

## THE PURPOSE OF THE FOURTH GOSPEL: JOHN 20:31 RECONSIDERED

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### I. Introduction

In recent years discussions of the purpose of John's Gospel have largely ignored John 20:30–31. The purpose of the Fourth Gospel has been delineated largely on premises other and broader than this explicit contribution to the theme within the canonical text. For most, these larger premises revolve around the location of the Johannine community and its opponents within the trajectories of developing Christianity, a task best accomplished by detailed study of the book as a whole, especially redaction-critical study. One cannot help thinking of the detailed historical reconstructions advanced by Raymond Brown.<sup>1</sup> In such studies, John 20:31 plays only a small role; for the textual and exegetical uncertainties in the verse (which I shall mention in a moment) afford the interpreter enough room to maneuver and shape the verse's interpretation in a fashion consistent with his or her broader thesis, established on other grounds.

For a small but growing number of scholars, the question of the Fourth Gospel's *historical* purpose has been displaced by the relatively ahistorical concerns of structuralism or of narrative theology: one thinks of essays in *Semeia* or of the stimulating book by R. A. Culpepper, where the Fourth Gospel is assessed as a work of art or as an autonomous text but not in terms of that text's place in the history of Christianity.<sup>2</sup> In such work John 20:31 may have a role to play as an aid to the interpreter's grasp of John's themes or language, but not as a contribution to an assessment of the author's purpose in writing the Gospel in the first place. Only a very small minority of scholars

<sup>1</sup> Not only in Brown's major work on the Fourth Gospel (*The Gospel According to John* [2 vols.; AB 29, 29A; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966]), but especially in his two more recent books: *The Community of the Beloved Disciple* (New York: Paulist, 1979); and *The Epistles of John* (AB 30; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1982).

<sup>2</sup> E.g., Kim Dewey, "Paroimiai in the Gospel of John," *Semeia* 17 (1980) 81–100; John Dominic Crossan, "It is Written: A Structuralist Analysis of John 6," *Semeia* 26 (1983) 3–21; R. Alan Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel: A Study in Literary Design* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983).

appeal to this verse in support of the thesis that the Fourth Gospel is primarily evangelistic.<sup>3</sup>

The points of interest in the verse that are commonly discussed are three:

(1) Textually, should we read πιστεύητε, present subjunctive, supported by p<sup>66</sup>vid N\* B Θ 0250 et al., or πιστεύσητε, aorist subjunctive, attested by N<sup>2</sup> A C D L W Ψ 0100 f<sup>13</sup> m lat sy? The former might be taken by some to mean "in order that you [continue to] believe," suggesting that the Gospel was written for Christians; and the latter might be taken to mean "in order that you may [come to] believe," suggesting that the work was written to bring unbelievers to faith. The external evidence is very finely balanced, but probably a majority of recent commentators prefer the present subjunctive. Some of them have been impressed by an influential essay by H. Riesenfeld, who argues that John commonly uses the present tense after ἵνα. Riesenfeld suggests that 20:31 means that the work was written to encourage believers to persevere in the faith, not to bring outsiders to the faith.<sup>4</sup>

But in fact, whatever one concludes the outcome of the text-critical question to be, the meaning of the verse is not determined by the tense of this one verb. Apart from other considerations, the most that can be deduced from the aorist itself is a reference to the simple act of believing; from the present, some kind of durative or iterative belief, and even that can be questioned. John 11:15 provides an instance where the *aorist* subjunctive πιστεύσητε occurs with the sense of having faith corroborated; John 1:7 provides an instance of the *aorist* subjunctive πιστεύσωσιν signifying a coming to faith (cf. also 4:48). At the same time, the *present* subjunctive πιστεύητε occurs in the best reading of John 6:29 to refer to the entire process of coming to faith and continuing to believe: this is the work of God, ἵνα πιστεύητε εἰς ὃν ἀπέστειλεν ἐκεῖνος. In short, the text-critical evidence is not determinative, not only because it is evenly balanced but also because both the present subjunctive and the aorist subjunctive can occur both in the context of coming to faith and in the context of continuing in faith. R. Schnackenburg rightly observes that even if one reads the aorist in this verse, such a reading is insufficient ground on which to base an "evangelistic" interpretation.<sup>5</sup> It would have been helpful if he had also noted that if one reads

<sup>3</sup> E.g., Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971) 855–57, and with somewhat more specialized or focused understandings of who is to be evangelized, see also W. Oehler, *Das Johannesevangelium eine Missionsschrift für die Welt* (Gutersloh: Bertelsmann, 1936), idem, *Zum Missionscharakter des Johannesevangeliums* (Gutersloh: Bertelsmann, 1941), E. D. Freed, "Did John write his gospel partly to win Samaritan converts?" *NovT* 12 (1970) 241–56, K. Bornhauser, *Das Johannesevangelium Eine Missionsschrift für Israel* (Gutersloh: Bertelsmann, 1928), C. H. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: University Press, 1953) 8–9, passim.

<sup>4</sup> H. Riesenfeld, "Zu den johanneische ἵνα-Sätzen," *ST* 19 (1965) 213–20.

<sup>5</sup> Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Gospel According to St John* (3 vols., New York: Crossroad, 1982)

a present subjunctive, that is not support for his own preferred position. Perhaps it should also be pointed out that most of Riesenfeld's examples in support of the position that John commonly prefers the present subjunctive after ἵνα come from 1 John. The evidence in the Fourth Gospel itself is much more ambiguous.<sup>6</sup> Appeal to the first epistle will bear little weight with those who detect different authors behind John and 1 John; equally, such evidence will bear little weight with those who argue that the purpose of John is evangelistic whereas the purpose of 1 John is to address the immediate concerns of the church. Indeed, that Riesenfeld has had to resort to the epistle for so much of his evidence might even be taken as *prima facie* evidence against his thesis.

(2) X. Leon-Dufour has suggested that the first ἵνα-clause be rendered "believe that Jesus the Messiah, is the Son of God."<sup>7</sup> But C. K. Barrett rightly points out that the word order does not encourage such a rendering.<sup>8</sup> Only D and W attest a different word order, and these two witnesses fail to agree.

(3) Those who hold that the Fourth Gospel is primarily an evangelistic writing aimed at Jewish nonbelievers are disposed to see in "Son of God" a synonym for "Christ" or "Messiah." Those who think that the book was addressed to Gentile nonbelievers or to the church see in "Son of God" a somewhat different title (Brown calls it "a more profound meaning,"<sup>9</sup> which I think is simply a way of blessing his own judgment). Regardless of whether "Son of God" is more or less synonymous with "Messiah," however, the crucial question addressed by this paper receives no certain response from decisions made about the meaning of "Son of God." This is best seen by showing that there is no necessary connection between one's opinion on the Son-of-God question and one's opinion on the readers of this Gospel. For instance, even

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<sup>6</sup> The aorist subjunctive characterizes the solid majority of verbs after ἵνα in the Fourth Gospel: approximately 88 are aorist subjunctives (1:7[*bis*], 8, 19[*v.l.*], 22, 27, 31; 2:25; 3:17, 21; 4:8, 34[*v.l.*], 47; 5:7, 34, 36; 6:5, 7, 15[*v.l.*], 30[*bis*], 50[*bis*]; 7:32; 8:56[*v.l.*], 59; 9:2, 3, 22, 36, 39; 10:10[*bis*], 17, 31, 38; 11:4, 11, 15, 16, 19, 31, 42, 50, 55, 57; 12:7[*v.l.*], 9, 20, 23, 36, 38, 46, 47[*prob.*]; 13:1, 2[*v.l.*], 18, 19[*v.l.*], 29; 14:13; 15:11, 13, 16[*bis, v.l.*], 25; 16:2, 7, 32; 17:1, 2[*v.l.*], 4, 12, 15[*bis*]; 18:9, 28, 32, 37, 39; 19:4, 16, 24, 28, 31, 35[*v.l.*], 36, 38; 20:31[*v.l.*]); approximately 47 are present subjunctives (3:15, 16, 17; 4:36; 5:20, 23, 40; 6:28[*v.l.*], 29[*v.l.*], 38[*v.l.*], 40; 8:6[*v.l.*]; 10:10, 38; 11:53; 12:10, 47[*prob.*]; 13:15, 34[*bis*]; 14:3, 16[*v.l.*]; 15:2, 8, 11, 12, 16, 17; 16:4, 24, 30, 33; 17:3[*v.l.*], 11, 13, 19, 31[*tris*], 22, 23[*bis*], 24[*bis*], 26; 20:31)—and not a few of these are associated with rather stylized verbs that might be expected to take the present tense (esp. εἰμί, ἔχω, and ἀγαπάω). In NA<sup>26</sup>, there is also one future indicative (7:3[*v.l.*]), though some of the variants already listed offer the same tense and mood.

<sup>7</sup> X. Léon-Dufour, *The Gospels and the Jesus of History* (trans. and ed. J. McHugh; London: Collins, 1968) 81.

<sup>8</sup> C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John* (2d ed.; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978) 575.

<sup>9</sup> Brown, *John*, 2. 1060.

if the two terms are roughly synonymous, then *contra* those who think synonymity between “Son of God” and “Messiah” supports the view that the readers are Jewish nonbelievers, the Gospel itself could still have been addressed to Christians to encourage them in their faith: all we would have to assume is that in this instance “Son of God” is not much more than a preacher’s way of emphasizing a point. Conversely, if “Son of God” adds a new dimension to what should be believed, it is difficult to see why the Gospel should be judged less evangelistic on this ground, since the semantic content of “Son of God” has to some extent already been fleshed out by the occurrence of the title throughout the Gospel (John 1:34[v.l.], 49; 3:18; 5:25; 9:35[v.l.]; 10:36; 11:4, 27; 19:7; 20:31). I shall briefly return to this question a little further on in the paper.

The purpose of this paper is to examine an overlooked syntactical unit in John 20:31 and, on this basis, to suggest an alternative understanding of the first *ἵνα*-clause. If this exegesis is defensible, it may have repercussions on our understanding of the rest of the book, and some of these are briefly and tentatively explored in the last part of the paper.

## II. The Meaning of *ἵνα πιστεύ[σ]ητε ὅτι Ἰησοῦς ἐστὶν ὁ χριστὸς ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ*

I begin by summarizing the conclusions set out in the dissertation by Lane C. McGaughey, *Toward a Descriptive Analysis of EINAI as a Linking Verb in New Testament Greek*,<sup>10</sup> largely using McGaughey’s own summary in three points and several subpoints:

(1) The subject is that word or cluster that agrees in person and number with the personal ending of the verb. That is, of course, true for all verbs (except where there is breach of concord), and not just for *εἶναι*.

(2) The word or word cluster with head term in the nominative case is the subject. Once again, of course, this is true for all verbs, except where the verb takes on the form of an infinitive, in which instance the “quasi subject” is in the accusative.

(3) The subject is determined by its antecedent—which may be linguistic, situational, or merely the topic on which comment is being made. In particular:

(3a) Demonstrative and relative pronouns are subjects (this follows, of course, from what has just been said).

(3b) The subject is indicated by zero anaphora—that is, the subject need not be separately expressed, but the context nevertheless tells us that *ψεῦστης ἐστὶν* means “he is a liar” and not “a liar exists.”

(3c) The word or word cluster determined by an article is the subject.

<sup>10</sup> Lane C. McGaughey, *Toward a Descriptive Analysis of EINAI as a Linking Verb in New Testament Greek* (SBLDS 6; Missoula, MT: SBL, 1972).

(3d) If both words or word clusters are determined by the article, the first one is the subject.

The interesting rule for my purposes is (3c). McGaughy says that after checking every occurrence of ἔστιν in the NT, he finds that all of them fit under one of these descriptive "rules," except for five exceptions to (3c), viz., John 20:31; 1 John 2:22b; 4:15; 5:1; 5:5c. In each of these instances, a christological statement is being made; and in each instance McGaughy says that the anarthrous "Jesus" is the subject. In an important review, E. Goetchius points out that there are three rather similar constructions in Acts, but all with the infinitive εἶναι: viz., 5:42; 18:5, 28.<sup>11</sup> Once more the subject is Christology, and the majority of interpreters understand "Jesus" to be the subject.

But Goetchius takes the discussion further. He points out that there is no syntactical or contextual reason for taking any of these eight passages as actual exceptions. Indeed, in Acts 18:5, the RSV has "that the Christ was Jesus," not "that Jesus was the Christ"; the NEB and Rieu, "that the Messiah was Jesus"; and similarly at 18:28. Even at 5:42, the NEB offers as an alternative, in the footnote, "telling the good news that the Messiah was Jesus." Such a rendering of the infinitival construction is also confirmed by the work of H. R. Moeller and A. Kramer, who have treated every instance of a double accusative compounded with an infinitive in order to establish which of the two accusatives serves as the "quasi subject."<sup>12</sup> Moreover, the rendering "that the Messiah is Jesus" makes at least as good sense as "that Jesus is the Messiah" in Acts 5:42, and considerably better sense in Acts 18:5, 28.

That brings us to the five finite verbs, all in the Johannine corpus, that McGaughy judges to be exceptions to his rule and that Goetchius suggests may not be exceptions at all. Four of the five occur in 1 John. Despite recent arguments to the contrary, I remain persuaded that some form of proto-gnostic heresy stands behind that epistle, a heresy that divided "Christ" or "Son of God" from "Jesus." The former may have come to rest for a while on Jesus; but this "Son of God," perhaps conceived as a demiurge, could not actually take on physical form and become the man Jesus. In short, the point being denied, from the perspective of the writer of the epistle, is that the Son of God or the Messiah is Jesus. Therefore, it is entirely understandable if the crucial christological confession, from his point of view, is that the Messiah is Jesus (2:22b; 5:1) or that the Son of God is Jesus (4:15; 5:5c).

That leaves only John 20:31, and there is every syntactical reason for thinking that the crucial clause should be rendered "that you may believe that the Christ, the Son of God, is Jesus." If this conclusion is sound, it means that the writer conceives of his purpose, according to 20:31, less as the

<sup>11</sup> See E. V. N. Goetchius, *JBL* 95 (1976) 147-49.

<sup>12</sup> H. R. Moeller and A. Kramer, "An Overlooked Structural Pattern in New Testament Greek," *NovT* 5 (1961-62) 25-35.

answer to the question Who is Jesus? than as the answer to the question Who is the Messiah? Who is the Son of God?

### III. Implications and Reflections

To provide a full discussion of the ways in which this vantage might well shape our understanding of passage after passage in the Fourth Gospel would require a book. If done well, such study would result in a sufficiently coherent picture that the interpretation of John 20:31 proposed here would in turn be confirmed. But in the short space allotted this paper, I shall attempt no more than a rather hesitant priming of the pump, in the form of a number of implications and reflections.

(1) The question Who is the Messiah? or Who is the Son of God? could be taken in two principal ways: (a) It could be asking *what kind of person* Messiah would be: for example: "Who is 'the Messiah'? What sort of person are you talking about?" Answer: "I can give you a ready reply. Have you heard of Jesus? Yes? Well, if you want to know who Messiah is, understand this: the Messiah is Jesus." The trouble with this line of argument is that it presupposes that the reader knows more about Jesus than about the Messiah, so that the latter may become the explanation or standard of the former. But that is not the way the Fourth Gospel is cast. Passage after passage predicates things of Jesus, not of the Messiah: the many "I am" passages (absolute and otherwise), the manifestation of Jesus' glory, the plethora of titles and functions ascribed to him in the first chapter, and much more. Three times Jesus is explicitly said to be the Messiah: in 1:41 ("We have found the Messiah"); in 4:25–26 (" 'I know that Messiah . . . is coming.' . . . 'I who speak to you am he' "); and 11:27 ("I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world"). It is impossible to imagine how that kind of answer could serve as a response to the question as I have slanted it. Admittedly, it is this *what kind of person Messiah is* question that stands behind the four instances of this construction in 1 John. But it is the literary context of 1 John that helps us draw that conclusion, and equally it is the literary context of the Fourth Gospel that forces us to rule out that possibility here. (b) Alternatively, the same question could be asking for an identity, that is, asking for a name: for example: "You claim that Messiah has already come. Prove your claim: who is he, then?" Answer: "Messiah is Jesus." The intriguing thing about this sort of model is that it could equally well be answered by "Jesus is the Messiah." To expand a little, both of the following sequences make sense: (i) "You claim that Messiah has already come. Prove your claim: who is he?" Answer: "The Messiah is Jesus." (ii) "You claim that Messiah has already come. Prove your claim: who is he?" Answer: "Jesus is the Messiah." Thus, the fact that three passages, as we have seen, predicate that Jesus is the Messiah instead of predicating that the Messiah is Jesus, is no bar to the interpretation of 20:31 I am proposing. There is no obvious or immediate

reason why the syntax of 20:31 should not be understood in line with the way it is regularly taken in the Greek NT. And something similar could be argued for "Son of God."

But that means that even in the plethora of messianic titles and functions ascribed to Jesus, the main focus is on the question Who is the Messiah? and not Who is Jesus? That both questions, rightly understood, *can* generate responses that are formally identical, does not mean that *both of the questions themselves* are identical. But what might be meant by the difference? And that brings me to my second point:

(2) If the question behind 20:31 is Who is Jesus?, as is regularly presupposed, one must posit either a readership of non-Christians who in the mind of the church need to hear the answer to the question, or a readership of Christians who are perhaps a trifle unsettled in their faith, perhaps because they are in dispute with synagogue authorities over the person of Jesus. The majority of contemporary scholars, as we have seen, favor the latter interpretation. But if the question behind 20:31 is Who then is the Messiah?, understood as an identity question (which is, I have suggested, the only way to make sense of both the syntax of 20:31 and the thrust of the Fourth Gospel), then one cannot easily posit a readership primarily of Christians in dispute with the synagogue; for in that case the entire dispute turns on the identity of Jesus, not the identity of the Messiah. The only candidates for the primary readership, I think, are the following: (i) docetic Christians or those in conflict with them, for whom the identity of the Messiah or of the Son of God is extremely important. That accounts nicely, I think, for the recurrence of the disputed construction in 1 John; but *contra* E. Käsemann, whom I have attempted to rebut elsewhere, I doubt very much that the Fourth Gospel is at all interested in either defending or confronting a docetic Christology.<sup>13</sup> (ii) Gentile non-Christians who in the view of the church need to learn who the Messiah is. At first glance, this proposal might seem attractive, but in fact it turns on a slippery jumping of categories. For this readership, the question Who then is the Messiah? would not be an identity question at all, but a surreptitious return to the question What kind of person is the Messiah? — a question we have already ruled unlikely on other grounds. Such an interpretation could only be made plausible again if the Fourth Gospel turned out on inspection to be a kind of primer for the non-Jewish Hellenistic world of the nature of messiahship. It is doubtful if anyone is hardy enough to defend *that* thesis. (iii) Non-Christian Jews who may have had some vague exposure to Christianity and are at least interested enough to ask the question Who then is the Messiah? That is surely the most plausible answer, and it meshes rather nicely with papers published by

<sup>13</sup> Ernst Käsemann, *The Testament of Jesus* (London: SCM, 1968); D. A. Carson, *Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility: Biblical Themes in Tension* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1981) 154, 157–62.

W. C. van Unnik and J. A. T. Robinson, and an earlier monograph by K. Bornhäuser, who argue with some force that the Fourth Gospel is designed to serve as an evangelistic tool aimed at converting Hellenistic Jews to Jesus Messiah.<sup>14</sup> I would include as well proselytes and God-fearers, who would also have considerable exposure to the OT and who would ask the question in the same way as the Jews with whom they had come to worship.

(3) The argument that the translation of Semitic words (e.g., 1:38, 41; 4:25; 19:13, 17) presupposes a non-Jewish readership confuses race and religion with linguistic competence. A Greek-speaking Jew with no knowledge of Hebrew or Aramaic might well appreciate the translations. More important, the immense wealth of OT quotations and allusions presupposes a readership steeped in biblical lore. Especially impressive are the allusions – not only the explicit ones, such as the brief mention of the serpent in the wilderness (3:14), but especially the implicit ones, such as the replacement of “holy space” with Jesus Messiah,<sup>15</sup> or Jesus’ self-identification with elements tied in with Jewish feasts – and perhaps also veiled references to OT events understood as foreshadowings of events in Jesus’ life, ministry, death, and resurrection.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, as Culpepper has noted, no explanation is offered of “the son of man” or of “the prophet” (1:21, 25; 6:14), the devil (13:2) or of Satan (13:27).<sup>17</sup> Even the opening ἐν ἀρχῇ is redolent of the LXX, and in this Gospel Jesus presents himself as in line with or in fulfillment of such figures as Jacob (1:51) and Moses (3:14; 5:46). Such phenomena virtually rule out a biblically illiterate readership. We are left with either Christians (of whatever race) or non-Christian Jews and proselytes to Judaism. It is interesting that 1 John, addressed quite clearly to Christians, makes little use of the OT, in rather stark contrast to the Fourth Gospel. Not too much should be made of this, but perhaps it is one more little piece of evidence that the intended first readership of the Gospel of John was Jewish and not Christian.

(4) The approach I am suggesting is also consistent with the prologue, which, more decisively than anything in the Synoptic Gospels, orients this Gospel to a “Christology from above.” Luke’s birth narrative, for instance, virginal conception included, focuses on who Jesus is; John’s prologue focuses on who the “messianic figure” is (if I may resort to a generic description).

<sup>14</sup> W. C. van Unnik, “The Purpose of St John’s Gospel,” *SE* (1959) 382–411; J. A. T. Robinson, “The Destination and Purpose of St John’s Gospel,” *NTS* 6 (1959–60) 117–31; K. Bornhäuser, *Das Johannesevangelium*.

<sup>15</sup> I am thinking in particular of the convincing thesis of W. D. Davies (*The Gospel and the Land: Early Christianity and Jewish Territorial Doctrine* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974] 288–335).

<sup>16</sup> Most recently, see Mark Reasoner, “The Relationship of Three Old Testament Woman-at-the-Well Texts to John 4:1–42,” (M.A. thesis, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 1985).

<sup>17</sup> Culpepper, *Anatomy*, 221.



(5) It might be objected that this interpretation implies a firm, pre-existing, Jewish understanding of the notion Christ/Son of God into which Jesus fits; and such a theory is invalidated by the fact that the Johannine conception of messiahship/sonship surpasses and defies any Jewish understanding of the concept gleaned from other sources. But this objection, taken seriously, proves too much; for it would force us to conclude that *any* NT attempt to prove that the awaited Messiah is Jesus is principally impossible. That there were various messianic expectations in the Second Temple period is well known; that nascent Christianity was early harnessed to such expectations while simultaneously outstripping them (e.g., by linking the Suffering Servant motif with various royal motifs) is equally well known. Virtually all knowledge is acquired by beginning with the known and moving to the unknown. All that is claimed in the thesis of this paper is that John has as a primary purpose the identification of Jesus with first-century Jewish messianic expectation; but that does not prevent him from pushing back the frontiers in other parts of his book to enlarge on what kind of messiah he is talking about, and on what kind of Messiah Jesus turned out to be. This is not taking back with the right hand what is given with the left, for any evangelism of Jews and Jewish proselytes by Christians in the first century necessarily faced the problem of simultaneously trying to draw the connections between the Jewish messianic hope and the church's understanding of Jesus; between the church's insistence that the old covenant had prophesied the coming of Jesus and its growing insistence that the old covenant had been fulfilled and thus in some way superseded; between the church's evangelistic impetus to Jews and its perception that substantial numbers of Jews were hardened and blind. From our perspective we may well be able to delineate, with more or less clarity, how far John's understanding of messiahship defied or surpassed notions of messiahship in first-century Judaism; but, from his perspective, he was in line with the scriptures (5:39–40, 46), and he was therefore rightly harnessing messianic expectation and rightly identifying who the Messiah really was, while his opponents did not understand the scriptures. That is such common fare in early Christianity as to eliminate all force from the stated objection.

(6) It has been suggested that in 20:31 the appositional "the Son of God" looks away from a Jewish to a Gentile readership.<sup>18</sup> In that case, the Fourth Gospel is designed to serve as an evangelistic writing to *both* Jews and Gentiles. But too much in this thesis is based on an arbitrarily restrictive understanding of "the Son of God"; for it is now well known that the title took on different meanings in its different constituencies, and could actually serve as a messianic title (*Pss. Sol.* 17:5). Of the eleven occurrences of "Son of God" (listed above on p. 642; and two of them are variants), one cannot help noting

<sup>18</sup> So, for instance, E. P. Groenewald, "The Christological meaning of John 20:31," *Neot* 2 (1968) 131–40.

that three place the title in parallel to Messiah or Christ (1:49; 11:27; 20:31), one is connected with the resurrection, a decidedly Jewish notion (5:25), and two are tied up with the OT and/or Jewish tradition (10:36; 19:7). Even the remaining five are comprehensible within a Jewish framework. Moreover, there is too little support for the thesis as a whole within the Fourth Gospel itself, and the richness of the OT background stands against it.

(7) The evangelistic purpose I am suggesting is perfectly sustainable even in the face of John's strong attacks on Jewish leaders. The Fourth Gospel is not as anti-Jewish as many have argued.<sup>19</sup> Salvation is still "from the Jews" (4:22). But insofar as those strong confrontations occur, they are not inimical to evangelistic purposes. It may even have been part of John's strategy to drive a wedge between ordinary Jews and their leaders among his readership, while still in the example of Nicodemus, leaving hope even for the leaders themselves. This is not meant to short-circuit the extremely complex questions surrounding the identity of the Ἰουδαῖοι,<sup>20</sup> but only to point out that some kind of what appear to be "love/hate" relationships between the converted and the unconverted are standard fare in evangelistic literature. One cannot read tracts prepared by, say, Jehovah's Witnesses for the consumption of Protestants and Catholics without being reminded of the fact: all the churches are apostate and everyone is wrong except for the Witnesses—set precisely in the midst of literature whose purpose it is to win Catholics and Protestants to the camp of the Jehovah's Witnesses. A score of other examples instantly come to mind.

(8) Something must be said about the final clause of 20:31. The pattern ἵνα plus a transitive verb whose direct object is "life" or "eternal life" occurs seven times in the Fourth Gospel (3:15, 16; 5:40; 6:60; 10:10; 17:2; 20:31). Not one of them unambiguously suggests continuing in life or preserving eternal life or the like. One quite clearly refers to conversion (5:40), and all of the rest must either be taken as references to conversion or as generalized, almost gnomic, references to eternal life which nonetheless occur in contexts that speak or hint also of death and therefore of the change or conversion that must be effected. Applied to 20:31, this observation serves as telling evidence that John wrote his Gospel with evangelistic intent.

(9) In private conversation, some have questioned whether it is right to rest so much weight on the article with a name, especially the name Ἰησοῦς, when names in general and this name in particular exhibit notorious complexities in the patterns of their articular or anarthrous occurrence. But the crucial syntactical unit is not the name, with or without the article, but all

<sup>19</sup> See esp. Reinhold Leistner, *Antijudaismus im Johannesevangelium? Darstellung des Problems in der neueren Auslegungsgeschichte und Untersuchung der Leidengeschichte* (Bern: Herbert Lang, 1974).

<sup>20</sup> Most recently, see John Ashton, "The Identity and Function of the Ἰουδαῖοι in the Fourth Gospel," *NovT* 27 (1985) 40–75.

nominative nouns syntactically linked to ἔστιν. The frequency of the construction and the consistent validity of McGaughey's "rule"—especially so once his own "exceptions" have been judged unnecessary and unlikely—suggest that the syntactical argument cannot be so easily sidestepped.

(10) Perhaps the most difficult question this proposal must confront is what we are to do with John 14–17, which few would judge to be primarily evangelistic. A detailed response would require another essay, but several observations may at least alleviate the difficulty: (a) Few NT documents are more emphatic than John in insisting that genuine faith perseveres to the end: "If you *remain* in my word, then you are truly my disciples," Jesus insists (8:31). Correspondingly, we must not think of this Gospel as "evangelistic" merely in the sense that it was written to produce superficial professions of faith, but in the sense that it was written to produce converts who grow and persevere and develop as disciples. In that context, John 14–17 seems less out of place. (b) Ostensibly, John 14–17 deals with the dynamics among Jesus, his disciples, and his Father on the night he was betrayed. Before too much skepticism is applied, it is worth noting that at least some of the misunderstandings displayed by the disciples in these chapters are utterly meaningless or historically implausible in any other historical context—as I have tried to show elsewhere.<sup>21</sup> In certain respects, the first disciples' "coming to faith" was unique, for it involved waiting for certain events (especially the cross and the resurrection) to take place before their understanding *could* become distinctively "Christian." But there was nothing to prevent a gifted evangelist from taking the account of their unique "coming to faith" and shaping it and applying it to his readers, who also needed, in his view, to come to settled convictions on a number of points if they were to be considered "Christians" at all. (c) If someone were to suggest that a simple source-critical solution is preferable, by which all of John 14–17 should be relegated to later strata, or John 20:31 linked with some prototypical "signs gospel" or the like, three notes might afford at least temporary pause: first, I attempted to assess the methodological viability of the source-critical approaches to the Fourth Gospel in an earlier essay and came away dissatisfied;<sup>22</sup> second, these two verses, 20:30–31 are fairly tightly tied to the preceding narrative by the twin uses of πιστεύω in 20:29, picked up in 20:31, and by the "sign" value of the resurrection itself, picked up in 20:30; and third, now that the new criticism is being applied to John (notably by Culpepper), the problem of identifying aporias and therefore seams and sources is becoming increasingly problematic.<sup>23</sup> It will not do to use the same evidence to justify a seam on the one

<sup>21</sup> D. A. Carson, "Understanding Misunderstandings in the Fourth Gospel," *TynBul* 33 (1982) 59–91.

<sup>22</sup> D. A. Carson, "Current Source Criticism of the Fourth Gospel: Some Methodological Questions," *JBL* 97 (1978) 411–29.

<sup>23</sup> Culpepper, *Anatomy*; see also George A. Kennedy, *New Testament Interpretation Through*

hand and the literary and theological unity of the finished Gospel on the other: to the extent that a piece of evidence is rightly explicated by the former approach, to that extent it is illegitimately applied to the latter—and vice versa. One need only compare, say, the conclusions R. Fortna draws from aporias, including the order and interconnection of the signs, with what Culpepper makes of exactly the same evidence.<sup>24</sup> Protestations by the latter that his work does not call into question the merits of traditional historical and source criticism are in vain; for if apparent aporias are best understood as narrative “analepses” and “prolepses” one cannot find in them an unconscious seam; and if those aporias constitute evidence of a seam, it is futile to speak of the narrative art that justifies the seamlessness of the finished garment. The tensions between these two disparate trends in current biblical study have scarcely been recognized as yet, much less resolved. If integration is possible, it will be nuanced and sophisticated. Until such integration takes place, however, it must be frankly admitted that the standard source theories must be held in abeyance, or at least be recognized as only one possible theory that can explain the data. (d) John 14–17 also provides sanction for the disciples to engage in evangelism. Although such a datum could be of support to *Christian* readers, it would also prove of evangelistic and apologetic value to non-Christian Jews who might well question by what right Christians were trying to win them to their position. (e) Above all, first-class evangelistic literature will not only tell prospective converts *how* to become Christians, and *why* one should become a Christian, but also *what being a Christian is like*. In that sense, John 14–17 can be read as invaluable to the evangelistic enterprise. In short, there does not appear to be an intolerable objection to the proposal of this paper in the contents of John 14–17.

(11) Barrett has strenuously objected to the view that the Fourth Gospel is a missionary tract for the Judaism of the Diaspora (and again, I include Gentile proselytes to Judaism), largely on the ground that there are Hellenistic and gnostic overtones in this book, as well as Jewish themes.<sup>25</sup> But that is just the point: Diaspora Judaism was nothing if not diverse and frequently syncretistic. The presence of other overtones is not surprising, especially if John is also concerned with reaching proselytes and God-fearers.

(12) It has been argued on purely experiential grounds that although the Fourth Gospel has often in the history of the church served as an evangelistic tool, it has not less frequently proved of immense succor to ordinary believers who read it and meditate on it; therefore, it is wrong to seek an “either/or”—either a document for some church or an evangelistic writing for outsiders.

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*Rhetorical Criticism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984) 39–74.

<sup>24</sup> Robert T. Fortna, *The Gospel of Signs* (Cambridge: University Press, 1970) esp. 102–9; Culpepper, *Anatomy*, 54–70, *passim*.

<sup>25</sup> C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel of John and Judaism* (London: SPCK, 1975).

But this argument confuses purpose and result. An evangelist recently gave a series of addresses attempting to sweep through the entire Bible in eight or ten sessions, avoiding religious clichés but attempting to communicate with those who profess no ecclesiastical or Christian allegiance. The first address was titled “The God who does not wipe out rebels”—on creation and the fall; the second was “The God who writes his own agreements”—on Abraham and the covenant that bears his name. So it went on, right through a number of high points in the Bible’s “story.” What intrigued him was the number of *Christians* who expressed gratitude for the fresh way he had “put the Bible together” for them. He had not prepared the series with them in view; but the effectiveness of the series certainly encompassed them. In the same way, the fact that both Christians and non-Christians have found help from the Fourth Gospel is no necessary reflection of the writer’s primary aim. Probably almost any fresh and creative articulation of the gospel in a new situation will prove of considerable help to believers, even if they are not primarily the audience for whom the material is prepared. At the end of the day, we are left with John’s own statement of his purpose, and with careful evaluation of whether that stated purpose squares with the rest of his book.

#### IV. Conclusion

Obviously, much more needs to be worked out, pericope by pericope, with this interpretation of John 20:31 in mind. But if the syntactical, thematic, and contextual reasons for this interpretation, lightly marshaled in this paper, can be sustained, then we are going to have to contemplate the possibility that the Fourth Gospel is primarily evangelistic after all. And that in turn may have some further bearing on the confidence with which some reconstructions of the history of the Johannine community are currently being undertaken.