

John's Destination, Occasion, and Purpose

(Dan Wallace)

Purpose

Regarding the purpose, the author states it in 20:31: "But these things have been written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that, by believing, you might have life in his name." The twofold ἵνα-clause neatly delineates the purpose: that the audience embrace Christ and that they receive life because of this. One question remains, however: the main verb, "believe" has a textual glitch. It is either πιστεύσητε (aorist) or πιστεύητε (present). If the former, it *might* be construed (though by no means necessarily) to mean "come to saving faith." If present, the idea probably would be "continue to believe." At issue is whether the audience is principally believers or non-believers, whether this gospel is principally evangelistic or confirmatory. Although my own text-critical preference is for the present tense, not much should be made of this either way. Further, even if this document is seen as principally evangelistic, by analogy, would this suggest that the Roman congregation which Paul addresses is also principally unbelievers, on the basis of his statement in 1:15 (as well as the content of the whole book)?! Thus, the purpose of the book is to confirm or strengthen Gentile believers in their faith.

In addition to this specific statement of the purpose, how John intended to go about it is a significant question. Clement of Alexandria represented an ancient tradition when he wrote that "Last of all John, perceiving that the external facts had been set forth in the Gospels, at the insistence of his disciples and with the inspiration of the Spirit, composed a spiritual Gospel." As we have suggested earlier, although the patristic writers can be relied upon largely for the who, they are filled with contradictory evidence when it comes to the why. This is a case in point. Clement is guessing—as were his predecessors—based on the radically different style and content of the fourth gospel. As we examine the occasion for this gospel, perhaps *some* of this will be cleared up.

Occasion (and Method of Composition)

As for the occasion, the catalyst for this gospel must be seen in chapter 21. The likelihood (though disputed by some) that this book already tidily ends with 20:31, only to be resumed again in chapter 21, should be a major signal: John had finished the work, but felt compelled to add a final chapter before publication. We believe that the gospel went through at least three stages of composition: primitive diary which John made while with Jesus; a virtually finished version which lacked the prologue (1:1-18) and the epilogue (ch. 21) as well as, perhaps, other incidental comments; and the final edition, in which chapter 21 was appended. This major seam indicates the urgency with which this gospel was manufactured in its present form. Chapter 21 is occupied with one principal concern: the death of Peter.

Without elaborating in too great a detail, our hypothesis is that after the death of Paul (summer of 64), the remaining apostles felt it necessary to communicate to Paul's churches in order to make sure that they knew how they felt about Paul's gospel. Peter wrote one letter, then another. John was putting on the finishing touches of his gospel for Paul's churches (since the churches of Asia Minor had none and since Paul did not know Christ according to the flesh) when Peter was arrested. John had intended merely to end the gospel at chapter 20, as seems obvious. What made him add the final chapter? We believe that 2 Peter 1:15 gives the clue: "Now I am eager that each of you have a memorial of these things after my departure." This cryptic verse has been interpreted in many ways, but whatever it refers to it is fairly clear that some sort of posthumous document written by other



than Peter is in mind. The immediate antecedent is v. 14 where Peter refers to his own impending death—a death which was even revealed by Christ. Is it possible that the memorial of “these things” is John 21—an appendix which Peter (knowing that John was writing a gospel to Paul’s churches in Asia Minor) requested John at the last minute to “work in” to his gospel? The reason for such would be obvious: these churches had just lost Paul and now were going to lose their apostle-in-writing, Peter. Why shouldn’t they give up the faith? Because even Peter’s death was within the sovereignty of God, having been predicted by the Lord Jesus himself. That is why John couches his own longevity in such careful terms: he simply does not know how long he will live and does not want his audience to base their hope on his life.

In short, John wanted to give Paul’s churches the gospel because Paul died. He wrote the last chapter in haste, and as the final catalyst to his efforts, because Peter died. What is remarkable affirmation of this view are several pieces of independent data: (1) entirely apart from the consideration of Peter’s death is our conclusion about the date of this book at c. 65 CE; (2) the early tradition of John’s residence in Ephesus (the main locale where Paul’s stamp was felt) needed some sort of catalyst, though none is provided in patristic literature; (3) John’s departure from Jerusalem in 65 is also somewhat attested in patristic literature; (4) the Gentile audience and the strongly hellenized flavor to this gospel need some kind of rationale since John was not commissioned as an apostle to the Gentiles; (5) the strong influence of Paul, which has actually been an argument against Johannine authorship, is to be accounted for by John’s intentional *deja vu* connection with Paul.

In conclusion, once an early date for this gospel is allowed, the explanation of John 21 as the catalyst for this gospel comes into sharp relief. Paul had died and Peter died, too. John not only wanted to make the literary connection with Paul’s churches that Peter had done—he went the extra mile and took up residence in Ephesus himself. As we stated in our preface, the Gentile mission and the Gentiles’ missionary are what drive the literary endeavors of the NT writers. John has certainly put his stamp of approval on Paul’s gospel and efforts!

Theme

John’s Gospel places an emphasis on the deity of Christ more explicitly than any other gospel. It begins with the evangelist’s declaration (1:1) and concludes with doubting Thomas’ expression of faith (20:28). Clearly this gospel presents Jesus as the Son of God. But it does more than that. It also expects a response from the audience—a response of belief (πιστεύω occurs 98 times; the noun, πίστις, not once). Further, John lacks certain key features found in the Synoptic Gospels—such as the journey to Jerusalem, Olivet Discourse, Sermon on the Mount, Transfiguration, parables, etc. Jesus’ death is viewed as his glory and an eschatological judgment is suppressed. In sum, John presents Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God, who is to be believed in order that one might *right now* pass from death to life.