

INTRODUCTION

THE APPROACH OF THE COMMENTARY

The primary goal is to explore and elucidate the significance of the Fourth Gospel in its canonical form. While there will be a recognition that some of the awkwardnesses in the narrative reflect the history of its writing, and a later section of the Introduction will explore stages in the composition of the Gospel, the focus of the commentary will be on the final product. As a result of this decision, chapter 21, for example, which is considered by many to have been added after an original conclusion at the end of chapter 20, will be treated as an integral part of the narrative, because, whenever this section was actually written, there is no evidence that the Gospel ever circulated without it. On the other hand, there is considerable evidence that the account of Jesus' dealings with a woman seized in the act of adultery in 7.53—8.11, although often included within the narrative, but also within parentheses, in English versions of the Bible, did not circulate as part of the earliest written Gospel. It is therefore not treated as an integral aspect of the Gospel's narrative but is assessed independently at the end of the commentary in the Appendix, where the issues surrounding its origins, interpretation and canonicity are discussed more fully.

In pursuing our primary goal, and as noted in the Preface, the commentary will concentrate on the literary, historical and theological dimensions of the text. These dimensions are related to what are sometimes described as the world in or of the text, the world behind the text, and the world in front of the text. By definition, a commentary makes the text as it has come to us the centre of its attention, and so what will concern us most is the way the Fourth Gospel communicates its message about Jesus through this particular narrative. At the same time, however, the commentary endeavours to keep in view the historical and social factors that are important features in any adequate explanation of this text as a communication between its final author and readers in a particular first-century CE context. The content of this Gospel and its appeal to its readers to believe its message make the theological dimension arguably the most important aspect of interpretation. Because of the nature and scope of the series of which this commentary is a part, exploration of this dimension

takes place primarily through highlighting and explicating the narrative's major theological themes but cannot extend to critical theological appropriation of the text's message.

Some features of each of the three main dimensions will be surveyed in the sections that follow. Within the commentary itself, discussion of individual pericopes and their verses raise points relevant for all three dimensions. Matters of narrative sequence and plot are therefore treated at the start of major sections and suggestions about the structure of individual passages are provided before their detailed treatment. A discussion of the relationship of a passage to the Synoptic Gospels and, if appropriate, of its historicity may be found either before or after such passages. The purpose of the comparisons with the Synoptics is twofold. They explore John's dependence or independence in relation to the other canonical Gospels and at the same time they serve to highlight the distinctiveness of this Gospel's own story of Jesus. A commentary on the Fourth Gospel is not, of course, a study of the historical Jesus. Nevertheless, the story told by the fourth evangelist raises questions about its relation to what is likely to have been the case in the life of the earthly Jesus. Conclusions about this, as will be seen, are tied up with decisions about the relationship between this Gospel and the Synoptics and about the amount of authentic historical tradition conveyed by the Synoptics. It would be impossible to analyse the reliability of traditions in all the cases where this Gospel has material that overlaps with the Synoptics, but in significant cases, where it contains incidents that are unique to its story rather than merely distinctive elaborations on earlier traditions, some attempt has been made to discuss likely historicity. A summary of the theological thrust and, again where appropriate, the likely social function of a passage is provided after the commentary on it.

Within the individual sections of commentary, eclectic use is made of methods appropriate to each of the different dimensions of the text, while attempting not to fall into the trap of confusing their distinctive concerns. This accounts, for example, for the shifts in terminology that will be found. Sometimes talk will be of the narrator or the implied author and sometimes of the evangelist, depending on whether the literary or the historical aspect of a given passage is in view in the comments. For those not familiar with this terminology, narrative criticism of the Gospels focuses attention on the present form of the text as a story. For these purposes it is interested not so much in the historical entities of the real author or the real readers but in what it calls the 'implied author' and the 'implied readers'. These latter categories refer to the author and the readers whose profiles can be reconstructed from the clues provided by the narrative itself, whatever it is thought can be known from other sources about the actual historical author or first readers. The implied author can sometimes take on a specific voice within the narrative, that

of the narrator – the one who is actually relating the story. One further and connected terminological explanation should be given. The designation ‘John’ is sometimes used as shorthand for the fourth evangelist or for the Fourth Gospel. This should not be thought to entail any historical conclusion about the actual author of this Gospel but simply reflects as a matter of convenience the attribution and title of the Gospel in early tradition. The Gospel itself does not name its author as John but does in fact have another important character of that name. Although significantly the Fourth Gospel, unlike the Synoptics, does not call this character ‘the Baptist’, the commentary will refer to him as John the Baptist in order to avoid confusion.

Whole books have been devoted to the introductory issues that surround the Fourth Gospel and entire monographs have been written about most of the individual introductory topics. This Introduction can only select some of the more important topics and summarize the writer’s perspective on them. At the end of each section, it will therefore point to one or two significant, helpful or alternative treatments of the topic in English.

Further Reading

For two recent accessible treatments of introductory and interpretative issues, see R. E. Brown, *An Introduction to the Gospel of John*, ed. F. J. Moloney (New York: Doubleday, 2003) and R. Edwards, *Discovering John* (London: SPCK, 2003). On a literary approach to John and for explanation of key terms in narrative criticism, see R. A. Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel: A Study in Literary Design* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983). For an attempt at critical theological appropriation of some aspects of John’s message, see A. T. Lincoln, *Truth on Trial* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2000), 354–497.

NARRATIVE OUTLINE, SHAPE AND PLOT

The outline that follows indicates what appear to be the main structural divisions of the narrative and suggests further sections and subsections and their content. The main value of such an outline is as an initial map offered by a more experienced reader to enable other readers to negotiate what may be the relatively unfamiliar terrain of a narrative’s content and sequence. Provided that it makes no strong claims to having been the design in the original author’s mind and that the need for its modification or expansion, as readers make their own discoveries, is acknowledged, then the attempt to produce one may have a provisional and limited usefulness. This outline has two further functions. It displays the divisions

and their headings that will be employed within the commentary and it serves as a reference point for the more detailed ensuing discussion of the shape of the narrative.

A. The prologue	1.1–18
1. The Word in relation to God and creation	1.1–5
2. The witness of John the Baptist to the Word as light	1.6–8
3. The Word in the world and the two types of response	1.9–13
4. The community's confession about the Word	1.14–18
B. Jesus' public mission (signs of glory)	1.19–12.50
1. Beginnings: John the Baptist's testimony; the response of Jesus' disciples	1.19–51
(i) John the Baptist's testimony	1.19–34
(ii) The response of Jesus' first followers	1.35–51
2. The opening of Jesus' mission: from Cana to Cana	2.1–4.54
(i) Water into wine at Cana	2.1–12
(ii) Jesus and the temple	2.13–22
(iii) Reaction to Jesus in Jerusalem	2.23–5
(iv) Jesus' discourse with Nicodemus	3.1–21
(v) John the Baptist's final testimony	3.22–36
(vi) Jesus and the Samaritan woman	4.1–42
(vii) Return to Cana and healing of the official's son	4.43–54
3. Revelation and testimony in controversy with 'the Jews'	5.1–10.42
(i) Healing of the man at the pool	5.1–18
(ii) Jesus' discourse on his relation to the Father, judgement and testimony	5.19–47
(iii) The feeding of the five thousand	6.1–15
(iv) The walking on the sea	6.16–21
(v) Jesus' discourse on the bread of life	6.22–59
(vi) Defection of some disciples and Peter's confession	6.60–71
(vii) Jesus goes to the Festival of Tabernacles	7.1–13
(viii) Jesus' teaching on the law and the Messiah and the response	7.14–36
(ix) Jesus' teaching on living water and the response	7.37–52
(x) Jesus' teaching on the light, his departure, true discipleship and Abrahamic descent	8.12–59
(xi) Healing of the man born blind	9.1–41
(xii) Jesus' discourse on the sheepgate and the shepherd	10.1–21
(xiii) Jesus at the Festival of Dedication	10.22–39
(xiv) Transition: Jesus beyond the Jordan	10.40–2
4. Conclusion: move toward the hour of death and glory	11.1–12.50
(i) The raising of Lazarus	11.1–53

(ii) Transition: the approach of Passover	11.54–7
(iii) The anointing at Bethany	12.1–8
(iv) The plot to kill Lazarus	12.9–11
(v) The entry into Jerusalem	12.12–19
(vi) The Greeks and the coming of the hour	12.20–36a
(vii) Summary statement about the response to Jesus’ signs and words	12.36b–50
C. Jesus’ farewell, passion and resurrection (departure as glory)	13.1—20.31
1. The farewell	13.1—17.26
(i) The footwashing	13.1–20
(ii) Jesus’ prediction of his betrayal	13.21–30
(iii) Jesus’ farewell discourse (part one)	13.31—14.31
(iv) Jesus’ farewell discourse (part two)	15.1—16.33
(v) The prayer of Jesus	17.1–26
2. The passion	18.1—19.42
(i) The arrest	18.1–11
(ii) Jesus (and Peter) under interrogation	18.12–27
(iii) Jesus’ trial before Pilate	18.28–19.16a
(iv) Jesus’ crucifixion and death	19.16b–37
(v) The burial	19.38–42
3. The resurrection	20.1–31
(i) Discovery of the empty tomb and appearance to Mary Magdalene	20.1–18
(ii) Jesus’ appearance to the disciples	20.19–23
(iii) Jesus’ appearance to Thomas	20.24–9
(iv) The purpose of the narrative	20.30–1
D. The Epilogue	21.1–25
(i) The miraculous catch of fish	21.1–14
(ii) The rehabilitation of Peter	21.15–19
(iii) The role of the beloved disciple	21.20–3
(iv) Conclusion	21.24–5
Appendix: the controversy about the woman taken in adultery	7.53—8.11

In discussing the shape of this Gospel’s story, attention can only be drawn to some of the more salient features in the arrangement of its sequence and thematic presentation. In the final form of the Fourth Gospel’s narrative a prologue (1.1–18) and an epilogue (21.1–25) surround the main story, which itself has two main parts. The first of these (1.19–12.50) deals with Jesus’ public career, the second (13.1—20.31) with his departure from this world. The second part itself has two clear subsections. 13.1—17.26, in which the departure is interpreted by Jesus for ‘his own’,

the disciples, and then 18.1—20.31, in which the departure takes place as the story line culminates in the passion and resurrection. The two main parts should not, of course, be thought of as sealed off from each other. Not only are there themes that run throughout, but also the action of the last part of Jesus' public mission in particular prepares for his departure.

The prologue provides an extended introduction to the main character, Jesus, in which the implied author's point of view is made clear. The identity of the central figure is disclosed as that of the divine Logos through whom all things came into being (1.1–3, 14), and the implied reader is given clues about the significance of this figure's mission. It involves his glory (1.14), it contrasts with Moses and the law (1.17), and it entails making God known (1.18). There is also a preview of the outcome of this mission in 1.11–12 which announces a divided response with some, however, through their acceptance of the Logos, being enabled to become children of God.

The public career of Jesus as the incarnate Logos is presented through his deeds and words. Jesus' deeds are predominantly depicted as signs, and there are seven of these, which run through section B on the outline (cf. 2.1–11; 4.46–54; 5.1–18; 6.1–15; 6.16–21; 9.1–41; 11.1–53). Some (e.g. Dodd 1953: 289; Moloney 1998: 23; Brown 2003: 299) have been so impressed by this feature that they have called this section of the Gospel 'the Book of Signs'. Despite the apparent elasticity of the term 'signs' later in 20.30–1, where it may stand for the ministry as a whole, this title is not precise enough to describe the public mission, since it makes the specific signs more dominant than they in fact are and does not do enough justice to the speech material. Nevertheless, the explicit association of signs with the theme of glory (cf. 2.11; 11.4), which pervades the narrative discourse, should be noted, since this provides a major element of continuity with the second half of the Gospel's story. This has been indicated on the outline by the parenthetical subheadings for sections B and C – Signs of Glory and Departure as Glory.

The words through which Jesus makes God known are mainly found in the form of extended discourses. These do not necessarily involve a complete monologue from Jesus, and, where there is extended speech material on the lips of Jesus that is interrupted more than usual by debate or questions, 'dispute' may sometimes be a more accurate categorization than discourse. Given this and granted that there must be some uncertainty, as the discourses are far less clearly demarcated than the signs, it can be argued that there are seven major discourses in the public ministry as well as seven signs (cf. 3.1–21; 4.1–26; 5.19–47; 6.22–59; 7.14–36; 8.12–59; 10.1–21, with the fourth, fifth and sixth of these passages having more of the character of disputes).

There is no consistent pattern of relationship between the discourses and the signs as they are interwoven in the narrative, although clearly the

fourth sign and the fourth discourse are related, as the feeding of the five thousand prepares for the discourse on the bread of life. Similarly the sixth discourse and the sixth sign are linked through the 'I am the light of the world' saying, which is found not only in the sign passage about the blind man receiving his sight in 9.5 but also in the preceding discourse material in 8.12. In relation to the action in general the discourses can often continue a dialogue occasioned by a specific situation in Jesus' mission and in so doing leave behind the occasion which prompted them. Persons involved in conversation with Jesus can disappear from the scene while Jesus' discourse continues. This appears to happen, for example, with Nicodemus in 3.1–21 and with 'the Jews' in 5.19–47.

The public career of Jesus has a clear beginning and a clear end (1.19–51 and 12.36b–50). Its initial opening treats John the Baptist and the gathering of disciples around Jesus. The narrative discourse here is almost exclusively concerned with John the Baptist as providing witness or testimony to Jesus. This highlights a motif which will be highly significant, and since the force of testimony is juridical, it is closely associated with such other major themes as judgement and truth. The narrator's very first words about the public ministry in 1.19 are 'This is the testimony given by John' and previously in the prologue John the Baptist had already been introduced as a witness (1.7, 8, 15). The narrative will also end with this motif in its twofold reference in the epilogue to the testimony of the Beloved Disciple in 21.24, thereby forming an *inclusio* – an element found at the beginning and the end of a unit, here the entire story, and tying it together. In regard to activity within history, the Fourth Gospel begins with the witness of John the Baptist and concludes with the witness of the Beloved Disciple.

Returning to the account of Jesus' public mission, it can be seen from the outline that both the beginning and the summary ending are linked to larger opening and closing units. After disciples begin to collect around Jesus, there is then a depiction of the start of his mission proper, introduced and concluded by a sign in Cana (2.1–4.54). Similarly, the summary of the mission in 12.36b–50 is the final element of a section which describes Jesus' move towards his hour of death and glory (11.1–12.50). The From Cana to Cana section introduces further themes that will characterize Jesus' mission and the conflict it will produce. In particular, the first major deed – changing water into wine (2.1–11) – both rounds off the initial response of the disciples to Jesus and anticipates what is to be the significance of Jesus' mission, as the water of the Jewish rites of purification gives way to the wine and joy of the new life that Jesus provides. The next episode, in the temple in Jerusalem (2.13–22), also sets the tone for what is to follow, as it shows Jesus from the start of his mission confronting the Jewish authorities at the heart of their religious system, and it is made clear by the dialogue that follows and the

narrator's comments that the resurrected Christ is in fact to be the new locus of God's presence, fulfilling what to this point has been represented by the temple. From these first two major activities of Jesus it immediately becomes clear that the relation of Jesus to the symbols and institutions of Judaism will be dominant issues in his public mission. The discourse with Nicodemus emphasizes the need for God to be at work through the Spirit if people are to accept Jesus' message, speaks of that message in terms of Jesus' witness, and introduces both the notion of Jesus' death as the lifting up of the Son of Man and the concept of judgement with its twofold outcome of either life or condemnation. Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman presents him as the source of eternal life, the agent and embodiment of true worship of God, and the one who can employ the divine self-identification of 'I Am', a formulation that will have an important role in the next section of the narrative. The ready acceptance of Jesus' mission by Samaritans also contrasts with the far more divided reception of his message in that next section.

Jesus' testimony about himself in controversy with 'the Jews' is at the heart of the narrative of his public mission (5.1—10.42). This takes place primarily in the environs of the temple in Jerusalem but also in a synagogue setting in Capernaum. This part of the mission is marked by hostility and conflict and much of it takes the form of interrogations or mini-trial scenes (5.19—47; 7.14—36; 8.12—58; 10.22—39). In these scenes the issue is the truth of Jesus' witness about himself — as the Son who is one with the Father, as 'I Am', as the source of light and life — and he is accused of being in breach of the law, of leading the people astray as a false prophet, and of blasphemy. In the process the witness of the accused himself becomes accusatory and in fact he claims to be the ultimate judge. The intensity of the hostility this provokes on the part of the Jewish authorities is indicated by their decision to kill him (5.18; 7.1, 25), their attempts to arrest him (7.32, 44, 45; 10.39) and their moves to carry out the death sentence by stoning him (8.59; 10.31). In this central section not only is there the threat of death from Jesus' opponents, but he himself already makes clear that his death will be necessary if there is to be a judgement producing life rather than condemnation. In the discourse in 6.22—59 the bread Jesus will give for the life of the world is his flesh. In the dispute of 8.22—59 he claims that people will die in their sins 'unless you believe that I Am' and that they will know him as 'I Am' when they have lifted up the Son of Man. In 10.1—21 Jesus announces that, as the good shepherd, he will lay down his life for the benefit of the sheep. As part of the portrayal of hostilities resulting from Jesus' mission, an extended passage is devoted to the depiction of the recipient of one of Jesus' signs — the man born blind, who, in coming to belief in Jesus, undergoes his own interrogation by the authorities and is cast out of the synagogue by them.

One other feature of this section should be mentioned. Throughout its narrative Jesus' activities are set against the backdrop of Jewish feasts.

Already the temple incident had had as its temporal setting ‘the Passover of the Jews’ (2.13). Now the mention of such feasts becomes more frequent and it becomes clear that Jesus is to be seen as fulfilling what these festivals signified (cf. 5.1; 6.4; 7.1–13, 14, 37; 10.22). This is particularly highlighted in relation to the Feast of Tabernacles, whose elements of prayer for rain and the illumination of the Court of Women are taken up in Jesus’ provision of water and light (7.37–9; 8.12; 9.5) and to the Feast of Dedication, where the dedication or sanctification of the altar is taken up in Jesus’ claim to be the one whom God has sanctified (10.36).

The hostility directed towards Jesus by the religious authorities leads into the final phase of his public mission – the move towards his hour of death and glory (11.1—12.50). In particular, it is the last sign in that mission – the raising of Lazarus – that precipitates Jesus’ death. This extended episode (11.1–53) is the midpoint and pivot of John’s story as a whole. Ironically, Jesus’ embodiment of his claim to be the resurrection and the life results in the Sanhedrin’s verdict that he should be put to death. Mary’s anointing then anticipates the burial preparation for Jesus, Jesus enters Jerusalem for the final time at the festival of Passover (12.12, 20), and the coming of some Greeks to see Jesus signals that his hour has now come, an hour in which his death will also be his lifting up and his glory (12.20–36a). After this, 12.36b–50 forms the appropriate conclusion to the public ministry, summarizing the response first to Jesus’ signs and glory and then to his words, which will serve as final judge.

There is no further public teaching or activity of Jesus in Jerusalem, but the action does not move immediately to Jesus’ arrest and passion. Instead these are preceded by a lengthy section in which Jesus bids farewell to his disciples, so that the second main part of the narrative consists of Jesus’ farewell, passion and resurrection (13.1—20.31). It has been entitled by some ‘The Book of Glory’ (e.g. Moloney 1998: 24; Brown 2003: 299). Although this captures the sense in which the death and exaltation are the particular moment of Jesus’ glorification, it does not sufficiently recognize that the signs themselves are signs of glory and that for the Fourth Gospel the whole of Jesus’ life is a manifestation of his glory (1.14). It is somewhat more accurate, therefore, to sum up this part as Jesus’ Departure as Glory. Indeed the farewell episode (13.1—17.26) speaks immediately of Jesus’ departure (13.1) and its discourse uses this language of going away throughout. There is also no mistaking that this departure from the world is to be interpreted in terms of glory, which is the perspective set out at the beginning of the discourse (13.31–2) and in the prayer at the end of the section (17.1, 4, 5, 22, 24). All the aspects of the farewell section – the footwashing, the prediction of betrayal, the two-part discourse, and the prayer of Jesus – are meant to prepare the disciples for what is about to happen, in regard not only to Jesus’ destiny but also to their own future in the world after Jesus’ mission is completed.

In going away to his Father, Jesus will also prepare a place for his disciples, return to remain with them, and send them the Paraclete or Advocate, the latter connotation being important for the narrative's juridical motif. His followers are to be witnesses to Jesus' cause and, in carrying out this role, will face hostility from the world in the form of persecution and exclusion from the synagogue, but they will also experience Jesus' gifts of joy and peace as they remain in a relationship with him characterized by faith and love.

The events for which Jesus has been preparing his disciples unfold quickly in the passion account (18.1—19.42). In line with his prior knowledge of these events, Jesus is portrayed as in sovereign control in the midst of what happens. After manifesting his divine identity by means of an 'I Am' saying, he gives himself over to the Roman and Jewish forces who have come to seize him. Since Jesus has been on trial before the Jewish authorities throughout the major part of his mission and the Sanhedrin have already reached their verdict, what follows is simply an interrogation of Jesus by Annas, at which Jesus declines to repeat or elaborate on teaching he has already given openly. At the same time Peter is also undergoing a more informal interrogation in the courtyard of the high priest's residence, but, in contrast to Jesus' boldness, he denies three times being a follower of Jesus.

Via Caiaphas, Jesus is passed from Annas to Pilate, and an extensive depiction of his trial before the Roman prefect then becomes the centre-piece of this Gospel's passion account (18.28—19.16a), preceded by the accounts of his arrest and interrogation and followed by those of his crucifixion and burial. The Roman trial both places Jesus' mission in a wider setting, that of empire, and underscores themes that have appeared earlier. Under interrogation for claims of being King of the Jews and Son of God, Jesus sums up his whole mission in terms of witness to the truth. The accused is the central figure and the ultimate judge, while his would-be judges – Pilate and 'the Jews' – are shown to be those on trial here. Pilate proves himself culpable, because despite his threefold avowal of Jesus' innocence, he allows Jesus to be crucified. The Jewish leaders are exposed by their choice of Barabbas, a known bandit and insurrectionary, instead of Jesus, and by their confession of sole allegiance to Caesar.

Even after Jesus has been handed over to be crucified, he is portrayed as in control of events. He carries his own cross, on which the inscription pronounces him to be King of the Jews. While soldiers cast lots for his clothes, he continues to care for his own from the cross by uniting his mother and the Beloved Disciple. Through the terminology of 'completion' in relation to Scripture and to Jesus' cry from the cross, his death is shown to be the fulfilment of God's will and of his own mission. After it is clear that he is dead, his body is pierced with a spear and blood and water flow out, indicating that this death is the source of life, a verdict

to which the Beloved Disciple gives testimony. Jesus' body is given a hasty but proper burial and is prepared with an amount of spices fit for a king.

The Resurrection account (20.1–31) begins with Mary Magdalene's discovery of the empty tomb and is followed by the Beloved Disciple seeing and believing on entering the tomb. Mary Magdalene then meets but does not at first recognize Jesus. When she does, she is commissioned to announce to the disciples that Jesus is ascending. At an appearance to the disciples later on the same day, the risen Jesus authorizes and empowers them for mission. At a further appearance to them, Thomas, absent previously and still unbelieving, now utters the climactic confession, 'My Lord and my God' (20.28). The narrative comes to an initial conclusion with a statement of why it has been written, emphasizing the need, if its readers are to obtain life, for belief in Jesus as the Christ and the sort of Christ who is Son of God.

The epilogue (21.1–25) opens with the risen Jesus appearing to his disciples in Galilee, enabling them to make an extraordinary catch of fish, symbolic of the success of their mission when directed by Jesus. The episode leads into a dialogue between Peter and Jesus, accompanied by comments from the narrator, which ties up some loose ends from the main narrative about the relationships between Jesus and Peter and between Peter and the Beloved Disciple. Peter is rehabilitated after his threefold denial through a threefold avowal of love for Jesus and a threefold commissioning to feed Jesus' sheep, and is told that he will die a martyr's death. There has been a rumour that Jesus said that the Beloved Disciple would not die before his final coming. This rumour is scotched and the epilogue concludes with the narrator making clear that the Beloved Disciple will bear faithful witness through his involvement in the writing of the Gospel. In these ways the epilogue bridges the gap between the time of the earlier story and the time of its implied readers.

In attempting to gain an overall perspective on the narrative, with which more detailed study can then be in interplay, it is helpful to consider its plot. The three most basic categories for plot analysis are commission, complication and resolution. In the main plot of this narrative Jesus has been given a commission by God. Indeed he repeatedly describes God as 'the Father who sent me' and speaks of the task or work God has given him to do (cf. e.g. 4.34; 9.4; 17.4). The nature of the commission is described in a variety of ways, some of which are explicitly formulated as mission statements ('I have come to ...'). Among the more prominent descriptions are making God or God's name known (cf. 1.18; 17.6, 26), being glorified and bringing glory to God (cf. e.g. 13.31–2; 17.4), bringing life (cf. e.g. 3.16; 10.10; 17.2), bearing witness to the truth (cf. e.g. 3.32–3; 8.14; 18.36) and judging (cf. e.g. 5.22, 27; 8.15, 16; 9.39). The complication or element of conflict in the plot is provided

by the resistance to Jesus' mission on the part of a number of opponents, who include the chief priests and Pharisees, 'the Jews' in the sense of unbelieving Jews who reject Jesus' witness, 'the world' in its negative sense of humanity hostile to God, the devil or ruler of this world, Judas, and Pilate. The opposition's rejection of Jesus' mission takes the form of interrogations, accusations, charges, attempts to arrest him and to stone him, the Sanhedrin's verdict that he must die, his final arrest, interrogation by Annas, trial before Pilate, judgement and crucifixion. Despite the apparent success of the opposition in ending Jesus' mission, this ironically turns out to be the resolution of the plot, the goal or 'the hour' to which it has all the time been moving. Jesus' cry from the cross – 'It is completed' or 'It is finished' (19.30) – indicates that the culmination of his mission lies in his death (cf. also the anticipation of this in 17.4). The resolution includes not only the accomplishment of the commission but the judgement and overcoming of the opposition. Jesus' hour with its suffering and death is to be seen as involving both the judgement of this world (12.31) and the conquering of the world (16.33).

The pattern of this plot is of crucial significance for the message conveyed by the narrative. The varying descriptions of Jesus' commission are not simply disparate but form a network of motifs that are linked thematically, especially by their dominant juridical associations. Jesus is sent as God's uniquely authorized agent in a process of divine judgement that is taking place. Within that process he is both witness and judge. The issue at stake is the truth about God's identity or name and about God's glory, the divine reputation and honour, both of which are inseparable from Jesus' identity and glory. The outcome of the process is either eternal life or condemnation, and the verdict depends not only on the divine action in Jesus but on the human response to Jesus. The resolution of the plot in Jesus' death entails a radical reversal of ordinary categories of judgement. Against all appearances, it means that God is most truly known in the weakness and suffering of Jesus' death as a victim and that the divine glory and honour is most fully displayed in the humiliation and shame of the crucified Messiah. What is more, the death of Jesus is the focus for God's judgement of the world. To appreciate the interrelation of juridical motifs in John's narrative, it must be remembered that in the world of thought of the Jewish Scriptures, which this Gospel to a large extent inhabits, divine judgement was not primarily a negative concept. For God to act as judge was for God to establish justice and to restore conditions of well-being. To call on God as judge frequently involved asking God to be faithful to the covenant and to rescue Israel from its plight. So for God to enact justice was also for God to save. To say, therefore, that in this narrative God's judgement is carried out in Jesus' death is to make a primarily salvific point. Through Jesus' death God deals with the world's plight and restores conditions of well-being through

establishing the positive verdict of life, symbolized in the blood and water that flow from Jesus' side.

Finally, this analysis of the plot, concentrating on the commission of the central character and seeing the resolution in his death, raises two further issues about the shape and content of the narrative. Does it not make the resurrection accounts superfluous (a criticism of this Gospel by, among others, Bultmann 1955: 56)? And does it not neglect the substantial amount of attention devoted in the narrative to followers of Jesus? It could be said in response to both questions that this sort of analysis inevitably deals with the protagonist and the main story line that centres around him and with a commission that he consciously carries out. But this still does not entirely meet the objection about the resurrection, because this narrative is distinctive in making not only God but also Jesus himself the agent of his resurrection (cf. esp. 10.17–18). What needs to be added, therefore, is that in this narrative the notion of Jesus' death as glory or as exaltation presupposes his resurrection. The climax of the story as a whole is not the death as such or the resurrection as such but the exaltation of the crucified Jesus in a resurrected body. Jesus has claimed in his mission to be the embodiment of resurrection and life (cf. 11.25) and through his death has rendered the verdict of life, and now the claim and the verdict are confirmed and substantiated in the resurrection accounts. In those accounts the risen Jesus tells Mary Magdalene to pass on the message that he is ascending (20.17), so that both death and resurrection are integral stages in his exaltation and return to the Father who sent and commissioned him. As the incarnate Logos, in whom was life, Jesus does not abandon the body but ascends to the Father with a body marked by death yet transformed by life (20.20).

The role of Jesus' followers is important for the plot, because the process of divine judgement reaches its decisive stage in Jesus' death and resurrection yet continues to be worked out through the mission of these followers in the world. What this will entail is previewed within Jesus' public mission through the lengthy account of the man born blind, his interrogation, increasingly bold witness and eventual expulsion from the synagogue (9.1–41). It is particularly in the Farewell section (13.1–17.26) that disciples are prepared for their future mission, as they are given a fuller understanding of Jesus and his death and told that, like Jesus, they are to be witnesses, a role for which they have been qualified by having accompanied Jesus from the beginning and in which they will have the help of the witness of the Spirit as Advocate (15.26–7). Critical for their role in the midst of persecution and trial is that they be a community of love and unity in a sustaining relationship with Jesus. For this subsidiary story line about the disciples the resurrection accounts are again by no means superfluous. It is not until after the resurrection that they are actually commissioned and empowered with the Spirit to engage

in a mission involving a declaration of judgement. This declaration reflects the divine verdict and is one of either the forgiveness or retention of sins, depending on the response to their witness (20.21–3). The epilogue takes the story line about the continuation of Jesus' mission through his followers, and especially through the important roles of Peter and the Beloved Disciple, up into the time of the readers. The shape and sequence of the narrative remain significant in this secondary story line. The most extensive material on the disciples' continuation of Jesus' cause in the world (13.1–17.26) comes before their post-resurrection mission and in fact before the passion narrative. This enables believing readers to see Jesus' witness under interrogation, trial, suffering and death as a paradigm for what they have just been told about the witness of his followers. What is more, the juxtaposition of Peter's failure and Jesus' steadfastness under interrogation (18.12–21) reinforces the starkly contrasting choices which confront them in their continuation of the Gospel's story. Before the epilogue concludes, however, Peter's rehabilitation will provide the encouragement that failure is not necessarily the last word.

Further Reading

For a survey of the overall narrative, see D. M. Smith, *The Theology of the Gospel of John* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 20–48, and for discussion of an outline, see R. E. Brown, *An Introduction to the Gospel of John*, ed. F. J. Moloney (New York: Doubleday, 2003), 298–316. For various approaches to structure and plot, see R. A. Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), 77–98; F. F. Segovia, 'The Journey(s) of the Word of God: A Reading of the Plot of the Fourth Gospel', *Semeia* 53 (1991), 23–54; M. W. G. Stibbe, *John's Gospel* (London: Routledge, 1994); R. A. Culpepper, 'The Plot of John's Story of Jesus', *Interpretation* 49 (1995), 347–58.

GENRE

After exploring the sequence and shape of the narrative and its story lines, there is still the question – what sort of narrative is John's story of Jesus? The Fourth Gospel describes itself in two ways. There is a reference to 'this book' (20.30), but this leaves a similar question – what sort of book? There is also a reference to its story as a witness to Jesus' significance (21.24). But witness or testimony is not itself a genre; it can be given in a variety of literary forms. The term 'Gospel' is also not particularly helpful in determining genre. In its early Christian usage it denoted the proclamation of good news, but it only became attached to written accounts of Jesus' life or teachings later, during the second century. The canonical

Gospels with their accounts of the mission of Jesus, written in Greek, are most likely to have been thought of by their first readers as sharing the broad characteristics of the *bios* or Life, that is, as belonging to the literary genre of ancient biography. The conventions for an ancient biography should not be confused with those for a modern one. The genre of *bios* was a flexible one and operated within a continuum that stretched from ancient history writing on the one side through to the encomium on the other. Ancient Lives also often shared features with other sorts of writing such as moral philosophy or the romance or novel.

To be sure, the canonical Gospels have features that make them distinctive within ancient biography. In their accounts of Jesus they have been influenced by accounts of the history of Israel and of its leaders and prophets within the Jewish Scriptures and the writings of the second temple period. These, of course, see Israel's God at work in history, but they also, especially in the later of these writings, already show the influence of Hellenistic historiography. In addition to their concern with God's purposes in history, the Gospel writers also attribute an ultimate significance to Jesus and pay particular attention to his death, and the purpose of their accounts is to persuade their readers to believe in Jesus as Messiah and Son of God. Yet these are differences in content rather than form. In any case, ancient biographers were interested in the impact of their subjects and their significance for ethical and philosophical issues, they could give the greatest amount of space to what they considered the subject's most important period, they wrote their Lives for many different purposes, and in the process they employed a variety of rhetorical techniques to persuade their readers.

Just as the Gospels of Matthew and Luke follow that of Mark, in presenting the message about Jesus in the form of an ancient biography, so also, despite its distinctive features, does the Fourth Gospel. The question of genre is important because it indicates the shared general expectations of author and readers about a particular work. In particular, questions of historicity loom large in the study of the Gospels, not least John's Gospel. In these matters it is vital that present-day readers do not impose modern expectations about biographical or historical writing. It has become clear that the Fourth Gospel tells a well-crafted, deliberately patterned and thematically coherent story about Jesus. But what is its relation to the actual events of Jesus' life and to what he taught? Modern categories have often forced polarized answers – either the whole story is historical in its detail (and therefore complex harmonizations with the Synoptics also need to be sought) or it is an imaginative, even if theologically profound, creation (and therefore of little worth for gaining historical knowledge of Jesus). Examination of some of the features of ancient biography helps to reshape modern assumptions and to indicate the general range of expectations about historicity within which John's Life of Jesus would have been expected to fall.