

PRAISE FOR A THEOLOGY OF JOHN'S GOSPEL AND LETTERS

For the comprehensiveness of its coverage in the field of Johannine theology (gospel and letters), there is nothing to compare to this work.

D. A. CARSON, research professor of New Testament,
Trinity Evangelical Divinity School

This book is a “first” in many ways: the first volume that sets the pattern for the quality and style of the new Biblical Theology of the New Testament series published by Zondervan; the first major volume to be devoted specifically to the theology of John’s gospel and letters at a high academic level; and the first volume to offer a thorough interpretation of the theology of an eyewitness of the life and passion of Jesus. Andreas Köstenberger has already laid a foundation for his study with his careful, detailed commentary on the gospel of John, and here presents a self-standing study that gathers together the thought of the Evangelist in a systematic and complete manner. I particularly welcome the way in which the book sets out John’s theological story in the gospel and letters before giving a detailed, thematic study

I. HOWARD MARSHALL, emeritus professor of New Testament exegesis and
honorary research professor,
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Massive and masterful, this book presents Johannine theology in encyclopedic fullness. Arguing for apostolic authorship of John’s gospel and epistles, Andreas Köstenberger gives due weight to historical, literary, linguistic, and thematic matters in careful interaction with other scholars. Yet pastors and advanced students will also find the discussion accessible. We find here a new benchmark in synthetic treatment of these priceless writings of Christ’s beloved disciple.

ROBERT W. YARBROUGH, professor of New Testament,
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ZONDERVAN

A Theology of John's Gospel and Letters

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Requests for information should be addressed to:

Zondervan, Grand Rapids, Michigan 49530

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Köstenberger, Andreas J., 1957-

A theology of John's Gospel and letters : the Word, the Christ, the Son of God / Andreas J. Köstenberger.

p. cm. - (Biblical theology of the New Testament)

Includes bibliographical references and indexes.

ISBN 978-0-310-26986-1 (hardcover, printed : alk. paper)

1. Bible. N.T. John - Theology. 2. Bible. N.T. Epistles of John - Theology. I. Title.

BS2601.K67 2009

226.5'065-dc22

2009028347

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Cover and interior design by Mark Sheeres

Printed in the United States of America

To the Word-Made-Flesh

“And since they all [i.e. all four canonical Gospels]
had the same object, to show Christ,
the first three exhibit His body,
if I may be permitted to put it like that,
but John shows His soul.”

—*John Calvin, 1553*

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Part 1

THE HISTORICAL
FRAMEWORK FOR
JOHANNINE THEOLOGY

Chapter 1

JOHANNINE THEOLOGY AND THE HISTORICAL SETTING OF JOHN'S GOSPEL AND LETTERS

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1 JOHANNINE AND BIBLICAL THEOLOGY

1.1 Introduction

What a wonderful challenge and opportunity it is to write a Johannine theology! This is the body of Scripture anchored in the gospel of Clement of Alexandria called a “spiritual Gospel” (*pneumatikon euangelion*),¹ and this gospel, in turn, has moved countless hearts to recognize their need for Christ and nurtured many to greater heights in their spiritual pilgrimage. Markus Bockmuehl has recently made a case for the importance of *Wirkungsgeschichte* (a study of a work’s “history of effects” on later interpreters) in biblical studies,² and John’s writings have indeed had a profound impact on Christian theology and spirituality that is second to few (if any) biblical or other works.³

1.2 The “Spiritual Gospel”

1.2.1 History of Scholarship

In the recent history of interpretation, Clement’s reference to John as a “spiritual gospel” has frequently been taken to imply that John is less interested in histori-

1. See the reference to Clement’s *Hypotyposes* in Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 6.14. The full quotation is as follows: “But that John, last of all, conscious that the outward facts had been set forth in the Gospels, was urged on by his disciples, and, divinely moved by the Spirit, composed a spiritual Gospel.”

2. Markus N. A. Bockmuehl, *Seeing the Word: Refocusing New Testament Study* (Studies in Theological Interpretation; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006).

3. See J. N. Sanders, *The Fourth Gospel in the Early Church: Its Origin and Influence on Christian Theology up to Irenaeus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1943); François-Marie Braun, *Jean le théologien*, Vol. 1: *Jean le théologien et son évangile dans l’église*

ancienne (Paris: J. Gabalda, 1959); T. E. Pollard, *Johannine Christology and the Early Church* (SNTSMS 13; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970); Alois Grillmeier, *Christ in Christian Tradition*, Vol. 1: *From the Apostolic Age to Chalcedon (431)* (trans. John Bowden; 2nd rev. ed.; Atlanta: John Knox, 1975); R. Alan Culpepper, *John, the Son of Zebedee: The Life of a Legend* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1994; repr. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000); Annette Volting, *John the Evangelist in Medieval German Writing: Imitating the Inimitable* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); and Charles E. Hill, *The Johannine Corpus in the Early Church* (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

cal matters than the Synoptics, and a chasm began to open up between John as a “spiritual” (i.e., nonhistorical) gospel and the Synoptics as more reliable historical accounts.⁴ However, taking “spiritual” as “nonhistorical” is of doubtful merit.⁵ More likely, by observing that John was “conscious that the *outward facts* had been set forth in the [Synoptic?] Gospels” already, Clement sought to draw attention to the profound theological reflection present in John’s gospel without intending to disparage the historical nature of his account. Indeed, John deepens the reader’s understanding of the significance of Jesus’ life and work by focusing on a small number of pivotal items such as the identity of Jesus, the necessity of faith, and the universal scope of Christ’s redemptive work.

Understood this way, there is every reason to believe that John, as a “spiritual gospel” — in the sense of being an *interpretive* account that brings out more fully the spiritual significance of the events and teachings it features — is grounded firmly in actual historical events, for it is only on such that theological reflection can properly be based.⁶ Most likely, in his theological reflection John took his departure from the “outward facts” set forth in the Synoptics rather than disregarding or contradicting them. His account commences with the Baptist’s witness to Jesus (John 1:6–8, 15) and the incarnation (1:14). These events, in turn, are grounded in previous salvation history such as the tabernacle (1:14) or the giving of the law through Moses (1:17). What is more, in framing his narrative, the evangelist uses eyewitness language to testify to these events: “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling *among us*. *We have seen* his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. . . . For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ” (emphasis added).⁷

In this sense, then, John is a “spiritual gospel”: it is the product of profound theological reflection, which, in turn, is grounded in actual historical events through which God acted in salvation history.⁸ However, the last half millennium of human thought has bequeathed several unfortunate dichotomies on biblical scholarship. The separation between history and theology has led to a gradual disparagement of John’s historical reliability and moved the gospel’s genre closer to myth and legend.⁹

4. Though historical critics have questioned many aspects of the historical reliability of the Synoptics as well. Challenges to John’s historicity go back at least as far as Karl Gottlieb Bretschneider, *Probabilia de evangelii et epistolarum Joannis, apostolic, indole et origine eruditorum judicii modeste subject* (Leipzig: A. Barth, 1820). See the summary in William J. Baird, *History of New Testament Research* (2 vols.; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992, 2003), 1:312–14. More recently, see Maurice Casey, *Is John’s Gospel True?* (London/New York: Routledge, 1996).

5. See Marianne Meye Thompson, “The ‘Spiritual Gospel’: How John the Theologian Writes History,” in *John, Jesus, and History*, Volume 1: *Critical Appraisals of Critical Views* (ed. Paul N. Anderson, Felix Just, and Tom Thatcher; SBLSymS 44; Atlanta: SBL, 2007), 103–7; and the discussion below.

6. Note the “eyewitness” motif in John’s gospel, on which see Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewit-*

ness Testimony (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006). See also Acts 2:36 and 1 Cor 15:12–20.

7. The fourth evangelist’s affirmation, “We have seen his glory,” represents perhaps the most paradigmatic statement of the entire gospel. “We have seen” captures the eyewitness dimension, while “glory” pervades John’s presentation of Jesus as the Word, the Messiah, and the Son of God from his preexistent glory to his “signs” to the “lifting up” of the Son of Man and his glorious return.

8. See the still helpful discussion by Leon Morris, “History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel,” in *Studies in the Fourth Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969), 65–138. See also D. Moody Smith, “John—Historian or Theologian?” *BRev* 20 (2004): 22–31, 45.

9. See, e.g., David Friedrich Strauss, *The Christ of Faith and the Jesus of History* (trans. and ed. Leander E. Keck; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977 [1865]), 161: “The Gospels are to be regarded as the oldest collections of the myths which were attached around the core

Another dichotomy passed on to the contemporary interpreter is that between religion and theology. If theology is understood as reflection on actual divine revelation, religion, by contrast, is conceived as the result of the human quest for meaning and as the evolution of human consciousness of a higher power. Thus Johann Salomo Semler sought to blend pietism with rationalism by separating theology as an historical, objective academic discipline from religion, which, he held, was subjective and based on personal experience.¹⁰

Friedrich Schleiermacher, likewise, building on Immanuel Kant's distinction between metaphysics and practical morality, drew the same distinction between religion as a phenomenon of feeling and experience, "the sense of absolute dependence on God," and theology as intellectual reflection about God. After him, Karl Bretschneider (who in 1820 threw down the gauntlet by challenging the historical reliability of John's gospel),¹¹ the Tübingen School (which favored a late, second-century date for John's gospel), and others applied critical reason to the biblical documents, questioning their historical reliability, while others sought to retain the spiritual relevance of the Scriptures, including John's gospel.¹²

However, salvaging John's spiritual message appeared possible only by jettisoning his historical reliability, whether through Rudolf Bultmann's demythologization program (on which see further below) or the setting aside of the gospel in historical Jesus research. Thus this gospel, which had exerted such powerful influence throughout the centuries, not least in the formation of the early Christian creeds, was increasingly marginalized. The gospel, the emerging consensus had it, was of great devotional and theological value, but lacked a proper historical foundation. It appeared that John had suffered irreparable damage at the hands of skeptical scholars, having been dissected by critics of all stripes whether by applying source, form, redaction, or some other form of "higher" criticism.

In the past several decades, however, some have come to view this approach to John's gospel as misguided, advocating the study of the final text of John's gospel. A new breed of literary, narrative critics read the gospel holistically with a view toward appreciating its narrative features.¹³ At the same time, however, this "new" way of reading John's gospel—in fact, these literary critics were by no means the first to read the gospel as story—proceeded frequently only after both "legs" of the interpreter had been amputated by historical critics, and literary readings were conducted on the basis of a self-chosen agnosticism, if not negative assessment, of John's historical nature.¹⁴

of this personality [i.e. Jesus]"; Rudolf Bultmann, *The History of the Synoptic Tradition* (trans. John Marsh; New York: Harper & Row, 1963 [1957]), 370–71: "Thus the kerygma of Christ is cultic legend and the Gospels are expanded cult legends." For an excellent (though not always unbiased) account of the history of NT research, see Baird, *History of New Testament Research*. On the genre of John's gospel, see chapter 2, sec. 3 below.

10. See Baird, *History of New Testament Research*, 1:117–27.

11. Bretschneider, *Probabilia*.

12. For a discussion of the debate regarding the apostolic authorship of John's gospel between 1790 and 1810, see Andreas J. Kö-

tenberger, "Early Doubts of the Apostolic Authorship of the Fourth Gospel in the History of Modern Biblical Criticism," in *Studies on John and Gender: A Decade of Scholarship* (Studies in Biblical Literature 38; New York: Peter Lang, 2001), 17–47.

13. See especially the now-classic work of R. Alan Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel: A Study in Literary Design* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983). Cf. Tom Thatcher and Stephen D. Moore, eds., *Anatomies of Narrative Criticism: The Past, Present, and Futures of the Fourth Gospel as Literature* (SBLRBS 55; Atlanta: SBL, 2008).

14. See, e.g., the critique of the "new criticism" in general and of Culpepper's work in particular in D. A. Carson, *The Gospel according*

1.2.2 *The Road Ahead*

Where does Johannine scholarship go from here? As mentioned, the historicity of John's gospel has been widely diminished by modern scholarship. Even though some have sought to overcome its alleged lack of historical grounding by accentuating its literary nature, such efforts are ultimately unsatisfactory. If, as mentioned, the Johannine narrative were found to rest on a precarious historical foundation, this would have major negative consequences for the veracity of its theological, christological, and soteriological assertions. It is therefore imperative to assess the historical value of John's gospel, not least because mere literary readings fall short of doing full justice to the historical nature of Christianity and the gospel's claim of eyewitness testimony.

In one's scholarship, it will be essential to transcend the above-mentioned dichotomies between the spiritual and the historical, and theology and religion, and to consider the possibility that John's gospel is deeply nurturing spiritually precisely *because* it is grounded in an accurate historical portrayal of what actually took place in and through the life of Jesus Christ.¹⁵ This does not necessarily entail the rejection of historical methodologies or literary approaches where these serve to shed light on the setting of John's writings and on the contours of John's message.

In conducting one's research, it will also be vital for one's primary loyalties not to be to the critical establishment or to the current academic guild and its scholarly paradigms and methods. In fact, anyone looking at the state of Johannine research today will observe that the field is in a considerable state of disarray. D. A. Carson has spoken of the "balkanization" of Johannine studies—that is, its lapse into increasing fragmentation and disintegration into various interpretive enclaves.¹⁶

In many ways, the state of Johannine studies resembles that described in George Guthrie's delightful parody of "busy boats in the bay":

The bay has gotten crowded and we must ask what we are to do about it. As we observe the frenetic activity in the bay, it occurs to us that some connections do exist between some of the boats. They can even be seen stealing bait from one another from time to time. *Yet, for the most part, those in the boats fish in their own part of the bay either ignoring or glancing briefly at the other boats to decry what seem from a distance very small catches indeed.*¹⁷

to *John* (PNTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 63–68 (adapted from his review in *TrinJ* 4 NS (1983): 122–26).

15. See David Steinmetz, "The Superiority of Pre-critical Exegesis," *ThTo* 37 (1980): 27–38; repr. in Stephen E. Fowl, ed., *The Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Classic and Contemporary Readings* (Blackwell Readings in Modern Theology; Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 26–38. This, of course, does not mean that precritical scholarship was necessarily more accurate, just that it was not yet beholden to this dichotomy between history and theology.

16. D. A. Carson, "The Challenge of the Balkanization of Johannine Studies," in *John, Jesus, and History*, Vol. 1: *Critical Appraisals of Critical Views* (ed. Paul N. Anderson, Felix Just, S.J., and Tom Thatcher; SBLSymS 44; Atlanta: SBL, 2007), 133–59; idem, "Reflections upon a Johannine Pilgrimage," in *What We Have Heard*

from the Beginning: The Past, Present, and Future of Johannine Studies (ed. Tom Thatcher; Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2007), 90–92. The term "balkanization" refers to the region in Europe, including the former Yugoslavia, called "the Balkans," which was broken up in the twentieth century into ever smaller regions feuding with one another. Similarly, the field of Johannine studies has witnessed a fragmentation into various camps, whether source critics, redaction critics, literary critics, deconstructionists, postmodernists, or practitioners of other methods.

17. George H. Guthrie, "Boats in the Bay: Reflections on the Use of Linguistics and Literary Analysis in Biblical Studies," in *Linguistics and the New Testament: Critical Junctures* (ed. Stanley E. Porter and D. A. Carson; JSNTSup 168; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 24 (emphasis added).

How, then, shall John's Gospel be read? In a bold proposal, N. T. Wright calls for the adoption of a form of "critical realism" and the development of nothing less than a "new epistemology."¹⁸ While this is not the place to flesh out this proposal, I resonate with these sentiments in many ways. As Johannine scholarship moves into the future, it should take care not to build uncritically on the dubious legacy of its historical-critical forebears. Rather than attempt to construct a new edifice on top of a structurally unsound foundation, students of John's writings will be wise to eschew false dichotomies, to acknowledge the undeniable faith dimension in biblical scholarship, and to adopt a hermeneutical model that affirms the various component parts of the interpretive process in proper balance and proportion.¹⁹

1.3 Prolegomena

1.3.1 *The Hermeneutical Triad*

Interpreters of Scripture are faced with three inescapable realities they need to address in their interpretive practice: (1) the reality of God and his revelation in Scripture (theology); (2) the existence of texts containing that revelation that require interpretation (language and literature); and (3) the reality of history, or, more specifically, salvation history, that is, the fact that God's revelation to humans, which is conveyed by the biblical texts, took place in human history. The writings of Scripture did not come into being in a vacuum; they were written by people with specific beliefs, convictions, and experiences.

In essence, therefore, the interpretive task consists of considering each of the three major elements of the "hermeneutical triad" in proper balance: history, language or literature, and theology, with the first two elements being foundational and theology occupying the apex.²⁰

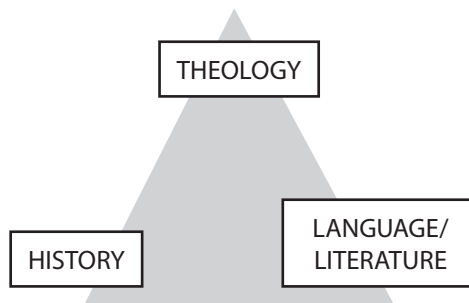


Fig. 1.1: The Hermeneutical Triad

18. For a very incisive, thorough discussion along similar lines see N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Christian Origins and the Question of God 1; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 31–144.

19. On the role of faith in the interpretive process, see Adolf Schlatter, "Atheistic Methods in Theology," in Werner Neuer, *Adolf*

Schlatter: A Biography of Germany's Premier Biblical Theologian (trans. Robert W. Yarbrough; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996 [1905]).

20. See Andreas J. Köstenberger and Richard D. Patterson, *Invitation to Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, forthcoming).

While theology—discerning the spiritual message of Scripture—is at the pinnacle of biblical interpretation, an appreciation of both the historical-cultural background of a particular text and of the Bible's linguistic and literary features is essential. The history of interpretation has shown the flaws in approaches that neglect any one, or two, of the three poles of the “hermeneutical triad.”

During the Enlightenment, many became disenchanted with the supernatural element in Scripture, such as the miracles performed by Moses or Jesus.²¹ Increasingly, the very possibility of miracles was questioned, and anti-supernaturalism often prevailed. A new view of science led to the interpretation of the biblical creation and miracle stories as “myths.” This included Jesus' resurrection, even though Paul and other NT writers insisted that the resurrection is essential to the Christian faith. Over time, this rationalistic mindset gave rise to a pronounced skepticism toward the scriptural data and led to the development of the historical-critical method with its commensurate criteria for assessing the historicity of biblical texts.

One particularly telling expression of this approach is the effort by the twentieth-century theologian Rudolf Bultmann to “demythologize” Scripture in order to salvage an existentialist core of the Christian message.²² For many proponents of the historical-critical method, the question of history became detached from the biblical text, and “*Wie es eigentlich gewesen ist*” — “How it actually happened,” the German theologian von Ranke's definition of history — became the preeminent preoccupation of biblical scholars. Assessing the historicity of the events recorded in Scripture largely replaced the study of the actual text of the Bible, a development trenchantly chronicled in Hans Frei's *Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*.²³ The historical-critical method therefore serves as an exemplar of an undue emphasis on history at the expense of the Bible's linguistic, literary, and theological dimensions.²⁴

In the wake of Frei's work, however, the pendulum swung to the other extreme. Increasingly, historical skepticism toward the historicity of events depicted in the Bible led to a mere literary study of Scripture as any other book. In this approach, aptly labeled “aesthetic theology” by Kevin Vanhoozer, students of Scripture focused unilaterally on the various literary features of the biblical text while excluding historical questions from the scope of their investigation.²⁵ Biblical scholarship was transmuted into narrative criticism or various other forms of literary criticism, and while interesting literary insights were gained, Scripture's historical moorings were unduly neglected, resulting in imbalanced interpretative outcomes once again.

21. See, e.g., Baird, *History of New Testament Research*, 1:3–5, *et passim*.

22. See the perceptive discussion in Stephen Neill and Tom Wright, *The Interpretation of the New Testament 1861–1986* (2nd ed.; Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 237–51.

23. Hans W. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 1974).

24. See in this regard Tom Thatcher, “Anatomies of the Fourth Gospel: Past, Present, and Future Probes,” in *Anatomies of Narra-*

tive Criticism, 2–4, who diagnoses a similar “eclipse of Johannine narrative” prior to the publication of R. Alan Culpepper's *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel*.

25. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, “A Lamp in the Labyrinth: The Hermeneutics of Aesthetic Theology,” *TrinJ* 8 NS (1987): 25–56. See also Andreas J. Köstenberger, “Aesthetic Theology—Blessing or Curse? An Assessment of Narrative Hermeneutics,” *Faith & Mission* 15/2 (1998): 27–44.

Postmodernism, for its part, cast the very notion of truth as a mere function of sociological factors rather than in terms of correspondence to facts and reality.²⁶

In assessing the merits of literary approaches to Scripture, it must be remembered that *texts* do not have a theology; *people*—authors—do.²⁷ This shows the limitations of methods that leave largely in abeyance the question of authorship while focusing on a written text regardless of the adjudication of authorship or other matters intrinsic to the historical setting of a given document. This does not mean that the author's larger-than-life presence should be used to override and overshadow what is expressly stated in the text; the *text* should be regarded as the place where the author expresses his theology. Yet the text is not autonomous; it did not create itself. People, including authors, for their part, are shaped by beliefs and formative experiences. N. T. Wright provides a fitting illustration of the relationship between texts and history when he compares it to eating a piece of fruit, noting that it is impossible to cleanly peel away the skin without some of the fruit attaching to it.²⁸ It is similar with texts that cannot be completely sanitized or divorced from history.

Yet other approaches abandoned the notion of historicity while retaining the centrality of theology. Adherents to this school of thought maintained that theological truth was not contingent on the truthfulness of Scripture in depicting various phenomena and events. The resurrection was redefined as an existential experience of new life through faith in the individual apart from the historical resurrection of Jesus following his crucifixion.²⁹ Personal regeneration upon faith in Christ was recast as the result of an existential encounter with God through the reading of Scripture. These examples illustrate approaches to theology that inadequately recognize the fundamental role of history in the investigation of Scripture. While, as mentioned, theology is properly placed at the pinnacle of biblical interpretation, it must be built on the foundation of a proper appreciation of the historical, linguistic, and literary dimensions of Scripture if a valid and balanced interpretive outcome is to be attained.

For this reason the “hermeneutical triad” constitutes the most satisfying overall framework from which to proceed in order to explore the theology of John's gospel and letters. Rather than being pitted against one another, history, language and literature, and theology each have a vital place in the study of Scripture. If the interpreter is willing to pay attention to each of these dimensions of biblical interpretation and is prepared to follow the text's directions rather than setting out on one's own whim, he or she will be equipped to take their proper place in submission to Scripture and affirm with young Samuel, “Speak, for your servant is listening” (1 Sam 3:10).

26. See on this question Andreas J. Köstenberger, ed., *Whatever Happened to Truth?* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2005).

27. See my review of Edward W. Klink III, *The Sheep of the Fold: The Audience and Origin of the Gospel of John* (SNTSMS 141; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), in *JETS* 51 (2008): 654–56.

28. See Wright, *New Testament and the People of God*, 20, whose entire discussion in “Part II: Tools for the Task” repays careful reading.

29. See the discussion of Bultmann's program of “demythologization” and the critique in Neill and Wright mentioned above.

1.3.2 *The Plan of This Book*

Like any solid structure, Biblical Theology must be built on a robust foundation. In keeping with the preceding reflections, the first portion of this book will therefore be devoted to laying a firm historical and literary foundation for the proper apprehension of John's theology (Parts 1–2, chaps. 1–5). This will consist of, first, setting the enterprise of discerning Johannine theology within the larger framework of the discipline of Biblical Theology (chap. 1, sec. 1).³⁰ The chapter commences with a survey of the history of interpretation of John's writings, with special emphasis being given to the quest for the historical setting of the gospel and letters.³¹

This will be followed by a discussion of the major introductory matters pertaining to John's gospel and letters: their authorship and historical setting (chap. 1, sec. 2), their genre (a somewhat neglected field of inquiry; chap. 2), and various linguistic and literary dimensions of John's gospel and letters (chap. 3). Having laid the historical and literary foundations for studying John's theology, the next two chapters will be devoted to a reading of John's gospel and letters (chaps. 4–5). Under the next heading, I will discuss the nature of this reading in greater detail.

1.3.2.1 Three Areas: Historical Investigation, Literary Study, Theological Reflection

Technically speaking, as is widely recognized, introductory matters are not a part of Biblical Theology but rather inform the discipline by way of convictions derived from prior research. Exegesis, likewise, is not viewed as part of Biblical Theology as such but is presupposed.³² Nevertheless, it will be appropriate to articulate these underlying convictions at the outset of this work.

On the basis of these assumptions and in keeping with the hermeneutical triad sketched above, the strategy in the present volume will be: (1) to investigate the historical and literary setting of John's gospel and letters (chaps. 1–3); (2) to conduct a literary-theological reading of John's gospel and letters (chaps. 4–5); and (3) to engage in theological reflection on major Johannine themes (chaps. 6–15), followed by a brief assessment of John's theology in its canonical context.

This procedure can be diagrammed as follows (read from bottom to top):

30. For a helpful introduction see the essays "Biblical Theology," "History of Biblical Theology," and "Challenges to Biblical Theology" by Brian S. Rosner, Charles H. H. Scobie, and Peter Balla in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology: Exploring the Unity & Diversity of Scripture* (ed. T. Desmond Alexander and Brian S. Rosner; Leicester, UK: Inter-Varsity Press, 2000), 3–27.

31. See esp. Seán P. Kealy, *John's Gospel and the History of Biblical Interpretation* (2 vols.; Mellen Biblical Press Series 60a–b; Lewiston, NY: Mellen, 2002).

32. In the case of this present volume, this means that my

BECNT commentary on John (and my other publications on John's gospel, both monographs and smaller studies) provides the exegetical foundation for this Johannine theology and that the latter is conceived as a sequel to the former. See also the helpful article by D. A. Carson, "The Role of Exegesis in Systematic Theology," in *Doing Theology in Today's World* (ed. John D. Woodbridge and Thomas E. McComiskey; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 39–76, in which he delineates the relationship between exegesis and hermeneutics, historical theology, biblical theology, systematic theology, spiritual experience, and preaching.

BIBLICAL THEOLOGY	Theological reflection on major themes in John's theology (Part 3) Literary-theological reading of John's gospel and letters (Part 2)
UNDERLYING CONVICTIONS	Study of historical setting of John's gospel and letters (Part 1) Exegesis of individual passages in John's gospel and letters

Fig. 1.2: A Working Model of Engaging in Biblical/Johannine Theology

Note that only the theological reading and the theological reflection—the tip of the iceberg, as it were—are properly part of Biblical (here Johannine) Theology. Nevertheless, it will be helpful to provide a discussion of the assumptions regarding introductory matters that are lying beneath the surface. Exegetical matters will be discussed briefly where relevant or the reader will be directed to relevant exegetical discussions in footnotes.

How, then, will this theological reading of John's gospel and letters take place? In light of the preliminary observations registered above, this will not merely be a "literary reading" cut off from historical considerations. It will proceed on the basis of an understanding of the genre of the gospel as a theological biography written by an eyewitness³³ and of 1, 2, and 3 John as genuine first-century letters. An effort will be made to understand these writings within the context of their presumed historical setting in response to then-recent events. In this regard special attention will be given to the particular worldview reflected in these documents.

The above-sketched procedure is based on the conviction that the *theology* of a given document is revealed in the context of the specific *literary form* by which it is conveyed. This, in turn, capitalizes on the strength of Biblical Theology—its careful attention to biblical terminology and the original historical context. Further life is infused into the interpretive process through the insights of literary methods that have sharpened the reader's ability to process narratives and discourses perceptively. Especially in the case of the Gospels, this calls for considerable hermeneutical sophistication, since it is no easy task to discern the theology of a particular writer from his or her narrative.

This holistic, theological reading of John's gospel and letters will ask historical, literary, and theological questions and seek to explore them initially in the unfolding narrative or epistolary framework of John's gospel and letters. In this regard every effort will be made to be sensitive to, and to discern to the extent possible on the basis of the existing data, the plan and structure of these documents, including major and minor transitions. While paying attention to the particulars on the micro-level (i.e., individual words, phrases, and sentences), the primary focus will be on tracking John's unfolding theology on the macro-level (i.e., the larger thematic and synthetic level).

33. E.g., John 1:14; 19:35; 21:24–25. See esp. Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*.

This simultaneous attention to the micro- and macro-level will ensure that the apprehension of Johannine theology flows organically from, and is adequately grounded in, the actual text of these writings rather than, as is sometimes the case, the text being domesticated by a scholar's larger theories regarding John's theology, on the premise that some pesky data should not be allowed to get in the way of one's grand theological scheme.³⁴ This would certainly not be appropriate for a book on Biblical Theology, since, as discussed below, it is intrinsic to Biblical Theology that data not be superimposed "from above" but that the process flow "from below" to the larger thematic and theological level, respecting the expression of an author's theology in a given text in his or her own idiom, style, and thought forms.

1.3.2.2 Major Theological Themes Chosen and Criteria for Selection

This attempted close theological reading of John's gospel and letters in chapters 4 and 5 will then be followed in Part 3 by sustained theological reflection on several of the most significant themes found in these documents.³⁵ By way of prolegomena, I will discuss the Johannine worldview and the grounding of John's theology in various strands of the OT Scriptures (chap. 6). The major theological motifs chosen for reflection are: (1) the Messiah and his signs (chap. 7); (2) creation and new creation (chap. 8); (3) God: Father, Son, and Spirit (chap. 9); (4) salvation history: Jesus' fulfillment of festal symbolism (chap. 10); (5) the cosmic trial motif (chap. 11); (6) the new messianic community (chap. 12); (7) Johannine ethics (chap. 13); (8) John's theology of the cross (chap. 14); and (9) John's trinitarian mission theology (chap. 15). In conclusion, John's theology will be set in its proper canonical context.

In the interest of full disclosure, the process by which these thematic clusters were determined can be sketched as follows. The background was set by over a decade of close working with John's gospel and letters and by engaging in a variety of exegetical and thematic studies. This repeated, reflective reading and work with John's writings resulted in an increasing grasp of John's theology and its constituent parts. As it became necessary to select the specific theological topics to be addressed, three major points of reference that emerged in the gospel were: (1) the introduction (John 1:1–18); (2) the preamble to Part 2 (13:1–3); and (3) the purpose statement (20:30–31).

Located at the beginning, the middle, and the end of John's gospel, these units represent strategically placed indicators of John's major theological purposes and

34. This premise has often applied to German scholarship guided by idealism. Not that Anglo-American scholarship is immune to this, however. A current example of synthesis at times illegitimately controlling exegesis might be aspects of the work of N. T. Wright.

35. In framing the present volume I have benefited particularly from the approach used in the following volumes: John W. Pryor, *John: Evangelist of the Covenant People* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1992); Charles H. H. Scobie, *The Ways of Our God:*

An Approach to Biblical Theology (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003); and the *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*. I have also benefited from reading several of the volumes in the NSBT series (edited by D. A. Carson) and from perusing Dunn, *Theology of Paul the Apostle*. Also, theological differences notwithstanding, Rudolf Bultmann's *Theology of the New Testament* (2 vols.; trans. Kendrick Grobel; New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1951, 1955) has been an inspiration as well.

thematic emphases, together with, and to a slightly lesser extent, other major or mid-level introductory, summary, or concluding sections (John 6:60–71; 12:36b–50). Indeed, it is entirely in keeping with literary theory to read a story in light of its beginning, middle, and end. These three units will therefore serve as the points of departure for the discussion of major Johannine themes in this volume. Also, since the gospel is judged to be the foundational Johannine document, it will serve as the primary basis for this study, with John's letters providing supplementary material for John's theology (though important themes in the letters will be treated in their own right).

In this manner, the present volume seeks to contribute to the question: How does one derive the theology of a particular author from a given text? Essentially, the answer given here is: (1) through repeated careful reading; and (2) through special attention being given to programmatic sections, such as a writing's introduction, purpose statement, or other sections by which an author indicates his theological emphases. What is more, not only do the beginning, middle, and end of a narrative constitute strategic junctures, it is vital to read the document in light of its purpose (the end), which is one reason why the treatment of major themes in John's gospel takes its point of departure from the Johannine purpose statement. The same is true for the letters, especially 1 John, which, as will be seen, presents its own unique challenges.

In light of the importance of reading a document with the end—its purpose—in mind, the investigation of John's theology in part 3, then, will commence with John's declared purpose, which focuses squarely on the Messiah and his signs (chap. 7): "Jesus performed many other *signs* [*sēmeia*] in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the *Messiah*, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name" (20:30–31, emphasis added).³⁶ Thus the Messiah and his signs are the focal point of John's *theo*-drama, or perhaps better, his *Christo*-drama or *sēmeio*-drama (an account of the Messiah's signs).³⁷

Interestingly, neither the Messiah (first as part of the expression "Jesus Christ" in John 1:17 and then describing what John the Baptist was *not* in 1:20) nor his

36. Note that in addition to the Messiah and his signs, "believing" and "life in his name" are also mentioned in the purpose statement. But unlike "Messiah" and "signs," "believing" and "life" form an integral part also of the introduction to the gospel, so that it seemed best to treat these latter two motifs under the rubric "beginning," below.

37. For the notion of *theo*-drama, see Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), following Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory* (4 vols.; trans. G. Harrison; San Francisco: Ignatius, 1988, 1990, 1992, 1994). Mark Stibbe, "Telling the Father's Story: The Gospel of John as Narrative Theology," in *Challenging Perspectives on the Gospel of John* (ed. John Lierman; WUNT 2/219; Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 2006), 170, with reference to Francis J. Moloney,

The Gospel of John (SP; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1998), 47, says that John is "telling the Father's story," not Jesus', and cautions that "John's theology . . . not . . . be swallowed up in his Christology." He contends, on the basis of the reference to Jesus making God known in John 1:18, that John's gospel is not just a βίος Ἰησοῦ; it is also a βίος θεοῦ, "or, better still, a βίος πατρός" (ibid.). No one would deny that Jesus came to make God known; this is explicitly stated in 1:18. Nevertheless, it is stated plainly in 20:30–31 that it was John's purpose to demonstrate that it is *Jesus* who is the Christ and Son of God; and it is asserted in the introduction that it was Jesus *the Word* who was with God in the beginning. This amply indicates the Christocentricity of John's gospel and supports the contention that John's gospel constitutes a *theo*-drama precisely because it, as *Christo*-drama, shows that Jesus was both Messiah and Son of God.

signs are featured in the introduction.³⁸ This shows that they are not so much part of John's universal theological outlook but part of his particular salvation-historical message pertaining to the Jewish people. It is to them that Jesus first came as their Messiah, though they rejected him (12:36b–40). This rejection, in turn, revolves around Jesus' "signs," found only in Act I³⁹ of the gospel, spanning John 2 through 11. Because the Messiah and his signs are not featured in the introduction to the gospel, it may have been better to deal with them later on in the volume; yet because they are at the heart of John's purpose statement, it seemed appropriate to place the discussion of the Messiah and his signs first.

After this the exploration of John's theology starts where John starts: with protology, that is, the Word and its activity in both creation and new creation (chap. 8). Understanding John's theology as it unfolds in the Johannine narrative will turn out to be of seminal significance both methodologically and in its practical outworking. Continuing to track with John's initial remarks, it is apparent that his opening words, "In the beginning was the Word," are followed immediately by his assertion that "the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1). This raises important questions as to the nature of God, and later in the introduction one finds references to the Father and the Son (1:14, 18), respectively (though not of the Spirit). For this reason the next topic that will be considered is God: Father, Son, and Spirit (chap. 9).

After this integrated consideration of the Godhead, the next topic that emerges organically from the unfolding fabric of John's narrative in the introduction is that of salvation history pertaining to Judaism and its various religious institutions, festivals, and holy sites, including the temple (chap. 10). This flows from the references to Jesus "pitching his tent" (cf. 1:14, an allusion to the tabernacle) and various other allusions to the exodus narrative in the latter portions of the introduction (1:14–18). In this regard, what will emerge is an integral connection between John's theology of the temple and the motif of the glory of God in Jesus the Messiah.⁴⁰

Next in the introduction to the gospel comes John's reference to the world's rejection of its Creator upon its visitation by him (John 1:10–11)—part and parcel of the cosmic trial motif in John, which includes references to the world, the Jews, and the witnesses to Jesus—and to those who become God's children through faith and the new birth (presupposing divine election) and who thus come to form the new messianic community, Jesus' "own."⁴¹ These two thematic clusters—the cosmic trial motif and the genesis of the new messianic community—constitute the next topics of discussion (chaps. 11 and 12, respectively).⁴²

After this, the discussion moves to the middle of the Johannine narrative, the preamble to Part Two of John's *Christo*-drama. With the *sēmeio*-drama having

38. Though the author's affirmation, "We have seen his glory" (John 1:14), turns out to encompass the signs (2:11; 9:3–4; 11:4) as well as the cross (12:23, 28; 17:1, 4–5) in the remainder of the Johannine narrative.

39. Please note that I am using the expression "Act I" and "Part

I" as synonyms, and "Act II" and "Part 2."

40. See esp. the discussion in chap. 10, secs. 22.3, 5; and 24.

41. Compare John 1:12 with 13:1.

42. See also the reference to "believing" (as well as "life in his name") in the purpose statement (John 20:31).

drawn to a close at the end of chapter 12, chapter 13 marks the opening of the Johannine *cruci*-drama, showing how the rejection of the Messiah's signs issued in his crucifixion, which, paradoxically, constituted his glorification via the double entendre featured in the "lifted-up sayings."⁴³ Under this rubric, the first topic of discussion will be that of Johannine ethics (chap. 13). This is a subject that is most fully featured in the footwashing pericope, where Jesus provides an anticipatory expression of his love for his disciples and sets them an example to follow. In this way the footwashing serves as an emblem for the cross, where Jesus provides the ultimate expression of his love (John 3:16; 15:13; 1 John 3:10). Thus the Johannine ethic is shown to be an ethic of love, proving the appropriateness of the epithet for John as the "apostle of love."

Next to last, but by no means least, is John's theology of the cross (chap. 14). This is a crucial topic indeed, and, as will be shown, John's *theologia crucis* is distinctive when compared to the Synoptics (though there is, of course, considerable overlap as well). The note of redemption is sounded fairly early in the gospel (note, e.g., the Baptist's reference to "the Lamb of God" who takes away the sin of the world in John 1:29). This unit will include discussions of the nature of Jesus' coming and work and note John's contribution to the theology of the NT on this subject, a subject that has been at the center of vigorous discussion over the course of church history and again in recent years.

The final topic of investigation is one of great (albeit widely underrated) importance without which no Johannine theology would be complete: John's trinitarian mission theology (chap. 15). I have written on this subject elsewhere, so that there will be a certain amount of overlap between my treatment here and other publications, but this topic must be given its due in the present context to round out—and, indeed, culminate—John's theology, just as John's trinitarian mission theology climaxes the Johannine narrative.⁴⁴ This topic, therefore, will serve as a fitting conclusion to the exploration of John's theology.

After this set of theological reflections, one final task remains—that of considering the contribution of Johannine theology to the canon of the NT and of the entire Scriptures (chap. 16). Thus the volume is rounded out with a discussion of John's theology in comparison to the Synoptics and briefly with a comparison of Johannine theology with Pauline theology, the theology of Hebrews, and the theology of the other NT writings. A few concluding remarks and observations close out the volume. With this, the stage is set for an investigation, first, of the historical foundations for a study of John's theology.

43. See John 3:14; 8:28; and 12:32.

44. See John 20:21–22 (cf. 17:18), where Jesus, the Father, and

the Spirit are shown to unite in their mission to the world through Jesus' commissioned followers.