Books and Missiology

The Gospel of John as Missiological Theology

by Michael T. Cooper

Editor's note: This article is an excerpt from Ephesiology: A Study of the Ephesian Movement, *by Michael T. Cooper (William Carey Publishing, 2020), taken from chapter 5, pages 82–89. Reprinted by permission.*

In the recent book, Ephesiology: A Study of the Ephesian Movement, *Michael Cooper argues for the vital role of missiological theology in movements to Jesus. By synthesizing Luke's material in Acts with portions from Paul's epistles and the Johannine corpus, Cooper is able to identify crucial functions in an Ephesian movement. He claims a healthy movement will begin with a keen "missiological exegesis," but it must mature towards a missiological theology. Cooper portrays Paul as a missiological theologian who "begins to connect the activity of God in the culture with the One true Creator God we can only know from his own revelation." Cooper then turns and addresses the role of John the Apostle in the theological maturation of this movement. He digs into biblical scholarship and asserts that John's gospel is the work of a missiological theologian in dialogue with his context, whose sensitivity to the religious systems of that Ephesian milieu help ground the theology of this movement. Cooper asserts that the astute missiological theologian will help correlate culture and the revelation of God in Jesus Christ in a way that sustains a movement.*

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The Gospel of John, the Fourth Gospel, provides a wonderful model of a text that offers a deliberate focus on addressing specific cultural issues and connecting them to Jesus' story. John's unique contribution to the Ephesian corpus testifies to the importance of connecting stories. Matthew's Gospel did that with the Hebrews. Mark's did the same with the Romans, and Luke's with Theophilus. Now, less than forty years after the arrival of the light of the world, John is connecting Jesus' story with the Ephesians.

There are at least two things that first-year Greek students observe in the Gospel of John. First, and perhaps foremost, is how relatively easy it is to translate the Gospel from Greek to English. The simplicity of words and grammatical structure helps build the confidence of budding new Greek scholars. Second is how difficult it is to interpret John's Gospel. Even with the simplicity of the language, the thoughts and ideas conveying John's unique expression of Jesus' story are some of the most profound in all of Scripture.

The profound nature of John's Gospel is due in part to the diversity of opinion related to the reason why he wrote such a different perspective than the Synoptics—Matthew, Mark, and Luke. D. A. Carson summarizes the mood of Johannine studies:

> There is much more of the same, all of it worthy of lengthy discussion. But the dominant impression of the field of Johannine studies today is of considerable disagreement as to what the text says or implies, and disarray as to the best methods for studying the book. (1990, 40)

Even so, Carson writes,

> Whether the Fourth Gospel was interpreted so as to ground some form of Christian mysticism, or so as to make clear the truth of justification by faith, there was at least no doubt that it was the product of the apostle John, that in some ways it is the most focused of the four canonical Gospels, and that fundamental reconciliation between John and the Synoptics can be achieved. (ibid., 29)

Perhaps even more interesting, most scholars have agreed that the provenance or origin of John has little impact on our understanding of the Fourth Gospel. In fact, Craig Keener argues,

> Although the evidence for a Syro-Palestinian provenance is not absolutely compelling, it is not weak and would be the most likely proposal if the evidence for Roman Asia is judged as better. At the same time, it should also be noted that establishing a provenance in Ephesus is not essential for interpreting the Gospel. Ephesus was mostly representative of other Greco-Roman cities of the eastern Mediterranean, so the same general milieu would inform the Gospel there as in many other places. (2010, 146)

To dismiss the *Sitz im Leben*—the setting in life—of the Fourth Gospel will result in a complete misunderstanding of John's message. The background of Ephesus is absolutely necessary.

Keener's insistence that the culture of Ephesus is not necessary for interpreting the Gospel is remarkable and flies in the face of every first-year Bible student who learns that context is king. The *Sitz im Leben* (roughly "setting in life"), a German term that biblical scholars use to communicate the context of a text, is critical to understanding and interpreting the purpose of a text. Along with the Sitz im Leben, authorial intent—the reason why the author wrote—also influences our understanding of the text. To dismiss the Sitz im Leben of the Fourth Gospel will result in a complete misunderstanding of John's message. As we consider the unique contribution of John's Gospel to Jesus' story, the background of Ephesus is absolutely necessary.

So we begin there; and the story of how this Gospel came to be is worth repeating. We do not know exactly when John arrived in Ephesus, but we have no doubt that he lived there, most likely sometime between Paul's death in AD 67 and the conclusion of the persecution of Emperor Domitian in AD 96. Eusebius, the fourth-century bishop and renowned "Father of Church History," adds clarity to John's presence in Ephesus (although not necessarily to the writing of the Gospel) after the death of Domitian, when John returned from exile in Patmos:

> Listen to a tale, which is not a mere tale, but a narrative concerning John the apostle, which has been handed down and treasured up in memory. For when, after the tyrant's [Domitian's] death, he returned from the isle of Patmos to Ephesus, he went away upon their invitation to the neighboring territories of the Gentiles, to appoint bishops in some places, in other places to set in order whole churches, elsewhere to choose to the ministry some one of those that were pointed out by the Spirit. *(HE* 3.23.6)

Irenaeus (AD 130–202) relates a story he heard from Polycarp (AD 69–155) that places John in Ephesus at the time of Cerinthus:

> John, the disciple of the Lord, going to bathe at Ephesus, and perceiving Cerinthus within, rushed out of the bath-house without bathing, exclaiming, "Let us fly, lest even the bath-house fall down, because Cerinthus, the enemy of the truth, is within." *(Against Heresies* 3.4.4)

Cerinthus (died ca. AD 100), a Jewish Christian from Egypt, contended that Jesus received the Christ at his baptism. Some believe this to have been an early form of Gnosticism, but to connect Cerinthus to the late second-century heresy is anachronistic. He was most likely a Judaizer, as he continued to hold a strict Jewish position on the Sabbath and circumcision. His teaching presumably flourished during the late first century in Asia and was perhaps influenced by Egyptian mystery religions, as he denied the divinity of Jesus.

Some have suggested that Cerinthus impacted Paul's ministry, even to the point of being the focus of his epistle to the Galatians as well as the Jerusalem council (Acts 15) in AD 50, but there is no good reason to make such an assertion. Jerome certainly indicates the possibility when he writes,

> I refer to Cerinthus, Ebion, and the rest who say that Christ has not come in the flesh, whom [John] in his own epistle calls Antichrists, and whom the Apostle Paul frequently assails. *(Commentary on Matthew,* Preface, 2)

However, such a vague reference cannot be assumed to have been the occasion for Paul, who had no aversion to calling out false teachers by name (2 Tim 1:15; 2:17), to write Galatians.

Recounting Polycarp's ministry as bishop of Smyrna, a city north of Ephesus on the Aegean coast, Irenaeus remembers hearing him teach what he had learned from the apostles, especially sitting at the feet of John, as he came to faith in Christ as a young man *(Against Heresies* 3.3.4). John later appoints him as bishop of the church in Smyrna (Tertullian, *Prescriptions* 32.2). Polycarp died a martyr's death in AD 155 for being an "atheist," since he did not believe in the Roman gods. Repeatedly asked to repent from his unbelief and to renounce Christ, Polycarp testified, "Eighty-six years have I served him and he has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme my King and my Savior?" *(Martyrdom of Polycarp,* 9). The date of Polycarp's death, and his age helps place John in Ephesus around AD 69, if not before.

Relating what he knew from Clement, Eusebius indicated that John only wrote his Gospel out of necessity *(HE* 3.24.5), something that seems apparent in Jerome's preface to his commentary on Matthew's Gospel:

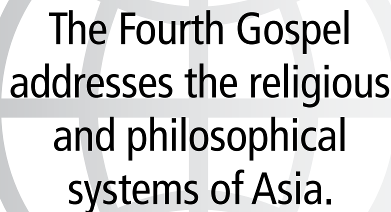
> When [John] was in Asia, at the time when the seeds of heresy were springing up…he was urged by almost all the bishops of Asia then living, and by deputations from many Churches, to write more profoundly concerning the divinity of the Saviour, and to break through all obstacles so as to attain to the very Word of God (if I may so speak) with a boldness as successful as it appears audacious. Ecclesiastical history relates that, when he was urged by the brethren to write, he replied that he would do so if a general fast were proclaimed and all would offer up prayer to God; and when the fast was over, the narrative goes on to say, being filled with revelation, he burst into the heaven-sent Preface: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God: this was in the beginning with God." *(Commentary on Matthew,* Preface, 2)

Charles Hill suggests that Eusebius' reference is actually a fragment from Papias' book (written ca. 110), *Expositions of the Sayings of the Lord* (1998, 582–629). Papias, a hearer of John and friend of Polycarp, became the second bishop of Hierapolis (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 5.33.4). If Hill is correct, then John's Gospel was well known throughout Asia in the late first century. Additionally, Polycarp and Papias could have been among the bishops who requested that John write about the Savior, although it seems more probable that they became involved in the ministry in Asia later, as both seem to know the entire Johannine corpus. This could suggest a date for the Fourth Gospel in the range of AD 68 to 90.

Granted, many scholars have given attention to the nascent Gnosticism and Docetism that might have emerged in John's day. However, this seems unreasonable if we date the Gospel early. Few scholars give attention to the city of Ephesus and the worship of Artemis and Dionysus as a contributing influence on the content of this unique Gospel. Even more, the striking prologue emphasis on λόγος *(logos)* and the connection to the philosophy of Heraclitus of Ephesus (535–475 BC) is largely ignored. Granted, there are nearly six hundred years between Heraclitus and John. Nevertheless, Heraclitus' logos philosophy was renowned in Ephesus and Asia, much more so than the teaching of Cerinthus, which only survives in the writings of his antagonists.

Diogenes Laërtius writes in the fifth century BC that Heraclitus' book, *On Nature,* was housed in the temple of Artemis and, "…acquired such fame that it produced partisans of his philosophy who were called Heracliteans" *(Lives of Eminent Philosophers,* IX, 6). As Kahn points out, Heraclitus' philosophy attracted the attention of many during John's day and later into the third century,

> Down to the time of Plutarch [AD 46–120] and Clement [of Alexandria, ca. AD 150–215], if not later, the little book of Heraclitus was available in its original form to any reader who chose to seek it out. (1981, 5)



Paul and Luke must have also known about Heraclitus. For two years, Paul reasoned (Greek διαλέγομαι; *dialegomai)* the word (Greek λόγος; *logos)* of the Lord to Jews and especially Greeks in the philosophical school of Tyrannus, where Heraclitus would have no doubt been taught (Acts 19:9–10). While we do not know much about this school, the language Luke uses to describe it indicates its connection to Greek philosophy. The Greek, σχολαί *(scholai),* is a term used to describe the location where philosophers taught (Lidell and Scott's *Greek-English Lexicon),* and διαλέγομαι, as we saw in chapter 3, is the manner in which philosophers engaged students. As we have seen, Paul was a student of culture, so it is only natural that he would have studied the major philosophy that emerged out of Ephesus just like he did with that which emerged out of Athens.

Heraclitus, writing during the period when the Jews were returning from the Babylonian exile and constructing the Second Temple, was regarded as highly as Plato and the later Stoics. Even Christian philosophers held him in high regard. Justin Martyr (AD 100–165), who heard the gospel while in Ephesus, thought of Heraclitus, along with Socrates, as a pre-Christ Christian. He writes,

> We have been taught that Christ is the first-born of God, and we have declared above that He is the Word of whom every race of men were partakers; and those who lived reasonably are Christians, even though they have been thought atheists; as, among the Greeks, Socrates and Heraclitus, and men like them; and among the barbarians, Abraham, and Ananias, and Azarias, and Misael, and Elias, and many others whose actions and names we now decline to recount, because we know it would be tedious. *(First Apology,* 46)

So was John dealing with a proto-Gnosticism or Docetism in his prologue, or with an existing *logos* belief in Ephesus? Gnosticism and Docetism do eventually become formidable competitors of Christianity, but not until later in the second century. Could John have foreknown these systems of belief? Absolutely, but why would we need to force a tenuous prophetic declaration by the apostle when he clearly wanted to connect Jesus' story to those in Asia?

The Fourth Gospel is an evangelistic presentation focused on addressing the religious and philosophical systems in Asia, and specifically those associated with the goddess Artemis and the god Dionysus, as well as with the philosopher Heraclitus. John was not concerned with embellishing the Synoptics with his personal eyewitness of Jesus, nor was he concerned with the chronology of Jesus' ministry. It also

seems unreasonable to suggest that the destruction of the Jewish temple or the Jewish War would have influenced his writing. If the Gospel is dated to the beginning of the Jewish War, when John arrived in Ephesus, the temple's destruction has no bearing on the Gospel. In fact, the significance of John's references to the temple (John 2:14–21; 7:14–28; 8:2–59) must be juxtaposed to the importance of the temple of Artemis to the Ephesians. If, in fact, John's audience comprised non-Christian Ephesians, they would have had no regard for the Jewish temple, if they had even known about it at all. It makes more sense that John's references to the temple in his Gospel positioned Jesus as the most high God who was greater than any god or goddess worshipped in temples made by human hands. Jesus superseded the worship and rituals occurring in a temple, no matter where the temple was located—Jerusalem or Ephesus.

John's Gospel was a message that would have connected with a people who were proud to live in the city of a wonder of the ancient world, where "all Asia and the world worship" Artemis (Acts 19:27). His primary concern was connecting Jesus' story with the story of those in Asia in such a way that they would clearly see that the one true God, εγώ εἰμι, is the creator and sustainer of the κόσμος (John 6:35–51; 8:12; 9:5; 10:9, 11–14; 11:25; 14:6). It is he alone who gives the right to become children of God, rather than Artemis, who acted as the protector of childbearing (John 1:12). Jesus performed genuine signs, like the wedding feast miracle, that would clearly demonstrate his primacy above Artemis, the goddess of matrimony (John 2:1–12). It is Jesus who can respond to religious leaders and call them to be born again, in distinction from Dionysius who was twice born of Zeus (John 3:1–15). Jesus had special knowledge of people, like the woman at the well (John 4:1–45)—who, like some women in Asia, consorted with men in the antics of the symposium. Jesus' reference to being the living bread signifies his preeminence above other gods and goddesses, whose theophaginic rituals connected the practitioner with the deity. Only Jesus can take away the hunger of humanity (John 6:22–59).

John's superb missiological theology made Jesus real to those who had never heard of him. The fact that he was an eyewitness further testified to the authenticity of Jesus as "the true light, which gives light to everyone" (John 1:9), who came into the world to give abundant life (John 10:10). Jesus was rejected and despised by his own people (John 1:11), but those other nations—and John was writing in a context where there were as many as fifty distinct ethnic groups—would find solace in a personal God who sacrificed himself and was resurrected to new life so that they might also receive eternal life (John 4:39–42, 46–53; 10:16; 12:20–26; 16:8–9; 17:20–21). This was a message for the entire world, a word that John repeats in order to make clear that Jesus is the one true God and Lord, supreme over all others.

In spite of Keener's conclusion—"An Ephesian provenance does not affect interpretation as much as we might hope" (2010, 146)—it seems clear that the uniqueness of the Fourth Gospel provides compelling evidence for John as a missiological theologian. The heart of the gospel is to tell the story of Jesus, and John brilliantly portrays Jesus in a way that made sense to those in Ephesus and Asia. John is connecting with the Ephesians on philosophical, religious, cultural, and ethnic levels to communicate Jesus' story in a way that it did become their story. It was no longer just the Jewish story of a Messiah. It was the story of the one true God who would restore the world, including the world of those in Asia.

John clearly understood the culture and history of Asia. He must have read Heraclitus to make the connection with the *logos*. He understood the significance of the temple of Artemis for the lives of the Ephesians and juxtaposed Jesus, who has supremacy over any temple. John knew about the religious rituals of theophagy (eating the gods) and matrimony. He demonstrates a profound awareness of the importance of women in Ephesian culture as he relates the story of Jesus' relationships with women (Samaritan woman, Mary Magdalene, Syrophoenician woman). His deep understanding of his context and his thoughtful engagement when relating Jesus to his audience demonstrates a missiological theology that connected Jesus' story with the people's story.

This manner of connecting stories ensured that Christianity would be an indigenous system of beliefs and contributed to the ongoing expansion of the movement that was as much a Jewish movement as it was a Greek movement. In fact, it was God's movement, as he continued to go before the early disciples to make himself known. The task they enjoyed was showing those they engaged how God was at work among them. To do that meant they had to be where the gospel was needed and they had to allow the Holy Spirit to show them what God was doing to grab the attention of those he was pursuing.

The effectiveness of these early efforts demonstrated a thoughtful understanding of the context, as they dialogued with people, observed their culture, and studied their history. They knew the story of those they were engaging and they connected that story with God's story so that it became a unified story of God's relentless pursuit of more people worshipping him. This model of developing a missiological theology is one contemporary missions must emulate if the gospel has any hope of connecting to culture. **IJFM**

Endnotes

[1] Cerinthus and the Ebionites have both been mistakenly identified as proto-Gnostic. Their beliefs certainly found a home in later Christian Gnosticism, but Cerinthus and the Ebionites were clearly situated in the milieu of their day. Both Cerinthus and the Ebionites emerged out of the Judaizing Christians and their doctrines developed in concert with Christianity and Plato.

[2] Papias' own testimony on being a disciple of John is conflicted. Whatever the case, he certainly learned the Johannine traditions.

[3] The main source for Cerinthus' teaching includes Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* (1.26.1; 3.2.1, 2; 3.3.4; 3.11; 16); and Ephiphanius, Panarion. Eusebius writes about Cerinthus in *HE* 3.28.

[4] Diogenes writes, "As to the work which passes as his, it is a continuous treatise *On Nature,* but is divided into three discourses, one on the universe, another on politics, and a third on theology. This book he deposited in the temple of Artemis and, according to some, he deliberately made it the more obscure in order that none but adepts should approach it, and lest familiarity should breed contempt." Only fragments of *On Nature* exist today.

[5] See Andreas Kostenberger, "The Destruction of the Second Temple and the Composition of the Fourth Gospel," *Trinity Journal* 26 (2005), 205–42, for a discussion of the impact of the temple's destruction. I obviously disagree with Kostenberger's assessment.

[6] Luke typically uses οἰκουμένη (inhabited earth) rather than κόσμος (world).

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