

# MIRACULOUS SIGNS AND LITERARY STRUCTURE IN JOHN'S GOSPEL

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## I. INTRODUCTION

In the first article we examined the literary purpose of the Last Discourse, found in John 13-17. We proposed that the Discourse should be viewed as an encomium whose aim is evangelistic. The closest analogue that I know about in Greek literature is the Platonic dialogue called the *Phaedo*.

But we have not yet said enough about the literary milieu into which John sent his Gospel. We want to try to do that today. In order to do this, we first need to think a little bit about the author.

## II. THE SON OF ZEBEDEE

I accept the ancient tradition that John the son of Zebedee was the author of the Fourth Gospel. The author was also one and the same as the disciple who leaned on Jesus' breast in the Upper Room.<sup>1</sup> Let's think about him for a moment.

According to Matt 4:21-22, Jesus called James and John while they were "in the boat with Zebedee their father," and they promptly "left the boat and their father" to follow Jesus. Now some might think that these two boys ran out on their dear old Dad!

Dry your tears. Mark 1:20 informs us that they "left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired servants." The Greek word for *hired*

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<sup>1</sup> Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* 3.1; Eusebius, *H. E.* 3.24 and 5.8.

*servants* is the plural of *misthōtos*. It the equivalent of our word “employees.” Zebedee didn’t really need the boys, since he had employees.

When we come to the Gospel of John, we are told a most interesting fact. When Jesus was arrested, we read this in John 18:15-16:

And Simon Peter followed Jesus, and so did [the other] disciple. Now that disciple was known to the high priest, and went with Jesus into the courtyard of the high priest. But Peter stood at the door outside. Then the other disciple, who was known to the high priest, went out and spoke to her who kept the door, and brought Peter in. [NKJV, except bracketed words.]

In all probability, “the other disciple” is the author. *But what is this?* The son of an obscure Galilean fisherman is known to the high priest? He is so familiar with the servants that he talks one into letting Peter into the courtyard? What’s going on here?

Here’s my suggestion. Zebedee was not a backwoods yokel from the sticks up in Galilee. On the contrary, he was a successful entrepreneur who was in the fish business. He had ships that worked for him on the Sea of Galilee (including Peter and Andrew’s ship) and his fish graced the markets in both Galilee and in Judea. I further suggest that he was a resident of Jerusalem and that his wealth permitted him to move in the best social circles there.

In his classic book, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus*, Joachim Jeremias observes:

From time immemorial Jerusalem had attracted the wealth of the nation—merchants, landowners, tax-farmers, bankers and men of private means. Several members of the Sanhedrin came from these circles. . . . Jerusalem merchants dealing in grain, wine and oil, and wood, who belonged to the Council between AD 66-70, are mentioned in rabbinic literature . . .<sup>2</sup>

Of course, the best social circles in Jerusalem included Caiaphas the high priest and his father-in-law Annas. As Jeremias also notes:

The house where lived the ex-high priest Annas, father-in-law to the officiating high priest, to whom John says Jesus was first taken after his arrest (John 18:13), had a spacious court

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<sup>2</sup> Joachim Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus: An Investigation into Economic and Social Conditions during the New Testament Period* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, rev. ed. 1967), pp. 95-96.

(John 18:15). A woman doorkeeper (John 18:16) and other servants belonged to the household (John 18:18 . . .). According to tradition there was great luxury in the houses of the high-priestly families . . .<sup>3</sup>

Since Annas is called "high priest" by John in 18:19; 22, the reference in 18:15 is probably to Annas rather than to Caiaphas. John's social connections were with the household of Annas.<sup>4</sup>

The repeated references to "Judeans" (*Ioudaioi*) in the Fourth Gospel is consistent with the suggestion that Zebedee's family resided in Jerusalem. Thus John, as he grew up, had more than once been to the residence of the high priest and, as a kid, had probably played in the courtyard. The servants knew him, just as did the high priest.<sup>5</sup>

I find additional confirmation of my suggestion in a remarkable incident recorded in the Synoptics, but not in John. John's mother once brought her two sons, James and John, to Jesus seeking to guarantee their preeminence in the coming kingdom. She even kneeled to Him and asked for a promise that her sons would sit on His right hand and on His left in His Kingdom (Matt 20:20-23). Now if you ask me, that sounds a lot like a high society lady who knew a thing or two about social climbing. She's aiming for the top.

If my hypothesis is correct, it is extremely likely that before Zebedee allowed his sons to get involved in his fishing business, he saw to it that they got an education. To do this, he might well have hired tutors. Or he

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 96, 97.

<sup>4</sup> It is plausible, however, that, when Annas sent Jesus "bound to Caiaphas" (18:24), we should not infer a separate household. Caiaphas was married to Annas' daughter (18:13) and may well have lived in the same residence as his father-in-law. In that case, the description of Caiaphas' house that Jeremias deduces from the Synoptic accounts is a description of one and the same household. Cf. Jeremias, *Jerusalem*, pp. 96-97.

<sup>5</sup> For what it is worth, in his very recent book, Bauckham states: "I take the view of many other scholars that the Gospel's portrayal of the beloved disciple makes most sense if he was not one of the Twelve, not one of the innermost disciples who traveled around with Jesus, but a disciple resident in Jerusalem, who hosted Jesus and his disciples at the Last Supper and took the mother of Jesus into his Jerusalem home." Richard Bauckham, *The Testimony of the Beloved Disciple: Narrative, History, and Theology in the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), p. 15. We only need to drop Bauckham's distinction between the son of Zebedee and the beloved disciple to produce a position identical with the one I postulate in this paper.

might have sent his sons to join other children from well-to-do families in private schooling sessions.

It is not too far fetched to suggest that John might have attended a small school conducted by a *grammaticus* in the high priest's own household. A *grammaticus* was a teacher of language and literature. Gaius Octavius had one long before anyone knew he would become the Emperor Augustus.<sup>6</sup>

Or perhaps Zebedee hired tutors for James and John. Philip of Macedonia had done that for Alexander, and one of the three he employed was a pretty fair tutor. His name was Aristotle.<sup>7</sup>

Of course, any tutor worth his salt would have introduced Zebedee's boys to classical Greek literature. The chances are excellent they did reading in Homer, in Plato, in Aristotle, maybe also in Xenophon and Aristophanes, etc. Training in rhetoric and in philosophy would have been part of such an upper class education.

We have no reason to suppose that when John wrote the Fourth Gospel he was reaching *way over his head* trying to communicate with a literate audience. That doesn't make sense. When John the son of Zebedee began to follow our Lord, I think he had already received a neat education. Jesus planned to use *all* of that in the years that lay ahead.

After all, the most reliable tradition is that John lived into the reign of Trajan (98-117 AD).<sup>8</sup> His Gospel is a tremendous literary triumph. For centuries, readers have loved to read it and scholars have loved to analyze it. Thousands and thousands of articles and books have been churned out to comment on the Fourth Gospel. If you want to talk about literary success, you can't do much better than that.

### III. THE GENRE OF JOHN'S GOSPEL

In the course of his education, in all probability John was introduced to a type of literature that was called *bioi* (from the Greek word *bi-os*, meaning "life"). We would call this *biography*. There were many *bioi*

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<sup>6</sup> Anthony Everitt, *Augustus: The Life of Rome's First Emperor* (New York: Random House, 2006), pp. 13-14.

<sup>7</sup> On Alexander's tutors, see Paul Cartledge, *Alexander the Great: The Hunt for a New Past* (New York: The Overlook Press, 2004), pp. 82-84.

<sup>8</sup> Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.*, 2.33; Eusebius, *H. E.*, 3.23, 31.

in circulation in John's day.<sup>9</sup> And as it turned out, the first Christian century was a *great* century for the production of biography.

Some years ago, Paul Murray Kendall observed that the first Christian century "gave birth to the three first truly 'professional' biographers—Plutarch and Suetonius . . . and the historian Tacitus."<sup>10</sup> But biography had a long history dating from the poet Ion of Chios in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC.

Kendall also has fittingly said, "the two greatest teachers of the classical Mediterranean world, Socrates and Jesus Christ, both prompted the creation of magnificent biographies written by their followers."<sup>11</sup> Plato's *Apology* and his *Phaedo*, as we have seen, are biographical dialogues related to Socrates. There, Plato "brilliantly re-creates the response of an extraordinary character to the crisis of existence."<sup>12</sup> Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, of course, are biographies focused on Jesus Christ.

We have already noted that Plato's *Apology* and *Phaedo* concentrate on the last days of Socrates. The *Phaedo* takes place on his very last day, while the *Apology* is his defense before the Athenian jury that condemned him. That defense took place nearly a month before his execution. In the case of Jesus, the historical sequence was different. First there was His last meeting with His closest disciples (John 13-17). But subsequently that very night, Jesus is arrested, tried, executed the following morning and buried that same day. In John's Gospel this is chapters 18-19.

You will notice, of course, that John spends a lot of time on these two events, which are, (1) Jesus' final conversation with His friends (John 13-17); and (2) Jesus final confrontation with His enemies (John 18-19). I want to suggest that the effort John makes to describe these

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<sup>9</sup> Bauckham, *Beloved Disciple*, pp. 17-18, observes: "Both Lincoln and Keener acknowledge the landmark significance of Richard Burridge's work on Gospel genre, which has convinced many, perhaps most, Gospels scholars that to their contemporary audiences the Gospels would have been recognized as lives (*bioi*) of Jesus, i.e. belonging to the broad generic category of Greco-Roman biography." Cf. also Andrew T. Lincoln, *The Gospel According to Saint John*, Black's New Testament Commentaries (New York: Hendrickson Publishers, and London: Continuum, 2005), pp. 14-17.

<sup>10</sup> Paul Murray Kendall, "Biographical Literature," in *The New Encyclopedia Britannica: Macropaedia* (1975) 2:1011.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 2:1010-1011.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 2:1011.

scenes in detail is harmonious with the practice of biographers before and during the first Christian century. Let's consider this for a few minutes.

#### IV. DEATH SCENES IN ANCIENT BIOGRAPHY

At this point we need to recall the request that Echecrates made to Phaedo which resulted in the dialogue that followed.

**Echecrates:** I wish you would be kind enough to give us a really detailed account—unless you are pressed for time.

**Phaido:** No, not at all. I will try to describe it for you. Nothing gives me more pleasure than recalling the memory of Socrates, either by talking myself or by listening to someone else.

**Echecrates:** Well, Phaedo, you will find that your audience feels just the same about it. Now try to describe every detail as carefully as you can.<sup>13</sup>

Here, obviously, Echecrates is a stand-in for the upper class hearer or reader whose social set is gathered to listen perhaps to a professional lector starting to read Plato's dialogue. This pleasurable occasion must not be spoiled by some brief and superficial account. Echecrates wants details.<sup>14</sup> Phaedo promises to provide something that can be enjoyed. He loves talking about Socrates.

When one considers other instances of ancient biography, it is obvious that the ancient reader/hearer savored details. That is especially clear, I think, when it comes to accounts of a person's death.

Plutarch was the most prolific biographer that the first century AD produced. He was born in AD 45, only a few years after the crucifixion of our Lord. His birthplace was at Chaeronea in Boeotia in central

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<sup>13</sup>*Phaedo*, translated by Hugh Tredennick, in *The Collected Dialogues of Plato Including the Letters*, eds. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (Princeton: University Press, 1961; 7<sup>th</sup> rep. ed. 1973), p. 41.

<sup>14</sup>The words of Echecrates, "a really detailed account," translate the underlying Greek phrase *ως σαφιστατα* (from *σαφης*, "clear," "plain," "distinct") and "as carefully as you can" translate *ως αν δυνα ακριβεστατα* (cf. *ακριβως* in Luke 1:3). See *Plato's Phaedo*, with Introduction and Notes by John Burnet (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1925), 58d.1 and 58d.8-9.

Greece. Plutarch received training in philosophy at Athens and taught that subject later at Rome. The Emperor Trajan granted him consular rank and later Hadrian gave him a procuratorship in Greece. He wrote in Koine Greek.

Plutarch's monumental accomplishment in the field of biography is the multi-volume work that we know as *Parallel Lives*. The series contains 46 biographies, mostly broken up into pairs with one member of the pair being a Greek person and the other member a similar Latin individual. The last four lives, however, are single. The purpose of the *Parallel Lives* was not simply to retail historical facts, but to offer moral examples and/or moral warnings.

The list of the subjects of these biographies is quite long and I won't bore you with the whole list. But the list includes such pairs as: Solon and Publicola; Themistocles and Camillus; Pericles and Fabius Maximus; Lysander and Sulla; Dion and Brutus. You get the idea.

Picking somewhat at random, Plutarch's narrative of the death of Cicero is illustrative of my point. Plutarch's account can be said to run from chapter 46-49 of his life of Cicero.<sup>15</sup> Plutarch recounts how Cicero was betrayed by Octavian, whom he had helped to gain political power. Octavian resisted, but eventually gave in to, the demands of Antony and Lepidus that Cicero be proscribed—that is, designated for execution.<sup>16</sup>

When news of the proscription reached Cicero at his country home in Tusculum, he and his brother Quintus decided to flee to a sea coast residence Cicero had at Asturia. They then planned to sail to a place called Brutus in Macedonia, but Quintus later got cold feet and left Cicero, only to be killed not long after by his own servants. Cicero sailed from Asturia and reached Circaeum. But instead of sailing on at once, as his servants urged, he went ashore and walked a hundred furlongs *back* toward Rome!<sup>17</sup>

Listen now to Plutarch's account of Cicero's irresolution:

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<sup>15</sup> All quotations are drawn from *Plutarch's Lives*, vol. 7: *Demosthenes and Cicero; Alexander and Caesar*, trans. Bernadotte Perrin, The Loeb Classical Library, ed. G. P. Gould (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1919; rep. ed. 1986).

<sup>16</sup> Plutarch, *Cicero* 46.1-6.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.1-5.

But again losing resolution and changing his mind, he went down to the sea at Asturia. And there he spent the night in dreadful and desperate calculations; he actually made up his mind to enter Caesar's house by stealth, to slay himself upon the hearth, and so fasten upon Caesar an avenging daemon. But a fear of tortures drove him from this course also.<sup>18</sup>

Cicero now sails off to a summer villa he had at Caieta. But as he sailed, "a flock of crows flew with loud clamor towards the vessel of Cicero as it was rowed toward land; and alighting at either end of the sail-yard, some cawed and others pecked at the end of the ropes, and everybody thought that the omen was bad."<sup>19</sup>

It *was* bad! At the end of this remarkable story, we eventually find the assassin Herennius overtaking Cicero in his litter and:

Cicero, perceiving him, ordered the servants to set the litter down where they were. Then he himself, clasping his chin with his left hand, as was his wont, looked steadfastly at his slayers, his head all squalid and unkempt, and his face wasted with anxiety, so that most of those that stood by covered their faces while Herrenius was slaying him. For he stretched his neck forth from the litter and was slain, being in his sixty-fourth year.<sup>20</sup>

Do you see what I mean? This is a very detailed account. Plutarch, of course, didn't see it happen and doesn't scruple to pass on whatever details had reached him in one way or another. He himself would probably not have vouched for the absolute truth of every detail in his narrative. But this is what readers wanted.

Now observe this important fact. Plutarch paired the Latin orator Cicero with the Greek orator Demosthenes.. A brief section of comparison follows these two parallel lives. Whereas he has praise for Demosthenes' death, he has this to say about Cicero's death:

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 47.6-7.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 47.8.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 48.4-5.

And after all the one [i.e., Cicero] is to be pitied for the manner of His death—an old man ignobly carried up and down by his servants, trying to escape death, hiding himself from those who were coming after him not much in advance of nature's summons, and then beheaded . . .<sup>21</sup>

In short, in his death, this famous personality is anything but a hero. In the manner of his end, there is little if anything to admire.

## V. THE DEATH OF JESUS THE CHRIST

John the son of Zebedee, of course, was an eyewitness to the events recorded in John 13 through 19. He makes sure his unconverted readers know this, by inserting himself from time to time into his account. He need not rely on hearsay as Plutarch must often have done. He saw all this happen.

John was with Jesus in the Garden when He was arrested. Jesus inquires, "Whom are you seeking?" and when told, "Jesus of Nazareth," He boldly replies, "I am He" (John 18:4-5). Further, He intercedes for the release of His disciples: "I have told you that I am He. Therefore, if you seek Me, let these go their way" (18:8). There is no cowardice here.

Not long after that, John is inside the courtyard of the high priest. He is probably not warming himself, like Peter, before a fire. No doubt he is within earshot when Jesus responds to Annas' questions about His disciples and His doctrine.

Jesus is not intimidated by the circumstances and He replies, "I spoke openly to the world. I always taught in the synagogues and in the temple, where the Jews always meet, and in secret I have said nothing. Why do you ask Me? Ask those who have heard Me what I said to them. Indeed they know what I said" (18:19-21).

Immediately, Jesus is slapped by a servant. No doubt Annas was offended, but Jesus is not intimidated by this influential man. Annas does not get deferential treatment.

Neither does Pontius Pilate in the record of John 18:28-19:11. Particularly impressive is the exchange in 19:8-11. When Pilate asks, "Where are You from?" Jesus gives him no answer. The following exchange then occurs (19:10-11):

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<sup>21</sup> Plutarch, *Comparison of Demosthenes and Cicero*, 5.1.

**Pilate:** Are You not speaking to me? Do You not know that I have power to crucify You, and power to release You?

**Jesus:** You could have no power at all against Me unless it had been given you from above. Therefore the one who delivered Me to you has the greater sin.

Instead of flying into a rage, Pilate—John tells us—sought to release Jesus (19:12). Pilate is impressed. So no doubt are John’s readers. After all, this was the Prefect of Judea whom Jesus has just described as powerless!

In the account of the actual crucifixion in John’s Gospel, it is noteworthy that John ignores the two thieves who reviled Jesus, and there is no cry of desolation (“My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?”). Instead, there is a stress first of all upon His Messianic claim to kingship. The Fourth Gospel *alone* records the objection by the Jews to Pilate’s inscription above the cross. The inscription read, “Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews.” Pilate refuses to soften this down to accommodate the Jewish objections. (19:19-22).

Even in His death, the claim that Jesus is the Christ was out there for all to see!<sup>22</sup> The readers could not fail to notice.

The death scene is then concluded by two incidents that fulfill Scripture (the gambling over His garments and the offer of sour wine to drink:19:23-29). In between these incidents is a touching manifestation of Jesus’ humanity and compassion. John *alone* records that Jesus on the cross thinks of the future welfare of His mother and commits her to John’s care. On the view I have suggested, Mary would have been cared for in the substantial Jerusalem residence of John’s wealthy father, Zebedee.

Here, then, is this wonderful Person whose very clothes are being dispersed among the soldiers who crucified him. And although His body was racked with thirst, not to mention pain, He is concerned for the

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<sup>22</sup> For the identification of the title “King of the Jews” with the designation “Christ,” see the helpful article by Herbert W. Bateman IV, “Defining the Titles ‘Christ’ and ‘Son of God’ in Mark’s Narrative Presentation of Jesus,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 50 (3, September 2007): 537-59; esp. 540-45.

mother He loved. As a result of His concern, she will be comfortable for the rest of her life!

John's original readers will feel the impact of this entire scene. The Person on the cross is no mere man. He is the Christ, the King of the Jews.

## VI. MIRACULOUS SIGNS AND LITERARY STRUCTURE

Many evangelicals read the Last Discourse (John 13-17) and the Trial and Crucifixion Narrative (18-19) *with their eyes closed*. It's hard to read with your eyes closed, but many of us manage it quite well. We are especially guilty of this in John 13-19.

The material in these chapters is *so* familiar to us, and the parallels in the Synoptics are *so* familiar, that we have stopped listening to John's text. I want to repeat that. In John 13-19 we have stopped listening to John's text. We read into it our previous knowledge, and our theology, and our own ideas. And we fail to understand what John is really doing.

Let me suggest, therefore, that taken together the Last Discourse (13-17) and the Trial and Crucifixion (18-19) are two parts of a single larger unit. Taken together, they are intended to reinforce the claim of this book that Jesus is the Christ. The manner in which Jesus handled His approaching betrayal, and then the way He passed through His trial and death, is extremely impressive. All of this is eloquent testimony to the fact that Jesus is everything John claims Him to be.

Literate people in John's day would get the message that John intends them to get from chapters 13-19. These chapters reinforce the claim John is making for Jesus. Like all the rest of the Fourth Gospel, these chapters invite the reader/hearer to *believe*.

But note well. This large unit from 13 through 19 is also a preamble to the final miraculous sign in this book. That sign, as indicated already by 2:18-19, was the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.<sup>23</sup> In John,

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<sup>23</sup> Despite 2:18-19, the fact that the resurrection is part of a unified series of signs has been lost on many commentators on John. Under the spell of the tradition of treating the trial, death and burial scenes in the four Gospels as separate literary units, commentators have missed John's integration of 13:1-20:29 into the overall structure of the main body of the Fourth Gospel. Thus Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Doubleday, 1997) sharply separates "1:19-12:50 Part One: The Book of Signs" from "13:1-20:31 Part Two: The Book of Glory," p. 334. This analysis is not challenged by

of course, Jesus raises *Himself* from the dead. Jesus prophesied that in John 10:17-18:

Therefore My Father loves Me, because I lay down My life that I may take it again. No one takes it from Me, but I lay it down of Myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again. This command I have received from My Father.

If time permitted—which it does not—I could carry you through the entire Fourth Gospel and try to show you a simple fact about its literary structure. Starting in 2:1 with the first sign, and extending through 20:29, all the non-miraculous narrative and discourse material serves the purpose of either preparing for, or illuminating the meaning of, the eight signs around which the book is structured. That is *emphatically true* of the material we have looked at in my talks yesterday and today.

The superlative self-assurance that Jesus manifests in chapters 13-19, His selfless love for His own, His courage while on trial, His compassion on the cross, and everything else, are preparatory. These chapters *prepare* the reader for the astounding fact that Jesus rose from the dead. Though many might doubt that fact, as Thomas did, Thomas is at last convinced. His confession, “My Lord and My God” (20:28) is followed by the last words of the main body of this book. Jesus says in 20:29:

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Maloney in the posthumous volume, Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the Gospel of John*, edited, updated, introduced and concluded by Francis J. Maloney (New York: Doubleday, 2003). See the chapter, “The Outline of the Gospel,” pp. 298-315. The approach simply reflects the older view, e.g., of C. H. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: University Press, 1953), pp. 289-291. Nothing much has really changed in the massive 2-volume commentary of Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, 2 vols. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2003). Keener’s breakdown of 13:1-20:31 seems very traditional: “Farewell Discourse (13:1-17:26)” [see 1:xviii] and “The Passion and Resurrection (18:1-20:31)” [1:xxi]. See also 2:1167 and 1210-12. There is no apparent sense of structure here. However, Bauckham, *Beloved Disciple*, p.88, is definitely in the ballpark when he says, “John 20:30-31 speaks of the written narrative of chapters 2-20, which it concludes: the narrative of Jesus’ signs, which the author has written so that his readers/hearers may believe. The seventh [*sic*] of these signs, the climactic and preeminently important one (cf. 2:18-19), which alone enables believing perception of Jesus’ full significance, seems to be his death and resurrection.”

Thomas, because you have seen Me, you have believed.  
Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.

To his unconverted readers in Ephesus, therefore, John is saying this: You didn't see any of this, but I did. You are blessed if you believe. And what is that blessing? John 20:30-31 expresses it—the blessing is *eternal life*!