CONTENTS

Introduction

EVERY SPRING, Christians around the world gather to celebrate Easter. Music of various kinds accompanies the observance of Easter as well as the somber services of the preceding Holy Week. But the performance of one piece always seems to invite controversy: Johann Sebastian Bach's *St. John Passion*, a choral and orchestral work first performed on Good Friday, April 7, 1724. Take, for example, the Cleveland Orchestra's performance of Bach's *St. John Passion* in the spring of 2017 or, that same spring, five performances of the work staged in New York City by different orchestras and choral groups. Each of these performances was accompanied by debate among community members: Should the piece continue to be performed? Is it ethical to perform it? To listen to it? Conductors now frequently hold panel discussions to explain the work and to counter opposition. And yet performances of the *St. John Passion* continue to be contentious.

At stake in the controversy about Bach's *St. John Passion* is not the music per se, which is often regarded as one of the pinnacles of Bach's compositional career. Rather, the controversies stem in large part from the text of the choral work—in particular, the passages from the Gospel of John that Bach chose to

incorporate into the choral work—and the manner in which Bach's music heightened the problematic text. Bach used the German translation of the Gospel of John—the translation done by Martin Luther during the sixteenth-century Reformation—and its narratives of the trial and death of Jesus. It is in this translation of the Gospel, as well as in its Greek original, that we can locate the heart of the controversy, for it is in the Gospel of John that "the Jews" "cry out" ever more urgently "crucify, crucify him." Identifying the crowds calling for Jesus's execution specifically as "the Jews" is distinctive to this Gospel and audiences, performers, and critics alike have long questioned whether the apparent antisemitism in the *St. John Passion* should make us rethink performances of the work.

Such debates illustrate just one of the many legacies not of Bach, Luther specifically, or the history of antisemitism, but of the Gospel of John itself. Likely written sometime in the last decade of the first century, perhaps around 95 CE, the Gospel of John is unique among all of the canonical and noncanonical Gospels. John's differences from the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) are striking: it begins not with the birth narrative, but with a poetic reinvention of the beginnings of the Book of Genesis, one that places Jesus as logos, the Word, in the beginning of creation. In this Gospel, Jesus does not teach in parables; he teaches openly about his identity (e.g., "I am the light of the world"); his healings are not kept secret, but rather presented as open signs of his identity. This Gospel alone contains the well-known stories of the water changed into wine in Cana, the raising of Lazarus, the woman taken in adultery, and many others; images such as Jesus as the good shepherd, the "Lamb of God," the "word made flesh"—these are unique to John. It is in this Gospel that we meet, too, the disciple "whom Jesus loved"—the character of the never-named, mysterious

"beloved disciple" who is said to have recorded the words found in this Gospel. And it is in the Gospel of John that "the Jews"—as a collective—are depicted in strident opposition to Jesus. Here they are unequivocally responsible for Jesus's execution.

It is in part due to these distinctive features that the Gospel of John has had such a long and paradoxical biography. Throughout Christian history, the Gospel of John has been the most "beloved" of all the Gospels—a Gospel highly regarded for its "soaring," "glorious," and "spiritual" qualities. Its language, stories, and images lie at the forefront of late ancient Christological controversies, divisions between Eastern and Western Christianity, the Crusades and Reformation, and modern evangelical movements. The first biblical commentary written by a Christian was one written on the Gospel of John; among the very earliest manuscripts of Christian texts is a second-century fragment of the Gospel of John; John was a centerpiece for Augustine's works of theology and biblical interpretation; Johannine ideas about the "word made flesh" and "signs" became important to the debates about icons and the use of images in the early Middle Ages; crusaders drew upon passages from John to justify their conquests of Jerusalem; Protestant reformers privileged the Gospel of John above other Gospels; and so on. This is without a doubt the Christian Gospel with the greatest impact throughout history—and this history can be charted by its beloved and benighted status. It is a contentious history.

Perhaps it was inevitable that a Gospel animated by paradox and stark oppositions would have a thwarted afterlife: light and dark, spirit and flesh, those from above and those below, of the world and not of the world, believers and nonbelievers, insiders and outsiders, truth knowers and the ignorant, the Jews and Jesus's followers, the saved and sinners, the living and the

dead—the striking distinctions and dualistic language running throughout this Gospel have born richly dynamic and deeply problematic reverberations. The history of the Gospel of John takes us to the heights of Christian theology and the cultivation of the very crux of Christian identity while simultaneously drawing our attention to the complex and challenging impact the Gospel has had in religious history and on the global stage.

In this book, I tell the story of this complex history not to judge the Gospel or the merits of various theological views on the Gospel, but to understand how and why the Gospel of John has had a such an important legacy. In the coming chapters, we will begin with the earliest history of the Gospel—its origins in the first century, questions about its author(s) and first readers, the transmission and dissemination of the Gospel as a book. We will examine how the stories from the Gospel have been rendered in art and film, as well as in music; how John's unique stories and language have intersected with major developments in Christian history like the medieval Crusades, the Protestant Reformation, and modern evangelical movements. My goal is to the tell the story of the book itself, while also attending to the many ways that the legacy of this gospel exceeds its existence as a book. It is important to keep in mind that when the Gospel of John was written and indeed throughout much of history, the vast majority of people could not read or write, so their encounters with the text was through listening to it read or, probably more frequently, hearing the stories found in the Gospel told and retold in predominantly oral societies.

Throughout this book, I will variously call this Gospel the Fourth Gospel, because of its placement in the New Testament following the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. At times, for simplicity, I will call it John, but at the outset I should emphasize that the Gospel was written anonymously and the

title and tradition associating it with Jesus's disciple John, the son of Zebedee, emerged after its composition. We will look more closely at the question of authorship, but I will continue to emphasize how much we do not know about the person or persons who wrote the book. Another term will appear quite frequently in the following chapters, and that is the term "Johannine," a term used by scholars to identify the ideology and literary characteristics of the Gospel of John and the three canonical epistles of John (1, 2, and 3 John). Encountering this Gospel as a book is only one way to think of its history; the Gospel of John has had a legacy that goes well beyond its book form: everything from the earliest paintings of stories from the Gospel to contemporary billboards, film, and music show us that this Gospel has had numerous and varied afterlives.

For now, the place to begin is by setting the historical stage for the story of the Fourth Gospel.

Setting the Stage

Why was the Gospel of John originally written in Greek? This might seem odd, given that Jesus's native language was Aramaic. There is a simple answer: the conquests of Alexander, King of Macedon, who, in the fourth century BCE, began a military campaign throughout the eastern Mediterranean region, down into Egypt, and then on eastward through to what is modern-day Iraq, Iran, and northern India. Much has been written about Alexander—frequently called Alexander the Great—but for our purposes a few key details are important. First, in the wake of his conquests, the gradual but nearly complete transformation of the eastern Mediterranean regions (and beyond) into a conglomeration of Greek city-states and the spread of Greek language and culture was the beginning of what we can call the

Hellenistic period in Greek and Roman history. It is difficult to overestimate the significance of the spread of Hellenism for the later development of Christianity: all of the texts contained in the New Testament—indeed, all Christian texts that we have from the earliest period—were written in Greek, because by the first century CE, Greek had become the lingua franca throughout the Mediterranean and Near Eastern world. Paul wrote in Greek, the early Christian Gospels were written in Greek, the earliest Church Fathers wrote in Greek, and so forth.

Alongside the gradual change to Greek language as the dominant spoken and literary language came Hellenistic philosophical, religious, and cultural ideas about the pantheon of the Greek gods, sacrificial rituals that were conducted in Greek temples to please these gods, the philosophical writings of Aristotle and Plato, Greek art and music—all of these had enormous impact on the history of Christian origins. It is important, too, to understand that the spread of Hellenism did not wipe out indigenous religions and cultures: we can think of the period as a kind of historical layering or a meshwork of different cultures that came together, which strictly speaking ended with the Roman conquests of the Near East in the first century CE, although the effects of Alexander's conquests continued to shape a Near East now overlaid with Roman ideas and cultures.

For our purposes, beyond the spread of Greek language and culture, one of the most important developments during the period was Hellenism's impact on the history of Judaism. Judaism, as a religion, was born out of ancient Near Eastern Israelite religion—religious practices, ideas, and sacred texts that stretched back into the second millennium BCE. Israelite religion was focused on place—in particular, the regions around Jerusalem, where King Solomon's Temple was built in the tenth

century BCE—and the rituals associated with the annual religious-agricultural festivals. Like ancient Near Eastern religions (and Greek and Roman religions), Israelite religious practice included sacrificial rituals. But there were two key ways in which it differed from other ancient Near Eastern and later Greek religions. First, it was monotheistic or, more precisely, henotheistic: the Israelites worshiped one high God, though they acknowledged the existence of other gods. Second, Israelite religion and subsequent Judaism had sacred scriptures—the Torah. These scriptures were written in Hebrew (and Aramaic) and they tell the story of the history of the Israelites from the creation of the world down to the destruction of the Solomonic Temple by the Babylonians in 586 BCE—an event with tremendous significance for the development of Judaism. The Babylonians exiled many of the residents of Jerusalem and the surrounding area to Babylonia, sparking what we call the diaspora, the spread of Judaism around the Mediterranean and Near East; it had begun earlier, of course, but the Babylonian conquest and exile accelerated and expanded Jewish diaspora.

The scriptures also told the story of the reconstruction of the Jerusalem Temple under the Persians and a return of some of the exiles. This new Jerusalem Temple, completed in the late sixth century BCE, is what scholars call the Second Temple and after extensive renovations by King Herod centuries later it was the Temple that was standing in Jesus's day . The sacrificial rituals in the Temple and the sacred books of Moses (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy), the prophets (like Isaiah and Jeremiah and many others), and an assortment of other writings, such as the book of Psalms—these were important for Jewish identity.

Much of what I have described here predates Alexander the Great: conquest and exile had already shaped Judaism by the time of Alexander. But what happens to Judaism in the wake of

Alexander's conquests is dramatic: communities of Jews, now residing throughout the Near East, gradually began adopting the Greek language; eventually they translated the Hebrew scriptures into Greek, and they began worshipping in synagogues, which were not places of sacrificial rituals like the Temple in Jerusalem, but rather places for prayer and study and for communal gatherings. The word itself, "synagogue," came from the Greek *synagō*, which meant "to gather together." The origin of synagogues remains somewhat murky: some may have been built prior to Alexander, but our best archaeological evidence for synagogues comes from the Hellenistic period and later. These early synagogues were, as far as we can tell, fairly small structures, with seating around the sides of the building and a Torah niche/cupboard to hold the scrolls of scripture.

For the most part, Jews were permitted to continue practicing their religious rituals like the sacrifices in the Jerusalem Temple and to gather in synagogues in the Hellenistic period. But one of the things we find during this time is that Judaism became increasingly diverse because, in part, Hellenism was viewed differently by different Jewish communities. Some communities seem to have embraced Hellenism fully and used the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible (called the Septuagint) as their Bible. Some Jews attended Greek schools and participated in Greek life, including even religious festivals or the Greek games. Others, however, resisted such changes.[1] It's in the Hellenistic period that we see the development of a variety of Jewish groups: the Pharisees, the teachers of Jewish law and interpreters of scripture; the Sadducees, priests officiating at the Temple sacrifices in Jerusalem; the Essenes, who opposed the Sadducean priests and appear to have left Jerusalem to form a community on the northwest shores of the Dead Sea, to

whom the Dead Sea Scrolls are linked; and later the Zealots, who wanted to take up arms against Roman rule.

These developments happened gradually, but they came to shape Jewish history in significant ways, including during the aftermath of the destruction of the second Jerusalem Temple by the Romans in 70 CE. Sometimes there were Jewish revolts against Greek or Roman rule: in the second century BCE, for example, the Maccabean revolt, and the Jewish revolt of the late 60s CE. One of the fascinating developments within Judaism appears to have its origin during such revolts: an ideology or worldview we call "apocalypticism"—a word that comes from the Greek word *apokalypsis*, which meant "revelation." This is the idea that the world is currently dominated by evil forces and good folks are being oppressed, but the tides will change—there will be a judgment day when evil rulers will be crushed and the devout will be vindicated. Parts of the Book of Daniel, in the Hebrew Bible, were written in the second century BCE and offer us a particularly illuminating example of early Jewish apocalypticism: a vision, a revelation, of beasts rising out of the sea comes to the prophet Daniel, and as he watches he sees "thrones were set in place, and an Ancient One took his throne, his clothing was white as snow, and the hair of his head like pure wool . . . the court sat in judgment, and the books were opened" (Daniel 7: 9–10). Daniel keeps watching the scene unfold: "I saw one," he says, "like a human being, coming with the clouds of heaven . . . to him was given dominion and glory and kingship" (7:13–14). It's important to understand that the phrase "one like a human being" can also be translated "one like a son of man."

The title "son of man" will eventually be used by some of the earliest followers of Jesus, who saw him as the awaited messiah,

the anointed one, the figure who was prophesied by Daniel and others, the one who would rescue the Jewish people from their suffering. Here is why setting this stage becomes so essential to understanding the Fourth Gospel, as well as all of the early Christian Gospels. These texts were written in the first century in a world of Jews, Zoroastrians, Greeks, and Romans—a complex religious and political landscape with a long history of domination and resistance, and, in the case of Judaism, a sacred scripture that explained catastrophic events like exile and the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem. And this history is fundamental to understanding the historical Jesus and his earliest Jewish followers: when we reconstruct the history of Jesus's life and teachings from the sources available, many scholars have argued that he was an apocalyptic Jewish itinerant preacher, and that he gathered followers who shared his sense of a coming judgment day and a new kingdom of God, a new kingdom that would rise up after the evil oppressors had been destroyed.

The reconstruction of the historical Jesus is beyond the scope of our study of the Fourth Gospel; there are many treatments of this period and Jesus's life and teachings.[2] It is also beyond the goals of this book to say whether or not the Fourth Gospel got history right, or whether its story of Jesus is accurate. But I want to signal here something that is important for understanding the Fourth Gospel, which was written after the destruction of the Jewish Temple in 70 CE: we should read the Gospel not for whether it gets history "right" but for what it reveals about the complex time period in which it was written. The fact that it was written in Greek, but uses some Aramaic terms, is important; when the Gospel of John quotes passages from the Hebrew Bible, it does so from the Septuagint, the Greek translation; when it fashions an opposition between Jesus and, say, the Pharisees, it does so from an understanding

of the complexity of Jewish history; and when it softens apocalyptic ideas, it does so from an awareness that the judgment day that Daniel (and Jesus) seem to have predicted had not yet happened.

This brief historical survey will be important in the coming chapters. For now, we need to attend to what we mean by the term "gospel" and how and why some Gospels came to be included in the canon of the New Testament. Then, we'll turn to the many ways that the Gospel of John is distinctive from other ancient Gospels.

What Is a Gospel?

The term "gospel" comes from an Old English word, which was itself a translation of an ancient Greek word, *euaggelion* (with the "gg" pronounced as "ng" in English, like *euangelion*), which meant simply "good news" or a "good report." A friend or relative, for example, might bring you "good news" or a send a "good report." The Greek *euaggelion* is also where we get our terms "evangelist," "evangelical," and "evangelism"; the Gospel writers have long been called the Evangelists, the Protestant Reformers in the sixteenth century were called Evangelicals, and the work of missionary forms of Christianity support evangelism—the spread of the "good news." If we want to get into the weeds with etymology, it might be useful to add that the prefix *eu* in Greek meant "good" and the term *aggelos* (from which we get our English word "angel") meant "message" or "messenger." In its earliest use by Christians, the term *euaggelion* referred to a message—the Christian message, or "good news," about Jesus, his resurrection, and salvation. The term was not necessarily attached to anything written down, such as a text or a book. We have largely lost this meaning in English. When we hear

something called "the gospel truth," for example, it means a belief or message that can be believed and relied upon—something that is true and accurate.

In the second century, the term *euaggelion* comes to be used by Christians to refer to a book—in particular, a book that claims to tell the story of Jesus. The message or gospel of Jesus now becomes the story of Jesus as told in a Gospel. This is how we wind up with our common understanding that a Gospel is a book and, more specifically, a book about the figure Jesus. The form that early Christian Gospels took varied: some were simply a collection of sayings of Jesus with little narrative as we find in the Gospel of Thomas; others told the story of Jesus from his birth through to his execution and resurrection as we find in the Gospels of Luke and Matthew. We might think of a Gospel in this sense as a kind of ancient biography of Jesus, but very few early Christian gospels narrate the story of Jesus's life in the way we might think of a modern biography with, for example, the story of birth, childhood, education, adulthood, and death; the historical context of the individual's life; the influences that led them to become a figure worthy of a biography; and so forth.

We have surprisingly few stories of Jesus as a child in any of the early Christian Gospels—the exceptions here are the story of Jesus in the Temple of Jerusalem when he was twelve years old as found in the Gospel of Luke and the stories of a young Jesus found in the Infancy Gospel of Thomas. We hear very little about Jesus's family and we do not encounter explanations of the historical and contextual influences that led to Jesus's life as a teacher or preacher. These Gospels were not written as neutral accounts of Jesus's life. Instead, early Christian Gospels were invested in persuading their readers—and their listeners—of who Jesus was and the meaning and significance of his life, death, and resurrection. And this is why it is so critical

to understand each Gospel as a distinct rendering of the story of Jesus, a story meant to persuade the reader of Jesus's identity. No two Gospels were exactly the same. Some authors wanted to emphasize Jesus as a Jewish prophet; others portrayed him as a teacher of esoteric and secret wisdom. Some Gospels presented Jesus as a teacher and healer, while others stressed his divinity.

Early Christian writers knew that there were different stories of Jesus circulating. They knew that written Gospels told different stories; that some told the same stories in different ways; and that some outright contradicted one another. The Gospel of Luke actually begins with a disclaimer of sorts: "Since many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed on to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, I too decided, after investigating everything carefully from the very first, to write an orderly account" (Lk 1:1–3).[3] The Gospel of John ends by suggesting that there were "many other things that Jesus did," and all the books in the world could not contain them (Jn 21:25). Each Gospel writer deliberately selected the material to include and shaped the story to convey a particular message.

Attending here to the chronology of Christian origins helps us understand the context of these diverse Gospels. The oral accounts about Jesus's life and teaching first came to be written down some thirty or forty years after his death. It is widely accepted among scholars that the historical Jesus lived from roughly 4 BCE to 29 CE. The social and historical context of Jesus's life was early first-century Palestine, his language was Aramaic, and he was Jewish. These three aspects of Jesus's life—date, context, and language—are critical to remember when we look at the Gospels, all of which were written in Greek, and

almost certainly not in Palestine nor by eyewitnesses of the accounts they tell. Among the Gospels that have survived, the Gospel of Mark is likely the earliest, written sometime between the late 60s or early 70s CE. But Gospels then proliferated: the Gospels of Matthew, Luke, John, Thomas, Peter, and many others began to be written and circulated during the late first century and throughout the second and third centuries.

As we will see, there are important distinctions to be made between the history of the Gospel of John and the Christian traditions about the Gospel. Traditions sprang up around the Mediterranean world about what happened to Jesus's apostles: for example, Christian tradition claims that the apostle James was buried in Spain at Santiago de Compostela Cathedral, Peter and Paul buried in Rome (Peter in St. Peter's Basilica in Vatican City and Paul in the Basilica of St. Paul Outside the Walls), and Thomas was said to have traveled to India and he is now venerated in San Thome Basilica in Chennai. According to the most widespread Christian tradition, the Fourth Gospel was written by one of Jesus's disciples, John, also known as one of the sons of Zebedee. Tradition associated him with Ephesus in Asia Minor and in the fifth or sixth century a basilica was built there to commemorate him. The remains of this basilica, which was constructed around his supposed tomb, along with its baptismal pool, can still be visited today near the town of Selçuk in western Turkey.

We will return to traditions about John's author in chapter 7, which deals with the "beloved disciple" in the Gospel of John, for over time this character came to be identified as John, the son of Zebedee, the author of the Fourth Gospel. Tradition also associated this same "John" as the one who wrote the Book of Revelation, though its style of writing, ideology, and apocalyptic content is quite different from the Gospel of John. For now, it is critical that we distinguish this tradition from the historical

FIGURE 1.1. St. John Basilica with the tomb of St. John in the foreground, Ephesus, Turkey. Credit: Author.

record: even if the Gospel of John had its origins in the oral stories of Jesus's followers, the final writing and editing of the Gospel took place in the very late first century, long after Jesus's followers would have died, and it is written in Greek, not the language that Jesus and his first followers spoke, which was Aramaic.

An Emerging Christian Canon

Given how many Gospels were written by Christians, it is worthwhile asking how only four Gospels made it into the canon of the New Testament, and how and why the Gospel of John came to be one of them. The earliest Christians inherited from their Jewish origins a concept of scripture—sacred and

authoritative texts. The canon of Jewish scriptures consisted of the five books of Moses (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy), prophetic books (e.g., those of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos, Hosea, and others), and a diverse set of other writings, including the book of Psalms and the Song of Solomon. These scriptures were written in Hebrew and subsequently translated into Greek, a translation called the Septuagint, as I've already indicated. One might think that having these scriptures would suffice for early Christians, but as Christianity began to develop increasingly apart from its Jewish origins, Christians turned to some of the earliest texts written by believers in the Jesus movement—texts like the letters of Paul and the various Gospels written in the late first century. Over time, these works came to be understood as scripture—a New Testament—on par with the Jewish scriptures, which Christians now called the Old Testament.

There have been many treatments of the complex process of canonization in early Christianity.[4] For our purposes, it is important simply to note that the formation of a Christian canon of scripture—a Christian Bible—took place over the course of hundreds of years. The Greek word *kanōn* probably derived from an Aramaic word for "reed" and specifically a papyrus reed, usually, that was used for measuring—much like we think of a ruler or measuring stick. Paul, for example, uses the term in some of his letters and there the meaning is a kind of rule, standard, or norm; and, subsequently, it meant more specifically a "rule of faith." But in the fourth century, the term comes to be used by Christians to refer to a collection of Christian writings, the Christian canon of scripture. It is not until the late fourth century, some 350 years after Jesus's life, however, that we find a bishop (Athanasius in Alexandria, Egypt) writing a list of New Testament books that accords with the New Testament today.

The impetus for the closure of a canon of scriptures came in response to a diversity of Christian beliefs and practices. And our only sources for these developments come from the writings of Christians who were concerned about "right belief." Closing a canon of scriptures became, then, one strategy toward unity in the debates over heresy and orthodoxy.

As early as the late second century, a bishop named Irenaeus from what is now southern France wrote the following:

> Matthew also issued a written Gospel among the Hebrews in their own dialect, while Peter and Paul were preaching at Rome, and laying the foundations of the Church. After their departure, Mark, the disciple and interpreter of Peter, did also hand down to us in writing what had been preached by Peter. Luke also, the companion of Paul, recorded in a book the Gospel preached by him. Afterwards, John, the disciple of the Lord, who also had leaned upon His breast, did himself publish a Gospel during his residence at Ephesus in Asia. (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.1)

We will return to Irenaeus in chapter 3, but for now it is worth noting how he identifies the four gospels and emphasizes the importance of these four gospels—no more and no fewer belong in the sacred scriptures, he argues. As he writes against those he perceives as heretics, Irenaeus claims there are four gospels alone that contain the right belief. And the number four is significant, for, he says, there are "four zones of the world in which we live, and four principal winds"; the gospels are like "four pillars, breathing out immortality on every side"; and the four gospels provide "four aspects, but bound together by one Spirit" (*Against Heresies* 3.8). It is worth dwelling on this word "aspects," because Irenaeus here is suggesting that the Gospels tell different stories, provide different perspectives on the figure of Jesus. He

acknowledges that the Gospels are different from one another. And yet by putting them side by side in the list of scripture, he seeks to soften those differences and appeals to the idea that in spite of differences, they are "bound together by one Spirit." What had been a fairly fluid state of a variety of Christian Gospels circulating among small Christian communities throughout the Mediterranean will gradually coalesce around the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John as the only canonical Gospels.

One of the important ways to understand the distinctive story that the Fourth Gospel tells is to compare it to the other Gospels contained in the New Testament. By looking closely at John in comparison to the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, we can begin to unravel the earliest history of this gospel.

John and the Synoptics

As I have already suggested, each of the early Christian Gospels, including both those that were eventually canonized (i.e., Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) as well as those that were not (e.g., Thomas, Mary Magdalene, Judas, and others), has distinctive features. And it is in part through each Gospel's particularity that we are able to discern how each Gospel seeks to make a claim about Jesus's identity. This is especially true in the case of the Gospel of John, which stands apart from what have long been called the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke). These three Gospels share much of the same material and, at times, have extensive word-for-word identical material. They are called "Synoptic" because they can be viewed together: in Greek, *syn* means together and *optic* derives from the Greek verb "to see." Yes, each of the Synoptics has its own particular slant on the story of Jesus, but they share similar structures and stories and have many passages in common.

A brief overview of these three Gospels will help us see how John is distinct from them. Two of the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew and Luke) begin with Jesus's birth narrative, though told with different details; they all include the story of Jesus's baptism, and his subsequent teaching in Galilee. In these Gospels, Jesus uses parables to teach—parables are short narratives akin to riddles and they are meant to teach Jesus's followers about the kingdom of God, about ethics, and about following Jesus. A good example is the parable of the sower, found in the Synoptic Gospels, where Jesus says,

> Listen! A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seed fell on the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Other seed fell on rocky ground, where it did not have much soil, and it sprang up quickly, since it had no depth of soil. And when the sun rose, it was scorched; and since it had no root, it withered away. Other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no grain. Other seed fell into good soil and brought forth grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirty and sixty and a hundredfold. (Mk 4:3–8; compare Mt 13:3–8; Lk 8:5–8)

Jesus teaches in parables, he says, so that the people "may indeed listen, but not understand" (Mk 4:12). He also teaches about a coming day of judgment, the kingdom of heaven, and the figure of the Son of Man. In the Synoptics, Jesus performs miracles, especially exorcisms (casting out demons) and healings (such as healing the blind or the lame). Very frequently, he urges his disciples and those who witness these healings not to report what they have seen, but to keep quiet. He debates with the Pharisees about matters of Jewish law—about how, for example, to keep the Sabbath. Toward the end of these Gospels, Jesus makes a fateful trip to Jerusalem for the Passover festival. He goes into the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem and creates a

ruckus by driving "out those who were selling and those who were buying in the temple; he overturned the tables of the money changers and the seats of those who sold doves" (Mk 11:15). The Jewish authorities in the Jerusalem Temple become alarmed and one of Jesus's disciples, Judas, betrays him to the chief priests. The Roman authorities then put him on trial, crucify him, and then his followers either find the tomb empty (Mark) or they also find a raised Jesus (Matthew and Luke).

Much of this storyline is likely familiar: the birth narratives with their shepherds and magi; the parables of the mustard seed or the lost sheep and the kingdom of heaven; the exorcisms and healings, the "cleansing of the Temple," the trial and crucifixion. What is fascinating is that almost none of this material is in the Gospel of John. For starters, the structure of the Gospel of John is quite different: the text begins with a poetic opening (1:1–18) rather than a birth narrative. It shifts then to a narrative section that tells of Jesus's miracles, which are almost entirely different from those told in the Synoptics and, even more importantly, in this Gospel they are called "signs," and they are performed openly and meant to show who Jesus is. There is no secrecy motif here. Jesus in the Gospel of John does not teach in parables but rather teaches openly about his own identity. It is true that he sometimes speaks metaphorically, but he does not use parables. He travels several times up to Jerusalem for the Passover. During his final trip to Jerusalem, he delivers a lengthy speech, or sermon, about his own identity (14:12–17:26). The next section of the Gospel contains the story of Jesus's betrayal, trial, crucifixion, and resurrection (18:1–20:31) and a final chapter that reads like a coda and contains more resurrection sightings (21).

John's story is distinctive even in the stories he shares with the Synoptics. The Jewish authorities like the chief priests do appear in this Gospel, for example, but John is the only Gospel

to use the specific phrase "the Jews" to identify the crowds around Jesus. The so-called cleansing of the Temple in John takes place near the beginning of the Gospel (2:13–22). The miracles that appear in John are far more dramatic than those found in the Synoptics and there is not a single story about an exorcism. Jesus teaches openly and many of his statements are some of the most frequently quoted passages from the Bible, and they often begin with "I am" statements, such as:

"I am the light of the world" (Jn 8:12).
"I am the good shepherd" (Jn 10:11).
"I am the true vine" (Jn 15:1).

In the next chapter, we will take a closer look at the literary aspects of the Fourth Gospel to unpack its unique story and to understand its history in the first century.

The distinctiveness of the Fourth Gospel has been described by New Testament scholar Robert Kysar like this: "The Fourth Gospel is a maverick among the Gospels. It runs free of the perspective presented in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. It is the nonconformist Gospel of the bunch. No wonder that many of the heretical movements in the history of the Christian church have used the Gospel of John as their authority in the New Testament."[5] Kysar's articulation of the distinctiveness of the Gospel of John and his gesture toward its legacy informs this biography, for it is at once a maverick story of Jesus and yet utterly essential for understanding Christian history.

Stories upon Stories

Humans are, as Jonathan Gottschall has written, the "storytelling animal." "Humans are creatures of story," he writes, "so story touches nearly every aspect of our lives."[6] Biographies are one

kind of story that we tell, write, and read. We are endlessly curious to know about others' lives, their challenges and successes, the influences who made them become who they are. At their core, ancient Gospels tell stories. They are biographies, though they lack elements we have come to expect in a biography; they are narratives, though the plot often takes second place to the message. They were written to share with readers and listeners what their writers already knew. Story was essential to the Jesus movement, to the formation of the Christian Gospels, and to the spread of Christianity itself. One of the most effective ways to spread the "good news," after all, was to tell the stories of Jesus's miracles, the many that he healed, and the tale of his own resurrection. Stories abounded, much as they do today. Indeed, "stories are everywhere," as Will Storr claims: "Stories are *us*. It's story that makes us human."[7]

The lines between fact and fiction, between history and literature, are never clear. The Gospel of John in this sense is no different from other ancient Gospels: it is written with a tone of assurance and a conviction its truths, and yet it also crafts a story—a story meant to persuade its readers of Jesus's identity and significance. As Alan Culpepper has argued, "In reading the gospel, one is drawn into a literary world created by the author from materials drawn from life and history as well as imagination and reflection."[8] In telling its story, the Fourth Gospel reveals another story: the story of the communities that called this Gospel scripture. In that sense, the Gospel provides a story within a story, much as this book about the legacy of the Fourth Gospel tells stories within stories. Let's start at the beginning.

INDEX

Page numbers in italics refer to figures.