

A LOOK AT A BOOK: John

February 5, 2012

Found only in John:

- The Word becomes flesh (Chapter 1)
- Water to wine (Chapter 2)
- Long conversation with Nicodemus (Chapter 3)
- Woman at the well (Chapter 4)
- Healing of man born blind (Chapter 9)
- Death and resurrection of Lazarus (Chapter 11)
- Washing the disciples' feet (Chapter 13)
- Mary and the Beloved Disciple at the cross (John 20:25ff.)

Authorship

1. Early church tradition favors that the apostle John wrote the fourth gospel toward the close of the first century in Ephesus, a city of Asia Minor. Especially important is the testimony of Irenaeus, a disciple of Polycarp, who was in turn a disciple of the apostle John – a direct line of tradition with only one link between Irenaeus and John himself.

2. The writer of the fourth gospel claims to be an eyewitness of Jesus' ministry (1:14; compare 19:25; 21:24, 25), and exhibits a Semitic style of writing and an accurate knowledge of Jewish customs and of Palestinian topography as it was before A.D. 70 (for example, the pool with five porches near the Sheep Gate [5:2] and the paved area outside the Praetorium [19:13], both in Jerusalem and both probably confirmed by modern archeologists). In addition, vivid details such as one would expect from an eyewitness, yet incidental to the story, appear everywhere – numbers (*six* water jars [2:6], *one hundred* yards [21:8], *153* fish {21:11}), names (Nathaniel [1:45ff.], Nicodemus [3:1ff.], Lazarus [11:1ff.], Malchus [18:10], etc.), and many other vivid touches.

3. Moreover, the author writes as “the disciple whom Jesus loved,” not out of egotism (he never identifies himself by name!), but to emphasize that the contents of the gospel merit belief since they come from the man in whom Jesus confided. Still further, the beloved disciple repeatedly appears in close association with Peter (13:23, 24; 20:2-10; 21:2, 7, 20ff.). The synoptists

tell us that James and John the sons of Zebedee worked at fishing with Peter and with him formed the inner circle of the Twelve. Since James had long ago died as a martyr (Acts 12:1-5) and since Peter appears as a different person from the beloved disciple, only John is left to be the beloved disciple and author of the fourth gospel. For if someone other than the beloved disciple wrote the fourth gospel, why did he not attach the name of John to “the disciple whom Jesus loved”?

Supplements Matthew, Mark, and Luke

John consciously supplements the Synoptics. He emphasizes the Judean ministry and largely omits parable and the theme of God’s kingdom. Apparently John thought the Synoptics had presented enough information about the Galilean ministry and the kingdom. Unconcerned with giving a complete chronology of Jesus’ life, the Synoptics mention only the last Passover, when Jesus died. But John lets us know there were at least three and probably four Passovers during Jesus’ public career; thus it lasted at least more than two years and probably from three to three and a half years.

Jesus’ Speech in John

With the possible exception of Matthew, the fourth Gospel contains more extended discourses by Jesus than the Synoptics do. The discourses tend to cut down on narrative material. Questions and objections from the audiences often punctuate the discourses.

Johannine Theology

Running through the fourth gospel, many important theological themes appear and reappear in different combinations and sometimes continue into 1-3 John and Revelation. John expounds these themes by skillfully alternating narratives and discourses, so that the words of Jesus bring out the inner meaning of His works. Much of the action in the gospel thus becomes symbolic. For example, Jesus’ washing the disciples’ feet represents the cleansing effect of His redemptive work. There is also frequent irony, such as that which tinges the question of Jesus, “I have shown you many good works from the Father; for which of these do you stone me?” (10:32). And just as the works of Jesus bear a symbolic meaning, so also His words often carry second and even third meanings. “Born again [or anew]” also means “born from above” (3:3ff.), and the reference to Jesus’ being “lifted up” points not only to the method of His execution, but also to His resurrection and exaltation back to heaven (12:20-36).

The theological themes in John begin under the category of revelation. Jesus is the revelatory *Word* (Logos) of God. As such he reveals the *truth*, which is more than veracity. It is the ultimate reality of God's own person and character, as *witnessed* to by Jesus, the Father Himself, the Spirit, Scripture, and others. The *light* thus illuminates those who believe and drives back the *darkness* of evil. The repulsion of darkness is the *judgment* of the world. Not that Jesus came to condemn the world, but He did come to discriminate between those who belong to the light and those who belong to the darkness – and the latter already stand self-condemned by their unbelief. The *world*, human society dominated by Satan, opposes the light and thus is the object of God's wrath. This fact makes it all the more remarkable that God "loved the world" (3:16). His *love* came through Jesus Christ and continues to manifest itself through the love of Jesus' disciples for one another. To demonstrate God's love, Jesus descended from the Father and worked toward His "*hour*," the time of His suffering and death on behalf of the world. For revealing the Father's *glory* in this way, the Father in turn glorified the Son with heavenly exaltation.

Believing in Jesus

Preeminently, however, John is the gospel of believing. Indeed, the verb "believe" is the key word of the Gospel:

Many other signs therefore Jesus also performed in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these have been written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name (20:30, 31).

Christological in content, this believing highlights the deity of Jesus as the unique and preexistent Son of God who, in obedience to His Father, became a real human being in order to die sacrificially for the redemption of human beings. Such an emphasis went against the denial of His humanity and death by Gnostics, early Christian heretics who thought anything material or physical was inherently evil. Thus, not only does the deity of Jesus receive emphasis (beginning with "the Word was God" [1:1] and many times throughout the Gospel); so also His humanity: "the Word became flesh" (1:14, grew tired and thirsty (4:6, 7; 19:28), wept (11:35), and physically died and rose again (19:30-42; 20:12, 17, 20, 27, 28).

Jesus is the royal Jewish Messiah in Matthew; the divine Servant-Worker in Mark; the sympathetic Savior in Luke; the incarnate Son of God in John.

Jesus Himself demands this Christological belief by making a series of “I am...” claims in the fourth gospel:

“I am the bread of life” (6:35, 48; compare vv. 41, 51);

“I am the light of the world” (8:12);

“I am the door” (10:7, 9);

“I am the good shepherd” (10:11, 14);

“I am the resurrection and the life” (11:25);

“I am the way, and the truth, and the life” (14:6);

“I am the true vine” (15:1, 5).

In addition there are “I am” statements not followed by a complement.

These suggest the claim to be the I AM – YAHWEH of the Old Testament (4:25, 26; 8:24, 28, 58; 13:19; 18:5f.; compare 6:20; 7:34, 36; 14:3; 17:24; Exodus 1:13ff.).

Not John, but Jesus

It is possible a subsidiary purpose of John was the correction of a cult that had grown up around the figure of John the Baptist. Acts 19:1-7 shows there had been followers of John the Baptist in Ephesus some decades earlier during the time of Paul; and according to early tradition Ephesus is the place where John the apostle wrote his gospel. Moreover, John takes great pains to show that Jesus is superior to the Baptist, that the Baptist had to decrease and Jesus increase, that through His disciples Jesus baptized more followers than the Baptist, and that Jesus had testimony even greater than what the Baptist gave him (1:15-37; 3:25-30; 4:1, 2; 5:33-40).

Contents

In several respects, John 1:11, 12 presents a summary of the kinds of material included in the fourth gospel. “Those who were His own did not receive him” – the somber backdrop of the gospel is the repeated Jewish rejections of Jesus: when He cleansed the temple (ch. 2); after He healed the paralytic (ch. 5); after He fed the five thousand (ch. 6); when His half brothers taunted Him (ch. 7); when He attended the Festival of Tabernacles (ch. 7); when He claimed to be the light of the world (ch. 8); when He asserted His oneness with God the Father (ch. 10); and after He raised Lazarus (ch. 11).

“But as many as received him” – in contrast with the general rejection, some individuals did receive Jesus through personal encounter with Him: Andrew, John (unnamed in the text), Peter, Philip, Nathanael (ch. 1); Nicodemus (ch.

3); the Samaritan woman (ch. 4); the man born blind (ch. 9); Mary and Martha (ch. 11); the eleven in the upper room (ch. 13-16); and Mary Magdalene (ch. 20).

“To them he gave the right to become children of God” – John details a number of miracles performed by Jesus, but calls them “signs” and “works” because of their value in symbolizing the transforming power of belief in Jesus: the changing of water to wine illustrates the transformation from the ritual of Judaism to the better reality of the gospel (ch. 2); the healing of the nobleman’s son pictures the transformation from spiritual sickness to health (ch. 4); the healing of the paralytic, from powerlessness to strength (ch. 5); the feeding of the five thousand, from emptiness to fullness (ch. 6); the walking on the water, from fear to assurance (ch. 6); the giving of sight to the blind man, from darkness to light (ch. 9); the raising of Lazarus from death to life (ch. 11); and the miraculous catch of fish, from failure to almost unmanageable success in Christian evangelism (ch. 21).

All three lines of thought converge in the passion story: “Those who were his own did not receive him” – the trial and crucifixion; “but as many as received him” – the three Marys and the beloved disciple standing beside the cross; “to them he gave the right to become children of God” – the transforming power of Christ’s resurrection.

John Rylands Fragment, AD 125, P52

3.5x2.5 inches

7 lines on front; 7 lines on back of John 18

Earliest existing record of a New Testament text