

THE NARRATIVE FUNCTION AND VERBAL ASPECT OF THE HISTORICAL PRESENT IN THE FOURTH GOSPEL

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I. INTRODUCTION

Scholars have long recognized the frequent occurrence of the historical present in classical and first-century Greek narratives.¹ In the NT, the historical present occurs most often in the Gospels of Mark and John.² While this verbal feature of the Gospel of Mark has drawn considerable scholarly attention,³ the way in which it functions within the Fourth Gospel remains

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¹ Historical present is used by ancient Greek writers including Herodotus (e.g. *Histories* 1.8–12), Thucydides (e.g. 6.54–58), Xenophon (e.g. *Anabasis* 1.3.20–21) and Lysias (e.g. 1.6–25; 3.1–18). It is missing from Homer's writings. For the historical present in classical Greek, see Kenneth L. McKay, "Further Remarks on the 'Historical' Present and Other Phenomena," *Foundations of Language* 11 (1974) 247–51; C. M. J. Sicking, "Aspect Choice: Time Reference or Discourse Function?" in *Two Studies in the Semantics of the Verb in Classical Greek* (ed. C. M. J. Sicking, and P. Stork; Leiden: Brill, 1996) 5–118; C. M. J. Sicking and P. Stork, "The Grammar of the So-called Historical Present in Ancient Greek," in *Grammar as Interpretation: Greek Literature in Its Linguistic Contexts* (ed. Egbert J. Bakker; Leiden: Brill, 1997) 131–68.

² As Abbott notes: "[t]he historic present, which is much more frequent in Mark than in the other Synoptics, is also a striking characteristic of John." By my count there are 165 historical presents in John's Gospel. Hawkins finds 78 historical presents in Matthew, 151 in Mark, 4 in Luke, 162 in John, and 13 in Acts. Decker detects 152 historical presents in Mark. O'Rourke counts 164 and Campbell finds 166 historical presents in the Fourth Gospel. Notice that the two variant figures—167 (p. 66) and 164 (figure 2, p. 67)—that Campbell gives in his section on John's historical presents could be the outcome of misprint or miscalculation. Summing up all his examples comes up with a total of 166 (cf. n. 64 and n. 65), not 167 or 164. See Edwin A. Abbott, *Johannine Grammar* (2 vols.; London: Adam and Charles Black, 1906) 1:350 (§ 2482); John C. Hawkins, *Horae Synopticae* (2d ed.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1968) 143–49; John J. O'Rourke, "The Historic Present in the Gospel of John," *JBL* 93 (1974) 585–90; Rodney J. Decker, *Temporal Deixis of the Greek Verb in the Gospel of Mark* (New York: Peter Lang, 2001) 99, 101–4; Constantine R. Campbell, *Verbal Aspect, the Indicative Mood, and Narrative* (New York: Peter Lang, 2007) 66–68 (esp. n. 64 and n. 65).

³ Randy Buth, "Mark's Use of the Historical Present," *Notes* 65 (1977) 7–13; Stephen H. Levinsohn, "Preliminary Observations on the Use of the Historical Present in Mark," *Notes* 65 (1977) 13–28; Ralph Enos, "The Use of the Historical Present in the Gospel according to St. Mark," *Journal of the Linguistic Association of the Southwest* 3 (1981) 281–98; Ronald L. Shive, "The Use of the Historical Present and Its Theological Significance" (Th.M. thesis; Dallas Theological Seminary, 1982); Carroll D. Osburn, "The Historical Present in Mark as a Text Critical Criterion," *Bib* 64 (1983) 486–500; Buist M. Fanning, *Verbal Aspect in the Greek New Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1990) 231–34; Decker, *Temporal Deixis of the Greek Verb in the Gospel of Mark* 101–4. For Matthew's use of the historic present, see Stephanie L. Black, "The Historic Present in Matthew: Beyond Speech Margins," in *Discourse Analysis and the New Testament: Approaches and Results* (ed. Stanley E. Porter and Jeffrey T. Reed; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999) 120–39.

a subject that has not yet been fully explored.⁴ This paper does not attempt to create a comprehensive model to explain the *raison d'être* of all the occurrences of the historical present in the Fourth Gospel. Rather, it gleans insight from recent discussions of verbal aspect and discourse analysis in order to explore the modest possibility that the historical present in this Gospel serves a narrative function. After identifying 165 occurrences of the historical present from the 980 present forms catalogued, this paper focuses on the Gospel's use of the historical presents that are non-λέγω verbs.⁵ Present forms of λέγω were excluded from the analysis because the verb's historical present, as a number of grammarians have observed, has likely become a "stereotyped idiom" that no longer carries rhetorical force.⁶

The second section will briefly discuss four major theories about the significance of the historical present. An overview of the verbal phenomenon of the historical present in the Fourth Gospel follows. The remainder of the essay centers upon the selected texts—particularly those containing a series of historical presents—in order to closely analyze the operation of the historical present within its immediate narrative context. This essay will demonstrate that, in many but not all cases, the use of the historical present in the Fourth Gospel serves the narrative function of introducing a new participant into the scene or introducing a participant's speech. These two functions help explain the peculiar distribution of the historical present within the Fourth Gospel, specifically, its concentration in some pericopae and absence from the others, and will shed new light on the composition of the Gospel's literary strategy.

II. THEORIES CONCERNING THE HISTORICAL PRESENT

Approaches to the historical present vary widely. The traditional view articulates a theory of temporal transfer, at one end of the spectrum, whereas recent discussions of verbal aspect that consider tense form as aspectually based and timeless reside at the other end. Four major theories fall within the spectrum, and their major tenants can be described as follows:

The first is the traditional, or time-based, view. This theory is taught and subscribed to by the majority of standard Greek grammars. In this view, the present tense is primarily used for denoting linear action that takes place simultaneously with the speaking or writing.⁷ When a present form occurs in the context of the past, its semantic value is that it evokes the present

⁴ Research that focuses specifically on John's historical present is scant. Mention should be made of O'Rourke, "The Historic Present in the Gospel of John"; David Boos, "The Historical Present in John's Gospel," *START* 11 (1984) 17–24. Fanning briefly comments on this grammatical feature in *Verbal Aspect* 234–35. See also Campbell, *Verbal Aspect* 57–76.

⁵ See the discussion in section 3.

⁶ Fanning, *Verbal Aspect* 231–32; *BDF* 167; Buth, "Mark's Use of the Historical Present" 7; cf. Nigel Turner, *Syntax* (vol. 3 of James H. Moulton's *A Grammar of New Testament Greek*; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1963) 60–62.

⁷ C. F. D. Moule, *An Idiom-Book of New Testament Greek* (2d ed.; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963) 7.

time, and it has the rhetorical effect of transposing the narrated event from the past to the "now." As a result, the story is brought to life and made more vivid. According to *BDF*, "the historical present can replace aorist indicative in a vivid narrative at the events of which the narrator imagines himself to be present."⁸ N. Turner makes a similar comment: the historical present is found "especially in vivid narrative where the speaker imagines himself present. . . . Mark and John are particularly fond of it, and their narrative is made vivid thereby."⁹ The traditional view explains the significance of the historical present in temporal terms, asserting that its chief function is to dramatize the story and heighten its rhetorical impact by depicting past events as if they took place in the reader's own timeframe.

A second theory, built upon the syntactic presupposition of tense reduction, contends that the historical present operates as a zero tense in past narrative.¹⁰ A major proponent of this theory is P. Kiparsky. The time-based view demonstrates an obvious weakness in failing to offer a satisfactory explanation for frequent alterations between the aorist and present forms. This fact "simply highlights the impossibility of adequately characterizing the so-called historical present on a semantic basis alone. Rather, a syntactic solution is called for."¹¹ At the semantic level, the historical present is no different from the past tense—it is only a present tense in disguise. At the pragmatic level, the historical present functions according to the "syntactic rule" of "some form of conjunction reduction, which optionally reduces repeated occurrences of the same tense to the present."¹² Kiparsky offers an example to illustrate the rule: "The sequence . . . Past . . . and . . . Past . . . is reduced to . . . Past . . . and . . . zero . . . , and since it is the present which is the zero tense, the reduced structure . . . Past . . . and . . . zero . . . is realized morphologically as . . . Past . . . and . . . Present. . . ."¹³ The tense reduction model has received little support from grammarians and linguists. As K. McKay points out, an obvious shortcoming of this model is that it fails to explain the tense sequence in a passage that comprises an uninterrupted string of historical presents, such as that in Thucydides 7.43.3–4.¹⁴ In S. Porter's assessment, the model is

⁸ *BDF* 167.

⁹ Turner, *Syntax* 60; cf. Georg B. Winer, *A Treatise on the Grammar of New Testament Greek* (3d ed.; trans. W. F. Moulton; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1882) 333–34; A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research* (5th ed.; New York: Hodder & Stoughton, 1931) 866–69.

¹⁰ Paul Kiparsky, "Tense and Mood in Indo-European Syntax," *Foundations of Language* 4 (1968) 30–57.

¹¹ *Ibid.* 35.

¹² Kiparsky goes on to say: "Such a rule not only accounts for the historical present, but at the same time for the alternation of aorist and present in modal contexts, and also for the alternation of future and present, which in the traditional theory remain separate and unexplained facts" (*ibid.* 33–34).

¹³ *Ibid.* 35.

¹⁴ McKay, "Further Remarks on the 'Historical' Present and Other Phenomena" 247–51; cf. Fanning, *Verbal Aspect* 229–30. For McKay's aspectual approach to Greek verb, see Kenneth L. McKay, "Time and Aspect in New Testament Greek," *NovT* 34 (1992) 209–28; *idem*, *A New Syntax of the Verb in New Testament Greek: An Aspectual Approach* (New York: Peter Lang, 1994) 27–52.

also unable to account for the historical present's appearance in a text that starts out using a present tense (e.g. Xenophon's *Anabasis* 1.1.1).¹⁵

Fanning's position represents the third approach to the historical present.¹⁶ On the one hand, this model seeks to incorporate the insights of recent linguistic studies on verbal aspect, while, on the other hand, it attempts to retain the temporal notion so central to the traditional view. According to this model, time is a semantic element of tense, at least in the indicative mood. The historical present is broken down into two distinguishable types. The first is what Fanning calls the "expressive" type, which serves "to give vivid description" by "transferring the past event into the present."¹⁷ The second is the "annalistic" type, which is used in "immediate note-taking or chronicling of facts, as though recording the event on the scene."¹⁸ It is Fanning's conviction that "in both types of historical present, the key feature which prompts the use of the present is the temporal transfer, not some sort of aspectual effect."¹⁹ As in the time-based view, Fanning treats the historical present as a literary device employed by the author to enact past incidents right before the reader's eyes and enliven the story accordingly. While insisting that the present form retains its temporal value in past situations, Fanning claims that its aspectual force is neutralized.²⁰ Following in the footsteps of Fanning, D. Wallace asserts that the aspectual force of the present tense is "reduced to zero" when employed in a past-time context.²¹ For the purpose of this paper, Fanning's observation that the historical present in Mark's narrative performs four discourse functions is central. The historical present in the Gospel of Mark often (1) raises the curtain on a new scene; (2) introduces a new character into the story; (3) signals the movement of a character to a new location; or (4) begins a specific pericope, following a succinct introduction.²² Fanning does not, however, attempt any further scrutiny of the historical present's usage in the Fourth Gospel.

The fourth view of the historical present is embodied in Porter's verbal aspect theory.²³ Although both Porter and Fanning ascribe semantic signif-

¹⁵ Stanley E. Porter, *Verbal Aspect in the Greek of the New Testament with Reference to Tense and Mood* (New York: Peter Lang, 1989) 190–92.

¹⁶ Fanning, *Verbal Aspect* 226–39.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* 227.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ "The point of the historical present is not how the occurrence is viewed, but that it occurs (rhetorically) 'now'" (*ibid.* 228).

²¹ Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996) 526.

²² Fanning, *Verbal Aspect* 232. Buth observes that Mark's historical present is often situated in "the beginning sentence of a paragraph and describes a change in the geographical setting of participants already on stage, or introduces participants who were off-stage." See Buth, "Mark's Use of the Historical Present" 13.

²³ Porter, *Verbal Aspect* 189–98. A concise definition of "verbal aspect" is given on p. 88: "Greek verbal aspect is a synthetic semantic category (realized in the forms of verbs) used of meaningful oppositions in a network of tense systems to grammaticalize the author's reasoned subjective conception of a process." See also D. A. Carson, "An Introduction to the Porter/Fanning Debate," in *Biblical Greek Language and Linguistics: Open Questions in Current Research* (ed. Stanley E.

icance to verbal aspect, Porter's theory diverges sharply from Fanning's in that it considers Greek tense as semantically non-temporal, even when the verb is used in the indicative. The implication is that temporal transpositions of past events to the reader's present time cannot be a rhetorical function or effect of the historical present. When a present form is juxtaposed with an aorist form in a narrative to express events from the past, the present tense's aspectual force is not neutralized but rather remains in play, giving a portrayal of the action.²⁴ "Imperfective" aspect—the present tense's semantic value—evinces the authorial perception of the action as in progress. The "perfective" aspect—grammaticalized in the aorist tense—depicts the verbal process "in its entirety as a single and complete whole."²⁵ Furthermore, on the basis of what Porter calls "material, implicational, distributive, and semantic criteria," the present tense entails a higher degree of "markedness" compared to the aorist tense, within the verbal network of aspectual oppositions.²⁶ Although both the present and imperfect tenses convey the imperfective aspect, the present tense is more heavily marked than the imperfect tense because the latter tense form grammaticalizes an additional notion that Porter calls "remoteness."²⁷ Since the present tense is a semantically more heavily marked tense form, the author may employ present forms in the beginning, in a transition, in a climax, or at any point of the story to add emphasis or bring something important to the fore.²⁸ Porter's analysis of the historical present within the fabric of aspectual oppositions has recently been taken up by C. Campbell in his study on the indicative mood in NT narrative. Although Campbell prefers to speak of "proximity" instead of "remoteness," his understanding of the historical present shares much in common with Porter's.²⁹

Porter and D. A. Carson; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993) 18–25; Stanley E. Porter, "Greek Grammar and Syntax," in *The Face of New Testament Studies: A Survey of Recent Research* (ed. Scot McKnight and Grant R. Osborne; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004) 76–103; Robert E. Picirilli, "The Meaning of the Tenses in New Testament Greek: Where Are We?" *JETS* 48 (2005) 533–55; Andrew D. Naselli, "A Brief Introduction to Verbal Aspect in New Testament Greek," *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal* 12 (2007) 17–28.

²⁴ In a past-time situation, "the historic present has either altered or neutralized its verbal aspect" (Porter, *Verbal Aspect* 196).

²⁵ The perfect and pluperfect tenses grammaticalize the stative aspect, that is, the verbal process is viewed as "in a state or condition of affairs" (ibid. 91).

²⁶ Ibid. 178–81. The most heavily marked tense form, however, is not the present but the perfect tense.

²⁷ "The Imperfect is best understood as the less heavily marked imperfective form, grammaticalizing [+remoteness], i.e. it is used in contexts where the action is seen as more remote than the action described by the (non-remote) Present" (ibid. 207).

²⁸ The present tense form may occur "at those places where the author feels that he wishes to draw attention to an event or series of events." Porter goes on to write: "This includes the beginning of units of discourse, and thus it is used to highlight possibly the discourse unit itself but certainly the transition to the new unit, often including setting and participants; events within a discourse unit selected for special significance, such as the climactic turning point; dialogue considered as special pertinent to a discussion" (ibid. 196).

²⁹ Campbell, *Verbal Aspect* 57–76, but Campbell is less affirmative than Porter as to the present tense's discourse function in signaling prominent themes.

This brief survey is not exhaustive, but it should suffice in sketching out the current scholars' major approaches to the historical present. The remainder of this paper adopts Porter's aspectual theory as a provisional model in order to investigate the historical present's function in the narratives of John's Gospel. The main reason for choosing this theory is the conceptual power of "aspectual distinction" in explaining the historical present's appearance alongside non-present forms such as the aorist and imperfect tenses in past-time context. The other three theories are unable to provide a satisfactory explanation for the coexistence of present and non-present tenses, and the frequent jumping between them, within the textual context of a given narrative. Having addressed the theoretical issues surrounding the historical present, the next section will set forth observations about this verbal feature's use in the Fourth Gospel. The paper will then look closely at the historical present's specific function within the literary context of a few selected Gospel passages.

III. GENERAL OBSERVATIONS

John's narrative contains 2530 indicative verbs.³⁰ Among them, 1019 are in the present tense;³¹ 823 are in the aorist tense; 281 are in the imperfect tense; 204 are in the perfect tense;³² 169 are in the future tense; and 34 are in the pluperfect tense. This study cataloged 980 present indicative verbs (these do not include one form present in an OT citation [12:15], and 34 δύναμαι and four μέλλω found in various catenative constructions³³) in the Fourth Gospel. As far as time is concerned, present indicative verbs in this Gospel are used in diverse temporal situations, beyond the narrow scope of the immediate present.

There are 165 occurrences of the historical present in the non-discourse sections of John's Gospel.³⁴ This total differs slightly from the figure provided

³⁰ The statistic is based on the result performed by GRAMCORD GNT morphological search and research system (v. 2.4), with slight modifications of the data. All the figures in this paper do not count the indicative verbs located in the pericope 7:53–8:11, which is considered by most textual critics as a late insertion. For a discussion of the authenticity of the text, see Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (2d ed.; New York: UBS, 2002) 187–89.

³¹ The database included πιστεύετε (14:1a, b) and γινώσκετε (15:18), yet the contexts suggest that they are more likely to be imperatives. These two examples were manually eliminated from the data.

³² The indicative verb ἔσθηκεν in 8:44, which has shown up in the GRAMCORD search for perfect indicative verbs, was not included. The verb should be in the imperfect tense. It also appeared in the search for imperfect indicative verbs in John's Gospel.

³³ For issues about the catenative construction, see Porter, *Verbal Aspect* 487–92.

³⁴ The decision of excluding direct and indirect speeches in the analysis was made on the basis of the observation that Greek usually retains the tense, when changed from direct to indirect speech. It is then notoriously difficult to determine whether a present indicative verb, embedded within a direct or indirect discourse, is indeed a historical present. Notice that the matter of direct/indirect discourse pertains to not only verbs of speaking, but also verbs of knowing and believing. See Turner, *Syntax* 64; Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* 537–39; Stanley E. Porter, *Idioms*

by O'Rourke in his 1974 essay, which finds 164 historical presents in this Gospel.³⁵ There are three differences between the two lists of the historical present. First, the present study counted three additional past-referring present indicative verbs—ἔστιν (5:2),³⁶ ἔρχεται (20:6), and λέγει (21:22). Second, two verbs that are in the list of O'Rourke are absent from that of this study: φωτίζει (1:9) and ἐστίν (1:19). In the former case, the direct object (πάντα ἄνθρωπον) of φωτίζει suggests that the verb describes a general instead of past situation. In the latter case, the present indicative verb ἐστίν is a part of the evangelist's introductory statement for the Baptist's witness. It is, then, not properly considered a historical present.

On the whole, the lexical meanings of the 165 historical presents fall into three main verbal categories: speaking, seeing and moving. There are 125 verbs in the category of "speaking" (75.8%), of which 120 are sundry forms of λέγω.³⁷ Three instances of ἀποκρίνομαι (12:23; 13:26, 38), one of φωνέω (2:9) and one of φημί (18:29) constitute the five remaining occurrences in this category. Two common verbs of seeing (9 occurrences; 5.5%) are among the Gospel's historical presents: βλέπω is used five times (1:29; 20:1, 5; 21:9, 20), and θεωρῶ appears four times (6:19; 20:6, 12, 14).³⁸ There are 24 (14.5%) past-referring verbs of moving used in the present tense. The predominant verb is ἔρχομαι, which occurs 13 times in the past-time context (4:5, 7; 11:38; 12:22 [2x]; 13:6; 18:3; 20:1, 2, 6, 18, 26; 21:13). Other historical presents falling into this verbal class include ἄγω (9:13; 18:28), ἐγείρω (13:4), τίθημι (13:4), βάλλω (13:5), νεύω (13:24), λαμβάνω (13:26; 21:13), δίδωμι (13:26; 21:13) and τρέχω (20:2). The seven (4.2%) remaining historical presents that do not fit neatly into any of the three categories are: φαίνω (1:5),³⁹ μαρτυρέω (1:15), εἰμί (5:2),⁴⁰ and εὐρίσκω (1:41, 43, 45; 5:14).

of the Greek New Testament (2d ed.; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999) 268–75. Depending on one's view of the literary structure of certain Johannine passages, some present indicative verbs may or may not be regarded as situating within a speech environment (e.g. μαρτυρεῖ in 3:32). This verb is not considered as a historical present in this study. Even if this instance is included in the research, the result would not be greatly affected. It is uncertain whether the present indicative verb ἐστίν in 19:40 is a historical present; this verb is not included in the 165 occurrences of the historical present. Four present forms of εἰμι, that are located within quotation formulas (2:17; 6:31, 45; 12:14) are also not considered.

³⁵ O'Rourke, "The Historic Present in the Gospel of John."

³⁶ Wallace argues that this verb is a "stative present" instead of a historical present. See Daniel B. Wallace, "John 5:2 and the Date of the Fourth Gospel," *Bib* 71 (1990) 177–205; idem, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* 531.

³⁷ John 1:21, 29, 36, 38, 39, 41, 43, 45, 46, 47, 48, 51; 2:3, 4, 5, 7, 8, 10; 3:4, 4:7, 9, 11, 15, 16, 17, 19, 21, 25, 26, 28, 34, 49, 50; 5:6, 8; 6:5, 8, 12, 20; 7:6, 50; 8:39; 9:12, 17; 11:7, 8, 11, 23, 24, 27, 34, 39 (2x), 40, 44; 12:4, 22 (2x); 13:6, 8, 9, 10, 25, 27, 31, 36, 37; 14:5, 6, 8, 9, 22; 16:29; 18:4, 5, 17 (2x), 26, 38 (2x); 19:4, 5, 6, 9, 10, 14, 15, 26, 27, 28; 20:2, 13 (2x), 15 (2x), 16 (2x), 17, 19, 22, 27, 29; 21:3 (2x), 5, 7, 10, 12, 15 (3x), 16 (3x), 17 (3x), 19, 21, 22.

³⁸ Abbott notes that the verb βλέπω does not appear in the form of the historical present in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke. See Abbott, *Johannine Grammar* 1:350 (§ 2482).

³⁹ It is possible that φαίνω is a gnomic present.

⁴⁰ See n. 35.

All of the 45 non-λέγω verbs used in the historical present were analyzed to ascertain whether they exhibit patterns of usage. The results are summarized as follows:⁴¹

1. Ten are used to begin new pericopae (in most cases, new scenes): 1:43; 5:2; 5:14; 9:13; 11:38; 13:4a, b; 18:28; 20:1a, b.⁴²
2. Five are used to close pericopae: 13:38; 20:18; 21:13a, b, c.
3. Twenty-two are used to introduce new characters into the story: 1:29, 41, 43, 45; 2:9; 4:7; 6:19; 9:13; 12:22a, b; 13:6, 24, [26b],⁴³ 26c; 18:3; 20:2a, b, 12, 14, 18, 26; 21:20.
4. Eight are used to indicate characters' movement to new locations: 4:5; 11:38; 18:3, 28; 20:2a, b, 6a, 18.
5. Seventeen are located at speech margins that are followed almost immediately by speeches: 1:15, 29, 41, 43, 45; 2:9; 4:7; 5:14; 12:23; 13:6, 26a, 38; 18:29; 20:2a, b, 26; 21:20.
6. Five do not fit any of the above descriptions: 1:5; 13:5; 20:5, 6b; 21:9.

A few issues require comment here. First, the historical presents in the Fourth Gospel perform functions in the narrative. More specifically, the Gospel's historical presents are generally located at key junctures of the story where new participants come into scene or existing participants begin to speak.⁴⁴ The appearance of the historical present might, then, signal changes to the narrative scene. Second, unlike Mark's Gospel—in which over 30 (non-λέγω verbs) of the 152 instances of the historical present are situated at the opening events of new paragraphs⁴⁵—only 10 historical presents in John's story function to raise the curtains on individual scenes. Yet, as with the usage in the Second Gospel,⁴⁶ John's historical presents are rarely employed for depicting final closing events. The fact that there are few occurrences of

⁴¹ Note that historical presents that execute several functions simultaneously may occur more than once. See the works of Fanning and Decker for the classification of the historical presents in Mark's Gospel. Fanning, *Verbal Aspect* 232; Decker, *Temporal Deixis* 103–4.

⁴² The letters (a, b, c, etc.) indicate the sequence of non-λέγω historical presents in a single verse, where there is more than one occurrence of this type of verb. The historical presents in 13:4a and 13:4b come after a brief introductory sentence in the literary unit. Notice that this category ("to begin new pericopae") includes categories 1 ("to begin a paragraph") and 4 ("to begin a specific unit after a sentence introducing the general section in which it falls") in Fanning's system of classification (*Verbal Aspect* 232).

⁴³ Following Nestle-Aland 27th edition, the present indicative verb λαμβάνει is placed within brackets to indicate some degree of uncertainty regarding the authenticity of the text. It only receives a rating of C by the UBS committee. See Metzger, *Textual Commentary* 205.

⁴⁴ Campbell observes that the historical present often performs the role of discourse-introducer, yet he misses the important function of bringing in characters. Campbell, *Verbal Aspect* 57–76.

⁴⁵ Here I rely on the studies of Fanning and Decker—the latter scholar detects 152 historical presents in the Gospel of Mark. See Fanning, *Verbal Aspect* 232; Decker, *Temporal Deixis* 103–4. Enos observes the "pericope-initial" use of Mark's historical presents (Enos, "The Use of the Historical Present in the Gospel According to Mark" 292).

⁴⁶ Only five historical presents in Mark's Gospel are employed for depicting closing events. See Fanning, *Verbal Aspect* 232; Decker, *Temporal Deixis* 103–4.

the historical present in the opening and closing of the passages suggests that the evangelist does not use the historical present as a literary device at a macro-level to structure his composition, such as by marking divisions between large literary units. Instead, the historical present functions at the micro-level in the Fourth Gospel, operating within individual units to bring in characters and signal their intention to speak.

Third, there may be a correlation between tense choice and lexis, or type of action.⁴⁷ As mentioned earlier, the majority of the historical presents in the Fourth Gospel are used to depict speaking, seeing, and moving. Several scholars have observed that verbs used for these purposes tend to occur in the present tense in post-classical Greek literature, including in some historical books in the LXX.⁴⁸ Of important note, the general usage of the historical present in the Fourth Gospel aligns with this conventional linguistic tenet. A quick search of the data indicates that 11 of the 12 occurrences of βλέπω in the Gospel appear in the present tense. Present forms of θεωρέω (15 out of 17 occurrences) are also common.⁴⁹ The intimate connection of the present tense with certain kinds of lexis/action may temper the notion that John's historical presents that belong to the three verbal classes serve specific discourse purposes such as signaling prominence.⁵⁰

Fourth, the fact that the historical present serves a narrative function in the Fourth Gospel (especially introducing characters and speeches) contradicts O'Rourke's claim that its "uneven distribution" in this Gospel provides "an argument against the alleged stylistic unity of John."⁵¹ There are two reasons why O'Rourke's contention is untenable: On the one hand, if the historical present often operates to introduce persons and utterances, its paucity in certain passages should not be surprising. As is common in Jesus' monologues (e.g. chaps. 15 and 17), or in dialogues between only a handful of individuals or parties (e.g. chaps. 3, 9, and 10), the occasions for ushering in interlocutors or interlocutions are, naturally, rare. On the other hand, an

⁴⁷ Sicking and Stork prefer to speak of "categories of events (i.e. saying, answering, ordering, hearing, seeing, arriving, dying, etc.)" in classical Greek literature that often are portrayed by the historical present. Sicking and Stork, "The Grammar of the So-Called Historical Present" 166. Fanning mentions "an idiomatic predilection to use the historical present more commonly with some verbs" (*Verbal Aspect* 234–35).

⁴⁸ See Turner, *Syntax* 61. Thackeray points out the widespread use of the historical present in the Greek translations of the books of Kings. "The present is mainly confined to verbs of motion (coming, going, sending); some writers use it also with verbs of seeing and saying. . . . The main function is thus, I maintain, to introduce a date, a new scene, a new character, occasionally a new speaker; in other words a fresh paragraph in the narrative." See Henry St. John Thackeray, *The Septuagint and Jewish Worship: A Study in Origins* (London: Oxford University Press, 1921) 21.

⁴⁹ However, among the 110 occurrences of ἐρχομαι in the Fourth Gospel, only 49 are in the present tense. There are 37 aorist forms of this verb. The statistics only refer to verbs in the indicative mood and do not include the verbs in 7:53–8:11.

⁵⁰ Silva comments that in the case where "some specific verbs are characteristically used in one rather than another aspectual form, . . . the significance of such a use diminishes significantly." See Moisés Silva, "A Response to Fanning and Porter on Verbal Aspect," in Porter and Carson, *Biblical Greek Language and Linguistics* 80.

⁵¹ O'Rourke, "The Historic Present in the Gospel of John" 587.

abundance of the historical present in other pericopae may be due to particular narrated events that unfold a number of actions of speaking/seeing/moving (e.g. chaps. 13, 18–20). It is also possible that, because the present tense is a more heavily marked tense form, the proliferation of the historical present in chapters 13–21⁵² (except chaps. 14–17⁵³) serves to alert the reader that the plot's summit has arrived. In these important chapters, the climactic events of the entire narrative—namely, Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection—gradually unfold. In short, the historical present's uneven distribution in the Fourth Gospel may indicate the Gospel's creative craftsmanship rather than stylistic dissonance.

IV. SAMPLE PASSAGES

This section closely studies the function of the historical present within individual pericopae. Limited space allows us to examine only five representative passages. We will begin with those that contain a high number of historical presents.

1. *Jesus' appearance to Mary Magdalene.* The first selected passage (20:1–18) narrates the story of Jesus' resurrection appearance to Mary Magdalene. Eighteen historical presents are found in this pericope (10 of which are non-λέγω verbs). The chart below shows all of the historical presents underlined. Present forms of λέγω appear with dotted underlines.

- 1a τῇ δὲ μιᾷ τῶν σαββάτων + "Mary Magdalene came (ἔρχεται)" (pres) + pres ptcp
- 1b καί + "she saw (βλέπει) the stone" (pres) + pf ptcp
- 2a "She ran (τρέχει)" (pres)
- 2b καί + "she came (ἔρχεται) to Simon Peter" (pres)
- 2c "the disciple whom Jesus loved (ἐφίλει)" (impf)
- 2d καί + "she said (λέγει) to them" (pres) + [speech]
- 3a "Peter and the other disciple came (ἔζηλθεν)" (aor)
- 3b καί + "they went (ἤρχοντο) to the tomb" (aor)
- 4a "The two were running (ἔτρεχον)" (impf)
- 4b καί + "the other disciple ran (τάχισεν) ahead of Peter" (aor)
- 4c καί + "he came (ἦλθεν) first to the tomb" (aor)
- 5a καί + aor ptcp + "he saw (βλέπει)" (pres) + pres ptcp
- 5b μέντοι + "he did not go in (εἰσῆλθεν)" (aor)
- 6a "Simon Peter came (ἔρχεται)" (pres) + pres ptcp
- 6b καί + "he went into (εἰσῆλθεν) the tomb" (aor)
- 6c καί + "he saw (θεωρεῖ)" (pres) + pres ptcp
- 7a "which was (ἦν) on his head" (impf) + pres ptcp
- 7b ἀλλά + pf ptcp

⁵² Ninety (28 are non-λέγω verbs) of the Gospel's 165 historical presents are situated in chapters 13–21.

⁵³ All of the five historical presents in chapter 14 are various forms of λέγω. See n. 36.

- 8a τότε + "he [the other disciple] came (εἰσῆλθεν)" (aor) + aor ptcp
 8b καὶ + "he saw (εἶδεν)" (aor)
 8c καὶ + "he believed (ἐπίστευσεν)" (aor)
 9a "they did not understand (ἤδεισαν) the Scripture" (plupf)
 9b ὅτι + "he must (δεῖ) rise" (pres + aor inf)
 10 "the disciples went (ἀπῆλθον)" (aor)
 11a "Mary stood (εἰστήκει) at the tomb" (plupf) + pres ptcp
 11b ὥς οὖν + "she was weeping (ἐκλαίεν)" (impf)
 11c "she bent (παρέκυσεν) into the tomb" (aor)
 12a καὶ + "she saw (θεωρεῖ) two angels" (pres) + pres ptcp
 12b "where Jesus' body was laid (ἔκειτο)" (impf)
 13a καὶ + "they said (λέγουσιν) to her" (pres) + [speech]
 13b "She said (λέγει) to them" (pres) + [speech]
 14a aor ptcp + "she turned around (ἐστράφη)" (aor)
 14b καὶ + "she saw (θεωρεῖ) Jesus" (pres) + pf ptcp
 14c καὶ + "she did not know (ἤδει)" (plupf)
 15a "Jesus said (λέγει) to her" (pres) + [speech]
 15b pres ptcp + [indirect discourse]
 15c "She said (λέγει) to him" (pres) + [speech]
 16a "Jesus said (λέγει) to her" (pres) + [speech]
 16b aor ptcp + "she said (λέγει)" (pres) + [speech]
 17 "Jesus said (λέγει) to her" (pres) + [speech]
 18a "Mary Magdalene went (ἔρχεται) to the disciples" (pres) + pres ptcp
 + [speech]
 18b "he said (εἶπεν) these things to her" (aor)

Three observations emerge from the diagram. First, the historical present accompanies the first appearance of each of the main characters: Mary Magdalene (ἔρχεται in v. 1); Peter (ἔρχεται in v. 2); the beloved disciple (ἔρχεται in v. 2); two angels (θεωρεῖ in v. 12); Jesus (θεωρεῖ in v. 14); and the other disciples (ἔρχεται in v. 18). In each case, the subject of the verb is Mary Magdalene. In the evangelist's skilful hands, "Mary Magdalene" operates as a literary motif running throughout the chapter's plotline to usher in characters and to signal transitions to new scenes. Application of the historical present to Mary Magdalene reflects her crucial role as a protagonist in the resurrection narrative, whose focal point converges in her encounter with the risen Jesus.

Second, the historical presents are clustered primarily at the opening and closing sections of the story. No occurrence of the historical present is found in vv. 3, 4, 7, 8, 9, 10, and 11. A glance at these verses indicates that their contents do not constitute the heart of the story, whose spotlight shines instead on Jesus' resurrection appearance to Mary Magdalene. In verses 1–2, a chain of five historical presents (ἔρχεται–βλέπει–τρέχει–ἔρχεται–λέγει) is employed to vividly depict Mary's initial responses to discovering that the tomb is empty. As the narrative focus turns to Peter and the beloved disciple (v. 3), the predominant tense form shifts from the present tense to the aorist and imperfect tenses. These two tense forms prevail until verses 5–6, where

another key event occurs, that is, the arrival of Peter and the beloved disciple at the empty tomb.⁵⁴ Historical presents again surface to highlight the significance of this event. When Mary Magdalene recedes completely to the background (vv. 7–10), the historical present in turn disappears. Pluperfect, aorist and imperfect forms are employed in verse 11 to begin the last sub-unit (vv. 12–18), where 10 historical presents are found. Although the majority of these forms are of λέγω (7 occurrences), this high concentration of the historical present signals the plot's climax, namely, the appearance of the risen Jesus.

Third, despite arguments to the contrary, one cannot help but take notice that all historical presents used in this chapter fall into the verbal categories of speaking (λέγω), seeing (βλέπω, θεωρέω), and moving (έρχομαι, τρέχω). Verbs associated with these kinds of actions or events tend to occur in the present tense, both in John's Gospel and in contemporary Greek literature. Thus, it is possible that frequent use of the historical present in this passage relates to the kind of action or event that the verb portrays.

2. *The footwashing pericope.* Fourteen historical presents appear in the footwashing pericope (13:1–30), a parabolic act foreshadowing Jesus' imminent death on the cross. Eight of the historical presents are non-λέγω verbs: ἐγείρω (v. 4a), τίθημι (v. 4b), βάλλω (v. 5), ἔρχομαι (v. 6), νεύω (v. 24), ἀποκρίνομαι (v. 26a), λαμβάνω (v. 26b), and δίδωμι (v. 26c). The following diagram charts the tense forms used in the basic plot. Again, all historical presents are underlined (dotted lines signal the present forms of λέγω).

- 1a πρὸ δὲ τῆς εορτῆς τοῦ πάσχα + pf ptcp + [indirect discourse]
- 1b pf ptcp + "he [Jesus] loved (ἠγάπησεν) them" (aor)
- 2 καὶ + pre ptcp + pf ptcp + ἵνα-clause
- 3 pf ptcp + [two ὅτι-indirect discourses]
- 4a "He [Jesus] got up (ἐγείρεται)" (pres)
- 4b καὶ + "he laid aside (τίθησιν) his garments" (pres)
- 4c καὶ + aor ptcp + "he wrapped (διέζωσεν) a towel" (aor)
- 5a εἶτα + "he poured (βάλλει) water" (pres)
- 5b καὶ + "he began (ἤρξατο) to wash . . . and to wipe" (aor + pres inf + pre inf)
- 6a "He came (ἔρχεται) to Simon Peter" (pres)
- 6b "He [Peter] said (λέγει) to him" (pres) + [speech]
- 7 "Jesus answered (ἀπεκρίθη)" (aor) + "and he said (εἶπεν)" (aor) + [speech]
- 8a "Peter said (λέγει) to him" (pres) + [speech]
- 8b "Jesus answered (ἀπεκρίθη) him" (aor) + [speech]
- 9 "Simon Peter said (λέγει) to him" (pres) + [speech]
- 10 "Jesus said (λέγει) to him" (pres) + [speech]
- 11a "He knew (ᾔδει)" (plupf) + pres ptcp

⁵⁴ Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament* 868–69.

- 11b διὰ τοῦτο + “he said (εἶπεν)” (aor) + [speech]
 12a ὅτε οὖν + “he had washed (ἐνίψεν) their feet” (aor)
 12b [καί] + “he took (ἔλαβεν)” (aor)
 12c καί + “he reclined (ἀνεπεσεν)” (aor)
 12d “he said (εἶπεν)” (aor)
 12e–20 [Speech]
 21a aor ptp + “Jesus was troubled (ἐταράχθη)” (aor)
 21b καὶ + “he testified (ἐμαρτύρησεν)” (aor)
 21c καὶ + “he said (εἶπεν)” (aor) + [speech]
 22 “The disciples looked at (ἐβλεπον) one another” (impf) + pres ptp + [indirect discourse]
 23a “[He] was (ἦν) reclining” (impf + pres ptp)
 23b “the disciple whom Jesus loved (ἠγάπα)” (aor)
 24 “Simon Peter motioned (νεύει) to him” (pres) + aor inf + [indirect discourse]
 25 aor ptp + “he said (λέγει)” (pres) + [speech]
 26a “Jesus answered (ἀποκρίνεται)” (pres) + [speech]
 26b aor ptp + “[he took (λαμβάνει)]” (pres)
 26c καὶ + “he gave (δίδωσιν) to Judas Iscariot” (pres)
 27a καὶ + “Satan entered (εἰσῆλθεν)” (aor)
 27b “Jesus said (λέγει) to him [Judas]” (pres) + [speech]
 28 “no one knew (ἔγνων)” (aor) + pres ptp + “why he said (εἶπεν) to him” (aor)
 29 “Some thought (ἐδόκουν)” (impf) + [indirect discourse]
 30a aor ptp + “he went out (ἐξῆλθεν)” (aor)
 30b “It was (ἦν) night” (impf)

Most of the historical presents are located in two key junctures in the pericope: 13:4–10 (8 occurrences) and 13:24–27 (6 occurrences).⁵⁵ The first series of the historical present occurs after vv. 1–3, which provide necessary background information. Three historical presents (ἐγείρεται, τίθησιν, and βάλλει) are employed in verses 4–5 to depict Jesus’ preparatory actions to serve the disciples. Appearance of these historical presents raises the curtains on the footwashing scene. The fourth historical present (ἔρχεται in v. 6) introduces Simon Peter, whose conversation with Jesus occupies the story’s attention until verse 10. Notice that two aorist forms are inserted in among the five historical presents in verses 4–6. The syntactical constructions of these seven indicative verbs are as follows: present-καί-present-καί-aorist-present-καί-aorist-present-present. All of the verbs in these constructions are used in the third person, with Jesus as the shared grammatical subject. The verbs used for the two interjected aorist forms are διαζώννυμι and ἄρχω. Interestingly, their use is coordinated with immediately surrounding present indicative verbs.

⁵⁵ Fanning believes that the selection of the present tense here may partly be indebted to a chain of verbal reactions, that is, “use of one historical present prompts several in series” (*Verbal Aspect* 235).

The verb διαζώννυμι appears twice in the NT and exclusively in the Fourth Gospel. Besides this occurrence, the other instance also appears in the aorist tense. Since διαζώννυμι is “aspectually vague,”⁵⁶ the use of the aorist form does not create aspectual opposition with neighboring present indicative verbs. Use of the aorist tense, therefore, does not mean that the unfolded event (“wrapping a towel”) is less significant than the other events (“laying aside his garments” [v. 4b] and “pouring water” [v. 5a]) described by the present tense. The second verb (ἄρχω) is used 66 times in the indicative form in the NT. Aorist forms constitute the great majority of its occurrences, save six instances. At 13:5, the verb ἤρξατο is followed by two subordinating present infinitives (νίπτειν and ἐκμάσσειν). This grammatical construction (aorist-present-present), together with the lexical meaning of the verb, suggests that ἤρξατο is subordinated to the ensuing infinitives. It serves to deflect attention to the infinitives and to complete their lexical concepts: Jesus washes and dries the disciples’ feet. Notably, these humble actions are expressed in present forms, which are more heavily marked than the aorist.

The second chain of historical presents (6 occurrences) is located within verses 24–27. In this sub-unit, the story reaches closing thematic apex; that is, the unveiling of the identity of Jesus’ (would-be) betrayer. Three historical presents accompany the first appearance of two characters: the beloved disciple (νεύει) and Judas Iscariot (λαμβάνει and δίδωσιν). An aorist form (εἰσῆλθεν in v. 27) is found among the string of six historical presents: νεύει-λέγει-ἀποκρίνεται-λαμβάνει-δίδωσιν-εἰσῆλθεν-λέγει. This cluster of historical presents brings the entire event to the foreground so that the reader is alerted to what is most important in the storyline. Although the aorist tense is employed for depicting Satan’s involvement in Judas’ betrayal (v. 27), it is unlikely that the tense choice in that case means that that incident is less significant than the others recounted in the historical present. There, aspectual differences between the present and aorist tenses (imperfective and perfective aspects) sufficiently account for the tense alternations. Utilization of an aorist indicative verb reveals the author’s subjective perception of the verbal process as a complete action.

3. *The calling of Jesus’ first disciples.* Ten historical presents are found in 1:35–51, where four of Jesus’ earliest disciples appear for the first time in the Fourth Gospel. Seven of these historical presents are various forms of λέγω. Unlike with Andrew, the three other disciples (Peter in v. 41; Philip in v. 43; and Nathanael in v. 45) are introduced by the present form of εὐρίσκω. Absence of the historical present in Andrew’s appearance accords with his secondary role in the narrative, reflected in his brief introduction as “Simon Peter’s brother” (v. 40). Turner notes that the usages of the historical present in this pericope demonstrate the complementary functions of the present and aorist tenses: “the main events in the present and the incidentals

⁵⁶ The expression “aspectually vague” refers to certain Greek verbs that do not conjugate into “a full set of tense-forms, and hence do not participate in the aspectual system.” Porter, *Idioms of the Greek New Testament* 24–25.

in the aorist.”⁵⁷ In all three appearances of the historical present, the indicative verb is situated in a speech margin, followed almost immediately by an utterance. The discourses in verses 41 and 45 pertain directly to Jesus’ messianic identity—undoubtedly central to the theology of the Fourth Gospel. The speech in verse 43 recounts Jesus’ call to Philip to walk down the path of discipleship.

4. *Jesus and the Samaritan woman.* There are 14 past-referring present forms employed in 4:1–42. In large part, this passage is dominated by Jesus’ interchanges with the Samaritan woman. Not surprisingly, then, the verb λέγω is responsible for 12 present forms. In verses 1–3, five aorist indicative verbs (ἔγνων, ἤκουσαν, ἐβάπτισεν, ἀφῆκεν, and ἀπῆλθεν) set the stage for the entire story. After a succinct note about Jesus’ resolve to go through Samaria in verse 4 (the imperfect ἔδει), a historical present (ἔρχεται in v. 5) is employed to indicate his geographical movement to the town of Sychar. The second non-λέγω historical present (also an ἔρχεται in v. 7) brings the Samaritan woman—the other protagonist of the narrative—onto the stage.

While ἔρχομαι is a common verb of movement, its usage in chapter four suggests the significance of the two historical presents in verses 5 and 7. Among the verb’s nine occurrences in 4:1–42, six are in the present tense (4:5, 7, 21, 23, 25, 35), two are in the aorist tense (4:27, 40), and one is in the imperfect tense (4:30). All of the other three past-referring ἔρχομαι (vv. 27, 30, 40), other than those used in a speech context, do not appear in the present tense. These three verbs describe the return of the disciples (v. 27), the departure of the Samaritans from the city (v. 30), and their subsequent coming to Jesus (v. 40). These events fall into the backdrop of the narrative to allow for the showcasing of the main actions taking place in the foreground. But the first two ἔρχομαι (vv. 5, 7), which are historical presents, aid in unfolding crucial events at the outset of the story.

5. *Summary.* Although a number of the historical presents in the Fourth Gospel are used in connection with emphatic elements in their respective passages, it is overly simplistic to assume that all historical presents in the Gospel carry special significance.⁵⁸ This last example illustrates that the

⁵⁷ Turner, *Syntax* 61. Similarly, BDF remarks (referring to 1:29–43): “thus the circumstances, or all that is secondary, are given in a past tense; on the other hand the main action is likely to be represented by the present, while the concluding events are again put into the aor. because here a historical present would not be natural” (p. 167).

⁵⁸ In a collaborative essay, Reed and Reese examine the verbs of the Letter of Jude with reference to discourse prominence and verbal aspect. The result affirms an employment of the prominence model to discern Jude’s thematic significance, but Reed and Reese keenly remark that it is simplistic to interpret each occurrence of a particular tense in terms of prominence. See Jeffrey T. Reed and Ruth A. Reese, “Verbal Aspect, Discourse Prominence, and the Letter of Jude,” *Filologia neotestamentaria* 9 (1996) 180–99. Reed’s earlier essay mentioned that “aspect” is one of various literary means (e.g. word order, verbal voice, noun-verb relations) by which the NT authors utilize to lift out crucial elements from the context. Jeffrey T. Reed, “Identifying Theme in the NT: Insights from Discourse Analysis,” in *Discourse Analysis and Other Topics in Biblical Greek* (ed. Stanley E. Porter and D. A. Carson; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995) 75–101.

appearance of the historical present does not necessarily point to the surrounding narrative's prominence.

The historical present $\mu\alpha\rho\tau\rho\epsilon\tilde{\iota}$ (1:15) used in the Gospel's prologue does not begin or close the pericope, nor does it introduce a participant, since the Baptist has already appeared in verses 6–8. The verb $\mu\alpha\rho\tau\rho\acute{\epsilon}\omega$, found 33 times in the Fourth Gospel, does not fall into any of the verbal categories of speaking, seeing, or moving.⁵⁹ Only 11 of those 33 occurrences are various present indicative forms; the verb tends not to occur in the present tense in John's narrative. Most of these 11 instances are couched in a speaking environment, except in 1:15, where the historical present precedes an utterance, and also perhaps in 3:32.⁶⁰ In the Gospel's non-speech sections, past-referring $\mu\alpha\rho\tau\rho\acute{\epsilon}\omega$ occurs once in the imperfect tense (12:17), three times in the aorist tense (1:32; 4:44; 13:21), and once in the perfect tense (3:26).⁶¹ On the basis of these observations, the tense choice of $\mu\alpha\rho\tau\rho\epsilon\tilde{\iota}$ in the prologue cannot be explained simply by appealing to the Greek vernacular (i.e. the fact that it is not a common verb of speaking/seeing/moving in Johannine usage), lexical predilection (i.e. the fact that it does not tend to occur in the present tense in the Fourth Gospel) or authorial idiosyncrasy (i.e. the fact that the present tense is not the predominating tense form in the Gospel's past-time, non-speech sections). The question then arises: Does the historical present function to point out emphasis in the prologue?

In 1:15, the Baptist compares himself with Jesus and then confesses the latter's superiority. It can be argued that the historical present here serves to rhetorically underscore the Baptist's remarks and his subsequent witness to Jesus. Two observations support this contention. First, the historical present appears within a literary context where aorist forms prevail—all verbs used in verses 13–14, 16–17 are in the aorist tense. Second, a perfect indicative verb $\kappa\acute{\epsilon}\kappa\rho\alpha\gamma\epsilon\nu$ (v. 15) closely follows the historical present. According to Porter, the perfect tense is the most heavily marked tense form, having the additional effect of drawing attention to the grammatical subject (here, the Baptist).⁶² Yet, if $\mu\alpha\rho\tau\rho\epsilon\tilde{\iota}$ (v. 15) predominates, what explains the absence of the historical present in other equally or more important themes within the prologue (e.g. the incarnation or the comparison between Moses and Jesus)? It seems improbable that the historical present operates to accentuate the Baptist's witness as the prologue's centerpiece. More likely, the tense choice primarily reflects John's conception of the speech (the Baptist's tes-

⁵⁹ Although the verb $\mu\alpha\rho\tau\rho\acute{\epsilon}\omega$ may be used to express verbal testimony, its semantic range is evidently broader than that. It is thus not classed as a verb of speaking, at least not in the case of John's usage.

⁶⁰ It is possible to consider the section 3:31–36 as the evangelist's personal commentary and therefore not to treat the verses as a part of the Baptist's utterance.

⁶¹ These figures refer only to the verbs in the indicative mood. If the perfect indicative form in 19:35 (which is situated within the evangelist's commentary) is counted, then there are two instances of past-referring $\mu\alpha\rho\tau\rho\acute{\epsilon}\omega$ in the perfect tense.

⁶² "In the overwhelming majority of cases where the transitive Perfect occurs the emphasis appears to be on the subject" (Porter, *Verbal Aspect* 280). See also Kenneth L. McKay, "On the Perfect and Other Aspects in New Testament Greek," *NovT* 23 (1981) 309–14.

tifying) as in progress (the imperfective aspect). Moreover, the historical present functions as an introduction to the Baptist's speech.

V. CONCLUSION

This paper has analyzed the historical present's narrative function in the Fourth Gospel in the light of recent studies on verbal aspect and discourse analysis. The results broadly support the idea that the historical present in this Gospel generally executes particular functions in the narrative. The two predominant usages of the historical present are for introducing new participants and for initiating speeches. Less frequently, the historical present is also used to begin new paragraphs, to portray closing events or to indicate the movement of individuals to different geographical settings. Expressing prominence is the most obvious use observed in the pericopae where a number of historical presents are clustered, such as in chapters 13 and 20 of the Gospel.⁶³ Particularly in chapter 20, the historical present appears to underscore the narrative role of Mary Magdalene, thereby bringing her witnessing of Jesus' resurrection to the fore. At the structural level, the historical present's narrative function is helpful in illumining this verbal feature's peculiar allocation within John's Gospel and thereby refuting the scholarly misuse of the historical present's "uneven distribution" to dismiss the document's literary unity. In brief, analysis of the narrative function of the historical present was shown to be rewarding in understanding the literary and rhetorical strategy in John's composition.

The results of this study, however, do not comport with the simplistic assumption that all historical presents in the Fourth Gospel are used for discourse purposes or signaling prominence. It has repeatedly been said that verbs of seeing, speaking, and moving exhibit a tendency of occurring in the present tense in post-classical Greek literature including the Gospel. Appearance of such present forms in a narrative, therefore, does not necessarily signal the introduction of the narrative's prominent theme. Authorial idiosyncrasies and particular writing styles need to be taken into consideration as possible factors behind the use of a particular tense in any given work. This paper did not attempt to offer a comprehensive theory of the usage of the historical present in the Fourth Gospel. Nor does it believe that the functional value (narrative function or discourse prominence), rather than the aspectual force (imperfective aspect), of the present tense is central to the tense form's linguistic operation in every case. However, this paper has—at the least—demonstrated that the historical present is a literary device used for introducing characters and discourses and, in the particular case that a cluster of historical presents occur, for indicating prominent themes or events

⁶³ Campbell claims that "only in clustering significant numbers of historical presents does John use the historical present for the purposes of discourse prominence. The remaining historical presents are cases of either the imperfective-proximate spill, or verbs of propulsion used for heightened transition." His analysis, however, does not make a distinction between the historical present of λέγω and that of non-λέγω verbs. See Campbell, *Verbal Aspect* 67–68.

of John's story (e.g. chapters 13 and 20). Further research on the literary and rhetorical functions of the historical present in the Fourth Gospel and in other NT books, as well as comparative analysis of the use of the historical present within these writings, is recommended.