

# Signs and Discourses in John 5 and 6

Edited by  
JÖRG FREY and  
CRAIG R. KOESTER

*Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen  
zum Neuen Testament*

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**Mohr Siebeck**

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463





# Signs and Discourses in John 5 and 6

Historical, Literary, and Theological Readings  
from the Colloquium Ioanneum 2019 in Eisenach

Edited by

Jörg Frey and Craig R. Koester

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## Foreword

This is the fourth volume of essays produced by the Colloquium Ioanneum, an international group of established Johannine scholars, which held its fourth biennial meeting in Eisenach, Germany from August 5–9, 2019. Whereas previous meetings were held at Patmos, Ephesus, and Jerusalem, places associated with the story of the Gospel or the tradition about its composition, Eisenach is linked to the reception history of John. It was at the Wartburg, which overlooks Eisenach, that Martin Luther translated the New Testament into German in 1521.

Each meeting of the Colloquium focuses on a specific section of John's Gospel. Participants are invited to approach the text from different perspectives and using different interpretive methods. Sessions in 2019 centered on John 5 and 6. These chapters are distinctive in that they are structured in similar ways. Each begins with accounts of one or two miraculous "signs," which are followed by an extended discourse that elaborates the theological implications in contexts marked by controversy. John 5 and 6 are an especially fruitful section for critical dialogue because they bring together many of the most disputed issues in Johannine research.

In narrative studies, character portrayal has been a major focus of investigation. Interpreters recognize the importance of Johannine characters in conveying the Gospel's message, yet they differ as to whether the writer portrays a figure like the invalid at the pool in John 5 or the crowd in Galilee in John 6 in primarily positive or negative terms, and to what extent a mixture of traits might be involved. Contributors to this volume adopt various approaches when analyzing the portrayal of Jesus and his disciples, including comparisons of John and Mark, consideration of how intertexts from Isaiah and other biblical writings might shape the perspectives of the readers, and exploration of the way models from the Greco-Roman world might contribute to interpretation. Tensions around the portrayal of Judas and his role in the Johannine narrative are also considered. Fresh attention is given to the way space is constructed in the narrative, shaping the readers' perspective on the settings in which the story unfolds.

Christology and eschatology are deeply connected in Jesus's speech in John 5. Interpreters have long debated how the speech's references to judgment and eternal life might be understood alongside its use of apocalyptic images, which have a more futuristic orientation. In this volume, consideration is given to the way the depiction of Jesus's narrative audience can enhance interpretation, and how John's portrayal of Jesus as judge encompasses both present and future

dimensions. A major aspect of the speech is Jesus's claim to work on the Sabbath as his Father does. Essays in this volume consider what these works entail, whether they support the charge that Jesus is making himself equal to God, and how Jesus's claim to be completing his Father's work might actually fit within a broader theme of creation – an often neglected theme in Johannine research.

Jesus's words about eating his flesh and drinking his blood are offensive to the audience depicted in the narrative. Using various interpretive angles, the contributors look at this disputed section of John 6, exploring the role of Eucharistic traditions, how the language might be linked to the Gospel's insistence on the reality of the incarnation, and the extent to which it points to the offense of Jesus's crucifixion. Together, the essays offer a multifaceted look at major topics of importance for current Johannine studies.

The Colloquium Ioanneum expresses thanks to the University of the Free State in Bloemfontein, South Africa for its partnership with the Colloquium. We are also grateful to Andrew Bowden (Munich/Mainz) who tended the comprehensive editing of the whole volume and compiled the bibliography and indexes, and to Michael Jost (Zurich/Cambridge) for his editorial work with the German articles. We want to thank the staff at Mohr Siebeck, in particular Tobias Stähler and Bettina Gade, for the helpful and professional management of the production process.

Zürich / St. Paul, Mn., in December 2020

Jörg Frey and Craig R. Koester

## Table of Contents

Foreword .....	V
 <i>George Parsenios</i>	
The “Man at the Pool” and the “Man Born Blind”: Comparison in the Lives of Plutarch and the Gospel of John .....	1
 <i>Christos Karakolis</i>	
The Lame Man (John 5:1–18) as a Model for the Johannine Jews: A Narrative and Reader-Response Analysis .....	15
 <i>Adele Reinhartz</i>	
Doing God’s Work: John 5:17–18 from a Jewish Perspective .....	29
 <i>Jörg Frey</i>	
Who Should “Not Wonder”? On the Audience and Logical Structure of the Discourse-Section John 5:19–30 .....	39
 <i>R. Alan Culpepper</i>	
Jesus the Judge (John 5:21–30): The Theme of Judgment in John’s Gospel ..	59
 <i>Ruben Zimmermann / Zacharias Shoukry</i>	
<i>Creatio Continua</i> in the Fourth Gospel: Motifs of Creation in John 5–6 ...	87
 <i>Jean Zumstein</i>	
The Construction of Space in John 5–6 .....	117
 <i>Michael Labahn</i>	
Jesus: Gottes Gabe in der Not. Theologische und christologische Charakterisierung Jesu und seiner Jünger im Vergleich zwischen Mk 6:30–52 und Joh 6:1–21 .....	129
 <i>Craig R. Koester</i>	
Signs and Christology in John 6:1–21 in Light of Jewish and Greco-Roman Frames of Reference: Prophet, King, and Revealer of God .....	155



*Catrin H. Williams*

Intertextual Perspectives on John's Sea-Crossing Account (John 6:16–21) .. 175

*William Loader*

Soteriology and Spirituality in John 6: A Reflection on Key Issues  
in Johannine Theology ..... 199

*Michael Theobald*

„Diese Rede ist hart“ (Joh 6:60): Wider die Versuchung, Joh 6:51e–58  
bildlich zu verstehen ..... 215

*Udo Schnelle*

Johannes 6:60–71 und die Genese der johanneischen Theologie ..... 249

*Marianne Meye Thompson*

“Many of His Disciples Turned Back”: The Offense of Jesus's Death in the  
Gospel of John (John 6:60–71) ..... 275

*D. Francois Tolmie*

Elected and a Devil? The Characterization of Judas Iscariot  
in the Fourth Gospel ..... 289

Bibliography ..... 311

List of Contributors ..... 347

Index of Ancient Sources ..... 349

Index of Authors ..... 375

Index of Subjects ..... 381

# The “Man at the Pool” and the “Man Born Blind”

## Comparison in the Lives of Plutarch and the Gospel of John

*George Parsenius*

Major characters in the Gospel of John are often joined in pairs. Peter and the Beloved Disciple are the best-known duo, and they interact with one another in various ways in various episodes, especially in the famous final scene in chapter 21. Other figures are linked together in a similar way, such as the pairings of Mary/Martha, Nicodemus/the Samaritan woman, and Thomas/Mary Magdalene. Less famous, but no less obvious, is the pairing of the blind man in John 9 and the lame man healed at the pool in John 5. Scholars have shown how closely these two characters are connected and have evaluated the significance of each individual figure by exploring their relationship to one another.<sup>1</sup> That these two figures should be read in concert seems clear. The purpose of their pairing is less certain. What are we to learn from comparing them? This question will be addressed in the present essay, but this question also begets an even larger question regarding all of the paired sets in John: Why does the Fourth Gospel join its characters in sets of two? Scholars have responded to this situation in various ways in the history of scholarship, and the present essay will interact with previous discussions by reading John’s narrative together with the *Lives* of Plutarch. Plutarch also combines characters in pairs that are designed to encourage comparison. By seeing how comparison operates in Plutarch, we will shed light on how comparison operates in John.

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<sup>1</sup> R. Alan Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel: A Study in Literary Design* (Philadelphia, Fortress, 1983), 137–38; idem, “John 5:1–18: A Sample of Narrative-Critical Commentary,” in *The Gospel of John as Literature*, ed. Mark W.G. Stibbe, NTTS 17 (Leiden: Brill, 1993), 193–207. See also the article of Christos Karakolis in this volume; Jeffrey L. Staley, “Stumbling in the Dark, Reaching for the Light: Character in John 5 and John 9,” *Semeia* 53 (1991): 55–80; J. Ramsey Michaels, “The Invalid at the Pool: The Man Who Merely Got Well,” in *Character Studies in the Fourth Gospel: Narrative Approaches to Seventy Figures in John*, ed. Steven A. Hunt, D. Francois Tormie, and Ruben Zimmermann, WUNT 314 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), 337–46.

## 1. Opposing Views on the Lame Man at the Pool

The lame man healed at the pool in John 5 is obscure. Both his behavior and his motivations are described very sparingly. One thing seems clear, though. The circumstances of his healing are strikingly similar to the circumstances of the blind man healed by Jesus in John 9. R. Alan Culpepper lays out a series of 11 points of comparison that make clear the association between the healing of the lame man in John 5 and the blind man in John 9, as follows:<sup>2</sup>

	<i>Lame man</i>	<i>Blind man</i>
1. Length of illness told	(5:5)	(9:1)
2. Jesus heals	(5:6)	(9:6)
3. A pool mentioned	(5:2)	(9:7)
4. Jesus heals on Sabbath	(5:9)	(9:14)
5. Jesus accused of violating Sabbath	(5:10)	(9:16)
6. Healed man interrogated	(5:12)	(9:15)
7. Man uncertain about place/identity of Jesus	(5:13)	(9:12)
8. Jesus finds man	(5:14)	(9:35)
9. Sin linked to suffering	(5:14)	(9:3)
10. Man encounters the Jews	(5:15)	(9:34–35)
11. Jesus does “works” of Father who sent him	(5:17)	(9:4)

The various points of connection listed here correspond very tightly, although in a few notable places the association is one of similarity-in-difference. Jesus apparently connects illness to sin in John 5:14, for example, but he denies such a connection in John 9:3.<sup>3</sup> Other points of disparity exist as well, especially in the outcomes of the two stories. In contrast to the healing in John 9, which leads to discipleship and worship of Jesus, we are never told that the man in John 5 believes in Jesus – or even thanks him. Where the man in John 9 has a clear connection to Jesus at the end of the episode, the man in John 5 is left in limbo.

This lack of specific detail about the results of the healing in the life of the lame man leads interpreters to arrive at differing, even opposing views, as they evaluate whether or not the lame man is a positive example of faith in Jesus. Michael Theobald views him as a negative example of faith.<sup>4</sup> Physical health, Theobald argues, is not to be equated for John with spiritual health. Being healed does not mean being saved. Moreover, true faith must have some consequence for those

<sup>2</sup> Culpepper, *Anatomy*, 139–40. The descriptions of the eleven categories here listed are abbreviated from Culpepper’s actual descriptions.

<sup>3</sup> Udo Schnelle resolves this tension by saying that illness might, but need not, be the result of sin. Only Jesus knows the proper understanding of the past, and what matters is not the past, but the future life of faith for each person, regardless of their differing pasts (Udo Schnelle, *Das Evangelium nach Johannes*, 5th ed., THKNT [Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2016], 142).

<sup>4</sup> Michael Theobald, *Das Evangelium nach Johannes: Kapitel 1–12*, RNT (Regensburg: Friedrich Pustet, 2009), 380.

who profess it, as we see in the case of the blind man. The lame man in John 5, however, merely identifies Jesus as his healer. He just says the name of Jesus. He does not profess faith in that name. Culpepper has a similar perspective. He views the man in John 5 as an example of poor faith. He may even betray Jesus. Culpepper writes, "The man does not even know who healed him, but he is ready to blame his violation of the sabbath on his benefactor."<sup>5</sup> Culpepper recognizes, of course, that the man's circumstances might be more complex when he says, "To what extent his naivete or dullness is culpable may be debatable, but there is little with which to excuse him."<sup>6</sup>

Christos Karakolis sees the opposite.<sup>7</sup> Karakolis ingeniously sees great meaning in the duration of the man's illness. Sick for thirty-eight years (5:5), the man healed at the pool suffered for as long as Israel dwelt in the wilderness when it was punished for disobedience (Deut 2:14). The healed man is, thus, a symbol of Israel on the path to true faith in Jesus Christ. Jeffrey Staley sees the same positive example of faith in the lame man, but for different reasons. For Staley, the absence of explicit condemnation spells vindication. No one ever denounces the man, Staley argues, so readers should not denounce him either. Staley writes, "[Neither] the narrator nor Jesus condemns him, either explicitly or implicitly ... Perhaps he is ... a character who serves in his own way, with his own theological argument, as a faithful witness to a sign performed."<sup>8</sup>

For Staley, then, the very ambivalence that surrounds the man is a positive sign, and yet he is led to this position by the same shortage of information that leads Theobald and Culpepper in the opposite direction. For Culpepper and Theobald, the lack of specific detail meant a lack of faith, while for Staley, the want of any specific critique of the man implies that he is not to be viewed negatively.

These two polar opposites are not the only options for interpreters. For some scholars the ambiguity is the very point of the story. Udo Schnelle suggests that the man is described in limited detail because he has a merely limited role, a role that is purely functional on the level of narrative dramaturgy. The lame man is a means to an end. He is the catalyst who causes Jesus to heal on the Sabbath, and so enflame the growing tensions with the leaders of Israel. The man is described simply, because his role is very simple.<sup>9</sup> J. Ramsey Michaels says the same of the lame man, but he even denies him a clear narrative role. He refers to the man at the pool without any color or description as "the man who got well," and insists that nothing further can be known. He writes, "All that can be said of him is what is said over and over again in the text – that he 'got well.' No faith, no new birth,

<sup>5</sup> Culpepper, *Anatomy*, 138.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 138.

<sup>7</sup> See the essay by Karakolis in the present volume.

<sup>8</sup> Staley, "Stumbling in the Dark," 63.

<sup>9</sup> Schnelle, *Evangelium*, 118–19.

no lasting forgiveness. Any of these – or on the contrary, ‘something worse’ – could lie in his future, but it is all left to the reader’s imagination ....”<sup>10</sup> But he is not only ambiguous for lack of detail. It is also that there are both good and bad things in his portrayal. Marianne Thompson sums this matter up nicely when she says, “The man’s actions are somewhat ambiguous. By reporting Jesus to the authorities, he has not only borne witness to Jesus’s power to heal, but he has also (inadvertently?) become the occasion of escalating hostility toward Jesus.”<sup>11</sup>

This ambiguity is something to which we will return repeatedly, both in John and in Plutarch. The ambiguity, I think, is not an accident, but intentional. Schnelle is correct to say that the man in John 5 is a means to an end, and I think that this designation applies to more than merely dramaturgy. The lame man plays not just a dramatic role but also an ethical one. He is a catalyst to deeper reflection on the nature of true discipleship. Some people in John are clearly to be read positively, like the blind man in John 9. Others are clearly to be read negatively, like the people who crucify Jesus. We are to imitate the one and to avoid the other. The purpose of the lame man in John 5 is different. He is neither to be imitated nor avoided but contemplated. He compels us to reflect further on what it means to be a disciple. To argue one way or the other regarding the figure in John 5, scholars have had to reflect on what discipleship really means. This is certainly what the lame man has done in the history of interpretation, as the opinions surveyed above demonstrate. I suggest that this is John’s purpose in painting the man in John 5 in ambiguous colors.

Two things are true, therefore, of the lame man in John 5. First, he is meant to be compared to the blind man in John 9, and second he is depicted in a spare, ambiguous fashion. I will argue in what follows that these two factors are meant as catalysts for reflection on the nature of discipleship. They are complementary aspects of the man’s portrayal. Comparison and ambiguity serve the same purpose as they force the reader to reflect further on what it means to follow Jesus.

## 2. Comparison and Ambivalence in Plutarch

Comparison and ambivalent character portrayals also complement one another in Plutarch’s *Lives*. Comparison is especially important. Comparison, or *synkrisis* (σύγκρισις), is a defining feature of Plutarch’s biographical project. Every life comes as part of a pair, one Greek and one Roman, and each pair begins with a common prologue. After the prologue, the two separate biographies are sketched

<sup>10</sup> Michaels, “The Invalid at the Pool,” 346.

<sup>11</sup> Marianne Meye Thompson, *John: A Commentary*, NTL (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2015), 119.

individually, but then they are viewed synoptically again in a section labeled *synkrisis*, where Plutarch examines the two figures in tandem. Each individual figure is meant to be compared with another. They are joined at the hip, as it were. Plutarch, of course, does not invent the idea of writing biography in this fashion. Cornelius Nepos had presented *Parallel Lives* roughly a century earlier, and the idea of comparison is common in antiquity, especially in rhetoric.<sup>12</sup> But comparison plays a uniquely significant role in Plutarch's project. To understand more clearly the purpose of comparison in Plutarch, we need to say a few words first about the purpose of the *Lives* in general.

Plutarch makes the ethical emphasis of his biographies plain in his prefaces.<sup>13</sup> The life of *Alexander*, for example, begins by saying that the purpose is not merely to describe everything that Alexander ever did but to uncover his character. Like a portrait painter, Plutarch will not reproduce the whole man's life but only the aspects of his life that show his character (*Alexander* 1). What is the purpose of excavating character? The prologue to *Aemilius and Timoleon* clarifies the point when it adds the following:

I began the composition of my *Lives* for others, but I have continued and lingered with them for myself, using the narrative as a kind of mirror in some way to improve and assimilate my life to the virtue of these men. In fact it has seemed to be nothing less than living with them and sharing their lives, whenever we welcome each of them in turn like a guest through the narrative, and taking them hand in hand we contemplate them "just as he was," choosing for study the most significant and noblest of their deeds. What greater delight than this could you have, and what more dynamic in producing improvement of character? (*Timoleon* 1.1–3 [Perrin, LCL])<sup>14</sup>

It was a common fact in ancient moral formation that imitation of others was a helpful tool for improving oneself. Simon Swain writes, "A key part of Plutarch's plan for moral improvement, with the aim of constituting one's life according to philosophy, was the observation of others."<sup>15</sup> Imitation had, of course, long

<sup>12</sup> It is especially significant in speeches of praise (*encomia*). See, for example, Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 1368a19–26; Quintillian, *Institutio Oratoria* 2.4.21. It became so common in rhetoric that it was included the *Progymnasmata*. See Timothy E. Duff, "Plutarchan Synkrisis: Comparisons and Contradictions," in *Rhetorical Theory and Praxis in Plutarch*, ed. L. Van Der Stockt, Collection d'Etudes Classiques II (Leuven: Peeters, 2000), 141–61, here 141; For further discussion, see Donald Lemen Clark, *Rhetoric in Greco-Roman Education* (New York; Columbia University Press, 1957), 198; Michael W. Martin, *Judas and the Rhetoric of Comparison in the Fourth Gospel*, New Testament Monographs 25 (Sheffield: Phoenix, 2010), 37–45.

<sup>13</sup> Simon Swain, *Hellenism and Empire: Language, Classicism, and Power in the Greek World, AD 50–250* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1998), 138.

<sup>14</sup> To be sure, moral formation is not utterly absent in history writing. Josephus follows standard practice when he writes about the mistakes and misfortunes of Antipater following the death of Pheroras, and moralizes about them in Josephus *Jewish Antiquities*, 17.3.3; Livy, a half-century earlier in *The History of Rome*, says that the study of history affords its student an array of examples to imitate and to avoid (Preface 10).

<sup>15</sup> Swain, *Hellenism and Empire*, 138.

been a key catalyst in moral formation across the philosophical spectrum, and it appears in the New Testament famously in those places where Paul announces, “Be imitators of me” (1 Cor 4:16; 11:1; Gal 4:12; Phil 3:17; 1 Thess 1:6).<sup>16</sup> The observation of examples is also not confined to the *Lives*. Plutarch uses examples throughout his moral treatises, as even the most cursory reading will demonstrate. One of a myriad of examples makes the point, taken from the treatise *On Praising Oneself Inoffensively*, which says,

In the first place self-praise goes unresented if you are defending your good name or answering a charge, as Pericles when he said, “Yet I, with whom you are angry, yield to none, I believe, in devising needful measures and laying them before you; and I love my country and cannot be bought.” (*On Praising Oneself* 4 [De Lacy, LCL])

This is why the *Lives* focus exclusively on character. The *Lives* are not intended as history books from which a reader might learn everything a great figure ever accomplished. The *Lives* are meant to engage their readers and to urge them to live a more philosophical life. So they are selective in what they present.

This insight returns our attention to the Gospel of John for a moment. The *Lives* of Plutarch, as is now well known, are often compared to the New Testament Gospels, and this is one area where the comparison is especially close, particularly in the case of the Fourth Gospel.<sup>17</sup> The Gospel of John draws to its close with a similar apology for not recording everything that Jesus did, but being selective, and also for seeking a particular result in the reader. John writes,

Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name. (John 20:30–31)

At a certain level of abstraction, the purpose of John coincides with the purposes of Plutarch. John, like all of the Gospels, focuses on the parts of Jesus’s life that reveal his character, in the same way that Plutarch focuses on the parts of his subjects’ lives that reveal their character.

Our concern here is on another connection shared by John and Plutarch, the comparison of paired figures. If Plutarch writes about his characters as pairs and compares their lives after he writes about them, why does he do so? Plutarch seems at one point to give us a clue. He does not present only positive characters that are worthy of imitation but introduces the *Lives* of Mark Antony and Demetrius Poliorcetes by writing,

<sup>16</sup> For imitation in ancient moral formation generally, see Abraham J. Malherbe, *Moral Exhortation: A Greco-Roman Sourcebook* (Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox, 1989), 136–38.

<sup>17</sup> For John and biography, see Richard A. Burridge, *What are the Gospels: A Comparison with Greco-Roman Biography*, SNTSMS 70 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992). Loveday Alexander recognizes points of contact between the Gospels and ancient Lives, but also points out issues of disparity in “What is a Gospel?” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Gospels*, ed. Stephen Barton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 13–33.

Ismenias the Theban used to show his scholars good and bad performers on the flute, and to tell them, "You should play like this man," and, "You should not play like that," and as Antigenidas used to say, "Young people would take greater pleasure in hearing good playing, if first they were set to hear bad," so, in the same manner, it seems to me likely enough that we shall be all the more zealous and more emulous to read, observe, and imitate the better lives, if we are not left in ignorance of the blameworthy and the bad. For this reason, the following book contains the lives of Demetrius Poliorcetes and Antonius the Triumvir; two persons who have abundantly justified the words of Plato, that great natures produce great vices .... (*Demetrius* 1.6–7 [Perrin, LCL])

We read, then, not only about characters to imitate but characters to avoid. At first sight, then, the point of giving us two figures together, and then comparing them, is to help us to decide which one to imitate and which one to ignore.

This is certainly one way for comparison to operate, but it is not the only way. The *Progymnasmata* textbooks actually envision the possibility of comparing figures for various purposes, including demonstrating their equality. Aphthonios writes that *synkrysis* in rhetoric refers to "comparison, made by setting things side-by-side, bringing the greater together with what is compared to it." (*Progymnasmata* 10).<sup>18</sup> Expanding on this point, Pseudo-Hermogenes writes,

Now sometimes we introduce comparisons on the basis of equality, showing the subjects we compare as equal, either in all respects or in most; sometimes we prefer one or the other, while also praising what we placed second. ... There is also a comparison with the better, where you bring in the lesser to show it is equal to the greater; for example, if you were to compare Odysseus to Heracles. (*Progymnasmata* 19–20 [Kennedy])

Comparison, then, is designed not only to demonstrate superiority but also to reflect on two topics that might be seen as equal. This is how it regularly operates in Plutarch. For instance, the very fact that Plutarch compares one Greek figure to one Roman figure has been seen as an attempt to praise the one and diminish the other. But this is not borne out by the evidence. While Plutarch does insist that virtue is an outgrowth of Greek *paideia*, Romans and Greeks are equally able to achieve the virtue that he praises. Ethnic comparison is not intended to show the superiority of one race.<sup>19</sup> The comparison of Romans and Greeks is a comparison of equality. The same is true of other comparative exercises in Plutarch outside the *Lives*. In his treatise *On Superstition*, Plutarch actually discusses two related areas of concern, superstition and atheism, and sees both of them as deviations from the mean of true piety. Although he denigrates superstition as worse than atheism, both of them are dangerous deviations from true piety. His goal in comparing atheism and superstition, then, is not merely to praise one and to demean the other. His goal is to discuss the nature of true piety.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Duff, "Plutarchan *Synkrysis*," 141. Translation from George Kennedy, trans., *Progymnasmata: Greek Textbooks of Prose Composition and Rhetoric* (Brill; Leiden, 2003), 83.

<sup>19</sup> Swain, *Hellenism and Empire*, 138–40.

<sup>20</sup> Duff, "Plutarchan *Synkrysis*," 142.



This is how comparison often operates in the *Lives*. The comparison can lead to a degree of ambiguity about which figure is superior to the other. This reality has led Timothy Duff to reflect carefully on those places where the *synkrisis* is not a neat and tidy conclusion to the *Lives* but an opaque and ambiguous door into further reflection. One such place where this occurs is in the paired biographies of the Roman Lucullus and the Greek Cimon. In the biographical section, Lucullus ends his life in an opulent retirement. While Plutarch does not see this as ideal, he casts it as an attempt for Lucullus to devote himself to philosophy. After admitting that Lucullus spent his money on lavish banquets, Plutarch adds that Lucullus also made his library a place of great learning. Plutarch writes,

In these ways, then, Lucullus used his wealth wantonly, as though it were in very truth a Barbarian prisoner-of-war. But what he did in the establishment of a library deserves warm praise. He got together many books, and they were well written, and his use of them was more honourable to him than his acquisition of them. His libraries were thrown open to all, and the cloisters surrounding them, and the study-rooms, were accessible without restriction to the Greeks, who constantly repaired thither as to an hostelry of the Muses, and spent the day with one another, in glad escape from their other occupations. Lucullus himself also often spent his leisure hours there with them, walking about in the cloisters with their scholars, and he would assist their statesmen in whatever they desired. And in general his house was a home and prytaneium for the Greeks who came to Rome. He was fond of all philosophy .... (*Lucullus* 41.6–42.2 [Perrin, LCL])

This is how the matter is addressed within the biography proper. In the *synkrisis* section that follows the *Comparison of Lucullus and Cimon*, however, Plutarch sees this behavior in a less positive light, when he writes,

And further, though both alike were wealthy, they did not make a like use of their wealth. There is no comparing the south wall of the Acropolis, which was completed with the moneys brought home by Cimon, with the palaces and sea-washed Belvideres at Neapolis, which Lucullus built out of the spoils of the Barbarians. Nor can the table of Cimon be likened to that of Lucullus; the one was democratic and charitable, the other sumptuous and oriental. The one, at slight outlay, gave daily sustenance to many; the other, at large cost, was prepared for a few luxurious livers. (*Comparison of Lucullus and Cimon* 1.7–8 [Perrin, LCL])

But as soon as he censures Lucullus, he also adds that Lucullus did not die at the height of his powers, and in active service, as Cimon did, suggesting that how Lucullus spent his retirement is not so blameworthy after all. He seems to keep from praising one figure over the other, even where he might be able to do so. We are not entirely sure what Plutarch thinks.

The same happens in several other *Lives*, where the *synkrisis* takes episodes from the biographical narratives, and reads them stereoscopically in such a way that the final verdict on comparing the two figures is not a pro for one and a con for the other, but a draw. They each have virtuous qualities, given their differing

circumstances, just as, if Lucullus had died earlier, he might have lived as Cimon did. The two had different lives and different circumstances, so they are assessed in light of those differences. Duff interprets these *synkriseis* in the following way:

We should ... see Plutarch's refusal in the *synkriseis* to come down in favour of either figure as preventing the *synkriseis* from becoming a mere exercise in grading or ranking, a ritual prize-giving to whichever of the subjects might be judged superior. The *synkriseis* focus the reader's attention not so much on the individual subjects – which was a better man? – as on the virtues and vices revealed by their two lives.<sup>21</sup>

The effect of this manner of writing is that Plutarch turns the reader of the *Lives* into "the jury in the rhetorical *agon* of the *synkrisis*."<sup>22</sup> The point of the *Lives*, after all, is not to receive answers about the lives of others but to ask questions about ourselves. Plutarch is explicit on this point in some places. At the conclusion of the *synkrisis* to the *Comparison of Philopoemen and Titus*, he says,

Nobly generous, then, was the clemency and humanity which Titus showed to the Greeks, but more nobly generous was the firmness and love of freedom with which Philopoemen opposed the Romans; for it is easier to confer favors on suppliants than it is to vex with opposition those who are more powerful. But since, after this examination, the difference between the two men is hard to define, *I leave it to my reader to say* [emphasis mine] whether, if we award to the Greek the crown for military experience and generalship, and to the Roman that for justice and goodness of heart, we shall not make a fair decision. (*Comparison of Philopoemen and Titus*. (3.3 [Perrin, LCL])<sup>23</sup>

Duff writes, "The final judgment, as in other cases where a final judgement is given, is crude and disappointing. But it is just possible that the invitation to the reader might be taken as more than simply a rhetorical convention. The closing words might well be regarded as an invitation to consider what one does make of Philopoemen and Titus."<sup>24</sup> The *Comparison of Lysander and Sulla*, for example, ends in an even more ambiguous situation:

We may now consider whether we shall err very much from the truth in pronouncing our verdict that Sulla won the more successes, while Lysander had the fewer failings; and in giving to the one the preëminence in self-control and moderation, to the other, in generalship and valor. (*Comparison of Lysander and Sulla* (5.6 [Perrin, LCL])

Both figures have virtues, if in different areas. This is by far the most common way in which the comparisons end, not with a clear ranking of one figure over another but with a sense that each has some vice and each has some virtue. And this may be where Plutarch most helps us to read John.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 146.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 161.

<sup>23</sup> Translation from Bernadotte Perrin, *Plutarch, Lives*, LCL (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1921).

<sup>24</sup> "Plutarchan Synkrisis," 149.

### 3. Comparison in John's Gospel

Those characters like the lame man, who are presented in ways that make their status unclear, are meant to lead us to deeper reflection on the nature of discipleship. The greatest support for this suggestion is that many recent interpreters have begun to read John's paired groups in precisely this fashion.

Take, for instance, Mary and Martha in John 11 as they are discussed by Craig Koester. Mary and Martha are not only paired in the same scene and paired as sisters but they also both meet Jesus and say, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died" (11:21, 32). But where Martha greets Jesus with elementary hope in the resurrection, and is taught even more about the resurrection, Mary greets Jesus with weeping. Even so, Jesus does not disparage her. Koester writes, "Martha and Mary present two faces of grief, each of which has a place within the Christian community ... Mary's posture ... differs from that of her sister, for she fell at Jesus' feet, weeping (11:31, 33). Nevertheless, the evangelist does not seem to disparage Mary, but allows her to present another face of grief in the aftermath of death."<sup>25</sup> There is certainly no hint of the Lukan elevation of Mary over Martha (Luke 10:38–42).

Harold Attridge has also written importantly on the pairing of Thomas and Mary Magdalene.<sup>26</sup> Both encounter the risen Jesus and both are involved in touching him or not. Jesus tells Mary, "Do not touch me (Μή μου ἅπτου), for I have not yet ascended to my Father" (John 20:17). Thomas, on the other hand, is told to place his finger into the wounds of Jesus (20:27). To some, this has suggested that Mary is deficient in comparison with Thomas. But Mary Rose D'Angelo has recognized that the phrase "Do not touch me" corresponds to a similar phrase in the *Apocalypse of Moses* (*Life of Adam and Eve* in Greek; 31:3–4), where Adam says, "When I die, leave me alone, and let no one touch me (μηδεις μου ἅψηται), until the angel of the Lord shall say something about me." Mary, with a very similar phrase, is told not to touch Jesus because he has not yet returned to his Father; he is somehow in a transitional state. Following this insight, Attridge writes,

On his way back on high, [Jesus] was simply not fit to be touched ... If there was nothing wrong with Mary, she is not being marginalized or put in her secondary place by Jesus' command. She is not, moreover, being contrasted unfavorably with Thomas. After all, she does not need to touch Jesus in order to come to whatever degree of faith she achieves. Above all, she does not need to be touching him in order to do what all disciples are called upon to do: tell his story to others.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Craig Koester, *Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel: Meaning, Mystery, Community*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 66–67.

<sup>26</sup> Harold W. Attridge, "'Don't Be Touching Me': Recent Feminist Scholarship on Mary Magdalene," in *A Feminist Companion to John*, vol. 2, ed. Amy Jill-Levine (New York; Sheffield Academic, 2003), 140–66, here 162–64.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 166.

## Index of Ancient Sources

### Hebrew Bible

<i>Genesis</i>	31, 37, 90, 97–98, 101	14	184–185
1	87, 89–90, 93, 95, 103, 105, 108	14–15 14–15 LXX	185, 196 185
1–2	91–92	14:4, 18 LXX	284–285
1–3	87, 90, 93, 95	14:13 LXX	185
1:1	87, 103	14:21	184
1:2	107–108	14:21–31	196
1:21, 25–26	103	14:24	142
1:28–31	103	14:24 LXX	185
2	30, 100	14:27, 29	185
2–3	91, 113	15	190
2:1–3, 5–6, 9, 11	103	15:8, 19	185
2:2	31, 37, 100–102	15:13 LXX	190
2:2 LXX	100	15:24	278
2:2–3	29, 96–97	16	223
2:3	31, 37, 96	16:1–36	111
2:4, 18	103	16:3, 8, 12	223
2:7	87	16:4	278, 277
2:13, 16, 19–20	103	16:4, 14, 31	158
2:15	112	16:15	226, 277
3:8	92	17:3	239
5:18–24	260	18:13, 22, 26	64
15:1	169, 186	20	30
17:1	187	20:8–11	29, 98
18	260	20:11	103
26:24	169, 187	20:18	168
28:17	168	33:19, 22	190
49:10	159	33:19–23	142
49:16	64	34:5–6	190
		34:6	142
		34:30	168
<i>Exodus</i>	30, 37, 97, 125, 278	36:2	100
3:6	168, 187	40:33	100
3:14	146, 169		
3:14 LXX	169	<i>Leviticus</i>	
5:13	100	24:15–16	271
6:21	185		
12:3–5	188	<i>Numbers</i>	
12:8	227	11:1	278
12:10, 46 LXX	188		

11:6–9	111	<i>1 Kings</i>	
14:2, 27	278	7–26 LXX	100
14:26–35	17	17:7–16	111
17:5, 10	278	17:8–24	159
17:20, 25 LXX	278	17:17–24	159
20:3, 13	239	19:11	142, 190
24:17	159		
27:17	140	<i>2 Kings</i>	
34:11	119	2:7–8, 14	184
		4:8–36, 42–44	159
<i>Deuteronomy</i>	30	4:42–44 (LXX)	111
2:14	3, 17, 20	5:7	100
5:14–15	30	5:7 LXX	104
8:2–3	209		
8:3	278	<i>Nehemiah</i>	
8:3, 16	111	6:6, 16 MT	100
17:6	158	9:6	104
8:15, 18	158	9:15	277
8:15–18	140		
8:15–19	158–160	<i>Job</i>	108–109
8:16	158	9:8	96, 108, 146, 169
8:18	157	9:8 LXX	184
8:19a	158	9:11 LXX	184
8:19b	158	10:3	99
18:15, 18	196	10:8	103
19:15	158	19:26–27	108
21:22–23	271	24:13	108
32:39 LXX	169, 187	26:12	146
32:42 LXX	224	26:12–13	146
34:11	158	31:8	108
		34:25	64
<i>Joshua</i>	36	36:6	104
3:7–4:18	184	36:24	36–37
13:27	119–120	38:16	146
19:35	120	38:16 LXX	184
24:29	37		
24:31	36–37	<i>Psalms(s)</i>	44, 190
		8:3	36
<i>Judges</i>	36	8:3 LXX	99
2:7	36	8:4	99
2:10	36	23:2	123, 135, 145,
6:22	168		147
6:22–23	169	23:2, 23	140
6:23	186	28:3–5	64
13:22	168	29:3	184
		31:19	98
<i>2 Samuel</i>		33:21 LXX	188
7:11–14	159	35:10 LXX	105

36:9	105	<i>Ecclesiastes</i>	
36:10 MT	105	7:12	104
41(40):10	305	11:5	36
41(40):10, 41	302		
62:12	80	<i>Isaiah</i>	37, 64, 73, 83, 169,
65:7	184		181, 187, 191, 193,
68:10 LXX	193		196
70:20	104	2:1–3	278
74:12–17	146	4:3	30
76:17, 20–21 LXX	184	6:45	169
76:17–20 LXX	110	8:23	192
76:20–21 LXX	190	9:1	192
77:12	36	10:12	37
77:12–20 MT	110	11:1–5	69, 159
77:13 LXX	184, 190	11:9	278
77:16, 19–20	184	14:12	77
77:16–19	110	26:19 LXX	66
77:19	169	40:3	192–193
77:19–20	172, 190	40:9	187
77:20	146	41:4	169, 187, 192
78:13	172, 184, 190	41:4, 10, 13	169
78:24	277	41:10	192
89:9–10	184	41:10, 13, 14	187
89:10	146	42:6–7	192
93:3	146	42:16	192
93:4	184	43	172, 191–192
96:13	64	43:1, 5	187, 191
102:25	36	43:1–2, 10	172
103:15	216	43:2, 16–17	184
104:6–7	146	43:2 LXX	192
104:13	36	43:3, 14 LXX	195
107(106):28–40	189	43:3, 15	195
107:28–30	172	43:5 LXX	192
		43:10	69, 187
<i>Proverbs</i>		43:10, 13 LXX	191
2:1–6	260	43:10–13	192
8	89	43:10, 25	169
8:22	36	43:13	37
8:22–31	260	43:15 LXX	195
8:28–29	146	43:16	169
8:30	36	43:16, 19	192
9:1–6	224–225	43:16 LXX	191
9:31	278	43:17	192
11:9	65	43:19 LXX	192
14:31	103	43:25	152, 187
22:8	100	44:2	187
24:12	80	45:18	187
24:22	305	45:18 LXX	169

45:19, 22	169	38:33–34 LXX	278
46:4	169, 187, 192	50:21	98
48:12	169, 192	51:10	37
48:17	192		
49:9	192	<i>Ezekiel</i>	66
49:10	184	11:19–21	66
49:26 LXX	224	34:14	111
51:9–10	184	36:26, 27, 31	66
51:10	191	36:26–27	242
51:10 LXX	192		
51:12	152, 169, 187	<i>Daniel</i>	66, 78
51:12 LXX	191	7	46, 65–66, 69
52:6	152, 187	7:9–10	65
53:12	244	7:13 LXX	66
54:4 LXX	187, 193	7:13–14	65
54:13	169, 278	7:22 LXX	65
55:1–3, 10–11	224	7:46	46
55:10–11	278	10:13–21	260
58:10	192	12:2	65–66, 78
59:9	192	12:8	69
60:1–3	192	12:10	149
63:13	191		
64:7	99	<i>Hosea</i>	
66:18	64	13:2	100
<i>Jeremiah</i>	37	<i>Habakkuk</i>	
1:8	186	1:5	37
5:22	146	2:14	278
13:24	30	3:2	36
15:16	224	3:15	146, 184
31:10 LXX	81		
31:31	244	<i>Malachi</i>	
31:33	242	3:1	159
31:33–34	278	4:5–6	159

### Early Jewish Literature

Apocrypha		16:3, 16 LXX	100
<i>1 Esdras</i>		19:6 LXX	104
6:9 LXX	100		
<i>2 Esdras</i>		<i>Judith</i>	
7:31–38	68	8:14	103
12:32–34	68–69	<i>1 Maccabees</i>	
13:37–38	69	4:46	157
		4:51	100

13:37	165	6:12–11:1	260
14:41	157	8:4	99
<i>2 Maccabees</i>		8:19–20	66
5:21	109, 167	9:1, 9	103
9:8	109	10:18–19	184, 190
9:8–9, 12	109	11:24	103
14:4	165	12:12	103
		13:1	99
<i>Sirach</i>	89, 278	16:24	103
4:6	103	16:26	209
7:25	100		
7:30	103	Pseudepigrapha	
10:12	103	<i>Apocalypse of Moses</i>	
15:3	224	work	10
16:12–14	80		
16:26	99	<i>Arisotobulos</i>	31–32
17:8	99	Frag. 5a	31
17:11	278	Frag. 5:11–12	98
24	83		
24:3, 19, 21	224	<i>2 Baruch</i>	67
24:5	184	29:3, 8	161
24:12	36	37:7–40:2	161
24:19–21	278	40:1–2	66
24:19–22	278	50:2	67
28	209	51:10	67
32:13	103	72:2	66
38:8, 27	100	72:2–73:2	161
42:15, 22	99		
42:15–17	99	<i>1 Enoch</i>	46, 67
42:16	37	1:9	66
43:2, 25, 28, 32	99	22	67
45:5	278	37–41	46
47:8	103	42	209
		49:4	66–67
<i>Tobit</i>		61:9	67
3:11	99	62:2–3	66–67
12	260	63:11	67
		69:27	66
<i>Wisdom of Solomon</i>		69:27–29	67
work	66–67, 89		
1:13	103	<i>2 Enoch</i>	
1:16	67	65:11	67
2:23	103		
2:24	281	<i>4 Ezra</i>	68
3:1–4	67	7:24	81
5:1–8	67	8:52	41
6:7	103		



- |                                      |                       |                                       |             |
|--------------------------------------|-----------------------|---------------------------------------|-------------|
| 13                                   | 46                    | <i>Testament of Reuben</i>            |             |
| 13:1–37                              | 66                    | 6:9                                   | 82          |
| <i>Joseph and Aseneth</i>            |                       | <i>Testament of Solomon</i>           |             |
| work                                 | 93, 104–105, 228, 246 | 6:1–4                                 | 281         |
| 8:3                                  | 104                   | Philo of Alexandria                   |             |
| 8:9                                  | 104                   | <i>De cherubim</i>                    |             |
| 12:1                                 | 104                   | 87                                    | 96, 98, 102 |
| 12:9–10                              | 281                   | <i>De fuga et inventione</i>          |             |
| 14                                   | 260                   | 97                                    | 278         |
| 16:14                                | 228                   | <i>De migratione Abrahami</i>         |             |
| 23:8                                 | 157                   | work                                  | 33          |
| <i>Jubilees</i>                      |                       | 91–93                                 | 33          |
| 2:3                                  | 99                    | <i>De mutatione nominum</i>           |             |
| 2:16–17                              | 101                   | 259–260                               | 278         |
| 10:5                                 | 281                   | 253–264                               | 209         |
| <i>Life of Adam and Eve</i>          |                       | <i>De specialibus legibus</i>         |             |
| 31:3–4                               | 10                    | 2.59                                  | 99          |
| <i>Letter of Aristeas</i>            |                       | 2.58–59                               | 101         |
| 210                                  | 98–99                 | <i>De vita Mosis</i>                  |             |
| <i>Liber antiquitatum biblicarum</i> |                       | 1.334                                 | 161         |
| 9–17                                 | 281                   | 2.2–7                                 | 161         |
| <i>Prayer of Manasseh</i>            |                       | <i>Legatio ad Gaium</i>               |             |
| 2–3                                  | 110                   | 118                                   | 262         |
| <i>Psalms of Solomon</i>             |                       | <i>Legum allegoriae</i>               |             |
| 17                                   | 68                    | 1.1–3                                 | 101         |
| 17:25–27                             | 69                    | 1.1–18                                | 31          |
| <i>Sibylline Oracles</i>             |                       | 1.5                                   | 31          |
| work                                 | 110                   | 1.5–6                                 | 96          |
| 1:21–22                              | 101                   | 1.5–6, 16–18                          | 98          |
| 6                                    | 110                   | 1.6                                   | 32          |
| 6:16–17                              | 110                   | 1.18                                  | 32, 102     |
| 8:272–274                            | 110                   | 2.86                                  | 224         |
| <i>Testament of Levi</i>             |                       | 3.162–164                             | 278         |
| 29:1                                 | 81                    | <i>Quis rerum divinarum heres sit</i> |             |
| <i>Testament of Naphtali</i>         |                       | 191                                   | 278         |
| 6:4–9                                | 172                   | 121–122                               | 101         |
| 6:9                                  | 190                   |                                       |             |

<i>Quod Deus sit immutabilis</i>		<i>Jewish War</i>	
137	165	2.259	161
		2.434	161
Josephus		2.573	120
<i>Antiquitates judaicae</i>		3.57	120
1.21	99	3.463, 506	120
17.3.3	5	4.456	120
17.272	161	4.593, 601	165
17.273–274	161	4.604	165
17.278	161	6.285	161
18.36–38	162	7.70–71	165
20.97–98	196	7.438	161
20.168	161		
		<i>Vita</i>	
<i>Contra Apionem</i>		304	171
2.192	99	349	120

## Dead Sea Scrolls

<i>1QS</i>	67	<i>CD</i>	
1.9–10	68	2.14–15	81
2.21–23	141	13.1–2	141
3.13–4.26	76		
4.6–8	68	<i>4QpIs<sup>a</sup></i>	69
4.12–13	68	3.18–24	69
4.17	68		
4.19	68	<i>4Q175</i>	
4.22	68	4–8	157
4.23–24	68		
9.11	157	<i>4Q511</i>	
		63.4.2–3	228

## Rabbinic Writings

<i>b. Sanh.</i>		<i>Exodus Rabbah</i>	
43a	283	30:6	30, 98
67b	30		
<i>Genesis Rabbah</i>			
68:4	30		

## New Testament

<i>Matthew</i>	69, 77–78, 175, 178–179, 181, 212, 235	17:24–27	121
3:3	46	18:6	275
3:10–12	70	18:8–9	70
4:1–10	281	18:9	70
4:13	121	19:28	77
4:19–21	275	20:17	275
5:1	275	22:13	70
5:22	70	23:15, 33	70
5:22, 29–30	70	24:51	70
7:19	70	25:30	70
7:21	77	25:31–46	77
7:21–23	275	25:27, 44	77
7:22	69	25:41	70
8:12	70	25:46	70
8:16	69	26:26	235
9:1	121	26:26–28	237
9:9–10	275	26:28	235
9:9–13	227	27:42	275
9:33, 34	69	27:57–58	46
10:1	69, 275	28:7–8, 16	275
10:8	69		
10:22	46	<i>Mark</i>	48, 120, 130–137, 139–144, 146–154, 175–187, 189–191, 193, 196–197, 202, 235, 275, 294
10:28	70	1:4	212
10:32–33	80	1:13	179
11:2	275	1:14	179
11:18	69	1:16	119, 251
11:23	70	1:19	251
12:24, 27, 28	69	1:19–38	121
12:43, 45	69	1:35	182
13:19	281	1:35, 45	135
13:40	70	1:41	140
13:42, 50	70	2:10	212
13:57	158	2:13–17	227
14:12–21	131	3:16	251
14:18	111	3:17	251
14:19	112	3:18	251
14:22–33	175, 185	3:20	121, 135
14:24	170, 183	4:15	281
14:25–26	108	4:35–41	143
14:26	167	4:35–8:21	133
14:32	169	4:39	149
14:34	189	6–8	132, 224
16:17	237		
16:18	70		
17:18	69		

6:4	158	6:49	108, 149, 167, 185
6:6–13	147	6:50	146, 149, 177, 185–188
6:12–13	147	6:51	136, 149, 169, 177, 189
6:14–29	147	6:52	149, 193
6:19–20	181	6:53	189
6:21	140	7:31	119
6:29	177	8:6	222
6:30	147	8:27–30	254
6:30–34	144	8:29	251, 254
6:30–44	134–135, 140	8:33	281, 294
6:30–44, 45–52	182	8:34	191
6:30–52	129, 132	8:38	80
6:30–54	131	9:2	182
6:30–8:33	131	9:33	121
6:31	147	9:42	275
6:31, 35	135	10:32	191
6:31–32	135, 182	10:43–45	135
6:33	139	10:45	140, 154, 212
6:33–34	135	11:15–17	182
6:34	135, 137, 140, 147	13:3	182
6:34a	136	14:2	212
6:34c	136	14:10, 43	251
6:34d	136	14:22	235–236
6:35	136	14:22–24	237
6:35–38	147	14:24	235
6:36	136, 141, 147–148	14:27	135, 140
6:37	141, 148, 150	14:28	191
6:38	111, 148	14:32–33	182
6:38a, 39, 41	141	14:61–64	271
6:38b, 40	141		
6:39	135, 140	<i>Luke</i>	120, 159, 175, 178–179, 235, 237, 275, 296
6:41	112, 141, 148	2:10	169
6:41a	144	4:1–13	281
6:41b	144	4:24	158
6:42	140	4:31a	121
6:42–52	134, 175–176	5:1	120
6:44	134	6:16	251
6:45	134, 141, 143, 182	7:39	157
6:45, 51	190	8:12	281
6:45–46	177, 182	9:10–17	131
6:45–52	182, 196	9:26	80
6:45–53	142	10:18	76
6:46	134, 136, 141	10:38–42	10
6:47	136, 170, 177, 185	13:33	158
6:47–51	183	22:13	281
6:48	108, 136, 138, 176–177, 183–185, 190	22:19	226, 235–237
6:48–50	152	22:28, 30	251

23:50–51	46	1:17	59, 272
24:9, 33	275	1:18	25, 72, 79, 126, 172, 211
<i>John</i>	1, 4, 6, 10–13, 15, 23, 26, 31, 37–40, 48, 55, 59–60, 62–71, 73–79, 81–96, 98–99, 101–109, 112–115, 117–121, 125, 136, 143, 154–158, 162, 165, 167, 169, 172, 175–188, 190–194, 196–197, 200–204, 208, 210–212, 224, 250, 270–272, 275–278, 280–284, 287–290, 292–293, 305, 308–309	1:19 1:19, 24 1:19–21 1:19–21, 40–49 1:21, 25 1:21, 27 1:23 1:29 1:30 1:32–33 1:33–34 1:35–51 1:36–37 1:37 1:37–40 1:39, 46 1:41, 49 1:42, 48–49 1:43 1:43–45, 47–49 1:44 1:45 1:45–46 1:45–49 1:46 1:50 1:51 2 2–4 2:1 2:1, 3, 12 2:1, 11 2:1–11 2:4 2:6 2:6–10 2:11 2:11, 23 2:12 2:13, 23 2:13–22 2:14, 15 2:14–15 2:14–17 2:14–22	43, 121 84 156, 159, 161 22 159 159 180–181, 193 188, 203–204 161 179 213 143 251 287 272 287 287 271 189, 287 26 120 271 271 251, 272 287 15 90, 232 12, 113, 121 122 202 271 120 271–272 75 22 22 156, 166, 271, 275, 287 15 121, 271 121 182 121 121 25 272
1–5	90	1:37–40	272
1:1	78, 87	1:39, 46	287
1:1–3	88	1:41, 49	287
1:1–3, 10, 14	92	1:42, 48–49	271
1:1–4, 10	88	1:43	189, 287
1:1–5	271	1:43–45, 47–49	26
1:1–18	261	1:44	120
1:1c, 18	272	1:45	271
1:2	35	1:45–46	271
1:3, 4	106	1:45–49	251, 272
1:3, 10	103	1:46	287
1:3, 10a	114	1:50	15
1:3–5, 18–20	87	1:51	90, 232
1:4	105	2	12, 113, 121
1:5	124	2–4	122
1:5, 11	84	2:1	202
1:7	202	2:1, 3, 12	271
1:9	160	2:1, 11	120
1:10	76, 225	2:1–11	271–272
1:11–12	21, 287	2:4	75
1:11b	272	2:6	22
1:12	169, 193, 275	2:6–10	22
1:12–13	114, 300	2:11	156, 166, 271, 275, 287
1:13	114, 256	2:11, 23	15
1:13, 14	267	2:12	121, 271
1:14	25, 78, 225, 236–237, 247, 287	2:13, 23	121
1:14a	219, 272	2:13–22	182
1:14b	271	2:14, 15	121
1:14c	272	2:14–15	121
		2:14–17	25
		2:14–22	272

2:15	183	3:25	22
2:16	25, 176	3:29	82
2:17	181	3:30	108
2:18	156	3:33	159
2:19	233	3:34	213
2:20	233	3:36	56, 79, 82
2:21	233, 271	4:3, 43 45, 46, 47	120
2:22	176, 188	4:3, 47, 54	120
2:23	19, 24, 205	4:4, 5, 7	120
2:23–25	12, 20, 275	4:4, 9	120
2:25	12	4:4–42	272
2:23–25	44, 156	4:5–42	272
3	11, 180	4:6, 12	120
3:1	11–12	4:6–7	272
3:1, 4, 9	272	4:7–29	26
3:1–11	272	4:9, 19, 25, 29	157
3:1–12	251	4:10	202
3:1–21	26	4:13–14	229
3:2	11–12, 15, 22, 156	4:14	21
3:3, 5	162, 239	4:17–18, 21–24	157
3:3, 6	279	4:19, 25	161
3:3–8	114	4:19, 25, 29	22
3:5	202	4:20, 21, 45	121
3:6	253, 256, 267	4:21–26	49
3:9	12	4:23	206
3:10	12	4:25	26
3:11	206	4:25–26	157
3:12	279	4:29	271
3:12–15	279	4:31–33	166
3:13	25, 107, 172, 252	4:34	35, 37, 91, 100, 210
3:14	76	4:37	108
3:14–15	206	4:42	183, 258
3:15–16, 36	21	4:44	157, 271
3:16	71–73, 206	4:44–45	20
3:16, 31	261	4:46	121
3:16–18	275	4:46–54	26, 159, 271
3:16–21	82	4:46–5:9	132
3:17	71–72, 76, 137	4:48	156
3:17, 19	160	4:53	15, 24
3:18	56, 79	4:54	120
3:18–19	59, 81	5	1–3, 12, 20, 23, 32, 40, 58, 63, 65, 84, 100–101, 103, 112, 119, 121, 123, 125–126, 158, 169
3:19	59, 75		
3:19–20	73		
3:19–20, 24, 25	50		
3:19–21	71–72		
3:21	81	5–6	86, 95, 97, 103, 114–115, 117–118, 120, 122–124
3:23	170		
3:24	179		

5:1	17, 19, 40, 119–120	5:19–20	51–52, 54–55, 70
5:1–2	121, 123	5:19–20, 21–23	50
5:1–9	271	5:19–20, 30	53
5:1–18	15, 18, 25, 33, 70	5:19–20, 36	103
5:1–47	40, 56, 95	5:19–23	51, 55
5:2	2, 17, 121	5:19–23, 25–29	51
5:3	17, 19–20, 124	5:19–23, 26–27	51
5:5	2–3, 17, 20–21	5:19–27	47, 49
5:5, 10b–11	114	5:19–30	39–40, 42–43, 47, 49–50, 56, 58, 60
5:5–6	271	5:19–47	40–41, 57
5:6	2, 104, 124	5:19a	42, 51
5:6a	20	5:19b	42, 50
5:6b	21	5:19b, 19c, 20	50
5:6c	21	5:19b, 24, 25, 28	50
5:7	22	5:19b–c, 21–23	50
5:8	21–22, 124, 271	5:19b–20	52
5:9	2, 4, 22, 40, 104	5:19b–20, 21–23	51
5:9–10, 16, 18	97–98	5:19c	50
5:10	2, 23, 34	5:19c, 20, 21	50
5:10–13	23	5:20	45, 52–53
5:11	34, 40	5:20, 26–27	53
5:11, 15	23, 26	5:20, 26–27, 29	50
5:12	2	5:20, 28	43, 45, 53
5:12, 16	26	5:20b	42
5:13	2, 19, 24	5:20b, 27	50
5:14	2, 34, 40–41, 104, 121, 123	5:21	52, 103–106, 169
5:14a	24	5:21, 22, 23, 26	125
5:14b	25	5:21, 22–23a, 23b	50
5:15	2, 25, 40	5:21, 25	22
5:16	23, 25–26, 29, 40–41, 84, 98	5:21, 26	53, 61
5:16–17	102	5:21–22	53
5:16–18	27	5:21–22, 26–27	53
5:17	2, 29–30, 32–34, 41, 55, 70, 88, 95–96, 99, 102	5:21–23	51–52, 54–55, 61
5:17, 18, 19, 20	125	5:21–25	53
5:17, 20, 36	92	5:21–27	61
5:17–18	29–30, 102	5:21–30	59–61, 85
5:18	26, 29, 34–35, 38, 41, 84, 102–103, 123	5:22	52, 59, 61, 70–71, 84, 103
5:18, 25, 42, 44	125	5:22, 27	53, 61, 71
5:19	38, 50, 52–53, 71	5:22–23	52
5:19, 21–23	53, 61	5:22–23a, 26–27	50
5:19, 24	50	5:23	52, 61
5:19, 24, 25	43, 51	5:23, 24, 30, 37	125–126
5:19, 30	53	5:23b	50
		5:23b, 30a, 30b	50

5:24	42, 50–53, 55–56, 59, 62–63, 67, 72, 74–75, 79, 234	5:36, 37, 43, 45	125
		5:36–40	158
5:24, 25	50, 53, 61	5:37	42, 44, 158, 172
5:24, 25, 26, 27	50	5:37–38	84
5:24, 29, 40	21	5:38	44
5:24, 30	51	5:38a	42, 44
5:24–25	39, 48–49, 54–56, 62–63	5:39	44, 84, 209
		5:39, 46	159
5:24–26	125	5:39–40	22
5:24–29	272	5:39a	42
5:24a, 24b, 25, 30	50	5:39b	42
5:25	42, 45, 47, 49–56, 63, 206	5:40	44, 73
5:25, 28	61	5:40a	42
5:25, 28–29	53	5:40b	42, 45
5:25–27	51	5:42	43–44
5:25–28, 29	61	5:43	158, 169, 193
5:25a	51	5:44	43, 73
5:25b, 26–27	51	5:44a	43–44
5:26	52	5:44b	43
5:26–27	46, 51–55, 62	5:45	59, 158
5:26–27, 28–29, 30	50	5:45–46	44, 83–84
5:26–29	53	5:45a	43, 45
5:27	45–46, 50, 52, 59, 65–66	5:45b	43
5:27, 30	103	5:46	43, 158
5:27b	51, 55	5:47	43–44
5:27b–29	47–49	5:51–58	205
5:28	42, 46, 50, 53, 55, 62, 66	6	40, 42, 57, 103, 108, 110–112, 119, 121–123, 125–126, 129, 145, 149–150, 155, 158–159, 162–163–164, 166, 169, 173, 175, 190, 192, 194–195, 197, 199, 205, 208–209, 212–213, 215–228, 241, 245–248, 255, 258, 276–277, 283
5:28–29	39, 46–58, 62–63, 74, 80, 82, 124		18, 119–122
5:28–30	53	6:1	108
5:29	56, 59, 67, 78, 80, 82	6:1, 16–19	162
5:30	35, 44, 47, 51–55, 59, 71–72, 75	6:1, 23	132
5:30a, 30b	50	6:1–4	137
5:30b	50	6:1–5	246
5:31	158	6:1–11	19
5:31, 39	188	6:1–14	91, 96–97, 110–111, 129, 155, 158, 175, 182
5:31–47	42–43	6:1–15	
5:32–35	84		
5:33	42–43		
5:34	42, 45		
5:35	42, 189		
5:36	15, 26, 84, 100, 126, 261		



6:1–21	129, 131–132, 155–156, 271	6:16–19, 21	187
6:1–25	256	6:16–21	96–97, 108, 129, 155, 172, 175–177, 180–183, 191–192, 195, 197
6:2	18, 103, 123, 144, 156, 159	6:17	124, 151, 167, 169, 183, 190, 192
6:2, 5	276	6:17, 19, 21	124
6:2, 5, 22, 25	277	6:17, 24, 55	121
6:3	18, 123	6:17, 24, 59	121–122
6:3, 12	166	6:17–18	108
6:3, 15	122	6:17a	143
6:4	18–19, 119, 158, 184	6:17b	143
6:5	111, 150	6:17c	139
6:5, 7, 9, 11	256	6:18	138, 177, 183
6:5–9	166–167	6:19	96–97, 107–109, 152, 169, 177, 183, 186, 190, 192
6:5–10	250	6:19–20	152, 184, 194
6:5–13	136	6:19–21	168
6:5–15	144, 235	6:19–47	126
6:6	271	6:20	133, 168–169, 177, 186–189, 196
6:6, 14	103	6:20–21	195
6:6, 28, 30–31	136	6:21	122–123, 152, 169, 173, 189–190, 192–195
6:7	111	6:21b	169
6:7–9	167	6:22	134
6:8	150	6:22, 24	195
6:8–9	143	6:22, 25	108
6:9	112	6:22–25	182, 195
6:10	122, 144	6:22–27	223
6:10, 14–15	276	6:23	121–122, 169, 171, 222
6:10–11	163	6:23, 51e–g	236
6:11	111–112, 158, 162, 240	6:23c	235
6:11, 23	246	6:23–24	169
6:11a	164	6:25	111, 195
6:11b	164	6:25–30, 31–59	175
6:12	110, 112	6:25–50	20
6:12–13	97, 111–112, 162	6:25–71	73
6:13, 23, 26, 31	256	6:25b–59	136
6:13, 67, 70, 71	251	6:26	136, 137, 156
6:14	15, 143–144, 156, 158, 196, 277	6:26–27	111
6:14–15	22, 134, 282	6:26–29	228–230
6:15	134, 136, 144, 151, 160, 164–165, 173, 195–196, 253, 294	6:(26–29)30–58	256
6:15, 17	177	6:26–30, 31–59	182
6:15, 22–25	182	6:27	200, 205–206, 223–224, 226, 229–230
6:15–16	134		
6:16	124, 143, 148, 167, 177		
6:16, 18, 19	122		
6:16–18	167, 183		

6:27, 33, 35	21	6:39	307
6:27, 53	252, 277	6:39, 40, 44, 54	77
6:27, 55	256	6:39d, 40d, 44c	241
6:27, 53, 62	258	6:40	73
6:28	94, 115	6:40, 47	234, 245
6:28–29	81	6:40, 47, 51	21
6:28b	228	6:40, 48–51	278
6:30	38, 156, 252	6:41, 42, 50, 51	125
6:30–31	137	6:41, 43, 61	252
6:30–32	18	6:41, 48, 50, 51	256
6:30–34	228	6:41, 52	42, 277
6:30–44, 45–52	182	6:41–42	137, 278
6:30–51a, b	255, 257	6:41–51d	229
6:30–51d	228	6:42	231–232, 271
6:30–58	258	6:44	73
6:30–58, 59	254	6:44–45	252, 278–279
6:30–58(59)	256	6:44a, 45d	193
6:31	125, 180–181, 277	6:45	73, 169, 176, 180–181, 193
6:31, 32, 33, 38	125	6:45–52	175
6:31–34	169	6:46	126, 172
6:32	161, 209	6:46, 50, 62	261
6:32, 33, 34, 35	256	6:47, 48, 51, 53	126
6:32–33	196	6:47–51d	228–230
6:32–33, 35, 41	144	6:47a–51d, 53–54	229
6:32–22, 51	160	6:48	177, 183
6:32–40	158	6:48–51d	239
6:33	105, 230	6:49	125, 229
6:33, 38	278	6:49–51d	229
6:33, 38, 41, 42	126, 248	6:50, 51, 58	126, 144
6:33, 38, 41–42	261	6:50a	229
6:33, 41, 42, 50	252	6:50b, 51b	231
6:33a	230	6:50c	229
6:34	143, 163	6:51	201, 236, 271
6:34, 41–42	136	6:51, 52, 53, 54	267
6:35	133, 223, 228–230, 246	6:51, 58	252
6:35, 40, 48, 51	169	6:51–53	216
6:35, 41, 48, 51	194	6:51–56	115, 172
6:35, 48	106	6:51–58	206, 212, 223–226, 230, 232–233, 240, 248, 256
6:35, 48, 50, 51	278	6:51b	200–201, 204, 248
6:35, 48, 51a	258	6:51b–58	200
6:35–40	194	6:51c	229, 241, 255
6:35–42	160	6:51c–d	229
6:35a	271	6:51c–58	257, 267
6:37, 39, 44a	253	6:51c–58, 59	255
6:38	103	6:51d	228, 230
6:38, 39, 44	126		
6:38, 51–56	166		
6:38a, 50b, 51b	230		

6:51c-58	221-222, 245, 247, 253, 255-256, 258	6:61d-62b	231
6:51c-58, 60-70	259	6:61d-63(65)	230
6:51e	225-226, 228-229, 232, 234, 239-241	6:62	126, 225, 231-232, 252, 258
6:51e-g	236	6:62-63	232-233, 234, 245, 247
6:51e-58	215, 219-221, 223-224, 227, 229, 232, 234, 241, 245-246, 248	6:63	105, 217, 225, 228, 231-233, 239, 247, 253, 279, 292
6:52	133, 229, 233, 239, 240, 278	6:63-64	242
6:52-56	236	6:63a-b	231
6:52-58	239	6:63c-d	232
6:52-59	223	6:64	152, 251, 253, 276, 291-292, 294
6:53	189, 216, 230, 239	6:64-65	230, 279
6:53, 54	234	6:64a	290
6:53, 54, 57-58	279	6:64b	291
6:53-54	215-216, 226-227, 229, 239-241, 245	6:65	73, 253, 292, 307-308
6:53-54, 63, 68	21	6:66	137, 250, 253, 284
6:53-56	256	6:66-71	225, 292
6:53-58	217, 226, 239	6:67	195, 292
6:54	233, 241-242	6:67-71	179, 254-255, 275, 286
6:54, 56-58	257	6:68	194, 256, 280-281
6:54, 63, 68	126	6:68-69	143-144, 150-151, 169, 251, 254, 284
6:54-57	230	6:69	195, 293
6:54d	241	6:70	120, 254, 294, 296, 301-302, 308-309
6:55	217, 226, 239, 241, 245	6:70-71	26, 182
6:55, 56	267	6:71	251, 254, 289, 291, 294-296, 299, 302, 305
6:56	242	7	19-20, 57
6:56-57	239	7-8	44
6:57	242	7-10	84
6:58	229-231, 239, 256	7:1	120, 179
6:59	40, 122, 252	7:1-10	271
6:60	215, 230-231, 252, 254	7:1-10:21	282
6:60, 66	251	7:2	19
6:60-61	230, 279	7:3	195
6:60-62	253	7:6-7	80
6:60-63	230, 232	7:8, 10, 14	258
6:60-65	290	7:11	24
6:60-66	152-153, 254	7:12	282
6:60-71	123, 194-195, 249-252, 254-256, 267, 273, 275, 289, 296-299, 308	7:14, 28	121
6:61	250, 284, 286	7:16-17	283
6:61-63	255	7:17	283
		7:18, 28	283
		7:19, 41, 52	120
		7:20	24, 282

7:20–23	19	8:44	281, 293
7:21	38	8:48–53	24
7:21–24	33	8:50	59
7:22–23	98	8:51	22, 233
7:25–31	24	8:52–53	233
7:26–27, 31	22	8:54–55	233
7:26–29	282	8:56	83, 233
7:30	75	8:57	233
7:31	15, 24, 161	8:58	233
7:31, 40–41	282	9	1–2, 12–13, 17, 23,
7:33–34	233		25–26, 33–34, 40,
7:35	203, 272, 294		72, 101, 114
7:35–36	233	9:1	2
7:38	181, 193	9:1–41	271
7:39	76, 205–206, 232	9:3	2, 102
7:40	157	9:3–4	92, 99, 102
7:41, 52	271	9:3–5	81
7:41–42	22, 161	9:4	2, 138, 167
7:42	271	9:4a	206
7:44	189	9:6	2, 92
7:47	283	9:7	2
7:50	251, 272	9:9	168
7:50–52	12, 26, 180	9:11	195
7:51	11	9:11, 25	40
8:12	21, 71, 106, 124, 138,	9:12	2
	271	9:14	2
8:14	232	9:14, 16	98
8:15	59, 71–72, 232, 267	9:15	2
8:16	59, 72, 75	9:16	2
8:17	158	9:17, 22	161
8:18	233	9:22	12
8:19a	233	9:31–33	25
8:19b	233	9:31–41	20
8:20	75	9:34–35	2
8:20, 59	121	9:35	2
8:21	233	9:39	72
8:22	233	9:39–41	21, 72
8:23–24	233	9:41	25
8:24	25	9:41b	21
8:24, 28	194	10	106, 144
8:24, 34	25	10:1	258
8:26	59	10:1, 8, 10	297
8:26, 50	75	10:1–18	272
8:28	76, 107	10:3	73
8:30–31	24	10:7, 11	271
8:31–59	81	10:10	114, 304
8:41	73	10:10, 28	21
8:42	25	10:11	144

10:11, 15, 17	201	11:52	203
10:13	297	11:55	258
10:15–16	203	11:56	24, 121
10:17	201	11:57	296
10:17–18	166	12	45, 75, 181
10:19–21	24, 283	12:1–8	289, 291, 296–298, 303, 309
10:22	121	12:3	26, 75
10:23	121	12:4	251, 291, 296
10:24	22	12:4, 6	297
10:25, 37–38	15	12:4–7	26
10:26	73	12:5	297
10:28	106	12:6	297, 305
10:28–29	307	12:7	309
10:30	35, 103	12:11, 18	15
10:30, 36	254	12:12–19	162
10:32	91	12:13, 34	22
10:33	38	12:11, 42	24
10:33, 36	41, 271	12:12	121
10:34	181	12:13	181
10:35	44	12:13, 15, 40	181
10:36	160	12:13a	165
10:38	103	12:13b	165
10:42	24	12:13c	165
11	259	12:14–16	166
11:1–44	251, 271	12:15	181
11:3	271	12:15, 40	180–181
11:4, 40	25, 271	12:16	176, 205, 250
11:7	120	12:16, 23, 27–28	287
11:9	251	12:19	165
11:10	167	12:20	203, 258
11:11	271	12:20–21	272
11:16	250	12:21	120
11:18	121	12:23	75–76
11:20–27, 32	26	12:23–24	206
11:21, 32	10	12:23–25	286
11:24	77	12:23–36	106
11:25	78, 106, 115, 271	12:23, 27	75
11:25–26	21, 49	12:24	107, 115, 160
11:26	228, 285	12:25	107
11:31	195	12:27	179, 272, 285
11:31, 33	10	12:27–28	75
11:33–34	271	12:31	76, 79, 203, 282
11:35	271	12:31–32	293
11:40, 42	15	12:31–34	206
11:45	24	12:32	76, 107
11:45–53	84	12:32–33	76
11:47–48	162	12:35	138, 167
11:50–52	203		

12:35, 46	124	13:23–24	11
12:36	114, 165	13:23–26a	272
12:37–44	45	13:27	11, 251, 281, 293, 302–303, 305, 309
12:38	181		297, 303
12:38, 40	181	13:29	298, 302, 306, 309
12:38–41	44	13:30	76
12:40	181	13:31–32	42
12:41	83, 181, 196	13:36	201
12:42–43	26	13:37	275, 284
12:43	73	14:1	48
12:46–48	71	14:2–3	282
12:47	59, 71	14:3	184
12:47–48	59, 65, 78	14:4, 18	286
12:48	72, 78–80	14:5	42
12:50	309	14:5, 22	106, 271
13	11, 246	14:6	25
13–17	298	14:6–9	72, 103
13:1	75, 137	14:9	184
13:1–2	298	14:10, 31	72, 254
13:1–20	272	14:10–11	15
13:1–30	289, 303, 309	14:11, 29	45, 115
13:1–38	298	14:12	272
13:2	281–282, 291, 293, 298–300, 302–306, 309	14:16, 26	213
		14:16–17	49
13:2, 21–30	26	14:21–24	251, 296, 304
13:2, 26	296	14:22	22
13:3	298	14:23–24	72, 271
13:3, 26, 29	251	14:26	75, 79, 293, 306
13:3, 27	73	14:30	271
13:7–11	284	15:1	146
13:8	308	15:1–5	246, 272
13:10	22, 309	15:1–8	284
13:11	291, 300, 303	15:2	300
13:12–20	301	15:3	46
13:17	301	15:11	201–202
13:18	73, 180–181, 256–257, 293, 302, 305, 309	15:13	254, 293
		15:16, 19	76
13:18, 26–27	253	15:18–25	84
13:18a	301	15:18–16:4	73
13:18b	301	15:19	27
13:18b–c	301	15:20	72
13:18c	301	15:22	25
13:18d	301	15:23–24	15
13:21	272, 291, 303–304	15:24	180–181
13:21–30	302	15:25	72, 272
13:20	193	15:26	76
13:23	251	16	284
		16:1	

16:7	272	18:8	309
16:8	59, 72	18:8–9	194
16:8–9	79	18:9	307
16:8–11	210	18:10, 26	272
16:9	25	18:11	285
16:11	75–76, 79, 282, 293	18:13, 24	272
16:11, 33	203	18:14	203
16:13–15	26	18:15–18	272
16:17–18	250	18:17–27	285
16:17–18, 29	42	18:18	285
16:19	189	18:20	40, 121–122, 225
16:21	87	18:24–28	179
16:22	168	18:25	285
16:30	15, 137	18:28	84
16:28	261	18:30	290
16:32	285	18:35–36	290
16:33	88	18:36	166
17	211	18:36–37	166
17:1	75	18:37	160
17:2	105, 267	18:39	143
17:2–3	21	19:1–2	272
17:4	37, 206, 211	19:5	272
17:5, 8, 21, 23	261	19:5, 25–27	271
17:5, 24	88, 92, 114	19:7	41, 271
17:6	211	19:11	289, 307
17:8	211	19:12	162, 165
17:12	73, 289, 304–307, 309	19:13	84
17:12b	304–305, 308–309	19:16	84, 290
17:14	211	19:19	76, 143
17:17, 19	254	19:19–22	166
17:18	160	19:24	181
17:18, 20	254	19:25	300
17:19	203	19:25–27, 34b–35	272
17:22	211	19:26	11, 271
17:24, 25	261	19:26–27	251
17:26	211	19:28	101, 176, 272
17:29	232	19:28, 30	101
18–20	91	19:28–30	271
18:1, 26	91	19:30	79, 101, 206
18:1–11	289, 306	19:31	98
18:1–11, 33–38	271	19:31–36	227
18:2	291, 297, 304, 306	19:33	272
18:2, 3, 5	251	19:34	251, 256, 271, 279
18:3	26, 309	19:34–35	257, 267
18:4	271	19:34b	257
18:5	285, 291, 306, 309	19:35	257
18:5–8	169	19:36	180–181, 188
18:6	284, 307	19:36, 37	181

19:37	181	<i>Romans</i>	
19:38	272	1:3	237
19:38–42	180	1:3b–4a	259
19:39	251, 272	2:5–10	80
19:39–40	272	3:25	245
19:39–42	26	4:17	105
19:41	91	5:9	245
20	92, 258	8:3	260
20:1,	124	8:11	105
20:1, 19	98	9:5	260
20:2–10	251		
20:3–10	285	<i>1 Corinthians</i>	
20:6–7	11	1:23	261
20:8, 30–31	15	2:6–8	76
20:11–18	272	4:16	6
20:15	87, 91	8:6	260
20:15–16	309	9:1	259
20:17	10, 258	10:3–4	238, 243–244, 246
20:17–18	286	10:4	260
20:19	124	10:16	243
20:19–20	168	10:16–17	243
20:20, 27	272	11:1	6
20:22	87, 92, 232	11:22, 34	238
20:22–23	115	11:23–24	236, 243
20:24	251, 275, 292	11:23–25	237
20:24–29	272	11:24	235
20:27	10, 258	15:3–5	259
20:28	251, 271, 286	15:5	251
20:30–31	6, 85, 276	15:5, 7	251
20:31	21, 24, 105	15:8	259
21:1	120	15:22, 36, 45	105
21:7	11	15:45	231
21:13	240	15:50	237
21:15–22	285		
21:17	309	<i>2 Corinthians</i>	
21:18–23	63	3:6	105, 231
21:20	285, 289, 291, 307–308	4:4	76
21:20–22	11	8:9	260
		11:5	81
<i>Acts</i>	281		
1:13	251	<i>Galatians</i>	
1:13, 16	251	1:16	259
1:18	46	4:4	260
3:32	157	4:10–11	33
5:36	196	4:12	6
7:37	157		
13:8–11	281	<i>Ephesians</i>	
		2:2	76



6:12	76	2:19	252, 254, 267, 273
6:13–16	281	2:19–25	281
<i>Philippians</i>		2:22	259, 267
2:6	260	2:22–23	267
2:7–8	260	2:28	63
3:17	6	3:6, 9	25
<i>Colossians</i>		3:8–12	281
2:15	76	3:14	50
2:16	33	3:16	202
<i>1 Thessalonians</i>		3:23	259
1:6	6	4:1–3	259, 268, 270
<i>2 Thessalonians</i>		4:1–3, 15	267
2:3	305	4:2	259, 267–268
<i>1 Timothy</i>		4:2–3	263
3:16	76, 237	4:9	259
6:13	105	4:17	62–63, 77
<i>2 Timothy</i>		5:1, 5	267
2:23–24	239	5:6	259, 270
<i>Titus</i>		5:18	25
3:9	239	5:19	76
<i>1 Peter</i>		<i>2 John</i>	
1:2, 18–19	245	7	259, 267, 270
3:18	105, 231, 237	<i>3 John</i>	80
4:1	237	11	80
5:8–9	281	<i>Revelation</i>	
<i>2 Peter</i>		1:5	245
3:18	228	1:17	169
<i>1 John</i>	62, 204, 247	2:10	281
1:1–4	259, 270	5:9	245
2:1	212, 272	5:13	228
2:7	245	7:12	228
2:18–23	270	7:14	245
		12:9	77, 281
		12:9, 12	281
		12:11	245
		20:2	281
		21:3, 7	242
		22:12	81

## Early Christian Literature

## Apostolic Fathers

*Epistle of Barnabas*

work	102
5:5, 10–13	237
6:7, 9, 14	237
7:5	237
12:10	237
15:3–5	102

*Didache* 226, 238, 246

9	222
9:1, 2, 3	222
10:3	238, 246
10:3a, b/c	238
10:6	238

## Ignatius

*To the Ephesians*

7:2	269
20:1	269
20:2	218, 246

*To the Magnesians*

11	269
----	-----

*To the Romans*

6:1	269
7:3	246

*To the Smyrnaeans*

1:1	269
1:2	269
2	269
3:1	269
4:2	269
5:2	268
6:2	269
7:1	246, 269

*To the Trallians*

9:1	269
9:2	269
10	269
11:2	269

## Shepherd of Hermas

*Similitudes*

5.6.5–7	237
---------	-----

*Acts of Paul*

4.5	224
41.3.14f.	224

## Augustine

*In Evangelium Johannis tractatus*

25.12	217
-------	-----

## Cyril of Alexandria

*In Evangelium Ioannis commentariorum libri VIII*

2.5	26
-----	----

## Eusebius

*De ecclesiastica theologia*

3.12	216
------	-----

## Euthymius Zigabenus

*Expositio in Ioannem*

5	26
---	----

*Gospel of Judas*

33.22–34.18	248
-------------	-----

*Gospel of Philip*

23a/b	227
30b	227

*Gospel of Thomas*

28	224
----	-----

## Irenaeus

*Adversus haereses*

3.19.1	246
4.38.1	246
5.2.3	246
6.18.5, 6	238

John Chrysostom		<i>Homilies on Numbers</i>	
<i>Homiliae in Joannem</i>		GCS 40.487	216
37	26	<i>Pascha</i>	
38	26	1.77–78	227
43.2	170	1.96–97	227
Justin		Makarios Magnes	
<i>Apologia i</i>		<i>Apokritikos</i>	
13.1f	238	3.15.2	227
66	236, 246	3.23.1–13	227
<i>Dialogus cum Tryphone</i>		Tertullian	
69	283	<i>De resurrectione carnis</i>	
Origen		37.1–3	227
<i>Commentary on John</i>		Theophylact of Ohrid	
4.43	216	<i>Enarratio in Evangelium S. Ioannis</i>	
10.17	216	5	26
20.41	216		
32.24.310	216		

### Graeco-Roman Literature

Aelius Aristides		Augustus	
<i>Orations</i>		<i>Res gestae</i>	
42.10	171	34	165
45.33	171	Cicero	
Apollodorus		<i>De divinatione</i>	
<i>Library</i>		79	262
1.4.3	169	<i>De natura deorum</i>	
1.7.1	169	1.42.117	167
Apuleius		<i>De republica</i>	
<i>De Deo Socratis</i>		3.28	267
123	266	<i>Pro Murena</i>	
Aristotle		77	164
<i>Rhetoric</i>		<i>Pro Sestio</i>	
136a19–26	5	48 § 103	163

Dio Cassius		Menander	
<i>Roman History</i>		<i>Frag. 924K</i>	109, 169
55.2.4	164		
Dio Chrysostom		Pindar	
<i>Discourses</i>		<i>Olympionikai</i>	
3.30–31	109	2.57–60	64
11.129	167	Plato	
32.31	163	<i>Apologia</i>	
63.7	171	40–41	64
Epictetus		<i>Georgias</i>	265
<i>Diatribes</i>		523a–527a	64
4.10.20–21	163	<i>Nomoi</i>	265
Herodotus		900D	264
<i>Historiae</i>		900E	264
7.35	109	<i>Phaidon</i>	265
Homer		67c	265
<i>Iliad</i>		<i>Phaidros</i>	
13.16–30	109	246c	264
<i>Odyssey</i>		246d	264
11.568f–71	64	<i>Politeia</i>	265
17.485–486	260	2.382e	268
Juvenal		379b	264
<i>Satires</i>		377b, c, e	264
10.44–46	163	381b	264
10.44–46, 73–80	163	<i>Symposium</i>	
Lucian of Samosata		203a	265
<i>Lover of Lies</i>		<i>Timaios</i>	265
13	167	Pliny the Elder	
<i>Navigium</i>		<i>Naturalis historia</i>	
9	138	17.244	165
Maximus of Tyre		Pseudo-Hermognes	
<i>Orations</i>		<i>Progymnasmata</i>	7
11.204 ff.	206	10	7
		19–20	7

Plutarch		<i>Moralia</i>	
<i>Aemilius and Timoleon</i>		165B–F	167
work	5	<i>On Praising Oneself Inoffensively</i>	
1.1–3	5	4	6
<i>Alexander</i>	266	<i>On Superstition</i>	7
<i>Caesar</i>		Quintillian	
57.4	164	<i>Institutio Oratoria</i>	
<i>Comparison of Lucullus and Cimon</i>		2.4.21	5
work	8	Seneca	
1.7–8	8	<i>Epistulae morales</i>	
41.6–42.2	8	102.27	267
<i>Comparison of Lysander and Sulla</i>		<i>Hercules furens</i>	
work	9	322–324	109
5.6	9	324	169
<i>Comparison of Philopoemen and Titus</i>		Suetonius	
work	9	<i>Divus Augustus</i>	163
3.3	9	Tacitus	
<i>Crassus</i>		<i>Annales</i>	
12.2	164	12.31	163
<i>De communibus notitiis adversus stoicos</i>		<i>Historiae</i>	
31	266	1.15	164
<i>Delphi</i>			
19	265–266		
<i>Demetrius</i>			
1.6.7	7		

## Index of Authors

- Aalbers, Bert 295  
Abramowski, Luise 217, 240  
Adams, Sean A. 181  
Al-Suadi, Soham 222  
Aland, Barbara 148  
Alexander, Loveday 6  
Anderson, Paul N. 89, 158, 161, 228  
Angel, Joseph L. 228  
Ashton, John 65–66  
Attridge, Harold W. 10, 74  
Aune, David E. 164–165  
Aus, Roger D. 185
- Ball, David M. 169, 187  
Baltes, Matthias 264  
Balz, Horst 269  
Barker, James W. 179  
Barrett, C. K. 18, 32, 96, 119, 175, 177, 276, 280, 293, 301, 304–305  
Barrosse, Thomas 89–90  
Barton, John 64  
Bauckham, Richard 11, 157, 161, 178–179, 192, 282  
Bauer, Thomas Johann 269  
Bauer, Walter 218, 234, 237, 269  
Beasley-Murray, George R. 22, 69, 77–78, 82, 84  
Beck, David R. 130  
Becker, Jürgen 49–51, 88, 96, 202, 219, 247  
Beckmann, Klaus 290  
Beirne, Margaret M. 296  
Bennema, Cornelis 130, 147, 151, 156, 209, 293, 295, 297, 299  
Berg, Werner 191  
Bergmeier, Roland 206, 209  
Bernard, J.H. 16, 20  
Betz, Johannes 216, 246  
Beutler, Johannes 16, 20, 22, 26, 32, 129, 131, 151, 202, 221, 228, 269, 293  
Bienert, David C. 215, 221
- Billerbeck, Paul 23, 31, 35  
Blackburn, Barry 186, 191  
Blank, Josef 48, 71–72, 74, 81, 206  
Blass, Friedrich 259  
Bock, Darrell L. 271  
Boismard, Marie-Emile 229  
Borgen, Peder 33–34, 89, 195  
Bornkamm, Gunther 89, 219  
Borsch, Frederick H. 65  
Bourdieu, Pierre 126  
Bradshaw, Paul F. 226  
Brant, Ja-Ann 130, 150  
Broadhead, Edwin K. 141  
Brodie, Thomas L. 16  
Broer, Ingo 63  
Brooks, Oscar S. 219  
Brown, Jeannine K. 92, 98, 101  
Brown, Raymond E. 18, 20, 22–23, 33–34, 53, 77, 84, 96, 100–101, 103, 160, 169, 177, 181, 183, 195, 202, 215, 217, 269, 291, 295, 300–301  
Brownson, James V. 299  
Brox, Norbert 247, 262, 268  
Buchinger, Harald 216  
Bultmann, Rudolf 15, 20, 39, 47–48, 61–62, 68, 71–73, 85, 117, 138, 152, 170, 208, 218–220, 242, 250, 267, 269  
Burkett, Delbert 65  
Burkert, Walter 260  
Burrige, Richard A. 6  
Busse, Ulrich 195, 221
- Calvin, Jean 216–217  
Carmichael, Calum M. 90, 97  
Carson, D.A. 22  
Carter, Warren 162  
Casey, Maurice 65  
Cavallera, Ferdinand 217  
Chesnutt, Randall D. 105  
Chibici-Revneanu, Nicole 109  
Cho, Sukmin 160

- Clark, Donald L. 5  
 Clark-Soles, Jaime 70, 74, 78  
 Claußen, Carsten 161  
 Collins, Adela Yarbrow 109, 140–141, 146–149, 167, 184, 186  
 Collins, John J. 110, 159  
 Coloe, Mary L. 92–93, 96, 101, 105  
 Colpe, Carsten 240, 268  
 Colwell, E. C. 65  
 Conway, Colleen M. 130  
 Croatto, J. Severino 159  
 Crossan, John D. 221  
 Cullmann, Oscar 59, 117, 234  
 Culpepper, R. Alan 1–3, 16–17, 20, 23, 26, 39, 59, 67–69, 73, 75–76, 78–79, 83, 90, 93–94, 96–97, 102, 130, 132–133, 144, 150, 196, 216, 221, 249, 297–301  
 Cuvillier, Élian 143
- Dahl, Nils 74  
 Daly-Denton, Margaret 94, 96–97, 110–112, 114  
 Daniélou, J. C. 305  
 Danker, Frederick W. 61, 72, 162–163, 290, 294, 297  
 Danove, Paul L. 131, 147  
 de Boer, Martinus C. 151, 203, 211  
 Debrunner, Albert 259  
 Dennis, John A. 191, 203–204  
 Derrenbacher, Robert A. 178  
 Despotis, Athanasios 216, 224  
 Destre, Mauro 117–118  
 Dettwiler, Andreas 118, 124  
 Dodd, C. H. 21–22, 83, 170, 254, 269  
 Dörrie, Heinrich 264  
 Downing, F. Gerald 178  
 Drews, Alexander 82, 99  
 Dschulnigg, Peter 130, 292–293, 296, 302  
 Du Rand, Jan A. 90  
 du Toit, David 142, 148  
 Duff, Timothy E. 5, 7–9  
 Dunbabin, Katherine M. D. 164  
 Dunderberg, Ismo 132, 179, 182  
 Dunn, James D. G. 122, 186, 220
- Ebner, Martin 143  
 Eckhardt, Benedikt 221, 227  
 Ehorn, Seth M. 181
- Ehrhardt, Arnold 90  
 Ellwein, Eduard 217  
 Endo, Masanobu 89, 101  
 Engberg-Pedersen, Troels 60–61, 74, 78  
 Erdkamp, Paul 163  
 Erler, Michael 264–265  
 Ernst, Josef 140, 142  
 Eslinger, Lyle 290, 298  
 Evans, Craig A. 89
- Farelly, Nicolas 296–297, 299  
 Felsch, Dorit 16, 19–20, 24, 26  
 Field, John 299  
 Fletcher-Louis, Crispin 65  
 Fontanille, Jean-Philippe 162  
 Forestell, J. Terence 201  
 Fortna, Robert T. 47, 177  
 Fossum, Jarl E. 260  
 Foucault, Michel 117, 123  
 Frankemölle, Hubert 245  
 Freed, Edwin D. 68  
 Freedman, Harry 30  
 Frey, Jörg 39–41, 43, 47–51, 57, 60–61, 63, 65, 71, 74–78, 80, 83, 106, 117, 138, 151, 157, 166, 178–179, 182, 200–206, 209–212, 228, 247, 258–259, 263  
 Freyne, Sean 121
- Gagné, André 293, 297, 300, 305–306  
 García Martínez, Florentino 68  
 Gärtner, Bertil 302  
 Gemeinhardt, Peter 264  
 Giblin, Charles H. 171, 177, 183, 193, 195  
 Gibson, Shimon 17  
 Gnilka, Joachim 139, 141–142  
 Godet, Frédéric 16  
 Goldstein, Ronnie 263  
 Gollwitzer, Helmuth 217  
 Gordley, Matthew E. 95  
 Gould, Peter 119  
 Gregory, Andrew 179  
 Grigsby, Bruce 179
- Habel, Norman C. 94  
 Habermann, Jürgen 260  
 Haenchen, Ernst 16, 19, 22–23, 138, 152  
 Hahn, Ferdinand 59, 212  
 Hahn, Johannes 148

- Halbwachs, Maurice 118  
 Hambly, W.F. 89, 97  
 Hammes, Axel 49  
 Harvey, A. E. 84  
 Heath, Jane 196  
 Hegermann, Harald 90  
 Heil, John 168, 170, 172, 189  
 Heilmann, Jan 200, 216, 221–229,  
 231–233, 235–237, 240–242, 245, 248,  
 255  
 Heiningner, Bernhard 248  
 Hellholm, David 221  
 Hengel, Martin 63, 101, 260, 269  
 Higgins, A. J. B. 65–66  
 Hoegen-Rohls, Christina 254  
 Hofbeck, Sebald 16, 22  
 Holleran, J. Warren 17  
 Holtzmann, Heinrich J. 211  
 Hooker, Morna D. 147  
 Hoskyns, Edwyn C. 89, 205  
 Howard, Virgil P. 186  
 Hübenthal, Sandra 135  
 Hübner, Hans 145–146  
 Hunt, Steven A. 130, 132, 155, 177, 272  
 Hunziker-Rodewald, Regine 135  
 Hylén, Susan E. 20, 130, 150, 152, 158,  
 166, 168, 185, 193, 196, 277, 280, 287  
  
 Isaac, E.67  
  
 Janowski, Bernd 260  
 Jeremias, Joachim 17  
 John, V. J. 94  
  
 Kammler, Hans-Christian 55  
 Karakolis, Christos 160  
 Käsemann, Ernst 89, 93, 208, 210–211,  
 244  
 Kasser, Rodolphe 248  
 Keener, Craig S. 16–17, 22, 24, 30–32, 35,  
 81, 146, 170, 184, 189, 196, 206, 283,  
 292, 302  
 Kennedy, George 7  
 Kertelge, Karl 132  
 Kilde, Jeanne H. 124  
 Kim, Dongsu 292  
 Kinlaw, Pamela E. 262  
 Klaiber, Walter 221, 239  
  
 Klassen, William 289–290, 294  
 Klauck, Hans-Josef 130, 218, 247, 259,  
 268–269, 289, 294, 302, 305  
 Klinghardt, Matthias 221, 223  
 Knöppler, Thomas 202–203  
 Kobel, Esther 115, 239  
 Koch, Dietrich-Alex 132  
 Koester, Craig R. 10, 16–17, 21, 40, 74,  
 76, 97, 111, 130, 145–146, 155–156, 160,  
 173, 215, 217, 220–221, 234, 245, 247,  
 280, 293, 301–302  
 Kogon, Aaron J. 162  
 Kohler, Herbert 206  
 Kollmann, Bernd 140  
 Konings, Johan 150, 177  
 Konradt, Matthias 88  
 Krafft, Eva 301  
 Kramp, Igna M. 91  
 Kratz, Reinhard 187, 189  
 Kubiś, Adam 305  
 Kübler, Mirjam 289  
 Kuhn, Heinz-Wolfgang 132  
 Kunath, Friederike 250  
 Kurz, Gerhard 256  
 Kysar, Robert 152  
  
 Labahn, Michael 16, 82, 109, 129,  
 131–134, 137, 143–146, 148, 151,  
 167–168, 170, 176, 179, 182, 189, 196,  
 284  
 Lagrange, Marie-Joseph 16  
 Lamouille, Arnaud 229  
 Lang, Manfred 131, 135  
 Lange, Benjamin 84  
 Larsen, Kasper Bro 168, 181  
 Lee, Dorothy A. 16–17, 106, 133, 194,  
 221  
 Léon-Dufour, Xavier 52–53, 55, 106, 242  
 Leonhard, Clemens 221, 227  
 Leonhardt-Balzer, Jutta 76, 90  
 Leroy, Herbert 233  
 Liddel Henry G. 224  
 Lierman, John 161  
 Lies, Lothar 216  
 Lieu, Judith M. 270  
 Lightfoot, R. H. 298, 300  
 Lincoln, Andrew T. 34–35, 84, 106, 176,  
 181, 201, 203, 220, 276



- Lindars, Barnabas 22, 65, 186, 190, 194, 211
- Loader, William R. G. 42, 60, 79–80, 168, 170, 199–203, 205–207, 209–210, 258, 272, 278, 282
- Lohmeyer, Ernst 190
- Löhr, Hermut 80
- Loisy, Alfred 20, 22–23
- Luther, Suzanne 125, 249
- Lüthi, Kurt 289, 305
- Maccoby, Hyam 298, 301
- Mackay, Ian D. 132, 177, 181, 194, 201
- Madden, Patrick J. 107, 168, 183
- Malbon, Elizabeth S. 130
- Malherbe, Abraham J 6
- Marcus, Joel 158, 186–187
- Maritz, Petrus 223
- Martin, Michael W. 5, 294
- Martyn, J. Louis 159, 283
- Mastin B. A. 16, 20, 185
- Mayordomo, Moisés 245
- Maysner, Edwin 234
- McDonough, Sean M. 88, 96–97
- McGowan, Andrew B. 221
- McKay, Heather A. 34
- Meeks, Wayne A. 12, 71, 161
- Meier, John P. 170
- Méndez, Hugo 74
- Menken, Maarten J. J. 89, 180, 200, 220, 255, 263, 302
- Meshorer, Ya'akov 162, 171
- Meyer, Marvin 248
- Michaels, J. Ramsey 1, 3–4, 16, 20, 23, 25, 168, 170, 206, 255, 277, 284
- Moloney, Francis J. 19, 25, 88, 106–107, 138, 145, 150, 161, 195, 211, 230, 292, 299
- Moore, Anthony M. 87, 91, 96
- Morris, Leon 16, 235
- Moser, Marion 56
- Moulton, James H. 46
- Müller, Theophil E. 213
- Muller, Ulrich B. 259
- Mußner, Franz 241
- Nagel, Titus 215
- Nereparampil, Lucius 94
- Newman, Judith H. 186
- Neyrey, Jerome H. 16, 50, 84, 121
- Nicklas, Tobias 95, 130
- Nitzan, Bilhah 95
- Noreña, Carlos 162, 171
- North, Wendy E. S. 180–182, 193
- Novakovic, Lidija 84
- O'Day, Gail R. 78, 168, 175, 186, 193
- O'Donnell, Tim 74
- Odeberg, Hugo 31, 35, 220
- Omanson, Roger L. 18
- Painter, John 65, 73, 92, 96–98, 114, 175, 177, 186, 295
- Paffenroth, Kim 298
- Parsenios, George L. 1, 60, 70–71, 84–85, 249, 270
- Passow, Franz 240, 250, 257
- Peres, Imre 266
- Perrin, Bernadotte 5, 7–9, 164
- Pesch, Rudolf 136, 140, 142
- Pesco, Adriana 117–118
- Petersen, Silke 186, 218, 248
- Pettem, Michael 175
- Phythian-Adams, William J. 89
- Pietsch, Christian 264, 266
- Piper, Ronald A. 282–283
- Poplutz, Uta 249
- Popp, Thomas 144–145, 151–152, 195, 250, 285–286
- Potterrie, Ignace de la 84
- Preisker, Herbert 269
- Rahmsdorf Olivia L. 103
- Rechenmacher, Hans 108
- Reichardt, Michael 142, 152
- Reinhartz, Adele 29, 38, 41, 102, 289
- Reinmuth, Eckart 104
- Rensberger, David 212, 270
- Resseguie, James L. 19
- Reynolds, Benjamin E. 65–66, 215–216, 220, 240, 242
- Richter, Georg 234, 262
- Ridderbos, Herman N. 170, 281
- Riedweg, Christoph 265
- Rigaux, Béda 251
- Roberge, Michel 215, 220–221

- Röder, Jorg 249  
 Ronning, Christian 148  
 Roth, Dieter T. 112  
 Rowland, Christopher 260  
 Runesson, Anders 78  
 Rusam, Dietrich 249, 267, 270
- Salier, Willis Hedley 162, 167  
 Sand, Anne 133, 148  
 Sanders, E. P. 31  
 Sanders, J.N. 16, 185  
 Sandmel, Samuel 31  
 Sanger, Dieter 221  
 Schenke, Ludger 132, 145, 150, 250, 253  
 Schlatter, Adolf 16, 19, 220  
 Schlier, Heinrich 219, 222  
 Schlund, Christine 202–203  
 Schmidt, Eckart D. 249  
 Schmitt, Valentin 215  
 Schnackenburg, Rudolf 16, 18–19, 31, 49, 59, 77, 89, 168–169, 183, 185, 215, 218, 220, 232, 240, 259, 292, 299, 306–307  
 Schneider, Johannes 16, 20  
 Schneiders, Sandra M. 63, 67  
 Schnelle, Udo 2–4, 21–23, 60, 64, 71, 77–78, 82, 84, 90, 96–98, 109, 111, 114, 132, 137–138, 143, 145, 149–150, 157, 167, 176, 182, 195, 200, 202, 206, 209, 219–220, 228, 230, 232, 235–236, 240, 249, 255–256, 259, 262, 264, 268–271, 279, 283, 292, 295, 301, 306–307  
 Schoedel, William R. 268–269  
 Scholtissek, Klaus 16–17, 26, 129, 146, 204, 242  
 Schrage, Wolfgang 218, 243–244  
 Schreiber, Stefan 131, 145  
 Schröter, Jens 119, 121, 263–264  
 Schulz, Siegfried 50, 53–54  
 Schürmann, Heinz 234–236  
 Schwankl, Otto 133, 138, 183  
 Schweitzer, Albert 55  
 Schweizer, Eduard 218–221, 226, 232, 242  
 Scott, E. F. 211  
 Scott, Robert 224  
 Segovia, Fernando F. 202  
 Sellin, Gerhard 118  
 Sheridan, Ruth 81  
 Siebert, Folker 47, 90
- Siliezar, Carlos R. S. 91–92, 96–97, 101, 103, 108, 110  
 Skinner, Christopher W. 130, 155  
 Slusser, Michael 262  
 Smit, Peter-Ben 222  
 Smith, Dennis E. 171, 221  
 Smith, D. Moody 62, 78, 82  
 Smith, R. R. R. 162  
 Snoy, Thierry 191  
 Soards, Marion L. 190  
 Söding, Thomas 202–203, 260  
 Specht, Thomas 217  
 Staley, Jeffrey L. 1, 3, 23, 25–26, 290  
 Stamm, Raymond T. 89, 96  
 Standhartinger, Angela 164  
 Stare, M. 220  
 Stegner, William R. 185  
 Stenger, Werner 232, 253  
 Stevens, George B. 211  
 Stewart, Alistair C. 263  
 Stibbe, Mark W. G. 120, 123  
 Sticher, Claudia 89  
 Stovell, Beth M. 162  
 Strack, Hermann L. 23, 31, 35  
 Strathmann, Hermann 16, 20, 220–221  
 Straub, Esther 16, 20–23, 25–26  
 Strecker, Georg 269  
 Strotmann, Angelika 224  
 Stroumsa, Guy G. 263  
 Stuckenbruck, Loren T. 260  
 Suggit, John 91  
 Swain, Simon 5, 7  
 Sylva, Dennis 285–286
- Tabb, Brian J. 91  
 Takács, Sarolta A. 171  
 Taschl-Erber, Andrea 278, 282  
 Thatcher, Tom 306  
 Theissen, Gerd 119, 121, 133, 144, 150, 189  
 Theobald, Michael 2–3, 16, 18, 20, 24, 39–40, 49–52, 60–63, 75, 80, 88, 96, 117, 129, 133, 137–138, 148, 161, 168, 177, 190, 193–194, 196, 200–201, 209, 211, 215, 222, 226–228, 230–231, 235, 237–239, 241, 245–247, 250, 253, 255, 259, 290, 292–293  
 Thomas, John Christopher 16

- Thompson, Marianne Meye 4, 60, 64,  
84, 105, 137–138, 161, 168, 190, 192,  
194, 200, 205, 220, 247, 258–259, 275,  
279–280, 299
- Thüsing, Wilhelm 205–206
- Thyen, Hartwig 17, 20, 26, 160, 168, 187,  
206, 220–221, 223, 231–233, 235, 247,  
270, 294, 306
- Tillich, Paul 258
- Tolmie, Francois 20, 130, 134, 155, 272,  
290
- Tröger, Karl-Wolfgang 262
- Trudinger, Peter L. 94
- Uebele, Wolfram 268, 270
- Valantasis, Richard 109
- Van Belle, Gilbert 131, 137, 223
- van der Watt, Jan G. 15, 60, 70, 82, 84–85,  
90, 161, 211, 228
- van Iersel, B. M. F. 141–142, 191
- van Tilborg, Sjef 152
- Vanhoye, Albert 53, 55
- Vollenweider, Samuel 260
- von Möllendorf, Peter 269
- Voortman, Terence C. 90, 97
- von Goethe, Johann Wolfgang 269
- von Heyden, Wichard 247
- von Lips, Hermann 138
- von Siebenthal, Heinrich 46
- von Wahlde, Urban C. 16–17, 23, 26, 47,  
62, 96, 305
- Wagener, Fredrik 290–292, 296, 300–301,  
306–308
- Wallace, Daniel B. 291
- Wallraff, Martin 222, 225–226
- Warren, Meredith J. C. 17, 160, 162,  
282
- Watts, Rikki E. 187
- Weder, Hans 129, 259
- Wehr, Lothar 219, 234, 237, 239
- Weidemann, Hans-Ulrich 93, 96, 105,  
142, 235, 237, 246
- Weigandt, Peter 262, 268–269
- Weiss, Hans-Friedrich 89
- Weiss, Herold 98
- Welck, Christian 22, 145
- Wellhausen, Julius 47–48, 218–219
- Wengst, Klaus 35, 119, 269
- Whitacre, Rodney A. 202
- White, Rodney 119
- Whitenton, Michael R. 186
- Wieland, Christoph M. 138
- Wilckens, Ulrich 267–268, 270
- Wilkens, Wilhelm 16
- Williams, Catrin H. 110, 146, 160,  
169–170, 175, 178, 181, 184–188, 277,  
282, 304
- Williams, Joel F. 131
- Windisch, Hans 269
- Winston, David
- Witkamp, Leonard T. 16, 192–193
- Wrede, William 211
- Wurm, Alois 270
- Wust, Gregor 248
- Wyatt, Nicolas 91
- Zahn, Theodor 215
- Zeller, Dieter 260
- Zilm, Jennifer 110
- Zimmermann, Ruben 60, 81–82, 87–88,  
91, 99, 103, 106–107, 115, 130, 133, 149,  
155, 173, 201, 272, 305
- Zumstein, Jean 17–18, 20, 40, 60, 62,  
77–78, 82, 84–85, 99, 117, 120, 122,  
125, 177, 185, 189, 194, 200, 220, 227,  
239–242, 248, 253, 264, 280, 295, 299,  
307
- Zwiep, Arie 295

## Index of Subjects

- Ahithophel 302
- Andrew, Disciple of Jesus 143, 150–151, 153, 166, 277, 287
- Angel(s) 10, 68, 70, 260–263  
– See also “Demon(s)”
- Apocalyptic(ism) 39, 48, 57, 65–66, 69–70, 203, 305  
– See also “Eschatology”
- Baptism 43, 216, 219, 239, 247, 256–257, 270
- Bartholomeus 251
- Belief 33, 41, 45–47, 55, 59, 64, 66–67, 82, 98, 215, 217, 232, 253, 275, 278  
– See also “Faith”
- Beloved Disciple 1, 11, 13, 251, 257, 272, 285, 297, 308
- Bible 18, 100  
– Hebrew Bible 36–37  
– See also “Scripture”
- Blood 224, 257–258, 270–271, 279  
– As Something to be Drunk 215–217, 222, 224, 226, 240, 242, 245  
– As Symbol of New Covenant 242  
– of Jesus 200, 212, 232, 243–244, 246, 248, 255  
– Sacrifice/Offering 211, 244–245  
– See also “Eucharist/Lord’s Supper,” “Dualism,” “Flesh,” “Wine”
- Bread 105, 111–113, 126, 129, 141, 148, 153, 155–156, 158–160, 163, 169–170, 195, 200, 207, 210, 216, 221, 224, 229, 233–241, 243–244, 255–258, 277–278, 287, 303  
– Bread of Life Discourse 18, 175, 232, 276, 281, 286, 289  
– Jesus as Bread 105–106, 133, 137, 158, 194, 200, 205, 208–209, 212, 218, 223–226, 229, 230–231, 234, 242, 246, 250, 255–256, 258, 278–279, 303  
– See also “Eucharist/Lord’s Supper,” “Food,” “Manna,” “Wine”
- Cajetan 217  
– See also “Jean Calvin,” “Martin Luther,” “Zwingli”
- Christianity 11, 118, 300  
– Early Christianity 57  
– See also “Judaism”
- Christology 33, 36, 41, 48, 59, 64, 115, 130, 155, 212, 253, 259–260, 261–263, 270  
– Docetic Christology 261–262, 268–269  
– Johannine Christology 34, 69, 71, 83, 86, 126–127, 129, 155, 181, 209–211, 213, 232, 246, 248, 258, 262  
– Markan Christology 143  
– See also “Logos,” “Messiah,” “Savior,” “Son of God,” “Son of Man”
- Creation 29, 31–32, 36–37, 70, 81, 83, 87–108, 110, 112–116, 118, 141, 184, 191
- Cross 11, 76, 101, 106, 109, 126, 143, 145, 149, 154, 166, 204–205, 212, 231, 233, 247–248, 253, 263, 271–272, 279, 281, 284–286, 288, 300  
– See also “Death,” “Resurrection”
- Crowd 17, 20, 24, 81, 135–136, 139–141, 143, 148, 150, 155–161, 163–167, 170, 173, 182, 195–196, 252, 271, 275–278, 282–283, 287, 302  
– See also “People”
- Darkness 68, 70–71, 78, 107, 124, 134, 136, 138, 145, 151, 167, 183, 185, 192, 194, 298  
– Children of 68  
– See also “Light”
- David 69, 240, 302
- Death 5, 10, 25, 55–56, 63–64, 66–67, 71, 73–79, 83, 85–86, 95, 103–107, 113–115, 120, 135, 146, 165, 169, 188, 200–213, 225, 231–232, 234, 241, 243–246, 257–258, 265, 267, 270–272, 275, 279–281, 283–288, 290, 300  
– See also “Life,” “Resurrection”

- Decalogue 29–30  
 – See also “Law,” “Torah”
- Demon(s) 76, 282–283  
 – See also “Angel(s)”
- Devil 70, 73, 77, 118, 276, 280–283, 289, 291, 293–295, 298–300, 302–303, 305–306, 308–309  
 – See also “Satan”
- Disciple(s) 6, 10–11, 27, 37, 41–42, 45, 57–58, 63, 76, 79, 86, 110–112, 115, 121, 123–124, 129–134, 136, 139, 141, 143–156, 166–173, 176–177, 182–187, 189, 190–197, 202, 204–205, 207–208, 213, 218, 224, 230–231, 250–255, 265, 272, 275–277, 279–288, 290–294, 296–297, 300–309
- Docetic(ism) 202, 208, 223, 247, 262–263, 268–270  
 – Christology 261, 263  
 – See also “The Twelve”
- Dualism  
 – Flesh/Spirit 113, 231, 233, 253, 292  
 – Johannine 49, 138  
 – Life/Soul 265
- Eden 91
- Egypt 18, 30, 67, 158, 277
- Election 289, 293–295, 301, 308
- Elijah 156, 159, 190
- Enoch 46, 260, 262, 267
- Eschatology 38, 48–49, 55, 62  
 – Johannine Eschatology 39, 51, 54–55, 57, 60, 63–64, 74, 83, 85–86  
 – Present/Future Eschatology 62–64, 74, 125  
 – Realized Eschatology 62, 74  
 – Sapiential Eschatology 67  
 – See also “Apocalyptic(ism)”
- Eucharist 200–201, 208, 213, 217, 219, 221–222, 225, 227, 234, 239, 240–242, 244, 246–248, 250, 253–257, 269–270, 273  
 – See also “Bread,” “Lord’s Supper,” “Wine”
- Exodus 18–19, 30, 36, 125, 158, 169, 182, 184, 181, 193, 196, 277–278, 287  
 – New Exodus 184, 187, 190–191, 196–197
- Faith 2–3, 10, 12, 15, 17–18, 21, 23–28, 64, 73, 82, 93, 110, 113, 122, 130, 156, 194, 204–205, 207–208, 213, 279–281, 283–284, 286–287, 293–294, 298, 308  
 – Father 2, 10, 15, 25–26, 29, 32, 34–38, 51–52, 54–55, 59, 61–63, 70–73, 75, 79–80, 82, 84–86, 96, 98, 100, 102–104, 125–126, 133, 143–146, 152–153, 160, 169, 201, 204–206, 210–211, 218, 229, 231–233, 240, 242, 248, 252, 254, 258, 261, 267, 278–280, 283, 285–287, 292–293, 295, 307–308  
 – See also “God”
- Flesh 107, 110, 113–115, 200, 217, 219, 224, 230–231, 233, 235–236, 240, 247, 253, 257, 261, 266, 279, 292, 295, 298, 308  
 – As Bread 278  
 – As Something to Eat 115, 215–217, 221, 223–226, 230, 233–234, 239–242, 245–246, 278–279  
 – “Flesh and Blood” 166, 172–173, 213, 216, 220, 224–225, 227, 232, 237–238, , 240–242, 258, 267, 279–280, 284  
 – of Jesus 83, 116, 160, 166, 200–201, 205, 219–220, 232–234, 236, 246–248, 255, 259, 264, 267–269, 271–272, 284, 287  
 – See also “Blood,” “Bread,” “Dualism,” “Eucharist/Lord’s Supper”
- Food 37, 100, 111–113, 133, 159, 163, 166, 200, 216–219, 223–227, 229, 233–234, 238–243, 245–246, 255, 257–258, 278–279, 284  
 – See also “Bread,” Eucharist/Lord’s Supper,” Wine”
- Forgiveness 11, 204, 210–213  
 – See also “Sin”
- Galilee 120–121, 162, 165, 271, 282–283  
 – See also “Sea of Galilee”
- Gentile(s) 17, 32, 203
- Glory 25–26, 30, 37, 44, 64–65, 67–68, 73, 83, 99, 106–107, 125, 142, 149, 181, 196, 204, 209, 211, 272, 275, 287, 305, 309
- Gnostic(ism) 208, 248, 268–269
- God 11–12, 20–22, 24–27, 29–38, 41–46, 51, 55–56, 60, 62, 64, 66–69, 71–73, 77, 80–84, 86, 93–96, 98–100, 102–106,

- 108–110, 113–116, 121, 123, 125–125,  
140–142, 146, 154–155, 157–160,  
165–166, 168–173, 184, 190–193,  
196, 209–210, 213, 218, 244, 252, 258,  
260–262, 264–266, 268, 270–272,  
275–279, 281, 284–285, 299, 303  
– See also “Father”  
Grumble 277–279  
– See also “Murmur”
- Heaven 29–30, 36, 65, 76–77, 80, 82, 90,  
104–105, 108, 110, 118, 125–126, 144,  
158, 160, 169, 173, 208–209, 229–232,  
246, 252–253, 263, 265, 267, 277–280,  
283, 286–287
- High Priest 202–203, 284–285
- “I am” 37, 69, 106, 109–110, 113, 133, 149,  
155, 168–170, 172, 176, 181, 184–188,  
191–194, 196, 277–278, 284, 307
- Incarnation 64, 74–75, 79, 83, 85, 92,  
114–115, 118, 186, 209, 225, 231,  
233, 245, 253, 256, 258–261, 263, 268,  
271–272, 279, 287
- Ἰουδαῖοι 40–41, 122, 239, 293  
– See also “Jew(s)”
- Israel 3, 11, 17–18, 20–21, 27, 31, 36–37,  
44, 64, 70, 77, 83, 104, 120, 140, 165,  
169, 172, 176, 179, 185, 187, 195, 197,  
203, 251, 278, 283  
– See also Ἰουδαῖοι, “Jew(s)”
- James, Brother of Jesus 251  
James, Son of Alphaeus 251  
Jean Calvin 216–217  
– See also “Cajetan,” “Martin Luther,”  
“Zwingli”
- Jerusalem 12, 17, 19, 37, 40–41, 43, 84, 99,  
119–121, 132, 137, 156–157, 161, 165,  
205, 207, 282–283, 295
- Jesus – see “Cross,” “Logos,” “Lord,”  
“Messiah,” “Resurrection,” “Savior,”  
“Son of Man,” “Son of God,”
- Jew(s) 2, 11, 17–30, 33–34, 36, 38, 40,  
45, 57–58, 67, 76, 84, 102–103, 119,  
122, 157, 209, 239, 243, 252, 256, 261,  
277–279, 282–283, 287  
– Johannine Jews 15, 19–20, 22–27, 35  
– “The Jews” 40–44, 123, 137, 240, 267,  
276–277, 287
- Johannine School 77, 252, 267, 272
- John the Baptist 42–44, 84, 80, 121, 132,  
147, 159, 193, 212
- Joseph and Aseneth 93, 104–105
- Joseph, Father of Jesus 232, 287
- Joseph of Arimathea 11–12
- Josephus 5, 99, 120, 161–162, 165,  
170–171, 196, 295
- Judaism 22, 48, 55, 58, 60, 64, 69, 85, 95,  
102, 209, 212
- Judas, Disciple of Jesus 12–13, 26, 73,  
251, 253–254, 273, 276–277, 280–286,  
288–309
- Jude, Brother of James 251
- Judea 120–121, 162
- Judge 11, 35, 43, 45, 51, 59–64, 66–72,  
75–78, 80, 84–86, 100, 102–103
- Judgment 4, 9, 35, 38, 44–48, 52, 54–56,  
58–81, 83–86, 103, 109, 169, 210, 213,  
301
- King 60, 64, 70, 76, 85–86, 143, 155,  
159–166, 171, 173, 196, 266, 276,  
282–283, 287  
– of Assyria 37  
– See also “Prophet”
- Law 11–12, 32, 41, 43, 59  
– Sabbath Law 30, 40  
– See also “Decalogue,” “Torah”
- Lazarus 84, 251, 259, 271, 296
- Life 4–5, 8, 33, 36, 42, 52, 54–55, 63, 75,  
80, 87, 92, 95, 103, 106, 160, 164, 166,  
171, 183, 206–207, 209, 216, 218, 253,  
258, 265, 268, 271, 281  
– As Bread/Food 18, 105–106, 111,  
113, 126, 144, 153, 158, 176, 194, 205,  
212, 221, 233, 239, 241, 244–245, 255,  
278–279, 281, 289, 303  
– As Healing 2, 23, 25, 159  
– Eternal Life 22, 25, 27, 42, 44, 55,  
66–69, 73–74, 78–79, 82, 92–93, 106,  
113–114, 126, 194, 199–200, 204–207,  
209–210, 213, 215, 222–223, 225,  
229–230, 234, 238–239, 241, 245, 257,  
276, 278, 280–281, 285

- Given by Jesus/God 21, 28, 45–47, 55, 61, 69–72, 77, 79, 85–86, 93, 97–98, 100, 104–107, 112, 126, 135, 137, 143–144, 146, 154, 160, 169, 173, 194, 200–202, 204, 208, 210–211, 213, 234–236, 240, 242, 276–277, 279–281, 283–285, 287–288
- New Life 12, 107, 113, 115, 210
- of Jesus 6, 83, 87, 105–106, 119, 121, 211, 219, 253, 271, 273
- True Life 111
- Water of Life 205
- Word(s) of Life 232, 284, 286
- See also “Death”
- Light 8, 12, 33, 37, 67, 72–73, 94, 99, 104, 115, 138, 141, 188, 208, 304, 306
- As a Force 302–304, 306
- as Jesus 43, 71, 73, 75, 78–79, 81, 83, 105–106, 205, 207, 209, 211
- Children of 68, 114
- Light/Darkness 73, 75, 81, 87, 92, 104, 106, 113, 192, 309
- See also “Darkness”
- Logos 35–36, 83, 89–90, 105, 209, 216, 225, 231, 245, 247, 255–256, 259–260, 263, 267, 272
- See also “Messiah,” “Savior,” “Son of Man,” “Son of God”
- Lord 10–11, 29–30, 36–37, 63–64, 66, 68, 99, 102, 104–105, 165, 169, 188–189, 193–194, 236, 268, 271, 277, 280, 284–286, 288, 291
- Lord’s/Last Supper 12, 200, 255–256, 279
- See also “Bread,” “Eucharist,” “Food,” “Wine”
- Manna 125–126, 158, 161, 209, 228–229, 246, 277–278
- Martha 1, 10, 21, 106, 251, 296
- Martin Luther 87, 217
- See also “Cajetan,” “Jean Calvin,” “Zwingli”
- Mary Magdalene 1, 258, 286, 309
- Mary, Mother of Jesus 269
- Mary, Sister of Martha 1, 10, 296–297, 308–309
- Matthew, Disciple of Jesus 251
- Messiah 6, 68–69, 77, 140, 151, 157, 160–161, 166, 203, 253, 261–262, 276, 288
- See also “Christology,” “Logos,” “Savior,” “Son of God,” “Son of Man”
- Moses 18, 32, 43–45, 59, 64, 83–84, 111, 157–159, 161, 169, 173, 185, 190, 196, 260
- Murmur 278–280
- See also “Grumble”
- Nicodemus 1, 11–13, 20, 26, 58, 180, 251, 272
- Paraclete 59, 63, 72, 76, 79, 208, 272
- See also “(Holy) Spirit”
- Passover 18–19, 145, 158, 165, 184, 188, 202–203, 282–283, 298
- Paul 6, 28, 234, 238, 243–245, 249, 251, 259–261, 270
- People 4, 7, 11–12, 15, 17–21, 23–24, 27–28, 36, 38, 44–45, 57, 66, 68–69, 75, 78, 81, 94, 100, 105, 111, 122–124, 134–135, 137, 140–141, 144, 156–160, 162–165, 167–169, 171–172, 184, 190–192, 203–204, 212, 217, 247, 263, 275–278, 280–283, 287, 306, 309
- Pharisees 20, 38, 58, 72, 84, 232, 283, 296
- Philip, Disciple of Jesus 72, 166, 251, 272, 287
- Philo 31–34, 90, 96, 98–99, 101–102, 161, 165, 209, 224, 278
- Pilate 58, 84–85, 165–166, 269, 272, 290, 308
- Prophet 36–37, 140, 155–161, 166, 173, 184, 193, 196, 203, 278, 282–283, 287, 305
- “Prophet like Moses” 196
- See also “King”
- Qumran 67, 69, 76, 95, 208–209
- Rabbinic Literature (Sources, Tradition), 30–31, 35, 98, 120
- Resurrection 10, 12, 22, 45–48, 54–55, 58–59, 62–67, 69, 71, 74–80, 83, 85–86, 91–93, 106, 135, 166, 218, 253, 262, 269, 275, 285–288
- See also “Cross,” “Death”

- Sabbath 2–3, 23–27, 29–34, 36, 38, 40–41, 65, 70, 84–85, 95–98, 100, 102, 114–115, 124  
 – See also “Law”
- Salvation 23, 45, 63, 71, 82, 98, 107, 110, 115, 121, 123–124, 137, 157, 169, 187, 191–195, 199–201, 204–210, 212, 217, 241, 244, 253, 286, 288  
 – See also “Soteriology”
- Samaria 120, 162, 166, 272
- Savior 21–22, 26, 139, 142  
 – See also “Christology,” “Messiah,” “Son of God,” “Son of Man”
- Satan 73, 76–77, 118, 281–282, 293–294, 302–303, 305, 309
- Scripture 42, 44, 46, 56–57, 156, 158–160, 175–176, 179, 181, 188, 197, 205, 263, 277–278, 282, 287, 301–305, 307–309  
 – Hebrew/Jewish Scripture 36–37, 60, 64, 71, 80, 84–85, 146, 179–180, 182, 184–187, 197  
 – See also “Bible”
- Sea of Galilee 18, 119–121, 162, 282
- Septuagint 18, 187, 193
- Sheep 11, 73, 77, 106, 135, 140, 201–203, 285  
 – Sheep Gate 17, 119
- Shepherd 11, 103, 106, 123, 135–136, 140–142, 144–145, 147–148, 154, 201, 283, 285–286, 297, 304  
 – See also “Lamb/Sheep”
- Simon Iscariot 276, 289, 291, 293–296, 298, 303
- Simon Peter 122, 150–151, 153, 170, 201, 251, 254, 273, 276–277, 280–281, 283–287, 291, 293–295, 297, 308–309
- Simon the Zealot 251, 277
- Sin 2, 15, 25–26, 34, 72, 77, 79, 113–114, 188, 203–204, 210, 213, 281, 287, 307  
 – See also “Forgiveness”
- Son of God 6, 24–25, 27, 34, 51, 72, 79, 81, 102, 153, 160, 193, 206, 209, 240, 251, 259, 263, 267, 270–271, 276, 287–288  
 – See also “Christology,” “Logos,” “Messiah,” “Savior,” “Son of Man”
- Son of Man 45–47, 51, 53–55, 58–59, 61–62, 65–67, 69, 71, 78, 80, 140, 157, 200, 206, 216, 223, 230, 232, 239–240, 252, 258, 262, 279, 290  
 – See also “Christology,” “Logos,” “Messiah,” “Savior,” “Son of God”
- Soteriology 127, 199, 210, 231, 233, 261  
 – Johannine Soteriology 154, 210, 213, 246, 267  
 – Markan Soteriology 154  
 – See also “Salvation”
- Soul 34, 67–68, 75, 208, 265–266  
 – Immortality 66  
 – Preexistent 66–67
- Spirit 11, 66, 92, 101, 206, 216–217, 219, 228, 231–234, 239, 243, 247, 257, 266, 268, 291, 303, 308  
 – of God 66, 105, 108, 279  
 – of Life 87  
 – of Truth 282  
 – See also “Dualism”
- (Holy) Spirit 114–115, 204–205, 208, 210–211, 213, 230–233, 240, 253–254, 263, 292  
 – See also “Paraclete”
- Spirituality 199, 210, 213
- Synoptic Gospels 281, 33, 64, 66, 69, 80, 85, 178–180, 270  
 – Synoptic Tradition 75, 108, 121–122, 263, 306  
 – Synoptic Parallels 111, 189
- Talmud 283
- Temple 17, 19, 23–25, 27, 33, 38, 40–41, 109, 121–124, 202, 205, 271, 284, 306  
 – at Aphrodisias 162, 171
- Thaddeus 251
- Thomas, Disciple of Jesus 1, 10, 251, 258, 271–272, 276, 283–286, 292
- Torah 23, 33, 38, 81, 83, 98–99, 209–210, 212–213, 278  
 – See also “Decalogue,” “Law”
- Truth 9, 44, 48, 67–68, 71, 81–82, 104, 106, 158, 166, 206, 209, 211, 221m 224, 254, 269, 273, 281–283, 297
- “The Twelve” 77, 120, 251, 254, 275–277, 280–281, 283–284, 286, 291–297, 301, 308  
 – See also “Disciple(s)”



- Wilderness 3, 17–18, 20–21, 229, 239,  
125, 169, 277–278, 287–288
- Wine 22, 101, 216, 224–226, 240,  
243–244, 255
- As Blood of Jesus 238, 242, 244
  - As Symbol of the New Covenant 242
  - See also “Blood,” “Bread,” “Eucharist/  
Lord’s Supper,” “Food”
- Wisdom 36, 68–69, 83, 89–90, 104, 190,  
209, 212, 224, 260, 263, 278–279
- Jewish Wisdom Literature 95, 209,  
224
- Zion 37