

Terrena atque Caelestia: A Prolegomenon to a Study of the Fourth Gospel

C. Wilfred Griggs

Richard Lloyd Anderson has had a significant and long-lasting impact on me. He has been my teacher in both undergraduate and graduate classes, a valued colleague for more than a quarter of a century, and a dear friend during all that time. The quality of his scholarship is demonstrated through an unusual tenacity in finding and evaluating original sources relating to historical issues. The breadth of his interests is a challenge to all students to expand their horizons of knowledge in different disciplines, at the same time probing for a deeper understanding within specific areas of special interest and training. The example of his commitment to Jesus Christ in his words and actions reminds all friends and colleagues that faith and scholarship are not incompatible traits in an individual. Richard Anderson has presented a model of achieving excellence in both areas during his long and illustrious career at Brigham Young University.

I am offering this brief survey of ancient views on John's Gospel to this volume of essays honoring Richard Anderson, both as a modest tribute to a revered teacher and friend and as an introduction to my forthcoming commentary on the Fourth Gospel.

A number of years ago I began to write notes and observations on the text of the Gospel of John, planning to produce a commentary on that work. Even earlier, I had written (assisted by Randall Stewart, then a graduate student) an introductory New Testament Greek grammar that focused on John.¹ In the course of writing extensive notes on the Fourth Gospel, I discovered a meaning of the text that I had not found in other modern studies of John. Because of John's immense popularity from post-apostolic Christian history onward, I decided to write, as an introduction to my own commentary, a brief survey of how different ancient Christian authors viewed John's Gospel. I was partly motivated by a curiosity about the approaches of ancient and modern authors to this Gospel and about how ancient views compared with my own. It was somewhat surprising (if occasionally pleasantly so) to notice that my own observations, although not necessarily in agreement, were often closer to ancient views than to more recent theories of composition and meaning in the text. Why that is so is not yet entirely apparent to me, though it may become clearer in years to come.

Although this is not the place to present a comprehensive history of the influence of the Gospel of John in Christian history, I wish to make the reader aware that this biblical book enjoyed an early and widespread popularity among many Christians, both those later labeled heretical and those considered orthodox. It is of course well-known that the earliest existing fragment of a New Testament writing is a small piece of papyrus containing portions of John on both the *recto* (front) and the *verso* (back) sides. Comparing the letters on the fragment with those on other papyri from around the beginning of the second century—some having dates on them corresponding to A.D. 94 and 127—led C. H. Roberts to conclude that this text of John was written either at the end of the first century or the beginning of the second.² Jack Finegan more recently claimed that this fragment, known now as *Papyrus Rylands Greek 457*, was written no later than A.D. 125 and “is evidence that that Gospel was circulating in Egypt already at this date.”³ Despite some attacks on the writings of John in the late second century,⁴ the textual evidence for the Gospel suggests that continued popularity at that time is considered at least as good, if not better, for John as for the Synoptics.⁵

Evidence for the existence of the Gospel of John no later than the beginning of the second century is found in the *Egerton Papyrus 1*, “discovered” in 1934, and published by H. Idris Bell and T. C. Skeat in 1935 (compared with the time gap between discovery and publication of other famous religious texts, Bell and Skeat may have established a record for promptness in publishing a text). Identified by content simply as “Fragments of an Unknown Gospel,” the manuscript is dated no later than the first half of the second century,⁶ and the connection between this text and John is described as “obvious and palpable.”⁷ Whether this connection (particularly in passages that have great affinity with verses in John 3:2; 5:39; 7:30, 44; 8:59; 9:29; and 10:25, 39) occurs because of borrowing from the Fourth Gospel or because material was taken from another earlier account cannot be determined. What can be affirmed is that the material in question was certainly known and in circulation among Christians in Egypt by the end of the first century or the beginning of the second. The entirety of the *Egerton Papyrus* is given below (Bell’s translation) so the reader can see the similarities:

(1)? And Jesus said] unto the lawyers,[? Punish] every wrongdoer and transg[r]essor, and not me; . . . (2) And turning to the rulers of the people he spake this saying, Search the scriptures, in which ye think that ye have life; these are they which bear witness of me. (3) Think not that I came to accuse you to my Father; there is one that accuseth you, even Moses, on whom ye have set your hope. (4) And when they said, We know well that God spake unto Moses, but as for thee, we know not whence thou art, Jesus answered and said unto them, Now is your unbelief accused. (5)? they gave counsel to] the multitude to [?carry the] stones together and stone him. (6) And the rulers sought to lay their hands on him that they might take him and [?hand him over] to the multitude; and they could not take him, because the hour of his betrayal was not yet come. (7) But he himself, even the Lord, going out through the midst of them, departed from them. (8) And behold, there cometh unto him a leper and saith, Master Jesus, journeying with lepers and eating with them in the inn I myself also became a leper. If therefore thou wilt, I am made clean. (9) The Lord then said unto him, I will; be thou made clean. And straightway the leprosy departed from him. (10) [And the Lord said unto him], Go [and shew thyself] unto the [priests (11) coming unto him began to tempt him with a question, saying, Master Jesus, we know that thou art come from God, for the things which thou doest testify above all the prophets. (12) Tell us, therefore: Is it lawful [?to render] unto kings that which pertaineth unto their rule? [Shall we render unto them], or not? (13) But Jesus, knowing their thought, being moved with indignation, said unto them, Why call ye me with your mouth Master, when ye hear not what I say? (14) Well did Isaiah prophesy of you, saying, This people honour me with their lips, but their heart is far from me. In vain do they worship me, [teaching as their doctrines the] precepts [of men]. (15) shut up . . . in . . . place . . . its weight unweighted? (16) And when they were perplexed at his strange question, Jesus, as he walked, stood still on the edge of the river Jordan, and stretching forth his right hand he . . . and sprinkled it upon the . . . (17) And then . . . water that had been sprinkled . . . before them and sent forth fruit.⁸

It is certainly clear that there is no wholesale borrowing from John (or the Synoptic Gospels, for that matter), because similar ideas and events are recast into a quite coherent narrative, with no abrupt changes or sharp literary seams. Bell does not claim a solution for determining how the similarities with John came to exist in this format, but he suggests that both John and the *Egerton Papyrus* likely derive from a common source in the first century.⁹ The *Egerton Papyrus* text is cited here to demonstrate the early popularity enjoyed by material that is found in the Gospel of John (even if recast in a different setting and format in *Eg. Pap.* 1).

Who specifically used John in the early post-apostolic church, and in what way this Gospel was first understood, are questions not easily answered from existing evidence. Rudolf Schnackenburg clarifies the problem as plainly as

anyone:

When one attempts to trace the influence of the Gospel of John in the life and history of the Church, one is hindered by the lack of monographs which might cast light on particular points . . . but here [in the second century] in particular these initial stages are full of obscurities. Was it mainly adopted by Gnostics to start with and made to serve their opinions, or was it quickly acknowledged by the whole Church? . . . One thing is certain, that Irenaeus saw the value of the fourth Gospel in the struggle against Gnosticism and that it is due to him above all that John was launched on its triumphal march in the Church.¹⁰

Whether the Gnostics were the first to accept and comment on John, the first unquestioned quotations from and commentaries on this book come from so-called Gnostics and Gnostic sources. A brief and necessarily incomplete survey of the influence of John in both Gnostic and ecclesiastical Christianity will provide a suitable background for a later discussion in this study of secular matters and especially spiritual matters in the Fourth Gospel.

In 1895 Carl Schmidt discovered fifteen pages of a previously unknown work, an *Epistula Apostolorum* (*Epistle of the Apostles*). An entire copy of the work in Ethiopic was published in 1913, and a composite publication of the Coptic and Ethiopic versions was published by Schmidt in 1919.¹¹ Hugo Duensing claims that the *Epistle of the Apostles* “is a remarkable document from the time of the battle between Christianity and Gnosticism,” and although the document is in opposition to Gnosticism, Duensing argues that some doctrines in the work arise “not from the soil of ordinary Christianity but from Gnosticism, which caused the writing to be dropped in a later period.”¹² The *Epistle* is part of a large corpus of materials known as the forty-day literature¹³ and combines a considerable amount of eschatology with ritual preparation for a future resurrection and a postmortal heavenly ascent (see esp. *Epistle of the Apostles* 12–13, 15, 19–21, 26–29, and 34–39). In a review of Jesus’ ministry, the text quotes John, demonstrating that whoever composed the *Epistle* considered the Gospel to be authoritative in an apocalyptic and ritual setting. Selected passages will be given to show how John was used in the *Epistle of the Apostles* (the Duensing-Taylor translation is cited):

We believe that the word, which became flesh through the holy virgin Mary, was conceived in her womb by the Holy Spirit, and was born not by the lust of the flesh but by the will of God. (*Epistle of the Apostles* 3; cf. John 1:13)

Then there was a marriage in Cana of Galilee. And he was invited with his mother and his brothers. And he made water into wine. (*Epistle of the Apostles* 5; cf. John 2:1–11)

Then when we had no bread except five loaves and two fish, he commanded the people to lie down, and their number amounted to 5000 besides women and children, whom we served with pieces of bread; and they were filled, and there was some left over, and we carried away twelve baskets full of pieces. (*Epistle of the Apostles* 5; cf. Matthew 14:17–21; Mark 6:38–44; Luke 9:10–17; and John 6:9–13)

But when they had approached the tomb they looked inside and did not find his body. And as they were mourning and weeping, the Lord appeared to them and said to them, For whom are you weeping? Now do not weep; I am he whom you seek. (*Epistle of the Apostles* 9–10; cf. John 20:11–15)

That you may know that it is I, put your finger, Peter, in the nailprints of my hands; and you, Thomas, put your finger in the spear-wounds of my side. (*Epistle of the Apostles* 11; cf. John 20:20, 27)

And he said to us, "I am wholly in the Father and the Father in me." (*Epistle of the Apostles* 17; cf. John 10:38; 14:10–20; and 17:21–23)

But look, a new commandment I give you, that you love one another. (*Epistle of the Apostles* 18; cf. John 13:34)

Truly I say to you, you and all who believe and also they who yet will believe in him who sent me I will cause to rise up into heaven, to the place which the Father has prepared for the elect and most elect, the Father who will give the rest that he has promised, and eternal life. (*Epistle of the Apostles* 28; cf. John 10:28; 17:2)

From these few examples it is obvious that the *Epistle of the Apostles* assumes acceptance of John within the Christian community to which it is addressed. Because of the strong emphasis on the physical resurrection of Jesus, the writing cannot be viewed as originating from a Docetic author; however, the presence of apocalypticism and the ability to escape from darkness into light through the knowledge and power obtained by means of the revelation of Christ (see *Epistle of the Apostles* 20, 30, *passim*) are sufficient for Duensing to say that it arose from the soil of Gnosticism. For present purposes, it is sufficient to note that by early in the second century, the Gospel of John (among other Old and New Testament writings, to be sure) was being used in writings that claim to provide the reader with the knowledge and power to obtain eternal life.

In addition to the textual evidence, which suggests the early and ongoing popularity of John's Gospel in Egypt, a number of Egyptian Christians from the second and third centuries quote or comment on that Gospel in their writings. The earliest known of these, Basilides of Alexandria (fl. c. A.D. 130), is known only through his critics, the heresiologists, whose motives to ridicule and discredit their subjects render their own works questionable. Basilides and others who are condemned by such churchmen as Irenaeus, Hippolytus, Tertullian, and Epiphanius are called Gnostics, a term of disapproval rather than of definition. Despite volumes written in recent years on that subject, Gnosticism is not easily defined, and there was no unified or identifiable sect constituting the so-called Gnostic church or movement. Worse yet, even those labeled as Gnostics by their opponents usually disavowed such labels, making identification still more elusive and uncertain. A well-known example of this problem comes from Tertullian, a late second-century heresiologist, who declares, "We are quite aware why we call them Valentinians, although they affect to disavow their name."¹⁴ Since this is not the place to attempt a solution to the problem of who in Egypt was a Gnostic and who was not, let it suffice to note that many authors who considered themselves Christians (whether they were or were not called Gnostics by others) quoted or commented on John in support of their beliefs and practices.

According to Photius, Hippolytus, a student and successor of Irenaeus, gives a summary of Basilides' doctrines and avows that when the Alexandrian commented on Genesis 1:3, "Let there be light," he quoted John 1:9: "He was the true light, which lighteth every man that cometh into the world."¹⁵ Basilides also quoted John 2:4, "Mine hour is not yet come," when affirming that everything has its own particular time to happen.¹⁶ No current evidence suggests in a detailed way how Basilides used the Fourth Gospel or in what way he understood the text.

The first commentary on John that survives even in part is written by another so-called Gnostic of the late second century, Heracleon, a student of the famous Egyptian Gnostic, Valentinus. Most of the existing quotations from Heracleon's commentary are found in Origen's commentary on John, continuing an Egyptian Christian tradition of displaying a strong interest in the Fourth Gospel.¹⁷ The most prominent Italian disciple of Valentinus, Ptolemy,¹⁸ was contemporary with Heracleon, and he also wrote a commentary on the introduction to John.¹⁹ Concerning

the commentaries of Ptolemy and Heracleon, Elaine Pagels has suggested that both wrote with a specific type of audience in mind, including or excluding explanations to suit that audience.²⁰ In the case of Ptolemy, Pagels believes that he included Gnostic interpretations for his audience of initiates, while Heracleon omitted explicit references to his esoteric theology from his commentary because he intended it to be read by noninitiates.²¹ Even so, Pagels contends that Heracleon presupposes an esoteric “mythopoetic theology” in his commentary, inferring that these authors understood an exoteric (public) level of Christianity and an esoteric (reserved for initiates) level of the faith. The “mythopoetic theology” in this context refers to four things: variations of some so-called Gnostic accounts of a precosmic council, a rebellion by one or more spirit powers in that setting, the creation of the physical cosmos and the subsequent descent of the Savior into the fallen creation, and, finally, the mysteries of redemption based on revealed knowledge (*gnosis*) passed on to initiates in the faith.

Further evidence for these two levels of exposition of Christian doctrine in early Egyptian Christianity is found in the letter of Clement of Alexandria to Theodore, published by Morton Smith in 1973.²² In that fragmentary account, Clement claims that Mark, while in Rome with Peter, wrote “an account of the Lord’s doings, not, however, declaring all of them, nor yet hinting at the secret ones, but selecting what he thought most useful for increasing the faith of those who were being instructed.”²³ Later, when Mark went to Alexandria after Peter’s death, “he composed a more spiritual Gospel for the use of those who were being perfected.”²⁴ Even in his “secret Gospel,” Mark was apparently careful to write in such a way that only those who were initiates in the mysteries would understand his message:

Nevertheless, he did not divulge the things not to be uttered, nor did he write down the hierophantic teaching of the Lord, but to the stories already written he added yet others and, moreover, brought in certain sayings of which he knew the interpretation would, as a mystagogue, lead the hearers into the innermost sanctuary of that truth hidden by seven veils.²⁵

Clement assures Theodore that not only is the sacred and secret message of the esoteric gospel kept from the uninitiated by the style of the writing, but the Gospel itself was kept under guard to keep it from falling into the hands of unworthy or unscrupulous people:

Thus, in sum, he prepared matters, neither grudgingly nor incautiously, in my opinion, and, dying, he left his composition to the church in Alexandria, where it even yet is most carefully guarded, being read only to those who are being initiated into the great mysteries.²⁶

Despite the precautions taken by the Alexandrian Church for the security of the sacred text, some apostate Carpocratians had obtained a copy of “Secret Mark” and were causing a stir with their misinformed and distorted version of its contents.

The two-level interpretation of Christianity (exoteric and esoteric) is not limited to Gnostics, according to Pagels. She specifies two Alexandrian Christians, Clement and Origen, “who *also* apprehend the ‘scriptures’ as ‘religious literature’ and seek to expound its ‘hidden’ symbolic meaning.”²⁷ Whereas the Gnostics are said to be guilty of denying the literal reality of Jesus’ flesh or the events of his incarnation, these “ecclesiastical Christians” are writing within the common and accepted beliefs of Christianity.²⁸ Both Alexandrian writers accept the reality of the scriptural accounts but believe that deeper theological and symbolic insights may also be found in them.²⁹ One of the problems in comparing the approach of Gnostic writers with that of the so-called “ecclesiastical” writers, of

course, is that the Gnostic commentaries are only available through the polemical writings of their religious enemies and critics.

Beyond observing the two levels of Christian doctrine in early Egyptian Christianity, this is not the place to analyze Heracleon's methods in interpreting John's Gospel. Pagels's study is recommended for readers who wish to pursue that subject. Here it is enough to note that Heracleon perceives different levels of understanding the Gospel, each available to readers according to their own spiritual nature.³⁰ Such levels of apprehending the meaning of John are not to be confused with the later distinctions of orthodoxy and heresy, for, as Walter Bauer has shown, those are concepts which had not become well-defined in the second-century church.³¹ Heracleon seeks rather "to define the inner and true interpretation of the faith over against 'the many,' whose beliefs and practices, he claims, are not only limited . . . but also misleading and erroneous."³²

Claiming to have a deeper understanding of scriptures than is generally known or acknowledged by others may lead to countercharges by one's enemies of arrogance and alleged superiority. Indeed, the Valentinians in Egypt were denounced by ancient writers as determinists for claiming that they alone would be saved while the bulk of mankind would be damned.³³ Modern commentators have also interpreted Valentinian theology as predestinarian, excluding from salvation those who by nature are not entitled to receive the greater knowledge.³⁴ Pagels argues that the charge of determinism is oversimplified, suggesting "that Heracleon is setting forth a theory of the dynamic transformation of human insight."³⁵ Thus those whose spiritual nature allows them to receive heavenly knowledge and insight can enjoy new levels of understanding the scriptures. This capacity is not found in all people, however, and Pagels asserts that Valentinians had only a limited concept of free will. She concurs with Gilles Quispel in claiming that the spirit of understanding came as a gift of grace, rather than simply as an expression of a person's natural endowment.³⁶ Although everybody can apprehend the Gospel of John in a meaningful way, only those who have been enlightened by the spirit of grace can comprehend the symbolism found in the Gospel.³⁷ The Valentinians do not deny the historical reality of events in John—they simply consider those events to be unimportant when compared to the spiritual meaning they convey.³⁸

Although the first known commentaries on John were written by those later called Gnostics, the Fourth Gospel was not ignored or abandoned by Christians who were in the mainstream of the emerging orthodox tradition. Just after the middle of the second century, "Tatian in Rome, the pupil of Justin Martyr, had already used the framework of the Fourth Gospel and thus John's chronology, in opposition to that of the Synoptics, as the basis of his Diatessaron."³⁹ A generation earlier, in the first half of the second century, documentary evidence suggests that Papias, bishop of Hierapolis, and Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna, both knew John.⁴⁰ The latter was even ordained a bishop by John, according to Tertullian.⁴¹ No record survives to show whether or how Papias made use of the Gospel of John, but his list of Jesus' disciples, recorded by Eusebius,⁴² is sufficiently like those found in John 1:35–51 and 21:2 to argue that he used John, rather than the Synoptics, in some instances.⁴³ Only a few passages in Polycarp's extant *Epistle to the Philipians* show a clear relationship to John's writings, the most famous being, "For everyone who does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is an antichrist."⁴⁴ Any similarities with the Gospel are not precise and are not easily shown to be using that source.

A Christian convert of the middle of the second century, Justin, who was also the teacher of Tatian mentioned above, wrote two apologies and a *Dialogue with Trypho* (a Jew). While this apologist mentions John specifically as the author of the book of Revelation ("A certain man among us, whose name is John, one of the apostles of Christ,

prophesied in a revelation which was made to him”),⁴⁵ he does not name John as the author of the Gospel. Nevertheless, “Justin’s doctrinal system is dependent as a whole upon the Fourth Gospel, and especially on the Prologue.”⁴⁶ An example of Justin’s dependence on John can be seen in *Apology* 61:4–5:

For Christ has also said: If you are not born again you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven. But it is obvious to everybody that those who have been born cannot enter the womb of their mother. (cf. John 3:3–5)

The Reverend Dr. John Pryor has recently summarized the evidence relating to Justin’s knowledge and citation of the Fourth Gospel, including the famous passage quoted above. Even though his assessment is generally negative concerning Justin’s awareness or opinion of the Gospel of John, he still concludes, “Justin does appear to be familiar with a document which we know as John’s Gospel.”⁴⁷ He makes the suggestion that Justin’s reticence to use that Gospel may be caused in part to “the high standing of the Fourth Gospel in heretical circles.”⁴⁸ Not all commentators agree with Pryor’s negative assessment of Justin’s use of John, for some see many allusions to John in Justin’s work. In any case, the Gospel of John was widely known among the early church fathers.

It was natural, and perhaps expected, that the popularity of the Fourth Gospel would engender some negative reactions. In an effort to distance themselves from those they deemed heretical, some ecclesiastical leaders would reject whatever the so-called apostates were promoting. In the latter half of the second century, a man named Montanus, in company with two female associates, Prisca and Maximilla, appeared in Phrygia, and the three “claimed to be prophets inspired by the Paraclete.”⁴⁹ Announcing that the second coming of Christ was imminent and would occur in that region,⁵⁰ the Montanists placed great emphasis on the Revelation of John, and “The Gospel also suffered from their misguided appeal to the Johannine doctrine of the Spirit.”⁵¹ Opponents of Montanism not only rejected the heretical movement, but, according to Irenaeus, “set aside at once both the Gospel [of John] and the prophetic Spirit.”⁵² Hippolytus of Rome wrote that an educated Christian in Rome named Gaius refuted the Montanists and their doctrines in part by rejecting the Gospel and Revelation of John, claiming that the former was written by Cerinthus.⁵³

Epiphanius writes in his work against heretics of a group of Christians whom he calls “Alogoi” because they did not accept the Logos which had been preached by John.⁵⁴ Little can be affirmed regarding their beliefs, but the Alogoi rejected John’s authorship of the Gospel and the Revelation, ascribing both to Cerinthus (similar to Gaius, mentioned above, who attributed the Gospel to Cerinthus). Schnackenburg, following August Bludau, maintains that “they themselves had not come to this view out of hostility to Montanism, but by internal criticism of John, based on its contrast to the synoptic presentation.”⁵⁵ The Alogoi were not considered heretical in other respects, however, as Epiphanius concedes: “For they seem to believe the same things we believe.”⁵⁶

Such opposition to the Gospel of John, whether based on a study of its contents or because of its acceptance by one’s enemies, demonstrates the pervasive influence of that Gospel in the second-century church. Even those who opposed this book do not appear to have been motivated by a dislike of the Fourth Gospel. In their own attempts to establish an orthodox Christian doctrine, these fathers instead undertook to discredit those who were using John to support doctrines increasingly considered heretical within the nascent patristic orthodoxy. The main question for most Christians in the first two centuries focused not on the authenticity or the importance of the Fourth Gospel, but rather on its meaning. Even those who were called heretics and apostates considered

themselves Christians, and they believed that the Gospel of John contained keys to understanding doctrines relating to the salvation of mankind.

By the end of the second century, the popularity of the Gospel of John was no longer in doubt, even though not everyone agreed on its purpose and meaning. It will come as no surprise to the student of Christian history that one writer of the third century, Origen of Alexandria (A.D. 185–254), towers above all others in defining Christian theology, especially in commentaries on scriptural writings. Origen tried, as part of his work, to provide the definitive interpretation of the Fourth Gospel. Born in Alexandria in A.D. 185 to parents who either were already Christians or became so soon afterward,⁵⁷ Origen received both a classical and biblical education.⁵⁸ One indication of his prodigious intellectual capabilities was his appointment to take charge of the Christian Catechetical School at Alexandria at the age of seventeen.⁵⁹ Another indication of Origen's genius and industry was the vast output of his writings. Jerome recorded that Origen wrote approximately two thousand volumes,⁶⁰ while Epiphanius claimed Origen had authored some six thousand works.⁶¹ Most of his works have not survived, however, primarily because of later controversies surrounding his interpretations of Christian doctrines. One of these doctrines, to give an example, had to do with the eternity of the human soul. Jerome later condemned Origen for teaching that the soul had a premortal existence and existed as an angel in heaven.⁶²

Among the many treatises authored by Origen were his *Commentaries on Holy Scripture*, begun in Alexandria and continued in Caesarea after his move there in A.D. 233. His sponsor in that great undertaking was a wealthy patron named Ambrose, who provided Origen with every requirement and convenience for producing his manuscripts:

And also from that time Origen began to write his Commentaries on the Divine Scriptures, at the urgent request of Ambrose, who not only gave verbal encouragements and appeals, but also provided ungrudgingly an abundance of every needful thing. While he dictated, there were more than seven shorthand-writers, who relieved each other at appointed times, and there were at least as many copyists, as well as girls trained in penmanship. For all of them Ambrose provided generously everything they needed.⁶³

One is not surprised that, with such uncommon intellectual capability and under such propitious conditions, Origen produced so much in his lifetime.

As noted above, Origen began to write a commentary on the Gospel of John, a massive undertaking that occupied perhaps fifteen years of his life.⁶⁴ He began his work on John while living in Alexandria, but had only completed five books of the commentary by the time he moved to Caesarea.⁶⁵ Origen's method of analysis included an exhaustive examination of the meanings of words and a comparison of words and concepts in John with the same words and concepts found elsewhere in the scriptures. Employing his method in critical detail resulted in the first book of his commentary analyzing the meanings and significance of only two words from John 1:1: *beginning* and *word*. Origen had given a detailed study of only the first eighteen verses of chapter one of John in his first five books of the commentary. He had reached John 13:33 by the end of his thirty-second book, which is the last presently in existence, but he told his patron, Ambrose, in the preface to that book "he expected he could not complete the commentary and would have to resume his study of John's Gospel in paradise."⁶⁶ Allan Menzies thought there once may have been thirty-nine books in the commentary,⁶⁷ but Eusebius remarks that only twenty-two books had survived to his own time.⁶⁸ Of this majestic enterprise, which Crouzel believes "may be

considered Origen's Masterpiece,"⁶⁹ only somewhat more than eight books are extant: 1, 2, 6, 10, 13, 20, 28, 32, and some of 19. Origen often refers to the earlier commentary written by Heracleon, frequently disagreeing with him.

Origen's methodology in scriptural interpretation is often described as allegorical, but one should be aware that the learned Alexandrian is not throwing out literal or historical tradition by introducing the symbolic or spiritual interpretations. Although emphasis on the historical level of understanding scripture varies from work to work, Origen's general practice is to explain the passage literally before moving on to the symbolic or spiritual level of interpretation. Achieving a higher level of understanding is not, for Origen, the same as entering the realm of rhetoric and literary eloquence. For such ornaments the Alexandrian theologian has little use, arguing that the scriptures were written in a common and rather plain style so that they might not be deemed as persuasive according to the wisdom of the world. Rather, the success of scripture in producing conviction comes not through rhetorical polish, but through the demonstration of the Spirit and the power of God.⁷⁰ Similarly, Origen argues that scriptures are not understood through the methods of linguistics or literary analysis⁷¹ but by means of the same spirit by which they were given:

And if we arrive at the Gospels, the accurate understanding of these also, inasmuch as it is an understanding of the mind of Christ, requires the grace that was given to him who said, "But we have the mind of Christ, that we might know the things freely given to us by God, the things which also we speak, not in words taught through the wisdom of man, but in words taught through the Spirit."⁷²

It is with the Spirit that one can give a spiritual (as distinct from a strictly symbolic or allegorical) interpretation of the scriptures. Origen declares that a spiritual interpretation demonstrates the heavenly message of which earthly events and records are types and shadows.⁷³ In such language and thought, Origen is of course echoing Paul, who earlier wrote the same sentiments to both the Corinthians (1 Corinthians 10:11) and the Hebrews (Hebrews 8:5). Far from relegating the scriptures to allegorical or symbolic interpretation, as some have argued, Origen maintains that

there are many more (scriptural) passages which are true with respect to their historical meaning than those which are interwoven with purely spiritual significance.⁷⁴

Still, he argues, even those passages which are historically accurate have a spiritual meaning, and the student of scripture should strive to grasp the full meaning.⁷⁵ Such subjects as the nature of God and his Son, the origin of evil, the fall of man, and the atonement are concealed in "accounts containing a narrative which bears an explanation of the sensible universe, the creation of man and of the succession of the first men until they became numerous."⁷⁶ Through such accounts, "certain mysteries (things not to be uttered publicly) are made clear to those who are able to examine carefully these writings."⁷⁷

Within the context of Origen's method of scriptural exegesis, one would expect the spiritual message of John to overshadow the historical events. Origen's feeling for the importance of the Fourth Gospel is revealed clearly at the beginning of his commentary:

Therefore one should venture to say that the first-fruits of all the scriptures are the Gospels, and the first-fruits of the Gospels is the Gospel according to John.⁷⁸

According to Origen, John “teaches a shadow of the mysteries of Christ,”⁷⁹ both through “the mysteries which are brought forward by his words and the matters of which his deeds were the clues.”⁸⁰ This claim does not permit one to retreat into intellectual Christianity alone, for Origen acknowledges that one must be a Christian in physical, as well as spiritual, matters.⁸¹

In conformity with the manner of interpreting scripture given above, Origen reveals as his purpose the pursuit of a spiritual understanding of the Gospel, for, he says, from the events in the scriptures anyone can be persuaded of truth at the factual (historical) level.⁸² He wishes to understand spiritually, however, and prays:

And now let us ask God to assist us through Christ by the Holy Spirit for an explanation of the secret meaning (connected with the mysteries) which has been treasured up in these words.⁸³

Even if one disagrees with Origen’s spiritual understanding and interpretation of John, his sincerity and enthusiasm for his effort—or his self-assurance, for that matter—are not in doubt. It was clear to Origen that not all followed his reasoning or agreed with his conclusions, but for them he expresses disdain:

I am often led to marvel at the things which are said concerning Christ by some who profess to believe in Him. . . . I am amazed at the stupidity (I am speaking quite plainly) of many of them, but that is what it is.⁸⁴

For one who is willing to pursue the spiritual understanding of the Gospel, he will “put on” Christ and carry in his own body the dying Lord Jesus, and his life as well.⁸⁵ There are those, however, who “will take offense at what we have said, (we who are) representing the Father as the One True God, but admitting that besides the True God others have become Gods by having a share of God.”⁸⁶ Those who refuse to truly participate in divine matters (the spiritual mysteries of the gospel) must remain in ignorance:

And perhaps it is so that those who share in the Word (or who are in the mystery) know the things which do not come to those who do not share in the Word.⁸⁷

Participating in the Word means, according to Origen, to follow Christ and imitate him in all things. To those who understand this, the mysteries are opened and revealed in clarity.⁸⁸

There were then, as now, competing doctrines and philosophies of Christianity, and Origen somewhat apologetically explains why he feels compelled to give his own viewpoints at such great length:

And now with the pretense of higher knowledge the heterodox (apostates) are rising up against the holy church of God, and they are bringing forth compositions in many volumes which pronounce an interpretation of the evangelical and apostolic writings. If I should remain silent and not set before the church members the saving and true doctrines, these teachers will overpower inquisitive souls which, with a lack of saving nourishment, will hasten toward things which are forbidden, food that truly is both impure and abominable.⁸⁹

Origen is not just showing off his considerable erudition; he perceives his task to be nothing less than the saving of souls through the acquisition of spiritual knowledge, and the Gospel of John provides a great key to gaining entry to that knowledge. In point of fact, Origen says, “We knock so that by the keys of knowledge the hidden matters of

the scripture may be opened to us.”⁹⁰ Origen then compares his knocking at the door to Jesus’ going up to the temple and there driving out the moneychangers. Origen notes that in the church, as in the temple in Jerusalem, there are always those who make merchandise of the Word of God. They will be separated out, however, and only by obtaining knowledge and through the mysteries will church members become part of the heavenly building.⁹¹ For Origen then, the Gospel of John provides the key to understanding the truths of the eternal gospel and becoming part of the heavenly temple.

Not only does the Gospel of John have the earliest and perhaps best attestation of the New Testament writings, but it is also arguably the most popular writing in the early church. Opinions differed on specific interpretations of the Fourth Gospel, but there was general agreement that its message held the keys to spiritual knowledge and insights that would assist a Christian to progress both in mortality and beyond the grave. Because Christian concerns have not changed in the modern era, it will be advantageous to consider the Gospel of John in light of the restored gospel. This introductory essay reveals the direction the examination will follow.

Notes

1. See C. Wilfred Griggs and Randall Stewart, *Learn Greek through the New Testament* (Provo, Utah: Interlinguistica Series in Foreign Languages, 1981).
2. See C. H. Roberts, ed., *An Unpublished Fragment of the Fourth Gospel* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1935), 13–16.
3. Jack Finegan, *Encountering New Testament Manuscripts* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 86.
4. See, for example, Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses* 3.11.9, and Epiphanius, *Panarion* 51.
5. See Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Gospel according to St. John*, trans. Kevin Smyth (New York: Herder and Herder, 1968), 1:173.
6. See H. Idris Bell and T. C. Skeat, eds., *Fragments of an Unknown Gospel* (London: Oxford University Press, 1935), 1–2.
7. *Ibid.*, 31.
8. *Ibid.*, 28.
9. See *ibid.*, 35–39.
10. Schnackenburg, *Gospel according to St. John*, 1:192.
11. See Carl Schmidt, *Gespräche Jesu mit seinen Jüngern nach der Auferstehung* (Leipzig: Hinrichs’sche, 1919).
12. Hugo Duensing, “Epistula Apostolorum,” in *New Testament Apocrypha*, ed. Edgar Hennecke and Wilhelm Schneemelcher, trans. R. McL. Wilson (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1963), 1:190.
13. On which, see Hugh W. Nibley, “Evangelium Quadraginta Dierum: The Forty-day Mission of Christ—the Forgotten Heritage,” in *Mormonism and Early Christianity* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1987), 10–44.

14. Tertullian, *Adversus Valentinianos* 4.

15. Hippolytus, *Adversus Haereses* 7.10.

16. See *ibid.*, 7.15.

17. For the published fragments of Heracleon, see Werner Foerster, *Gnosis: A Selection of Gnostic Texts*, trans. R. McL. Wilson (Oxford: Clarendon, 1972), 1:162–83.

18. See Johannes Quasten, *Patrology* (Utrecht: Spectrum, 1961), 1:261.

19. See Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses* 1.8.5; see Latin ending: *Et Ptolemaeus quidem ita*.

20. See Elaine H. Pagels, *The Johannine Gospel in Gnostic Exegesis: Heracleon's Commentary on John* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1973), 18–19.

21. See *ibid.*

22. See Morton Smith, *Clement of Alexandria and a Secret Gospel of Mark* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973).

23. Folio 1, recto, lines 15–18, Smith's translation.

24. Folio 1, recto, lines 21–22, Smith's translation.

25. Folio 1, recto, lines 22–26, Smith's translation.

26. Folio 1, recto, lines 26–28; verso, lines 1–2, Smith's translation.

27. Pagels, *Johannine Gospel*, 16.

28. *Ibid.*

29. See *ibid.*

30. See *ibid.*, 55.

31. See Walter Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity*, ed. Robert A. Kraft and Gerhard Krodel (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971), xxii.

32. Pagels, *Johannine Gospel*, 58.

33. See Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis* 4.89; Clement of Alexandria, *Excerpta ex Scriptis Theodoti* 56.3; Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses* 1.6.1–2; Origen, *Commentaria in Evangelium Joannis* 20.20; Hippolytus, *Refutatio* 5.9.22.

34. See John E. L. Oulton and Henry Chadwick, *Alexandrian Christianity* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1954), 2:31–32; Bentley Layton, *The Gnostic Scriptures* (New York: Doubleday, 1987), 9–12.

35. Pagels, *Johannine Gospel*, 57.
36. See *ibid.*, 100.
37. See *ibid.*, 119–22.
38. See *ibid.*, 118.
39. Martin Hengel, *The Johannine Question*, trans. John Bowden (London: SCM, 1989), 4.
40. See Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses* 5.33.4; Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica* 3.39; 5.24.16.
41. See Tertullian, *De Praescriptionibus* 32; cf. Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses* 3.3.4: “Polycarp also was not only instructed by apostles, and conversed with many who had seen Christ, but was also, by apostles in Asia, appointed bishop of the church in Smyrna.”
42. See Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica* 3.39.3–4.
43. See Hengel, *Johannine Question*, 16–23.
44. Polycarp, *Epistle to the Philippians* 1.1; cf. 1 John 4:2–3.
45. Justin, *Dialogue* 81.
46. John H. Bernard, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to St. John* (Edinburgh: Clark, 1928), 1:lxv.
47. John W. Pryor, “Justin Martyr and the Fourth Gospel,” *Second Century* 9/3 (1992): 169.
48. *Ibid.*
49. W. H. C. Frend, *The Rise of Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 253.
50. See Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica* 5.16.
51. Schnackenburg, *Gospel according to St. John*, 1:200.
52. Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses* 3.11.9.
53. See Schnackenburg, *Gospel according to St. John*, 1:200.
54. See Epiphanius, *Panarion* 51.3.
55. Schnackenburg, *Gospel according to St. John*, 1:201.
56. Epiphanius, *Panarion* 51.4.
57. See Henri Crouzel, *Origen*, trans. A. S. Worrall (Edinburgh: Clark, 1989), 4.

58. See Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica* 6.2.7–9.
59. See *ibid.*, 6.3.3.
60. See Jerome, *Apologia adversus Libros Rufini* 2.22.
61. See Epiphanius, *Panarion* 64.63.
62. See Jerome, *Letters* 51.4; see also Origen, *De Principiis* 1.2.10; 1.4.3; 2.9.
63. Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica* 6.23.2.
64. See Joseph W. Trigg, *Origen: The Bible and Philosophy in the Third-Century Church* (Atlanta: Knox, 1985), 148.
65. See Origen, *Commentary on John* 6.1.8.
66. Trigg, *Origen*, 148.
67. See Allan Menzies, ed., *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1969), 10:294.
68. See Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica* 6.24.1.
69. Crouzel, *Origen*, 42.
70. See Origen, *De Principiis* 4.1.7.
71. See *ibid.*
72. *Ibid.*, 4.1.10.
73. See *ibid.*, 4.1.13.
74. *Ibid.*, 4.1.19.
75. See *ibid.*, 4.1.20.
76. *Ibid.*, 4.1.14.
77. *Ibid.*
78. Origen, *Commentary on John* 1.6.
79. *Ibid.*, 1.9.
80. *Ibid.*
81. See *ibid.*

82. See *ibid.*, 1.10.

83. *Ibid.*, 1.15.

84. *Ibid.*, 1.23.

85. *Ibid.*, 1.25.

86. *Ibid.*, 2.3.

87. *Ibid.*, 2.4.

88. See *ibid.*

89. *Ibid.*, 5.4.

90. *Ibid.*, 10.16.

91. See *ibid.*, 10.18–20.