



The Gospel of John

Introduction

The Gospel According to John, or the “Fourth Gospel,” has long been a favorite of Christian readers of scripture. Ancient readers, like the second-century teacher, Clement of Alexandria, called it the “spiritual gospel,” more focused than Matthew, Mark, and Luke on the spiritual significance of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

The Gospel’s presentation of the life of Jesus is distinctive. Unlike the other “Synoptic” gospels, John suggests that Jesus had a public ministry that spanned three Passover festivals rather than a single year. It portrays Jesus as speaking in lengthy, sometimes highly symbolic, discourses, rather than the pithy aphorisms and parables that mark his speech in the Synoptics. Some stories, such as the multiplication of the loaves and fish, overlap with stories in the Synoptics, but others, such as the changing of water to wine at Cana and the raising of Lazarus, appear only in John.

The theological perspective of the Gospel is also remarkable. While the other gospels portray Jesus as speaking of the coming Kingdom of God, he here speaks primarily about himself, as the one who reveals and represents God to the world. The evangelist wrestled with what it meant to affirm that Jesus plays that role. On the one hand, for anyone like our evangelist, who was raised in a Jewish environment, it meant that Jesus played, in a definitive way, the roles that had been associated with the Jewish Scripture, the Torah, and with the center of Jewish liturgical life, the Temple. Much of the gospel’s symbolism revolves around these traditional focal points of Jewish life, all of which now somehow point to Jesus.

If Jesus is, in the Gospel’s view, the ultimate revealer of who God is and what God means, a reader might think it possible to convey the content of that revelation in a clear and succinct way. The Gospel, however, refuses to conform to that expectation. For much of its carefully wrought narrative, it cycles back, time and again to Jesus as the content as well as the conveyor of revelation. It reinforces this insistence on Jesus as revealer in a dramatic way by insisting that it is through his death on the cross that the revelation takes place. That is the moment of his paradoxical “glorification,” in which he draws all people to himself and therefore to his Father.

Yet what Jesus reveals is not simply the fact that he reveals. In the latter half of the gospel, from chapter 13 through the account of the Passion and Resurrection, Jesus does reveal God’s love, by his example, by explicit command, and by traditional proverb. In Jesus, claims the gospel, is revealed the love that God has for the whole world. That love is, moreover, manifest

in the absence of Jesus by the presence of his spirit in the community created by his resurrection, a community in which forgiveness is the norm.

The Gospel's reflection on the significance of Christ is couched in a literary form that combines simplicity of expression with consummate literary artistry. Conventions of Greek rhetoric and drama appear alongside techniques of scriptural interpretation known from contemporary Jewish sources. Some elements of the Gospel evoke the piety of sectarians such as the Jews who produced the Dead Sea Scrolls. Other elements evoke the philosophical sophistication of Jews like Philo of Alexandria (40 b.c.e. – 40 c.e.), who combined a piety focused on Jewish scripture with deep familiarity with Plato and the Stoic philosophers.

This intricate reflection on the meaning of the life, death and teaching of Jesus was composed sometime in the latter half of the first century. Most scholars argue for a date later in the century or even early in the second century. The text may well have been the product of community reflection over time, although it is too easy a theory to explain away tensions in the text as results of editorial activity.

Tradition identifies the unknown author as the disciple of Jesus, John the son of Zebedee. He may lurk behind the figure of the Beloved Disciple who appears four times in the text, but the identification is not explicit. The character of the Beloved Disciple plays some clearly literary roles, whether or not there was a historical figure who inspired the account.

The circumstances in which the Gospel was written are also a subject of speculation. In its canonical shape, the gospel may, as tradition suggests, have been composed in Asia Minor, in an environment where followers of Jesus and more traditional Jews competed for attention and adherents. Whatever its initial audience, the text has constantly challenged and inspired Christian readers to reflect on their own commitment to God and to his Word Incarnate.

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