

Highgrove Church Seminar 1 March 2021

John's Gospel

An Intriguing Book.

Imagine you were a pagan scholar browsing the 'exotic Jewish' section of the great Library in Alexandria, Egypt in say, 125 AD and you opened a scroll labelled 'John's Gospel'. What would you make of it?

Well, our pagan's attention might be grabbed by the first words:

In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God.

They might have nodded sagely in agreement, particularly if they were the sort of pagan who was influenced, as many were, by a broad way of thinking that we might call, 'stoicism'. For the stoics believed that all the Universe was a great divine being ('pantheism') but that this divine Cosmos had a soul. Now they called that 'world soul' the 'word' or, in the Greek, *logos*. So our friend would have thought they were on familiar ground, an impression strengthened as they read on. In this way of thinking, it wasn't too 'off the wall' to hear that this *logos* was also a light shining in the darkness which enlightened humanity. One of the things stoics believed was that we should get in line with the *logos* of the cosmos and live in its truth. And the notion of someone witnessing to the *logos*, or even believing in it was fine; that's what philosophers were supposed to do after all.

However, our pagan friend might scratch their head when told that 'the word became flesh and dwelt among us'; indeed, they would have really stumbled over that phrase because what it said literally was not only that "the Word became flesh' (difficult to imagine that the 'world soul' could, as it were, concentrate itself in one fleshy body or that it would want to get stuck in such messy stuff anyway) but also that this word 'pitched his tent among us'! I mean, 'camping'? Soldiers on campaign and rather poor travellers who couldn't afford a decent inn might pitch tents but the very soul of the Universe? What's going on?

Still, our friend might well have been intrigued enough to carry on to discover what all this meant, and who knows, might have found an encounter in this text with a Jewish teacher called Jesus who made some extraordinary claims about himself, did some astonishing things, was executed as a public danger but was then raised again by God, in a way that vindicated his claims. And they might have found their encounter with this Jesus, this word made flesh, not only intriguing but transformative.

However, let's imagine another reader in that ancient library.

Not a pagan now, but a Jew, or perhaps a 'god-fearer', that is someone from a non-Jewish background but attracted to Judaism. Someone, at any rate, who knew very well what we call the Old Testament, but they would have just called 'the Scriptures'. Such a reader would also have been intrigued by the Gospel's first words, but they would have picked up a lot more of what this scroll was trying to say.

For those first words 'in the beginning' would have reminded them of the first words in the first book in the Bible, Genesis— 'In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth'. They would have realised that the God of this text was almost certainly not going to be the Stoics' 'God who is the Universe' but the Bible's transcendent, other, creator God who made the Universe, but isn't the same as it. Moreover, when it went on to say that 'in the beginning was the word', someone who knew Genesis would remember that this transcendent Creator God's Spirit had hovered over the watery chaos in the beginning and then had created not by a deed, but by, as we also know, a word. "And God said, let there be light'.

From which our scripturally informed reader would have supposed that this was a book about creation or perhaps, given the mess it seemed creation was in at the moment, about a re-creation, a new creation. Indeed what the Gospel goes on to say about the word being light and giving life, again words that jump off the page in the first chapter of Genesis, would make them think they were on the right track.

What's more, although a devout Jewish reader in the first century might have been as puzzled as our imaginary pagan (indeed perhaps even, at first, repelled) by the idea that this creative word from God might have 'become flesh', they would also understand far better than the pagan reader what it might mean for this word to 'pitch their tent among us';

for the word used for this camping trip was the same word used in the Greek version of other biblical books, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy, for a particular sort of tent, for the 'Tabernacle' the holy tent pitched by the people of Israel in the desert. And it was in this holy tent that God had come to dwell among the people; in it his presence had been right in the middle of their life in the desert. So the Gospel was claiming that in this word, this *logos*, made flesh, the very presence of God had come to dwell in the midst of the people, a glorious presence, the only begotten from God 'full of grace and truth'.

Not only that, this 'only begotten' himself Divine, would make the God whom no-one has ever seen, known, would communicate his very nature, especially to those who believed in him.

Remarkably, we haven't yet been told who exactly this 'word made flesh' might be. He's not the John who appears in verse six and, it seems, is only a witness to the word. Indeed it's not until a little later that we hear the name 'Jesus' on John's lips and that this Jesus is identified as 'the Lamb of God' - and again, the biblically literate reader would, perhaps, think of the lamb that the people of Israel had sacrificed on the first Passover in order to save them from the deadly punishment that came upon their pagan enemies. But then the rest of the narrative kicks in and they would learn much more about this Jesus, 'this word made flesh'; and that in the life of Jesus something very profound about God and his word was being said. Again we might hope that as they read further, this reader might also be led to meet with God in a new and transformative way.

A Missionary Gospel

Now, I've begun in this way with two rather different imaginary ancient readers of the Gospel partly because I want to take very seriously the words near the end of John that tell us the book was written that the reader 'may believe (or even 'come to believe') that Jesus is the Christ, and that believing you may have life in his name' (John 20.31). I'm not very convinced by those scholars who have argued that John wrote for a rather small community with a rather odd theology, one that was a bit outside the mainstream of the early church. It seems to me, on the contrary that his Gospel, while it certainly could be read with profit by those who were already followers of Jesus, was also one that tried to present Jesus so that who he is could be readily grasped by anyone who wanted to find out about him. That it was then, a 'missionary text' seeking to bring people to faith in Jesus.

What's more, it seems to me that while it's really helpful to imagine what impact the Gospel might have made on those who first read it, it's written in such a way that it is still able to present Jesus to people in our day and age. Indeed, when, as a pastor, I was asked what they should read by people who were wanting to know more about Jesus, I would ask them how much time they had. If they were in a rush then I would suggest they read Mark's Gospel; but if they had a bit more time, then John, I suggested would be the most helpful to them.

For John's witness is very clear indeed to a Jesus who makes God known. Jesus' words and his deeds point to the nature of the invisible God. So, for example, his miracles, seven of which are described in the first part of the Gospel (until Chapter twelve) are called not 'mighty acts' (*dunameis*) as they are in the other gospels but 'signs' (*semeia*). So whether it's turning water into wine, or healing or giving sight to one born blind or miraculously multiplying loaves and fishes or raising the dead, Jesus is making known the nature of a God who brings joy and laughter, heals, give light, multiples grain in the fields and shoals in the sea, as well as bringing life from the dead. So, Jesus' deeds are signs saying, to those who are prepared to look, that in his ministry 'God is at work'; and that God is the God of the earlier Scriptures, the transcendent life-giving God. The same could, of course, be said of the 'mighty deeds' of Jesus in the other Gospels; they too point to God at work among the people, bringing in his kingdom of peace and justice, holiness and health. However, John's commitment to witnessing to Jesus as the one who makes God known is shown very clearly by his use of this word 'signs'. These deeds speak about God's intentions to renew and raise up his world through the ministry of his Son, Jesus. Those who hear can come to faith (John 2.11; 7.31) although, like all communication these signs from God can be wilfully misunderstood or valued for their own sake and not for the truth they point to (John 4.48)

What sort of God is at the centre of this mission?

So, according to John's witness, the signs Jesus 'performed' already point us to the nature of this God, one very much in line with the picture of God's nature presented elsewhere in the Scriptures. But there's more; something very profound indeed is being said about the word of this God that spoke the Cosmos into being and has now taken flesh amongst us.

For we might, perhaps, think of this creative word as one of irresistible command; as a word coming from a great boss who only has to say something for it to happen obediently

Interestingly, that's not how the creative word that God speaks in Genesis comes across. That word is not a harsh order. God doesn't say to the light, the firmament, the waters, the earth, the heavenly bodies, the living creatures, the Adam, 'Jump to it! Come immediately into existence or you'll be sorry!'. He says something softer. He speaks a permissive word 'let there be' (the 'jussive' in the original Hebrew; passive imperative in the old Greek which was the first translation of that original made about 150 years before Christ was born and the favourite version of the first Christians). It's almost as if the things that God creates—Light, darkness, heavenly bodies, plants, animals, humans—were there, unmade, but yearning to be, and God's word gives them permission to emerge and come and stand before him and engage with him. God in Genesis doesn't create so he can, as it were, grow bigger and more powerful; he doesn't need more slaves to boss around. Rather he delights in creating a Cosmos that, although he upholds it, is also independent from him; that has its own being and validity. Indeed he is prepared, for the sake of giving creation such freedom, to run the risk of creating humans who are able to turn against him and ignore him.

And so it is in John. This Gospel bears witness that the word spoken in Jesus is not about a remote, bossy God who wants us all to jump to attention and obey him instantly. No, the Gospel's witness is that Jesus reveals to us a God who wants us to know him not as a tyrant but as a conversation partner. These conversations are not easy ones; God in Jesus runs the risk again and again of being misunderstood and rejected but they are, potentially at least, profoundly creative.

So one fruitful way of reading the Gospel is to see it as a series of conversations between Jesus and others, with partners who come to these conversations with a variety of different attitudes; perhaps curiosity for Nicodemus, or suspicion in the case of the unnamed Samaritan woman, yearning for healing on the part of the sick, yet again, downright hostility in the case of many others or even arrogance, hatred and world-weary cynicism. Indeed, a conversation with Jesus is never a cosy chat; it is always a profoundly challenging experience. People are always changed whether they accept what this word shows them of the truth or not. Speaking to Jesus can transform but it can also reveal the

hard, sinful heart. 'He came to his own and his own did not receive him; but to all who did receive him, he gave the right to become the children of God' (John 1.11-12).

Whenever we read about these conversations we should be on the alert for the echoes of the earlier Scriptures. So when *Nicodemus*, whose very name 'victorious people' bespeaks a deep concern for his nation, comes 'in the night' to visit Jesus (John 3.2), we might think of the prophet Isaiah's song, 'sung in the land of Judah' about the 'righteous nations that keep faith' with its verse, 'My soul yearns for you in the night; my spirit earnestly seeks you' (Isaiah 26.9) and realise that what is being hinted at is that this Nicodemus is a man who longs for a new and better way for himself and his people; or when Jesus meets a rather dodgy foreign woman by a well we might recall the times when Israelite men meet foreign women by wells in Genesis and Exodus (Abraham's servant and Rebecca; Jacob and Rachel; Moses and Zipporah) and marriage is in the air. This woman has been married many times already and Jesus doesn't want her for her body; no, what he longs to offer her is a love which will transform and redeem her difficult life and, through that transforming love, bring fruitful life to her people. So these conversations are themselves in conversation with the great themes of the earlier scriptures. What is Israel's true purpose? What does it mean to be in fruitful, covenantal relationship with others and with God? Can we truly leave behind the old dead ways and walk in new paths that lead to life? These are the important life-changing questions that are raised whenever people encounter this Word who was in the beginning with God, is from God, is God.

Who might have written such a Gospel?

Critical scholarship has tended to date John late in the first century, sometimes straying into the early second century, but the evidence for such dating is weak and is often justified by an argument marked by circularity. e.g. 'How do we know that John is late? Because his 'christology is so high' (the jargon for Jesus being identified clearly with the one creator God). Why is John's christology high? Because he is writing so late.' Against this, we should note that John is often well informed about historical details of life in early 1st century Judea/Galilee and indeed about details concerning the circumstances of Jesus' arrest and execution. For instance, his remarks about stone vessels for purification in John 2.6 are culture specific and he knows that the soldiers who arrested Jesus were led by a Roman officer (the Centurion [Χιλιάρχος] of 18.9)— which, historically, is highly plausible as the Romans would not have wanted such a high profile arrest to have been conducted without their close supervision.

All in all, the traditional theory that the vast bulk of the Gospel was written by a 'John' we might identify with the 'beloved disciple' who appears so frequently in its text, has much to recommend it. But which John? (bearing in mind that the name, in its Hebrew form, *lochanan*, was very common in first century Judaism). The John who the Synoptics identify as the brother of James, the Apostle? Or, as Bird and Wright argue¹ John 'the elder' (*presbuteros*) who is believed to have led the Christian community in Ephesus in the later first century?

In favour of the latter identification (which is supported by many ancient witnesses) is what we might call the 'Jerusalem focus' of the Gospel. While some of the early stories in John are set in Galilee the action centres far more round the Holy City than it does in the Synoptics and this would seem odd if the author were John the brother of James, a fisherman from Galilee. There is no certain way of confirming authorship and dating but my own view is that the Gospel is earlier than most scholarship supposes. John 1-20 may even have been written before 70. John 21 which seems to know of the martyrdom of Peter in the Neronian persecutions of the mid-60's may have been added later by a disciple as an epilogue to the the main body of the Gospel, although it affirms (John 21.24) that the main body of the Gospel is eye witness material. The objection that the Gospel may have drawn at points on elements of the synoptic traditions is not fatal to such early dating if we accept that those traditions may have been circulating in draft form from a very early date in the life of the church.

Relationship with the other Gospels

The different approach taken by John's Gospel, marking it out from the broad tradition shared by Mathew, Mark and Luke has been recognised from antiquity. There are, firstly, some relatively minor anomalies, narrative details in some tension with the 'synoptic' accounts. They include; the depiction of the 'cleansing of the Temple' incident as early on in Jesus's ministry (John 2.13-22)—whereas in the Synoptics it occurs in the last week of his life; a pattern of regular visits to Jerusalem—whereas (with the exception of the Temple incident in Luke 2), the Synoptics describe only one such visit; and the timing of his death in John on the day of preparation for the Passover (John 19.31, that is the time when the

¹ Wright N T and Michael Bird *The New Testament in Its World: An Introduction to the History, Literature, and Theology of the First Christians* (London: SPCK, 2019) pp. 652-8

lamb's were being slaughtered for the feast!)—whereas it appears from the Synoptics that he celebrated the Passover with his disciples before his death.

Ways can be found of assimilating these discrepancies, but perhaps even more striking are the differences in style and content between John and the other Gospel traditions. John's Jesus does not generally use pithy short parables as his preferred teaching method but engages in dialogue, often challenging dialogue, with a variety of partners whose attitudes range from exploring (Nicodemus) to intrigued (the Samaritan woman) and even to hostile (the 'Jews'—better perhaps often, in this Gospel, 'the Judeans'?).

John's Jesus also offers extended monologues about his own person and ministry (e.g. John 14-17) of a kind rarely found in the Synoptics. On his lips are found a series of 'I am' sayings that point to his relationship, even his pre-existent identity (John 8.58), with his 'Father'—that is, with YHWH, the creator God to whom Israel is bound in covenant relationship—that are unparalleled in the other Gospels. Indeed, the Christology of John is stratospherically 'high'. Only in this Gospel, in the entire New Testament, is Jesus undeniably called 'God' when Thomas, after the Resurrection, acclaims him as 'my Lord and my God' (John 20.28 Ὁ κύριός μου καὶ ὁ θεός μου)

So, while in Mark, Jesus often commands that his status as Messiah and Son of God should not be spoken of, in John, there is no such 'Messianic secret'. Moreover, his depiction of Jesus does not focus on him as the 'man of sorrows' as in Mark and Matthew, or even as the emotional, affectionate 'friend of sinners' in Luke (although it is noteworthy that John's is the only Gospel to witness to Jesus' sorrowful tears over the suffering and death of a friend — John 11.35). John's Jesus is rather one who seems in total control of events, sure of his destiny. Even his account of the passion seems to imply a Jesus who speaks to Pilate with authority and rises high above the shame and suffering of the cross which is after all, in John's thinking where he most clearly glorifies his Father's name (John 12.27-33). There is nothing to compare with the cry of desolation '*elōi, elōi, lema sabachthani?*' recorded so movingly in Mark 15.34.

Yet, even these observations also reveal deep commonalities with the other Gospels. All four know how important was the Galilean ministry and yet have Jesus travel to Jerusalem for his final, fateful conflict, suffering and death. While Jesus may be more explicit about his relationship with his Father in John, his implied claims about his status in the other

Gospels are equally as astounding. Many of the miracles portrayed in John are recognisable as the same incidents in the Synoptics albeit seen through a slightly different lens. I am impressed by those who argue that much of John's distinctive witness may be down to his seeing Jesus from the angle of a Jerusalem based disciple rather than one who originated from Galilee.

Revealing God through Jesus

John's Gospel is a celebration of how God shares with us what we need to know for our healing and redemption; that sharing is primarily through the life and saving death of Jesus of Nazareth, his Word in human flesh, as witnessed by the Evangelist but it continues through the witness of the Holy Spirit who teaches the faithful all things and brings to their remembrance all that Jesus has said (John 14.26). The Gospel reveals to us a God who, in spite of all his mysterious otherness, yearns to communicate himself to his creation through his Son.

'No one has ever seen God, the only begotten God who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known' (John 1.15)

Further Resources:

(Perhaps more accessible)

The Bible Project's two videos on the Gospel

<https://bibleproject.com/explore/video/john-1-12/>

<https://bibleproject.com/explore/video/john-13-21/>

Wright, Tom *John for Everyone: Part One Chapters 1-10* (London: SPCK, 2002)

Wright, Tom *John for Everyone: Part Two Chapters 11-21* 2nd Ed (London; SPCK, 2004)

Wright N T and Michael Bird *The New Testament in Its World: An Introduction to the History, Literature, and Theology of the First Christians* (London: SPCK, 2019) pp. 652-8

(Perhaps more challenging)

Barrett, C. K. *The Gospel According to John: An Introduction and Commentary with Notes on the Greek Text* (London: SPCK, 1978)

Beasley-Murray, George *John* 2nd Ed (Nashville TN: Thomas Nelson, 1999)

Brown, Raymond E. *The Gospel According to John (i-xii) Introduction, Translation and Notes* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1971)

— *The Gospel According to John (xiii-xxi) Introduction, Translation and Notes* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1971)

Carson, D. A. *The Gospel According to John* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1991)

Köstenberger, Andreas *Encountering John: The Gospel in Historical, Literary and Theological Perspective* 2nd Ed (Grand Rapids MI: Baker Academic, 2013)