

‘I Suppose’ (*oimai*): The Conclusion of John’s Gospel in Its Literary and Historical Context

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Introduction

Discussions of the authorship of the Fourth Gospel continue unabated, and commentators leave no stone unturned in their quest to solve this enigma of Johannine studies. One of several issues that have yet to receive adequate attention is the fact that the Gospel concludes with a first person reference, ‘I suppose’ (*oimai*). It is widely held that the final two verses of the Gospel, perhaps together with the last chapter in its entirety, were added by the Church or some later redactor. This appears to find support by the third person reference to ‘this disciple who witnesses to these things’ and the first person plural verb *oidamen* (‘we know’) in the penultimate verse. This conclusion also nicely undergirds a variety of source and redaction-critical theories surrounding the composition of the Fourth Gospel. The Johannine community, it is argued, here comes to the fore as the community responsible for the final version of the Gospel. Some view John 21:24–25 more narrowly as an authentication of the preceding Gospel by its recipients. Others draw more far-reaching implications from these final verses, holding that the Johannine community was responsible for the body of the Gospel as well. According to these interpreters, John’s Gospel tells the story of Jesus in terms of the history of this Johannine community.

These views would perhaps be less assailable if it were not for the presence of the first person verb *oimai* (‘I suppose’) in the concluding verse of the Gospel. As Morris acknowledges, if John 21:24–25 were added by a later group, one would expect the first person plural to continue through v. 25.¹ The stubborn fact is that it does not. In an important recent study H. M. Jackson has adduced considerable primary evidence to suggest that both the third person singular and the first person plural references in the penultimate verse should be understood within the framework of ancient conventions of self-reference.² Specifically, Jackson has plausibly shown that John 21:24 most likely is cast in the third person in order to affirm the credibility of the author’s own witness.³ In the second part of the verse, the author shifts to the first person plural—an ‘associative collective’ where the ‘you’ subsumed under the ‘we’ are the book’s Christian readers but where the ‘I’ included in the ‘we’ is the author⁴— and in v. 25 to the first

¹ Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to John* (NIGTC; rev. ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 775, n. 64.

² H. M. Jackson, ‘Ancient Self-referential Conventions and Their Implications for the Authorship and Integrity of the Gospel of John,’ *JTS* 50 (1999): 1–34.

³ ‘This is the disciple’, ‘his testimony’ (cf. 19:35; see also 17:3 where Jesus is portrayed as referring to himself as ‘Jesus Christ’). Compare Thucydides’ practice of introducing himself in the third person (Thucydides, *Hist.* 1.1.1 and 5.26.1) and of referring to himself as ‘Thucydides’ (*Hist.* 4.104.4: ‘Thucydides, the son of Oloros, who composed this history’) this is true also of Julius Caesar, *B Gall.*, who regularly refers to himself in the third person as ‘Caesar’. Cf. Jackson, ‘Ancient Self-referential Conventions,’ 27 (see also *ibid.*, 28–30 on Josephus).

⁴ Jackson, ‘Ancient Self-referential Conventions,’ 23–24. Cf. D. A. Carson, *The Gospel according to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 684, who refers to 1:14; 3:2, 11; 20:1; 1 John 1:2, 4, 5, 6, 7; 3 John 12; and 2 Cor 12:2–4; Adolf Schlatter, *Der Evangelist Johannes* (2nd ed.; Stuttgart: Calwer, 1948 [1930]), 376, with reference to 3:2 and 20:2; and Daniel Wallace, *Greek Grammar beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 397, who lists the

person singular, striking a more informal, familiar tone in order to underscore his personal involvement and in order not to appear unduly detached from the events recorded earlier.⁵

In light of Jackson's findings it can therefore no longer be confidently maintained that the references to 'this disciple' and the phrase 'we know' in John 21:24 provide compelling grounds for signalling a shift of authorship from the person responsible for the bulk of the Gospel to the authenticating community in 21:24–25. In what follows I will seek to build on Jackson's findings and attempt to supplement them with some primary data concerning the term *oimai*.⁶ I will argue that, even apart from Jackson's study, the first person singular reference in John 21:25 is best understood as a final expression of authorial modesty by the author of the entire Gospel.⁷ After a survey of the state of scholarship on John 21:24–25 representative instances of *oimai* in contemporaneous extrabiblical Greek literature will be cited. This will be followed by an evaluation of the significance of this data for an assessment of the authorship of John's Gospel.

NOTE: For the rest of this essay, see P. J. Williams, Andrew D. Clarke, Peter M. Head, and David Instone-Brewer, eds., *The New Testament in Its First Century Setting. Essays on Context and Background in Honour of B. W. Winter on His 65th Birthday* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2004), 74–88.

present passage as a (debatable) example of the exclusive 'we', 'in which the first person plural restricts the group to the author and his associates.'

⁵ Jackson, 'Ancient Self-referential Conventions,' 8.

⁶ The term *oimai* (elsewhere also attested in the uncontracted form *oiomai*), though not in the first person singular, is used elsewhere in the New Testament only in Phil 1:17 and Jas 1:7; For lexical entries see Louw and Nida, § 1.369; BDAG, 701; and LSJ, 1208–09, who note that the term occurs already in Homer with the meaning 'think, suppose, believe', which suggests that the word's denotation has remained constant in ancient Greek. While the lexical meaning of *oimai* is thus not disputed, its rhetorical import requires further study. In the study below we will follow the syntactical analysis in BDAG, 701, and limit ourselves to the study of syntactical parallels to the usage of *oimai* or *oiomai* followed by an accusative and infinitive.

⁷ Compare the oblique self-reference 'the disciple Jesus loved' in the second half of the Gospel (13:23; 19:26; 20:2; 21:7, 20).