

CHAPTER ONE

WHY QUESTIONS?

Before I refuse to take your questions, I have an opening statement.
—Ronald Reagan

According to John, Jesus asked questions.

Why did Jesus ask questions—instead of just giving answers?

Why did John bother to include Jesus' questions—instead of just his statements?

What do questions *do* in John—and do they make a difference to the readers of John's Gospel?

Do the questions of Jesus in John matter—or are they merely window-dressing?

At first these questions may elicit simple responses:

Jesus asked questions because questions are a typical part of narrative and dialogue.

John included those questions as part of the narrative and dialogue.

The questions of Jesus are questions typical for this kind of literature, and they make a difference in that they carry the story along.

The questions of Jesus in John do matter; but only as a narrative device, not substantively. They matter less than the statements—the theology—put forth in the gospel. The questions are there to spice up the narrative so readers can stay awake long enough to dig out the nuggets of theological truth.

How important are the questions of Jesus in John? This depends on who you ask. Is it merely an interesting coincidence that the very first words of Jesus in John are a question (“What do you seek?”) *and* the very last words of Jesus in John are a question (“What is it to you?”)?¹

¹ The first words spoken by a narrative's protagonist carry extra degrees of significance; see for example, Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic, 1981), 74; Ben Witherington, III, *John's Wisdom: A Commentary on the Fourth Gospel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995), 69; John Painter, “Inclined to God: The Quest for Eternal Life—Bultmannian Hermeneutics and the Theology of the Fourth Gospel,” in *Exploring*

Or that the first words of Jesus after his resurrection also take the form of a question (“Woman, why are you weeping?”)? Or that questions usually serve as openings or climaxes for Jesus’ discourse?² Or that the most common narrative device in John’s Gospel is the question?³ Or one of the most significant?⁴ Scholars have written book after book after book on the statements of Jesus in John, with little or no attention paid to the questions.

I believe the questions of Jesus in John—by which I mean, the questions Jesus *asks*—are far more significant than past treatments have afforded. They deserve a second look as to their meaning, usage and purpose in the Fourth Gospel. With very few exceptions, readers of the gospel have overlooked their worth throughout the years; they have bypassed the questions to get to the *real* meaning and substance, the statements. I will argue in this book that a deeper investigation of the questions of Jesus is long overdue.⁵ I will also argue that these questions are more meaningful than Western readers realize, in part due to foundational presuppositions received from the Western tradition.⁶

The Propositional Problem

Most readers of the gospels read them to see what Jesus will *say*, not to see what Jesus will *ask*. More problematically, many modern readers of the gospels read the texts to pick out the most important statements of Jesus, divorced of their context, and segregated from the original questions

the Gospel of John: In Honor of D. Moody Smith, ed. R. Alan Culpepper and C. Clifton Black (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996), 354; and Robert H. Smith, “‘Seeking Jesus’ in the Gospel of John,” *Currents in Theology and Mission* 15:1 (1988): 51.

² For example, openings such as John 1:38 (first disciples), 2:4 (mother), 5:6 (disabled man), 6:5 (Philip), 8:10 (alleged adulterer), 9:35 (blind man), 18:34 (Pilate), 20:15 (Mary Magdalene), and 21:5 (last disciples); and climaxes such as 3:10 (Jesus’ wake-up call to Nicodemus), 7:19 (Jesus’ challenge of the crowd’s intent), 11:26 (Jesus’ call for decision from Martha), 18:11 (Jesus’ arrest), and 21:17 (Jesus’ call for decision from Peter).

³ Jo-Ann A. Brant, *Dialogue and Drama: Elements of Greek Tragedy in the Fourth Gospel* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2004), 194.

⁴ Gerald L. Borchert, *John 1–11*, NAC 25A (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2001), 177.

⁵ In writing this book, I intentionally chose to limit my study to the questions Jesus asked, omitting other questions in the Fourth Gospel (such as those asked of Jesus by other characters). This is no reflection on the value of those questions, which I do believe would be fruitful for further study. For a preliminary take on those, see Henry J. Cadbury, *Jesus: What Manner of Man* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2008).

⁶ I will not argue questions are superior to statements, or that they are somehow the key to “unlocking” the gospel. I will not argue they are a theme, or motif, or a paradigm.