

## Introduction to the Gospel of John

The Gospel of John is the fourth Gospel in our Bible and probably the fourth to be written, around A.D. 75-90, when the apostle John was an older man, perhaps finishing up his life's work. Each Gospel has a theme-statement in the beginning or the end. The theme-statement of Luke, in chapter 4, is that Jesus came to preach the good news to the poor and all sorts of people and to release the captives. Mark tells us that his book is "the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." Matthew, at the end of his Gospel, tells us that Jesus' disciples should make disciples of all the nations. John's purpose is given in chapter 20, verse 30: "Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and by believing, you may have life in his name." This is a familiar statement, but a study of the original Greek language offers some insights.

John says his Gospel was written so that you might believe. In the Greek it is not clear whether he is writing in order that people might begin to believe or that people might continue to believe and be strengthened in their faith. You may have heard that John is an evangelistic Gospel written to lead people to believe for the first time. Nonetheless, John would be a wonderful book to confirm or settle people in their faith. The Gospel of John operates on two levels: a simple level and a deeper, more complex level with lots of allusions, hints, and invitations to meditate on half-buried themes.

Another interesting aspect of the Greek is that a strict translation would result in the phrase "you may believe that the Christ is Jesus." Is there a difference between saying "Jesus is the Christ" or "the Christ is Jesus"? The former may be important to introduce to people who have never heard the Gospel by explaining who Jesus is. It is likely, however, that John intended to identify who the Christ was for Jews or anyone who was waiting to see who the deliverer might be. The Christ is Jesus. He fulfills the hopes of the Jews and those waiting for a deliverer. So the Gospel of John is a good place to start if you have never read the Gospels before. But it is also true that the depths of John can only be probed by a believer who understands something of the Old Testament and the need for a savior.

Just as people quarrel over Matthew, Mark, and Luke, and wonder if they are reliable historically, so people quarrel with John. If John was an old man writing 50 to 70 years after the event, some argue, it would be so easy to forget the details. But some things are so memorable that they are emblazoned upon your mind and you cannot forget them. There was a time my dad was taken into police custody. My father was born in America, but went to Italy at age 25 because my grandfather was an opera singer. While he was there in 1915, the word came to him that my great-grandfather was almost executed during the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia. He was actually minutes away from being shot, and afterwards he suffered a nervous breakdown. So my grandfather, with my young dad in tow, went back to Russia to get him back on his feet, give him money, and be there for him. When they got there, the Communists then led the government. My dad's family had their documents taken, and they were held illegally for twelve years. My father was able to escape around 1935. Almost nobody was escaping from Russia then, and when my father talks to a Russian and says he got out, they do not believe him. Only a couple hundred people got out at that time, and so they doubt the credibility of his story. Usually in order to escape, one had to be very well connected, and my father was not such a man with connections. So his story is doubted by some people. Although these events happened when he was in his twenties and he is now 81 years old, he can still tell the story.

I will admit the story changes a bit depending on what mood he is in, but there are some things that never change. For example, they had one piece of identification that proved their American citizenship, and they hid it in an asbestos cup at the bottom of their furnace. After all, the furnace is probably the last

place one would look for such a precious document. That detail never changes no matter how many times he tells the story. And every time he tells about when he was hauled into the office by a colonel of the secret police, and how the colonel was thinking of shooting him for various reasons, such as the colonel's belief that my father had stolen documents (which indeed he did steal), he says the colonel waved a seven round revolver at him. My brothers and I believed this was part of the story he was embellishing, and we say, "Dad, there are not any seven round revolvers." But when you go to check the story out, there was a revolver commonly used in Russia during the 1910's which had seven rounds. It goes to show that if you have someone waving a seven round revolver at you, it is a detail you do not forget, especially if you are guilty of the charge being levied against you. There are some things you cannot forget even if you are 81 years old. Thus it is certainly likely that John could not forget the remarkable things that happened during his time with Jesus, particularly with the Holy Spirit helping him.

The Gospel of John is reliable and includes many items that could be verified. It records a large number of customs or items from the social and religious setting of the time—the geography, the architecture, the topography of Palestine and Judea. The Gospel is also loaded with memorable things like turning water into wine, and feeding 5000 people. John also claims to be an eyewitness in his first epistle. In 1 John 1:4 he emphasizes "what we heard, what we have seen with our eyes, and what our hands have handled." The word "handled" means 'to grip, to grab'. John is saying that he heard Him, he saw Him, and he touched Him. The Gospel of John is full of sensory details. When he tells about the death of Lazarus, the King James Version says, "Do not roll the stone away because He stinketh." That is an indication of John remembering a detail from being there. He also includes details about what he saw. John says that they ran ahead to the tomb and peered in and saw the clothes lying there, with the headpiece twirled up in a separate place. And in the scene with Thomas, Thomas says, "Unless I put my hand in His side..." The idea was that the wound from the spear was so big that Thomas knew he could stick his fist into it. It is a tactile report, because John was there and he knows of what he speaks.

John introduces his Gospel with a prologue in chapter one. The prologue contains a poetic form called a chiasm in which concepts alternate and reflect one another. John 1:1-4 says, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of men." Thus the first thing we hear is something about Jesus' preexistence. Then in John 1:6-8 we enter into history: "There came a man who was sent from God; his name was John. He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all men might believe. He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light." The second thing we hear is that Jesus came into the world. He was preexistent but He also entered into the human realm. But then John 1:9-11 says, "The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world. He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him." So the third point made is that Jesus was not received. A fourth point is made, however, in John 1:12-13: "Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God." So as a whole, He was not received, but those who did receive Him, by faith, have the right to become children of God.

The next section is a repetition of points one, two, and three in reverse order. In John 1:14, it says that Jesus made His dwelling among us and we saw His glory—implying that others did not. Following this John the Baptist testifies that Jesus is the one he said was coming into the world greater than himself. This is the historical entry of Jesus into the world; He is the fullness of grace, and blessing, and truth. Then in John 1:18 Jesus' preexistence is again referenced: "No one has ever seen God, but God the One

and Only, who is at the Father's side, has made him known." The way that chiasm works is that the thing that is in the middle, the thing not repeated, is the most important. Thus verses 12-13 are the most important; they tie in with the purpose statement at the end of John: all these things were written so that we might believe. So John tells us something at the beginning and the end that we know is very important: that by believing we become children of God and by believing we have life in His name.

John does a difficult thing in writing his Gospel by writing for multiple audiences. John grew up in Judea, but in his later life he lived in Gentile lands. Church tradition tells us he spent his last years in Ephesus, actually exiled to the island of Patmos which is off the coast of the Aegean Sea by Ephesus. So his early years are with Jews, and his later years with Gentiles. He writes a Gospel that would appeal very much to a Gentile without the Jews minding, and it would appeal to the Jews without that Gentile minding. That is a difficult trick, as you might know if you have done any teaching, especially when the audiences have both some advanced and non-advanced people. He is trying to reach them all simultaneously.

He begins to reach Gentiles right away in his opening phrase, "In the beginning was the Word," by using the Greek word *logos* for "word." *Logos* was one of the favorite terms in Greek philosophy. The term meant the rational organizing principles of the world. Stoic philosophers believed there was a rational principle in the universe that gave it structure and organization. Other ancient philosophers like Heraclitus and Zeno and a Jewish philosopher named Philo, used the word *logos* to describe God's instrumentation and rational power in creating the world. So when John uses that word in the beginning, all the philosophers are interested. Then when he goes on to say, "The word became flesh," they might not be so sure about that. But he constantly uses terms that would be of interest to a Gentile reader. He also keeps things simple so that the novice would not feel that it is going over his head.

On the other hand, John writes for Jews by including only a few quotations which could put off somebody. Using quotations is like using big words or quoting the Bible to a novice—they do not like that. John knows that you need to hide things, so instead of quotations he uses many allusions to the Old Testament that Jews would understand. For example, the first allusion is in John 1:1 in which the phrase, "In the beginning," sounds like the beginning of the book of Genesis. Then in John 1:14 John writes, "The word became flesh and made His dwelling among us." The word for "made his dwelling" is the one for pitching a tent, which was also used for the tabernacle in the Old Testament. So what John is alluding to is, if the tabernacle signifies that God dwells with Israel symbolically in the one place we know of as the glory cloud, then Jesus is the real thing. The tabernacle is the symbol of God's presence; Jesus is God's presence. Jesus is also Lamb of God, as we read in chapter 1, the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world. There were many lambs sacrificed at the altar, but Christ is the true lamb. He is the lamb that truly gets rid of sin by offering a sacrifice.

In His first miracle, Jesus turned water into wine. Wine was a symbol of the Messianic age. A Jew would understand this, though a Gentile might not. Jesus says in chapter 10, "I am the good shepherd," which is similar to "The Lord is my shepherd," from Psalm 23. Beyond that, there is the general idea that God is the caretaker of Israel as a shepherd is to his sheep. Furthermore, there is also a good shepherd/bad shepherd theme in the Bible. The bad shepherd is described in Ezekiel 34 and Jeremiah 9. God says that He will bind up Israel's wounds caused by these shepherds. Then in John 9-10, the bad shepherds of Israel, the Pharisees, are beating the sheep and Jesus is binding up the wounds. If a Gentile does not know these Old Testament verses, it is not going to hurt him. He is still going to understand the basic idea. But if you have been looking for a true shepherd of Israel, if you were a Jew and knew the hopes and aspirations of waiting for a good shepherd, then the whole story has much greater depth. So

John is writing for Gentiles, using terms they would understand, and he is writing for Jews, using dozens of allusions to the Old Testament.

One way of dividing up the book of John is into four parts. It has a prologue in chapter 1 and an epilogue in chapter 21. Then the two large parts are sometimes called ‘the book of signs’ for chapters 2-11, and ‘the book of glory’ for chapters 12-20. The signs and miracles Jesus performs, and the conversations they cause, largely dominate the book of signs. The book of glory focuses on the death and resurrection of Christ and the discussion Jesus had with His disciples to prepare them for it.

In chapters 2-11, the dominant things are indeed the signs. The signs present Jesus’ claim to the world. The signs by themselves, however, did not engender faith. They do not prove anything; rather they point. By definition, signs are miraculous deeds that demonstrate—if you have eyes to see—that God is working in the world through Jesus. Think about the signs you encounter today—a traffic signal, a yield sign, or a stop sign. A sign cannot make you do what it says, it is only a way of indicating something, such as the need to stop at a particular intersection. This is how the signs of Jesus are. They indicate a certain meaning, but they do not force action or response on our part.

Jesus’ first sign is turning water into wine at Galilee. People say this proves Jesus approves of marriage, but that is not the main point. The main thing is not that Jesus is at a wedding. Maybe He was related somehow, because Jesus’ mom seems to have some responsibility when they run out of wine. At any rate, weddings usually lasted a whole week in that culture. One had to prepare for years to get the food and beverages together for this. If you ran out, it was a major social disgrace that would haunt you for the rest of your life. And Mary sees that the wine is running out and so she takes matters into her hands by putting them into Jesus’ hands. John 2:3 says, “When the wine was gone, Jesus’ mother said to him, ‘They have no more wine.’” In one translation, the next verse reads, “‘Dear woman, why do you involve me?’ Jesus replied. ‘My time has not yet come.’” The word “dear,” however, is not present in the Greek. A literal translation of the Greek reads, “What is there between me and you, woman?” The word “woman” used that way can seem pretty rude, but in that time it would have been a very neutral expression. It would not be a rebuke or a slap, but it would not be particularly polite either. Jesus’ statement establishes distance. Jesus is telling her she is asking Him to break His schedule. He is telling her she is out of line—not mildly, but not sharply. Then it says in John 1:5, “His mother said to the servants, ‘Do whatever he tells you.’” This is common in the Gospels—somebody asks something from Jesus, Jesus rebuffs that person, and then they persevere. What John does is very subtle, but it was there because his audience was attuned to the nuances of discussions. He is establishing that Mary bends to Jesus. When Mary comes to Jesus as His mother with a claim on Him, she is rebuffed. But when she approaches as a believer, she is approved. She leaves the decision up to Jesus. She bows, we might say, to the supremacy of her son. These are wonderful words that go beyond what Mary meant.

Once that is established, Jesus takes action. John says that Jesus sees six stone jars nearby, the kind used for ceremonial washing. That is a detail that matters, because each one held 20 to 30 gallons. The Jews had small areas where they would wash themselves for ritual cleansing before going to the temple or for other purposes. They would get down in and immerse themselves. So we know this is a lot of water. Jesus says to take those and fill them to the top with water and then—we do not know when or how—the water changed to wine. They take the wine to the steward and he says they have saved the best for last. That, of course, is not the way it usually works. Usually you get people drunk first on the best, and then bring out the cheap. But Jesus does everything first-rate. This is the first of His miraculous signs.

If you are like me, you might think, “This is great that He changed water into wine. But what does it signify? Why would He start His ministry in this particular way?” The answer requires knowing the

background. Free flowing and abundant wine was a sign of the Messianic age in Israel. Amos 9:13-14 indicates this, as does Hosea 14:7, which says, “New wine will drip from the mountains and flow from all the hills. I will bring back my exiled people Israel; they will rebuild the ruined cities and live in them. They will plant vineyards and drink their wine.” So when God restores His people, they will plant vineyards and drink wine again. John takes advantage of that imagery as Jesus takes water for ceremonial washing and uses that as part of His sign. It indicates that the day for rituals, for ceremonial cleansing, the day for the temple’s kind of cleansing is gone, because the Messiah is here with the full-blown restoration He has to offer. That is what the Messiah does. He sets all things right; He removes disease; starvation and want are gone and a season of plenty is coming. This first sign fits into the restoration theme of Jesus’ ministry. What is old is done and Jesus is starting something new.

There are other examples of that theme throughout John’s Gospel. The old temple is replaced by the new temple, which is His body. The old temple could not really cleanse sin but His body can. The temple will be destroyed, and He will raise it up in three days because He is the real place for God’s dwelling and God’s cleansing. In chapter 3 with Nicodemus, we have the statement that the old physical birth is replaced by the new birth. Then in chapter 4, the old water that people draw from wells is replaced by new water that wells up from within and gives eternal life. Also in chapter 4 the old places of worship, whether in Jerusalem or not, will be removed and restored by the new place of worship. Now all who worship in spirit and truth are true worshipers, wherever they may be. Chapters 2-4 show that Jesus is bringing the age of new things, the age of completion.

Jesus’ first discourse is at the end of chapter 2. After the cleansing of the temple, John tells us that many people saw the miraculous signs Jesus was doing and believed in His name. So Jesus performed certain other signs that John is not telling us about. Now it says that the people saw the signs and believed, but Jesus would not believe them. Why not? John says it is because He knew all men and He did not need man’s testimony about man because He knew what was in a man. In other words, John is telling us there are two different kinds of belief. There is a superficial belief, which is not enough. And Jesus knows that and does not trust superficial confession.

Next, John tells us in chapter 3, “Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus.” It is an odd phrase to say he “was a man of the Pharisees.” Why not say he was a Pharisee? This is the only time in the whole Gospel this odd phrase is used. Remember that Jesus knew what was in a man. So Jesus knew what was in this man. This is important to understand the conversation with Nicodemus.

Nicodemus came to Jesus at night and said, “Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him.” John 3:10 says, Nicodemus is “the teacher of Israel.” Nicodemus is one of the greatest, if not the greatest, of all rabbis in Israel, and he wants to talk with Jesus as an equal. Jesus responds, “I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.” If you are Nicodemus, you have to think Jesus is out of His mind. Nicodemus wants to talk, teacher to teacher, and sees himself as condescending by giving Jesus the same standing as himself. But Jesus seems to reject this, and introduces a new topic—the new birth. We are familiar with the idea of being born again, but the phrase was not used during that time. In fact, Jesus’ response might seem rude because Nicodemus is the supposed superior in the conversation and so should have been in charge of picking the topic of discussion. To refuse to debate the topic of discussion proposed by the superior man was an act of rudeness.

So Nicodemus sputters, “How can a man be born when he is old? Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother’s womb to be born!” Nicodemus starts with generous praise, but he is quickly confused. Jesus continues to instruct, saying, “I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he

is born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.' The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit." Nicodemus is not helped much by this. Maybe he understands that you must have this to see the kingdom; you must be born again. You need two births: a birth of water, which is euphemistic for a natural process, and a birth of the spirit. That part might be clear to Nicodemus. But all this business of the spirit and wind blowing—the word for those is the same in Greek—must be confusing because Nicodemus says, "How can this be?" In other words, What are you talking about? So Jesus says, "You are Israel's teacher and you do not understand these things?" Nicodemus is probably thinking this does not help at all—he does not understand and he does not want it rubbed in.

Then Jesus goes further. He says, "I tell you the truth, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony. I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man. Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up." Nicodemus still does not understand, and that is the point. What Nicodemus needs to realize is that he does not realize. The lesson to Nicodemus is that he thinks he can come to Jesus and have a conversation of teacher to teacher and great man to great man. But Jesus is saying that Nicodemus is not His peer. The first thing Nicodemus needs to learn is that he does not know anything and he needs to be humbled. He needs to be reborn and start all over, and then maybe he can begin to learn.