder" seems to be a clear allusion to the Johannine author's title in [2 John 1](#) and [3 John 1](#).¹³¹ Yet Eusebius claims on the basis of this title that Papias distinguishes this elder clearly from the Apostle John, who wrote the Gospel;¹³² he further cites a local tradition in his day that claimed two Johns, both buried in Ephesus.

An examination of Eusebius's evidence calls into question the probability of his own claim. Eusebius reports that Papias did not claim to have known the apostles themselves, but only their associates, whose traditions he then memorized and passed on. According to Eusebius, Papias sought to learn the teachings of the elders, "What was said by Andrew, Peter or Philip. What by Thomas, James, John, Matthew, or any other of the disciples of our Lord. What was said by Aristion, and the presbyter John, disciples of the Lord; for I do not think that I derived so much benefit from books as from the living voice of those who are still surviving." Eusebius comments that, since Papias lists "John" twice, and the second time only after Aristion, who was not an apostle, two different Johns are in mind.¹³³ Eusebius's exegesis of his own citation of Papias does not support his conclusion. Papias lists apostles whose traditions he sought to learn from others; "Aristion and the elder John" do seem to be set apart from this group, perhaps as those who were still surviving. But if "the elder" John does not mean that he was one of the original apostles, it is difficult in this context to guess what else it might mean. Eusebius plainly records Papias' report that he sought to learn the "teachings of the elders," and then lists among elders members of the Twelve. By calling Aristion and John "disciples of the Lord," Papias may also include them [p 97](#) among eyewitnesses; but he almost certainly includes the elder John as one of the Twelve, who are also called "disciples" in the same quotation, probably tying them all (including Aristion) to the first generation. Why then are Aristion and John set apart from the others? Perhaps because Aristion and John are the survivors of whom Papias speaks; this would simply confirm the tradition that John outlived the other apostles.

Although Eusebius denies that Papias claims to have known the apostles personally, he concedes that Irenaeus regarded him as a hearer of John, presumably the apostle, and an associate of Polycarp,¹³⁴ a tradition considerably earlier than Eusebius himself.¹³⁵ It is Eusebius, and not Papias, who distinguishes the two Johns. But why would Eusebius be so eager to appeal to a different John? It should be remembered that Eusebius was among those who wished to place the Revelation on a lower than apostolic level because of its apparent inclusion of millennial

¹²⁹ Barrett, *John*, 109.

¹³⁰ Eusebius *Hist. eccl.* 3.39 (Papias frg. 6, in *ANF* 1:154).

¹³¹ Brown, *Epistles*, 648–51, lists five interpretations of "Elder" there and settles on a disciple of Jesus' disciples (cf. [Irenaeus Haer. 3.3.4; 4.27.1; 5.33.3](#)) as the most likely meaning; based on earlier rather than later sources, however, the term in these epistles is probably simply an honorary title of church leadership (cf. [1 Pet 5:1](#)) or age (cf. Westcott, *Epistles*, 223). Brown (*Epistles*, 12) is probably correct, however, that the church later was cautious about 2 and 3 John because it viewed the "elder" as something other than an apostle.

¹³² Cf. *Apos. Con.* 7.46.

¹³³ Eusebius *Hist. eccl.* 3.39 (trans. Cruse, 125).

¹³⁴ Eusebius *Hist. eccl.* 3.39. To protest that Papias himself does not make this claim is to argue too much from silence, given the very few fragments of Papias that remain—and a silence created by rejecting some of the evidence that does remain.

¹³⁵ [Irenaeus Haer. 5.33.4; Papias frg. 9](#) (from Anastasius Sinaita, in *ANF* 1:155). See esp. the new study by Weidmann, *Polycarp* (brought to my attention by D. Moody Smith).

eschatology. He elsewhere cites with favor the report of Dionysius, who distinguishes the Gospel from Revelation on the basis of style. Since Revelation explicitly purports to be written by John, the only way to distinguish the apostolic author of the Gospel from a different author of the Apocalypse is to attribute the latter to a different John.¹³⁶ It is thus not surprising that, after his discussion of the two Johns in Papias, Eusebius observes that it makes good sense that John the elder, as opposed to John the apostle, wrote the Apocalypse.¹³⁷ Eusebius has a clear agenda in propagating this position.¹³⁸

If Papias received traditions directly from the apostle, which is not itself inherently improbable, it becomes likely that the distinction between John the elder and John the apostle merely represents a tendency of tradition to overexegete, a characteristic also found in some rabbinic traditions. The name “John” was fairly common in this period as far as Palestinian Jewish names go,¹³⁹ but intrinsic probability does not tend to favor a disciple of the Apostle John named John, with whom the former was inadvertently conflated. Ancient writers sometimes confused persons of the same name, but they also sometimes created new persons on the supposition that two persons of the same name had been confused. Thus a story was circulated that the Pythagorean diet was to be attributed to a *different* Pythagoras, a story which Diogenes Laertius prudently found unpersuasive.¹⁴⁰ In a case not unlike John the elder versus John the apostle, some opined that Pythagoras the philosopher had a student with the same name responsible for the athletic treatises wrongly ascribed to the teacher.¹⁴¹ Distinctions demanded by divergent traditions yielded more than one heroic Heracles and more than one Dionysus.¹⁴²

p 98 How then did the tradition arrive at two Johns, both buried in Ephesus? Even on the face of it, two prominent Johns both buried in Ephesus sounds suspicious. Holy sites were important to ancient religion, and competing churches in Ephesus may have wished to lay claim to the apostle’s burial site, giving rise to the tradition of two Johns which Eusebius happily exploits.¹⁴³ Given the weak exegetical basis in Papias for Eusebius’s conclusion, this tradition plus Eusebius’s desire to distinguish the Apostle John from the writer of the Apocalypse may serve as the entire basis for his insistence that there were two Johns. When all this is taken into account, it is far more likely that John the elder was none other than John the apostle. We also argued above that the beloved disciple was likely one of the Twelve, which would disqualify a “different” John.

3. Other External Evidence

¹³⁶ Eusebius *Hist. eccl.* 7.25; cf. 3.28.

¹³⁷ Eusebius *Hist. eccl.* 3.39.

¹³⁸ It was recognized that some writers rejected the authenticity of some others’ works for personal reasons (cf. Dionysius of Halicarnassus *Isoc.* 18).

¹³⁹ See Ilan, “Lhbdly”; Williams, “Personal Names,” 87–88; for the feminine variant, see, e.g., *CPJ* 1:132–33, §7; 1:246–47, §133.35, 39. In Athens there were two relatives named Alcibiades (Xenophon *Hell.* 1.2.13); two contemporary rhetors named Apollonius (Philostratus *Vit. soph.* 2.20.600); two prominent Chaerephons (Philostratus *Vit. soph.* 1.483); cf. also namesakes in Valerius Maximus 3.3.ext.3; 4.6.2–3.

¹⁴⁰ Diogenes Laertius 8.13.

¹⁴¹ Iamblichus *V.P.* 5.25.

¹⁴² E.g., Arrian *Alex.* 2.16.1–4; 4.28.2; 5.13; Appian *R.H.* 6.1.2. One writer distinguishes four Dinarchuses in history (Dionysius of Halicarnassus *Dinarchus* 1); Philostratus distinguishes two Memnons (*Hrk.* 26.16–17).

¹⁴³ Various temples and other locations in Smyrna claimed Polemo’s body (Philostratus *Vit. soph.* 1.25.543, doubting all of them). Tombs did not necessarily correspond with location during life: Dionysius of Miletus spent little of his life in Ephesus (Philostratus *Vit. soph.* 1.22.522–526), but he was buried in its marketplace (Philostratus *Vit. soph.* 1.22.526).

Some conservative commentators have assembled considerable external evidence in support of Johannine authorship, and their arguments bear repeating, at least briefly. Although I find some of their other arguments about the Gospel less convincing (e.g., that its purpose was to evangelize Diaspora Jews and proselytes),¹⁴⁴ Carson, Moo, and Morris effectively summarize much of the best external evidence for Johannine authorship and are followed at many points here.¹⁴⁵

One could argue that Irenaeus simply inferred Johannine authorship from the Fourth Gospel itself (see internal evidence above) or from 21:24.¹⁴⁶ Irenaeus was not infallible, and as we shall argue when addressing the life-setting of the Fourth Gospel, his view about its primary milieu is probably mistaken. Yet this hardly means that Irenaeus was mistaken about everything, nor is it likely that he simply fabricated the line of tradition he claims. He personally knew Polycarp, and reported in a letter to Florinus that Polycarp learned much about Jesus from John who had seen the Lord.¹⁴⁷ If Polycarp were martyred at age 86 in ~156 C.E., he would have been in his twenties in ~the 90s of the first century. He provides a natural chronological bridge between Irenaeus and the apostolic tradition in ~late first-century Asia. Polycarp would have known much about John if he lived there.¹⁴⁸ Yet if [p 99](#) Irenaeus had access to such information in his youth, it would be surprising for him to prove completely mistaken regarding the authorship of the Fourth Gospel, which he explicitly attributes to the disciple John, who leaned on Jesus' breast (*Irenaeus Haer.* 2.1.2).¹⁴⁹ The connection with Polycarp makes it unlikely that Irenaeus simply is guessing; his lack of clarification concerning a second John makes it likely that he referred to the apostle, son of Zebedee, since the Gospel tradition itself reports only one disciple John.

Further, Irenaeus had previously lived in the East and later remained in close touch with the prominent Roman church, so he would likely know if the view he espoused differed from the accepted views of the other churches. But he seems to assume that other churches will support his claims.¹⁵⁰ After Irenaeus, all sources seem agreed on Johannine authorship. This fact, too, suggests that Irenaeus's claim lacked serious challengers in his day, and that it reflected whatever consensus already existed.¹⁵¹

The date of the anti-Marcionite prologues to the Gospels is disputed, but if these prologues stem from ~the mid-second century (Marcion was active in Rome ~ca. 140 C.E.) they also may provide some evidence of early tradition.

¹⁴⁴ Carson, Moo, and Morris, *Introduction*, 171; Carson, *John*, 8, 87–95; Milne, *Message*, 24–25.

¹⁴⁵ Whereas the conservative introductions often arrive at predictably conservative conclusions, they interact with less conservative scholars, whereas some of the traditional critical introductions completely ignore the contributions of conservative scholarship. See also Bruce, *John*, 6–12.

¹⁴⁶ See Davies, *Rhetoric*, 251.

¹⁴⁷ Eusebius *Hist. eccl.* 5.20.5–6; see comments in Carson, Moo, and Morris, *Introduction*, 139; Guthrie, *Introduction*, 270. The letter's authenticity may be questioned, but at least Eusebius thought it authentic; given his own view of two Johns, it is improbable that he would have forged Irenaeus's letter.

¹⁴⁸ An argument from lack of explicit mention of John in Polycarp (cf. Davies, *Rhetoric*, 246; Culpepper, *John*, 34) is an argument from silence (especially given the one letter of Polycarp that remains), ignores possible allusions to the Epistles, and might ask too much after the Gospel's relatively recent publication (though cf. P^{52}). Does one mention one's ordaining or academic mentor in every work? (As much as I respect mine, I certainly have not!) Culpepper, *John*, 34, likewise protests Ignatius's silence, but Ignatius also fails to mention John the seer, though he must have been known to Ephesus (*Rev* 1:1, 4, 9, 11; 2:1; 22:8).

¹⁴⁹ See Carson, Moo, and Morris, *Introduction*, 139; Carson, *John*, 26.

¹⁵⁰ Guthrie, *Introduction*, 271.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*

The anti-Marcionite prologue to John claims that Papias’s own exegetical books (which could still be checked into the Middle Ages) make John the author by dictation, and (according to the most likely interpretation) Papias his amanuensis. Some of the information attributed to Papias’s works here cannot be correct. John might have lived until ¹⁵² the end of the first century, but he could not have lived long enough to excommunicate Marcion! If Papias claimed anything of this nature, perhaps it was that John excommunicated people with views like those of Marcion. But Papias’s work is no longer extant, and the anti-Marcionite prologue a weaker support in favor of Johannine authorship. Its primary value is its probable attestation that within ¹⁵³ the second century orthodox Christians were attributing the Gospel to “John,” without any need to specify which John was in view.¹⁵² The anti-Marcionite prologue to Luke claims that the Apostle John wrote Revelation on Patmos and later added the Gospel.¹⁵³

By ¹⁵⁴ the end of the second century, it is clear that Clement of Alexandria (who called it a “spiritual gospel”) and Tertullian accepted Johannine authorship (Eusebius *Hist. eccl.* 6.14.7). By this period the only persons to reject it were those stigmatized as the *Alogoi*, “senseless ones.”¹⁵⁴ Gaius of Rome was considered orthodox except on this point, but may have rejected Johannine authorship partly due to his polemic against the Phrygian Montanists, who made heavy use of Johannine claims.¹⁵⁵ From ¹⁵⁶ the end of the second century, the Gospel was unanimously accepted as coming from the apostle John. Although Eusebius focused on discussing the disputed works, he regards this Gospel as undisputedly John’s, and Eusebius knew many works now lost.¹⁵⁶

Before ¹⁵⁷ the end of the second century the orthodox Christians accepted all four canonical gospels on a level with OT Scripture; Tatian even employed John’s chronology as a structure for arranging the other three (a premise about which we would be more [p 100](#) skeptical). Granted, much of the evidence for the Gospel’s authorship—like most of our external attestation for ancient works—is not from the generation immediately following the Gospel; it is, however, almost unanimous, and Irenaeus, an explicit reporter of John’s authorship, was close to Polycarp the disciple of John. Thus Dodd, though he ultimately rejects John as the author on internal grounds, recognizes the lack of external evidence that would dispute a case in favor of Johannine authorship.¹⁵⁷

4. Other Objections

While not all scholars who deny direct apostolic authorship would attribute the Gospel to “another John,” many scholars still maintain only a base of Johannine tradition in the Fourth Gospel. The external evidence for Johannine authorship is strong, but it is difficult to understand why it took ¹⁵⁸ second-century “orthodox” Christians so long to accept the Gospel. That John son of Zebedee was the source of a tradition later reworked by others is a workable compromise solution (see further below on the Johannine school). Thus Painter suggests,

One way around these difficulties is to see John as the origin of the tradition, which was ultimately expressed in the Gospel. Around him a school of disciples developed and the Gospel ultimately issued from them.... In general terms it provides a working hypothesis. It takes account of the claims that the Gospel is based on eyewitness testimony (1:14; 19:35; 21:24) and explains the late appearance and doubtless acceptance of the Gospel in ¹⁵⁸ the second century.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵² See Carson, Moo, and Morris, *Introduction*, 140; Carson, *John*, 27.

¹⁵³ Beasley-Murray, *John*, lxvii.

¹⁵⁴ Wiles, *Gospel*, 8; Carson, *John*, 27–28; Bruce, *John*, 12; Carson, Moo, and Morris, *Introduction*, 141, citing Epiphanius *Pan.* 51.3; probably Irenaeus *Haer.* 3.11.9; and noting the pun on John’s *logos*.

¹⁵⁵ Carson, *John*, 28; Bruce, *John*, 12; Carson, Moo, and Morris, *Introduction*, 141; Braun, *Jean*, 149–56.

¹⁵⁶ Carson, *John*, 28; Carson, Moo, and Morris, *Introduction*, 141.

¹⁵⁷ Dodd, *Tradition*, 12; Carson, Moo, and Morris, *Introduction*, 141.

¹⁵⁸ Painter, *John*, 4.

This position is tenable but probably not necessary. When most of our internal and external evidence points to John son of Zebedee as the author, other explanations may be found for the delay of the second-century church in using the Gospel. Nonapostolic authorship would explain this situation, but, because it appears to contradict more explicit evidence, we do not regard it as the likeliest solution. We have commented above on the probably limited circulation of the Gospel and its use by the gnostics.

Nevertheless, on the whole the Gospel's late (i.e., mid-second-century) appearance in orthodox citations is probably the most persuasive objection to Johannine authorship. Given the networking of early Christianity and John's role in earliest Christianity (Acts 3:1; Gal 2:9), one would have expected his Gospel to gain immediate circulation regardless of gnostic exploitation. This is the one argument that might incline the case toward a Johannine tradition written after John's death by one of his disciples. This is not the position I favor, but it runs a close second to it in probability (and also accounts for the tradition's association with John).

One could argue that John son of Zebedee would hardly have omitted special material about Zebedee's sons and other Galilean material for which he would have been an eyewitness.¹⁵⁹ As noted above, however, the reverse seems more likely. An eyewitness who traveled with Jesus during his entire public ministry would have much more material from which to choose than appeared in the pool of tradition available to the Synoptics. Further, as we have argued above, it is quite unlikely that a writer who names so many disciples and continues Peter's prominent role would omit John unless he did so deliberately. John's omission of events like the transfiguration¹⁶⁰ fit his theological *Tendenz* (cf. 1:14); it is unlikely that the Fourth Gospel's author, even if he were not an eyewitness, would be unaware of the transfiguration tradition (cf. 2 Pet 1:16–18).

One might also complain that John, Peter's subordinate in the Synoptics, would not portray himself as Peter's rival here.¹⁶¹ But the "rivalry" between the two disciples in this Gospel is not one of rank, and this argument would in any case eliminate any disciple, since all of them were subordinate to Peter in the Synoptics, though James and John were closest.

The objection that has sometimes been raised, that a Galilean fisherman would be too unlettered to write a Gospel (or discuss the Logos),¹⁶² has been answered so frequently that it does not bear the fullest possible response.¹⁶³ Galilee was not as backward as some have assumed;¹⁶⁴ the level of literacy in Jewish Palestine was higher than in the rest of the Greco-Roman world;¹⁶⁵ and fishermen were hardly peasants,¹⁶⁶ ranking instead with tax-gatherers,

¹⁵⁹ Witherington, *Wisdom*, 14–15. We answered above the objection that John differs too much from the Twelve to have been one of them.

¹⁶⁰ Eller, *Disciple*, 48.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 45–46.

¹⁶² Cf. *ibid.*, 46.

¹⁶³ For a response see, e.g., Stanton, *Gospels*, 186. Cf. similar responses concerning the Greek of the allegedly Judean author James (e.g., Davids, *James*, 10–11; cf. Sevenster, *Greek*, passim, for the wide use of literary Greek), acknowledged also by some who do not believe James wrote it (Laws, *James*, 40–41). The Greek of James is on a much higher level than that of John.

¹⁶⁴ It was economically less disparate than most of the rest of the empire (Goodman, *State*, 33), and more cosmopolitan than was previously supposed (Freyne, *Galilee*, 171), though its predominantly rural population lived mainly in towns and villages (Freyne, *Galilee*, 144–45).

¹⁶⁵ See Josephus *Life* 9 (of himself); *m. 'Abot* 5:21. While Josephus certainly wishes to portray his people as especially learned to his educated Hellenistic readership, his portrayal is hardly mere propaganda. Other nations recognized the Jewish people's preoccupation with learning their law (Gager, *Anti-Semitism*, 39; see Theophrastus [372–288 B.C.E., in Stern, *Authors*, 1:8–11], Megasthenes [ca. 300 B.C.E., in *ibid.*, 1:46], Clearchus of Soli [ca. 300 B.C.E., in *ibid.*, 1:50] and other examples in *ibid.*,

carpenters, and artisans as a sort of middle-income group that comprised much of the upper 10 percent of wage earning in antiquity (of which merchants and land-owning aristocracy were but a small fraction).¹⁶⁷ John's own family of origin was prosperous enough to have hired servants ([Mark 1:20](#)). Further, the sixty years that had passed since John had moved from fishing to leadership in a prominent movement would have allowed time to acquire new skills expected of leaders in that society.

Besides any skills John had acquired, he undoubtedly would have had help; even the most literate normally used scribes,¹⁶⁸ and Josephus's staff included style editors to [p 102](#) improve his Greek.¹⁶⁹ John would have been an unusual writer if he published the work entirely by himself. One scholar even uses this final factor to account for the stylistic differences between the Fourth Gospel and Revelation; exiled on Patmos, John wrote the latter "in his own idiosyncratic Greek."¹⁷⁰ But finally, John's Greek is not particularly "literate" Greek anyway; it would demand far less proficiency than the Greek of Luke-Acts, James, Hebrews, 1 Peter, or even the Pastorals.

John's age could be cited as a problem. After all, a fisherman who began following Jesus [⌚] around 27 C.E. would now have been in his eighties or nineties. A guess in the eighties is reasonable. John and most of the disciples were probably somewhat younger than Jesus when they followed him ([13:33](#); [21:5](#), though these terms apply to any students regardless of age), though none of them would have been younger than adolescents.¹⁷¹ Both fishermen working with their fathers and disciples of teachers could be in their teens. Unlike Peter ([Mark 1:30](#); cf. [1 Cor 9:5](#)), no wife for John is mentioned in the Gospels (though one cannot put much weight on this silence). Further, his father, unlike Peter's father-in-law, remains alive at John's calling ([Mark 1:20, 29–30](#)). If he was in his mid-teens [⌚] ca. 27 C.E., he would be in his [⌚] early eighties in [⌚] the mid-nineties of the first century. It is true that most people did not live this long, then as today.¹⁷² But inscriptions attest that some people did live this long, and life expectancy increased considerably if one survived childhood. That one disciple of the Twelve should survive to [⌚] the end of the first century, and then be prevailed upon to preserve the memoirs which he had been preaching, is not inherently improbable.¹⁷³ That he, like some other Judean Christians, might have followed the Hellenist Diaspora in fleeing

though some must be spurious), and the Gospel pictures of "scribes" as prominent figures in legal debate contrasts sharply with "scribes" as mere executors of legal documents throughout most of the Mediterranean world (e.g., [CPJ 1:157, §21](#); [1:188–89, §43](#)). Literacy in most of the empire may have averaged roughly 10 percent (Meeks, *Moral World*, 62).

¹⁶⁶ Wilkinson, *Jerusalem*, 29–30; cf. Stambaugh and Balch, *Environment*, 69; Applebaum, "Life," 685; see Hengel, *Property*, 27, on [Mark 1:20](#). Fish merchants could even become wealthy; cf. [ILS 7486](#) (from Rome, in Sherck, *Empire*, 228).

¹⁶⁷ Still, fishermen were not scribes; Origen felt this justified John's insufficient clarity (Origen *Comm. Jo.* 13.54).

¹⁶⁸ Stambaugh and Balch, *Environment*, 40; cf., e.g., the full "secretarial staff," including "the *a manu/ad manum* who took dictation and the copyists and clerks (*librarii*)" of Livia's household, in Treggiari, "Jobs," 50; [ILS 7397](#) (from Rome, in Sherck, *Empire*, 226), [7393, 7401](#) (both from Rome, in Sherck, *Empire*, 228). For the papyri (usually from those of much lower economic status), cf. Longenecker, "Amanuenses," 282–88; Milligan, *Thessalonians*, 129–30.

¹⁶⁹ Josephus *Ant.* 1.7; [20.263–264](#); *War* 1.3. Josephus implies that his first draft was in Aramaic (*War* 1.3), though the extant version clearly addresses a Greco-Roman audience. At the very least, he employed a style editor to help his Greek (cf. Townsend, "Education," 148, who also cites [Ag. Ap. 1.50](#)), though he undoubtedly underestimates his own competence (Rajak, *Josephus*, 46–64, 230–36).

¹⁷⁰ Sanders, "Patmos," 84; cf. similarly Longenecker, *Exegesis*, 195.

¹⁷¹ A disciple could start in boyhood ([Eunapius Lives](#) 461; cf. [Acts 22:3](#); or schoolteachers, Plutarch *Camillus* 10.1; Watson, "Education," 310–12).

¹⁷² Leon, *Jews*, 229, notes the preponderance of early deaths (before the age of ten) in the inscriptions, but also observes (230) that "epitaphs tended to record the age of those who died young." Perhaps only 13 percent reached sixty (Dupont, *Life*, 233).

Palestine in the wake of the revolt, is no less probable than the widely-attested tradition that Peter ministered in Rome after Paul's death.¹⁷⁴

Nor should one assume that an elderly survivor would be incapable of dictating a coherent message to his amanuenses, who might then refine it. In many cases, one's mind weakened after age 70 (Philo *Creation* 103), making it harder to memorize verses after that age (Theophrastus *Char.* 27.2); it was understood that old age tended to weaken memory (Cicero *Att.* 12.1; Iamblichus *V.P.* 5.21; *Jub.* 23:11).¹⁷⁵ But Roman census reports included numbers of persons a century old, including some who were famous; Cato the Elder remained in public service, with undiminished memory, at 86.¹⁷⁶ Some philosophers continued training disciples into old age, one Priscus doing so past age 90 (Eunapius *Lives* 482); Pacuvius wrote a play at 80 years of age (Cicero *Brutus* 64.229). Valerius Maximus claims that Carneades continued as active in philosophy at age 90 as before (8.7.ext.5); Socrates reportedly learned the lyre late in life (8.7.ext.8); Chrysippus began his thirty-ninth volume of *Logical Problems* at age 80 (8.7.ext.10); and Cleanthes taught till age 99 (8.7.ext.11). Likewise Simonides taught poetry at age 80 (8.7.ext.13), and Isocrates, who lived till age 99, composed his *Panathenaicus* at age 94 (8.7.ext.9).

Historians might also note exceptional foreign rulers who through exercise continued physically and mentally strong into old age.¹⁷⁷ The Romans reportedly made Quinctius ruler when he was over 80 years old (Livy 4.14.2). Valerius Maximus claims that Metellus lived to 100 and remained healthy in public office in old age (8.13.2); Q. Fabius Maximus lived past 100 and held office for sixty-two years (8.13.3); Cicero's wife lived to age 103, and another woman reportedly lived to 115 (8.13.6).¹⁷⁸ For that matter, C. H. Dodd was in his 80s when he wrote *Historical Tradition in the Fourth Gospel*, and Goodspeed wrote on Matthew at the age of 90.¹⁷⁹ W. D. Davies, born in 1911, was apparently in his 80s when he collaborated with Dale Allison on one of the most scholarly Matthew commentaries produced to date.

To what extent could one's memory remain sharp in old age? At age 90 Proclus the Sophist was reputed for a memory that surpassed even most younger rhetoricians (Philostratus *Vit. soph.* 2.21.604). Hippias the sophist reportedly could repeat fifty names in sequence, immediately after hearing them, even in his old age (Philostratus *Vit. soph.* 1.11.495). Tradition reported that Gorgias remained healthy in mind and body till his death at age 108 (Philostratus *Vit. soph.* 1.9.494; Valerius Maximus 8.13.ext.2; cf. the claim in Deut 34:7). Philostratus claimed that

¹⁷³ The elderly figure of Polycarp in *Martyrdom of Polycarp* may also be modeled after John, though one could also argue the reverse.

¹⁷⁴ Bruce, *Peter*, 121–22, cites Eusebius *Hist. eccl.* 3.31.3–4; 5.24.2, for the early tradition (from Polycrates of Ephesus and Proclus) concerning Philip's family and John.

¹⁷⁵ It also dulled taste (Athenaeus *Deipn.* 9.404D). Aulus Gellius 15.7 thinks one safer if one survived to one's 64th birthday (though Themistocles died by suicide at 65!—Plutarch *Themistocles* 31.5). *P. Bik.* 2:1, §2, makes 60 an average age for death, 70 a blessing, and after 80 life becomes difficult; in *p. Ber.* 1:5, seventy is a long life; in Seneca *Ep. Lucil.* 77.20, 99 is extremely old.

¹⁷⁶ Valerius Maximus 8.7.1; Dupont, *Life*, 233–34. Plutarch *Marcus Cato* 15.4 quotes a wise saying Cato uttered at his trial at age 86; Cicero *Brutus* 20.80 recalls a powerful speech Cato delivered in the year of his death (which he places at 85). Musonius Rufus 17, p. 110.7, comments on someone doing well at age 90.

¹⁷⁷ Diodorus Siculus 32.16.1, Valerius Maximus 8.13.ext.1, and Polybius 36.16.1–5, 11, on Masinissa of North Africa at 90. Agesilaus continued to rule competently at about 80 (Xenophon *Agesilaus* 2.28); though his body weakened, his soul remained strong (*Agesilaus* 11.14–15). Polybius reports an envoy aged 80 (though he died then; 30.21.1–2).

¹⁷⁸ Valerius Maximus does, however, accept some ancient reports uncritically (ages 500 and 800 in 8.13.7).

¹⁷⁹ Carson, Moo, and Morris, *Introduction*, 150; Leon Morris was in his 70s when he contributed to that introduction.

whereas others might be growing senile at 56, it was youth for a sophist, since sophists grew in skill with age (*Vit. soph.* 1.25.543). Seneca the Elder, who may have died in his 1st mid-90s, complains that his memory is not as sharp as in his youth, when he could recite up to two thousand names or two hundred verses immediately after hearing them (*Controv.* 1.pref.2–3). He admits that matters of recent years have begun to elude him, but he recalls the events of his boyhood and young manhood as if he had just heard them (*Controv.* 1.pref.3–4), and proceeds to demonstrate this by his complete account.¹⁸⁰ Age should not, therefore, be posed as an objection to Johannine authorship.

Most other objections are weaker. That John's Galilean background would prevent the Gospel's Judean focus¹⁸¹ ignores the tradition that he spent years after the resurrection in p 104 Judea (*Acts* 1:13; 3:1–4:19; 8:14; 12:2; 15:2); by the time of the Gospel's writing, John may have been away from Galilee for six decades!¹⁸² Some object that the beloved disciple appears primarily in Jerusalem, hence is probably a Jerusalemite.¹⁸³ But does this disciple appear especially in Jerusalem, or especially in the Passion Narrative? The Gospel does not mention him when Jesus is in Jerusalem in chs. 2–3, 5, or 7–10; and when he does appear, he appears among Jesus' closest disciples. Does his lack of mention earlier imply that he was not among the disciples earlier? As noted above, Xenophon mentions his own presence only after he assumes a role of leadership in the retreating Greek army, but hardly appeared only then in the midst of Persia!

Other objections are no stronger. That *Mark* 10:39 presumes the martyrdom of both sons of Zebedee has been used to argue against one of them being the beloved disciple (21:20–23).¹⁸⁴ The argument appears reasonable, but is hardly conclusive (especially if they did not need to be martyred at the same time, as *Acts* 12:2 suggests they were not). One could use the same datum to argue the reverse: the prophecy might not be *ex eventu*; thus the early Christians who knew that saying might have avoided attributing a Gospel to John in 1st the 90s without good reason for doing so.¹⁸⁵ Eller complains that, in view of the Synoptic tradition, John son of Zebedee could not have become a disciple as early as 1:35–42 (assuming this is the beloved disciple)—but explains away the same problem for Andrew, whom the text clearly identifies (1:40).¹⁸⁶ That a “son of thunder” (*Mark* 3:17)¹⁸⁷ could not write a gospel of love (sixty years later) shows remarkable faith in the recalcitrance of human character, like denying that Paul the persecutor could become an apostle.¹⁸⁸ But if one doubts the possibility of such transformation, one may still ask whether readers of the gospel of

¹⁸⁰ Even as an old man, he claims, his memory fails only when unprompted, but remains good if his memory is jogged by some cue (Seneca *Controv.* 9.pref.1). His son Seneca the Younger also exceeded expectations for old age (*Nat.* 3.pref. 1–2.). For some aged Stoics, see Lucian *Octogenarians* (LCL 1:238–39).

¹⁸¹ E.g., Eller, *Disciple*, 48; Culpepper, *John*, 31.

¹⁸² Also Carson, *John*, 73.

¹⁸³ Smith, *John* (1999), 335, connecting more explicit appearances with 18:16. If this connection held, Lazarus, Barnabas, or John Mark's mother's family might prove better candidates for supplying a well-to-do, priestly Jerusalem disciple (cf. *Acts* 4:36–37; 12:12–13; *Col* 4:10).

¹⁸⁴ Perkins, “John,” 947.

¹⁸⁵ On the prophecy not arising after the event, see, e.g., Jeremias, *Theology*, 243–44; Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*, 147; Keener, *Matthew*, 485–86.

¹⁸⁶ Eller, *Disciple*, 48–52.

¹⁸⁷ E.g., Culpepper, *John*, 31. The objection based on John's opposition to the Samaritans (*Luke* 9:54; *ibid.*) falls into the same category, especially in view of the explicit testimony of *Acts* 8:14–15 (which should be doubted no more than Luke's claim in *Luke* 9:54–55).

¹⁸⁸ Carson, *John*, 74. Peter's character changes even between Luke and Acts! John Chrysostom *Hom. Jo.* 1 attributes the Gospel directly to the “son of thunder.”

love have noticed its fierce polemics as well. The objection that a Galilean fisherman would not have known the household of the high priest, against 18:15–16, is probably (though not definitely) correct; but the “other disciple” of 18:15–16 is not explicitly the beloved disciple (see comment *ad loc.*)¹⁸⁹ The author does not name himself, but this is no more a problem for Johannine authorship than for any other author, especially if the audience knew the disciple’s identity and John could use the title to typify ideal discipleship by means of the historical figure.

p 105 Levels of Redaction?

One could accept Johannine authorship on some level for the Fourth Gospel, yet believe that these traditions or the original document were thoroughly revised by others before the Gospel reached its present form. One problem with the suggestion of extensive redaction on the work of an eyewitness is that an extremely tidy editor (one who consistently preserved Johannine style throughout the Gospel) should have modified the apparent claim that the document’s “author” was an eyewitness (on the author as an eyewitness, see above). One could regard this claim itself as redactional or deliberately distinguishing its claimant from the author, because it is stated in the third person (see in more detail discussion below). Third-person authorial claims appear in antiquity alongside first-person ones, however.¹⁹⁰ Further, we lack concrete evidence for these statements being redactional (unless the hypothesis that they are redactional counts as evidence); certainly the “witness” motif (19:35) fits the rest of the Gospel, and other “beloved disciple” passages fit securely into their context (13:23; 20:2–8). Such objections have not, however, prevented the prevalence of redaction theories. Many scholars, in fact, are reticent to speak of the Gospel’s “author,” believing that too many stages stand behind it.¹⁹¹

Whether or not they can be distinguished, stages of editing within the Gospel are surely possible (and could even stand behind a few textual variants); if we include the possibility of the author or his associates revising the Gospel, such stages may even be deemed probable. Some works were released by an author in substantially revised editions (see, e.g., Ovid *Amores* prol.1–4), or continually being reedited by the author (Dionysius of Halicarnassus *Thucyd.* 24).¹⁹² These examples, however, represent revisions by the same author at each stage. Various textual traditions of ancient documents (including *John* 7:53–8:11) demonstrate that editing after the author’s death remained possible, though (as classicists can normally safely assume) in most cases of written works the final authorial product remained mostly stable. This seems especially true once a document became “canonical” for a particular community of disciples.

Nevertheless, on such an issue, various proposals must be evaluated for their probability, rather than on the premise

¹⁸⁹ Fishermen were usually relatively high on the socioeconomic scale (see sources in Keener, *Matthew*, 151–52; Stanton, *Gospels*, 186; Whitacre, *John*, 20), but Galilee was a long way from Jerusalem (Smith, *John* [1999], 335). The high priest’s household could import fish from the Lake of Galilee, but probably through agents (though fishermen could make more income if they sold directly to the rich rather than through middlemen; Alciphron *Fishermen* 9 [Aegialeus to Struthion], 1.9). Blomberg, *Reliability*, 35, argues that Zebedee’s wife had priestly relatives (*Mark* 15:40; *Matt* 27:56; *John* 19:25; *Luke* 1:36, 39).

¹⁹⁰ E.g., *Thucydides* 1.1.1; 2.103.2; 5.26.1; Xenophon *Anab.* 2.5.41; 3.1.4–6 and *passim*. Polybius uses first-person claims when he was an observer (e.g., 29.21.8) but prefers third-person when he is an active participant in the narrative (31.23.1–31.24.12; 38.19.1; 38.21.1; 38.22.3; cf. 39.2.2). A narrator might distance himself from his role as participant in this way to meet expectations for objectivity (see esp. Jackson, “Conventions”).

¹⁹¹ E.g., Dunn, “John,” 293–94. He commendably recognizes that the stages are now difficult to reconstruct; but one then wonders how it is possible to know they existed.

¹⁹² Cf. also comments on “proto-gospels” on p. 6, though these comments address primarily prepublication stages of revision.

that such editing is impossible, or on the premise that it necessarily took place. A few of these proposals are surveyed below, with special attention to a theory proposed by Raymond Brown, which has been especially influential in North American Johannine scholarship.

1. Brown's Theory of the Community's Development

Of several redaction theories proposed in recent decades, probably the most influential reconstruction has been that of Raymond Brown, dominant in the 1980s. In *The Community of the Beloved Disciple*, Raymond Brown proposes four main stages in the development of the Johannine community, each including phases in the development of the Johannine tradition. Although the book was written in a period when redaction critics' claims were sometimes too extravagant, Brown recognizes the limitations of his method.¹⁹³

His stages of the community's development are, as he admits, hypothetical; but while they are historically plausible, his reconstruction is quite detailed and builds many hypotheses on other hypotheses, a method which seems historiographically questionable.¹⁹⁴ In my opinion, its detail exceeds the "historical verisimilitude" at which even ancient historians (such as John) generally aimed. Although Brown warns of the dangers of circular reasoning and of reading too much into the period before the Gospel was completed, in the absence of popular alternatives some students have accepted his hypothetical reconstruction, based on just such details, as the decisive historical interpretation. That we have the completed Gospel but lack definite earlier stages of the tradition should make us heed more intently Brown's own cautions.

At the outset, Brown, more nuanced in his approach than many scholars whose reconstructions he challenges, observes that the Fourth Gospel's community was not a sect wholly removed from the rest of early Christianity (whether or not early Christianity itself is viewed as sectarian).¹⁹⁵ Yet his emphasis on the differences between the Johannine community and apostolic Christianity would make this "mainstream" of early Christianity quite wide, perhaps wider than most early Christians would have deemed acceptable.

Brown proposes four phases of Gospel tradition, and the phases themselves are not historically implausible. The impact of the synagogues' response to the Johannine Christians must have shaped the polemic of the community, and many scholars agree that the secessionists in 1 John seem to be heading toward fully-developed docetism. But neither of these suggestions is original with Brown, and some of the details of his reconstruction, as well as the ingenious manner in which he develops them, are more questionable.

His first phase, similar to that proposed by some other scholars, envisions a situation in which the Johannine community consisted of Jews with a low Christology¹⁹⁶ related to the teachings of the Twelve.¹⁹⁷ The situation is not inherently implausible, but it may be debated whether any traditions preserved in the Fourth Gospel address it. In John, the Christology of all true believers (this excludes those who remained in the ranks of Jesus' opponents) is higher than that of any believers described in the Synoptics. Brown himself does not contend that John disagreed radically with his sources; he points out that the terminology of this lower Christology appears in virtually every stratum of NT theology. His hypothesis is logical and explains some of the data, but other hypotheses could explain these features equally well. For instance, these terms of "lower" Christology could be included because they

¹⁹³ Brown, *Community*, 18–21.

¹⁹⁴ Such criticisms have also been voiced by others, e.g., King, "Brown." Watson, "Reading," compares some redaction critics' speculative reconstructions with allegory, practiced by earlier academic elites.

¹⁹⁵ Brown, *Community*, 14–17, 88–91.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 25.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 32.

reinterpret messianic language from Judaism or other Christian sects with which the community had once been in dialogue; some terms were the heritage of early Christians in general.

Brown proposes that a second group with a higher Christology subsequently entered the Johannine community, but apparently distinguishes this group from the original [p 107] group on the basis of the frequent assumption that high Christology is not a primitive feature. This premise, however, is open to serious challenge. Pauline or pre-Pauline material in 1 Corinthians, Philippians, and Colossians describes Jesus in similar terms (see ch. 7 of our introduction), and Brown's reply that these traditions are lower in their Christology than John's¹⁹⁸ misses the point. Paul presents Jesus in terms of divine Wisdom, identifying him so thoroughly with Wisdom that his description exceeds even "mainstream" Judaism's most exalted depictions of Moses. John's Torah Christology in *John 1:1–18* is likewise a Wisdom Christology. It may be true, as Brown contends, that Paul's Wisdom Christology is limited to hymns, whereas the Wisdom Christology of John's prologue spills over into his narrative; but since Paul's Wisdom Christology has no extant narrative into which to spill, the contrast is not quite fair. Many scholars ignore Paul when constructing their evolution of early Christian doctrine. Brown is too good a scholar to ignore him, but at this point has sidestepped him.

Further, some developments in the community he proposes would have rendered the final Gospel impenetrable to its intended audience; much of its tradition should have been redacted *out*. Although Brown rightly notes the background of John and focus of persecution, his argument that the feasts have lost their significance for the Johannine community makes little sense if we are to believe that the community understood the numerous pregnant allusions in the Gospel to the feasts. Much of the polemical significance of chs. 7–8 would be incomprehensible to Gentiles or to Jews who had no knowledge of, or concern for, their Jewish heritage, particularly two decades after the destruction of the Jerusalem temple. In other words, what Brown sees as continuity between two stages in the community's history may actually indicate that these two stages did not occur.

Most of the groups Brown proposes in Phase Two are indeed evident in the Gospel, although one could divide them differently. It is uncertain whether on the Johannine level the "Crypto-Christians"¹⁹⁹ should be distinguished from the "Jewish Christians of inadequate faith,"²⁰⁰ and it is unlikely in either case that they are addressed as recipients of the letter. (Brown does not argue that they are part of the Johannine community.)²⁰¹ The difference between the apostolic and Johannine churches²⁰² builds on the prior argument that the Fourth Gospel's author was not John son of Zebedee. If this premise is questionable, so is his case for the distinction between Johannine and apostolic Christianity. He also assumes that the beloved disciple represents the Johannine community in conflict with other communities represented by characters in the Fourth Gospel, when in fact he might simply represent idealized discipleship, in contrast to the motif of failed discipleship already so prominent in Markan tradition.

His proposals on the third phase are addressed under "*Gospel versus Epistles*" below. There is much to commend Brown's reconstruction of the community's fourth phase. The secessionists and the Johannine communities both went their ways, one toward gnosticism (explaining early gnostics' use of the Fourth Gospel) and one toward the synthetic orthodoxy of the second century. But while this phase provides a sensible historical framework for data of the subsequent use of the Fourth Gospel, its relation to our current discussion of redactional stages within the traditions behind the Fourth Gospel itself is peripheral.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., 45–46.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid., 71–73.

²⁰⁰ Ibid., 73–78.

²⁰¹ Ibid., 78–79.

²⁰² Ibid., 81–88.

^{p 108} The weakest link in the theory is actually the textual basis proposed for it. Brown thinks that the lowest Christology appears in 1:35–51,²⁰³ but that chs. 2–4 introduce the higher Christology of the second phase.²⁰⁴ Yet one would expect the earlier tradition of the community to have been uniformly overlaid with, and thereby reinterpreted in light of, the purported higher Christology, rather than that the development of the community would have been portrayed in narrative form. Why should the writer have wished to *record* the history of the community in his history of Jesus? And why should it not continue to be recorded and developed consistently throughout the course of the Gospel? More to the point, the Christology of *John 1* need hardly be viewed as low (“King of Israel” can be read as a divine title). *John 2–4* includes further revelation of Jesus to the disciples and others, and *John 3:1–21* more to the readers, but this revelation continues progressively throughout the course of the Gospel, a progression which fits the story world without any necessary referent in the community’s history.

Although elements of Brown’s historical reconstruction are convincing, where his theory addresses levels of tradition it has little hard evidence to commend it. It reflects the interests of redactional analysis when he was writing (i.e., for Brown’s academic community) and the lack of data on pre-Johannine traditions that the Fourth Gospel reveals to its most diligent interpreters. Although Brown’s book might have produced healthy discussion and counter-theories, at some points it has had little competition because others have feared to venture so far into hypothetical reconstructions. Such fear is reasonable.

Although recognizing that Brown is a sober scholar, Emory’s Luke Timothy Johnson notes that his redaction-critical approach to the Fourth Gospel in *Community of the Beloved Disciple* is “subject to even fewer controls” than in Matthean and Lukan criticism.

Now the reconstruction of a “community,” which is otherwise unlocatable either temporally or geographically, is treated through the analysis of four documents and the supposed stages of their composition. The problems inherent in such an attempt ought to be obvious. What guiding principles attend the discrimination between sources and stages? What reasons are there for arranging the pieces in the suggested sequence? What would happen if the order were changed? Once more, such exercises should be recognized as flights of fancy rather than sober historiography.²⁰⁵

That the author and his circle issued various editions of his Gospel is feasible, but as Burridge observes, “attempts to provide precise reconstructions of the various versions” are quite diverse precisely due to the unity of the extant Gospel and the speculativeness of the enterprise.²⁰⁶ The Gospel’s unified style “argues against composite or multiple production theories,”²⁰⁷ and Brown’s redaction-critical work, for all its brilliance, is probably too speculative for today’s soberer critical climate. Ancient biographies revealed some incidental matters about their implied audience, but they revealed far more about their primary subject, the protagonist about whom they wrote.²⁰⁸ Herman Ridderbos suggests that it is better to accept the author’s claim to be an eyewitness (19:35; verified in 21:24) than to replace it with a hypothesis of dependence on sources which are purely speculative and on which no two scholars can agree.²⁰⁹

^{p 109} 2. *The Johannine Circle of Early Christianity*

²⁰³ Ibid., 32–33.

²⁰⁴ Ibid., 34–35.

²⁰⁵ Johnson, *Real Jesus*, 100.

²⁰⁶ Burridge, *Gospels*, 228–29. Cf. also Witherington, *Wisdom*, 6–7; Borchert, *John*, 48.

²⁰⁷ Burridge, *Gospels*, 232–33.

²⁰⁸ Witherington, *Wisdom*, 4.

²⁰⁹ Ridderbos, *John*, 680–82.

The Fourth Gospel may emanate from a community founder who heavily influenced its writing, without this founder necessarily being “author” of everything in that Gospel. One could propose this sort of “authorship” of the Qumran hymns by the Teacher of Righteousness,²¹⁰ though the extent of his actual role in the compositions of the hymns remains speculative.²¹¹ Based on the final verses of *John 21*, which may indicate editorial comment, some scholars have proposed earlier editorial revisions by other disciples of the author. These disciples represent a Johannine “circle” or “school.”²¹² Oscar Cullmann, a representative of this position, believes that the author is responsible for the bulk of the extant work, but that it was edited or completed after his death by a redactor or redactors under his influence. This view is more tenable than some scholars’ proposals of severe, multiple redactions.²¹³

One is again confronted with the question, however, whether it is a necessary interpretation of the evidence. Although variation is a characteristic feature of John’s style,²¹⁴ the work as a whole is a stylistic unity. Theological tensions are no greater than those found within any work. (Whatever else may be said for deconstruction, it has certainly demonstrated that such tensions exist in every work.) What appears to some to be visible editorial stitchwork (14:31; perhaps 1:1–18) could indicate reworking by the original author as easily as reworking by a community.²¹⁵ While some editing by disciples is possible, there is little evidence in the text itself for such editing on a large scale.

But it is likely that the author had some help in writing the Gospel; well-to-do people used scribes because they could afford them, and the illiterate used scribes because they needed them. The use of amanuenses was standard enough to suppose that John must have had some assistance in writing, and perhaps even in editing his long-developed oral accounts. That the disciple “wrote these things” (21:24) can mean “caused them to be written” (19:19), and the Muratorian Canon claims that others encouraged John to write his recollections and assisted him in doing so.²¹⁶ Cullmann’s general position has been developed in far more nuanced fashion, with attention to relevant parallels in ancient society, by those who propose a Johannine “school.”

3. *The Johannine School*

Scholars have suggested that the Johannine literature owes its present shape to a Johannine “school.”²¹⁷ In support of this, proponents have pointed out the similarities and differences among the Johannine writings, patristic references to John and his “disciples,” and John’s use of the OT on the analogy of Matthew’s “school.”²¹⁸ This theory has been especially [p 110](#) capably defended by R. Alan Culpepper, who has added a fourth, comparative approach, which would allow composite Johannine authorship on the analogy of collections of writings from ancient philosophical schools.²¹⁹ Unlike more speculative proposals, Culpepper’s view involves only a modest level of redaction, some or

²¹⁰ Mowinckel, “Remarks,” 276, is among those who suggest that the *Hodayot* may have been authored by the Teacher of Righteousness.

²¹¹ As many scholars (e.g., Aune, *Prophecy*, 132) note, it is not even clear that there was only one Teacher of Righteousness; cf. CD 6.10–11 and the view of later documents in Buchanan, “Teacher.”

²¹² Cullmann, *Circle*, 2.

²¹³ *Ibid.*, 9–10.

²¹⁴ Morris, *Studies*, 293–319; Nicholson, *Death*, 135.

²¹⁵ Michaels, *John*, xxii.

²¹⁶ Hunter, *John*, 198.

²¹⁷ Contrast Smith, “Tradition,” 174, who does not think that the NT offers evidence that early Christians established rabbinic-style schools.

²¹⁸ Culpepper, *School*, 261.

all references to the beloved disciple being added later to the beloved disciple's work.²²⁰

There is ample evidence for philosophical schools,²²¹ some of which adopted a "sectarian" mentality. Rabbinic schools similarly came to be common,²²² and undoubtedly had pre-70 roots in the training of schoolteachers and lawyers.²²³ The first-century "houses" of Hillel and Shammai are probably best understood in these terms.²²⁴ Greek students also learned to imitate the style of famous authors,²²⁵ not least of which might have been that of the founder of their own school.

But this theory, while shown possible and explained by Culpepper's discussion, remains at most *possible*; the evidence has not demonstrated its certainty. If internal evidence requires multiple authors, this is the likeliest position (and the one I would rank second in likelihood to the traditional position). In my opinion, however, the differences among the Gospel and three epistles are not serious enough to support the case for different authors. The different genres and situations involved are sufficient to explain the differences (see discussion below). While this would not rule out composite authorship, neither is it sufficient to support it. Despite conscious attempts to imitate a master's style, pseudonymous works in ancient corpora are generally more stylistically distinct from the genuine works than are the Johannine Gospel and Epistles from one another (see discussion below on the authorship of the Epistles). The patristic evidence for John's "disciples" could suggest something of a Johannine "school," but need not in itself suggest that our Johannine literature is composite in any sense. Finally, even if Matthew's use of Scripture reflects a community (which could still be debated), John's need not do so; and even if John's does, identifying sources for his tradition need not challenge a single redactor or author for the whole work.

Carson suggests three flaws in Culpepper's argument. First, the characteristics of "schools" identified in Johannine tradition could also fit a church. Second, parallels between [p 111](#) the beloved disciple and the Paraclete do not make them equivalent. Finally, Culpepper's argument assumes what is to be proved; could not the Johannine literature testify to the personality of the author, rather than to that of a Johannine "community" as a whole?²²⁶ In short, if one holds to the community authorship of the Fourth Gospel, Culpepper's work provides its best defense and explanation. Its case does not, however, appear designed to prove community authorship to those who, on other grounds, find it a

²¹⁹ Ibid., passim; on Philo's "school," cf. 199–209 and Mack and Murphy, "Literature," 391; for the Johannine school and Jewish schools, see Tiwald, "Jünger." Many characteristics of ancient schools fit the Johannine community (Culpepper, *School*, 287–89), but many of these fit early Syro-Palestinian Christian communities in general, and some (like the communal meal) must be read into the Fourth Gospel on the analogy of early church practice in general.

²²⁰ Culpepper, *John*, 30. That the Gospel was edited after the original evangelist's death "to preserve traditions that had been circulating in the Johannine communities" (Perkins, *Reading*, 244–45, summarizing a view) is not implausible.

²²¹ E.g., Epictetus *Diatr.* 2.19.29; cf. also academic scriptoria in cultic settings (Frankfurter, *Religion in Egypt*, 239–41). Meeks, *Moral World*, 41, warns, however, that philosophical schools were usually just "a lecturer and his pupils who met in whatever place they found convenient." Because early Christian groups concerned themselves more with ethics than ritual, however, they probably appeared to outsiders as schools (Meeks, *Moral World*, 114; cf. Aune, *Prophecy*, 229; Wilken, "Collegia," 277; idem, "Christians as Romans Saw Them," 107–10; in Justin, Wilken, "Social Interpretation," 444–48).

²²² For inscriptional evidence, cf., e.g., *Inscriptions*, ed. Carmon, 84, §183; 85, §§184–85. The literary evidence is, of course, pervasive. On the Qumran scriptorium and an evaluation of scholarly discussion on the Qumran "school," see Culpepper, *School*, 156–68.

²²³ See Keener, *Marries*, 23, and notes 2–6 on 145–46.

²²⁴ Cohen, *Maccabees*, 157.

²²⁵ Epictetus, Loeb introduction, xiv; cf. Aune, *Environment*, 31.

²²⁶ Carson, "Tradition," 133–34.

thesis less plausible than that of a single main author.

Besides standard views of “schools,” one may compare the Jewish view of a succession of prophets,²²⁷ which probably also implies master-disciple relationships²²⁸ (see below in our discussion of the Paraclete in *John* 14:16).²²⁹ Although it is unlikely that schools of the sages originated in this model as opposed to the Hellenistic model²³⁰ (Jewish wisdom had been transcultural from the start), the analogy was evident enough to the rabbis who read their own practices into the OT prophets. It is thus not surprising that some scholars have suggested a prophetic context for the origin of the Johannine literature. The relation between the Fourth Gospel and claims to prophetic inspiration will be treated below (pp. 115–22).

4. *Distinguishing the Beloved Disciple and the Author*

Confirming the identity of the beloved disciple would not automatically settle the question of the book’s authorship, because many scholars doubt that the beloved disciple is the actual author of the book. On the basis of 19:35, Culpepper distinguishes the beloved disciple from the narrator.²³¹ Certainly we do have some ancient accounts, such as Apuleius’s account in his *Metamorphosis* of Lucius’s spiritual journey, that allow a distinction between author and narrator (though these are not characteristic of histories or biographies).²³² Nevertheless, one wonders whether this text’s third person bears the entire weight Culpepper assigns to it. It could represent a scribal aside (as in *Rom* 16:22), but even more naturally fits the third-person characterization of the beloved disciple throughout as a character in the story. As mentioned already, however, third-person authorial claims appear in antiquity as well as first-person ones.²³³ The distinction is possible but not necessary.

Accepting this distinction, Culpepper then suggests, on the basis of 21:24, that the narrator “characterizes the implied author as the Beloved Disciple.”²³⁴ (Some others reject the evidence of 21:24 as possibly the inaccurate view of a later redactor, but this is unlikely; [p 112](#) see our comments on ch. 21.)²³⁵ Culpepper’s distinction here accords well with his earlier conclusions concerning different documents composed by the Johannine “school.”²³⁶ The distinction between an actual author and an implied author is also reasonable; in the ancient world, one could say that someone “authored” a work even if one meant only that it contained his words, possibly in expanded form.²³⁷ Yet if

²²⁷ Meeks, *Prophet-King*, 144, cites Justin *Dial.* 52.3 and Josephus *Ant.* 4.218. Cf. *Acts* 3:24; and the late reference *Lev. Rab.* 10:2 cited in Bowman, “Prophets,” 208.

²²⁸ E.g., *CD* 8.20–21 (Baruch, Jeremiah’s scribe, is promoted by analogy to Elisha’s Gehazi); *Mek. Pisha* 1:150–153; *Pesiq. Rab Kah.* 16:4; cf. *Sipre Num.* 93.1.3 (Moses sharing the Spirit).

²²⁹ Cf. the early Christian prophetic groups suggested in Aune, *Prophecy*, 195–98, 207; Hill, *Prophecy*, 88, although the evidence offered for them (especially in Revelation) is tenuous.

²³⁰ Culpepper, *School*, 188. Kugel and Greer, *Interpretation*, 53, suggest instead a broader similarity of school-like settings for OT prophet- and wisdom-guilds, which is more probable.

²³¹ Culpepper, *Anatomy*, 44; also Witherington, *Wisdom*, 17; Kysar, “Gospel,” 920.

²³² Pseudepigraphic devices like unreliable narrators were much less common in antiquity than today (Kurz, *Reading Luke-Acts*, 169–70).

²³³ E.g., *Thucydides* 1.1.1; 2.103.2; 5.26.1; Xenophon *Anab.* 2.5.41; 3.1.4–6 and passim.

²³⁴ Culpepper, *Anatomy*, 47. Aristotle praised Homer for his restraint in generally narrating or speaking as others without speaking in his own person (*Aristotle Poet.* 24.13–14, 1460a). Aristotle probably would have objected to some of John’s asides!

²³⁵ Beasley-Murray, *John*, lxxii; Kysar, “Gospel,” 920.

²³⁶ Culpepper, *School*, passim.

²³⁷ See Charlesworth, *Disciple*, 26.

the narrator wished to characterize the implied author as the beloved disciple (which is reasonable), why would he allow himself to be so easily distinguished from him in 19:35, as Culpepper maintains? And could not the narrator just as easily characterize the implied author in these terms because he *was* in fact this author?

On a closer examination of 19:35, it is not clear that the beloved disciple and narrator are distinct. If the eyewitness (presumably the beloved disciple who was present, 19:26) “knows” (present tense) that his witness is true, and provides it that the reader may believe (19:35; 20:31), the eyewitness appears to be speaking in the text. These are not the words of a posthumous editor, as some have proposed, nor is the narrator here revealing his hand by distinguishing himself from the beloved disciple. He wishes his readers to continue to identify the two, yet if he belongs to the Johannine community to whom he writes, his readers presumably know who he is. Ancient readers who did not have reasons external to the Gospel to believe otherwise would have read the book as claiming to be from the beloved disciple, and would have known that the author realized that his book would be read in this way.

We disagree with Culpepper’s argument, but acknowledge it as brilliant. Other objections against the beloved disciple being the author, such as the claim that no Christian would call himself or herself “beloved” by Jesus, do not rate so highly. Early Christians do not seem to have viewed Jesus’ love as merited (3:16; though cf. 14:23), and various texts celebrate Christians’ experience of divine love (Gal 2:20; Eph 3:14–21).²³⁸ The designation probably refers to a special role of this disciple, but it need not imply an arbitrary favorite (see comment on 13:23).

5. Major Redaction in the Fourth Gospel?

Most scholars agree that the Gospel depends on several layers of tradition and reworking of sources or earlier drafts. The problem is separating these drafts from the narrative as it now stands. The abundance of barely related source theories suggests the difficulty of the undertaking, even when theories are based on such potentially tangible clues as the presence of Aramaisms.²³⁹ As one scholar has pointed out,

... the gospel has certainly undergone some degree of editing, but the work of the redactor cannot be shown to have different aims and presuppositions from those of the evangelist himself. These are expressed in the final verses of ch. 20, which are frequently cited to indicate the purpose of the gospel as a whole. At this point it certainly looks as if redactor and evangelist are at one. And the conclusion is not impossible that they are, in fact, one and the same person.²⁴⁰

p 113 While some other redaction theories are debated, the view that the epilogue (John 21) was a later addition has become almost standard in scholarly orthodoxy. The usual evidence adduced for this position is questionable, however: the chapter may be “anticlimactic,” but so is the final book of the *Iliad*, the most widely read work of Greco-Roman antiquity.²⁴¹ Further, once subject matter is taken into account, the vocabulary is thoroughly Johannine.²⁴²

Brown’s contrast between John 21 and the rest of the Gospel based on their “different” portrayals of Peter²⁴³ is not convincing, either. Peter’s pastoral role is hinted at elsewhere (1:42; 6:69) and connected verbally with ch. 21 (13:36).

²³⁸ Carson, *John*, 76.

²³⁹ Manson, *Paul and John*, 86, finds them mainly in 1:1–34, 3:22–4:42, 5:1–47, 6:22–71, 7:14–10:39, and 12:20–18:40; Bruce, *Documents*, 54, however, cites Driver as noting that Burney’s most cogent examples for Aramaic in the Fourth Gospel are in Jesus’ speeches.

²⁴⁰ Lindars, “Traditions,” 123–24.

²⁴¹ Book 24, depicting Achilles’ treatment, and final relinquishment, of Hector’s body.

²⁴² Although this commentary does not focus on source-critical questions, this issue will be treated briefly in our introduction to John 21.

²⁴³ Brown, *Community*, 161–62.

The beloved disciple compares favorably with Peter in [John 21](#) as much as in the rest of John, but Peter is not portrayed particularly negatively in either. Peter comes off far worse in Mark, and Brown is therefore consistent in suggesting that Mark was not written by a disciple of Peter because it plays him down.²⁴⁴ This being the case, however, Brown would be more consistent to argue further that very little of the Gospel tradition represents “apostolic” Christianity. On this view one would have to claim that, like Paul ([Gal. 2](#)), neither of the sources of Markan and Johannine tradition got along particularly well with Peter and his allies. Such a hypothesis would find more hostility to Peter in the NT than the texts themselves warrant. Our extant NT somehow retained the centrality of the Twelve as Jesus’ historical followers. This is not to deny that the beloved disciple and Paul both contrast themselves favorably with Peter; it is to deny that this places them on the fringe of apostolic Christianity (see comment on [13:23](#)).

The structure of the Fourth Gospel is more difficult to determine than that of a more topically arranged book such as Matthew; themes seem to be developed and expanded in almost spiral fashion throughout the book, as has also been suggested for 1 John. The structure may be chronological, insofar as possible, like those of many Greco-Roman biographies;²⁴⁵ the book is full of chronological indicators of disputed significance (the “days” of ch. 1, “after this” in [2:12](#), etc.) As in the Gospel of Mark, the development of controversy and attendant suspense is critical to the plot.²⁴⁶ The bulk of the Gospel’s body is also built around the feasts in Jerusalem.²⁴⁷

Nevertheless, on the stylistic level, the Fourth Gospel is a unity.²⁴⁸ Scholars have often pointed to clear disjunctions in the narrative as a sign of disunity, but disjunction seems [p 114](#) simply to represent a common stylistic characteristic of the evangelist. This may not be the practice with which we are familiar from the Synoptic Gospels, but it was hardly unique to John. While some rhetoricians like Lucian and [Quintilian](#) recommended linking episodes together (cf., e.g., [Mark 1:16–39, 5:21–43](#)), Polybius felt that his disconnected narratives were better, providing variety.²⁴⁹

Sudden shifts in the narrative seem to be part of Johannine style, but even these shifts are not unconnected with their context. For instance, the major geographical break in ch. 6 does not obscure the theological progression from the prophet to whom Moses bore witness ([5:45–47](#)) to the gift of new manna ([6:32–58](#)). Since the references to motifs which recur throughout the book are in each case integral to the context in which they occur, the impression of thoughtful planning in the book is further reinforced.²⁵⁰ And since historical works were typically based on an initial

²⁴⁴ Ibid., 34 n. 46.

²⁴⁵ Aune, *Environment*, 34, 47. For a broader literary structure, cf., e.g., Tolmie, *Farewell*, 183 (much more convincingly than Westermann, *John*, 7, 63–64).

²⁴⁶ See Tenney, *John*, 40–41 for a structure based on this recognition. Bruce, *Message*, 106, outlines the Fourth Gospel according to clues in the prologue, but this use of the prologue is questionable. For suspense in ancient rhetoric, see, e.g., Cicero *Verr.* 2.5.5.10–11.

²⁴⁷ So also Bruns, *Art*, 24–25. Bruce, *Documents*, 55–56, provides suggestions for harmonizing this with the chronology of the Synoptics. We may leave aside from consideration for the moment Eileen Guilding’s proposed liturgical structure based on readings from the triennial cycle, which takes matters too far.

²⁴⁸ Its unity in this sense is accepted even by those who recognize redactions and displacements, e.g., MacGregor, *John*, xli. Ellis, *Genius*, develops a unity based on parallelism rather than narrative, following cues from John Gerhard’s dissertation (ix, 12); although his development of chiasmic parallelism in the Fourth Gospel is brilliant, it remains more convincing in some texts than in others, and not convincing overall.

²⁴⁹ Aune, *Environment*, 90, citing Lucian *Hist.* 55; [Quintilian](#) 7.1.1; [Polybius](#) 38.5.1–8.

²⁵⁰ Bruns, *Art*, 28–30.

draft rehearsing in chronological order (when possible) the events to be covered (*hypomnēma*), such planning and reediting by the same author should be expected.²⁵¹ Even stylistic or vocabulary changes from one section to the next—changes which in John are at most minor—need not indicate distinct sources. Arrian need not be quoting Epictetus more accurately in some sections of his *Discourses* than in others, although some phrases (e.g., τί σοὶ καὶ ἡμῖν) predominate in particular sections; other phrases are more evenly distributed throughout. Both Epictetus and Arrian probably had some words and phrases fresher on their minds at specific times, just as writers do today. Robinson is certainly right to observe:

On purely stylistic grounds I believe this Gospel must be judged to be a literary unity. Whatever the slight variations from the average in word-count in certain passages, I accept the view that the whole is the work of a single hand, including the prologue and the epilogue. The attempt to isolate sources on literary grounds cannot be said to have succeeded. “It looks as though,” to quote Professor Pierson Parker, “if the author of the Fourth Gospel used documentary sources, he wrote them all himself.”²⁵²

Berg, who finally concludes that different hands wrote different pieces of the Farewell Discourses, nevertheless concurs that those examining any text should start with the unity of their text as a working premise, altering this position only in light of clear evidence to the contrary.²⁵³ Unpersuaded that the Fourth Gospel provides clear evidence of its sources, this commentary will proceed on the assumption of its unity in its present form.

Conclusion regarding Authorship

Scholars commonly concur at least that the beloved disciple is the reliable source of much of the tradition recorded in the Fourth Gospel.²⁵⁴ Beyond this, however, scholars dispute to what degree the finished Gospel reflects this reliable tradition.

It is somewhat surprising, then, to discover the degree to which internal and external evidence appear to favor John son of Zebedee as the Fourth Gospel’s author. Although he p 115 undoubtedly used a scribe or scribes, probably members of his own circle of disciples, who may have exercised some liberty, one may therefore attribute the Gospel as a whole to an eyewitness. The eyewitness has clearly taken liberties in the telling of the story, probably developed over years of sermonic use; but a strong case can be made for Johannine authorship and therefore that the Gospel contains substantial reminiscences, as well as theological interpretations, of Jesus. If, because of the Gospel’s slow acceptance in “orthodox” circles, we attribute it to a Johannine school rather than to the apostle himself (my second choice), we may still argue that the oral tradition the work incorporates depends on John’s own witness.

This question of authorship raises two related questions. The first is the question of a claim to inspiration, as John’s contemporaries employed the concept. Granted that the Gospel implies human authorship, does it also imply a claim to divine authorship? For John’s audience, the latter claim might appear more significant. A claim to divine authorship is not, strictly speaking, empirically verifiable; what we investigate here is whether the Gospel, like many other ancient religious works, makes such a claim.

Second, we must investigate whether the Johannine Epistles and Revelation might derive from the same author or (more commonly accepted) circle. The answer to this question may affect the extent to which these documents

²⁵¹ Aune, *Environment*, 82, citing Josephus *Ag. Ap.* 1.47–50; Lucian *Hist.* 16, 48.

²⁵² Robinson, “Prologue,” 120; Parker’s citation is from “Two Editions of John,” *JBL* 75 (1956): 304, which Robinson also cites in *Trust*, 83.

²⁵³ Berg, “Pneumatology,” 82–83.

²⁵⁴ E.g., Dunn, “John,” 299; Smith, *John* [1999], 400. Even an unbroken chain of attributable tradition would be viewed as mostly dependable (e.g., *Eunapius Lives* 458).

(generally agreed to derive from the same community, especially the Epistles) may be employed in the interpretation of the Fourth Gospel (including the reconstruction of its provenance and milieu). It is also important to the question of authorship because, in contrast to the Fourth Gospel, Revelation explicitly claims authorship by one “John” (Rev 1:1). Yet the differences between the two books have suggested to most contemporary scholars that they derive from different authors.

The Paraclete and Internal Claims to Inspiration

Whereas the questions of genre and authorship are related when one investigates the degree of historical accuracy to be supposed for the Fourth Gospel, the question of ancient claims for inspiration is a separate issue. Despite the testimony of the beloved disciple, the identity of the human author may be a concern less intrinsic to the Gospel than its implicit claim to a sort of divine authorship or, more accurately, inspiration by the Paraclete. Inspiration is a category with which modern readers are far less equipped to deal than ancient readers were; the concept of inspiration was widely understood and articulated in antiquity, whether with regard to inspiration of Greek or Roman poetry by the Muses or Apollo,²⁵⁵ oracles by Apollo and other deities,²⁵⁶ Egyptian sacred writings authored by Thoth,²⁵⁷ or the OT Scriptures by the Spirit of YHWH in ancient Judaism.²⁵⁸ Poets regularly invoke the Muses, often to provide an omniscient perspective.²⁵⁹ Some believed that

²⁵⁵ E.g., Horace *Carm.* 1.26; cf. 2.12.13; 3.1.3–4 (cf. 3.3.69–72), 3.14.13–15; 4.8.29, 4.9.21.

²⁵⁶ E.g., Longinus *Subl.* 13.2; Virgil *Aen.* 6.12; Lucan *C.W.* 5.97–101, 148–93.

²⁵⁷ Frankfurter, *Religion in Egypt*, 238–40 (citing, e.g., P.Oxy. 11.1381.32–52).

²⁵⁸ I have treated kinds of inspiration in more detail in *Paul*, 262–65; idem, *Spirit*, 23–24.

²⁵⁹ E.g., Homer *Il.* 2.484–492; 16.112–113; *Od.* 1.1; *Battle of Frogs and Mice* 1; Hesiod *Op.* 1; Apollonius of Rhodes 1.1, 22; 4.1–2; Virgil *Aen.* 1.8; 9.525–529; [Virgil] *Catal.* 9.1–2; Ovid *Metam.* 1.2–3; Callimachus *Aetia* 1.1.1–38; Musaeus *Hero* 1; Statius *Achilleid* 1.9; Pindar *Nem.* 3.1–5; frg. 150 (in Eustathios *Commentary on Iliad* 1.1); Valerius Flaccus 1.5–7; 3.15–17; Philostratus *Hrk.* 43.5–6; for other deities, e.g., Aelius Aristides *Defense of Oratory* 19.5D–6D; 20.6D; Philostratus *Hrk.* 25.18. This may suggest whatever comes to the author in proper meter; see Dimock, “Introduction,” 3; cf. Homer *Od.* 19.138. Cf. a “divine” (θεῖος) minstrel (Homer *Od.* 4.17–19).