**An Exegesis of John 10:22-42**

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**July 28, 2023**

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# Historical Analysis

As with many of the other New Testament books, the gospel of John is disputed in a number of areas: date, authorship, and audience/purpose.

First, it is important to explore the date of the gospel, as the date can serve as a limiting factor when assessing the other areas of authorship and audience. Perhaps the best way to close off the latest possible date of writing would be to look at the earliest known uses of John in the early church. The earliest possible reference to the gospel of John comes from Ignatius of Antioch. In chapter 7 of his “Epistle to the Philadelphians,” Ignatius uses a phrase which is extremely similar to the text of John 3:8, when Ignatius writes, “For [the Spirit] knows both whence it comes and whither it goes.”[[1]](#footnote-0) Considering that we know Ignatius had direct contact with Polycarp, a direct disciple of John, it should be no surprise that Ignatius would have had access to John’s teachings.[[2]](#footnote-1) However, this also confounds our assurance of Ignatius quoting a written gospel of John, as he may rather have heard this phrase as part of a yet unwritten oral tradition.

While it is possible that we could cap the date of John’s gospel as late as 117 (the latest possibility given for Ignatius’s death), a more certain date to cap the writing of John would be around the date of Justin Martyr’s “First Apology,” written around 155.[[3]](#footnote-2) In his section on Christian Baptism (1.61), Justin says, “unless you are born again you will not enter into the Kingdom of heaven.”[[4]](#footnote-3) While it is possible that Justin Martyr also received an oral teaching related to John, we know that Justin’s protege, Tatian, created a harmony of the four gospels known as we currently know them. He did this harmonization as late as 160. Tatian’s work was called the Diatessaron and harmonized the four canonical gospels.[[5]](#footnote-4) As the gospel of John had to have been written prior to Tatian’s work - including time to circulate - it seems safe, and extremely generous, to put a cap on the dating of John’s gospel at 160. Capping the date of John’s gospel at 160 is also generous considering the archeological evidence we have in fragment P52,[[6]](#footnote-5) which is not only the earliest known fragment of John, but the earliest manuscript fragment of the whole New Testament, dating somewhere between the early and mid-late 2nd century.[[7]](#footnote-6)

With a latest possible date based on physical evidence, one can move on to assessing the authorship of the gospel of John. The best place to begin in regard to assigning authorship is to look at early tradition. Tradition may not in and of itself be conclusive proof as to genuine authorship, but it helps one begin the process of assigning authorship. From there we can look to test hypotheses.

Irenaeus, writing around 200, records a number of references to John as the author of the gospel attributed to him, two of which can be found in the work “Against Heresies” 2.22.3[[8]](#footnote-7) and 3.1.1.[[9]](#footnote-8) We can also see attributions of John’s authorship of the gospel by other witnesses such as Eusebias, Polycrates, and Clement of Alexandria,[[10]](#footnote-9) and a testament to John as the author of his gospel in the earliest known list of New Testament books, the “Muratorian Canon.”[[11]](#footnote-10) Traditionally speaking, then, John is the author of John’s gospel, though there is some discrepancy in the early church as to whether this John is the disciple/apostle John, or whether there is another John, John the Presbyter/Elder.

Assuming authorship by the apostle John as most tradition holds, one can begin to piece together other evidences present in the text. First, the gospel of John seems to have clearly been written by an eyewitness of the events recorded due to geographical knowledge. This is evident in the fact that John’s gospel mentions 17 unique geographical locations - two more unique locations than all the synoptics combined.[[12]](#footnote-11) The specifics of the geography mentioned point to the author being a Palestinian Jew from Galilee, with a familiarity of Jerusalem.[[13]](#footnote-12) The fact that the language of John has both strong Semitic and Aramaic elements strengthens a Jewish Galilean connection, as Galilee was a bilingual region.

Another important feature of John’s gospel is that, “John is the only canonical gospel that explicitly claims to be based on an eyewitness account.”[[14]](#footnote-13) This doesn’t initially seem to be helpful, because in our world of anonymity and content creation, a mere claim does not evince genuine authorship. It is important to remember, however, that content creation was much more difficult in the ancient world due to financial, material, and educational limitations. One didn’t just create content on a whim. What was created must have been considered important and weighty. In order to add to the influence of a written document, authors often identified themselves to the general audience. A known name could elicit credibility, and therefore weight to the words. If an author didn’t announce themselves in a work, it was likely a result of the assumption that the readers would know the author due to a close relationship. For this reason, spurious authorial attributions often resulted 1) as an attempt to garner credibility and add weight to a text, and 2) because the author was trying to make connections with a group they didn’t have a relationship with. As Craig Keener notes about John, “the Gospel lacks a major feature characteristic of most pseudepigraphic works: a direct claim to authorship. In other words, pseudonymity is unlikely for the Fourth Gospel, unless we wish to propose ‘implicit’ pseudonymity, a literary category for which other examples are conspicuously lacking.”[[15]](#footnote-14) The fact that John does not claim specific authorship is actually indicative that the author was well-known within the early Christian community and was not trying to bolster fictitious eyewitness accounts through false authorial claims.

There are a number of other evidences as to a more specific dating of John - evidences which help to place the text well within the generation of Jesus’s disciples. For example, John 5 uses several present tense ideas related to temple structures which seems to indicate a date for the text sometime prior to the temple’s destruction in 70 CE.[[16]](#footnote-15) One can get into the weeds exploring the minutia of arguments centering around the temple or around geographical name changes, but the point is that when coupling church tradition with linguistic, historical, cultural, and geographical evidence, the indication is that the author is a Palestinian Jew who knows Aramaic, who is familiar with the local geography, and who has witnessed many or all of the events he describes first-hand. It is extremely plausible that the author lived contemporaneously with Jesus’s disciples. Therefore, defaulting to church tradition to illuminate the author seems like the most warranted route to take when ascribing authorship to the gospel of John.

Finally, it is important for us to assess the range of possible historical purposes for John before perusing the text. John is one of the more helpful books of the Bible in regard to discerning at least a surface level purpose, in that John writes in the last two verses of his book that “Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.”[[17]](#footnote-16) The author’s express purpose, then, is to foster the reader’s belief.

The question then becomes, who were the readers. Some have argued that John was the great evangelist because he sought to foster belief in those who were unbelievers. Yet others point out that this final thought from John is actually in the aorist tense and is rather directed at those who already believe. They argue that John is writing so that those who are believing would continue doing so, reminiscent of the discussion on abiding in Jesus as the vine and branches.[[18]](#footnote-17) The argument for both of these cases is nuanced, and it’s possible that John is even writing for both purposes of belief: initial conversion and continuation of belief. John also models his book with a number of very Jewish elements, most notably his centering of many portions of Jesus’s signs with the various feasts of Judaism (Passover, Tabernacles, and Hanukkah). Yet John also zooms in with much more detail on individual narratives to explain various elements, seemingly with Gentile readers in mind.[[19]](#footnote-18)

General belief, then, seems to be the focus of John, as the book tends to carry both themes that would encourage believers, as well as themes which would help bring unbelievers to faith. Beyond standard belief, it also appears as though John had some sort of functionality in mind when writing his work, as his work is very distinct from the synoptic gospels.[[20]](#footnote-19) Assuming John is not in priority, which is the assumption of the vast majority of biblical scholars, John would have been writing after the formation of the other gospels, and almost certainly with a knowledge of them. If that is the case, John’s deviation in his story selections and deeper explanations seem to indicate that John purposed his account to serve a purpose which was unique in comparison to the other gospels, purposely avoiding the content present in the other gospels. Assuming that John authored both the gospel and the book of Revelation, it is possible that combatting the Nicolaitans referenced twice in Revelation, or some gnostic sect, is what is in view with the book of John. Considering the gospel’s emphasis on the flesh of the Word at the beginning of the gospel, and the ability to know apart from a secret knowledge as expressed at the very end of John, it is quite possible that John is teaching to counter gnosticism. Likewise, the phrase “sin no more” which John records from the lips of Jesus twice (chapters 5 and 8, though 8 may have been added after John), is only found in John. This may be an added emphasis to counter the licentious teaching of the Nicolatians.

In summary, there is much ambiguity in regard to the authorship, date, and audience/purpose of John. At the same time, there are some fairly narrow parameters within which John is framed. The gospel was likely written by the apostle John himself, or it was an oral tradition that was codified by a Johannine community familiar with his teachings. Early attestation by those who knew John’s direct disciples gives us confidence that John is likely the original author, though if he wasn’t, we still have confidence that it is his framing transmitted to us in the gospel. The purpose of the gospel is to foster belief, which may have just been a general goal, but also makes sense in the framing of early heresies present during the time that John was likely written.

# **Literary** **Analysis**

According to Keener, “Much of the speech material of the Fourth Gospel appears in controversy narratives.”[[21]](#footnote-20) John, however, focuses on mostly different narratives than his synoptic counterparts, and he tends to go into much greater detail about each event. Furthermore, John seems to situate many of these controversy narratives in the first half of his book, a portion commonly labeled as “The Book of Signs,” from 1:19-12:50. In this portion of the book, John focuses on 6-7 signs, depending on what one counts as a sign. This portion of the work leads up to the second half of the book which is known as “The Book of Glory,” from 13:1-20:31.[[22]](#footnote-21)

The discourse unit in view for this paper, John 10:22-42, is situated near the end of “The Book of Signs.” Not only is this unit understood better in the context of Jesus giving signs for the glory he will reveal in the latter half of John’s gospel, it is also best understood in the context of Jewish feasts and celebrations. There are seven feasts in the book of John: Passover (2:23, 6:4, & 11:55), Purim (5:1, 17), Booths (7:2), The Great Day (7:37), and Dedication (10:22). Not only does John make use of feast days to teach about Jesus, but all of the feast days are contained within the first half of John’s gospel - in the Book of Signs. In order to understand the discourse unit that is in view, then, it is helpful not only to recognize that John is intending to convey signs unto belief for readers, but also to see that John has been using feast days to frame these signs.

We can specifically see how John’s literary framing around feasts presents itself in John 6 and John 7-8. At the first feast, Passover, Jesus presents himself as the bread of life, and in the second, the feast of Tabernacles, Jesus presents himself as the living water. Both of these symbolisms aligned with the themes of the respective feasts. While these are the most clear examples of alignment, understanding that such symbolism exists is helpful for us to be aware of as we keep our eyes open for this potential here in John 10.[[23]](#footnote-22)

# Textual Analysis

A number of variant readings exist for the discourse unit currently under review, but for the vast majority of those, there aren’t significant implications for one reading over another. The verse with the most significant implications for variant readings comes from John 10:29. According to Brown, there are five variant readings, but only two of which ought to reasonably be considered: “My Father, who has given (them) to me, is greater than all,” or “As for my Father, what He has given to me is greater than all.” The implications are significant for determining the greater which is in view, the Father, or what the Father has given.[[24]](#footnote-23) Bruce Metzger’s commentary acknowledges that this is a uniquely difficult text to parse out given the information we have. The committee labeled this variant with a “{D}” and noted that, “the letter {D}, which occurs only rarely, indicates that the Committee had great difficulty in arriving at a decision. In fact, among the {D} decisions sometimes none of the variant readings commended itself as original, and therefore the only recourse was to print the least unsatisfactory reading.”[[25]](#footnote-24)

A number of solutions are proposed in solving the issue of variance. One of the solutions is to look at early understandings of this text by the early church. When going that route, we get attestations from men such as Ambrose and Augustine which make it appear that “that the reading ὁ πατήρ μου ὃ δέδωκέν μοι πάντων μεῖζόν ἐστιν, because of the unexpected sequence of neuter relative pronoun after ὁ πατήρ μου…best explains the origin of the other readings.” Yet others feel as though going this route causes a reading which doesn’t fit as well with the theme of the text.[[26]](#footnote-25)

Others, like Whittaker, have taken a different route, arguing that a scribal change likely came about because the original was awkwardly worded, and therefore a change was viewed as the correction of a mistake. Multiple commentators noted that the original manuscript is unlikely to be one with agreement, because it doesn’t make sense for so many variations to arise from an originally correct form of grammar, but rather, a multiplicity of variations would arise from a form which scribes are seeking to correct. That leads Whittaker to think that the original reading would be a reading that had awkward grammar. Pursuing this hypothesis, Whittaker points out that some of the phrasing may have arisen from John’s insertion of a well-known, Hellenistic Jewish liturgical phrase, into a Christo-centric context.[[27]](#footnote-26)

As a simple, non-liturgical example in English usage, we could look at the phrase “Thar she blows,” a common sailing expression used when a whale was spotted, and made famous by Melville’s “Moby Dick.” However, this phrase can today be used when any item of interest is spotted or comes on the horizon. If, for example, I attended an autograph day at my local sport’s stadium and saw the team’s 2-3 busses enter my view, I could say “Thar she blows!” This phrase would be wrong in a number of senses. First, “she” is feminine whereas the team would be composed of all males. Second, “she” is singular, while the team is composed of many players traveling in a number of vehicles. Third, “thar” is not a real word. And fourth, the phrase makes no sense because nothing is blowing. Yet because “thar she blows” is a known formula, I can apply it to a masculine, plural object which has no relationship to a whale blowing from its spout. Whittaker is essentially arguing that such a formula helps make sense of an original text that seems grammatically awkward, and which scribes would then seek to resolve a perceived error. Whittaker even gives example of where this formula can be found in ancient literature.

Besides the variance present in verse 29, one other possible variant of significance arises in John 10:38. Brown notes “though you still put no faith,” in the Codex Bezae and the Latin read, “though you do not wish to put faith.” While Brown doesn’t think that this variant is the best attested, it is nevertheless a variant to note. Part of this confusion arises as a result of the seemingly “pleonastic” use of γνῶτε and γινώσκητε right next to each other. However, it is helpful to note that the first term is in the aorist tense, while the other is in the present. It seems, then, that this is less a redundancy than some kind of nuance the author wishes to convey.

# Lexical Analysis

There are two terms or phrases in the discourse unit which are particularly important to know prior to evaluating the unit. First, there is a phrase in John 10:24 which the NIV translates as “How long will you keep us in suspense?”[[28]](#footnote-27) Most English versions translate this phrase similarly. However, a literal translation of the Greek would render something more like, “how long will you take away our life/soul?” Brown notes this Greek idiom and says, “the use of this expression for suspense is not well attested; perhaps it means, as in modern Greek, ‘annoy, bother.’ [[29]](#footnote-28) Those are two readings with a minor nuance, yet a significant one. It seems that the Jews were either asking Jesus to reveal whether or not he was the messiah, out of a sense of longing for him to be the one, or it was a declaration of anger and frustration at Jesus. Were the Jews skeptical, but hopeful that Jesus would save Israel, or were they completely set against Jesus already?

On the one hand, it seems more apparent that the Jews are asking Jesus a question, because this idiom is followed up by inquiring about whether Jesus is the Messiah or not. On the other hand, The Jews have tried to kill Jesus several times already, and they don’t seem to have shown much interest in Jesus being a viable Messiah.

The second term that is unique in this discourse unit are the words “ἐγκαίνια” and “ἡγίασεν.” While the words are not uncommon in the Bible, their relation to one another is important. Brown notes that, “hagiazein, ‘to consecrate, sanctify,’ is used in LXX of Num 7:1 to describe Moses’ consecration of the Tabernacle, whereas enkainizein is used in Num 7:10–11 for the dedication of the altar. The two are synonyms. Numbers 7 was a synagogue reading for the feast of Dedication”[[30]](#footnote-29) So it’s possible to view these terms as being synonymous with one another, as Brown does.

However, how one views these terms contributes to the plausibility of an argument made by some that one of the themes here in our discourse unit is related to Jesus becoming a replacement for the temple. Up to this point, John has already shown us that Jesus has become the bread during the Passover and the water during Tabernacles. If those themes hold, then it makes sense that John would be declaring that Jesus is replacing the temple during the Feast of Dedication to commemorate the consecration of the temple after the Maccabees reclaimed it. If one views the two consecration terms as having distinct usages, however, then this argument becomes less plausible. So understanding this theme of consecration and the terms involved could shape how one interprets all that John is trying to convey in this discourse unit.

While the aforementioned terms and phrases are the most important to parse out, there is one other term which I think should be noted because it plays beautifully with John’s literary flare. In verse 39, the NIV says that Jesus escaped their “grasp,” and many other versions have something similar, or use terms like “clutches.” That certainly makes the point John was trying to make on the surface, but it loses some of the connection with the rest of the text, because Jesus used the exact same term, “χειρὸς,” in verse 29 when he said that nobody could snatch his sheep out of his Father’s “χειρὸς.” The word is also one which will arise in an extended reading of Psalm 82 from which Jesus quotes. This seems like a clear set up for a play on words and for connected imagery.

# Syntactical Analysis

Two significant syntactical considerations exist in the currently identified discourse unit. The first has already been addressed previously under the textual analysis section, but it will be worthwhile going over it again here. In verse 29, we have at least five variants, which is a pretty significant amount of variance for one small segment of a verse.[[31]](#footnote-30) Part of the proposed reason for such variance is due to the syntactical awkwardness of the verse. While no definitive solution to the verse has been presented, it does seem as though the original was likely non-conforming to syntactical norms, which is why there have been so many variations in an attempt to correct a perceived mistake. It is frustrating to not have a firmer grasp of a definitive answer, yet understanding how syntactical norms work while simultaneously holding to inerrancy actually give us some measure of confidence in ruling out certain variations, while simultaneously looking for creative solutions and hypotheses, as those like Whittaker has done.[[32]](#footnote-31)

The other syntactical issue worth noting in this discourse unit can be seen in John 10:30. In verse 30, Jesus says, “I and the Father are one.” Both of these individuals are defined in the masculine sense. However, the word for “one” here is “ἕν,” which is a neuter term. This is not a distinction we get in English, so it’s particularly important to point out. Many commentators have given reasons for why Jesus used a neuter term to describe two entities who are masculine. D.A. Carson says, “The word for ‘one’ is the neuter hen, not the masculine heis: Jesus and his Father are not one person, as the masculine would suggest, for then the distinction between Jesus and God already introduced in 1:1b would be obliterated, and John could not refer to Jesus praying to his Father, being commissioned by and obedient to his Father, and so on. Rather, Jesus and his Father are perfectly one in action, in what they do: what Jesus does, the Father does, and vice versa.”[[33]](#footnote-32) Similarly, John Calvin argues that, “The ancients made a wrong use of this passage to prove that Christ is (ὁμοούσιος) of the same essence with the Father. For Christ does not argue about the unity of substance, but about the agreement which he has with the Father, so that whatever is done by Christ will be confirmed by the power of his Father.”[[34]](#footnote-33)

Recognizing this nuance present in John 10:30 can be a very valuable insight, as it continues a theme John has been parsing out over the last few chapters. Only two chapters ago Jesus said “Before Abraham was born, I Am,” essentially declaring himself God. The Jewish response was to attempt to stone Jesus. We notice that the immediate response to Jesus’s “we are one” statement is for the Jews to “again” pick up stones to kill Jesus. But what that oneness expressly means is up for debate, as many exegetes continue to ponder over the lack of agreement between the entities and pronouns represented in John 10:30.

# Rhetorical Analysis

The particular discourse unit of John can be best understood rhetorically if we break it down into two levels, and beginning with the simplest. On the small-scale, the book of John uses one of my favorite literary devices, the double meaning. Brown provides a number of these examples when he writes, “The Gospel often plays on the double meanings of words, whether in Aramaic or Greek, for example: in 3:3 ff. on anōthen as ‘from above’ and ‘again’; in 4:10–11 on the twofold meaning ‘living’ and ‘flowing’ to describe the water; in 7:8 on the ambiguity of ‘going up’ (to Jerusalem or to the Father?).”[[35]](#footnote-34) I have already mentioned each of these instances, but it’s important to identify these as rhetorical examples.

First, I explored earlier how a significant discussion revolves around the use of terms for the Feast of Dedication and for the consecration of Jesus. The two are certainly connected thematically, but what John meant by making such a connection is up in the air. Had he wanted to make a stronger connection which showed that Jesus replaced the temple, it seems he would have used the same word in both places, though that is mere conjecture.

In the same vein, John also hits on the notion of “hand” twice. He does so once in reference to his father’s hand being secured, with no life being stolen from it, and once in reference to escaping from the hand of the Jews with his life in tact.

Finally, the idiom used by the Jews, “how long will you take away our life,” seems to be answered by Jesus immediately following the question. While the Jews mean to ask whether or not Jesus is the Messiah, their question also has a literal meaning infused with two questions.

| Metaphorical Question | 1. Will you keep us waiting? Tell us if you are the Messiah!
 |
| --- | --- |
| Literal Question | 1. Will you take our lives/give us life?
2. How long will you take/give us life?
 |

Jesus goes on to declare that he gives life (1,2), this life is eternal in duration and they will never perish (3). Nobody can take this life (2), and Jesus is one with the Father (1). His whole monologue in verses 25-30 continues to circle around and around emphasizing the answer to all three of these questions - using terminology and concepts related to the literal question to frame his response, while simultaneously answering the heart of the metaphorical question the Jews were asking.

I love the beauty of even this simple layer of John’s rhetorical skill, but it gets even better. A second layer to John’s rhetorical flare is to situate this story of the Feast of Dedication into a larger theme which appears to span at least three chapters (10-12). John sets the stage by declaring that the event he is going to talk about starting in verse 22 is happening during the Feast of Dedication. This is obviously an emotionally charged time of year for the Jews who are joyfully celebrating a previous victory over Gentile oppressors, while simultaneously petitioning God to save them from their new Gentile oppressors. The words of 2 Maccabees 10:4 likely rang in their ears, “they fell prostrate before the Lord with entreaties that they might never again incur such disasters, but that, if ever they should sin, he would chasten them with forbearance, instead of handing them over to blasphemous and barbarous pagans.”[[36]](#footnote-35) The Jews always wanted freedom from the Gentiles, but they especially felt that this time of year.

The Jews all surrounded Jesus - a term often used with the surrounding of a city by armies (e.g. Jerusalem and Jericho), or a word used for Jonah being engulfed by the sea. They were passionately petitioning Jesus to declare his intentions because they felt as though their life was draining from them. And all of this was being done almost certainly in the midst of Gentiles and outcasts, as John declares they were standing under Solomon’s Portico which was connected to the Court of the Gentiles and open to everyone. Yet only 6 verses earlier, in John 10:16, Jesus declared that he had other sheep which weren’t of this sheep pen. Now, in our discourse unit, Jesus tells the Jewish hearers that they aren’t of his sheep! Some from the other sheep pen are his sheep, but so also, some of the Jews aren’t! And to top it all off, “I and the Father are one,” which may mean that Jesus is one in substance with the Father, but as Carson and Calvin noted, it likely has a primary meaning of the Father and Jesus being of one will in this. For Jesus to declare all of these things to the Jews, especially at this patriotic time of year, was infuriating.

When the Jews pick up stones to kill Jesus, Jesus invokes another rhetorical device in his implementation of the Old Testament. Jesus cites Psalm 82. Now, how much of the Psalm Jesus quotes or how much he intends for his listeners to reflect upon isn’t known, as John only records a short phrase. However, we can see a number of parallels between Psalm 82 and some of the main ideas we’ve identified so far in this discourse unit, and some we haven’t.

 1 God presides in the great **assembly**;

 he renders judgment among the “gods”:

 2 “How long will you defend the unjust

 and show partiality to the wicked?

 3 Defend the weak and the fatherless;

 uphold the cause of the poor and the oppressed.

 4 Rescue the weak and the needy;

 **deliver them** from the **hand** of the wicked.

 5 “The ‘gods’ **know [LXX ἔγνωσαν]** nothing, they **understand [LXX συνῆκαν]** nothing.

 They walk about in **darkness**;

 all the foundations of the earth are shaken.

 6 “I said, ‘**You are “gods**”;

 you are all **sons of the Most High**.’

 7 But **you will die** like mere mortals;

 you will fall like every other ruler.”

 8 Rise up, O God, judge the earth,

 for **all the nations** are your inheritance.[[37]](#footnote-36)

There is much overlap between the themes in Psalm 82 and those in John 10. I’ve highlighted the ones which stand out the most. We can see the idea of being gathered in an assembly (synagogue and temple) and deliverance specifically from the *hand* of the wicked. We see the theme of darkness or an inability to see. Sonship is also present, as is the notion of death, or life being taken away. And we also see that Psalm 82 concludes with all the nations being God’s inheritance, not just Israel.

On a side note, I think it’s extremely interesting that Psalm 82:5 is translated as ‘know and understand,’ which Brown claimed was a conundrum and a seemingly pleonastic usage at the end of John 10 in Greek. Brannan and Loken, for example, say the following.in regard to John 10:38: “A significant combination of early manuscripts has ‘know and understand,’ but a few early manuscripts and related later witnesses have ‘know and believe.’ The word ‘believe’ occurs in the context twice before the variation unit, and is similar to the word “understand” in the Greek, so a scribe could have confused the two. Alternately, ‘know and understand’ are two forms of the same word in Greek, and the second instance may have confused “understand” for ‘believe.’[[38]](#footnote-37) Interestingly, Psalm 82’s quote by Jesus may help to explain why John put in this seeming redundancy of “know and understand,” in order to mimic the structure of Psalm 82 and clue readers into a larger parallel than just the “you are gods” segment. What still strikes me as curious about this explanation, however, is that Psalm 82 in the LXX uses two different Greek words for “know” and “understand:” ἔγνωσαν and συνῆκαν. Why didn’t John use two different forms if it was his intent to mimic Psalm 82? Going even further down the rabbit hole, a word search indicates that John actually never uses “συνῆκαν,” not even once in his gospel. Γινώσκητε’s root, however, John uses 34 times, more than twice as much as any other book of the Bible, with the exception of I John, which uses the root a stunning 23 times in its short five chapters. While I don’t have any grand conclusions to draw from all this, this information seems like a very fruitful place to dig into for future research (Psalm 82’s connection to John 10, authorship of John and I John due to linguistic similarities, John’s use of γινώσκητε and avoidance of συνῆκαν, etc).

As you can see from Jesus’s use of Psalm 82, there is a lot we can pull out of the passage and run with. But I want to hone in on two major ideas to highlight here. First, in the immediate context of John 10, Jesus has been dealing a lot with the topic of life and death. At the beginning of John 10 Jesus discusses the life of the sheep and the protection by the shepherd of that life from destruction, and then he moves on into discussing the laying down of his own life and the taking of it back up again. The discussion then moves into the Jewish idiom, “how long will you take away our life,” followed by Jesus declaring that he gives life.

Psalm 82 is situated in the midst of this discussion, and this notion that “you are gods” fits right into the theme of life. Neyrey makes the case that the Jews of Jesus’s day had four basic midrashic understandings available to them in regard to the identity of the “gods” from Psalm 82: angels, Melchizadek, judges, and Israel. Neyrey argues that the best and most common understanding of Jews at the time was that the gods in Psalm 82 referred to Israel, and more specifically, Israel receiving the law at Sinai. It’s easy to see how this is a plausible interpretation, as Psalm 82 references the assembly, judgment, justice, deliverance, the foundations being shaken, and the people walking about in darkness. These are all reminiscent of Sinai. The Jews viewed Sinai as a new creation, or a new endowment of God’s image that had been lost in the fall. Israel was, at Sinai, standing in front of the judge who was giving them the just law to bring them out of darkness, having just been delivered from the empire of Egypt, and now, with the law, delivered from a life walking in sin. Israel, at Sinai, could now image God again and walk in holiness, and this holiness was connected with life. So God’s law, which was given to Israel, enabled life. In this sense, the nation and the law, or ethnicity, holiness, and life, were often tied together.[[39]](#footnote-38)

Whether this midrashic interpretation of Psalm 82 is correct or not, it certainly seems like the image Jesus is running with in his reference to Psalm 82. For right after invoking the Psalm Jesus says, “If he called them ‘gods,’ to whom the word of God came…” This sounds very much like a reference to receiving the law at Sinai, when the word of God was given to Israel. Neyrey goes on to argue in much finer detail about the perceived connection between holiness and life, but for our purposes, I want to draw out two concepts pertinent to this paper.[[40]](#footnote-39)

 First, Neyrey argues that the logic of being called “gods” in Psalm 82 is specific and not general. Humans in general are not called “gods,” but rather a specific group of people - a group Jesus identifies as those to whom the word of God came. This group was set apart by God, unto holiness and life, and therefore called “gods.” Second, this special consecration helps to explain a theme we pointed out earlier in the parallel of the feast of dedication/consecration (v.22), and Jesus’s consecration (v.36). We can see how Jesus may be making the argument that Israel’s consecration allowed them to be called gods so long as they maintained their holiness, and likewise, Jesus has been set apart and has a right to be called the Son of God, so long as he maintains the holiness with which/for which he was set apart. This, in turn, helps to explain why Jesus here points the Jews to judge him by his works and see that he has not invalidated his call.

Beyond the consecration theme drawn out in Psalm 82, I also think it’s significant that Psalm 82 focuses so much on nations. If Jesus is indeed responding to a midrash that focuses on Israel as a nation, then Psalm 82 not only culminates with God inheriting the nations, but also has the nation of Israel - and her loss of life - in view throughout. This then fits very snugly in our discourse unit’s theme centered around Hanukkah, as well as the broader unit of John 10-12 and its touching on the ideas of nations, and the nation being taken away at the end of John 11. John 10 shows Jesus declaring that he has sheep from other pens, being confronted by Jews celebrating Hanukkah with seemingly impassioned zeal, and now Jesus quotes a Psalm about God’s inheritance of the nations. This theme becomes more certain as we read to the end of chapter 11 and discover that in verses 47-50, the reason giving for killing Jesus is the preservation of Israel’s land and temple.

47 Then the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the Sanhedrin.“What are we accomplishing?” they asked. “Here is this man performing any signs. 48 If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and then the **Romans will come and take away both our temple and our nation.**”49 Then one of them, named Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, spoke up, “You know nothing at all! 50 You do not realize that it is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish.”

This rationale for killing Jesus is reminiscent of what we saw in II Maccabees, where the petition to God was to never again allow the Gentiles to take the nation and the temple. Finally, when Jesus enters Jerusalem in chapter 12, we see a scene reminiscent of what’s recorded in I Maccabees 13:51 and II Maccabees 10:7, where Jesus, the Messiah, is greeted with the waving of palm branches just as the messianic Maccabees were. This theme of two nations - two sheep pens - seems to at least be a sub-theme present in the structure of John 10-12, though that theme may extend beyond those bounds upon further research.

# Structural Analysis

While John’s book is a beautiful implementation of rhetorical devices and sub-structures, like the theme of nation, John also places the book within a larger structure we already referenced at the beginning of this work. On the largest scale, we can break the book down into a book of signs and a book of glory, and then within each of those sections we can break the book down further. As John 10 resides in the first book, it would be helpful to explore this in more detail, but we’ll also want to lead into the structure of the second book since John 10 is on the cusp of the transition.

The book of signs is filled with 6-7 signs or miracles to which John attests. These are carefully selected miracles, and all are given in relatively significant detail compared to how other gospels tend to present events. Throughout the book of signs, not only are we shown a number of miracles, but we are also given the backdrop of seven separate feasts, though we see three of these represented in different passover events. Many believe that John pulls out themes from each event, as mentioned earlier, like the bread of life at Passover or the living water at Tabernacles.

With that tendency in view, John 10 is set at the beginning of one of the seven feasts in the book of signs - the feast of Hannukah (or the feast of lights). While John 10 doesn’t explicitly reference any symbolic concepts as did some of the other feasts, the theme of nation and outsiders is still present. And if we look a little more broadly to the setup for John 10 as well as what follows, we can see concepts of blindness and darkness being present. Also, in John 10 itself we see references to not understanding, which is often depicted as darkness elsewhere, and which is explicitly referenced in Psalm 82 if an extended reading if one thinks that is warranted from Jesus’s reference.

# Theological Analysis

Each section of the Bible is filled with a plethora of possible applications, and this discourse unit from John 10 is no different. But there are two particular applications I think are especially potent and pertinent for where our society is today.

First, I think the theme of nationalism and other is vital for U.S. Christians to understand. It’s easy to view one’s nation, one’s party, or one’s denomination in Messianic terms. While most Christians would never admit they are looking for alternative saviors in nationalism, the attitudes and actions often betray this idolatry. I grew up in a fundamentalist area and I remember when I was a teenager, getting a shirt that said, “Welcome to America, now speak English!” I thought it was funny and I agreed with the sentiment at the time. But I’ll never forget when I was teaching in Mexico City my first year out of college, and I walked into a Mexican market to order something in broken Spanish, and the owner apologized to me profusely for not speaking English. I was actually an illegal immigrant in Mexico (working when I shouldn’t have been) who didn’t speak good Spanish, and they apologized to me for not speaking English!

Needless to say, my worldview has changed as a result of my life experiences, but also as a result of my theological growth. I think there is a beauty to this passage that doesn’t simply undermine the nationalist position, but broadens what we view as our nation. Why would the Jews want to continue clinging to their vision of life? I mean, what a small life! Israel is a small sheep pen! Jesus expands the vision and expands the pen, but he also expands the life. He gives abundant and eternal life, not some fleeting life of a nation that comes and goes with the inclinations of leaders and tyrants.

But beyond the call for hearers to change their vision, to see - to know and understand - Jesus provides us with the security from which to move forward. Yes, it’s hard to put down our visions of what life should be, but Jesus guarantees us that it’s only in his hands that our lives are secure. This security ought to give us a boldness to move out into the world.

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