

Survey of Major Models for the Occasion of Fourth Gospel¹

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The Fourth Gospel does not describe the occasion that prompted its writing.² Its purpose is apparent from John 20:31: evangelistic (apologetic, polemic, judicial in nature) and pastoral.

1. Traditional (apostolic or eyewitness):

- **Origins:** Early and widespread Christian church, probably faced with heresies (e.g., docetism, Gnosticism, and Montanism), generally affirmed that John wrote and/or published the Fourth Gospel as an eyewitness account.
- **Major Proponents:** *Ancient:* Justin, Irenaeus, Theophilus, Clement, Eusebius, and Jerome; *Modern:* Schleiermacher, Westcott, Sanday, Thiessen, Köstenberger, Keener, and Bauckham.
- **Description:** Irenaeus, a presbyter of Lyon, and Theophilus, a presbyter of Antioch in Syria, were the first post-apostolic writers (ca. 178-180 and 180-183/5 C.E. respectively) to link the Fourth Gospel explicitly with John (presumably the apostle and son of Zebedee).³ Irenaeus was also the first extra-biblical writer to connect John with the “beloved disciple” (BD), an anonymous and idealized expression that appears in five scenes in the Fourth Gospel (Jn 13:23-25, 19:26-27, 20:1-10, 21:2-7, 20-23).⁴ The

¹ Based in part on Gary A. Staszak, “A Critical Introduction to the Gospel of John,” paper submitted to Gospel of John Seminar, Turner School of Theology, Amridge University, Fall 2011; Andreas J. Köstenberger, *A Theology of John’s Gospels and Letters* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 51-72; and Andreas J. Köstenberger, “The Destruction of the Temple and the Composition of the Fourth Gospel,” in *Challenging Perspectives of the Gospel of John*, ed. John Lierman (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006), 69-108. The goal eventually is to include a bibliography of the works of various proponents cited in this survey.

² The immediate occasion (historical setting) is the circumstance, event, situation, or combination thereof that prompted the author(s) to write (e.g., Gospel of John). The larger occasion includes the ideas, attitudes, and emotions behind the composition. Andreas J. Köstenberger, *John* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004), 8, also lists early Gentile missions and the development of Christian theology in the late first century as other occasions. Others have proffered a correction of a remnant of a John the Baptist cult in Ephesus. These reasons are not covered because they are not regularly cited.

³ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 3.1.1; and Theophilus, *To Autolycus*, 2.22.

⁴ See Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 3.1.1, for his claims about the Gospel’s provenance and portrayal of its author John as “the disciple of the Lord, who also had leaned upon his breast,” a similar description used of the beloved disciple in Jn 21:20 (cf. Jn 13:23). Similar descriptions are found in a letter of the Ephesian presbyter Polycrates (ca. 196 C.E.) and Origen’s fifth commentary on John (ca. 233 C.E.), both of which are preserved by Eusebius (*Ecclesiastical History*, 3.31.3; 5.24.2; 6.25.9-10). On account of the BD’s close association with Jesus, efforts have been made to identify this character with John, the apostle and son of Zebedee, and, ultimately, the author of the Fourth Gospel, through a series of harmonizations (e.g., the frequent appearance of the beloved disciple with Peter in John and Acts, Synoptic descriptions of the apostolic participants at Jesus’ last Passover, and the short list of disciples at the Sea of Tiberius scene in Jn 21). Absolute identity is impossible because the internal evidence is inconclusive (cf. Jn 21:2) and external evidence is uncertain. Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel according to John*, Anchor Bible 29 (New Haven, CT: Yale University, 1966), xcii-xcviii, reviews the evidence related to the various identifications of the beloved disciple, ranging from John Mark to Lazarus to John the son of Zebedee.

statement in Jn 21:24 taken *prima facie* indicates that “the disciple whom Jesus loved . . . who also reclined upon his breast at supper” in 21:20 was the author of the Gospel or, at the very least, the eyewitness source behind the Gospel’s tradition. The Muratorian Fragment (ca. 180-200 C.E.), an early listing of New Testament books, essentially supports the early tradition that John wrote his Gospel based on the urging of his disciples and fellow-presbyters who later revised it (see lines 9-33).⁵ Justin at Ephesus (ca. 135 C.E.) was the first to intimate the apostle John lived in the city during the late first century.⁶ According to Clement of Alexandria (ca. 200 C.E.), John initially preached his Gospel and composed it only after the Synoptics (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) as a supplement to the others.⁷ The tradition for apostolic authorship was universally “undisputed . . . well-known in the churches throughout the world” by the time Eusebius completed his history of the church (ca. 326).⁸

- **Weaknesses:** These early sources are recollections or polemical works, not critical treatises on history. Many of their manuscripts are fragmentary and preserved in second-hand works, such as Eusebius’ history, written a few centuries after the presumed composition of John (ca. 85-90 C.E.). Irenaeus’ testimony has been criticized as propaganda because he had a vested interest in preserving the apostolic legacy of the Fourth Gospel in his refutation of the second-century Gnostics who commended and appealed to it for their interpretations (e.g., Valentinus: *Gospel of Truth* and Heracleon).
- **Strengths:** The evidence is widespread and early (less than a hundred years from composition). Irenaeus’ witness in particular could essentially be considered that of Polycarp (ca. 100-160 C.E.).⁹ Bruce believes the Muratorian Canon’s writer based his

Brown (xcviii) concludes this latter figure is the “strongest hypothesis, if one is prepared to give credence to the Gospel’s claim of an eyewitness source.” His view was more traditional in his first volume, but later he postulated a series of stages (phases) of development for the Gospel among a “Johannine community” (see third model below).

⁵ This notion is later reflected in Clement’s writings (n. 7). The late second-century dating is disputed. A new emerging consensus dates the fragment to the 300s C.E., primarily due to the work of Albert Sundberg Jr. For more details, see Gregory Allen Robbins, “Muratorian Fragment,” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freeman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 4:928-929.

⁶ Justin, *Dialogue with Trypho*, 81.4 (cf. Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 4.18.6-8). See Polycrates as preserved in Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 5.24.3-4, then also Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* (2.22.5; 3.1.1; 3.3.4) for his claim John lived at Ephesus until the time of the Roman Emperor Trajan (98-117 C.E.).

⁷ Clement’s writing (e.g., *Hypotyposes*) as preserved by Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 6.14.7. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 3.1.1, also places the writing of the Fourth Gospel after the Synoptics (n. 8).

⁸ Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 3.24.7, 11-13, 17 (cf. Augustine, *On the Harmony of Gospels*, 4.7, 5.8).

⁹ During his youth, Irenaeus was a close associate of Polycarp, the apostle John’s disciple, from whom he learned of Jesus (see Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 3.3.4; cf. *Ecclesiastical History*, 4.14.3-8 and also 5.20.4-8 for Eusebius’ description of that relationship from a part of Irenaeus’ letter to Florinus). Brown, *Gospel*, xc-xcii, reviews the early evidence related to the Gospel’s authorship, especially as it relates to Irenaeus’ claims about John. Brown (xcii) concludes that despite valid objections, “Irenaeus’ statement is far from being disproved.” The debate related to a certain “John the elder” in contrast to the apostle John in Papias’ *Interpretation of our Lord’s Declarations* (Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 3.39.4-13) is more properly associated with the authorship of the Apocalypse (Revelation).

statement on an ancient tradition, despite the dispute over its dating.¹⁰ This source corresponds with the Fourth Gospel's internal evidence, which indicates it is an eyewitness account (cf. John 19:35, 21:24a, 25), whose testimony was verified, and possibly revised, by close associates (cf. John 1:14, 16, 21:24b). It is supported by the early scribal record. The appellation KATA ΙΩΑΝΝΗΝ (Eng., "According to John") was probably affixed sometime by the mid-second century C.E. to this gospel to differentiate it from the other three Synoptic Gospels with which it appears to have circulated in codex form shortly thereafter. Papyrus 66 (ca. mid-second century) offers the earliest textual evidence from Egypt regarding the designation of Johannine authorship.¹¹ Despite modern skepticism regarding authorship, Köstenberger cogently observes: "Although the hypothesis of apostolic authorship of the Fourth Gospel is regularly rejected in recent Johannine scholarship, the hypothesis has never been decisively refuted and continues to be at least as plausible as alternative explanations."¹²

2. Gnosticism:

- **Origins:** The late nineteenth- to early twentieth-century German school of thought known as history of religions (*Religionsgeschichtliche Schule*) viewed religion as a social-cultural phenomenon that evolved from primitive to complex, and John's supposed Gnosticism was an outgrowth of a syncretistic ancient movement.
- **Major Proponents:** Michaelis, Loisy, Gunkel, Bauer, Westcott, Bultmann, Käsemann, Bornkamm, Schottroff, Thyen, and Westermann.
- **Description:** Certain Johannine elements, words (*logos*, see, ascend, way, etc.) and concepts (e.g., pre-existence, heavenly revelation, polarities such as God/world, light/dark, truth/falsehood, above/below, etc.), are considered to be products of Gnostic influence.¹³ The proposal heavily promoted pre-Christian Gnosticism and its influence on the Fourth Gospel (e.g., Bultmann and the Gnostic redeemer myth). Irenaeus and Jerome claim John wrote a gospel to address the doctrinal heresies of the early docetic (possibly proto-Gnostic) Cerinthus (ca. 100+ C.E).¹⁴

¹⁰ F. F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John: Introduction, Exposition and Notes* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), 10.

¹¹ Papyrus 75, a codex from the late-second to early-third century C.E. that contains Luke and John, also bears the designation "The Gospel According to John" (though it shows some variation of spelling in the Greek).

¹² Köstenberger, *John*, 7. See also Donald Guthrie, "John's Gospel," in *New Testament Introduction*, 4th ed. (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 1990), 257, n. 1, who describes the state of the patristic position on the internal evidence: "It is significant that this identification was assumed without question by patristic writers, who regarded the apostle John as the author of the gospel."

¹³ See Claus Westermann, *The Gospel of John in Light of the Old Testament*, tran. Siegfried S. Schatzmann (Peabody, MA: Zondervan, 1998), as an example that follows a hybrid approach related to this model.

¹⁴ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 3.11.1; and Jerome, *Lives of Illustrious Men*, 9. Jerome's version also contains the element that Asiatic bishops requested that John write a gospel to address the doctrinal docetism of Cerinthus and later Ebionites, who believed that Jesus was a mere human until the Holy Spirit descended upon him

- **Weaknesses:** Gnosticism is a generally considered a second-century phenomenon; at most these similarities/affinities could refer to an emerging or proto-Gnosticism. They are inconclusive for determining a Gnostic influence on the Gospel's composition and the hypothesis has not been universally accepted.¹⁵ The question of methodology also plagues such assertions about Gnostic influence on John because Gnostic similarities in the later dated Nag Hammadi codices could have been influenced by John and are fundamentally different in nature than the Fourth Gospel.¹⁶ The affinities between Johannine expressions and intertestamental and Qumran literature (cf. Bar. 3:20-37; 1QM and 1QS 3:13-4:26: e.g., light/darkness, truth/error, "sons of light," etc.) reveals these concepts, including *logos* (Word)/Wisdom traditions were more widely circulating in first-century Judaism and not simply a matter of Hellenistic (Greek) or later Gnostic thought. Resting on the work of Kilpatrick, Robinson notes John's vocabulary closely resembles the Septuagint and Josephus rather than Philo (Alexandrian Hellenistic Jew) and the *Hermetica* (Greek wisdom texts).¹⁷ Recently, Gordley proposed a new synthesis of John's Prologue as a Jewish didactic hymn, a song designed to instruct its audience through historical recitation (e.g., Ps. 34:11).¹⁸
- **Strengths:** This proposal possibly explains the origins of the Prologue and the predominant usage of the Gospel by early Gnostics who valued it for their exegesis. It may provide a possible occasion for the writing of the First and Second Epistles of John, which criticize the docetic heresy (1 Jn 4:2-3; 2 Jn 7-10). It is argued that the schismatics of the Johannine epistles understood the Gospel in docetic (possibly Gnostic) terms and seceded from the Johannine community.

at baptism (i.e., "Word became flesh"). If Jerome's report is true, then it might provide some basis for the addition of the prologue in a reconstruction of a proto-gospel.

¹⁵ Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the Gospel of John*, ed. Francis J. Moloney (New York: Doubleday, 2003), 120-124.

¹⁶ Brown, *Introduction*, 117-120; and Saeed Hamid-Khani, *Revelation and Concealment of Christ* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000), 129-130.

¹⁷ John A. T. Robinson, *Redating the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976) 268; and Donald Guthrie, "John's Gospel," 340.

¹⁸ Matthew Gordley, "The Johannine Prologue and Jewish Didactic Hymn Traditions: A New Case for Reading the Prologue as a Hymn," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 128 (Winter 2009), 781-802. While Gordley's article offered thought-provoking analysis in regard to the origins of the hymnic elements of John's Prologue, it offered no new synthesis on the background of the *logos* concept in the gospel. At most, it identified the term *logos* more centrally within contemporary first-century Hellenistic Jewish Wisdom traditions or a Palestinian Jewish cultural setting, one in which John the apostle would no doubt have been at home.

3. Two-Level Drama: Johannine Community and Expulsion Theory:¹⁹

- **Origins:** Proposal-movement in late 1960s-early 2000s within Johannine studies that theorized the reason for the Gospel's writing rests with the expulsion of early Jewish Christians from the synagogue and the development of Gospel within a Johannine community. The final form of the Gospel of John reflects the phases or stages of its composition that sketches the life of a reconstructed Johannine community.
- **Major Proponents:** The hypothesis was first popularized by Brown (1966, 1970, 1979) and later classically developed by Martyn (1968, 1979, and 2003).²⁰
- **Description:** The Gospel was composed in the late first century C.E. in reaction to being excommunicated from the parent synagogue for confessing Jesus as messiah. This hypothesis rests on three expulsion passages (Jn 9:22, 12:42, 16:2) and initially on an assumed anti-Christian insertion of the *Birkath ha-Mînîm* (twelfth benediction against the heretics) into synagogue liturgy by the Jamnian/Yavneh sages (ca. 90 C.E.). Central to the argument is an allegorical reading of John 9 and other pericopae (Jn 8:31-59) as a two-level drama (two stories), in which the community's memory of the hostility, experience of alienation, and sectarianism with the synagogue Pharisees are projected onto Jesus' life story and conflict with a group known as the "Jews."
- **Weaknesses:** Support for the expulsion thesis has waned due to **serious** historical, redactional, and exegetical weaknesses. Several developments have undermined its importance, validity, and relevance for the study of John (adopted from and compared with several sources, but nos. 1-7 adopted from Köstenberger).²¹

¹⁹ While the Johannine community and expulsion theses are actually two separate hypotheses, they are intricately linked as presented in several important reconstructions (see n. 20). For example, Raymond E. Brown, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), 22-23, postulates the expulsion from the synagogue occurred during the first phase (50-80 C.E.) and the persecution during phase two (ca. 90 C.E.) of his four-phase reconstruction of the community. He relies on both the Gospel and Johannine Epistle for his reconstruction (ibid., 22-24). Relying on the critique of T. L. Johnson, Robert Kysar, "The Expulsion from the Synagogue: The Tale of a Theory," in *Voyages with John: Charting the Fourth Gospel* (Waco, TX: Baylor University, 2005), 242, suggests that both theses are perhaps essentially and seriously flawed due to their similar reliance on the same method of redaction criticism. His observation supports the notion that these two hypotheses are integrally linked.

²⁰ Brown, *Gospel*, Anchor Bible 29-29A (1966, 1970), lxxiii-lxxv, 651 (Brown later references Martyn's thesis). See n. 19 for Brown's *Community of the Beloved Disciple*. J. Louis Martyn, *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel*, 3rd ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003), 47ff. Martyn's first edition appeared in 1968 and was later revised and expanded in 1979. Brown and Martyn proposed different reasons for the expulsion. The expulsion hypothesis had earlier roots in the writings of Carroll and Davies (Kysar, "The Expulsion from the Synagogue," 237).

²¹ For a chronicle of the rise and fall of the Brown-Martyn hypothesis, see Kysar, "The Expulsion from the Synagogue," 237-245. Portions of the following listing was adapted from Andreas J. Köstenberger, *Theology of John's Gospel*, 55-59; Stephen Motyer, *Your Father the Devil? A New Approach to John and the Jews* (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster, 1997), 92-93; David Flusser, *Judaism of the Second Temple Period: The Jewish Sages and Their Literature* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 26-27, 44-75; and Adele Reinhartz, "John and Judaism," in *Life in Abundance: Studies of John's Gospel in Tribute to Raymond E. Brown* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2005),

- 1) the *birkath ha-mînîm* played a minor role in the separation of Jews and Christians in the first century C.E. (Schäfer 1975),
- 2) post-destruction Judaism (> 70 C.E.) did not move against Jewish Christians and there is no evidence that the *birkath ha-mînîm* or any other formal act played a role in the expulsion from the synagogue (Schiffman and Kimelman 1981),
- 3) Jamnian sages had an open attitude, cursing only those reluctant to commit to ideological pluralism (Cohen 1982),
- 4) the textual evidence reveals a vulnerable foundation for Martyn view's of the development of the twelfth benediction (Horbury 1982),
- 5) the Jamnian sage Eliezer ben Hyrcanus exhibited a outstandingly irenic attitude toward other groups within Judaism, even Samaritans (Neusner 1983),
- 6) the sages lacked any real authority in the Greek-speaking Diaspora until the third century C.E. (Goodman 1987),
- 7) while evidence for the existence of the benediction in the early second century exists, it was probably meant to establish rabbinism as orthodox, a phenomenon that occurred over a longer time period than initially anticipated, possibly beyond the second revolt in 132-135 C.E. (Alexander 1992),²²
- 8) the Johannine evidence does not need to be read as anachronistic and could equally be describing the "post-Easter community generally . . . from the beginning" (Stibbe 1992 citing Hengel 1989 then Robinson 1985),
- 9) the expulsion theory does not fit the rhetoric and reading of the whole Gospel, specifically scenes where Jesus' disciples are comforted by Jews, such as in Jn 11:17-44 (Reinhartz 2001),
- 10) there is "no direct evidence either internal to the gospel or external to it for the existence of a 'Johannine community'" and its experiences (Reinhartz 2005),
- 11) the conflict seen in the epistle of First John could plausibly provide the historical setting for the conflict exhibited in the Fourth Gospel (Thatcher 2006),
- 12) the twelfth benediction possibly first existed in some form as an anti-Sadducean polemic during the Hasmonean Period (142-37 B.C.E.) or earlier before it became fixed in the liturgy (Flusser 2009), and
- 13) the Johannine narrative does not necessarily portray a widespread separation from Judaism as a past, but more as a potential event as indicated by the subjunctives in 9:22, 12:42 and future tense in Jn 16:2 (Staszak 2014).

108-116; Mark W. G. Stibbe, *John as Storyteller: Narrative Criticism and the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 56-61, who cites Martin Hengel, *The Johannine Question* (London: SCM, 1989), 114-117; John A. T. Robinson, *The Priority of John*, ed. J. F. Coakley (London: SCM, 1985; repr., Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2011), 72-91; and Tom Thatcher, *Why John Wrote a Gospel: Jesus—Memory—History* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006), 63-102. See also Adele Reinhartz, *Befriending the Beloved Disciple: A Jewish Reading of the Fourth Gospel* (New York: Continuum, 2001), 37-53; and Hamid-Khani, *Revelation and Concealment*, 175-208, for detailed critiques of Martyn and other proponents of the expulsion-community theory.

²² The earliest recorded alleged reference to the twelfth blessing appears after ca. 135 C.E. (see Justin, *Dialogue*, 16.96). The Babylonian Talmud (*b. Ber.* 28b-29a) claims its composition occurred under the leadership of Gamaliel II (ca. 80-118 C.E.) and at Yavneh (the Sanhedrin met at Yavneh from 70-80 C.E., then again from 116+ C.E.). It would seem a second-century dating for its composition is more plausible, considering Justin's testimony.

- **Strengths:** This hypothesis provides a concise reconstruction for the hostility exhibited in the narrative between Jesus and the term “Jew(s),” and various other complex features.²³ Versions of the Johannine community thesis have been refined to accommodate the demise of the expulsion element. The existence of and relationship between the Johannine Epistles (John 1, 2, 3) presupposes some sort of continuing community or, at the very least, a congregation or network of congregations.

4. Post-70 Conflict—Destruction of Second Temple:

- **Origins:** With waning influence of the Johannine community hypothesis and two-level reading strategy of Brown-Martyn, scholars have searched for more verifiable datum to explain the occasion for the composition of John by looking to historical research of the world of Judaism in first century C.E.
- **Proponents:** Westcott, Dunn, Köstenberger, Motyer, Davies, Draper, Coloe, and Stegemann.
- **Description:** Proponents rightly claim that John presupposes certain events and offers indirect evidence for situations that highlight theological importance (Jesus’ baptism by John, the institution of the memorial of Passover, etc.). As a result, they believe the Fourth Gospel also encodes the post-destruction trauma and crisis of the loss of the second temple in terms a first-century Jewish Judean and Diaspora reader would have understood. Jesus is portrayed as the fulfillment of messianic expectations, in that he inaugurates a fuller manifestation of God’s presence among his people in terms of the festivals (Passover, Sabbath, Tabernacles, Dedication) and other Mosaic-Jewish institutions (sacrifices, tabernacle, temple), a dominant theme of John 2-12. It also addresses several points of sensitivity prevalent in Jewish society at the time (e.g., renewed emphasis on Torah, resurgence of mysticism, etc.).²⁴
- **Weakness:** The narrative does not encode a post-destruction situation (pre- versus post-70 C.E.), though elements of fulfillment (possibly discontinuation) are evident (Jn 4:20). The supersessionist position that often accompanies this hypothesis is largely flawed because it assumes a replacement theology by over-exaggerating narrative rhetoric (Jn 1:14) and failing to adequately address the state of Jewish thought in the first century (e.g., expectations of a renewed or rebuilt temple). For example, Jesus’ resurrection is portrayed as the rebuilding of the temple, *not* its replacement in Jn 2:19. The second half of the Gospel is virtually silent regarding the temple (chs. 13-21, except 18:20).
- **Strengths:** The temple destruction offers an indisputable historical point from which to build a reconstruction. The ensuing national and religious upheaval in Judaism associated

²³ For an exhausting review of the entire issue, see Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 1:194- 228.

²⁴ See Köstenberger, *Theology of John’s Gospel*, 59-72; and Stephen Motyer, *Your Father the Devil?* 35-104, for these and other points of sensitivity.

with the temple's destruction forms a plausible framework for understanding John's persistent encouragement of the reader to identify him- or herself with Jesus (e.g., believe). The crisis of the destruction would offer a plausible resurgence of missions among Jewish people and proselytes in the Greek-speaking Diaspora who likewise would have been affected by the loss of this symbol of Jewish identity (Jn 7:34-35; cf. 12:20-21).

5. Mission Emphasis:

- **Origins:** Recent socio-religious research of early Christianity suggests various groups of Christians were less isolated and maintained close contact and communication.²⁵ Research of the gospel genre strongly indicates John like the Synoptics was written as a theological treatise in a narrative form, which reflected Greco-Roman biographies.
- **Proponents:** Bauckham, Burridge, Hamid-Khani, Alexander, Gorman, Goodman (possibly).
- **Description:** Early patristic writers, such as Clement and Eusebius, viewed John as a supplement to the Synoptics, primarily as a “spiritual” gospel.²⁶ As such, Christology becomes the key to interpreting John: Jesus' identity, role, and function in God's self-revelation and history of salvation. John would have been written to convey information of the words and deeds of Jesus as an example to imitate. Under this thesis, the Fourth Gospel would have enjoyed a broad circulation, maybe initially to Jewish Christians and proselytes (god-fearers) and later to a more universal, Gentile audience.²⁷
- **Weaknesses:** The major weakness of this approach is that it does not address a specific context and concerns of a Johannine community, which is *assumed* by modern scholarship.
- **Strengths:** It does not attempt to differentiate between the situation of Jesus and his disciples at the time of writing, a largely speculative endeavor of various reading strategies. This hypothesis is the clearest explanation for the narrative as a story about Jesus' life, death, and resurrection and bolsters the Gospel's purpose to encourage belief in Jesus as the fulfillment of the Hebrew Bible and Jewish expectations. It reflects a “social picture that emerges from the Gospel . . . of community intensely interested in the spread of the Christian message, engaged with the world, including the world of ‘the Jews.’”²⁸ It also contains the final words of John's Jesus, who commissions his disciples

²⁵ Hamid-Khani, *Revelation and Concealment*, 157-159. He relies especially upon the premise of Richard Bauckham, ed., *The Gospel for All Christians: Rethinking the Gospel Audiences* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), which challenges the current scholarly consensus and assumption that the Gospels were written to specific audiences (communities) without justification by argument and discussion.

²⁶ Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.24.7, 6.14.7.

²⁷ Hamid-Khani, *Revelation and Concealment*, 157-174.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 199, and also pp. 208-219.

as sub-agents to fulfill the mission his Father gave him: “as my Father has sent me, so I send you” (Jn 20:21; cf. Jn 17:20). Jesus’ commission was not one of condemnation, but of salvation based on God’s love for the inhabited world (Jn 3:16-17). This approach makes sense of the textual data that suggests John was attempting to build an identity for early Johannine and later Christians by centering their lives in the mission of God (*missio Dei*) and Jesus’ example of foot-washing and command of mutual love.²⁹

6. Roman Empire—Anti-imperial Polemic and Identity:

- **Origins:** Twenty-first century explorations of the first-century C.E. Roman context of the Gospels (particularly Matthew) have uncovered numerous issues and elements in the Gospel of John that can, and, in many cases, should be read against the background of the Roman Empire.
- **Proponents:** Carter, Richey, Thatcher, Rensberger, Cassidy, Newman.³⁰
- **Description:** According to this hypothesis, the Gospel of John and its presumed countercultural rhetoric originate with the Johannine community’s conflict with the Roman or imperial cult system. The Gospel’s author purposefully challenges Roman religious, social, political, and cultural traditions, including its worldview, power structure, and propaganda, urging listeners/readers to identify with, offer allegiance to, and witness to the kingship of the crucified-glorified-exalted Jesus instead of Caesar.
- **Weaknesses:** While works based upon this approach offer impressive insights in the historical first-century Roman context of John, they sometimes suffer from methodical weaknesses (oversimplification of parallels between Johannine and Roman elements and themes), false comparisons of Johannine content and pagan cult elements (e.g., John the Baptist and pagan prophets), and a failure to account for significant Johannine themes (e.g., *logos*, light, life, etc.).³¹

Strengths: This hypothesis helps to explain the historical significance of several key passages that contain phrases or imperial titles, such as “savior of the world” (Jn 4:42) and “son of God (1:34, 49; 3:18; 5:25; 10:36; 11:4, 27; 19:7; 20:31). The Passion narrative contains elements that could be read as a polemic against Roman ideology and the power and authority of Caesar: Jn 6:14-15; 11:48; 18:3, 12, 33-38; 19:1-16; 20:28.

²⁹ Jan G. van der Watt, “Radical Social Redefinition and Radical Love: Ethics and Ethos in the Gospel According to John,” in *Identity, Ethics, and Ethos in the New Testament* (Berlin: Gruyter GmbH & Co., 2006), 127-128. For an important new work on this subject, see Michael J. Gorman, *Abide and Go: Missional Theosis in the Gospel of John* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, forthcoming), which represents a revised and expanded version of his earlier Didsbury Lectures presented in October 2016 at Nazarene Theological College in Manchester, England.

³⁰ See Brian K. Blount, “John: The Christology of Active Resistance,” in *Then the Whisper Put on Flesh* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2001), 93-118, for a treatment of John that follows this approach in his development of New Testament ethics from an African American perspective.

³¹ See Francis J. Moloney, “Recent Johannine Studies: Part Two: Monographs,” *The Expository Times* 123 (2012): 424-26, for a more detailed listed of weaknesses of this hypothesis.