INTRODUCING JOHN'S GOSPEL: IN THE UPPER ROOM WITH JESUS THE CHRIST

Part 1 of 2

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I. INTRODUCTION

John 13–17 contains a special body of material. In popular communication it is often called *The Upper Room Discourse*.

This is not precisely accurate. John 14:31 indicates the point at which Jesus and His disciples left the upper room. (Jesus says: "Arise, let us go from here.") But John 15–16 continues the discourse, and the prayer of John 17 concludes it. Most writers now refer to John 13–17 as "The Last Discourse."

The material in these chapters is unique to John's Gospel. By contrast, the Synoptic Gospels are relatively brief in describing our Lord's final interaction with his eleven disciples (cf. Matt in 26:17-30; Mark 14:17-26; Luke 22:14-38). For many reasons, we need to pay closer attention to The Last Discourse. We need to examine again its actual role in the Gospel of John.

II. A FUNDAMENTAL PREMISE

A fundamental premise is that the purpose of the Gospel of John is evangelistic. This purpose is quite clearly stated in John 20:30-31. Nevertheless, I am well aware that the subject of John's purpose is debated in the current technical literature.

During the 20th century Raymond E. Brown was probably the premier Johannine scholar in the English speaking world. He was a lifelong Roman Catholic, and an ordained priest, of moderately liberal persuasion. His magisterial two-volume commentary on John remains a goldmine for all students of the Fourth Gospel. He passed away suddenly on August 8, 1998.

The year before his death Brown published a massive volume (over 900 pages) entitled *An Introduction to the New Testament*. It distilled his enormous scholarly knowledge. In that volume he comments on the issue of John's purpose:

> Luke explains his purpose at the beginning of his Gospel (1:1-4), but John saves his statement of intention till the end. In selecting material to be included in the Gospel his goal has been to have people come to faith or increase in faith (disputed reading) in Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God, and through this faith to possess eternal life in his name.[1]

This pretty well reflects the state of affairs even a decade later. Brown rightly locates the center of the discussion in the textual problem found in John 20:31. The problem concerns the presence or absence of a single letter (a sigma) in the phrase "that you might believe" *(hina pisteu[s]ate)*. With it, the verb is aorist; without it, present.

Those who deny the evangelistic purpose of John's Gospel typically depend heavily on the present tense. They think that the present suggests the idea, "that you might *continue* to believe." The 27th edition of the Nestle-Aland GNT indicates that the present tense is found in three old manuscripts plus a few others; the rest support the aorist.

Actually it makes no difference at all which reading is accepted. The view that the present tense supports the idea of "continue to believe" is a semantic fallacy. This was pointed out as long ago as 1975 by Johannes P. Louw. Louw was the co-editor with Eugene Nida of the *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains*.[2]

In 1975 Louw published an article, "Verbal Aspect in the First Letter of John," in the journal *Neotestamentica*. There Louw states:

> The Greek praesens [present tense] is aspectually neutral or unmarked, it is a zero tense. It . . . may be used if the context suggests linear or habitual occurrence, and often verbs denoting processes . . . give the impression that the praesens

[1] Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), p. 360.

[2] Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains*, 2d ed., 2 vols. (New York: United Bible Societies, 1988, 1989).

> signifies duration though the praesens itself merely states the occurrence as a fact.[3]

On the next page he adds, "it is a zero tense of factual actuality."[4]

I know, of course, that this is not what was taught in Greek classrooms for the last several generations. Most scholars were weaned on the idea that the present tense expressed on-going, or continuous, action. But this idea is a grammatical fallacy. If you read your Greek NT with the same facility you do English, you can easily see for yourself that Louw's position is a slam dunk.

I am sorry to say this, but you can get a reputation as a Greek scholar without reading your Greek NT that easily. That's because the field of NT Greek is loaded to the max with helpful tools—with lexicons, grammars, word studies, commentaries, the whole nine yards. You don't need to know very much to use all these tools. The number of skilled semanticists like Louw is quite small. I once heard some lectures by his co-editor, Eugene Nida, reputed to be a linguistic genius. I suspect Louw is not too far behind.

Of course, not everyone has fallen into the "tense trap." You can find a competent, conservative defense of John's evangelistic purpose in Carson, Moo, and Morris's *An Introduction to the New Testament*.[5]

What's the bottom line? It is simply this. Neither in John 20:30-31, nor anywhere else in the Fourth Gospel as far as I can tell, does John employ the present tense of the verb *pisteu*ō ("believe") with any suggestion of continuous action. The idea that John's purpose was to get people to "continue to believe" does not have a shred of linguistic evidence.

It is an idea based on a zero tense and it has zero probability.

III. The Historical Purpose of The Last Discourse

Before we can consider the literary purpose of The Last Discourse in John's Gospel, we must think about its historical purpose. Naturally, I assume the historicity and unity of the Discourse as presented in the

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[3] J. P. Louw, "Verbal Aspect in the First Letter of John," *Neotestamentica* 9 (1975): 102.

[4] Ibid., 103.

[5] D. A. Carson, Douglas J. Moo, and Leon Morris, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), pp. 168-72.

Fourth Gospel. It is not a pastiche of Jesus' sayings drawn from here and there.

In fact, the Discourse has a geographical starting point and a geographical endpoint. It begins in the upper room, but 14:31 shows that Jesus and His disciples left the upper room after 14:30 was spoken. The Discourse continued as they made their way through the streets of Jerusalem (John 15–16). The Discourse was concluded by Jesus' prayer in John 17. Following His prayer, John 18:1 states:

> When Jesus had spoken these words, He went out with His disciples over the Brook Kidron, where there was a garden, which He and His disciples entered.

The words "He went out" (*exēlthe*) cannot mean that "He went out" *of the upper room*. They had left there some time ago. It can only mean that now Jesus and His disciples went out *of Jerusalem itself*, on their way to the Garden of Gethsemane. There is no real problem here.[6] As Craig Blomberg points out, "Peripatetic rabbis and philosophers regularly taught and discoursed with their followers as they walked."[7] There is no reason why John needs to say specifically that the group left after 14:31. I think that's obvious.

The Last Discourse, therefore, is a unity. In terms of the historical situation, its purpose is very clear. Let me say first what it is *not*. The Last Discourse is *not* an exposition of the Christian life. True, we can learn a great deal about the Christian life from this Discourse. But this benefit is *not* the reason for the Discourse.

Plainly, The Last Discourse was designed to prepare the disciples for the events that lay immediately ahead. In other words, it was designed to prepare them for Jesus' crucifixion, resurrection, and return to heaven. If we pay attention to the text, this purpose has high visibility and it is inescapable.

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[6] It is hard to see why Blomberg should say, "The last sentence in 14:31 creates the single biggest problem for supporters of the unity and authenticity of the discourse. Literally it reads, 'Rise, let us depart from here.' But Jesus keeps talking for another three chapters and seemingly does not leave the upper room until 18:1." But this is to misread 18:1 and fail to take 14:31 seriously. Craig L. Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of John's Gospel: Issues and Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), p. 204.

[7] Ibid., p. 205.

Permit me to list here a series of statements by Jesus that disclose this purpose beyond doubt.

John 13:18-19: "I do not speak concerning all of you. I know whom I have chosen; but that the Scripture may be fulfilled, 'He who eats bread with Me has lifted up his heel against Me.' Now I tell you before it comes, that when it does come to pass, you may believe that I am He."

John 13:33: "Little children, I shall be with you a little while longer. You will seek Me; and as I said to the Jews, 'Where I am going, you cannot come,' so now I say to you."

John 13:36: Simon Peter said to Him, "Lord, where are you going?" Jesus answered him, "Where I am going you cannot follow Me now, but you shall follow Me afterwards."

John 14:1-4: "Let not your heart be troubled; you believe in God, believe also in Me. In My Father's house are many mansions, if it were not so I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also."

John 14:16 and 18-19: "And I will pray the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may abide with you forever . . . I will not leave you orphans; I will come to you. A little while longer and the world will see Me no more, but you will see Me. Because I live, you will live also."

John 14:29: "And now I have told you before it comes, that when it does come to pass, you may believe."

John 15:20b-21: "If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you. If they kept My word, they will keep yours also. But all these things they will do to you for My name's sake, because they do not know Him who sent Me."

John 16:1: These things I have spoken to you that you should not be made to stumble."

John 16:4: "But these things I have told you, that when the time comes, you may remember that I told you of them. And these things I did not say to you from the beginning, because I was with you."

John 16:16: "A little while, and you will not see Me; and again a little while, and you will see Me, because I go to the Father."

John 16:20: "Most assuredly, I say to you that you will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice; and you will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will be turned into joy."

John 16:28: "I came forth from the Father and have come into the world. Again I leave the world and go to the Father."

John 16:32: "Indeed the hour is coming, yes, has now come, that you will be scattered, each to his own, and will leave Me alone. And yet I am not alone, because the Father is with Me."

John 17:4-5: [speaking to the Father] "I have glorified You on the earth. I have finished the work which You have given Me to do. And now, O Father, glorify Me together with Yourself, with the glory I had with You before the world was."

John 17:11a: "Now I am no longer in the world, but these are in the world, and I come to you."

John 17:13: "But now I come to You, and these things I speak in the world, that they may have My joy fulfilled in themselves."

I rest my case!

The historical purpose of The Last Discourse was this: *to prepare the disciples for the events that would begin that very night, and would lead to the death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus the Christ.*

IV. The Audience of John's Gospel

Only if we clearly see the historical purpose of The Last Discourse are we prepared to see its literary purpose in the Fourth Gospel. In an inspired document, we expect a literary purpose that is fully consistent with the historical reality.

As we have just said, The Last Discourse is not an exposition of the Christian life. It is certainly useful for Christian living, but this was not its historical purpose. What then is its literary purpose within the framework of John's Gospel?

In order to address the literary purpose of the Fourth Gospel, we should ask about its audience. Who were they?

Ancient tradition points in one direction only. According to Irenaeus (2d century AD), "John the disciple of the Lord who also had leaned upon his breast, published a Gospel during his stay at Ephesus."[8]

Eusebius, the 4th century church historian, reports the following: "Meanwhile the holy apostles of our Savior were scattered across the whole world. Thomas, according to tradition, was allotted Parthia, And-

[8] Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.*, 3.1.

rew Scythia, and John Asia, where he stayed until his death at Ephesus."[9] Later in his *History*, Eusebius quotes the statement of Irenaeus to which I have just referred.[10]

Despite the many debates about this evidence, there is no good reason for rejecting the tradition that John wrote his Gospel from Ephesus.[11] Both writers are likely to have known more than we do.

The internal evidence of the Gospel is consistent with the view that the fundamental audience was Jewish and living outside of Palestine. The audience was also Greek speaking and very literate.

During the days now long past when Rudolf Bultmann was the towering figure in NT scholarship, it was popular to describe John as a piece of Hellenistic literature that was only marginally Jewish as compared to the Synoptic Gospels. This view now deserves to be laughed at. The Qumran discoveries not only indicate the fundamental Jewishness of the Fourth Gospel. They also have led to the equally extreme suggestion that John is the most Jewish of all four gospels.[12]

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[9] Eusebius, *H. E.*, 3.1. The quotation is from Paul Maier, *Eusebius: The Church History*, translation and commentary by Paul Maier (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2007), p. 80.

[10] Eusebius, H. E., 5.8.

[11] As is well known to technical scholars, the ancient evidence as a whole has been taken to suggest that there was more than one John in the early church. This is due to a passage from Papias, quoted by Eusebius (*H.E.*, 39.4), about which there has been much speculation as to whether he distinguishes a certain Elder John from John the Apostle and son of Zebedee. The classic conservative defense of authorship by John the son of Zebedee can be found in Brooke Foss Westcott, *The Gospel According to St. John* (1881; var. eds. and pubs.), pp. v-xxxiv. Quite recently Richard Bauckham (drawing upon the work of Martin Hengel) has argued that the Elder John was the author. He is to be identified with the beloved disciple of the Fourth Gospel, but distinguished from John the son of Zebedee. See Richard Bauckham, *The Testimony of the Beloved Disciple: Narrative, History and Theology in the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), pp. 33-72. The argumentation is erudite (as always with Bauckham) but still severely taxes credulity.

[12] Bauckham, *Beloved Disciple*, p. 136, notes ironically that, "It was the publication of the Qumran texts that effected a shift in Johannine scholarship toward recognizing the thoroughly Jewish character of Johannine theology. In retrospect this appears to have been a case of drawing the correct conclusion from the wrong evidence. There is no need to appeal to the Qumran texts in

But despite the obvious Jewish character of John's Gospel, John still translates certain Semitic words: i.e., *Rabbi* (1:38); *Messias* (1:41; 4:25), *Kēphas* (1:42), *Silōam* (9:7), and *Golgotha* (19:17). The audience could not be presumed to understand these Semitic words. Furthermore, the audience must necessarily have been quite literate. In Roman times you did not write a twenty-one chapter book for the man in the street. Perhaps I should say, for the man in the market place (that is, the agora). A long book of this nature presupposes a high educational level for its readers.

Keep in mind that Greek-speaking Jews (i.e., Hellenists) were a fruitful evangelistic field in NT times. The Hellenists referred to in Acts (Grk., *Ellēnistai*: 6:1; 9:29; 11:20) are best understood as Greek-speaking Jews. Their widows alone made up a significant portion of the Christian widows who needed the ministrations of the Church, according to Acts 6. As is often pointed out, the six deacons chosen to resolve the problem all had Greek names: *Phillipos, Prochoros, Nikanōr, Timōn, Parmenas, Nikolaos*.

After his conversion, Paul sought to evangelize the Hellenists of Jerusalem, who responded by trying to kill him (Acts 9:29). The Hellenists were also the object of evangelism in Antioch of Syria (Acts 11:20).

The Hellenists must have been ripe targets also in the city of Ephesus. There was a synagogue there where Paul evangelized (Acts 18:19), and for all we know there may have been several. In a commercial center like Ephesus we should expect a substantial Jewish population, and a significant number of successful Jewish entrepreneurs.

In NT times, Ephesus was a large and prosperous port city located on the western coast of Anatolia (i.e., Turkey). In the centuries that followed, the port silted up and the site of Roman Ephesus is now an inland site. It contained a huge outdoor theater, the one referred to in Acts 19, which could accommodate about 24,000 spectators. Years ago I actually sat down briefly in the ruins of this theater during a Bible lands tour conducted by my friend and Dallas Seminary colleague, Dr. Bruce Waltke.

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order to demonstrate the Jewishness of the Fourth Gospel's light/darkness imagery. This can be done more convincingly by comparison with other Jewish sources, which were already available long before the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls."

Cornell and Matthews in their lavishly illustrated *Atlas of the Roman World* tell us this. "The life of Roman Ephesus is revealed, not only by the extensive archaeological remains, but by the inscriptions which show the munificence of the leading families and its rivalries with Smyrna for the title 'first city' of Asia."[13] You can still see today the ruins along a "colonnaded road at Ephesus, once lined with shops, leading from the harbor to the theater."[14]

Of special interest to us right now is the famous library of Celsus. Archaeologists have excavated the remains of this library that was dedicated in the early 2d century to the Roman governor of the province of Asia, by name, Tiberius Julius Celsus Polemaeanus (AD 106-107).[15] The construction of such a memorial to the governor, shortly after the close of the first Christian century, is eloquent. It is a powerful testimony to the high level of literary life in 1st century Roman Ephesus.

Thus when John published his Gospel at Ephesus, he could anticipate a significant readership. As Graham Shipley has stated in his very thorough volume, *The Greek World After Alexander: 323-30 BC*,

> A helpful definition of literature might be the circulated written works of a social elite, read or performed for enjoyment. It is important, however, to define one's elite. In this book [Shipley's own] science, philosophy and literature are treated separately, but for many practical purposes they were parts of the same set of social activities carried out by the same individuals from the upper wealth-levels of society and their protégés who devoted their leisure to their chosen mode of cultural creation.[16]

The original recipients of the Fourth Gospel could well have been an upper class Jewish social circle, or a guild composed of educated Jewish artisans or other professionals. Or the Fourth Gospel could have gone

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[13] Tim Cornell and John Matthews, *Atlas of the Roman World* (New York: Checkmark Books, 1982; rep. ed. 2001), p. 152.

[14] David E. Aune, "Ephesus," in *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. David Noel Freedman, Allen C. Myers and Astrid B. Beck (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), p. 414.

[15] Cornell and Matthews, p. 152.

[16] Graham Shipley, *The Greek World After Alexander: 323-30 BC* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 236.

first to a large extended Jewish family many of whose members were educated readers. The possibilities are numerous. We just don't know which possibility is correct.

In any case, John intended to evangelize the original readers.

V. The Literary Character and Purpose of The Last Discourse

As we just saw, Ephesus was a good place to publish a book because it apparently had many readers at the highest echelons of society. Strikingly, the first librarian of the famous library in Alexandria, Egypt, was an Ephesian. His name was Zenodotus (c. 325-c. 270 BC) who took that position about 284 BC. Those who are Greek students may be interested to know that Zenodotus invented the original Greek accents. They were tonal accents in his day.[17]

Therefore, I propose that a cultured, literate Jewish circle in Ephesus was the original intended audience of the Fourth Gospel. How, then, would The Last Discourse in John 13–17 strike these original, non-Christian readers? I may surprise you by my answer to that question.

My answer is this: It would remind some of them—perhaps most of them—of a famous dialogue of Plato called the *Phaedo*.

Plato, who lived from ca. 429–ca. 347 BC, left behind a large number of dialogues. A modern writer has said, "These dialogues were written twenty-three hundred years ago, and the thought of the ancient world, the Renaissance, and that of contemporary times, have all come under their influence."[18] And although Socrates is a familiar figure in the Platonic dialogues, there are only three dialogues that purposely focus on the character and personality of Socrates, and these three are: the *Apology*, the *Crito*, and the *Phaedo*.[19]

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[17] Ibid., p. 240.

[18] Huntington Cairns, "Introduction," in *The Collected Dialogues of Plato Including the Letters*, eds. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (Princeton: University Press, 1961; 7th reprint ed., 1973), p. xiii.

[19] See the observation of Edith Hamilton in her prefatory note to the *Apology*: "The first three dialogues given here [*Apology, Crito, Phaedo*] are an account of the last days and death of Socrates. In what order Plato wrote the dialogues we do not know, but in reading them there is good reason for beginning with those that center in the death of the chief personage. Only in them is

The *Apology*, of course, records Socrates' defense before the Athenian jury that condemned him to death. The *Crito* reports the effort by Socrates' disciple, Crito, to persuade him to accept the aid of his disciples to escape his impending execution by poison. Socrates refuses. Interesting as these dialogues are, right now I am concerned with the *Phaedo*.

Needless to say, Plato's writings would be among the classics available at Ephesus. They would be of special interest there because Ephesus was situated in the Aegean basin in territory originally colonized by the ancient Greeks and known to them as Ionia. I do not know of any piece of ancient literature to which The Last Discourse bears a stronger resemblance than it does to the *Phaedo*.

The setting of the *Phaedo* is the last day of Socrates' life as he sits in his prison quarters awaiting the delivery of the poison from which he will die. There Socrates is surrounded by his disciples. The form of the *Phaedo*, as we have said, is a dialogue. His disciples participate by asking or answering questions. This in itself is reminiscent of The Last Discourse in John's Gospel.

The main content of the *Phaedo* consists of the words of Socrates himself. The topic under discussion between Socrates and his disciples, quite naturally, is the subject of the immortality of the human soul. Socrates himself believes in the soul's immortality but realizes he has only logical arguments for it. In the final analysis he is not sure what comes after death.

The *Phaedo* is introduced by an exchange between a certain Echecrates, probably a Pythagorean, and Phaedo, a disciple of Socrates. (I am using the translation of Hugh Tredennick as found in *The Collected Dialogues of Plato Including the Letters,* edited by the famous classicist

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Socrates himself the subject. In the others, although almost always the main speaker, he rarely speaks of himself. Indeed, in two of the three latest dialogues he is only a listener, and in the last he does not even appear. But in these first three he talks at length about his life and beliefs." In *The Collected Dialogues of Plato, Including the Letters,* eds. Edith Hamilton and Huntingdon Cairns (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1961), p. 3.

Edith Hamilton and by Huntington Cairns.[20]) The *Phaedo* begins as follows:

> **Echecrates**: Were you there with Socrates himself, Phaedo, when he was executed, or did you hear about it from somebody else?
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> **Phaedo**: No, I was there myself, Echecrates.
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> **Echecrates**: What then did the master say before he died, and how did he meet his end? I should very much like to know.[21]

Let me pause to point out that the words rendered "how did he meet his end?" in the Greek of Plato's text were *kai pos eteleuta*.[22] They are not an inquiry about the method of execution, since Echecrates would have known that it was by poison. Instead this is a question that means, "How did he face death? How did he behave?" In antiquity that was an important consideration as I will point out in the second part of this article.

A little later we have this exchange:

> **Echecrates**: But what about the actual circumstances of his death, Phaedo? What was said and done, and which of the master's companions were with him? Or did the authorities refuse them admission, so that he passed away without a friend at his side?
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> **Phaedo**: Oh no, some of them were there—quite a number in fact
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> **Echecrates**: I wish you would be kind enough to give us a really detailed account—unless you are pressed for time.

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[20] *Phaedo*, translated by Hugh Tredennick, in *Collected Dialogues*, pp. 41-98.

[21] Ibid., p. 41.

[22] *Plato's Phaedo,* ed. with Introduction and Notes by John Burnet (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1925), 57.6.

Phaedo: 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.[23]

In this way, the *Phaedo* begins. What, then, did Plato himself hope to accomplish through the account that Phaedo now unfolds in great detail? This becomes apparent towards the end of the dialogue, when the jailer comes in and speaks as follows to Socrates:

> Socrates, he said, at any rate I shall not have to find fault with you, as I do with others, for getting angry with me and cursing when I tell them to drink the poison—carrying out government orders. I have come to know during this time that you are the noblest and the gentlest and the bravest of all men that have ever come here, and now especially I am sure that you are not angry with me, but with them, because you know who are responsible. So now—you know what I have come to say—good-by, and try to bear what must be as easily as you can. As he spoke, he burst into tears, and turning round, went away. Socrates looked up at him and said, Good-by to you, too. We will do as you say.[24]

Very touching, right? And what a cool customer Socrates is!

But just to make sure that the reader doesn't miss this point, here is how Plato ends the *Phaedo* with Phaedo's final words to Echecrates:

> Such, Echecrates, was the end of our comrade, who was, we may fairly say, of all those we knew in our time, the bravest and also the wisest and most upright man.[25]

The last words of this statement, which are the last words of the *Phaedo*, are a very euphonic series of superlative forms: *aristou kai allōs phronimōtatou kai dikaiotatou.*[26]

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[23] *Collected Dialogues,* pp. 41-42.
[24] Ibid., p. 96.
[25] Ibid , p. 98.

This is a nice rhetorical climax.

The literary genre of the *Phaedo,* therefore, is that of an encomium in dialogic form. That is to say, it is an extended tribute to a worthy man who died worthily.

So what about The Last Discourse? What is its literary purpose in John's Gospel? The answer is that the purpose is essentially the same as the purpose of the *Phaedo,* but with far weightier subject matter. No one ever faced death the way that Jesus did. And the way that He faced death is an argument that He is in fact the Christ.

Let's get precise here. Exactly what does John expect his readers to learn about Jesus in chapters 13–17? We are not left to guess. He tells us in John 13: 1:

> Now before the feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that His hour had come that He should depart from this world to the Father, having loved His own who were in the world, He loved them to the end.

Two things appear here. (1) Jesus has perfect knowledge of what lies ahead and where He is going. (2) In His last hours He loves His followers right up to the end of His life. If you read chapters 13–17 carefully you will find that both these themes emerge repeatedly.

First of all, nothing catches Jesus by surprise. Early on He announces that one of His inner circle will betray Him (13:10-11, 21) and He gives Judas the sop (13:26-30). Judas leaves with only Jesus realizing what he is going to do. Moreover, Jesus knew that His separation by death from His disciples would be quite brief: "A little while and you shall not see Me, and again a little while, and you will see Me, because I go to the Father" (16:16). Note the repeated emphasis on this theme (13:33; 14:19; and 16:19). As with the betrayal by Judas, the disciples don't pick up on this idea either (cf. 13:17-18).

Jesus knows. The disciples don't. Jesus has supernatural knowledge. As John will remind us in the Garden scene (18:4): "Jesus therefore, knowing all things that would come upon Him, went forth and said to them, 'Whom are you seeking?'"

The second major theme is Jesus' love for His own, right up to the end of His life. This is every bit as impressive as His supernatural forek-

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[26] Plato's *Phaedo,* 118.16-17.

nowledge. Here is a Man who knows full well He is about to be arrested, physically abused, tried, and condemned unfairly, and then subjected to a cruel and painful death by crucifixion. And yet in His Final Discourse with His followers—and even in His prayer to God—there is not the slightest trace of self-concern or self-pity. His whole concern is that His disciples should be able to weather this severe shock to their faith that would begin only too soon.

In John's Gospel, there is no discussion of Jesus' agony in Gethsemane. There is no report of His sweat falling to the ground like great drops of blood (Luke 22:44). That would have confused John's unconverted readers and distracted them from the point John was making. Jesus knew what lay ahead. And during this Discourse, He is totally focused on the need of His disciples in the coming hours and days, and even beyond that into their time of witness for Him. They could look forward to the arrival of another Helper when this present Helper returned to His Father (John 14:16-18). Jesus' words express His love and His concern for *them*, not for *Himself!*

As you know, The Last Discourse begins with that humble act of love that only John reports, the washing of His disciples' feet. Over and over in The Discourse Jesus speaks of His love for them and about their need to replicate that love among themselves. The Discourse closes with His request to the Father that "the love with which You have loved Me may be in them, and I in them" (17:26).

This unit of material shows a Person whose approach to His own death is unique beyond all human experience. Compared to this Person, Socrates himself was a poor, frail mortal who had no assurance about what lay beyond death for him. By contrast, Jesus the Christ knows He is on His way to the Eternal Father (John 13:1).

The bottom line is simply this: The Last Discourse in John 13–17 is a skilled portrait of Jesus in the hours before His death. This portrait invites the readers to believe that He is who this Gospel proclaims Him to be. Jesus is *the Christ*.

In other words, The Last Discourse is a brilliant and effective evangelistic tool.