Any student in an introductory New Testament course can tell you that Paul’s letters address specific situations that have arisen in his churches and intend to persuade his audience to take action, such as ignoring the so-called circumcision party that is making inroads in Galatia or overcoming the factionalism that is creating conflict in Corinth.1 Yet one may ask whether the differences in intent between the Pauline epistles and the New Testament gospels are truly as sharp as we tend to believe, particularly with regard to the Gospel of John. To be sure, the Gospel of John is by no means an epistle but rather a chronological narrative that begins in the beginning and ends with Jesus’ resurrection appearances. At the same time, the Gospel exhibits a number of features that suggest that the evangelist, like Paul, is addressing a concrete situation within a particular community that he knows very well, and that he wishes to move his audience along from their current position or behavior to one that in his view is better aligned with his view of how people should live in the period between Christ’s resurrection and the eschaton. In other words, the Gospel of John, no less than the letters of Paul, is a rhetorical document that is intended not only to narrate a story but to convince a specific audience of a particular position, and, even more than that, to have a transformative impact on their communal life.

The most obvious evidence of the Gospel’s rhetorical purpose is the conclusion of Chapter 20, generally taken to be the statement of purpose

1 This assumption also of course underlies Martinus de Boer’s own important work on Paul. See, for example, Martinus C. de Boer, “Paul’s Use and Interpretation of a Justification Tradition in Galatians 2.15–21,” JSNT 28 (2005): 189–216.
of the Gospel as a whole: “Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name” (20:30–31). From this passage emerge a number of important points. First, the Gospel of John is not an accidental writing that grew like topsy but a document intentionally composed as a book to be read to or by others. Second, the use of the second person plural suggests that these others are not imaginary readers but a real group, whether large or small, that exists outside the narrative world. Third, the book was written with a specific purpose: “in order that you may believe [or come to believe].” Believing, however, is not a goal in and of itself, but the ticket to eternal life. A life without faith in Jesus as the Christ and Son of God is no life at all. From the perspective of these verses, then, the Gospel is a rhetorical document in that it envisions a concrete audience that it hopes to engage in a profound existential transformation: the escape from darkness and death to light and life (8:52).

If the Fourth Gospel were a solely spiritual gospel, as many from Clement of Alexandria onwards have believed, it would be enough to say that its purpose is indeed to encourage faith in Jesus as the Messiah and Son of God and assure believers of life in his name. But from a historical-critical perspective, this conclusion is far from satisfying. Surely something more concrete is intended, and something more specific is at stake. In the absence of any external evidence for the composition and situation of the Johannine audience, there is only one way to get a purchase on these historical questions, and that is to make a crucial yet unverifiable assumption: at the same time as it tells a story of Jesus, the Gospel of John also reflects and addresses, however dimly and obliquely, its intended audience and their historical situation. Only by making this assumption is it possible to even ask the three fundamental historical questions that allow us to consider the rhetorical purpose that the Gospel writer may have had in mind: Who is the intended audience, the “you” to whom the last few verses of chapter 20 are addressed? What situation is the Gospel trying to address? And, most important, in what transformative process is the Gospel trying to engage its audience?

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2 All English translations are from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).