I have talked so far about several of the methods scholars use in order to study the Gospels of the NT: the literary-historical, redactional, and comparative methods. As I’ve stressed, each of these can be used for any one Gospel (or for any other piece of writing, in theory). In my textbook, when I come to the Gospel of John, I show how they all can be applied to the *same* book, before introducing an altogether different method known as the socio-historical approach. I will explain all this in a series of posts, starting with this one.

As I have argued, historians are responsible not only for interpreting their ancient sources but also for justifying these interpretations. This is why I have self-consciously introduced and utilized different methods for each of the books we have studied: a literary-historical method for Mark, a redactional method for Matthew, a comparative method for Luke, and a thematic method for Acts. As I have indicated, there is no reason for a historian to restrict him or herself to any one of these approaches: each could be applied to any one of the books that we have studied.

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I have decided to illustrate this point by applying each of these four methods to the Gospel of John. This will be valuable not only for its own sake — that is, for showing how a variety of approaches can enrich the process of interpretation — but also for providing us with the data that we need to understand yet a fifth method that scholars have used in their study of the early Christian literature, one that might be called the “socio-historical” method. In a nutshell, the socio-historical method seeks to understand how a literary text reflects the social world and historical circumstances of the author who produced it. We have already explored this kind of question for each of the other Gospels, but only in passing. In this chapter we will learn how to pursue the matter with greater rigor and in fuller detail. Since one of the prerequisites for applying this method is a detailed knowledge of the text itself, we can begin by examining the Fourth Gospel from the literary-historical, thematic, comparative, and redactional perspectives.

The Gospel of John from a Literary-Historical Perspective

Despite its wide-ranging differences from the Synoptics — which I will begin to detail below — the Gospel of John clearly belongs with them in the same Greco-Roman genre. That is to say, it too would be perceived by an ancient reader as a biography of a religious leader: it is a prose narrative that portrays an individual’s life within a chronological framework, focusing on his inspired teachings and miraculous deeds, leading up to his death and divine vindication.

As was the case with the other Gospels, the portrayal of Jesus is established at the very outset of the narrative, by the introductory passage known as the Johannine Prologue (1:1-18). This prologue, however, is quite unlike anything we have seen in our study of the Gospels to this stage. Rather than introducing the main character of the book by name, it provides a kind of mystical reflection on the “Word” of God, a being from eternity past who was with God and yet was God (v. 1), who created the universe (v. 3), who provided life and light to all humans (vv. 4-5), and who entered into the world that he had made, only to be rejected by his own people (vv. 9-11). John the Baptist testified to this Word (vv. 6-8), but
only a few received it; those who did so became children of God, having received a gift far
greater even than that bestowed by the servant of God, Moses himself (vv. 12-14; 16-18).

It is not until the end of the Prologue that we learn who this “Word” of God was. When the
Word became a human being, his name was Jesus Christ (v. 17).

Up to this point, that is, through the first eighteen verses of the book, the ancient reader
may not have realized that he or she was reading an introduction to a biography. Rather, as
I’ve indicated, the Prologue appears to be a philosophical or mystical meditation. But
beginning with 1:19, the book takes on a biographical tone that continues to the very end.
What should one make of the Prologue, then, from the literary-historical perspective of
ancient Greco-Roman biography?

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That is where I will pick up next time.

More Literary-Historical Perspectives on John
Jesus’ Birth: Some Comparisons