John



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Baker Academic
a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

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Published by Baker Academic
a division of Baker Publishing Group
P.O. Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516–6287
www.bakeracademic.com

Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Brant, Jo-Ann A., 1956–
John / Jo-Ann A. Brant.
p. cm. — (Paideia: commentaries on the New Testament)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978-0-8010-3454-1 (pbk.)
1. Bible. N.T. John—Commentaries. I. Title.
BS2615.53.B73 2011
226.5′07—dc22 2011012330

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11 12 13 14 15 16 17 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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Foreword



Paideia: Commentaries on the New Testament is a series that sets out to comment on the final form of the New Testament text in a way that pays due attention both to the cultural, literary, and theological settings in which the text took form and to the interests of the contemporary readers to whom the commentaries are addressed. This series is aimed squarely at students—including MA students in religious and theological studies programs, seminarians, and upper-division undergraduates—who have theological interests in the biblical text. Thus, the didactic aim of the series is to enable students to understand each book of the New Testament as a literary whole rooted in a particular ancient setting and related to its context within the New Testament.

The name "Paideia" (Greek for "education") reflects (1) the instructional aim of the series—giving contemporary students a basic grounding in academic New Testament studies by guiding their engagement with New Testament texts; (2) the fact that the New Testament texts as literary unities are shaped by the educational categories and ideas (rhetorical, narratological, etc.) of their ancient writers and readers; and (3) the pedagogical aims of the texts themselves—their central aim being not simply to impart information but to form the theological convictions and moral habits of their readers.

Each commentary deals with the text in terms of larger rhetorical units; these are not verse-by-verse commentaries. This series thus stands within the stream of recent commentaries that attend to the final form of the text. Such reader-centered literary approaches are inherently more accessible to liberal arts students without extensive linguistic and historical-critical preparation than older exegetical approaches, but within the reader-centered world the sanest practitioners have paid careful attention to the extratext of the original readers, including not only these readers' knowledge of the geography, history, and other contextual elements reflected in the text but also their ability to respond

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correctly to the literary and rhetorical conventions used in the text. Paideia commentaries pay deliberate attention to this extratextual repertoire in order to highlight the ways in which the text is designed to persuade and move its readers. Each rhetorical unit is explored from three angles: (1) introductory matters; (2) tracing the train of thought or narrative or rhetorical flow of the argument; and (3) theological issues raised by the text that are of interest to the contemporary Christian. Thus, the primary focus remains on the text and not its historical context or its interpretation in the secondary literature.

Our authors represent a variety of confessional points of view: Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox. What they share, beyond being New Testament scholars of national and international repute, is a commitment to reading the biblical text as theological documents within their ancient contexts. Working within the broad parameters described here, each author brings his or her own considerable exegetical talents and deep theological commitments to the task of laying bare the interpretation of Scripture for the faith and practice of God's people everywhere.

Mikeal C. Parsons
Charles H. Talbert

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Preface



When my students complain that the problem with the Bible is that no one can agree on its meaning, I counter with the suggestion that when people cease to discuss and debate its meaning, Scripture will have become a dead rather than a living tradition. Commentary is a vital part of a religious tradition that brings those who live in the present into dialogue with the community that received the text and the communities that have handed down the text to us. While some older commentaries are so insightful that they continue to deserve a place in a seminary reference room or on the open stacks, none provides the final word. Archaeological discoveries, observations about both the nature of human societies and the physical world, new methodologies, and, though sometimes regrettably, prevailing ideologies—these call for continuous reengagement and fresh commentary. This commentary belongs to the Paideia series and makes its contribution by intentionally instructing its reader about such things as ancient argumentation and narrative conventions in order to prepare the next generation of readers to enter into the commentary tradition.

A file in my office marked "graduate papers" contains a paper dated March 1985 on Jesus's "cleansing" of the temple, in which one can find my first attempt to comment on the Gospel of John. I wrote, "John's depiction of the event reads like the script of a play by blocking out a character's movements." At the time, my interest in the Gospel of John was limited to the requirements of my doctoral comprehensive exams. I went on to write a dissertation on "oaths and vows: how to make them, how to break them" in Second Temple Judaism, but when I began to teach the New Testament, I found that John was the Gospel I most enjoyed pondering with my students and that my interest in its dramatic structures grew stronger with each reading. Twenty years later, a complete monograph on John's use of theatrical conventions finally appeared (Brant 2004). My interest in ancient drama continues to inform my

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work, but this commentary allows my broad interest in how language does things to come into play.

While this commentary is the product of many hours of solitary labor, a wide circle of people made it possible for me to devote my time to this work. I wish first of all to thank James Ernest, editor of the Paideia series, who proposed that my name be added to the list of contributors to the series and provided significant suggestions about the content of the manuscript. I thank R. Alan Culpepper for giving his vote of confidence and the general editors Mikeal C. Parsons and Charles H. Talbert for extending the invitation to write the John volume. I am grateful to Wells Turner, senior editor, and to Rachel Klompmaker, editorial assistant, for bringing the project to completion. I owe many thanks to Dave Garber, who served as copyeditor and spared me much embarrassment by catching many errors.

I am indebted to the support provided to me by all my colleagues at Goshen College. A few must be named for particular reasons. President James Brenneman believed that this was an important project that I should accept. Dean Anita Stalter approved of my sabbatical to complete it. Professor Paul Keim never failed to show interest when I answered his question, "What are you working on now?" Librarian Laura Hostetler kept me continuously supplied with books and articles from other libraries. Nine brave students—Saron Ayele, Michael Dicken, Dusty Diller, Ashley Ervin, Dara Joy Jaworowicz, Kaleem Kheshgi, Dirk Miller, Breanna Nickel, and Matthew Plummer—participated in a seminar course on the Gospel of John and provided valuable feedback on the first draft of the commentary. I am especially grateful to Dara Joy Jaworowicz, who served as my assistant for several years and whose growing passion for biblical studies reinvigorates my own. I thank my circle of friends in the Ancient Fiction and Early Christian and Jewish Narrative section of the Society of Biblical Literature for keeping my work grounded in a broad context. Above all, I am thankful for my husband, Joe Springer, who always anticipates my needs and has added organization and delight to my life.

Commentary on ancient texts requires translation or working from translations. Translations of Greek and Latin texts are my own unless stated otherwise. Quotations from the Hebrew Bible are from the NRSV. My translation of the Gospel of John is not intended for liturgical use. It follows the syntax and replicates the grammar of the Greek as closely as possible. As a result the English translation is not always grammatically sound and frequently less elegant than the original Greek. Occasionally the choice of English words seeks first to reproduce Johannine figurative language rather than provide the best literal translation. John, like other ancient classical Greek authors, uses the subjunctive mood much more than modern English authors. Most contemporary translations use indicative rather than subjunctive verbs whenever possible. I have translated the subjunctive with either an infinitive or subjunctive verb form in order to preserve the mood appropriate to the context. John

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switches back and forth in his use of past tenses and the historical present, and some translations mute this by consistently using the past tense. With the exception of the verb *oida* (the perfect form of *eidomai*, "I see," that has the present sense of "I know"), this translation preserves the tense of the Greek verbs, especially the historical present. John seems to use the historical present as part of a rhetorical strategy to create a sense that narrated past action is unfolding before one's eyes. John uses *oun* instead of *de* or *kai* at the beginning of sentences with unusual frequency. Conjunctions normally appear at the beginning of sentences in ancient Greek expository discourse (speeches/dialogues embedded in the narrative). Because we do not use conjunctions at the beginning of sentences in English, it is difficult to draw attention to John's asyndeton (the absence of an explicit conjunction) in translation. Therefore I comment when seemingly significant cases of asyndeton occur or insert a word, such as "immediately," in square brackets to signal the effect of the asyndeton.

Translation and written composition is a process of selection and reduction. Alternate wording, digressions, additional illustrations, and supporting quotations now sit in files labeled deleted material. I hope that what is left, this commentary, does justice to the care with which the author we know as John selected the content of his Gospel.

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Introduction

Beginning in the late Middle Ages, the lecterns in European cathedrals from which Scripture was read often took the form of an eagle, the symbol for John the Evangelist, with the result that the Latin word for eagle, *aquila*, became a synonym for lectern. The eagle's widespread wings provided a desk upon which to rest a cumbersome medieval Bible. While the symbol for the Fourth Evangelist may have been more suited to this function than Mark's lion or Luke's ox, Matthew's angel might have worked equally well. Art historians and congregations that continue to install eagle lecterns look to the association of the image with the Gospel of John and not just the shape of the symbol to account for its popularity. How appropriate to read "the Word of God" from a symbol for the evangelist whose soaring rhetoric proclaims, "In the beginning was the Word."



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Figure 1. The eagle lectern from the fourteenth-century Buckland Church of St. Andrew.

The Gospel of John is fraught with familiar symbolism and imagery, and readers often treat it as a compendium of sayings from which one can lift out a passage or image here or there for spiritual or artistic inspiration. In contrast, reading the Gospel of John as a single literary work can be a disorienting experience. The Gospel introduces Jesus with

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Aporia

Johannine scholars borrow the Greek rhetorical term *aporia* (difficulty, or puzzle) to indicate places where the text seems to contradict itself or its structure unravels (see, e.g., the abrupt jump in location from Jerusalem to the Galilee in John 6:1). In rhetoric, an *aporia* occurs when a speaker argues both sides of an issue. Perhaps the most famous instance of an *aporia* in a literary work is Hamlet's soliloquy, "To be or not to be: that is the question."

an ambiguous signifier, the *Logos*, and then proceeds through a select number of episodes that, for a modern audience, provoke one persistent question: why is this Gospel so different from the Synoptic Gospels? Lines that Christians commonly cite as foundational to their faith, such as "I am the way, and the truth, and the life" (14:6), begin to perplex when read within their narrative setting, in which Jesus antagonizes rather than inspires his audience. This commentary brings into view subtleties and complexities in the text, as well as the coherence that may evade modern readers, by identifying the rhetorical and narrative strategies and key theological themes that make the Gospel a unified work.

To prepare for a sustained reading of the Gospel, this introduction addresses some of the traditional questions of authorship and provenance, but the principal focus is on introducing features of the Gospel's rhetoric and narrative structure that facilitate a synchronic versus a diachronic reading. A diachronic reading is concerned with identifying stages in the development of the text: the appropriation of literary sources by its author and revision by various editors. A synchronic reading focuses on the extant text (a text based on careful discernment of the best manuscript traditions by an international and ecumenical committee of lower critics). While many aporias in the Gospel of John can be explained away by presupposing multiple editors with different priorities, the synchronic approach demonstrates that the Gospel's interlocking and sustained themes and rhetorical strategies render it a unified literary work and that, in many cases, aporias may either serve a literary purpose or simply be a feature of human thought.

Date, Authorship, and Provenance

The earliest extant NT fragment, $\mathfrak{P}^{52}$ (Rylands Library Papyrus 457), contains John 18:31–33 and 37–38 and is dated to ca. AD 130. Hippolytus of Rome (ca. 170–236) quotes an Alexandrian gnostic named Basilides, who quoted John 1:9 around AD 130 (*Haer.* 7.10). Justin Martyr, writing in about AD 155, knew the dialogue with Nicodemus in John 3:1–5 (*1 Apol.* 61). Together these references indicate that the latest possible date for the composition was in the early first half of the second century. The apparent lack of acknowledgment of the Synoptic Gospels or explicit reference to the destruction of

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the temple in the Gospel provides support for an argument for composition before AD 70. The emphasis on exclusion from the synagogue rather than the temple (9:22; 12:42; 16:2), however, suggests to most scholars a date after the destruction of the temple, in a period when Christians and Jews began to define themselves in mutually exclusive terms. Many contend that a lengthy time period is required for the development of the Gospel's Christology. Some suggest that, by the time the Gospel is written, sufficient time has passed for the rise of a Johannine sectarian community that intentionally disregarded the synoptic material. Both the criteria of developed Christology and sectarian status are contestable, and many scholars are now pushing the date for the development of both Christian and Jewish orthodoxies into the third or even fourth century. Nevertheless, a date a decade or so after AD 70 seems to be warranted. Though the Gospel does not refer to the destruction of the temple, the question of how to worship without a temple seems to inform the dialogues and action of the Gospel.

In this commentary, the name "John" is used to refer to the author of the Fourth Gospel. This habit reflects the historical attribution of the Gospel to the disciple John and is not an assertion of the validity of the attribution. The Gospel itself names "the disciple whom Jesus loved," popularly known as the Beloved Disciple, as its authority. The earliest attestation that John the son of Zebedee is the author of the Fourth Gospel comes from Irenaeus († ca. AD 180; *Haer.* 3.1.1; quoted in Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 5.8.4), who recalls hearing the elderly Polycarp († ca. AD 155) say that he had it directly from John. Irenaeus is not consistent; he also attributes his source to Papias († ca. AD 163). Moreover, Eusebius questions whether this might be a reference to John the Elder, the author of 2 and 3 John. What is significant about these early attributions is that by the second century, tying the author to a known and authoritative first-person witness had become important. Modern arguments about authorship have been less concerned with lining the author up with one of the twelve disciples and more interested in broadening the scope of discipleship and leadership in the early church by including as candidates for authorship Mary Magdalene (de Boer 1996), Lazarus (Waetjen 2005, 18), Thomas Didymus (Charlesworth 1995), and Nathanael (Catchpole 1998). While these possibilities are intriguing, evidence is thin and has not persuaded many scholars to adopt any particular identifiable individual. Many find themselves returning again to the hypothesis that either John the son of Zebedee, perhaps in collaboration with John the Elder, is the authoritative witness who informs the Gospel (Hengel 1993). What is noteworthy is how identification of authorship is tied to trends within the church: first to centralize authority, and then to decentralize it.

Several scholars have argued that the Beloved Disciple is an idealized figure (e.g., Loisy 1903) or that the phrase "the disciple whom Jesus loved" is a circumscription for a number of witnesses (e.g., Casey 1996, 160–64). Jesus

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loved all his disciples and friends. There is, nevertheless, sufficient evidence pointing to an individual who had a significant teaching career and died, perhaps unexpectedly (see 21:20–24), to treat the Beloved Disciple as a particular disciple, but within the Gospel he does fulfill a special role. His identity is carefully veiled, suggesting that he serves an important literary or exemplary function that stands apart from any authority that one might ascribe to him by virtue of his role as a leader or performer of heroic acts. Unlike Simon Peter, he has access to privileged conversations with the high priest, and he does not blurt out what he thinks, sparing him the scrutiny subjected to the confessions of other characters or the test of loyalty that Simon Peter at first fails. In the narrative, what he knows, he keeps to himself (20:8). He stands in a dialectical relationship with Simon Peter. The two are frequently paired (1:35, 40; 13:23–24). Simon Peter is the traditional martyr who witnesses to his faith through his obedient death, whereas the Beloved Disciple witnesses by watching attentively, recognizing or making sense of what he sees in light of Jesus's teaching or actions and Hebrew Scripture, and then eventually sharing it with others. While he may be more astute than Peter, he is not represented as prescient (13:28); he like others is enlightened by Jesus's resurrection. Moreover, he plays no significant role in the action. He is like many other anonymous witnesses who have faithfully handed on what they have seen and heard in order to sustain a tradition of belief and practice.

In the final verses of the Gospel, the narrator states with reference to the Beloved Disciple, "This is the disciple, the witness concerning these things, and the one who has caused these things to be written" (21:24). While the narrator tells us that the Beloved Disciple is the authority for the truth of what has been written, the action is not focalized through the eyes of the disciple. The narrator recounts scenes at which no disciple is present. Moreover, the narrator refers to the Beloved Disciple in the third person, and 21:23 seems to imply that he has died. In antiquity, authors often referred to themselves in the third person. Thucydides begins his history with these words: "Thucydides, an Athenian, composed the history of the war between the Peloponnesians and the Athenians" (*Hist*. 1.1.1). In this case, however, the use of the third person points to a complicated process of publication.

To speak of the author of the Gospel requires clarification. The Beloved Disciple seems to stand in the position of a teacher from whom the composer or author learned the story. The word "author" connotes the source for the words on the page but not necessarily the person who wrote the words. In antiquity, one did not have to be literate to be the author of a piece of writing, especially a letter. Composers of letters and literature often dictated to a secretary who may have had strong literary skills and who might have, therefore, been free to finesse the grammar and vocabulary of a composition. In his study of Greco-Roman letter writing, E. Randolph Richards (2004, 64) finds that a secretary's role fell somewhere between transcriber, contributor, and

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Gnosticism

Gnosticism refers to various movements (Jewish, Christian, and pagan) in antiquity claiming that a malevolent demiurge created the material world to entrap divine sparks (souls) in mortal flesh. Esoteric knowledge (*gnōsis*) of the soul's true nature then liberated humans from the material world. Some early twentieth-century scholars in the history-of-religions school reconstructed a gnostic redeemer myth about a heavenly being who comes to earth to control demonic forces and impart wisdom. They treated this myth as foundational to the Gospel's Christology, but manuscript evidence suggests that the redeemer myth developed *after* the canonical Gospels were composed. Debates continue within the academy regarding the date of gnostic thought and whether gnostic Christian movements should be treated as heretical and marginal or alternate and significant expressions of early Christianity.

composer. In personal letters to his secretary Tiro, Cicero thanks him for his invaluable service in Cicero's "studies and literary work" (*in studiis, in litteris nostris*; *Fam*. 16.4.3; see also 16.11.1) and on one occasion describes how Tiro "loved to be the standard [*kanōn*]" of his writings (16.17.1). Cicero's use of the Greek word *kanōn* suggests that he is using the terms of their old intimacy.

The author composed for a lector (reader); therefore, first-person singular pronouns could refer to either the author or the reader in the capacity of narrator, and first-person plural pronouns, to the reader and audience (see 1:14; 21:24–25). John's narrator is not a character within the world of the narrative comparable to the narrator of *Moby Dick*, who invites his readers in the first line to "Call me Ishmael." John's first-person narrator belongs to the world of the audience.

Most modern theories of narration presuppose an individual silent reader, but any discussion of authorship and narration of John must take into account the performance art of ancient reading. John wrote for an oral reading. This commentary, therefore, refers to the narrator as the reader, the one who takes on the role of narrator by reading the words supplied by the author. A distinction is maintained between "the reader," who narrates, and "the audience" of the Gospel, which listens to the Gospel being read or recited. In the modern context, these two entities collapse into the solitary silent reader, who is free to linger over passages or flip pages back and forth to clarify meaning. In antiquity, reading moved forward through a text at a pace designed for an audience to follow.

Arguments to locate the place of composition for the Gospel tend to be tied to arguments regarding its intended audience and, hence, its purpose or the thought world to which it belongs. In his critique of heresies, Irenaeus claims

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that John resided and wrote the Gospel in Ephesus (*Haer.* 3.1.1) and asserts that John wrote to discredit a local gnostic heresy, against which Irenaeus now contends (3.11.1). Many scholars think that Irenaeus has inverted the relationship. Early Christian gnostics seem to have known John rather than John knowing or addressing Gnosticism (e.g., *Trimorphic Protennoia*).

Given that the earliest manuscripts and references to the Gospel come from Egypt, it is plausible that this is where it was written. However, manuscripts were better preserved in the dry Egyptian climate, so the argument for Egypt cannot rest on the manuscript evidence alone. Scholars who favor an Egyptian provenance do so because John seems to draw from a Hellenistic milieu similar to that of Philo of Alexandria (20 BC–AD 50). John's familiarity and references to Judea and the Galilee suggest to others that he wrote from and for an audience in that area. For many years, scholars argued back and forth, situating John within either a Jewish milieu or a Hellenistic milieu, but of late, scholars have recognized that their picture of Judaism has relied too heavily on imposing later forms, those of the sixth-century Babylonian rabbis, on first-century Judaism in order to draw distinctions. An observant Jew could obtain a Hellenistic education in Judea and even in the Galilee. The question of where John wrote has given way in recent years to inquiries about the education necessary to facilitate the composition of the Gospel.

References to reading in Jewish literature during the Roman period (1QS 6.6–8; 8.11–12; Josephus *Ag. Ap.* 2.204) suggest to some a high degree of literacy among Jews throughout the Mediterranean world, but recent studies argue that the documentary evidence represents only elite groups and that a literacy rate of about 10 percent, comparable to other populations, would have been normative (see Hezser 2001, 496–504). Consequently, it may not be logical to assume that the Jews had an education system alternate and parallel to the Greco-Roman rhetorical schools. Jews would have learned to recite Scripture from memory in the synagogues, but there is no evidence for formal rabbinical schools until the third century. Scribes were most likely educated in an apprentice system or within the context of family enterprises rather than in a scribal school. John's description of Jesus's education by the side of the Father suggests an apprenticeship (John 5:19–23). Similarity in exegesis in the writings of Philo of Alexandria and *Genesis Rabbah* suggests to Peder Borgen that John attended a synagogal school with a curriculum of exegetical questions and answers found in such schools (2003, 126–29), but this curriculum may have been more like catechesis than biblical studies. Like most NT authors, John demonstrates a familiarity with a narrow strip of Hebrew Scripture and not necessarily an expansive knowledge of the Torah, Prophets, and Writings. He does, nevertheless, represent Jesus as capable of the use of sophisticated exegetical techniques.

The Gospel's limited Greek vocabulary and grammar suggests someone working in a second language. Perhaps the most telltale sign of the author's

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Greco-Roman Education

Formal education beyond instruction at home in religion, family, and civic traditions began at a preparatory school for sons of citizens that taught grammar, geometry, astronomy, literature, physical competition, and theoretical music, with rhetoric and dialectic as the crowning accomplishments. Imitation of pieces of classical writing was central to even the earliest stages of this education. Students learned to read and write by using exercises (*progymnasmata*) contained in handbooks that delineated the various styles and forms of rhetoric and contained well-known examples from classical literature for students to imitate (see Quintilian, *Inst.* 1.10–11). The most advanced students proceeded to a curriculum of *gymnasmata*, practice of oral declamations on a particular theme—a legal argument or a political or social concept—utilizing all the skills gained through imitation of the masters.

limited Greek is the nonuse of the optative mood with the exception of John 13:24. In contrast, Luke uses the optative twenty-eight times and Paul thirty-one times. By the Greco-Roman era, the optative mood had disappeared from letters and other forms of writing that did not deliberately seek to imitate Attic Greek. John's syntax does not demonstrate the linguistic refinement of the author of Hebrews (see J. Thompson 2008, 6) or the sophistication of the author of the Gospel of Luke, who was able to compose elegant periodic sentences (e.g., 1:1–4), but these limitations should not be confused with a diminished capacity to use language effectively and artfully. John either had some formal training or was a gifted student of public recitals of rhetorical, narrative, and dramatic works because he displays many of the rhetorical strategies and narrative conventions that were taught in the *progymnasmata* of Greco-Roman schools. Moreover, John demonstrates familiarity with many of the topics that are the focus of discussion by rhetoricians and philosophers: *parrhēsia* (frank speech), friendship, slavery and freedom, consolation, happiness, and *virtus* (manly virtue).

Relationship to the Synoptic Gospels

C. K. Barrett (1955, 43) notes ten incidents in the Gospel (including the work and witness of the Baptist, departure to Galilee, the feeding of the multitude, walking on the water, Peter's confession, departure to Jerusalem, entry into the city and anointing, betrayal and denial predictions, arrest, and passion and resurrection) that follow the same order as Mark and that, therefore, suggest some literary dependence. Nevertheless, large parts of John's narrative, his characters, and Jesus's proclamation are very different from what we find in

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the synoptic tradition. Clement of Alexandria († ca. AD 215) is the first on record to comment on these differences: he states that the first three Gospels recorded "bodily facts," whereas John wrote a "spiritual" Gospel (cited by Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 6.14.7).

Until the mid-twentieth century, the view that John knew one or more of the Synoptic Gospels prevailed, but during the latter half of the twentieth century, scholars began to account for differences by arguing that the Gospel of John represents a strain of the Christian tradition that broke away from the synoptic tradition early in the oral stage and then gave rise to different literary sources (e.g., a *sēmeia*, or signs, source and an *Offenbarungsreden*, or revelatory discourse source) on which the Gospel is based.

The language of the Gospel of John is often polemical, emphatic, and fraught with metaphor. Observations about the tone of this language combined with reconstructions of a multiple-stage composition history have given rise to a theory that the Gospel was written for a sectarian community that shared an "antilanguage," which set them apart from Jews in the synagogue as well as Christians who made use of the Synoptic Gospels (see Malina and Rohrbaugh 1998). "Antilanguage" is a term coined by linguist M. A. K. Halliday (1975) to refer to the imposition of specialized meaning on common words in order to exclude outsiders from understanding a group's discourse. The sect-versus-church typology is a sociological concept first developed by sociologist Max Weber (1864–1920). Church stands at one end of a continuum and signifies a religious organization that has influence on society or sees itself as making a claim on all members of its society. A church is allied with secular powers, hierarchical and bureaucratic, with a professional leadership. Sects are breakaway groups that stand in tension with society and define themselves over against the organization from which they have separated themselves and the society in which they reside. Given that the primitive church itself seems more like a sect of Judaism than what Weber calls church, and given that we have no empirical evidence for the existence of a Johannine community, this commentary takes note of where in the Gospel the sectarian hypothesis finds its support but does not argue for a sectarian reading.

The hypothesis that John knew one or more of the Synoptic Gospels remains viable. The significant distinction between the Gospel of John and those of Matthew, Mark, and Luke may lie in their use of rhetoric and narrative rather than different sources or sectarian tension. The authors of the Synoptic Gospels construct *chreia*, brief or pithy anecdotes that report either a saying or an edifying action. John constructs one sustained narrative, with episodes into which he embeds dialogues that are not chiefly the housing for Jesus's sayings. Dialogues and debates are the action of the Gospel. The form of the Synoptic Gospels is suited to paraenesis, practical ethical teachings informed by Jesus's proclamation of the reign of heaven. The form of the Gospel of John is suited to Jesus's proclamations about his identity as the Son of God.

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The Rhetoric of the Gospel

The agonistic dialogues set John apart from the Synoptic Gospels. The purpose of these exchanges has preoccupied Johannine scholarship for several generations, beginning with the contribution of J. Louis Martyn (1968; 1979). Martyn posited that the Gospel was written in response to a major event in the life of the Johannine community. He identified that event as the addition of the "Benediction against Heretics" (*Birkat ha-Mînîm*) in the synagogue liturgy by the rabbis who met at the council of Yavneh (ca. AD 80), following the destruction of the temple. As a result of this addition, according to Martyn, Christians were effectively expelled from the synagogues. Martyn identified "a two-level" drama within the Gospel, in which the story of the church's conflict with the synagogue authorities becomes inscribed on Jesus's conflicts with the Jerusalem authorities. Because this theory explained both the anxiety of reprisals for making a confession regarding Jesus's divine status and the polemic against Judaism that seems to pervade the Gospel, it was quickly adopted as a near consensus by Johannine scholarship. That consensus soon began to unravel: scholars began to recognize that the decisions attributed to Yavneh occurred over many years, and that orthodox Judaism is a product of retrospection prompted in part by the rise of orthodox Christianity. Nevertheless, the puzzle put forward by Martyn (1979, 16) of why "the Johannine Jesus, himself a Jew, [would] engage in such an intensely hostile exchange with 'the Jews'" continues to invite proposals.

Largely under the influence of classical scholars such as George A. Kennedy (1984), more recent discussions have begun to situate the Gospel within the context of Greco-Roman rhetoric, the principal concern of which was to persuade. For example, Andrew Lincoln (2000) treats John's Gospel as a piece of forensic narrative that seeks to exonerate Jesus and condemn his accusers. Lincoln contends that the author structures the narrative by using a lawsuit motif, in which Jesus is put on trial by the Jews as a counterplot to the main plot, in which the world (with the Jews as its representative) stands accused. Lincoln's hypothesis does not give weight to the statement of purpose in John 20:31: "These are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name." The action of believing (*pisteuō*) can suggest a deliberative act of weighing out evidence; therefore, some readers treat the rhetorical focus of the Gospel as an invitation to listen to it as though it were a speech given in a legislature, and then hearers deliberate and come to the decision or reaffirm their decision that Jesus is the messiah (see Keener 2003, 214). This notion of belief fits with modern usage, which places emphasis on faith as volitional assent to doctrinal propositions; however, if one examines the language of belief in the Gospel, acts of belief or trust (another word with which we can translate *pisteuō*) are not about individual decisions or even certitude so much as a positive and

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Types of Rhetoric

Aristotle (384–322 BC) identifies three contexts or purposes in which persuasive speech is necessary. *Forensic*, the rhetoric of judicial courts, concerns speeches in defense or prosecution of people under trial and in judgment of a past action. *Deliberative*, the rhetoric of legislatures and politics, concerns policy-making speeches and decisions about the future. *Epideictic*, the ceremonial rhetoric of praise or blame found in victory and funeral orations, seeks to strengthen shared beliefs about present realities (*Rhet.* 1.3.1–6 [1358b]).

enthusiastic response to God's presence in the person of Jesus (see Kysar 2005, 214). The purpose of the Gospel is, therefore, not to bring its audience to faith but to stir up or express that faith. Consequently, this commentary treats the Gospel's overall rhetorical strategy as epideictic.

The action of the Gospel, Jesus's verbal duels, and the representation of his death all place the Gospel in the tradition of commemoration. The story of the loved one serves to comfort the community as it grieves the death. In the case of Jesus's death, the story not only consoles; it also subverts the humiliation of crucifixion suffered by Jesus and the shame imposed on his followers. Epideictic rhetoric, especially after a death, often takes the shape of narrative or lyric that reinforces the solidarity of its audience by encouraging them to identity with the person whose life is praised in the story and to celebrate by listening to that story. The emphasis on vivid representation of Jesus's actions and his poetic discourses mnemonically sustains the community's convictions. Within the context of epideictic rhetoric, the Gospel's language is not antilanguage; it is memorable language.

Johannine Narrative Art, Structure, and Interpretation

We tend to use the word "gospel" to refer to the genre of the first four books of the NT and forget that the authors of the NT used the word to refer to the proclamation or good news of Jesus Christ. A gospel is not a genre; it refers to the content or focus of a work, its message. The Gospel of John, as well as the three Synoptic Gospels and the apocryphal gospels, belongs to a literary milieu in which two new genres, the novel and biography, were emerging, both of which borrowed from the conventions of ancient histories, epics, and drama. Scholars, therefore, have found it helpful to treat the Gospel's composition as an example of either the early novel or the early biography.

The alignment with the novel, a category that modern readers associate with fiction, causes some consternation for readers who have thought of the Gospels as true histories, that is, faithful accounts of what Jesus actually said and the events as they happened. Whatever genre category we impose on our reading of the Gospel of John, it is helpful to recognize that ancient writers

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did not think of invention of events or details or speeches as a distortion of the truth but rather as conveying the truth. The writers of biographies and histories sought to reveal the true character of their subject or the nature of an action rather than lay down the bare facts for others to interpret. In order to achieve this, they made use of the literary and rhetorical conventions that they learned by imitating the masters of earlier genres in order to bring historic figures and past events before the mind's eye of their audience. Some dissembling of chronology and conflating of events and some invention of speeches and settings were not just tolerated but expected in order to tell the truth.

The style of the Gospel of John has been called dramatic in comparison to that of the synoptic authors. The conflict arises at the beginning of the narrative and develops steadily toward a climax so that the action is always fraught with tension. In fewer and longer episodes than are found in the Synoptic Gospels, the conflict arises out of the dialogues, and tension mounts within episodes. As in classical drama, the emphasis lies upon action that occurs through speech. Modern readers tend to focus on what language means and overlooks that language often does things. The Gospel's earliest audiences would have been much more sensitive to this distinction. This was a world in which oaths were central to the economy of the society, in which vows were made on a regular basis as part of piety, and in which social relationships were negotiated through verbal acts of supplication and blessing. John, like other pieces of Greco-Roman literature, constructs action around speech acts such as debate and supplication; therefore, this commentary introduces a number of these forms of speech in order to help modern readers follow the plot development.

John's author carefully demarcates episodes by using a number of recognizable conventions: entrances and exits or journeys and attention to time and place. As a result, it is readily apparent that he has a carefully developed structure, but this does not lead to a consensus about what that structure is. Some scholars have based their arguments about the meaning of the Gospel on a delineation of its structure. For example, the marking of time with reference to dates in the Jewish ritual calendar leads some to conclude that the Gospel reveals how Jesus replaces key elements of Jewish ritual. Rather than treating the conventions that he uses to demarcate episodes as the plot of the Gospel, the following outline looks for the dramatic structure that unfolds from beginning to end within the dialogues that are the main action of the Gospel. The plot is plaited with three major strands—prophetic narrative, tragedy, and heroic epic—each of which could be treated in isolation as the main plot, but to do so runs the risk of missing major plot elements in the narrative. Table 1 outlines the major elements in each form. Laying out the Gospel in a chart avoids reducing the plot to one story, but it can obscure elements of its structure that render the plot even more complicated. John introduces great

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variety and development into epicycles of recognition and fulfillment, as well as supplication, that run throughout the Gospel.

Table 1. Structure and Plot in John's Gospel

Structure	Prophetic	Tragic	Heroic
Prologue (1:1–18)			
From John's witness to the wedding at Cana (1:19–2:12)	Anticipation	The hero reveals his glory to his own	Arrival and acknowledgment of the champion, the Savior of the world
From the temple incident to the healing of the official's son (2:13–4:54)	Surprise		
From the first Sabbath violation to the raising of Lazarus (5:1–10:42)	Disappointment of Jewish expectations	His own do not recognize him	Challenges to the hero's honor
From the entry into Jerusalem to his entombment (12:12–19:42)	Fulfillment	*Pathos*: His own kill him	Triumph: Heroic death and consolation
From his entombment to his resurrection appearances (19:38–21:25)		*Anagnōrisis*: His own recognize him *Peripeteia*: Grief turns to joy, fear to peace, doubt to belief	

Hermeneutics and Method

When I began to study religious texts in an academic setting, I was impatient with professors who engaged their students in protracted discussions about the methods and objectives of the study itself. I complained that I wanted to study religions, not the study of religions. I hope that my reader is more patient than I was, because each act of reading, whether conscious or not, entails a hermeneutic, a notion of the goals and methods of interpretation that affects how one reads. Sometimes that hermeneutic might lead one to believe that the meaning one finds is what the author intended. If one suspects that various editors have constructed a text from various sources, then a hermeneutic may call for reconstruction of sources or close examination of editorial seams or evidence of earlier or later strata. This sort of reading requires a diachronic approach, which focuses on parts of the text and can disregard others as additions or insignificant residue from sources or earlier editions. Synchronic readings focus on the text itself rather than the process that gave rise to the text, but various hermeneutics are still possible. For example, one's hermeneutic may presuppose that the Holy Spirit directs one to an understanding

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An Example of a Diachronic Reading

In his 1941 commentary on the Gospel of John, Rudolf Bultmann laid out a diachronic reading: first he located a stratum in which the Fourth Evangelist demythologizes Jesus's apocalyptic eschatology and replaces it with a realized eschatology, in which eternal life is a way of living fully here and now (see 3:16–21 and 5:19–24); then a later stratum added by an "ecclesiastical redactor" reconciled the Gospel with the synoptic accounts and reintroduced future salvation and sacramental interpretations of John's symbolic language (see 5:28–29; 6:51b–58; 19:34b–35). Bultmann then made sense of some of the aporias in the Gospel by arguing that at some stage in the manuscript history, pages were displaced and then edited together in a new order. Bultmann's commentary follows what he takes to be the original order of the Gospel (e.g., 4:43–54; 6:1–59; 5:1–47; 7:15–24; 8:13–20; 7:1–14; 7:25–29; 8:48–50; 8:54–55; 7:30; 7:37–44; 7:31–36; 7:45–52). Besides attributing large sections of the Gospel to a signs source, a sayings source, and a passion source, he also identified a Jewish gnostic source to which he attributed the prologue. Bultmann also treated many expressions and phrases as glosses (brief notes provided by a transcriber or commentator that are later treated as part of the original text), some because they are not found in all early manuscripts (e.g., "except the feet"; 13:10) and others because they seemed to him to disrupt the continuity of a thought (e.g., "You do not have a bucket for drawing water and the well is deep"; 4:11).

intended by God, or one's hermeneutic might call one to read with suspicion that the text encodes a deep-seated bias against women.

Western thought has become suspicious about efforts to recover the intent of the author, seeing it as a romantic but unattainable goal presupposing that we can find encoded in the text some fixed intent and meaning found originally in the private realm of an individual's consciousness (see Wimsatt and Beardsley 1946; Barthes 1977). To avoid the problem of reading for an ultimately inaccessible object, structuralists focus on the words and patterns in the text and seek some stable meaning that could be intentionally or unconsciously encoded in the text by the author. John's complicated narrative structures have provided rich material for this approach. At the farthest extreme lies the hermeneutics of poststructuralists such as Jacques Derrida, who argued that every attempt to find meaning excludes possibilities in the language of a text that permit other meanings—and forms different patterns, sometimes at direct odds with the meaning that a reader finds or even that the author intended. I began writing this commentary with a hermeneutic informed by the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900–2002) and with the presupposition that writing is a substitute for speech: it intends an audience; therefore, reading is an act of communication, and interpretation is a dialogue between the reader or audience and the author.

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In his major work *Wahrheit und Methode* (1960; ET: *Truth and Method* [1975]), Gadamer explains that each of us approaches a text with "fore-structures" or "anticipatory" structures that allow us to come to a preliminary understanding of what we read. This may mean that we impose ideas onto the text in order to find coherence because we are presupposed to find something understandable. This predilection to find meaning has a practical dimension insofar as our interpretations tend toward present concerns and interests. Gadamer asserts that understanding can occur only when one avoids reading a text to justify one's own preconceptions (prejudices), guarding against this by being self-conscious about what those prejudices are. Gadamer articulates a dialogic hermeneutic. Since our view is determined from our historical location, we have what Gadamer calls a horizon (*Horizont*) of understanding and interpretation, but we are not restricted by this horizon. We can bring our presuppositions into question precisely because we are aware that we read a text as a part of a tradition and because we acknowledge its authority, something written by another. In some cases, we read it as authoritative if we read as a member of a faith tradition. As a result, understanding is something that we negotiate with our dialogue partner, the author of the text, in order to come to a common framework that takes both our interests and the author's priorities into account, a process that Gadamer calls the "fusion of horizons" (*Horizontverschmelzung*). The process of interpretation is ongoing. The more that we can weigh out and integrate ideas that are native to the society in which the text arose that are strange or even anomalous to us, the more we can enter into dialogue with it. Consequently, we never arrive at a final or complete interpretation because we are not seeking direct access to the subjective meaning of the author's consciousness. Moreover, we cannot exhaust the process of learning the conceptual and linguistic horizon of the author, nor is our own situation static.

The format of this commentary is coherent with Gadamer's theory of interpretation. Each chapter begins with an introductory section that explains why what follows is treated as a literary unit. These introductions provide background material germane to the late Second Temple setting of the action, the rhetorical and literary conventions that a Jewish writer in the Greco-Roman world would have employed, and the topics of theological and philosophical concern to the ancient world that call for reexamination of our modern preconceptions about words and concepts. The center section of each chapter traces the logic or sense of the text as one proceeds in a synchronic reading. The final section engages in a discussion of some of the theological issues that arise from reading in our own context and as a result of the traditions that have sustained interest in the Gospel since its composition.

A number of features of Johannine narrative arrest the attention of a modern audience because of our historical situation. This Gospel is fraught with conflict. Conflict calls for a protagonist and at least one antagonist, and the Jews

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are Jesus's opponents in debates and the agents that move the action toward his arrest and execution. Seen from the vantage point of a post-Holocaust perspective, modern scholarship has become intensely concerned with the "anti-Judaism" of the Gospel and dualistic language that promotes a judgmental ecclesiology and soteriology. Consequently, this commentary focuses attention on the rhetorical and narrative conventions that John uses to construct not just conflict but also the characters who oppose or accept Jesus. The heated debates will be set within the conventions of classic literary dialogues. Then, in the theological issues section, the dialogue with the text will entertain the question of whether a modern reader ought to resist coming to an agreement with what one understands the text to mean. The dialogue will also entertain the possibility that some interpretations are informed more by creeds and doctrines that have developed *after* the Gospel was written than by what can be read *in* the Gospel. The purpose of the theological-issues sections is not to provide a conclusive argument for a particular interpretation but to facilitate the reader's own dialogue with the text.

This commentary is not intended to be an exhaustive compendium of all the textual variants, disagreements about translation, and meanings of words or significance of references. Students of the Gospel of John engaged in research for papers or other forms of communication with other readers and audiences would do well to procure Raymond E. Brown's Anchor Bible commentary on John (1966–70) and Craig S. Keener's more recent two-volume work *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (2003).

John's Place in the Canon

Recent use of the term "maverick" within American discourse might cause one to hesitate to use the word to describe the Gospel of John, but when Robert Kysar wrote *John, the Maverick Gospel* (1993), he did not anticipate that a presidential contender would lay claim to the title in 2008. Kysar, like John McCain and running-mate Sarah Palin, uses the word "maverick" to signify breaking free of conventions and going one's own way. Throughout the history of Christian thought, John has been a maverick Gospel in another sense. It has defied being tamed and controlled. The history of its reception is a trail of repeated efforts to tie it down.

Until the last two decades of the second century AD, the Gospel of John seems to have been neglected in Christian thought. This silence ended when Irenaeus used it to defend his Christology and soteriology against Gnosticism. Paradoxically, at the same time that the Gospel of John earned a place within the orthodox canon, it seems to have been part of the canon of various movements deemed heretical. Students of the gnostic Valentinus (ca. AD 100–160) wrote commentaries on the Prologue and cited verses from the Gospel to

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support their views (see Culpepper 2000, 114–18). As new challenges to the core doctrines of the Roman Catholic Church arose toward the end of the Middle Ages, the Gospel of John once more became orthodoxy's champion. In the words of Thomas Aquinas, John "refutes all heresies" (*Joh.* 1.10). At the same time, early reformers such as Jan Hus found in the Gospel of John affirmation that they followed God's will.

Study of the Gospel of John seems to have brought to Christianity intellectual rigor and philosophical respectability. Origen of Alexandria (ca. 185–254) praised the Gospel of John as the firstfruits of the four Gospels but conceded that only the one who laid at the breast of Jesus had the mind of Christ necessary to understand his own book (*Comm. Jo.* 1.6). Origen seemed to relish the way that the Gospel allowed him to inform his Christian convictions with neoplatonic philosophy. Medieval theologians, unconcerned about historical context or authorial intent, looked for the spiritual sense of Scripture by using allegorical, moral, and anagogical meanings, and the Gospel of John provided material well suited to their methods. As a result, Augustine of Hippo (354–430) and then Thomas Aquinas (ca. 1225–74) produced longer commentaries on John's Gospel than on the Synoptic Gospels. John the Evangelist became "John the Divine" or "John the Theologian," a status not granted the other three evangelists.

While the Gospel of John was a favorite object of study for a small literate minority, it was mediated to the laity not simply through homilies and the lectionary, but also through its translation into paint and stone. The earliest iconographic depictions of Jesus are as the Good Shepherd and the Lamb of God. Many of the illustrations in this commentary are taken from Christian decorative relief work.



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Figure 2. A fourth-century glyptograph of Christ as the Good Shepherd.

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The Gospel helped define orthodoxy, but it also sat at the center of a conflict between East and West that rent the church in two. The debate over the question of whether the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father or the Son led to a split in liturgical practice when the Roman church, at the Toledo Council of AD 589, added the *filioque* clause to the Nicene Creed, "We believe in the Holy Spirit, . . . who proceeds from the Father," so that it read "We believe in the Holy Spirit, . . . who proceeds from the Father *and the Son*." They found scriptural support for this insertion in John 14:26; 15:26; and 20:22–23. The Eastern Orthodox churches insist that the Holy Spirit comes from the Father through the Son. Contention over the *filioque* clause led, in large part, to the AD 1054 schism between the Roman Catholic and the Eastern Orthodox churches.

While scholastic theologians found confirmation of their sacramental theology in John, reformers such as Luther and Calvin shifted attention to John's pronounced use of the verb *pisteuō* (believe) and moved the practice of faith from participation in the mysteries of the church to confession of belief. In his *Preface to the New Testament* (1522), Martin Luther asserted that the Gospel of John, along with Paul's and Peter's Epistles, was "the true kernel and marrow" of the NT and the chief Gospel because it proclaimed Christ the most clearly. He directed the increasingly literate German-speaking people to begin with the Epistles and the Gospel of John and thereby set the Gospel of John at the center of the growing practice of private and silent devotional reading of Scripture.

With the rise of modern historical-critical methods, the distinction between the Gospel of John and the synoptic tradition led to neglect of its study as participants in the quest for the historical Jesus placed less confidence it its historical reliability than in material found in the Synoptic Gospels. Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729–81), the father of modern criticism, wrote that we have the Gospel of John to thank for the Christian religion (1784) but concluded that the Gospel was apocryphal, that is, not the product of an eyewitness (1777). The scholarly turn to literary, rhetorical, and social scientific criticism has brought John back into focus.

The Gospel of John has found an iconic place within the context of contemporary lay and popular culture. According to WikiAnswers™, perhaps not the most reliable source but certainly a reflection of popular perspectives, John 3:16 is the most-quoted passage in Scripture. The popularity of John 3:16 has led to a peculiar phenomenon. The phrase John 3:16, or simply the numbers 3:16, written on a sign, a lapel pin, a T-shirt, or a bumper sticker has come to signify a confession of faith.

Cultural critics describe postmodern culture as a kaleidoscope, with ever-changing fragmented images or a pastiche of imitations of images, phrases, and concepts borrowed from various cultural heritages. Glimpses of the Gospel of John appear in unexpected places. For example, in the climactic scene in the fantasy film *Inkheart* (Iain Softley, dir., New Line Cinema, 2008), a young

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girl with the power to read characters out of books and into reality furiously writes down a new ending to the book *Inkheart* and reads what she has written aloud. As a result, the monstrous shadow whom she has magically called from its pages turns upon the evil character rather than upon her mother, Toto from *The Wizard of Oz*, and the book's author. The word becomes flesh. If one watches the film after reading this introduction, what will now catch one's eye is the lectern from which the girl reads the book. Yes, it is an eagle.

Paradoxically, at the same time as Christian merchandizing reduces the message of the Gospel of John to one verse and Hollywood randomly borrows bits and pieces of Johannine themes and symbols, the methodologies used to study the Gospel facilitate reading from beginning to end. This commentary seeks to enhance the intelligibility of the Gospel for modern audiences and the gratification one finds in coming to know it as a unified work.

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