

The Gospel of John

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The Gospel of John, often characterized as a Gospel written to and for those who already believed in Jesus Christ, stands apart in content and style from the three Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke). Sometimes referred to in scholarly circles as “The Fourth Gospel,” it contains material not found in the others. Unlike Matthew and Luke, which follow the basic chronological and geographic progression of Mark that culminates in a single visit to Jerusalem, John portrays Jesus as traveling from Galilee to Jerusalem several times, suggesting a ministry of two or three years. Passing over miracles, parables, and sermons recorded in the Synoptics, John relates other powerful acts and teachings of Jesus that focus largely on his divine identity and mission.¹

John also differs strikingly in style and approach. In terms of genre, as a “gospel,” it is close to the Synoptics. Like them, it is an interesting combination of ancient biography, history, and theological reflection. Nevertheless, John also has much in common with classical drama.² Filled with dialogues and scenes that draw in the reader, it effectively paints characters that present models of different types of responses, positive and negative, to Jesus with which readers can identify.³ This Gospel is also the most symbolic, teaching at many levels and rooting believers in every age more firmly in their faith. Above all, John’s Christology—that is, how it portrays Jesus and his saving work—is more developed than that of the Synoptics. Whereas Mark demonstrates that Jesus is God’s son by having the Father proclaim it at his baptism (Mark 1:11) and Matthew and Luke show that he was divinely conceived and miraculously born in their infancy narratives (Matthew 1–2; Luke 1–2), John reveals Jesus

as the Divine Word who was together with God from the beginning (John 1:1). Throughout the text, John consistently portrays Jesus as a divine and majestic figure.

The Gospel according to John has long been appealing to Latter-day Saint readers because of its symbolism and high Christology, which are similar to that of the Book of Mormon and the revelations of Joseph Smith in the Doctrine and Covenants. Indeed, many of its images and ideas, and even some of its language, appear in other Restoration scripture, influencing the way we talk about important doctrinal concepts.⁴ Many Latter-day Saints, however, are not familiar with the host of scholarly issues—such as questions concerning its authorship, compositional history, and thematic questions—surrounding the study of John. A deeper understanding of these issues will help us better interpret and apply the Fourth Gospel and be more appreciative of its symbolism, theology, and literary power.

The Beloved Disciple: Author or Source?

Like the other Gospels, the Gospel of John is formally anonymous, meaning that its text never directly identifies its author.⁵ Such anonymity, which is different from the epistolary conventions of the New Testament letters, may seem particularly unusual to Latter-day Saint readers, who are accustomed to the regular self-designation of Book of Mormon authors. It was not unusual for other biblical books, however, especially those of the Old Testament. In the case of the Gospel of John, the original audience may have already known the author's identity, and perhaps he did not want to highlight his own role in a narrative intended to focus on the Savior. In addition, the name *John*, by which the Fourth Gospel is identified, never appears in the text except in reference to John the Baptist. Instead, our knowledge about the author—or perhaps the source behind the original author—is based on internal evidence from the text itself and from suggestions by early Christian authors in the post-apostolic period. While the compositional history of the Gospel of John may be more complicated than many readers are aware, the text has as its foundation the testimony of an important eyewitness of Jesus and his ministry.

Although the Fourth Gospel never identifies its author by name, it has more direct references to its ultimate source than do any of the Synoptic Gospels. An editorial addition at the very end of the Gospel maintains, “This is the disciple which *testifieth* of these things, and *wrote* these things: and we know that his testimony is true” (John 21:24; emphasis added). While this passage seems to suggest that this disciple was the author of the text, it could mean that he caused his witness to be written by a scribe or other intermediary. As biblical scholar Raymond Brown has emphasized, anciently there was often a difference between the *author* (from the Latin *auctor*, or “authority”) and the actual *writer*.⁶ Another possibility is that the disciple wrote his earlier recollections, which a final author or editor used to produce the text as we have it now. This testifying figure had been twice identified earlier in John 21 as the unnamed disciple “whom Jesus loved” (21:7, 20). The setting was a post-Resurrection appearance of the risen Lord to seven disciples at the Sea of Galilee. Three of these—Simon Peter, Thomas, and Nathanael—are directly named, two are described as the

sons of Zebedee, and the remaining two are not identified. The Gospel of John never mentions either of the sons of Zebedee by name, though we know from the Synoptics that their names were James and John. Because James was martyred in AD 44, long before the Gospel was written, presumably either John or one of the two unnamed followers of Jesus was “the disciple whom Jesus loved.”

This beloved disciple figure had previously appeared at the Last Supper (John 13:23) and at the foot of the cross (19:26), where he also bore record of the blood and water that flowed from Jesus’s side after his death (19:24–25). If he had also been the unnamed disciple who accompanied Peter to Caiaphas’s house after the arrest of Jesus (18:15–16), then he was a firsthand witness of many of the Savior’s final hours in the second half of the Gospel.⁷ This disciple was also with Peter when they heard from Mary Magdalene that Jesus’s tomb was empty, and together the two apostles ran to see for themselves that Jesus’s body was no longer there (20:2–10). Some scholars also identify the Beloved Disciple with the unnamed disciple of John the Baptist who, along with Andrew, was one of the first to begin following Jesus (1:35–40). Regardless, the first half of the Gospel bears many indications that it, too, came from an eyewitness,⁸ and there are other indirect indications in the text that the source or author was a Jew from the Holy Land at the time of Jesus. These include his detailed knowledge of Jewish terms and customs and his accurate descriptions of the geography of the Holy Land and the city of Jerusalem.⁹

The Beloved Disciple—whether he was the actual writer or the original witness whose testimony lay behind the final text—is not the only unnamed figure in the Gospel of John. Other anonymous characters include the mother of Jesus (John 2:1–12; 19:25–27), the woman at the well in Samaria (John 4), and the man born blind (John 9). By not naming them, John allows them to serve not only as historical figures but also as literary types with whom readers can identify. The result is that this original witness not only serves as a type or representative for all disciples who come to know Jesus, but also allows us to compare ourselves to him, stressing that we, too, are loved by the Lord.¹⁰

Not surprisingly, several early Christian sources identified the apostle John as the author of the Fourth Gospel. John, along with Peter and James, was one of the Twelve whom the Synoptics portrayed as being closest to Jesus (see Mark 5:37; 9:2; 14:33; and parallels). In addition, John and Peter were associated together in Acts 3–4 and 8, much as the Beloved Disciple and Peter were in the final scene of John 21 and in earlier scenes such as 13:21–30 and 20:2–10. Irenaeus supported this identification in the mid-second century, writing, “John, the disciple of the Lord, who also had leaned upon his breast, did himself publish a Gospel during his residence at Ephesus in Asia.”¹¹ Likewise, another early authority, Clement of Alexandria, wrote, “But, last of all, John, perceiving that the external facts had been made plain in the Gospel, being urged by his friends and inspired by the Spirit, composed a spiritual Gospel.”¹²

On the other hand, Papias, another early Christian source, provided ambiguous evidence that we could read as suggesting that another early disciple, also named John but not the apostle, wrote the Fourth Gospel.¹³ In addition to this “John the Elder,” who might

also be connected with 1 and 2 John, modern commentators have made a number of other suggestions for the Beloved Disciple. These range from Lazarus, Philip, and an unknown disciple (any of whom could have been one of the two unnamed and otherwise unidentified figures of John 21:2) to other candidates such as Nathanael, Thomas, Judas (not Iscariot), or John Mark.¹⁴ While the conventional identification of John the son of Zebedee as the author has long remained the accepted one, some have noted that it might have been encouraged by the tendency to attribute Christian texts to apostolic authorship, real or putative, to give them more authority.¹⁵ Others, however, have stressed that because such early Christian sources were relatively close to the time of the composition of the Gospels, these writers may well have preserved legitimate, well-known traditions regarding their authorship.¹⁶ In this case, the identification of John as “the Beloved” is still a real possibility, one that Latter-day revelation and tradition support.

Compositional History and the Purpose of the Gospel

For various reasons, scholars see the text as having gone through several stages of development. Later editors may have thus reworked and revised the original witness, and perhaps even an early draft of the Gospel. Such theories of compositional history see the Beloved Disciple as an eyewitness who served as the original source for the Fourth Gospel. He either shared this orally with his own students or perhaps wrote an early draft, which a later author reworked. This Gospel, along with other texts attributed to John, such as the epistles that bear his name and perhaps the book of Revelation, may have received final editing as part of a collection of Johannine works.¹⁷ Latter-day Saints can certainly understand how this kind of compositional history can occur, being familiar with how discourses such as those of King Benjamin or Amulek were recorded by others, collected with one set of records, and then finally abridged and edited by Mormon (see Mosiah 2–5; Alma 34).¹⁸

One indication of this compositional history is seen in the fact that all references to the Beloved Disciple are in the third person. While there are ancient parallels for authors referring to themselves impersonally in this way, it seems unlikely that an author who studiously avoided naming himself would regularly call himself “the disciple whom Jesus loved.” Rather, this phrase might indicate a later editor’s understanding of the relationship that the original “author” had with the Lord, or it might reflect the honor and affection the editor and the first audience felt for this witness. Additionally, for homiletic reasons the final editor may have decided to use the anonymous source as a type to represent all disciples who used the text to better love and be loved by Jesus.

Such compositional history helps to reconcile the conventional understanding that many Latter-day Saints have regarding the authorship of the Gospel of John with the observations that other scholars have made about the text. Early Latter-day Saints leaders accepted the tradition that the apostle John wrote the Fourth Gospel, and later authorities and commentators have generally accepted the traditional identification without much analysis.¹⁹ This propensity is understandable because Latter-day revelations seem to confirm that

John wrote it (see Doctrine and Covenants 7; 77:1–15; 88:141; see also 1 Nephi 14:18–27 and Ether 4:16, which directly link the book of Revelation with John). In particular, Doctrine and Covenants 7:1–3, a revelation that seems to have been received because of a discussion that Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery had about the fate of the apostle John, directly equates John with the “the disciple whom Jesus loved” in John 21:20–23.²⁰

Nevertheless, Joseph Smith’s understanding of the apostle John’s role in the Gospel of John is not in conflict with the proposition that John, as the Beloved Disciple, was the source but not necessarily the final author or editor of the text. In fact, the renaming of the Gospel of John in Joseph Smith’s New Translation (popularly known as the Joseph Smith Translation or JST) to “The Testimony of St. John” accords rather well with the fact that this may be a text based upon an original source’s witness.²¹ As Frank Judd has described this possible scenario, “Unlike the Gospel of Mark, it is not the scribe or compiler who received the credit for authoring the Gospel of John. Instead, the apostolic eyewitness and source of the information received the credit.”²²

A staged compositional history also helps explain certain questions about the dating of the Gospel and the nature of its original and intended audiences. The developed theology of John and post-apostolic references to its composition combine to suggest that it was written later than the Synoptics. Scholars frequently suggest a date in the AD 90s, placing it between Luke, usually assumed to be the last of the Synoptics written, and the appearance of the earliest manuscript evidence for the text, which dates to the early second century. On the other hand, the lack of any reference to the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70, present tense statements in the description of the pool of Bethesda in John 5:2, and the fact that it seems to be unaware of the other Gospels could be taken to suggest an earlier date of composition.²³ These two different views might be reconciled by suggesting that the original material from the Beloved Disciple, whether transmitted orally or in written form, took shape earlier but that the final edition that we now have dates to the end of the first century AD.

Similarly, such a compositional history can help resolve conflicting possibilities regarding the original audience of the Gospel of John. The stated purpose of this Gospel is broad: “And many other signs truly did Jesus in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book: but these are written, *that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life through his name*” (20:30–31; emphasis added; compare 1:7). While this passage could have been written by a later editor, it nonetheless reflects very well the testimony that we would have expected from the apostle John or some other original witness of Jesus Christ. Still, many scholars have noted that certain episodes seem to reflect the situation of a particular Christian community in the late first century as much as they do the situation at the time of Jesus. One of the most frequently cited examples revolves around the story of the man blind from birth whom Jesus healed in John 9. Jesus’s opponents in the Jewish leadership threatened him and his parents with being “put out of the synagogue” (9:22; compare 12:42; 16:2), something that many scholars feel might have been a sadly familiar experience to many Jewish Christians who were expelled from their synagogues later in the first century.

The resolution may be that the original source, and even the first author, had a simple, theological purpose for the text but the final editor tailored it for his audience, emphasizing and perhaps adapting descriptions to fit the situations that he and his readers faced. For a modern audience, however, perhaps a more important point is how we should interpret and apply the stated purpose of John 20:30–31 that readers “might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God.” Because of the theological depth of the Fourth Gospel, commentators both within and without The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints see John as a Gospel written for believers.²⁴ On the other hand, editorial asides and explanations seem to suggest that some readers did not know certain details of Jesus’s ministry or some points of doctrine. Additionally, deep theological, almost philosophical, reflections might have been intended for educated non-Christian readers.

Interestingly, the textual evidence for the phrase “might believe” is divided. Some manuscripts read *pisteuēte*, a present subjunctive that means “continue to believe” or “keep believing,” a reading that would suggest the text was meant to help readers deepen their faith. Others, however, read *pisteusēte*, an aorist subjunctive form that suggests beginning to believe or coming to faith.²⁵ Regardless of which reading best reflects the original, perhaps we should assume a broad audience for the Gospel. Like the Book of Mormon that was written for the Lamanites, the rest of the house of Israel, and the Gentiles—in effect, for everyone—the Gospel of John is a powerful testimony of Jesus Christ that can bring all readers to know that Jesus is the Son of God. Having faith in this, they can then lay hold of his great gift of eternal life.

Themes and Structure

The central purposes of the Gospel of John—to bring readers to a knowledge that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and to help them have eternal life through his name—are reflected in two of its major emphases. The first is its high Christology, which shows that Jesus is the Divine Word made flesh and that as the Incarnate Word he always said and did the will of the Father. The second is an emphasis on the response of people to Jesus, particularly of the disciples who choose to follow him and believe in his name. While much of the “the world” rejects him, those who come to know him, either through the witness of others or their own encounters with him, are given the power to become the children of God, passing from spiritual death to life even while in the world (John 1:12; 3:16–17; 5:24; 10:10; 11:25–26). These emphases are frequently seen in dualistic terms as the Gospel presents its major themes such as life and death, light and darkness, spirit and flesh, the world above and the world below, truth and falsehood, and love and hatred. Such terms in John are also broader and more inclusive than the words sometimes mean otherwise. For instance, *life* does not just refer to biological functioning. Rather, it is the fuller, spiritual type of existence that believers can experience as they are waiting for eternal life in the next world. Likewise, *light* is more than what is visible from the sun or a fire; it represents spiritual truth, illumination, and the enlivening power of the Spirit.²⁶

John's primary focus on Jesus and its secondary attention to believers unfolds in the structure of the Gospel as these themes are developed and applied. The Gospel is divided into four major parts (see table 1): a prologue (John 1:1–51); a major division focusing on the ministry of Jesus (2:1–11:57); another division focusing on Jesus's final week, culminating in his passion and resurrection (12:1–20:31); and an epilogue (21:1–25). The prologue is an introduction that first presents Jesus in cosmic and thematic terms and then provides the first template of how his disciples come to believe in and follow him. John first presents Jesus in what is often called the *Logos* Hymn (1:1–18), because *logos* is the Greek term for “word” as well as a wide semantic range of related concepts. Echoing the opening of the creation story when God brought forth first light and then all of creation by speaking (Genesis 1:3–2:3), John describes Jesus as the Word, representing God's will, plan, and intent as well as the means by which he communicates and interacts with his creation. Set “in the beginning,” the *Logos* Hymn establishes that even before his birth, Jesus was with God, divine, and the source of light (1:1–5). Becoming flesh, the Word is rejected by many of his own people but accepted by his own creation, and those men and women who receive him become God's children by believing in his name (1:9–14). The hymn in some ways serves as an overture, introducing the Gospel's Christology and major themes. As such, it helps interpret the explanation of these themes as they appear later in the text.²⁷

Poetic whenever it speaks of the Word, the hymn also interweaves prosaic descriptions of the first witness of the light, the prophet John (1:6–8, 15), known as “the Baptist” in the Synoptics.²⁸ In the Fourth Gospel his primary role is to bear witness of the Word. After being introduced in the hymn, John is the first figure in the second part of the introduction (1:19–51), where he is the first in a chain of witnesses when he declares to two of his own followers that Jesus is the Lamb of God (1:29, 39). As they then go and find others who become Jesus's first disciples, they set the pattern that becomes the template for those who hear

Table 1. Outline of the Gospel of John

- Prologue (1:1–51)
 - » *Logos* Hymn (1:1–18)
 - » The first witnesses and disciples (1:19–51)
- Book of Signs (2:1–11:57)
 - » First signs and dialogues (2:1–4:54)
 - » Signs and discourses in the context of Jewish feasts (5:1–10:42)
 - » The raising of Lazarus and its aftermath (11:1–57)
- Book of Glory (12:1–20:31)
 - » Setting the scene for the Passion (12:1–12:50)
 - » The Last Supper and the farewell discourses (13:1–17:26)
 - » Crucifixion, death, and burial (18:1–19:42)
 - » Resurrection (20:1–29)
 - » Purpose of the Gospel (20:30–31)
- Epilogue (21:1–25)
 - » Resurrection appearance to seven at the Sea of Galilee (21:1–15)
 - » Jesus and Simon Peter (21:15–19)
 - » The fate and testimony of the Beloved Disciple (21:20–25)

the testimony of another and then “come and see” (1:39) that Jesus is the Master, the Messiah or Christ, the Son of God, and the King of Israel.²⁹

The first major division of the Gospel after its prologue chronicles Jesus’s miraculous and symbolic acts as well as his conversations with individuals and his speeches before groups during the course of his ministry (2:1–11:57). This ministry lasts two or three years, depending on how many Passover festivals are mentioned (2:13, 6:4, and 11:55 refer specifically to Passover, but 5:1 refers to an unspecified feast often taken to be a Passover). Sometimes called “the Book of Signs” because of seven miraculous signs that Jesus performs in it, this section also contains seven discourses.³⁰ Both signs and discourses focus more on who Jesus is and simultaneously on individuals who either accept or reject him. The first signs and dialogues comprise a discrete unit, framed by miracles performed in the Galilean town of Cana (2:1–4:54). These all stress the theme of newness, particularly the new life that Jesus has come to bring. The next collection of signs and discourses occurs in the context of Jewish feasts, including the weekly festival of the Sabbath and the annual celebrations of Passover, Tabernacles, and Dedication (5:1–10:42). In this section, Jesus’s actions and teachings reveal him as the fulfillment of the Jewish law and expectations. Finally, a dramatic episode centering on the death and raising of Jesus’s friend Lazarus demonstrates that Jesus is the resurrection and the life, strengthening the faith of his followers even as this seventh miraculous sign rallies the Jerusalem establishment against him (11:1–57).

The Gospel’s second major division is often called “The Book of Glory” because John frequently describes the saving death and resurrection of Jesus as the means by which he is both glorified and glorifies the Father.³¹ The title is apt, especially for Latter-day Saint readers, because in Restoration scripture the Lord directly declares, “For behold, this is my work and my glory—to bring to pass the immortality and eternal life of man” (Moses 1:39). After setting the scene for the Passion with Mary of Bethany’s anointing of Jesus and the triumphal entry (John 12:1–12:50), this section moves to an account of the Last Supper and Jesus’s final discourses to his disciples (13:1–17:26). While recounting his last hours with his earthly friends, the scenes and words are profoundly intimate and draw in and also speak to modern believers. They are followed, however, by the strikingly painful scenes of Jesus’s trial, crucifixion, death, and burial (18:1–19:42), which are ameliorated by his resurrection appearances, first to Mary Magdalene (20:11–18) and then to the eleven apostles (20:19–29). Each moves from grief to hope with the news of the empty tomb and then to joy with the witnesses of the risen Lord. Thomas, the last to gain this testimony, echoes the description of the Divine Word from the prologue with his own declaration, “My Lord and my God” (20:28).

The style of the epilogue (21:1–25) may suggest that it was a later addition; it certainly resumes a narrative that seemed to end with the programmatic statement of John 20:30–31. With its final resurrection appearance to seven disciples at the Sea of Galilee (21:1–14), it provides another witness to the reality of Jesus’s rising. Jesus’s loving dialogue with Peter not only provides the leader of the Twelve with a chance to proclaim his love three times after his earlier threefold denial, it also shifts the story of Jesus to the future of his church, which

Peter will lead and care for (21:15–19). The epilogue finally closes with a focus on the fate and testimony of the Beloved Disciple (21:20–25). Throughout the four parts of the Gospel and in each of their subsections, the Beloved Disciple’s witness shines powerfully, showing Jesus as the source of life, light, and truth and encouraging readers to come to Christ and believe in his name.

The Divine Word Made Flesh

When the prologue declares, “And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us” (John 1:14), it connects Jesus with *YHWH*, or Jehovah, who had earlier dwelt with his people in the wilderness. This is done through the Greek term *eskēnōsen* (KJV “dwelt”), which literally means “pitched his tent” and recalls the ancient tabernacle in which Jehovah had dwelt after the Exodus. From that point on, John’s portrayal of Jesus is that of Jehovah only thinly veiled in flesh as he walks and works among his people. He knows the will of the Father perfectly and knows all things even before they happen (3:11; 7:29; 8:55; 10:15; 13:1–3; 18:4; 19:28). Further, he knows all men and women, seeing into their hearts and knowing which have been given to him by God (5:42; 6:37–39; 17:9, 11, 24). He also rarely tires or acts like a normal man. In fact, when he gets tired and thirsty in John 4:6–7, it only seems to be a way for him to initiate his conversation with the Samaritan woman, and he never drinks the water she draws or eats the food that his disciples later offer him. Similarly, when he thirsts on the cross, he does so to fulfill the prophecy of Psalm 69:21 (John 19:28–29).

Perhaps the most revealing way in which John’s text implies that Jesus is in fact Jehovah is through its use of what are called “I AM” statements. The Greek phrase *egō eimi* was used in the Septuagint, or Greek translation of the Old Testament, to render the phrase “I AM THAT I AM” (Hebrew, *‘eyeh ‘ašer ‘eyeh*), by which Jehovah had identified himself to Moses (Exodus 3:14; compare Isaiah 43:25; 46:4; 51:12). It is also close to the root meaning of the name-title *YHWH*, which comes from the Hebrew verb *to be*. John’s Gospel has Jesus use the phrase *egō eimi*, or “I am,” more frequently than do the Synoptics. Often these are in predicated situations, that is, when Jesus says that he is *something*. While there is no other way to express this in Greek or English, in seven instances Jesus uses the expression to equate himself with a christological title or symbol, such as “I am the bread of life” (John 6:35) or

Table 2. “I AM” (*egō eimi*) Statements in John

- “I am the bread of life” (6:35, 41, 48)
- “I am the light of the world” (8:12)
- “I am the door of the sheep” (10:7, 9)
- “I am the good shepherd” (10:11, 14)
- “I am the resurrection and the life” (11:25)
- “I am the way, the truth, and the life” (14:6)
- “I am the true vine” (15:1)

Absolute “I AM” statements: 4:26; 6:20; 8:24, 28, 58; 13:19; and 18:5

“I am the good shepherd” (10:11, 14), that are reflective of his divine role (see table 2). More significantly, however, are seven absolute “I AM” sayings, where *egō eimi* appears without a predicate. While the King James Version sometimes provides the predicate *he*, yielding “I am he,” these passages are better read as an appositive to the main clause. For instance, “I that speak unto thee am he” (4:26) can be read, “I AM, the one who speaks to you.”³²

Another important way that John stresses Jesus’s divinity is through his statements that Jesus not only is the source of life for all mankind but also has power over life and death for himself: “Therefore doth my Father love me, because I lay down my life, that I might take it again. No man taketh it from me, but I lay it down of myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again” (John 10:17–18). In accordance with the high Christology of John, Jesus in the Fourth Gospel carries his own cross all the way to Golgotha (19:17), not needing the help of Simon of Cyrene, and accomplishes the atoning sacrifice on his own. Unlike the Synoptics, which portray the Jewish leaders and the Romans as taking Jesus’s life and the Father raising him from the dead, Jesus gives up his own life (19:30), and the disposition of his grave clothes in the Fourth Gospel’s resurrection narrative (20:6–7) suggests that Jesus has taken it up again on his own.³³

Signs and Discourses

Jesus’s divinity is revealed throughout the Fourth Gospel in his actions and his words. Both his miracles and many of his symbolic actions are “signs” (Greek, *sēmeia*) that symbolize who he is and what he came to do. Likewise, even the way he speaks reveals his divinity and focuses on his mission.³⁴ The most common Greek word in the Synoptics for “miracle” is *dynamis*, or “mighty deed,” indicating the great thing he does for those whom he blesses. On the other hand, the narrator of this Gospel consistently uses the word *sēmeion*. Although this word is usually translated simply as “miracle” in our King James Version, the Greek word choice emphasizes that in the Fourth Gospel the miracles are primarily signs that reveal something about Jesus himself.

John records far fewer miracles than the Synoptics, with seven in the first major section of his gospel, the Book of Signs (see table 3), and a final sign, the miraculous catch of 153 fish, in the epilogue. However, each is significant for what it reveals about Jesus. The changing of water into wine at the wedding at Cana (John 2:1–11) is more than just a miracle of provision. Instead, it reveals Jesus as Jehovah. Just as the Divine Word had first created, or

Table 3. Seven Miraculous Signs in John

- Water to wine (2:1–11)
- Healing the nobleman’s son (4:46–54)
- Healing the man at the pool of Bethesda (5:1–18)
- Feeding the five thousand (6:1–15)
- Walking on water (6:1–15)
- Healing the man born blind (9:1–41)
- The raising of Lazarus (11:38–44)

organized, the world, the Incarnate Word reorganizes. Establishing this correspondence, the healings of the nobleman's son (4:46–54), the man at the pool of Bethesda (5:1–18), and the man born blind (9:1–41) can be seen as acts of divine reorganization, restoring infirm bodies to their correct, whole state. Yet the symbolism is often even deeper. Because of the symbolic correspondence in this Gospel of water to divinity and spirit on the one hand and wine and blood to mortality on the other, the changing of water to wine can also be seen as a symbol of the incarnation as the Divine Word becomes the man Jesus. Similarly, the infirm healed by Jesus can be types of fallen men and women, making Jesus's restoration of them symbols of his atoning work. In John, the feeding of the five thousand (6:1–15) and Jesus's walking on water (6:16–21) are directly connected to the first Passover and the Exodus, revealing him as Jehovah who parted the Red Sea and fed his people with manna. Now, as Jesus, he can feed us (temporally and spiritually) and still the storms in our lives. The seventh and crowning miracle in the Book of Signs is the raising of Lazarus (11:38–44), showing not only Jesus's power over death but foreshadowing his own resurrection and the ability to raise all of us from spiritual as well as physical death.³⁵

Some of Jesus's nonmiraculous acts can also be seen as signs. For instance, the cleansing of the temple, which occurs earlier in Jesus's ministry in John than it does in the Synoptics, is less about the temple than it is a foreshadowing of the death of Jesus's body (John 2:13–22). After this episode, some Jews in Jerusalem begin to believe in Jesus “when they saw the miracles [Greek *sēmeia*] which he did” (2:23). Likewise, Nicodemus may have had this action in mind as well when he said, “We know that thou art a teacher come from God: for no man can do these miracles [*sēmeia*] that thou doest, except God be with him” (3:2). Such figurative actions are similar to some of the symbolic performances of prophets such as Isaiah and Ezekiel (see, for example, Isaiah 20:26; Ezekiel 3:1–4; 4:9–17; 24:15–27), suggesting some other actions, either performed by Jesus or performed for him, are what we could call “enacted signs.”³⁶ These could include the anointing of his feet by Mary of Bethany (John 12:3–8), the triumphal entry (12:12–16), Jesus's washing the feet of his disciples (13:4–17), and his being lifted upon the cross itself (3:14; 8:28; 12:32; 19:16–37).

The words of Jesus in John also differ in style, and often in focus, from those recorded by the Synoptics. As the Incarnate Word, Jesus speaks differently than mortals, using what biblical scholar Raymond Brown describes as a semipoetic divine speech, which his listeners often misunderstand, perhaps reflecting that the words of God can be understood only by the Spirit.³⁷ Whereas Mark primarily preserved parables and short teaching sayings, to which Matthew and Luke added longer sermons, John presents long discourses of Jesus, seven in the Book of Signs, and the Farewell Discourses to his disciples in the Book of Glory (see table 4). The first of Jesus's speeches, the Discourse on the New Birth (3:1–15) and the Discourse on the Water of Life (4:7–26), are set as dialogues with Nicodemus and a woman from Samaria. As such, they present very personal interactions and conversations with Jesus that readers can identify with. Framed by the signs of the new wine at the wedding at Cana and the newly healed nobleman's son, being born from above (Greek *anōthen*; KJV “again”)

Table 4. Seven Discourses in John

- The New Birth (3:1–15)
- The Water of Life (4:7–26)
- The Divine Son (5:17–47)
- The Bread of Life (6:35–58)
- The Life-Giving Spirit (7:16–52)
- The Light of the World (8:12–59)
- The Good Shepherd (10:1–18)

Also, the Farewell Discourses (14:1–16:33), the Intercessory Prayer (17:1–26), and the final dialogue with Peter (21:15–19)

in John 3:3 and the water springing up to everlasting life in 4:14 both symbolize the eternal life that Jesus came to bring.

Jesus delivers his other discourses in the Book of Signs to groups of people. The Discourses on the Divine Son (5:17–47), the Life-Giving Spirit (7:16–52), the Light of the World (8:12–59), and the Good Shepherd (10:1–18) were delivered in Jerusalem, often to hostile crowds, to whom he nonetheless boldly declared who he was and what he had come to do. Jesus gave the Bread of Life Discourse (6:35–58) in Galilee to a mixed group. Jesus first addressed this discourse to the crowds who had recently seen the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand, describing himself as the Divine Word come down from heaven, which represented both the manna and the law that God had given the Israelites in the wilderness. He then spoke more specifically to “the Jews,” which John frequently used as a term for the religious elite who were often at odds with Jesus.³⁸ To this group, who should have better understood the symbolism he was using, he declared why it was necessary for people to symbolically eat his flesh and drink his blood in order to obtain eternal life. Finally, after some of his own disciples stopped following him because of this “hard saying” (6:60), he spoke with Peter and the Twelve, who confessed their faith, declaring that he had words of eternal life and that they believed that he was the Christ, the Son of the living God (6:68–69).

Discipleship in John

Another major emphasis of the Fourth Gospel, how people respond to Jesus, is seen in the reaction of people to his signs and discourses. Although groups of people, including disappointed crowds and the religious leadership opposed to Jesus, often rejected him, by and large the Gospel of John focuses on individual responses to Jesus. These are the ones who, picking up a theme established in the prologue, receive him and believe on his name (John 1:14). This individual focus explains John’s emphasis on discipleship. In the ancient world, discipleship was not only about learning from a teacher; it was also about striving to become like a master. In the other Gospels, the primary model of discipleship is usually the Twelve. John, on the other hand, refers to the Twelve only a few times. He never provides a full list of the Twelve, and the word *apostle* does not occur in the English translation of this Gospel at all (the Greek word *apostolos* does appear in John 13:16, where it is used in such a nontech-

nical sense that the KJV simply renders it “he that is sent”). Andrew, Simon Peter, and Philip appear in 1:19–51 as individuals coming to Christ. Each of these apostles appears later, as do Thomas and the two Judases, but the Twelve only appear explicitly as a group at the end of the Bread of Life Discourse, at the Last Supper and the following Farewell Discourses, and, minus Judas, in the Upper Room after Jesus’s resurrection (John 6:67, 70; 13:18; 15:16, 19; 20:19–29).

The result is that rather than being limited to a smaller group of chosen special witnesses, discipleship appears more broadly as something with which all readers can identify.³⁹ To this end, the Gospel of John develops a number of other, non-apostolic disciples, such as Lazarus, Martha, Mary, and perhaps Nathanael, who, although he is often associated with the Synoptic figure of Bartholomew, is presented differently in John. The variety of characters and the different trajectories of their walks with Jesus make them valuable models for readers today. Most of the characters in John are presented as encountering Jesus and then needing to make a faith-decision as to whether and how to follow him.⁴⁰ Andrew, for instance, was already an earnest believer who readily followed Jesus when he received the witness of another. Nicodemus, well-to-do and well educated, first struggled to understand and accept Jesus but seems to have accepted him in his death. The Samaritan woman was an outsider with a questionable past who was nonetheless open to the truth. Peter and Thomas were devoted but impulsive disciples: at times each slipped or questioned, but both went on to have great faith. Martha and Mary were devoted friends of the Lord whose faith was tested at a time of great loss.⁴¹ These and other characters can serve as different models for discipleship, but perhaps the most significant is the Beloved Disciple himself. This figure never wavers in his devotion and was a witness of some of the most pivotal moments in the narrative: he leans on Jesus’s bosom at the Last Supper, stands at the foot of the cross, and runs to find the empty tomb (John 13:23; 19:26; 20:1–8).

The Lamb of God

The declaration of John the Baptist that Jesus is the Lamb of God (John 1:29, 36) provides one of the central themes of the second major division of the Fourth Gospel, the Book of Glory. This association of Jesus with the Passover lamb explains many of the unique features of the Passion narrative in John that differ from the versions presented by the Synoptics. First, it helps explain differences in the timing of the Last Supper and the Crucifixion. Whereas the Synoptics portray the Last Supper as a Passover meal (Matthew 26:17–20; Mark 14:12–17; Luke 22:1, 7–14), in John the festival began at sunset *after* Jesus died on the cross (John 18:28; 19:31, in which the preparation day was likely the day when the Passover was prepared). Reconciling John with the Synoptics on this matter is not easy. One possibility is that the Synoptics are correct but John moved the Passover to the next evening for literary reasons so that Jesus’s death on the cross was taking place even as the paschal lambs were being sacrificed in the temple. On the other hand, John’s version bears more historical verisimilitude, since it was unlikely that an arrest, trial, and execution would have taken place

during the festival itself, something that the Jewish leaders had explicitly said they wanted to avoid (Mark 14:2; parallel Matthew 26:5). In this case, perhaps the Synoptics had moved the timing of the Passover to underscore the feast's similarity with the sacrament, the institution of which they record but John does not. A third possibility is that Passover actually occurred after the Crucifixion but Jesus, knowing he would be dead before it was celebrated, held a symbolic Passover meal with his friends a day early.⁴² Instead of the institution of the sacrament, the Gospel of John includes an account of the washing of the disciples' feet (13:3–17).

Paschal imagery and the high Christology of John may also explain other differences in the Fourth Gospel's Passion narrative, which lacks any reference to Jesus's suffering in the Garden of Gethsemane and provides different details about the Crucifixion. This may be because the Passover lamb was not primarily a vicarious sin offering but rather a sacrifice that brought the hope of new life to the children of Israel, who were passed over by the angel of death because of the lamb's blood. Perhaps rather than seeing Jesus shoulder the crushing burden of sin in Gethsemane and carry it to the cross, where he died as a vicarious sacrifice for sin, John focused on Jesus's death as a source of life. Passing over reference to Jesus's feeling abandoned by the Father, with whom he is always at one with in John, this account has Jesus declare "It is finished" and voluntarily "g[i]ve up the ghost" (John 19:30). Then, just as the blood of the paschal lambs was spread on the doorframes of the Israelites in Egypt, so the blood of the Lamb of God pours on the wood of the cross when a soldier pierces Jesus's side with a spear to make sure he is dead. Linked with the blood is a stream of water (19:34), recalling the fountain of living water of John 4:10 and the rivers of living water of John 7:38. To complete the Passover imagery, John 19:36–37 stresses that the soldiers did not break Jesus's legs, a requirement of the paschal lamb being that none of its bones could be broken.⁴³

With Jesus's death on the cross, Nicodemus, who was confused by his first encounter with Jesus (3:1–15) and timid in his support for Jesus in a later meeting of the Jewish leadership (7:45–53), came out in the open after the Crucifixion to help Joseph of Arimathea bury Jesus (19:38–42). At last recognizing the Lamb of God as the King of Israel, he brought a royal weight of spices to honor Jesus. Through this action he seems to have at last understood the sign that Jesus had prophesied to him at their first meeting: "And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up: That whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life" (3:14–15).

Abundant and Eternal Life

The paschal emphasis on escaping death and obtaining new life picks up the theme that was established in the prologue: "In him was life" (John 1:4). Indeed, one of the most famous and beautiful passages of the Gospel of John is the witness that "God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved" (3:16–17). As with many of the themes in the Gospel of John, life is a broad concept, referring to biological activity, the nature of life in this world,

and the promise of eternal life in the world to come. In his Discourse on the Good Shepherd, Jesus had testified, “I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly” (10:10). Meaning “to an extent remarkable or extraordinary,” *abundantly* (Greek *perisson*) refers to a richer, deeper life such as that suggested by the good wine of Cana, the living water of Samaria, or the flowing rivers promised by Jesus. It suggests a spiritual quality of life here on the earth that anticipates the everlasting life promised by the death and resurrection of Jesus.

In John, Jesus stresses that such life is available here and now, a concept called realized eschatology. Eschatology is literally the “study of the end,” and usually eschatology is future, referring to the blessed state that will accompany the end of the world and the advent of God’s kingdom. Yet Jesus at times speaks of our future state as if it can be realized now. For instance, in his Discourse on the Divine Son he declares, “Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that heareth my word, and believeth on him that sent me, *hath everlasting life*, and shall not come into condemnation; but *is passed* from death unto life” (5:24; emphasis added). By using present and present perfect tenses here, he suggests that believers have eternal life and have passed from death to life now. Similarly, in his famous declaration to Martha that he is the resurrection and the life, Jesus says, “Whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die” (11:26). Because many believers in Jesus die (indeed, Martha’s brother Lazarus has just died), the suggestion seems to be that the death Jesus is talking about is spiritual death, making the raising of Lazarus that follows this scene as much a symbol of the spiritual rebirth of people who come to Christ as it is an anticipation of a future resurrection.⁴⁴

Of course, in John, Jesus teaches future eschatology also, as when he spoke of the coming day when “all that are in the graves shall hear his voice, and shall come forth; they that have done good, unto the resurrection of life; and they that have done evil, unto the resurrection of damnation” (5:28–29). Yet eternal life is more than just the immortal, never-ending life that follows the Resurrection. As Latter-day Saint doctrine teaches, it is having the kind of life that God and Christ have in their presence for eternity, for “this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent” (17:3).



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Notes

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2. Brown, *Introduction to the Gospel of John*, 284–91; Blomberg, *Historical Reliability of John's Gospel*, 20, 57–61; and Richard Bauckham, *The Testimony of the Beloved Disciple* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 16–21.
3. Colleen M. Conway, *Men and Women in the Fourth Gospel: Gender and Johannine Characterization* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 1999), 42–45; Christopher W. Skinner, *Characters and Characterization in the Gospel of John* (Bloomington, IL: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2013), xvii–xxxii; and Eric D. Huntsman, *Becoming the Beloved Disciple: Coming unto Christ through the Gospel of John* (Springville, UT: Cedar Fort, 2018), 8–12 and *passim*.
4. For instance, see Blake T. Ostler, "The Development of the Mormon Concept of Grace," *Dialogue* 24, no. 1 (1991): 57–84; Eric D. Huntsman, "The King James Bible and the Doctrine and Covenants," in *The King James Bible and the Restoration*, ed. Kent P. Jackson (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2011), 182–96; and Nicholas J. Frederick, "Line within Line: An Intertextual Analysis of Mormon Scripture and the Prologue of the Gospel of John" (PhD diss., Claremont Graduate School, 2013).
5. See Frank F. Judd Jr., "Who Really Wrote the Gospels? A Study of Traditional Authorship," in *How the New Testament Came to Be*, ed. Kent P. Jackson and Frank F. Judd Jr. (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2006), 123–40.
6. Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel according to John*, vol. 29, Anchor Bible Series (New York: Doubleday, 1966), lxxxvii. See also Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006), 358–63.
7. R. Alan Culpepper, *John, the Son of Zebedee: The Life of a Legend* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 56–72.
8. Brown, *Gospel according to John*, xcii–xciv; Morris, *Gospel according to John*, 10–12; Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, 127–29, 390–93, 402; and Cornelis Bennema, *Encountering Jesus: Character Studies in the Gospel of John* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2009), 299–30.
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11. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.1.1; see also 2.22.5 and 3.3.4.
12. Quoted in Eusebius, *History of the Church* 6.14.7.
13. Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, 420–23.
14. Culpepper, *John, The Son of Zebedee*, 72–85; and Ruth B. Edwards, *Discovering John: Content, Interpretation, Reception* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015), 25–32.
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16. Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, 264–318.
17. Brown, *Introduction to the Gospel of John*, 62–78.
18. Holzapfel, Huntsman, and Wayment, *Jesus Christ and the World of the New Testament*, 128.
19. See, for instance, C. Wilfred Griggs, "The Testimony of John," in *The Gospels*, ed. Kent P. Jackson and Robert L. Millet, vol. 5, *Studies in Scripture* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1986), 109–11; John D. Claybaugh, "What the Latter-day Scriptures Teach about John the Beloved," in *The Testimony of John the Beloved: The 27th Annual Sidney B. Sperry Symposium* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1998), 16–20; and Brian L. Smith, "The Witness of John," in *The Testimony of John the Beloved*, 266–67.
20. See Frank F. Judd Jr. and Terry L. Szink, "John the Beloved in Latter-day Scripture (Doctrine and Covenants 7)," *The Doctrine and Covenants, Revelations in Context*, ed. Andrew H. Hedges, J. Spencer Fluhman, and Alonzo L. Gaskill (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2008), 90–107.
21. Significantly, though printed Latter-day Saint editions of the KJV Bible note that *Gospel* should be changed to *Testimony* for all four Gospels, the actual JST manuscripts do so only for Matthew and John. See Scott H. Faurling, Kent P. Jackson, and Robert J. Matthews, eds., *Joseph Smith's New Translation of the Bible: Original Manuscripts* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2004), 234; and Kevin L. Barney, "The Joseph Smith Translation and Ancient Texts of the Bible," *Dialogue* 19, no. 3 (Fall 1986): 88. This could support the idea that these were in fact "apostolic testimonies" or, as I have suggested here, literary texts based on apostolic testimonies.
22. Judd, "Who Really Wrote the Gospels?" 134.
23. Griggs, "Testimony of John," 111; Brown, *Introduction to the Gospel of John*, 206–15; and Blomberg, *Historical Reliability of John's Gospel*, 42–44;
24. The Latter-day Saint Bible Dictionary, for instance, maintains, "[John wrote] to members of the Church who already had basic information about the Lord. His primary purpose was to emphasize the divine nature of Jesus as the Only Begotten Son of God in the flesh" (s.v. "Gospels," 683), and Raymond Brown in his Anchor Bible commentary wrote, "This is a Gospel designed to root the believer deeper in his faith" (*Gospel of John*, lxxviii).
25. Bruce R. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Stuttgart: German Bible Society, 1994), 219–20. See Blomberg, *Historical Reliability of John's Gospel*, 62–63.
26. Craig R. Koester, *Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 141–43, 171–74; and Bauckham, *Gospel of Glory*, 119–29.
27. Christopher W. Skinner, *Reading John* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2015), 8–31.
28. Huntsman, *Becoming the Beloved Disciple*, 132–34.
29. Huntsman, *Becoming the Beloved Disciple*, 16–25.
30. Brown, *Introduction to the Gospel of John*, 300–307; and Edwards, *Discovering John*, 170–71.
31. Brown, *Introduction to the Gospel of John*, 307–15; and Edwards, *Discovering John*, 171.
32. Bauckham, *Testimony of the Beloved Disciple*, 243–50; Bauckham, *Gospel of Glory*, 195; and Skinner, *Reading John*, 70–78.

33. Eric D. Huntsman, "The Lamb of God: Unique Aspects of the Passion Narrative in John," in *Behold the Lamb of God: An Easter Celebration*, ed. Richard Neitzel Holzapfel, Frank F. Judd Jr., and Thomas A. Wayment (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2008), 60–62).
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35. Eric D. Huntsman, *The Miracles of Jesus* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2014), 3, 15–25, 52–55, 96–100, 112–18, 135–36.
36. Koester, *Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel*, 79–82, 127–34.
37. Brown, *Introduction to the Gospel of John*, 284–92. See also Skinner, *Reading John*, 68–95.
38. For a discussion of John's use of the expression "the Jews" (Greek *hoi Ioudaioi*), see Huntsman, *Becoming the Beloved Disciple*, 41–42, 78, 86–87n13.
39. Huntsman, *Becoming the Beloved Disciple*, 5–8.
40. Bennema, *Encountering Jesus*, 103.
41. Huntsman, *Becoming the Beloved the Disciple*, 53–65, 89–100, 106–19.
42. Huntsman, "Lamb of God," 54–56.
43. Huntsman, "Lamb of God," 59–64.
44. Huntsman, *Miracles of Jesus*, 115–17; and Huntsman, *Becoming the Beloved Disciple*, 93, 101.