

# The Original Epilogue (John 20:30–31), the Secondary Appendix (21:1–23), and the Editorial Epilogues (21:24–25) of John’s Gospel

## Observations against the Background of Ancient Literary Conventions

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### I. Introduction

The Gospel of John consists of several clearly distinguishable components: a title (“Gospel according to John”), a theological prologue (1:1–18), a long narrative section (1:19–20:29), a comment on the book’s purpose (20:30–31), a second, shorter narrative section (21:1–23), and two additional comments, one on the author (21:24) and a second one on the length of the book (21:25):

*Table 1: Components of the Fourth Gospel*

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Title	“Gospel according to John”
John 1:1–18	theological prologue
John 1:19–20:29	long narrative
John 20:30–31	first comment (regarding purpose)
John 21:1–23	short Narrative
John 21:24	second comment (regarding author)
John 21:25	third comment (regarding length)

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The title probably does not come from the evangelist.<sup>1</sup> Whether this is also true of chapter 21 and the two concluding comments pertaining to the trustworthiness of the author and the extent of the book, is debatable.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. the material presented by Th. K. Heckel, *Vom Evangelium des Markus zum viergestaltigen Evangelium* (WUNT 120; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1999), 207–218, and

*Table 12: The genre of John 21:24–25*

	<i>Position</i>	<i>Origin</i>
<i>Incipit</i>	beginning	author
<i>Sphragis</i>	beginning or end	author
John 21:24–25	end	editor
Subscription	end	copyist, corrector, translator

## 6. Conclusion

As the interpretation of John 20:30–21:25 against the background of ancient epilogues and appendices has demonstrated, Martin Hengel (who followed Raymond Brown and Rudolf Schnackenburg) was probably right when he interpreted John 20:30–31 as the original epilogue of the evangelist, chapter 21 as an editorial appendix, and John 21:24–25 as the epilogue of the editors.

*Table 13: The components of the Fourth Gospel and their origins*

John 1:1–18	theological prologue	evangelist
John 1:19–20:29	original narrative	evangelist
John 20:30–31	original technical epilogue	evangelist
John 21:1–23	secondary appendix	evangelist/editors
John 21:24	secondary technical epilogue	editors
John 21:25	secondary technical epilogue	editors

In order to express his authorial intention the author of the Fourth Gospel adopted a literary device from Greco-Roman historiography with its characteristic fondness for purpose statements. Formally, the evangelist's decision to make his purpose statement not in a prologue but rather in a solitary epilogue at the very end of his book was reminiscent of the Old Testament preference for solitary technical comments at the end of literary works. Yet, his main reason for choosing this unusual place for his technical purpose statements will have been that he wanted to open his Gospel with a weighty theological introduction (John 1:1–18) whose immediate impact he did not want to lessen by a preceding technical prologue. In addition, it was in line with his general understanding of authorship that the

evangelist made his own voice heard only at a rather unobtrusive place of his work, in its final lines.

Since all kinds of epilogues (whether solitary or with a preceding prologue) signaled the end of a literary work, John 20:30–31 indicates that the evangelist originally intended to finish his book with chapter 20. Chapter 21 has therefore to be regarded as an appendix, whether it was added by the evangelist himself or by some later writer.

Since content, syntax, and vocabulary of John 21 are very similar to the content and style of chapters 1–20, the appended chapter 21 probably comes from the same source as the rest of the book. Several minor semantic peculiarities, however, and the reference to the “Sons of Zebedee” in John 21:2 suggest that John 21 was not in the same direct way the work of the evangelist as the rest of the book. One possibility among others is that chapter 21 was written down from memory by one of the evangelist’s disciples.

The supposition that the evangelist was not the immediate author of John 21 is supported by the observation that, on the one hand, ancient authors who supplemented their own books moved earlier written epilogues to the end of the appended versions of their texts. On the other hand, later writers, who added material to the books of others could, out of respect for the integrity of the original author’s work, leave the author’s epilogue in its original place and add the supplementary material after it (or even before a prologue).

The second conclusion in John 21:24 contains a statement in the first person plural (“we know”) about a person who is mentioned in the third person singular (“this is ...”). As a self-reference this expression is without precedent. A more natural interpretation takes this verse as a concluding statement of an unidentified group about the author of the book. Since John 21:23 does not form an appropriate conclusion and since John 21:24 is closely connected with the content of chapter 21, the most probable assumption is that the comment about the evangelist in 21:24 stems from the author of chapter 21.

In contrast to a *sphragis*, John 21:24–25 is neither part of a poetical text nor does it go back to the book’s author; and in contrast to a subscription or colophon, John 21:24–25 cannot be ascribed to a scribe, corrector, or translator of the Gospel. Since John 21:24–25 comes from the editors of the book who added chapter 21 and forms a concluding remark about some technical aspects of the book’s origin and quality, the most appropriate designation for this text is editorial epilogue.

Finally, whereas the paratexts in John 20:30–31 and 21:24–25 help to classify chapter 21 as an editorial appendix, which had been difficult to do on purely literary-critical grounds, it is hardly possible to identify further

interpolations that were added by the editors who appended John 21. In light of the highly unified content and style of the Fourth Gospel, any hypotheses that go beyond what can be deduced from the epilogues remain highly speculative.

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