Jacob Schuler / General Adult

How to Study the Bible / John 4

Scripture:

TOPIC/SCRIPTURE/STUDY: Biblical Themes and Background John 4

TEXT: John 4

THEMES IN BIBLICAL STUDY: A **theme** is the central idea, message, or underlying meaning that runs throughout a piece of writing, speech, or artistic work. In the context of **Scripture**, a theme refers to a **recurring theological or spiritual concept** that helps interpret the purpose and message of a biblical book or passage.

BACKGROUND IN BIBLICAL STUDY: In biblical studies, **background** refers to the **historical, cultural, geographical, political, and religious setting** in which a biblical text was written and originally understood.

1. Why is it important to understand a book or passage theme and how do I find it?
2. What is the context of John's of John 4 and how do I use that to understand it?

1. Biblical Themes

Major themes of the Bible

According to the *Dictionary of Bible Themes* by Martin Manser, the Bible contains over **2,000 thematic articles** organized into **nine major categories**:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____
7. _____
8. _____
9. _____

Bible Gateway also highlights themes such as **grace**, **atonement**, **covenant**, **prayer**, **Holy Spirit**, and **the Gospel.**

Central Theme of John: Jesus as the Son of God

The overarching purpose of John's Gospel is clearly stated in **John 20:31**:

“These are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.”

This verse encapsulates the **core theme**: **belief in Jesus as the divine Son of God** leads to **eternal life.**

HOMEWORK ASSIGNMENT

1. Optional - Create a free account on the Logos bible study web application. Logos.com.
2. Optional - Add the Faith Life Study Bible - FSB Free Resource to your library in Logos.
3. Read the Introduction to John and read the background and context section. (Use the provided handouts for Faithlife Study Bible and Reformation Study Bible)
4. What does the Faith Life Study Bible author tell you about the difference between John's Gospel and the other Gospels?
5. What phrase does Jesus use that equates him with God the Father?
6. What do these commentaries say is the theme of John?

2. Background and Context of a Text

Understanding background helps readers grasp the **original meaning** of Scripture by placing it within the **real-world circumstances** of its time.

The *Dictionary of New Testament Background* emphasizes the importance of Jewish and Greco-Roman life, including topics like purity, honor/shame, patronage, and book culture.

Background Elements:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

How to Find out the Background of a Text

1. **Read Book Introductions**

- Study Bibles and Logos provide:
  - Author
  - Date
  - Audience
  - Purpose
  - Historical setting

2. Use Bible Dictionaries and Encyclopedias

- Look up places, people, customs, and events.
- Logos has resources like:
  - *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*
  - *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary*

3. Explore Maps and Timelines

- Visual tools help place events in **historical** and **historical** context.

4. Study Ancient Cultures

- Learn about:
  - Jewish customs
  - Greco-Roman society
  - Political systems (e.g., Roman rule)

5. Use Parallel Texts

- Compare biblical accounts with **extra-biblical sources** (e.g., Josephus, Dead Sea Scrolls).

HOMEWORK ASSIGNMENT

1. Read the Study Guide Resources for John.
2. What does the Faithlife Study Bible say about the background for John?
3. What does the Reformed Study Bible say about the background for John?
4. Read John Chapter 4 in light of your new learnings about themes and biblical background.

CIT

1. Barry, John D., Douglas Mangum, Derek R. Brown, Michael S. Heiser, Miles Custis, Elliot Ritzema, Matthew M. Whitehead, Michael R. Grigoni, and David Bomar. *Faithlife Study Bible*. Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2012, 2016.
2. Sproul, R. C., ed. *The Reformation Study Bible: English Standard Version (2015 Edition)*. Orlando, FL: Reformation Trust, 2015.
3. Manser, Martin H. Dictionary of Bible Themes. Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2009. Available through Logos Bible Software.
4. Hickey, Michael. Themes from the Gospel of John. Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software. Accessed via Logos thematic study resources.
5. Evans, Craig A., and Stanley E. Porter, eds. Dictionary of New Testament Background. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2000. Available through Logos Bible Software.
6. Barry, John D. “4 Steps to Studying the Bible in Context.” Logos Blog. Faithlife Corporation. Accessed via Logos.com.
7. Henry, Matthew. Matthew Henry’s Commentary on the Whole Bible. Public domain. Accessed via BibleGateway.com.
8. Rau, Andy. “How to Study the Bible in Context.” Bible Gateway Blog. HarperCollins Christian Publishing. Accessed via BibleGateway.com.
9. Walton, John H., and Craig S. Keener. Interview on biblical background and context. Featured on BibleGateway.com.

Supplemental Materials:

Faithlife Study Bible Introduction to John

Introduction to John

The Gospel of John illustrates what it looks like when God the Son comes to dwell among His people. John's Gospel profoundly shows how God's Son, Jesus, makes it possible for us to have an eternal relationship with God the Father (John 3:16–17).

Background

The text of the Gospel of John identifies its author as a witness of Jesus' crucifixion (19:35) and as the disciple loved by Jesus (21:20, 24). According to early church tradition, the author is the Apostle John, the son of Zebedee (also called John the Evangelist)—whom the early church fathers also regarded as the author of 1 John. However, the Gospel of John was originally anonymous, and thus it is possible that another church leader, whom the early church called John the elder, is the author or final compiler. Some church fathers thought John the elder might have been the author of 2–3 John, but others ascribed 2–3 John to the Apostle John (see the "Introduction to 2 John"). In addition, Revelation, may be ascribed to the Apostle John, John the Elder, or another John (see the "Introduction to Revelation").

The Gospel was most likely written ca. AD 85–95, although if John the Elder is its author it could have been written in the early second century AD. The "Rylands Fragment," a tiny piece of papyrus (about the size of a credit card), contains parts of John 18 in Greek and dates to AD 125–150.

Although John's Gospel is associated by early church tradition with Ephesus, in modern-day Turkey, it contains details about Jewish customs that reflect firsthand knowledge of Judaea. Based on this content, the original audience likely consisted of Jewish Christians who affirmed Jesus as the God of Israel. The Gospel may have been written to encourage them during a time of opposition (see 9:22; 12:42; 16:2). This may be why John's Gospel seems to emphasize Jesus' difficulties with "the Jews." Jesus Himself and His earliest followers were Jewish, but struggled to find acceptance among their own people group, especially Jewish religious leaders. For this reason, John emphasizes all the ways Jesus fulfills the law (e.g., 12:38; 15:25; 19:24) and highlights the great command to love (13:34–35).

Structure

The Gospel of John stands apart from the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) in its content, order, wording, and themes. John 1:1–18 serves as a prologue that identifies Jesus as the Word (logos in Greek). Jesus is described as pre-existent—already present at the beginning of the universe—and as being the one through whom creation happened. After the prologue, there is not another significant break until the end of ch. 12. This first major section (1:19–12:50) narrates Jesus' public ministry, with special emphasis on His activities during various Jewish festivals: Passover (chs. 2; 6; 11–12); an unnamed feast (5:1); Tabernacles (chs. 7–9); and Dedication (ch. 10).

The second major section begins with Jesus' last meal, prior to His death, with His disciples (ch. 13) and presents a detailed account of what is often called Jesus' farewell discourse (chs. 14–17). The final section of the Gospel records Jesus' arrest, trial, death, and resurrection (chs. 18–20). The last chapter (ch. 21)—Jesus appearing to His disciples in Galilee—could function in part, or in entirety, as an appendix.

Outline

- Prologue (1:1–18)
- Jesus' public ministry (1:19–12:50)
- Jesus' farewell discourse (13:1–17:26)
- Jesus' passion, resurrection, and post-resurrection appearances (18:1–21:25)

Themes

From the beginning of the Gospel of John to the end, this book shows that Jesus is God in flesh (1:1–3, 14). He has authority and thus is right to call people to abide in His love and share that love with others (e.g., 13:34–35; 15:9–17). Throughout John's Gospel, Jesus uses "I am" phrases, which equate Him with Yahweh, the God of the Old Testament (e.g., 6:35; 8:24; 10:11, 14; 13:19; 15:1; 18:5–9; compare Exod 3:14–16).
Unlike the Synoptic Gospels—which focus on the kingdom of God/heaven—the emphasis of John's Gospel is the unity of Jesus, God's Son, with God the Father (John 10:30; 14). On the basis of this, Jesus emphasizes that His followers should be unified with Him and with one another. Jesus also says that the Holy Spirit will come to His followers—God's eternal presence is with His followers (ch. 15).
Thomas even calls Jesus his Lord—which may indicate that he is calling him Yahweh—and his God (20:28). John emphasizes that the only way to true and eternal relationship with God the Father is through Jesus' sacrificial death and resurrection (e.g., 3:16–17; 14:16–17; 17:3). And this is the message our world needs to hear today.

TITLE

Many scholars believe that the autographs (the original copies produced by the authors) of the four Gospels did not originally bear what we would consider a "title," but the opening lines of each of the Synoptics identify the contents of those documents in various ways. The opening words of Mark's gospel (1:1) imply that it contains the (preached) "good news" in written form. Matt. 1:1 echoes Genesis in speaking of "the book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ." Luke places his researched and "orderly account" alongside other such narratives of the events attested by the eyewitnesses and ministers of the Word (1:1–3). The fourth gospel, on the other hand, opens with a majestic prologue that (like Matthew) echoes motifs in Genesis ("in the beginning," creation, light) but does not specifically characterize the document as a whole. John's prologue does, however, begin with the Word who was with God in the beginning, was God, and through whom God is definitively revealed (1:1, 18), as the gospel goes on to reaffirm (8:58; 10:30; 14:6–9).
The second-century church father Irenaeus characterized this book as the "proclamation" and the "teaching" of the gospel, and the document known as the Muratorian Canon (late second century) states that "the fourth book of the Gospels is that of John, one of the disciples." The earliest complete manuscripts bear the simple title "According to John," paralleling the titles of the Synoptics and implying that one gospel of salvation is being proclaimed through these four witnesses.

AUTHOR

The author of John's gospel was almost certainly a Jew. He displays an intimate knowledge of Jewish customs, festivals, and beliefs. His detailed geographical knowledge suggests that he was a native of Palestine, and it appears that he was an eyewitness of many of the events recorded in his gospel (19:35; 21:24).

Although the work is usually considered anonymous, it contains hints about its authorship. This is the only gospel that refers to one of the apostles with the expression "the disciple whom Jesus loved" (13:23; 19:26) rather than by name. This disciple is identified as the eyewitness who "is bearing witness about these things, and who has written these things" (21:24). His presence at the last supper shows that he was one of the Twelve (Mark 14:17); but he was not Peter, Andrew, Nathanael (Bartholomew), Philip, Thomas, Judas Iscariot, or the other Judas, since these are identified by name in the gospel. Moreover, any careful reader will notice that John, son of Zebedee, who was one of Jesus' three closest disciples (Mark 3:16, 17; 9:2; 14:33), is not mentioned by name in the gospel. (John 21:2 mentions "the sons of Zebedee" among those who went fishing with Simon Peter after Jesus' resurrection, and "the disciple whom Jesus loved" was in that group, according to 21:20.) It is difficult to explain this omission unless one assumes that John wrote this gospel and that he refrained from identifying himself. John's brother James, also not mentioned by name in this gospel, was martyred so early that no rumor would have circulated that he would live until Jesus' return (Acts 12:2; John 21:23).

Early church tradition, such as the second-century writings of Irenaeus (a disciple of Polycarp, who in turn had direct contact with some of the apostles), consistently and explicitly attributes this gospel to the apostle John. Modern doubts about the reliability of that tradition have led many scholars to reject Johannine authorship of the book, but no other view gives as satisfactory an account of the evidence of the church fathers and the gospel's internal signals concerning its author.

DATE AND OCCASION

Early church tradition suggests that John wrote the gospel toward the end of his life, around A.D. 90. Some scholars of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, having abandoned Johannine authorship, argued that the gospel was written as late as the middle of the second century. The discoveries of the Rylands papyrus (a manuscript fragment dated to about A.D. 125, containing a few lines from John 18) and of the Dead Sea Scrolls (which improved understanding of Palestine in the first century) have led most scholars to return to the gospel's traditional date. Some specialists have gone further and dated it before A.D. 80 or even 70.

The author himself describes his purpose for writing: "that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name" (20:31). He therefore seems to envision an audience that at least includes many who do not yet believe in Jesus' divine-human identity and who need to heed the testimony of Jesus' words and deeds, especially His being "lifted up" in crucifixion and resurrection, in order to receive eternal life in God's Son. The purpose statement of the first epistle attributed to John, by contrast, identifies its audience as "you who believe in the name of the Son of God" and describes the aim of that epistle in terms of assurance: "that you may know that you have eternal life" (1 John 5:13).

The polemic emphases of John's gospel suggest that at its writing, as during Jesus' ministry, opposition to its witness to Him as the Son of God was coming from Jewish opponents who believed that its Christology was a blasphemous contradiction of the monotheism revealed in the Old Testament Scriptures (Deut. 6:4; Is. 43:10, 11; etc.). The gospel's insistence that the Word, who was God, "became flesh and dwelt among us" as the supreme revelation of God (1:1, 14, 18) probably also has in view the error of proto-Gnostic dualism, which viewed the material world as intrinsically defiled and unfit for contact with the divine (cf. 1 John 4:1–3; 5:6–11; Col. 1:15–20; 2:8, 9). Thus, this gospel bears its witness in answer both to Jewish and to Greek objections, inviting its readers from various backgrounds to receive eternal life in the knowledge of the Father and of Jesus Christ His Son (17:3).

GENRE

Like the Synoptic Gospels, the fourth gospel offers a selective and theologically interpreted testimony to the events of Jesus' earthly ministry, culminating in His death, resurrection, and appearances to His followers

after rising from the dead. The fidelity of the gospel's record to the events it records is emphasized in the concluding affirmation that the beloved disciple who "is bearing witness about these things" is offering true testimony (21:24).

Unlike Matthew and Luke but like Mark, John bypasses the birth of Jesus and begins his account, after the prologue (1:1–18), with the ministry of John the Baptist (introduced in the prologue itself; 1:6–8, 15), who bears witness to the descent of the Spirit on Jesus, designating Him as the supremely worthy One who will baptize with the Holy Spirit (1:19, 26, 27, 32–34; cf. Luke 3:15–17, 21, 22).
All the Gospels give to the final week of Jesus' earthly ministry what would be, in a conventional biography, a disproportionately extensive treatment. In this way, they emphasize the redemptive importance of Jesus' death and resurrection. In John's gospel, this weighting of the narrative toward Jesus' suffering and resurrection is most pronounced, with approximately forty percent of this gospel devoted to the week that began with Jesus' triumphal entry. John's account of that week concentrates on Jesus' private instruction to His disciples (chs. 13–17, if we include His prayer for them and those who will believe through their witness), whereas the Synoptic Gospels record His public teaching and disputes with opponents during Passion Week.
Around the turn of the third century, Clement of Alexandria characterized the stylistic and thematic distinctives that set the fourth gospel apart from the Synoptic Gospels, observing that John, writing last, knew that the "outward facts" of Jesus' ministry had been set forth by Matthew, Mark, and Luke, and therefore composed a "spiritual Gospel."

LITERARY FEATURES

Several noteworthy literary features characterize the fourth gospel. (1) Particularly prominent is its majestic prologue (1:1–18), which introduces the gospel's subject, Jesus Christ, the divine Word who became flesh, thereby revealing the Father (vv. 14–18); and many of the themes to recur repeatedly in the following narrative (light/darkness, life, faith, birth). (2) Narrative parables, so characteristic a teaching device employed by Jesus in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, are virtually absent. (3) Symbolism and metaphor in the teaching method of Jesus (temple, wind, water, bread, sight/blindness, vine, etc.) are pervasive. (4) Jesus' miraculous signs and His teaching are shown as interrelated. For example, His feeding of the five thousand introduces His self-disclosure as the Bread of Life, given by the Father to offer His flesh for the life of the world (ch. 6). His healing of a man born blind leads to discussions of physical and spiritual blindness (ch. 9). His physical raising of Lazarus (ch. 11) links with both earlier and subsequent discussions of His identity as "the resurrection and the life" (11:25), and therefore His authority to give life to those who believe in Him in the present and to call the dead from their graves at the end of history (5:19–29). (5) The fourth gospel contains the extensive Upper Room Discourse (mainly monologue but with occasional interjections from the disciples) in which Jesus prepared His followers for His suffering, return to the Father, and sending of the Holy Spirit (chs. 13–16), followed by the High Priestly Prayer in which Jesus affirmed the completion of His mission and asked the Father to preserve and unite both His apostles and those who would come to faith through their witness (ch. 17).

CHARACTERISTICS AND PRIMARY THEMES

The teachings of Jesus recorded in John tend to be lengthy discussions of a single topic, in contrast to the pithy, proverb-like sayings usually found in the Synoptic Gospels. The teaching material is often embedded in conversations, as Jesus interacts with individual people or groups in discussion.

Jesus' interaction with those who did not receive Him although they were "his own" (1:11) is an important focus of the public ministry (chs. 1–12). Jesus appeared often in Jerusalem at the time of the Jewish feasts. These feasts had special importance because of the way Jesus related His own work to what the feasts signify (7:37–39). Despite this ministry, His nation did not receive Him, a fact that John explains as the result of human sin. Jesus was rejected, not because He was a stranger, but because people love darkness rather than light.

The gospel of John makes use of sharp contrasts: light and darkness (1:4–9), love and hatred (15:17, 18), from above and from below (8:23), life and death (6:57, 58), truth and falsehood (8:32–47). Other distinctive features are the theme of misunderstanding (2:21; 6:51–58 and notes), the use of twofold or double meanings (3:14; 6:62 and notes), and the role of the "I am" sayings (6:35 note; "Christ in John" below).

THEOLOGY OF JOHN

As this gospel's purpose statement (20:30, 31) shows, central to its theology is the identity of Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God ("Christ in John" below). Other theological themes that receive emphasis are God's sovereignty, the person and work of the Holy Spirit, sin, and faith (in relation to Jesus' signs).

In the sovereign mercy of God, the salvation of believers can be traced back before the creation of the universe to the eternal purposes of God. Those who will, in time, pass from death to life through faith (5:24) already belong to the Father, who has given them to the Son (17:6). The Son, in turn, voluntarily lays down His life for His sheep (10:11, 15) and secures all those whom the Father has given to Him, so that none is lost (6:39; 17:12; 18:9). Jesus knows and calls His sheep by name (10:3), and they recognize His voice and follow Him (10:27). When people do not believe in Jesus, it is because they are not among His sheep (10:26). But His sheep are secured for eternal life by His sovereign power, for no one can snatch them out of His hand and His Father's hand (10:28, 29). From another perspective, such sovereign divine grace is necessary because no human being (except Christ), deadened as we are by sin, can either see or enter God's kingdom apart from having been born anew, from above, by God's Spirit (3:3–8; 1:12, 13). No one comes to Christ unless the Father draws him (6:44), but all whom the Father gives will come to the Son and be welcomed by the Son everlastingly (6:37–39, 45).

God's Spirit is not only the author of the new birth of God's children but also the ongoing sustainer of their lives, as living water sustained the Israelites in their wilderness wanderings (7:37–39; cf. 4:13, 14). After His resurrection, Jesus bestows the Spirit on His people (20:22; cf. 3:34), in fulfillment of John the Baptist's prediction (1:33) and His own promise (15:26; 16:7). It is also true that, as Jesus returns to His Father, the Father sends the Spirit in Jesus' name (14:16, 26). The Spirit of truth comes to reveal the Son more fully than

His disciples have been able to receive during His earthly ministry, thereby glorifying the Son (14:25, 26; 16:12–15). The Spirit also presses God's convicting indictment of the world for its unbelief and sin (16:8–11). By means of the Spirit's indwelling, the Son and the Father make their residence in believers, not leaving them as orphans in a hostile world (14:16–20, 23).

John highlights the reality of sin in various ways, but especially by emphasizing our total dependence on God for salvation. Just as our physical birth was not the result of our own effort or will, so our spiritual birth is due not to our efforts but to God's will and the power of His Spirit (1:12, 13; 3:5–8). Sinful men and women are unable to come to Jesus for salvation unless the Father draws them (6:44). But when they come to Jesus, they have "eternal life," and do not "come into judgment" (5:24); they belong to the Father, and He will not let them die (10:27–29).

A special challenge to interpreters of John's gospel is the relationship between faith and seeing "signs." The author places great emphasis on the unique significance of Jesus' miracles because they reveal much about His person and work (20:30, 31). But some passages seem to suggest that belief based solely upon having personally seen the signs is not a good thing. In 4:48, for instance, Jesus rebukes His hearers: "Unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe." This passage brings to mind the statement of Thomas in 20:25—"Unless I see … I will never believe"—where Thomas is not depicted favorably. Consequently, many readers have concluded that an ideal faith has no interest in miracles. The problem with this conclusion, however, is twofold. First, if faith resulting from miracles is not good, why does Jesus perform miracles? Second, why does John link these signs to faith in Christ (20:31)?

To believe in Jesus means not only to acknowledge His ability to perform miracles, but also to accept what those miracles as signs reveal about His person and work. The writer indicates that the written record of Jesus' signs is sufficient testimony for those who are not eyewitnesses. This understanding is implied by what Jesus says to Thomas, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed" (20:29). Paul's formulation portrays a similar relationship between faith and sight: "We walk by faith, not by sight" (2 Cor. 5:7; cf. Rom. 8:24, 25).

Faith can be produced and encouraged by the signs Jesus performed. But the goal of this faith is to apprehend Jesus in His fullness, not merely as a miracle worker. Jesus is revealed by His signs as the eternal Word of God, one with the Father and the Spirit. It is not necessary to be an eyewitness of the signs; the record of them is sufficient to convey their power for eliciting and strengthening faith in Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of God.

JOHN IN THE LARGER STORY OF THE BIBLE

The opening words of the fourth gospel, “In the beginning,” link the story of Jesus directly to the opening sentence of the whole Bible and the creation of the universe: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” (Gen. 1:1). The Word who was with God and was God, the agent of the original creation, “became flesh and dwelt among us” as Jesus of Nazareth (1:14). As other sections of this introduction illustrate, John’s gospel integrates themes from the feasts (Passover, Tabernacles) and institutions (temple) that were ordained for Old Testament Israel, showing how their meanings and functions converge and reach their fulfillment in Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

John’s gospel also looks forward to the future task that Jesus entrusted to His disciples in the Upper Room Discourse and after His resurrection, when He breathed on them and promised the powerful presence of the Holy Spirit for the mission into which He was sending them (20:21). Through their word, “the children of God who are scattered abroad” will be gathered “into one” (11:52) as they come to believe on the basis of the testimony of apostles (17:20–26; 20:29–31). Jesus’ words, therefore, foretell the dissemination of the word of truth across the Greco-Roman world, as that is traced in the book of Acts and is reflected in the New Testament epistles addressed to churches throughout the Mediterranean world.

The relationship between the fourth gospel and the other New Testament books attributed to John (1, 2, 3 John, Revelation) merits special mention. John’s gospel and epistles share stylistic similarities, such as the repeated use of a relatively limited range of vocabulary; the blend of grammatical simplicity and vivid imagery with conceptual profundity; emphases on love and truth; insistence on the concrete reality of the incarnation; the shared purposes of the gospel and 1 John to engender and give assurance of faith, respectively. The book of Revelation differs from other Johannine literature in genre and style; yet with the gospel and epistles it shares imagery (e.g., Jesus as the Lamb) and the sharp disjunction between Christ and Satan, and between those who belong to God and those who belong to “the world.”

CHRIST IN JOHN

One of the most striking characteristics of this gospel is the prologue (1:1–18), which presents Jesus as the eternal Logos, or Word, who reveals the Father because He shares in the Father’s deity. He made the universe (1:3). He met the needs of the Israelites in the wilderness, and now provides spiritual water to the thirsty (4:13, 14; 7:37–39). He is the Lord who announced in Jer. 23 and Ezek. 34 that He would come personally as the shepherd to gather, heal, and feed His sheep, delivering them from the exploitation of unfaithful leaders (ch. 10). In short, He is one with the Father, the great I Am (5:18; 8:58; 10:30–33; cf. Ex. 3:14; Is. 47:8, 10).

While emphasizing that the divine Son, “the only God” (1:18), is equal to the Father (10:30–33), the gospel also stresses that the Son has come in submission to His Father, intent on doing “the will of him who sent me” (5:30; 6:38, 39). Indeed, doing the Father’s will is the very “food” that sustains Jesus (4:34). In words that

foreshadow the Gethsemane struggle recorded in the Synoptic Gospels, Jesus' soul is troubled as His hour approaches; yet His prayer to the Father is not for rescue from the horror of that hour, but that God's name be glorified (12:27, 28). Moreover, the full reality of the incarnate Son's humanity is demonstrated in the details of His suffering and crucifixion (19:1, 2, 16–18, 28–30, 34–37), as well as in the demonstration of the reality of His bodily resurrection (20:20, 25–29).

Although all four Gospels attach the pivotal importance to Jesus' redemptive death, only the fourth gospel preserves the record that the forerunner, John the Baptist, announced Christ's mission in these terms as "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" (1:29). In all four Gospels, only John the Baptist prophesies that Jesus will baptize with the Holy Spirit (1:33). Only John (20:22) and Luke (Acts 1; 2) return to that prediction to indicate its fulfillment after Jesus' death and resurrection.

Dimensions of Christ's saving grace to believers are shown in the seven "I Am" statements with predicates, in which Jesus identifies Himself as:

1. The bread of life, given from heaven by the Father (6:35)
2. The light of the world, leading believers as the cloud of glory led Israel in the wilderness (8:12)
3. The door, through whom His sheep enter and find safety (10:7–9)
4. The good shepherd, who lays down His life for the sheep and calls them by name (10:11)
5. The resurrection and the life, whose voice brings the dead to life (11:25)
6. The way, the truth, and the life, the unique revealer of the Father and the only route by which anyone may approach the Father (14:6)
7. The true vine, yielding fruit pleasing to the vinedresser (unlike ancient Israel) through branches that draw their life from Him (15:1–5)

These and other themes (e.g., Jesus' body as the temple that will be destroyed and subsequently raised up, 2:19–22) reinforce the gospel's message that in Jesus' person and saving work, the means of grace (sanctuary, feasts, etc.) that God gave to ancient Israel through Moses have found their fulfillment in the person of Christ.

HISTORY OF INTERPRETATION

As noted above ("Genre"), even in the patristic period the church fathers recognized John's distinctive perspective, which differs from the angle of vision shared by Matthew, Mark, and Luke, witnesses who "see together" (synoptic). The suggestion of Clement of Alexandria that John knew the Synoptic Gospels and intended to provide an account that emphasized the spiritual significance of Jesus' ministry seems to be an apt observation of the distinctiveness of the fourth gospel. Over the centuries, students of God's Word have observed both John's emphasis on symbolism and the concentration on Jesus' instruction to His disciples (more than His ministry to the crowds).

The rise of historical criticism associated with the Enlightenment led to a tendency to devalue this gospel as

a historical witness, to date it well beyond the apostles' lifetimes (even late second century), and to attribute its high Christology to a lengthy process of theological development in which Gentile influences (such as Gnosticism) were more formative than the words and deeds of the historical Jesus. As noted above ("Date and Occasion") late dating became less plausible after the 1934 discovery of the Rylands papyrus (P52), which contains a portion of John and is dated around A.D. 125—one of the oldest extant New Testament manuscripts. Further research into first-century literature, including the Dead Sea Scrolls discovered at Qumran, have weakened arguments that the gospel's conceptual world is more influenced by Hellenistic/Gnostic backgrounds than by the Old Testament and Judaism. Moreover, claims that John's "high" Christology, which attributes deity to Jesus, could only have developed over a long period in which the historical (human) Jesus had receded in memory is contradicted by expressions of "high" Christology not only in the Synoptic Gospels (e.g., Matt. 11:27; Mark 2:5–10; 4:35–40) but also in the Pauline epistles, composed (as all scholars agree) within decades of Jesus' life (Rom. 9:5; Col. 1:15–20; Phil. 2:5–11; etc.).

Among the issues about which interpretive difficulty remains are:

1. The textual status of the account of the woman taken in adultery (7:53–8:11). As the ESV rightly indicates, this section is absent from the earliest, most reliable manuscripts of John's gospel. The account appears here in some later copies, but in other manuscripts it appears elsewhere in John's gospel and even in Luke. Its portrait of Jesus' relationship both with a sinner and with her self-righteous judges is consistent with the Savior's character revealed elsewhere in the Gospels. But the status of this section in terms of textual attestation is doubtful. If the oldest manuscripts are correct in seeing seamless continuity between 7:52 and what we now (following the King James Version) call 8:12, Jesus self-identification as "the light of the world" (8:12) occurred on the last day of the Feast of Tabernacles (7:37), when Israel commemorated both the provision of water from the rock (7:37–39) and the light from God's cloud of glory that led them in the wilderness.
2. Issues of harmonization between John and the Synoptics persist. Although plausible explanations have been proposed, none has won universal concurrence among evangelical scholars. Two such issues are Jesus' cleansing (or cleansings) of the temple and the question of whether the Last Supper was a Passover meal.
   a. Matthew, Mark, and Luke all date Jesus' vigorous, violent purging God's house from money-changers and those who were selling animals during the week leading up to Jesus' arrest and crucifixion. John, on the other hand, associates his account of the cleansing with a Passover not long after Jesus' first sign, the transformation of water to wine at Cana (2:12–22). It is conceivable that Jesus found it necessary to purify the temple precincts both at the beginning of His ministry and several years later, at the end. Such business not only profited the chief priests who ruled the temple but was also justified as a service to pilgrims who had come from a distance. So it would not be surprising if the merchants resumed business, with official priestly endorsement, not long after the Galilean prophet Jesus disrupted their trade. Moreover, the difference in observers' responses seems to confirm that these incidents, though formally similar, occurred at different points in Jesus' ministry. John records little negative reaction to Jesus' actions (2:23–25), whereas in the Synoptics the temple cleansing strengthens the resolve of Jesus' opponents to destroy Him

(Mark. 11:15–18; Luke 19:45–48). However, it is possible that John describes the same event but is moved to place it at the beginning of his gospel by thematic concerns, bringing the motif of the temple's replacement by Jesus' body (2:21) into connection with the sign in which water stored in jugs for Jewish cleansing rituals (2:6) is transformed into the wine of the new covenant.

b. The Synoptic Gospels state clearly that the meal at which Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper, after which He was betrayed and arrested, was a Passover celebration (Matt. 26:17–19; Mark 14:12–16; Luke 22:7–15). The fourth gospel, on the other hand, seems to indicate that Jesus was crucified on the day leading up to the evening on which the Jewish leaders and people were to eat "the Passover" (18:28; 19:14). A possible or plausible reading of 13:1 is that the last supper that Jesus shared with His disciples was "before the Passover," and "the feast" for which some thought Judas was buying supplies that evening (13:29) is understood as the Passover meal to be eaten (so the disciples may have thought) the following evening. Thus, some scholars believe that John modified the chronology to show that Jesus, the Lamb of God, died the same afternoon that lambs were being slain in the temple for the Passover observance after sundown. Scholars who have not been satisfied with a solution that finds either John or the Synoptics to be in error have proposed various harmonizations. Some have cited evidence that certain subgroups in first-century Judaism dated the Passover differently from the lunar calendar followed by the temple's officials. Another explanation suggests that John implicitly agrees with the Synoptics: Jesus washed His disciples' feet immediately before their Passover meal together (13:1); and John's later references to "the feast" and "the Passover" refer to the observances of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, which began with the seder meal and continued for the next seven days. (Luke 22:1 indicates that the names were used interchangeably.) Thus the "day of Preparation" (19:14, 31, 42; Mark 15:42 par.) preceded the weekly Sabbath, which was invested with special importance since it fell during the weeklong Feast of Unleavened Bread.

The differences between the fourth gospel and the Synoptics are not irreconcilable, but study is required to harmonize them. Their positive contribution, however, is that they demonstrate that "the disciple whom Jesus loved" has indeed borne his own eyewitness testimony to the acts and person of Jesus, not slavishly dependent on the records provided by Matthew, Mark, and Luke, but rather showing Jesus the Christ from a distinct complementary perspective.