

Introduction to the Gospel According to John

Lesson One – Introduction

By J B Cross

This is intended as a four-lesson course on the Gospel commonly known as the Gospel of John. The first lesson introduces the concepts, origins, and history of the text itself. The following three lessons—two, three, and four—deal with the text itself. The intention is that study be undertaken in conjunction with reading the text, beginning after you have finished the first lesson. In this way, you will be able to encounter the Gospel directly.

The Gospel According to John

This ancient text stands alone among the Gospels in its rich language and ordering of events. It is considered to be the most theological of the Gospels and its perspective is different from that of the other three Gospels. John, the author, takes us behind the scenes and more fully explains the mystery of the person of Jesus. The text opens not with a narrative about the physical birth of Jesus, but with an explanation of His eternal origin and Divine nature.¹ Jesus is unique in this Gospel because "he was in the beginning with God," and actually active in creation, the source of light and life (John 1.2-4). Jesus in the incarnation makes known to mankind the eternal God, whom "no one has ever seen" (John 1.14; John 1.18)

The Gospel according to John is also referred to by modern scholars as the Fourth Gospel. It is one of a series of writings associated with "John" and thus with the Johannine tradition. In addition to the Fourth Gospel, there are three letters and an apocalyptic document—Revelation—which are traditionally attributed to the Apostle and Evangelist John. The actual authorship has been questioned, but whether the writing was by John or by his students and followers, these writings give the reader deep insight into the learning of the early Church about the person, purpose, and meaning of the ministry of Jesus. While these Johannine writings were once often treated separately, many interpreters read the Gospel, letters, and Revelation in relation to one another as witnesses to an early Christian tradition associated with John.

For many years this Gospel was thought to be less 'factual' as its story line and depiction of Jesus' path to the cross is very different from that set out in the other three Gospels. Scholars felt that one should look beyond the factual differences and concentrate on the interpretation of the events and the rich use of symbols from common experience - bread, water, light, life, word, shepherd, door, and way - to make the significance of Christ both clear and gripping. This traditional view has been subjected to growing dissension since roughly the middle of the twentieth century.²

In this more recent period, support has grown for the view that the basic tradition underlying John's Gospel may be historically more reliable than previously acknowledged. The earlier position was based on an exhaustive study of sacred texts known as "Biblical Criticism," a trend that began in the middle of the nineteenth century. As a result, scholars tended to regard this Gospel as a theological rewriting of the other Gospels. It was thought that the author knew the texts of Mark, Matthew, and Luke, but went his own way when he wished to interpret their meaning. However, that conclusion, and the assumption that John knew and used the other Gospels in their finished form,

¹ Smalle, Steven S., The Gospel According to John, an Introduction, The Oxford Companion to the Bible (c) Oxford University Press, 1996. All rights reserved, Articles by Stephen S. Smalle.

² Smalle, Steven S., The Gospel According to John, an Introduction, The Oxford Companion to the Bible (c) Oxford University Press, 1996. All rights reserved., Articles by Stephen S. Smalle

have been seriously questioned. It is now thought possible that John drew more or less independently on common Christian sources about the life and teaching of Jesus. Further, archaeological discoveries in and around Jerusalem have challenged some central assumptions about the lack of a historical basis for John's statements. The problem for nineteenth-century scholars was that this Gospel refers to some place names that appear nowhere else. Until recently, it was assumed that there were no such places and that they were therefore the result of the author's imagination. For example, John uses place names previously unknown, such as Bethesda (John 5.2) and Gabbatha (John 19.13). These sites and place names have since been identified and excavated. Thus, the stories associated with such sites need not be theological creations and may well rest on an underlying historical tradition. Scholarly debate aside, this turn of events demonstrates that even after two thousand years of reading and contemplating the Gospels, there is still new and fresh ground to cover and insight to be found.

The Gospel begins with a soaring prologue (John 1.1-18), in which the Gospel sets forth Jesus Christ himself as the object of faith (John 1.19-4.54), then depicts Christ's conflict with unbelievers (John 5-12), his kinship with believers (John 13-17), his death and resurrection (John 18-20), and finally concludes with an epilogue (John 21). Much of the Gospel deals not with a description of events but rather consists of discourses by Jesus. In contrast to the other Gospels, Jesus is often interrupted by questions or objections from his hearers. The Gospels attributed to Mark, Matthew, and Luke are known as the "Synoptic Gospels." The basis for this grouping is that all three follow a similar outline of events. They are not the same, but they follow the same basic order, with differences usually involving the presence of additional material in some but not all three, rather than contradictory material. The standard "Christmas Story," for example, is a combination of the accounts in Matthew and Luke. The Gospel of John stands alone in its order of events.

In the Synoptic Gospels, Jesus starts his ministry in Galilee and moves dramatically toward Jerusalem for one fatal visit to the city. In John, by contrast, the ministry of Jesus alternates between Judea and Galilee, with several trips to Jerusalem. John places the purification of the temple early in the ministry, at Passover (John 2.13-22), while the Synoptic Gospels place it near the climax of the story. Jesus returns for other feasts in Jerusalem (John 5.1; John 7.1-10; John 10.22), and at last returns for the final Passover (John 12.12). The order of events surrounding the death of Jesus is different as well. In John, Jesus dies on the day of Preparation for Passover (John 19.31), so the last meal is not presented as the Passover meal in the same way it is in the Synoptic tradition. Mary Magdalene comes to the tomb alone (John 20.1), and other details, such as the order of appearances, are different (John 20.11-18; John 20.19-29). The order of events in John, with its periodic visits to Jerusalem, seems in some respects more natural than the order laid out in the Synoptic Gospels.

The basic teaching presented in John is a theology of life. John not only reveals Jesus but also shows the possibility of life through Jesus (John 1.4). The author of John makes this point by the repeated use of the symbol of light. The life offered by Jesus to every believer, through His revelation and His glorification for the world, is the same divine life of the Father himself (John 5.26). In John's Gospel, the author speaks of life through Jesus in all its fullness. The miracles, called "signs" in this Gospel, also carry a subtext: they show the concern of Jesus for the physical dimension of human existence as well as its spiritual possibilities. This is shown through the signs, which suggest that all matter—not only water, bread, and wine—is intended to convey the abundance of life through Jesus (John 10.10). The first portion of the Gospel gives an account of seven signs of Jesus. Though the Gospel's author states that many others were performed, only these are covered. Thus, the question must be asked: why tell about these seven and not the many others? This question reveals the purpose of relating the seven signs, which is to evoke faith among those who witnessed them (John 2.11; John 2.23), beginning with the disciples (John 2.11). The seven signs are: 1. changing water into wine (John 2); 2. healing the official's son (John 4); 3. making the sick man well (John 5); 4. feeding the five thousand (John 6); 5. restoring the blind man's sight (John 9); 6. raising Lazarus from the dead (John 11); and 7. the catch of 153 fish and the recalling of Peter

(John 21). Together, these incidents point to the unlimited scope of the Christian good news, an idea retained throughout John's Gospel.

Two other features distinguish this Gospel from the other three. The first concerns conflict with the Pharisees, and the second relates to the sayings of Jesus. As in the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke), the conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees receives marked attention in John (for example, John 8.31-59; John 10.19-39). This conflict no doubt reflects the heightened antagonism that developed in the latter part of the first century between the young church and the synagogue, with mutual recrimination arising. Second, while it is often thought that the Synoptic Gospels preserve the sayings of Jesus in words closer to their original form, in the Fourth Gospel the Evangelist more freely employs his own modes of thought and language in reporting and interpreting the teaching of Jesus. The fact, however, that this Gospel was soon placed side by side with the Synoptic Gospels indicates that the early church recognized in it authentic testimony to Jesus and to the promise reported by John: "The Holy Spirit... will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you" (John 14.26).

The next issue concerns the identity of the author of this Gospel. Tradition says it was the apostle John. Many scholars, however, think that it was composed by a disciple of John who recorded John's preaching, as Mark is traditionally said to have done for Peter. In any case, when the Gospel was published near the close of the first century, the church accepted it as authentic apostolic testimony to Jesus (John 21.24), written so that readers might "come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God," and thus "have life in his name" (John 20.31). Scholars theorize that John the apostle, who has traditionally been identified as the "beloved disciple," transmitted orally to his followers an account of the deeds—especially the miracles, or "signs"—and sayings of Jesus, as well as his death and resurrection. At some point, the beloved disciple and his circle of followers may have moved to Ephesus, a city associated by strong tradition with John. In that city, a church developed around this disciple, often referred to as the Johannine church. While resident in that city, John's followers or students may have committed to writing the stories and traditions preserved in their community for the purposes of worship and instruction. In this theoretical first draft of the Fourth Gospel, what may now be recognized as distinctively Johannine thought emerged. These ideas were handed on by the apostle and theologically developed by his followers as they continued to study and discuss them. Finally, after the death of John, his church at Ephesus may have published a final, edited version of the Gospel. This final edition included a summary introduction (John 1.1-18), based on a community hymn. The whole Gospel thus assembled then carried an authenticating postscript (John 21.24-25).

The final issue to discuss in this introduction is the date of the Fourth Gospel. The prior discussion regarding historical reliability suggests that some traditions behind the Gospel may be early, but the further question remains: when was the final version published? A latest possible date is usually set in the early to middle second century CE because of early papyrus evidence from Egypt. The Rylands Papyrus contains a few verses of John 18 and is commonly dated to the first half of the second century. Another early papyrus, Egerton 2, includes part of an unknown gospel that appears to draw on traditions also known from John as well as from the Synoptic Gospels. The existence of these sources suggests that John's Gospel must have been written no later than the beginning of the second century CE, and probably earlier.

Questions for reading

As you read the first section, try to imagine it as a hymn, even though the effect is partly obscured by translation.

The symbol for the Apostle John is the eagle because it is said that this Gospel soars like an eagle. Do you see that? Do you disagree? Or do you think this is an exaggeration? See if you can find the reference to the "beloved disciple."

New Words and Concepts - What do you make of these terms?

Beloved Disciple
Biblical Criticism
Fourth Gospel
'Johannine'
Signs
Synoptic Gospels

Bibliography

Basic source: Smalley, Stephen S., "The Gospel According to John, an Introduction," in The Oxford Companion to the Bible, Oxford University Press, 1996. These materials are intended as notes for a layperson's study and to facilitate discussion of the topics.

a. Smalley, Stephen S., "The Gospel According to John, an Introduction," in The Oxford Companion to the Bible, Oxford University Press, 1996.

b. Johnson, Luke Timothy, The Writings of the New Testament: An Interpretation, Revised Edition, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 1999.

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