9

THE FOURTH GOSPEL

> The Gospel according to John has so different a character in comparison with the other three, and is ... the product of a developed theological reflection.[1]
>
> Jn belongs to the same literary genre, 'gospel', as the Synoptics.[2]

Within New Testament scholarship, separations can sometimes appear between those who deal with the Epistles and Revelation and those who specialize in gospel studies; furthermore, the latter may be divided into synoptic specialists and Johannine scholars. This is understandable for two reasons: first, those who read and study few ancient texts other than the four canonical gospels see an immediate difference between the first three and the Fourth Gospel which grows larger on more study: 'The gospel of John seems to have come from another tradition entirely – even from another universe of thought.'[3] Secondly, the vast and ever growing body of secondary literature makes it increasingly difficult to keep up with both aspects. Nonetheless, such a gulf is regrettable and leads even more to notions of the isolation and uniqueness of the Fourth Gospel. We have argued throughout this study that a wide-ranging and interdisciplinary approach is necessary for a proper appreciation of the place of the gospels within contemporary literature and also for a correct interpretation of their genre and message, arising from such an appreciation. So far, we have discovered that analysis of the main generic features of the synoptic gospels has revealed the same pattern and family resemblance as found in Graeco-Roman βίοι; because it has been viewed often in isolation, it is important that the Fourth Gospel is subjected to our analysis to see if it also belongs to the same genre. The inevitable consequence of such a

[1] Bornkamm, *Jesus of Nazareth*, p. 14.
[2] Kümmel, *Introduction to NT*, p. 200.
[3] J.B. Gabel and C.B. Wheeler, *The Bible as Literature* (OUP, 1986), p. 198.

wide-ranging study is that it is impossible to cover the whole field of Johannine studies and interests. As with the synoptic gospels, so here too our prime concern is with the genre of the final, written text, rather than the major interests of Johannine scholarship, such as the background and composition of the gospel, and its theological understanding of issues such as Christology or eschatology.[4]

However, our basic assumptions about the background and composition of the Fourth Gospel are as follows: the gospel belongs within the syncretistic milieu of the eastern Mediterranean towards the close of the first century AD; within such a culture, those involved with its production would have been influenced by both Jewish and Hellenistic philosophical and religious ideas – everything from Platonic thought and proto-Gnosticism to Rabbinic or 'non-conformist' Judaism – without needing actually to belong to any of these groups. The Jewish–Christian debate and the separation of church and synagogue was probably a significant factor in the background. Secondly, the production and composition of the gospel is best understood within a corporate context, often called the Johannine Community, which developed its distinctive flavour, probably in the course of several editions or versions.[5] Furthermore, the writer(s)/editor(s) had access to some primitive and early oral traditions overlapping those used by the synoptic writers, but without knowing their actual texts.[6] With this in mind, we turn to study the generic features of the text itself.

[4] For general surveys, see Kümmel, *Introduction to NT*, pp. 188–247; Robert Kysar, *The Fourth Evangelist and His Gospel: An Examination of Contemporary Scholarship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1975), abbreviated and updated as 'The Fourth Gospel: A Report on Recent Research', *ANRW* II.25.3 (1985), pp. 2389–480; Stephen Smalley, *John: Evangelist and Interpreter* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1978); J.A.T. Robinson, *The Priority of John* (London: SCM, 1985); John Ashton (ed.), *The Interpretation of John* (London: SPCK, 1986); Barnabas Lindars, *John* (SAP, 1990); and the introductions to the commentaries by Raymond E. Brown, Anchor Bible, 2 vols. (New York: Doubleday, 1966 and 1970; 2nd edn, 1984); Barnabas Lindars, NCBC (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1972); C.K. Barrett, 2nd edn (London: SPCK, 1st edn 1955, 2nd edn 1978); Ernst Haenchen, 2 vols., Hermeneia Series (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984); George R. Beasley-Murray, WBC (Dallas: Word, 1987).
[5] See Brown, *John*, pp. xxiv–li, and his *The Community of the Beloved Disciple* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1979); and Kysar, *Fourth Evangelist*, pp. 9–172.
[6] Kümmel (*Introduction to NT*, pp. 200–17) and Barrett (Commentary, pp. 34–45 1st edn, or 42–54 2nd edn) remain convinced that John knew at least one of the synoptic gospels; we prefer the general consensus, which has developed since P. Gardner-Smith's *St. John and the Synoptic Gospels* (CUP, 1938) – see surveys in n. 4 above, and P. Borgen 'John and the Synoptics', in *Tradition and Interpretation in the New Testament*, ed. G.F. Hawthorne and O. Betz (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), pp. 80–94.

A Opening features

1 Title

As with the synoptic gospels, we have no original title preserved to provide an initial indication of genre, just the traditional superscription, κατὰ Ἰωάννην. While the mention of 'John' has caused great debate about the possible authorship or underlying authority of John the Apostle (or Elder) and any connection he may have had with the Beloved Disciple of 13.23, 19.26 etc., the κατὰ construction shows that *the Fourth Gospel was perceived as belonging with the synoptics, and of the same literary type.*

2 Opening formulae/prologue/preface

The gospel begins with a formal prologue of a poetic or hymnic character, concerning ὁ λόγος, identified as personal and co-existent with God from the beginning, but who came to dwell on earth, 'full of grace and truth' (1.1–18). From its peculiar style and because key words like λόγος and χάρις are not mentioned again in the gospel, it is often assumed that the prologue had an independent origin but was taken over and adapted by the evangelist/redactor, perhaps at the final stage or edition of the work; possible backgrounds for the prologue range from the Gnostic to Jewish Wisdom traditions.[7] However, there is little by way of generic guidance for us here.

The opening words provide a reminiscence of the opening of Genesis, with their resonant ἐν ἀρχῇ . . . using the two opening words of the Septuagint to place the Logos even before the creation of the world. We noted that both Mark and Matthew have similar allusions at the start of their gospels; this even more exact reference must be designed to link this text in some way with the sacred scriptures and the activity of God.

The other common opening feature for βίος is an early use of the subject's name: here, ὁ λόγος comprises the fourth and fifth words, which is then identified with Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ in v. 17, the first mention of Jesus' name at the end of the prologue (and in the genitive case). Our attention is next drawn to John the Baptist's

[7] See Brown's commentary, pp. cxxii–cxxviii and 3–37; Haenchen's commentary, pp. 101–40; also, James D.G. Dunn, *Christology in the Making*, 2nd edn (London: SCM, 1989), pp. xxvi–xxxii and 213–50; and Kennedy, *NT Interpretation*, pp. 108–13.

denial of being the Christ (1.20), witnessing instead to Jesus (1.29–34; 35–7). Thus, although Jesus' actual name is not part of the immediate opening words, he is clearly identified as the subject of the prologue and his name and Messianic identity commence the text itself after the prologue. *The use of the name after the prologue was noted as a common feature in βίοι, such as the 'Agricola'.*

B Subject

1 Analysis of verb subjects

The Fourth Gospel is usually considered to be less interested in Jesus' activity than the synoptics, seeing him more as a mouthpiece for theological propositions. Manual analysis reveals the surprising result that over a fifth of the verbs have Jesus as their subject (20.2%), occurring in narrative or conversation, with another 1.1% referring to him by means of a title (Word, Son, Lamb, Lord, etc.). Furthermore, over a third of the verbs occur in teaching or discourse material placed on the lips of Jesus (34.0%), including nearly a tenth where Jesus speaks of himself (9.4%). If these self-referring verbs are added to those in the narrative (9.4% + 20.2% + 1.1%), Jesus is the subject of over 30% of the verbs. All together then, over half the verbs are taken up with Jesus' deeds or words, performed by him or spoken by him (55.3%) (see Figure 15, Appendix, p. 274). These totals make interesting comparisons with those in Mark, where Jesus is the subject of 24.4% and speaks a further 20.2%, and Matthew (17.2% + 42.5%) and Luke (17.9% + 36.8%). Thus the Fourth Gospel occupies a middle position *between* Mark and Matthew/Luke: despite all John's different 'feel' and discourse material, he places *less* teaching on Jesus' lips than Matthew and Luke do, and gives Jesus more prominence in his narrative than they have.

The remaining 44.7% is shared by everyone else. Once again, no individuals feature significantly; the two notable groups are the disciples, individually and corporately (9.3%), and those receiving ministry from Jesus (Nicodemus, the Samaritan woman, the official and his son, the paralytic, the adulteress,[8] the blind man, Mary, Martha and Lazarus – 6.4%). The opponents of Jesus form two groups, 'the Jews', οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι, with 3%, occurring mostly in

[8] Since we are dealing with the genre of the whole text, 7.53–8.11 is included; if it is removed, the effect is to reduce the totals for Jesus, Recipients and Jewish Leaders by less than 0.5%.

the first section of the gospel, and the Jewish leaders, scribes, Pharisees and priests, who continue their opposition through to the Passion (2.4%). Interestingly, God does not feature significantly as a subject in the narrative, although on the lips of Jesus he is the subject of 3.7% of the gospel's total verbs, often referred to as ὁ πέμψας με; a similar number of 'you plural' verbs spoken by Jesus refer to the Jews (3.6%) or, during the Last Supper Discourses, to the disciples (3.7%).

Thus, we may conclude that the Fourth Gospel, far from not being interested in Jesus' activity, *displays the same exaggerated skew effect which is typical of βίοι in both Jesus' activity in the narrative, as well as in the large amount of his teaching.*

2 Allocation of space

Analysis of the content of the Fourth Gospel reveals a pattern similar to that in the synoptic gospels, with the last week of Jesus' life dominating the work. A fifth of the work (20%) is made up by the Last Supper (4.3%) and the Passion and Resurrection (15.7%); this compares closely with Mark (19.1%), while Matthew and Luke had 15%. Into this final section the Farewell Discourses have been inserted, which occupy over an eighth (13.3%).[9] Thus a third of the total work is devoted to the last week of the subject's life. Although this might seem excessive for modern biography, we need to compare it with the *Agricola* (26% devoted to Mons Graupius),

XIII: *Content analysis of the Fourth Gospel*

Chapters	Verses	Topic	Percentage of work
1^{1-18}	18	Prologue	2.0%
$^{19-51}$	33	Beginnings and call of disciples	3.8
2–10	427	Ministry and Signs	48.6
11–12^{11}	68	Bethany	7.8
12^{12-50}	39	Entry into Jerusalem	4.5
13	38	Last Supper	4.3
14–17	117	Discourses	13.3
18–21	138	Passion and Resurrection	15.7
Totals:	878		100.0%

[9] Since 14.31 ends with 'Rise, let us go hence', but this is not actually done until 18.1, chapters 15–17 are usually seen as an insertion into the narrative at a later revision; see commentaries *ad loc.*

Agesilaus (37% to the Persian campaign), *Cato Minor* (17.3% to the last days) and *Apollonius of Tyana* (26.3% to the imprisonment dialogues, trial, death and subsequent events).

We conclude from the study of the subject, verbal analysis and allocation of space, that *the Fourth Gospel displays very similar results from these generic features to those already discovered in the synoptic gospels and Graeco-Roman βίοι.* This provides an initial expectation – to be confirmed or corrected by the other generic features – that the Fourth Gospel may be a βίος Ἰησοῦ.

C External features

1 Mode of representation

The Fourth Gospel is written in continuous prose narrative, so considerations of metre do not apply. Although there are breaks (or 'aporias') in the narrative (such as the famous jump from 14.31 to 18.1, or the apparent conclusion in 20.30–31, followed by yet another chapter),[10] nonetheless, the story flows in a continuous sequence. Into this narrative, extended discourses and dialogues have been inserted. This is common in βίοι, especially those of philosophers; much of the *Apollonius of Tyana* is similarly occupied with dialogues and long speeches containing the sage's teachings. The feature of dialogue was also noted in Satyrus' *Euripides*. Smalley notes the strongly dramatic feeling in the gospel, describing it as a drama with a prologue, two acts and an epilogue.[11] While this is an helpful insight into its structure, the Fourth Gospel is only dramatic at the level of *mode*, since it lacks the other formal features of the genre of drama, such as poetic metres, choruses and so on. It is significant that John, for all his concern with Jesus' teaching, has still composed in a mode of representation of continuous narrative, *thus making another link with the synoptic gospels and βίοι*, rather than compiling a collection of sayings or discourses, in the manner of some non-canonical gospels or as Q is sometimes supposed to be.

2 Size

Morgenthaler reckons the Fourth Gospel to be 15,416 words in length. This is about halfway between Mark's length and the size of

[10] See Smalley, *John*, pp. 97–100, and Brown's commentary, pp. xxiv–xxv.
[11] Smalley, *John*, pp. 192–203.

Matthew and Luke. It is similar to the length of *Cato Minor* and in the centre of our medium-range category. Thus, *the generic feature of size is also shared with the synoptic gospels and βίοι*. By way of comparison, we note that in the rest of the New Testament, only Acts is comparable (18,382); Revelation is the next longest (9,834). Epistles are much shorter, the longest being Romans (7,105) and 1 and 2 Corinthians (6,811 and 4,469); apart from Hebrews (4,951), the rest range from about 1,000 to 2,000 words.

3 Structure

Most analyses of the gospel's structure are variations upon a twofold scheme, like Smalley's two-act drama. Stanton uses another image: 'Like a great mediaeval cathedral, the main body of the gospel is in two sections.'[12] This basic structure is clear from Table XIII above: the work begins with the Prologue and the call of the first disciples (1.1–18 and 1.19–51), followed by the first large section of ministry and signs, alternating between Galilee and Jerusalem (2–10). After the Bethany interlude (11.1–12.11), the second half is devoted to the events of Passion week (12.12–20.31), with the appendix of the lakeside appearance (21). This is a clear chronological framework, from Jesus' pre-existence as the Word with God, through his arrival on the public scene and his ministry, to the death and the events afterwards. This is similar to the synoptic gospels, as Hengel says: 'All the gospels follow a geographical and chronological order, which contains fundamental historical features common in essentials to all the gospels, even if there are differences between the synoptic gospels and John.'[13]

Into this basic chronological outline, John has inserted discourse and dialogue material, arranged topically and often linked to one of Jesus' signs: thus we find eschatology in chapter 5, sacraments, especially the eucharist in 6, light in 8–9 and the farewell discourses at the Last Supper, 14–17. *This structure of a chronological framework with topical material inserted was also noted in the synoptic gospels and is typical of the structure found in many βίοι.*

[12] Stanton, *The Gospels and Jesus*, p. 112; for further discussion of John's structure, see Brown's commentary, pp. cxxxviii–cxliv; Haenchen's commentary, pp. 78–86.

[13] M. Hengel, *Acts and the History of Earliest Christianity*, (London: SCM, 1979), p. 19.

4 Scale

The Fourth Gospel is written on a narrow scale, with the focus constantly upon Jesus; as we shall see in our discussion of the setting below, he is rarely absent from the centre of the stage and there is no attempt to relate him to wider events and times. The only suggestion of a slightly broader scale comes in the discourses, which build a link between the traditions about Jesus and the needs and concerns of the Johannine community. Generally speaking, however, *the narrow scale is another link with both the synoptic gospels and Graeco-Roman βίοι.*

5 Literary units

The Fourth Gospel is more of a continuous whole than the synoptic gospels, despite the occasional break or seam in the narrative. It is composed of three main types of unit: stories, dialogue, and speeches or discourses. The stories tend to be a little longer than those of the synoptic gospels, and we do not find anecdotes, or pronouncement stories being used in quite the same way. Nonetheless, some stories are shared with the synoptic tradition, such as the sequence of the miraculous feeding followed by the walking on water in John 6.1–21 (compare Mark 6.32–51). The dialogues are extended conversations, with Jesus responding, sometimes at length, to questions from the crowd or Jewish leaders; such dialogues are typical of philosophical βίοι, such as *Apollonius* or Socratic literature. The discourse material is usually worked carefully into the text, often expounding the meaning of a Sign: thus the eucharistic discourse follows the feeding of the 5,000 in chapter 6, or the debate about light linked with the healing of the blind man in 8–9. Lindars considers such units of discourse to have originated from homilies by the evangelist.[14] There are a few stray units which seem unconnected to the main narrative, e.g. 3.16–21 or 3.31–36, but these are exceptions. Finally, we have the large unit of the Passion narrative, like those of the synoptic gospels, into which the Farewell Discourses have been inserted, followed by the stories of the Resurrection. We conclude, therefore, that *the Fourth Gospel is composed mainly of stories, dialogues and speeches or discourses, which are the typical material of βίοι, especially those of philosophers and teachers.*

[14] Lindars, *John*, pp. 36–7; see also his commentary, pp. 51–4.

6 Use of sources

Source criticism of the Fourth Gospel is more difficult than for the synoptic gospels, since the literary relationship of the latter allows us to compare them and to see what use they may have made of each other, or of shared source material (i.e. Mark and Q on the traditional hypothesis). If John knew any of the synoptics, his revision of them is very radical; if he did not know them, as seems more likely, then we have no external evidence for his sources, nor anything with which to compare him. Most Johannine source theories fall into one of three types: *displacement theories* suggest that the text has somehow become mixed up – hence the breaks in the narrative; rearrangement is required to restore the 'original' order. While pages of a codex may get out of order, it is hard to see this happening to individual verses – and even harder if the first versions were on scrolls; since all our early manuscripts have the same order and reconstructed versions usually reflect the predilections of the scholar, such approaches are not convincing. Theories involving *multiple sources* used to be popular: Bultmann's classic version suggested that the Fourth Evangelist had combined three main sources, Signs, Discourses and Passion, into his gospel which was then revised by the Ecclesiastical Redactor to tone down external influences, like Gnosticism, and to make it more acceptable to the church. Whether it is possible to separate out the different strands from the reasonably unified whole in this way is debatable, although such an approach does still have its exponents, notably Fortna.[15] Most contemporary interpreters prefer some form of *multiple edition* theory, in which the gospel was revised at different stages in the life of the Johannine community in order to address current concerns.[16] While this seems the most likely solution, methodological questions can still be raised about attempts to provide precise reconstructions of the various versions;

[15] See Bultmann's commentary on John, originally published in 1941 (Oxford: Blackwell, 1971); Robert T. Fortna, *The Gospel of Signs: A Reconstruction of the Narrative Source Underlying the Fourth Gospel*, SNTSMS 11 (CUP, 1970) and *The Fourth Gospel and its Predecessor* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1989); for further evaluation of such approaches, see Kysar, *Fourth Evangelist*, pp. 10–37 and 'The Fourth Gospel', *ANRW* II.25.3, pp. 2395–402; Smalley, *John*, pp. 102–13; Kümmel, *Introduction to NT*, pp. 200–17.

[16] The classic version is in Brown's commentary, pp. xxiv–xl, and *Community, passim*; Appendix 1 of *Community* discusses other attempts, pp. 171–82; see also, Smalley, *John*, pp. 113–21, and Kysar, *Fourth Evangelist*, pp. 38–81 and 'The Fourth Gospel', *ANRW* II.25.3, pp. 2402–11.

the sheer multiplicity of proposals suggests that the overall unity of the gospel makes this difficult.

Perhaps some of the proposed source hypotheses have not taken into account the mechanics of production in the ancient world, nor the freedom of writers, especially of βίοι, to revise and alter their sources. It is likely that the writer(s) of the Fourth Gospel had access to oral and written sources from which a selection was made to produce the portrait of Jesus and his teaching which was desired. As Kysar concludes:

> The role of the fourth evangelist appears to be more alike than unlike the role of the synoptic evangelists. Where scholars once set the fourth evangelist apart from his synoptic counterparts, where they once saw him as the unique mystic or the theologian among the four gospel writers, they are now portraying his function as exactly the same as that of the synoptic evangelists: To articulate a Christian tradition in such a manner as to address it with new relevance to a given community.[17]

This is the approach of writers of βίοι, particularly those writing about philosophers and teachers within the context of their particular schools and followers.

7 Methods of characterization

Characterization in the Fourth Gospel is achieved, as in the synoptic gospels and in Graeco-Roman βίοι, mainly by the indirect means of relating the deeds and words of the subject. Obviously, Jesus' words are of supreme importance here, and through the words he uses and the things he says, John's picture of Jesus' character emerges. Direct characterization of a metaphorical kind is provided by the 'I am' sayings, with their images of light, bread, the vine (6.35, 8.12, 15.1, etc.). Nonetheless, John has not abandoned deeds, in the manner of a 'sayings gospel': the significance given to the Signs is important as a way of earthing both Jesus' message and his character.[18] Finally, we have the occasional suggestion of Jesus' motive or thought to explain his actions,

[17] Kysar, *Fourth Evangelist*, p. 81.

[18] See Brown's commentary, Appendix III, pp. 525–32, on the use of Signs and their relationship to synoptic miracles, and Appendix IV, pp. 533–8 on the 'I am' sayings.

building up his character; e.g., 'perceiving then that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, Jesus withdrew again to the mountain by himself' (John 6.15). *Deeds and words, sayings and imputed motives are typical devices of characterization in Graeco-Roman βίοι.*

8 Summary

The external structural features of the Fourth Gospel are similar to those of both the synoptic gospels and Graeco-Roman βίοι: it is prose narrative of medium length, with an apparent chronological framework into which topical material, arranged in discourses in the manner of philosophical βίοι, has been inserted. On a narrow scale, the narrative is composed of stories, dialogues and discourses selected from oral and written sources to depict the character of Jesus. So far, these features confirm the initial impression of βίος Ἰησοῦ.

D Internal features

1 Setting

As in the synoptic gospels, the geographical setting is largely determined by the whereabouts of Jesus himself, and includes places in Galilee, Judea, Samaria and Jerusalem. The dramatic setting nearly always has Jesus on centre stage with other characters reacting to him. He is only absent from some 9% of the verses of the gospel, and in most of these, those left on stage are discussing Jesus, his identity, or what they are going to do about him: John the Baptist and Jewish leaders (1.19–28); John the Baptist and disciples (3.25–36); officers and Jewish leaders (7.45–52; 11.45–53; 12.9–11); the Jews (10.19–21; 11.55–57); and Thomas with the disciples (20.24–25). The two remaining passages, the debate between the Jewish leaders and the blind man and his parents (9.13–34), and Simon Peter's denial (18.15–18, 25–27) are also strongly influenced by Jesus' presence off-stage. *Such a sharp focus on the person of Jesus was also noted in the synoptic gospels, and the concentration on the subject is a typical feature of βίοι.*

2 Topics

Here we follow the same analysis as in previous chapters:

(a) *Ancestry:* βίοι often begin by tracing the ancestry of the subject back to an impressive forbear in the realm of the legendary or semi-divine; thus Matthew and Luke follow Jesus' origins back to Abraham and Adam or God respectively. John, however, 'leaves the other three far behind in a single super leap by starting its account in the time before creation, in eternity'.[19] Thus Haenchen sees the Prologue as fulfilling this feature by asserting Jesus' origins on the cosmic scale.

(b) *Birth, boyhood and education:* These are all missing in the Fourth Gospel; presumably all that needed to be said was covered in the majestic sweep of the Prologue. However, the gospel is aware of Jesus' humble earthly origins, and the fact that they were not what was expected of the Christ: see Nathaniel's sneer about Nazareth in 1.46, and the debate among the Jews and the Pharisees about how Jesus' origins prevent him from being the Christ in 7.40–42, 52.[20]

(c) *Great deeds:* According to most analyses of the Fourth Gospel, Jesus performs seven great deeds, or 'Signs', although which the seven are is not agreed. Seven Signs can be found in the first half of the gospel, often called 'the Book of Signs': changing water into wine (2.1–11); the healing of the official's son (4.46–54), and of the paralytic (5.2–15); the miraculous feeding (6.1–14); walking on water (6.16–21); sight to the blind man (9); and the raising of Lazarus (11.1–44).[21] Unfortunately, the walking on water is not treated like a Sign and no significance or dialogue is attached to it. Smalley rejects it, therefore, and substitutes the miraculous catch of fish in 21.1–14, even though it occurs in the epilogue. Fortna solves this problem by placing it after the official's son in his reconstruction of the pre-Johannine Signs Gospel, thus making it the 'third sign' – the earlier redaction of 'the third time Jesus was revealed' in 21.14.[22] Whichever way the signs are analysed, John, like the synoptic gospels and βίοι, includes narration of his subject's 'mighty deeds'. Equally, as often in βίοι of philosophers and teachers like

19 Haenchen's commentary, p. 101; see also pp. 124–5.
20 See Stanton, *Jesus of Nazareth*, p. 154.
21 See C.H. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (CUP, 1953), pp. 289–389; and Brown's commentary, Appendix III, pp. 525–32.
22 Smalley, *John*, pp. 86–8; Fortna, *The Fourth Gospel*, pp. 65–79; for lists of other versions of the Signs, see Kysar, *The Fourth Evangelist*, pp. 25–9.

Demonax and Apollonius of Tyana, the great deeds also include his 'great words', and so we have all the dialogues and discourses.

(d) *Virtues:* In company with the synoptic gospels and some of our βίοι, John does not analyse his subject's virtues separately, but allows them to emerge through the general narrative.

(e) *Death and consequences:* Nearly a sixth of the gospel is taken up with Jesus' arrest, trial, death and resurrection appearances, chapters 18–21. All our βίοι returned to chronological narrative for the subject's death and its immediate consequences at the end of their work (with the exception of Isocrates' *Evagoras*). Robinson sees a link between the final section of the Fourth Gospel and the narratives of Socrates' trial, final discourses and execution, and suggests that 'the "trial narrative" as a genre of literature is regularly produced when the need for it is first felt – to set straight the record of what really happened'.[23] We might also compare the huge amount devoted to the imprisonment and trial of Apollonius, as a setting for his final discourses and teaching. Thus, in finishing his gospel with the Farewell Discourses and the events of Jesus' death and their aftermath, John is once more displaying a topic typically used in Graeco-Roman βίοι.

Despite some differences between the narrative of the Fourth Gospel and the synoptic gospels, this feature has shown that *they share a similar range of topics to that found in Graeco-Roman βίοι.*

3 Style

Some have seen John's style as containing many Hellenisms while others noted a Semitic quality to the language: in 1922, C.F. Burney even suggested that the Fourth Gospel was originally composed in Aramaic. It does contain various Semitic terms, such as Rabbi, Messiah and Cephas (see 1.37–42), and prefers to connect short sentences paratactically with a simple 'and', or to have no connection at all (asyndeton), rather than using long classical periods. Perhaps this reflects a bi- or trilingual culture, typical of the eastern Mediterranean. The language is fairly uniform, with a limited and repetitive vocabulary; it can be a little flat and ponderous, and displays a unified 'feel' and style to the

[23] J.A.T. Robinson, *The Priority of John* (London: SCM, 1985), pp. 92–3.

work, which argues against composite or multiple production theories. John has certain key words, used little in the synoptic gospels but recurring constantly here, e.g. ζωή, ἀλήθεια, or ἀγάπη; the use of dualistic contrasts, such as φῶς and σκοτία, may resonate with Greek philosophical and/or Jewish religious thought, displaying some education. All of this fits the social milieu of the eastern Mediterranean and is typical of other examples of general Koiné more than high-flown or literary levels. *Such a style is comparable to that in which popular βίοι or treatises were written.*[24]

4 Atmosphere

Like the synoptic gospels, the Fourth Gospel has a fairly steady and serious atmosphere. The tone is even, and the mood does not have the variations noted in the synoptics, partly because of Jesus' dominating control: the contrast between the desolation of the Crucifixion in Mark or Matthew followed by the excitement and fear at the Resurrection is flattened out here by Jesus' control and quiet confidence throughout the Passion. The attitude to the subject reflects this high estimation: Jesus is revealed as divine from the opening words of the Prologue through to Thomas' words, 'my Lord and my God' in 20.28. There is a sense of awe which follows from this view of the subject. The attitude to the reader is open and didactic, inviting us to become one of those 'who received him' (1.12) and helping us to be privy to the reality which opponents cannot or will not see. The values expressed are those of the Johannine community, probably a somewhat separate and introspective group, stressing the need to love the 'brethren', more than the synoptics' 'neighbour'.[25] *This serious and even worshipful approach may be slightly less varied than that found in the synoptic gospels, but it still remains similar to their atmosphere and to that of other βίοι.*

5 Quality of characterization

Since the writer believes that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, in whom is all life and who knows of his own pre-existence and his

[24] See further the commentaries by Lindars, pp. 44–6; Haenchen, pp. 52–66; and Brown, pp. cxxix–cxxxvii and Appendix I on key words of Johannine vocabulary, pp. 497–518.

[25] For one view of the implications of Johannine Christology and ecclesiology, see Ernst Käsemann, *The Testament of Jesus* (London: SCM, 1968).

future return to glory with the Father, any characterization is bound to fall short of a realistic human portrait. The stress on Jesus' divinity and his unity with the Father affects his characterization, making it rather 'unreal' in places. Thus Käsemann attacks John's picture of Jesus as 'naively Docetic', a visitor from another realm who never really touches earth but merely wears 'the absolute minimum of costume' among us for a little while.[26] While this is not really 'stereotypic', it is not realistic characterization either. The sense of unreality is further developed by the long expositions of Johannine theology placed on Jesus' lips.

However, we noticed in both the synoptic gospels and other βίοι that, while characterization can often be stereotypic, a more 'real' picture emerges indirectly through the narrative itself. So too here we see that, despite the divine figure of Christ, the human Jesus has not completely disappeared: he is weary and thirsty in 4.6–7, and weeps at the death of a friend in 11.35, 'snorting with rage' (ἐμβριμώμενος) at what has happened (11.33, 38). Even the calm confidence exhibited in the Passion has to be reached through the nearest John gets to the agony of the synoptics' accounts of Gethsemane, the 'troubling' of Jesus' soul (τετάραχται) in 12.27. Finally, we note the very human and poignant question of one who has been let down: 'Do you also want to leave me?' (6.67). There is, therefore, a creative tension in John's picture and characterization of Jesus between the real and the unreal, the human and the divine. *Such an ambivalent quality is not dissimilar from the mix of stereotype and reality found in both the synoptic gospels and Graeco-Roman βίοι.*

6 Social setting and occasion

Since we have no external knowledge of the setting and occasion of this gospel, we are again dependent on hints internal to the text. From these, various social settings and backgrounds have been proposed over the years: for a long time, particularly through Bultmann's work, a 'history of religions' approach dominated, seeing John as influenced by Hellenistic, especially Gnostic, ideas; then the pendulum swung back, placing it within the fuller under-

[26] Käsemann, *The Testament of Jesus*, p. 10; for a critique, see Günther Bornkamm, 'Towards the Interpretation of John's Gospel: A Discussion of *The Testament of Jesus* by Ernst Käsemann', in *The Interpretation of John*, ed. John Ashton, pp. 79–98.

standing of Judaism brought by the Qumran material. Increasingly, a better appreciation of the pluralistic and syncretistic nature of the eastern Roman empire during the period is helping us to understand the wide variety of allusions and influences which the text seems to reveal. A social setting is needed in which ideas of traditional Greek philosophy, Platonism and Stoicism, could be coupled at a popular level with those of new cults and sects, including the proto-Gnostics; links are also to be made with the Jewish world of the Old Testament, Rabbinic arguments and the ideas of heterodox or 'non-conformist' Judaism. The work of Philo of Alexandria demonstrates that this heady mixture was available at a sophisticated and educated level; however, such a syncretistic culture spread all the way down the social scale and was thus capable of influencing the early Christian communities.[27]

As regards the occasion of the writing of the gospel, here again we simply do not know. Traditionally, the Fourth Gospel was associated with the apostle John in his old age at Ephesus, and some Johannine Community theories allow for John to have been the *authority* behind the gospel's production, if not the author. On this basis, his death at an old age could have prompted the production of the gospel, or one edition of it. Another possible occasion arises from the gospel's attitude towards 'the Jews'. This phrase, rare in the synoptics, occurs some seventy times in the Fourth Gospel, becoming increasingly prominent as opposition to Jesus grows; Jesus and his disciples, who are all Jews themselves, appear to be set apart from their own people (e.g. 15.25, 'their law'); 9.22 and 12.42 say that any who accept Jesus as Christ will be made ἀποσυνάγωγος. It is argued that this makes no sense in Jesus' own day, but fits perfectly into the increasing separation of church and synagogue around AD 85, with the Council of Yavneh and the insertion of the Benediction against the Heretics ('Birkath ha-Minim') into Jewish liturgy. Perhaps, therefore, the occasion which caused the gospel to be written was the crisis of confidence which this separation from the synagogue caused the Johannine Community: they needed to be reassured that they were the real people of God, persecuted by 'the Jews' as Jesus himself was. Robinson, however, disagrees, arguing that ἀποσυνάγωγος is not

[27] For further discussion, see the commentaries by Lindars, pp. 35–42, and Brown, pp. lii–lxvi; see also, Smalley, *John*, pp. 41–68; Kysar, *Fourth Evangelist*, pp. 102–46 and 'The Fourth Gospel', *ANRW* II.25.3, pp. 2411–25; Kümmel, *Introduction to NT*, pp. 217–28.

a technical term and that the separation from Judaism was more gradual; the conflict with the Jews in John is no different from that seen in the synoptic gospels – so we need to look elsewhere for the occasion of the gospel's composition.[28]

Thus, the text does not reveal anything definite about its setting and occasion, other than to suggest that it belongs within the rich pluralism of the eastern Mediterranean towards the end of the first century AD and its occasion was the need to relate Jesus and his teaching to both the Johannine community and those around it. *Such a setting and occasion are well within the scope of βίοι.*

7 Authorial intention and purpose

> Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name. (John 20.30–31)

The evangelist's expressed purpose in writing the gospel provides a clear biographical intent with the whole focus upon the person of Jesus: it is an account of 'signs' which *he* did, that people may believe who *he* is, and have life in *him*. Secondly, 20.31 contains two purpose clauses, expressed by ἵνα plus the subjunctive; the first declares an evangelistic aim ('that you may believe') and the second a practical one ('that you may have life'). These aims may be related to our analysis of βίοι: we shall leave aside encomiastic and exemplary intentions, and also the intentions of preserving the subject's memory and providing entertainment, since none of these seem relevant to the expressed purpose or the text itself.

However, the informative and the didactic aims are relevant to the purpose expressed in 20.31. The writer must provide information about Jesus in order for the reader to come to believe, and he chooses to do this by narrating the Signs. In fact, through the *chronological narrative*, all the necessary information about Jesus' cosmic origins, earthly ministry, Passion and Resurrection is provided for the reader to realize the true identity of Jesus, while

[28] Robinson, *Priority*, pp. 72–93; see further, Brown's commentary, pp. lxx–lxxv, and *Community*, pp. 40–3, and 66–9; Smalley, *John*, pp. 140–9; Kysar, *Fourth Evangelist*, pp. 149–56 and 'The Fourth Gospel', *ANRW* II.25.3, pp. 2425–8; Kümmel, *Introduction to NT*, pp. 230–4; and Dunn, 'Let John be John', in *Das Evangelium und die Evangelien*, esp. pp. 318–21.

through the *discourse material* the reader comes to appreciate the teaching of Jesus and the Christian faith.

Another common purpose of βίοι was as apologetic and polemic, particularly in political or philosophical debate. These purposes can be detected in the Fourth Gospel: thus the gospel's attitude towards 'the Jews' may have its origins in defending the Johannine Community against Jewish attacks, and in its response. Polemic may also be seen in the depiction of John the Baptist telling his followers to leave him and join Jesus (1.29; 1.35–37) since 'he must increase, but I must decrease' (3.30). This may reflect a debate between the Johannine Community and disciples of the Baptist, mentioned as being in Ephesus in Acts 19.1–7. Christian heretics are another possible target: Irenaeus suggested that John was written to counter the arguments of the Christian Gnostic Cerinthus, whereas Bultmann detected pro-Gnostic influence in the gospel. Similarly, 'the Word became flesh' in 1.14 is sometimes considered to be anti-Docetic, like the anti-Docetic polemic in the Epistles, e.g. 1 John 4.2, 2 John 7, possibly directed towards former members of the community who had left (1 John 2.19). However, Käsemann interprets the evidence the other way, stressing 1.14b 'and we beheld his glory', and therefore he sees the gospel as naively Docetic itself. Thus in both Gnosticism and Docetism, the argument for polemic has been interpreted both ways, both pro- and anti-. Likewise, opposing polemical approaches for and against the sacraments and to eschatology have also been noticed. Whichever positions one adopts, the rôle of polemic is clear.[29]

The Fourth Gospel has several intentions and purposes, both those expressed by 20.31 in terms of evangelism and didactic, and those discerned from study of the text itself of apologetic and polemic. *These purposes are also central to the synoptic gospels, and they are some of the most common purposes of Graeco-Roman βίοι, particularly those originating within philosophical schools.*

[29] Thus Rodney A. Whiteacre entitles his study, *Johannine Polemic: The Role of Tradition and Theology*, SBLDS 67 (Chico: Scholars, 1982), while Lindars has a section headed 'The Use of the Gospel in Debate', *John*, pp. 46–62; see also, David Rensberger, *Overcoming the World: Politics and Community in the Gospel of John* (London: SPCK, 1989). For further discussion of John's purposes, see the commentaries by Lindars, pp. 56–63, and Brown, pp. lxvii–lxxix and *Community, passim*; and also, Smalley, *John*, pp. 125–36; Kysar, *Fourth Evangelist*, pp. 147–65 and 'The Fourth Gospel', *ANRW* II.25.3, pp. 2425–32; Kümmel, *Introduction to NT*, pp. 228–34; Stanton, *The Gospels and Jesus*, pp. 119–23; Martin, *Narrative Parallels to the New Testament*, p. 23.

8 Summary

The Fourth Gospel displays a pattern of internal features similar to that noted in the synoptic gospels; furthermore, many of these features are shared with Graeco-Roman βίοι. The focus of the geographical and dramatic settings upon the person of the subject, the selection of biographical topics, the rather serious atmosphere and the range of purposes are all typical of βίοι. The quality of the characterization reveals a mixture of the human and the divine which is not unlike the usual mix of the real and the stereotype in βίοι. Finally, the style and social setting are consonant with the background of popular Hellenistic βίοι. *The hypothesis that the Fourth Gospel is a βίος Ἰησοῦ is thus confirmed.*

Conclusion

> The Gospel writer presents his theology in the form of a *life* of Jesus.[30]

Our analysis of the generic features of Graeco-Roman βίοι and the synoptic gospels showed that these works exhibit a shared pattern or family resemblance. The same analysis has now been applied to the Fourth Gospel with the following results:

(i) Like the synoptic gospels, John lacks any kind of biographical title; it begins with a formal prologue, after which the subject's name is mentioned. These are common opening features in βίοι.

(ii) Verbal analysis of the Fourth Gospel reveals that Jesus is the subject of a fifth of the verbs and a further third are placed on his lips. Such dominance by the subject occurs also in the synoptic gospels and βίοι. Furthermore, the 20% with Jesus as subject demonstrate that, despite all the discourse material, John has not abandoned narrative about Jesus. A similar proportion of space is allocated to the events of the Passion and Resurrection as in the synoptic gospels, and to crucial periods of the subject's life in βίοι.

(iii) With respect to external features, the Fourth Gospel shares a similar mode of representation, size, structure and scale to those of the synoptic gospels and βίοι, and makes use of similar literary units, drawn from oral and written sources to display the character of Jesus by means of his deeds, words and sayings in a manner typical of βίοι.

(iv) All four gospels share similar internal features of settings, topics and atmospheres with Graeco-Roman βίοι. The style and social setting of the Fourth Gospel are probably to be located amid groups of the eastern Mediterranean, where popular βίοι were also to be found. John's characterization of Jesus has a mixed quality about it, reminiscent of that found in the synoptics and βίοι. Finally, its purposes of information, didactic, apologetic and polemic are typical of Graeco-Roman βίοι, especially among philosophical schools.

These results place the Fourth Gospel clearly in the same genre as the synoptic gospels, namely βίοι. As Dunn says:

> Another striking fact is that the Fourth Evangelist obviously felt it necessary to retain the format of a *Gospel*. For all its differences from the Synoptics, John is far closer to them than to any other ancient writing . . . he chose, and chose deliberately, to retain the developed discourse material within the framework of a Gospel as laid down by Mark – traditions of Jesus' miracles and teaching building up all the while to the climax of the cross.[31]

Now that we have established the common biographical genre between the synoptic gospels and the Fourth Gospel, this takes us into one further issue: if John is not dependent upon the synoptic gospels nor knew their texts, then 'is it feasible that both Mark and . . . the fourth evangelist independently originated the gospel genre?'[32] Kysar's question leads us into the origins and development of the gospel genre, or more accurately, of the subgenre of βίος literature known as 'gospel' and concerned with βίοι Ἰησοῦ, and also into the hermeneutical implications of this generic identification. These must be the concerns of our concluding chapter.

[30] Oscar Cullmann, *Salvation in History* (London: SCM, 1967), p. 270, his italics; see also, Lindars, *John*, p. 26.

[31] Dunn, 'Let John be John', pp. 338–9.

[32] Kysar, *Fourth Evangelist*, p. 69.

What are the Gospels?

A Comparison with Graeco-Roman Biography

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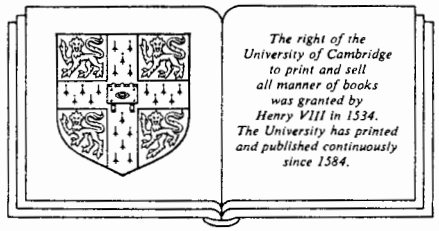

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