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Challenging Perspectives on the Gospel of John

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Table of Contents

Preface	v
DAVID WENHAM	
Paradigms and Possibilities in the Study of John's Gospel	
1. Introduction	1
2. Questions of History and Sources	2
3. Questions of Context, Corpus, and Community	5
4. Community, Eternal Life, and Sacraments	8
5. Narrative Readings of John's Gospel	10
6. John 13 as Literary, Theological, and Historical Text	10
7. Conclusion	13
PETER W. ENSOR	
The Johannine Sayings of Jesus and the Question of Authenticity	
1. Introduction	14
2. Distinctive Characteristics of Jesus' Johannine Speech	16
2.1 Vocabulary	16
2.2 Grammar	17
2.3 Literary Form	17
2.4 Literary Devices	17
2.5 Theological Emphases	18
3. Toward a Less Johannine Distinctive Jesus	18
3.1 Milieu	18
3.2 Vocabulary	19
3.3 Style	20
3.4 Theology	21
3.4.1 Eschatology	21
3.4.2 Christology	21
4. The Question of Authenticity	22
4.1 The Concept of Authenticity	22
4.2 The Criteria for Authenticity	24
5. The Presence of Authentic Material in John's Gospel	25
5.1 <i>Ipsissima Verba</i>	25
5.2 Paralleled <i>Ipsissima Dicta</i>	26
5.3 Unparalleled <i>Ipsissima Dicta</i>	27
5.4 Paralleled <i>Ipsissimae Sententiae</i>	28
5.4.1 John 5:36	28
5.4.2 John 14:10c	29
5.4.3 John 15:25a	30
5.4.4 Implications of Paralleled <i>Ipsissimae Sententiae</i>	31
5.5 Unparalleled <i>Ipsissimae Sententiae</i>	32

6. Conclusion	32
RICHARD BAUCKHAM	
Messianism According to the Gospel of John	
1. Introduction	34
2. Three Eschatological Figures (1:19–21)	36
3. The Prophet	40
3.1 The Prophet Like Moses in Jewish Literature	41
3.2 Moses-like Prophets Who Led Popular Movements	42
3.3 The Prophet in John 6 and 7	49
4. The Messiah	54
4.1 Messianic Titles	54
4.1.1 “Messiah” in John	54
4.1.2 “Messiah” in Other Jewish Literature	54
4.1.3 Other Messianic Titles in John	57
4.1.3.1 Son of God	57
4.1.3.2 King of Israel	59
4.2 Origins of the Messiah	60
4.3 Signs Done by the Messiah	63
4.4 Messiah’s Eternal Reign (John 12:34)	64
4.5 No “Son of Man”	67
5. Conclusion	67
ANDREAS J. KÖSTENBERGER	
The Destruction of the Second Temple and the Composition of the Fourth Gospel	
1. Introduction: The Search for the Setting of John	69
1.1 Traditional Setting of John	69
1.2 Enlightenment Disputes	70
1.3 The Johannine Community Hypothesis	72
1.4 The Johannine Community Hypothesis Undermined	72
1.5 Back to the Future	77
2. Destruction of the Temple as a Setting for the Fourth Gospel	78
2.1 Date of the Destruction Relative to John	78
2.2 Impact of the Destruction	79
3. The Gospel of John – and Other Jewish Responses to the Loss of the Temple	82
3.1 Jewish Strategies for Coping with the Loss of the Temple	82
3.2 John’s Gospel as Jewish Response to the Destruction of the Temple	85
3.3 “Letting John Be John”	88
3.4 “Points of Sensitivity” in John’s Gospel	89
3.5 Messianic Expectations and Jews Doing Without a Temple	92
3.6 Conclusion	93
4. Reading the Fourth Gospel Against the Destruction of the Second Temple	94
4.1 Selection and Delimitation of the Evidence	94
4.2 Jesus as Fulfillment of Jewish Institutions and Festivals	97
4.2.1 The Word Made Flesh: The New Tabernacle (1:14)	97
4.2.2 Jesus and the Open Heaven: The New House of God (1:51)	99
4.2.3 Clearing the Sanctuary: The New Temple (2:14–22)	99

4.2.4 The Inadequacy of Stone Sanctuaries: The New Worship (4:19–24) ...	101
4.2.5 Jesus at the Feast of Tabernacles: The New Provision (7:1–8:59)	103
4.2.6 Jesus at the Feast of Dedication: The New Liberation (10:22–39)	104
4.3 Jesus as the Proper Focus of Worship	104
4.3.1 Giving Sight to the Blind: A New Way of Seeing (9:38)	104
4.3.2 Eliciting Faith from the Sceptic: Seeing and Believing (20:28)	105
4.4 And What of the Temple?	105
4.4.1 The Destruction of the “Holy Place”: The Temple as a Symbol of Jewish Religious Identity (11:48–52)	105
4.4.2 A Telling Silence: Setting Aside the Temple (13–21)	106
5. Conclusion	107
ANDREW GREGORY	
The Third Gospel? The Relationship of John and Luke Reconsidered	
1. Introduction	109
2. The Relationship of John and Luke in Recent Scholarship	110
2.1 Twentieth Century Uncertainty	110
2.2 A Fresh Idea	111
3. A Test of Luke’s Use of John: Luke 24:12 John 20:3–10	114
3.1 Background	114
3.2 The Hypothesis of John’s Direct Use of Luke: Frans Neiryck	116
3.3 The Hypothesis of Luke’s Direct Use of John: Mark Matson	118
3.4 Continuing Debate	119
3.5 Conclusion	121
4. John as Third Gospel: Theological and Historical Consequences	122
4.1 Theological Consequences	122
4.2 Importance of the Relationship of John and the Synoptics for the Historicity of John	124
4.3 Historical Consequences of Luke’s Use of John	127
5. Conclusion	132
CHARLES E. HILL	
The Fourth Gospel in the Second Century: The Myth of Orthodox Johannophobia	
1. Introduction	135
2. History of the Orthodox Johannophobia Paradigm	136
2.1 Johannophobia Exposed	136
2.2 Origins and Recent Challenges of the Paradigm	137
2.3 Foundations of the Paradigm	139
3. John Among the Orthodox, A.D. 170–200	140
3.1 Positive Use	140
3.2 Explicit Opposition	142
4. John Among the Gnostics Before A.D. 170	145
4.1 Did Heterodox “Johannophilia” Lead to Orthodox “Johannophobia”?	146
4.2 Does All Heterodox Use Signify Affinity?	147
4.3 Gnostic (Non-)Reception of John	149
5. The “Silence” of the Orthodox Prior to A.D. 170	150
5.1 Orthodox “Silence,” A.D. 150–170	150
5.2 Justin Martyr	153

5.3 Orthodox "Silence" Before A.D. 150	159
6. Conclusion	168
MARK STIBBE	
Telling the Father's Story: The Gospel of John as Narrative Theology	
1. Introduction	170
2. Studying the Father in John	171
3. Characterization of the Father in John's Gospel	173
3.1 The Narrator's Comments About the Father	174
3.2 The Father's Inward Speech	177
3.3 Reports About the Father by Other Characters	178
3.3.1 The Priority of the Voice of the Son	178
3.3.2 Report From the Voice of the Son	179
3.4 Words Spoken by the Father	184
3.4.1 Speech as Self-Characterization	184
3.4.2 The Father's Self-Characterization	185
3.5 The Father's Appearances and Actions	186
3.5.1 Appearances	187
3.5.2 Actions	187
3.6 Rich Synthesis of Opposites	189
4. Conclusion: Putting Father First	191
STEVE MOTYER	
Narrative Theology in John 1-5	
1. Introduction	194
2. Narrative Theology	195
2.1 Theology in Narrative	195
2.2 Theology in Metanarrative	196
2.3 Narrative as Testimony to Experience	198
3. John's Theology in Metanarrative and Testimony	200
3.1 Narrator as Witness	200
3.2 Foundation of a Metanarrative	201
3.3 Meet the Narrator: Who are "We"?	203
3.4 Sources of John's Narrative as Testimony	207
4. Conclusion	208
JOHN LIERMAN	
The Mosaic Pattern of John's Christology	
1. Introduction	210
2. Jesus as the Prophet Like Moses	211
2.1 Allusions to the Prophethood of Moses	211
2.2 The Signs of Moses	213
3. Faith in Moses, Faith in Christ	214
3.1 Faith in Moses	214
3.2 Faith in Christ	215
4. Jesus as the Mosaic King	216
4.1 Jesus as King	216
4.2 Moses as King	217
4.2.1 Evidence From Jewish Scriptures	218

4.2.2 Moses as King in Jewish Literature	219
4.2.3 Moses as King in Mark 6:34-44 and John 6:1-15	221
4.3 Conclusion	223
5. The Mosaic Disciplemaker	224
6. The Divine Moses	225
6.1 The Heavenly Advocacy of Moses	225
6.2 Unity Between God and Moses	226
6.3 Exaltation of Moses	228
6.3.1 Moses as God	229
6.3.2 Jesus as God	231
7. Conclusion	232
GARY BURGE	
Revelation and Discipleship in St. John's Gospel	
1. Introduction	235
2. Revelation and John's Literary Drama	237
3. John as the Reader's Mentor	242
3.1 John's Strategy of Addressing the Reader	242
3.1.1 Obvious Interventions	242
3.1.2 Non-Interventions	243
3.1.3 Citing the Old Testament	243
3.1.4 Using Enigma	245
3.2 Hierarchies of Meaning	246
3.3 Invisible Christology	247
3.4 John as Mentor	247
4. The Promise of Understanding	248
4.1 John as Example	248
4.2 Present Confusion	248
4.3 Promised Enlightenment	249
5. Revelation and John's Experience	250
6. Theological Implications	252
GABI RENZ	
Nicodemus: An Ambiguous Disciple?	
A Narrative Sensitive Investigation	
1. Introduction	255
2. Nicodemus Before John's Audience	258
2.1 John 3:1-21, An Ambiguous Encounter	259
2.1.1 Meet Nicodemus	259
2.1.2 First Impressions	263
2.1.3 Implications of Characterization	264
2.2 John 7:50-52, An Ambiguous Defence	264
2.2.1 Nicodemus Versus the Pharisees	265
2.2.2 Double Defence	266
2.2.3 Ambiguity Perpetuated	268
2.2.4 The Challenge for the Audience	270
2.3 John 19:38-42, Ambiguity Resolved	270
2.3.1 Positive Reading of the Burial Passage	274

2.3.2 Negative Reading of the Burial Passage	277
2.3.3 Summary	279
3. John's Audience: Not in Twilight	279
4. Conclusion	282
BILL SALIER	
Jesus, the Emperor, and the Gospel According to John	
1. Introduction	284
2. Significance of the Imperial Cult	286
3. The Cult and the Fourth Gospel	290
3.1 In the Beginning Was the Word (John 1:1)	290
3.2 A Benefactor Provides Wine (John 2:1-11)	291
3.3 Truly the Saviour of the World (John 4:42)	292
3.4 Signs and Healings (John 5:1-9; 9:1-12)	293
3.5 Benefactor Again (John 6:1-14)	294
3.6 Kings "Walking on Water" (John 6:16-21)	295
3.7 A Triumphal Entry (John 12:12-15)	296
3.8 Peace the World Cannot Give (John 14:27; 16:33; 20:19, 21)	296
3.9 Death and Resurrection of a King (John 18:28-19:22)	297
4. Theological Impulse and Pastoral Reflex	298
5. Conclusion	301
Bibliography	302
Citation Index	335
Author Index	357
Subject Index	362

Paradigms and Possibilities in the Study of John's Gospel

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1. Introduction

There is nothing new under the sun. Moreover, "of making many books there is no end. Much study is a weariness of the flesh" (Eccl. 11:12). Dangers of pointlessness, fruitlessness, and fatigue notwithstanding, the author of Ecclesiastes knew there was a place for new books – he wrote one – and for new thinking. In his day, as in ours, there were old platitudes to be challenged, new questions to be asked, new ideas to be heard. He wrote accordingly. We still need such books.

But do we need them in the ancient discipline of biblical studies? Biblical scholars are often asked how there can still be anything new to say about the Bible. Are scholars playing games, seeking originality where originality is no longer possible? Or is biblical scholarship perhaps really a matter of vanity (of vanities)? This certainly seems possible. Scholars regularly talk to other scholars about scholarly issues in a language that only other scholars can understand. A few mainly way-out and exotic theories make the headlines, and occasionally even make money, but the great bulk of scholarship has little obvious impact in the wider world.

In reply, the scholar insists that if the Bible has not changed, its readers have. New questions and perspectives appear on the agenda: liberation theology, for example, has helped us look at the Bible with new eyes, as have feminism, the charismatic movement, narrative approaches to literature, and post-modernism. Some of these perspectives are more esoteric than others, but even the ones that target mainly the academic mind eventually trickle out of the academy. At the same time, some new developments are mainly popular, for example the recent renewed interest in the apocryphal gospels, with Dan Brown's fictional *Da Vinci Code* raising all sorts of questions in people's minds.

There are, of course, dangers with scholarship that responds to new agendas. One in particular is that of remaking theology to suit ourselves (as Albert Schweitzer famously observed apropos of the quest for the historical Jesus); to put it more starkly, we may end up making God in our