

LIFE AND ‘THE SCRIPTURES’ IN JOHN 5:39-40

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Summary

In John 5:39-40 we see a dividing line being drawn over the proper interpretation of “the Scriptures” between the Jewish leaders of the first century and the early Christians of the Johannine community. Both parties agreed that “searching the Scriptures” was essential; however, the two groups disagreed about the nature with which one was to “search the Scriptures” and how one was to possess or lay hold of this eternal life. “The Jews” viewed eternal life as a birthright that was maintained by rigorous study of the law and strict observance of its principles. The study of the law became an end in itself. The Christians of the Johannine community, on the other hand, believed that eternal life was only granted as gift when a person comes to the one of whom the Scriptures testified, Jesus Christ. Eternal life was neither a birthright nor something that could be merited, but rather a gift given to those who truly “search the Scriptures” and truly see the one who they are written of. This disagreement between the Johannine community and the first century Jewish leadership is a reflection of the division between Jesus and the Jewish leaders during his day as well as a reflection of the division between Christians and Jews in our day. But perhaps more importantly, it is a reflection of the complacent attitude that pervades much of the church today. The words of this passage are a warning or wake-up call to us all. We must be careful not to presume that eternal life is ours because of any merit or association. We must be careful to search “the Scriptures” with our eyes wide open and without presuppositions that will hinder of from discerning its true meaning. But most importantly, we must look to the one of whom these “Scriptures” testify, Jesus Christ. If we truly want to live, as we assume all men do, then we must do what is necessary to inherit eternal life. We must heed the words of “the Scriptures” and we must heed Jesus’ words: we must come to Jesus who alone is the source of eternal life. This begins and ends with proper interpretation of the Word of God.

Key Terms

1. Scriptures (ta.j grafa,j)
2. Eternal life (zwh.n aiwv,nion)
3. Jews (oi` VIoudai/oi)
4. Search (evrauna,w)
5. Come (e;rcomai)
6. Testify (marture,w)
7. Witness
8. Law (o` no,moj)
9. Interpret
10. Have/hold/possess (e;cw)

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1. Introduction

A debate that consumes much of the theological world today is how to properly interpret Scripture. Some of the central issues surrounding the debate are the definition of Scripture, the reliability of existing manuscript copies of the Scriptures, and the consistency of the different books of Scripture with each other. This debate is really nothing new. Many of the questions that scholars and theologians wrestle with today are the same questions once posed by the people of the New Testament. The Gospel of John is a vivid example of this. The Evangelist presents one of the fundamental disagreements between the first century Christians and the Jewish leaders of this period: how to interpret the Hebrew Scriptures. Both groups believed that eternal life (ζωή αιώνιον) could be found in the pages of Scripture, but they greatly differed on how this life was to be ascertained. While the Jewish leaders sought life from the words of Scripture themselves, and the strict, and often “wooden,” interpretation and obedience to them, the Christians of the Johannine community and the author of the Gospel of John himself understood this life to be found in the Word (ὁ λόγος) of whom the Scriptures testified to. This theme of life being found in the Word is prevalent in the Gospel of John, and time does not allow for a full exploration of every reference in the gospel. My aim in this paper is to explore how to properly interpret the Old Testament Scriptures in regards to their provision of life and their testimony to Jesus Christ, and how to apply this to New Testament theology and Christology based on Jesus’ words recorded in John 5:39-40.

Our text is “an especially controversial passage” [Haenchen, E. 1984: 264]. It brings with it questions of authorship, source material, hermeneutics, and even anti-Semitism. We will need to answer each of these questions if we are to fully understand the implications of the words that the Evangelist is attributing to Jesus Christ. We will begin this investigation with a grammatical and syntactical analysis where an initial translation will be proposed as well as an explanation of the reasons for the choices that were made in translation. Following this we will conduct a structural analysis paraphrasing the passage and attempting to reconstruct the Author’s argument. Detail and literary analyses will follow and the passage be broken down into phrases and analyzed and then discussed according to its literary genre, respectively. Once this foundation has been laid, we will begin our exegetical work of John 5:39-40 and consider the context of the passage (micro), the context of the whole Gospel of John (macro), and the canonical context of the entire New Testament. Next, we will take a look at the author/dating of the Gospel, following with a look into the Johannine community and source material. Once these issues have been investigated, we will turn our attention to the Jewish community. It is necessary to determine who the “Jews” are that Jesus is so often in conflict with and to answer claims of anti-Semitism. In addition to this we will need to understand what was accepted as Scripture by the “Jews” and the Johannine community during the writing of this Gospel as well as both groups’ views on interpretation of these Scriptures. Finally, conclusions will be drawn from our findings with implications in hermeneutics, Christology, and ultimately soteriology.

2. Grammatical & Syntactical Analysis

Checking the Greek text of John 5:39-40 reveals that there are a few variants that need to be considered, but none create too great a difficulty [Nestle, E. and Aland, K. 1993: 262] [Metzger, B. 1994: 210] The first variant is found in the Papyrus Egerton 2 where this passage is addressed to “the rulers of the people,” in contrast with other manuscripts that address it to “the Jews” [Brown, R. 2003: 225]. This provides relatively no difficulty in that it deals only with to whom the passage is addressed to (see section 12), not what is said in the passage. A second variation has more to do with the passage itself. In some versions, the OS, OL, Armenian, and Papyrus Egerton 2, the word “eternal” ($\alpha\iota\omega\nu, \nu\iota\omicron\nu$) is omitted [Brown, R. 2003: 225]. This variant provides little difficulty. The concept of eternal life is implied in the passage. The Evangelist has already made several references to “life” ($\zeta\omega\eta. \nu$) without using the term “eternal” ($\alpha\iota\omega\nu, \nu\iota\omicron\nu$) twice in 1:4 and in 5:21, 24, 26, and 29. In addition to this the Evangelist has used “life” and “eternal life” interchangeably in John 3:36 and throughout chapter 5, as he could easily have done in our passage. This is a similar pattern that we see throughout this Fourth Gospel. It seems that the reader is expected to assume that the Author is referring to eternal life. One final distinction needs to be addressed. This is not a true variant, but rather a simple vowel change in the word $\epsilon\nu\alpha\upsilon\alpha\nu\alpha/\tau\epsilon$ between the original form and later forms in the Greek, which does not affect the meaning [Haenchen, E. 1984: 264]. With these two variants only warranting a little discussion, we are now able to continue in our analysis.

These two verses are located in the end of a section where Jesus lists the numerous witnesses that testify on his behalf, with “the Scriptures” being the most

powerful witness in Jesus' argument (an argument could perhaps be made for the final witness cited, Moses) as it relates to "the Jews." The argument was initiated by a healing that took place at a pool near the Sheep Gate in Jerusalem. Jesus healed a man who had been an invalid for thirty-eight years, and was confined to superstitious hopes for being healed. This man appears to be an outcast who was excluded from the temple like all of the blind, lame, and paralyzed (perhaps following the conditions spelled out in 2 Samuel 5). Jesus first asked the man "do you want to get well?" After the man appeared to wallow in self-pity, Jesus healed the man by commanding him to get up, pick up his pallet, and walk. When we see the man later in verse 14, he is in the temple, apparently having been restored into society with access to the temple. Perhaps this is some of the reasoning for the attitude of "the Jews," but clearly this is not as strong as the reasoning directly stated in the passage: it was the Sabbath. The man is said to have violated the Law of Moses regarding the Sabbath, by carrying his mat; however, "the Jews" present an even stronger and more forceful case against Jesus because he healed on the Sabbath.

When "the Jews" confront Jesus about his actions, Jesus stresses that the Father is working, and because the Father is working, the Son is working also. This only seems to escalate the problem. Not only is Jesus violating laws about the Sabbath; now he is also blaspheming God, by calling God his own Father. Jesus' adversaries point out correctly, that Jesus is making himself equal with God. It is within this context that Jesus begins to defend his statement about God being his Father. In verses 19-30, Jesus stresses what power and authority he has as the Son. He claims to see the Father (v. 19), to imitate the Father (v. 19), to be loved by the Father (v. 20), to be able to give life in behalf of the Father (v. 21), to have the right to judge for the Father (v. 22), and to have authority over

life and death (v. 24, 25). The text does not provide us at this point with any explanation of the reaction of “the Jews,” but we can imagine that they are becoming more and more hostile to what is being said. It is almost as if Jesus were digging himself deeper and deeper into a hole with every statement he made. No devout Jew could rightfully make the claims Jesus made and remain a part of Jewish life, perhaps not even remain alive.

Thus Jesus further has to defend himself. According to the Old Testament law, two or three witnesses were needed to prove a crime (Deuteronomy 17:6, 19:15). Jesus submits to the lawful requirements of multiple witnesses in defending himself and even goes beyond the Old Testament’s proposed number of witnesses. Five witnesses are listed in sequence: John the Baptist, Jesus’ works, the Father, the Scriptures, and Moses. It is within this context that we find Jesus’ statement in verses 39-40. I have proposed the following as my initial translation of these verses:

*You search the Scriptures,
because you think in them to have eternal life;
and these are the ones testifying about me;
but you do not desire to come to me
in order that you may receive life.*

This initial translation will serve as the background of the exegetical work that will comprise the majority of the remaining pages. Though *evrauna/te* may either be an indicative or an imperative, I have chosen to translate it as indicative along with a majority of commentators. Jesus does not seem to be commanding “the Jews” to do

something that they were currently doing (though with improper motives and faulty results). He appears to be stating that he knows their actions, “searching the Scriptures.” I have also chosen to translate τα.ῖ γραφα.ῖ as “the Scriptures,” in accordance with its

usual rendering in the New Testament. The term is consistently translated as “the Scriptures” in the Synoptics, the Book of Acts, 1 Corinthians, and 1 Peter. It certainly seems appropriate in our passage. It is safe to assume that there would be no other set of “writings” that “the Jews” would so highly regard and so diligently search as “the Scriptures.” We can also assume that there would be no collection of writings other than the Hebrew Scriptures that would be referred to as “the writings,” knowing the prominence of these Scriptures in Jewish culture.

The ο[τι clause indicates the reason why “the Jews” are searching the Scriptures; therefore, I have translated this conjunction as “because.” The reason is that “the Jews” δοκει/τε (think, seem, suppose, consider, imagine) that the Scriptures contain life. I have chosen “think” because “the Jews” do believe this, and as Jesus indicates they are correct in thinking this, even if they do not fully understand how to obtain life from the Scriptures. “The Jews” are not “imagining” that the Scriptures have life them; there is some truth to what they believe. The prepositional phrase ἐν αὐται/ῖ has been translated “in them,” since the object of the preposition is dative, feminine, plural, clearly referring back to “the Scriptures.” ε;χειν is the infinitive and could be translated “have, hold, possess, get, or keep.” “Have” or “possess” appear to best convey the idea of the Scriptures being full of life, but I have chosen “have” since it is not so much that the Scriptures possess life, but rather testify about the One who gives life,

as Jesus indicates. What these Scriptures have or possess is $\zeta\omega\eta\nu\alpha\iota\omega\nu$, eternal life. My choice of translation was based on comparison of the usage of this phrase throughout the New Testament, where it is consistently rendered “eternal life.”

$\kappa\alpha\iota$ could either be translated as “but” or “and” as a conjunction. I have chosen “and,” because it appears that Jesus is indicating that he agrees with “the Jews” assessment that life can be found in the Scriptures, rather than disagreeing with them. The demonstrative pronoun is $\epsilon\upsilon\kappa\epsilon\iota/\nu\alpha\iota$, plural feminine and is referring once again back to “the Scriptures.” “These Scriptures” *are* currently testifying about Jesus. $\epsilon\iota\upsilon\varsigma\iota\eta$ is present tense and carries a continuous aspect. The Scriptures have been testifying about Jesus

and they continue to even at the present time as “the Jews” discuss this matter with the one whom the Scriptures are written about. Jesus indicates this with the participle $\alpha\iota\mu\alpha\rho\tau\upsilon\rho\omicron\upsilon/\sigma\alpha\iota$, which I have translated “the ones testifying.” The participle is nominative feminine plural, referring back to “the Scriptures” and agreeing with the tense and aspect of the main verb in this clause. Any of the variances of this term (bear witness, testify, be a witness; attest, affirm, confirm) would be appropriate; “testifying” was chosen simply as a personal preference. Jesus has listed in the witnesses for himself throughout this chapter, and witnesses testify. Finally in verse 39, the phrase $\pi\epsilon\rho\iota\epsilon\upsilon\mu\omicron\upsilon/$ has been translated “concerning me,” since the object of the preposition is genitive and 1st person. An alternative that would carry the same meaning could be “about me.”

In verse 40, the choice to translate $\kappa\alpha\iota$ as “but” is due to the fact that Jesus appears to be contrasting what “the Jews” hoped for and what is actually taking place.

“But” is more adversative than “and.” “And yet” would suffice, but I have chosen “but” to represent more of a contrast. $\alpha\epsilon, \lambda\epsilon\tau\epsilon$ is negated by $\omicron\upsilon\upsilon$. I chose to translate this term “desire.” Any of the variances would be sufficient, as it appears the idea is that the will, wish, or desire of “the Jews” is *not* to come to Jesus. This is the same term used in Jesus’

question to the invalid in verse 6: “do you $\alpha\epsilon, \lambda\epsilon\tau\epsilon$ to get well?” In the following prepositional phrase, we once again see the 1st person pronoun translated “to me.”

Following this $\iota \lbracket na$ begins a subjunctive clause and may be translated “that, so that, or in order that.” I have chosen “in order that” to stress the purpose for which one would come to Jesus, to have life. This term for “life,” $zwh . n$ is simple but appears to be paralleled to the “eternal life” discussed in verse 40. The final word is the same verb

used in verse 39, $e ; cw , ,$ is the subjunctive present indicating the idea of possibility, translated “may have.” If “the Jews” *would* come to Jesus they *would* have life, but since they are unwilling to come the statement fails to become reality. They fail to have what they claim to seek.

3. Structural Analysis

The key words that are repeated are “to have” ($e ; cein$) and “life” ($zwh . n$), both of which are related. The basic message of verse 39 is that the very Scriptures in which the Jews are diligently searching to find life are the very words that testify about Jesus. But verse 40 reveals that these seekers refuse to come to the one and receive this life from him. The author’s argument can be reconstructed by breaking the passage up

into individual clauses: 1) evrauna/te ta.j grafa,j 2) o[ti u`mei/j dokei/te evn auvtai/j zwh.n aivw,nion e;cein 3) kai. evkei/nai, eivsin ai` martouro/sai peri. evmou/ 4) kai. ouv ge,lete evlqei/n pro,j me 5) i[na zwh.n e;chteÅ

Clause 1) Jesus stresses that he is fully aware of “the Jews” diligent study and intense “searching” of the Scriptures. Clause 2) Jesus indicates that he knows “the Jews” reasoning for searching these Scriptures: because they think that life can be found in these Scriptures. Clause 3) Jesus confirms that “the Jews” reasoning is well-informed; these Scriptures do have life in (because Jesus is found in them). This appears to be a parallel to an earlier statement made about Jesus in John 1:4: “In Him (Jesus) was life,” and other references to Jesus claiming to be the “bread of life” (6:35, 48);” the resurrection and the life” (11:25); and “the way, the truth, and the life.” In this clause, Jesus clears up this issue: the reason the Scriptures contain life is because they testify about the one who *is* the life, Jesus. Clause 4) Jesus contrasts the perceived actions of “the Jews” with their motives. These “Jews” appear to want life, but in their stubbornness, perhaps pride and/or prejudice, they actually do not want to do what is necessary to receive this life: come to Jesus. Clause 5) Jesus indicates to “the Jews” that if they would come to him, they would receive the thing they claim to be seeking, life.

The argument may be paraphrased as the following: Jesus says “I know that you are searching the Scriptures because you think that you will find eternal life in these Scriptures, and you correct. Eternal life can be found in these Scriptures because they point to me, to source of life. The problem is you do not want to do what is necessary and come to me to actually receive this life.” Simply stated, the author’s message is that

Jesus is the one who possesses life, not the Scriptures; the Scriptures reveal this as they testify about Jesus and those who *really* want to receive life should heed the words of these Scriptures and come to Jesus. In this particular case, “the Jews” stubbornly refuse to do so.

4. Detail Analysis

4.1 *evrauna/te ta.j grafa,j*

The beginning phrase of verse 39 has drawn considerable amount of discussion by scholars and commentators. The term generally means “to search, examine; enquire, find out.” But several scholars, most notably Schnackenburg, have noted that the term may even be “a technical expression both in Rabbinic Judaism and in the Qumran literature for the study of the scripture” [Schnackenburg, R. 1982: 125], though this is the only time this particular term is used in the New Testament (variations are found in John 7:52; Romans 8:27; 1 Corinthians 2:10; 1 Peter 1:11; Revelation. 2:23). Boismard agreed with this assessment saying “the verb ‘search’ represents the technical Hebrew verb *daras* used for scripture study only” [Brown, R. 2003: 225]. As we will examine shortly, this observation seems justifiable in the context of whom Jesus is speaking, “the Jews.”

The real discussion centers on the mood of the term. *evrauna/te* can either be indicative or imperative, and the Greek here is ambiguous. Throughout history some theologians and commentators have suggested the imperative, translating the phrase as more of a command than a statement (i.e. Origen, Tertullian, Ireneaus, and Vulgate), but most modern scholars parse the term in the imperative. Raymond Brown comments “the indicative suits the line of argument better, and most modern commentators prefer it”

[Brown, R. 2003: 225]. Likewise, Leon Morris suggests “we should almost certainly take the indicative” [Morris, L. 1995: 292]. Rudolph Schnackenburg has written “indicative accords better with the context: Jesus grants that the Jews show a pious zeal, but they do not recognize that the very scriptures too bear witness to him” [Schnackenburg, R. 1982: 125]. Likewise, G.K. Barrett has noted that the indicative accords better with the technical rabbinical term [Barrett, C.K. 1978: 222]. Following the views of these respected scholars, I believe that the mood is intended to be indicative. It appears that Jesus is condemning “the Jews” because they have failed to find him in the words of “the Scriptures” they have been searching, though the imperative rendering of a command would equally find some validity in that “the Jews” should continue to search the words of Scripture to find Jesus. This is further confirmed by the context in which we find our text. In the verses following our text, Jesus continues to list the witnesses who testify concerning him including Moses, whom Jews believed was responsible for writing the Law of God. Jesus states that Moses is the accuser of “the Jews” before God. Moses is the one whom “the Jews” have set their hope upon (v. 45), and yet he is the one who makes them guilty before God. The reason appears to be that though “the Jews” have read Moses words, “the Scriptures,” they have failed to see the one whom Moses wrote about, Jesus (v. 46). This appears to confirm the indicative case for *evrauna/te*. “The Jews” were already searching “the Scriptures.” They were, however, missing the point. Jesus is not so much giving a command, but rather making an acknowledgement, that will soon turn to condemnation.

The “searching” that is in reference here is the searching of “the Scriptures.” The term *ta . j grafa , j* is in the accusative plural which means “Scripture, sacred writing,

passage of Scripture” in the singular, but is generally translated “Scriptures,” specifically the Old Testament, in the plural (Matthew 22:29, Mark 12:24, Luke 24:32, 45, Acts 17:11, 1 Corinthians 15:3-4, 2 Peter 3:16) [Bruce, F.F 1988: 28]. This brings up a weighty question that must be fully answered: what are the Scriptures? Or more specifically, what are the Scriptures to which Jesus referred and is his understanding of what is Scripture different than that of “the Jews” with whom he is speaking? Clearly, this reference to “the Scriptures” (τὰ βιβλία, j) is before the completion of the New Testament, and the time of the particular account in the Gospel of John would have been before any New Testament books had even been composed. Jesus is not referring to anything post-Easter. His reference “to the Scriptures” must be directed at that which was written before he began his ministry, the Hebrew Scriptures.

To determine what exactly was defined as the Hebrew Scriptures forces us to delve into a very interesting time in the history of the Mediterranean world, when the Roman Empire had a firm grasp on the region and languages, cultures, and religions were mixing. It is within this context that we must define “the Scriptures.” As mentioned earlier there was no “New Testament” on the scene, but the Old Testament, simply referred to as “the Scriptures” (τὰ βιβλία, j), was fully developed and in wide use. What makes the defining of these Scriptures so difficult, however, is the blending of referred to earlier. Hebrew copies of the Scriptures were readily in use, as many of the Jews would have known Hebrew. However some would have known the Jewish Scriptures only in Greek or Aramaic translation [Beale, G.K. 1994: 29]. In fact, there is evidence that many first century synagogues read the Scriptures in Hebrew, followed by an Aramaic paraphrase (Targums) for those Jews who were unfamiliar with the

native language of the Patriarchs [Ferguson, E. 2003: 580]. Likewise, a survey of New Testament quotations and of other writings from the first century reveals that the Scriptures most commonly used by many was the Greek translation, the Septuagint (LXX). The LXX was “widespread, well known, and respected in spite of some obvious defects when appraised from the standpoint of modern scholarship” [Nicole, R. 1958: 135-151]. With Koine Greek spreading across the region, the use of the Septuagint became invaluable in spreading the gospel. Of course, an issue arises out of the use of 1st century Jews and Christians in regards to their use of the LXX: what about the additional books. The Septuagint is larger than the present canon of the Jews, and includes the books disputed between Catholics and Protestants (as well as the additions to Daniel and Esther). These extra books and additions pose a serious question as to whether or not there was a disagreement between the 1st century Jews and the early Christians (specifically, the Johannine community) regarding what was to be defined as “the Scriptures,” since the LXX largely became more of a Christian book rather than a Jewish book” in later history. To answer this, we must look at Jesus usage of the term $\tau\alpha\ \lambda\omicron\gamma\gamma\alpha\ \beta\iota\beta\lambda\iota\alpha$ and his frequent quoting/citing of Old Testament passages in the gospels, especially in the Gospel of John. We will need to determine if Jesus grouped any of these deuterocanonical books with the regularly accepted books of the Hebrew canon. In addition to this, we could further explore references in the New Testament epistles to determine whether or not the authors made any similar statements. A brief survey of Jesus’ use of the term $\tau\alpha\ \lambda\omicron\gamma\gamma\alpha\ \beta\iota\beta\lambda\iota\alpha$ reveals that the multiple uses of the term attributed to Jesus in the Synoptics make no reference to any deuterocanonical books, and many passages show direct quotations, taken from canonized Old Testament books.

Unfortunately, the current text being discussed, John 5:39-40, is the only reference to $\tau\alpha.\dot{\iota}\ \gamma\rho\alpha\phi\alpha,\dot{\iota}$ in the Gospel of John, leaving us nothing extra with which to compare. Further investigation of Jesus' quoting of "Scripture" passages reveals that of all his quotations, none are from a deuterocanonical book, though some of his interpretations of Old Testament canonical passages were revolutionary in his day [France, R.T. 1971: 172-

226]. This appears to be the source of much of the controversy in our text. The observation continues by comparing other uses of $\tau\alpha.\dot{\iota}\ \gamma\rho\alpha\phi\alpha,\dot{\iota}$ in the New Testament and looking at quotations of "Scripture" passages. Nowhere do the authors of these letters

include deuterocanonical books in their references to Scripture.¹ Most notably, though quotations are all taken from the LXX, no quote is taken from a deuterocanonical book.² What we find in our investigation appears to be that 1st century Christians regarded only the currently canonized Hebrew Scriptures of today as their "Scriptures" even though they widely accepted and utilized the LXX. This also seems to be true of the New Testament authors and Jesus himself. The early Christians, including the Johannine community, accepted the Hebrew Scriptures along with "the Jews," and the Jewish canon that is accepted today is the one which was present in their day [Sunberg, A. 1964] [Wescott, B.F. 1871] [Beckwith, R. 1986] [Ellis, E.E. 1991]. In the words of F.F. Bruce, "we can be confident that [Jesus and his apostles] agreed with contemporary leaders in Israel about the contents of the canon" [Bruce, F.F. 1998: 41]. Barnabas Lindars has suggested, "It would be quite wrong to suggest that the canon shared by primitive Christianity with the contemporary Judaism was anything less than the complete Old

Testament” [Lindars, B. 1976: 59-66]. Though the definition of Scripture would play a major role in the debates between Christians and Jews for years to come, it does not appear to be the dividing issue that we find in our text. Many commentators have agreed with this assessment, noting that Jesus does not appear to be condemning “the Jews”

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1. Though Paul does refer to Luke’s writings as “Scripture” (1 Timothy 5:18) and the author of 2 Peter refers to Paul’s in the same manner (2 Peter 3:15-16).
 2. Some quoted texts are grouped together from many Old Testament passages. This has been referred to as the use of “testimonia,” as proposed by Rendel Harris with the assistance of Vacher Burch, Testimonies (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1916-1920) 2 vols.
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for accepting the wrong “Scriptures” or even their zealotry in “searching,” but rather for the wrong interpretation of these “Scriptures.” Schnackenburg comments, “Jesus does not deny the zeal of the Jews in searching the scriptures” [Schnackenburg, R. 1982: 125]. Howard-Brook suggests, “Jesus begins by conceding the intentions of the Judeans” [Howard-Brook, W. 1994: 137]. Similarly, Leon Morris asserts, “the words [of Jesus] convey a rebuke for the wrong attitude of the Jews to scripture, coupled with a profound respect for the sacred writings [Morris, L. 1971: 292]. I agree with these commentators; the issue is what not *ta.j gafa,j* themselves, but the *evrauna/te* or the prejudice behind it.

4.2 *o[ti u`mei/j dokei/te evn auvtai/j zwh.n aivw,nion e;cein*

The next clause is a *o[ti* clause, presenting the reason why “the Jews” were searching the “Scriptures.” *o[ti* can be translated as “that, since, because” or even as quotation marks, but it seems most likely that the Evangelist intended it to be “because,” to which the majority of modern translations confirm. The reason for their searching is due to what they thought (*dokei/te* present, indicative verb) they would

find in Scripture. The term *dokei/te* can be translated “think, consider, suppose, imagine,” and is used four times in the Gospel, including this particular use. It is important to note that the Evangelist uses this word rather than a word for “knowing” or “understanding” indicating more certainty such as *oi=da* or *ginw,skwn* or other available words. The author appears to be pointing out that “the Jews” were searching the Scriptures for unfounded reasons: to find life in the *act* of searching them rather than in finding the *one* whom the Scriptures testify to as the life-giver. They “think;” they do not “know.” Herein begins the debate over proper interpretation.

“The Jews” were seeking life. There is no doubt about this. And they were seeking life in the Scriptures. The pronoun *auvtai/j*, the plural dative feminine, clearly refers back to the plural feminine *ta.j grafaj*. “The idea that much study and interpretation of the scripture helped one attain eternal life, and that life is stored up in the Torah itself, is also quite in accord with Jewish thinking, for which the Torah signified the source of all salvation” [Schnackenburg, R. 1982: 125]. And as we have already noted, many commentators grant that Jesus commends “the Jews” for this. Jesus acknowledges their “profound respect for the sacred writings” [Morris, L. 1995: 292].

“The Jews” in full respect for what God had blessed them with were seeking *zwh.n aivw,nion*. This term literally could be translated “life of eternal,” though it is consistently rendered “eternal life” throughout the New Testament and the Septuagint. The concept of “eternal life” is rather difficult to pin down in Jewish theology. There appears to be no uniform Jewish doctrine of the afterlife in the New Testament period

[Ferguson, E. 2003, 554]. In fact a survey of Old Testament literature yields little material to work with. The phrase “eternal life” is nowhere to be found, and the equivalent “everlasting life” (translated *zwh.n aivw, nion* in the Septuagint) is only found in one verse, Daniel 12:2. Some have suggested that there are more “hints” of the possibility of life after death in the Old Testament, but even these hints place the idea of “eternal life” at the “fringe of Old Testament faith” [Baker, D. 1976: 230].

As a result of the sparse Old Testament references to “eternal life” and the “back-burner” treatment of this concept in Jewish theology, we are left with only some physiological assumptions. All men are concerned with life. This is why we eat, drink, seek shelter, etc. People want to live, and we do what we know is necessary to survive. We can assume that the Jews of Jesus’ day were no different. While, there appears to be little theological development of the concept of “eternal life,” we assume that those of the Jewish faith including the leaders of the people in 1st century Palestine were concerned with life. Their diligent study of the Torah and the relentless pursuit of living according to its statutes reveals that they desperately wanted to live. “In Hebrew thought the Law was par excellence the source of life [Brown, R. 2003: 225]. We can assume “the Jews,” like all men, desperately wanted to live. The only thing that distinguishes them from others is that they saw God’s revelation in “the Scriptures” to be the central necessity for finding and sustaining life. And as we shall see, their understanding of the essentiality of these Scriptures is well founded. As we have noted earlier, Jesus in one sense appears to commend “the Jews” for their recognition of this. Yet, there is also condemnation.

The purposes for which “the Jews” were searching the Scriptures was very much different than the purpose to which Jesus speaks. “The Jews” (at least the leadership,

most notably the Pharisees, see section 12) studied the law with the purpose of identifying laws. Their assumption was that being born Jewish meant that they were born into the kingdom of God and that by searching the Scriptures they could identify God's laws and learn how to live. By careful study and observance of the law, they could maintain their status within the kingdom of God. In short, the Scriptures did not point out *how to be saved*, but rather *how to remain saved*. Observing the law would allow one to remain a part of the covenant of God. Biblical studies became an end in themselves [Barrett, CK. 1978: 223]. Therefore, the Torah signified the source of all salvation [Schnackenburg, R. 1982: 124]. This is the opposite of what the Gospel of John presents. Most notably, 1:12-13. In these verses we see that those who come to faith in Jesus Christ are given the right to become children of God. This is something that comes from Jesus, *not* natural descent. It is not something that comes from observing the law either. In fact we will see a few chapters later, that Jesus reminds "the Jews" that "not one of you keeps the law" (7:19). Eternal life is not something given at birth and maintained by keeping the law. No one has life automatically. Heredity does not guarantee salvation. Natural descent does not save. Since no one is born with eternal life, searching "the Scriptures" and/or keeping the law will not maintain eternal life. According to the Gospel of John, no one is born into the kingdom of God; men must be born again to come into the kingdom of God.

It is only these who have been born again who are given eternal life. Throughout the Gospel of John, Jesus makes statements that those who "believe in the Son" (3:15, 16, 36, 5:24, 6:40, 47), who "drinks the water the Son gives" (4:14), who feasts on the body and blood of the Son (6:54), and who leaves all to follow the Son (12:25) are the ones

who have eternal life. Though there are few references to “eternal life” in the Synoptic Gospels, the claims in these few references are similar to the claim found in John 12:25: those who want eternal life must abandon all to follow Jesus. Once again, we see that these claims are the opposite of what “the Jews” appeared to have believed. Jesus claims that eternal life is possessed by him alone and all who want to live must heed the words of Scripture written about him and cling to him for life.

This distinction between views of possessing eternal life can be clearly seen in by investigating the remaining word in our clause, *ε;cein*. This verb as found in verse 39 is parsed as the infinitive present active, and can be translated “to have, to hold, to possess.” The Jews believed that the Scriptures possessed life. The pages of God’s revelation were the “holding tank” of life. This belief is where we find the dividing line between “the Jews” and the Johannine community. Whereas, the Judeans saw life as being found in the words of the Law itself and the study there of, as we have already seen Jesus and the Johannine Christians saw this life to be found in the One to whom the words testified, namely Jesus himself. Jesus is the one who possess life and he is the one who gives it (John 10:28).

4.3 *kai. evkei/nai, eivsin ai` marturou/sai peri. evmou/*

This becomes clear in the next clause. This portion of verse 39 begins with the conjunction “and” (*kai.*) linking this clause to the previous one. Barrett suggests this term should be understood as the classic meaning of *kai.*, that is “and yet” [Barrett, C.K. 1978: 223]. Clearly, Jesus is making a distinction. The same “Scriptures” that have

been discussed as that which was being “searched” and that which “possessed life” is now applied to Jesus. We further see this with two terms, which are both nominative feminine plural, the demonstrative pronoun *evkei/nai*, and the present active participle *ai` marturou/sai*. Beginning with *evkei/nai*, the author appears to be pointing out that the very same Scriptures which the Jews have been searching are the ones to which he is referring. The Evangelist is not claiming to introduce a “new” revelation, but proclaiming a new focus on the very words that the Jews were so devoutly attached to.

The force of his statement, and the center of the debate that will follow, is found in the Author’s claims regarding these Scriptures. “These Scriptures are the ones testifying/bearing witness about *me*.” The participle *ai` marturou/sai* can be translated “testifying, bearing witness, being a witness.” The verb in its various forms is used throughout the New Testament to describe that which testifies or reports on behalf of something of someone. The Scriptures were meant to reveal and bear witness to the God

who had given them, but Evangelist claims this for Jesus himself. With the genitive preposition *peri*. the author turns attention to Jesus. *peri*. can be translated “about, concerning, of, with reference to.” In this context I have preferred “about,” but each of these meanings function in the same way, focusing attention on Jesus as he asserts that these Scriptures testify about/concerning *evmou*/ (1st person singular present pronoun).

As

Gerhard Vos noted, Jesus is presented in the Gospel of John as regarding “the whole Old Testament movement as a divinely directed and inspired movement, as having arrived at

its goal in himself” [Vos, G. 1992: 358]. This statement which the Evangelist records as the words of Jesus begin to reveal the point of separation (including the expulsion from the synagogue which has resulted in the Johannine community) between “the Jews” and the Johannine Christians: the interpretation of Scripture, or more accurately the interpretation of Scripture as it relates to Jesus Christ. Schnackenburg has observed, “This sentence reflects the controversy between Christianity and Judaism in the Evangelist’s own day and later [Schnackenburg, R. 1982: 125]. Beasley-Murray stated the ramifications of such a disagreement reflected in the statement when he noting, “for the evangelist, it is not only that individual sayings of scripture are fulfilled in Jesus but the whole of scripture is directed towards him and speaks of him. The Scriptures (Law, Prophets, and Writings) find its fulfillment and goal in Jesus, and this purpose is realized when those who read it put their faith the one whom they testify to, Jesus [Beasley-Murray G. 1999:81]. The words of Scripture and Jesus’ own words form a unity, and in the light of Jesus’ glorification these “Scriptures” finally discloses hidden meaning. This represents a high-point in the Christological interpretation of scripture in primitive Christianity” [Schnackenburg, R. 1982: 125]. This “Christological interpretation” of Scripture serves as the dividing line between Jews and Christians [Morris, L. 1995: 292]. This appears to be the source of division in Jesus’ day as well as the present.

The issue is not “what is Scripture,” but rather “how do we interpret these Scriptures?” From the Jewish perspective, the interpretation centers on strict, literal interpretation, which Leon Morris calls “wooden and superstitious reverence for the letter;” for the Johannine Christians the interpretation is connected to its witness to Jesus [Morris, L. 1971: 292]. And for our Evangelist it appears that these Christians believe

that *all* of Scripture is to be interpreted in light of Jesus, not just portions of it. I believe that Carson said it well: “the [Scriptures] are to be interpreted in a Christocentric way if it is to be interpreted right” [Carson, D.A. 1981: 133, 169]. This appears to be the Jesus’ point in our text.

4.4 *kai. ouv qe,lete evlqei/n pro,j me*

Nowhere does this disagreement come across so strongly, as it does in the next clause of verse 40. The Evangelist quickly points out that according to Jesus, “the Jews” are not on the right end of this disagreement, and the condemnation directed at them is in regards to their prejudice for which they conduct their study [Haenchen, E. 1984: 264-26]. The Jews were looking in the right place, for the right thing, but with wrong ideas and wrong perspective, and this was leading to misinterpretation.

The coordinating conjunction *kai* ties this clause together with the previous sentence, and is usually translated “and, also, but, even, yet.” Different translations vary in their rendering of this word between “and” and “yet” with a few that prefer “but.” Whatever the translation of choice, it is clear that the *kai* is adversative with possibly “an air of pessimistic resignation” as Schnackenburg has suggested [Schnackenburg, R. 1982: 125]. The Evangelist appears to be marking the distinction between what the Jews are attempting to do and what is actually taking place. This is clearly directed at all “Jews” who are present. The verb *qe,lete* is the indicative present active 2nd person plural, directed at the “you” whom these previous words have also been directed towards. This

term is referenced repeatedly in the New Testament and often is used to indicate that which a person (even God) truly desires. The verb can be translated “wish, will, desire, want” and is negated in our text by the preceding *οὐκ*. Translations once again vary in the way they translate this word, mostly between “not willing/unwilling” and “refuse.” Brown suggests that the point that is being made by the author is that the refusal to come to Jesus is deliberate [Brown, R. 2003: 225]. Likewise, Beasley-Murray suggests that this refusal is a rejection and frustration of the purpose of God [Beasley-Murray, G. 1999 79]. I agree with these commentators. There appears to be no confusion or simple ignorance in the matter; this is flat out rebellion.

The Jews were unwilling “to come” (*εὐλqει/ν*). The verb is parsed the infinitive aorist active, which is an unexpected tense, though much debate is avoided because of the infinitive mood. The phrase “coming to Jesus” is a common Johannine phrase [Barrett, C. K. 1978: 224]. We see Nathaniel “comes to Jesus” after Philip shares about him (1:47). Nicodemus “comes to Jesus” at night to enquire about the things Jesus was doing (3:2). When the Samaritan woman met Jesus at the well reported back to the people in her village, they all “came to Jesus” (4:30, 40). The royal official “comes to Jesus” to ask for the healing of his son (4:47). Jesus even stress in 6:35 and in 7:37 that those who “come to him” will receive eternal life.

The real debate is found in what, or rather to whom, they were unwilling “to come.” The author indicts “the Jews” for their stubborn unwillingness to come to Jesus (*pro, j me*, 1st person accusative singular – referring back to Jesus who is speaking).

The claim has already been leveled that the Scriptures testify to Jesus; now the claim is reinforced by the assertion that coming to Jesus is the result of a true “search” of “the Scriptures.” The tense debate between “the Jews” and the Johannine community over the proper interpretation of Scripture now comes to a head. It was assumedly a source of frustration and much hardship for the early Christians, but also mystery to them. “The mystery of the [Jews’] sincere search but refusal to acknowledge the fruit when they find it was one of the greatest puzzles the Johannine community had to face, one that surfaces again and again in the Fourth Gospel (e.g. 12:37, 43)” [Howard-Brook, W. 1994: 138]. All indications are that the Johannine community did not sever themselves from “the Jews” but were rather cast out by “the Jews.” We would assume that there was much confusion as to how something like this could happen to them at the hands of many of their own countrymen. Why would their fellow “Jews” not recognize the coming of the promised Messiah as foretold in the very “Scriptures” of which they studied with much pride? I suspect these first century Jewish Christians were not only confused by the unbelief of their former leadership, but perhaps they were also afraid of them and the consequences of crossing them.

4.5 *i [na zwh.n e;chte*

Finally, by way of analysis of this particular verse, we see the reason why people should come to Jesus: “in order that you might have life” (*i [na zwh.n e;chte*).

The final

clause is a subjunctive clause introduced with *i [na*, which is translated “that, so that, in order that.” All three of these usual translations for this subordinating conjunction carry the same meaning and purpose as they link the two clauses together in this verse. The

ending clause, *zwh.n e;chte*, is the result of the doing the action of the verb in the opening clause, *ouv qe,lete evlqei/n pro,j me*. The result of coming to Jesus is “so that” the one coming might have or possess life. Likewise, the result of refusing to come to Jesus is not having life. This simple conjunctive introduces a subjunctive clause that deals with possibilities, in this case life or no life.

Of course, the real discussion involving the phrase we are investigating in this section is found in the final two words, the words that are the results of the coming to Jesus mentioned in the beginning of the verse. The Evangelist concludes that coming to Jesus results in “having life” (*zwh.n e;chte*). First we deal with the verb *e;chte*, which parses 2nd person plural present active subjunctive. Whereas we translated this word earlier as “to have, to hold, to possess,” we can add additional possibilities for translation here in the transitive sense. The term can be translated “get, receive, keep.” All possibilities are appropriate here as long as they carry the sense of laying hold of something that has been offered. As previously stated, the subjunctive implies possibility. The author suggests that if “the Jews” would simply come to Jesus, they “may, might” have life. Perhaps, he would have chosen the indicative of the verb if the willingness to come to Jesus had not been negated in the previous. This however, is only speculation.

It is “life” (*zwh.n*) that those who come to Jesus would find. This *aivw,nion* is missing, but we conclude from the previous discussions that it is implied. Eternal life is

the result of coming to Jesus. This life is the same life mentioned in verse 39, as that which “the Jews” were searching for in the Scriptures.

The phrase, *i [na zwh.n e;chte*, is also used by the Evangelist in two other passages in the Gospel, 10:10, and 20:31. In John 10:10, it is said that Jesus has come that “they may have life.” The person is different, but the result is the same, “having or possessing”

life. It is interesting to note that the Evangelist here says that the reason for which Jesus came is the very same reason for which the Jews are searching the Scriptures, “to have life.” In John 20:31, the other usage of the phrase *i [na zwh.n e;chte*, the author states that the purpose for writing the Gospel itself is “that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ...and that by believing you *might have life* through his name.” Once again the subjunctive is chosen, indicating possibility. The author cannot create belief and the resulting life; he can only present the case for it and hope that others will do what is required. In this example, we see that once again “life” is to be found in Jesus Christ, namely by belief in Him.

In both of the additional uses, we see the same message from our text being reiterated: Jesus is the source of life. He is the one “having” it, “holding” it, and “possessing” it; those who come to him will “have” it, lay “hold” of it, “posses” it, and “receive” it. There is a tremendous sense of irony in this message compared to what Jesus confirms about the Jews. “The irony revolves around the interpretation of ‘eternal life’ and the role of scripture. The Jews search ‘the Scriptures’ because they think that they are the source of eternal life. The scriptures bear witness to Jesus but the Jews ignore

the witness and choose not to come to Jesus and ‘to have life’” [Keck, L. 2003: 587]. In short, “the Jews” were missing the point.

By stating that the Jews are unwilling to come to him and that they “might have life,” he is implying that they do not have life in their current state. This would, of course, be a shock to “the Jews” who certainly would have believed they possessed life. What our Evangelist seems to be pointing out is the distinction between the Jewish and early Christian (at least the Johannine community) views of eternal life. “The Jews” relied upon their Jewish lineage and assumed that salvation was a guarantee. Because of the covenant that God had made with their Jewish forefathers, “the Jews” assumed that they were born into the kingdom of God. The question was not “how can I *be* enter the kingdom of God,” but rather “how can I *stay* in the kingdom of God.” “The Jews” poured over the Scriptures with the purpose of identifying laws that they should govern their lives by. This strict observance of the law would guarantee that a person remained a part of the covenant. Eternal life thus becomes the end of a process of studying “the Scriptures” and obeying the laws.

This is the opposite of what Jesus is claiming in our text. The Christian view, the view that is expressed throughout the Gospel of John, is that eternal life must be given through a “new birth” (i.e. 1:12-13, 3:3-8). Mankind must seek this new birth in order to receive salvation and inherit eternal life. Eternal life is not a physical birthright; it is a spiritual birth right. “The Jews” assume that they had life from searching “the Scriptures,” but Jesus indicates that they are without life because they are not seeking Him. More importantly, Jesus indicates that they will continue to be without life if they do not start seeking him.

5. Literary Analysis

It is necessary in exploring this passage to identify the type of literature with which we are dealing. The gospel of John is generally referred to as a historical narrative, but others have described the gospel as a biography and a drama. Our text is clearly a narrative passage with the main characters being Jesus and “the Jews.” We expect that there were additional characters who witnessed the confrontation between these two main characters, but all indications are that these witnesses merely observed and did not contribute to the discussion. The person who is telling the story is an “eyewitness” (the Beloved Disciple) who tells the story in third person. This does provide an interesting difference between the Gospel of John and the Synoptics which are told in 1st person, which has lent to much of the debate as to whether or not the Evangelist was an actual eyewitness, such as the Apostle John. Even with this 3rd person perspective, the Evangelist still preserves, at the same time, some of the immediacy and vividness of a first person point of view. Perhaps this is the reason for the large number of historical present tense uses in the Fourth Gospel. Once again, this is only speculation.

While the author claims to be a participant in the events he very carefully separates himself from the events. If he was an eyewitness, he seems to look back upon these events from a distance. While we see the events through his eyes, we are carefully guided to see through those eyes not as he saw the events when they happened but as he saw them at the actual time of his writing. The Evangelist has also chosen what some refer to as “the omniscient author perspective,” where he includes not only information

the readers would not have, but information that even a firsthand observer of the events could not know (i.e. Caiaphas' prophecy in 11:51-52). As an "omniscient author" he uses his access to information that a participant in the events could not have had at the time the events occurred. In general, we could define the author's point of view in this narrative as a "post-resurrection" point of view, looking back on the events of Jesus' life with the benefit of further insight into the theological implications of all that transpired [Harris, W. H. 2001: 2].

6. Micro-contextual Analysis

Of course, our text is not presented in a vacuum. We find these words of the Fourth Gospel five chapters into the book and immediately in the middle of a complete conversation between Jesus and the Jewish leaders, a controversial conversation. This conversation (or debate) models the debate between Christians and Jews in the days of Jesus, in the days of the Johannine community, and even in our modern day [Beasley-Murray, G. 1999:72-73]. To fully understand the implications of what our text says, we must explore the context in which this controversial debate is found. We will begin with the micro-context, as we look at the events that are taking place in John 5.

The Evangelist states in verse 1 that it was time for "a feast of the Jews." All indications are that this feast is the Feast of Passover, when all able Jews come to Jerusalem to commemorate the events of the Exodus. Jesus was no different; as a faithful and able-bodied Jew he made the trip from Galilee (see chapter 4) to Jerusalem. Passing through Jerusalem, he passed by the "sheep gate" called "Bethesda" (some variation exists in different manuscripts) various sick and lame people lay in wait by a pool hoping

to be healed (v. 2-3). The earliest manuscripts do not include the latter part of verse 3 and verse 4, but later manuscripts (i.e. 5th century or later) who include these portions report the reasons for which the people lingered at the waters near the sheep gate: there was a belief that angels would periodically come down from heaven and stir up the waters; the first one in the pool would be healed of any infirmities [Culpepper, A. 1998: 150]. It is here that we meet one of the most interesting characters of the Gospel, one whose response to Jesus has been a subject of much debate. Jesus encounters a man who had been ill for thirty-eight years and initiates a conversation with him which will ultimately lead to a miraculous healing, charges of violating the Law, and bold claims of divine authority.

The Evangelist reports that as Jesus passed by the pool of Bethesda he notices the man who was ill for thirty-eight years³ and asks, “Do you want to get well” (v.6). The man appears to dodge the question by pointing out his condition, but Jesus turns from questioning to command. He tells the ill man to pick up his mat and walk, to which the man does apparently being healed of his illness. At this point, the author informs us that it was the Sabbath when the man was healed (v. 9), setting the stage for the confrontation specifically if the violation is the healing itself or the command to carry a load, by “picking up the mat.” Whatever the specific violation, “the Jews” enter the scene at this point, confronting the healed man in regard to his carrying of his mat (v. 10). The man responds by pointing the blame to Jesus, by telling the Jews that Jesus had commanded

3. This can serve as another example of the “omniscient author perspective” where the author knows what Jesus is thinking, but also as an example of divine attributes being attributed to Jesus. Him to do so, serving as yet another example of the passive actions of the man in this chapter as Culpepper has noted. Other examples are not asking to be healed, not

answering the question as to whether or not he be healed, and blaming his condition on others. [Culpepper, A. 1998: 150-151]. After this, the text jumps ahead where Jesus finds the man alone in the temple (v. 14). We are not told what took place in the time between the ill man's first encounter with "the Jews" and his meeting of Jesus, but immediately after he meets Jesus he reports to "the Jews" (v. 15). Perhaps, the man had been threatened with consequences for carrying his mat, and by pointing out Jesus to the religious leaders, he figured he could escape these consequences. Or maybe, he simply was excited to find the one who had healed and wanted Jesus to be investigated. Still, he could be testifying about Jesus, though this is the least likely of the options in relation to the character of the man that has been presented in the preceding verses. Whatever the reason, we are not told. More interesting, however, is Jesus' statement to the man when he finds him in the temple: "Behold, you have become well; do not sin anymore, so that nothing worse happens to you." Jesus first of all confirms that he has in fact healed the man, but then commands the man to sin no more with a threat of judgment. The author has Jesus making claims of the power to heal, to command obedience, and to judge: something that many would understand as only something God can properly claim.

At this point, the narrative switches gears slightly, as the Evangelist records the remaining teaching in this passage through discourse. The "meat" of what the Evangelist wants to teach about Jesus is found in this section of the chapter. This central discussion is that follows appears to be based on the nature of the relationship between Father and Son as Lindars has noted [Lindars, B. 1983: 154]. Verse 16, begins by stating that the Jews were persecuting Jesus because of what they judged as a violation of Sabbath law. There is no quotation of what charges "the Jews" leveled against Jesus, only Jesus

response: "My Father is working until now, and I myself am working." There are strong implications in this statement. First, Jesus is claiming a divine status by claiming that God is his father. The Evangelist quickly points this out in the following verse as "the Jews" were seeking to kill him all the more due to what they deemed a blasphemous statement. The second implication is that Jesus claims that God is working on his Sabbath. The claim suggests that some work is allowed on the Sabbath. If God is working, there must be exceptions to the law against working on the Sabbath day. In his defense, Jesus argues that the work of healing is an exception to Sabbath law. A third implication is further elaborated on in the following verses. In verse 19, Jesus states that he does what he sees the Father do. Some have suggested that the portion of this statement "the Son can do nothing of himself, unless it is something he sees the Father doing" may be a common proverb [Dodd, C.H. 1963:386] [Culpepper, A. 1993:67-71]. But Jesus goes beyond a proverb to claim that he is doing similar works and that he will do even greater works (v. 20). He is claiming authority from the Father and foreshadowing future miracles, possibly the resurrection of Lazarus and even his own resurrection (v. 21). All of this has eschatological implications, as demonstrated in verses 22-30. Jesus claims that *he* will be the one to raise the dead, that *he* will be the one to judge, and that *he* will be the one honored along with the Father. The Evangelist is forcefully showing Jesus making divine claims.

In the midst of this we notice a familiar phrase, "having eternal life" ($\epsilon\kappa\epsilon\iota\zeta\omega\nu\ \alpha\iota\omega\nu, \nu\iota\omicron\nu$). In verse 24, the claim is made that if a person hears and believes *Jesus'* words,

he will have eternal life. The force of this statement when compared with our text is that Jesus' words are put on par with the Scriptures. In essence, the author is claiming that Jesus is the author of Scripture. Not only does Scripture testify about Jesus, as presented in our text, but it is also the work of the one whom it testifies about. One might say that the Evangelist is claiming that Jesus had the prophets write the Scriptures as his own "authorized" biography of sorts.

To continue his defense, Jesus then calls forth additional witnesses. Culpepper, Brown, and Beasley-Murray, among others describe the ensuing verses as a "trial scene" [Culpepper, A. 1998: 152-153] [Brown, R. 1966: 228] [Beasley-Murray, G. 1999:77-78]. From all indications, this appears to be a good assessment. Beasley-Murray even compares this to the frequent "trial-like" scenes in the Old Testament where Yahweh summoned witnesses to testify on behalf of the gods of the nations in the face of the truth of the only God [Beasley-Murray, G. 1999:77-78]. Culpepper further notes that according to the Levitical Law, testimonies had to be confirmed by two witnesses; here, the Evangelist lists a possible five in Jesus' defense of himself: John the Baptist (v. 33-35), the works of Jesus (36), the Father (37-38), the Scriptures (v. 39), and Moses (v. 45-47) [Culpepper, A. 1998: 152-153]. Jesus appears to submit to the jurisprudence of the Hellenistic culture and of his Jewish lineage [Schnackenburg, R. 1982: 120]. This is the same practice that Jesus notes in chapter 8, when addressing the Pharisees he states, "In your own Law it is written that the testimony of two men is valid" (8:17). Once these witnesses are revealed, Jesus begins to hint at reasons why "the Jews" do not accept the testimony of these witnesses, most notably the Scriptures (i.e. the Torah). In verse 40, he states that they are unwilling to come to him. In verse 42, he claims that they do not have

the love of God in them. In verse 44 he says that they do not seek God's glory, but rather their own. And finally, in verses 45-47, Jesus asserts that "the Jews" do not even believe the words of Moses in the Torah, thus making themselves worthy of judgment. What began as a trial with Jesus as the defendant has turned into a trial with Jesus as the prosecutor. Jesus is seen turning the table on his accusers.

7. Macro-contextual Analysis

The Gospel of John is often contrasted with the Synoptic Gospel because of what many consider to be "significant" differences between them. This Fourth Gospel places more emphasis on the deity of Christ than any of the other gospels. For example we can see how the Evangelist book ends the Gospel beginning with his declaration that the "Word was God" in 1:1 and closing with Thomas' confession, "my Lord and my God," in 20:28. In conjunction with this it is no surprise that a major theme is responding these claims by believing. The verb *pisteu, w* occurs 98 times in the Gospel; the noun *pi, stin* not once. The Evangelist even states this fact by declaring his purpose for writing the Gospel in 20:31, "these [events of Jesus' life] have been written so that you may *believe* that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that *believing* you may have life in His name." His purpose was that his readers would read and believe and thereby have life. Once again we come back to a familiar term, "life" (*zwh . n*), the very thing that our text reports Jesus saying that he will give to those who seek him. This provides an interesting background for our text, where the *unbelief* of the Jews is highlighted. This is actually a repeated scene throughout the Gospel. The author reports various miracles and

discourses from Jesus that are designed to illicit a response; some believe, while others are unwilling to believe (usually “the Jews”).

We also see the same five witnesses to Jesus’ authority that the author presents Jesus using in his defense/indictment in our text. The thought of witness is prominent in the Gospel [Morris, L. 1995: 286]. Early chapters of the Gospel begin by stating that John the Baptist came to testify concerning Jesus (v. 6-7, 15, 19-27, 29-34, 3:25-36). Likewise, Jesus’ works are constantly referred to as testifying on behalf of Jesus. The term *shmei/on* which is translated “sign, distinguishing mark, miracle” is used frequently in the Gospel. Every time Jesus performed a miracle it was with the intention of testifying to himself. There were no “wasted miracles.” Examples of signs being attributed to Jesus include 2:11, 2:23, 3:2, 4:54, 6:2, 6:14, 6:26, 7:31, 9:16, 11:47, 12:18, 12:37, and 20:30, where the Evangelist says specifically that he selected the particular “signs” for the purpose of his Gospel. The ultimate sign would be his death, burial, and resurrection. When asked to perform a sign, Jesus’ response was that he would rebuild the destroyed temple of his body (2:18-21) that and that he would give himself as true bread from heaven (6:30-35). In addition to chapter 5, the Father is seen to be testifying on behalf of Jesus 6:27ff, 8:16-19, and 10:37-38, along with the numerous passages where Jesus speaks of his relationship with the Father. The fourth witness highlighted throughout the Gospel is the Scriptures. The term *ta.j grafaj* is found only in 5:39 of our text, but the singular Scripture (*grafhv*) is referenced as a witness in 2:22, 7:38, 7:42, 13:18, 17:12, 19:24, 19:28, 19:36, 19:37, and 20:9. Many of these references simply state that “the Scriptures say” but several are quoted as direct prophecies

concerning Jesus' life and death. Most notably in 7:38, Jesus claims that "the Scripture says"

whoever believes in Jesus will have streams of living water flowing within him (i.e. eternal life). Finally, Moses (or the Torah) is cited as a testimony to Jesus in the Gospel of John. While this witness is certainly related to the preceding witness, the Scriptures, there are a few distinctions. Philip declares that Jesus is the one "whom Moses wrote about" (1:45). Moses is seen as a prefigurement of Jesus as Old Testament typology takes shape in the Gospel (3:14, 6:32), as Leonard Goppelt has demonstrated [Goppelt, L. 1982].

We should also note one other reference to Moses in the Gospel, that figures in with the theme of "spiritual blindness" to which Jesus alludes to. In chapter 9, the author tells the story of Jesus' healing of the man born blind. The resulting debate over the healing of this man's physical blindness leads to discussion of spiritual blindness. In verse 39, Jesus states that he came "so that those who do not see may see, and that those who see may become blind." Next, the Pharisees' (assumed to be "the Jews," leaders of the Jewish people) question: "We are not blind too, are we?" in verse 40. Jesus answers by indicating that their sin remains because they claim to "see." There is no further discussion on this theme, but we assume Jesus is pointing out their blindness of the one to whom the Scriptures point. "Seeing lies in refusing to see when one is confronted with the light" [Culpepper, A. 1998: 178].

From this brief survey of the context of the Gospel of John, we can see that our text fits perfectly with the Evangelist's thought. Though all of the witnesses to Jesus are presented at various times throughout the Gospel, in no other place are they grouped

together as a common witness. Five witnesses become one in one chapter. “The catalogue is not fivefold so much as it is single. It is God who speaks on Jesus’ behalf in a variety of ways” [Sloyan, G.S. 1988: 83]. This single message is: it is Jesus who is the source of eternal life, and one who wishes to be saved must come to him and believe in him (3:15, 16, 36, 4:14, 5:24, 6:47, 54, 12:25). This is what Peter confesses in John 6:68 when Jesus asks Peter if he plans to leave due to hard teaching. Peter’s response is simple: “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.” This appears to be the point of the Gospel of John: “the Scriptures” are not the possessor of eternal life; Jesus is. “The Scriptures” may testify to one who has eternal life, but if men do not believe *in* this one, they will remain without life.

8. Canonical-contextual Analysis

The next question in our discussion of this text is asking how it compares with the rest of the Canon of Scripture. We will consider the Old Testament canon as well as the New Testament canon. How does the Evangelist’s words about the Scriptures, life, and belief/unbelief compare with the words of “the Scriptures themselves?” Additionally, how do his words compare with the writings of the other early Christians, especially the Synoptic Gospels?

8.1 The Old Testament Canon

We have already briefly discussed the issue of life, or eternal life, in the Old Testament witnesses. We have observed the theology of eternal life was not fully developed and seemed to be treated as a secondary issue. The lone reference to

everlasting life is found in Daniel 12, but references to “life” itself abound, beginning with God’s creating of life in Genesis. God created the first man and woman and the two of them “sacramentally” ate of the tree of life to sustain their lives. This is in accordance with the assumption that we made earlier that all men seek life and do what is necessary to keep themselves alive. In addition to this we see that life was considered to be a sacred gift, so the Levitical Law required that anyone who took human life would receive the death penalty in retribution (Exodus 21:22-23, Leviticus 24:17-18, Numbers 35:30-31, Deuteronomy 19:21). Most vividly displaying the significance of life in the Old Testament, Israel was commanded to “choose life” by seeking and obeying God in Deuteronomy 30:19. Various other passages suggest the same thing that devotion to God brings assurance of life, while idolatry and rebellion lead to death (i.e. Deuteronomy 28:64-66). Baker has suggested that there is a contrast between Old Testament and New Testament theology regarding salvation; in the Old Testament salvation was the result of obedience to God and in the New Testament it is the result of identifying with Christ [Baker, D. 1976: 81-82]. While this observation carries some weight, I see more of an agreement than Baker presents. The New Testament, and our text in particular, suggest that salvation (i.e. finding life) is found in obedience to God’s word; this word testifies that men are to come to Jesus for life. Obedience to the Scripture is coming to the one of whom they beckon to. Life is found both in obedience and in coming to Christ, as these doctrines are not mutually exclusive but interrelated. Life was a precious commodity and seeking it was necessary. Though we cannot find many references to “eternal life” we can most likely assume that the teaching which we find in our text falls inline with this

Old Testament understanding of life. Life is to be treasured and men should diligently “search” to find out how to sustain it.

In addition to this, we have also briefly explored the understanding of Old Testament Scripture. In the Evangelist’s day, the Old Testament Scriptures were complete, though debate continues over when canonization actually took place. During the hundreds of years of composition of these words of Scripture, there was no luxury of appealing to a canon of Scripture, but there was understanding that the words being written and spoken were the words of God on numerous occasions (i.e. Deuteronomy 5:4-5 and 1 Samuel 9:27). These words are even considered to be a source of life at times (Deuteronomy 30:19-20). The words of God were understood to be authoritative and obeying and disobeying these words had consequences of life and death. This is the same general understanding that we see in the Gospel of John. “The Jews” knew that life could be found in these Old Testament Scriptures, something that Jesus affirms. The only difference is that in our text, there appears to be consequences for misinterpreting these Scriptures or ignoring the one to whom they testify, in addition to the consequences for disobedience presented in the Old Testament.

Another point worth mentioning is Jesus’ claim that life can be found by coming to him. This is the same claim that God makes in Isaiah 55:1-5, where Israel is commanded to “come to [God], hear [God], and live,” as well as Amos 5:4, where Israel is beckoned to “seek [God] and live.” Jesus is putting himself in the position of God. In other words, he is making divine claims. Jesus is not making new claims about how men should seek life. There is no new method or way of searching out life; but there is a new

identification or revelation of whom is to be sought for life. “The Jews” would most likely be familiar with these Old Testament passages summoning men to seek God for life, but the claims that Jesus makes in our passage would be quite shocking, even blasphemous, which our text seems to indicate “the Jews” believed.

8.2 *The New Testament Canon*

A comparison with the Old Testament is valuable to understand the background of what is being presented in John 5:39-40. The New Testament is equally as valuable for understanding what theological concepts were being propounded in the first century by multiple Christian writers and what concepts were especially being emphasized by the author of the Fourth Gospel. Many concepts about “the Scriptures must be investigated, including “searching” them, finding life in them, their testimony to Jesus, and belief/unbelief in their witness.

The idea that the Scriptures testify to Jesus is something shared among many New Testament authors. All three of the Synoptics and the Book of Acts quote Old Testament passages, suggesting that Jesus fulfilled the prophecies contained in them. Two very interesting passages in the Lukan writings have similar themes to our text. In Luke 24:32, Jesus is reported appearing in an unrecognizable form to two men on the road to Emmaus. While walking with the men, “beginning with Moses and with all the prophets, He explained to them the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures” (Luke 24:27). The same Scriptures of the Old Testament that are referred to in our text are the same ones that the author Luke claims Jesus explained about himself. Similarly, in Acts 8:26ff, we see that beginning with a quotation from Isaiah 53:7, Philip is said to have

“preached Jesus” to the Ethiopian “beginning with this passage” (Acts 8:35). The book of Acts does not tell us what other words Philip used to preach Jesus to this man, but we do know his starting point: an Old Testament passage that is referenced to testify about Jesus. The first Petrine epistle also makes brief references to the Scripture’s witness to Jesus, quoting the Old Testament and applying it to Jesus (1 Peter 2:4-8). The New Testament seems to be in agreement with the Fourth Evangelist: the Old Testament serves as a witness to Jesus Christ.

The Johannine epistle presents a similar argument to the larger context where our text is found. In 1 John 5:8-12, we see a similar argument present. Multiple witnesses, including God, testify on behalf of Jesus (v. 8-9). Belief in Jesus is required (v. 10). Believing in Jesus brings eternal life (v. 11). Rejecting Jesus results in not having eternal life (v. 12). The flow of the argument could not be more parallel.

But perhaps the most interesting comparison of the Gospel of John with the New Testament witness concerns references referring to finding life by coming to Jesus and/or the consequences of refusing to come to Jesus. No text is more direct in its reference to this than 2 Corinthians 3:12-18:

*“Therefore having such a hope, we use great boldness in our speech, and are not like Moses, who used to put a veil over his face so that the sons of Israel would not look intently at the end of what was fading away. But their minds were hardened; for until **this very day at the reading of the old covenant the same veil remains unlifted, because it is removed in Christ.** But to this day whenever Moses is read, a veil lies over their heart; **but whenever a person turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away.**”*

The two places that I have emphasized in the passage concern our theme. First, Paul claims that “the sons of Israel” (i.e. the Jews) have a veil over their faces when the “old covenant,” in other words the Old Testament, is read. But the interesting portion is the following phrase and the conjoined thought of verse 18: “the veil” is removed or taken away in Christ. What Paul is teaching is that men are blinded to the real meaning of the Scriptures until they come to Christ and begin to see it in its true light. But Paul doesn’t just state this about all men. He makes a specific reference to “the Jews,” of whom Paul used to be. This passage is a clear parallel passage to our text. The Jews are “blinded” to the testimony of the Scriptures.

A second passage in 2 Corinthians suggests that those who do not seek Christ are “blinded.” In 4:1-4, Paul describes the gospel as being “veiled” by the “god of this world,” who has “blinded” men’s minds so that they cannot see Christ. The reference to blinding is the same, but the difference is that this time Paul does not attribute the blame to the individuals who cannot see, but rather to Satan. “Blinding” is also something that the Gospel of Matthew records in the account of one confrontation between Jesus and the Pharisees described in Matthew 23. The reference is not as direct as the passage in 2 Corinthians, but Jesus is seen repeatedly referring to the Jewish leaders as “blind” because they claim to be obedient to the Scriptures, but are missing the main point. By trusting in their Jewish lineage and mistakenly assuming salvation was a birthright, “the Jews” remained blind to the one whom they should have sought out in the Scripture, Jesus himself.

In essence, we can say that the New Testament is in agreement with the theology presented in our text by the Evangelist. The Evangelist of the Fourth Gospel, most likely writing later than most if not all other New Testament books, confirms the message found within them. Christ is to be the focal point of the Scriptures; only by seeking him and seeing him as the key to understanding will one unlock its true message and find life that he seeks. The Jews fail to see this, because they refuse to come to Jesus even though the words which they desperately claim to search point towards him repeatedly.

9. Authorship

9.1 The Traditional View

The Gospel of John is traditionally viewed as being written by an aging Apostle John, but nowhere in the Gospel does the author actually state his name [Harris, W.H. 2001: 2]. The superscription “According to John” was added sometime in the second century [Culpepper, A. 1998: 29]. The author does identify himself as the “Beloved Disciple” (13:23, 19:26, 20:2, 21:7, 21:20), but the lack of direct claims to authorship has led to widespread discussion in scholarly circles and many theories concerning the authorship of this Fourth Gospel. Included as possible authors within these theories are the Apostle John, John of Jerusalem, John the Elder, John Mark, Lazarus, an unknown pseudepigraphal author, and simply the Johannine School, though these are just the most prominent theories (others abound). There seems to be no consensus today as to who actually wrote the Gospel of John.

The traditional view that this Evangelist is John the Apostle rests mainly on second-hand information from Ireneaus, a second century church father,⁴ as quoted by

4. Born 115-142AD, died circa 200AD. Scholars date the birth of Ireneaus between these two dates largely based on whether or not they give credit to his claims to have known Polycarp. Eusebius. Eusebius reports that Ireneaus wrote to a friend reminiscing about childhood conversations with Polycarp, who is believed to have been a disciple of the Apostle John. According to Eusebius, Ireneaus makes mention of Polycarp identifying the Apostle John as the author of this fourth gospel [Eusebius 3.39.3]. However, Ireneaus' testimony has and Polycarp was very old, leading to misunderstandings about the report given concerning the Apostle John. Some modern scholars discount the chain of testimony from Polycarp to Ireneaus claiming the Ireneaus was very young to Eusebius to be convincing, but still have unresolved questions concerning Ireneaus' credibility [Culpepper, A. 1998: 34]. Reasons for questioning Ireneaus' credibility or rejecting it altogether include the fact that no other author mentions the Apostle John and this Gospel in the in the first half of the second century. Some view this simply as "an argument from silence," but it does lead to some questioning. The first attribution of the Gospel to the Apostle comes from the Gnostics, such as Heracleon [Culpepper, A. 1998: 32-33], but many are skeptical to accept Gnostic sources (this skepticism may be justified). It is not until the end of the second century that we begin to find quotations from the "orthodox" church fathers that attribute the Gospel to John the Apostle, which is where we find the so-called reference from Ireneaus. It most be noted that much of the attempts to discredit Ireneaus' testimony presupposes that his only source of information was Polycarp. Ireneaus does mention another presbyter, whom some believe to be his predecessor as Bishop of Lyons, Pothinus. Pothinus is believed to have been born in the first century and to have possible connections to John [Harris, W.H. 2001: 2]. This is just

speculation, but it could provide supporting evidence to Ireneaus' testimony. Others add to this the fact that Ireneaus was in close touch with Rome and would have been familiar with the traditions there. It is evidence like this that leads J. Drummond to state "critics speak of Ireneaus as though he has fallen out of the moon, paid two or three visits to Polycarp's lecture-room, and had never known anyone else...he must have had numerous links with the early part of the century" [Drummond, J. 1903: 348].

It remains unclear as to whether or not we can trust Ireneaus' report, but it is interesting to note that all writers subsequent to Ireneaus assume the apostolic authority of the Gospel, such as Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria, and Origen. If they were merely reporting Ireneaus' opinion, they must have considered it worth reporting, apparently without suspicion [Harris, W.H. 2001: 2].

9.2 *John of Jerusalem*

Alternate theories of apostolic authorship began to prominently appear in the early 19th century after E. Evanson's 1792 work, *The Dissonance of the Four Generally Received Evangelists*, began to stir up doubt by pointing out discrepancies among the four gospels. One such theory to the traditional view is that the Evangelist is "John of Jerusalem," of whom we know little about. This theory was first proposed by H. Delff in 1889. Delff concluded that this John has access to the High Priest's house and was able to provide some eyewitness testimony, though not apostolic. This John later would become influential in the Asiatic churches. This view does have the advantage of relying

on eyewitness testimony, but there is virtually no known external evidence to support such a theory, perhaps attributing to little support.

9.3 *John the Elder*

One theory that has some possible better supporting external evidence is that this Gospel was written by John the Elder. Ironically, interest in this theory rises from another quotation of Eusebius, where he quotes Papias who mentions John the Apostle *and* John the Elder [Eusebius 3.39.3] There has been a great deal of discussion as to what Papias meant by the “Elders” in this passage. Are they to be identified with the “Disciples” named or as a separate group? The answer to this question is unclear, and scholars are divided on both sides of the issue. Whatever the answer, it does at least appear that Papias’ information was second-hand at best. Ireneaus states that Papias had heard the Apostle John, as quoted once again by Eusebius [Eusebius 3:39:1] but there is little agreement from scholars on this issue, especially with Papias’ claims to apparently have second-hand information.

Of course, there is still a whole realm of conclusions that that can be drawn from this theory. If Papias is referring to the apostles as “Elders” then there are only two groups and Papias formerly received information directly from the followers of the apostles. In that case, his testimony is closer to that of Ireneaus. It is also possible that Papias is referring to the Apostle John and the Elder John as one and the same person. He could simply be distinguishing between what John had said in the past and what he was saying at the time of Papias enquiring. And of course, it is possible that there may have been two men with the name John. It is and was not an uncommon name. This could

even be supported by Eusebius' interpretation of Papias' words, though some believe that Eusebius' words may not be totally impartial since he wished to attribute the Book of Revelation to a different John than the author of the Gospel of John [Harris, W.H. 2001: 2]. And finally, it is entirely possible that if the later Church was susceptible to confusing the apostles and the elders in this way that Papias himself could have made a similar mistake. Whatever the case, we cannot be entirely certain of any conclusion. The theory that an author separate from the Apostle John, named John the Elder, wrote the Gospel of John is a possibility, perhaps though remotely.

9.4 *John Mark*

The theory that John Mark authored the Gospel of John was originally proposed by Wellhausen, but has also been promoted by J.N. Sanders and Pierson Parker in more recent history [Sanders, J.N. and Parker, P. 1960: 97-110]. While this theory does receive some support, it does not compare to the support other theories have received or continue to receive. And rightly so, for it is hard to reconcile this theory with the traditional viewpoint that John Mark authored the Gospel of Mark. This Gospel and the Gospel of John could not be any more different in styles. Add to this the fact there is virtually no known supporting external evidence (one would also be hard-pressed to find any worthwhile internal evidence) and this theory carries little to no weight at all.

9.5 *Lazarus*

The theory that Lazarus authored the fourth gospel was first verbalized by Floyd Wilson, where he observed that Lazarus is the one male figure in the Gospel of whom it is specifically said that Jesus loved him (11:3, 5, 36). He argues that the Gospel was meant to be “self-intelligible” to readers so that they could identify the author as Lazarus without having to rely on the 2nd century tradition that attributed it to the Apostle John [Filson, F. 1949: 83-88]. K.A. Eckhardt developed this theory further, suggesting that Lazarus was a pseudonym for the Apostle John, whom Jesus had raised from the dead [Eckhardt, K.A. 1961]. Both of these theories are problematic. The problem for the former is due to the fact that the theory is really only valid if readers are unaware of the author’s identity before they began reading the Gospel. This seems to be an unlikely situation. The latter’s problem lies in the fact there is no trace of evidence in the Synoptic Gospels and/or tradition that the Apostle John had been raised from the dead. One final variation is suggested by the aforementioned J.N. Sanders. He proposes that the basis of this fourth Gospel is an Aramaic work originally composed by Lazarus that was later edited by John Mark, who is the true author of the Gospel of John [Sanders, J.N. and Parker, P. 1960: 97-110]. While this remains a possibility, there are no record or manuscript copies that remain of an original Aramaic gospel. Some scholars deny the existence of such a manuscript and suggest that it is even unnecessary [Barrett, C.K. 1978: 223]. Whatever the case, this theory does not close the case, and in my opinion it does not help the cause much either. Even if this were the case that Lazarus had composed an original, it still does not answer the question as to who our Evangelist is. We have already seen that there is virtually no evidence to support the idea that it is John Mark.

9.6 *Unknown Pseudepigraphal Author*

Some scholars have suggested the theory that the author of this fourth Gospel is not an eyewitness to the events of the life of Jesus like the Apostle John or another apostle, but rather by another person writing to give the impression that he is an apostle. In other words, this theory proposes that the Gospel of John is a pseudepigraphal work, where the author who was not an eyewitness uses eyewitness details to create the impression that he was there.

This view suffers many faults. First of all, we have to ask the question, “why did an author who was intending to write a pseudepigraphal work not just mention the Apostle John’s name?” This would clearly have been more effective and representative of the pseudepigraphal practice. In addition to this, it is difficult to imagine how the Gospel could have gained acceptance in the face of Gnosticism if it had not been assumed to be apostolic. The Gospel of John was a favorite of the Gnostics and it seems unlikely that it would be so readily accepted if there was not a belief in its apostolic roots. There are no known cases of works once recognized as pseudonymous ever losing their pseudonymous ascription at some time later [Harris, W.H. 2001: 2]. It is possible, but more improbable that the Gospel of John is *not* an exception to this.

9.7 *The Johannine Community*

A more readily accepted theory, at least in modern scholarship, is that the author of the Gospel of John is not John the Apostle, but rather an individual(s) from the

Johannine community. This view theorizes that a person(s) who was a part of the community that had grown up under the teaching of John the Apostle wrote the gospel or at least was the editing redactor of the original Gospel. It should be noted that this fails to answer the question of who the original author is. David Fredrick Strauss, Ernest Renan, C.H. Weisse, and J.B. Lightfoot are largely responsible for the early promotion of this theory, and many leading commentators, such as Edwyn Hoskyns, C.K. Barrett, Raymond Brown, and Rudolph Schnackenburg have joined the cause [Culpepper, A. 1998: 36]. While this view is heavily supported in modern scholarship, there is still no true consensus as to whether or not John the apostle had actual influence on the writing of the Gospel. In short, this theory makes a good proposition, but it by no means settles the issue.

9.8 *Conclusion*

There is no consensus today as to the identity of the Evangelist of the Gospel of John. Various theories abound, some possessing more validity than others. The Gospel claims to be written by “the Beloved Disciple” (13:23, 19:26, 20:2, 21:7, 21:20), but it remains a mystery as to who this is. By the end of the second century, the traditional view appears to have been firmly established that the author was none other than the Apostle John, and as the evidence for and against the other views is weighed it is hard for me to ignore the force of the evidence pointing in favor of this traditional view. At the very least, I agree with Alan Culpepper’s assessment: “in all probability, the Gospel rests on early eyewitness testimony that was shaped by the worship and struggles of the

Johannine community” [Culpepper, A. 1998: 37]. Granting this, it will be necessary to investigate the background of this community and the source material that was utilized in constructing the Gospel. But before we do this we will briefly look at the issue of dating the composition of the Gospel.

10. Dating

Given the diversity of opinion concerning authorship of the Gospel of John, the consensus on its dating is very remarkable. There has not always been a consensus, as many dated the Gospel late in the second century. However, after the discovery of the p52 papyrus fragment of the John Rylands Library in 1934 by C.H. Roberts things changed. The fragment is now dated by a consensus of New Testament scholars and papyrologists 120-130 A.D [Kysar, R. 1992: 919-920], with the significance being that virtually no one believes this to be a fragment piece of the original manuscript. Since it was found in Egypt, most concede that it would take several decades for the Gospel to be copied, circulated, and carried to Egypt where it was buried. This suggests that the Gospel was penned in the late first century. With additional discoveries of the Dead Sea Scrolls revealing much of the imagery and symbolism that had been attributed to Gnosticism within the Gospel being found in the Qumran community, most place the date for composition between 90-100A.D. Some place it slightly later, and a few, most notably Rudolph Bultmann, in the decade of the 80’s A.D.

The issue of dating is relatively insignificant due to such a strong consensus among scholars. “The date is agreed upon by Catholic and Protestant, by conservative

and liberal, by those who defend apostolic authorship and by those who reject it, by those who believe that John used the Synoptics and by those who do not...therefore, many commentators, such as Schnackenburg, scarcely bother to discuss the issue of dating” [Robinson, J.A.T. 1976: 261]. In the words of Kummel, Feine, and Behm, “the question appears to be settled” [Feine, P. and Behm, J. and Kummel, W.G. 1965: 246]. I can only agree.

11. Sources & the Johannine Community

For many who reject the traditional view, the discussion of authorship immediately turns towards possible sources and background material of the Johannine community. Beginning in the early 1900’s scholars like Julius Wellhausen began attempting to point out inconsistencies with the Synoptic Gospels, claiming that these findings proved that the author used sources or that the Gospel had a later redactor. Later scholars like Eduard Schwartz and Emmanuel Hirsch would continue these theories, but it was the landmark commentary by Rudolph Bultmann that brought the full force of this argument. He built upon the work of others as he postulated various theories of possible sources as well as a later redactor. Bultmann’s work was so forceful that, “even those who disagree with him, must deal with the issues with which he focused [Culpepper, A. 1998: 38-39] (which scholars such as Ruckstuhl, Schweizer, and Fortna have attempted to do). To date, the issue of sources is far from settled with adherents of the traditional view drawing battle lines against those who reject the view, though there are a few theories that find themselves between these polar views. Some views include theories of

Synoptic influence and of processes of development, such as Raymond Brown's "Five Stage Composition Theory" [Brown, R. 1966: 34-39]. Whether or not one adheres to the traditional view or not, there appears to be good evidence that at minimum the Johannine community did influence the composition of the Gospel if it did not compose the Gospel itself. The most prominent issue that appears to have influence on the composition is the conflict with the Jewish synagogue. It seems that at the time of the writing of the Gospel, formal action had been taken by Jewish authorities to exclude Christians from the synagogues. There are still those who disagree with this assessment, such as Oscar Cullman who proposes that the Johannine Christians were associated with Hellenists in the early church in Jerusalem [Cullman, O. 1982: 178-179]. The reasons for this are not directly presented, but we can assume it is related to the emergence of Christology and the acceptance of Gentiles into previously closed Jewish circles. Whatever the reason, it appears that the members of the Johannine Christians were originally part of the Jewish synagogue, but were later excluded leading them to form their own community, possibly led by the "Beloved Disciple" [Culpepper, A. 1998: 44]. Whatever the case we can be fairly certain that "the life situation of early Christians [of the Johannine community] probably influenced the Fourth Evangelist's shaping of Jesus' words [in this passage]" [Keck, L. 2003:587]. This conflict may explain what seem to be hostile references to "the Jews" in the Gospel of John, including our text itself. With this in mind, we must turn our attention to the question "who are 'the Jews' that the Evangelist refers to?"

12. Who Are “the Jews?”

The term “the Jews” (οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι) provides for an interesting discussion, or debate in regards to the Gospel of John. The term appears seventy times, compared to only sixteen times in the three Synoptic Gospels combined. Some have suggested that more than half of these seventy references convey a negative attitude [Leibig, J.E. 1983], so much so that there are often claims of “anti-Semitism” leveled against the Evangelist. We will turn our attention to this claim shortly, but first it is important for us to understand who “the Jews” are to whom the Gospel so regularly refers. In order to determine who “the Jews” are we will look for internal evidence within the Gospel of John itself. Our Evangelist does not appear to be opposed to *all* the Jews. In fact, the main players in this Gospel are Jews, including John the Baptist, the apostle, and even Jesus Himself. Hakola has even suggested that “Jesus is indeed in many respects more Jewish than his Jewish contemporaries in the Gospel” [Hakola, R. 2000]. Add to this the fact that most of the first followers of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel appear to be of Jewish descent. Not all statements about “the Jews” are hostile. Jesus claims that salvation is “from the Jews” (4:22). Here, Jesus indicates that the very thing that all men seek is from “the Jews.” This is most likely a reference to the Jewish people in general and presents a different context than the cases where hostility is present. In other references, we see Jesus going to various “feasts of the Jews” (5:1, 7:11). This clearly seems to be referring to the Jewish people as a whole, as Jesus is observing the proper customs of his heritage. Jesus is even referred to as “King of the Jews” (18:33, 39, 19:3, 19:21), and while most of this title is used to mock Jesus at his crucifixion, it should be noted that “the Jews” does appear to refer to the people group known as “the Jews.” Most strikingly, we see some

“Jews” putting their faith in Jesus (8:31, 11:45, 12:11). There has been much scholarly debate about the nature of this faith, and time will not allow for a full discussion on this subject, but we can at least observe that there were some of Jewish lineage who at least embraced Jesus with a superficial faith if not absolute surrender. As noted previously, most of the first followers of Jesus were Jewish and we presume that a substantial portion of the Johannine community was Jewish.

However, in other contexts, the term οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι/οἱ appears to refer to the religious leaders or possibly the Judeans, but not *all* the Jews [Culpepper, A. 1998: 44]. In these instances it seems that a distinction is being drawn between those of Jewish descent (the category with which many believe the Evangelist and his community fall into) and the controlling religious forces. The religious leaders are singled out. For example, we in chapter 7 of the Gospel we see that the various crowds at the Feasts of Booths privately discuss the identity of Jesus, but no one publicly speaks of him “for fear of the Jews.” We can assume that the majority if not all of those who are present in these crowds are of Jewish descent and yet they fear “the Jews.” Clearly, there is a distinction between those of Jewish lineage and those to whom the Evangelist is referring to as “the Jews.” Further support is given by comparing the previously mentioned variant Papyrus Egerton 2 where

this passage is addressed to “the rulers of the people” as opposed to “the Jews.” Perhaps a copyist(s) understood the nature of the term as originally intended or at least tried to clarify any misconceptions. In either case, this does seem to aid the theory that the Evangelist was not addressing the Jewish people as a whole, but rather on of their ruling bodies.

To determine which ruling body this is, we will begin by comparing the various references throughout the Gospel to “being put out of the synagogue.” In 9:22, we see that the parents of a blind man who was healed by Jesus are afraid to speak on behalf of their son because they fear being expelled from the synagogue by “the Jews.” Jesus warns his disciples in 16:2 that they will be put of the synagogues for following him, without giving reference to specifically who would be responsible for their expulsion. But the reference we find in 12:42, gives strong indication to who “the Jews” are when we compare it with the 9:22. Many people believed, but because they feared “the Pharisees’” apparent power to expel people from the synagogue, they would not confess faith in Jesus. Here we find the clearest reference that those who had authority over the synagogues were the Pharisees. The Pharisees were a ruling sect who claimed authority in interpreting the Scriptures and setting rules for the observance of the law in daily life [Kittle, G. and Friedrich, G. 1964-1976].

We find further confirmation that the Evangelist is perhaps referring to the Pharisees when he uses the term “the Jews” by comparing the issue of interpreting the Scriptures as found in our text with other references to the Scriptures (τα. j γραφα, j) and the law (ο` νο, μοj) throughout the gospel. In the very chapter in which we find our text, “the Jews” appeal to the law, claiming that the healed invalid is breaking the “law” by carrying his mat (5:10). There is no Old Testament reference to “carrying a mat” as being a matter of work, and it is likely that this is requirement is more of a “tradition” rather than a “law.” Pharisees were known for their meticulous devotion to obeying the

Levitical law and for adding additional requirements to the already stringent code [Ferguson, E. 2003: 515]. This is perhaps another “tradition” of the Pharisees, lending evidence to the fact that perhaps “the Jews” are the Pharisees. Likewise, in chapters 7 and 8 of the Gospel we see a great deal of discussion about “the law” amongst the chief priests, the scribes (teachers of the law), and the Pharisees, with the Pharisees being most prominent in these discussions. Jesus reminds the Pharisees that it is “[their] law” that requires multiple witnesses (8:17), which is exactly what Jesus is providing in our text. Another example that might be referenced is the claim by the Pharisees to be disciples of Moses in chapter 9 of the Gospel. In this exchange, we see the Pharisees confronting a man who had been healed from blindness by Jesus. As this simple man is questioned, the conversation becomes antagonistic and the man himself begins to question the Pharisees, sparking boasts of authority. The Pharisees claim superiority over the man by claiming to disciples of Moses. Here we see their spiritual pride and arrogance. It is throughout this ninth chapter of the Gospel of John that we see “the Jews” almost used interchangeably with the Pharisees and we become aware of their attitude that sheds light on the situation in John 5:39-40. In view of this evidence it seems that “the Jews” are most likely the Pharisees.

Clearly, the Author may well have an interest in driving a wedge between ordinary Jews and (at least) some of their leaders, mostly the Pharisees [Carson, D.A. 1991: 171]. The issues of expulsion from the synagogue and interpreting the Scriptures apparently has driven a wedge between the early followers of Christ (i.e. the Johannine community) and the ruling bodies of the places of worship in the first century. The members of this community had in a sense lost their “Jewishness,” that is they had

become ostracized from the Jewish community due to their beliefs in Jesus as the Messiah. Raymond Brown has even suggested that this may be the very purpose of the Fourth Gospel, “to persuade Jewish Christians to leave the synagogue and to openly profess their faith in Jesus” [Brown, R. 1966: 228]. I do not totally agree with Brown’s assessment, as I am uncertain that the Evangelist is asking Jewish Christians to leave the synagogue but possibly reform the synagogue. I do, however, agree that the Author perhaps encouraging believers to profess their faith in Jesus. Perhaps Beasley-Murray’s viewpoint is more appropriate: the Evangelist provided an example of “missionary apologetic of Christians to Jews, who wanted to know on what basis they maintained their belief in Jesus as the promised Messiah of God” [Beasley-Murray, G. 1999:79]. The desire was to encourage the Christians in the Johannine community to stand firm in their faith in Jesus as the Messiah and to somehow persuade their fellow countrymen to embrace Jesus in faith.

13. Anti-Semitism?

This does not fully answer the claims that the Gospel of John is anti-Jewish, and no discussion of “the Jews” in the Gospel of John can be complete without answering the claims of anti-Semitism. The Gospel has been called after all, the most ‘anti-Jewish’ book in the New Testament. Admittedly, “there are statements with respect to ‘the Jews’ in the Fourth Gospel which on a first reading can certainly be construed as maliciously and despicably anti-Jewish” [de Boer, M.C. 2000]. Some have suggested that claims of anti-Semitism have risen from surface readings of the text and misrepresentations of the original historical context. In Kysar’s words, the Gospel “is now read and interpreted

outside of its original situation and beyond its original purpose” [Kysar, R. 1993:26-27]. When a clear understanding of whom “the Jews” are in relation to the Jewishness of those making these statements is realized, the issue of anti-Semitism begins to fade away. Scholars like Alan Culpepper have labored to point out that when passages in the Gospel of John appear to show hostility towards “the Jews,” these situations in fact show the hostile, even violent behavior of the Jewish leaders towards Jesus and his followers, though even this hostility is not expressed as hatred (i.e. John 5:16, 18, 7:1, 8:31, 37-38, 44, 47, 9:22, 16:2-3, 18:36, 19:38, 20:19). The Gospel “arguably exhibits perplexity, exasperation, and annoyance, but neither Jesus in John nor the Evangelist in editorial comments counsels hatred or contempt for ‘the Jews’ or their beliefs” [de Boer, M.C. 2000]. There is no doubt that the Gospel portrays a division between the Jewish authorities and the Johannine community, but I do not believe the claim that the Evangelist was anti-Semitic. Burke has provided a good explanation of the situation when he suggested that “the community’s language became polemical as its members sought to establish a new place for themselves within a society they perceived to be increasingly hostile to them” [Burke, D.G. 1993], to which I agree. The language may suggest “anti-Semitism” but in my opinion, the heart of it is nowhere to be found. Hostile overtones are the result of theological disagreement, not racial issues. This appears to be the view of many scholars. For example, D.A. Carson commented:

“Anti-Semitic’ is simply the wrong category to apply to the fourth gospel: whatever hostilities are present turn on theological issues related to the acceptance or rejection of revelation, not on race. How could it be otherwise, when all of the first Christians were

Jews and when, on this reading, both the fourth evangelist and his primary readers were Jews and Jewish proselytes?” [Carson, D.A. 1991: 171]

Likewise, Raymond Brown observed:

“Thus John can be described as anti-Jewish in a qualified sense when through Jesus’ words it attacks those whom it calls ‘the Jews,’ from whom the (Johannine) disciples of Jesus differ religiously, if not necessarily ethnically or geographically. And even the religious difference is narrowly restricted: The Johannine Christians and ‘the Jews’ do not differ in venerating the Scriptures and the Jewish religious heritage but in their estimation of Jesus.” [Brown, R. 1966-1970: 34-39].

The Evangelist who composed the Gospel of John (and/or any redactor) was not anti-Semitic, but rather opposed to the rejection of Jesus as the Messiah. This of course, is the entire setting of our passage for discussion, John 5:39-40.

14. Conclusions

There is perhaps no more important subject than the subject of proper interpretation of the Scriptures. The results of proper or improper interpretation have results of life and death. So is the case with John 5:39-40, where we see Jesus confronting the Jewish leadership for their failure to interpret the Scriptures in reference to himself and thus to for failing to find life. But the results of our findings are confusing

to us, and apparently this situation was confusing to the Johannine community. How could “the Jews,” the so-called leaders of the Jewish people to whom many of the members of the Johannine community belonged, possess the Scriptures and study them (perhaps more diligently than many especially what are often considered to be the “uneducated” men who were Jesus’ earliest followers), and yet miss the main point of their teaching? It appears to be an issue of stubborn rebellion and prejudice that leads to misinterpretation. Rather than letting the Scriptures speak for themselves, “the Jews” forced their interpretation to suit their traditions and practice. They refused to give up the false hope of their Jewish birthright. When confronted with correction concerning their misinterpretation, they stubbornly “dug their heels in,” and rejected any revision. It is not the study of the scripture that is flawed, but the prejudice with which they conduct their study [Haenchen, E. 1984: 24]. Had the Jews been willing to swallow their pride and look at the Scriptures with un-blinded eyes they would “no doubt have come to recognize the truth of his claims. But they read them with a wooden and superstitious reverence for the letter, and they never penetrated to the great truths which they pointed. The result is that in the presence of him to whom the scriptures bear witness, in the presence of him who could have given life, they are antagonistic” [Morris, L. 1995: 292-293]. True searching of the Scriptures perhaps would have led to the realization that they were sinners in need of a Savior. An unbiased study of Scripture should reveal man’s inability to keep the whole law, his need for new birth, and God’s provision in Jesus. “The problem from Jesus’ perspective (and that of the Johannine community) is that if they were *really* looking for eternal life in the scriptures, they would recognize his presence” [Howard-Brook, W. 1994: 137]. Prejudice and shallow pride can lead to

misinterpretation, and a lack of humility in searching the Scriptures can lead to error. The Jews were guilty of this and because of their lack of a “teachable” spirit they missed the coming of the Messiah, from whom the Scriptures had promised would bring the very life they so desperately sought.

This is not only something that the Johannine community faced, but also something that we face in our world today. Following an earlier assumption, we assume that all men are seeking life. Whether from the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments or elsewhere, all are looking for life. Those who seek outside of the Scriptures do so with a prejudice against them, but we cannot make too many observations about them from our text, since they do not have much in common with the situation. Bultmann has commented that “the world’s resistance to God is based on imagined security which reaches its highest and most subversive form in religion” [Bultmann, R. 1971: 267-268]. Such was the case of “the Jews” in Jesus’ day, who had false security in their religious ties to their forefathers and the covenants their forefathers made with God. It is important to note that in our day there are many who perhaps fall prey to this same sense of false security. It is common practice to say “I was born a Christian,” or “I’m a Christian; I go to church.” These people may not necessarily “search the Scriptures” as “the Jews” did in Jesus’ day, but they do seem to rest in the same false hope “the Jews” had. Here, the lack of “searching the Scriptures” leads to the same error made by those who search with wrong motives.

However, our major concern is with those who *do* “search the Scriptures.” We can make observations about those who do seek life from the Scriptures, but do so

without humility and with less than “teachable spirits.” When Scripture becomes a religious list of “do’s and don’ts” or when the Scriptures are looked at with a “wooden” sense of literalness the Scriptures lose their life-giving testimony and power. Our text indicates that the Scriptures are meant to bring eternal life by testifying to the one who can give this life to those who are seeking, Jesus Christ. The Scriptures are meant to free not to burden, and failure to realize this leads to error and self-righteousness.

If we heed the words of Jesus presented in the Gospel of John, we must be prepared to admit our own blindness to God’s word at times. Spiritual pride, dogmatic presuppositions, and false security will only lead to error. We must be ready and willing to learn and to approach the Scriptures diligently, as “the Jews” did, but also with humility and sincerity, with which they did not. And most importantly, we must look to the pages of Scripture through the lens of Jesus Christ, the key to interpretation. “The Scriptures (of both testaments) bear witness to Christ. That is their glory. It is also their limitation” [Beasley-Murray, G. 1999: 81]. Failure to see Jesus in the Scripture will only lead to frustration and legalistic practice. Respect for the letter of the law must be coupled with desire to fulfill the spirit of the law. Failure to harmonize this will result in difficulty in grappling with the thought of the Scriptures [Morris, L. 1995: 292]. In short, it leads to misinterpretation, and misinterpretation is as bad if not worse than no interpretation. Much damage has been done over the years and continues to be done in the name of God and/or Jesus as a result of misguided interpretation of “the Scriptures.”

What we are concerned with in New Testament theology (as it relates to the use of the Old Testament) is proper interpretation. And what we are concerned with in life is truly finding life by a proper interpretation of all these Scriptures. All men want life, and

not just ordinary life, but abundant life. This is exactly what the Evangelist reports Jesus claiming to bring in John 10:10. The words of Scripture are said to testify to him and the life he provides. This life is meant to be sweet and desirable. In the words of St. Augustine: “Read the prophetic books without reference to Christ – what couldst thou find more tasteless and insipid? Find therein Christ, and what thou readest will not only prove agreeable, but will intoxicate thee” [Augustine]. But only when one begins to remove the blinders and see the sweetness of Christ in the pages of Scripture will one truly begin to find the abundant life to which the Scriptures call us to. Life is a gift. The Scriptures are a gift. But a gifts are only as good as they are received. We must learn to receive both humbly and reverently, with our eyes focused on the Giver of both gifts, Jesus Christ. The Scriptures testify about Jesus, but the actual decision of faith is left to us. We must make the personal commitment. We must seek Jesus and continually seek him if we want to truly receive eternal life. We must come to him, believe in him, dine on him, and remain in him. Then we will truly live.

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